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Making It Nice: Kāvya in the Second Century

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Abstract Around the second century of our era, *kāvya* steps out from the shadows. What was *kāvya* at this early moment? What ties together the *kāvya* produced within the Kuṣāṇa empire in North India, in Sanskrit, with that produced within the Sātavāhana empire of the South, in Prakrit? What ties the Buddhist *kāvya* of Mātṛceṭa, Aśvaghoṣa, and Kumāralāta to the Jain *kāvya* of Pālitta and the secular *kāvya* found in the *Seven Centuries*? One answer involves the idea of ornamentation (*alaṃkāra*): the features that, when worked into a text, transform it into an aesthetic object, not simply the "figures" of sound and sense with which this word would later be associated. In the Prakrit texts associated with the Sātavāhana court, ornamentation is essential—the *Seven Centuries* proclaims that all of its verses have it—but it was just as essential for it to be inconspicuous. The paradox of "artless artifice" was central to the aesthetic of these texts. In the Sanskrit texts of the North, the reverse was the case: massive effort was expended in making the artless appear artful, in casting the teachings and stories of Buddhism as *kāvya*. I will offer a few speculations about why the North and South took these different "paths," and conclude by connecting them with the later discussion in Sanskrit poetics about the two "paths" of *kāvya*.

Keywords Kāvya · Literary history · Hāla · Sātavāhana · Kaniṣka · Aśvaghoṣa · Mātṛceṭa

سادگی و پرکاری ہے خودی و ہشیاری
حسن کو تغافل میں جرئت ازما پایا
— Ghalib

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One of the many fragmentary manuscripts discovered in the elaborate system of rock-cut caves in Qizil, in the Xinjiang province of China, contains a group of verses in praise of the Buddhist monk Aśvaghoṣa, who lived in the second century CE.[1] We don't know who the author was. It could have been anyone in the chain connecting Aśvaghoṣa to the Qizil manuscript, which was probably written around the fourth century. One of the only complete lines of the eulogy says that "the texts of that monk, of all different kinds, have gone all over the world and become its ornaments."[2] We could read this simply as a formulaic praise of a poet whose works formed an important part of the curriculum in Buddhist monasteries in Central Asia. But I think the word "ornament" is used deliberately: Aśvaghoṣa's relation to the concept of ornamentation defined his literary activity.

I will use this concept to situate Aśvaghoṣa in one of his many contexts, that of Indian literary history. We know that Aśvaghoṣa is one of the earliest practicioners of the belletristic writing that his contemporaries, and he himself, called *kāvya*. Whatever *kāvya*'s origins may be—and this is a perennial topic of debate—by Aśvaghoṣa's time it had become a movement. Situating Aśvaghoṣa in this movement, however, has proven difficult. The earliest texts are all famously hard to date. Influences can often be detected, but clear evidence of intertextual relationships is hard to come by. And although *kāvya* is clearly a rule-bound practice, exactly what the rules were at this early stage is impossible to tell. For my purposes, then, "situating" Aśvaghoṣa in this movement means recovering and analyzing his literary ideals, and comparing them to the ideals of other early poets. These ideals, I'll argue, correspond to real communities of poetic practice, even though our sources don't give us a very granular view of these communities. This approach thus lets us see how the constitutive values of the *kāvya* movement are given specific and divergent interpretations in different locales.

Making it Nice

The first part of this argument is relatively uncontroversial: at the beginning of the common era, as *kāvya* emerged from the shadows in various parts of India, what characterized this new discourse above all else was a concern for ornamentation in language. I use "ornamentation" here as a translation of *alaṃkāra*, but it's important to note that the Sanskrit term has a wider range of application. Whereas "ornamentation" conjures up images of the rococo, and can imply unnecessary and uncalled-for elaboration, *alaṃkāra* refers in the first place to "rendering capable," of doing what is necessary in order for something to perform its true function. In the context of *kāvya*, ornamentation allowed a text to perform an aesthetic function over and above its communicative functions; it rendered the text an aesthetic object in itself. Thus I understand *alaṃkāra* broadly, not just as the particular figures of sound and sense that theorists later listed under this category,

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[1] I assume, with almost all of the available evidence, that Aśvaghoṣa was a contemporary of Kaniṣka (see Lévi 1908 and 1936), and that the latter ruled from about 126 to 150 CE (see Falk 2001).

[2] *lokālaṃkārabhūtaṃ carati bahuvidhaṃ vāṅ[maya](ṃ ya)[s]ya sādhor*; Lüders (1926, p. 33).

but as the general phenomenon of textual beauty that those figures instantiate. *Saundaryam alaṃkāraḥ*, as the theorist Vāmana will say in the eighth century.[3] In a slightly less rarefied register, we can say that ornamentation is "making it nice." I'm partial to this expression because it encompasses not only the jaw-dropping beauty of truly successful *kāvya*, but also the smaller effects, noticeable if not always striking, that are more consistent features of *kāvya*.

It is clear that, at some point, ornamentation in this sense was thought to be the constitutive feature of *kāvya*. It gave its name to the body of knowledge that was concerned with analyzing and theorizing *kāvya*: *alaṃkāraśāstra*, "the science of ornamentation." But was it always so? Was *kāvya* a discourse of ornamentation already in Aśvaghoṣa's time? What, in fact, do we mean by *kāvya* "in Aśvaghoṣa's time"?

Given how little we know for certain about the terrain of *kāvya* in Aśvaghoṣa's time, we can start to answer this question by looking at one text that we happen to know quite a bit about. This is Rudradāman's inscription at Junāgaṛh, in the Kathiawad peninsula of today's Gujarat, which was inscribed in 150 CE. Rudradāman was a king in the "Kṣatrapa" dynasty founded by his grandfather Caṣṭana, so called because its rulers took this title, which was originally used for military governors under the Achaemenids. Scholars also call this dynasty "Indo-Scythian," because the Kṣatrapas who established independent kingdoms in India descended from "Scythian" or Śaka communities in Central Asia. The Junāgaṛh inscription is very often seen as one of the earliest dateable examples of *kāvya*, since it is composed in a highly literary prose style. In a long sentence describing Rudradāman, he is said to be "skilled in the composition of *kāvya*s in prose and verse, which are exquisitely *ornamented* by the confluence of clear, swift, sweet, wonderful, and pleasing language."[4] This passage is important because it shows not only that ornamentation was part of the vocabulary for talking about *kāvya* at an early period, but also that the means of ornamentation included the qualities of language listed there.

