Throne and Temple*

Political Power and Religious Prestige in Vidarbha

INTRODUCTION

In 1983 a volume of *Essays on Gupta Culture* (edit. by Bardwell L. Smith) appeared in which two articles have a special relevance for the matter discussed in the present paper. Burton Stein, in his contribution entitled *Mahānavamī. Medieval and Modern Kingly Ritual in South India* (*op. cit.* 67–90), analyses the difference in status or nature of the kings of the Gupta period (4th–5th centuries) and those of Vijayanagara one millennium later, a difference that may be understood from the different (royal) rituals performed or organized by them.

In an essay entitled *Vākāṭaka Art and Gupta Mainstream* (*op. cit.* 215–233) Joanna Williams discusses recently discovered pieces of Vākāṭaka art that put the Vākāṭaka artistic tradition on a par with the much better known Gupta style from which it appears to be largely independent.

The archaeological remains on Ramtek Hill contribute most importantly to our knowledge of Vākāṭaka art and culture. This prominent hill ‘rises 600 feet above the level of the plain [and] is at once a landmark to the surrounding country and a vantage ground from which the great Wainganga Plain may be seen spread out below, its irregularities of surface softened into smoothness by the height from which one looks down upon it.’ (Nagpur Gaz. p. 3). Add to this, that the hill controls one of the principal highways that connect the Gangetic Plain with the Deccan—the present-day Route National No.7 which passes through Nagpur, 47 km SW of the hill, and leads over the Satpura Range of which the foothills begin about 50 km to the north of Ramtek—and it becomes clear why from an early day, at least since the times of the Vākāṭakas, the hill has played a significant part in the political and religious strategies of the rulers of the Vidarbha region.

Joanna Williams inferred from a cursory investigation of two of the total of seven Vākāṭaka temple constructions that remain, that these ‘possibly go back

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* The first version of this article was published in Bakker, Hans (ed.), *The Sacred Centre as the Focus of Political Interest*. Proceedings of the symposium held on the occasion of the 375th anniversary of the University of Groningen, 5–8 March 1989. Egbert Forsten, Groningen 1992. pp. 83–100. It was published again as Chapter 10 in: Sahu, Bhairavi Prasad & Hermann Kulke (eds.), *Interrogating Political Systems. Integrative Processes and States in Pre-Modern India*. Manohar 2015. pp. 277–300.

to the second quarter of the 5th century AD when we know that nearby Nandivardhana was the capital', viz. of the rulers Rudrasena II, Prabhāvatī Guptā and Pravarasena II (AD 375–450) (*op. cit.* 226). This capital Nandivardhana is commonly identified with the site of the present-day villages Nagardhan and Hamlapuri 5 km south of the hill, and this seems to be confirmed by recent archeological exploration.¹ The hypothetical date proposed by Williams is corroborated by an investigation of other Vākāṭaka remains on the hill, on which I have reported elsewhere (Bakker 1989c), and by an inscription that was discovered on the wall of one of the two Narasiṃha temples (above, p. 113).

As far as can be known, the Vākāṭaka princes were the first who succeeded in uniting under a central rule the patchwork of supposedly more or less autonomous agrarian communities of the Wainganga Plain and 'tribal' societies of the waste lands.² The area around present-day Nagpur evidently formed the heart of the realm so constituted. The rise and fall of the Vākāṭakas coincide with the classical age of Indian history, when the greatest part of northern India was under Gupta sway. In the 6th century the Vākāṭaka kingdom disappeared without a trace and with it our sources. It may be assumed that the area was ruled again on a sub-regional level, acknowledging nominally the suzerainty of the great kingdoms of the Northern Deccan, or, occasionally, of the conquering kings of Madhya Pradesh, notably of the Kalacuris of the Dahala country around Tripurī (modern Tewar, c. 12 km west of Jabalpur). Then, in the 13th century, the region became part of the empire of the Yādavas whose capital Devagiri (modern Daulatabad) was situated 500 km to the southwest. To judge from the archaeological remains of this period, Vidarbha bloomed again, and epigraphical sources resume to inform us about its history.

The Vākāṭaka and Yādava periods may roughly correspond with the different phases of South-Indian kingship as discussed by Stein in the above-mentioned article. Point of departure of Stein's argument is Robert Lingat's *Les sources du droit dans le système traditionnel de l'Inde* and it leads Stein to postulate 'a profound desacralization of kings by the medieval period of Indian history'. He continues:

By the close of Gupta times, kings were divested of the sacred stuff which they were deemed to possess, partly ascriptively, by birth as kṣatriyas, and partly by the contingent outcome of their periodic ritual regeneration; there was even a prohibition of those great royal sacrifices whose object was to infuse kings with divine power. Many Dharma forbade *aśvamedha* and *rājasūya* sacrifices. [...] What divine qualities were lost to individual kings, however, appear to have been gained by the institution of kingship. [...] Kingship is the royal function exercised by powerful, yet flawed men: men who err, who sin, and who are subject to *Karma*.

1 IAR 1981–82, 49 f.; Jamkhedkar 1985b, 18; Verulkar 1987, 2 f.; Jamkhedkar 1987a, 339; Bakker 1989c, 79. This hypothesis has most recently been further corroborated in the excavations at Nagardhan by Virag Sontakke *et al.* 2016.

2 This hypothesis has been corroborated by the archaeological fieldwork of Harriet Lacey (Lacey 2016).

This powerful agent, though finite and flawed, is nevertheless active as a protector. The powerful deity to whom the king is analogized by most medieval writers or with whom he is identified by earlier writers is infinite and perfect, but gods require the intervention of men to be active. (Stein 1983, 71 f.)

We have quoted this passage as it is the intention of this paper to reconsider this thesis in the light of the testimony left behind by the two above-mentioned dynasties which, with an interruption of 800 years, held sway over Ramtek Hill.³ In particular it may be objected that this view is too one-sidedly informed by a special class of brahmanical scriptures and as such insufficiently based on the testimonies of the kings themselves. But I have to admit that Stein's position is not fully clear to me when he acknowledges at the end of his essay that the medieval 'king and god are at least homologized, if they are not equated' (*op. cit.* 87).⁴ As will turn out, disagreement as to this initial postulate does not preclude us from joining his main conclusions.

