This paper analyses a set of life-size Snakes Goddesses (Nāginīs) dating to the first century A.D. They were probably made in Mathurā and shipped, for worship, to Nandan, U.P. These Nāginīs open a new subject category in early Indian art because they are: 1) a life-size 2) group of 3) goddesses not originating from the sphere of Hinduism, Buddhism or Jainism, and 4) dating to the 1st century A.D. These four characteristics, taken together, have so far not been associated with other early imagery. As such, there is no precedent on which to base the analysis. However, the likelihood that such a set could occur can be anticipated. For example, the slightly later Mathurā life-size Nāginī in the Cleveland Museum of Art (No. 68.104), which may be coupled with a Nāgarāja in The Brooklyn Museum of Art (No. 67.202), raises the possibility that, as elsewhere, there could have been earlier attempts in Mathurā.¹ Also, as will be shown below, archaeological, iconographic and textual indicators suggest the worship of Nāginīs within the Nāga Cult so prevalent in antiquity. Therefore, even though the Nāginī set described in this paper is presently anomalous, it is not a cultural impossibility for its time. However, before providing evidence in support of that contention, the onus of any anomaly is proof of authenticity; it is with this issue that we should start.

¹ For illustrations of both sculptures, see S.J. Czuma and R. Morris, Kushan Sculptures: Images from Early India, (Cleveland, 1985); Plates 25 & 26. The authors propose that the two sculptures form a Nāga couple, which may be the case. See Endnote 42, for an earlier Nāga couple.
This section opens with a detailed description of the Nāginīs’ physical properties, including their place of discovery and point of dispersal, all of which relate to the question of authenticity, to be addressed in the second part of this section.

Description

Today the Nāginīs stand apart, one in New Delhi (Fig. 13.1), one in Tokyo (Fig. 13.2), and one in Kansas City (Fig. 13.3). But in Pre-Kuśāṇa times, they should have formed a unit at Nandan, circa 100–110 kilometers from Mathurā, where I believe they were made.

Discovery of the New Delhi Nāginī, now in the National Museum, New Delhi was announced in “A note on A Red Sandstone Nāginī from Nadan, District Agra (Uttar Pradesh).” The figure, sculpted in the round, came into the Museum in two fragments the combined height of which the Museum recorded as 5’2” (1 m. 58 cm). The split occurs at the Nāginī’s waist. The part from the waist up measures 71 cms.; the part below the waist measures 99 cms. The figure faces straight forward with a slight bend in the right leg. The right arm is missing and the left, also subject to the split (see Figs. 13.1 & 13.4), is now repaired and held akimbo. Although the New Delhi Nāginī suffered considerable damage, her salient identifying feature remains. The snakehood can clearly be seen from the back where the thinly incised lines indicate that the serpent hood is comprised of nine or more heads (Fig. 13.5). The center part of this hood is treated like tresses that are ornamented with a double-strand gar-

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2 N.R. Banerjee wrote the note in National Museum Bulletin Nos. 4, 5 and 6 (1983), 71; Fig. 64. See also Late Dr. Shashi Prabha Asthana, MathurāKalā (A Catalogue of Mathura Sculptures in the National Museum), National Museum, (New Delhi, 1999), 55–56. An earlier, less informative mention of the sculpture is by B.N. Sharma, “A Nāginī Image from Nadan,” Oriental Art, N.S. XXV (1979), 248–250. My thanks to Dr. R.D. Choudhury, Director, National Museum, for providing facilities to study the National Museum Nāginī.

3 This height is independently verified by John Twilley, Art Conservation Scientist, who accompanied me in 2000 to the National Museum to prepare for the exhibition of the Nāginī that year in Kansas City. Twilley noted: 4’10” is the surviving height from top of the head to top of the deteriorating wood base below; estimated length of statue inside base = 2 1/2”–3 1/2”. Estimated total surviving height is 5’1 1/2” +/- 1”. 

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