

MAGHA

माघ

# THE KILLING OF SHISHUPALA

Edited and translated by  
PAUL DUNDAS



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## INTRODUCTION

Magha's *mahākāvya*, or "great poem," *The Killing of Shishupala* has been long acclaimed as one of the most distinguished and elaborate works within the canon of Sanskrit literature. Unfortunately, as with most early Sanskrit poets, virtually nothing can be said with confidence about Magha, and even the century in which he flourished has not been securely established. The brief *praśasti*, or encomiastic description, of Magha's immediate ancestry appended to the conclusion of *The Killing of Shishupala* names the poet's father as Dattaka and describes his grandfather Suprabhadeva as having been a minister in the service of a ruler called Varmala. If this individual is identical with the king named Varmalata mentioned in an inscription from Sirohi dated to 625 C.E., then it is possible to judge Magha to have lived in the second half of the seventh century in what is today the far south of Rajasthan. However, the spelling of the king's name differs in several versions of the *praśasti*, and other evidence could support the conclusion that Magha might possibly be dated around the middle of the eighth century.<sup>1</sup>

There is also uncertainty about Magha's social status and background. Clearly steeped in traditional Sanskrit learning and poetic technique, he may have been a court functionary or a professional poet dependent on patronage, but no reference is made in the *praśasti* to any sort of aristocratic patron or a specific courtly connection. While it is possible that he

was an independent man of letters, there is no significant evidence for such an authorial type in early medieval India.<sup>2</sup>

*The Narrative of The Killing of Shishupala*

Magha's only known work is *The Killing of Shishupala*.<sup>3</sup> In common with the authors of the other early *mahākāvyas*, he uses a well-known plot, transmuting an episode in the great Sanskrit epic the Mahabharata, which in its barest terms depicts a dispute between the five Pandava brothers and their ally Krishna and the latter's kinsman Shishupala.<sup>4</sup> However, as Vallabhadeva states at the outset of his commentary on *The Killing of Shishupala*, the action of the poem takes place at the junction of two world ages, the Dvapara and Kali Yugas, when the universe goes through a jarring period of transition, and the real issues at stake in both Magha's poem and its source are ultimately cosmic in nature, confirming the triumph over demonic power of the deity Vishnu, incarnated as Krishna, and the continuity of the world.<sup>5</sup> The Mahabharata version of the story of the killing of Shishupala is as follows.

Shishupala, king of the Chedis, while present at the sacrifice being performed to confirm the regal authority of Yudhishtira, the eldest of the five Pandava brothers, aggressively refuses to accept the decision that Krishna, their ally, should receive the gift of honor that concludes the ritual. He derides Krishna and the Pandava counselor Bhishma, and the latter responds by praising Krishna's divinity. The tension increases as Shishupala incites the other kings present to disrupt the sacrifice, pointing out the various

offenses of Krishna and the Pandavas, including the killing of Jarasandha, the king of Magadha, Shishupala's confederate and patron.

Bhishma then describes Shishupala's monstrous birth as a three-eyed, four-armed freak who, according to a prophecy, would gain normal human form only after having sat in the lap of his eventual killer. This had duly occurred when Shishupala was placed by his mother, the sister of Krishna's father, Vasudeva, in the lap of her nephew. As a boon, Krishna promised his aunt that he would tolerate a hundred crimes perpetrated by her son. Bhishma asserts that Shishupala represents a fragment of the divine Krishna, who must have willed him to endanger his life by boastfulness so he could recover his pristine status.

Shishupala responds by calling on Bhishma to honor appropriately the other kings present at the sacrifice, but Bhishma expresses contempt for them and invites Shishupala to challenge Krishna to a duel, in which he will be killed and thus enter Krishna's body. Shishupala accordingly issues a formal challenge, whereupon Krishna enumerates his manifold misdemeanors, including his futile attempt to marry Rukmini, who had become Krishna's wife, and declares that the permissible number of one hundred crimes has been reached. After listening to further insults, Krishna summarily beheads Shishupala with his discus, and the audience of kings watches as, to heavenly acclamation, his foe's life energy transfers itself into Krishna's body. The funeral rituals are performed for Shishupala, and his son is appointed his successor as king of the Chedis.

In *The Killing of Shishupala* Magha pares down the

Mahabharata's narrative of an attempted disruption of ritual order, while clearly emphasizing at the outset Shishupala's earlier demonic incarnations as Hiranyakashipu and Ravana, which had been described for the first time in the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* (c. fifth century C.E.), the earliest textual description of the developed mythology of the god Vishnu.<sup>6</sup> *The Killing of Shishupala* alludes only in passing to the young Shishupala's encounter with Krishna, his mother's plea, and his subsequent acts of delinquency, and Bhishma's contemptuous appraisal of Shishupala's royal followers is omitted or partially transposed.<sup>7</sup> As well as deploying numerous descriptive set pieces characteristic of the *mahākāvya* genre, Magha introduces other episodes to amplify the Mahabharata's emplotment, most notably the lengthy advice proffered to Krishna by his half brother Balarama and his councillor Uddhava about the appropriate political reaction to Shishupala, the duplicitous speech by a Chedi emissary, the great battle between the Pandava and Chedi armies, and the culminating duel between Krishna and Shishupala. All these narrative events reflect the preoccupations of the highly militarized Hindu aristocracy which most likely represented a substantial part of the original audience for this *mahākāvya*.

