# Revealing Śiva's superiority by retelling Viṣṇu's deeds: Viṣṇu's manifestation myths in the Skandapurāṇa

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*ya imaṃ śṛṇuyān martyaḥ sadā parvasu parvasu |*
*arcayec chivaviṣṇuṃ ca sa gacchet paramāṃ gatim ||*
"The man who always listens to this [story], chapter by chapter,
and worships Śivaviṣṇu, he would go to the highest state."
*Skandapurāṇa* 121.21

## 6 Conclusions

With some of their roots in the Vedas, their firm embedment in the *Mahābhārata* and their ever-growing popularity in the Purāṇas, Viṣṇu's manifestation myths of Narasiṃha, Varāha and Vāmana are famous narratives. We hear about Viṣṇu in the star role of saviour of the universe. Fighting with the Asuras, rescuing the earth and traversing the cosmos; nothing is impossible for Viṣṇu… until the *Skandapurāṇa*. How does Viṣṇu's heroism fit in this Śaiva Purāṇa which glorifies Śiva as the supreme god, presents a Śaiva universe and speaks of Pāśupata ascetic practices? Why did the *Skandapurāṇa* composers dedicate so many chapters and so much attention and effort in retelling Viṣṇu's manifestation myths? These questions have been central in this dissertation. I have examined Viṣṇu's manifestation myths from different angles—from a study of the sources in which the narratives appear, to a survey of the alterations, preservations and innovations in the *Skandapurāṇa*. In this chapter, I will bring the observations together and reflect on the research questions as formulated in section 1.4.

The first set of questions concerns Viṣṇu's manifestation myths as retellings: *where does the Skandapurāṇa stand in the literary landscape of Viṣṇu's manifestation myths? How does it relate to other (re)tellings?* Whether the myths of Narasiṃha, Varāha and Vāmana formed a part of a section on creation or were included in an overview of Viṣṇu's animal and human manifestations, they were widely spread across the epic-Purāṇic genre. The *Skandapurāṇa* finds itself in the middle of a vibrant epic and Purāṇic landscape with its retellings, showing, per manifestation myth, a different relationship with other texts.

In the case of the Narasiṃha myth, the majority of texts focusses on the battle between Narasiṃha and Hiraṇyakaśipu (see section 2.1). A notable Vaiṣṇava exception

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to this storyline is the *Viṣṇupurāṇa*, which only briefly mentions Hiraṇyakaśipu's death by Narasiṃha. It otherwise deals with the distorted relationship between Hiraṇyakaśipu and his son Prahlāda, exemplifying the merits of devotion to Viṣṇu. The retelling in the *Skandapurāṇa* understandably rather connects to the other texts.

There are two main variants of the Varāha myth: the cosmogonic story leading to the (re)creation of the universe and the Asura-slaying story revolving around the battle between Varāha and Hiraṇyākṣa (see section 2.2). Although the cosmogonic version is much more popular in early Purāṇas, the Asura-slaying one is also already referred to in the *Mahābhārata* and the *Purāṇapañcalakṣaṇa*. The *Skandapurāṇa* and the *Harivaṃśa* (HV App. 1 No. 42) are the first texts to recount it in full, making a clear distinction between this and the cosmogonic story. In the case of the Varāha myth, the *Skandapurāṇa* therefore relates particularly to HV App. 1 No. 42. As demonstrated in section 2.4, the Varāha myth in the *Skandapurāṇa* also shows strong connections with one of the retellings of the Vāmana myth in the *Harivaṃśa* (HV App. 1 No. 42B). The *Skandapurāṇa* description of the *devāsura* war leading to Hiraṇyākṣa's take-over of the universe has significant parallels with the description of the *devāsura* war leading to Bali's take-over of the universe in HV App. 1 No. 42B.

The general storyline of the Vāmana myth is largely the same by the time of the epics and the Purāṇas (see section 2.3) and is followed by the *Skandapurāṇa* as well. It is only towards the end of the narrative that a special relationship can be observed. In the final scene of the main story, the *Skandapurāṇa* and HV App. 1 No. 42B share elements that do not occur in other early Purāṇas and appear to be unique to the two texts.

