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ARTICLE V.

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ON THE

HISTORY OF THE VEDIC TEXTS.

BY

WILLIAM D. WHITNEY.

(Read October 27, 1853.)

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ON THE

## HISTORY OF THE VEDIC TEXTS.

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IN the present condition of the Indian Vedas, as laid before us by the native manuscripts, or by the editions which Western erudition and industry are putting forth upon their authority, there is much to excite admiration and suggest inquiry. There is the general archæological interest attaching to records of the past of so remote an antiquity, of so primitive a type, and preserved to us in an extent so considerable. No other nation has placed in our hands so ample a literary representation of an equally distant epoch of its mental development. And this is the more remarkable, as the Indian mind is not one to which we can attribute an inclination to store up historical records. A people that, amid the abundance of its literary productions of every other class, has never originated anything which deserves the name of history, that has erected no national monuments, has yet, as if with a genuine scientific zeal, saved to its latest times a mass of material for the investigation of its earliest, compared with which the fragmentary recollections, traditions and myths, of most other ancient nations, appear but poor and scanty. And the wonder awakened by this circumstance is not lessened by a view of the external form and state in which they are presented to us. In spite of the immense period, more than two thousand years, which has elapsed since their commitment to writing, the antiquity of their dialect (partially obsolete even at the first, and growing ever more and more out of knowledge), and the usual unconscientious and uncritical carelessness of Indian transcribers and scholars, their text exists in a state of purity almost absolute, offering hardly a corruption or various reading to perplex their modern student. Here then are questions interesting both to the antiquarian and the phi-

logist. What are the motives which have prompted to so remarkable a conservation, and what the means by which it has been rendered practicable, in the midst of so many opposing influences? Let us seek to find an answer to these and other kindred inquiries by tracing out in a general way the history of the Vedic texts, both before and after their compilation.

The materials from which such a history is to be constructed are for the most part only data derivable from the texts themselves, their form and arrangement as collections, and their mutual relations, and general considerations drawn from our knowledge of Indian antiquity. Native tradition, except so far as it has preserved, with the hymns, the names of their authors, has but little that is valuable to say respecting the subject. Some few notices are scattered through the mass of the theological literature, which may one day, when gathered and collated, cast some light upon it, but at present they are too obscure to be trusted. To us, however, in our present inquiry, names of individuals, or even names of places, are matters of but secondary importance. It concerns us rather to follow out the history in its more general features, and to recognize the spirit that has manifested itself in the succession of its events.

The general date and character of the Vedic records have been already explained in a previous communication to the Society,\* and therefore need not be enlarged upon here. It was there made to appear that at the period more exclusively termed the Vedic, that represented by the earlier and larger portion of the hymns composing the Rîg-Veda, the Indian race had as yet hardly made its way into India itself, was still struggling on the threshold of the country for its possession, a community of half-nomadic warriors, with deep religious feelings which found expression in sacred song, but unlettered, and with little leisure or inclination for the peaceful pursuits of literature. A long interval must have elapsed, then, before these sacred lyrics were gathered and committed to writing. But they were by no means suffered meanwhile to fall into oblivion: the memory of the nation had seized them with a grasp which only grew firmer as they grew older. They sprang up as, in a sense, the free

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\* See *Journal of the Amer. Or. Soc.* vol. iii. pp. 291, ff.

and natural expression of the devotional feelings cherished by the whole people toward the gods in whom it believed. Yet it was, of course, in certain individuals or families that the power of expression, the faculty of propitiating the divinities by acceptable address, chiefly inhered. The hymns themselves contain evidences enough, direct and indirect, of the high value placed upon them, and of the estimation in which was held the power of their production, and those possessed of this power. And this reverential regard went on to increase rather than diminish, along with the gradual transition of the religion from a more spiritual to a more formal character. Instead of passing out of remembrance or becoming superseded, as their dialect fell into partial forgetfulness, and as both the popular and priestly creeds of after generations became ever farther removed from that which they represented, the respect which they commanded became a kind of superstitious reverence. Looked upon at first as the best accompaniment and recommendation of worship offered to the gods, they came to be held indispensable parts of worship, its only efficient medium: they identified themselves with the religion of the race as its expression, so that selections were made from them for the ordinary purposes of the ceremonial, and their phraseology became in a measure the natural language of discourse upon religious subjects: they were acknowledged as the groundwork of all theological and philosophical speculation: an inspired origin, and a supernatural virtue and efficacy were attributed to them, making their minutest details matters of essential importance, and to be preserved with jealous care. Meantime, also, the families in which they had originated, and who derived from them perhaps their first title to especial consideration, continuing still to retain by right of inheritance their peculiar custody and their employment in the services of religion, participated both in kind and degree in the augmented regard with which they were honored, and came by degrees to constitute a peculiar class, possessors of the inspired word, and privileged mediators between the divinities and their worshippers. And it could not but be their highest interest to preserve in unimpaired remembrance the sacred hymns which constituted so important a source of their influence and authority.

