Chapter One

Kṛṣṇa, Viṣṇu and the *avatāra* myth

Believers in God, whatever their religious affiliation, find themselves trying to reconcile two apparently opposing needs. On the one hand the object of their worship must be beyond human comprehension, supreme over the universe which he/she creates, sustains and encompasses, and on the other hand they need a God whose love and care are accessible to the humblest worshipper. Sometimes the attempt to satisfy these needs has taken the form of postulating a transcendent Supreme God who manifests him/herself in an accessible form or a variety of such forms. Within Hindu theism, or more precisely within Vaiṣṇavism, these needs were factors in the rise of the *avatāra* doctrine, the idea that the Supreme God, the Lord of the world, 'descended'[1] from time to time into his own world to help its inhabitants.

The best-known of these 'descents' is Kṛṣṇa. The Vaiṣṇava tradition oscillates between two different ways of seeing him. Besides being the eighth in one version of the standard list of the Supreme God Viṣṇu's ten *avatāras*,[2] he is also worshipped by millions in India and throughout the world as Supreme God himself (even though the very same temple in which Kṛṣṇa's image occupies the central place may also contain a picture in which he features among the *avatāras*). A historical progression from being admired as a tribal hero to being worshipped as God might seem to be the reason for this dual status of Kṛṣṇa,[3] but a serious objection to such an explanation is constituted by the fact that it is in one of the earliest texts which centre upon Kṛṣṇa, the *Bhagavadgītā*, that he appears at his most God-like. The Kṛṣṇa of the *Gītā*, the Bhagavān who teaches Arjuna that all offerings

to any divinity are really offered to him, is obviously presenting himself as the one true God. Yet it may be claimed that Kṛṣṇa is speaking here as one of Viṣṇu's *avatāras*, so that it is Viṣṇu who is being presented as God. As Friedhelm Hardy says, the concept of Bhagavān, 'a single, all-powerful, eternal, personal and loving God ... is an empty slot, to be filled by concrete characteristics which then make up a specific Bhagavān-figure who serves as (the one and only) God to a given group of people'.[4] In the case of Viṣṇu and Kṛṣṇa, it is not easy to see whether there are two contenders for this slot or whether Kṛṣṇa is to be subordinated to Viṣṇu as one among several of the latter's manifestations.

This book sets out to explore the relationship between Viṣṇu and Kṛṣṇa in the context of the *avatāra* myth as it is presented in three major Vaiṣṇava texts of the first millennium CE: the *Harivaṃśa*, the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* and the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*.[5] The context of the *avatāra* myth would appear to foreclose the question of Kṛṣṇa's status. If he is one of the subordinate manifestations of Viṣṇu, the claims of those who see him as God in his own right can surely be dismissed as poetic hyperbole rather than taken seriously as theological assertions. Yet the *avatāra* myth may be used in such a way as to affirm Kṛṣṇa's supremacy rather than to deny it, so that Kṛṣṇa's status in these three texts is not the foregone conclusion that it might seem.

None of these texts has ever been regarded, or ought to be regarded, as a piece of systematic theology. All three deal in narrative, poetry and myth, not in doctrine and argument. Yet they use narrative, poetry and myth in such a way as to set up tensions and balances between the figures of Kṛṣṇa and Viṣṇu, weaving together the same themes in different ways. The *Harivaṃśa* sets Kṛṣṇa's life into the overall context of the *Mahābhārata*, while supplying its own immediate context which relates Kṛṣṇa to Viṣṇu and to the universe. In the *Viṣṇu* and the *Bhāgavata* this life is presented in relation to a fully developed cosmology. In the *Viṣṇu* the *avatāra* idea is almost lost in this new perspective, but in the *Bhāgavata* it is brought into play again in a new and dynamic way, so that Kṛṣṇa's story becomes both the key to the universe's meaning and the model of that divine grace which informs all the other *avatāra* stories.

The literary standing of the Purāṇas, the genre to which all three texts belong,[6] has usually been regarded as low by both Indian and Western scholars. For Indian scholars this is because they fail to conform to the standards of Sanskrit poetics.[7] For Westerners it is at least partly because they are mainly compilations of traditional

material rather than original compositions. In Western culture the word 'compilation' tends to have a somewhat negative meaning, being often prefaced by the adjective 'mere'.[8] It suggests a collage of miscellaneous material with little in the way of structure and development, often centred loosely upon some well-worn theme and repeating what is already familiar. A 'compiler' likewise calls to mind 'someone not particularly creative or imaginative, and certainly not original'.[9] Within the Hindu tradition, however, 'compilation' and 'compiler' have higher connotations. One of the most prestigious figures in Hindu mythology is Vyāsa. He is the origin, humanly speaking, of the Vedas, the *Vedāntasūtra*, the *Mahābhārata* and the Purāṇas. He is *the* Arranger or Compiler: that is what his name, or to be more precise his title, means.[10]

For the Hindu, the act of arranging is in fact a form of creating, perhaps even the highest form. As Hindus see the cosmos, it is created and recreated in a never-ending cycle of great acts of arrangement and rearrangement. In contrast to the Christian idea of *creatio ex nihilo*, the Hindu tradition sees creation as the repeated differentiation of the unmanifest primordial materiality into a seemingly infinite number of forms which can be arranged into a variety of patterns,[11] not only through re-creation (where the same patterns recur, as *Viṣṇu* 1.5.63–7 indicates), but also through the way in which various myths or cycles of myths can arrange themes or figures in different sequences.[12] It is this perception of the cosmos which gives to Hindu mythology its kaleidoscopic quality: the basic elements can be shaken up together time and again so that they fall into new configurations.[13]

In the *Harivaṃśa*, the *Viṣṇu* and the *Bhāgavata*, the basic elements of the *avatāra* myth and the life of Kṛṣṇa are shaken up together so as to produce three different configurations. To a greater or lesser degree all three texts make use of the same traditional material, but they ring the changes on it by various devices such as framing, drawing of parallels, introducing passages of praise or prayer (this is especially true of the *Viṣṇu*), shifts in perspective, changes in time, echoes of other texts (used to particular effect in the *Bhāgavata*), use of older ideas to give a new interpretation, and relocation of incidents. These devices will be amply illustrated in later chapters. The immediate task is to separate out the theological and the literary strands of this study, so this chapter will deal first with the *avatāra* myth as a theological development within Vaiṣṇavism and then with the three texts in which the use of the *avatāra* myth is to be explored.

