CHAPTER 4

On the Early History of the Brahmanical Yugas

Vincent Eltschinger

Albert Hoffstädt’s best friend, Virgil (Publius Vergilius Maro, 70–19 BCE), repeatedly dealt with the Hesiodic myth of the metallic races and its conception of a Golden Age (aurea aetas), making himself responsible both for its “integration into the Roman history and imaginaire” and for influential innovations in its narrative structure and meaning. Like his near contemporaries Catullus, Horace, and Ovid, Virgil made frequent use of this myth to express his feelings and inclinations in the much troubled political circumstances of the end of the Republic and the early years of the Empire. Catullus and Horace had resorted to the motif of the Iron Age to describe the climate of moral depravation and political violence that, due to the neglect of pietas, threatened civil institutions and freedom. From his very first remarks on the Golden Age in the fourth Eclogue, and probably still in support of Antony, Virgil repeatedly expressed his belief in a possible restoration of the Golden Age. In the Aeneid, the advent of Augustus coincided with the return of the aurea aetas, which rural Italy had been embodying since the very foundation of the Urbs. Virgil’s Georgics and Aeneid thus came close to the new regime’s propagandistic uses of the myth, whereas Ovid argued that the Augustan restoration of peace and laws was not to be confounded with the spontaneity of justice that characterized the Golden Age. A few decades later, Seneca and others welcomed Nero as the founder of a saeculum felix, which, again, coincided with the regime’s ideology and self-legitimation strategies, often resorting to prophecies.

In Virgil as well as in his influential model, Aratus’s Phenomena, the four main features of the aurea aetas are the absence of war, the absence of travels (made unnecessary by autarchy), nature’s spontaneous abundance, and the humans’ natural practice of piety and justice (other motifs include vegetarianism and the commensality of gods and humans). While yielding a similar picture of the Golden Age, Ovid’s Metamorphoses (1.90–150) provide a more systematic account of the gradual degeneration of human society. In the Silver Age (or race, argentea proles) the four seasons make their appearance with hot summers and cold winters forcing humans to seek shelter, whereas the Bronze Age

1 Jacqueline Fabre-Serris, Mythologie et littérature à Rome: La réécriture des mythes aux Iers siècles avant et après J.-C. (Lausanne: Éditions Payot, 1998), 29.
(aenea proles) sees an increase in cruelty. The fourth and last period, the Iron Age (aetas ferrea), characterizes itself by the disappearance of all virtues (honor, truthfulness, faith) and their replacement by vices such as treachery, violence and greed; crime, theft, and mistrust are substituted for justice; war and seafaring appear together with land allotment, agriculture, and mining.

Directly or indirectly, all known versions of the myth go back to Hesiod’s (seventh century BCE) original account in the Works and Days (106–202). Here, the history of mankind is divided into five successive states referred to as “races,” with heroes or demi-gods (many of them died at Troy, the survivors living in secluded islands under king Kronos) appearing between the Bronze and Iron Races. In the time of Kronos, the Golden Race, dear to the gods, lived a god-like life without fear, misery, illness, and old age. This age of peace and beauty was made especially prosperous thanks the earth’s spontaneous and abundant production. A most violent Silver Race succeeded it; created by Olympian gods whom, in its impiety, it failed to honor properly, it was destroyed by Zeus, who replaced it by the belligerent Bronze Race. Born from ash wood, this strong and ugly race disappeared into black and silent Hades. Finally, the short-lived Iron Race knows almost only suffering and worries with neither love nor friendship; offending their parents, its representatives are envious, violent and mischievous, plundering neighboring cities and paying no respect to oaths and justice.

The Graeco-Roman myth of the metallic races has long been recognized to bear close resemblance to the ancient Indian doctrine of the four yugas—“ages,” “eons,” “(cosmic) periods”: kṛtayuga, tretāyuga, dvāparayuga, and, most famous among them, kaliyuga. In spite of the fact that the metallic symbolism is conspicuously absent in the Indian context (the four yugas are traditionally reported to borrow their names from the dice game, from the winning throw to the losing throw, see below), the yugas have, from the earliest days of Western indological scholarship as well as among esoteric circles, been com-

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2 By far the best study to date is Luis González-Reimann, The Mahābhārata and the Yugas: India’s Greatest Epic Poem and the Hindu System of the World Ages (New York: Peter Lang, 2002). See also Luis González-Reimann, “Cosmic Cycles, Cosmology, and Cosmography,” in Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism, vol. 1, ed. Knut A. Jacobsen et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 411–28.

3 This was the case, e.g., of William Jones (1746–1794) and Paulinus a Sancto Bartholomaeo (1748–1806; Systema Brahmamicum liturgicum mythologicum civile [Romae: Apud Antonium Fulgonium, 1791]; note, e.g., p. 209—for you Albert: Addde his, aetates indicas in quatuor disper
tiri, et primam quidem krdayugam, vel satyayugam seu veritatis & iustitiae aetatem usque ad
diluvium perdurasse, secundam dvidiayugam dictam, a diluvio seu prima incarnatione Vishnu
in piscem incepisse, tertiam tredayugam seu aetatem cupream triginta annis post mortem dei
Krshnae, quae ad annum circiter 1000 ante Christum natum reicienda est, sinivisse, ad circa id
tempus kalyugam seu aetatem ferream incepisse...). Note also René Guénon, La Crise du monde
pared if not identified with the Hesiodic races/ages. The doctrine finds its first but already mature expression in two closely related second- to third-century CE (parts of) texts, the Manusmṛti (Laws of Manu, 1.81–86) and the third book of India’s great epic, the Mahābhārata (e.g., 3.148, 186–189). The four yugas are ascribed descending durations (4,000, 3,000, 2,000, 1,000 years). Each of them being preceded by a period of dawn (400, 300, 200, 100 years) and a period of dusk (same duration), the aggregate period, referred to as a yuga (and later as a caturyuga, “fourfold yuga,” or a mahāyuga, “great yuga”), amounts to 12,000 years (a thousand such yugas amount to a Day of Brahmā). The criterion most commonly resorted to in order to estimate this degeneration is the Law (dharma, behavioral, ritual, social and cosmic order, including, first and foremost, the integrity of the caste-classes and the stages of life), which is said to be diminished by one fourth in each successive yuga. In the same way, “age after age ... virility, wisdom, strength, and influence shrink by one-fourth.”

