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Revanta, an Indian Cavalier God

Revanta, son of the sun god Sūrya, is a rather late entrant into the Purāṇic pantheon of Gupta India. His appearance suggests a prior synthesis of both external and factors which give the Indian "cavalier god" a distinctly international flavor, associating him with a family of similar deities whose cults were scattered across Asia from the Black Sea to the Tarim Basin.

Varāhamihira, in the early 6th century, is the first to mention him, saying that he should be shown on horseback engaged in the sport of hunting with attendants¹. As to why the sun god's son should be depicted thus, we are given no explanation. In a rather elaborate myth we are told essentially that Sūrya and his mate conceived Revanta while they both had taken the form of horses in the fabulous northern country of Uttarakuru². Revanta was born holding a sword and bow, clad in armor, riding a horse, and carrying a quiver of arrows³. According to the *Kālikā*

¹ *Brhatsaṃhitā*, chs. 58, 56. For the date and details on this work, see A.M. Shastri, *India as seen in the Brhatsaṃhitā of Varāhamihira*, New Delhi, 1969, pp. 1-38.

² *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, III, 2, 2-7 (see the *Vishṇu Purāṇa*, trans. H.H. Wilson, London, pp. 214-215). Sūrya's wife is Saṅjñā, daughter of Viśvakarmā. Originally, she had three offspring by Sūrya: Manu Vaivasvata, Yama and Yamī. Sūrya's heat caused her to leave him, putting Chhāyā in her place, by whom he had three minor offspring. Finally realizing that his wife had disappeared, Sūrya searched for her and located her in the wilderness disguised as a mare. He went to her in the form of a horse and from their union as a pair of horses were produced the Aśvins (also horsemen) and Revanta in full regalia. See also the *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa*, III, 67, 9; *Sāmba Upa-Purāṇa*, 29, 13.

³ *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*, 105, 6-12.

Purāṇa, he should ride a white charger, wear armor, carry a sword and whip, and have his hair tied with a "cloth" (probably a band, diadem, or fillet) ⁴. In other words, he is a perfect portrait of an Indo-Scythian prince, strongly reminiscent of the equestrian coin images of Śaka kings. Interestingly enough, most Purāṇic accounts make him a cavalier, armed and armored, but say nothing about the fact that he should be hunting ⁵. Thus, it would seem that we have two traditions at work here — one describing Revanta as a mounted princely hunter actively pursuing his prey, and another describing him as a cavalier on a white horse. As to his functions, we are informed that he is king of the Guhyakas, protects people from the terrors of lonely places, from natural disasters, and from robbers or enemies ⁶. He is essentially a "lord protector", bestowing on his devotees health, wealth, happiness, fame, and kingship ⁷. Later, he also became a deity closely associated with horsemanship and fine horses ⁸. Revanta, we are told, should be worshipped at gates (city gates or palace gates, presumably) by kings, according to the principles of sun worship ⁹.

If we turn to the extant images of Revanta we are faced with a seeming incongruity, since he is not usually shown actively hunting, but returning from the hunt in a glorious procession, having presumably slain the wild beast, usually a boar. Sometimes the prey is shown carried along, and sometimes a tiny conflated scene of the chase with dog and boar is seen beneath his horse. Probably one of the earliest known Revanta images is a stele in the Patna Museum which represents the deity advancing majestically on his horse with a royal umbrella over his head carried by a servant, his faithful hound beside him, while carrying a bowl in his right hand (Plate Ia). He has luxurious long hair bound by a diadem with two rosettes on it, with its tails flying out behind. He wears trousers and boots and has a sword (?) at his side. In general appearance he does not differ greatly

⁴ Kālikā Purāṇa, 85, 46–49.

⁵ See B.N. Sharma, *Iconography of Revanta*, New Delhi, 1975, pp. 25–31.

⁶ Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa, 105, 20–23; Kuvalayamālā Kathā of Uddyotana Sūri, Bombay, 1959, p. 68.

⁷ Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa, 105, 23–24; Skanda Purāṇa (Prabhāsa Khaṇḍa), 164, 1–4.

⁸ See Sharma, *op. cit.*, pp. 29–31; *Aśvaśāstram* 7, 1–6. The name Revanta became a princely epithet in the medieval period, and during this time the god's popularity waned in North India and waxed in the South.

⁹ Kālikā Purāṇa, 85 46–49. The Śabdakalpadrūma cited by Sharma (p. 29) relates that at the Nirājana ceremony Revanta was to be worshipped by preparing an image of him, or a "picture on a clay jar" on the interior of the outer gateway. This was a protective military ceremony practiced by kings and generals.

from Gupta "royal horseman" coin images (Plate Ib), except that the details of the hair and diadem give him the exotic characteristics of the Gupta Sūrya, who is himself a descendent from Kushān tradition as a "northern barbarian" prince ¹⁰.

A slightly later example of a Revanta image, datable to the early 7th century, shows a more elaborate scheme with musical Guhyakas below, the dead boar carried along behind, and attendants carrying a sword and wine (?) flask in a festive panoply (Plate II). Another version of the same scene, still later in date, shows a boar pursued under the horse's feet, and a diadem-bearing genius flying overhead, as the god parades sedately, again holding a cup (Plate III).

Closest to these works in general feeling are the royal hunt reliefs of Khusrau II from his famous rock-cut iwan at Tāq-i-Bustān in Sasanian Iran, which depict the hunt as the epitome of royal pomp, combining music, entertainment, and extravagant display surrounding a king whose hunt is always a premeditated triumph (Plate IV a) ¹¹. In the ancient Near East, at least as far back as the Assyrians, the depiction of the king slaughtering wild beasts was a metaphor for his invincibility against an enemy. This tradition continued in representations of royal hunters on Parthian and Sasanian monuments, on Sasanian royal silver plates, and is mirrored in the image of the ruler as royal slayer of wild beasts on Gupta gold coins ¹². Revanta shows himself as an invincible conqueror of evil in imagery parallel to that of royal propaganda of the age.

