Indian Art Objects as Loot

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Let us imagine a graceful bronze image of Dancing Siva before us. It was perhaps created by a Cola artist in eleventh-century Tamilnad to be installed in a temple to receive offerings of worship, and to parade around the town in a ceremonial palanquin on festival days. From there, this image might have followed any of several paths to stand before us now in a North American museum. Perhaps it was buried under a banyan tree in the fourteenth century when invading Islamic armies, feared for their iconoclasm, marched through the Kaveri delta on their way to Madurai. It could have been disinterred in the nineteenth century, during British rule, by a Tamil workman on a road crew, who showed it to the civil engineer, who brought it to the attention of the District Collector, who passed it on to the Director of Archaeology. In the twentieth century, perhaps, when an international market developed for such objects, it might have ended up in an auction room, a cosmic dance sold to the highest bidder. Or a government expert on culture might have selected it, after its long hibernation in the basement storehouse of its temple, as an image worthy to travel abroad as an ambassador of independent India in the international diplomacies of traveling exhibitions.

All of us who attend to South Asian art realize that the "art objects" we admire so much in the Museum of Art or at the Festival of India are there, revealing themselves to us, as the result of a series of disjunctive historical events and processes. Certainly, we recognize that the nameless artists who produced these works were not working with museum display as their goal. Yet here, finally, they are.

Acts of appropriation, by which objects are removed from the settings for which they were fabricated and placed in new ones, are nothing new in South Asia. We would certainly be wrong to picture Islamic iconoclasm or European commoditization, however profound their impact, as impinging on a previously static Hindu domain, where all such objects occupied and remained in their own fixed places, recognized and respected by all. To the contrary, if we judge from inscriptions, chronicles, and the objects themselves, certain objects circulated widely and famously in early medieval India.

This article will examine one phase in the circulation of Indian art objects: the appropriation of sculpted images by medieval Indian rulers as political acts. During

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this period, the worship of divinized images in temples was the central public religious

cult of the subcontinent, and temple images were often closely tied to the political

order. In the prevailing ideological formations of medieval India, worshipers of Viṣṇu, Śiva, or Durgā considered ruling authority to emanate from the lord of the cosmos downward to the human lords of more limited domains such as em-

pires, kingdoms, territories, or villages. The construction of monumental temples

housing images of these divinities, making evident their cosmic sovereignty within

the polity of the sponsor, was a way of representing and embodying political ac-

complishments while locating such attainments within a larger, encompassing

divine order.

With divine images already preponderant participants in the medieval system

of authoritative relations, it is not surprising that images were often seized publicly

by one ruler from another in circumstances of conflict. Alive to the identities and

mythic backgrounds of the figures, royal looters dislodged selected images from

their customary positions and employed them to articulate political claims in

a rhetoric of objects whose principal themes were victory and defeat, autonomy

and subjugation, dominance and subordination. Such acts were undertaken in

deadly earnest and often had decisive effects for the human actors. For the

images, too, there were notable consequences. Captured by new proprietors,

relocated in new surroundings, their identities shifted significantly. Here I wish to

explore this medieval political discourse that utilized religious images and its effect

on the objects so used.

The Appropriation of Images

When art historians, historians of religion, and others who concern themselves

with Indian religious objects think about an image such as our hypothetical Dancing

Śiva, we focus our attention most often on the aesthetic elegance of its form, on

the religious meaning of its iconographic composition, or on the social and political

context within which it was fabricated. In these matters, we believe, lies the essential

significance of the object, the message the artist and other agencies responsible for

its composition intended to convey. The subsequent life history of the object we

tend to regard as extrinsic, as somehow beside the point. It is as if meaning were

fixed once and for all at the moment of creation.

With these tacit assumptions, Indianists have seldom studied the appropriation

of art objects in premodern South Asia. The only general treatment that I know of

is Royal Conquests and Cultural Migrations in South India and the Deccan (1964),

by the erudite art historian C. Sivaramamurti. In his wide-ranging survey of the

relationship between military campaigns and the transmission of artistic themes and

motifs in classical and medieval South Asia, Sivaramamurti paints a portrait of

essentially benign artistic exchanges among warring kings, motivated by spontaneous

aesthetic appreciation.

Sometimes a great victor was struck with admiration and adopted what were essential

features of the culture of a dynasty long reduced to dust with all its glory forgotten.

Sometimes the politically vanquished sovereign had something glorious to give as

a lesson of culture to his victor, who, it must be said to his credit, enthusiastically

accepted it, though it was really a cultural conquest of the political victor by the

vanquished.

