

Orality in a world of manuscripts: reconstructing Purāṇic composition, preservation and transmission on the basis of the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*

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Abstract: Since the invention of the Indian writing system around the third century BC, Sanskrit literature was no longer exclusively oral. However, not all genres immediately adopted the new possibilities. In order to fully understand the orality and writing of Sanskrit literature, I will first define a threefold division of what I call ‘the compositional complex’, the totality of processes involved in the creation of texts and their subsequent usages. The first stage is the composition of the text, the second is its preservation for the sake of future generations, and the third is its transmission to the audience. Each stage can be oral or written. After a brief discussion of secondary literature on the compositional complex of the Vedas, the *Mahābhārata* and the Purāṇas, I look for text-internal evidence for the compositional complex of Purāṇas in the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*, ‘the Purāṇa of the future’. On the basis of this single Purāṇa, it is possible to make a reconstruction of the composition, preservation, and transmission of Purāṇas, where orality and writing intertwine.

Keywords: Purāṇa, *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*, composition, manuscript, oral transmission, recitation

Sanskrit texts come in many forms. From late-nineteenth-century printed editions to online texts with analyses of declensions and conjugations; from microfilmed manuscripts to open access critical editions. All these different shapes, available in libraries and online, would almost suggest that texts composed in Sanskrit, an ancient Indian language, have always been materialized in writing. However, with the oldest Sanskrit texts being 3500 years old and the Indian writing system having been invented only around the third century BC, Sanskrit literature has undergone major innovations in terms of how texts were composed by people, preserved for future generations and transmitted to the public. In this article, I will shed a light on different developments in the orality and writing of Sanskrit literature, starting with the oldest texts called the Vedas and concluding with a Purāṇa that has its final compositional stages in the late nineteenth century, the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*, the 'Purāṇa of the future'.

The compositional complex

For the sake of studying the topic of the orality and writing of Sanskrit literature, I would like to introduce and determine what I refer to as 'the compositional complex'. The compositional complex is the totality of processes involved in the creation of texts and their subsequent usages. I define three different stages, each of which can be executed orally or in written form: composition, preservation, and transmission. For this threefold division, I draw on a distinction presented for the first time by V. Narayana Rao (Doniger 1991: 31 n. 2) and later reformulated by Wendy Doniger. In order to grasp the complexity of the composition of Sanskrit texts, Doniger (1991: 31) argues that we should

'distinguish among texts that were (or that we think have been) *composed* orally (in contrast with those that may have been composed in writing), those that were *preserved* orally (in contrast with those preserved in manuscript), and those that were traditionally *performed* orally.'

In this threefold compositional complex, a term not used by Doniger, the first stage is the composition of a text (defined broadly as the collective of letters and words that form a unit, not just a written text). This is the moment of intentional creation of a text. To lesser or greater extent, this mental activity demands preparation time and professional skills, and it presupposes an intention to preserve it. In the case of Sanskrit literature, authors had a wide range of narratives, extracts from lawbooks, ritual hymns, and numerous other narrative units to draw upon for the sake of a new Sanskrit composition. The question relevant here concerns how the author formulated or materialized the composition for the first time. I consider the composition oral, when the composition was communicated

by narrating it, making it audible to whoever was present at the moment. The most famous Sanskrit example is Vyāsa, a mythical sage, who composed the *Mahābharata*, one of the two great Sanskrit epics (discussed in more detail below). The epic provides its own creation story (*Mahābhārata* 1.53.32–4), in which it is said that Vyāsa narrated the story for the first time during the breaks of a sacrifice by king Janamejaya, which ‘sprang from that saintly seer’s oceanic mind’ (translation by Van Buitenen 1973: 125). Although this event took place in the narrative world, it may be representative of how *sūtas* (‘bards’) travelled to courts and sacrificial events to communicate their pieces of literary art orally. I consider a composition written, when it is the author’s intention, after having mentally created the text, to preserve the text and materialize it in writing. This mode of composition is most straightforward when the author and the writer are one and the same person. However, the author (the mental parent of the text) may not necessarily be the same person as the one putting the letters on paper or another form of material. Even when the author dictates and another person, a scribe, writes down what is said, I consider this a written composition, since it is the author’s intention to communicate the composition in written form right after its mental conception.

The next stage of a text is preservation. This stage deals with how a text was preserved when it was supposed to last for a longer period. The text is preserved orally, when it is passed on from teacher to pupil through oral education. If a text is preserved in written form, then it is qualified as written preservation. In the case of Sanskrit literature, texts initially survived on manuscripts made of palm leaf or birch bark, for example, which were kept together by a string in the middle. Later they were preserved on paper manuscripts, and again later, they were printed in books.

The final stage of the compositional complex is the transmission of texts. How did the text reach its audience? Many Sanskrit texts, as we will see below, have been transmitted orally, involving a public recitation for a group of people. The audience listens to the text that is recited by a narrator, either from a manuscript or from memory. In both cases, the transmission counts as oral. Doniger (1991), quoted above, only defines oral transmission. However, I consider a transmission written, when the text is read from a manuscript or book, because in this case, the text reaches its audience through its material, written form. This can be a private matter or a group activity, when a text is read as a joint event.

All three stages (composition, preservation, and transmission) can be applied to Sanskrit literature. The possible modes (oral and written) only become relevant when the Indian writing system is invented around the third century BC.¹ However, orality remains an important mode in the compositional complex long after this moment, and a definitive dis-

¹ Pollock (2013: 78–79); for a discussion of an alternative dating to the fifth to fourth century BC based on graffiti on South Indian and Sri Lankan sherds, see, e.g., Coningham, Allchin, et al. (1996); Salomon (1998: 10–12); Falk (2014).

inction between orality and writing turns out to be impossible in the case of Sanskrit literature (cf. [Graham 1987: 67–77](#); [Orsini and Butler Schofield 2015: 1–27](#)).

