

Life Before Life Before Life: An Extraordinary Perspective on Jina Usabha's Biography¹

Anna Aurelia Esposito

The biography of Usabha (Skr. Rṣabha)² is, along with that of Vaddhamāṇa Mahāvīra, the most interesting and elaborate among the narratives surrounding the 24 *tīrthaṅkaras*³. As all sources agree, Usabha was born at the end of the *suṣamāduḥṣamā*, the third era of our current descending world period (*avasarpinī*), when the former paradisiac circumstances gave way to harsher living conditions. Not only had the ten wish-fulfilling trees (*kalpadruma* or *kalpavṛkṣa*)⁴ gradually ceased to fulfill the wishes of all people and thus to enable them to live a carefree life, but the general deterioration of morals required also the establishment of laws. Seven⁵ *kulakaras* (lawgivers or patriarchs) appeared one after another, giving the humankind rules about their actions and introducing punishments. As it became clear that the deteriorating of morals and world conditions in general required more than a *kulakara*, Usabha, the son of the last *kulakara* Nābhi, was crowned as the first king of this world period. He acted as a cultural hero, laying the foundations of all later civilization. Besides diverse handicrafts, he taught his subjects farming, trade, and the method of cooking. He introduced administration and judicature

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- 1 I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to Thomas Oberlies who drew my interest to the fascinating world of Jain narrative literature many years ago. I am grateful to the late Willem Bollée for some valuable suggestions that have been included into this article.
 - 2 As my focus will be mainly on Prākṛit sources, I will use in the following the Prākṛit names, giving, if necessary, at the first mention the Sanskrit equivalent in brackets. When dealing with a source in Sanskrit, Apabhraṃśa or Kannaḍa, the spelling is as in the respective text.
 - 3 *Tīrthaṅkaras*, lit. “Makers of the Ford”, are human beings who have attained omniscience through their own efforts and who teach others the path to liberation.
 - 4 See e.g. *HTr*. 1.2.121–126 / Johnson, vol. I, 1931, 94f.; Jināsena, *Ādipurāṇa* 3.35–40.
 - 5 The Śvetāmbaras postulate seven *kulakaras* (e.g. *HTr*. 1.2.157–206 / Johnson, vol. I, 1931, 97–100), the Digambaras fourteen (e.g. *ĀP* 3.52–56). In some texts, as in the *Ādipurāṇa* or the *Tisāṭṭhimahāpurisaguṇālaṅkāra*, Rṣabha, the 1st *tīrthaṅkara*, and his son Bharata, the 1st *cakravartin*, are also listed among the *kulakaras*, extending their number to 16. For more information see Esposito 2020: 43f.

as well as the various arts and sciences. Marriage and family life originated during his reign, and also castes emerged.⁶ Finally he decided to renounce the world and appointed his son Bharata, the firth *cakravartin*, as his successor on the throne. He became thus the first ascetic of the current descending world period, and, having gained finally omniscience, the first *tīrthaṃkara*. So it is small wonder that not only his life, but also his previous lives are the object of various legends and myths, handed down in different versions.

In the following, I will focus on these narratives concerning Usabha's former births by comparing the different traditions and their positioning inside the respective works. I will pay special attention to the oldest extant source of Usabha's "prenatal biography", Saṅghadāsa's *Vasudevahiṇḍī*, the earliest text of Jain narrative literature. In this work, Usabha's former births are intertwined in an unique, artful way, making thus not only the narrative more lively and exciting, but reproducing and recreating thereby also in a certain way the world we are living in.

1. The different versions of Usabha's "prenatal biography"

Besides a few minor mentions in the early strata of the Śvetāmbara canon,⁷ the first elaborate account of Usabha's life can be found in the *Kappasutta* ascribed to Bhadrabāhu (Skr. *Kalpasūtra*, 3rd cent. BCE), the 8th chapter of the *Āyāradasāo*.⁸ Noteworthy, this account starts not with the birth as Usabha, the 1st *tīrthaṃkara*, but with his former incarnation as a god in the heaven Savvatthasiddha (Skr. Sarvārthasiddha), where he had lived for an unimaginably long time (*Kappasutta* 1.206). This seemingly unimportant remark shows the central importance of earlier incarnations in Jain narrative literature, which arose at a relatively early stage: without knowledge of these earlier lives,⁹

6 *HTr*. 1.2.924-984 / Johnson, vol. I, 1931, 150-156; *ĀP*. 15.100-16.269; cf. Esposito 2020: 44. For a detailed investigation based on the commentaries on the *Āvaśyaka Sūtra*, see Mette, 1973, 7-21.

7 E.g. scattered remarks in the *Samavāyāṃgasutta*, *Viyāhapannatti* XX.8 4c (Deleu), etc.

8 *Kappasutta*, 1.204-228 / transl. Jacobi 1884: 281-285.

9 Phyllis Granoff (1994: 16) argues that "[r]emembered autobiography plays a fundamental role in the Jain quest for salvation", referring to "*Ācārāṅga Sūtra* 1-27", which in Schubring's edition 1910 (and Jacobi's translation 1884) should correspond to the sentences I.1.1-7. The *Ācārāṅgasūtra* explicitly states that only someone who is clearly aware of his or her past is able to lead a religious life and ultimately attain salvation. It does not matter whether an individual remembers his former existences himself or whether he is told about them.

the present one with all its various facets of joy and suffering would not be comprehensible to the audience¹⁰. It is precisely these narratives about former births of the *śalākāpuruṣas*, the 63 “illustrious men” of “Jain Universal History”,¹¹ that have been developed further and further in subsequent literature. Stringent narratives on the lives of the Salakapurusas and their earlier births are rarely found in the canon itself, but only in the related commentary literature. Concerning the former births of Usabha, the commentaries on the *Āvaśyakasūtra*, belonging to the *Mūlasūtras* of the Śvetāmbara canon, are of vital importance. While in the *Āvaśyaka-niryukti*,¹² the first stratum of the exegetical scripture on the *Āvaśyakasūtra*, the past lives of Usabha are given only in brief keywords, the later commentaries, basing on the *Niryukti*, elaborate on these narratives. The oldest commentary on the *Āvaśyakasūtra* and the *Niryukti*, the *Āvaśyakacūrṇi* (C) attributed to Jinadāsa, is written in Prakrit

10 As Cort (1993: 202) points out, Jain *Purāṇas* (which may be extended here to texts of Jain narrative literature in general) were not written with the intention of being read silently by an individual within his or her own four walls. The *Purāṇas* (and thus also Jain narrative literature) were texts intended for performance. Thus, they must also be seen in a performative context in order to fully understand their position within the Jain tradition. On the contemporary (as well as earlier) use of the Jain *Purāṇas* and their contents in the preaching of the monks, cf. Cort 1993: 202–204. I do not wish to deny that the *Vasudevahiṇḍī* has also had her readership over the centuries; in the following, however, I will use exclusively the terms “audience” or “listener”, which is meant to include both the readership and the audience.

