Rituals devoted to the propitiation and supplication of snakes, nāgas, have been practiced on the South Asian subcontinent for more than two millennia and have spread far beyond India to such places as Tibet, Cambodia, and Indonesia. Moreover, these ritual practices remain relevant for people up to the present day. During nāgapañcamī, the annual festival devoted to the deified snakes in Banaras, for example, thousands of people crowd into the area around Naga Kuan ("Snake Pool"), which is situated in the northwestern sector. At this festival, which takes place during the rainy season in the month of śrāvana (Jul–Aug), bathers are drawn to the deep, dark pool believed to provide access to the Nāgaloka, the magnificently luxurious underwater world of the nāgas. Worshippers honor these supernatural snakes in order that these deities might ensure a variety of boons, mostly related to human and earthly fertility, such as the birth of healthy children and the provision of bountiful harvests.

While nāgas are specially equipped with supernatural powers, any snake can potentially be a nāga, although in narratives and representations from the Common Era, nāgas are depicted specifically as cobras – cobras, moreover, who have the capacity to take on human form but always with some feature of the snake remaining, such as the cobra’s hood or tail. J. Williams notes that, in some cases, representations of nāgas reflect the dress customs of the time, for the nāga statues in Nagauri and Gulgaon appear wearing stone turbans. In relation to these nāgas, “Williams has argued that the Nagarui and Gulgaon nāgas belong to a 'localized' style, which gives the impression of a folk tradition not fully accustomed to working in stone” (Shaw, 2004, 22).

In present times, women, particularly those desiring to become pregnant, worship nāgas. As part of these devotional rituals, women cover nāga statues with fresh flowers or sprinkle them with water. In Banaras, one site that is very popular for such activities is at the top of Chauki Ghat in the southeastern sector of the city, where several nāga statues are situated beneath a huge tree. Women also dominate the ritual spaces associated with these practices. For example, on Saturday evenings in Banaras, the nāga temple called Nāg Kuān – site of the nāgapañcamī annual festival – is filled with women who, according to first-hand reports, have been coming to the temple every Saturday night for decades, as had their mothers before them.

A. Allocco notes that women in South India are also the primary worshippers at temples and sites devoted to snake worship: “During the Tamil month of āṭi (July–August), a vibrant festival season... I witnessed crowds of women arranging abundant offerings in front of these nāga images” (Allocco, 2013, 233). Snakes as ubiquitous, powerful denizens of the earth’s surface provide constant and easy access to anyone who might wish to approach them as objects of religious devotion – a crucial feature for those disenfranchised by orthodox traditions. It comes as no surprise, moreover, that these rituals in both North and South India occur during the rainy months, for it is during this time that snakes tend to emerge from their usual abodes and join humans on porches, gardens, and the interior of houses. Thus, an important feature of nāga worship recognizes the power of these beings and attempts to ritually propitiate them when they are most active.

The earliest representation of a snake comes from the Indus Valley civilization in the form of a pottery tablet found at Harappa circa 2300–1750 BCE. On this tablet, two snakes are painted poised behind two kneeling men, each flanking a seated figure. T.V. Mahalingam (1965, 4) refers to the seated figure as a “seated deity,” but from the evidence, it could just as easily be a royal personage. Other archaeological artifacts from the Indus Valley civilization include pottery pieces painted with snakes, the carved figure of a snake, a clay amulet with a snake situated in front of a stool on which there appears to be an offering of some sort, and an amulet picturing two snakes and a bird (Heras, 1953, 364). From this evidence, what can be said about the representation of snakes during the pre-vedic period is that they seem to be associated at times with divine and/or sovereign power, and they seem to be objectified in a positive fashion.
When Alexander was assaulting some of the cities in India and capturing others, he found in many of them, besides other animals, a snake which the Indians, regarding as sacred, kept in a cave and worshipped with much devotion. (McCrindle, 1971, 45)

