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## **Vīrabhadra, the Dreadful Destroyer of Sacrifice Representations in Plaques from South India**

**ABSTRACT:** When Śiva is not invited to the great sacrifice organised by Dakṣa, his bride Satī's father, he emanates from himself the terrible Vīrabhadra, who completely destroys the sacrificial arena. The remote origins of this mythical story, which is extensively narrated especially in the Purāṇas, lie in some myths concerning Rudra, Śiva's Vedic-Brahmanic precursor. The cult of Vīrabhadra spread throughout South India during the Vijayanagara empire, mainly thanks to the Śivaite sect of the Vīraśaivas. The long-lasting diffusion of his cult is also demonstrated by the wide production of metal plaques depicting this god. A few years ago the art collectors Paola and Giuseppe Berger donated a conspicuous collection of these plaques to the Veneranda Accademia Ambrosiana of Milan; they are currently on display in the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana. Many of these plaques are possibly attributable to the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and their exact provenance cannot be defined at the present stage of studies, but most of them presumably come from Karnataka. They show an almost constant basic iconography, but also a wide range of different artistic languages. Here we propose a general analysis of this repertoire, and a more detailed description of some of the specimens.

**KEYWORDS:** Vīrabhadra, Vīraśaivas, Vijayanagara, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana

These pages focus on a collection of metal plaques depicting Vīrabhadra, a terrible hypostasis of the god Śiva, donated by the private collectors Paola and Giuseppe Berger to the Veneranda Accademia Ambrosiana of Milan, Italy, and on display in the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana since 2018.<sup>1</sup> It is a collection of great importance, probably the largest public collection of this type of artefacts currently in existence. The numbering of the exhibits, together with some provisional notes, was done by Marilia Albanese; there is no catalogue. To the best of our knowledge, this category of objects has never been exhaustively studied.<sup>2</sup>

## The myth

The myth underlying the figure of Vīrabhadra, the “Excellent hero,” is one of the most famous in the Hindu tradition. It is narrated, with rich variations, in a large number of Sanskrit works, from the *Mahābhārata* (XII.274; XII Appendix 1 No. 28), to many Purāṇas. *Locus classicus* may be considered the *Śiva Purāṇa*, which expounds the story in two different parts of the text (*Rudrasaṃhitā*, *Satīkhaṇḍa*;

<sup>1</sup> The exhibition, completely centred on Vīrabhadra, consists of 75 objects, including 67 solid plaques made, as we shall see, by casting or embossing; the detached pedestal of one of these; three cast openwork plaques; a small stone stele attributable to the 16<sup>th</sup> century that is probably the oldest object in the collection; a gold pendant; a mould, and a metal statuette. Here we deal specifically with the solid plaques, the most universally widespread type of such artefacts.

<sup>2</sup> On Giuseppe Berger and his activity as a private collector, see Freschi 2022. Berger’s extensive collection of objects depicting Vīrabhadra, which includes plaques and other artefacts, is dealt with by Albanese and Freschi 2022. Some of the plaques illustrated in the present article are also reproduced there. An article in Italian on these plaques has been recently published by the present author in the Proceedings of the *XIII Dies Academicus* of the Accademia Ambrosiana (Pieruccini 2023). I sincerely thank Marilia Albanese who so generously made some of her unpublished material available to me; and likewise Paola Berger and Renzo Freschi, for their kindness in enriching my expertise. The numbering, dimensions, and some of the material specifications of the objects examined here are, of course, those of the Pinacoteca.

*Vāyavīyaśaṃhitā*, I.18–23). Other Purāṇic narratives include *Vāyu Purāṇa* I.30; *Liṅga Purāṇa* I.99–100; *Kūrma Purāṇa* I.14; *Skanda Purāṇa* I.1.1–5 (32); and *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* IV.2–7.<sup>3</sup> Here we summarise the general outlines of the myth, reproducing, with some slight modifications, a synopsis given by David Shulman on the basis of various sources (Shulman 1978: 112–113; cf. 1980: 113):

