**I.** The Vedic Period@@1

The term *υeda—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 Brāhmanical system of religious behef. This sacred canon is divided into three or (according to a later scheme) four co-ordinate collections, likewise called Veda: (1) the *Ṛig-υeda,* or lore of praise (or hymns); (2) the *Säma-veda,* or lore of tunes (or chants); (3) the *Yajur­veda,* or lore of prayer (or sacrificial formulas); and (4) the *Atharva-veda,* or lore of the Atharvans. Each of these four Vedas consists primarily of a collection (*saṃhitā*) 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 *trayī vidyā,* or threefold wisdom, of hymn (*rich@@*2)*,* tune or chant *(säman),* and prayer *(yajus)—*the fourth Veda, if at all included, being in that case

classed together with the Rik.

The Brãhmanical 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* (or *hotṛi, 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 *(éastra),* made up of various hymns and detached verses; (2) the *Udgātar* (udgātṛi), 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 Saṃhitās in this way: that the Saṃhitās of the Sāmaveda and Yajurveda form special song and prayer books, arranged for the practical use of the udgātar and adhvaryu respectively; whilst the Ṛik-saṃhitā, 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, however, had no special text-book assigned to him, but was expected to be familiar with all the Sarµhitâs as well as with the practical details of the sacrificial performance (see Brahman and Brähmana). It sometimes happens that verses not found in our version of the Ṛik-saṃhitā, but in the Atharvavedasaṃhitā, are used by the hotar; but such texts, if they did not actually form part of some other version of the Ṛik—as Sāyaṇa in the introduction to his commentary on the Ṛik-saṃhitā assures us that they did—were probably inserted in the liturgy subsequent to the recognition of the fourth Veda.

The several Saṃhitās have attached to them certain theological prose works, called *Brāhmaṇa,* which, though subordinate in authority to the Mantras or Sarphitâs, 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 and to explain the mystic import of the different rites and utterances included therein (sec

Brähmana).

More or less closely connected with the Brāhmaṇas (and in a few exceptional cases with Saṃhitās) are two classes of treatises, called *Āraṇyaka* and *Upanishad.* The *Āraṇyakas*, *i.e.* works “ relating to the forest,” being intended to be read by those who have retired from the world and lead the life of anchorites, do not greatly differ in character and style from the Brāhmaṇas,

but like them are chiefly ritualistic, treating of special cere­monies not dealt with, or dealt with only imperfectly, in the latter works, to which they thus stand in the relation of supplements. The Upanishads, however, are of a purely speculative nature, and must be looked upon as the first attempts at a systematic treatment of meta­physical questions. The number of Upanishads hitherto known is very considerable (about 170); but, though they nearly all profess to belong to the Atharvaveda, they have to be assigned to very different periods of Sanskrit literature—some of them being evidently quite modern productions. The oldest treatises of this kind are doubtless those which form part of the Saṃhitās, Brãhmanas and Āraṇyakas of the three older Vedas, though not a few others which have no such special connexion have to be classed with the later products of the Vedic age.@@3

As the sacred texts were not committed to writing till a much later period, but were handed down orally in the Brãhmaṇical schools, it was inevitable that local differences of reading should spring up, which in course of time gave rise to a number of independent versions. Such different text-recensions, called *śākhā (Le.* branch), were at one time very numerous, but only a limited number have survived. As regards the Saiµhitãs, the poetical form of the hymns, as well as the concise style of the sacrificial formulas, would render these texts less liable to change, and the discrepancies of different versions would chiefly consist in various readings of single words or in the different arrangement of the textual matter. But the diffuse ritualistic discussions and loosely connected legendary illustrations of the Brāhmaṇas offered scope for very considerable modifications in the tradi­tional matter, either through the ordinary processes of oral transmission or through the special influence of individual teachers.

Besides the purely ceremonial matter, the Brāhmaṇas also contained a considerable amount of matter bearing on the correct interpretation of the Vedic texts; and, indeed, the sacred obligation incumbent on the Brahmans of handing down correctly the letter and\* sense of those texts necessarily involved a good deal of serious grammatical and etymological study in the Brāhmaṇical schools. These literary pursuits could not but result in the accumulation of much learned material, which it would become more and more desirable to throw into a systematic form, serving at the same time as a guide for future research. These practical requirements were met by a class of treatises, grouped under six different heads or subjects, called *Vedāngas, Le.* members, or limbs, of the (body of the) Veda. None of the works, however, which have come down to us under this designation can lay any just claim to being considered the original treatises on their several subjects; they evidently represent a more or less advanced stage of scientific development. Though a few of them are composed in metrical form—especially in the ordinary epic couplet, the *anushṭubh śloka,* consisting of two lines of sixteen syllables (or of two octosyllabic pādas) each—the majority belong to a class of writings called *sūtra, i.e. “* string,” consisting of strings of rules in the shape of tersely expressed aphorisms, intended to be committed to memory. The Sūtras form a connecting link between the Vedic and the classical periods of literature. But, although these treatises, so far as they deal with Vedic subjects, are included by the native authorities among the Vedic writings, and in point of language may, generally speaking, be considered as the latest products of the Vedic age, they have no share in the sacred title of *śruti* or revelation. They are of human, not of divine, origin. Yet, as the production of men of the highest standing, profoundly versed in Vedic lore, the Sutras are regarded as works of great authority, second only to that of the revealed Scriptures; and their relation to the latter is expressed in the generic title of *Smṛiti,* or Tradition, usually applied to them.

@@@1 J. Muir’s *Original Sanskrit Texts* (5 vols., 2nd 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*—as *ṛi* does to *ṛ—*in the scheme of the alphabet.

@@@3 Cf. P. Deussen, *The Philosophy of the Upanishads* (Edinburgh, 1906), where these treatises are classified; Jacob, *A Concordance to the Principal Upanishads and Bhagavadgītā* (Bombay S.S., 1891).