

CHAPTER 7

Early Pilgrimage Traditions in South Asia

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Abstract

This chapter looks at early history of pilgrimage in South Asia. Sacred sites that were believed to offer rewards to those who visited them have been a significant feature of South Asian religious traditions since at least the first centuries CE. This chapter suggests that some pre-Buddhist, non-Vedic religious rituals in north and central India associated with sacred trees, pools of water, and shrines, might have been objects of pilgrimage travel also in pre-historic times. The chapter analyses statements about pilgrimage in two early texts that promoted pilgrimage, the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* and the *Mahābhārata* and suggests that different forms of ritual travel associated with pilgrimage are promoted in these texts and argues that they had different roots. The chapter suggests that perhaps the pre-Buddhist, non-Vedic religious traditions were of some importance for the development of South Asian pilgrimage

Introduction¹

In this article I look at some early South Asian pilgrimage traditions and the integration of pilgrimage rituals in the Hindu traditions. Sacred sites that were believed to offer rewards to those who visited them have been a significant feature of South Asian religious traditions since at least the first centuries CE, and the practice of religious travel to visit such sacred sites is still flourishing. South Asia is one of the major pilgrimage regions in the world. Some of the most popular sites in contemporary South Asia such as the Veṅkaṭeśvara temple in Tirumala, the Jagannāth temple in Puri, the Harmandir Sahib in Amritsar, the Sharīf Dargāh in Ajmer, and the Basilica of Our Lady of Good Health in Velankanni, attract millions, if not tens of millions annually, and some pilgrimage festivals such as the *kumbhamelās*, attract even more people during the weeks they take place. All the four religions of Indian origin have numerous pilgrimage sites, which are centres of ritual activities, and their sacred geographies continue to develop, not only in South Asia but increasingly also globally. In Jainism and Buddhism, the sacred sites are primarily associated with the events and teachings of *tīrthāṅkaras*, *buddhas*, and *bodhisattvas*, and sacred structures such as temples and *stūpas*. In Hinduism the power of the sites to give rewards are connected to the events and presence of their gods, goddesses, ascetics, ṛṣis, and so on, which are seen as inherent in the sites themselves. The Hindu sites are often situated next to waterbodies. In Sikhism, the sites mark

historical places associated with their ten human gurus. Christians in South Asia have likewise created sacred sites such as the Marian shrine of Velankanni in South India, and Muslims have numerous Dargāhs and Masjīds. The sites often represent a particular powerful presence of the divine, and salvific rewards such as healing, wealth, moral purification, and *mokṣa* are thought to be available at the sites. Sacred sites such as a Buddhist *stūpa*, a historical *gurdvāra*, a temple at a Hindu pilgrimage place, or a temple marking the place associated with Jain *tīrthaṅkaras*, also signify the religious ownership of localities and define landscapes. In addition, the sites make the sacred narratives of sages, divinities, and powers, which the sites celebrate, appear true, authentic, and genuine, since the places where the narratives were supposed to have happened actually do exist and can be visited, seen, touched, smelled, heard, and experienced.

Sites claimed to have been places of religious narratives and powers become “owned” by ritual traditions, and the religious rituals and narratives connected to space can represent a form of “land grabbing”. The All-India pilgrimage described in the *Tīrthayātrāparvan* of the *Mahābhārata* can be understood as an attempt to claim this whole geographical space for Brahman ritual experts. That this pilgrimage is imagined as an All-India *parikrāma* (see Bhardwaj 1973) strengthens this interpretation. In his study of the *Vāyupurāṇa*, D. Patil observed, regarding the descriptions of *tīrthas* and pilgrimage in the *Mahābhārata*, that the heroes of the epic visit *tīrthas* “almost as if on a holy campaign” (Patil 1946: 333). One of the purposes of the descriptions, and why it can be characterized as a “holy campaign”, was probably to claim “ownership” of the sacred sites within this *parikrāma*. This possibly included the ritual clients who visited places and functioned also to increase the number of clients by making the sites better known and part of larger networks and narratives. Ritual clients are a central resource for ritual traditions and one important reason for taking over old or creating new sacred sites seems to have been to gain access to and increase this important religious resource.

Pre-Buddhist, non-Vedic religious ritual sites

The early history of pilgrimage and sites of pilgrimage in South Asia is associated with much uncertainty and its earliest history will probably never be known. However, in all probability the sacredness of some pilgrimage sites dates back to pre-historic times. Pilgrimage rituals might have been part of the Indus Valley civilization although there is no conclusive evidence.² Some pre-Buddhist, non-Vedic religious rituals in parts of north and central India were associated with sacred trees, pools of water, and shrines in the form of stones, and some

of these might have been objects of pilgrimage travel also in pre-historic times. Festivals possibly took place at their sites. Such sacred sites were later called *caityas* (Sanskrit) or *cetiya*s (Pali), or sometimes *caityavṛkṣa* (tree shrine) (Falk 1973: 4).³ A *caitya* was in particular associated with a tree or group of trees, which was most often the abode of beings that in the textual traditions came to be called *yakṣas* or *yakṣiṇīs*. These beings seem to have been connected to sites around which their worship centred and which sometimes also had shrines. The worship of *yakṣas*, as well as *nāgas* and other deities, was perhaps widespread in north and central India. They were guardians of places and gatekeepers, and were probably associated with prosperity and fertility. Significantly for understanding early pilgrimage, since *yakṣas* or *yakṣiṇīs* were connected to sites, the worshipper would have to travel to their sites in order to worship them. The *yakṣa* would have a distinctive type of shrine, which was thought to be “representative of the wilderness that constituted the yaksha’s original home” (Falk 1973: 3). Ascetics may have gathered at or near such *caityas* in order to collect alms from visitors, who could then perhaps be considered pilgrims. The shrines consisting of a tree or a grove of trees that sometimes had a stone of some considerable size under them are frequently depicted in the texts and art (Falk 1973: 3).

