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Classical Texts of Ayurveda: A Chronological and Historiographical Review

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Abstract

Introduction: Ayurveda possesses one of the oldest continuous medical literary traditions in the world, extending from the Vedic period to the modern era. Over several centuries, numerous treatises, redactions, and commentaries were composed in Sanskrit, reflecting the progressive development of medical concepts, clinical practices, and philosophical foundations. A chronological and historiographical examination of these classical texts is essential to understand the evolution of Ayurvedic knowledge and to identify the original contributors of key doctrines.

Methods: This review is based on a systematic analysis of *Ayurveda ka Vaigyanika Itihāsa* authored by Ācārya Priyavrata Sharma, a widely accepted reference in Ayurvedic historiography. Information regarding authors, texts, redactions, and commentaries was extracted and reorganized in a century-wise chronological framework. The literature was classified into three major historical phases: Prachīna-kāla (pre-Christian era to 7th century CE), Madhya-kāla (8th–15th century CE), and Ādhunika-kāla (16th–20th century CE). Only Sanskrit texts recognized by Priyavrata Sharma were included to maintain consistency.

Results: The chronological tables generated in this study present a structured overview of nearly two millennia of Ayurvedic literary development. They illustrate the temporal placement of major Saṃhitās, commentaries, Nighaṇṭus, and subject-specific treatises, highlighting the gradual expansion and refinement of Ayurvedic concepts across different historical periods.

Discussion: Although scholarly debates exist regarding the exact dating of several classical texts, the present compilation offers a practical and coherent historiographical framework. It serves as a useful reference for students and researchers and provides a foundation for future comparative historical studies in Ayurveda.

Keywords: Ayurveda History, Chronological Analysis, Priyavrata Sharma, Classical Ayurvedic Texts, Medical Historiography, Sanskrit Tradition

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Introduction

Ayurveda, the ancient Indian medical science of life, has been practiced since time immemorial and continues to be followed across the world. It possesses a vast documented history of at least 6000 years, tracing its origins to the Vedic period.[1] Over this extensive timespan, numerous scholars composed manuscripts to preserve and transmit knowledge acquired through continuous clinical practice. Since these classical texts were written in a concise and aphoristic style, several commentators later authored detailed commentaries on earlier works to elucidate complex and implicit meanings. Additionally, many ancient treatises underwent redaction to align them with the needs of subsequent periods.

Ayurveda, regarded as an eternal (śāśvata) science, was systematically divided into eight specialties (aṣṭāṅga āyurveda) by Brahmā, the primordial originator of the science, for the purpose of structured learning and application.[2] Specialists of these eight branches composed independent treatises, highlighting practices specific to their respective domains. Furthermore, several sub-branches and their corresponding literature evolved

over time to address emerging clinical and societal needs.

All classical Ayurvedic texts were composed in Sanskrit, an ancient language renowned for its exceptional capacity to convey profound concepts with brevity and precision. As metrical composition facilitated memorization and oral transmission of extensive material, most Ayurvedic texts were written in poetic form. These manuscripts often reflect contemporary cultural, political, religious, and social influences, including wars, reigns of kings, rituals, and prevailing philosophical traditions. Although primarily medical practitioners, authors came from diverse backgrounds such as philosophy, religion, governance, culinary sciences, ascetic traditions, and royalty. Consequently, the intrinsic nature and worldview of each author left a distinct imprint on their writings.

A critical examination of the interrelationship between time, author, and text provides valuable insights for Ayurvedic literary research. Among all influencing factors, time itself plays a crucial role, encompassing sociopolitical developments, major historical events, and intellectual currents, which are frequently reflected—directly or indirectly—in

medical literature. Therefore, a chronological review helps establish the sequential positioning of authors and texts, facilitating an understanding of intellectual transmission, mutual influences, and attribution of priority regarding the first documentation of specific concepts.

Methodology

The present review is primarily based on the authoritative work *Āyurveda kā Vaijñānika Itihāsa* authored by Ācārya Priyavrata Sharma. Authors and texts belonging to *Pracīna-kāla*, *Madhya-kāla*, and *Ādhunika-kāla* were classified and arranged chronologically on a century-wise basis. The analyzed data are presented in tabular form, followed by a separate discussion and concluding observations.

Only major and widely recognized Sanskrit texts were selected to maintain conciseness within limited space. *Rasa-granthas* were excluded, as they warrant an independent and detailed study. Although composed by historically authenticated authors, texts written in languages other than Sanskrit were also excluded. The review considers literature up to the end of the 20th century CE; texts composed thereafter are not included.

