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Some Observations on Vārāhī in Bihar and Bengal

ABSTRACT: The sheer intensity of the encounter between the Buddhist and Hindu pantheons in ‘Eastern India’ (comprising the Indian states of Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal and present Bangladesh) from the 7th to the 12th century, was unmatched in any other region.¹ It left, above all, a visual and textual trail in the Buddhist iconography, as attested by the presence of two Mātṛkas (Mothers) among the members of Māra’s army attacking the Buddha on the night of his Awakening, Brahmanical deities being incorporated into the Buddhist world: Vārāhī appears in the Jagdishpur sculpture, and Cāmuṇḍā in a large fragment from a sculpture which must have been as large as the Jagdishpur image and used to stand in Lakhisarai, more fragments of it being preserved in the Indian Museum (Fig. 1).² Further, the key

¹ See Amar 2012 for detailed analysis of this situation.

² This incorporation of ‘Hindu’ deities in the Buddhist world has already been discussed by various authors (for instance Mallmann 1964); however, there are obvious discrepancies between the actual visual evidence and the literary descriptions, where many such deities are mentioned as belonging to *maṇḍalas* or integrated in the iconography of mostly fearsome characters. The Jagdishpur image has been reproduced in various publications; the only paper dealing with a study of the carving was published by John C. Huntington in 1987 (Vārāhī is seen at the level of the proper right shoulder of the Buddha in Fig. 5). The Lakhisarai fragments preserved in the Indian Museum, Kolkata, were collected at Ghosikundi, a village located in the southern part of the area, on the eastern bank of the Kiul river (Bautze-Picron 1991/1992: 255, A.4).

component of Vārāhī iconography,³ the hog head, became an integral part of the images of Buddhist deities like Māricī and Vajravārāhī. The cultural background within which the images of the goddess were incorporated helps to understand this twofold phenomenon, the representation of her being transferred to a Buddhist context and some of her specific features being embedded in the iconography of Buddhist deities.

KEYWORDS: Vārāhī, Cāmuṇḍā, Māṭṛkas, Bihar, Bengal, Gaya, Bodhgaya

Two of seven

Both Vārāhī and Cāmuṇḍā belong to the group of the seven Mothers whose history in Eastern India shows that sets of free-standing sculptures were made in Bihar during the post-Gupta period,⁴ before slabs illustrating the full group were produced after the 8th century (Figs 2–5). Such slabs remained rare in Bengal,⁵ where independent sculptures of

³ The present paper focuses on the material evidence observed in Bihar and greater Bengal. For highly detailed review of the literary sources concerning the goddess, see the observations by Thomas E. Donaldson in 1995: 158–160 and Haripriya Rangarajan in 2004: 61–90.

⁴ A group was found at Saraikela, Singhbhum district (Jharkhand State) (Panikkar 1997: 113–115, with further references & pl. 106–109); another, of three badly damaged images, was found at Mundeshvari (*ibidem*: 90–91, pl. 53–55) while another set of five carvings, roughly sculpted and badly damaged, was found at Pachar, Gaya district: all the images are preserved in the Bihar Museum (Panikkar 1997: 111, 113, plates 100–103). The group is also mentioned as such in an inscription dating back to Kumāragupta I's reign (Tiwari 1985: 102 with further references).

⁵ Rahman 1998: 229 and pl. 224, Haque/Gail 2008: 165, pl. 385 (with further references) shows an unusual panel with nine goddesses, where Indrāṇī is inserted between Vārāhī and Cāmuṇḍā. Three further panels are known to us, unfortunately all badly preserved: (1) Bautze-Picron 1998: 93–94, fig. 259; Ghiraw 2006–2007: pl. 23.1 (a fragment from Gaur). (2) Rahman 1983: fig. 29; Rahman 1998: 229–230, pl. 225; Ghiraw 2006–2007: pl. 23.2 (from Kirtail, Manda, Naogaon district). (3) Shah 2006; 2006–2007: 210–213, pl. 18.6 studied a fragment from a large panel (70 x 80 cm) said

Mothers were apparently favoured, with increased importance attributed to Cāmuṇḍā and Vārāhī, as was the case with all such images throughout South Asia (Tiwari 1985: 106; Mahapatra 2018: 38–39). Both Mothers appeared together in a shrine at Salda, Bankura district (West Bengal) as we shall see (Fig. 20) and both were apparently also present at Deo Baranark, Bhojpur district (Bihar) (Fig. 7).⁶