11 The world is believed by the Jains to be everlasting, with an uncountable number of progressive and regressive half-cycles of time in certain areas of the universe. In every half-cycle, so-called “illustrious men” (*śalākāpuruṣas* / *mahāpuruṣas*) are born in various locations of the middle realm (*madhyaloka*) inhabited by humans and animals where conditions are neither extremely good nor extremely bad, so that people will be motivated to follow their teachings. These 63 *śalākāpuruṣas* are 24 *īrthaṅkaras* (human beings who have attained omniscience through their own efforts and who teach others the path to liberation), 12 *cakravartins* (universal emperors who rule over one entire continent of the world), and 27 heroes (*vīras*), namely 9 *vāsudevas* (rulers over the half of one continent), 9 *baladevas* (their half-brothers), and 9 *pratīvāsudevas* (their enemies). Their “biographies” are dealt with in detail in the “Jain Universal History,” a term coined by Western scholars for the Jain legendary history of the world. For an outline of the “Jain Universal History”, cf. Esposito 2020; for the term “*śalākāpuruṣa*” see also Parekh 1974.

12 The *niryuktis* comprise the first stratum of exegetical scriptures on the Śvetāmbara canon. They are composed in *āryā* metre, and their language is Jaina-Māhārāṣṭrī (for a significant study of selected words of the *Āvaśyaka*-commentaries see Oberlies 1993). For more details on *niryuktis* in general see Balbir 1993: 39–41, for the *Āvaśyaka-niryukti* pp. 41–45, Leumann 1934: 21a, 29b-31b and Bruhn 1998: 120f. Leumann (1934: 28b) suggests around 80 CE as a possible time of origin, Khadabadi (1991: 28) assumes a later date. For a concise introduction to exegetical literature of the Śvetāmbara canon in general and the *Āvaśyaka*-tradition in particular, see Bruhn 1981.

prose and dates around the 6th–7th cent., Haribhadra’s *Vṛtti* (H) probably originated in the 8th and that of Malayagīri (M) in the 12th century (both in Sanskrit prose with stories in Prakrit).¹³ Interestingly enough, regarding the “prenatal biography” of Usabha, already in these commentaries two different traditions emerge, one containing seven, the other, nine previous births (cf. also Bruhn 1954: 48–50). A work that does not belong to the canonical literature seems to have played a major role in splitting the formerly uniform tradition: the aforementioned *Vasudevahiṇḍī* of Saṅghadāsa,¹⁴ as we will see below.

Both traditions are combined to yield twelve former lives in two texts belonging to the group of the so-called Jain *Mahāpurāṇas*,¹⁵ Śīlāṅka’s *Caūpaṇṇamahāpurisacariya* (*ŚC*, in Jaina-Māhārāṣṭrī, completed 868/869 CE) and Hemacandra’s *Triṣaṣṭiśalākāpuruṣacarita* (*HTr*, in Sanskrit, composed between 1160 and 1172 CE). To discuss the different versions of Usabha’s former lives, their probable chronology and the possible reason for their emergence, it is, first of all, necessary to have an overview of the entire “prenatal biography”. I will base my following summary on the combined versions found in the texts of Śīlāṅka (*ŚC* 10.26–34.7) and Hemacandra (*HTr* I.1.31–911), approaching then gradually the possible original form of the narrative.¹⁶

The first birth of the future *tīrthaṅkara* Usabha about which we are informed is his birth as the generous merchant Dhana (*HTr* Dhana). Attracted to the true religion (that is, Jainism) through the sermon of an ascetic, he joyfully gives alms to some monks. This deed will bear rich fruits in his future lives, as he

13 See Balbir 1993: 45, 81–89.

14 The *Vasudevahiṇḍī* is mentioned three times by the *Āvaśyakacūrṇi* (C 164.12 and 460.3, C II 324.1 [the figures refer to the pages and lines of the printed text], see Balbir 1993: 101). As the *Āvaśyakacūrṇi* is dated around the 6th–7th century (Balbir 1993: 45), the *Vasudevahiṇḍī* cannot be later than the sixth century (see also Jacobi 1932: vii f.). Alsdorf (1935–37: 320) assigns a much earlier date because of the *Vasudevahiṇḍī*’s archaic Jaina-Māhārāṣṭrī, von Hinüber (2001: 76) assumes a time of origin before 450 CE.

15 The Jain *Mahāpurāṇas* are comprehensive texts that cover the complete “Jain Universal History,” giving the biographies of all the 63 *śalākāpuruṣas* of the current descending world period including their former lives, and hinting occasionally at future incarnations, cf. Cort 1993: 191–193, Esposito 2020: 32f.

16 I will follow here Śīlāṅka’s *Caūpaṇṇamahāpurisacariya* as the older work, but give the Sanskrit equivalent of the names and other deviations found in Hemacandra’s *Triṣaṣṭiśalākāpuruṣacarita* in brackets. The figures given for *ŚC* refer to page and line in Bhojak’s edition.

thereby acquires “the seed of enlightenment” (*bodhi-bīja*).¹⁷ After his death he is reborn as a twin in the Uttarakurus,¹⁸ then as a god in the heaven Sohamma (*HTr* Saudharma). In the fourth birth, he is born as the *vidyādhara*¹⁹ King Mahābala. He rules the earth and, moreover, he enjoys his life. Luckily he has a true friend – his minister Vimalamaī (*HTr* Svayambuddha), who wants to lead him down the right path. After a discussion about the vanity of life and the worthlessness of bodily pleasures, he persuades King Mahābala to renounce the world. After twenty-two days of severe PajjuNNausterity the king dies and receives a rich reward – as the god Laliyaṃga (*HTr* Lalitāṅga) he spends blissful days in the heaven Īsāṇa (*HTr* Īsāṇa) together with his beloved wife, Sayampabhā (*HTr* Svayamprabhā). After her death the former Sayampabhā ekes out a miserable existence as a poor and despised girl without even a proper name, Niṇṇāmiyā (*HTr* Nirnāmikā). Laliyaṃga reveals himself to Niṇṇāmiyā and instructs her to fix her thoughts exclusively on him in order to be reunited with him after her death. She follows his instructions, and they live many more years together in the Īsāṇa-heaven. Such a strong bond between two souls normally does not end with death. The soul of goddess Sayampabhā

