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ON “THE DEATH OF SANSKRIT”*

“... disagreement is inevitable in trying to make sense
of this complex, and perplexing chapter in the history of language ...”¹

In a recent article² Sheldon Pollock has tried to explore some of the changes and discontinuities that beset Sanskrit learning and literature – perhaps through most of its history, but more palpably in the phases for which our sources are richer – and summarised these processes with the strong metaphor of the “Death of Sanskrit”. The article itself,

is a first attempt to understand something of the death of Sanskrit literary culture as a historical process. Four cases are especially instructive: The disappearance of Sanskrit literature in Kashmir, a premier center of literary creativity, after the thirteenth century; its diminished power in sixteenth-century Vijayanagara, the last great imperial formation of Southern-India; its short lived moment of modernity at the Mughal court in mid-seventeenth-century Delhi; and its ghostly existence in Bengal on the eve of colonialism. Each case raises a different question: first, about the kind of political institutions and civic ethos required to sustain Sanskrit literary culture; second, whether and to what degree competition with vernacular cultures eventually affected it; third, what factors besides newness of style or even subjectivity would have been necessary for consolidating a Sanskrit modernity [...] (p. 395).

Pollock substantiates his thesis by drawing together evidence from a wide variety of sources. Since “death” in our context can be diagnosed most efficiently by an absence of activity, his evidence is often negative: Sanskrit is dead because no Sanskrit writings are known from a certain time in history. Often the diagnosis resembles more a clinical death, which, as Pollock maintains, rests on the observation that during a specific time there was Sanskrit activity, but not the real signs of life, as creativity and innovation. Both ways of argumentation are used in an elegantly suggestive, but as I shall try to demonstrate, often arbitrary manner.

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¹ Sheldon Pollock: “The Sanskrit Cosmopolis”, In: *Ideology and Status of Sanskrit. Contributions to the History of the Sanskrit Language*. Ed. by Jan E.M. Houben, Leiden: E.J. Brill 1995, p. 197.

² “The Death of Sanskrit”. In: *Comparative Studies in Society and History, International Quarterly* 43.2 (April 2001), Cambridge.



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Pollock is aware of the pitfalls of the image he has chosen,³ but we ought to deal with the issue at two levels of communication, namely the academic and the public: the Sanskritist need not be told whether Sanskrit is dead, he wants to know in what sense, and most of the article deals of course with determining just that. On a more public level the statement that Sanskrit is a dead language is misleading, for Sanskrit is quite obviously not as dead as other dead languages⁴ and the fact that it is spoken, written and read will probably convince most people that it cannot be a dead language in the most common usage of the term. Pollock's notion of the "death of Sanskrit" remains in this unclear realm between academia and public opinion when he says that "most observers would agree that, in some crucial way, Sanskrit is dead" (p. 393).

Before considering in what sense Sanskrit could be dead, we should also ask against whom such a pronounced metaphor could be directed, i.e. what would be Pollock's *pūrvapakṣa*? It is, as is obvious from his introduction, a strand of modern Indian nationalism with its distorting reconstructions of India's past. To expose pseudo-scientific propaganda of that sort is certainly important, and it is also clear that in politics the bold and simple style is required to be noticed at all. But that being granted, we can now proceed to the details of the debate.

Pollock investigates different areas and periods in Indian history where he diagnoses a decrease of the vitality of Sanskrit, or an arresting of its capacity "to make history" (p. 393). Sometimes the discontinuities are more spectacular than one would have realized before and here he offers important observations. First I would like to make it clear that one can only agree with Pollock in that there are, sometimes dramatic, discontinuities in the history of Sanskritic culture as expressed in literary activity, that Sanskrit has in a sense died frequently, even though one cannot ignore the fact that it has reinvented itself in various ways. Trying to understand this process is a worthwhile endeavour, to which he has contributed with his interesting article.

But it is my impression that Pollock has overinterpreted the evidence to support his theory, perhaps in his understandable anger over current nationalistic statements about Sanskrit and indeed new attempts

³ "Although we often speak of languages as being dead, the metaphor is misleading, suggesting biologicistic or evolutionary beliefs about cultural change that are deeply flawed" (p. 393).

⁴ This, however, seems not to have reached beyond academic circles. Some time ago, the highest officer for cultural affairs of the German government, Michael Naumann, stated in an interview in order to ridicule the Indian programme of the German Wave, that, Sanskrit being a dead language, the German Waves' Sanskrit programme would be similar to a broadcasting of Maya hieroglyphs. *Der Spiegel*, 36, 6.9.99, p. 138.

at resanskritization (p. 393) – processes that should perhaps be analysed a few decades later from a distance. His commitment to this pronounced position seems to have forced him to defend the notion of death even in adverse circumstances and it is in these instances that his article remains unconvincing.

First one has to bear in mind that when it comes to the multilingual Indian scene some of the occidental presuppositions about language can be quite misleading. Instead of diagnosing the death of Sanskrit, we could – with similar shaky arguments and justification – claim that it was never alive in the first place. And we might, for the sake of the argument, add that during the period in which Pollock would call Sanskrit still alive⁵ Sanskrit was never the mother language of any writer and, being primarily a language of literature, religion and politics, could with similar nebulous justification be called an artificial language.

When talking about a literary language the metaphor of death implies a radical change in the quantity of output or of its quality. In his article Pollock utilises both lines of argumentation to prove the death of Sanskrit: sometimes its decay is proved through the dwindling activity of writers, sometimes, especially when the first criterion is not applicable, through the 'quality' of their output.⁶ Occasionally another argument is adduced as what seems to be the last resort, namely that even in centers that promoted Sanskrit – he adduces the "sanskritizing courts" (p. 413) – "not a single work escaped the confines of the palace" (p. 413), i.e. its effect on the rest of the subcontinent was marginal. Thus the definition of a *living* Sanskrit would imply a large-scale literary production of high quality with a wide influence throughout India, that is, Sanskrit "occupying a cosmopolitan space" (p. 404).