(Sivaramamurti 1964b)
Undoubtedly, many medieval South Asian kings did appreciate the artistry of a finely rendered bronze image or an elegant carved pillar, just as they appreciated well-crafted poetry. As prescriptive texts indicate, a young prince's education might well include instruction in the various branches of art and architecture. Kings often participated directly in the construction of religious edifices as ritual patrons, and several substantial texts on the fabrication of temples and images are attributed to royal authorship. However, kings did not regard the appropriation of an image as primarily an expression of aesthetic sensitivity, nor did they recognize the strong division of "political" and "cultural" domains implicit in Sivaramamurti's account. In almost all inscriptions and narrative accounts dealing with the matter, expropriations are treated as predominantly political acts. Such actions were not benign but were highly consequential, not only for the development of art, but for the subsequent course of political events as well.

To gain a preliminary idea of the value attached to image appropriations, let us consider the case of the pure-gold Buddha image of the Jewel Palace in Anuradhapura, seized by the Pāṇḍyans in the ninth century and regained by the Sinhalese king Sena II. The events are narrated by the Buddhist monk and chronicler Dhammakitti in the Cūlavamsa (CV) (Geiger 1925:115–36; 1929:138–60).

In the early ninth century, the Pāṇḍyan kingdom of southern Tamilnad expanded northward into the Kaveri and Kongu regions, and sometime around 835 the Pāṇḍyan ruler Śrīmāra Śrīvallabha (r. 815–62), filled with imperial ambitions, mounted an invasion of the island of Sri Lanka. The Sinhala king Sena I (r. 831–51) attempted to resist, but the Pāṇḍyan attack proved too formidable.

In an instant the giant army of the Pāṇḍyan king swept over the large crowd of Sinhala soldiers and crushed them, moving like Māra's army. And the Sinhala king, hearing that his army had been sundered, took up all his portable wealth and fled the city, heading towards the mountains.

(CV 50.19–20)

With the Sinhalese army dispersed and leaderless, Śrīmāra (like his namesake Māra, deadly to the Buddhists) easily captured the capital and began to plunder it.

He removed all the valuables from the royal treasury, and seized everything that could be seized in the monastery and the city. The statue of the Teacher made entirely of gold in the Jewel Palace, the pair of jewels set as eyes in the Lord of Sages made of stone, likewise the gold plate on the caitya in the Thūpārāma, and the golden images in the various monasteries—all these he seized, denuding Lanka island of its wealth and spitting out the once-splendid city as if demons (yakṣas) had devoured it.

(CV 50.33–36)

The solid-gold Buddha was not an ancient image. It had been made about fifty years earlier, sponsored by King Mahinda II (r. 772–92) at the steep cost of 60,000 copper coins, and established on a pedestal in the Jewel Palace, a pavilion constructed by Mahinda in the Abhayagiri monastic complex (CV 48.136–37). Mahinda's grandson, Aggabodhi VIII (r. 801–12), honored the image with a grand festival as part of his accession to kingship (CV 49.44). The sumptuous image was evidently one of considerable importance not only to the Abhayagiri monks who maintained it but also to the Sinhalese rulers of the period.

1All translations from Pali, Sanskrit, and Tamil in this essay are mine. I also cite published translations, where available.
Back on the mainland, the Pallavas were organizing a coalition of forces to oppose the upstart Pāṇḍyans, and this undoubtedly made Śrīmāra more eager to come to terms with his defeated opponent. From exile, Sena I was able to negotiate a settlement with the occupying power, giving elephants and all his jewels to Śrīmāra. The Pāṇḍyan king left the island with his booty and tribute. Sena I returned to the capital and took up sovereignty once again, but sovereignty of a decidedly diminished stature.

When Sena I died, his nephew, Sena II (r. 851–85), became ruler. The new king ruled without incident, Dhammakitti relates, until the day he held a festival for the Tooth-relic:

Once when the king was celebrating the great festival of the Tooth-relic with all proper offerings, he ascended the excellent Jewel Palace, and there saw the empty pedestal where the golden Buddha had once stood. “Why is this?” he asked.

“Does the king not know?” replied the ministers. “During the time of your uncle, King Sena, my lord, the Pāṇḍyan king came here, laid waste to the island, and left, taking all that had become valuable to us.”

When the king heard this, he was ashamed as if it were he himself who had been defeated. And that very day he ordered the ministers to assemble his troops.

(CV 51.22–26)

A disgruntled Pāṇḍyan prince, apparently a passed-over claimant to the throne, had conveniently appeared in Lanka requesting aid, and Sena II saw in him an opportunity to redress his grievance. The Sinhala king sent an expeditionary force to accompany the prince and support his claim to rule in Madurai, the Pāṇḍyan capital. “Go!” he ordered his commander, Kuṭṭaka, “Kill the Pāṇḍyan king! Bring back all the jewels he once took from here! Grant sovereignty to this prince, and return quickly!”

(CV 51.30–31).

Meanwhile, the Pāṇḍyan armies had been engaged with the Pallava-led coalition, fighting three costly battles. When the Sinhalese armies attacked from the other flank and marched on Madurai, the Pāṇḍyans were unable to resist. Śrīmāra died shortly after of wounds sustained in battle.