With regard to the general storyline of Viṣṇu's manifestation myths, we can conclude that the *Skandapurāṇa* engages with a large and vibrant epic-Purāṇic community, as it is generally consistent with the majority of available texts. Additionally, it has a special relationship with two narratives in the *Harivaṃśa*, the Asura-slaying version of the Varāha myth in HV App. 1 No. 42 and the Vāmana myth in HV App. 1 No. 42B. Whereas the correspondences in the final scene of the Vāmana myth seem to point to a case of direct intertextuality (see section 2.3), the parallels in the descriptions of the *devāsura* wars rather point to a situation in which the composers of the *Skandapurāṇa* and the *Harivaṃśa* (at least HV App. 1 No. 42B) belonged to the same literary milieu, drawing

upon the same pool of narratives, using the same language and employing the same compositional techniques (see section 2.4).

A similar conclusion of a shared stylistic repertoire has been drawn for the way in which the *Skandapurāṇa* composers described Hiraṇyakaśipu's boon in the Narasiṃha myth and for the inclusion of a eulogy to Viṣṇu. Both case studies extend the "literary milieu" of the *Skandapurāṇa* composers with at least the *Mahābhārata*. As I have shown in section 2.1, Hiraṇyakaśipu's boon in the *Skandapurāṇa* includes a loophole. The *Skandapurāṇa* is not the only text doing so, but it has implemented it differently. First, Hiraṇyakaśipu asks for complete immortality. Then, Brahmā says he should add a loophole, which is adhered to by Hiraṇyakaśipu. He makes the circumstances in which he cannot be killed explicit—thus keeping him mortal in the remaining cases. The same structure is found in several other narratives in the *Skandapurāṇa*, where an Asura first requests complete immortality, Brahmā then replies that Asuras cannot be immortal because this status is reserved for the gods, and the Asura finally adds a loophole to the boon, elucidating under which circumstance(s) he can be killed. This type of boons is not unique to the *Skandapurāṇa*, but also appears in the *Mahābhārata*. I have argued that this is a compositional technique that can be used by epic and Purāṇic composers, whenever the narrative demands a boon for an Asura.

The same explanation is more or less applicable to the inclusion of an otherwise unexpected hymn of praise to Viṣṇu in the Varāha myth (see section 3.5). The *Viṣṇustotra* is unexpected because it is not just the only one in the *Skandapurāṇa*—which otherwise only contains hymns to Śiva or one of his closest relatives or attendants—but there is also no *Viṣṇustotra* in the Asura-slaying version of the Varāha myth in other texts. In other words, the inclusion cannot be explained from the perspective of internarrational or intertextual consistency, to use the terminology of chapter 3. I have suggested a case of extratextual consistency instead, whereby the *stotra* can be explained from the context in which the scene appears, *viz.* a request for help. In several narratives of the *Skandapurāṇa*, a request for help consists of different steps: from sketching the problem at hand, to the requested god offering help and providing the gods with the solution. One of the intermediary steps is to praise the requested god. Since this structure is found in various narratives, both in the *Skandapurāṇa* and at least in the *Mahābhārata*, it appears to be part

of an epic and Purāṇic repertoire of narrative elements, used by the *Skandapurāṇa* composers as well.

However, as I have shown in section 3.5 as well, the *Skandapurāṇa* composers could have settled for a simple phrase like "the gods praised Viṣṇu", as they did in the Narasiṃha myth. Since they included a complete *stotra*, I have given an additional reason for its inclusion that the *Skandapurāṇa* composers took the chance to provide the audience with a Śaiva version of a *Viṣṇustotra*. The epithets in the hymn can be categorized in different groups: from general qualifications, such as physical features, to epithets that stress the contents of the Varāha myth, such as epithets referring to Asura-slaying stories and Viṣṇu's manifestations. One category particularly stands out, *viz.* the one including epithets that are related to the *Skandapurāṇa* and Śiva. By incorporating epithets like *mahādevapriyāya*, "dear to Mahādeva ["the Great God", i.e. Śiva]", and *maheśvaragaṇāya*, "Gaṇa of Maheśvara ["the Great Lord", i.e. Śiva]", the *Skandapurāṇa* composers were able to take control of how Viṣṇu should be worshipped from a Śaiva perspective.

From the above considerations, we can conclude that the *Skandapurāṇa* composers do not only relate to the epic-Purāṇic corpus in following the general storyline of Viṣṇu's manifestation myths, but also in sharing an epic-Purāṇic style of writing. They must have been aware of the literary environment they worked in, adopting popular narratives, mainstream storylines and a typical epic-Purāṇic language and style.

