

CLAS 366 or IP 366: Literatures of Ancient India.

Special Topic: Epic Traditions from India to Italia.

Writing Intensive



Spring 2024

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Description:

BACKGROUND

Sanskrit poetry (*kāvya*) is among the most beautiful literatures imaginable. Elaborate images, subtle nuances of emotion, and layered, rhythmic unfolding combine to produce an aesthetic experience that is moving, enlightening, and enjoyable beyond words. These are stanzas of passion and perfection that can be endlessly reread without losing any of their excitement. This tradition of verbal art was born in ancient India in the early centuries of the common era, but a far older tradition of oral-improvisational-epic poetry lay behind it, stretching deep into the prehistoric Eurasian steppes. Ancient Iranian and Mediterranean classical literatures drew upon the same prehistoric, Indo-European poetic tradition, and thus we find exact formal parallels in the Sanskrit epics *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* with the Homeric epics, the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*. Similarly, later, more ornate Sanskrit court poetry drew upon an epic register in the same way that Virgil's *Aeneid* did in ancient Rome. Finally, the Silk Road trade beginning in the early centuries BC meant that India, Persia, Greece, and Rome were interconnected as part of one large classical world. Recent archeological discoveries in Afghanistan and Pakistan only augment this picture, as hordes of gold coins from the Kuṣāṇa emperors are uncovered: these are coins stamped over Augustan denarii and modeled on the same Roman coins, but with images from all the major religions

intersecting at that time and place: Hinduism, Buddhism, Ancient Greek religion, ancient Iranian religions/early Zoroastrianism, etc.

THIS COURSE'S PROJECT

The point of this course is to read the ancient classical world's literatures—from ancient India to ancient Rome—in dialogue, since these civilizations defined themselves in dialogue; setting aside the anachronistic picture of an “east” and a “west” insulated from one another. We start by tracing the development of poetry in ancient India focusing on the epics *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*. These vast poems were, in their early history, transmitted without the aid of writing, by performers who combined memorization and improvisation in a fashion exactly analogous to Homer. Thus we read the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* side-by-side with the Sanskrit epics to reflect on the play of similarity and difference.

Classical Sanskrit literature produced another epic tradition much later, but this time with the aid of writing. This poetry was composed in the breathtakingly fancy style mentioned above, while nevertheless telling stories from the epics. These are called the “mega poems” (*mahākāvya*) by the most celebrated Sanskrit authors: Aśvaghoṣa, Kālidāsa, Bhāravi, Māgha, and their successors. Virgil's *Aeneid* presents the exact corollary in Latin literature of an epic tradition being reinvented in a formally fancier way within roughly the same timeframe.

Aśvaghoṣa's mega poem on the life of the Buddha—the *Buddhacarita*—was composed at the Kuṣāṇa court at a time when Greek and Roman culture were an essential part of the mosaic. Several centuries before this point, we have evidence of Greeks in India worshipping the Hindu god Kṛṣṇa (perhaps seen as a form of Hercules)—e.g. the Prakrit inscription of Heliodoros—and other Hindu deities. Greeks also turned to Buddhism; the Buddha's dialogue with king Menander (*Milindapañhā*) forms part of the Pali canon. We thus read Aśvaghoṣa, Kālidāsa, and others alongside Sappho, Horace, and Catullus to trace the play of similarities and differences revealed by a shared prehistory combined with a long history of cultural exchange. Is the underlying concept of lyric poetry more or less the same, or do the differences begin to outweigh the commonalities?

Juxtaposing Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin poetry—along with Old Persian inscriptions, selections from the Old Tamil anthologies, etc.—reveals a global ancient empire of poetry.