Then the Sinhalese armies fearlessly entered the city and plundered the place completely, like gods sacking the city of the demons. The commander inspected the treasury in the royal palace, and took all the valuables that had been taken from our island, as well as those found in the town and the countryside.

(CV 51.39–41)

A good patriot, Dhammakitti compares pillage done by others to the work of Māra’s army and demons; when it is done by his own countrymen, however, it is as if gods plundered demons.

Kuṭṭaka had the Pāṇḍyan prince crowned as King Varaguṇavarman II and, after a brief tour, returned to Lanka, where Sena II received the victorious army with rejoicing and rituals of solidarity. The king held a great feast for them in the capital, celebrated a festival of victory, and distributed gifts to the poor. The repatriated objects he conscientiously restored to their proper places.

Without attachment he placed all the valuables in their original places on the island, and he ritually established the golden images just as they had been before.
He filled the empty pedestal of the Teacher in the Jewel Palace, and he secured the land by setting up guardposts.

(CV 51.48–49)

The restoration of images had remarkable effects on the community, for from that time on, Lanka became as prosperous as Uttarakuru, the legendary land of plenty beyond the Himālaya.

In this simple moral tale of treasure lost and recaptured, we begin to see more clearly how medieval kings and their advisers regarded the expropriation of images. The stolen image, disclosed to the young king by its empty pedestal, serves as an objectification of defeat not only for his uncle, who had suffered the loss, but for the very institution of Sinhala sovereignty. The humiliation that the king feels and his immediate resolve to retrieve the golden Buddha indicate how powerfully the empty pedestal provoked him, how clearly he understood its message in this discourse of objects. His orders to Kūṭṭaka and the commander’s careful search in the royal treasury at Madurai confirm that recovery of the missing images was a central purpose of the invasion, and the jubilation upon their successful return is in the narrator’s eyes a celebration of the restoration of the country’s wholeness. For Dhammakitti, whose principal concern throughout the Cūlavamsa is to delineate proper relations between Sinhalese sovereignty and the Buddhist community, loss and recovery of the golden Buddha is a synecdoche for the integrity of the Sinhalese polity itself.

**Loot: Morality and Motivation**

In their inscriptions, medieval Indian rulers proudly and repeatedly proclaim their expropriation of objects from other kings. Here, for instance, is the epigraphic account of a Cola king’s victory over a Cālukya opponent at the battle of Kūṭalcaṅkamam:

Virarājendra halted his hot, impetuous elephant and donned the garland of victory. He plucked out his opponent’s wives, the family treasure, his conches, his fringed white parasol, his trumpets, his war-drum, his canopy, his white yak-tail fans, the banner of the boar, the crocodile gateway, “Blossom” the female elephant, a herd of war-elephants, and a troop of prancing horses. Amidst shouts of praise, he put on the victory crown adorned with splendid red jewels.

(Hultzsch 1899a:34)

Not only does Virarājendra (1063–69) “pluck” his defeated enemy of these properties, he also places them on display in the capital for his subjects to view:

Seated on a throne of bright jewels, Virarājendra exhibited in orderly rows the great heaps of treasures he had seized in the Vengi territory, while all the kings on earth did homage at his feet and praised him.

(Hultzsch 1899b:67)

There is nothing furtive about all this. Just as the subordinate rulers bowing at Virarājendra’s feet visibly signify their acceptance of his overlordship, the orderly exhibition of Cālukyan treasures is meant to represent objectively to all observers Virarājendra’s battlefield victory. Looting, in medieval South Asia, was an important element in the rhetoric of kingship.
The forcible expropriation of valued objects from an other defined as an enemy in circumstances of military conflict, which we designate by the Anglo-Indian term "looting," is a longstanding practice in many cultures, of course (Yule and Burnell 1903:519–20). However, this activity may be constructed and construed differently in different times and places. We in the modern West have come to regard looting as a species of theft, a side effect of war that is predatory, disorganized, and motivated by economic gain.

Indians of the medieval period, by contrast, did not consider such seizure as theft, nor did they necessarily conduct it in a disorderly and surreptitious fashion. As the inscriptions of Virarājendra suggest, medieval South Asian rulers and their retinues carried out plunder as a normal and public aspect of war, organized by and around the person of the king, and directed as much toward symbolic objects as toward economic resources. To consider more closely the cultural construction of such wartime appropriations, let us begin with the dharmaśāstra of Manu (MS) and his ninth-century Kashmiri commentator, Medhātithi (MSBb) (Jolly 1887; Buhler [1886] 1984; Kevalananda and Gharpure 1958; Jha 1920–26).

