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The Goddess on the Lion

Animal Symbolism in the Representations of the Female Warrior Deity in Kuṣāṇa and Early Gupta India

ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on the genesis of the association between the Indian warrior goddess and the lion. As is well-known, this is a goddess with a multifaceted identity, who evokes both imperial grandeur and village cultic practices. This figure cannot be identified as Mahiṣāsūramardīnī or Durgā in any Pre-Kuṣāṇa and Kuṣāṇa text or inscription. A considerable influence on her burgeoning representation was probably exercised by Nanā, a Hellenistic goddess, who takes on characteristics of the Mesopotamian Inanna-Ištar, typically associated with lions. Significantly, in the early centuries CE, this feline was still a widespread species on the Subcontinent and had already become identified as the fiercest wild predator, informing the long-lasting lion-warrior imagery. While the background and the rise of Durgā have been the object of several studies, relatively little attention has been paid to her symbolic association with the lion as a key perspective that may contribute to providing a deeper understanding of both the shaping and the significance of this divine figure. By analysing some of the most significant of the earliest iconographic and textual representations, this paper is an initial attempt to employ the feline attribute as a prism to trace the earliest phase in the historical process of the development of the goddess. It may provide insights regarding both the degree of entanglement between local cults and early Hinduism, and the interrelation between the

representation of this warrior goddess and kingship ideology in Kuṣāṇa and early Gupta India.

KEYWORDS: lion *vāhana*, warrior goddess, Nanā, Maḥiṣāsuramardīnī, Vindhavāsīnī, Kuṣāṇa, early Gupta, Durgā

This contribution focuses on the genesis of the association between the Indian female warrior deity and the lion. As is well-known, this is a goddess with a multifaceted identity who evokes both imperial grandeur and village cultic practices. Indeed, her iconography and later her mythology denote an inextricable and deep connection with kingship. At the same time, various characteristics indicate that she is strongly related to indigenous traditions. This goddess has been assigned various epithets, among which, since the 6th century, the name Durgā stands out next to Caṇḍī or Caṇḍikā. She probably represents the most dramatic and powerful equation of war with a deity.

While the background and the rise of this deity have been the object of several studies (e.g. Divakaran 1984, Coburn 1988, Stietenron 2005, Yokochi 2013, Sarkar 2017), relatively little attention has been paid to her symbolic association with the lion as a key perspective that may contribute to providing a deeper understanding of both the shaping and the significance of this divine figure. This paper is an initial attempt to employ the role of the feline attribute as a prism to trace the earliest phase in the historical process of the development of the goddess. By analysing some of the most significant of the earliest iconographic and textual representations, this approach may provide insights regarding both the degree of entanglement between local cults and early Hinduism, and the interrelation between the representation of this warrior goddess and kingship ideology in Kuṣāṇa and early Gupta India. I shall only mention the fight with the buffalo demon when it is relevant to the chosen perspective.

The presence of the lion since the early history of the goddess is not of secondary importance. As is well-known, an animal, be it real or fantastic, is associated with most of the Hindu deities as their *vāhana*. Scholars quite unanimously assume that the vehicle connotes the sphere

of the god's influence, symbolising his or her nature or function. The mount, however, is not the god or goddess's alter ego, but there is a constant and reciprocal allusive relationship between a deity and his or her *vāhana*. There is a play of reflexes that at the same time expands the divine personality and vividly expresses his/her distinguishing features. As a rule, a vehicle allows a deity to be identified, but there are cases where the same *vāhana* is shared by different divine figures (Dalpico 2012). For each deity, the association with the respective vehicle is attested from a different date—for example, while Indra rides the four-tusked white elephant Airāvata right from the ancient times as reflected in the epics (Bose 2020: 311), Gaṇeśa appears to be associated with the bandicoot or the mouse consistently only from the 6th century onwards.

The lion associated with the goddess is both a symbolic expression of the valences and functions attributed to her but also a reflection of religio-historical processes. In the early centuries CE, this carnivore was still a widespread and common species on the Subcontinent.¹ The feline was probably a recognised presence in the environment and human interactions with it were still significant, presumably oscillating