All seven Mothers were often depicted in a single row as seen in panels which appear to have been carved mainly in Gaya and its region from the late 8th and 9th century onwards (Figs 2–6).⁷ Sitting, or more rarely standing, Cāmuṇḍā appears at the end of this assembly; outside Bihar and in an earlier or coeval period, Indrāṇī was in most cases seen close to her, flanked by Vārāhī on her other side.⁸ However, a major change in this sequence in Bihar had Vārāhī standing or sitting close to Cāmuṇḍā. Compared to other Mothers, both of them display the most

to have entered the collection of the National Museum of Pakistan, Karachi, around 1968–1969; this panel originates from Yogirbhavan, Bogra and was previously preserved in the Mahasthangarh Museum: see Ghiraw 2006–2007: 254, pl. 23.3, with further reference to Haque 1992: 257. It was published twice in the same issue of the *Journal of Bengal Art*, by Shah and by Ghiraw who supplied the precise place of origin of the panel, which apparently escaped the attention of the editors of the Journal.

⁶ Buchanan clearly describes an image of Cāmuṇḍā which he observed during his 1812–1813 survey of Shahabad (Oldham 1926: 12–13; Buchanan 1934: 76–77). It is not mentioned by Henry Bailey Wade Garrick while doing his survey of the site in 1881 but he photographed a representation of a four-armed dancing Vārāhī standing on a corpse supporting her right, now lost, leg (British Library item number 1003468) together with a dancing Vaiṣṇavī (British Library item number 1993467): both goddesses were reproduced by Garrick in his *Survey* (1885: pl. VIII—here Fig. 7).

⁷ For a survey of these panels still in situ in Gaya, see Mevissen 2020a: 229, 232–233 and endnote 16, and in Lakhisarai: Mevissen 2020b: 193–195, fig. 9 (Fig. 9F reproduces the panel here seen in Fig. 4). Fig. 5 reproduces a panel found at Nalanda (Vogel 1906: 218–219, pl. LXIII.1; Misra 1998, Vol. 3: 161–162, endnote 115, Fig. 236).

⁸ Meister 1986: 234–235; Misra 1989: pl. 26, 28–30 reproduce groups from other parts of the Subcontinent. Only one example carved above the sanctum doorway of the Sun temple at Umri (Tikamgarh district, Madhya Pradesh, c. AD 825–850) has been published by Meister illustrating the sequence as seen here of having Vārāhī between Cāmuṇḍā to her left and Indrāṇī to her right (1986: 235, Chart B, Fig. 7). Another rare example has been published by Rangarajan 2004: Fig. 32.

fearsome features; these are part of the personality of Cāmuṇḍā who sits on a corpse and has a dreadful, emaciated appearance whereas Vārāhī shows a more peaceful character, the fearsome features less accentuated: she exhibits an animal head, whereas other Mothers have a human face;⁹ also, her body does not have the slenderness demonstrated by the other Mātṛkas but displays the corpulence of a boar; her mount is a black buffalo which is also the vehicle of Yama.¹⁰ Her stoutness might, moreover, point to her maternal nature by showing her pregnant whereas Cāmuṇḍā's skeletal body would then be a reminder of death. And whereas all the other Mothers except Cāmuṇḍā wear a tiara or a neat bun, the hair of Vārāhī is dishevelled and standing on end (Figs 1, 6).¹¹ Her attributes are the *kapāla* and the fish, the shape of which being similar to that of a knife, she can put one or the other in her mouth—a gesture which recalls that displayed by Cāmuṇḍā who often bites into a corpse, and to these two attributes may possibly be

⁹ Images from Uttarakhand show her with a human face and the hog head attached to the left shoulder: Tewari 2007: 103–104, Figs 11–12 (with numerous references, to which are to be added: Agrawala 1962: 47, Fig. 2, a sculpture from Jageshwar, Almora District, which belonged to a set of Mothers, some of which are preserved in the local museum—this is also the image published by D. C. Bhattacharyya 1980: fig. 28 to whom Tewari refers, correctly assessing the Jageshwar origin whereas Bhattacharyya suggested it originated from Rajasthan).

¹⁰ The animal is also seen in two rare, roughly carved panels recovered in North Bengal (Rahman 1998: 229–239, pl. 224–225), and is her vehicle in other panels showing the seven Mothers produced in North India, outside Bihar; see, for instance: Misra 1989: pl. 16, 25, 29. The buffalo is the main vehicle of the goddess but others are named in the literary sources (Rangarajan 2004: 61–90 *passim*): the elephant, the horse, the owl, the *preta*. The boar is also her *vāhana* in another geographical and chronological context (Meister 1986: 234, chart A); Harper 1989: 124 notes that when the goddess takes on a boar face, her boar vehicle is replaced by the buffalo, for which “there is no extant explanation.” A detailed study of the animal was made by L. P. van den Bosch 1982: 45–48 in particular. The presence of the animal would imply that she is Yāmī according to HariPriya Rangarajan 2004: 76, 78, 103.

