

# An Early Sculpture of Gaja-Laksmi From Patan

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Until recently, it was thought that Nepal played second fiddle to India in the field of artistic creation and constituted a backwater region where some remnants of India's high artistic tide were left marooned. Some scholars maintained that the art of Nepal was of only secondary importance to the Gupta art of India. A comprehensive survey and a fresh look, however, clearly show that the art of Nepal has its own character with a history traceable from at least the 1st century A. D., apparently long before the Licchavi dynasty was founded in Nepal.

It is somewhat surprising that the Valley of Kathmandu with its physical isolation should harbour such a variety of icons whose antiquity goes back to the early centuries of the Christian era. Recent discoveries of a number of early images hitherto unknown to previous writers have shown indisputable evidence of early scul-

ptures and subsequent icons display a constant record of steady growth and high artistic achievements to its credit down to the 11th century A.D.

A thorough study of early icons has established that the folk cults of the Yakshas (local tutelary divinities), Nagas (serpents) and fertility goddesses (in the form of Matrikas or Divine Mothers) were as popular in Nepal as in India around the early centuries of the Christian era. A comparative study of the art of the two countries shows that the early people were largely devoted to the cult-worship of these divinities that developed under a socio-religious milieu dominated by the tribal culture.

A cursory look at the early icons of India reveals that a sophisticated and elitist art grew up under the impact of Buddhism which gained popularity by

integrating the older folk divinities as acolytes or attendants of the Buddha or of his symbolical presence. Thus a synthesis was created between the divinities of higher religions and the folk deities, or between a sophisticated culture and a tribal culture. This process started with the rise of the Mauryan dynasty about the 3rd century B. C. and continued in full vogue until about the beginning of the Christian era, with the art of Maurya, Sunga, Satavahana and Kushana periods. The earliest Yaksha image found in the Valley of Kathmandu (Pl. 1) probably represents a similar synthesis between a higher and a lower religion.

As we know it now that the earliest sculpture of Nepal in anthropomorphic form, is the remarkable torso of Yaksha, discovered a few years ago at Hadigaon and now preserved in the National Museum, Kathmandu (Pl. 1). Thus the sculptural art of both India and Nepal begins with Yaksha images. Authorities like A. K. Coomaraswamy and V. S. Agrawala have remarked that both Yaksha and Naga are aboriginal non-Aryan type. In remote past Yaksha was regarded as tutelary goblin of a bucolic spirit who inhabited fields, trees and forests.

Mathura where images of almost all cults formulated and concretised, was indeed the most important center of early Indian art. Here, we not only find early

representation of Yaksha, Yakshi, Naga Tree-spirit and other folk divinities including Mother-Goddesses of anthropomorphic or mixed zoomorphic and anthropomorphic forms but also representation of early Buddhist and Brahmanical divinities such as Buddha, Bodhisattva, Vishnu, Lakshmi, Gaja-Lakshmi, Siva, Skanda, Mahisamardini, Indra, Balarama, Varaha, Kubera, Hariti, Ardhanarisvara and Saptamatrikas.

A few scholars have hinted that Mathura was the primary source of inspiration for the early art of Nepal, and this is indeed becoming clearer as more specimens of early Nepalese sculpture come to light.

The image of Gaja-Lakshmi from Chyasaltol, Patan (Pl. 5) may be cited here as an example. Before dealing with the sculpture in question we shall first briefly discuss the evolution of the cult of Gaja-Lakshmi.

The early Indo-Aryan Mother Goddesses are to be found in ring-stones which were worshipped as Sri-Chakra dating back to ca. 4th century B. C. Such ring-stones in which the Mother Goddesses were carved in various forms and shown in full figures standing stiffly with large circular earrings, firm breasts, heavy and large hips, and with two straight arms dangling, have been discovered in Taxila, Kausambi, Mathura, Rajghat, Rupar and Basarh. Mother godde-

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1. Ramesh Jung Thapa, "Nepali Murtikala (Nepalese Sculpture)", Ramjham, vol. 6, No. 3, p. 12 (Kathmandu, Oct. 1970).

esses were later associated with and identified as Sri-Devi, Sri-Ma, Sri-Laksmi, the supreme universal deity and spouse of Vishnu. Thus, Goddess Sri or Sri-Laksmi was regarded as the goddess of wealth. A lotus became her symbol and main attribute. She was represented either sitting or standing on a lotus and as a very popular deity she became the Goddess par excellence and was regarded as born from water — a symbol of fertility and abundance. She was the giver of wealth and food, and thus she also became the Goddess of prosperity to her devotees.

