*Vāhana*s on the Bharhut *stūpa*

Remarks on animal and hybrid figures between art and texts

Chiara Policardi

Through animals, both real and imaginary, something new can be said about human cultural and historical dynamics. As is well known, an animal, be it real or imaginary (hybrid), is associated with most of the Hindu deities as their *vāhana.* Such a distinctive feature of Hindu divine representations is a phenomenon whose genesis or matrix remains a yet unsolved Indological knot. To shed some light on the issue, a valid research direction seems to be the investigation of attestations relating to the formative phase of the divine 'vehicles.'

This paper analyses a series of life-size sculptures of *yakṣa*s, *yakṣī*s, and '*devatā*s' standing on animal, hybrid, and anthropomorphic figures on pillars of the *vedikā* of the Bharhut *stūpa*. Many are identified by proper names thanks to the accompanying Brāhmī inscriptions. This undoubtedly reflects their ongoing presence and power in local cults. The monument, constructed *suganaṃ raje* 'during the Śuṅga reign' according to an inscription (CII II/II: 11-12 [A1]), is only partially preserved. Nonetheless, thanks to the richness of its iconographic and epigraphic fabric, it weaves a vivid glimpse into the world of beliefs of the centuries around the turn of the Common Era. These lithic documents are indeed an expression of a tradition that is presumably more ancient than the extant Pāli Canon.

The Bharhut *stūpa* assumes importance far beyond the domain of ancient Buddhism. It has been argued that this is probably the earliest firm visual evidence of an association between deities and vehicles (van der Geer 2008: 37; Dallapiccola 2012), which, from then on, will be common in South Asian visual arts across regional and religious contexts. While this monument has been the object of several studies, research that systematically investigates these *vāhana* figures in the light of the iconographic and literary vocabulary of ancient India remains a *desideratum*. Through the examination of a few textual passages from both Buddhist and Hindu literature, this paper advances some remarks on the formative phase of the *vāhana* phenomenon.

Keywords: *vāhana*s, symbolic animals, *yakṣa*s, *yakṣī*s, early Buddhism, Bharhut *stūpa, Āṭānāṭiyasutta*.

1. Introduction[1]

Through animals, both real and imaginary, something new can be said about human cultural and historical dynamics. As is well known, an animal, be it real or imaginary (*i.e.* hybrid), is associated with most of the Hindu deities as their *vāhana*. Such a distinctive feature of Hindu divine representations is a phenomenon whose genesis or matrix remains a yet unsolved Indological knot (Zimmer 1955: 42-48; Gonda 1965: 71-114; Ganguli 1966; Pelissero 1996; van der Geer 2008: 37-40; Jacobsen 2009; Dallapiccola 2012).

Scholars quite unanimously deem that the mount manifests the deity's sphere of influence, symbolising her or his nature or function. A play of reflections occurs between a deity and her/his vehicle, which at the same time expands the divine personality and vividly expresses her/his distinguishing features. As a rule, in mythic narratives and in iconography, a *vāhana* allows a deity to be identified, but there are cases where the same vehicle is shared by different divine figures (Dallapiccola 2012). For each deity, the association with the respective mount is attested from a different date—for example, while Indra already rides the four-tusked white elephant Airāvata in the Vedic literature after the *Ṛgveda*, Gaṇeśa appears to be only consistently associated with the bandicoot or the mouse from the 6th century CE onwards.

To shed some light on the issue of the genesis of the *vāhana* phenomenon, a valid research direction seems to be the investigation of attestations relating to the formative phase of the divine vehicles. It has been argued (van der Geer 2008: 37; Dallapiccola 2012) that the earliest firm visual evidence of an association between deities and mounts is represented in the sculptures that ornate the Bharhut *stūpa*. Based on paleography and style, this monument has been dated to about the mid 2nd century – beginning of the 1st century BCE (Barua 1934: I, 29-36; Lüders 1963: xxx-xxxiii; Hawkes 2008: 12, n. 3). From then on, the association with symbolic animals or hybrids became common in South Asian visual arts across regional and religious contexts. That is to say, *vāhana*s become eloquent elements of the South Asian visual semiotic code.[2]

[1] This research was made possible thanks to the financial support of Next Generation EU – Line M4.C2.1.1 – PRIN 2022, project "For a Multivocal History of the Attitudes Towards Non-Human Animals in South Asia. Ethics, Practices, Symbolism. Investigating New and Unsolved Issues," CUP G53D23004630006.

[2] It goes without saying that, when assessing the first appearance of new forms and expressions in South Asian visual arts, we are referring to the earliest surviving appearance in the medium of stone. Before the Gupta period, construction and decoration was prevalently in brick and wood (Dehejia 2009: 75). Hence, the images on the *stūpa* of Bharhut were probably not the first attempt to express the idea of animal symbols associated with divine figures in a visual form.

While the remains of the Bharhut *stūpa* have long been the object of several studies,[3] research that systematically investigates such *vāhana* figures in the light of the iconographic and literary vocabulary of ancient South Asia remains a *desideratum*. In what follows, I analyse a series of life-size figures of *yakṣa*s, *yakṣī*s, and '*devatā*s' carved standing upon animal, hybrid, and anthropomorphic mounts on the *vedikā* pillars of this *stūpa*. As will be discussed, this is a key monument for understanding early Buddhist imagery, which quite often reflects popular beliefs and pre-Buddhist visions. Through the examination of a few relevant textual passages from both Buddhist and Hindu literature, some remarks on the formative phase of the *vāhana* phenomenon will be advanced.

2. The Bharhut *stūpa* and the *yakṣa* cults

For present purposes, let us recall some essential lineaments relating to the Buddhist *stūpa* of Bharhut before moving onto the heart of the discourse. In November 1873, in the Tons River valley, in northeastern Madhya Pradesh (dist. Satna), Alexander Cunningham and Joseph D. Beglar encountered the fragmentary remains of a *stūpa*. Made from the dark red sandstone of Central India, excavated from the Kaimur Hills, the structure measured about twenty meters in diameter (Cunningham 1879: vi-vii; Ghosh 1978: 1). Only the eastern gateway and a portion of the railing (approximately one third of the original) still exist today; most of the remaining material is preserved in the Indian Museum of Kolkata as Cunningham required (Fig. 1).

[3] To mention the fundamental ones: Cunningham (1879), Barua (1934-1937), Coomaraswamy (1956), Lüders (1963), Bajpai (1967), Ghosh (1978), Dehejia (1998). More recently, Brancaccio (2005, 2022) and Hawkes (2008, 2009, 2010, 2011). For a thorough review of the studies on Bharhut, see Hawkes (2008: 1-3).

Figure 1. View of the Bharhut Gallery at the Indian Museum, Kolkata, with the eastern *toraṇa* at the centre. Mid 2nd century BCE (Image: courtesy of Benoy K. Behl).

A part of the Bharhut findings was shipped from Calcutta to London on the SS Indus, but never reached its destination since the liner sank in the waters north of the Sri Lankan coast in 1885. The site of the shipwreck has been identified, but the remains of the ship have yet to be recovered (Brancaccio 2022: 674, and n. 14). Some other important pieces from the Bharhut *stūpa* are housed in the Allahabad Museum, while some fragments are scattered in several other museum collections in India and the USA (Hawkes 2008: 8, Table 1). At the original site, all that can be seen today is the circular shape of the *stūpa* foundations (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. The site of the Bharhut *stūpa* today (2019), Satna district, Madhya Pradesh (Image: Chiara Policardi).

Even though it is only partially preserved, this *stūpa* is one of South Asia's earliest large-scale stone structures and one of the earliest surviving monuments of Buddhism. Its visual programme is surprisingly rich and sophisticated for being one of the earliest realisations of this kind. Also, this monument represents a unique case as its iconography is interwoven with a rich epigraphic fabric. It has yielded 229 Brāhmī inscriptions, of which 145 are donative, while the remaining 84 are descriptive or label inscriptions (Hawkes 2008: 7).[4] The descriptive inscriptions were (and, to a certain extent, still are) "links to banks of data. [...] They label or map the rich iconographic programs of the *stūpa*, giving the names of the beings that inhabit the narrative and ritual landscape" (Skilling 2009: 65). Carved in stone in the 2nd century BCE, these lithic documents are an expression of a tradition that is presumably more ancient than the extant Pāli Canon. As Skilling (2009: 66) remarks, several names appearing in the Bharhut corpus appear untraceable in surviving texts (be they in Pāli, Sanskrit, or Chinese). The language of these inscriptions is a Prakrit suffused with mainly Western dialectal characteristics, influenced by the Pāli diction.[5]

An inscription on the surviving gateway claims that it was made *suganaṃ raje* 'during the Śuṅga reign' (CII II/II: 11-12 [A1])[6]—reign which ended around 80 BCE. This inscription is valuable for the (apparently unique) epigraphic mention of this dynastic name (Salomon 1998: 141); however, it has

[4] Cfr. Salomon (1998: 141)—the number of known inscriptions has slightly increased in the last decades.

[5] For a thorough phonological and morphological analysis of the language of Bharhut inscriptions see Lüders (1963: xiii-xxix).

[6] I refer to Bharhut inscriptions following Lüders' system (1963).

been widely demonstrated that the role of royals was marginal in the overall construction and expansion of this and other *stūpa*s (Thapar 1987: 20). The monument was built up thanks to the patronage of monks and nuns from the Buddhist community—who evidently had private property despite prohibitions against this—and especially through donations from people from the non-élite laity (two third of the donors were private individuals, Hawkes 2008: 6). Votive inscriptions reveal donors from different walks of life—traders, artisans, landowners—coming "from Pāṭalipura, Kauśāmbī, Vidiśā, Nāsik, Karhāḍ, and other cities in northern and central India" (Neelis 2011: 206).

