Imagining and Unimagining the Political in Bilhaṇa's *Vikramāṅkadevacarita*

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1. Introduction: The Place of a Poet

Compared to the scant knowledge we have about the time and place of most Sanskrit *kāvya*s, information about the *Vikramāṅkadevacarita* (hereafter VDC) and its author Bilhaṇa is abundant. We can date the work with rare accuracy to the late eighties of the eleventh century, most probably to the short period between 1085 and 1089.[1] The place is, of course, Kalyāṇa, or Kalyāṇi, capital of the Western Cālukya dynasty, during the long reign of its victorious monarch Vikramāditya VI (a.k.a. Vikrama or Vikramāṅka, r. 1076-1126). We also know much about the life of Bilhaṇa prior to the composition of the VDC: his upbringing in Kashmir, which he left after completing his education some time between 1062 and 1065,[2] and his subsequent career as a professional poet in some of the major centers of the Indian peninsula, such as Mathurā, Kānyakubja, Pryāga, Vārāṇasi, Somnath and the court of the Ḍāhala king Karṇa in Mt. Kālañjara, before his arrival at Kalyāṇi. The availability of such information is significant and related to two salient features of the VDC: its explicit historical subject matter and its substantial biographical afterword. Bilhaṇa went out of his way to tell his readers where and when to place him. In more than one sense, a major theme of his work is precisely the place poets occupy in the world.

In this connection it is worth mentioning the place that later tradition allotted Bilhaṇa. The VDC is one of the most oft-quoted Sanskrit *kāvya*s. Dozens of its verses have been cited in anthologies compiled throughout the subcontinent.[3] Many more

verses of sources unknown to us have also been ascribed to Bilhaṇa in the anthologies, alongside a single stanza from his other surviving work, the drama *Karṇasundarī*.[4] Quite a few later poets (from Maṅkha in Kashmir, to Veṅkaṭādhvarin in the deep Tamil country), literary theorists (such as Ruyyaka and Appayya Dīkṣita), commentators (like the famous Arjunavarmadeva), to say nothing of Kashmir's chronicler Kalhaṇa, have referred to, praised, or quoted Bilhaṇa.[5] In addition, Bilhaṇa has had an unusual posthumous career as the author of the renowned and much-loved *Caurapañcāśikā* -- "The Fifty Poems of the Thief." Indeed, he is sometimes referred to simply by the nickname *cora*, "the Thief."[6] There is no way of verifying that Bilhaṇa did compose this collection, and indeed, the ascription seems quite doubtful.[7] Still, this popular collection somehow attached itself to Bilhaṇa and created for him a new biography in the form of its frame story. According to *Caurapañcāśikā*'s framing narrative, recorded in later works such as *Bilhaṇacarita*, the poet had an illicit love affair with a princess who was entrusted to him as his student and whose heart he stole. Her father came to know of this affair and was about to execute Bilhaṇa, when the poet began to utter his fifty poems on the gallows. Each poem begins with the words "even now" (*adyāpi*) and ends with "I remember her" (*tāṃ smarāmi*), with longing descriptions of the beloved young princess sandwiched in between. According to the story, the king was so moved by the spontaneous poetry that he pardoned Bilhaṇa and even gave him the hand of his daughter.[8]

Like many such medieval narratives, this (after-) life of Bilhaṇa deals with the tense, indeed dangerous relationship between poets and patrons, and the power of poetry in deciding matters of life and death.[9] Beyond such recurring patterns, however, the story

also picks on themes from Bilhaṇa's own biographical account in the VDC as well as in several other afterlives attached to him. I will return to these narratives at the end of the paper, but I can already say that they consistently portray a poet living on the edge. He is hired for his poetry, in trouble due to his poetry, and sometimes out of trouble, again, thanks his poetry. An ambivalent and almost renegade author, he is always on the road, ever on the verge of insulting his local interlocutors, always somewhat distanced from his subject matter if not actually hostile to political agents and patrons. It is this type of alienated position that I find most distinctive of the thief's main work, the VDC.

2. Setting the Right(?) Tone: Bilhaṇa Addresses his Audiences

Bilhaṇa sandwiches his extensive narrative of King Vikrama's exploits – constituting the bulk of his eighteen canto poem – between two personal statements: a short preface and a much longer biographical afterward (for the latter, see below). The preface is a meta-poetic discussion addressing such varied topics as the author's poetic ideals and the socio-political environment of poetry, yet it does so primarily in connection with the crucial question of the anticipated reception of the VDC. The poet addresses several audiences in connection with his quest for approval. These include the pantheon of gods and goddesses, the collective of canonical poets, contemporary literati and potential critics, and the entire class of kings – former, current, and future patrons. Surprisingly, it is with the first group, consisting of the divinities, that Bilhaṇa feels most at home. This is primarily because the gods can be trusted to recognize good poetry, so there is no question of them not endorsing his work.

More specifically, the poem's first eight verses, which formally function as a necessary invocation of divine support and protection, depict the deities as occupying a world of relative harmony. The realm of gods and goddesses is by no means tension-ridden or monochromatic. On the contrary, what makes their realm so special is that they are perfectly capable of containing contrasts. Indeed, the divinities are portrayed as complex entities made of condensed elements, wherein each embodies its opposite. Take, for example, the following verse, where Bilhaṇa' invokes Pārvatī for the protection of his readers:

> Her single breast looms large:
> it reaches almost up to her mouth
> to receive word, as it were, about the whereabouts
> of the other.
> That's our Daughter of the King of Mountains
> when she is half herself and half her lover.
> May she protect you![10]

This verse, with its daring imagery and playful attribution of human agency to insentient objects (*utprekṣā*), both of which are typical to Bilhaṇa, begins with an acute sense of asymmetry, split, and loss. These notions are epitomized by the image of a woman's sole, towering breast, longing for its missing pair. Yet this split turns out to be the outcome of, and hence the icon for the tightest possible union, as Pārvatī, Daughter of the King of Mountains, combines herself with her lover, Śiva, to create a single new body: she is

literary made of, or carries, half of his body alongside a half of hers (*priyārdhasthitim udvahantyāḥ*). It is this Pārvatī – successfully containing both genders and divine powers – that the poet invokes for the purpose of aestheticization and protection. In fact, Pārvatī appears in his introduction only in this combined, *ardhanarīśvara* form. Her partner Śiva, for his part, is also a symbol of tension-containment, as he manages to both soothe Pārvatī and address his other lover Sandhyā at the very same time (1.6).

A similar picture is found in the household of Viṣṇu. Lakṣmī's image reflected in his sword is a constant reminder of her rival Radhā, Viṣṇu's other beloved (1.5). This state of contained opposition is also manifest in the chromatic imagery Bilhaṇa employs in portraying Viṣṇu, who is compared to a black bee in a white lotus (1.2). The poem's opening verse contains another chromatic contrast, again in the context of Viṣṇu's sword, whose pitch-black blade reflects the bright conch he holds in another hand and which is likened to foam from the milky ocean (1.1). Viṣṇu's sword is thus both black and white, liquid and solid, presence and memory -- an amazing embodiment of coexisting opposites.

