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Viṣṇu's *Cakra* as Narrative Weapon in the *Skandapurāṇa*: Studies in the *Skandapurāṇa* XIV

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ABSTRACT: The *Skandapurāṇa* is one of the earliest Purāṇas, with a strong Śaiva message throughout the entire text. It promotes devotion to Śiva and narrates stories about Śiva, his relatives and followers. It does not, however, deny other gods. At least six narratives concern Viṣṇu and his deeds. Three of these are manifestation myths, narrating Viṣṇu's conquest of the Asuras. For its retellings, such as Viṣṇu's manifestation myths, the *Skandapurāṇa* combines known narrative elements with new characterizations, features and scenes. This is not only observable in the stories as a whole, but also on the level of narrative details. In this article, I will show this by studying one of Viṣṇu's primary weapons, the *cakra*, 'discus'. The description of the *cakra* sometimes agrees with those in other texts, such as its fiery appearance and its quality of returning to its owner. At the same time, there are various new characterizations, for example the fact that it originally belongs to or comes from Śiva. With the help of a theory referred to as narrative consistency, I will explore the reasons behind the inclusion of known elements and the introduction of new elements, as well as the reasons behind a combination of the two.

KEYWORDS: Purāṇas; retellings; Śaivism; *Skandapurāṇa*; Viṣṇu.

The stories about the god Viṣṇu are rich, captivating and versatile. By reading the numerous myths centring around Viṣṇu, we get to know his many deeds, appearances and characterizations. His stories are narrated in the Vedas, the Brāhmaṇas, the *Mahābhārata* (*Mbh*), the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the Purāṇas and in many

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other sources. The narration of Viṣṇu's exploits is not limited to Vaiṣṇava texts. The *Skandapurāṇa* (SP), a Śaiva Purāṇa from the sixth to seventh century CE from northern India, is an engaging example of a non-Vaiṣṇava text that incorporates Viṣṇu and his stories. Although the majority of the SP's narratives centre around god Śiva and his retinue, other Brahmanical deities are treated as well. Six narratives, covering 25 of the total 183 chapters of this Purāṇa, feature Viṣṇu as the main character where he fights with the enemies of the gods, the Asuras, as the preserver of the universe. Each of these narratives was known from other sources, but the SP provided a new version. The most radical alterations are the total reshaping of the myths' endings and a novel picture of Viṣṇu himself as dependent on Śiva. The innovations also concern Viṣṇu's weaponry, which is the topic of this article. After a short introduction to the text and its retellings, I will focus on Viṣṇu's weapon, the *cakra*, 'discus'. How is Viṣṇu's *cakra* described in the SP? Which features agree with information known from other sources and which elements have been added? Why did the SP composers choose this new characterization? And how can such a seemingly small element become part of a larger narrative strategy?

THE SKANDAPURĀṆA

Dateable to the sixth to seventh century CE, the SP can be counted among the early Purāṇas.² It starts with a group of sages asking about the birth of Śiva's son, Skanda, but it is not until the end of the Purāṇa that they hear Skanda's story. Most of the many other topics and narratives that pass by in between show strong connections with Śaivism and in particular with Pāśupata Śaivism. Pāśupata Śaivism is known for its ascetics with their extreme practices, such as smearing themselves with ashes, living on cremation grounds and acting like madmen (Acharya 2011: 460). Although the SP deals with several ascetic practices, such as the Pāśupatayoga and the Pāśupata observance, it primarily highlights key Śaiva topics, practices and teachings relevant for the Śaiva lay community (Adriaansen, Bakker and Isaacson 1998: 4; Bakker 2014: 1–21). By far the most important teaching is the worship of Śiva.

2. There are several compositions going under the name '*Skandapurāṇa*'. One of these is *Śrī-Skandamahāpurāṇam*, ed. Kṣemarāja Śrīkṛṣṇadāsa (7 vols, Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1986–87; originally published in 1910 by Venkateshvara Press of Bombay), which comes across as a collection of individual texts, compiled over a couple of centuries, rather than one coherent text. The SP studied in this article is of significantly earlier date, has a narrower compositional timespan and is considered one coherent text. The making of a critical edition of this SP is ongoing. Chapters 1 to 112 are already available and are used in this article (*Skandapurāṇa* 1998, 2013, 2018 and 2021). Quotations from chapters 113 to 183 come from *Skandapurāṇasya Ambikākhandaḥ*, ed. Bhaṭṭarāi (Kathmandu: Mahendrasaṃskṛtaviśvavidyālayaḥ, 1988).

It is a recurring theme that everybody in the Śaiva universe—gods, sages and even the Asuras—is devoted to Śiva and that they receive wonderful boons from the gracious god Śiva in return. Another persistent teaching is the hierarchical order of deities. Śiva is superior, indestructible and the driving force behind all existence and actions. The text presents a universe in which the gods maintain the roles they are known for. Brahmā, for instance, remains the creator, Indra the king of the gods, and Skanda still becomes the leader of the divine army. At the same time, the gods are at the full service of Śiva, and it is Śiva who occasionally assigns these major cosmic tasks. The *SP* is the first known Purāṇa with such a strong Śaiva message across the entire text.

The religious content of the text is expressed in various text units, such as eulogies and instructions for liberation. The vast majority of the text, however, consists of mythological narratives in which this Śaiva universe and other religious ideas are voiced. This does not only go for narratives with Śiva or his retinue in the leading role—which by definition have a Śaiva orientation—but also for most retellings that originally feature other gods, such as those concerning Viṣṇu. Instead of simply adopting these narratives, the *SP* composers carefully adjusted and integrated them into their new context, a Śaiva Purāṇa.³ We can observe how the composers followed the general storyline, maintained several key elements of Viṣṇu's myths and preserved some essential characteristics of Viṣṇu, while at the same time making some far-reaching changes and introducing new elements and character traits of the deity. Since this process is crucial for my argument regarding the treatment of the *cakra* in the *SP*, I start with a brief sketch of the development of the Varāha ('Boar') myth—the myth in which the *cakra* has a prominent role—and its representation in the *SP*, and introduce my methodology used in the main section.