In his discussion of proper royal conduct, Manu is concerned to circumscribe battlefield behavior within a code of chivalrous conduct. Manu sets down prescriptions concerning whom a warrior may strike, when he may strike him, what weapons he may use, and much more. While urging discipline upon the troops in many respects, Manu indicates no similar compunction about the propriety of plunder.

Chariots, horses, parasols, money, grain, cattle, women, all kinds of goods, and base metals all belong to the one who wins (jayati) them.

(\textit{MS 7.96})

It is a matter of "victory," not of theft.

The moral question for Manu is not whether one may expropriate objects (and living property as well) from defeated opponents, but how one should properly distribute the booty. Certain valuable commodities, such as gold, silver, and land are reserved for the king alone, Medhātithi tells us. This includes, as we will see, all regalia and images. It is impermissible, however, for the king as master (svāmin) to appropriate all loot for himself. Other items—those listed in Manu's verse—belong to the individual warriors who acquire them. But here, too, a portion (and, Medhātithi specifies, the best portion) must be presented to the king: "One should give a share to the king. So it is stated in the Veda" (\textit{MS 7.97}). The king occupies the center of all looting transactions. Sharing the spoils reiterates substantively the moral relationship between king and troops.

The Vedic precedent to which Manu refers is none other than the primordial battle between Indra, king of the gods, and the demon Vṛtra. When Indra defeated the demon in combat and so became great, he requested and received the best portion of all the loot obtained (\textit{Aitreyabṛāhmaṇa} 3.21; Keith 1920:178). As Indra among the gods, so, too, the king among his subordinates is entitled to the choice part of every expropriation. By sharing loot hierarchically, Manu suggests, Hindu rulers should attempt to replicate in human society the model set by the Vedic gods.

Medhātithi records an additional provision concerning spoils gained by the king himself and those acquired by the army as a collectivity. Of such loot, he tells us, "the king should distribute it among those he supports according to the principle of ‘bestowing acquisitions on a worthy recipient’" (\textit{MSBb 7.97}). This principle, Medhātithi explains elsewhere, means that a king should apportion out his acquisitions
to such "worthy recipients" as gods, hermitages, intellectuals, moral exemplars, and others of that ilk. He also may employ his resources in sponsoring public festivals (MSbh 7.56). By that same principle, we often learn through inscriptions of looted objects presented to temple deities and to those who served the king in battle. Booty engenders those substantive transactions that link the king both with the god or gods whose cosmic sovereignty includes and surpasses his own and also with eminent subjects within his own dominion.

Far from eschewing wartime appropriations, then, medieval Hindu rulers place themselves forthrightly in the center of a redistributive network involving expropriated objects. Not surprisingly, this is closely linked to the medieval Hindu ideology of royal authority, which views the king as the central agency responsible for integrating the dispersed segments of his domain into a unitary polity and bringing about its prosperity. By seizing objects during military campaigns, he embodies the victory he has attained over his rivals, symbolically incorporating their signs, and by reapportioning those objects within his own domain, he replenishes it and reiterates the ties that bind together the dominion of which he is the moral center.

Appropriated Images and Secondary Signs

The appropriation of Indian images recasts their significance without altering what they are and fundamentally represent. To clarify this point, it is useful to keep in mind Roland Barthes's well-known model of mythology as a second-order semiological system (1957:111–17). Here, the first-order sign system consists not of language but of physical objects—in most cases, sculpted objects that represent something according to known conventions and also may serve as the embodiment of that something. The golden Buddha image, as signifier, evokes immediately in its viewers the concept of "Buddha-as-Teacher," the signified. Their associative unity, drawn even more closely when the Buddha is ritually invoked into the image, constitutes the sign. It is this first-order pairing of image and signified concept (or divinity) that we refer to when we "identify" an Indian image iconographically. When seized by the Pāṇḍyan king, however, the signification of the golden Buddha shifts, as Barthes would have it, sideways. The appropriated image in its new situation now serves as the signifier also of the military victory of the Pāṇḍyan ruler over the Sinhalese. It has not lost its previous identity, but a secondary signification augments it.

This enhancement of identity may be asserted explicitly, as in the case of a Cālukyan door-guardian looted by the Cola king Rājādhirāja (r. 1018–54), where details of its origin and seizure have been inscribed onto the object itself: "This is the door-guardian brought by Lord Vijayarājendradeva after burning Kaliyānapuram." The source of the looted image may become a permanent part of its name. The "Vātāpi Gaṇapati" at Tiruccenkāṭṭāṅkuṭi, for instance, denotes the image of Gaṇeṣa brought to Tamilnad by the Pallava ruler Narasimhavarman I (r. 630–68), after sacking the Cālukyan capital of Vātāpi in 642 C.E. (Balasubrahmanyam 1975:96–102). Images may even carry with them entire pedigrees of previous proprietors and appropriators. In the Lakṣmanā temple of Khajurāho (illustration 1), constructed by the Candella ruler Yaśovarman shortly before 950 C.E. to house a solid-gold image of Viṣṇu Vaikuṇṭha, the foundation inscription traces the background of the image:
The lord of the Tibetans got it from Mount Kailāsa, and then Sahi the king of Kangra received it from him out of friendship. With his troops of elephants and horses, Herambapila (Pratihāra) thereupon seized it from him. Obtaining it from his son, the (Pratihāra) prince Devapāla, the illustrious (Candella) king Yaśovarman—an ornament among kings and a crusher of enemies—performed the ritual establishment of Vaikuṇṭha.