But why, we might ask, should Revanta display these unusual characteristics? Since his character appears to have strongly non-Indian overtones, out of what sort of background did he develop? First and probably basic to the whole question is the fact that Revanta must be shown on horseback. The horse, as we know, was of paramount importance to

¹⁰ See J. Rosenfield, *Dynastic Arts of the Kushans*, Berkeley, 1967, pp. 189 ff. for a full discussion of the Kushān conflation of royal and solar characteristics in imagery. See also *Bṛhatsaṃhitā*, 58, for a description of Sūrya's *udīcyaveṣa* northern style dress of the Gupta period; also *Viṣṇudharmottara*, III, 72, 2-7.

¹¹ See R. Ghirshman, *Persian Art*, trans. S. Gilbert and J. Emmons, New York, 1962, pp. 193-194. Ghirshman identifies the *iwan* as dedicated to Peroz, but most scholars prefer Khusrau II (A.D. 590-628).

¹² Tang-i-Sarwak in Khuzistan (ancient Elymais) displays a rock relief of an equestrian princely hunter of a type which must have been a prototype for those of the Sasanian era in Iran. (See G. Herrmann, *The Iranian Revival*, Oxford, 1977, p. 83; also P. O. Harper, *Silver Vessels of the Sasanian Period*, I, New York, 1981, ch. III, pp. 40 ff.). A.S. Altekar, *The Coinage of The Gupta Empire*, Varanasi, 1957, pls. III, 13-14; VII, 1-10; XII, 1-10 and 11-13; XIII, 1-6.

the ancient Indo-Iranian steppe nomads, and to a large extent made possible their conquests in India and Iran. It was very probably the primitive tribal chief's war horse that formed the basis for the elaborate and archaic *Aśvamedha*¹³. Thus, the link between horse and rulership first emerged as a concept at an early period. As developments in horse-breeding continued, riding rather than chariot-driving became predominant in the ancient world; and cavalry warfare developed in imitation of tactics evolved by the steppe invaders. Gods and kings, however, were still shown riding sedately in chariots, since actual horse-riding was apparently seen as undignified for those of the most exalted status.

Only in the post-Achaemenid period of the Parthians and Śakas do we find the imagery of kings on horseback, hunting, fighting, and in investiture scenes. Perhaps the greatest impetus for this change was brought about by the revolutionary Hellenistic imagery of Alexander the Great, deified conqueror of all Asia, on his mighty Bucephalus. His active style of leadership and personal daring favored equestrian imagery in both battle and the chase, as seen in the famous Alexander mosaic (where the routed King Darius stands helplessly in his clumsy chariot) (Plate IV *b*), and the equally famous "Alexander Sarcophagus" with its parallel scenes of battle and the chase (Plate V *a*)¹⁴. This prototype, however, not only strongly influenced depictions of royalty henceforward from Rome to India, but appears to have generated the introduction of equestrian deities as armed princely cavaliers.

Indo-Greek coins occasionally show the ruler as a horseman, but with the arrival of the Śakas to Northwest India the ruler is predominantly represented on coinage as an equestrian warrior, a heavily armed and armored cataphract with lance, bow, and whip (Plate I *c*)¹⁵. The Śaka tribes, originally a part of the vast Massagetic confederation of Central

¹³ *Rig Veda* CLXIII, 12, 22. Here we have references to a not-yet-royal horse sacrifice, but one certainly of great importance, available only to the most wealthy and powerful. Later the sacrifice became the prerogative of the *cakravartin*, or "universal monarch." (See *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (J. Eggling), pt. V, XII, 5, 2 and XIII, 2, 8, 1; also H. Roychaudhuri, *The Political History of Ancient India*, Calcutta, 1950, p. 171). The sexual/fertility overtones of the dead horse may derive from a non-Vedic source, and one which belongs to a primitive agricultural stratum of culture. (See K. Bharatta Iyer, *Animals in Indian Sculpture*, Bombay, 1977, pp. 38-40).

¹⁴ See M. Bieber, *The Sculpture of the Hellenistic Age*, New York, 1962, pp. 72 ff; also T.B.L. Webster, *The Art of Greece and the Age of Hellenism*, New York, 1966, pp. 38-42.

¹⁵ A listing of the Indo-Greek kings who used the "horseman" on their coins is given by A.N. Lahiri, *Corpus of Indo-Greek Coins*, Calcutta, 1965, p. 207. The

Asian nomads, evidently had a strong predilection for solar worship¹⁶. Like the Armenians and Persian they sacrificed horses to the sun, and appear to have seen the sun itself as a tireless horse flying across the heavens, or as a solar cavalier (as opposed to the chariot-driving Greek Helios)¹⁷. Thus, it is possible to trace the origins of the sun god who rides a horse, or in theriomorphic form, is a horse, to the Śakas and related tribes in Central Asia. The story of Revanta's birth takes place in the hyperborean land of the sun, Uttarakuru¹⁸. Revanta's sire is the sun god (Sūrya in India) as a divine horse. This brings up another interesting feature of the Śaka solar horseman. He appears to have been seen as an ancestor of the kings of Sarikol and, as Siyavush, the dynastic hero of kingdoms in Choresmia and Sogdiana¹⁹. Whether as divine horse, sire of the celestial

first of these coin images of rulers on horseback is probably the famous "Porus Medallion" of Alexander the Great. The horses are invariably shown prancing with forelegs raised. The ruler/horsemen on Saka coins are heavily armed and horses stand with all four feet on the ground, which is an innovation. (See M. Mitchiner, *Indo-Greek and Indo-Scythian Coinage, V. The Establishment of the Scythians in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, London, 1976, pp. 448 ff.