The main action of *The Killing of Shishupala* involves only male protagonists—warriors, kings, and a semidivine sage. The lengthy descriptions of the erotic adventures of the anonymous Yadava women in the first half of the poem serve to create a generalized sensual ambience rather than to define characters, providing a counterpart to the second half, in which a narrative of increasing tension relates to ritual,

politics, and preparation for war. There the roles of women are purely incidental: as enthusiastic spectators of Krishna's procession through the streets of Indraprastha (13.30-48), a version of a standard trope of the *mahākāvya* genre, or as apprehensive harbingers of the death in battle of their husbands, Shishupala's followers (15.79-95).

### *The Mahākāvya Genre*

By the early centuries of the second millennium C.E., *The Killing of Shishupala* was numbered among a group of five *mahākāvyas* that had come to be regarded as the prime representatives of this prestigious mode of poetic composition.<sup>8</sup> Irrespective of exactly when Magha wrote his poem, the *mahākāvya* genre itself had become well established by the seventh century C.E., with its beginnings coinciding with the acceptance (at least in the north of the subcontinent) of Sanskrit in the form codified by the grammarian Panini (c. fourth century B.C.E.) as an elite linguistic vehicle for poetry, drama, philosophy, and a range of intellectual and technical disciplines. The earliest author of what can be recognized as *mahākāvyas* in nascent form was Ashvaghosha (c. second century C.E.) who composed two poems respectively describing the life of the Buddha and the conversion of his half brother Nanda. This writer by his own account employed a stylized poetic idiom with the aim of promoting the Buddhist worldview, and while his works undoubtedly had some influence on his immediate successors, they were to fall out of circulation and be excluded from the wider Sanskrit literary canon.

It is with Kalidasa (c. fifth century C.E.) and Bharavi (c. sixth century C.E.), who both drew on Hindu narrative subjects, that the *mahākāvya* displays most of the generic traits that were to characterize it as a specific literary form for more than a millennium. These two poets deployed, and sometimes devised, an extensive repertoire of thematic conventions and figurative topoi that expanded the stylistic range of preexisting literary sources, most significantly inscriptional royal panegyric, the two great Sanskrit epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, and individual, often anonymously composed stanzaic verses, which may have emerged in a vernacular context.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Kalidasa and Bharavi displayed a markedly novel poetic sensibility in their depictions of, for example, emotions and the pleasures of the natural world. Magha can be regarded as consolidating this foundational phase of the *mahākāvya* by fully defining its rhetorical landscape, and *The Killing of Shishupala* came to be a representative model of the genre's possibilities with which later generations of Sanskrit poets were repeatedly to engage, both in reworkings of traditional epic and mythological narratives and in more innovative modes, such as biography and dynastic history.

The Sanskrit *mahākāvya* unquestionably presents problems for modern readers unfamiliar with the genre's background, tone, and conventions, but attempts to define it as analogous to more familiar literary forms are misplaced. In particular, the lazy if common assessment of the *mahākāvya* as representing a variety of epic poetry will immediately frustrate expectations. Leaving aside the question of the transcultural viability of the Western genre category of

“epic,” a cursory inspection will reveal that the *mahākāvya* typically embodies a narrative logic, linguistic and metrical ingenuity, and sophisticated figurative patterning largely at variance with virtually all types of ancient epic poetry. Furthermore, although the *mahākāvya* is often concerned with the standard epic subjects of kingship and conflict, its royal and warrior protagonists are not depicted in any particularly nuanced fashion, and they generally lack the moral ambivalence and flawed personality verging on the tragic that regularly characterize the heroes of works like the Mahabharata or, in the Western canon, Homer’s *Iliad*.<sup>10</sup> Nor is there any preoccupation with the narrative theme of grief and lamentation, whether male or female, that animates so many ancient epic poems.<sup>11</sup>

