

## Cornucopia Non est Nidhiṣṛṅga

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In an article in the Bulletin of the Prince of Wales Museum No.9, 1964-66, 1-33, Moti Chandra tries to convince the reader that the Indian equivalent of Latin cornucopia is the term *nidhiṣṛṅga* handed down by the *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa*. The following lines try to make clear that his attempt titled *Nidhiṣṛṅga* (cornucopia) : a Study in Symbolism fails.

In the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid the horn of plenty is derived from the horn of a bull whose form the river-god Acheloos adopted when fighting with Herakles. Herakles tears out this horn, nymphs fill it with fruits and fragrant flowers and Acheloos remarks that the goddess of plenty is rich by his horn (*divesque meo Bona Copia cornu est*, *Met.IX.88*).

This derivation of cornucopia to which Moti Chandra refers (p.3) seems, however, to be secondary. The respective horn is in



Fig.2 : Bull, Domain Dahlem, Berlin: Author.



Fig.1 : Goat, Domain Dahlem, Berlin: Author.

general regarded

as the horn of the goat Amaltheia<sup>1</sup> who nourished the newly born Zeus with her milk (Fig.1). Moreover, the Roman variant contains a difficulty. The rather short horn of a bull has a massive tip and is, therefore, not very suitable as a drinking horn and, even less, as a horn of plenty (Fig.2). Practicable were only artificial bull-horns made of clay or of metal. The pretty long horn of a goat, however, is hollow.

Moti Chandra takes two verses of the Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa (III.43.15-16) as the key text for an equivalent of cornucopia in Sanskrit : nidhiṣṛṅga. Quite rightly he criticizes the translations by Stella Kramrisch and by Priyabala Shah. His own version, however, is not better. I quote Moti Chandra : One of the most important references to the cornucopia, however, appears in the following couplets in the Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa : (note 36, Viṣṇudharmottara., III, edited by Priyabala Shah, Baroda, 1950; 43, 15-16.) :

nidhi-ṣṛṅgān vṛṣān rājan nidhi-hastān mataṅgajān /  
nidhīn Vidyādhārān rājan ṛṣayo Garuḍas tathā // 15 //

Hanumāṅśca sumāṅgalyā ye ca loke prakīrtitāḥ /  
likhitavyā mahārāja gṛheṣu satataṁ nṛṇām // 16 //

Dr. Stella Kramrisch has translated the couplets as follows : “.....bulls with the horns (immersed) in the sea, and (men) with their hands sticking out of the sea (whilst their) body is bent (under water) ..... (oh) great king, the Vidyādharas, the nine gems, Garuḍa, Hanumān, all those who are celebrated as auspicious on the earth, should always be painted in the residential houses of men.” (note 37, Stella Kramrisch, The Viṣṇudharmottara (Part III), Calcutta, 1928, pp.60-61).

Unfortunately, the translation hardly gives any sense. Dr. Priyabala Shah's explanation hardly improves the matter. She explains : “All those things which are regarded as auspicious by people such as bulls with Nidhi horns, elephants with Nidhi trunks, (nine) Nidhis, Vidyādharas, sages, Garuḍa and Hanumān should generally be shown in them” (note 38, Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa, Third Khaṇḍa, vol.II, Baroda, 1961, pp.135-136).

I have translated the couplets as follows (note 39, Bulletin of the Prince of Wales Museum, no.7, 1959-1962, p.8) : “O King, in the residences of men should always be painted the 'treasure horns' (nidhiṣṛṅgān) of the bulls, the 'treasure handles' (nidhihastān) made of elephant tusks (mataṅgajān), the nidhis, the Vidyādharas, the Ṛṣis (siddhas), Garuḍa, the 'wide-jawed one (mask)' (hanuman), the auspicious women (sumāṅgalyāḥ) and other auspicious symbols famous all over the world.”

The Viṣṇudharmottara therefore leaves no doubt that in the Gupta period to which probably the text belongs, nidhiṣṛṅga represented by the bull horn and the elephant tusk was a well recognized motif associated with good luck and fortune.

