

SOUTH ASIA RESEARCH

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A Publication Series of
The University of Texas Center for Asian Studies
and Oxford University Press

THE EARLY UPANIṢADS
Annotated Text and Translation
Patrick Olivelle

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New York Oxford

Oxford University Press

1998

Bṛhadāraṇyaka and the Chāndogya, although I will deal with some of the doctrines of the Sāṃkhya and Yoga traditions and with the monotheistic and devotional tendencies that underlie several later Upaniṣads.

In this introduction I have avoided speaking of “the philosophy of the Upaniṣads,” a common feature of most introductions to their translations.¹ These documents were composed over several centuries and in various regions, and it is futile to try to discover a single doctrine or philosophy in them. Different theologians, philosophers, and pious readers down the centuries both in India and abroad have discovered different “truths” and “philosophies” in them. That has been, after all, the common fate of scriptures in all religions. Even in the future, that is an enterprise best left to the readers themselves, and the prudent translator will try to step aside and not get in their way.

The Social Background of the Upaniṣads

Modern scholarship has unveiled to some degree the distant and long-forgotten past of northern India. Prior to the middle of the second millennium BCE, this region was probably populated by numerous groups of diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. About most of them we know very little. About one group, however, we have a wealth of information unearthed by archaeologists early in the twentieth century. This group of people built an urban civilization along the Indus River (hence the name Indus Valley Civilization); it lasted from around 2300 until the middle of the second millennium BCE and centered on the two major cities of Harappa and Mohenjo Daro.² This urban civilization died without exerting any noticeable influence on the civilizations that followed.

At about the time when the Indus Valley Civilization became extinct, according to the commonly accepted theory, there took place a relatively large migration of people from the west into the upper Indus Valley.³ They were a pastoral but militarily powerful people who called themselves *ārya* (literally, ‘noble’ or ‘honorable’; whence the word Aryan). Modern linguistic studies have demonstrated that the language of these people, the language in which the ancient vedic literature including the Upaniṣads was written and which later came to be known as Sanskrit, belongs to

1. For an eminently readable yet accurate, unbiased, and brief presentation of the main doctrinal themes of the Upaniṣads, I refer the reader to Brereton 1990.

2. For information about this civilization see B. and F. R. Allchin, *The Rise of Civilisation in India and Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Gregory L. Possehl (ed.), *Ancient Cities of the Indus* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 1979); Gregory L. Possehl (ed.), *Harappan Civilization: A Contemporary Perspective* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982).

3. The Aryan migration theory has been challenged recently by several archaeologists: see Colin Renfrew, *Archaeology and Language: The Puzzle of Indo-European Origins* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987). Even though the migration theory possibly needs revisions and the Aryan migrations may have occurred at different times and at a much earlier period, I think the preponderance of evidence still supports the view that there was an Aryan migration into India in the second millennium BCE and that the language of the Veda reflects the language of those Aryans. For the most recent study of this question by leading archeologists and textual scholars, see *The Indo-Aryans of Ancient South Asia*, ed. G. Erdosy (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1995).

a family of languages (generally referred to as Indo-European) that includes Greek, Latin, and most of the modern European and northern Indian languages, as well as the ancient and modern languages of Iran. This distribution of languages suggests that a related group of nomadic pastoral people migrated across Europe and toward the east, settling first in Iran and finally in northern India.

The Aryans who came into India first settled the fertile land of the upper Indus tributaries (the area of present-day Punjab) but soon migrated farther east into the Ganges Valley. Although the material culture of the Aryans was much inferior to that of the Indus Valley Civilization—urban culture, for example, would not rise again for another thousand years—they left behind a vast corpus of literature, the Vedas, and for this reason the Aryan civilization from the time of the composition of the earliest R̥gvedic hymns, probably in the last few centuries of the second millennium BCE, until about the fifth century BCE is known as the Vedic Civilization.⁴

The Aryans dominated the native populations across much of northern India. Their military prowess may have had many causes, but the horse and the horse-drawn chariots that they possessed must have been an important factor. The horse remained a central symbol of royal power in ancient India, and the horse-sacrifice that figures so prominently in the opening chapter of the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad became the primary ritual expression of that power. But their domination was not necessarily numerical. “The evidence of widespread settlement in the Ganga Valley by the late 2nd millennium B.C.,” Erdosy (1988, 101) points out, “would suggest, that numerically the native population would have been overwhelmingly dominant.” It is this blend of indigenous and Aryan peoples that constituted vedic society.

The subjugated non-Aryans appear to have been by and large relegated to the lower class of an emerging quadripartite social structure: (1) the elite ruling cum military class generally referred to as Kṣatriya; (2) the hereditary priestly class of Brahmins; (3) the large group of peasants and artisans known as Vaiśya; and finally (4) the Śūdra group, which included a motley array of people, including subjugated non-Aryans, servants, and slaves. These four social groups were called *varṇa* (lit., ‘color’), the first three consisting at least in theory of Aryans.