Śiva married Satī (also called Umā), the daughter of the Prajāpati Dakṣa; but Dakṣa did not like his son-in-law and refused to honor him. Dakṣa performed a great sacrifice, but he did not invite Śiva or reserve a portion for him. Sage Dadhīca tried in vain to convince Dakṣa to invite Śiva. Satī, hearing of the sacrifice, begged to be allowed to go there, and Śiva gave her permission. She upbraided her father for not inviting her husband; then, in anger, she entered the fire and died (or burned herself by yogic fire). Śiva came as Vīrabhadra (together with Bhadrakālī, in some versions) to destroy the sacrifice; he uprooted the sacrificial stakes, plucked out the eyes of god Bhaga, knocked out the teeth of god Pūṣan, and cut off Dakṣa's head with the sacrificial knife. When the wrath of Vīrabhadra was appeased, and Dakṣa had acknowledged the greatness of Śiva, Śiva restored the sacrifice and put a ram's head on Dakṣa. Then Śiva took up the corpse of Satī and danced with it over the face of the earth. Viṣṇu, fearing that the wild dance would destroy the world, cut Satī's body into pieces. Wherever a part of the corpse fell, a shrine was consecrated.

In the latter part, the myth is connected with the *pīṭhas*, i.e. the “seats,” of the cult of divine feminine power (*śakti*), which is to be considered a later addition (Sircar 1948: 6–7).

<sup>3</sup> For the myth underlying the figure of Vīrabhadra, its sources, variants and connections, and its interpretations, with regard to both Sanskrit and Tamil traditions, an essential bibliography includes Sircar 1948: 5–7 and Appendix III; Shulman 1978; Shulman 1980: 110–131, 317–346; Doniger O'Flaherty 1976: 272–286; 1981: 128–130, 214, 249, and *passim*; Kramrisch 1981: 301–335 in particular; Klostermaier 1985; Mertens 1998; Ramasso 2003; Rajarajan 2009: 5–50, useful despite being somewhat naïve. On contemporary Coastal Andhra cults connected with the appeasement of victims of untimely deaths, especially children, who become fearsome *vīrabhadras*, Knipe 1989 and 2005.

The Purāṇic descriptions of Vīrabhadra evoke a divine being of immense and invincible power, with terrible and shocking features, both dazzling and marvellous. The following is an excerpt from the *Vāyavīyaśaṃhitā* of the *Śiva Purāṇa* (I.19.25–33, transl. Shastri 1970):

He had a thousand faces, a thousand lotus-like eyes. He was holding a thousand iron clubs, thousands of arrows, spear, axe, mace, bow, discus and the thunderbolt. He looked fierce and terrible. The crescent moon adorned his crest; the thunderbolt illuminated his hands. His hair shone like lightning. He had a huge mouth terrible with the curved fangs and a huge belly. His tongue was like lightnings. His lips hung down. His voice sounded like the cloud and the ocean. He wore the tiger's hide dripping with blood. He ear-rings formed circles close to his cheeks. He had adorned his crest with the garlands from the heads of leading gods. He was bedecked in golden shoulderlets and jingling anklets. He was shining with heaps of gems. His chest was covered by necklaces. He was equal in exploit to the great fabulous animal Śarabha, tigers and lions. His gait was gentle and majestic as that of a stately elephant in rut. His lustre was white like conch, chowrie, Kunda flower, moon and the lotus-stalk. He was like the snow-capped lord of mountains who had become mobile. Flames surrounded him. Wearing pearl ornaments he shone brilliantly as the fire at the dissolution of the world.

Here we can only give an extremely brief summary of the prodromes of this myth,<sup>4</sup> which involve extensive and complex discourses on the Vedic-Brahmanic world and on the very genesis of the divine figure of Śiva. In the early Vedic literature, Dakṣa is one of the progenitors and patriarchs of the whole of creation; in the late Vedic period, this ancient role develops into his homologation with Prajāpati, who in this religious phase becomes the creator god par excellence. This is why he starts to be also called Prajāpati Dakṣa, as we have already seen. Later, in the Epic and Purāṇic tradition, Dakṣa is presented as the father of a numerous group of divine daughters, including Satī, given

