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# Revanta Images from Mathura Region

Vinay Kumar Gupta

Revanta, a very popular minor god of northern India during the medieval times, is mentioned in the sixth-century text *Bṛhatsaṃhitā* (chapter 58, verse 56) as *revanto 'śvārūḍho mṛgayākrīḍādīparivāraḥ*||. It tells that Revanta should be shown in sculpture as riding on a horse and involved in hunting game. In fact, it might be one of the earliest references to this god in literary texts. Among others, a Saura text, the *Sāmba Purāṇa* (chapters 10-11) mentions the story of the birth of Revanta when the Sun god, in the form of a horse, met Saṃjñā in the Northern Kuru country and had physical union with her. As a result of this union, the two horse-headed Aśvins, named Nāsatya and Dasra, were born, as well as another son, who was named Raivata (or Revanta). This son “had the body of a horse and was armed with bow and arrow” (HAZRA 1958: 43).<sup>1)</sup> Significantly, till now no icon of Revanta having the body of a horse<sup>2)</sup> and armed with bow and arrow is known. By delving in the details of various references in literary texts,<sup>3)</sup> it becomes clear that by the post-Gupta and medieval periods, Revanta had become a popular deity in northern and central India (Gujarat, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Bihar, Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, and Maharashtra). He was a son of Sūrya but the circumstances of his birth

were quite extraordinary. The absence of references related with Revanta in the *Harivaṃśa Purāṇa* and the two epics (*Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*) indicate that in the early centuries of the Christian era, he was probably not considered a significant deity. In later times, he was worshipped by a wide range of people including kings and nobles, hunting parties, traders, warriors, outcastes and people on move in order to attain various worldly merits, as mentioned in the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* (105, 20-23).

In sculptural art too, Revanta is observed at the same time as in the literature. The earliest representation of Revanta in art might be the image from Pachar, Gaya, now in the Patna Museum (SHARMA 1975: 42, fig. 5), possibly belonging to the sixth century CE. Other early images of Revanta include those from Newal (Unnao, Uttar Pradesh) and from Jahangira hill (Sultanganj, Bihar), which may date back to the seventh century CE if not earlier (*ibid.*: figs. 3-4).

The Mathura region, the area known as Braj, is equally important for the spread and popularity of the Revanta cult. Only few images from this region are already known to the scholarly world (*ibid.*: 45-46, 49-50, figs. 13, 24). My exploratory work has brought to light five new Revanta images, which will be discussed below.

## 1. Fragmentary Revanta Relief from Harnaul

Harnaul is an extensive archaeological mound – though under habitation – about 20 km to the north-east of Mathura city (in proximity to the famous Mat *devakula* site) in District Mathura. This fragmentary sculptural relief is presently in worship at a local Devī shrine (**Fig. 1**). The relief represents a hunting procession moving to the proper right, preserving two equestrian figures, the first one intact up to head and the second up to the neck. A third equestrian figure, now missing, should have been in front leading the procession (to our extreme left). The central,

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1) HAZRA does not give the exact source for this statement, but he probably refers to *Sāmba Purāṇa*, ch. 11, 49, “*aśvarūpaḥ śārī dhanvī kumāraḥ*” which, however, according to SCHMIDT (1977: 142, 154, note 85), should be corrected to “*aśvārūḍaḥ ...*”, thus meaning “mounted on horse-back ...”. [Editor]

2) Only few sculptures are known depicting Sūrya in horse form; see e.g. the 10<sup>th</sup>-century panel in the Jogeśvara temple at Sadari, Rajasthan, which shows Sūrya as a horse approaching horse-headed Saṃjñā accompanied by the two horse-headed Aśvins (SHARMA 1975: fig. 1). [Editor]

3) For a survey and analysis of Revanta in literature, see SHARMA (1975: 25-40), SCHMIDT (1977: 141-143, 154-155), and BHATTACHARYA (2005).



Fig. 1 Fragment of Revanta Triad, ht. ca. 60 cm; Harnaul, District Mathura, Uttar Pradesh. Photo: author

most intact figure was tentatively identified by me as Revanta in a previous paper (GUPTA 2009b: 61, pl. 6.1). A parasol bearer is visible between the two equestrian figures holding an umbrella above the head of Revanta as usual. Also to be noted is the fact that the proportion of this figure is slightly larger than the following figure; it is generally observed that the central figure occupies more space than the other two figures. In between the legs of the horse marching ahead a hound is shown attacking a boar from behind. A similar scene is depicted between the feet of the second horse but here the hound is attacking the boar from the front. Possibly a decorated border was provided at the base of the relief. Some kind of movement is still visible in the uplifted front hooves of both horses.