As Thapar (1987: 20) stresses,

> Community patronage, which is what distinguishes the particular *stūpa* architecture discussed here, was largely a collection of individual gifts brought together through a religious identity and a more loosely defined social identity. The gift was made initially for personal reasons and not because of requirements of status or function.

The Bharhut *stūpa* is located at the crossroads of both interregional travel routes and the religious-cultural landscapes of ancient South Asia. The site was placed within a network of arteries of commercial and cultural exchange, particularly on an intermediate itinerary between the 'Northern Route' (Uttarāpatha) and the 'Southern Route' (Dakṣiṇāpatha) across the Vindhya Hills (Neelis 2011: 211-212). Presumably, such a strategic position was carefully chosen by the monastic community. Both the inscriptions and the iconographies suggest a cosmopolitan environment (Hawkes 2009: 161; Basu 2023: 199).

Furthermore, the *stūpa* rose at the base of a large hill, Lal Pahar, which is considered to be sacred by the local population. Modern shrines feature at the summit of the hill and along its slopes (Hawkes 2010: 135). *Yakṣa*s and *yakṣī*s whose cults were based in diverse localities throughout the Subcontinent seem to have been gathered at Bharhut and featured on the railing (DeCaroli 2004: 71-74). These semi-divine, life-size carved figures were a prominent presence and immediately visible to visitors. Located on the outer, middle, and inner faces of the railing pillars, they interacted with the community of monks and nuns, with those who lived around the religious building, and with pilgrims. Most of them are depicted holding their hands in *añjalimudrā*, paying homage to the Buddha and the relics. All of them are portrayed as undoubtedly sensuous figures, and reconciling them with the most common idea of ancient Buddhism is not immediate. They apparently contradict, to some extent, the early Buddhist vision, at the level of both doctrinal precepts and monastic life, marked essentially by ethical, philosophical, and intellectual austerity. But they must have been vital for the society of that time, to the point that—I suppose—most of the people who frequented the Bharhut site, both monks and lay-

folk, presumably never even paused to ask themselves why images of semi-divine, sensually evocative, beings were portrayed on a sacred Buddhist structure (Skilling 2001: 265-266; Dehejia 2009: 75-81).

One of the oldest attested forms of South Asian religious practice is the worship of such divine figures which, as proposed by Robert DeCaroli (2004: 8-20), can be labelled under the umbrella-term of 'spirit-deities.' *Yakṣī*s and *yakṣa*s, and likewise *nāga*s, were part of early South Asian cults which, to a certain extent, were eventually incorporated into the folds of Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism. The world was presumably imagined as filled with these spirit-deities, who could be both supportive and malevolent and who could be involved in human lives. They were probably not only essential to popular devotion, but also, in varying degrees, important to the literate laity, the élite classes, and the Buddhist monastic community itself. As far as we know, these cults did not find expression in texts of their own, so we are able to reconstruct aspects of beliefs and ritual interactions only through the writings, and hence through the filters, of other religious and philosophical traditions (DeCaroli 2004: 9-10).

At Bharhut, these deities are identified by proper names thanks to the inscriptions. Hence, not only are *yakṣa*s and *yakṣī*s depicted on a Buddhist monument, but their identities are also preserved: this undoubtedly reflects their ongoing presence and power in local cults. In the context of the *stūpa*, they are presumably performing the duty of watching over the entrances to the sacral building and of marking the boundaries of the sacred space. They embody powerful forces that, if harnessed, are protective. At the same time, they honour the Buddha and the *saṃgha*.

A transactional ritual with a tree-spirit appears to be represented in a relief found on the coping stone of the Bharhut *vedikā* (Fig. 3): in this scene, a man is sitting in front of a tree, from which human arms emerge. The spirit of the tree is holding a bowl of food in one hand, while its other hand pours water over the man's hands. The image vividly represents the belief in tree-spirits and their worship (DeCaroli 2004: 27).

Figure 3. Scene of ritual interaction with a tree spirit. Bharhut *stūpa*, *vedikā* coping section. Mid 2nd century BCE. Indian Museum, Kolkata (image: John C. Huntington, Courtesy of the John C. and Susan L. Huntington Photographic Archive of Buddhist and Asian Art).

3. Figures standing on aquatic hybrids

Let us first consider a group of *yakṣa* figures that are depicted standing upon hybrid beings. The components of these hybrids can be variously interpreted, but they are undoubtedly aquatic beings, as they all have a fishtail.

"One of the masterpieces of Bharhut" (Huntington 1985: 70) is the figure labelled 'Cadā yakhi' (CII II/II: 74 [B2]), *i.e.* Candrā *yakṣī* (Fig. 4). She graces the middle face of a terminus corner pillar once flanking the northern *toraṇa* (western quadrant). This masterfully crafted sculpture is the quite perfect representation of the *śālabhañjikā* motif, as she grasps the branch of a tree, while her arm and leg are entwined round its trunk. Moreover, her left hand, held at the level of her genitalia, holds a flowering stem from the tree, and could be evocative of the flourishing of both the female body and the tree (Dehejia 2009: 77). She is standing on a hybrid animal, one foot resting on its head and the other on its curled tail. The animal has been described as a "horse-faced *makara*" (Barua 1934: II, 70) and as "a sheep or ram with the hind-part of a fish" (Lüders 1963: 70). According to my analysis, it is a hybrid with an equine head and a fishtail, which has been designated as *jalaturaga* by Coomaraswamy ([1931] 2001: II,

82, Plate 43, Fig. 2), a term thereafter uncritically repeated in secondary literature (e.g. Krishna Murthy 1985: 48)—we will return to this later on.

Figure 4. 'Cadā yakhi,' *i.e.* Candrā *yakṣī*, upon a fish-tailed horse. Bharhut *stūpa*, *vedikā* pillar. Mid 2nd century BCE. Indian Museum, Kolkata (Image: © Regents of the University of Michigan).

On the inner face of the pillar on which the *yakṣī* is portrayed a donative inscription is found. It states that the pillar was donated by 'the reverend Budharakhita who has abandoned attachment' (CII II/II: 37-38 [A58]): hence the donor was a monk who was quite advanced on the spiritual path and who chose the image of this female semi-deity for the *stūpa*, along with those of Kubera and Ajakālaka *yakṣa*, whom we are going to discuss below.

The name of this *yakṣī* begs the question as to whether there are any connections between this figure and Cundā, the Mahāyana goddess whose name is found in different forms, such as Candrā, Cundrā, and Cundī (Niyogi 1977: 299; Misra 1981: 116; Donaldson 2001: 282). This deity was the focus of

an important cultic worship that flourished in the 8th century CE in the Bengal and Odisha regions, where she was the tutelary deity of the Pāla dynasty and where her iconography became increasingly sophisticated (Niyogi 1977: 308; Donaldson 2001: 282; Buswell and Lopez 2014: 204); the cult then spread to other areas of Asia. Cundā's early history remains problematic: according to Conze (1967: 254), "Cundā has up to now remained a rather mysterious deity. Literary documents concerning her are scarce, and we know next to nothing about [...] her origin." Her cult has been attested since at least the 3rd century CE as she is named Candrā in the *Āryamañjuśrīmūlakalpa* (Donaldson 2001: 283). Buswell–Lopez (2014: 204) postulate that she is the divinised form of a prominent local *yakṣī*. While hypothesising a connection between the Bharhut *yakṣī* and the Mahāyana goddess is certainly tantalising, at the present stage of research the only attested link lies in their name. Hence the question remains open.[7]

At Bharhut, the fish-tailed equine *vāhana* is also found beneath the feet of another *yakṣī* who is not accompanied by an inscription (Fig. 5). She is depicted holding a mirror to herself in one hand. Ghosh (1978: 63) has interpreted her mount as a *sindhu-siṃha*, a 'sea-lion,' but it clearly does not have feline paws, but hoofs. So, in my view it could likewise be a water-horse. Note that, once again, the *yakṣī*'s upraised right foot is on the head of her *vāhana*.

[7] Biswas (1987: 88) refers to a possible connection between Cadā *yakhi* and the god Candra, often identified with Soma, who rides a chariot drawn by ten horses according to the *Matsyapurāṇa*, *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa*, and *Śilparatna* (cfr. Rao 1914-: vol I, Part II, 319). However, a chariot drawn by horses is a kind of *vāhana* quite different from a hybrid horse.

Figure 5. Female figure upon a fish-tailed horse. Bharhut *stūpa*, *vedikā* pillar. Mid 2nd century BCE. Indian Museum, Kolkata (Image: John C. Huntington, Courtesy of the John C. and Susan L. Huntington Photographic Archive of Buddhist and Asian Art).

This mount is also found in other early Buddhist contexts, such as in a relief from the site of Jaggayyapeta, in Andhra Pradesh (Fig. 6; see also Viennot 1958a, Fig. 14). Centuries later, in the late 5th century CE, this hybrid equine appears as part of the exuberant painted decorations at Ajanta, particularly on the ceiling of the hall of Cave 17 (Fig. 7). Its tail is made of big waves, suggesting an association with water (Sharma 2015: 50-51).

