

Zeitschrift:	Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie
Herausgeber:	Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft
Band:	73 (2019)
Heft:	1
Artikel:	Who was alya's father? : Examining the genealogy of an epic hero
Autor:	Száler, Péter
DOI:	https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-823079

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Who Was Šalya's Father? Examining the Genealogy of an Epic Hero

<https://doi.org/10.1515/asia-2017-0045>

Abstract: To the question, “Who was the Šalya of the *Mahābhārata*?”, a wide scale of different answers can be given. Without being exhaustive, Šalya can be described as a king, a general, a friend, a charioteer or even as a traitor. The high number of his roles indicates that he is among the most prominent epic heroes. On the other hand, it is striking that none of the answers given above refers to Šalya's ancestry. The importance of the genealogical lists in the *Mahābhārata* is well established. For an epic hero it was his ancestry that determined his real identity. Therefore it is surprising that our knowledge about Šalya's family is so meagre. As a matter of fact, the only thing we know about his birth is that he was an offspring of a prestigious royal dynasty. Šalya himself was, however, very proud of his descent and considered his service as Karṇa's charioteer as a disgrace on his family. This paper attempts to identify this highly honoured dynasty from which Šalya arose. Many passages of the epic give the impression that Šalya was also of Kuru descent just as the Kaurava and Pāṇḍava heroes. This interpretation may shed new light on such events as Šalya's appointment as general and Pāṇḍu's second marriage.

Keywords: Bāhlika, Mādrī, Mahābhārata, Šalya, Somavamśa

Perhaps it is not an exaggeration to say that Šalya is one of the most prominent heroes of the *Mahābhārata*. Among others he appears as a great charioteer, Mādrī's oldest brother, Pāṇḍu's brother-in-law, the valiant king of Madra, and last but not least the Kaurava commander-in-chief after Karṇa's death.

Accordingly, Šalya's figure has not been neglected in studies on the great epic. Meiland emphasized the ambiguity of the character, since Šalya, though he sympathized with the Pāṇḍavas, fought on the Kaurava side.¹ Others, such as Ruben and Hiltzebeitel regarded Šalya together with Karṇa as a caricatural

¹ Meiland 2005: 18–19.

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counterpart of Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna.² Hiltebeitel, moreover, proposed an allegorical relationship between the Madra king and the Earth, on the basis of which he interpreted Yudhiṣṭhīra's triumph over Šalya as the final conquest of the Earth.³ Šalya's participation in the Great War has thus been fairly well examined, but less attention has been given to his origins.

In contrast to the other heroes in the epic, there is in fact very little that we know about Šalya's descent. Even Vettam Mani's enormous encyclopedia gives no more information than the fact that he and Mādrī were fathered by the king of Madra, about whom there are no further details.⁴ Bowles has paid a bit more attention to his lineage and regarded it as the main reason for the enmity between Karṇa and Šalya. According to him, the request to serve Karṇa as a charioteer was an insult for Šalya on his prestigious family.⁵ Nevertheless, the lack of more accurate information is quite disturbing especially in the light of such recent studies as Brodbeck's, McGrath's and Witzel's which call attention to the central role of the epic genealogies.⁶

Therefore, to say something about Šalya's reputable ancestry, it is worth investigating those epic passages carefully, which are concerned with him. In these verses Šalya is regularly mentioned together with Bāhlīka's descendants, in fact the *Mahābhārata* refers to Šalya himself as a Bāhlīka.⁷ Although this epithet has usually been explained as an allusion to his ethnic identity,⁸ the possibility of Bāhlīka being a patronymic can not be excluded and is worth further examination.

Bāhlīka, Šalya's possible ancestor is a character in the *Mahābhārata* famous as Pratīpa's second son as well as Šaṃtanu's elder brother.⁹ He left the kingdom

² Hiltebeitel 1990: 256; Ruben 1943: 221.n.

³ Hiltebeitel 1990: 266–279.

⁴ Mani 1984: 460.

⁵ Bowles 2006: 34–35.

⁶ Brodbeck 2009; McGrath 2004: 179–191; Witzel 2005.

