

The Threefold Meaning of the Vishnu Anantashayana at Deogarh, M.P., India

Adalbert J. Gail

The Vishnu temple at Deogarh is one of the most important early stone temples in Northern India (Fig.1). Erected on an extended terrace around CE 500,¹ its historical position is the transition from a stepped to a curvilinear superstructure (*shikhara*). Its door is on the western side, three beautiful bas-reliefs embellish the three other walls: Vishnu as Gajendramoksha in the north, the seer (*rishi*) Nara-Narayana in the east, and Vishnu Anantashayi on the south side (Figs.2-3). Subject of our consideration is the latter panel that I would, first of all, like to describe without repeating earlier, partly misleading delineations.

Vishnu reposing on the primeval, seven-hooded serpent (Ananta, Shesha) occupies the middle register of the panel. The god is four-armed without any attributes or weapons. His left shank is supported by seated Lakshmi, on whose left side an anthropomorphic Garuda, - eagle, carrier and devotee of Vishnu, - touches a serpent necklace.

Six gods can be seen in the upper register. In the left corner appears Varuna, regent of the western direction, seated on a goose (*hamsa*), his vehicle. He is followed by Indra, king of the gods and regent of the eastern direction, seated on the elephant Airavata. The centre is occupied by three-faced Brahma, the creator of the universe, seated cross-legged on a lotus seat (*padmasana*). In his two hands he holds a rosary (*akshamala*) and a water vessel (*kalasha*). To his right Shiva and Uma share a bull (*vrishabha*) as vehicle. The last god in the right corner depicts Vayu, whose trademark is a shawl (*uttariya*) blown up by wind (*vayvapurita-vastra*).

In the lower register we find two sword-carrying warriors on the left side, who are confronted by four males on the right side. The smaller group represents



Fig.1 : Vishnu temple, Deogarh



Fig.2 : South side of Vishnu temple, Anantashayana

Madhu and Kaitabha, who try to inhibit Brahma's creation work from the very beginning. They are, however, defeated by Vishnu, here represented by his four weapons in human form. From left these are: the sword (*asi*), the conch trumpet (*shankha*) that rises from the head of a male, the disc (*chakra*) forming the headdress of a male, and finally the club (*gada*), whose knob embellishes a female's head.

An extraordinary feature is the fact that the stalk of the lotus on which Brahma is seated does not rise from Vishnu's navel as reported in various Puranas (see below). The place of origin of the lotus is concealed, the stalk just appears behind Vishnu's lower right arm. The primary meaning of the panel, viz. Brahma's birth from Vishnu's navel and the primeval creation (*sarga*), cannot be doubted,

