Nāgas in Early Buddhism: A Heavenly Abode and an Unfortunate Birth

Charlotte Gorant*

Abstract: At early Buddhist sites on the Indian subcontinent, nāgas as cobra beings are depicted with a remarkable conception of bodily fluidity between human and cobra forms. Analysis of Buddhist visual narratives and textual accounts in Pāli and Sanskrit reveals their ability to take on the guise of a human, a defining feature that has been overlooked in previous scholarship which considers sculptures from the period before the Common Era. Examining their identities from the perspective of a Buddhist worshipper, I consider nāgas in visual representations with a status between animals, human, and divine beings, exploring how nāgas can inhabit heavenly places, yet remain confined to their unfortunate birth status as animals.

Keywords: Nāgas, Buddhism, Ancient India, fluidity, sculpture

At Buddhist monuments across the Indian subcontinent in the early centuries BCE, cobra beings called nāgas appear in stone carvings and painted images (**Fig. 1**). While in many of the relevant narratives human worshippers have already progressed on the path towards awakening, nāgas are confined to an unfortunate and limiting birth.[1] By looking

* https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5460-9100.

1 See the recent discussion of the term "awakening" in: Bhikkhu Bodhi, "Awakening or Enlightenment? On the Significance of *bodhi*," *Mindfulness* 12 (2021), 1653–1658; note that not all beings in the early Buddhist texts strive for awakening.

Published in: Angermeier, Ferstl, Haas, Li (eds.): *Puṣpikā, Volume 6: Proceedings of the 12th International Indology Graduate Research Symposium (Vienna, 2021)*. Heidelberg: HASP, 2023, pp. 295–318. DOI: https://doi.org/10.11588/hasp.1133.c15537.

closely at nāgas in visual iterations with textual comparisons, noticing how beings with animal and supernatural qualities have the capacity to act as humans in different contexts, this paper will explore the complexities of their status in images. For certain nāgas who wish to seek awakening through human birth in early Buddhist sculptures, their fluid ability to transform bodily shape often expresses moral self-transformation in visual form.[2] In this article, I examine nāgas in narrative sculptures on stūpa railings from northern archaeological sites in South Asia between three main categories of visual representation, namely, as animals, as human beings, and as divine beings, considering how these types of depictions evolve over time through discourse between texts and images.[3]

Although unique as animals, nāgas are still born to unfortunate birth.[4] In early Buddhism, the level of an individual's rebirth is determined by wholesome or unwholesome actions within the chain of *saṃsāra*. The fortunate destinies for rebirth are as *deva*s, *asura*s, or human beings; the unfortunate destinies are as ghosts, animals, and hell-beings.[5] A well-known passage from the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* equates rebirth in hell or as an animal to be of the same unsuccessful status.

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2 For an in-depth study of different bodily forms, without a focus on narrative images, see Charlotte Gorant, "Nāgas in Early Buddhist Art: Fluidity and Framing Presence," in *The Long Arc of South Asian Art: A Reader in Honour of Vidya Dehejia*, edited by Annapurna Garimella, (New Delhi: Marg and Women Unlimited, 2022), 11-21.

3 Here I compare visual depictions of nāgas, in the three listed categories, from two distinct art historical periods – in the two centuries before the 1st century CE, which is the primary focus of this article, and at the start of the 1st century CE, marked by a shift in representation of the Buddha from emblematic to anthropomorphic form.

4 Following the work of Reiko Ohnuma, *Unfortunate Destiny: Animals in the Indian Buddhist Imagination*, (Oxford: 2017), 5–23, especially 21; and Naomi Appleton, *Narrating Karma and Rebirth*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 24, 51–54; Kristin Scheible, *Reading the Mahavamsa: The Literary Aims of a Theravada Buddhist History*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 67–94.

5 Certain early Buddhist literary traditions conceived of a 6 *gati* system; like the nāgas, the *asura*s are ambiguous beings, classified as evil bournes (*durgati*), yet very powerful. See for instance "gati" in *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, edited by Robert E. Jr. Buswell, and Donald S. Jr. Lopez. Princeton University Press, 2013, 315–316.