These groups were not as watertight as the later caste divisions of Indian society, and there appears to have been some mobility across the groups. The *varṇa* division of society, however, has remained from the vedic period until modern times the primary theological and theoretical conception of society in India,⁵ and it underlies much of the discussion in the Upaniṣads. By the time of the latest hymns of the R̥gveda, probably the early centuries of the first millennium BCE, the *varṇa* division of society had become theologically so central that a creation hymn (RV 10.90) depicts the emergence of the four classes from the mouth (Brahmin), arms (Kṣatriya), loins (Vaiśya), and feet (Śūdra) of a primeval man (*puruṣa*), whose sacrifice and dismemberment created the universe.

4. The best and the most accurate description of vedic society drawn from literary sources is Rau 1957. Witzel (1987, 1997b, 1997c) has provided the first ever social history of the vedic texts. Accessible, though somewhat dated, studies on vedic religion and mythology are: Macdonell 1898; Keith 1925.

5. For a discussion of the *varṇa* ideology and its use as a classificatory principle, see Smith 1994.

How much influence the non-Aryan religious and cultural traditions may have exerted on the dominant vedic culture has been a matter of much debate and controversy. That there must have been some influence is unquestionable, but to identify specific non-Aryan elements of vedic culture is, I believe, a nearly impossible and an altogether futile enterprise.⁶ As Erdosy (1988, 101) has argued, the very durability of the social order that the Aryan migrants created indicates that the Aryans may have utilized and exploited the social divisions of the non-Aryan groups themselves. It is likely that the élites of these groups were co-opted into the Kṣatriya ruling class and that the Brahmin priestly class incorporated both Aryan and non-Aryan ritual specialists. The Aryans themselves soon lost any collective memory they may have had of having migrated from the west; none of the early vedic texts preserves any such memory.

The influence of the native peoples was probably most marked in the economic area. The Aryans, who had been nomadic cattle herders, adopted much of the economic system of the natives; the economy of the vedic society along the Ganges Valley during circa 1000–600 BCE was by and large an agricultural one, although animal husbandry, especially cattle, continued to play an important role, and cows were the symbol of wealth. Rice, a native cereal of the Ganges region, became their staple food. There is also evidence of crafts, especially pottery, textile, and metal work. The vedic texts themselves attest to the existence of trade and traders.⁷ The economy, however, was primarily agricultural and was based on villages; vedic society remained primarily village-based until about the sixth century BCE.

Beyond the villages and their internal organization, there were broader political units run by chieftains who ruled over many villages. “Already in the 10th–7th centuries B.C.,” Erdosy (1988, 55) claims, “we can see the presence of a two-tier hierarchy of settlements, and suggest that the largest centre existed to control the movement and processing of raw materials, exploiting its position at the boundary of two zones with distinct resources.” These chiefdoms were probably the largest political units during this period, controlling crafts and commerce, collecting taxes and tributes, and exercising military and judicial powers.

By the late vedic period these units had been sufficiently consolidated so that we can speak of the emergence of kingdoms and a monarchical form of government along the Ganges. By about the sixth century BCE—that is, during the period of the first Upaniṣads—many relatively large kingdoms had been created. Kings and royalty, as the Upaniṣadic evidence itself indicates, began to play an increasing role both in the political economy of northern India and in the area of religious thinking and institutions.

A major issue regarding late vedic society is urbanization. After the demise of the urban civilization of Harappa and Mohenjo Daro, northern Indian society was essentially village-based. The available archaeological and literary data indicate the rise of cities along the Ganges Valley between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE.⁸

6. For a discussion of this issue, see Olivelle 1993, 68–69.

7. See Rau 1957, 28.

8. The most recent and very readable study of the archaeological evidence for the emergence of cities and states in the Ganges Valley in the sixth to fourth centuries BCE is Erdosy 1988.

The cities functioned as administrative, commercial, and military centers of the kingdoms. "If the previous period's findings indicated a chiefdom," writes Erdosy (1988, 116), "here we may justifiably argue for the first emergence of a state level of political organization." These relatively large realms facilitated commerce and travel, permitting not only the distribution of goods but also the dissemination of religious ideas and institutions.