I won't have much to say in what follows about Rudradāman's kingdom: it is not clear whether the "Ujjayinī plays" ascribed to Śūdraka, the *Gift of a Lotus* (*Padmaprābhṛtaka*) and the *Little Clay Cart* (*Mṛcchakaṭikā*), belong to the same political formation. But as the map below shows (Fig. 1), the kingdom of the Kṣatrapas formed a hinge between two other second-century kingdoms: that of the Kuṣāṇas to the north, and that of the Sātavāhanas to the south. Some of the earliest surviving *kāvya* was produced within these two kingdoms. But their role extends further than just providing historical context: in each case, the royal elite—kings, princes, nobles, and ministers—were actively involved in the production of *kāvya*.

The Kuṣāṇas, who had previously settled in what is now northern Afghanistan, extended their kingdom into northern India in the later first and second centuries CE, with major centers in Gandhāra and Mathurā. Unlike the Sātavāhanas, the Kuṣāṇas

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[3] Raghavan (1973 [1942]), who cites Vāmana on p. 55; cf. also his discussion of "ornamentation" in Western aesthetic canons on pp. 67–68.

[4] Sircar (1965: 179); see also Mirashi (1981, p. 126): *sphuṭa-laghu-madhura-citra-kānta-śabda-samayodārālaṃkṛta-gadya-padya-[kāvya-vidhāna-praviṇe]na …*

left no inscriptions that have the characteristics of *kāvya*.[5] But a number of poets are held by Buddhist tradition to have been personally connected to the Kuṣāṇa court. This includes, first of all, Mātṛceṭa, whose hymns to the Buddha were learned by heart by every monk in India.[6] Mātṛceṭa wrote a *Letter to King Kaniṣka* (*Mahārājakaniṣkalekha*), now available only in Tibetan translation, the first verse of which alludes to an invitation from the king that Mātṛceṭa turned down for reasons of old age and infirmity.[7] Aśvaghoṣa was also said to be personally connected to Kaniṣka. He is called the king's *kalyāṇamitra*, and he is mentioned together with the minister Māṭhara and the physician Caraka as one the king's "three friends."[8] Kumāralāta, a grammarian and poet from Takṣaśīla, probably lived a generation or two after Aśvaghoṣa. He mentions Kaniṣka several times in his collection of Buddhist stories, the *Set of Examples Adorned by Imagination* (*Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā Dṛṣṭāntapaṅkti*), but I am not aware of a personal connection between Kumāralāta and the Kuṣāṇa rulers.

The Sātavāhanas were the self-styled "Masters of the Deccan" (*dakṣiṇāpatha-pati-*). The second century might be called the Golden Age of the Sātavāhanas: it began during the long rule of Vāsiṣṭhīputra Śrī Puḷumāvi (ca. 84–119), who extended the empire southwards and eastwards, and ended with the rule of Gautamīputra Śrīyajña Sātakarṇi (ca. 171–199).[9] Some of the inscriptions of the Sātavāhanas clearly belong to the *kāvya* movement: with their dense compounds, poetic expressions, and figures of sound and sense, they set a new standard for political self-expression in India. But these were not the only *kāvya*s they produced. The *Seven Centuries* (*Sattasaī*), one of the most influential lyric anthologies in India, was compiled by a Sātavāhana ruler with the name, or pen-name, of Hāla.[10] The poets who contributed verses to the *Seven Centuries* may have been personally connected to the Sātavāhana rulers, above all through the *goṣṭhī*s that they were said to organize. This is certainly true of Pālitta, a Jain poet whose verses appear in the *Seven Centuries* but who also composed a romance in verse called the *Taraṅgavatī*. The *Great Story* of Guṇāḍhya is also said by some sources to have been a product of

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[5] Unless one includes the Rabātak inscription of Kaniṣka, in Bactrian (Sims-Williams 2004), but this seems to be modelled on Achaemenid models of royal self-presentation rather than on the *kāvya* style of earlier Indian inscriptions (e.g., that of Nāganikā at Nāṇeghāṭ, or that of Khāravela at Hāthigumpha).

[6] According to the testimony of Yijing (Hartmann 1987, p. 15).

[7] Thomas (1903), Hahn (1992).

[8] Bailey (1942), referring to a Khotanese text (*aśagauṣa kaḍḍña-maittra*); Lévi (1903), referring to the *Sutra on the Casket of Miscellaneous Jewels* (雜寶藏經 *Zabaozang jing*) and the *History of the Transmission of the Dharma Storehouse* (付法藏因緣傳 *Fu fazang yinyuan zhuan*), both compiled by Kiṅkara (吉迦夜) and Tanyao (曇曜) in 472 CE. The *Fu fazang yinyuan zhuan* contains a story about Aśvaghoṣa. He had converted many princes to Buddhism in Pāṭaliputra "with his music and teaching" (should we understand: *kāvya*?). The king ordered him to stop. Later on, Kaniṣka besieged the city, and the king of Pāṭaliputra offered Kaniṣka Aśvaghoṣa, the Buddha's begging-bowl, and a "naturally compassionate" rooster who did not drink any water that contained insects.

[9] The most up-to-date history of the Sātavāhanas in general is Shailendra Bhandare's (1999) dissertation. For their inscriptions and literary patronage see chapter 3 of Ollett (2017).

