

Re-newing the ancient: The *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* and Śaiva Vārāṇasī

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The present essay reassesses the central narratives of that renowned Purāṇic ‘glorification’ (māhātmya) of Vārāṇasī, the Kāśīkhaṇḍa. In retelling the ancient stories pertaining to Śaiva Vārāṇasī, the Kāśīkhaṇḍa embeds itself within the authoritative tradition of Vārāṇasī māhātmyas, even while effecting an ambitious literary project: a radical reconfiguration of the Śaiva landscape of the city. This reconfiguration would seek to legitimize new Śaiva forms—most prominently, an imperial temple dedicated to Viśveśvara—while reconciling them with Vārāṇasī’s existing Pāśupata infrastructure. Belying facile characterizations of Purāṇa as mere ‘myth’, the Kāśīkhaṇḍa composers took care in ensuring that the many, interwoven strands of its grand narrative of Vārāṇasī’s past were purposefully linked to ideological concerns of the present. A close reading of the Kāśīkhaṇḍa’s narrative strategies provokes a reevaluation of current scholarly understandings of Vārāṇasī history that view texts as imperfectly reflecting historical realities, rather than as actively constructing that very history.

purāṇaṃ kasmāt? purā nava bhavati
Nirukta 3.19

In his 3rd century BCE *Nirukta*, Yāska, the great authority on classical semantic analysis, provides the above-quoted phrase, in which the term *purāṇa* is analyzed according to its supposed component parts (*nirvacana*). We might translate this as follows: ‘Why is it called Purāṇa? It is because the ancient (*purā*) becomes new (*navam*)’. While it seems unlikely that the ‘Purāṇa’ of Yāska’s day would have closely resembled the sprawling web of textual profusion that began to flourish under the title of Purāṇa some centuries later, the mode of oral and/or literary presentation to which Yāska here refers may also underlie the constitution of the class of literature known to us as the ‘classical’ Purāṇic corpus. In what ways, then, might a Purāṇa be said to ‘renew the ancient’?

Though Yāska’s insightful gloss is not necessarily supported by a purely linguistic analysis,¹ it certainly calls to mind the oft-cited fluidity of the Purāṇic textual

¹ That is, there are more linguistically accurate derivations (*vyutpatti*) of the term *purāṇa*. For a technical account of several such derivations, see Tripāṭhi 1993, 56–8.