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THE ROLE OF CANḍA IN THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE PAṢUPATA CULT AND THE IMAGE ON THE MATHURĀ PILLAR DATED GUPTA YEAR 61*

The image on the Mathurā pillar bearing an inscription with the Gupta year 61 (equivalent to 380/381 AD) was identified early in 1931 by D.R. Bhandarkar as a standing figure of Lakulīśa.¹ Most scholars still accept this identification, though in recent decades some have raised suspicions about it and are themselves inclined to uncertainty.² The image on the pillar does not bear the standard attributes of Lakulīśa, namely a sitting pose and ithyphallic appearance. Likewise, the inscription engraved on the pillar makes no mention of Lakulīśa, nor does it even refer to the Pāṣupatas directly. There is no evidence that the notion of Lakulīśa as an incarnation of Śiva existed at that time, even though the name Lakulīśa or a variant of that name is attested in early Sāiva scriptures. And, there is another striking point to be noted: namely, that a fairly regular iconography of Lakulīśa begins to emerge only by about the sixth century.³

Bhandarkar’s ground for identifying the image as Lakulīśa was that the inscription on the pillar records a donation by one Uditācārya, tenth in line from Bhagavat Kuśika, who in turn is purportedly a direct disciple of Lakulīśa.⁴ R.C. Agrawal (1969: 355) has rejected Bhandarkar’s

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¹ Bhandarkar 1931: 1. Bhandarkar reproduces a rubbing of the inscription but not a picture of the image. I reproduce here a picture of the image with the kind permission of the Mathurā State Museum. I am grateful to Prof. Madhav Sharan Upadhyaya (Mahendra Sanskrit University) for approaching the museum authority on my behalf and getting this permission.

² Shah 1984: 97. Dyczkowski 1989: 20,144. Lorenzen (1991: 180) also appears unsure but in the end terms the image a “Lakulīśa-like standing figure” and finds it reasonable to assume the Mathurā pillar record to be Lakulīśa-Pāṣupata in origin. See also below, footnote 5.

³ Shah 1984: 97.

⁴ Bhandarkar (1931: 5–6) has identified this Bhagavat Kuśika with Kuśika, one of the direct disciples of Lakulīśa, but Lorenzen (1991: 180–181), finding the identification problematic, raises the possibility of two Kuśika-s. Pathak (1960: 9) identifies him with Kuśika II mentioned in the list of 18 avatāras transmitted in Jain sources. See Bisschop 2006: 45f.,49f.
identification of the figure and attempted to prove that it is not Lakulīśa but “Śiva as Bhairava.” T.S. Maxwell (1988: 7) in turn has openly criticized Agrawal’s view, stating that “one of the grounds for this change of mind – which is not acknowledged – is that no icons of Lakulīśa are found in Kusāna sculpture with a flabby belly, which is a prominent feature of the Mathurā pillar figure. This is not only an unacknowledged reversal of a previously advanced identification, but also an inaccurate description.”

Using the information existing in the inscription itself can solve the problem of the identification of the image on the pillar. The clue is found in the concluding line of the inscription, which is nothing but a verse composed in the āryā metre in praise of the deity sculpted below on the pillar. Surprisingly, Bhandarkar and Agrawal have not written a single word on the relation of this line to the rest of the inscription or to the figure.5 However, some letters in this line, as in other lines, are partly effaced. Bhandarkar has restored these effaced letters tentatively within brackets, and other scholars have accepted his reading. First of all, then, it is necessary to examine Bhandarkar’s reading of this line, which runs thus:

\[ jayatichabhagavān = [dandaḥ] rudra-dandaḥ = gra-[na]yako nitya[m.] \]

Here, the Lord (bhagavat), the foremost leader and the holder of the terrifying staff (rudradanda), is praised, but unfortunately the name of the Lord is effaced. Bhandarkar erroneously deciphered this word of two letters to be danda. He reads this name along with the initial adjective as bhagavān dandaḥ, and immediately observing that this reading is wrong, he suggests what he takes to be a grammatically and metrically correct reading in a footnote: bhagavān dandaḥ sa.7 But this reading cannot be accepted even on paleographic grounds. The ligature following bhagavā is different than the ligature ndah immediately following or with another ligature ndo in rudradanda in the same line. Bhandarkar fell prey to the similarity between the ligatures ňca and nda in the Gupta

5 Lorenzen (1991: 180) has unquestionably understood the importance of the concluding line, but his conclusion is wrong. He writes: “[t]he only reliable means of identifying Uditācārya’s sectarian allegiance are the inscription’s concluding line of praise to Lord Daṇḍa, who bears the staff of Rudra, and the Lakulīśa-like standing figure engraved on the pillar. These render it reasonable to assume that this is a Lakulīśa-Păśupata record, but there is still a problem about the identification of Bhagavat Kuśika.”
6 Bhandarkar 1931: 9. Note that ca is transliterated as cha.
7 Bhandarkar 1931: 9, footnote 5.