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The Varāha (Boar) Avatāra of Viṣṇu in Indian Texts and Art

English Summary of PhD Thesis

The importance of the Varāha *avatāra* in the research of the history of religion and the aim of the dissertation

The doctrine of *avatāras* has been an important subject of research since the beginning of scientific interest in Indian religions. The reason for this, apart from the popularity of the cult of *avatāras*, is that the doctrine of *avatāras* as a typical phenomenon of religious syncretism, allowed for the assimilation of non-Aryan religious elements, deities and cults into the former religious system called Brāhmaṇism and thereby played a decisive role in the evolution of Hinduism as we know it today. In the course of this long process, the major stages of which are marked by the late Vedic *Samhitās*, the *Brāhmaṇas*, *Āraṇyakas*, *Upaniṣads*, the great epics and the *Purāṇas*, the polytheistic and impersonal forms of religion came to be replaced by personal, theistic and monotheistic trends that in the case of the cult crystallizing around the figure of Viṣṇu were coupled by devotional tendencies. In the figure of Viṣṇu, gradually ascending to the rank of supreme god, the major elements that were to constitute the characteristic features of Vaiṣṇavism merged. Among them, the identification of Viṣṇu with the sacrifice of creation and his active and morally motivated role played in the preservation of the universe created by himself are prominent; the latter is achieved through the system of *avatāras* (incarnations).

Four of the incarnations – the Fish, the Tortoise, the Boar and the Dwarf – are rooted in cosmogonic myths known from the Vedas and the *Brāhmaṇas*. The Boar first appears in Vedic hymns but not as Viṣṇu's (or any other god's) incarnation but as an enemy of the Aryans and the guardian of the treasure of the *asuras* which is indicative of his relation to the native population of the subcontinent as early as the period of the oldest religious literature of India. It is probable that the myth of the Boar lifting the Earth from the depth of primeval

ocean originates in a pre-Aryan cult which was related to fertility and the centre of which was located in the Vidhya mountains. The myth of the Boar has two versions, the core of which – the rescue of the Earth from the waters – is identical. The difference is that while in one case the emphasis is on the relation to creation, in the other it is on the victory over the demonic enemy. In the latter case, the myth of the Boar acting as the *avatāra* of Viṣṇu is embedded in the cosmic struggle of good and evil and gains a moral tone that corresponds well to the characteristic qualities of the emerging figure of Viṣṇu.

Extent images as well as textual sources attest that the Boar incarnation of Viṣṇu is depicted in art in two different ways: in a semi-human form with man's body and boar head and in an entirely animal form that are respectively called *Nṛ-varāha* ('Man-Boar') and *Yajña-varāha* ('Boar of Sacrifice') in the *Purāṇas*. In my view, the divergence of the visual tradition reflects the divergence of the Boar myth, that is, the zoomorphic representation is related to the cosmogonic version of the myth while the half boar-half man type to the *avatāra* myth. In my thesis I intend to demonstrate this correlation through the analysis of the relevant texts and extant Varāha images. By cataloguing the known sculptural representations of Varāha, I show the spread of both iconographic types in time (chronological order) and space (geographical diffusion). On this ground it can be ascertained that the semi-human form had appeared among the earliest *avatāra* sculptures and later spread all over Hindu India; its production was continuous until the decline of Hindu dynasties. On the other hand, the spread of the zoomorphic type was much less limited both in time and in space: its representations are produced in Central India during the Gupta, Paramāra, Kalacuri and Candella dynasties between the 5th and 13th century. I seek answer to the question about the specific conditions and historical circumstances favourable for the making and spread of Varāha images; about the religious and historical processes that underlied the success of Varāha in Central India as well as about the iconographic features themselves and their primary and secondary readings that facilitated these processes.

In my dissertation I seek to make the best of the possibilities and information offered by iconography. Apart from the relevant mythological and iconographical texts and the literature on the subject, my research was to a considerable extent based on a field study in Central India and Uttar Pradesh which enabled me to study the iconography and original setting of many Varāha images on the spot.