(Kielhorn 1892:129)

Illustration 1. Lakṣmaṇa Temple, Khajurāho, M. P.
Candella period, reign of Yaśovarman, 954 C.E.
(Photograph courtesy American Institute of Indian Studies.)

From “Kailāsa” (Kashmir?) to Tibet to Kangra to Kanyakubja to Khajurāho: these past journeys of this eminent Viṣṇu image are carefully recorded as indicative and constitutive of its identity and value.

Appropriated images are, nevertheless, still also divine images. The object may be removed from its original and intended situation, but this does not empty it of its previous significance as a fabricated icon that may, under proper ritual conditions, serve as an embodiment for a god or goddess. Looted images are, therefore, worthy of respectful treatment from their new proprietors, and for the most part during this period they did receive it. We do not hear of the intentional defilement of divine images nor, very often, of their public mutilation by those who seize them.

Often the looters made considerable effort to erect new temples for housing plundered images in the manner that befitted their significance. One of the most
notable practitioners of royal appropriation was the Vijayanagar emperor Kṛṣṇadevarāya (r. 1509–29). Shortly after assuming the throne, the emperor attacked the forces of the Gajapati ruler Pratāparudra at Udayagiri, a hill stronghold in Andhra Pradesh. After a bitter siege lasting some eighteen months, the fortress fell, paving the way for further victories over the Gajapatis and leading finally to Pratāparudra’s acceptance of Vijayanagar suzerainty.

The victory at Udayagiri was celebrated as a momentous event, and as part of the celebrations Kṛṣṇadevarāya had transported back to his capital an image of Bālakṛṣṇa from a small temple at Udayagiri (Krishna Sastri 1912:164–200). It was a modest figure, just over three feet tall with its pedestal. Carved in the greenish black granite typical of the Udayagiri area, it portrayed Kṛṣṇa as a chubby boy seated with his right foot on a lotus flower and holding a butter-ball (illustration 2). To house the looted image, the emperor had specially constructed the Kṛṣṇavāmi temple, resembling in plan and design the Udayagiri temple from which the image had been removed. At its consecration ceremony, the king presented gold and silver vessels to the Udayagiri Bālakṛṣṇa and endowed it with the royal share from nine villages for maintaining regular daily worship on a suitable scale (Krishna Sastri 1923:44–50). Vyāsarāya, a favored intellectual of the royal court, composed a series of hymns to honor the advent of this image in Vijayanagar (Nilakanta Sastri and Venkataramanayya 1946:1.203). Evidently, Bālakṛṣṇa was treated as a valued and honored guest by his new dynastic hosts.

There is good reason to suppose that another Vijayanagar monument of Kṛṣṇadevarāya’s time, the Viṭṭhalasvāmi temple, also housed a looted image. Viṭṭhala is a form of Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa worshiped almost exclusively in Maharashtra, and his cult is centered at Pandharpur. In 1520 and 1521, Kṛṣṇadevarāya led a successful campaign against Ismā’īl ‘ĀdilShāh, Sulṭān of Bijapur, bringing him temporary control over the Pandharpur area. Considerable evidence suggests that the Vijayanagar ruler took the image of Viṭṭhala from its cult center and brought it back to the capital to animate his own Viṭṭhala temple, which was then under construction (Khare 1936).

For Kṛṣṇadevarāya, the appropriation of such images does not appear to have been simply a matter of personal religious predilection or of offering refuge from the threat of Islamic iconoclasm to gods of other regions (Longhurst 1916–17:27; Krishnasvami Aiyangar 1936:20–21). Rather, I would argue, it was part of a ritually incorporative imperial policy, requiring the conspicuous, ceremonial presence of subordinated polities in the capital. As Burton Stein has argued, during Navarātrī, the principal royal festival of Vijayanagar, the feudatory “chiefs” were obliged to participate in a series of hierarchicized transactions with their overlord, enacting and reconstituting annually their subordinate share in Vijayanagar sovereignty (Stein 1983). Divinities of the subject regions likewise made yearly treks to attend the ceremonies, along with retainers of priests and temple dancers, who arrived in great “triumphal cars.” While the human servants of these divinities made obeisance to the Vijayanagar emperor and danced for him, the images themselves expressed homage to the presiding deity of the festival, an image of the goddess Durgā, slayer of the Buffalo-demon.

