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An Unpublished Sculpture from the Kulu Valley

A sculptured head in stone (Plates I-III) is to be found at Māśāḍā¹ in the High Kulu Valley (Himachal Pradesh, India)*. The villagers told me that it was found between fifteen and twenty years ago, in the Chhaki *nāla*².

This head is set on a large flat stone, with three other dressed stones forming a border at the back and on both sides³. It is a sort of throne or small open-air altar-cum-temple, and I have often noticed offerings of small change and wild flowers upon it; traces of ochre or white powder are sometimes put on the brow and the cheeks, the design indicating a Vaiṣṇava cult. This little shrine is situated along the path which leads down towards the village temple dedicated to Tripurā Klāsni Devī⁴. According to local tradition, a *brāhman* was murdered near this sculpture, so it would have been inauspicious to place it in the sacred precincts of the temple.

ABBREVIATIONS

AARP = *Art and Archaeology Research Papers*; *ASIAR* = *Archaeological Survey of India, Annual Report*; *ASINIs* = *Archaeological Survey of India, New Imperial series*; *ASR* = *Archaeological Survey Reports*; *CAJ* = *Central Asiatic Journal*; *EW* = *East and West*; *JPaHS* = *Journal of the Panjab Historical Society*

* The author wishes to thank Dr. T. S. Maxwell who has had the kindness to translate this article. All the photographs were taken by H. Diserens in 1979, 1981 and 1983.

¹ Māśāḍā is a hamlet on the left bank of the Biās, neighbouring Nagar. This proximity allows one to envisage that the development and history of this hamlet were closely related to those of Nagar.

² *nāla* or nullah (English usage) in this Himalayan region indicates a ravine, often very wild, in which a torrent flows. Preceded by a proper name, it indicates the name of the current. The chhaki *nāla* is a left-bank tributary of the Biās.

³ These re-employed stones might come from an ancient temple. We might note that two miniature stone shrines (Jettmar 1974, Tafel 34) are found in front of the Tripurā Klāsni Devī temple. One of them is now ruined, the other (about 1 metre high) is only just holding up. The little bas-reliefs on the outside walls represent Sūrya (west), Brahmā (south), and Viṣṇu (north); inside are three *liṅga*-shaped natural stones.

⁴ Dr. G. K. Jettmar-Thakur informs me that the origin of this goddess is not clear; Klāsni comes from the name of Klāsh village; this goddess would be the 'sister' of Tripurasundarī Devī at Nagar, or this same goddess. This confirms my opinion that Māśāḍā and Nagar were closely connected.

The dimensions⁵ of this head, which are greater than life-size, and the very high relief⁶ in which it is rendered, lead one to envisage it as having originally been part of a large sculpture designed to be seen from the front. The head is broken off at the base: no part of the neck is visible. Other fractures can be seen at the earlobes and the bridge of the nose. A line of serious erosion has affected the central ornamentation of the crown, the lips and chin.

It imparts a serene expression of great concentration. The form of the face, emphasized by the narrow chin, gives a general impression of roundness. The facial features, which are only slightly indicated, contrast with the more deeply cut features of the crown. The eyes are elongated; the irises and eyelids not being seen, they seem to be closed. A fine groove traces the eyebrow-line. The usual fringe of curls under the fillet of the crown is not represented; there are only some light incisions at the top of the forehead which could suggest its presence. The rounded ears stand out from the head, and the very clearly broken lobes suggest, perhaps, that they were particularly elongated and may have been ornamented. There are no visible traces of clues that I have found to suggest side-heads or a nimbus⁷.

The crown of this sculpture is of a type which is relatively homogeneous in this region of the Himālaya; its components were perpetuated, with variations, for several centuries. It is worn by gods and goddesses alike (Plate IV). This one is relatively tall (cf. note 5) although it gives the impression of being truncated⁸. The fillet is broad, with a series of thirteen round gems between the two pearled borders: it ends in the little classical rosette which stands out from the head above the ears. Its three triangular fleurons (Plate III) are richly ornamented: at their base is a half-rosette around which radiate, like petals, four rosettes and a lozenge shape which stretches up to the apex. The spaces between the fleurons are filled by surfaces which are folded back, forming a central ridge. These surfaces are striated with oblique parallel lines which meet on the ridge to form a sort of chevron, the interpretation of which is not clear: should one see

⁵ Dimensions: total height, 40 cm.; height of crown, 19 cm.; height of face, 21 cm.; maximum width, 27 cm.

