

# From Mantramārga Back to Atimārga: Atimārga as a Self-referential Term

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## 1 Introduction

The impact of Alexis Sanderson's scholarship can be easily measured by the subject of the present paper. Before 1988, when Sanderson published his groundbreaking article "Śaivism and the Tantric Traditions," the term Atimārga was hardly used by anyone with the exception of a few specialists of Tantric Śaivism, and it certainly was never addressed systematically.<sup>1</sup> Thus, for example, Minoru Hara, who completed his dissertation on the Pāśupatas at Harvard in 1966 and published extensively on the Pāśupata tradition in the subsequent decades, never once used the term.<sup>2</sup> In the years to come, however, various scholars started to use it with great confidence in increasing numbers and currently the Atimārga is widely regarded as one of the two major divisions of Śaivism, alongside that of the Mantramārga. Quite influential in the dissemination of the term has been Gavin Flood, who adopted it in his *An Introduction to Hinduism* (1996). The chapters on the Śaiva and Śākta traditions in this book are deeply dependent on Sanderson's scholarship. As an illustration of how commonplace and accepted its use has become, reference may also be made to the entry on Atimārga in the popular *A Dictionary of Hinduism* by W.J. Johnson (2009). The description clearly reflects Sanderson's scholarship:

One of the two main branches of Śaivism described in the Śaiva Āgamas or Tantras (the other being the mantramārga, or "path of mantras"). The atimārga, which is entered on solely in order to attain liberation, is open only to ascetics. It has two divisions, the Pāśupata, and the Lākula, itself

1 An early reference may be found in Goudriaan and Gupta 1981, 35, 45 (referring to the *Niśvāsatattvasaṃhitā*).

2 Although there are many entries starting with *ati-*, the index of Hara's collected *Pāśupata Studies* (2002) has no entry on Atimārga.

a development from within the Pāśupata tradition; both are concerned with Śiva in his wild and terrible form of Rudra.<sup>3</sup>

In the present paper I would like to reconsider the meaning and use of the term Atimārga, in the light of an intriguing passage from an unpublished Māhātmya on the holy city of Vārāṇasī (sometimes referred to hereafter as “VM”). In particular, I want to take up the question whether the term Atimārga was ever used by Pāśupatas or other groups that one would associate with the Atimārga themselves. Was it, in other words, ever used self-referentially or does it only represent a higher, tantric (“Mantramārgic”) perspective on the ascetic path of Śaivism?

## 2 Atimārga and Mantramārga

For a start, here is the introduction to the Atimārga from “Śaivism and the Tantric Traditions,” without a doubt the single most influential article on Śaivism of the twentieth century:

The Teaching of Śiva (*śivaśāsana*) which defines the Śaivas is divided between two great branches or “streams” (*srotas*). These are termed the Outer Path (Atimārga) and the Path of Mantras (Mantramārga). The first is accessible only to ascetics, while the second is open both to ascetics and to married home-dwellers (*gṛhastha*). There is also a difference of goals. The Atimārga is entered for salvation alone, while the Mantramārga promises both this, and for those that so wish, the attainment of supernatural powers (*siddhis*) and the experience of supernatural pleasures in the worlds of their choice (*bhoga*). The Atimārga’s Śaivism is sometimes called Raudra rather than Śaiva. This is because it is attributed to and concerned with Śiva in his archaic, Vedic form as Rudra (the “Terrible”), the god of wild and protean powers outside the *śrauta* sacrifice. It has two principal divisions, the Pāśupata and the Lākula. (Sanderson 1998, 664.)

An important aspect of the above definition is that it is written from the viewpoint of the Mantramārga. Although it follows an emic division of Śaivism,<sup>4</sup> it is one which appears to have been coined by the Mantramārga and not by

3 Quoted from the electronic version: <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198610250.001.0001/acref-9780198610250>

4 Cf. Sanderson 2006, 163: “The term Atimārga, which I suggest we use for the non-Āgamic

the Atimārga itself. In other words, it reflects the higher Mantramārgic systematization of doctrines and practices. The Atimārga, in contrast, represents a more archaic ascetic strand of Śaivism, predating the development of tantric Śaivism. Initially it was not known as Atimārga, nor do we have evidence of ascetics who refer to themselves as Atimārgins, “Followers of the Outer Path.” The name Atimārga was well chosen, however, for the Pāśupata ascetics adhered to what they called the Atyāśrama “Outer Discipline,” by which they indicated that they were beyond the four disciplines (*āśrama*) that define orthodox Brahmanism. *Pāśupatasūtra* 2.15–17 plays on the theme of being “beyond” (*ati-*) customary practise:

*atidattam atīṣṭam atitaptaṃ tapas tathā atyāgatiṃ gamayate*

The extraordinary gift, the extraordinary offer, and the extraordinary practise of asceticism leads to the extraordinary goal.

Whoever coined the term was therefore closely familiar with the tradition.

The division of Śaivism into Atimārga and Mantramārga appears for the first time in the *Niśvāsamukha*, the introduction to the *Niśvāsattvasaṃhitā*. The Mantramārga is presented here as the fifth and highest stream (*srotas*) of religion, which has been revealed by Śiva’s fifth, upper face.<sup>5</sup> The Atimārga, by contrast, is said to have been revealed by Śiva’s fourth, eastern face. In terms of hierarchy this indicates a lower position, on a par with that of the revelations by Śiva’s three other faces: the Laukika or mundane religion taught by his western face, the Vaidika or brahmanical religion taught by his northern face, and the Ādhyātmika or system of knowledge of the self taught by his southern face. On the other hand, its connection with Śiva’s eastern face sets it apart from the three other religious traditions and it is clear from the *Niśvāsattvasaṃhitā* itself that some of the text’s teachings are in fact deeply influenced by those of the Atimārga.<sup>6</sup> The *Niśvāsamukha*’s fivefold scheme itself appears to be an expansion based on a passage from the *Manusmṛti* (2.117), where three forms of knowledge are distinguished: Laukika, Vaidika, Ādhyātmika.<sup>7</sup>

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Śaivism of the Pāśupatas and related systems, is extracted, then, from a stage of the tradition which predates our famous commentators and perhaps even some of the Āgamas themselves.”