⁷ *Mahābhārata* 1.61.6.cd; 1.105.7.d*61.12. (Central group of the Northern recension). – Here it is important to make a comment on my attitude to the Critical edition. During my research, I regarded it as a great collection of the several *Mahābhārata*-texts rather than an Ur-version of the epic and therefore I included the so-called star passages in the references to get as comprehensive picture about the theme as it is possible.

⁸ Brodbeck 2009: 156; Mani 1984: 674.

⁹ *tathaiva sarvadharmajñah pitur mama pitāmahāḥ pratīpāḥ pṛthivīpālas triṣu lokeṣu viśrutāḥḥ tasya pārthivasiṁhasya rāyaṁ dharmena śāsataḥḥ trayāḥ prajajñire putrā devakalpā yaśasvināḥḥ devāpir abhavaj jyeṣṭha bāhlīkas tadanantaram/ tṛtyāḥ ūaśaṃtanuś tātā dhṛtimān me pitāmahāḥḥ* (Mahābhārata 5.147.14–16). [Dhṛtarāṣṭra says to Duryodhana]: Likewise my father's grandfather, Pratīpa, who knew all the Laws, a king famed in the three worlds: to this lion among kings, who ruled the kingdom under Law, three famous Godlike sons were

after the death of his father and moved to his maternal homeland, the Śibi country:

Thereupon, with sorrowing spirit and grieving over his son, Pratīpa died: and seeing him dead Devāpi took shelter in the forest. Bāhlīka had left the realm and established himself in the family of his maternal uncle. He abandoned his father and brothers and acquired a wealthy town. (van Buitenen 1978: 459.)¹⁰

Then Bāhlīka started his own lineage, the descendants of which were named Bāhlīkas, after their forefather. Although all of his descendants appear in the *Mahābhārata*, their accurate genealogy is spelled out in the *Harivamṣa* and in the *purāṇas*, according to which Bāhlīka begot Somadatta, who became the father of three excellent sons, namely Bhūri, Bhūriśravas and Śala.¹¹

However, if we examine the text of the *Mahābhārata* carefully, we see that in lists that mention Bhūriśravas and Śala, it is Śalya who occurs right beside them and not Bhūri, as one might expect.¹² It is telling that, in the descriptions of the Kaurava army (enumerations) Śalya appears next to the two sons of Somadatta, while Bhūri is always omitted.¹³ Verse 7.19.9 is perhaps the most explicit:

Bhūriśravas, Śala, Śalya, Somadatta and Bāhlīka, these heroes surrounded by the army, resorted to the southern flank.¹⁴

Apart from the war books, Bhūri and Śalya will rather seem to be counterparts of each other if we take notice of the analogous list found in the *Virāṭaparvan*,¹⁵ in which there occurs Bhūri instead of Śalya.¹⁶

born. Devāpi was the eldest, Bāhlīka came after him, and steadfast Śamtanu, my grandfather, son was the third. (van Buitenen 1978: 459.).

10 *tataḥ pravyathitātmāsau putraśokasamanvitah| mamāra tam mṛtam dṛṣṭvā devāpiḥ samśrito vanam|| bāhlīko mātulakule tyaktvā rājyam vyavasthitah| pitṛbhrātṛṇ parityajya prāptavān puram ṛddhimat||* (*Mahābhārata* 5.147.26–27).

11 *Harivamṣa* 23.116; *Bhāgavata*–*p.* 9.22.18.c–19.a; *Brahma*–*p.* 13.116; *Garuḍa*–*p.* 1.140.34.c–35. a; *Viṣṇu*–*purāṇa* 4.20.31–32.

12 *Mahābhārata* 5.196.10.a, 6.47.17.a, 6.52.5.a, 6.55.131.d, 6.57.11.ab, 6.114.15.a, 7.19.9.a, 7.36.24. bc, 7.52.15.c, 11.26.31.cd, 15.40.10.c.

13 *Mahābhārata* 6.47.11–21, 6.52.1–9, 7.19.5–20.

14 *bhūriśravāḥ śalah śalyah somadattaś ca bāhlīkah| akṣauhiṇyā vṛtā vīrā dakṣiṇam pakṣam āśritāḥ||* (*Mahābhārata* 7.19.9.).

