Seminar SAW:  
History of Science, History of text

Abstract

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The Composition of the Arthaśāstra: On Kauṭilya’s Use of Sources and the Evolution of the 
Text

The Arthaśāstra of Kauṭilya (ca. 100 CE) is the only surviving treatise from classical South 
Asia devoted wholly to statecraft. It is a very valuable text for many reasons, but for the 
purposes of this talk, it is most important in that it preserves a number of technical 
discourses from the early classical period otherwise largely lost to us. For, given the variety of individual practices and areas of expertise involved in the enterprise 
of statecraft, the composer of the Arthaśāstra needed to draw on a number of pre-existing 
discourses, some of them clearly quite technical in nature, to provide instruction on various 
aspects of governance. Such discourses include what we might think of us “applied knowledge” and often take the form of discrete “topics” (prakaraṇas) or “subjects” (adhikaraṇas) within the text: construction, state finance, agriculture, law, animal 
husbandry, autopsy, and so forth. As such, the Arthaśāstra can rightly be considered an 
important compendium of technical literatures from early classical South Asia found 
nowhere else.

My primary interest in the text has been the manner of its composition: how it came to the 
form in which we now receive it. That Kauṭilya used a number of sources has long been 
recognized, and a well-regarded study by Thomas Trautmann has attempted to prove this 
through statistical analysis of the frequency of certain lexemes. What has been lacking, and 
what I have tried to provide in my own work, is a comprehensive theory of the composition 
of the Arthaśāstra based on clear philological analysis.
In my talk, I will present the key features of the text and the methods of textual criticism that I have used to help bring to light the various “layers” or “strata” of the text. In this, I will seek to make clear the philological reasoning upon which my results depend. I will then turn to look at the various layers of the text themselves. Such analysis yields a variety of insights about the composition of the text as well as its sources, and it is in this regard that useful observations can be made about the presence of technical discourses in the text itself in respect of both their content and presentation.