THE VĀKĀṬAKA PERIOD

Kālidāsa, who in all likelihood maintained close relations with the court of the Vākāṭakas,⁵ gives in his *Raghuvamśa* the following epitome of the ideal relationship between kingly and divine power:

THE (king) milks the cow (that is the earth) in order to make the (required) sacrifices; Maghavat (i.e. Indra) milks the heaven for the sake of a (rich) harvest; both together (thus) sustain the two worlds (heaven and earth) by means of their mutual exchange of riches. (*Raghuvamśa* 1.26)

Significant in this quotation is the absence of the brahmin, something, of course, unheard-of in brahmanical texts themselves. The concept underlying

³ Cf. Scharfe 1989, 97.

⁴ Cf. also Stein's discussion of the 'different perspectives' that tend to confuse scholarly communication on the issue of Indian kingship (1978, 147 ff.). By bringing archaeological and iconographical material into our analysis the present paper attempts to overcome Stein's verdict (1978, 148):

The conventional historian's approach aimed at confronting various conceptions about kings with evidence about how kings actually performed [...] provides no solution. For, it is necessary to recognize that almost all that is known of Indian kings of the ancient and medieval periods comes from normative texts, that is from documents possessing a firm value perspective. No source for understanding Indian kingship exists apart from literature of this character.

⁵ Mirashi in CII V, xxiv; Mirashi 1964a, 137–140. When I visited the Central Nagpur Museum in November 1989 a red sandstone image that was recently found in the Nagardhan–Hamlapuri region was shown to me. This splendid image represents a *kavi* holding a book in his left hand. There appears to have been an inscription on the 'book' which, however, has remained undeciphered. It has been suggested that the image represents Kālidāsa himself. I have dealt with this image more elaborately in Bakker 1997, 124–27.

the quoted view acknowledges two main, distinctive, agencies: 1) the nobility governing the earthly affairs, and 2) the divinity that repays the good deeds performed by the first group. The third group that is generally recognized, the clergy, whose traditional role consists in mediating between both realms, may be seen as implied in the first category, as merely instrumental to the king or *yajamāna*. This order (*dharma*), bipartite in essence, tripartite in practice, is eternal, that is sacred, and so are to some extent its constituents. To uphold and reinforce this order sacrificial rituals like the Aśvamedha may once have been performed recurrently, yet the Vākāṭaka kings of the Main or Eastern Branch thought it sufficient to refer—repeatedly, it is true—to the Vedic sacrifices that had been performed by the founder of the kingdom, the ‘emperor’ (*śamrāj*) Pravaraśena I.⁶ It may therefore be doubted whether these kings ever were actually deemed to possess ‘sacred stuff’ or ‘divine power’ (cf. Stein 1983, 70 f.).

Moreover, it may be questioned whether in the 4th and 5th centuries AD anybody, besides perhaps a small group of initiated specialists, still attributed the meaning to these rituals that Indologists have discovered in analysing Vedic texts and the subsequent brahmanical literature, and according to which the king was transformed into, or homologized with divine beings (*deva*).⁷ On the

6 Cf. Dirks 1976, 139:

An initial performance of one or several sacrifices could elevate the subsequent line to kingship in addition to the actual performer, as can be seen from the bunching of sacrificial references toward the early years of dynasties and the continuing references to the sacrifices of the respective primordial kings. The capacity of the sacrifice to have cross-generational effect was particularly important because there was no independent attribution to divine origin to the kings either in genealogies or in the eulogistic epithets, nor did the kings have any kṣatriya base which would have endowed them with the substance of kingship.

7 Cf. Gonda 1969, 24–33; Dirks 1976, 134 ff.; Stein 1983, 71. It may be granted that the king, being considered an extraordinary being, may be termed *deva*, since the word *deva* in common Indian parlance often denotes no more than an ‘extraordinary being’ (cf. the use of *diva* to signify ‘prima donna’). Accordingly, equation of the king with, mostly Vedic, deities in (later) Sanskrit literature (collected by Gonda *ibid.*) should be taken as symbolic language expressing the extraordinary concentration of natural (not supernatural) powers within the figure of the sovereign, which make him appear like a god. Similarly Lingat 1967, 232:

Certains versets des dharmasāstra attribuent au roi lui-même une origine divine. Cette conception, qui est étrangère aux dharmasūtra, a sans doute sa source dans certains textes védiques qui attribuent au roi une nature divine en raison de sa participation à des rites qui l’identifient à un dieu. Mais elle n’est guère reprise que pour auréoler le roi de prestige et justifier le respect dû à sa personne, plutôt qu’elle n’est présentée comme le motif essentiel de l’obéissance due à ses ordres. D’ailleurs, les mêmes dharmasāstra exposent une autre version de la création divine de la royauté *qui se réduit à des analogies entre les divers aspects de la fonction royale et les fonctions essentielles de certaines divinités*. (italics mine).

Cf. also Scharfe 1989, 98: ‘This so-called divinity of kings must be seen against the background of Indian polytheism, where *deva*-s are many and where everything is, at least potentially, charged with a higher power.’

contrary, these rituals probably continued to be performed or referred to in order to confirm the exemplary dharmic nature of the kings, that is to raise and enhance their prestige as sovereign rulers by displaying this awe-inspiring traditionality, in the hope of thus legitimizing their rule as being dharmic and hence as incontestably right.⁸

In sum, it may be questioned whether these boasted performances of Vedic sacrifices had anything to do with religion for the governing Vākāṭaka kings and their subjects. What the inscriptions seem to prove and what is confirmed by archaeological remains is that the actual living religion of the time was already something altogether different.

The Vākāṭaka inscriptions

In their inscriptions the Vākāṭaka rulers of the Eastern Branch styled themselves as representatives and supporters of the *dharma* by calling themselves the ‘champions of the dharma’ (*dharmaviṣayin*) or *dharmamahārāja*, claiming to have reinstalled the dharmic ideal of the Kṛtayuga on earth—pictured by Kālidāsa in the above-quoted stanza—thanks to the grace of God (*śambhoḥ prasādadhṛti(ta)kārtayugasya*).⁹ It is obvious that at least part of the function of these inscriptions was to broadcast this image of the Vākāṭaka ruler as the ideal dharmic, that is unimpeachable, king, who was entitled to the royal office on account of his exemplariness and the Vedic rituals performed by his ancestor (not on account of birth, since the Vākāṭakas were brahmins!), and who by this exemplary behaviour and thanks to the grace of Viṣṇu (*bhagavataś cakrapāṇeḥ prasādād* [CII V, 12 l. 13]) was able to bring prosperity to his subjects.

