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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	7
<i>Deborah Klimburg-Salter</i>	
Elephant Goads and Other Marks on Female Figures in Bhārhut	9
<i>Chandreyi Basu</i>	
A Terracotta Relief from Ahicchatrā — Sun Barque, Solar Chariot or ...?	23
<i>Marion Frenger</i>	
Maitreya and the Past Buddhas: Interactions between Gandhāra and Northern India	29
<i>Kurt A. Behrendt</i>	
On the Necessity of Contextualisation: a Nagaradevatā and other Semi-nude Women in Gandhāran Representations of the Buddha's Life	41
<i>Katia Juhel</i>	
Ongoing Studies of Bodhisattva Imagery from Greater Gandhāra: Turban Ornamentation in the Form of Winged-Lion Plaques	53
<i>Carolyn Woodford Schmidt</i>	
Skanda in Gandhāra: A Hindu God in a Buddhist Environment?	71
<i>Kirsten Southworth</i>	
Non-Buddhist Narrative Scenes at Nagarjunakonda	77
<i>Monika Zin</i>	
Aṣṭamahābhaya Avalokiteśvara in the Western Deccan: Buddhist Patronage and Trade between the fifth and sixth century CE	91
<i>Pia Brancaccio</i>	
Designing a New Hoysaḷa Temple in Karnataka	99
<i>Adam Hardy</i>	
A Magnificent Gupta Terracotta Vāsudeva-Viṣṇu Image from the David Nalin Collection	119
<i>Gouriswar Bhattacharya</i>	
The Hindu Sculptures from Pāhārpur Reconsidered	131
<i>Vincent Lefèvre</i>	

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Ten Illustrated Leaves from a <i>Pañcarakṣā</i> Manuscript in a Private European Collection	143
<i>Eva Allinger</i>	
Architecture as Identity: Architecture of the Bengal Sultanate	153
<i>Perween Hasan</i>	
Images of Ardhanārīśvara from Bengal and Nepal — A Chronological Survey	167
<i>Gerd J. R. Mevissen</i>	
Thirteenth and Fourteenth Century Wall Paintings in West Tibetan Caves: Style and Iconography	183
<i>Helmut F. Neumann and Heidi A. Neumann</i>	
The Magru Mahādeva Temple at Chhatri (distr. Mandi, Himachal Pradesh): Architectural and Iconographical Observations	197
<i>Anne-Claire Juramie</i>	
On a Wall Painting from Toplukdong Site no. 1 in Domoko: New Evidence of Vaiśravaṇa in Khotan?	215
<i>Erika Forte</i>	
New Evidence on Sogdian Painting from Uch Kulakh (Bukhara Oasis — Uzbekistan)	225
<i>Ciro Lo Muzio</i>	
Plates	237

NON-BUDDHIST NARRATIVE SCENES AT NAGARJUNAKONDA

MONIKA ZIN

The narrative representations on two pillars kept today in the Archaeological Museum at Nagarjunakonda (figs. 1–2, nos. 36 and 44)¹ still require explanation. Although some attempts have been made to identify separate registers as illustrations of the Buddhist *jātakas*, such explanations are not convincing. For instance, one register (fig. 2, B 2) showing a lion was identified by Rama as the *Sukarajātaka* (Pali *Jātaka* no. 153), i.e. the story about a lion who prefers to let a boar go free and pretend that he has won the fight, rather than touch its filthy and stinking skin (according to the prose text of the *jātaka*, the boar besmeared itself with human excrement and Rama explains that a squatting person below is shown in the act of producing this).² The weak point of this identification is that the boar does not belong to the scene with the lion but is placed on the middle belt of the pillar, where different animals are represented in rectangular panels (in most cases, two animals are depicted in each field). Another alleged depiction on the same pillar (fig. 2, D 2–3) was interpreted as the *Mahāhamsajātaka* (no. 534),³ i.e. the Buddhist story about a Great Goose who preaches a sermon to a human king. As opposed to the story mentioned above, this narrative has a known pictorial tradition,⁴ which demonstrates that the goose — like all individuals shown teaching throughout the entire Indian tradition — must be depicted at a higher level. The scene with two geese standing on the floor, each

looking furthermore in two different directions, can on no account represent a sermon held by the Bodhisatva.