The figure following the central figure of Revanta should be identified as Daṇḍin as is the case in all the Revanta reliefs from the Mathura region, though a reverse order of the two flanking deities can be observed in some reliefs from Bihar (BHATTACHARYA 2005: 457-458, figs. 7, 9; MEVISSSEN 2013: pl. 6A,C).

Because of the relief being much corroded, it is difficult to identify other characteristics. But it can be said with some confidence that it appears to be the earliest representation of Revanta from the Mathura region and might date back to about the seventh century CE. Manth (Mat) in all probability was an important centre of Sūrya worship as the presence of the *devakula* and the recent

finding of a Sūrya image in the village of Mat suggest (GUPTA 2009a: 62, pl. 5.4) suggest. It is interesting to find the presence of Revanta (Sūrya's son) in worship in later times in the vicinity of Mat.

## 2. Revanta Relief from Badipur

This sculpture relief was observed at an open Devī shrine in village Badipur in Tehsil Kaman, District Bharatpur (Fig. 2). The historical site dating back to the early centuries of the Christian era has an ancient mound which is in most parts under modern habitation. The village is situated about 7 km from Kaman and about 60 km north-west of Mathura city. The relief is intact except for the intentional chopping off of the heads which appears to be the work of Muslim iconoclasts.

The relief represents a hunting procession moving to the proper right. The equestrian figure riding ahead (to our left) should be identified as Piṅgala holding a stylus in his right hand whereas the object in his left hand is not clear. Piṅgala as well as the head of his horse are turned backwards in the direction of Revanta, the central figure. Revanta along with his horse have been provided with the maximum proportion and space in the relief. He wears high boots and is two-handed. With his left hand he holds the reins of the caparisoned horse whereas his right hand holds a bowl in his open palm. A female figure, now mutilated, is shown pouring something into this bowl from a

vessel. A male figure from behind is shown holding a parasol over the head of Revanta. The third equestrian figure can be identified as Daṇḍin who in his left hand holds the reins of his caparisoned horse whereas his right hand holds a thick staff (*daṇḍa*) resting on his right shoulder. Piṅgala is also shown with long boots just like Revanta; the respective portion of the lower leg of Daṇḍin is quite mutilated to form an idea. All the three deities are seated on decorated saddles.

By the side of Daṇḍin are shown two human figures carrying some heavy object tied to their long sticks kept over their right shoulders, which in all probability is meat, possibly of a boar. The figure moving ahead holds some round object in his left hand whereas the figure following him holds some long but indistinct object in his left hand. The hunting party is marching with the beating of a drum (*mṛdaṅga*) and blowing of a conch as indicated by the two human figures above Piṅgala who are shown busy in such activities. One more human figure visible by the side of Revanta is holding a long garland. A boar is shown

underneath each horse but the pose of all three boars is different. The boar beneath Piṅgala's horse stands in the opposite direction of the marching procession and is searching something from the soil. The boar under Revanta's horse is bigger in size and is also searching something from the soil; it stands in the direction of the marching procession. The boar under Daṇḍin's horse is not well carved out but is also busy in the act of searching something from the soil.

In the panel on top of the relief on the proper right side of the parasol are depicted eight planetary deities (*aṣṭa-grahas*) with Rāhu clearly identifiable as the last member with only his head shown. All except Rāhu are seated in an easy pose (*sukhāsana*). On the other side of the parasol, the panel contains eight deities seated in *sukhāsana* pose. These are the guardians of the eight directions (*aṣṭa-dīkṣālas*), with only the fourth figure, Yama, identifiable by his staff (*yama-daṇḍa*) and the seventh, Vāyu, by the semi-circular loop over his head. On stylistic grounds, this relief should be dated to *circa* the eighth century CE.