⁶ The back of the head is hatched or broken.

⁷ If this head had had a nimbus, it could have been an independent member which was attached.

⁸ The correspondence between the height of the crown and that of the face is 0,9. When this correspondence is, as here, negligible (1%), the points appear slender or shortened depending upon whether the space between the fleurons are empty or filled with ornamental motifs. The truncated form of the hair and the backward-leaning attitude of the head also exaggerate this impression of foreshortening.

in this an ornamental motif, or the stylised representation of a hair-arrangement?

The elaborate composition of the diadem and the simplified treatment of the face, with its oval form as compared to the circularity of later sculptures (Plate IV), in addition to the relatively large dimensions of this sculpture – these are the few indices by which it might be dated.

The crown being the most important element, I have given my attention to a large number of crowns represented on Kulu sculptures and those of adjacent regions (Chambā, Kāñgrā and Mañḍi).

This study reveals that the height of the fleurons is not a determining factor in assigning dates. The variations of correspondence between the height of the crown and the face may be weak for sculptures separated by several centuries and important for relatively contemporaneous works. I have also noticed that, if it is possible to attribute a more or less late date to a crown of little height⁹, the chronology remains uncertain when the fleurons are elevated since this characteristic was perpetuated for a long period¹⁰.

The quality of the sculpture and the particularly delicate ornamentation of the fleurons of the Māśāḍā crown indicate how much closer the artist was to the post-Gupta tradition of the ancient sculptures¹¹ of the regions studied than to the Pratihāra tradition which followed¹². The truncated form and the rather heavy striation could indicate a period of transition during which Pahari influence and technique would have gradually supplanted those inspired by the apogee of Indian art.

The absence of inscriptions and texts concerning the artists, their origins, movements, the situation of their ateliers, hierarchical structures and the organization of their guilds is particularly regrettable. This know-

⁹ For example, the crowns of goddesses Docā and Mocā (Diserens, 1983, fig. 1). The crown of Docā already betrays the strong Pahari influence of a local artist:

¹⁰ The correspondence between the height of the crown and that of the face is as follows: 1 at Chhatrārhi, end of the 7th or beginning of the 8th century (Diserens, forthcoming in *EW*, Plates 1 and 2); 0.9 at Māśāḍā (9th/10th centuries); for the *devis* Docā and Mocā (cf. note 9) it is 0.33 and 1 respectively. Mocā, according to stylistic considerations, could be of the 8th/9th century and so relatively contemporaneous with the Māśāḍā head.

¹¹ In Kulu: detached stone statues or reliefs found near the site of the Viśveśvara Mahādeva temple at Hat/Bajaura: Cakrapuruṣa, ca. 6th/7th century; Sūrya, ca. 8th century (Ohri 1975, p. 141, Diserens 1981, pp. 166, fig. 1); Viṣṇu Vaikuṇṭha, 7th century (Ohri 1975, p. 140); Viṣṇu Viśvarūpa, ca. 7th/8th century (Maxwell 1973, pp. 64 ff. & *passim*, p. 70, Ohri 1975, p. 120, fig. 76). At Gajan: a group of six wood sculptures, ca. 8th century (Diserens 1981, pp. 163–173, 1983, p. 43). In Chambā: at Brahmor and Chhatrārhi: Vogel 1904, 1911, Goetz 1955, Diserens (forthcoming in *EW*, Plates 1 and 2).

¹² Ohri 1980, pp. 32–36.

ledge would perhaps have helped one better to understand the simplified treatment of the face of this head. Was it merely roughed-out in the absence of an artist who was able to master this delicate modelling¹³; did a moveable mask (in wood or precious metal) cover it? Was it rejected due to an imperfection in the stone, for a ritual reason or any other cause during the sculpturing?