15 *Mahābhārata* 4.63.41.b*1080.1–9 (S = Southern recension).

16 *Mahābhārata* 4.63.41.b*1080.2. (S).

These passages, therefore, imply that one should regard Bhūri as Šalya's equivalent, which impression can be further confirmed by some additional, more explicit passages.

The *Udyogaparvan* unfolds how Duryodhana gained Šalya's assistance in the Great War.¹⁷ The Kaurava prince maintained that he was as close a kinsman of Šalya as the Pāṇḍavas:

Just as the Pāṇḍavas are to you, in the same way I am to you.¹⁸

At first sight, however, Duryodhana's words make no sense, because Šalya, as Mādrī's brother, was honored as maternal uncle (*mātula*) by the Pāṇḍavas, and his greater affection for them was in this way evident. But the Madra king did not refuse Duryodhana's statement which, therefore, indicates that we should also accept it as true. I was, however, not able to find any other appropriate solution to substantiate this claim than the above-proposed position of Šalya in the Kuru family tree. Duryodhana, incidentally, in the same way tried to get support from the Vṛṣṇis. In this case he similarly adduced only the common patrilineal relationship while he neglected that Kṛṣṇa, as Kuntī's nephew was the cousin of the Pāṇḍavas:

In this approaching war you should come to my aid, for you bear me equal friendship with Arjuna, and you are equally allied with us, Mādhava. (van Buitenen 1978: 197.).¹⁹

Later in the same book, there is a description of the arrival of the Kaurava allies which not only mentions Šalya and Bhūriśravas in the same verse but also puts stress on the fact that they joined Duryodhana with separate armies:

The champion Bhūriśravas, too, and Šalya joined to Duryodhana, O joy of the Kurus, with a grand-army each. (van Buitenen 1978: 219.).²⁰

Their separate approach might be underlined here because one would expect two related warriors to come jointly. Moreover, the same account provides an analogous verse in which a similar syntagm is used concerning the two Avantī rulers who, though they were from the same country, arrived there separately:

¹⁷ *Mahābhārata* 5.8.1–13.

¹⁸ *yathaiva pāṇḍavāḥ tubhyāṇ tathaiva bhavato hy aham* (*Mahābhārata* 5.8.12.d*52.1. (S)).

¹⁹ *vigrahe 'smiṇ bhavān sāhyāṇ mama dātum iḥārhati*|| *samaṇ hi bhavataḥ sakhyāṇ mayi caivārjune 'pi ca tathā saṃbandhakāṇ tulyam asmākaṇ tvayi mādhava*|| (*Mahābhārata* 5.7.9c–10).

²⁰ *tathā bhūriśravāḥ śūraḥ Šalyaś ca kurunandana*|| *duryodhanam upāyātāv akṣauhiṇyā pṛthak pṛthak*|| (*Mahābhārata* 5.19.16.).

Both kings of Avanti, surrounded by a mighty force, came to Suyodhana with a grand-army each. (van Buitenen 1978: 219.).²¹

Still before the war, Yudhiṣṭhira asked Saṃjaya to enquire after the welfare of the Kaurava heroes who, though they fought against the Pāṇḍavas, were loved by him.²² Among them Somadatta, Bhūriśravas, Śalya as well as Śala are mentioned together, and, furthermore, it is added about Śala that it was he who protected Śalya's back:

The wise bull of the Bāhlikas, who has no other desire than that there might be peace among the Bhāratas – may he salute me again as he did before – he possesses many and excellent virtues, who is learned, but not harsh at all, who always endures anger out of affection – that Somadatta I consider worthy of respect. Somadatta's son, the most venerable among the Kurus, is my brother and my friend, o Saṃjaya. He is the best archer among the warriors whom his ministers attend, please, ask him about his welfare. My dear, Bhūriśravas fights against destruction, he is a great archer, the best of warriors. Approach him and address him with my words, and Śalya too, going to him in my name. Śala, the great archer, the greatest warrior, best and constant will protect his back.²³

Although Śalya's descent in this manner seems to be fairly well established, we should not forget those epic passages which seem to set him apart from the Bāhlikas.