¹ According to Thapar et al. 2013, lions (and cheetahs) were brought to India from Africa and Persia by royalty around the times of Alexander the Great's appearance at the borders of India, and in the Subcontinent these animals would thus play the role of "exotic aliens." However, studies based on genomic data (mitochondrial DNA; see e.g., Barnett et al. 2014) establish that lions arrived in India well before the Vedic period as a consequence of an out-of-Africa migratory wave caused by cyclical changes in African climate. Representations of the lion occur in the earliest Indian textual and art-historical sources, namely in the *R̥gveda*, where the *simha* is mentioned with striking frequency, and in Mauryan monumental art, where this large wild cat is glorified, appearing as a symbol of both royal authority and aspects of the Buddha's personality (Gokhale 1974: 113–115; Divyabhanusinh 2008: 57–72; Thapar et al. 2013: 37). An indirect indication that lions were still living across parts of the Subcontinent in antiquity is that they were present in Greece and Asia Minor at that time (A. van der Geer, personal communication, 10 February 2023). A drastic decline in lion population in India took place because of the increasing sophistication of weapons, which climaxed with the spread of firearms from the 16th century onward, and due to deforestation and other forms of anthropic interference in the environment.

between awe and terror. This animal held a prominent place in the Indian imagery related to animals: it had already become identified as the fiercest of the wild predatory animals and as the king of beasts. In other words, the representation of the lion was already part of the ancient Indian cultural vocabulary (Divyabhanusinh 2008: 53–79).

The figure of a warrior goddess associated with a lion cannot be identified as the Hindu *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī* in any Pre-Kuṣāṇa and Kuṣāṇa text or inscription, at least on the basis of the available evidence. The earliest sources are material records—coins, reliefs, and sculptures—as we are about to see. As Srinivasan (1997: 283) argues, this goddess is “seemingly bereft of roots in Brahmanism as well as Buddhism and Jainism.” A recent study by Lubin (2020) confirms that the Vedic treatments of *Durgā* do not allude to an association with a lion or to a battle with a buffalo demon.²

Interestingly, a considerable influence on the burgeoning representation of the Indian warrior goddess was presumably exercised by the goddess *Nanā* or *Nanaya*, a Sumerian-Akkadian and then Hellenistic deity. Running the risk of simplifying the complexity at stake, we can state that *Nanā* herself took on some characteristics of a more ancient Mesopotamian goddess, *Inanna-Ištar*, who is closely associated with love, war, kingship, and lions, as attested from the 4th millennium BCE onwards. *Nanā* first appears in the Mesopotamian lists of gods in the Ur III period (c. 2112–2004 BCE), and in some texts is mentioned alongside *Inanna* (Parpola 2015: 256; Westenholz 2014: 172–173). Then *Nanā* is found to be worshipped beyond the ancient Near East, her cult spreading to the West and the East. According to Askola Parpola (2015: 256),

Nana came to Bactria with the lapis lazuli trade by the end of the third millennium BCE, probably via Susa, where this goddess apparently had a temple around 2300 BCE and where her worship continued until Hellenistic times.

² For the association also of *Lakṣmī* with the lion see Srinivasan 2016, Raven 2020.

Possible attestations of the cult of Nanā are found in regions that were under the domain of the Śakas and the Kuṣāṇas. The Kuṣāṇas adopted this goddess as one of their deities, making her their main royal patron (Francfort 2012: 130; Falk 2015). She is depicted as sitting or standing on a lion on several Kuṣāṇa coins and is especially prevalent on the coinage of Kaniška (c. 127–153 CE) and Huviška (c. 153–191 CE). The goddess bears a lunar crescent on her head and her name is often written on the border of the coin, either in Greek as Nanaia or in Bactrian as Nanā (Fig. 1) (Falk 2015).

In addition to the coin images, a few rare seals from the North-West depict Nanā, such as a chalcedony seal now held in the British Museum, dated to the 2nd century CE (Fig. 2). Here too, the goddess has a crescent on her head and sits side-saddle on a lion; she also holds a sceptre with a lion protome.

Such an image also seems to have inspired some of the early Gupta coins (Altekar 1957: 27–38, Pl.I.6–13). In particular, a goddess accompanied by a lion was engraved on the reverse side of coins struck by Candragupta I and his queen Kumāradevī (319–335/336 CE) (Fig. 3). The third Gupta ruler seems to have elevated the dynasty to the imperial status also thanks to the matrimonial alliance with the Licchavis, which led him to crowning the Licchavi princess Kumāradevī as his queen. The female figure on the lion on the reverse of the coin might be considered a symbolic representation of Kumāradevī who guaranteed the legitimacy of the Gupta dynasty. The style in which the goddess is depicted sitting on the lion and the way she wears her upper garment are likely to be inspired by a coin type of the late Kuṣāṇa king Kaniško, probably Kaniška III, issued in the 3rd century (Altekar 1957: 27–38). As is well-known, coins travel, carrying with them, as they pass from hand to hand, images and symbols that are as much an expression of religiosity as of political power. According to Anant S. Altekar (1957: 31)

The selection of the Lion device from the type of Kaneshko may probably be due to *Simhavāhinī* Durgā being the tutelary deity of the Licchavis, whose exclusive name appears on the reverse.

