

**JOURNAL
OF
THE INDIAN SOCIETY
OF
ORIENTAL ART**

NEW SERIES : VOLUMES XXVIII & XXIX
2011-2012 & 2012-2013



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A UNIQUE SCULPTURAL PANEL OF ŚRĪ-LAKṢMĪ - GAṆEŚA FROM BRAJ REGION

VINAY KUMAR GUPTA*

Description of the panel

This unique sculptural panel (Pl. 1) was found from Village Kanawara in Kaman *tehsil* of District Bharatpur. The core of Braj region (area in and around Mathura) includes Kaman *tehsil* as its integral part. Kanawara is a small village situated about 2.5 km south-east of Kaman town and is about 70 km (by road) north-west of Mathura and about 8 km distant from Barsana connected by unmetalled road. The panel is in worship at a small temple constructed in the name of local village goddess and is worshipped as a female deity irrespective of what it represents.¹ The sculptural panel made of spotted red sandstone is quite defaced, especially at the top. The total length of the panel is 64 cm / 25 inches and its height is 41 cm / 16 inches. The panel depicts two deities in high relief seated close to each other and it appears that the sculpture

would have contained more than two figures in any case, as the broken edges suggest. The male deity is seated in *ardhaparyāṅkāsna* / *mahārājājalāsana* to the right of the female deity and has an elephant's head as the face.² It seems that the deity is two-armed. In his left hand, he holds a *modaka-pātra* from which he is taking *modakas* with the help of his trunk turned towards his left. The trunk is having only one tusk (*ekadanta*) which is missing except for its mark which is visible as a buff spot. The object in his right hand is not clear since it is too mutilated, but on the basis of other contemporary images of the deity who is for sure Lord Gaṇeśa, it might be identified either as a tusk or a fruit (pomegranate). The body of the deity is corpulent and stout. *Nāga yajñopavīta* is running down from the left shoulder and is tied at his prominent belly in a peculiar manner with the snake having many curves (similar to *udarabandha* in appearance). He is possibly not shown nude (ithyphallic) as a part of the folds of *dhotī* is visible between his legs. The head is probably

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devoid of any headdress like a *mukuṭa* or *uṣṇīṣa*.

The female deity to his left is seated in *bhadrāsana/utkuṭikāsana* (or the European pose) with her mount lion. The face of the lion is missing but the paws, remnants of manes and the shape of the body confirms the identification of the animal. It seems that she is also two-armed. It is quite difficult to identify the object held in her left hand which is positioned near the navel with open palm. The possibility of a child sitting on the palm is negated as no legs of child are visible hanging below the palm as well as there are no other indications of a child in the mutilated image. So, the open palm might have held some round object like *bilva* fruit or *bilva-phala* (*śrīphala*).³ The head and the right hand of the deity are missing but there is a possibility that in her right hand, she holds a lotus flower in profile. There is a possibility of the presence of wings on the back of the female deity as visible by the bulge near the left shoulder of the deity (Pl. 2). If the bulge is not for a wing since it is not traceable on the right side of the deity, then the only possibility is that the deity is actually four-handed. In spite of the much-mutilated condition of the panel, there is no possibility of the presence of any other figure besides these two as is clear from the edges on both the sides. The maximum mutilation has been on the portion above neck of the female deity. The length of Gaṇeśa figure at the base of the pedestal is 29 cm and that of lion is 33 cm.

Analysis of the panel

Now, we come to an important issue of panel's identification apart from its art historical importance. When we look at those early panels which have two, three or more deities in roughly similar seated position, we come across the panels which represent Kubera-Hārītī, Kubera-Lakṣmī-Hārītī, *Yakṣa-Yakṣī* and group of *mātrkāś* (up to seven) etc. during the Kuṣāṇ period. First three types of these panels are definitely related with the concept of prosperity, child birth-and-protection and other worldly gains. None of them was possibly being worshipped as the supreme deity. The deity in this panel cannot be Hārītī as she must be having a child with her as an essential part of her iconography and secondly she is not associated with Gaṇeśa in any way. Besides, lion cannot be associated with her at all. This deity cannot be a *Yakṣī* or any other deity for that matter who is not associated with lion. Only two female deities can appear in Indian art with mount lion, one is Goddess Durgā and the other is Goddess Lakṣmī and for both of them, association of lion is somehow related with the sophisticated mingling of their cults with that of Nanā, who was essentially related with lion. The first major work on this aspect was done by B.N. Mukherjee way back in late sixties and recently D.M. Srinivasan has some good work on the issue to her credit.⁴ There are many examples of Goddess Durgā represented along with lion from Mathura, viz., Mathura Museum Nos. 214/A, 592, 724, 879, 2028, 1283 etc. and in all of them

