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Madeleine Biardeau
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INTRODUCTION

Alf Hiltebeitel’s publishing career has been extraordinarily prolific. Since 1976, the year he published his first book, *The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahābhārata*, a revised version of his doctoral dissertation, he has averaged over a book a decade. His completed monographs include a two-volume field study of the cult of Draupadi published in 1988 and 1991 and his two “Rethinking” books published in 1999 and 2001. And two books on dharmā are now coming out in 2010 and 2011. Additionally, since 1972, the year he published his first article, he has published 72 articles, 25 of them in the last decade alone. In narrowing down the list of articles for re-publication in this edition, we as editors adopted two basic principles to guide our selection. While Hiltebeitel’s interests are unusually broad, one can identify two broad areas of inquiry: the classical Sanskrit epics (principally the *Mahābhārata* and, to a lesser degree, the *Rāmāyaṇa*), and the goddess, as his field-work finds her in the south Indian cult of Draupadī and the related cult of Kūttānantar/Aravān. We decided that the best way to present Hiltebeitel’s long career of publishing was to create two volumes: one on the *Mahābhārata* and the other on goddess cults. Even with this decision, however, we still faced the difficult task of narrowing down our selection from 35–30 articles each on the epic and on the goddess

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8 See the enclosed Chronology of Works for a list. Articles included in this volume have been marked by an asterisk; those included in volume 2 by a double asterisk.
to 20 articles per volume. Anything more, and the two volumes would have been unwieldy.

Once we had decided to group the articles into two volumes, each centered around a different thematic area, it also became clear that each volume would have to follow a slightly different organizing principle. While Hiltebeitel’s scholarship on the epics has undergone a series of clearly delineated stages, his goddess studies present a comparatively homogeneous picture. This is not to suggest that one cannot discern a comparable development in Hiltebeitel’s ideas in his work on the goddess, but there is a basic methodological difference between the two groups of articles. Whereas Hiltebeitel’s work on the epic is primarily concerned with theoretical issues (spanning, among others, literary theory, theories of textual composition, textual dynamics, history, etc.), his studies of the goddess adopt a primarily topical approach. There are, of course, theoretical issues at stake here as well (as becomes especially clear in his article, “Śiva, the Goddess, and the Disguises of the Pāṇḍavas,”9 one of the most significant of these for an appreciation of the epic’s meaning and literary form). Moreover, there is an unavoidable amount of overlap between the two groups of articles (the article just cited, for example, could be considered to belong in volume 1 just as much as in volume 2). All the same, the basic difference between the more theoretical pieces (on the Mahābhārata) and the fieldwork-related studies of the goddess holds. Consequently, volume 2, we decided, should adopt a roughly chronological approach,10 since its ethnographic thread remains as valid as ever today and, in fact, highlights Hiltebeitel’s early advances in the field. Even the earliest of these, “The Indus Valley Proto-Śiva” (originally published in 1978), is not “dated” in any sense of the term, as it presents a view that continues to be influential in contemporary scholarship.11

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10 In practice, however, it was necessary to cross the chronological approach with a thematic approach, organizing the articles around three thematic focii: Draupadi, the cult of Kūttānṭavar/Aravān, and more general reflections in a third section titled "Companion Studies." The chronological order is nonetheless evident: the first section features articles from 1981, 1980, 1980 (two articles), 1985, 1991, 1997, 1995, 1992, 2003, 2000 in that order; the second from 1995, 1998, 1999, and one new article written for the volume; the third from 1978 (the oldest in the volume), 1999, 1999, 1999 (three articles), 2005, 1985, and 1992. (See the enclosed Chronology of Works for full references; the articles are all marked by a double asterisk.)
11 An assessment that is borne out in Gregory Possehl’s recent citation of the article: “An interesting and provocative paper has been published by A. Hiltebeitel, who drew
Volume 1, in contrast, we felt, would be much more useful if it provided a prospective on the future direction of Hiltebeitel’s researches into the Indian epic, rather than a retrospective of his previous work. While there are continuities between Hiltebeitel’s early and late work on the epic, there is a much clearer sense of development here. In particular, Hiltebeitel’s work is articulated into two distinct stages by what he has called his “literary turn” taken around the early 90s. In the first stage, Hiltebeitel approaches the epic in keeping with dominant theories about a common Indo-European epic tradition; in the second “literary” stage, his thinking undergoes significant revision and becomes increasingly critical of the dogmatism of established views. A chronological approach akin to that adopted in volume 2, it was clear, would be of more use to the doxographers than those interested in thinking (or perhaps, in rethinking) about the epic.

Volume 1 is thus unusual in that it does not provide an overview of the thinker’s development (as such retrospective collections usually do). Rather, it makes a cogent case for a certain view of the epic that Hiltebeitel has been developing since 1991 and arguing for since the mid-1990s: that the Mahābhārata is a “product of conscious literary design” and must hence be read with a view to this conscious artistry rather than being saddled with our scholarly expectations of what it ought to look like. In practice, this has meant that of the twenty-one heavily on the work of B. Volchok, one of the Russian scholars who worked on their attempted decipherment of the Indus script [Hiltebeitel 1978]. Hiltebeitel's critique is much like Srinivasan’s, but he makes much of the fact that the horns on the central figure are those of a buffalo. Indian tradition is rich in mythology and symbolism concerning Mahiṣa, the buffalo god. Water buffalo also seem to occur in various contexts in the Indus Civilization. For example, there is seal 279 showing a man hurling a spear at a buffalo [Mackay 1937–8]. "This has been regarded as depicting a mythic scene: a prototype of Skanda killing Mahisasura; the “Buffalo Demon,” with a spear (sakti; Mahābhārata 3:221, 66, Poona Critical Edition) or Valin killing the buffalo Dundubhi (Ramayana, 4, 11, 7–39; Baroda Critical Edition), or the prototype of a Dravidian style buffalo sacrifice." [Hiltebeitel 1978, 773–4] Turning to other iconography on seal 420, Hiltebeitel begins to deal with the surrounding animals: the elephant, rhinoceros, tiger and buffalo. . . . [Hiltebeitel] tries to associate these animals with the ‘vehicles’ (vāhanas) of later Indian tradition, particularly those of the deities of the four quarters, the dik- or lokapalakas], or ‘World Regents.' This was first suggested by Marshall, but relegated to a footnote he never pursued in his commentary [Marshall 1931e: 53 n.1]. This proposition between the anima iconography on the seal and vāhanas remains interesting but not proved." Gregory L. Possehl, The Indus Civilization: A Contemporary Perspective (New Delhi: Vistaar Publications, fifth printing 2009; first pub. 2002 by AltaMira Press), 142–3.

A view first advanced at the 1st Dubrovnik International Conference on the Sanskrit Epics and Purāṇas (DICSEP), although, as one might imagine, to a less than entirely persuaded audience, and since recorded in the Proceedings of that conference:
In his 1972 article, for example, he already voices “doubts” about some of Dumézil’s “Indo-European comparisons,” while simultaneously underscoring “the close connections between the epic crisis and the ideology of the Brāhmaṇa.” In his 1974 article, the question of how this Indo-European background relates to its Indian context once again comes to the fore. While retaining the basic Dumézilian approach, he concludes by noting the need to consider how this prototypical Indo-European material would have been “reshaped by Indian reformulations of traditional Indo-European concepts of kingship, and by such specifically Indian themes as reincarnation, yoga, dharma, and bhakti.”