Why is this business of containing of opposites so important to Bilhaṇa? For one thing, it seems that frictions and tensions are a precondition for creativity, so long as they can be managed. Consider, in this connection, Bilhaṇa's all-important appeal to Sarasvatī, Poetry embodied:

> It is as if the planets envied the stardom of Guru,
> "Lord of Speech," and searched for their own
> weighty words, that they ended up as pearls

strung on Sarasvatī's rosary.

May She be favorable to you.[11]

The planet Guru (Jupiter) is known as the Lord of Speech, a status that seems to have made the other planets jealous -- note again the playful lending of human emotions and motivations to nonhuman entities. Yet Sarasvatī is easily and quite literally capable of handling these covetous heavenly bodies, who in her palm suddenly seem as petty has their aspirations. The whole image harks back to Subandhu's famous verse about gifted poets who have won the favor of Sarasvatī, and who can thus behold the entire world as if it were a tiny, hand-held jujube.[12] Containing and controlling the bickering worlds (and words), it would seem, is the *sine qua non* of poetry.

Moreover, note that this state of union, containment, control and internal wholesomeness is also an unambiguous sign of success. Sarasvatī's rosary, just like Viṣṇu's sword of contrasting colors and Pārvatī's towering breast, are indications of their powerful and fortunate state of being, physically manifest for anyone who can see them. Or consider, in this context, Viṣṇu's own chest, combining another set of contrasts. Bilhaṇa portrays its dark surface as a virtual touchstone (*kaṣapaṭṭikā*), where the gold of the god's good fortune (*saubhāgyahemnaḥ*) is displayed in the form of the luminous sheen of his constantly present consort Śrī (1.3). The reference is to gauging the genuineness of gold by rubbing it against a piece of fine-grained dark schist: only pure gold leaves an unmistakable streak, a signature, on the stone's surface. I believe that the significance of this talk of touchstone here is Bilhaṇa's conviction that if tested on the gods and goddesses the gold of *his* poem would immediately be recognized. One

indication for his remarkable self-confidence is the fact that nowhere in the benediction does he seek the gods' protection or, in the case of Sarasvatī, inspiration, for *himself*. It is only for the readers that he pleads with Viṣṇu, Śiva, Pārvatī and Poetry embodied, on whose grace (*prasāda*) he can presumably count. Since the gods embody the yardstick of quality, Bilhaṇa knows he has nothing to worry about from their side. If only one were writing poetry in the world of Sarasvatī and the gods.

But one is not, unfortunately. And the human terrain as envisioned by Bilhaṇa is quite different from the divine. It is riddled with gaps and contradictions that are extremely difficult to bridge. The poet, we learn, works in a thoroughly divided world. He faces canonical poets and upstarts, traditional tastes and new literary fashions, great poets and lousy ones, a few good critics and a hoard of nasty and professional fault-finders, some sensitive readers among a whole lot of dull patrons, and a handful of noble monarchs in the midst of a sea of crooked politicians. And what is more, there is no unambiguous authority, no objective touchstone – a repeated theme for Bilhaṇa. The poet thus has a very difficult, almost impossible task. He has to meet the standards set by the elders, but also to innovate. He may win the praise of the sensitive critics but is sure to stir, perhaps for the very same reasons, the harsh comments of those who are unfavorable to his innovations and fail to appreciate his genius. He may occasionally win the support of a great king, but for the most part he is dependent for his livelihood on a bunch of unworthy patrons.

As soon as Bilhaṇa turns from the world of the gods to that of mortals, he foregrounds a set of harsh, irreconcilable divides, both through his words and by means of an unusual indexing device of verse-doubling. Immediately following his appeal to the

deities we find a series of paired verses, wherein the second starkly contradicts the first. One stanza warns the classical poets (*kavīndra*s) of the gang of recent poetic thieves, who are gearing up to loot the essence of their poems. Thus the new poets are reminiscent of the *asura*s, who were bent on grabbing the nectar of immortality (*amṛta*) from the gods, led by Indra, during the churning of the milky ocean (1.11). But the following verse takes the exact opposite position. The great poets of the past have no reason for worry. Let the new writers grab whatever they can, for the ocean of *kāvya* is simply inexhaustible (1.12). In one verse the poet boasts that good critics will like his work even if it departs from the older patterns and employs a new style (1.13).[13] In the very next he bemoans the dullness of bad critics, who are to poetic quality what a hard substance is to a knife -- they make it blunt (1.14).

Then there is the opposition between two distinct if not opposite poetic ideals, also presented in two succeeding verses: the Vaidarbha style, typically associated with Kālidāsa, and the bold flashy style (*citra*), often associated with Bāṇa and his followers. The former flows uninterrupted, a "cloudless rain of nectar to the ears" (*anabhravṛṣṭiḥ śravaṇāmṛtasya*). It also is more traditional, "the very birthplace of Sarasvatī's elegant gestures" (*sarasvatīvibhramajanmabhūmi*). In short, it is a sure bet: "the success of poetry in this style is like money in the bank" (*suabhāghalābhapratibhūḥ padānām*). As for the latter, it requires a complex arrangement of poetic ornaments, reminiscent of an intricate musical concerto (*pañcamanādamitra-citroktisandarbhavibhūṣaṇeṣu*), and yet it too is never devoid of Sarasvatī: poets who compose in this style are so illustrious that it seems as if she is playing her lute inside their very mouths (*sarasvatī yadvadaneṣu nityam ābhāti vīṇām iva vādayantī*).[14] Again, the implication is that Sarasvatī is capable of

manifesting herself in two very different styles, and that our poet is as well, as he seems confident in his ability to successfully use both of them in the very same poem. But whether the single-minded critics can appreciate such a fine mixture is an altogether different matter.

Bilhaṇa, in other words, knows he has the compass inside him, but feels that the realm he occupies is so polarized and many of its inhabitants so misguided, that his clear sense of direction does him little good. These notions intensify when the poet ups his indexing technique as he turns to directly address the community of readers. Each of the verses that follows consists of some irreconcilable divide, usually spelt out in the first two quarters and then heightened by an illustration (*dṛṣṭānta*) in the following two. A poet's genius can captivate the wise but not the dull, just like a fine needle can pierce a pearl but not a rock; readers who appreciate good poets know to avoid ill ones, not unlike the musk-deer, which grazes on the fragrant *granthi* leaf and never on mere grass; poetasters can fool dull-minded critics but never sophisticated ones, just as water can extinguish fire but cannot remove the rays emerging from precious stones.[15]

To make things worse, Bilhaṇa has now been living and working in an environment totally devoid of cultural refinement for a decade, ever since leaving his homeland:

> Poetic Genius must be Saffron's fellow citizen.
> Here's how I know: I haven't come across
> a trace of either, once I left
> the jurisdiction of Sarasvatī.[16]

Saffron, a rare and expensive spice, is a specialty of Kashmir. Bilhaṇa believes that the same is true of the equally rare quality of poesy. In fact, he has no qualms about saying in the face of his audience in the Deccan – to the degree that he, in fact, considers them a worthy audience – that they have no true poets of their own and must import them from the remote Himalayan valley.[17] True, the author's celebration of himself as a rare commodity from Kashmir can be understood as lending prestige to his proud Cālukya employers, who managed to hire him. But the local audience could not have failed to detect the disdain in his voice. I will return to Bilhaṇa's Kashmiri patriotism and defiant antilocal tone later. But for the moment let us stay with his utter sense of alienation and cultural exile. Again, there is pride in being the one true poet, the saffron that gives the local watery soup its taste and color, and the afterword gladly records Bilhaṇa's constant intellectual victories in a variety of localities. But there is also an audible loneliness of a poet who has left the jurisdiction of Poetry behind him and who therefore feels he has no peer. Indeed, as fools populate the literary salons, one's gift becomes a liability (1.23). What appreciation can Bilhaṇa expect from those who would find even the succulent sugarcane unpalatable (1.20), and who, like camels, always choose a thorny bush over a lush grove (1.29)?