> Monks, the poor, destitute, miserable person who misconducts himself in body, speech, and mind, upon the breaking up of the body after death, is imprisoned in the bondage of hell or in the bondage of an animal birth (*tiracchāna-yoni*).[6]

Birth in the world as a human is difficult to obtain and extremely rare. During the Buddha's own past lives, narrated in *Jātaka* stories, he accrued further merit through his actions until his final human life as Bodhisatta. Within the Buddha's recorded teachings, it is not until a person becomes a *sota-āpanna*, or "stream-enterer," that they can continue along the Buddhist path as a once-returner, non-returner, and finally an arhant towards achieving enlightenment.[7]

More than an animal, but not quite human, nāgas can shift form into the body of a human in Buddhist stories. In accordance with the Pāli *upasampadā*, the ceremony of vows to become a Buddhist monk, every individual must swear that he is a man and not a nāga. There is a story from the *Mahāvagga* that elucidates their mischievous nature, the *Tiracchānagatavatthu*, in which a nāga enters the monastery with the hope of becoming an ordained monk. The nāga is deeply disturbed by his nāga state, so he strategizes how he can be quickly freed from his nāga-birth while receiving the benefits of a human birth. The moment he takes on the guise of a human is indicated in the text when he approaches a monk "with the appearance of a young brahmin" (*māṇavaka-vaṇṇena*).[8] Though he initially fools the monks, he is discovered as being a nāga when he slips back into his coiled cobra form after he

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6 Following Ohnuma's translation of *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 353, I have amended Ohnuma's translation of *yoni* as "realm" here to "birth." See Ohnuma, *Unfortunate Destiny*, 6; Pāli as found in *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, *Chakka-nipāta*, edited by R. Morris and E. Hardy, (London: Pali Text Society, 1885–1900), Part 3, 353; see also Appleton, *Narrating Karma and Rebirth*, 24.

7 *Sīlavanta-sutta*, *Samyutta-nikāya* 22.122, edited by Léon Feer, (London: Pali Text Society, 1884–1904), Part 3, 167–169; see for translation: Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans. *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya*, (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012), 970–971. It must also be noted here that many *arhant*s in early Buddhist discourses need not be *anāgamin*s before realizing arhathood.

8 *Mahāvagga, Vinaya-Piṭaka*, 1.63, edited by Hermann Oldenberg, (London: Williams and Norgate, 1879–1883), 86–88; I.B. Horner, *The book of the disci-*

falls asleep at night. The Buddha instructs him to return to the nāga realm and observe *uposatha* days, the semi-monthly monastic assembly in which monks recite the rules of conduct, so that he may have a chance to eventually be reborn as a human.[9] The Blessed One tells the monks that there are two conditions for a nāga to revert to his own state: when he engages in intercourse with a *nāginī* or when he falls asleep with his guard down. Yet other depicted narratives show, as we will see, there are exceptions to these conditions.

In the *Erāpata-jātaka* inscribed from the stūpa of Bhārhut (ca. 2nd century BCE), the artist has represented the nāga king taking on the form of a human during his nāga birth (**Fig. 2**).[10] The brāhmī inscription *erāpato nāgarāja* on the bottom railing confirms that the repeated figure with his hands clasped together in worship is indeed this nāga king.[11] The inscription to the right of the kneeling king in the center, *erāpato nāgarāja bhagavato vadate*, which translates to "Erāpata the nāga king worships the Blessed One," identifies the tree and stone seat of the king's veneration as a living Buddha.[12] Showing the nāga king in three separate scenes, the artist visually emphasizes Erāpata's wish to transform morally through the depiction of physical transformation during his lifetime, depicting him in human form with a cobra hood during the final scene of worship. As in the text of the *Dhammapada*, the king in

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pline (Vinaya-Piṭaka), (London, H. Milford, Oxford University Press, 1938–66), *Mahāvagga* Vol. IV, 110–111.

9 In the *Samyutta-nikāya*, it is stated that nāgas that are egg-born are inferior to nāgas born the three other ways; however, nāgas that are egg-born can observe *uposatha* and "relinquish concern for their bodies." *Uposatha-sutta*, *Samyutta-nikāya* 19.3, edited by Léon Feer, 240–1; Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans. *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha,* 1020–21.

10 Here I defer to the inscription on the sculpture for the title of this narrative. In the Pāli text, the title is *Erakapattanāgarāja*; see *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā* 14.3, edited by H.C. Norman, Vol. 3, (London: Pali Text Society, 1970), 230–236; see translation by: Eugene Watson Burlinghame, trans. *Buddhist Legends*, (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard university press, 1921), 627–630.