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Hence, the existing identifications cannot be considered convincing, the more so as they concern only selected registers. As we shall see, there are good reasons to suppose that both pillars not only look similar and undoubtedly belong together, but that they also bear scenes illustrating one and the same story, or at least the same story sequence. Surprisingly, there are also quite convincing arguments to suggest that the narratives depicted do not show Buddhist stories at all.

That this should appear surprising is already significant. The fact is that out of 127 sites excavated at Nagarjunakonda only about 30 were Buddhist, whereas all the hitherto recognized narrative reliefs illustrate Buddhist stories. The Ikṣvāku were, as is commonly known, the followers of Śiva (only their mothers, wives and daughters were Buddhist)⁵ and their religious halls were marvelously decorated. The excavations have brought to light the temples of Śiva Sarvadeva, of Kārttikeya, of Viṣṇu Aṣṭabhuja and of numerous other deities. The city had splendid *ghāṭs*, an impressive stadium and scores of fine residential buildings. At these sites, several representations of gods have been unearthed, as well as many decorative or figurative representations of various kinds, one

1. All pictures by Wojtek Oczkowski have been taken with the kind permission of the Archaeological Survey of India. No. 36 (Fig. 01 in the article at hand) is illustrated in: Longhurst (1938: pl. 9a–d); Rao (1956: pl. 55); Ray (1983: figs. 168, 168a, 214, 223); Rao (1984: pl. 381); Rosen Stone (1994: fig. 270); Rama (1995: pl. 80); Sugimoto (2003: pl. 9a–b); Soundararajan (2006: pl. 46 B). No. 44 (here Fig. 02) is illustrated in: Longhurst (1938: pl. 10a–d); Rama (1995: pl. 50); Sugimoto (2003: pl. 8).

2. Cf. Rama (1995: 143–44). The explanation of the author (p. 144) that the ‘... lion is plunging with its mouth open as though it is out to have its bath and is vomiting out of nausea brought on by

his contact with [the] boar’ has no counterpart in the *jātaka* text at all.

3. Cf. Rama (1995: 149–56); repeated by Sugimoto (2003, 68–69).

4. Cf. Schlingloff (2000/2013: nos. 13–14); the narrative is not represented in the Amaravati School, but it is known from the new excavation at Kanaganahalli.

5. For an overview concerning the rulers of Nagarjunakonda, their dating and social structures, as revealed by inscriptions — cf. Rosen Stone (1994: ch. 1).



Fig. 1: Nagarjunakonda, pillar from site 37, Nagarjunakonda Museum, no. 36.

instance of which is an image of a *yoginī* (fig. 3) meditating between five fires (the fifth being the sun).⁶ This representation was found in the vicinity of what is called the ‘Royal Burning Ghāt’ (site 126) and it bears an inscription dated to the reign of Ehovula Cāmtamūla (i.e. second half of the third century), which refers to the temple of Śiva Nādagīśvara.⁷ Nonetheless, no

narrative reliefs showing corresponding stories have been found at these sites.⁸

*

The two pillars discussed here (figs. 1 and 2) were discovered by Longhurst (in excavations carried out between 1927 and 1931) at a place referred to by later

6. Archaeological Museum at Nagarjunakonda, no. 118, illustrated in: Sivaramamurti (1979: fig. 2); cf. photo from the excavation: Soundararajan (2006: pl. 101).

7. Soundararajan (2006: 243 & pl. 101).

8. Soundararajan (2006: pl. 78 C) illustrates some broken fragments, one of which shows part of an anthropomorphic figure with the head of a buffalo — perhaps from a narrative depiction in which the Yakṣa Gomukha played a role? Unfortunately, the piece is very small and its religious affiliation is unknown.