THE VARĀHA MYTH AND ITS RETELLING IN THE *SP*

The Varāha myth centres around the manifestation of a god as a boar.⁴ Since its first appearances in the Vedas, it has undergone many transformations in terms of deities concerned, length and even the entire storyline. In one of its oldest narrations (*Taittirīya Saṃhitā* 7.1.5.1.1–12), Prajāpati becomes a boar in order to save the earth who has sunk into the cosmic ocean. He lifts her up and puts her back in her original place, so that all beings and natural

3. Although Purāṇas are anonymous, I refer to 'the *SP* composers', because the structural features of the *SP* reflect compositional skills, narrative techniques, verbal competence and a deep knowledge of the rich epic-Purāṇic repertoire, making it possible to hypothesize about the composers' intentions and aims.
4. There are many studies on the Varāha myth, such as Gonda 1954: 129–45; Gail 1977; Brinkhaus 1992; Prasad 1989.

elements can be created again. Later, Viṣṇu takes over this cosmogonic role and becomes associated with the Boar manifestation. This version of the myth was for long the only version known, and enjoyed great fame in the epics and the Purāṇas (for example, *Mbh* 3.100.19, *Purāṇapañcalakṣaṇa* (PPL) *sarga* 3,⁵ *Harivaṃśa* (HV) 31.21–30 and HV App. 1 No. 42 ll. 1–488).

In the early epic-Purāṇic period, a second, completely different storyline appears. In this version, Viṣṇu becomes a Boar in order to save the earth from the evil Daitya Hiranyākṣa.⁶ The new storyline matches other manifestation myths of Viṣṇu in which he assumes a form to protect the gods from their enemies. The first references to this Asura-slaying Varāha myth are found in the *Mbh* (7.13.44, 12.202 and 12.326.71–73ab) and in one verse shared by various Purāṇas (PPL *vaṃśānucarita* 5B.77).⁷ One of its first extant narrations is in the HV (App. 1 No. 42 ll. 489–662), where the king of the Asuras called Hiranyākṣa starts a war against the gods. The Asuras win, gain control over the universe and take the earth in captivity. The gods are in distress, so Viṣṇu comes to the rescue. He manifests himself as a Boar. He approaches Hiranyākṣa, fights with him and kills him in battle. He puts the earth back in her original place, and Indra becomes the ruler of the universe again.⁸

The SP contains an extensive retelling of this second variant (SP 76.14–110.31, text and synopsis in Bisschop and Yokochi 2021). The general storyline as narrated in the HV is found here as well. Viṣṇu still becomes a Boar, kills Hiranyākṣa, saves the earth and remains the heroic preserver of the universe. These pieces of information are known from other sources and are immediately recognizable to the audience. There are, however, also ample new elements such as engaging conversations, scenic descriptions of Hiranyākṣa's victory and long battle scenes. Śiva also makes his entrance, reviving Varāha when he has fallen in battle, and most radically, making Viṣṇu return to his own body at the moment he clings to his Boar manifestation. From other manifestation myths, we know that Viṣṇu returns to his own form, as soon as he has conquered the Asuras. However, in each manifestation myth of the SP (the Narasimha ('Man-Lion'), Varāha and Vāmana ('Dwarf') myths), Viṣṇu continues to live in his manifested form. This creates new problems, and Śiva

5. The PPL (Kirfel 1927) is a compilation of narratives that are found in various Purāṇas and share literal parallels. Instead of implying the existence of an ancient Sanskrit text referred to as 'Purāṇapañcalakṣaṇa', I use Kirfel's compilation as a convenient way of representing material found in multiple Purāṇas. The section referred to here is found in the *Mārkaṇḍeyapurāṇa*, *Padmapurāṇa* (PdP) *Srṣṭikhaṇḍa*, *PdP Uttarakhaṇḍa*, *Varāhapurāṇa* and *Viṣṇupurāṇa* (VP).
6. The Daityas and the Dānavas are the most prominent Asuras. The Dānavas are descendants of Kaśyapa and Danu, and the Daityas are descendants of Kaśyapa and Diti.
7. The verse is found in the *Brahmāṇḍapurāṇa*, *Matsyapurāṇa*, *PdP Srṣṭikhaṇḍa*, *PdP Uttarakhaṇḍa* and *Vāyupurāṇa*.
8. For a French tr. of this version of the story, see Saindon 2009.

is presented as the only deity who is able to provide a solution and to properly restore the cosmic order. This makes Śiva the ultimate saviour.⁹ These new data in the Varāha myth make the narrative more engaging and furnish it with Śaiva material. Combined with the known information of key features of both the story and its protagonist, Viṣṇu, this results in a unique retelling of the Varāha myth.

Such combination of known and unknown information is also found on the level of narrative details, as I will show on the basis of the *SP* representation of Viṣṇu's primary weapon, the *cakra*. By deconstructing the different qualities and features of the *cakra* throughout the Varāha myth and the *SP* as a whole, I will examine why we encounter a combination of known and unknown data, using two supplementing methodologies.