[10] I find the arguments that the *Seven Centuries* was composed after the fall of the Sātavāhana empire to be unconvincing; the evidence for an earlier date is unanimous.
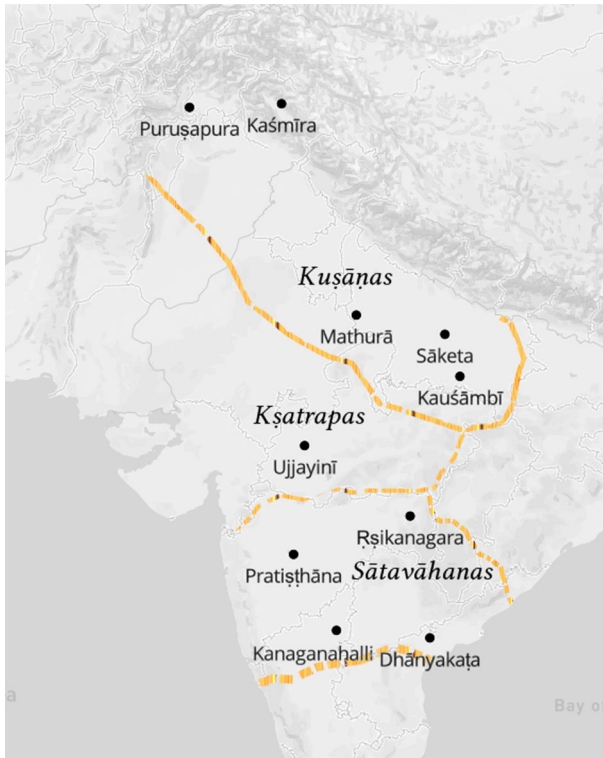
Fig. 1 The approximate extent of the Kṣatrapa, Sātavāhana, and Kuṣāṇa kingdoms in the second century CE

the Sātavāhana court.[11] Buddhist authors are largely absent from this southern literary culture, despite the fact that the Sātavāhanas gave generously to Buddhist communities.[12] But the great teacher Nāgārjuna lived under the Sātavāhanas and possibly addressed two introductory texts on Buddhism, the *Strand of Jewels* (*Ratnāvalī*) and *Letter to a Friend* (*Suhṛllekha*), to a Sātavāhana king.[13]

Thus, as soon as we can talk about *kāvya* with any historical specificity, we are talking about texts that are embedded in a particular geopolitical space. This is despite the tendency towards abstraction and universalism that *kāvya* is sometimes associated with. My discussion will be based on the terrain of *kāvya* surveyed in the preceding paragraphs. This survey is necessarily partial, given the amount that is lost, but there is one omission that deserves further comment. Where does Tamil fit into this picture? I agree with scholars who have argued that the earliest Tamil

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[11] See Lacôte (1908) and Tsuchida (2002); only the Sanskrit versions produced in Kashmir (from the eleventh century) place Guṇāḍhya in the Sātavāhana court; the earlier Tamil and Prakrit versions do not.

[12] See Fynes (1995) on the patronage of the Sātavāhanas.

[13] The authenticity of the *Letter to a Friend*, which is only available in Tibetan translation, is somewhat doubtful; see Dietz (1983). For the stories that connect Nāgārjuna to Sātavāhana see Lévi (1936) and Sohoni (1999).

poems—the so-called Caṅkam poems—were full-fledged participants in the wider *kāvya* movement, and I consider it likely that some of these poems, such as those of the *Kuṟuntokai*, were composed in the second century.[14] I also find the connections between Tamil and Prakrit poetry, highlighted by George Hart and others, to be convincing.[15] The account I offer here should certainly be expanded to account for Tamil *kāvya*, which is to say, I will wait for others who are much more knowledgable about Tamil than I am to explain the significance of ornamentation as a literary ideal in that literature.

Across this differentiated field, the concept of ornamentation has a number of general features. Taken together, these are what makes *kāvya* "nice," rendering it not just communicative but aesthetically pleasing. Of course, many of these features are also found in other kinds of texts apart from *kāvya*, and hence their confluence—their *samaya*, if this is what the word means in Rudradāman's inscription—is what matters.

First, language. In contrast to previous eras, textual production in the second century is dominated by two languages, Sanskrit and Prakrit.[16] Texts in Sanskrit and Prakrit were considered to be nice; others weren't. This is true even for Jains and Buddhists, who had previously used different languages for transmitting their scriptures, and increasingly turned to Sanskrit and Prakrit in the beginning of the common era. Accordingly, this period, with about a century on either side, is known for the progressive "Sanskritization" of discourse, and I have suggested that there was a parallel "Prakritization" as well.[17]

Second, content. Nice texts are about nice things. One of the most common themes in *kāvya* is beauty, above all the beauty of nature and the beauty of men and women, which are often projected onto each other. Sculpture of the second century exhibits the same preoccupations, for example the reliefs from the Buddhist *stūpa*s at Kanaganahalli and Amarāvati. Literature and art took their place in an "aestheticized lifestyle," such as was described in the *Kāmasūtra* of Vātsyāyana, in which life was organized around the cultivation of refined desires and their fulfillment.[18] I believe this "culture of *kāma*" was widespread in the second century, and probably related to the period's unprecedented material prosperity, although art and literature leaves no doubt that the royal court was imagined to be its primary center. In fact, most of the uses of the word *alaṃkṛ-* in Aśvaghoṣa's poetry refer to the material culture of the royal court: regalia, jewelry, architecture, and clothing.[19] A series of relief from the *mahācaitya* at Kanaganahalli shows the Sātavāhana kings fitted out in the *alaṃkāra*s of royalty and enjoying the company of beautiful women.

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[14] Wilden (2014).

[15] Hart (1975).

[16] By "Prakrit" I do not mean, tautologically, any language that is not Sanskrit, which is how scholars sometimes use this word. I mean the specific literary language that later became known as Mahārāṣṭrī. See Ollett (2017) for details.

[17] See chapter 4 of Ollett (2017).

[18] Ali (2004).

[19] See *Story of the Buddha* 6.59 (of regalia like the royal turban), 8.3 (of Siddhārtha's caparisoned horse), 3.53 (of the road leading to the palace).

Fig. 2 The Sātavāhana king Mantalaka, depicted on a casing-slab at the *stūpa* of Kanaganahalli in Gulbarga district, Karnataka. (Photograph by the author with the permission of the Archaeological Survey of India.)

This is not to say that the content of second-century literature is "nice" in a banal sense, but only that they are overwhelming preoccupied with beauty, and that their central themes often revolve around the human aims of love and pleasure, however deeply they are problematized. Even poems that ultimately involve the renunciation these goals—such as Aśvaghoṣa's *Handsome Nanda* and Pālitta's *Taraṅgavatī*—are, in a significant sense, love poems (Fig. 2).

