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# Image iconopraxis and iconoplasty in South Asia

MICHAEL W. MEISTER

In India's religions, deities often emerge from the earth. The origin legend of the Dadhimatī-mātā temple, near Nagaur in Rajasthan, tells of the goddess rising from rocky ground amid the sound of an earthquake's rumble. Stopped by the startled cries of a herdsman, only her elbow—a natural rock—became visible for worship.<sup>1</sup> In the origin myth of the Oswal Jains at Osiāñ, a sage passing in the air descended at the urging of his personal goddess to locate an image, naturally formed where a cow had been dripping milk into sand. Taken from the earth prematurely by recent converts, this "found" image of Mahāvīra, the last in a lineage of Jain sages (*tīrthankaras*), was placed in a temple built to receive him. Mutilated by misinformed youths, the image's curse caused the Jain population of Osiāñ to flee.<sup>2</sup>

Excavated sculptures also raise questions about our knowledge of how South Asia developed a visual vocabulary for varieties of ritual worship and how patterns of thinking influence oral mythologies of contemporary worship.<sup>3</sup> I think of the controversial, gigantic sixth-century C.E. *yakṣa* (nature spirit) from Tālā in eastern India, for example, or the multi-headed dwarf-like Śaiva gnomes excavated in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra.<sup>4</sup> For me to compare images thought to be

naturally formed or found to sculptures recovered by excavation is not simply a conceit. In South Asia a sculpture gives body to divinity; how it was perceived is essential to what it is and why it was made.

## Temples at Kāfirkot

In the fortress at Kāfirkot North, near the Chashma barrage, above the west bank of the Indus River in the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan, are four standing temples (A–D: a fifth, documented a century ago near the foot of the fort, has disappeared). For these and other temples in the Salt Range I have established a chronology from the sixth to tenth century C.E., before and during the reign of Hindu Śāhi kings.<sup>5</sup> These temples are part of a legacy of "Gandhāra-Nāgara" architecture, hardly studied since the partition of South Asia, and from a frontier region with a long history of crosscurrents and cultural change.<sup>6</sup> Fresh evidence coming from these sites requires rethinking canons, not imposing them.

In two seasons of excavation in the fortress at Kāfirkot North, a team from the Pakistan Heritage Society, with support from the University of Pennsylvania, established

1. Michael W. Meister, "Light on the Lotus: Temple Decoration or Essential Form?" in *Multiple Histories: Culture and Society in the Study of Rajasthan*, ed. Lawrence A. Babb, Varsha Joshi, and Michael W. Meister (Jaipur and New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2002), pp. 232–253; Michael W. Meister, "Giving Up and Taking On: The Body in Ritual," *RES* 41 (2002):92–103. An inscription dated ca. 608 C.E. found in the present Dadhimatī-mātā temple refers to patronage of the goddess by the Dāhimā Brahman community, *Epigraphia Indica* 11 (1911–1912):299–304.

2. See Lawrence A. Babb, "Monks and Miracles: Religious Symbols and Images of Origin Among Oswāl Jains," *Journal of Asian Studies* 52 (1993):3–21; Michael W. Meister, "Sweetmeats or Corpses? Community, Conversion, and Sacred Places," in *Open Boundaries, Jain Communities and Cultures in Indian History*, ed. John C. Cort (Albany: State University of New York, 1998), pp. 111–138.

3. It is important to understand discontinuities and variations in the development of India's forms of worship. A precise and historically considered framework is provided in Louis Renou, *Religions of Ancient India* (London: The Athlone Press, 1953).

4. *Riddle of Indian Iconography* (Zetetic on Rare Icon from Tālā), ed. L. S. Nigam (Delhi: Sharada Publishing House, 2000); N. P. Joshi, "Early Forms of Śiva," and M. A. Dhaky, "Bhūtas and Bhūtanāyakas: Elementals and Their Captains," in *Discourses on Śiva: Proceedings of a Symposium on the Nature of Religious Imagery*, ed. Michael W. Meister (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), pp.

47–61, 240–256, respectively; Hans T. Bakker, *The Vākāṭakas: An Essay in Hindu Iconology*, Gonda Indological Series 5 (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1997). Hans T. Bakker, "An Enigmatic Giant from Tālā," in *Riddle of Indian Iconography* (ibid.), p. 104, interprets the gemonic figure from Mandhal with two layers of four faces (four in cardinal and four facing subcardinal directions), as "Śiva's manifestation on four levels, the eight heads of the upper two tiers jointly representing his two forms as Sadāśiva and Maheśvara." R. C. Agrawala, "An Enigmatic Statue from Tālā," in ibid, p. 108, suggests "the transition of a phase when people had started carving Śiva-*līras* on the pattern of Yakṣa images but not forgetting the older traditions of Yakṣa worship."

5. Michael W. Meister, "Chronology of Temples in the Salt Range, Pakistan," in *South Asian Archaeology 1997*, ed. Maurizio Taddei and Giuseppe De Marco (Rome: Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, 2000), vol. 3, pp. 1321–1339; Abdur Rehman, *The Last Two Dynasties of the Śāhis: an Analysis of Their History, Archaeology, Coinage and Paleography* (Islamabad: Centre for the Study of the Civilizations of Central Asia, 1979). For known marble sculptures of the earlier Turk Śāhi kings of Afghanistan, see Douglas Barrett, "Sculpture of the Shahi Period," *Oriental Art* n.s. 3 (1957):54–59; Shoshin Kuwayama, "The Turki Shahis and Relevant Brahmanical Sculptures in Afghanistan," *East and West* n.s. 26 (1976):375–416.

6. Michael W. Meister, "Gandhāra-Nāgara Temples of the Salt Range and the Indus," *Kalā, the Journal of Indian Art History Congress* 4 (1997–1998):45–52.



Figure 1. Limestone sculpture excavated in 1997 at Kāfirkot North, North-West Frontier Province, Pakistan. Photograph by the author.

two phases of construction for Temple C, cleared platforms in front of Temples A and B, and uncovered the base platform and added compound for a previously unknown sixth temple (E).<sup>7</sup> This, we believe, was first

7. Excavations at Kāfirkot North were undertaken by the Pakistan Heritage Society, Peshawar, with a license from the Department of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Pakistan, and with financial support from the University of Pennsylvania Research Foundation, South Asia Studies Department, and the American Institute of Pakistan Studies.

constructed in the sixth century, then expanded and reformulated late in the ninth century (fig. 2).<sup>8</sup>

In November 1997, this team also uncovered a unique stone sculpture (fig. 1)—on which I wish to focus

8. Michael W. Meister, "Temples Along the Indus," *Expedition* 38/3 (1996):41–54; Michael W. Meister, Abdur Rehman, and Farid Khan, "Discovery of a New Temple Along the Indus," *Expedition* 42/1 (2000):37–46. Other temples at Kāfirkot North and Bilot also show reformulation in the ninth/tenth centuries C.E.

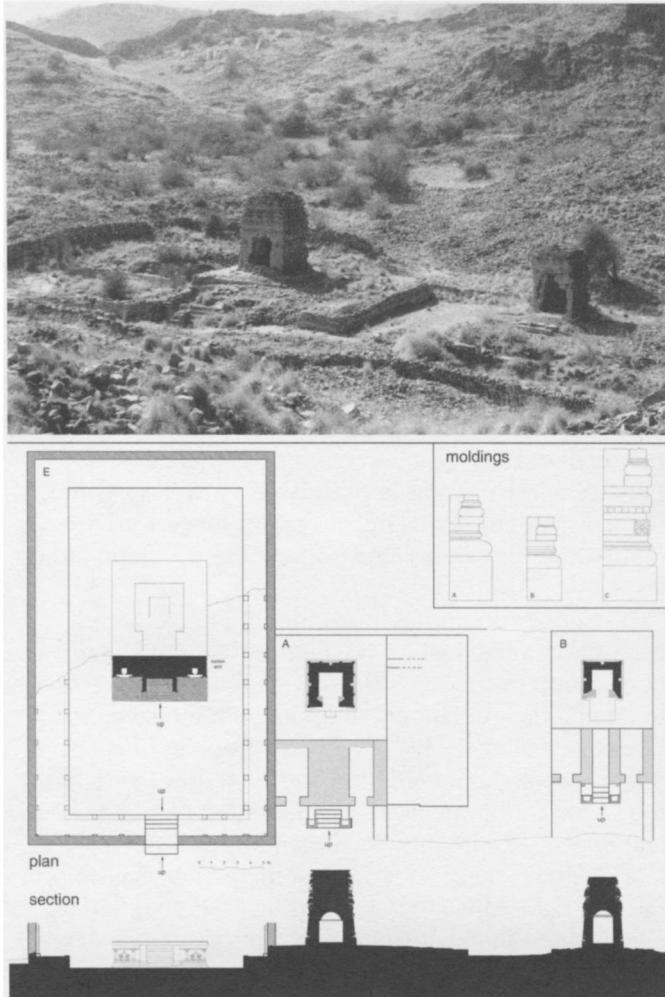


Figure 2. Kāfirkot site, plan and section, temples E, A, and B; moldings, temples A, B, and C. Photograph and drawings by the author.

this essay—from excavations in front of Temple B.<sup>9</sup> This was found in two pieces,<sup>10</sup> the lower part first, in soil above the stairway leading to Temple B's platform, one of the earliest temples at the site. Its inner square

9. Meister, Rehman, Khan (*ibid.*), fig. 12; Michael W. Meister with Abdur Rehman, "Archaeology at Kafirkot," in *South Asian Archaeology 2001*, ed. Catherine Jarrige and Vincent Lefèvre (Paris: Editions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 2005), pp. 571–578; Michael W. Meister, "Crossing Lines: Architecture in Early Islamic South Asia," *RES* 43 (2003):126, fig. 15.

10. Abdur Rehman, "The Discovery of Śiva-Maheśvara Figure at Kafirkot," *Lahore Museum Bulletin* 9, no. 2 (1996):51–56 (published in 1998).

sanctum is only ca. 1.5 m wide. The newly discovered sculpture in its present state is ca. 58 cm tall and could have fitted comfortably in Temple B's sanctum, on a pedestal that no longer survives.

### Iconoplasty and iconopraxis

If these temples represent a missing link in our understanding of the development of northern Indian temple architecture, this stone icon comes from a region where cultural and cultic interactions over millennia constitute a test for canons that we tend to impose from more "central" South Asian regions, later literature, and medieval or modern practice.<sup>11</sup> This sculpture coming from the period of these temples' founding is a remnant of particular thinking—the fabric of local knowledge seldom available to us—from which other criteria can still be sought.

While I wish to document this important new sculpture and to interpret the intent of its image, my purpose is also more general. I want to test our capacity to reconstruct the iconoplasic experimentation and iconopraxis of its age.<sup>12</sup> By "iconoplasty" I mean the semantic fluidity of forms at times of ritual definition and the transformational characteristics of meanings attached to forms in the same period by different users synchronically and over longer durations (diachronically).<sup>13</sup> I use "iconopraxis" to designate the fluidity and multiplicity of practice that both helped generate such forms and responded to them, as opposed to the more commonly used "iconography" and "iconology," which tend to be used to fix forms and

11. Michael W. Meister, "The Membrane of Tolerance: Middle and Modern India," in *Art, the Integral Vision*, ed. B. N. Saraswati, S. C. Malik, and Madhu Khanna (New Delhi: D. K. Printworld, 1994), pp. 289–298; Meister, "Crossing Lines" (see note 9).

