

Review

Charlotte Schmid, *Le don de voir. Premières représentations krishnaïtes de la région de Mathurâ. (The Gift of Seeing: The First Representations of Kṛṣṇa in the Mathurâ Area)*. Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient, monographie n° 193. Paris, 2010, 752 pp., 72 ill., 2 maps. €50. ISBN 978-2-85539-131-1 (paperback).

Reviewed by: Raphaël Rousseleau, Lausanne University and CEIAS, Paris.
Raphael.Rousseleau@unil.ch

This big volume is a revised and largely extended version of the author's doctoral thesis (1995). Her researches are the results of some historical questions related with the Indian god Krishna: for example, why there is an apparent chronological discrepancy between his first iconographical representations and his textual descriptions in the *Mahābhārata*? Then, why does his identification with the Vedic god Vishnu appear only with the *avatāra* theory (towards the end of the fourth century), and not so clearly in the *Mahābhārata* itself? As the author argues, such problems are solved if we accept the point of view of the modern devotees of this deity, a point of view relayed by the 'structural' analysis of the epic texts by Madeleine Biardeau, who systematically equated the first god with an incarnation (*avatāra*) of the second one, whenever she found their occurrence. But, if we try to follow the 'basic' archaeological evidence and supplement this evidence with philological investigations, everything becomes both more articulated and more historically complex, than the unitary structural theory of Biardeau suggests.

In the first chapter, the author bases her enquiry only on the texts, and shows that a clear chronology is difficult to establish from this single type of source. Then, if we rely only on explicit descriptions of Krishna, for example, a certain iconography can be found already in the *Mahābhārata*. After Krishna offers a special 'gift of seeing' to Arjuna, the Pandava hero can finally contemplate Krishna's divine aspect: the one of a god with four arms, holding a mace, a disc and a conch. This description corresponds to the older sculptures of the deity, discovered in the Mathurā area and dating back to the Kushana period, during the first centuries of our current era.

Soon, another question arises: while such older sources describe an adult Krishna, Mathurā, on the other hand, is rather known from the *Harivamsa* onward (third–fourth century CE, during the Gupta period) as the native area of Krishna, represented here as a child *avatāra* of Vishnu.

Putting together such factual evidences, a chronological evolution appears gradually: this evolution suggests a link between the adult god Krishna and the Kushana empire, and then another between the child Krishna, *avatāra* theory and the Gupta dynasty. The author does not attempt to force this hypothesis, considering that information relating to the two empires currently remains too scanty, but she comes returns to the relevance of the royal discourse in the volume conclusion.

By adopting both the iconographic and textual methodologies of analysis, the author focuses on the first iconography surrounding the original Krishna, and gives us an interpretation of each of the divine beings represented. The first one explored is the elder brother of Krishna himself, Balarāma. The archaeological and epigraphical evidence tend to show that the two brothers were originally worshipped as a pair of semi-divine heroes, or even as a being with a double body. A second important character is the one of a small goddess, not easily identifiable, accompanying the two brothers. According to the author, the triad constituted by Krishna, Balarāma and this goddess may reflect the development of the legend of Krishna as a boy with family and clan connections. She supports this interpretation by a comparison with the first iconography of the Śaiva god Skanda, who was first depicted as an adult god before being accompanied by his various mothers, and only later, then, by Shiva as his father. Coming back to Balārama, the sculptures and the texts identify him as a snake god (*nāga*), and particularly as ‘the’ snake god who supports the whole world. This association would be developed later in the concept of Vishnu resting upon the cosmic snake.

The author further analyses some other animal or anthropomorphic figures (boar, horse-man) as linked with a new cosmogonic function attributed to the god with four arms. The Gupta period images and texts show another context: the development of a personal devotion towards a god (*bhakti*) as the first iconographic depictions of Vishnu. This phenomenon occurs at the beginning of the Gupta age, when the first Vaishnava images of childhood also appear. The author puts forward the argument that this evolution may be linked with dynastic filiation concern and the concept of the king as a ‘god’s son’ (*deva-putra*). This term also applies to Krishna as consecrated by Indra, the king of the gods, in the legend of the Mount Govardhana.

The end of the book draws some comparisons between the evolution of the Krishna iconography and the Saiva one. The author comes back to the archaeological evidences (sculptures, coins) to assert that, in both cases, ‘the son has given birth to his father’. This means that the image of a young god associated with a form of imperial power was progressively enriched with a richer mythology, attributing to him one or various mothers, a childhood and an even more divine father (Vishnu or Shiva).

This book is doubtless a ‘heavy’, path-finding and thought-provoking piece of work. The author manages to master an impressive variety of sources and shows an interdisciplinary curiosity which is not so common in this field of

research. This variety of approaches might sometimes give to the reader a labyrinthian impression, or a sense of vertigo in such an 'ocean of stories' for a period on which, as the author herself recognizes, information remains limited. Nevertheless, her questioning of common prejudices (mostly about weak identifications of ancient gods from an attribute which can be shown to appear later on) and the new interpretations she proposes are always stimulating and most often convincing. For example, the idea that the first representations of the 'god with four arms' is most probably Krishna instead of Vishnu is supported by new archaeological evidences. More generally, the author focuses, not on archaeology only or texts only, but on the serious connections between textual clues, archaeological fragments, and Kushana/Gupta imperial context. Being a social anthropologist myself, I particularly appreciate such an attempt, and the shift from a 'purely' textual reading in term of 'Hindu mythology' to a sociopolitical one, most probably linked with dynastic legitimization. The author confines her hypothesis on this subject to the conclusion, due to the present limited state of art, but I have no doubt about the fecundity of it, as well as the quality of the author's present research concerning the South Indian field.