

Indian Regional *nāga* Cults and Individual *nāga* Stories in Chinese Buddhist Travelogues

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Abstract: This paper attempts to link the archaeological and epigraphic evidence of *nāga* veneration in South Asia (Mathurā, Ajanṭā) with the textual sources about *nāgas* and their veneration from the Chinese Buddhist travelogues (Faxian, Xuanzang). As a specific case study, the information about the *nāga* Dadhikarna attested in Mathurā is compared with Faxian's description of the cult of the *nāga* 'White-Ear' in Sāṅkāśya and other texts referring to rituals or festivals dedicated to *nāgas*.

Keywords: Faxian, Xuanzang, Mathurā, *nāga*

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1. Introduction

For some time now, I have been working with and on Buddhist and, to a lesser degree, Hindu narratives where *nāgas* – i.e., serpentine semi-divine beings – play an important role.² The treatment of *nāgas* by scholars of South Asia shows the, at times, odd discrepancy between art historical representation and textual evidence for certain religious phenomena in the same region in South Asia; it also reflects the problems arising from hierarchising the sources and material which we have at hand, textual versus art historical or

¹ This article is a revised version of a paper given at the workshop 'Mathurā: The Archaeology of Inter-religious Encounters in Ancient India', held at the Centre for Religious Studies (CERES), Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Germany, from 25 to 26 July 2019. I thank the organisers, Patrick Krüger and Jessie Pons, for inviting me to give a paper, and the participants for their comments which – hopefully – helped to improve the paper. I also have to thank the two anonymous Reviewers for their valuable comments, corrections and suggestions which helped to improve the article, and in particular my Cardiff colleague Simon Brodbeck for polishing the English and having his eagle eyes on some details which would have slipped through.

² See DEEG 2009, 2016. For general discussions of snake/*nāga* veneration in South Asia throughout history see COZAD 2004 and JONES 2010.

archaeological, and vice versa.³ While there are, for instance, many examples of art historical representation of *nāgas* across India, textual references to concrete *nāga* stories, or to ritual practices⁴ in relation to them, are not plentiful and not that old.⁵ In the Buddhist context one could argue, based on early art historical evidence (Sanchi, Bharhut), that in the wider framework of the enlightenment narrative the story of the *nāga* Mucilinda protecting the newly enlightened Buddha from a thunderstorm with his coils wrapped around him and his hood spread above him⁶ is the oldest example of such a *nāga*-related narrative motif, although as such it stays remarkably stagnant and vague until later, narratively more elaborate versions.⁷

2. Two kinds of *nāgas*

Following up on this observation, the point I want to make is that in the sources from South Asia we have evidence of two kinds of *nāgas*: anonymous *nāgas* and individualised *nāgas*.⁸ My claim is that *nāgas* of these two ‘groups’ are too often and too easily put into the same category of regional *nāga* cults without looking at their contextual, structural and functional differences. In a way, I am challenging the methodological implication of the wide-spread notion of general local *nāga* cults when religious monuments at the respective sites display representations of *nāgas*; free-standing and huge *nāga* sculptures as possible objects of veneration and ritual practice are, of course, a different matter, but even they have to stay anonymous to us as long there is no additional information in the form of an inscription or a text that undoubtedly refers to and thereby individualises them. To be clear, I am not challenging the existence of this seemingly ubiquitous cult of *nāgas* as such, and there are, as will be discussed below, examples of *nāga* veneration directly set in local Buddhist monastic contexts. Although the comparison may seem a little

³ DECAROLI 2004: 4.

⁴ Such records of ritual practice have been kept more or less divorced from the archaeological evidence, which has led to the problem which SAXENA 2021: 239 formulates clearly in the context of the apsidal *nāga*-temple at Sonkh, Mathurā: ‘It might be difficult to comprehend how Nāgas were worshipped in so sophisticated a temple’. But this is, of course, applicable to all *nāga* images which may claim worship by size, inscriptional evidence, etc.

⁵ Old in the sense of being contemporary with the assumed older/oldest strata of texts – whatever that is supposed to mean in individual cases, e.g., the canonical *sūtra* texts.

⁶ VOGEL 1926: 102–105.

⁷ For a discussion of different textual versions of the Mucilinda narrative see DEEG 2005: 451–454.

⁸ The problem has been addressed, for instance, by ZIN 2018: 105 in her discussion of the Mucalinda episode at Kanaganahalli: ‘The wonderful representations of mighty *nāgas* which were placed on the *stūpas* – ... – are depictions of (specific?) *nāgas* and not episodes from the Buddha’s life.’

bit overstretched, to infer a regional *nāga* cult on the basis of a depiction of *nāgas* without any other evidence would be a bit like inferring a cult of demons in specific churches and monasteries and their environment in the Middle Ages on the basis of sculptures of demonic creatures like dwarfs, gargoyles, and griffins at exposed positions on the outside of Gothic cathedrals⁹ or in the initials of medieval manuscripts.¹⁰ I also find it somewhat problematic to take the occurrence of the element *nāga* in onomastic material as an indication of *nāga* veneration.¹¹ The Buddhist philosophers Dignāga and Nāgārjuna, to name just the most prominent examples, certainly had nothing to do with a *nāga*-cult as, for instance, Fergusson in one of the earliest treatments of the subject assumed;¹² the narrative of Nāgārjuna being given Buddhist texts (*sūtras*) by the *nāgas* in the netherworld¹³ is more likely an etiological *post-ex-nomine* means of making sense of the name in a hagiographical context than the reason for the ‘individual’ having been given the name in the first place. I would therefore claim that it requires careful contextualisation of different strands of material to understand, more generally, the role and function of *nāgas* in particular artistic and textual sources and, more specifically, the role and function of particular individualised *nāgas*.

When speaking of individualised *nāgas*, I do not just mean *nāgas* who bear names (like Karkoṭaka, Takṣaka, etc.) but rather *nāgas* with a relatively clear and individual ‘narrative’ and/or ‘ritual’ identity, i.e., those who have a religious practice of veneration and/or a story attached to them. This makes them local in the first place – the narrative has to happen or be localised somewhere – although they can easily become trans-local, i.e., become referred to or venerated at different places, as Robert DeCaroli has rightly emphasised with reference to the (non-*nāga*) deity Harīti (DeCAROLI 2004: 16, 183).

3. The idea of the *nāga*

Before discussing some examples of *nāga* narratives, I would like to briefly trace the idea of the *nāga*, or more generally of serpentine spirits, in Indian sources. The word *nāga* is a relative ‘latecomer’ as a term for a snake or serpentine being in Old Indo-Aryan. There are – apart from descriptive names like *bhujamga(ma)*, ‘arm-walker’, *uraga*, ‘breastwalker’, *dvijihva*,

⁹ See CAMILLE 1992.

¹⁰ See BOVEY 2002 and NISHIMURA 2009.

¹¹ SHAW 2004; see also DeCaroli’s rather critical remarks (DeCAROLI 2009: 98f. & 112f., note 1).

¹² FERGUSSON 1873: 64f.; for an overview of the connection between Nāgārjuna and *nāgas* see WALSER 2005: 73–75.

¹³ WALLESER 1924.

‘two-tongued’, *dīrghajihva*, ‘long-tongued’, etc. – older words like *sarpa* (an Indo-European inheritance; primary derivation from $\sqrt{\text{srp}}$, ‘to creep’, see Lat. *serpens*)¹⁴ and (Vedic) *áhi*¹⁵. Although the exact etymology of *nāga* is unclear, the word is semantically related to *nagna*, ‘naked’¹⁶. In Brahminical/Hindu sources, *nāgas* do not appear earlier than in the epics, which means that, in combination with early art historical material and the epigraphic evidence, the Buddhist textual sources contain the earliest references to the term *nāga*, even though they are not necessarily older as texts than the Brahminical ones.