THE *AVATĀRA* DRAMA: KṚṢṆA AS ACTOR AND AS ROLE

Although its primary meaning is 'descent', the word *avatāra* is often translated into English as 'incarnation'. This is misleading because it suggests too strong a resemblance to the Incarnation of Christian theology. The Latin *incarnatio*, like the Greek *ensarkosis* which it translates, implies that what is important in the Christian concept is that the divine personage should be 'in the flesh', i.e. totally real in human terms, all of a piece with the rest of human history. Whereas Christians have been reluctant to use words like 'appearance' or 'manifestation' of their incarnate Lord, such ideas are implicit in the term *avatāra*, since it has associations with the theatre (*raṅgāvataraṇa*, 'entering on the stage', is a word for the acting profession; *raṅgāvatāraka* is an actor).[14] The *avatāra* is God appearing upon the world's stage, having descended from the highest level of reality to that of the *trailokya* (the triple world of *devas, asuras*[15] and human beings) in order to perform some beneficial action, notably the restoration of the socio-cosmic order (*dharma*).[16] It is not simply a question of the transformation of any celestial being into another shape. The transformation must be that of the Supreme God and it must be undertaken for the good of the world, or of some individual within the world.

The *avatāra* myth is usually regarded as a distinctive feature of Vaiṣṇavism. Although there are texts which describe successive manifestations of Śiva and Devī,[17] it is clear from even a superficial reading that these passages are directly imitative of Vaiṣṇava *avatāra* lists.[18] The *avatāras* of Viṣṇu carry a greater theological weight than those of Śiva or Devī. The qualities which characterise Śiva – e.g. his combination of ascetic and householder lifestyles, the extravagance of his grief or anger[19] – are not illustrated by stories of his *avatāras*. Take away Śiva's *avatāras* and a rich mythology remains. Take away the *avatāras* of Viṣṇu and his mythology is impoverished because it is precisely in these episodes that he most often shows his characteristic concern for *dharma*, his benevolence towards human beings and his power to save.

Although it is usual to speak of Viṣṇu as the source of the *avatāras*, this is only one of the names of the Supreme God of Vaiṣṇavism. He is also known as Nārāyaṇa, Vāsudeva and Kṛṣṇa, and behind each of these names is a divine figure with his own characteristics and associations. The fact that the tradition which worships him is known as Vaiṣṇavism does not mean that the process of fusion, whereby the traits of these four divine figures were combined, was one in which

Viṣṇu was always dominant, nor does it mean that the process began with his followers. Indeed expressions such as 'followers of Viṣṇu' or 'cult of Viṣṇu' are meaningless in the earliest stages of this development.[20] It is much more likely that it was the growth of the cult of Kṛṣṇa which gave rise to this process of fusion, a process which appears to have taken place somewhere between the fifth and second centuries BCE, although its precise stages are impossible to document and peripheral to the main themes of this study.[21]

A brief look at each of these four divine personae of the Supreme God of Vaiṣṇavism will show their chief characteristics and their affinities with each other. The traditional association of **Viṣṇu** with √*viś* (to enter) establishes him as the God who enters or pervades the universe.[22] Although a relatively minor figure in the Vedic pantheon,[23] he is not an insignificant one. He is the *axis mundi*, upholding the threefold universe.[24] He is Indra's brother and close friend, drinking *soma* with him and sharing his home.[25] He is a hero: his 'mighty deeds' which are celebrated in the *Viṣṇusūkta* (1.154) consist of three great strides which are described again and again,[26] and are intimately connected with Indra's victory over Vṛtra.[27] Indeed there is one hymn which ends with the suggestion that Viṣṇu's striding and Indra's killing of Vṛtra are to be seen as two aspects of the divine work of creation.[28] Benevolence towards human beings is the general attitude of all the Vedic gods,[29] but Viṣṇu is specially seen as their protector and friend.[30] His measuring out of the earth is said to be undertaken on behalf of the human race.[31] He is the protector of the unborn child.[32] In the Brāhmaṇas, and particularly in the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*, Viṣṇu is identified with the Vedic sacrifice.[33]

Nārāyaṇa is also linked with sacrifice in the earliest known references to him. In *ŚB* 12.3.4.1, 13.6.1.1, Puruṣa Nārāyaṇa is given as the name of the self-offered victim in the great cosmic sacrifice of *ṚV* 10.90. Although not mentioned in the *ṚgVeda* itself, Nārāyaṇa came to be regarded as the seer who composed this hymn. It is possible that the *ṛṣi* who composed the *Puruṣasūkta* may have been assimilated to the Puruṣa whose praise he had sung, and thus himself become the object of a cult.[34] Certainly the figure of a divine *ṛṣi* named Nārāyaṇa, along with his companion Nara, appears in many epic and purāṇic texts.[35]

Whereas Viṣṇu's strides and his character of pervasiveness link him with the spaciousness of the upper air, Nārāyaṇa's connections are with water.[36] The most common etymology of his name, from the *Mahābhārata* onwards, indicates this:

> The waters are called *nāras*: I gave them the name; therefore I am called Nārāyaṇa, for the waters are my perpetual course (*āpo nārā iti proktāḥ saṃjñānāma kṛtaṃ mayā / tena nārāyaṇo 'smy ukto mama tad dhy ayanaṃ sadā // Mbh* 3.187.3)[37]

This etymology is reinforced by the sculptured representations which are found of Viṣṇu/Nārāyaṇa sleeping upon the serpent Ananta/Śeṣa who floats upon the cosmic ocean during the periods of dissolution which end each *kalpa*.[38]

The image of the sleeping Nārāyaṇa may also have facilitated the link between this god and Viṣṇu, because Viṣṇu too is said to have periods of sleep which have consequences for the socio-cosmic order. During each rainy season he falls asleep; no sacrifices can be performed then, and Indra does Viṣṇu's usual work. This idea is expressed in *Hv* 40.23–5:

> 23 When the gods cannot see Acyuta as he sleeps, then he goes to sleep at the end of the hot season and wakes when the rainy season is over. 24 While he is asleep no sacrificial ceremonies, with their purifying texts, take place: Madhusūdana awakes for the sacrifice at the beginning of autumn. 25 Then the Lord of the clouds turns this wheel of the year; while Viṣṇu sleeps, Indra performs his work (23 *yadainaṃ vīkṣituṃ devā na śekuḥ suptam acyutam / tataḥ svapiti gharmānte jāgarti jaladakṣaye //* 24 *tasmin supte na vartante mantrapūtāḥ kratukriyāḥ / śarat-pravṛttayajño hi jāgarti madhusūdanaḥ //* 25 *tad idaṃ vārṣikaṃ cakraṃ kārayaty ambudeśvaraḥ / vaiṣṇavaṃ karma kurvāṇaḥ supte viṣṇau puraṃdaraḥ //*)

It must have been easy for this annual sleep of Viṣṇu, reflecting the pause in sacrificial ceremonies which the rainy season brought in Vedic times, to become identified with the sleep of Nārāyaṇa, the Puruṣa who absorbs all things into himself at the end of each *kalpa*. Indeed, *Hv* 40 shows that this identification has already been made: the sleeping Viṣṇu lies in 'the hermitage called by his own name Nārāyaṇa' (*svena nāmnā parijñātaṃ ... taṃ nārāyaṇāśramam*, *Hv* 40.3).