12. *Oxford English Dictionary*, online edition, records "iconoplast," a fashioner or maker of images," and "iconodulist, a worshipper or server of images," but not "iconoplasic," which was, however, used to specify India's religious sculpture by T. A. Gopinatha Rao, *Elements of Hindu Iconography*, 2 vols. (Madras: Law Printing House, 1914–1916), vol. 1, pt. 1, p. 29 and passim; and by Jitendra Nath Banerjea, *The Development of Hindu Iconography* (Calcutta: The University of Calcutta, 1941), pp. 219–266: "Icono-plastic Art in India—Factors Contributing to Its Development."

13. Michael W. Meister, "Seeing and Knowing: Semiology, Semiotics and the Art of India," in *Los Discursos Sobre el Arte* (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 1995), pp. 193–207; Michael W. Meister, "De- and Re-constructing the Indian Temple," *Art Journal* 49 (1990):395–400. See also Sarah Boxer, "A Symbol of Hatred Pleads Not Guilty," in "Arts & Ideas" section of *The New York Times*, July 29, 2000: "It's a simple question: Can the swastika ever be redeemed?"

meanings as unvarying.<sup>14</sup> Of the monumental composite *yakṣa* sculpture uncovered at Tālā I wrote that we "no longer believe in canonical linearity. Layered traditions form our standard model. What is out of the ordinary seems but a new facet to the elephant of India's history we have always studied only in its parts . . . . [S]cholarship looks now for evidence—for clues to the anti-canons, to other layers of realities in India's past."<sup>15</sup>

The lower part of the sculpture from Kāfirkot shows the torso and legs of a male figure seated on a thin pallet above a base of downturned lotus petals. His well-muscled legs are crossed, the heels drawn together, his toes in tension touching the lotus's crown.<sup>16</sup> He wears a garment (*dhoti*) tied low under his belly, drawn up between his legs to form a pouch (*puṭa*) for his genitals, much like that of a wrestler today.<sup>17</sup> The shapes of the genitals themselves, however, are not visible.<sup>18</sup> Short flaps of this cloth *dhoti* cover the upper part of his broad thighs.

14. *Oxford English Dictionary*, online edition, defines "praxis" as "action, practice," and more specifically "the practice or exercise of a technical subject or art, as distinct from the theory of it." As adopted by Karl Marx, it came "to denote the willed action by which a theory or philosophy (esp. a Marxist one) becomes a social actuality."

15. Michael W. Meister, "Too Late to Tālā," in *Riddle of Indian Iconography* (see note 4), p. 83. The most suggestive vision that the Tālā stone sculpture may have been intended to materialize is *Atharva-Veda Samhitā*, trans. William Dwight Whitney, Harvard Oriental Series 7–8 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1905) (hereafter abbreviated as AV): 10.7.38: "A great monster (*yakṣa*) in the midst of the creation (*bhūvana*) strode in penance on the back of the sea—in it are set whatever gods there are, like the branches of a tree roundabout the trunk."

16. Stella Kramrisch, *The Presence of Śiva* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 10–11, describes a posture of "*siddha āsana*, in which the crossed heels touch the testicles." Vidya Dehejia and Daryl Yauner Harnisch, "Yoga as a Key to Understanding the Sculpted Body," in *Representing the Body, Gender Issues in Indian Art*, ed. Vidya Dehejia (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1997), p. 77, on the other hand, make a case for *mūla-bandhāsana* ("root-locked pose") where the heels are raised and the "toes rest on the ground" but, unlike this figure, "he then raises his body . . . and gently lets it down to rest on toes and knees."

17. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Yakṣas* (Washington, D.C.: Freer Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 1928, 1931), vol. 2, pt. 2, p. 79, describes one of the early Indian auspicious symbols found on several Mathurā sculptures as a "*panṇa-pacchi* or *panṇa-puṭa* (*pūrṇa-puṭa*)" without giving a source for the term. By this he may mean to indicate a ripe citron (*pacanī*) or full parcel (*puṭa*); Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, new ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1899), p. 631, defines *puṭa* as "a fold, hollow space, slit, concavity . . . ; a cloth worn to cover the privates."

18. Kramrisch (see note 16), p. 157, observes that in Śiva images "the *linīga* is not meant to be absent, as is the case in images of the Buddha, on whose figure the organs of sex are said to have withdrawn.

From this fragment, as it was first found, the figure would seem to have been a practitioner of yoga (*yogin*); a sage (*rishi*), but not an emaciated ascetic; and divine, if not necessarily a divinity, because of his lotus support. I do not immediately say "deity" because the lotus in India, while used almost invariably to keep a divinity's feet (or seat) from touching the earth, was also used as support for many other emblems of sacrality and power seen as cosmically centered.<sup>19</sup>

The human particularities of this body pull the image back from those of Śiva, Viṣṇu, or other deities presented as master of the process of yoga.<sup>20</sup> Only the third of Hinduism's male triad, Brahmā,—related to Vedic *brahman*, the all-pervading formless "uncreate,"<sup>21</sup> but honored as a deity only in the breach by later Hinduism—shares this appearance of a well-fed priest, belly distended. Yet his images rarely suggest, as this figure does, the disciplined body of the wandering forest ascetic.<sup>22</sup>

The upper portion of this sculpture, found in excavation a few feet from where its lower half had been found several days before, raises interpretive stakes to another level. Bare-chested, but with a heavy broad lappet of cloth over his proper left shoulder (it is not, as it first seems, the sacred thread) (fig. 4), this figure had four arms and three faces. His upper left hand carries a leaf-headed scepter; the lower left arm is broken (although the shape of it, bent at the elbow, is visible); the two right arms are gone. Through these added appendages, the image enters into the discourse of what

Their absence is one of the signs of the *mahāpuruṣa*, the Buddha as supernal being."

19. For lotus altars see Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Yakṣas, Essays in the Water Cosmology*, ed. Paul Schroeder (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 40.

20. Michael W. Meister, "Art and Hindu Asceticism: Śiva and Viṣṇu as Masters of Yoga," in *Art and Archaeology of South Asia: Essays Dedicated to N. G. Majumdar*, ed. Debala Mitra (Calcutta: Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Government of West Bengal, 1996), pp. 315–321.

21. Kramrisch (see note 16), pp. 7, 471: "supreme reality."

22. Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 116, citing AV (see note 15): 10.7.17, observes that "*brahman* is recognized as the pillar of the universe, the support, the base." For an important sixth-century brass figure of standing Brahmā (96.5 cm high) found near Mirpur Khas, see Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *History of Indian and Indonesian Art* (New York: E. Weyhe, 1927), p. 241 and pl. 45, fig. 168. J. E. Van Lohuizen-de Leeuw, "The Pre-Muslim Antiquities of Sind," in *South Asian Archaeology 1975*, ed. J. E. Van Lohuizen-de Leeuw (Leiden: E. Brill, 1979), p. 170, observes that the left hand of this Brahmā "is held in the attitude typical of an ascetic carrying a kamaṇḍalu or water-pot."

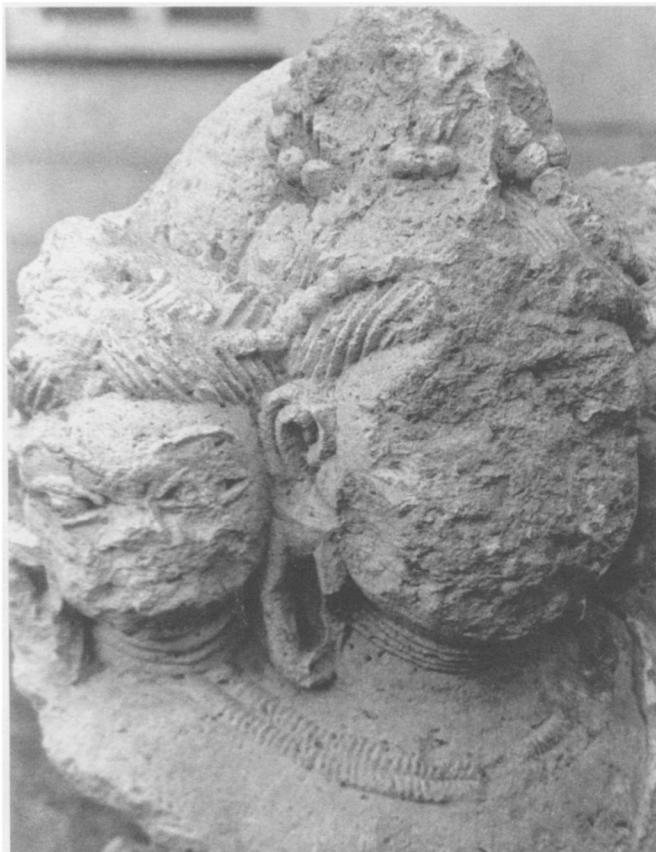


Figure 3. Kāfirkot image, proper right face. Photograph by the author.



Figure 4. Kāfirkot image, proper left face. Photograph by the author.

Doris Srinivasan has labeled the “multiplicity convention.”<sup>23</sup>

The figure sits upright, his head naturally cast forward. The two side heads, set above his shoulders, are smaller than the central face (figs. 3, 4). Each rests on a distinct neck with neck-folds and is presented in three-quarter view.<sup>24</sup> These side heads are set behind the

central head and seem to share its elongated earlobes.<sup>25</sup> Their hair is tied up in twisted bands, ornamented with chains of beads. All three faces have been broken and abraded (figs. 3, 4). In my observation, however, there is little to distinguish the expressions of each, and no significant symbols—such as moon, lotus, snake, or skull—are woven into their hair.<sup>26</sup>

23. Doris Meth Srinivasan, *Many Heads, Arms and Eyes: Origin, Meaning and Form of Multiplicity in Indian Art* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), p. 6: “Vedic man believed that the act of parturition involves the emission of forms somehow already present (? as seeds; ? as potentialities) in the womb.”

24. Compare this to Kushan-period images that have three necks, illustrated in T. S. Maxwell, “Viśvarūpa, the Form of the Universe,” *Cosmos* 12 (1996):131–161. A number of other early multi-headed figures from the Northwest avoid rigorous cardinality of faces; see, for example, Doris Meth Srinivasan, “Skanda/Kārttikeya in the Early Art of the Northwest,” *Silk Road Art and Archaeology* 5 (1997–1998): 233–268.

25. These side faces are angled, not placed cardinally as in the brass Brahmā from Sind (see note 22); there also, however, the figure has large elongated earlobes that seem to be shared by the side faces. Rehman (see note 10), p. 51, speaks of these as “ear-pendants . . . resembling elongated ear-lobes in some Gandharan sculptures.” The elongated earlobes of the Buddha are taken to indicate his royal descent and renunciation of his status as a prince. Tribal women also often have highly elongated earlobes from wearing large heavy earrings.