However, most *mahākāvyas* do undoubtedly possess an epic-like capaciousness. The two earliest Sanskrit literary critics, Bhamaha and Dandin, who may have been nearly contemporary with Magha, provide prescriptive accounts of the ideal *mahākāvya*, in which they identify an array of possible topics and scenarios, apparently reflecting their familiarity with lost as well as extant examples of the genre. In his *Ornament of Poetry* Bhamaha defines a *mahākāvya* as a work composed in *sargas* (loosely, chapters; also often, and rather unhelpfully, called cantos), with its designation as “great” (*mahā*) deriving from its length and its having mighty protagonists and deeds as its subject matter. Typically, Bhamaha asserts, a *mahākāvya* contains descriptions of councils, embassies, expeditions, war, and the good fortune of the poem’s hero. Such a poem should be structured around five major plot transitions in the same manner

as a drama, should not require much explication, and should conclude auspiciously with the triumph of its protagonist. The plot of a *mahākāvya* must relate to the four traditional aims of man (gain, pleasure, dutiful action, and liberation), conform to the way of the world, and deploy the various aesthetic flavors (*rasa*).<sup>12</sup>

According to Dandin's *Mirror for Poetry*, the subject matter of a *mahākāvya* should be derivative, being taken from epic narrative or some equivalent source, and should describe the virtuous, with its hero being both ingenious and elevated of temperament. Dandin's enumeration of a *mahākāvya*'s set pieces is more extensive than Bhamaha's, and includes accounts of cities, oceans, mountains, seasons, sunrise and moonrise, amorous encounters in gardens or by lakes, drinking parties, and passionate lovemaking. He also identifies additional themes, such as separated lovers, marriages, the birth and rise to glory of princes, discussions of matters of state, embassies, armies on the march, battles, and the hero's final triumph.<sup>13</sup>

Bhamaha and Dandin are frustratingly unhelpful about the environment in which an audience would have engaged with an elaborate literary work of the sort they describe. The conventional rendering of *mahākāvya* as "court poem" is hardly precise, since connections between any of the early *mahākāvyas* and specific courtly locations can be made only in approximate terms.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, it can be conjectured with reasonable confidence that one of the main functions of a *mahākāvya* such as Magha's was to mirror the cultural ambience and concerns of a royal court and to depict the idealized actions of mythical protagonists in light of the

various emotional and social codes that governed the behavior of the aristocrats and courtiers who peopled such surroundings. The early medieval Indian courtly world was one of substantial material splendor in which a highly cultivated aesthetic and intellectual sensibility, intense sensuality, and profound esteem of martial valor were enmeshed with a religiosity attuned to the lively and colorful narratives of the *purāṇas*, the compendia of Hindu mythology that were codified from around the fourth and fifth centuries C.E.<sup>15</sup> Apparently mirroring the opulence and brilliance on the surface of this sophisticated environment, the linguistic contours of the *mahākāvya*, of which *The Killing of Shishupala* is the near-archetypal exemplar, are markedly characterized by the manipulation of outward form embodied in a wide range of elaborate figures of speech and *recherché* grammatical and lexical usage.

As for the medium through which an audience experienced a *mahākāvya* such as *The Killing of Shishupala*, the absence of manuscripts dating from before the second millennium precludes any clear conclusions about the extent of such poems' early circulation in written form, although it seems clear that a complex genre such as the *mahākāvya* presupposes writing rather than orality as the means and context of poetic composition. However, it is possible that, at the outset and by way of experiment, the author of a *mahākāvya* declaimed or, more likely, sang each verse of his poem in a quasi-performative manner in front of an assembly of *sahṛdayas*, or cultivated aficionados, possibly presided over by a courtier or king versed in the techniques of Sanskrit poetry, pausing for acclamation or critical

adjudication before moving on to the next verse.<sup>16</sup> This speculative scenario might explain the presence in *The Killing of Shishupala* of extended episodes dealing with a single narrowly focused and reiterated theme, such as the descriptions of the dust enveloping rival armies on the battlefield, of a sort already found in Kalidasa's *The Dynasty of Raghu* (*Raghuvamśa* 7.39–43) and Pravarase-na's *The Building of the Causeway* (*Setubandha* 13.49–61) and exploited to striking and lengthier effect by Magha (17.52–69).<sup>17</sup> Rather than viewing such a set piece as involving a miscalculated repetition of subject matter, one might envisage the poet here as similar to a connoisseur of precious stones, inspecting a fine jewel from a variety of perspectives in the presence of like-minded experts, meticulously turning it around to comment on its differing facets before moving on to admire another choice gem from his collection.

### *The Title of Magha's Mahākāvya*

The Sanskrit title of Magha's poem, *Śiśupālavadha*, is encoded, along with the name of its author, in the concluding verse of chapter 19. The critic Kuntaka (c. eleventh century) was to stigmatize this title as prosaic and not conducive to the enhancement of the overall beauty of the *mahākāvya*.<sup>18</sup> While this criticism may be as true for the other early *mahākāvyas* as it is for Magha's poem, it is in fact not entirely certain how best to translate the title *Śiśupālavadha*. The Sanskrit word *vadha* usually denotes "killing," and as the action of the poem appears to climax in the penultimate

verse, when Krishna strikes off his foe Shishupala's head with his discus, the title *The Killing of Shishupala* (or some version thereof) has become nearly standard and is accordingly adopted here. However, *vadha* can also mean "death," and given that the very last verse of the poem describes the beheaded Shishupala's life energy merging into Krishna, a culminating moment of transfiguration for an erstwhile demonic career, the alternative translation "The Death of Shishupala" undoubtedly has some merit.

#### The Killing of Shishupala *as a* Mahākāvya

An often cited Sanskrit verse, of no clear provenance, describes Magha's poetic skills as encompassing and surpassing the attainments of three of his most illustrious predecessors: "Kalidasa is famous for use of simile, Bharavi for gravity, and Dandin for verbal grace; but Magha is master of all three of these qualities."<sup>19</sup>

Leaving aside the merits of Dandin, whose surviving narrative writings represent a form of nonmetrical poeticized prose, there can be no doubt that Magha's poetic style and imagery are frequently more complex than those of the *mahākāvyas* of Kalidasa and Bharavi. Furthermore, Magha employs a range of vocabulary (it is tempting to call it lexical overload) that became near proverbial. However, while *The Killing of Shishupala* is undoubtedly somewhat less accessible than the earlier *mahākāvyas*, this does not imply, as some modern commentators would have it, that Magha is therefore a more "artificial" poet than his celebrated predecessors, since the corollary, a "natural" poet, lacks

any serious interpretative value in Sanskrit poetic literature, which consistently privileges the ornate.

*The Killing of Shishupala* is a poem of twenty chapters consisting (in the edition offered here) of 1,638 verses composed in forty-one different meters. Some of these meters are only used once by Magha and can be viewed as variants of more common metrical structures. While no single meter predominates, the *anuṣṭubh*, a highly flexible verse form consisting of four quarters of eight syllables each, which is standard in the Mahabharata, is used throughout virtually the entirety of chapter 2 and the bulk of chapter 19, the two longest chapters of the poem, where the subject matter evokes the atmosphere of the great epic.<sup>20</sup> The individual verses of Magha's poem can generally stand as self-contained poetic utterances encapsulating one particular moment or observation, but they are also sometimes grouped in extended cumulative series as vehicles for elaborate scenic description or forceful statement, or, less commonly, organized in syntactically linked clusters.<sup>21</sup>

In common with the other authors of *mahākavyas*, Magha deploys an elaborate array of figurative devices (*alaṅkāra*) intended to ornament and enhance language and thus, as the early Sanskrit literary theorists understood it, to represent a heightened, specifically poetic mode of diction. These figures of speech were classified under the generic categories "ornaments of meaning" (*arthālaṅkāra*) and "ornaments of sound" (*śabdālaṅkāra*). The former includes the ubiquitous tropes of simile (*upamā*) and metaphor (*rūpaka*) and others more specific to ancient Indian rhetoric, such as "substantiation" (*arthāntaranyāsa*) in which a specific example is

supported by a general observation.<sup>22</sup> Most noteworthy among the ornaments of meaning, and a source of some difficulty for modern readers, is *śleṣa*, literally “embrace (of two meanings),” a form of wordplay going far beyond the implications of the conventional renderings of the term as “paronomasia” or “punning.” This “extreme poetry,” as it has been styled, is intended to subvert the reader’s or listener’s expectations, sometimes amplifying and reinforcing the primary denotation of a verse, sometimes destabilizing and reversing it, and sometimes yielding a totally variant register of meaning, as in chapter 16 of *The Killing of Shishupala*, where a devious ambassador conveys simultaneously an emollient and a hostile message.<sup>23</sup>

While ornaments of sound occur relatively infrequently in the poems of Ashvaghosha and Kalidasa, from Bharavi’s time they came to occupy an increasingly prominent formal position in the *mahākāvya*, and Magha skillfully exploits the Sanskrit language’s rich phonetic texture to produce aesthetic effects that defy adequate translation. For example, in every third verse of the fourth chapter of *The Killing of Shishupala* (and randomly elsewhere in the poem) he employs intricate rhyming effects called “twinning” (*yamaka*), based on Sanskrit’s easy susceptibility to resegmentation and regrouping of clusters of words and their constituent phonetic elements in order to generate alternative meaning.<sup>24</sup> One straightforward example may suffice to convey how this figure functions. The first line of 4.3 (a description of Mount Raivataka) contains a *yamaka* that can be identified by underlining: *krāntaṃ rucā kāñcānavaprabhājā navaprabhājālabhṛtāṃ mañinām*. Here the

identical groups of phonemes are to be respectively grouped as *kāñcana-vapra-bhājā*, “(possessed by the luster) pervading its golden slopes” and *nava-prabhā-jālabhṛtām*, “(of jewels) endowed with a mass of fresh brilliance.”