Vāsudeva appears to have a twofold character. The traditional etymology of his name, 'dwelling in all things'[39] aligns him with Viṣṇu as a divine figure with cosmic concerns. Yet he appears in other contexts as a tribal hero of the Vṛṣṇi clan. There is a first century CE inscription, found on a slab used in the construction of a well near the

village of Morā in the Mathurā area,[40] which refers to images 'of the five holy heroes' (*bhagavatāṃ pañcavīrāṇām*) of the Vṛṣṇis. These are usually identified with the five heroes listed in *Vāyu* 97.1b–2a: Saṃkarṣaṇa, Vāsudeva, Pradyumna, Sāmba and Aniruddha.[41] Three of the four names associated with Vāsudeva in this formula (Saṃkarṣaṇa, Pradyumna and Aniruddha) are also found in a late section of the *Mahābhārata*, the *Nārāyaṇīyaparvan* (*Mbh* 12.321–39), usually regarded as one of the earliest documents of the Pāñcarātra tradition.[42] As its title indicates, its usual name for the Supreme God is Nārāyaṇa, but in *Mbh* 12.326.28–40 it is Vāsudeva which is the name of the Supreme God and also the name of the first of four *vyūhas* which emanate from him,[43] the other three being Saṃkarṣaṇa, Pradyumna and Aniruddha.

The name **Kṛṣṇa** means 'black', which has generally been held to point to a non-Aryan origin.[44] There appear to have been two cycles of Kṛṣṇa stories, in which the hero's life is displayed in two different lights: (1) as a cowherd living in the forests around Mt Govardhana; (2) as a *kṣatriya* of the Yādava clan, friend of the Pāṇḍavas and founder of the city of Dvārakā.[45] Probably these were once independent figures, Kṛṣṇa Gopāla and Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva, but texts which tell the whole story of Kṛṣṇa's life link them together by having him born into a *kṣatriya* family and smuggled out secretly to grow up in a cowherd village, in order to escape the murderous designs of his kinsman Kaṃsa. The fact that in this story Kṛṣṇa's mother's name is Devakī may also link him with the Kṛṣṇa Devakīputra who is said in *ChU* 3.17.6 to have been instructed by Ghora Āṅgirasa.

Although the stories of Kṛṣṇa Gopāla became part of the main Vaiṣṇava tradition later than those of Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva, they probably circulated for some centuries earlier among the cattle-rearing tribes of north-west and western India. The tribe with which they are most often associated is that of the Ābhīras. There is some debate as to whether this tribe were immigrants or natives of India, but it is generally accepted that they were settled there by the third century BCE.[46] As for the *kṣatriya* Kṛṣṇa, through the connections between the Yādava clan and the Vṛṣṇis, he became fused with the latters' hero-divinity, Vāsudeva.[47] Once this fusion had happened, the easiest way of accounting for the fact that the hero had two names, Kṛṣṇa and Vāsudeva, was to say that his father was called Vasudeva, so that the second name was a patronymic.[48]

The synthesis of Kṛṣṇa, Vāsudeva, Viṣṇu and Nārāyaṇa probably represents, as R. N. Dandekar suggests, an attempt on the part of an

originally non-Vedic movement, 'the new Kṛṣṇaism', formed by an 'amalgamation of the Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa-religion and the Gopāla-Kṛṣṇa-religion', to establish a rapport with Vedism which would revitalise the latter and give the authority of ancient origins to the new movement.[49] At first sight this makes the *avatāra* myth, which subordinates Kṛṣṇa to Viṣṇu, seem an unlikely development in a process of fusion in which Kṛṣṇa was obviously a more vigorous element than Viṣṇu. How did it happen that the worshippers of Kṛṣṇa should have countenanced the *avatāra* idea, which gave their god a subordinate place to Viṣṇu as one of his manifestations?

The answer to this question probably lies in the fact that they had a problem as to how to reconcile Kṛṣṇa's human life with his divine status. Once he was identified with the Viṣṇu whose abode was the *parama pada* above all mortal comprehension,[50] and with the Nārāyaṇa whose perpetual course was the waters, this human life could most easily be explained by presenting him as a lower manifestation of a higher divinity. The *avatāra* myth gave coherence to a composite deity whose features included those of 'a god who had entered human history'[51] as one of his components. But it is important to remember that Kṛṣṇa was from early times one of the names for the divine actor in the *avatāra* drama as well as the name of one of the roles which that actor plays.

To turn now to these roles, ten of Viṣṇu's *avatāras* came to be regarded as his major appearances: Matsya (the fish), Kūrma (the tortoise), Varāha (the boar), Narasiṃha (the man-lion), Vāmana (the dwarf), Paraśurāma (Rāma with the axe), Rāma (the hero of the *Rāmāyaṇa*), either Kṛṣṇa or his brother Balarāma (also known as Saṃkarṣaṇa), the Buddha, and Kalki (a figure yet to appear who will one day cleanse the world of all evil and fit it for a new beginning). The ten figures emerged from a process of selection which continued through several centuries.[52] They are so diverse from each other in origin and character that it is hard to see what the criteria involved in this selection could have been.[53] Nor is any reason ever given for the emergence of a list of ten rather than of any other number.

It is important to distinguish between the individual stories which have been incorporated into this *daśāvatāra* sequence and the *avatāra* myth itself. Some of the former are primal myths which express basic insights into the nature of the world and into the human condition. The latter is a secondary myth, doctrinal or ideological in character and purpose, which has been imposed upon the former in order to give them a common frame of reference and a particular theological

character which they did not originally possess.[54] Perhaps it would be more appropriate to speak of the *avatāra* doctrine rather than the *avatāra* myth, but 'doctrine' suggests something which could be part of a system or an argument rather than something presented, as it always is in the Purāṇas, in narrative form. 'A doctrinal myth' is therefore the most fitting description. There are other doctrinal myths within the Hindu tradition, notably that of the *trimūrti*, which also develops during the purāṇic period, and which not only links the three *guṇas* with Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva and their respective operations of creation, maintenance and destruction, but also establishes a framework in which the two great gods Viṣṇu and Śiva can coexist.