In the sources, *nāgas* have specific characteristics which differentiate them from other sentient beings.¹⁷ They have the ability to change into human form; they are linked with the aquatic netherworld and therefore have control of water in a more general way; and they are more or less ambivalent creatures in the sense that they are potentially dangerous through their physical capacity to kill using poison (see the snake words *viśadhara*, ‘poison-bearer’, *viśānana*, *viśāśya*, ‘poison-mouthed’, *viśāyudha*, ‘fighting with poison’) and also through their command over nature, particularly over the element water (causing rain, flooding or droughts). The link with water and the withholding thereof is best expressed in the Vedic Vṛtra myth: the serpent (*ahi*) Vṛtra withholds water, and the god Indra has to release it with physical force.¹⁸ In this myth, Vṛtra quite appropriately carries the name ‘concealer, withholder’ ($\sqrt{\text{vr}}$ -, ‘to cover’),¹⁹ while the later *nāga* concept clearly draws on and refers to real poisonous creatures best represented in India by the cobra, the ‘hooded one’ (*paṇin*), which is, of course, how *nāgas* are depicted in visual representations from the earliest time.

4. *Nāgas* in Chinese Buddhist literature

There is considerable information about *nāgas* as a category of beings in Buddhist literature in Chinese, confirming the features and aspects discussed above and adding some more. The ambiguity of *nāgas* is striking: they are both potentially dangerous and benevolent.²⁰ This ambiguity is clearly expressed in the **Saddharma-smṛtyupasthāna-sūtra* / *Zhengfa-nianchu-jing* 正法念處

¹⁴ MAYRHOFER 1976: 445f., s.v. *sárpati*.

¹⁵ For the rather uncertain etymology of this word see MAYRHOFER 1992: 156, s.v.

¹⁶ MAYRHOFER 1963: 150f., s.v. *nāgáh*.

¹⁷ See BLOSS 1973.

¹⁸ See WATKINS 1995; DEEG 2016: 88–91.

¹⁹ DEEG 1995: 141, 290.

²⁰ SCHMITHAUSEN 1997 and DEEG 2009: 93f. Ritually this ambivalence seems to be reflected in the Nepalese *sarpabali* when one snake is sacrificed into the fire while another is set free: VAN DEN HOEK and SHRESTHA 1992: 59.

經, translated by Gautama Prajñāruci / Qutan Banruoliuzhi 瞿曇般若流支 (fl. 538–543) (T.721.105b.17–21):²¹

There are two kinds of *nāga* king: one practises the *dharma*, [while] the second one does not practise the *dharma*; one protects the world, the second destroys the world; in the cities [of the two kinds of *nāga*] it does not rain hot sand where the *nāgas* practising the *dharma* reside, but it constantly rains hot sand where the *nāgas* not practising the *dharma* reside: when the hot sand hits their heads it is as hot as fire, burns down [their] palaces and their retinue, all of them being smashed, and after having been destroyed [they] are reborn.²²

The usual Buddhist way of dealing with these creatures was to have them converted to the *dharma* by the Buddha or another eminent Buddhist saint and made protectors of a specific site or the local environment, as demonstrated by the two most well-known *nāga* stories of Apalāla and Gopāla in the Northwest of India (Nagarahāra, Swāt). If the *nāgas* are only driven from their former place, they can still be dangerous and inflict damage: in the foundation story of Kaśmīr, after the conversion of the *nāgas* of the valley through the Buddhist saint Madhyantika the human population has to stay outside the valley for half a year, during which the *nāgas* who had previously resided there can still exert control over the country.²³ In Nepal, the *nāgas* have to be propitiated by the Buddhist saint Śāntikāra because, even after the *bodhisattva* Mañjuśrī has driven them to and contained them in a small lake in the valley, they still cause a drought.²⁴ It is interesting that, at least according to the stories known from extant literature, it is only the Buddha who can tame and pacify *nāgas* completely, while even very powerful Buddhist saints like Madhyantika in Kaśmīr only succeed in taking land from them.

If, more specifically, we turn to Buddhist *nāga* narratives in the biography of the Buddha,²⁵ the oldest and most prominent seems to be the narrative of Mucilinda, where the *nāga*'s protection of the Buddha from the forces of nature exemplified through a fierce thunderstorm and rainfall may be linked to the

²¹ All Chinese texts are quoted according to the Taishō edition (Taishō-shinshū-daizōkyō: abbreviated as T. + number, page and column of the printed text) of the Chinese Buddhist canon in the electronic version of the Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association (CBETA), with slightly modified punctuation.

²² 有二種龍王：一者法行；二者非法行。一護世界；二壞世間。於其城中法行龍王所住之處，不雨熱沙；非法龍王所住之處，常雨熱沙。若熱沙著頂，熱如熾火，焚燒宮殿及其眷屬，皆悉磨滅，滅已復生。 See also DEEG 2009: 93, note 5.

²³ DEEG 2016: 144–156.

²⁴ DEEG 2016: 167–173, 194–196.

²⁵ On *nāgas* in the biography of the Buddha see VOGEL 1926: 93–131 and DEEG 2008: 92.

nāgas' power to control water. I exclude the story of the Buddha's fight against the fire-*nāga* of Kāśyapa as an exceptional case because of its prominent connection with fire and not with the usual element of water.²⁶

Rain magic and/or control of or over water is a motif often connected with *nāgas*.²⁷ In this context, stories of the conversion of *nāgas* by the Buddha are well known, the best documented and researched probably being the story of the conversion of the aforementioned *nāgas* Apalāla (in Swāt) and Gopāla (in Nagarahāra) in the Indian Northwest. One could add the stories of *nāga-sādhana*, 'overcoming of *nāgas*', in the foundation stories of Nepal and Kaśmīr.²⁸ Although the means and methods of taming are different, there is always a powerful person involved, either a religious figure (Buddha, Madhyantika) or a king.

5. Case study: Mathurā

The region of Mathurā provides a good example of a discrepancy between the archaeological and art historical situation and the textual sources in relation to *nāgas*.²⁹ While there is plenty of visual and some epigraphic evidence for *nāgas*, none of the known Buddhist texts or the Chinese travelogues contains a single narrative about *nāgas* or a *nāga* in the region. For the latter type of source this does not really come as a surprise, since the oldest extant report (by Faxian; see below) has not much to say about the region, and a large proportion of Xuanzang's longer 'description' of Mathurā is based, as I have shown elsewhere,³⁰ on a misreading of Faxian's general report on India, and therefore does not deal with Mathurā at all.

As stated above, Mathurā itself offers considerable evidence of *nāga* veneration:³¹ according to Upinder Singh, 46 of the sculptures from Mathurā from the period between roughly 200 BC and 200 AD are *nāgas* (or their female equivalents, *nāginīs* or *nāgīs*), which thereby rank in second place

²⁶ See ZIN 2006: 138–141.

²⁷ See the many examples discussed in DEEG 2016.

²⁸ See BRINKHAUS 2001 and DEEG 2016; the extreme form of 'pacification' seems to be the sacrifice of snakes (*sarpabali* or *sarpahūti*) with its narrative precedent in Janamejaya's *sarpasatra* in the *Mahābhārata*: see VAN DEN HOEK and SHRESTHA 1992, and MINKOWSKI 1989.

²⁹ See SAXENA 2021: 225–224.

³⁰ DEEG 2007.