she is shown in standing pose. Here some of the early examples of Śrī-Lakṣmī in association with lion also may be cited. First such confirmed example of a seated goddess (being lustrated by elephants and seated with lion) from Kashmir or north-west region, now housed in the British Museum, was brought to notice by N.P. Joshi in a passing reference.⁵ Although, Joshi described this image while describing Kuṣāṇ images, Srinivasan has suggested a *circa* sixth century date for it.⁶ Another image of Śrī-Lakṣmī being lustrated by elephants and seated on lion (Pl. 3) was brought to the notice by Sir Alexander Cunningham from Bilsad.⁷ Bilsad is an important site situated between Soron and Sankisa in District Etah, about 150 km east of Mathura, from where an inscription of Kumāragupta's reign mentioning about a temple of Kumāra along with many temple remains was found. The image of Śrī-Lakṣmī is carved on a pillar of the temple (possibly the same as mentioned in the inscription) and is datable to about CE 420.⁸ Besides, there are some other early medieval sculptures which represent Śrī-Lakṣmī in association with lion.⁹

It is very important to understand the reason for which lion is being associated with Śrī-Lakṣmī in some of early Gupta and later reliefs. Keeping aside the arguments about the mingning of various goddess cults from north-west and north as well as the importance of lion in Indian art, we may look for a more substantive explanation for its depiction with Śrī-

Lakṣmī. Mahiṣāsura-mardinī Durgā, essentially associated with lion was possibly the most popular deity in and around Mathura since early centuries of the Christian era¹⁰ and it is quite astonishing to note that in the *Devī Mahātmyam* of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*, the *devī* is being worshipped in the form of Mahālakṣmī as the destroyer of Mahiṣāsura.¹¹ It is believed that this association of Mahālakṣmī with the killing of Mahiṣāsura would have been responsible for the depiction of lion with Mahālakṣmī as lion played an important role in the fierce combat. Except for the lion, Mahālakṣmī is maintaining all her other attributes. Date of composition of the text should not pose a problem in such association since the concept would have developed much prior to the time of actual composition of the text. The reference in the *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa* (III. 82.3-4) ascribing a *simhāsana* to Lakṣmī may or may not mean that lion is being mentioned as a mount of Lakṣmī but it is for sure a reference to a lion-throne which was ascribed to some other deities as well.¹² In the Kanawara and Bilsad reliefs, depiction of lion is as a mount of the goddess and not just as a lion-throne. So, it can be presumed that the sculptor generally depicted Durgā as Mahiṣāsura-mardinī but in some of the images after early Gupta period, Mahālakṣmī also came to be worshipped as the destroyer of Mahiṣāsura in some of the examples, taking inspiration from the above concept which finally got mentioned in the *Devī Mahātmyam*.

Other possible approaches to the panel's identification

The female deity seated with Gaṇeśa cannot be identified as his Śakti because in all the images of Gaṇeśa with Śakti known till now, Śakti has a distinctive personality or iconographic repertoire. The first such image is believed to be from Bhumara Gupta temple (ca. 6th century CE) in which Śakti sits on Gaṇeśa's left lap, holding a bowl of *modakas* in her lap from which Gaṇeśa with his left-turned trunk takes a sweetball. In later examples, his Śaktis may be either one or two but the pose is quite the same.

