RIGHTHEOUS RĀMA
The Evolution of an Epic

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This book seeks to set the Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki in its total context, thus providing a comprehensive study of the epic. Starting from a close linguistic study of the text, it establishes the relative chronology of the different layers of its composition and on that basis investigates the material, cultural, social and religious milieux as they are revealed at different periods. Previous studies of these aspects of the Rāmāyaṇa have tended to rely on rather subjective criteria for their assessment of the relative date of particular features, or else uncritically to assign the whole work to a single period. In this work, the careful analysis of the language and style of the epic in relation to the transition from earlier to classical Sanskrit is the basis for charting the various layers of composition on internal and relatively objective evidence. The linguistic data presented in the second chapter are therefore central to the argument of the book but equally may safely be omitted by those readers whose interests are cultural rather than linguistic, provided that they are willing to take on trust the division into stages propounded in the final part of that chapter (and summarised in the Appendix).

By means of this division into stages, the information which can be drawn from the Rāmāyaṇa on cultural aspects is significantly enhanced and we are able to see how the Rāmāyaṇa, like the even more extensive Mahābhārata, reflects the changing culture. We can discern in its different layers the last stages of Vedic religion, exemplified in particular by the early prominence of Indra, followed by the rise and eclipse of the relatively short-lived importance of Brahmag, which gives way in the latest stages to an incipient Vaiṣṇavism; thus, new light can be shed on the transition between the religion of the Vedas and later Hinduism. Similarly, the Rāmāyaṇa reflects a social pattern at a transitional phase between that of the Aryan expansion across northern India and the settled pattern of village-based agriculture which is so much a feature of modern India—the change from a heroic age to caste society.

Comparison with the Mahābhārata and the Purāṇas contributes to a fuller understanding of the textual history of the Rāmāyaṇa. The new light shed on the text also prompts a reconsideration of its influence on later Sanskrit and vernacular literature, as well as its spread outside India. For, as Rāma developed into a figure for veneration, and more
particularly came to be seen as an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, later generations of Indian poets continued to retell and adapt the legend down to the present day.

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With a smile, Brahmā said to Vālmīki: ‘You have indeed invented the śloka... O best of seers, compose the entire Rāma story.’

(1.2.29–30)

The Rāmāyāna enshrines the legend of Prince Rāma and his adventures when exiled to the forest. It is a long epic poem, composed mostly in the śloka metre, ranging from accounts of intrigue at court to wanderings among ascetics in the forest; it culminates in the great battle when the Rākṣasa Rāvana is defeated and punished for his abduction of Rāma’s wife, Sītā. Tradition has it that the original version was composed by a sage called Vālmīki and then transmitted orally; but the version of the Vālmīki Rāmāyāna now extant was undoubtedly composed over several centuries between perhaps 500 BC and 300 AD, during which period it was also committed to writing. It is now divided into seven kāndas, or books, each comprising between 66 and 116 sargas, or chapters, whose contents and style enable several successive stages of composition to be determined.

The original story began no doubt with some version of the court intrigues which open the Ayodhyākāṇḍa, now the second book of the epic. Here we are introduced to the aging king of Ayodhyā, Daśaratha, his wives Kausalyā, Kaikēyī and Sumitrā, and the four princes: Rāma, son of Kausalyā, Bharata, son of Kaikēyī, and Laksmaṇa and Śatrughna, sons of Sumitrā. Daśaratha determines, amid general approval, to install Rāma as yuvārāja, ‘young king’ or heir-apparent (sargas 1–6), but Kaikēyī, urged on by her servant Mantharā (7–9), contrives to have him supplanted by Bharata and banished to the forest for fourteen years (10–12). Daśaratha feels forced to give in to her petulance in fulfilment of two boons he has previously granted her, but his agony of mind in doing so is touchingly portrayed; so profound is