The first approach relates to a narrative technique that I refer to as 'narrative consistency' (Dokter-Mersch 2021: 95–99). Inspired by the narratological theory of 'the unreliable narrator',¹⁰ I understand narrative consistency as the assumption that composers generally attempt to write a narrative that is in line with what is told within the narrative or in other narratives (either in the same text or externally), or that is in line with conceptual ideas. I have conceptualized these different types of consistency into a fourfold categorization.¹¹ 1. There is *intranarrational* consistency when a narrative element is in line with what is told within the narrative itself. 2. There is *internarrational* consistency when a narrative element agrees with the rest of the text. This can be further divided into two subcategories. There is *internarrational* consistency on *the narrative level* when a given narrative element is consistent with what is told in other narrations of the text. This can be entire stories, but also characterizations of figures or other details. Alternatively, there is *internarrational* consistency on *the ideological level*: consistency with, in this case, Śaivism as it is proclaimed in the rest of the text. This includes ideas on the right way of worshipping Śiva, the text's ideal Śaiva universe, et cetera. 3. There is *intertextual* consistency when a narrative element is in accordance with fixed knowledge known from other sources. 4. There is *extratextual* consistency when a narrative element is consistent with factors that transcend the text, such as general world-knowledge, cultural codes, literary conventions and conventions of literary genres. This fourfold categorization helps

9. For an extensive study and summaries of the afterlife episodes of Viṣṇu's manifestation myths in the *SP*, see Dokter-Mersch 2021: 138–80. For a study on the boons granted by Śiva to Viṣṇu at the end of each manifestation myth and on the importance of the endings of narratives, see Dokter-Mersch 2022.
10. The concept of 'the unreliable narrator' was coined by Booth (1961), defining a narrator as 'reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), *unreliable* when he does not' (pp. 158–59).
11. This categorization has been adapted from Hansen's (2007) four levels of a narrator's unreliability.

us to understand the choices made by the *SP* composers in describing Viṣṇu's *cakra* in particular.

However, these individual levels of narrative consistency do not always stand on their own. We will see that there is a combination of intranarrational level and intertextual level—in other words, a combination of unknown, new information about the *cakra* and known, accepted information. For the understanding of this combination, I will use a theory developed in Greek and Latin studies called 'anchoring innovation'. Sluiter (2016) explains that '[i]nnovations may become acceptable, understandable, and desirable when relevant social groups can effectively integrate and accommodate them in their conceptual categories, values, beliefs and ambitions. This is the case when they can connect what is perceived as new to what they consider familiar, known, already accepted, when, that is, innovations are "anchored"' (p. 23). Sluiter provides examples from architecture (p. 29) and politics (pp. 34–35) that show the goal of innovations is to be accepted, and in order to be accepted, there should be a familiar, known component, to which the intended audience can link the new information. In the same way, we will be able to explain the presence of new and familiar characteristics of the *cakra* in the *SP* and hypothesize about acceptance as the goal of the innovation.

WHOSE CAKRA IS IT REALLY?

At least by the time of the *Mbh*, the *cakra* has been identified as one of Viṣṇu's distinctive weapons. There are countless examples of Viṣṇu or his manifestations using the *cakra* during battles against the enemies of the gods, such as Kṛṣṇa's fight against Śiśupāla in the *Mbh*¹² and Viṣṇu's encounter with Kālanemi in the *HV*.¹³ It is generally described as a fiery weapon,¹⁴

12. *Mbh* 2.42.21: *tathā bruvata evāsya bhagavān madhusūdanaḥ | vyapāharac chiraḥ kruddhaś cakreṇāmitrakaṛṣaṇaḥ | sa papāṭa mahābāhur vajrāhata ivācalaḥ || 21 ||* 'He was still speaking when the blessed Madhusūdana [Kṛṣṇa], scourge of his enemies, irately cut off his head with his discus. The strong-armed king [Śiśupāla] fell like a tree that is struck by a thunderbolt' (tr. Van Buitenen 1975: 104).

13. *HV* 38.45: *saṁmuṣṇan dānavam tejaḥ samare svena tejasā | ciccheda bāhūś cakreṇa śrīdharaḥ kālanemiḥ || 45 ||* 'Using his own power to disarm the Dānava power, the bearer of fortune cut off Kālanemi's arms with the discus in battle' (tr. Brodbeck 2019: 126).

14. *HV* 38.39: *sa sūryakaratulyābhaṁ sahasrāram arikṣayam | dīptāgnisadrśaṁ ghoram darśaniyam sudarśanam || 39 ||* 'He raised his discus [*cakram udyasya*, *HV* 38.44c] Sudharshana, the terrible ruin of his foes, a sight to behold. It looked like a blazing fire, and with its thousand spokes it shone as if with sunbeams' (tr. Brodbeck 2019: 126).

sharp-edged¹⁵ and adorned with one thousand spokes.¹⁶ It is to be thrown at the enemy and it will always return to its owner, as expressed in one of the origin stories of the *cakra* in the *Mbh*.¹⁷ These characteristics are so widespread that they are considered fixed and should not be changed.

Viṣṇu also resorts to his *cakra* when he fights in his Varāha manifestation. Already in the first extant narration of the myth in the *HV*, Viṣṇu's weapon of choice to kill Hiranyākṣa is the *cakra*.

tato bhagavatā cakram āvidhyād ity asaṃnibham | 599 |
pātitaṃ dānavendrasya śirasy uttamatejasah || 600 ||
tataḥ sthitasyaiva śiras tasya bhūmau papāta ha | 601 |
daityendrasyāśanihataṃ meruśṛṅgam ivottamam || 602 ||

Then the incomparable *cakra* was thrown at the head of the very glorious lord of the Dānavas (Hiranyākṣa) by the lord (Viṣṇu), thinking: 'let it pierce [him]'. Then, as the lord of the Daityas (Hiranyākṣa) was standing there, his head fell on the ground, like the highest peak of Mount Meru being struck by lightning.¹⁸

(*HV* App. 1 No. 42 ll. 599–602)

The same weapon and method of killing are in the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* (*VdhP*)¹⁹ and in the *SP*.