Fig. 02: Nagarjunakonda, pillar from site 37, Nagarjunakonda Museum, no. 44.

archaeologists as site no. 37.⁹ Longhurst called this site a ‘palace’ in view of the exceptionally fine carvings on the pillars.¹⁰ He excavated not only these two, but also three other pillars that do not show narrative reliefs, but other, no less interesting, figurative representations;

9. Cf. photos from the excavations in: Longhurst (1938: pl. 8 c) and Soundararajan (2006: pl. 45).

10. Longhurst (1938: 11): “In the central part of the valley, where the ancient city of Vijayapurī once stood, the ruins of a large *mandapa* were discovered and five very handsome stone pillars were unearthed (...). All are damaged and the pavilion must have been wantonly destroyed. From the style of their elaborate ornamentation and curious semi-classical subjects portrayed on

inter alia a Scythian soldier.¹¹ For Soundararajan — who excavated at Nagarjunakonda in the 1950s, shortly before the valley was flooded, and who discovered a real palace area on the hill (the co-called ‘citadel’) — site no. 37 was rather the residential building of a

their shafts, the pillars appear to have supported the wooden roof of a hall belonging to some royal palace. No pillars of this kind were found at any of the other sites.”

11. Archaeological Museum at Nagarjunakonda, no. 40 and National Museum in Delhi, no. 50.23; the Scythian soldier is illustrated e.g. in Longhurst (1938: pl. 10c–d); Rosen Stone (1994: figs. 232, 280–82).

nobleman; from the depiction of Scythian soldiers, he argued that the owner might have been a foreigner.¹² Rama (1995) calls the building the ‘Śaka Club’.

Whether this site was the city residence of a foreign nobleman, the domicile of a well-heeled merchant or perhaps the assembly hall of a guild, is not to be ascertained. Of importance however, is the fact that the building was located in the housing area of the city, and that in its design or endowment there is nothing indicative of any ritual purpose.

*

Both pillars (figs. 1–2) demonstrate an identical design. The ends at the bottom and on the top are cubic; the middle section is octagonal and is again divided horizontally into three bands. On each pillar there appear as many as 32 figurative panels that are surrounded by beautiful and sometimes lavishly ornamented strips.

All the upper panels are filled with representations of fat-bellied dwarfs dancing or playing with a toy or a pet ram. The dwarf motif is repeated on the middle band of the octagonal section of the pillars — they appear here in medallions, which are shown alternately with rectangular panels bearing depictions of various animals.¹³

The remaining panels, i.e. 20 sculptural fields on each pillar, show a variety of scenes. The larger panels at the bottom and all the main panels on the octagonal sections, which are placed on the principal side surfaces, show scenes of a clearly narrative character. It is difficult to decide whether the same can be said about the panels between them, i.e. on the surfaces created as a result of cutting off the square corners. These panels mainly depict courting couples. The scenes might not, however, be entirely devoid of significance, since they are likely to supplement the matter or the mood represented in the central fields. Even without these additional scenes, both pillars carry a total of 24 panels of narrative character, out of which



Fig. 3: Nagarjunakonda, slab found in the vicinity of site 126, Nagarjunakonda Museum, no. 118.

12. Soundararajan (2006: 141, 143): “Situated by the side of [the] road (no. 2) was what appears to be a unique residential building, probably utilized by a noble man or an important foreigner. It was a 24-pillared hall with two entrances, to the east and west respectively, with one long room on either side. The entrances were provided with well decorated moon-stone slabs. There was a central platform inside the hall with beautifully carved pillars. (...) However, considering the limited size of this structure, it might have been the house of [a] rich Śaka nobleman who lived in the city. (...) As the citadel was not excavated during

Longhurst’s time, the remains of the royal residence found inside would not have been known to him. Further, [a] royal palace was hardly likely to be outside the citadel, for purposes of security.”

13. Decorative bands showing medallions with dwarfs and fields with animals are known from other remains at Nagarjunakonda, cf. the pillars from site 15, illustrated in Rosen Stone (1994: figs. 236–38). The medallions also appear on the pillars with the Scythian soldier, cf. Fn. 11.



Fig. 4: section B1 of fig. 2.

eight are now damaged, three of them severely. Each pillar has a better or worse preserved side — apparently as a result of how they were lying in or on the ground.