Division of Time

Historians and philosophers have divided historical time in various ways. Broadly, time is classified into three periods: ancient, medieval, and modern.[3] The ancient period is considered to extend up to the 7th century CE, coinciding with the Gupta era, and is traditionally traced back to the Vedic period, approximately 6000 years before the present. The medieval period spans from the 8th to the 15th century CE, during which India established contact with Arab countries, followed by Afghan and Mughal invasions that significantly influenced Indian medical literature. The modern period begins from the 16th century CE, marked by the arrival of Dutch, French, and British powers. This era witnessed both the loss of valuable indigenous literature and the assimilation of certain foreign therapeutic concepts into contemporary Ayurvedic texts.

Ancient Period (*Pracīna-kāla*)

The ancient period represents the formative phase of Vedic literature. Max Müller classified ancient Vedic literature into four stages: *Chanda-kāla*, *Mantra-kāla*, *Brāhmaṇa-kāla*, and *Sūtra-kāla* [4], whereas other scholars divide it into *Samhitā*, *Brāhmaṇa*, *Āraṇyaka*, and *Upaniṣad* periods. Although Ayurveda is considered an

eternal and perpetual science, its literary foundations are firmly rooted in the Vedic corpus.

According to tradition, Brahmā composed a comprehensive text known as Brahmā Saṃhitā, consisting of one thousand chapters and one hundred thousand verses. Although this text is no longer extant, its existence is acknowledged in Suśrutasaṃhitā, a work believed to have originated around 1000 BCE.[5] Some scholars trace the development of Ayurveda to the Ṛgveda, while others attribute it primarily to the Atharvaveda.[6] The Aśvinīkumāras are revered as divine physicians and surgeons, frequently cited in Vedic literature for their clinical expertise.

The Auśadhi Sūkta of the Ṛgveda reflects an advanced understanding of medicinal substances, including their classification and properties. A total of 67, 81, and 289 medicinal substances are described respectively in the Ṛgveda, Yajurveda, and Atharvaveda.[7] The Atharvaveda contains references to practices corresponding to all eight branches of Ayurveda, indicating their existence during the Vedic period.[8] During this pre-Christian phase of Pracīna-kāla, the foundational structure of Āyurvedavāñmaya was firmly established with the emergence of the three principal classical texts—Suśrutasaṃhitā, Carakasaṃhitā, and Kāśyapasāṃhitā.

Table 1: Authors and Texts of Pracīna-kāla (Period Before Common Era)

Time	Author	Text / Commentary
4000 BCE	Apauruṣeya	Ṛgveda, Atharvaveda
1500–1000 BCE	Divodāsa, Vṛddha Suśruta	Suśruta Tantra
Upaniṣadic period (c. 1000 BCE)	Agniveśa, Bhela, others	Agniveśa Tantra, Bhelatantra, etc.
600 BCE	Kāśyapa; Bhagavān Buddha	Kāśyapasāṃhitā; Bauddha Darśana
200 BCE (Śunga-kāla)	Caraka; Gautama	Carakasaṃhitā; Nyāyasūtra

Pracīna-kāla, as accepted in the reviewed text, extends up to the 7th century CE. During this period, redaction of the principal Ayurvedic treatises such as Carakasaṃhitā and Suśrutasāṃhitā by scholars like

Suśruta, Dṛḍhabala, and Nāgārjuna occurred. The composition of the third pillar of Br̥hat-trayī in the form of two independent treatises—Aṣṭāṅgasaṃgraha and Aṣṭāṅgahṛdaya—

by the eminent Aṣṭāṅga physician Vāgbhaṭa also took place in this era.

The tradition of writing commentaries commenced during this period, beginning with Caraka Nyāsa by Bhaṭṭāra Haricandra, followed by

Caraka Pañjikā by Svāmikumāra. The emergence of Laghu-trayī and subject-specific texts is also attributed to this phase, particularly with the appearance of Mādhavanidāna.

Table 2: Authors and Texts of Pracīna-kāla (Up to 700 CE)

Time	Author	Text / Commentary
100 CE	—	Kāniṣka-kāla
200 CE	Suśruta	Suśrutasamhitā
400 CE (Gupta-kāla)	Dṛḍhabala	Redaction of Carakasamhitā; Bower Manuscript (Navanītaka)
500 CE	Bhādanta Nāgārjuna; Nāgārjuna	Rasa-vaiśeṣika; Addition of Uttaratantra to Suśrutasamhitā
600 CE	Vṛddha Vāgbhaṭa; Bhaṭṭāra Haricandra; Varāhamihira; Vātsyāyana; Śalya-vaidya Jīvaka	Aṣṭāṅgasamgraha; Carakanyāsa; Bṛhat Samhitā; Redaction of Kāśyapasamhitā
700 CE	Laghu Vāgbhaṭa; Mādhavakara; Svāmikumāra; Unknown	Aṣṭāṅgahrdaya; Mādhavanidāna; Carakapañjikā; Mādhava Cikitsita; Bhelasamhitā (extant)

Middle Period (Madhya-kāla)

The defining feature of Madhya-kāla is the extensive enrichment of Ayurvedic literature through authoritative commentaries on earlier classical texts composed by learned physicians. Scholars such as Jejjata, Candranandana, Cakrapāṇidatta, Gayadāsa, Ḏalhana, Hemādri, Indu, and Śivadāsa Sena expanded and clarified the doctrines of Bṛhat-trayī through detailed explanatory works.

Among the Laghu-trayī texts, the emergence of Śārṅgadhara Samhitā, followed by its commentary by

Āḍhamalla in the subsequent century, represents a major milestone in the development of subject-oriented literature. Another significant contribution of this period is the textual corrections incorporated by Candrata in Suśrutasamhitā. Commentaries by Vijayarakṣita-Śrīkanṭhadatta and Vācaspati on Mādhavanidāna further enriched diagnostic literature.

In addition to commentarial works, original treatises were composed by Vrndā, Tisatachārya, Candrata, Cakrapāṇidatta, Rājā Bhoja, Śoḍhala, Vopadeva, and Vasavarāja

between the 8th and 15th centuries CE. Commentaries on relatively later texts, such as Ratnaprabhā by Niścalākara on Cakradatta, are also notable developments of this era. The composition of important Nighaṇṭu

texts by Śoḍhala, Hemacandra, Madanapāla, and Kaiyadeva towards the end of Madhya-kāla further consolidated Ayurvedic materia medica.

Table 3: Authors and Texts of Madhya-kāla (800–1500 CE)

Time	Author	Text / Commentary
900 CE	Jejjata; Vṛnda; Ugradityācārya; Indrakāra-sūnu Mādhava; Ravigupta	Nirantara-pada-vyākhyā on Carakasamhitā; Vṛndamādhava / Siddhayoga; Kalyāṇakāraka; Paryāyaratnamālā; Praśnasahasravidhāna; Siddhasāra Samhitā
1000 CE	Candrata; Tisatachārya; Vararuci; Candranandana; Brahmadeva	Yogaratna-samuccaya; Textual corrections in Suśrutasamhitā; Cikitsākalikā; Padārtha-candrikā on Aṣṭāṅgahṛdaya; Gaṇa Nighaṇṭu; Gūḍhapada-bhaṅga tippanī
1100 CE	Cakrapāṇidatta; Nāradatṭa; Gayadāsa; Śrīkṛṣṇa Vaidya; Rājā Bhoja	Āyurveda Dīpikā; Bhānumatī; Cakradatta; Nyāyacandrikā; Rājamārtanda
1200 CE	Dalhaṇa; Vijayarakṣita; Śrīkaṇṭhadatta; Śoḍhala; Vāṅgasena; Hemacandra	Nibandha Samgraha; Madhukośa; Gadanigraha; Cikitsā-sāra-samgraha; Nighaṇṭu-śeṣa
1300 CE	Śāringadhara; Aruṇadatta; Hemādri; Vopadeva; Indu; Niścalākara	Śāringadhara Samhitā; Sarvāṅgasundarā; Āyurveda Rasāyana; Śāringadhara Vyākhyā; Śāsilekhā; Ratnaprabhā
1400 CE	Āḍhamalla; Vācaspati; Madanapāla	Dīpikā on Śāringadhara Samhitā; Ātaṅkadarpaṇa; Madanapāla Nighaṇṭu

Modern Period (Ādhunika-kāla)

The modern period reviewed in the present article extends from the 16th to the 20th century CE. Significant textual developments of this era include the composition of Bhāvaprakāśa Samhitā by Bhāvamiśra, which is regarded as a later inclusion within the Bṛhat-trayī. Scholarly commentaries on

Laghu-trayī texts of the medieval period by Kāśirāma and Rudrabhaṭṭa also represent important contributions of this time. The emergence of influential treatises such as Yogaratnākara and Bhaiṣajya Ratnāvali further marks the literary advancement of Ayurveda during this period.

In addition, authoritative commentaries on *Carakasaṃhitā* by eminent and successful physicians such as Gaṅgādhara Rāya, Yogīndranātha Sena, and Jyotiśacandra Sarasvatī constitute notable achievements of the modern era. Haranacandra Cakravartī composed what is considered the last available Sanskrit commentary on *Suśrutasaṃhitā* during this period. Scholars including Trimallabhaṭṭa, Lolimbarāja, and Vinodlāl Sena Gupta

authored important independent works.

Furthermore, distinguished scholars such as Gaṇanātha Sena, Vaidya Bhāskara Viśvanātha Gokhale, and Vaidya Yādavajī Trikamajī Ācārya significantly enriched Ayurvedic clinical and academic literature through their scholarly writings, critical editions, and systematic revitalization of classical texts during the modern period.

**Table 4: Authors and Texts of Ādhunika-kāla
(From 16th Century CE Onwards)**

Time	Author	Text / Commentary
1600 CE	Bhāvamiśra	Bhāvaprakāśa Saṃhitā
	Todaramalla	Todarānanda / Āyurveda-saukhya
	Moreśvara	Vaidyāmṛta
1700 CE	Trimallabhaṭṭa	Yogatarāṅgiṇī; Dravyaguṇaśataka / Dravyaguṇaśāstakā
	Kāśīrāma	Gūḍhārthadīpikā on Śāringadharasaṃhitā
	Rudrabhaṭṭa	Āyurveda-dīpikā / Gūḍhānta-dīpikā on Śāringadharasaṃhitā
	Lolimbarāja	Vaidyajīvana; Vaidyāvatāṃsa
1800 CE	Narahari	Rājanighaṇṭu
	Nayana / Nārāyaṇaśekhara	Yogaratnākara
	Harikīrti Upādhyāya	Yogacintāmaṇi
	Śaṅkarabhaṭṭa	Vaidya-vinoda
1900 CE	Govindadāsa	Bhaiṣajyaratnāvali
	Balarāma	Ātaṅka-timira-bhāskara
	Rāmasena	Tīkā on Rasendra-sāra-saṃgraha and Rasendra-cintāmaṇi
2000 CE	Gaṅgādhara Rāya	Jalpakalpataru on <i>Carakasaṃhitā</i>
	Vinodlāl Sena Gupta	Āyurveda Vijñāna
	Haranacandra Cakravartī	Suśrutārtha-sandīpana on <i>Suśrutasaṃhitā</i>
	Yogīndranātha Sena	Carakopaskāra on <i>Carakasaṃhitā</i>
	Jyotiśacandra Sarasvatī	Carakapradīpikā
	Dattārāma Caube	Bṛhat Nighaṇṭu Ratnākara

	Gaṇanātha Sena	Pratyakṣa-śārīra; Siddhānta-nidānam; Samjñā-pañcaka-vimarśa
	Kṛṣṇarāma Bhaṭṭa	Siddha-bheṣaja-maṇimālā; Pālāṇḍu-rāja-śatakam
	Vaidya Bhāskara Viśvanātha Gokhale	Cikitsā-pradīpah
	Yādavajī Trikamajī Ācārya	Critical editions and revitalization of Carakasaṃhitā (with Āyurvedadīpikā), Suśrutasaṃhitā (with Nibandhasaṃgraha), and Mādhanavidāna (with Madhukoṣa)

Discussion and Conclusion

The chronological periods presented in the present review are primarily based on the historiographical framework proposed by Ācārya Priyavrata Sharma. However, it is well acknowledged that the dating of several classical Ayurvedic authors and texts remains a subject of scholarly debate, and alternative chronologies have been proposed based on diverse literary, epigraphical, and historical evidences. Consequently, many authors and treatises may be placed in different centuries when evaluated through the perspectives of other eminent scholars.

For instance, Ācārya Priyavrata Sharma places Caraka in the Śuṅga period (circa 200 BCE), whereas Yādavajī Trikamajī Ācārya assigns him to the Kāñiṣka period (1st century CE). Similar chronological variations are observed when the opinions of other scholars are considered, such as Hariśāstrī Parādakara Vaidya in the

Upodghāta of Aṣṭāṅgahṛdaya, Gaṇanātha Sena in the Upodghāta of Pratyakṣa Śārīra, Pañdita Hemarāja Sharma in the Upodghāta of Kāśyapasaṃhitā, and Gurupada Sharma Haldar in works related to Vṛddha-trayī and the history of Ayurveda.

A notable historiographical debate pertains to the authorship of Aṣṭāṅga Saṅgraha and Aṣṭāṅgahṛdaya. While Ācārya Priyavrata Sharma considers the two Vagbhatas as distinct authors, an alternative view—that both texts were authored by a single Vagbhatta—has been convincingly supported by eminent scholars such as Parādakara Śāstrī and Yādavajī Trikamajī Ācārya. This position is substantiated in the respective prefaces of Aṣṭāṅgahṛdaya and Carakasaṃhitā, along with supporting textual and internal evidences.

In view of such scholarly divergences, it is prudent to allow scope for correction and revision in Ayurvedic

chronological studies, rather than treating any single opinion as definitive. Tentative fixation of periods, with openness to revision based on authentic references and multiple scholarly viewpoints, is both

academically sound and practically useful. Such an approach ensures avoidance of non-factual assertions while fostering a balanced and evolving understanding of the historiography of Ayurveda.[9,10]

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