It is, however, uncertain whether the urbanization of the Ganges Valley occurred before or after the composition of the early prose Upaniṣads and what influence, if any, it had on the development of Upaniṣadic thought. The society and culture reflected in these documents, nevertheless, are far different from those of the early vedic period. At least some of the new ideas and institutions, especially asceticism and celibacy,⁹ I believe, reflect, if not an urban environment, then at least one that is in the process of urbanization. The vast geography known to the Upaniṣads indicates the relative ease of travel and commerce across much of northern India. They refer to the Gandhāra region of the northwest and the Videha region of the southeast, two regions separated by over 1,600 kilometers. People traveled long distances not only to trade but also to acquire knowledge (BU 3.3.1). It is also interesting in this context to note that there are very few agricultural metaphors and images in the Upaniṣads, while examples derived from crafts such as weaving, pottery, and metallurgy are numerous. These crafts, of course, could appear in village life, but the dominance of craft metaphors at least suggests a milieu somewhat removed from the agricultural routine of villages. A close reading of these texts suggests to me that, by and large, their social background consists of court and crafts, rather than village and agriculture. The later verse Upaniṣads were certainly composed after the rise of urbanization and possibly even after the creation of the Maurya empire in the late fourth century BCE.

The Literary History of the Upaniṣads

The Upaniṣads, on the one hand, are portions of a large body of sacred texts collectively known as the Veda and are thus an integral part of the fundamental scriptures of most people we have come to call "Hindu"; it is in this manner that the Upaniṣads have been transmitted through the centuries, and we should, therefore, consider their position within the broader vedic corpus. They are, on the other hand, documents composed and edited by individuals at given moments in history and in specific geographical locations; we, therefore, need to look at the history of their composition.

The Upaniṣads within the Vedic Corpus

In the brief introductions to individual Upaniṣads, I identify each as belonging to a particular branch of the Veda. The literature of the Veda was produced by and

9. For a summary of how this new urbanization may have affected religious ideas and institutions, see Olivelle 1993, 55–58.

largely intended for Brahmins. Different families of Brahmins became specialists in different aspects of the many and complicated sacrifices that dominated their lives and thought. These specialized family traditions developed into the vedic “branches” (*śākhā*, sometimes also translated as “school”) within which specialized ritual texts were produced and transmitted. The literary structure of the vedic corpus, therefore, mirrors the division of the priestly community into branches specializing in different aspects of the complex sacrificial ritual.¹⁰

The Veda is broadly divided into three sections: Ṛgveda, Sāmaveda, and Yajurveda, but in time a fourth, the Atharvaveda, came to be added to these three.¹¹ The first identity of a Brahmin is determined by his affiliation to one of these vedic traditions; I will explain below the different priestly functions associated with each. Further “branching” of the vedic traditions took place as a result of numerous factors, including geographical location, ritual specialization, and doctrinal and ritual disputes.

Each of these vedic branches has as its foundational text a “collection” (Saṃhitā) of verses or liturgical formulas¹² and a prose text (Brāhmaṇa) explaining the meaning of the liturgy (see Fig. 1). The Saṃhitā of each Veda is by and large common to all its branches, even though some may have their own recension of it, while each branch has its own Brāhmaṇa. The Brāhmaṇas were not the work of single authors, and periodic additions were made to them. These additions included esoteric material explaining the hidden meanings of ritual actions and words. Some of these esoteric sections of the Brāhmaṇas came to be called Āraṇyakas (texts that were to be recited in the wilderness outside the village), while others came to be called Upaniṣads. The distinction between these two groups of texts is not altogether clear, since both deal with similar material; some of the Upaniṣads, such as the Aitareya, are embedded within their respective Āraṇyakas, while others, such as the Bṛhadāraṇyaka (lit. ‘Great Āraṇyaka’), are viewed as both Āraṇyaka and Upaniṣad. Cosmological and metaphysical topics generally occupy a more central position in the Upaniṣads, however, than in the Āraṇyakas, and the Upaniṣads are, by and large, later than the Āraṇyakas. Figure 1 illustrates the position of the early Upaniṣads within the framework of the vedic corpus.

The vedic texts, including the Upaniṣads, were composed and at first transmitted from generation to generation orally and within their respective vedic branches. The reader will observe, and I have frequently pointed out in the notes, the many instances where the oral nature of the Upaniṣads is manifest, as when the author uses deictic pronouns ‘this’ and ‘this’ to refer to his two eyes, or ‘this (here)’ and ‘that (over there)’ to refer to the earth (or something on earth) and the sun. The

10. For a survey of this literature, see M. Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, tr. S. Ketkar, Vol. 1 (New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corp., 1972); J. Gonda, *Vedic Literature* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1975). For the social history of these texts, see Witzel 1987, 1989, 1997b, 1997c.

11. The Atharvaveda is not directly connected with the vedic liturgical tradition and incorporates beliefs and rituals from traditions of healing and magic. Upaniṣads ascribed to the Atharvaveda are generally late and were probably composed as independent documents outside the vedic branches.

12. The Saṃhitā of the Ṛgveda is in verse and contains 1,028 hymns divided into ten books; the Saṃhitā of the Sāmaveda consists mostly of Ṛgvedic verses set to music; and the Saṃhitā of the Yajurveda is in prose and contains formulas that are recited during a sacrifice.