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- 17 Stories about the efficacy of a gift, *dāna*, are frequent topoi in Jain narrative literature; one example is the anonymous *Dānāṣṭakakathā* (cf. Balbir 1982). Of supreme importance is not only the kind of gift, but also the state of mind in which it is bestowed and who the recipient is for the gift that is pure in three ways see Balbir 1983: 148, especially n. 18: *teṇaṃ davva-suddheṇaṃ dāyaga-suddheṇaṃ paḍigāhaga-suddheṇaṃ tivheṇaṃ tikaraṇa-sud-dheṇaṃ... (aṇagāre) paḍilābhīe*). As the Jaina monk Vijayasimha explains in Haribhadra’s *Samarāiccakahā* (3rd Bhāva, 157.17–158.4 [Jacobi]); for a translation of the whole passage see Mette 2010: 149-151), alms given to an undeserving recipient are worthless (or even dangerous?) for the donor. Merchant Dhaṇa not only bestows his pure gift full of joy and devotion, but he also gives it to worthy recipients and takes therewith his first step on the way to salvation.
- 18 Uttarakuru is the northern part of the *varṣa* (region) Videha, situated in the center of Jambūd-vīpa, the continent we are supposed to be living on. Contrary to our region Bharata which is a *karmabhūmi* (realm of action), Uttarakuru is a *bhogabhūmi* (realm of enjoyment), not subject to the cycle of time and thus possessing living conditions that are always equivalent to the era of *suṣamāsuṣamā* (extremely happy). Due to the paradisiac conditions, people have no motivation to strive for liberation. Jinas are never born here, and thus it is impossible for human beings living in these lands to attain liberation (see also Satinsky / Wiley 2020).
- 19 A Vidyādhara possesses certain magical powers, *vidyās*, which can be acquired through a combination of ascetic practices and magical spells. The “owner” of a certain *vidyā* can even pass her on or lend her to somebody (cf. *Vh* 92.20, where Kaṇagamālā gives the *vidyā* Paṇṇattī to her foster-son Pajjuṇṇa, or *Vh* 108.17 f., where Pajjuṇṇa lends the same *vidyā* to his brother Samba). For this reason it is quite possible for a human being to become a Vidyādhara – as is the case with King Naravāhanadatta. For a comprehensive treatment of the Vidyādharas in classical Indian literature see Grafe 2001.

will accompany the soul of our former merchant Dhana till his last birth. After his lifetime as a god ends, Laliyaṅga is born as the Prince Vāirajaṅgha (*HTr* Vajrajaṅgha), and his former wife Sayampabhā as a princess, Sirikaṃtā (*HTr* Śrīmatī). They are happily reunited through their recollection of their last birth. One night, after having spent many happy years together, they decide to renounce the world first thing the next morning. Unfortunately they can't carry out this decision – that same night they are poisoned by their son. They are born again as twins in the Uttarakurus, and afterwards as gods in the heaven Sohamma (*HTr* Saudharma). In the ninth birth our former merchant, Dhana, is born as the physician Jīvāṅgha (*HTr* Jīvānanda). He and his five friends²⁰ are inseparable. One day Jīvāṅgha heals an ascetic with the help of his friends. Afterwards they renounce the world and in the course of time begin a fast to the death (*sallekhanā*). This most praiseworthy act leads to a rebirth as gods in the twelfth heaven Accua (*HTr* Acyuta). Afterwards the former merchant Dhana is born as Prince Vāiraṅgha (*HTr* Vajraṅgha); the others are born as his younger brothers, and his former wife as his friend and charioteer (in *ŚC* no name is given, in *HTr* Suyaśas). One day Vāiraṅgha's father, King Vāiraseṇa (*HTr* Vajrasena), renounces the world and installs his eldest son on the throne. After gaining *tīrthaṅkara*-hood²¹ he delivers a sermon on *dharma*, after which Vāiraṅgha, his younger brothers and his charioteer renounce the world. At this point, something important happens: Our protagonist gains *tīrthaṅkara-nāma-karman*, which means that he will preach in a future life as a *tīrthaṅkara* the true religion and attain salvation. After his death he gains a birth as a god in the heaven Savvaṭṭhasiddha (*HTr* Sarvārthasiddhi).

So far the “prenatal biography”; now our former merchant, Dhana, incarnates for the last time (cf. *ŚC* 34.8–41.25, *HTr* I.2.207-3.643): He is born as Usabha (*HTr* Rṣabha), first king and first *tīrthaṅkara* of the current descending world period. As mentioned before, he plays the role of a cultural hero, bringing fire, various crafts, mathematics and writing to mankind. Finally he installs his sons as kings and renounces the world. After a long period of fasting he begs for alms. Since Usabha is the first monk in this world age, no one

20 Among them is his former wife, reborn now as Kesava (*HTr* Keśava), son of a merchant (according to *HTr*; *ŚC* gives only his father's name).

21 Vāiraseṇa / Vajrasena is one of the 24 *tīrthaṅkaras* of a former world age.

could know for sure which food is proper for monks. For his great-grandson²² Sejjam̐sa (*HTr Śreyāṃsa*), however, Usabha's monk's robe seems familiar. Suddenly he remembers his former births together with Usabha (*jāissaraṇa*, Skr. *jātismaraṇa*, ŚC 41.3, *HTr* I.3.283) – as god Laliyaṃga's wife Sayampabhā and so on. He especially dwells on his penultimate birth as charioteer of Prince Vairaṇābha, where he saw the monk's robe of his friend's father, Vairaseṇa. He suddenly knows what to give for alms, and so performs the first act of giving (*dāna*) in the current descending world period. Over time Usabha gains omniscience, spreads with his first sermon the true religion and finally attains salvation.

As we have seen, Śīlāṅka and Hemacandra present in their works the following chain of lives, till the 13th and last incarnation as Jina Usabha:

1st birth:	As merchant Dhaṇa
2nd birth:	As a twin in the Uttarakurus
3rd birth:	As a god in Sohamma-heaven
4th birth:	As King Mahābala
5th birth:	As god Laliyaṃga in Īsāṇa-heaven (wife: Sayampabhā)
6th birth:	As Prince Vairaṇābha (wife: Sirikaṃtā)
7th birth:	As a twin in the Uttarakurus
8th birth:	As a god in Sohamma-heaven
9th birth:	As physician Jīvāṇanda (friend: Kesava, son of a merchant)
10th birth:	As a god in Accuya-heaven
11th birth:	As Prince Vairaṇābha (friend: his charioteer)
12th birth:	As a god in Savaṭṭhasiddha-heaven
13th birth:	As <i>tīrthaṃkara</i> Usabha (great-grandson: Sejjam̐sa)

22 According to most sources Śreyāṃsa is the son of Bāhubali's son Somaprabha and therefore Rṣabha's great-grandson (e.g. *HTr* I.3.244), sometimes he is Somaprabha's younger brother, thus Usabha / Rṣabha's grandson (e.g. in Jinasena's Ādipurāṇa 20.31, Pampa's Ādipurāṇaṃ prose passage after 9.129, Cāvuṇḍarāya's Triṣaṣṭilakṣaṇamahāpurāṇaṃ 39.23, or Puṣpadanta's Mahāpurāṇa 9.3.2). The Āvaśyakacūrṇi (162.14) mentions another view in addition to the latter one: *tattha bharahassa putto sejjam̐so; anne bhaṇaṃṭi – bāhubalissa suto somapabho seyāṃsa ya* (Some say that Śreyāṃsa was the son of Bharata, others say that both Somaprabha and Śreyāṃsa were the sons of Bāhubali).