1 For detailed discussion see chapter 2 and Appendix. All references are to the Critical Edition published at Baroda (The Vālmīki-Rāmāyana, Critically edited for the First Time, 7 vols., G. H. Bhatt and U. P. Shah gen. eds., Baroda, 1960–75), using its system of notation for references to text and rejected material (** passages). Short rejected passages are given in the apparatus criticus at the appropriate point in the text (e.g. 2.1**1) and longer ones in Appendix I of each volume (e.g. 2 App.1.1.1).
his grief that he dies shortly after Rāma’s departure from Ayodhya, attributing his death, separated from his son, to retribution for having accidentally killed an ascetic (57–8). His distress is shared by almost all the inhabitants of the town, but not by Rāma himself, who accepts the decree with absolute submission and with the calm self-control which regularly characterises him (16). The more completely to fulfil his father’s commands, he suggests sending messengers to recall Bharata, who, with Śatrughna, is away from Ayodhya on a visit, and so innocent and ignorant of his mother’s machinations, Rāma then makes preparations for his departure with no protest whatsoever, accompanied at their insistence by his wife Sītā and his brother Lakṣmaṇa (17–35). The trio soon evade the huge crowd of mourning citizens who flock after them (40–1), and make their way, first by chariot, then on foot, to mount Citrakūṭa, visiting en route the Niśāda chief Guha (44–5) and the ascetic Bharadvāja (48). On Citrakūṭa they erect a hermitage (50), where they live happily for a while, enjoying the beauties of nature (88–9).

Meanwhile, to avert the graphically predicted evils of a kingless state (61), Bharata has been recalled to Ayodhya (62–5), where he confines his mother’s schemes by angrily rejecting the proffered kingdom (67, 73) and setting off, accompanied by the three queens and a huge retinue, to fetch Rāma back (76). They too meet Guha (78–81), and are entertained to a miraculous banquet by Bharadvāja (84–5). Rāma greets Bharata with none of the rancour displayed by the excitable Lakṣmaṇa (90–1), but enquires calmly about his conduct of public affairs (94, the kaccī sarga), but he insists on carrying out to the letter his father’s express wish, undeterred alike by Bharata’s impassioned pleas and offers to change places with him (97–9), by the cynical materialism expressed by the courtier Jābali (100), and by the defence of orthodox traditional values put forward by the court chaplain, Vasiṣṭha (102). Eventually Bharata and his train return to Ayodhya, taking with them Rāma’s sandals as a symbol of his authority (104–5); Bharata retires to nearby Nandigrāma, from where he administers the country as Rāma’s regent (107). Meanwhile Rāma and his companions decide to leave Citrakūṭa for a more remote part of the forest, by way of the hermitage of Atri and Anasūyā, who listen to their story and present them with handsome gifts of clothing and ornaments (109–11).

Book three, the Aranyakāṇḍa, narrates the exiles’ life amongst the hospitable, respectful sages and the hostile Rāksasas of the Daṇḍaka forest. Despite Rāma’s resolve to live like an ascetic, it is his role as the perfect ksatriya, or warrior, which now comes to the fore. The brothers have to rescue Sītā from the clutches of a Rāksasa, Virāṭa (2–3), and the sages extract a pledge from Rāma to protect them against the depredations of the Rāksasas (5). Sītā (or, more realistically, a relatively late redactor of the poem) feels that such conduct may lead to a charge of aggression, but Rāma counters this argument with an appeal to his duty to protect the ascetics (8–9). For ten years Rāma and his party wander among the sages; we have specific accounts of their visits to Śarabhaṅga (4), Sūrīkaṇṭha (6–7), and to Agastya, who gives him divine weapons and advises him to build a hermitage in nearby Pańcavaṭi (10–12); on the way there, they meet the vulture Jatāyu, who narrates his lineage and offers them his protection (13).

While they are living in the hut they have built in Pańcavaṭi, the hideous but none the less amorous Rāksasi Śūrpanakhā makes advances to the brothers; infuriated by their disdain, she attacks Sītā, and Lakṣmaṇa mutilates her as a punishment (16–17). Her brother Khara attempts to avenge her, first by sending a posse of fourteen Rāksasas to kill the brothers (19), and then, after they have all been killed, by leading an army of fourteen thousand to attack them; Rāma alone defeats them all, killing the generals Dūṣana (25) and Triśiras (26), and finally Khara himself (27–8), to the delight of the Daṇḍaka sages (29). Śūrpanakhā then seeks a different kind of vengeance from another brother, Rāvana, king of Lankā, whom she incites to abduct Sītā (30–2). He compels the aid of the unwilling and timorous Mārica (33–9), whose disguise as a golden deer and feigned call for help induce Sītā to send both brothers after it (40–3); Rāvana, disguised as a mendicant, thus has no difficulty in seizing her (44–7). Jatāyu is fatally wounded when he attempts to intervene (48–9), and Sītā is taken to Lankā, where, having vehemently rejected all Rāvana’s blandishments, she is confined in a grove of aśoka trees (51–4).

Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa meanwhile are in great distress (55–62); the dying Jatāyu tells them what has happened (63–4), and the monster Kabandha advises them to ally themselves with the Vānara leader Sugriva, who will help them to recover Sītā (65–9). On their way to find him they meet a Sabari ascetic-woman (70).

Book four is the Kiskindhākāṇḍa, for it concentrates on events in or relating to the Vānara capital Kiskindhā. The beautiful lake Pampā revives Rāma’s longing for his wife (1); there the two princes are accosted by the exiled Sugriva’s minister, Hanumān, who takes them to his master (2–4). Rāma and Sugriva make a solemn pledge of alliance (5), and Rāma is encouraged by the sight of some of Sītā’s clothes and ornaments which, seeing a group of Vānaras, she had thrown down as Rāvana abducted her (7). Sugriva next enlists Rāma’s help in ousting his usurping brother Vālin (8), and recounts the history
of their quarrel (9–11). Encouraged by Rāma, Sugrīva challenges Vālīn to single combat, and finally, with Rāma’s covert assistance. Vālīn is mortally wounded (12, 14–16). He dies reproaching Rāma (17), who justifies his action (18), mourned by his wife Tārā and his son Aṅgada (20–3), and is cremated with elaborate ceremonial (24). Sugrīva is now installed as king, taking over Vālīn’s harem, including Tārā and his own former wife Rumā, with Aṅgada as his heir (25).

The onset of the rains prevents any further search for Sītā (26–7); afterwards Hanumān (28, 31) and then Laksmana (33) remind Sugrīva of his promise to help. A vast army of Vānara is mustered (36, 38), divided into four, and sent off with instructions to search for Sītā in every direction (39–42). Rāma places most faith in the party led by Hanumān and Aṅgada, and entrusts his ring to Hanumān as a token for Sītā (43). The other three parties return without success (46), but after much searching and several bouts of suicidal despair (48–54), Aṅgada and Hanumān’s troop meet Sāmpāti, Jātāyu’s brother (55); from him they learn that Sītā is on the island Lāṅkā (57), and Hanumān resolves to leap over the sea to find her (65–6).

Book five, called the Sundarakāṇḍa after its account of the beauties of Lāṅkā, opens with a long account of Hanumān’s fantastic leap (1), after which he alights unnoticed in Lāṅkā and wanders about the city, dazzled by its splendours (2–5). Entering Rāvana’s magnificent palace, he searches in vain for Sītā (6–9), but eventually discovers her in the asoka grove (13), and overhears her rebuff Rāvana’s entreaties and threats (18–20). Her guards also try to persuade her to accept Rāvana, though one, Trijata, cheers her by recounting an auspicious dream (21–5). Hanumān gently reveals himself to the incredulous Sītā (28–33) and proves his identity by producing Rāma’s ring (34). Sītā refuses to escape with Hanumān, preferring to be liberated by Rāma in person, but gives the Vānara a jewel as a token for Rāma (35–6). Instead of hurrying back in secret, Hanumān then embarks upon a course of ostentation and wanton destruction (39, 41), kills a number of Rākṣasas champions (42–5) and finally, curious to see Rāvana, allows himself to be captured by Indrajit. Rāvana’s son (46). The angry Rāvana is dissuaded from killing Hanumān outright by his virtuous brother Vibhīṣana’s reminder of the inviolability of envoys (50), so he merely sets fire to the Vānara’s tail (51). This does not have the desired effect: Hanumān uses it as a brand to complete the destruction of Lāṅkā (52). Reassuring himself of Sītā’s safety (53–4), he recrosses the sea (55) and reports to his eager companions (56–8). Overjoyed, they rampage through Sugrīva’s private orchard, the Madhuvana, to the discomfiture of its guards (59–61) before returning to Kiṣkindhā with the news of the success of their mission (62–6).

Book six, the Yuddhakāṇḍa, concerns the final battle between the armies of Rāma and Rāvana. While Rāma and the Vānara march southwards (4), the Rākṣasas prepare for war (6–8), but Vibhīṣana defects when his conciliatory advice is refused (9–10). After some debate, he is welcomed into Rāma’s camp, and consecrated king of Lāṅkā (11–13). The problem of how to cross the sea is solved by Nala’s construction of a causeway (15). Rāvana receives information from his spies about the size of the besieging army (16–21) and after trying in vain to frighten Sītā into submission by showing her the illusion of Rāma’s severed head (22–4) and rejecting Rāma’s ultimatum delivered by Aṅgada (31), joins battle (32–4).