The strict orality of the Vedas

The oldest known Sanskrit texts are the Vedas, a religious, ritualistic body of texts, dealing with deities many of which remained important in Hinduism. The canon is divided into the *Ṛgveda*, the *Yajurveda*, the *Sāmaveda*, and the *Atharvaveda*, which are again subdivided into the *Samhitās*, *Brāhmaṇas*, *Āraṇyakas*, and the *Upaniṣads*. Each has its own style and topics. For example, the oldest text, the *Ṛgveda Samhitā*, is a collection of Sanskrit hymns on Vedic gods, while the *Upaniṣads* are characterized by their philosophical nature. The (sub)divisions have been composed in phases, resulting in a vast compositional period of 1500 until 500–400 BC ([Witzel 2003: 68](#)). Based on these dates, all three stages in the compositional complex must have been executed orally because the writing system was only invented one century after the last texts. To clarify the compositional complex of the Vedas, it is nevertheless useful to revisit each stage (cf. [Scharfe 2002: 8–37](#); [Witzel 2003: 68–9](#); [Keßler-Persaud 2018](#); [Proferes 2018](#)). The Vedas are said to have been revealed to Vedic ṛṣis (‘sages’), who ‘skillfully [*sic*] created these new songs just as a carpenter builds a chariot, with the help of divine inspiration’ ([Scharfe 2002: 13–14](#)). Based on internal evidence, scholars generally agree ‘that the Vedic texts were orally composed in northern India’ ([Witzel 2003: 68](#)). They were subsequently passed on to new generations through oral teaching from teacher to pupil. The Vedas ‘are considered timeless revealed truths, something ordinary men can never hope to perceive themselves but can “hear” through the endless chain of oral tradition’ ([Scharfe 2002: 13](#)). Students were expected to remember the Vedas verbatim, since they are considered divine truths that should be preserved as they are. The Vedas reached the audience through oral transmission. Not all social classes were allowed to hear them, but those who were, would hear them during a recitation that was bound to strict rules regarding, among other things, metre and intonation. This oral and mnemonic tradition of the preservation and transmission of the Vedic corpus continued long after the Indian writing system had been invented around the third century BC, and there are even contemporary cases of an oral transmission of the Vedas ([Larios 2017](#)). The first successful written records of some parts of the Vedic material only took place in the middle of the first millennium AD, possibly due to the prohibition of writing the Vedas by several traditions ([Scharfe 2002: 8–9](#)), and it was not until the early second millennium that the majority of the corpus was put in writing ([Witzel 2003: 68–9](#)). The long-lasting strictly oral character of the Vedas is, however, a special case in Sanskrit literature. Other literary genres adopted writing faster, and some are, in fact, known for being written. Sanskrit poetry (*kāvya*), for example, was composed and transmitted in writing, as a result of

its complex vocabulary and intricate metres, to which the written format gave further rise (Pollock 2013: 80; Lienhard 1984: 46). However, I will limit myself to one text and one genre to illustrate different scenarios of the compositional complex: the *Mahābhārata* and the Purāṇas.

From oral to oral and written: the *Mahābhārata* and the Purāṇas

The main narrative of the *Mahābhārata* ('Great Bhārata'), as we know it today from the critical edition from the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (Sukthankar, Pratinidhi, et al. 1933–1966), revolves around the claim to the throne by two branches of one family: the Kurus and the Pāṇḍavas. This leads to a massive war that lasts for eighteen days until the Pāṇḍavas conquer their enemies. After the parts describing the battle, the text continues with a long aftermath, including the crowning of the Pāṇḍavas and their going to heaven. Besides the main story, the *Mahābhārata* includes numerous other narratives dealing with various Hindu deities, as well as religious and didactic material. It is divided into eighteen large sections called 'books' (*parvan*), varying from five chapters in book eighteen to 353 in book twelve. The text is primarily written in *śloka*, an easy and flexible metre, and is structured on a dialogical frame with someone asking questions and another person providing the answers in the form of narratives.

As briefly mentioned above, the text provides its own story of composition, as well as its own interpretation of its preservation and transmission. It starts with an account of how Vyāsa composed the *Mahābhārata* orally by narrating it. He passed it on to his pupil Vaiśampāyana, indicating oral preservation. Then, Vaiśampāyana recited it for the first time at a snake ritual, which was a public occasion, suggesting oral transmission in the form of recitation. The oral preservation and transmission of the *Mahābhārata* is confirmed by a second frame-story where a professional *sūta* called Ugraśravas, the son of the famous *sūta* Romaharṣaṇa, has heard the story and later narrates it to a group of sages elsewhere. It is this *sūta* who becomes the main narrator in the dialogical frame.

These narrative frames are a narrative representation of the compositional complex of the *Mahābhārata*, which raises the question of the historicity of matters. Its envisioned composer, Vyāsa, is a legendary figure, and there is no trace that he was once a historical figure. However, since he is presented as the only composer and there is no biographical data on the *Mahābhārata*'s historical composers, the text is considered anonymous literature. Given its massive size and its vast compositional time frame, there were clearly multiple groups of composers involved in the creation of the text who used different methods of

composition. In order to get a more nuanced perception of the compositional complex of the *Mahābhārata*, each major redaction that took place over a time-frame of more than 800 years should be examined separately.

According to James L. Fitzgerald, the development can be divided into five phases (2018: ‘Closing note on the development of the written Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*’, par. 2). The first phase of composition started before 400 BC, when the text was still called ‘*Bhārata*’ (instead of ‘Great *Bhārata*’). Predating the invention of the Indian writing system, the *Bhārata* was an oral composition, preserved and transmitted orally. The second phase took place between 400 and 50 BC. Although writing was invented in this period, scholars generally agree that the composition, preservation, and transmission of this *Bhārata* was still oral. This changed in the next compositional phase, ‘[b]etween 50 BCE and 50 CE: the creation and promulgation of a written Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*’ (Fitzgerald 2018). According to John Brockington, this happened simultaneously with the *Rāmāyaṇa* (‘Rāma’s Journey’), the other great Sanskrit epic, thought to have been composed by Vālmiki. The *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* belong to the same literary genre referred to as the Sanskrit epics or Itihāsa (literally, ‘this is how it was’). Brockington (2003: 117) argues that ‘at some point around the middle of their main period of growth (possibly the first century CE), each epic was committed to writing and their transmission passed into the hands of the brāhmins, the main custodians by then of traditional values’. The text was, in other words, transferred from the *sūtas*, whose compositional complex revolved around orality, onto the Brahmins, who made use of writing (Brockington 1998: 3). Although it seems unlikely that oral composition disappeared entirely, this phase is considered to represent a shift where the primary mode of composition was one of writing. A similar shift took place in the preservation of the text. The *Mahābhārata* came to be preserved in manuscripts—no doubt in addition to being preserved orally during a transitional phase. The transmission long continued orally because the illiterate, non-Sanskritic audience needed explanations in their local language to understand the text.² This written Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* continued to grow with two more major additions, the first between AD 50 and 150, and the second between AD 150 and 350.