At a first glance, in this combined version of Usabha's former lives the doubling of the births as twin in the Uttarakurus and as a god in Sohamma-heaven (births two and three as well as births seven and eight) seems rather curious and indicates a probable interpolation. A certain discomfort can already be noticed in the *Āvaśyaka*-tradition, one of our earliest sources about Usabha's former births: The *Āvaśyaka-niryukti* deals with Usabha's former lives in the stanzas 171–178 and 185 (numbering of Haribhadra's *vṛtti* (*H*); Malayagiri (*M*): stanzas 168–175 and 182). Stanza 171 (*H*; *M*: 168) deals with Usabha's former birth as merchant Dhaṇa; stanza 172 (*H*; *M*: 169), however, is given twice in Haribhadra's as well as Malayagiri's *vṛttis*: the first stanza (*H* 172* / *M* 169*),²³ containing births two to six, is declared explicitly to be a later insertion²⁴ by Haribhadra, while the second stanza (*H* 172 / *M* 169),²⁵ containing births seven to nine, obviously was felt to be the original. Furthermore, the births in question are described rather concisely by the commentators Haribhadra and Malayagiri, unlike, for example, the ninth and the eleventh incarnations as a physician and as Prince Vāiraṇābha. This already applies to the *Niryukti*, which dedicates three stanzas (*H* 172–174; *M* 169–171) to Usabha's incarnation as a physician, and four (*H* 175–178; *M* 172–175) to the life as Prince Vāiraṇābha, while the births four to six as King Mahābala, god Laliyaṃga and Prince Vāirajaṃgha are summarised in one single verse. The argument is further strengthened by Jinadāsa's *Āvaśyakacūrṇi*, which mentions specifically that births four to eight²⁶ have been left out.²⁷ Births four to six, that is the life as King Mahābala, god Laliyaṃga and Prince Vāirajaṃgha, were obviously introduced into the *Āvaśyaka*-tradition from

23 *uttarakuru sohamme mahāvidehe mahabbalo rāyā| īsāṇe laliyaṃgo mahāvidehe vāirajaṃgho|*, that is, the births as a twin in the Uttarakurus (birth 2), as a god in the Sohamma-heaven (birth 3), as King Mahābala in Mahāvideha (birth 4), as god Laliyaṃga in the Īsāṇa-heaven (birth 5) and again in Mahāvideha as Prince Vāirajaṃgha (birth 6).

24 *iyam anyakartṭṛkī gāthā sopayogā ca* (H 115a.6).

25 *uttarakuru sohamme videhi* (*M*: *videha*) *tegičhiyassa tattha suo* (*M*: *sutto*) *rāyasuya seṭṭhimaccāsathāhasuyā vayaṃsā se|*, that is, the births as a twin in the Uttarakurus (birth 7), as a god in the Sohamma-heaven (birth 8), and as son of a physician (birth 9) in Videha, together with his friends, the sons of the king, a guild-master, a minister and a merchant.

26 Evidently the *Āvaśyakacūrṇi* regards the second existences as twin and as god, births seven and eight, as alien elements, but not the first existences, births two and three. For an explanation see below, fn. 32.

27 *mahābala lalito vāirajaṃgha mithunakaṃ ca sodhammasura, etadbhavapañcakam atra tyaktam* (132.4).

a secondary source.²⁸ It is a text outside the canonical works, pertaining to a totally different genre – the *Vasudevahiṇḍī* of the Jain monk Saṅghadāsa, basing in its main narrative on the *Brhatkathā*-tradition.²⁹ Written in an archaic form of Jaina-Māhārāṣṭrī,³⁰ the *Vasudevahiṇḍī* intertwines the Hinduistic material of the *Brhatkathā* in an unique way with the Universal History of the Jains. The main plot line of the *Brhatkathā* thereby serves as a kind of framework, which is not only overlaid with an abundance of secondary stories, but also wrapped in several narrative layers of pure Jain origin.³¹ One of these narratives inserted in the main plot is the tale of Jina Usabha and his former births – interrupting the main narrative for 22 pages (*Vh* 157.1–178.14)³².

In Saṅghadāsa’s version, the life as merchant Dhaṇa, in which the future *tīrthaṃkara* Usabha acquired “the seed of enlightenment” leading him to the right path, is ignored; instead, the first birth we encounter is the life as King Mahābala, followed by the birth as god Laliyaṃga and Prince Vāiraṃga. The “new” rebirths were apparently placed in front of the chain of rebirths of the first tradition,³³ leaving aside Usabha’s first life as merchant Dhaṇa and containing consequently nine previous births. The “new” rebirths as King Mahābala, god Laliyaṃga and Prince Vāiraṃga are given in the *Vasudevahiṇḍī* more prominence than the births in the older tradition – to be precise,

28 This fact has already been stated by Bruhn (1954: 49), who suggested, the old version of Usabha’s “prenatal biography” should contain only the first birth as merchant Dhaṇa and then births seven to twelve, altogether seven former births.

29 For a detailed study see Jain 1977.

30 As already Alsdorf pointed out in his article “The Vasudevahiṇḍī, a Specimen of Archaic Jaina-Māhārāṣṭrī” (1935–37), the language of the *Vasudevahiṇḍī* is an archaic form of Jaina-Māhārāṣṭrī, often very close to Ardhamāgadhī, the language of the Jaina canon. For the characteristics of Ardhamāgadhī, see von Hinüber 2001: 98-100 (§§ 74–78), for a study of the Prakrit of the *Vasudevahiṇḍī* see Esposito 2012b.

31 Cf. Esposito 2012a.

32 The figures refer to the pages and lines of Caturvijay Muni and Punyavijay Muni’s edition.

33 As noted above (fn. 25), the *Āvaśyakacūṛṇi* evidently regards the second existences as twin and as god, births seven and eight, as alien elements, but not the first existences, births two and three. Bruhn (1954: 49) tried to explain this fact: He assumes, the *Vasudevahiṇḍī*-tradition did not know the first birth as merchant Dhaṇa; so the “new” former existences were put at the beginning, that is in front of the births as twin in the Uttarakurus and as god in Sohamma-heaven. As the chain of former births now began with King Mahābala, the *Āvaśyaka-niryukti*, taking over the new births, placed in front of them again the existences as twin and as god, to preserve the old tradition of merchant Dhaṇa’s rebirth. For this reason the *Āvaśyakacūṛṇi* mistakenly looked upon the original births as twin and as god (births seven and eight) as interpolation and regarded the inserted births at the beginning of the chain (births two and three), however, as genuine.

they run on for more than ten pages (*Vh* 166.3–177.2), while the births taken from the older tradition run less than two pages (*Vh* 165.19–166.2, 177.3–178.9).