The narrative outline of the *avatāra* myth is clear and simple: the triple world is out of balance in some way so that *adharma* is prevailing over *dharma*; the Supreme God descends into it, playing the role of some animal or human being, and restores its balance. Yet there is ambiguity in the myth also, arising from the fact that the Supreme God has several names and that one of them, Kṛṣṇa, is also the name of the figure who often occupies the eighth role in the *avatāra* list. Is he the Supreme Actor himself or simply one of ten roles which are all assumed by, and subordinate to, the Supreme Actor?

THREE VERSIONS OF THE *AVATĀRA* DRAMA

It has already been stated that the *Harivaṃśa*, the *Viṣṇu*, and the *Bhāgavata* may all be regarded as belonging to the purāṇic genre. This is not an easy genre to define, whether in terms of subject-matter or of form. There are scores of extant *purāṇas*,[55] and their subject matter is wide-ranging and various. Their form, on the other hand, is unvarying. They consist of long dialogues between a narrator, who is the major contributor in terms of volume, and a questioner who, to some extent, controls the direction of the narrative by requests for information and occasional comments. But this is a form which they share with other branches of literature within the Hindu religious tradition, and which is in no way distinctive of any one particular genre.

The Purāṇas' own self-definition lies in their name, and in the word *pañcalakṣaṇa* which they use to describe themselves. The word *purāṇa* means 'old' when used as an adjective, and 'something belonging to the past' or 'an ancient tale' as a noun. In transmitting

these ancient tales the Purāṇas see themselves as repositories of brāhmaṇical wisdom, 'in agreement with the Vedas' (*vedasammata*, cf. *Viṣṇu* 6.8.12) or even 'equal to the Vedas' (*vedasammita*, *Vāyu* 1.11; 4.12),[56] and yet, unlike the Vedas, as dispensing this wisdom in a form which can be understood by even the humblest members of society.[57] The definition of a *purāṇa* as *pañcalakṣaṇa*, which is first found in Amarasiṃha's Lexicon 'dated variously in the fifth or sixth century A.D.',[58] is usually translated as 'having five characteristic topics', because this is how the Purāṇas themselves interpret it. *Vāyu* 4.10b–11a claims:

> A *purāṇa* has five characteristic topics, i.e. creation, destruction, genealogies, reigns of the Manus, and supplementary stories about those included in the genealogies (*sargaś ca pratisargaś ca vaṃśo manvantarāṇi ca // vaṃśānucaritaṃ ceti purāṇaṃ pañcalakṣaṇam /*)[59]

My translation here of 'the 'five characteristic topics' differs in some ways from that which Wilson, following Colebrooke, used in the preface to his translation of the *Viṣṇu* in 1840:

> . . . 1. Primary creation, or cosmogony; 2. Secondary creation, or the destruction and renovation of worlds, including chronology; 3. Genealogy of gods and patriarchs; 4. Reigns of the Manus, or periods called Manvantaras; and 5. History, or such particulars as have been preserved of the princes of the solar and lunar races, and of their descendants to modern times.[60]

These differences are not just at the level of words. They spring from the fact that I do not believe, as did Wilson and those scholars who have followed his lead, that the *pañcalakṣaṇa* verses were intended as a table of contents, listing five sequential blocks of material. '*Sargaś ca pratisargaś ca*' can therefore keep its more likely meaning of 'creation and destruction' because *pratisarga* no longer has to be interpreted in some way which places it between 'creation' and 'genealogies'.[61] '*Vaṃśa*' can be taken to mean genealogies in general, rather than being related only to 'gods and patriarchs', with royal genealogies being put into the fifth category of *vaṃśānucarita*. The way in which *vaṃśa* and *vaṃśānucarita* intertwine and overlap with each other is just one indication that these various categories were never understood by the *paurāṇikas* as self-contained blocks, but as interrelated themes. Rather than taking *pañcalakṣaṇa* as referring to a table of contents, I prefer V. Narayana Rao's approach to it as 'the ideological frame that

transforms whatever content is incorporated into that frame'. He goes on to say, 'Since the ideas of *pañcalakṣaṇa* are tacitly assumed in the Brahminic worldview, they do not appear in every Purāṇa and do not constitute a sizeable length of the text even when they appear'.[62]

Of the three purāṇic texts which are being considered here, the *Viṣṇu* and the *Bhāgavata* certainly set out their own versions of 'the Brahminic worldview'. The *Harivaṃśa* is more concerned to add its own particular features to the world-view of the *Mahābhārata*. What is true of all of them is that they make more sense when read as wholes than they do when fragmented into different topics or sections. Simply to compare together each one's *Kṛṣṇacarita*, for instance, would be to miss or misunderstand a great deal of what each whole text is saying, because its message is in part conveyed by its placing of the *Kṛṣṇacarita* in relation to the whole.[63]

Yet over the last hundred years the Purāṇas have rarely been treated as integrated texts. They have been used as quarries for various types of material (for history, as by Pargiter; for *dharmaśāstra* as by Hazra and Kane; for myths, as by O'Flaherty and Biardeau) or they have been dealt with by the method which Hacker employed in *Prahlāda*: by isolating episodes and comparing together the versions of them found in different texts. A notable exception to this is Greg Bailey. Near the beginning of his introduction to the *Upāsanākhaṇḍa* of the *Gaṇeśapurāṇa* he deplores the 'particular brand of historicism which has not come to terms with the proposition that the basic unit of analysis in purāṇic studies must be the Purāṇa considered as a single synchronic literary unit',[64] and makes it plain that his own approach remains the one which he had already stated earlier: '... I work from the assumption that the best way to gain an understanding of Purāṇic contents is to take for granted the integrity of the Purāṇa as a self-contained unit organised in the way that it appears to us today in manuscript or edited version'.[65]

Throughout this study, I have tried to approach each of the texts as a whole. Although I have chosen to explore a particular theme, I have not concentrated on the *Kṛṣṇacaritas* in isolation, nor have I abstracted *avatāra* lists and related passages from the texts, connected them with one another and insulated them from all their connections with their original context. Instead I have tried to set out the major theological perspectives of each text, and to show the place within these of Kṛṣṇa's relationship to Viṣṇu and to the other *avatāras*. The decision to treat the texts in this way was not one which I took at the beginning of my exploration of this theme, but one which was almost

forced upon me by the texts themselves, as I became increasingly aware of how they had arranged and rearranged their material in order to express their own viewpoints.