In other words, their prestige as rulers was greatly dependent on the extent to which, on the one hand, these kings managed to be acknowledged by their subjects as exemplary executors of an order hailed as dharmic and, on the other hand, they were successful in convincing their subjects that this acclaimed dharmic order really was the desired one. Or, in the words of Mario Erdheim, who gave a penetrating analysis of this issue in his study of Aztec society (Erdheim 1973), their prestige consisted in ‘das Wissen das die Angehörigen (ihrer) Bezugsgruppe von (ihrer) Vorbildlichkeit (hatten)’. (*op. cit.* 27). The stability of the Vākāṭaka regime during more than a century—it is very remarkable that their inscriptions hardly make mention of wars and heroic feats on the battleground—and the prosperity they brought in Vidarbha as attested by the archaeological remains, seem to warrant the conclusion that, indeed, they were quite successful in this respect.

To illustrate the values that determine the exemplariness of the Vākāṭaka king, a representative self-portrayal as found in these inscriptions may here be

⁸ That a ‘great deal of latitude was, in practice, allowed to the kings’ in interpreting *dharma* was convincingly argued by Derrett 1976, 607.

⁹ CII V, 12 ll. 15–16 (Inscr. No. 3).

quoted:

By order of the illustrious Pravarasena [II], the king (*mahārāja*) of the Vākāṭakas, who is entirely devoted to Maheśvara (*paramamāheśvara*), and who, by the grace of Śambhu (*śambhoḥ prasāda*°), has established the Kṛtayuga on earth[...]; he was born from Prabhāvatī Guptā, daughter of the illustrious emperor (*mahārājādhirāja*) Devagupta (i.e. Candragupta II), [...] and is the grandson of the illustrious Vākāṭaka king Prthivīśeṇa [...], who was endowed with the following virtues among others: truthfulness, sincerity, compassion, courage, leadership, selfdiscipline, magnanimity, wisdom, modesty, righteousness (*dharmavijayitva*), purity of mind, [...] and who had performed [...] four Aśvamedha sacrifices. (CII V, 12 ll. 2–17)

One cannot fail to note that, whatever ‘divine substances’ might once have believed to have been generated within the king by his passing through regenerative brahmanic rituals,¹⁰ the Vākāṭaka king does not explicitly claim these; on the contrary, the qualities on which these kings pride themselves are quite human, and though, admittedly, their possession in full by one individual might appear rather extraordinary, the king’s claim is simply to be such an extraordinary, exemplary human being owing to the grace of god. This is the ideology that these charters intended to advocate.

Policy of the Vākāṭaka kings

Considering this ideology the question arises how this thus legitimized political authority was brought to bear in the Vidarbha region. A difficulty encountered in reconstructing this process is the fact that we have practically no direct information regarding the situation in the region before the Vākāṭaka age. But extrapolation from the results of research in other comparative regions makes it plausible that the fertile areas of Vidarbha situated in the vicinity of rivers were inhabited by agrarian communities under local (sub-regional) rule, and that its less arable areas were populated by what is often called with a misnomer ‘tribal’ societies, the ancestors of the Gonds, and the Gaolis or Ahirs.¹¹

The power of the Vākāṭakas was originally based on the surplus-production of the agrarian regions which, following Stein, may be conceived of as ‘nuclear areas’ (Stein 1969). It is in this area that the ‘higher’, sanskritic form of Hinduism/Brahmanism had its strongest base, and the administrative and intellectual staff of the Vākāṭakas was primarily recruited from here. Our sources do not permit any conjecture regarding the origin of the Vākāṭakas themselves, who may either have belonged to the area or have forced themselves upon it as roaming freebooters. In either case their first success consisted in becoming recognized as central authority (*mahārāja*) by the land-owning and educated

10 Gonda 1969, 71ff.; Stein 1983, 68f.

11 Cf. Nagpur Gaz. 3f.; Russell 1969 II, 18–38. Cf. below, n. 19 on p. 158.

classes of the region, as a result of which they succeeded in appropriating an important part of the surplus-production which, again, enabled them to develop their power base consisting of the military, intelligence and administrative systems.

A religious policy, no doubt, was an important device for gaining this recognition. The Ramtek Hill was reshaped into the impressive religious centre of the realm as well as, probably, into a military stronghold. Since the beginning of the 5th century numerous temples, seven of which still remain today, arose on top of the hill.¹² The Narasiṃha form of Viṣṇu occupied a major place besides Varāha. Two temples testify to this. In addition, archaeological exploration in the environs yielded a number of little images of the Man-lion deity, which are replicas of the main idol on the hill and which were obviously meant for domestic altars.¹³

Ramtek Hill thus seems to substantiate the findings of A. Eschmann in Orissa, to the effect that aside from the theriomorphic boar deity (Varāha), Narasiṃha has been the figure par excellence to accommodate non-sanskritic or so-called 'tribal' deities within the Vaiṣṇava pantheon of the 'Great Tradition'. Eschmann discovered various cases in which lion deities—who were preferably worshipped on hills or in caves at a safe distance from residential areas—were assimilated in a process of 'sanskritisation' (Eschmann 1978a, 106 f.). This certainly was the active policy of the Vākāṭaka rulers: through recognition and patronage (e.g. by means of temple construction) of local deities, large groups of the population were won over to their regime, while at the same time, by enforcing 'higher' or sanskritic cult images and ritual proceedings, the brahmanical world-view, which was the ideological basis of the Vākāṭakas, was spread among broad layers of the populace.