Three reliefs might furnish the elements of an answer. A bas-relief, *in situ*, on the outside south wall of the «miniature» temple at Nagar (dated *ca.* 9th century by Ohri¹⁴) represent Śiva and Pārvatī; the faces of these two divinities show this simplified modelling, while the hair-arrangement of Śiva is intricately cut. This remark applies equally to the Sūrya, of unknown provenance, in the Roerich garden at Nagar, and in a high-relief stele representing Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa in the Gaurīśaṅkara temple at Daśāl¹⁵. This summary modelling is common to these three reliefs and to the Māśāḍā head; other similarities (morphology, details of dress and jewellery) suggest that these sculptures are products of a single atelier, if not the work of one and the same artist.

The large size and the fine quality of the rounded or high relief of the ancient High Kulu Valley sculptures (Hat/Bajaura and Gajan, cf. note 11) have also served as comparative criteria in this attempt at dating. The scarcity of clues afforded by this sculpture permits only an approximate dating, which I would place around the 9th/10th centuries. I wish to take into account the opinions that I have already been able to gather: for some, it would date to the 8th century; for others, later than the 10th.

For the same reasons, its identification will be conjectural: the face reveals neither a masculine nor a feminine character; only the importance of the crown indicates elevated status, royal or divine.

The history of Kulu has been transmitted mainly by the *vaṃśāvalis* (royal genealogies), some rare inscriptions¹⁶, and oral traditions; it is mixed with legend and, in the opinion of historians¹⁷, is scarcely reliable for the periods before the 16th century. The destruction of the royal

¹³ The bloated look of the cheeks, eyes and forehead would then be merely the result of uncut stone.

¹⁴ Ohri 1975, pp. 127–128, fig. 78.

¹⁵ Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa: Viṣṇu is represented with three visible heads; his two side-heads are theriomorphic, representing on his right the lion and on his left the boar. He has two pairs of arms, the hands of which hold, on the right, *padma* and *gadā*, and on the left *cakra* and *śaṅkha*. The Gaurīśaṅkara temple at Daśāl is of about the 9th century and is situated at 5 or 6 km. north from Nagar.

¹⁶ Most of these inscriptions are later than the period under discussion.

¹⁷ Harcourt 1870; Hirananda Sastri 1911, p. 268; Hutchison and Vogel 1919, p. 165; 1933, p. 460; Charak Singh 1978, p. 253; Pandey 1980, pp. 22–28.

archives¹⁸ in the 19th century has deprived us of invaluable documents. Historians agree in saying that Nagar was the second capital of the kingdom for a very long period, the beginning of which is not dated, but which ended in 1660.

Plastic representations of historical persons are limited. The *barsellas*, commemorative stelae erected on the death of a king, represent the *rāja* surrounded by the *rañi*, his concubines and servants, by members of the royal house and sometimes by favourite animals. The *barsellas* of Mañḍi were studied by Cunningham¹⁹; they bear inscriptions from the 17th to the 19th centuries. Those of Nagar bear no inscription; they probably belong to the last period of the capital. There are two equestrian statues of Rājput princes and one of a standing princess in the Roerich garden at Nagar; Madanjeet Singh²⁰ dates them to the 16th/17th centuries. The absence of historical elements contemporary with the Māśāḍā head does not allow one to pursue this hypothesis.

The theory which seems most probable is that it represents a major Hindu deity²¹. Among the gods and goddesses of this pantheon, Śiva, Viṣṇu, Sūrya and the Goddess have been envisaged – the fact that their cults were particularly important during the period of interest here would provide justification for suggesting that a statue of such large size could have been dedicated to them; in addition, both the expression of the face and the crown could belong to these deities²².

Śiva: This hypothesis which, at first sight, seemed to be excluded due to the lack of details characteristic of his hair-arrangement, has nevertheless been envisaged: the sculpture of the region offers examples in which the identification of this god cannot be made by an examination of the head alone. Comparative study of the crowns of Śiva shows that most often the strands of hair are animated by a light undulating movement, but this is not a constant.

Viṣṇu: Representations of this god are numerous. In the most ancient sculptures, the god has several heads (Viśvarūpa at Hat) or three visible heads (Vaikuṅṭha at Hat); the latter form is the most frequent, having been represented for a long period. The Daśāl stele (cf. note 15) is, to

¹⁸ Howell 1918, p. 76.

¹⁹ Cunningham 1882, repr. 1970, pp. 119–125.