The most decisive break with the Dumézilian paradigm, however, can be correlated with his first visit to India in 1974–75. His review of Dumézil’s Mythe et épéée concludes by calling into question the very premise of Indo-European epic theory. Citing Wikander’s work, which “demonstrates that certain narrative epic features of the Mahābhārata may be very old,” Hiltebeitel asks: “How then can Dumézil speak of the design of its authors as ‘de transposer en épéée aussi complément que possible un ensemble mythologique et un seul’ (ME, 3:144)?” “The Mahābhārata narrative,” he concludes, “is more than simply the result of a transposition of a set of mythological types and one eschatological drama.”

Here one must mention the other major influence on Hiltebeitel’s work and the person who perhaps more than any other played a role in his distancing himself from the dominant ideology in Epenforschung: Madeleine Biardeau. In Hiltebeitel’s 1972 article, Biardeau is already a dominant influence, her “general distrust of the Indo-European comparison” preceding and signaling Hiltebeitel’s own attempts to distance himself from the Dumézilian paradigm. In many ways, one can read Hiltebeitel’s early work as an attempt to reconcile Dumézil’s method of approaching the Indian epic via an allegedly original Indo-European epic tradition with Biardeau’s method of using the Purāṇas to retrospectively illuminate the epic. While Biardeau has been frequently criticized for her rejection of the German text-historical method, a critical clarification of the underlying premises of 19th–20th century German scholarship on the Indian epics brings to light major problems.

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Far from being an objective science of texts, as German Indologists like to claim, German Orientalism plays into peculiarly Germany anxieties about religious, cultural, and ethnic identity. Indeed, one can trace the origins of the Indo-European theory back to 19th century *Indogermanische Forschungen*, which in turn originate in a characteristically 19th century German anxiety with establishing authentic (i.e., Āryan) origins for Germans. Scholars such as Pollock and Figueira have already illuminated the complicity of German Indology in the *Rassenideologie* of the National Socialist state, but what is surprising is that this thinking continues to take on some of its old forms in contemporary German scholarship. Obviously, whether one approaches...
the *Mahābhārata* as the detritus of a heroic archaic civilization (one to which German scholars, merely in virtue of being German, would have privileged access) or as a work of fundamental theological, cosmological, and philosophical relevance, cannot any longer be considered a neutral issue. Rather, it bears upon issues of identity, colonialism, and race. While the present work does not allow us space for a consideration of these issues, we would like to draw the reader’s attention to a forthcoming work by the editors titled *The Nay Science: A History of German Indology*, in which we raise some of these issues.

Biardeau also played a role in yet another decision that led to a significant realignment in Hiltebeitel’s work: his decision to study the reception and continued development of the epic tradition among indigenous communities in India. As Hiltebeitel recounts, in 1974, after finishing his first book on the *Mahābhārata*, he made his first trip to India with a sense that the Indo-European connections he had argued for in that book were getting less and less compelling. Hiltebeitel had a hunch that he might find the *Mahābhārata* known better on the ground there than in Western, or for that matter, Indian halls of academe. In particular, he had begun to notice, while proposing his project on a suggestion from Biardeau that he study the Tamil Draupadi cult, that there was total bifurcation between knowledge of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* and knowledge of *Mahābhārata* vernaculars. If Sanskritists owned the text, vernacular *Mahābhāratas*, not to mention a Tamil *Mahābhārata* of Śūdra farmers, were only to be belittled.

In effect, although Hiltebeitel perhaps could not have realized the full implications at the time, his ethnographic work on the Draupadi cult would lead to a significant break with two centuries of German scholarship on the epic. Since Holtzmann and Oldenberg, German Orientalists had distinguished between an “Indo-Germanic” or an “Āryan” Urepos whose “homeland” (Heimat) would have been in the “Northwest,”

26 Cf. Adolf Holtzmann, for whom, “Instead of the elegiac softness, the resignation, being tired of life, [characteristic] of later Indian literature, the raw war-like air of the
and the epic in its present form which they attributed variously to the influence of Brahmīn ideology, the “worshippers” (Verehrer) of Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva, or to bhakti. Given their obsession with isolating this epic “core” from the Mahābhārata, these scholars were less interested in the Indian reception of the text. Hiltebeitel was not unaware of this gap in research: in his 1979 bibliographic essay on Kṛṣṇa in the Mahābhārata, he writes, “startling as it may be, there had up to this point been no real effort to place the Mahābhārata in the direct line of India’s own literate religious tradition.” One can thus view his fieldwork on the Draupadī cult as an attempt to rectify this state of affairs. It would also lead to one of the most productive periods in his career, with approximately 26 articles published on the cults of Draupadī and Kūttāṃṭavar in the two decades between 1980 and 2000. As most of these articles have been published in volume 2 and are also reviewed there (see now the introduction to vol. 2), we shall forego a longer discussion here.

Hiltebeitel’s researches into the reception of the epic within indigenous communities also led to the publication of a two-volume study of the cult of Draupadī between 1988 and 1991. In these two books, Hiltebeitel first mapped the distribution of approximately two thousand Draupadī temples across Tamilnadu and neighboring states and identified the cult’s “core area.” Volume 1 treated the core area’s mythology.

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28 Ibid., 94 (italics in original).
29 See n. 2 above for the full citation.
while volume 2 focused on its rituals. While adopting anthropological modes of inquiry (indeed, a review in the Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies described Hiltebeitel as an “honorary anthropologist”), his approach was also notable for its sensitivity to local traditions of interpretation and reception. Unsurprisingly, the reception was unanimously positive. In 1992, Hiltebeitel was invited to Paris as Directeur d’Études Invité to give a course on “Le Mahābhārata dans les traditions populaires de l’Inde du Sud” at the École Pratiques des Hautes Études, Vème Section, Section des Sciences Religieuses. And in 1994, he was invited to be coordinator and main lecturer for a five-week Ford Foundation workshop on folk religion at the Folklore Research Center, St. Xavier’s College, Palayamkottai, Tamilnadu.