Charters of the Vākāṭaka queen Prabhāvatī Guptā were issued from Ramtek: 'Bhagavat (i.e. Lord Viṣṇu) is victorious! From the feet of the Lord of Rāmagiri (i.e. Ramtek) [...] etc.' (CII V, 35, Inscr. No. 8). Her brother, the emperor Kumāragupta, issued coins with the legend: 'the lion-king who resembles Narasiṃha is always victorious'.¹⁴ Recently another Vākāṭaka inscription was discovered on the wall of one of the Narasiṃha temples which shows, according to our interpretation, that this temple was built in the second quarter of the 5th century, probably by a daughter of Prabhāvatī Guptā for the sake of her mother's merit.¹⁵ As the case of Prabhāvatī Guptā herself shows, women played an important and public role in the Vākāṭaka polity and were evidently

12 Jamkhedkar 1985–86, 1987a, 1987b, 1988; Bakker 1989c.

13 Four such images were shown to me in the Central Nagpur Museum, all from the Nagardhan–Hamlapuri region. Two more are said to have been found and stored in the Museum, but their present whereabouts are not known. Two such images are in a private collection (also said to be found in Nagardhan), while more images are reported to have been found at other Vākāṭaka sites in Vidarbha.

14 *sākṣād iva narasiṃho siṃhamahendro jayaty anīṣam* (Allan 1914, 77). The particle *iva* is particularly significant.

15 This inscription has been edited and discussed above, pp. 113 ff.

in a position to make large endowments (cf. Dirks 1976, 141). This newly discovered inscription mentions, for instance, the construction of an artificial lake (*sudarśana*) in the village Kadalīvāṭaka (modern Kelāpur, 2 km N of the Hill) and the purchase of a piece of land, probably for the maintenance of this temple (*prāsāda*) which is said to be dedicated to the ‘Lord of Prabhāvatī (*prabhāvatisvāminam*), i.e. Viṣṇu (see above p. 144). Until recently, when the image in this temple was cleaned by the Archaeological Survey, thick layers of *sindūra* testified to the original nature of this deity as a bloodthirsty ‘king of spirits’ (*bhūtarāja*) (cf. Sontheimer 1985, 145).

When we look at the artistic products of this process, the first thing that strikes us is their earthly and stalwart, though pious character. The Narasiṃha temples and the Varāha pavillion (and image) are square and solid, like the Vākāṭaka inscriptions themselves (Plate 11). The image of Narasiṃha installed in the above-mentioned temple is a genuine masterpiece, expressing assured sovereignty, not particularly ethereal or heavenly, not hieratic, but natural supremacy, which is again accentuated by its relaxed friendly, even sweet playfulness (see below, Plate 57). It represents the peculiar Vākāṭaka style, which is largely independent of the mainstream of Gupta art, a conclusion to which the material available to Joanna Williams had already tentatively led her in the above-mentioned article.¹⁶

Plate 11
Varāha on the Rāmagiri

¹⁶ Williams 1983, 232 f.:

To my mind, the two (i.e. Vākāṭaka and Gupta) are too different and the points of contact too limited to justify uniting the dynastic terms. [...] The Vākāṭaka style seems different in broad historical terms from the Gupta. On the one hand, Vākāṭaka work continues a sense of specificity in modelling which was characteristic of the second century A.D., both in Kuṣāṇa Mathurā and Amarāvati. At the same time, the Gupta artists had shifted the balance toward the ideal. The relationship between the image and the real world is distinctly different in the two. On the other hand, the Vākāṭaka style may well usher in elements of the medieval before these are apparent in the Gangetic north.

The Vākāṭaka century must have been a happy epoch, in which the quoted stanza of Kālidāsa may have had more than only poetical actuality.

So far we have spoken of the centre of the realm, the economic, political and religious fundament of the reigning elite of the Vākāṭaka polity. But the region also comprised extensive areas in which the economical and cultural level may have been less sophisticated: the outlying districts. How did the Vākāṭaka kings integrate these regions into their realm? The *Arthaśāstra* gives the following guidelines.

He (i.e. the king) should carry out what is agreeable and beneficial to the subjects by doing his own duty as laid down, granting favours, giving exemptions, making gifts and showing honour. Hence he should adopt a similar character, dress, language and behaviour (as the subjects). And he should show the same devotion in festivals in honour of deities of the country (*deśadaivata*), festive gatherings and sportive amusements. And he should cause the honouring of all deities and hermitages, and make grants of land, money and exemptions to men distinguished in learning, speech and piety, order the release of all prisoners and render help to the distressed, the helpless and the diseased. And discontinuing whatever custom he might regard as harmful to the treasury and the army, or as unrighteous (*adharmiṣṭha*), he should establish a righteous course of conduct (*dharmavyavahāra*). And he should cause a change of residence, not in one place, of those in the habit of robbing and of mleccha communities, and of chiefs of forts, country and army. In the place of those removed, he should establish men from his own country or those in disfavour with the enemy (*Arthaśāstra* 13.5.3–18, tr. Kangle).

From an analysis of the corpus of Vākāṭaka inscriptions it appears that, broadly speaking, the kings attempted to carry out these directives. Apart from donations to local sanctuaries and construction of temples,¹⁷ for what originally sometimes might have been non-sanskritic deities, the majority of the inscriptions concern donation of land and villages to brahmins. In his *Inscriptions of the Vākāṭakas* Mirashi tentatively identified most of the villages donated, but he only plotted the find-spots of the inscriptions in a map, though many of them are engraved copperplates (CII V, xviii). If, on the other hand, we plot the donated estates on a map—as has recently been done by K.M. Shrimali (1987, Map 2)—it appears that the great majority of them are situated in these outlying districts. The foothills of the Satpura and Maikala Range appear to be particularly favoured, while none of the estates lies more than 180 km from Nagpur, which is taken as the geographical centre.¹⁸

17 E.g. a temple of Pravareśvara (CII V, Inscr. Nos. 4 & 5), of Mahāpuruṣa (CII V, Inscr. No. 13), a *dharmasthāna* (dedicated to Mahābhairava?) (CII V, Inscr. No. 1), a tank and temple called Sudarśana in the village Kadalivāṭaka (*Narasimha Temple Inscription*, see above, n. 72 on p. 145), temples in Mansar (Williams 1983, 227 f.; Bakker 2008) and Mandhal (A.M. Shastri 1977–78, 1984–86, 130–133; Jamkhedkar 1987a; Bakker 1997), and the temple complex of Ramtek Hill (Bakker 1989c, 1997).