And as noted by R. Gombrich,

[There is] epigraphic and archaeological evidence for the worship of nāgas, supernatural snakes, in shrines and temples. Hārtel has excavated a nāga temple at Sonkh, near Mathurā, which he dates to the Kusān period. He considers that the area around Rājagrha known as Maniyār Matha has been securely identified by excavators as a nāga shrine; its oldest strata are dated to the second or first century bc...[I]t is about as old as the evidence for any Indian shrine or temple, so it seems reasonable to extrapolate by projecting the cult back a couple of centuries. (Gombrich, 1996, 72)

The excavation and dating of such places are essential because the sites traditionally associated with the worship of the supernatural snake are either tīrthas or caityas, neither of which leave much in the way of archaeological traces. Tīrthas are places where one might literally cross (verb tṛ-) a body of water and thereby gain access to the deities living under the water in their palatial homes in the Nāgaloka – a luxurious underwater world built and decorated with all the gemstones of the earth. Caityas, however, are sacred spots marked by a pool or body of water, a stone, or a tree. Supernatural snakes are also associated with anthills. In a recent ethnography, looking at contemporary nāga worship in South India, A. Allocco notes the following:

The snake goddess takes the form of an anthill (purru, sometimes referred to as a termite hill or white-ant hill), which is conceived by some to be a svayambhū (self-manifest) eruption of the goddess from the earth. These conical earthen mounds may be relatively small or grow to be as many as six or more feet in height and are often decorated with vermilion and turmeric powders, nīm fronds, and flower garlands. (Allocco, 2013, 232)

It is fortunate that we have some of these nāgi statues ensconced in temples, for, not surprisingly, these statues do not survive intact out in the natural world. Either they are beaten down by the

Fig. 1: Nāga worship in the Bhramarāmbā temple complex at Srisailam (photo by Ivo Belandi, used by courtesy).
weather over the centuries, or they are sometimes stolen. According to J. Shaw,

The earliest known serpent sculptures in the area come from Gulgaon, a settlement (and modern village) around two kilometers to the west of Sanchi. Here a nāga/nāginī couple originally stood on the embankment of an ancient irrigation reservoir. During the 1980’s the nāga was shifted to the Sanchi Archaeological Museum following the theft of the nāginī partner. (Shaw, 2004, 22)

Given the natural contours of caityas, tīrthas, and anthills, and the problems associated with statues left to nature and the avaricious inclinations of human nature, very little exists to mark the historical worship of these figures. However, we can draw forth some of the historical traces of snake worship by looking at the orthodox texts of the Hindu tradition. Whether contextualized in a negative, neutral, or positive fashion, the Brahman redactors of these texts end up encompassing an enormous amount of material concerning the development of snake worship over the centuries: information such as what ritual elements comprised these practices, what social groups may have been involved in these practices, and what brought them to choose the snake as an object of religious devotion.

Even a cursory examination of the Hindu and Buddhist textual traditions goes a long way today answering this last question. From its earliest appearance in the Rgveda, the snake consistently displays the following three features: it is portrayed as an earthly sovereign, it is endowed with supernatural powers over earthly elements, and it responds (both positively and negatively) to human desires. Moreover, these texts also give us a great deal of information as to how snake-centered rituals were conducted and possibly by whom, thus contributing to and preserving the ritual tradition associated with snake worship.

The Rgveda (c. 1200 BCE) is made up of 1,028 hymns or chants. The divine order in the Rgveda is led by Vajradhara (“He Who Wields the Thunderbolt”; i.e. Indra), who is declared to be king of the vedic gods (RV. 1.32.15). In order to be legitimated as exclusive controller of the natural world, Indra is pitted against an opponent characterized as having dominion over earthly and atmospheric elements: Vṛtra, a supernatural snake.

Vṛtra is so named because he encloses/covers up (verb vr-) things, particularly water. In several hymns, he is called apovṛt (the encloser of the waters) and nadiavṛt (the encloser of the rivers) (RV. 1.32). Vṛtra is also depicted as having “the lightning and thunder, rain, and hail” at his command (RV. 1.32.13). In addition to controlling both earthly and atmospheric waters, Vṛtra maintains the highest point of the earth as he “lay on the mountain” (RV. 1.32.2). And while this association with mountains has led some scholars to describe Vṛtra as a high-flying dragon rather than a snake, one need only turn to rygvedic hymns 4.18 and 1.32 – in which Vṛtra is described respectively as vyamsa and as anamsa, both meaning “shoulderless” – to find that only a snake would fit that description. Interestingly, this descriptor recurs across space and time, for in present-day Mississippi, another region abounding in snakes, these creatures are often referred to as “Mr. No-Shoulders.”