One could, of course, say more of Hiltebeitel’s extraordinarily fruitful engagement with Biardeau, whose presence can be felt even today in his work. Her sense of the epic as a symbolic universe all its own—one that can neither be reduced to some “Indo-European”/“Indo-Germanic” Urepos nor adequately clarified through a theory of interference between indigenous “Vedic” or “para-Vedic” traditions and an Indo-European tradition—is perhaps the single most important factor in Hiltebeitel’s attempting, since the early 1980s, to engage questions of the epic’s meaning rather than historical origins. An article from 1984 (“The Two Kṛṣṇas in One Chariot: Upaniṣadic Imagery and Epic Mythology”; originally published in History of Religions and reprinted as chapter 16 of this volume) illustrates perfectly the incipient conflict between these two principles as it plays itself out in Hiltebeitel’s work in this new phase of his thought:

Classical bhakti Hinduism [he writes], the nonsectarian Hinduism whose social theory, cosmology, and theology are first fully articulated in the two Hindu epics and the Harivamśa, developed in these mythological texts a theological language of images that has ever since retained its power in mainstream devotional Hinduism. This essay is an exploration of such imagery as it is worked out through the narrative of the Mahābhārata, the most fundamental of these texts, “le monument principal, et sans doute le plus ancien, de la bhakti.” The point of departure for this study is thus an assumption not widely shared but, nonetheless, compelling in its widening application, that the Mahābhārata in its classical form is a

30 See n. 3 above for the full citation.
work of bhakti through and through. In other words, no matter what one hypothesizes by way of sources for the story in earlier mythology, heroic legend (I am still of the view that it presupposes an Indo-European and Āryan heritage that distinguishes it from its companion texts) or possible history, there are no passages or incidents which on their own permit the reconstruction of either pre-bhakti stages of mythologization or a historical pre-“divinized” or premythological core. Indeed, it is more pointless to look for original human-historical figures and elements than earlier forms of the story since in the latter case there is at least something comparative to go on. Rather than being a patchwork of myths, legends, and historical reminiscences overlaid with bhakti, what the narrative builds up to and works around are a series of what I would call “bhakti tableaux,” scenes which present images that hold themselves before the hearer’s mind. Ultimately, they present ways of seeing the divine through the stories that are akin to the contemporaneous development of temple iconography, and it is no accident that many of these epic bhakti tableaux continue to find their places on mass market oleographs in India today.32

One can see how Biardeau’s approach to the epic of studying the way the Purāṇas both emerge from and reciprocally illuminate the Mahābhārata provides a major impetus for Hiltebeitel in this article to begin thinking about the text in terms of itself. Crucially, his attention turned from an engagement with scholarly theories on the epic to the epic itself: what did it have to say to the reader? How was it able to provide a vital framework of meaning (ethical, social, and political) for so many centuries across such a wide area, while recognizably maintaining its textual integrity? What were the literary strategies the epic made use of in presenting itself?

Sometime in the early 1990s, Hiltebeitel recalls taking a “literary turn” in his Mahābhārata studies. At its simplest, this means that he increasingly came to think about the Mahābhārata as a work of literature as opposed to a palimpsest of textual and historical strata as was the accepted scholarly convention. Although he claims to have aired the idea first in 1994 during a talk on the epic at the Śiva-Viṣṇu temple in Lanham, Maryland, it is clear from his writings that the idea had been slowly maturing for a long time. Articles such as “The Folklore of Draupadi: Sārīs and Hair” from 1991 already reveal a preoccupation with the literary qualities of the epic,33 as does the back and forth

33 Alf Hiltebeitel, “The Folklore of Draupadi: Sārīs and Hair,” in Gender, Genre, and Power in South Asian Expressive Traditions, ed. Arjun Appadurai, Frank J. Korom, and
comparison between Bhaṭṭa Nārāyaṇa’s Sanskrit drama Venīśaṃhāra (“The Binding-Up of the Braid”) and the Mahābhārata in his 1981 article on Draupadi’s hair.\textsuperscript{34} The concern with literary aspects is even more prominent in his 1995 article on the Rām, Rāś, and Pāṇḍava Līlā traditions of north India,\textsuperscript{35} and ultimately culminates in a virtuoso analysis of the epic’s strategies of literary self-presentation through its use of frame-narratives in the article “Conventions of the Naimiṣa Forest.”\textsuperscript{36} Both as a paper and, later, as a section of a central chapter in his 2001 book, “Conventions” provides compelling evidence for rethinking some of the more dogmatic historicist claims about the epic, such as the thesis of an older, compact “Bhārata” that is later expanded to form the “Mahā-” or “Great-” Bhārata. While scholars were not about to give up positions on which they had built up entire careers (not to speak of identities!), by moving the frame-narratives center-stage in “Conventions,” Hiltebeitel had effectively turned the received theory of “accretion of secondary materials to the central story” (van Buitenen)\textsuperscript{37} on its head. The Mahābhārata, he had shown, had to be read from the outside inward, rather than being read from the inside outward. Perhaps alone of the “Western savants” (Sukthankar),\textsuperscript{38} Hiltebeitel had dared think what Western scholars had long been unwilling to concede: that perhaps the epic had always been preserved, understood, and transmitted in an exemplary manner in the Indian tradition, without the need for Western “critical” surgeries. Indeed, if this approach was correct, then the epic could no longer be seen as a “monstrous chaos” (Oldenberg)\textsuperscript{39}

Margaret A. Mills (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1991), 395–427. (This article has been reprinted in vol. 2 of this collection.)

\textsuperscript{34} Alf Hiltebeitel, “Draupadī’s Hair,” in Autour de la déesse hindoue, ed. Madeleine Biardeau, Purushartha 5 (1981): 179–214. (This article has been reprinted in vol. 2 of this collection.)

\textsuperscript{35} Alf Hiltebeitel, “Draupadi Cult Līlās,” in The Gods at Play: Līlā in South Asia, ed. William Sax (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 204–24. (This article has been reprinted in vol. 2 of this collection.)

\textsuperscript{36} Alf Hiltebeitel, “Conventions of the Naimiṣa Forest,” Journal of Indian Philosophy 23 (1998): 69–79.


\textsuperscript{38} V. S. Sukthankar, On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata (Bombay: Asiatic Society, 1957), 29; cf. also p. 31 and 67. On p. 25, Sukthankar speaks, perhaps more accurately, of “European savants.”

\textsuperscript{39} Hermann Oldenberg, Das Mahābhārata, 1. In all, the term Ungeheuer and derivatives occur 33 times in Oldenberg’s Mahābhārata, with the greatest concentration of occurrences (7 in total) occurring between pages 80–82. The most frequent usage is as a description of the epic, in the forms: “ungeheures Gedicht,” “ungeheures Werk”
or as a “literary monster” (Winternitz), but had to be understood as a product of conscious literary and artistic design.

