



Fig.2.6 : *Nalagiri* (lower two frames) and *Abhinishkramana* (upper frame) episodes, 50 x 8.9 cm approx. sandstone, left doorjamb, vestibule 7th century Buddhist Monument, Aihole

Jataka Panels from Aihole

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The double-storeyed, partly rock-cut and partly structural, 7th-century monument on the north side slope of the Meguti hill at Aihole, Karnataka, is the only surviving important Buddhist structure¹ of the Chalukyas of Badami in their home region, Fig.2.1. Its sponsor is anonymous, but the builder was Binjadi Ovaja.² The monument has three sancta on the ground and one on the upper storey. Carvings of numerous Buddhist narratives and ornamental scroll-work on the doorjambs of the vestibule and central sanctum are an interesting aspect of this monument and some of these have been identified earlier: *Aramadusaka-jataka*, Siddhartha's *abhinishkramana*, *Nalagiri* episode³ and *Chullahamsa-jataka*.⁴ This author has recently identified all the *Jataka* depictions on the sanctum doorframe in another paper.⁵ This paper is focused on the *Jataka* depictions on the doorframe of the vestibule. The narratives are in miniature form and occupy one of the *shakhas* of the doorjambs. On each doorjamb, the artist has divided the *shakha* into eight rectangular frames arranged in vertical order. From the bottom to the top, one, two or three successive frames contain depictions of the episodes of a *Jataka* story. The doorjambs, Figs.2.2 and 2.3, were carved before being fixed, and the artist apparently commenced his sketch work from the lower end. The stories are to be read from the bottom to the top, as suggested by the two lower frames of the left doorjamb which hold scenes of two successive incidents from the *Nalagiri* episode one above the other.

The *Jataka* narratives are described here in brief, the numbers pertaining to the frames in order.

Jatakas depicted on the Right Doorjamb

Frame 1: Damaged

Frames 2 and 3: *Chullahamsa/Mahahamsa-jataka*⁶, Fig.2.4, the two lower frames:

2. Damaged figure of a person: the two geese are caught in the fowler's trap.
3. Two persons are seated with hands in *anjalinudra* in front of two geese: *Dhritarashtrapreachesto*, the king and queen, adoring the Golden geese.

Story: *The Bodhisattva born as Dhritarashtra, the king of a flock of golden geese with Sumukha as commander-in-chief, was trapped in a fowler's noose. While his companions flew away, Sumukha stayed by his side. Moved by Sumukha's dedication to his master the fowler set them free, but the two geese insisted to see the king of Varanasi, and Dhritarashtra (Bodhisattva) preached the moral Law to the king and queen.*

Frame 4 : *Matsya-jataka*,⁷ Fig.2.4, upper frame: A fish in a burgeoning lotus grove in bloom: the Mighty Fish succeeds in restoring the pond to its former glory.

Story : The Bodhisattva who lived as a virtuous, pious Mighty Fish in a pond in Jetavana, attesting to his own virtuosity, caused Parjanya to rain heavily during a draught and thus saved his companions.

Frames 5 and 6 : *Asadisa-jataka*,⁸ Fig.2.5, the two lower frames:

5. The king arrives in a chariot in the royal grove symbolized with a mango tree.

6. An archer has shot from his bow at the sky; another seems to praise him. Bodhisattva as Asadisa shows his peerless skill in archery.

Story : Peerless archer Prince Asadisa-kumara (Bodhisattva) takes service under the king of another country to dispel doubts of his younger brother, King Brahmadata-kumara. One day when the king visited the park Asadisa displayed his excellence in archery by skillfully timing two arrows at the sky one after another and bringing down the bunch of mangoes with a falling arrow.

Frame 7 : *Aramadusaka-jataka*,⁹ Fig.2.5, the upper frame: A monkey is busy uprooting a tree.

Story : The gardener of King Brahmadata, wishing to attend a festival in the city, requested the monkey-king in the royal garden to water the plants. The monkey-king advised his folk to water the plants according to the size of the roots. The monkeys began to pull out every plant. The Bodhisattva who happened to pass by asked why they were doing so. When they answered that it was their king's order, the Bodhisattva reflected how, despite the desire to do good, the ignorant and foolish could only cause harm.

Scenes from Buddha's life and Jatakas on the Left doorjamb

1. *Nalagiri Episode*,¹⁰ Fig.2.6, the two lower frames:

Frame 1 : A rushing elephant and three monks, Ananda, Sariputra and Buddha: The inebriated Nalagiri creates tension in Rajagriha.

Frame 2 : The Nalagiri kneels down while Buddha is caressing the elephant. Sariputra and Ananda are witnessing the miracle.

Story: His cousin Devadatta once tried on Buddha's life in collusion with King Ajatasatru by letting loose the liquor-fed elephant Nalagiri in Rajagriha where Buddha and his brethren were going for alms. Buddha's disciples, Sariputra and Ananda, wanted to face it first as they feared the elephant might kill the Master, but Buddha remained in front and brought Nalagiri to its knees by sweet sounds and caress and taught the Law.

Frame 3 : *Siddhartha's Abhinishkramana, Great Renunciation, Fig.2.6, the upper frame:*
Prince Siddhartha on horse, with a parasol and flywhisk above.

Story : This is the well-known incident of Siddhartha on his horse Kanthaka departing to embrace ascetic life.

Frames 4 and 5 : *Ruru-jataka,*¹¹ Fig.2.7, the lower and upper frames:

4. A standing deer and a person drowning in water : Ruru (Bodhisattva) hears the cry of Mahadhanaka.
5. A person on a deer : Ruru carries Mahadhanaka to show the road.