Cosmological and apocalyptic/millenarian uses of the doctrine can be distinguished according to whether it is intended as a relatively neutral account of the cosmic time structure or, rather, as an ex post facto description (generally in the future tense of prophecy) of the present in terms of the scenario of the End.

If, in spite of ancient India’s reluctance for seafaring, the absence of navigation seems not to characterize the kṛtayuga, the absence of fear and conflicts, the spontaneity of both the Law and nature (with or without sowing and labor) are recurring features of the first age. Other aspects include the absence of gods, diseases, suffering, discontent, pride, envy, and trade. Sacrifice appears in the tretāyuga together with austerities and donations. During the dvāparayuga, the Veda becomes fourfold, truthfulness collapses as diseases and disasters increase. Among the countless features of the kaliyuga (or of the yugānta), mention can be made of the fatal deterioration of Law and truthfulness; the end of the Vedic life-rules and rituals; crop failures and drought; social, sexual and dietary disorders; foreign invasions, false policies and plunder; trade, game and taxes, etc. In this dreadful last period, people are short-lived (men turn grey in their sixteenth year), of little vigor and valor; seven or eight-year-old girls become pregnant; women cast off all morals, have intercourse with the mouth

moderne (Paris: Gallimard, 1973 [1946]), 21: “La doctrine hindoue enseigne que la durée d’un cycle humain ... se divise en quatre âges, qui marquent autant de phases d’un obscurcissement graduel de la spiritualité primordiale; ce sont ces mêmes périodes que les traditions de l’antiquité occidentale, de leur côté, désignèrent comme les âges d’or, d’argent, d’airain et de fer.” Most sincere thanks are due to Christophe Vielle for his generous help with these and other fascinating materials.

4 Mahābhārata 3.188.13, translation J.A.B. van Buitenen, The Mahābhārata, 2: The Book of the Assembly Hall; 3: The Book of the Forest (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1975), 594.
and, “secretly deceiving their husbands, lasciviously fornicate with slaves and even cattle”⁵; Vedic students drink liquor and swive their teachers’ wives, while the aged behave like children; odors become stench and flavors putrid; the crossroads bristle with jackals, the cows give little milk, and the trees yield few flowers and fruits.

To the best of my knowledge, the two dispositifs have no common Indo-European ancestry.⁶ The origins of the four-yuga system remain shrouded in mystery even after Luis González-Reimann’s path-breaking study of the ways in which the doctrine made its way into the Mahābhārata. In spite of various uses of the word yuga as early as the Rigveda (1,500–1,000 BCE; in the sense of a human generation or of an undefined time period) and the mention of longer periods of time (a hundred and ten thousand years) in the Atharvaveda (around 1,000 BCE?), “Vedic literature shows no awareness of large recurring time cycles [and does not] seem interested in the possibility of world destruction” (González-Reimann, “Cosmic Cycles,” 412b). Even if Babylonian influences have been postulated concerning the duration of yugas in later, Purāṇic materials (417b), and if Greek influence on the four descending ages is perhaps not to be entirely ruled out according to González-Reimann (ibid., 416b), hypotheses concerning the origin, the formation and the early history of the doctrine are still very much a desideratum.⁷

To begin with, most scholars seem to take a simultaneous appearance and parallel, organic growth of all four yugas for granted. This scenario looks very unlikely to me. Let me consider first Aśvaghoṣa, a celebrated Buddhist monk, poet and dramatist whose works cannot be later than 100–150 CE, i.e., about one century earlier than the Laws of Manu and the relevant sections of the Mahābhārata (the latter could be even younger). To begin with, the two intermediate ages, the tretāyuga and the dvāparayuga, are conspicuously absent from Aśvaghoṣa’s extant writings (the Buddhacarita or Life of the Buddha and the Saundarananda or Handsome Nanda; two fragmentary dramas have come down to us as well). On the contrary, Aśvaghoṣa is well acquainted with the kṛtayuga, to which he alludes several times, e.g., while describing king

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⁵ Mahābhārata 3.186,55; trans. van Buitenen, The Mahābhārata, 588.
⁶ Note, however, that Michael Witzel holds the four ages to belong to what he calls “Laurasian mythology.” See Michael Witzel, The Origins of the World’s Mythologies (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), 86–87.
⁷ González-Reimann’s insightful remarks concerning the Mahābhārata as a “Kali” poem (conflict, war, bad luck, misfortune) and the felt necessity to “codify” and make time predictable are extremely useful in this connection. See González-Reimann, The Mahābhārata and the Yugas, 138–163. On Johannes Bronkhorst’s views on the passage from conceptions of the (near) end of the (kali)yuga to conceptions of a (long) kaliyuga, which I endorse, and which the present essay makes even more likely in my opinion, see below.
Śuddhodana, the Buddha’s father, as “abiding by the law of righteousness of the
golden age,”8 or the king’s subjects as rejoicing in Kapilavāstu (Śuddhodana’s
capital city and the Buddha’s birth-place, so to say) “as in the golden age of
Manu, in happiness, plenty and virtue.”9 What about the kaliyuga? As far as I
can see, the expression does not occur in the Saundarananda and the first
part of the Buddhacarita, which has been preserved in its Sanskrit original, but
verse 21.64 of the Buddhacarita, which has been preserved in Tibetan,10 likely
reflects Aśvaghoṣa’s use of the expression, provided that the Tibetan expression
rtsod ldan dus renders the Sanskrit kaliyuga. J.S. Negi’s Tibetan-Sanskrit
Dictionary (vol. xi [2003], 4756a) records at least one occurrence of Tibetan
rtsod ldan dus used to translate kali(yuga), and Tibetan rtsod pa’i dus is well
attested as a standard rendering of kaliyuga in other Tibetan-Sanskrit diction-
aries. The same stanza (Buddhacarita 21.64) provides us with an additional al-
lusion to the kṛtayuga (Tibetan rdzogs ldan [gyi] dus) in Aśvaghoṣa’s writings.
As we shall see, the Mahābhārata and other Brahmanical sources not only de-
scribe the kaliyuga, but also the yugānta or “end of a/the yuga,” where yuga is
likely intended in the sense of the entire four-yuga pattern, or as an unspeci-
fied era.11 To put it briefly, the yugānta “is a time of great destruction, caused
mainly by natural forces: torrential rains, implied by the rolling clouds and the
thunder; earthquakes …; terrible winds …; and an intense, resplendent Sun;
but most of all fire, an all-consuming fire that destroys everything. There are
also comets and meteors, as well as negative planetary configurations.”12 In
Buddhacarita 16.39, Aśvaghoṣa compares the imperturbable Buddha with
Brahmā who “at the end of the great eon … shines sitting when the conflagra-
tion dies down.”13 The Tibetan expression E.H. Johnston translates with “(con-
flagration at) the end of the great eon” is dus mtha’i me, which almost certainly
renders the ubiquitous Sanskrit expression yugāntāgni, literally “the fire at the