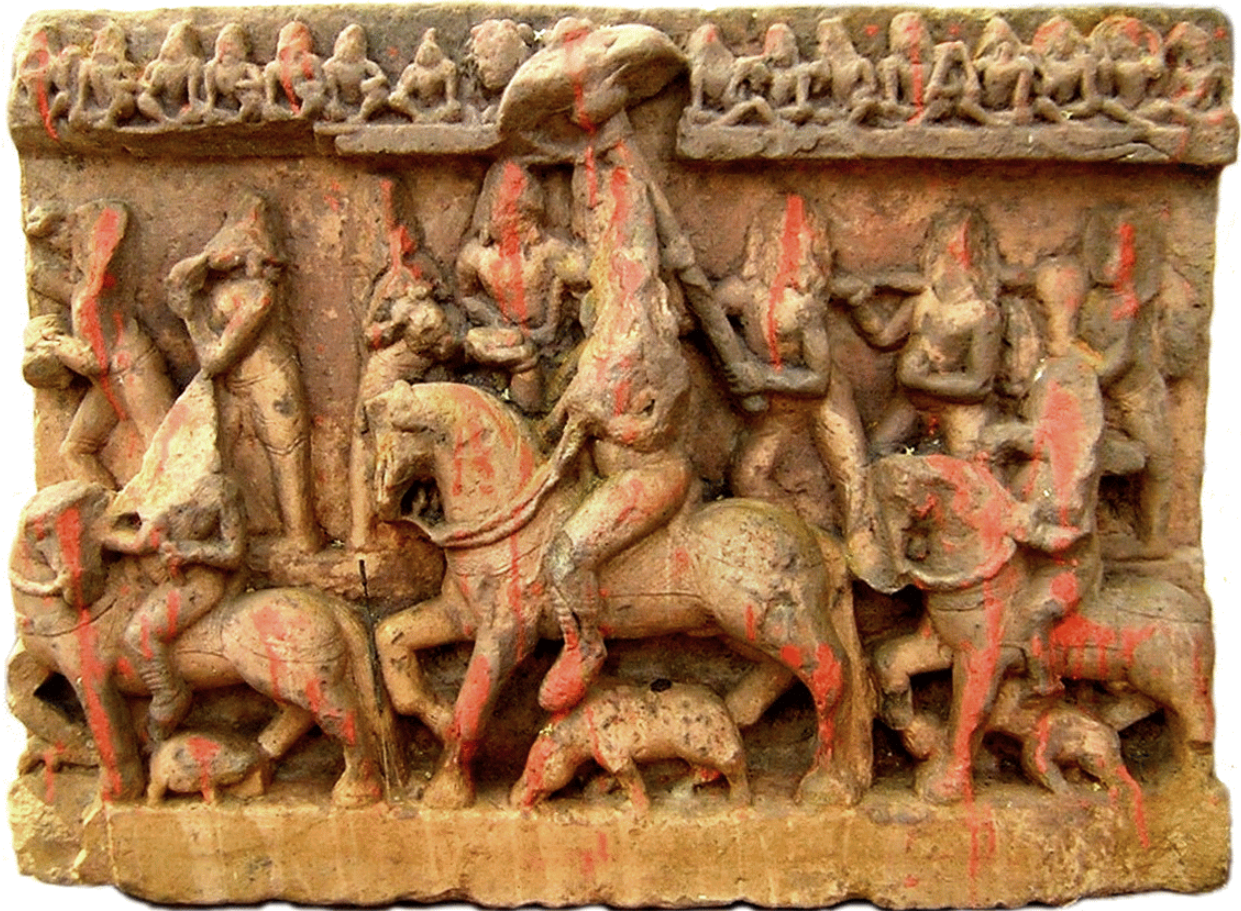


Fig. 2 Revanta Triad, height circa 75 cm; Badipur, District Bharatpur, Rajasthan. Photograph by the author



Fig. 3 Revanta Triad, ht. ca. 53 cm; Mandoi, District Mathura, Uttar Pradesh. Photo: author

### 3. Revanta Relief from Mandoi

This sculpture was observed in worship at an open air Devī shrine in the village Mandoi in District Mathura, about 45 km north-west of the district headquarters (GUPTA 2009b: 62, pl. 6.3). The relief depicts a hunting procession marching towards proper right (Fig. 3). It is much damaged; still three equestrian figures are identifiable. The central figure with its horse is the most prominent one. The figure moving ahead should be of Piṅgala who holds the reins of the caparisoned horse in his left hand; his right hand is mutilated. The central figure is that of Revanta who with his left hand holds the reins of his caparisoned horse while his right hand and perhaps also a female figure pouring something into the cup held in his right hand are too mutilated to confirm. An attendant is holding a parasol over the head of Revanta from behind. The third equestrian figure following Revanta is that of Daṇḍin who holds a long, thick *daṇḍa* in his right hand and the reins in his left.

