The textual evidence of the Mewar Rāmāyaṇa manuscripts

By J.L. Brockington

As it has been transmitted over the centuries — told and re-told by bards and storytellers, copied and re-copied by scribes — the text of the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa has inevitably undergone change and development. Gradually, therefore, forms of the text emerged that differ from each other to an appreciable extent, broadly on a geographical basis. The two main forms, normally called ‘recensions’ by scholars, are the Northern recension and the Southern recension, with the Northern recension further divided into a Northeastern and a Northwestern branch and sometimes also a Western branch, although this is so similar to the Northwestern that it is better combined with it.

Until a very recent period it was customary for Sanskrit manuscripts to be written in the script current in the region, which would be that used for the local language or a slight variant of it. Thus, Sanskrit manuscripts in Bengal were regularly written in Bengali script, while in Tamil Nadu they were written in the Grantha script, an adaptation of the Tamil script. After the introduction of printing (a late arrival in India), the Devanāgarī script, used for the modern languages of Hindī and Marāṭhī and already used for a large proportion of Sanskrit manuscripts, rapidly became dominant for printed texts.

The Critical Editions of the two Sanskrit epics, the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa, produced by teams of Indian scholars, have rightly become the standard texts for scholarly work on either and in what follows reference will be made for convenience to the evidence assembled in the Critical Edition of the Rāmāyaṇa (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1960–75). When the editors of the Critical Edition established its text they grouped the manuscripts within the recensions by the script used, for all except the Devanāgarī-script manuscripts, following the practice established by the Mahābhārata Critical Edition. The Northern recension presents a generally more polished and smoother text than the Southern; the so-called Southern recension (which also became current in North India) is therefore usually considered to be more original and so was taken as the basis for their work by the editors of the Critical Edition.

Very large numbers of Rāmāyaṇa manuscripts are preserved in various collections, but the number of manuscripts used for the Critical Edition is comparatively small, although a larger number was initially collated. Differing readings and new patterns of omission or addition can be found in almost every manuscript. Consequently, the
relationship between the different recensions and versions is considerably more complex than the picture presented in the introductions to the successive volumes of the Critical Edition. Indeed, its system of assigning manuscripts to script versions is almost as limiting as attempting to construct a *stemma codicum* — the kind of family tree that is more justifiably constructed for Greek and Latin texts. In reality script boundaries are not as rigid as this scheme of classification suggests and the number of manuscripts in each version or script group varies considerably, which further affects their significance.

In addition, it is clear that often either the scribes themselves or a reviser compared the manuscripts that they were copying with other manuscripts of the text, which were sometimes in a different script (or copied from one in a different script), and that texts were transcribed from one script into another (misreadings caused by the transliteration from one script to another are merely the most obvious evidence for this). This is certainly true of the available Rāmāyaṇa manuscripts. In the Critical Edition the NW recension in particular comprises both a limited number of manuscripts, between one and three, in the Śāradā script (an older script of Kashmir) and a larger number in the Devanāgarī script which clearly derive from a text in the Śāradā script. The NW recension also seems to have more in common with the Southern than the NE does. The NE recension includes manuscripts in the Nevārī (used in Nepal), Maithilī (used in Mithilā, the northern part of Bihar) and Bengālī scripts, as well as a limited number in Devanāgarī.

Most manuscript collections contain predominantly manuscripts of the 16th to 19th centuries, although one Nevārī-script manuscript is older by a very considerable margin (it is dated *saṃvat* 1076 = A.D. 1020). For the Rāmāyaṇa this means an even bigger gap since its origins than for most Sanskrit literature. It also means that the manuscript of the Mewar Rāmāyaṇa written by Mahātmā Hīrānanda is among the older manuscripts available, predating the majority of those used for the Critical Edition, and so is of considerable interest for its evidence. That is all the more the case because the evidence varies from one kāṇḍa (book) to another. This is a feature found with other manuscripts too but, since Hīrānanda records that he wrote his text at different locations, possibly this resulted in copying a different manuscript and so may be linked with the changes in alignment (sometimes within a single kāṇḍa) that are noted below.

First, though, a few remarks about how Hīrānanda went about his work. Although the very first task was ruling the triple red lines that mark the side margins of each side, other items in red (the *daṇḍas* to mark the line ends, the double lines for top and bottom margins, and on a few leaves stepped squares in the centre and roundels in the centre and at the sides) were only added afterwards (and quite often omitted), except that the chapter colophons were usually but not always written at the same time as the
text; sometimes just a lengthy blank is found where a colophon was to be added. Next Hirānanda wrote the text itself in a good-sized, neat Devanāgarī, copying the manuscript before him, which for several of the kāṇḍas was evidently sometimes defective, since he occasionally puts a few dashes in place of syllables that he was unable to read. He also not infrequently made errors which are corrected in one of four ways: obscuring the error with yellow or sometimes white pigment, writing little lines to cancel individual letters, placing caret signs at the point of omission, or putting a line through several words with a bracket round the whole. The caret signs in particular seem to have been added by someone else, who also wrote the individual syllables or whole lines added in the margin (these are definitely by a different writer). In general, however, Hirānanda seems to have been an accurate and conscientious copier, perhaps partly because he was doing it mechanically; it is clear that he was not very fluent in Sanskrit — even the relatively simple epic Sanskrit — and did not always fully understand the text he was copying, occasionally substituting a word that he did know for an unrecognised one in a way that makes nonsense.