5 For a critical edition, with annotated translation and accompanying study, of the *Niśvāsamukha*, see Kafle 2015.

6 See Sanderson 2006.

7 *Manusmṛti* 2.117 (Olivelle 2015):

Following the *Niśvāsamukha*, we find the division in a range of Mantramārga scriptures and in texts of authors with a Mantramārga affiliation, although it is certainly not ubiquitous across tantric literature. As will be seen below, most important for the present paper is the following passage from the *Svacchanda-tantra*:

It is called Atimārga because it is beyond the mental dispositions. It is taught as “Atimārga” because the doctrine is beyond the worlds. And the *lokas* are designated “bound souls,” in the cycle of birth and death. They who are established in the Atimārga, [that is to say] the followers of the observance of the skull and the Pāśupatas, they are to be known as beyond them. There is no rebirth for them and they abide in [the reality of] Īśvara, in [the world of] Dhruva.<sup>8</sup>

The division into Atimārga and Mantramārga appears to be found only in texts belonging to the Mantramārga.<sup>9</sup> No Pāśupata or for that matter “Atimārga” text refers to the concept of Atimārga, let alone to Mantramārga. The only exception that I am aware of is a medieval Māhātmya about Vārāṇasī, the subject of this paper.

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*laukikaṃ vaidikaṃ vāpi tathādhyātmikam eva ca |*  
*ādādīta yato jñānaṃ taṃ pūrvam abhivādayet ||*

The first half of this verse is identical to two pādas in *Niśvāsamukha* 1.26–1.27ab, where the fivefold division is introduced for the first time:

*śṛṇvantu ṛṣayas sarve pañcadhā yat prakīrtitam |*  
*laukikaṃ vaidikaṃ vāpi tathādhyātmikam eva ca ||*  
*a[[timārgaṃ ca mantrākhyam]]—|*

For a discussion of this incomplete passage, see Kafle 2015, 21; and pp. 49–53, for further evidence of the influence of the *Manusmṛti* on the composition of the *Niśvāsamukha*.

8 *Svacchanda* 11.182–184:

*atītaṃ buddhibhāvānām atimārgaṃ prakīrtitam |*  
*lokātītaṃ tu taj jñānam atimārgam iti smṛtam ||182||*  
*lokās ca paśavaḥ proktāḥ sṛṣṭisaṃhāravartmani |*  
*teṣām atītās te jñeyā ye 'timārge vyavasthītāḥ ||183||*  
*kapālavratino ye ca tathā pāśupatās ca ye |*  
*sṛṣṭir na vidyate teṣām īśvare ca dhruve sthītāḥ ||184||*

9 See Sanderson 2006 for references.

### 3 The Atimārga in the *Vārāṇasīmāhātmya* of the *Bhairavaprādurbhāva*

For some years now I have been working on a manuscript containing a unique collection of *Vārāṇasīmāhātmyas*.<sup>10</sup> It concerns an old palm-leaf manuscript, currently in the Kaiser library in Kathmandu (Acc. No. 66).<sup>11</sup> The manuscript may be dated on palaeographical grounds to the end of the twelfth century CE. It was most probably penned down in Vārāṇasī itself, as suggested by comparison of the old Nāgarī script with that of other manuscripts written in twelfth-century Vārāṇasī, but now likewise surviving in the collections of Nepal.<sup>12</sup> It is an extensive but incomplete manuscript: 145 folios survive but the text breaks off in the middle of a long quotation of the *Skandapurāṇa*. The manuscript consists of Māhātmyas taken from and attributed to a range of Purāṇas, including the *Matsyapurāṇa*, *Nandipurāṇa*, *Brahmapurāṇa*, *Liṅgapurāṇa*, *Śivapurāṇa* and *Skandapurāṇa*. Several Māhātmyas can be identified in the present editions of works bearing the same name (most importantly the Māhātmyas of the published *Matsyapurāṇa* and the early *Skandapurāṇa*), but quite a few of them are unknown from any other source. The manuscript provides a unique glimpse into the production of Māhātmya literature in early-medieval Vārāṇasī.

The first 13 chapters, covering the first 59 folios, about one third of the surviving text, contain the complete text of a Māhātmya not known otherwise. It is attributed in the colophons to the *Bhairavaprādurbhāva* of the *Matsyapurāṇa*, but there are strong grounds to think that this attribution is incorrect and that it was originally intended to belong to the *Bhairavaprādurbhāva* of the *Vāmanapurāṇa* instead. My reasons for this assumption are the following:

- The attributions of Māhātmyas to other Purāṇas are incorrect in several other cases of the manuscript as well.
- There is no section called *Bhairavaprādurbhāva* in the surviving text of the *Matsyapurāṇa*.

<sup>10</sup> See Bisschop 2007 and 2013.

<sup>11</sup> The manuscript has been microfilmed by the NGMPP on reel C 6/3. I also have access to excellent colour photographs kindly provided to me by Harunaga Isaacson. There is also a paper apograph in a private collection, microfilmed as NGMPP E 766/7.

<sup>12</sup> Some comparable manuscripts produced in Vārāṇasī and dated to the twelfth century are: *Jayadrathayāmala* (NGMPP A 996/3, A 997/1), *Bṛhatkālottara* (A 43/1), *Harivaṃśa* (A 27/5), *Manusmṛti* (C 44/4). The scribe of our manuscript is, however, less neat. The text also abounds in scribal errors.