Such were the causes, of a religious or religio-superstitious, and not of a historic, nature, which procured the careful and accurate conservation of the Vedic lyrics during the period of their oral transmission. But there arrived at last a time when they were to be rescued from the charge of tradition alone, and given over into the more trusty keeping of written documents. At what precise point in the history of the Indian race this took place, it is not easy to determine. But it cannot have been earlier than at some time posterior to the transferral of Indian supremacy and culture from the plains of the Penjab to the great fertile valley of Hindustan. For it was not until after the new seats of the race had been fairly entered upon quiet possession of, external foes driven off, internal feuds pacificated, and the advantages of that rich country, which demanded so little labor to be expended in winning a sustenance from it, and left so much leisure for higher pursuits, had been enjoyed for a season, that an epoch of such literary activity as must be assumed to have preceded and accompanied the recording of the Vedic texts, can be supposed possible. During the interval had taken place the development of Brahmanism, at least in all its essential features; the separation of the priestly caste, and the consolidation of its power. It was now the ruling class, foremost in authority, foremost also in culture and knowledge, representing the collected intellect of the nation. And it is not to be supposed that its members had been content to remain in inactive possession of their sacred hymns, recognizing them only as important sources of their power, to be retained and employed as its instruments. They regarded them likewise as their most valuable treasure, the inspired foundation of their faith, the germ of their religious and philosophic science; and as such, the worthy objects of especial examination and study. The Brâhmanas, the second class of Vedic writings, are to us a sufficient evidence of the kind of systematic investigation to which the sacred texts, even before their compilation, had been subjected in the schools of the priesthood. When therefore the necessary time of preparation was past, and an era of active literary effort had been ushered in, the idea of placing upon record these precious relics of the past could not be long in suggesting itself to the minds of those who had them in custody. It

was but a continuance in a new form of the same care which had already long handed them down from generation to generation: a next step forward in the series of labors which had been spent upon them from the beginning.

But at the time when the task of compilation was entered upon, the mass of material which it had to deal with was no longer precisely what it had been at the first. We have spoken as yet only of the hymns of a single period, the oldest. General analogies, and the great similarity of their style and language, justify us in assuming them to have been the production of a particular period, a time of special poetical inspiration; such an assumption, too, would materially aid in accounting for the extreme regard in which they so soon came to be held, as if by a generation that had itself lost the faculty of independent origination, and was reduced to cherish and to employ as its religious expression the legacy of a more highly-endowed age; and yet farther, it would explain why, although hymns are found included in the canon which exhibit a state of things comparatively very modern, most of the intermediate steps of development are but scantily, if at all, represented. The whole succeeding time, however, had not remained entirely unproductive. Partly, doubtless, the genuine spirit of poetry and religion which inspired the earliest singers, had maintained itself for a time in existence, and had not been dumb; partly the possession of the songs already composed had prompted to imitations of them, copying with more or less faithfulness their form and tone; and partly the new and less exalted spirit of the later time had found its own separate expression. Thus a considerable body of lyrics of another epoch had appended itself to those which the tradition had in the beginning undertaken to preserve. Their later and less sacred origin, however, would seem to have been in general distinctly recognized. They were not confounded with the well-attested productions of the ancient sages, but held apart by themselves, and variously regarded by different authorities as authentic and inspired, or the contrary.

