

NOTES ON A NEPALESE THANKA

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Upon looking at this small Nepalese painting (*paubha*), one's initial impression is that neither the subject nor the composition will pose big problems or will bring to light new facts. Indeed, the central figure, the Dākinī Vajravārāhī, is not unknown. She is, especially in Tibet, the most important female tantric deity of the lamaist religion—"et elle jouit d'un culte très populaire au Népal."¹ In the row above her, in the middle, the Adibudha Vajrasattva is enthroned; to his left a deity that is still to be identified; to his right, although badly damaged, unmistakably a Dākinī. Further, in the upper left part we notice the moon crescent, and without doubt the sun disc must have been its counterpart on the right side. The bottom row of the painting shows two donors and or adorers with offerings to the left, and a similar group represented to the right, while at the top of the painting the Himalayas are suggested by four steep and snow-covered mountains. To the left and the right of the Dākinī Vajravārāhī and against a dark green background, we see two vases or *kalasa*, one above the other. On each rests a *kapāla* or skull from which a lotus flower emerges. Finally, under the painting proper a text in Devanagari script draws our attention. As these texts sometimes contain precious data regarding the conditions and customs at the time the *paubha* was made, it is appropriate to start the further scrutiny of the painting with an analysis of the text.

The inscription reads as follows:

Subha samvata 845 Magha krishṇa pādu Sukravāra thvo kunhu rekhāsampura yāḍa juro Guru Kvātha Bahārayā Vajracarya Sukra Devaju yāta Kera Tora jhoṭā mugaraya kona cheya Citrakāra Trairoka Siṅha Padmanitya Siṅha thopani nimasena a Sri 2 Vajravārāhī pratimā cosyā doharapā juro thutiyā punyanam jojamāna āyurāroge janadhana santāna vridḍgu rastu subha.

Let us divide the legend in two.

The first part is an indication of the date:

*Subha samvata 845 Māgha krishṇa
pādu Sukravāra*

1. For a short description with illustration of this *paubha* see A. Neven: "Peintures lamaïques des 18^e et 19^e siècles" in: *Jalons et Actualités des Arts*, Bruxelles 1976, no. 20, p. 23.

Nepal Samvat begins in 879 A. D. on "Kartika Sukla Pratipada"² which is the first day of the bright half of the month in October; to be more precise: on the 20th of October 879 A. D. If we add 845 to 879, we arrive at the year 1724. *Māgha*, the fourth month of the year, agrees with our month January. Therefore the date given on the *paubha* and transposed into our era, falls in January 1725.

Was there any reason to choose January? According to information we gathered in Nepal there seem to be four 'holy' months in a year: (*Vaiśākha* (April), *Srāvāṇa* (July), *Kārtika* (October), and *Māgha* (January)). The month of *Māgha* is very often met with in the dating of *paubhas*; to mention but one instance, on a *paubha* belonging to the Ethnographical Museum at Antwerp we read: ". . . 901 Nepal Samvat. . . in the month of *Māgha*³." According to other sources, the time from the fourth till the tenth month-viz. from *Māgha* to *Srāvāṇa*-would be auspicious for initiation ceremonies. Probably this same period of eight months is also favourable for the 'ordering' of religious paintings. The legend of another thanka runs as follows: "The painting of the subject came to his mind while Krishna Dhana stayed in Lhasa, where he was on business and was a member of the *Lāhakaṇḍā* . . . This thanka was dedicated in the Nepal era 923 on the third day of the light half of the month, on a Sunday in (the month of) *Jyeṣṭhā*",⁴ that is the month in the Nepal Samvat calendar. We may add that this thanka, taking into account its style, was probably painted at Lhasa. It would be worth-while to check all known captions to see whether the month they indicate belongs to one of those 'auspicious' months indicated above, and this regarding not only pure Nepalese paintings (i. e. Nepalese as to the deities represented) but also regarding thankas of Tibetan workmanship, but ordered by Nepalese. As to the months, we suppose they refer to lunar months. Therefore approximately every 32 months one lunar month has to be inserted, otherwise the festivals that are closely bound to the course of the seasons would fall in a season that would not correspond to the religious prescriptions.⁵

The date mentioned on a *paubha* is given much consideration. The year (1725) and the month (January) do not suffice. Since the fourteenth century the five *pancāṅga* also play an important role. These are five elements-not necessarily all of them mentioned in connection with the date given-which help to fix the moment of the event in a most precise manner. The first in the series is the *tithi*, the lunar day, the duration

2. D. R. Regmi: *Medieval Nepal*, Kathmandu 1965 Vol. I, p. 51.

3. A. E. 53.5.16.

4. L. P. Van der Wee: "A Tibetan Thangka" in : *Oriental Art*, 1969, Vol. XV number 4, p. 296.

5. For a more thorough survey of Nepalese calendars we refer the reader to D. R. Regmi : *Medieval Nepal*, Kathmandu, 1966, Vol. II. p. 793.