- Colophons in several manuscripts of the *Vāmanapurāṇa*, critically edited by the Kashiraj Trust, reveal that various chapters from chapter 9 onwards are attributed to the *Bhairavaprādurbhāva* of the *Vāmanapurāṇa*.<sup>13</sup>
- The narrators of the present Māhātmya and the *Vāmanapurāṇa* are the same: Nārada and Pulastya.
- The “Origin of Bhairava(s)” (*bhairavaprādurbhāva*) is narrated in relation to the destruction of Andhaka by Bhairava in *Vāmanapurāṇa* 44.30 ff.
- The eight Bhairavas (*aṣṭabhairava*) originating from the blood of Andhaka when Śiva strikes him correspond with a set of eight Bhairavas mentioned in our Māhātmya.<sup>14</sup>

I therefore conclude that the Māhātmya was originally meant to be included in the *Bhairavaprādurbhāva* section of the *Vāmanapurāṇa*. In all likelihood the text was composed by a local pandit in twelfth-century Vārāṇasī, for the description of the town evinces clear connections to the layout of the town around the time when the Gāhaḍavālas were ruling north India and had made Vārāṇasī into their religious capital. It appears to be the work of a Śaiva author who engages with the increasing presence of Vaiṣṇava worship in Vārāṇasī supported by the Gāhaḍavāla kings.<sup>15</sup>

The Atimārga is referred to towards the end of the first chapter of this Māhātmya. After Pulastya has told Nārada about the abodes of the eight Bhairavas,

13 See also Bonazolli 1982.

14 *Vāmanapurāṇa* 44.23–38: Vidyārāja (east), Kālarāja (south), Kāmarāja (west), Somarāja (north), Svachchandarāja, Lalitarāja and Vighnarāja. Bhairava himself should be added as the eighth. In VM 1.53–54 seven similar Bhairavas are mentioned: Kālarāja (in Avimukta), Kāmarāja, Saumya, Svachchanda (in Jayantika), Lalita, Vighnarāja (in Kālāñjara), and Bhairava (in Bhṛgutuṅga). The passage is corrupt and requires heavy emendation. I have tentatively reconstructed the text as follows, but many readings remain doubtful:

*viśiṣṭaṃ sarvasattvānām tāraṇaṃ jagataḥ param |*  
*kālarājasya ca kṣetraṃ dattaṃ caiva svayambhuvā ||53||*  
*kāmarājā tu saumyaś ca svachchandaś ca jayantike |*  
*lalitaś ca kalau devi vighnarājā kaliñjare |*  
*svayaṃ tu bhairavo devo bhṛgutuṅge vyavasthitaḥ ||54||*

53a °sattvānām] *conj.*; °sattānām V<sub>1</sub><sup>pc</sup>V<sub>2</sub>, °sattānām V<sub>1</sub><sup>ac</sup> (*unmetr.*) 53b jagataḥ] V<sub>1</sub><sup>pc</sup>V<sub>2</sub>; jagata V<sub>1</sub><sup>ac</sup> (*unmetr.*) 54a kāmarājā tu] *conj.*; kālālayaṃ tu V<sub>1</sub>, kālālayaṃ ca V<sub>2</sub> 54b svachchandaś ca jayantike] *conj.*; svachchande ca jayantikā V<sub>1</sub>V<sub>2</sub> 54c lalitaś ca] *conj.*; lalitasya V<sub>1</sub>V<sub>2</sub> 54d °rājā] *conj.*; °rājaṃ V<sub>1</sub>V<sub>2</sub> • kaliñjare] V<sub>1</sub>, kaliñjale V<sub>2</sub>

15 Particularly relevant in this connection is chapter 7 of the Māhātmya. It deals with the north end of the town, which was the centre of Gāhaḍavāla religious activity. This area, referred to in the text as “Brahmapura,” is presented as an area of brahmanical authority where gifts of gold, land, etc., are practised, as is indeed attested by the Gāhaḍavāla inscriptions, and where Vedic recitation constantly takes place. See Bisschop 2011.

the most important of which is Kālarāja, who resides in Vārāṇasī and is also known as Kālabhairava or Āmardaka,<sup>16</sup> he introduces a number of important *tīrthas* in the town. From VM 1.99 onwards Pulastya zooms in on the cremation ground, the *śmaśāna*, also called *ūṣara* (saline ground), where, at the time of destruction, all beings and worlds enter into Bhairava's mouth. He tells Nārada that it is because of this that the cremation ground grants release.<sup>17</sup> He also reports that there is a pond there called Kālodaka, which arose when Kālarudra was playing on the cremation ground. At that time the Lord taught the observance of the skull (*kapālavrata*). He chopped off the fifth head of Brahmā, as a consequence of which there arose the holy Pāśupata pond.<sup>18</sup> Mahādeva subsequently carries Brahmā's skull around the world and unites with the cre-

16 VM 1.37–38:

*kālarājasya devena purī vārāṇasī śubhā |*  
*nirdiṣṭā mokṣaṇārthāya pāpānāṃ caiva sarvadā ||37||*  
*tasyaṃ caiva sthitaḥ sākṣād bhairavaḥ kālabhairavaḥ |*  
*mardayan sarvapāpāni tena cāmardakaḥ smṛtaḥ ||38||*

37c mokṣaṇārthāya] conj.; rakṣaṇārthāya V<sub>1</sub>V<sub>2</sub>

17 VM 1.99cd–101:

*śmaśānasya śṛṇuṣvemāṃ kathāṃ pāpaprāṇāsānīm ||99||*  
*śmaśānaṃ ūṣaraṃ proktaṃ yatra khādyanti jantavaḥ |*  
*lokāś caiva tu saṃhāre praviśya bhairavaṃ mukham ||100||*  
*kālānalamaḥādīptaṃ kālarājasya bhairavam |*  
*tena caiva śmaśānaṃ tu vārāṇasyāṃ tu mokṣadam ||101||*