Towards the end of the short preface it becomes clear that Bilhaṇa's feels most alienated when it comes to kings – the main protagonists and patrons of his poems. The contradictions that the poet has to manage when dealing with these difficult customers are the harshest. Think of the writer as a goldsmith, his poetry as ornaments fashioned from gold or precious stones, and the king as the client. This is a standard metaphor that

Bilhaṇa repeatedly invokes while expressing his doubts about the worthiness of the king as a recipient for the jewelry he crafts (1.16, 18, 19). For all he knows, his customer may be a brutish savage who simply cannot appreciate the value of what he is getting:

> The number of fine feats on their resumes
> is *zero*. Can someone tell me why such kings
> assemble teams of poet laureates? Why in the world
> would berry-wearing forest dwellers
> appoint a jewelry designer in residence?[18]

A king should be able to provide his poet with at least a few achievements to work with – some good deeds – for the process of poetic imagination cannot be entirely foundationless. Or perhaps it can? For here Bilhaṇa reaches the apex of his bitterness by claiming, conversely, that what kings do or do not do is of no significance. It is only the poets that matter. One may be a perfect ruler and yet be forgotten, if there is no true poet by his side (1.26). More importantly, the poet has the power to turn a hero into a villain and vice versa. The combination of Rāvaṇa's ignominy and Rāma's glory is a case in point, for both these lasting images from the *Rāmāyaṇa* are indicative of the power of First Poet Vālmīki *and of nothing else* (*sa sarva evādikaveḥ prabhāvo*). To make sure the message is not lost (one should never take such things for granted, especially so far away from the land of poetry), Bilhaṇa spells out the conclusion unequivocally: "Kings better not mess with their poets!" (*na kopanīyāḥ kavayaḥ kṣitendraiḥ*, 1.27).[19]

Before concluding his preface, Bilhaṇa hastens to add that king Vikrama, his current patron and subject matter, is by no means unworthy of praise. On the contrary, so illustrious are the deeds of this king that any poem of which he is the hero will be admired regardless of its literary merit (1.28). Indeed, the pearls and gems are already supplied by the history of the Cālukya dynasty; all that the poet/jeweler has to do is to string them together, and the outcome, a necklace made of verses, is sure to be perfect (1.30). But these declarations, while they may certainly soften the previous blunt message, still cannot wipe it clean. The bitter and cynical tone has already sunk in, and the listeners – King Vikrama, whose fellow monarchs Bilhaṇa has just torn to shreds, and his courtiers, whose literary sensitivity he has just denounced in no uncertain terms – must now be on the edges of their seats, nervous to examine the ornament that the master from Kashmir has crafted in his poetic workshop.

3. On Thickening: Patterns of Political Imagination in the VDC

And it is not as if they were not nervous to begin with. King Vikrama has a few skeletons in his closet, scandals that call for treatment by the most delicate hand. By the mid-1080s, there is probably no one in the Cālukya kingdom who has not heard of the two princes, the king's older brother Somadeva (a.k.a. Someśvara) and his younger brother Jayasiṃha. Vikrama has imprisoned and probably executed the former and has arrested or exiled the latter.[20] It would take a truly gifted poet to put a positive spin on the events that led to this embarrassing state of affairs, and so the courtiers may be willing to swallow an insult from their new and arrogant acquisition from Kashmir, if, as he insinuates, he has the capacity to turn a hero into a villain and vice versa. However, Bilhaṇa's ominous

reference to monarchs with a record of zero good deeds must have caused the king's men to miss a beat, and his brief praise for King Vikrama and his ancestors may not have entirely eased their suspicions. They nervously wait to see how Bilhaṇa will treat the kingdom's most sensitive political issues.

Bilhaṇa begins his actual story by going several generations back. He narrates the official story of the Cālukyas and their miraculous origin from the god Brahma's cupped hand, or *culuka* (1.46).[21] Turning to more recent history, he describes the exploits of Tailapa, Vikrama's great grandfather, and gradually works his way to the current king's father, Āhavamalla (a.k.a. Someśvara I). The courtiers can momentarily relax. Bilhaṇa shows he is perfectly capable of doing wonders with what he has. The monarchs of the Cālukya dynasty, heroically protecting and expanding their realm, are presented as worthy of their divine origin and of Bilhaṇa's ornaments. Consider, for example, the following verse from the description of Tailapa, still in the work's first canto:

> In the battlefield, it was the heat of his valor
> that made his hand sweat and moistened his sword,
> a living form of Death to his foes, so that the pollen
> from the rain of flowers that Indra kept pouring
> caused it to thicken.[22]

It is not the actual skirmish that makes a true hero like Tailapa swelter in battle, but the sheer impact of his radiant, hot valor. This internal and innate quality also manifests in his successful handling of his enemies and wins him the appreciation of the gods, those

ardent connoisseurs of bravery, and Indra, who is busy pouring down his famous rain of flowers. Perspiration and flower-dust combine to coat Tailapa's sword, which his enemies view as the very embodiment of the dark god of death, with an additional colorful layer. The swords physical thickening (*nibiḍatva*) is a divine and a poetic stamp of approval: Tailapa's varnished sword, like Viṣṇu's scimitar in the opening verses, is a true touchstone of heroism.

Bilhaṇa continues to meditate on this sharp object:

> The fame born from the tip of his sword,
> black as a woman's eyeliner,
> has turned white. I think I know why.
> It has robbed the cheeks of his enemies' wives,
> pale as a sugarcane,
> of their color.[23]

Again, black and white somehow coexist in Tailapa's blade, though here the imagery is even richer. Fame is conventionally white in *kāvya*, and Bilhaṇa proposes to explain how it is that such a bright color can emerge from the dark edge of a sword. He attributes (another *utprekṣā*) this strange chromatic effect to the white color running off the faces of his enemies' wives – an allusion to the fate of their husbands in battle. Note that it is common in *kāvya* to conflate the king's military and erotic conquests, and to index his martial achievements by the losses of the women of his foes.[24] Bilhaṇa's verse, however, is original in contrasting the pallid color of the women's cheeks with the eyeliner-black

of the sword. This import of vocabulary from the erotic to the heroic is even more complicated than it may initially seem. For the long compound stretching almost the entire length of the verse's second half incorporates a five-word sequence taken straight from a stanza in Kālidāsa's *Mālavikāgnimitra* (*śara-kāṇḍa-pāṇḍu-gaṇḍa-sthalī*), where it is indeed found in an erotic rather than a heroic context.[25] So the poet too, like the sword he describes, is involved in an act of robbing. The "Thief" stole an entire chunk from the treasures of classical poetry, just as he had warned us he would do. At the same time, he put this language to new use, thereby proving his other earlier point, namely that the ocean of poetry is inexhaustible regardless of such literary theft. All in all, an amazing process of intensification or "thickening" – wherein the poem is saturated with additional colors, images, attributions, emotional flavors (*rasa*s) and intertextual echoes – serves to heighten Tailapa's heroism.