²⁰ Madanjeet Singh 1968, both figs., p. 147.

²¹ Buddhism having flourished in this region prior to the period concerned is not included among these hypotheses.

²² The comparative elements of this identificatory research correspond to observations made within a narrow perimeter around Māśāḍā.

my knowledge, the oldest representation of Viṣṇu in the area close to Māśādā; it may be dated around the 9th century. Representations with a single head are less frequent: some reliefs in which Viṣṇu is standing and some Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa images.

Sūrya: This identification is just as probable, if one takes into account the importance which the solar cult had in this region. The proximity, both geographical and chronological, of two large Sūrya statues (at Hat and Gajan), in addition to large numbers of reliefs, give serious support to this hypothesis.

Devī: The cult of the Goddess is particularly ancient; her effigies are the most numerous. She is represented in her Mahiṣāsūramardini or Durgā form (other forms are rarer) on reliefs of which the most ancient date from around the 8th/9th centuries²³. I know of no round or high stone relief to match that of the Māśādā head; this hypothesis is justified, however, by the proximity of two statues of nearly similar dimensions near the Trilokanātha temple in Maṇḍī, ancient capital of a border-kingdom of Kulu. One, probably representing Kālī²⁴, has a total height of 188 cm., of which the head and tiara combined measure about 35 cm. The other, a Durgā (?) image, is astride a lion. It must be remarked that in these two examples the heads are also hatched at the back, broken at neck-level, and that they rest against a background stele. Although they are stylistically later, it is of interest to point them out because they may suggest, by these similarities, what the whole sculpture, to which the Māśādā head belongs, might have been.

Among these four divinities, Viṣṇu and Sūrya seem to me to be those to whom the Māśādā head could most probably have belonged. The absence of side-heads, however, prevents me from making a formal Viṣṇu identification; the Sūrya hypothesis seems to have an equally strong claim, but without identificatory iconographical features, this must remain theoretical.

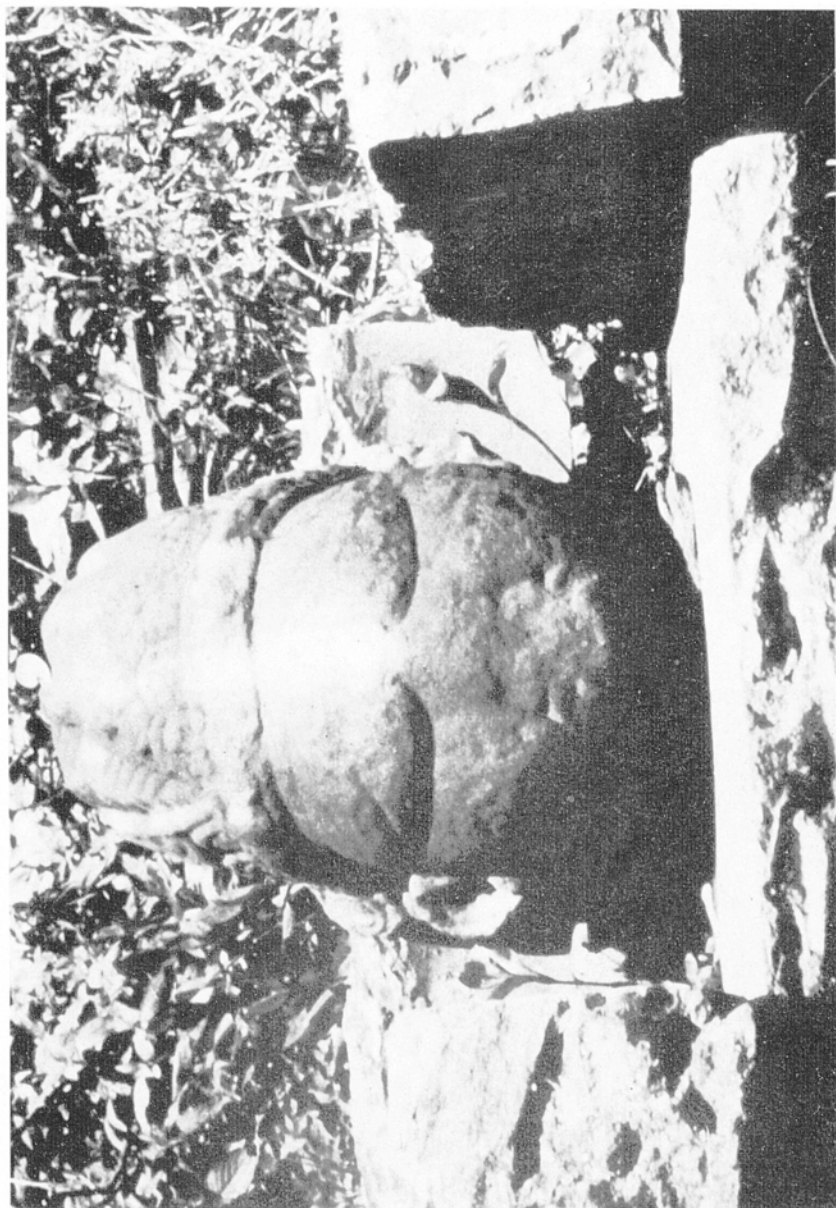
In closing this study which, unfortunately, has not been able to take us beyond the realm of hypothesis, I express the hope that a fortuitous discovery of other fragments will not only allow my dating and identification to be made more precise, but also that it might lead to the full restoration of this sculpture.

