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3 **Vyoman: The Sky is the Limit.** **On the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*'s Reworking** **of the *Liṅgodbhava* Myth**

1 Introduction

One of the most celebrated myths of Śiva tells about “The Origin of the Liṅga” (*Liṅgodbhava*), the material icon that is the central object of Śiva worship. Once, as the story goes, Brahmā and Viṣṇu were quarrelling with each other about who was the greatest god of all, each claiming to be the primary creative agent that animates the world. To dispel their pride, a massive *liṅga* appears in between them. Brahmā travels upwards in order to find its end, while Viṣṇu goes down, but to no avail: neither can find the end of the *liṅga*. Through this experience, they realize that Śiva, the lord of the *liṅga*, is, in fact, the supreme god. The narrative concludes with Viṣṇu and Brahmā praising Śiva and worshiping him in the form of the *liṅga*.¹

This popular etiological myth stands at the intersection of text and material culture, recounting the mythical origin of the material object of devotion. Textual accounts of the *Liṅgodbhava* myth are found in the Śaiva Purāṇas in particular, but one of the earliest versions may be the one told in the *Śivadharmasāstra* (ca. sixth to seventh century CE), a foundational work of Śaiva devotionism that advocates *liṅga* worship as the means of salvation.² The image has also found expression in narrative tableaux decorating the walls of Śiva temples, most notably in the Tamil South, but also in North India, as illustrated by this magnificent panel from Mount Harṣa in Rajasthan, now in the Ajmer Museum (Figure 1).³

1 For studies of different versions of the *Liṅgodbhava* myth, see Raju Kalidos, “*Liṅgodbhavamūrti* in Early Medieval Art and Literature,” *Acta Orientalia* 64 (2003): 77–136; Nirajan Kafle, “The *Liṅgodbhava* Myth in Early Śaiva Sources,” in *Puṣpikā. Tracing Ancient India Through Texts and Traditions. Contributions to Current Research in Indology I*, eds. Nina Mimig, Péter-Dániel Szántó, and Michael Williams (Oxford: Oxbow, 2013), 241–263; Angela Wagner-Hohenberger, “On the Composition of Parallel Versions of the Story ‘The Appearance of the *Liṅga* (*Liṅgodbhava*)’ in the Purāṇas,” *Asiatische Studien/Études Asiatiques* 68, no. 3 (2014): 831–848.

2 See Kafle, “The *Liṅgodbhava* Myth in Early Śaiva Sources” for a first edition and study of the *Liṅgodbhava* myth in the *Śivadharmasāstra*. On the question of the time and place of composition of the *Śivadharmasāstra*, see the introduction in Peter C. Bisschop, *Universal Śaivism. The Appeasement of All Gods and Powers in the Śāntyadhyaṇya of the Śivadharmasāstra* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

3 On the *liṅgodbhavamūrti* in Pallava art, see Valérie Gillet, *La création d'une iconographie śivaïte narrative. Incarnations du dieu dans les temples pallava construits* (Pondicherry: IFP/



Figure 1: *Liṅgodbhava* panel. Mount Harṣa (Rajasthan), now in the Ajmer Government Museum. Photo: author.

The *Liṅgodbhava* myth is well known and has received much attention. However, a remarkable adaptation of this myth in the context of Sūrya worship, recorded in the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* (*BhavP* 1.153–156), has gone unnoticed.⁴ In this text, Śiva's *liṅga* has been replaced by Sūrya's *vyoman*, a mysterious object presented as the supreme form of the Sun god. As I have argued elsewhere, the

EFE0, 2010), 173–186. On the archaeological remains of Mount Harṣa, see Elizabeth A. Cecil, “The Medieval Temple as Material Archive. Historical Preservation and the Production of Knowledge at Mount Harṣa,” *Archive Journal* (August 2017), <https://www.archivejournal.net/essays/the-medieval-temple-as-material-archive/>.

⁴ The *Epic and Purāṇic Bibliography* does not list any publication referring to the relevant chapters of the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*; cf. Heinrich von Stietencron, ed., *Epic and Purāṇic Bibliography* (up to 1985) *Annotated and with Indexes*, 2 vols. (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1992).

Bhaviṣyapurāṇa has incorporated and revised large parts of the *Śivadharmasāstra* and the *Śivadharmottara*, the two texts that make up the earliest part of the Śivadharm corpus, and transformed them into the teachings of “Sauradharm.”⁵ As part of this Saura adaptation, the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* has also revised the *Liṅgodbhava* myth told in chapter 3 of the *Śivadharmasāstra* and turned it into a myth about the manifestation and worship of Sūrya’s *vyoman*. But what is this *vyoman*? While the *Liṅgodbhava* narrative describes the origins of a familiar object of devotion (i.e. the Śiva *liṅga*), the identity of the *vyoman* as an object of worship is more difficult to trace. Does the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*’s description of the Saura emblem represent a textual innovation, or does it describe an actual object?

With these questions in mind, the first part of the present paper introduces the *Vyomodbhava* myth of the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*, with reference to the underlying parallels with the *Liṅgodbhava* myth of the *Śivadharmasāstra*. The second part examines the possible identity of the *vyoman* as an object of worship in medieval India in relation to the surviving material evidence as well as other textual descriptions.

2 The *Vyomodbhava* Myth of the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*

The *Vyomodbhava* myth covers chapters 153 to 156 of the *Brāhmaparvan* of the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*. The *Brāhmaparvan* is generally considered to be the oldest part of the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*, as suggested by R. C. Hazra’s study of quotations from the text in medieval Dharmanibandha literature.⁶ Although the precise date of composition of the *Brāhmaparvan* remains uncertain, it seems likely that a large part of it was composed sometime during the second half of the first millennium CE. This part of the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* is primarily concerned with teachings about Sun worship. While worship of the Sun has been part and parcel of the Vedic tradition from a very early period,⁷ the type of cultic Sun worship taught in the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* is markedly different, in that it presents Sun worship as a distinct religion centered on a single supreme deity, with its own class of priests

⁵ Bisschop, *Universal Śaivism*, 21–25; Peter C. Bisschop, “Vyāsa’s Palimpsest. Tracking Processes of Transmission and Re-creation in Anonymous Sanskrit Literature,” in *Perspectives on Lived Religion: Practices – Transmission – Landscape*, eds. N. Staring, H. Twiston Davies, and L. Weiss (Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2019), 165–172.

⁶ R. C. Hazra, *Studies in the Purāṇic Records on Hindu Rites and Customs*, 2nd ed. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1972), 167–173.

⁷ The *Rgveda*’s Sāvitrī or Gāyatrī mantra, dedicated to the Sun, is regarded as the quintessence of the Vedas to the present day.

(Māghas and Bhojakas), its own community of worshippers, and its own form of ritual practice. The text reflects on and engages with the traditions of Sun worship, strongly rooted in ancient Iran, that had spread to northern India during the first millennium CE.⁸ The *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* presents Sun worship in accordance with a Brahmanic model of worship and teaches that the sun is the highest and ultimate Lord (*īśvara*), encompassing and ruling over all other deities.⁹

At the beginning of a kalpa, as the story goes, Brahmā, who was creating the world, became arrogant, thinking, “There is no one in the world who is superior to me.” Likewise, Viṣṇu became arrogant while he was protecting the world, and Śiva while he was destroying it.¹⁰ They start quarrelling with each other, each claiming to be the one who creates, preserves, and destroys the universe.¹¹ As they are quarrelling, the darkness of ignorance enters them and they can no

8 On the history and incorporation of Iranian traditions of sun worship in the formation of the Saura religion, see François Chenet, “Les Sauras de l’Inde: Le brillant échec d’une identité religieuse inclusiviste?” *Journal Asiatique* 281 (1993): 317–392; Adalbert J. Gail, “Der Sonnenkult im alten Indien – Eigenwuchs oder Import?” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 128 (1978): 333–348; H. Humbach, “Mithra in India and the Hinduized Magi,” in *Études Mithriaques. Actes de Congrès 4* (Tehran: Bibliothèque Pahlavi, 1978), 229–253; Michael Stausberg, “Hinduism and Zoroastrianism,” in *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, vol. 4, eds. Knut Jacobsen et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 605–616; and Heinrich von Stietencron, *Indische Sonnenpriester. Śāmba und die Śākadvipīya-Brāhmaṇa* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1966).

