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The Visnu Image from Sarisadah in the Indian Museum, Kolkata

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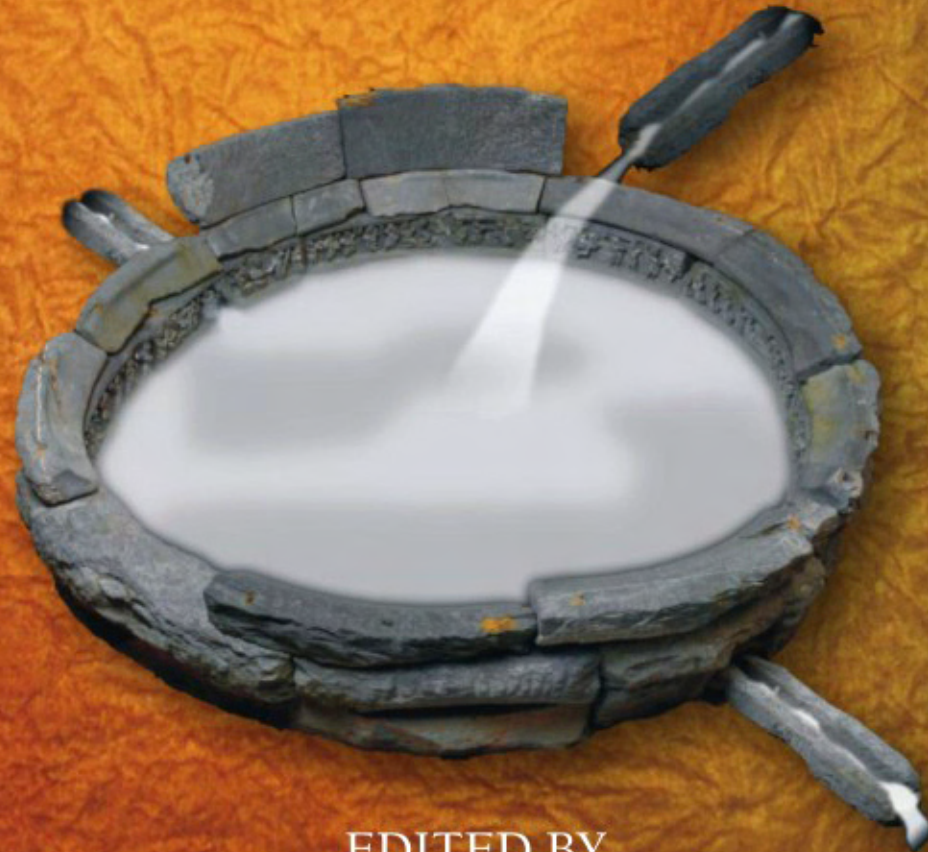
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PRAJÑĀDHARA

Essays on

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Gouriswar Bhattacharya



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CLAUDINE BAUTZE-PICRON

In one of his recent articles, Gouriswar Bhattacharya has drawn the attention on the development of the ‘Vāsudeva-Viṣṇu images from Bengal’ and on the presence of a tiny lotus flower in the lower right hand of the god, which he suggests to identify as an ‘auspicious mark’.¹ He reminded us that this development is articulated on four stages,² which he identifies first of all through the position of the arms of the god: All four are lowered down in the early Gupta and post-Gupta period; only in the late post-Gupta or early Pāla period, two of the arms are raised at the level of the shoulders, an attitude which is generalized till around AD 1200. A second criterion concerns the presence of different attendants at the side of the god: The weapons club and disk or the respective *āyudhapuruṣas* are present till the beginning of the Pāla period, being then replaced by the wives; finally, the *āyudhapuruṣas* of the conch and lotus are introduced by the side of the wives.

As a token of respect and admiration for Gouriswar Bhattacharya’s work, and of recognition for the numerous exchanges of views on the art history of Bihar and Bengal in the last twenty and more years, I would like to consider here a twelfth century image of Viṣṇu (**Plates 26.1-3**) which was discovered in 1884 by Kadir Gaze, an inhabitant of Sarisadah, a village located near Dakshit Barasat, Jayanagar Thana, in the District of the 24 Parganas before entering the rich holding of the Indian Museum in Kolkata (inv. 2592).³ Measuring 152.4 x 79.36 cm, the sculpture is perfectly preserved, despite the broken upper pointed extremity. Although it has been mentioned or published by various authors, its very particularity which is to have been inspired by an image of the Gupta or post-Gupta period does not seem to have drawn the attention.