It is also in the Rgveda that we see the first of what will be a historical succession of signifiers given to this sovereign snake. In hymns 1.32 and 1.2, we see the name Vṛtra used interchangeably with the term ahi (snake). Ahi is not merely descriptive but rather carries a negative connotation: it comes from the verb amh- (to press together, to strangle), which forms other words such as amhati and amhas (anxiety or distress).

In the late-vedic texts, we find a great deal of information about nāgas and nāga worship such as the following: the supernatural snake’s hybrid nature, the rituals conducted by and for supernatural snakes, the first reference to a supernatural snake as a nāga, their ability to tame their non-supernatural brethren, their divine nature, their ability to help humans against enemies, and their expanded powers over the natural world. We are able to glean so much information about supernatural snakes in the late-vedic texts because the redactors of these texts appear most interested in compiling all of the various ritual means available for controlling nature and valorize the supernatural snake as one of those means.

While the rygvedic redactors constructed powerful snakes as demonic beings, the late-vedic redactors constructed powerful snakes as divine beings. They began this process by shifting the negative ahi to the neutral sarpa, and finally to the nāga. Sarpa comes from the verb srp-, “to glide,” and thus highlights the unique, reptilian nature of the snake. This shift in signifier, however, does not signal the snake’s impotence; in these texts, a constant association is made between snakes and
their inherent powers, especially the power to render a poisonous bite. In the Satapathabrahmana, for instance, poison is declared to be the primary factor in elevating the snake to the status of a divine being (ŚBr. 10.5.2.20). Beyond their poisonous prowess, the late-vedic snakes are depicted as capable of amazing feats such as stopping the world from spinning on its axis and protecting the four corners of the earth. And the sarpanāma (snake-naming) mantra proclaim the fact that “these worlds are ruled by snakes” (ŚBr. 7.4.1.25–30).

In hymn 12.3 of the Atharvaveda, the redactors again enhanced the snake’s supernatural powers over the entire earth as they portrayed snakes as guardians of the four quarters: the eastern quarter has Asita as protector; the southern quarter has Tiraścirāji as protector; the western quarter has Pṛdāku; and the northern quarter has Svaja. Each of these names describes their reptilian characteristics: asita (black), tiraścirāji (striped across), pṛdāku (adder), and svaja (viper). This hymn thus highlights the fact that the snake’s power, its capacity to act as a world ruler and protector, is grounded in its reptilian being. While functioning as a celestial guardian, each of these creatures is characterized first and foremost as a snake.

Having made a strong association between snakes and their inherent powers, and having enhanced the snakes’ supernatural powers, the redactors made a further assertion: because they are powerful, snakes are worthy of deification. In another hymn from the Atharvaveda, it is stated that snakes should be regarded as gods because of their mordacious powers.

May the snake not kill us along with our children and our people. If its jaws are closed, let them not open, if they are opened, let them not close. Honor to the god people. Honor to Asita, honor to Tiraścirāji, honor to Svaja, [and] honor to Babhru [i.e. the son of Arjuna and the nāgī princess Citrāṅgadā], honor to the god people. I seal up your teeth, your jaws, your tongue, and your mouth. (AV. 6.56; trans. by author)

It is no wonder that the worship of supernatural snakes is replete with ambivalence. While they are regarded as divine and capable of providing riches and fertility to their worshippers, they are also efficient killing machines. This duality forms the foundation on which these snakes are characterized as hybrid beings, for “these creatures . . . are represented as having the capacity to bless as well as curse” (Allocco, 2013, 232). Moreover, while

Fig. 2: Nāgakals (snake stones) in the Bhramarāmbā temple complex at Srisailam (photo by Ivo Belandi, used by courtesy).
they are perceived by worshippers as controlling water and providing “sufficient rain for healthy crops, they also had the power to cause destructive storms” (Shaw, 2004, 17–18).