ṚGVEDA	YAJURVEDA		SĀMAVEDA	ATHARVAVEDA
	Black (Kṛṣṇa)	White (Śukla)		
Ṛgveda Saṃhitā	Taittirīya Saṃhitā	Vājasaneyi Saṃhitā	Sāmaveda Saṃhitā	Atharvaveda Saṃhitā (Śaunaka)
Aitareya Brāhmaṇa	Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa	Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa	Talavakāra (Jaiminiya) Brāhmaṇa	Gopatha Brāhmaṇa
Kauṣītaki/Śāṅkhāyana Brāhmaṇa				Chāndogya Brāhmaṇa
Aitareya Āraṇyaka	Taittirīya Āraṇyaka			
Śāṅkhāyana Āraṇyaka				
Aitareya Upaniṣad	Taittirīya Upaniṣad	Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad	Chāndogya Upaniṣad	Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad
Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad	Śvetāśvatara Up.	Kaṭha Upaniṣad	Jaiminiya-Upaniṣad-Brāhmaṇa	Prasna Upaniṣad
			Kena Upaniṣad	Māṇḍukya Upaniṣad

NB This chart is not comprehensive, and there are other vedic branches and texts, which are not included because they do not have extant Upaniṣads. The chart is intended only to indicate the position within the broader vedic corpus of the Upaniṣads translated or referred to in this book.

Fig. 1. The Upaniṣads within the Vedic Corpus

writing down of these documents did not take place for perhaps a thousand years, but the transmission was, nonetheless, very faithful—more accurate, I might add, than most manuscript traditions—and the priestly tradition developed many, often artificial, devices to ensure a faithful transmission.

Toward the last centuries BCE and certainly by the first centuries of the common era, the role of the sacrifice within religion and of the vedic branches within Brahmanical learning became less significant. Specialized traditions of learning (*śāstra*) came into existence, first Sanskrit grammar and then others such as religious law (*Dharmaśāstra*), political science (*Arthaśāstra*), and medicine, traditions that cut across vedic branches. Even within ritual and religious practice, Brahmanical thought came to consider the literature of all vedic branches—that is, the totality of the Veda—as authoritative over individuals in every vedic branch. The Upaniṣads themselves became somewhat detached from their respective vedic branches and became the common property of all Brahmins under the generic title “Vedānta,” meaning the end or conclusion and, in an extended sense, the essence of the Veda.

An early effort, probably within the first five hundred years of the common era, to make a systematic presentation of Vedāntic doctrines is the *Vedāntasūtra* (or *Brahmasūtra*) ascribed to Bādarāyaṇa.¹³ The Upaniṣads came to be considered the section of the Veda containing salvific knowledge (*jñānakāṇḍa*), whereas the other sections contained information about rites (*karmakāṇḍa*). As the revealed source of knowledge, therefore, the Upaniṣads became the basic scriptural authority for most later Indian theological traditions.

Given the importance of these basic texts, numerous documents, often espousing sectarian viewpoints, were composed with the title “Upaniṣad,” and, at least among some segments of the population, they enjoyed the authority and sanctity attached to the Vedas; most of these late texts are ascribed to the Atharvaveda. Such Upaniṣads continued to be produced possibly as late as the sixteenth century CE and number in the hundreds. In the first half of the second millennium CE, furthermore, the early Upaniṣads were detached from the Brāhmaṇas of which they were a part and, together with these later Upaniṣads, gathered into collections; the number of Upaniṣads included in these collections varied according to the region, 52 being a common number in the north and 108 in the south.¹⁴

The Composition of the Upaniṣads

The second issue relating to the literary history of the Upaniṣads concerns their composition. Who were their authors? When and where were they composed?¹⁵

13. See *The Vedānta Sūtras of Bādarāyaṇa with the Commentary by Śaṅkara*. Tr. by G. Thibaut (2 parts; SBE 34, 38; Oxford: 1890–96; repr. New York: Dover Publications, 1962).

14. For an account of these collections, the translation of fifty into Persian (Oupnikhat) in 1656, and the European encounter with these collections, see Deussen 1966, 33–38. For a study on the date of the late Upaniṣads and Upaniṣadic collections, see Sprockhoff 1976, 9–26, 277–95.

15. These are, of course, historical questions. Theologically, the Brahmanical tradition considers the Vedas as revelation. The mainstream view is that they are without human or divine authors; they are self-existent knowledge (*veda* literally means ‘knowledge’) ‘heard’ by ancient seers (hence *śruti* or ‘hearing’ is another term for Veda). Others consider the Vedas to have been revealed by God.

These are difficult questions to answer, because the Upaniṣads have come down to us as anonymous documents and, apart from evidence internal to the texts themselves, no external evidence exists regarding their authorship or dates.