Following the last major redaction, a new genre appeared: the Purāṇas (Rocher 1986: 31–2, 133–254). ‘Purāṇa’ literally means ‘ancient’, referring to the narratives of the past that they tell. The Purāṇas that are studied in this article are extensive religious works that contain stories about gods from the Hindu pantheon (such as Śiva, Viṣṇu, Brahmā, Sūrya, Devī, and Gaṇeśa), lineages of kings, demi-gods, and creatures from the underworld; the subjects cover the creation of the universe, descriptions of different realms, theologies, glorifications of places, eulogies of gods, rules for festivals, observances, *dharma* (‘right conduct’), and rituals. Some Purāṇas centre around a particular god and represent a specific religious

² For *Mahābhārata* recitations described in Sanskrit literature, see Brockington (1998: 131).

affiliation. The *Viṣṇupurāṇa* and the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, for example, focus on the worship of Viṣṇu, whereas the *Skandapurāṇa* and the *Līṅgapurāṇa* are dedicated to Śiva. The Purāṇas have several characteristics in common with the *Mahābhārata*. They are primarily written in verse, generally in *śloka*. They are massive works containing hundreds of chapters and are sometimes divided into several ‘books’ (*parvan*, *khaṇḍa*, or *kāṇḍa*). They are structured on a dialogical frame with someone posing questions and another person answering with narratives or teachings. Like the *Mahābhārata*, they describe their mode of composition. According to most Purāṇas, they were composed orally by a god called Brahmā, who passed them on to Vyāsa, the composer of the *Mahābhārata*, again through oral communication. Or they were composed directly by Vyāsa and then recited by a *sūta* called Romaharṣaṇa (the narrator in the dialogical frame), usually to a group of sages headed by Śaunaka (for other interlocutors see Bonazzoli 1980). In the narrative world of the Purāṇas themselves, their entire compositional complex was oral. Does this narrative representation correspond with the compositional complex in the physical world?

Although the Purāṇas are manifest about their acclaimed mythological composers, Brahmā or Vyāsa, they remain silent about their historical composers. The latter left no trace of personal information, but rather function as ghost-writers for Brahmā or Vyāsa. The only personal data that are sometimes available concern the scribes who copied the manuscripts.

Although Purāṇas are anonymous texts, they were clearly not composed by just one person, and it is sometimes possible to hypothesize about the (religious) milieu of the initiators of a given Purāṇa. For example, based on the strong emphasis on a particular branch of Śaivism called Pāśupata Śaivism, the composers of the early *Skandapurāṇa* (sixth to seventh century) are considered to have come from this religious milieu (Bakker 2014: 12–21). Purāṇas are fluid texts that by their very nature are open to changes. They grow and change over centuries, because new material is added and irrelevant material removed. They constantly adapt according to new contextual, religious, spatial, and temporal conditions. By analogy with ‘composition-in-performance’, that is the assumption that texts pertaining to oral traditions ‘must be composed in the course of a “live” performance’, Hans Bakker aptly called this process that Purāṇas go through ‘composition-in-transmission’, that is the ‘re-composition during the process of literary transmission rather than in a living oral tradition’ (1989: 331). There is not just one composition of a Purāṇa. Rather, a Purāṇa consists of different layers of compositions that are created as they are transmitted.³ For the sake of brevity and clarity, however, this study will speak of ‘the’ composition, preservation, and transmission of a Purāṇa. The reader should keep in mind that this only refers to the composition, preservation, and transmission of a particular layer or redaction of a Purāṇa, as it is found in manuscripts and editions.

³ See Yokochi (2013: 3:33–66) for different compositional stages of the early *Skandapurāṇa*.

There is still considerable debate on the mode of the composition of Purāṇas. According to Freda Matchett (2003: 131), '[l]ike the *Mahābhārata*, the Purāṇas are generally thought by scholars to have been first recited by *sūtas*, bards who attended *ṣatriya* leaders [those belonging to the warrior (*ṣatriya*) class] and provided them with inspiration and entertainment in the form of stories of their ancestors'. According to this view, the composition of Purāṇas is closely related to performing them, just like Vyāsa composed and recited the *Mahābhārata* during a sacrifice. In this way, it has parallels with the idea of composition-in-performance.

Although Velcheru Narayana Rao agrees that Purāṇa authors 'composed the texts mentally and recited them orally', he adds that 'then the scribe wrote them down' (1993: 95). According to Narayana Rao, the use of writing 'was limited to preserving a text rather than producing it or communicating it. Scribes were a different group of people in India, who, like modern day typists, specialized in a technical skill' (1993: 95). Narayana Rao seems to refer to the moment that a text is recorded for the sake of written preservation, rather than the moment that a text is composed by the author and is written down by a scribe on the request of the author himself for the sake of written composition.

However, the massive number of available manuscripts and the fact that the writing system had been in use for several centuries when the first Purāṇas came into existence do not rule out written composition either. Although Bakker (1989) does not give a conclusive answer to the question of orality or writing of the earlier versions of Purāṇas, he does, as summarized above, argue for written redactions of Purāṇas. One of the few scholars who goes further than this is Giorgio Bonazzoli in a largely neglected article entitled 'Composition, transmission and recitation of the Purāṇa-s (a few remarks)'. He quotes verses and passages from various Purāṇas that, according to him, show 'that the purāṇic texts we possess are written compositions [...]. In fact, the texts we read now claim constantly to be written compositions' (Bonazzoli 1983: 25–8). Bonazzoli's arguments are based on the presence of the verb *paṭh-*, 'to recite' or 'read out loud', the existence of a ritual on 'the gift of knowledge' (*vidyādāna*), which centres around the donation of manuscripts, and several accounts of 'the rules of listening to Purāṇas' (*purāṇaśravaṇavidhi*) involving the recitation from manuscripts. Bonazzoli rightly challenges the importance of orality in the case of the Purāṇas, but as will become clear from the analysis of the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*, the examples presented by him relate to the Purāṇas' preservation and transmission, rather than to their composition.⁴