It is moreover evident that so extensive a body of poetic matter as the Vedas taken together make up, could not remain long in the keeping of oral tradition without undergoing in some measure corruption and alteration. Especially considering that the language in which they were composed

was gradually growing antiquated, its vocabulary passing out of use, its forms becoming modified, it could not be that all the zealous care expended upon them would keep them quite free from verbal, or yet more extensive, changes: their phraseology would become modernized; some passages especially removed from comprehension might become hopelessly distorted, or be consciously amended into greater intelligibility. The same matter would in different hands and under different circumstances be preserved with different degrees of fidelity: so, especial reverence for the sanctity of certain portions might keep them purer, or constant use in ceremonial service might stereotype more decidedly the passages thus employed. At the time of compilation, then, there would be in existence versions more or less at variance with one another of much of the material from which the compilation was to be made.

Examining now the different collections, with an eye to the relations in which they may appear to stand to the thus stated condition of the material which the tradition had handed down, we find in the first place that the main collection, the *Rik*, is plainly composed of heterogeneous matter. Its first seven books are of one character, arranged upon one plan, primarily according to their authors, secondarily according to the divinities to whom they are addressed: they may be deemed to comprise the oldest, most authentic and most sacred hymns; to have been held by the tradition as a complete and congruous whole; probably to have been first and separately assembled and arranged. The eighth and ninth books exhibit a different system of internal arrangement, or a want of any system; in many instances, too, the tradition is at fault respecting their authorship, and has to ascribe them to fictitious or mythical personages: some of them are given to authors whose collected hymns are contained in the previous books, and would hardly have been left out of their proper place there with the rest, if acknowledged as genuine by the same authority that compiled the latter. It might not be safe, however, to assert the existence of anything in their language or character which would prove them the product of another region or time. The tenth book resembles in respect to arrangement its two predecessors, and the ungenue names are found with still greater frequency among its alleged authors: but farther

than that, it is full of the plainest evidences of a later origin, and doubtless includes many hymns of a time but little removed from that of the compilation itself. Even if, however, we are inclined to believe that the collection grew by degrees to its present bulk, we shall not be warranted in concluding that the whole body of hymns which it finally came to comprise were not in existence at the time when the first partial compilation was made. The intention was probably in every case to assemble all the hymns which the compilers were willing to accept as forming part of the sacred canon, and it was rather the canonical standard which was later, or by other hands altered so as to admit of including a wider range. Various circumstances, of place or person, may have operated to exclude from the collection hymns or passages which were fairly entitled to find place in it, and it is evident from the fragments found in the other Vedas of a character not unaccordant with that of the mass of the *Rik*, that the latter cannot lay claim to full completeness.

The *Sâma* and *Yajus*, in virtue of their character as liturgical collections, aim only at a secondary completeness; at presenting all the passages used in a certain ceremony, or body of ceremonies. With respect to the mass of material from which they are extracted, they include and represent the whole body of hymns which the *Rik* in its present form contains. The *Sâma*, indeed, makes its selections in much the greater part from the material of the eighth and ninth books of the *Rik*, a fact which has yet to receive its full explanation. Both include a certain amount of matter which the great historical collection does not exhibit: the *Sâma* only a few verses; the *Yajus* a much larger number, probably not far from half those of which it is composed: but many of these are of a class which would at any rate have been denied admission into the *Rik*. The *Sâma* shows no signs of having been increased from the extent in which it was originally compiled: the *Yajus*, however, has plainly received considerable augmentations: its connection with the religious ceremonials still in constant usage would naturally expose it to be altered in correspondence with any changes which the latter might undergo. Both exhibit many readings varying more or less considerably from those of the *Rik*: the *Sâma* in particular, in which the versions are claimed to be in the main decidedly older and more original

than those of the great historical collection: this would not prove it to be, as a collection, older than the latter, since its more antique character might be owing to the conserving influence of the ceremonial usage. To settle the question of priority between these two Vedas would be a difficult matter at present: both may safely be pronounced older than the Yajus. The deviations of the latter from the Rik text are neither so numerous nor so extensive as those of the Sâma, nor do they appear to possess any peculiar significance.

