

# Śiva Dakṣiṇāmūrti or Sage Nārāyaṇa? Reconsidering an Early Terracotta Panel from Ahichhatrā

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This paper focuses on a fragment of a circa mid-5<sup>th</sup> century CE figurative terracotta panel originating from the largest of the two pyramidal brick Śaiva monuments at Ahichhatrā.<sup>1</sup> The panel, which is kept in the National Museum, New Delhi, depicts a seated four-armed deity accompanied by two attendant figures. Ever since its discovery in the 1940's, the panel has been described as representing Śiva Dakṣiṇāmūrti. As will shortly become evident, however, this reading is untenable. Through an examination of the relevant textual and iconographic sources, it will be concluded here that this inscrutable deity might instead represent Sage Nārāyaṇa.

## RELEVANT ARCHAEOLOGICAL HISTORY

Ahichhatrā is located next to the small village of Rāmnagar in the Aonla Tehsil of the Bareilly district, Uttar Pradesh (coordinates: 28°22'00 N 79°07'39 E), and was once the capital of northern Pañcāla, one of the sixteen *mahājanapadas* (polities) mentioned in the Buddhist text, the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (Shrimali 1983, 9) (Fig. 1). Pañcāla is thought to have covered a vast territory stretching from the Himalayan foothills to the Chambal Valley (Shrimali 1983, 20). Northern Pañcāla (*Uttara-Pañcāla*) (also known as Rohilkhand, comprising Uttarakhand and northwestern Uttar Pradesh), was situated in the upper Gangetic Alluvial plain with Ahichhatrā as its capital, while southern Pañcāla (*Dakṣiṇa-Pañcāla*) was situated in the upper part of the Doab between the Ganges and Yamuna rivers, and had Kampilya as its capital (Shrimali 1983, 20). The River Bhāgīrathī separated Uttara-Pañcāla and Dakṣiṇa-Pañcāla (Sharma 1985, 47). The earliest settlement at Ahichhatrā is indicated by the presence of Ochre Coloured pottery, (Vikrama 2010, 297) which broadly dates to the second millennium BCE. The city was continuously inhabited until around the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century CE.<sup>2</sup>

With its myriad of sprawling mounds and depressions densely carpeted with brickbats and potsherds, its vast ramparts, its two monumental pyramidal structures and its diverse wildlife,

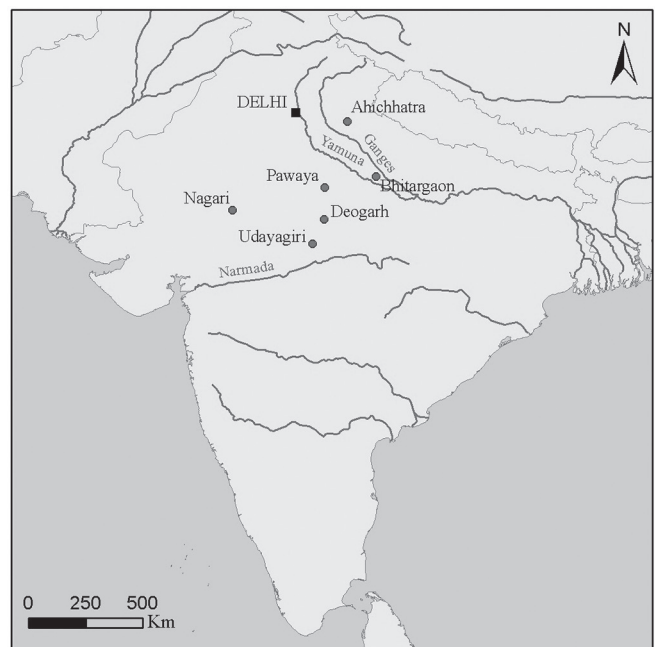


Figure 1: Map showing the Gupta period temple sites featured in this paper.



Figure 2: A view of the two pyramidal brick monuments at Ahichhatrā. The structure in the foreground is known as ACII, while the monument in the background is ACI or Bhimgaja. The latter monument is located at the heart of the walled city. Author's photograph, 2012.

the uninhabited ancient fortress city of Ahichhatrā is intensely atmospheric (Fig. 2). Moreover, beneath its surface lies a wealth of antiquities and structural ruins, which may explain why treasure seekers and archaeologists have returned to this site repeatedly over the course of a hundred and fifty years. Indeed, N.R. Banerjee has commented that 'perhaps no other site in India offers such scope for work as Ahichchhatra does' (cited in Shrimali 1983, 2).