11 H. Lüders, *Bharhut Inscriptions*, (Ootacamund: Government Epigraphist for India, 1963), B36, 110.

12 Lüders, *Bharhut Inscriptions*, B37, 110; A separate donative inscription on the left records the pillar gift: *aya-isi-dinasa bhānakasa dānaṃ*, "Gift of the venerable sage and reciter." H. Lüders, *Bharhut Inscriptions*, A62, 39.

the Bhārhut sculpture approaches the living Buddha with reverence and cultivates faith (*pasāda*).[13] The artist indicates the Buddha through the empty stone seat and the tree, a common depiction before the 1st century CE.[14]

While there are many representations of nāgas in different bodily forms at early Buddhist sites, this depiction of a nāga's body in different forms within a single sculpture is unique to Bhārhut. Nāgas are one of many types of beings found in early Buddhist sculptures along the railing of early Buddhist stūpas in Northern India whose architectural placement seems to suggest divine status. For instance, consider the pillar of Cakavāka nāga from Bhārhut (**Fig. 3**). At this early Buddhist stūpa, which no longer stands today, apart from the narrative reliefs depicting stories from the Buddha's past lives, are a unique set of inscriptions identifying *yakṣa*s, *yakṣinī*s, *devatā*s, and nāgas that are sculpted on the pillars of the surviving railing.[15] What is striking when comparing the different bodily forms of nāgas in sculptures, including life-size pillars, medallions, and other narratives scenes, is that the significance of fluidity in their bodily forms across different sculptures becomes clear. Rather than looking to individual sculptures of the nāga in a single frame, viewing this bodily fluidity within sculptures from the circumambulation

13 *Erakapattanāgarāja. Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā* 14.3, edited by H.C. Norman, 230–236; Burlingame, trans. *Buddhist Legends*, 627–630. See the discussion of *pasāda* in Andy Rotman, *Thus Have I Seen: Visualizing Faith in Early Indian Buddhism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), Part II, 63–88.

14 Vidya Dehejia, "Aniconism and the multivalence of emblems," *Ars Orientalis* 21 (1991), 45–66.

15 The size and status of this nāga on a pillar suggests divine status in this context. Vidya Dehejia has estimated that out of the remaining pieces from the site, a third of the sculpted materials (forty-nine out of eighty pillars) would have been devoted to "semi-divine beings" (Vidya Dehejia, *The Body Adorned: Dissolving Boundaries between Sacred and Profane in India's Art*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 75–98). See also: Anne Keßler-Persaud, "Yakṣas and Yakṣiṇīs," in *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism Online*, edited by Knut A. Jacobsen, Helene Basu, Angelika Malinar, and Vasudha Narayanan, accessed March 1, 2022.

pathway allows the bodily transformation of the nāga to unfold across time as the worshipper walks around the stūpa.[16]

Publications from the colonial era remain significant in art history because they serve as primary sources for archaeological research. There is a pervasive notion of a primitive spirit cult of serpent beings that were incorporated into a Buddhist orthodoxy and mainstream religious tradition, deriving from sources such as Jean Vogel's *Indian Serpent Lore*: *Or, The Nāgas in Hindu Legend and Art* and James Fergusson's *Tree and Serpent Worship*, which conceptualize nāgas as static animal-spirits.[17] This is not only a modern conception – Max Deeg has also shown from accounts of Xuanzang and Faxian that simplistic views of nāgas were also prevalent among Chinese travellers in the fifth and nineth centuries.[18] While scholars such as Paul Mus, who considered nāgas in the 6 *gati* system in *Les Voies de la Transmigration,* and more recently Reiko Ohnuma, who interprets the described actions and identities of nāgas in connection with their unfortunate birth, have explored the status of nāgas in greater depth, in art history it was often assumed that viewers at archaeological sites as well as the artists had a simplistic world view.[19] Without addressing their ability to take on the guise of a human as an

16 Charlotte Gorant, "Nāgas in Early Buddhist Art". Paul Mus noticed this hybridity in depictions too and briefly mentions this as follows: "Le SSU fournit une description de leur aspect hybride que répond exactement au témoignage iconographique…" Paul Mus, "Les Voies de la Transmigration et la folklore de l'Inde," in *La lumière sur les Six Voies*, (Paris: Institut d'ethnologie, 1939), 170.

17 Jean Vogel, *Indian Serpent-Lore: Or, The Nāgas in Hindu Legend and Art*, (London: Probsthain, 1926); James Fergusson, *Tree and Serpent Worship: Or Illustrations of Mythology and Art in India in the First and Fourth Centuries after Christ from the Sculpture of the Buddhist Topes at Sāñchī and Amāravatī*, (London: India Museum, 1873).

18 Max Deeg, "Der Buddha und die *nāga*s: Buddhistische Unterwerfungsmythen und Regenmagie," *Hōrin* 15 (2008), 91–114; Max Deeg, *Miscellanae Nepalicae: Early Chinese Reports on Nepal: The Foundation Legend of Nepal in Its Trans-Himalayan Context*, (Lumbini: Lumbini International Research Institute, 2016), especially 73–76.