99c śmaśānasya] V<sub>1</sub><sup>pc</sup>V<sub>2</sub>; śmaśāna V<sub>1</sub><sup>ac</sup> (*unmetr.*) 100b khādyanti] conj.; kṣidyanti V<sub>1</sub>V<sub>2</sub>  
100c lokāś caiva tu] V<sub>1</sub><sup>pc</sup>V<sub>2</sub>; lokāś caiva tu lokāś caiva tu V<sub>1</sub><sup>ac</sup> (*unmetr.*) 101b bhairavaṃ]  
V<sub>2</sub>; bhaivaṃ V<sub>1</sub> (*unmetr.*)

18 VM 1.102–105:

*kālodakaṃ ca nirdiṣṭaṃ kālarājasya cāgrataḥ |*  
*kālānalasamaṃ prakhyāṃ tasmīn eva mahat saraḥ |*  
*saṃbhūtaṃ kālarudrasya śmaśāne kṛḍataḥ purā ||102||*  
*tataḥ kṛḍānusaktena devadevena śambhunā |*  
*kāpālavratam uddiṣṭaṃ tasmīn kāle mahāmune ||103||*  
*kāpālavratam āsthāya brahmaṇas ca śiro mahat |*  
*cakartta bhagavān kruddhaḥ pañcamam ghoradarśanam ||104||*  
*tasmīn eva samutpannam divyaṃ pāśupataṃ saraḥ |*  
*tena tṛpyanti sakalāḥ kṣaṇamātraniyojitāḥ ||105||*

103a kṛḍānusaktena] *em.*; kṛḍānusaktena V<sub>1</sub>V<sub>2</sub> 103b devadevena] V<sub>1</sub>; devadena V<sub>2</sub>  
(*unmetr.*) 104a kāpālavratam] V<sub>2</sub>; kāpālam vratam V<sub>1</sub> 105b divyaṃ] V<sub>1</sub><sup>pc</sup>V<sub>2</sub>; divyaṃ  
divyaṃ V<sub>1</sub><sup>ac</sup> (*unmetr.*) • saraḥ] *em.*; saraḥ V<sub>1</sub>V<sub>2</sub> 105d °niyojitāḥ] conj.; °niyojite V<sub>1</sub><sup>pc</sup>,  
°niyojitam V<sub>1</sub><sup>ac</sup>, °niyojite V<sub>2</sub>

mation grounds.<sup>19</sup> There he teaches that transmigration results from attachment (*sneha*), that attachment comes from desire (*rāga*), and that attachment is destroyed by indifference (*vairāgya*). When people attain indifference, their karma is destroyed and they attain unequalled happiness (*saukhya*).<sup>20</sup> He then teaches the following:

The great tree of transmigration has arisen from the seed of desire. After cutting the tree with the axe of indifference, whose sharp blade is disattachment, they proceed on the Atimārga.<sup>21</sup>

Here the text introduces a term that we do not expect to come across in a Māhātmya. The text continues in the same vein, however, attesting to the appropriation of this significant terminology. The passage is worth quoting in full:

Engaged in the path of the observance of the skull (Kāpālavratamārga), the Lord wanders, free from attachment, displaying the Lokamārga and the supreme Lokātīta. And the *lokas* are designated “bound souls,” includ-

19 VM 1.106:

*sakapālaṃ mahādevo babhrāma sakalaṃ jagat |  
krīḍamāṇas tadā kṣetrair uṣarair samapadyata ||106||*

106a sakapālaṃ] *conj.*; taṃ kapālaṃ V<sub>1</sub>V<sub>2</sub> 106c tadā] V<sub>1</sub>; tada V<sub>2</sub> 106c kṣetrair] *em.*;  
kṣetrer V<sub>1</sub>V<sub>2</sub> 106d samapadyata] V<sub>1</sub><sup>ac</sup>; sampadyate V<sub>1</sub><sup>pc</sup> (*unmetr.*), samupadyate V<sub>2</sub>

20 VM 1.112–113:

*aho mūrkhā na jānanti saṃsāraṃ snehasaṃbhavam |  
rāgāc ca jāyate sneho vairāgyāt snehasaṃkṣayaḥ ||112||  
tad vairāgyaṃ yadā puṃsāṃ jāyate karmasaṃkṣayaḥ |  
tadā saṃprāpyate saukhyam asādrśyaṃ tu kasyacit ||113||*

112b saṃsāraṃ snehasaṃbhavam] V<sub>1</sub>; saṃsārasnehasaṃbhavā V<sub>2</sub> 112d vairāgyāt]  
V<sub>1</sub><sup>pc</sup>V<sub>2</sub>; vairāgyā V<sub>1</sub><sup>ac</sup> 113a vairāgyaṃ] V<sub>1</sub>; vairāgya V<sub>2</sub> 113b °saṃkṣayaḥ] *conj.*; °saṃ-  
kṣaye V<sub>1</sub>V<sub>2</sub> 113c saukhyam] *conj.*; mokhyam V<sub>1</sub>, mokṣam V<sub>2</sub>

21 VM 1.114:

*rāgabījasaṃutpannaḥ saṃsāravaiṭapo mahān |  
vairāgyasya kuthāreṇa niḥsaṅgatikṣṇa-m-aśmanā |  
chītvā caiva tu taṃ vṛkṣam atimārgaṃ vrajanti te ||114||*

114d °tikṣṇa°] V<sub>1</sub><sup>pc</sup>V<sub>2</sub>; °tikṣṇa° V<sub>1</sub><sup>c</sup>

The reading of pāda d is highly uncertain: it shows syncopation throughout and a meaningless compound-breaking *-m-* is inserted. As Harunaga Isaacson has pointed out to me, the image calls to mind *Bhagavadgītā* 15.3d (= *Mahābhārata* 6.37.3d): *asaṃgāstrena dṛ-  
dhena chītvā*.