Third, you need to have a vocabulary suited for talking about nice things. The poetic lexicon is filled with words for beautiful things, and it comes with a set of

conventions for using them: every face a moon, every eye a lotus, every lip a *bimba* fruit, every hand a flowerbud, every arm a creeping tendril.[20] It is impossible to know when this way of talking started or took hold, but it is certainly in place in the second century: from Mātṛceṭa's hymns in Kashmir, to Rudradāman's inscription in Gujarat, to the Deccan countryside that Hāla evokes.

Fourth, technique. The familiar meaning of *alaṃkāra* as a "figure" of sound or sense points to the role that these figures had in making a text nice. But by "technique" I don't simply mean these poetic figures. A much more general concern with patterning is at work in early *kāvya*: repetitions, inversions, correspondences, and so on abound, calling as much attention to the manner of speaking as to what is spoken, as I'll discuss in connection with Aśvaghoṣa's style.

Fifth is arrangement. Nice texts are not just written but composed. There are choices to be made in putting texts together: the use of metrical forms, the repetition of sounds and ideas, using compound words or analytic expressions. Theorists would later classify compositions on the basis of the "qualities" that they embodied, using the same terms that Rudradāman mentioned in his inscription. In this connection, it is worth mentioning that *kāvya* presupposes a fundamental revision of the metrical systems of both Sanskrit and Prakrit, employing new, "secular" (*laukika*) meters that operate according to different underlying principles of versification from earlier meters.[21]

Sixth, which is the most important and yet most difficult to define, being nice *mattered* in the second century much more than it did previously. It was important to people who composed texts, whoever and wherever they were, that those texts had at least some of the features in this list. We can speak of a broadly-based aestheticization of discourse. "Making it nice" (*alaṃkṛ-*) was the slogan of an aesthetic sensibility that traversed linguistic, political, and religious boundaries—a sensibility that lies at the base of what Sheldon Pollock called, for this reason, the Sanskrit cosmopolis.[22]

The Northern Style: Making the Artless Seem Artful

The second half of my argument is that the concept of ornamentation, so central to *kāvya* as a whole, was understood in divergent ways by the Buddhist poets of the north and the poets associated with the Sātavāhana court in the south. That is, both groups were centrally concerned with producing *kāvya*, but had very different ideas about the role that ornamentation should play in *kāvya* and consequently about what *kāvya* itself should be. This difference has far-reaching consequences, both for how we understand the works of these poets themselves and for and how we situate them in the broader history of the *kāvya* movement.

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[20] The classic work on this topic is Ingalls (1962).

[21] The term *laukika* is Piṅgala's (*Chandaḥsūtra* 4.9). In Sanskrit, this change meant the regulation of the weight of every syllable in the metrical pattern (whereas before there were free positions that could be realized by either light or heavy syllables); in Prakrit, it meant the spread of mora-counting meters at the cost of syllable-counting meters.

[22] Pollock (2006).

   The northern poets had what I consider to be a common-sense or even naïve understanding of the role of ornamentation. The whole point of producing literature, for them, was to make Buddhism more attractive, to make it "nice." "Anything other than liberation that appears here," Aśvaghoṣa famously wrote at the end of *Handsome Nanda*, "has been introduced from the conventions of *kāvya*, in order to make it pleasing to the heart, like a bitter medicine mixed with honey."[23] Whether or not Aśvaghoṣa's use of the "conventions of *kāvya*" was completely instrumental, I don't think we can deny that he imagined those conventions to be a source of charm and beauty.[24] It is an open question whether these conventions in general need to be recognized as such in order to fulfill this function, but I think that for the northern poets, artifice was precisely the value that poets added to their subject-matter, and it was important for it to be conspicuous. The job of these poets was to make the artless seem artful.

   This is evident on the level of style, the way that they composed their poetry, and on the level of program, the kinds of poetry they produced. Let's begin with style.[25] Aśvaghoṣa's style is perspicuous, but he has showy tendencies that often result in a "I-see-what-you-did-there" effect. Against the aesthetic canons of later Sanskrit poetry, his fondness for syntactic patterns is particularly noticeable. Indeed, as far as I know, Sanskrit poetics doesn't have a general word for this kind of device, although *dīpaka* represents one subvariety that Aśvaghoṣa does use occasionally. What I mean are verses like this, from the *Story of the Buddha*: "He spoke what was pleasant, but not what was devoid of meaning; he spoke the truth, but not what was unwelcome; for a pleasant untruth, or a harsh truth, he was too ashamed to speak even to himself."[26] A strict syntactic parallelism in the first half presents an evenly-balanced contrast that is paired, twice, in the second half. Similar patterns can be discerned in longer passages. The best example is the Bodhisattva's response to Śreṇya in chapter 11 of the *Story of the Buddha*. At first, there are a few conspicuous echoes (*kāmeṣv atṛpto nahuṣaḥ papāta* in v. 14 and *jagāma nāśaṃ viṣayeṣv atṛptaḥ* in v. 15), but once he gets going, the parallelism is more driving and insistent: every verse ends in a question, and after a while, the question becomes a refrain, "Is there anyone who would let himself fall in love with pleasures?"[27]

   A special case of syntactic parallelism is what Gerard Manley Hopkins called the "figure of grammar": repetitions and variations of grammatical categories, which Sanskrit possesses in abundance. Aśvaghoṣa had a reputation for these kinds of figures. One of the only verses cited from his work by classical Sanskrit authors is a verse from the *Story of the Buddha* that builds its first half entirely out of nouns, and its second half out of a rapid succession of verbs: "Still, blind, their arms hanging

[23] *Handsome Nanda* 18.64: *yan mokṣāt kṛtam anyad atra hi mayā tat kāvyadharmāt kṛtaṃ | pātuṃ tiktam ivauṣadhaṃ madhuyutaṃ hṛdyaṃ kathaṃ syād iti ||.*

[24] This topic is discussed in Roy Tzohar's contribution to this issue.

[25] The best overview of Aśvaghoṣa's style remains E. H. Johnston's essay in his edition and translation of the text (1936: lxxix–xcviii).