26. Ibid., p. 52, identifying this image as Śiva Maheśvara, takes the proper right face to be horrific (*aghora*) and that to the left as feminine/peaceful (*Vāmadeva/Umāvakra*) on the model of the

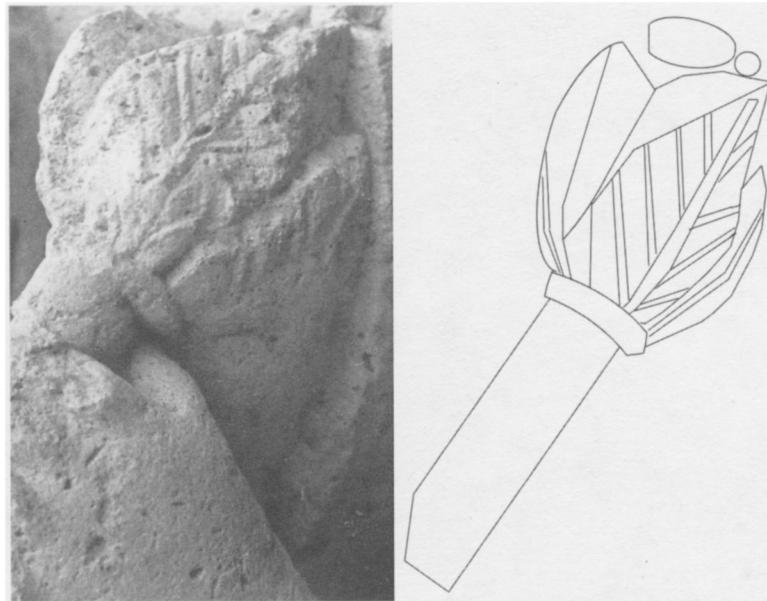


Figure 5. Kāfirkot image, scepter held in left hand. Photograph and drawing by the author.

The central figure wears two thin strands of what seem to be flattened seeds or thin stone discs across his chest.<sup>27</sup> (These fade over his shoulders and into the necks of the side heads, as if these were only shadow illusions.) Ornamenting the tied-up hair are long strands of rough-textured *rudrākṣa* beads, the large sacred seeds favored by *sādhus* to this day.<sup>28</sup> The lappet over the figure's left shoulder suggests that he is an ascetic, but it

Maheśvara/Mahādeva image at Elephanta (Stella Kramrisch, "The Great Cave Temple of Śiva at Elephanta: Levels of Meaning and Their Form," in *Discourses on Śiva* [see note 4], pp. 1–11). There are, however, no skulls or snakes in the hair of the left face, nor lotuses as hair ornament for the right face; the cut and expression of the eyes and mouths, so far as they remain, seem identical.

27. Rehman (see note 10), p. 51, describes these and the lappet as "a double pearl-string necklace above the chest and also the characteristic *yajñopavita* (i.e. the sacred thread)." Eliade (see note 22), p. 305, reports that many Kānpaṭa Yogīs "make pilgrimage to the Vāmacāra temple of Hinglāj, in Baluchistan, and wear a necklace of white pebbles as a souvenir."

28. See Martin Hürlimann, *Picturesque India, a Photographic Survey of the Land of Antiquity* (Berlin: Ernst Wasmuth, 1928), p. 159, for a photograph of "A Sadhu" in Benares. These seeds are said to be heavy enough to sink in water. Rehman (see note 10), p. 51, describes these chains as "pearl-strings one of which passes over the ears forming a loop above the forehead, while the other encircles the pile of hair on top of the head and then rises at the back side."

does not take the form of an antelope skin or other distinguishable marker.<sup>29</sup>

Behind the three heads was once an aureole, only a fragment of which survives above and behind the leaf scepter the figure holds in his proper left hand (fig. 5). Plain, its border etched with a bold band of flat circles, this aureole had bud-shaped extrusions framed by pearl-like beads. Behind the main head, visible only from the side and above, is a rounded dome-like form that unites the three heads to the aureole (figs. 6, 7). This my colleague Abdur Rehman, in his preliminary publication of this sculpture, described as the "rounded tip of a *linga*," concluding that this figure's "identification as Maheśvara is absolutely certain because of the presence of Linga which, according to the Agamic philosophy, represents the first stage in the three-fold sequential

29. The well-known image on the west wall of the sixth-century C.E. temple at Deogarh, Madhya Pradesh, shows Nara, a two-armed human ascetic wearing an antelope skin, discoursing with the four-armed deity Nārāyaṇa. Simple cloth scarves, however, are seen in sculptures of sages and deities who wear the ascetic's loincloth in the Queen's step well at Patan, Gujarat, ca. 1063 C.E., Kirit Mankodi, *The Queen's Stepwell at Patan* (Bombay: Project for Indian Cultural Studies, 1991): fig. 60, Buddha shown as an ascetic; fig. 73, Vāmana (dwarf) incarnation of Viṣṇu; fig. 88, the goddess Pārvatī performing penances; fig. 138, a bearded ascetic. Lakulīśa is also sometimes shown with a lappet rather than sacred thread.



Figure 6. The Kāfirkoṭ image has three heads, with the cap of a *skambha* column behind. The scepter in fig. 5 is to the right. Photograph by the author.

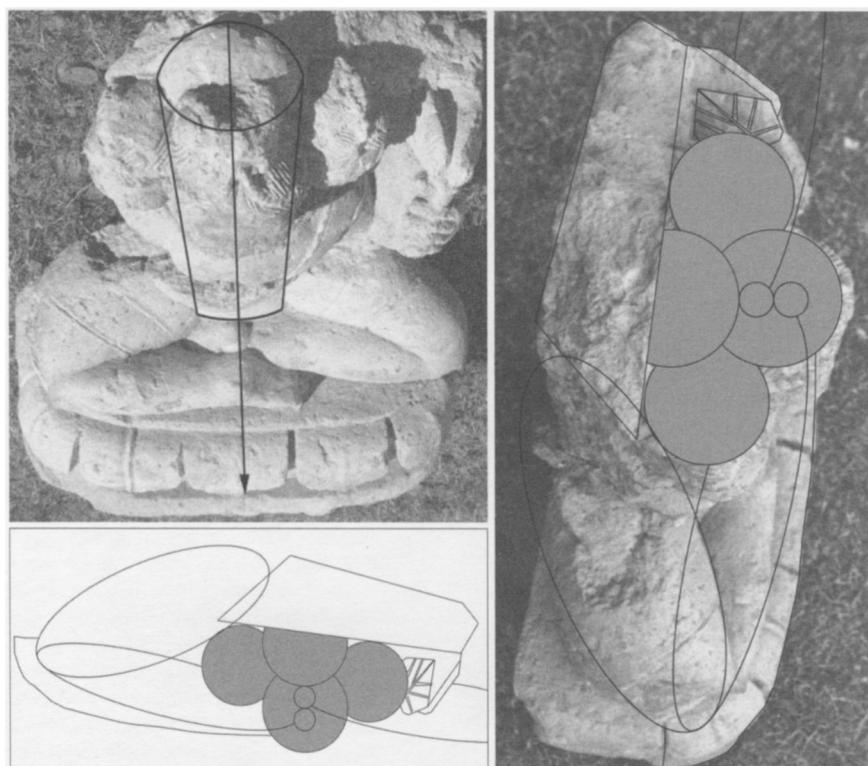


Figure 7. Kāfirkoṭ image, diagrams of the column passing through the figure in relation to his three faces. Photographs and drawings by the author.

unfolding of the all-pervasive and transcendental Supreme into material forms.”<sup>30</sup>

### Signs and variation

We must first, however, say what this image is not. There are no clear signs of the deity we know from Āgamic sources as Śiva (such as the trident, bull, or an erect phallus). There are no skulls or snakes, no differentiation of faces. Unlike Lakuliśa, the historic charismatic teacher and founder of the Pāśupata sect in the second century C.E., whose sculptures often depict him as an incarnation of Śiva with an erect phallus—and at times with four arms as if he were a deity<sup>31</sup>—this ascetic’s genitalia are withdrawn within the flattened pouch of the *puṭa*, as texts sometimes describe those of the Buddha.<sup>32</sup>

The *linīga* (lit. “sign”) behind this figure’s head is not in phallic form, as in god Śiva’s *linīgas*,<sup>33</sup> but extends as a part of a vertical shaft beginning at the base of the spine of this ascetic’s body and passing through it (fig. 7).<sup>34</sup> This axis seems measured by the ascetic’s rooted, down-turned toes, the flattened *puṭa*-pouch, his central face, and the *linīga* crown.<sup>35</sup> As a “sign,” it may better be

30. Rehman (see note 10), pp. 51–52, citing Srinivasan, “From Transcendency to Materiality: Para-Śiva, Sadāśiva and Maheśa in Indian Art,” *Artibus Asiae* 50 (1990):108–126.

31. D. R. Bhandarkar, “An Ekingii Stone Inscription and the Origin and History of the Lakuliśa Sect,” *Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 22 (1908):151–167; D. R. Bhandarkar, “Lakuliśa,” in *Archaeological Survey of India, Annual Report, 1906–07* (Calcutta: Govt. Of India Press, 1909), pp. 189–192; Debala Mitra, “Lakuliśa and Early Śaiva Temples in Orissa,” in *Discourses on Śiva* (see note 4), pp. 103–118; U. P. Shah, “Lakuliśa: Śaivite Saint,” in ibid., pp. 92–102.

32. Vishakha N. Desai, “Reflections on the History and Historiography of Male Sexuality in Early Indian Art,” in *Representing the Body* (see note 16), pp. 42–55, cites the fourth-century *Citralakṣana* on the *cakravartin*, who, “like an elephant-king, . . . keeps his sexual organs withdrawn as if in a cavity” as well as the *Lalitavistara*, which says of the Buddha that “[n]ature has concealed the marks of his sex.” Desai, p. 52, interprets this to mean that “the sexual organ . . . should be properly visualized but not in a state of erection” in part because Kushan-period Buddha images do have clearly limned sexual organs.

33. Gritli v. Mitterwalner, “Evolution of the Linīga,” in *Discourses on Śiva* (see note 4), pp. 12–31.

34. I am reminded of a comment by Eliade (see note 22), p. 235: “The spinal column is identified with Mount Meru—that is, with the cosmic axis. This is why, according to Buddhist symbolism, the Buddha could not turn his head but had to turn his entire body, ‘like an elephant’; his spinal column was fixed, motionless, as is the axis of the universe.”