The walls of the fortress form an isosceles triangle and stretch for around 6.2 kilometres, while the site spans an area of over 1.83 square kilometres. The fortifications are constructed from densely piled mud with bastions, or towers, spaced at intervals along the fortress walls. The eighteen-metre high brick pyramidal Śiva monument (also known as ACI or Bhimgaja) located at the heart of Ahichhatrā is the focal point of this paper (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4). The monument dominates the plains for miles around and is awe-inspiring in its vastness. It rises up in four tiers with the base measuring approximately 47.5 m on each side.<sup>3</sup> There are staircases to the east and west, with the latter side being the main entrance, evidenced by its substantial projection. It was in niches on the walls of the second terrace on the west face of the structure that magnificent life-size mica-speckled terracotta sculptures of the river goddesses Gaṅgā and Yamunā in high-relief were discovered.<sup>4</sup> A fractured *liṅga* measuring approximately 2.2 m in height and 1.1 m in breadth balances precariously at the pinnacle of Bhimgaja (Fig. 5). The form of the *liṅga* corresponds precisely with the description in Varāhamira's encyclopaedic *Bṛhatsaṃhitā*, which dates to the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE.<sup>5</sup> Excavations down to the level of the foundations on the south side of the monument reveal that it was built over the ruins of an apsidal or circular Kuṣāṇa structure, which was found to house a great deal of pottery (Shrimali 1983, 150). This structure is still partially exposed, but its original function has not been identified.



Figure 3: *A photograph of the south face of Bhimgaja taken during the 1940-44 excavations at Ahichhatra. At the base of the structure the semicircular wall of a Kuṣāṇa structure can be seen. Photograph courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India.*



Figure 4: *A photograph of the much-restored north east corner of the Bhimgaja monument at Ahichhatra. Author's photograph, 2012.*



Figure 5: View of the Śiva liṅga at the pinnacle of Bhimgaja, Ahichhatrā. Author's photograph, 2011.

The record of Cunningham's first visit to Ahichhatrā in 1862 is of great interest since it contains the only extant account of the site prior to any major excavation work. Cunningham provides an invaluable overview of the mounds and tanks within the fortress and in the surrounding areas. Although the report is all too fleeting, it nonetheless makes an important contribution towards the development of a formal understanding of Bhimgaja, most especially since Cunningham illustrated his account with a ground plan of the foundations of a temple that stood at its apex, and of which little now remains. The external measurements of the temple were recorded as being 14.7 m by 8.9 m (Cunningham 1871, 259). Unusually, the monument had open porches on both its the east and west sides in alignment with the staircases of the platforms, and internal corridors which led through to a rectangular *garbhagrha* (inner sanctum).

Excavations were conducted at Ahichhatrā over four seasons between 1940-44 under the direction of Rao Bahadur K. N. Dikshit (Agrawala 1985, 1). A brief summary of the archaeological findings following excavation of the two terraced structures was outlined in a letter addressed to Stella Kramrisch from A. Ghosh, via Sir Mortimer Wheeler, the then director of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). The account highlights a few of the discoveries made, such as that the terraced monuments ACI and ACII continued 'in their last stages till the end of the tenth or eleventh century.' Importantly we are also informed that the larger of the terraced monuments [ACI/ Bhimgaja] had to be abandoned 'before it was fully understood' (Kramrisch 1991, 174. ff).

## TERRACOTTA PLAQUES FROM AHICHHATRĀ

Between 1942 and 1944<sup>6</sup> a series of around eleven large terracotta plaques were found on the upper terrace of the Bhimgaja monument, some of them in a fragmentary state (Agrawala 1985, 63). The plaques range from delicate and skilfully executed to somewhat coarse and clumsy. Regardless of variations in aesthetic appeal, however, all are of interest to scholars as they represent early, or sometimes even the earliest, surviving visual depictions of famous myths from the *Mahābhārata*, the *Skandapurāṇa* and other sources. Although incomplete, this is the largest extant collection of figurative terracotta panels from a Śiva temple dating to *circa* the Gupta period, and thus is of considerable importance. A brief formal analysis of the plaques is included in V. S. Agrawala's 1948 catalogue on the *Terracotta Figurines of Ahichchhatrā*. This work records hundreds of figurative sculptural fragments and their find spots, and for this alone the catalogue is an invaluable source for historians, more so since many of the figurines and reliefs are now misplaced. Agrawala's analysis of the somewhat obscure imagery on the plaques, though, is occasionally problematic and has since been repeated almost *verbatim* by historians such as K. M. Shrimali (Shrimali 1983, 127-128).

Some of the terracotta panels found on Bhimgaja depict forms of the god Śiva.<sup>7</sup> Among the characters and narrative scenes illustrated are a wide-eyed trident-wielding deity who may represent the *gaṇa* Nīlāhita—a manifestation of Rudra—with a deceased buffalo demon slung over his shoulders;<sup>8</sup> an image of Caṇḍeśvara, the leader of the *gaṇas* who punishes the transgressions of Śaiva initiates;<sup>9</sup> the *gaṇas* and Śaiva deities including Caṇḍeśvara and Vīrabhadra destroying Dakṣa's sacrifice; *gaṇas* stealing and eating sweets at Dakṣa's sacrifice; and a unique and enigmatic three-headed fire-breathing Bhairava image, yet to be satisfactorily identified. Among the plaques less obviously connected with Śiva are depictions of a centauress with her lover; two warriors, previously identified as Yudhiṣṭhira, the upholder of *dharma*, in combat with Jayadratha (Ramachandran 1951, 304-311);<sup>10</sup> and a fragment showing an amorous couple kissing.<sup>11</sup>

