

## Conference Shaping the sciences of the ancient world

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### A historical approach to philology

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*A Theory of Philological Practice in Early Modern India*

**Abstract** - While never conceptualized as a discrete form of knowledge, philology—in the narrow sense of text-criticism—was a highly consequential form of cultural practice in India before the modern era. The absence of such conceptualization, however, means not only that we need to dig the data of philology out of its forms of practice, as found above all in commentarial literature, but to distill the theory of these practices ourselves. The systematic analysis of this literature has scarcely begun, but available data reveal several important historical and theoretical trends that I suspect will be borne out by further research. The philology that became dominant in the early second millennium was almost certainly an invention of that epoch (though several key notions, about interpolation, for example, can be traced to the middle of the first millennium), and it grew apace over that period. It was directed generally to texts of literature rather than science—where *how* what is said matters more than *what* is said, and where therefore criteria of grammatical, rhetorical, metrical, and other kinds of normativity that inform philological reasoning can be directly applied—but by the eighteenth century works of systematic thought (such as language analysis) had come to be studied by a similar metrics. In addition to laying out this empirical data, I try to extract from it a theory of philological practice. This is marked by a widely shared sense of the text as an intentional authorial creation, where variation is deviation, but where at the same time variation is driven—and known to be driven—by two powerful currents in the history of Indian textuality: the regionalization of recension, and the transformation effects, in a manuscript culture, of a still living tradition of engagement.