35. Eliade makes the distinction that the “mūlādhāra (*mūla* = root) is situated at the base of the spinal column, between the anal orifice

understood as the *skambha* (cosmic pillar) described in the Atharva Veda.<sup>36</sup>

On this figure there may remain a slight suggestion of a third eye centered above the eyebrows of the central face. A deep chisel cut visible on his forehead, masked by substantial abrasion of the stone, may represent the left corner of such an eye. If so, this eye was placed horizontally, not vertically as the third eye of Śiva more commonly appears.<sup>37</sup>

What games are being played out here? By the sixth to seventh century C.E., the iconography of images for Hindu worship seems to many scholars to have been fairly well fixed. Yet this image still plays with the “cusp” of earlier thought.<sup>38</sup> As Louis Renou has described the process: “all possibilities are admitted, but none is finally confirmed. The questions of who made the world and the human body are constantly recurring . . . These speculations are assiduously pursued.”<sup>39</sup>

I do not, however, want to substitute one interpretation for another, but to suggest that interpretations coexist and overlap, multiple traditions survive and conflict,

and the genital organs” and at its center has “the svayambhū-*linīga* (the *linīga* existing by itself), its head as brilliant as a jewel,” while the separate “svādhiṣṭhāna cakra [or] meḍhrādhāra (meḍhra = penis), is situated at the base of the male genital organ (sacral plexus)” (ibid., p. 241).

36. Eliade translates AV (see note 15): 10.7.17: “He who knows the *brahman* in man knows the Supreme Being and he who knows the Supreme Being knows the *skambha*” (ibid., p. 116). Kramrisch (see note 16), p. 171, calls *linīga* the “subtle body” and “the ontological foreshadowing of the manifest world.”

37. Kramrisch (see note 16), p. 89: “The Great God was marked by the third eye on his forehead. He was the Lord by whom the Vṛātya was swayed, and whom he now saw before him as the Sole Vṛātya, his god, his reality.” Herbert Härtel, “A Śiva Relief from Gandhāra,” in *South Asian Archaeology 1985*, ed. Karen Frifelt and Per Sørenson (London: Curson Press, 1989), pp. 392–396, publishes a standing figure with a horizontal third eye. Joanna Williams, “An Ardhanārīśvara-*Linīga*,” in *Kusumāñjali: New Interpretation of Indian Art & Culture*, ed. M. S. Nagaraja Rao (Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, 1987), vol. 2, pp. 299–305, pl. 10, refers to a two-faced *linīga* from Mathurā, one face showing an ascetic with moustache, braided hair, and a horizontal third eye. Williams takes this to be Śiva and the face on the other side to be feminine, therefore Umā. Gerd Kreisel, “Caturmukha *linīga* and Maheśamūrti—the Cosmic Aspects of Śiva,” *Tribus* 36 (December 1987):105–116, identifies the two faces on this Mathurā “dvimukha-*linīga*” instead as Yogin/Mahādeva and Tatpurusa/Nandivaktra. Williams believes that the horizontal third eye “suggests a pre-Gupta date,” citing an image of Umā-Maheśvara from Kauśāmbī inscribed either 216 or 387 C.E.; see James Harle, *Gupta Sculpture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), pl. 53.

38. Jitendranath Banerjee, *The Development of Hindu Iconography*, 2nd ed., rev. and enl. (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1956); Rao (see note 12).

39. Renou (see note 3), p. 25, cites especially the Atharva Veda.

many communities of users could make their own choices through time and at the same time. This particular stone sculpture is remarkable because it seems precanonical as South Asia's icons go, yet ancient in its image-play. It is deeply embedded in a system of signs, but whose system of signs and which system? Led by the propensity of India's own traditions to universalize from every particular embodiment of an idea, scholarship has tended to read later systems back into earlier—or even parallel—forms.<sup>40</sup> Does Śiva have three, four, or five faces?<sup>41</sup> Must they be what later Śaiva cult traditions say they are? Should *liṅga* always mean "phallus"?<sup>42</sup> We should not become too quickly procrustean.

### *Skambha, vetasa, and liṅga*

Doris Srinivasan has proposed the theory that "Hindu Śiva and the icons representing him grow out of Vedic notions and experiences, especially those associated with Vedic Rudra-Śiva."<sup>43</sup> This is surely so, but in more problematic, politicized, varied, and nuanced ways than her study implies. Referring to Kushan and just pre-Kushan sculptures (ca. first century B.C.E.–second century C.E.), she framed the question as: "If a *Liṅga* is a sign

40. For an exposition of cult variability in contemporary India, see Lawrence A. Babb, *Redemptive Encounters: Three Modern Styles in the Hindu Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). Babb, p. 206, points out that it cannot be "a matter of what is sometimes called 'world-view.' These [three] traditions construct quite different visions of the way things are . . . . The common elements between them are best characterized as certain loosely floating images." Doris Meth Srinivasan, "The So-Called Proto-Śiva Seal from Mohenjodaro, an Iconological Assessment," *Archives of Asian Art* 29 (1975–1976): 47–58, attempts to destabilize what too commonly has been taken to be a "canonical" third/second-millennium B.C.E. antecedent for Śaiva iconography.

41. For a classic analysis of this Śaiva iconography see Kramrisch (note 26).

42. *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (see note 17), p. 901, defines *liṅga*: "(. . . prob. fr. / *lag* 'to adhere, stick, cling or attach oneself to'); cf. *laksha*, *lakṣaṇa*) a mark, spot, sign, token, badge, emblem [i.e. basically as a semiotic sign]; then only secondarily 'the sign of gender or sex, organ of generation.'" He goes on to give as a meaning "in logic": " = *vyāpya*, the invariable mark which proves the existence of anything in an object (as in the proposition 'there is fire because there is smoke,' smoke is the *liṅga*.)"

43. Srinivasan (see note 23), p. 47; this thesis also underlies Kramrisch (see note 16), but there it is more subtly and poetically applied. Renou (see note 3), p. 20: "Sometimes the ambivalence is an integral feature of the divinity, as in the case of Rudra, who is, in this respect only, the prefiguration of Śiva: the two figures have nothing else in common."

referring to the transcendental god, why does that form take on the shape of a large, realistic phallus?"<sup>44</sup>

Her solution depended on her reading of one phrase, *vetasa hiranyāya* (golden reed), in the *Atharva Veda*'s hymn to Skambha (10.7.41), of which she writes "An instructive Vedic passage indicates that in the *Samhitās*, the phallus is the sign symbolizing the Creator's capacity for unlimited production. The passage occurs in the *Atharva Veda*, in Hymn X.7 to Skambha (lit. 'prop, support, pillar') . . . a *vetasa hiranyāya* ('a golden phallus') standing in the water represents the hidden (*guhya*) Prajāpati (v. 41). What is being said is that the first evolute of cosmic creative energy is a hidden, or unperceivable progenitor symbolized by a golden phallus in the water."<sup>45</sup>

She defends her translation of *vetasa* as phallus by professing that "[*v*]etasa- may mean both 'stick, reed' and 'phallus' and therefore has lent itself to punning such as in RV [Rig Veda, hereafter abbreviated as RV] 4.58.5." She compares this passage to *Mahābhārata* 10.17, a creation tale much later than that in the *Atharva Veda* in which Śiva tears off his phallus and catapults it to earth, a passage that she says "associates unambiguously the meaning of 'phallus' with the term *liṅga*, an association not readily discernible in the Vedic texts."<sup>46</sup>

The *Atharva-Veda*'s hymn to Skambha, however, repeats over and over again images of the *skambha*-column as the frame for creation, here taken from William Dwight Whitney's translation (see note 15):

AV 10.7.8–9: "What that was highest, lowest, and what that was midmost Prajāpati created, of all forms—by how much did Skambha enter there? what did not enter, how much

44. Srinivasan (see note 23), p. 232; for an earlier statement of this question, see Srinivasan, "Significance and Scope of Pre-Kuṣāṇa Śaiva Iconography," in *Discourses on Śiva* (see note 4), pp. 32–46.

45. Srinivasan (see note 23), p. 232: "The image presages *liṅga* symbolism."

46. Ibid., p. 232, n. 56. The *Mahābhārata* passage "Sauptika Parvan" neither uses *vetasa* nor associates it with *liṅga*; Srinivasan (ibid., p. 232), asserts that "the golden phallus (*vetasa*) in the water as sign of the unseen creator has become the golden phallus (*liṅga*)."  
Her general point, that "the [*Mahābhārata*]'s myth in its specific details contains mythopoetic imagery overlapping with the *Atharva Veda* account," is valid for the *Mahābhārata*, but anachronistic for the *Atharva Veda*. A Pāśupata version of this tale was added to the *Kūrmapurāṇa* in the eighth century C.E.; see Richard H. Davis, "The Origin of Liṅga Worship," in *Religions of India in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 637–648. For a comparative evaluation of this "castration" myth, see Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Śiva* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 130–136.

was that? By how much did Skambha enter the existent? how much of him lies along that which will exist? what one member he made thousand-fold, by how much did Skambha enter there?"

AV 10.7.28: "People know the golden-embryo [as] highest, not to be overcrowded (*anatyudyâ*); the *skambhâ* in the beginning poured forth that gold within the world."

AV 10.7.35: "The *skambhâ* sustains both heaven-and-earth here; the *skambhâ* sustains the wide atmosphere; the *skambhâ* sustains the six wide directions; into the *skambhâ* hath entered this whole existence."

AV 10.7.39: "Unto which with the two hands, with the two feet, with speech, with hearing, with sight; unto which the gods continually render tribute, unmeasured in the measured out—that *skambhâ* tell [me]: which forsooth is he?"

Only then do we have

AV 10.7.41: "He who knows the golden reed (*vetasâ*) standing in the sea—he verily is in secret Prajâpati."

"*Vetasâ hiranyâya*" in AV 10.7.41 uses the likeness of a "golden reed" as a simile for the flaming pillar—not, it seems to me, as a sign of later "*linga* symbolism" as Srinivasan avers, but well within the image and language fields of the Vedas.<sup>47</sup> Griffith, an earlier translator of *The Hymns of the Atharva-Veda*—imaginatively, and appropriately in my view—took the "golden reed" in this passage to be fire (*agni*), comparing it to *Rg Veda* 4.58.5: "I look upon the streams of oil descending, and lo! the golden reed is there among them."<sup>48</sup> What nascent Śaivism made of Vedic cosmic mysticism in the early centuries C.E. as recorded in the Epics and Purânas should not be imposed back onto the early first millennium B.C.E.<sup>49</sup>

47. *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (see note 17), p. 1014, defines *vetasâ*: "the ratan (Calamus Rotang) or a similar kind of cane, a reed, rod, stick, RV. &c. &c.; the citron . . . ; N. of Agni" and gives compounds such as "—*grîha*, n. an arbour formed of reeds." AV (see note 15): 1.1.2 lists different types of reeds used for medicinal purposes "[a]gainst injury and disease" and AV 1.1.3 "[a]gainst obstruction of urine: with a reed."

48. *The Hymns of the Atharva-Veda*, trans. Ralph T. H. Griffith, 2 vols. (Benares: E. J. Lazarus and Co., 1896), vol. 2, p. 33, n. 41. Griffith is of course alluding to the poetic image of the glittering strand of oil poured by priests into the sacrificial fire. Srinivasan (see note 23), p. 232, n. 56, also cites *Rg Veda* 4.58.5, but with a different agenda. The *Atharva Veda* documents many uses for reeds, beginning with AV (see note 15): 1.2.1: "We know the reed's father, Parjanya the much nourishing; and we know well its mother, the earth of many aspects."