Disaster soon strikes. Indrajit puts Rāma and Laksmana out of action (35), to the despair of the Vānara (36) and the watching Sītā (37–8), but eventually the brothers are restored by the divine intervention of the bird Garuda (40). Then follows a long series of duels, resulting in the eventual deaths of all the most fearsome Rākṣasa champions at the hands of Rāma, Laksmana and the Vānara chiefs (41–86). During this time, Rāma overcomes Rāvana but spares his life (47). One of the most terrible of the Rākṣasas is another brother, Kumbhakarna, who is under a curse of deep sleep (49); the elaborate efforts of his desperate comrades to wake him (48) provide some much needed comic relief from the tension of the battle scenes, but after causing initial havoc among the Vānara even he is slain by Rāma (55). Indrajit repeatedly resorts to magic to strike terror into the Vānara; one of his stratagems is to show Rāma and Laksmana the illusion of Sītā being executed (68); he also embarks upon a sacrifice to ensure victory (69), but is prevented from completing it by Laksmana (73), who eventually kills him (78). Only Rāvana is left, and at last he takes the field again amid bad omens (83). His duel with Rāma is protracted, but finally, after Rāma receives divine help in the form of Indra’s chariot and driver, Rāvana too is killed (97), and Vibhīṣana installed as king (100).

Little trace remains of what was no doubt the original simple happy ending of the story: there is no reason to suppose that Rāma and Sītā were not joyfully reunited and lived happily ever after. In the version now extant, however, later qualms about Sītā’s virtue cause Rāma to be made coldly to spurn her, saying (for the first time) that he undertook the quest and combat simply to vindicate his own and his family’s honour, and not for her sake (103). In desperation, Sītā undergoes an
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ordeal by fire (104). The gods appear to Rāma and reveal that he is in fact an incarnation of Viṣṇu (105) and Agni hands Sītā back to her delighted husband, unhurt and exonerated (106). Daśaratha now appears, blesses his sons, and tells Rāma to return to Ayodhyā and resume his reign (the fourteen years of exile have, it seems, just expired) (107). At Rāma’s request, the dead Vānaras are restored to life by Indra (108); then Rāma, Laksmana and Sītā, and all the Vānaras, and Viśiṣṭa and his counsellors, all climb into Rāvana’s chariot Puspaka, and—surveying as they go the scenes of their earlier adventures—they fly back to Ayodhyā (109–11).

After greeting Bharadvāja (112), Rāma sends Hanumān to find Bharata, who is living the life of an ascetic (113). Bharata is delighted by the news of Rāma’s triumph and return (114), and restores to him the kingdom. This is followed by an elaborate ceremony of installation, and the epic is rounded off with a eulogy of Rāma and his righteous ten-thousand-year reign (116).

Popular stories, from the Iliad and the Chanson de Guillaume to Sherlock Holmes and the Forsyte Saga, have never lacked for sequels and prologues, and the Rāmāyaṇa is no exception. Now forming the first book of the poem, the Bālakāṇḍa is a late addition composed to narrate Rāma’s birth, youthful exploits, and marriage. Some of its incidents develop suggestions in the main narrative, others are purely fanciful, with a distinct tendency towards the miraculous and the mythical: interpolated into the history of Rāma are the legends of Rṣyasrīga (8–10), Kuśa, Brahmādatta and Viśvāmitra (31–3), Gaṅgā (34, 41–2), Umap (35), Kārtikeya (36), Sagara (37–40), the churning of the ocean (44), Dīti (45), Indra and Ahalyā (47–8), Vasiṣṭha, Viśvāmitra and the cow, Śābalā (51–5), Triśaṅku (56–9), Śunāṣāpā (60–1), and Viśvāmitra’s attainment of brāhmaṇ status, despite the distractions of Menakā and Rambhā (62–3).

The birth of Rāma and his three brothers is narrated in miraculous terms: Daśaratha is childless, and in his anxiety for an heir performs first an asvamedha (11–13), then a puṇreṣṭi sacrifice (14). At the gods’ request, Viṣṇu decides to become incarnate as Daśaratha’s four sons as the only means of destroying Rāvana (14–15), and the other gods procreate the Vānar heroes (16); Rāma, then Bharata, then Laksmana and Śatrughna, are born amongst great rejoicing (17).