Seemingly, the version of the *Vasudevahiṇḍī* has not only influenced the *Āvaśyaka*-commentaries, but also had an impact on works dealing with Jain Universal History as far south as Karnataka: Jinasena followed in his *Ādipurāṇa* (9th cent., in Sanskrit) the *Vasudevahiṇḍī* in describing nine former births, starting with King Mahābala (4.51–11.221).³⁴ Instead of Usabha’s incarnation as physician Jīvāṇanda, however, Jinasena presents again a “royal” birth as King Suvidhi (10.121–169). Like in the *Vasudevahiṇḍī*, more attention is paid to the “new” births – the incarnations as King Mahābala, god Lalitāṅga and Prince Vajrajaṅgha (4.51–9.32) obviously take up more space than the “old” ones (9.33–11.221). The same applies for Pampa, whose *Ādipurāṇam* (c. 860 CE) is the first extant work written in Kannaḍa, and for Cāvūṇḍarāya’s *Triṣaṣṭīlakṣaṇamahāpurāṇam*, also called *Cāvūṇḍarāyapurāṇam* (completed 978 CE), both written in Haḷegannaḍa / Old Kannaḍa and strongly influenced by Jinasena and thus by the *Vasudevahiṇḍī*-tradition. As their predecessor, Pampa and Cāvūṇḍarāya narrate the “new” births as King Mahābala, god Lalitāṅga and Prince Vajrajaṅgha in far more detail than those belonging to the “old” tradition;³⁵ instead of the birth as physician Jīvāṇanda, also here the life as King Suvidhi is told.³⁶ The fourth extant work dealing with Jain Universal History and originating in the Kannaḍa-speaking region, Puṣpadanta’s *Tisaṭṭhimahāpurisaguṇālaṃkāra* (965 CE, in Apabhraṃśa), also called *Mahāpurāṇa*, does not mention the earlier lives of Usabha, except for a short remark that Seyaṃsa, Usabha’s companion for many past lives, all of a sudden remembers their past life together as Vajjajamḡha and Sirimai (9.6.1).³⁷ It is interesting to note that the

34 Interestingly enough, Jinasena presents one more birth in addition to the nine former lives known by the *Vasudevahiṇḍī*: As King Mahābala’s minister Svayambuddha gets to know from an ascetic possessing the *avadhijñāna* (clairvoyance), his master had been in a former life a prince named Jayavarman, who was passed over for the succession to the throne and, disgusted with life, renounced the world (*Ādipurāṇa* 5.193–211).

35 Pampa: “new” births 1.56–5.24, “old” tradition 5.25–7.108 (the figures refer to chapter and verse); Cāvūṇḍarāya: “new” births 13.12–27.15, “old” tradition 27.16–31.10 (the figures refer to the pages and lines of Kulakarṇi’s edition). Like Jinasena, both authors insert into the narrative of Mahābala a former birth as Prince Jayavarmanu (*Ādipurāṇam* prose passage after verse 2.33–2.42; *Cāvūṇḍarāyapurāṇam* 15.31–16.18).

36 Pampa: prose passage after 5.99-prose passage after 6.11; Cāvūṇḍarāya: 29.16–30.7.

37 *jinam avaloiṭṭha kuṃyareṇa loyasāro| sirimai-vajjajamḡha-jammaṭtarāvayāro||*

only former birth mentioned in this text belongs to the “new” births of the *Vasudevahiṇḍī*-tradition.

The *Āvaśyaka*-commentators Haribhadra and Malayagiri had already tried to combine both versions, leaving the “new” births rather brief and allowing more space for the stories belonging to their own tradition. The next development was to merge the two traditions in a fully articulated form with all births being given the same weight,³⁸ as can be seen in Śīlānka’s *Caūpaṇṇamahāpurisacariya* and Hemacandra’s *Triṣaṣṭīśalākāpuruṣacarita*.³⁹ The development of the narrative of Usabha’s previous births, starting with the *Niryukti*-stanzas and ending with the “combined version” of Śīlānka and Hemacandra, could be thus visualised as follows:⁴⁰

Table: Usabha's previous births in the different versions

Niryukti-stanza	old version	<i>Vh</i> 's version	new combined version	
171 (H), 168 (M)	Dhaṇa		Dhaṇa	
172* (H), 169* (M)			twin	repetition of birth 7
172* (H), 169* (M)			god	repetition of birth 8
172* (H), 169* (M)		Mahābala	Mahābala	interpolation
172* (H), 169* (M)		Laliyaṃga	Laliyaṃga	interpolation
172* (H), 169* (M)		Vāīrajaṃgha	Vāīrajaṃgha	interpolation

38 As there is not much to write about the births as twins in the Uttarakurus and as gods in the Sohamma-, Accuya- and Savatṭhasiddha-heaven respectively, these existences are described rather concisely by all authors – except for Jinasena, who uses these births as an occasion to expand on doctrinal contents or to artfully praise the beauties of heaven etc.

39 Nevertheless, in these two works there are less word-for-word correspondences in Usabha’s former lives as Mahābala, Laliyaṃga and Vāīrajaṃgha than in the other births, cf. Bruhn 1954: 48.

40 This overview is inspired by Bruhn’s table (1954: 49), but slightly enlarged and adjusted to the editions of Haribhadra’s and Malayagiri’s *vṛttis*.

Niryukti-stanza	old version	<i>Vh</i> 's version	new combined version	
172 (H), 169 (M)	twin	twin	twin	
172 (H), 169 (M)	god	god	god	
172-174 (H), 169-171 (M)	physician	physician	physician	
175 (H), 172 (M)	god	god	god	
175-178 (H), 172-175 (M)	Vairaṇābha	Vairaṇābha	Vairaṇābha	
185 (H), 182 (M)	god	god	god	
185 (H), 182 (M)	Usabha	Usabha	Usabha	

It appears rather improbable that Saṅghadāsa should not have known the story of merchant Dhāṇa; what could have been his motive for replacing this birth with the narratives of King Mahābala, god Laliyaṃga and Prince Vairaṅgha? One possible reason might be the literary genre of the *Vasudevahiṇḍī*, narrative literature. A merchant's role is by far less spectacular and "fairy-tale-like" than the figure of a king or a god in Īsāṇa-heaven. Furthermore, stories of laymen and laywomen who set foot on the path to salvation by making an offering to a worthy person are quite widespread in Jain literature.⁴¹ For this reason, the tale of merchant Dhāṇa is neither very innovative nor very unique and could have easily been replaced by more exciting narratives. As we shall see in the next section, however, the *Vasudevahiṇḍī* not only contributed new rebirth-stories for Jina Usabha's "prenatal biography", but also inspired some later authors by the exceptional *position* it assigned to Usabha's former births within the text.