49. Bakker, *The Vâkâṭakas* (see note 4), p. 75, argues that "the earliest textual reference to *lîṅga* worship is found in the

### What the image is or is not

As an exercise in analysis, I have taken the sculpture from Kâfirkot and subjected it to certain compositional possibilities. First, I note that the carver has scratched a vertical mark at the center of the stone base that documents his use of a centered vertical line drawn on the limestone block to aid his composition (fig. 1).<sup>50</sup> This line (or, more properly, its plane in depth) passes through the pulled-in heels of the feet, genitals, navel, heart, neck, forehead, and headdress, points that form part of a well-documented compositional system for Indian sculptors as well as for the systems of meaning applied to yogic figures (fig. 8).<sup>51</sup>

If one uses the central face of the figure as unit of measure (not the head, as in many non-Indian compositional systems), as John Mosteller's study of India's proportioning systems demonstrates was a common practice, it is possible to inscribe a series of circles along this vertical axis. These divide the body at seven points that fit the *maṇḍala* (diagram) of yogic transcendence described by Mircea Eliade—the *cakras* (meditational circles) of root, sex, navel, heart, throat, brow, and crown—reinforcing the ascetic's identity.<sup>52</sup>

Suppose we see the figure primarily as that of an ascetic or ascetic teacher, a "*mahâyogin*." Such teachers still lead many individual sects. The figure is also "*yogîśvara*," a master of Yoga—as the deities Rudra, Viṣṇu, Śiva, and others in later Hinduism are often portrayed—but this is a state of being, not an identification.<sup>53</sup> In his

*Ghyapariśiṣṭasûtras* of Baudhâyanâ (3rd–4th centuries AD?) but points out the *Rg Veda*'s well-known warning (7.21.5; 10.99.3) "against the worshippers of the penis (*sîśnadeva*)."  
Srinivasan (see note 44) gives a review of Kushan and pre-Kushan scholarship.

50. For a discussion of constructional devices and proportioning systems used in India, see John F. Mosteller, "Texts and Craftsmen at Work," in *Making Things in South Asia: The Role of Artist and Craftsman*, ed. Michael W. Meister (Philadelphia: Department of South Asia Regional Studies, 1988), pp. 24–33; John F. Mosteller, *The Measure of Form: A New Approach for the Study of Indian Sculpture* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1991).

51. Heinrich Zimmer, *Artistic Form and Yoga in the Sacred Images of India*, trans. Gerald Chapple and James B. Lawson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Maxwell (see note 24), fig. 60, citing P. H. Pott, *Yoga and Yantra* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1966).

52. Mosteller (see note 50) finds the distance from throat to navel more accurate to measure; he then divides this in half to confirm the face unit. Eliade (see note 22), pp. 241–243, citing the *Ṣaṭacakraṇirūpâ* (trans. Sir John Woodroffe [pseud. Arthur Avalon], *The Serpent Power* [London: Luzac, 1919]), makes clear that the "root" *cakra* and that of the sexual organs (*medhra*) are separate.

53. Meister (see note 20).

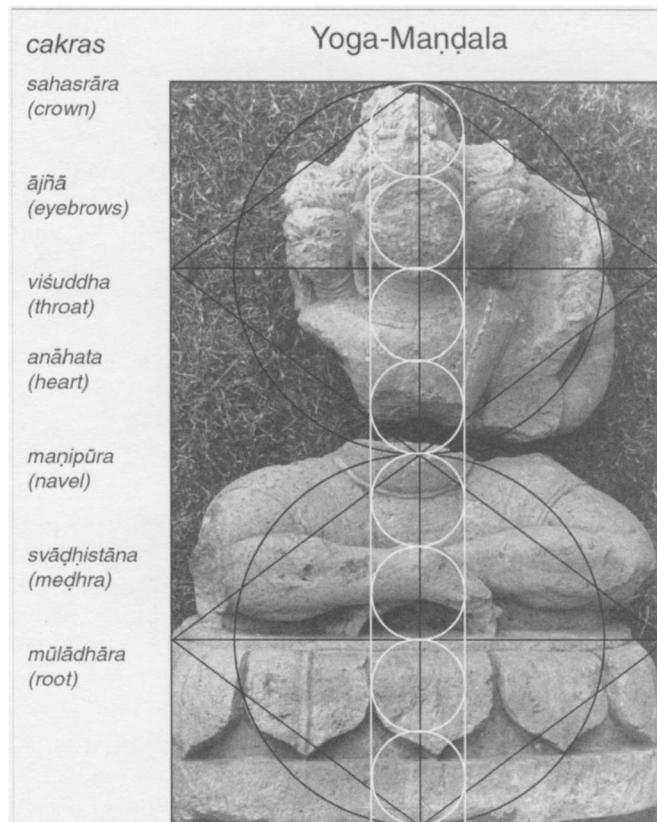


Figure 8. Kāfirkot image, *cakra* points used for both composition and meditation; list after Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 242–245. Photograph and diagram by the author.

multiple heads and arms, he participates in the proliferation from zero to infinity implicit in India's ancient cosmogony,<sup>54</sup> but this need not make him a deity. As Eliade phrased it: "The divinization of man, the 'man-god,' remains a predominant motif of Indian spirituality."<sup>55</sup>

### Vrātyas

Perhaps the most startling parallel for the image projected by this sculpture comes from a set of sacred hymns orally transmitted from more than a millennium before this object's making. Chapter 15 of the *Atharva Veda*—otherwise largely a set of magical cures<sup>56</sup>—

contains a paradigmatic discussion of the "cosmic structure of the vrātyas' 'mystical' experiences."<sup>57</sup>

The specific ascetic wanderers mentioned, called Vrātyas, were a mysterious people in the second millennium B.C.E. characterized by Basham as "bands of nomadic renegade Āryans . . . who did not follow the Vedic rites, roamed the land with their flocks and herds."<sup>58</sup> Griffith, an early translator of the *Atharva Veda*,

54. Srinivasan (see note 23), *passim*.

55. Eliade (see note 22), p. 103.

56. V. W. Karambelkar, *The Atharva-Veda and the Āyur-Veda* (Nagpur: Usha Karambelkar, 1961), p. 116: "The Atharvan system is primarily a charm system in which the charm was systematically accompanied by an amulet."

57. Eliade (see note 22), p. 105.

58. A. L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India* (Bombay: Orient Longmans, 1963), p. 40. In his index, p. 567, he calls the Vrātyas "in the Veda, a type of unorthodox ascetic"; pp. 243–244: "This term, in its later broad meaning, implied an Āryan who had fallen from the

tartly wrote that "I have followed von Roth, in taking the Vrātya to be the religious wandering mendicant, regarded as a being of peculiar sanctity. But this explanation of the word is of later origin than the compilation of the Songs of the Atharvans, and, as far as regards this Book, must be abandoned."<sup>59</sup> Renou wrote pertinently of this period that the "Vedic clans . . . were surrounded by the hostile mass. . . . The clans themselves were divided: there were the *aris* or 'strangers' . . . . There were the *vrātyas*, whose religion Vedism tried to absorb into itself, and whose texts may have been incorporated into the *Atharvaveda*."<sup>60</sup>

Heesterman, in his study of Vrātya rituals, concluded that "vrātyas are still unspecialized, at the same time sacrificer and priest" but that they "are authentic Vedic Aryans. Their rituals . . . are the crude predecessors of the śrauta [sacrificial] ritual. The vrātya is the predecessor of the dīkṣita [the initiated]."<sup>61</sup> By the time of the *Mahābhārata*, however, many centuries later, Vrātyas were classed "with those low on the social scale, such as Soma vendors, arrow makers, astrologers, poisoners and the like,"<sup>62</sup> leading Griffith to comment of the *Atharva-Veda*'s description that it "is hard to understand, and I do not attempt to explain, the idealization and grotesquely extravagant glorification of the Vrātya or heretical nomad who appears at one time to be a supernatural Being endowed with the attributes of all-pervading Deity, and at another as a human wanderer in need of food and lodging."<sup>63</sup>

faith and no longer respected the Vedas; but the vrātya of the *Atharva-Veda* was a priest of a non-Vedic fertility cult."

59. *Hymns* (see note 48), vol. 2, p. 199, note, referring to AV (see note 15): 15.

60. Renou (see note 3), pp. 5–6.

61. J. C. Heestermann, "Vrātya and Sacrifice," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 6 (1962):34–36, characterizes Vrātyas as "warrior brahmans resacralized through rituals." Of one of these rituals he wrote, p. 26: "The sacrifice reenacting Prajāpati's role, integrates, disintegrates and reintegrates the universe." See also Michael Witzel, "R̄gvedic History: Poets, Chieftains, and Polities," in *Dialectes dans les littératures Indo-Aryennes*, ed. Collette Caillat (Paris: Edition-diffusion de Boccard, 1989), pp. 307–352.

62. Kramrisch (see note 16), p. 97, citing *Mahābhārata* 5.35.39–41, trans. J. A. B. van Buitenen, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1973–on going).

63. *Hymns* (see note 48), vol. 2, p. 199, note. Alf Hilttebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata, a Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001), pp. 134–135: "secret Vrātya sattras in the forest seem to have emphasized cow sacrifice with overtones of human sacrifice, identification with dogs, and the self-sacrifice and rebirth of the gr̄hapati-sthapati himself"; in *ibid.*, pp. 129–176, he gives a summary of scholarship on references to Vrātya in the Epics.

### *Ekavrātya/Mahādeva*

I do not, of course, argue that an Atharvan Vrātya had wandered into the sixth century C.E., but only that the description of his experience may set a model for what this image once represented.<sup>64</sup> The figure's body focuses on a column—the *sthānu* or *skambha* of the *Atharva-Veda*'s influential cosmology<sup>65</sup>—that begins at the root of his spine, ascends through his genital region and torso, and emerges behind his three heads (figs. 6–8). Its symbolism can be entwined with that of the "heretic hermits" of the *Atharva Veda*—the Vrātyas who wandered the wilderness and saw a vision of themselves as the "Sole Vrātya," becoming "Mahādeva" in Kramrisch's retelling.<sup>66</sup> This Ekavrātya was a great cosmic creative Lord. He was not, however, the phallic lord that Śaiva cults coopted at a later point, dropping his phallus on the earth as his marker, as recounted in the *Mahābhārata* and *Purāṇas*.<sup>67</sup>

A compositional parallel can perhaps be made between the construction of the Kāfirkot̄ image and a small *liṅga* column in the Peshawar museum, which represents a northwestern regional convention.<sup>68</sup> The column grows up from a bust that has three heads, not four; the two side faces are smaller; and they are not cardinally oriented (fig. 9).

Rather than a cosmic "Mahādeva" alone, the Kāfirkot̄ image seems to me to reflect a cult of living *yogins*, a Mahāyogin who, like the wandering Vrātya, "saw as one the great God and his own true Vrātya being."<sup>69</sup> As Kramrisch paraphrased the consequences of the Atharva-vedic story: "[A] roving ascetic, a vrātya, realized the birth of his god and his own rebirth in that god." It may be such a transcendent yogic moment that this image

64. A preliminary version of this analysis was presented at the Sixteenth International Conference of the European Association of South Asian Archaeologists, Paris, 2001; see Meister and Rehman (note 9).

