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Summary

Revealing Śiva's Superiority by Retelling Viṣṇu's Deeds

Viṣṇu's Manifestation Myths in the *Skandapurāṇa*

This thesis deals with a Sanskrit text called *Skandapurāṇa*, composed in the sixth to seventh century. It is related to Śaivism and belongs to the literary genre of Purāṇas. Although the *Skandapurāṇa* can be counted among the early Purāṇas, it exhibits several features that are found in early as well as later Purāṇas: i) themes and narratives from the *Purāṇapañcalakṣaṇa*, ii) theological text units, and iii) a combination of new stories and retellings that are known from other sources. This thesis focusses on the latter category, viz. the well-known myths of Viṣṇu taking on a manifestation to conquer the king of the Daityas, the enemies of the gods. It centres around the *Skandapurāṇa* version of the manifestation myths of Narasiṃha (“Man-Lion”), Varāha (“Boar”) and Vāmana (“Dwarf”). From the *Mahābhārata* onwards, the general storyline of these manifestation myths remains *mutatis mutandis* the same and is incorporated in numerous Purāṇas. It includes the heroic moment that Viṣṇu conquers the Daityas and restores the cosmic order. At first glance, this climax of Viṣṇu saving the universe does not seem to match the Śaiva ideology of the *Skandapurāṇa*, which centres around Śiva and devotion to Śiva. This raises the question how the myths are retold and why they have been incorporated in the first place.

Compared to the many other retellings of the myths—demonstrating their fame in the epic-Purāṇic period—the *Skandapurāṇa* composers created their own, new version. On the one hand, they preserved several key narrative elements, as well as key characteristics of Viṣṇu. These components are known and recognizable from other sources and are incorporated for the sake of the acceptance of the retellings. On the other hand, the *Skandapurāṇa* composers also made considerable alterations and innovations. Whereas the changes remain fairly moderate in the main story of the manifestation myths, the composers added entirely new endings to the myths, hereby taking control of the narratives as a whole. The new endings are the most noticeable form of a “Śaivization” of Viṣṇu's manifestation myths: a process whereby a narrative (element) is changed or new

narrative elements are introduced to make the retellings match the Śaiva ideology of the text. The text presents a renewed portrayal of Viṣṇu as being completely dependent on Śiva and his ideal devotee. By inserting Śiva's superiority and grace, Viṣṇu and his manifestation myths become integrated and accommodated in the Śaiva ideology of the *Skandapurāṇa*. Another type of change concerns the style of writing of the *Skandapurāṇa* composers. The entire composition is full of scenic descriptions, insider jokes and emotional speeches. In the case of retellings, including Viṣṇu's manifestation myths, we can speak of "dramatic visualization": retellings are written in a rich, engaging and appealing way, thanks to which it is easier for the audience to visualize the story before their eyes. Dramatic visualization goes even further, when the *Skandapurāṇa* composers use long lists on Daitya lineages and battles collected in the *Purāṇapañcalakṣaṇa* as a basis for crafting more complex and rich myths.

All three factors—the various preservations, the cases of Śaivization and a dramatic visualization of *Purāṇapañcalakṣaṇa* themes—match the aim of the *Skandapurāṇa* composers with the text as a whole: the composition of a comprehensive and appealing Śaiva Purāṇa. Since Viṣṇu's manifestation myths were an intrinsic part of this literary genre, they were incorporated as well, even when they do not seem to fit the rest of the text at first glance. The solution was to compose them in an engaging and appealing style and to insert Śiva and devotion to him as essential components in the story. Through carefully selected compositional and ideological decisions, Viṣṇu and his manifestation myths of Narasiṃha, Varāha and Vāmana proved to be the perfect vehicle for the Śaiva message that the composers sought to convey with this new Śaiva Purāṇa.