Thus, in maintaining that the texts should be treated as wholes, I am not claiming that any one of them is the work of an individual author, but that all show a high degree of 'creative compilation' in their selection and arrangement of earlier material. Rather than analysing the texts into component parts of diverse date and provenance, I am seeking to show how these parts mesh together to build up a distinctive theology and cosmology. Again, this is an approach which few scholars have undertaken, although, in addition to Bailey's work, there are articles by David Pocock[66] and Robert Goldman[67] which also treat purāṇic material in a way which shows the interrelation between literary and theological or mythological concerns. Like all the Sanskrit *purāṇas*, the three in question have been produced by brahmins, so that they all three express some kind of brāhmaṇical ideology. But each version of this ideology has its own individual features, because of the particular circumstances in which each text was composed. This means that even though this study is concerned with exploring the world which springs from the text rather than the world from which the text springs, some attention must be paid to locating each text at its own point in the history of India and of the Vaiṣṇava tradition.

1. The *Harivaṃśa*

Writing in 1968, Daniel H. H. Ingalls spoke of 'the general consensus that the *Harivaṃśa* dates from between the birth of Christ and the third century A.D'.[68] A year later P. L. Vaidya, who edited the text as part of the Critical Edition of the *Mahābhārata*, set the date of the 'oldest form of the *Harivaṃśa*' at about 300 CE.[69] The somewhat earlier dating of Ingalls is upheld, however, by André Couture in the introduction to his recent French translation of 1991; he favours '... the middle or the end of the Kuṣāṇa period, that is to say somewhere between the first and the third century of our era'.[70] He supports this date by reference to N. P. Joshi's identification of 'a series of passages which could possibly allude to artistic representations typical of the Kuṣāṇa period or of the Śuṅga period which preceded it',[71] as well as the resemblance which Joshi sees between descriptions of Saṃkarṣaṇa in the *Harivaṃśa* and Kuṣāṇa sculptures of him.[72] He also points to

the use of *devaputra* in *Hv* 71.49, saying that this word was adopted as a title by the Kuṣāṇa dynasty and by no other in Indian history.[73]

Another pointer to a Kuṣāṇa date for the *Harivaṃśa* is provided almost accidentally by Doris Srinivasan in an article which she herself regards as supporting a much later date.[74] After remarking that, in spite of its importance for iconography and its connections with Kṛṣṇa's story, Mathurā seems to have produced scarcely any sculptured representations of Kṛṣṇa Gopāla in the Kuṣāṇa (or even the Gupta) period, she goes on to describe what it did produce: sculptured triads of Saṃkarṣaṇa, Ekānaṃśā and Vāsudeva.[75] In the *Harivaṃśa*, and in no other known version of Kṛṣṇa's story, this trio is important, as the third chapter of this study will show.

Both in Vaidya's Critical Edition and in the Vulgate version, the *Harivaṃśa* consists of three books: the *Harivaṃśaparvan* made up mainly of material which is found also in other *purāṇas*, the *Viṣṇuparvan*, which tells the story of Kṛṣṇa's life and is the central part of the text in every sense, and the *Bhaviṣyaparvan*, extremely short in the Critical Edition, but enormously expanded in the Vulgate to include creation myths, extended stories of Varāha, Vāmana and Narasiṃha, and much other material. The whole text is attached to the *Mahābhārata* as a supplement (*khila*), although there is no agreement as to how this came about. Ingalls believes that the purāṇic material in the first and third books is 'only a framework' to the *Kṛṣṇacarita* contained in the second,[76] and presumably only useful in making the link with the Epic. Horst Brinkhaus, however, claims that this material had been attached to the *Mahābhārata* before the *Kṛṣṇacarita* was added, and was already known as the *Harivaṃśa* because a large part of it dealt with Kṛṣṇa's ancestry.[77]

The precise manner in which the two texts came together is of no particular interest in the context of this study. What is more to the point is why the story of Kṛṣṇa's life should have come into this central position in Vaiṣṇavism at this particular time. Couture's interpretation of *khila* in the traditional Indian sense of 'a supplement received from elsewhere for the sake of completion, fulfillment, elucidation', rather than in the Western sense of an appendix,[78] gives some indication of just how central this position was. It is unlikely, to say the least, that the *Kṛṣṇacarita* should have sprung into it from nowhere. The fact that the *Bālacarita*, a play attributed to Bhāsa, and regarded by Hardy as belonging 'to the second to fourth century AD',[79] appears to be based on a different account of Kṛṣṇa's childhood[80] again suggests that by Kuṣāṇa times the story of Kṛṣṇa

was old enough to have branched out into different versions. Why then did it take this story so long to appear within the mainstream of Vaiṣṇava tradition?

A clue to the answer may be found in the *Sabhāparvan* of the *Mahābhārata*. One of the kings present at Yudhiṣṭhira's *rājasūya*, Śiśupāla of the Cedis, objects to Bhīṣma's decision to confer the foremost guest gift upon Kṛṣṇa (2.33.31b–2). He tries to belittle Kṛṣṇa in various ways, one of them being a denigratory account of the latter's youthful exploits (2.38.5–15) culminating in a reference to him as 'a cow-killer and woman-killer' (*goghnaḥ strīghnaś ca*, v.15). This description of Kṛṣṇa's youth contains slighting allusions to many of the episodes included in the *Harivaṃśa*: Kṛṣṇa's killing of Keśin (*aśva*, v.7), his overturning of the cart (v.8), his holding up of the 'ant-hill-sized' (*valmīkamātraḥ*, v.9) Mt Govardhana and eating a lot of food at the top of the mountain (v.10), and his slaying of Kaṃsa (v.11). The epithets of 'cow-killer' and 'woman-killer' appear to refer to his killing of Pūtanā and Ariṣṭa, already mentioned along with Keśin in v.7. The order in which these events are mentioned is not that of the *Harivaṃśa*, and it is therefore unlikely that the composers of the Epic have this in mind when they give these words to Śiśupāla. But without doubt this passage suggests familiarity with stories of Kṛṣṇa's youthful days as a cowherd, and Śiśupāla's sneering dismissal of them may represent the light in which they were once regarded by some leaders of the brāhmaṇical establishment. It may well have been that such stories, cherished and transmitted by nomadic cattle-rearing tribes, well outside the main spheres of brāhmaṇical tradition, were mostly unknown in those spheres for centuries and not much valued at first when they became known.[81]

However, the opening up of trade with the Mediterranean world and Central Asia which followed from the rule of foreign kings in north-west and western India, the Indo-Greeks, the Śakas and the Kuṣāṇas, led to an increase in the prosperity and influence of the merchant classes.[82] It may well have been this rise of one branch of the *vaiśya* class which created a climate in which stories of a divine hero who grew up in another branch became welcome rather than distasteful, particularly in view of the fact that the Ābhīras are generally seen as living in the north-west and western regions.