<sup>4</sup> We refer in particular to Sircar 1948: 5; Long 1977; Kramrisch 1981: 3–70, 220–227, and *passim*; Doniger O'Flaherty 1981: 70–76, 114–117, and *passim*. See also footnote 3.

in marriage to gods; in the myth of Vīrabhadra we see him play the role of the Brahman who officiates at the sacrifice of the great tradition. It is also important to stress that, according to Brahmanical doctrines, Prajāpati himself is considered a personification of these sacrificial rites. As for Śiva, or rather Rudra, the Vedic god who precedes the classical Śiva in the Vedic-Brahmanic literature, his originally disturbing and marginal characteristics are well-known. Sacrificial offerings, and often only their leftovers, are granted to him with difficulty and hesitation.<sup>5</sup> According to a very famous myth, by shooting an arrow he interrupts the incestuous intercourse between Prajāpati and his daughter Uṣas, the Dawn, who flee in the form of a stag and doe. The divine seed is scattered but cannot go to waste: from it sacrificial rites arise, and divine beings and living creatures are generated. These are the strands that converge in the Epic-Purāṇic myth of Vīrabhadra.

Mythologically, the story of Dakṣa's sacrifice "was the culmination of Rudra's aeivternal struggle for recognition by those gods who had been critical of him from the beginning" (Kramrisch 1981: 325–326). Regardless of other possible implications, this myth in its basic connotations appears to reflect persistent antagonism and difficulty in admitting Śiva into the Brahmanical religious sphere, represented by the great "priest" Dakṣa. Śiva's inclusion in the "high" religion takes place through violence, a violence that in the mythical tale, we think it possible to assert, may sublimates—or reflect—potential or actual, and perhaps very concrete, social and religious disagreements and clashes.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> In this connection, a passage from the *Gopatha Brāhmaṇa* appears to be particularly significant. Prajāpati excludes Rudra from the sacrifice; Rudra "pierces" the sacrifice and takes a part of it (II.1.2). There follows the maiming of various deities who approach this dismembered sacrifice; Bhaga is blinded for looking, and Pūṣan loses his teeth for eating it. The maiming of these gods also returns, as we have seen, in the myth of Vīrabhadra.

<sup>6</sup> Klostermaier (1985) interprets the myth from the perspective of the "conquest" by Śivaite currents of the important *tīrtha* of Kanakhala near Haridwar. The socio-political approach to this myth proposed in Upadhyay 1973 is also interesting, although we do not find his specific arguments very convincing.

## Vijayanagara and beyond

The plaques under consideration have their origins in the spread of the cult of Vīrabhadra that occurred in Vijayanagara and its territory, in the Deccan and South India. As is well known, the great city of Vijayanagara, which corresponds to the modern village of Hampi in Karnataka, flourished from 1336 onwards, becoming the capital of a vast empire. After the city was destroyed in 1565 by a coalition of the Deccan Sultanates, the last rulers established a new capital at Penukonda and then at Chandragiri (both in the present-day Andhra Pradesh) and reigned over a limited territory until the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century. In the meantime, South India was fragmented under the Nāyakas (“Governors”), while the European colonial powers had entered the political arena.

In the development of the cult of Vīrabhadra in Vijayanagara, the contribution of the religious sect of the Vīraśaivas, the “Śivaite heroes,” appears to have played a decisive role. Their historical origin is commonly attributed to Basava, a religious leader and reformer who lived in Karnataka in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. They are also known as Liṅgāyats, or “Bearers of the *liṅga*,” due to their practice of wearing a small *liṅga*, a symbol evoking the divine essence, usually in a small box around their neck.<sup>7</sup> In many respects, this movement presented itself as subversive to canonical Hinduism: it advocated, among other things, the abolition of castes (although in a way these would later become part of the system), the elevation of women’s status, and the total rejection of sacrifices of the Vedic-Brahmanic tradition and of a cult based on the representation of the divinity in images. However, the latter orientation