19 Paul Mus, *La lumière sur les Six Voies*, 153–183. The hierarchy of individual figures as simplistic comes from many frameworks, one example being the idea of perceptualism as the definition of art, in Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: The Study of Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, (London: Phaidon, 1960); For the

important part of their visual identity, this approach to nāgas fails to account for their dynamic role in early Buddhist art in the centuries before and after the Common Era.

However, interpreting sculptures with movement through the architectural spaces, as well as by looking at the sculptures throughout a site and within the surrounding landscape, has become an important practice. Robert DeCaroli has traced the names of nāgas inscribed on near life-size stūpa pillars to townships described in Buddhist textual sources, exploring their associations with locations in northern India and grounding them in historical landscapes.[20] Julia Shaw has considered the association of nāgas with agriculture, highlighting the placement of freestanding nāga sculptures within Central Indian archaeological landscapes near ancient dams within irrigation channels.[21] This study builds on the pre-existing scholarship with a study of nāgas through the lens of Buddhist worshippers at early stūpas in Northern India, beginning with the notion that depictions of nāgas in early sculptures would have been physically connected on a single railing during circumambulation. For this reason, representations of nāgas must be considered together rather than as isolated fragments.

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original critique, see Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History," 73, no. 2 (June 1991), 62–62; Reiko Ohnuma, *Unfortunate Destiny*, 5–23.

20 Robert DeCaroli, *Haunting the Buddha: Indian popular religions and the formation of Buddhism*, (New York: Oxford University, 2004); and see also his take on their role at Ajanta in DeCaroli, "The Abode of the Nāga King: Questions of Art, Audience, and Local Deities at the Ajaṇṭā Caves," *Ars Orientalis* 40 (2011), 142–161; DeCaroli, "Snakes and Gutters: Nāga Imagery, Water Management, and Buddhist Rainmaking Rituals in Early South Asia," *Archives of Asian Art* 69, no. 1 (April 2019), 1–19. In a prior study, Richard Cohen argued for a local identity of nāgas with the depicted actions of the Buddha at Ajanta. Richard S. Cohen, "Nāga, Yakṣiṇī, Buddha: Local Deities and Local Buddhism at Ajanta," *History of Religions* 37, no. 4 (May 1998), 360–400.

21 Julia Shaw, "Nāga Sculptures in Sanchi's Archaeological Landscape: Buddhism, Vaiṣṇavism, and Local Agricultural Cults in Central India, First Century BCE to Fifth Century CE," *Artibus Asiae* 64, no. 1 (2004), 5–59; Ronald Davidson has looked at a shrine from the 5th century: Ronald M Davidson, "Studies in Dhāraṇī Literature IV: A Nāga Altar in 5th Century India," in *Consecration Rituals in South Asia*, edited by István Keul, (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 123–70.

The question of which bodily form an artist has chosen to represent, and how each would have been perceived in the original site context as different forms of nāgas on a single railing, is at the center of this visual analysis. In most cases, a plot element or theme calls for the artist's visual representation of either a cobra or human body. Art historians have not yet studied varying depictions of how nāgas take on the bodily form of a human as narrated in early Buddhist texts. Through visual analysis of narrative sculptures, I will offer potential avenues to understand the reasoning for their bodily depictions in sculptures from the Northern part of the subcontinent, from the early stūpas of Bhārhut and Sāñcī, as well as comparisons from Gandhāra and Mathurā dated to the beginning of the Common Era.[22] I consider nāgas as unique in the animal world, in certain instances in which they could be almost human, and as divine beings guarding Sakka's heaven and with their own remarkable palaces, exploring the perplexing idea that nāgas can inhabit these heavenly places and take on human guise yet remain confined to unfortunate birth status.

1. Nāgas as unique in the animal world

It is not always clear why artists chose to depict nāgas in the body of a cobra in some scenes and in the body of a human with a cobra hood in other. Are nāgas depicted in sculptures like other animals? On the architrave of the east gateway and entrance to the stūpa at Sāñcī is a scene of animals, some of them composite, venerating a tree and a stone seat sculpted across the long horizontal frame (**Fig. 4**). On the far right of the frame, the sculptor has depicted a nāga and a large garuḍa bird. The nāga appears to be a focus of the image due to its size and position in the fore-

22 For this purpose I follow the discussion of "aniconism" in the well-known essay by Vidya Dehejia, "Aniconism and the Multivalence of Emblems," *Ars Orientalis* 21 (1991), 45–66, and further take into account the significance of the anthropomorphic Buddha image as treated in Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "The Origin of the Buddha Image," *Art Bulletin* 9, no. 4 (1927), 287–329. In a related context, Faure explores the idea of the emblem as more powerful than the anthropomorphic image and considers image theories in connection with Buddhist representations across traditions in Bernard Faure, "The Buddhist Icon and the Modern Gaze," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 3 (1998): 768–813.

ground and facing the viewer directly. Garuḍas are the sworn enemies and predators of nāgas. In the first centuries CE, as exemplified in an image from Gandhāra (**Fig. 5**), the tension between nāgas and garuḍas is explored as a visual depiction through their overlapping bodies, as well as the *nāginī*'s head clasped within the beak of the garuḍa bird.[23] The emphasis on the nāga's body in tension with the garuḍa's body coincides historically with the emergence of the anthropomorphic form of the Buddha in this period.

