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Character descriptions in *mahākāvya* literature

An examination of the early Sanskrit court epic poems (i.e. Aśvaghoṣa's *Buddhacarita* and *Saundarananda* of the 1st century AD, Kālidāsa's *Kumārasambhava* and *Raghuvamśa* of the 5th century AD, Bhāravi's *Kirātārjunīya* of the 6th century AD, as well as Bhaṭṭi's *Rāvaṇavadha*, Kumāradāsa's *Jānakīharaṇa* and Māgha's *Śiśupālavadha*, all three of the 7th century AD) clearly shows that extended portrayals of the outward appearance of the characters are neither as frequent nor as long here as one would expect in this description-loving literary genre; it is especially striking when one compares them with the two other types of *sargabandha* descriptive passages, namely depictions of the setting and representations of situations in the plot.

Most of the above-mentioned Sanskrit *mahākāvya* authors, beginning with Aśvaghoṣa, preferred to depict most of the characters of their poems briefly. It would have been natural if Kālidāsa had set a trend with his splendid, 18 stanzas long, systematic toe-to-head portrayal of the goddess Umā, the heroine of the poem, in the 1st canto of the *Kumārasambhava*. However, that is not the case. Not every subsequent *sargabandha* poet chose to describe at least one of the main characters (the hero, the heroine or the villain) of his work extensively (and not every subsequent long character portrayal conforms to the toe-to-head or head-to toe, limb-by-limb model).

Nevertheless, there seems to be enough material for a serious investigation. Thus, this paper analyses in detail all the extended (8 or more stanzas long) descriptions of the outward appearance of a single character found in the early Sanskrit *mahākāvya*s, from the above-mentioned *Kumārasambhava* 1.32-49, up to four passages of the *Śiśupālavadha*, viz. 1.2-10 (9 stanzas, the sage Nārada), 2.14-21 (8 stanzas, Balarāma), 3.2-22 (21 stanzas, the hero of the poem Kṛṣṇa) and 15.3-11 (9 stanzas, the villain of the poem Śiśupāla); selected shorter character portrayals

from the early *sargabandhas* are also taken into account. Each descriptive passage is examined here in its specific context.

The paper aims to explain various techniques organising the structure of character descriptions in the early Sanskrit *mahākāvyas*, and to classify them into types, as well as to trace, wherever possible, their development in *sargabandha* literature.