The details of this position are contained in a previous work on "The Sanskrit Cosmopolis".⁷ There he had argued that Sanskrit came to an end as a political language around 1300, but that it also had a beginning: "Only slowly and reluctantly, it appears, did Sanskrit emerge as a public political language – such as we can characterize this from inscriptions – from the sacerdotal environment in which it was most at home."⁸ The main problem the thesis tries to explain is that the political function of Sanskrit, which geographically extended from Peshawar to Java, cannot be explained by an

⁵ See below.

⁶ The assumption of a shared opinion about the quality of Sanskrit works is in itself problematic, but for the sake of simplicity not discussed here.

⁷ In: *Ideology and Status of Sanskrit. Contributions to the History of the Sanskrit Language*. Ed. by Jan E.M. Houben, Leiden: E.J. Brill 1995, pp. 197–247.

⁸ Pollock 1995, p. 197.

“organized political power such as the Roman imperium”, but its “spread was effected by intellectuals and religious professionals, often following in the train of scattered groups of traders and adventurers.”⁹ And he continues: “There is little to suggest – the very fact that we have to ask the question is counterevidence – that Sanskrit was an everyday medium of communication in South let alone Southeast Asia, or that it ever functioned as a language-of-trade, a bridge-, link-, or koiné language or lingua franca (except among those traditional intellectuals) like other imperial or cosmopolitan languages such as Greek, Latin, Arabic, Persian, Chinese.” Or: “Sanskrit nowhere approached a language of everyday life – not the language of the market, the army, the kitchen, of childhood, friendship, or love.”¹⁰

Not everyone will agree with his presentation of such counterevidence and for examining this argument the following observation may be of help: Few years ago two Indian research scholars, one senior, the other working on his doctorate, were guests in our institute. When they first met they immediately exchanged polite words in Sanskrit, after some time they switched to English. There were quite a few languages they shared: Sanskrit, English, Hindi, and (to some extent) German and none of these were any one’s mother tongue (which were Nepali and Marathi). Quite obviously Sanskrit had served a purpose better than the other languages could have done, if only it was the claim to belong to a certain social group. For these two scholars it was indeed one lingua franca, or link language, the other being English. I find it very difficult to assume that the matter was any different during the times of the Sanskrit cosmopolis, except that often no other common language to connect speakers of different “mother tongues” than Sanskrit was available. Pollock’s argument involves different elements: Sanskrit is not an “everyday medium of communication” and its use as a lingua franca is limited to “traditional intellectuals”. Everyone interested in modern Sanskrit knows that it can be and is used for the most basic and banal purposes of daily life and the lack of records of these uses may have to do with its status as a ‘sacred language’. There is no reason to assume that this everyday use of Sanskrit in *pāṭhaśālas* is a recent invention.¹¹ Of course I am not trying to claim that Sanskrit was widely spoken in the homes and on the markets, but it appears to me that the statement that Sanskrit was nowhere a language of everyday life involves the danger of projecting our own suppositions without any evidence except

⁹ Pollock 1995, p. 198.

¹⁰ Pollock 1995, p. 231.

¹¹ If it were, one could even adduce it as a counter-argument against Pollock’s thesis of a lack of creativity in later Sanskrit.

general plausibility. Despite the genre of *pākaśāstra* one would not want to claim that Sanskrit was at home in the kitchen, but to exclude it from the realm of love is quite arbitrary. If we take into account the milieu of the cultured *nāgara*, in which we situate erotic poetry and the *Kāmaśāstra*, it becomes very difficult to exclude Sanskrit from the realm of love. The general implausibility of an everyday use of Sanskrit is easily reduced to a lack of intimacy with practical Sanskrit on our side. For us, who have learned Sanskrit as a literary language without practical application, it is simply unthinkable how this abstract language could be used in the realms that Pollock names. Someone trained in a *pāṭhaśāla* will have a different view. Again, I would like to emphasize that by this argument I am not intending to prove that Sanskrit was widely used in practical life, but only that Pollock's 'evidence' has to be discarded.

The most objective procedure for tackling this problem, namely to count or estimate the number of speakers or writers is unfortunately unreliable, because of the complicated status of Sanskrit and the fact that in truly multilingual environments the choice to use a certain language may depend on social or political considerations: Even in contemporary polls the implausibly high numbers of Sanskrit speakers are difficult to verify or interpret. There still, or again, is a strong urge to identify with, or gain access to, the high culture through Sanskrit¹² and we have all reason to believe that this was the case during the Sanskrit cosmopolis.

We need not discuss Pollock's main hypothesis on the Sanskrit cosmopolis,¹³ although there are some generalizations that seem unwarranted.¹⁴

¹² The recent case of the minister Sahasrabudde, supposed to be from a Dalit background, who took her oath in Sanskrit is quite telling. The Pandit who taught Sanskrit to her was subsequently expelled from the *paṇḍitasamāja*. See Axel Michaels: "Traditional Sanskrit Learning in Contemporary India." In: *The Pandit. Traditional Scholarship in India*. Ed. by Axel Michaels, Delhi: Manohar 2001, p. 15.

¹³ "Sanskrit articulated politics not as material power – the power embodied in languages-of-state for purposes of boundary regulation or taxation, for example, for which so-called vernacular idioms typically remained the vehicle – but politics as aesthetic power" (p. 198).

