The ancient city of Mathurā, built on the right bank of the Jamna (Yamunā) river between Delhi and Agra, and the surrounding area known as Mathurā-manḍal, Braj-manḍal, Braj-bhūmi or simply Braj, an area which roughly corresponds to the western part of the Mathurā District of Uttar Pradesh, are renowned from ancient times, both in Indian literatures and in local traditions, for their association with the divinized hero of the pastoral tribes of northern India, Kṛṣṇa-Gopāl, the Cowherd god, considered as an avatāra of god Viṣṇu-Hari, or even as the supreme Deity, Bhagaṅgī ‘the Adorable One’. To-day Mathurā stands out, with Jagannāth Puri in Orissa and Dwārkā in Kathiawar, as one of the most famous centres of Krishnaite devotion.¹

Mathurā is considered as the birth place of Kṛṣṇa. Excavations carried out in the area have brought to light ancient icons witnessing to the importance of the Nāga and Yakṣa cult at an early period in Indian history, during the first centuries B.C. and A.D.² Buddhist and Jain antiquities belonging to that period are particularly numerous there and testify to the importance of Mathurā as a Buddhist and Jain centre up to the Gupta period, when some ‘Brahmanical’ icons appear. It is to this period that the first known images of Kṛṣṇa-Gopāl belong. The hero is then represented in the pose known as govardhana-dharana, ‘the holding of the Govardhan hill’ or Kāliya-damana, ‘the taming of the Kāliya [Nāga]’; also as receiving milk or curds from Gopīs.³ However, neither inscriptional nor literary evidence suggests the prevalence of a Vaiṣṇava cult in the area during the Gupta period. There is besides no literary evidence that Mathurā became a holy city of

¹ F. S. Growse in Mathurā, a District Memoir (1874) p. 47, writes that “Mathurā is the birth-place and abiding home of Vaiṣṇava Hinduism”. This assertion however, needs to be qualified in view of the material analysed in the present paper.

² More recent excavations, conducted by a German team led by Dr H. Haertel in 1967–1974 have brought to light important Nāga shrines and sculptures belonging to the era of Kanishka I (end of the 1st century A.D.) in the Sonkh area, 7 miles SSE of Govardhan. Cf. ‘A Kusāna Nāga Temple at Sonkh’ by H. Haertel, in Bulletin of Museums and Archaeology in U.P., June–December 1973 (No. 11–12) n.d., Lucknow 1974 (= Mathurā Museum Centenary Number); cf. also the article ‘Sonkh Excavations’ in German News, publ. by the Embassy of the FRG in New-Delhi, January 15, 1974 pp. 8–9, 14 (with illustrations).

³ A short bibliography concerning the ancient Krishnaite iconography will be found in a previous paper by the author; Ch. Vaudeville, ‘The Cowherd-God in Ancient India’, published in English in Pastoralists and Nomads in South Asia, Südasien Institut, University of Heidelberg, 1974.
Hinduism at a very early period, as its name does not appear in the ancient lists of mahātirthas.\(^4\)

Nothing is known of Mathurā’s history between the seventh and the eleventh century, which marks the beginning of the Muslim onslaught on the Āryāvarta. Recent studies tend to show that Śaivism was the dominant cult there for many centuries as in other regions of northern India.

In medieval and even in modern times, Mathurā is often identified with Madhupurī, a city which is supposed to have been founded by Śatrughna, Rāma’s younger brother, after he had defeated and killed the Asura Madhu. Growse convincingly argues that Mathurā, as it stands from Buddhist times, is a different city from Madhupurī, one of the tīrthas of Braj. The ancient name Madhupurī survives in the present Maholī in Madhuban, situated some five miles south-west of Mathurā and the river Jamna.

Since the beginning of the 16th century at least, if not earlier, Mathurā stands out as a great centre of Krishnaite pilgrimage, endowed with innumerable temples and religious establishments belonging to all the living Vaiṣṇava sects. From the point of view of medieval and modern Hinduism, however, it is not so much the city of Mathurā as the whole area, the Braj-bhūmi itself, that stands out as the holy land of Krishnaism. The sacred land of Braj is constantly crowded with pilgrims, especially during the rains, as its holiness is said to be greatly enhanced during the Caturmāsya, the four months of the rainy season, when all the tīrthas are said to come and reside in Braj. It is also during the rains, especially during the month of Bhādon (Skt. Bhadra), that the parikramā or circumambulation of the whole Braj-mandala takes place. This famous parikramā is commonly called Ban-yātṛ (vana-yātṛ), since the various tīrthas of Braj are mostly the vanas (‘woods’ or ‘groves’) hallowed by particular ‘sports’ (līlā) of Lord Kṛṣṇa.

The great authority for the Braj-parikramā or Ban-yātṛ is considered to be the Mathurāmāhātmyam, a religious chronicle of Mathurā found in the Vārāha Purāṇa.\(^5\) The text says that the Mathurā-mañḍala is 20 yojanas in extent. It briefly describes

\(^4\) Mathurā is not quoted either among the eight great cities of Jambudvīpa in the Pāli Canon, but there is evidence of its importance as a Jain and Buddhist centre at an early date. Ptolemy, in the 2nd century A.D., mentions ‘Modura, the city of the gods’ – but the gods could have been Jain or Buddhist deities as well as Brahmanical ones (or Nāga deities, as suggested by the recent archaeological finds, see n. 2). H. Goetz in JUPS. 5 (1932), p. 29, remarks that the site of Mathurā, as the site of Dwārkā, does not seem to have been the object of a particular veneration until Caitanya’s time. The whole of Puranic literature makes Mathurā the capital of the Śūrasenas. The city is given as the second of the capitals of the kings of the Lunar race: these capitals were in succession Prayāga, Mathurā, Kuśasthāli and Dwārkā.

\(^5\) Growse (op. cit. pp. 52 & 92) considers the Mathurā-māhātmyam as an interpolated section of the Vārāha Purāṇa; according to H. H. Wilson in the Preface to his English translation of the Viṣṇu Purāṇa (3rd ed., Calcutta, 1961, p. xiiii), the present work known under that name is not the Vārāha Purāṇa described in the Matsya Purāṇa.