Chapter 1. The study of Vaiṣṇavism and the *avatāras* – a survey

In the first chapter of my thesis I give a brief account of the history of the research of *avatāras* both from the aspect of religious history and iconography. From the reports of early travellers and missionaries through the emergence in the mid-17th century of the demand for a systematic exploration to the scientifically based research of Indian religious history from the late 18th century up to the present I follow the history of the endeavour, Western and Indian, to know about and study Indian religions and art. The research on the *avatāras*, in close interdependence with the research on Vaiṣṇavism in general, accelerated with the increasing availability of archaeological, epigraphical and iconographical data and textual sources. The study of iconography that evolved as a special branch of the study of religious history not only allows for the identification and dating of the works of art through the interpretation of their specific features but may also provide important information on different aspects of religious life such as the religious and social context of making images, the role of a certain cult in a given period of time or region or the religious preferences of dynasties, etc. In the majority of the cases, the study of the Varāha *avatāra* has been done in the context of the study of Hinduism, Vaiṣṇavism and the *avatāras*; works or studies specifically focussing on this particular *avatāra* are rather rare.

Chapter 2. The evolution of Vaiṣṇavism: The emergence of Viṣṇu as supreme god and his characteristic features; the evolution and role of the *avatāras*

The theistic cult centering on Nārāyaṇa-Viṣṇu as the supreme god that came to be called Vaiṣṇavism after its cult god evolved in the centuries before our era and took final shape in the Gupta age. The Viṣṇu of this theistic cult emerged through the identification of three gods: the man-god Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa, the Vedic solar deity Viṣṇu and Nārāyaṇa the cosmic god of the *Brāhmaṇas*. The solar character of the Vedic Viṣṇu, his creative act symbolized by his three strides measuring out the universe and his identification with the sacrifice forecasted his characteristic features as supreme deity, qualified him for his ascent as major god and determined those points of linkage where several deities could merge into his figure while strengthening his basic features. The examination of these components of his figure reveals that they had not only influenced the formation of the figure of Viṣṇu as supreme god but had an effect on his incarnations and their iconography as well, primarily on the cosmic elements of the Viṣṇu-Varāha iconography. By the analysis of the relevant passages of the texts, I

intend to grasp the Vedic, epical and purāṇic nodal points in the more than a millennium long history of the evolution of Vaiṣṇavism. In this chapter of my dissertation, I also follow the formation of the standard list of the ten *avatāras*. I give emphasis to the treatment of the doctrine of the manifestations of the godhead as the principal tenet of the *pāñcarātra* system which, by its differentiation between the various levels of the incarnatory forms of the supreme god, played an important role in the evolution and spread of iconic forms in general and the emergence and spread of *avatāra* images in particular. Moreover, in the case of zoomorphic Varāha sculptures, the doctrine of *vyūha* even had a direct effect on their iconography.

Chapter 3. Textual sources of the Varāha incarnation: Cosmogonic and *avatāra* myths

In the third chapter I trace the evolution of the myth of the Boar from the relevant passages of the *Ṛg-veda* through the *Atharva-veda*, the *Brāhmaṇas*, *Saṁhitās*, *Āraṇyakas* to the *Purāṇas* and from among the *vāstu-śāstras* the *Aparājita-ṛcchā*. Based on the analysis of these texts, two versions of the myth can be differentiated, namely, its cosmogonical and *avatāra* versions which account for the dichotomy found in the iconographic representations of the Varāha. In the first version, the Boar of the creation myth is identified in the texts with sacrifice (Yajña-varāha). This version of the myth and the symbolic interpretation of the different parts of the body of the Yajña-varāha in the *Purāṇas* that I analyze in detail, shed light on the origin of the iconographic features of the Varāha in its zoomorphic form. The Boar involved in creation is also related to fertility; this aspect can be traced back to the *Atharva-veda* and has its parallels in Indo-European and non-Indo-European mythologies and folklore. It is important that all Indian data are from Central India. In the second version of the myth where the Boar delivers the Earth by killing the demon Hiraṇyākṣa, the original cosmogonic role of the Varāha gradually loses its importance and finally becomes lost, but the intimate relationship between the Boar and the Earth goddess remains and is reflected in iconography. Some of the quotations from the Sanskrit sources are given in my own translation.

Chapter 4. Textual sources of the Varāha incarnation: Iconographic descriptions

In the fourth chapter I analyse the iconographic texts concerning the sculptural representations of the Varāha. It can be stated that there is only partial correlation between the iconographic

texts and the extant images: on the one hand, some of the iconographic types mentioned in the texts are not known from sculpture while, on the other hand, only some of the known sculptural forms can be related to some text (an example for this is the *Vaikhānasāgama* which clearly constitutes the textual background for South Indian Nṛ-varāha representations of the Pallavas). Conspicuous is the lack of detailed iconographic descriptions of the Boar in the zoomorphic form. However, the *Pratimālakṣaṇa* chapter of *Viṣṇudharmottara*, the most important textual source for iconography, in its one single line which is about the zoomorphic Varāha relates the Boar to the cosmic form of Viṣṇu, thereby specifying the iconographic background for those representations of the Boar in animal form whose body is covered with the images of the universe and who is called Yajña-varāha in the *Purāṇas*. The quotations from the texts are given in my own translation.