³¹ VOGEL 1912. In the most recent study of Mathurā *nāga* cults SAXENA 2021: 229 rightly concludes that they were 'an established religious tradition at Mathura, drawing considerable patronage from the community.'

after *yakṣa* images (57).³² The most striking and individual example is the archaeological and inscriptional evidence for a *nāga*-king Dadhikarṇa, ‘Milk-Eared’, previously discussed by Bühler, Vogel, and Lüders.³³ As pointed out by these scholars, the name occurs in a list of *nāgas* in Hemacandra’s (12th cent.) commentary to his *Abhidhanacintāmaṇi* 4.366³⁴, which includes two other *nāga*-names formed with the initial membrum *dadhi-* (Dadhīpūraṇa and Dadhimukha). Another reference to the *nāga* is found in a list of *nāga*-kings (*bhujageśvara*) in the appendix to the *Harivaṃśa*, in which the *nāgas* are invoked for their protection (*pāntu māṃ bhujageśvarāḥ*, ‘... may the lords of the snakes protect me.’).³⁵ This list reflects some similarity with Hemacandra’s list.³⁶ All this shows that a *nāga* called Dadhikarṇa was known as a *nāgarāja* in the three major religious traditions of India.

The three ‘Dadhikarṇa inscriptions’³⁷ from Mathurā were found or originally located at the Jamālpur Mound where the remains of a Buddhist monastery were identified side by side with a non-Buddhist sanctuary interpreted as the shrine of the *nāga*-king³⁸. The two sites seem to have had a close relationship, as Lüders notices: ‘... there seem to have been friendly relations between the Buddhist monks and the worshippers of the shrine ...’ (LÜDERS 1961: 59).

While the individualised *nāga* Dadhikarṇa is clearly attested by an inscription on the pedestal of a headless *nāga* statue (*Dadhika[r]ṇ[ṇ]o*)³⁹, an almost complete Sanskrit inscription referring to Dadhikarṇa gives more interesting information (translation LÜDERS 1961: 62f.):

Success! In the year 26, in the third (month) of the rainy season, on the fifth day, on this date, the stone slab was set up at the shrine of the holy lord of Nāgas Dadhikarṇa by the boys, chief of whom is Nandibala, the sons of the actors of Mathurā, who are known as the Cāndaka brothers. May it be for the sharing of the principal lot by their parents. May it be for the welfare and happiness of all sentient beings.

³² SINGH 2004: 388. An example for a rather large *nāga* image from Mathurā is the one from Chargaon (see Fig.1); the accompanying inscription refers to a tank or pond and thereby describes the typical ‘setup’ of a *nāga* cult; see SAXENA 2021: 231.

³³ BÜHLER 1892: 390, VOGEL 1926: 41f., 282, and LÜDERS 1961: 62f., §27 & 70, §34.

³⁴ HARGOVINDAS and BEHECHARDAS 1914: 526.

³⁵ I am happy to acknowledge that I owe the details of this reference to my colleague Simon Brodbeck, Cardiff.

³⁶ The list also contains a *nāga* Dadhimukha.

³⁷ See also SAXENA 2021: 230f.

³⁸ LÜDERS 1961: 59.

³⁹ LÜDERS 1961: 126f.

There are several interesting details in the inscription which we should keep in mind for the subsequent discussion: 1. The stone was erected during the rainy season. The date given in the inscription coincides astonishingly well with the date of the modern *nāga-pañcamī* ritual (the 5th day of the bright half of Śrāvaṇa, i.e. July/August). 2. The *nāga* is called *bhagavat*, a title/epithet which is also given to another *nāga* at Mathurā called Bhuma (or Bhumo⁴⁰) and to an anonymous, but, according to the size of its statue, important *nāga* from Chargaon (Fig.1)⁴¹. 3. The merit generated by the erection of the stone is, in clear and typical Buddhist fashion, transferred (*puṇyapariṇāma*) to the parents and all living beings.⁴²

Another shorter inscription found at the same place, which was, according to Lüders, part of a Buddhist *vihāra*,⁴³ refers to a shrine priest (*devakulika*) of the *nāga*, who made a donation to the *vihāra* (translation LÜDERS 1961: 70, §34):

The gift of Devila, the priest (*devakulika*) at the shrine of Dadhikarṇṇa, in the year 77, in the 4th (month) of summer, on the 29th day.⁴⁴

From the archaeological remains we cannot draw any direct conclusions about what the *nāga* shrine may have looked like or about its relationship to the Buddhist *vihāra*, but from other evidence it is likely that there was a body of water in the vicinity, which usually would be linked with the presence of a *nāga*. A Mathurā inscription dedicated to the *nāga* Bhuma from year 8 of the Kaniṣka era mentions the donation of a pond (*puḥṣirīṇi*) and a garden (*arama*),⁴⁵ and another inscription from the 40th year of Huviṣka (at Chargaon, Fig.1) additionally mentions the *nāga*'s 'own pond' (*puṣkaraniyya svakā[yyām]*)⁴⁶. Furthermore, the so-called 'Apsidal Temple no. 2' at Sonkh, excavated and described by Härtel and his team, clearly indicates that quite elaborate shrines or temples for the veneration of *nāgas* did indeed exist in Mathurā (HÄRTEL 1993: 425).

As in most other cases of relatively short inscriptional material, no specific details are given about the function and cult of this *nāga* Dadhikarṇṇa – or, as

⁴⁰ HÄRTEL 1993: 426b gives Bhūmo.

⁴¹ LÜDERS 1961: 148f., §102 & 173f., §137.

⁴² The formula 'for the welfare and happiness of all sentient beings' (*sa(rv)[va]satahida[s] (ukha)*) is also found in the inscription of the *nāga* Bhuma: LÜDERS 1961: 149, §102; see also DAMSTEEGT 1989: 299b.

⁴³ LÜDERS 1961: 59; see also DAMSTEEGT 1989: 299b.

⁴⁴ *dānaṃ Devilaṣya Dadhikarṇṇa-devakulikasya saṃ 70 7 gr 4 divase 20 [9]*.

⁴⁵ LÜDERS 1961: 148.

⁴⁶ LÜDERS 1961: 174.

it were, of other *nāgas* – and the conclusions that can be drawn based on the archaeological evidence alone are quite weak.⁴⁷ Despite their having individual names, this type of *nāga* often stays oddly anonymous if they cannot be contextualised further from other sources.

6. Milk-Eared and White-Eared: parallels in Chinese travelogues

Although the Chinese travelogues say nothing about *nāgas* in Mathurā, there is a curious parallel in Faxian's report where, in my opinion, there is a direct link with the *nāga* Dadhikarṇa in Mathurā. In the context of Sāṅkāśya (Sengjiashi 僧迦施), the place of the Buddha's spectacular descent from Trayastriṃśa Heaven after having preached the *dharma* to his deceased mother Māyā, Faxian 法顯 (travelled 399–412) describes in quite some detail the cult of a local *nāga* housed in a monastery (Gaoseng-Faxian-zhuan 高僧法顯傳, T.2085.860a.4–14):

There (i.e., in Sāṅkāśya) there are about a thousand monks and nuns who take their meal together [although] some of them study the Hīnayāna [and some of them] the Mahāyāna. At the place where they live, there is a white-eared *nāga* who is the *dānapati* of the monks' community and who causes rich harvest and timely rainfall without damage in the kingdom. He provides security for the *saṅgha*. The monks are grateful for his benevolence, and therefore they built a house for the *nāga* in which they established a sitting place for him. Furthermore, they have established [the distribution] of food [for the sake of] merit: every day, the monks choose three from their community to go to the house of the *nāga* and eat [inside]. After each summer retreat, the *nāga* transforms into a small white-eared snake, [and] the monks recognise him in [this form]. They put the [transformed] *nāga* in a copper pot with ghee in it and all [monks], from the eldest [in ordination] down to the lowest, pass [the *nāga*] and bow in greeting. When they have [all] greeted him, [the *nāga*] transforms [again] and disappears. This happens once a year.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ See HARTTEL 1993: 426 and COHEN 1998: 379.