18 Shrimali 1987, 25–30. Unlike Shrimali, I leave the donations made by the Vatsagulma Branch out of account here.

This outcome seems to prove two things. First, that the actual range of power of the Main or Eastern Branch of the Vākāṭakas was not really very wide and that what is often taken as the realm of the Vākāṭakas was in reality probably a sort of federation of collateral branches. Secondly, that the Vākāṭaka kings strived to extend their sphere of influence by means of brahmanical colonisation. The endowed brahmins, as members of the class that supplied the religious and management executives of the Vākāṭaka administration, naturally had an enormous influence on the spread of the ideology on which the prestige of these kings was based.¹⁹ Often they may have been the main upholders of law and order and in this way may have proved themselves indispensable, though ultimately merely instrumental to their political masters.²⁰

The historical sources of the Vākāṭaka age do not allow us to narrow down the exact proportion of the two strategies of dominion, viz. that of coercion and that of creation of consensus linking mutual interests that is largely based on prestige,²¹ but it may ensue from the above that prestige was an important factor in the building up and enforcement of the authority of the Vākāṭaka kings, who seem to have been duly aware of this.

THE YĀDAVA PERIOD

More than seven centuries after Vākāṭaka dominion, Vidarbha came under the sway of the Yādava kings. This is clear from two brief inscriptions in the Narasiṃha temple, which I have edited and discussed elsewhere (above, pp.83ff.), one of which is dated in AD 1240 and refers to the reign of the Yādava king Siṃhaṇa. For the Yādavas Ramtek Hill was not the centre of

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19 Cf. Shrimali 1987, 26 f.:

Who were the agents of this transformation? We see this problem in the light of the process of Sanskritisation of tribal areas, the thrust for which came mainly from the Guptas. [...] Some of the names of donees of Vākāṭaka land grants also enable us to trace the process of Sanskritisation of the tribal areas, e.g., the donee of the Indore plates is Goṇḍārya—the Gonds still constitute an important element of tribal population in the Vidarbha region.

20 Cf. Derrett's main conclusion: 'The king was not subordinated to brahmins in his actual performance of his duties: he manipulated them, and utilized them. After all, he was their principal patron' (Derrett 1976, 607).

21 Cf. Erdheim 1973, 38:

Das Phänomen der Herrschaft wird nur verständlich, wenn man zweierlei beachtet, nämlich *erstens* jene Institutionen, die dazu dienen, Zwang anzuwenden, falls die Untergebenen die erlassenen Befehle nicht durchführen wollen, und *zweitens* jene Einrichtungen, welche Konsensus und Gegenseitigkeit schaffen und erhalten. [...] Betrachten wir das Prestige nun in diesen Zusammenhängen, so zeigt sich, daß es zu jenen Institutionen gehört, die Konsensus und Gegenseitigkeit schaffen und erhalten, und auf diese Weise das Funktionieren der Herrschaft ermöglichen.

their realm, but it was an important foothold on the periphery of their sphere of influence. We return to the question of how these kings legitimized their, super-regional, power.

The prime minister (*sarvaśrīkaraṇaprabhu*)²² under two Yādava kings (Mahādeva and Rāmacandra), the brahmin Hemādri, author (or editor?) of the great encyclopaedia of the *dharma*, the *Caturvargacintāmaṇi*, acclaims the standing of the Yādava dynasty in his *Rājaprasāsti* that precedes the *Vratakhanda*²³ in the following words:

THE Dynasty of the Moon is victorious, the renowned one, in which that King Yadu made his appearance and in which in former days Murāri (i.e. Kṛṣṇa) was born in order to take away the burden of the incarnations of Asuras.

IN that dynasty of the one who caused Kaṁsa's ruin King Bhillama made his appearance; his valour, a lamp (illuminating) several continents, led the moths, his enemies, to their destruction.²⁴

The divine nature of the kings of this lineage is asserted by King Siṁhaṇa himself less reluctantly than by the orthodox brahmin minister.

VIŠVAKSENA (i.e. Viṣṇu) who broke the arrogance of King Bali, who bestrode the universe in (three) steps, and who is held in eternal embrace by Lakṣmī, he is the towering king, the ornament of the Yadu dynasty.

MURĀRI (i.e. Kṛṣṇa) was desirous to descend to earth in the Kaliyuga also (in order to take away) its burden; thus a certain part of the Lord of the World was born on earth as its king with the name of Bhillama.²⁵

Two significant components of the Yādava ideology are expressed in these verses: 1) Kṛṣṇa, the famous incarnation of Viṣṇu, is a member of the Yādava lineage, that is, should be reckoned among its ancestors; 2) the living kings of this dynasty are likewise at least partial incarnations of Viṣṇu, born on earth for the sake of relieving it from a burden, just as their famous, divine kinsman Kṛṣṇa. The dharmic order that regulates the exchange of divine and earthly affairs is no longer the focus of attention. Contrary to the view set forth by Burton Stein to the effect that 'what divine qualities were lost to individual kings, however, appear to have been gained by the institution of kingship' (Stein

22 Hemādri, *Caturvargacintāmaṇi* Vol. I v. 13 (p. 3).

23 Not included in the printed edition of the *Caturvargacintāmaṇi* but edited separately by Bhandarkar 1928, pp. 238–47.

24 Bhandarkar 1928, 245 (= *Rājaprasāsti* II):

vaṁśo himāṁśor jayati prasiddho yasmin sa rājā yadur āvirāsīt |
babhūva yasminṇ asurāvatārabhārāpahārāya purā murārīḥ ||
vaṁ(śe) tasmīn kaṁsavidhvaṁsanasya kṣaṇīpālo bhillamaḥ prādurāsīt |
nīnye nāśaṁ vairibhūhṛtpatāṅgān yasyānekadvīpadīpaḥ pratāpaḥ ||

25 EI III, 112 (ll. 7–8):

viśvakṣeṇaḥ prabaddhoddhatabalinṛpatir vikramākrāntaviśvaḥ,
śaśval lakṣmyopagūḍho yadukulatilakaḥ proddhṛtottuṅgabhūhṛt |
bhūmābhārāvatāraṁ kila kali(sa)māye kartukāmo murārer,
aṁsaḥ ko 'py āvirāsīd bhuvi bhuvanavibhor bhūpatir bhillamākhyah ||

1983, 71), these kings not only claimed to hold a holy (sacred/divine) office, viz. to liberate the earth from a (superhuman) burden, but, on top of that—and this alone enabled them to do it—they claimed a divine nature for themselves as they wished to be deemed part of the transcendent divine incarnate.