of which corresponds approximately to 1/30 th part of a lunar month, whereas a solar day runs from one sunrise to the following one. Next, corresponding to the lunar calendar, each month is divided into two halves of 15 days each (15 tithis) with consecutive numbering from one to fifteen. The period of the waxing moon, i. e. from the new moon to the full moon, is called *śukla pakṣa*, the 'light' half. The following 15 days, during which period the moon wanes and ends with the new moon, is the *kṛṣṇa pakṣa*, the 'dark' half. Further, the first day of each fortnight, i. e. the first day of the *Śukla pakṣa* and the first day of the *kṛṣṇa pakṣa*, bears the name *pratipadā* (*padu*), and in this case is also a Friday, a *Śukravāra*, the *vāra* as well as the *tithi* being one of the five *pancāṅga*. These *vāras*, or solar days of the week, derive their names from the sun (*Ravivāra*), the moon (*Somavāra*) and the five planets, among them Venus (*Śukravāra*). The remaining three *pancāṅga* are the *yoga*, the *nakṣatra* and the *karaṇa* which however are not mentioned in our legend.

Now that we have firmly established the date of our Vajravārāhī *paubha*, we can translate it as follows:

This work was completed on the first day (*PĀDU*),

Friday (*ŚUKRA VĀRA*), of the dark fortnight (*KRSNA*)

of the month of January (*MĀGHA*) in the year 1725 A. D.

(*SAMVATA 845*).⁶

To conclude the discussion of this first part of the text, the question has to be answered, to what in fact does the date refer: to the ordering of the painting, to its completion or to its consecration? The most logical reply—in Nepal indeed confirmed by the initiated—is the day of completion. One would at first consider the date of its consecration. But this can only take place when the painting is completed. As the consecration has to take place on an auspicious occasion, taking into account, among other elements, the horoscope of the donor—which may give rise to complicated calculations—the dating could hardly have been inserted beforehand.

The second part of the text on the Vajravārāhī *paubha* runs as follows:

This painting of Śrī Śrī Vajravārāhī was painted by two citrakāras Trairokya Singh and Padmanitya Singh living in Kera Tora at the southern house of Jhotā

Mugara and was given to their priest Vajracarya Sukra Deva of Kvātha-bahāra.

This part will give us some information about the social institutions and the religious observances during the late middle ages in Nepal, i. e. a period which coincides with the part of the Malla rule starting in 1530 and ending with the rise of the Ghurkas.

The names of the two painters of the *paubha* viz. Trairokya Singh and Padmanitya Singh, are certainly quite unusual as we usually come across the name of donors only.

6. We express our heartfelt thanks to Mr. Purna Harsha Bajracharya, Chief Research Officer, Dept. of Archaeology, Kathmandu, for the rendering of the Newari text in Devanagari script into English.

Chance has it that in this case the donors and the painters of the *paubha* are identical and so we have before us one of those very rare scrolls on which the names of the painters are mentioned.

In the caste system, as practised in Nepal at that time, there are four groups, Citrakāras belong to a professional sub-caste that is part of the second group. The profession of painters is thus highly esteemed in comparison with the goldsmiths' caste for instance, which only belongs to a subdivision of the third group. Each caste (there are about 80 in all) has certain obligations and privileges. D.R. Regmi states that "the higher the caste . . . the longer is the period of mourning; the maximum was of 12 days".⁷ (Citrakāras mourned for 10 days). Both the painters of our *paubha*, Trairokya Singh and Padmanitya Singh, live in Kera Tora. The Newaris very often write RA for LA and vice versa. Thus Kera Tora, on the inscription, is no other than Kela Tola still existing in the old business quarter of Kathmandu, namely between Indrachowk and Asantole, at the street that runs from the Hanuman Doka in a north-eastern direction and that ends near Rani Pokhari, the artificial lake dug by Pratapa Malla. In Regmi we further read as follows: "Some of the *Vihāras* served as colonies providing housing accomodation. Each *Vihāra* of the colony type formed a locality, a *tola* of the town".⁸ A *vihāra*—and in Kathmandu alone there are at least some thirty important ones—is a Buddhist monastery, originally inhabited by celibate monks. However, through the influence of the Brahmans they gradually relinquished celibacy and since the 17th century there are no unmarried monks left. These married monks live in the *nani*, premises contiguous to the *vihāra*. They have been integrated in the caste system of Nepal and their caste comprises two groups: the Guvājus and the Bades. All the descendants of the erstwhile monks belong by right of birth to their caste. Only the Guvājus or Vajrācāryas have a priestly status. The closed community could also be established at a certain distance from the *vihāra* proper when the latter owing to a shortage of space did not allow of extension on the spot. In that light we probably have to understand our Kela Tola. We know that the inhabitants of the *nani* (living quarters, *tola*) continue to belong to the *vihāra*. The same is true of our two Citrakāras who entrust their *paubha* to their priest Vajrācārya Sukra Deva of the Kvātha bahāra. Kvātha-bahāra (Sanskrit: Maitripura Mahāvihāra) still exists in the northern part of Kathmandu, on the way to Tabahi.