Regardless of the constant threat posed by the snake, killing a snake is considered to be a horrific action and one that will have terrible karmic consequences in not only this life but also future lives. “A number of authors note that killing a snake is regarded as a sin and detail the lengths that individuals may go to in order to avoid injuring a snake as nāgas are believed to deliver formidable curses with far-reaching implications” (Allocco, 2013, 231).

The Satapathabrāhmaṇa first uses the word that comes to signify the supernatural snake: nāga. “The wise Śvetaketu Āruneya said, ‘To the one who will know the splendor of the preliminary offerings, people in future days will come in droves as if desiring to see a great Nāga’” (ŚBr. 11.2.7.12). While the term nāga is also sometimes used in these texts to signify an elephant, the Satapathabrāhmaṇa’s commentary explicitly states that the nāga in question is a mahāsarpa (great snake; ŚBr. 11.2.7.12). What is striking about the term nāga as it is first employed in the above passage is that, unlike ahi or sarpa, it signifies a snake that is differentiated explicitly from the average reptile: a snake that is exceptional due to its great size, its great powers, or perhaps both. This term thus captures the dual nature of an exceptional being.

It is also in the Satapathabrāhmaṇa that we first hear of the sarpavidyā (the science of snakes). This science is taught to the vids (knowers) of sarpa (snakes) in order for them to understand and control snakes. C. Minkowski makes an interesting point when he speculates that orthodox commentators [link] the sarpavidyā with the vast network of Indian snake lore, the science of how to avoid harm from snakes, which escapes the limits of even Sanskrit literature” (Minkowski, 1991, 394). Given the on-the-ground reality of poisonous snakes in India, it is to be expected that others, in addition to the redactors (possibly farmers tending their fields or women tending their homes), would have been interested in the issue of controlling snakes. Another snake-centered ritual deserves mention at this juncture: the sarpasattra – the term sarpasattra literally means “snake sacrifice,” and in the late-vedic version of this ritual, this term denotes a sacrifice performed by snakes functioning in the role of Brahmans. The late-vedic version of the sarpasattra also incorporates a cosmogonic myth explaining how snakes became both powerful biters and wonderfully heroic. In performing this ritual, the Bauḍhāyanagrhyaśītra promises benefits such as sons, cattle, and snakebite protection. It also states that you need not be a Brahman to perform this ritual, nor must one perform the entire ritual to gain protection against poisonous snakes. One need only recite the names of Arbuda, and the other Brahman-snake officiates, saying, “Let there be homage paid to the snakes,” to be protected from dangerous snakes (BauGS. 3.10). The short version of this ritual thus allows the average householder to benefit from performing this ritual act.

Many of the supernatural snakes listed in the late Vedas have names that link them to specific regional areas. For example, Dhtarāṣṭra Airavata’s name ties him to the Irāvatī River region located in the Punjab. And in relation to Takaśaka Vaiśāleya, his name ties him to the town of Vaiśāli. The name Vaiśāleya also turns up in the Karnaparvan of the Mahābhārata to signify a tribe of Nāga people – those who took the divine snake as a totem or who believed themselves to be descendants of divine snakes (MBh. 8.63.37). While various royal principalities took the nāga as a symbol of their power, it is important to note that the people of Nagaland have no association with the supernatural snake. As noted by K.R. Dikshit quoting Lieutenant Colonel R.G. Woodthorpe, “The word ‘Naga’ is quite foreign to and unrecognized by the Naga [people] themselves” (Dikshit & Dikshit, 2013, 310). K.R. Dikshit goes on to say, “The situation has changed, and though the term ‘Naga’ may have been used by the plains’ people, its use is firmly established today in the society, government and even internationally” (Dikshit & Dikshit, 2013, 310). Regardless of its use as a socially unifying name, it remains distinct from any association with the supernatural nāga discussed here.