⁴⁸ 天帝釋、梵天王從佛下處。亦起塔。此處僧及尼可有千人，皆同眾食，雜大、小乘學。住處有一白耳龍，與此眾僧作檀越，令國內豐熟，雨澤以時無諸災害，使眾僧得安。眾僧感其惠，故為作龍舍，敷置坐處，又為龍設福食供養。眾僧日日眾中別差三人，到龍舍中食。每至夏坐訖，龍輒化形作一小蛇，兩耳邊白。眾僧識之，銅盂盛酪，以龍置中，從上座至下座行之，伏若問訊，遍便化去，每年一出。其國豐饒，人民熾盛，最樂無比。諸國人來，無不經理，供給所須。 See DEEG 2016: 76. A similar but shorter description is also found in Faxian's biography in Huijiao's 慧皎 Gaoseng-zhuan 高僧傳 (T.2059.338a.11–16) and in Sengyou's 僧祐 Chu-sanzang-jiji 出三藏記集 (T.2145.112a.13–18), but also in Daoshi's 道世 Fayuan-zhulin 法苑珠林 (T.2122.475b.3–8).

None of the sources about the Buddha's descent from the Trayastriṃśa heaven reflects any direct connection between this event and a *nāga*. The only indirect link is the fact that some sources (Faxian, Xuanzang) report that the Buddha took a bath immediately after having descended.⁴⁹ That Faxian does not mention a *nāga* in this connection seems to imply that the cult of the local *nāga* developed independently of the famous event in the biography of the Buddha.⁵⁰

Chinese sources contain some additional textual evidence for a *nāga* cult in Sāṅkāśya; although in these sources the *nāga* remains anonymous, we can assume a continuity from Faxian's time. In the biography of Narendrayaśas (490–589), a monk born in Udyāna⁵¹, it is recorded that he visited a *stūpa* dedicated to the *nāga* of Sāṅkāśya – the 'heavenly ladder' (*tianti* 天梯) clearly refers to the descent of the Buddha from the Trayastriṃśa – on his way from the Northwest (Nagarahāra), the place of the skull bone and tooth relics of the Buddha, to Rājagṛha (Bamboo Grove monastery) in Magadha (T.2060.432a.29–b.6):

At the age of twenty-one [Narendrayaśas] received full ordination (*upasampadā*), and [when he] listened to the elder [monks who were] full of admiration for the trace of the Buddha's shadow, some said that in a certain kingdom there was the alms bowl [of the Buddha], in certain kingdoms there were the robes, the skull bone, the tooth, and that there were multiple miraculous phenomena, [and] as a consequence [he] made up his mind and made a vow to see and to venerate [all these traces of the Buddha]. Because [he] had just received the precepts [he] had to know the specifics of the *vinaya*, [but] after five summer [retreats he] departed on [his] journey to [these] places, and as a result [visited] the traces of the stone platform of the heavenly ladder [and the] site of the jewelled *stūpa* of the *nāga*-shrine, [and thus] travelled widely through [different] kingdoms and personally worshipped [sites] where the traces were already gone. [He] stayed alone for ten years in what used to be the Bamboo Grove monastery (Veṇuvana-vihāra).⁵²

⁴⁹ See DEEG 2005: 278f. where references to the famous fragrant water of Sāṅkāśya can be found as well.

⁵⁰ No *nāgas* are found in the visual depictions of the descent and the Buddha's sermon – see SCHLINGLOFF 2011: 476–487 and ZIN 2018: 54f. – except in one peripheral scene at Ajanta in which, according to SCHLINGLOFF 2011: 485, centre right, 'A Garuda comes flying through the gateway to Heaven, promising two Nāgas invulnerability [mistake for invulnerability, MD] for the duration of the sermon.' Unfortunately, Schlingloff does not give any sources for this reading, but the scene at least represents the presence of *nāgas* at the sermon of the Buddha.

⁵¹ Modern Swāt (Pakistan).

⁵² 二十有一得受具篇，聞諸宿老歎佛景迹，或言：某國有鉢，某國有衣。頂骨牙齒，神

In his report on Sāṅkāśya in the *Datang-Xiyu-ji* 大唐西域記, Xuanzang 玄奘 (travelled 629–645) does not record the cult of the *nāga* but only refers to a *nāga* in a lake who protects the sacred place (T.2087.893b.26f.):

Southeast of the great *stūpa* is a *nāga* in a lake [who] constantly protects the sacred traces. Miraculously guarded in that way, it is difficult even to cause small damage [to it]. In many years it may fall into ruins by itself, but no man is able to destroy it.⁵³

A lake or pond (*Sengjiashi-guo-dachishui* 僧迦尸國大池水) near the famous bejewelled heavenly staircase was already mentioned in the Chinese *Samyuktāgama* (T.125.707a.11f.)⁵⁴, but without mention of a *nāga*. All this is enough to show that Faxian's description of *nāga* veneration is not the pure invention of a pious mind but is based on a *longue durée* tradition. It also fits the historical framework which Saxena worked out for the history of *nāga* worship in Mathurā (SAXENA 2021: 240): while these cults were still dominant in the Gupta era at the time of Faxian's visit, they may not have been as 'recognisable' as in the earlier period, and this is why the later visitors to Sāṅkāśya (Narendrayaśas and Xuanzang) only mention an anonymous *nāga* in a pond.

I have discussed Faxian's record elsewhere⁵⁵, but I have not previously pointed out the seemingly evident parallel with the Mathurā *nāga* Dadhikarṇa. As far as I know, no one else has yet made the connection.⁵⁶ The reference to a yearly festival in honour of a *nāga* – or rather a festival to appease him and to have him grant good harvest – is known from other sources⁵⁷ and places.⁵⁸

The most striking parallel between Dadhikarṇa in Mathurā and Faxian's *nāga* in Sāṅkāśya is the name: as far as I can see, the element 'ear' (Skt. *karṇa*,

變非一，遂即起心，願得瞻奉。以戒初受，須知律相，既滿五夏，發足遊方，所以天梯石臺之迹，龍廟寶塔之方，廣周諸國，並親頂禮，僅無遺逸。曾竹園寺一住十年。See DEEG 2005: 273, note 1348. KUWAYAMA 1988: 13f. could not identify this place, as he did not recognise the link with Sāṅkāśya.

⁵³ 其大窰堵波東南有一池龍，恒護聖迹。既有冥衛，難以輕犯，歲久自壞，人莫能毀。

⁵⁴ See DEEG 2005: 272, note 1346.

⁵⁵ DEEG 2005: 281–283, DEEG 2009: 95f., and DEEG 2016: 75f.

⁵⁶ Even VOGEL 1926: 283, making a reference to Faxian's story, overlooked the parallel. DECAROLI 2004: 40 and 76f. briefly discusses the passage – wrongly calling the *nāga* 'converted' (p. 40). COHEN 1998: 377–380 uses Faxian's story to argue that the *nāga* cave 16 at Ajaṅṭā was used for a similar ritual.

⁵⁷ The *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya* refers to *nāga* festivals several times: see DEEG 2009: 97. In the story of the two *nāgas* in Rājagṛha (see below), a play about the life of the Buddha should be performed on the occasion of the *nāga* festival: see PANGLUNG 1981: 143.

⁵⁸ According to the *Svayambhupurāṇa*, a cloth on which the banned *nāgas* are painted is brought out of the shrine when there is the danger of a drought: DEEG 2016: 196.