tad yugāntānalaprakhyam kṣurāntaṃ sphoṭayan nabhaḥ |
jagāma dānavam kṣipraṃ diśaḥ sarvā dahann iva²⁰ || 35 || ...
gatvā tasya śiraḥ kāyād unmamātha yathācalam || 40 ||
tat tena kṛtaṃ sumahac chiro 'gryaṃ
vyāttānanāgnipratimogranetraṃ |
daṃṣṭrālam atyadbhutaḥhīmanādāṃ
papāta meror iva śṛṅgam uccam || 41 ||

15. *Mbh* 3.23.30ab: *kṣurāntam amalam cakram kālāntakayamopamam*, 'my honed-edged stainless discus, the like of Time, the Finisher, or Yama' (tr. Van Buitenen 1975: 266).
16. *HV* 112.94: *tataś cakram sahasrārāṇaṃ nadan megha ivoṣṇage | jagrāha puruṣavyāghro bāṇabāhuprasāntaye || 94 ||* 'Then, roaring like a cloud thundering at the end of the hot season, Krishna the man-tiger picked up his discus of a thousand spokes in order to destroy Bāna's arms' (tr. Brodbeck 2019: 340).
17. *Mbh* 1.216.24: *kṣiptam kṣiptam raṇe caitat tvayā mādharma śatruṣu | hatvāpratihatam saṃkhye pāṇim eṣyati te punaḥ || 24 ||* 'Whenever thou hast hurled it in battle at thy foes, O Mādhava [Viṣṇu], and hast slain them with it unobstructed, it shall return to thy hand' (tr. Van Buitenen 1973: 417).
18. When no translator is indicated, the translation is my own.
19. *VdhP* 1.53.36: *śaṅkhasvanenāpi janārdanaś ca vidrāvya daityān sakalān mahātmā | sakunḍalam daityagaṇādhipasya ciccheda cakreṇa śiraḥ prasahya || 36 ||* 'Having driven away all Daityas, withstanding [them], the great Janārdana (Viṣṇu), sounding his conch, cut off the head of the king of troops of Daityas (Hiranyākṣa), which was decorated with ear-rings, with his *cakra*.'
20. For similar constructions of a nominative masculine present participle with *iva* qualifying a feminine or neuter noun, see Yokochi 2013: 71 and Bisschop and Yokochi 2018: 28.

Resembling the fire at the end of an era, splitting the sky, seeming to burn all directions, the razor-edged [*cakra*] quickly went to the Dānava (Hiraṇyākṣa). ... Having reached his head, [the *cakra*] cut [Hiraṇyākṣa's head] off his body, as if it were a mountain. This very large, supreme head—with its mouth wide open, eyes fierce like fire, and tusks, [crying] an extraordinary, terrifying roar—fell as it was cut by it, just like the high peak of Mount Meru.

(SP 107.35, 40cd–41)

Several details in this description are known from other sources. First of all, allusions are made to its fiery appearance, by comparing it to 'the fire at the end of an era' (*yugāntānalaprakhyam*) and saying that it 'seemed to burn all directions' (*diśaḥ sarvā dahann iva*).²¹ The *cakra* is furthermore 'razor-edged' (*kṣurāntam*). Finally, the fact that Varāha kills Hiraṇyākṣa by beheading him with his *cakra* agrees with other texts as well. The inclusion of these well-known, fixed features of the *cakra* in the narration of the Varāha myth can be explained from the perspective of narrative consistency. By describing the *cakra* with these familiar characteristics, the *SP* composers are consistent on the intertextual level.

However, the *cakra*'s description is not complete yet. The *SP* composers added a feature that is not seen in the examples given above. In the verses preceding the death scene, a bodiless voice appears and tells Varāha that if he keeps on fighting as he has done thus far, he will not be able to kill Hiraṇyākṣa. He should use the *cakra* instead.

muktvainam daityarājānam cakreṇa vinisūdaya |
māheśvareṇa vaikuṇṭha tato mṛtyum avāpsyati || 23 ||

Having released the king of the Daityas (Hiraṇyākṣa), kill him with Maheśvara's (Śiva's) *cakra*, O Vaikuṇṭha (Viṣṇu), so that he will find death.

(SP 107.23)

The *cakra* is qualified as *māheśvareṇa*, 'belonging to the Great Lord'. This is a crucial adjective because it suggests that the *cakra* was owned or produced by Śiva. And indeed, when Varāha sets Hiraṇyākṣa free, we come to know that Viṣṇu does not have immediate access to the *cakra*. He calls the weapon to mind, pays homage to Śiva, and only then does the *cakra* arrive.

kṣurāntam tan mahācakram abjam jalacarāntakam |
durnirikṣyam sarvaghāti abhedyam avighāti ca || 31 ||
tathāpratihatam divyam mohanam sarvadehinām |
karam āgād varāhasya śatāśanīsamāsvanam || 32 ||

That great *cakra*—with sharp edges, born from water, destroying the water creatures, hard to look at, killing everything, unbreakable and unobstructed,

21. Both characterizations also stress the *cakra*'s destructive force.

indestructible, divine and deluding all beings—travelled to the Boar's hand²² with the sound of a hundred thunderbolts.

(SP 107.31–32)

The short passage describes the *cakra*'s journey. The end point is clear: Varāha's hand. The rest of the journey is somewhat cryptic. The qualification *jalacarāntakam*, 'destroying the water creatures', suggests that the *cakra* went through the water. Since the fight between Varāha and Hiraṇyākṣa takes place in the netherworld, located below the cosmic ocean, the water implied here should be this vast ocean. The starting point must have been somewhere above the waters and this too can be deduced from an adjective in the narrative, namely '*māheśvareṇa*': the *cakra* came from Śiva, who resides in heaven. The two passages combined are the SP composers' way of explaining how the *cakra* came from Śiva in heaven, went through the cosmic ocean and arrived at Viṣṇu.

