The history of Sanskrit literature labours under the same disadvantage as the political history of ancient India, from the total want of anything like a fixed chronology. As there are extremely few well-ascertained political facts until comparatively recent times, so in that whole vast range of literary development there is scarcely a work of importance the date of which scholars have succeeded in fixing with absolute certainty. The original composition of most Sanskrit works can indeed be confidently assigned to certain general periods of literature, but as to many of them, and these among the most important, scholars have but too much reason to doubt whether they have come down to us in their original shape, or whether they have not rather, in course of time, undergone alterations and additions so serious as to make it impossible to regard them as genuine witnesses of any one phase of the development of the Indian mind. Nor can we expect many important chronological data from the new materials which will doubtless yet be brought to light in India. Though by such discoveries a few isolated spots may indeed be lighted up here and there, the real task of clearing away the mist which at present obscures our view, if ever it can be cleared away, will have to be performed by patient research—by a more minute critical examina­tion of the multitudinous writings which have been handed down from the remote past. In the following sketch it is intended to take a rapid view of the more important works and writers in the several departments of literature.

In accordance with the two great phases of linguistic development above referred to, the history of Sanskrit literature readily divides itself into two principal periods, the Vedic and the classical. It should, however, be noted that these periods partly overlap each other, and that some of the later Vedic works are included in that period on account of the subjects with which they deal, and for their archaic style, rather than for any just claim to a higher antiquity than may have to be assigned to the oldest works of the classical Sanskrit.

I. The Vedic Period. @@1

The term *veda—i.e.,* “ knowledge,” (sacred) “ lore ”— embraces a body of writings the origin of which is ascribed to divine revelation *(śruti,* literally “hearing”), and which forms the foundation of the Brahmanical system of religious belief. This sacred canon is divided into three or (according to a later scheme) four coordinate collections, likewise called Veda:—(1) the *Rig-veda,* or lore of praise (or hymns); (2) the *Sâma-veda,* or lore of tunes (or chants)*; (3)* the *Yajur-veda,* or lore of prayer; and (4) the *Atharva-veda,* or lore of the Atharvans. Each of these four Vedas consists primarily of a collection *(samhitâ)* of sacred, mostly poetical, texts of a devotional nature, called *mantra.* This entire body of texts (and particularly the first three collections) is also frequently referred to as the *trayî vidyâ,* or threefold wisdom, of hymn (*rich* @@2), tune or chant *(sâman),* and prayer *(yajus),—*the fourth Veda, if at all included, being in that case classed together with the Rik.

The Brahmanical religion finds its practical expression chiefly 'in sacrificial performances. The Vedic sacrifice requires for its proper performance the attendance of four officiating priests, each of whom is assisted by one or

more (usually three) subordinate priests, viz.:—(1) the *Hotar (i.e.,* either “ sacrificer,” or “ invoker ”), whose chief business is to invoke the gods, either in short prayers pronounced over the several oblations, or in liturgical recitations *(sastra),* made up of various hymns and detached verses*; (2)* the *Udgdtar, or* chorister, who has to perform chants *(stotra)* in connexion with the hotar’s recitations ; (3) the *Adhvaryu,* or offering priest *par excel­lence,* who performs all the material duties of the sacrifice, such as the kindling of the fires, the preparation of the sacrificial ground and the offerings, the making of obla­tions, &c.; (4) the *Brahman, or* chief “priest,” who has to superintend the performance and to rectify any mistakes that may be committed. Now, the first three of these priests stand in special relation to three of the Vedic Samhitas in this way, that the Samhitas of the Samaveda and Yajurveda form special song and prayer books, arranged for the practical use of the udgatar and adhvaryu respectively ; whilst the Rik-samhita, though not arranged for any such practical purpose, contains the entire body of sacred lyrics whence the hotar draws the material for his recitations. The brahman, on the other hand, had no special text-book assigned to him, but was expected to be familiar with all the Samhitas as well as with the practical details of the sacrificial performance. In point of fact, however, the brahmans, though their attendance at Vedic sacrifices was required, can scarcely be said to have formed a separate class of priests : their office was probably one which might be held by any priest of the three other classes who had acquired the necessary qualification by additional study of the other Samhitas and manuals of ritual. In later times, when the votaries of the fourth Veda pressed for recognition of their Samhita as part of the sacred canon, the brahman priest was claimed by them as specially connected with the Atharva- veda. It is perhaps for this reason that the latter is also called the *Brahmaveda,—*though this designation may also be taken to mean the Veda of spells or secret doctrines *(brahman).* It sometimes happens that verses not found in our version of the Rik-samhita, but in the Atharva- veda-samhita, are used by the hotar; but such texts, if they did not actually form part of some other version of the Rik,—as Sayana in the introduction to his commentary on the Rik-samhita assures us that they did,—were prob­ably inserted in the liturgy subsequent to the recogni­tion of the fourth Veda.

The several Samhitas have attached to them certain theological prose works, called *Brahmana,* which, though subordinate in authority to the Mantras or Samhitas, are like them held to be divinely revealed and to form part of the canon. The chief works of this class are of an exegetic nature,—their purport being to supply a dogmatic exposi­tion of the sacrificial ceremonial in so far as the particular class of priests for whose enlightenment the Brahmana is intended is concerned in it. Notwithstanding the un­interesting character of no small part of their contents, the Brahmanas are of considerable importance, both as regards the history of Indian institutions and as “ the oldest body of Indo-European prose, of a generally free, vigorous, simple form, affording valuable glimpses backward at the primitive condition of unfettered Indo-European talk ” (Whitney).

More or less closely connected with the Brahmanas (and in a few exceptional cases with Samhitâs) are two classes of treatises, called *Âranyaka* and *Upanishad.* The Aran- yakas, *i.e.,* works “ relating to the forest,” being intended to be read by those who have retired from the world and

@@@1 J. Muir’s *Original Sanskrit Texts,* 5 vols., 2d ed., forms the most complete general survey of the results of Vedic research.

@@@2 The combination *ch,* used (in conformity with the usual English practice) in this sketch of the literature, corresponds to the simple *c* in the scheme of the alphabet, p. 270.