Yakṣas, in particular, have been considered “a relic of non-Aryan worship” (Mishra 1981: 6), and some beings named *nāgas*, *āpsarasas*, *rakṣasas*, etc. might have belonged to that same category of non-Aryan worship. *Caityas* were important in the Buddhist and Jain traditions, but “there is sufficient evidence to prove that many such *caityas* belonged to the Yakshas” (Mishra 1981: 20). The Buddha apparently often stayed and preached at such *cetiya*s (Mishra 1980: 42) and some *viḥāras* were built on such sites (ibid.). Buddhists seemingly made use of “local deities in order to emplace themselves within a local society” (Cohen 1998: 377) and this was possible precisely because these deities were connected to localities. By associating with these deities, the Buddhists could connect their own presence to the same spot. “The Buddha and saṅgha become localized,” writes Cohen, “insofar as they share their dwellings with the deities who are indigenous and unique to sites of the monasteries” (Cohen 1998: 380). Mishra, in his study of the *yakṣa*, notes, “One by one the different religious systems made a concerted effort to dislodge and supersede the Yakshas” (Mishra 1981: 1). The popularity of the *yakṣas* is visible on the reliefs of *stupās*, which are some of the earliest statues in India, and in stories preserved in the Buddhist texts and by their presence in the *Mahābhārata* and other Hindu texts such as *Purāṇas*. These divinities had superior powers and could apparently be both benevolent and malevolent (Sutherland 1991), although the texts, Buddhist or Hindu, might very well have misrepresented them. However, they were

often venerated as protectors and guardians and known to have been worshipped as such at some pilgrimage places such as Kurukṣetra, even after the sites had become identified with the narratives of Hindu gods. The *yakṣa* Macakruka owned a lake at the border of Kurukṣetra and was recognized as a powerful gatekeeper. According to the *Mahābhārata* (3.81.7, 3.81.178), when a person went to or simply thought about the lake, all his evil deeds disappeared and he obtained a reward equal to the gift of a thousand cows, especially when he saluted the *yakṣa* Macakruka. Some *yakṣas* were also transformed into Hindu divinities and sages. One such case is the *yakṣa* Kapila. Several of the Hindu pilgrimage places associated with the well-known Sāṃkhya sage Kapila were previously associated with the *yakṣa* named Kapila. The *yakṣa* identity was at some point of time changed into the Sāṃkhya sage Kapila (Jacobsen 2008, 2013). One of these Kapila *yakṣas* was the *yakṣa* Kapila in Kurukṣetra district, who was one of Kurukṣetra's four guardian *yakṣas* and is now worshipped in the form of the Sāṃkhya teacher Kapila (see Jacobsen 2013). That the Buddha sought enlightenment under a bodhi tree in Bodhgaya was probably because this sacred tree was already worshipped and the place beneath it was by that time a sacred site with a *cetiya*, a shrine. The worship of the tree, perhaps with its *yakṣa*, was then redefined, or reinvented, emphasizing the tree and the site's significance for the Buddha and Buddhist tradition. In several of his previous lives, as told in the Jātakas, the Buddha was a tree-god (*yakṣa*). According to the enlightenment narrative, the female servant of Sujāta, the woman who gave boiled rice to the Buddha, believed he was the tree's *yakṣa*.

As already suggested, pilgrimage was probably part of the worship of *yakṣas* at *caityas* since they belonged to sites to which humans had to travel, and in Jain texts there are references to pilgrimages to *yakṣas* which date back to the period of the *Mahābhārata* (Miśra 1980: 52). Miśra writes:

Giving oblations to the Yakshas was an essential part of the worship. Sometimes pilgrimages were made to such spots hallowed by Yakshas. The Bhaṇḍīravana of Mathura, which probably contained the *caitya* of Sudarśana Yaksha as mentioned in the *Vipāka Sūtra* was one of such places where persons used to go for worship. The prayers in this case were offered to the Bhaṇḍīravaṭa. In the *Āvaśyaka Sūtra* (I.275) Bhaṇḍīravaṭa is connected with Yakshas: and it is said there that people made pilgrimage to this place of worship in honour of the Yaksha. The antiquity of this *vaṭa* goes back to the *Mahābhārata* which refers to the *nyagrodha* tree Vrinālavana which was known as Bhaṇḍīra. (Miśra 1980: 52)

It seems therefore reasonable to assume that the later Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain pilgrimage traditions were influenced by traditions associated with pre-Buddhist, non-Vedic religious rituals connected to *yakṣas* (and perhaps other divine beings), who were identified with specific sites or territories which they owned and guarded. About this spirit religion of *yakṣa* worship, and its relationship to Vedic religion, Robert DeCaroli has noted:

These spirit-deities are chthonic creatures and are intimately associated with specific features in the physical landscape, such as a particular tree or certain pool of water. It is therefore unlikely that such beings could have been imported. It is even less likely that Vedism, which had its origins in a nomadic culture, would have originated a belief system in which divinity is contained within a localized natural feature and delimited by boundaries. It would seem then, that *yakṣa* was a Vedic term that may originally have been applied to an ephemeral and transcendent spirit inhabiting the physical world, but later was used to identify a type of spirit-deity worshiped by the non-Vedic-speaking populations. (DeCaroli 2004: 9)