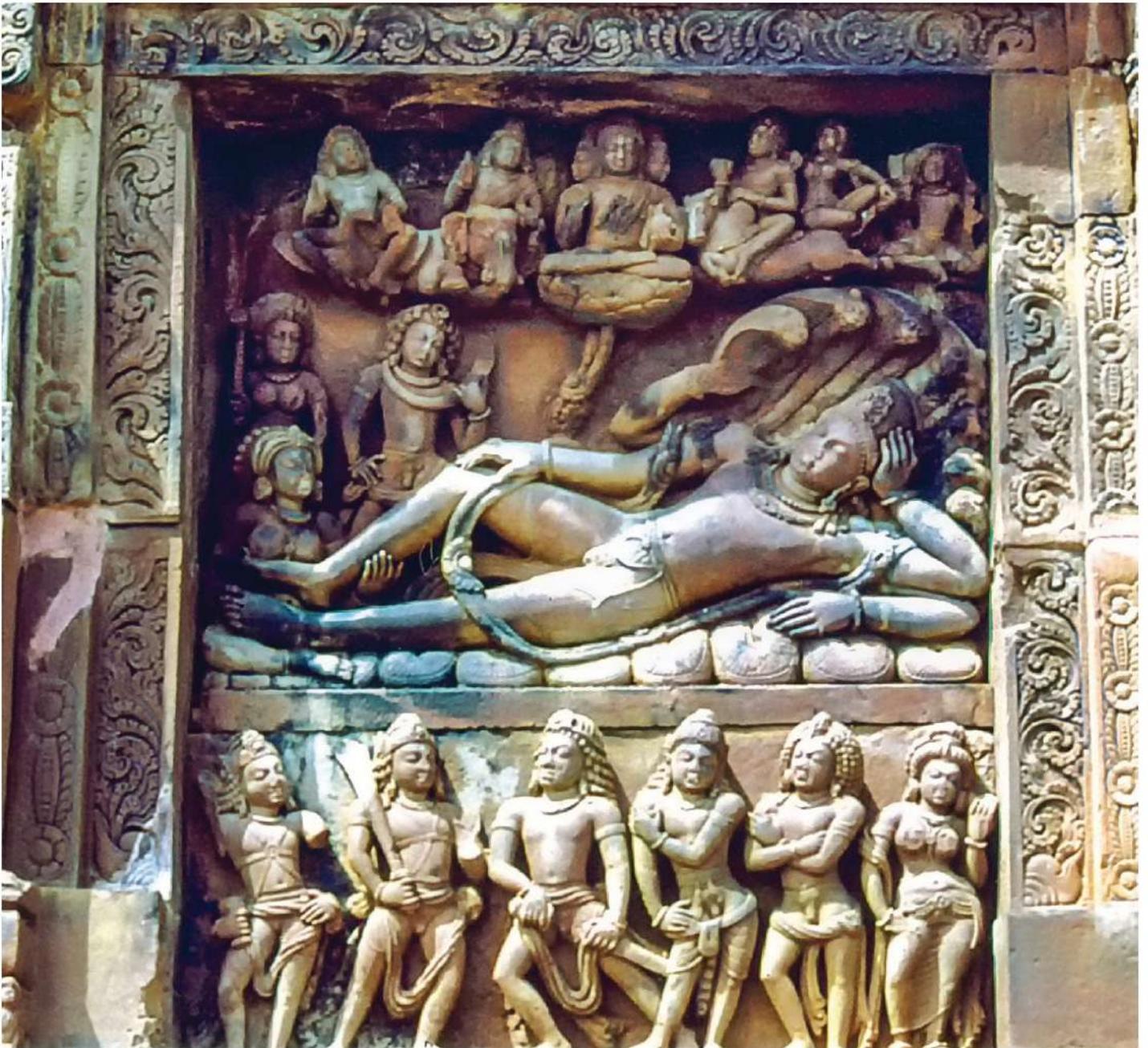


Fig.3 : Front view of Anantashayana

since the appearance of Madhu and Kaitabha and their defeat by Vishnu's weapons is firmly connected with that event.

This observation leads us to a concise recapitulation of the creation of the universe according to the *Vaishnava* tradition.

The whole system of cosmic time is based on Brahma, who as Svayambhu (self-born, self-existent) sets in motion the universe. One day and night of his 100-years-life is considered as equivalent with 4,32 billions of human years.² The

contemporaneous aeon (*kalpa*) - consisting of 1000 *Mahayugas*, each comprising four *Yugas*, viz. *Krita-*, *Treta-*, *Dvapara-*, *Kali-yuga* - is the first day of the second half of Brahma's life.³ The Ramachandra-Avatara of Vishnu takes place in the *Treta-yuga*, the Krishnavatara in the *Dvapara-yuga*.

Originally Brahma creates, in continuation of late Vedic ideas, the universe in his own right.⁴

In a second step the Vaishnavas argued that Brahma was just the creative form of Vishnu, in other words: that Vishnu is the real creator.⁵

Yet there was one more step of Vishnuization of the cosmogonic process. The *Markandeya-Purana*⁶ (MkP) and the *Matsya-Purana*⁷ (MtP) report that Brahma was born from a lotus that rose from Vishnu's navel.⁸ Thus Brahma is no longer Svayambhu but in reality an offspring of Vishnu. This idea was turned into an impressive image, as the Deogarh relief attests.