¹⁴ In his assessment of the function of Sanskrit versus Prakrit in inscriptions and the role of Sanskrit therein ("Sanskrit enabled one to say things – the aesthetic qualities I just referred to – that were not yet sayable in any of the other languages (Tamil importantly excepted)", p. 241), he seems to restate a variant of Max Müller's theory of a Sanskrit renaissance during the Gupta reign to the domain of political aesthetics. This theory was already refuted by Georg Bühler ("Die indischen Inschriften und das Alter der indischen Kunstpoesie." *Sitzungsberichte der kais. Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien. Philos.-hist. Classe. Band CXXII. XI, Wien 1890, pp. 76ff, especially 73f.*) by pointing to elaborate *praśastis* in the second century A.D. that presuppose a sophistication of *Kāvya* that runs quite contrary to our belief in a linear development from the simple style of Kālidāsa to

What is important for the present context is that in this earlier article he did not claim that Sanskrit itself died, but that it merely lost its peculiar political function. “The Death of Sanskrit”, however, implies that with this loss, Sanskrit lost its true life.

One of the methods for assessing the status of Sanskrit is through data on the circulation of works. For proof of this circulation Pollock adduces the distribution of manuscripts in certain areas, but, in fact, the majority of our manuscripts are from a period *after* the supposed death of Sanskrit. Here we could indeed face a methodological problem, for the criteria according to which our manuscripts were selected for copying were not those of the pre-12th century period. For instance, the plethora of preserved manuscripts containing Stotras, devotional or ritual texts and simple textbooks that summarize the *darśanas* could stem from their wide-spread use in ceremonies and the necessities for running *pāṭhaśālas*. We could thus easily revert the argument: The mass of “low quality”, introductory works could be taken to attest an active Sanskrit training system rather than the inability to write more advanced works. It is thus at least doubtful whether we can really assess and interpret the data unambiguously.

The situation is somehow similar to that of the history of the texts themselves: often the vulgate texts that we have of so many, even important Sanskrit works are, as is well-known, removed in varying grades from the original wording. In fact, it is sometimes quite difficult to get direct access to the old phase, when Sanskrit was alive. This argument may not count for much in many of Pollock’s observations, but it certainly affects the “classics” and possible grounds for judging their literary quality, which may well rest on criteria which in reality are those of the transmitters (and “correctors”) from the period after the supposed death of Sanskrit!¹⁵

One point made in this connection by Pollock illustrates rather well how I would like to modify the “death” metaphor into a description of “change”. He states that “as late as the early eighteenth century, in the disciplines where Sanskrit intellectuals continued to maintain control, old networks of vast circulation and readership were as yet intact” (p. 413). In fact the speed of distribution as well as the intellectual force of some debates is stunning. Minkowski has recently described the case of the “Indian version of the Copernican Revolution”, that is, a debate raging about the validity

increasingly complicated poetry. This discussion also shows how shaky conclusions from supposedly negative evidence can be.

¹⁵ See for instance Dominic Goodall: “*Bhūte ‘āha’ iti pramādāt*: Firm Evidence for the Direction of Change Where Certain Verses of the *Raghuvamśa* are Variousy Transmitted.” In: ZDMG 151.1 (2001): 103–124.

of the cosmological models of Indian astronomy, of that of the Purāṇas and the Western model,¹⁶ in which published literary exchange took place within merely two years, "a pace faster than many exchanges of letters to the editor of learned journals today."¹⁷ From his detailed description we do not get the impression that Sanskrit had just died, or was about to die, rather that profound changes had to find adequate expression in Sanskrit, as it was finding expression in other languages. Furthermore, soon after the supposed death of Sanskrit, namely in 1835, Indians were by law allowed to own machines for printing and this produced an enormous boost in literary activity in perhaps all Indian languages including Sanskrit.¹⁸ Pollock describes this period of Sanskrit literature as follows: "And with very few exceptions (which suggest what was in fact possible), there was no sustained creation of new literature – no Sanskrit novels, personal poetry, essays – giving voice to the new subjectivity. Instead, what the data from early nineteenth-century Bengal – which are paralleled everywhere – demonstrate is that the mental and social spheres of Sanskrit literary production grew ever more constricted, and the personal and this-worldly, and eventually even the presentist-political, evaporated, until only the dry sediment of religious hymnology remained" (p. 417). This is mere wishful thinking. This phase in the production of Sanskrit works remains until to day one of the blank spots in Indology: Owing to a wide-spread opinion that only "real", that is, ancient Sanskrit literature is worth studying, these works are regrettably, with very few exceptions, not made the object of academic research, not (re)printed and not even systematically collected in libraries.

With regard to the question of the status and spread of literature only a detailed investigation of known cross references could establish the speed and extent of the distribution of works in ancient India. For it is not at all certain that the works that now appear to us as "classics" were known all over the subcontinent in the same century or even shortly after. It may appear so because of peculiarities in our manuscript transmission. One telling example is the supposed India wide impact of Śāṅkarācārya as conceived in his hagiographies. In fact, his influence in Kashmir cannot be traced early. Until the time of Abhinavagupta Vedānta meant

¹⁶ Christopher Z. Minkowski: "The Pandit as Public Intellectual". In: *The Pandit. Traditional Scholarship in India*, ed. Axel Michaels, Delhi: Manohar 2001, pp. 79–96.

¹⁷ Op. cit., p. 91.

¹⁸ See Kerrin Dittmer, *Die indischen Muslims und die Hindi-Urdu-Kontroverse in den United Provinces*, Schriftenreihe des Südasien-Instituts der Universität Heidelberg, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz 1972.

Maṇḍanamīśra's Vedānta, not Śaṅkara's.¹⁹ It is thus not at all obvious that Sanskrit literature was, before 1300, as globalized as Pollock tries to establish and that only later "Sanskrit, idiom of cosmopolitan literature, gradually died, in part because cosmopolitan talk made less and less sense in an increasingly regionalized world" (p. 417).