DeCaroli states that the artistic and archaeological evidence leave little doubt that the Buddhist community intentionally sought out and absorbed spirit-deities into its fold (DeCaroli 2004: 186) and that numerous accounts describe the conversion of spirit-deity *cetiya*s into Buddhist monasteries (DeCaroli 2004: 61). Burial grounds were also taken over. Megalithic grave monuments are found in several areas of South Asia and Buddhist *stūpa*s were often built in the vicinity of them. The Buddhist monasteries and the *stūpa*s often belonged together to make a sacred complex (Schopen 1997: 34). Burial grounds perhaps also contributed to developing the idea of well-defined spaces for ritual worship as distinct from the settlement area, as suggested by Mishra and Ray (2017: 4). Buddhism was established as similar to but also superior to the religion it tried to replace (Schopen 2004: 360–381), and building *stūpa*s on places already established as sacred was a strategy of expansion. The association of specific *cetiya*s with individual *yakṣas* (Pali: *yakkhas*) is attested in Buddhist texts and Buddhaghosa glosses *cetiya*ṇi as “*yakkha-ṭṭānāni*”, the “dwelling places of *yakkhas*” (Trainor 1997: 34). References to many such sites are found in the literature. This is clear evidence that the Buddhists built *cetiya*s on places that were already sacred and associated with *yakṣas*. A similar process can be seen in the *Mahābhārata* with *yakṣas* and other divinities associated with pilgrimage places.

Since the pre-Buddhist, non-Vedic ritual traditions did not produce texts, the earliest textual statements of religious pilgrimage and sites of pilgrimage in South Asia were found in texts of the Buddhist and Hindu traditions. Two early important texts that promote pilgrimage are the Buddhist *Mahāparinibbānasutta* / *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* and the Hindu *Mahābhārata*. Both texts indicate that the presence of the pre-Buddhist, non-Vedic religious traditions was important for the development of pilgrimage traditions.

Sacred sites and religious travel in early Buddhism

The famous text *Mahāparinibbānasutta* (*sutta* 16 in the *Dīgha Nikāya*) about the last days of the Buddha contains the first statements of Buddhist pilgrimage. Ānanda, worrying about what will happen when the Buddha passes away, says to the Buddha that after the Buddha's death it will no longer be possible for the monks to come to pay homage to him after the end of the rainy season. The Buddha then explains that honouring him after his death would still be possible and that the monks should go to pay homage to four sites (*thāna*) with the same enthusiasm (*saṃvejanīyāni*, “arousing *saṃvega*”, eagerness or sense of urgency that leads to better rebirth) that they used to show to the Buddha.⁴ These four sites are: Lumbinī, the Buddha's birthplace; Bodhgayā, the place of the awakening of the Buddha; Sārnāth, where the Buddha held the first sermon; and Kusinārā, where he attained *parinibbāna*. The monks, nuns, and lay people are encouraged to go to these places and the Buddha promises that they will gain religious merit from visiting these sites (*Dīghanikāya* 16.5.8).⁵

Concluding the topic, the Buddha promises a rebirth in heaven as the reward of the pilgrimage:

And they, Ānanda, who shall die while they, with believing heart, are journeying on such pilgrimage (*cetiya-cārikam*), shall be reborn after death, when the body shall dissolve, in the happy realms of heaven (*sugatiṃ saggam lokam*) (*Dīghanikāya* 16.5.8; trans. T.W. Rhys Davids)⁶

It is notable that the four sacred places to which one should go on pilgrimage are called *cetiyas*, the same name as used for the pre-Buddhist *yakṣa* shrines.⁷ Gregory Schopen considers this statement of the *Dīghanikāya* “the single most important canonical passage” (Schopen 1994; 291).⁸ That the Buddha is stated to have said that those who undertook the pilgrimage and died while travelling to a sacred site will be reborn in heaven, indicates that the sites were thought to possess salvific power. Similarly, this is the understanding of the

other type of pilgrimage place, the *stūpa*. Ānanda asks what they should do with the body of the Buddha after he passes away. The Buddha answers that “there are wise men, Ānanda, among the nobles, the brahmins, among the heads of houses, who are firm believers in the Tathāgata; and they will do due honour to the remains of the Tathāgata” (*Dīghanikāya* 16.5.10; trans. T.W. Rhys Davids). The Buddha explains that his body should be put in a vessel filled with oil and burned, and a *stūpa* built at a crossroads.

At the four cross roads a cairn (*thūpo*) should be erected to the Tathāgata. And whosoever shall there place garlands or perfumes or paint, or make salutation there, or become in its presence calm in heart—that shall long be to them profit and a joy. (*Dīghanikāya* 16.5.10; trans. T.W. Rhys Davids)⁹

The relics, the vessel, and embers were eventually divided between eight different rulers, who built *stūpas* and organized festivals there. According to Gregory Schopen, “the Buddha was thought to be actually present and alive” at these sites (Schopen 1997: 126). The idea that the Buddha was believed to be alive at the sites has similarity to the beliefs about *yakṣas* and their sites. However, in the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* the origin of the salvific power at these sites is explained as relating to the life and the body of the Buddha and there is no mention of any pre-Buddhist pilgrimage to these sites. Researchers often claim, nevertheless, that the Buddha consciously sought out certain places such as Gayā and Vārāṇasī (which the Buddha had decided should be two of the four pilgrimage places connected to events of his life; as Bodhgaya and Sarnath), because they were already sites of important Hindu pilgrimages. This view is probably mistaken. There might have been pilgrimages in connection with the *yakṣa* worship at these places,¹⁰ but the Hindu pilgrimage associated with these sites originated probably several centuries after the Buddha. Hans Bakker (1996) shows that Varanasi as a pilgrimage place associated with death, *mokṣa*, and the Hindu god Śiva was a late development, and he argues that Vārāṇasī had developed as a commercial centre in the fifth century BCE and that “this may have been one of the factors that attracted the Buddhist order to its neighbourhood” (Bakker 1996: 33). Bakker writes: “judging by archaeological as well as literary testimony the town itself had no special religious significance within the Brahmanical tradition (beyond a local one) before the beginning of the Christian era” (Bakker 1996: 33). A “shift came in the third century CE” but “the transformation of commercial, i.e. profane, space into sacred space ... took place in the fourth to sixth centuries of the Christian era” (Bakker 1996: 33). Sayers (2010) argues that the association of Gayā with the *śrāddha*