Similar images of swords, always embodying contrasting colors and other contradictions (such as the combination of solid matter, liquid, and light) continue to appear as the poet finally turns to describe Vikrama, the work's main protagonist. Indeed, poetic enhancement can take place not only in the visual dimension but also in the realm of sounds. Consider, for example, the description of King Vikrama's skill in archery, as part of his praise by an envoy of the Tamil king in Canto 5:

> Your bow is soul-mate to your arm.
> What enemy stationed on the frontline
> can withstand its twang, immediately magnified
> by the wailing of the doe-eyed darlings

back home?[26]

Note again the movement from embodied valor -- here in the form of Vikrama's arm, from which the bow is inseparable as a soul mate (*praṇayin*) -- to the detectible, external strum of his bowstring. This sound, in itself unbearable to the ears of enemy soldiers in the firing line, is amplified by the crying of their instantly bereaved wives back home. This magnification (*vyaktim*) by means of a different sound quality from a far away realm is, just like the thickening of Tailapa's sword, another unmistakable indication of the true heroic nature of the Cālukya kings. Indeed, this verse is uttered by an envoy whose speech *is* Sarasvatī (3.30), and so Poetry herself, put in the envoy's mouth by Bilhaṇa, forms an added sound layer with its hypnotic, hissing alliteration surrounding the strumming in the first line, thereby providing a final proof of Vikrama's unworldly valor. If the poet has an eye for pollen collected on a sword, he also has an ear for resonances amplified, or masked by other sounds (5.19), or echoed (5.40), and a whole variety of other audible effects.

We could go on and on about such visual and sonorous effects in the VDC, not only in the realm of war but also in that of love. But it is important to realize that such poetic intensification is not the only mode of thickening in the poem. Another crucial mode involves the superimposition of the Rāma narrative template on the story of Vikrama. Bilhaṇa connects and compares the Cālukyas to Rāma's lineage, both by narrating the lineage's divine origin from Brahma's cupped hands along the lines of the Rāmāyaṇa's story of the gods' appeal to him for worldly intervention (1.40-57) and by stressing the fact that the Cālukyas first had Ayodhyā as their hereditary capital

(*kularājadhānī*), the very city which Rāma settled after defeating Rāvaṇa and rescuing Sītā (*prasādhya taṃ rāvaṇam adhyuvāsa maithilīśaḥ*, 1.63). It is only later that the Cālukyas moved South, to the land of areca trees, once nothing in the North was left to be conquered, and their subsequent successful campaign, not unlike Rāma's, reached all the way to the southern shores, and then beyond, to the "kingdom of Vibhīṣaṇa" (1.64-66).

More specifically, Bilhaṇa repeatedly and consistently identifies King Vikrama himself with Rāma. Rāma is invoked not to comment on Vikrama's success against some demonic enemy – a pattern that, as Sheldon Pollock has argued, came to dominate Sanskrit political imagination shortly after the time of Bilhaṇa, with the rise of Muslim power in South Asia.[27] Rather, the allusion to Rāma is meant to highlight above all what Vikrama's total indifference to power and his quality as a paragon of brotherly love, even when faced with an intra-familial conflict over the succession of his father's throne. This somewhat unusual move is at the heart of Bilhaṇa's poetic project, precisely due to the political circumstances described above, and we should follow it closely to see if Bilhaṇa succeeds in pulling it off. The identification of Vikrama with Rāma surfaces first in the second canto, when Āhavamalla, Vikrama's father, is described as bereft of sons and performing a set of elaborate rituals and austerities at the Śiva temple, so that his wife be impregnated. Finally, one morning, he hears the voice of Śiva speaking to him directly:

> Your efforts have earned you two sons,
> but a third boy, born between them,
> is *my* gift to you: with the might of his arms
> he'll bring Fortune herself, from across the ocean,

just like Rāma.[28]

Like Rāma, Vikrama is predicted to perform a feat of bringing Śrī, the very embodiment of Fortune, from the ocean's far shore. In the case of Rāma, this refers to his rescuing of Sītā from her captivity in Laṅkā; in Vikrama's case, the allusion is either to some overseas victory or to his marriage to Candralekhā, a princess from a neighboring kingdom whose family traces itself back to Rāvaṇa's Laṇkā.[29] But what is significant in this verse is that the first direct comparison of Vikrama with Rāma is in the context of his two brothers and, more specifically, that a reference is made to his place in the order of birth. After all, of the epic heroes, Rāma is perhaps *the* paradigmatic elder brother, both in relation to Lakṣmaṇa (a.k.a. Rāmānuja, or Rāma's junior) and to Bharata.[30] Thus Bilhaṇa's portrayal of a middle-born Rāma is indicative of his plan to attack the problem of fraternal relations directly and boldly by turning Vikrama's biggest liability into an asset.

Indeed, our next Rāma moment comes when Āhavamalla, just like Daśaratha before him, is set on choosing an heir apparent. Bypassing the normal order of seniority, Āhavamalla decides to confer this status on Vikrama, his second-born. The father, "whose words ring the anklets of Sarasvatī" (3.29), does his best to convince his beloved son Vikrama to consent, and rebukes his seeming disobedience (3.31), but to no avail. Vikrama, "teeth white like Sarasvatī's silk sari," knows that his father's special love for him blinds him to the proper procedure and affectionately but firmly says 'no.' Ignoring the order of birth in matters of succession, he says, is certain to destroy the reputation of the family (3.36-38). His father, he adds, should officially announce Someśvara II,

Vikrama's senior, as the next king. Vikrama vows to retain his dutiful role as the king's loyal foot soldier (3.39). To drive this point home he cites the case of Rāma's father, Daśaratha:

> Rāma's father crowned Bharata,
> disregarding seniority, and to this day
> he suffers worldwide infamy
> as the puppet of his wife.[31]

In this simple yet stunning verse, Bilhaṇa's Vikrama puts himself in Bharata's place, and it is rather his older sibling Someśvara who is compared to Rāma. This clinches the argument and Āhavamalla unhappily appoints his elder heir apparent. Note, however, that by portraying Vikrama's renunciation of the throne in favor of his brother, Bilhaṇa cleverly insinuates that it is *he*, the second-born, who actually behaves in a true, Rāma-like manner. Indeed, later in the work, when the two brothers have a falling out after the father's death, Vikrama is portrayed as willfully embracing exile, in a manner that is quite reminiscent of Rāma's behavior. When his brother marches after him with an army Vikrama is still keen on avoiding conflict at any cost, and makes numerous conciliatory offers to Someśvara, vowing to resign all rights to the throne, but to no avail. It is only when no other option but war is possible, and following a direct dictum of an increasingly impatient Śiva, that Vikrama, in an act of self-defense, captures his brother.