## THE PLAQUE

Let us turn now to the terracotta panel in question, only the upper right-hand corner of which survives (Fig. 6). It portrays a four-armed seated male figure accompanied by a considerably smaller female and a standing male; only the upper bodies of the latter two are extant. The faces of the three characters are somewhat square in shape, remarkably reminiscent in fact of the sculpture of the Kuṣāṇa period. The left leg of the four-armed deity is lost, but it is likely that he was seated on a bench in *lalitāsana*. His matted dreadlocks are worn in a topknot (*jaṭāmukuṭa*), out of the centre of which several locks cascade fountain-like down the left side of his head. Across his chest he wears a strap (a *vastropavīta*?) that has the appearance of animal hide or possibly tree bark, rather than the usual sacred thread. He wears a short, coarse-looking *dhotī*, probably intended to represent bark. His lower left arm is bent at the elbow with his hand resting upon his thigh. In the palm of his upper left hand he balances a pot with foliage (*amṛtaghaṭa*). Only a couple of fingers survive from his lower right hand, which is held against his abdomen. In his raised upper-hand he holds a fragmented rosary, above which is a flower, its head facing towards the deity. Over his left shoulder lies something ribbed and folded-in-two. The possibility undoubtedly exists that this rather ambiguous article represents part of a snake, and, if this were the case then it would suggest that this four-armed character is a depiction of Śiva in one of his aspects. Next to the deity is a small female figure with her hands pressed together in *añjalimudrā* (a gesture of obeisance). She wears several bangles on each of her lower arms,



Figure 6: *The terracotta plaque from Bhimgaja (Ahichhatra) depicting a four-armed deity together with fragments of a female figure and a male figure. The plaque measures 65 × 73 cm and is housed in the National Museum in New Delhi. Author's photograph.*

and large hooped-earrings. Her hair is worn in an elaborate plaited style, which, as James Harle points out, recalls the Gaṅgā sculpture from Bhimgaja (Harle 1974, 31). Agrawala's drawing of the plaque shows the no-longer extant thighs of the female figure (Fig. 7). She appears to be standing naked, but for jewellery and a shawl draped around her shoulders. Behind the female figure stands a man with tightly curled hair, head bowed and eyes facing towards the earth. He wears a sacred thread and holds his left-hand palm upwards, facing the deity. His thumb and little finger appear to be touching. His right hand is closed and held below his eye.

The attributes and appearance of the four-armed deity initially point to this being a depiction of a yogic form of Śiva. This interpretation is further reinforced by the overwhelmingly Śaiva context of the temple. Indeed, Agrawala describes this plaque as representing Śiva Dakṣiṇāmūrti, the 'Lord who faces South'; (Agrawala 1985, 66) a form of Śiva as the divine teacher who is generally depicted seated beneath a Banyan tree known as the tree of knowledge (Kramrisch 1981, 57). Both Harle and Shrimali accept Agrawala's interpretation (Harle 1974, 31; Shrimali 1983, 127), and while Hans Bakker and Peter Bisschop have questioned the identity of this plaque (Bakker 2007, 25, Bakker and Bisschop 2016, 232-33), to the best of my knowledge, no alternative reading of the panel has ever been presented.<sup>12</sup>



Figure 7: Drawing of the so-called Śiva Dakṣiṇāmūrti plaque from Bhimgaja (Ahichhatrā), after Agrawala 1985, 65.

Agrawala has identified the female figure as a representation of Pārvatī, described in the *Kumārasaṃbhava* of the Gupta period dramatist and poet Kālidāsa, as waiting upon Śiva for a long period of time while he sat in meditation (Agrawala 1985, 66). Her nudity, however, sits uncomfortably with this interpretation. While Pārvatī is usually depicted naked on her upper half, she is always clothed to a greater or lesser extent from her waist down. Moreover, female nudity is uncommon in Gupta and post-Gupta art as a whole, being more a feature of Śuṅga and Kuṣāṇa sculpture.

The identification of this character as Śiva Dakṣiṇāmūrti is called into question for the following reasons: firstly, as already mentioned, Dakṣiṇāmūrti is usually depicted seated beneath a Banyan tree. Secondly, perhaps to make room for other important figures, this deity is situated in the top right-hand corner of the

plaque. Śiva Dakṣiṇāmūrti, though, would undoubtedly be the principal figure in a composition and thus should probably occupy either the centre or the left-hand side of the panel. Moreover, he would be flanked by ṛṣis (sages or seers). Most tellingly, however, is the presence of the naked female figure, upon whom the deity fixes his eyes. She has no place in an image of Śiva Dakṣiṇāmūrti. Indeed, the combination of her beauty and nudity suggests that she might represent a heavenly nymph (*apsarā*).<sup>13</sup>

The only myth familiar to me which involves both Śiva and a nymph, is that of Tilottamā. The *Ādiparvan* of the *Mahābhārata* (1.203) tells the story of the *asura* brothers Sunda and Upasunda (also known as Nisunda) who could only be slain by one another. The architect of the universe, Viśvakarman, created a dazzling *apsarā* Tilottamā, for the purpose of engendering a deadly rivalry between the brothers. Tilottamā, however, first circumambulated the *devas* (gods) whereupon three more heads emanated from Sthāṇu (a form of Śiva) as a result of his desire to watch her as she encircled him. He thus became four-faced or *caturmukha* (Bisschop 2009, 746-747). The deity in the Ahichhatrā plaque, however, has one head only; moreover, what part would the standing male figure play in this myth?