ritual also did not predate the Buddha and that references to it appear long after the Buddhist narratives of the Buddha's enlightenment had become popular (Sayers 2010: 10).

Studies of inscriptions have shown that already at the time of Aśoka (third century BCE) Buddhists had established their own sacred sites (Schopen 1997) and that the most characteristic element of Buddhist sacred sites in India was the presence of a *stūpa* (Schopen 1994: 273). The relics of the Buddha and the *stūpa* symbolized his presence and were objects of worship. In early Buddhism, the *darśan* of the place implied a "direct, intimate contact with a living presence" (Schopen 1997: 117). Schopen has argued for a close similarity between the Hindu idea of *tīrthas* and Buddhist *stūpa* sites as living deities. But the idea of living deities associated with sites may very well go back to the non-Vedic, pre-Buddhist substrate culture. The use of *stūpas* for political control may explain the Aśoka's eagerness for the expansion of the cult of relics (Strong 2004).¹¹

Sacred sites and religious travel in early Brahmanical Hindu traditions.

The *stūpa* was, in contrast to the placeless-ness of the Vedic gods, a site of the permanent presence of sacred power. The *stūpa*, writes Romila Thapar,

was in many ways the antithesis of a Vedic sacred enclosure. Unlike the temporary sanctification of the location of an area for the sacrifice, the stupa was a permanently demarcated sacred place (Thapar 2003: 264).

But as we have seen, the idea of a permanently demarcated sacred place most likely represented a continuation of the pre-Buddhist, non-Vedic substrate culture. The evidence from inscriptions from Aśokan times are probably earlier than the *tīrtha* texts of the *Mahābhārata*, which, if this dating is correct, would indicate that Buddhist pilgrimage originated before the pilgrimage texts of the *Mahābhārata*. While the source of this ritual in South Asia may very well have been the pre-Buddhist, non-Vedic substrate culture, the expansion of Hindu places promoted in the *Tīrthayātrāparvan*, which encompasses large parts of India, may perhaps be read as a textual response to the Aśokan and post-Aśokan expansion of Buddhist sacred sites with the construction of a large number of *stūpas* and monastic institutions. A continuation of this process is found in the geographical expansion described in the Purāṇas (Nath 1993, 2001, 2007), which became the most important genre of texts to promote Hindu pilgrimage sites.

The early Vedic religion was nomadic and its gods were notably space-less and not connected permanently to sacred sites such as *caityas* and *stūpas*. These gods preferred open space and did not like locations, it has been suggested (Angot 2009, 63), and they could thus have no clear links with any specific sites. The Vedic gods instead travelled to where humans performed sacrifices; humans did not travel to them. In the religion of the Vedas there was no pilgrimage since “To go on pilgrimage you must have somewhere to go!” (Angot 2009: 48). One major difference between the Vedic religion and most of the later Hindu traditions is indeed the localization of divinities (Jacobsen 2013). In the pilgrimage tradition, the relationship between gods and humans became reversed compared to the pre-pilgrimage, Vedic tradition. Divinities now belonged to particular sites, and people travelled to these places to be in their actual presence. The idea of pilgrimage developed across Buddhism, Jainism, and the Hindu traditions, but it is notable that the divinities of the pre-Buddhist, non-Vedic substrate culture were localized, as were sites of worship of the Buddhists. It might very well be that the absorption of these ideas happened earlier in some traditions than others. It is significant that in the orthodox Dharmaśāstra tradition there was a critical attitude towards pilgrimage, but in the Buddhist tradition its founder supposedly embraced the ritual. Falk notes that stories of Buddha-*yakṣa* encounters have a fairly consistent form: the Buddha encounters a *yakṣa* and converts him; a monument is then erected on the site, and the *yakṣa* becomes its guardian spirit (Falk 1973: 13). The success of this strategy of the Buddhist tradition, as well as the *stūpa* cult and worship of the Buddha, was perhaps one reason why the Brāhmaṇical tradition followed “as if on a holy campaign” to connect their ritual traditions to sacred sites in the Indian landscape.

The longest of the pilgrimage texts of the *Mahābhārata* is the *Tīrthayātrāparvan* of the *Āraṇyakaparvan* (*Vanaparvan*) (chapters 78–148). Other major pilgrimage chapters are in the *Śalyaparvan* (chapters 35–54) the *Anuśāsanaparvan* (chapters 25–26), the *Ādiparvan* (chapters 206–210), the *Udyogaparvan* (chapter 187), the *Mahāprasthanikaparvan*, and the *Svargarohanikaparvan* (*prthivīpradakṣiṇā* and *mahāprasthāna*). Here I will look only at some chapters in the *Ādiparvan*, the *Śalyaparvan*, and the *Āraṇyakaparvan*. Bigger (2001) has argued that pilgrimage texts in these three books were inserted at different stages of the textual development of the *Mahābhārata* and that the *tīrthayātrā* of Baladeva in *Śalyaparvan* is the oldest, thereafter the *Tīrthayātrāparvan* was added, and lastly Arjuna's journey in the *Ādiparvan*, which had hitherto only been concerned with Arjuna's amorous adventures, was transformed into a pilgrimage narrative (Bigger 2001). Vassilkov has suggested that bards at pilgrimage sites were central to this development (Vassilkov 2002).

