

Notes on Two Navagraha Panels from the Malwa Region

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K. L. Mankodi

The following are notes about two Navagraha panels from the Malwa region of central India. The panels are unknown to scholars and likely to remain so, given the circumstances; that is the reason they are being illustrated in this short article with basic documentation, which other scholars can follow up.

1. Navagrahas on a Lintel/Slab from the Atru Region (Figs.1-3)

Atru in the Baran district of south-eastern Rajasthan recently came into prominence because of the thefts and illegal exports of two *Mithuna* sculptures of the Pratihāra period of the early tenth century.¹ While touring in that region in March 2012, news was received that a sculpture found by a villager had been deposited in the police headquarters in the town of Baran. The discovery was widely reported in the local media. On a personal visit to the police station, this sculpture turned out to be an almost undamaged panel with the figures of all the nine personified planets or the Navagrahas, a popular subject in Indian art. The panel had been a chance discovery made by a farmer near the village Baodi Kheda just off the newly laid Express Highway No.76 that runs from Allahabad in Uttar Pradesh to Pindwada in southern Rajasthan. With the permission of the police authorities, the panel was photographed in the Kachaharī or headquarters police station on 30 March 2012.

The panel is 27 inches long and 12 inches wide, probably part of the lintel of a shrine doorway. It was customary to crown shrine door lintels with representations of the Navagrahas and the Seven Mother Goddesses or *Saptamātrkās*, as gods of protection. If that was



Fig.1 : Navagraha slab, Baodi Kheda, late-9th century



Fig.2 : Navagraha slab, Baodi Kheda, detail of Ravi and Soma



Fig.3 : Navagraha slab, Baodi Kheda, detail of Śani, Rahu and Ketu

the case here, the shrine door must have been 54 inches wide; but the other half of the lintel was not found.

The panel has the Nine Grahas standing in a row from the Sun god Sūrya or Ravi, followed by Soma or Candra, Maṅgala, Budha, Bṛhaspati or Guru, Śukra, Śani, Rāhu and Ketu. They have as usual two arms and Sūrya/Ravi to Śani all are in the standing posture, Sūrya/Ravi standing erect, the following six with a gentle swaying stance. Rāhu is represented as his bust, up to the waist, with a smiling expression, his hands in the *tarpaṇamudrā* but without the crescent moon in them; and Ketu as an almost full length male figure is standing to face, hands folded. The Sun god carried lotuses in his hands, but only one hand is preserved undamaged. The following six gods form the *abhaya* gesture and hold pitchers of waters (purifying-healing-medicinal-protective properties). There are minimal personal adornments; the goddess Mahāśvetā stands between the feet of the Sun god, with *abhaya* and pitcher. The Sun god wears a tall cylindrical crown; the six other true Planets all seem to be having their hair tied in simple *jaṭā*, but some minor individual variations are noticeable. A faint crescent moon is behind Soma's head. Śani's and Ketu's matted hair is the best preserved, and is comparable to that of a Soma sculpture from Atru, an early and contemporary site nearby.² If there are small representations of the Grahas' mounts next to their feet, they were not visible when the photograph was taken, before the panel had been properly cleaned; probably no such mounts are present.

In sculptures of the personified planets, Guru or Br̥haspati and Śani are sometimes bearded; on this panel, Br̥haspati has a normal face but Maṅgala and Śani both have thin rather long beards.³ Śani in Indian tradition is lame. Here, however, he has a normal youthful figure with no deformity. Eight of the Grahas, including Ketu, have large round halos with lotus petals and broad rims, Rāhu's wild hair itself serves as his halo. Unlike the other panel from Gyaraspur illustrated in this article, Rāhu's face is not twisted in a grimace: he is represented here, so to say, as the malevolent planet god after he was pacified.

