There is something quite deceptive about Bilhaṇa’s Vikramāṅkadevacarita, one of the most popular and oft-quoted works of the Sanskrit canon. The poem conforms perfectly to the stipulations of the mahākāvya genre: it is replete with descriptions of bravery in battle and amorous plays with beautiful women; its language is intensified by a powerful arsenal of ornaments and images; and it portrays its main hero, King Vikramāṅkavaḥkā VI of the Cāḷukya dynasty (r. 1076–1126), as an equal of Rāma. At the same time, the poem subverts these very aspects of Sanskrit literary culture: the poetic language is thinned down at a series of crucial junctions; the Rāmaness of the hero is repeatedly undermined; and the poet consistently airs his ambivalence toward, if not utter resentment for his immediate cultural milieu, his own patron and subject matter, and the very task of a court poet. The article argues that Bilhaṇa’s ambivalence and alienation are the hallmark of his work, and that the poet constantly and consciously struggles with and comments on what he sees as the utter incompatibility between poetry and political reality. It also demonstrates that Bilhaṇa’s unique, personal voice resonates in his many afterlives and in several collections of poems attributed to him posthumously. I argue that it may well be a sign of recognition of what was truly innovative in his poetry that the tradition has credited Bilhaṇa with such additional lives and corpora.

Keywords Bilhaṇa · Vikramāṅkadevacarita · Cāḷukyas · Kāvya · Bāña · Ambivalence · Alienation · Kashmir
Introduction: The Place of a Poet

Compared with the scant knowledge we have about the time and place of most Sanskrit poems, there is an abundance of information about *Life of Vikramāṅka* (*Vikramāṅkadevacarita*, hereafter *VDC*) and its author Bilhana. We can date the work with rare accuracy to the 1080s, most probably to the short period between 1085 and 1089. The place is Kalyāṇa, or Kalyāṇi, capital of the Western Cālukya dynasty, during the long reign of its victorious monarch Vikramāditya VI (also known as Vikrama or Vikramāṅka, r. 1076–1126). We also know much about the life of Bilhana before the composition of the *VDC*: his upbringing in Kashmir, which he left after completing his education sometime between 1062 and 1065, and his subsequent career as a professional poet in some of the major centers of the Indian peninsula, such as Mathurā, Kānyakubja, Vṛṣṇi, Somanātha and the court of the Dāhala king Kraṇa in Mt. Kālanjara, before his arrival at Kalyāṇa. The availability of this information is related to two salient features of the *VDC*: its explicit historical subject matter and its substantial biographical afterword. Bilhana went out of his way to tell his readers where and when to place him. In more than one sense, a major theme of his work is precisely the place poets occupy in the world.

In this connection it is worth mentioning the place that later tradition allotted Bilhana. The *VDC* is one of the most frequently quoted Sanskrit kāvyaś. Dozens of its verses have been cited in anthologies compiled throughout the subcontinent. Many more verses of sources unknown to us have also been ascribed to Bilhana by anthology compilers. Quite a few later poets (from Mañkha in Kashmir to Veṅkaṭadhipparṇa in the deep Tamil country), literary theorists (such as Ruyyaka and Appayya Dīkṣita), and commentators (like the famous Arjunavarmadeva in his commentary on the *Amarśāttaka*), to say nothing of Kashmir’s chronicler Kalhana, have referred to, praised, or quoted Bilhana. In addition, Bilhana has had an unusual posthumous career as the author of the renowned and much-loved *Caurapāṇcāśikā*—“The Fifty Poems of the Thief.” Indeed, he is sometimes referred to simply by the nickname *cora*, “the Thief.” There is no way of verifying

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3. For the details and numbers, see “Afterlives and Afterthoughts: Bilhana’s Posthumous Career and its Lessons” section below.
5. See, for example, *Viśvaguruḍarstrācampaṇi* of Veṅkaṭadhipparṇa, verse 549, where the Thief is the second in a long list of canonical poets. Note, however, that there were those who viewed Bilhana and the Thief as two separate authors. An example is the Telugu author Peddana, who mentions the two separately in a list of glorious poets of the past (*Manucaritramu* of Peddana, 1.7). Clearly, much work needs to be done on the story of the Thief, which became extremely popular around the sixteenth century and circulated in languages such as Telugu, Marathi, and Tamil, in addition to Sanskrit.