At Sāñcī, this nāga is represented with his cobra body while venerating the Buddha represented as a tree and stone seat. This unnamed nāga in the Sāñcī image has a full cobra body, with five individual heads, ribbed designs on its body, and a long coiling tail that extends beneath him. The nāga's individual heads are carved in high relief, appearing to peer outwards and extend to meet the glance of the viewer. The shadows underneath the faces of the nāga's heads emphasize this engagement with the gaze of the viewer. While the artist might have chosen to align his gaze with the other figures, this choice seems to highlight the body of the nāga and single him out as distinct. Yet the depicted nāga blends in with other composite and non-composite animals venerating the central tree and the stone seat.

Within the *Maṇikaṇṭha-jātaka* from the Bhārhut railing, the viewer sees a conversation between the Bodhisatta's ascetic brother and a nāga king called Maṇikaṇṭha (**Fig. 6**).[24] In the *Jātaka* text as transmitted in

23 For further examples, see Rhi's examination of Gandhāran steles with nāgī/nāga depicted as human figure along with their enemy counterpart the garuḍa in the form of a bird, which differ from nāgas represented in bodhisattva turbans. Juhyung Rhi, "The Garuḍa and the Nāgī/Nāga in the Headdresses of Gandhāran Bodhisattvas: Locating Textual Parallels," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 23 (2009), 147–158; discussion of the Sanghao image Fig. 2. Raven considers several sealings with garuḍa birds as context for Gupta gold coins with the garuḍa depictions. See especially the example of a *suparṇa*, or garuḍa, carrying a *nāginī* in human form in Ellen Raven, *Gupta Gold Coins with a Garuḍa-Banner (Samudragupta to Skandagupta)*, 2 vols., (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1994), sealing in Vol. 1, Pl. 19; coins with *garuḍadhvaja* in Vol. 2.

24 *Maṇikaṇṭha-jātaka*, *Jātaka-aṭṭhakathā* 253, edited by V. Fausbøll, 7 vols., (London: Pali Text Society, 1877–1896), vol. 2, 282–286; see translation: E.B. Cowell, *The Jātaka, Or, Stories of the Buddha's former births*, (Cambridge: University Press, 1895–1913), 197–199. For the iteration of the narrative in the *Vinaya*, see *Jātaka-*

Pāli, Maṇikaṇṭha, whose name means "jeweled-throat," first encounters the ascetic while "going about in the shape of a young brahmin" (*māṇavaka-vesena vicaranto*).[25] Depicted in this sculpture is the brother seated in front of his ascetic home in dialogue with the nāga king in cobra form, wearing a large jewel across his neck.[26] However, since they become inseparable as friends, he feels comfortable enough "to forsake this [guise] form" (*attabhāvaṃ vijahitvā*), and to embrace the ascetic with his cobra body.[27] Whenever his friend came for a visit, the ascetic became afraid of being squeezed inside the cobra's enormous coils.

The Bodhisattva, knowing of the ascetic's attachment to his nāga friend and the nāga's to his jewel, teaches the ascetic not to cling onto attachments. He instructs the ascetic to ask the nāga for his jewel, knowing that this will cause the nāga to return to the nāga abode because he takes pride in his jewel over their friendship. Maṇikaṇṭha takes the guise of a human in this image just as it is specified in the text, but unlike Erāpata, he never cultivates faith while visiting the ascetic and exhibits attachment as a facet of his unfortunate birth status. The artist's visual representation of Maṇikaṇṭha shows how he inspires fear in his friend the ascetic.

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aṭṭhakathā, Vol. 3, Suttavibhangha (Part 1), 144–147; see also the translation as found in Horner, *Book of the Discipline*, vol. 1, 248–250.

25 *Maṇikaṇṭha-jātaka*, *Jātaka-aṭṭhakathā* 253, vol. 2, 283; Cowell, trans. *The Jātaka,* 198.

26 Dehejia identifies this image as mono-scenic because the depiction of the conversation between Maṇikaṇṭha and the ascetic represents the whole story. See Vidya Dehejia, *Discourse in early Buddhist art: Visual Narratives of India*, (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1997*),* 86.