Chin. *er* 耳) is not attested in any *nāga* name except those of Dadhikarṇa and Faxian's Baier(-long) 白耳(龍),⁵⁹ and Śuktikarṇa in the aforementioned list of *nāgas* in the *Harivaṃśa*.⁶⁰ *Dadhi* 'sour milk' is metaphorically used for 'white', as, for instance, in the name of a jackal in the *Pañcatantra*, Dadhipuccha, 'Milk-Tailed', or the name of the plant Dadhipuṣṭī, 'Milk-(or White-)Flowered'.⁶¹ Although it is difficult to decide what the Indic name for Baier was – the most obvious reconstruction would be *Śvetakarṇa (attested in the *Harivaṃśa* and the *Purāṇas*) or *Śuklakarṇa (attested in the examples in the *Kāśikā* to Pāṇini 6.2.112) – the semantic identity of the two names Dadhikarṇa and Baier-long makes it more than likely that the same *nāga* is referred to.⁶² We would then have evidence of a *nāga* cult being practised in or around Buddhist monasteries at more places than the *nāga*'s region of origin, although it is difficult to decide whether this was Sāṅkāśya or Mathurā.

In both cases, Dadhikarṇa in Mathurā and 'White-Ear' in Sāṅkāśya, the *nāga* is venerated in a Buddhist monastic context and is housed in a shrine or temple (**devakula*: *devakulika*, *longshe* 龍舍, *nāgaṛha*?, or Narendrayaśas's *longmiao* 龍廟). As has been emphasised by various scholars from Vogel to DeCaroli, it is striking that the whole process of *nāga* veneration is in the hands of the monastic community. Such a symbiosis not only has a parallel in the retraceable remains of the Dadhikarṇa shrine in Mathurā but also in the set-up and inscriptional evidence of cave 16 at Ajanta (Ajaṅṭā), where there is a *nāga* figure in the vicinity of the entrance (Fig.2) and the inscription refers to a *nāga* shrine.⁶³ Robert DeCaroli has gone a step further and argued that the artistic programme at Ajanta was a means to control superhuman local beings like *nāgas*.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ While it is clear that Dadhikarṇa is to be taken as the proper name of the *nāga* in Mathurā, this cannot be fully decided in the case of the *nāga* in Sāṅkāśya: *baier* can be taken as an attribute ('white-eared') or as a personal name ('White-Ear'). For my purposes, an attributive meaning of *baier* would make an identification or equation of both *nāgas* even more plausible.

⁶⁰ 'Clam-Eared'; one may wonder whether Faxian had misunderstood a *śuktikarṇa* as *śukrakarṇa* (or *śuklakarṇa*), 'white-eared', or whether *śuktikarṇa* is a corrupted *śuktakarṇa*: see the example given in PW 7, 242, s.v. *śukla*.

⁶¹ See PW 3, 504, s.vv.

⁶² One (speculative) possibility is that Faxian was explained that the *nāga* had 'white ears' (**eṣo nāgaḥ śvetakarṇo 'sti*) and took this for the name (see above).

⁶³ See MIRASHI 1963: 109–111. The respective, very mutilated verses are 23 and 25: 23. [*sajalāmbuda*]vr̥ṇdalambitāgre bhujagendrādhyuṣite mahīdharendre ... 25. ... prakrāmbumahānidhānaṃ nāgendraveśmādibhir ... ('23. On the best of mountains, on which hang multitudes of water-laden clouds (and) which is inhabited by the lords of serpents ... 25. ... which is provided with a large reservoir of abundant water situated and is also ornamented with a shrine of the lord of the Nāgas and the like.' Translation MIRASHI 1963: 111).

⁶⁴ DECAROLI 2011.

In cave 16 at Ajanta it seems clear that although no name is given, the inscription and the image refer to an individual *nāgarāja* who occupied the location before the Buddhist *saṅgha*. Although this may also have been the idea in other cases, there seems to be another concept at play here: as in the narrative of the *nāga* Gopāla in Nagarahāra – and perhaps originally in that of Sāṅkāśya as well – the *nāga* should, after his conversion, be ‘bani-shed’ to his site (a water body?) to guarantee his continuing benevolent power over his element, the water, and to control his potential harmful behaviour. This becomes even more plausible if we consider the role that *nāgas* seem to have played in ensuring the provision of water in general,⁶⁵ but also more particularly in the monastic context. As Robert DeCaroli has pointed out, in Pitalkhorā and other monastic centres *nāgas* were closely related with water and its supply in the context of the monastery (DECAROLI 2004: 77–79). This is endorsed by an instruction attributed to the Buddha in the *Kṣudrakavastu* (*Zashi* 雜事; not extant in Sanskrit) of the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya*, given in the context of the construction of the Jetavana-vihāra in Śrāvastī, the exemplary Buddhist monastery, where only the water storage building is to be decorated with paintings of *nāgas*, while all the other buildings are to be embellished with paintings of *yakṣas* or other motifs:

... in the water storage hall⁶⁶ [one should] paint *nāgas* carrying water containers and wearing delicate necklaces; ...⁶⁷

7. The story about two *nāgas* and *nāga*-festivals

As pointed out above, part of the Buddhist way of dealing with individual *nāgas* was that they had not only to be tamed but also to be kept at the place to guarantee the continuous efficacy of their water-providing and water-regulating power.

The *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya* contains a long story about two *nāgas* who leave a certain region, and water provision and the harvest are in danger there until the *nāgas* are called back successfully (T.1442.842c.27–844a.14):

The Buddha resided in the Bamboo Grove Garden (Veṇuvana) in the city of Rājagṛha. At that time there were two *nāga* kings in that city,

⁶⁵ On the link between early Buddhist monasteries and the hydrological infrastructure of the regions, which also included *nāgas*, see SHAW 2004.

⁶⁶ *anshui-tang* 安水堂: Skt. **udakasthāna-śālā*? This term is a *hapax legomenon* in the Chinese canon and does, to my knowledge, not correspond to any known Skt. word. I did not, however, check the Tibetan version of the *Kṣudrakavastu* which may help to provide a better basis for the reconstruction of the Sanskrit.

⁶⁷ T.1451.283b.6f. ... 安水堂處畫龍，持水瓶，著妙瓔珞，...

one called Qili⁶⁸, and another called Baju⁶⁹. Because of the miraculous power of the two *nāgas*, there were five hundred hot springs in Rājagrha, and the ponds always had a constant flow [of water], seasonal rain fell on time and the five [kinds of] crops ripened [on time]. Now after the World-Honoured One had subdued the two *nāga* kings Nanda and Upananda, those two *nāga* kings, every month on the eighth day, fifteenth day, twenty-third day, and on the final day of the month, rose from the ocean to the miraculous high mountain peak, and came to the place where the Buddha dwelt, because [they] wanted to make offerings and hear the *dharma*. When the two *nāga* kings Qili and Baju saw Nanda and Upananda coming to the place where the Buddha dwelt and extending [their] offerings, [they] said to each other: ‘Every month on the four fasting days these two *nāga* kings come to this city from other places afar, service the World-Honoured One, and at the same time listen to the wonderful *dharma*. Why do we [who live] in this city not extend [our] veneration? We should now go and make offerings to the World-Honoured One.’

When the two *nāga* kings [Qili and Baju] came to the place where the Buddha was [they] greeted [him by touching his] two feet [with their forehead and] sat at one side. Thereupon the Buddha expounded the essence of the *dharma* to these two *nāgas* and let [them] take refuge in the Three Jewels and receive the five precepts (*śikṣāpada*), and after that [their] bodies and [their] assets all increased. And now that [they] had increased, [they] discussed with each other: ‘We now should reside in the ocean, should stay and live in an extensive place according [to our size].’

⁶⁸ Qili 祇利 / EMC **gji-li*^h: Skt. Giri, explained or rendered semantically later as ‘Mountain’ (*shan* 山); in the Tibetan version the name is Ri bo, Skt. Giri(ka): see PANGLUNG 1981: 20.