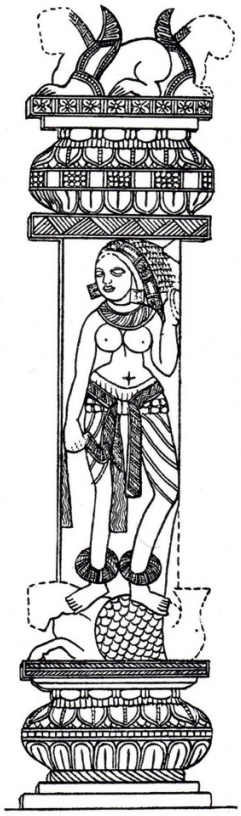

Figure 6. Pillar with a female figure upon a fish-tailed horse. Jaggayyapeta, 2nd century BCE. Chennai Museum (drawing after Coomaraswamy 2001, Vol. II, Pl. 42, 2).

Figure 7. Fish-tailed horse painted on the ceiling of the hall of Cave 17, Ajanta. Late 5th century CE. (Image after Yazdani 1955, Plate LXXIV, a).

The fish-tailed horse was thus presumably part of the early South Asian imagery which found expression also in the Buddhist domain. Such an idea of a hybrid figure with equine and fish components is found not only in early art, but also in texts. The above-mentioned term *jalaturaga* is found in Hemacandra's *Abhidhānacintāmaṇi* (1355) lexicon (12th century).[8]

Interestingly, the *Mahābhārata* (III.173.50d-51b) contains a reference to this kind of hybrid. According to the story in the *Āraṇyakaparvan,* Arjuna has just shot the Raudra weapon to kill the demons, and thousands of shapes have appeared on the battlefield. These include animals and composite creatures such as *jhaṣa- gajavaktra-* 'elephant-faced large fishes,' owls, and *mīnavājisarūpa-* 'creatures in the shape of fish and horses.'[9] It is noteworthy that *jhaṣa- gajavaktra-* might be a reference to the *makara.*

A third *yakṣī* found at Bharhut, named 'yakhini Sudasana' in the inscription (CII II/II: 80 [B10]), *i.e.* Sudarśanā *yakṣī*, is depicted standing upon a *makara* (Fig. 8). As is well known, the *makara* is a mythical, composite creature, whose essential nature, according to various studies,[10] appears to draw on that of the crocodile: according to Vogel (1929-1930: 146) the prototype should be seen in the saltwater crocodile, the *Crocodilus porosus*, a species of South Asian crocodile living in both rivers and the ocean. Another source of inspiration might have been the South Asian river dolphin (*Platanista gangetica*), which once populated the South Asia's major rivers and is now an endangered species (Guy 2023: 45). The figure associated with Sudasana has sharp crocodilian teeth, and an elephantine trunk curled upwards.

[8] To be precise, the term occurs in the *Svopajñaṭīkā* (Hemacandra's auto-commentary) ad 1355. See *Abhidhānacintāmaṇi* edited by Boehtlingk–Rieu (1847: 407).

[9] *jhaṣāṇāṃ gajavaktrāṇām ulūkānāṃ tathaiva ca* || 50 ||

mīnavājisarūpāṇāṃ nānāśastrāsipāṇinām |

'[Shapes] of elephant-faced large fishes, of owls,

of creatures having the shape of fish and horses, and brandishing all kinds of weapons and swords.'

Sanskrit text according to the Calcutta edition reproduced by Parimal Publications 2008, II: 489. In the critical edition of the MBh (III.170.45d-46b) these verses are identical except for the compound *mīnavājisarūpāṇāṃ,* substituted by the reading *mīnakūrmasamūhānāṃ.*

[10] The concept, forms, and distribution of the *makara* have been the object of several works, among which mention should be made of Coomaraswamy (2001 [1928-1931] II: 47-56), Vogel (1929-1930), Viennot (1954, 1958a, 1958b) and Darian (1976).

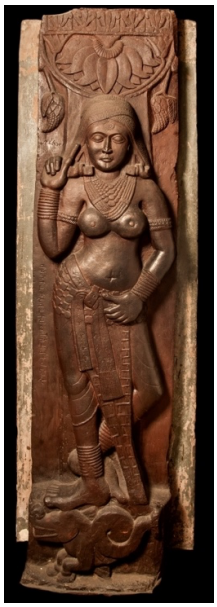

Figure 8. 'Yakhini Sudasana' *i.e.* Sudarśanā *yakṣī*, upon a *makara.* Bharhut *stūpa*, *vedikā* pillar. Mid 2nd century BCE. Indian Museum, Kolkata (Image: © Regents of the University of Michigan).

The *makara* appears several times in the reliefs of the *stūpa*, and not in the role of *vāhana* but as an independent figure, which is very artistically rendered for example in the side projection from one of the three architraves of the eastern gateway (Fig. 9).

Figure 9. Makara in the side projection from one of the three architraves of the eastern gateway. Bharhut *stūpa*. Mid 2nd century BCE. Indian Museum, Kolkata (Image: Courtesy of Thierry Ollivier).

The *makara* becomes *the* most common aquatic animal in subsequent South Asian art. From around the Gupta period, it will become the distinctive mark of the goddess Gaṅgā, the personification of the river Ganges. The most recurrent representation of this goddess is found at the entrances to Hindu temple buildings or to the cella therein, but she is possibly found in the Buddhist context of Ajanta as well, for example at the entrance to Cave 17 (Fig. 10). Only possibly, as it is uncertain as to whether this female figure on a *makara* can be identified as the goddess Gaṅgā *tout court* or whether she was still an undifferentiated river deity (Stietencron 2010: 13).

Figure 10. Female figure (goddess Gaṅgā?) at the entrance of Cave 17, Ajanta. Late 5th century (Image: Anandajoti Bhikkhu. Public domain, available at https://photodharma.net/India/Ajanta-Caves-2/index.htm).

In this light, it seems interesting that in the *Mahābhārata* (XIII.2.19-35) a character by the name of Sudarśanā is the daughter of king Duryodhana of the Ikṣvāku dynasty and of the river goddess Narmadā. The story goes that so beautiful a woman as Sudarśanā had never been born. The god Agni fell in love with her and married her. Can this Sudarśanā featuring in the epic be identified with the *yakṣī* represented in the Bharhut sculpture? The daughter of a king and a river goddess might have been considered as a semi-divine figure, and her *vāhana*, the *makara*, might indicate that she was indeed related to a river goddess and perhaps intended as a *nadīdevatā* herself. So, Sudarśanā may possibly have been a local deity, and is for this reason represented on the Bharhut *stūpa* railing (Lüders 1963: 71; Misra 1981: 118).

My hypothesis is that, in the early historic period, namely around the turn of the Common Era, different hybrid aquatic animals were represented as *vāhana*s. However, starting presumably in the Kuṣāṇa period, the *makara* was gradually selected as the quintessential water symbol, associated in particular with flowing or moving water (Coomaraswamy 2001 [1928-1931]: II, 50; Stietencron 2010: 16 n 9; Guy 2023: 44).

On the same terminus corner pillar on which Cadā *yakṣī* is depicted, on the outer face, we find the carving of a *yakṣa* named in the accompanying inscription as 'Ajakālako yakho' (CII II/II: 74 [B3]), that is *yakṣa* Ajakālaka (Fig. 11). He is represented standing, while his left leg bent so that his toes touch the *vāhana* beneath his feet, probably its head. The upper part of this mount is heavily eroded, and the remaining portion seems to represent a hybrid figure, with the body and the tail of a fish, but with human hands thrust into its mouth—a peculiar pose we will return to later on.

Figure 11. 'Ajakālako yakho,' i.e. *yakṣa* Ajakālaka, upon a fish-tailed human figure. Bharhut *stūpa*, *vedikā* pillar. Mid 2nd century BCE. Indian Museum, Kolkata (Image: after Coomaraswamy 1956, Planche VII, Fig. 22).

A *yakṣa* by a slightly different name, that is Ajakālapaka, appears as one of the Buddha's interlocutors in the *Udāna* (1.7), the third book of the *Khuddakanikāya*:

> *evam me sutaṃ. ekaṃ samayaṃ bhagavā Pāṭaliyaṃ [Pāvayaṃ] viharati Ajakalāpake cetiye Ajakalāpakassa yakkhassa bhavane. tena kho pana samayena bhagavā rattandhakāratimisāyaṃ abbhokāse nisinno hoti, devo ca ekamekaṃ phusāyati. atha kho Ajakalāpako yakkho bhagavato bhayaṃ chambhitattaṃ lomahaṃsaṃ uppādetukamo yena bhagavā ten'upasaṅkami, upasaṅkamitvā bhagavato avidūre tikkhattuṃ akkulopakkulo ti akkulapakkulikaṃ akāsi: eso e samaṇa pisāco 'ti. Atha kho bhagavā etam atthaṃ viditvā tāyaṃ velāyaṃ imaṃ udānaṃ udānesi:*
>
> *yadā sakesu dhammesu pāragū hoti brāhmaṇo,*
>
> *atha etam pisācañ ca bakkulañ c'ātivattatī 'ti.* || 7 ||
>
> (Steinthal, ed. 1885: 4-5)

> So was there heard by me on one occasion when the Lord was staying at Pāvā,[11] at the Ajakalāpaka Shrine within the realm of the yakkha Ajakalāpaka. And on that occasion, the Lord was seated in the open air, at night, in the dimness, in the darkness; and the (sky-)deva was spotting one by one. Then the yakkha Ajakalāpaka, desiring to give rise to fear, stupefaction and horripilation in the Lord, approached the Lord and, having approached, three times performed his akkula-pakkula saying: 'Akkula-pakkula!' not far from the Lord, (adding:) 'This goblin is for you, recluse!'
>
> Then the Lord, fathoming this matter, gave rise at that time to this Udāna:
>
> 'It is when, with respect to dhammas that are one's own, one be gone to the other shore, that one becomes the brahmin; then does one proceed beyond this goblin and pakkula.'
>
> (transl. Masefield 1997: 6)

According to this short prose tale from the *Udāna* collection and to the related commentary by Dhammapāla (Masefield 1994: 100-108), the *yakṣa* grew so furious when he saw the Buddha sitting inside his mansion that he tried three times to frighten the Enlightened One. He raised violent storms, uttered horrid cries, shook the earth, and so on, but, *ça va sans dire*, everything was in vain in the face of the Buddha's firmness of mind. Ajakālapaka ended up becoming one of the Buddha's disciples. The tale reveals that this *yakṣa* had great power over the place, be it Pāvā or Pāṭali, and that he was of a frightful nature.