The more permanent presence of the Udayagiri Bālakṛṣṇa in Vijayanagar conveyed much the same message as the visiting deities of Navarātrī. Transported to the capital and housed in its own temple, it spoke, not only of the glorious child-god Kṛṣṇa, who received the homage of Kṛṣṇadevarāya and his retinue, but also of the encompassing of Gajapati polity within the overarching imperial lordship of the Vijayanagar sovereign.
Illustration 2. Bālakṛṣṇa, Udayagiri, A. P. Gajapati period, fifteenth century. Taken by Krishnadevaraya to Vijayanagar, 1514. Now in Government Museum, Madras. (Photograph courtesy Institut Français d'Indologie, Pondicherry.)

Homologies for Defeated Kings

Barthes's model of a second-order semiological system may also help account for the choice of particular objects or images as loot. The most common target for royal appropriation in medieval India, according to inscriptions, was regalia, a repertoire of objects closely associated with the king's person and his capacity to rule—banners, yak-tail fans, umbrellas, crowns, thrones, scepters, musical instruments, and gateways. With such synecdochic objects, the choice was rather simple. Since they were clearly and unequivocally associated with the king through an ongoing series of royal ceremonials, they presented obvious targets for seizure.
But divine images are more complex objects than other items of regalia, and similarly, the semiotic value of their appropriation was more complicated.

One might expect (as I initially did) that a conquering king would direct himself toward the most important images of a defeated kingdom. What more powerful way to proclaim dominance than to appropriate the preeminent deity of the vanquished. There are certainly cases where this expectation is borne out, such as the seizure of the Sinhalese Golden Buddha by the Pāṇḍyans. Not only was this image closely associated with Sinhalese royalty, but it also acted as an apt signifier for a polity that strongly supported the Buddhist Sangha as the primary religious group in its domain.

Just as often, however, this does not happen. Consider, for example, the perplexing choice of a stone door-guardian from Kalyāṇi as a target for appropriation by the Cola king Rājādhirāja. In 1045, Rājādhirāja waged war against his Cālukya foes led by Someśvara I (r. 1042–68), routed the enemy forces at the battle of Pūṇṭur, forced Someśvara to flee, and then continued north to burn the Cālukya capital of Kalyāṇi. To add ritual insult to injury, he there performed a Heroic Consecration ceremony and assumed the new royal title of Vijayarājendra, the Victorious Rājendra. Returning from this successful campaign, Rājādhirāja transported a massive black stone door-guardian nearly 500 miles to his own capital of Gaṅgaikondacolapuram, where he displayed it as a trophy of war and had it incised with an identifying inscription stating that he had seized it when burning the Cālukya capital (illustration 3).

Now, if Rājādhirāja plundered and burned Kalyāṇi, he presumably had his pick of a great number of Cālukya images. He could perhaps have taken an image of Viṣṇu in his Boar incarnation, which was the particular insignia of the Cālukya dynasty. To save Earth from sinking into the ocean, Viṣṇu had once embodied himself as a powerful Boar, dove into the depths, and raised Earth on his giant snout. The Cālukyas, emulating the earlier Gupta dynasty, adopted this form of Viṣṇu for special attention, seeking to re-enact the Boar’s mythical deed through their own Earth-saving dynastic mission. Yet Rājādhirāja contented himself with an image of clearly inferior status within the temple hierarchy. Door-guardians were divine henchmen, stationed at the entrances to temples, whose business it was to prevent demons and enemies from approaching the inner sanctum and to pay homage to the supreme lord within, thereby enacting and displaying their own subordinate position.

To comprehend Rājādhirāja’s choice, it is first necessary to recognize that it alluded to a historical precedent, Dantidurga’s famous “Golden Womb” (höranyagarbhha) ceremony at Ujjain. The first autonomous ruler of the Raṣṭrakūṭa dynasty, Dantidurga (r. c. 742–56) gained independence from Lalitāditya of Kashmir and commenced a “conquest of the directions” (dīgavijaya), which brought him into conflict with the Gurjāra-Pratihāra king, Nāgabhaṭa I, who ruled over the Malwa region. Dantidurga was victorious in the ensuing battle. He occupied the Gurjāra capital, Ujjain, and there performed a royal gift-giving ceremony, the Golden Womb ritual. As one inscription relates it, “When he directed warriors to perform the Golden Womb ceremony in Ujjain, Dantidurga made the Gurjāra ruler and other kings serve as his door-keepers (pratihāra)” (Bhandarkar 1925–26:243). Clearly, the Raṣṭrakūṭa king was here making a powerful ritual statement of political subjugation,

2 A more complete discussion of this case of appropriation, touching on many of the themes of this essay, may be found in Richard Davis, “Trophies of War: The Case of the Cālukya Intruder,” in Perceptions of India’s Visual Past, eds. Catherine Asher and Thomas Metcalf (Delhi: American Institute of Indian Studies, forthcoming).
forcing a defeated opponent to act in a lowly capacity in a royal gift-giving ceremony, in his own capital to boot. Subsequently, Dantidurga went on to defeat the Cālukyas of Vātāpi (from whom the later Cālukyas of Kalyāṇī claimed descent), and the Rāṣṭrakūṭas replaced them for the next two centuries as the pre-eminent power of the Deccan.