65. AV (see note 15): 10.7.17.

66. Kramrisch (see note 26), pp. 88–97; p. 89: "The book of the Vrātya begins by telling of a roaming Vrātya: 'he stirred up Prajāpati [the Creator]'; 'The myth of the Vrātya conveys the ecstasy of an ascetic . . . . The Vrātya had been the instrument and witness of the taking shape of his god.' Eliade (see note 22), p. 105, remarks on 'the cosmic structure of the vrātyas' 'mystical' experiences."

67. Davis (see note 46).

68. See Maurizio Taddai, "Non-Buddhist Deities in Gandharan Art—Some New Evidence," in *Investigating Indian Art*, ed. Marianne Yaldiz and Wibke Lobo (Berlin: Museum für Indische Kunst: Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, 1987), pp. 349–362.

69. Kramrisch (see note 16), p. 97.

records. As Eliade wrote, "as a result of yogic experience, the physical body becomes 'dilated,' 'cosmized,' transubstantiated."<sup>70</sup>

### Periods of cultic transition

Renou perhaps most carefully among scholars has been cautious about claiming continuities—as opposed to connections—among India's religions. He has characterized Hinduism as a "mosaic of sects and independent groups that are sometimes in rivalry."<sup>71</sup> Of Tantrism he wrote: "The germ of the movement has been sought, and consequently found, in the Veda, as is so often the case with Indian problems which really have no beginning. Tantric correlations are, in fact, clearly connected with the old equivalences of the Vedic world."<sup>72</sup> Yet he was quick to emphasize: "Its system is new." His judgment was that "Vedic contribution to Hinduism, especially to Hindu cult-practice and speculation, is not a large one,"<sup>73</sup> yet he could also write: "The importance of the Veda to India is well known. Its imprint on Hinduism is permanent and unmistakable."<sup>74</sup> (The distinction he makes between "imprint" and influence is worth attention.)

Recent scholarship has begun to put a face on periods of cultic transformation and on the agglomeration of India's religious past in ways that demand both precision and caution. Each moment of change can be multiply mapped. Each locality may have multiple realities present.<sup>75</sup> A broad outline of transformation—from the liturgy and sacrifice of the Vedas, to image worship, to temple rituals—has been well established, with something of a chronology, yet it is in the interstices that new scholarship can find something of the "social system" Renou was wise to

70. Eliade (see note 22), p. 236. Sculptures have come on the market in recent years that have been given a Hindu Śāhi attribution. These, however, extend Turk Śāhi appearances (see note 5) much more than they represent sculpture of Hindu Śāhi territories or period. See Donald M. Stadtner, "Shahi Sculpture Revisited," *Orientations* 30.8 (1999): 68–73; Michael W. Meister, "Fig Gardens of Amb-Sharif, Folklore and Archaeology," *East and West* 55 (2005): 201–216.

71. Renou (see note 3), p. 89: "the most active sects were themselves only isolated groups within the great body of believers."

72. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

73. *Ibid.*, p. 47: "Vedic influence on mythology is rather stronger, though here also there has been a profound regeneration."

74. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

75. For the complexities of mapping sacred landscapes in India, see Chandreyi Basu, "Redefining the Nature of Cultural Regions in Early India: Mathurā and the Meaning of 'Kuṣāṇa' Art (1st–3rd centuries AD)," Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2001.



Figure 9. Small *linga* column with three-headed bust in the Peshawar Museum. Photograph by the author.

wish could be determined: "We tend to regard the various *mārgas*, *yogas* and *darśanas* [paths, practices, and rituals] as absolute truths in themselves whereas they are really aspects of the truth which exist side by side."<sup>76</sup>

We must pay more attention to Renou's "mosaic of cults" and moments of "profound regeneration." The first millennium C.E. too often is treated as a single period, when images began to be worshiped and temples built. There are many more subtle modulations than this, from private cults to public worship, that scholarship has only begun to parse.<sup>77</sup>

76. Renou (see note 3), p. 56: "If we had a better knowledge of the social system in which this religion arose, we could more easily decide which features of it were public, and which were secret or even esoteric."

77. Richard H. Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 26–27: "The earliest texts setting forth practical instructions for the fabrication, consecration, and worship of Hindu imagery only appear around the fifth century C.E., often as

Useful to my project at Kāfirkot have been Ronald Inden's explorations of the shift from "Vedist" to "Deist" liturgies in Kashmir in the seventh and eighth centuries C.E., a transformation he characterizes as a discursive process of "augmentation"—utilized by both Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava sects—that led to the substitution of temple rituals for those of sacrifice.<sup>78</sup> This can cautiously be supplemented by Max Müller's category of "henotheism," which Renou defined as "the tendency of the worshipper to ascribe the attributes of other gods to the particular deity whom he is honouring."<sup>79</sup> Inden, for example, can demonstrate that the Vaiṣṇava Pāñcarātrins of the *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa* "considered Śiva to be a manifestation of Viṣṇu."<sup>80</sup> Also useful have been Alexis Sanderson's recent writings on the mixtures of practices in private worship (*Atimārga*) and temple worship officiated by priests (*Mantramārga*),<sup>81</sup> "[s]ince the Pāśupatas' private worship was very different from that of the *Mantramārga* it is reasonable to conclude that wherever officiants of the *Mantramārga* took over control of a Śiva temple . . . the temple cult would sooner or later have changed radically."<sup>82</sup>

'appendices' to the Vedic corpus . . . Starting in the seventh and eighth centuries, new bodies of religious literature began to appear . . . The Vaiṣṇava sāṃhitās and Śaiva āgamas did not aspire to be parts of the Vedic corpus, but rather claimed to contain the direct revealed teachings of the gods themselves."

78. Ronald Inden, "Introduction: From Philological to Dialogical Texts" and "Imperial Purāṇas: Kashmir as Vaiṣṇava Center of the World," in Ronald Inden, Jonathan Walters, Daud Ali, *Querying the Medieval Texts and the History of Practices in South Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 1–98; p. 46: "Procedures for temple construction and image installation replace those for the performance of multifire sacrifices"; p. 53: "Pāśupata and Pāñcarātra belong together in the sense that both were sciences advocating theism." See also Michael W. Meister, "Mountain Temples and Temple-Mountains: Masrur," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 65.1 (2006):26–49.

79. Renou (see note 3), p. 12, citing Max Müller, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion, as Illustrated by the Religions of India* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1878).

80. Inden, "Imperial Purāṇas" (see note 78), p. 46.

81. Alexis Sanderson, "Śaivism and the Tantric Traditions," in *The World's Religions: The Religions of Asia*, ed. Friedhelm Hardy (London: Routledge), pp. 128–172.

82. Alexis Sanderson, "Did Post Atimārgic Śaivism Transform the Śaiva Temple Cult? Negative Evidence from 7th-Century Cambodia and the Earliest Pratiṣṭhātantras," lecture, University of Pennsylvania, 26 Feb. 2005; "Outline," p. 1. Sanderson argued that surviving literature recording ceremonies of the Śaiva temple cult "is late and South Indian"—and cannot be used to explain what happened in cultic temples in earlier centuries. For varieties of Śaiva cults, see also Vibhuti Bhushan Mishra, *Religious Beliefs and Practices of North India During the Early Mediaeval Period* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973), pp. 46–52.

Sanderson interestingly points to a "shift of emphasis from objective image to subjective concept" in Abhinavagupta's tenth-century account of "the summoning and visualization of the deities in the daily cult," quoting from Abhinavagupta's *Tantrāloka*. "He should meditate on the cult-platform, imagining that it is transparent, like a crystal or a clear radiant sky . . . In this [mirror like] consciousness he should contemplate the images of the deities as reflections and himself as the reflected." Sanderson surmises that "if the initiate realizes that the deities are nothing less than his own liberated identity, then ritual . . . will be superfluous. Nor can his identity be circumscribed by devotion to one deity rather than another, for all will be recognized . . . as so many projections of the one autonomous, self-articulating consciousness."<sup>83</sup>

Could this process reflect, or be foreshadowed by, that of the wandering Vrātya in the *Atharva Veda*—or be the kind of vision made material by the sculpture found at Kāfirkot?

### Kāfirkot's temples and this image

Temple B, the smallest and simplest of Kāfirkot's temples, may have functioned as a shrine to a cult founder, complementing temples E, A, and C (fig. 2). For what images were placed in those shrines we have little evidence. This region, however, was located between the evolving plural cultic norms of northern India and cults that were non-Indian. The configuration of first-phase temples, with a central shrine and two flanking sub-sanctuaries in the platform, cannot yet fully be explained. It is, however, through this region that Maga (sun-worshiping) priests from Iran, for example, are said to have brought their personified solar cult into India,<sup>84</sup> and two powerful pilgrimage temples to the sun god existed at Multan in the Indus Valley and Martand in Kashmir in this period. We know that the now destroyed pre-seventh-century temple of the sun at Multan remained of very great significance in the pre-Islamic life of this region. Perhaps these excavations at Kāfirkot bring us back in contact with that world?<sup>85</sup>

83. *Tantrāloka* 26.41–42b cited in Alexis Sanderson, "The Visualization of the Deities of the Trika," in *L'image divine, culte et méditation dans l'Hindouisme*, ed. André Padoux (Paris: Éditions du centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1990), pp. 73–74.

84. Lalita Prasad Pandey, *Sun Worship in Ancient India* (Delhi, Patna, Varanasi: Motilal Banarsi Dass, 1971), pp. 177–180.

85. Meister, Rehman, Khan (see note 8), p. 45, fig. 11, illustrates one other fragment of an image recovered, a furled ribbon in part suggestive of sun images from the northwest.

### Jackfruit, *jambu*, and the cosmic world

I have one last speculation and observation about the iconography of this figure, focusing on what he holds in his upper left hand and on the remnant of an aureole behind (fig. 5). This is not a trivial issue. This scepter is an essential sign of the sculpture's meanings. The *dhvaja*-standard in his upper left hand has a peculiar cluster of leaves—neither *pīpal* nor lotus—with what seems like a series of seeds emerging from it. The best comparison for this leaf cluster can be found on reliefs of the first centuries C.E. at Mathurā and elsewhere that show early sets of eight auspicious symbols (*aṣṭamarigalas*) (fig. 10). These are placed on Jain platforms (*āyāgapāṭas*), ceiling slabs, and even on the great umbrella once over the head of Friar Bala's inscribed image of a Bodhisattva at Sarnath.<sup>86</sup> Among these, one motif that Coomaraswamy had called a *pañña-pacchi* or full pouch (*pacchi* can also mean the pouch that contains the genitals),<sup>87</sup> shows a basket of such leaves supporting a strangely marked fruit (some have called it a garland) (figs. 10, 11).