ing gods, demons and men. No one realizes the supreme certainty with respect to knowledge of the self. And except for Śarva, the supreme god, there is no such behaviour of another [god]. No other god has certainty of knowledge. There is no such behaviour anywhere in the world with all its gods. The gods, beginning with Brahmā, also proceed along the Laukikamārga. The God of gods, Virūpākṣa, who is established in the Lokottaramārga, proceeds beyond [the institutes of] sacrifice (*yajña*), giving (*dāna*) and asceticism (*tapas*). But those sages who are on that path, delighting in the knowledge of the self, also proceed along the Lokottaramārga, abandoning their bodies. And there is no rebirth in this world (*iha*) for those Pāśupata sages who follow the observance of the skull, they who abide by the Atimārga. For the practitioners of the Atimārga there is only (*kevalam*) indifference. Those who have set out on the Atimārga only (*kevalā*) delight in indifference. Those who die on the saline ground (*uṣara*) go along that path, but of all saline grounds Vārāṇasī is the best, O sage. And there is no sprouting for those who die there. The body abandoned on the cremation ground merges in the Lord of Time.<sup>22</sup>

22 VM 1.116–125:

*kāpālavratamārgastho niḥsaṅgo bhramate prabhuḥ |  
darśayan lokamārgaṃ tu lokātītaṃ paraṃ ca yat ||116||  
lokāś ca paśavaḥ proktāḥ sadevāsuramānuṣāḥ |  
na kaścīt paramaṃ vetti ātmajñāne tu niścayam ||117||  
ṛte śarvān mahādevān nānyaceṣṭāsti cedṛṣī |  
jñānasya niścayo nāsti anyadevasya kasyacit ||118||  
na ceṣṭā idṛṣī loke vidyate sāmāre kvacit |  
laukikenāpi mārgeṇa yānti brahmādayaḥ surāḥ ||119||  
devadevo virūpākṣo mārge lokottare sthitāḥ |  
atītya vartate devo yajñadānatapāṃsi ca ||120||  
tasmīn mārgē tu ye viprā ātmajñānānurañjitāḥ |  
te 'pi yānti tanuṃ tyaktvā mārgē lokottareṇa tu ||121||  
ye ca pāśupatā viprāḥ kāpālavratadhāriṇaḥ |  
na teṣāṃ udbhavo 'stīha atimārgeṇa ye sthitāḥ ||122||  
vairāgyaṃ kevalaṃ tatra atimārgaṇiṣevīṇāṃ |  
atimārgaprayātānāṃ vairāgye kevalā ratīḥ ||123||  
tena te yānti mārgeṇa uṣare tu mṛtā hi ye |  
sarveṣāṃ uṣarāṇāṃ tu śreṣṭhā vārāṇasī mune ||124||  
tasyāṃ caiva mṛtānāṃ ca praroho naiva vidyate |  
kālarājalyaṃ yāti śmaśāne tūjjhitā tanuḥ ||125||*

116d ca] V<sub>1</sub><sup>pc</sup>; om. V<sub>1</sub><sup>a</sup>V<sub>2</sub> (*unmetr.*) 117d ātmajñāne] V<sub>1</sub>; ājanmajñāne V<sub>2</sub> (*unmetr.*) 118b nānyā°] V<sub>1</sub><sup>pc</sup>V<sub>2</sub>; nānyā V<sub>1</sub><sup>a</sup> • cedṛṣī] V<sub>1</sub>; cedṛṣaṃ V<sub>2</sub> 119b sāmāre] V<sub>1</sub>; sāmāraḥ V<sub>2</sub> 120b lokottare] V<sub>1</sub>; lokottaraḥ V<sub>2</sub> 120d °dānatapāṃsi] V<sub>1</sub>; °dānaṃ tapāṃsi V<sub>2</sub> 121b

This passage is revealing in several respects. First of all, it is the only known non-Mantramārga source that uses the term Atimārga. Moreover, it does so in a proper Atimārga context: its message is strict asceticism and there is no mention of the Mantramārga at all, neither here nor in the following chapters of the Māhātmya. As for the identity of the Atimārga in question, the text brings together a number of key terms under one umbrella: Kāpālavratamārga, Lokātīta, Pāśupata, and Atimārga. In appearance it is a form of Kāpālika asceticism, involving cultivation of indifference (*vairāgya*) and aiming for death at the cremation ground. This is an old theme in the Pāśupata tradition, harking back to the *Pāśupatasūtra* itself.<sup>23</sup>

There are several hints in the above passage that indicate a relation with the *Svacchanda*. The *Svacchanda*, as we have seen earlier, also refers to the division of the Atimārga and, like our passage, stresses that it is Lokātīta (“Beyond the Worlds”). The *Vārāṇasīmāhātmya* elaborates further on this theme, drawing a clear distinction between the way of the Lord and that of the other gods. The latter are merely followers of the Laukika path, or Lokamārga.

Moreover, we can identify two textual parallels:

1. *lokāś ca paśavaḥ proktāḥ* (*Svacchanda* 11.183a = VM 1.117a)

2. *kapālavratino ye ca tathā pāśupatās ca ye |*  
*sṛṣṭir na vidyate teṣām* (*Svacchanda* 11.184ac)

≈

*ye ca pāśupatā viprāḥ kāpālavratadhāriṇaḥ |*  
*na teṣām udbhavo ’stīha* (VM 1.122ac)

Aside from these textual parallels it is noteworthy that some of the themes that precede the verses on the Atimārga in the *Svacchanda* are taken up in the passage of the *Vārāṇasīmāhātmya*. Thus, in *Svacchanda* 11.176 it is stated that those who follow the *hetuśāstra* “science of reasoning” find no certainty or conviction (*nīścaya*) in matters of Dharma, Artha, Kāma or Mokṣa: *dharmaṛthakāmamokṣeṣu nīścayo naiva jāyate* (*Svacchanda* 11.176cd). The theme of *nīścaya* is taken up in the *Vārāṇasīmāhātmya* with respect to the “knowledge of the self” (*ātmajñāna*), which is restricted to Śiva alone. No other god has it.