9 This paragraph reproduces some information from Bisschop, “Vyāsa’s Palimpsest,” 167.

10 *BhavP* 1.153.2–3:

kalpādaḥ sṛjato vīra brahmaṇo vividhāḥ prajāḥ |
aḥaṁkāro mahān āsin nāsti loke maduttamaḥ || 2||
tathā pālayato vīra keśavasya dharāpate |
tathā saṁharato jajñe ’haṁkāras tryambakasya ca || 3||

Compare *ŚiDhŚ* 3.2:

pūrvam ekāṁave ghore naṣṭe sthāvarajaṅgame |
vivādaḥ sumahān āsīd brahmaviṣṇoḥ paraspāram ||

All references to the *Śivadharmasāstra* in this paper are to my draft edition of chapter 3.

11 *BhavP* 1.152.6–8:

aḥaṁ kartā vīkartāhaṁ pālako ’haṁ jagatprabhūḥ |
ity āha bhagavān brahmā kṛṣṇabhīmaḥ samarcitau || 6||
tathaitya śaṁkaraḥ kruddhaḥ kaḥ śakto madṛte bhuvi |
saṁhartuṁ jagad etad dhi sraṣṭuṁ pālayituṁ tathā || 7||
nārāyaṇo ’py evam eva manākkrodhasamanvitaḥ |
na vā śakto jagat sraṣṭuṁ saṁhartuṁ rakṣituṁ tathā || 8||

longer see anything.¹² They do know what to do, however, and cry out for each other in despair:

Mahādeva said:

“Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa! Great-armed one! Where have you gone, great-minded one? And where has Brahmā gone, hero? I don’t see the two of you anywhere! [15]

I am truly bewildered by great delusion and darkness. What can I do? Where can I go? And where can I stay now? [16]

For not at all do I see the mountain, the earth, the trees, Devas, Gandharvas, or Dānavas, the broad ocean, the rivers! [17]

How can I see the world, both stationary and nonstationary? Tell me, best of gods, I am overcome with shame!” [18]

On hearing Śaṁkara’s words, Hari replied in a voice stammering with misery, deluded by darkness, o king. [19]

Viṣṇu said:

“Bhīma, Bhīma! I do not know where you are now! My mind is also greatly deluded by darkness, Śaṁkara! [20]

Where do I go, where do I stand, how can one gain comfort? For the entire world is filled with darkness, Parameśvara! [21]

If that god, the best of the gods, the one arisen from the lotus, is seen, let us ask him, the great soul, if you agree, o Hara, [22]

abandoning arrogance, pride, remaining even, alone, the lotus-faced one, he who originates from the lotus, whose eyes are like lotus petals.” [23]

On hearing the words of Viṣṇu of immeasurable splendor, who was speaking thus, Lord Brahmā spoke to the Bearer of the Gaṅgā (Śiva) and the Bearer of the Earth (Viṣṇu): [24]

“Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa! Great-armed one! Bhīma, Bhīma! Great-minded one! Where are you two? Say something! What were you two saying to each other? [25]

Compare ŚiDhŚ 3.3:

ahaṁ kartā hy ahaṁ kartā na madanyo jagatpatiḥ |
evam āha hariṁ brahmā brahmāṇaṁ ca haris tathā ||

12 BhavP 1.152.9–10:

evam teṣāṁ pravadatāṁ kruddhānāṁ ca parasparam |
samāviśat tadājñānaṁ tamo mohātmakaṁ vibho || 9||
tena krāntadhiyaḥ sarve na paśyanti parasparam |
atyarthaṁ moham āpannā na jñantīha kiṁcana || 10||

My mind and intellect are greatly subjugated by darkness! I do not hear, I do not see, being subjugated by sleep and delusion! [26]

Alas! The entire world, with its gods, demons, and men, is struck by darkness, you two gods! I do not know where the light has gone!" [27]¹³

Following this lively exchange, which pokes fun at the three gods who find themselves in the pitch-black darkness of ignorance, the *vyoman* makes its appearance:

As the gods, headed by Brahmā, were speaking like this, afflicted by pride, anger, and fear, with their minds overcome by darkness, [28]

13 BhavP 1.153.15–27:

mahādeva uvāca |
kṛṣṇa kṛṣṇa mahābāho kva gatas tvaṃ mahāmate |
brahmā ca kva gato vīra nāhaṃ paśyāmi vāṃ kvacit || 15||
mohena mahatāhaṃ vai tamasā ca vimohitaḥ |
kiṃ karomi kva gacchāmi kva cāham adhunā sthitaḥ || 16||
kṣmādharaṃ pṛthivīm vṛkṣān devagandharvadānavān |
vīpulaṃ sāgaraṃ sindhūn na hi paśyāmi kiṃcana || 17||
kenopāyena paśyeyaṃ jagat sthāvarajaṅgamam |
brūhi me devaśārdūla vṛḍā me 'tīva jāyate || 18||
śaṃkarasya vacaḥ śrutvā harir vacanam abravīt |
śokagadgadāyā vācā tamasā mohito nṛpa || 19||
viṣṇur uvāca |
bhīma bhīma na jāne 'haṃ kva bhavān vartate 'dhunā |
namāpi mohitaṃ cetasaḥ tamasātīva śaṃkara || 20||
kva gacchāmi kva tiṣṭhāmi kathaṃ tat svasthatāṃ vrajet |
tamasā pūrītaṃ sarvaṃ jagad dhi parameśvara || 21||
yady asau dṛśyate devaḥ surajyeṣṭho 'mbujodbhavaḥ |
pṛcchāvas taṃ mahātmānaṃ yadi te rocate hara || 23||
hītvā darpam ahaṃkāraṃ samam āsthāya kevalam |
padmānanam padmayoniṃ padmapatranibhekṣaṇam || 24||
ity evaṃ gadato vākyam viṣṇor amitatejasah |
śrutvovāca vibhur brahmā gaṅgādharamahidharau || 25||
kṛṣṇa kṛṣṇa mahābāho bhīma bhīma mahāmate |
kva bhavantau brūta kiṃ ca kiṃ yuvām ūcathur mithaḥ || 26||
namātīva manobuddhī tamasā vaśam āgate |
na śṛṇomi na paśyāmi nidrāmohavaśaṃ gataḥ || 27||
aho bata jagat sarvaṃ sadēvāsura mānuṣam |
tamasā vyāhataḥ [corr.; vyāṣṭataḥ Ed.] devau na jāne kva gataṃ mahaḥ || 28||

in order to remove their pride and to teach them, the luminous form of Gopati (Sūrya) appeared, with eight projections,¹⁴ unparalleled, [29]

unmarked by evil or darkness, o king. It shone, covered in a wreath of flames, o hero, and with many forms, [30]

one hundred *yojanas* in extent, rising upwards and flickering, in the midst of the stars, o great king, like the pericarp of a lotus. [31]¹⁵

This passage clearly models its account of Sūrya's material epiphany on the description of the appearance of the *liṅga* in *Śivadharmasāstra* 3.4–5, even including some of the same vocabulary:

In order to remove their pride and to teach them, the mighty *liṅga*, consisting entirely of fire, appeared in the middle of the two gods, [4]

covered in a wreath of flames, divine, endowed with immeasurable qualities, ten thousand *yojanas* in extent, it stood in the pure water. [5]¹⁶

Astonished by the sight of the *vyoman*, Brahmā travels upwards, Śiva goes down, and Viṣṇu goes crosswise, but they are unable to measure it.¹⁷ The passage is a