One must appreciate the radicality of this suggestion, which basically broke with two hundred years of Orientalist scholarship and pseudo-critique on the epic. The Śūdras and the low-status Alis (transsexual “brides” of Kṛṣṇa), Hiltebeitel was implicitly suggesting, had understood

(twice), “ungeheuren Umfang,” “ungeheures Schatzhaus,” “ungeheures Hauptstück,” “ungeheuren Stoffmassen,” and “ungeheures Epos.” The term is also used twice of the main battle (variously described as an “ungeheure Schlacht” or as an “ungeheure Kampf”), and a total of four times to describe various aspects of the epic: its transformation into a didactic poem (“ungeheurliche Verwandlung”), the didactic expansion of the poem (“ungeheueren lehrhaften Erweiterungen”), and its expanses (“ungeheuren Weiten”). But the most interesting occurrences for our analysis are those that serve to characterize its aesthetic character: the events narrated in the epic spread out into “monstrous dimensions” (“ungeheurliche Dimensionen”), it contains events that have been enlarged into the “monstrous” (“das Ungeheure”), it conjures up or is the product of “monstrous visions” (“ungeheueren Visionen”), it itself contains actual “monsters” (“Ungeheuern”) and “monstrosities” (“Ungeheurlichkeiten”). To this we may add a final class: those usages that serve to characterize the Indian aesthetic in the widest sense, namely, its very outlook on becoming. Thus, the Indian aesthetic contemplates the life of the universe as permeated by “monstrous tensions and discharges” (“ungeheuern Spannungen und Entladungen”); contemplates, in the epic, an image of the “monstrosity of natural- and divine existence” (“ungeheueren Natur- und Götterbegebenheit”); sees, “in the whole of nature,” “a monstrous realm of life” (“ungeheueres Reich des Lebens”); sees human and divine fate as being suffused with a “monstrous All-Life” (“ungeheuren Allleben”); as merely a wave in the “monstrous stream of Sāṃsāra” (“ungeheuren Strom des Sāṃsāra”); pushes narrative occurrences into the “most monstrous dimensions of the event” (“ungeheursten Dimensionen des Geschehens”; note the superlative degree!) or sees them steered along “monstrous paths” (“ungeheure Bahnen”); and fashions itself out of “masses of material” drawn from an existence that is “monstrous, wonder-filled, [and] terrifying” (“ungeheuren wunderfüllten furchtbaren”) at the same time. Crowning this vast picture of uncontrolled, teeming becoming and its corresponding aesthetic, as its symbol and archetype, is Śiva: the “supreme god” whose “monstrous agency” (“ungeheure Tun”) Oldenberg dimly perceives to be at work in all this fantastic cosmological and narrative unfolding. (This note excerpted from the editors’ forthcoming work The Nay Science: A History of German Indology.)

40 Moritz Winternitz, Geschichte der indischen Literatur, vol. 1 (Leipzig: Amelang, 1909), 272. The full citation reads: “For us, however, who contemplate the Mahābhārata not as faithful [gläubige] Hindus, but as critical literary historians [kritische Litterarhistoriker], it is nothing less than an artificial work [Kunstwerk]; and in no case can we see in it the work of an author, indeed, not even of a capable collector and arranger. The Mahābhārata is a literary monster [litterarisches Unding]. Never had an artist’s hand attempted—and it would, indeed, hardly have been possible—to unify the conflicting elements to a uniform poem. Only unpoetic theologians and commentators and talentless hacks [Abschreiber] finally welded parts that are in truth irreconcilable and date back to different centuries together into a disordered mass” (editors’ translation).
the epic better than an array of German (and some other) “experts” had ever succeeded in doing.41

It is thus unsurprising that when Hiltebeitel published his next two books, they both included the word “Rethinking” in the title. In effect, Hiltebeitel had spent the time since his first book in 1976 reappraising the issue of what epic studies as such meant or ought to mean from the ground up. The two intervening books, his studies of Draupadi from 1988 and 1991, marked important milestones in this process, while themselves fuelling further bouts of “rethinking.” The two “Rethinking” books (published in 199942 and 2001,43 respectively) signaled Hiltebeitel’s “matured” view of the epic. Even an ardent critic of Hiltebeitel’s like Fitzgerald was inclined to concede, “Alf Hiltebeitel has been the single most open-minded and fearlessly imaginative Western reader the authors and editors of the Sanskrit Mahābhārata (MBh) have ever had for their masterpiece.”44

The two books are very different in style and substance. At 560 pages plus a 15 page introduction, Hiltebeitel’s 1999 book was his longest yet—and its subject appropriately ambitious: a comprehensive overview of the regional martial oral epics of India and of the way they relate to or “rethink” the classical epics. To that end, it demonstrated that, if one were to consider the Sanskrit epic tradition as a whole rather than addressing its disjecta membra as both traditional scholars of the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa and modern scholars of India’s vernacular oral epics till then had done, the only approach capable of encompassing this whole was literary hermeneutics. The following passage from the

42 See n. 4 above for the full citation.
43 See n. 5 above for the full citation.
introduction is especially illuminative of how Hiltebeitel, since 1999, has been thinking about the task of epic studies:

…rethinking India’s epics has meant thinking more about literature and history than doing anthropology. No matter how important I continue to think they are for the study of Hinduism and South Asian religions, and indeed for the anthropological study of South Asia, India’s classical epics are above all works of literature. This has meant recalling some of the reasons I was once an English major for my first three years of college, and giving some attention to recent studies in literature and literature theory.45

Hiltebeitel’s next book, Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader’s Guide to the Education of the Dharma King, then sought to buttress this case for a literary reading of the Mahābhārata by examining the way the author of the epic, Vyāsa, and its main kingly protagonist, Yudhiṣṭhira, interact throughout the epic. In contrast to the reigning orthodoxy of an oral Kṣatriya epic rewritten to legitimate a newly-instituted Brahmin hierarchy, Hiltebeitel argues for seeing the Brahminic Vyāsa as a “narrative fiction,” just as the references to orality are “literary tropes.” Thus, rather than reducing Yudhiṣṭhira or Vyāsa to historical personages and interpreting their interaction as evidence of a historical conflict between the Kṣatriya and Brahmin castes, Hiltebeitel argues for a complete shift in perspective: the epic, he suggests, is from the very beginning the product of Brahmins, who make use of tropes such as orality and bardic transmission (in the many references to the sūta), in order to articulate a comprehensive view of the proper dharma and of the way a righteous king (such as the fictional Yudhiṣṭhira) might be instructed in maintaining this dharma. Oral epic theory, he suggests, is not only of little use in a clarification of this philosophical and literary project; it has actively distorted our perspective on the epic:

Western scholarly reception of the Mahābhārata is built squarely upon the premise, aired most magisterially by Moritz Winternitz and Hermann Oldenberg, that the Mahābhārata is a “literary unthing” (literarisches Unding), a “monstrous chaos” (ungeheuerliches Chaos). Although our time is now one in which “literary monstrosity” might imply a kind of artistry (one thinks first of Henry James writing on the art of the novel as “such large loose and baggy monsters”), the phrase is simply not adequate to the critical task. Nonetheless, the premise of monstrosity has served a purpose. It has allowed scholars of very different persuasions and interests

45 Hiltebeitel, Rethinking India’s Oral and Classical Epics, 7.
to design a *Mahābhārata* of convenience through which to nurture—with more bombast than debate, and with scarcely anything that could be called cumulative results—their own contradictory notions of origins and their equally contradictory developmental theories.\(^{46}\)

Instead, Hiltebeitel “urges” that the *Mahābhārata* “must have been written over a much shorter period than is usually advanced…by ‘committee’ (Kirste 1902, 7 and 9) or ‘team’ (Dumézil 1968, 238), and at most through a couple of generations.”\(^{47}\) Indeed, as a sustained meditation on the problem of Yudhiṣṭhira’s education in the *Mahābhārata* shows, the entire epic (including the so-called “narrative” and the “didactic” portions) coheres around the *Mahābhārata’s* central problem: reconciling the violence that is an inevitable aspect of *pravṛttidharma* with the philosophical ideal of *nivṛttidharma*. “The svadharma of kings,” he notes, “must include not only the means to violence, but the means to its appeasement… One of the chief objects of the *Mahābhārata* is thus to instruct kings and other Kṣatriyas in how to curb endless cycles of violence, particularly as such cycles affect and implicate Brahmins.”\(^{48}\)

In chapter 5, Hiltebeitel then proposes that the concept of ānṛśamsya (which he translates as “noncruelty”) which is recommended to Yudhiṣṭhira as a kingly ideal represents the epic authors’ solution to the problem of violence as both necessary and repugnant.