PLACE-BASED LEARNING. Our inquiry this semester will profit IMMEASURABLY from our location in a heartland of the ancient world and living monument of western civilization. We will undertake weekly visits to museums, monuments, and archaeological artefacts; exploring these local cultures' richness with our own senses. Interactions at the level of art and material culture are sometimes impossible to ignore as in the case of the famous Pompei Lakshmi statue, evidence of long-distance trade in the first century. The incomparable collections of ancient art at the National Archeological Museum Florence will become familiar friends. The National Roman Museum, and the newly-opened Museum of Rescued Art are among the panoply of resources

provided by the eternal city, Rome being just a 95 minutes train ride from Florence, and a certain destination for group daytrips this Spring. Frequent guest lectures by local scholars and archaeologists will add yet another beautiful color to this mosaic.

HAWAIIAN PLACE OF LEARNING.

Although this course is conducted abroad, we bring our Hawaiian place of learning with us wherever we go. The Kānaka Maoli consciousness is posited first and foremost through *aloha ʻāina* (love of the land/country). I understand this partly in terms of a concern for land and natural resources, woven into the poetry and traditional Kānaka ceremonies. These ceremonies are fundamentally about rules of “sacred conduct,” indigenous normative practices appropriate to time, place and cultural context. These traditional prayers, chants, dances, and speeches—performed in ritual ceremonies—closely parallel those of Vedic chants and rituals with their similar concern for the entwined nature of the sacred and earthly spheres. This course invites one to be attentive to the presence of land and the cosmic world in people’s practical and everyday lives, and comparison with ōiwi culture, in which the question of right conduct takes on so much and so many kinds of significance. This kind of comparative learning with an attention to Kānaka Maoli consciousness will be our guide throughout the semester.

PLEASE NOTE: THIS SYLLABUS WILL BE UPDATED THROUGHOUT THE SEMESTER SO IT IS IMPERATIVE THAT YOU CHECK IT FOR UPDATES AT LEAST ONCE A WEEK

Student Learning Outcomes (SLO)

--Demonstrate understanding in writing of ancient Indian poetry and poetics in historical perspective

--Formulate comparisons in writing of ancient literatures from across the Mediterranean and South Asian worlds.

--Demonstrate understanding in writing of ancient Indian poetry and poetics in comparative perspective

--Formulate in clear writing reflections upon ancient literatures in the global perspective of the ancient world

--Demonstrate in writing an understanding of various approaches to and methodologies for interpreting literature and its historical contexts.

Mode of Evaluation:

Students will be required to do two shorter written assignments 3-5 pages each (20% each=40% total), as take-home midterm and final exam assignments respectively, as well as one 8–10-page research paper which is due the last week of class (40%). Class attendance and participation in class will count for (20%) of the final grade.

Some writing feedback exercises will be especially critical for your attendance and participation grade. The week after the midterm is submitted, you will exchange papers and tell the class what your classmate's paper is about and what you thought about it. It is ok to be critical, but we should also be kind and try not to hurt anyone's feelings. Likewise, the week before you submit your final 8-10-pager paper, you will share an abstract (see below "what is a paper abstract?") of your paper with both the instructor and one of your fellow students. Again, everyone will briefly present another student's concept for their paper based on the abstract, offering thoughts and suggestions.

About the Written Assignments:

The two, short written assignments—which make up the midterm and final exam—are meant to be response papers, where you discuss your reactions to, experience and understandings of, at least two primary texts. They do not need to be as organized and methodical as your final paper, but should be clear, persuasive, and polished, as well as free of grammatical, spelling, and other mistakes.

The final research paper (8-10 pages) is a chance to think in depth about a topic and discuss at least 3 of the readings we have studied thus far. Apart from this minimal constraint, you are free to choose the specific topic, and encouraged to consult with me about it. You are being asked to think critically about the categories we use to understand premodern India and its textual and traditions. How, for example, do ancient Indian poets and modern scholars each make use of these narrative poems in distinctive ways? How do ancient Indian authors think about tradition, historical time, and change versus how a modern scholar might approach these topics? How do modern categories like "India," "Hindu," "religion," "mythology," etc. both help and hinder our understanding? **The most important part of the paper is your own interpretation/argument, which should be indicated at the outset and then supported with examples from our readings.**

DUE DATES=The first response paper will be due **WEEK 6**. The Second response paper is due **ON THE SCHEDULED DATE OF THE FINAL EXAM, BY THE END OF THE SCHEDULED TIME FOR THE FINAL EXAM. THE FINAL RESEARCH PAPER IS**

DUE AT THE BEGINNING OF THE LAST WEEK OF CLASS.