14 The meaning of *aṣṭaśṛṅga* will be discussed in the second part of this paper.

15 *BhavP* 1.153.28–31:

atha teṣāṃ pravadatām brahmādinām divaukasām |
darpakrodhabhayārtānām tamasākrāntacetasām || 28||
teṣāṃ darpāpahārāya prabodhārthaṃ ca gopateḥ |
tejorūpaṃ samudbhūtam aṣṭaśṛṅgam anaupamam || 29||
alakṣyaṃ pāpatamasā mahadvyoma narādhipa |
jvālāmālāvṛtaṃ vīra bahurūpaṃ ca bhāsate || 30||
śatayojanavistīrṇaṃ gatam ūrdhvaṃ bhramat tathā |
gomadhyato mahārāja karṇikevāmbujasya tu || 31||

16 *ŚiDhŚ* 3.4–5:

tayor darpāpahārāya prabodhārthaṃ ca devayoḥ |
madhye samutthitaṃ liṅgam aiśvaryaṃ tejaśaḥ param || 4||
jvālāmālāvṛtaṃ divyam aprameyaguṇoditam |
yojanāyutavistīrṇaṃ sthitaṃ tad vimale 'mbhasi || 5||

17 *BhavP* 1.153.34–37:

tejasā mohitaṃ tasya mahadvyoma narādhipa |
tato vismayam āśinā dṛṣṭagopatayo nṛpa || 34||
paśyamānā maho vyomni mitho vacanam abruvan |
aho tejaḥ samudbhūtam asmākaṃ śreyase nṛpa || 35||

logical adaptation of the *Liṅgodbhava* myth in which Brahmā travels up and Viṣṇu goes down to find the end of the *liṅga*.¹⁸ In the *Vyomodbhava* myth, there are three gods involved and the object is the disk of the sky (*vyoman*), so they each have to go up, down, and crosswise. The outcome, however, is the same: they are unable to find the end of the *vyoman* and all the gods start reciting praise. Sūrya appears and shows himself to the gods in the *vyoman* as the supreme lord.¹⁹ Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva each praise Sūrya individually.²⁰ There follows an extensive exchange between Sūrya and the gods, in which Sūrya offers each of them boons. Brahmā requests to have devotion, while Śiva asks to be instructed about his true form, which Sūrya does in extenso. He teaches them about his own four forms: the *rajas* form of Brahmā, the *sattva* form of Viṣṇu, the *tamas* form of Śiva, and the fourth supreme form, which is free from *guṇas*.²¹ They cannot experience it without worshiping him in the form of the *vyoman*.²²

prakāśāya ca lokānāṃ sarve paśyāma kiṃ nv idam |
jñānāyordhvaṃ gato brahmā cādhistāt tripurāntakaḥ || 36||
tiryag jagāma deveśaś cakrāmbujagadādharah |
alabdhvā tasya te sarve pramāṇaṃ gairikādhīpāḥ || 37||

18 ŚiDhŚ 3.7:

gatāv ūrdhvaṃ adhas tasya saṃpradhārya parasparam |
adho 'valambayad viṣṇur agād ūrdhvaṃ pitāmahaḥ || 7||

19 BhavP 1.153.41–42:

stuvatām apy athaiteṣāṃ sahasrakiraṇo raviḥ |
ātmanāṃ darśayām āsa kṛpayā parayā vṛtaḥ || 41||
jñātvā bhaktiṃ mahābāho brahmādināṃ mahopamām |
atha te vyomni deveṣaṃ dadṛśuḥ parameśvaram || 42||

20 BhavP 1.153.50–80.

21 BhavP 1.154.15–19:

caturmūrtir ahaṃ deva jagad vyāpya vyavasthitaḥ |
śreyase sarvalokānāṃ ādimadhyāntakṛt sadā || 15||
ekā me rājasī mūrtir brahmeti parikīrtitā |
sṛṣṭiṃ karoti sā nityaṃ kalpāḍau jagatāṃ vibho || 16||
dvitiyā sāttvikī proktā yā parā parikīrtitā |
jagat sā pālayen nityaṃ duṣṭadaityavināśinī || 17||
tṛtīyā tāmāsī jñeyā īśeti parikīrtitā |
trailokyāṃ saṃharet sā tu kalpānte śūlapāṇinī || 18||
caturthī tu guṇair hīnā satyādibhir anuttamā |
sā cāśakyā kvacid draṣṭuṃ sthitā sā cābhavat sadā || 19||

22 BhavP 1.154.23:

That which is known as the Primeval Lord, that is praised as the *vyoman*. For at the end of a kalpa, all gods are dissolved in this *vyoman*. [28]

Brahmā is dissolved in the right side, Janārdana in the left, and you, Tripurāntaka, are dissolved in the top. [29]

Gāyatrī, mother of the world, is dissolved in its heart; the Veda, along with the six *aṅgas*, the *pada*[*pāṭha*], and the *krama*[*pāṭha*], is dissolved in its head. [30]

The entire world, both moving and unmoving, is dissolved in the belly. From it again arises Brahmā, etc., and all that is moving and unmoving. [31]

Space, they say, is *vyoman*; the earth is held to be *nikṣubhā* (unshakable). I am space, the most excellent of beings, and Nikṣubhā is my wife. [32]

By me and Nikṣubhā all the world is pervaded, Three-eyed One. Therefore you, Brahmā, and Keśava should worship the *vyoman*. [33]²³

This passage draws directly upon *ŚiDh* 3.14–18:

At the end of a kalpa all the gods are dissolved in this *liṅga*. Brahmā is dissolved in the right [side], the eternal Viṣṇu in the left. [14]

And Gāyatrī, the most supreme of all the gods, in the heart. The Vedas, along with the six *aṅgas*, the *pada*[*pāṭha*], and the *krama*[*pāṭha*], reside in the head. [15]

The entire world, both moving and unmoving, is dissolved in the belly. From it again arises Brahmā, etc., and all that is moving and unmoving. [16]

Space, they say, is the *liṅga*; the earth, its pedestal. It is the dwelling (*ālaya*) of all beings. Due to dissolving (*liyanāt*) into it, it is called *liṅga*. [17]

na sā spraṣṭuṃ tvayā śakyā hariṇā brahmaṇā na ca |
mām anārādhya bhūteṣa vyomarūpaṃ kadācana ||

23 *BhavP* 1.154.28–33:

yat tv ādyam īśvaraṃ jajñe tad vyoma parikṛtitam |
kalpānte hy atra vai vyomni liyante sarvadevatāḥ || 28||
dakṣiṇe liyate brahmā vāme tasya janārdanaḥ |
tvaṃ sadā kacadeṣe tu liyase tripurāntaka || 29||
gāyatrī liyate tasya hṛdaye lokamātaraḥ |
liyate [corr.; liyante Ed.] mūrdhni vai vedaḥ saṣaḍaṅgapadakraṃmaḥ || 30||
jaṭhare liyate sarvaṃ jagat sthāvaraṅgamam |
punar utpadyate hy asmād brahmādyam sacarācaram || 31||
ākāśaṃ vyoma ity āhuḥ pṛthivī nikṣubhā matā |
bhūtaśreyo 'ham ākāśo nikṣubhā dayitā mama || 32||
mayā nikṣubhayā sarvaṃ jagad vyāptaṃ trilocana |
tasmād ārādhaya vyoma tvaṃ brahma keśavas tathā || 33||

Therefore, the one who installs a *liṅga*, the origin of all the gods, has thereby installed and worshiped everything, without a doubt! [18]²⁴

In this part of the text, the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* stays relatively close to the text of the *Śivadharmasāstra*, yet introduces some significant changes in order to accommodate the new context of the origin of the *vyoman*. Most significant is the adaptation of the mystical identification of the *liṅga* in *ŚiDhŚ* 3.17. This verse identifies the *liṅga* with space and the earth with its pedestal (*pīṭhikā*), and provides a *nirukti* of the word *liṅga* that derives it from the root “dissolve” (*√li*).²⁵ In *BhavP* 1.153.32, the *vyoman* is identified with space, while *nikṣubhā* (the unshakable) is identified with the earth. *Nikṣubhā* is the name of one of the wives of the sun and plays a key role in the legendary ancestry of the Magas. According to *BhavP* 1.139.33–43, the Magas are the descendants of Jaraśastra (i.e. Zaratustra), the son of the Sun and the goddess *Nikṣubhā*.²⁶ This statement should therefore also be read in the light of the legendary ancestry of the Maga priests, who are portrayed as the ideal Sun worshippers in the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*.