The best explanation for what this ancient symbol was comes first from looking at reliefs from Bhārhut and Amarāvatī where the jack has clearly been differentiated from the lotus and other plants (fig. 11).<sup>88</sup> Pliny described the jackfruit as the fruit "whereof the Indian Sages and Philosophers do ordinarily live"; a single jack, up to three feet long and weighing seventy-five pounds, was able to feed four ascetics at a time.<sup>89</sup>

The jack tree also has one remarkable and significant feature: Some of its fruits grow upward from its exposed roots rather than downward from its trunk and branches. These special upward-growing fruits are repeatedly recorded as having great sweetness and prestige.<sup>90</sup> The

86. Vasudeva S. Agrawala, "Mathura Āyagapattas," *Studies in Indian Art* (Varanasi: Vishwavidyalaya Prakashan, 1965), pp. 178–180; the Friar Bala image is dated to year 3 of Kaniśka's rule (ca. late first century C.E.).

87. Coomaraswamy (see note 17), p. 79.

88. Henry Yule and A. C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson*, ed. William Crooke, new ed. (London: J. Murray, 1903), pp. 284–285: "among the Bharhut sculptures . . . there is a fruit represented which is certainly very like the custard-apple." To this discussion the editor, William Crooke, added his comment, pp. 285–286: "Dr. Watt says: They may prove to be conventional representations of the jack-fruit tree or some other allied plant."

89. Yule and Burnell (ibid., pp. 440–443) write of the jackfruit tree: "The tree called by botanists *Artocarpus integrifolia* . . . and its fruit" and cite Pliny, *The Historie of the World, Commonly Called the Naturall Historie of C. Plinius Secundus*, trans. Philemon Holland (London: A. Islip, 1601).

90. Yule and Burnell (ibid., p. 442) cite the Chinese pilgrim Hwen T'sang, ca. 650 C.E.: "Sometimes the fruit hangs on the branches, as

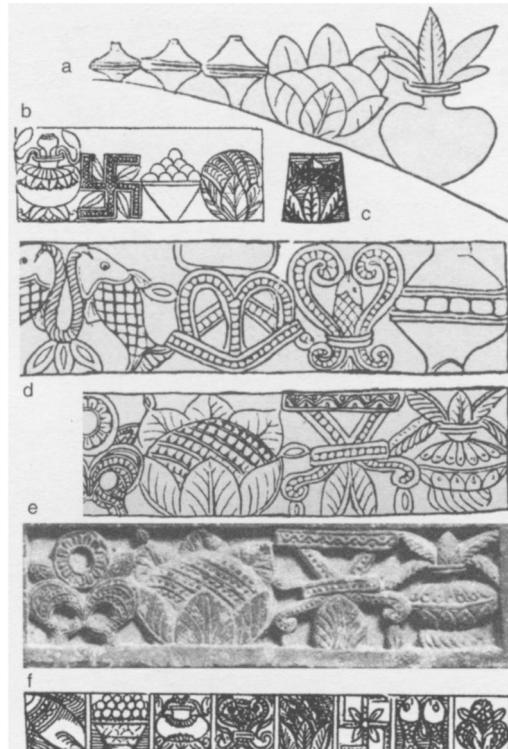


Figure 10. Mathurā, Uttar Pradesh, sets of auspicious symbols (*aṣṭamarigala*), ca. first centuries B.C.E. and C.E. Drawings edited and compiled from Vasudeva S. Agrawala, *Studies in Indian Art* (Varanasi: Vishwavidyalaya Prakashan, 1965), figs. 3, 9, 80; Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Yakṣas* (Washington, D.C.: Freer Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 1931), pt. 2, pl. 31; Alex Wayman, "The Mathurā Set of Aṣṭamarigala (Eight Auspicious Symbols) in Early and Later Times," in *Mathurā the Cultural Heritage*, ed. Doris Meth Srinivasan (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1989), pl. 26.I (photograph by John C. Huntington).

*pañña-pacchi* of early Mathurā sets of auspicious symbols (replaced in later sets by the ubiquitous lotus) are, in my view, precisely those auspicious jackfruits that rise up from the ground (figs. 10, 11).<sup>91</sup>

with other trees; but sometimes it grows from the roots"; Ibn Batuta, ca. 1335: "fruits borne nearest to the ground are the *barkī* they are sweeter and better flavoured"; and Nicolo de' Conte, ca. 1440: "the fruit is also found growing from the roots of the tree underground, and these fruits excel the others in flavour, wherefore they are sent as presents to kings and petty princes. These (moreover) have no kernels inside them."

91. Agrawala (see note 86), p. 179, does not consider this among the symbols "that may be readily identified"; U. P. Shah, *Studies in Jaina Art* (Banaras: Jaina Cultural Research Society, 1955), pp.

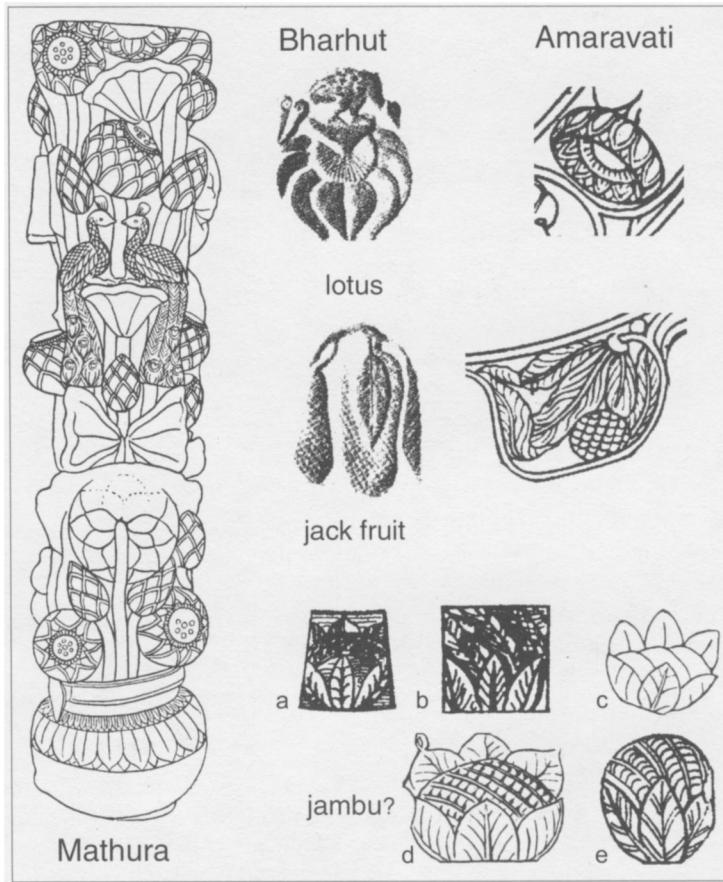


Figure 11. Mathurā, image showing an auspicious pot with growing lotuses; lotuses and jackfruits represented in reliefs from Bhārhut, Madhya Pradesh, and Amārāvatī, Andhra Pradesh; auspicious *jambu* symbols from *aṣṭamarigala* sets from Mathurā, ca. first centuries B.C.E.–C.E. Drawings from Agrawala (ibid., see fig. 10); Coomaraswamy (ibid., see fig. 10), pls. 11, 31, 37, 49.

Why the jackfruit? Perhaps in the world of cults near the turn of the first millennium C.E. the jack was taken—first by the Buddhists—to be the vast tree at the center of Jambudvīpa (the cosmic continent that humans occupy), a river of sweetness flowing from its roots.<sup>92</sup> Aśoka's

edicts in the third century B.C.E.<sup>93</sup> are the first sources to speak of the “continent of the rose apple” as many translate it (although the rose apple of Bengal, which the British took to be *jambu*, is only a medium-sized shrub or tree imported fairly recently from Southeast Asia).<sup>94</sup>

110–112, labels it a “full-grown flower” or “full-grown lotus” from Jaina sources, but concedes that these “Mathurā finds represent a stage anterior to the tradition recorded in the Jaina canons”; N. P. Joshi, *Mathura Sculptures* (Mathura: Archaeological Museum, 1966), p. 77, calls it “basket with garland.”

92. Renou (see note 3), p. 73: “The early Buddhist conception is very similar. From the *Purāṇas* onwards it is replaced by a portrayal of concentric islands and seas, surrounding the principal continent, *Jambudvīpa*. This is a tangible representation of the world.”

93. Romila Thapar, *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, 2nd ed. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 68, refers to “his claim that Jambudvīpa was fit for the gods after the propagation of his policy of Dhamma”; p. 199: “the Minor Rock Edict at Brahmagiri, referring to the gods in Jambudvīpa.”

94. [www.tradewindsfruit.com/rose\\_apple.htm](http://www.tradewindsfruit.com/rose_apple.htm) and [www.crfg.org/pubs/ff/roseapple/html](http://www.crfg.org/pubs/ff/roseapple/html), accessed 9/7/2004. Monier-Williams (*Sanskrit-English Dictionary* [see note 17], p. 412), is cautious, listing *jambu* as “the rose apple tree (*Eugenia Jambolana* or



Figure 12. Home ritual, Bengal, pot filled with jack leaves. Photograph by Pika Ghosh. Compare this to the pots with leaves in Figure 10.

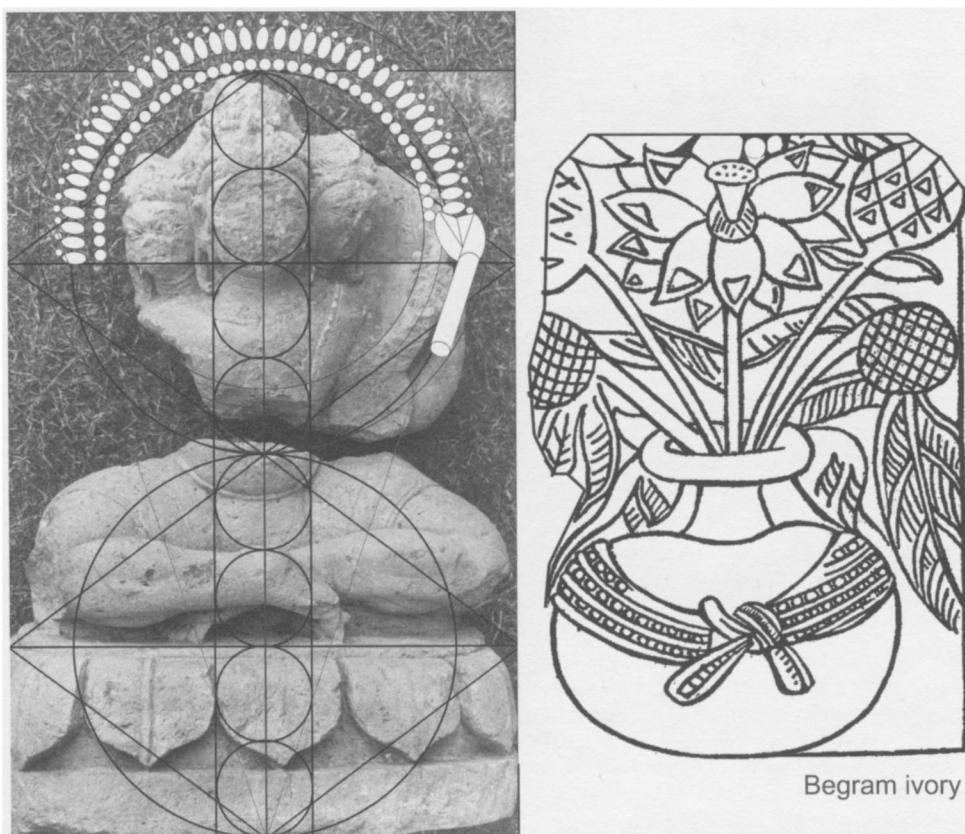


Figure 13. Kāfirkot image, *jambu-dhvaja* (jack-tree standard) and aureole (left). Photograph and reconstruction by the author. Begram, Afghanistan, ivory with composite vase-and-foliage motif (right). After Agrawala (*ibid.*, see fig. 10), fig. 26.