Besides rethinking Western positions on the Indian epic from the ground up, Hiltebeitel has also continually sought to revise and expand the narrow methodological canon of Indological studies. As a student of Eliade’s, he already displayed a sophisticated understanding of sacrifice and ritual in his early *oeuvre*. He has since then incorporated a number of interdisciplinary perspectives into his work, including the work of the French post-structuralists Derrida and Foucault. In his 2001 book, for example, a discussion of Foucault’s question “what is an author?” in chapter 2 gives way to a reflection on “author function” and, finally, to a philosophical engagement with the work of the eminent phenomenologist and Heidegger scholar, J.L. Mehta. Other work has sought to reconsider the epic in light of the work of A.K. Ramanujan, Velcheru Narayana Rao, and even Freud. More recently, Hiltebeitel has been interested in thinking through affinities between

\(^{46}\) Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, 1; see now n. 39 and 40 above.

\(^{47}\) Ibid., 20.

\(^{48}\) Ibid., 118.
articles in volume 1, only four are older than 1998 and, of these, only one is older than 1977. Of Hiltebeitel’s earlier “Indo-European epic theory”-inspired work, only one article has been included: the article “Brothers, Friends, and Charioteers” from 1982, included as it demonstrates how, even in this early phase of his research, Hiltebeitel was already seeking bridges between Indo-European epic theory and the texts of the Indian tradition.

From theories of Indo-European epic to a “literary turn”

Hiltebeitel’s earliest work on the Mahābhārata clearly demonstrates the influence of Dumézil and Wikander. His first published article, “The Mahābhārata and Hindu Eschatology,” begins with an extended discussion of Dumézil’s work on the parallels between the apocalyptic scenario of the Scandinavian myth of Ragnarök and the Mahābhārata’s own, equally apocalyptic, vision of the Kurukṣetra. His next two articles, “Dumézil and Indian Studies” and “Comparing Indo-European ‘Epics’” (a review of Dumézil’s Mythe et épopée, vols. 2 and 3), owe even more to Dumézil. Nonetheless, a sense of dissatisfaction with the Indo-European paradigm is already in evidence in these early essays.

“the largest inadequacy in Mahābhārata scholarship, including my own,” Hiltebeitel writes, “is simply the failure to appreciate the epic as a work of literature. The western scholarly reception of this epic is straightforwardly built on and entrenched in the premise, aired most magisterially by Moriz Winternitz and Hermann Oldenberg—that the Mahābhārata is a ‘literary monster’.” Alf Hiltebeitel, “Reconsidering Bhṛguization,” in Composing a Tradition: Concepts, Techniques, and Relationships, ed. Mary Brockington and Peter Schreiner (Zagreb: Croatian Academy of Sciences and the Arts, 1999), 156.


14 I.e., the article “Nahuṣa in the Skies: A Human King of Heaven”; see n. 13 above for full citation.

15 See n. 13 above for full citation.


the *Mahābhārata* and Walter Benjamin’s Arcades Project. Hiltebeitel is also currently co-proposing (with Vishwa Adluri) a volume titled *The Emergence of Hinduism* (under consideration by Fortress Publishing), in which he hopes to show why thinking about Hinduism in terms of “emergences” rather than “origins” does more justice to it than the historicist approach hitherto.

**Position pieces and interpretative pieces: Parts I and II of volume 1**

Since completing his 2001 book, Hiltebeitel’s work has mainly focused on working out the implications of such a literary reading for the epic. As these articles constitute a coherent body of work no less significant than his other published monographs for an understanding of his intellectual trajectory, we were clear from the outset that, whatever the final form of volume 1, it would include a majority of these articles. They perhaps more than any other body of Hiltebeitel’s work constitute his “matured” view of the epic and this volume, in bringing them together, may be considered Hiltebeitel’s most comprehensive statement to date on questions of approach, methodology, and interpretation looking back at over 40 years of *Mahābhārata* scholarship.

But although we were clear from the outset that volume 1 ought to provide an overview of Hiltebeitel’s evolving views on the epic, the task of selecting which articles to include was not easy. One of the first principles adopted was to include those articles which focused on carrying forward the argument of Hiltebeitel’s 2001 book. Unusually for such an edition, this volume was planned from the very outset as a

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49 The book’s idea of “emergences” will be advanced by Vishwa Adluri, based on an attempt to articulate a philosophical rather than historical approach to Hinduism. Adluri draws on the distinction between “origin” and “originary” found in his teacher Reiner Schürmann’s work to deconstruct essentialist approaches based upon privileging historical origins such as the entire German rhetoric of “Āryan origins” for the *Mahābhārata* (see n. 22 above). For a discussion of the distinction between “origin” and “originary,” see Vishwa Adluri, *Parmenides, Plato and Mortal Philosophy: Return from Transcendence* (London: Continuum Publishing, 2011).

sort of “companion” volume to Hiltebeitel’s *Rethinking* book. Thus, we opened with a selection of six articles in which Hiltebeitel argues for the literary character of the *Mahābhārata*, and the benefits of interpreting it as a work of literary art that holds together effectively. These include positions on writing, reading, and orality (chapters 1 and 2; originally published in 2005\(^{51}\) and 2000\(^{52}\) respectively); textual representation of the author and the politics of devotion, or having gods be part of the story (chapter 3; 2004);\(^{53}\) the epic’s primary self-identification of its genre as *itiḥāṣa* or “history” (chapter 4, new article);\(^{54}\) the *Mahābhārata’s* Critical Edition and the epic’s archetypal design (chapter 5, new article),\(^{55}\) and on the epic’s inclusion of substories (chapter 6; 2005).\(^{56}\) Four of these articles had been previously published, while two were new “position pieces” written especially for the volume. Of these four, the aptly titled “Rethinking the *Mahābhārata*: Toward a Politics of Bhakti” (chapter 3), constituted Hiltebeitel’s response to the critics of his 2001 book. Part I thus includes all of what might be called Hiltebeitel’s “position pieces” to date, i.e., those in which Hiltebeitel has taken a stance on issues of the epic’s genre, form, literary content, redactorial history, and interpretation.

