

Mayūrārudha Ṣaḍānana Kārttikeya Under Snake-Canopy

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While on a trip to South India during December 2008, we happened to be in a small temple known as Rāma Tīrtha Mandira at Rameshvaram. Our attention was drawn there towards hundreds of stone snake figures in the compound. These figures are placed in rows on a multisteped terrace so that all of them may be seen at a sight (Pl. 10.1). Among all these carved figures on panels, one is quite large about 80-85 cm. in height and carved around.

1

This large black-stone figure carved in three coils has five-headed raised hood. Within this snake-hood canopy there is a six-handed and twelve-handed male deity seated in *lalitāsana* on the back of a standing peacock. Seated majestically the god has his left leg folded and the right suspended. Decked with high crown the central face is attached with two other similar crowned faces in profile on either side; the sixth face supposed to be on the back. Presence of six faces is supported by twelve hands. There is seen the conical top of *śakti* or spear in the frontal right hand, half raised from elbow; the attribute in the left hand could not be properly recognized due to some mutilation. The other ten hands, five on both sides, stretched and slightly raised upwards, form an oval shape like the *prabhāmaṇḍala* or halo. The attributes or weapons in these hands are also not clear. Below the mount peacock there stands another smaller peacock (Pls. 10.2, 10.3). On stylistic grounds the sculpture may be assigned to 9th-10th century C.E.

This double mount of peacock in this figure is a notable feature, although two peacocks, one on each flank have also been found in the figures of Skanda from Baijnath in Uttarakhand¹ and Bhubaneswar in Orissa², may be taken to represent the *mayūra-āsana*, like *Takht-e-tāūsa* of a Mughal emperor (*takht*=throne and *tāūsa*=peacock) i.e. throne of peacock or *mayūra-ratha*,³ the chariot drawn by peacocks. Double mount figures of two geese of Brahmā, two elephants of Lakṣmī, two rats of Gaṇeśa and two lions of Kṣemaṅkarī, Pārvatī, Lakṣmī, Vārāhī, Mahiṣāsurmardini, Viṣṇu, Sūrya, Umā-Maheśvara, Jaina



Pl. 10.1: Congregation of stone snakes with Śeṣāvatāra Skanda, Rama Tirtha Mandira, Rameshwaram, Tamilnadu

Tīrthaṅkaras, Buddha etc. have also been found, although none of them has any canonical injunction. The only difference between these examples is that the double figures of mount are seen one on each flanks whereas in the case from Rameshwaram, the two figures of peacock are seen one upon the other.

As regards the identification of the deity, he is doubtlessly Kārttikeya. The six faces, twelve hands, the weapon spear and the mount *mayūra* or peacock leave no doubt in identifying the deity with Śaḍānana Kārttikeya. This identification is supported by several *śilpa* texts viz.-

- Viṣṇudharmottara* (III.71.4)⁴ - *Kumāraḥ ṣaṇmukhaḥ kāryaḥ / mayūraravāhanaḥ //*
- Matsyapurāṇa* (260.45-47)⁵ - *Mayūraravāhanaḥ / Bhujān dvādaśa kāryet //*
- Aparājītapṛcchā* (212.40)⁶ - *Ṣaḍvaktraṁ dvādaśa bhujam / śikhārūḍham //*
- Rūpamaṇḍana* (V. 26-27)⁷ - *Mayūraravāhanam / Bhujān dvādaśa kalpayet //*
- Kāśyapa-saṁhitā*⁸ - *Mayūraravāhanaḥ Skandaḥ /*
- Śilparatna* (XXV. 128, 130)⁹ - *Vilikheta ṣaṇmukham devam mayūraravāhanam/Bhujān dvādaśa kurvīt //*
- Aṁśumadbhedāgama* (XLIX)¹⁰ - *Ṣaṇmukham bhānuhastakam /*
- Uttarakārikāgama* (LXIV)¹¹ - *Ṣaṇmukhaśśaktipāṇiśca kārttikeyo guhastataḥ Karaṇḍamakūtopeto //*
- Kumāratāntrāgama* (II)¹² - *Ṣaṇmukha, dvādaśabhujā (Śaravaṇabhuvāḥ) / Mayūrārūḍha, ṣaḍvaktraṁ, dvādaśabhujam (Ṣaṇmukha) Ṣaḍvaktraṁ śikhivāhanam (Śikhivāhanaḥ)*
- Pūrvakāraṇāgama* (XIII)¹³ - *Ṣaḍ dorbhiḥ, mayūrāroha*