A more marked example of this formalism occurs throughout chapter 19, where Magha, expanding Bharaṇi’s techniques, deploys what poetic theoreticians came to call “brilliant poetry” (*citrakāvya*), as a linguistic echoing of the organized chaos of battle. A range of verses in this chapter are made up of words with a highly restricted range of phonemes, often producing a staccato or drumming-like rhythm, or they are structured across lines in conformity to predetermined patterns, such as the wrap-around “binding of a drum” (*murajabandha*) or the zigzag “urinating of a grazing cow” (*gomūtrikā*).<sup>25</sup>

*The Killing of Shishupala* contains a substantial number of the themes and settings prescribed for a *mahākāvya* by the critics Bhamaha and Dandin. Indeed Magha structures his poem around a series of such kaleidoscopically vivid representations of urban, natural, erotic, and martial scenes that the central narrative of Shishupala’s enmity toward Krishna and the Pandava brothers is at times totally occluded. Although the principal theme of the poem ensures that it is not lacking in solemnity at significant moments in the plot, perhaps the most striking feature of *The Killing of Shishupala* is a pervasive playfulness and lightheartedness. These qualities can be found even in the culminating bloody battlefield scenes that are described with an exuberant gusto, but they are most evident in chapters 7 to 10, which elaborately depict the highly charged erotic interaction of

the Yadava men and women within the setting of Mount Raivataka, whose terrain is envisaged by Magha as a type of fantasy pleasure park. The outing to a lake by the Yadavas, the subject of chapter 8, is like a choreographed scene from a Bollywood extravaganza, involving sly glances, voyeuristic gazing by men, rivalry between cowives, splashing water, and revealingly wet garments, while the drinking party elaborately described in chapter 10 takes place in a realm of languid sensuality, artfulness, and wit.<sup>26</sup>

Numerous allusions to traditional branches of learning, such as grammar, the ancient Indian intellectual discipline par excellence, occur throughout *The Killing of Shishupala* and might strike some modern readers as intrusively incongruous.<sup>27</sup> However, these learned references would most likely have been viewed by Magha's immediate audience as further examples of poetic playfulness, redolent of the all-embracing nature of the *mahākāvya* genre and the common intellectual culture linking poet and connoisseurs. A less obvious example of Magha's learning worthy of mention is his frequent reference to elephants and their behavior.<sup>28</sup> Although elephants had no doubt been employed by rulers for ceremonial and military purposes long before the beginning of the Common Era, by the time of Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra* (c. second–third century C.E.) identifying characteristics of these animals, training them, ensuring their health, and understanding how to deploy them in battle had become an important branch of practical knowledge.<sup>29</sup> While clearly familiar with the technical vocabulary of “elephant science” (*gajāśāstra*), Magha can also sympathetically convey the varying experiences of elephants,

whether casually destroying the jungle while on the march, playing in rivers, wistfully recalling life in the forest before they were captured, or experiencing the horror of mutilation and slaughter on the battlefield. *The Killing of Shishupala* is perhaps the first extended Sanskrit literary work to highlight not just the military importance of the war elephant in ancient India but also the animal's personality, prowess, and frequent suffering.

### *Krishna in The Killing of Shishupala*

The immediate literary influence on *The Killing of Shishupala* can be judged to have been the *mahākāvya* by Bharavi, *Arjuna and the Hunter* (*Kirātārjunīya*).<sup>30</sup> That poem describes how the Pandava hero Arjuna attempts to win divine weapons from the god Shiva, who has disguised himself as a fierce hill tribesman, and culminates in a description of a great duel, at the conclusion of which the deity reveals himself in his true form to grant his opponent the boon he seeks. *The Killing of Shishupala*, which also has a duel at its climax but instead exalts Krishna, the incarnation of the god Vishnu, might be regarded as a deliberate counterpart to *Arjuna and the Hunter* and its lauding of Shiva.<sup>31</sup>

Like *Arjuna and the Hunter*, *The Killing of Shishupala* commences with the auspicious word *śrī*, and the final verse of every chapter of the poem also incorporates this as a kind of signature.<sup>32</sup> The eleventh-century scholar-king Bhoja claimed that *The Killing of Shishupala* was in essence about counsel, and the poem does undoubtedly exemplify the nature of good and bad policy as represented, respectively,

by Krishna and Shishupala.<sup>33</sup> However, it is the concept of *śrī* that provides a particularly apt master theme for Magha's *mahākāvya*. As an abstract noun, *śrī* embodies a nexus of notions that pertain to majesty, prosperity, and auspiciousness. Every early Indian ruler was perceived ideally as being intimately connected with *śrī*, which both served as a necessary underpinning of his regal behavior and was itself the product of dutiful kingship.<sup>34</sup> Prominent manifestations of *śrī*, such as political acumen, orderly governance of the capital city and its populace, due attention to the requirements of sacrificial ritual, disbursement of wealth to Brahmins, and honorable martial endeavor, are accordingly foregrounded throughout *The Killing of Shishupala*, serving a literary function as much didactic as aesthetic.