¹¹ Donaldson 1995: 176 underlines the dissimilarities in their images, both showing the extreme rendering of the female body which is idealized in the representation of the other Mothers. For a view of the full panel, see Pal 1988: 166–167.

added the bell and hatchet.¹² Whereas the goddess is given the buffalo of Yama as *vāhana*, Cāmuṇḍā is identified with Yāmī, Yama's *śakti*, in the *Varāha Purāṇa* (Rao 1914: 381; Harper 1989: 170).¹³

Vārāhī and Durgā

Not only do Vārāhī and Cāmuṇḍā sit side by side on the relevant panels from Gaya, but they also show points of convergence in their personality and iconography. For instance, in some rare examples from Bihar (Figs 7–8) and elsewhere, the first goddess adopts corpse as her vehicle (Misra 1989: 94, 97; Rangarajan 2004: 107, 109, 138).¹⁴ More than any other Mātṛkā, Vārāhī relates to the Kushan iconography where the goddesses often display monstrous forms with animal heads.¹⁵ The goddess sits on the *mahiṣa*, animal form of the demon vanquished by Durgā, and also the vehicle of Yama, Lord of the Dead. Both deities, Vārāhī and Durgā, are important figures in the religious landscape of Gaya and Bihar right from an early period. West of Gaya, the central image worshiped in the Muṇḍeśvarī temple shows the goddess sitting astride a standing buffalo, holding shield and sword, bow and arrows, and apparently the *vajra* (or the *ghaṇṭā*?), some attributes being partly broken

¹² Her literary iconography shows numerous variances (Donaldson 1995: 158–160).

¹³ She would also be named as such in the *Mahābhārata* (Misra 1989: 2). Both mother-goddesses are clearly related to death (see Harper 1989: 161 on Cāmuṇḍā in this position as opposed to Brāhmaṇī symbolizing the birth of the universe); the name could also apply to Vārāhī (below, note 24).

¹⁴ Both authors mention such examples from the region of Mandsaur (notably Rangarajan 2004: Fig. 21) or Tamilnadu; see also Joshi 1989: 123–124, Fig. 47. The goddess under the name of Vārtālī (a name also given to one of the goddesses attending on Mārīcī in her *maṇḍala*: Mallmann 1986: 56) sits on a corpse in the *Mantramahodadhī* (Bühnemann 2000: 152–153).

¹⁵ Bautze 1987; Panikkar 1997: pl. 4–6, 9–10. In fact, this tradition also found its way to Bihar, as evidenced by some of the Mother images recovered at Nongarh which have been variously dated between the 1st and 6th centuries (Chattopadhyay, Bandyopadhyay 2017: 24, see pl. 3–6; Asher 2000: Figs 5–7).

off; the goddess is evidently represented here as having defeated and disempowered the demon (Fig. 10) (Sharma 2017: 117–119, fig. 340). And, as Meera Sharma reminds us, here Durgā might have momentarily abandoned her lion and jumped over the demon buffalo while fighting the demon as narrated in a passage from the *Vāmana Purāṇa* (Sharma 2017: 118). Further evidence of this concept in Muṇḍeśvarī is offered by a fragment showing the head of the animal that had supported the standing Devī in a type traditionally encountered in South India (Sharma 2017: 175, fig. 449—here Fig. 11).¹⁶ Another rare 7th-century example of this iconography in North India was carved on a boulder at Sultanganj (Fig. 12). Both images remain isolated in the context in which they were discovered and might have been carved at the request of pilgrims coming from South India or returning from there, but they might also reflect “the surfacing in the survival record of a local tradition” as formulated by Vidya Dehejia and Gary Michael Tartakov.¹⁷

Be that as it may, and as also noted by Meera Sharma, both Durgā and Vārāhī share common features, but over and above this observation, the fact remains that all Mothers may also be a part of Durgā’s body, and that both goddesses, together with Cāmuṇḍā, share the most fantastic and fearsome physical features. Durgā, the Mother Vārāhī, and the ferocious emanation Cāmuṇḍā best illustrate the fierce combat which the goddesses lead against the demons.¹⁸ And as shown by the Buddhist community with their representation of terrifying deities arising in a landscape progressively dominated by the Brahmanical temple,

¹⁶ This image named ‘Viṣṇu Durgā’ by H. Rangarajam (2015: 95) should be a form of Vārāhī according to the same author (2004: 108–109, Fig. 20; 2015: 95–96, Fig. 1).

