

## The Viṣṇu Temple of Deogarh Revisited on the Concept of its Three Images

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The three main bas-reliefs of the Viṣṇu temple at Deogarh (M.P.) contribute to the most magnificent *in situ* sculptures of Gupta India (320-500 CE). In continuation of my previous article on “The threefold meaning of the Vishnu Anantashayana at Deogarh” on the south side of the temple<sup>1</sup> (Fig.1), I would like to discuss now the two other panels on the east and north side -



Fig.1 : Anantaśayana, Deogarh, Viṣṇu temple, south-side, ca. 500 CE

Gajendramokṣaṇa and Nara-Nārāyaṇa, respectively based on textual evidence. I will then try to answer the important question - never satisfactorily explained - as to why the temple presents this remarkable and unique configuration of these three particular Vaiṣṇava myths. My opinion fundamentally differs from Susan Huntington’s message (1985: 208-211, see fn. 9), who reads the sculptural program counterclockwise beginning with the Anantaśayana panel.

### Gajendramokṣaṇa (saving the lord of elephants)

The central panel on the east side, opposite to the entrance (Fig.2), exhibits



Fig.2 : Gajendramokṣaṇa, Deogarh  
Viṣṇu temple, east-side

the liberation of an elephant from the coils of a huge, seven-hooded serpent by Viṣṇu. The god glides from heaven riding on his mount Garuḍa, the mythical king of birds. Viṣṇu is embellished with the usual ornaments and a cylindrical crown. Three of his four hands carry the wheel (upper right), club (lower right) and conch (now destroyed). Garuḍa appears in human shape, his necklace is a snake. Beneath that group is a lotus pond, where the elephant is entangled by the coils of a seven-hooded serpent: his human upper body is struck by Viṣṇu's *cakra* or wheel. The *nāga* or serpent is accompanied by his consort, a one-hooded *nāgī*. The upper register is occupied by four flying deities, the inner couple holding a massive crown over Viṣṇu's head.

For our analysis of the narrative background two *purāṇas* and one *śāstra* texts are at our disposal: the *Vāmana-Purāṇa* (VāmP) 6, the *Viṣṇudharmāḥ* (ed. Grünendahl) 67, and the *Viṣṇudharmottara-Purāṇa* (VdhP) I, 193f. The three texts are partly identical, particularly regarding the hymn to Viṣṇu, and seem to derive from a common source.<sup>2</sup>

The VdhP, however, can be taken as the most consistent text. Chapter I, 193 reports a musical competition between the Gandharvas Hāhā and Hūhū. They reject the wise Devala (*sādhu, muni*) as a judge, arguing that he is unfamiliar with the art of singing. Therefore both are cursed by Devala to take the shapes of an elephant and a crocodile who, eager to fetter the elephant, would be cut into two halves by Viṣṇu's *cakra*.<sup>3</sup> This prophecy is fulfilled in chapter I, 194.

Hūhū becomes a fierce crocodile, while Hāhā the chief of an elephant herd, wants to sport with the cows in a lake on Trikūṭa mountain that is surrounded by the milk ocean (*kṣīrodak*). The crocodile wants to drag the elephant into the deep water. Whereupon the elephant starts reciting a long *stotra* or eulogy (I,194, 29-48) to his favourite god Viṣṇu. Pleased by the animal's *bhakti* or devotion, Viṣṇu strikes the crocodile with his *cakra*, thereby releasing the elephant from (Varuṇa's) fetters<sup>4</sup>. Both regain their Gandharva-nature, and the chapter ends with a *phalastuti* (or praise of religious merit).

Like the Vdh, the VāmP adds Varuṇa's fetters to the grip of the crocodile.

This is a somewhat odd idea.

The sculptor avoids this problem by replacing the crocodile by a *nāga* whose coils function as fetters. Not a single textual testimony seems to support this important change that we observe in Deogarh. On the other hand, there is one tiny relief on a Mathura pillar that depicts the elephant entangled by a serpent (Williams: Plate 24, ca. 400-415 CE). A plausible conclusion is that there was an oral tradition that had the elephant fettered by a *nāga* without mentioning a crocodile or Varuṇa's fetters.