At the head of the relief, above Piṅgala, a figure of Sūrya is shown,<sup>4</sup> identifiable by his symmetrically held hands bearing lotuses (damaged) and the semi-circular loop falling between his hands. He is possibly taking care

of the procession of Revanta as his father and lord of his acolytes Daṇḍin and Piṅgala.<sup>5</sup> At the top of the relief is a heavily damaged row depicting the figures of Aṣṭagrahas, three to the left of parasol and the rest to the right, ending with the large head of Rāhu. This relief may be dated to *circa* the eighth-ninth centuries CE.

### 4. Fragments of Revanta Relief from Mahrana

Two fragments of a Revanta panel were observed at a Devī shrine in the village Mahrana, situated about 50 km north-west of Mathura city in District Mathura. The old village dates back to the early centuries of the Christian era and is presently occupied by modern habitation. Originally the panel would have consisted of three equestrian figures, of which one is now lost whereas the remaining two are found on two separate fragments (Fig. 4).

The hunting procession moves towards its right. The equestrian figure marching ahead should be that of Piṅgala who holds the reins of his caparisoned horse in his left hand whereas his right hand as well as the above-neck portion is missing. A dog is shown barking under the horse and the left leg of Piṅgala is possibly kept on the

<sup>4</sup> Separate figures of Sūrya are only rarely found in Revanta images; see also Fig. 4 and BHATTACHARYA 2005: 455, figs. 2-3; MEVISSEN 2013: note 4 & pls. 5A, 6C.

<sup>5</sup> For a textual reference to the *Bhaviṣya Purāṇa* (1,79,57-62) explaining the connection between Sūrya, Daṇḍin and Piṅgala, and Revanta, see SCHMIDT 1977: 141, 154, note 78; BHATTACHARYA 2005: 459.

body of this dog. As in the previous image, a Sūrya figure is shown in front of the procession, possibly as the presiding deity. Sūrya has a large circular halo around his head decorated with lotus medallions. He is shown holding a long robe forming a loop with both his hands. Two birds (ducks) are shown flying above Piṅgala and holding between their beaks some unidentifiable object. Two human figures are depicted below the Sūrya figure. They might be musicians, but the objects held in their hands are not clear. Behind Piṅgala's horse is shown a human figure carrying a dead boar on his shoulders. At the top of the relief, few deities were represented in a panel; remnants of only three figures are preserved. It is difficult to identify the panel because of spoliation.

The other broken fragment represents the mutilated figure of Revanta who is identifiable by the parasol held by a human figure over his head. Revanta holds the reins of the caparisoned horse in his left hand whereas in his now destroyed right hand, he would have probably held a cup since a mutilated female figure is visible to his right pouring something from a pot held in her hands. A dog is shown under Revanta's horse. Here again, the proportion of the Revanta figure along with the horse is much higher in comparison to the figure of Piṅgala. Part of a tree is visible behind Revanta's horse, after which would have followed the missing figure of Daṇḍin riding on his horse.

On stylistic grounds, this Revanta relief may be assigned a date of *circa* the eighth-ninth centuries CE.

### 5. Revanta Relief from Aring

This Revanta image is in worship at a Devī shrine in the village Aring, 18 km to the south-west of Mathura city in District Mathura. The site has an extensive archaeological mound dating back to OCP period (pre-1800 BCE) which in most parts was some years back free of modern habitation. The site lies on an important trade route going to the western region (especially Vairāṭa) from Mathura.

The relief is sculptured in three planes (*triratha*) with a projecting central part; it is complete (**Fig. 5**) except for the intentional defacing at certain spots by the bigoted iconoclasts. Unlike all the other known Revanta reliefs from the region, here the procession is moving towards the proper left. The figure marching ahead represents Piṅgala who holds in his left hand the ink pot as usual, whereas his right hand, probably once holding the stylus, is damaged; remains of his beard are still visible. He is turned towards Revanta, the central figure. In the space above Piṅgala's head is carved a halo decorated with an eight-petalled lotus. A hound is shown attacking a boar face-to-face under his horse.