Unlike Yudhishtira, the eldest of the Pandava brothers, whose sacrifice to confirm his royal status is the flashpoint for the climactic battle in the poem, Krishna, a prince of the Yadava clan, is not actually a fully consecrated king, as his adversary Shishupala, king of the Chedis, sarcastically points out in order to justify his own inimical stance toward him (15.15, 20–22, and 27). Nonetheless, Krishna is closely associated with *śrī* in a very specific manner. In many early iconic representations of Vishnu, of whom Krishna is an earthly manifestation, the god's chest is adorned with the diamond-shaped hair-whorl of the *śrīvatsa*, or "mark of *śrī*," which is indicative of his divine majesty. As Vaishnava Hinduism took shape in the first millennium C.E., *śrī* became deified as the goddess Shri, who has the role of Vishnu's consort. So Magha refers to Krishna as husband of Shri, who clings to his chest in a wifely embrace (2.118 and 3.12, and 13.11), thus

establishing his continuing identity as Vishnu, the divine creator and protector.

Krishna is more broadly portrayed throughout *The Killing of Shishupala* as representing the two main manifestations of Vishnu found in the *purāṇas*: a transcendent yogic god envisaged as the primal being overseeing the universe, and an interventionist deity who saves the world through a series of “descents” (*avatāra*), or incarnations.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, Magha alludes on several occasions to what was to become an increasingly significant aspect of Krishna, adumbrated for the first time in the Mahabharata and greatly expanded in the *Harivaṃśa* (a kind of narrative supplement to the great epic), as a pastoral figure who engages in love affairs with cowherd girls, miraculously protects the cattle he is guarding by holding a mountain above them, and is, above all, the youthful slayer of demons and Kamsa, the evil king of Mathura.<sup>36</sup> However, as opposed to his depiction in the Mahabharata, Krishna is given very little to say in the course of *The Killing of Shishupala*, actually speaking only in chapters 1, 2, and 13, and he is barely present at all as an agent in many chapters of the poem. Prior to the full manifestation of his divine heroism in chapters 19 and 20, his character and nature are largely defined by other protagonists in eulogistic terms, or by misguided abuse, as when Shishupala and subsequently his emissary denounce him in chapters 15 and 16. Throughout the poem a controlled reticence and restraint characterize Krishna, most strikingly in the course of his final violent encounter with Shishupala.<sup>37</sup> While occasional references are made to Krishna’s amorous activity with court ladies (for example,

at 3.13), and his sexual allure brings the women of Indra-prastha flocking to ogle him (13.30–48), it is his Yadava followers who engage in the uninhibited pleasures of love-making and wine drinking.

By contrast with Krishna, Shishupala's demonic nature ensures that he is conspicuously lacking in both self-control and self-knowledge. Balarama points out in passing (2.38; see also 20.6) that Shishupala may have been harboring a genuine grievance because Krishna had taken Rukmini to wife, despite the fact she had been promised to Shishupala. However, Shishupala himself does not dwell on this in his diatribe in chapter 15; instead he scorns Krishna as a confidence trickster who refuses to acknowledge the claims of his betters. *The Killing of Shishupala* frequently evinces a strong devotional tenor, but it is not a "religious" poem as such. Significantly, Magha does not introduce a significant theological theme found in the *purāṇas*' treatment of the narrative that would interpret Shishupala's obsessive antagonism toward Krishna as being in reality a form of piety, informed by his intense preoccupation with the god, which ultimately brings deliverance.<sup>38</sup> However, the mingling of the beheaded Shishupala's life energy with Krishna at the very end of *The Killing of Shishupala* signifies not just the victory of the hero over his foe, the sole appropriate ending for a *mahākāvya* as stipulated by the early Indian poetic theorists. Shishupala's death is itself also a kind of triumph, for his beginningless round of rebirths has come to an end, and the cosmic disruption he represented has been demonstrated to have no absolute or continuing status.

By reconfiguring the mythology of Krishna, first established by the epic and puranic tradition, within the ornate poetic conventions of the elite genre of the Sanskrit *mahākāvya*, Magha definitively confirmed the centrality of this divine figure in Vaishnava Hinduism in the concluding centuries of the first millennium C.E. At the same time, *The Killing of Shishupala* is a unique literary work of elaborate and coruscating imagination, dealing with universally engrossing cultural themes such as sex, war, and the natural world, that deserves to be encountered purely on its own aesthetic terms. At a time when there is increasing openness to premodern India's artistic achievement and the manifold literary modes couched in Sanskrit and other Indian languages, it is appropriate to offer the first complete English rendering of Magha's celebrated *mahākāvya*.