[26] 2.38: *sāntvaṃ babhāṣe na ca nārthavad yaj jajalpa tattvaṃ na ca vipriyaṃ yat | sāntvaṃ hy atattvaṃ paruṣaṃ ca tattvaṃ hriyāśakann ātmana eva vaktum ||.*

[27] vv. 24–33: *kāmeṣu kasyātmavato ratiḥ syāt.*

slack from their shoulders, the women seemed unconcious in their sorrow. They did not cry out, they did not weep, they did not wail, they did not move. They were, for that moment, like painted pictures."[28] A more extreme example comes from the second chapter of *Handsome Nanda*, which modulates through Sanskrit's various past tenses. When Aśvaghoṣa gets to the reduplicated aorist, he endeavors to use each form as many times as possible, with subtle shifts in meaning, turning the figure of grammar into a figure of sound.[29]

Aśvaghoṣa does not shy away from the repetition of whole words, a device about which later theorists were very ambivalent. A verse in the sixth chapter of *Handsome Nanda*, for example, reads: "Wearing her lotus-colored dress, the lotus-faced woman with eyes as long as lotus petals withered like the lotus-hued Lakṣmī without her lotus, like a lotus-flower garland in the sun."[30] Examples can easily be multiplied: "At home in the pursuit of pleasure, faltering in the pursuit of mendicancy, strengthened by the best of all teachers, he pursued the pursuit of celibacy."[31] These repetitions are sometimes concentrated in interlocking patterns, as in a passage at the end of *Handsome Nanda* that could be characterized as an alliterative crescendo, culminating in *kṛtsnaṃ kṛtaṃ me kṛtakārya kāryaṃ*.[32] He is especially fond of doing this with names: *citra* and *caitraratha*, *kumāra* and *sanatkumāra*, *aśakya* and *śākya*, and so on. Johnston noticed that "Yaśodharā's name can never be mentioned without adding one or more compounds ending in -*dharā*."[33]

My point is not just that Aśvaghoṣa's artifice is sometimes on the nose, or as Johnston called it, "academical" and "pedantic." It is that this particular kind of artifice—conspicuous, learned, and playful—was a large part of what made *kāvya kāvya*. So much that Aśvaghoṣa offers a mild apology for it at the end of the *Story of the Buddha*: "Thus this poem has been composed for the good and happiness of all

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[28] 8.25: *hatatviṣo 'ndhāḥ śithilāṃsabāhavaḥ striyo viṣādena vicetanā iva | na cakruśur no rurudur na sasvanur na celur āsur likhitā iva kṣaṇam ||.* See Warder (1990 [1974]: §733), referring to Rājaśekhara, *Analysis of Literature (Kāvyamīmāṃsā)* p. 18.

[29] For example 2.35–36: *aśrāntaḥ samaye yajvā yajñabhūmim amīmapat | pālanāc ca dvijān brahma nirudvignān amīmapat | gurubhir vidhivat kāle saumyaḥ somam amīmapat | tapasā tejasā caiva dviṣatsainyam amīmapat ||* ("The king, as a sacrificer, assiduously caused the sacrificial ground to be measured out at the appropriate times; through his protection, he caused the Brahmans to offer their prayers without interruption; himself mild, he caused the mild soma-juice to be pressed by the elders according to the hallowed rules; through his austerity and brilliance, he hemmed in the army of his enemies").

[30] 6.26: *sā padmarāgaṃ vasanaṃ vasānā padmānanā padmadalāyatākṣī | padmā vipadmā patiteva lakṣmīḥ śuśoṣa padmasrag ivātapena ||.*

[31] *Handsome Nanda* 11.4: *kāmacaryāsu kuśalo bhikṣucaryāsu viklavaḥ | paramācāryaviṣṭabdho brahmacaryaṃ cacāra saḥ ||.*

[32] *Handsome Nanda* 18.7–10: *yā dṛṣṭiśalyo hṛdayāvagāḍhaḥ prabho bhṛśaṃ mām atudat sutīkṣṇaḥ | tvadvākyasaṃdaṃśamukhena me sa samuddhṛtaḥ śalyahṛteva śalyaḥ || kathaṃkathābhāvagato 'smi yena chinnaḥ sa niḥśaṃśaya saṃśayo me | tacchāsanāt satprathamāgato 'smi sudeśikasyeva pathi praṇaṣṭaḥ | yat pītam āsvādavaśendriyeṇa darpeṇa kandarpa viṣaṃ mayāsīt || tanme hataṃ tvadvacanāgadena viṣaṃ vināśīva mahāgadena | kṣayaṃ gataṃ janma nirastajanman saddharmacaryāmuṣito 'smi samyak || kṛtsnaṃ kṛtaṃ me kṛtakārya kāryaṃ lokeṣu bhūto 'smi na lokadharmā ||.*

[33] See p. xc of his introduction to the *Story of the Buddha*.

people in accordance with the Sage's scriptures, out of reverence for the Bull of sages, and not to display the qualities of learning or skill in poetry."[34]

But when we widen the perspective from style to program, we can see that "making it nice" in this sense was literally the name of the game for northern poets. It was once thought that Aśvaghoṣa had written a Sanskrit text called the *Ornament of the Sūtras*, of which the Chinese *Great Ornament Treatise* is a translation. As it turns out, the *Great Ornament Treatise* is a translation of the work of Kumāralāta I mentioned earlier. But Heinrich Lüders, who published the Sanskrit fragments of Kumāralāta's work, speculated that it was modelled on an earlier work of Aśvaghoṣa's. And there is mounting evidence that a text called the *Ornament of the Sūtras* existed, and that Aśvaghoṣa was its author.[35] The *Ornament of the Sūtras* would have been precisely what it sounds like. The ornamentation might have consisted first of all in presenting the *sūtra*s themselves in Sanskrit verse, as another fragmentary manuscript from Qizil does.[36] This alone might have been a major change, since many Buddhist communities still transmitted the *sūtra*s in languages other than Sanskrit. In any case, as noted earlier, we must see the use of Sanskrit as a precondition for the project of "making it nice": by the second century, it was well on its way to becoming the vehicular language of intellectuals across South Asia and edging out its competitors as a language of power. Perhaps a generation or so earlier than Aśvaghoṣa, the Sarvāstivādins had taken to transmitting the scriptures in Sanskrit.[37] Second, it might have consisted in adding commentary and explanation to the scriptures in a mixture of prose and verse, as in the aforementioned Qizil manuscript as well as Kumāralāta's and Āryaśūra's books of stories. These texts have a striking variety of metrical forms, some of which are very long, and they include meters that are otherwise unknown or very rare. The *Jānāśrayī*, a metrical textbook of about 600 CE, refers the reader to the *Ornament of the Sūtras* for examples of the super-long meters known as *daṇḍaka*s.[38]

The project of "making the scriptures nice" accords with what Aśvaghoṣa tells us of his own motives at the end of *Handsome Nanda*: the techniques of *kāvya* are a means of catching the attention of people who are not otherwise interested in the Buddhist teaching. It is also an admission that the scriptures lack the elegance and appeal of *kāvya*. As anyone who has read Augustine's *Confessions* will know, Christians were well aware that their scriptures were prosaic and inelegant in comparison to the eloquence of non-Christian authors such as Virgil. Augustine

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[34] *Story of the Buddha* 28.74, Johnston's translation.