Yet, many doubts remain except for basic mistakes of Chandra's translation. Although the Viṣṇudharmottara text is defective, a better translation is possible when we put the verses in the context of the whole chapter. It discusses, which

objects, connected with certain sentiments (rasa), should be painted in particular rooms, and which ones should not be painted. Below is my own translation.

“In council-halls, in the palace of kings all sentiments<sup>2</sup> should be represented. With the exception of a council-chamber of a king (sabhā) and with the exception of a temple (devaveśma) inauspicious (topics such as) battle, cremation-ground, pity, death, misery, mishap, despised matters should never be painted in rooms (13b-15). (The artist should paint) bulls with treasures at his horns, o king, and trunks with treasures that come from elephants (nidhi-hastān mātaṅgajān).<sup>3</sup> Treasure (nidhi), Vidyādhara (= flying genii), Ṛṣis, Garuḍa, Hanumān are those very auspicious (topics), o great king, that are praised in the world. They should always be painted in houses of men. (The painter) himself should not execute a work of art in his own house, o king [probably in order to avoid envy, etc.] (16-17).

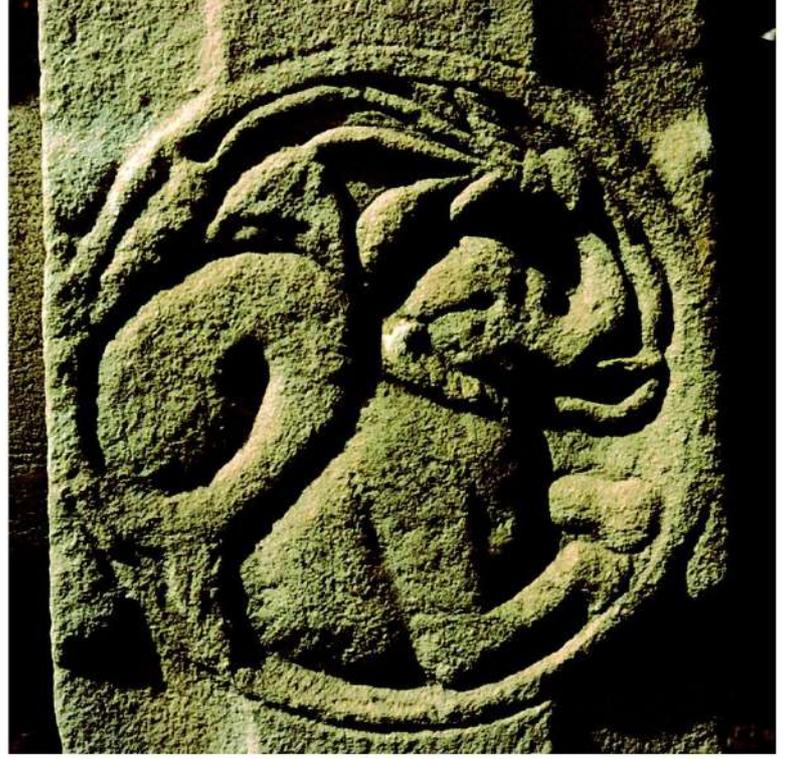


Fig.3 : Pseudo-elephant, Stūpa 2, Sanchi.

sabhā-veśmasu kartavyā rajñām sarva-rasā gṛhe // Vdh., 43.13b //

varjayitvā sabhām rājño deva-veśma tathaiva ca //  
yuddha-śmaśāna-karuṇā-mṛta-duḥkhārta-kutsitān // 14 //

amaṅgalyāṅśca na likhet kadācid api veśmasu //  
nidhi-śṛṅgān vṛṣān rājan nidhi-hastān mātaṅgajān<sup>4</sup> // 15 //

nidhir Vidyādhara rājan ṛṣayo Garuḍas tathā //  
hanumāṅśca sumāṅgalyā ye ca loke prakṛtitāḥ // 16 //

likhitavyā mahārāja gṛheṣu satatām nṛṇām //  
citra-karma na kartavyam ātmanā svagrhe nṛpa // 17 //

From the context it is perfectly evident that we have not to do with hollow horns filled with fruits and flowers – the meaning of the evolved cornucopia – but with painted horns of bulls and painted trunks of elephants that are embellished with a nidhi-decor, i.e. most probably with śaṅkha and cakṛa patterns, the most popular nidhis in Indian art. Although we do not have such paintings at our disposal from Ancient India,<sup>5</sup> the text does not allow any other interpretation.