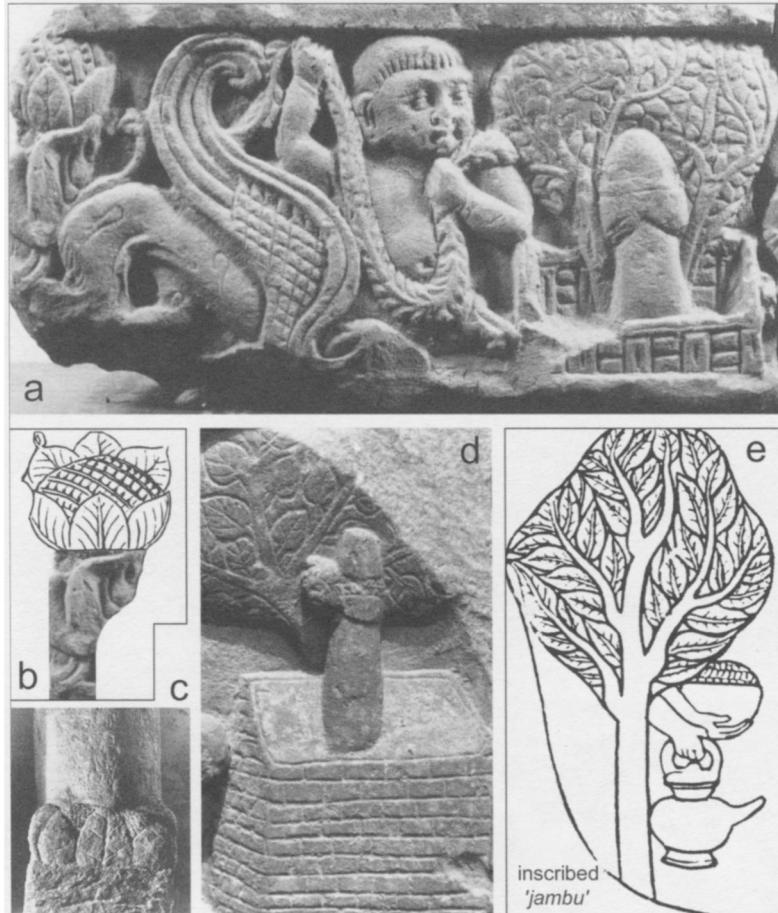


Figure 14. (a) Mathurā, detail of lintel, ca. first century B.C.E., centered on a fenced *liṅga*-pillar (right), with a *jambu* plant growing to the left; (b) this can be overlaid with the auspicious symbol found in figures 10, 11; (c) both can be compared with the basket-base of a sandstone *liṅga*-pillar from Mathurā, ca. first century C.E.; (d) Mathurā, relief showing *liṅga* altar, second century C.E., State Museum, Lucknow; (e) Bhārhut, *jambu* tree giving food and water from inscribed relief, first century B.C.E. Photographs after *Discourses on Śiva: Proceedings of a Symposium on the Nature of Religious Imagery*, ed. Michael W. Meister (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), pls. 3, 20 (Government Museum, Mathura), 26 (Doris M. Srinivasan) and drawings from Coomaraswamy (*ibid.*, see fig. 10), pls. 25, 31.

another species); . . . the rose apple fruit . . . ; N. of a fabulous river (flowing from the mountain Meru; formed by the juice of the fruits of the immense *Jambu* tree on that mountain)." Other fruit confused with *jambu* over time and in different regions include *bhel*, *jamun*, custard-apple (*sītaphal*), and guava. *Jamun*, rather than being large fruits, are compared by one source in Yule and Burnell (see note 88, p. 449) to "ripe Cordova olives"; Yule and Burnell (*ibid.*, p. 285) point out that the custard-apple was introduced from South America and was "not mentioned among Indian fruits" in the Mughal emperor Babar's survey of Indian plants, ca. 1530 C.E.

An inscription on the veranda of the Buddhist *caitya* cave at Karli records that this rock-mansion is "the most excellent in Jambudvīpa."<sup>95</sup> A label on a relief panel

95. James Burgess and Bhagwanlal Indraji, *Inscriptions from the Cave-temples of Western India* (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1881), p. 28. The inscription from Bhārhut reads "jabū [jambu] Nadode pavate," which Heinrich Lüders, *Bharhut Inscriptions*, rev. E. Wakdschmidt & M. A. Mehendale (Ootacamund: Government



Figure 15. Kāfirkot, Temple E, excavations revealing southeastern sub-shrine, narthex, and first-phase stairway previously covered by second-phase extensions. Photographs by Farid Khan and the author, courtesy Salt Range Temple Project.

from Bhārhut in the early first century B.C.E. identifies the scene showing a food-giving *jambu* tree (fig. 14e).<sup>96</sup>

Priests in Bengal still use pots of jack leaves in home rituals (fig. 12), which look very much like the *pūrṇa-*  
*ghaṭa* placed next to the *pañña-pacchi* symbol in some  
*aṣṭamarigala* sets (fig. 10a, e).<sup>97</sup> Images of fat Ganapati are described as carrying "mango, a plantain, a jackfruit, and a sugar-cane" or "the wood-apple, *jambu* fruit, the sesamum, and a bamboo-stick" in their hands in medieval iconographic texts.<sup>98</sup>

I thus identify the scepter (*dhvaja*) in the hand of the Kāfirkot sculpture as a *jambu-dhvaja* (a term in the *Mahābhārata* that refers to the cosmic tree itself)<sup>99</sup> and

Epigraphist of India, 1963), p. 170, translates as the "rose-apple tree on Mount Nādoda."

96. Lüders (ibid.), pp. 170–171 and pl. 47, fig. B74.

97. See Pika Ghosh, "Household Rituals and Women's Domains," in *Cooking for the Gods: The Art of Home Ritual in Bengal*, ed. Michael W. Meister (Newark, N.J.: Newark Museum, 1995), pp. 21–25.

98. Rao (see note 12), vol. 1, p. 52.

99. Monier-Williams (*Sanskrit-English Dictionary* [see note 17], p. 412) describes *jambudvīpa* as "the central one of the 7 continents surrounding the mountain Meru (= India, Buddh.; named so either from the Jambu trees abounding in it, or from an enormous Jambu tree

see its radiance—literally its ring of seeds—as part of the image's powerful cosmogonic symbolism (fig. 13). I am struck by the iconography of a small ivory recovered from Afghanistan decorated with a vase-of-plenty (*pūrṇa-kalaśa*) that conflates the opening lotus with jackfruits on either side with typical blade-like leaves (figs. 12, 13).<sup>100</sup> It is intriguing also that a ninth-century Tibetan list of the *aṣṭamarigalas* analyzed by Alex Wayman makes the lotus—which by then had replaced the ambiguous earlier *pañña-pacchi* in the set of eight—a symbol of light, of radiance, rather than, as more commonly, of cosmic waters (fig. 13).<sup>101</sup>

When we see reliefs from the first centuries B.C.E. and C.E. from Mathurā that represent *liṅga*-shrines, or *liṅga*-

on Mount Meru visible like a standard to the whole continent)." He lists the compound, *Jambu-dhvaja*, as "having the Jambu tree as its standard."

100. Prithvi Kumar Agrawala, *Pūrṇa Kalaśa or the Vase of Plenty* (Varanasi: Prithivi Prakashan, 1965).

101. Alex Wayman, "The Mathurā Set of Aṣṭamaṅgala (Eight Auspicious Symbols) in Early and Later Times," in *Mathurā the Cultural Heritage*, ed. Doris Meth Srinivasan (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1989), pp. 236–246, cites Buddhaguhya. See also Coomaraswamy, "The Vase of Plenty, or Full Vessel," in Coomaraswamy (see note 19), pp. 161–168.

pillars themselves, it is essential to remember that the cult of *sthānu*—the pillar—must have had more than one expression over time (fig. 14).<sup>102</sup> We are not necessarily looking at “Śaiva” *lingas*, but at signs shared and used differently by a variety of cults that eventually melded into Brahmanical Śaivism.<sup>103</sup> It intrigues me in particular that in one of the earliest reliefs from Mathurā (fig. 14a), which shows a central railing surrounding a *linga*-pillar that grows directly from the ground, what we might call a *jambu-linga* seems counterposed as a homology to the far left: a stem rooted in the ground with that distinctive *panna-pacchi* (jackfruit) top (fig. 14b).<sup>104</sup> One of the earliest free-standing *linga*-pillars from Mathurā, in fact, has the shaft of the *linga*-pillar significantly emerging from such a fruit “basket” or “leaf bowl” (fig. 14c).<sup>105</sup>

If this unique newly discovered sculpture excavated at Kāfirkot (fig. 1) can be taken as an image of a Mahāyogin, “great yogin”; Yogīśvara, “Lord of yoga”; Mahādeva, “Great Lord”—it must also be seen as representing an aspiration toward human transcendence that has great antiquity in India. That these ideas still had cultic potency at Kāfirkot in the sixth and seventh centuries seems to me likely, in ways that were stranger and less easily parsed than through the canons of later Hinduism. Perhaps that is why Hindu Śāhi kings were attracted to existing ancient holy centers in this region. Yet they felt the necessity, in repossessing these in the ninth and tenth centuries, to reorient temples built at a time of cultic fluidity to make them more conventional (fig. 15)—praxis finally catching up with the plasticity of early Indic worship.<sup>106</sup>

Seen, in the light of the glittering strand of oil poured by priests into a sacrificial fire,<sup>107</sup> as a transforming form of *yogin*, emerging god, sign of the cosmogonic moment, a column, continent, luminosity, and a focus

for devotion as a human sage, this sculpture’s semiotic multivalency—in both praxis and plastic form—is manifest. What cult he founded or represented we may never recover.

102. See Srinivasan (see note 44).

103. Kushan- and pre-Kushan-period reliefs show *yakṣas*, *gnas* (gnomes), and fantastic composite animals worshiping the *linga*-column (fig. 14); see Joshi (note 91), pls. 10, 11; Meister, “Giving Up” (see note 1).

104. Joshi (*ibid.*), p. 80: Mathura Museum 52.3265, from Bhutesvara, ca. first century B.C.E.

105. Mitterwalner (see note 33), p. 20: “The leaf bowl calls to mind similar bowls in the hands of worshipers . . . in cult reliefs from Mathurā, and of the leaf bowl that is one of the *mangala* symbols on the rims of *āyāgapatas* . . . dating from the Kuṣāṇa period.”

106. Michael W. Meister, “The Problem of Platform Extensions at Kafirkot North,” *Ancient Pakistan*, in press.

107. See note 48.