

“When the lake drained away” The 600 Nāgas of Kashmir

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Résumé: Le Cachemire a conservé une liste de quelque 600 Nāgas locaux, des êtres semi-divins ressemblant à des serpents qui habitent la Vallée. Ils vivent dans les étangs et les ruisseaux avec les humains arrivés plus tardivement. La raison de leur nombre exceptionnellement élevé et de leur localisation dans la Vallée reste énigmatique. Un examen plus approfondi de la nature sous-jacente des Nāgas comme encapsulant et contrôlant, contrairement à l'Inde, les eaux, y compris sous forme de glace et neige, établit leur préhistoire dans la région de Bactriane/Hindukush. Leur disposition au Cachemire est dû à des cercles évoluant dans le sens des aiguilles d'une montre formés de huit Nāgas, commençant par Nīla dans le sud-est de la Vallée.

Mots-clés: Nāgas, Cachemire, Inde, Bactriane, Hindukush.

Abstract: Kashmir has preserved a list of some 600 local Nāgas, the semi-divine snake-like beings that inhabit the Valley. They live in ponds and streams along with the later-arrived humans. The reason for their exceptionally high number and for their widespread locations in the Valley remain enigmatic. A closer look at the underlying nature of the Nāgas as encapsulating and controlling, unlike in India, the waters, including as ice and snow, establishes their prehistory in the Bactria/Hindukush area. Their arrangement in Kashmir is due to clockwise circles of eight Nāgas each, starting with Nīla in the southeast of the Valley.

Keywords: Nāgas, Kashmir, India, Bactria, Hindukush.

The 600 Nāgas of the Kashmirian *Nīlamata Purāṇa*

The multitude of Nāga names, some 600, contained in a long section of the *Nīlamata Purāṇa*, (NM vss. 881 - 946)¹ of Kashmir has baffled many readers of the text. As is well known, Nāgas are semi-divine beings, usually depicted with a human upper part of their body and a snake-like lower part. They can change shape to fool humans but revert to snakes when sleeping or having sex.² In Kashmir the Nāgas are deities that reside in the springs, ponds, lakes, and rivers of the Valley. Large springs are called *nāg*, small ones *nāgini*.³ They are imagined, even nowadays, in the form of snakes.⁴

1. In the critical edition by de Vreese, Leiden 1935.

2. See the Pali text about a Nāga who became a monk to shorten his path to deliverance, but who was detected by a cellmate who saw him sleeping in form of a snake, see Vinaya I 87 (cf. Suttanipāta III 241).

3. Bühler, 1877.

4. Bühler, Report 1877; Stein, *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, 1.30, note. Cf. Crooke, 1894, p. 383-399.

The Nāgas of Kashmir as earlier inhabitants

In the NM and elsewhere Nāgas appear as inhabitants of the Valley. However, a common problem is the confusion between demigods or demons and tribal names, which, more often than not, were given to signify the somewhat demoniac nature of foreign tribes, living at the fringes of one's own civilization, for example in the Chinese, Greek and Indian civilizations.

Another group of early inhabitants of Kashmir are the Piśācas. Along with their chief Nikumb(h)a, they decidedly have a more demoniac nature in the NM.⁵ But in other texts, such as the Epic and some Purāṇas, they appear as a tribe of the North-West.⁶ In NM 200 sqq., the Piśācas are said to have lived in Kashmir in a previous Caturyuga. But for half a year they go to the “ocean of sand” (*bālukārṇava*) where their chief Nikumbha fights the local demons for six months beginning in the month of Caitra, and returns to Kashmir and the Himalaya (NM 210) on the fifteenth day of the bright half of the month of Aśvayuj, -- an event yearly remembered in the festivals of Kashmir.

This half-yearly absence of the Piśācas “in the ocean of sand”, the Takla Makan desert north of Kashmir, makes one think of transhumant herdsmen who periodically come to Kashmir⁷, belonging to a northern tribe in the vicinity of Kashmir. They may represent earlier inhabitants that were marginalized by the Kashmirian Nāgas and humans that, in the worldview of the NM and *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, dwell together in the Valley.⁸

The intention of the texts obviously is to show a series of consecutive inhabitants of the Valley. The Nāgas, in fact, are quite different from the Piśācas. Not only

5. Note that *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* 5.469 also knows of a village called Piśācapura, where, ironically, the virtuous king Yaśaskara was born.

6. See the materials collected by Ved Kumari, 1968, p. 58 sqq. There also is a country Nikumba in the *Milindapañha* (tr. SBE 35, p.203-4, ed. p.231) while enumerating these countries: Saka-Yavane pi Cīna-Vilāte pi Alasande pi Nikumbe pi Kāsi-Kosale pi Kasmīre pi Gandhāre pi. Nikumba is a Northern country close to Kashmir; the loss of aspiration in aspirated mediae is typical for Kashmiri and the surrounding Dardic languages.

7. But they do so in the wrong season, in winter, when they cannot get food for their animals in the Valley, which is covered by snow. Nevertheless, it probably is easier for them to stay in the Valley than in the even more hostile Himalayan pastures north of the Valley.

8. In the description given by NM 201, the Nāgas were intended to live in Kashmir but were at first cursed by Kaśyapa to live together with the Piśācas, and only after one Caturyuga, with humans (NM 214). See see *Nilamata Purāṇa* (LR 210 sqq.) with non-IA names: chief of the Piśāca: Nikumb(h)a and largely indigenous Nāga names such as Karkoṭa, Aṭa, Baḍi, Bahabaka, Cāṭara, Cikura, Cukkaka...

do they dwell in the company of men, who worship them (NM 216), but they are not demoniac and usually friendly semi-divine beings.