None of the immediate sources of your paper should be websites (e.g. Wikipedia, Yahoo Answers, etc.).

What is a paper abstract? This consists of 150-300 words outlining your paper's basic concept, what you intend to argue or prove, and which materials you will use to support your case. It is essentially like an outline of your paper written as a paragraph. Expressing the fundamental concept of an essay in an abstract is a challenging task, but it is such a useful skill to develop. If you apply for a grant, you will have to provide a good abstract. Everyone struggles to condense and synthesize their ideas in an abstract, but it provides the additional reward of helping you to clarify and boil down your most essential ideas. Writing the abstract before you have written—or while you are writing—the paper is challenging and it can only be provisional, i.e. you might transform your argument as you write the actual paper, but the exercise of writing an abstract will help you organize your thoughts and then give you more of a flow as you write your paper.

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WEEK 1) What is Literature? What is Sanskrit? Introduction to Sanskrit, Prakrit, Greek, and Latin Poetry and other Genres

Readings:

- (1) Eagleton: "What is Literature?"
- (2) Daniel Ingalls: "Sanskrit Poetry and Poetics"
- (3) Selections from: (3.1) the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* (3.2) the Odyssey (3.3) Bilhaṇa *The Thief's Fifty Poems* [translated "Phantasies of a Love Thief] *Caurapañcāśikā* trans. Stoler-Miller, (3.4) Kālidāsa's Birth of the Young God (*Kumārasambhava*), 3.5 Catullus Carmina

WEEK 2-5 Epics 1: the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the Odyssey

- (1) R.P. Goldman and S.J. Sutherland-Goldman. "*Rāmāyaṇa*"
- (2) *Rāmāyaṇa*. Selections.
- (3) *Odyssey*. Selections
- (4) Lord & Perry *Singer of Tales*. Selections.

Watch the magnificent *Rāmāyaṇa* Japanimé= <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3yf-kYqivn0>.

Take a look at the beautiful illuminated manuscript, the Mewar *Rāmāyaṇa*, completely digitized=
<https://www.bl.uk/ramayana>

WEEK 5-8 Epics 2: The *Mahābhārata* and the *Iliad*

- (1) Fitzgerald. “*Mahābhārata*.”
- (2) Knutson. “The *Mahābhārata*’s Infernal Paradise”
- (3) Nagy. The Best of the Achaeans. Selections.
- (4) *Mahābhārata*. Selections.
- (5) *Iliad*. Selections.

Watch the extraordinary documentary “The Heritage of the Owl” by Chris Marker=
<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0096615/>

WEEK 9-12 Courtly Epic and Lyric Poetry

- (1) *Verses on Life and Love from Ancient India*=Hāla *Sattasāi*
- (2) Aśvaghoṣa *Buddhacarita*
- (3) Ollett, “Making it Nice: Kāvya in the Second Century C.E.”
- (4) Virgil. *Aeneid*.
- (5) Catullus. *Carmina*.

MIDTERM AND FINAL PAPER INSTRUCTIONS=

1) THE PRIOR WEEK, POST YOUR PAPER ABSTRACT TO LAULIMA AND COMMENT ON ONE CLASSMATE’S PAPER ABSTRACT. REVIEW.

2) SUBMIT YOUR ASSIGNMENT ON THE DUE DATE TO “CLASS DISCUSSIONS”=

General prompt for midterm and final: Choosing your topic is part of this assignment, and it is intended as an exercise in creative freedom. That said, there is one rule=please write comparatively about at least 2-3 texts we have studied thus far.

You are encouraged to think critically about how what counts as “poetry” or “literature” differs radically in different times and places (e.g. ancient India vs. ancient or modern Oahu). Reviewing materials from week 1 and 2 could be helpful. Creative analysis and comparison of the relationship between literary traditions of the ancient world, and those we still live with today, are especially welcome.

