

VYASA

Vyasa (*Mahabharata*)

Life

Vyasa is a legendary sage and poet, who is credited by tradition with composing several major texts in ancient India. The most famous of these is the *Mahabharata*, whose opening chapter narrates the tale of its own composition. Vyasa is given the task of compiling this massive epic text. It is important to note that he does not 'write' or 'create' the Mahabharata; rather he 'compiles' it, that is, he puts together already existing legends and stories. Daunted by this task of compilation, yet not wanting to displease the gods, Vyasa accepts but only on one condition. He demands that Ganesa, the elephant-headed god, should write down everything he says. Ganesa accepts but lays down his own requirement: that Vyasa must not pause in his recitation (otherwise the long epic would be even longer and Ganesa might die before it was finished!). Vyasa accepts this but only if Ganesa agrees that he will only write down a line once he has actually understood its meaning. With this precondition, clever Vyasa has ensured that there will be time between each line, as Ganesa reflects on its meaning, for him to recall the next line. Other legends, outside the *Mahabharata*, state that Vyasa was the son of a sage and a fisherwoman. Some stories put his birthplace in Nepal, others locate it in the Gangetic plain of north India.

Works

In addition to the Mahabharata, Vyasa is said to have composed or compiled the eighteen mythic texts known collectively as the *puranas* (c. 400-1200 CE). He is also credited with composing the *Yoga Bhashya*, a commentary on the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali.