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edited by

† MAURIZIO TADDEI
and
GIUSEPPE DE MARCO

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R O M E

ISTITUTO ITALIANO PER L'AFRICA E L'ORIENTE

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MONIKA ZIN

Two Nāga-Stories in the Oldest Paintings in Ajanta IX

Dedicated to the memory of the copyists, students of John Griffiths from the Jemsejit Jijibai School of Art, thanks to whose painstaking work the old Ajanta paintings were able to be identified less tediously.

The custom of decorating caves with paintings can be verified for Ajanta even in the early phase. In the old Ajanta caves, both *caityas* IX and X were decorated with paintings on the walls, ceilings and pillars, as well as the dwelling cave, *vihāra* XII, where today clear traces of the floral motifs can still be recognized on the ceiling and in the sculptured barred windows. All of the old Ajanta murals are today in a desolate state, even those which had still been clearly legible in the 19th century and had rendered the creation of copies possible. In many cases, the present state of preservation would not suffice for identification. For this reason, only those stories which were recognized in the 19th century and those copied at that time have been identified. As the only painting not copied, the remains in the apsis of Cave X have been identified by me as the tale of pious Śyāmāvati and her husband Udayana (Zin 1998).

Cave IX also contains fragments of murals of which no copies exist and which thus have not been identified. The remains are to be found on the right-hand side wall, nearer to the entrance, across from the pillars R2-R4. The state of the paintings is disastrous, the plaster is flaking off, the colours are very dark. The paintings were never cleaned or conserved. The following description and drawing is the result of several days' work in the cave at Christmas 1996, made possible by financial assistance of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft.

The Tale of the Nāga King Elapatra (Fig. 1)

The preserved part of the painting contains four scenes, one of which, the one on the left-hand side, is uncertain and only fragmentarily preserved. This scene probably showed a snake deity in its animal form with a five-

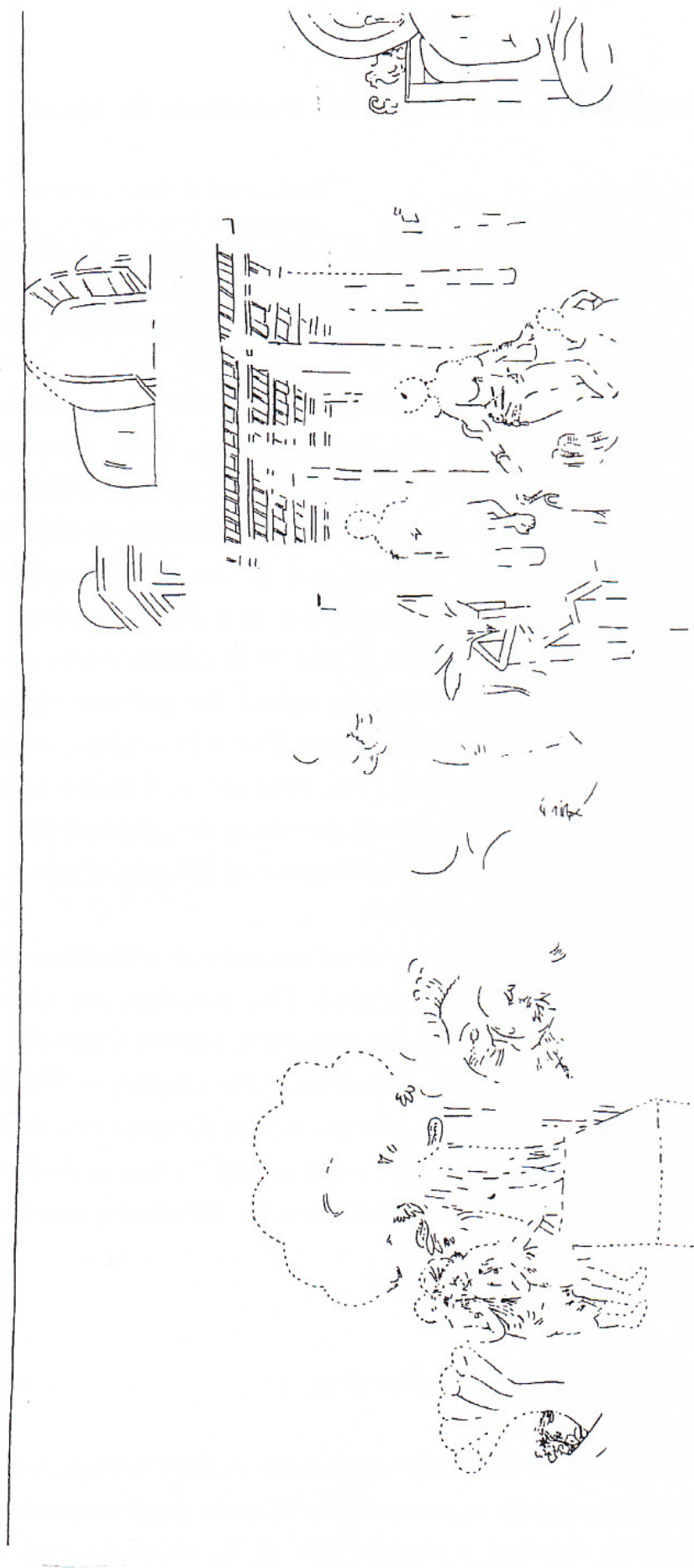


Fig. 1 – Painting on the right side wall in Cave IX in Ajanta. (Drawing: author).

fold snake-hood. The other three scenes to the right of this are poorly preserved, but once recognized they are clearly comprehensible. The possible further continuation of the pictorial narration to the right has been covered over by a repainting of the 5th century. Paradoxically, these murals (S.A.A.P.C. I-1081 no. 24:25) showing nothing more than stereotypical seated Buddhas, have been conserved. The part of the older murals bordering on the repainting is well preserved in its upper section and shows large parts of a building with a wooden ceiling construction resting on several slim pillars, and the vault above it with a *caitya* window and side turrets. The building, which is surrounded by walls, is definitely a palace complex. Similar depictions of palaces are to be found both in the older Ajanta paintings and in contemporary relief art (Zin 1996: 466). The scene taking place in the interior of the palace is difficult to decipher. What attracts the observer's attention is a white object consisting of delicately striped and twisted lines. Fortunately, the upper left part of the object is preserved and allows it to be identified as a snake. Poorly visible, but impossible to be identified otherwise, is the figure of a woman standing to its right (Fig. 2). The beautifully adorned lady is standing in an unnatural pose with her body slightly twisted, her legs crossed and with her arms held far from her body, leading one to assume that she was portrayed as dancing. In the head region only an eye remains, doubtlessly looking at the white snake. The woman and the snake were evidently portrayed surrounded by the court, of which today only fragments of two persons can be recognized.

The middle fragment of the preserved painting contains an object, which, although parts of it can be easily recognized, is very difficult to complete, as there is nothing similar to be found in nature. The preserved parts (Fig. 3) permit no doubts that this is a picture of a living creature, whose skin is painted as reddish and dotted and whose body is portrayed as rolled up in many coils. The painting must be a representation of a giant snake of the type as which the Nāgas were portrayed on the *torāṇas* in Sanchi (Fig. 4). Whereas in Sanchi the coils of the snake's body emerge from the water, in Ajanta leaves can be seen directly beside it.

The scene further to the left is the best preserved and can be interpreted without any doubt: two males, simply dressed and without jewels are standing directly beside a tree honoured by a parasol and garlands,

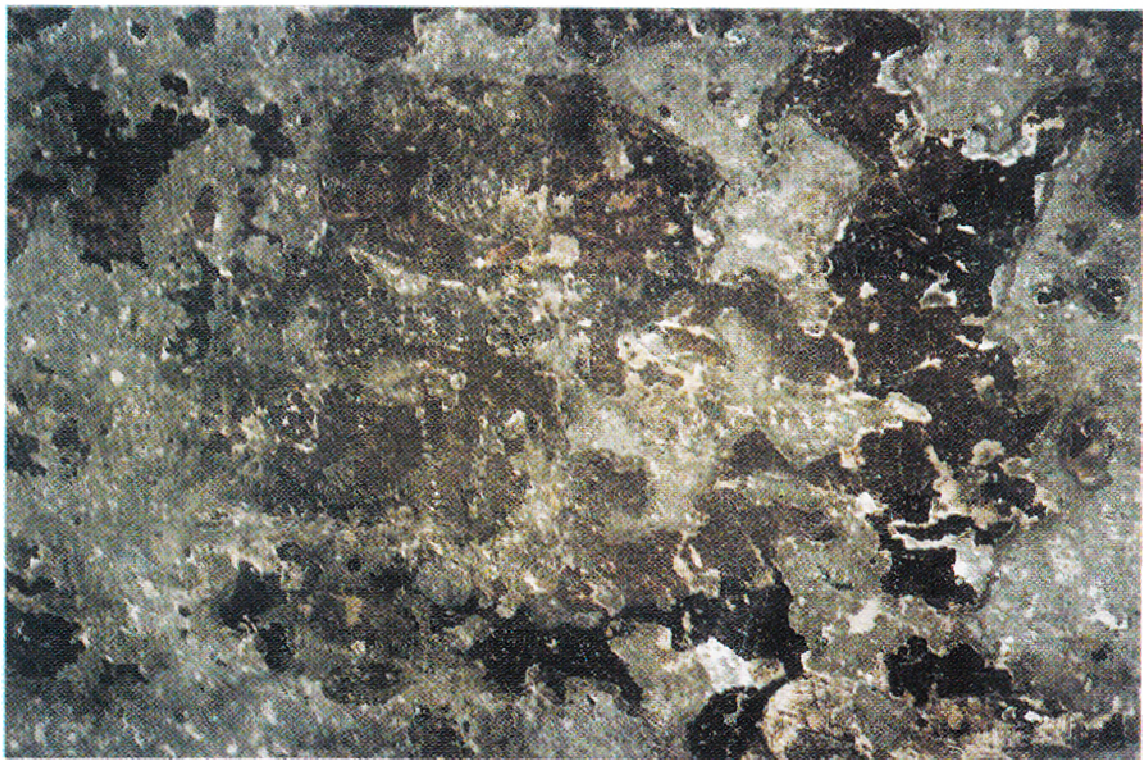
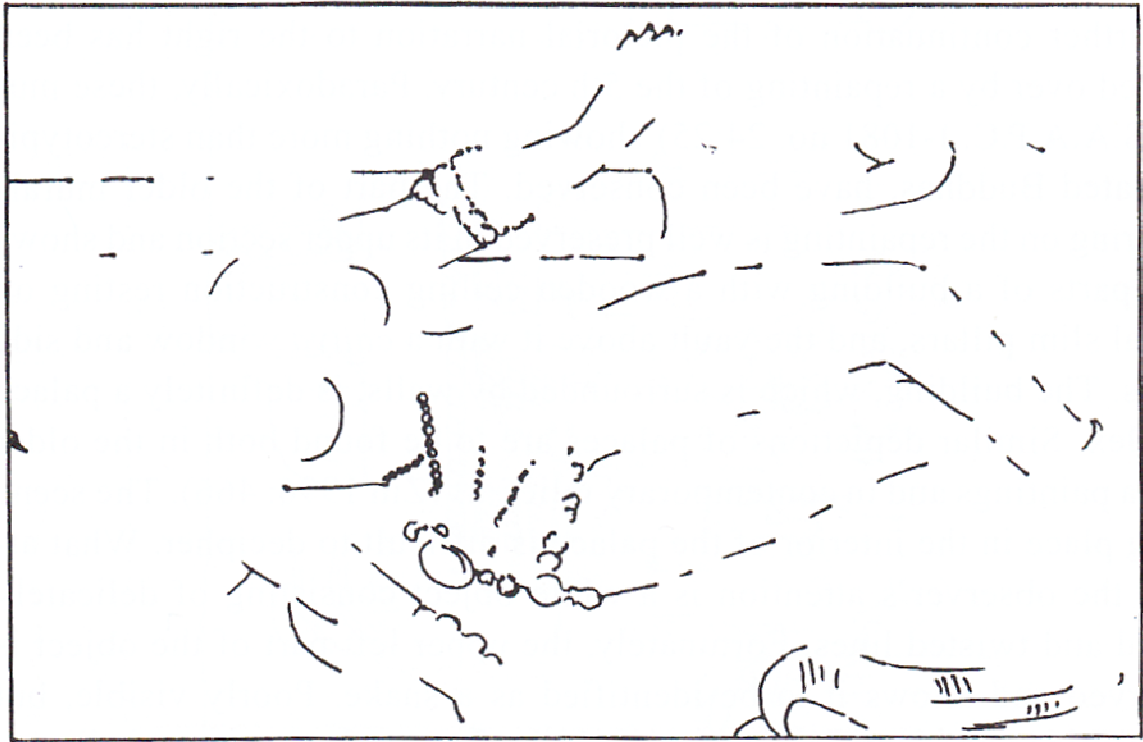


Fig. 2 – Detail of Fig. 1. (Photo and drawing: author).

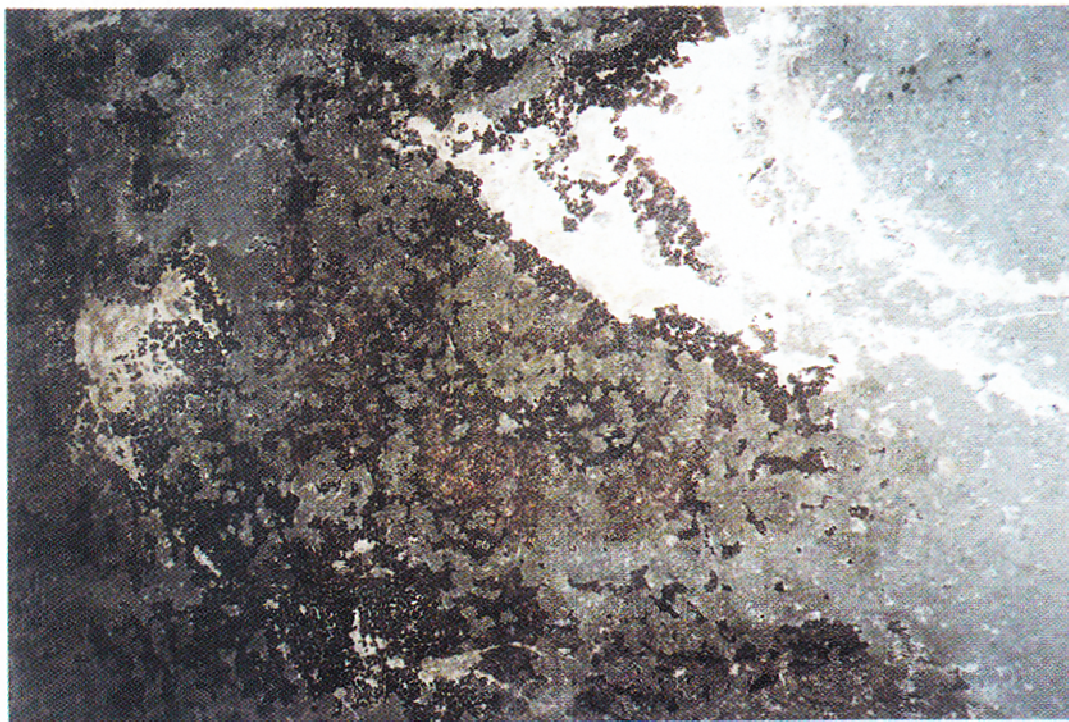
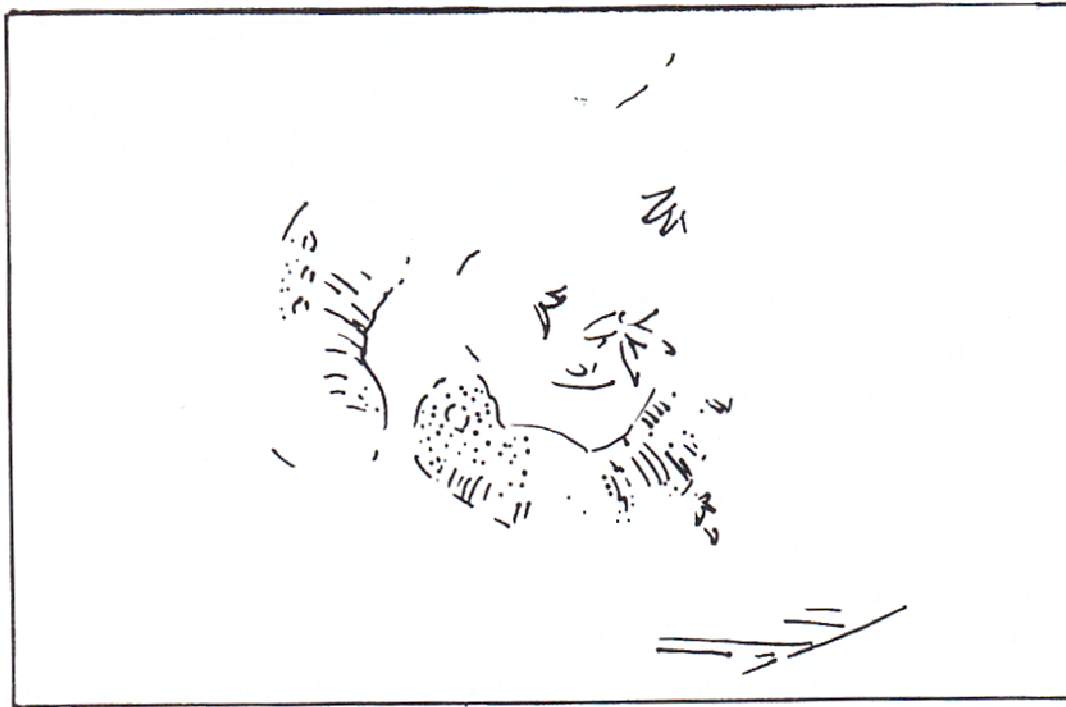


Fig. 3 – Detail of Fig. 1. (Photo and drawing: author).



Fig. 4 – Sanchi III, front side. Detail of the lowest beam of *torana*. (Drawing by the author: after Marshall & Foucher 1940: III, pl. 96-98, detail of pl. 97).

beneath which we see a grey seat (Fig. 5). One man, dressed in white and with a moustache, standing to the rear, has joined his hands respectfully in view of the tree, and a man standing in front of him in red clothes and a turban is turning to the man behind him and pointing with his outstretched left arm to the seat under the tree (Fig. 6). The seat under the tree is vacant, which of course can only mean the presence of the Buddha in person.

The selection of stories which could be linked to the scenes represented here is small (for Nāga topics in Buddhism, cf. Vogel 1926: 93-165). Although there are many *jātaka* tales in which the Bodhisatva appears as a snake or as another person in a Nāga story, the number of Nāga episodes from the life of the Buddha is small and the vacant seat under the decorated tree leaves no room for doubt that this is such a tale. The painting contains a direct reference to the story told here: the tree with its characteristic trunk is *Acacia sirissa*. In iconography the Śiriṣa-tree is known as the tree of enlightenment of the Buddha Krakasunda.¹ (Fig. 7; ill.: Cunningham 1879: pl. 29.3; Coomaraswamy 1956: pl. XXII.58; Klimburg-Salter 1995: pl. 32; for the Inscription cf. Lüders 1963: 84-84; for the inscribed representations of the Buddhas of the past in Ajanta XXII, cf. the Griffiths' copy 22A in Indian Section of Victoria & Albert Museum, no. 4-1892, photo in India Office, Vol. B: 27; Griffiths 1896-97: I, 91; Yazdani 1930-55: IV, Text, pl. 1; S.A.A.P.C. I-1081, no. 48: 4-6, for in-

¹ (*Dīghanikāya* XIV.1.8, ed. Vol. 2, p. 4; transl. p. 5: *Kakusandho bhikkhave bhagavā araham sammāsambuddho sirisassa mūle abhisambuddho*; the Sanskrit reference is not preserved, cf. Waldschmidt 1953: 72).

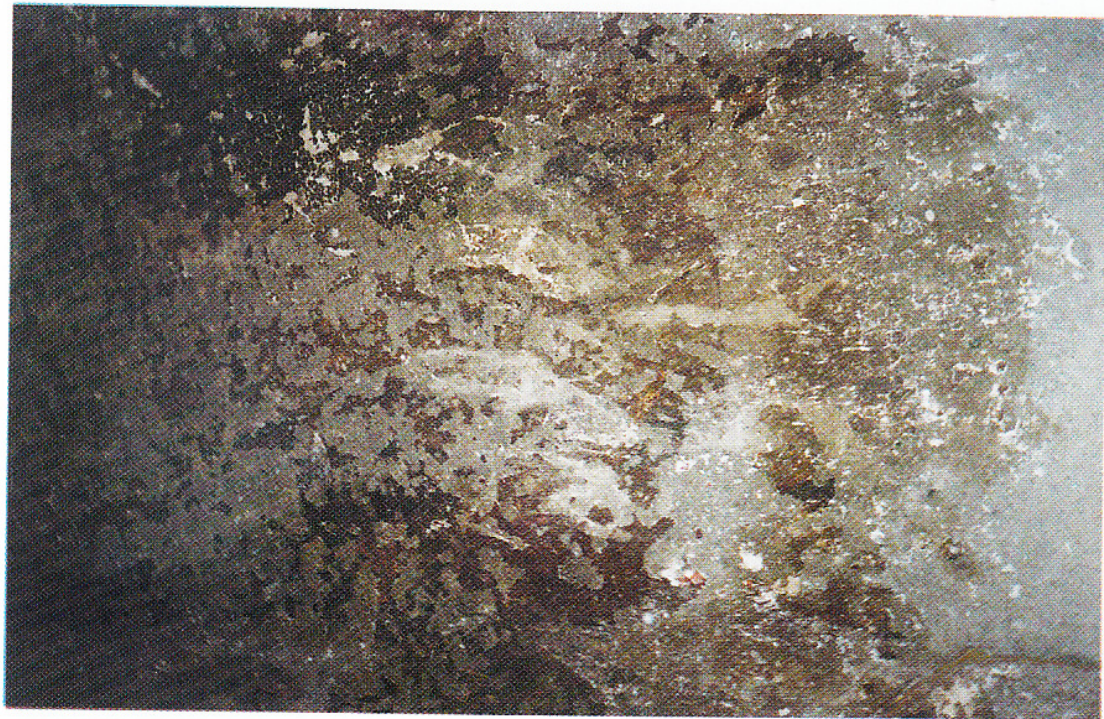
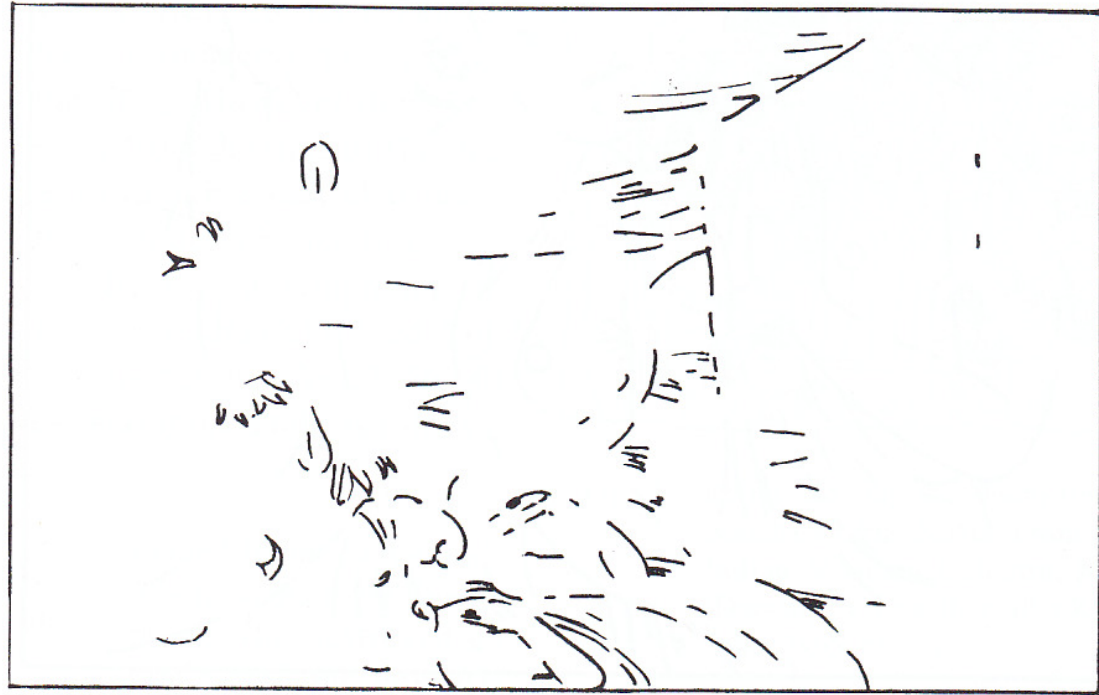


Fig. 5 — Detail of Fig. 1. (Photo and drawing: author).

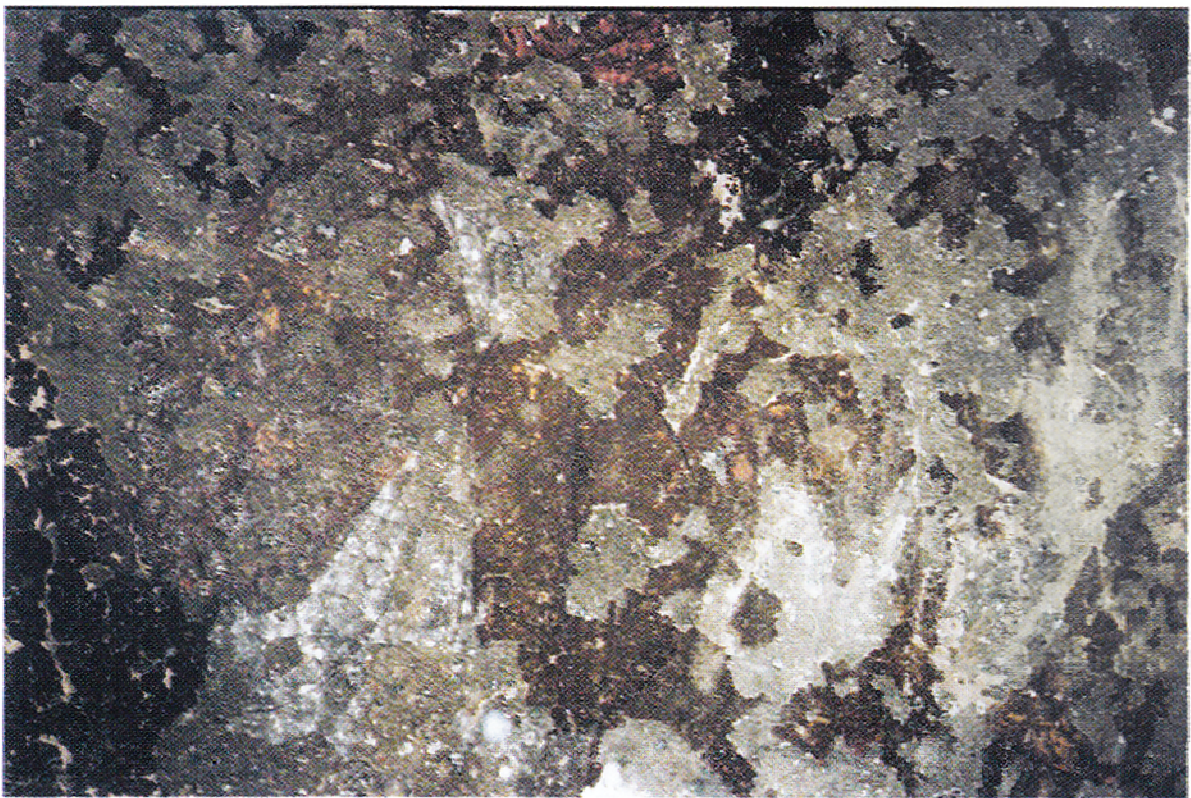


Fig. 6 – Detail of Fig. 1. (Photo and drawing: author).

scriptions cf. Burgess & Bhagwanlal 1881: 88; Chakravarty in Yazdani 1930-55: 11-12) who, however, as far as I know, has no connection to any Nāga narrative. However there is a story from the time of Buddha Śākyamuni which also takes place under a Śiriṣa-tree.

In the commentary to *Dhammapada* (XIV.3, ed. Vol. 3: 230-35, transl. Vol. 3: 56-60) the narration is told as follows:

In the lifetime of the Buddha Kassapa there lived a monk who destroyed an eraka leaf one day. Although otherwise very pious, he failed to confess this sin and for this he was reincarnated in animal form, as a Nāgarāja as big as a canoe and with the name Erakapatta. As he had not forgotten the teachings of Buddha Kassapa, he waited in yearning for a sign of the coming of a new Buddha. When a daughter was born to him, he taught her to sing a verse composed of enigmatic questions, which he knew could only be answered by someone who knew the Buddha's teachings. In order to give as many people as possible the opportunity to hear the verse, on holidays Erakapatta made his daughter dance on his head and sing the verse, while he swam in the Ganges. Many people tried to answer the questions, as the Nāgarāja promised his daughter and great riches in return, but no-one succeeded. The Buddha, who sat down under one of the seven Sirissa trees, decided to teach the young Brahmin Uttara the correct answer. During the instruction Uttara was converted. He went to the river, where the large crowd gathered on the bank made way for him, and answered the singing of the Nāga maiden. The Nāga Erakapatta knew immediately that the new Buddha was in the world and for joy he created such big waves with his huge body that the people were carried away and had to be rescued by him afterwards. Then Nāgarāja demanded to be led to the Buddha. Upon sight of the teacher he cried for joy.



Fig. 7 – Relief showing the Bodhi-tree of the Buddha Krakucchanda. From Bharhut. Indian Museum Calcutta, No. 293. (Drawing by the author: after Klimburg-Salter 1995: pl. 32).

One could think that the Erakapatta story, not mentioned in the Pali Canon, is not old, however it is to be found portrayed in Bharhut (Fig. 8;



Fig. 8 – Relief with the depiction of the Story of the Nāga Erakapatta. From Bharhut. Indian Museum, Calcutta, No. P.29. (Drawing by the author: after Coomaraswamy 1956: pl. X.29).

identif.: Coomaraswamy 1928: 629-30; ill.: Cunningham 1879: pls. 14, 54; Coomaraswamy 1956: pl. X.29; Lüders 1963: pl. 39) where it is still secured in inscriptions *Erapato (nā)garajā* and *Erapato nāgarājā bhagavato vadate* (Lüders 1963: 110-13: the Erapatta of the inscript is the older form of the Erakapatta of the story. The name of the Nāga king goes back to the old snake-god name Airāvata; he is also named Erāvaṇa in *Suttanipāta*, 379, which became Elāvata or Elāpatta in Pali. The Buddhists explain the name with the pluck-

ing of the Ela-leaf, cardamon, and later with the Eraka-leaf, a type of plant growing near water). The relief shows the events in three scenes: the Nāga in his theriomorphic form appears from under the water, while his daughter stands on his head and talks to a man standing in the water. Further below, the Nāgarāja is portrayed in human form, on the right accompanied by his family and on the left on his own kneeling before the Buddha's throne.

Although there can be no doubts regarding the link between the relief and the existing text, not everything can be brought into accord: the crowd of people mentioned in the text is not even implied in the relief, and it is not comprehensible why Uttara is standing in the water. The story in *Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā* does not appear to be particularly logically constructed either. The flood which injures people and the unexplained seven

Sirissa-trees lead one to the assumption that the commentator had imprecisely paraphrased an earlier version of the story.

The fact that the story is very old is proven not just by its representation in Bharhut but also by its version in the so-called 'northern' Sanskrit Buddhism. In contrast to the South, here several versions have been preserved, which all differ slightly from each other and especially from the *Dhammapada* commentary. The two most important points of difference are that the 'northern' stories deal above all with the man who learns the correct answer from the Buddha – later he becomes the famous monk Mahākātyāyana – and that the Nāgarāja who here bears the name Elapatra is always linked to the Gandhāra town of Takṣaśilā. Elapatra is mentioned in some texts without any allusion to our story, as the Nāga king guarding a treasure in Takṣaśilā (*Mahāvastu*, transl., Vol. 3: 381, fn.; Hiuen Tsiang, Beal 1884: I, 137).

In the *Vinaya* of the Mūlasarvāstivādins (Tibetan, ed. Vol. 44: *Vinayaṣudraka*, 107.2.1-108.33, 202b-265b; transl. Schiefner 1875: 11-14; Rockhill 1884: 46; analys. Panglung 1981: 183) the following is recounted:

Elapatra, the powerful Nāgarāja from Takṣaśilā gains possession of two enigmatic verses, spoken by the Buddha in the Tuṣita heaven. Knowing that the verses can only be explained during the lifetime of the Buddha, Elapatra goes on a pilgrimage, during which he wanders through the country in the guise of a young Brahmin (*māṇava*) and promises 100,000 pieces of gold to anyone who knows the answer. In Benares he finally meets Nalada, who had obtained the answer from the Buddha and was converted at the same time. Nalada shows Elapatra where the Buddha is and Elapatra decides to display himself to the Buddha neither in his own form nor as a Brahmin youth, but as a Cakravartin. When he appears before the Buddha, the Buddha commands him to assume his own true form, which he got as a consequence of his evil deeds. Elapatra then displays himself in his terrifying form of a giant snake, so big that while his head is in Benares, the tip of his tail is in his palace in Takṣaśilā. Elatrees grow on the snake's heads as a punishment for destroying this plant in an earlier incarnation during the time of Buddha Kāśyapa.

The story is also preserved in the canon-literature of Mahīśāsakas and of Dharmaguptakas. In both cases it is inserted into the text of *Catuṣpariṣatsūtra* (*Vinaya* of Mahīśāsakas, T.I, Vol. 22, p. 106a-107a, of Dharmaguptakas, T.I, Vol. 22, p. 791a-792c, cf. Waldschmidt 1951: 106).

The versions preserved in the ‘northern’ Buddhism differ only minimally from each other. The Chinese translation of the *Abhiniṣkramaṇasūtra* (T 190, transl. Beal 1875: 275-80) however resembles slightly the version from *Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā*, as here too a Nāga girl is on offer as a reward for the correct answer. Although the girl is not presented as the daughter of the Nāgarāja and is not accompanied by him but by two other snake deities, the answering of the verse takes place at the Ganges, like in the commentary to *Dhammapada*.

Elapatra’s daughter appears also in the version of the story in the *Mahāvastu* (ed. Vol. 3: 382-84; transl.: 379-82) in which even the name Uttara appears, however not as the future Mahākātyāyana, but as his brother. The version in the *Mahāvastu* is particularly incoherent, and without knowledge of the other adaptations it is almost incomprehensible. Likewise, the reference in the *Buddhacarita* (XVII.3, transl.: 191) requires the reader to know the story. The other Sanskrit versions are not just incomprehensible, they are also illogically structured. In particular the prophecy about the future Buddha Maitreya, which is pronounced at the end of the story every time, seems to be in no way connected to the contents of the narrative. The connection of the story with the prophecy of Maitreya is probably due less to the longevity of Elapatra, who can survive the time intervals between the Buddhas, than to the fact that he is considered to be the guard of one of the treasures that will appear at the coming of the future Buddha (*Divyāvadāna* III, ed.: 61; Hiuen Tsang, Beal 1884: I, 137).

In several ‘northern’ versions seven false preachers are mentioned, to whom the future Mahākātyāyana first goes in search of the meaning of the verses. It is possible that this explains the incomprehensible statement of *Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā* that the Buddha sat under one of the seven trees. It is also possible that the search for the answer formed the core of the story. In Bharhut too a further five same trees (perhaps the sixth was in the knocked off part of the relief) are portrayed, surrounded by floods caused by the Nāgarāja, presumably to punish the false preachers.

Even though the southern and the northern versions help to explain each other, the fact remains that they recount two relatively different versions of the story: the southern one takes place only on the Ganges, with the verses being spoken by the girl, the northern one begins in Takṣaśilā and the verses are spoken by the Nāga king in the guise of a young Brahmin, who then takes on the form of a giant snake at the Buddha’s behest.

While the Bharhut relief adheres to the southern version, the Ajanta painting could suit the northern one. Our painting (Fig. 1) would then show two spatial areas, on the right the palace of the Nāgarāja in Takṣaśilā with a woman dancing in the presence of a snake and on the left the events in Benares. The two people approaching the Buddha, who is sitting under a Śiriṣa-tree – the Nāgarāja Elapatra in the guise of a Brahmin youth dressed in white and the other man (the future Mahākātyāyana?), who is pointing out the Buddha to him. The poorly discernible coils of the huge snake's body would then correspond to Elapatra's animal form, stretching from Benares to his residence in Takṣaśilā. The picture can no longer serve to answer the question whether the leaves painted on certain spots of the snake's body are of any significance.

The only deviation from the text would then be that the Nāga presents himself to the Buddha in the form he had adopted for his pilgrimage and not as a Cakravartin. This discrepancy could have entered the text at a later date (it reminds one very much of the story of the nun Utpalavarṇā, who adopts the guise of a Cakravartin during the descent of the Buddha from heaven, in order to stand directly beside the Buddha (*Vinaya* of the Mūlasarvāstivādins, Tibetan, Vol. 44.156.21, 85a, analys. Panglung 1981: 192-93, *ibid.* parallel texts) or it was intentionally omitted by the artist as an aid to understanding.

Foucher (1905-51: I, 502-7) linked one Gandhāra relief to the Elapatra legend. However, the relief (Lahore Museum, no. 1155; ill.: Foucher 1905-51: I, fig. 251; Ingholt 1957: fig. 163; Kurita 1988: fig. 341) only shows one man (without a snake-hood!) kneeling before the Buddha, who is accompanied by Vajrapāṇi and worshippers. Behind him we see a fenced-in tree, under which a Nāginī (?) is standing. As Vogel correctly noticed, there are no clues in the relief which could confirm the interpretation. Vogel himself (1926: 107) interprets as a portrayal of the Elapatra tale a relief, in which a Nāga is represented twice: first among the worshippers revering the Buddha, then at the base of the Buddha's throne as a snake (Peshawar Museum, no. 1716; ill.: Vogel 1926: pl. 8a; Kurita 1988: fig. 342). The decisive factor for the interpretation is supposed to be the presence of the five monks, who, according to Vogel, indicate Benares as the location. The fact that the snake is very small, and thus does not fit the description at all, speaks against the identification.

* * *

On the right front wall of Cave IX the paintings have been preserved (S.A.A.P.C. I-1081, no. 23:45) covering relatively large areas with colours that still shine strongly. The picture stretches from the right-hand wall, as seen from the entrance, over to the window and entrance door and borders on the old painting of the *Paṇḍarajātaka* (Schlingloff 1993) to the left of the door. The piece over the door is completely lost, but apart from this the mural has only been destroyed in certain spots, especially in the lower sections. The fact that the painting is illegible is due to another cause, obvious to any observer: here we are dealing with two layers of paint – a painting of pre-Christian times and a repainting of the 5th century (Fig. 9a).

It is difficult to discern both layers of the murals, because the colour spectrum of each layer is only slightly different from that of the other, but *in situ* it is feasible, because lighting it from the side permits one to recognize precisely the 2-3 mm thick layer of the more recent plasterwork.

The more recent painting (Fig. 9b) consists of several representations of the Buddha. The Buddhas are mostly portrayed as sitting on lion thrones. Lotus tendrils and lotuses on which the Buddhas are seated or standing are visible. It is possible that this is a picture of the Miracle of Śrāvastī which is proven by two skin-coloured remnants (bottom, middle), probably interpretable as remains of the naked ascetics. On the right-hand side, two of the monks' heads have been preserved, which could also be linked to the iconography of the Miracle of Śrāvastī.

Fortunately, it was omitted to conserve these stereotypical and not particularly interesting murals, with the result that the painting beneath could come to light.

The Story of the Nāga King Paṇḍaraka (Fig. 9c)

On the left-hand side of the painting a building with many pillars is shown (Fig. 10); two people, the left person of whom is possibly wearing a Nāga-hood behind his head, are observing something portrayed in the middle of the building, which is completely lost today – at this spot the wall is blank.

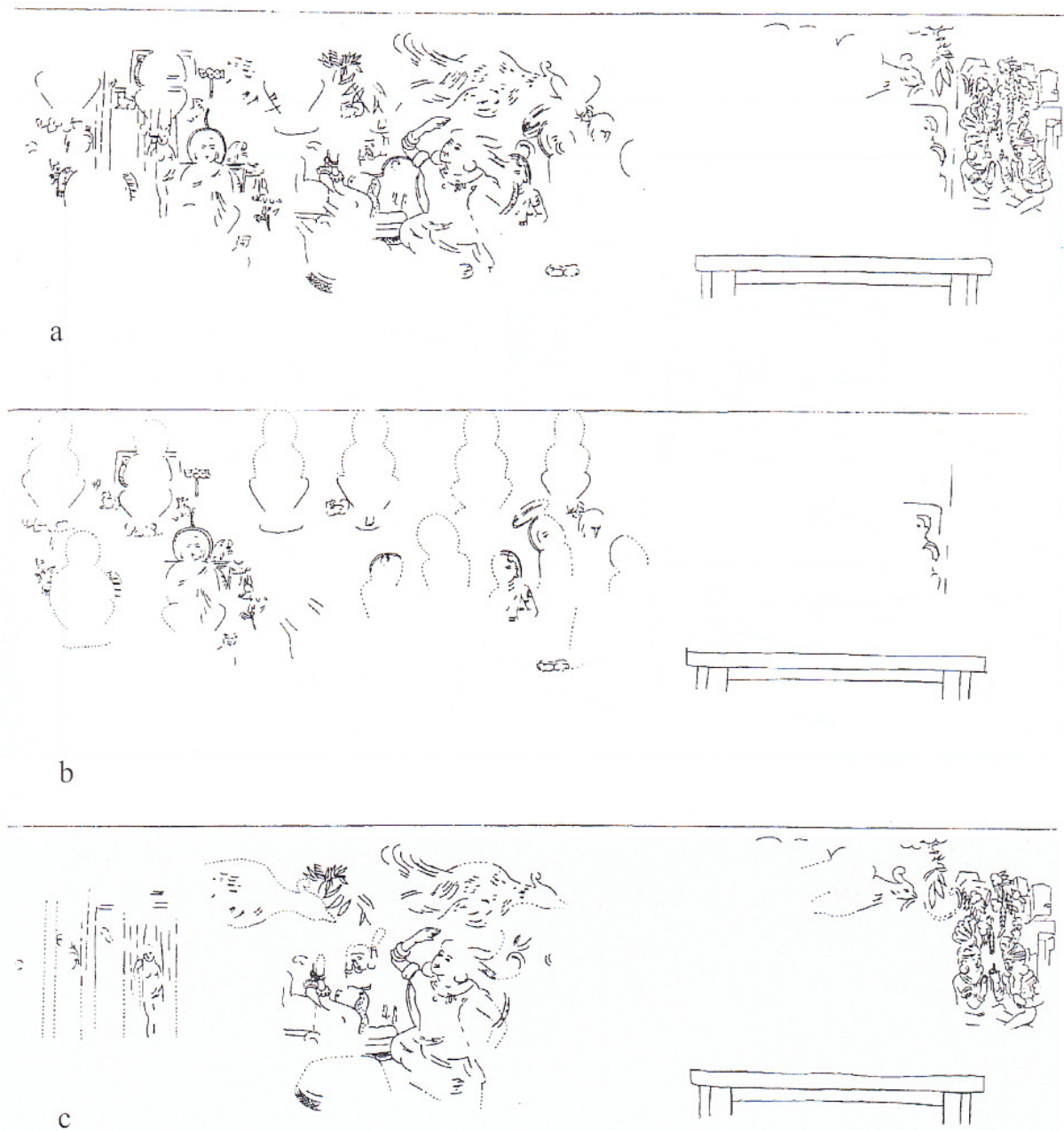


Fig. 9 – Painting on the front wall in Cave IX in Ajanta: a) two layers of paint; b) repainting of the 5th c. AD; c) old painting of c. 1st c. BC. (Drawings: author).

The scene to the right of the palace of pillars consists of several large-sized people. The central person is relatively clearly discernible (Fig. 11): it is a man holding his right arm with a clearly recognizable red palm over his head. The man is richly dressed and adorned, the three drop-like pendants attached to his broad, round necklace are characteristic. This person has his head directed upwards and his eyes are also looking in this direction. The hands of the slightly smaller people beside him are also directed

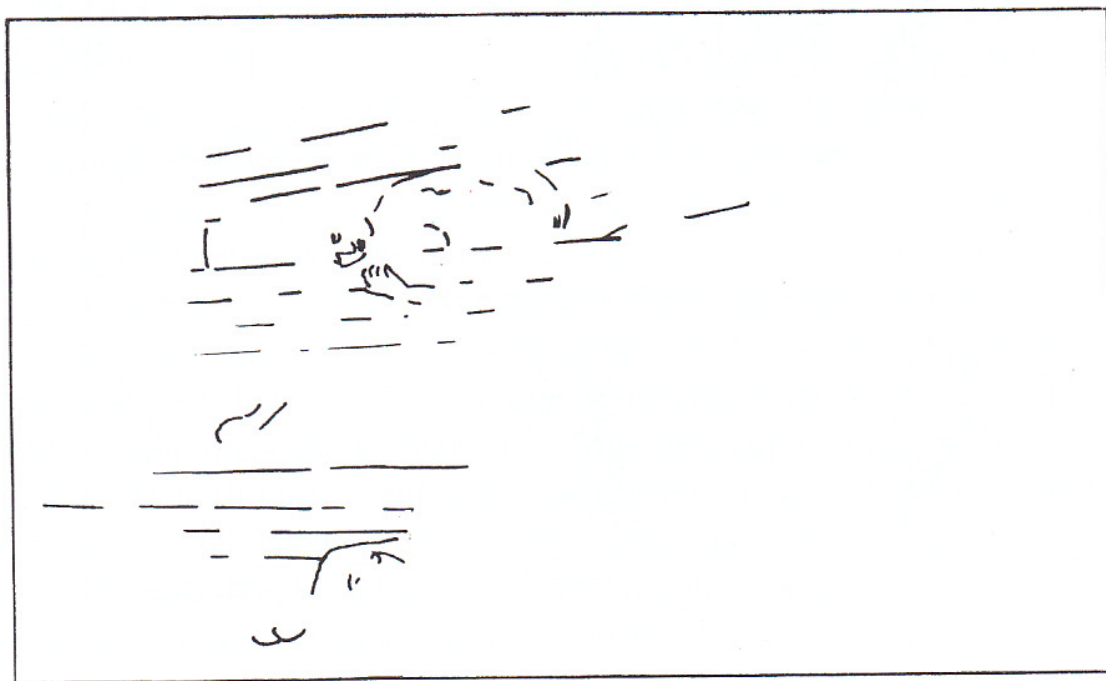


Fig. 10 – Detail of Fig. 9c. (Photo and drawing: author).



Fig. 11 – Detail of the Fig. 9c. (Photo and drawing: author).

in the same direction, to the upper left. These figures are not completely preserved, however their arms with well visible rich bangles and the round stools standing beside them indicate that we are dealing with several women, who have jumped up from their seats and are gazing at something in the air. If one follows the direction in which the arms and eyes are turned, one can recognize only a couple of white spots, which, however, are very characteristically painted with grey, short, irregularly curved lines. What the object is that the figures of this scene are looking at, is clarified in the following scene to the right, where behind some tree leaves the white area with the grey lines reappears. Here we have no difficulties in identifying it as a representation of feathers. A large bird with an exposed feathered crest is gliding through the air (Fig. 12). In Indian art the crest is an unmistakable identification feature of the Garuḍa (Fig. 13: Sanchi I; ill.: Marshall & Foucher 1940: II, pl. 46 – Fig. 14: Sonkh; ill.: Härtel 1993: 254, pl. 26b; Raven 1994: II, pl. 1). In the painting the Garuḍa bird is shown once more – above the right-hand side of the door. Here it is discernible that he is holding a curved object in his beak. It is not difficult to guess that this must be a snake. Now we can interpret the white lines portrayed behind the head of the male person with the raised arm as snake-hoods. This is with certainty the abduction of a Nāga by the theriomorphically represented Garuḍa. Today it can no longer be ascertained whether the Nāga was portrayed in the scenes over the door in animal form like the Garuḍa or not (perhaps there are still some remains of the therio- or anthropomorphic body of the Nāga under the portrayal of the monks).

The following scene (Front wall, to the left of the entrance), copy: Griffiths 9H, Indian Section of the Victoria & Albert Museum, Phot. *ibid.* no. 137-1885; Phot. in India Office, Vol. 70: no. 5962; ill.: Griffiths 1896-97: I, pl. 37; Yazdani 1930-55: III, pl. 15a, 16 (tracing); Schlingloff 1993: fig. 9 (tracing); S.A.A.P.C. I-1081, no. 23:47, 24:26) shows the Nāga and the Garuḍa in human form with the appropriate five-fold snake-hood and a Garuḍa head above the turbans (Fig. 15). The Garuḍa head (Fig. 16) does not just have the crest feather, which looks exactly like in the scenes in his animal form, the neck feathers too are elaborated here exactly like in the other scenes. But we also recognize in the seated Nāga the person shown in the previous scene – it is sufficient to point out the three drop-like pendants on his necklace.



Fig. 12 – Detail of the Fig. 9c. (Photo and drawing: author).



Fig. 13 – Sanchi I, eastern Gateway, middle beam, rear side, right. Detail of of the Buddha's sermon. (Drawing by the author: after Marshall & Foucher 1940: II, pl. 46).



Fig. 14 – Relief from Sonkh. Government Museum, Mathura, no. SO I 110. (Drawing by the author: after Härtel 1993: 254, pl. 26b).

We can assert with certainty that the whole painting portrays a single Nāga-Garuḍa story. It is unnecessary to seek the identification of the story, as it has already been identified on the basis of the relatively well preserved and copied scene of the conversation of the two deities.

The story is the verse-part of the Jātaka no. 518 (*Paṇḍarajātaka*, ed. Vol. 5: 75-88, transl.: 42-48), the tale of the Nāga called Paṇḍaraka and the Garuḍa, named in the text as 'the beautifully feathered one', Suparṇa. The identification by Schlingloff (1993) was already proven by the single last scene, since there is no other story in the literature in which the Nāga and the Garuḍa sit together peacefully and the Garuḍa has the gesture of the instructor and the Nāga that of the worshipper – the discovery of the previous scenes can only confirm the identification.

As the literary fundament has been definitely identified and the painting is the oldest pictorial representation of the narrative, a detailed comparison of the text and its pictorial rendering may be of some interest.

The 39 *gāthās* of the Jātaka are constructed according to the following plan:

In the first three verses (1-3) the problem and the two involved persons are presented: it is the story of the betrayal of a secret through the fault of the person involved. Somebody unable to keep his secret fares badly, like Paṇḍaraka at the hands of Suparṇa. In the fol-



Fig. 15 – Detail of Fig. 9c. (Photo: author).

lowing verses the Nāga tells further details: he had gained confidence in the naked ascetic (*acela samaṇa*) and had confided his secret to him, which now brought his ruin. Furthermore it is indicated (8) that Paṇḍaraka had to quit his luxurious life with beautiful robes,



Fig. 16 – Detail of Fig. 9c.
(Drawing: author).

women, fragrant herbs etc., and is now in the hands of the Garuḍa. Suparṇa reproaches him for his inability to keep a secret (6-7) and asks him who should deserve greater reproach: the ascetic, who had not kept the secret entrusted to him, Suparṇa or the Nāga himself (9). Suparṇa continues with further nine verses (11-19), containing the explanation of the importance of keeping secrets. The result of the instruction is that Paṇḍaraka, upon repeatedly stating his trust in the ascetic, notices (22) that he himself had distanced himself from Artha and Dharma by letting out his secret. Then, however, completely unexpectedly and apparently without any connection to the conversation up to then, he asks about the nature of true asceticism (23). Suparṇa replies with one verse (24) of religious instruction.

Although both the question and the answer are stereotypical and conventional, they have the planned effect: the Nāga asks the Garuḍa to accept him as a son (25). What is meant is a sonship as a pupil, i.e. a second birth through the teacher's mouth – after the religious instruction the Garuḍa cannot refuse this request and consequently he releases the Nāga as his son and grants him his life (26-28). After the following verses (which were inserted here from another Jātaka), we learn that the two deities make their way to the *acela* (33), however, only the Nāga goes straight to him (34). The ascetic admits his betrayal and explains it through his affection for Garuḍa (35). Thus he demonstrates that he has not fulfilled the basic requirement of asceticism, namely to be dispassionate.

It is not easy to understand who speaks the following verses (36-38, ed.: 86-87; transl.: 47):

*na me piyaṃ appiyaṃ vāpi hoti / sampassato lokam imaṃ paraṃ ca /
susaññatānaṃ hi viyañjanena / asaññato lokam imaṃ carāsi // ari-
yāvakaṃ si anariyo cāsi / asaññato saññatasannikāso / kaṅhābhijātiko
si anariyarūpo / pāpaṃ bahuṃ duccharitaṃ acārīti // aduṭṭhassa tuvaṃ
dūbhi dūbhī ca pisuṇo c'asi / etena saccavajjena muddhā te phalatu
sattadhā ti //*

The prose commentator thinks that it is the Nāga. However, the person who speaks them has great knowledge – he knows both this world and

the next world, which cannot be expected of the Nāga, he also knows about the rest of the ascetic's evil way of life and is described in the last verse of the Jātaka (39, ed.: 87; transl.: 48) as *inda*:

*tasmā hi mittānaṃ na dubbhitabbaṃ / mittaddubhā pāpiyo n'atthi
añño / āsittasatto nihato pathavyā / indassa vākyena hi saṃvaro
hato ti //*

Therefore it is probably not *nāginda*, as the commentator assumes, but Indra, who descended from heaven to speak the words of truth. Through this truth the head of the ascetic breaks into seven pieces (for shattering of the head as a result of questioning beyond one's limits or refusing to answer, cf. Witzel 1987: 363 ff.). The fact that Indra appears as the 'executor' of the punishment is utterly appropriate to the situation: in other places in Buddhist literature where a shattering of the head is threatened (*Majjhimanikāya* 4.5, ed. Vol. 1: 231 and *Dīghanikāya* III.1.21, ed. Vol. 1: 95) the Yakṣa Vajrapāṇi appears as the executor, who is interpreted as Indra by the commentator Buddhaghosa (*Sumaṅgalavilāsinī*, *DN-aṭṭakathā* on III.1.21; ed.: 264: *vajiraṃ pāṇiṃhi assāti Vajirapāṇi / yakkho ti na yo vā so vā yakkho Sakko devarājā ti veditabbo*). The final verse of the Jātaka reaffirms that the ascetic falls to the ground when he is sprinkled with the water of the truth utterance. This part is somewhat incomprehensible for the reason that the truth utterance only pronounces what was already known and what Acela had already admitted. What really had bad consequences for him was the ritual utterance together with the pouring of water (for the significance of water in truth utterances and curses, cf. Lüders 1951: 32-33).

This ballad explains the *mantrabheda*, the betrayal of a counsel-secret, a problem from the area of political science (cf. *Kauṭilīya Arthaśāstra* I.15, ed.: 18-21; transl.: 32-36) by means of an animal fable in the style of the *Pañcatantra* (Ruben 1959: 137 ff.) given with a Buddhist revision in the Jātaka. Nonetheless, the version is not particularly Buddhistic. For the author of the prose commentary the Garuḍa is the Bodhisatva, possibly because he misunderstood the ending and did not want to sully the Bodhisatva with the ascetic's death. In the *Milindapañha* (IV, ed.: 201; transl. Vol. 1: 291) Paṇḍaraka is the Bodhisatva.

We will never know who was the Bodhisatva in the opinion of the Ajanta artist. We cannot decipher if in the last scene it is the Bodhisatva

who in his goodness is instructing his arch-enemy or if the Bodhisatva had the cleverness to save his life by making his murderer his guru – both possibilities correspond to the Jātaka-Gāthās as well as to our painting.

The scenes painted in Cave IX present the situation as it must logically have taken place, but is not described in the verses: the Garuḍa approaches the Nāga king surrounded by the court, pulls him into the air and carries him away. It cannot be ruled out that the bird with its prey was portrayed once again – in the destroyed piece of painting above the door. This presentation corresponds to the *gāthā*-text insofar as already in the first verses the Nāga describes himself as overpowered *ātītamatto kapaṇo rudāmi* (vv. 4, 5 and 10) thus in the hands of Suparṇa – and is not returned to earth until the 27th verse of the Jātaka (ed.: 84):

*icceva vākyam visajī supaṇṇo / bhumyā patiṭṭhāya dijo dujivham /
mutt'ajja tvam sabbabhayātivatto / thalūdake hohi mayābhigutto //*

after the bird has granted him his life. This means that the actual instruction took place in the air, which the artist presumably intended to show by the repeated representation of the Garuḍa in flight. The ascetic is not (and was not) portrayed in the painting. The poorly preserved scene at the left edge of the painting – if it is not a space filler – can only have shown the luxurious residence of the Nāga or Garuḍa king, but under no circumstances the dwelling of an ascetic. We do not learn what the actual content of the secret was. As the *gāthās* imply (v. 5, ed.: 77), it was a spoken statement:

*tassāham paramam brahme guyham / vācam h'imaṃ nāsakkhi
saṃyametuṃ /*

so he probably did not reveal the Nāgas' hiding-place. The interpretation presented by the prose writer – the ascetic reveals to the Garuḍa that one must seize the Nāgas by the tail, rather than by the head, because they fill their stomachs with stones and are hard to carry:

*bhante mayam mahante mahante pāsāṇe gilitvā bhāriyā hutvā
nipajjitvā supaṇṇānaṃ āgamanakāle mukham nibbāhetvā dante
vivaritvā supaṇṇe ḍasituṃ gacchāma te āgantvā amhākaṃ sīsaṃ
gaṇhanti [...] tesam amhe gaṇhantānaṃ kiṃ sīsena gahitena bālā
naṅguṭṭhe gahetvā amhe heṭṭhāsīsake katvā gahitagocaraṃ mukhena
chaddāpetvā lahuke katvā gantuṃ sakkontīti //*

is not compatible with the picture. The anthropomorphic portrayal of the Nāga as the Garuḍa approaches rules out this explanation. Unexplained, but perhaps in some way connected to the content of the secret is a small can-like object, which the Nāga is holding on his lap during the abduction.

As in our Ajanta painting Garuḍas were portrayed in the oldest Indian art both in their anthropomorphic (Fig. 17: fragment of a Bharhut relief; ill.: Cunningham 1879: pl. 16; Coomaraswamy 1956: pl. XI.30) as well as in their theriomorphic form (Fig. 18: fragment of the 'Indra' relief, Bhaja XIX; ill: Coomaraswamy 1927: pl. 8.127; Zimmer 1955: 42). However, nowhere else has the alternation of the two forms been preserved within the framework of one story.

The custom of displaying the Garuḍa's head above the human head, analogue to the Nāga-hoods, has only very rarely been preserved outside of Ajanta. I am aware of only three examples: a Garuḍa figure above the *caitya* entrance to the Manmodi cave in Junnar (Fig. 19: ill.: Dhavalikar 1984: pl. 6b) and two Amaravati reliefs, one in Madras Government Museum (ill.: Rosen Stone 1994: pl. 156) and another one known to us today only in the form of a copied drawing from the 19th century (Fig. 20: ill.: Fergusson 1868: pl. 67) which portrays a whole bird above the deity's head. In later art the Garuḍa is represented either as a bird with a human face (Fig. 21: metal seal of Kumāragupta II, or III; ill.: Raven 1994: pl. 16.) or as a winged human with a beak nose (Fig. 22: Ajanta XVII; copy: Griffiths 17L: Indian Section of the Victoria and Albert Museum, Phot. *ibid.*; no. 56-1885 and in India Office, Vol. 70: no. 5979; ill.: Griffiths 1896-97: I, pl. 54; Yazdani 1930-55: IV, pls. 38-39; Takata 1971: pls.



Fig. 17 – Detail of the depiction of the Buddha in heaven. From Bharhut. Indian Museum, Calcutta, No. P3. (Drawing by the author: after Coomaraswamy 1956: pl. XI.30).



Fig. 18 – Detail of the so called 'Indra relief'. Bhaja XIX, right from the doorway. (Drawing by the author: after Zimmer 1955: II, pl. 42).

36-38; Plaeschke 1982: fig. 10; Okada 1991: 197).

The two Nāga stories in the oldest Ajanta art prove that the Nāga cult played a very important role in the early epoch in Ajanta as well as in later times. The portrayal of the two stories, that of the Nāga Paṇḍaraka and that of the Nāga Elapatra, is also an example of the difference between bad ascetics, *acela* and the six false preachers, and the good ascetic – the Buddha. Perhaps this was the most important message of the painting.



Fig. 19 – Nāga and Garuḍa on the façade of the Bhut Leni *caitya* IX at Manmodi, Junnār. (Drawing by the author: after Dhavalikar 1984: pl. 6b).



Fig. 20 – Relief showing the adoration of the Buddha. From Amaravati. (After Fergusson 1868: pl. 67).



Fig. 21 – Metal seal of Kumāragupta II, or III, recovered at Bhīrtārī (U.P.). State Museum, Lucknow. (Drawing by the author: after Raven 1994: pl. 16.)



Fig. 22 – Detail of the Ajanta painting depicting the Buddha preaching in Indra's heaven, Cave XVII, antecella, left side wall. (Drawing by the author: after Griffiths 1896-97: I, pl. 54).

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