¹⁶ Herodotus, I, 216.

¹⁷ See Strabo, *Geography*, XV, 732, XI, 530 (the satrap of Armenia sent 20,000 foals a year to be sacrificed at the annual Mithrakana); also P. Altheim, *Alexandre et l'Asie*, Paris, 1954, pp. 284-290; for the Thracians, see A. Fol and I. Marazow, *Thrace and the Thracians*, New York, 1977, pp. 18, 30, 56.

¹⁸ This may well refer to the horse cult of Central Asia. For Uttarakuru see *Mahābhārata, Sabhā Parvā*, ch. 28, 7-20; *Bhīṣma Parvā*, ch. 8, 2-13. This is essentially a paradisaical land, fabulous in detail, having much in common with the similarly fabled land of the Hyperboreans sacred to Apollo in Greek mythology, also inaccessible and existing "beyond the north wind". As to the horse cult, we find it in Han Chinese references which tell of a "sacred horse" which lived on a mountaintop in Ta-yuan (Ferghana) and was the supernatural progenitor of the Heavenly Horses so eagerly sought by the Han Emperors. (See *Records of the Grand Historian of China*, trans. B. Watson, New York, 1961, vol. II, pp. 274-275). Later the same type of cult appears to have existed in Tokharistan, where there was a Divine Horse in a cave on Mt. Po-li. (See E. Chavannes, *Documents sur les Tou-kiue*, St. Petersburg, 1903, pp. 155-156.

¹⁹ According to the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang, the kingdom of Sarikol was miraculously founded when a Chinese princess on her way to wed the king of Persia was sequestered on a mountaintop due to an outbreak of fighting with robbers. While there, she was impregnated by a "...horseman who came from the sun's disc" at noon every day. The princess stayed in that location, built a palace there, and raised a son who became a ruler with great powers. He commanded the elements and was able to fly through the air. After his death, he was buried in a mountain cavern where his tomb and mummified body received homage and gifts from his countrymen (S. Beal, *Buddhist Records of the Western World*, London, 1884, vol. II, pp. 298-302). Beal notes the similarities between this tale and that in the *Shah Nameh* of the hero Siyavush and the miraculous birth of his son, Kaikhusrau, child hero of the Sun (*ibid.*, p. 301).

horses coveted by Han emperors, or divine cavalier progenitor of kings, the sun god of the Śakas strongly influenced the development of the character of the Indian Revanta²⁰. Possibly much of the reinforcement for the popularity of Revanta came with the influx of Maga East Iranian priests of the sun god from Seistan (i.e., Sakastan), the ancestors of Varāhamihira among them²¹.

The Śaka element, however, appears to have been overlaid by another influence in the imagery of Revanta. He also belongs to a family of cavalier deities whose cults proliferated in the post-Alexandrian period, and who had specific functions, not necessarily involving anything royal or solar. Revanta, we should remember, is a protector against harm in lonely places, and against robbers or demons who lie in wait. The cavalier gods of Western Asia and the Black Sea region include the ubiquitous Thracian rider "Hero", Anatolian deities such as Men, and numerous Palmyrene and regional Syrian gods who appear to have had localized cults. The Thracian Rider was, like Revanta, a protective deity and his image was usually placed in doorways of houses and beside city gates²². The Syrian deities were, for the most part, caravan gods riding horses and camels, who were the protectors of traders and merchants along the treacherous routes to the East, such as the Palmyrene pair illustrated here (Plate V *b*)²³. Likewise, Revanta is a god of travellers, including traders, on their dangerous journeys over land and sea. Some of the cavalier gods are depicted as armed equestrians, others actually hunt wild beasts (most often

²⁰ One may reasonably argue that the cult was far more generalized, and probably had existed in a variety of forms since Indo-Iranian times, since the relationship between horse/horseman and sun are probably very old and widespread. It began, I believe, with the evolution of the riding horse. See S.P. Tolstov, *Drevniy Choresm*, Moscow, 1948, pp. 196–210, for his interesting theories on the hero Siyavush as ancestor of the Choresmian kings. Tostov sees Siyavush as a "rider god" in terracotta figurines and on coinage. He is of the dying-and-reviving type, like Adonis, and was intimately connected with the mythological histories of Bukhara and Samarkand.

²¹ M. L. Carter, "Mithra on the Lotus", *Acta Iranica*, 2nd ser., vol. 7 (21), 1981, pp. 80 ff.; also Shastri, *op. cit.*, pp. 19–21.

²² For comparative material, see E. Will, *Le relief cultuel gréco-romain*, Paris, 1955, pp. 56–66. The custom evidently was to set figures of the cavalier god by house doors and city gates in Thrace.

²³ M. Rostovtzeff, "The Caravan Gods of Palmyra", *JHS*, XXII, 1932, pp. 107–111; H.J.W. Drijvers, *The Religion of Palmyra*, Leiden, 1976, pp. 20–21. See also M.A.R. Colledge, *The Art of Palmyra*, London, 1976, pp. 48–49, figs. 32, 33, and 43. The Syrian *genii* were always of princely military bearing, and may also have been thought of as escorting the Sun across the sky (an armed escort) as was the case with Azizos and Monimos of Edessa. Interestingly enough, the Aśvins also may accompany Revanta.

boars); and a few, like Revanta, are shown returning with their quarry. One interesting detail of Revanta imagery is the cup which he customarily holds. Is this simply for the rider's food or drink as a part of the general celebration, or did it originally have a deeper meaning?