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8 Saundarananda 2.25c, translation E.H. Johnston, The Saundarananda or Nanda the Fair,
Translated from the Original Sanskrit of Aśvaghoṣa (London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford
Univ. Press, 1932), 10.
9 Saundarananda 3.41cd-42, translation Johnston, The Saundarananda, 19.
10 Derge edition of the Tibetan canon (Bstan ’gyur) Ge 77b6–7.
11 On the yugānta, see González-Reimann, The Mahābhārata and the Yogas, 64–73. Jo-
hannes Bronkhorst, “The Historiography of Brahmanism,” in History and Religion: Narrat-
ing a Religious Past, ed. Bernd-Christian Otto et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), and below.
12 González-Reimann, The Mahābhārata and the Yogas, 71.
13 Derge edition of the Tibetan canon (Bstan ’gyur) Ge 63a3, translation E.H. Johnston, Aśva-
ghoṣa’s Buddhacarita or Acts of the Buddha (in three parts: Sanskrit Text of Cantos I-XIV
with English Translation of Cantos I-XXVIII, Cantos I to XIV translated from the Original
Sanskrit supplemented by the Tibetan Version and Cantos XV to XXVIII from the Tibetan and
Chinese Versions (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1984), 17.
end of a/the yuga." To sum up, Aśvaghoṣa is familiar with the kṛtayuga, the il-
lud tempus of ideal kings and seers (ṛṣi), the kaliyuga, and the yugānta, but
never refers to the intermediate periods of the tretā- and dvāparayugas.

The Rāmāyaṇa, ancient India’s second great epic, reveals roughly similar
tendencies. Although the Rāmāyaṇa, like the Mahābhārata, cannot be dated
with any degree of certainty (between 500 BCE and 500 CE?!?) and has under-
gone much reworking, it looks like significant parts of the core narrative (can-
tos 2–6) were known to Aśvaghoṣa in pretty much the same form as the ones
we now read, as Gawroński and others have demonstrated. A quick search
into the electronic text of the Rāmāyaṇa entirely confirms reading notes and
impressions: tretāyuga occurs six times in the Rāmāyaṇa, all of them in book
7 (17.31, 65.11–12, 65.17, 67.18, 68.1); dvāparayuga presents the same overall dis-
tribution with only four occurrences in book 7 (65.19, 20, 21, 23). Either alone or
in compound expressions, kali(yuga) surprisingly only occurs at 7.65.22 (for
tisya, a synonym of kali[yuga], see below). Now, the Rāmāyaṇa’s books 1 and 7
are almost unanimously regarded as later additions. In other words, the total-
ity of the Rāmāyaṇa’s allusions to the tretā-, dvāpara- and kaliyugas (with the
possible exception of the tisya occurrence) can safely be considered later additions re-
flecting conceptions widely attested in the Mahābhārata and early
Purāṇas. The kṛtayuga is only slightly better represented with six occurrences
in book 7 (2.4, 17.31, 53.3, 65.9, 70.5, 88.8), two in book 1 (1.73, 44.14) and two in
books 5 (1.108) and 6 (26.13), the only ones justified to claim some antiquity.
Rāmāyaṇa 6.26.13 is certainly the most interesting among them. After reveal-
ing that the Blessed One had created two parties, the dharmic gods and the
adharmonic anti-gods, Mālyavat, a parent of cruel Rāvaṇa, explains that “[when]

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14 See Andrzej Gawroński, Studies about the Sanskrit Buddhist Literature, Collected Papers, ed. Marek Mejor (Warsaw: Research Centre of Buddhist Studies, Faculty of Oriental Stud-
ies, Univ. Warsaw, 2012 [the article “Studies about the Sanskrit Buddhist Literature” was initially published in 1919]), 102. Gawroński’s systematic research was based on book 2.
15 See the digitized Poona critical edition at <http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil. html#Ram>, last accessed 26 December 2019.
16 See John Brockington, The Sanskrit Epics (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 379–83 and 391. These two
books are regarded as the third stage of growth of the epic, the second stage consisting of
various types of inflation (expansion, interpolation) in books 2–6, criteria for which can be
either formal/stylistic (ornateness in language and style, long compounds, prosody) or
material (Purāṇic elements, divinity of Rāma, etc.). The addition of stage three is not ear-
lier than the first to second century CE and may very well be dated to the fourth century
CE, if not later. In the Rāmāyaṇa as in the Mahābhārata, this addition “seems ... to be
linked with passing from the hands of their traditional reciters ... into those of the brāh-
mans as the guardians of all traditional learning,” and reflects a “process of adaptation to
brāhman values” (religious, ethical, cosmological) (Brockington, The Sanskrit Epics, 394).
This process also reflects a “shift from oral to written transmission” (p. 395).
dharma eclipse[d] adharma, then the kṛtayuga prevailed, [but when] adharma eclipses dharma, then tisya (= kali[yuga]) breaks out.” What we actually find in the Rāmāyaṇa are comparatively abundant references to the yugānta or “end of a/the yuga,” only six of which occur in book 7 (6.55, 7.10, 15.9, 32.38, 61.20, 61.31), and none in books 1–2. Among the twenty-six occurrences of yugānta in books 3–6, twelve refer to the yugāntāgni (“the fire at the end of the/a yuga”) that we have already encountered in Aśvaghoṣa’s Buddhacarita, the remaining fourteen referring to other aspects of the final cataclysm (suns, winds, clouds, lightning). The two occurrences of yugākṣaye (“at the close/consumption of the/a yuga”) in book 6 (82.38, 88.4) point in the same direction. To sum up, the early portions of the Rāmāyaṇa reflect no awareness of the tretā- and dvāparayugas. They only rarely allude to the kṛta- and the kaliyugas (in the form of tisya), operating almost exclusively with the yugānta. The evidence from the Rāmāyaṇa and the works of Aśvaghoṣa suggests that in first-century CE Ayodhya/Sāketa (the Rāmaite center, of which, according to colophons, Aśvaghoṣa was a native), cosmological and eschatological conceptions revolved around the three motifs of an “Edenic” kṛtayuga (widely used in reference to ideal kingship), a cataclysmic yugānta (most often in the context of similes and metaphors) and a still very discrete kaliyuga/tisya with unspecified mutual connections and no organic pattern of gradual degeneration.

Close attention should be paid in this connection to a curious little text, the so-called Yugapurāṇa, which, if its tentative dating by its learned editor could be confirmed, would be the earliest extant source concerning the four yugas. The 115-verse Yugapurāṇa forms section 41 of the Gārgīyajyotiṣa, a bulky treatise (6,500 verses) on astral science twice referred to in the Mahābhārata. Given that the Mahābhārata explicitly refers to the text’s sixty-four divisions, the Gārgīyajyotiṣa likely was known to its redactors “in a form at least very similar to its present form” (Mitchiner, The Yuga Purāṇa, 10). From the fact that the Gārgīyajyotiṣa and the Yugapurāṇa refer to the Indo-Greeks (yavana) and the Indo-Scythians (śaka) but not to later groups of foreign invaders such as the

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17 See González-Reimann, “Cosmic Cycles,” 415a, and John E. Mitchiner, The Yuga Purāṇa, Critically Edited, with an English Translation and a Detailed Introduction (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1986), vii. The overall interpretation of the Yugapurāṇa is my main, and basically unique, point of disagreement with González-Reimann, who, while apparently assenting to Mitchiner’s chronology, regards the text as a forerunner and possible source for the Mahābhārata’s (and, for this reason, the Vāyu purāṇa, “the puraṇa revealed by [the god] Vāyu”) attempt to locate the epic events in the yuga scheme (see below). See González-Reimann, The Mahābhārata and the Yugas, 98–99 and 142.

18 For a summary of the Gārgīyajyotiṣa, see David Pingree, Jyotiḥśāstra, Astral and Mathematical Literature (A History of Indian Literature vi, 4) (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1981), 69–72.
Pahlavas, the Kušāṇas, the Tuṣāras and the Hūṇas, J. Mitchiner deems it “reason-able to suggest at this stage a date of the composition of the Gārgīyajyotiṣa as a whole during the period of Indo-Greek rule and presence in India, and before the Indo-Parthian and Kušāṇa invasions: namely some time prior to c. AD 25” (p. 11). Mitchiner’s final estimate is 25 BCE, about one century before Aśvaghoṣa. Mitchiner (pp. 14–16) sees no reason to doubt the authenticity of the Yugapurāṇa as an integral and original part of the Gārgīyajyotiṣa: this section conforms in language, form and style to the rest of the treatise; the name purāṇa is given to other sections of the work as well; all extant complete manuscripts of the Gārgīyajyotiṣa contain the Yugapurāṇa chapter; no independent manuscript of the Yugapurāṇa or any other part of the work has come to light. As for the unity of composition of the chapter, it has received only little attention from the editor: judged on metrical criteria, “the text of the Yugapurāṇa is on the whole reasonably unitary” (p. 14).

The text presents itself as a cosmological-historical exposition delivered by Śaṅkara/Śiva in answer to a set of questions posed by Skanda: “What was the nature of the Time which has gone by in the past, and what is to be the nature [of Time in the future]? What [will be] the length of life and what the bodily form of living beings: and what also will be the strength of tapas (ascetic practices) at the end of the Yuga? What [will be] the degree of authority at the start of the Yuga, and the dharma (forms of righteous conduct) in each Yuga: and at the end of the Yuga, [what] will be the state of affairs at that time, O Lord of Creatures?” Śiva’s answer consists in an account of the four yugas (vv. 6–37): kṛtayuga (vv. 6–14), tretāyuga (vv. 15–22), dvāparayuga (vv. 23–36), and kaliyu-ga (vv. 37–113). During the kṛtayuga of supreme virtue, fear, death, thieves, greed, anger, passions, deceit, depravity and sexual union were unknown; trees bore fruit at will and the earth was full of corn; gods and other supernatural beings were born, and the humans’ life-span amounted to 100,000 years.