The text then introduces a new element into the narrative. After he explains the nature of the *vyoman* to Śiva, Sūrya instructs Śiva to worship his *vyoman* on Mt. Gandhamādana; furthermore, Viṣṇu should worship it at Kalāpagrāma, and Brahmā at Puṣkara.²⁷ Viṣṇu asks Sūrya to instruct them on the precise form of

24 *ŚiDhŚ* 3.14–17:

kalpānte tasya liṅgasya liyante sarvadevatāḥ |
dakṣiṇe liyate brahmā vāme viṣṇuḥ sanātanaḥ || 14||
hṛdaye caiva gāyatrī sarvadevottamottamā |
mūrdhni tiṣṭhanti vai vedāḥ saṣaḍaṅgapadakramāḥ || 15||
jaṭhare liyate sarvaṃ jagat sthāvarajaṅgamam |
punar utpadyate tasmād brahmādyam sacarācaram || 16||
ākāśam liṅgam ity āhuḥ pṛthivī tasya pīṭhikā |
ālayaḥ sarvabhūtānām liyanāl liṅgam ucyate || 17||
tasmāl liṅgaṃ pratiṣṭhāpya sarvadevabhavodbhavam |
sthāpitaṃ tena sarvaṃ syāt pūjitaṃ na saṃśayaḥ || 18||

25 On this verse, see Peter C. Bisschop, “Buddhist and Śaiva Interactions in the Kali Age. The *Śivadharmasāstra* as a Source of the *Kāraṇḍavyūhasūtra*,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 61 (2018): 396–410.

26 Edition and translation in von Stietencron, *Indische Sonnenpriester*. See also Humbach, “Mithra in India and the Hinduized Magi,” 250.

27 These three places each have a traditional connection with the three deities. Kalāpagrāma is also referred to as Śālagrāma later on in the text.

BhavP 1.154.34–36:

the *vyoman* that they should worship.²⁸ In the subsequent chapter, Sūrya tells him that Brahmā should worship a quadrangular *vyoman* at daybreak; Viṣṇu, a discus-shaped *vyoman* at noon; and Śiva, a round *vyoman* in the evening.²⁹ This additional episode may have been inspired by the outcome of the *Liṅgodbhava* myth in the *Śivadharmasāstra*: there, all the gods each install and worship their own *liṅga* made of different material. According to the *Śivadharmasāstra*, they gain their divine positions because of this: Brahmā acquires the status of Brahmā by worshiping a stone *liṅga*; Indra, the state of Indra by worshiping a crystal *liṅga*; Kubera, the state of Kubera by worshiping a golden *liṅga*, etc.³⁰

tan me rūpaṃ mahadvyoma pūjayitvā trilocana |
divyaṃ varṣasahasraṃ hi girau tvaṃ gandhamādane |
tato yāsyasi saṃsiddhiṃ śaḍaṅgāṃ paramāṃ śubhāṃ || 34||
kalāpagrāmam āśritya śaṅkhacakraḡadādharaḡ |
ārādhayatu māṃ bhaktyā vyomarūpaṃ janārdanaḡ || 35||
antarikṣagataṃ tīrthaṃ puṣkaraṃ lokapāvanam |
tatra gatvā viriṅco me vyomarūpaṃ sadārcatu || 36||

28 BhavP 1.154.41:

kīḡrgvyoma tv ahaṃ brahmā haraś ca tripurāntakaḡ |
ārādhayāmahe deva bhaktyā śreyo'rtham ātmanaḡ ||

29 BhavP 1.155.2–4:

ārādhayatv ayaṃ devo mama rūpaṃ anaupamaṃ |
catuṣkoṇaṃ paraṃ vyoma adbhutaṃ gairikojjvalam || 2||
tvam ārādhyā ca cakrāṅkaṃ śaṅkaro vṛttam ādarāt |
śabdādau satataṃ brahmā saḡarādau trilocanaḡ || 3||
madhyāhne tvaṃ sadā deva bhaktyā mām arcayasva vai |
yatheṣṭam ṛbhavaḡ sarve bhaktyā māṃ pūjayantu vai || 4||

30 ŚiDhŚ 3.20–22:

brahmā pūjayate nityaṃ liṅgaṃ śailamayaṃ śubham |
tasya saṃpūjanāt tena prāptaṃ brahmatvam uttamaṃ || 20||
śakro 'pi devarājendro liṅgaṃ maṇimayaṃ śubham |
bhaktyā pūjayate nityaṃ tenendratvaṃ avāpa saḡ || 21||
liṅgaṃ hemamayaṃ kāntaṃ dhanado 'rcayate sadā |
tenāsau dhanado devo dhanadatvam avāpa saḡ || 22||

The verses that follow (23–39) also mention the Viśvedevas, Vāyu, Viṣṇu, the Vasus, the two Aśvins, Varuṇa, Agni, Sūrya, Buddha, Arhat, Soma, the Nāgas, the Rākṣasas, the Piśācas, the Guhyakas, and the Mātṛs. For a discussion of this passage, see Peter C. Bisschop, “Inclusivism Revisited. The Worship of Other Gods in the *Śivadharmasāstra*, the *Skandapurāṇa* and the

In the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*, the three gods follow the advice of Sūrya and set out for Puṣkara, Śālagrāma, and Gandhamādana, each to worship their own *vyoman* in accordance with Sūrya's instructions.³¹ After a thousand divine years have passed, the sun is satisfied and manifests himself to them.³² First he goes to Brahmā, who bows down and praises him as the lord of the gods.³³ Sūrya addresses him as his "first-born son" and offers him a boon.³⁴ Brahmā asks for his creation to be successful, whereupon Sūrya informs him that he will take up birth as his son in the line of Marīci,³⁵ which will make his creation

Niśvāsamukha," in *Tantric Communities in Context*, eds. Nina Mirnig, Marion Rastelli, and Vincent Eltschinger (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie für Wissenschaften, 2019), 511–537.

31 *BhavP* 1.155.24–27:

jaḡāma puṣkaraṃ brahmā śālagrāmaṃ janārdanaḥ |
vṛṣabhadhvajo gato vīra parvataṃ gandhamādanam || 24||
tyaktvā mānam ahaṃkāraṃ kurvantas tapa uttamam |
ārādhayanti taṃ devaṃ bhāskaraṃ vāṛitaskaram || 25||
vyomni kṛtvā catuṣkoṇaṃ brahmā nityam apūjayat |
cakrāṅkitaṃ harir nityaṃ samyag vyoma tv apūjayat || 26||
haro 'pi satataṃ vīra tejasā vahnisaṃnibham |
apūjayat sadā vṛttaṃ vyoma bhaktyā samanvitaḥ || 27||

32 *BhavP* 1.155.28–30:

divyavarṣasahasrānte pūjayanto divākaram |
gandhamālyopahārais tu nṛtyagītapravāditaiḥ || 28||
atoṣayan mahātmānaṃ kurvāṇas tapa uttamam |
bhaktyācalena manasā vivasvantam anuttamam || 29||
atha teṣāṃ mahārāja prasanno bhuvanādhipaḥ |
darśayām āsa lokātmā yugapad vai vibhāvasuḥ || 30||

33 *BhavP* 1.155.37:

namas te devadeveśa namas te timirāpaha |
namas te bhūtabhavyeśa bhūtāde bhūtabhāvana ||

34 *BhavP* 1.155.39cd–40:

tvaṃ me prathamajaḥ putraḥ saṃbhūtaḥ kāraṇāt purā || 39||
varaṃ varaya bhadrāṃ te varado 'smi tavāgrataḥ |
yam icchasi surajyeṣṭha mā tvaṃ śaikāṃ kuru prabho || 40||

35 *BhavP* 1.155.42–43:

na putratvam ahaṃ prāptas tava deva caturmukha |
tavānvaye gamiṣyāmi putratvaṃ hi maricaye || 42||

thrive. Brahmā thereupon asks him where his abode shall be and Sūrya assigns him a place in the *vyoman*:

You shall always dwell together with the multitudes of gods in the great *vyoman*, which is my form, with projections on the surface, most supreme: [46]

Indra in the eastern corner, the son of Śaṇḍili (Agni) in the southeast, Yama always in the south, Nirṛti in the southwest, [47]

Varuṇa in the west, the one who constantly moves (Vāyu) in the northwest; the granter of wealth (Kubera) shall dwell in the northern part, [48]

the god Śaṅkara in the northeast. You, together with Viṣṇu, [shall dwell] in the center. [49ab]³⁶

In other words, the *vyoman* with its eight projections is the abode of the eight deities of the directions (Lokapālas), while Brahmā and Viṣṇu together occupy the center.