²³ Jettmar 1974, Tafel 46; State Museum, Simla 1981, p. 35, n° 47; Diserens, forthcoming in *EW*, Plate 4.

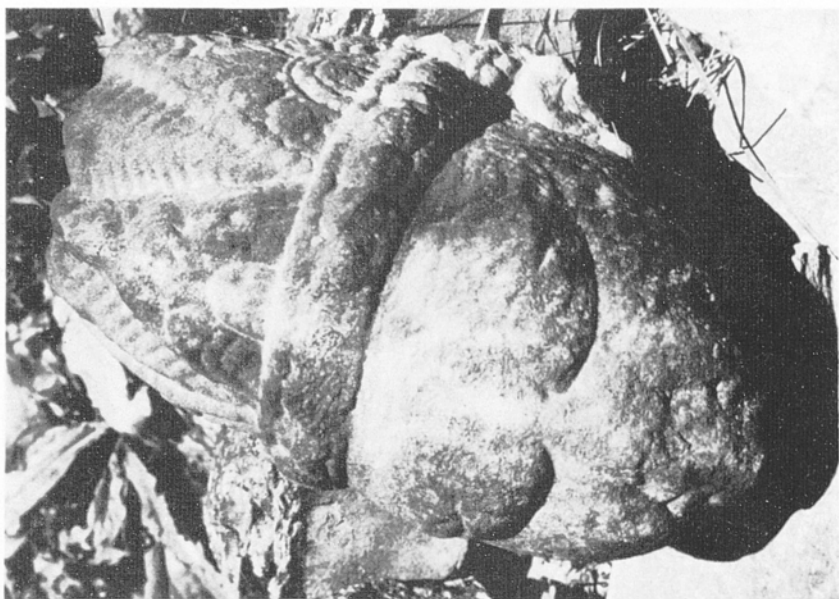
²⁴ Standing, with four pairs of arm, holding on the right a sword and (?), on the left a shield and dagger (?); two hands are laid on attendants' heads and two are broken; the image wears a skirt of severed arms and hands.

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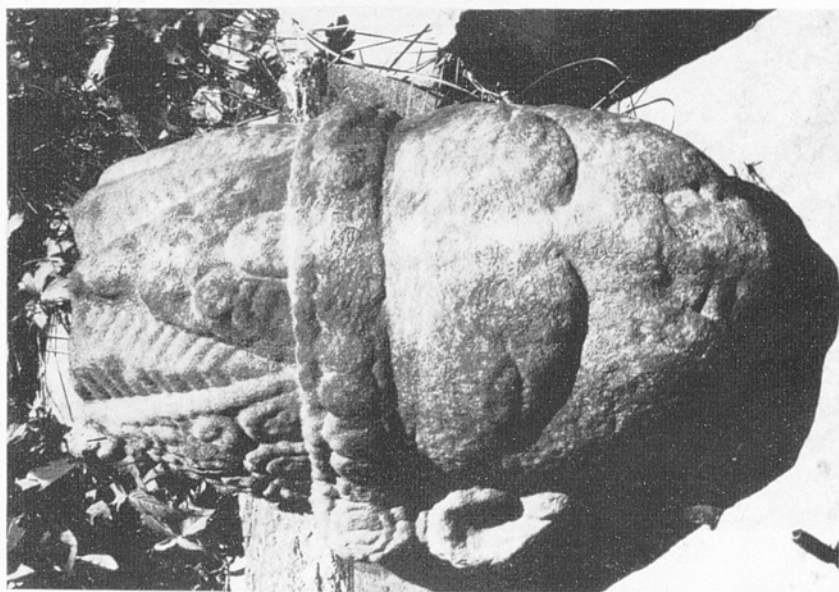
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Stone head from Māsāḍā.