The kṛtayuga ended with a big battle at the end of which Brahmade created the aristocratic and military caste (kṣatra, i.e., kṣatriyas). Women, the four caste-classes, sacrifices, treatises and mantras appeared during the tretāyuga; humans were upright and not deceitful, dedicated to dharma and their own socio-religious duty; their life-span decreased to 10,000 years as anger and greed descended upon the surface of the earth. Rāma (Paraśurāma or Jámadagnya, not the hero of the Rāmāyaṇa) caused the disappearance of the entire caste of the warriors (likely to avenge the death of his father at their hands). In spite of the fact that truth, righteousness and sacrifices remained, and one quarter of the dharma was left, the dvāparayuga proved “terrible” (ghora), with

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19 Yugapurāṇa 1cd-3, translation Mitchiner, The Yuga Purāṇa, 87.
a decrease of the life-span to 1,000 years and an apocalyptic war causing the destruction of the earth, men, and kings.20 This war is none other than the one narrated in the *Mahābhārata*, the most important characters of which are mentioned by name, including Keśava (= Viṣṇu) in the form of Vāsudeva (= Krṣṇa). The description of the *kalīyuga*, starting with king Pārīkṣit (vv. 38–39), occupies the rest of the chapter, where general descriptions of the gloomy last age (vv. 50–55, 82–86, 90–94) alternate with seemingly historical characters and narratives.21 The *Yugapurāṇa*’s description of the *kalīyuga* ends with an optimistic note. Calm, patience and self-restraint, as well as the firm upholders of Brahmanical values, will remain at the consumption of the *yuga* as twelve regions (*maṇḍala*) are created with a view to the welfare of surviving living beings (vv. 95–113) in a climate that is evocative of the dawn of a new *kṛtayuga* (the expression does not occur in this context).

The *Yugapurāṇa*’s account of the *kalīyuga* seems odd. The expression *kalīyuga* appears three times at the very outset of the account (vv. 37, 38, 40) and then entirely disappears.22 What one finds instead are repeated allusions to the end of the *yuga*, most of which occur in refrain-like manner at the end of (half-)verses in the form *yugakṣaye*, “at the consumption/close of the *yuga*.” This pattern is reflected in no less than eleven verses (50–51, 95–97, 99, 102–104, 110, 113), an additional one consisting in the equally formulaic *yugānte samupasthite*, “when the end of the *yuga* is at hand” (v. 53). This, together with the “*yuga*’s end” of v. 91, suggests that the major part of vv. 37–113 was intended as a description, not of the *kalīyuga*, but of the *yugānta*.23 The pattern is clearly reminiscent of at least two passages in the Mārkaṇḍeya section of the *Mahābhārata* (3.186–189). In 3.186, the relevant segment (vv. 24–55) occurs immediately after a general outline of the four-*yuga* system (vv. 17cd–23) that reflects the same doctrine as the *Laws of Manu* (1.81–86). Eight references to the

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20 The use of the future tense starts with the description of the end of the *dvāparayuga*, suggesting that Śiva’s exposition takes place before the *Mahābhārata* battle. The *Yugapurāṇa* is thus as much a narration of the past as a prophecy.

21 Foundation of Pāṭaliputra by Udāyin together with subsequent events connected to kings Śāliśūka, Sādhuśa and Vijaya (vv. 40–46), disorders caused by the invasion of the Indo-Greeks (vv. 47–48 and 56–57), the desolation caused by the seven mighty kings of Sāketa and the Agniveśyas (vv. 58–61), appearance of the king of the Śakas (vv. 62–65), events connected with kings Āmrāṭa/Lohitākṣa, Gopāla, Puṇḍaka, Anaranaya, Gokulananda, Agnimitra (vv. 66–78), Agniveśya and his struggle against the Śabaras (vv. 79–81), king Śatūvara and the massacres caused by the Śakas (vv. 87–89).

22 I am not inclined to interpret *kalipriyam* in v. 96 as a reference to the *kalīyuga*.

23 An additional feature of the passage is the repeated, here again refrain-like occurrence of *na (atra) saṃśayaḥ*, generally at the end of the verse. The pattern is reflected in vv. 38, 42, 48, 50–54, 54, 57, 64, 78, 85, 92.
yugānta can be numbered (against one for the kaliyuga, v. 27), three of which consist of end-of-verse yugakṣaye, “at the consumption/close of the yuga” (vv. 35, 42, 48). Most striking is, however, 3.188. The passage presents itself as Mārkandaṇeya’s answer to Yudhiṣṭhira’s question about the kaliyuga, which he makes every impression of deliberately equating with the end of the yuga (see vv. 4–7). Here again, the passage opens with a short outline of the four yugas (vv. 9–12). This short introduction, in which the kaliyuga is not explicitly mentioned, reflects the “orthodox” doctrine of the descending four quarters of the dharma. The seventy-one verses that follow (vv. 13–84) contain no less than thirty-eight explicit references to the end of the yuga,24 all of them in the locative, and more or less with the same meaning (“at the end of the yuga”): yugānte paryupasthite (vv. 19, 35–37, 39, 43–44, 47, 54, 76, 81, 83), yugakṣaye (vv. 20–23, 25, 32–33, 41, 50–51, 78, 85), yugānte (vv. 49, 53, 66, 73, 79), yugasanikṣaye (vv. 55, 62, 64), gate yuge (v. 69), yuge kṣīne (v. 66), and tadā saṅkṣepsyate yugam (“then the yuga will end,” vv. 59, 67–68). There is little doubt in my opinion that the original intent of this passage was the yugānta, not the kaliyuga. Yugapurāṇa 37–113, Mahābhārata 3.186 and 3.188 thus seem to exhibit a very similar structure in which a lengthy development dedicated to the yugānta is introduced, and sometime concluded, by a generally much shorter and ideologically standardized outline of the four (or only three) yugas. In all cases, this reorganization results in the yugānta becoming the end, not of an unspecified era, as it originally was in my opinion, but of the kaliyuga, hence of a four-yuga period. I cannot resist the impression that, in those three passages, original apocalyptic/prophetic accounts of the yugānta were provided with a new meaning by incorporating them into the alien and most probably more recent framework of the four yugas.