Next, Sūrya proceeds to Mount Gandhamādana, where he finds Śiva engaged in the act of worshiping the *vyoman*.³⁷ He offers a boon to Śiva, who prostrates himself and requests that Sūrya “do that which a father does for his son.”³⁸ He

tato yāsyati te siddhiṃ kṛtṣṇā sṛṣṭiś caturmukha |
bhavitaivaṃ na saṃdeho matprasādāj jagatpate || 43||

36 BhavP 1.155.46–49ab:

yan me rūpaṃ mahad vyoma prṣṭhaśṛṅgam anuttamam |
tatra devakadambais bhavān nityaṃ nivatsyati || 46||
indrah pūrvadiśo bhāge āgneyyāṃ śaṇḍilisutaḥ |
dakṣiṇasyāṃ yamo nityaṃ nairṛtyāṃ atha nirṛtiḥ || 47||
paścimāyāṃ tu varuṇo vāyavyāṃ tu sadāgatiḥ ||
uttare tu diśo bhāge nivased dhanadas tataḥ || 48||
aīśānyāṃ śaṃkaro devo madhye tvaṃ viṣṇunā saha |

37 BhavP 1.155.51cd–53:

ādityo 'pi varaṃ dattvā brahmaṇyo brahmaṇe 'nagha || 53cd||
jaḡāma saha devena parvataṃ gandhamādanam |
dadarśa tatra bhūteśaṃ tapas tīvraṃ samāśritam || 54||
kapardīnaṃ śūladharaṃ candrārḍha[corr.; candrārka- Ed.]kṛtaśekharam |
pūjayantaṃ paraṃ vyoma suvratam tejasānvitam || 55||

38 BhavP 1.155.60:

tavāṅgasambhavo deva putro 'haṃ vallabhas tava |
yat karoti mahādeva pitā putrasya tat kuru ||

then asks him for “unwavering devotion,” which will help him destroy the universe at the end of time, and “a supreme place,” which will help him conquer all weapons.³⁹ Sūrya grants him this boon and tells him that the *vyoman* that he has worshiped shall be his supreme weapon, the trident (*triśūla*), while his place shall be in the northwestern part of the *vyoman*.⁴⁰

In the final chapter, Sūrya proceeds to Śālagrāma to give a boon to Viṣṇu. He finds him worshiping the *vyoman* in the shape of a discus.⁴¹ After Viṣṇu has paid homage to Sūrya, saying that he is his “second son” (after Brahmā), he requests that he grant him his wishes, “like a father to his son.”⁴² Sūrya grants him a boon and Viṣṇu requests “unwavering devotion,” which will allow him to conquer the enemy, as well as “a supreme place, skill in the protection of the

39 BhavP 1.155.63–65:

yadi tuṣṭo 'si me deva anugrāhyo 'smi te yadi |
prayaccha me varaṃ bhāno dehi bhaktiṃ mamācalām || 63||
devadānavagandharvayakṣarakṣogaṇāṃs tathā |
nirjityāhaṃ yathā deva yugānte saṃhare prajāṃ || 64||
tathā prayaccha me deva sthānaṃ ca paramaṃ vibho |
yenāhaṃ hetī sarvaṃ ca jaye deva jagatprabho || 65||

40 BhavP 1.155.67:

yad etat pūjitaṃ nityaṃ madrūpaṃ vyoma cottamam |
etat triśūlaṃ paramaṃ tava śastraṃ bhaviṣyati |
iśāne ca tathā bhāge vyomno vāso bhaviṣyati ||

41 BhavP 1.156.1–3:

itthaṃ dattvā varaṃ bhānur iśvarāya viśaṃ pate |
śālagrāmaṃ jagāmāsu varaṃ dātuṃ harer nṛpa || 1||
dadarśa sa hariṃ tatra tapantaṃ paramaṃ tapaḥ |
kṣṇājīnadharaṃ śāntaṃ prajvalantaṃ svatejasā || 2||
pūjayantaṃ mahad vyoma cakrākāram anaupamam |
gandhamālyopahāraiś ca nṛtyagītapravāditaiḥ || 3||

42 BhavP 1.156.10:

putro 'haṃ tava deveśa dvitīyo brāhmaṇo 'nagha |
piteva putrasya rave dehi kāmāñ jagatpate || 10||

worlds, power, heroism, glory, and pleasure.”⁴³ Sūrya grants him all this and tells him:

This great *vyoman* shall become your discus, the best of all weapons, o hero, destroying all enemies, and [it shall be] your supreme place, worshiped by all the worlds.⁴⁴

After he has given Viṣṇu this final boon, Sūrya returns home.⁴⁵

3 The Form and Material Shape of the *Vyoman*

The *Vyomodbhava* myth summarized above clearly builds on the model articulated in the *Liṅgodbhava* myth of the *Śivadharmasāstra*, but includes several important additions and elaborations. In replacing the *liṅga* with the *vyoman*, the authors of the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* have significantly expanded upon the narrative, providing more detail and context. The three gods of creation (*śṛṣṭi*), preservation (*sthiti*), and destruction (*saṃhāra*) are granted their cosmic tasks along with their weapons on account of their worship of Sūrya’s *vyoman*. The main question raised by the *Vyomodbhava* myth concerns the identity of the object at the heart of the story. While the *liṅga* is well known from material culture as the phallic icon installed in the Śiva temple, no object corresponding to the *vyoman* appears to be known from the tradition of Sūrya worship. The icon installed and worshiped in a Sūrya temple is typically the anthropomorphic form of the deity, not an abstract emblem. Are we confronted here with a textual invention that was designed to furnish a corresponding Saura parallel for the

43 *BhavP* 1.156.16–17:

yadi tuṣṭo mama vibhur bhaktyā krīto mayā yadi |
prayaccha tv acalāṃ bhaktiṃ yathā śatruṃ parājaye |
tathā mama varaṃ dehi sarvārātivināśanam || 16||
mama sthānaṃ ca paramaṃ sarvalokanamaskṛtam |
lokānāṃ pālanaṃ yuktiṃ balaṃ vīryaṃ yaśaś sukham || 17||

44 *BhavP* 1.156.21:

etad eva mahad vyoma cakraṃ te prabhaviṣyati |
sarvāyudhavaraṃ vīra sarvārātivināśanam |
tathā sthānaṃ ca paramaṃ sarvalokanamaskṛtam ||

45 *BhavP* 1.156.23:

bhāskaro ’pi varaṃ dattvā keśavāyāmitaujase |
jagāmāśu mahārāja svapuraṃ vibudhādhipaḥ || 23||

liṅga in the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*'s telling of the story, or does this narrative describe an actual object venerated by devotees of the sun? The remainder of this paper is dedicated to addressing this question.