Surprisingly in North India we also find two figures of Kārttikeya in association with a snake, one from Rajasthan and the other from Madhya Pradesh.¹⁴ In the Nakaṭī Mātā Temple of the 9th century C.E. at Bhavānīpurā near Jaipur, Rajasthan there is a four-armed *mayūrārūḍha* Skanda in the northern outer niche of the *garbhagr̥ha* (*sanctum sanctorum*) holding *śakti* (spear) and *sarpa* (snake) in the upper right and left hands respectively and *kamaṇḍalu* (water vessel) in the lower left hand. In the opposite side niche on the south there is a figure of Gaṇeśa; and the niche just behind the *garbhagr̥ha* on the west is vacant. This sculpture has personally been seen and examined by R.C.Agrawala. Another figure of *Mayūrārūḍha* Kārttikeya was located by the Archaeological Survey of India at Ranod in the



Pl. 10.2: *Ṣaḍānana-Kārttikeya* under snake-canopy, Rama Tirtha Mandira, Rameshwaram, Tamilnadu



Pl. 10.3: Detail of *Skanda* on peacock with snake-canopy, Rama Tirtha Mandira, Rameshwaram, Tamilnadu

former Gwalior State, now in Madhya Pradesh during 1918-19*. Assignable to the late medieval period (c. 14th-15th century C.E.), the six-faced and twelve-handed deity rides on a peacock and keeps his legs on its stretched side wings. A snake is seen around the neck of the deity with its mouth falling down from his right shoulder and the tail part from the left. The tail reaches up to the naval region of the deity. Another smaller snake also enwraps the lower neck of the peacock, who holds its mouth part in its beak. The mount peacock also unfolds its beautiful long tail-feathers as it does while dancing. This makes the round background accommodating the deity with his stretched ten extra hands. Only four attributes—*śaṅkha* and *cakra* in suspended normal hands and *gadā* and *sanāla padma* in uppermost right and left hands are very clear. There is an umbrella over the head of the god, the top knot of which alludes to be a snake-hood. Below, at the both corners there is a small pot on stand. Its purpose is yet to be investigated. In the Archaeological Survey of India Report (Calcutta, 1918-19) only the photo of this figure is published on Plate XIII D without any description. According to R.C. Agrawala, all the visible attributes are Vaiṣṇava, therefore the figure represents the syncretic form of Skanda-Viṣṇu.

But none of these two Kārttikeya figures is similar to that from Rameshvaram as regards the association of snake. The figure of the Nakaṭī Mātā Temple represents the snake as an attribute and the other figure from Ranod represent the serpent around the neck of the deity as well as that of his mount peacock; whereas the Rameshvaram example is a three coiled large serpent carved in round accommodating the six-faced god on peacock under the canopy of the five-headed hood. The present figure of *Ṣaḍānana*-Kārttikeya is the one and only representation of its type known so far.

II

Now the question arises about the association of Skanda with snake. Who is the five-headed Nāgarāja, the serpent king under whose hood-canopy the *Ṣaḍānana* Kārttikeya enjoys the peacock ride? To get the answer we contacted some South Indian persons including Dr. (Smt.) Haripriya Rangarajan (New Delhi), Vice Chairman of the Indian Art History Congress, Guwahati, Śrī Mani Swami, Head Pontiff of the Skandāśarma, Bhilai, Chhattisgarh, Smt. M.S.Chandrashekhar, Bhilai and Prof. G.Sethuraman of M.K.University, Madurai.

According to Dr. Haripriya Rangarajan¹⁵, the images of Skanda-Kārttikeya associated with *Nāgas* are called Subrahmaṇya or Nāga-Subrahmaṇya in South India. The images of Subrahmayṇya either in human form with snake canopy or in the *Nāga* form denote one

* See article 9, Pl. 9.1

of the unique characteristic features of Kārttikeya in the interior part of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and South Canara in Karnataka. She also informs about a fine specimen of the god Subrahmaṇya in such form still in worship in the cella of the Kukke Subrahmaṇya Swāmi temple in Subrahmaṇya village located near Mangalore (South Kannada) in Karnataka, which also has the *Garuḍa-dhvaja* pillar in front of the entrance gate. The name of the place and the name of the deity in the cella are one and the same. Here the deity appears to the physical eyes of the devotees only in the form of a serpent. In the cella, representations of Vāsuki, Śeṣanāga and the image of Subrahmaṇya seated on his *vāhana* peacock are one above the other respectively. The deity is represented with Śeṣanāga canopy. Similarly in the Kerala temple also the image of Subrahmaṇya with *Nāga* canopy is represented. One such temple is at Koduma in central Kerala¹⁶ and the other at Haripād hill.¹⁷ Another temple with deity in the *Nāga* form in Kerala is located at Mannā salā, wherein live snakes are believed to come freely and drink the milk kept there by devotees. According to K.V. Soundara Rajan,¹⁸ often Subrahmaṇya is represented by worship of snakes, similar to the trends seen in coastal Karnataka and Andhradesa. This opinion is probably based on the serpent god worship ritual in Kerala. The ritual is solemnly performed with deep devotion and dedication in the form of gaiety celebration. The sacred ceremony includes geometrical designs made of coloured powder, ritual chanting by priest, dance and music and prayer offered to Śiva and Pārvatī in which the purpose of the ritual is expressed to please them as well as to serpents, *bhootas*, demons and celestial singers.¹⁹ In Tamil Nadu, according to the Tamilian Pontiff Mani Swami, there are six main places of Subrahmaṇya - Tirupparakuṇḍram (near Madurai), Tiruchendūr (on the sea-shore of the Bay of Bengal), Palani, Svāmīmalai, Tiruttanī (near Chennai) and Paḍamudicholai. A Subrahmaṇya temple is also located within the complex of Bṛhadīśvara Temple at Thanjavur.