Since, moreover, this is the only Sanskrit text that uses the term *nidhiṣṛṅga*, we can also be almost sure that there is no linguistic equivalent in Sanskrit for *keras Amaltheia*, the Greek original, or its Latin version *cornucopia*.

On the other hand, there can be no doubt that the object itself, the horn of plenty, reached India via Iran from the Mediterranean world. *Ardoxšo*, *Nanā* and most probably *Lakṣmī* are equipped with *cornucopia*.

Much effort has been made to study the obverse types of Kushan and Gupta coins including a female carrying a *cornucopia* in her left hand. According to the coin-inscriptions of the Kushans' – *Huviṣka*, *Vāsudeva I* and *Kaṇiṣka II* – the goddess is definitely *Ardoxšo*, the Iranian 'embodiment of the principle of abundance and prosperity' (Rosenfield, 1967, 74). The *cornucopia* also occurs with stone sculptures of *Ardoxšo* (and *Pharro*) and of *Hāritī* and *Pāñcika* (Rosenfield, 1967, fig.78; Kurita II, pl.499) (Figs.4-5).



Fig.4 : Pharro and Ardoxšo, Gandhar:  
Museum für Indische Kunst  
Berlin, Lost.



Fig.5 : Pāñcika and Hāritī, Sahri Bahlol,  
Peshawar Museum : I. John

In the Gupta period, as pointed out by Ellen Raven (2011, 259-261), we should identify the goddess with cornucopia as Lakṣmī, the patroness and symbolic spouse of the Gupta kings according to Kālidāsa (Raghuvamśa, I, 31f. tayā manasvinyā (scil. Sudakṣiṇyā) Lakṣmyā ca).<sup>6</sup> (Figs.6-7).



Fig.6 : Samudragupta (obv.) and Lakṣmī (rev.) : E. Raven, 2010, Fig.7)



Fig.7 : Candragupta I and Kumāradevī (obv.) and Lakṣmī? (rev.) : E. Raven, 2010, Fig.21ab

Later, in the Pala period, it is the Buddhist goddess Vasudhārā who seems to carry some sort of straight pipe, perhaps the last remnant of the cornucopia in India (Fig.8).



Fig.8 : Vasudhārā Kurkihar, Patna Museum: I. Johne, 2011, Abb.160).

The later tradition of the Northern Buddhism – Vajrayāna or Tantrayāna – can best be studied in Nepal where Vasudhārā, the goddess of fertility and abundance, plays an important role in art and ritual.<sup>7</sup> In her most popular six-armed appearance the middle left arm holds a dhānyamañjarī (ear of rice) that seems to replace the earlier cornucopia (Figs.9-10a,b).



Fig.9 : Vasudhārā (CE 1015), Cambridge Ms.1643 : Cambridge University Library.