Looking at these three texts, it becomes obvious that two different rituals of religious travel are described in these pilgrimage sections of the *Mahābhārata*. One is a procession ritual, performed by wealthy royalty with daily sacrifices, carried out partly for the purpose of economic redistribution, with emphasis on an extremely generous distribution of gifts to Brahmins.¹² The other ritual of religious travel is a ritual of pilgrimage recommended for poor people who cannot afford to perform sacrifices, with emphasis on the easy access to salvific rewards. The *tīrthayātrā* of Baladeva in the *Śalyaparvan* describes a royal procession ritual modelled on the *sarasvatīsattra* ritual (Bigger 2001) while pilgrimage in the *Tīrthayātrāparvan* is a quite different ritual, and seems related to the Buddhist pilgrimage as presented in the *Mahāparinibbānasutta*, to which it was perhaps introduced as a competitor. It is probably this second type that functioned to expand the number of Brahmanical pilgrimage sites and aimed at increasing the number of ritual clients for the Brahmin priests, and which became omnipresent in the Purāṇas. These two traditions, the royal procession and the ritual of popular pilgrimage, certainly seem to have different purposes and functions.

Baladeva's journey in the *Śalyaparvan* is presented in the text as a ritual journey to visit *tīrthas*. It is accompanied by a performance of fire sacrifices along the river and the distribution of wealth. In Baladeva's procession ritual there are hundreds of Brahmins and thousands of cows. About the place Āṛṣṭhisena, it says: "Giving away diverse kinds of wealth in that foremost of *tīrthas*, Balarāma also cheerfully gave away milch cows and vehicles and beds, ornaments, and food and also drink of the best kinds, O king, unto many foremost of Brahmins after having worshipped them duly".¹³ Redistribution of wealth to Brahmins seems to be a main function of this procession ritual.

In the *Śalyaparvan*, visiting *tīrthas* is presented as a Vedic sacrificial ritual and associated with Vedic recitation. According to the *Śalyaparvan*, after the completion of the twelve-year sacrifice in Naimiṣa, the ṛṣis set out to visit *tīrthas*. At these places "it resounded with the chanting of the Vedas" and the whole region reverberated with the loud recitation of ṛṣis who poured libations into the sacred fire.¹⁴ In a total reversal of the *tīrtha* ideology, the river Sarasvatī becomes sevenfold because it appears where the *munis* performed sacrifice and thought of the river.¹⁵ This is similar to the Vedic religion, where gods were not fixed to places but appeared where humans carried out sacrifices and called on them (Pradhan 2002: 93–94). The text tries to connect the salvific power of sites to Vedic mythology and represents perhaps an attempt to Vedicize the new pilgrimage ritual. The *tīrtha* Āṛṣṭhisena attained its

power because a king obtained knowledge of the Veda at the place by means of penance, the text informs. In an interesting narrative about how Kurukṣetra gained salvific powers, it is explained as being caused by the interaction of Kuru with Vedic gods. These gods gave their consent to the place becoming a *tīrtha*, as Kuru had wished for, as a way to protect themselves from the threat of the site attaining absolute power. By consenting they limited the power of the place. Kurukṣetra was a centre for worship of the *yakṣas* (Mishra 1980), and thus had sacred sites connected to their worship, and the narrative perhaps attempts to transfer their sacredness to the Vedic tradition. The *Śalyaparvan* uses the etymology of Kurukṣetra (“the field of Kuru”) to explain how salvific powers came to be present at the place. Baladeva asks for what reason Kuru cultivated the field and the *ṛṣis* tell him the story. Kuru was tilling the field intensely and Indra came down from heaven and asked for what purpose he tilled the field. Kuru answered that his purpose was to ensure that those who die there should be purified of moral impurity (*pāpavivarjita*) and attain heaven (*sukṛta loka*, 9.52.6). Indra responded by ridiculing him. Kuru, however, continued to till the soil for the creation of a *tīrtha*. Indra called the other gods, who, on being informed of the situation, asked Indra to stop Kuru by offering him a boon, because, “If men, by only dying there were to come to heaven, without having performed sacrifice to us, our very existence will be endangered“ (*yadi hy atra pramītā vai svargam gacchanti mānavāḥ, asān aniṣṭvā kratubhir bhāgo no na bhaviṣyati*, 9.52.11). Indra returned to Kuru and told him to stop tilling. Indra also told Kuru that those who have abstained from food and, with all their senses awake, die in the field will come to heaven, as will those who die there in battle. Kuru answered, so be it (*tathāstu*). The text states that the gods had approved that there was no place more sacred on earth than Kurukṣetra, that ascetics who die there go the world of Brahman, but also that those who give away their wealth there would soon see their wealth doubled. It seems the text attempts to Vedicize, i.e. give Vedic legitimization to Kurukṣetra being a *tīrtha*, by connecting the salvific powers of the *tīrtha* to the Vedic gods. The tension in the text between sacrifice and *tīrtha* is perhaps mirroring a conflict between the orthodox priests who were against the rituals of pilgrimage and the concept of a permanent presence of the divine at particular sites and the new pilgrimage priests who chose to function as priests at the sites and received payments from the pilgrims (for this conflict see Jacobsen 2013, Olivelle 2010, Stietencron 1977).