One of the earliest representations of Sri-Laksmi under the name of Sirima-Devata is found in the art of Bharhut belonging to the 2nd century B.C. A terracotta figurine of Sri-Laksmi datable to the 1st century B.C. was recently discovered from the excavation of Tilaurakot, Nepal,<sup>1</sup> (Pl. 2). Here, goddess Sri-Laksmi is shown standing in tribhanga pose and cross-legged on a large full-blown lotus in a tank encircled by a railing. A similar terracotta figurine of Sri-Laksmi was discovered from the ruins of Kausambi, India<sup>2</sup>. The discovery of a number of images of this goddess in stone and terracotta reflects the popularity of the cult of Sri-Laksmi. From about the 2nd century B. C. goddess Sri-Laksmi was represented as Gaja-Laksmi and this form of the goddess frequently occurs in seals, coins and

stone reliefs of Sunga and early Kushana periods (Pl. 3). The most interesting representation of Gaja-Laksmi is with two elephants, one on each side, pouring water over her head from an inverted jar held in each trunk (Line-drawing Figs. 1, 2, 3).

Possibly one of the earliest representations of Gaja-Laksmi in Indian art is to be found in the fragment of a torana architrave from Kausambi, now preserved in the Allahabad Museum (Pl. 4), datable to the 2nd century B.C. This goddess is shown standing on a large lotus with her right hand raised in abhayamudra and her clenched left hand placed on her hip. From the lotus on which the goddess stands, three long lotus stalks issue on each side and on each of the middle and tallest stalk stands an elephant bathing the goddess with water from long-necked jar held in its trunk. The lower garment of the goddess is diaphanous and is secured by a girdle of a single beaded string. She is wearing heavy earrings, a necklace consisting of a single strand of large beads falling between the breasts, coiled bracelets and large anklets.

The tallest pair of lotus stalks in the above sculpture bear seed-pods at the top. Such lotus seed-pods whereon stand two elephants, have flat tops and are rarely depicted in the early art of India.

1. B. K. Rijal, "Excavation and other archaeological activities in Tilaurakot, Ancient Nepal, No. 26, January, 1974.

2. S. C. Kala, *Terracotta Figurines from Kausambi*, Pl. XX 1.

Interestingly enough, an image of Gaja-Laksmi, almost identical not only in form but also in iconography to that of Kausambi Gaja-Laksmi mentioned above, is known from Chyasaltol, Patan (Pl. 5). The discovery of this image constitutes the earliest sculpture of Gaja-Laksmi found in the Valley of Kathmandu which means this is the first record of this divinity in Nepal. Although this Gaja-Laksmi is one of the most important images of Nepal, it has never been properly identified<sup>2</sup> or discussed in print. It is entirely possible that this sculpture is the sole example of Gaja-Laksmi in this form in the Valley of Kathmandu for, no images of Gaja-Laksmi have been found in the Licchavi or the post Licchavi periods, let alone in the art of Malla period.

Like the Gaja-Laksmi of Kausambi, the Gaja-Laksmi of Chyasaltol stands in **samabhanga** pose with her feet apart similar to the early Kushana images (Line-drawing Fig. 6). She is wearing a necklace consisting of a single strand of beads, and a diaphanous garment. Massive anklets, like those of the female deities of the Kushana period and also of the early female divinities of Nepal, are conspicuously visible on her feet. Her earrings too, are identical to that of Laksmi from Mathura Museum belonging to the Kushana period (Pl. 6). The central folds of her

garment are gathered into a decorative fold as seen in a number of early icons of the Valley. A three-fold sash falls diagonally from left to right making a 'U' shaped turn on the left, a common feature to be seen in the early art of Mathura (Line-drawing Figs. 6, 9).

Two mutilated figures, apparently devotees, are kneeling with folded hands on either side of her feet. The face of Gaja-Laksmi is partly broken and abraded. A full-blown lotus which the goddess is holding in her left hand is identical to that of Laksmi referred to above (Pl. 6). Her right hand, raised as if in **abhaya-mudra**, holds a lotus-bud. Her broad and heavy hips are indeed, reminiscent of the Mother Goddess from Mohenjodaro or the Indo-Aryan Mother Goddess found in the ring-stones.