Yet we have already observed that our sculpture deviates from the textual report and most pictorial depictions. The stalk of Brahma's lotus does not really rise from Vishnu's navel.⁹ This observation leads us to an additional interpretation of the Anantashayana panel. Taking the creation myth at its word the presence of Lakshmi, the consort of Vishnu, of Garuda and of the gods in the upper level is by no means legitimized. Lakshmi, as we know, is a product of the churning of the milk ocean (*amrita-manthana*), an event that happens in the *Krita-yuga* after the creation of gods and demons and (according to the ViP) in the present *Varaha-kalpa*, i.e. some billions of years after the primeval creation or – to say it in mythic words – on the first day of the second half of Brahma's life (see above).

Thus the panel seems to depict, quasi as one scene, two events that are, in terms of time-span, astronomically wide apart. Let us now focus on this second event, viz. the invitation for Vishnu to descend. At first glance it seems obvious that this invitation envisages the Balarama- and Krishna-avatara. In the beginning of its *Krishnayana* book V the ViP reports that Kamsa, who is threatened by the eighth child of Devaki, is going to kill her, but saves her life after being insured that all her children would be delivered to him. Then the author inserts the story about

the earth, who approaches the assembly of the gods, preceded by Brahma. She (the female earth) complains about the burden, shaped as the demons that oppress her. Brahma then goes, together with the gods, to the northern coast of the milky sea, eulogizes Vishnu and submits the complaints of the earth.¹⁰ Vishnu, willing to relieve that burden, plucks off two hairs, one white and one black, and speaks to the gods: "These my hairs shall descend upon earth, and shall relieve of the burden of her distress".¹¹

This is the founding story of the *avatars* Balarama and Krishna, who will be born as the seventh and eighth child of Devaki.

The presence of the gods, of Lakshmi and Garuda, seems to virtually enforce a second semantic level of the relief, viz. the invitation for Vishnu to descend; further, the encounter at Vishnu's ocean residence seems to make sure that the Balarama- and Krishna-avatara is alluded to.

The invitation for Vishnu to descend as Ramachandra, son of Dasharatha, can obviously be ruled out, as it seems, since this invitation, according to the *Ramayana* (I.14) does not take place at the coast of the ocean. In contrast, the poet of the *Ramayana*, Balakanda, tells us a different story.

Soon after the gods have uttered grave words (*vacanam mahat* 5b) towards Brahma concerning the threat executed by the demon Ravana, Vishnu appears (*Vishnur upayata* 15b). Any circumstances of his appearance are not narrated. The gods ask him to slay Ravana, who is invulnerable to themselves. Vishnu is willing to help and chooses king Dasharatha as his father (15, 7).

Let us have a look into the Ramopakhyana of the *Mahabharata*, where this event is also shortly alluded to. The gods, seers etc. ask Brahma to save them from Ravana. Brahma answers that four-armed Vishnu has already descended on his behest (*avatirna* III, 260, 5).¹²

Kamban, the poet of the Tamil *Ramayana*, says that Vishnu, in the above-mentioned situation, suddenly appeared on his eagle Garuda.¹³ In all these versions Vishnu seems to have appeared like a *deus ex machina*. Certainly, the event does not take place by the ocean, the area of the Anantashayana.

Yet there is another version of the story that seems to lead us exactly to the

scenario of our bas-relief. Kalidasa in *Raghuvamsha* X relates that the gods, oppressed by the son of Pulastya , i.e. Ravana, went to the ocean, when Vishnu awoke. He is described lying on the coils of the serpent (*bhogi*), scil. Shesha, and his leg(s) repose in the lap of Shri.¹⁴

It seems almost obvious that the sculptor or his commissioner has conceived the respective scene of the Deogarh relief according to this poetical idea of Kalidasa.¹⁵

Before, however, summing up our observations, we should have a look at another text that belongs to the *pratimalakshana* section (“characteristics of images”) of the *Vishnudharmottara-Purana*¹⁶ (VdhP III, 81). Markandeya answers Vajra's question, how Padmanabha (Vishnu as “the one with a lotus navel”) looks like:

Shesha, looking like a serpent, should be depicted in the middle of waters; he has a head that is hardly to be looked at on account of splendid jewels on plenty of hoods (2).