Perhaps the deity is not Śiva after all—but who then would fit the role of a four-armed ascetic? Based on a comparison of this plaque with a depiction of the Sages Nara and Nārāyaṇa (part incarnations of Viṣṇu) on the east face of the Gupta period temple at Deogaṛh in District Lalitpur, Uttar Pradesh, the conclusion reached here is that the figure in the Ahichhatrā plaque previously thought to be an image of Śiva might represent Sage Nārāyaṇa (Fig. 8). Since only part of the panel has survived, we can posit a guess that Nara may have been seated to the right of Nārāyaṇa as on a panel *in situ* on the *śikhara* (tower) of the Gupta period brick temple at Bhītargāon in the Kanpur District of Uttar Pradesh. In the Deogaṛh relief, both figures are seated on benches in a forest hermitage.<sup>14</sup> Notably, in this depiction Sage Nārāyaṇa sits on the left hand side of the panel.<sup>15</sup> The four-armed Nārāyaṇa holds a rosary (*akṣamālā*), a water pot (*amṛtaghaṭa*), and what might be identified as the tapered stem of a flower (Vats 1952, 14).<sup>16</sup> Although worn, the head of a drooping or bell-shaped flower is just about perceptible above Nārāyaṇa's hand, recalling the flower in the Ahichhatrā image. His lower right hand is held to his chest in *vitarkamudrā* (the gesture of teaching) and a family of deer sit at his feet (*ibid.*). His hair is matted and worn in a convoluted topknot. The two-armed Nara, also sporting a typically ascetic coiffure, holds a rosary and wears an antelope skin across his chest. A lion lies in blissful repose beneath his bench. Behind each of the sages is a small bearded attendant figure. In order to demonstrate the hierarchy of the two figures, Nārāyaṇa is on a slightly larger scale than Nara. Moreover, although each sage has a tree behind him, Nārāyaṇa's is more luxuriant than his companion's and forms an arc over his head. In the upper register of the panel sits Brahmā on a lotus flanked by *mithuna* (loving couples). Absent from this scene is the presence of a heavenly nymph standing before the sages, which brings us back to the identity of the nude female in the Ahichhatrā plaque.

The terracotta plaque from Bhītargāon is the only other relief panel surviving from the Gupta period to depict Nara and Nārāyaṇa in the company of *apsarās* (Fig. 9).<sup>17</sup> Here the sages are headless, but aside from this the plaque is intact and measures 47 x 52 cm (Zaheer 1981, 93). In contrast to the ornate composition at Deogaṛh, the foliage and flora of the Badarī hermitage has not been depicted here. Nārāyaṇa is four-armed and sits in *lalitāsana*, while to his right, seated on the same bench, is Nara who occupies only about a quarter of the width of the panel. Several diminutive but voluptuous *apsarās* flock around the sages, trying to tempt them out of meditation. Given the context, a nymph standing on Nārāyaṇa's lap is likely to be a representation of the heavenly *apsarā* Urvaśī. Thus the scene unfolding here must be that of a myth told on two occasions in the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* (VdP) (I.129, 1-19 and III.35, 1-18), which describes how Indra, king of the gods, felt increasingly threatened by the power that the sages were amassing through their severe penances, and so in an act of cunning he sent several beautiful *apsarās* to the hermitage of Badarī





Figure 8: Relief panel depicting Nara Nārāyaṇa on the east face of the Gupta period Daśāvatāra temple at Deogaṛh.  
Photograph courtesy of Adam Hardy.

in an attempt to lure them away from their penance. Sage Nārāyaṇa, who had conquered lust and anger, then demonstrated his immense power and detachment by effortlessly creating Urvaśī, the most beautiful *apsarā* of all, by drawing her outline in mango juice on his thigh. The same identification is proposed here