* * *

Nilman Chakravarti (1908: 88-89) provides the best and longest description in his catalogue of the collection of the Indian Museum⁴ which is summarized in one sentence in the 1911 edition of the catalogue by Theodor Bloch (pp. 81-82). Chakravarti identifies the female attendant with Lakṣmī while giving no name for the male figure (p. 88). Kalidas Dutt (1928-29/1930a: 12) identifies here the god as being Vāsudeva accompanied by the personified Cakra, Lambodara, and the personified Gadā or Sulocanā according to the *Viṣṇudharmottara* of Hemādri. In his two studies concerned with a survey of the Sundarbans (1928-29/1930a & 1930b), this author furnishes, moreover, a detailed account of the ‘antiquities’ collected in the region where this Viṣṇu was discovered.

J.N. Banerjea (1945: 79; 1956: 403-404) refers to this image where he recognizes Gadādevī and the Cakrapuruṣa. Enamul Haque (1992: 61)⁵, although referring to J.N. Banerjea’s writings in his Ph.D. Thesis in 1972, published in 1992, suggests to recognize here ‘Pradyumna and Balarāma, or Viśvākṣena and Vatsa-daṇḍa’, i.e. two male attendants, having overlooked the fact that the over-dimensional attributes *gadā* and *cakra* are carved behind the two characters.

In his book on *Vaiṣṇavism in Eastern India*, Pranabananda Jash (1982: 59)⁶ quotes the identification given by J.N. Banerjea, but because of the presence of the two small *āyudhapuruṣas* at the side of the composition and of the ‘ascetic-like figure’ in the pedestal (in fact, the donor/devotee), he suggests to identify this image as being ‘the Yogasthānakamūrti of Viṣṇu’.

* * *

When we compare this sculpture, even briefly, to other images found in the region,⁷ it becomes evident that this image is not a local production but must have been imported from North Bengal, comparing for instance to images from Gazole, Malda District (**Plate 26.6**).⁸ Such images like those reproduced on **Plates 26.4-5** integrate, each of them, motifs observed in the Sarisadah sculpture. Without entering here into a detailed stylistic analysis, let us underline that the image in the National Museum of Bangladesh (**Plate 26.4**) presents the same *kaustubha* jewel attached to the necklace, the same composition of the pommel of the *gadā*, two large flowers on both extremities of the pedestal (see here at the right corner, symmetric to the devotee) which appear also on images from Rajshahi District,⁹ and Garuḍa in the middle of the pedestal, facing the viewer, on his own lotus-pedestal (see also **Plate 26.7**).¹⁰

Similarly, we notice the following common features between the Sarisadah image and the sculpture preserved in the Asian Art Museum, Berlin (**Plate 26.5**): flying figures flanking the monstrous head topping the composition, similarly shaped nimbus with the row of intricate flames, and the same large rhomboid ornament in the middle of the necklace, same bulbous tiara adorned by a row of lotus petals at its basis (see also **Plates 26.7-8**), beside the same facial features, such as pointed chin, small mouth (also **Plates 26.6-8**).

We observe that the same flying *gandharvas* carrying a sword are introduced in the images of Dhaka and Berlin (and **Plates 26.6-8**) whereas the Sarasadah image shows them accompanied by their spouses. All sculptures share the same treatment of the lower part of the pedestal, the same aureole, the same shape of the nimbus, round but slightly pointed and flanked by triangular ornaments, eventually with a flat extremity (**Plates 26.6-8**), the same undulating movement of the sacred chord, the same ornamentation of the girdle, etc., the overall same scheme of composition. However, a close scrutiny in the carving of details reveals that the Sarasadah image might be slightly later: A fringe of tiny pleats runs along the edges of the shawl across the chest and to the skirt; the upper part of the moulded pedestal has angles accentuated by a circular line (seen on both parts of the pedestal whereas it is only carved in the lower part of the pedestal on the other two images; see also **Plates 26.6-7**). All images share the same form of the opening of the back-slab behind the god, i.e. the slab is carved through below the armpits up to the feet, which underlines the shape of the body and deepens the space behind the central deity, and which differs from the opening in the back-slab in images from the Vikrampur area or further East where it forms a horizontal rectangle behind the upper part of the body: wider, it is there also to be seen behind the arms.¹¹ All images also favour the presence of plain and smooth surfaces on the back-slab, emphasizing this way such motifs as the *kīrtimukha*, the figures flying on their clouds, and even, on the Sarisadah image in particular, the ornamentation of the back-throne. This sculpture was thus carved in North Bengal, most probably in the second half of the twelfth century.

* * *

As mentioned above, what makes this image peculiar is that it does not follow the iconographic pattern usually adopted in the eleventh and twelfth centuries in Bengal (or Bihar) and which is illustrated here on

Plates 26.4-8. The god lowers down his four arms, and is not flanked by his wives Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī,¹² but by the *āyudhapuruṣas* of the club and the disk, i.e. the Gadādevī Kaumodakī and the Cakrapuruṣa Sudarśaṇacakra. Two further small *āyudhapuruṣas* complete the group, positioned as usual behind the main attendants; they can be identified with the personifications of the conch and, strange as it might appear, of the disk – identification allowed through comparison with other images (**Plates 26.5-8**).¹³ The attitude of these two figures may vary: The weapon can be carried on the head (**Plates 26.5-6**) or, as it is the case here, on a lotus held by the left hand (and **Plates 26.7-8**).¹⁴

The magnified club and disk are visible behind their respective personification (**Plates 26.2-3**); the disk forms an elongated aureole behind Sudarśaṇacakra, with the extremities of its spokes radiating all around (**Plate 26.3a**) whereas the club is carved behind Kaumodakī, its elaborated pommel being seen at the level of the head, the lower extremity being partly hidden by the feet. Both attendants carry the same lotus flower; like Viṣṇu, the goddess holds a fruit, and wears the jewellery and dress traditionally presented by all goddesses, whereas Sudarśaṇacakra has the hair standing on end which forms like a nimbus.¹⁵

Viṣṇu lowers his four hands; while two are laying on the club and the disk, the other two ones present a fruit, as he does on early images from the Gupta to the early Pāla period (**Plates 26.10, 26.12**),¹⁶ and the conch, in the right and left hands respectively, a late element being here the tiny lotus also held in the right hand. Interestingly enough is the fact that the conch does not lay on his open hand, being prevented from falling through two fingers folded on it, as it is usually the case (**Plates 26.4, 26.8**), but is here fully seized by the hand, with two fingers sliding into it. The gesture is most unusual after the eighth century, and even at an earlier period, it remains rarely encountered in Eastern India. It is true that this particular manner evoked the god actually blowing into it,¹⁷ this interpretation is, however, most likely to be obsolete in the Bengali context of the twelfth century. In the present case, we have to do with a late copy of an unknown image which must pre-date the eighth century. One of the nicest examples is illustrated by the Narasiṃha from Shahkund in Bhagalpur District, Bihar (**Plate 26.9**).¹⁸ Other post-Gupta images from Bihar show the same way of holding the *śaṅkha*.¹⁹ On the contrary, whatever the period, artists from Bengal always preferred to present the conch on the open palm with the fingers closing on the attribute.²⁰ As to the tiny lotus, it is likewise observed since the eleventh century on images from North Bengal (**Plates 26.4, 26.8**), constituting a development of the ‘auspicious mark’ as named by Gouriswar Bhattacharya.²¹

As mentioned above, the sculpture remains alien in the surrounding where it was recovered but relates to the contemporary production of North Bengal (Malda and Rajshahi Districts), and this lets surmise that it must have been ordered in a north Bengali atelier. But its particular way of illustrating an aspect of Viṣṇu iconography departs from the contemporary trend illustrated here on **Plates 26.4-8** and makes it equally unfamiliar in the region. We presume that either the artist or the donor, but most probably the donor, must have seen an early image of the Gupta or post-Gupta showing the personified attributes touched by the hands of the god. When studying the stylistic or iconographic development of a particular school, we tend perhaps too quickly to neglect this fact, which is that images continued to be worshiped all through the centuries, and that the worshippers like the artists were practically in a permanent contact with the production of bygone ages. Examples are known from other regions. The Gupta atelier of Sarnath produced a copy of early Kuṣāṇa images present in the site,²² and the Gupta atelier of Mathura drew its inspiration from the earlier Kuṣāṇa local production to create an image utmost unusual (**Plate 26.13**):²³ The central Buddha tames the wild elephant Nālāgiri, he is flanked by two smaller images of himself which are evidently copies of two