¹⁷ With reference to a similar and earlier image of the goddess found at Besnagar (Tartakov, Dehejia 1984: 323–324, Fig. 18). The depiction at Sultanganj belongs to an extremely interesting panel showing, from left to right, the four-handed Devī practicing asceticism between two fires, two-handed Skanda seated on the peacock, Ekapāda Śiva, the four-handed Devī standing on the buffalo head and the Ekamukhalinga.

¹⁸ “May the three-eyed Vārāhī destroy our group of enemies with the fires emanating from her eyes, she who is the splendour of a lightning (bolt and) who holds with (her) lotus-like hands a noose, a spear, a hammer/mace and a goad.” (*Mantramahodadhi*: Bühnemann 2000, Vol. I: 120).

Durgā and Cāmuṇḍā became major goddesses defending and fighting for the territory gained in Bengal by the Brahmanical institution.

As from the Gupta period, the city of Gaya became a major Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva devotional centre, the placing of Vārāhī and Cāmuṇḍā next to each other might reflect the consolidation of a local alliance between these two main religious currents which were already evidenced in the group of seven Mothers through the presence of Vaiṣṇavī and Maheśvarī. The latter are peaceful goddesses, unlike Vārāhī and Cāmuṇḍā. In the group of seven goddesses, it is Vārāhī and no other female form of Viṣṇu's *avatāras* that is shown: a choice probably made to recall that Varāha rescued the Earth goddess from the ocean depths where she was held prisoner,¹⁹ and that the Mother could act the very same way.²⁰ Moreover, Gaya is a place where rituals for the Dead were performed, making it a site associated with Yama, Lord of the Dead, who rides a black buffalo.²¹ The animal supporting Vārāhī in Gaya might thus be ambivalent, showing the victorious goddess but also illustrating her closeness to Yama.²² In this context, it is worth noting that the *Devīpurāṇa* calls the two-handed monstrous goddess with the face of a hog, seated on the wild buffalo,

¹⁹ Rangarajan 2004: Fig. 17 and 2015: 101, Fig. 8.10 show the Mother in the position traditionally displayed by Varāha looking at the Earth Goddess seated on her left arm near her shoulder. Concerning the Varāha personality and iconography as antecedents to Vārāhī, see Donaldson 1995: 156–158.

²⁰ Assimilation of Bhūdevī occurs in another context: at the moment of his Awakening the Buddha touches the earth whose goddess is depicted emerging and presenting him with a jar of plenty. A reaction to this taking possession of the earth by the Buddha, illustrated with countless sculptures, occurred in Southeast Bengal (Bangladesh) where Bhūdevī is seen in images of Viṣṇu who is her husband (Bautze-Picron 2022: 2).

²¹ On Gaya as a place where rituals are offered for the safety of the soul of the dead: Bautze-Picron 2007: 88; Bautze-Picron 2014: 110–111; Amar 2012: 162–164. From the 8th century this major function of the city exerted a strong impact on the Buddhist community around Nalanda and Kurkihar, as shown by J. Leoshko in her 1985 paper where she studied the image of Amoghapāśa Lokeśvara displaying the function of rescuing the *pretas*.

²² The goddess can also be given noose and club as attributes, which brings her closer to Yama (Donaldson 1995: 177). According to H. Rangarajan (2004: 78), the goddess would be named Yamī in a shrine located in the compound of the Lingaraja in Bhuvaneswar (Donaldson 1995, however, has nothing to say about this possible identification).

by the name of Vaivasvatī,²³ thereby relating the physical appearance of Vārāhī to Yamunā, twin-sister of Yama, both children of Vivasvata.²⁴

A most interesting carving is set into the wall of a passage leading from the Vishnupad Mandir to the Phalgu river; this is possibly the reverse of a double-faced carving which was reused for a lengthy Telugu inscription dated to the year 1444 of the Śaka era,²⁵ the obverse then being hidden in the wall (Figs 8, 19): it shows Durgā and Vārāhī merged into one single icon; the eight-armed, animal-headed goddess kills the buffalo-headed demon rising over a corpse, a motif reminiscent of Cāmuṇḍā iconography but also seen below the Vārāhī at Deo Baranark (Fig. 7). A similar but later image, probably carved in the 11th century, was recovered in North Bengal,²⁶ where depiction of the killing of the demon is in the tradition of Durgā Maḥiṣāsura-mardīṇī (Fig. 13).

Mukhlesur Rahman, Thomas Donaldson, and Haripriya Rangarajan (Rahman 1983: 92–96; Donaldson 1995: 158–160; 2001b: 107–120, Figs 143–156; Rangarajan 2004: 46ff; Panikkar 1997: 55ff) collected all the relevant literary sources where Vārāhī is mentioned or described. They concur in showing her as a war goddess described in the *Devīmāhātmyam* as having emerged from Varāha's body and as one of the seven Mothers leading the war alongside Durgā, there named Caṇḍī, against Śumbha

²³ Rahman 1983: 95, with reference to the textual passage mentioned by T. A. G. Rao 1914, Appendix C: 151.