The importance of the goddess on the lion for the Kuṣāṇas is further attested by the finds from the Kuṣāṇa dynastic site at Māt, near Mathura, which was the Kuṣāṇa's winter capital. At Māt, the royal *devakula* ("house of gods"), along with the famous portrait statues of the Kuṣāṇa sovereigns, yielded the lower part of a standing female figure, with a couchant lion visible behind her legs (Fig. 4) (Ghose 2006: 99). That this figure represents the goddess Nanā seems to find confirmation in an inscription discovered in 1993 in northern Afghanistan, at the site of Rabatak (Sims-Williams 2004). It is from the first year of Kaniṣka I, most probably 127 CE. The text states that the king Kaniṣka derived his kingship from the goddess Nanā. This suggests that Nanā had a cult of her own, still in vogue during the 2nd century CE, and that she was one of the most important deities in the Kuṣāṇa pantheon. In particular, the inscription indicates that the Kuṣāṇas employed the image of the goddess as a symbol of the legitimacy of their dynasty. It is also worth noting that the stone bearing the inscription was found together with fragments of a sculpture of a lion (Ghose 2006: 99, 104 n. 42; Falk 2015: 266).

A warrior goddess, often associated with a lion, is also represented on several reliefs and sculptures of the early centuries CE from different sites on the northern Indian Subcontinent but found in large numbers almost exclusively in the region of Mathura. As is well-known, this was the area which saw the blossoming of the Subcontinent's earliest indigenous school of art that in many ways engendered Hindu visual forms. Srinivasan (1997: 282) identifies two distinct typologies of warrior-type goddess icon,

either (1) she stands straight, without her adversary, but sometimes with the lion crouched beneath her feet [...], or, (2) she stands with her weight on her right straight leg and the weight of the buffalo on her left bent leg, while her arms do battle with him.

In this early phase the goddess overcomes the buffalo by breaking his spine and strangulating him with her main hands which hold no weapons.

The first iconic type seems more closely associated with a lion. An example is a sculpture from Mathura (Fig. 5) representing a two-armed female figure standing facing forward on a lion couchant whose face is turned towards her. She holds a trident in her left hand, while her half-raised right hand is in *abhayamudrā*. But the second type, generally known as the Kuṣāṇa Mahiṣāsūramardīnī type, can also be accompanied by a lion, as in the case of the small stone relief from Mathura reproduced in Fig. 6.

In another example from Mathura, a red sandstone relief dated to the late Kuṣāṇa period, the goddess wrestling the buffalo demon stands on the back of two lions (Fig. 7). The latter have been interpreted as “visual synecdoches” insofar as they would allude to a lion throne (Srinivasan 1997: 290), but this is not beyond doubt. She also holds aloft a floral garland with two of her top hands,³ and with another pair of arms she holds a sun and a moon disc in each hand. The sun and moon discs, the wreath of victory, and the lion are typical elements of Nanā’s iconography, represented here according to the local Mathuran style (Sarkar 2017: 27).

At the height of their hegemony, the Kuṣāṇas ruled over a political unit that incorporated ample territories of the northern Indian Subcontinent and part of the Iranian domain. The latter was familiar with Hellenism and different religious streams. The removal of political barriers led to a more fluid circulation of men, trade, and beliefs in such a wide area. The Kuṣāṇa civilization enjoyed indeed a syncretic and eclectic character (Mukherjee 1985: 410; Falk 2019; Srinivasan 2022: 60–62). This is reflected in the Mathura relief in Fig. 7, where components of different origins are merged together in the iconography of the Indian warrior goddess.

If we now consider the early Gupta period, a terracotta plaque from Nagar, Rajasthan (Fig. 8) shows the goddess with her left foot on the head of a lion crouching in the lower left corner, while her lower left arm, instead of encircling the buffalo’s neck, is pulling its tongue from its mouth. On account of its iconographical features, various scholars

³ This object is discussed by Srinivasan 2022.

(Viennot 1956; Mitterwallner 1976: 205) date this figure to around the 4th century CE.⁴

But the early Gupta type of Mahiṣāsūramardīnī is best preserved in four reliefs at Udayagiri in Madhya Pradesh. As is well-known, this site is one of the most emblematic for the early Gupta sculpture of Hindu inspiration. For some scholars (Mitterwallner 1976: 202; Yokochi 2004: 116 n. 92) the relief on the north wall of the courtyard in front of Cave VI (Mitterwallner 1976: Fig. 4) and the other one on the outside wall of Cave XVII on the proper left of the doorway (Fig. 9) appear to show the goddess, with her raised left leg, resting on a rock that looks like a lion.⁵ However, since this part is heavily eroded in both reliefs, it is very difficult to assess. Nonetheless, we can hypothesise that, if the object on which the goddess's left foot rests were a lion, she would assume the same pose in these two Udayagiri reliefs as she does in the image from Nagar (Fig. 8). According to Gritli von Mitterwallner (1976: 202):

In all three reliefs: in the one of Nagar and the two of Udayagiri, the lion does not yet take an active role in the fight between the Goddess and the buffalo as in the later mediaeval images of Mahiṣamardīnī. He merely serves as a sort of footrest, facing away from the Goddess to the proper left, uninterested in the fight taking place above him.