Although, there is a very popular tradition of Gaṇa-Gaura worship in Braj area where now-a-days Gaṇa stands for Gaṇeśa and Gaura for Gaurī (Pārvatī), it is quite difficult to identify the female deity with Gaurī (Pārvatī) because in no circumstances, she can be represented to the left of Gaṇeśa who happens to be her son in Hindu mythology. Worship of Gaṇeśa and Gaurī as harvest deities has been dealt with by B.A. Gupte but he did not trace its origin as well as combined worship of these two on Gaṇa-Gaura festival.¹³ If Gaṇa actually stood for Gaṇapati-Śiva¹⁴ in the beginning and later on because of Gaṇapati's identification as Gaṇeśa started to be identified with Gaṇeśa, then such a representation as the Kanawara panel can be found but there is no literary evidence available to confirm such worship. In the current tradition, there is a confusion related with the above-mentioned theory as only those married

women whose husbands are alive can worship Gaṇa-Gaura and not an unmarried or a widow lady. If Gaṇa-Gaura actually stood for Gaṇeśa-Gaurī (son-mother) relation, then it should not have happened. In fact, Viśvarūpāchārya's commentary on *Yājñavalkya Smṛti* equates Ambikā (possibly same as Gaurī) with either Buddhi (i.e., wife of Vināyaka-Gaṇeśa) or Rudrapatni, but not as mother of Vināyaka.¹⁵ If Kanawara panel represents this concept, then the deities can be identified with Vināyaka-Gaṇeśa and Ambikā. But, according to the author, such a concept which is neither popular in literature nor in popular belief could have been represented in the sculptural art and that too in a rare panel at such an early date.

During the period (1st-3rd century CE), only a few occurrences of Gaṇeśa (some of them debatable) in sculptural art are known, but, Lakṣmī as Gaja-Lakṣmī and Śrī-Lakṣmī was a popular goddess. Since the female deity in our panel is inspired by a *mātrkā* prototype, we must look at the association of *mātrkā* with Gaṇeśa. For that matter, Gaṇeśa's association with *mātrkā*s does not begin before the Gupta period. Even during the early Gupta period, Gaṇeśa is not represented in *Sapta-mātrkā* panels like at Badoh-Pathari and Udayagiri (both situated near Vidisha).¹⁶ It is only at Ramgarh (District Guna), Deogarh and Naharghati near Deogarh (District Lalitpur), that Gaṇeśa appears for the first time with *mātrkā*s during 6th-7th century CE in the respective *Sapta-mātrkā* panels. One important point which should be kept in

mind is that at Udayagiri (Vidisha), Gaṇeśa appears twice at the entrance of two early Gupta shrines.¹⁷ Here on one side (left) of the entrance is depicted Gaṇeśa and on the other Durgā / Maḥiṣāsūramardīnī. So, it makes it clear that by mid 4th century, Gaṇeśa had become an important deity and was not much inferior to Durgā in status as far as his depiction at Udayagiri caves is concerned but still not found a place in the *mātrkā* panels. Besides, it also proves that by this time Gaṇeśa was absorbed in Śaivite / Śākta cult. In all the later *Sapta-mātrkā* panels, Gaṇeśa is placed last in the series of *mātrkā* at the extreme right except for a panel from Mandor datable to early 7th century CE where he sits in the extreme left. The *mātrkā* who precedes him in almost all cases is Chāmuṇḍā. Here in Kanawara panel, the position of Gaṇeśa is not on extreme right but rather he is shown seated in the extreme left to the right of the female deity. Firstly, this panel is not a part of a *mātrkā* panel and secondly, Goddess Chāmuṇḍā is never represented with mount lion. So, the possibility of its identification as Gaṇeśa-Chāmuṇḍā like the Tintoi image kept in Baroda Museum (Panikker 1997: Pl. 64) does not exist.¹⁸

In spite of the fact that the female deity is inspired by Kuṣāṇ *mātrkā* prototypes, the way she is putting her weight on lion (which must be her mount as the representation indicates) is unique and in a way not imaginable to be represented in art for that early period.¹⁹ If the deity is actually winged, then its identification becomes more curious because except for this panel,

there is just one example of a *mātrkā* panel (M.M. No. 75.20) in which a female deity (*mātrkā*) with wings holding a flask in her upraised hand is shown seated in *bhadrāsana* and by her side appears Lakṣmī holding a lotus with a long stalk. Probably, winged female deity is also observed on some 2nd-1st century BCE terracottas having *pañchachūḍa* from Eastern India. Besides these, no other winged female deity is known in Indian art as far as the author's knowledge goes.