A representative passage from one of the many Yādava inscriptions may be quoted to bring out the contrast with the Vākāṭaka kings and to make manifest this change in ideology.

THE illustrious King Rāmacandra, who makes his appearance in the dynasty of Yadu like a pearl (in a shell), who is Nārāyaṇa among the earthly kings, who is the Grandsire (Brahmā) among the protectors of the earth, who equals Bhīma when he raises his arms like a rampart, a lion to the mighty elephants of the trembling master of the Mālava land, the son of King Kṛṣṇa, he is victorious! (14)

WHICH enemy, like a deep darkness, would not flee when he, shining with the lustre of the sun, ascends the Mountain of the Gods (i.e. Devagiri), which is like the Eastern Mountain Range, and shoots his arrows, thus vying with the halo (of the sun). (15)

—In the reign of this illustrious Rāmacandra, who is the moon (above) the lotuses of the lineage of Yadu, who controls the entire terrestrial sphere and whose eminence shines forth from the honorary titles like the following: ‘he who parches the petty reservoirs of glory of inimical kings by his scorching burning brilliance’, [...] ‘he who is tumultuous like Narasiṃha when he rips up the broad chests of his mighty foes’, [...] ‘he who is courageous like Nārāyaṇa against the demons, his enemies’, [...] ‘he, who himself a Grandsire among kings, surpasses Grandsire (Brahmā) in his life’, [...] ‘lion who tears asunder the elephants of the Gurjaras’, [...] ‘the holocaust that extinguishes the light of the Mālavas’, ‘generous tree of plenty’,

—While the illustrious Hemādri [...], crest-jewel of the ministers, who has re-claimed the jungle (*nirjitaḥhādimaṇḍala*), who is completely dedicated to the superintendency of (all) records, [...] who is the head of the elephant-drivers—(while) this (Hemādri) is acquitting himself of the heavy task (of administering) the whole empire consigned to him by his (i.e. the king’s) grace (*prasāda*),

THERE is this pearl in the line (*gotra*) of Gautama, the illustrious Jalhaṇa; after him there is Mūdhugi [...] who excels in virtues and who is a polemicist in the field of *śruti* and *śāstra*; to him has been born a virtuous son, the illustrious Acyutanāyaka who is blessed by the illustrious Rāmacandra. (16) [...]

And this (Acyutanāyaka), the Grandsire among the governors [...],

WHILE exercising the office of governor here in the Konkan awarded to him by the illustrious Rāma, he has bestowed upon thirty-two brahmins a village named Vaula [...] etc. (18)²⁶

What stands out in this passage is the hierarchy among the four parties mentioned: 1) the (semi-)divine sovereign Rāmacandra whom no hyperbole can

26 EI XIII (*Thana Plates of Rāmachandra: Saka 1194*), No. 17, vv. 14–18 (pp. 201–03).

describe, 2) Hemādri, the actual ruler and superintendent of the administration and the army, 3) the ruler of the Konkan who excels among the governors, 4) the 32 brahmin donees only mentioned by name.

The inscription begins with ‘King Rāmacandra is victorious’, instead of ‘God (Bhagavat) is victorious’ as do the Vākāṭaka inscriptions. It is not the king who rules the empire by grace (*prasāda*), but his prime minister Hemādri. Instead of God blessing the king, the king blesses his proxies. Yet another conspicuous difference between the Vākāṭaka and Yādava inscriptions is the bellicose tone in the latter, completely absent in the former. On the other hand, the Yādava princes declare themselves, like some of the Vākāṭakas, great devotees of Viṣṇu. However, in variance with the Vākāṭaka practice, according to which endowments were made ‘in order to increase our merit (*dharma*), life, power, glory, and authority and for our own benefit with regard to (our) welfare in this and yonder world’,²⁷ endowments and donations of the Yādavas were professedly made ‘for our own sake to please Śār(a)ṅgapāṇi (i.e. Viṣṇu)’.²⁸

This leads to a central theme of our study: to investigate whether there is any correlation between this change of ideology (concomitant with a change in religion) and the extent of the Yādava realm as compared to that of the Vākāṭakas. The Yādava kingdom had been established by military means and was consequently made up of different regions that had very little in common, which resulted in a political constellation that threatened to fall apart on every and each occasion.²⁹

The new ideology emphasized the uniqueness of the monarch; his (semi-) divine status aimed at distinguishing him from all ordinary regional rulers, be they governors, vassals or puppets. If his power were legitimized in the same way as that of the Vākāṭakas, there would have been no specific reason for the populace and chieftains of a region to raise this monarch above the authority of their own political elite. In other words, the type of prestige acquired by the Vākāṭakas would not have been sufficient for the Yādavas to keep the dangerous feudal forces in check, except at the expense of great military efforts. The new form of Hinduism, the Vaiṣṇava devotion (*bhakti*), which was in the ascendent in the Yādava age and was actively supported by them, appears to have been almost the only thing in common that united the different regions. This religion, in which the divine is humanized as a corollary of the growing devotion to Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, both born as the sons of kings on earth (a phenomenon that could be denominated as ‘royalisation’), and in which the human is deified concomitant with the king’s recognition as an impersonation of a part of the divine (which could be called ‘deification’)—this type of religion

27 CII V, 12 ll. 22 f. (Inscr. No. 3): *ātmano dharmāyurbalavijayaiśvaryavivṛddhaye ihāmutrahitārtham ātmānugrahāya* [...].

28 Fleet 1885, *Paithan Plates of Rāmachandra – Saka 1193* (= AD 1272), p. 317 ll. 63 f.: [...] *ātmanah śrīśāraṅgapāṇiprītyartham* [...].