But, rather than uninterested, the lion might be portrayed as subjugated or domesticated by the goddess: in the visual language of the subcontinent, the act of placing a figure beneath one's foot (or feet) patently expresses the power of the character who is standing on or trampling someone or something; indeed, it demonstrates that the figure who is trodden upon has been defeated (Bühnemann 2023). The very representation of the goddess as Mahiṣāsūramardīnī will undergo a significant transformation over the centuries, so that, while in the Kuṣāṇa

⁴ Instead, Agrawala (1958: 124–127) ascribed it to the period between the 1st century BCE and the 1st century CE.

⁵ In the most famous representation of Mahiṣāsūramardīnī at Udayagiri, the one on the façade of Cave VI, the lion, seemingly, does not appear.

representational type, as mentioned, she strangulates the buffalo, fatally embracing him, by the beginning of the 7th century the goddess is usually represented pressing the buffalo's hindquarters downwards with her foot or knee, symbolising his defeat (Stietencron 2005: 131–143). It is thus worth considering that, in these representations of Durgā belonging to the Gupta cultural milieu, the connection with kingship and royalty might also be expressed by the act of overpowering a lion, which was most presumably the typical exploit of a sovereign. For example, gold coins of Candragupta II known as “lion slayer type,” show, on the obverse, the king slaying the lion with an arrow and placing his foot on the animal (Divyabhanusinh 2008: 70).

It might be questioned whether type 1—a standing warrior goddess without an adversary—and type 2—a goddess holding the buffalo up by its neck—portray one and the same deity. However, the similarity of the weapons, ornaments, and the presence of a lion or lions in several examples of both typologies lead to the assumption that the two might be considered as different representations of one and the same goddess. Srinivasan (1997: 282) proposes calling her the Warrior Goddess, avoiding the usual epithet *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī* since “there are no records, to date, which name the *Kuṣāṇa* Goddess.” In other words, for this goddess there is neither an attested name nor any mythology in the available pre-Gupta Indian sources.

As Yuko Yokochi demonstrated in her studies (2004, 2013), the early history of the goddess consists of different currents that converge and give rise to a single, more inclusive, but nonetheless multifaceted figure that emerges as a supreme deity. One of her most conspicuous traits is her warrior nature, which was likely derived from a variety of bellicose goddesses worshipped in peripheral or tribal contexts with unorthodox rituals involving bloody sacrifices and alcoholic offerings. Some of these goddesses were deeply rooted in a specific place; it was believed that they were the divine beings who ultimately held power over the territory, protecting it or devastating it. *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī* and *Vindhyavāsīnī* were probably among the most powerful and representative of these figures; they also had the role of protectors of the cosmic order through their demon-slaying feats. The warrior goddess

thus unfolded as a powerful means of drawing rural or tribal goddesses into mainstream Hinduism, absorbing them into herself.

The name Vindhyaśinī, “the Goddess who dwells in the Vindhya mountains,” may have been a common appellation for several female deities whose cults dotted the mountain landscape. Indigenous groups living in the Vindhya mountains presumably propitiated this fierce and liminal lady of war, who was thought to have control over death and thus presided over battlefields. She is characterised as a dark-skinned virgin, riding a chariot drawn by lions (Yokochi 2004: 3, 54–55). Unlike Mahiśasuramardīnī, whose killing of the buffalo shapes a specific iconography, Vindhyaśinī does not seem to be portrayed in a defined iconic type.