Chapter 5. The representation of the Varāha *avatāra* in art: The distribution of extant images by type, chronology and provenance; iconographic analysis of images

In this chapter of my thesis, I traced the emergence and spread of the two types of Varāha sculptures and the changes in their iconography from the appearance of the first images to the end of 16th century. My method was the following: within the given interval of time (from 1st to 16th century), I detected the diffusion of the two types of the Boar representation, Nṛ-varāha and Yajña-varāha in the different regions (states) in chronological order (pre-Gupta age before the 3rd century; Gupta age from 4th to 5th century; post-Gupta period from 6th to mid-8th century; Middle Ages from mid-8th to 16th century). I listed the Varāha sculptures known to me and analyzed their iconography region by region (districtwise in Madhya Pradesh, due to the great number of Varāha images). This method not only renders it easy to see the spread of Varāha images geographically but also allows for iconographic comparisons between Varāha sculptures of different provenance within the same period or between images of the same provenance but different age. My catalogue of Varāha sculptures comprises 224 items, out of which I described and analyzed 169 items; from among these I have personally visited and studied 74 sculptures. In these cases, my own photographs are attached to the descriptions.

When collecting, cataloguing and describing Varāha sculptures I could not possibly aspire to give a complete account of all sculptures, especially because of the proliferation of Nṛ-varāha images from the late 8th and 9th century, the description of all of which would have exceeded

the scope of this thesis. Therefore, I had to set up a priority order. I treated all known Varāha sculptures of both types from the pre-Gupta, Gupta and post-Gupta age, in order to give an overall picture of the key periods of the emergence and spread of Varāha representations. Similarly, I gathered, described and analyzed all Yajña-varāha sculptures in all regions and in the whole interval of time under scrutiny, in order to give a comprehensive account of this type of the Varāha icon. Since Central India and the adjacent parts of Uttar Pradesh in the formative period of the Varāha icon took a leading role in the production of Varāha images, I tried to give a detailed account of Nṛ-varāha sculptures, too, in these regions. As for other regions, I opted for giving a full description of one characteristic sculpture, while listing other sculptures that are known to me. I based my lists and analyses on separate images, only exceptionally introducing *daśāvatāra* sculptures or Varāhas in the framework (*parikārikā*) of Viṣṇu sculptures in order to illustrate the diversity of Varāha representations. Through the analysis of extant Varāha sculptures the iconographic preferences of ruling dynasties have become clear and also the specific iconographic and stylistic features of the Boar in their art have been delineated.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

In my thesis I have provided evidence for my initial proposition that the zoomorphic representation of the Boar was typical to Central India and its production there was limited to the 5th–13th century, while the making of the Nṛ-varāha type was pursued from the time of the earliest *avatāra* images (Mathura, 1st–2nd century A.D.) until the end of the Hindu dynasties; the spread of the latter has been detected over most of the subcontinent. The specific historical and religious processes that were favourable in Central India in the period from the 5th to 13th century for the popularity of the Boar in its animal form has been delineated. Royal support in the Gupta age had to a great extent contributed to the strengthening and popularity of the cult of *avatāras* which was also reflected in the making of their images. The core area of Central India – Eran and its vicinity (Sanchi, Vidisha, Udayagiri) –, itself won by a military campaign, was of strategic importance for the Gupta emperors as the starting point for their conquests in the West. The royal preference for the Varāha icon was due to the parallel drawn between the victorious king and the Boar rescuing the Earth. After the military successes of the Gupta emperors in Central and Western India the symbolism of the Boar was transferred to the king who delivered the territory of the kingdom

from the enemy and thus secured the territory for his people, thereby repeating the act of divine creation. By erecting a Varāha sculpture, the king set a parallel between the incarnation of Viṣṇu and himself, and glorified the god as well as himself and his sovereignty. The body and limbs of the Boar in the animal form are covered with the sculpted images of the universe and its inhabitants; thus, the iconography of the Varāha not only unmistakably refers to the role of the Boar in creation but presents him as the sacrifice of creation itself. The visual representation of the Boar bearing the whole universe on his body relates this iconographic type to the cosmic form of (Nārāyaṇa-Kṛṣṇa-)Viṣṇu and his iconographic representations.