The figure of Revanta occupies the central projecting part of the relief. He holds the reins of his caparisoned



Fig. 4 Two fragments of a Revanta Triad, height ca. 60 cm; Mahrana, District Mathura, Uttar Pradesh. Photograph: author

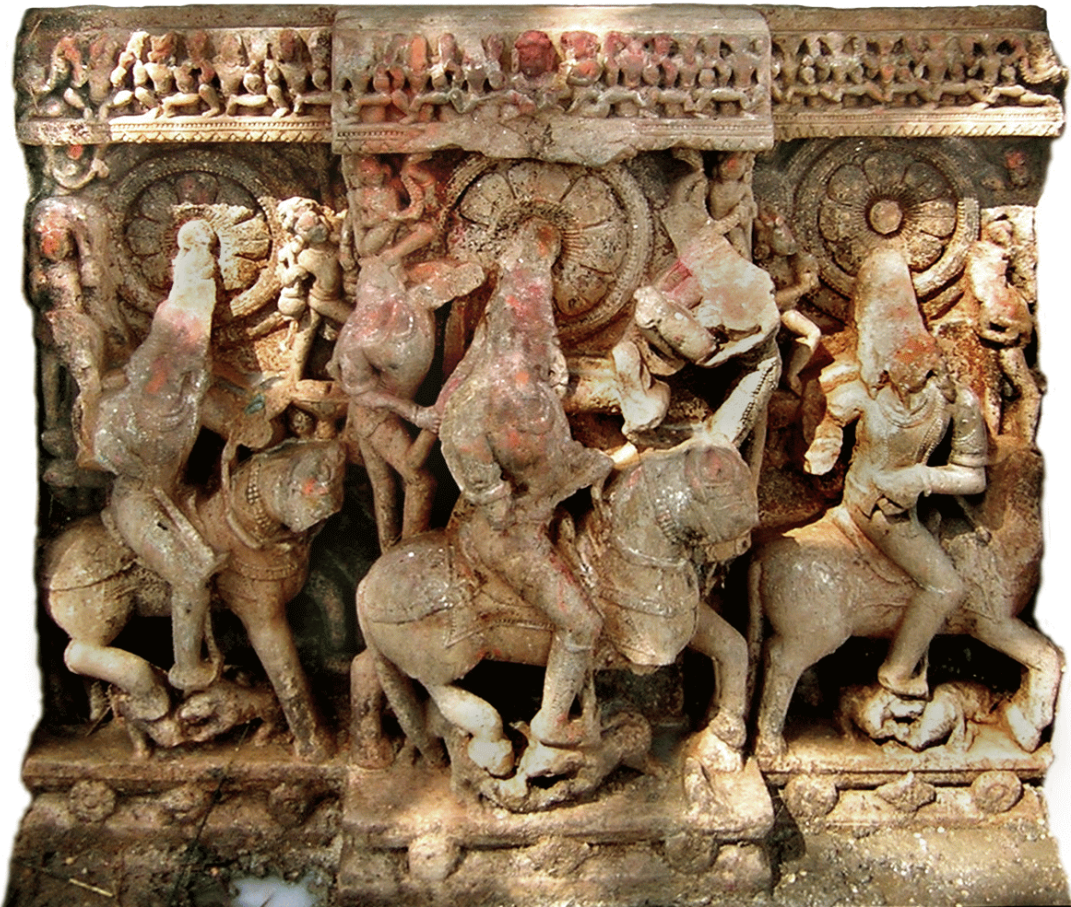


Fig. 5 Revanta Triad, ht. ca. 76 cm; Aring, District Mathura, Uttar Pradesh. Photograph by the author

horse in his right hand and a cup in his left hand. A female figure is shown pouring something into the cup from a longish flask. Here again, a hound is seen attacking a boar face-to-face between the feet of the beautifully decorated horse. A human figure behind Revanta holds a parasol of which only the staff is preserved. Revanta's head is also backed by a round halo decorated with an eight-petalled lotus, on either side of which are shown two flying garland-bearers (*mālādhara*s).

The third figure is of Daṇḍin who holds the reins of his caparisoned horse in his left hand and a long staff (*daṇḍa*) in his right hand. A hound is shown attacking a boar face-to-face under his horse. Interestingly, the positioning of these two animals is similar to that under Revanta's horse and opposite to that of Piṅgala's. Daṇḍin also has a halo consisting of an eight-petalled lotus.