The idea that Viṣṇu receives his *cakra* from another god is not new. Agni gave the *cakra* to Kṛṣṇa in one of the *cakra*'s origin stories in the *Mbh*,²³ and in the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* (VP), it is the creational 'architect' Viśvakarman who granted Viṣṇu his *cakra*.²⁴ In terms of narrative consistency, the basic structure of Viṣṇu's obtainment of his weapon shows intertextual consistency with other sources. The way in which this structure is then implemented in the SP is, however, different from the example origin stories in the *Mbh* and the VP.

First of all, the origin stories in the *Mbh* and the VP as examples of such narratives are an epic and Purāṇic way of explaining how the *cakra* became Viṣṇu's weapon and remained his primary arm. Although the combination of the two SP passages described above likewise illustrates how the *cakra* arrived at Viṣṇu, it is not there to stay. This becomes clear in the afterlife episode of the Varāha myth. When Viṣṇu has killed Hiraṇyākṣa, he refuses to cast off his Boar manifestation. After Hiraṇyākṣa's death, a long time passes by, during which he marries Citralekhā, and the two get a son called Vṛka. The son is a real troublemaker. One day, he wrecks the palace garden of Skanda, for which

22. In the SP, Varāha is half boar, half human. Since Hiraṇyākṣa cannot be killed in a number of circumstances, Viṣṇu becomes a *naravarāha*, 'man-boar' with hands, feet, fingers, toes and other human body parts, but also with a tail and fangs. See Dokter-Mersch forthcoming and Dokter-Mersch 2021: 66–72 for a comparative study on the appearance of Varāha in other texts and the striking parallel with the Narasiṃha myth.

23. *Mbh* 1.216.21: *vajranābhaṃ tataś cakram dadau kṛṣṇāya pāvakaḥ | āgneyam astram dayitam sa cakalyo 'bhavat tadā || 21 ||* 'Thereupon the Fire gave Kṛṣṇa a discus with a thunderbolt in the center, a fiery weapon that he loved, and he too became full of vigor' (tr. Van Buitenen 1973: 417).

24. VP 3.2.10–11a: *yat sūryād vaiṣṇavaṃ tejaḥ śātitaṃ viśvakarmaṇā | jāyāyamānam apatat tad bhūmau munisattama || 10 || tvaṣṭaiva tejasā tena viṣṇoś cakram akalpayat |* 'That lustre of Viṣṇu that was cut off from the sun by Viśvakarman fell on the earth as it was blazing, O best of sages. From that same lustre, Tvaṣṭṛ (Viśvakarman) made Viṣṇu's *cakra*.'

he is kept in captivity and tortured by Skanda and his loyal assistants the Gaṇas. As soon as Varāha hears about this, he goes to the palace, where he encounters Skanda and his retinue and starts fighting with them. He uses various arms, including the *cakra*. The *cakra* does not, however, do its job; it returns to Varāha's hand, but then 'it immediately went to its own abode' (*prayayau kṣipraṃ svam eva bhavanaṃ prati*, SP 110.9cd). Since it is originally Śiva's *cakra*, it is likely that the weapon went back to Śiva's divine palace. Apparently, Viṣṇu was not only dependent on Śiva in receiving the *cakra*, but he remains dependent on him because the *cakra* has left him for its own abode, that is, Śiva's abode.

Such a power dynamics between Viṣṇu and Śiva becomes even clearer when we take the rest of the SP into account, for the idea that Viṣṇu receives his weapon from Śiva is not only present in the Varāha myth. It is a recurring theme throughout the text. In nearly each passage that mentions the *cakra* as Viṣṇu's weapon, Śiva is involved as well. First, in a myth on the goddess Kauśiki (text and synopsis in Yokochi 2013), a place called Svarṇākṣa is associated with various boons that Viṣṇu received. The *cakra* is one of them.

yatra viṣṇur varāṃl lebhe devam ārādhyā śaṃkaram |
cakraṃ sudarśanaṃ nāma dvīṣatām antakopamam || 10 ||
[Svarṇākṣa is the place] where Viṣṇu, after having propitiated god Śaṃkara (Śiva),
received boons [including] the *cakra* called Sudarśana, which is like death for one's
enemies.

(SP 68.10c–10f)

Later, in the Tārakāmaya myth, several battles between the gods and the Asuras are narrated. One of these is Viṣṇu's fight with Kālanemi, during which Viṣṇu takes his *cakra*, 'created by Rudra'.

sa tadā dyāṃ bhuvaṃ caiva vyāpya rūpeṇa sarvaśaḥ |
cakraṃ tad abjaṃ sasmāra yat tad rudreṇa nirmītam || 11 ||
Then, having completely pervaded heaven and earth with his body, he (Viṣṇu)
called the water-born *cakra* to mind, which was created by Rudra (Śiva).

(SP 122.11)

The Varāha episode is the third instance in the SP where the *cakra* is said to originate from Śiva. No other available text preceding the SP makes Śiva the donor of the *cakra*. This is a new development in the SP and remains limited to a few later Śaiva Purāṇas.²⁵ However, within the SP, Śiva's involvement appears to be the norm. It is structurally added and becomes a continuous proclamation of a new representation of the *cakra* across various narratives.

From the perspective of narrative consistency, the inclusion of this new element of Śiva's involvement into the Varāha myth can be explained on both sub-levels of internarrational consistency. It is first of all consistent on

25. Śiva is the creator of the *cakra* in the PdP and the Śivapurāṇa (Begley 1973: 20) and in Liṅgapurāṇa 2.5.43.

the narrative level because, as the verses from the Kauśikī and Tārakāmaya myths show, it is found in various narratives. Second, it is consistent on the ideological level, for Śiva's distribution of the *cakra* has strong parallels with the Śaiva universe as it is conveyed in the *SP*. As briefly mentioned above, the *SP* envisions a Śaiva universe with Śiva on top of it, overseeing, directing and designing actions by the other gods. Although the other gods play an important role in the execution of great (cosmic) tasks, there is a distinct hierarchy between the superior god Śiva and the other gods because many received their tasks from him.