27 *Maṇikaṇṭha-jātaka*, no. 253, vol. 2, further down on 283; Cowell, trans. *The Jātaka,* 198. Monika Zin considers this sculpture in a study of early sculptures of heavens, analyzing depictions and descriptions of heaven as distinctive from teachings on enlightenment. Monika Zin, "Pictures of Paradise for Good Luck and Prosperity: Depictions of Themes Irreverent for Enlightenment in Older Buddhist Tradition (with special reference to paintings of Ajanta)," in *Manusushma: Archaeology and Heritage*, edited by Vinay Kumar, vol. 1, (B.R. Publishing: Delhi, 2015), 125–147, as on 129.

2. Nāgas as almost human

An image from Sāñcī of the emperor Aśoka features a large group of nāgas with human bodies and cobra hoods venerating a stūpa, showcasing their human capacity for devotion (**Fig. 7**).[28] On the right side of the sculpture, which is located on the south toraṇa (gateway) of Sāñcī stūpa 1, emperor Aśoka appears riding towards the center on a grand chariot. A series of nāgas venerate the stūpa on the opposite side, shown in a detail on the left. The nāgas are depicted with full human bodies and cobra hoods as they just restored the relics back to humanity after they protected them in their abode for safekeeping after the enlightenment.[29] With nāgas of all different ages and sizes, the many figures together make what appears to be a nāga family. To the bottom right of this figure is a very small child nāga with hands clasped together in worship.

Together, the nāgas and Aśoka in this image demonstrate their newfound devotion to the true *dhamma* in worshipping the stūpa. The em-

28 Most scholars agree that in this sculpture the presence of nāgas with the depiction of a king makes this likely to be a version of the Rāmagrāma story which is contained in the *Aśokāvadāna*; however, it must be acknowledged that the written form is much later and that it is most likely that different oral versions of the story existed before. *Aśokāvadāna* 52, edited by Sujikumar Mukhopadhyaya (New Delhi: Sahiya Akademi, 1963); John Strong, *Legend of King Aśoka*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 219–220. One portion of the relics is given to the nāga king of Rāmagrāma in the Pāli text of the *Mahāparinibbānasutta*: *Mahāparinibbānasutta*, *Dīgha Nikāya* 6.28, edited by T.W. Rhys Davids and J. Carpenter, (London: Pali Text Society, 1890–1911), 167; Maurice Walshe, trans. *Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Digha Nikaya*, (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 277. The identification of Aśoka has been rightly disputed in related Sāñcī reliefs in Dieter Schlingloff, "Aśoka or Māra? On the interpretation of some Sāñcī reliefs," in *Indological and Buddhist Studies: Volume in Honour of Professor J.W. de Jong on his Sixtieth Birthday*, edited by L.A. Hercus et al., (Faculty of Asian Studies: Canberra, 1982), 441–456.

29 Monika Zin suggests that perhaps nāgas as protectors of the relics could in part originate from observations of elephants and other animals congregating at abandoned shrines. Monika Zin, "The Buddha's Relics and the Nāgas: An Attempt to Throw Light on Some Depictions in the Amaravati School," in *South Asian Archaeology and Art, Volume 2: South Asian Religions and Visual Forms in their Archaeological Context*, edited by Vincent Lefèvre, Aurore Didier, and Benjamin Mutin, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016), 757–776.

peror's visit to the Rāmagrāma stūpa is described in the *Aśokāvadāna* after he has descended to the nāga realm.[30] At this point in the text, emperor Aśoka has just begun distributing the relics into eighty-four thousand parts to spread the Buddha's teachings, though the form the nāgas take is not specified. The text also recalls that the relics were stolen by the nāgas, and somehow despite this, the relics are not taken from the nāgas but left in their possession by Aśoka. In the image at Sāñcī, the community of nāgas worship alongside the emperor with human form at their own nāga palace abode. As with the story of Erāpata, the nāgas with anthropomorphic bodies and gestures in this scene worship in a way that appears almost human. The artist has in this Rāmagrāma stūpa image expressed the nāgas' ability to express devotion, like the humans who have a greater capacity for enlightenment, in their representation and transformation into human form.

3. Nāgas as divine beings

While nāgas are not always conceived of as divine in early Buddhist imaginaries, in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* they are at times spontaneously born (*opapātikā*) like *deva*s, and in sculptures their unique divine association is emphasized in various ways.[31] In an architrave at Sāñcī stūpa III, two large nāga figures are seated on opposite ends of Sakka. Sakka is seated at the center in the Vejayanta palace in Tāvatiṃsa (**Fig. 8**).[32] Their size and frontal position may indicate that they are guarding Sakka. More than an animal, less than the *deva*s, these enormous nāga figures

30 In the *Aśokāvadāna*, Aśoka descends to the nāga world to see the Droṇa stūpa and leaves the relics there after worshipping. *Aśokāvadāna* 52; Strong, *Legend of King Aśoka*, 219–220.