29 Cf. Dirks 1976, 148 f.; Kulke 1978, 131 ff.

appeared simply, in the words of Kosambi, ‘to be the best religion to hold this type of society and its state together’.³⁰

The *bhakti* religion and the ideology based on it thus involved a change that in the terminology developed by Mario Erdheim could be defined as a shift from *virtù* to *charisma*:

Stellen wir Charisma und virtù gegeneinander, so können wir sagen: Charisma setzt neue Werte, begründet Normen und ist die Ausnahme, die neue Regeln fordert; virtù realisiert die überlieferten Werte, ist Maßstabsgebunden und ist zwar auch eine Ausnahme, aber eine solche, die die überkommenen Regeln bestätigt. (Erdheim 1973, 30 f.)

The Vākāṭaka kings in their exemplariness possessed virtù: ‘das Vorbild ist die Verkörperung der virtù; es zeigt fast wie in einem Modell, was Tapferkeit, Frömmigkeit, Weisheit, Geschäftstüchtigkeit bedeuten, wenn sie im Leben verwirklicht werden sollen. [...] Deutlich ist einmal die *Alltäglichkeit* der virtù und damit auch des Prestiges geworden’ (*ibid.* pp. 29, 31). The Yādava kings claimed, if we interpret their inscriptions rightly, to possess something extra.

Wesentlich für das Charisma ist seine Außeralltäglichkeit; seine Kräfte sind übernatürlich, über-menschlich, außer-ordentlich; sein Wirkungsbereich liegt im Außer-Gewöhnlichen, dort wo Sitte und Gewohnheit (i.e. *dharma*, H.T.B.) nicht mehr ausreichen.³¹

This shift in the nature of the king reveals the potential contradiction inherent in the concept of his exemplariness. This was implicitly recognized by Clifford Geertz in his analysis of Hindu kingship on the island of Bali: ‘The king, the lord, the priest, and the ascetic are all said to be *sekti* [Skt. *śakti*] (not, as often has been said, “to possess” it) to the extent that *they are, in turn, instances of what they adore*.’³² In other words, in the ‘exemplariness’ of the Yādava king the two dialectical moments inherent in this concept, viz. being, on the one hand, different from *hoi polloi*, and being, on the other hand, as the ideal type, intrinsically their equal—or formulated in terms of the *bhakti* religion, being in one respect divine, in another respect the paragon of devotion (*paramabhakta*)—these two moments were developed to extreme paradoxality.

Yet, we would not be in India if we did not find that a way and style was developed to cope with this paradox, fostered as an expression of reality. Once more we ask, how did these monarchs implement their authority. Hermann Kulke proposed the following answer:

Besides investing more and more in their ever increasing army, the Hindu *rājas* of these loosely structured regional [in our case extended to ‘super-regional’, H.T.B.]

³⁰ Quoted from Kulke 1978, 133.

³¹ See *op. cit.* 30, referring to ‘Max Webers Charisma-Begriff’.

³² Geertz 1980, 106; italics mine.

kingdoms, in absence of a centralized bureaucracy, tried with their traditional patrimonial power to counterbalance these dangerous feudal forces by ritual measures: 1) royal patronage of places of pilgrimage of regional and all-Indian importance within their respective kingdoms; 2) a systematic and large-scale settlement of Brahmins; 3) construction of new imperial temples. (Kulke 1978, 132)

We already encountered the second method in dealing with the Vākāṭakas, so this does not seem to be specific to the Medieval period, though this does not detract from its importance.³³ The first and third means coincide to a large extent. Hence, broadly speaking, two developments are significant for the Yādava age: 1) expansion of military power ('Zwangsapparat') which clearly emerges from the inscriptions; 2) symbolic and ritual representation employing religious conceptions and images ('Vorstellungen') as well as sacred centres where these representations could be reified and enacted. Ramtek Hill was such a centre.

We shall finally consider how this development—this structural change in royal prestige in the wake of a shift in the balance of social and religious powers ('Potenzen')—became visible on Ramtek Hill.

RAMTEK HILL: THEATRE OF PLENIPOTENTIARIES

In the 13th century Ramtek evolved into a place of pilgrimage which attracted votaries from far beyond the region itself. The best known of these was the founder of the Mahānubhāva sect, Cakradhara. He came to the hill sometime before AD 1264, probably during the reign of Mahādeva, and stayed in the Bhogarāma Temple, which was originally a Vākāṭaka temple enshrining Vāsudeva and Saṃkarṣaṇa, but at that time was dedicated to Viṣṇu-Rāma and his counterpart Kṛṣṇa.³⁴ The hill did not derive its fame directly from its being a Vaiṣṇava centre as such, nor from its possession of an ancient Narasiṃha temple, but from the fact that it had come to be considered as the residence of Rāmacandra. Two 13th-century inscriptions in the Kevala-Narasiṃha Temple testify to the pilgrimage of two brothers, the poet Trivikrama (who may have been the author of the *Madālasācampū*) and his brother Rāghava, for the sake of worshipping the illustrious Rāma (above, p. 86).

Two big temples had arisen to the west of the Vākāṭaka temples on the spur of the hill, giving it an impressive skyline (Plate 12). The main temple

33 Contrary to Dirks (1976, 145), I do not see significant structural changes in the character of royal donations other than quantitative ones. The underlying principle of all royal grants (*dāna*), to be distinguished from *dakṣiṇās*, in the classical as well as in the medieval period, may have been simply that of *do ut des*, notwithstanding religious justifications. It was the price kings, and intermediate dignitaries, had to pay for loyalty shown to them. In other words, its main social and political function was and remained to reinforce royal prestige through distribution of authority.

34 See Bakker 1992c; Bakker 1997, 63 f.

was dedicated to Rāmacandra, the other to his brother Lakṣmaṇa. The latter temple contains a lengthy stone-inscription, in which the praises are sung of Rāmacandra, the king and the god, and a Māhātmya is given of the holy places on and around the hill (see above, pp. 88 ff.). It was engraved under the reign of the Yādava king Rāmacandra by his plenipotentiary, the governor ruling this part of the realm, and it may have recorded some endowments or repairs made to the temple by this governor, though illegibility of the last part of the text makes this uncertain.

The governor, who styles himself the ‘superintendent of the guard of the royal bed-chamber’, proclaims that ‘the illustrious lord Rāmacandra had entrusted him, who was giving due weight to the virtues . . . , with the care of the magnificent prosperity of his thriving empire’ (v. 31). It may have been more than mere coincidence that the king’s proxy put up this inscription in the temple dedicated to the younger brother, not in the main Rāma temple itself, since he might have conceived of his relationship to the sovereign as homologous with the relation between the latter’s eponym, Rāma the god, and Lakṣmaṇa, the deity of the temple.