From the *Vyomodbhava* myth itself, we can discern the following. The most concrete piece of information is that it has “eight projections” (*aṣṭaśṛṅga* [*BhavP* 1.153.29d]). This description matches Sūrya's subsequent teaching to Brahmā that the eight Lokapālas each take up one of its eight corners (*BhavP* 1.155.46–49ab). Moreover, the *vyoman* has a center, for this is declared to be the space occupied by Brahmā and Viṣṇu. In contrast to the *liṅga*, the *vyoman* is not a vertical object (whose top and bottom Brahmā and Viṣṇu seek to find), but spreads in all directions, like the expanse of the “sky” (*vyoman*) that gives it its name. The fact that Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva each worship the *vyoman* in a different form (quadrangular, discus-shaped, and round) may either be a narrative trope to account for the receipt of their individual weapons (taught to derive from their worship of the *vyoman*), or it could indicate that these are the three elements that jointly make up the three parts of the full form of the *vyoman*.

But the conceptualization of the *vyoman* in the *Vyomodbhava* myth is not a mere textual invention born of the need to retell the *Liṅgodbhava* myth in a Saura setting; this is evinced by the presence of other passages in the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*'s *Brāhmaṇapāraṇa* that likewise give instructions on the worship of the *vyoman*. These passages provide further details, some of which match the above.⁴⁶ Thus, for example, *BhavP* 1.203.2–3, the opening of the chapter on the *Vyomapūjavidhi*, confirms that the *vyoman* has eight projections (Brahmā speaking):

Learn from me, o Kṛṣṇa, the procedure for the worship of the *vyoman*, the way in which men worship the *vyoman* of eight projections. [2]

After making a golden, silver, copper, or stone [*vyoman*] with eight projections, o great-armed one, he should worship [it] according to this procedure. [3]⁴⁷

⁴⁶ The following survey is by no means complete, but should give an impression of the prominence of the *vyoman* teachings in the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*.

⁴⁷ *BhavP* 1.120.2–3:

vyomapūjavidhiṃ kṛṣṇa nibodha gadato mama |
aṣṭaśṛṅgaṃ yathā vyoma pūjayanti maṇiṣiṇaḥ || 2||
sauvarṇaṃ rājataṃ tāmraṃ kṛtvā cāśmamayaṃ tathā |
aṣṭaśṛṅgaṃ mahābāho anena vidhinārcayet || 3||

Other passages in the text speak of the *vyoman* as having “four projections” (*catuṣśṛṅga*)⁴⁸ or “four corners” (*catuṣkoṇa*, *caturasra*).⁴⁹ This would seem to correspond to the form of the *vyoman* worshiped by Brahmā in the *Vyomodbhava* myth,⁵⁰ but it is possible that it rather represents a different layer of the same object.⁵¹ In the remainder of the *Vyomapūjāvidhi*, Brahmā teaches the various mantras to be used in the worship of the different parts that make up the *vyoman*. The passage quoted above includes the important detail that, like the *līṅga*, the *vyoman* may be made of different types of durable material. This further makes it clear that the author intended to refer to an actual material object of worship.

One passage identifies the *vyoman* as the “weapon of Sūrya” (*sūryapraharaṇa*).⁵² This may come as a surprise, since a lotus does not immediately suggest a

48 *BhavP* 1.67.14a; 1.124.3a; 1.124.3c; 1.130.59a.

49 *BhavP* 1.101.13b; 1.155.2c; 1.130.59a.

50 Compare also *BhavP* 1.68.2, according to which Brahmā worships a lotus-shaped *vyoman*:

padmākṛtiṃ sadā brahmā nalinair guggulena tu |
vyomarūpaṃ sadā devaṃ mahādevo 'rcate ravim ||

51 Note that the *Devyāmata*, an early Śaiva *Pratiṣṭhātantra*, likewise refers to the *vyoman* “with four or eight projections.” Cf. *Devyāmata* 266cd–267ab:

atha vā vyomarūpaṃ tu caturśṛṅgaṃ tu kārayet ||
atha vā cāṣṭaśṛṅgaṃ tu ata ūrdhvaṃ na kārayet |

Edited in Anna Ślaczka, “The Iconography of the Hindu Deities in the *Devyāmata*, an Early Śaiva *Pratiṣṭhātantra*,” in *Interrelations of Indian Literature and Arts*, ed. Lidia Sudyka (Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2011), 181–261. See Ślaczka, 213–218 for a discussion of this passage.

Furthermore, a verse from the Tantric compendium the *Pratiṣṭhālakṣaṇasārasamuccaya* states that the *vyoman* may have “twelve, four, or eight projections” (PLSS 6.276):

vyomaṃ sūryāgrataḥ kuryāc chṛṅgair dvādaśabhir yutam |
caturbhir aṣṭābhir vāpi madhye 'bje 'ṣṭadalānvitam ||

Edited in Gudrun Bühnemann, *The Hindu Pantheon in Nepalese Line Drawings. Two Manuscripts of the Pratiṣṭhālakṣaṇasārasamuccaya* (Varanasi: Indica Books, 2003). The two seventeenth-century Nepalese manuscripts with line drawings depict the *vyoman* as a cow with four horns (Bühnemann, fig. 105). This certainly does not conform to the icon described by the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*, and may be the later invention of the Nepalese artist.

52 *BhavP* 1.125.2:

hanta vyoma pravakṣyāmi sūryapraharaṇaṃ śubham |
yadātmakaṃ hi yatproktaṃ yathā vasanti devatāḥ ||

weapon, but it was probably considered to be a weapon modeled on the shape of a lotus:

Just as Varuṇa has the noose, just as Vedhas has the *huṅkāra*, just as Viṣṇu has the discus, just as Tryambaka has the trident, and just as Indra has the thunderbolt, so is Sūrya known to have the *vyoman*.⁵³

This verse suggests that the *vyoman* has the form of a lotus, being identified with the lotus(es) that Sūrya holds in his hands. Read together with the passages mentioning the *vyoman*'s eight projections, we can conjecture that these represent the eight petals of the lotus. Such an identification receives support from an important passage in the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa*, whose *Pratimālakṣaṇa* section includes a brief chapter laying out the form of the *vyoman* (ViDhP 3.75: *Vyomarūpanirmāṇam*). It provides the most concrete description of the *vyoman* and matches some of what we have learned so far from the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*:

It should be square at the base and then round, o long-armed one; then a small square and then another square, [2]

Then another small square, so that it appears like Mt. Meru. This is taught as the *bhadrapiṭha*. The *vyoman* part is the third. [3]

This is declared as the characteristic of all *bhadrapiṭhas*. The square that is like a pillar is proclaimed to be the middle part. [4]

On top of the *bhadrapiṭha*, one should render a lotus with eight beautiful petals. In its center, up to the pericarp, is Divākara (the sun), [5]

And one should arrange the guardians of the directions in its petals according to the quarters. Below the *bhadrapiṭha*, one should position the earth. [6]

And they know the lotus, the part above it, as the intermediary space. All the supreme gods are present there. [7]

The *vyoman* consisting of all the gods has been taught to you, great-armed one. After worshiping it, one obtains all desires. [8]⁵⁴

53 *BhavP* 1.125.5–6ab:

varuṇasya yathā pāśo huṅkāro vedhaso yathā |
viṣṇoś cāpi yathā cakram trisūlaṃ tryambakasya ca || 5||
indrasya ca yathā vajram tathā vyoma raveḥ smṛtam |

54 *VDhP* 3.75.2–8:

caturasram bhaven mūle tato vṛttaṃ mahābhujā |
tato 'lpacaturasram ca caturasram tato bhavet || 2||
tato 'lpacaturasram ca meruvat saṁsthitaṃ tataḥ |
bhadrapiṭhaṃ idaṃ proktaṃ vyomabhāgaṃ tṛtiyakam || 3||

While the description is terse and some of the details remain ambiguous,⁵⁵ we can make out that the *bhadrapiṭha* includes a square and a circular part (which recall the square and circular parts worshiped respectively by Brahmā and Śiva) and that it is topped by an eight-petalled lotus in which the guardians of directions are positioned. There can be little doubt that the author of the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* had a similar object in mind.