Identification of Kanawara panel as Śrī-Lakṣmī - Gaṇeśa panel

Whether there were two elephants at top lustrating the female deity or not, cannot be determined because of so much mutilation at top. On the basis of various iconographic features like her sitting pose, the position of hands and the association of lion as well as being seated along with Gaṇeśa, the female deity in all probability should represent Śrī-Lakṣmī. It is also a fact that no combined representation of only Lakṣmī-Gaṇeśa is found till medieval times either in sculptures or in literary texts. But in popular conception of the Hindus, this combination forms one of the most popular pairings especially on the most celebrated festival of Dīpāvalī. If we look at sculptural representations of Lakṣmī where she is seated with some male deity, in almost all cases it comes out to be Kubera, the lord of wealth. So, in a way Gaṇeśa who is largely believed to be the God of prosperity and wisdom is replacing God of wealth. In fact, the sitting pose of

Gaṇeśa (*mahārājatilāsana*) in Kanawara panel is not observed in any prior sculptural representation except for a seated Kubera image from Maholi, Mathura (M.M. No. C 3), which should also be datable to late 3rd-early 4th century CE. Other images in which this pose is observed are generally of Kubera belonging to Gupta period (e.g. Kubera from Ahichchhatra). The *sthūlakāya śarīra* (stout body with a prominent belly) of Gaṇeśa also appears to be inspired from Kubera's iconographical features. So, at least in iconography, Gaṇeśa draws a lot of inspiration from Kubera but unlike Kubera who remains a worldly deity with no sectarian affiliations, Gaṇeśa is somehow merged with Śaiva and Śākta cults and also enjoys an important position in Vaiṣṇava sect. We can also have a look at various references associating Gaṇeśa with Lakṣmī. One of such association is observed by Courtwright when he mentions that during *Upanayana*, on the day before the rite is performed – after Gaṇeśa, Śrī (Lakṣmī) and other deities are propitiated.²⁰ In an episode from *Skanda Purāṇa*, Lakṣmī is cursed by a Brāhmaṇa to have an elephant's head. Brahmā is so pleased by her penance in this form that he declares that she will henceforth be worshipped as Mahālakṣmī.²¹ Lawrence Cohen mentions that the elephant-headed goddess as Mālinī is mother to Gaṇeśa; Lakṣmī is usually associated with Gaṇeśa as consort.²² Getty notes that in ancient representations Gaṇeśa was never figured with his two consorts; but at an early epoch, he was shown with a *devī* seated beside him

sometimes called Lakṣmī.²³ She further adds that in this form, he was worshipped by those followers of the *Vāmācāra* doctrine who admitted 'wine and women' in their ceremonies.

Here, the author would also like to discuss another very interesting sculptural relief from Mathura region (National Museum No. 68.113, Pl. 4) which represents three seated deities Gaṇeśa - Śrī-Lakṣmī - Kubera.²⁴ The central deity Śrī-Lakṣmī occupies the maximum space of the panel and is for sure the most prominent of the three. Shown seated in *sukhāsana*, it is a typical representation of her where she is being lustrated by two elephants. She holds a lotus flower (or bud) in her right hand whereas in the left she possibly holds a *bilva-phala*. Gaṇeśa has many similarities with the Kanawara Gaṇeśa figure but is definitely of lesser stature here than the other two deities. Kubera holding a money bag in his left hand and a wine-cup in the right enjoys the position which is slightly at par with Śrī-Lakṣmī. This panel is a rare blend of the ancient artistic traditions and the future traditions to be evolved after its coming into existence and might be datable to about 6th-7th century CE. But, conceptually it is much different from the Kanawara panel since here all the three deities are representative of wealth and prosperity as their iconography reveals whereas the Kanawara panel has some more esoteric meanings attached to its formulation along with the visible representation of wealth and prosperity. In Kanawara panel, there are only two deities

who are of equal stature but in this panel, it is different.