However, the *Skandapurāṇa* composers did not just follow other texts in retelling Viṣṇu's manifestation myths. In fact, while the general storyline may have been maintained, the *Skandapurāṇa* retellings are unlike any other. This is because an intricate combination of preservations, alterations and innovations is made, which brings me to the second set of research questions that are concerned with Viṣṇu's manifestation myths in the *Skandapurāṇa*: *which narrative elements are preserved, which have been changed, and which have been newly added? What effect do these decisions have on the rest of the narrative? Why did the Skandapurāṇa composers make these decisions?*

For a start, the *Skandapurāṇa* composers preserved several key narrative elements in the main story[461]. The most important preservation for the recognisability and the credibility of the manifestation myths is the fact that Viṣṇu remains the one who rescues the universe from the perils of the king of the Daityas. Viṣṇu is the warrior *pur sang*, the Asura-slayer who ensures the cosmic order, and this characterization is continued in the *Skandapurāṇa* (see section 3.1). Another fixed element that is followed in the *Skandapurāṇa* concerns Viṣṇu's weapons and their effectivity against the Asuras: Narasiṃha kills Hiraṇyakaśipu with just one slap of his claw and Varāha decapitates Hiraṇyākṣa by throwing his *cakra* only once (see section 3.3). The *cakra* is, besides Varāha's weapon, also Viṣṇu's weapon in other battles. At least since the *Mahābhārata*, Viṣṇu uses it against all sorts of enemies in various contexts. This intrinsic feature is upheld in the *Skandapurāṇa* (see section 3.2). The manifestations of Narasiṃha and Varāha show another preservation: they are described as *sarvadevamaya*, "consisting of all the gods". Many sources narrate how the gods enter Narasiṃha and Varāha, by taking their positions in the limbs of the manifestations. It gives the manifestations strength and inspires awe. The same result is present in the *Skandapurāṇa*. The *Skandapurāṇa* description of Varāha's body has a further parallel with other texts, for it includes the characteristic feature that the Boar's limbs are connected with external entities (see sections 2.2 and 3.1).

In addition to these preservations, there is a large number of alterations and innovations. They can be roughly divided into two categories, each describing a different process: Śaivization and dramatic visualization.

In section 1.2.1, I have defined Śaivization as a "process of changing a narrative (element) or introducing new narrative elements to make the retellings match a Śaiva context or teaching". Most of the alterations and innovations of Viṣṇu's manifestation myths fall under this category. The process of Śaivization is particularly discernable in the new portrayal of Viṣṇu as (i) a Śaiva devotee, (ii) who is dependent on the other gods in general and on Śiva in particular.

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[461] In this part of the *Conclusions*, I focus on the preservations in the main story, as opposed to the afterlife episodes, because the former part has a counterpart in other texts and the latter does not. Even though within the afterlife episodes, the composers made use of known elements—e.g. the fact that Narasiṃha fights against a Śarabha represents a classical fighting duo of lions and Śarabhas (see section 4.1.1)—these are left out of the present discussion because the afterlife episodes as a whole are innovations.

Viṣṇu's devotion to Śiva occurs only twice in the main story of the Varāha myth (see section 3.4), but it is omnipresent in the three afterlife episodes. First, when Viṣṇu as Narasiṃha sees that his attack on Śiva as a Śarabha has no effect, he realizes that it is Śiva standing in front of him, and he immediately starts praising Śiva with a hymn of praise. This act of worship reveals Viṣṇu's devotion to Śiva (see section 4.1.1). Second, as soon as Viṣṇu has left his boar-form thanks to Skanda, Viṣṇu goes to Śiva to honour him. Śiva is pleased with Viṣṇu's devotion and the effort he made for the gods, so he offers Viṣṇu a boon. Viṣṇu requests Śiva to teach him and the gods the *pāśupatavrata*, "the Pāśupata observance", the most important vow in Pāśupata Śaivism. Performing a royal type of the *pāśupatavrata* makes Viṣṇu, the king, an official Pāśupata; another confirmation of his loyalty and devotion to Śiva (see section 4.2.2). Third, Viṣṇu's devotion reaches its climax in the afterlife episode of the Vāmana myth. When Viṣṇu is released from Pāpmā, "Sin", he worships Śiva for 1,006 years and six months. As a result, Śiva yet again grants Viṣṇu a boon. Viṣṇu asks Śiva to tell him a teaching so that he will not be contaminated by sin or *tapas*. Śiva teaches him the *mahāvrata*, "the great observance", which is qualified as a *pāśupatavrata*. By accepting this observance, Viṣṇu gives up his worldly life and becomes a Pāśupata ascetic. Having performed the *vrata*, he obtains supremacy and eventually reaches union with Śiva. Viṣṇu's trajectory is the paragon of the ideal Pāśupata path: from the utmost devotion, via the attainment of supremacy, to the highest goal in the life of a Pāśupata ascetic, liberation (see section 4.2.3).