Bilhaṇa, in other words, presents a version of the story, according to which Vikrama's rise to power has been forced upon him, despite his active resistance every

step of the way. Bilhaṇa is very careful in making the facts conform to his story. He insists that Someśvara was first crowned unopposed, and that his political fortunes changed only after the unwarranted attack he mounted on his exiled junior brother, disinterested in the throne. Thus throughout Canto 6, where the conflict between the two evolves, Bilhaṇa is consistent in calling Vikrama "prince" and his brother Someśvara "king." Note that Vikrama's own son, Someśvara III, in his later biography of his famous father, saw no problem in revealing a very different scenario, according to which Vikrama was indeed made crown-prince at the age of sixteen, implying that the normal order of seniority was in fact disregarded.[32] Even if this was not the case, it seems quite obvious that the two princes battled for the throne already during the father's lifetime and that Vikrama's exile as described in Canto 6 was busily spent on building external alliances for the purpose of winning the political battle back home. Bilhaṇa, however, presents Vikrama's diplomatic and military maneuvers as done for the benefit of the kingdom that exiled him. Vikrama is also presented as protecting good and generous kings against the actions of predatory ones.

We can see what Bilhaṇa is working around and how he ingeniously uses the Rāma template to re-imagine Vikrama's career. What we should also realize is that in following this poetic plan, Bilhaṇa consciously echoes a famous predecessor: Bāṇa, court poet of emperor Harṣa (r. 606-647). This intertextual echo is the final act of intensification, or thickening, I wish to mention here. There are many ways in which Bilhaṇa knowingly emulates Bāṇa. These include not only the biographical section in his work, reminiscent of Bāṇa's, but also his narrative solution to a similar sensitive political situation.

Note that like king Vikrama (and unlike Rāma), Harṣa was the second son of his father Prabhākara. His older brother was Rājyavardhana, and there was also a younger sister, Rājyaśrī, who was married off to an important political ally, Grahavarman. So in addition to the father there were at least three possible male contenders for power in the family – the two brothers and the brother-in-law -- a potentially volatile situation. But, as Bāṇa reports, all of Harṣa's potential competitors basically disappeared all of a sudden: Rājyavardhana was off to fight the Huns, and his younger sister Rājyaśrī was away with her husband in Kanauj, when the father suddenly died. Rājyavardhana returned desirous to renounce the kingdom. Then news came that brother-in-law Grahavarman was assassinated by the king of Mālwa, and that the sister, Rājyaśrī, was taken captive. Rājyavardhana suspended his renunciation in order to avenge this assassination and redeem his sister. But then he too was treacherously murdered, this time by the king of Gauda. From all the males of the family, Harṣa alone is left to rule, and he unwillingly assumes power only in order to rescue his sister and punish the evildoers. As I show elsewhere, Bāṇa's goal may have been to put a positive spin on the miraculous ascendancy of a junior prince to power, for, as Warder has noted, his attitude to his brothers may actually have been "less exemplary."[33] The point I wish to stress here is that in both cases, the younger prince had no desire to rule despite being destined to do so (in Harṣa's case this destiny is manifest in his royal birth marks, "holding fast to his arms and legs and, ignoring his protests, forcefully dragging him to the throne"[34]), and that their very aversion to power is taken by the poet as the ultimate proof of their right to be kings. Whatever the actual story behind Harṣa's ascendancy, it was probably forgotten by Bilhaṇa's time and replaced by Bāṇa's poetic version. The famous intertext provides

Bilhaṇa's work with a final topping: a prestigious and reliable echo chamber lending reliability to his portrayal of Vikrama.

4. Unimagining the Political in the VDC

So can Vikrama and his men finally relax in their seats? Didn't the poet from Kashmir provide the goods by lending his poetic stamp of approval to the king? The answer is not so straightforward as it may seem. Bilhaṇa certainly presents Vikrama as faultless, to the extent that V. S. Pathak has portrayed his "defense plea" as a betrayal of his duty to history.[35] But there are many points along the way where Bilhaṇa seems to knowingly flatten the poetic construction he himself has so meticulously built. Indeed, throughout the work, the reader confronts a series of gaps, silences, and absences, which seem at least as powerful as the verbalized intensifications and reverberations we have been discussing. Thus in a variety of subtle yet conspicuous ways the poet reveals and even foregrounds his continued ambivalence towards his subject matter.

Consider, as a starting point, the incongruity between the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s narrative template and the story of Vikrama. It takes nerve to present as Rāma-like a character whose major achievements the poem describes as hard-won victories over both his older (Canto 6) and younger (Canto 15) brothers. Such comparisons are also ironic, especially in verses like the one cited above, in which Vikrama compares *himself* to Bharata and his *brother* to Rāma. But the problem is deeper than that. The basic logic of the Rāma mytheme, as Pollock has demonstrated, is the creation, through divine intervention, of a special creature that escapes definitions such as 'human,' 'animal,' or 'god,' so that he can defeat some powerful demonic creature who has already attained immunity from all

these entities. Thus, it is not so much brotherly love that typifies Rāma, as it is the existence of a demonic enemy like Rāvaṇa. Indeed, as Pollock has also shown, one of the main breakthroughs of Vālmīki's poem, when seen against the backdrop of the *Mahābhārata*, is that violence is strictly limited to an exotic, demonic realm. Yet alas, a demonic enemy is conspicuously and entirely absent from the VDC. Śiva's prediction translated above, that Vikrama will bring Śrī from across the ocean, "just like Rāma," signals a wide gulf between the subject (*upameya*) and the standard (*upamāna*) of the simile. Rāma crossed over to Laṅkā, defeated Rāvaṇa and his army, and brought Sītā back; Vikrama did nothing of the kind. It would thus appears that Brahma, Śiva, and Viṣṇu have all conspired to intervene in worldly affairs only so that this king can secure his power by overcoming his very own siblings.

Consider, in this connection, an example from the beginning of the poem, when the origin of the Cālukya lineage is traced to Brahma's handful (*culuka*) of ritual water. Brahma, we are told, was in the midst of his twilight ritual offering, when Indra arrived to see him. As is often the case, Indra is need of urgent help from Brahma, and after a few mandatory praises he gets right to the point:

> Lord, my spies are telling me that the earth is in turmoil,
> so much so that we unaging gods, happily eating our share
> of what the people offer, would soon be left,
> I'm afraid to say, with nothing
> but memories.[36]

Note the laconic tone and sudden bareness of language. Precisely at the point where Bilhaṇa's relevant intertexts – think of Māgha's *Śiśupālavadha* as one prominent example – would turn to describe at some length the monstrosity and terrifying deeds, past and present, of a demon who has come to terrorize heaven and earth and has caused the gods to flee to Brahma for help, Indra remains extremely tightlipped. All he says is that a state of unspecified turmoil (*viplava*) has taken over earth, endangering the continuity of what, for the gods, is a crucial matter -- the performance of sacrificial rites. One could, perhaps, argue that the verse alludes to the rise of Muslim rulers in South Asia, who in later literature are sometimes described as endangering the Vedic sacrifice. But there is nothing either here or elsewhere in the poem to support this hypothesis. Vikrama's wars in the VDC are all with his neighboring Hindu kingdoms, and they all ultimately hark back to the internal affairs of his kingdom. There is not much Indra can or wants to say, and he is quite open about his disinclination to speak (*kiṃ vā bahūktaiḥ*, 1.43). His communication to Brahma is intentionally unadorned and business-like. Indeed, language suddenly becomes thin, in a process that diametrically reverses the thickening described above. It is as if the poet, too, is suddenly lost for words. And what is more, the divine, mythic frame almost collapses under its own weight in a verse like this, a collapse that is marked by the audible silence I have been describing. Also punctuating the collapse of the mythic frame is the latter part of Indra's wry remark. The gods, by definition, never age (*nirjara*), and yet they are about to be reduced to a situation not unlike that of the elderly, where joys that in the past were taken for granted have become the subject of distant memories.