31 I thank Alex Wynne for pointing me to this reference. Nāgas are described as being born in four ways: *aṇḍajā nāgā jalābujā nāgā saṃsedajā nāgā opapātikā nāgā*, "from eggs, from a womb, from moisture, or spontaneously." *Suddhikasutta*, *Samyutta-nikāya* 29.1.3, edited by Léon Feer, 240; Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, 1020.

32 This reading of nāgas as guardians is supported in the textual narrative, as well as their size and frontal position on either side of Sakka. Nāgas as among the fivefold guards, as in *Kulavaka Jātaka*, *Jātaka-aṭṭhakathā* 31, vol. 1, 198–208; Cowell, trans., *The Jātaka,* 76–83. Dehejia considers this image and generally the sculptures from Sāñcī stūpa 3 "non-narrative." Dehejia, *Discourse*, 132.

have the bodies of humans with gargantuan cobra hoods behind them. Sakka sits as king of the gods in the center of the image with his wife Sujā seated in royal ease on the right, with his daughters, wives, and female apsaras directly on either side. Sakka's attendant Pañcasikha stands on the right-hand side, recognizable from his beluva-wood *vīṇā*, and perhaps his chariot driver Mātali stands on the opposite side.[33] The nāgas are represented directly above the river. As they are associated with water, the artist has also depicted small fish and other aquatic life flowing through the ripples of the heavenly water flowing below.[34] Nāgas in human bodies with enormous nāga hoods behind them sit while guarding the Vejayanta palace, demonstrating their divine role as one of the fivefold protectors of Sakka's heaven.

A narrative pillar at Bhārhut, which is inscribed *Vitura Punakiya-jatakam*, depicts key moments from the story of the yakkha Puṇṇaka's capture of Vidhura for the nāgas, and their reconciliation upon realizing an enormous misunderstanding (**Fig. 9**).[35] The narrative is organized topographically, with the scenes taking place in the nāga kingdom at the top of the pillar and the scenes that take place in human kingdoms at the bottom.[36] This follows the logic of the story since the nāga palace is only accessible through flying, and much like the nāgas, the yakkha Puṇṇaka possesses unique powers of soaring into the air to arrive there. As comparison with the Pāli text of the *Vidhura-Paṇḍitajātaka* reveals, the nāga king summons Vidhura because he mistakenly thinks his wife wishes

33 The attendants Mātali and Pañcasikha are identified from Pāli texts describing Sakka. Pañcasikha often carries a *vīṇā*. See for instance the *Sakka-pañha-sutta*, *Dīgha Nikāya*, 21; and the translation in Walshe, trans. *Long Discourses of the Buddha*, 323. For the *vīṇā* identification, see Bo Lawergren, "Buddha as a Musician: An Illustration of a Jātaka Story," *Artibus Asiae* 54, no. 3/4 (1994), 226–240, especially 232.

34 The river could be the Mandākinī river, as it is mentioned, for instance, in the *Sūkarika-avadāna*, *Divyāvadāna*. E.B. Cowell and R.A. Neil, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1886), 193–196; see for translation, Andy Rotman, trans, *Divine stories: Divyāvadāna*, (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2008), 325–328.

35 Lüders, *Bharhut Inscriptions*, B55, 146.

36 Dehejia points out the topographical narrative format. For further discussion of narrative arrangement and the understanding of the viewer, see Vidya Dehejia, *Discourse*, on the knowing viewer in synoptic narrative 21–24, on this pillar 97.

him dead.[37] A knowing viewer would recall that the wise Vidhura, as Bodhisatta, realizes that the *nāginī* queen Vimalā did not wish for his heart but wished to hear his teachings.

At the very top left of the pillar, the yakkha Puṇṇaka meets the king's *nāginī* daughter Indratī whom he wishes to marry. Next, at the bottom, Puṇṇaka competes in a dice game to win and carry Vidhura to the court of Indratī's father. He then rises into the air, depicted in the middle scene of the pillar on horseback traveling the nāga king's court with the wise Vidhura holding onto the horse's tail. After he narrowly escapes death on the right, Vidhura preaches the *dhamma* to him on the left, and Puṇṇaka next flies on horseback taking Vidhura to the nāga palace. In their nāga palace in the second scene from the top, King Varuṇa and Queen Vimalā sit regally as Puṇṇaka arrives with Vidhura, accepting a powerful jewel from earlier in the story and the Bodhisatta's wisdom. The small, cobra hoods above their heads identify them as nāgas, even though in this scene they take the shape of humans on an exquisite throne. With the visualization of the nāgas in human form in this scene, the artist has depicted the nāgas as recipients of the *dhamma* within a palace in the sky, showcasing the nāgas as almost human with unique divine abilities.[38]