The four-armed god of gods is sleeping there; one foot should be depicted reposing on Lakshmi's lap (*Lakshmy-utsanga-gata*), my lord (3).

The other one should be positioned on the coils of Shesha; one arm is to be depicted on his (Padmanabhas) knee (4).

Another arm should be near his navel, one arm carries his head (5). Another arm should hold a Santana flower. On a lotus that grows from his navel-lake (*nabhi-saras*) (6),

(a lotus) that consists of the whole world, Pitamaha [= Brahma] should be made in front of Lakshmi. Attached to the lotus stalk should be depicted Madhu and Kaitabha (7).

In the vicinity of the serpent his weapons should be made in human form (*nri-rupa*) (7a).

On the one hand the text is in remarkable concordance with our relief, on the other hand there are important deviations. The text almost seems to describe two important features, viz. Padmanabha's leg on Lakshmi's lap, and the human weapons (*ayudha-purushas*). Yet the lotus stalk does not grow from Vishnu's navel,

the god does not carry a flower, and Madhu-Kaitabha are not attached (*lagna*) to the lotus stalk.

Could this text have functioned as a guide for the Deogarh sculpture? I do not think so. Three other texts in this chapter prescribe a lotus as attribute for Vishnu as Varaha (79,6), as Hayagriva (80,4) and for all four Vyuhas (85). The lotus, however, comes up as an attribute of Vishnu only in the 7th century, as I have pointed out elsewhere.¹⁷ The Deogarh sculpture, on the other hand, can safely be attributed to the end of 5th/beginning of 6th century (see fn.1).

The credit of inventing Vishnu's leg on the lap of Lakshmi seems to remain with Kalidasa. The author of the *Pratimalakshana* chapter of the Vdh might have seen this or a similar sculpture that inspired his text.