Other striking similarities between the Chyasaltol Gaja-Laksmi (Pl. 5) and the Gaja-Laksmi from Mathura Museum (Line-drawing Fig. 7) are the modelling of the face, the earrings, the coiffeur, the diagonal sash and the above all the pattern of the lotuses which the goddesses hold in their left hands. Both the Goddesses are standing in their hieratic posture. Due to these likenesses, one who is not aware of the early Nepalese sculpture in the first centuries of the Christian era might

1. When this image was first discovered about a decade ago, it was partly submerged in the water at the Chyasaltol waterspout. For over a year, the drainage was blocked and the entire fountain court was filled with rain water. Very recently, the local people, out of their own donation, took charge of renovating the waterspout thereby reinstalling the image of Gaja-Laksmi in the present position.
2. Mary Slusser, *Nepali Sculpture--New Discovery, Aspect of Indian Art*, Leiden, 1972, p. 102.

mistakenly assume that both images mentioned above came from the same atelier.

The distinctive hair-style of Gaja-Laksmi from Patan deserves close examination. The tresses of the hair fall from central bun and reach down to the ear. The lateral tresses are short, round and curved, shaped like sausages and constitutes the first appearance of such unique hair-style in the early sculptures of Nepal (Line-drawing Figs. 14, 15, 16). In the early icons of India, we do not see a similar type of hair-style, but a motif akin to this pattern is shown in the female divinities in Mathura-Kushana art. However, in most cases, this motif is shown as a conopy above the head which has been wrongly identified by scholars as a Naga-hood. In Nepal, this unique hair-style is entirely an innovation of Nepalese artists. A careful study of the early art of the Valley has revealed that a number of early female divinities, including Hariti-Sitala from Balaju<sup>1</sup> and Mother Goddess from Kotaltol, Hadigaon, have similar hair-style. These are the early female divinities which may be assigned to the late 2nd or early 3rd century A. D., on the basis of a comparative study with the Mathura-Kushana art of India.

Another significant feature of the early images of the Valley is the heavy anklets worn by female divinities. The Gaja-Laksmi from Patan and the Hariti-Sitala from Balaju as well as the Mother

Goddess from Haugal, Patan have heavy and conspicuous anklets. It must be further added that in the art of Mathura and western India of the Kushana period almost all female divinities are shown wearing heavy anklets, indeed a ubiquitous feature of the early art of Mathura. In Nepal, too, early female divinities wear heavy anklets like those of Mathura (Line-drawing Figs. 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13). Scholars with conservative views may not agree<sup>2</sup>, it would nevertheless seem that heavy anklets worn by female divinities is undoubtedly one of the early features of Nepalese art for, such heavy and doughnut like anklets are never seen in any female deity of Licchavi or post-Licchavi period. Hence, this motif must be regarded as a pre-Licchavi feature.

It is manifestly clear from the above discussion that there are pre-Licchavi motifs to be seen in the early art of Nepal, viz. the lotus seed-pods (Line-drawing Figs. 4, 5), massive anklets, diagonal sash and of course the representation of Gaja-Laksmi itself. This shows that the Valley of Kathmandu was directly or indirectly in touch with the Gangetic Valley of India from remote past. Now it must be emphasized that the stylistic affinity between the early deities of Nepal and those of the Kushana period allows us to assign a fairly accurate date of the early art of Nepal.

As cited already, the Gaja-Laksmi from Patan has undoubtedly close affinity with the early sculptures of Mathura of