The Atharva is, like the Rik, a historical and not a liturgical collection. Its first eighteen books, of which alone it was originally composed, are arranged upon a like system throughout: the length of the hymns, and not either their subject or their alleged authorship, being the guiding principle: those of about the same number of verses are combined together into books, and the books made up of the shorter hymns stand first in order. A sixth of the mass, however, is not metrical, but consists of longer or shorter prose pieces, nearly akin in point of language and style with passages of the Brâhmanas. Of the remainder, or metrical portion, about one-sixth is also found among the hymns of the Rik, and mostly in the tenth book of the latter; the rest is peculiar to the Atharva. Respecting their authorship the tradition has no information of value to give: they are with few exceptions attributed to mythical personages. The greater portion of them are plainly shown, both by their language and internal character, to be of much later date than the general contents of the other historic Veda, and even than its tenth book, with which they yet stand nearly connected in import and in origin. The condition of the text also in those passages found likewise in the Rik, points as distinctly to a more recent period as that of their collection. This, however, would not necessarily imply that the main body of the Atharva hymns were not already in existence when the compilation of the Rik took place. Their character would be ground enough for their rejection and exclusion from the canon, until other and less scrupulous hands were found to undertake their separate gathering into an independent collection. The nineteenth book is a kind of supplement to the preceding ones, and is made up of matter of a like nature which had either been left out

when they were compiled, or had been since produced. The twentieth and last book is a liturgical selection of passages from the hymns of the *Rik*, and it is not easy to see how it should have become appended to the *Atharva* as a portion of its text.

But while the four collections, when compared with one another, thus exhibit differences of reading in the portions common to two or more of them, are none, it may be enquired, to be found within the spheres of the individual collections? At the compilation of each there must have been a choice made by the compilers from among the different readings presented by the tradition: was the task performed in each case by such paramount authority that the text as established by it found universal reception, no new versions being set up in opposition to it? We read much of *Çâkhâs*, "schools," of the different Vedas: how far had they the same original text, differing only in their treatment and interpretation of it, and how far had they independent texts also? These are questions which in the present state of our knowledge can be but partially answered. With reference to the *Rik*, *Sâma* and *Atharva*, although we have direct or indirect acquaintance with the texts of more than one school of each, we do not find that they differed from one another in respect to readings, but only as one accepted as a part of the canon some portion rejected by another. Nor among all the innumerable quotations from these texts to be found in the grammatical, exegetical and ceremonial works hitherto investigated have there been pointed out any deviations from the readings offered by the manuscripts of the present time. With the *Yajus* the case is very different: under that name are included two texts, the *White Yajus* and the *Black*, considerably varying from one another in contents, arrangement, and readings; and of each of these more than one version is preserved, with less striking, but still important, differences. Any explanation of this so remarkable dissimilarity between the *Yajus* and the other Vedas we must leave at present unattempted.

Having thus taken a view of the general circumstances attending the compilation of the Vedic texts, we now come to consider the particular manner in which the act of their commitment to writing was performed. We know, indeed, but very little of the history of alphabets and the art of

writing in India, but in the absence of any special evidence to the contrary we may assume that these texts were placed at the first in nearly the external condition in which they now lie before us: that the alphabet made use of was an ancient form of the Devanâgarî, essentially coincident with that of the present day, and that their orthographic form was the one which they still wear. At any rate, neither the one nor the other will have been devised for their express benefit. For although the system of sounds of the spoken Vedic was not so different from that of the Sanskrit that they should not both have been written accurately with the same characters, it was otherwise with the orthographic form: that was peculiarly Sanskrit and did not in all respects suit the Vedic texts, which accordingly had to undergo some degree of violence to be forced into it. It is well known, namely, with what extreme care the Sanskrit avoids the hiatus, or juxtaposition of two vowels. Except in one or two cases, where a consonant has fallen out between them, such a concurrence is never permitted: either the one or the other of them is dropped, or the former is converted into a semivowel, or the two are coalesced into one. The Vedic language, however, as the metre of the hymns proves beyond question, had to the very last no such dread of the hiatus, but allowed it with the utmost frequency as well in the interior of words as between two words: all the rules by which the Sanskrit avoids it are incessantly disregarded: their observance may be said even to constitute the exception, to have been simply admissible as a metrical expedient. And it is a circumstance very characteristic of the period at which the hymns must have been written down, that in the process all the rules of the later Sanskrit in respect to the hiatus are strictly followed: they are accordingly not written as they were spoken and are to be read: what is set down as one syllable is frequently to be taken apart into two, three, or possibly even four. Apart from this, which may be regarded as in some measure also required by the character of the alphabet made use of, it is probable that the phonetic peculiarities of the Vedic language are faithfully recorded in the written texts: they exhibit at any rate many special usages, or violations of the rules of the classic language. And the nature and degree of these variations, as appearing in different texts, or portions

of texts, are not without value as indications of comparative age or mutual relationship of the portions in question.