<sup>7</sup> Strictly speaking, the two terms Vīraśaivas and Liṅgāyats are only partially synonymous, but they are commonly used interchangeably also by scholars; for the sake of simplicity, here we adopt the designation Vīraśaivas. This religious current is still represented in Karnataka and adjoining territories and can count perhaps ten million devotees; in recent years, the community has made an official demand to be recognised as members of a separate religion, distinct from Hinduism. The bibliography on the Vīraśaivas / Liṅgāyats is extensive: for brevity, here we merely mention the general introduction by Michael 2011.

underwent a change in Vijayanagara, probably because the Kālāmukhas, another Śivaite sect devoted to the iconic cult of a terrible form of Śiva, were absorbed into their fold, and also to better compete with the other actively-practiced religions, like Viṣṇuism and Jainism, in which images played a fundamental role.<sup>8</sup> In this context, the Vīraśaivas adopted Vīrabhadra as their iconic deity, which is perfectly in line with their principles since in this manifestation Śiva plays the role of the great destroyer of the sacrificial rite. Moreover, this warlike figure is in accord with the sect's militant and aggressive attitude. The subversive role of Śiva/Vīrabhadra evoked by the myth can therefore still be read at this time; indeed, it appears to be at the very heart of his cult.

The Vīraśaiva community became very influential in Vijayanagara, not least because some important personages, including for instance two ministers of the very powerful king Devarāya II (r. ca 1426–1446), were followers of this creed and offered their patronage. Several other South Indian rulers supported this sect, in particular the Nāyakas of Keladi-Ikkeri; in their kingdom, that lasted from the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century until its fall in 1763, Vīraśaivism was the official religion (Schouten 1995: 15–16, 259). It is also noteworthy that the cult of Vīrabhadra in Vijayanagara appears to have been adopted by predominantly mercantile social strata; it has been suggested that this fighting god may have represented a kind of ideal encouragement and protection for merchants, exposed as they were to the dangers of trading voyages, and because of the frequent and often violent contrast with the essentially agrarian social strata that were, on the contrary, of Vaiṣṇava devotion (Sarojini Devi 1987: 9–12).

In Hampi, i.e. in the ancient city of Vijayanagara, there are two important temples dedicated to Vīrabhadra; neither is very significant from an artistic point of view, but they are remarkable for other features.<sup>9</sup> One stands spectacularly on the highest point of the city,

<sup>8</sup> For these remarks and more generally on the Vīraśaivas in Vijayanagara, see in particular Sundara 1988: 106; Sarojini Devi 1987; 1990: 54–57 and *passim*; Verghese 1995: 23–25, 112–113 and *passim*.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. among others Balasubrahmanya 1985: 133; Devakunjari 1998: 46; Verghese 1995: 24.

Mataṅga Hill, and can perhaps be assigned to the beginning of the kingdom, despite the various modifications over time and the fact that the image in worship today is probably not the original. The other is today known as Uddhāna Vīrabhadra, and an epigraphic record documents that a statue of Mudu Vīraṇṇa, i.e. Vīrabhadra, was installed here in 1545 by a Vīraśaiva general called Jaṅgamaya. This temple, where Vīraśaivas still administer the cult, houses a colossal 3.6 metre high image of the god, of however uncertain dating. Several other small shrines and scattered representations are found throughout the city, and images of this god are also housed in the site's museum, testifying to his great popularity during the city's heyday.<sup>10</sup>

Epigraphic evidence amply attests to the foundation or patronage of places of worship dedicated to Vīrabhadra in the territory of the kingdom (Sarojini Devi 1987: 4; 1990: 54–55 and *passim*). These include one of the most famous temples in South India, namely the temple of Lepakshi (Andhra Pradesh), which was extensively patronised by the brothers Virupaṇṇa and Vīraṇṇa, officials under the reign of Acyutarāya (r. 1529–1542; Verghese 1995: 24). Among the sacred buildings founded by Nāyaka rulers, the one at Keladi (Karnataka) stands out for its artistic qualities; it is a double construction, in which two temples, the Rāmeśvara and the Vīrabhadra, are joined at the level of the *maṇḍapa*. The place saw several phases of growth, probably from around 1500 to the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>11</sup>

Vīrabhadra is depicted with some variants in the sculpture of Vijayanagara and the later kingdoms. However, the available documentation seems to show that the iconography that was to become substantially crystallised in the plaques, and which we will see shortly, was soon widespread in its basic elements and was probably prevalent in the territory of Karnataka.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Balasubramanya 1985; for lists, Verghese 1995: 32, notes 137–139; 186–187.