1. P. Pal. *The Arts of Nepal*, Part I, Sculpture, Leiden/Koln, 1974, Fig. 58.

2. Mary Slusser, *op. cit.* p. 99.

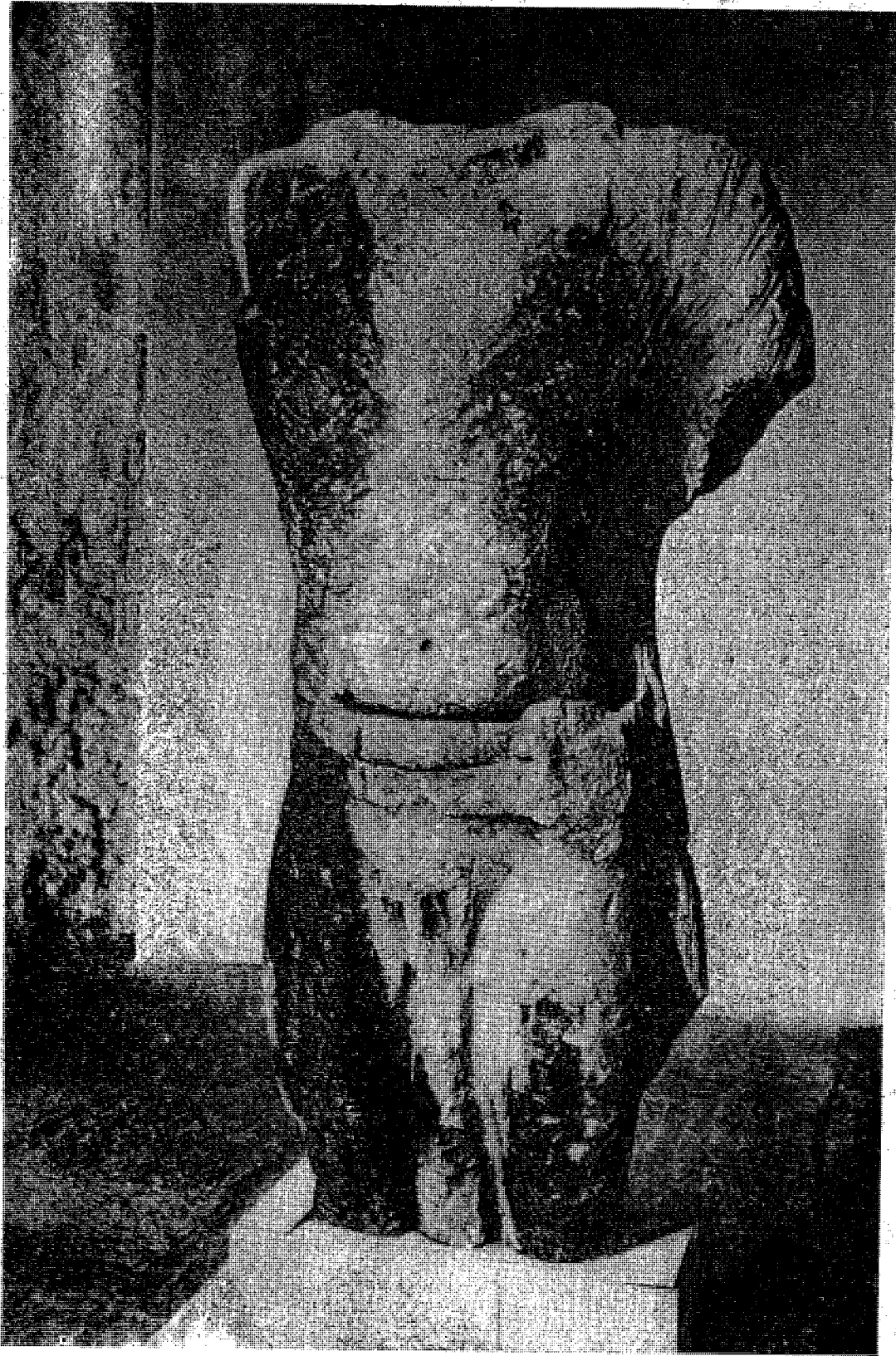
the Kushana period, both in stylistic treatment as well as iconography. Thus a close comparison with its counterparts in India provides ample evidence on which the Gaja-Laksmi from Chyasaltol, Patan can reasonably be placed in the 2nd century A.D. Moreover, additional unpublished evidence recently discovered throws new light on the early art of Nepal which

may not only add a new dimension to the study of the pre-Licchavi art but also help us to establish a chronological framework for the sculptural heritage of Nepal beginning from the Yakstra image of Hadigaon of the 1st century A.D. to the earliest inscribed Vishnu-Vikranta images of Lazimpat and Tilganga of A.D. 467.

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Pls. 3, 4. Courtesy: Allahabad Museum (India).

Pl. 6. Courtesy: Mathura Museum (India).



Pl. I. Yaksha, National Museum, Kathmandu, 1st century A. D.



Pl. 2. Sri-Lakshmi, Tilaurokot (Nepal), 1st century B.C.