Authorship: The issue of authorship is complicated by the fact that some of the earliest and largest Upaniṣads—at least the Bṛhadāraṇyaka, the Chāndogya, and the Kauṣītaki—are anthologies of material that must have existed as independent texts before their incorporation into these Upaniṣads by an editor or a series of editors. Several such source texts are included in more than one Upaniṣad, leading us to believe that the editors at least partly drew upon a common stock of episodes and teachings.¹⁶

Some of this source material consists of dialogues, debates, and formal teachings by famous teachers of the time, who are identified. Prominent among these are Yājñavalkya (in the BU), Uddālaka Āruṇi (in the CU), Janaka, Pravāhaṇa Jaivali, Ajātaśatru, Śāṇḍilya, and Satyakāma Jābāla.¹⁷ Many of these are, of course, Brahmins, who were not only priests but also the theologians and teachers within the social hierarchy of the time. It is, therefore, surprising that several prominent teachers of Upaniṣadic doctrines are presented as kings, or at least as belonging to the Kṣatriya class. The Kṣatriya contribution to Upaniṣadic thought has been an issue long debated among scholars. Many have gone so far as to claim that the creative and new elements of Upaniṣadic doctrines were the creation of Kṣatriyas.¹⁸

The Upaniṣads themselves appear to lend support to such a view. They record numerous episodes where a Brahmin or a group of Brahmins who claim to be learned are worsted in debate by a Kṣatriya, who then goes on to teach a new doctrine to them. King Pravāhaṇa Jaivali, for example, claims that the famous doctrine of the five fires “had never reached the Brahmins. As a result in all the worlds government has belonged exclusively to royalty” (CU 5.3.7). Similar episodes are narrated with reference to kings Aśvapati Kaikeya (CU 5.11–24), Ajātaśatru (BU 2.1), and others.

The relationship between the priestly and royal classes in ancient India was complex. At one level it was symbiotic; the cooperation between these two groups, in whose hands power was concentrated, permitted both to thrive. At another level, the two groups were rivals for power and prestige. The entire Brahmanical ideology of society and the science and practice of ritual were designed, on the one hand, to enhance Kṣatriya power and, on the other, to ensure the recognition by the Kṣatriyas that the source of their power was the Brahmin. It is naïve, therefore, to accept the literary evidence of the Upaniṣads regarding their Kṣatriya authorship at face value and as historical fact. Surely, these documents were composed and transmitted by

16. The episode relating to the disclosure of the doctrine of five fires is found in BU 6.2; CU 5.3–10; KsU 1.1–2; and elsewhere (see Bodewitz 1973, 110–23; Schmithausen 1994). Further, BU 6.1–3 corresponds to CU 5.1–10.

17. For a study of these thinkers, see Ruben 1947.

18. See, e.g., Deussen 1966, 17–21; Horsch 1966, 427–41. Some scholars have explained the non-standard Sanskrit phrases occurring in some Upaniṣads as due to the influence of a hypothetical Kṣatriya dialect of Sanskrit.

Brahmins. Why, then, did they deliberately include episodes that placed them at a disadvantage vis-à-vis the royal class? There must have been political, religious, economic, and even literary reasons for including or creating these episodes. We must bear in mind that the Brahmin community itself was not a monolithic entity. The most we can say is that some segments of the Brahmanical community must have perceived it as advantageous to present doctrines they favored as coming from the royal élite.¹⁹

This is not to deny, however, that the nobility surrounding the kings played a part in the intellectual and religious life of the time. Indeed, at a time not too distant from the early Upaniṣads, we have new religions such as Buddhism and Jainism rising in approximately the same geographic region of northern India, religions whose founders are considered to have come from the royal class. The doctrines of the devotional religions that became part of Brahmanism are also depicted as being taught by people belonging to that class, people such as Kṛṣṇa and Rāma, who are viewed as incarnations of god Viṣṇu. What is important, however, is not whether a particular doctrine originated among the Kṣatriyas, but that the new religious climate in northern India, of which the Upaniṣads were a part, was created through the intellectual interaction among "new thinkers" within both groups.

The early Upaniṣads also present at least two women, Gārgī Vācakanvī (BU 3.6, 8) and Maitreyī, the wife of Yājñavalkya (BU 2.4; 4.5), as participating in theological disputes and discussions. The fact that these women are introduced without any attempt to justify or to explain how women could be engaged in theological matters suggests the relatively high social and religious position of at least women of some social strata during this period. This is confirmed by a ritual for obtaining "a learned daughter" recorded in BU 6.4.17.

Chronology: In spite of claims made by some,²⁰ in reality, any dating of these documents that attempts a precision closer than a few centuries is as stable as a house of cards. The scholarly consensus, well founded I think, is that the Bṛhad-āraṇyaka and the Chāndogya are the two earliest Upaniṣads. We have seen, however, that they are edited texts, some of whose sources are much older than others. The two texts as we have them are, in all likelihood, pre-Buddhist; placing them in the seventh to sixth centuries BCE may be reasonable, give or take a century or so.²¹ The three other early prose Upaniṣads—Taittirīya, Aitareya, and Kauṣītaki—come

19. For a more extended discussion of this point, see Olivelle 1993, 61–62.

20. See, e.g., the precise dating of various Upaniṣadic thinkers by Ruben (1947): Śāṇḍilya, 670–640 BCE; Uddālaka Āruṇi and Yājñavalkya, 640–610 BCE; and Śvetaketu, 610–580 BCE.