It is of interest to note that various representations of the Thracian Horseman show the deity holding a patera, as exemplified in a relief in the Bucharest Museum (Plate VI *a*)²⁴ or a rhyton, as depicted on a plaque from Razgrad, Bulgaria (Plate VI *b*)²⁵. Other cavalier gods also often held vessels, including this small but fascinating representation of a possible Mithra *ephippos* in the Getty Museum (Plate VII *a*)²⁶. Certainly, these are more than a coincidence. Like the horse and camel-riding deities of Palmyra, we find their reflections, complete with cups, on a painted Khotanese wooden tablet (Plate VII *b*)²⁷. Khotan, like Palmyra, was a rich caravan city, albeit far removed from Western Asia. One may speculate with some confidence that the Khotanese cavaliers may also have been gods who protected the city and its caravaneers. The Buddhist Vaiśravaṇa, patron god and ancestral deity of Khotanese royalty, is also occasionally represented as a cavalier, here perhaps due to the rich Śāka heritage of the desert kingdom²⁸.

There is no time here to investigate the complex interconnections between the Śāka solar/royal cavalier, Thraco-Phrygian rider deities, and the equestrian caravan protectors, although some very interesting possibilities

²⁴ See N. Hampartumian, *Corpus cultus equitis thracii*, IV, Leiden, 1979, p. XXIV (37), pp. 47–48. The author gives no provenance for this work. Vermaseren, however, notes that it is from Tomis and is in the Bucharest Museum (see M.J. Vermaseren, *Cybele and Attis*, London, 1977, p. 142, no. 77). Here the Rider is an "Attis" as horseman. The author notes that the Thracian and Danubian Rider Gods were often solar in nature.

²⁵ See D. Tudor, *Corpus monumentorum religionis equitum danuviorum*, Leiden, 1976, pl. XIII, 1, and pp. 147–153. See also Will, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

²⁶ See Marcelle Duchesne-Guillemin, "Une statuette equestre de Mithra", *Acta Iranica*, ser. 1, vol. 4, 1978, pp. 201–204.

²⁷ M. Bussagli, *Painting of Central Asia*, Geneva, 1963, p. 59. This is a two-sided votive tablet from Dāndān Ōilūq sanctuary D. VII (5), now in the British Museum. See also J. Williams, "The Iconography of Khotanese painting", *East and West*, 23, 1973, 1–2, pp. 150–151, figs. 66, 67. She also illustrates another panel of a horse rider (D.X.5) now lost. There is also a camel rider with a goblet, wearing a three-pointed crown in the National Museum, New Delhi, from Farhād-Bēg-Yailaki (F.II.iii oo2). It has Buddha figures on the opposite side. See also A. Stein, *Ancient Khotan*, Oxford, 1907, vol. II, pl. LIX (D. VII.5); pl. LXII (D.X.5).

²⁸ A. Getty, *Gods of Northern Buddhism*, 2nd ed., Oxford, 1929, pp. 157–159, pl. XLVIIIa. Vaiśravaṇa is guardian of the North and his paradise is located in Alaka in the Himalayas. He is attended by horse-headed *kinnaras*.

may exist. Also, obvious links exist between Revanta, the “god on the white horse” who is essentially a kind of savior-protector, and the savior-of-the-future avatar of Viṣṇu, Kalki. Kalki is an apocalyptic horseman god whose roots must extend back to a very early period in Iranian Central Asia²⁹. Like so many Purāṇic deities, his essentially alien ideology was assimilated and transformed almost, but not quite, beyond recognition.

The epiphany of the “flying white horse” as an agent of salvation, originating from the Śaka theriomorphic form of the solar deity, is also a subject worthy of investigation within early Buddhism. His first appearance is in the Valāhassa Jātaka, illustrated here in a carved scene from a Kushān railing pillar from Mathurā (Plate VIII), where the future Buddha, as a miraculous flying horse, saves a company of merchants about to be devoured by demons. Later versions of this story make the horse a form of Avalokiteśvara, certainly appropriate to his character as a savior Bodhisattva³⁰. It should also be noted that the Great Departure scene so popular in early Buddhist narrative may possibly have overtones of the cavalier god, particularly with the emphasis in Gandhāra being on the figure emerging from the city gate, air-borne as it were, with his horse carried by Yakṣas³¹. Also, it is of interest to note that, according to a Chinese legend, when the Han Dynasty Emperor Ming sent envoys to the West, after having a vision of a man in shining raiment who told him of the appearance of a Perfect Man there, they discovered on their way two men holding a magnificent white horse laden with Buddhist books, images, and relics. These were brought back to Loyang and installed in the earliest institution of its kind in China, the White Horse Monastery³².

²⁹ *Agni Purāṇa*, XVI. *Bhāṣā Bhārāta*, ch. 190; *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* (Wilson), p. 622. Kalki carries a sword, and is never seen as a hunter or reveler.

³⁰ See J. Meech-Pekarik, “The Flying White Horse”, *Artibus Asiae*, XLIII, 1981–82, pp. 111–112, note 2, for various permutations of the story. The name of the horse is Bhalaha (Valaha in Pali). The story turns up in Japan as a part of the *Lotus Sutra*. There is the Japanese Batō Kannon with a white horse-head in his hair, who appears to be related to the Tibetan Dharmapāla Hayagrīva, patron of horses and an armed warrior (see Getty, *op. cit.*, pp. 94–95).

³¹ Upon parting from Śakyamuni, Kanthaka died of grief and was reborn in Trayastriṃśas heaven as a *deva*. (See J. Legge, *A Record of the Buddhist Kingdoms*, Oxford, 1886, p. 70, note 1).