sculptures of the ‘*Kapardin* type’, in particularly the standing Buddha at the proper left of the central image. As to the seated image, and although it is backed by the large scalloped nimbus surrounded by the thick foliage of the Bodhi tree of earlier times, it combines it with the *bhūmisparśamudrā* which is introduced in the Gupta period. These are only a few striking examples of images being inspired by earlier sculptures, and where we can assume that they constituted particular commissions. The inspiration can also be limited to the use of some ornamental/ symbolic motifs. We notice, for instance, that the Gupta nimbus of Mathura with the lotus flower spread and the row of pearls appears on a Viṣṇu image from Bihar.²⁴

Most stone images showing Viṣṇu’s four hands being lowered down are observed in Bihar (**Plate 26.10**).²⁵ The type was, however, not altogether ignored in Bengal in the Gupta and post-Gupta periods, but since the region caught up with the development of the god’s iconography at a later period, the main phase where this type had been favoured in Bihar was already over. Small and rectangular slabs where the god is represented in an often very rough manner have been found in various regions of North and West Bengal; they show him with the four hands lowered down and with the enlarged *cakra* and *gadā*.²⁶ Small carvings of a higher quality than those slabs and illustrating the same iconography were also collected from various places of Bengal.²⁷ Within this context, we should draw the attention to terracotta images of this type which have surfaced around Mahasthan (Bogra District) in the recent years and which betray a high aesthetic quality. The first image to be mentioned here belongs to the Bangladesh National Museum (**Plate 26.11**): Both personified attributes are turned towards each other, practically profiled on either side of the god who leans his hands on them. The second terracotta, now in a private collection, is slightly later and has been restored; it includes the magnified weapons in place of their personification (**Plate 26.12**). Both testify to the existence of this iconography in North Bengal; such images were probably at the origin of the rough small carvings evoked above and which appear to have been produced as pious tokens, and such images might also have been at the origin of a sculpture like the Sarisadah image.

* * *

The sculpture is well balanced with Viṣṇu positioned on the vertical axis of symmetry; his body is profiled in the darkness created by the opening of the back-slab. The emptiness of the back reminds that the image is only a reflection arisen out of the void. Further, it isolates the god and enhances his importance: Alone, he stands in the centre, source of the universe which emanates out of his body. The four distinctive animals and mythical beings flanking him on either side and attached to the throne backing the deity symbolize, let us remember, the four elements which become entangled in the process of creation through the fifth element, i.e. the ether or quintessence. The sanctity of this phenomenon is here underlined by the presence of a plain zone which separates the throne and its animals from the aureole running along the edge of the image. Through this zone, the artist has chosen to introduce even more distance between the god and the human world.²⁸ Similarly, the traditional ornamentation and garments adorn the powerful body of the god, letting large bare parts counterbalancing the intricate and adorned back-slab. The prominence of the god over his attendants is also stressed by the depth of the carving as seen on **Plate 26.3a**.

The attendants depicted, as always, in decreasing sizes, are intrinsic part of the divine personality: They personify, as we know, the attributes which are held by the four divine hands, and are thus the direct continuation of the god’s body as well as they symbolize the divine power which is exercised through them. The presence of those personifications forces the attention exclusively on the god, whereas the representation of

the two wives Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī puts together deities of various origins within the Vaiṣṇava realm. This focusing of the perception fully coincides with the composition: When drawing two lines from the top of the lotus surmounting the *kirīṭa-mukuta* to the elbows of the two external *āyudhapuruṣas*, one gets a triangular space within which the five deities are completely included, which can never be the case in the usual representation of the god with two hands raised at the level of the shoulders. Even Garuḍa is included within this composition, fulfilling his function to carry the god (**Plates 26.1, 26.4, 26.7**); facing us, he appears in the direct prolongation of the god above him with whom he shares the frontal position, a position which is, in the range of positions presented by deities, the most impressive, the most adequate for representing the highest divine nature: The deity is offering him/herself to the look of his/her devotees. He is taller than when, as it is the case in most images of the period in North Bengal (**Plates 26.5-6, 26.8**),²⁹ he appears as a small character usually introduced in the right part of the pedestal, from where he is looking toward the centre of the composition, slightly turned toward Viṣṇu; in this situation, he is symmetric to the human devotees with whom he shares the gesture of venerating the god, i.e. he is depicted as if partly emerging out of the human world which is integrated in the lower level of the image.³⁰

The Sarisadah image is thus not a mere copy or adaptation of a Gupta model: The artist innovated in resorting to an iconographic model which was out-of-date and in integrating it with harmony into the stylistic composition of his time. He also managed in creating an elegant image, carved with attention and elaborated on a very complex and subtle structure which reflects the Indian perception of creation of the universe and relationship between the devotee and the deity.