[35] See Lüders (1926, pp. 17–36). The *Jānāśrayī Chandoviciti*, which cites Aśvaghoṣa elsewhere, knew of a text called the *Sūtrālaṃkāra* (Lévi 1936, p. 80; see below). See also Hanisch (2007), who refers to a Tibetan commentary on the *Jātakamālā* that quotes verses from the *mDo sde rgyan* (*Sūtrālaṃkāra*) of gŹan la phan pa'i dbyaṅs (Parahitaghoṣa, i.e., A-sva-ghoṣa).

[36] Lüders (1926, pp. 29–32) discusses the manuscript, which is still unpublished. See also Thomas (1946).

[37] Bronkhorst (2010), Pollock (2006), Aklujkar (1996).

[38] *Jānāśrayī Chandoviciti* p. 69: *śeṣāṇām udāharaṇāni granthavistarabhayān nodāhṛtāni. tāny api kāvyeṣu sūtralaṅkārādiṣu draṣṭavyāni.* For a comparison of Kumāralāta's, Aśvaghoṣa's, and Āryaśūra's metrical practice see Lüders (1926, pp. 54–56). Kumāralāta uses the *bhujaṃgavijṛmbhita*, the longest meter in Sanskrit literature apart from the *daṇḍaka*s (Lüders 1926, p. 174).

learned to love the "humble speech," as he called it, but some Christians sought to solve this problem by excerpting and rearranging bits from classical authors into composite texts called *cento*s. The most well-known example is Faltonia Betitia Proba's *Cento vergilianus de laudibus Christi*.[39] And intertextuality is one of the principal phenomena of "making it nice." If we can put quotation marks around phrases of various length in Proba's poetry to indicate that they are conscious borrowings from other texts, Aśvaghoṣa would have us put quotation marks around themes, phrases, motifs, images, and meters, as if to say, "this is what we do when we make *kāvya*s."

The Southern Style: Making the Artful Seem Artless

By contrast, the south developed a poetics in which it was the poet's job to make the artful seem artless, and in which one of the joys of listening was identifying and appreciating these inconspicuous hints of artifice. One of the first verses of the *Seven Centuries* announces that the poems in that collection all possess a certain kind of ornamentation (*sālaṃkārāṇa*).[40] It might have gone without saying that the verses in literary anthologies are "nice." But I think that this verse is more of a guarantee that they are, despite appearances to the contrary: it is challenge to the reader, asking him or her to find the artifice.

Consider another verse from the same anthology. Like many such verses, it is ostensibly about sex. But beneath the surface we can discern a more general engagement with the themes of technique, artifice, and naturalness that invites a metapoetic reading: "Technically sophisticated lovemaking, with its multiple orgasms, can't compare to the pleasures of true love, wherever and however they come."[41] There are poets who will pull out all the stops, and try every trick in the book, to hold their readers' interest. But if they lack a direct emotional connection, it's all for naught.

The poems of the *Seven Centuries* are in fact a world apart from Aśvaghoṣa's poems. They each consist of a single verse, which radically changes the possibilities of narration. In contrast to the polymetric tendencies of the northern poets, the surviving output of the southerners is almost entirely in a single meter whose name, *gāthā*, came to be synonymous with Prakrit verse. Unlike the meters used by northern poets, however, in which the quantity of every single syllable was fixed, the underlying structure of the *gāthā* permitted an enormous variety of surface patterns. In this respect the *gāthā* was representative of southern poetics: to an

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[39] This is a technique generally known as *samasyāpūrti* in India, exemplified by such works as Jinasena's *Pārśvābhyudaya* (which incorporates one or two lines from Kālidāsa's *Meghadūta* in every verse). For "humble speech" see Auerbach (1993 [1958]).

[40] 3: *satta saāiṃ kaïvacchaleṇa koḍīa majjhaārammi | hāleṇa viraïāiṃ sālaṃkārāṇa gāhāṇaṃ ||* ("Seven hundred from among a hundred thousand are the beautiful (*sālaṃkārāṇa*) verses that Hāla put together."). I cite the verses from Weber's edition.

[41] 274: *ṇa vi taha chearaāi vi haraṃti puṇaruttarāarasiāiṃ | jaha jattha va tattha va jaha va taha va sabbhāvaṇeharamiāiṃ ||.* The interpretation, as with most of the Seven Centuries' verses, is subject to debate.

untrained ear, it might not sound like verse at all, but in fact it was governed by sophisticated principles of versification.[42]

Then there is Prakrit, the language of this type of poetry. While I do not believe that this language was created to imitate the speech of common people, that is one of its main roles in the *Seven Centuries*.[43] Like Sanskrit, the Prakrit language was invested early on with an aesthetic value in itself, and was considered—especially in contrast to Sanskrit—to be sweet and mellifluous.[44] The language of Prakrit poetry is relatively simple and direct, and there are certainly no Aśvaghoṣa-style displays of grammatical erudition. The verses often contain dialogue, revealed by the usual markers of deixis ("I," "you," "mother!", "look!", etc.). In fact, most of the commentaries read every single verse as spoken by someone to someone else, even when there are no linguistic indicators of dialogue. And this is a crucial difference: in north, it is the poet who speaks; in the south, the poet summons anonymous characters to speak for him.