Fig.4 : Invitation for Vishnu to descend, *Ramayana*, Pullamangai

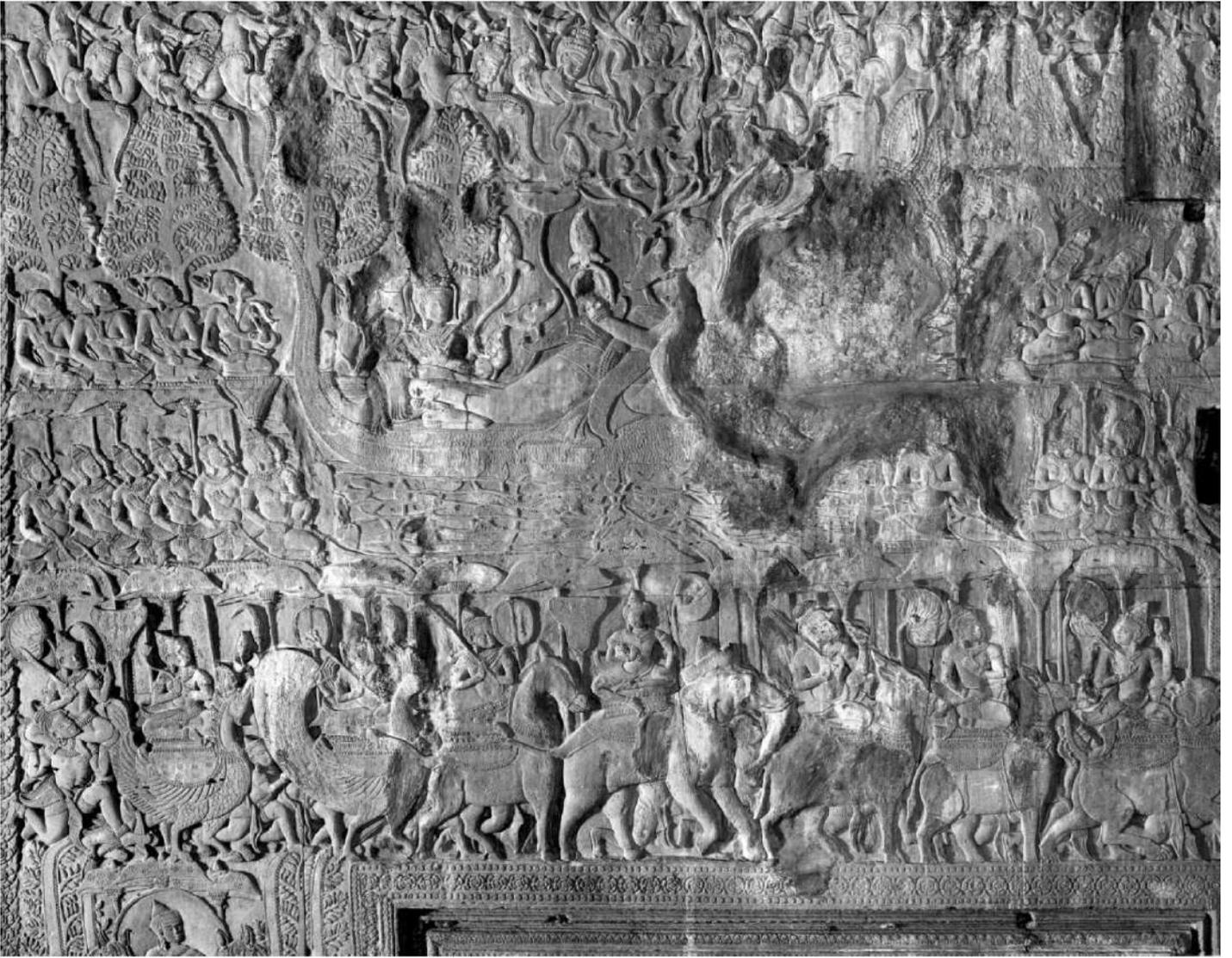


Fig.5 : Invitation for Vishnu to descend, Angkor Wat

Our result is threefold. On the one hand, the Anantashayana relief represents the *origin of the universe* in Vaishnava understanding (birth of Brahma, Madhu-Kaitabha-*vadha*). The presence of more gods than Brahma as well as the hidden origin of the lotus stalk have led us to the interpretation of an invitation for Vishnu to descend. While the scenario at the ocean pleads for the introduction to the *Balarama-Krishnavatara*, details such as Lakshmi, who is supporting Vishnu's leg, and Vishnu reposed in the ocean shift the scenario close to the *Ramavatara* according to Kalidasa's *Raghuvamsha* (in contrast to Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Balakanda).

Following the Deogarh panel the couple Anantashayana and Lakshmi was more and more popular,¹⁸ and its basic design expanded to South India and Southeast Asia¹⁹ (Figs.4²⁰ and 5²¹).

One of the trademarks of Indian poetry (*kavya*) is the use of double-entendre, ambiguity (*shlesha*).²² It would be surprising, if that tendency, viz. to convey a double meaning, were limited to poetry and would exclude the visual arts. The discovery of *shlesha* in the arts, however, has begun only recently.²³

Photo courtesy: Figs.1-4 author, Fig.5 Jaroslav Poncar.