We are told nothing of their childhood, until Rāma is fifteen, and the sage Viśvāmitra comes to court to ask for Rāma to protect his sacrifice against the attacks of the Rākṣasas Mārica and Subhūtu (17–20), an incident obviously suggested by Mārica’s speech to Rāvana in the Aranyakāṇḍa; with Daśaratha’s reluctant permission, Rāma and Laksmana accompany the sage and drive off his persecutors (21–9).

The account of Rāma’s marriage is another Bālakāṇḍa expansion. Viśvāmitra takes Rāma and Laksmana to attend King Janaka’s sacrifice at Mithilā (30). We learn of Sītā’s miraculous birth, and of Śiva’s bow, which no man has strength to string (65); Rāma not merely bends but breaks the bow (66), and with Daśaratha’s consent, Rāma is married to Sītā, Laksmana to her sister, and Bharata and Śatrughna to her cousins (72).

As the party return to Ayodhyā at the close of the book, Rāma’s status is further enhanced by an encounter with the belligerent Rāma Jāmadagnya, whom he frightens away (73–5). At a very late date, two summaries of the whole story were added to the beginning of the Bālakāṇḍa (1, 3), and its composition ascribed to the sage Vālmīki (2, 4).

The seventh book of the Rāmāyaṇa is the Uttarakāṇḍa, or ‘Further Exploits.’ It is set in Ayodhyā after Rāma’s victorious return, but despite its title, the first third details Rāvana’s misdeeds before his encounter with Rāma, as told to Rāma by Agastya (1–36). Among the many miscellaneous incidents we are told how the Rākṣasas brothers practise penance, and are granted boons by Brahmā: Rāvana becomes invincible except to man, Viśiṣṭa obtains virtue, and Kumbhkarna deep sleep (10). We also learn how Rāvana expelled Kubera from Lankā, taking his Puspaka chariot as booty (11, 14–15), how his attack on Vedavatī leads her to prophesy her reincarnation as Sītā for his destruction (17), and how his incestuous rape of Rambhā provokes the curse which is to prevent him from raping Sītā (26); in a fight with Indra, his son is granted the name Indrajit, together with the promise of inviolability unless interrupted in a sacrifice (30), explaining his death at the hands of Laksmana. Other incidents, such as Rāvana’s attempt to lift mount Kailāsa (16) and his fight with Yama (20–2), are irrelevant to the main story. Agastya’s narrative concludes with an account of Hanumān’s exploits (35–6).

The rest of the book deals with events subsequent to Rāma’s installation. After his guests depart, Rāma lives happily with Sītā for a while, and the country prospers under his rule (40–1), but slanderous gossip about Sītā’s virtue while a prisoner of Rāvana compels Rāma reluctantly to order her exile to Vālmīki’s hermitage (42–4), an order which is carried out only by means of a subterfuge (45–8). On his way to conquer the Asura Lavana and found the city Madhurā (53–62), Śatrughna stays the night at Vālmīki’s hermitage and learns of the birth of Rāma’s twin sons, Kuśa and Lava (58).
These several recensions are each to a considerable extent divergent in their contents as well as their internal divisions. This is due no doubt in part simply to the long time-span over which the epic has been transmitted but another factor must have been the method of transmission. For it is clear that both the epics, the Rāmāyaṇa and the much longer Mahābhārata, were composed against an oral background of heroic ballads and were transmitted through recitation by bards (śūtras). The earliest stages in the development which led to the epics may possibly be seen in the akhyāna hymns of the Rigveda and more certainly in the songs of praise of heroes, legends and ancient stories (gāhānārāśami, itihāsa, purāṇa), the recitation of which formed part of the rituals discussed in the Brāhmaṇas. The next stage must have been the coalescence of such brief compositions into longer ballads and cycles of ballads around some central focus, either a particularly outstanding hero or events of special importance. The two extant epics would constitute the culmination of such an evolutionary process in the recitations of the śūtras, whose duties included not only the recital of their rulers’ praises but also acting as their charioteers in battle or the hunt, thus giving their descriptions a basis in first-hand experience. Later on, itinerant ballad-singers (kūṭālava) played a role in the dissemination of these heroic lays and the epics among the population at large; the myth of their origin connects them with the recital of Vālmiki’s poem by Rāma’s sons Kuśa and Lava.