In practice, this commitment to a disarming naturalism will mean that the promised beauty or charm will often come from the simplicity of the verse. Take the following verse: "It's hard to find a lover. Hard, when found, to make him yours. Even if you find him, it's as if you didn't, if he isn't to your liking."[45] This verse has similar syntactic patterns to those we saw in Aśvaghoṣa's poetry, but they are shorter, they fit less predictably into the metrical form, and they feel less forced and more proverbial.

The limit-case of this aesthetic of the understated is the unstated. The idea that an unstated meaning could be "suggested" or "implied," which Ānandavardhana made into one of the leading ideas of Indian poetics, derives largely from the study of Prakrit poetry. Most verses in the *Seven Centuries* have been given an interpretation along these lines by the commentators, so it will suffice to mention one example. In the first verse of the collection after the introduction, someone describes a heron "standing absolutely motionless on a lily-pad, like mother-of-pearl on an emerald plate."[46]

A nice image, maybe, but according to the commentaries, that is not the *alaṃkāra* of the verse. The fact that the heron is motionless suggests that there is nobody else around, and this means that it is a perfect place to meet one's lover. In cases like this, it is precisely the lack of conspicuous embellishment that makes the verse "nice." The ubiquity of this aesthetic in one tradition of *kāvya* makes its absence from the northern tradition all the more striking. Although the verses of Aśvaghoṣa and Mātṛceṭa are often allusive, and sometimes riddling, I can think of none that are suggestive in precisely this way.

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[42] So sophisticated, in fact, that they pose a significant challenge to modern theories of metrics; see Ollett (2012).

[43] Herman Tieken (1995, 2001, and 2009, with Peter Khoroche) is the main exponent of the mimetic theory of Prakrit.

[44] See chapter 4 of Ollett (2017).

[45] 305: *dukkhehi labbhaï pio laddho dukkhehi hoi sāhīṇo | laddho vi aladdho ccia jaï jaha hiaaṃ taha ṇa hoi ||.*

[46] 4: *ua ṇiccalaṇippaṃdā bhisiṇīvattammi rehaï valāā | ṇimmalamaragaabhāaṇapariṭṭhiā saṃkhasutti vva ||.*

Are there explicit statements about this aesthetic of the understated? In so many words, no. But I think we can find some corroboration in *Taraṅgavatī*, extant only in abridged form. Pālitta wrote this story about three souls who are entwined over several lifetimes. As in many verses in the *Seven Centuries*, the story's introduction harps on themes that strongly suggest a metapoetic reading. The nun Suvratā visits a house on her round of begging alms, and the residents are amazed at her beauty, *all the more so* because she had none of the usual adornments (*ābhūsaṇa-*). After some discussion of the benefits of telling stories, Suvratā is persuaded to tell the story of her life, and "the nun then told them, with complete impartiality, without any overabundance or pride, her eyes totally fixed on to the *dharma*, like Sarasvatī incarnate."[47] Pālitta here enunciates an ethic of disinterestedness and impartiality, of "telling it like it is" without any embellishment, which comes directly out of the teachings of Jainism. But the story that comes out of Suvratā's mouth is, in fact, the text of *Taraṅgavatī*, which would become something of a literary classic.

Pālitta, far from being insincere, is making an aesthetic claim out of an ethical claim: conspicuous ornamentation cannot really make a text nice, and a text that is "internally ornamented" by its simplicity, straightforwardness, and truthfulness does not stand in need of external ornamentation.[48] Whether or not *Taraṅgavatī* meets this description, it obviously shares an aesthetic with the *Seven Centuries*. Part of this aesthetic is naturalism, both in the sense of foregrounding the natural world and leaving a very light touch of poetic artifice.[49]

The Two Paths of *Kāvya*

It is clear enough that, in some sense, the northern and southern poets were all engaged in the same enterprise—one that they themselves called *kāvya*, and which was centrally concerned with *alaṃkāra*, "making it nice." But it is equally clear that there were major differences between these two groups, which have so far been registered on the level of form, affiliation, and genre: northern Sanskrit and southern Prakrit, northern Buddhism and southern Hinduism and Jainism, *mahākāvya* and *stotra* in the north and *muktaka* and *kathā* in the south. Since geography co-varies with these other differences, we may not think that it alone serves to explain them. In other words, we might say that Aśvaghoṣa's stylistic tendencies are in line with other composers of *stotra*s, including Mātṛceṭa, and that if authors from the south had composed *stotra*s they might have used a similar style. In addition to these differences, however, I have argued that there is a major separation between their

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[47] 83: *iḍḍhī-gārava-rahiyā majjhatthā tatthimaṃ bhaṇaï ajjā | dhammekka-diṇṇa-diṭṭhī sarassaī ceva paccakkhā ||.*

[48] Aśvaghoṣa makes a similar claim at *Handsome Nanda* 18.34, but its aesthetic implications—if any–are not clear to me, especially given that the verse itself seems recycled from a generic ethical context.

[49] This naturalism is also a constitutive feature of early Tamil poetry, which I pass over entirely here (see above). There is an argument to be made that the thematic concern with "in-ness" (see Shulman 2016) in early Tamil poetry corresponds to its poetics, and especially in the dynamic between what seems, at first, to be a perfectly clear surface meaning and the surprising hidden meanings that appear on closer reflection. For parallels between *Taraṅgavatī* and the *Seven Centuries* see Bhayani (1993).

aesthetic sensibilities. We can characterize this separation in terms of their understanding of the importance of ornamentation. One community of practice thought of ornamentation as something that can and should be added to a text in order to increase a reader's or listener's interest in it and appreciation for it; to perform this function, it had to be conspicuous, and on occasion shameless. The other community thought of ornamentation as something that, in order to be truly effective, had to be understated, or even unstated.

I refer to these "communities of practice" because I think they are our best hope of explaining these radical differences. On the one hand, we have Buddhist monks like Aśvaghoṣa and Mātṛceṭa, writing both for their fellow monks and—explicitly so in the case of Mātṛceṭa's letter—for lay followers and prospective lay followers. Their use of *kāvya* was not only strategic, as it recreated Buddhism in a compellingly aestheticized vein, but strategic it was: they believed that by adopting the language, stories, and techniques of *kāvya* they might make the *dharma* more attractive. The influence of the *Rāmāyaṇa* on this community, and on Aśvaghoṣa in particular, has been well-documented. If the poetry of the North was the only early *kāvya* available to us, we would probably imagine a line of progressive stylization, ever more complex patterns, increasingly elaborate metrical practice, and in general more explicit "ornamentation," stretching from Vālmīki to Kumāralāta.