²⁴ Yama is also known as “son of Vivasvat” or Vaivasvata (Wayman 1959a: 45, 48, 55 and 1959b: 120, 125). Naming the hog-faced goddess thus helps to account for the presence of the tortoise under her left foot in a rare image preserved in the Sagar University Museum, Madhya Pradesh (Misra 1985: pl. XXXIX; Misra 1989: pl. 67; Rangarajan 2004: 101–102, Fig. 17; Rangarajan 2015: 101, Fig. 10). Above note 13 concerning the name Yamī, as śakti of Yama, given to Cāmuṇḍā.

²⁵ Corresponding to 2 July 1541 A. D. (Sircar, Sarma 1959–1960: 110–113, pl. II). One can surmise that this panel, together with further carvings showing Vaiṣṇavī (Fig. 19; Bautze-Picron 1989: Fig. 4) and Varāha (Fig. 9) inserted in the same wall, form a coherent program.

²⁶ Haque/Gail 2008: 258–259 (with further references), Fig. 377 where she is named ‘Kokāmukhā Maḥiṣamardīṇī’ by Enamul Haque; see, however, M. Rahman’s detailed paper of 1973: 156–158, pl. III, and of 1983: 102, Fig. 33 (quoted by H. Rangarajan 2004: 49).

and Niśumbha, after the Great Goddess had vanquished Mahiṣāsura; in a later combat described in the same text, she and the other Mothers emerge from Ambikā's, i.e., Durgā's body, helping the goddess to vanquish Raktabīja. Moreover, as Daṇḍanātha or Potriṇī, she holds a major position in Lalitā's army fighting the demon Baṇḍhāsura in the *Lalitopākhyāna* (*Brahmāṇḍapurāṇa*) (Rangarajan 2004: 84, note 18). The interaction between both goddesses, Durgā and Vārāhī, continued throughout the centuries, as illustrated by a 17th-century painting belonging to the 'Tantric Devī' series from Basohli/Nurpur, showing the ten-armed Vārāhī seated on a tiger which occupies the place of the lion as *vāhana* of Durgā.²⁷

The goddess alone

Free-standing images of the goddess, dated between the 11th and 12th centuries, were apparently found only in Bengal. Whereas the buffalo is a constant feature in the panels showing the whole group of Mothers, the animal is very rarely retained as vehicle in independent representation of the goddess (Fig. 20 and Rahman 1989: pl. 22). A small seated male character is depicted beneath a 7th–8th-century sculpture belonging to a set of Mothers recovered at Saraikela in Singhbhum District (Fig. 14); he appears in some later 11th–12th-century carvings from Bengal where he may also be replaced by a figure in a flying position depicted as if supporting the goddess and possibly identified with Garuḍa²⁸ (Fig. 15);

²⁷ The goddess is evoked in the Sanskrit inscription on the reverse of the painting, "Her lotus eyes quiver through drinking wine/Equal in glory to a thousand suns/ Seated upon a lion/Of ten arms/In my heart I praise Vārāhī" whereas she is called "Vairahī" on the obverse (Goswamy/Smith 2005: 190–191).

²⁸ Seven images are considered here: (1) Bandyopadhyay 1999: 231–238, pl. I (South 24 Parganas), see 236 and her notes 20–24 where other examples found in Bengal are listed. (2) To be added to the references given by Bandyopadhyay 1999 for the image in the Asutosh Museum: Rahman 1983: Fig. 30; Rangarajan 2004: 126 & Fig. 58. (3) To be added to the references given by Bandyopadhyay 1999 for the image in Malda Museum: Chakrabarti and Chattopadhyay 1992: 148–149, Fig. 13. (4) For the carving from North Bangladesh and with unknown present location cited in Bandyopadhyay 1999,

in the 12th-century carvings from North Bengal, a small standing *gaṇa*-like figure is depicted on the pedestal (Figs 13, 22), possibly side by side with a buffalo (Fig. 22; Rahman 1983: 99–100; 1989: pl. 22).²⁹

The two-armed Saraikela goddess has a powerful body and sits in a peaceful attitude, legs wide apart and feet firmly planted on the ground (Shah, Gupta 1968: 155, Fig. 7; Panikkar 1997: 113–114, pl. 108, with further references). Another early image of the two-armed goddess was recovered in the Hooghly district,³⁰ whereas later images dated between the 11th and 12th century and recovered in Bengal represent her with four arms and holding sword and shield, skull and fish. Garuḍa supports Vaiṣṇavī in the set of seven Mothers and his probable presence beneath Vārāhī in Bengal would appear to underline her link with Viṣṇu whereas Cāmuṇḍā, the other major Mother in Bengal, shows evident signs of links to Śaivism.