⁶⁹ Baju 跋窣 / EMC **bat-gua*[’] (variant for *ju* 窣 is *lou*: **ləw*[’]); in the Tibetan version the name is Grog mkhar, Skt. Valmīka, ‘ant hill’ (PANGLUNG 1981: 20), maybe because ant hills are a favourite place of residency of snakes. VÖGEL 1926: 118 paraphrases the same story given in SCHIEFNER 1848: 272 and accepts the latter’s reconstruction of the name as Vidyujvāla, obviously without noticing that this is based on an emendation of Grog mkhar to Glog ’bar: SCHIEFNER 1848: 322, note 45. The Tibetan translation does not help to identify the underlying Skt. name of Chin. Baju. It is very likely that this transliterates Skt. *valgu*, ‘nice, pretty, beautiful, handsome’ (see PW, s.v.). The two names of the *nāgas* are later translated as ‘Mountain’ and ‘Excellent’ (Sheng 勝); in another story about these two *nāgas* the Tibetan version gives the translation Rab mdzes which here very probably is not Skt. Sundara, as PANGLUNG 1981: 143 reconstructs, but again Skt. Valgu. Support also comes from the transliteration of the river name Phalgumati (Aciravati, Revati, modern Rapti) which Yijing transliterates as Bajumodi 跋窣未底 / **bat-gua*[’]-*mat-tj*[’] (T.1453.491c.25, 1458.539a.29); for the mix-up of *valgu* and *phalgu* see PW, s.v. *valgu*, PETECH 1950: 24, and the Pāli form Vaggumudā.

After [this] discussion [they] went to the Buddha, and after having paid respect to him they sat at the side and spoke to the Buddha: ‘Oh [you of] great virtue! After we received the refuges and precepts from the World-Honoured One our bodies and [our] assets all have increased. May the merciful World-Honoured One in [his] compassion allow [us]: we now want to go to the ocean and dwell [there] in accordance with [our enormous] size.’

When the Buddha was [thus] asked [he] told the two *nāgas*: ‘The great king Bimbisāra is the ruler of the kingdom; [if] you want to leave [you] should let [him] know.’

Thereupon the two *nāgas* took leave of the Buddha and said to each other: ‘From what the Buddha said it looks as if [we] are not permitted [to leave].’ Then [they] stayed where [they] were before.

The two *nāga* kings, when they came to see the Buddha at night, would have their original appearance [as *nāgas*], but [when they came] during the day [they] would assume the form of guild masters. When later the *nāgas* were with the World-Honoured One to hear the Buddha expound the *dharma*, the great king Bimbisāra then also came to the Bamboo Grove Garden, and when [he] came to the entrance [he] gave order to [his] entourage: ‘You [should] go the Buddha and see who is there.’

The entourage followed the instruction and went, and when [they] came to the Buddha [and] had greeted the Buddha [by touching his] feet [with their foreheads, they] saw the two guild masters where the World-Honoured One was; thereupon [they] returned to the king and said: ‘Oh great king! There are two guild masters with the Buddha.’

The king thought: ‘These two guild masters are my subjects – [will they] dare not to rise when [they] see me arriving?’

Then king Bimbisāra wanted to go to the Buddha, [and when] these two *nāgas* saw the great king arriving [they] said to the World-Honoured One: ‘Oh [you of] great virtue! [Should] we now for the time being first venerate the *dharma*? [Or] are [we] to venerate the king?’

The World-Honoured One told [them]: ‘All Buddhas, World-Honoured Ones and *arhats* venerate the *dharma*.’ Thereupon, on this occasion, [he] pronounced three *gāthās*: ‘Since the Buddhas of the past and of the future, the World-Honoured Ones of the present, [who] can do away with all sorrow, all venerate the *dharma*, expound [and] steadily practice [it], and always and at all times pay respect to the true *dharma*, those who seek benefit and expect abundant joy should venerate the *dharma*, [should] always think of the teaching of the Buddhas.’

When the two *nāgas* heard what the Buddha had explained about venerating the *dharma*, [they] did not venerate the king, although [they] saw him coming. When the king saw this [he] thought: ‘These two guild masters are my subjects, [and even though they] see me coming [they] do not venerate me.’

[He] then became angry. When [he] went to the World-Honoured One, [he] greeted [him by touching] both his feet [with his forehead] and sat on one side. The Buddha knew the king’s mind and that [he] was angry, [but he] talked [to him] about other things and did not explain the *dharma* to him. Thereupon, king Bimbisāra asked the Buddha: ‘May the great teacher explain the *dharma* to me!’

Thereupon, on this occasion, the World-Honoured One pronounced the *gāthās*: ‘If [one] has no clear mind, harbours hateful intentions, [one] cannot understand the subtle *dharma* explained by the Buddhas; [if one] subdues [one’s] troubled mind, has no impure intentions and can eradicate the harm of anger, only then [will one] understand the subtle *dharma*.’

After king Bimbisāra had heard the *gāthās* [he] thought: ‘It is the work of the two guild masters that the World-Honoured One at present does not explain the essence of the *dharma* to me.’

[He] then rose from [his] seat, greeted the Buddha, went away and gave an order to [his] entourage: ‘You ought to wait until these guild masters at the side of the Buddha go away and then you should tell [them]: “The great king gives order that you two have to go away quickly and must not reside in his kingdom [anymore].”’

The servants received the order and went away.

After these two *nāga* kings had heard [this they] thought: ‘For a relatively long time we were happy, [but] now [we] should not take favours anymore and can do as [we] wish.’

Thereupon [they] raised dense clouds that poured down flooding rain, they followed the water ditches and entered the river, followed its course, and arrived in the ocean [where their] bodies and assets increased even more.

After the *nāgas* had left, the five hundred hot springs around the city of Rājagṛha all dried up, the seasonal rain did not fall at the proper time, the five [kinds of] crop did not grow, and the people became anxious and worried. When king Bimbisāra saw this matter, [he] thought: ‘There are two *nāga* kings in the city of Rājagṛha, one called “Mountain”, and

the other called “Excellent”⁷⁰, who have always lived in this city. With their miraculous power [they] cause the five hundred hot springs in Rājagṛha and the ponds always to have a constant and uninterrupted flow [of water, they] cause seasonal rain to fall on time and make the five [kinds of] crops ripen on time, [so that there is] no shortage. Now suddenly the hot springs and the ponds all have dried up, and for a long time there was no rain, and the five [kinds of] crops have not grown. Could it be that the two *nāga* kings have died? Or have [they] escaped to another region or kingdom, or been seized by a *nāga* charmer? [Or have they] been eaten by the gold-winged king of the birds (Garuda)? But the Buddha, the World-Honoured One, is omniscient and there is nothing [he] does not observe. I now should go and ask [him] about the reason [for all this].’

Thereupon, king Bimbisāra went to the Bamboo Grove, greeted the Buddha [by touching his] feet [with his forehead], sat at one side and said to the Buddha: ‘Oh [you of] great virtue! There are two *nāga* kings who live in this city. [Their] power is said to be the reason of prosperity or decline. Do [you] not know where [they] reside now?’

At that time, the World-Honoured One told king Bimbisāra: ‘The great king should know [that] these two *nāgas* have not died or lost [their] lives, and also have not been eaten by the gold-winged [one], but it was the great king himself [who] expelled [them].’

The king said: ‘I do not remember that [I] have met them. How could [I] then have expelled [them]?’

The World-Honoured One told [him]: ‘I [would like to] remind the great king of the circumstances of the expulsion. Does the king not remember when once [you] came to me and saw two guild masters sitting next to me? What did the great king say publicly at that time?’

Bimbisāra said to the Buddha: ‘Oh World-Honoured One! I did not say [anything] publicly, [but only] sent messengers to tell the two guild masters: “[You] are not to stay in my kingdom!”’

The Buddha said: ‘These two guild masters in fact were the two *nāga* kings [who] had transformed into human shape and come to listen to the essence of the *dharma*.’

The king said: ‘Where have these two *nāga* kings now gone?’

The Buddha said: ‘[They] have gone into the ocean.’

