AN IVORY CASKET FROM SOUTHERN INDIA

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THE group of ivory panels described below is in the collection of Professor Arthur Michael, of Newton, Massachusetts. The four panels and decorative borders now remounted in a plush frame measuring over all 10 x 14½ inches, shown on the accompanying plate, were originally parts of a casket. If we refer to the panels as now arranged as numbers one to four, counting from top to bottom, we may say that they formed the two long sides (nos. 3, 4), one end (no. 1) and the top (no. 2) of the original casket, of which only the other end panel and some parts of the borders and base are now missing. Our intention will be to explain the representations on the panels, as far as possible by reference to the corresponding texts. The panels themselves are of admirable workmanship, and unsurpassed by any other examples of South Indian ivory carving that have yet been published.

Bone and ivory boxes of this kind, and others of circular form, are well known from Ceylon and Southern India, and range in date from the seventeenth century, or possibly earlier, to the present day. The Brahmanical theme of the present example, and the characteristic forms of the horned and bird-headed "lions" in the borders, show that it must be of South Indian origin. The admirable workmanship and the richness of the design, without any of that excessive relief and elaboration that are to be seen in more recent productions, suggest a dating not later than the earlier part of the seventeenth century; the architectural forms to be seen at the two ends of the first panel and in some of the other panels are those of the Nāyaka period (1600 onwards) in Madura. The voluptuous forms which are so appropriate to the theme remind us of a long inheritance, of which the evidences are extant in the fact that some of the sculpture at Sāñcī (first century B.C.) was executed by "the ivory workers of Vīdisā,\(^2\)" in the wonderful Indian ivory lately found at Pompeii,\(^3\) in the equally marvelous and luxurious ivories of Gupta date that have been found in Afghanistan,\(^4\) and in many literary references to the uses of ivory in India.\(^5\) The actual style of our ivory is ultimately Cāluṣyan; it may be compared to the best productions of the Tanjore school,


5. J. Hackin, Mém. de la délégation archéologique française en Afghanistan, ix, Recherches archéologiques à Bagram, Paris, 1939, and "The 1939 Dig at Bagram—II" in Asia, November 1940.

6. See my Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon, p. 175; additional references include Dīgha Nikāya, ii, 291 (ivory turning), Mahāsāṃśa, xxxviii, 100 (King Jetthāattā described as skilled in the arts of ivory), and Bṛhat Samhāta, xi, Ch. 32 (wooden beds to be inlaid with ivory; the different qualities of ivory). Of the last-mentioned work I know only the translation by N. C. Iyer, in the Aryan Miscellany, Samhāta Series, Madura, 1884.
or may have been made in Madura or in Mysore, or still more probably in Travancore, where the traditions of Indian art have been better preserved than anywhere else and where many fine and relatively early examples of Indian ivory work can still be found.

Our chief concern will be with the iconography. The theme is that of Siva’s dance in the Devadāruvana, alluded to in the Tiruvācaṯam where Siva is apostrophized as the “Supernal Dancer, who to Patañjali gave grace.”7 The many versions of the myth vary in detail, and taken collectively contain the explanation of a large part of the South Indian Saiva iconography. Here we shall summarize from the various sources,8 and mainly from the Liṅga Purāṇa and Darpadalanam, so much of the myth as is necessary for an explanation of the representations before us.

The abode of Siva and his consort Pārvati—the divine essence and divine nature—is on the summit of Mount Kailāsa; He is seated there with Her upon their common throne, or common vehicle the Bull Nandi, as may be seen in the central compartment of our second panel; this is an Umāmahēṣvara-mūrti of the usual type, in which Siva holds the axe (paraśu) and deer (mṛga) in His upper hands, while the two normal hands are both in the pose of reassurance (abhaya mudrā).9 The slopes of Mount Kailāsa, i.e. the Himālayas, the “Abode of Snow,” are clothed by the Deodar Forest (Devadāruvana), which is the home of many families of Rishis, Brahmanical ascetics who are worshipers of Siva but are wholly occupied in the performance of sacrificial rites.10