The identification between the Bharhut *yakṣa*, named Ajakālaka in the inscription, and the *Udāna yakṣa* Ajakālapaka with his slightly different name has been debated (Barua 1934: II, 60; Lüders 1963: 75; Misra 1981: 114-115; DeCaroli 2004: 73). But it is likely that the two characters are one and the same.

The portrait at Bharhut depicts a figure in an elegant, I would say pacific, pose, holding a lotus: if this particular *yakṣa* were known to monks and pilgrims of the time, this iconography was presumably intended to remind them how this character, this *yakṣa*, had been converted by the Buddha. But it is possible that the frightening nature of this *yakṣa* has been retained in the figure of his *vāhana*, which, although now incomplete, clearly has a monstrous aspect with the peculiar pose of its human hands that enlarge its mouth, a gesture which may possibly allude uttering horrid cries.

[11] Peter Masefield reads 'Pāvāyaṃ' following the Chaṭṭhasaṅgāyana edition and the Siamese edition, but the Pāli Text Society's edition reads 'Pāṭaliyaṃ'. See Masefield 1997: 15, n. 38; cfr. Gnoli (ed.) 2001: 714, n. 14. Hence, the Buddha was staying at Pāvā or at Pāṭali. Pāvā was an important city of the Malla principality in ancient India, identified with the village of Padaraona in the present-day state of Uttar Pradesh (Singh 2009: 263). Pāṭali, which was a Magadha village, called Pāṭaligrāma, was located in the area where the renowned city of Pāṭaliputra later emerged (Singh 2009: 272).

4. Figures standing on anthropomorphic *vāhana*s

Let us now consider three figures accompanied by anthropomorphic *vāhana*s. According to the inscription, the inner face of the three-sided terminus corner pillar of the north-western quadrant (featuring Cadā and Ajakālako on the other faces) portrays 'Kupiro yakho' (CII II/II: 73 [B1], Fig. 12), that is to say Kubera, the well-known regent of the northern quarter of the world. His northern placement in the original iconographic scheme of the *stūpa* was undoubtedly meaningful. In early South Asia, he was a very popular god, portrayed and worshipped not only as the king of the northern direction, but especially as the god of wealth and opulence, in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jaina traditions alike. In particular, he was (and still is) considered as the lord of precious stones and other valuable assets from the mountains and of the treasures hidden in the earth (Bedeker 1969; Raven 1988; Wessels-Mevissen 2001: 103-105). This Bharhut portrayal is one of the oldest surviving depictions of this deity, if not the oldest.

Figure 12. 'Kupiro yakho,' *i.e.* Kubera, upon a *guhyaka*. Bharhut *stūpa*, *vedikā* pillar. Mid 2nd century BCE. Indian Museum, Kolkata (Image: © Regents of the University of Michigan).

He is represented standing upon an anthropomorphic, stocky figure who supports himself on his feet and hands, in a crouching posture. This dwarfish being has slanting eyes, pointed ears, and a grinning expression on his face. In Sanskrit literature, a quite common epithet for Kubera is *naravāhana*, 'having

a *nara*-vehicle.'[12] Who are these dwarf-like creatures, these *nara*s, with which Kubera evidently was associated? Ellen Raven (1988) has already suggested that these supporting figures are *guhyaka*s, literally 'the hidden ones,' a group of the Lord of Riches' close attendants who were different from *yakṣa*s. In textual sources they are described as creatures associated with the earth, who inhabit the caves (*guha*s) of the mountainous regions of Kubera's northern realm. They guard his enormous terrestrial treasures of gold and precious goods. Kubera is defined as *guhyakeśvara* in the *Amarakośa* (1.1.68-69).

One of the most illustrative textual passages of the task performed by the *guhyaka*s is found in the *Mahābhārata* (II.10.1-4):

sabhā vaiśravaṇī rājañ śatayojanam āyatā |
vistīrṇā saptatiś caiva yojanāni sitaprabhā // 1 ||
tapasā nirmitā rājan svayaṃ vaiśravaṇena sā |
śaśiprabhā khecarīṇāṃ kailāsaśikharopamā || 2 ||
guhyakair uhyamānā sā khe viṣakteva dṛśyate |
divyā hemamayair uccaiḥ pādapair upaśobhitā || 3 ||
raśmivatī bhāsvarā ca divyagandhā manoramā |
sitābhraśikharākārā plavamāneva dṛśyate || 4 ||

Kubera Vaiśravaṇa lustrously white hall, O king, is one hundred leagues long and seventy wide. Vaiśravaṇa built it himself with the power of his austerities, prince. It is luminous like the moon, floating in the sky, like a peak of Mount Kailasa. Carried by the Guhyakas, the celestial hall seems as though fastened to the sky, and tall trees of gold adorn it. Irradiating rays, effulgent, redolent with divine fragrances, charming and shaped like a white cloud or mountain peak, it appears as though it is floating in space.
(transl. van Buitenen 1975, II: 49-50)

It vividly describes how the *guhyaka*s support Kubera's *sabhā*, a heavenly audience hall which their efforts keep floating in the sky. They are thus characterised as very strong creatures. The solid anthropomorphic being who lifts up Kubera at Bharhut seems to correspond to the textual descriptions of *guhyaka*s.

Another of the Bharhut *stūpa* railing pillars represents a richly adorned female figure in the *śālabhañjikā* pose, supported by a short-statured, pot-bellied male (Fig. 13). This image only came to light relatively recently since the sculpture was not found at the site of the *stūpa* when it was discovered

[12] See e.*g.* MBh III.156.25; III.259.14; III.229.3; *Amarakośa* 1.1,70; *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* III.53,1-7.

by Cunningham, but in a private house, worshipped as the tutelary deity of the family (Cunningham 1879: 22, n. 4). Later, it was stolen and smuggled out of India, only to unexpectedly resurface in the USA in 2012. The photos of the sculpture were published for the first time in 2016 by the archaeologist Kirit Mankodi (see Mankodi 2016). The inscription identifies the figure as 'Mahakoka devata' (CII II/II: 81 [B2]):[13] hence, not a *yakṣī*, but a deity, called 'Great Kokā.'

Figure 13. 'Mahakoka devata,' upon a *guhyaka*. Bharhut *stūpa*, *vedikā* pillar. Mid 2nd century BCE (Image: Courtesy of Kirit Mankodi).

[13] In this case, Lüders (1963: 81, n. 4) records the inscription from Cunningham's eye-copy.

Interestingly, only three figures at Bharhut are labelled 'devatā.' These are Mahakoka, Culakokā, whom we are going to discuss in a moment, and Sirimā *devatā*. If in the inscription they are defined with a different term than *yakṣī*, they were perhaps supernatural beings who enjoyed a slightly different status, albeit akin to the semi-divine nature of *yakṣī*s (Sutherland 1991: 106; DeCaroli 2004: 12; Dehejia 2009: 216, n. 4). Needless to say, we do not know exactly where Mahakoka was collocated along the *stūpa* railing, but evidently her *vāhana* is similar to Kubera's. My working hypothesis is that she can be considered equal in rank to Kubera and perhaps interpreted as his queen, as the close resemblance of their *vāhana*s is undoubtedly meaningful.

Another pillar from the Bharhut railing was found in the village of Batanmara. It portrays a richly bejeweled female figure who is being lifted by a dwarfish being similar to Mahakoka's (Coomaraswamy [1928-1931] 2001: I, Plate 4, Fig. 1). In the absence of an inscription label, it is even more difficult to put forward any kind of hypothesis concerning her identity. As Misra (1981: 119) surmises, the rocky landscape behind her *vāhana* might allude to the mountainous kingdom of Uttarakuru. Hence, while she might well be another candidate for Kubera's queen, the fact that the inscription identifies Mahakoka with a proper name suggests that she could have been a well-known and recognisable figure in the mythological landscape of that time. Also in the case of the Batanmara lady, now held in the Ramvan Museum (dist. Satna), the similarity of her *vāhana* makes a connection with Kubera plausible: we can hypothesise that the sculpture was placed in the northern quadrant of the *stūpa* and that she represents a member of Kubera's royal entourage.

5. Figures standing on elephants

It is most likely that Mahakoka was also intended as the counterpart of another sculpture, labelled as 'Culakokā devatā' (CII II/II: 80 [B11]), that is Kṣudrakokā, 'Little Kokā' (now in the Kolkata Museum, Fig. 14). According to Cunningham's reconstruction, this sculpture was situated on a corner pillar flanking the southern gateway, near the image of Virūḍhaka, the regent of the south direction. So, this might be another hint that points towards placing Mahakoka on the northern side, near Kubera.