It is therefore probably no coincidence that the 9th–10th-century images of these two Mātṛkas stand side-by-side in a shrine located at Salda (Bankura district) (Fig. 20, Chattopadhyay 2010: 192, plates CIV–CV); both images are outstanding in their depiction of the goddesses: the standing two-armed Cāmuṇḍā has a beautifully-adorned human body; with her face slightly distorted by a twisted smile and framed by hair cascading over her shoulders, she holds the *kapāla* and probably the *khaṭvāṅga*, and stands on the gently-smiling *mahāpreta* mentioned

note 24 as having been published by M. Rahman (1989: 62–63, Fig. 22), add Rahman 1983: 99–100. (5) Another similar stela is preserved in the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco (Bautze-Picron 1995: Fig. 24). (6) Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi inv. 223: Rahman 1983: Fig. 31, Rahman 1998: 232, cat. 591. (7) Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi inv. 65: Rahman 1983: 99; Rahman 1998: 231, cat. 589 (pl. 230); Haque/Gail 2008: 163, pl. 208 (with further references). Rahman 1998: 232, cats 590 (pl. 231), 592 describes two further fragmentary images (see also Rahman 1983: 99).

²⁹ Donaldson 1995: 171 observes that the small male figure (*nāra-vāhana*) belongs to the early phase of the goddess' iconography, later replaced by the buffalo.

³⁰ Rahman 1983: 99; 1998: 232, cat. 590, pl. 231. This might have been part of a larger sculpture showing other Mothers: her seated attitude and head turned to her left recall her image in the panels.

in literary sources, who supports her right foot with his hand,³¹ and is also present in the Vārāhī sculpture at Deo Barunark (Fig. 7). Like the image of Vārāhī which shows stylistic features encountered in Orissa as suggested by R. K. Chattopadhyay (2010: 192), Cāmuṇḍā wears jewelled ornaments recalling the art of the region. Vārāhī is close to a group of two- or four-armed goddesses from Orissa; better preserved, these sculptures show the *kapāla* and the fish in the main hands, noose and goad in the others (Donaldson 1995: 173).³²

In a Buddhist context

Like numerous other Brahmanical deities, Vārāhī appears in *maṇḍalas* described in contemporary Buddhist literary sources (Bhattacharyya 1958: 364; Mallmann 1986: 434–435): in one case, she rides on the back of an owl, is four-handed and presents fish in a right hand and skull in a left, while holding the other two hands in *añjalimudrā*; in another case, she holds sword and staff in her right hands, chain and shield in her left hands³³ and has buffalo as her *vāhana*. These two descriptions were evidently made to some extent on the evidence of the panels mentioned above. The same can be said of her image in Māra's army in the Jagdishpur image (Fig. 1), where she is among the demons and Hindu deities that belong to this army (Bautze-Picron 1996: 122–124; 2010: 111–116) and holds the very same set of attributes presented in a panel, now preserved in the Indian Museum (Fig. 3): fish and skull, bell and hatchet. None of

³¹ Chattopadhyay 2010: 192 suggests the attribute may be a dagger; however, the attribute, now mostly destroyed, was long and reached her shoulder; see Mallmann 1963: 153 on the *mahāpreta* and her note 2 mentioning that the *khaḍga* replaces the *khaṭvāṅga* in one manuscript.

³² Let me add here a broken but outstanding carving of Varāha standing at Gokulnagar (Chattopadhyay 2010: 168 & pl. LXII), a village located one kilometre south of Salda, which shows stylistic features from Orissa (Donaldson 2001b: Figs 128–141).

³³ Mallmann 1986: 435 note 4 suggests this identification of the ploughshare (*hala*) mentioned in one text is mistaken, being in reality the shield (*phala*) which forms a pair with the sword.

the other Mothers apart from Vārāhī and Cāmuṇḍā seem to have been depicted in this particular position, the emaciated goddess being also seen in what remains as a fragment of Māra's army (Bautze-Picron 1996: fig. 21); in similar depictions of this army noted in Southeast Bengal, both goddesses are not present, but Durgā belongs there to the assailants' troop (Bautze-Picron 1996: 128, and 2010: 113–114). Durgā was and remains the most important female deity in Bengal, which might explain how she was integrated into Māra's army together with numerous other major male Hindu deities, all appearing as a permanent threat in the eyes of the Buddhist community. The presence of Cāmuṇḍā in such a group, as seen in the Lakhsarai fragment of the 12th century, coincides with her prominent position in the Bengali religious landscape of the 11th and 12th century, when she was depicted in numerous images (Melzer 2008–2009: 138–143), whereas the appearance of Vārāhī in the 10th-century sculpture of Jagdishpur finds an echo in her image as seen in the panels of Mothers. In all these cases, the appearance of one or the other was not by chance but responded to a contemporary social and religious situation, the Buddhist community being confronted with the growing importance of the Brahmanical temple.