References & Notes

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2. H.H. Wilson, *The Visnu-Purana* (hereafter ViP) (repr. Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1961) pp.21-24. *Visnu-Purana*, ed. J.V. Bhattacharya. Bibliotheca Indica (Calcutta, Sarasvatīyantra, 1882) V, 3.
3. This *kalpa* is called *Varaha-kalpa*, since Vishnu as boar saves the earth that was flooded at the end of the last *kalpa*.
4. Willibald Kirfel, *Das Purana Panchalakshana* (hereafter PPanc) (Leiden: Brill, 1927) p.3.
5. PPanc 9.24. A textual parallel of *Padma-* and *Visnu-Purana*, collated in Kirfel's PPanc, shows that Brahma worshippers later tried to remodel the creation executed by *Vishnu Brahmarupena* in favour of an independent Brahma (PPanc 9.24; 11.38; 14.18.1; 16.7).
6. *Markandeya-Purana*, ed. K.M. Banerjea. Bibliotheca Indica, vol. 29 (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1862).
7. *Matsya-Purana*, Gurumandal Series 13 (Calcutta: Chaukhamba Vidyabhavan, 1954).
8. MkP 81.50; MtP 168.1; see also *Mahabharata* (MBh), ed. crit. by V.S. Sukthankar et al. 24 volumes (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Institute, 1933-1970) XII (*Shantiparvan*), 200, 10-15.
9. See Ratan Parimoo, *Sculptures of Sheshashayi Vishnu* (Baroda: M.S. University of Baroda Press, 1983).
10. Among the gods are mentioned Indra and Varuna, who also appear in our relief (ViP V.1.57).
11. *Etai mat-keshau vasudha-tale avatiryaya bhuvō bhara-klesha-hanim karishyatah* (ViP V.1.6o).
12. *Mahabharata*, Aranyakaparvan (III), ed. crit. by V.S. Sukthankar et al. 24 volumes (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Institute, 1933-1970).

13. *Kamba Ramayanam*, Balakandam, 41 (stanza 191).
14. *Shriyah...anke nikshipta-charana X, 8. The Raghuvamsha of Kalidasa, with the commentary of Mallinantha*, ed. G.R. Nandargikar (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 4th ed. 1971).
15. The pre-Deogarh versions of Anantashayana from Bhitargaon and at Udayagiri, M.P., do not depict Lakshmi (Parimoo, Figs.4 and 5).
16. Bombay: Venkateshvara Press,1923. - I have translated the chapter from the original Sanskrit.
17. Adalbert J. Gail, *The Earth and the Lotus. A contribution to Vishnu's iconography in India. Pandanus '09*, 2009, pp.83-91, Figs.1-11.
18. Parimoo, 1983, Figs. 5-8, 10-11, 13-20, 22, 24-30, 37-45, 47, 52, 57-58, 76-79. – The two pre-Deogarh Anantashayanans from Bhitargaon and at Udayagiri, M.P., do not depict Lakshmi, see Parimoo 1983, Figs.4 and 9.
19. K.V. Soundara Rajan, *The Typology of the Anantshayi Icon. Artibus Asiae*, vol. 29, 1967, pp.67-84.
20. The tiny panel form the beginning of a *Ramayana* sequence on the socle of the Brahmapurishvara temple. In this case Lakshmi stands while she supports Vishnu's feet.
21. The large panel forms part of the northwest pavilion of the Angkor Wat. Here the inviting gods are the eight Dikpalas, Surya and Chandra. For other Khmer specimens that include Lakshmi see Adalbert J. Gail, *Serpents in Angkor. Apotheosis of a Decorative Motif. Pandanus '12*, 2012, Figs. 43-45, 47.
22. Yigal Bronner, *Extreme Poetry: The South Asian Movement of Simultaneous Narration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).
23. Michael D. Rabe, *The Mamallapuram Prashasti: A Panegyric in Figures. Artibus Asiae* vol.57, 3/4, 1997, pp.189-241. -Adalbert J. Gail, "Double-entendre (*shlesha*) in the Visual Arts of India, Nepal, and Cambodia". *South Asian Archaeology and Art*, 2012. Volume 2: *South Asian Religions and Visual Forms in their Archaeological Context* [Proceedings of the 21st International Conference of the European Association of South Asian Archaeology and Art, Paris, Ecole du Louvre, 2 to 6 July 2012], eds. Vincent Lefèvre, Aurore Didier & Benjamin Mutin. Turnhout , Belgium: Brepols, 2016: 483-492 (*Indicopleustoi: archaeologies of the Indian ocean*, 12). Paris.