These three passages have another feature in common. As we have seen, the Yugapurāṇa lays strong emphasis on the political events to take place at the end of the yuga. Some at least among these events pertain to intruding barbarian (mleccha) kings or groups such as the Indo-Greeks, the Indo-Scythians, and king Āmrāṭa/Lohitākṣa. The Indo-Greeks, “infatuated by war,” (v. 56), are made responsible for the ruin of Pāṭaliputra (modern Patna), various disorders, and a great war. The mighty king of the Śakas is “greedy for wealth,” “vicious,” “evil” and “goes while plundering,” and “when the Śaka realm has been destroyed, the earth will be desolate.”25 “Then the terrible Śaka will cause the peoples, acting for their own destruction..., to be also scattered.... He will destroy a quarter of living beings by arms; [while] the Śakas will take a quarter of the

24 Including paścime kāle, “in the final period/time” (v. 52).
25 Yugapurāṇa vv. 62–64, translation Mitchiner, The Yuga Purāṇa, 93.
wealth to their own city.” As for Āmrāṭa the Mleccha, “red-eyed and wearing red garments, having robbed the helpless people, [he] will then cause them to be destroyed. Then that king will destroy the four varṇas [caste-classes, VE].”

To be sure, the barbarian kings have no monopoly over political and social violence in the Yugapurāṇa, but they are indiscriminately regarded as evil. Consider now Mahābhārata 3.186.29–31: “Many barbarian kings, O overlord of men, will rule the earth with false policies, being given to evil and lies. Āndhras will be kings then, Scythians, Pulindas, Greeks, Kambojas, Aurnikas, serfs, and Ābhīras. Not a brahmin then lives by his own Law, and likewise the barons and commoners work at the wrong tasks, O king.”

As for Mahābhārata 3.188, it exhibits a refrain-like statement to the effect that at the end of the yuga “the entire world is/will be barbarized” (mlecchabhūtaṃ jagat sarvam, vv. 29, 37, 45). Other references to barbarians in 3.188 include vv. 52 (“all men will be omnivorous barbarians, cruel in all their deeds”) and 70: “The earth will soon be overrun by barbarians, while the brahmans, out of fear of the tax burden, flee in all the directions.”

The Yugapurāṇa is certainly unique in its insistence on the political factors at play at the end of the yuga, but all three texts refer, sometime in a fairly insisting manner, to barbarian rule and habits as sure signs and decisive causes of the End.30

As suggested above, Mahābhārata 3.186 and 188 seem to betray a recontextualization of passages originally dedicated to the yugānta. Now, can the kaliyuga part of the Yugapurāṇa (vv. 37–113) be shown to have undergone a similar process of “adaptive re-use”? In other words, can the initial outline of the first three yugas and the beginning of the “kaliyuga” section be shown to be anachronistic? Towards the end of the tretāyuga section, the Yugapurāṇa mentions (Paraśu)rāma (v. 22); a few verses below, at the end of the dvāparayuga section (v. 30), it refers to Vāsudeva (= Kṛṣṇa). At least as far as Vāsudeva is concerned, these allusions have nothing anachronistic in themselves: by the putative date of the text (25 BCE), Vāsudeva was a well-known figure referred to not only by the grammarian Pāṇini (fourth century BCE; Aṣṭādhyāyī 4.3.98), but also by several second- to first-century BCE epigraphs such as, e.g., Heliodoro’s (a Greek ambassador in Taxila) famous Garuḍa pillar inscription at

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26 Yugapurāṇa vv. 88–89, translation Mitchiner, The Yuga Purāṇa, 95.
27 Yugapurāṇa vv. 68–69, translation Mitchiner, The Yuga Purāṇa, 93.
28 Translation van Buitenen, The Mahābhārata, 586–87.
29 Translation van Buitenen, The Mahābhārata, 595–96.
30 See Vincent Eltschinger, Buddhist Epistemology as Apologetics (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 2014), 34–72, Bronkhorst, “Historiography,” 29–32, González-Reimann, The Mahābhārata and the Yugas, 97.
Besnagar.\textsuperscript{31} In addition, Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa is represented with four arms, a conch, a disk, and a mace (the attributes of the “future” Hindu god Viṣṇu) from the end of the first century BCE (Malhār/Bilaspur in Central India; see Schmid, \textit{Don de voir}, 112–118), so that at least part of what follows need not surprise us (\textit{Yugapurāṇa} vv. 29–30): “Keśava will arise at the end of the Dvāpara, in order to destroy horses and elephants, princes and men; [he will be] four-armed, of great valour, bearing the conch, disk and mace: [and he will be] called Vāsudeva, the strong one, dressed in yellow clothes.”\textsuperscript{32} What is striking about this passage is that it opens the \textit{Yugapurāṇa}'s detailed account of the \textit{Mahābhārata}'s plot and personnel (vv. 31–36), which the text thus locates at the close of the \textit{dvāparayuga} (this has been the most current view about them from Purānic Hinduism onward):

Then, resembling Kailāsa, wearing a garland of flowers [and] bearing the plough as weapon, there will arise Yudhiṣṭhira—the excellent king of the Pāṇḍavas—for the purpose of slaughter at the end of the Dvāpara, together with [his] four brothers: [namely] both Bhīmasena the son of Vāyu, and Phālguna of severe \textit{tapas} [austerity, \textit{ve}], and the two brothers Nakula and Sahadeva, born of the Aśvins. Also Bhīṣma, Droṇa and others, and the prince Dhṛṣṭadyumna: and Karṇa, the king of Aṅga, together with Aśvatthāman the invincible; Devala and Śatadhanvan, and Dāruka the illustrious—they will arise at the end of the Yuga, in order to protect the world of men. So too Śakuni and Dantavaktra, and Śiśupāla the haughty: together with Śalya, Rukmi, Jarāsandha, Kṛtavarman [and] Jayadratha. The cause [of strife] of these mighty kings will be Kṛṣṇa, the daughter of Drupada: [and] the earth will go to [her] destruction.\textsuperscript{33}

As demonstrated by González-Reimann,\textsuperscript{34} however, the \textit{Mahābhārata}'s own statements to the effect that its plot would belong to the end of the \textit{dvāparayuga} (and that Kṛṣṇa's death would open the \textit{kaliyuga}) are extremely scarce, isolated, and demonstrably late—as is, of course, the \textit{Mahābhārata}'s own summary of contents at 1.2 (Brockington, \textit{The Sanskrit Epics}, 135), where such claims find their first expression in the great Epic (\textit{Mahābhārata} 1.2.9: “And once the junc-

\textsuperscript{31} On the early history of Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa, see Charlotte Schmid, \textit{Le Don de voir: Premières représentations krishnaïtes de la région de Mathurā} (Paris: École française d’Extrême-Orient, 2010). See also Gérard Colas, “Bhāgavatas,” in \textit{Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism}, vol. 3, ed. Jacobsen et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 295b.