One clear example of this process involves Brahmā, who is known as the creator god in the epic and Purāṇic period. The *PPL*, for example, narrates a widespread creation myth in which this and other recurrent narrative elements are present. The myth starts with Brahmā's birth from the cosmic egg²⁶ and culminates in the creation of the universe.²⁷ The *SP* (3–4, text and synopsis in Adriaensen, Bakker and Isaacson 1998) does not share such literal parallels as those Purāṇas collected in the *PPL*, but it does tell a creation myth with Brahmā's birth from the cosmic egg,²⁸ his becoming the lord of offspring,²⁹ and creating all kinds of beings.³⁰ The *SP* composers added one important element to this well-known story: Śiva assigned the task of creation to Brahmā.³¹ Śiva becomes the mastermind behind all actions, including the plan of creation. Although the retelling of the creation myth preserves some key elements (intertextual consistency), Śiva along with Śaiva ideas is added as an extra, decisive layer (internarrational consistency on the ideological level).

There is a similar strategy behind the new portrayal of the *cakra* as being distributed to Viṣṇu by Śiva. Although Viṣṇu remains primarily associated and successful with his *cakra* in the *SP*, Śiva either granted it to Viṣṇu or

26. *PPL sarga 1.12–13: hiraṇyavarṇam abhavat tad aṇḍam udakeśayam | tatra jajñe svayaṃ brahmā svayaṃbhūr iti naḥ śrutam || 12 || hiraṇyagarbho bhagavān uṣitvā parivatsaram | tad aṇḍam akarod dvaidhaṃ divaṃ bhuvam athāpi ca || 13 ||* 'There was a golden egg lying in the water, from which Brahmā himself was born, known by us as Svayaṃbhū. Having dwelt [there] for a year, lord Hiraṇyagarbha (Brahmā) divided that egg into two: heaven and earth.' The passage is found in the *Agnipurāṇa*, *Brahmapurāṇa*, *HV* and *Śivapurāṇa Dharmasaṃhitā*.
27. For example, Brahmā created the seven sages Marīci, Atri, Aṅgiras, Pulastya, Pulaha, Kratu and Vasiṣṭha (*PPL sarga 1.16*).
28. *SP 3.4ab: purā brahmā prajādhyaḥṣaṇḍe 'smin samprasūyate*, 'once upon a time, Brahmā, the chief of offspring, was born in that egg.'
29. *SP 3.22c: prajāpatitvaṃ*, 'the state of being the lord of offspring.'
30. *SP 4.19cd: asṛjad vividhās tv anyāḥ prajāḥ sa jagati prabhuḥ*, 'the lord created all kinds of other beings on earth'.
31. *SP 3.22: prajāṛthaṃ yac ca te taptaṃ tapa ugraṃ suduścaram | tasmāt prajāpatitvaṃ te dadāni prayatātmane || 22 ||* (Śiva addressing Brahmā) 'Since you have performed severe and very hard asceticism for the sake of offspring, I grant you, the pious soul, the state of being the lord of offspring.'

previously owned it. With this additional characterization, Viṣṇu becomes dependent on Śiva, and Śiva becomes the *cakra*'s agent. He becomes responsible, and therefore laudable, for the great deeds performed with it. Just as Śiva is the mastermind behind the tasks and actions of the gods, he is likewise the mastermind behind Viṣṇu's weapon *par excellence*.³² With this new qualification, the *SP* composers become consistent on the internarrational, ideological level.

THE (IN)EFFICACY OF THE CAKRA

Śiva's involvement is not the only new element in the description of Viṣṇu's *cakra* in the *SP*; another new feature appears in the afterlife episode of the Varāha myth. As summarized above, the afterlife episode starts when Varāha encounters Skanda and his Gaṇas. During their battle, Varāha throws his *cakra* at one of Skanda's Gaṇas called Kokavaktra.

tataś cakram sahasrāraṃ yugāntāgnisamaṇḍam |
 śilāgrahaṇavyagrāya gaṇāya vyaśṛjat prabhuḥ || 6 ||
 tad antakapratikāśaṃ cakram sarvasurāriham |
 viveśa na gaṇaṃ tūrṇaṃ tatas tad vyanivartata || 7 ||
 tan nivr̥ttaṃ punaś cakram akṛtvā kāryam ujjvalam |
 na jagrāha tadā viṣṇur avamene ca tat tadā || 8 ||
 tat tadānarcitaṃ tena cakram dānavaghātinaḥ |
 viṣṇunā prayayau kṣipraṃ svam eva bhavanaṃ prati || 9 ||

Then the lord (Viṣṇu) discharged the thousand-spoked *cakra*, resembling the fire at the end of an era, at the Gaṇa (Kokavaktra), who was focused on catching a rock [that was approaching at the same time]. That very *cakra*, resembling death, the slayer of all the enemies of the gods, did not rapidly enter the Gaṇa, [but] it then returned [instead]. Viṣṇu did not take up the blazing *cakra* again, when it had returned without doing its job, but then disregarded it. Then, being disrespected by that Dāna-destroying Viṣṇu, the *cakra* immediately went to its own abode.