21. Much of the chronology of the Upaniṣads and of other ancient texts depends on the date of the Buddha's death. The generally accepted date of around 486 BCE has been challenged recently. Bechert's dating of 355–375 BCE ("The Date of the Buddha Reconsidered," *Indologica Taurinensia*, 10 (1981): 29–36) has been supported by Erdosy using archaeological data ("The Archaeology of Early Buddhism," in N. K. Wagle and F. Watanabe (eds.), *Studies on Buddhism in Honour of Professor A. K. Warder* (Toronto: University of Toronto Centre for South Asian Studies, 1993), 40–56. If the latter date is accepted, which I favor, then the dates of the early Upaniṣads should be pushed forward a century or so (see Witzel 1989, 241–51).

next; all are probably pre-Buddhist and can be assigned to the sixth to fifth centuries BCE.

The Kena is the oldest of the verse Upaniṣads and contains many of the themes, such as the search for the one god who is both the creator and the agent of liberation for humans, that recur in the four subsequent verse Upaniṣads. Of these, the oldest is probably the Katha, followed by Īśā, Śvetāśvatara,²² and Muṇḍaka. All exhibit strong theistic tendencies and are probably the earliest literary products of the theistic tradition, whose later literature includes the Bhagavad Gītā and the Purāṇas. All these Upaniṣads were composed probably in the last few centuries BCE. Finally, we have the two late prose Upaniṣads, the Praśna and the Māṇḍūkya, which cannot be much older than the beginning of the common era.

Geography: The final issue regarding the composition of the Upaniṣads relates to the geographical areas where these documents were composed. The land known to the authors of the Upaniṣads was broadly northern India ranging from the upper Indus Valley to the lower Ganges, and from the Himalayan foothills to the Vindhya mountain range. We can say with a great deal of confidence that they were all the product of the geographical center of ancient Brahmanism, comprising the regions of Kuru-Pañcāla and Kosala-Videha, together with the areas directly to the south and west of these (see Fig. 2). It is much more difficult, however, to determine the geographical location of individual Upaniṣads. Several scholars have recently attempted to localize vedic branches and texts using evidence internal to the texts themselves. Although the results are not conclusive, this research is significant and is evidence of a growing realization that in interpreting ancient texts philology needs to be supplemented by the knowledge of the geographical region and the social context in which they were composed. I reproduce here some of the tentative conclusions of Witzel's (1987, 1989, 1997c) important studies; the map (Fig. 2) shows both the important regions mentioned in the Upaniṣads and the areas in which some of the individual Upaniṣads may have been composed. In general, we find that the early texts of the vedic corpus were composed in the western and northwestern regions, whereas the center of literary activity in the later vedic period shifts further east, mostly to the Kuru-Pañcāla region; some were composed even further east in the region of Videha.

In the case of the two oldest Upaniṣads, the BU and the CU, localization is complicated by the fact that they are compilations of preexisting documents. On the whole, however, the center of activity in the BU is the area of Videha, whose king, Janaka, plays a central role, together with Yājñavalkya, who appears almost as the personal theologian of the king. During the late vedic period the heartland of Brahmanism was the central region of Kuru-Pañcāla; the Kuru-Pañcāla Brahmins considered their land as the place where the best theological and literary activities were taking place. They must have viewed Videha as something of an unsophisticated frontier region. The entire setting of the third and fourth chapters of the BU

22. Oberlies (1995, 68) estimates that it is impossible for the SU to have been composed long before the first century BCE.