\textsuperscript{32} Translation Mitchiner, \textit{The Yuga Purāṇa}, 90.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{34} See González-Reimann, \textit{The Mahābhārata and the Yugas}, 86–107.
ture of the *kali* and the *dvāpara* was reached, there was a war between the armies of the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas in Samantapañcaka*). In other words, if Mitchiner’s early chronology were to be accepted, the author(s) of the *Yugapurāṇa* would be the first witness(es), and likely inventor(s), of a central theological-mythological complex that only appears about three centuries later in the *Mahābhārata* itself. Considered in this light, the verses on Keśava appearing as Vāsudeva (vv. 29–30) are perhaps liable to a different interpretation. The text’s reference to the four arms, the conch, the disk, and the mace could very well refer to Viṣṇu himself, in which case Vāsudeva(-Kṛṣṇa) could be understood as a manifestation of the latter (Keśava appears *with the name* Vāsudeva), even if the vocabulary of traditional Vaiṣṇava theology (*avatāra*, *prādurbhāva*, *vyūha*, etc., all meaning something like “manifestation” or “embodiment”) is not represented in our text. Now, this would be incompatible with a late first-century BCE date given that even the *Bhagavadgītā* (first to second century CE) does not consider Kṛṣṇa, its main protagonist, to be a manifestation of Viṣṇu.35 Clear allusions to Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa being a manifestation of Viṣṇu seem not to be attested before late strata of the *Mahābhārata* such as the first (1.61.90, *aṃśāvataraṇa*, “partial embodiment”) and especially the twelfth books (12.326.61, etc., *prādurbhāva*, “appearance”). According to A. Malinar, “[a]lthough there are some epic passages in which Kṛṣṇa is considered to be identical with the god Viṣṇu or is addressed as Viṣṇu, this identification, making Kṛṣṇa an embodiment (*avatāra*) of Viṣṇu, seems to have been a later development. The earliest sources, in which Kṛṣṇa becomes part of a Vaiṣṇava genealogy and which turn him into one of the various embodiments of Viṣṇu, are the *Harivaṃśa* (second to third cents. CE) and the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* (third to fourth cents. CE).”36 As we have seen, moreover, the *Yugapurāṇa* describes Vāsudeva as “dressed in yellow clothes.” The motif may presuppose passages such as *Mahābhārata* 3.148, which associate different colors (and names) with Viṣṇu in each *yuga*: Nārāyaṇa is white in the *kṛtayuga*; Acyuta is red in the *tretāyuga*; Viṣṇu is yellow in the *dvāparayuga*; and Keśava is black (*kṛṣṇa*)! in the *kaliyuga*. As for the *Yugapurāṇa*’s allusion to Rāma (v. 22–23a), “at the end

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35 The *Bhagavadgītā* (vv. 4.6–7), however, is often regarded as providing a first general concept of the motif: “Although I am unborn and imperishable and the lord of the creatures indeed, I transform nature (*prakṛti*) that is mine and take birth through an appearance of myself (*ātmamāyā*). For whenever the Law (*dharma*) languishes, Bārata, and lawlessness (*adharma*) flourishes, I create myself. I take on existence from eon (*yuga*) to eon, for the rescue of the good and the destruction of the evil, in order to reestablish the Law.” Translation as in André Couture, “Avatāra,” in *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, vol. 2, ed. Jacobsen et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 702a.

36 Angelika Malinar, “Kṛṣṇa,” in *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, 1: 609b.
of the Tretā Yuga ... the earth was made devoid of kṣatriyas thrice-seven times by Rāma. Then, when the Kṣatra had been destroyed..., it is likely to presuppose passages such as Mahābhārata 3.117.9: “Twenty-one times the lord emptied the earth of barons [kṣatriyas, ve].” As far as I can see, however, this passage of the Mahābhārata does not associate the famous episode of Rāma’s revenge with the tretāyuga. Such an association seems only to appear, again, in the Epic’s summary of contents at Mahābhārata’s 1.2.3: “At the juncture of the tretā and the dvāpara [yugas], Rāma the best among warriors several times destroyed all the terrestrial kṣatriyas (pārthivam kṣatram).” The parallelism cannot be clearer: in addition to the episode itself, both passages refer to the earth (mahī, pārthiva) and to the kṣatra (military order/power; the kṣatriyas as a whole). In both Mahābhārata 1.2 and the Yugapurāṇa, the only two stories narrated in this particular context are those of Rāma and Vāsudeva.