In Part II, under the heading “Interpretive Pieces,” we then chose to feature a set of six essays that follow from the positions developed in Part I. These are, in effect, applications of the positions taken in Part I to specific sections or themes in the epics. One of Hiltebeitel’s main aims in these longer studies was to show that readers’ knowledge of the text appreciates from working things out through the positions articulated in Part I. Part II opens with a discussion of the “Nārāyaṇīya and the

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\(^{54}\) Alf Hiltebeitel, “Why *Itihāṣa*? New Possibilities and Limits in Considering the *Mahābhārata* as History.” In spite of the resemblance in the titles, this is not the same article as the more preliminary “Why *Itihāṣa*? New Possibilities in Considering the *Mahābhārata*’s Intention as ‘History’,” in *Ways and Reasons for Thinking about the Mahābhārata as a Whole*, ed. Vishwa Adluri (Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, forthcoming).

\(^{55}\) Alf Hiltebeitel, “The Archetypal Design of the Two Sanskrit Epics.” This chapter will also appear by agreement as an article in *Proceedings of the 5th Dubrovnik International Conference on the Sanskrit Epics and Purāṇas*, ed. Petteri Koskikallio (Zagreb: Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, forthcoming).

Early Reading Communities of the *Mahābhārata*” (chapter 7; 2006),57 an article that touches upon almost all of the positions taken in Part I. Subsequent pieces in Part II then address, in turn, *bhakti* (chapter 8; 2007),58 the Aśvamedha sacrifice in both Sanskrit epics (chapter 9; new article),59 and the narrative progression of the respective heroines of the two epics (chapter 10; 2010),60 before returning once again to the theme of *bhakti* in “Mapping Bhakti in the Sanskrit Epics: Friendship, Hospitality, and Separation” (chapter 11; new article). The final chapter in this section (chapter 12; 2005)61 then re-prints an extended-length review of Fitzgerald’s translation of the ŚāntiParvan. Unlike Part I, where there is a strong sense of chronological continuity and chronological development, the articles in Part II were intended more as self-standing pieces and hence do not follow a chronological order.

**Recent/Early Companion Pieces: Part III**

Part III, under the heading “Recent/Early Companion Pieces,” then concludes volume 1 with a mix of recent pieces and earlier ones that display work on overlapping topics. Here, the positions and interpretative implications worked out in Parts I and II continue to find applications, but now in articles where one can see Hiltebeitel addressing topics both before and after his literary turn.

Chapters 13–14 both discuss ways the epic brings in cosmological considerations. “Bhīṣma’s Sources” (chapter 13; 2001),62 the first “recent”

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59 Alf Hiltebeitel, “Epic Aśvamedhas.” In spite of the resemblance in the titles, this is not the same article as “Epic Aśvamedhas,” in *Papers from the Fourth International Vedic Workshop: The Vedas in Culture and History*, ed. Joel Brereton (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, forthcoming).


62 Alf Hiltebeitel, “Bhīṣma’s Sources,” in *VidyārnavaVavandanam: Essays in Honor of*
piece, deals with how the great patriarch Bhīṣma comes to know what he knows in the Śāntiparvan. The next piece, “Nahuṣa in the Skies,” the oldest of the articles included in this volume (first published 1977), was selected as providing an interesting comparison to the more recent “Bhīṣma’s Sources.” As in the 2001 article, Hiltebeitel’s starting point is the question of how epic narrative introduces questions that are only solved through turning to cosmological considerations, but the treatment is quite different, invoking, for example, a significant amount of Vedic material. Nonetheless, one can note a remarkable continuity between the two articles, in that both are concerned with demonstrating the intrinsic connection between the epic’s so-called “narrative” and “didactic” portions.

The two cosmological chapters then give way to a triad of “charioteer”-themed articles. The first, “Krṣṇa in the Mahābhārata: The Death of Kṛṇa” (chapter 15; 2007), is a “recent” piece that examines the role of Krṣṇa’s actions in bringing about the death of Kṛṇa. The next two chapters, written in 1982 and 1984 respectively, may be seen as early “precursors” of chapter 15 in that they, too, focus on the pivotal confrontation between Arjuna and Kṛṇa. Chapter 16 focuses on Indo-European parallels to Irish epic, reflecting Hiltebeitel’s early Dumézilian framework; but the next article, cited earlier for its paragraph on “bhakti tableaux” and written just two years later, already displays a remarkable development away from this paradigm. Here, rather than the Indo-European connections, it is the Upaniṣadic background to the two Krṣṇas on one chariot that is foregrounded.

Chapters 18–19 are about Buddhism and the Mahābhārata. The first of these, “Buddhism and the Mahābhārata: Boundary Dynamics in Textual Practice” (chapter 18; 2005), is a “recent” piece dedicated to a discussion of the work of scholars who have advanced the idea that Buddhism is one of the background forces that shapes the epic.


63 See n. 13 above for the full citation.
65 See n. 13 above for the full citation.
66 See n. 13 above for the full citation.
67 See n. 32 above.
While Biardeau, Sutton, and Fitzgerald have made points in this regard favoring a post-Aśokan dating, Hiltebeitel was the first to advance a new discussion along these lines in his 1991 article “Krṣṇa at Mathura,” included as the next piece (chapter 19)\textsuperscript{69} in this section.

Finally, chapters 20–21, “Empire, Invasion, and India’s National Epics” and “Role, Role Model, and Function: The Sanskrit Epic Warrior in Comparison and Theory,” treat the epic’s portrayals of warriors and kings. Published in 1998\textsuperscript{70} and 2004,\textsuperscript{71} respectively, but both written in 1997 as spin-offs of the writing of *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, these last two articles address questions about the nature of epic in Indian national culture and different images of the warrior in classical, medieval, and modern India.

In its three parts, this volume is thus intended to carry the reader forward through a series of articles highlighting and defending positions taken in Hiltebeitel’s *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*; in particular, his claim that the *Mahābhārata* was composed by a committee of “out of sorts Brahmins”\textsuperscript{72} over a short period of time of no longer than two generations between the middle of the second century BCE and the turn of the millennium.\textsuperscript{73} Many of these adduce additional evidence based on a closer study of the text; chapter 3, for example, offers further thinking about the epic’s hints at what Hiltebeitel posits to be its two-generation committee in relation to the centrality of Vyāsa as “the author,” while chapter 6 argues that the epic’s “subtales” cannot be later than the archetype that includes them. *Post quem* and *ante quem* intertextual considerations are also raised in chapter 4 with respect to the seldom-studied *Yuga Purāṇa*; 9, 10, and 11 with respect to the *Rāmāyaṇa*; and in chapter 13 with regard to the *Mahābhārata*’s own manner of citing “sources.” Chapter 4 also draws on collaborative projects undertaken along with other scholars\textsuperscript{74} whose work supports Hiltebeitel’s claim. Indeed, five of the six chapters that comprise the

\begin{itemize}
\item 69 See n. 13 above for the full citation.
\item 72 Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, 19.
\item 73 Ibid., 18–32.
\item 74 See *Ways and Means for Thinking about the Mahābhārata as a Whole*, ed. Vishwa Adluri (Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, forthcoming), a volume that
\end{itemize}
“Position Papers” in Part I (the exception is chapter 2) contribute to this discussion in one way or another. As Hiltebeitel’s claim favoring a relatively brief period of composition constitutes the crux of the debate between Hiltebeitel and his critics, we turn next to a discussion of some aspects of this debate.

Vyāsa’s atelier

Let us begin with a recent criticism of Hiltebeitel’s view of the Mahābhārata’s composition. Fitzgerald, a defender of oral epic theory, has been adamantine in his opposition to the idea that the epic, roughly as we have it in the Pune Critical Edition, may have been ab initio a work of conscious composition. But why is Fitzgerald so opposed to the idea, and what is at stake in this debate? Consider Fitzgerald’s characterization of Hiltebeitel’s position, as articulated in a recent book on “epic and history”:

One major scholar of the MBh, Alf Hiltebeitel, has argued that an atelier of epic poets working under the guidance of a chief architect for a period of a few years (two generations at most, he says) created the MBh in a single literary effort. Arguing like intelligent design theorists in another anti-evolutionary arena, Hiltebeitel denies there was ever an oral Bhārata epic. He charges that oral epic theory is a large house of cards in relation to the MBh, and he claims that the few references we have in adjacent Sanskrit literature to a “Bhārata” as opposed to a “Great Bhārata” are of no significance. What Hiltebeitel gains by viewing the MBh in this way is a completely synchronous artistic creation (or one that is nearly so; he admits the possibility of a few additions to the text after its composition) that is the product of some kind of unified authorial vision. Hiltebeitel says that the archetypal text recovered in the Pune edition was produced in writing between “the mid-second century BCE and the year zero” (Hiltebeitel 2001: 18). Hiltebeitel’s argument that the text was created

includes contributions from T. P. Mahadevan and the editors based on papers originally presented as part of a panel at the 14th World Sanskrit Conference in Kyoto, Japan.

Fitzgerald’s enthusiasm for 19th century German epic theory also extends to Holtzmann, Sr.’s hypothesis of an original Indo-Germanic saga of heroic deeds and knightly chivalry akin to the Nibelungenlied and to his nephew, Holtzmann, Jr.’s inver- sion hypothesis,” according to which the Kauravas were the original heroes of the old epic and were only later maligned through a Brahmanic revision that introduced the Pāṇḍavas as the ideal of Brahmanic kingship. Of Holtzmann’s “inversion hypothesis,” Sukthankar already remarked, “These wild aberrations of Holtzmann, which hardly deserve the name of a theory…have now little more than antiquarian interest.” Sukthankar, On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata, 15.
in a single synchronous creative effort is, in my judgment, completely unsupported, even paradoxical, but it has a helpful, clarifying effect on thinking about the Mahābhārata’s development. On the other hand, I have no trouble imagining such an atelier producing a written *Great Bhārata* on and around some older oral *Bhārata*.76

Equating Hiltebeitel’s idea with “intelligent design theorists” may be rhetorically effective, but what is the substantial criticism behind it? If, as Hiltebeitel has compellingly shown in his 2001 book, there are traces of “intelligent design” throughout the *Mahābhārata* (in its use of frame narratives, in its making the author of the work also the progenitor of the principal characters, in its sophisticated hermeneutic strategies), does that make Hiltebeitel an “intelligent design theorist” or does it make the *Mahābhārata* a work of literature? Is Hiltebeitel taking up an argument in an “anti-evolutionary arena” or is he, rather, suggesting that evolutionary models are of limited use in thinking about conscious poetic creations? And although Hiltebeitel does deny that there is any basis for thinking there was ever “some older oral *Bhārata*”—that is, an ancient oral *Bhārata* tribal epic—he does not deny that the *Mahābhārata* poets could have drawn on oral legendary and didactic sources.

Clearly, Hiltebeitel anticipated such challenges from those positing an ancient bardic oral core in *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*.77 But one senses that he felt that the more important debate would continue over notions of what was “added” to the *Mahābhārata*, for he already noted in his 2001 book that, “The real challenges will continue to come from those who find one or another reason to argue that some portion or passage within the Critical Edition is late, such as the highly devotional *Nārāyaṇīya* portion of the *Śāntiparvan*, or the entire *Anuśāsana Parvan*.” Acknowledging the possibility, Hiltebeitel nonetheless notes with characteristic precision that, “since no one is close to proving anything, let us be all the more cautious about what we try to disprove.” He “would only argue that even these axiomatically late portions must be looked at with an eye fresh to the possibility that they are not any later—or at least much later: hours, weeks, or months rather than centuries—than

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76 Fitzgerald, “No Contest,” 110. It is to be noted that Fitzgerald gives no citations for what he calls “references we have in adjacent Sanskrit literature to a *’Bhārata’* as opposed to a *’Great Bhārata’*,” nor does he discuss what significance might be imputed to them independent of what the *Mahābhārata* says itself. See chapter 6 of this volume for Hiltebeitel’s discussion of these terms in the epic.

77 See Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, 8, 19 and n. 74.
At the time Hiltebeitel wrote this about the Nārāyaṇīya in his Rethinking book, he could not have anticipated the support for his argument that would come from researching the text fully and from Thennilapurmahadevan’s researches into the Southern Recension. In a monograph published in 2008, although shared earlier with Hiltebeitel, Mahadevan compared the manuscripts of the Southern Recension against each other and against the CE text and correlated their variation with what he was discovering about Brahmin migrations to the south.79 Using this data, he was able to date a bifurcation of Southern Recension manuscripts to the Kalabhra interregnum (ca. 350–550 CE)80 and demonstrate that changes made in the baseline archetype, including the Nārāyaṇīya, would have had to have been made before that date.

In addition to this evidence, Hiltebeitel has also been able to show in two recent studies81 that the Southern Recension redactor or “S” undertook a major revision of the Critical Edition’s “baseline” archetypal text before the Kalabhra interregnum and that the Malayālam manuscripts of the Nārāyaṇīya modified this S Recension archetype rather than the baseline text itself (which S had already modified). Indeed, if Hiltebeitel’s analysis here is correct, then this argumentation would also have to apply to S’s nearly complete revision of a segment of the Anuśāsana Parvan known as the Umā-Maheś vara Saṃvāda (13.126–34), and thus to the Anuśāsana Parvan itself. One may then conclude that S had a baseline Mahābhārata already available to him.

78 Hiltebeitel, Rethinking the Mahābhārata, 29–30.
80 Hiltebeitel is now able to revise this date down from the 400–700 CE date offered in previous discussions thanks to a new dating made by the epigraphist Iravathmahadevan, as communicated orally to Thennilappuram Mahadevan (August 2010). See Alf Hiltebeitel, “On Sukthankar’s ‘S’ and Some Shortsighted Assessments and Uses of the Pune Critical Edition (CE),” Journal of Vaishnava Studies 19.2 (Spring 2011): 89–128 and Hiltebeitel, Dharma: Its Early History in Law, Religion, and Narrative.
to modify, which suggests a much older date for the epic as a whole in line with Hiltebeitel’s thinking on the topic.\(^{82}\) If one considers the evidence above along with Hiltebeitel’s continued exploration of post quem and ante quem considerations,\(^{83}\) it is clear that, in spite of certain critics’ dismissal of Hiltebeitel’s chronological argumentation, there are indeed good reasons for thinking that the “Great-Bhārata” epic, which also called itself the Bhārata, was composed within a much shorter period of time than previously thought. As Hiltebeitel argues above, it puts the onus on those who argue for extensive “interpolation” over an extended period of time to provide more convincing evidence for their view.