Their case, however, is more complicated. A simple transfer from Nāgas as shape shifting snake deities to more or less anthropomorphic local deities is difficult to understand without taking a much closer look at the origins and the development of the concept of Nāgas in India.

Reading the *Rājataranṅiṇī* (and similar texts) one is surprised, time and again, by Nāga features that do not fit Indian Nāgas. Strangely, Kashmiri Nāgas bring ice and snow as punishment for the early prevailing Buddhist worship and thus, for the neglect in the Valley of the chief Nāga Nīla and the others. Kashmiri Nāgas even reside in frozen ponds and lakes.⁹

This non-snakelike behavior, impossible to imagine in India proper, can only be understood against the general religious background of the Dardic and Nuristani (Kafiri) area, now called *Peristan* by some, after the common local word for fairies, *peri*.

The Nāgas of Peristan ultimately reflect concepts that seem to go back to at least c.2000 BCE, when they are found in the Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex or Oxus civilization.¹⁰

There, we find an opposition between two major entities: one is the 'water demon', depicted as a one-eyed man with reptile skin, who carries a water bottle in his arm (see illustration). According to Francfort, he is encompassing the waters during the dry winter months, when they are cooped up in ice and snow. In spring they are released,¹¹ through the activities of another major mythological figure,¹² the "Hero", a muscular eagle-headed human with wings and bird feet.¹³

This reflects the old Iranian and Vedic myth of the release of the waters¹⁴ by the great hero Indra, who slays the demon "resistance" (*vṛtra*, RV 1.32 etc.), personified as great reptile. Indra and his Iranian counterpart are called *vṛtrahan* / *vərəθrağna* 'slaying the resistance'. Actually, Indra seems to have been

9. Typical for the Nuristan area, see Buddruss and Degener, 2015, for traditional Prasun mythological tales. Note the main river Lunang < **Deva-nāga*.

10. Francfort, 1994.

11. See Forssmann 1968 on the Avestan demon of draught, Apaoša.

12. There also are other deities, such as a "mother goddess" type, clad in an elaborate sheep wool dress: Francfort, 1994, with illustrations.

13. The local biological background is that of the *Lämmergeier* culture who carries away lambs. He fights, as is the case, also with a boar or a tiger.

14. In India as the monsoon rains; in Afghanistan as snow melt (*vaējah*), see Falk, 1997.

a local¹⁵ epithet or designation for the Hero, who has incorporated many features of the Indo-European “dragon slayer”.¹⁶ In the Veda this defeat clearly is a periodic feature that occurs around winter solstice when time, society, etc. break down, to be re-established after New Year.¹⁷

The relationship of this myth with transhumance is obvious, especially in the greater Hindukush mountains, as described in the Avesta text *Vīdēvdād* 1.1-2:¹⁸ herders stay in the highland, “the best of Aryan places” (*airiianəm vaējah*) for just two summer months, the others being too cold.

This feature is still visible with the NIA speaking Kalasha of Chitral, on the border of Afghanistan,¹⁹ as that of the local transhumance situation: the opposition, on one hand, of high mountain pastures and their deities, notably the seductive fairies (from Persian), the “Apsaras” (Kalash *jaç < yakṣī*) and, on the other, the human herders. Both can interact in the alpine meadows, where they may come down to in the summer pastures, though not always in a friendly way. Certain high, “pure” mountains are the favored seats of the fairies, especially the impressive, 7708 m high pyramid of the Kailāsa-like Tirich Mir North of Chitral. One such incident is reported for Kashmir in Kalhaṇa’s *Rājataranṅiṇī* (3.468-470), when King Raṇāditya, around 500 CE, entered a mountain cave of the fairies, when he disappeared into the company of Daitya women.²⁰

In the autumn, the human pastoralists and their herds move down to their villages, and the fairies, after descending from the high mountains to the soon snow-clad alpine meadows, stay there. There is a general pattern of belief in the Hindukush-Himalayan area in mountain fairies. The Kalash distinguish between Suchi (*sūci*), who are helpers in the hunt and in the killing of enemies, and the *varōti* who are the more violent and angry male partners of the Suchi, reflecting the later Vedic (and typical medieval Kashmiri) distinction between Apsarases and Nāga/Gandharvas.²¹

When the Peri visit the high mountain meadows in summer, there is a special role for Kalasha half-grown boys, who are treated with special awe. They combine, like the Vedic Brahmacārins, pre-puberty behavior and the purity of

15. The word ‘Indra’ has no good IE etymology, see Mayrhofer, 1986 sqq.

16. Watkins, 1995.

17. Still visible in the Kalash myth about Indr visiting at winter solstice, cf. Witzel, 2004: <http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/%7Ewitzel/KalashaReligion.pdf>.

18. Witzel, 2000.

19. See Witzel, forthcoming.

20. See Witzel, 2004 (*R̥gvedic Religious System*).

21. Note the angry ghost emerging from a frozen lake, in Buddruss, 2015.

the high mountains, where they tend goats during the summer months. The same degree of purity cannot be attained by men who interact with women and impure entities in the villages.

The stress on the purity of the high mountain regions, as habitat of fairies and the black/red demons (like Rudra) seems to be a local feature of the mountain chain from the Hindukush to the (western) Himalayas. Many of their characteristics further elucidate what we observe in the RV (Gandharva, Rudra, Apsaras, Yakṣa) and especially in the AV, as features of the deities, demigods and spirits living in the high mountains. Such items clearly belong to the ancient mountain cultures of the Hindukush-Pamir-Himalayas²² and have been taken over, only fragmentarily, into Vedic religion.²³

Thus, the nature of Nāgas and their female counterparts, the fairies, can only be understood against Peristani background.