As one views the rituals with which these snakes are associated, one apprehends why the snake regents were and continue to be valued by local inhabitants: for in addition to guarding the populace from dangerous snakes, they also purify the earth. In fact, the late Vedas explicitly associate the snake Arbuda Kādraveya with the earth – Kādraveya being a matronymic for Kadrū, that is, “the earth personified” according to the Brāhmaṇas. This chthonic connection continues...
Nāgas as snakes are propitiated to ensure the protection of those things built on the earth. As such, there is a specific ritual listed in the Sāmavidhānabrāhmaṇa in which the snake Vāsuki is addressed through the ceremony of the vāstupraśamana – a ceremony specifically designed to purify the earth and make it fit for human habitation (SāViBr. 3.3.7). In the Gobhilagṛhyasūtra, Vāsuki is asked to ensure the propitious setting of a foundation stone for a new house (GobhGS. 4.71.41). In the Kauśikasūtra, both Taṣaka Vaiśaleya and Vāsuki are invoked as protectors of the house, as the supernatural snake stands on the limen between the civilized world and the natural world (KauS. 74.8).

The Mahābhārata, one of two great epics, was redacted over several centuries and is usually dated somewhere around 300 BCE–300 CE. While the late-vedic redactors positioned the supernatural snake as a powerful deity worthy of both fear and reverence, the first book of the Mahābhārata, the Ādiparvan, positions supernatural snakes as troublesome deceivers bent on destruction. Thus, the redactors of the Ādiparvan strip the snakes of the very powers for which they are revered in the late Vedas: they lose their regional place names; they lose their status as independent demigods as they are made dependent on established gods such as Indra; their powers over the natural elements are diminished; they are provided with an overpowering natural enemy in the form of the great Garuḍa bird; and they are presented as a threatening multitudinous force that deserves to die. In fact, the Ādiparvan both begins and ends with the attempted destruction of all snakes in a blazing fire. One cannot help but wonder why supernatural snakes are depicted in such a negative fashion in this text. Perhaps, snake worship had become popularized to the extent that it was perceived as a threat by the orthodox redactors of the Ādiparvan. Whatever the reason, the redactors emphasize the need to destroy these creatures not only by giving them a powerful, voracious enemy in the form of Garuḍa but also by attempting to annihilate the snakes first in a snake sacrifice, a sarpasattra, and second through the destruction of their home in the Khāṇḍava Forest.

The Ādiparvan introduces the mighty Garuḍa in a myth depicting the origin of the nāgas. In this myth, Kadrū, the earth, is depicted as the mother of all nāgas, while her sister, Vineṭa, is presented as the mother of Garuḍa. According to this myth, Kadrū gives birth to a “Thousand nāgas...all equal

Fig. 3: Nāgakal in the Bhramarāmbā temple complex at Srisailam (photo by Ivo Belandi, used by courtesy).
in brilliant energy,” while “just at the appropriate time, Garuḍa is born – he who destroys snakes” (*MBh*. 1.14.5–23; trans. by author). As featured in the epic, Garuḍa attends to his task with zeal, for in addition to his vigorous appetite for snakes, in one episode, he attempts to burn the nāgas by flying them into the sun’s rays. Garuḍa’s role is not without precedents, for the enmity between snakes and birds is mentioned as far back as the *Rgveda* (2.38). Moreover, both the *Athravaveda* (4.6.3) and the *Samkhya-anaghyasūtra* (1.22.15) mention a particular Garumat (“One Who Has Wings”) who is the happy imbirer of poison, the snakes’ singular weapon.

The destruction of the snakes by fire, however, is a particularly powerful motif in this text as noted by W. Doniger:

> It begins with King Janamejaya’s attempt to murder all the snakes in the world in revenge for his father’s death by snake bite…To the ancient Indians, a snake sacrifice must have been an abomination, for though Hindus have worshiped snakes from time immemorial, they do so by making small offerings of milk to them, not by killing them. (Doniger, 2009, 266)

And it is particularly ironic that in the late-vedic version of the *sarpasattra*, the sacrifice is depicted as one performed by snakes, whereas in the *Ādiparvan*, it is depicted as a sacrifice of snakes. The *Ādiparvan* describes this event in lurid detail as Brahman officiants, “having put on black robes and with eyes red from the smoke,” offer the snakes to the mouth of Agni:

> Then they offered all of the snakes into the mouth of the fire, causing terror to roll in the minds of all those snakes. The snakes fell into the blazing fire, coiling around themselves, weeping, and crying out to each other. Falling heavily into the lustrous fire they died, trembling and hissing, writhing about with their heads and their tails. White, black, blue, old, and young screeching horrible screams, they fell into the radiant flames. Hundreds of thousands and millions and tens of millions of snakes were destroyed completely against their will. (*MBh*. 1.47.20–24; trans. by author)

At the end of the *Ādiparvan*, snakes again are targeted for destruction as Agni moves to burn down their home in the Khāṇḍava Forest. However, Agni is incapable of achieving this task on his own because “Indra’s friend lives there with his people, the Snake Takṣaka, and for his sake, the Thunderbolt-Wielder (Indra) protects it from burning” (van Buitenen, 1973, 415). Having secured the help of Arjuna and Krṣṇa, Agni almost succeeds in killing all of the snakes except for Takṣaka, who has removed himself to the field of the Kuru.

While much of the *Ādiparvan* focuses on the destruction of snakes, it also gives us a great deal of information about snakes:

1. the term nāga has evolved over the centuries to become the dominant modifier associated with the supernatural snake;

2. we have our first appearance of the Nāgaloka, a beautiful, bejeweled, underwater kingdom that is described as the home of the nāgas;

3. the nāgas of the *Mahābhārata* are able to shift their shape into any form they desire such as a tiny worm or an anatomically correct human being;

4. the *Mahābhārata* introduces its audience to nāgis, the feminine term for nāga, and these nāgīs appear as beautiful, sensual, mermaid-like beings who are always adorned with a brilliant jewel in the middle of their foreheads;

5. snakes such as Takṣaka Vaiśāleya and Daṇḍarśa Airāvata are stripped of their matronymics/patronymics, and as such, they are stripped of their familial connection to a regional locale; and lastly

6. we are introduced to a new snake that comes to be extremely important in both popular practice and Hindu textual sources: Śeṣa, whose alternative name is Ananta (“Endless”) – the nāga whose coils are “without end.”

On introduction, Śeṣa is positioned at a tīrtha, a place where nāgas are ritually invoked to assist the worshipper in gaining the powers of fertility or the riches of the earth. The practice of worshiping nāgas and other deities at tīrthas is not a foreign element in the *Mahābhārata*, for the *Tirathayātrāparvan* goes into great detail on this subject. In this *parvan*, which extends for more than 70 sections, we learn of not only all the different tīrthas of the east, south, west, and north but also the benefits that accrue from bathing at these sites, such as the capacity to hear far distant sounds, the knowledge of all the worlds, freedom from snakebites, and the capacity to cross over to the nāgalokā at the tīrthas called Nāgobheda and Sarpadarvī. In this *parvan*, moreover, the redactors compare tīrtha worship to sacrificial rituals and laud the former as a type of religiosity that
might be more generally accessible to a broader range of people. "One might wish to sacrifice with the ‘Praise of Agni’ [i.e. agnīṣṭoma] ritual or with other rites that require extensive fees, yet not obtain the reward [that accrues] from visiting the tīrthas" (MBh. 3.80.40; trans. by author).

As the Mahābhārata features Śēsa as a powerful figure susceptible to granting human wishes, it is not surprising that a recent ethnography reports that Śēsa has taken on Vāsuki’s late-vedic role as the nāga charged with helping human beings situate the foundation stone for a house.

If one digs over Śēnāg’s head, there will be harm to one’s parents; and if one digs over the back there will be fear, disease, and pain; and if one digs over the tail there will be harm to the three gotras. But whoever digs over an empty space will obtain the benefits of wife, sons, and wealth (Goodwin-Raheja, 1988, 55).

As indicated in the above quote, G. Goodwin-Raheja notes the care that must be taken in digging out a foundation; this is due to the fact that, in India, situating a house is linked both to astrology and to astronomy – fields that are not nearly as disconnected in India as they are in the West. The linkage occurs as Śēnāg’s body moves in conjunction with the earth’s rotation around the sun. ‘During each three-month period, Śēnāg moves ninety degrees clockwise, and the ‘empty space,’ where the digging should always be done, changes accordingly’ (Goodwin-Raheja, 1988, 80). A. Allocco also notes that there is a linkage between harming a snake and astrology in her ethnographic research in South India.