Certainly the *Harivaṃśa* contains a story in which the values of all three branches of the *vaiśya* class (agriculture, trade and animal-rearing) are set out forcefully. This is the episode, given an important position among Kṛṣṇa's youthful exploits by the *Harivaṃśa*, but

almost completely ignored by the *Bālacarita*, in which the young Kṛṣṇa diverts to himself the sacrifice intended for Indra, and protects the cowherd community from the latter's consequent wrath (*Hv* 59–62). It begins with Kṛṣṇa asking the cowherd elders about the feast which they are preparing to celebrate. When told that it is in honour of Indra, the lord of the gods (*sureśaṃ*, 59.18), who is worshipped by all kings and by all other men including the herders, Kṛṣṇa bursts out in protest against this:

> 20 Herdsman, we are forest-dwelling herdsmen, living on the wealth of our cows. Know this, divinity for us is our cows, the mountains and the forests. 21 Agriculture is the livelihood of farmers, trade is the livelihood of merchants, for us the cow is our supreme livelihood; this is what is called the threefold [*vaiśya* livelihood]. The skill upon which one concentrates is one's highest divinity. 22 He who gains benefits from one [divinity] and performs ceremonies for another receives a double misfortune, both in this life and the next ... 27 Brahmins are intent upon the sacrifices of *mantras*, farmers upon the sacrifices of the furrow. The mountain sacrifices are for us cowherds; we should worship the mountain in the forest (*20 vayaṃ vanācarā gopa gopā godhanajīvinaḥ / gāvo 'smad daivataṃ viddhi girayaś ca vanāni ca // 21 karṣakāṇāṃ kṛṣir vṛttiḥ paṇyaṃ vipaṇijīvinām / asmākaṃ gauḥ parā vṛttir etat traividhyam ucyate / vidyayā yo yayā yuktas tasya sā daivataṃ param // 22 yo 'nyasya phalam aśnānaḥ karoty anyasya satkriyām / dvāv anarthau sa labhate pretya ceha ca mānavaḥ // ... 27 mantrayajñaparā viprāḥ sītāyajñāś ca karṣakāḥ / giriyajñā vayaṃ gopā ijyo 'smābhir girir vane //* 59.20–2,27)

This is not to say that the Kṛṣṇa of the *Harivaṃśa* should be seen as inciting *vaiśyas* to rise against their *kṣatriya* masters or patrons. Not only does the Govardhana episode end with Kṛṣṇa and Indra firm friends, but when Kṛṣṇa does eventually rise against Kaṃsa, it is because he is a tyrant, not because he is a *kṣatriya*. Indeed, in the second part of his story Kṛṣṇa himself takes up his rightful position as a leading member of a *kṣatriya* clan. Nevertheless, his speech in *Hv* 59 would be heard gladly, by more than its immediate audience in the story, as a resounding statement of *vaiśya* values.[83]

The idea of a deity who embraces such values accords well with the democratisation of religion brought about by the development of *bhakti* between the time of the Mauryas and that of the Guptas

(roughly 200 BCE–300 CE). The Kṛṣṇa of the *Gītā* had already declared that 'women, *vaiśyas*, even *śūdras*' (*striyo vaiśyās tathā śūdrās*, *BhG* 9.32) were eligible to be his worshippers.[84] Now in the *Harivaṃśa* Kṛṣṇa himself lives as a young *vaiśya*, even though he is a *kṣatriya* by birth. This marks the culmination of the process which Dandekar calls 'the Kṛṣṇaisation of Viṣṇu'.[85] From now on the image of the young cowherd dominates the Vaiṣṇava imagination more and more. The *Bhagavadgītā* as the teaching of the *kṣatriya* sage remains influential. But at the level of the imagination and the emotions it is Rāma who comes to be seen as God's representative in *kṣatriya* terms.[86] The figure of Kṛṣṇa gains a more universal appeal than this, by incorporating *vaiśya* as well as *kṣatriya* elements into his story.[87]

2. The *Viṣṇupurāṇa*

In discussions of the date of the *Viṣṇu* the story in 3.17–18 of how Viṣṇu subverted the *asuras* into Buddhist and Jain doctrines has featured prominently. F. E. Pargiter believed that the *purāṇa* could not be earlier than the fifth century CE, on the grounds that 'from its account of Buddhism and Jainism ... it appears to have been composed after brahmanism has recovered its supremacy'.[88] For R. C. Hazra, this account was 'most probably interpolated at a later date', and his own estimate put the *Viṣṇu* somewhere 'in the last quarter of the third or the first quarter of the fourth century AD'.[89]

The story told in *Viṣṇu* 3.17.9–18.4 is interesting in that its structure is the familiar mythological one of an episode in the perpetual war between the *devas* and the *asuras*, yet within that structure there are hints of a historical situation which has been incorporated into the myth. It opens with the defeated gods laying their problems before Viṣṇu on the northern shore of the Ocean of Milk. They explain that they cannot prevail against the Daityas, because the latter are too faithful to the practices and precepts of the Veda. Viṣṇu takes action on their behalf and gives them an illusory form (*māyāmoham*, 3.17.41) which will go before them to encounter the *asuras*. This illusory form in fact takes more than one shape and proclaims various non-Vedic doctrines: the Jain *syādvāda* in 3.18.2–12, Buddhist teachings in vv15–19, and other unacceptable ideas in v.23. The result of all this is that the *asuras* abandon the Veda completely, thus rendering themselves vulnerable to defeat by the *devas* (vv32–4).