<sup>11</sup> Rajarajan 2006, I: 85–86; II: XXIII and Plates; and, for further information and bibliography on this temple, Dębicka-Borek and Sudyka 2022.

<sup>12</sup> There seems to be greater pattern variation in Tamil Nadu. On Vīrabhadra's iconography, see Rao 1914–1916: II,1, 186–188; Nagar 1970 (where a plaque is also reproduced); Sundara 1983; Balasubramanya 1985; Sarojini Devi 1987: 6–8;



## The plaques of the Berger Collection at the Ambrosiana

And now we come to the metal plaques depicting this god. This is a typology of artefact that counts a large number of specimens, as evidenced by their diffusion in museums<sup>13</sup> and on the antiquary market, and of course by the Berger Collection at the Ambrosiana itself. But, as we have said, to the best of our knowledge, it seems that this specific category of objects has never been studied systematically. Certainly, given the large number and variety of pieces, the Ambrosiana collection may prove to be very interesting for such a study.

First of all—and this remark is also valid for the specimens documented elsewhere—let us emphasise the fact that, at the present stage of research, it is basically impossible to establish the exact place of manufacture of the plaques in this collection, which, according to the information gathered, appear to have been bought on the antiquary market. They may come, to some extent, from the present-day southern Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh or Tamil Nadu, but certainly we must presume that most of them were produced in Karnataka, given the historical roots of the cult and, apparently, the equally historical diffusion of a similar iconography in the sculpture from this territory. The specimens show a considerable variety of styles, which may surely depend on the place of production, the skills of the craftsmen, and the social level of the patrons. On the other hand, this variety is a clear sign of Viṛabhadra's great popularity among several social strata: it must be remembered that the Vīraśaivas were opponents of the caste hierarchy. For the same reasons, dating is also problematic, but many of the plaques under examination

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Vergheze 1995: 24–25, Plate 5; Ramasso 2003: 310–318; Rajarajan 2006: I, 130; II, Plates 87, 89, 90–92, 245–247, 250, 311; Rajarajan 2009: 62–63 and *passim*. Viṛabhadra is also depicted as an accompanying figure to the Saptamātrkāḥ; we will not deal with this iconography here, as it is not relevant to our topic.

<sup>13</sup> To quote but a few examples as reported in the online catalogues of the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum: British Museum Nos. 1853,0108.9; 1880.753; 1924,1208.1; 1927,0106.1; 1940,0716.29; Victoria and Albert Museum Nos. IND.LOST.168; IS.33-1999; IS.536-1952; IS.537-1952; IS.538-1952; IS.1988-1883; IS.1989-1883; IS.1990-1883; IS.2295-1883; IS.2752-1883.

can possibly be dated between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>14</sup> The origins of the patrons, of course, are also reflected in the more or less generous size of the artefacts and the use of different metals. These appear to be copper-based alloys, similar to brass or bronze, or less common silver alloys, the metal used for some ten pieces in the Ambrosiana collection. The production techniques are casting<sup>15</sup> or embossing on a metal sheet; all the pieces in silver alloy are embossed. The different techniques in themselves imply different choices on the part of the craftsmen as for designs and details, and perhaps even distinct workshops.

The iconographic features of Vīrabhadra reproduced in the plaques of the collection can be summarised as follows.<sup>16</sup> The god is depicted frontally, often with his left foot (exceptionally the right) turned outwards, or with the lower part of his body in profile in the act of advancing most regularly to his left, i.e. in postures intended to express dynamism. He sports a high tiara, which takes different shapes depending on the style of the plaque; the wearing away of the metal often makes it impossible to identify the presence of the third eye on the forehead. He typically has a conspicuous moustache and is often adorned with a long necklace of skulls. He also wears anklets and footwear of a specific style (*pādukā*). These reproduce wooden clogs that are of particular importance to the Vīraśaivas because they are associated with the fundamental figures of this religious current, the *gurus* and the *jaṅgamas*, the “moving ones,” i.e. the wandering ascetics. To this day, footwear of this type which belonged to a deceased spiritual master is an object of veneration among the Vīraśaivas (Lorenzetti 2020). One may also think that the dynamic posture with which Vīrabhadra is depicted may recall the concept underlying the figure of the *jaṅgamas*.