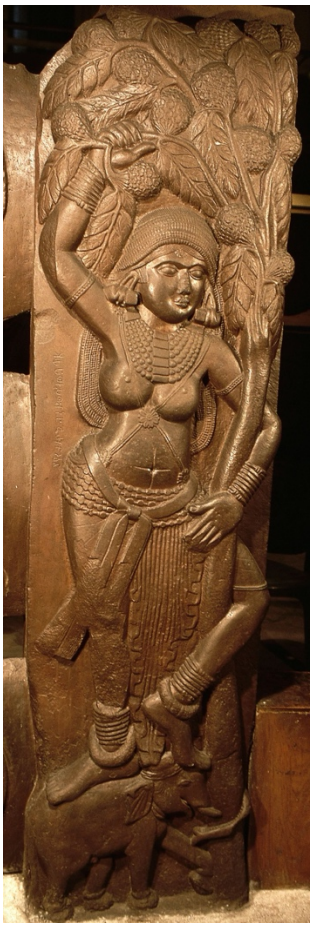

Figure 14. 'Culakokā devatā,' i.e. Kṣudrakokā, upon an elephant. Bharhut *stūpa*, *vedikā* pillar. Mid 2nd century BCE. Indian Museum, Kolkata (Image: © Regents of the University of Michigan).

Culakokā stands upon an elephant: her left foot rests on the head of the animal, while the elephant's proboscis embraces the trunk of the tree, mirroring the posture of Culakokā's left leg. A possible textual parallel is with two female deities who appear in the in the *Devatāsaṃyutta* (*Saṃyuttanikāya* 1.1,4.9-10): Kokanadā and Cūḷa-Kokanadā, the daughters of the rain god Pajjunna. They visited the Buddha at the Kūṭāgārasālā at Vesālī and spoke verses in praise of the Buddha and the Dhamma. Since at Bharhut both Mahakoka and Culakokā are portrayed as they embrace a flourishing tree, the connection with the rainy waters might be meaningful; interestingly, in the *Āṭānāṭiyasutta* (to be discussed below), Pajjunna is mentioned as one of the *mahāyakkha*s to be invoked in time of need (DN 32.10.204).

Other two Bharhut figures portrayed standing upon elephants are 'Gamgito yakho' (CII II/II: 76 [B5]; Coomaraswamy 1956: Planche VI, Fig. 19) and 'Supāvaso yakho' (CII II/II: 77 [B7]; Coomaraswamy 1956: Planche XVII, Fig. 41).

6. Interpretative remarks

Given the complexity of the issues at stake and the incompleteness of the sources, providing any kind of interpretative remarks inevitably involves a degree of simplification. Also, some questions will have to be left open. The Bharhut *stūpa* is a monument erected for the glorification of Buddhism; at the same time, its visual imagery is suffused with the world of pre-Buddhist beliefs.

6.1. Figures standing upon their mounts—not seated

The semi-divine figures, as illustrated above, are portrayed standing upon their mounts. The representation of gods and goddesses seated on their vehicles as a visual formula that shows their association seems to become common in the Gupta period (Raven 2020: 261). Why does the reciprocal positioning of the deity and her/his vehicle vary over time? This is a complex issue, which would require an investigation in its own right. Here, I will limit myself to articulating the question. As Trautmann (2015: 99-100) aptly highlights:

> [...] the gods of the *Ṛg Veda* all ride chariots and neither elephants nor other animals, as do the gods of later Hinduism. [...] The Hindu gods of a succeeding period each have a particular *vāhana* or animal mount, and this development constitutes an important difference of historic Hinduism from the Vedic religion from which it descended. Indra, in particular, the king of the gods and their leader in war, always and only rides a chariot in the *Ṛg Veda* [...]. But in the later Vedic texts and ever after Indra is associated with his own *vāhana*, the celestial elephant Airāvata or Airāvaṇa. How exactly this development came about is far from clear, but Gonda is surely right to connect it with the rising dignity of riding horseback in the ancient chariot-using civilizations of western Asia and southern Europe generally. The point to be made here is that horseback riding was known in Vedic India and was not first introduced in later times. The salient fact is that horseback riding was of low status in the warrior culture of Vedic times, while chariot riding was of the highest status. It is possible that the invention of the war elephant contributed to improving the status of riding on the back of an animal, relative to riding a chariot.

A few pages later (Trautmann 2015: 119-121), he maintains: "Conveyance is highly visible and highly differentiated, a sign of social status, a way of publicly displaying one's place in the social hierarchy."

Hence, let us reformulate the previous question: why, in the pre-Gupta period, does the visual language predominantly choose the formula of divine figures depicted standing rather than sitting on their emblematic mounts? Structural or technical reasons—the need to represent these images vertically on the pillars of the railing at Bharhut—can hardly suffice as an explanation. The discussed semi-divine figures, indeed, are not an isolated case: for example, the South Asian warrior goddess is represented standing upon a lion in pre-Gupta sculptures (and also subsequently, alongside sitting

portraits; see Policardi 2024), and the *nadīdevatā*s Gaṅgā and Yamunā are always portrayed standing upon their mounts, a *makara* and a tortoise respectively (Viennot 1964).

A possible line of inquiry could be subsumed by the question: does the standing position reflect the highest status expressed by chariot riding? In iconography, associating a figure with a vehicle is a way to express her/his divine status. Is it possible that the importance of the chariot in early south Asian society not only found expression in Vedic religiosity, but also, consciously or unconsciously, still underlies divine representations of the centuries straddling the Common Era? Undoubtedly, as Sparreboom (1985: 6) demonstrates, at the end of the first millennium BCE the chariot was perceived as an artifact belonging to the past. Whether its significance and values indirectly reverberated in the standing positions of deities on their mounts in early visual language remains a possibility which requires investigation.

6.2. Three main typologies of *vāhana*s at Bharhut

At Bharhut, the mounts may be classified into three main categories: aquatic hybrid beings; anthropomorphic beings; elephants. In my interpretation, each typology may express the same three main valences, but differently declined.

The aquatic hybrids seem to be *in primis* a symbolic representation of the deity's function or sphere of action, in this case they may express the dominion of the semi-divine figure over the aquatic realm. Second, as remarked above, the *yakṣa* or *yakṣī* invariably places one of her/his feet on the head of her/his mount. In South Asian culture this act expresses the power of the character who is standing on or trampling someone or something; indeed, it shows that the figure trodden upon has been subjugated (Huntington 1985: 68; Bühnemann 2023). In this case it may symbolise the control over the potentially dangerous forces of the watery realm. Third, the function of aquatic hybrids in the literal sense of vehicles, that is as a means of transportation for the deity, might be present, but appears to be the least prominent.

The second typology is represented by anthropomorphic figures, in particular *guhyaka*s. They seem to mainly express the idea of dominion: as illustrated previously, the *guhyaka*s are subjects, servants of Kubera and presumably also of other members of his royal entourage. Second, they are a symbolic representation of the deity's role or function, in this case they seem to be an expression of the deity's royal status—a king is usually accompanied by servants. Moreover, they perform this symbolic function by literally being vehicles in the sense of a means of transportation: mythically, they transport Kubera's hall, and hence the king himself, and perhaps his queen.

The third typology concerns in elephants. Culakokā *devatā*, but also Gamgito *yakho* and Supāvaso *yakho*, are depicted standing upon elephants. In the first place, elephant *vāhana*s may express the idea that the deity is connected with clouds and rains: the association of elephants with rain-making clouds is a well-known motif found throughout South Asian culture and literature. As Courtright (1985: 22-23) outlines:

> The relationship of clouds and rain to elephants reflects more than the fact that elephants are round and grey and massive, like the grey monsoon clouds, and can spray water out of their trunks, like rain. The monsoon clouds bring both nourishing water and the possibility of destructive floods; the elephant symbol is equally ambivalent. This ambivalence springs from the opposition of wild and tame. The tame elephant, the paradigm of power domesticated, clears the wild jungles so that human habitations may be built. He carries the king in battle and ceremonial procession; he is, in short, the symbol of order. [...] The wild elephant, however, driven by heat of sexual desire or burning fever of disease, can create awesome destruction. This ambivalence of wild and tame in the behavior of elephants is reflected in a number of myths from both Hindu and Buddhist sources.

Second, elephant mounts seem to be the expression of the figure's high social status, as the elephant ranked at the top of the hierarchy of conveyances (Trautmann 2015: 121). Third, they are undoubtedly vehicles in the literal sense of means of transportation.

6.3. The Bharhut *stūpa* as a translation in stone of the cosmological map?

The location of the sculptures in each of the cardinal directions seems anything but casual. But a *caveat* is in order. As mentioned, we rely on Cunningham's reconstruction of the *stūpa*, which is particularly determinant, and unavoidable, as far as the topography of the monument is concerned. He found the site in an advanced state of ruin, with only parts of the religious building preserved. Hence, we must consider a margin of uncertainty in his reading of the loose pieces and of the whole picture. Consequently, the remarks that follow inevitably fall into the realm of speculation. Furthermore, both relevant texts and contemporaneous art-historical records seem to offer no unequivocal evidence concerning a comparable ensemble of figures related to early (or pre-)Buddhist cosmology. We are undoubtedly venturing onto uneven ground. Nonetheless, the question regarding a possible rationale behind the disposition of the semi-divine figures around the core of the *stūpa*, and hence around the Buddha, is a significant one. As for the location of the sculpted pillars, I refer to the useful outline by Lüders (1963: xxxvii-xxxviii).