41 An example from the *Vasudevahiṇḍī* is the daughter of Brahman Miga, Vāruṇī, who was encouraged to give food to some monks on the occasion of a festival. Due to this deed she gained various rebirths in royal families and in several heavens, until she finally achieved salvation (cf. *Vh* 253.7–264.16, esp. 255.6–15, and Esposito 2010: 326 as well as table II on p. 331f.). For the consequences of alms-giving in the various narratives cf. also Balbir 1982 and 1983.

2. The position of Usabha's "prenatal biography"

In most texts the extensive story of Usabha's previous births can be found right at the beginning of his biography. So we learn all about his different lives, including his last birth as Jina Usabha, in a chronological course of events. This is the case in the *Āvaśyaka*-tradition as well as Jinasena's *Ādipurāṇa*, Pampa's *Ādipurāṇam*, Cāvuṇḍarāya's *Triṣaṣṭīlakṣaṇamahāpurāṇam*, Śīlāṅka's *Caūpaṇṇamahāpurīśacariya* and Hemacandra's *Triṣaṣṭīśalākāpurūṣacarita*.⁴² In these texts the story of Usabha's former lives appears again as a kind of flashback, when Sejjama / Śreyāṃsa, his great-grandson and first donor, recalls at the sight of Usabha's monk's robe the births they had together. On this occasion, however, a detailed narrative is not told at all, and not even all previous births are quoted: In the four Purāṇas originating from the Kannaḍa-speaking region, viz. Jinasena's *Ādipurāṇa* (20.78 f.), Pampa's *Ādipurāṇam* (prose passage after 9.131), Cāvuṇḍarāya's *Triṣaṣṭīlakṣaṇamahāpurāṇam* (39.13 f.) and Puṣpadanta's *Mahāpurāṇa* (9.6.1), only the former births as Śrīmati / Sirimāi and Vajrajaṅgha / Vajjajamaṅgha are explicitly mentioned. ŚC 41.3 refers to Sejjama's former birth as Niṅṇāmiyā as the first of eight births together with Usabha (*niṅṇāmiyā-pamuhāṇi bhagavayā saha gayāṇi aṭṭha bhavantarāṇi*), skipping the actual first birth as goddess Sayampabhā; in ŚC 41.4 a further reference to Usabha's birth as *cakravartin* Vāiraṇābha is made. In *HTr* I.3.283–288 Śreyāṃsa remembers his birth as charioteer together with Vajranābha, their renunciation at the feet of *tīrthaṅkara* Vajrasena (Vajranābha's father), and their former existences as "Svayamprabhā etc."

At first glance, in these texts Sejjama / Śreyāṃsa's "flashback" on the occasion of Jina Usabha's fast-breaking seems rather curious. It is very likely that this insertion was influenced again by the *Vasudevahiṇḍī*. This work not only explains in more detail the reason why Sejjama⁴³ remembers their former births exactly at this occasion, but also only at this very point fully recounts his previous lives together with Usabha. Here again, the *Vasudevahiṇḍī* particularly influenced the *Āvaśyaka*-tradition. Instead of mentioning only Sejjama's *jātismaraṇa* (together with some names that he remembers) like all the other works, the *Āvaśyaka*-commentaries insert at *this* point, after

42 As mentioned above, Puṣpadanta does not narrate in his *Mahāpurāṇa* Usabha's earlier births at all.

43 In the *Vasudevahiṇḍī*, besides "Sejjama" also the forms "Sijjama" or "Seyama" can be found. For reasons of facilitation I will use in the following the form "Sejjama", as it occurs also in ŚC.

Sejjamṣa’s giving of alms, the far more detailed account of Usabha’s former lives, not at the beginning of the Usabha-*carita*. The *Āvaśyaka*-commentaries themselves explicitly confirm that this is a secondary development through the influence of the *Vasudevahiṇḍī*-tradition:⁴⁴ In all three texts Sejjamṣa states, his knowledge concerning the giving of proper alms results in his former births together with Usabha. Asked by the kings to relate these former births, he gives an account *as in the Vasudevahiṇḍī (jahā vasudevahiṇḍīe)*.⁴⁵ The following tale is in the *Āvaśyakacūrṇi* nearly word for word identical with *Vasudevahiṇḍī* 165.20–178.10.⁴⁶ Malayagiri also follows very closely the version of the *Vasudevahiṇḍī*, but less verbatim than the *Cūrṇi*.⁴⁷ Both texts

44 See also Bruhn (1954: 49 f.) and Balbir (1993: 131).

45 *C* 164.12, *M* 218b.8, *H* 146a.3.

46 *C* 164.14–180.9. Divergences occur, apart from some corrupt readings, only in orthography, insertion or deletion of single prae-fixes, words or short sentences. Two passages, however, are abbreviated: In the birth as physician Kesava, the long procedure of curing the Sādhu is left out with the words *kayāim ca sādhu mahappā kimikuṭṭheṇa gahito jahā puvvaṃ jāva teṇeva paḍigatā* (179.14, “And once a Sādhu, a great soul, was seized by worms, as [told] before, till ‘there they returned’”), so *C* 132.7 (beginning with the words *kimikuṭṭheṇa gahito*) up to 133.5 (*teṇeva paḍigatā*) is to be inserted here and *Vh* 177.10–21 is left out. The second passage occurs in Rṣabha’s next human birth as *cakravartin* Vāiraṇābha, where the *Cūrṇi* suddenly breaks off with the words *sārahī jāto sujaso nāma, sesaṃ jahāpuvvaṃ jāva uvavāo savvaṭṭhe savvehiṃ, paḍhamo vāiraṇābho cuo tti* (180.4f., “I was born as [his] charioteer, Sujasa by name, the rest is like [told] before, till ‘the birth of all was in the Savvaṭṭha-[heaven], first [of all] died Vāiraṇābha”). Contrary to the first abbreviated passage, the starting point of the text to be inserted is not clear at all: Not only are the words *sārahī jāto sujaso nāma* absent in the previous narrative about Vāiraṇābha (133.6–134.1 and 135.4–6), nay, no charioteer at all is mentioned there! For further differences between the *Āvaśyakacūrṇi* and the *Vasudevahiṇḍī* cf. also Jain 1977: 12 f.