Included in the army of demons in the Jagdishpur image, Vārāhī was evidently perceived as highly negative in this particular position. Besides her fearsome aspect, which might have led to her depiction here, she has the same vehicle as Yama, who was identified with Māra and thus figured out as an enemy of the Buddha to be feared: the *Kṛṣṇayamārikalpa* tells how the Buddha evoked Yamāntaka, i.e. the 'defeater of Yama,' in order to destroy Māra and Yama: "At the time when the Teacher was demonstrating on the Diamond Seat (*vajrāsana*) the taming of Māra at dusk ([Tib.] *srod*), for the purpose of taming Māra and Yama he caused Yamāntaka and retinue (*parivāra*) to manifest, as the Tantras say." (Wayman 1959b: 126; Bautze-Picron 1995/1996: 373 and endnote 85). Moreover, as previously observed, Śiva Andhakāsuravadhamūrti is possibly present in Māra's army in the Jagdishpur sculpture,³⁴ depicted

³⁴ Bautze-Picron 2010: 116, Fig. 20, and facing him is an image having the standing position of Śiva Tripurāntakamūrti (*ibid.*: fig. 21). I am thankful to Gudrun

above Vārāhī who, with the other Mātṛkās, assisted Śiva in his fight against the demon Andhaka (Rahman 1983: 92; Panikkar 1997: 64; Rangarajan 2004: 49).

Yamāntaka is a *krodharāja* or ‘sovereign of wrath’ in the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* (Wallis 2002: 37) where he is described in the most dreadful aspect possible and given the greatest power, enabling him to destroy ‘the rulers of death’ and force all beings, including Mothers and other Brahmanical deities, to enter the *maṇḍala* to receive Buddhist teaching (*ibid.*: 82–84, 164). In this context, putting an end to Yama’s power also implied that his vanquisher took possession of the god’s vehicle, and that Yama’s kingdom was, ipso facto, assimilated: the impressive sculpture of the god now preserved in the Mahant compound at Bodhgaya (Fig. 18; Bautze-Picron 1995/1996: 372–373), together with the Trailokyavijaya image standing near it, were probably the most awe-inspiring testimony to this belligerent development.³⁵

Assimilation of significant visual elements is a major tactic in conquering new spaces and defeating their owners. The personality of Mārīcī that emerged at Bodhgaya is another example of a deity who had the function of driving off the darkness and personified the light filling the universe at the moment of the Awakening; elaboration of her image found its inspiration in various aspects displayed by Hindu gods and goddesses. In the initial phase of her existence, all her faces are human and she borrows the seven horses from Sūrya (Fig. 17), which are very soon replaced by seven hogs; this assimilation takes a more decisive turn when she and her four female attendants display the most

Melzer for having brought to my attention an image of Vārāhī (Fig. 22) which entered the collection of the Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi in 2009 (inv. 2009.01) and of which I was not aware: this beautifully preserved sculpture shows a buffalo on the pedestal and a set of seven deities distributed above the goddess. We recognize Śiva Andhakāsuravadhamūrti alone at our left and Vaiṣṇavī symmetric to him at our right, both flank a group of five Mothers, Cāmuṇḍā, Maheśvarī, Brāhmaṇī, (most probably) Indrāṇī and Kaumārī from left to right.

³⁵ On Trailokyavijaya, see Amar 2012: 175–177. Both images were studied in detail by Linrothe 1999: 162–166, 199–203.