Thanks to the accompanying inscriptions, it is possible to identify two world-regents (*lokapāla*s): Kupiro, illustrated above, and 'Viruḍako yakho,' who, not surprisingly, are depicted on corner pillars

of the northern and southern *toraṇa*s respectively. According to early Buddhist cosmology, Kubera is the king of the northern realm, the Uttarakuru, while Virūḍhaka (Virūḷhaka in Pāli) is the regent of the southern direction (Wessels-Mevissen 2001: 18; Buswell-Lopez 2014: 480; Shaw 2021: 97, 102-103, 228-231). The group of the *cāturmahārāja* is completed by Dhṛtarāṣṭra (Pāli Dhattaraṭṭha) for the East and Virūpākṣa (Pāli Virūpakkha) for the West, but their images appear to be missing at Bharhut (Cunningham 1879: 20).[14] While the four directional guardians find quite frequent mention in Buddhist literature as a group,[15] no art-historical evidence for the complete ensemble appears to survive from pre-modern South Asia (Wessels-Mevissen 2001: 18).[16]

Interestingly, the other *yakṣa*s and *yakṣī*s found in the same quadrant of the railing appear to have *vāhana*s similar to one another. In some cases, the sculptures located in the northern quadrant appear to have hybrid aquatic beings as mounts: this is the case of Cadā *yakhi* (fish-tailed horse), *yakhini* Sudasana (*makara*), and Ajakālako *yakho* (fish-tailed human figure). Instead, Kupiro *yakho*, as illustrated above, stands on a *guhyaka*, and Mahakoka *devata* similarly has a *guhyaka* as her mount—she was perhaps located in the northern section of the *stūpa*, opposite to Culakokā located to the South. Can these two typologies of mounts allude to waters (the hybrid aquatic beings) and caves, stone, and mountains (the *guhyaka*s) as elements characteristic of the kingdom of Uttarakuru?

Interesting allusions to the prosperity of this northern realm are found in the *Āṭānāṭiyasutta*, the thirty-second *sutta* of the *Dīghanikāya*. This text belongs to the genre of *paritta*, as it mainly contains protective verses: indeed, the *sutta* describes itself as a *rakkhā* (Skt. *rakṣā*). The recitation of this kind of texts was believed (and still is, in present day Sri Lanka) to confer protection against psychic and physical harm. These *paritta*s "have historically been very popular: as early as *Milinda's Questions* (circa 100 B.C.E. to circa 200 C.E.), many, including the *Āṭānāṭīya-sutta*, are mentioned as particularly powerful" (Shaw 2021: 224). The *Āṭānāṭiyasutta* presumably belongs to the earliest stratum of the Pāli Canon, and can be found throughout the Asian regions of early Buddhist dissemination (Skilling 1997: II, 66-69).

The frame story starts by describing how the Four Great Kings (Cattāro Mahārājā) and the four classes of powerful supernatural beings presented as their subjects (namely *yakkha*s, *gandhabba*s,

[14] Waddell (1912: 137-144) posits that, at the time of the Bharhut *stūpa*, the conception of the four directional regents had yet to be fully developed, and argues that two other figures on the southern corner pillar, namely Gamgito *yakho* and Cakavāko Nāgarāja, are to be identified as the eastern and western guardians. This remains an unsubstantiated conjecture.

[15] E.g. DN 18.12.207; DN 20.9.257. See Haldar (1977: 23-24, 80-81) and Agrawala (1989: 67 and notes) for further references.

[16] Instead, depictions of the Four Great Kings are frequent at the base of *stūpa*s in other regions of Asia, particularly Central Asia, China, Japan and Tibet (Snodgrass 1985: 135; Sutherland 1991: 66-67).

*kumbhaṇḍa*s, and *nāga*s) come to visit the Buddha on a mountain peak. King Vessavaṇa, the regent of the North, tells the Buddha that while many supernatural beings have faith in the Dhamma, the majority of *yakkha*s have no faith, as their nature is incompatible with a code of refraining from killing, stealing, promiscuity, lying, and the consumption of alcohol and drugs (DN 32.2.195). Many of them live in lonely and remote recesses in the forest, places frequented by disciples of the Buddha, as they are ideal for meditation. Hence, Vessavaṇa personally gives the Buddha the Āṭānāṭā protective verses, so that he can teach them to monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen in order to ward off dangerous spirit-deities. Most of this *sutta* is made up of such *paritta*s, which essentially detail the supernatural beings present in each direction, with the Four Great Kings heading the list. At the end, they pay homage in unison to the Buddha. Vessavaṇa states that if this text is recited, any *yakkha* or other supernatural being who threatens the Buddha's followers will be severely dealt with by *yakkha* leaders (*mahāyakkha*s, DN 32.10.205).

This text evokes and invokes forces that occupy the space around the Buddha, conjuring up an "organised cosmos of beings witnessing or singing praises to the Buddha" (Shaw 2021: 225). In outlining the fabulous kingdom of Uttarukuru, the *sutta* mentions the presence of waters, first in connection with the rains:

> *Rahado pi tattha Dharanī nāma*
> *yato meghā pavassanti,*
> *Vassā yato patāyanti.*
>
> There's the mighty water Dharaṇī,
> Source of rain-clouds which pour down
> When the rainy season comes.
> (DN 32.7.201; transl. Walshe 1987: 475)

Then, in the conclusion of the description of the realm, after mentioning different species of birds:

> *sobhati sabba-kālaṃ sā*
> *Kuvera-nalinī sadā.*
>
> And there for ever beauteous lies
> Fair Kuvera's lotus-lake.
> (DN 32.7.202; transl. Walshe 1987: 476)

Moreover, when describing the men, 'possessionless, not owning wives' (*amamā apariggahā*, DN 32.7.199) who inhabit Uttarakuru, the text mentions the vehicles (*vāhana*s) they use: besides riding on oxen, elephants and horses, they use women, men, maidens, and boys as mounts (*itthīvāhanaṃ, purisavāhanaṃ, kumārivāhanaṃ, kumāravāhanaṃ*, DN 32.7.200). Walshe (1987: 615, n. 1004) comments: "This trait, which spoils the otherwise idyllic picture, remains an unexplained curiosity." While at first glance the four terms seem to refer to actual human beings, it is possible that, in a similar way to the *naravāhana* epithet discussed above, they designate beings belonging to the class of *guhyaka*s. As is known, protective invocations prefer to enumerate all the parts that form a totality rather than mentioning the totality itself in a synthetic form; in other words, charm texts seek completeness and exactness.

In the subsequent Hindu tradition, the *makara* is considered as one of the nine treasures of Kubera (*navanidhi*s).[17] Hence, there is no unequivocal evidence that the aquatic hybrids and anthropomorphic beings appearing as *vāhana*s on the Bharhut *stūpa* are also evocative of the mythological Uttarakuru kingdom, but it is undoubtedly worth considering that this could have been one of their layers of meaning.

Instead, the sculptures located in the southern quadrant appear to have mainly caparisoned or apparently wild elephants as vehicles: this is the case of Culakokā *devatā*, Gamgito *yakho*, and Supavāso *yakho*. However, the king, Viruḍako *yakho*, is represented standing on a figuration of rocks with caves inhabited by wild animals (Coomaraswamy 1956: Planche VI, Fig. 18). As Agrawala remarks (1989: 69-70):

> It is interesting and a bit curious that Virūḍhaka here [...] does not specifically bear any of the peculiar traits of the Kumbhāṇḍa iconography. Without the contemporary label his identity would have been altogether unknown in the sculptural scheme of this religious building.

It is noteworthy that both Virūḍhaka and Kubera are defined as *yakṣa*s in the accompanying inscriptions. Whether there is a reason why the semi-divine figures located to the south in the Bharhut iconographic programme are mainly associated with elephants is a matter that remains to be resolved.

This tradition of the Four Great Kings and the mythical land of Uttarakuru is undoubtedly of pre-Buddhist origin (Walshe 1987: 614-615, n. 1000; Sutherland 1991: 66).[18] As Shulman (2019: 221) remarks, the *Āṭānāṭiyasutta* is an expression of

[17] *E.g. Mārkaṇḍeyapurāṇa* 68.5 and 68.17-20; see Sharma (2019: 43). See also Mani (1975: 544).

[18] The only figure in common with the Brāhmaṇical tradition of the eight Dikpālas is Kubera (Wessels-Mevissen 2001).

> the cosmological map—a *maṇḍala*—with the Buddha at its hub, which is at work in Buddhist protective magic. The Buddha is placed in the middle of the four quarters, and supernatural beings, powerful and potentially hazardous agents, turn to him, acknowledge his pre-eminence, and worship him in adoration.

The *stūpa* of Bharhut, to some extent, appears to be a translation in stone, or a monumentalisation, of such a vision. That is to say, the well-established interpretation of the *stūpa* as a cosmogram (Snodgrass 1985) in the case of Bharhut might include the supernatural beings that inhabit the cosmos.

As already remarked, the iconography of a *stūpa* does not respond to the unitary project of a ruler or a single patron, as will happen later for Hindu temples, but it is built, so to speak, by accretion, through donations from the monastic community and lay people. Hence, reliefs and sculptures reflect the beliefs and imagery with which people were imbued at that time, but which in some cases seem to recede into the distance in later religio-historical developments, thus becoming difficult for us to read.

Interestingly, the same three types of *vāhana*s found at Bharhut appear on *toraṇa* fragments recovered from the site of Kankali Tila in Mathura, dated to ca. 100 BCE, and held at the museum of Lucknow (Vogel 1925, Pl. 57; Quintanilla 2007, Figs. 39-41). Three curved brackets depict three female figures standing respectively on an anthropomorphic dwarfish figure, a *makara*, and the protome of an elephant. While the figure standing on the *makara* is preserved only from the waist down, the other two are almost entirely readable and they are undoubtedly in the *śālabhañjikā* pose, as they are grasping the branch of a tree. According to Quintanilla (2007: 52), the two *śālabhañjikā*s are so similar in style that we can assume they were produced by the same artistic workshop. They were probably part of a *toraṇa* from a Jaina sanctuary, insofar as Kankali Tila has yielded mostly, if not exclusively, Jaina findings. Presumably, also the figure on the *makara* belonged to the same complex. The fragmentary nature of these pieces and the impossibility of reconstructing the *stūpa*(s) to which they belonged make the parallels with the three *vāhana* types of Bharhut undoubtedly more suggestive than conclusive. Nonetheless, the coincidence is worth noticing.