In an article entitled “‘Saura-Piṭha’ or the Solar Altar,” Shetti (1992) has collected several examples of so-called “*saurapiṭhas*.”⁵⁶ One beautiful example comes from Gangaikondacholapuram in Tamil Nadu, “which shows Sūrya as a large blossoming lotus at the top, the eight other *grahas* seated on the sides facing the eight directions and a row of seven horses facing east” (Figure 2).⁵⁷ Somewhat similar is a slab from Andhra Pradesh, now in the Chatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, Mumbai (Figure 3).⁵⁸ This shows the lotus on top, surrounded by the signs of the zodiac, placed on a square base that includes the Dikpālas and their consorts seated on their *vāhanas*, as well as the seven horses along with Aruṇa. Shetti also draws attention to a slab, now in the Hyderabad Museum, that

sarveṣāṃ bhadrapiṭhānām etal lakṣaṇam ucyate |
stambhavad [corr.; *stambhavaś* Ed.] *caturasraṃ tu madhyabhāgaṃ prakīrtitam || 4||*
bhadrapiṭhaṃ tato bhāge tatra padmaṃ niveśayet |
śubhāṣṭapatraṃ tanmadhye karṇikāsyād divākaraḥ || 5||
patreṣu kalpayet tasya dikpālāṃś ca yathādiśam |
bhadrapiṭhaṃ adhastāt tu pṛthivīm prakalpayet || 6||
antarikṣaṃ tathā padmaṃ ūrdhvaabhāgaṃ tato viduḥ |
tataḥ saṃnihitāḥ sarve bhavanti tridaśottamāḥ || 7||
sarvadevamayaṃ vyoma kathitaṃ te mahābhujā |
tasya saṃpūjanaṃ kṛtvā sarvān kāmān avāpnuyāt || 8||

55 For a different translation accompanied by hypothetical drawing of what the *vyoman* described in the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* might look like, see Dipak Chandra Bhattacharya, *Pratimālakṣaṇa of the Viṣṇudharmottara* (New Delhi: Harman Pub. House, 1991), 178–181 and plate 77.

56 As Shetti observes, “The Āgamic texts specify the worship of Sūrya in the form of a lotus altar. Evidently this is a representation of *Saura piṭha* (solar altar), intended for daily worship”; see B. V. Shetti, “‘Saura Piṭha’ or the Solar Altar,” in *Indian Numismatics, History, Art, and Culture: Essays in the Honour of Dr. P. L. Gupta*, vol. 2, eds. D. W. Macdowall, Savita Sharma, and Sanjay Garg (Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, 1992), 335. I have not been able to identify the Āgamic texts in question, and unfortunately the author provides no specific textual reference. Some of the same objects are discussed in relation to Sūrya and the symbolism of the lotus in C. Sivaramamurti, *Approach to Nature in Indian Art and Thought*. New Delhi: Kanak Publications, 1980. For another comprehensive survey, see Krishna Deva, “Lotus-Symbolism of the Graharāja-Manḍala,” *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, n.s., 22–23 (1993–95): 107–113, where they are referred to as “*sūryayantra*” or “*graharājamanḍala*.”

57 Shetti, “‘Saura Piṭha’ or the Solar Altar,” 337, fig. 2.

58 Shetti, “‘Saura Piṭha’ or the Solar Altar,” 338–339, fig. 3a/b.



Figure 2: Saurapīṭha. Gangaikondacolapuram. Source: C. Sivaramamurti, *The Chola Temples. Thaṇjāvūr, Gaṅgaikoṇḍaḥolapuram & Dārāsūram* (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1978).

shows the lotus surrounded by the Rāśis along with the Dikpālas below.⁵⁹ Another example, not mentioned by Shetti, is a slab at the Amritheshwara Temple at Amritpura, near Shimoga in Karnataka (Figure 4).⁶⁰ This again shows the lotus on top surrounded by the signs of the zodiac at the edges. More important, however, is the presence of a *praṇāla*, which indicates that the *saurapīṭha* (or *vyomapīṭha*) received the rites of *pūjā*, which conforms to the ritual prescriptions of the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*.

From North India comes a ninth-century image, currently in the Gwalior Museum, that more closely resembles the tiered structure described in the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* (Figure 5).⁶¹ Moreover, it has four prominent projections

⁵⁹ Shetti, “‘Saura Piṭha’ or the Solar Altar,” 337, fig. 1d.

⁶⁰ Srikumar M. Menon, “From Megaliths to Temples: Astronomy in the Lithic Record of South India,” in *Growth and Development of Archaeology and Astrophysics in India and the Asia-Pacific Region. Proceedings of the 9th International Conference on Oriental Astronomy*, eds. W. Orchiston, A. Sule, and M.N. Vahia (Mumbai: Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, 2018), 253–254, fig. 29.

⁶¹ Shetti, “‘Saura Piṭha’ or the Solar Altar,” 337, fig. 1c. See also Anne Casile, “Temples et expansion d’une centre religieux en Inde centrale. Lectures du paysage archéologique de Badoh-



Figure 3: Saurapīṭha. Prince of Wales Museum, Mumbai. Photo: Elizabeth A. Cecil.

on the corners, which recall the projections (*śṅga*) mentioned in the descriptions of the *vyoman*. Placed on a rectangular tiered base, it has the lotus on top, below which are represented the planets as well as a personified Sūrya in niches on the sides of the base. A similar example from the same period comes from Gaḍarmal, Madhya Pradesh (Figure 6).⁶² Casile (2009, 298), who has made an extensive study of the temple complex, refers to it as a “*balipīṭha* or *saurapīṭha*.” In addition to the lotus on top, the *pīṭha* displays the Navagrahas, Daśavatāras, Saptamātrkāś, and “11 divinités masculines assises,” which I suggest represent the Ekādaśarudras. A sculpted set of the Dikpālas surrounding the lotus completes the set. The *pīṭha* is still in situ at the temple complex of Gaḍarmal, directly in front of the Sūrya temple.

In view of the argument of this paper, it is noteworthy that the Sūrya temple is the only one of the seven temples surrounding the main temple at Gaḍarmal

Paṭhāri du 5e au 10e siècle de notre ère” (PhD diss., Université Sorbonne Nouvelle–Paris 3, 2009), plate 70, fig. 5, from which I have taken the picture.

⁶² Casile, “Temples et expansion d’une centre religieux,” plate 117, fig. 4. See also Deva, “Lotus-Symbolism of the Grahārāja-Manḍala,” fig. 8 and 8A.



Figure 4: Saurapīṭha. Amriteshwara Temple at Amritpura, Karnataka. Source: Menon, “From Megaliths to Temples.”

that has such a *pīṭha*.⁶³ This strongly suggests its intrinsic connection with Sūrya worship. The siting of the object in front of the Sūrya temple conforms to the description of the *vyoman*’s location in the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*, which stipulates several times that the object should be in front of the deity or the temple:⁶⁴

The *vyoman*, which is seen in front of Sūrya, o brahmin.⁶⁵

The *vyoman*, with four corners and four projections, is in front of the temple.⁶⁶

⁶³ See Deva, “Lotus-Symbolism of the Grahārāja-Maṇḍala,” plate 107 and 117, fig. 5.

⁶⁴ Compare also the verse from the *Pratiṣṭhālakṣaṇasārasamuccaya* quoted above (n. 51).

⁶⁵ *BhavP* 1.125.1ab:

yad etad dṛśyate vyoma sūryasya purato dvija |

⁶⁶ *BhavP* 1.130.59ab:

caturasraṃ catuḥśṛṅgaṃ vyoma devagr̥hāgrataḥ |



Figure 5: Saurapīṭha. Gurjari Mahal Archaeological Museum, Gwalior. Source: Casile, “Temples et expansion d’une centre religieux en Inde centrale.”