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## INTRODUCTION

### NOTES

- 1 See Kielhorn 1908 and Lienhard 1984: 187–188. It is uncertain whether the *praśasti* was composed by Magha himself. Of the two most important commentators on *Shishupala*, Vallabhadeva and Mallinatha, only the former comments on the *praśasti*.
- 2 Indian scholars sometimes invoke a Jain tradition recorded by the fourteenth-century chronicler Merutunga that claims Magha was a scholar who died in poverty owing to his excessive generosity, but there is no corroborative evidence for this. See Merutuṅga 1901: 48–52.
- 3 Fourteen verses attributed to Magha are found in various anthologies of Sanskrit poetry compiled in the medieval period. These may be judged to be variants or supplementary verses associated with *The Killing of Shishupala* that have not been included in currently accessible recensions. See Trynkowska 2007.
- 4 *Mahābhārata* 2.33–42. See *Mahābhārata* 1975: 97–104. The centuries-long development of the Mahabharata can be regarded as effectively concluded by the fifth century C.E. See Couture and Chojnacki 2014: 45–48 for a portion of the Mahabharata vulgate version of the Shishupala episode. The wider epic context of Shishupala's alliance with Jarasandha, king of Magadha, his sins, his disruption of Yudhishtira's sacrifice, and his death are discussed in Brockington 2002 and 2010, Dumézil 1983: 51–69, and Minkowski 2001.
- 5 Magha refers throughout his poem to the cataclysmic tempest and conflagration that arise as the universe enters the final phase of this particular epoch.
- 6 *Viṣṇupurāṇa* 4.15.1–8.
- 7 For example, at *Mahābhārata* 2.41.25 Bhishma states that he does not count Shishupala's followers as worth a straw, while at *The Killing of Shishupala* 15.61 these followers are portrayed as deriding Krishna in the same terms. See *Mahābhārata* 1975: 103.
- 8 On the five “canonical” *mahākāvya*s—Kalidasa's *The Birth of the Prince* (*Kumārasaṃbhava*) and *The Dynasty of Raghu* (*Raghuvamśa*), Bharavi's *Arjuna and the Hunter* (*Kirātārjunīya*), Magha's *The Killing of Shishupala*, and, Shriharsha's *The Adventures of Nala* (*Naiṣadhiyacarita*)—see Patel 2014: 59. These *mahākāvya*s may have been grouped together because of a commentarial tradition that facilitated understanding of their difficulties. See

- Hahn 2013: i. The group is sometimes increased to six poems with the addition of Bhaṭṭi's *The Killing of Ravana* (*Rāvaṇavadha*), c. seventh century, a work famous for its systematic deployment of a wide range of grammatical forms but stylistically very close to the Mahabharata and Ramayana. See Bronner, Shulman, and Tubb 2014: parts II and III; Lienhard 1984: 161–196; and Smith 1985 on the *mahākāvya* genre in general, and Patel 2014 and Peterson 2003 for studies of two major examples. The Polish study by Trynkowska (2004b) is the only recent full-length discussion of the literary context of *The Killing of Shishupala*. Tenshe 1972 examines Magha's *mahākāvya* from a largely linguistic perspective.
- 9 See Ali 2004: 78–85. Scholarship has yet to assess adequately the role played in the establishment of the *mahākāvya* genre and its conventions by extended, linguistically complex poems from the first half of the common millennium in Prakrit, an alternative literary language to Sanskrit that eventually lost its prestige as a poetic medium. The earliest of these Prakrit poems to survive in complete form is *The Building of the Causeway* (*Setubandha*) by Pravaraśena (fifth century C.E.), who seems to have been a contemporary of Kalidasa. For Kalidasa's literary connection to the Buddhist poet Ashvaghosha, see Tubb 2014a: 75–80.
  - 10 For all Shishupala's quasi-heroic bravado displayed in chapters 15, 19, and 20 of *The Killing of Shishupala*, his character is depicted by Magha in unambiguously negative terms.
  - 11 The distress of the wives of Shishupala's followers is presented at 15.79–95 in the form of a series of ill omens predictive of imminent disaster, rather than as a reaction to the deaths of their husbands.
  - 12 Bhamaha, *Kāvyaṭīkā* 1.19–23.
  - 13 Dandin, *Kāvyaḍarśa* 1.14–18.
  - 14 Kalidasa's generally accepted connection with the Gupta court is based as much on inference and tradition as actual historical evidence. Bharavi is usually regarded as having flourished in south India, but there is uncertainty about which royal house provided this poet with employment. See Bharavi 2016: ix. His patron may in fact have been Yashodharman (also known as Vishnuvardhana), the Aulikara king whose capital was Dashapura in the region of Malwa in western India. See Bakker 2014: 35–37. For the connections between the Sanskrit language, literary culture, and political power in ancient India, see Pollock 2006.