³² Getty, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

POSTSCRIPT

Professor Maurizio Taddei has very kindly informed me of an article which had escaped my attention by H.P. Schmidt, entitled "Mithras the Horseman and Revanta Lord of Horse", in *Some Aspects of Indo-Iranian Literary and Cultural Traditions*, Commemoration Volume of Dr. V.G. Paranjpe, Delhi, 1977, pp. 132-157. Having reviewed this article, I find that Dr. Schmidt's ideas are generally similar to my own, except for a reticence on my part to become involved in the complex problem of the origins of the Western Mithras *ephippos*. These images of Mithras as a horseman or mounted hunter come mainly from Dura Europos and have been extensively treated by Cumont, Rostovtzeff, and others. As to the Syrian examples of Mithras as a mounted hunter, much has been speculated on their significance in regard to Mithraism's relationship to Zoroastrian Iranian origins³³. Another body of opinion, however, suggests that the Mithraic imagery of Dura, including the hunting scenes, are simply a local treatment of themes brought to Dura from the West³⁴.

Indeed, the most difficult problem surrounding Roman Mithraism is that solid evidence of a close tie to Iranian religion of the period is lacking. There is no physical trace of the cult outside of the Roman Empire; and although the Zoroastrian *yazata* Mithra is solar in character, he has no strong resemblance to the Roman Mithras³⁵. As Schmidt and others have observed, elements bearing on the sources of Roman Mithraism may

³³ See M.J. Vermaseren, *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae*, The Hague, 1956-60, vol. I, mon. 52, fig. 24; M. Rostovtzeff, F. Brown, C.B. Welles, *The Excavations at Dura-Europos. Preliminary Report of the Seventh and Eighth Seasons of Work*, New Haven, 1939, p. 113, pls. XIV-XV; L. Campbell, *Mithraic Iconography and Ideology*, Leiden, 1968, pp. 192 ff., 254 f. and passim; F. Cumont, "The Dura Mithraeum", *Mithraic Studies*, ed. J.R. Hinnells, Manchester, 1975, vol. I, 1978, pp. 151 ff., 186, 189; M. Rostovtzeff, "Dura and the Problem of Parthian Art", *Yale Classical Studies*, V, New Haven, 1934, pp. 235 ff.

³⁴ See S.B. Downey, "Syrian Images of Mithras Tauroctonos", *Études Mithriaques. Acta Iranica*, I ser., *Actes du Congrès*, IV (XVII), pp. 135 ff. See pp. 147-148, and refs. Downey notes the absence at Dura of Iranian elements, and that there are few hunting scenes known in Parthian art in Iran. She sees the hunts as secular. She does however admit Syrian influence in the choice of an equestrian Mithras, since Syria is full of local horsemen deities. See also A. Perkins, *The Art of Dura Europos*, Oxford, 1973, pp. 65-67.

³⁵ The arguments of J. Imam-Jomeh ("In Search of a Mithraeum at Takht-e-Solaiman" *Études Mithriaques*, pp. 255-259) are not convincing. H.J.W. Drijvers ("Mithra at Hatra", *Études Mithriaques*, pp. 184-186) finds no evidence for a Mithraic cult in that important site. In 1954, H. Lenzen claimed to have discovered

be sought from the extended orbit of Outer Iranian culture, where varied forms of solar religious ideology appear to have existed. This would include the vast region from the Black Sea to the Pamirs, cradle of the Cimmerians, Scythians, Sarmatians, and Eastern Sakas during the first millennium B.C.³⁶

Blawatsky and Koshelenko's speculations on Scytho-Sarmatian religion around the Black Sea are most intriguing, and, if correct, might indicate a factor in the formation and transmission of a nascent Mithraism³⁷. Yet, in the larger sense, Anatolian, Thracian, and Danubian cults featuring equestrian deities, some demonstrably solar, some not, are probably all parts of a general spread of the culture of these steppe horsemen out of trans-Caspian South Russia. Mithraism, as well as cults devoted to rider "heroes", may have commons roots in this historical phenomenon. Among the most promising places to trace possible related traditions might be Armenia, Georgia, Choresmia, Sogdiana, Bactria, and Seistan. Yet, such examinations are extremely difficult in the case of Mithraism, since its foundations may be strongly syncretic, and are overlaid with a strongly hellenizing veneer.

Through their invasions, the Śaka tribes from East Iran to the Tarim Basin affected the culture and religion of North India. Here too, however, the problem of specific influence is complex. Śaka tribes originating from

a Mithraeum at Uruk. (*MDOG*, vol. 87, pp. 46 ff., pl. 1a,b; Sbb. 8-13; idem. XIV. *Vorläufiger Bericht über die von dem Deutschen Archäologischen Institut und der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft aus Mitteln der Deutschen Forschungs-gemeinschaft unternommen Ausgrabungen in Uruk-Warka*, Winter 1955-56, *ADOG*, 3, 1958, pp. 18-20, pls. 19b-25b). A number of years earlier a clay mould showing the body of a bull and legs of a man were found at the same site; but it bears little resemblance to a Mithraic tauroctony. (See A.D.H. Bivar, "Mithra and Mesopotamia", *Mithraic Studies*, II, p. 280, pl. 7e).

³⁶ See Schmidt, *op. cit.*, pp. 138 ff. See also I. Gershevitch, "Die Sonne das Beste", *Mithraic Studies*, I, pp. 82 ff. Gershevitch gives cogent arguments for a non-Zoroastrian source for Mithraism, and gives attention to the Sakas, whom, he believes might have influenced the Medes in forming the solar character of Mithra. I. Scheftelowitz ("Die Mithras-Religion der Indoskuthen", *Acta Orientalia*, XI, 1933, pp. 293-333) first promoted the Saka solar religion as an influence on the Avestan Mithra; but, as it now appears, the Saka sun god may be closer to Mithras than Mithra. Scheftelowitz' conclusions were based on odd Zoroastrian elements mixed in with notices on solar worship in the Hindu *Purāṇa*, parts of which may be fairly late in date. H. von Stietencron (*Indische Sonnenpriester*, Wiesbaden, 1966) has analysed the relevant sources and finds two waves of Saka influence, one totally non-Zoroastrian in 1st century B.C., and a later Zoroastrian one, sometime before the 5th century A.D.