The second telling example of Śaivization of Viṣṇu's manifestation myths is the fact that Viṣṇu is made dependent on the other gods, in particular Śiva, to fulfil his tasks and to observe his role as Asura-slayer in the future. By introducing this new character trait, the composers were able to maintain the key narrative elements as presented under the preservations above (such as Viṣṇu being the saviour in the manifestation myths), while at the same time making Śiva in control of Viṣṇu's deeds. This creates a new power dynamic that is found at various occasions across all three narratives.

First, in the afterlife episode of the Narasiṃha myth, Śiva gives Viṣṇu the boon of *daityaghna*, "slaying Daityas". Through this boon, he appoints Viṣṇu the task of protecting the universe by fighting the Asuras. This form of Śaivization is found throughout the text. Brahmā, for example, becomes the creator of the universe because

Śiva granted him this role. In other words, although the gods maintain the roles and tasks that they are known for in other texts and execute these successfully, it is Śiva who designates them. This makes him in full control of the Śaiva universe as it is envisioned in the *Skandapurāṇa* (see section 4.2.1). Viṣṇu's dependency is furthermore explicitly expressed in the Varāha myth. In section 3.1, I have indicated five occasions at which Varāha is so severely hurt that he needs the help of the gods, the sages and Śiva to get back on his feet and resume the fight against Hiraṇyākṣa. Third, Viṣṇu's dependency is intricately incorporated into the otherwise purely positive qualification of *sarvadevamaya*. Viṣṇu becomes *sarvadevamaya*—and therefore strong and awe-inspiring—because he actually needs the strength of the other gods. After admitting that he does not stand a chance against Hiraṇyakaśipu and Hiraṇyākṣa without the gods, Viṣṇu asks the gods to enter his body (see section 3.1)[462].

Śiva does not only take control of Viṣṇu's task and success, but also of his weapons. In fact, Viṣṇu's *cakra*, his standard attribute, has undergone the same process of Śaivization as Viṣṇu's task as Asura-slayer: the *cakra* is repeatedly framed either as given by Śiva or belonging to Śiva. Since Śiva distributes Viṣṇu's primary weapon, he becomes its underlying agent and as a consequence, he takes ownership of the laudable deed that is accomplished with it, such as killing Hiraṇyākṣa (see section 3.2). Another case of Śaivization of Viṣṇu's weapons is found in the afterlives of Narasiṃha and Varāha. Whereas Narasiṃha's claw and Varāha's *cakra* were successful in the battles against Hiraṇyakaśipu and Hiraṇyākṣa, they have no effect on Śiva as a Śarabha, nor on Śiva's son Skanda and Skanda's Gaṇapa Kokavaktra. The ineffectiveness of Viṣṇu's weapons against Śiva *cum sui* contributes to the all-encompassing message that Śiva is superior (see section 3.3).

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[462] Varāha's body has undergone a second change. In most texts, the Boar is a Yajñavarāha, "Sacrificial Boar", whose limbs are only those of a boar and connected to sacrificial elements (for example, he has four feet that represent the four Vedas). In the *Skandapurāṇa*, on the other hand, the Boar is a Naravarāha, "Man-Boar", whose limbs are both that of a boar (e.g. a tail) and that of a human (e.g. two hands and feet in total) and are connected to sacrificial elements, gods and natural elements. In section 2.2, I have argued that thanks to this change, a clear distinction is made between the more traditional cosmogonic Boar and the relatively new Asura-slaying Boar, who is intended in the *Skandapurāṇa*.