The Cola kings of the eleventh century were acutely aware of the Rāṣṭrakūṭas. For one thing, the Rāṣṭrakūṭas had in the mid-tenth century dealt the Colas a humiliating defeat at the battle of Takkolam and had occupied Cola territory for several decades thereafter. More important, the Rāṣṭrakūṭas had been for almost two centuries the “supreme overlords” of the subcontinent, and the Cola kings Rājarāja I and Rājendra I—Rājādhīrāja’s grandfather and father, respectively—aspired to supersede them as the major imperial power of India. After two victorious “conquests of the directions,” they had largely accomplished this. As a culmination of the Cola rise to pre-eminence, Rājendra mounted a grand northern progress to the Ganges River, which he had possessed and transported to his own new capital—all of this replicating an earlier raid on the Ganges perpetrated by the Rāṣṭrakūṭas. (I will discuss the seizing of Gaṅgā below.)

So, too, Rājādhīrāja looked to Rāṣṭrakūṭa precedents in his political rhetoric. His appropriation of a door-guardian from the later Cālukyas re-enacted Dantidurga’s ritual demotion of the Guṇḍa king during the Golden Womb ceremony in a less personal and less compelling but more permanent manner. Mimicking the earlier conqueror of the Cālukyas, Rājādhīrāja also performed a royal ritual in the capital of the defeated king—in this case, a Heroic Consecration. Unable to force his rival to take on the role of ceremonial doorkeeper in person, since Someśvara had successfully fled, Rājādhīrāja seized a stone door-guardian instead and transported it back to the Cola country.

The parallelism of door-guardian and Cālukya king went further still: both had failed in their primary responsibility. The hapless door-guardian had been unable to stop the destruction of its temple, and likewise Someśvara had failed to prevent the Cola armies from entering and destroying his capital. Waiting in attendance at the Cola capital, the looted Cālukya door-guardian could act as a permanent visible homologue of the subjugated Cālukya ruler. It was a taunting display, to be sure, and, not surprisingly, Someśvara returned from exile to avenge his humiliation by killing Rājādhīrāja at the battle of Koppam.

Redistribution: The Emerald Pedestal

Not only does the seizing of objects from opponents in war convey political messages, so, too, does the subsequent redistributing of those objects. If an image forcibly taken from an unwilling opponent and repositioned in one’s own capital can serve as a figurative incorporation of that opponent’s polity, then by the same token an image accepted willingly by a subordinate ruler from his overlord may signify a subjugation voluntarily accepted. The operative principle in such cases is Manu’s phrase, “bestowing acquisitions on worthy recipients.”

Within the system of loot-distribution described by Manu and Medhātithi, as we have seen, all important appropriated objects reverted to the king, who then “bestowed” them as warranted. The “worthy recipient” that he chose to favor might be, first and foremost, the god he worshiped as his own lord. So when the Kalacuri king Lakṣaṁśaṇa-raja II, ruling in the Dāhala region of Madhya Pradesh, undertook
in the tenth century a western military campaign, he pointedly made a pilgrimage to the famous Śaiva temple of Somnāṭha on the Gujarati coast and there "presented in reverence to Śiva an image of Kāliya [presumably Kāliyavadha Kṛṣṇa] made of jewels and gold," which he had taken in an earlier battle with the king of Orissa on the east coast (Mirashi 1955:213–14).

Alternatively, a king might choose human subordinates as worthy recipients for looted images, not as an act of devotion to a superior but as one of favor or grace to an inferior. To consider the political semantics of such a gift, let us take the case of an "Emerald Pedestal" (marañaktapīṭām) employed as a central ritual object in an impressive performance of Navarātri in Ramanathapuram in the year 1892 (Śivasankara Pandiyaji n.d.; Breckenridge 1977). The pedestal was a looted object. According to local tradition, it had been acquired in the mid-seventeenth century by the Setupati Raghunāṭha Tevar, an ancestor of H. H. Raja Bhaskararwamy Avargal, the Setupati sponsoring the 1892 celebration.