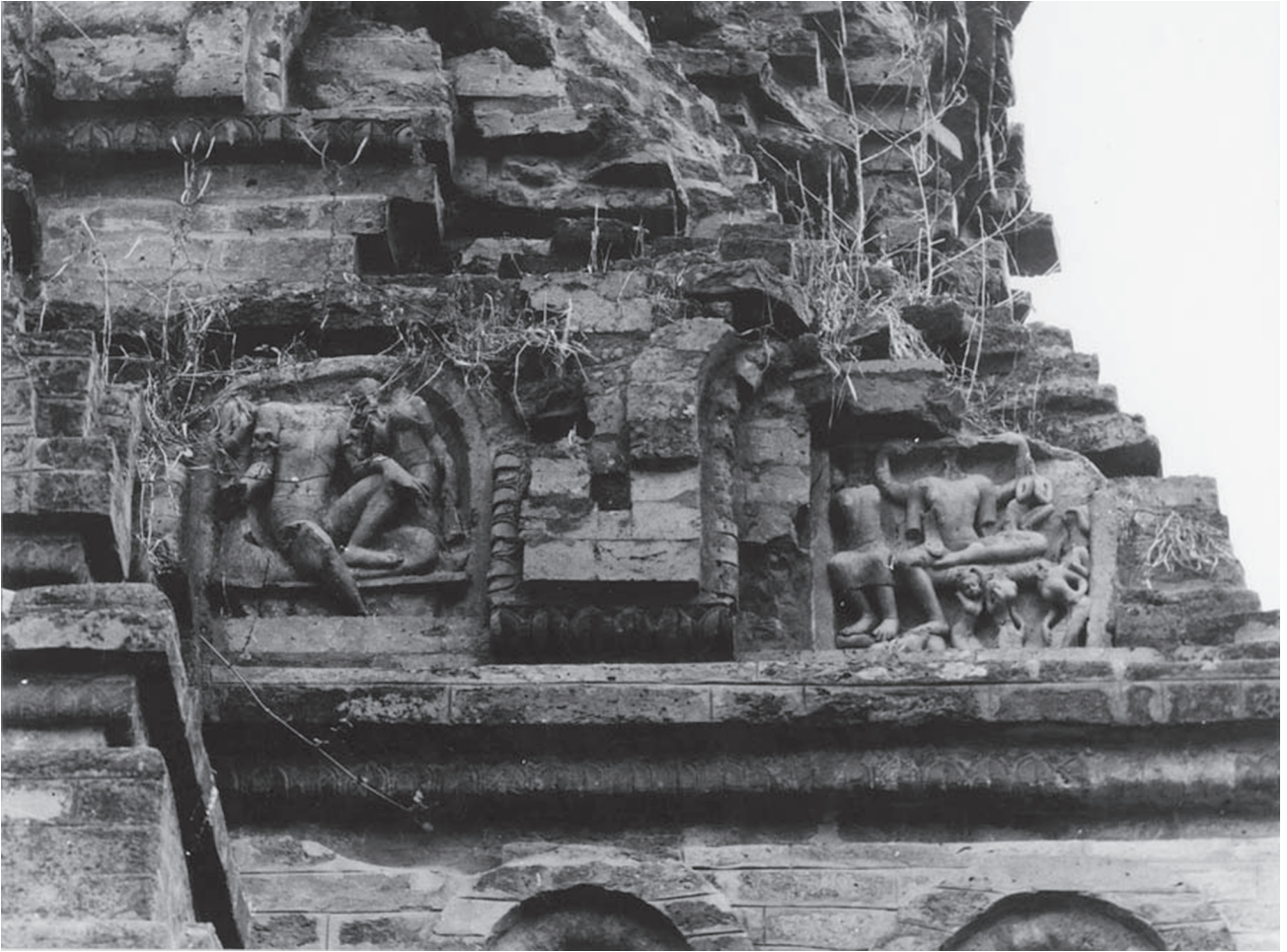


Figure 9: *Terracotta plaque depicting Nara Nārāyaṇa in the company of several celestial nymphs, in situ on the śikhara of the Gupta period temple at Bhītargāon. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.*

for the Ahichhatrā plaque; and hence the nude female figure could be a representation of the lovely Urvaśī. It is apposite then that Sage Nārāyaṇa has been depicted with his left hand on his thigh, perhaps illustrating that the creation of Urvaśī has just taken place. As in the plaque from Bhītargāon, several more *apsarās* may have been portrayed in the lower register of the panel. The association of this narrative relief with the myth telling of the attempted seduction of Nara and Nārāyaṇa is strengthened by the subject matter of the second plaque from Bhimgaja, which, based on style and border design, was paired with the former plaque (Fig. 10). It depicts an *apsarā* or *kinnarī* (in this instance a celestial centauress) with a princely lover on her back. These are the only two plaques to survive from Bhimgaja depicting nymphs.

Returning to the former plaque, the foliage-filled pot held by the deity is unusual; one would expect Sage Nārāyaṇa to hold a water bottle symbolic of an ascetic, and indeed this is the case in the Deogaṛh relief. This detail may or may not hold significance. For example, in the Gupta period the river goddesses are often depicted holding water pots, and occasionally, as in a charming example of a terracotta plaque depicting Gaṅgā, held in the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Berlin, the pot is shown overflowing with foliage (Poster 1986, 165).<sup>18</sup> To take an educated guess, the pot held by Sage Nārāyaṇa may signify his creative potential, or rather his ability to create. It should be mentioned that the foliage-filled pot is only one of many oddities



Figure 10: *Terracotta plaque from Bhimgaja (Ahichhatrā) depicting a scene with a celestial kinnarī and a male lover with a human form. The plaque measures 64 × 64 cm and is housed in the National Museum in New Delhi. Author's photograph.*

present in the plaques from Bhimgaja. Lastly, the male figure standing to the right of the plaque is probably an ascetic, perhaps a pupil of the great sages, indeed his role here might be to enhance the sacrosanct nature of the image. As mentioned above similar figures stand behind Nara and Nārāyaṇa in the Deogaṛh panel.