Finally, Viṣṇu's dependency and Śiva's control are expressively exposed at the moment when Viṣṇu needs Śiva to make him return to his old body because he is stuck to his manifested form. In the Narasiṃha myth, it is Śiva himself who actively makes Viṣṇu leave his Narasiṃha form as a Śarabha, by stepping on Narasiṃha (see section 4.1.1). In the same myth, it is made explicit that Śiva had once promised Viṣṇu that he would always make him return to his old form whenever he is stuck to a manifestation (see section 4.1). This promise is once more acceded in the Varāha myth, where Śiva is again responsible for Viṣṇu's return to his own form, but in a more passive role. In this myth, Viṣṇu is saved from his boar-form by Skanda who threw his Saṃvartikā spear at Varāha. Although the actual return is thus effectuated by Skanda, the spear was given to him by his father Śiva before. In this way, Śiva becomes the mastermind behind the plan and takes ownership of the result (see section 4.1.2)[463]. In the Vāmana myth, the gods and the sages take Viṣṇu on a pilgrimage and make him perform a horse sacrifice in order to expiate Sin. Although the necessary prerequisites are done by the gods, Śiva completes the sacrifice and actually purifies Viṣṇu (see section 4.1.3). Whether active or passive, Śiva becomes the ultimate saviour in each manifestation myth.

To summarize, Viṣṇu's manifestation myths display a combination of on the one hand, narrative elements that are well-known from other sources and on the other hand, new Śaiva characterizations. Each have their own function and are deliberately employed by the *Skandapurāṇa* composers (see section 3.6). First of all, the reason why so many elements are preserved, especially in the main story, is to make them "acceptable, understandable, and desirable"[464]. If the composers would have eliminated key narrative elements, the retellings might not have found connection with the audience and might not have been accepted. Since the *Skandapurāṇa* version of the manifestation myths were markedly different from what the audience was familiar with and did not belong to the established order, acceptance was crucial.

At the same time, since the retellings appear in the *Skandapurāṇa*, there are also ideological expectations to be met when narratives are retold, *viz.* the retellings should

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[463] Skanda's primary weapon, the spear, hence underwent the same process of Śaivization as Viṣṇu's *cakra*.
[464] The terminology comes from the theory of Anchoring Innovation, applied in section 3.6.

match the Śaiva ideology of the text as a whole. The *Skandapurāṇa* composers accommodated in this demand through the introduction of a large number of Śaivizations, creating a new portrayal of Viṣṇu as a Śaiva devotee, who is dependent on the other gods in general and on Śiva in particular. Each characteristic can be understood from the perspective of the Śaiva universe as it is presented in the *Skandapurāṇa*. First, in the Śaiva universe, everybody is devoted to Śiva. As I have shown in section 3.4, there are countless examples of gods, sages, Asuras and people who worship Śiva. From Brahmā to Hiraṇyākṣa, everybody is a devotee of Śiva, and Viṣṇu is no exception. Second, Śiva governs all creatures and actions, and everything can be led back to him. Although he generally remains at the background and does not take an active part in grand endeavours like the creation of the universe, he is the one who decides which god should execute which task and who provides that god with the necessary means (like essential weapons). In this way, the *Skandapurāṇa* composers were able to give Śiva full control of everything that happens in the universe. In other words, distribution becomes a form of taking control.

By changing Viṣṇu's character and manifestation myths with these processes of Śaivization, they are blended into the Śaiva ideology of the text. Viṣṇu nevertheless received a different treatment from, for example, Brahmā. As I have argued in section 4.3, unlike Brahmā, Viṣṇu is not just one of the many devotees of Śiva, nor is he simply governed by Śiva because he received the task of Asura-slayer. On the contrary, Viṣṇu is presented as the ideal Pāśupata Śaiva who even reaches liberation through sole devotion to Śiva, and he is completely dependent on Śiva in fulfilling his task, now and in the future. This new portrayal of Viṣṇu is structurally and repeatedly advocated throughout the three manifestation myths and in particular at the end, the most defining part of a narrative. In this way, the *Skandapurāṇa* composers were able to "integrate and accommodate"[465] Viṣṇu and his manifestation myths in the Śaiva universe and Śaivism at large.

Not all changes and innovations can be ascribed to Śaivization. Some changes rather concern the style of writing of the *Skandapurāṇa* composers. One of the most notable stylistic features in the case of retellings is "dramatic visualization" as opposed to

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[465] The terminology again comes from the theory of Anchoring Innovation, applied in sections 3.6 and 4.3.

