

FROM TWO SANSKRIT MANUSCRIPTS, the smaller an 18th Century example containing selections from several Puranas, the larger, of the early 19th Century, containing excerpts from the Mahabharata; one a plain book for humble use, the other evidently the work of Kashmir craftsmen done at the order of a prince or some person of means. Both books are written in Devanagari script, and correspond somewhat loosely in purpose to a Latin breviary. ¶ The Mahabharata is the oldest, and by far the longest, of the Sanskrit epics. Were it strictly an epic poem, it could be called the longest in the world, but of its one hundred thousand couplets about four-fifths are of such a didactic nature that "the work has taken the place," to quote Professor Macdonell, "of a moral cyclopaedia in Indian literature". Embedded in this jungle of history, legend and ethical dissertations, however, are the beautiful romances of Nala and Damayanti, and the Bhagavad-gita, or Song of the Adorable One, both well-known throughout the cultured world. ¶ The Puranas consist of eighteen epic works, also didactic in character like the Mahabharata from which they were apparently derived. Beginning with cosmogony, "they deal with mythical descriptions of the earth, the doctrine of the cosmic ages, the exploits of ancient gods, saints, and heroes, accounts of the Avatars of Vishnu, the genealogies of the Solar and Lunar race of kings, and enumerations of the thousand names of Vishnu or of Siva." ¶ While Hindu calligraphy and illumination never reached the exquisite refinement that characterizes that art in Muhammadan countries, one can readily see that Sanskrit characters possess peculiar dignity and strength, calling for robust treatment and striking color contrasts.

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