One of the earliest texts that describes Vindhyaśinī is the *Harivaṃśa*. Generally considered as an appendix to the *Mahābhārata*, the *Harivaṃśa* seems to have reached its final form between the 1st and 4th century CE (Sarkar 2017: 111–112, n. 30). This work attempts to incorporate the warlike goddess into the Bhāgavata/Vaiṣṇava mythology: Vindhyaśinī is assimilated on the one hand to Nidrā, Kṛṣṇa’s dark-skinned virginal sister, who is the female personification of Viṣṇu’s cosmic sleep, and, on the other, to Ekānaśā, Kṛṣṇa’s foster-sister (Yokochi 2004: 57–78). The *Harivaṃśa* appears to be the earliest written source to explicitly indicate that the lion is the vehicle of the Devī. This association, however, is not found in the critically reconstituted text of the *Harivaṃśa*, published by Parashuram Lakshman Vaidya in 1969–1971, but occurs in two hymns to the Goddess that are comprised in appendices to the text in some manuscript versions and which are thus quite difficult to date with certainty (Coburn 1988: 281–289).⁶ In particular, the lion mount appears in the so-called Pradyumna’s hymn (embedded in Appendix I 30 to *adhyāya* 99): “I bow to the one mounted on a lion, having as her emblem the best of lions” (v. 372).⁷ In another hymn (inserted in Appendix I 35 to *adhyāya* 108), which, according to the narration, is pronounced by

⁶ These appendices are collected in Vaidya’s second volume (1971).

⁷ *siṃhavāhāṃ namasyāmi siṃhapravaraketanām* || HV_App.I,30.372.

Aniruddha, the goddess is defined as *siṃharathā* (v. 34),⁸ a compound that may indicate a figure either standing on a chariot drawn by lions or riding a lion; such a descriptor is nearly identical to the one found in *Skandapurāna* (SkP) 29.197a (see below).

But the entire myth cycle of the goddess Vindhyavāsīnī, or better Kauśikī-Vindhyavāsīnī, is narrated in the so-called early or original SkP. This text is one of the oldest Śaiva Purāṇas, probably composed in North India around the 6th century by a group of Śaiva brahmins affiliated to the Pāśupata tradition, as illustrated by various scholars working on the critical edition of this voluminous text (with the oldest manuscript dated to 810/11 CE; see, among others, Yokochi 2013: 33–76). The myth of Vindhyavāsīnī’s fight against the demon brothers Sumbha and Nisumbha narrated in the SkP (62–66) probably informed the account of the same feats in the *Devīmāhātmya* (DM 5–11), even though in the latter text the myth was no longer set in the Vindhya mountains.

In the narration of the SkP, Vindhyavāsīnī is frequently identified with Kauśikī, while Pārvatī at times incorporates the goddess Kauśikī-Vindhyavāsīnī; both Pārvatī and Kauśikī-Vindhyavāsīnī are often associated with lions. Pārvatī is portrayed as “riding an excellent vehicle to which big lions are yoked” (SkP 32),⁹ and as *siṃharathinī* (SkP 29.197a), a compound that portrays her as riding a chariot drawn by lions or with a lion as her vehicle. Such an association with lions is among the traits that indicate the assimilation of Kauśikī-Vindhyavāsīnī into Pārvatī’s persona (Yokochi 2004: 54–55).

In another passage, in a eulogy dedicated to Pārvatī by Viṣṇu, the latter affirms that the goddess, standing on the top of Mount Meru, shines like the sun, riding on a lion with a swaying golden mane (SkP 60.49).¹⁰ At this juncture Yokochi (2004: 117) interestingly argues that,

⁸ *varāṅganām siṃharathām bahurūpām vṛṣadhvajām* || HV_App.I,35.34.

⁹ *mahāsiṃhayuktātīvāhām* (Yokochi 2004: 54).

¹⁰ *bhāsi siṃham samārūdhā calatpīṅgalakesaram | dīptā prabheva sāvitṛī meru-mūrdhānam āsthitā* || (Yokochi 2004: 117 n. 95).

Because the subsequent two verses describe her [Pārvaṭī] as fighting with demons on the battlefield, shooting arrows in 50 and wielding a battle-axe in 51, her riding on a lion in 60.49 is also likely to have been associated with her bellicose aspect and, along with her fighting with demons in 50–51, would have originated in myths of a warrior-type goddess or warrior-type goddesses who was/were assimilated into Pārvaṭī by the time of the composition of the *Skandapurāṇa*.

Moreover, a few verses earlier (SkP 60.45), the text alludes to a buffalo sacrifice offered to the goddess by her devotees—a mention that seems to confirm the convergence of martial goddesses into the figure of Pārvaṭī as conceived by the SkP (Yokochi 2004: 98–99, n. 54).