The texts thus recorded were then farther provided with a designation of the accentuation. This, although it in fact does no more than complete to the eye the representation of the spoken language, yet merits being made mention of as a special contribution of Indian scholarship to the exactness and integrity of the Vedic texts, since it was not a usual practice; saving these collections and a single Vedic work of the second rank, the *Çatapatha Brâhmaṇa*, no Indian text has its accent noted. It is a matter of high congratulation to us that the notation of it was added, not only because we have thus preserved to us the whole system of Indian accent in a much more satisfactory and distinct manner than if it could only have been constructed from the rules of the native grammar, but also because the accent is an aid of no small importance to the understanding of the text. For many forms coincident in orthography are, as in Greek, to be distinguished from one another by their different accent; farther, the accentuation of sundry words in a sentence depends upon the character of the sentence and the relations of its parts, and is accordingly indicative of those relations; and again, what is perhaps of most consequence, the nature of many compound or derivative words may be deduced from the tone given them, since the latter is not confined in point of place, nor otherwise euphonicly variable, but rests on the syllable to which the general laws of formation assign it.

But texts, even when thus carefully committed to writing, and though defended by the extreme reverence with which their every word and letter was regarded by the Brahmins, as inspired by the highest divinity, were by no means insured against gradual corruption in the lapse of generations. Some farther expedient was needed to place their integrity out of danger. And this was found in the construction of a new text, or rather the re-writing of the text already fixed into a new form, which in all probability followed not long after. This was not a work undertaken for the sole and express purpose of guarding the sacred canon from corruption; its special end was rather exegetical; but, taken in conjunction with other means to be explained later, it at any rate effectually secured also the former object. As

already remarked, we are not to suppose the commitment to paper of the hymns to have been the absolute commencement of anything like a scientific treatment of them. Theological and philosophical speculation had been busying itself with their interpretation, and doubtless in some degree also philological and grammatical study with their form. And this latter class of investigations in particular could not but receive a new impulse, and advance with rapidity, when a written text was placed before it as the basis of study. Partaking of the etymologizing and analytic character which has always distinguished the Indian grammatical science, it set itself to separate the continuous and in part self-obscuring flow of speech into its constituent parts, the individual words. And its results were embodied in the production of an analyzed text (the so-called *pada-pátha*, "word-text," in contradistinction to the ordinary *sanhitá-pátha*, "combination-text"). In this each part of speech, member of the sentence, is set apart and presented in its own proper form, uninfluenced euphonicly by the other words with which it stands in connection. But farther yet than this was the process of dissection carried: the words themselves were divided into their component parts; an analysis clear up to the original root, indeed, was not attempted, but compounds were separated into their composing members, and the main secondary suffixes, and in some cases also the case-endings, were severed from the themes to which they were appended. Moreover, such Vedic peculiarities of orthography as were deemed to be mere irregularities occasioned by metrical or other similar causes, were rejected, and the words affected by them reduced to their normal form. This word-text rests upon the ordinary text as its absolute authority, never attempting to alter or amend one of its readings. It is simply the best effort which Indian scholarship was at that period capable of to take apart and present in its elements the language of the sacred hymns. It has for us, then, only a secondary authority, and we are at liberty to reject its teachings when we deem them clearly erroneous: as for instance, to amend an etymology asserted by the division of a word regarded as compound, or even to separate a clause otherwise into its component words. Yet, in the case of the Rik especially, they who fixed the new text were still so near to the time of the hymns themselves, had received

from tradition so correct an understanding of them, and performed their task with such skill and care, that it constitutes for us an authority of very considerable weight, from which it will be necessary only in rare instances decidedly to dissent.