Notes

1. Bhattacharya 2007: 103; see further Bautze-Picron 1985: 467 (where I suggest to identify the round mark, wrongly labelled by me ‘rosette’, as emblem of the *cakravartin*), and pp. 470-472. One can distinguish three treatments of the motif: 1) the ‘auspicious sign’ (Bhattacharya) or ‘*cakravartin*’ emblem (i.e. the *cakra*) (myself); 2) the tiny lotus flower substituted to it (Bautze-Picron 1985: 471& note 185) still understood by Bhattacharya as being the auspicious sign; and 3) the lotus flower of a size equal to the size of the other attributes (Bhattacharya 2007: 103; Bautze-Picron 1985: 471& note 187). Considering the epigraphic and literary material available, the deity should be named Vāsudeva or even Nārāyaṇa at a later period (Bautze-Picron 1986). For sake of easiness, I shall retain here the common denomination Viṣṇu all through this paper.
2. Bhattacharya 2007: 99-101; Bautze-Picron 1985: 441-76 also distinguished four ‘epochs’ (A. Gupta and post-Gupta epochs; B. Post-Gupta and Pāla epochs; C. Pāla epoch, period 1; D. Pāla-Sena epoch, periods 2-4 with a distinction between the northern and south-eastern types).
3. Chakravartti 1908: 88-89 (with a long description) and after him Bloch 1911: 81 who refers to the image only as being “an excellent work of the chisel carved out of a very hard basalt stone” (also quoted by Dutt 1928-29: 12) while quoting the origin after Chakravartti’s caption. The measurements are given, however, only in Bloch’s catalogue. Dutt reproduces also a pillar of nearly 2,54 m (10 feet) which was discovered in the vicinity; he suggests that it might have belonged to the temple where the image under study was worshipped (*ibid.* and fig. 15); however, it does not seem to be contemporary to the sculpture. The image is reproduced on his fig. 14.
4. Nilman Chakravartti was apparently the author of the catalogue which was published in 1911 under the name of Theodor Bloch. In his catalogue, only known to me through a proof copy, which was printed at the Pioneer Press in Allahabad in 1908, the descriptions are longer but no measurement is given.