The text of the Bālakāṇḍa that Hirānanda copied is basically aligned with the NW and W recensions as a whole but occasionally with just a few within the NW manuscripts used for the Critical Edition, and more rarely it includes readings that are aligned with the NE recension. Neither here nor in any other kāṇḍa is Hirānanda’s text aligned only with manuscripts identified as W (and copied in Rajasthan or Gujarat), despite his working in the premier kingdom of Rajasthan. The text on the later part of one folio (f.95v/97v) is repeated on the next two folios, which are in a different format also seen on one earlier folio, perhaps indicating that these are replacements, although the writing looks identical. There are a few unique variant readings and one unique line (i.e. not attested in the Critical Edition). However, the manuscript being copied is broadly a standard NW form and presumably in good condition (there are no dashes for illegible syllables in the extant folios of this book).

The first part of the Ayodhyākāṇḍa is broadly aligned with the NW and W recensions but quite often shows variant readings up to whole lines added or omitted which are shared only with a subgroup of two manuscripts in the Critical Edition: the sole Śāradā-script manuscript and one other of the NW manuscripts. However, the later two-thirds are aligned with the NE recension and several times with a subgroup within that comprising the Bengali-script manuscripts and one Nevārī-script manuscript (not the eleventh-century one). It also contains occasional unique readings up to a full line in length, as well as occasional marginalia throughout and dashes for illegible syllables in the exemplar on six pages (f.72v, f.84v, f.86v, f.91v, f.103v, f.107v).

As in other manuscripts belonging to the N recension, the Aranyakāṇḍa begins with the last few sargas (chapters) of the Ayodhyākāṇḍa in the S recension (and the
Critical Edition); an obvious feature of the divergence between the N and S recensions is their placing of the beginnings and ends of the kāṇḍas at different points and the Mewar Rāmāyaṇa text agrees in this with the N recension throughout. The Aranyakāṅda starts by showing the same alignment with the NE recension as the later part of the Ayodhyākāṅda, but only for a couple of folios. Thereafter there is a complete change and the text is basically in agreement with the NW recension (or the combined NW and W), although it occasionally has readings not found there, including a substantial number of readings not recorded at all in the Critical Edition. There are no dashes for illegible syllables, suggesting that Hīrānanda was copying a clear and complete manuscript. There are no marginalia after the first six folios, so evidently any revision of the text was abandoned very soon.

The Kiṣkindhākāṅda text is aligned broadly with the NW (or NW and W) recension but there are a few places where its text is that of the NE recension. Towards the end it shows an interesting agreement with a subgroup of two manuscripts which spans the North-South divide: one Śāradā-script manuscript (Ś1) and one Southern Devanāgarī manuscript (D10), which is, however, preserved in the Jodhpur Palace Library and dated saṃvat 1899 = A.D. 1843, so nearly two centuries later. Could its scribe, if he perhaps wrote it in or near Jodhpur, have had access to a manuscript closely related to the Mewar Rāmāyaṇa itself? Hīrānanda’s text also again contains quite a few unique variant readings and even additional lines. But there is only one leaf where he has to resort to dashes (f.77v).

The Sundarakāṅda text is regrettably incomplete, lacking not only its first folio but also a large number of others. It is normally in agreement with the NW and W recensions as a whole but has some readings shared with only one of the Critical Edition’s manuscripts (D2, a NW ms dated saṃvat 1716 = A.D. 1660). Dashes for illegible syllables occur on only one extant page but that is revealing: on f.3v the dashes occur in the name of the sarga which forms part of the sarga colophon and a more literate scribe might well have worked out from the contents of the sarga what the name should be (kṣa–sa–d– for <rā>kṣasīsamādeśaḥ).

The Yuddhakāṅda broadly follows the Northern recension as a whole but with some bias towards readings characteristic of the NE recension and containing several readings shared primarily with the Maithilī-script manuscripts (V1-3). Throughout it shares a number of readings with just one of the Critical Edition’s manuscripts (D13), though not some at least of its unique additions; however, Hīrānanda’s text does contain several unique variant readings of its own. In the middle part of the text the sarga colophons are mostly written in black and just separated by a small space from the preceding and subsequent text. The absence of dashes indicates that he was copying a more complete and legible text than for several other books.
The *Uttarakāṇḍa* starts by being aligned with the NW (or the N as a whole) but later is aligned with the NE recension and shows almost no agreement with the Śāradā-script manuscripts that define the NW recension. With a total of 17, it has the largest number of leaves with dashes for illegible syllables (f.9v, f.33v, f.35v, f.61r, f.65v, f.72v, f.77v, f.79v, f.83v, f.84v, f.97v, f.98v, f.99r, f.99v, f.105v, f.111v, f.113v) and they often occur on adjacent folios; once there are even several on one side (f.77v). No double line defining top and bottom margins was ever drawn throughout this book and there are fewer corrections than in other books, both perhaps symptoms of reduced interest in the project by the new Mewar ruler. It contains relatively frequent unique variant readings and a surprising number of agreements with one manuscript only (at different points with Ṛ1, V1, B1, B2, B3 and T3), including additional passages found only in one of these (all except T3, in Telugu script, the only Southern ms among them). In one instance it fills in a lacuna in that manuscript (at 6.90* l.8 it fills the gap in the reading in Ṛ1 with *raṇe śakro*). This last item illustrates well the contribution of the Mewar *Rāmāyaṇa* to the textual history of the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a whole and the *Uttarakāṇḍa* in particular (where the relationships between manuscripts is particularly complex).