7. Conclusion

Tracing the development of the *vāhana* phenomenon back to Buddhist art in the *stūpa* of Bharhut shows that the conception of animal and hybrid vehicles associated with divine figures was gradually shaped,

and that it emerged over time in the cultural and religious landscape of ancient South Asia. It appears significant that, in visual arts, the earliest attestations of this association concern such semi-divine beings as *yakṣa*s and *yakṣī*s, who belong to pre-Brāhmaṇical and pre-Buddhist religiosity. They were believed to inhabit a space between the human and divine realms of existence.

When considered together and analysed more closely, these Bharhut *vāhana* figures appear to subsume various layers of meaning. *Vāhana*s are clearly symbolic representations, and, just as all symbols do, they express an array of valences. In Hindu traditions, *vāhana*s are a way to materialise the power of the deity with which they are associated. The lion mount of the South Asian warrior goddess is emblematic in this sense: since the early history (pre-Kuṣāṇa) of this divine figure, the feline symbolises wild ferociousness and war on the one hand and regal power and prestige on the other (Policardi 2024). We may hypothesise that the vehicles accompanying these semi-divine figures who encircle the *stūpa* are intended to symbolise the forces inhabiting the cosmos. Control over these creatures denoting waters, earth, and clouds perhaps meant control over the environment, which was something central in the thought of ancient societies. In the last centuries before the Common Era, this vision was called upon to co-exist with the Buddhist doctrine. Representing these semi-divine beings on *vāhana*s at the periphery of the *stūpa*, while the center was reserved for the Buddha, might have been a way to visually—and spatially—represent the Buddha's mastery and superiority over all cosmic forces. But it is at the same time a way to recognise the existence and power of those divine forces.

Some of the *yakṣa*s and *yakṣī*s were believed to live in the mythological kingdoms ruled over by the four *lokapāla*s, but many were imagined as inhabiting the forests, caves, mountains, lakes, and rivers in the world around humans (Haldar 1977: 146-149; Shaw 2021: 228-231). By allowing them a space in the Buddhist religious building, under the dominion of two (presumably four) directional guardians, they were not denied but acknowledged.

Many other semi-divine figures must have graced the now lost portions of the railing. Furthermore, according to a reassessment of the wider site of Bharhut and its archaeological landscape by Jason D. Hawkes (2008, 2009, 2010, 2011), the monument excavated by Cunningham appears "to have been one of at least three *stūpa*s that were part of a wider complex of contemporary buildings" (Hawkes 2008: 6). Hence, we cannot exclude the possibility that new archaeological findings from the wider Bharhut area might be recovered, opening up new perspectives.

This contribution is an initial attempt to employ the Bharhut *stūpa* as a case study for investigating the formative phase of the *vāhana* phenomenon. I hope that further research, based on both art-historical records and texts, will allow other steps towards an understanding of the thought-world that

imagined the animal and hybrid companions of divine figures, emblems of the rich and multifaceted tension between humans and animals, between humans and the worlds around humans.

References

Primary sources

Abhidhānacintāmaṇi = Hemacandra. 1847. *Hemakandra's Abhidhanakintamani: ein systematisch angeordnetes synonymisches Lexicon.* Edited by Otto Boehtlingk, Charles Rieu. St. Petersburg: Kaiserliche Akademie der Wissenschaften.

Amarakośa = Amarasiṃha. 1941. *Nāmaliṅgānuśāsana, with the Commentary Amarakośodghāṭana. Critically Edited with Introduction, English Equivalents, and Various Indices.* Edited by Har Dutt Sharma and Narahar Gopal Sardesai. Poona: Oriental Book Agency.

http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/1_sanskr/6_sastra/2_lex/amark1pu.htm (last accessed on 27.12.2024).

Āṭānāṭiyasutta = 1890-1911. *The Dīgha Nikāya*. Edited by Thomas William Rhys Davids and Joseph Estlin Carpenter. 3 vols. London: Pali Text Society.

CII II/II = Lüders, Heinrich. 1963. *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum, Vol. II, Pt. II., Bharhut Inscriptions*. Revised and edited by Ernst Waldschmidt and Madhukur Anant Mehendale. Ooctamund: Government Epigraphist for India.

Mahābhārata = 1933–1966. *The Mahābhārata.* For the First Time Critically Edited by Vishnu Sitaram Sukthankar, Shripad Krishna Belvalkar, Parashurama Lakshmana Vaidya. 19 Vols. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute.

Mahābhārata Calcutta edition = 2008. *The Mahābhārata. Sanskrit Text with English Translation.* Edited by Ishvar Chandra Sharma, Om Nath Bimali. Translated by Manmatha Nath Dutt. Vol. II. Delhi: Parimal Publications.

Markaṇḍeyapuraṇa = 1851. *Markaṇḍeya Puraṇa*. Edited by Banerjea Krishna Mohan. Calcutta: Encyclopaedia Press.

Saṃyuttanikāya = 1884. *The Saṃyutta-nikāya of the Sutta-Piṭaka. Part 1: Sagātha-Vagga.* Edited by M. Léon Feer. London: Pali Text Society.

https://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/2_pali/1_tipit/2_sut/3_samyu/samyu1ou.htm

(last accessed 7.08.2024).

Udāna = 1885. *Udāna*. Edited by Paul Steinthal. Vol. 12. London: Pali Text Society.

The *Udāna* commentary = 1994. *Paramatthadīpanī nāma Udānaṭṭhakathā. Volume I. By Dhammapāla*. Translated from the Pāli by Peter Masefield. Oxford: Pali Text Society.

Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa = 1985. *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇam.* Edited by Śrīkṛṣṇadāsa Kṣemarāja. Bombay, 1912. Repr. Nag Publishers, 1985.

Secondary sources

Agrawala, Prithvi Kumar. 1989. *The Kumbhanda Overlord Virūḍhaka*. In: *Ratna-Chandrika: Panorama of Oriental Studies (R.C. Agrawala Festschrift)*, edited by Devendra Handa and Ashvini Agrawal, 67-74. New Delhi: Harman Publishing.

Bajpai, Krishna D. 1967. "New Bharhut Sculptures and Interpretation of Some Inscriptions." *Journal of the Madhya Pradesh Itihasa Parishad* 5: 6-12.

Barua, Benimadhab. 1934-1937. *Barhut*. 3 Vols. Calcutta: University of Calcutta.

Basu, Chandreyi. 2023. *Nonhuman Animals on Unlabelled Sculptures of the Bharhut Stupa Railing*. In: *Chakshudana or Opening the Eyes: Seeing South Asian Art Anew*, edited by Pika Ghosh and Pushkar Sohoni, 187-205. London – New York, NY: Routledge.

Bedeker, V.M. 1969. "Kubera in Sanskrit Literature, with Special Reference to the *Mahābhārata* (from an Earth-Spirit to a God)." *Journal of the Ganganatha Jha Research Institute* 25: 425-451.

Biswas, Tāraṇ Kumar, 1987. *Horse in Early Indian Art*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.

Bosch, Lourens P. van den. 1982. *Yama—The God on the Black Buffalo*. In: *Commemorative Figures*, edited by Theodorus P. van Baaren, 21-64. Leiden: Brill.

Brancaccio, Pia. 2005. "The Making of a Life: Re-Reading Bharhut Sculptures." *South Asian Studies* 21: 7-52.

Brancaccio, Pia. 2022. "Art and Performance in the Visual Narratives at Bhārhut." *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 50: 671-688.

Bühnemann, Gudrun. 2023. *Patterns of Dependency in the Buddhist Tantric Iconography of Nepal.* In: *Embodied Dependencies and Freedoms: Artistic Communities and Patronage in Asia*, edited by Julia Hegewald, 239-252. Berlin–Boston: De Gruyter.

Buitenen, Johannes Adrianus Bernardus van. 1975. *The Mahābhārata, Volume 2. Book 2: The Book of Assembly; Book 3: The Book of the Forest.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Buswell, Robert E., Lopez, Donald S. 2014. *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*. Princeton–Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Conze, Edward. 1967. *Thirty Years of Buddhist Studies: Selected Essays*. Oxford: Bruno Cassirer.

Coomaraswamy, Ananda Kentish. 2001. [I ed. 1928-1931]. *Yakṣas* (2 Parts). New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.

Coomaraswamy, Ananda Kentish. 1956. *La Sculpture de Bharhut*. Paris: Vanoest.

Courtright, Paul B., 2001. *Gaṇeśa. Lord of Obstacles, Lord of Beginnings*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

Cunningham, Alexander. 1879. *The Stûpa of Bharhut. A Buddhist Monument with Numerous Sculptures Illustrative of Buddhist Legend and History in the Third Century B.C.* London: W. H. Allen & Co.

Dallapiccola, Anna Libera. 2012. *Vāhanas*. In: *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, edited by Knut Axel Jacobsen et al. www.brillonline.com (accessed on 4.06.2017).

Darian, Steven. 1976. "The Other Face of the *Makara*." *Artibus Asiae* 38 (1): 29-36.

DeCaroli, Robert. 2004. *Haunting the Buddha. Indian Popular Religions and the Formation of Buddhism*. Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press.

Dehejia, Vidya. 2009. *The Body Adorned. Dissolving Boundaries Between Sacred and Profane in India's Art*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Dehejia, Vidya. 1998. *Circumambulating the Bharhut Stupa, The Viewers' Narrative Experience*. In: *Picture Showmen, Insights into the Narrative Tradition in Indian Art,* edited by Jyotindra Jain, 22-31. Mumbai: Marg Publications.