The place of the *vyoman* should be prepared nearby in front of the deity.⁶⁷

The *saṛapīṭha* at Gaḍarmal thus provides a perfect match with the descriptions of the *vyoman* in the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*. Some further examples of such altars from North India, adduced by Deva 1993–95, have either four, eight, or twelve projections on the corners.⁶⁸ One striking example, not discussed in any of the

⁶⁷ *BhavP* 1.130.62cd:

devasya purataḥ kāryaṃ vyomasthānaṃ samagrataḥ |

⁶⁸ A remarkably early one is a terracotta piece from the Neolithic-Chalcolithic site of Chirand, Bihar, which shows “an altar with a full blown lotus flower enclosed by eight plain petals” (Deva, “Lotus-Symbolism of the Graharaṇa-Maṇḍala,” 109, fig. 1). According to Deva, this was found in the Mauryan stratum. A seventh-century image from Mundesvari, Bihar (Deva, “Lotus-Symbolism of the Graharaṇa-Maṇḍala,” 109, fig. 4), by contrast, shows the lotus surrounded by four projections, while a contemporary image from Kanauj (Deva, “Lotus-Symbolism of the Graharaṇa-Maṇḍala,” 109, fig. 5) has twelve such projections, or “petals,” as Deva calls them.



Figure 6: Saurapīṭha. Gaḍarmal, Madhya Pradesh. Source: American Institute of Indian Studies (Acc. No. 2674).

literature that I have seen, comes from the Kal Bhairava temple in Ujjain (Figure 7).⁶⁹ This has eight projections surrounding the eight petals of the central lotus. On the base below are displayed the other Grahas.

Finally, I wish to draw attention to a peculiar iconographical feature found in some Sūrya sculptures from ninth- to twelfth-century Northeast India, described by Ślaczka as follows: “On these images the two open-blown lotuses held by the deity are often surmounted by more or less cubical elements resembling altars topped with a number of prongs.”⁷⁰ This curious

⁶⁹ I am grateful to Michael Willis for drawing my attention to this image and providing me with a photograph. It is now housed in a modern shrine, but may well come from an early sun temple in Ujjain.

⁷⁰ Ślaczka, “The Iconography of the Hindu Deities in the *Devyāmata*,” 35.



Figure 7: Saurapīṭha. Kal Bhairava Temple at Ujjain. Photo: Michael Willis.

representation recalls the identification of the *vyoman* with Sūrya’s “lotus-weapon” in the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* passage quoted above. The iconography is not restricted to Northeast India, however, for there is also a striking example from Kanauj (ca. eighth to ninth century), now in the National Museum in New Delhi (Figures 8a & 8b).⁷¹ It looks as if the artist has tried to integrate the handheld lotuses that comprise a standard feature of Sūrya’s iconography with the altarlike structure of the *vyomapiṭha* taught in the *Bhaviṣya-* and *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa*.⁷² In this way, the *vyomapiṭha* is represented

⁷¹ See also Casile, “Temples et expansion d’une centre religieux en Inde centrale,” plate 70, fig. 7, where the image is described as follows: “Relief sculpté de Sūrya arborant deux petits balipīṭha au-dessus de chaque lotus tenu par la divinité.”

⁷² The term *vyomapiṭha* is found in *BhavP* 1.203.9:



Figure 8a and 8b: Sūrya. Kanauj, now in the National Museum, New Delhi. Photo: author.

as the ritual counterpart of the lotuses held in his hands. The extended shafts below the lotus motif on this particular image are curiously reminiscent of some of the fire altars depicted on the reverse of Sassanian coins. These, just like the Kanauj image, display a ribbon tied around the shaft of the altar (Figure 9).⁷³ The parallelism is certainly striking and may be indicative of Zoroastrian influence on the artist's depiction of Sūrya.⁷⁴

namo 'stu sarvapāpebhyo vyomapiṭhaṃ sadārcayet |
te narāḥ satataṃ kāmān prāpnuvanti na saṃśayaḥ ||

⁷³ These lower shafts are not present on the northeastern Sūrya examples adduced by Ślaczka, "The Iconography of the Hindu Deities in the *Devyaṃmata*," plates 8 and 9 (along with references to Susan L. Huntington, *The "Pāla-Sena" Schools of Sculpture* [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1984], plates 66, 211, 217, and 218). On the typology of fire altars on Sassanian coins, see Nikolaus Schindel, "Sasanian Coinage," in *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Iran*, ed. Daniel T. Potts (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 815–840.

⁷⁴ Xuanzang reports the existence of a sun temple in Kanauj, which indicates that the city had become a center of sun worship by the seventh century; see Samuel Beal, *Si-Yu-Ki. Buddhist Records of the Western World. Translated from the Chinese of Hiuen Tsiang (A.D. 629)*



Figure 9: Gold Coin of Shapur (CE 383–388 CE). Source: Wikimedia Commons.

4 Concluding Remarks

The *Vyomodbhava* myth of the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* has much to offer to the historian of religion. The textual parallel with the *Liṅgodbhava* myth of the *Śivadharmasāstra* attests to the intensive nature of religious exchange in early medieval India, in which one of the founding myths of Śiva and the *liṅga* cult was reused and adapted to demonstrate the supremacy of Sūrya and his worship in the form of the *vyoman* instead. The parallel with the *Liṅgodbhava* myth and the apparent lack of a corresponding icon in Sūrya worship may at first sight give the impression that the *vyoman* at the heart of the myth represents a textual innovation, motivated by the necessity to recast the *Liṅgodbhava* myth in the context of Sūrya worship. A closer study of the text, however, shows that the worship of an object called *vyoman* forms a core element of the teaching of the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*'s *Brāhmaparvan*, which has been overlooked in existing scholarship on the Saura religion.⁷⁵ Moreover, the *vyoman* also appears as a form of Sūrya in iconographical texts such as the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa*, the *Devyāmata*, and the *Pratiṣṭhālakṣaṇasārasamuccaya*. As I have argued in this paper, the descriptions in these sources suggest a plausible connection

(1884; repr., Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1981), 223. See also Deva, "Lotus-Symbolism of the Grahārāja-Manḍala," 109–110.

⁷⁵ No mention of the *vyoman* is made, for example, in Lalata Prasada Pandeya, *Sun-Worship in Ancient India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1971); V. C. Srivastava, *Sun-Worship in Ancient India* (Allahabad: Indological Publications, 1960); or von Stietencron, *Indische Sonnenpriester*.

with certain material objects from medieval India that have been identified as *saurapīṭhas* in art-historical literature. The *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*'s *Vyomodbhava* myth may thus represent a doctrinal overlay of an existing material practice, providing it with a powerful new explanation and ideology based on the model of the *Līṅgodbhava* myth.

The present paper is meant as a first step toward bringing the various materials into conversation with each other. More research is needed to put them into context, which will also require looking into *vyoman*-related rituals and taking into account other sources that could not be dealt with in the context of the present study. To mention just one example of the former, the thirteenth-century Dharmanibandha author Hemādri quotes a *vyomaśaṣṭhī* and a *vyomavrata* from the “*Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*” in the *Vratakhanda* of his *Caturvargacintāmaṇi*.⁷⁶ Furthermore, for evaluating the materials of the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*, the descriptions of the *vyoman* in the *Sāmbapurāṇa*, a text that has strong textual links with the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*, should be taken into account as well.⁷⁷ I plan to do so in a future study.

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⁷⁶ Hemādri, *Caturvargacintāmaṇi of Śrī Hemādri. Vratakhanda*, eds. Bhāratacandra Śiromaṇi, Yajñeśvara Smṛtiratna, and Kāmākhyanātha Tarkavāgīśa (Calcutta: Bibliotheca Indica), 1.1: 616–617, 2:904–905. I have not been able to identify these two passages in the printed edition of the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*. The first passage also quotes from the *vyoman* description in *VDhP* 3.75.

⁷⁷ See R. C. Hazra, *Studies in the Upapurāṇas*, vol. 1, *Saura and Vaiṣṇava Upapurāṇas* (Calcutta: Sanskrit College, 1958), 39, 49, 50, and 52.

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