Story : Mahadhanaka, a rich merchant's spendthrift son and debtor, threw himself into the Ganga. The Bodhisattva, living as a golden deer in the grove nearby, saved him and carried him to show the road to Varanasi. The ungrateful man led the king to the golden deer for reward and the deer taught the Law to the king and queen.

Frames 6 to 8. *Mahakapi-jataka,*¹² Fig.2.8:

6. An ape is carrying a person on his back, a tree in the background and a deep pit with water: The Great Ape (Bodhisattva) saves the Brahmin from the ditch.
7. A person hurls stone at a resting ape: The ungrateful Brahmin hurls a stone on Ape's head.
8. Two standing persons in dialogue: The Ape shows the Brahmin the road.

Story: A Brahmin lost himself in the Himalaya region while searching his lost oxen. To eat some fruit, he climbed up a tree and slipped off into a deep ditch. The Bodhisattva, living nearby as a Great Ape hauled him out, but the ungrateful man hurled a stone on the resting Ape. Despite the grave injuries, the Ape rescued the ungrateful man from the forest and showed the road to escape.

Contextual Relevance

Any discussion on the significance of these *Jataka* depictions on the doorframe of the vestibule should also consider the depictions on the sanctum doorframe. In total, thirteen *Jataka* stories, including the seven on the sanctum doorframe, have been identified in addition to the two episodes from the life of Buddha in the Buddhist monument at Aihole. There is one more on the right doorjamb of the vestibule, unfortunately in a damaged state, hence hard to identify the subject. Depiction of fourteen *Jatakas* is quite a big number for this comparatively small monument.

As many as seven *Jatakas* depicted in this monument are found not only in the Pali *Jatakas*, but also in Arya Sura's *Jatakamala*. One of them on the sanctum doorframe, viz. *Vyaghra-jataka*,¹³ figures for the first time in *Jatakamala*. Since the verses inscribed in 5th century characters under *Kshantivadi-jataka* and *Maitribala-jataka* in Cave 2 at Ajanta are from *Jatakamala*, scholars have placed him in 4th or 5th century.¹⁴ The occurrence of *Vyaghra-jataka*— perhaps for the first time—in the Aihole Buddhist monument, together with Ajanta paintings, attests to the popularity of his work all over the Deccan by 7th century.

Another significant point is that *Jatakamala* stories 1, 3, 6, 9 and 10, all related to the concept of *dana* are found in that order on the sanctum doorframe while 15, 22, 24 and 26, related respectively to the concepts of *satya*, *maitri*, *anukampa* and *daya*, are on the vestibule's doorframe. This seems to owe to a deliberate exercise in the choice of the stories.

Some *Jataka* depictions on the doorframe of the vestibule are related to the episodes of Devadatta's ungratefulness or his attempt on Buddha's life. For instance, the Nalagiri episode depicted here exemplifies one such attempt of Devadatta. The context of *Mahakapi-jataka* narrative was the incident of Devadatta hurling a stone on Buddha.¹⁵ Similarly, the *Ruru-jataka* was contextualized to illustrate Devadatta's ungratefulness to Bodhisattva in the previous life, the merchant's son in that *Jataka* was Devadatta in former birth, Ananda was the king and Buddha, the deer himself.¹⁶ The choice of these stories for the beautiful doorframe of the vestibule along with Nalagiri episode had a deeper intent beyond the laws of the frame, to condemn the evil and energize the monastic reforms.

As mentioned earlier, there are four sancta in this monument, and each would have enshrined an image of Buddha. Three of the images are available, one near the monument itself and two others housed in the local Archaeological Museum. All these are in *dhyanamudra*. There are two more free-standing images in the Museum, one apparently of *Padmapani Avalokitesvara* in *samapada* posture and the other probably of *Tara* seemingly from this very monument. On the lower part of sanctum doorframe *Padmapani Avalokitesvara* is depicted on the left side and another Bodhisattva, probably *Mahasthamaprapta*, holding probably *Vajra* on the right side. This suggests that the principal sanctum image was that of the *Dhyani Buddha Amitabha*. Putting the evidence together, it may be suggested that the Buddhist structure at Aihole most probably belongs to a Mahayana-Vajrayana transitional phase.

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Fig.2.1 : Storeyed Buddhist Monument, 7th century, sandstone, Meguti Hill, Aihole



Fig.2.2 : Left doorjamb detail vestibule, 7th century, sandstone 215 x 92 cm approx. Buddhist Monument, Aihole



Fig.2.3 : Right doorjamb detail
vestibule, 7th century, sandstone
215 x 92 cm approx.
Buddhist Monument, Aihole



Fig.2.4 : *Chullahamsa-jataka* (lower two frames) and *Matsya-jataka* (upper frame), 50 x 8.9 cm approx., sandstone right doorjamb, vestibule, 7th century Buddhist Monument, Aihole



Fig.2.6 : *Nalagiri* (lower two frames) and *Abhinishkramana* (upper frame) episodes, 50 x 8.9 cm approx. sandstone, left doorjamb, vestibule 7th century Buddhist Monument, Aihole



Fig.2.7 : *Ruru-jataka*
33 x 8.9 cm approx.
sandstone, left doorjamb
vestibule, 7th century
Buddhist Monument
Aihole

Fig.2.8 : *Mahakapi-jataka*, 50 x 8.9 cm approx.
sandstone, left doorjamb, vestibule, 7th century
Buddhist Monument, Aihole