There is more scholarly consensus on these two stages of the compositional complex. The vast number of manuscripts of Purāṇas throughout the centuries is proof of their written preservation. One of the oldest Purāṇa manuscripts is a manuscript of the *Skandapurāṇa*

⁴ Cf. Mackenzie Brown (1986) for another study on the presence of writing based on Purāṇic references.

from Nepal which is dated by the scribe to AD 810 (Adriaensen, Bakker, and Isaacson 1998: 32–3). This is not to say that the Purāṇas were only preserved in manuscripts. Many Paurāṇikas and even non-specialists knew entire Sanskrit compositions by heart, including (part of) the Purāṇas. The continuing centrality of orality is particularly visible in the transmission of the Purāṇas.

Most scholars agree that the Purāṇas were orally transmitted to the audience through recitations by a *sūta* (Rocher 1986: 53–9; Bailey 2018). Rosalind O’Hanlon (2013: 97) writes that the oral transmission was done ‘by a specialist pauranika. He based his performance on his Sanskrit text, its visible presence a guarantee of the performance’s authority. But much of it was extemporized in the vernacular, and given fresh colour and an individual twist with allusions to local matters’. The vast majority of the audience did not know Sanskrit, so explanations or a kind of commentary in the local language were essential for the audience to understand the material. Moreover, given the length of the Purāṇas, it was often more feasible to recite only parts of them (Taylor 2012: 95). The ‘seven-day recitation of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*’ (*bhāgavatasaptāha*) is a famous case study which is still present today. It involves the narration of ‘narratives from the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* to an audience over a seven-day period [...] supplemented with material from other well-known scriptures, from oral tradition, and from daily life’ (Taylor 2016: 7). The rules for these recitations are laid out in an appendix to the *Padmapurāṇa* (Taylor 2016: 8–10). Besides a public seven-day recitation of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, there are also attestations of a private *bhāgavatasaptāha*. To fulfil a vow, ‘over a seven-day period [...] one or more Brahmin males [...] read the text silently or in a low murmur’ (Taylor 2016: 7). Since the vow involves a private reading of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, it is considered written transmission.

The description of oral recitations of Purāṇas in Sanskrit literature itself is rare. Bakker (2014) has discussed a fascinating passage from the *Harṣacarita* (‘the life of [king] Harṣa’), a prose work by Bāṇa. In this passage, it is told that Bāṇa ‘heard a Purāṇa recitation by the reader (*pustakavācaka* [literally ‘narrator of books’]) Sudṛṣṭi [... who] seated himself on a chair and then began his performance. [...] He pauses for a moment before he places, on a desk made of reed stalks that is put in front of him, a codex (*pustaka*), which, although its wrapping has been removed by that time, is still wrapped, as it were, in the halo of his nails which shine softly like the fibres of a lotus. [...] He] turns over the leaf marking the end of the chapter read in the morning session, takes a small bundle of some folios, and recites the “Purāṇa spoken by the Wind” (Bakker 2014: 156). The passage is a beautiful description of what a Purāṇa recitation may have looked like at the time of the *Harṣacarita* (seventh century AD). The *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* (discussed below) also contains at least two other references to a Purāṇa recitation (*Bhaviṣyapurāṇa pratisargaparvan*: 2.32.1–22, 4.19.14–20, both referring to a type of *bhāgavatasaptāha*).

This brief overview of secondary literature shows that the compositional complex of Purāṇas has been a topic for decades. The number of scholars that return to the texts themselves is, however, relatively limited. Bonazzoli (1983) and Mackenzie Brown (1986) are welcome exceptions, but a deep dive into the topic by focussing on just one Purāṇa is yet to be made. In this article, I will concentrate on the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* and zoom in onto the relevant sections. For in fact, the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* allows us to reflect on each stage of the compositional complex of Purāṇas: their composition, preservation, and transmission.

The *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*

The *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* was published for the first time in 1896–7 by the Śrī Veṅkaṭeśvara Press (henceforth: Veṅkaṭeśvara Press). All references in my article are to the third edition of this publication (*Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* 1959), despite its considerable problems, discussed below. A translation of the entire Purāṇa based on the printed edition was prepared by Nagar (2021).

The edition consists of four *parvans*, ‘books’: the *Brāhmaparvan*, *Madhyamaparvan*, *Pratisargaparvan*, and *Uttaraparvan* (Hazra 1940: 167–73; Rocher 1986: 151–4; for partial studies, see, e.g., Scheftelowitz 1933; Hazra 1963: 366–96; Hohenberger 1967; Lazlo 1971; Arora 1972; Bonazzoli 1979; Bisschop 2019). The majority of the *Brāhmaparvan* deals with the worship of the god Sūrya, ‘Sun’. Some chapters involve observances, donations, rituals, and iconographical prescriptions related to him, others contain narratives about the god himself or a specific class of devotees called *bhojakas*. Although the text focusses on Sūrya, other deities and more general topics such as cow worship are also present in the *Brāhmaparvan*. It probably contains the oldest portions of the text. Rajendra Chandra Hazra, whose works are usually referred to for dating the Purāṇas, dated this section to AD 500 based on the zodiac system and weekdays found there (1940: 172). However, Hazra’s attempts at dating are generally one or more centuries too early, and this seems to be the case with his dating of the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* as well.

The *Madhyamaparvan* and the *Uttaraparvan* primarily give information on observances, festivals, donations, worship, ceremonies, and the iconography of various gods. These topics are often introduced by narratives, explaining, among other things, the origin of the topic at hand. According to Hazra, both *parvans* are later additions. Based on quotations from the *Madhyamaparvan* and the *Uttaraparvan* in other Sanskrit literature (Dharmanibandhas), the former may have been composed between AD 1300 and 1500 and the latter before AD 1100 (Hazra 1940: 169–70).⁵ The third book, the *Pratisargaparvan*, provides long lineages of kings in different (divine) eras, gives its own interpretation of the aftermath of the *Mahābhārata*,

⁵ Hazra’s (1963: 395) alternative dating to AD 700–800 is probably too early.

refers to non-Hindu figures, such as Mohammed, Jesus, and Noah, mentions historically identifiable events and persons, such as the compositions of Pāṇini and Varāhamihira, as well as the arrival of Queen Victoria in Calcutta. The latter event provides the book with a *terminus ante quem*: late nineteenth century, just before the edition was published.