(*SP* 110.6–9)

The passage has some interesting qualifications of the *cakra* that are known from other sources. It has a thousand spokes (*sahasrāraṃ*), it blazes (*ujjvalam*), it is thrown at the opponent (*vyaśṛjat*) and it returns to the one who threw it (*vyanivartata*). The passage thus shows intertextual consistency for these

32. The same is true for the Skanda's primary weapon, the spear. I stated earlier that each manifestation myth in the *SP* is elaborated with an afterlife of Viṣṇu's manifestation, in which Śiva makes Viṣṇu leave his manifestation and return to his own body again. In the Varāha myth, however, it is Skanda, the son of Śiva, who factually does this. Skanda pierces Varāha's heart with his spear, and through that piercing, Viṣṇu leaves his manifested body and assumes his old one. Still, Śiva can be credited for the deed, because the spear was given to Skanda by Śiva, just before the act of piercing. The distribution of weapons becomes a form of power, even when it concerns Śiva's very own son.

fixed characteristics. Most noteworthy, however, is something that is not known from other retellings of the Varāha myth: it returns without having done its job. Whereas Varāha's *cakra* instantly cut off Hiraṇyākṣa's head from his body, it does not even manage to reach Kokavakra. This is a new narrative element that can be explained from the perspective of internarrational consistency both on the narrative level and on the ideological level.

In another afterlife episode, that of the Narasiṃha myth (SP 70–71, text and synopsis in Bisschop and Yokochi 2018), there is a striking parallel with the efficacy and inefficacy of one of Viṣṇu's weapons. The Narasiṃha myth, which is known from the *Mbh*, the *HV* and many other Purāṇas,³³ revolves around Viṣṇu's manifestation as a Man-Lion and Hiraṇyākṣa's older brother called Hiraṇyakaśipu. The latter had once received a boon from Brahmā thanks to which he cannot be killed by gods nor by human beings, not by day nor by night, not by weapons nor by arrows, and there are some more restrictions. In order to escape the conditions of Hiraṇyakaśipu's immortality, Viṣṇu becomes Narasiṃha—half man, half lion—and kills Hiraṇyakaśipu with his paw. The SP follows this general storyline, including Hiraṇyakaśipu's death by Narasiṃha.³⁴

*grhītva sa tadā siṃho hiraṇyakaśipuṃ sakṛt |
talenāhatya taṃ prāṇair vyāyojayata satvaram || 44 ||*

Having grabbed Hiraṇyakaśipu and struck him with the palm [of his paw] once, the Lion (Viṣṇu) immediately took away his life.

(SP 71.44)

Just as Varāha's *cakra* immediately killed Hiraṇyākṣa by being thrown just once, Narasiṃha's paw immediately killed Hiraṇyakaśipu by hitting just once. Viṣṇu's weapons, in other words, are extremely successful against the enemies of the gods. The parallel continues in the afterlife episode. Just as in the Varāha myth, Viṣṇu is not willing to give up his Narasiṃha manifestation. His destructive behaviour starts to form a threat to the universe. The gods are afraid and ask Śiva for help. Śiva consents to their wish and assumes the form of a Śarabha, a fierce mythical creature with four feet on its back and sharp teeth.³⁵ As Śarabha, he approaches Narasiṃha, and the two meet.

*atha siṃhas tadā dr̥ṣṭvā śarabhaṃ samupasthitam |
krodhena mahatāviṣṭo talenainam atāḍayat || 51 ||*

33. The myth appears, for example, in *Mbh* 12.326.73e–f, *HV* 31.31–67, *HV* App. 1 No. 42A, *PPL* *vaṇśa* 2C.16–22 (found in the *Brahmāṇḍapurāṇa* and *Vāyupurāṇa*) and *VdhP* 1.54. Several studies have been done on the Narasiṃha myth, such as Hacker 1960: 25ff., Swain 1970 and Soifer 1991: 73–99.

34. For example, the *HV* once reports that Hiraṇyakaśipu was killed 'by one hand', i.e. paw (*ekapāṇinā*, *HV* 31.67d), and another time that Narasiṃha attacked him and tore him open 'with sharp long claws' (*tikṣṇair... mahānakhaiḥ*, *HV* App. 1 No. 42B l. 519).

35. For an engaging study on the Śarabha, see Slaje 2017.

*sa hatas tena siṃhena śarabho naiva cuṣubhe |
tataḥ śarabham āhatya vajradehaṃ mahābalaṃ |
ātmanaivāgamat kṛcchraṃ sparśāt tasya mahātmanaḥ || 52 ||*

Upon seeing the Śarabha (Śiva) standing nearby, the Lion (Viṣṇu), filled with great anger, struck him with the palm [of his paw]. Although he was hit by the Lion, the Śarabha did not even budge. [On the contrary,] when he (Narasimha) had struck the very strong Śarabha, whose body was [hard] like diamond, he himself felt pain by the [mere] contact with the great soul (Śiva).

(SP 71.51–52)

The weapon that Narasiṃha uses here is exactly the same as the one used against Hiraṇyakaśipu: the palm of his paw. However, whereas he needed just one firm slap against the Asura, the Śarabha—that is, Śiva—is not the least hurt. It must have been a deliberate choice to use the exact same word *tala* (instead of a synonym for ‘palm’ or ‘paw’ or a word like ‘nails’) in order to contrast the power of Viṣṇu’s weapon against Hiraṇyakaśipu with its ineffectiveness against Śiva.

The parallel with the afterlife episode of the Varāha myth is unmistakable. In both afterlife episodes, the very same weapon is used as in the main narrative in order to stress the contrast of the weapons’ effectiveness. On the one hand, there is the great success of the weapons against the Asuras, and on the other hand, their failure against Śiva or someone in the Śaiva spectrum, in this case, one of the primary Gaṇas of Śiva’s own son. Considering that the Narasiṃha and Varāha myths show the same structure, there is internarrational consistency on the narrative level.

Viṣṇu’s ineffective weapons against Śiva and his retinue can furthermore be understood from the perspective of internarrational consistency on the ideological level. According to the SP, Śiva is superior and indestructible. This religious idea finds expression in the afterlife episodes of the Narasiṃha and Varāha myths when Viṣṇu fights with Śiva himself or someone belonging to his retinue. There is no one, not even the strongest god, who can harm Śiva. In the Varāha myth, it is Śiva’s company that enjoys the same fortune.