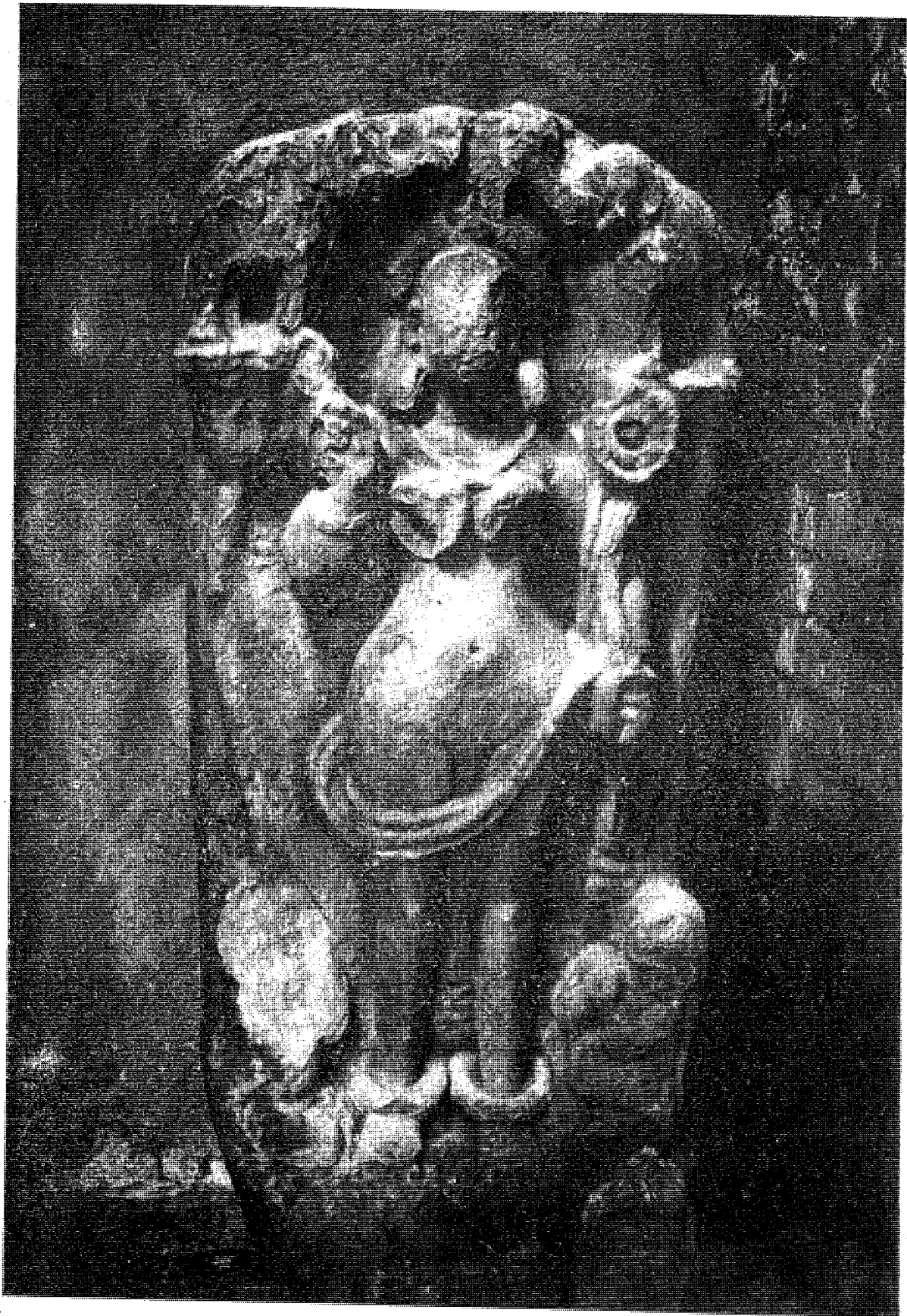




Pl. 3. Gaja-Lakshmi, Allahabad Museum (India), 2nd Century B. C.



Pl. 4. Gaja-Lakshmi, Allahabad Museum (India), 2nd century B. C.



Pl. 5. Gaja-Laksmi, Chyasaltol, Patan, 2nd century A. D.





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Pl. 6. Laksmi, Mathura Museum, (India) Kushana Period.

LINE-DRAWING FIGURES



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Fig. 1. Gaja-Laksmi from Bharhut (India), 2nd century B. C.

Fig. 2. Gaja-Laksmi, Detail of a pillar, Sanchi (India), 2nd century B. C.

Fig. 3. Gaja-Laksmi, Bodhgaya Stupa (India), 2nd century B. C.