As indicative of the considerable variation in the portrayal of the Planets, Śani in an early tenth century ceiling panel from Gangobhi near Kota/Baroli is bearded; though not a cripple. Moreover, in another, unpublished ninth century seated Navagraha lintel from nearby Krishna Vilas, both Soma/Candra (also with a crescent behind the head) and Śani have short beards, but Maṅgala does not, and the six Grahas from Soma/Candra up to Śani have the matted hair as befits personages of piety.

The planets can make or mar men's destiny, and must be propitiated; but these 'properties' so to say, are not in conflict with the traits such as saintliness/spirituality. Thus, the Grahas in other myth-clusters or myth-constructs play the role of priests or *Ṛṣis*: Guru or Br̥haspati is the preceptor of the Devas, Śukrācārya of the Daityas; and Soma, later transformed into Candra, the plant at the centre of the Vedic sacrificial cult itself, is a sage in his own right. Hence, their matted hair, their *abhayamudrā* and the pitchers of purifying sacred water of holy men are appropriate.

To place this panel in its chronological and stylistic context, we have the few yet unpublished sculptures from nearby sites, such as Atru, Kakuni or Krishna Vilas, that cover a rather broad bracket in the ninth to tenth century. Atru, a less known site, has recently come into prominence because of the theft, illegal export and recovery of two of its sculptures, as noted above. It was a time when this region was under the Gurjara Pratihāras of Kānyakubja or Kannauj (till circa 955-960 CE), then after that date under the Paramāras of Malwa. A more detailed discussion of patronage and style goes beyond this paper's scope, to be taken up in a monograph under production.⁴ However, we can say this much that medieval Malwa's aesthetic preferences have not yet permeated these figures; 'Pratihāra' has not yet been replaced by 'Paramāra', something that happened after CE 950-960. In this writer's opinion, the Navagraha panel from Baodi Kheda is to be dated in the last quarter of the ninth century CE or the Pratihāra period, actually, even earlier than Atru's *Mithunas*.

The panel may be only the half part of a lintel; the other half must have had the Seven Mother Goddesses or the Saptamātṛkās, but this was not found. As is the practice of art vandals, they would have stolen the antiquity from its original place and hidden it for removal later when convenient. It is of course possible that the panel accidentally turned up while laying a particular stretch of the highway, and was buried by the finder. The suggestion was made to the concerned authorities to search in the neighbourhood of the village for the missing Mother Goddesses and

indeed any more parts pilfered from an unrecorded shrine; it is not known if this suggestion was acted upon.

2. A Fragmentary Navagraha Panel from Gyaraspur (Fig.4)

At Gyaraspur, forty kilometres north-east of Vidisha, in the heart of ancient Daśārṇa country, Brahmanical and Buddhist monuments were built in the ninth and tenth centuries. They were brought on record by British archaeologists as early as the late nineteenth century. ASI's *Report of a Tour in Bundelkhand and Malwa*, 1871-72, Vol.VII, Calcutta, 1878, by J. D. Beglar, 'Gyaraspur' is recorded at pp.90-93; and ASI's *Report of Tours in Bundelkhand and Malwa* in 1874 and 1876-77, Vol.X, 1880, by Alexander Cunningham, Gyaraspur is at pp.31-34. However, those initial reports have not been followed up by later scholars, apart from some chapters in the concerned volume of the *Encyclopaedia of Indian Temple Architecture*. The monuments are under the protection of the Archaeological Survey of India, and are not in worship.

The town of Gyaraspur has an antiquity, but its original name and those of all the temples in it too have just slipped away from people's memory. The origin of the name 'Gyaraspur' itself is not known, for example; a closer look at the old inscriptions could reveal it. Similarly, its monuments have purely descriptive names that do not preserve memories of their historical identity. Scattered at different spots in the small township, they are named as – Hindolā Torāṇā, 'the swing', Cāra Khambhā, 'the four columns', Āṭha Khambhā, 'the eight columns', Mālādevī Temple, Bajarā Maṭha and Dhenkinātha Buddhist Stūpa.



Fig.4 : Navagraha fragment, Gyaraspur, mid-9th century

The *śālabhañjikā* preserved since long in the Gwalior Museum is a celebrated sculpture from Gyaraspur, of course, under the name of the Gyaraspur Yakṣī.