"a summary presentation" of the same narrative element (see section 1.2.2). Whereas the *Skandapurāṇa* composers made an effort to narrate Viṣṇu's manifestation myths in a rich, engaging and appealing way, thanks to which it is easier for the audience to visualize scenes before their eyes, other early versions of the manifestation myths can be simple, without much attention for details. Dramatic visualization comes in different forms, such as vivid dialogues, insider jokes and meticulous cosmographic information. The Narasiṃha myth has a comic scene in which Hiraṇyakaśipu wants to have the Man-Lion as a pet for his wife, but the audience obviously knows that the frightful Narasiṃha will kill Hiraṇyakaśipu (see section 2.1); the Varāha myth has rich and scenic descriptions, such as Varāha's dive to the netherworld, showing the composers' cosmographic knowledge (see the introduction to chapter 2); and Viṣṇu's first stride after leaving his Vāmana form is elaborated with a description of the horizontal extent of the step (from the far East to the far West), which makes it easier for the audience to visualize the scene (see section 2.3). Humorous, emotional and scenic descriptions like these are found throughout the *Skandapurāṇa* and can be considered characteristic features of the style of writing of the *Skandapurāṇa* composers.

Another form of dramatic visualization is seen in the composers' way of reworking themes that are known from the *Purāṇapañcalakṣaṇa*. In section 5.2, I have explored this phenomenon in detail in the context of the relative immediate context of the manifestation myths. This textual context ranges roughly from SP 70 to SP$_{Bh}$ 129, with some interruptions of non-related narratives. The myths that are told in this section are held together by two shared topics: the lineage of the Daityas and a series of *devāsura* wars. The order of the first five *devāsura* wars is dominated by the lineage of the Daityas, as it is known from the *vaṃśa* section in the *Purāṇapañcalakṣaṇa*. The *devāsura* wars continue with four additional war myths, and all nine are known from the *vaṃśānucarita* section of the same text corpus. The *Skandapurāṇa* composers seem to have modelled the narratives after the information of the *Purāṇapañcalakṣaṇa*. The way in which the information is presented, however, is very different. Whereas the *Purāṇapañcalakṣaṇa* simply lists the names of the Daityas and the *devāsura* wars, the *Skandapurāṇa* tells extensive narratives about them. In other words, the *Skandapurāṇa* composers made use of the basic information provided in other Purāṇic material and processed it into vivid and

appealing narratives. It is the most noticeable form of dramatic visualization, where sheer lists become extensive myths.

Although it is possible to identify such forms of dramatic visualization, it is difficult to determine to what extent dramatic visualization is a deliberate choice of the composers. In other words, is dramatic visualization an active process or should it rather be understood as merely reflecting the composers' compositional style (that is to say, is this simply how they wrote)? On the one hand, the *Skandapurāṇa* is full of appealing narratives with entertaining conversations, humorous scenes and cosmographic descriptions. This might point to the second possibility. On the other hand, since the *Skandapurāṇa* tells a radically new, Śaiva version of Viṣṇu's manifestation myths that was still to be accepted by the audience, it seems crucial to present an appealing and convincing retelling. It is not unthinkable that acceptance becomes easier when the retelling is entertaining and rich. This rather suggests that dramatic visualization was a deliberate technique that the composers used.

To conclude, thanks to the preservations, alterations and innovations, the retellings are recognizable (preservations) and appealing (dramatic visualization), which enhances the chance at being accepted by the audience. The retellings show, at the same time, radically new Śaiva innovations (Śaivization), the objective of which was to integrate and accommodate Viṣṇu and his manifestation myths in the Śaiva universe and ideology as presented in the text. Since these findings are structurally and repeatedly employed throughout the manifestation myths, and in some cases throughout the entire text, the decisions can be considered deliberate choices on the part of the *Skandapurāṇa* composers. By looking for structural findings, such as compositional techniques and style of writing, it is my contention that it is possible to speak about the aims and intentions of the composers. In the final part of this chapter, I consider which aims and intentions the composers may have had to incorporate Viṣṇu's manifestation myths in the first place. This brings me to the third and final research question: *why have Viṣṇu's manifestation myths been incorporated into the Skandapurāṇa?* The answer to this question is, as I will argue below, twofold: (i) the *Skandapurāṇa* composers' goal with the text as a whole was to compose a comprehensive Purāṇa, and (ii) Viṣṇu's manifestation myths formed an intrinsic part of the genre of Purāṇas.