Wendy O'Flaherty has pointed to this story as 'a significant example' of the way in which purāṇic texts of the Gupta period deal with heretics, and particularly with Buddhists.[90] It is, moreover, not the only passage in the *Viṣṇu* in which there is implied criticism of Buddhist views or a hint that Vaiṣṇavas are their moral equals, if not superiors: e.g. 1.6.29–31, which describes 'those in whose consciousness the spot of sin created by time developed' (*yeṣāṃ tu kālasṛṣṭo 'sau pāpabindur . . . / cetaḥsu vavṛddhe . . .*, v.29) as abandoning the Vedas and the sacrificial system;[91] Prahlāda's ethical teaching, which shows that followers of Viṣṇu are exponents of the main Buddhist virtues;[92] Viṣṇu's offer of *nirvāṇa* to Prahlāda in 1.20.28, which declares that Vaiṣṇavas too can attain the supreme Buddhist goal.[93] Such passages suggest that Hazra was mistaken in trying to isolate 3.17–18 from the rest of the text as a later and atypical interpolation: 'these texts of the Gupta period were weapons in a battle between the instigators of the Hindu revival and the still thriving establishment of Jainism and Buddhism'.[94]

Indeed the *Viṣṇu* as a whole seems to have been intended by its composers as a powerful instrument of this Hindu revival. It proclaims the power of Viṣṇu as the Supreme Being, and his presence in various forms throughout the universe. The figure of Viṣṇu combines Vedic resonances with the newer appeal of *bhakti*, according well with the tendencies of the Gupta kings, who 'used the mystique of the Vedic rituals and symbolism to legitimate their authority' while showing a personal preference for Vaiṣṇavism.[95] Frederick M. Asher has seen the Udayagiri relief of Varāha raising the earth from the cosmic waters as 'a remarkable allegory for the unification of the empire under Candra Gupta II'.[96] It would not be too far-fetched to see the *Viṣṇu*'s whole picture of the cosmos as an allegory, in Asher's sense,[97] for the wide expanse of Gupta rule.

To return to the story in *Viṣṇu* 3.17–18, however, this could well be, far from an interpolation, a key to understanding the whole *purāṇa*. Scholars who have examined the *Viṣṇu*, from Wilson to Rocher, have been struck by the fact that there is little emphasis in it upon any particular region or location. As Rocher says, they 'seem to be resigned to the belief that absence of *māhātmyas* or descriptions of *tīrthas* make it nearly impossible to determine the place of origin of the purāṇa'.[98] Yet there is one location which appears to have a particular significance for the *Viṣṇu*. When the deceiving illusion first approaches the Daityas they have 'resorted to the banks of the Narmadā' (*narmadātīrasaṃśritān*, 3.18.1) to practise asceticism. This

is not the first time that the *Viṣṇu* has mentioned the Narmadā. In 1.2.8–9 the narrator Parāśara, having told his questioner Maitreya of how he acquired the knowledge which he is about to impart, explains that this *purāṇa* was transmitted to him from Brahmā via 'Dakṣa and other excellent sages' (*dakṣyādair munisattamaiḥ*), who told it to 'Purukutsa who reigned on the banks of the Narmadā' (*purukutsāya bhubuje narmadātaṭe*),[99] who passed it on to Sārasvata.[100]

This reference to the Narmadā may point not only to the region in which the *Viṣṇu* originated, but to a more specific date for its composition than anything so far suggested. Towards the end of the fourth century Candra Gupta II married his daughter Prabhāvatī Guptā to Rudrasena II, king of the Vākāṭakas (d.390 CE), and then went on to annex the kingdom of the Śaka–Kṣatrapa dynasty in Gujarat. This annexation must have occurred shortly before 409 CE, because in that year the coins of the Śaka king Rudrasiṃha III, bearing a Buddhist *vihāra*, were replaced by Candra Gupta's coins bearing the image of Garuḍa.[101] These moves made the Narmadā the southern boundary of the western part of the Gupta empire, with the Vākāṭaka allies on the other side of the river. The *Viṣṇu* may have been compiled as a kind of Vaiṣṇava Bible, marking the retreat of Buddhism and Jainism, and offering the Guptas a vision of the cosmos, which was at once an image of their empire and a celebration of Viṣṇu as Supreme Being. This was a vision, moreover, which could claim the utmost antiquity, going back to Vedic origins. There are therefore no 'sectarial acts'[102] described in the *Viṣṇu* because the worship and the world-view which it sets out are presented as part of the very fabric of the universe, in existence since creation.

It may seem overbold to claim that 'the banks of the Narmadā' provides such a precise answer to the questions of the *Viṣṇu*'s date and provenance. The full substantiation of such a claim would require deeper and more detailed research than this study can offer. Yet an origin in Western India in the early years of the fifth century CE has nothing unlikely about it, nor has the idea that it was intended to provide the Gupta empire with a religious vision in accordance with the Vaiṣṇava sympathies of its rulers.

3. The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*

This is by far the best-known of the three texts, and its date and provenance have given rise to much discussion. As far as its date is

concerned, Rocher gives a list of twenty which he knows have been assigned to it.[103] They range from 1000 BCE at the head of his list[104] to 1200–1300 CE at the end of it.[105] The latter date is connected with the idea current among pandits in Colebrooke's time that the *Bhāgavata* was the work of the grammarian Vopadeva who flourished under the patronage of Hemādri, a minister of the Yādava kings of Devagiri in the northern Deccan some time between 1260 and 1309.[106] However, such a late date would not only fail to account for the fact that Madhva, roughly contemporary with Vopadeva, regarded the *Bhāgavata* as authoritative, but would be difficult, if not impossible, to hold in view of the fact that the *Bhāgavata* is mentioned by al-Bīrūnī, writing c.1030 CE, as one of the *mahāpurāṇas* found in a list in the *Viṣṇu*. The *Bhāgavata*'s presence in this list counters also another argument which has sometimes been used as evidence of a late date: the fact that Rāmānuja (traditionally dated 1017–1137) does not mention the *Bhāgavata*, whereas he quotes frequently from the *Viṣṇu*.[107]

Al-Bīrūnī's list seems to be the only generally accepted *terminus ad quem* for the *Bhāgavata*, and would mean that it must almost certainly have been composed not much later than the middle of the tenth century CE for it to be accepted as a *mahāpurāṇa* by 1030 CE.[108] At the other end of the scale there is no such precise *terminus a quo*, but it would seem unlikely, to say the least, that the *Bhāgavata* should predate the Āḻvār movement in South India or even be contemporary with its beginnings. This would rule out any date which was earlier than the ninth century CE. Hardy's suggestion of 'the ninth or earlier tenth century'[109] seems to be as near to the date of the *Bhāgavata* as it is possible to arrive.