Aside from the reliefs already mentioned, there are two further images dating to *circa* the Gupta period, which have previously been identified as depicting Nara Nārāyaṇa. A terracotta plaque at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) depicts two sages, but since they are both two-armed it is not possible to establish who is who (Pal 1970/ 1971, 77).<sup>19</sup> They wear their matted hair in topknots while some loose locks fall onto their shoulders. Both have antelope skins draped over their left arms. A tree and a wicker stand separate the sages.<sup>20</sup> The figure on the right of the panel holds a scroll and appears to be reading

to his companion. Interestingly, one of the sages has a rotund belly, while the other is emaciated with his ribs displayed. The figure on the right is sporting a long beard ending in a point, and his companion may have also been bearded originally. Although considerably less refined and detailed than the Deogarh depiction, this panel is nevertheless animated to a degree that is difficult to capture in stone. Pal writes at length on this plaque, describing the two characters as Nara and Nārāyaṇa.<sup>21</sup> Although this interpretation cannot be dismissed outright, there is reason to suppose that in actuality a different pair of sages have been represented here. The image could, for example, be illustrating Vālmīki reciting the *Rāmāyaṇa* to his pupil Bharadvāja. This theory is based on the premise that none of the artefacts or features that distinguish Nara and Nārāyaṇa from other ascetics are portrayed here—for instance, the wild animals which feature in the Deogarh panel are not depicted, and moreover, Sage Nārāyaṇa is generally shown with four arms during the Gupta period. Indeed, it is his multiple limbs that make him recognisable and that differentiate him from Nara.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the presence of the scroll in the LACMA plaque does not, as far as I am aware, accord with any textual reference to the two sages.

According to Williams, a very worn panel on a large stone lintel from Nagarī in the Chittorgarh District of Rajasthan (Fig. 11), dating to the sixth-century, portrays Nara and Nārāyaṇa (Williams 1982, 134 and 141). The



Figure 11: *Detail of a sixth-century stone lintel from Nagarī, Chittorgarh District, Rajasthan. Author's photograph.*

panel depicts a pair of two-armed male figures seated side by side, both in the *lalitāsana* pose. The figures hold their right hands up in *abhayamudrā* and place their left hands on their thighs. There is a smaller, very worn figure to the rear on the right-hand side of the panel. An animal kneels at the base of the panel and probably represents a lion. All other details are lost. This is a depiction of two ascetics, and given the context of the rest of the lintel, which portrays some of the exploits of Arjuna who is often associated with Sage Nara, it is indeed possible that they represent Nara and Nārāyaṇa, although the absence of multiple-arms for one of the characters does call this interpretation into question. Bakker and Bisschop, on the other hand, believe that the image represents Arjuna (Nara) conversing with Indra who has donned the disguise of a *brahmin*, a story told in the *Mahābhārata* (3.38) (Bakker and Bisschop 2016, 241-42).

## THE SAGES NARA AND NĀRĀYAṆA

*Rṣis* (sages) are intermediaries between gods and men. Moreover, they are at the same time householders and renunciants, effortlessly balancing two seemingly contradictory lifestyles (Biardeau 1993, 97). Nara and Nārāyaṇa are somewhat different to most *rṣis*, however, since they are inseparable forms of Lord Viṣṇu. The god splits himself into Nara and Nārāyaṇa, but it is Nārāyaṇa who remains closer to Viṣṇu (hence his being four-armed); it is he who is the embodiment of the perfect *yogi* and is sometimes associated with Viṣṇu's *avatāra*, Kṛṣṇa. Nara on the other hand is the warrior, the preserver of *dharma* and the ideal king and is connected with Arjuna (Biardeau 1993, 97).

The textual history of Nara and Nārāyaṇa is long, varied and sometimes confused, with the sages making their first appearance in the *ṛgveda* (X, 90, 16). Here they are called *sādhyas* (a form of semi-divine celestial being) (Pal 1970/1971, 78). Nara and Nārāyaṇa feature a number of times in the *Mahābhārata*. In one myth, for example, King Dambodbhava, who had already vanquished the earth, relentlessly insisted that the sages take up arms against him. After much initial resistance, Nara eventually slew the king's entire army, using blades of grass in place of arrows (*Mbh* 5.96). In this same myth it is mentioned that Nārāyaṇa is more powerful than Nara (*Mbh* 5.96). Another myth tells how Nārāyaṇa (Viṣṇu) 'the soul of the universe,' took his birth in 'quadruple form' as Nara, Nārāyaṇa, Hari and Kṛṣṇa; they were born as sons of Dharma. Of these four, Nara and Nārāyaṇa devoted themselves to severe penance in a Himalayan hermitage by the name of Badarī. The sages travelled to the hermitage on eight-wheeled chariots formed from the five primordial elements. According to the *rṣi* Nārada, here the sages become 'the highest refuge of the universe' (*Mbh* 12.335). In 3.270 of the *Mahābhārata* we are told that Arjuna is Nara, and that he 'had practised penances of old in the Vadari forest.' Another myth in 12.343 recounts how Śiva, after having destroyed Dakṣa's sacrifice, flung his trident, which then travelled all the way to the Badarī hermitage and pierced Sage Nārāyaṇa in the chest. The sage, whose hair turned green, returned the trident to Śiva who was incensed, and charged at the sages. Nārāyaṇa took Śiva by the throat, which became dark, and thus the latter is known as Śitikaṇṭha. The sages appear in the *Viṣṇudharmapurāṇa* (*VP*) and as already mentioned, in the later *Viṣṇudharmottapurāṇa* (c. 6<sup>th</sup> century CE). In these texts the ascetics are considered to be minor incarnations of Viṣṇu (Pal 1970/ 1971, 78). A myth told in both of the *purāṇas* is that of the birth of the heavenly *apsarā* Urvaśī (*VdP* 1.129, 1-9 and III.35, 1-8 and *VP* cited in Pal 1970/1971, 78-79). In the *Viṣṇudharmapurāṇa*, Sage Nārāyaṇa roared with laughter after he had foiled Indra's plot, and 'the entire universe was revealed in his mouth, thereby indicating that he was a manifestation of Viṣṇu' (cited in Pal 1970/1971, 79). The *Viṣṇudharmottapurāṇa* (III.76, 1-5) gives instructions on how the sages must be depicted in art. According to the text, Nara is to be two-armed and green in colour. Nārāyaṇa is to have four arms and to be blue in colour. Badarī, abundant with fruits, should also be portrayed. The sages should carry rosaries, be clothed in black antelope skins, and wear their hair