Reasons for the importance of Nāgas in Kashmir

Focusing now again on the 600-odd-items long list of Nāgas of the Kashmir Valley, connected with its ponds, streams and lakes, they are depicted as the earlier inhabitants of the valley, who are to be worshipped by their human co-inhabitants. Regarding their multitude, unparalleled in other texts, a first obvious question must be: what is the reason for this agglomeration of Nāgas? The NM list neither fits the pan-Indian Hindu or Buddhist lists of important Nāgas, nor does it agree with that of some prominent Indian Nāgas known in Kashmir,²⁴ nor with that of important local Nāgas.

As had been indicated, it is not the relative importance of the Nāgas that decided their position in the long list found in NM. This can immediately be seen even in the ordering of the very first few Nāgas. After mentioning the chief Nāga of Kashmir, Nīla, the list continues with: Vāsuki, Upataṣṣaka, Kambala-Aśvataṛa, Kārkoṭaka-Dhanaṃjaya, Ailāpattra, Ananta, Nanda-Upanandaka, Kulika, Śveta-Śaṅkha, Pālāsa, Kheḍima, Baḍi... These are partly

22. See also Witzel, 2012.

23. Examples include the shamans (except for the RV Muni) and their rituals (except for a trace in the Vājapeya ritual and maybe some healing ceremonies in the AV); the role of boys and adolescents as semi-priests; the centrality of goat sacrifice and blood, of sacred twigs (juniper), and of megalithic monuments.

24. Note that Kashmir does the same in the introduction *Rājatarāṅginī* 1. 30, see Stein *ad loc.* Kalhaṇa mentions two Nāgas, Śaṅkha and Padma. They are known from NM no. 13 *śveta12-śaṅkha*13 and *śaṅkha*pālo18; NM 1245cd *kālodakam nandikuṇḍaṃ śaṅkha-cakrau gadāṃ tathā; padma*25, as a *tīrtha* NM 1246.

well-known, partly completely unknown names. (The actual list will be dealt with in a longer, book-length version of this paper). Some NM Nāgas (such as Vāsuki, Nanda, Upananda, Sāgara)²⁵ are also mentioned in Buddhist literature, though in a slightly different order. But others clearly are otherwise unknown or typical for Kashmir (e.g. Hullura,²⁶ or Śaṅkha). We will have to revert to their ordering later.

So far, the NM is the only list in Sanskrit literature that gives so many names of different Nāgas. There are, it is true, a few lists to be found in the Epic and in Buddhist Skt. texts,²⁷ which run to some 80 names or so, but the NM list is, by all means, remarkable, even if we take into account that the Nāgas, ultimately, are innumerable: for example when they appear at the time of Janamejaya's *sarpasattra* in the *Mahābhārata* (1.53.2052, 1.57.2148), and as Mbh. 1.31.1 indeed calls them (see below).²⁸

The Nature of the Nāgas

In order to understand the Kashmirian Nāgas more deeply, a look into early Indian texts is necessary. They reveal a wealth of information on snakes and snake-like or dragon-like beings or such semi-deities.

In Indo-European myth, there is the very common concept of a primordial snake, called Śeṣa in the Indian Epic, or Midgard snake in Germanic mythology. And there is a dragon that guards the waters and is killed by a heroic god like Indra Vṛtrahan in India, or Vərəθrayna in Iranian, or Beowulf in Saxon mythology.²⁹ The motif can even be found well beyond the limits of Indo-European mythology, e.g. as Yamata no Orochi in old Japan³⁰ and in oldest China. Nevertheless, it is instructive to witness the specifically Indian concept of the Nāgas gradually emerge in the older Vedic texts. In fact, the RV does not know of the Nāgas under this name. However, the old Indo-European word for “snake”

25. *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, ed. Bunyiu Nanjio, p. 4 line 11. Cf. also the lists of Yakṣas published by S. Lévi, JA 1915, 19-138, BEFEO 1905, 264 sqq.

26. With v.l. *huluḍa*, cf. *holāḍa*, *huluṭa* in Kashmir, see NM 882.

27. See Enomoto, 1994; and in the *Mahāvīyutpatti*, ed. Minayeff p. 46 ff.; Yumiko Ishihama and Yoichi Fukuda, *A New Critical Edition of the Mahāvīyutpatti, Sanskrit-Tibetan-Mongolian Dictionary of Buddhist Terminology. Materials for Tibetan-Mongolian Dictionaries*, Vol. 1, (Studia Tibetica No. 16), The Toyo Bunko, Tokyo 1989, no. 3212 sqq., p. 164.

28. They are enumerated at Mbh. 1.52 (1.57.2148 sqq.) as being descendants of Vāsuki, Takṣaka, Airāvata, Dhṛtarāṣṭra.

29. See Watkins, 2013.

30. Witzel, 2005.

(*sarpa*-) is attested, as well as the root “to crawl”, *sṛp*.³¹ While hooded Nāga-like figures appear already in pre-Ṛgvedic times on Indus seals,³² serpent worship need not have been borrowed from the non-Indo-Aryan peoples of India. Note also that even the very word meaning “snake” (*sarpa*) only appears in the late 10th book of the RV, which is much closer to the language and some of the topics found in the second oldest text, the *Atharvaveda*. The Nāgas, albeit only under their common name *sarpa*, make several appearances, sometimes in the company of other semi-divine beings such as the Gandharvas and Apsaras.³³ Some of the occurrences in AV were discussed in more detail by J. Ph. Vogel.³⁴ Another interesting aspect of the Nāgas in the AV is that one of their oldest names is Śarkoṭa that occurs at PS 1.4.8. and 4.17.1, (AV 7.56.5) and with its derivative form Śārkoṭa, at PS 1.48.4, see also AV 7.56.7. Its later counterpart, Kārkoṭa is found in the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, in NM, in the *Mahābhārata* and the *Purāṇas*, as well as in the various Nepalese³⁵ accounts of the drainage of the Kathmandu Valley³⁶ a topic dealt at length in the seminal article by Nick Allen, to whom this volume is dedicated.³⁷ A special feature found in the AV is the mentioning of the snakes as the “four³⁸ or six dragons guarding the corners of the world, the directions of the sky,³⁹

31. RV 8.17.7c, 10.16.6, 10.18.10.

32. See Marshall, 1931: plates CXVI, CXVII.

33. But note that the word *nāga* does not occur in the Paipp. AV either (even where, as in PS 9.12.3, it has to be parsed and understood differently). Cf. especially the grouping of the snakes with the Gandharvas, Apsaras, *puṇyajana*, *pitṛ* and *deva*.

34. Ved Kumari, NM I, p. 46 sqq., Vogel, *Serpent Lore: AV* (Śaunaka) 3.26 directions of sky; 3.27, cf. 4.40, 5.10; 4.7, 5.13, 5.23, 6.12, 6.56, 7.56, 7.88, 10.4. Cf. now also Paippalāda AV on snakes (*sarpa*) 1.48.1b, 1.87.4d, 1.96.4b, 2.42.3a, 2.42.3a, 2.58.4c, 2.58.4c, 5.3.5b, 5.3.6a, 7.2.3a, 7.2.3b, 7.13.7a, 7.15.8c, 8.6.10b, 8.16.6b, 9.6.4d, 9.9.1a, 9.26.5a, 10.12.5a, 10.14.2a, 11.7.2a, 13.1.5a, 13.3.2b, 13.7.6b, 15.11.3a, 15.14.9b, 15.23.12c, 16.14.2c, 16.17.5d, 16.30.5b, 16.56.1b, 16.78.3b, 16.78.6b, 16.84.7b, 16.135.8a, 16.135.8g, 16.137.2d, 16.138.4d, 16.138.5b, 17.5.4a, 17.5.4d, 18.62.5a, 18.74.2a, 19.2.13b, 19.19.6d, 19.22.1a, 19.22.1d, 20.40.5a.

35. Karkoṭa is the only major Nāga that remains in the Kathmandu Valley after the lake had been drained, in a large pond, Taudāha, near Kirtipur and Cobhar.

36. The vacillation of *k/ś* is typical for “foreign” names in some older Vedic texts. Apparently, the local name had a sound which the Vedic Aryans could pronounce only as *k* or *ś*. As *ś* originally was a palatal the local sound must have been a palatal *k* (*k'*), a postalveolar *c* [ts] or close to the Skt. *ś* [ʃ]. This concerns only non-Indo-Aryan words: Śambara RV :: *kambala*, *kambu*, (Kamboja?, cf. Old Pers. *Kambūjīya*).

37. Allen, 1997.

38. Vogel, *Serpent Lore*, p. 8.

39. AV 3.26, PS 3.11 and AV 3.27, PS 3.24 which combine the enumeration of directions of sky and snake charms and on which Vogel observes: “represent 4 directions of the

(AV 3.26-27,⁴⁰ PS 3.11 3.24), cf. AV 4.40 (PS 13.1, PSK 13.12), which is comparable to the later anthropomorphic *lokapālas*.⁴¹ However, this does not play a role in the order of Nāgas in the NM.

Regarding the concept of Nāgas, some of the Nāga names have been retained right down from the AV to modern day Bengal and some of the ideas and expressions have been kept as well. This could be exemplified in detail, but for want of space I merely enumerate some basic features of snakes and their Skt. designations. Such expressions⁴² and beliefs have been described in detail by Vogel.⁴³ The famous rope illusion of Śaṅkara appears already in the AV that describes the snake as a “toothed rope” (*datvatī rajju*),⁴⁴ and the same image is used even today when a snake bite is described with the words “a rope has touched me.”⁴⁵

Importantly, several names of famous kings or other Kṣatriyas occur also as sky” (Serpent Lore, p.8) and: “four or six dragons guarding the corners of the world ... more primitive than that of the anthropomorphic *lokapālas*” (Serpent Lore, p.9) -- cf. *Yajurveda*: TS 5.5.10, and the Pāli *Parittas*, for example in *Cullavagga* 5.6, *Jātaka* 2, p. 145; -- cf. also the names at AV 6.56, PS 19.9.15 “homage to the god-people ... Asita [black] ... Tiraśchiraji [crosslines] ... Svaja [adder?] ... Babhru [brown] ...”; AV 6.56.1 (cf. PS 19.9.15) Asita [black], ... Tiraśchiraji [crosslined], Prḍāku, Kaṅkarvan; AV 5.13.5-6, PS 8.2.4-5: Kairāta, Prṣṇa, Upatṛṇya, Babhru, Asita, Taimāta, Babhru, Asita.

40. Cf. Vogel, *Serpent Lore*, p. 7; Whitney-Lanman, ad AV 3.36 compare the old *Parittas Jātaka* II p. 3416, *Cullavagga* V.6 and *Jātaka* II, p. 145 no. 203.

41. Vogel, *Serpent Lore*, p. 9; cf. TS 5.5.10. This thought is, of course, based on the Chinese idea of world dragons and has no direct bearing on the Indian scheme. Nevertheless, there are aspects of a North-Asian substrate in both the Iranian, Indian and Chinese system of directions of the sky, for instance in the colors associated with them, see Witzel, *Jungavestisch apāxədra- im System der avestischen Himmelsrichtungsbezeichnungen*, *MSS* 30, (1972), p. 183, n. 19.

42. The Amarakośa has 25 synonyms: *bhujaga*, *bhujamga*, *bhogin*, *pannaga*, *uraga*, *jihmaga*, (cf. Vogel, *Serpent Lore*, p.13), *urogama* (*Suparṇ.* 15.3), *uraṅga* (*Bhāg. Pur.* 10.16.23), *cakrin*, *kuṇḍalin*.

43. Vogel, 1926.

44. AV “biting rope”, AV 4.3.2 (PS 2.8.2) SBE 43 (Bloomfield) p. 147, 366. See now, Lee Siegel, *Net of Magic: Wonders and Deceptions in India*, Chicago 1991; A snake described as a “putrid rope” (*pūtirajju*) at AV 8.8.2 (PS 16.29.2), see Bloomfield, 1897, p. 117, 582; cf. also *Jātaka* II, p. 144; I, 22. - Other modern taboo usage, according to Crooke: A snake is called “maternal uncle” (Note that this might explain the curious relation of the Nāgas with the departed ancestors (see below): just as the maternal uncle is one’s only important relative on the mother’s side and one’s friend, in the same way the Nāgas are related to humas on the mother’s side, as e.g. Purūravas’ marriage with the Apsaras Urvaśī.

45. Crooke, *Folklore of N. India*, II, p. 142 sq.

names of snakes and Nāgas.⁴⁶ In the NM list we find: Kauravya, Dhanamjaya, Dhṛtarāṣṭra. 5.15, the discussion of some of these names appear in compound names⁴⁷ of Nāgas, which are quite common. Some such compound names found in the Epic and Purāṇas also occur in the NM list, but also separately: Kambala-Aśvatara, Kāla-Upakāla, Nanda-Upananda, Kuṇḍara-Mahodara, Durmukha-Sumukha, Nanda-Upananda, Badhira-Andha, Virasa-Surasa.

Importantly, at Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa 25.15 the sacrifice carried out by the serpent beings Dhṛtarāṣṭra Airavata, Takṣaka, Janamejaya, etc. has: "By this sacrifice the snakes have conquered death; death is conquered by those who will perform this sacrifice. Therefore they cast off old skin, and having cast off their old skin, they creep out of it, as they have conquered death. The Ādityas are the snakes. The splendour of the Ādityas becomes the (splendour) of those who perform this."⁴⁸ (Caland). Here the snakes are both identified with long-deceased heroes, otherwise known from the Mahābhārata, but also with a particular group of Ṛgvedic gods, the Ādityas: in both cases they represent diverse forms of ancestors of 'present' humankind: directly as heroes, or indirectly as gods, -- for, all humans descend from Manu Vaivasvata, a son of the Āditya Visvasvant Mārtāṇḍa.

It has not been observed that in the three worlds, the snake-like Ādityas/Gandharvas, the (divine/human) Vrātyas, and the Veda students (when on study break) are not married and live in temporary sexual unions only.

The curious median character of Sarpas/Nāgas and of humans (heroes) in the Vedic texts is also seen in their appearances birds: many Ṛṣis and Vedic teachers, such as Tittiri, Haridru.⁴⁹

It is to be expected that Nāgas should also appear as such. Indeed, the *Atharvaveda*'s Kauśika Sūtra 32.20, refers to the hymn AV 10.4 which deals with a dragon-like reptile, the *ahi*, is addressed to Takṣaka and the same hymn is used at the beginning of Vedic study at Kauś 139.8. AV 12.1.46 also is used in the same rite (Kauś 139.8, snakes, Veda study).

46. They include Ambarīṣa, Āryaka, Udayana (Mhvy), Kauravya, Janamejaya, Dilīpa, Dhanamjaya, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Pṛthuśravas, Baladeva (Mhvy), Rāghava (Mhvy).

47. They include: Karkoṭaka-Dhanamjaya, Kambala-Aśvatara (*Hariv.*228, 4.443; 9.501; 14.341, Yakṣas of Prayāga according to *Agni-Purāṇa* 111.4), Kāla-Upakāla (Mhvy), Nanda-Upananda, Kuṇḍara-Mahodara, Durmukha-Sumukha, Nanda-Upananda (> 1 Nāga in later Buddh.), Badhira-Andha, Mahodhara-Cūlodhara (*Pāli chron. Ceylon*), Virasa-Surasa.

48. Cf. ĀpŚS 23.14.8 *sarpāṇām sattreṇāpa jarām ghnate | ādityānām ivaiṣām prakāśaḥ*.

49. Witzel, 1983/85.

The Nāgas thus appear as a kind of departed teachers. In short, both birds and Nāgas/snakes can represent deceased ancestors, – the birds being the temporary vehicles (for one year) of the souls. Then, they are incorporated, by the *sapiṇḍikaraṇa* ritual, into the vague group of the ancestors (*pitṛ*), of whom only the last 3 are distinguished clearly by name.

The Nāgas however are the permanent carriers of the ancestors' souls,⁵⁰ having received a new body, half human, half snake, which can easily be changed back to a fully human form (see above).

Heroes, such as the Mbh. ones, receive a new body in the heaven of the gods, without any blemishes and even with their destroyed limbs restored. As such they enjoy the pleasures of heaven, vividly described at RV 9.113. They are led to heaven by the Apsaras, Indian *valkyrie*; this is still mentioned even by Kalhaṇa and his successors, well after 1000 CE, in their descriptions of battles. In the same way, ordinary humans go to the world of Yama, often thought of to be a netherworld below the earth. This is identical with the world of the Nāgas which is described in Indian (or Germanic) myth as a place of eternal light and bliss.

Reverting to the female companions of the Nāgas, the fairies, it must be noted that though the NM list has only male Nāga names, special mention must be of the seductive group of Nāginīs. They are, just as the male Nāgas, not easily distinguishable⁵¹ from human beings and as such may approach herders in the high pastures of the Hindukush and Himalayas.

Indeed, unions between men and Nāginīs are a favorite topic in literature and folklore.⁵² In the Epic, there are the tales of Arjuna and the nymph Ulūpī, daughter of the Nāga Kauravya, wife of Arjuna,⁵³ or the ascetic Jaratkāru and his bride of the same name, Jaratkāru, a sister of the Nāga Vāsukī.⁵⁴ This tale seems to be an Epic reflection of Manu and his *ghṛta*-born daughter/wife Idā. In both cases, the men have to resort to extra-ordinary measures to secure a wife, - with the sole purpose of creating progeny that can perpetuate the ancestor rituals. There are many more examples of men and kings who have

50. The mythological (Epic) enmity of snakes and birds (*Garuḍa*) may be linked to this; there is, of course, a natural "enmity" as well, since eagles, etc. feed on snakes.

51. For example, Padmavati is doubted whether she is a "*devakanyā, nāgakanyā, kinnarakanyā, mānuṣī?*" (*Mahāvastu*, vol. III, 21). One trick mentioned in JB is to look at the soles of their feet: if they have hairs, they are Nāginīs.

52. See Croke, I, p. 45.

53. And presumably the mother of Irāvāt, Mbh. 6.90; cf. 17.1.27; 1.214.7810.

54. Mbh. 1.13-15, 38-40, see Vogel, 1926, p. 74, 59.

a Nāga parent.⁵⁵ In the case of Kashmir, it is most notably the Kārkoṭa dynasty (625 – CE).

The snakes and Nāgas thus are multi-vocal beings, who are associated, in mythological and even in modern popular thought, through a large number of connections over the past three to four millennia. It is not to be expected that a coherent picture was available even by the time the NM was composed, after mid-first millennium CE. Heroes receive a new body in the heaven of the gods, without any blemishes and even with their destroyed limbs restored, and as such they enjoy the pleasures of heaven, vividly described at RV 9.113. They are led there by the Apsaras, an Indian *valkyrie*; this is still mentioned even by Kalhaṇa and his successors, well after 1000 CE, in their descriptions of battles. In the same way, ordinary humans go to the world of Yama, often thought of to be a netherworld below the earth. This is identical with the world of the Nāgas which is described in Indian (or Germanic) myth as a place of eternal light and bliss. We have to take all above (post-)Vedic Hindu developments into account when studying the Kashmiri Nāgas, as opposed to their state as the prehistoric BMAC/Hindukush Nāgas (of ice, snow and frozen lakes) preserved in Nuristan and northwest India.

Mythologically, according to NM and the Epic, the Nāgas are the descendants of Prajāpati Kaśyapa⁵⁶ and his wife Kadrū (next to others like the gods, the Daityas etc.).

In the NM, the Nāga chief Vāsuki asked Viṣṇu for protection and received it in the lake called Satisaras, which covered all of Kashmir in primordial time. Nīla was made king of the Kashmirian Nāgas.

After the Lake had been drained through an opening cut by Ananta,⁵⁷ Kaśyapa gave the land jointly to the Nāgas and to the human beings (*mānuṣa*). This was not easily accepted by the Nāgas (NM 198 sqq.). Due to this refusal, they were punished by having to live jointly with the Piśācas under their leader Nikumbha, who come every year for six months, on 15th of the month Āsvayuj in autumn and stay until Caitra in the spring.

55. See Vogel, e.g.: the *purohita* of Janamejaya has a Nāga mother, Pauṣya-Parvan, Mbh 1.3; Brahmin Viśākha and Candralekhā, daughter of Suśravas, in the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* (Vogel, 1926, p.4, 59); *Būridatta-Jāt.*: a Nāga princess and the prince of Benares, their daughter "Seaborn" is married by Dhṛtarāṣṭra, lord of all Nāgas; Gunādhya, poet of Bṛhatkathā is the son of the Nāga prince Kīrtisena and Brāhmaṇi; cf. further Mbh. 5.97.3520: Mātali would seek a husband for his daughter among the Nāgas. See now C. Minkowski, 1991.

56. From which the name of Kashmir is derived, by popular etymology, in some medieval texts.

57. NM 168 SR sqq., see Allen, 1997.

In Buddhist literature, the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Piṭaka*⁵⁸ contains a legend similar to that of the *Nīlamata*, according to which Buddha had forecast to Vajrapāṇi that Madhyandina, a disciple of Ānanda, would propagate Buddhism in Kashmir. He would subdue the malevolent Huluṭa Nāga, and extend his seat to cover the whole of Kashmir, thereby ousting the Nāgas, and making the land of 60,000 villages an abode of meditating monks.