In the Vindhyaśinī myth proper, the goddess is described as fighting in a chariot drawn by lions. Such a vehicle differentiates her from ordinary warriors, whose chariots were drawn by horses. The text narrates that when Pārvaṭī assigns Mount Vindhya to the goddess Kauśikī as her abode, she endows Kauśikī with a chariot, which is described as “a large, divine chariot, radiant like the sun, drawn by lions” (SkP 58.22, Yokochi 2004: 114). Several verses later, at the beginning of the fight with the troops of the demons, the goddess’ chariot is brought into sharper focus: it is “drawn by mighty lions with yellow manes flying, who were conquerors of hostile armies in battle” (SkP 64.39, Yokochi 2004: 115).¹¹ Moreover, according to the narration (64.20–26), before her fight against the demon Sumbha, Kauśikī had multiplied herself through the power of yoga and a number of goddesses had emerged from her limbs. Remarkably, each of these deities is said to be accompanied by women having the head of a specific animal or bird, who form the army of the main goddess Kauśikī (Yokochi 2004: 104–105). Interestingly, the text mentions (64.40b) the fact that Kauśikī’s charioteer is a female figure named Simhī, an appellation that evokes leonine characteristics. Indeed, she

¹¹ The lion-drawn chariot finds a significant parallel in representations of the goddess Cybele; for possible contacts and influences with this Hellenistic goddess, see Yokochi 2004: 117, n. 98. For evidence of the Cybele cult in Bactria see Francfort 2012.

may be animal-headed, that is lion-headed, just like the other figures who flank the goddess in battle.

In this respect, of great interest is an inscription found near Chhoti Sadri in Rajasthan (Pratapgarh District), in a temple now dedicated to the goddess Bhramaramātā. The inscription records the construction of a temple for a goddess by Mahārāja Gauri of Malwa in a year that, according to Lakshminarayan and Sircar (1953–1954: 122) and more recently Salomon (2021: 273), corresponds to 490–491 CE. The *praśasti* addresses the goddess simply as Devī, and the way in which she is described lets us presume that she is identified with Pārvatī. Nonetheless, it is not clear to which specific goddess king Gauri dedicated the temple. Interestingly, in the first stanza she is characterised as a martial, triumphant goddess, who defeats demons with her sharp spear, riding “with terrifying speed a chariot yoked with fierce lions.”¹² This inscription predates the SkP, hence such a description of a goddess on a chariot drawn by lions is not inspired by this text. On the contrary, it proves that the image of a warrior goddess associated with lions was not invented by the editors of the SkP, but rather the text bears witness to cults that were in vogue in those centuries (Yokochi 2004: 118–121).

As is well-known, one of the most important texts for the cult and myth of the Goddess in India is the *Devīmāhātmya*, embedded in the *Mārkaṇḍeyapurāṇa*. This text was previously ascribed to between the 5th and 7th centuries, following the dating proposed by Thomas Coburn in his pivotal study on the subject (1984). However, in light of other and different typologies of sources, scholars have demonstrated that the composition of this work should be ascribed to the 8th century (Yokochi 2004: 21–23, n. 42), a period in which the figure of the goddess was already crystallised. Thus, for the present inquiry the DM is relevant as the culminating point of a tradition, which presupposes earlier developments; in other words, what is interesting is the world behind and preceding the text, considering the time it took

¹² 1c: *siṅghogra-yukta-ratham āsthita caṇḍa-vegāḥ*. Sanskrit text and translation according to Salomon 2021: 275.

for a divine figure emerging in the religious landscape to be literally fixed in a Sanskrit text. Various elements in the narrative fabric indicate that the work was probably composed in royal environs, and

[t]hrough public recitations of this text in the Navarātra and other rituals for the Goddess, the king who sponsored them could have demonstrated that he assumed the power (*śakti*) and authority of the Goddess. (Yokochi 2004: 25)

Two earlier demon-slaying goddesses, Maḥiṣāsuramardīnī and Vindhyaśinī, were woven into the figure of the great Devī in the DM. The association with the lion mount is here one of the goddess' defining traits, providing a vivid impression of her martial nature as well as her splendid majesty. One of her epithets is indeed *siṃhavāhinī* (e.g., *adhyāya* 2, v. 35b), and the lion is a crucial ally in the fights against the demons, particularly against Maḥiṣa (*adhyāya* 3, 7, 14, 16). The feline mount is one of the iconic traits that impress the demons the first time they see the goddess:

Then they [Caṇḍa and Muṇḍa] saw the Goddess abiding (there), smiling lightly, sitting astride her lion, on a great golden peak of (Himālaya) king of mountains.¹³

According to the narrative, the lion is indeed donated to the goddess by Himālaya, the god personifying the mountain realm on the fringes of civilization.¹⁴ In light of Vindhyaśinī's contribution to the evolution of this pan-Indian martial goddess, it is at least worth considering that such a gift of the lion by Himālaya might have, mythologically, reflected her tribal and mountain roots.

¹³ *dadṛśus te tato devīm iṣaddhāsām vyavasthitām\ siṃhasyopari śailendraśṛṅge mahati kāñcane. Adhyāya* 7, v. 2. Sanskrit text according to Passi 2008: 379, translation Passi 2008: 300.