Various Gajendramokṣaṇa images in Ellora, cave 15 (Daśāvātāra, Fig.3) and 16 (Kailāsa) are seriously eroded or destroyed in the lower part. Thus they give no clear answer on the question, whether a *nāga* or a crocodile was sculpted, or, possibly, the attacker of Gajendra was not depicted at all. In Pallava and Coḷa art the story appears to be absent. The Hoysalas seem in general to follow the crocodile



Fig.3 : Gajendramokṣaṇa, Ellora, cave 15 (Daśāvātāra), ca.750 CE



Fig.4 : Gajendramokṣaṇa, Halebidu  
Hoysaleswara, ca.1120 CE

### Nara-Nārāyaṇa

In this magnificent relief the two ascetics are seated on top of a cave, where deer and lion peacefully live together. Both are clad in short skirts (*paridhāna*) exposing their *membrum virile* and deer skins (*mṛgājina*). Both also are given the typical hair arrangement of ṛṣis (*jaṭā-mukūṭa*). The main difference between them is that Nara has two arms while Nārāyaṇa is

version as in the Purāṇas and the Viṣṇudharmāh (*grāha* 67, 57ff.; Fig.4). It is probable that the tiny Mathura relief and the more monumental Deogarh composition depicted a *nāga* following an oral tradition instead of the textual crocodile. The other important result of our investigation is the fact that the Gajendramokṣaṇa story formed no part of any Purāṇa list of *Avatāras* or of any list of *Vibhavas* in the Pāñcarātra Saṃhitās.

Now let us turn to the Nara-Nārāyaṇa panel on the north side of the temple (Fig.5).

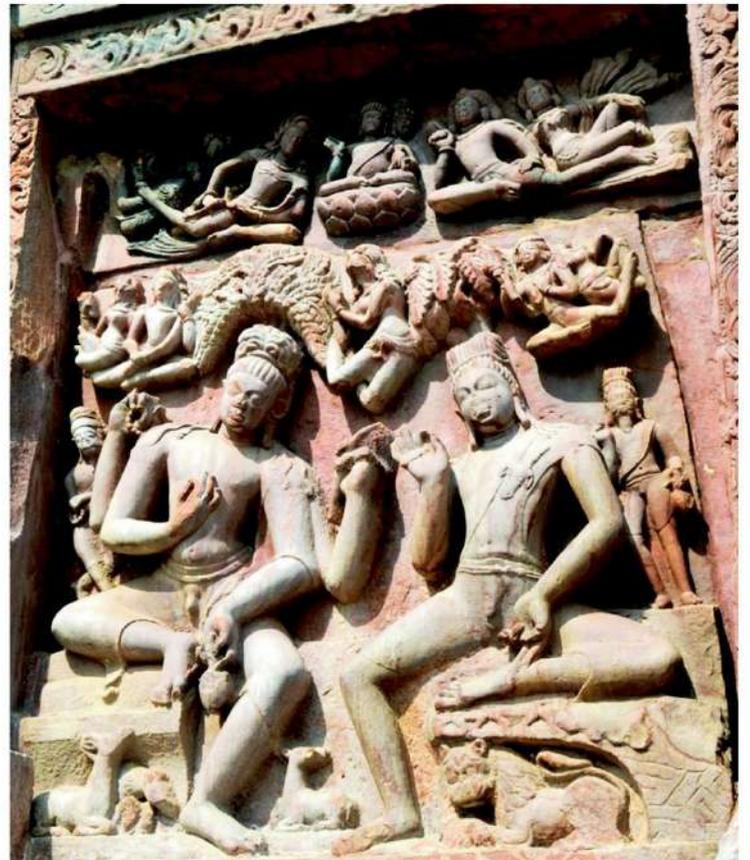


Fig.5 : Nara-Nārāyaṇa, Deogarh  
Viṣṇu temple, north-side



Fig.6 : Nara-Nārāyaṇa, North India, ca. 450-500 CE

four-armed. Both grasp an *akṣamālā* with the (upper) right hand, and Nārāyaṇa carries a *kamaṇḍalu* in his lower left, thereby emphasizing their ascetic nature. They are flanked by two other bearded hermits.