°rañjitaḥ] V<sub>1</sub>; °rakṣitaḥ V<sub>2</sub> 121c yānti] V<sub>2</sub>; jānti V<sub>1</sub> 122a ca] V<sub>1</sub>; tu V<sub>2</sub> 123a vairāgyam] V<sub>1</sub>; vairāgya° V<sub>2</sub> 124c uṣarāṇam] V<sub>1</sub>; uśvarāṇam V<sub>2</sub> 124d śreṣṭhā vārāṇasī mune] V<sub>1</sub>; siddhā vārāṇasī ne V<sub>2</sub> (*unmetr.*) 125d tūjjhitā] V<sub>1</sub><sup>ac?</sup>; tyajatām V<sub>1</sub><sup>c</sup>; tūktitā V<sub>2</sub>

The last sentence may be translated alternatively as: “he merges in the Lord of Time, but his body is abandoned on the cremation ground.”

23 The Pāśupata ascetic was supposed to die on the cremation ground. See *Pāśupatasūtra* 5.30–40.

Moreover, the *Svacchanda* also introduces the concept of *vairāgya*, a key term in the *Vārāṇasīmāhātmya*, just before its discussion of the Atimārga. The *Svacchanda* distinguishes several religious traditions on the basis of their characteristic mental dispositions (*buddhibhāva*):<sup>24</sup>

- Laukika is connected to *dharma*
- Pāñcarātra and Vaidika are connected to *dharma* and *jñāna*
- Bauddha and Ārhata are connected to *vairāgya*
- Sāṃkhya is connected to *jñāna* and *vairāgya*
- Yoga is connected to *jñāna*, *vairāgya* and *aiśvarya*

The Atimārga is said to be beyond these mental dispositions.<sup>25</sup> Instead of this, the *Vārāṇasīmāhātmya* passage rather stresses the importance of *vairāgya*, along with knowledge of the self (*ātmañāna*), as the key to liberation. Although we can thus trace some influence of the *Svacchanda* the teaching is put in a new, proper Atimārga perspective.

The passage also involves some genuine Pāśupata ideals and concepts. The statement that Śiva “proceeds beyond (*atītya*) [the institutes of] sacrifice (*yajña*), giving (*dāna*) and asceticism (*tapas*),” instantly calls to mind *Pāśupata-sūtra* 2.15–17, quoted above: *atidattam atīṣṭam atitaptam tapas tathā atyāgatim gamayate*. Finally, the prominent presence of the word *kevala* in this passage, which is employed to stress that for the follower of the Atimārga only *vairāgya* (indifference) remains, can be connected to the technical use of *Kevala* in the Pāśupata tradition. For the terms *Kevalijñāna* and *Kevalārtha* are used as synonyms for the Pāśupata teaching in several sources.<sup>26</sup>

The *Māhātmya* continues to use the terminology of Atimārga and Lokamārga in the subsequent two chapters. In chapter 2 Śiva returns to *Vārāṇasī* after he has wandered around with the skull for twelve years. He enters the

24 *Svacchanda* 11.179–181:

*mohakāḥ sarvajantūnāṃ yatas te tāmasāḥ smṛtāḥ |*  
*dharmenaikena deveśi baddhaṃ jñānaṃ hi laukikam ||179||*  
*dharmajñānanibaddhaṃ tu pāñcarātraṃ ca vaidikam |*  
*bauddhaṃ ārahatam caiva vairāgyeṇaiva suvrate ||180||*  
*jñānavairāgyasambaddhaṃ sāmkyajñānaṃ hi pārvati |*  
*jñānaṃ vairāgyam aiśvaryaṃ yogajñānapraṭiṣṭhitam ||181||*

The list of mental dispositions calls to mind *Sāmkyakārikā* 23:

*adhyavasāyo buddhir dharmo jñānaṃ virāga aiśvaryaṃ |*  
*sāttvikam etadrūpaṃ tāmasam asmād viparyastam ||*

25 *Svacchanda* 11.182:

*atītaṃ buddhibhāvānāṃ atimārgaṃ prakīrtitam |*  
*lokātītaṃ tu taj jñānaṃ atimārgam iti smṛtam ||*

26 See Sanderson \*2012, 9, n. 3.

cremation ground and installs the skull to the north of Kālarāja. When he has completed his observance, he bathes and satiates the sages, gods and ancestors. In this way, it is said, he displays the Lokamārga and sets an example for the people to follow.<sup>27</sup>

The logic is illustrated by drawing on a phrase from the *Bhagavadgītā*:

Otherwise, if Deva would not display it, the path would be destroyed. The people follow what he sets up as the standard.<sup>28</sup>

A *tīrtha* called Ṛṇamocana appears, provided with three *liṅgas*. The three *liṅgas* release from the threefold debt to the gods, the sages and the ancestors.<sup>29</sup> In this way the narrative integrates the teachings of the Lokātīta, or Atimārga, and the Lokamārga. Śiva next continues to display more observances. He even gives the Kāpālavrata to Kubera.<sup>30</sup>

27 VM 2.5–6:

*evaṃ vratasamāptiṃ tu kṛtvā devo maheśvaraḥ |*  
*snānaṃ kṛtvā tataḥ paścāt pareṇa vidhinā haraḥ ||5||*  
*tarpayitvā ṛṣiṇ devān pitaras ca yathāvidhi |*  
*evaṃ ca lokamārgaṃ tu darśayāno jagatprabhuḥ ||6||*