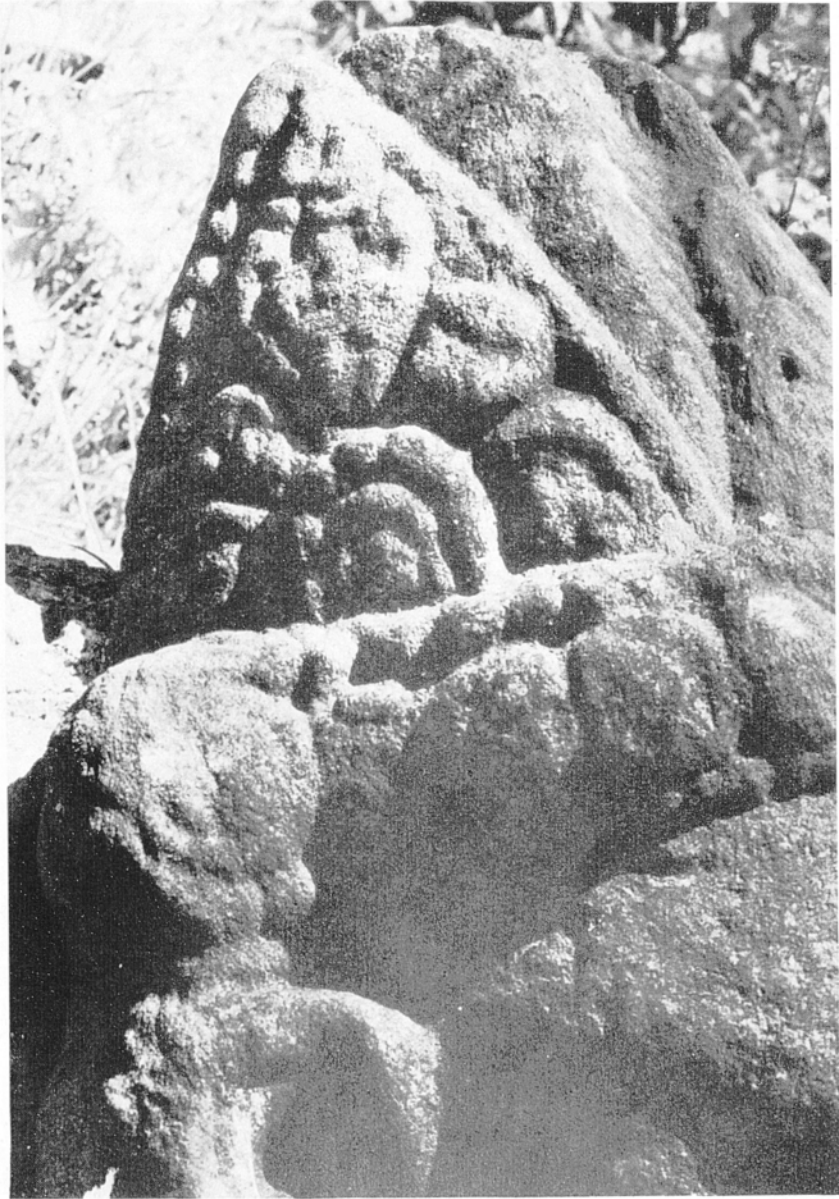


b



a

The same, from different angles.



Detail of the crown.



Gauri-Saṅkara. Vaidyanāth temple. Baijnāth (Kāngrā Valley, H. P.).