The significance which such heroic poetry has for the Vedic literature is highlighted when the Chāndogya Upāṇiṣad (7.2.1) speaks of a fifth Veda composed of legendary tales and ancient stories (itihāsa-purāṇa), in a dialogue between two figures who are themselves significant for the growth of the epic, Nārada and Sanatkumāra. This fluid mass of tales, which must have represented a tradition parallel to that of the Vedic literature rather than a part of it, in the case of the Mahābhārata pp. 79–111 esp. p. 82). Incidentally it should be noted that H. Wirtz (Die westliche Recension des Rāmāyaṇa, Bonn, 1994) is concerned with what is now called the NW. recension (first stated by W. Ruben, Studien zur Textgeschichte des Rāmāyaṇa (Bonner Orientalistische Studien 19), Stuttgart, 1936, pp. 30 and 43). Ruben’s suggestion (pp. 1, 12–4) of dividing the S. recension into two sub-recensions does not seem warranted, although the uniformity of the S. recension is certainly not complete.

For a convenient listing of the main divergences of content between the recensions see C. Bulcke, ‘The Three Recensions of the Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa’, JORM 17, 1947–8, pp. 1–32 and 18, 1948–9, pp. 191.

Charlotte Vaudeville comments on the low status of kūṭālavas and suggests that the story of the birth of the śloka from Vālmiki’s observation of a Niṣāda killing a krauṇca (1.2) was prefixed to the epic as part of their claim to respectability (‘Rāmāyaṇa Studies I: The Krauṇca-vadhya episode in the Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa’, JAOS 83, 1963, pp. 327–35).
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gradually coalesced around the story of the war between the Kuruś and the Pândava-s, which may possibly have a basis in the situation in the Delhi area and northwards about 900 BC. Whether this process was due to the unifying influence of a single poet, Vyāsa, is more problematic. But the role of the Bârgava-s in its amplification and in particular its brahmanisation is clear enough.

In the case of the Râmâyana the situation is rather different. The greater uniformity of the language compared with that of the Mahâbhârata and the evidence of a compact vocabulary and style strongly suggest that the traditional ascription of the Râmâyana to Vâlmiki is valid, in so far as it affirms that the core of the work was composed by a single individual; naturally there is no means of showing whether or not this was the Vâlmiki of legend. Vâlmiki himself figures directly in the action of both the Bâla and Uttara kânda-s, at the beginning of the Bâlakânda receiving inspiration to narrate the epic and in the Uttarakânda providing shelter for Sîtâ when she is abandoned by Râma. He is however conspicuous absent from the other books. Efforts were made subsequently to remedy this supposed defect and so, for example, the Southern recension inserts a passage in which Râma, Sîtâ and Laksmana visit Vâlmiki when first they go into the forest (2.1200*), introducing thus typically an inconsistency by locating Vâlmiiki's hermitage on mount Citrakûta and not on the river Tamasâ as in the Bâla and Uttara kânda-s.


† In speaking of the various layers of composition of the Râmâyana, I shall use the name Vâlmiiki to denote the original author of the Râmâyana, as contrasted with later reciters or interpolators, but this in itself implies no further assertion about the date and nature of the work than that the original appears to be traceable to one man, who no doubt used and to some extent incorporated older material in his epic. On the traditions concerning Vâlmiiki as a person, see C. Bulcke, 'About Vâlmiiki' and 'More about Vâlmiiki', JOIB 8, 1958–9, pp. 121–31 and 346–8; however A. Bloch, in 'Vâlmiiki und die Iksvâku-dynastie', IJ 7, 1963–4, pp. 81–122, questions the view, going back to Jacoby, that Vâlmiiki was the court poet of the Iksvâku-dynasty, while E. Hofsûetter on the basis of the story of the Nisâda and the kruaâca sees Vâlmiiki as a 'Lord of Anim-îs' (Der Herr der Tiere im alten Indien (Freiburger Beiträge zur Indologie 14), Wiesbaden, 1980, pp. 91–9).

There can thus be no question of accepting the historicity of the story in its present amplified form; but there is still room for the possibility that there is a kernel of historical or semi-historical fact around which the epic has developed. Just as the Mahâbhârata may reflect the political situation near the beginning of the first millennium BC, the Râmâyana might be based on actual conditions in the Gaṅga basin slightly later. In fact, there has been, especially in the latter part of the nineteenth century, considerable controversy over the origin and influence of the Râma story. Opinions put forward then include: influence from the poems of Homer advanced by Weber and rebutted by Telang; its interpretation by Henry as an allegorical narration of a solar myth; by Lassen, and following him Weber, as an allegorical representation of the Aryans' first attempt to conquer South India; and by Jacobi as a transposition of Vedic mythology about Indra.