obvious iconographic feature of Vārāhī, i.e. the hog face (Fig. 21), or when only her central face is human (Fig. 16).³⁶ We can surmise that taking possession of the Sun god's vehicle, and substituting heavy hogs for the spirited horses also constituted an audacious sign of putting down the ideology conveyed by the Hindu god in most of his images: he is replaced by a female deity and his horses are demeaned; she is depicted in the active position of victory while he stands in an attitude of perfect equipoise; she is multi-headed, the hog face as one of her side faces, and multi-armed while he has one face and two arms. Various opinions have been expressed regarding Mārīcī's animal face and the animals of her vehicle,³⁷ but since the goddess subdued hogs—and Vārāhī is the hog-faced goddess par excellence who is closely related to Yama in Gaya and the region—it can be surmised that by extension, Mārīcī circuitously overcame the Mother here; she stands moreover at the centre of a *maṇḍala* where the inner row of female attendants are also sow-faced and might bear names encountered in Hindu literary sources (Mallmann 1986: 56). Similarly, she also confronted Yama: being the light which arises at the very moment of Awakening, she opposes the ruler of the dark world of the dead. Throughout her history in Eastern India, standing in her stance of victory and armed with various weapons, and there being the “rays of light” pervading the universe at the very moment of the Awakening, this deity proves the best agent in promoting and defending the monastery as an established institution, the social importance of which was then declining in Bengal. The numerous sculptures representing her and collected in Southeast Bangladesh attest to this role. Besides her, and in a clearly esoteric

³⁶ Bautze-Picron 2001: 265–266: the elaboration of her iconography shows various attempts of integrating this particular animal element into her personality (she can even have two such faces in this early period as seen in Fig. 18); Donaldson 2001a: 306–328 presents a highly detailed study of the goddess in Orissa where she held and still holds an important position (see also Donaldson 1995: 178–181; Mahapatra 2018).

³⁷ *Ibid.*: 264–265, and more recently Kim 2013: 53–54 (who rightly demonstrates that the Buddhist goddess shows similarities with Durgā).

context, Vajravārāhī was to emerge as the most dreadful deity having absorbed the Hindu goddess (English 2002: 47–49).

Conclusion

Religious images are more than images of deities offered to the devotion of the faithful; they emerged, took on their own features and evolved over time within specific sites or regions, also in response to a situation where their makers were facing other ideological religious movements. In the religious landscape of Bihar, Gaya held a strong ideological and economic position which the Buddhist monasteries were faced with and to which they tried to react in different ways in the course of time: in the 8th and 9th centuries, Avalokiteśvara was highly venerated as rescuer of the *pretas* from the world of the dead in a region that stretched from Kurkihar, east of Gaya as far as Nalanda and its area; from the late 9th or 10th century, it was at the Vajrāsana, located some ten kilometres south of Gaya, that a strong reaction arose, with the creation of icons including Mārīcī and Yamāntaka. Another aspect of this encounter saw Buddhist authors massively incorporating Hindu gods and goddesses in the descriptions of their *maṇḍalas*, thus forming part of a virtual reality that had emerged within the monastic sphere, whereas the presence of some of them as members of Māra's army in stone images from Bihar or South Bengal belonged to the public sphere, viewed in a wholly negative light (Bautze-Picron 1996). The Mothers as a group appear in textual sources describing *maṇḍalas*, but in the real world two of them, Vārāhī and Cāmuṇḍā, were depicted in sculptures produced in the 10th and 12th centuries, at Jagdishpur and Lakhisarai, both sites being in Bihar. It was also these two goddesses that presented a fearful aspect unseen in the case of other Mothers appearing in the numerous panels showing this group, produced between the 8th and the 10th centuries.

Acknowledgements

I wish to express my gratitude to colleagues and friends for generously sharing information or photographs with me: Abhishek Amar, Sudipa Ray

Bandyopadhyay, Joachim K. Bautze, Rupendra Kumar Chattopadhyay, Gudrun Melzer, Subha Majumder, Gerd J. R. Mevissen, and Vikash Vaibhav.

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Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

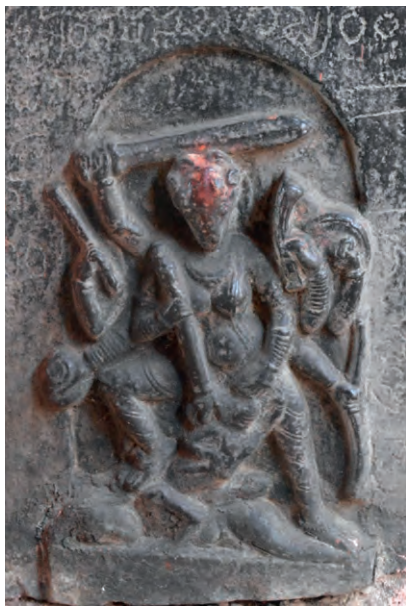


Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14



Fig. 15



Fig. 16



Fig. 17



Fig. 18



Fig. 19. Walled-in sculptures of “Durgā-Vārāhī” and Vaiṣṇavī, path running from the northern entrance of the Vishnupada towards the Phalgu river, photo courtesy of Abhishek Amar



Fig. 20. Vārāhī and Cāmuṇḍā, Salda, Bankura district, West Bengal, photo courtesy of Subha Majumder



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