³⁷ See W. Blawatsky, G. Koshelenko, *Le culte de Mithra sur la côte septentrionale de la Mer Noire*, Leiden, 1966, and as cited by Schmidt (*op. cit.*, pp. 138 ff.).



a) Revanta stele, gray stone, from Pachar Hill, Gaya District, India, c. A.D. 600 or slightly later. Ht. 24". Patna Museum (no. 10648). Author's photograph.



b) Gold dinar obverse of Candragupta II (c. A.D. 376-414), India. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of Anna Bing Arnold and Justin Dart (M.77.55.21). Photograph courtesy of the Los Angeles Museum of Art.



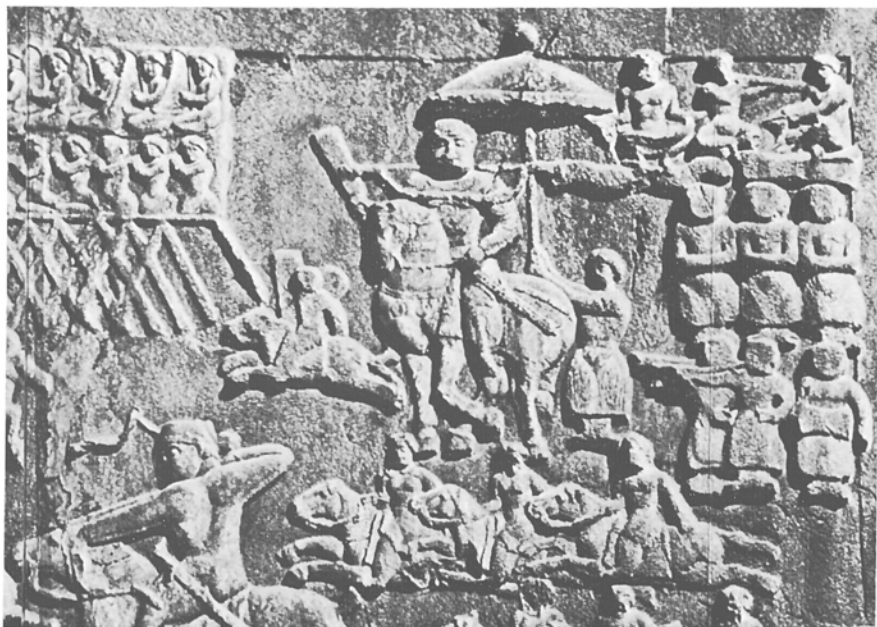
c) Silver tetradrachm obverse of the Śaka king Azilises (c. 40 B.C.), Taxila region, N. Pakistan. Author's collection and photograph.



Revanta and companions, pale cream sandstone, Uttar Pradesh, Sarnath area, India, early 7th century. Ht. 23". Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Harry Lenart (M.73.87.1). Photograph courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.



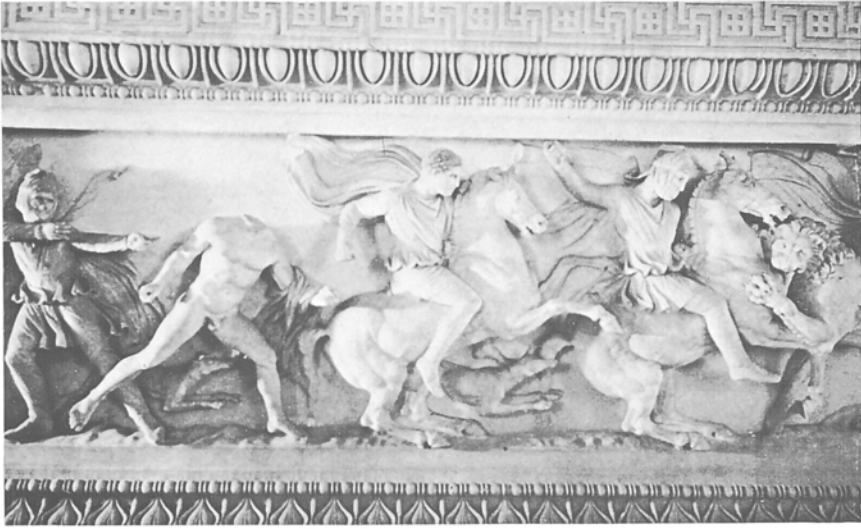
Revanta ad companions, dark grayish sandstone, Uttar Pradesh or Central India, 10th or 11th century. Ht. 32.5". Linden-Museum, Stuttgart (SA 32 607). Photograph courtesy of the Linden-Museum.