Reluctance to elaborate, if not actual protest of the very need to describe certain themes that are at the heart of the plot, is repeated throughout the poem. Consider, for example, a much later scene that resembles Indra's interview with Brahma. Here it is King Vikrama who is briefed by one of his advisors about some unspecified turmoil:

> As the rainy season aged and its head grew white
> with ashen clouds, one of the king's confidants
> appeared and apprised him in private:
> "There's a certain awful thing I must report.
> Please forgive me, King of Kutnala.
> Regardless of what news he bears,
> a king should never blame
> a faithful messenger.[37]

The topic of this briefing, the actions of Vikrama's younger brother and ally, is initially and intentionally unspecified -- it is simply "a certain awful thing" (*niṣṭhuraṃ kimapi*). Note the polite but grudging language the poet puts in the mouth of the messenger. Obviously, the king's informant, like Indra, reports of a problem that Vikrama is about to heroically solve. But in his great difficulty to even spell the problem out, we begin to sense that the poet too may be apologetic about what *he* is about to say. Perhaps he too is telling us that we should not judge *him* by his subject matter. Note also that here, too, there is reference to aging, as if the matter in question would instantly lead one's hair to

grow white, or, conversely, require the kind of disillusionment with the world that is associated with old age.

But the story has to be told. Vikrama is informed that Jayasiṃha, to whom he has always shown his brotherly love, is the instigator of "great injustice" (*nayaviparyayo mahān* 14.4): departing from the just path (*nyāyamārgam apahāya* 14.5), he now exploits the country with only his own self-profit in mind. This is as specific as the report gets, before the informant digresses to describe Jayasimha's mighty elephants. Both he and the poet seem far more comfortable with this topic, and describe it in the most luxurious *kāvya* idiom. The elephant-tusks, the rut, the ears, Śrī riding on their backs -- are all enhanced and enriched by various tropes and ornaments of the type exemplified above. But how exactly are these elephants related to the problem at hand?

> In your affection you granted him
> countless elephants of the best kind.
> Now, counting on their power, he plots something
> even the mention of which is a crime.[38]

So, again, it is some despicable thing we are speaking about, or around, for even to mention it is to commit a crime. All that the messenger can finally bring himself to briefly say is that by means of bribery and brutality the brother has gained control over the "forest regions" and won the alliance of the Tamil king, so that he is now poised "to crush your army" (14.11-12). He then concludes with another reluctant revelation:

To make a long story short…

This will sound incredible, king,

but trust me, it's for real:

in a matter of days he'll be facing off against us

on the banks of the Kṛṣṇā.[39]

Again the language is thin, unornamented and set on making "a long story short," definitely not the typical *kāvya* impulse. Of course, by this point we realize that the total disinclination to even speak of such matters is in itself a trope, reflecting on the nobility of the king and his men. Indeed, in response to the spy's briefing, the king is immersed in thoughts of dismay and indignation against fate, his second such soliloquy in the poem (more on the first below), where he is simply unable to fathom why people, let alone his own brother, would ever behave in such a way (14.15-21). And yet this tightlipped mode could also reflect the poet's attitude to his topic, which he seems happy to drop, precisely at this point, in favor of a long description of the Autumn (14.23-45). Then it is back to the business of the battling brothers. Bilhaṇa narrates pious Vikrama's efforts to avoid the conflict by means of a variety of conciliatory gestures, all of which fall on Jayasiṃha's deaf ears (14.48-56), concluding, again, with his "why say more?" (*brūmahe kim adhikam* 14.57).

Finally, when a showdown is no longer avoidable, Vikrama is forced to defend himself and his kingdom, and the battle unfolds. At this point Bilhaṇa seems to switch gears, dwelling willingly on a whole set of *kāvya*'s favorite objects, such as drums, conches, rutting elephants, horses, arrows and swords. Heroism again comes to the fore,

enhanced by various tropes and invocations to Victory embodied. Then there is the aesthetics of blood and carnage, where Bilhaṇa again is very much at home. So king Vikrama's warfare definitely provides the poet with a scope for description, a *varṇanāspadam*, as he himself remarks (15.73). There is, of course, the troubling identity of the opponent, who is neither a Rāvaṇa of sorts, nor even the neighboring monarch, but the king's own brother. This fact, however, is silenced once and for all. In the eighty-seven verses dedicated to narrating the battle – an entire chapter of the work -- the identity of Vikrama's rival is not once spelt out. Bilhaṇa employs a whole set of generic synonyms for 'enemy' (*para, pratipakṣa, ripu, prativīra, ari, dviṣad* etc.) but the name of this enemy simply never surfaces again. Nor is there anything in the description of the rival that even remotely insinuates who he is. Indeed, warfare is described in a manner following a formulaic heroic template, according to which the troops of the opponent initially have the upper hand, before the king single-handedly breaks the enemy lines and leads his army to victory. Only in the very last verse of the canto do we get a hint at the political realities underlying this theater of bravery. This is when Bilhaṇa reports briefly that the "thorn of the lineage" (*kulakaṇṭaka*) has been captured in the forest, and that King Vikrama spoke to him, choked with tears of compassion and that discussion was concluded to his satisfaction (*kāruṇyodgatabāṣpagadgadapadaḥ saṃbhāṣya saṃtoṣya ca*). After this, Jayasiṃha is never mentioned in the poem.

Bilhaṇa's poetic biography, then, is vast and audaciously verbose when it comes to a whole variety of topics, from Pārvatī'a breast, to war elephants, and from the king's bravery, to his attractiveness and lovemaking (a topic which has been left out of the discussion but occupies a prominent position in the poem). And yet, marked silences are

interspersed throughout the poem. There are certain topics that provide the poet with vast scope for his imagination and there are those he would rather avoid or not have to imagine. The mythical framework is used to enhance the hero and his actions but there are moments when the gaps between the human subject and mythic model become too wide and the whole poetic structure cracks and collapses. I want to conclude this section by discussing Bilhaṇa's description of the king's conflict with his older brother, Someśvara, apropos one final gap in his poetry, the gap with Bāṇa's intertext.

I earlier invoked Bāṇa's biography of Harṣa as a crucial precedent of a *kāvya* on a historical theme, also with its autobiographical portion, also engaged in an effort to put a positive spin on the rise to power of a second-born prince. I noted that Bilhaṇa, like Bāṇa before him, portrays his king as entirely disinterested in power, crowned against his will and reigning precisely on the basis of his indifference to power. We should, however, take note of some crucial differences between the two works. In Bāṇa's *Life of Harṣa*, the poet's account of himself comes at the beginning rather than at the end. This is significant because Bāṇa portrays himself as a young poet living on the fringes of mainstream culture, making a name for himself – and not necessarily a good name – while making his rounds, with a group of colorful friends, in the literary salons of central India. All this until one day, out of the blue, the invitation comes from the emperor himself to join his court. Bāṇa describes the sheer excitement that overtakes him at that moment, and how he comes to meet the king for the very first time. This dramatic event in Bāṇa's life is basically described as a moment of falling in love. Indeed, the whole movement of Bāṇa from the exterior of Harṣa's royal camp through a series of concentric walls and retinues until he finally lays his eyes on Harṣa, described from feet to head, is

closely modeled on Kandarpaketu's first meeting with Vāsavadattā, the beloved whom he has only seen in a dream in the work of Bāṇa's important predecessor Subandhu, as I demonstrate elsewhere.[40] I cannot dwell at great length here on Bāṇa's beautiful passage, one of the high points of his work, and can only say that this moment, when the poet's story shifts from its teller to its subject matter, is clearly presented as the climax of Bāṇa's life, at least up to this point. Moreover, the meeting with Harṣa represents the beginning of a very meaningful relationship in the poet's life, with a king whose personality and charisma he clearly and personally adores. Bāṇa's poem is, therefore, a poetic as well as personal endorsement of its hero.