In November 2012 and August 2013, this writer had a chance to examine the ASI's antiquities shed at Gyaraspur that shelters sculptures and other fragments collected from the centrally protected monuments there. Jostling among assorted architectural pieces and sculptures from Brahmanical monuments and the Dhenkinātha Stūpa is a fragmentary Navagraha panel.

Navagraha panels were normally mounted as lintels of shrines, of rather modest size, or as independent panels. This one was unusually large. Measuring almost 20

inches long even in its mutilated condition, when only two of the nine figures are preserved, the panel when intact could have been at least seven to eight feet wide, in all likelihood an independent panel set up outside a temple for worshipping the planets. It is 27 inches high, and it is only the right extreme of a large panel, with Śani, and the pseudo-planets Rāhu and Ketu, tail only, surviving. According to information from local staff, the Bhopal Circle of ASI had conducted a small excavation or clearance in the area to the east of the Hindolā Torāṇa some years ago. This must have been the clearance reported in *Indian Archaeology 1995-96 – A Review*, p.130 (Repeated requests to the ASI's Bhopal Circle for confirmation of the excavation did not yield a response).

The first six Grahas from Ravi to Śukra, and the last one, Ketu, are missing; probably they are still buried at the spot where this fragment was found. Śani, lean of form and simply attired, stands with his right leg crossed against the left; both his hands are broken. It is well known that Śani is thought of as lame of leg, in reference to his being the slowest moving planets in the solar system, and malevolent. By comparison with other completely preserved Navagraha panels elsewhere in central and eastern India where only Śani has this stance, we can safely conclude that the sculptor's intention indeed was to represent Śani's deformity; also since there is a short prop under his left foot to compensate for the shortness of the leg.

Śani's head is not preserved, but the lower part of the face with a tuft of a beard on the chin remains, an interesting feature in this region and at this date. What looks like the stump of a thick pole with a bulbous base remains by his side, reminding us of the rattle seen sometimes in eastern Indian sculptures to warn the approach of this inauspicious Graha. Could this be the leg of the sick bed? In popular imagination all over the country, victims of Śani's malevolent look suffer sickness for seven years.

Rāhu, in a grimace, is just a bust, in *tarpaṇamudrā* or gesture of offering an oblation, but no crescent moon is cradled in his hands, as is sometimes the case. Differently deformed, he has thin-arms but a rather stout figure, a tormented face, thick hair of the head gathered into curls spreading behind. The hands are joined as if holding the crescent of the moon. Beyond his figure, only the curling tail of Ketu is preserved, scales and underbelly carefully traced.

Surviving monuments of Gyaraspur date to the tenth century. The territory fell at different times within the Pratihāra, Kacchapaghāṭa, Candella and Paramāra dominions. In Gyaraspur itself, the Āṭha Khambhā has an inscription of VS 1039/CE 982 of an unnamed king probably of the Candella lineage (*Encyclopaedia*, p.31). Deogarh on the Betwa, where there is an inscription of the Pratihāra emperor Bhoja I of CE 862 and one of the Candella Kirtivarman of CE 1098 is only 150 kilometres to the north. Around the mid-ninth century, when this panel seems to have been carved, the imperial Pratihāras of Kānyakubja or Kannauj, represented by their vassals, were ruling. Style of carving when compared to the Hindolā Torāṇa/Cāra Khambhā a stone's throw away dated to the tenth century does suggest a date for the Navagraha panel that is considerably earlier.

Śani's sculptures in central India are not always illustrative of his lameness; it would seem that this feature was more commonly represented in the eastern part of the country and in Bangladesh. In eastern Indian sculptures, the lameness comes through as a physical defect, an ugly handicap leaving no doubt about his malevolence. 'Style', elegance of form, prompted the Gyaraspur sculptor to portray the deformity by means of the stance, providing him with a prop under the foot to compensate for the crippled leg.