As Pārvati is watching these earnest seekers for salvation, She pities them, and turning to Siva asks Him how it is that these devotees have for so long been unable to obtain release and to find Him. He replies that it is because they are not yet at peace, but still affable by love and wrath; they cannot cross over the sea of life to reach the farther shore so long as they can love and hate; whereas those who have freed themselves from passion and desire, even if they do not practice arduous rites, can attain to that imperishable state of real being.11 So saying, Siva descends from the Bull on which He has been seated and assumes the form of a nude mendicant, that of the Bhikṣāṇa-mūrti; and thus as a youth of extraordinary and incomparable beauty enters the Devadāruvana and passes through the Rishi settlements as any other religious mendicant might. There the wives and daughters of the Rishis are so overcome by His beauty, greater than that of the God of Love himself, that they lose all sense of shame, and letting their garments slip from their waists, follow and crowd about the lovely youth, singing and dancing and swooning for love. This is the subject of our third panel, where we see Siva in His mendicant transformation in the center and the infatuated women on either side of, i.e. round about, Him. The mendicant deity

9. More often one of the normal hands is in the “generosity” pose (varada mudrā).
10. For a representation of Mount Kailāsa, with Siva and Pārvati enthroned above and Rishis seeking towards Him on the lower slopes, see my Catalogue of the Indian Collections, Boston, v, Rajput Painting, pl. lviii.
11. It is affirmed already in Rgveda, viii.70.3 that God (here Indra) cannot be reached by works or sacrifices only. But neither the earlier nor the later Indian pronouncements of this kind are to be taken to be wholesale condemnations of the sacrificial and ritualistic practices themselves. What is meant, as we know from countless explicit texts, is that the fulfillment of the ritual and exoteric law without understanding and devotion can secure advantage in this world only; whereas the sacrifice performed with understanding and devotion, or even understood without performance, leads to the sacrificer’s highest good both here and hereafter. It would indeed, as Kṛṣṇa says (Bhagavad Gītā, v.1.8) be absurd to think of renunciation and action, ritual and practice, as really opposed to one another and as having different fruits—“he who is duly established in one obtains the fruits of both.” The Rishis of our myth were not in this sense “duly established” in their ritual and ascetic performance; they knew not Siva because they had not escaped from nor overcome themselves or their senses.
is nude, and represented as walking; He holds the hour-glass drum (śamaru) in His upper right and the trident (trīśāla) in his upper left hand, while the normal right hand holds a flower to which the deer is reaching up, and the normal left holds a mendicant's skull-cup (kapāla). He is accompanied by a pair of dwarf sprites (bhūta), members of His train (gaṇa); one of these is blowing a conch trumpet (ṭaṅkha), the other carries a tray of food. These bāḷavāres are the Vedic Maruts and the “Breaths” or energies by and in which the immanent deity operates in living beings; in legitimate relation to their chief it is their function to support Him in every way, notably with their music and by supplying Him with the food with which He must be nourished when He passes over from being to becoming. Thus the iconography follows closely the prescriptions of the Agamas and Śilpa-sāstras, and is the same as that of the many extant free-standing bronze or stone Bhikṣātana images.

The Rishis are infuriated by the behavior of their women, and pour out curses on the mendicant, who vanishes from them so that “they knew him not.” The Rishis’ whole scheme of life has been upset; they resort to Brahma, the Grand sire, and ask his advice. He tells them that it was the highest deity, “the linga-bearer, though He bears no linga,” that has appeared to them in an assumed likeness. They might have entertained an angel unawares, but actually failed in the basic duty of hospitality due to any guest, whether welcome or unwelcome, and whatever his conduct. Now their only resource is humbly to resort to Siva Himself; they are to worship the Siva-lingam, and to realize that it is not by asceticism, rites, or mere learning, but only by Siva’s own Grace that He can be reached. When they have followed the Grand sire’s advice for a year, Siva appears amongst them once more in the form of a nude ascetic, holding fire-brands in His hands and singing and dancing; they honor Him, and ask His pardon for whatever they have done in deed, thought, or word against Him ignorantly. They abandon their asceticism and pray Siva to appear to them in the form in which they had formerly known Him; He resumes accordingly His own, three-eyed form and gives them “the divine eye” by which they may see Him.

The mention of Siva’s dancing above must not be overlooked, for this dancing on His part is not a mere incident, but a cosmic epiphany and bound up with the whole doctrine of Siva’s form as Naṭārāja, to which we have already alluded above in mentioning Patañjali; and we must speak of this development, if only because three of Siva’s Nrīṭta-mārtis or Dancing Images are found on our panels. Before proceeding to Patañjali, it may be asked whether the mendicant form in which Siva for the second time entered the Dāruvana was not essentially the same as of the Rishis themselves, and in this case whether the figures of dancing Rishis which are often met with in groups of sculptures representing our myth

12. It must be presumed that these divine attributes were not seen by the Rishis and their wives, since it is explicit that Siva was not recognized.