We may also discuss a bit about the possible dating of Kanawara panel. In my opinion, on stylistic grounds, it should be datable to Kuṣāṇ-Gupta transition period (about mid 3rd-early 4th century CE.). More refined treatment of Śrī-Lakṣmī's legs than the bulky legs of Kuṣāṇ *mātrkā*s as well as overall treatment of human body warrants it a date later than Kuṣāṇ period but in any case it seems to be preceding the iconographic features of Bilsad relief as well as the above-cited National Museum relief and various *Sapta-mātrkā* panels cited above, more on the basis of their sitting posture and other artistic details.

So, following the popular tradition and some of these above-cited references, it may be concluded that the two deities represented in the Kanawara panel are Gaṇeśa and Śrī-Lakṣmī. Here I would like to draw our attention to Alfred Foucher's remarks in Getty's seminal work on Gaṇeśa's Introduction which is very significant from our point of view. He mentions²⁵ "Yet must one necessarily succumb to the habitual failing of the philologist whose learned candour leads him to infer that all things have their beginning from the time of their first mention in the texts? Such a conclusion would be absurd, for in any given place and moment there are always many more social facts than those recorded in writing. It is obviously true even of our own days, and the further we delve into the illiterate past of humanity the more we understand this to

be the case. One must be as short-sighted as a bookworm to deduce from the lack of any mention of Gaṇeśa in the early epics, that the god did not exist before the fourth or fifth century of our era, and it would require a certain amount of naïveté to believe that this divinity could have suddenly been conceived *ex nihilo*, and his worship established throughout the whole of India at such a comparatively recent date." So, this Kanawara panel represents that stage when these concepts of Gaṇeśa-Lakṣmī worship were not incorporated in religious texts, but surprisingly these were not incorporated after that as well. The panel must be very significant religiously as in spite of popular norm of representing Gaṇeśa to the left side of Lakṣmī, this panel represents Gaṇeśa at a higher position than Lakṣmī by representing him to the right side of Lakṣmī. This shift in the positions cannot be accepted as the fault of the sculptor believing that by then iconographic norms were not fixed ; because in any case the person who would have ordered for its carving would have categorically told the sculptor about the position of the deities. Any sculptor cannot be believed to be experimental for such an important carving. Experimentation can be done but not with the positions of the deities if there are only two deities to be represented. Such panels would appear from time to time to challenge established position of scholars by providing so much of interesting information.

Footnotes

1. There is a tradition in the whole Braj region to keep ancient images at local goddess's shrines and even if a Śiva-*liṅga* is put there, then it would also be worshipped as a female deity notwithstanding its actual identity.

2. Here it should be kept in mind that this *āsana* is different from *lalitāsana* as in *lalitāsana*, the deity sits on a high pedestal or throne with either left or right leg hanging vertically downwards whereas the other leg is kept folded horizontally. In *mahārājāṭīlāsana*, the deity sits with ease on the ground or on a low seat with one leg folded horizontally whereas the other leg is folded vertically with a hand kept at knee.

3. Similar fruit (*śrīphala*) in the left hand of a deity in almost similar pose is observed in an image of Gaja-Lakṣmī from Indragarh-Mandsaur which is datable to c. 8th century CE. It may be looked in Michael D. Willis, 1997, *Temples of Gopaksetra*, London, pl. 15.

4. B.N. Mukherjee, 1969, *Nanā on Lion*, Calcutta, and D.M. Srinivasan, "Śrī-Lakṣmī in Early Art: Incorporating the North-western Evidence", in *South Asian Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 1, March 2010, 77-95.

5. N.P. Joshi, 1972, *Catalogue of the Brāhmaṇical Sculptures in the State Museum, Lucknow*, Lucknow, p. 71 and Line Drawing 68.

6. D.M. Srinivasan, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

7. A. Cunningham, 1880, *Archaeological Survey Report*, Vol. XI, pp. 13-22 and Srinivasan, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

8. Joanna G. Williams, 1982, *The Art of Gupta India Empire and Province*, Princeton, New Jersey, pp. 74-75, pl. 81 doubts the relief to be later than the inscription of Kumāragupta's reign, which actually might not be the case. In her photograph the lustrating elephants are also missing, which were intact during the time Cunningham visited the site.