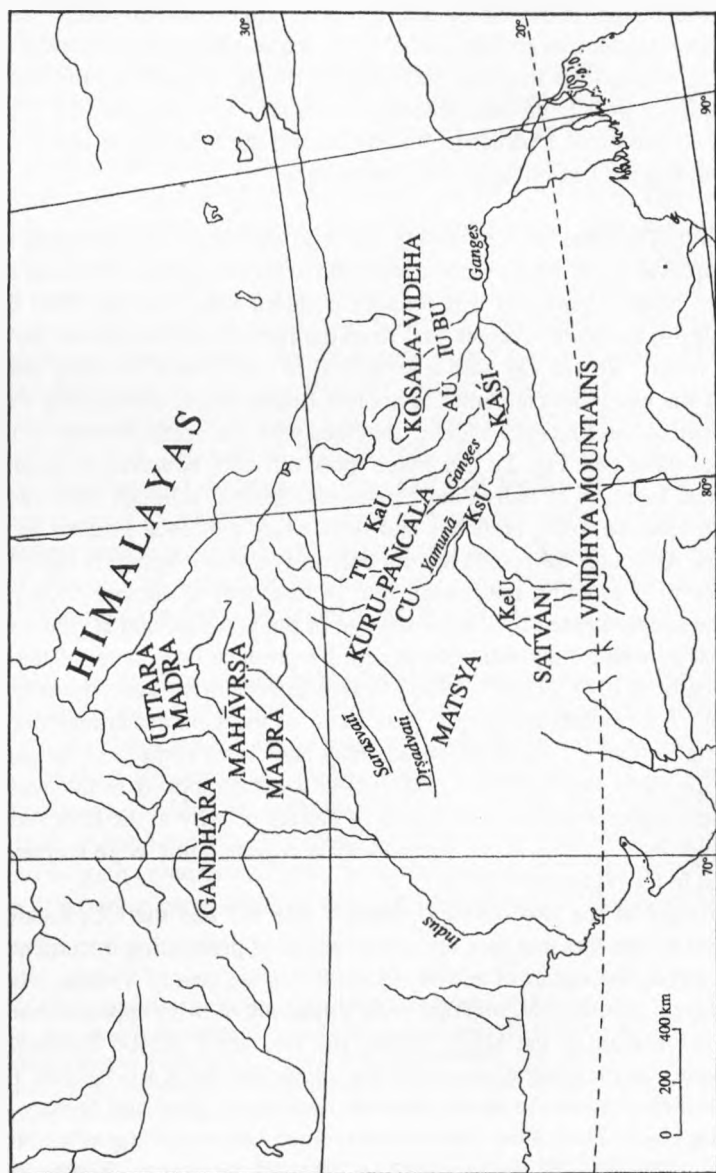


Fig. 2. Map of northern India: The Geography of the Upanishads

was probably intended to show how Yājñavalkya defeated all the best theologians of Kuru-Pañcāla (BU 3.9.19), thus demonstrating not only the preeminence of Yājñavalkya but also the rising importance of Videha as a center of learning.

The evidence for localizing the CU is more meager,²³ but I think Witzel (1987, 194 n. 74) is right in assigning "a more Western than an Eastern location," probably somewhere in the western region of the Kuru-Pañcāla country. The great Kuru-Pañcāla theologian Uddālaka Āruṇi,²⁴ who is vilified in the BU, and Pravāhaṇa, the king of the Pañcāla region, play central roles in the CU.

Turning to the other early prose Upaniṣads, Witzel places the Kauṣītaki/Śāṅkhāyana branch of the R̥gveda, to which the KsU belongs, in the western parts of the Kuru-Pañcāla country. There is little evidence internal to the KsU itself that would help its localization. In chapter 4, however, Ajātaśatru, the king of Kāśi, which is somewhat to the east of the central Kuru-Pañcāla region, plays a central role. The TU and the AU are more difficult to locate. Witzel places the early portions of the AB in the northwestern region around the Sutej and the later portions, and hence possibly also the AU, further east in the Videha region. The early texts of the Taittiriya branch, such as the TS, were probably composed in the northwestern region of Kuru-Pañcāla. The picture is less clear in the case of the later texts, including the TU, although a region somewhat to the north of the central Kuru-Pañcāla appears reasonable.

The later verse Upaniṣads are much more difficult to locate both because they hardly ever mention geographical locations and because they are less closely connected to the Brāhmaṇas of the respective vedic branches. The KeU belongs to the Talavakāra or Jaiminiya branch of the Sāmaveda. Although the early literature of the Jaiminiyas appears to have been composed in the Kuru-Pañcāla country, this vedic branch spread further south to the region where "the rivers run north"—that is, to what is today northern Madhya Pradesh and eastern Rajasthan. It was possibly in this region that the KeU was composed.

The KaU belongs to the lost Kāthaka Brāhmaṇa; without the latter it is impossible to determine the location of the former, which itself gives no geographical information. Witzel places the early literature of the Kāthaka branch in the eastern Punjab, near the River Beas, for it is here that, as the Kāthaka Saṃhitā states, the rivers flow westward. Whether this branch was still located in that region when the KaU, a somewhat late text, was composed is impossible to determine.

The IU, which comprises chapter 40 of the Vājasaneyi Saṃhitā of the White Yajurveda, likewise contains no geographical information. However, both branches of the White Yajurveda were located in the region of Kosala and Videha, even

23. The hazard of internal evidence is demonstrated by a couple of examples relating to the CU. The reference to hail in the Kuru country (CU 1.10.1) and the reference to rivers flowing to the east and to the west (CU 6.10.1) may point to a geographical location in the northern Kuru region, where hail is common and the upper tributaries of the Ganges and the Indus flow toward the east and the west, respectively. But the meaning of the term for 'hail' is unclear; it probably means 'locust.' And even the BU (4.8.9), a clearly eastern text, knows of rivers flowing in both directions; this may have been a bit of geographical knowledge commonly available to people at this time, irrespective of where they lived.