13. The skull-cup is, strictly speaking, Brahmadeva’s (see Rao, op. cit., pp. 292–305). Brahmadeva having claimed to have created the Universe solely by his own power, Siva is said to have cut off the fifth head by which His own supremacy had been denied; Brahmadeva survives the temporary death with only four heads and acknowledges Siva’s supremacy. The decapitation, however, involves what is technically the sin of Brāhma-slaying (brāhmaḥāya), a sin that is necessarily incurred by every creative divinity in one way or another (e.g. by Indra when he slays Ahi-Vṛtra-Viśvarūpā), and this sin attaches to Siva’s form as Bhairava. Brahmadeva appoints Siva the penance of begging, using as a begging-bowl the skull-cup made from the head that was cut off. This part of the legend explains the Bhikṣātana form in which Siva enters the Devadāruvana as a mendicant. In the meantime we are told that the sin of brahmaḥāya in feminine form followed Siva closely until at last he reached Vārānasi (Benares); and it would seem to be not implausible that it is really this sin rather than Bhadrakāli, as suggested above, that stands so close to the dancing Siva in two of our representations.

14. One of the main motives in the whole myth is to explain the cosmic significance of the Siva-lingam as a form of the axis mundi and to inculcate the worship of the lingam as supreme support of contemplation. We cannot enter into this subject here (see more fully F. D. K. Bosch, loc. cit., where the fiery essence and royal significance of the lignam are specially discussed), except to remark that a conception of deity as a binunity of polar aspects, on the one hand virile and on the other impotent (i.e. in actu et in potentia, being and non-being, etc.), is often explicitly stated in the Rigveda, notably in vii.101.31: “He shapes His likeness as He will, now He sterile, now progenitive.”
are representations of Siva Himself, or of Rishis dancing with Him; either interpretation would accord with the Indian ways of thinking.

Now as to Patañjali, otherwise Ādi-śeṣa, the World-serpent, and literally “Original Residue,” i.e. what is “left-over” when abstraction is made of all manifested existences, we learn from the Koyil Purāṇam version of our myth that Viṣṇu and Ādi-śeṣa, who have been witnesses of Siva’s dance in the Dārūvana, are left alone together when Siva returns to the summit of Mount Kailāsa, and that Ādi-śeṣa in particular is overcome with the longing to behold the dance again. In this version of the story, Siva’s dance is one of triumph over the evil powers that have been embodied and sent against Him by the curses and incantations of the angry Rishis, and it is this aspect of Siva’s dance that is depicted in the right-hand compartment of our second panel. Here His form is plainly still that of the nude mendicant, but He is now eight-armed, the two upper arms holding the axe and the deer (as in the central compartment of the same panel), while the two normal hands are in the characteristic pose that we are familiar with in the four-armed Nāṭarāja-mūrtis, of which there are many excellent examples in this country and also in Toronto.

The last of the evil forces projected by the Rishis against Siva was a black dwarf, who is the personification of ignorance (aviṣeṣaï, avidyā), darkness (irul = tama), dirt (malam) and dust (āṇava); in the Sanskrit iconographies the dwarf is known as the apasmāra-puruṣa, the “inhibitor of recollection” or “principle of confusion.” It is this earthly principle personified as a dwarf, and holding a shield and sword, that we see withering prostrate beneath the weight of Siva’s foot in the nṛṭta-mūrti in the right-hand compartment of our second panel, and in the same position on the other Nāṭarāja images. It is to the foot thus planted on that pulvis, in quo formatum est vestigium (pedis) that the weary Wayfarer, still involved in the causal nexus, resorts, while it is the lifted foot that ultimately sets him free.
The small female figure standing to Siva's left, and to be seen again with another dancing Siva in the fourth panel, may be that of Bhadrakāli, a form or emanation of Pārvatī corresponding to Siva's form as Virabhadra.22 The nṛttamūrti of the fourth panel, just referred to, is that form of Siva's dance that is called Lalāṭa-tilaka23 or "Brow-ornament," its characteristic being that the right leg is raised vertically24 as if to apply the tilaka to the forehead; ordinarily, of course, the hand is used for this purpose. The number of arms in figures of this class varies from four to sixteen; here there are ten. Bhadrakāli stands on Siva's proper right. The smaller and male figure on Siva's left, playing the drum, is four-armed, the two upper hands holding the axe and the deer, and thus in effect a miniature image of Siva himself; it is actually that of the apostle Nandikesvara, also known as Adhikāra-nandi.25 This saint is a legitimate son and incarnation of Siva, and therefore like Him; the divine filiation was acknowledged by Pārvatī, who smelt of his head while streams of milk poured from her breast.26 In a theriomorphic and perhaps original form, Nandikesvara is Nandi, the "Beatifier," Siva's bull and vehicle, seen in the middle compartment of the second panel.27