The front of the *triratha* pedestal is decorated with lotus and rhomboid designs. An attendant figure behind Daṇḍin probably carries a dead boar on his shoulders whereas the attendant moving ahead of Piṅgala is blow-

ing a conch. Few other small attendant figures occur in the procession.

The panel at the top of the relief shows nineteen small figures. The first and the last are garland-bearers flanking two groups of deities: the nine planetary deities (*navagrahas*) starting with Sūrya holding two lotuses and ending with the head of Rāhu and snake-tailed Ketu; they are followed by eight animal-headed figures, probably representing the *aṣṭavasus*, a class of divine beings connected with atmospheric powers.<sup>6)</sup> All these two-armed deities are seated in *sukhāsana* (except Rāhu); the objects held in their hands are not clear. This relief is the only Revanta image with representations of the eight Vasus known till now.<sup>7)</sup> It may date from the eleventh century CE.

6) The identification as Vasus was kindly suggested by Gerd Mevissen. In a previous paper I had tentatively identified the group as *aṣṭadikpālas* (GUPTA 2009b: 61, pl. 6.2).

7) *Aṣṭavasus* are rarely depicted in Indian art. For a representation above a temple doorway at Batesvara, Madhya Pradesh, also combined with *navagrahas*, see MEVISSSEN 2012: 97, fig. 5.

After an analysis of the Revanta images from the Mathura region, it can be said that all the images reported from this area are of the triple equestrian type. This type was not much in vogue in eastern India except for few such images reported from Bihar (BHATTACHARYA 2005: 457-458, fig. 7; MEVISSEN 2013: pl. 6A-C).<sup>8)</sup> More than twenty images of this type from different regions of northern and central India have been listed by MEVISSEN (2013). All the Revanta images from Rajasthan except from the parts adjoining the Mathura region are of the single equestrian type. Possibly, the impact of Mathura on the art of the surrounding areas could still be observed in early medieval times. Another observation regarding the find-spots of Revanta images in the Mathura region is that all these sites are well-connected with local trade routes and have a sizeable population of Kṣatriyas, especially Thākurs, who generally derive their origin from the solar race (*sūrya-vaṃśa*). Thus, among the people of the Thākur clan, Revanta would have been an important deity. The Kṣatriyas might have something in common with “the great lord of the realm” (*rājyabhaṭṭāraka*) Revanta, as the god is called in the *Skanda Purāṇa* (cf. SHARMA 1975: 28, 33, note 8).

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<sup>8)</sup> In his survey of Revanta sculptures from Bengal, MEVISSEN (2010: 34-52, pls. 3.13, 3.18) illustrates a stone and a metal image with three equestrian figures, one of which is female, as perhaps representing a Revanta triad, but the identification is only tentative. This type differs from any other known Revanta image. Recently MEVISSEN (2013: pls. 8-13) has brought to light several similar triple images from Bengal, the majority in metal. It is difficult to accept these groups as representing Revanta until some solid basis for such an identification is found.

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#### Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag stellt fünf zum Teil fragmentarische Reliefs der auf einem Pferd reitenden solaren Gottheit Revanta, dem Sohn des Sonnengottes Sūrya, vor, die vom Autor kürzlich in der Umgebung der alten Stadt Mathura gefunden wurden. Alle Reliefs zeigen den Gott auf dem Jagdzug in Begleitung von Daṇḍin und Piṅgala, den Akolyten seines Vaters Sūrya, und folgen somit dem Dreireiter-Typ dieses Bildwerks.

Eine Besonderheit, die nur sehr selten bei Revanta-Darstellungen anzutreffen ist, ist die zusätzliche Figur des Vaters Sūrya am Anfang des Zuges (**Fig. 3 & 4**). Recht selten sind auch die Figurenreihen der acht (**Fig. 2 & 3**) bzw. neun (**Fig. 5**) Planetengötter (*grahas*), der acht Richtungshüter (*dikpālas*, **Fig. 2**) sowie der bisher bei Revanta-Bildnissen unbekannte Darstellung der acht tierköpfigen *vasus* am oberen Bildrand (**Fig. 5**), was darauf hinweist, dass die Region um Mathura auch in der frühmittelalterlichen Zeit durch innovative Konzepte zur Weiterentwicklung der indischen Kunst beitrug. [GJRM]