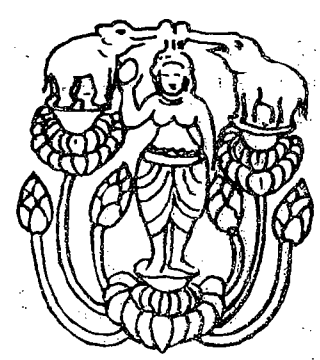


Fig. 3

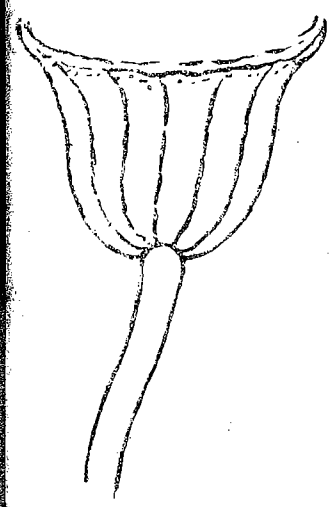


Fig. 4

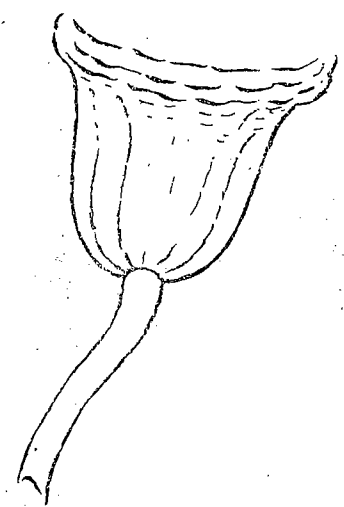


Fig. 5

Fig. 4. Seed-pod (detail), Gaja-Laksmi, Allahabad Museum (India), 2nd century B. C.

Fig. 5. Seed-pod (detail), Gaja-Laksmi from Chyasaltol, Patan, 2nd century A. D.

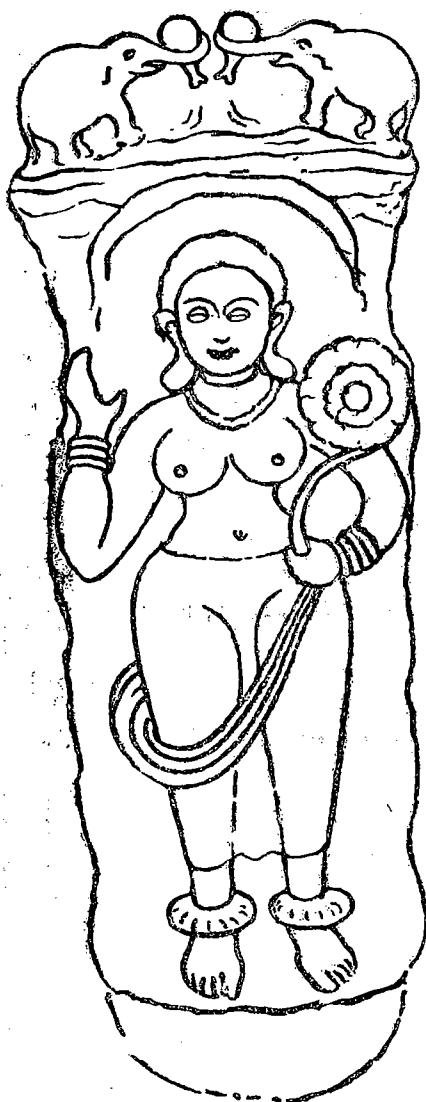


Fig. 6

Fig. 6. Anklets worn by Gaja-Laksmi, Mathura Museum (India), 2nd century A. D.