The sculpture from Rameshwaram under discussion is a fine example of Subrahmaṇya image from Tamil Nadu apparently similar to the one in the cella of the Kukke Subrahmaṇya temple near Mangalorē in Karnataka just described above and it fits in well with the description of the third *śloka* in the *Śrī Subrahmaṇya Pañcaratnam* (consisting of five *ślokas*) written by Ādi Śaṅkara, which clearly calls him 'Śeṣāvatāra', the incarnation of Śeṣa Nāga.²⁰ Ādi Śaṅkarācārya also composed another work, *Śrī subrahmaṇya Bhujāṅga Stotram*²¹ which also speaks the association of Subrahmaṇya with snake. According to the Kukke Sri Subrahmaṇya Temple website, the association of the *Nāga* with Sadānana Kārttikeya may also be related to a story. When Kumārasvāmī, after the battle with the demon Tāraka, came to the top of the Kumāra-*parvata*, he gave *darśana* to Vāsuki, the head of the *Nāgas*, who was making penance there. Vāsuki prayed to the Lord to stay along with permanently in the place and the Lord blessed Vāsuki with his boon.

The reason for adopting this unique feature of Skanda-Kārttikeya in Southern parts of India, according to Dr. Haripriya Rangarajan, is two-fold. One, with the advent of Āryans in the North India, the original inhabitants shifted to the Southern parts with the concept of their wargod Skanda-Kārttikeya who assimilated the concept of the local hunter-god Murugan there. Second, in the North there were some totem names given in Sanskrit literature like Vānaras (the monkey tribe), the Ajas (the goat tribe), the Garuḍas (the kite tribe), the Nāgas (the serpent tribe), etc. Among them Nāgas seem to have been widely prevalent because even in the historical period they have occupied North, East, Central and South India. When *Nāga* cult merged with that of Murugan cult in South then Murugan was identified with Subrahmaṇya (Brahmaṇyadeva of the *Mahābhārata*). According to Dr. Rangarajan, this is the only assumption one can say for showing the images of Subrahmaṇya Murugan in Southern states that are associated with Nāga and also are identified with Subrahmaṇya himself.

As regards the two above mentioned figures of Skanda-Kārttikeya of the North India, the first belongs to the 9th century C.E. and represents the snake only as an attribute of the deity; the second belonging to the 14th-15th century C.E. might be having some impact of the South. One thing is to be noted here. Both, the attributes of *śaṅkha*, *cakra*, *gadā* and *padma* in the hands of the Ranod image and the Garuḍa-pillar in front of the Subrahmaṇya temple Mangalore (Karnataka) have some striking Vaiṣṇava connection between the Kārttikeya-Subrahmaṇya image of the North and South India, which needs to be investigated. Anyway, the sculpture from the Rāma Tīrtha Mandira, Rameshwaram under our review is to be taken as a unique image of Nāga Subrahmaṇya.

Footnotes

1. R.C.Agrawala, 'Skanda from National Museum,' New delhi, *East and West* (Rome), Vol. 18 (3-4), 1968, fig. 3, pp. 319-320.
2. K.C. Panigrahi, *Archaeological Remains at Bhubneswar*, Orient Longman, Calcutta, 1961, fig. 103.
3. V.S. Apte, *Students, Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, Motilal Banarasida, Delhi, 1959, p. 426.
4. *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa*, ed. Priya Bala Shah, Oriental Institute, Vadodara, 1994, p. 197.
5. *Matsyapurāṇa*, ed. Pt. Tarnish Jha, tr. Ram Pratap Tripathi, Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, Prayag, Allahabad, 1988, pp. 464-465.
6. *Aparājitapṛcchā*, ed. P.A. Mankad, Oriental Institute, Baroda (now Vadodara), 1950, p. 542.
7. *Rūpamaṇḍana*, ed. Balram Srivastava, Varanasi, 1989, p. 190.
8. *Kāśyapa-saṁhitā*, quoted in *Bṛhat-saṁhitā*, ed. Pt. Achyutanand Jha, Varanasi, 1997, at the end of ch. 58, p. 397.