To begin with, they are evidently referred to separately in the *Ādi-* and the *Sabhāparvan*,²⁴ since these books mention side by side Śalya as well as Somadatta's sons. These references suggest that there did exist a tradition which treated Śalya separately from the Bāhlika Somadatta and his three sons.

²¹ *āvantyau ca mahipālau mahābalasusaṃvṛtau| pṛthag akṣauhiṇībhyaṁ tāv abhiyātau suyodhanam||* (*Mahābhārata* 5.19.24.).

²² *Mahābhārata* 5.30.10–29.

²³ *yasya kāmo vartate nityam eva nānyāḥ śamād bhāratānām iti sma| sa bāhlikānām ḥṣabho manasvī purā yathā mābhivadet prasannāḥ|| guṇair anekaiḥ pravaraiś ca yukto vijñānavān naiva ca niṣṭhuro yaḥ| snehād amarṣam sahate sadaiva sa somadattāḥ pūjanīyo mato me|| arhattamāḥ kuruṣu saumadattīḥ sa no bhrātā saṃjaya matsakhā ca| maheśvāso rathinām uttamo yaḥ sahāmātyaḥ kuśalam tasya pṛccheḥ| bhūriśravās tāta nipātayodhī maheśvāso rathinām uttamo 'gryāḥ|| gatvā sma tam madvacanena brūyāḥ śalyam tathā madvacanāt pratītāḥ|| samaḥ śalo rakṣitā pṛṣṭham asya|* (*Mahābhārata* 5.30.19–21.d*156.6.).

²⁴ *madrarājas tathā śalyaḥ sahaputro mahārathāḥ| rukmāṅgadena vīrena tathā rukmarathena ca|| kauravyaḥ somadattaś ca putrāś cāsyā mahārathāḥ| samavetāś trayāḥ śūrā bhūrir bhūriśravāḥ śalaḥ||* (*Mahābhārata* 1.177.13–14) The great warrior Śalya, king of the Madras, with his sons, the champion Rukmāṅgada and Rukmaratha. There Somadatta the Kaurava and his warrior sons come, the three heroes Bhūri, Bhūriśravan and Śala. (van Buitenen 1973: 350.) *ṛtaḥ śalyo madrarājo bāhlikaś ca mahārathāḥ| somadatto 'tha kauravyo bhūrir bhūriśravāḥ śalaḥ||* (*Mahābhārata* 2.31.7.c–8.b) Rta, Śalya king of the Madras, and the great warrior Bāhlika, Somadatta Kauravya, Bhūri, Bhūriśravas, Śala. (van Buitenen 1975: 89.).

The *Droṇaparvan*, in which Bhūri's character is fleshed out, seems to follow this latter tradition. After Šalya's injury,²⁵ his younger brother comes forth to protect him, but he is also killed in the battle.²⁶ Although Šalya's brother remains unnamed here, he might well be Šala who was earlier shown as protecting Šalya's back.²⁷

The fact that Šala does not disappear completely after this event, but his name occurs in some further enumerations seems to contradict this proposition.²⁸ On the other hand, Šala must have passed away by end of the *parvan* where he is listed among the dead:

O king! Your valiant son, Bhūriśravas has been killed, and Šala, too, who suffered from the fall of his brother.²⁹

At that place, where the long-armed Bhīṣma lies covered by hundreds of arrows, Pāṇḍu's strongest sons killed many heroes in battle, such as Vikarṇa, Citrasena, Bāhlīka, Jayadratha, Bhūriśravas, Jaya, Jalasamṛdhā, Sudakṣiṇā and Šala, the best charioteer, and the valiant Bhagadatta – these and other princes, whom even the gods could only have defeated with great difficulty.³⁰

Since there is no mention about his death anywhere else, perhaps it was indeed Šala who was killed while protecting his brother Šalya and one might regard the re-occurrences of Šala's name as corruptions in the transmission.³¹ Incidentally, following his brother, Bhūriśravas also lost his life in an unjust single combat against Sātyaki.³²

Bhūri finally appears in a duel in which he just like his brother is killed by Sātyaki.³³ Thus, the *Droṇaparvan* contains the third passage which

²⁵ *tataḥ sa viddho 'stravidā marmabhidbhīr ajihmagaiḥiḥ ūlāyo rājan Rathopasthe niṣasāda mumoha ca* (Mahābhārata 7.36.33.) O king! Then this marksman (i.e. Abhimanyu) wounded Šalya with mortal arrows, he collapsed on the seat of his chariot and lost his consciousness.