Even without knowing the topic of the narrative, it is obvious that the scenes are related on each side surface of the octagonal section, showing for instance: a fight below and a captive man above (fig. 1, C); or repeating the image of a pair of geese in the upper and lower panels (fig. 2, D). Nevertheless, the scenes also continue horizontally. What seems to be of special importance here is the repeated representation of a bow-shaped old Indian *vīṇā*,¹⁴ which appears four

times in the uppermost panels on one of the pillars, in two main and two additional semi-narrative scenes (fig. 1).

One of the scenes, in a larger panel at the bottom (fig. 2, B 1; fig. 4), can be easily identified, leaving no doubts or reservations.¹⁵ It depicts an elephant with three riders, which is shown running to the left in a rocky landscape. The riders comprise: a turbaned man driving the mount with an *anikuśa*, a woman, and a man without headgear who sits looking towards the back. He is holding a pot or a sack in both hands and is letting a flow of coins fall from it, behind the elephant. This

14. For the development of the old Indian *vīṇā* — cf. Zin (2004), with references to literary and pictorial sources, as well as to earlier research.

15. Identified in Rama (1995: 144) “Below those two panels in

the cubical part of the pillar occurs the scene of Vasavadatta being borne by Udayana on the elephant, while his treasurer is scattering from a bag, coins”.



Fig. 5: section A3 of fig. 1.

is the famous scene from the story of the elopement of king Udayana.¹⁶ According to an old tradition going back to the ancient *Brhatkathā*,¹⁷ Udayana — king of Kauśāmbī — was caught and held captive by Pradyota-Mahāsena of Ujjayinī. Together with Pradyota's daughter, Vāsavadattā, Udayana escaped from Ujjayinī on the she-elephant of the princess. To prevent them from being followed, Vasantaka — a friend and minister of Udayana who had accompanied the couple (he is Vidūṣaka in the theatre versions of the story) — dropped coins on the street behind them, so that their pursuers would stop to collect them. The scene is clearly recognizable and is known from representations on terracotta plaques,¹⁸ as well as from the relief in the so-called Gaṇeśa Gumpa in Udayagiri (Orissa).¹⁹

The narrative of king Udayana, named by Kālidāsa as the *Udayanakathā* (*Meghadūta* 30), enjoyed enormous popularity and was a part of the *Brhatkathā*, the (now lost) bestseller novel of old India, in which Udayana and Vāsavadattā are the parents of the hero Naravāhanadatta. The story of their love and elopement appears in later versions, including the popular *Kathāsaritsāgara*, known the best from Tawney's translation, *The Ocean of Story*. The narrative concerning the elopement with Vāsavadattā was incorporated into both Buddhist and Jaina scriptures. As a matter of fact, there are also scores of other stories about Udayana (including numerous tales whose older versions were unconnected with him).²⁰ In this respect, a general impression is given that all narratives concerning a womanizing king, jealous co-

16. For literary sources referring to the Udayana narrative — cf. Adaval (1970); the book provides references and very useful renderings of many stories about Udayana in Sanskrit, Pāli and Prakrit; its aim, however, is not to analyse the development of the literary motif, but rather to discover the truth about Udayana as an historical person; cf. also Zin (1998b).

17. From the enormous literature on *Brhatkathā* research, only three articles can be cited here that give an overview of the surviving versions and their relationship to each other, Nelson (1978 and 1980), Vijayalakshmy (1982).

18. Rai Krishnadasa (1945: 82–90); for further depictions cf. e.g.: Kala (1950: pls. 30, 31, 52, 53); Poster (1986: no. 45); a beautiful sculptural piece is kept in the Heermaneck Collection, cf. *The Arts of India and Nepal* 1966: no. 9.

19. The relief was identified in 1946 by V. S. Agrawala, on the basis of the similarity of this scene with the depictions on the terracotta plaques; the frieze was illustrated *ibid.* and *inter alia* in: Agrawala (1965: fig. 96, drawing); Mitra (1975: pl. 11b); Mahapatra (1981: pl. 22.2).