We can now consider the analysis of the legend as being completed and start the discussion of the main figure of our *paubha*: Vajravārāhī, a very prominent Buddhist deity and very popular in Nepal as well as Tibet. M. Th. de Mallmann has published an extensive iconographical study of Vajravārāhī.⁹ Briefly stated the

7. D. R. Regmi : *Medieval Nepal*, Vol. II, p. 775.

8. Ibid.

9. M. Th. de Mallmann: *Introduction a l'iconographie du tantrisme bouddhique*,

conclusions arrived at in that study are as follows:

1. Vajravārāhī is a name given to two different deities. The second one falls outside the scope of this article.

2. The first deity having this name—Vajravārāhī - according to M. Th. de Mallmann—belongs to the Hevajra-cycle and is depicted in all the texts she studied as having a white or a red complexion, the latter more exactly “couleur de la fleur du grenadier (Népalais); ‘but’ aucune description... ne prescrit la petite tête de laie qui certaines images de la Vajravārāhī rouge, apparait comme une excroissance au-dessus de l’oreille droite” which M. Th. de Mallmann also considers as being an abnormality, together with the fact that Vajravārāhī, in her red appearance, usually holds a chopper, “alors que celui-ci (le couperet) n’est mentionné que dans le seul Sādhana 220, les autres descriptions attribuant à la main droite le vajram voire exceptionnellement le croc sommé du vajra”.¹⁰

Vajravārāhī may be depicted embracing her yab. This form is not discussed here. In the other case—when she is represented alone—M. Th. de Mallmann gives seven aspects, of which six are red (numbered from 2 to 7) and one white (number 1). Of the red aspects, one has four arms. This leaves us with five, the numbers 2 to 6. But only number 5 wields a chopper, as is the case on our *paubha*. She stands on only one person, whereas in other cases mentioned in the texts, she tramples two persons, Bhairava and Kālarātri. On our *paubha* we notice only one person under her feet, a Shivaist; the typical horizontal lines are very clearly shown on his forehead. Besides, according to M. Th. de Mallmann number five “... a généralement la face porcine latérale... et munie du *khaṭvāṅga*”,¹¹ which agrees with our *paubha*. On the other hand we are of the opinion that number 3 of the series given by M. Th. de Mallmann also shows some affinity with the central figure of the *paubha*: “... elle est entourée d’un maṅḍala, réduit toutefois aux assistantes Dākini, Lāmā Khaṅḍarohā et Rupiṅ sur les quatre pétales cardinaux du otus dont elle occupe le réceptacle, et—sur les pétales collatéraux—aux quatre coupes crâniennes remplies de “pensée d’Eveil”,¹² Regarding these “coupes crâniennes”, R. O. Meisezahl has the following to say. “Abhayakaragupta berichtet von Lotusvazen die mit dem Willen zur Erleuchtung (tib. *byan chub sems*), mit Blütenstaub (tib. *khrag*) sowie mit den 5 Arten von Ambrosia (bdud rci lna) und Leucheten (mar me lna) der Welt zur Erkenntnis gefül seien...”.¹³ on our *paubha* this *maṅḍala* of Vajravārāhī is restricted to four lotus

Paris 1975, p 425–429.

10. *Idem*, p. 425.

11. *Idem*, p. 429.

12. *Idem*, p. 427.

13. R. O. Meisezahl: “Die Göttin Vajravārāhī in: *Oriens* 18–19, 1965–1966, p. 228–303

vases in the intermediate points of the compass. They are all identical: a lotus arising from a vase that we have to imagine as symbolically filled with the offerings mentioned above. Regarding the ornaments of Vajrāvārāhī M. Th. de Mallmann says: “elle est ornée des Six Sceaux”.