From the inscription it appears that, at the time, Rāma was deemed the supreme form of Viṣṇu (vv. 38–40):

... There is nothing superior to Hari to enable one to cross the ocean of existence. Though there are ten avatars of His, Rāma is the (foremost) of them . . . .
How can I describe that unsurpassed, wonderful efficacy of this mountain Tapaṃ-giri (i.e. Rāmagiri), where he, (the scion of the Raghu race), who is the supreme object of meditation of the yogis, lives together with the Son of the Wind (i.e. Hanumat)?

The text continues in the accomplished style of the Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* tradition, mentioning the Aśvamedha sacrifice merely to extoll the far superior merit that accrues to the visitor of the sanctuaries on the hill (*ibid.* v. 62).

The analysis above provides, at least partly, an explanation of the so far unsolved problem why, of all incarnations of Viṣṇu or of all other Worshipful figures in the Hindu pantheon, it was Rāma (along with Kṛṣṇa) who became the central object of veneration in Hinduism of the 2nd millennium, Rāma who, in contrast with Kṛṣṇa, did not have roots in a folk deity nor had been the exclusive object of worship or cult of any consequence in the first eight centuries of his career as an acknowledged incarnation of Viṣṇu. The same devotional religion that informed their ideology provided a mighty symbol for these kings to appropriate (in the sense of a ‘personal symbol’ as introduced by Obeyesekere 1981). For, just as the Yādava king assumed transcendency and royalty in his person and as such boasted of being a reflection of divinity, so this divinity reflected had to compromise the same both aspects. And within the entire Hindu pantheon no symbol was more suitable for this than the figure of Rāmacandra, who personified kingship and godhead in one.

Appropriation by kings of this symbolism—and the analysis of the Mahānavamī ritual by Stein, for instance, seems to uncover the same phenomenon

in the Vijayanagara empire (Stein 1983, 83)—contributed naturally, in an interactive process, to the growth of this type of *bhakti*. This was the way in which the dialectics of ‘royalisation’ and ‘deification’ referred to above (p. 161) actually worked. One of its consequences was the aggrandizement of the sacred complex of the hill of Rāma, Ramtek, epitomized in the Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa temples.

Whereas the Vākāṭakas in their dealing with the cult of Narasiṃha were actually concerned with a metaphor—the divine figure of Narasiṃha and his symbolization in an icon presented the qualities of the king by *analogy*—in the days of the Yādavas this analogy developed into a *homology*. The *bhaktas* who visited the sanctuaries on top of the hill and who witnessed and participated in the elaborate ritual universe created around the idols installed, not only stood in front of their god Rāmacandra, but also faced their King Rāmacandra. Partly under the influence of the *bhakti* religion, court ritual and temple ritual had become almost indistinguishable, the idol being handled as a living king, the king treated as a deity. This conflation of different levels of meaning is constantly met with in the epigraphical material of this period, the authors of which were experts in double-entendres and equivocal expressions (*śleṣa*). Take, for instance, the *Kevala-Narasiṃha Temple Ramtek Inscription No. 1*: ‘Śāriṅgadeva, son of Kāmadeva, who is the crown of the philosophers and whose praises are sung by the poet Trivikrama, praises always the illustrious Nṛhari.³⁵ In the time of the reign of Siṃhaṇa, in the Śārvarin-year’.³⁶ Here Nṛhari may equally refer to the god of the temple Narasiṃha and to the reigning monarch Siṃhaṇa, whose name qualifies him as a ‘Lion among Men’.

The promotion of imperial sanctuaries all through the realm, especially in the periphery, thus enabled the sovereign, standing proxy for God, to be ubiquitous. This, again, created ramifications of loyalty by means of which the king and his plenipotentiaries could enact authority. Though we disagreed with Stein with regard to the starting-point of his above-quoted article, we subscribe to his conclusion:

Sovereignty is conceived as shared between powerful humans (Rājas) and powerful divinities (Devas); the sovereignty of neither is complete; the sovereignty of both, together, is perfect. Those who fall under the sovereignty of both kings [...] and gods comprise a community of reverence and worship. This is a conception of community which occurs at every level of South Indian society from the village to the whole kingdom. [...] Worship is constitutive of (it establishes or creates) community; the sovereignty of great humans [...] and gods is realized in worship events, or ritual performances, of a public kind in which all of any corporate whole (family to kingdom) express membership and in which all witness as well as compete for the honors which alone can be distributed by powerful personages and divinities. (Stein 1983, 89 f.; cf. above, n. 14 on p. 61)

35 This can either mean ‘a lion among men’ or ‘man-lion’ (synonymous with Narasiṃha), or ‘Hari in the form of man’.

36 Bakker 1989b, 470; above p. 83.

Or, in our words, the charisma built up by the king through his engagement in this type of religion—by which simultaneously the ideology that founded his authority was propagated—this prestige he again distributed as grace (*prasāda*) among the polity in the form of honours, (ritual) privileges, estates, etc. It goes without saying that the balance of power established by this policy was a delicate one, since in the absence of an objective touchstone or an endorsing authoritative institution—like, for instance, the Church of Rome in the European Middle Ages—every ruler aspiring after supremacy could, in principle, assume the same status, to which a fabricated pedigree could be helpful. That this actually was the case is abundantly attested by the inscriptions of these centuries. Hence the king's precarious condition persistently called for more investments in the military machine, testified by the remains of heavy fortifications on the Ramtek Hill.

And this brings us back to the visual material of the Yādava age that is left on Ramtek Hill. It reflects the above-sketched cultural, i.e. social, religious, and political complex in its own way. In contrast to the Vākāṭaka sanctuaries, the temples of the Yādava period seek to rise above the earth in a tiered architecture that culminates in the *śikhara* which represents the centre, or axis mundi of the cosmic *maṇḍala* that is reified in the temple compound. The image installed under the *śikhara* is of a similar hierarchic rigidity, human and non-human at the same time, embodying the transcendent but reliable unwavering pivot, the fountainhead of sovereignty.

Plate 12

Rāmacandra and Lakṣmaṇa temples on the spur of the Rāmagiri