Comparison with a slightly later example from Sonkh in Mathurā also helps to demonstrate that so often the magnificent palaces of the nāga abode are depicted like those of a human king's royal court (**Fig. 10**). The entire nāga realm, much like the Tāvatiṃsa and other heavens, resembles human palaces to an almost indiscernible extent in visual form, yet it is known that it is accessed by supernatural abilities. Although the nāgas hold too closely to their attachments similarly to that of the gods, nāgas apart from Erāpata such as Muchalinda and Apalāla, convert after receiving the *dhamma* teachings just like human beings.[39]

37 *Vidhurapaṇḍita Jātaka*, *Jātaka-aṭṭhakatha* 545, vol. 7, 266–287; Cowell, trans., *The Jātaka,* vol. 6, 126–156.

38 See also Monika Zin's discussion of this *Jātaka* at Amāravatī, in which Vidhurapaṇḍita's teaching is the main scene represented. Monika Zin, "Gandhara & Andhra: Varying Traditions of Narrative Representations (Some Observations on the Arrangement of Scenes Citing the Example of the Bodhisatva Crossing the River Nairañjanā)," *Indo-Asiatische Zeitschrift* 22 (2018), 6–17.

39 DeCaroli, "Snakes and Gutters," 15; Deeg, *Miscellanae Nepalicae*, 97–100; Davids and Oldenberg, *Vinaya Texts*, pt. 1, 80–81.

4. Conclusion

It is only while seeing nāga representations together across bodily forms on the stūpa that their fluidity becomes visible as it would be for worshippers. The representations of nāgas in different bodily forms, often with small cobra hoods above their human bodies, demonstrate their power to transform and their complex identities. Could the visual representation of nāgas with human bodies and cobra hoods in images, especially in instances where their form is left ambiguous in the story, be an effort to showcase their in-between status? The ability of nāgas to transform embodies the contradictions true to their identities – that they are unique among animals, that they are *almost* human but never human-born, and that they are royal and divine beings in locations far from the viewer's own realm.

Whether or not worshippers truly believed that nāgas had the ability to take human form in their daily lives, they have that ability in Buddhist sculpted and textual stories; simply to say that nāgas take the form of humans as a pictorial device would be overlooking the significance of their full identities. Through their bodily fluidity connected across images on stūpa railings, as supernatural beings and animals that have the capacity to act and take on the guise of humans, nāgas by contrast reflect different aspects of the human experience. With their almost human capacity for suffering and devotion, divine embodiment in royal scenes and in heaven, as well as their ignorance resulting from animal status, nāgas recall different types of worshippers striving on the path through the physical manifestation of bodily and moral transformation in the presence of the relics.

Images

All photographs are my own unless otherwise specified.

Fig. 1: Nāga, Sāñcī stūpa 2. 2nd century BCE.

Fig. 2: Erāpata nāgarāja, Bhārhut stūpa, 2nd century BCE.

Fig. 3: Chakavāka nāga, Bharhut stūpa, 2nd century BCE.

Fig. 4: Animals worship, Sāñcī stūpa 1, 1st century CE. Photo by Biswarup Ganguly (CC BY 3.0), cropped. Source: https://w.wiki/5rbs.

Fig. 5: Three *garuḍa*s holding a *nāginī*. Photo by Henry Hardy Cole in 1883. Rhode Tope, Sanghao, Gandhāra. 2nd–3rd centuries CE. Courtesy of the British Library.

Fig. 6: Maṇikaṇṭha jātaka, Bharhut stūpa. 2nd century BCE. Photo by Vidya Dehejia.

Fig. 7: Nāgas venerate a stūpa, Sāñcī stūpa 1, 1st century CE. Photo by Anandajoti Bhikkhu (CC BY 2.0). Source: https://flic.kr/p/SVVGNj.

Fig. 8: Sakka's heaven and nāgas guarding. Sāñcī stūpa 3, 1st century CE. Photo by Anandajoti Bhikkhu (CC BY 2.0), cropped. Source: https://flic.kr/p/Tbx56C.

Fig. 9: Vitura Punakiya Jātaka. Bharhut stūpa, 2nd century BCE.

Fig. 10: Nāga Court, Sonkh Tila, Mathurā, 1st century CE. Courtesy of American Institute of Indian Studies. Photo by Biswarup Ganguly, (CC BY 3.0), cropped. Source: https://w.wiki/5rbv.

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