20. Cf. Zin (1998b: Fn. 36).



Fig. 6: section C2-3 of fig. 1.



Fig. 7: section B3 of fig. 1.



Fig. 8: section C1 of fig. 1.

wives, and court intrigues leading to outbursts of fury from a violent husband were attributed to Udayana. Udayana was also considered to be a virtuoso *vīṇā* player and a passionate hunter.

With the *Udayanakathā* in mind, let us take a closer look at the scenes with the *vīṇā*, which are placed on the second pillar, i.e. not on the one featuring the elopement on the elephant. Although two additional panels on the octagonal section simply show couples playing music, the scenes on the main surfaces unmistakably depict episodes from the Udayana narrative (fig. 1, A 3; fig. 5). In the first, there is a person playing the *vīṇā* in front of an elephant. The story tells us that Udayana's music was so beautiful that even animals were fascinated by it; hence the king used to catch elephants by playing his *vīṇā*. During one of these hunts, Udayana was kidnapped and brought to Ujjayinī. The several versions of the narrative differ at this point: many of them say that Pradyota ordered an artificial elephant to be built and that soldiers were hidden inside it. In all versions, however, Udayana is brought to Pradyota in Ujjayinī. The episode following the kidnapping might be depicted in two panels on the pillars (fig. 1, C 2–3; fig. 6). The lower panel shows a man bridling against several men, while being observed by a person on a seat (perhaps Pradyota's minister, who is named in the narrative?). The upper panel shows a prisoner with his arms bent behind his back, standing in front of a person on a throne. It is extremely difficult to identify with certainty what the additional reliefs on the sides might illustrate. The left side shows a man carrying game — perhaps extending the representation of an association with the hunt? The panel on the right side shows something exceptional: two elderly men are depicted, one of whom stands inside an angular tube, while the other pours some form of liquid out of a jar onto his leg. The scene has been interpreted as the depiction of a bath,²¹ but there is a detail in the carving that contradicts this description: the man in the tube is holding himself up on two handles, which are led underneath his armpits. The handles would certainly be extremely impractical for a person taking a bath, as

they would not allow the person to bend forward, and would by no means constitute a reasonable or practical facility for bathing. Are we then observing here a medical treatment²² — perhaps in connection with the captured or wounded man in the main scene?

Udayana was thus kidnapped during a chase, brought to Ujjayinī and forced to teach the *vīṇā* to Vāsavadattā. This part of the story is apparently shown on one of the pillars (fig. 1, B3; fig. 7), where a man can be seen playing the *vīṇā* while seated on the floor, in the presence of a king on his throne and a woman. He is clearly not an ordinary musician playing for amusement, since somebody is aiming a bow at him, but this is a very appropriate representation for a captive person being forced to play. In this episode too, the versions differ from each other. While the Buddhist and Jaina sources tell us that Udayana and Vāsavadattā were separated from each other by a curtain, intended to prevent them from falling in love, the surviving versions of the old *Brhatkathā* do not include this motif. Not only *The Ocean of Story*, in which the omission might have resulted from other reasons,²³ but also the southern versions of the *Brhatkathā*, the Tamil *Peruṅkatai*, do not mention the curtain at all.

In the *Peruṅkatai*, Udayana and Vāsavadattā meet and fall in love on the streets of Ujjayinī, where Udayana tames a rutting elephant by playing his *vīṇā*.

While further panels are difficult to explain in detail, their character nevertheless suits the Udayana narrative: At least two of them show the courtly life of a philanderer. One of them (fig. 1, B 1) represents a man sitting on a bed without a turban and a woman sliding away from him in view of an advancing lady. Another scene (fig. 1, D 1) shows a couple on a sofa, but not sitting close together, as in most depictions. On the contrary, the lady is turning away, while the man is moving in the opposite direction.