More recently, the theories of Georges Dumézil have been brought to bear on the Mahâbhârata and to a much lesser extent on the Râmâyana. Dumézil himself has seen underlying both the Mahâbhârata and the Scandinavian Ragnarök an ancient eschatological conflict played out in three phases: a rigid game by which Evil triumphs for a lengthy period displacing the representatives of Good, a great battle in which the Good takes revenge and decisively eliminates the Evil, and the government of the Good. In such general terms, this analysis could almost as well be applied to the Râmâyana. For there is undoubtedly an element of trickery or the deceitfulness of fate in the claiming of Kailâya's boon. Dumézil has also drawn attention to the three Râmas known in Indian tradition, suggesting a possible tri-functional relationship between the brâhman Paraśurâma, the king Râma Dâśaratha and the plough-bearing Balarâma with his obvious


agricultural links, who furthermore appear in this order. Heino Gehrts sees the Rāmāyana as based on the oriental form of the folk-tale motif of two brothers and one bride (the role of one brother leading to death, of the other to marriage), where the bride is abducted and later freed, a sequence of events equivalent in meaning to the loss and recovery of royal power in the consecration rituals of the rājasīya and aśvamedha. He holds that the ritual meaning of the tale is confirmed by the sacrificial imagery of the epic but there seems very little basis for this notion of a ritual of brotherhood; in addition it requires him to consider that two of the four brothers are a later addition—a drastic simplification of the story, though admittedly one made in an extra-Indian folk version of the Rāma story. In general, it does seem that such transformational interpretations are more readily applicable to the developed stages of the epic than to its origins. Basically I would support the view propounded for other epic poetry also that myth is a final stage in the development of a hero, whose historicity and particularity are transmuted in the popular memory into a mythical and universal form.

Such divergence of view has been accompanied by equal dispute about its dating. Weber placed the date of its composition as late as the third or fourth century AD, whereas Jacobi considered that the core must be before the fifth century BC, probably between the eighth and sixth centuries. Keith's view was that the poem probably belonged to the sixth century BC and Macdonell suggested that its kernel was composed before 500 BC, while the more recent parts were not added till the second century BC or later. More recent estimates have inclined to be somewhat lower. Thus, Bulcke suggests a date towards the end of the fourth century BC, or less probably in the third, Gonda suggests the fourth century BC for its origin and the second century AD as its closing date, Grinster suggests for both epics a period of formation approximately from the fourth century BC to the third century AD, and Guruge simply places it somewhere before 300 BC. However Bhargava, after a re-examination of earlier views, proposes a dating of 600 BC.

One thing that has been generally agreed upon is that the first and last books are later additions. There has also been a growing awareness that the original poem, contained in books 2-6, has over the centuries undergone alterations and additions. The bards who recited it from memory, responding to the expectations of their audience, felt the need to embellish and complete the original story with the insertion of episodes, descriptive digressions, praise of local deities and sacred places, and with geographical descriptions. The majority of the additions to the core are repetitions of events, of pathetic passages or additions of marvellous and supernatural deeds. A good deal of this material has been excluded from the Critical Edition on purely textual grounds and some even had been recognised as interpolated (prāksipta) by the commentators who, between the twelfth and eighteenth centuries, wrote commentaries on the Southern recension explaining any difficulties of language or vocabulary and indicating the religious significance of the text. There have also been attempts by most of the scholars just mentioned to distinguish such passages on criteria—sometimes rather subjective—of relevance, or consistency, or relationship to other versions of the Rāma story, or the degree of development of the narrative, in its transformation from an originally heroic epic into a Vaiṣṇava work. It is worth stressing that, far from being a Vaiṣṇava epic, Vālmiki's Rāmāyana is no religious epic at all. It is lamentable that misunderstanding of this point (often perhaps attributable to oversimplification rather than downright error) should still persist so long after Hermann Jacobi's explicit declaration, which may be paraphrased thus:

Rāma's deification and identification with Viṣṇu are constantly present in the mind of the poet of the first and last books. But in the five genuine books, apart from Vāmśītā's, the identification or relationship to Viṣṇu is rare, and that in the Vāmśītā's. But in the five genuine books, apart from Vāmśītā's, the identification or relationship to Viṣṇu is rare, and that in the Vāmśītā's...
Similarly Hanumān, who is regularly called the son of the wind (vāyu-pūra, mārauśāma) as a metaphor for his speed and legerdemain, is provided at the end of the Kiśkindhākandā with an elaborate story of how he was born to Aśjana, the wife of Kesaran, raped by Vāyu. Rāvana too, originally a relatively obscure figure, had to be made commensurate in stature with his opponent as Rāma increased in significance. Thus his titles or names, Daśagriva and Daśastaṇa, 'ten-necked' and 'ten-headed', originally also perhaps metaphorical for his strength, are taken more literally and he is described as having not only ten heads but twenty arms. The inconsistency between allusions to one or ten heads, two or twenty arms appears present throughout, but the stress on his supernatural abilities certainly tends to be later.

Thus it can be seen that the questions of the dating, nature and significance of the Rāmāyana are all inter-related. With the increasing religious significance of the work comes also its increasing adaptation to brāhmaṇ values, possibly under the influence of those same Bhārgavas responsible for the transformation of the Mahābhārata into its present encyclopaedic form. But our understanding of the precise mechanisms involved and our interpretation of the information which the epic can provide on many aspects of the culture is obviously dependent on an accurate and reliable discrimination of the successive stages of growth and adaptation which the work has undergone. While many attempts have already been made to do this, the problem has been that a particular view of the work's evolution has been adopted and the evidence viewed in the light of it. In order to avoid the pitfalls involved in this type of approach, our analysis will start from an examination of the text itself, from a study of its language and style, to which we shall turn in the next chapter.

Menakā flying over, and being childless wished for a child by her, who is Sitā (2.2385* and 2389*).

15 Das Rāmāyana, p. 65. See further in chapter 7. For a contrary view see R. Antoine, Rāma & the Burgs: Epic Memory in the Ramayana, Calcutta, 1975, who questions whether the poem was ever without its religious outlook and sees its compilers as the authors of the introduction to the Bālakanda producing a consciously literary work and fathering their efforts onto Vālmiki; he even sees the major figures as temporal representatives of the Hindu triad: Rāvana and Vībhāṣana of Brahmā, Rāma of Viṣṇu and Indraji of Śiva (p. 76). In fact, later mythologising tends to link Rāvana with Śiva.

16 The development of the Rāma story both within and beyond India will be surveyed in chapters 8 and 9.

17 However, later texts can still refer to Sitā as born; for example the Vāmana Purāṇa speaks of her as born in king Janaka's house (tato jāti gṛhe rājya janakasya mahārāmanah / sitā nāma vihīyātā rūmapani pativratā, Saromāhāmya 16.10).

18 On this last point, cf. Gonda, Early Viṣṇuism, p. 29. More generally, see C. Buleke, 'La naissance de Sitā', BEFEO 46, 1952, pp. 107–17. In a later development still, the N. recension adds to Sitā's account of herself to Anāstīya that Janaka saw the Apsaras from a few interpolated passages, this concept is absent and by contrast Rāma is thoroughly human. Such a transformation of Rāma's character could only have taken place over a long span of time. Such a transformation is operative not only with regard to Rāma's character but also with regard to Sitā's portrayal, for instance, the question of her birth, and to many other features of the story.

Rāma develops from the ideal figure of the dutiful son and prince through the embodiment of dharma to the stage ultimately of identification as an avatāra of Viṣṇu found regularly in the Bāla and Uttara kāṇḍas, though not constantly as Jacobs implies. This development will be taken up again subsequently and need not be elaborated on here. However, to a lesser extent it is accompanied by a similar process of mythologisation in respect of several of the other characters, the most obvious of which is the question of Sitā's parentage. From within the Rāmāyana itself, there is absolutely no warrant for supposing that Sitā is the daughter of Rāvana or the sister of Rāma or the like, as she is presented in certain other versions. Only two views are possible: either she is the daughter of Janaka and his wife or she was found in his furrow by Janaka as he was ploughing. Both views can be supported by a number of references, but they are obviously incompatible and some explanation must be found. Adherence to the view of Sitā as foundling involves dismissing the references to normal parentage as mere accidental lapses by the poet or reciter. While this is certainly possible, though hardly flattering to either, the number of such references is against it and especially their tendency to occur mainly in earlier parts, whereas the foundling references occur more often later. This strongly suggests that the story of Sitā in the furrow is a later development, which no doubt was influenced by the etymology of the name and by the fact that the minor Vedic goddess was especially associated with Indra.