If one follows Hazra's dating, there is an extreme compositional time-frame of possibly 1300 years. However, this is nowhere made explicit in the printed edition. According to the Sanskrit foreword of the third edition, 'eight manuscripts of the great Purāṇa' (*mahāpurāṇasyāṣṭāpratīpustakāni*) were collected 'by knowledgeable people living in various places' (*deśadeśāntarasthita... vidvajjanānām*) for the sake of printing the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* (*bhaviṣyapurāṇaṃ mudrayitum*). The foreword does not provide any information on the place and time of production of these manuscripts, nor on which portions of the text they contain (only one *parvan* or more), nor on which manuscript has a particular variant reading, if this is given at all. The first and second edition provide some more information. They give a very basic list, identifying from which library or person each manuscript was acquired. Although this is valuable information, the places of acquisition do not necessarily say anything about the origin of the manuscripts.

The *Pratisargaparvan* showcases an even more complicated situation because, as the editors acknowledge in a Sanskrit postscript to the *parvan*, the text is based on just one manuscript, which I was not able to find, nor have I been able to locate other manuscripts with the same text.⁶ Regarding the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* as a whole, I discovered even more challenging factors after consulting open-access digital manuscripts and various catalogues (e.g., [Aufrecht 1859](#); [Mitra 1885](#); [H. Śāstrī and Gui 1902](#); [M.H. Śāstrī 1904, 1928](#); and the online catalogue of the [NGMCP 2002](#)–). Most importantly, there is not a single manuscript that captures the entire Purāṇa and corresponds with the text of the printed edition. Instead, most manuscripts contain just one *parvan*, and only occasionally do we encounter manuscripts that combine the *Brāhmaparvan* and the *Madhyamaparvan*. Moreover, the manuscripts do not bear the same names as in the printed edition. The *Brāhmaparvan* is simply referred to as *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*, suggesting that it is a complete Purāṇa. The *Madhyamaparvan* is referred to as *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa madhyamatantra*, also implying an individual text. The *Uttaraparvan*, which is always recorded as a separate text, is called *Bhaviṣyottarapurāṇa*, suggesting that it was considered an individual purāṇa, in addition to the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*. In fact, even in the printed edition, the 'Uttaraparvan' is referred to as *bhaviṣyottaraṃ* (*Bhaviṣyapurāṇa uttara-parvan* 2.6, 207.4, 207.10). Finally, there are discrepancies in content between the printed edition and the manuscripts. Some chapters are found in the printed edition, but not in the manuscripts, and *vice versa*. Hazra (1963: 366–9) has collected these discrepancies for the *Uttaraparvan*.

⁶ See Bonazzoli (1979: 30) for other manuscripts containing modern, yet different material.

Although these findings may not come as a surprise, the printed edition is presented as if the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* was one coherent text with only minor variations. The reality is, however, that the printed edition is a collection of individual books, *parvans*, that are ascribed to the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*. We should be aware of the Purāṇa's compositional layers and the reality that at least in manuscript form, there was not one manuscript with all four *parvans*.

Despite these challenges of textual history, three of the four *parvans* will be used for the following analysis, which aims to turn these challenges into opportunities. What do the individual *parvans* say about the compositional complex of Purāṇas? To what extent do they sketch a coherent image? And what do these findings tell us, if we put them in a historical perspective? In other words, what can we learn of the (dis)continuity of ideas concerning the compositional complex of Purāṇas across the different compositional layers?

Orality, writing, and all the above

One way of categorizing narrative units is distinguishing between those relating to the narrative world and those relating to the physical world. The first element of the compositional complex, composition, is only described in the narrative world. The *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* starts with an exposition on its own origin. In line with Purāṇic tradition, the Purāṇa is of divine origin. Brahmā 'told' (*proktavān*, *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa brāhmaparvan* 1.99b) the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* to Śiva, by whom the Purāṇa then 'was narrated' (*kathitam*, 100b) to Viṣṇu. After oral transmission among the gods, the text reached Vyāsa (*Bhaviṣyapurāṇa brāhmaparvan* 1.99–101). Although the text does not elaborate on the composition and each stage of the transmission, it clearly intends oral composition by Brahmā, and oral transmission to the gods and Vyāsa. What is unique for the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*, however, is the presence of a second origin story. This story is told in one of the eight *maṅgala* ('benediction') verses, preceding the actual text.

Bhaviṣyapurāṇa Brāhmaparvan maṅgala 6:

krtvā purāṇāni parāśarātmajaḥ sarvāṇy anekāni sukhāvahāni |
tatrātmāsaukhyāya bhaviṣyadharmān kalau yuge bhāvi lilekha sarvam ||

The son of Parāśara (Vyāsa), having made all Purāṇas, each and every one of them, which are vehicles of happiness, **wrote** the future *dharmas* there (i.e. in the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*), the entire future in the Kali age, for the sake of the happiness of the self.

The 'future *dharmas*' (*bhaviṣyadharmān*) and the 'entire future' (*bhāvi ... sarvam*) refers to the content of the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*. According to this verse, Vyāsa *wrote* these (*likh-*). The verse

is unique, ground-breaking even, for Vyāsa usually ‘narrates’ or ‘makes’ Purāṇas; exactly the terminology used in the next two *maṅgala* verses: *vyāsaḥ ... avadad bhaviṣyam*, ‘Vyāsa narrated the *Bhaviṣya*[*purāṇa*]’ (7d), and *vyāsaḥ purāṇam prathitam cakāra*, ‘Vyāsa made the celebrated Purāṇa (*Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*)’ (8d). The verb ‘to make’ (*kr-*) especially is common in other narratives as well, for both oral and written composition (e.g., *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa pratisargaparvan*: 2.21.13cd–14ab, 4.19.20cd).