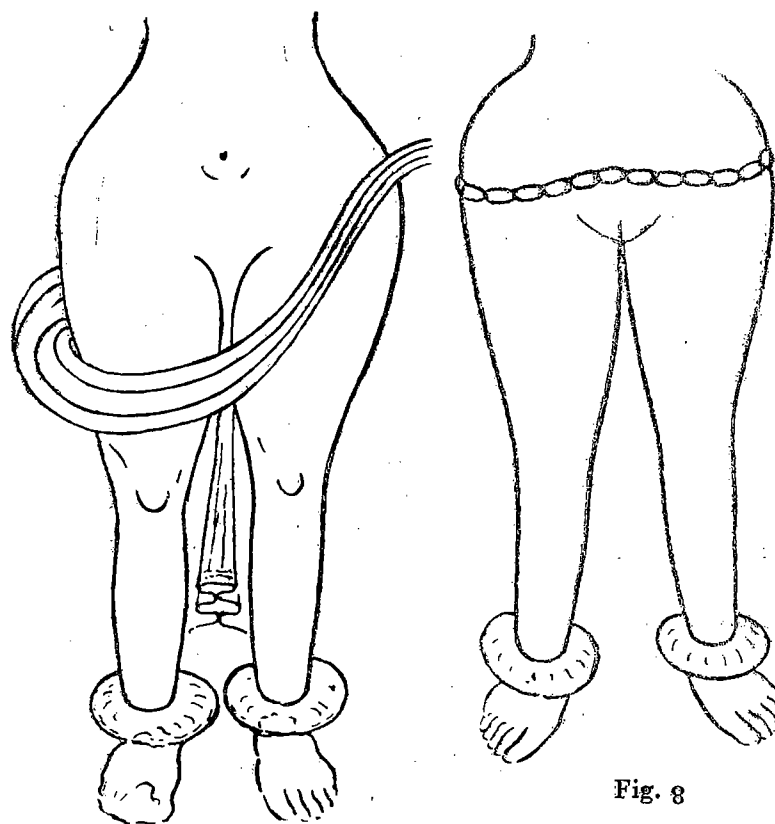


Fig. 7

Fig. 8

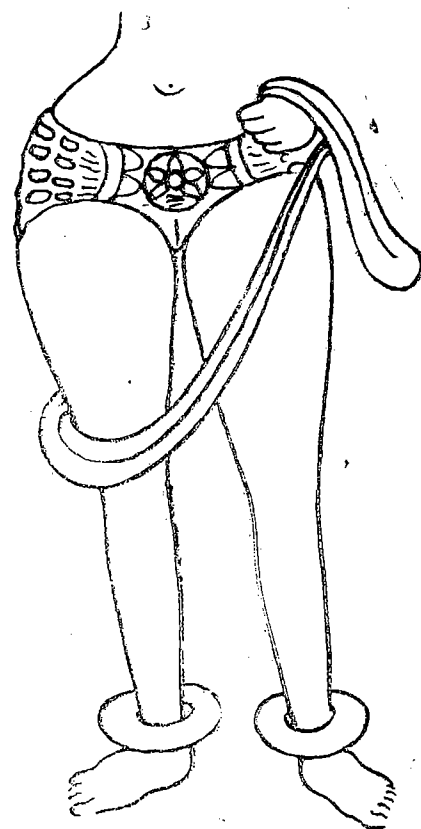


Fig. 9

Fig. 7. Anklets worn by Gaja-Laksmi from Chyasaltol, Patan, 2nd century A.D.

Fig. 8. Anklets worn by Gaja-Laksmi, Allahabad Museum (India), 2nd century B.C.

Fig. 9. Anklets worn by Female Figure, Mathura Museum (India), Kushana Period.



Fig. 10

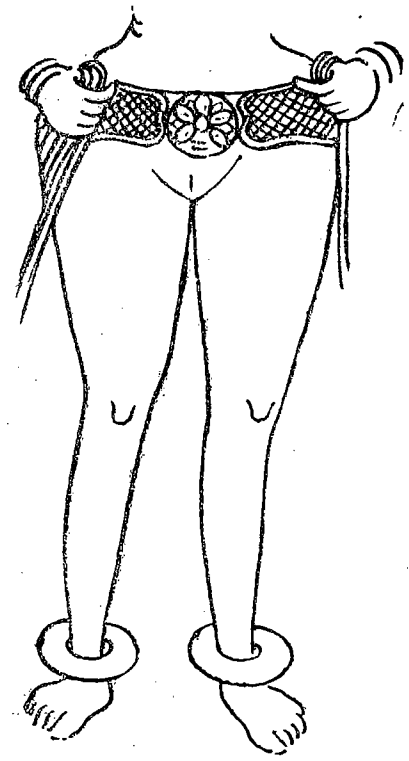


Fig. 11

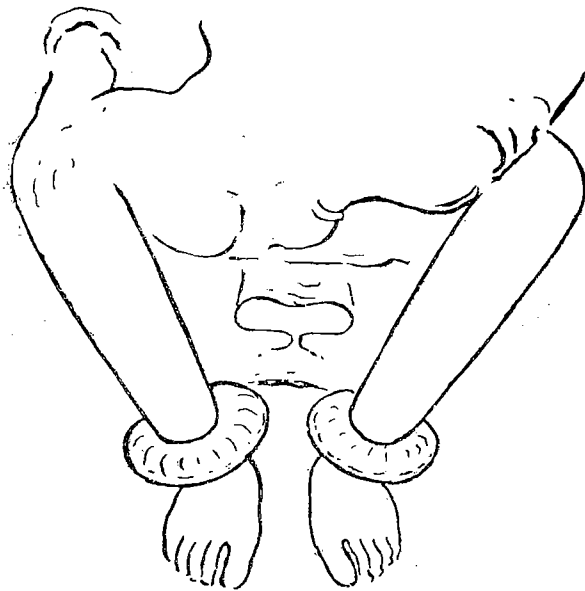


Fig. 12

Fig. 10. Anklets worn by Female Figure, Karle Cave (India), 1st century A.D.