Just like the ambiguity or ambivalence about the Graha's handicapped foot, his face too is sometimes provided with a beard, and sometimes not. In this sculpture, the upper part of the face is missing but the short tuft of hair on the chin remains; hence, this is an example where Śani was bearded. Whether any of the three other Grahas who are sometimes bearded, namely, Soma/Candra, Maṅgala and Śukra were also bearded cannot now of course be confirmed.

Gyaraspur and Baodi Kheda are both within the Malwa area of central India, Gyaraspur being about 250 kilometres to the south-east of Baodi Kheda, which is the spot where the Navagraha panel happened to turn up, the exact spot from where it was pilfered being unknown. Their noteworthy features are that Śani has a beard in both the sculptures, he is lame in Gyaraspur, his inauspicious character is perhaps suggested by the sickbed there; in the Baodi Kheda panel, Maṅgala also is bearded.

Some comparable Graha sculptures from central and western India (showing the variety of posture etc.) are listed below :

A tenth century ceiling slab from Gangobhi, a site submerged in the Pratap Sagar reservoir on the Chambal and now preserved in the Kota museum, has the Navagrahas where only Śani is bearded, but not lame; all the planets have *abhaya*/pitcher. It is numbered dsal@uchicago.edu 9481.

Another panel from an unrecorded site (in the Kota area) in the same museum has Śani without a beard, who is not lame, and all the Grahas in the same gently swaying postures : dsal 79547. There are no mounts. (The border on the other side of the slab might have had the Seven Mothers).

Temple 26 of the Jaina group at Deogarh of the eleventh century has a bearded Śani on the Navagraha lintel. This is illustrated in Mevissen, 'Figurations of Time', Fig.6; the AIS archives has the same temple but it is numbered there as 31, not 26 (See dsal accession No.45787 in Deogarh).

Dsal 5755 is a fragmentary ninth century panel in the Sagar university museum with only Budha, Guru, Śukra and Śani; the first three being in the gentle stance but Śani with the stance suggestive of his lameness, like Gyaraspur. This piece is 160 cm long, thus, it must have been like Gyaraspur, a large free standing panel.

A lintel from Ashapuri in district Raisen of the early tenth century has Śani with his legs crossed in contrast to the others, which are in graceful pose : dsal 33390.

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Endnotes

1. K. Mankodi, 'The Case of the Contraband Cargo; or, Two Amorous Couples from Atru', to be published in *Prasada-nidhi* : M. A. Dhaky Felicitation Volume.
2. See this writer's 'Soma : The Sapling that Sprouted in the Himalayas, to Grow Up as Guardian God of the North!', in *Indology's Pulse: Arts in Context, Essays presented to Doris Meth Srinivasan in admiration of her scholarly research* (in press), Fig.3a.
3. Gerd J. R. Mevissen, 'Figurations of Time', Śani with beard : Fig.6 in Deogarh temple 26. Gerd J. R. Mevissen, 'Independent Sculptures', pp.83-113, p.90.
4. This writer's *Atru : the Penumbra of Pratihāra and Paramāra Art* (under preparation).

Bibliography

1. M. A. Dhaky, ed. *Encyclopaedia of Indian Temple Architecture : North India : Beginnings of Medieval Idiom 900-1000 AD*, New Delhi, 1998.
2. *Indian Archaeology 1995-96 – A Review*, Available online.
3. Gerd J. R. Mevissen, 'Figurations of Time and Protection : Sun, Moon, Planets and Other Astral Phenomena in South Asian Art', *Figurations of Time in Asia*, Munich, 2012.
4. Gerd J. R. Mevissen, 'Independent Sculptures of Single Planetary Deities from Eastern India : Problems of Identification', *Journal of Bengal Art*, Vol.16, 2011, pp.83-113.
5. Gerd J. R. Mevissen, 'Īṣat-paṅgu Śanaiścara : The Lame Planetary God Saturn and His Vāhanas', *South Asian Archaeology, 1997*, Rome, 2000, pp.1267-1297.

Photographs – Author