Nothing like this exists in Bilhaṇa's *Life of Vikramaṅkadeva*, yet another important silence or gap. We hear nothing of a first meeting with the emperor and get no hint that the poet had any personal relationship with him, to say nothing of affection. Another difference is that Bilhaṇa tells his own story not as an introductory narrative, leading to that of his patron, but once his work is done, and he is looking forward, beyond his career in the Deccan, and plotting his return home to civilized Kashmir, where an extremely generous man and a great supporter of the arts, as he reports, has just been made king.[41] Indeed, when Bilhaṇa goes through his long list of stints as a poet and scholar, Vikrama is just another line on his CV. Thus, unlike Bāṇa, Bilhaṇa maintains a distance, if not a basic ambivalence about his current patron, a stance that is felt throughout the poem, from the audacious preface to the equally audacious afterword. A similar distance, I would argue, is maintained vis-à-vis the geographical context: his descriptions of the Cālukya land are, by and large, somewhat withdrawn and not nearly as personal as those of Kashmir, in the last and biographical chapter of the poem. This basic

stance of ambivalence or distance is nowhere clearer than in the poem's sixth canto, where the crucial events leading to Vikrama's coronation unfold.

The beginning of the canto finds prince Vikrama at what is clearly *the* low point of his political career. To begin with, Vikrama is basically exiled from the capital Kalyāṇa, currently ruled by his older and hostile brother Someśvara. He is camped out on the bank of the Tuṅgabhadrā and is busy making allies in an effort to cement a coalition of kings under his flag. But these efforts suffer blow after blow. He marries the Chola king's daughter, only to find out, shortly thereafter, that his new ally and father-in-law has been assassinated (6.7). A military expedition deep into the Tamil country, in which Vikrama installs the son of the slain king on the Chola throne, ends in another fiasco: within weeks the prince is overthrown by the invading Rājiga, king of Veṅgi (6.26). If these setbacks are not enough, Rājiga and Vikrama's brother Someśvara team up and mount a coordinated attack on Vikrama's camp; Rajīga from the front and Someśvara from the rear (6.27). It is at this moment that Bilhaṇa seems most sympathetic to his hero. This is perhaps because the prince, like him, is exiled in a harsh land and political landscape, and faces what seem to be insurmountable adversities from opposing poles. Thus Vikrama is described as a person who does not lose his internal truth and self-belief, and prevails over all his adversaries. Indeed, at the end of the canto, after both attacking armies have been crushed, Bilhaṇa brilliantly turns Vikrama's difficult situation into a virtue. What is basically an unceremonious coronation, out in the country, with no one there to witness it, becomes a celebration of the universe as such: lotuses blow conches in the form of white geese, winds scatter the Ganges water to anoint him, and elephants are in charge of percussion, in a resounding celebration of cosmic proportions (6.94-8).

But no matter how much the poet can bring himself to imagine the king's plight, this king, both personally and as a representative of his class, represents Bilhaṇa's own plight and his own exile, something that the poet never forgets. This is most apparent in his portrayal of Vikrama's own inner voice, when he bursts into a soliloquy upon learning of the imminent attack of his own brother. Vikrama's monologue bemoans in no uncertain terms the treachery, hypocrisy, stupidity, cowardice and utter wretchedness of certain bad kings (*kupārthiv*a 6.29), monarchs who have departed from the path of justice (*avinayapathavartin* 6.30) and are simply utterly wicked (*dagdha*, 6.31,33). As we already know from the introduction, the folly of such kings is a topic with which Bilhaṇa feels very much at home, and he is happy to allow Vikrama to elaborate. A theme Vikrama comes back to here is that power, while eventually evading evil kings (3.29, 30) in favor of those who deserve it, ultimately corrupts. This notion comes through his mention of Śrī, the feminine entity who embodies the wealth and royal power of a king. In the well-known convention of *kāvya*, Śrī is like a fickle lover: one day she is yours, the next day she runs away with another. Even when placing her feet on just kings, she never does so whole-heartedly (*no bhareṇa kṣipati padam* 6.28). And what is more, despite the self-destructiveness of bad kings and the fact that the deities of weaponry are intent to let the brave and honest man win (6.30-31), the very association with Śrī necessarily taints a king – any king (6.35).

All this talk of Vikrama again serves to portray him as naturally averse to power. But one wonders if we do not also hear the voice of the poet, ever alien to his job of praising kings. This other voice is mostly pronounced in the soliloquy when Vikrama, as if unintentionally, switches from speaking about bad kings to speaking about kings in

general. The verse that follows, for example, is couched between two verses that specifically speak of *evil* monarchs – the adjective *dagdha*, "charred," is particularly strong – but in it, no stipulation as to whether or not he is speaking of specifically evil kings is made:

> They're totally walled in by their bodyguards.
> Hell! Kings must think there's *nothing*
> out there. They never take a second,
> natural fools that they are, to worry about the world
> that's coming.[42]

There are several noteworthy things about this verse. First, the observation that kings are totally walled in by their security is the kind of complaint that one would expect not from a prince or a king in the making, but from someone who needs access to a king, say, a hired poet. Second, note the way the speaker – is this still Vikrama, or is it really Bilhaṇa speaking his mind – really does not mince words: kings are fools by their very nature (*prakṛtijaḍa*). Thirdly, note the pun on the word *śūnya*, "nothing," which substantiates the claim in the second half. Kings, living in their strange aloof reality, secluded from the world, come to think, not unlike Buddhists, that everything out there is empty. This is why they do not bother about the afterlife. After all, if, as the Buddhists preach, the world is empty, why waste time on worrying about the world to come? Obviously, this is not a very sympathetic presentation of the Buddhist position, but it connects us to the fourth and most important point about the verse: kingship not only corrupts, it is inimical to

one's basic religious beliefs, on par with heresy. This brings us to our next topic of Bilhaṇa's own afterlife, or, more precisely, the verses attributed to him posthumously.

5. Afterword and Afterlives [to be supplied]

[In this section I intend to address verses from Bilhaṇa's autobiographical afterword, as well as others ascribed to him posthumously, both of which emphasize some of the themes I have been discussing.]

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[1] Pathak 1966: 61, Warder 1992: 614.

[2] Bühler Bilhaṇa 1875: 23, cf. Raghavan 1978: 842, and Kawthekar 1995: 17-18 for an estimate of 1062.