From the issue of distribution we shall turn to the question of quality. Pollock takes some of the judgements about what is 'good poetry' for granted, judgements that are not indisputable. His denouncement of *citrakāvya* seems to rest on the assumption that literary Sanskrit should not be too complicated to have an immediate aesthetic appeal. It is well-known that writing *citrakāvya* was viewed as highly problematic from this point of view,²⁰ but it demonstrated the literary mastery of its author so effectively that even the most ardent of critics, Ānandavardhana, could not avoid writing one himself.²¹ We could thus interpret the fact that Pollock adduces for proving that contemporary Sanskrit is "completely denaturalized", namely the prize given by the Sahitya Akademi to a *citrakāvya* in 1955, in an entirely different way: instead of interpreting this as the incapability of authors to write anything of poetic worth, one could argue that a work was honoured, in which the abilities of the author, and the sophistication of the genre, were simply indisputable.

There are pitfalls involved in judging the literary quality of works over a period of 1500 years. Certainly not all scholars share the assumption that works written after, let us say, 1200 are of lesser quality. For some the boundary is later, for others it is far earlier. The case of A.B. Keith with his deprecating remarks on most of the poems written after Kālidāsa – expressed in a condescending style – is well-known.²² Works like the

¹⁹ Alexis Sanderson: *Purity and Power among the Brahmins of Kashmir*. In: *The Category of the Person*, ed. Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins, Steven Lukes, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1985, p. 210, note 41.

²⁰ "An almost metaliterary genre entirely unintelligible without specialized training" (p. 393). In this passage Pollock makes his point by merely suggesting an interpretation; in other instances he adds unnecessary polemics ("what Sanskrit learning in the seventeenth century prepared one best to do [...] was to resist all other learning", p. 408), or even dramatic statements ("the ability to make literary newness ... was lost to Sanskrit forever", p. 414).

²¹ Daniel Ingalls: "Ānandavardhana's *Deviśataka*". In: *JAOS* 109.4 (1989), pp. 565–566.

²² In his *History of Sanskrit Literature* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press 1928) he is very polemical about many of the well-known poets. Two examples may suffice: "Bhāravi sets a bad example in his fondness for showing his skill in grammar, and he is in many ways the beginner of mannerisms in the later poets" (p. 114). "Though on the whole we must condemn the elaboration of Śrīharṣa and his excessive use of Yamakas and rhyme, he was certainly capable of elegance and skill in the use of language [...]" (p. 141). That this lack of sensitivity was perhaps triggered by a deficient understanding of the Kāvya style

Haraviḷaya, which is according to others one of the highlights in Kāvya literature, are ranked by him under "The Lesser Epic Poets" and evoked severe criticism.²³ This is admittedly an extreme example, but it shows that literary criticism is problematic if used in this context.

Another arbitrary method of Pollock is to identify "core disciplines like hermeneutics or literary theory" (p. 394). Lack of activity in these fields, but more importantly in the production of *kāvya* itself is for him a sign of lifelessness. Perhaps the parallel with the decline of Latin (p. 415) leads him to take the production of religious literature as less indicative of an alive Sanskrit culture, while the religious Stotra is for this reason not a valid genre for him!²⁴ Whether literary theory is really that important for the creativity of a language remains doubtful. It is a mode of reflection attesting an intellectually sophisticated climate, but it could also be argued that the state of discussion in *Alaṃkāraśāstra* did not call for another 1000 years of revolutionary theories. And I imagine that not only Sanskrit poets would have protested against the notion that the real indicators of intellectual activity are the professional critic and the professor of literature, rather than the poet.

The first area Pollock investigates is Kashmirian literature from 1200 onwards. He states that literature following upon the "recommencement"

paired with a refusal to understand Kāvya by indigenous standards was ably demonstrated by Johannes Nobel in his detailed review. One of the most interesting passages of a wider application deserves extensive quotation here: "Die Geschichte der indischen Dichtung in ihrer Entwicklung darzustellen, ist dem Verf. nicht gelungen und konnte ihm nicht gelingen, weil die von ihm befolgte Methode nicht die richtige ist, weil er das Wesentliche oft nicht erkennt und vor allem mit dem Sanskrit nicht die Vertrautheit zeigt, die für ein gutes Verständnis von innen heraus gefordert werden muß. Gerade bei der indischen Dichtung kommt es so sehr darauf an, sie als individuelle Erscheinung im Rahmen indischer Vorstellungen zu würdigen. Wir müssen uns gewissermaßen mitten in die indische Ideenwelt hineinversetzen und unter Berücksichtigung scharf hervortretender und immer festgehaltener Grundanschauungen zusehen, wie der einzelne Dichter die schablonenhafter als anderswo vorgezeichneten Linien mit seinem Genius zu feinen Bildern ausarbeitet und ihnen immer wieder eine andere Farbenwirkung abzulocken versteht. Wollten wir unsere eigenen, ganz anders gearteten Vorstellungen als Maßstab anlegen, so wäre das ungefähr dasselbe, als wenn wir eine Persönlichkeit der Geschichte nach unseren, nur für die Gegenwart und nur für uns gültigen Richtlinien beurteilen wollten, anstatt sie aus der Zeit heraus verstehen zu lernen: wir würden sie völlig verkennen" (OLZ 6 (1930), pp. 480–481.)

²³ "The poet claims to have imitated Bāṇa, and some notice is taken of him in the anthologies, but, though he is doubtless responsible for some good stanzas, and Kṣemendra attests his skill in the Vasantatilaka metre, his poem is a hopeless blunder and his fondness for Yamakas adds to its inherent dreariness" (op. cit., p. 135).