The southern provenance of the *Bhāgavata* has long been recognised. Writing in 1925, C. V. Vaidya pointed out that in the description of Balarāma's *tīrthayātrā* in *Bhāgavata* 10.79, more attention is paid to the sacred places of South India than in comparable passages in the *Mahābhārata* or the *Skanda*. He also remarked upon the reference in 11.5.40 to the devotees of Vāsudeva who, in the *kaliyuga* would drink the waters of five holy rivers of the South, and the story told in 4.28.29–42 of the Pāṇḍya king Malayadhvaja, who became the ancestor of the seven Dravidian royal dynasties before eventually attaining release.[110]

With Hardy's thorough discussion in his *Viraha-bhakti* (1983) of the relationship between the language and themes of Āḻvār poetry and the *gopī* songs of Book 10, the southern provenance of the *Bhāgavata*

has become firmly established. Besides his main argument, Hardy also provides an appendix which gives five other pointers to a southern origin.[111] Three of these are the passages remarked by Vaidya, and Hardy adds to 4.28.29–42 two other stories from Book 8: 8.4.7–10, in which the elephant king rescued by Hari is said to have formerly been a Pāṇḍya king named Indradyumna, and 8.24.12–13, where the Manu who is rescued by the Fish is said to have been a Pāṇḍya king named Satyavrata, and the tiny fish begins its growth in a southern river, the Kṛtāmālā. The two other evidences of South Indian origin which Hardy discusses are the *Bhāgavata*'s knowledge of the distinctively southern myth in which Kṛṣṇa defeats seven bulls (10.58.32–53; 10.83.13–14), and 'indications of a Tamil substratum'[112] in 10.3.22, 10.31.19, 10.79.14 and 10.87.18, where words which have presented problems to translators and lexicographers are elucidated by a knowledge of Tamil.

T.J. Hopkins concludes his 'The Social Teaching of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*'[113] with what he calls 'a sketchy but useful picture of the devotional movement represented by the *Bhāgavata*'.[114] As Hopkins sees it, the movement was characterised by 'praise of poverty and compassion for the distressed',[115] and mainly composed of 'members of the depressed urban classes', led by 'scholarly ascetics ... who ... may or may not have been Brahmans'.[116] He makes no attempt to state exactly the urban centre to which the movement belonged, but suggests that it was 'in the Tamil country', during 'the reigns of the Pāṇḍyas and Pallavas, when Vaiṣṇavism enjoyed real patronage ...'.[117] Such a description might seem to point to Madurai or Kāñcīpuram as the *Bhāgavata*'s place of origin, with Madurai, the centre of the Pāṇḍya kingdom, as the more likely of the two. Hardy shows that the Āḻvārs upon whom the *Bhāgavata* draws were mainly those from the Pāṇḍya region,[118] and places its composition 'somewhere in the Pāṇṭiya-nāṭu'.[119]

Much of Hopkins' description of the devotional movement which produced the *Bhāgavata* reads convincingly, yet it is hard to believe that its composers thought of themselves as writing simply for the kind of movement which Hopkins describes. From the start they appear to be claiming the attention of a much wider circle, in ways which will be described in Chapter 6. They may be critical of Vedic orthodoxy, but they identify themselves closely with the Vedas and with other prestigious Sanskrit texts, while regarding themselves as free to reinterpret them in their own way.[120] One has the impression that this is a text which from its origin set out to achieve pan-Indian status.

Although there is so much evidence for the *Bhāgavata*'s southern provenance, it is perhaps not too fanciful to speculate that it was in fact composed in the north, as the work of a group which had migrated from the south to establish itself there. The beginnings of the Cōḷa ascendancy in the early tenth century may have provided the setting for such a scenario. The Cōḷas were Śaiva in their sympathies, and in 907 their first important ruler, Parantaka I, came to power, ten years after his father Āditya had defeated his Pallava overlord. During the tenth century the power of the Cōḷas extended into other regions of the south, including that of the Pāṇḍyas, and even as far as Sri Lanka and the Maldives.[121] It is possible that early in the tenth century a group of Pāṇḍya brahmins who were devoted to Kṛṣṇa decided to migrate to some area further north, away from this Śaiva influence, and that they then set out to incorporate within the culture of their adopted region the values and world-view of their southern home.

This is, of course, pure speculation. There is no obvious candidate for this 'adopted region', and there are no anti-Śaiva tendencies in the text.[122] Nevertheless, the idea that the *Bhāgavata* originated with a self-exiled southern group who lived somewhere in the north would be in keeping with its particular blend of Sanskrit and Tamil qualities, and with the various changes, noted by Hardy, which it makes to its Tamil material in order to make it acceptable to a non-Tamil audience.[123] This could also account for Rāmānuja's neglect of the *Bhāgavata*, as well as for its presence in al-Bīrūnī's northern list of *mahāpurāṇas*.

A final point needs to be made about the composition of all three texts. As *purāṇas* they belong to a genre which was originally oral. Composing a text would mean drawing upon a repertoire of stories, epithets and descriptions, and making variations in their order, wording and content as appropriate to the audience and the situation. A *purāṇa* of any length would take several days to recite, so this would allow time for questions to arise from the audience which would be answered in the next episode, perhaps by the introduction of new explanatory elements into the story.

Yet from early times there seems to have been a tendency towards the preservation of *purāṇas* in written form.[124] This means that it is not easy to be sure exactly what processes would have been involved in the composition of the three texts under consideration. The complexity of structure of the *Bhāgavata* and the deliberate archaism of its language suggest very strongly that this was a written document

from the beginning. Whether this is also true of the *Harivaṃśa* and the *Viṣṇu* is less likely, but may be the case, even though the material which they have brought together once circulated orally.

In the face of such uncertainties I have decided to refer to 'composers' or 'compilers' of these three texts, rather than to a composer or compiler of each one,[125] in order to indicate that I see the texts as products of group traditions rather than of single authors, while allowing for the possibility that at times members of the group showed their creativity not only by their skill in compilation but also in the invention of new stories. I have also referred throughout to the hearer/reader of these *purāṇas*, which, whether originally oral or written, were all intended for public recitation rather than for private reading. In the chapters which follow, both kinds of creativity will be encountered in the exploration of these three texts. The ambiguity of Kṛṣṇa's position, as both actor and role in the *avatāra* drama, will give plenty of scope for differing interpretations and perspectives, which will be sought first of all in the *Mahābhārata* to which the *Harivaṃśa* is attached, and then in each of the texts in turn.