On the Order of the Nāgas list

Against this background, not only the large number of Nāgas in the NM list but also their order still remains unclear. Scholars have not yet been explored a geographical arrangement of the Nāgas mentioned in the list. But this seems to fail, at least at first sight. For, those Nāgas that can be located on the maps,⁵⁹ or are discussed in Aurel Stein's notes to the *Rājataranṅiṇī*, do not have an instantly clear order. Though the list begins with Nīla and Vāsuki, in the extreme south-eastern part of the Valley, where the Vitastā (Jhelum) river originates, the immediately following Nāgas come from diverse other parts of Kashmir. The reason for their order thus remains a mystery.

If one wants to compare the order of the NM list as given by NM with those provided by other texts, one has to turn mainly to the Epic, as Vedic literature provides only a few scattered references to the Nāgas. There is no Vedic list, except for a grouping at AV 3.27 which seems to represent the guardians of the sky.⁶⁰

AV				AV	AV
3.27	<i>adhipati</i>	<i>akṣitr</i>	<i>characteristic</i>	10.4 (plural)	3.26
East	<i>Agni</i>	<i>Asita</i>	<i>Ādityas</i>	<i>Asita</i>	<i>heti</i>
South	<i>Indra</i>	<i>Tiraścayi</i>	<i>Pitaras</i>	<i>Tira°</i>	<i>aviṣyu</i>
West	<i>Varuṇa</i>	<i>Ṛdāku</i>	<i>food</i>	<i>Ṛdāku</i>	<i>vairāja</i>
North	<i>Soma</i>	<i>Svaja</i>	<i>aśani</i>	<i>Svaja</i>	<i>pravidhyant</i>
Fixed	<i>Viṣṇu</i>	<i>Kalmāṣagrīva</i>	<i>herbs</i>	<i>Kalmāṣagrīva</i>	<i>nilimpa</i>
Up	<i>Bṛhaspati</i>	<i>Śvitra</i>	<i>rain</i>	<i>Śvitra</i>	<i>avasvant</i>

58. Przyludski, 1941, p. 511.

59. Notably the Stein map based on the 1860 survey map, see now reprint in Obrock, 2013.

60. "Four or six dragons guarding the corners of the world is more primitive than that of the anthropomorphic *lokapālas*": Vogel, 1926, p. 9; AV 3.27, AV 12.3.55-60 for the quarters, AV 3.26 ; Bower Ms, ed. Hoernle vi, p.234; cf. YS 5.5.10, and Pāli: Paritta (for example in *Cullavagga* 5.6, *Jātaka* 2, p. 145), and PS 3.; TS, *Kauśś* 14.25: *diś*; 6.13, 50.13.

In the Epic⁶¹ there are a considerable number of lists, which do not agree with each other, for example at Mbh. 2.9 (365, 2.9.8-10), Mbh. 16.5.14-15 (16.9.118); they cannot be dealt with here in detail but will be discussed in the long version of this paper.

In the Epic, the Nāgas are divided into five groups, (Mbh. 1.52 (53.2056); 1.57 (2148) as the descendants, respectively, of Vāsuki, Takṣaka, Airāvata, Kauravya, Dhṛtarāṣṭra: "There are tens of millions... too many to enumerate them all..." Some Indian lists, however, are ordered according to the importance of the various Nāgas: the most well-known ones, (Vāsuki, Takṣaka, etc.) often come first. The Buddhist lists are unclear in that respect even though some of the (*upa*-)Nāgas clearly are local deities, such as the major rivers Gaṅgā, Sītā, etc.). However, even a detailed investigation of the various lists of Nāgas, whether from India or from Kashmir, -- that cannot be done here and will be presented in a future much longer article does not lead very far: while some relationships between the lists found in the Epic, the Purāṇas and those in Kashmiri *karmakāṇḍa* handbooks can be established, the reason for the order of the Nāgas in the NM remains a mystery. We still face an amorphous mass of Nāgas. Perhaps this could be expected, as they indeed constitute a large host, which is apparent in the *Mahābhārata* tale of the *sarpayajña*, the great sacrifice, the burning all the snakes of the world.⁶² The *Mahābhārata* indeed stresses this: "There are millions of Nāgas..." (see above).

At this impasse, and in view of all investigations carried out so far, it is from another angle that we must proceed towards a solution to the question put initially: why are so many Nāgas mentioned in NM and why in the order they appear? The solution comes from an unexpected angle.

We can see that the Nāgas in the NM list largely are local ones. One can set up a list of those Nāgas who are not found in dictionaries and similar sources. Their appearance must indicate that they are strictly local ones. Already beginning with no.14 in the NM list, we find names which are not otherwise recorded, as far as I see: *pālāsa no.14, kheḍima no.15, baḍi no.16, helihāla no.17, candanano.18-nandanano.19, vātikano.23-ṣaṅḍikauno.23*, etc. Most of these are local names. Further, neither are the Nāgas mentioned in the order of importance nor in an easily imaginable geographical arrangement. The point of individual rank also does not arise, as many otherwise completely unknown Nāgas are included in the list.

61. See Sörensen, Index, p. 492 sq; snake sacrifice Mbh. 1.53.2052 sqq. Cf. 1.57.2148.

62. Cf. The northern Kathmandu fire ritual, when once per year two Nepalese living snakes, birds and fish are burnt. See the Ritual in *Kathmandu*, film by B. van der Hoek (Leiden).

This point has misled even Stein,⁶³ who felt it necessary to remark that the Nāgas Śaṅkha no.13 and Padma no.25, mentioned at *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* 1.30, are not prominent and appear in NM only later on.⁶⁴ Such difficulties grow as the list progresses, for its author can be expected to run out of well-known names, as indeed the Hindu and Buddhist lists do, say after no.50 or no.80.