²⁶ Mahābhārata 7.37.2–9.

²⁷ Mahābhārata 5.30.21.d*156.6. (S).

²⁸ Mahābhārata 7.52.15c; 7.70.50.d; 7.79.4.a; 7.80.24.

²⁹ *hato bhūriśravā vīras tava putro mahārathāḥ ūlāś caiva tathā rājan bhrātrvyasanakarśitāḥ* (Mahābhārata 7.131.10.).

³⁰ *yatra bhīṣmo mahābāhuḥ śete ūrāśatācītāḥ* || *vikarṇāś citrasenaś ca bāhlīko 'tha jayadrathāḥ bhūriśravā jayaś caiva jalasamṛdhāḥ sudakṣiṇāḥ ūlāś ca rathināṁ śreṣṭho bhagadattaś ca vīryavān| ete cānye ca rājāno devair api sudurjayāḥ ūlāḥ nihatāḥ samare ūrāḥ pāṇḍavair balavattarāḥ* (Mahābhārata 7.133.58.c–61.b).

³¹ Actually there are some additional occurrences of the name Šala (Mahābhārata 7.102.69.b; 8.4.101.c; 8.62.2.c), but they probably do not refer to the Bāhlīka, but to a son of Dhṛtarāṣṭra by the same name.

³² Mahābhārata 7.117.1–118.41.

³³ Mahābhārata 7.141.1–12.

obviously differentiates Śalya and Bhūri. In this case, however, it can not be excluded that the authors were influenced by the widely known Bhūri-Bhūriśravas-Śala triad of the genealogical lists and therefore added the death of the third brother to the same *parvan*, though he had been neglected so far. (Figure 1)

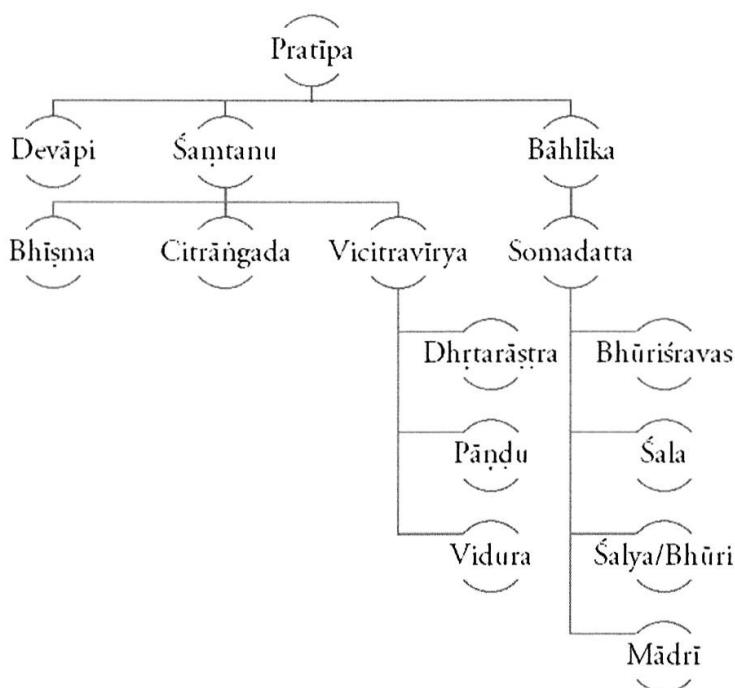


Figure 1: Śalya's genealogy.

We have seen above that many phases of the great epic appear to suggest Śalya's association with the Bāhlika house. One might venture the hypothesis that there might have existed such a form of the *Mahābhārata* which regarded Śalya as Somadatta's son. If this supposition is actually true, it entails two important conclusions.