The panel between these two scenes (fig. 1, C 1; fig. 8) represents the king accompanied by a small laughing Brahmin, characterized as such by a bent stick (*kuṭīla*). The man is shown with tufts or wisps of hair on his head. Thus, his appearance corresponds

21. Soundararajan (2006: 143), with reference to a 'public bath' excavated in Nagarjunakonda, e.g. site 19 (fig. 35, pl. 31) or site 102 (fig. 29). The excavated pools, which Soundararajan identifies as public baths, are of rectangular shape, of approx. 3–4 m and 6–7 m in length respectively.

22. Thoughts for medicinal treatments were discovered in several hospitals on Sri Lanka (cf. Mueller-Dietz 1996), one of them,

from Anurathapura (*ibid.*, fig. 2) looks very similar to the one in our relief — I would like to thank Dr. Dominik Wujastik (Vienna) for sending me this valuable article.

23. In the later versions, the story is sweetened into an ideal romance, in which Vāsavadattā's father wants Udayana for his son-in-law from the very beginning — hence the motif of the curtain could be removed as illogical.



Fig. 9: section D2 of fig. 1.



Fig. 10: section C2 of fig. 2.

precisely with descriptions of the theatrical fool, Vidūṣaka, portrayed in the treatise on theatre, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (XIII, 137–145), as carrying a *kuṭīla* and having the *kākapadaśīrṣā* (the crow's foot on his head).²⁴ This laughing character might therefore be the king's jester, or perhaps the theatrical Vidūṣaka in person — his name in the Udayana plays is Vasantaka. We should bear in mind that one of the sites excavated at Nagarjunakonda (site no. 80) was interpreted as a theatre.²⁵ Although we cannot be sure whether such an interpretation is entirely verifiable,²⁶ it seems at least quite plausible. Even though the dating of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, describing *inter alia* the construction of a theater, is uncertain, theatrical literature was unquestionably widespread at the time of the Ikṣvāku. Why then should they not have had a theater building as well? The two plays on Udayana und Vāsavadattā, the *Pratīñjayaugandharāyaṇa* and the most famous of the series of Sanskrit dramas found in Trivandrum, the *Svapnavāsavadatta*, may not be dated much later than the Nagarjunakonda of the Ikṣvākus. The plays are attributed to Bhāsa, who might have been living in the fourth century, and was in any case earlier than Kālidāsa.²⁷

The same *kuṭīla* bearer, with something that might be the crow's foot on his head, is to be found again in the scene (fig. 1, D 2; fig. 9), in which a horse is shown lying on the ground.

As a whole, there are certainly good reasons to connect the depictions on both pillars with the narrative of Udayana and it also seems that this narrative fails to conform to the Buddhist version. Not only are the details depicted different from those in the Buddhist sources known to us today (which, incidentally, would not be a strong argument, as there

are numerous Buddhist representations from lost literary traditions at Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda), but more significantly, the reliefs never show any part of the story emphasized by the Buddhist sources. For example, there is a famous episode about Śyāmāvati, a pious wife of Udayana, at whom he shot arrows, but the arrows fell down harmlessly due to Śyāmāvati's *maitrī*. This was one Buddhist narrative about Udayana that was commonly known and depicted in the region.²⁸ This particular Buddhist episode, however, is not illustrated on the pillars discussed here.

The narrative scenes on these pillars are of a quite different character in comparison to those shown on Buddhist reliefs from Nagarjunakonda or at other sites of the Amaravati School, where invariably the same pictorial representations tend to be repeated. If the pillars were indeed Buddhist, it would then be exceedingly intriguing to know why, among so many panels, not even a single scene of the Māndhātara, Sarvaṃdada or Viśvantara narratives is depicted, not to mention even a single episode from the life of the Buddha. Instead, we have one scene (fig. 2, C 2; fig. 9) that shows an ascetic, apparently a Śaiva.