Second, if this evidence further strengthens Hiltebeitel’s standing argumentation, why does it matter? The importance of the Mahābhārata’s dates cannot, of course, lie in the mere fact of dating, but must lie in what it tells us about the Mahābhārata text itself. Indeed, as Hiltebeitel suggests in his discussion of some “new possibilities and limits in considering” the Mahābhārata as itihāsa (“history”) in chapter 4 of this volume, the evidence in favor of a shorter period of composition must lead us to rethink what the Mahābhārata means by its primary genre-identification of itihāsa. Why itihāsa? Why does the epic use this term, if it can no longer be understood in the sense that we use the term “history”? In raising these questions, Hiltebeitel

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\(^{82}\) Indeed, one of the central intentions of Hiltebeitel’s forthcoming “On Sukthankar’s ‘S’” is precisely to demonstrate this.

\(^{83}\) Chapter 4 also considers post quem and ante quem and possibly contemporary intertexts; see also above following n. 72. To consider all the paths down which Hiltebeitel has been pursuing clarification on post and ante quem matters, see his groundbreaking study of Aśvaghoṣa’s Buddhacarita (“Aśvaghoṣa’s Buddhacarita: The First Known Close and Critical Reading of the Brahmanical Sanskrit Epics,” Journal of Indian Philosophy 34 [2006]: 229–86), which elaborates on the Mahābhārata’s intertextual position to demonstrate that Aśvaghoṣa, in the first or second century CE, knew already a Mahābhārata with features that many have thought “late” or “Gupta,” including Vāyasa’s precedent as a poet-author, the episode of the killing of Jarāśandha, and some kind of Mokṣadharmam Parvan—the latter, a point that Hiltebeitel returns to in another new essay (“Mokṣa and Dharma in the Mokṣadharmam”). The longer of his two new books on dharma (2011; see n. 7 above for citation), which updates the Buddhacarita article in its chapter 13, also takes these intertextual explorations further around evidence in the Buddhacarita and the Yuga Purāṇa (on which see chapter 4 of this book) that the Hariyamśa would be integral to the Mahābhārata project as conceived and considerably earlier than is usually posited (see also Alf Hiltebeitel, “Between History and Divine Plan: The Mahābhārata’s Royal Patriline in Context,” papers from the international workshop on History of Genealogy, Cardiff University, ed. Simon Brodbeck and James Hegarty, Religions of South Asia [forthcoming]).
for the first time begins to offer some answers as to why and how the Mahābhārata uniquely makes “history” its identifying genre term. Hiltebeitel looks at the major contexts in which the Mahābhārata uses the term itihāsa to construct what might be called an alternate Vedic history of the people of a total land.

Conclusion

Hiltebeitel’s approach is thus literary in realistic and pragmatic ways that other approaches, to date at least, are not. But it also takes in the historical implications of the epic’s monumental grandeur and design. As we have shown above, Hiltebeitel has continued to spend much energy disputing what have been called diachronic or analytic approaches that imagine older “Bhāratas” or pre-“normative recension” strata in the Mahābhārata, plus layerings that would continue to have been made up to its reaching its present archetypal amplitude and which can supposedly be mined with the tools of “higher criticism” based on the axiom that it continued to undergo “fluid” composition into the fourth to sixth or seventh century CE. Scholars who advance these lines of research to remove such inconveniences as yugas, bhakti, or the authorship of the author, are simply underestimating the text they are dealing with. But Hiltebeitel’s studies have probably even greater implications for those who carry forward what has usually been called a synchronic or synthetic approach. Some who try to sustain or at least credit both approaches concede that a synchronic approach is necessary insofar as it is indeed necessary to see the text as at some point becoming a whole, such as the Critical Edition archetype reveals. For several such scholars, it could have reached this form any time from the 4th to 7th centuries CE or, for a smaller number, even during the earlier dates that Hiltebeitel proposes. Yet most of these scholars still allow for the unrealistic view that the Critical Edition gives us a text that could be the free-fall of numerous centuries rather than the monumental historically-situated work of genius and rapid textual dissemination and reception that we can now see that it would have to have been. For such

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84 And still more recently in “Between History and Divine Plan” and in Hiltebeitel’s larger book on dharma (see n. 7 above).
85 See also Hiltebeitel, “The Southern Recension Reading of the Śakuntalā Story” (cited in n. 81).
scholars, the synchronic text is purely theoretical: a kind of convenient
ahistorical literary artifact suitable for either diachronic analysis or a
kind of stream of consciousness analysis, or both.86

On the contrary, for Hiltebeitel, the envisioning of the Mahābhārata
archetype must have been carried forward by both the hard and enjoy-
able work of joint composition. As he says in chapter 3, it must mean
something where the Mahābhārata says, “For three years the Muni
Krṣṇa Dvaipāyana always got up making the superb Mahābhārata story”
(Mahābhārata 1.56.32).87 And it would also mean that its composition
reflected plans for its rapid and universal dissemination, which would
have soon enough included transmission to the south, where its cus-
todians would have retailored it quite early for it to be appreciated by
new audiences. Hiltebeitel’s thesis is important for scholars and other
readers today, who would simply be missing the boat if they dismissed
the generative historical grandeur of this archetypal text as it was
designed, composed, transmitted, and first received in the centuries
around the turn of the first millennium.

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86 While they agree on much else, Hiltebeitel is most opposed to Brodbeck’s views
(The Mahābhārata Patriline: Gender, Culture, and the Royal Hereditary [Aldershot:
Ashgate Publishing], 7–8) on this matter of positing a more or less ahistorical and
what Hiltebeitel calls virtually a stream of consciousness text (personal communication)
for structural analysis. But these comments also apply to the ways Fitzgerald (“Many
Voices”) and others have used the terms synchronic and synthetic to define the limits
of what they allow for in such an approach, and to critique Hiltebeitel’s own approach.
Hiltebeitel does not view his own approach to the Mahābhārata as either synchronic
or synthetic; see Hiltebeitel, “On Sukthankar’s ‘S’.”

87 See now also Hiltebeitel, “The Southern Recension Reading of the Śākuntalā
Story.”
CHRONOLOGY OF WORKS*

1. Books


2. Edited books


* Except for a few articles that were newly written, the articles in these two volumes represent material previously published elsewhere. The editors would like to take the opportunity here to thank the many publishers & journals for granting us permission to reuse this material. Below we also explicitly acknowledge the original source of each of these contributions.


3. **Translations (from French)**


4. **Selected Articles, Including Long Review Articles**

[Articles included in this volume are denoted either with an asterisk (if in volume 1) or a double asterisk (if in volume 2)]


5. Interviews and Profiles


6. In Press


7. Book Reviews


8. Encyclopedia and Dictionary Articles and Editing


9. Work in Progress