⁷⁰ The context and the preceding name Shan 山, ‘Mountain’, for Giri(ka) shows that Sheng 勝 here is a translation of the name Bajū (see above).

When the king heard [this he] looked worried and said to the Buddha: ‘Oh [you of] great virtue! Will my kingdom fall into decline?’

The Buddha said: ‘The king’s kingdom has not yet fallen into decline, so [you] should apologise to the two *nāga* kings.’

The king said: ‘These are in the ocean, [and] I reside in the city; since [we] do not meet each other there is no way to try and make an apology.’

The Buddha said: ‘On each of the four fasting days [they] come to me and extend their veneration; on these days the king may come in person, I will show them [to you, and you] should repent and apologise.’

The king said: ‘When I repent and apologise, do [I have to] greet [them by touching their] feet [with my forehead]?’

The Buddha said: ‘[You] do not need to greet [them by touching their] feet [with your forehead]; [you] should stretch out [your] right hand and tell the *nāga* kings: “Forgive me! Do not be angry about [my] previous words!” The two *nāga* kings [then] will pardon [you].’

At another time, when the *poṣadha*⁷¹ day had come, the two *nāga* kings came to the Buddha, greeted the Buddha [by touching his] feet [with their foreheads and] sat on one side. On that day, the king Bimbisāra came as well, greeted the Buddha [by touching his] feet [with his foreheads and] sat on one side. Then, although [they] had [already] seen each other, the World-Honoured One pointed out their whereabouts [and that] these were the two *nāga* kings. Thereupon king Bimbisāra stretched out [his] right hand and told the two *nāgas*: ‘Oh *nāga* kings! May I be forgiven!’

The *nāga* kings responded: ‘[You] are forgiven, great king!’

The king said: ‘If [you] forgive [me], [I] beg [you] to return and to reside in my kingdom.’

The two *nāgas* told [him]: ‘Since we went to the ocean from this place [our] bodies and assets have [become] extremely huge, [so] if [we] come here, there is no space to accommodate us.’

The king said: ‘If this is the case, my kingdom is lost.’

The *nāgas* said: ‘The great king need not worry about losing [his] kingdom; [he] may built two shrines outside the city, one called “Shrine of the Nāga Qili”, and the other called “Shrine of the Nāga Baju”. We will let relatives of ours reside in these shrines, and once every six months [you should] organise a lavishly great assembly, [and] we will come and look after the king’s land and make sure that there is no lack [of provision].’

⁷¹ *baosatuo* 褒灑陀 / *paw-ʂe:-da.

The king said: ‘Good! [I] will do as [you say].’

Thereupon, king Bimbisāra built two shrines outside the city at places with forest and springs, and twice every year, at the days of the festival, people from all the six great cities flocked together.⁷²

⁷² 佛在王舍城住竹林園。時此城中有二龍王，一名祇利，一名跋蹉。由此二龍威神力故，於王舍城有五百溫泉及諸池沼常流不絕，時降甘雨五穀熟成。爾時世尊調伏難陀、鄔波難陀二龍王已，此二龍王每於月八日、十五日、二十三日、月盡日，從大海出昇妙高峯，來詣佛所欲供養及聽法故。時祇利、跋蹉二龍王，見難陀、鄔波難陀來至佛所而申供養，自相謂曰：“此二龍王每月於四齋日，遠從餘處來至此城，承事世尊并聞妙法。我等云何在此城中不申禮敬？我今宜往供養世尊。”是時二龍王來詣佛所，禮雙足已在一面坐。爾時世尊為彼二龍宣說法要，令歸三寶受五學處，從此已後身及資財並皆增盛。既增盛已即共議曰：“我等宜可往大海中，隨廣博處而為居止。”作是議已往詣佛所，致敬既畢在一面坐，白佛言：“大德！我從世尊受歸戒已，身及資財並皆增盛。若大悲世尊哀憐許者，我等今欲往大海中隨寬而住。”佛見請已告二龍曰：“影勝大王是國之主，汝等欲去，宜可自知。”時二龍王辭佛而去，便相謂曰：“如佛所言似不容許。”便依舊住。然二龍王若於夜中來見佛者，依本形狀，若於晝日作長者形。後異時中龍於晝日在世尊所聽佛說法，影勝大王亦於彼時往竹林園，既至門所命左右曰：“汝往佛所觀有何人？”時彼左右奉教而去，既至佛所禮佛足已，見二長者在世尊處，即還王所，白言：“大王[with other editions instead of T. 天]！有二長者在世尊處。”王作是念：“彼二長者是我國人，見我來至敢不起耶？”時影勝王欲至佛所，彼二龍王見大王來，白世尊曰：“大德！我今先且敬法為敬王耶？”世尊告曰：“諸佛世尊及阿羅漢等咸敬於法。”以此因緣說三伽他曰：“若過去諸佛，及以未來者；現在諸世尊，能斷一切憂。皆共尊敬法，言說及行住；常於一切時，尊重於正法。是故求益者，欲希富盛樂；應當尊敬法，常思諸佛教。”時彼二龍聞佛世尊說敬法事，雖見王來而不修敬。王既見已便作是念：“此二長者是我國人，見我來至不相敬重。”便生瞋恨。至世尊所禮雙足已在一面坐，佛知王意有瞋恚心，別作餘言不為說法。時影勝王請世尊曰：“唯願大師為我說法。”爾時世尊以此因緣說伽他曰：“若無清淨心，而懷瞋恨意，不能解諸佛，所說微妙法。降伏鬪爭心，及無不淨意，能除於忿害，方解微妙法。”時影勝王聞伽他已作如是念：“由二長者遂令世尊不為我演說法要。”便從座起禮佛而去，命左右曰：“汝可伺彼佛邊長者辭佛去時，應告之曰：‘大王有教，爾等二人宜當速去，勿居我國。’”于時使人奉命而往。彼二龍王既聞妙法，禮佛而去將出竹園。使人報曰：“大王有教，爾等二人宜當速去，勿居我國。”二龍聞已便作是念：“我比長夜情所樂者，今不為勞而能遂願。”即起密雲降注洪雨，從諸渠澗次入江河，展轉隨流至于大海，身及資財轉更增盛。龍去之後，王舍城側五百溫泉並皆枯涸，於時時中不降甘雨，五穀不成人懷憂感。時影勝王見此事已便作是念：“王舍城內有二龍王，一名山，二名勝，常居此城。由彼威力能令五百溫泉及諸池沼常流不絕，於時時中每降甘澤，五穀熟成無所乏少。忽於今時溫泉池沼並皆乾竭，多時無雨五穀不成，豈二龍王而命過耶？或復逃竄向餘方國，或呢龍者之所攝持？成金翅鳥王之所噉食？然佛世尊具一切智無不觀察，我今宜往問彼所由。”時影勝王往竹林中，禮佛足已在一面坐，白佛言：“大德！有二龍王在此城住，具述威力盛衰所由，不委今時居止何處？”爾時世尊告影勝王曰：“大王當知！非彼二龍身死命過，乃至亦無金翅所食，然是大王自為驅擯。”王曰：“我曾不憶與彼相見，況驅擯乎？”世尊告曰：“我為大王憶驅擯事。王豈不憶，曾於一時來至我所，見二長者在我邊坐，大王于時共作何語？”影勝白佛言：“世尊！我不共語，遣使留言報二長者：‘勿居我國。’”佛言：“彼二長者即是龍王，化作人身來聽法要。”王曰：“彼二龍王今向何處？”佛言：“往大海中。”王聞語已便帶憂色而白佛言：“大德！我之國界將衰損耶？”佛言：“王之國界未至衰損，然可愧謝彼二龍王。”王曰：“彼在海中我住城邑，既不相見，求謝無由。”佛言：“每於四齋日來至我所而申禮敬，王至此日

8. Coordinating the *nāgas* from Mathurā and Sāṅkāśya

There are references to this story in the Tibetan *Vinayavibhaṅga*, and in the Chinese *Bhikṣuṇīvinaya* and *Vinayasamgraha*, which refer to the regular festivals in honour of the two *nāgas*⁷³. But more importantly they refer to the involvement of the *saṅgha* in the festivals, which has to be regulated by the Buddha or through the respective monastic rules. In the *Vinayavibhaṅga*, the Buddha himself issues a rule against the performance of events from his life by members of the *saṅgha*, and in the two other examples rules are issued against the wearing of laypeople's clothes by *bhikṣuṇīs* and *bhikṣus*.