²⁴ "[...] the production of literature in all the of the major genres (courtly epic, drama, and the rest) ceased entirely, and the vast repertory of Sanskrit literary forms was reduced to the *stotra* (hymn)" (p. 396).

at the court of Zain had little in common with the high phase of Kashmirian learning before 1200 and briefly analyses the works of Jonarāja and Śrīvara, both of whom were according to his judgement poor poets, whose introductory statements of humility he chooses to take literally (p. 397). But why is Śrīvara called “the most interesting intellectual at the court”, when he is later disclosed as being “unable to create serious original work himself”. Was he merely the only intellectual at his court that we know of?²⁵

Pollock discusses and denies the possibility “that this picture of literary collapse could be an artifact” (p. 397). In view of the fact that Indology has hitherto concentrated almost exclusively on the earlier phases of Sanskrit writings this is highly problematic. One can, for instance, easily disprove his statement that in Kashmir “Sanskrit literary writing of any sort from the period after Zain-ul-’ābidīn is rare” (p. 398) by referring to the works of the Kashmirian writer Sāhib Kaul (17th century) and his followers. Only the largest of his works is published, the *Devīnāmvilāsa*, sometimes termed a *stutikāvya* and thus superficially conforming to Pollock’s theory that only the genre of Stotra remained, but a look at this work shows that it is not only a full Kāvya, but also encapsulates an expression of religious developments in the Kashmirian valley.²⁶ Quite contrary to his notion that later Sanskrit in Kashmir is “culture reduced to reinscription and restatement” (p. 398), we find an elegantly encoded expression of religious supremacy of the immigrant Kauls over the “local” religion. But, perhaps more importantly, many of the works from this phase remain unedited.²⁷

We sometimes tend to think that, although we know that many, even eminently important works, as for instance the *Bṛhatkathā*, are lost, we

²⁵ Compare Keith: “The work of these writers [i.e. Jonarāja and Śrīvara] is devoid of originality or merit; Śrīvara shamelessly borrows from Kalhaṇa, and, despite the length of the period with which they deal, the total of their work is not more than half that of the Rājatarāṅgiṇī; they waste space in episodic descriptions, and they are far less accurate in matters of topography than Kalhaṇa” (op. cit., p. 174).

²⁶ See my “Sāhib Kaul’s Presentation of Pratyabhijñā philosophy in his *Devīnāmvilāsa*”. In: *Le Parole e i Marmi. Studi in onore di Raniero Gnoli nel suo 70 compleanno*, ed. R. Torella, Serie Orientale Roma XCII, Rome 2001, pp. 399–418.

²⁷ An edition of the Stotras and one Paddhati of Sāhib Kaul is under preparation by the present author. Another instance, from the same century in Kashmir is Ratnakaṇṭha (17th century) – Pollock only refers to his learned commentaries (p. 419, fn. 14) – whose original works, the *Ratnāsataka* and the *Sūryastutirahasya* remain unedited. The “original”, i.e. non-commentatorial work by Bhaskarakaṇṭha (18th century), the *Cittānubodhaśāstra* has recently (ed. Suśamā Pāṇḍeya (Varanasi 1990)) and the surviving fragments of his extremely voluminous commentary on the *Mokṣopāya* have partly been edited also only recently by Walter Slaje. See his “The Mokṣopāya Project”. In: *ABORI 1997: 209–221*, for an overview.

already have a fairly accurate knowledge about the total number of literature written. As the case of the recently discovered Sanskrit original of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśasūtra* demonstrates, unexpected spectacular findings are still possible and other recent discoveries of, as for instance, an indigenous Kashmirian grammatical tradition specializing in syntax (*samanvaya*)²⁸ makes one hesitate about statements drawn from negative evidence. As Grünendahl has put it: "The entire written tradition of South Asia was transmitted exclusively in manuscripts until the late 19th century, with offshoots reaching well into the 20th century. Admittedly, a large number of texts has since been published in print, but in relation to the sum total this is just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. And, particularly in view of what has so far been sounded of the volume of the NGMPP material,²⁹ it would clearly be a grave navigational error to assume that only the visible part is of relevance."³⁰

Another forced interpretation of Pollock is his statement that in Kashmir "with the accession of the degenerate king Śaṅkaravarman in the late ninth century, followed in the mid-tenth century by Diddā, a deranged Khaśa princess, Sanskrit literary production appears to have been arrested for a generation. Scholarly work, however, continued to some degree [. . .]" (p. 398) Firstly this statement is confusing, since we do not know whether only the single generation during the reign of Śaṅkaravarman is meant or whether the phase of decline somehow includes, or reaches up to the reign of Diddā. From his following remarks, where he mentions the creativity of authors in the 10th century, one gets the impression that he has in mind the single generation during the reign of Śaṅkaravarman. But as a source for this statement Pollock quotes Ingalls,³¹ who had diagnosed that "soon after the death of King Avantivarman (A.D. 883) literature seems to have lost its royal patronage in Kashmir" and that "with the death of Sankaravarman things went from bad to worse". The tenth century, according to Ingalls, saw "the breakdown of royal administration", while in the second half

²⁸ See Walter Slaje: "Materialien zu einer vergessenen lokalen Tradition der einheimischen indischen Grammatik: Kuṭakas Samanvayadiś und die Folgeliteratur". In: WZKS 36 (1992): 105–126 and Oliver Hahn: *Kuṭakas Samanvayadiś nebst Kommentaren: Übersetzung der edierten Texte mit einer Studie der grammatisch-syntaktischen Lehren*, M.A. thesis, Leipzig 2000.

²⁹ As he says, the *Nepal Manuscript Preservation Project* has recorded 160000 documents, the large majority of which is in Sanskrit.

³⁰ Reinhold Grünendahl: "A Plea for an Integrated Approach towards Manuscript Cataloguing". In: *Journal of the Nepal Research Centre* 12 (2001): 153.