The uniqueness is alarming, and in fact, after consulting various descriptive catalogues and digitally available manuscripts of the *Brāhmaṇaparvan*, I discovered that these eight *maṅgala* verses are absent in all accessible manuscripts (Mitra 1885, MS no. 2553; M.H. Śāstrī 1904, MS no. 151; M.H. Śāstrī 1928, MSS nos. 3740, 3741; NGMCP 2002–, MSS nos. 268-2, 268-6, 269-2, 269-3, 270-5; EAP 2004–, MS no. EAP1023-25-54; ‘*Bhaviṣya Puran Sanskrit manuscript Jangamwadi Math collection*’ 2020). As mentioned before, it is unclear which manuscript(s) the Veṅkaṭeśvara Press used, so it is impossible to say to what extent the presence of these *maṅgala* verses—including the unusual remark on Vyāsa writing the Purāṇa—is supported by manuscripts. If we follow the manuscript evidence that I was able to check, then oral composition by Brahmā remains the only account for this stage of the compositional complex. Unfortunately, this account is a narrative unit in the narrative world, rather than in the physical world, so the text, as Purāṇas do, leaves us in the dark regarding its historical composers and mode of composition.

The *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* does, however, share its view on the preservation and transmission of Purāṇas in the physical world. Three of such narrative units will be discussed in detail. The first example gives insight into the preservation of Purāṇas, the second and third cases primarily deal with the transmission of the texts, but turn out to be valuable sources of information on the preservation of Purāṇas as well.

The first relevant chapter is called *vidyādānavarṇanam*, ‘the description of the gift of knowledge’ (*Bhaviṣyapurāṇa uttaraparvan* 174). The chapter appears in various manuscripts (e.g., Aufrecht 1859, MS no. 76; Mitra 1885, MS no. 2582; Hazra 1963: 366–9 n. 13), and it is quoted by the twelfth-century commentator Aparārka in his commentary on the *Yājñavalkyadharmasāstra* (see De Simini 2016: 85 n. 230, 86 n. 234, 91 n. 244, 99 n. 255, 102, 111). Verse 11 in the Veṅkaṭeśvara Press edition is also quoted by Nīlakaṅṭha Bhaṭṭa (seventeenth century) in the *Dānamayūkha* section of his *Bhagavantabhāskara* (see De Simini 2016: 289 n. 729).

Vidyādāna is a ritual centring around the gift of manuscripts, which appears in various Purāṇas, such as the *Devīpurāṇa*, *Agnipurāṇa*, *Matsyapurāṇa*, and in *śāstra* literature, such as the *Śivadharmottara*, which contains the most stages in the *vidyādāna* ritual (thus forming the basis for De Simini 2016; cf. Bonazzoli 1983: 261–2). Nevertheless, the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* shares several individual elements of the ritual. The present chapter describes each phase

of the ritual, from the preparations to the actual donation. Although most verses list the merits of donating a manuscript, the first part describes the copying of a text, which is a fixed part of the ritual, immediately attesting written preservation.

The ritual takes place on an auspicious day that has been announced by a sage. On that day, a four-squared drawing (*maṇḍala*) should be made, smeared with cow dung, covered in flowers and decorated with *svastikā* symbols and other auspicious signs. Having placed the exemplar (*pustaka*) on the *maṇḍala*, one should venerate it with fragrances and flowers (verses 4–5). The Sanskrit word *pustaka* can mean ‘book’ or ‘manuscript’ in general, but here I follow Florinda De Simini, who extensively studied the phenomenon of *vidyādāna*. Based on other Sanskrit sources, she argues that the blank manuscript that will be donated at the end of the ritual only appears at the next stage of the ritual as *lekhyā*, ‘that which is to be written’. The *pustaka*, therefore, is the exemplar, also referred to as *likhita*, ‘that which is written’ (De Simini 2016: 85–7).

The preparation continues with placing the required writing equipment. The pen (*lekhānī*) should be made of gold (*sauvarṇī*), and the inkpot (*maṣibhājana*) should be made of silver (*raupya*). Then after being venerated, the scribe (*lekhaka*) starts (verse 6). The actual copying is described in general terms, listing some of the grammatical components that the scribe shall use. The scribe, who should be trained and careful, should write a *pada* (a measurement in metre, literally ‘foot’) in the right metre (*mātra*), with *anusvāras* (a vocalic *m*), caesuras (*cheda*), and he should write letters (*akṣara*) that are equal (*sama*) in size, aligned on top (*samaśīrṣa*), round (*vartula*), and thick (*ghana*, verses 7–8).

Verses 10–11 mark the end of the ritual, where the transition from written preservation by the *lekhaka* to oral transmission by the *vācaka*, ‘narrator’, is illustrated. The *vācaka* is the one who recites texts to an audience. Having worshipped the *śāstra*, which is the freshly copied manuscript according to De Simini (2016: 100–101), it should be given to the *vācaka*, who is skilled and knowledgeable in the true essence of the scriptures and a good speaker. One should give the manuscript (*pustaka*) covered in two cloths (*vastrayugma*) and one should either place it as common property (*sāmānya*) for all the people or in a monastery (*maṭha*).

The written preservation of Purāṇas is central in this chapter. Although the chapter describes a ritual, the elements that are described fit regular acts of copying as well, such as the scribe, an exemplar, a pen, ink, and all the grammatical components required to make a new manuscript. What is particularly fascinating about this passage is that it also illustrates the transition from the scribe to the narrator who will bring the text to the audience orally.

The interplay between written preservation and oral transmission is also confirmed by two chapters on the rules (*vidhis*) of listening to Purāṇas, an element that is not compulsory

for a Purāṇa, but not unique to the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* either (see Bonazzoli 1983: 271–2 for a tripartite classification of this type of content). The first chapter is *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa brāhma-parvan* 216, called *purāṇaśravaṇavidhivarnanam*, ‘the description of the rules concerning the listening to Purāṇas’. It is found in at least three manuscripts, presumably as chapter 148 (Mitra 1885, MS no. 2553A; EAP 2004–, MS no. EAP1023-25-54; ‘Bhaviṣya Puran Sanskrit manuscript Jangamwadi Math collection’ 2020).