1. diademe (*cakri*) symbolisant Akṣobhya;
2. ornements d'oreilles (*kuṇḍala*) symbolisant Amitābha;
3. collier (*kaṅṭhi*) symbolisant Ratneśa;
4. bracelets (*rūcaka*) symbolisant Vairocana;
5. ceinture (*mekhalā*) symbolisant Amoghasiddhi;
6. tablier d'os, objet rituel”.¹⁴

Vajravārāhī on the *paubha* wears them all; however, she has something more, a detail that at once catches the eye: she not only wears ear-flowers (*karnaphula*)¹⁵ but also *karṇapaṭaka* (earflaps). These *Karṇapaṭa* also adorn the Mātṛkās, a group of eight deities, all manifestations of Devī and well known in Nepal. Since the 16th century they protect the city of Bhadgaon in the Kathmandu valley, a task performed by the eight Kālīs for Kathmandu and by the eight Kumārīs for Patan.

Regarding the *karṇapaṭka* on our *Paubha*, A. Neven is of the opinion that “son diadème de crânes péri de deux étandards. . . . est un détail propre au Nepal mais que nous croyons n'être apparu qu'au 19 ième siècle, ce qui pourrait confirmer notre impression d'une surcharge ultérieure de dorures”.¹⁶ We are not so sure about this addition dating from the 19th century. On glancing through the book *Nepal* with wonderful illustrations by Winkler, our attention was drawn to fig. 114: “Relief en pierre au bain royal de Patan”.¹⁷ This Royal Bath, completely bordered with small stone sculptures, was put up by Shri Nivasa Malla (1681-1684). On the left (fig. 2) Mahālaksmī is rendered; on the right we have Maheśvarī, Vaiṣṇavī and Brahmāyanī the respective śaktis of Siva, Viṣṇu and Brahmā. All four wear the two *karṇapaṭaka* or ear-flaps. The text in the book is by Prof. Mukuna Raj Aryal who writes as follows about the flower- and leaf-ornament bordering the goddess Mahālaksmī “Les motifs de fleurs et de feuillages sont caractéristiques de l'art Malla tardif.” The Mallas retained power till 1768. It is of course possible to add details on a *thanka* at a later time, but with a stone sculpture, as is the case in Patan, this is impossible. We may therefore conclude that ear-flaps as iconographical details did exist during the late

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14. M. Th. de Mallmann: *Introduction à l'iconographie de tantrisme bouddhique*, Paris 1975, pp. 427 and 38.
 15. R. L. Turner: *Comparative and etymological dictionary of the Nepali language*, London 1931: “*Karṇaphul*, S. Earring (cf. H. *karṇahul* m. a partic. ear-ornament; compd. *karṇa* and *phul*, lit. ear -flowers)”.¹⁵
 16. A. Neven. *Etudes d'Art Lamaique et de l'Himalaya*, Bruxelles 1978 p. 17.
 17. J. Winkler & M. R. Aryal : *Nepal*, Fribourg, 1976, p. 119.

Malla period, which-in the case of the bath-is about one hundred and fifty years earlier than A. Neven supposes. We are therefore inclined to believe that they were not added at a later date on the *paubha*, the more so as by a thorough survey of the gold paint this shows the same 'colour' all over the *paubha*.

The *mandorla* surrounding Vajravārāhī consists of three circles comprising *vajras*, skulls and flames respectively. The circle of skulls A. Neven takes as typical Nepalese. It is however also present on the Vajravārāhī maṇḍala, a Tibetan *thanka* in the Musée Guimet in Paris,¹⁸ where it looks like a thin white circle, while on the *paubha* we are studying here, the skulls form a quite distinct part of the *mandorla* because of their size. Furthermore, we have noticed, a band composed of skulls running as a decorative frieze round some temple buildings in Nepal. At times, they would alternate with other elements, such as lion heads and lotuses.

To sum up we may state that this small Nepalese Vajravārāhī-*paubha* is interesting for several reasons:

1. Once again Nepalese syncretism manifests itself, as the Buddhist deity is adorned with ornaments that are usually worn by the Hindu goddesses, such as Mahālakṣmī.
2. The strongly stressed circle of skulls, in our opinion a typical Nepalese detail and possibly particular to Vajravārāhī, certainly refers to strong tantric influences that are everywhere evident in Nepalese religion.
3. An unusual and important element is undoubtedly the presence of the names of two *paubha* painters. Although Nepalese paintings, contrary to Tibetan *thanka*, generally have legends, the names usually refer to donors and not to painters. Here we have besides the names of the painters also a date, an element that will eventually perhaps be valuable for a better knowledge of the history of Nepalese art.
4. When in a paper a date is mentioned, this is usually no more than the year, which may give rise to the wrong inference that the dating shows analogies with European notions of a date. Nothing is less true; the analysis of the legend gives ample proof that many elements, among which astrology and horoscopes play a major role, are important in the fixing of a date.

18. *Dieux et Démons de l'Himalaya, L'Art du Bouddhisme lamaïque*: Paris 1977; nr. 82 "Le mandala est entouré par quatre cercles de protection composés de crânes, de fleurs de lotus, de 'foudre-diamants' et de flammes".