The *Tīrthayātrāparvan* starts with Pulastya answering questions about the rewards (*phala*) of pilgrimage, which is the prime focus of this text. Yudhiṣṭhira asked Nārada: “If a person makes a circumambulation of the earth to visit pilgrimage places, what award does he get?

Tell me in full, Brahman!” (*pradakṣiṇaṃ yaḥ kurute pṛthivīm tīrthatatparaḥ, kiṃ phalaṃ tasya kārtsnyena tad brahman vaktum arhasi*) (3.80.10). Nārada then related what Pulastya answered Bhīṣma when he lived as an ascetic on the bank of the Gaṅgā and asked Pulastya a similar question (3.80.28). Pulastya begins his answer to Bhīṣma by stating that he will indeed talk of the rewards (*phala*) of pilgrimage. The text then informs about some of the presuppositions for attaining the rewards, again emphasizing that the rewards of pilgrimage are in focus. Pulastya describes ascetical values such as the control of the senses and being content, restrained, without selfishness, free from vices, without anger, truthful, and seeing oneself in all beings. Pulastya explains that the merit (*puṇya*) of visiting *tīrthas* is the same as the rewards of sacrifices (*tulyo yajñaphalaiḥ puṇyais*) (3.80.38), but that going (*abhigamana*) to *tīrthas* also surpasses them (*rṣiṅāṃ paramaṃ guhyam idaṃ bharatasattama, tīrthābhigamaṇaṃ puṇyaṃ yajñair api viśiṣyate* [This is the highest secret of the seers, the merit of going to *tīrthas* even surpasses the sacrifices], 3.80.39). Claiming something as a secret is often a way to attempt to gain legitimacy for a new teaching. In contrast, the information about the sacrifices and their rewards is found in the Vedas (*rṣibhiḥ kratavaḥ proktā vedeṣv iha yathākramam, phalaṃ caiva yathātattvaṃ pretya ccha ca sarvaśaḥ*, 3.80.34).

The difference between the *tīrtha* texts of the *Āraṇyakaparvan* and the *Śalyaparvan* is striking. The *Āraṇyakaparvan* states that pilgrimage is the poor man’s ritual, and that poor persons attain rewards that rich persons do not attain, not even by their sacrifices, while the *Śalyaparvan* describes a kingly procession whose main function seems to be the redistribution of wealth. Two quite different forms of ritual travel seem in fact to be described. The *Āraṇyakaparvan* states:

A poor man cannot obtain the fruits of sacrifices, O king, for they require many implements and a great variety of ingredients. Kings can perform them and sometimes rich people, not individuals lacking in means and implements and not helped by others (*Mahābhārata* 3.80.35–36).¹⁶

This description can be compared to a description of Baladeva, the brother of Kṛṣṇa, who travelled with his encourage in the procession described in the *Śalyaparvan*. Preparing for his pilgrimage ritual, Baladeva ordered his servants to:

Bring all things that are necessary for a pilgrimage . . . Bring gold, silver, kine, robes, steeds, elephants, cars, mules, camels, and other draft cattle. Bring all these necessities for a trip to the sacred waters, and proceed with great speed towards the Sarasvatī. Bring also some priests to be especially employed, and hundreds of foremost *brāhmaṇas*. . . he visited all the sacred places along her course, accompanied by priests, friends, and many foremost *brāhmaṇas*, as also with cars and elephants and steeds and servants, O bull of Bharata's race, and with many vehicles drawn by kine and mules and camels. Diverse kinds of necessities of life were given away, in large measures and in diverse countries unto the weary and worn, children and old, in response, O king, to solicitations. . . . At the command of Rohini's son, men, at different stages of the journey, stored food and drink in great quantities. Costly garments and bedsteads and coverlets were given for the gratification of *brāhmaṇas*, desirous of ease and comfort. Whatever *brāhmaṇa* or *kṣatriya* solicited whatever thing, that O Bharata, was seen as ungrudgingly given to him. . . . That chief of Yadu's race also gave away thousands of milk cows covered with excellent cloths and having their horns cased in gold, many steeds belonging to different countries, many vehicles and many beautiful slaves (trans. Ganguli [modified]).¹⁷

These two statements obviously reflect different traditions of religious travel in South Asia, the ritual royal procession and the individual pilgrimage of the common people. Both types of ritual travel developed in the Hindu traditions. It is also notable that in the *Śalyaparvan* chapters we are told about the performance of sacrifices at the *tīrthas*, while in the *Āraṇyakaparvan* pilgrimage is presented as an alternative to the sacrifice for poor people. Both may perhaps be considered forms of pilgrimage travel. It was however especially the individual pilgrimage travel to *tīrthas* that became promoted in the Purāṇas and was used to expand the number of ritual clients for the Brāhmāṇical tradition.