[3] Misra 1976: 65-8 has counted at least 73 of the work's verses as quoted at least once in the five anthologies he checked, with a total of at least 103 instances of quoting. Sternbach has counted 170 verses as attributed to Bilhaṇa, which makes him, according to Sternbach's own numbers, one of the anthology compilers' most popular poets. Only Kālidāsa, Kṣemendra, Bhānukara, and Rājaśekhara have more verses attributed to them. See Sternbach 1978: 42-45, for his list of oft-quoted poets, and Sternbach 1980: 95 for the verses attributed to Bilhaṇa>.

[4] Misra 1976: 103-6. Misra's identification of the *Karṇasundarī* verse in the *Subhāṣitartnakoṣa* is indicative of the speed in which his fame spread, as Vidyākara, the compiler of this anthology, is probably Bilhaṇa's senior contemporary. Bilhaṇa himself boats he enjoyed widespread fame during his own lifetime (*Vikramāṅkadevacarita* 18.88-9). It is interesting that the later tradition had a clear preference for Bilhaṇa's VDC over his *Karṇasundarī*. This is probably due not just to the more mature style of the VDC, but also to the fact that the VDC deals with trans-local concerns, the place of Kashmir in the world of Sanskrit, and other themes that fit well into the later image of Bilhaṇa, more on which below.

[5] For a useful initial list, see Misra 1976: 107-09. See also Sternbach 1980: 101.

[6] See, for example, Veṅkaṭādhvarin 1963: 549.

[7] One of the verses of the collection – the first in the northern recension -- is quoted by Bhoja and hence must predate Bilhaṇa (Raghavan 1978: 842). In her study of the different recensions of the poem, Miller reaches the conclusion that the ascription, although far from certain, is not entirely impossible Miller 1971: 188-9.

[8] For a summary of the story, see Kawthekar 1995: 42-45.

[9] See, for example, the narratives recorded in Granoff 1995; cf., Shulman 1992.

[10] *Vikramāṅkadevacarita* 1.3: ekastanas tuṅgataraḥ parasya vārtām iva praṣṭum agān mukhāgram | yasyāḥ priyārdhasthitim udvahantyāḥ sā pātu vaḥ parvatarājaputrī ||

[11] *Vikramāṅkadevacarita* 1.7: vacāṃsi vācaspatimatsareṇa sārāṇi labdhuṃ grahamaṇḍalīva | muktākṣasūtratvam upaiti yasyāḥ sā prasādāstu sarasvatī vaḥ ||

[12] *Vāsavadattā* 1: karabadarasadṛśam akhilam bhuvanatalaṃ yatprasādataḥ kavayaḥ | paśyanti sūkṣmamatayaḥ sā jayati sarasvatī devī ||

[13] The contrast is between the *vaidarbha* and *vaicitrya* stylse, more on which below.

[14] *Vikramāṅkadevacarita* 1.8-9.

[15] *Vikramāṅkadevacarita* 1.16-18.

[16] *Vikramāṅkadevacarita* 1.21: sahodarāḥ kuṅumakesarāṇāṃ bhavanti nūnaṃ kavitāvilāsāḥ | na śāradādeśam apāsya dṛṣṭas teṣāṃ yad anyatra mayā prarohaḥ ||

[17] See Cox forthcoming, for a fine discussion of this verse in the context of the larger circulation of commercial and cultural commodities between Kashmir and the deep South.

[18] *Vikramāṅkadevacarita* 1.25: kiṃ cārucāritravilāsaśūnyāḥ kurvanti bhūpāḥ kavisaṃgraheṇa | kiṃ jātu guñjaphalabhūṣaṇānāṃ suvarṇakāreṇa vanecarāṇām ||

[19] The very same point is strongly reiterated in the work's penultimate verse (18.107).

[20] See Pathak's discussion of these "blots" on "the fame of Vikrama" (Pathak 1966: 62.

[21] The same etymology is current in inscribed eulogies of the Cālukyas.

[22] *Vikramāṅkadevacarita* 1.70: śauryoṣmaṇā svinnakarasya yasya saṅkhyeṣu khaḍgaḥ pratipakṣakālaḥ | purandrapreritapuṣpavṛṣṭiparāgasaṅgān nibidatvam āpa ‖

[23] *Vikramāṅkadevacarita* 1.71: yasyāñjanaśyāmalakhaḍgapaṭṭajātāni jāne dhavalatvam āpuḥ | arārtinārīśarakāṇḍapāṇḍugaṇḍasthalīnirluṭhanād yaśāṃsi ‖

[24] For a discussion of both in the somewhat later corpus of the Sena poets, see Knutson forthcoming.

[25] *Mālavikāgnimitra* 3.8.

[26] *Vikramāṅkadevacarita* 5.34: tvadbhujapraṇayicāpanisvānaḥ kair asau samarasīmni sahyate | vyaktim eti ripumandireṣu yaḥ kranditadhvanibhir eṇacakṣuṣām ‖

[27] Pollock 1993.

[28] *Vikramāṅkadevacarita* 2.53: sutadvayaṃ te nijakarmasambhavaṃ mama prasādāt tanayas tu madhyamaḥ | payonidheḥ pāragatām api śriyaṃ sa dorbalād rāma ivāhariṣyati ‖ 2.53

[29] Warder 1972: 48.

[30] On brotherly relationship in Vālmīki see Goldman 1980.

[31] *Vikramāṅkadevacarita* 3.40: rāmasya pitrā bharato 'bhiṣiktaḥ kramaṃ samullaṅghya yad ātmarājye | tenothitā strījita ity akīrtir ādyāpi tasyāsti digantareṣu ‖

[32] *Vikramāṅkābhyudayam* 54.

[33] See Bronner forthcoming, cf. Warder 1972: 46.

[34] *Harṣacarita* 119: anicchantam api balād āropayitum iva siṃhāsanam sarvāvayaveṣu sarvalakṣaṇair gṛhītam.

[35] Pathak 1966: 69-74.

[36] *Vikramāṅkadevacarita* 1.44: niveditaś cārajanena nātha tathā kṣitau saṃprati viplavo me | manye yathā yajñāvibhāgabhogaḥ smartavyatām eṣyati nirjarāṇām ||

[37] *Vikramāṅkadevacarita* 14.1-2: vārdhakaṃ dadhati vāridāgame mūrdhajair iva ghanair vipāṇḍuraiḥ | vikramāṅkam upasṛtya nirjane kaścid āptapuruṣo vyajijñapat || niṣṭhuraṃ kim api kathyate mayā tatra kuntalapate kuru kṣamām | yat svakāryam avadhīrya gṛhṇate sevayaiva paritoṣam īśvarāḥ ||

[38] *Vikramāṅkadevacarita* 14.10: vatsalena bhavatā samarpitās tasya te kati na gandhasindhurāḥ | tadbalāt kimapi cintayaty asau yatkathāpi vitanoti pātakam ||

[39] *Vikramāṅkadevacarita* 14.13: bhūribhiḥ kim athavā kathādbhutais tattvam etad avadhāryatāṃ nṛpa | kaiścid eva divasaiḥ sa saṃmukhaḥ kṛṣṇaveṇinikaṭe bhaviṣyati ||

[40] See Bronner forthcoming.

[41] *Vikramāṅkadevacarita* 18.64.

[42] *Vikramāṅkadevacarita* 6.32: sakalam api vidanti hanta śūnyaṃ kṣitipatayaḥ pratihāravāraṇābhiḥ | kṣaṇam api paralokacintanāya parkṛtijaḍā yad amī na saṃrabhante ||