On the one hand, Śalya's appointment as commander-in-chief can be better understood. Śalya's precursors, Bhīṣma, Drona and Karṇa were closely related to the Kurus while he, as the Madra ruler was a simple vassal, whose installation seems unwonted since more constant companions such as Aśvatthāman and Kṛpa were still alive. But, if we regard Śalya as Somadatta's son, this oddity will immediately disappear.

On the other hand, this identification of Śalya throws new light upon Pāṇḍu's marriage with Mādrī. As stated in the *Mahābhārata* Pāṇḍu had two consorts who became his wives in different ways.

His first as well as chief wife was Kuntī, whom he obtained by means of a *svayamvara* which was evidently regarded as the most heroic manner of marriage and in which Pāṇḍu himself decided to take part:

This Pr̥thā, Kuntibhoja's daughter, was gifted with beauty and character; she rejoiced in the Law and was great in her vows. At the bridegroom choice that her father held for her she found, in the midst of thousands of barons, the powerful lion-toothed, elephant-shouldered, bull-eyed Pāṇḍu. The scion of the Pāṇḍus joined yoke with the daughter of Kuntibhoja with boundless happiness as Indra has joined yoke with Paulomī. (van Buitenen 1973: 241.).³⁴

In contrast to the first one, Pāṇḍu's second wedding was arranged by Bhīṣma. In this case, however, there is no remark about why Pāṇḍu needed a subsidiary wife just after the successful *svayamvara*:

Thereafter he went with Bhīṣma Devavrata to the capital city of the Madras, where Mādrī, daughter of the king of the Madras, lived, renowned in all three worlds and famed among all barons for her beauty, which was unmatched on earth. Bhīṣma bought her for Pāṇḍu at a high price, then prepared for the wedding of the great-spirited Pāṇḍu. (van Buitenen 1973: 241–242)³⁵

To understand Bhīṣma's purpose with this marriage, I suggest to have a look again at the Lunar line. After Vicitravīrya's death Bhīṣma remained the only scion of the paternal lineage in the main branch. As Romila Thapar rightly pointed out, both the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas being biologically connected to Satyavatī but not to Śaṃtanu laid claim to the throne in accordance with the matriline.³⁶

The Kuru patriline, however, had not yet completely disappeared at that time, because Bāhlīka and his offspring together with Mādrī still existed. Thus, Bhīṣma did nothing else but tried to save his family from the extinction of the patriline. Pāṇḍu's marriage with Mādrī, therefore, might have been the only chance to restore the paternal line.

Besides, the fact that the Bāhlīka princess was offered to Pāṇḍu reveals Bhīṣma's political aim that is to guarantee the kingship to him. Pāṇḍu was,

34 *rūpasatvagūṇopetā dharmārāmā mahāvratā| duhitā kuntibhojasya kṛte pitrā svayamvare|| simhadamṣṭram gajaskandham ṛṣabhaṅkṣam mahābalam| bhūmipālasahasrāṇām madhye pāṇḍum avindata|| sa tayā kuntibhojasya duhitrā kurunandanaḥ| yuyuje 'mitasaubhāgyaḥ paulomyā maghavān iva||* (Mahābhārata 1.105.1–3).

35 *yātvā devavratenāpi madrāṇām puṭabhedanam| viśrutā triṣu lokeṣu mādrī madrapateḥ sutā|| sarvarājasu vikhyātā rūpeṇāsadr̥ṣī bhuvī| pāṇḍor arthe parikritā dhanena mahatā tadā| vivāham kārayām āśa bhīṣmaḥ pāṇḍor mahātmanāḥ||* (Mahābhārata 1.105.4–5).

36 Thapar 1978: 351.

actually, the second son and therefore the legal successor would have been Dhṛtarāṣṭra according to the primogeniture. Dhṛtarāṣṭra, however, as a blind man seemed to be unable to govern, so Bhiṣma chose his younger brother and gave him Mādrī to re-establish the lineage.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Csaba Dezső for having read my article and polishing my English.

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