The narrative in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya* underlines the importance of binding the *nāga* to the place to guarantee the continuity of the water supply and a successful harvest. It inverts, in a way, the regular veneration of the Buddha by the *nāgas* Nanda and Upananda on the four fasting days (*zhairi* 齋日) of the month at the beginning of the story into a veneration of the *nāgas* Giri(ka) and Valgu (Qili and Baju) who were dedicated their own festival in which the *saṅgha* eventually got involved as well. As in Faxian's record about the veneration of the *nāga* 'White-Ear' in Sāṅkāśya, the text refers to the shrines (*shentang* 神堂) in which the *nāgas* were housed. Since the story of the two *nāgas* is only found in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya*, we may conclude that this *Vinaya* came up with the legend of the two *nāgas* (including the references to their festival as an event to venerate and to keep them happy) as a reaction to actual local *nāga* cults administrated by Buddhist monasteries as reported by Faxian. The story would reflect the Buddha's contribution and consent to the establishment of the first of these activities, binding the *nāgas* to a place, through Bimbisāra. The narrative would have served *post-ex-facto* to rubber-stamp a practice which was quite common in certain local monastic environments.

Another interesting common feature of the examples from Mathurā and from Faxian's *Foguo-ji* is the reference to milk: *dadhi* in Dadhikarṇa's name

宜可自來，我指示之當申懺謝。”王曰：“我懺謝時為禮彼足耶？”佛言：“不應禮足，宜申右手告龍王曰：‘願容恕我，勿恨前言。’彼二龍王自當容忍。”後於異時至褒灑陀日，彼二龍王來至佛所，禮佛足已在一面坐；其影勝王，亦於是日來禮佛足一面而坐。爾時世尊即便現相示其處所，此是二大龍王。時影勝王便舒右手告二龍曰：“龍王！於我願見懺摩。”龍王報曰：“懺摩，大王！”王曰：“若容恕者，願還來此住我國中。”二龍告曰：“我從此處至大海已，身及資財非常廣大，若來此者無處相容。”王曰：“若如是者當失我國。”龍曰：“唯願大王勿憂失國，可於城外造二神堂，一名祇利龍神堂，二名跋囊龍神堂。我令眷屬住此堂中，六月一時盛興大會，我等自來觀王國土不令闕乏。”王曰：“善！當如是作。”時影勝王即於城外林泉之所造二神堂，每年二時至節會日，遍六大城所有諸人並皆雲集。； for the Tibetan version see PANGLUNG 1981: 20.

⁷³ PANGLUNG 1981: 143, who mistakenly renders the name of the second *nāga* as Sundara instead of Valgu (see above). See also T.1443.988a.1–4, T.1458.593a.5f.

and the milk (*lao* 酪) into which the *nāga*-snake is placed. Alexander Cunningham (CUNNINGHAM 1871: 273f.) reported that still in his days the locals of Sankisa (Śāṅkāśya) venerated a *nāga* called Kārewar⁷⁴ in a tank by donating milk to him for delivering rain. If Cunningham's observation is correct, Śāṅkāśya would reflect a high degree of continuity in *nāga* veneration. The change from a *nāga* (Chin. *long*) into a snake (Chin. *she* 蛇) is quite plausible and pragmatic: concrete and public veneration of the *nāga* – if this was not just done in the form of an icon – could only be directed to a real snake, as contemporary snake veneration in India still shows. There was obviously a clear awareness that in a ritual context *nāga* and snake can be identical and just different embodiments of the same creature, a fact that may also be reflected in the inscription at cave 16 in Ajanta, which refers to the original inhabitant of the spot as *bhujagendra*, 'Lord of the Snakes', and *nāgendra*, 'Lord of the Nāgas'⁷⁵.

The use of milk for the veneration of *nāgas* is well known from modern Indian *nāga* rituals, being used in daily worship as well as in the *nāga-pañcamī* ritual,⁷⁶ thus showing an astonishing continuity with Faxian's description of the ritual veneration of the *nāga* at Śāṅkāśya. The *Varāhapurāṇa* ends the 24th chapter on the *nāgas* with the following *śloka* (33):

If one remains austere at that day (i.e., the *pañcamī tithi*), gives up all that is sour in food and bathes the Nāgas⁷⁷ in milk, they become friendly towards one.⁷⁸

The symbolic value of milk in the context of snake veneration is multiple: it represents purification, it is supposed to attract and appease the snakes,⁷⁹ and in our specific case it has a clear link with the physical appearance of the *nāga*, obviously wearing white spots on both sides of the head. A less prominent continuity and parallel with Faxian's record in modern *nāga* veneration is the use of metal plates or vessels in the rituals around snakes or *nāgas*.⁸⁰

⁷⁴ Is this going back to Kṣīreśvara, 'Lord of Milk'?

⁷⁵ I do not agree with MIRASHI'S 1963: 111 translation of *bhujagendra* in the compound as plural. It makes more sense that the same *nāga*, the one originally occupying the site, is addressed.

⁷⁶ See e.g., VOGEL 1926: 275–277; JONES 2010: 102f., 105f.; VAN DEN HOEK and SHRESTHA 1992: 58.

⁷⁷ I am not convinced that IYER'S 1985: 88 addition '(images of)' is needed here: obviously – and certainly in the case of Faxian's example – real snakes could be venerated as *nāgas*.

⁷⁸ *etasyaṃ saṃyato yas tv ambalan tu parivarjayet, kṣīreṇa snāpayen nāgāms tasya yāsanti mitratām*; edition ŚĀSTRĪ 1893: 60, translation IYER 1985: 88, slightly modified. See also *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* 1.32., UPĀDHYĀY 2012: 190–196.

⁷⁹ For the affinity of *nāgas* with milk see ZOLLER 2019: 100, 103.

⁸⁰ For examples of vessels used in the case of Tantric rain magic preserved in Chinese Tantric texts: see DEEG 2009: 104–109; in all these cases the vessel is not made of metal and the element of milk is missing.

9. Conclusion

If my tentative identification of Dadhikarṇa with Faxian's *nāga* Baier is correct, we would gain two insights from this identification. 1. Without going as far as to suggest that one of these two *nāgas* represents the original location of the veneration, I would at least conclude that we can trace the change from an individual *nāga* being venerated at one place to a trans-local cult. 2. We can further assume that the *nāga* in Mathurā and the one in Ajanta (and probably elsewhere) were venerated in a similar way to the one in Sāṅkāśya. It is in light of these possible parallels that the frequent depictions of *nāgas* in Mathurā and Ajanta may assume an individuality of their own.

Abbreviations

Chin. = Chinese

EMC = Early Middle Chinese

Skt. = Sanskrit

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Fig.1. *nāga*, Mathurā (Chargaon), dated 20th year of Huvīška. Photo by Robert DeCaroli, Courtesy of Robert DeCaroli.



Fig.2. *nāga*, Ajanta (cave 16). Photo by John C. Huntington, Courtesy of The John C. and Susan L. Huntington Photographic Archive of Buddhist and Asian Art.



Fig.3. Descent of the Buddha from Trayastrimśa Heaven (Sanchi, Stupa 1, Northern Gate). Photo by Gudrun Melzer, Courtesy of Gudrun Melzer.



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