³¹ Daniel H. H. Ingalls et al.: *The Dhvanyāloka of Ānandavardhana with the Locana of Abhinavagupta*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1990, pp. 28f. The following unmarked quotations are all from this passage.

of the 10th century “political affairs passed into the hands of the terrible Didda”. The following passage, in which Ingalls describes this phase, has to be quoted in full:

Because of the withdrawal of court patronage, court literature virtually disappears from Kashmir during the tenth century. From this century in Kashmir we have no plays, no Sanskrit lyrics. The only mahākāvya that we have from this period is Abhinanda’s Kādambarīkathāsāra, a work which retells in verse what Bāṇa in a former century had told better in prose. The traditions of Sanskrit scholarship, however, were not broken. The brahmins living in the capital or on their tax-free grants of land saw that their sons were taught Sanskrit grammar and the traditional Sanskrit sciences, in many cases teaching their sons themselves. The tradition was especially well maintained in Śaiva philosophy and literary criticism.

Firstly it has to be noted that Pollock’s statement that scholarly work continued “to some degree” is an overemphasis that does not go back to Ingalls, whose qualification “especially well-maintained” is fully justified: it is indeed difficult to doubt that the second half of the tenth century saw an enormous proliferation of Śaiva philosophy in a fertile intellectual climate.

But before discussing this theory, we need to turn to our main source for this time, the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*. Kalhaṇa states that during the reign of Śaṅkaravarman poets lacked royal support. But this is a pattern observed also elsewhere in the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* (RT): During the reign of “good kings”, like Avantivarman, the poets “Muktākāṇa, Śivasvāmin, Ānandavardhana and Ratnākara” (RT 5.34) are mentioned in order to underline the qualities of the monarch. But in verse 5.204 we read that during the reign of Śaṅkaravarman poets like Bhallaṭa had to pursue unfitting sources of income and that in general “good poets were without income” (RT 5.204), while one load carrier favoured by the king had an income of “two thousand dināras” (RT 5.205). All we can deduce from this is that the lack of funding for the arts was perceived as scandalous, but also that, judging from the fame of Bhallaṭa, poetry – as in other parts of the world – survived such a brief crisis in no bad shape. But a more subtle reading between the lines is perhaps required for assessing the worth of Kalhaṇa’s account as a historical source. His simplistic description of “good” and “bad” kings is certainly suspicious:³² If we consider that Kalhaṇa mentions the Śaiva saint Bhaṭṭa Kallaṭa in order to demonstrate the auspicious reign of Avantivarman (RT 5.66), but that none of his doctrinal successors, some of whom certainly of equal, if not superior fame, but living under “bad kings”, are ever mentioned, we can assume that for the description of a degenerate reign it would be

³² The latter usually develop from contact with women and Caṇḍālas.

improper to associate illustrious saints with the inauspicious king. From his *Rājatarāṅginī* it becomes very obvious that it was current practice to include outcasts in court life. King Cakravarman is, for instance, criticised for having Śvapākas as friends, even as the queen, and Kalhaṇa concludes that nothing can be expected from such a king (RT 5.390–394). This is a telling example of Kalhaṇa’s position within this socio-political framework and it may even give a clue as to why Kalhaṇa did not mention some of the later monistic Śaivas like Abhinavagupta: It seems the Kaulas held that even outcasts could become initiated Śaivas, while their more conservative rivals on the Śaiva-Siddhānta side contested this doctrine.³³ The “bad kings” who supported the sometimes dominant Śaiva religion – the Vaiṣṇava Avantivarman even pretended to be Śaiva all his life until he revealed on his death-bed his religious identity – will perhaps have been grateful for this loosening of caste boundaries. Within this spectrum Kalhaṇa seems to have adhered to a conservative agenda that needs to be filtered before we take his descriptions at face value.

The second part of Pollock’s statement, that is, his assessment that scholarly works continued “to some degree”, is, as we have seen, problematic. But there is a more fundamental problem here, since our dating of many a Sanskrit author of this time does not permit such detailed arguments. It is not enough to say that no author can be dated with any certainty during such a short span of time, one needs a counter-check. Is there positive evidence to exclude that Rājaśekhara³⁴ or Bhaṭṭa Bhauma³⁵ fell in the period of Śaṅkaravarman? For this particular time in Kashmirian history we have, furthermore, a conflicting contemporary source which is able to cast some doubt on Kalhaṇa, namely Jayanta Bhaṭṭa’s *Āgamaḍambara*,³⁶ where Śaṅkaravarman appears in a completely different light. While Kalhaṇa claims that he spoke no Sanskrit, but “an Apabhraṃśa dialect worthy of a drunkard”³⁷ and makes no secret of his disdain, Jayanta Bhaṭṭa implicitly expresses his diplomacy in a delicate religious matter, namely the banishing of the *nīlāmbaras* without upsetting

³³ See the interpretation of the injunction *śvapacān api dīkṣayet* by Abhinavagupta and Bhaṭṭa Rāmakaṇṭha as documented in my *Abhinavagupta’s Philosophy of Revelation. An Edition and Annotated Translation of Mālinīśloka-vārttika I, 1–399*, Groningen Oriental Studies 14, Groningen: Egbert Forsten 1998, notes on verse 196.

³⁴ “. . . last quarter of the 9th and first quarter of the 10th centuries”. Siegfried Lienhard: *A History of Classical Sanskrit Poetry. Sanskrit–Pali–Prakrit*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz 1984 [A History of Indian Literature 3.1], p. 88.

³⁵ “Before the 11th century.” Siegfried Lienhard, op. cit., p. 226.

³⁶ V. Raghavan (ed.): *Āgamaḍambara*, Darbhanga 1964.