¹⁴ *himavān vāhanaṃ siṃhaṃ ratnāni vividhāni ca (adhyāya* 2, v. 30ab) Sanskrit text according to Passi 2008: 353.

With regard to such an association with the lion, I find Srinivasan's argument (1997: 298) particularly compelling:

[...] it would seem that the Goddess has assimilated into her iconography a motif originating from non-Indian sources but sufficiently familiar in the local traditions so as to be capable of being assimilated.

This idea of a historical dynamic of convergence may be corroborated bringing into clearer focus an already complex picture.

As mentioned, there was still a lion population in North and Central South Asia in the early centuries CE. In the cultural and religious imagery of ancient India, this feline had already become an idiom of prowess and power, in both literary and iconographic vocabulary. Undoubtedly, this cultural fascination is not limited to South Asia or to a certain period in history.

A large cat, gregarious in nature, noisy with its frequent roars, diurnal in habit, easily observable in open country, and often unafraid of man, the lion allowed itself to be seen as the king of the natural world by man very distinctly. (Divyabhanusinh 2008: 61)

The morpho-ethological characteristics of this animal, namely prowess, splendid majesty, supremacy, virility, and ferociousness, patently paved the way for its connection, in religio-historical processes, with royal power and martial sphere. In other words, the ancient ecological scenario and the empirical observations of animal behaviour on the one hand, and the cultural resonances of these and the models of symbolic representation, which answered the ideological needs of human society on the other, were among the most important factors that directly or indirectly supported the emergence of the association between the warrior goddess and the lion.

Moreover, as is known, symbolic associations survive for a long time once they have been established as part of a repertoire. In particular, the symbolic value of an animal species does not necessarily vanish with the animal's extinction. In texts belonging to different

domains of ancient and mediaeval Indian literature, the lion is invariably considered as the king of beasts and frequently employed to evoke power—its strength and nobility being qualities required in rulers and warriors. Thus, lion metaphors inform long-lasting king and warrior imagery (Pontillo and Sudyka 2016: 287–297; Sohoni 2017: 227, 232; Bose 2020: 148–149; Vemsani 2023: 3).

The warrior goddess's association with the lion connects her to at least three closely interrelated spheres: a wild, indomitable nature; the sanguinary ferocity of a warrior ready to fight; and majestic appearance, prestige, supremacy. These themes conflate into her granting sovereignty to the ruler. The goddess herself, as a proctress of the stability of the world through her demon-slaying feats, is to some extent analogous to a monarch.

As mentioned above, the close relationship between the cult of a goddess of a warrior type associated with a lion or with lions and a royal dynasty in South Asia is attested at least from the early Kuṣāṇa period onwards. The Kuṣāṇa sovereigns, just like all ambitious rulers, aspired to military success on the one hand, and to the legitimisation of their own power on the other. Scholars have shown that these rulers, rising from clan chiefs to sovereigns, adopted a wide range of royal titles, belonging to different cultural contexts, to legitimise their rights to throne and to secure loyalty of the subjects and feudatories (Rosenfield 1967: 202–206). The goddess Nanā was considered by the Kuṣāṇas as the foremost deity from whom the kings could receive royal investiture (Ghose 2006; Falk 2015); in other words, she was an integral part of the Kuṣāṇa modes of empowering the sovereign.

In the early centuries of CE, elements characteristic of the foreign figure of Nanā, a goddess already evoking imperial grandeur, subsumed into the emerging representation of the Indian warrior goddess.¹⁵ As mentioned above, the lion was already associated with the Indian demon-slaying warrior goddess one of whose names and

¹⁵ Neither Mukherjee (1969, 1985) nor Srinivasan (1997: 282–304) argue that the goddess is of foreign origin, but both indicate several elements of her iconography that appear to reflect foreign influences.

manifestations was Vindhyavāsinī. There was a degree of intermingling between local cults with early Hinduism, and the process was also informed by foreign influences especially thanks to the syncretic cultural and religious climate fostered by the Kuṣāṇas (Falk 2019). The iconography of the goddess on the lion, thus, took shape, and it subsequently thrived for centuries because of its capacity to meet the needs and clusters of meanings already expressed in local traditions.

The two levels, local and imperial, indigenous and foreign, might be considered as subsumed by the emblem of a lion. Indeed, this animal is not only a vital symbol for tribes of hunter-gatherers, often living in the mountains or in areas perceived peripheral to civilization,¹⁶ but also an essential one for sovereigns, for whom the hunting of lions became a marker of royal prowess. Clearly, hunting was also a way to legitimise royal power over a region, while the king was simultaneously identified with the dominant predatory animal (Divyabhanusinh 2008: 71–79).