Of the three other persons represented in the fourth panel, Viṣṇu on Siva's proper right and Brahmā on His left are easily recognizable. Viṣṇu is four-armed, the upper hands holding the winged discus and winged conch, while with the normal hands he is playing on an hour-glass drum (ḍhakka) with a drum-stick (bāna). Brahmā is four-handed; the attributes held in the upper and lower left hands are not certainly identifiable; the right hand is in the "generosity" pose (varada mudrā); and as is often the case in reliefs, only three of the four heads are visible. The eight-armed dancing female figure on the right, whose upper right hand is raised and holding a bell (ghañṭa), is a form of Pārvatī, that is to say of the divine Nature (prakṛti), whose dancing reflects that of the divine Essence or Person (puruṣa), and it is evident that the whole composition corresponds to the description in the Tiru-Arul-Payan, ix.3, "The dance of Nature proceeds at one side, that of Gnosis (ñāṇa=Sanskrit jñāna) on the other."28 In all these compositions the background of verdure is no doubt a reference to the Deodar Forest in which the dances are manifested.

I am not able to give an equally precise account of the iconography of the dance represented in the first and smallest (side) panel. Siva is four-armed, the upper arms holding ap-
parently identical attributes (perhaps two lotuses) which I cannot recognize; under the lifted foot is a small, large-eyed animal, possibly a Nandi. A form of Pārvatī holding the trident (trisāla) in one hand stands on Śiva’s proper right.

There remains the representation of a feminine divinity seated on the Gander (haṁsa),29 two-armed, and holding the trident in her right hand. The trident connects her with Śiva, but in all other respects the figure would naturally be identified with Sarasvatī-Vāc, the “Muse” and consort of Brahmā (Bṛhaspati, Vācaspāti), who is the person of the Sacerdotum (brahma) in divinis. But Śiva Himself, from the point of view of the present iconography being the supreme deity and therefore Himself the Sacerdotum in which the Regnum (kṣatra) is inherent eminenter, and so at the same time superior to, and the origin of, the distinct persons of Brahmā the Priest and Viṣṇu the King. It is from this point of view a perfectly legitimate application of the ordinary iconography that makes of Sarasvatī-Vāc, His feminine potentiality; and for Her, who as the Muse is the patroness of all music, to be invoked in connection with the dance in which He manifests the universe that is really a production of both conjoint principles, those of the divine Essence and divine Nature.30

Briefer reference may be made to the framework. In the second panel each of the representations is placed in a niche or canopy, consisting of two pillars surmounted by the usual makara torana or “crocodile arch,” the two halves of which spring from the mouths of makaras seen in profile, while the apex is crowned by the well-known kāla-makara mask of which the significance is ultimately solar.31 At the right end of this second panel there will be seen a rearing horned lion or yādi of the kind so often forming an integral part of the pillars of the South Indian temples; it is likely that there were originally numerous pieces of the same kind, which have now been lost. Some of the monsters enclosed by the windings of the vegetative framings are horned lions of the same sort; others with beaks are more properly to be described as bird-headed lions.32 Immediately below the lowest of the vegetative frames is a part of the lotus-petal moulding33 (of which the Greek “egg and dart” is an analogue) which formed the pedestal of the original casket.

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29. Essentially the symbol of the spirit and light, and a form of the sun-bird. Equally in Sanskrit and Greek, words (bhan, bē, θεός, φῶς) meaning to speak and to shine, are etymologically related, and semantically convergent in the common values of such words as “clarify,” “declare,” “show,” “illustrate,” and “enlighten,” which can be used with reference to any kind of “demonstration” whether verbal or visual. It is from this point of view that the Gander is the proper vehicle of both persons of the syzygy Brahmā-Vāc.

30. It is, indeed, expressly stated in the Linga Purāṇa, t.28.34.35, that the Rishis in the Dāruvāna find it “difficult to distinguish Śiva from Brahmā and the other Gods” until He, who is the God of Gods, reveals Himself in His own specifically three-eyed form. For the Linga Purāṇa, Śiva is “the highest śmak” and “God of Gods.”

31. For some discussion of and references to this form see the Art Bulletin, XXII, 52-55.

32. Cf. in my Mediaeval Sinhalese Art, fig. 15.

33. Cf. ibid., figs. 12-14.