9. *Śilparatna* of Śrīkumāra, ed. K.Samb Shastri, pt. 2, Trivandrum (now Thiruvananthapuram), 1919, p. 170.
10. *Aṁśumadbhedāgama*, vide T.A.G. Rao, *Elements of Hindu Iconography*, Vol. II, pt. 2, Madras (now Chennai), p. 205.
11. *Uttarakmīkāgama*, *ibid.*, pp. 207-208.
12. *Kumāratantrāgama*, *ibid.*, pp. 218, 220, 224.
13. *Pūrvakāraṇāgama*, *ibid.*, p. 216.
14. Information and details of both these Skanda figures have kindly been supplied by R.C.Agrawala, Jaipur through his personal letters.
15. This has been communicated to us by Dr. Haripriya Rangarajan through her personal notes being shortly published with the title, *The Iconography of Skanda-Kārttikeya-Murugan* by the Sharda Publishing House, New Delhi.
16. K.V.Soundara Rajan, *The Art of South India : Tamil Nadu and Kerala*, Sundeep Prakashan, Delhi, 1978, p. 118.
17. Śrī Mani Swami, Head, Skandāśrama, Bhilai.
18. K.V. Soundara Rajan, *op.cit.*, p. 120.
19. See Suresh Kumar, "Serpent God Worship Ritual in Kerala," *Indian Folklore Research Journal*, Vol. 5, no. 8, December, 2008, pp. 304-319. We thankfully acknowledge the receipt of the xerox copy of this paper from Prof. G.Sethuraman, Head, Department of History of Art & Aesthetics, M.K.University, Madurai, Tamil Nadu.
20. *Śeṣāvātāraṁ kamanīya rūpaṁ Brahmaṇyadevaṁ śaraṇaṁ prapanye*. Complete *Subrahmanya Pañcaratnam* was provided by Dr. Haripriya Rangarajan (enclosed herewith). Its Tamil version is included in *Stotramālaya*, publisher - P.K.Muralivatsan, Kalaimakal Traders, Mylapore, Chennai-4, First Edition, 2006, available with Śrī Mani Swāmī.

श्रीसुब्रह्मण्य पञ्चरत्नम्

—आदि शंकराचार्य

षडाननं चन्दनलिप्तमात्रं महोरसं दिव्य मयूरवाहनम्।
 रुद्रस्यसूनुं सुरलोकनाथं ब्रह्मण्यदेवं शरणं प्रपन्ये ॥ 1 ॥
 जाज्वल्यमानं सुरवृन्दवन्द्यं कुमारधारातट मंत्रस्थम्।
 कंदर्परूपं कमनीयमात्रं ब्रह्मण्यदेवं शरणं प्रपन्ये ॥ 2 ॥
 द्विषट्भुजं द्वादशदिव्यनेत्रं त्रयीधनुं शूलमहं ददानम्।
 शेषावतारं कमनीयरूपं ब्रह्मण्यदेवं शरणं प्रपन्ये ॥ 3 ॥
 सुरारि घोराहव शोभमानं सुरोत्तमं शक्तिधरं कुमारम्।
 सुधारशक्त्यायुधशोभिहस्तं ब्रह्मण्यदेवं शरणं प्रपन्ये ॥ 4 ॥
 इष्टार्थसिद्धिं प्रथमीशपुत्रं इष्टान्नदं भूसुर कामधेनुम्।
 गंगोत्भवं सर्वजनानुकूलं ब्रह्मण्यदेवं शरणं प्रपन्ये ॥ 5 ॥

यः श्लोक पञ्चकमिदं पठते च भक्त्या

ब्रह्मण्यदेव विनिवेचित मानसस्वन्।

प्राप्नोति भोगमखिलं भुवियद्यतिष्ठं

हन्ते च गच्छति मुदा गुहसाम्यमेव ॥ 6 ॥

21. *Śrī Subrahmaṇya Bhujāṅga Stotram* by Ādi Śaṅkarācārya with Sanskrit *śloka* in Devanāgarī as well as Tamil scripts (Published by K.Kylasamier Giri Press, Triplicane, Madras, March, 1946, Preface by C.N.Kuppusami Ayyar, Dīvāna Bahadur, Judge of Chennai High Court and Introduction by Thediyoora Subramanya Sastrigal) was kindly provided by Smt. M.S. Chandrashekhar of Bhilai.

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Photo Courtsey

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