<sup>14</sup> Similar dating is attributed to comparable specimens in the British and the Victoria and Albert Museums (see footnote 13); see also Pal (2003: 303). But, at present, other datings, and even the presence of recent “replicas” cannot be excluded.

<sup>15</sup> Particularly in the cast examples, the highly varied nature of the metal alloys might result from the practice of melting the scrap metal that was occasionally available in a workshop. I am grateful to Renzo Freschi for suggesting this remark.

<sup>16</sup> Here we do not intend to exhaust all the—most often minor—iconographic variants appearing in the plaques in the collection, which could only be illustrated in a proper catalogue; but we will point out a few interesting details.

As we shall see, in only one plaque does the god possess more than four arms; of the four, uniformly, the front right one grasps a sword (*khaḍga*), the front left a shield (*kheṭaka*). His rear right hand usually holds an arrow (*bāṇa*) or a kind of pike (*śakti*), or a trident (*triśūla*); by far the most common weapon depicted in his rear left hand is a bow (*dhanus*). According to a pattern whose exceptions seem to be deliberate omissions, two small figures appear at the bottom on either side of the god. On his right we see Dakṣa with the head of a ram, his hands folded in the act of acknowledging the god's supremacy; while the other small figure on his left, also mostly with folded hands, can be interpreted as Saṭī, his bride, or as Bhadrakālī, which seems plausible when she—more rarely—carries a sword, i.e. she is depicted as a warrior. The ambiguity suggests, however, that the two female figures are to be considered somehow merged; in fact, Bhadrakālī mythologically embodies the wrath of the goddess. Normally, in the upper part of the plaque the sun and the moon, the symbol for eternity, and the bull Nandin and a *līṅga* appear, each member of the pair placed to one side. In rectangular-shaped plaques (the almost universal format in embossed specimens) or ones that are roughly this shape, a halo (*prabhāvalī*) inscribed within the plaque surrounds the god; in other cases the halo itself forms the upper edge of the plaque. At the top of the halo or plaque there is a *nāga*, or a *kīrtimukha*; below the *kīrtimukha*, a serpentine hood may also surmount the god's head. In several images the *kīrtimukha* also appears as a clasp on the god's belt. Occasionally, a sort of handle may be present on the back, certainly used to hold the plaque and raise it in worship; or there may be a pedestal, so that the plaque can stand alone in an upright position, in a temple or on a home altar. The frequent wear of the details and minor damage especially to the more fragile embossed pieces may depend on the bathing and rubbing that the plaques were subjected to during worship.

Let us now briefly comment on a few of these plaques which can be considered representative examples of what this collection offers, starting with some of more refined workmanship. Although small in size, perhaps the most remarkable is No. 34 (Fig. 1), a cast piece, which certainly comes from a high-level workshop. The image is of

great impact thanks to the ferocity expressed by the god's face, and it shows great plasticity, harmony of proportions and precision in details, not least, in the elegant foliate motifs and in the two rampant *yālīs* supporting the halo. Extremely accurate craftsmanship is also shown by No. 3 (Fig. 2), embossed, in strong relief and in a very different style; here the background is filled by curls that seem to evoke Vīrabhadra's arrival in the midst of emanations of smoke and fire. Two outward-facing, barded elephants occupy the corners of the base and two *haṃsas* hold the elaborate halo; Dakṣa is facing the god with folded hands. Interestingly, the weapon in the god's rear right hand appears to have the shape of a *nāga*, a detail that is also seen on other plaques. Among possible examples, this appears on No. 51 (Fig. 3), perhaps the most refined of the embossed silver alloy group.<sup>17</sup>