*

As far as the scenes interpreted before as Buddhist *jātakas* (fig. 2, D 2–3) are concerned, it should be pointed out here that they too could well fit into the *Bṛhatkathā* narrative context. In fact, there are several stories in which two geese play an important role. In *The Ocean of Story*, such narratives are recounted between the adventures of Udayana or his son. Likewise, there is a story about the king Brahmadaṭṭa, his wife and his minister, who are told by two geese that all five of them were once attendants of Pārvatī;²⁹

24. For literary references and the depiction of a jester in art — cf. Zin (1998a) and Zin (in print).

25. Soundararajan (2006: 116, pl. 12).

26. Soundararajan (2006: 118): "The structure with its central adjunct on the west and pillared hall in the centre, [and an] arrangement for controlling entry by means of [the] main gate was identified by T. N. Ramachandran as a *Prekshāgriha* or *Raṅgasthala*, a place of public resort for recreation purposes, like dance, music, etc. He identified structures of this complex as follows: The central brick room which must have served as a *vedika* (stage) and the adjunct in random rubble as *nepathya* or a green room, the central pillared hall as a place for *prekshakas* or spectators. The inscribed clay sealing found here bearing the name *sarasikā* has been taken by him as a token which had to be presented for admission into the hall." Soundararajan himself understands the building "either as a private residence or as a dance hall."

27. For the most recent overview of the dating of the plays attributed to Bhāsa — cf. Esposito (2010), with references to earlier research.

28. For the earliest representation in Ajanta Cave X — cf. Zin (1998b); the story is represented at Kanaganahalli and inscribed *rāyādayano* and *devi sāmivati* — cf. Zin (2011), Figs. 7–8; the two best-known representations of the Amaravati School come from the railing of the Amaravati *stūpa*, one in a medallion on a cross-bar is kept in the British Museum (no. 15, illustrated e.g. in Knox 1992: 80, no. 24), another is on the railing pillar in the Chennai Government Museum (no. 125, illustrated e.g. in Sivaramamurti 1942: pl. 34.1). The reliefs were identified by Raymonde Linossier (1929–30).

29. Tawney's *The Ocean of Story*, vol. 8, 133–43 (*Kathāsaritsāgara* CXIV, 17–44); cf. Vogel (1962: 53–54).

there is also a story about two artificial geese flying to the royal palace to steal treasure,³⁰ or about a couple who — seeing two geese flying — wish to be reborn as such.³¹ Without insisting on the claim that one or other of these narratives might be represented here, I would only like to draw your attention to the fact that there are enough non-Buddhist narratives that could have provided a literary source for the depiction.

As a matter of fact, I find it very difficult to explain the scenes: with the horse lying on the ground (fig. 9); with a very peculiar item on the floor (fig. 1, B 2); with a lady drawing or writing on a board (fig. 2, C 3); with the Lakuliśa (?) ascetic (fig. 10); with the worship of an ascetic in the woods (fig. 2, B 3); or finally, the scene with the lion (fig. 2, B 2). The latter depiction shows a lion in the act of devouring an animal, while a couple of people on the right apparently find out about their

loss by watching the blood flowing down the stream. Although I am not able to provide an unquestionable or reliable explanation for these scenes, I can nevertheless emphasize with all certainty that none of them, including the scenes connected earlier with the narrative of Udayana, are depicted elsewhere in other reliefs known today from Nagarjunakonda or at any other sites of the Amaravati School. In the Buddhist reliefs, the representations are generally familiar and many are recognizable at first glance, whereas here they are new and different; again providing an argument that they are not Buddhist.

Should my assumptions prove correct, we can see here one of the earliest relief carvings connected with orthodox (i.e. Non-Buddhist and Non-Jaina) narratives. But only connected, since they are seemingly of a secular character and illustrate a popular novel.

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LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1: Nagarjunakonda, pillar from site 37, Nagarjunakonda Museum, no. 36.

Fig. 2: Nagarjunakonda, pillar from site 37, Nagarjunakonda Museum, no. 44.

Fig. 3: Nagarjunakonda, slab found in the vicinity of site 126, Nagarjunakonda Museum, no. 118.

Fig. 4: section B1 of fig. 2.

Fig. 5: section A3 of fig. 1.

Fig. 6: section C2-3 of fig. 1.

Fig. 7: section B3 of fig. 1.

Fig. 8: section C1 of fig. 1.

Fig. 9: section D2 of fig. 1.

Fig. 10: section C2 of fig. 2.

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