On the other hand, the poets of the South operated in and around royal courts; they presented their work in *goṣṭhī*s, learned gatherings of literary experts. Thus, despite what we might at first make of the fact that the northern poets used Sanskrit and the southern poets used Prakrit, the northern poets wrote for a wider audience, including potential converts and young monks in need of spiritual edification, while the southern poets wrote for a rarefied audience of connoisseurs. I say "at first" because it is, in fact, a misconception that Sanskrit was a learned language and Prakrit was a popular language. Prakrit seems to have been no less learned than Sanskrit, even at this early period, and in contrast to Sanskrit—which anyone who had any kind of education would have been acquainted with—Prakrit was cultivated only by an elective group of littérateurs (and also Jain monks, but they stand somewhat apart from this community). The literary values of these circles placed greater importance on reception and readerly interaction: it was up to the reader to elicit all of the meanings that are hidden away in a text. If we only had the poetry of the South, we would have a harder time situating it in a narrative of development from the Sanskrit epics.

What did these two strands within the *kāvya* movement have to do with each other in the second century? My general impression is that the northern and southern poets operated completely independently of each other. Yet there is an epistemological and methodological problem here: *kāvya* as a form of textuality presupposes a set of conventions that, seemingly by definition, are prior to every single text. The earliest *kāvya*s available to us, the texts discussed here, already take many these conventions for granted. The specific relations between texts fade before the relations between texts and a set of "pre-texts" that are always already there. The *Rāmāyaṇa* is not really an exception, since it constitutes a kind of "pre-text" for the entire tradition of *kāvya* (as A. K. Ramanujan observed, nobody in India ever heard the *Rāmāyaṇa* for the first time). Still, I have a strong suspicion that Aśvaghoṣa

knew the work of Pālitta, who was after all originally from Kauśāmbī, not far from Aśvaghoṣa's hometown of Sāketa. Aśvaghoṣa uses the motif of the *cakravāka* bird several times in *Handsome Nanda*.[50] These birds, ruddy shelducks, pair-bond for life, but according to convention they are separated from their mates every night and quack mournfully. This motif may well belong to the beginningless stock of *kāvya* conventions, but it was most strongly associated with Pālitta's *Taraṅgavatī*: in that story, the hero and heroine were a pair of *cakravāka* birds in a previous life, one of whom was killed by a hunter. (This story, in turn, recalls the *krauñca* birds in the preface to the *Rāmāyaṇa*.) In fact, Aśvaghoṣa and Pālitta are much more similar than has been appreciated, in their poetic technique as well as their overall religious-ethical project.

What about after the second century? Did these two strands of *kāvya* ever come together, and how? The answer to this question is much more straightforward: the northern and southern poets were equally part of the genealogy of *kāvya*. The most famous Sanskrit poet of all, Kālidāsa, responds creatively to both Aśvaghoṣa and to the tradition of Prakrit lyric poetry represented by the *Seven Centuries*.[51] And although the second-century poets of the north would later be read almost only by Buddhists, their contributions to the history of *kāvya* are immense. We can view much of the later history of *kāvya* as a negotiation between the poetic values of the north and south, between a Sanskrit tendency toward conspicuous elaboration and a Prakrit tendency toward the inconspicuous and the unsaid.

Few poets were as explicit about this negotiation as Govardhana, a poet attached to the Sena court in twelfth-century Bengal. In one of the opening verses to his *Seven Centuries of Āryās* (*Āryāsaptaśatī*), an explicit response to Hāla's anthology, he wrote: "It took *force* to turn this poetry, whose flavor is most suited to Prakrit, toward Sanskrit, just like it took *Balarāma* to turn the Yamunā river, whose water naturally flows down, toward heaven."[52] But theorists of literature had long recognized a distinction between two regional styles of *kāvya*, one associated with the Gauḍa country of the northeast and the other with the Vidarbha country of the western Deccan.[53] I think that these two styles continue, under different names, the styles of the northern and southern poets. Vidarbha was the center of the Vākāṭaka kingdom, the political and literary successors of the Sātavāhanas in the fourth and

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[50] See Covill (2009).

[51] For Kālidāsa's response to Aśvaghoṣa see Tubb (2014).

[52] 52: *vāṇī prākṛtasamucitarasā balenaiva saṃskṛtaṃ nītā | nimnānurūpanīrā kalindakanyeva gaganatalam ||.* I have written about this verse, and the aesthetic values that are aligned with Sanskrit and Prakrit, in chapter 5 of Ollett (2017); see also Knutson (2014, pp. 47–71).

[53] The earliest theorist whose work is extant, Bhāmaha, actually attacks the idea of regional styles on the grounds that, at least in his time (maybe seventh century) belonging to a particular region doesn't track stylistic characteristics and *vice versa*. See *Ornament of Literature* 1.30–35 (cf. esp. v. 35: *alaṃkāravad agrāmyam arthyaṃ nyāyyam anākulam | gauḍīyam api sādhīyo vaidarbham iti nānyathā ||.* Note that Johnston thought that Bhāmaha had Aśvaghoṣa in mind when he criticized the use of the word *ajihladat* (lxxxii).

fifth centuries.[54] Gauḍa is more difficult, as I know of no early poets from the region that this word designates (modern Bengal), although there might be a connection to Magadha and specifically Pāṭaliputra (modern Patna), the first capital city of the Guptas. The Gauḍa style is generally thought to be flashy and bombastic, favoring conspicuous figures of sound such as repetition and breathless syntax, whereas the Vidarbha style is more subtle and assigns greater importance to balance, variety, and meaning. It's not a perfect fit, but if it's true, it would strengthen the claim that the *kāvya* of the second century, and especially its competing ideals of ornamentation, was crucially important in mapping out the range and stylistic possibilities of *kāvya* as a whole.

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[54] Mirashi notes the connection with the Vākāṭakas when discussing the use of the words *vaidarbhī* and *vacchomī* (*vatsagulmī*) to describe styles in Mirashi (1951).

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