- 15 See Ali 2004.
- 16 The Sanskrit term for such a poet is *kavi*. The verses ushering in the morning that constitute chapter 11 of *The Killing of Shishupala* are intoned by *vaitālikas*, approximately “bards,” responsible for punctuating the salient moments of the royal day and eulogizing their lord. See also 5.67.
- 17 Magha is able to draw on the extensive resources of the Sanskrit lexicon, which has several words for “dust,” such as *pāṃsu*, *rajas*, and *reṇu*, along with poetic kennings like *maruddhvaja*, literally “wind’s banner.” Further semantic depth is provided by *rajas* that can polyvalently signify “pollen,” “passion,” and “menstruation.” See Lienhard 2007: 392–395.
- 18 Kuntaka, *Vakroktijīvita* 4.24 autocommentary, p. 281.
- 19 See Patel 2014: 94–95.
- 20 The second most common meter is *upajāti*, a hybrid metrical form that is used throughout chapters 3 and 12, with the exception of their concluding verses. See the Hindi introduction to the edition of Musalgāonkara 2006: 71–72 for a conspectus of the meters employed in *The Killing of Shishupala*, and Cappeller 1915: 182–185 for a description of twenty-six of these. Morgan 2011: 74–189 analyzes the formal structure of many of the meters employed by Magha. Velankar 1948–49 places Magha’s metrical usage in the context of that of other major Sanskrit poets.
- 21 See, for example, 7.7–11 and 53–56 for series of verses depicting miniscenes, or 7.62–68, and 19.26–29 and 83–87 for verses grouped together in extended descriptions. Magha also regularly deploys repetitions of vocabulary or synonyms to bind groups of verses together. See Trynkowska 2004b: 188.
- 22 See 1.67 for an example of this type of figure of speech, which occurs throughout *The Killing of Shishupala*. Cappeller 1915: 186 identifies the figures of speech used most commonly by Magha, while Gerow 1971 provides descriptions of them.
- 23 On “extreme poetry,” see Bronner 2010. For a survey of varieties of *śleṣa*, see Gerow 1971: 288–306; for a study of an extended Sanskrit narrative poem with simultaneous meanings throughout, see Brocquet 2010. See also Note on the Text and Translation.
- 24 See Tubb 2014b: 173–189, 190–192 for Magha’s use of *yamaka* in chapters 4 and 19. Magha also employs *yamaka* in chapter 6. For a survey of varieties of *yamaka*, see Gerow 1971: 223–238.

- 25 See Hahn 2007 and Lienhard 2007: 133–157 and 173–189 for detailed descriptions and positive assessments of *citrakāvya*.
- 26 Magha compares the Yadava women to actresses at 8.63 and 9.79.
- 27 See, for example, 2.112, 10.15, 14.66, 16.80, and 19.75.
- 28 Most notably at 5.30–52, 12.45–50 and 58–62, 17.35–39, 18.26–51 and 56–58.
- 29 See Edgerton 1985 and Trautmann 2015: 50–215.
- 30 Magha appears to assert his superiority to Bharavi by playing on his own and his predecessor's names; see 6.62. For *The Killing of Shishupala's* extensive intertextual engagement with Bharavi's *mahākāvya* in terms of narrative structure, episodic detail, and figurative usage, see Jacobi 1970 and Tubb 2014b: 171–176 and 190–193. Bharavi 2016 is a complete English translation of *Arjuna and the Hunter*.
- 31 Shishupala's original manifestation as described in the Mahabharata can be regarded as a version of Shiva.
- 32 The Prakrit poets Sarvasena (fourth century C.E.) and Pravarasena (fifth century C.E.) seem to have inaugurated the practice of signing the end of each chapter with an emblematic word. Bharavi employs the word *lakṣmī*, synonymous with *śrī*, in the concluding verse of every chapter of *Arjuna*.
- 33 See Sudyka 2002–2003: 536.
- 34 See Hara 1996–1997.
- 35 For the initial phase of the evolution of the mythology of Krishna, see Schmid 2010, and for the early textual articulation of three incarnations of Vishnu (the Boar, the Man-Lion, and the Dwarf) mentioned in *The Killing of Shishupala*, see Saindon 2009. For the development of the relationship between Vishnu and Krishna in the *Harivaṃśa* and the *Viṣṇupurāṇa*, central works of Vaishnava mythology and theology that inform Magha's treatment of the two deities throughout his *mahākāvya*, see Matchett 2001: 23–106.
- 36 See Couture 1991 and 2015: 163–313, Couture and Chojnacki 2014: 21–76, and Matchett 2001: 44–64.
- 37 McCrea 2014 proposes a reading of *The Killing of Shishupala* in terms of the tension embodied in Krishna as a self-conscious divine figure who is essentially inactive and as a human incarnation temporarily obliged to follow a course of political and martial action. See also Trynkowska 2002–2003.
- 38 See Sheth 1999.