Jujube leaves above the heads of Nara and Nārāyaṇa signifying the locale as an *āśrama* while flying, garland-wearing Vidyādhara indicate the heavenly witnesses. In the center of this register, between the two trees, a beautiful

woman seen is flying up. The uppermost register exhibits, comparable to the Anantaśayana panel, the lotus-seated Brahmā in the center, here accompanied by two Vidyādhara couples.

Generally the texts inform us that Nara and Nārāyaṇa are born as twins from Dharma, a mind-born son of Brahmā. They spend their life as ascetics in the Bhadarikāśrama at the banks of the upper Gaṅgā in the Himālaya. The purpose of the myth is to demonstrate the victory over the attack of seductive heavenly Apsarās by the stratagem of the creation of the most fabulous Apsarā Urvaśī from the thighs of Nārāyaṇa. In the present era (*kalpa*) the twins are born as Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, the protagonists of the *Bhagavadgītā*. This incarnation is an important topic of the MBh, beginning from its first book (*ādiparvan*).

Out of various textual testimonies<sup>5</sup> I will here compare only the VāmP and VdhP versions. According to the VāmP Indra feels threatened<sup>6</sup> by the *tapas* of Nara and Nārāyaṇa and sends Rambhā and other Apsarases together with Kāma (god of desire) and Vasanta (Spring) in order to seduce them. Nārāyaṇa, however, welcomes them and, smiling, takes a creeper covered with flowers (*mañjarīṃ kusumāvṛtām* 7,4) with which he creates from his thighs (*ūrvoh*) Ūrvaśī, an outstanding beauty (7,5-13). Thus, Nārāyaṇa defeats them with their own

weapons. In the VdhP version I, 129 Kāma, Vasanta and Indra do not appear at all. When visited by ten beautiful Apsarases, who intend to disturb his *tapas*, Nārāyaṇa, undisturbed (*jitakāma*), produces from his thighs the even more beautiful Ūrvaśī. For that purpose he uses the juice of a passion-inflaming Mango blossom (*sakārasya rasaṃ madana-dīpanam* 129,11).

Thus, the beautiful woman figure represented in the Deogarh composition is clearly Ūrvaśī flying up to (Indra's) heaven. It may also be pointed out that the two *ṛṣis*, taken as *one avatāra*, constitute the fourth one among 22 in the long list of the BhP I, 3, 9. However, they are considered as two Vibhavas, precisely number 31 and 32, in the list of the *Ahīrbudhnya Saṃhitā* (Schrader: 42).

Ūrvaśī, the most seductive *Apsarā*, is born from a strictly celebrate ascetic. In other words: the anti-sexual sage is the source of an extremely erotic woman. The close connection of asceticism and eroticism is a well known topic of Śaiva mythology, e.g. the story of naked Śiva in the pine-forest (*dāruvana*), where he seduces the wives of the *ṛṣis*. The VāmP 6, 59-64 narrates this event embedded in the story of Nara and Nārāyaṇa.<sup>7</sup>

### Concept of the image program

The ensemble of the three images of the Viṣṇu temple at Deogarh is perhaps the most attractive among all Hindu temples. This is at least my personal opinion. Every detail discloses the hand of a master sculptor. All the more the question imposes itself: what is the concept underlying those three panels?

I try to give a hypothetical answer.