A curious inflation in sacredness is found in the *Tīrthayātrāparvan*. The first site described is Puṣkara and the text starts by informing that all “ten thousand crore of *tīrthas* are present in Puṣkara”. This became a common way to propagate certain *tīrthas*. This statement both reduces the value of *tīrthas*, by stating that there are billions of them, and increases the value of certain *tīrthas* by declaring that these billions of sites are all present at a single place. The Vedic tradition was restrictive, as the Vedas and *yajñyas* were only available to some, while the *tīrtha* tradition welcomed all. The inflated sacredness was perhaps a way of ridiculing

other traditions or practices. Even the dust from a *tīrtha* blown in the wind will give *mokṣa*, according to a statement about Kurukṣetra that is repeated twice in the *Mahābhārata*. There was a need to involve more people in rituals performed by Brahmins, because these rituals provided the priests with income. The large number of new rituals available at *tīrthas* such as *piṇḍadāna*, *śrāddha*, *dāna*, and *pūjā*, which required payment of some sort to Brahmins, also indicates that the idea of increasing the number of ritual clients was an important motivation in this development. V. Nath has argued that by the period of the beginning of the Guptas (320 CE), it was a matter of survival for the Brahmin priests to accept anyone as their ritual clients (Nath 1993: 47) and women and low castes, who had not been welcome at the Vedic sacrifices, were welcomed at the *tīrthas*. The purpose of the *Tīrthayātrāparvan* of the *Āraṇyakaparvan* is not to explain the presence of salvific power at pilgrimage sites but to propagate the salvific rewards of these places, especially for encouraging poor people to become ritual clients of the Brahmins and to give them food and other things needed as *dāna*.

In the short narrative in *Ādiparvan* (1.206–210), Arjuna visits water place *tīrthas* guarded by *apsarases* and *nāgas*, and the narrative illustrates how these spiritual beings, as guardians of sites, were utilized in the *Mahābhārata* to construct *tīrtha* traditions.¹⁸ When Arjuna bathes at the first place, Ulūpī, the daughter of the king of the *nāgas* (*nāgarāja*), pulls him under the water. Arjuna is then taken to the *nāga* Kauravya's palace where there is a giant sacrificial fire. Here he makes love to the *nāga* woman. He then goes to other *tīrthas*, and the text states that he makes donations of thousands of cows at the *tīrthas*, which perhaps means that this ritual travel was perceived as a procession ritual. He goes to the *tīrthas* of the southern ocean, we are told, which are all ornamented with ascetics (1.208). But five fords, which in the past were cultivated by ascetics, are now empty because the crocodiles living in them “drag away the ascetics”. Arjuna goes to visit one of these *tīrthas*, Bharadvājatīrtha, although the ascetics try to restrain him, and there he wrestles a crocodile. Once the crocodile is brought on shore it turns into a beautiful woman, an *apsaras*, who informs him that she was the favourite of Kubera, a *yakṣa*. This *apsaras*, along with four other *apsarases*, had tried to disrupt the mortifications of a Brahmin at the water place and he subsequently put a curse on them, turning them into crocodiles. The Brahmin promised that after one hundred years Arjuna would pull them out of the water and the *tīrthas* would become known as the *tīrthas* of the women (*nārītīrtha*).¹⁹ This story is also, similar to the Kurukṣetra story, an etymological story. The name of the *tīrtha* is explained with a story. The text does not clarify why these are *tīrthas* but just states that they are, and that the crocodiles disrupted their function. When the crocodiles were transformed back into *apsarases*, the ascetics could once again visit the

places. The text emphasizes gifts to Brahmans and that Arjuna was accompanied on his journey by bards, reciters, and storytellers (*sūtāḥ paurāṇikāś ca ye kathakāś*) (1.206.3). Bards, reciters, and storytellers played an important role in promoting the *tīrthas* (Vassilkov 2002) and it may have been the case that bards invented the etymological stories of Kurukṣetra and Nārītūrtha for the purpose of entertaining pilgrims at the sites.

It is generally assumed that the existence of pilgrimage traditions preceded their appearance in the *Mahābhārata* textual traditions because what is described in the *Mahābhārata* is almost a pan-Indian geography. In the Vedic texts, which are older than the *Mahābhārata*, there is no mention of specific pilgrimage sites. In the Vedic texts, although rivers were considered sacred and taking a purifying bath in sacred rivers is known, there is no evidence of particular spots being treated as *tīrthas* with ritual specialists serving as pilgrimage priests (Nath 1993). Yaska's *Nirukta* (c. 250 BCE), the oldest treatise on etymology, does not mention *tīrtha* in the meaning of a specific pilgrimage spot, but only in the context of rivers and their waters (Nath 1993: 29), and in the *Dharmaśāstra* literature there are no elaborate descriptions of *tīrthas* before the *Dharmanibandhas*, starting in the twelfth century,²⁰ although there are some mentions, and a list of sites for *śrāddha* is found in the *Viṣṇusmṛti*, one of the late texts of the *Dharmaśāstra* tradition (eighth to eleventh centuries).²¹ The prominence at that time of *Purāṇas*, temples, and theistic movements was probably one reason for the acceptance of the ritual of *tīrthayātrā* by the upholders of the *Dharmaśāstra*. Notable is the strong reluctance of the *Dharmaśāstra* authors to consider pilgrimage part of *dharma* before the twelfth century. The statements in the *Mahābhārata* and the *Purāṇas* about the rewards of visiting *tīrthas* being compared to the sacrifices, and the need to devalue the Vedic sacrifice, may be interpreted as an indication of a conflict between groups of Purāṇic and Vedic Brahmans. The ritual of *tīrthayātrā* was probably only reluctantly accepted in the Brahmanical tradition out of economic necessity (Nandi 1980: 100). The Epics and *Purāṇas*, which were the most important texts for the pilgrimage traditions, were incorporated into the *Dharmaśāstra* tradition only when the digests (*nibandha*) were produced, for the first time in a volume in the twelfth-century *Kṛtyakalpataru* of Lakṣmīdhara, the *Tīrthavivecanakānda*, which imported material from the Epics and *Purāṇas* into a thematically organized collection (Davis and Brick 2018: 35). When the Vedic Brahmans of the orthodox *Dharmaśāstra* tradition finally accepted the traditions of *tīrthas*, temples had become “powerful and widespread throughout India” (Davis and Brick 2018: 36). Previously, temple traditions had not been considered important enough to discuss in detail or at all in the orthodox *dharmaśāstra* tradition, “because the practices were unknown or did not exist at the time” (Davis and Brick 2018: 36).