From verse 47, the text prescribes the rules of the recitation of Purāṇas. One should go to the agreed place wearing clean clothes. Upon arrival, one should make a circumambulation and assign the teacher or explainer (*bodhaka*) a seat which is not too high nor too low (verses 47–9). Then the *vācaka* should accept the manuscript (*pustaka*). The manuscript should be worshipped and stored (*sthāpya*) in a house (verses 58), but also the scribe should be venerated, in particular at the end of a *parvan*, ‘book’ (verse 93). The manuscript remains present throughout the recitation. Having selected a ‘leaf’ (*patraṃ*, following the manuscripts; cf. *pātraṃ*, ‘vessel’, in the printed edition), taking it in his hands, and having venerated all the gods, such as Brahmā, as well as Vyāsa, Vālmiki (the composer of the *Rāmāyaṇa*), Viṣṇu, Śiva, and Sūrya, the narrator should start reciting (60–1). Whether the text is read from the manuscript directly or whether it is recited from memory with the manuscript merely being there as a kind of ritual item is not made explicit, but the verses confirm the physical presence of a manuscript during a recitation and the value of the manuscript.

The style of recitation is described in detail. The words should, for example, be firm (*stabdha*), powerful (*ūrjita*), and decorated with the *saptasvaras*, ‘the seven musical notes’: verses 62–3, *ṣaḍja*, *ṛṣabha*, *gāndhāra*, *madhyama*, *pañcama*, *dhaivata*, and *niṣāda* (Te Nijenhuis 1974: 13). This description suggests the singing of a text, with different intonations and requiring certain musical knowledge.

Verses 64–6 contain what is usually referred to as a *phalaśruti*, ‘the fruit of listening’ (see Taylor 2012: 94 for the problems of this translation). Verses of this type usually list the benefits that someone acquires by listening to a text or part of it (e.g., *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa brāhma-parvan* 1.70),⁷ although there are also *phalaśrutis* listing the rewards for the narrator (e.g., *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa uttaraparvan* 161.74–5) and examples where the risks of reciting a Purāṇa wrongly are enumerated (Taylor 2012: 102–3).

The *phalaśruti* in *Brāhmaparvan* 216 concerns someone who hears (*śru-*) the Itihāsas and the Purāṇas from a *vācaka*; that person will obtain the same benefits as those acquired after performing a horse sacrifice (*aśvamedha*), all his desires will be granted, he will be released from all diseases, and find great merit, or he will go to heaven. The interaction between

⁷ Cf. the final book of the *Mahābhārata* (Hegarty 2012: 60).

the narrator and the listener is beautifully illustrated in this *phalaśruti*, confirming the oral transmission of, in this case, the Itihāsas and the Purāṇas. It also shows the ideal and power of oral recitations. After all, the mere listening yields results equal to those of performing the most elaborate and expensive sacrifices (such as the royal Vedic horse sacrifice), or of subjecting oneself to the most arduous asceticism and the most rigorous rituals.

After the *phalaśruti*, the rules for the listener are described. He should bathe before arriving at the house of the narrator (that is, the place of the narration) and praise him. He should take a seat in front of the narrator and remain silent (*vāgyata*) and very concentrated (*susamāhita*). Each social class has a dedicated seat, including the lowest class, the Śūdras. As soon as the *vācaka* has paid homage to Vyāsa, the listeners should not speak anymore, ‘unless there is a doubt’ (*saṁśayādṛte*). In that case, the narrator should be asked (*praṣṭavya*) and he should answer. Whatever the narrator tells should be understood (*nibodhana*) by the audience (verses 67–73). Following a description of the benefits for the narrator and praise of the *vācaka* (verses 74–99), the role of the expositor is once again made clear by saying that he who always fully understands the meaning of the text (*granthārtha*) should tell its meaning to all social classes (verse 100). According to Bonazzoli (1983: 274), the ‘interpretation of the role of Vyāsa [i.e. the narrator] as an expositor, and the absence of the role of Sūta’ here put the chapter ‘at a rather recent date’.

From this description, it is possible to reconstruct several features of a Purāṇa recitation. It initially concerns a one-way recitation during which the narrator speaks and the audience listens quietly. However, when something is not clear, then the audience is allowed to interrupt and ask questions. The narrator has the task of explaining the text at hand. The fact that even Śūdras were allowed to visit the recitation suggests that it was a public event for all social classes.

Similar ideas are expressed in another chapter concerning the recitation of Purāṇas: *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa madhyamaṅgarvaṇa* 1.7, called *guruvarṇanam*, ‘the description of the teacher’. This is found, as the sixth or seventh chapter, in at least Mitra (1879), MS no. 1742; M.H. Śāstrī (1904), MS no. 151; ‘Bhavisya Puran Sanskrit manuscript Jangamwadi Math collection’ (2020); and Lāhā (1885).⁸

In this chapter, the teacher is the narrator, and his narration concerns not just the Purāṇas. In verses 24–6, for example, the seating arrangements of the audience and the narrator for different compositions are described. In the case of the recitation of Purāṇas and the *Mahābhārata*, the listener should face south (*yamadiś*), and the narrator should face north (*uttara*), but in the case of the recitation of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Dharmasāstras and the *Harivaṁśa*, it should be the reverse. If these rules are not met, evil spirits (*yātudhāna*) will steal the

⁸ The latter is a book recording the *Madhyamatantra* in Bengali script with a Bengali commentary and translation.

benefit of listening. Towards the end of the chapter, more information is provided on the recitation of the texts. After paying homage to Jaimini (a pupil of Vyāsa), Vyāsa, Śiva, and Viṣṇu, the narrator should start reciting, following certain prescriptions that have much in common with those in *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa brāhmaparvan* 216 (verses 109cd–116). For example, the narrator should speak clearly and employ the seven musical notes (*saptasvara*) and seven tones (*saptanāda*, verses 111–12).