47 *M* 218b.9–226b.7. The word-order diverges from the *Vasudevahiṇḍī* quite often, sometimes words are omitted or replaced by synonyms, some passages are shortened. In some places we find additional remarks, as in 219a.10, where Sambhinṇaso, King Mahābala’s minister, is called a *nāstikavādin (nāhiyavāi)*, a statement absent in both the *Cūrṇi* as well as in the *Vasudevahiṇḍī*. The story of physician Kesava is abbreviated even more than in the *Cūrṇi*: *kayāi sādhu mahappā kimikuṭṭheṇa gahito jahā puvvaṃ jāva samāhīe kālagayā* (226a.13, “Once a Sādhu, a great soul, was seized by worms, as [told] before, till ‘they died in peace of mind (*samādhi*)’”), so *Vh* 177.10–23 is left out and the text beginning at 158b.9 is to be inserted here. As the words *samāhīe kālagayā* are absent at Malayagiri’s former passage, the end of the insertion has to be guessed – probably 159b.9. In the story of *cakravartin* Vāiraṇābha the same passage as in the *Cūrṇi* is left out (*Vh* 177.28–178.3), but the words to be inserted are after this passage: *kaṇaganābho cak-kavaṭṭī bharaḥo iti, sesaṃ jahā puvvaṃ jāva savvaṭṭhe devā jāyā* (226b.3f., “Kaṇaganābha will be the *cakravartin* Bharaha, the rest is like [told] before, till ‘we were born in the Savvaṭṭha-[heaven]”). The words marking the beginning and the end of the insertion are not to be found in the foregoing text.

start, as the *Vasudevahiṇḍī*, with the birth as twins in the Uttarakurus and their memory of being born in a former life as the god Laliyaṃga and his wife Sayamṃpabhā, etc. In Haribhadra's *Āvaśyakavṛtti*, however, Sejjamṃsa relates only a summary of his eight former births together with Usabha, and this too in a strict chronological order.⁴⁸

Thus the *Vasudevahiṇḍī* introduced a new, unique way to position and to narrate the former lives of Jina Usabha. That this way found appreciation, is shown not only by the *Āvaśyaka*-tradition, that took over the whole narration at this point of the text, but is also reflected by Sejjamṃsa's flashback in the works mentioned above.

3. The narrative frame of Usabha's "prenatal biography"

The surrounding of one narrative by another is a popular device which, as Witzel notes, can be traced back to prehistoric times.⁴⁹ Some authors, however, use this narrative framing in a quite excessive way – to the greatest confusion of the audience. In such an extreme case, the question arises as to why an author tells a story in such a way that the audience can no longer keep track of it. To provide a possible answer, I would like to take a closer look at the narrative framing of Usabha's "prenatal biography". This is carried out quite differently in the individual texts: Some of them have no frame at all – such as Hemacandra's *Triṣaṣṭiśalākāpuruṣacarita*.

The text begins with verses praising the 24 *tīrthaṃkaras* and moves immediately into Rṣabha's former births. Śīlāṅka's introduction is more extensive, including reflections on the meaningfulness of a work such as this one and its probable influence on the audience. He continues then – like Hemacandra without a narrative framing – after a very concise explanation of the Jain cosmology and chronology with the appearance of the *kulakaras* and Usabha's former lives. By contrast, Jinasena and Puṣpadanta provide in their works a frame that is already used in canonical literature: King

48 H 146a.4-8. As Sejjamṃsa is relating only *his* former lives together with Usabha, he is leaving aside Usabha's birth as King Mahābala and begins with the life as god Laliyaṃga and his wife Sayamṃpabhā.

49 Witzel points to the practice, already present in Vedic times, of surrounding one narrative by another, leading to more complex narratives in the period of the Brāhmaṇas. Basing on Indo-Iranian and ancient Greek parallels, he argues that the use of frame structures, at least in poems, can be traced back far into prehistory (Witzel 1987: 411 f.).

Śreṇika,⁵⁰ who had come to worship Jina Mahāvīra, asks the *gaṇadhara* Gautama (Mahāvīra's main pupil), to tell him the story of *dharma*. After speaking about the current descending world period, the *kulakaras* and their deeds, Gautama finally promises to tell the story of Jina Rṣabha / Usabha. The *Ādipurāṇa* begins this account with Rṣabha's former birth as King Mahābala, while the *Tisatṭhimahāpurisaguṇālaṃkāra* immediately starts with the last birth as Jina Usabha.⁵¹

Quite unique is the framing provided by Saṅghadāsa's *Vasudevahiṇḍī*. Here Rṣabha's former births are embedded not only in one, but in various frames. Furthermore, the narrative time is not linear as in the works mentioned above; it provides a lively, but sometimes rather complicated account. The different layers concerning this passage are the following [for an overview see the table below]:

The *Vasudevahiṇḍī* begins with the story of Jambu. After his renunciation he is present at King Koṇia's conversation with the *gaṇadhara* Suhamma. This dialogue⁵² provides the frame and the first layer of our text. During their conversation, Suhamma tells Koṇia about an earlier meeting between Jina Mahāvīra and King Seṇia, Koṇia's father [second layer]. During that meeting Mahāvīra told Seṇia the story of King Vasudeva's grandsons [third layer]. In the course of this narration, Vasudeva recounts his own adventures to his grandsons [fourth layer]. Furthermore, Vasudeva's narration is interspersed with yet more stories. For example, an old woman once told him the story of Jina Usabha: Usabha's birth, life and renunciation, and his first begging for alms [fifth layer]. In this strain of the narrative, passers-by ask Sejjamṣa, Usabha's first donor, how he knew what alms were to be given. Sejjamṣa then has occasion to relate his and Usabha's former births: Their birth as twins in the Uttarakurus [sixth layer] and their memory of being born as the god Laliyaṃga and his wife Sayampabhā [seventh layer]. The god Laliyaṃga in turn remembers his former birth as King Mahābala [eighth layer], during which his friend Sayambuddha told him a series of moral stories [ninth layer]. King Mahābala renounces the world and dies after submitting himself to extreme

50 Śreṇika (Jaina-Māhārāṣṭri: Seṇia) is identical with King Bimbisāra in Buddhist sources, his son Kūṇika (Koṇia / Kūṇia) with Ajātasattu.

51 Cāvūṇḍarāya, who is generally very close to Jinasena, mentions Śreṇika's request to Gautama to tell him the story of the 63 *śalākāpuruṣas*, to which the latter agrees; but in contrast to Jinasena and Puṣpadanta, Cāvūṇḍarāya does *not* put the following narrative into Gautama's mouth and thus avoids a narrative framing.