coiled in a topknot. They should be seated on an eight-wheeled chariot – presumably the vehicle described in the *Mahābhārata*. Lastly, Hari should be like Nara, and Kṛṣṇa like Nārāyaṇa. Interestingly, none of the images surviving from the Gupta period depict the two ascetics seated on a chariot.

## CONCLUSION

To summarise briefly: we have argued here that a figurative terracotta plaque from Ahichhatrā, previously identified as a representation of Śiva Dakṣiṇāmūrti, might be a depiction of Sage Nārāyaṇa accompanied by the celestial nymph Urvaśī and an attendant ascetic. Since more than half of the plaque is missing, we conjecture that originally Nara was depicted to the right of Nārāyaṇa, while several other *apsarās* may have occupied the lower register of the plaque. This stance is strengthened not only by the attributes and appearance of the four-armed deity and his companions, but also by the existence of an approximately contemporaneous plaque from Bhītargāon depicting the same myth. It is important to note, however, that were the article draped over the left shoulder of the four-armed figure a snake, then the reading of this figure as Sage Nārāyaṇa would become obsolete.

Lastly, on the basis of the surviving early depictions of the two sages, it can be suggested here that Nara and Nārāyaṇa only began to be immortalised in temple iconography from around the latter half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE onwards.<sup>23</sup>

## NOTES

1. The themes in this paper are first explored in my PhD thesis. See Greaves 2015, 308-315 and 450-455.
2. An inscription dating to the 11<sup>th</sup> century CE describes Vodāmayūtā (modern Badaun) as the capital of northern Pañcāla (See Ghosh and Panigrahi 1946, 37). It is probable that after the demise of Ahichhatrā, inhabitants moved to Vodāmayūtā approximately thirty-four kilometres to the southwest to establish a new capital. Alternatively, Ahichhatrā was still occupied at this point in time, but had lost its hegemony. There were several major earthquakes in the northwestern foothills of the Himalayas between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries and Vikrama conjectures that Ahichhatrā was abandoned because of an earthquake dating to c. 1278-1400, the epicentre of which was in the region of Ramnagar 120 km away. (See Vikrama, <https://ees.kuleuven.be/igcp567/activities/bhuj2011/Bhuj2011-S16-abstracts.pdf>, 113-114). This argument is aided by the discovery of a multitude of collapsed walls and crushed terracotta images at Ahichhatrā (see Vikrama 2010, 304). Incidentally the first violent and iconoclastic Islamic campaigns in India took place during the 12th century CE, but it is not known whether Ahichhatrā was targeted and whether this could have played a part in the demise of the once great city.
3. Currently the monument looks as though it has five terraces, but this is due to its poor state and the manner in which it was restored post-excavation. In actuality the structure appears to have had a plinth, above which were situated three substantial platforms each with a wide walkway; a large temple occupied the uppermost platform. Indeed, what currently has the appearance of a fifth terrace at the pinnacle of the monument is in all likelihood the base of the sanctum sanctorum of the temple as well as two small inner passageways to the east and west. This is explored in detail in my thesis (2015).
4. These sculptures are on display in the National Museum in New Delhi and high-resolution images are published in Okada and Zéphir 2007, 88-89.
5. Adh: LVIII. Sl. 53-53 (Sastri 1946, 515-16).
6. The ASI albums containing photographs taken of the excavation of Bhimgaja are dated between 1942 and 1944.
7. Each of the panels is explored at length in my PhD thesis (2015).
8. The same deity might be portrayed in two further plaques from Bhimgaja although Bhikṣāṇamūrti is perhaps a more likely candidate.