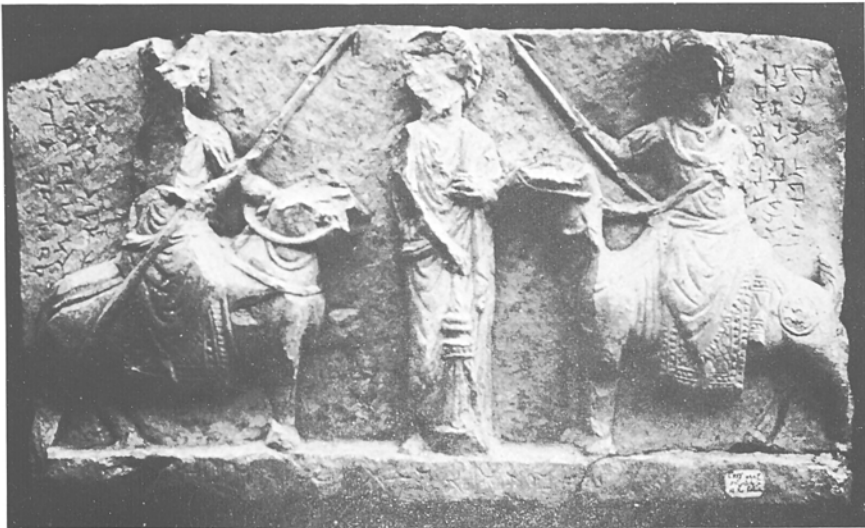
a) Detail of rock relief at Taq-i-Bustan, Iran, Sasanian Period, c. A.D. 600 (reign of Khusrav II). Author's photograph.



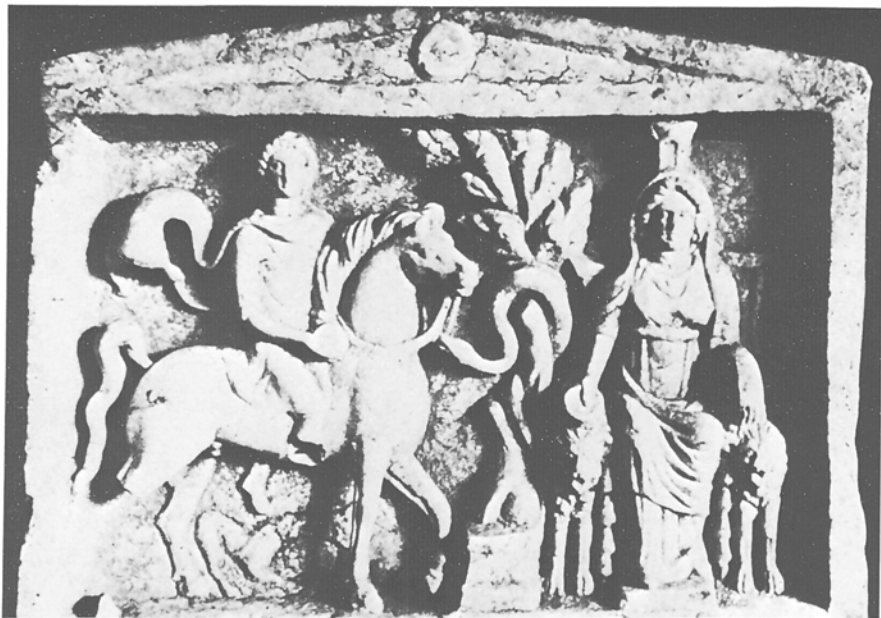
b) Detail of Alexander the Great in a battle scene from the Alexander Mosaic, House of the Faun, Pompeii. Hellenistic style, 2nd century B.C. National Museum, Naples. Author's photograph.



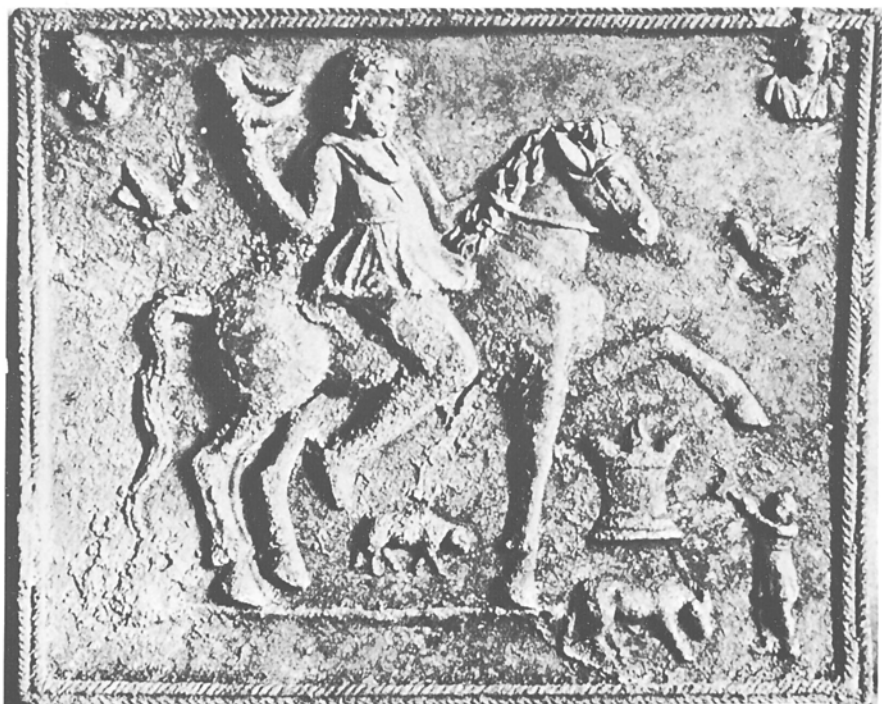
a) Detail from the Alexander Sarcophagus, Marble, Sidon, Hellenistic Era, c. 325–311 B.C. Archaeological Museum, Istanbul. Author's photograph.