³⁷ RT 5.206, quoted by Ingalls, op. cit., p. 28.

the hardly less heterodox Śaiva community. It is true that Jayanta may have been biased for Śaṅkaravarman as much as Kalhaṇa is opposed to him, but the main event around the *nīlāmbaras* seems to be historical, since it is quoted in the *Nyāyamañjarī*, where dramatic exaggeration would have been counterproductive.³⁸

And there are the works of Jayanta, which themselves are enough to disprove Pollock's theory. There is not much to be desired from the *Nyāyamañjarī* or the *Āgamaḍambara* in terms of creativity. Then the enormous growth of Tantric scriptures, which must predate the Pratyabhijñā-school, must have fallen within that period. And finally, since the beginning of the tenth century is full of authors that may have written also in the last part of the previous century, I fear that his argument loses much of its force. If there really was a break in activity, it is strange that many genres of Sanskrit literature not only recovered in the next generations, but sprang, from our perspective, into an unprecedented activity.

Furthermore I doubt that our catalogues of datable works are really complete enough to exclude that anything of poetical worth was written during the tenth century. If it were not for Kalhaṇa's statement quoted above, we would not know that Muktākaṇa, of whom we have merely two verses quoted by Kṣemendra,³⁹ was considered a great poet during the time of Avantivarman.

Whatever the outcome of this problem, it is possible to demonstrate my point that the present state of research does not permit conclusions from supposedly negative evidence. We only need to mention that the *Mokṣopāya*, a work of 30000 verses, contains large portions of unique Kāvya of still largely unknown quality.⁴⁰ This work must have been composed no later than the second half of the 10th century,⁴¹ but is more often than not overlooked in histories of Indian literature and philosophy and regularly dated wrongly, because its oldest version has remained unnoticed for a long time. And to the objector, who maintains that this idiosyncratic work is not "court poetry", we must refer to one passage in the work, in which it is stated that it was recited by one minister of the

³⁸ See Albrecht Wezler: *Zur Proklamation religiös-weltanschaulicher Toleranz bei dem indischen Philosophen Jayantabhaṭṭa*, Saeculum 27.4 (1976): pp.344–347, and A.K. Warder: *Indian Kāvya Literature*, Vo. 5, Delhi 1988, p. 300.

³⁹ See A.K. Warder: *Indian Kāvya Literature*, Vo. 5, Delhi 1988, p. 165.

⁴⁰ See my "The *Yogavāsīṣṭha* and its Kashmirian recension, the *Mokṣopāya*. Notes on their Textual Quality." In: *WZKS* 44 (2000), pp. 183–210.

⁴¹ The work mentions the Kashmirian king Yaśaskaradeva, who reigned 939–948, and is referred to by Kṣemendra.

Kashmirian king Yaśaskaradeva,⁴² just as it continued to be recited to later kings of Kaśmīr, like Zain.⁴³

In the light of the *Rājataranṅinī* it becomes necessary to contest Pollock’s interpretation of one passage in Jonarāja’s *Zainarājataranṅinī* about the goddess of learning having left Kashmir for good. This sounds as if the “ungifted” (according to Pollock) Jonarāja had unconsciously given an image of the death of Sanskrit learning in the Kashmirian valley. But the idea of a withdrawal of the gods is an image that we also find in Kalhaṇa’s account. Here it is the acceptance of outcasts in religious and court life, for Kalhaṇa a reversal of the natural order of the conservative Brahmanical universe, that is sufficient to assume that the deities had withdrawn from the temples to avoid contact with the outcasts that were allowed into the sanctuaries. There is no reason to assume that many – apart from conservative Brahmins – shared this opinion and also that this process was thought to be irreversible.

A further area investigated by Pollock is the kingdom of Vijayanagara, where he diagnoses a “contrast between the exhaustion of Sanskrit literary creativity and the vitality of Sanskrit scholarship” (p. 401). But here he underestimates those “men of considerable learning, if only reproductive and not original learning” (ibid.), for to state this of scholars such as Vidyāraṇya and Sāyaṇa who were crucial figures in establishing through their literary activities what later came to be considered the fundamental canon of Hindu religious tenets⁴⁴ is totally unconvincing. Later Pollock seems to concede that the lethal diagnosis is difficult to uphold in this case. Here his method is not sound, because he suddenly shifts to another mode of reasoning: “In Vijayanagara it was not as a mode of elite expression that Sanskrit was dying. [...] It was in some other dimension that Sanskrit was moribund: as a mode of personal expression, a vehicle of human experience away from the imperial stage, a characteristic that had marked Sanskrit throughout its long history and from its very inception.” (pp. 403–404) This is a surprising statement produced by the necessities of argumentation, rather than through evidence. Personal expression is not a strong point in Kāvya; on the contrary the few poets who have left us traces of their personality – I think of authors like Bhartṛhari, the author

⁴² See *Mokṣopāya* 4.32.16–21. See Walter Slaje’s forthcoming edition of Bhāskaraṇḍha’s *Ṭīkā* on the *Sthitiprakaraṇa*. An article dealing with the implication of this passage for the composition and history of this work is under preparation by Slaje.

⁴³ According to the preamble of the Persian translation of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* the text is one of those to be studied by Mogul princes. Śrīvara reports that he himself had recited the work to Zain (1.5.80; 1.7.132, 139).

⁴⁴ Walter Slaje: “On Changing Others’ Ideas: The Case of Vidyāraṇya and the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*”. In: *IJ* 41 (1998): pp. 115f.

of the three Śatakas, or Bāṇa in his autobiography in the *Harṣacarita*⁴⁵ – have always been spectacular cases. And I fail to understand where we could find “personal expression” on a large scale in early Kāvya in a form, in which it is supposedly absent later!