CONCLUSIONS

The SP shows unique retellings of stories that were long known. The Varāha myth is no exception. The SP composers made their own version by maintaining known information that is considered fixed knowledge, such as the general storyline, as well as introducing new information that usually attempts to make the narrative more fitting for the new context of the Śaiva Purāṇa, for example by adding Śiva at crucial moments in the story. The description of Viṣṇu’s *cakra* exemplifies how the SP composers did this on the level of narrative details and how the choices can be explained from the perspective of narrative consistency.

The *cakra* remains, on the one hand, Viṣṇu's preferable weapon. It is fiery, has sharp edges, decapitates one's enemy, such as Hiraṇyākṣa in the Varāha myth, and then returns to the one who threw it. These characteristics are known from other sources and are considered fixed, not to be altered. Their inclusion in the *SP* can be explained from the perspective of intertextual consistency. On the other hand, the *cakra* has undergone two important changes that can be explained from the perspective of internarrational consistency. First of all, the *cakra* originally comes from Śiva or is granted by him to Viṣṇu. This is a structural addition found in at least three passages where the *cakra* is mentioned. By adding this feature to (almost) each time the *cakra* is mentioned in relation with Viṣṇu, the *SP* composers become consistent on the internarrational, narrative level. This characteristic matches not only other narratives of the Purāṇa, but also its religious preferences. The idea that the *cakra* is distributed by Śiva fits the text's vision about Śiva's superiority and control over a Śaiva universe. Although the gods remain responsible for some of the greatest cosmic tasks, Śiva controls them by overseeing all actions, stepping in when things go wrong, and distributing these tasks. The fact that Śiva likewise distributes the *cakra* to Viṣṇu—to become Viṣṇu's primary weapon—makes Śiva in control, showing his superiority. The second innovation concerning Viṣṇu's *cakra* appears in the afterlife episode of the Varāha myth, where it refuses to do its job against Skanda and his Gaṇas. This new element in the story has a parallel with the Narasiṃha myth, where Narasiṃha's paw easily killed Hiraṇyakaśipu, but in the afterlife episode, it did not hurt Śiva in the form of a Śarabha. I have explained this as reflecting internarrational consistency on the narrative level. The parallel can additionally be explained from the perspective of internarrational consistency on the ideological level: Viṣṇu's weapons are extremely powerful and successful against the enemies of the gods, but are useless against Śiva and his retinue. It again shows Śiva's superiority and his indestructibility, as well as the power of Śiva's company, reflecting the text's affiliation with Śaivism.

By approaching the new portrayal of Viṣṇu's *cakra* with the theory of narrative consistency, it is possible to explain where the individual characteristics of Viṣṇu's weapon come from. Their roots lie either in the vast textual corpus of Sanskrit literature or their origin is much younger and is rather to be found in the *SP* itself, either in other narratives or in religious ideas. The importance of being consistent on the internarrational level is relatively easy to explain. The *SP* composers had a new message to proclaim, one of Śiva worship being the greater good and of Śiva's grace being endless. This message had not been proclaimed so vigorously in a Purāṇa yet. It is important to speak with one voice, across the many chapters that the Purāṇa counts, and the composers have certainly been successful in this. One may wonder, however, why the *SP* did not only tell this specific Śaiva version of the *cakra*. Why did its composers also implement elements that were well-known, such as the *cakra*'s characteristic of always returning? What is the function behind

the intertextual consistency? Or rather, what is the power of combining known and unknown features?

To answer this question, let us recall the theory of anchoring innovation. The premise of this theory is that innovations are more likely to be accepted when the audience is able to connect it to something they know. In the case of the *SP*, the innovations are the *cakra*'s new features that it is distributed by Śiva—in other words, that Viṣṇu is dependent on Śiva to receive his primary arm—and that while it is successful against the Asuras, it does not stand a chance against Śiva or his retinue. Implementing these new features at various points in the text shows that this is what the *SP* composers wanted to proclaim, and that they wanted these innovations to become accepted by the audience. However, following the thesis of anchoring innovation, if they only expressed this new worldview, there would be the risk of not being accepted, because there is too little familiar information about the *cakra*. Elements such as the *cakra*'s fiery appearance—and the very fact that it is Viṣṇu's weapon in the first place—are what is known by the audience and what matches their beliefs.

The Varāha myth (and many other retellings) in the *SP* is full of combinations like this. There is a constant balance between fixed Vaiṣṇava narrative elements and new Śaiva components. With the structural addition of Śiva and Śaiva topics, the retelling was, most probably, new for the audience. Knowing the religious preference of the Purāṇa, the audience might have expected to hear a revised version of the Varāha myth with some role for Śiva laid out. However, it remained the question as to what extent Śiva would play a role and which function he would have. Since it is a new retelling—that is, an innovation—it was still in need of acceptance. The audience had yet to approve that the *cakra* actually came from Śiva, that it sometimes refuses to do its job, that there is an afterlife of Viṣṇu's manifestation in the first place, et cetera. Given the fact that a balance between the known and the unknown is found throughout the *SP*, we may conclude that the composers seem to have been aware of how to “sell” their story: not by narrating an entirely Śaiva version of the Vaiṣṇava myth, divesting it of its familiar narrative elements, but by presenting a highly innovative yet credible myth. The way in which Viṣṇu's *cakra* is described is part of this marketing strategy, and Viṣṇu's weapon of choice became a narrative weapon in the hands of the *SP* composers.

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ABBREVIATIONS

HV	<i>Harivaṃśa</i>
Mbh	<i>Mahābhārata</i>
PdP	<i>Padmapurāṇa</i>
PPL	<i>Purāṇapañcalakṣaṇa</i> —see Kirfel 1927
SP	<i>Skandapurāṇa</i>
tr.	translation; translated by
VdhP	<i>Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa</i>
VP	<i>Viṣṇupurāṇa</i>

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