My focus is the figure of Viṣṇu, who was the main deity in the temple according to the *lalāṭabimba*<sup>8</sup> (Fig.7). Viṣṇu, seated on Garuḍa and gliding down from heaven conveys the transcendental, the metaphysical nature of the god. The whole story around the saving of the elephant is, intrinsically, just a pretext for an exhaustive hymn on Viṣṇu. He is praised as the highest *ātman* (*paramātman* VāmP 58, 37), the old *puruṣa* (*puruṣaṃ purāṇam* (Acc. case) VāmP 58, 44 and VdhP 194, 35), as the origin of being (*bhāvodbhava*) or the origin of all beings (*prabhavaḥ sarva-bhūtānām*, VāmP 58,50-52). Viṣṇu on Garuḍa does not step down as an *avatāra* (*avatr*), he appears like a *deus ex machina*. Suddenly arriving on Garuḍa, he also announces his descending (from heaven, *avatarāṇa*) as Rāmacandra (*Rāmāyaṇa* I, 1,



Fig.7 : Viṣṇu seated on Śeṣa, *lalāṭabimba*, Deogarh Viṣṇu temple, door lintel on west-side

15b). In one word: here on the east side of the temple Viṣṇu is imagined [besides normal eulogistic phrases] as the *absolutum*.

The primary message of the Anantaśayana in the south is Viṣṇu in his cosmic form and as the creator of the universe. This shape never changes for billions of years; it is perennial and symbolizes the eternity of the cosmic *saṃsāra*. During the day of the existence of the universe Viṣṇu is awake on the serpent Ananta, during the cosmic night he sleeps on Ananta's coils. Who wants to meet him, goes to the

shore of the milk ocean, as the gods do, headed by Brahmā, begging for Viṣṇu's Kṛṣṇāvatāra (*Viṣṇupurāṇa*, V, 1, 31).

The third panel in the north, the Nara-Nārāyaṇa, depicts an *avatāra* (BhP I, 3, 9), an earthly manifestation of Viṣṇu, a being (in our case twins), that moves and acts like a human one (although equipped with supernatural power).

As it seems, we face three graded visualizations of the highest god Viṣṇu: on the east side, opposite to the entrance, Viṣṇu as the *absolutum* (the theological *ātman* and *puruṣa*). Going *pradakṣiṇavat* (i.e. clock-wise) to the south panel we meet Viṣṇu as the figurative representation of the perennial cosmic cycle between day and night (each lasting billions of years). Going further (passing the entrance) to the north panel Viṣṇu appears as an incarnation, shaped as a human being (with superhuman abilities, therefore Nārāyaṇa is four-armed).

Looking at the three panels in this way we have three obviously demarcated visualizations of Viṣṇu, beginning with the most spiritual form, ending with the most corporeal guise, the *avatāra* (fn.9: S. Huntington thinks “Anantaśayana represents the beginning, Nara and Nārāyaṇa denote the means through which

*mokṣa* may be achieved, and the Gajendramokṣa story expresses the final result” (1985: 211). - Apart from reading the panels counterclockwise, her interpretation lacks a cogent connection among them.

## References & Notes

1. See Bibliography.
2. A critical textual history, however, is not really possible at the moment, since a critical edition of the VdhP is regrettably still missing.
3. Text 8 b is corrupt.
4. The VdhP passage is obscure. I rely here on the VāmP version 6, 63.
5. See VāmP Appendix I, p.4. VarāhaP 141,51ff. is only an allusion to the story, the DevīBhP is too late as a source for the Deogarh panel.
6. That is a topos in Indian mythology. Indra's power is threatened by severe *tapas* practicing ascetics. Their amorous seduction by women solves the problem.
7. Earlier versions of the subject (both ca.2<sup>nd</sup> half of 5<sup>th</sup> century CE) are a panel from Bhitargaon (Vogel 1908/9: s.v. Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma) and the LACMA panel (Pal 1986: S 122; Fig.6). In more recent years the subject forms part of paintings in popular Hindu art. See internet via Gajendramokṣanan.
8. The *lalāṭabimba* (verbally *forehead image*) is the central motif / figure on the lintel of the door leading to the *sanctum* (*garbhagrha*). In most cases it is a firm indicator of the main deity worshipped in the temple.

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**Photo Courtesy:** Figs.1-3, 5, 7 - A.J. Gail; Fig.4 - Internet; Fig.6 - LACMA