To sum up, close consideration of the tretā- and dvāparayuga sections of the Yugapurāṇa suggests their author’s likely indebtedness to late (second to fourth century CE?) strata of the Mahābhārata and perhaps other texts such as the Harivamśa and early Purāṇas. Alternatively, if the Yugapurāṇa is to be regarded as the source of the epic and early Purānic accounts, as Luis González-Reimann is inclined to believe, its elaboration on the four yugas—say, perhaps vv. 1–46—must postdate 25 BCE, unless one has to credit this short and rather isolated text with several major innovations in Indian religious history, such as Vāsudeva(-Krṣṇa) as a manifestation of Keśava(-Viṣṇu) and the assignment of Rāma to the juncture of the tretā- and dvāparayugas and of Vāsudeva and the Mahābhārata to the juncture of the dvāpara- and kaliyugas. In addition, the Yugapurāṇa would have to be the model for these two stories’ being the only ones narrated at the outset of Mahābhārata 1.2; for the episode of Rāma Jāmadagnya emptying the earth of all kṣatriyas; for other aspects such as the role played by Time (kāla) in the two accounts (compare v. 28 with Mahābhārata 1.2.25); and for numerous aspects of the legends of kings Janamejaya Pārīkṣit, Udayin, and Śāliśūka that seem only to be attested in Purānic literature (Mitchiner, The Yuga Purāṇa, 51–55). In short, the presence of all these motifs in a text from the first century BCE looks very implausible to me. To be sure, the Mahābhārata twice refers to the Gārgyajyotīṣa, but this does not mean that the author(s)/compiler(s) of the relevant sections of the Epic were acquainted with the Yugapurāṇa, at least in its present form. There are in my opinion some reasons to believe that the four-yuga framework of the Yugapurāṇa is a late addition intended to recontextualize an older, possibly end-of-the-first-century BCE account, not of the four yugas, but of the yugānta, “the end of the yuga.”
The formal, compositional and doctrinal features of the *Yugapurāṇa, Mahābhārata* 3.186 and 3.188 seem to point to two distinct layers: older apocalyptic accounts of the *yugāṇta* (first century BCE to second century CE?),38 and a later reframing of these prophecies made in order to align them with the new Brahmanical, essentially Vaishnava ideas concerning cosmology and, in one case at least, the historical manifestations of Viṣṇu (second to fourth century CE?).39 In my opinion, this is likely to give even more weight to J. Bronkhorst’s hypothesis that the (late Epic/early Purānic) conception of a long *kaliyuga* with a distant end imposed itself when apocalyptic expectations relating to the near end of the *kaliyuga* proved wrong.

I am inclined to believe that the doctrine of the four *yugas* was still unknown to the authors/redactors of the *Rāmāyaṇa* (books 2–6) and Aśvaghoṣa in first-century CE Sāketa/Ayodhyā and surroundings, even if, strictly speaking, their silence does not make such a conclusion necessary. Their eschatological conceptions revolved around fairly widespread ideas concerning a cataclysmic *yugāṇta*; both texts testify to a belief in a “Golden Age” of celebrated kings and ṛṣis increasingly referred to as the *kṛta(yuga)* and, albeit sparsely, to some acquaintance with a degenerate time period named the *kali(yuga)*, which could correspond in time with the *Mahābhārata*’s ubiquitous allusions to its own events as being *kali*, i.e., entailing conflict, war, bad luck, and misfortune. In addition, the chronology of the *Yugapurāṇa* (or at least parts of it, 25 BCE), a text that has often been regarded as the earliest extant witness to the four-*yuga* system, is far from warranted. I would thus hypothesize that the doctrine of the four *yugas* developed some time between the late first century and the late second century CE, likely on the basis of an analogy with the dice game. Once *kṛta* and *kali* were, so to speak, posited, those who created the new cosmology could easily resort to the terminology of the dice throws in order to fill in the new structure and give it a more distinctly degenerative physionomy.40 As shown by González-Reimann, the *Laws of Manu* testify to a similar attempt while reinterpretting two verses from the *Aitareyabrāhmaṇa* (600 BCE?) in which this terminology was used in order to indicate good and bad fortune. In

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38 For a partial anticipation of this hypothesis, see González-Reimann, *The Mahābhārata and the Yugas*, 72.
39 On the “Vaishnava appropriation” of the Epic by means of the doctrines of the *avatāras* and the *yugas*, see González-Reimann, *The Mahābhārata and the Yugas*, 103 and 151.
40 Think of the four Dalton brothers in the French comic book *Lucky Luke* by Morris and René Goscinny: only the smallest (Joe, the most stubborn and cruel of the four) and the tallest one (Averell, the most stupid and tender of the four) matter. The two intermediate brothers Jack and William play no other role in the narrative than suggesting a gradation in stupidity and cruelty.
the Brāhmaṇa, these verses are as follows: “The fortune of one who is sitting down, sits down; that of one who is standing, stands up. That of one who is lying down, lies down; the fortune of one who keeps moving, moves. Lying down one becomes Kali; getting up, Dvāpara. Standing, one becomes Tretā; by moving, one becomes Kṛta.” While reinterpreting these stanzas in the framework of political theory, the Laws of Manu (9.301–302) turn the metaphor of the dice throws into a yuga metaphor: “The sum of the king’s actions determines the Kṛta, the Tretā Yuga, the Dvāpara and the Kali, for the king is said to be the yuga. Asleep, he becomes the Kali; awake, the Dvāpara Yuga; ready to act, the Tretā; and when acting, the Kṛta Yuga.” As we have seen, the Laws of Manu are generally regarded, together with the Mahābhārata, as the earliest extant witness to the conception of the four yugas. This is not to say that the author(s) of the Laws of Manu, or of the relevant sections of the third book of the Mahābhārata, were the creators of the motif (Mārkaṇḍeya claims his revelation at Mahābhārata 3.186–189 to be based on the Vāyuproktam purāṇam, “the purāṇa revealed by Vāyu,” Mahābhārata 3.189.14), but it seems very likely to me that they belonged to the same milieu, and lived very close in time to its invention.

Whatever the relevance of the chronology suggested above, it seems likely that the four yugas did not originate as an organic system, but as a result of gradual accretion and ideologically motivated decisions made in order to update older cosmological and eschatological conceptions. Such a scenario is very unlikely to have led to the formation of the Hesiodic myth of the metallic races/ages, whatever the merits of Jean-Pierre Vernant’s hypothesis. The Greaco-Roman myth of the four/five ages and the Indian system of the four yugas present a clear case of superficially comparable structures, close historical analysis of which betrays logics and ideologies divergent enough to ruin every attempt at a heuristically fruitful comparison.

41 Aitareyabrāhmaṇa 7.15 (33:3.3–4), translation González-Reimann, The Mahābhārata and the Yugas, 122.
42 Adapted from González-Reimann, The Mahābhārata and the Yugas, 123.
43 Translation, ibid.
44 Jean-Pierre Vernant, “Le mythe hésiodique des races. Essai d’analyse structurale” (1958), in Vernant, Oeuvres, Religions, Rationalités, Politique (Paris: Seuil, 2007), 1: 255–80.