Fig. 11. Anklets worn by Female Figure, Mathura Museum, Kushana Period.

Fig. 12. Anklets worn by Hariti-Sitala, Balaju 3rd century A. D.

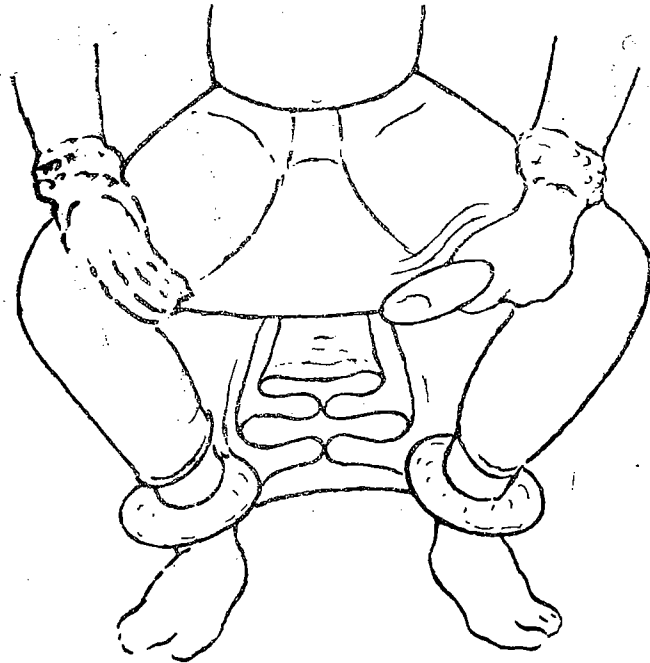


Fig. 13

Fig. 13. Anklets worn by Mother Goddess, Haugal Bahal, Patan, 2nd century A. D.

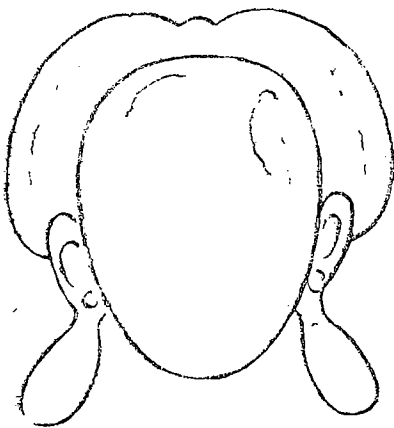


Fig. 14

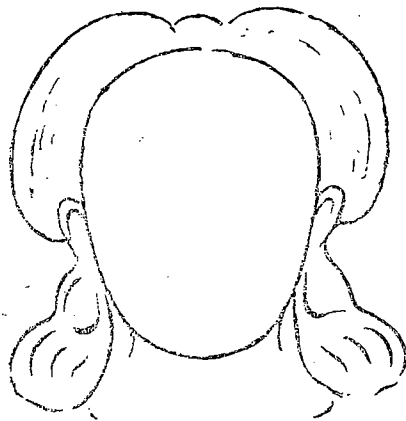


Fig. 15

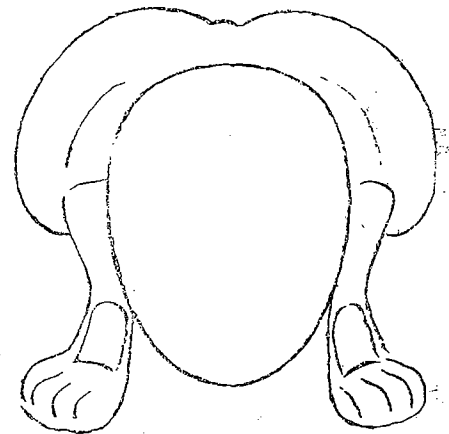


Fig. 16

Fig. 14. Hair-style of Gaja—Laksmi, Chyasaltol, Patan, 2nd century A.D.

Fig. 15. Hair-style of Mother Goddess, Kotaltol; Hadigaon, 2nd century A. D.

Fig. 16. Hair-style of Hariti-Sitala, Balaju, 3rd century A. D.