9. I am not aware of the current whereabouts of this plaque if indeed it has survived. In his catalogue, Agrawala has interpreted the character as representing Lakuliśa, though based on his description it is far more likely that he was a representation of Caṇḍeśvara (see Agrawala 1985, 65). The deity Caṇḍeśvara is discussed at length by Goodall (2009, 351-423) and Bisschop (2010, 233-249).
10. The story of the battle between Yudhiṣṭhira and Jayadratha is of so little consequence in the *Mahābhārata* that the likelihood of it being chosen as a subject for the exterior of a temple appears to be slim. Its presence on the walls of ACI, however, might only be explained if it were originally one of a sequence of plaques telling of the heroism of Abhimanyu (son of Arjuna) and perhaps the death of Jayadratha at the hands of Arjuna. This suggestion is not beyond the realms of possibility since many plaques from ACI must have been lost. Indeed, photographs taken during the excavations testify to the extremely poor and fragmented condition in which some of the plaques were found.
11. All of the plaques from Bhimgaja with the exception of the Caṇḍeśvara panel (which is missing and was never photographed) are reproduced in my PhD thesis (2015).
12. Bakker and Bisschop describe the identification of the four-armed figure in the Ahichhatrā panel as Śiva Dakṣiṇāmūrti as untenable (Bakker and Bisschop 2016, 232).
13. For an in-depth discussion on Śiva Dakṣiṇāmūrti and the complexities surrounding his visual manifestations see Bakker 2004, 117-148.
14. This sculptural relief panel measures 1.77 by 1.19 metres (see Vats 1952, 14).
15. The supposed flexibility of the seating arrangements in these panels might demonstrate the relatively relaxed attitude towards iconographic conventions present in the art of the Gupta period. Alternatively, in the art of this era we often find the more important figures in a scene situated to the left or centre of a composition, while the dramatic activity and supporting characters tend to be situated on the right. In the Bhītargāon plaque though, and as we shall shortly see in the Ahichhatrā plaque too, Sage Nārāyaṇa needs to be seated on the right in order to engage with the nymphs, who, since they bring drama to the scene and are lesser divinities are placed on the right-hand side.
16. Thanks are owed to Hans Bakker for his thoughts on this.
17. It might be suggested here that the Bhītargāon temple with its *bhadra* projections, upper shrine, ornamented *jaṅghā* (wall proper), and tall rectilinear *śikhara*, represents an advanced stage in the history of Gupta Hindu temple architecture. The structure might tentatively be dated to the late Gupta period, towards the close of the 5<sup>th</sup> century or in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century CE, possibly contemporaneous with the Daśavatāra temple at Deogaṛh, and potentially too with ACI/ Bhimgaja at Ahichhatrā.
18. This fascinating panel probably hails from the Mathurā region. A second fragment of a Gupta period terracotta plaque depicting Gaṅgā, illustrates the goddess holding a pot with foliage and flowers. The plaque is held in the Government Museum, Mathurā, and is reproduced in Okada and Zéphir 2007, 230.
19. Based on style, and a supposed similarity to a terracotta fragment depicting Agni on display at the National Museum in New Delhi, Pal believes that this relief panel originates from Ahichhatrā. The surface layer of much of the face and torso of the Ahichhatrā Agni has flaked off, leaving little with which to compare the LACMA Nara Nārāyaṇa plaque. What remains of Agni's eyes, are fairly similar to those of the sages, while the style of the clothing and hair is different. Pal also argues that because Dakṣa's sacrifice is depicted at Ahichhatrā, it is all the more likely that the Nara Nārāyaṇa plaque originated there, since a myth in the *Mahābhārata* links the two sages with the sacrifice. The plaque, however, does not appear to be depicting this particular episode. Thus, in short, more evidence needs to come to light in order to confidently identify the origin of this panel (see Pal 1970/1971, 79).
20. Pal, 'Notes on', p. 78. In light of its form and the indeterminate object placed on top of the stand, it is possible that this is in actuality a *bali-pīṭha* (offering altar).
21. This panel does not conform to the dictates of the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* which describes Nārāyaṇa as having four arms, and Nara as having two arms. *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* III.76, 1-5. Pal has dated the panel to around the mid-6<sup>th</sup> century CE which would take it into the post-Gupta period, although he still calls it Gupta and has also suggested that it might pre-date the Deogaṛh relief which is confusing (Pal, 'Notes on', p. 79).

22. As an aside, a pillar relief at Deogaṛh depicts two bearded, emaciated ascetics seated in profile on stools facing one another. The figure on the right holds a rosary in his left hand. At the centre of the composition is a leafy tree indicating that this is a hermitage. Between the figures is a tripod described by Vats as holding a water flask (Vats 1952, 29). Both ascetics have two arms and Vats has tentatively identified the figure on the left as Vālmiki narrating stories to Bharadvāja on the right (*ibid.*).
23. In the *Mahābhārata* 1.19, Nara and Nārāyaṇa participate in the churning of the milk ocean episode. This myth is illustrated in two surviving fragmentary lintel depictions dating to the early Gupta period located at Pawāyā and Udayagiri, both in Madhya Pradesh. The relief depictions, however, are very worn. The characters depicted in the Udayagiri lintel cannot be distinguished, while Nara and Nārāyaṇa are not identifiable in what remains of the Pawāyā scene. Regardless of whether the sages were originally part of these lintel depictions, however, it is still the case that they are only represented as the main characters in a scene, or as the focal point of an image in the mature to late Gupta period. For a reproduction of the Pawāyā lintel see Okada and Zéphir 2007, 262. For a reproduction of the Udayagiri lintel see Joseph Beglar's photograph taken in 1875 which shows the lintel in far better condition than it is in today. The image is available on the British Library's online gallery: <<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/apac/photocoll/c/019ph000001003u01372000.html>>

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