In section 5.3, I have presented arguments for the first component of the statement. My discussion on the relative immediate context has shown that the *Skandapurāṇa* composers embedded Viṣṇu's manifestation myths in two overarching *Purāṇapañcalakṣaṇa* themes. However, based on the three narratives' shared structure and ditto alterations and innovations, a hypothetical "Viṣṇu's Manifestation Cycle" would not have been out of place either. In that case, the narratives' strong Śaiva message would have stood out more prominently and attracted the attention, in particular Viṣṇu's religious growth—from his praise of Śiva with a eulogy in the Narasiṃha afterlife episode, to his practice of the *mahāvrata* with final liberation as a result in the Vāmana afterlife episode. A separate myth cycle would have supported the Śaiva ideology of the text. The fact that the composers chose differently suggests that they did not aim at composing a strictly doctrinal work. Instead, the text is a combination of theological notions, *Purāṇapañcalakṣaṇa* narratives and themes, and other well-known epic and Purāṇic myths and concepts; in other words, what constitutes a Purāṇa. I have therefore argued that the *Skandapurāṇa* composers wanted to compose a comprehensive Purāṇa that touches upon topics and narratives with both a Śaiva character and a more general Purāṇic nature.

Viṣṇu's manifestation myths of Narasiṃha, Varāha and Vāmana neatly fit this aim because two aspects of a Purāṇa, as identified in section 1.2, come together in the *Skandapurāṇa* version of the manifestation myths. I have identified three features of a Purāṇa: 1. a Purāṇa consists of topics and narratives that are known from the *Purāṇapañcalakṣaṇa*; 2. those Purāṇas that centre around a particular god contain theological text units corresponding to the religious strand in question; and 3. Purāṇas tell new narratives and retell known ones.

Given the great popularity of Viṣṇu's manifestation myths in the Purāṇas, they qualify as well-known narratives that are retold in different contexts; in other words, they are "retellings" (the third feature). The Varāha myth, for example, is often told within the framework of creation (e.g. in PPL *sarga* 3), but it is also recounted in the context of Viṣṇu's human and animal manifestations (e.g. HV 31) and in combination with the

Asura-slaying version of the myth (HV App. 1 No. 42)[466]. Based on their omnipresence in both early and later Purāṇas, I consider them to form an intrinsic part of the Purāṇic genre. If the *Skandapurāṇa* composers aimed at composing a comprehensive Purāṇa that addresses essential narratives and topics, then Viṣṇu's manifestation myths, being well-known Purāṇic myths, would well have been deemed indispensable.

The three manifestation myths can be furthermore used to convey a theological message (the second feature). Since even the most basic retellings of the narratives celebrate Viṣṇu's great deeds, the most straightforward religious affiliation of the myths is with Vaiṣṇavism. Some Vaiṣṇava Purāṇas have expanded this ideological character of the narratives by including eulogies to Viṣṇu or by reworking them more radically, as is done, for example, by the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* with the Narasiṃha myth. This retelling has become a story of devotion to Viṣṇu by centring around Viṣṇu's devotee Prahlāda, instead of Viṣṇu's manifestation as Man-Lion. However, the manifestation myths of Narasiṃha, Varāha and Vāmana have proven to be a suitable vehicle for the promotion of a Śaiva message as well. By sketching a new, Śaiva portrayal of Viṣṇu, one in which he is completely dependent on Śiva and in which he is an ideal Pāśupata devotee, the *Skandapurāṇa* composers found a way to integrate Viṣṇu into the Śaiva fold. In this way, Viṣṇu's manifestation myths have become the perfect means to proclaim Pāśupata Śaivism and to present an ideal Śaiva universe, in which everything and everyone is devoted to Śiva, even Viṣṇu.