Two plaques of high workmanship are distinguished by different aspects. No. 20 (Fig. 4), cast and of conspicuous size, is irregular in shape and somewhat chaotic in its composition, but on the whole it is absolutely effective, also because of the god's extremely beautiful face. Here the goddess is missing; two small figures appear at the top, each on one side of the *kīrtimukha*, instead of the sun and the moon. No. 23 (Fig. 5), embossed, stands out because the god is depicted with ten arms; it is the only case in the collection where the four-armed scheme is not observed. Two other embossed plaques, No. 10 (Fig. 6) and No. 31, of simple but well-balanced design, are identical apart from their border and thus they evidently derive from the same mould; here the gesture of Satī/Bhadrakālī turning towards the god and handing him an offering plate is particularly graceful.

Several plaques show some less refined execution and, so to speak, a more folkish flavour. These specimens display, above all, less accurate proportions in the design of the figures, linear decorative elements

<sup>17</sup> In No. 16 a *nāga* appears in the god's rear left hand, instead of the more common bow. Indeed, in many specimens from the collection, bows and arrows, canonically the elements most often placed in the god's rear hands, are depicted in a sinuous shape that can easily overlap with the image of a snake. The comparison or full identification of lethal arrows with poisonous snakes is widespread in Sanskrit literature; it is very conspicuous, for instance, in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, particularly in Book Six.

and more crudely executed details. No. 72 (Fig. 7), a cast piece, is very worn, possibly, as we said, due to it being rubbed during worship; a peculiar element here are the two prancing horses. Significant examples of the variety of styles and formats are No. 58, which is embossed and the largest plaque in the collection (Fig. 8), and No. 38 and No. 50 (Figs 9–10), both cast. In the latter, the rear left hand of the god appears to hold a very stylised object, perhaps a double-bladed axe, which the god can also be seen holding in other plaques.<sup>18</sup>

Lastly, the collection has a very distinctive group of cast plaques which show a further simplification, or, better perhaps, stylisation of forms, even though the fundamental elements of the iconography are still retained. The plaques in this category are regularly of a smaller size, and they often take the shape of a sort of “hut,” perhaps with the intention of representing a local shrine. See, for example, No. 68 and No. 4, the latter with a very typical shape (Figs 11–12).

Of course, these observations could be profoundly revised if further research could establish the places of manufacture and dating of these plaques; we may presume a connection with temples and sites of worship. Such identifications would take into account, or account for, the different features and styles of these objects. However, the richness of this collection already contributes to advancing the current state of our knowledge on this form of art and cult, which is decidedly remarkable, both in terms of its diffusion and its results.

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<sup>18</sup> No. 69 shows a singular detail: the god holds *vaiṣṇava* emblems, i.e. the disc, *cakra*, and the conch, *śaṅkha*, in his rear hands.

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Fig. 1. No. 34, cast copper alloy, cm 20.5 × 13.5.  
Milan, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana. Photo: Author



Fig. 2. No. 3, embossed copper alloy, cm 25.8 × 18.9.  
Milan, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana. Photo: Author



Fig. 4. No. 20, cast copper alloy, cm 34 × 20.  
Milan, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana. Photo: Author





Fig. 3. No. 51, embossed silver alloy, cm 18.4 × 14.8. Milan, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana. Photo: Author



Fig. 6. No. 10, embossed copper alloy, cm 18.5 × 13.4. Milan, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana. Photo: Author



Fig. 5. No. 23, embossed copper alloy, cm 20 × 16.4. Milan, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana. Photo: Author



Fig. 7. No. 72, cast copper alloy, cm 22.5 × 14.4. Milan, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana. Photo: Author



Fig. 8. No. 58, embossed copper alloy, cm 35.8 × 27.5.  
Milan, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana. Photo: Author



Fig. 9. No. 38, cast copper alloy, cm 18 × 10.5. Milan, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana. Photo: Author



Fig. 11. No. 68, cast copper alloy, cm 25.4 × 15.5. Milan, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana. Photo: Author



Fig. 10. No. 50, cast copper alloy, cm 22.4 × 11.5. Milan, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana. Photo: Author



Fig. 12. No. 4, cast copper alloy, cm 15.8 × 9.6. Milan, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana. Photo: Author