As mentioned, the list also does not have an apparent geographical ordering. One could imagine one beginning at the famous place of the Nāga Nīla in the south-eastern corner of the Valley and slowly progressing, in whatever direction, mentioning Nāga after Nāga until ‘all’ have been enumerated. This is not the case, as a glance at the known location of the first few Nāgas mentioned above quickly indicates.

The list simply is not structured in the way of those of the Epic, the *Purāṇas* or the Buddhist *Mahāvīyutpatti*, which otherwise contains the longest list of Nāgas known outside the NM. Buddhist influence on the list may be surmised due to the strong position of Buddhism around the first half and middle of the first millennium CE. Indeed, a few Nāgas in NM seem to reflect the typical local “Buddhist” ones. However, the NM list does not follow their order either.

Importantly, another feature of medieval Kashmir, just as in other parts of South Asia, leads in the right direction: the various gods could be arranged in certain quasi-geometrical patterns, that were realized in the actual geographical locations more or less agreeing with the ideal layout.⁶⁵ If we then take another look at the NM Nāga list, we must try to locate as many Nāgas as possible on the map of the Valley.⁶⁶ This has been done, as will be detailed in the planned longer paper, in groups of eight, representing the 4 direction of the sky and the 4 intermediate directions, starting with Nīla in the southeast, proceeding clockwise until reaching the east. This first set of 8 set, encompassing a relatively small area in the southeast of the Valley, is followed by other sets of 8, in ever widening circles, ending with the four major mountains surrounding the Valley. Can this arrangement represent a giant snake, all coiled up? This would be a felicitous image. The head of the list is Nīla, the “head” (*adhīpa*) of all Kashmirian

63. *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* 1.30.

64. Note the different numbering by Stein.

65. Gutschow, 1982.

66. The best map to do so is the one Stein used in his studies, the Survey map of 1856-60, which he reprinted, with many corresponding Sanskrit names added, in his *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* translation. It is missing in all copies of the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* and in the reprint; however, it was also printed separately by Stein in *JCBRAS* in March 1897, and now in Obrock, 2013.

Nāgas, located in the extreme southeast of the Valley at Vernāg. The body of the huge Nāga would thus cover all of Kashmir. Its head rises upwards towards the southeast, that is towards India proper, across the Banihal pass.⁶⁷

In fact, centrifugal and centripetal design are known from Nepal, where for example a tirthayātrā of 64 *liṅgas* that starts at the eastern outskirts of the Valley finally leads to the "national" shrine of Paśupatinātha, situated at the center of the Valley.⁶⁸

Images of coiled up snakes can also be found in *vāstupuruṣa* designs. In such cases it usually is a human figure, a *puruṣa*, that is made to fit the *vāstu* design; the head of the *puruṣa* usually is in the (north-) east.⁶⁹ But there also are designs that actually show a big snake as underlying the *vāstu*.

The center of such arrangements could be surmised to be at the political and ritual center of the Valley, at Srinagar, which is supposed to be situated on the boundary line between the two halves of the Valley, the northern Krama-Rājya and the southern Māḍavya-Rājya. However, the NM materials available do not point to Srinagar as the center.⁷⁰

Ultimately, the full extent of the problem will be successfully proved with better maps and by local investigations, with village inhabitants and preferably with some older and learned Kashmiri Paṇḍits, something quite impossible at the moment.

Nevertheless, I hope that the current investigation has not only shown something of the character of the Nāgas but that it has also indicated the direction in which the ultimate solution of the riddle of the 600 Kashmirian Nāgas is to be sought.

67. Cf. Kalhaṇa's (1.28) comparison of the Vistatā with a stick whose parasol is the pond of the Nāga Nīla.

68. On the contrary, a centripetal design is found in the Milindapañha: a spiral leading outward from the homeland of the author; fever is sent away, already in the AV, in a similar fashion, as are the deficiencies of a *dīkṣita*, at BŚS 2.5, see Witzel, 1980.

69. See for example, *Agni Purāṇa* (ed. Pt.s Śrīyukta-Pañcānana et al. Kalikāta, Śāka 1812), ch. 40.1-2 on the Puruṣa: *tad devair nihitam bhūmau sa vāstupuruṣaḥ smṛtaḥ / catuḥṣaṣṭipade kṣetre īsaṃ koṅārdhhasaṃsthitam...*; 34.36 "his head is in the east... the feet in the north-west and south-west" (*prācyāṃ śiraḥ samākhyātaṃ ... jaṅghe vāyavyanairṛte*); cf. Witzel, 1992.

70. Unless we want to cut short the list after no.33 (or perhaps no.80, 107, 184, etc.) and declare the rest of the Nāgas as additions.

ĀpŚS = Āpastamba Śrauta Sūtra

AV = Atharveveda (Śaunaka)

BEFEO = Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême Orient

Bhāg. Pur. = Bhāgavata Purāṇa

BŚS = Baudhāyana Śrauta Sūtra

JCBRAS = Journal of the Calcutta Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society

LR= Long recension

Mbh. = Mahābhārata

Mhvy = Mahāvvyutpatti

MSS = Münchener Studien zur Sprachwissenschaft

NM = *The Nīlamata Purāṇa* : A critical edition and English translation by Dr. Ved Kumari, Srinagar, 1973, J. & K. Academy of Art, Culture and Languages [longer recension].

Nīlamata or Teachings of Nīla : Sanskrit text with critical notes, edition by Koenraad Stanislaus Jan Marie de Vreese, 1936, Leiden, E. J. Brill [shorter recension].

Pers. = Persian

PS = Paippalāda Atharvaveda

RV = Ṛgveda Saṃhitā

TS = Taittirīya Saṃhitā

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