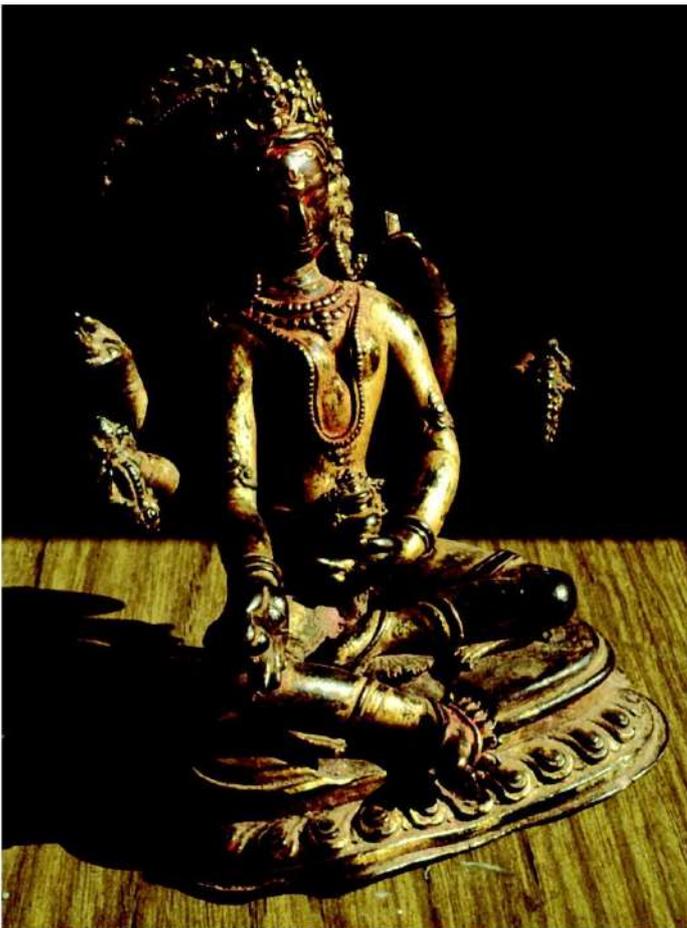


Fig.10a : Vasudhārā (CE 1644),  
Bronze from Nepal, Photo : A.J. Gail



Fig.10b : Reverse of 10a

## References

1. LIMC.I.1, 582 s.v. Amaltheia : “The horn of Amaltheia (cornucopia) was represented as having the power to provide all that anyone might desire to eat or to drink, and was sometimes equated with that horn which Herakles broke off from the brow of Acheloos; I.2, 437, no.3. Coin of Antoninus Pius (CE 138-161) : Amaltheia with baby Zeus in her left arm, in her right arm is a cornucopia.”
2. 43.1 : śṛṅgāra (love), hāsyā (mirth), karuṇa (distress), vīra (heroism), raudra (fury), vibhatsa (disgust), adbhuta (wonder), śānta (peacefulness) are the nine sentiments imparted by pictures (nava citrarasāḥ).
3. An easier reading would be just mātāṅgān since we could translate : and elephants with trunks that carry treasures (Fig.3).
4. Matāṅgajān of the Veṅkaṭeśvara edition makes no sense at all.
5. Some idea of this motif might be provided by the southern stone-elephant on the eastside of the Viśveśvara temple (built 1627 CE) on the Maṅgal Bazar in Pāṭan, Nepal (Fig.3). Moti Chandra seems to confound the elephant tusk with the elephant trunk (1966, 21-23). In Sanchi, the jewelled necklaces do not hang from tusks but – if at all – from trunks (1966, fig.14).
6. Puzzling, however, is a coin of Candragupta I where the obverse side exhibits a goddess seated on a lion and holding noose and cornucopia (Pal, 1978, 54f.:a). We do not expect the lion vehicle with Lakṣmī, but with Durgā. Nanā, a common type among Kushan coins (Kaniška, Huviška, see Rosenfield, 1967, 83-90) is used to sit on a lion. In the Gupta period, however, Nanā seems to have disappeared from the religious landscape in India.  
(Gaja-Lakṣmī on lion datable to Gupta period has been reported from Bilsāḍa, district Etah in Uttar Pradesh (Cunningham, Archaeological Survey Reports, XI, pl. VI – Editors).
7. Vasudhārā rituals, including a Vasudhārā vrata are vividly described in the still unpublished Ph.D. thesis by Isabell Johne, Vasudhārā : Eine Studie über den Ursprung, die Entwicklung und verbreitung von bildnerischen Darstellungen der buddhistischen Wohlstandsgöttin in ihrem kulturellen Kontext, Berlin, 2011.

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