

## WHY *ITIHĀSA*? NEW POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITS IN CONSIDERING THE *MAHĀBHĀRATA* AS HISTORY

ALF HILTEBEITEL

This presentation will argue that a convergence of recent scholarly insights has brought us close to a new and insightful way to consider the significance of the fact that the *Mahābhārata*'s primary term of genre self-identification is *itihāsa*. The work that I will consider most central to this discussion is Johannes Bronkhorst's *Greater Magadha: Studies in the Culture of Early India* (Brill, 2007). In brief, Bronkhorst's book makes the case that "greater Magadha" was a distinctive northeast Indian culture area of newly emergent metropolitan states that had push-back impact on Vedic culture. In that one feature of "greater Magadha" was its novel ways of accounting for time, one can explore the possibility that the *Mahābhārata* develops its distinctive post-Vedic, Brahmanical ways of dealing with time by registering "greater Magadha's" impact upon the culture area of the north-central traditional Vedic heartland - the area which the epic makes geographically central, whether it was composed there or not. Drawing additionally on some recent discussions by Michael Witzsel, this presentation will propose that in its relation to the Veda, the *Mahābhārata* is actually more "historical" in its recourse to plausible Vedic "sources," tying them to the concept of the *yuga*, than are early Buddhist treatments in the Nikāyas that link ancient cities and kingdoms to *kalpas* and the previous lives of the Buddha. The *Mahābhārata*'s recourse to Vedic sources also allows us to pinpoint where history intersects with what James L. Fitzgerald has recently called "invention": that is, the transition from "traceable" royal and Brahmin genealogies to the epic's main story

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about the untraceable dynastic crisis that culminates in the rivalries between the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas. From these points, and as a lead-in to the next presentation by Tennilapuram (T.P.) Mahadevan, it will be possible to isolate some instances that allow us to see how southern Malayālam manuscripts sharpen the *Mahābhārata*'s probably early sense of history, and to suggest some implications for considering the relationship between the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, which locates its more ancient "history" and "invention" in the Western parts of "greater Magadha."