9. D.M. Srinivasan, *op. cit.*

10. V.K. Gupta, "The Cult of Mahiṣāsura-mardīnī in

the Art of Mathura", *Kala*, Vol. XVI, 2010, pp. 73-77.

11. *Devī Mahātmyam, Madhyamacharitam*, Ram Krishna Math, Chennai, pp. 24 and 40.

12. *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa*. 1961, *Trītiya Khaṇḍa*, ed. Priyabala Shah, Baroda, p. 154.

13. B.A. Gupte, "Harvest Festivals in Honour of Gaurī and Gaṇeśa, *Indian Antiquary* 35 (1906): 60-64.

14. Śiva has been mentioned as Gaṇapati in the *Mahābhārata* and some other texts.

15. *Yājñavalkya Smṛti*, with commentary *Bālakrīḍā* of Viśvarūpachārya, 1921-22, Reprint Delhi, 1982 ed. T. Ganapati Sastri, Trivandrum, : 178, the commentary reads "Ambika cattra Buddhirucyate. sa hyasubhnamittam lobhādīṃ janayati. yadvā, d e v y e v a m b i k ā r u d r a p a t n ī , adhikaranyatvenetyubhayathapyadoṣah."

16. For Gaṇeśa in relation to *Sapta-mātrkā* in Central India, please see, Shivaji K. Panikkar, 1997, *Saptamātrkā: Worship and Sculpture*, Delhi, and O.P. Misra, 1989, *Iconography of Saptamātrkā*, Delhi.

17. For Udayagiri monuments, one may refer to D.R. Patil, 1948, *The Monuments of Udaygiri Hill*, Archaeological Department, Gwalior.

18. U.P. Shah in "Sculptures from Sāmālāji and Rodā in the Baroda Museum," Baroda, 1960: Fig. 53 has wrongly identified the image as Pārvaṭī-Gaṇeśa.

19. In none of the early images where lion is represented with a female deity, the deity is represented with *mātrkā* (motherly) aspect.

20. Paul B. Courtright, 1985, *Gaṇeśa: Lord of Obstacles, Lord of Beginnings*, New York, p. 100.

21. *Skanda Purāṇa, Nagara Khaṇḍa* 88.23, cited in P.K. Agrawala, 1978, *Goddess Vaināyakī : the Female Gaṇeśa*, Varanasi, p. 7.

22. Lawrence Cohen, 1992, "The Wives of Gaṇeśa," *Ganesh: Studies of an Asian God*, ed. Robert L. Brown, Delhi, p. 119.

23. Alice Getty, 1936, *Gaṇeśa: A Monograph on the Elephant-faced God*, Oxford, pp. 35, 36.

A UNIQUE SCULPTURAL PANEL OF ŚRĪ-LAKṢMĪ - GAṆEŚA FROM BRAJ REGION



The Kanawara panel.