Donaldson, Thomas Eugene. 2001. *Iconography of the Buddhist Sculpture of Orissa*. New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts–Abhinav Publications.

Ganguli, Kalyan Kumar. 1966. "The Concept of Vahana in Indian Iconography." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 28: 107-112

Geer, Alexandra van der. 2008. *Animals in Stone. Indian Mammals Sculpted through Time.* Leiden: Brill.

Gonda, Jan. 1965. *Change and Continuity in Indian Religion.* London – The Hague – Paris: Mouton & Co.

Ghosh, Arabinda. 1978. *Remains of the Bharhut Stūpa in the Indian Museum.* Calcutta: The Indian Museum.

Gnoli, Raniero. A cura di. 2001. *La rivelazione del Buddha. I testi antichi.* Volume primo. Milano: Mondadori.

Guy, John. 2023. *Tree and Serpent. Early Buddhist Art in India.* New York, NY: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Haldar, Jnanranjan. 1977. *Early Buddhist Mythology*. New Delhi: Manohar.

Hawkes, Jason D. 2011. "A Re-assessment of the Buddhist Stūpa Site of Bharhut." *Pragdhara* 19: 75-87.

Hawkes, Jason D. 2010. *Bharhut and its Wider Regional Context*. In: *South Asian Archaeology 2007,* edited by Pierfrancesco Callieri, Luca Colliva, 133-143. BAR International Series 2133. Vol. 2. Oxford: BAR Publishing.

Hawkes, Jason D. 2009. *The Wider Archaeological Contexts of the Buddhist Stūpa Site of Bharhut*. In: *Buddhist Stūpas in South Asia: Recent Archaeological, Art Historical, and Historical Perspectives,* edited by Jason D. Hawkes, Akira Shimada, 146-174. New Delhi: Oxford University Press India.

Hawkes, Jason D. 2008. "Bharhut: A Re-Assessment." *South Asian Studies* 24: 1-14.

Huntington, Susan. 1985. *The Art of Ancient India: Buddhist, Hindu, Jain*. New York, NY: Weather Hill.

Jacobsen, Knut Axel. 2009. "Sacred Animals." In: *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, edited by Knut Axel Jacobsen et al. Vol. 1. 711-718. Leiden: Brill.

Krishna Murty, Konakondla, 1985. *Mythical Animals in Indian Art*. Delhi: Abhinav Publications.

Mani, Vettam. 1975. *Purāṇic Encyclopaedia. A Comprehensive Dictionary with Special Reference to the Epic and Purāṇic Literature*. Delhi – Patna – Varanasi: Motilal Banarsidass.

Mankodi, Kirit L. 2016. "The Case for Devata Mahakoka from Bharhut." *CSMVS Journal:* 6-15.

Masefield, Peter. 1997. *The Udāna. Translated from the Pāli*. Oxford: Pali Text Society.

Misra, Ram Nath. 1981. *Yaksha Cult and Iconography*. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.

Neelis, Jason. 2010. *Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Networks*. Leiden: Brill.

Niyogi, Puspa. 1977. "Cundā – A Popular Buddhist Goddess." *East and West* Vol. 27, No. ¼: 299-308.

Pelissero, Alberto. 1996. "Il simbolismo animale nell'India antica." In: *Bestie o dei? L'animale nel simbolismo religioso,* a cura di Alessandro Bongioanni and Enrico Comba, 137-154. Torino: Ananke.

Policardi, Chiara. 2024. "The Goddess on the Lion: Animal Symbolism in the Representations of the Female Warrior Deity in Kuṣāṇa and Early Gupta India." *Cracow Indological Studies* 26: 175-204.

Quintanilla, Sonya Rhie. 2007. *History of Early Stone Sculpture at Mathura, ca. 150 BCE – 100 CE*. Leiden – Boston, MA: Brill.

Rao, T. A. Gopinatha. 1914-1916. *Elements of Hindu Iconography*. 2 vols. (4 parts). Madras: The Law Printing House.

Raven, Ellen M. 2020. *Beauty on the Beast*. In: *Religions, Society, Trade and Kingship: Archaeology and Art in South Asia and Along the Silk Road, 5500 BCE-5th Century CE*, edited by Laxshmi Rose Greaves, Adam Hardy, 261-282. New Delhi: Dev Publishers.

Salomon, Richard. 1998. *Indian Epigraphy. A Guide to the Study of Inscriptions in Sanskrit, Prakrit, and the Other Indo-Aryan Languages*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers.

Sharma, Mandira. 2015. "The 'Composite' *Jalacārin* Animals in Ancient Indian Texts and Ajanta." *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 96: 39–56.

Shaw, Sarah. 2021. *The Art of Listening: A Guide to the Early Teachings of Buddhism*. Boulder, CO: Shambala.

Shulman, Eviatar. 2019. "The Protective Buddha." *Numen* 66 (2/3), Special Section: Japanese Studies of Religions: 207-242.

Singh, Upinder. 2009. *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India. From the Stone Age to the 12th Century*. Delhi: Pearson.

Skilling, Peter. 2009. *Redaction, Recitation, and Writing. Transmission of the Buddha's Teachings in India in the Early Period*. In: *Buddhist Manuscript Cultures. Knowledge, Ritual, and Art*, edited by Stephen C. Berkwitz, Juliane Schober, Claudia Brown, 53-75. London: Routledge.

Skilling, Peter. 2001. "Nuns, Laywomen, Donors, Goddesses: Female Roles in Early Indian Buddhism." *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* Vol. 24, n. 2: 241-274.

Skilling, Peter. 1997. *Mahāsūtras, Vol. II.* Oxford: Pali Text Society.

Snodgrass, Adrian. 1985. *The Symbolism of the Stupa*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Sparreboom, Marcus. 1985. *Chariots in the Veda*. Leiden: Brill.

Stietencron, Heinrich von. 2010. *Gaṅgā and Yamunā. River Goddesses and Their Symbolism in Indian Temples*. New Delhi: Permanent Black.

Sutherland, Gail Hinich. 1991. *The Disguises of the Demon. The Development of the Yakṣa in Hinduism and Buddhism*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Thapar, Romila. 1987. "Cultural Transactions and Early India: Tradition and Patronage." *Social Scientist* 15 (2): 3-3l.

Trautmann, Thomas E. 2015. *Elephants and Kings. An Environmental History*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Vogel, Jean Philippe. 1929-1930. "Le *makara* dans la sculpture de l'Inde." *Revue des Arts Asiatiques* Vol. 6, No. 3: 133-147.

Vogel, Jean Philippe. 1925. *Gaṅgā et Yamunā dans l'iconographie brahmanique*. In: *Études Asiatiques publiées à l'occasion du vingt-cinquième anniversaire de l'École Francaise d'Extrême-Orient par ses membres et ses collaborateurs*, Tome second, 385-402. Paris: G. Van Oest.

Viennot, Odette. 1964. *Les divinités fluviales Gaṅgā et Yamunā aux portes des sanctuaires de l'Inde. Essai d'évolution d'un thème décoratif.* Paris: Publications du Musée Guimet, Presses Universitaires de France.

Viennot, Odette. 1954. "Typologie du *makara* et essai de cronologie." *Arts Asiatiques* Vol. 1, No. 3: 189-208.

Viennot, Odette. 1958a. "Le *makara* dans la décoration des monuments de l'Inde ancienne: positions et fonctions." *Arts Asiatiques* 5 (3): 183-206.

Viennot, Odette. 1958b. "Le *makara* dans la décoration des monuments de l'Inde ancienne: positions et fonctions (suite et fin)." *Arts Asiatiques* 5 (4): 272-292.

Waddell, L. Austine. 1912. "Evolution of the Buddhist Cult, its Gods, Images, and Art: A Study in Buddhist Iconography, with Reference to the Guardian Gods of the World and Hariti, The Buddhist Madonna." *The Imperial and Asiatic Quarterly Review and Oriental and Colonial Record,* 3d. ser., 33: 104-160.

Walshe, Maurice. 1987. *The Long Discourses of the Buddha. A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya.* Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications.

Wessels-Mevissen, Corinna. 2001. *The Gods of the Directions in Ancient India. Origin and Early Development in Art and Literature (until c. 1000 A.D.)*. Monographien zur indischen Archäologie, Kunst und Philologie 14. Berlin: Reimer.

Woodward, Frank Lee, Rhys-Davids, Caroline Augusta Foley. 1917-30. *The Book of Kindred Sayings: Sanyutta-Nikāya*. London: Pali Text Society.

Yazdani, Ghulam. 1955. *Ajanta. The Colour and Monochrome Reproductions of the Ajanta Frescoes Based on Photography. Part IV.* London–New York, NY–Bombay: Oxford University Press.

Zimmer, Heinrich. 1955. *The Art of Indian Asia. Its Mythology and Transformations,* edited by J. Campbell, 2 vols., Bollingen Series XXXIX. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.

Chiara Policardi is postdoctoral researcher in Indology at the University of Milan, within the PRIN project "For a Multivocal History of the Attitudes Towards Non-Human Animals in South Asia. Ethics, Practices, Symbolism. Investigating New and Unsolved Issues." Her monograph *Divino, femminile, animale. Yoginī teriantropiche nell'India antica e medioevale* (Alessandria: dell'Orso: 2020) investigates human-animal *yoginī*s in pre-modern Śaiva traditions relying on both Sanskrit texts and iconography. Her main research interests concern on the one hand Hindu feminine deities, on the other hand the significant and multifaceted role of animals in ancient and mediaeval South Asian culture.
Chiara can be reached at: chiara.policardi@unimi.it