5d vidhinā] V<sub>1</sub><sup>pc</sup>V<sub>2</sub>; vidhi V<sub>1</sub><sup>ac</sup> (*unmetr.*) 6a ṛṣiṇ] V<sub>1</sub>; ṛṣiṇ V<sub>2</sub> 6b pitaras ca yathāvidhi]  
V<sub>1</sub>; piraś ca yathāvidhiḥ V<sub>2</sub> (*unmetr.*) 6d darśayāno] V<sub>1</sub>; darśayāmo V<sub>2</sub>

28 VM 2.7:

*anyathā naśyate mārgo yadi devo na darśayet |*  
*sa yat pramāṇaṃ kurute lokas tad anuvartate ||7||*

7a naśyate] *em.*; tasya te V<sub>1</sub>V<sub>2</sub> 7c kurute] V<sub>1</sub>; kute V<sub>2</sub> (*unmetr.*)

Cf. *Bhagavadgītā* 3.21 (= *Mahābhārata* 6.25.21):

*yad yad ācarati śreṣṭhaḥ tat tad evetaro janaḥ |*  
*sa yat pramāṇaṃ kurute lokas tad anuvartate ||*

Also *Kūrmapurāṇa* 1.16.45:

*evaṃ hi laukikaṃ mārgaṃ pradarśayati sa prabhuḥ |*  
*sa yat pramāṇaṃ kurute lokas tad anuvartate ||*

29 VM 2.8–9:

*evaṃ jñātvā gato devas tarpayann ṛṇamocane |*  
*tasmāt tatra mahātīrthaṃ saṃbhūtam ṛṇamocanam ||8||*  
*trīṇi liṅgāni jātāni devadevasya tarpaṇe |*  
*ekaṃ devamanuṣyānāṃ trītyaṃ pitṛsaṃbhavam ||9||*

8c tatra] V<sub>1</sub><sup>pc</sup>V<sub>2</sub>; atra V<sub>1</sub><sup>ac</sup> • °tīrthaṃ] V<sub>1</sub>; °tīrtha V<sub>2</sub> 9a trīṇi] V<sub>2</sub>; trīṇi V<sub>1</sub> 9c ekaṃ]  
*conj.*; evaṃ V<sub>1</sub>V<sub>2</sub> • devamanuṣyānāṃ] V<sub>1</sub>; demanuṣyānāṃ V<sub>2</sub> (*unmetr.*) 9d pitṛsaṃ-  
bhavam] V<sub>1</sub>; tu trisaṃbhavam V<sub>2</sub>

30 VM 2.20:

In chapter 3, the apparent contradiction in Śiva's behaviour is articulated by Brahmā, who says that those who have no faith see the path of the world, viz. the Laukika and Apavargika, on the one hand, and the great path, the Lokottara, on the other, as a contradiction:

*ekataś ca jaganmārgaṃ laukikaṃ cāpavargikaṃ |  
lokottaraṃ mahāmārgaṃ viparītaṃ aho tvayi |  
dṛśyate bhuvanādhāra yatra śraddhā na vidyate ||6||*

6a °mārgaṃ] V<sub>1</sub><sup>ac</sup>; °mārge V<sub>1</sub><sup>pc</sup> V<sub>2</sub>    6b cāpavargikaṃ] V<sub>1</sub>; cāpavarggakaṃ V<sub>2</sub>    6c mahāmārgaṃ] V<sub>1</sub>; mahāmārgga V<sub>2</sub>    6f. vidyate] V<sub>1</sub><sup>pc</sup> V<sub>2</sub>; khadyate V<sub>1</sub><sup>c</sup>

But in God the two paths are united. In him there is no contradiction. His ways are inscrutable; only he can unite these contradictions and he does so because he delights in play (*krīḍā*).<sup>31</sup>

#### 4 Concluding Observations

I started this paper with the observation that the term Atimārga, although certainly useful for referring to the ascetic strand of early Śaivism, appears not to have been used by “Atimārgins” themselves. The term represents, by all accounts, a Mantramārgic perspective on the formation of the Śaiva religion.<sup>32</sup>

The *Vārāṇasīmāhātmya* discussed in this paper is the only exception that I know of in which we do find the term Atimārga—as well as the related term Lokātīta—used outside of a Mantramārgic context. Several observations can be made with reference to the passages of the *Vārāṇasīmāhātmya* discussed here:

*dhanadasya vrataṃ dattvā kāpālaṃ parameśvaraḥ |  
so 'pi tatra vrati bhūtvā devam āradhayan sthitaḥ ||20||*

20a dhanadasya] V<sub>1</sub>; vanadasya V<sub>2</sub>

31 VM 3.7:

*krīḍayā yāni deveśa karmāṇi kuruse prabho |  
tāni lokeṣu dṛśyante paramārthapradāni tu ||*

32 The same applies *mutatis mutandis* to terms such as Lokamārga or Laukika. Although Mantramārga sources take the Laukika religion to refer to the merit-making rituals and practices of the Śaiva laity taught in the *Śivadharma*, the term is not used by the *Śivadharma* itself to refer to its own religious practice, which is rather referred to as “Śivadharma.”

- The VM provides important evidence on traditions relating to Bhairava, in particular attesting to knowledge of the *Svacchanda* in Vārāṇasī around the twelfth century.
- The VM integrates the divide between Lokamārga and Atimārga or Lokottaramārga in a narrative of the origin of several sacred spots in Vārāṇasī and the rituals to be performed there.
- The VM adopts the term Atimārga within a proper Atimārga context. The ideology is clearly Atimārgic, representing a mixture of Pāśupata and Kāpālika Śaivism.
- Finally, and most importantly, in appropriating the term, the Atimārga is presented here as the ultimate path of liberation.