However, theoretically, the *Skandapurāṇa* composers could have chosen any manifestation myth of Viṣṇu to give him a new, Śaiva portrayal like the one described above. Why did they specifically select the manifestation myths of Narasiṃha, Varāha and Vāmana? This can be explained from two perspectives. First, the three manifestation myths match their relative immediate context by being part of a standard list of twelve *devāsura* wars, as reported in the *Purāṇapañcalakṣaṇa*. Since the majority of this list is followed by the *Skandapurāṇa* composers, the three manifestation myths were a logical choice. Second, taking in particular the afterlives into account, the three narratives were

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[466] Since Viṣṇu's manifestation myths appear in various Purāṇic contexts, and not just in a context that could be qualified as "*Purāṇapañcalakṣaṇa*", I consider them to fall under the third feature as identified in section 1.2, instead of the first feature.

especially suited to convey a Śaiva message. As argued in section 4.1, a problem arises when Viṣṇu continues to live on in his manifestation. From an ideological perspective, a manifestation should always be temporary, which means that when Viṣṇu has fulfilled his task, he should return to his own form again. This idea is problematized in the *Skandapurāṇa* by adding an afterlife to Viṣṇu's manifestations. In the afterlife episodes, manifestation-specific problems are introduced: Narasiṃha and Varāha form a threat to the universe because of their violent character, and Vāmana is unable to fight the Asuras because of his size. They are only able to fight those Asuras for which they were designed in the first place. As a consequence, Viṣṇu's task in the *Skandapurāṇa* as the slayer of Asuras, protector of the universe, is in peril. It is, in other words, crucial that Viṣṇu abandons these manifestations. By putting forward Śiva as the one who releases Viṣṇu from his precarious state, Śiva does not only become the saviour of Viṣṇu, but of the entire universe.

By comparison, other manifestations would not have been as suitable for this Śaiva message. The pool to choose from is first of all limited to Asura-slaying manifestations, given Viṣṇu's role in the *Skandapurāṇa*. The only options remaining then are human manifestations, such as Kṛṣṇa, Rāma Dāśarathi and Rāma Jāmadagnya. If Viṣṇu would continue to live in one of these manifestations—in other words, if the composers would have designed an afterlife for them—then there would still be the problem that the premise that a manifestation should be temporary is violated. However, the manifestations would at least be able to continue to fulfil their task as *kṣatriyas*. In fact, the *Harivaṃśa* is full of successive stories of Kṛṣṇa fighting with different groups of enemies, and so is the composite narrative of Rāma Jāmadagnya in the *Skandapurāṇa*. Staying in a human *kṣatriya* manifestation would therefore not be a threat for humankind, nor for the fulfilment of Viṣṇu's task as Asura-slayer. Since the latter problems do arise in the case of a continuation of Viṣṇu's manifestation as Narasiṃha, Varāha and Vāmana, the myths involving these three forms were a more appropriate vehicle to convey a Śaiva message in which Śiva becomes the ultimate saviour, and this seems to have been an additional reason to incorporate them in the *Skandapurāṇa*.

There are, to conclude, different reasons for the incorporation of Viṣṇu's manifestation myths of Narasiṃha, Varāha and Vāmana. First, together with nine other

*devāsura* wars, their battles constitute a standard list of twelve *devāsura* wars, of which eleven are transformed into actual myths in the *Skandapurāṇa*. Second, by introducing an afterlife of these manifestations, the *Skandapurāṇa* composers were able to design a new ending to the myths in which an additional problem presents itself and Śiva is put forward as the great saviour. Third, the manifestation myths served the aim of the composers to create a new Purāṇa. Since Viṣṇu's manifestation myths of Narasiṃha, Varāha and Vāmana formed an intrinsic part of the Purāṇic genre, they had to be included in the *Skandapurāṇa* as well. However, in order to be properly integrated and accommodated in the Śaiva ideology of the text, Viṣṇu and his manifestation myths had to undergo major adjustments. The end result was a rich set of engaging and convincing narratives, permeated with Śaiva elements, and hence perfectly matching the aims of the composition as a whole: a comprehensive, appealing and compelling Purāṇa, retelling key Purāṇic material, immersed with Śaiva ideology. Who would have thought to hear about so many gods, learn about so many different topics and discover such a complex universe, after the opening announcement of the *Skandapurāṇa* (SP 1.14)[467] that the *sūta* ("the bard") would tell the story of Skanda's birth, his devotion to Brahmins, his greatness and his heroism?

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[467] SP 1.14:
*śṛṇudhvaṃ munayaḥ sarve kārttikeyasya sambhavam |*
*brahmaṇyatvaṃ samāhātmyaṃ vīryaṃ ca tridaśādhikam ||*
"Listen, all you sages, to Kārttikeya's [i.e. Skanda's] birth, his devotion to Brahmins, his greatness and his heroism that surpasses [even that of] the gods."