In every culture, humans define themselves by non-humans. When they overpower an animal, they acquire, or seem to themselves to acquire, its qualities. Killing the strongest, most feared animal, you show yourself to be the strongest, most feared of men. (Padel in Thapar et al. 2013: 293)

The lack of more records of lion presence in the hill areas of India may be due to the lack of literate hunters in these regions (cfr. Schnitzler and Hermann 2019: 344).¹⁷

¹⁶ Dębicka-Borek 2019: 166–167. Also, the manifestation of Viṣṇu as Narasimha, Man-Lion, is associated with caves, mountains, and forested regions (Vemsani 2023: 72, 88).

¹⁷ Durgā is consistently associated with the lion in classical mythological accounts, iconography treatises, and ancient and mediaeval images, but the tiger might appear as an alternate, especially in post-mediaeval centuries. Tigers frequently co-occurred with lions in many habitats in Asia during the Holocene, but historically they have been less vulnerable to human hunting, because they prefer thick vegetation, while lions lived in more open landscapes (Schnitzler and Hermann 2019). While lions progressively decreased in numbers and thus faded from the human experiential horizon, the tiger presumably offered another symbol of

The preoccupation with power legitimation will accompany Indian kings throughout the mediaeval times. In this period, states quickly rose and fell, and tribal kingdoms tried to gain a more advantageous place on a fluid political map, whose borders were continuously re-defined by the ongoing regional warfare. The foundation of a kingdom and the acceptance of the sovereign by the indigenous communities depended closely on the adoption and elevation of local female deities. As Bihani Sarkar (2017: 146) remarks,

[t]he religious cults that developed in the vast majority of medieval Indian courts to enhance the divinity of the king all derived their key symbols (manifested in legends and rituals) from the ancient goddesses of the realm held to protect the royal lineage from its inception.

In brief, in the early history of the Indian goddess, the lion functions as a symbol of wild ferociousness and war and, at the same time, as one of regal power and prestige. In such an animal vehicle, ecological perceptions, symbolic re-elaborations, and foreign influences are interwoven. The warrior goddess associated with the king of animals will enjoy such great fortune in the history of Hindu religion because she had the capacity to integrate and link local and royal levels of power expression.

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strength and might, equal in prowess to the lion, but different in behaviour, since this stealthy feline is a nocturnal and solitary hunter and lives in dense jungles full of terrors for man (Divyabhanusinh 2008: 61–65; Bose 2020: 117–182).

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Fig. 1. Goddess Nanā sitting astride a standing lion, both facing right, reverse of a gold dinar of the Kuṣāṇa king Huviṣka (r. c. 155–189 CE). At right, the legend in Bactrian reads: Nano. British Museum (acc. no. 1888,1208.555). Photograph: © The Trustees of The British Museum



Fig. 2. Goddess Nanā, shown in profile seated side-saddle on a lion, crowned with a crescent, intaglio seal. Chalcedony, from Gandhāra, 2nd century CE. British Museum (acc. no. 1892,1103.100). Photograph: © The Trustees of The British Museum



Fig. 3. A goddess is seated facing forwards on a recumbent lion facing the left, reverse side of a gold dinar of Candragupta I (ca. 320–330 CE). On the right, the legend in Brāhmī reads: *lichchhavayaḥ*. British Museum (acc. no. 1910,0403.2). Photograph: © The Trustees of The British Museum



Fig. 4. Fragment of a standing female figure, with the head of a couchant lion visible behind her legs. From Māṭ, Kuṣāṇa period. Government Museum, Mathura (acc. no. 214A).
Photograph: courtesy of Doris M. Srinivasan



Fig. 5. Warrior Goddess from Mathura, ca. 2nd century CE.
Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin (acc. no. I 5894).
Photograph: courtesy of the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin



Fig. 6. Warrior Goddess wrestling the buffalo, from Mathura, Kuṣāṇa period. Government Museum, Mathura (acc. n. 2317).
Photograph: Chiara Policardi



Fig. 7. Warrior Goddess wrestling with the buffalo, standing on the back of two lions, from Mathura, late Kuṣāṇa period. Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin (acc. no. I 5817). Photograph: courtesy of the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin



Fig. 8. Warrior goddess, terracotta plaque from Nagar (Rajasthan), 4th century CE. Photograph: after Agrawala 1958, Fig. 1



Fig. 9. Durgā on the outside wall of cave XVII, Udayagiri, Madhya Pradesh. 5th century CE.

Photograph: © Regents of the University of Michigan



Fig. 10. Four-armed Durgā seated on her lion vehicle, probably from Uttar Pradesh, 9th century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (acc. no. 1990.15). Photograph: © The Metropolitan Museum