52 For the use of dialogue in Jain literature cf. Esposito 2015.

austerity [eighth layer], as god Laliyaṃga remembers. Now we are back in the seventh layer and witness the continuation of God Laliyaṃga's and Goddess Sayamṃpabhā's lives. After their death they are reborn, as we know, as Prince Vāirajaṃgha and Princess Sirimāi. In her youth Sirimāi remembers her former birth as Goddess Sayamṃpabhā and her existence as a despised girl with no name (or without a *proper* name), Niṅṅāmiyā [eighth layer]. Then the life of Vāirajaṃgha and Sirimāi continues until the time when they were poisoned by their own son, as the female twin in the Uttarakurus remembers in the sixth layer. Now the story continues chronologically.⁵³ The twins are reborn as gods in Sohamma-heaven, then as physician Kesava and his friend Abhayaghosa, again as gods in Accua-heaven, as Prince Vāiranābha and his friend Sujasa. After the birth as gods in Savvaṭṭhasiddha-heaven they were, as Sejjamṃsa recalls, reborn in this very life as Usabha and as his great-grandson and first donor Sejjamṃsa. Here we are back in the “narrative present”, the fifth layer. The story – and the fifth layer – closes with Usabha preaching the *dharma*, and in the fourth layer King Vasudeva's adventures continue, interspersed with many similar stories, enwrapped in stories, interwoven with more stories. In this way the *Vasudevahiṅḍī* connects the tale of Usabha's previous births on the one hand with the life of Vasudeva, father of the last *vāsudeva* in this world age, Kaṅha (Kṛṣṇa), and, on the other hand, with Jina Mahāvīra as well as with the fifth *gaṇadhara* Suhamma and his pupil Jambu.

This switching between different narrative levels and various former lives, where very few people will be able to keep track of who is reporting to whom and how the story is actually developing, is quite bewildering at first glance. It leads us back to the question we posed at the beginning: What is the deeper meaning behind such a form of narration in which the audience is lead more and more into confusion? If the author had only intended to make the narrative more lively and exciting, he would have gone far beyond the objective through *this* way of narrating. Obviously, this story was not told for the sole purpose of recounting Usabha's former lives. The artful intertwining of the different narrative levels, the jumping between the various former lives is used here as a stylistic device. The author skilfully arouses ever greater uneasiness and discomfort in the listener by confronting him with a situation that is at first glance

53 As we can see, the complicated interlacing of different narrative layers takes place only with the “new” rebirths of the *Vasudevahiṅḍī*-tradition. By contrast, the “old” rebirths taken over from the earlier tradition are depicted chronologically, and, as mentioned above, rather concisely.

incomprehensible: The linear time sequence that we are familiar with, which presents events chronological and thus easily comprehensible for us, is broken up, past events are mixed with future incidents, we lose track of our exact position in space and time. Thus, through his way of narrating, Saṅghadāsa is uncompromisingly deconstructing our view of the world, which is clearly structured by time and space, by kinship and social relations. Through this apparent chaos into which he throws the listener, he is reproducing and recreating this world, which, according to the Jains, has always existed and will never cease to exist, with all its creatures that have passed through myriads of incarnations since time immemorial. Through this kind of storytelling, the listener can gain a glimpse of the true nature of the world and the relativity of all existence – and draw his or her own conclusions. In many narratives revolving around rebirth stories, the protagonists renounce the world at the end, full of disgust – an example for the listener to follow.⁵⁴

Conclusion

To sum up, the *Vāsudevahiṇḍī*-tradition enriched Jina Usabha's "prenatal biography" not only by adding further, fascinating tales, but also by introducing a new perspective on Jina Usabha's previous births. Saṅghadāsa's version is unique regarding both its position inside the text and its elaborate narrative framing. The central importance and general acceptance of this version is shown by the frequent adoption of the "new" narratives and Sejjama's *jāti-marāṇa* by later texts, even if their authors dispensed with Saṅghadāsa's radical deconstruction of our clearly structured world through his interweaving of the different narrative levels and the jumping between Usabha's various past lives. Moreover, Saṅghadāsa answered in his version a legitimate question that some listeners may have asked: If Usabha was the first ascetic in our current descending world period, how did anyone know, how and what to give for alms? After all, it's just a question of remembering your former lives...

54 A similar type of narrative is also found, for example, in *Vh* 310.5–348.9, where the main narrative is interrupted for thirty-eight pages by two monks giving a long account of Jina Santi's former births (including a lot of other inserted tales and the lives of the Jinas Kunthu and Ara), see Esposito (forthcoming). A similar stylistic device is used in *Vh* 253.7–264.16, where the chain of rebirths of seven protagonists, interconnected with each other, are narrated, throwing the listener into even greater confusion, cf. Esposito 2010.

The different narrative layers of Saṅghadāsa's *Vasudevahiṇḍī* in connection with Usabha's biography

- 1st layer:** King Koṇia's conversation with *gaṇadhara* Suhamma
- 2nd layer:** King Senia's meeting with Jina Mahāvīra, narrated by *gaṇadhara* Suhamma
- 3rd layer:** The story of King Vasudeva's grandsons, narrated by Jina Mahāvīra
- 4th layer:** Vasudeva's adventures, narrated by himself
- 5th layer:** The story of Jina Usabha, narrated to King Vasudeva by an old woman
- 6th layer:** The previous birth of Jina Usabha as a male twin, narrated by Sejjamsa, Jina Usabha's first donor
- 7th layer:** The previous birth of the male twin as god Laliyaṅga, narrated by the female twin
- 8th layer:** The previous birth of god Laliyaṅga as King Mahābala, narrated by himself
- 9th layer:** Different moral stories, narrated to King Mahābala by his friend Sayambuddha
- 8th layer:** The previous birth as King Mahābala, continued
- 7th layer:** The previous birth as god Laliyaṅga (and goddess Sayampabhā), continued
- 8th layer:** The previous birth as Prince Vāirajaṅga (and Princess Sirimā)
- 7th layer:** Princess Sirimā narrates her former birth as Niṇṇāmiyā
- 6th layer:** The previous birth as Prince Vāirajaṅga and Princess Sirimā, continued
- 6th layer:** The previous birth as twins, continued
- 6th layer:** The birth as gods in Sohamma-heaven
- 6th layer:** The birth as physician Kesava (and his friend Abhayaghosa, son of a Seth)
- 6th layer:** The birth as gods in Accua-heaven
- 6th layer:** The birth as Prince Vāiranābha (and his friend Sujasa, his charioteer)
- 6th layer:** The birth as gods in Savvaṭṭhasiddha-heaven
- 5th layer:** The story of Jina Usabha, narrated to King Vasudeva by an old woman, continued
- 4th layer:** Vasudeva's adventures, narrated by himself, continued

Abbreviations

<i>C</i>	Jinadāsa's <i>Āvaśyakacūrṇi</i> (<i>C</i> II refers to the second volume)
<i>H</i>	Haribhadra's <i>Āvaśyakavṛtti</i>
<i>M</i>	Malayagiri's <i>Āvaśyakavṛtti</i>
<i>ŚC</i>	Śīlāṅka's <i>Caiṣpaṇṇamahāpurisacariya</i>
<i>HTr</i>	Hemacandra's <i>Triṣaṣṭiśalākāpuruṣacarita</i>
<i>Vh</i>	Saṅghadāsa's <i>Vasudevahiṇḍī</i>

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