The popular belief that disturbing, harming, or killing a snake, whether knowingly or inadvertently, in this life or in a previous birth, produces a condition called nāga dōṣam (snake blemish). This astrological flaw, which manifests in inauspicious planetary configurations in an individual’s horoscope (jātakam), is primarily faulted for delayed marriage and infertility but may also be blamed for an array of additional negative effects. (Allocco, 2013, 239)

The Ādīparvan also brings the beautiful, sensual nāgī princesses into focus and describes the practice of intermarriage between nāgas and humans. While this interspecies marriage in the Ādīparvan features none other than Vāsuki’s sister and a rather worn-out old Brahman, another example from the Mahābhārata is the marriage of Arjuna and the nāgī princess Ulūpī. Kālidāsa’s Raghuvamśa also includes a nāgī-human intermarriage: the union of Kuśa and the nāgī princess Kumudvati. And the poet Guṇāḍhya, purported author of the Brhatkathā, is said himself to be the progeny of a mortal mother and a nāga. All descriptions of nāgis portray them as having the following characteristics: they are of royal heritage; they are fabulously beautiful and sexually irresistible; they have healthy sexual appetites and are often driven to find a mortal man in order to satisfy these cravings; and they are forever fertile, often giving birth to a host of sons.

The matrimonial union between a mortal and a nāgī crosses the line from the mythological to the historical, as a large number of royal dynasties claim that there is a nāgī ancestress somewhere in their lineage. Having a nāgī in one’s genealogical history is seen as exceptionally desirable; it conveys not only a sense of sovereignty but also a promise of perpetual progeny. Thus, as chronicled by J.P. Vogel, the kings of the Swat Valley (Udyāna), Kashmir, Bhārdarva, Chhotanagpur, and Manipur; of Gonds and Bastar; Cholas; Pallavas; and also kings from as far afield as Cambodia and China all claim that there is a nāgī princess somewhere in their family tree (Vogel, 1926, 35–37). In fact, as noted by J. Shaw, evidence of various clan affiliations with nāgas can be found on coins:

[Large hoards of tiny copper nāga coins have been retrieved from the ancient [2nd-cent. CE Vidisha] city mounds. Analyses of these coins and other numismatic, epigraphical, and textual evidence, have led to the suggestion that the [Nāga] dynasty originated during the second half of the second century CE in Vidisha, from where it moved north to Mathura, Pawaya, and Kantipura, the three major nāga centers mentioned in the Viṣṇu Purāṇa... I also suggest that the nāga sculptures in the area doubled as symbols of the nāga clan and, in particular, their patronage of major irrigation projects in the area. (Shaw, 2004, 10–11)

To bring us back to the present day, one can still visit nāga temples or sites encompassing nāga statues in India and beyond. In her ethnography of South India, A. Allocco notes the following:

The snake goddess takes multiple manifestations and is accessible to devotees in a range of physical forms. She is perhaps most represented anthropomorphically, typically as a black stone
head with a crown of snake hoods arranged around her face. When she is installed in the inner sancta of temples in this form she may be accompanied by a full-body image as well, either carved from the same black stone or cast in a variety of metals. (Allocco, 2013, 235)

Or if one visits the tremendous compound of Angkor Wat in → Cambodia, one will experience the following:

Cambodian builders placed serpent balustrades along the bridges that crossed the surrounding moats, for as water symbols, serpents linked heaven and earth. . . . Heaven’s blessings then flowed outward from the temple, the centre of the universe or world of the gods, through the arched gate and across the serpent-railed bridge, to the benefit of humankind. (Fisher, 1993, 170)

Whether one might visualize “the rainbow as a large, sometimes two-headed snake” (Wessing, 2006, 213) or take darśan at a Vaisnava temple wherein one experiences Śeṣṭhā holding fast to the sleeping Viṣṇu, nāgas excite our attention in a myriad of ways. Thus, whatever statue, ritual, image, or reptile stirs one’s senses, it is clear that humans have a long, creative relationship with nāgas: a reciprocal relationship within which humans recognize and propitiate the nāga’s tremendous power “for the benefit of humankind” (Fisher, 1993, 170).

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