It is our good fortune that pre-eighth-century Hindu, likely Buddhist, as well as Jain images of Sarasvatī survive. In an environment where, irrespective of religious or philosophical affiliation, knowledge was highly valued, our goddess, as an embodiment of it, had widespread, universal appeal. In terms of textual background, as we have seen, there is a great deal of Vedic, epic, and Puranic literature on the goddess, including iconographic descriptions in the Purāṇas. On the Buddhist end, the Sarasvatī chapter of the Sutra of Golden Light, despite its comparative shortness, provides us with a wealth of information on the Buddhist Sarasvatī, likewise including an iconographic description. As we shall see, however, the sutra’s iconography does not apply to the one probably Buddhist image from Sārnāth (fig.9) treated below. As far as I am aware, furthermore, there are no extant Indian examples of the type of eight-armed, weapon-bearing representation described in the sutra that might be identified as ‘Sarasvatī,’ although it is not impossible that such images were in fact made. I will take up this particular iconographic type in the following chapter.

The principal Jain sources on Sarasvatī, on the other hand, date from a later period, and hence cannot provide us with a background for the earliest Jain images of the goddess. As the composition of these Jain sources extends beyond the time frame of this study (pre-eighth century), they will not be taken up here. The Jain conceptualization of Sarasvatī on the basis of the iconography of the early representations, however, will be briefly discussed.

I will focus here, then, on surviving pre-eighth century Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain Sarasvatī images. In view of the fact that a number of the representations of this time period have been erroneously labelled as Sarasvatī, identification is crucial. Hence I will discuss also these inac-

1 For a textual discussion of the Jain Sarasvatī, see U. P. Shah 1941. I would like to thank Professor Paul Dundas of the University of Edinburgh and Nagasaki Hōjun 長崎 法潤, Professor Emeritus of Ōtani University 大谷大学 in Kyoto, for their assistance in matters of dating Jain sources.
An image which has been called an early prototype of Sarasvatī, and even Sarasvatī herself, appears in the second-century B.C.E. Buddhist site of Bhārhut in eastern Madhya Pradesh. The figure is carved on the southeastern pillar of the earliest surviving stupa railing in India, now housed in the Indian Museum in Kolkata (Calcutta). She stands atop a full-blown lotus growing from a lake, with her left hip thrust out and her right knee bent. As in the case of some of the other Bhārhut images of Yāksas and Yāksīs, only the toes of her right foot, now largely missing, appear to have touched the ground. The deity, endowed with a youthful face, carries a seven-stringed harp in her two hands. She wears a sash around her waist, a covering over her head, and ornaments adorn her body. The image is, unfortunately, quite damaged, and there is no descriptive label as is usually found on Bhārhut reliefs. It is, therefore, impossible to identify the figure with certainty.

The belief that this may be Sarasvatī or an early prototype of the goddess stems exclusively from the presence of the stringed instrument, which is indeed a vīnā in its earliest form. In her study of musical instruments in ancient India, Claudie Marcel-Dubois discusses the different types of harps, zithers, and lutes, all of which may be referred to as vīnā. As Ananda Coomaraswamy and Marcel-Dubois explain, the word vīnā was in all probability initially applied to the bow-shaped harp (‘harpe

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4 E.g., Barua 1934–37; Harle 1987, fig.12.