Davis and Brick suggest that it was the emergence, during the second half of the first millennium, especially of the temple rituals of the Pāñcarātras and Pāsupatas, and the political and economic success of temple-centred sectarian traditions, called Āgamaic and Tāntric, that led to reconciliation between Purāṇic and Vedic Brahmans. The reconciliation was “intended to undermine the growing power and position of Tantric Brahmins in temples patronized by rulers and lords of medieval Indian states” (Davis and Brick 2018: 36). Thus Vedic Brahmans finally also accepted *tīrthayātrā* as a mainstream ritual, and the full incorporation of pilgrimage rituals in the Hindu traditions had been accomplished.

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Notes

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² For discussion about possible pilgrimage in the Indus Valley civilization, see Parpola 2003.

³ The earliest use of Pali *cetiya* is in the *Mahāparinibbānasutta*. See below, and Pradhan 2002.

⁴ *Cattārimāni Ānanda saddhassa kulaputtassa dassanīyāni samvejanīyāni thānāni*.

⁵ <https://obo.genaud.net/dhamma-vinaya/pts/dn/dn.16.rhyt.pts.htm>, accessed May 10, 2020.

⁶ <https://obo.genaud.net/dhamma-vinaya/pts/dn/dn.16.rhyt.pts.htm>, accessed May 10, 2020.

⁷ The term *cetiya* is also used in Chapter One of the *Mahāparinibbānasutta*, in which the Buddha explains what the Vajjians need to do to avoid the decline of their society. One of the things the Vajjians must do is honour the Vajjian shrines (Vajjicetiyaṇi) both within and outside (the city), and respect, revere, and worship them.

⁸ Schopen quotes the Sanskrit version of the *Mahāparivṛṇasūtra*: “Which of them on that occasion will with devout minds die in my presence (*mamāntike kālam kariṣyānti*), they—those with karma yet to be worked out (*ye kecit sopadhiṣesāḥ*)—all will go to heaven (*te sarve svargopagā*). (Schopen 1994: 291, fra E. Waldschmidt, *Das Mahāparivṛṇasūtra*. Berlin 1951, III, 390, 41.9). The Pali version reads: *Ye hi keci, Ānanda, cetiya-cārikaṃ ahiṇḍantā pasannacittā kālaṃ karissanti, sabbe te kāyassa bhedaṃ paraṃ maraṇā sugatiṃ saggam lokam uppajjissantīti*.

⁹ <https://obo.genaud.net/dhamma-vinaya/pts/dn/dn.16.rhyt.pts.htm>, accessed May 10, 2020.

The Pali reads: *Cātumahāpathe tathāgatassa thūpo kātabbo. Tattha ye mālaṃ vā gandhaṃ vā cuṇṇakaṃ vā āropessanti vā abhivādessanti vā cittam vā pasādessanti tesam taṃ bhavissati dīgharattam hitāya sukhāya*.

¹⁰ Mishra (1980: 34) notes that *yakṣa* worship was particularly strong in Vārāṇasī, Kurukṣetra, and Madhyadeśa. Mishra also notes that many religious traditions assimilated the *yakṣa* cult, but that Śaivas did not tolerate them and fought against the *yakṣa* worship (1980: 35).

¹¹ This expansion of *stūpas* for political control can be observed in contemporary South Asia in Sri Lanka.

¹² This procession ritual probably needs to be distinguished from the *digvijaya* procession, which seems to be modelled on the military procession, with emphasis on battles and conquest (see Sax 2004). In the *digvijayaparvana* of the *Mahābhārata* (2.23.23–29) the Pāṇḍavas conquer riches, defeat enemies, and return with gifts, which is quite the opposite of the procession pilgrimage described in the *tīrthayātrā* of Baladeva in the *Śalyaparvan*.

¹³ *Śalyaparvan* in *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwayapayana Vyasa*, Ganguli, trans. Vol VII, 1990: 114.

¹⁴ *Śalyaparvan* in *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwayapayana Vyasa*, Ganguli, trans. Vol VII, 1990: 107.

¹⁵ *Śalyaparvan* in *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwayapayana Vyasa*, Ganguli, trans. Vol VII, 1990: 107-109.

¹⁶ *na te śakyā daridreṇa yajñāḥ prāptuṃ mahīpate, bahūpakaraṇā yajñā nānāsaṃbhāravistarāḥ.prāpyante pārthivair ete samṛddhair vā naraiḥ kva cit, nārthanyūnopakaraṇair ekātmabhir asaṃhataiḥ*.

¹⁷ *Śalyaparvan* in *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwayapayana Vyasa*, Ganguli, trans. Vol VII, 1990: 97–98.

¹⁸ Water places were usually guarded by Yakṣas, Rakṣasas, Nāgas, and other spirits (Kumar 1983: 136).

¹⁹ The five *tīrthas*, Agastyatīrtha, Saubhadratīrtha, Paulomatīrtha, Kārandhamatīrtha, and Bharadvājatīrtha are called *nārītīrthas*.

²⁰ The first significant description is the *Tīrthavivekanakāṇḍa* of Lakṣmīdhara.

²¹ Its dealing with *tīrthas* is one of the proofs of its lateness. The *tīrtha* part of *Viṣṇusmṛti* can be dated to around the same time as the *Tīrthavivekanakāṇḍa* when Hindu pilgrimage had become accepted as a Dharmasāstric tradition.