An answer to the question why just in Central India the cult and representation of the Boar in zoomorphic form gained popularity is to be sought in the Central Indian origin of the boar cult. The fact that the zoomorphic Varāha is limited to this region iconographically supports the assumption that in the Varāha *avatāra* a Central Indian pre-aryan cult had been assimilated. Vedic textual data for Varāha and Emuṣa as well as the etymology of these names that partly or entirely relate them to the pre-Aryan linguistic substratum corroborate this assumption. Central India is known to have been inhabited by important tribes in the Middle Ages. In this region, particularly in Malwa, zoomorphic cults existed; a boar god had been known from early times among local tribes. The brāhmaṇisation of this boar god happened in the age of the *Brāhmaṇas* and by the Gupta age it had been assimilated into the cult of Viṣṇu.

The cult of the cosmogonic Varāha was carried on by the medieval dynasties of Central India. This we can explain by their strong local ties, or, at least partly, by their tribal origin: on the one hand, tribal cults were not alien to them, on the other, for legitimation and prestige reasons they were interested in the Hinduisation of these cults. Apart from the political aspect, however, the fertility aspect of the Boar was also continuously present. In the Indian myth the Boar delivers the Earth from the waters, that is, from the status of formlessness, and gives her form and expands her. In the symbolic language of the myth, the nozzle of the Boar, thrust into the lump of soil, refers to the fecundating role of the Varāha in cosmic creation, for the latter takes place through the unification of the Varāha and the Earth. The Boar of the *Brāhmaṇas* delivers the Earth in order to fecundate it and this role of his is identical with that of sacrifice; it is by no chance that the Boar of the cosmogonic myth is called Yajña-varāha.

The fecundating role of the Boar is closely connected to agricultural fertility; this is corroborated by textual data and certain elements of iconography as well. It cannot be by chance either that the zoomorphic Varāha sculptures of Central India were many times erected

in the immediate proximity of water reservoirs which refers both to the mythic act of the Boar and its role in (agricultural) fertility. The latter is still part of the contemporary cult of Varāha. It is probable that the political aspect of the Boar and its fertilizing function were related to each other and enhanced each other since the legitimation of the king who was to assure the preservation of the Earth (=the territory of the kingdom) and who glorified himself as such, was fostered and authenticated by his assuring the fertility of the land. Further, it is noteworthy that several of the Central Indian zoomorphic Varāha sculptures still in situ stand in a *śaiva* context which may indicate that the manifold symbolism of the Boar – its connection to royal power and agricultural fertility as well as its magical protective power related to the latter – rendered its presence desirable even in non-Vaiṣṇava context.

The textual sources serving as the background of the two types of Varāha icons can be differentiated and themselves explain the differences of the two iconographic types. In iconographic texts, the features of Nṛ-varāha are elucidated but the features of the zoomorphic type are not explained. At the same time, although a certain degree of freedom on the part of the creators is observable, mainly in the details, the major features are obviously regulated and follow the same principles in the case of the animal form as well. The cosmogonic myth of the Boar delivering the Earth, the purāṇic descriptions of Yajña-varāha and the cosmic form of (Nārāyaṇa-Kṛṣṇa-)Viṣṇu can be pointed out as sources for the complex system of images on the body and limbs of the zoomorphic Boar. We cannot exclude, moreover, it seems to be probable that the occurrence of an entirely naturalistic representation of the Boar among the earliest Varāha sculptures with no single figure on its body, marks the moment when the assimilation of the boar of a local zoomorphic cult into the Hindu panteon aroused the need of creating an iconographic tradition for the Boar in the animal form. In my view, the missing link between the entirely naturalistic representation of the Boar devoid of any representation and the zoomorphic Varāha covered with pictures of the universe may be the sculptural panels of the Varāha Cave of Udayagiri which for the first time translate the cosmogonic myth of the Boar to the visual language of iconography; thereafter, the elements in its side panels became adaptable to the body of the Boar in the animal form as well. Later on, the medieval dynasties of Central India developed their specific versions of Yajña-varāha iconography but the basic features remained unchanged all through its production.

The secondary readings of the Varāha iconography (political and fertility) were implicitly or expressly present in the iconography of both Varāha types and played an important role in the spread of the representations of this popular *avatāra*. However, while the Nṛ-varāha type,

enhancing the *dharma* and the glory of the king, diffused over the subcontinent, the concept of the Varāha as cosmic sacrifice belonged exclusively to the zoomorphic Boar and to Central India.

Finally, my thesis is completed with the table of Varāha sculptures described in the fifth chapter and four maps, prepared for this purpose, showing the diffusion of the two iconographic types of Varāha sculptures in India and in Madhya Pradesh. I conclude my dissertation with the list of references and literature used.