A large section in the present chapter deals with the rules concerning the written preservation of texts. For example, ‘one should make a round hole in the front part of the leaves’ (*patrāṇam agrabhāge tu vedhaṃ kuryāt suvartulam*, 71ab). The hole is probably meant for the string that keeps the individual leaves together. There are also rules regarding the copying of manuscripts (verses 76–83), using the verb *likh-*, ‘to write’, which Bonazzoli (1983: 260) argues bore the original sense ‘to copy’. For example, one should write 100 *ślokas*, ‘verses’, of the beginning of a Dharmaśāstra—implying that only after 100 verses, the scribe may take a break (verse 76ab). Furthermore, a Brahmin should never write out of delusion (*moha*), but should abide to chastity (*brahmacarya*, verse 77ab). One should not write just a part (*bhāga*) of the *Harivaṃśa*, nor that middle part of the *Garuḍapurāṇa* and the *Skandapurāṇa* that contains *tantras* (verses 78cd–79ab). In the case of copying the composition of Vālmiki (the *Rāmāyaṇa*), one should only copy the eulogies (*stotra*), while abiding to observances (verse 81). The text also provides rules concerning the direction the scribe should face when he copies a text, as well as the corresponding benefits and risks: for example, when he faces north, he obtains bliss (*śrī*), but when he faces south, he will find death (*maraṇa*). The text furthermore determines inappropriate days for copying, such as during a forefather ritual, an earthquake, or one’s birthday (verses 87–92), and describes different sizes of books (verses 102–6). For instance, the best size is 32 *aṅgulas*. One *aṅgula* corresponds to the size of the breadth of a finger. This book is called *Nārāyaṇa*. The smallest book is a *kaniṣṭha* (literally ‘smallest’) which is eight *aṅgulas*. Because of its rich descriptions of the preservation and transmission of Purāṇas, this chapter adds valuable details to what the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* declares in the other *parvans*. Combining all sections across three different *parvans*, what can be concluded regarding the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*’s perspective on the compositional complex of Purāṇas? What can we learn from the text in terms of historical (dis)continuity?

Conclusions

The *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* is almost the perfect candidate for reconstructing the composition, preservation, and transmission of Purāṇas. Each stage of their compositional complex is addressed in different narrative units and in different *parvans*. The first stage, composition, is only described in the narrative world, dealing with mythological figures. The printed edition published by the Veṅkaṭeśvara Press gives two different stories of its own composition. The first is found in one of the eight *maṅgala* ('benediction') verses, preceding the text proper. It says that Vyāsa wrote down (*lilekha*) the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*. This is a unique understanding of Purāṇic composition because they are usually narrated. This verse, found in the edition by the Veṅkaṭeśvara Press, appears to be an isolated phenomenon, not supported by any of the manuscripts that can be consulted in various descriptive catalogues and in open-access manuscripts. The presence of this unique representation of a written composition of a Purāṇa should therefore be approached with care and restraint. The *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* also gives an alternative origin story, which is much closer to the mode of composition also found in other Purāṇas: oral composition by Brahmā, who narrates it directly to Śiva, who in turn passes it on through narration.

Even though the story is set in the narrative world, featuring mythological figures, it would be inappropriate to dismiss this representation as factually untrue. Based on the manuscript evidence, oral composition by Brahmā is the only method of composition recorded in the entire Purāṇa. This means that this is the story that the historical composers wanted to tell the audience. This goes back to the idea described by Narayana Rao (1993: 93) 'that authorship of a text, in the Indian tradition, is not intended to inform us about the actual producer of the text, to offer biographical data about him, but has a semiotic function of conveying the status of the text. The texts of the highest authority are above human authorship. The Veda comes under this classification. Texts of the next level of authority are composed by a superhuman, and therefore infallible, person, Vyāsa'. The historical composers are anonymous because they should be; and the mode of composition remains likewise impossible to know from the Purāṇa itself.

The situation is different in the case of the information provided on the preservation and transmission of Purāṇas. The *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* deals with these two stages of the compositional complex in various narrative units, in the *Brāhmaṇaparvan*, *Madhyamaṇaparvan*, and *Uttaraṇaparvan*. Since all three *parvans* deal with the same topic, it is possible to compare the various accounts and observe to what extent they express the same content over a period of several centuries.

Concerning the preservation of Purāṇas, the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* testifies only to written preservation. Both the *Madhyamaṇaparvan* (chapter 1.7) and the *Uttaraṇaparvan* (chapter 174) describe

the rules for scribes on copying manuscripts, such as the measurements of manuscripts, the required equipment for copying, and (in)appropriate days for copying. Both *parvans*, as well as the *Brāhmaṇaparvan* (chapter 216), speak of the transition from written preservation to oral transmission. The *Brāhmaṇaparvan* and the *Madhyamaṇaparvan* prescribe the presence of the manuscript during the recitation of a Purāṇa, which should be worshipped by the narrator. Although each *parvan* gives a different number of details, the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*'s main message concerning the preservation of Purāṇas is clear: they were preserved in written form.

The *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* is also unequivocal in its message on the transmission of Purāṇas: they were transmitted orally. In chapter 174 of the *Uttaraṇaparvan*, the recitation of Purāṇas is only briefly referred to by highlighting the moment of handing over the manuscript from the *lekhaka* ('scribe') to the *vācaka* ('narrator'), but the importance of reciting is also evident from the ample examples of *phalaśrutis* in this section. The rules concerning the oral transmission of Purāṇas are prevalent in the *Brāhmaṇaparvan* (chapter 216) and the *Madhyamaṇaparvan* (chapter 1.7). There are, for example, seating arrangements for all social classes, and the role of the narrator and the audience is carefully described. Based on this information, it is possible to reconstruct the recitation as a public event, accessible even to the lowest social class, the Śūdras. The narrator would primarily speak and the public would listen, but the audience was allowed to ask questions as well. The information gathered from the *phalaśrutis* (found in all *parvans*), the sections on the rules of listening and reciting Purāṇas (*Bhaviṣyapurāṇa brāhmaṇaparvan* 216 and *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa madhyamaṇaparvan* 1.7) and the chapter on the *vidyādāna* ritual describing the process of copying manuscripts (*Bhaviṣyapurāṇa uttaraṇaparvan* 174) are each informative about the rules, usages, and practices of Purāṇas as soon as they have come into existence, and they express one message, that of a written preservation and an oral transmission.

Studying the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* comes with challenges, particularly because of the extremely long period over which it was supposedly composed. However, as the present study has shown, this situation also makes room for opportunities. The fact that the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* is so consistent throughout its *parvans* on how Purāṇas were preserved and transmitted shows that there has been a long tradition of orality in a world of manuscripts.

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