24. He is explicitly identified as a Kuru-Pañcāla Brahmin in the SB 11.4.1.1–2, where he is said to have traveled in the northern regions trying to draw the Brahmins of that frontier region into debate.

though their early literature may have been composed in a more western region. The IU is certainly later than the BU, and it is very likely that it, too, was composed in that region. Since they do not form parts of larger vedic texts, it is impossible to locate the SU, MuU, PU, and MaU.

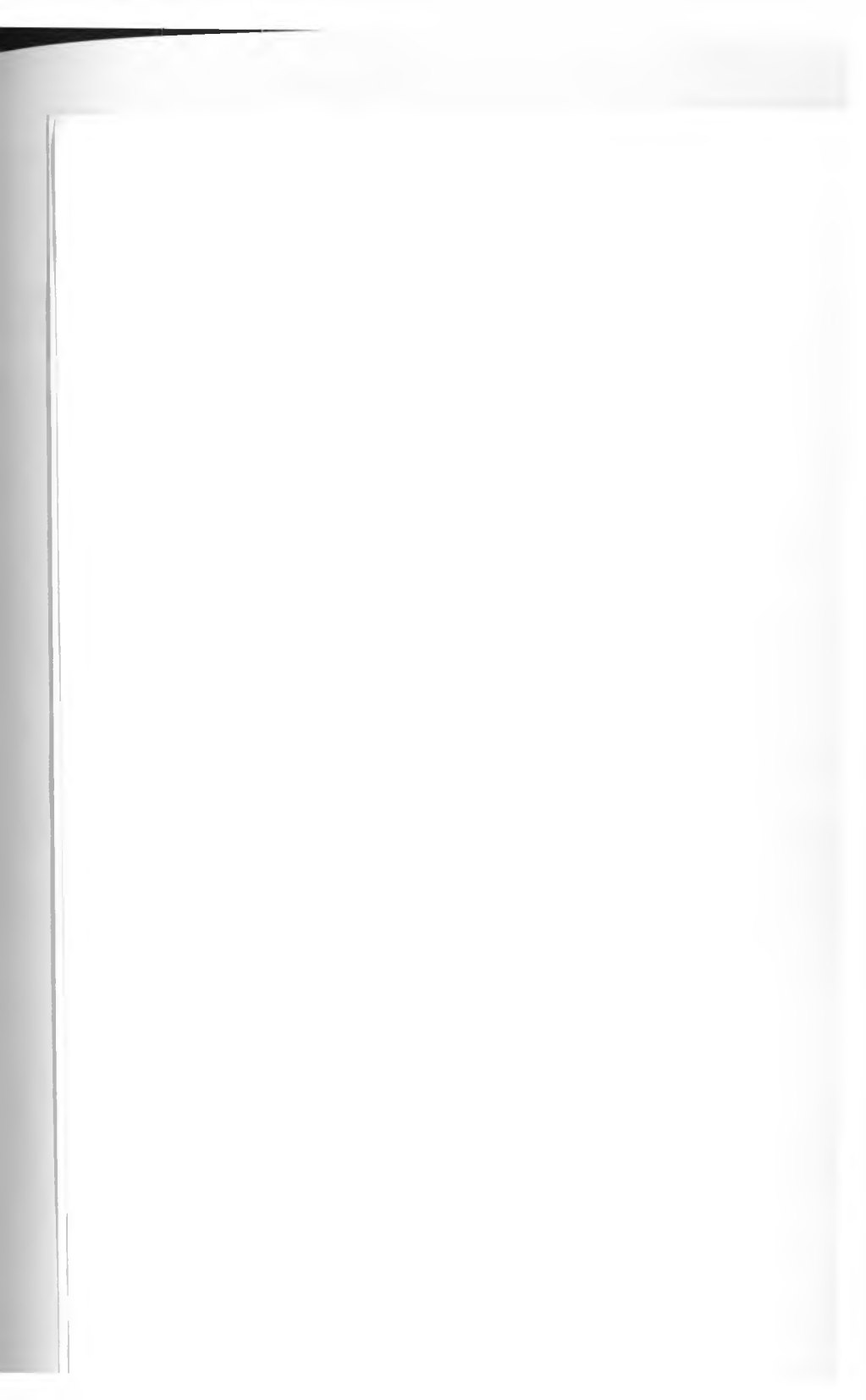
Vedic Rituals

Even though the Upaniṣadic authors sometimes speak vehemently against the vedic rituals, they do not reject them entirely. Just as the vedic rituals are not only ritual but also philosophical and

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The Early Upaniṣads

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Vedic Rituals

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