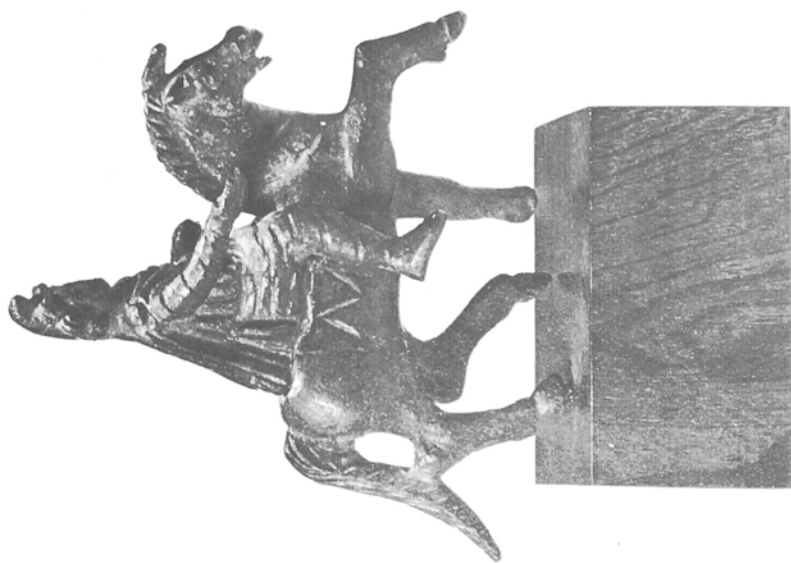
b) Relief of Rider Deities Ma'n and Sa'd(r), limestone, Palmyra, Syria, 2nd century A.D. Ht. 39". National Museum, Damascus. Author's photograph.



a) Relief of Rider God and Cybele, marble, Tomis, Rumania, 2nd or 3rd century A.D. Ht. 23.5". Bucharest National Museum. (Photograph from M. Vermaseren, *Cybele and Attis*, London, 1977, fig. 77).



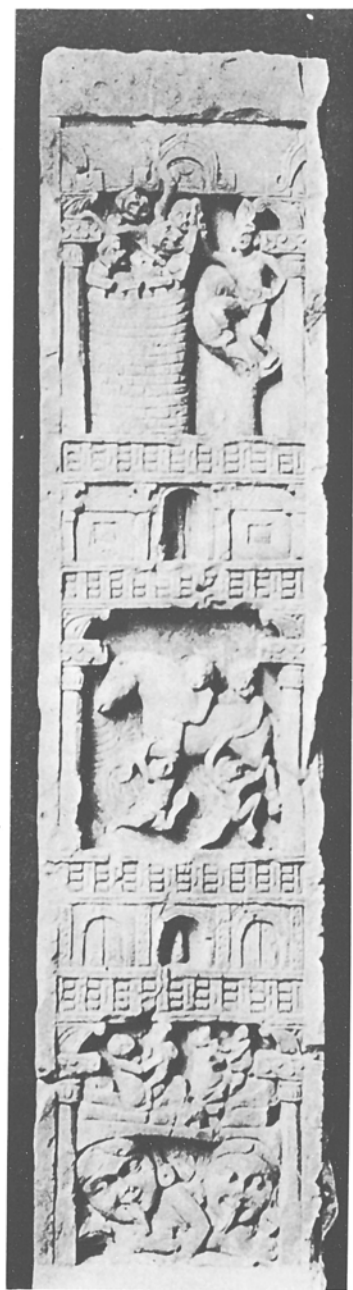
b) Plaque of a Rider God, metal, Razgrad, Bulgaria, 1st or 2nd century A.D. (Photograph from D. Tudor, *Corpus monumentorum religionis equitum danuviorum*, II, Leiden, 1976, pl. XIII).



a) Statuette of Mithra on Horseback, bronze, Roman, provenance unknown, 1st or 2nd century A.D. Ht. 2.75". The J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, California (71.AB.160). Photograph courtesy of the J. Paul Getty Museum.



b) Painted wooden plaque with horse and camel-riding Deities, Sanctuary D vii, Dāndan Ōlūq, Khotan, c. 7th century A.D. Ht. 13 1/8". The British Museum, London. Photograph courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.



Relief illustrating the Valāhassa Jātaka on a *stūpa* railing pillar, red sandstone, Mathurā, Bhūteśvar, India, Kushān Era, 2nd century A.D. Indian Museum, Calcutta (A 24946). Author's photograph.

different regions outside of India were not necessarily closely related; nor did they arrive in a single influx, but by varied routes over a period of several hundred years, beginning roughly in the late 2nd century B.C. Probably the last important migration was from Seistan around the year 300, which brought the Śakadvipa Magas to the Upper Indus region to create a popular center for solar worship at Multan. These propagators of devotion to the sun god as paramount deity, were, in my opinion, refugees from a devastating war by the Sasanian king Varahran II against his brother the Śakanshah, and by his high-priest Kartir against all heretical beliefs within the newly-formed Zoroastrian empire ³⁸.

There is no evidence for the presence of Revanta during the Kushān Era; and it seems most probable that the cavalier deity first became popular in Gupta India under Maga influence. The Kushān rulers of North India do not seem to have favored equestrian deities, with the exception of the rare Mazdooano, on coin reverses, who is seen riding a two-headed horse ³⁹.

Nevertheless Śaka influence was likely to have been initially responsible for the appearance of the Bodhisattva Siddhārtha as savior—on—horseback, and, in an earlier incarnation, as savior—horse within Kushān Buddhism.

³⁸ See M.L. Carter, *op. cit.*, pp. 84 ff.

³⁹ See R. Göbl, *Münzprägung des Kušanreiches*, Vienna, 1984, p. 42, pl. 7, type 61 (gold reverses of Kanishka I). The theories on the meaning of MAZDOOANO and the significance of the two-headed horse are reviewed by J. Duchesne-Guillemain in *Zoroastrian Symbols and Values*, New York, 1966 pp. 101–104. Another deity, who may have shared Revanta's attribute as protector of horses is the Kushān deity LROOASPO on gold coin reverses, who stands beside a horse, and may be compared to the Zoroastrian Drvaspa. (Göbl, *op. cit.*, p. 41, pl. 7, type 57, pl. 20, type 268).