It is striking that the author of the text does not seem to have felt the need to contextualize the Mantramārga from which he has adopted the term in the first place. Although it seems certain that the author had knowledge of the Mantramārga—the influence of the *Svacchandabhairava* is quite clear—he chose to neglect the Mantramārga entirely. Is this because he considered it irrelevant to the content of the text, which is after all a Māhātmya of Vārāṇasī, or because the Māhātmya represents a different perspective on what it means to be a Śaiva? It certainly testifies to the fact that views on what constituted Śaivism in early-medieval India differed across distinct Śaiva traditions. Much of our understanding today derives from specific textual traditions that only represent one layer of a much broader spectrum of religions oriented around the worship of Śiva that sought to define themselves and claim their place.

## 5 Postscript

After the presentation of my paper at the symposium in Toronto, Professor Sanderson kindly drew my attention to a veiled reference to the Atimārga in the *Halāyudhastotra*. The text of this *stotra* is recorded, together with the *Mahimnastava* and a *Narmadāstotra*, on an inscription of 1063AD (*saṃvat* 1120) in the Amareśvara temple at Oṃkāreśvar/Māndhātā.<sup>33</sup> The inscription

33 For an overview of the inscriptions of the Amareśvara temple and the publication of several more hitherto unpublished inscriptions from the temple, including the *Narmadāstotra*, see Neuss 2013 and 2015. The *Halāyudhastotra* was first published by P.P. Subrahmanya Sastri, with an additional note containing the prose part of the inscription by N.P. Chakravarti, in *Epigraphia Indica* 25 in 1939–1940 (appeared in 1948: Sastri 1948 and Chakravarti 1948). The text of the *Halāyudhastotra* was constituted on the basis of the inscription and two manuscripts of the *stotra* from the Madras Government Oriental Manuscripts Library. The inscription was subsequently republished by Mittal 1979, 322–339, and Trivedi 1989, 604–611.

was written by a Pāsupata, *paṃḍita* Gāndhadhvaja, while the text itself is said to have been composed by a brahmin named Halāyudha.<sup>34</sup> The spiritual lineage of the engraver of the inscription is recorded in a prose passage at the end of the inscription and mentions the names of several Pāsupata teachers: Bhāvavālmika → Bhāvasamudra → Bhāvaviriṃci → Supūjitarāśi → Vivekarāśi → Gāndhadhvaja.<sup>35</sup>

The *Halāyudhastotra* is an ornate poem in praise of Śiva. Phyllis Granoff (1993) has introduced and translated several parts of the inscription in an article on the experience of religion in medieval hymns and stories, but the verses that concern us here have not been translated or discussed before. Verses 34–35 contain what appears to be an allusion to the Atimārga:

The visitation of the wives of the distinguished sages in the Pine Park, the oblation with seed in Fire, the twilight dance: Your behaviour is not reprehensible.<sup>36</sup> O Three-eyed one! The doctrines of the world do not touch those who have left worldly life, *having passed far beyond the path* of those whose minds are afflicted by false knowledge.

The gods all wear gold and jewels as an ornament on their body. You do not even wear gold the size of a berry on your ear or on your hand. The one whose natural beauty, *surpassing the path* [of the world], flashes on his own body, has no regard for the extraneous ornaments of ordinary men.<sup>37</sup>

These verses poetically allude to the distinction between the Lokamārga and Atimārga, although the terms themselves are not used. Significantly, the *Halāyudhastotra* also makes reference to the term Kevalajñāna, in the first pāda

34 Sastrī (1948, 74) argues that he is identical with Halāyudha the tenth-century author of the *Abhidhānaratnamālā* and the *Kavirahasya*.

35 Chakravartī 1948, 185, lines 51–55.

36 The verse refers to three key mythological events: Śiva's visit as a naked ascetic to the Devadāruvana, the emission of his seed into the mouth of Agni leading to the birth of Skanda, and his performance of the twilight dance.

37 *Halāyudhastotra* 34–35:

*dārūdyāne dvijavaravadhūpaplavo retasāgnau  
homaḥ sandhyānaṭanam iti te ceṣṭitaṃ naiva duṣṭam |  
[mithyājñānopa]hatamanasāṃ mārgam ullaiṅghya dūram  
ye niṣkrāntās trinayana na tān lokavādāḥ sprśanti ||34||  
devāḥ sarve dadhati vapuṣā bhūṣaṇaṃ hemaratnaṃ  
guñjāmātraṃ kanakam api te nāsti karṇe kare vā |  
mārgātītaṃ sphurati sahaṇaṃ yasya saundaryam aṅge  
tasyāhārye[ṣv itarajanavan nā]daraḥ syād guṇeṣu ||35||*

of verse 3: “Victorious is the One God, Śiva, the embodiment of the Kevalajñāna.”<sup>38</sup> As mentioned above, Kevalajñāna may be used as a synonym for the Pāśupata teaching. A Pāśupata background of the *Halāyudhastotra* is furthermore indicated by the prose part of the inscription, which records the names of several Pāśupata teachers connected to the Amareśvara temple. The inscription also makes reference to the *liṅgas* at five famous Pāśupata centres: Avimukta, Kedāra, Oṃkāra, Amara (Amareśvara) and Mahākāla (Ujjain).<sup>39</sup> All in all the Amareśvara inscription merits further study as a testimony of the survival of Pāśupata Śaivism in north India in the medieval period.

### Abbreviations

conj.	conjecture
em.	emendation
NGMPP	Nepal German Manuscript Preservation Project
unmetr.	unmetrical
VM	<i>Vārāṇasīmāhātmya</i>

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38 *Halāyudhastotra* 3a: *eko devaḥ sa jayati śivaḥ kevalajñānamūrtir*.

39 Line 50:  
*avimuktaś ca kedāra oṃkāraś cāmaras tathā |*  
*pañcamam tu mahākālaḥ pañcaliṅgāḥ prakīrttaye ||*



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