

An Unusual Loose Sculpture at Sopara

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Amongst the numerous loose sculptures at Sopara (ancient Śūrpāraka), there is one sculptured panel lying in Cakreśvara temple yard which is noteworthy.

The composition of the panel is unusual and meaningful. The central motif is a goddess lustrated by two elephants (Abhiṣekalakṣmī?). These elephants are supported on slabs that divide the picture horizontally. Gaṇeśa appears in the lower half on the true right of the goddess. On the true left appear Kubera and a four armed goddess on an animal mount. Her raised upper hands hold an unidentifiable object above her head.¹ Kubera may be identified by the 'nidhis'.

This composition brings to mind images at Pipad (Pipar, Rajasthan) and Piplā Devī Temple at Osiāñ as well as the inscription from Sakrai, all discussed by Meister.² Even more relevant is his comment "The history of devotion in India is a Palimpsest...". [Palimpsest: A manuscript (usually written on papyrus or parchment) on which more than one text has been written with the earlier writing incompletely erased and still visible].

At Pipad, the sanctum of the small ancillary shrine near a *kuṇḍa*, has a recent image of Gaṇeśa, Durgā and Kubera, which may have replaced a broken older image of the same triad which lies outside.³ At Piplā Devī temple at Osiāñ, the sanctum has Kubera, Maḥiṣāsuraṃardinī Durgā and Gaṇeśa.⁴



Fig.1 : Loose panel from Sopara

The inscription from Sakrai,⁵ (between Jaipur and Mathura) invokes the same triad of Gaṇapati, Caṇḍikā and Dhanada that appear in stone at Osiāñ and Pipad.⁶ More importantly, the inscription refers to the *maṇḍapa* that was commissioned by a committee of eleven bankers (*śreṣṭhins*, who combine large scale commerce with banking).⁷ The present paper wishes to highlight this last aspect, that the triad was worshipped by bankers.

Regardless of the original location or date of the loose panel at Sopara (Fig.1) it can be considered as physical evidence of the continued economic importance of Sopara as a trading town in the medieval times. The relative importance of Gaṇeśa and



Figs.2,3 & 4 : Enlarged sections of Fig.1, Dhanada/Kubera with nidhis, a four-armed goddess on an animal mount

Kubera may have changed from region to region (Rajasthan to Maharashtra) but the presence of the three together is significant. A combination of Abhiṣeka-Lakṣmī, Gaṇeśa and Kubera is not attributable to a sect such as *Vaiṣṇava* or *Śaiva*, but these are deities that matter to traders and bankers because they ensure prosperity and affluence. Symbols, motifs and deities deeply entrenched in the psyche of common people endure regardless of changed thought processes and philosophies amongst the intelligentsia.

Sopara (ancient Śūrpārāka) was an important port in ancient times. Literary references trace the journey of Pūrṇa from Sopara to Śrāvasti during Buddha's lifetime.⁸ The 9th Edict of Aśoka found at Sopara⁹ conclusively proves the importance of this trading town and port in 3rd century BCE. The two *stūpas* at Sopara provide physical proof, both of prosperity and antiquity.¹⁰



Figs.5 & 6 : A life size, unfinished statue of Brahmā, close-up of faces

Such physical proof of prosperity (continued trading activity and commerce) of Sopara during medieval period is missing. Literary proof exists. A passing reference to Sopara (Śūrpārāka) in Soddhala's *Udayasundarikathā* indicates that Sopara continued to have religious importance in 11th century during the rule of



Figs.7 & 8 : Two sides of the mukuta of a large statue of Harihara



Fig.9 : Unidentified Goddess

Śialahāras.¹¹ Exquisite loose sculptures from medieval times further confirm religious importance of Sopara.

Loose sculptures of a larger than life size image of Brahmā, Harihara,¹² other Hindu Gods and Goddesses as well as Jaina *yakṣī* Ambikā can be taken as testimony to Sopara's continued social and religious importance, into the medieval period. Before the advent of British, Sopara was occupied by Mughals and then by Portuguese that may be the

reason why no structural antiquities of medieval period remain standing to provide physical proof.

Sopara and Kanheri are located close to each other. Kanheri, being in the forested area, was not violated. Kanheri bears inscriptions by three different mercantile professions, Sethī, Negama and Vaṇija.¹³ In the absence of inscriptions/ structures at Sopara, one can assume that economic and social conditions were similar at both places up to medieval period.

If the presence of a panel with Abhiṣeka-Lakṣmi, Gaṇeśa and Kubera (Fig.1) can be taken to indicate the continued presence of *śreṣṭhīs* at Sopara, it can be cited as a physical proof of continued trade and prosperity of Sopara in medieval times.

Endnotes

1. The posture of the goddess is reminiscent of Mahiṣamardinī Durgā at Udayagiri Caves, M.P.; Indira S. Iyer, 'The Conundrum of the Udayagiri Mahiṣamardinī' JASM, Vol.81, 2007-8, pp.1-6.
2. Michael W. Meister, 'Pipad (Pipar) and the Transmission of Architectural Knowledge', *Art, Icon and Architecture in South Asia, Essays in Honour of Dr. Devangana Desai*, Ed. Anila Verghese, Anna L. Dallapiccola, Vol.II, pp.317-331; Aryan Books International, New Delhi, 2015.
3. *Ibid.*, Photo 23.18, p.328.
4. *Ibid.*, Photo 23.19, p.329.
5. D. R. Bhandarkar, *ASWI PR 1907*, p.38, *EITA II 2*, pp.147-49.

6. Meister, *op.cit.*, p.329; "May the face of Mahaganapati bestow many blessings on you. May those hands of Chandika... shower prosperity on you. May the principal yaksha, Dhanada by name... confer affluence on you."
7. B. Ch. Chabra, 'Sakrai Stone Inscription, V.S. 699', *Epigraphia Indica*, 27, 1047-48, pp.27-33.
8. B. G. Gokhale, *Buddhism in Maharashtra : A History*, p.34, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1976.
9. Currently exhibited in the CSMVS (Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, Mumbai).
10. Bhagawanlal Indraj, 'Antiquarian Remains at Sopara and Padana', *JBBRAS*, Vol.XV, 1881-82, p.273; Henry Cousens, *ASWI PR*, for the year ending June 1898, Bombay.
11. Sodhdhala, *Udayasundarikathā* ; Ed. by C. D. Dalal and E. Krishnamachari, Gaekwad Oriental Series, No.XXI, XXII, Govt. of Baroda, 1920; V. V. Mirashi, *Literary and Historical Studies in Indology*, pp.71-91, Delhi, 1975.
12. K. D. Kanitkar, 'Images of Brahma found in Thane District, Maharashtra', *Marg*, Vol.57, No.3, pp.40-45, 2006.
13. Shobhana Gokhale, *Kanheri Inscriptions*, p.15, Deccan College Post Graduate and Research Institute, Pune, 1991; 'Market towns were called *nigamas*, the large scale traders there were called *Negamas*, smaller ones, *vaṇījas*. *Sethis* combined large scale commerce with banking.' B. G. Gokhale, *op.cit.*, p.127.