Let us now turn to some more recent works, which Pollock does not mention. The case of the famous *Śivarājāvijaya* written by Ambikādatta Vyāsa in 1870 is not unknown and the author – contrary to Pollock’s characterisation of Jagannātha as “the last Sanskrit poet” – seems to have been accepted as an important writer of the 19th century.⁴⁶ A hardly known, but remarkable work is the *Kārtavīryodaya*, an impressive and voluminous Mahākāvya by the Nepalese Pandit Sukṛtidatta Panta (1823/4–1873).⁴⁷ This leaves nothing to be desired from a “classical Kāvya” and, as so many works it is difficult to distinguish it in style from works almost a millennium earlier. What is more, it was completely unknown to Western Indology until recently. Many Sanskrit works of the nineteenth and twentieth century share this fate; some were studied in India,⁴⁸ but were almost completely ignored by Western Indology. Could we not face an ‘artefact’ here, in the form of the marked disinterest in later Sanskrit productions? In other words, is not the term “death” applied to cultural change in our case the negative side of a romantic projection of the bygone “golden age” of Sanskrit conceived by orientalist?⁴⁹

It would be possible to add instances, where Pollock has interpreted the evidence to fit his thesis without considering other options.⁵⁰ But let

⁴⁵ These are cases that are interesting mainly through their similarity to Western literary ideals, less through being representative for the ideals of old Indian literati. And it is perhaps for this reason that even Keith speaks highly of this author: “Bharṭhari’s poetry exhibits Sanskrit to the best advantage” (p. 178).

⁴⁶ Certainly exaggerated is: *devavāṇīsandrbdheṣu grantheṣu śivarājāvijayasya mahattvaṃ sarvātīśāyī vartate, Śivarājāvijaya*, ed. Ramāśaṅkar Mīśra, Vārāṇasī: Chowkhambā Surabhārati Prakāśan, p. 2.

⁴⁷ Edited in: Johannes Schneider: *Sukṛtidatta Pantas Kārtavīryodaya. Ein neuzeitliches Sanskrit-Mahākāvya aus Nepal*. Indica et Tibetica 27, Swisttal-Odendorf: Indica et Tibetica Verlag 1996. See especially the list of his works, which include several genres and 5 original poems.

⁴⁸ See C. Lakshminarasimha Moorty: *Research Trends in Sanskrit. A Bibliography of Doctoral Dissertations presented to various Indian Universities*, Trivandrum: CBH Publications 1991. Here at least three dissertations on Ambika Datta Vyāsa are listed.

⁴⁹ We cannot spare Pollock from the criticism that he has, as far as we can say from his article, not tried to search for “literary newness” (p. 414) in modern Sanskrit literature, which he mentions only once (see fn. 21 above).

⁵⁰ Consider the following statement: “The case of the professor of Sanskrit at the recently-founded Calcutta Sanskrit College (1825), Ishwaracandra Vidyasagar, is emblematic: When he had something satirical, contemporary, critical to say, as in his anti-colonial pamphlets, he said it, not in Sanskrit, but in Bengali” (p. 414). With equal justification

us briefly mention two examples of, if one wishes, innovations: The first is the development of a particular brand of Campū from the 10th century onward.⁵¹ The other is the recent adaptation in Sanskrit literature of new genres like that of the modern short story. One, in my view, particularly impressive synthesis of classical Sanskrit style and the modern social-critical short story is found in Kṣamā Rao's (1880–1954) works.⁵² It would not be surprising to find more of this sort in the Sanskrit literature of the 19th and 20th century. One should also not forget that the transformation of Sanskrit Pandits who came in contact with or were under the influence of the British education system in India, are not only examples for the power of the "Sanskritic culture" to adapt and interact with modernity; this innovation was even a necessary condition for the emergence of Indology itself.⁵³

Finally I would like to draw attention to one fundamental cultural misunderstanding that lies at the basis of Pollock's article, a misunderstanding that cannot be resolved easily. To the traditional Indian mind the cyclic renewal of cultural phenomena is not necessarily viewed as problematic. One predominant modern western concept of historical change is in comparison teleologically conceived as a development that has culminated in the present achievements. But we cannot overlook the fact that just as Kalhaṇa held that good poets revive the style of former poets,⁵⁴ modern Indian critics of contemporary Sanskrit poetry seem to have significantly less problems with the renewal of Sanskrit than many a Western scholar.

one could have claimed the contrary: When something of academic or religious value had to be discussed, it was discussed in Sanskrit! (See above, fn. 7, and the religious debates documented in Richard Fox Young: *Resistant Hinduism. Sanskrit Sources on Anti-Christian Apologetics in Early Nineteenth-Century India*, Vienna 1981 [Publications of the De Nobili Research Library VIII].) About the status of Sanskrit versus Bengali other assessments are apparently also possible: "... many leaders of the orthodox thought were strongly of the opinion that Sanskrit, and not the vernaculars, was the only Indian language which was suitable for literary writing. In Bengali, it was not until the late 1850s and the early 1860s that writers were able to contrive a style which was distinctively literary and yet intelligible and attractive to the ordinary reader, and not until 1865 that Bankimcandra Chatterji's novels won the day for it, though the pandits were still far from placated." *The Novel in India. Its Birth and Development* edited and with an Introduction by T.W. Clark, London: George Allen & Unwin 1970, p. 12.

⁵¹ See Siegfried Lienhard: *A History of Classical Sanskrit Poetry. Sanskrit–Pali–Prakrit*. HIL 3.1, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz 1984, pp. 265ff.

⁵² An article on this topic is being prepared by the present writer.

⁵³ For a vivid depiction of this transformation of Pandits into Professors, Madhav Deshpande's "Pandit and Professor: Transformations in the 19th Century Maharashtra". In: *The Pandit. Traditional Scholarship in India*, ed. Axel Michaels, Delhi: Manohar 2001, pp. 119–153, is highly recommended.

⁵⁴ RT 6.6.

For academic purposes it is far more interesting and fruitful to understand the underlying thought structures than to prove that the idea of renewal is historically wrong, and that those who favour it are desperately attempting to resurrect a language from the dead.

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