It would evidently be possible from an examination of this analyzed text alone to derive a tolerably correct general view of the state of grammatical science at the time of its fixation. We are not left to this source alone, however, for information upon that point, for contemporaneously with, or not long after, the setting up of the word-texts, were got together little grammatical treatises having for their subject the Vedic texts. These are the so-called *Prâṭiçâkhyas*; four such works are already known, belonging to the *Rik*, the *Atharva*, and the two divisions of the *Yajus* respectively: for the *Sâma* none is yet found, but that it exists, or has existed, can scarcely be doubted. It is necessary to guard against a misconception of the true character of these little works, liable to be derived from their title of Vedic grammars, and their description as the earliest extant records of Indian grammatical science. They do not at all take the whole phenomena of the Vedic language for their subject, and profess to furnish such an exhausting account of them as *Pânini* of the classical Sanskrit; neither do they assume the science of Sanskrit grammar, and undertake to display the peculiarities of the older dialect of the hymns as compared with it; nor are they the first productions of a science that is in its infancy, working its way through the various departments of grammatical inquiry in connection with certain texts, and recording its imperfect results: they are rather the offspring of a system fully developed in all its parts (as is shown by the grammatical phraseology employed by them, which is essentially the same that has remained in use through all after time), but confining itself here to the solution of a particular question. They base themselves primarily upon the existence, side by side, of the two parallel texts, and aim to give such an account of the difference between them that the one shall be convertible into the other. Or to speak more accurately, each supposes the existence in its analyzed state of the matter of the collection to which it attaches itself, and gives the system of rules and exceptions by which this is to be reduced to the

form of a combined and continuous text. Their department, then, is that of phonetics and euphony, of external form; and they adhere strictly to it: the whole subject of inflection, whether by declension or conjugation, and those of word-formation and syntax, are left quite out of sight in them. They do not indeed confine themselves to indispensable matter only, but enlarge somewhat upon the subjects which come under their survey: so more than one, perhaps all, of them, give an analysis and description of the sounds of the spoken alphabet, an account of the accents, definitions of grammatical terms, and the like; the one belonging to the R̥ik has also an interesting chapter on the general subject of the proper reading and pronunciation of the Vedic language, and devotes some attention to prosody, detailing and describing the metres made use of in its Veda: yet all this does not remove them from the department to which they belong, or change their true character and intent. They are still works which came into being in connection with the setting up of the word-texts of the Vedas, and which converted the latter, from instruments more especially of exegesis, into a complete and efficient apparatus for securing the preservation of textual purity. The two taken together, on the one hand the word-text, which by its nature was clearer, distincter, and less liable to corruption than the ordinary one, and which, maintaining an independent existence by the side of the latter, was a constant check upon its correctness, itself also in turn checked by it; and on the other hand the Pr̥at̥içāk̥hya grammar, which precisely established the relation between the two, both in its general rules and in its exceptional irregularities—these two together are the external aids by which the scrupulous care of the Brahmans has been enabled to maintain the sacred texts throughout their whole history so free from corruptions and discrepancies of manuscripts. They are not, however, the only ones which native ingenuity devised for the purpose. A third form of text was originated with the express design of putting the canon beyond the reach of variation: it was called “step-text” (*kr̥ama-pāṭha*), and combined in itself both the other forms, presenting each word now in its independent and now in its combined state: as its name denotes, it went through the text step by step, attaining its object by successive repetitions of small portions. There were several

modifications of it; the simplest was that which proceeded by steps of one word, but appending to each in turn its successor in the sentence, thus showing alternately its end and its beginning in the uncombined state. Rules for the formation of such texts are to be found in some, if not in all, of the Prâtiçâkhyas, and they had likewise their own special treatises. But manuscripts so written are very rare, and it would not appear that this expedient had ever been made sufficient use of to render it a very important auxiliary in the work of conserving the texts.

One other subordinate aid in this work deserves to be at least alluded to; a class of writings termed Anukramaṇî, which gave in succession for every hymn of the collections to which they attached themselves, its author, the divinity to whom it was addressed, the number of its verses, and the metre of each: they were accordingly of service to preserve the division, detect interpolations, and prevent corruptions of such extent as would produce a change of metre.

This closes the account of the scientific labors of the Indians having as their direct object the preservation in purity of their sacred canon. The same end was indirectly more or less contributed to by the whole remaining mass of Vedic literature, with its innumerable citations of passages and expositions of their form, meaning, or application, ending finally in the gigantic commentaries, which with their thorough and detailed treatment, grammatical and exegetical, of the whole texts, drawing in to themselves the results of the labors of generations of investigators, worthily closed off the history of a philology which in many respects may fairly be pronounced without a parallel in the world.