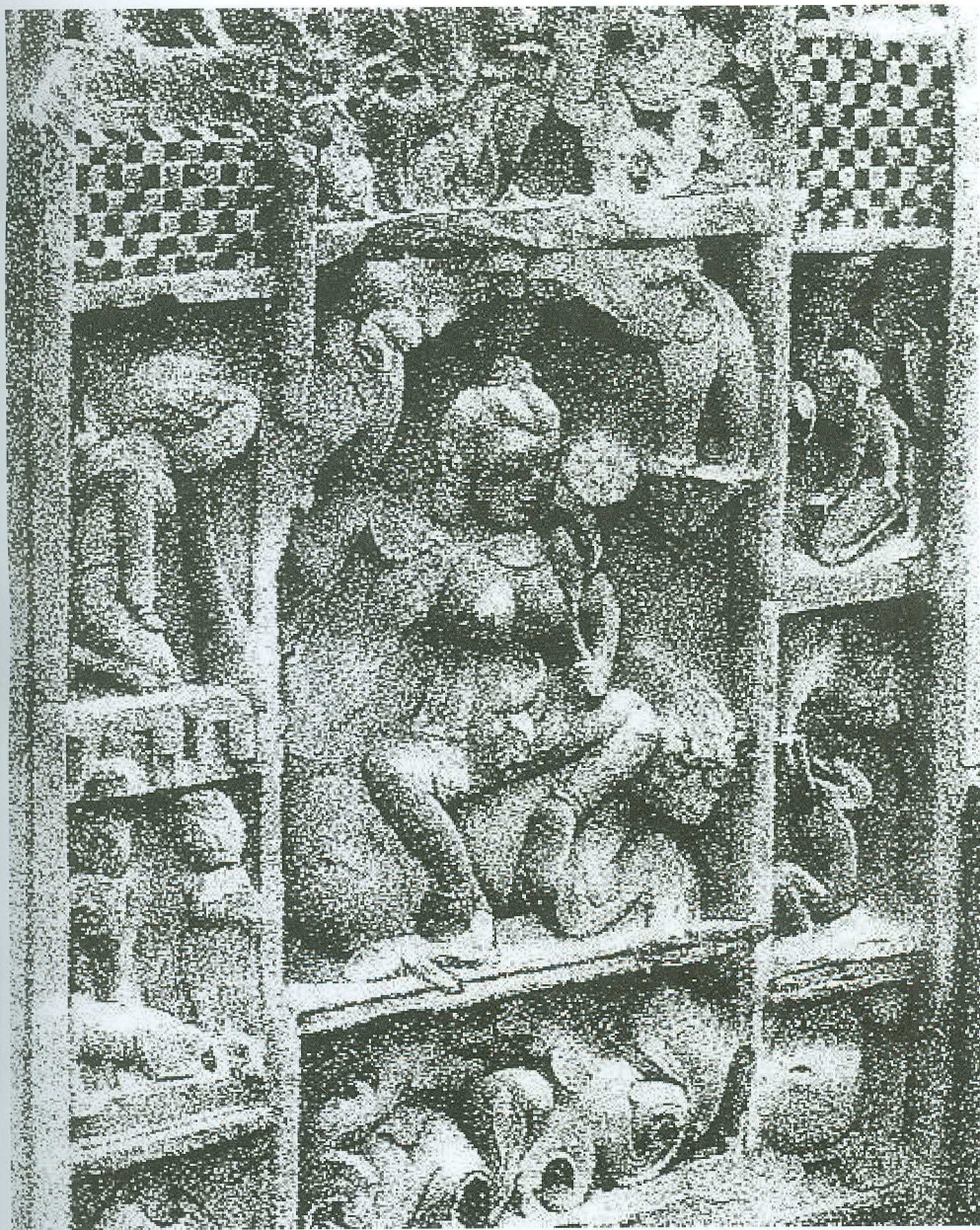
Plate 1

A UNIQUE SCULPTURAL PANEL OF ŚRĪ-LAKṢMĪ - GAṆEŚA FROM BRAJ REGION



Slide view of the Kanawara panel, the bulge is visible at the right corner.

A UNIQUE SCULPTURAL PANEL OF ŚRĪ-LAKṢMĪ - GAṆEŚA FROM BRAJ REGION



Bilsad Śrī-Lakṣmī reliwf (after Cunningham's lithograph in the *A.S.R.*, Vol.XI, Pl.VI).

Plate 3

A UNIQUE SCULPTURAL PANEL OF ŚRĪ-LAKṢMĪ - GAṆEŚA FROM BRAJ REGION



An interesting panel of Gaṇeśa - Śrī-Lakṣmī - Kubera from Mathura region
(Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi)

Plate 4

A UNIQUE SCULPTURAL PANEL OF ŚRĪ-LAKṢMĪ - GAṆEŚA FROM BRAJ REGION

24. It is my duty to acknowledge here that I came to know about the existence of this panel from Dr. Doris Meth Srinivasan.

25. Alfred Foucher, 1936, "Introduction," in Alice Getty, *Gaṇeśa: A Monograph on the Elephant-faced God*, Oxford, p. xvii.

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