5. And see p. 355 under no. 622 for a further reference (all references are evidently after Dutt 1928-29: 3).
6. However, although his description mentions the four arms of the god, in the caption to his pl. II.b, he refers to the god as being ‘*dvibhuja*’ (p. 281). Apparently he drew his identification from Banerjea 1956: 403.
7. For such images, see Dutt’s articles.
8. Other similar images from the region are mentioned by Bautze-Picron 1998: 97, note 87.
9. Preserved in the Varendra Research Museum inv. 81 (discovered at Bihanali) (Rahman 1998: 54-55, no. 117, with further references, pl. 71); inv. 342 (from Deopara, Godagari) (Rahman 1998: 64, no. 144; Huntington archive no. 13098). See also another image in the same museum, inv. 651 (unrecorded provenance) (Rahman 1998: 71-72, no. 169, pl. 87) where the two flowers are still organically attached to the stalk which runs on the pedestal and bears the other lotus flowers.
10. This image presents two iconographic peculiarities: First, the two female attendants carry the same attribute, i.e. the *padma*, and second eight tiny male images are seated in two rows of four behind the goddesses, holding a sceptre or a club (?) in the left hand while presenting the gesture of protection with the right one. Could they be the Dikpālas? For the attendants, see below note 12.
11. See for instance Haque 1992: pls. 26, 28.
12. Lakṣmī, also named Indirā, can be paired with Vasumatī (Bhūdevī); see Bühnemann 2001: 246 (also Haque 1992: 62); as Śrī, she is paired to Puṣṭi, another name for Sarasvatī (see Bhattacharya 2007: 104-106). Haque suggests recognizing Vasumatī in images where the goddess does not show the *vīṇā* but the *padma*, such as on **Plate 26.4** here.
13. Banerjea 1956: 403 recognizes here the Padmapuruṣa.
14. Compare the image in Begley 1973: 60, figs. 39 & 40.
15. Numerous other Gupta and post-Gupta images showing the personifications are published by Asher 1970 (see Bautze-Picron 1985: 442-444, 446 for the references).
16. I shall not discuss here anymore the identity of this attribute; see Bautze-Picron 1985: 452-465. Banerjea 1956: 403 identifies the attribute as being a lotus bud; however, the presence of the tiny lotus held by the same hand prevents us from agreeing to this identification. J.N. Banerjea published earlier the chapter X of his book, including his remarks on this image in a series of three papers entitled “Hindu Iconography” which were published in the *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, vols. XIII, XIV and XVI (1956: vii); his remarks on the image under survey appear in the first paper (vol. XIII, 1945: 79; as quoted by Haque 1992: 61).
17. Concerning the meaning of the conch in the mediaeval period in North India, consult Taddei 1993 who also makes observations concerning the way of holding the conch.
18. Asher 1980: 30-31, pl. 32, “late fifth or early sixth century”.
19. Asher 1980: pls. 9, 26. And from Bengal: Rahman 1998: 105, no. 273 (with further references), pl. 112. Variations are noticed in the way of showing the conch in Bihar during the Gupta and post-Gupta periods, see Asher 1980: pl. 65 where the standing conch is sustained by the fingers of the god. The traditional manner of presenting the conch is however the most wide-spread: Asher 1980: pls. 101, 107, 123, 150, and 155, and from a later period: 132, 133, 158, 159, 189, and 196-197. From Eastern India and also from the pre-Pāla period, see Begley 1973: figs. 32-35; from the ninth to tenth century: *ibid.*: figs. 37-38 (both images from Bihar).
20. Asher 1980: pls. 37, 104, 234, 237, and 242-244.
21. For further examples and a discussion of this controversial element, see Bautze-Picron 1985: 470-472, pls. XIc-XIIc, XIIIb, Xb (other images are mentioned in note 185); Bautze-Picron 2002: figs. 1-4.

22. Williams 1982: pl. 26 which should be compared to pl. 6 (see J. Williams' remarks on p. 34).
23. See also Huntington archive no. 11363; American Institute of Indian Studies no. 1577.
24. Begley 1973: fig. 37.
25. See images quoted in note 16.
26. Akmam 2006: 188-189, 191, pls. 13.12-13, 13.15 (Mahasthangarh); Rahman 1998: 78-79, no. 189, pl. 94 (Rajshahi Dt.); *ibid.*: 77, no. 185, pl. 93 (from Khari, 24 Parganas Dt.; see also: *Annual Report of the Varendra Research Society for 1929-30*: 4, fig. 1). A further example is reproduced on the website of Michael Bjorkqvist ("Asian Master Piece"), Copenhagen, item 449679 (www.trocadero.com/AMP/).
27. Rahman 1998: 71, no. 162 (with further references), pl. 84; *ibid.*: 71, no. 168 (with further references) pl. 86; *ibid.*: 95-96, no. 245 (with further references), pl. 104; *ibid.*: 104, no. 271 (with further references), pl. 111, where the *āyudhapuruṣas* are depicted; *ibid.*: 105, no. 274 (with further references), pl. 112.
28. Concerning this approach of the art object, see Bautze-Picron 2000, and more particularly in relation to the sculpture from Bengal, Bautze-Picron (in press).
29. Bautze-Picron 1985: 466, 469, pls. VIII-XIV.a. However, we notice in the twelfth century in this region an influence from Southeast Bengal where the divine bird is traditionally facing the viewer, half kneeling below Viṣṇu (*ibid.*: 473, pls. XIV.b-XV.c, XVI.b).
30. Bautze-Picron 2000: 203-204.

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Bangladesh National Museum.
Photo © Joachim K. Bautze.



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Viṣṇu, North Bengal.
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Photo © Asian Art Museum.



Plate 26.6:
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Photo © Archaeological
Survey of India,
New Delhi.



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Photo © National
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After Sotheby's 1993:
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 Hazaribagh District
 (now Jharkand).
 After
www.collectbritain.co.uk
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Plate 26.11:
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 Private collection.
 Photo ©
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Plate 26.13:
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 Photo ©
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PRAJÑĀDHARA

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