At the time of its acquisition, the Madurai Nāyakkar ("governor") Tirumalai (r. 1623–59) was ruling over southern Tamilnad, virtually autonomous from the fading Vijayanagar imperium that had established the Nāyakkar rule in Madurai a century earlier. Raghunāṭha Tevar, the Setupati of Ramnad, was his subordinate. During Tirumalai’s reign, the southern kingdoms of Madurai and Mysore had fought a series of inconclusive battles, and in 1656, with the aged Tirumalai sick in bed, the Mysore ruler Kaṇṭhirava Narasa attacked once again. Apparently, the Mysore forces penetrated all the way to Madurai, and Tirumalai’s only recourse was to call on his loyal subordinate. The Madurai chronicles narrate it this way:

Now the king Tirumalai Nāyakkar wrote and sent a letter to the Setupati. On the very day the Setupati read the letter, he immediately prepared 60,000 men and brought them. He defeated the Mysore army, drove it into the Ghats, attained victory, and returned to the king.

The king was very happy, and held a feast for him in the palace. He presented him with many elephants and horses, clothing, ornaments, and the like, and he gave him the title "Tirumalai’s Setupati." He also gave the Setupati his own Lion-faced Palanquin and other emblems such as a banner and a canopy. Calling him a son of his own lineage, Tirumalai dismissed all revenue assessments, saying that he no longer had to pay tribute. And from that time on, the Setupati ruled his territory without paying tribute, and he had the Ramanathapuram fort rebuilt as a stone fortress.

(Taylor 1835:2.26)

The transactions between the Ramnad Setupati and the Madurai Nāyakkars described here reflect a characteristic medieval South Indian patterning of authoritative relations by which ruling kings “shared” their sovereignty with lesser kings, who thereby became subordinate participants within the overarching system. In his recent ethnohistory of this political formation, Nicholas Dirks (1987) points to the Vijayanagar ceremony of Navarātri as the dramatic ritual paradigm of the system in action. During the nine-day ceremony, the Vijayanagar emperor at the center of the festival expressed his homage to an image of the goddess Durgā, the presiding deity of the festival, and received from her his authority to rule in the objective form of royal sword and scepter. In her defining mythic action, Durgā had herself received weapons from all the gods to aid her in killing the demon that none but she could defeat. The subordinate governors, Nāyakkars, who were compelled to be present in the capital, would in turn express their devotion to the emperor and receive from him portions of his authority in the physical form of emblems.
The sharing of the king’s sovereignty through the transactions of the festival had the effect of incorporating the disparate elements of the kingdom into his sovereign being and rendering them all parts—metonyms—of himself, even as the emblems were themselves metonyms of his sovereignty.

(Dirks 1987:42)

This personalized and embodied authority was passed down from level to level, from emperor to governor to subordinate chieftain and so on, through similar ceremonial exchanges.

The primary currency of this hierarchized transactional system, Dirks tells us, were “services” and “honors”: the subordinate offering service to his superior, the superior in turn granting honors of various sorts to the subordinate. So the Ramnad Setupati unhesitatingly offered his military service and troops to the beleaguered Madurai Nāyakkar, saving Tirumalai from defeat and attaining victory over the Mysore invaders on behalf of his overlord. The Emerald Pedestal presumably was part of the substantive “victory” that Raghunātha acquired during the campaign and presented to his lord. Tirumalai in turn recognized Raghunātha’s service with a host of honors: gifts, titles, emblems, and rights to the unfettered enjoyment of land. These royal gifts were, in fact, gifts also of limited, shared sovereignty within Tirumalai’s encompassing dominion.

In this light, it is not difficult to see why Tirumalai chose the looted pedestal as a suitable object to bestow upon his worthy recipient. During an earlier campaign on behalf of the Madurai ruler, Raghunātha had helped repel a Muslim invasion led by “Khub Khan” and had been honored with the title, “He who propped up the kingdom” (Nelson 1868:3.138). As a subordinate ruler and warrior, the Setupati certainly had acted as a prop to the Nāyakkar’s rule, and so the identity of the plundered object once again refers to a political relationship. The Emerald Pedestal was a homologue not for an involuntarily subjugated source but for a willingly subordinate recipient.

**The Gift of Submission**

In one final variation on this general trope, an image might be given as a token of submission, a metonymic acceptance of ritual subordination, to forestall an actual invasion and a more forcible incorporation. Our example here concerns the Rāṣṭrakūṭas and Sinhalese.

In the early part of the ninth century, the Rāṣṭrakūṭa king Govinda III (r. c. 790–815) undertook two southern expeditions, during which he decisively defeated the most potent southern kingdom, the Pallavas of Kāṇcīpuram, and occupied their capital. Other kingdoms of the south came under direct threat from this most powerful Indian empire, and the frightened Sri Lankan king Aggabodhi VIII, ruling in Anurādhapuram, did what he could to fend off a direct attack: he sent two images to Govinda. As a Rāṣṭrakūṭa inscription reports:

Just as if he had forcibly subdued the self-centered [Lankan] king and his indolent chief minister with his own scepter and brought them deaf and dumb to the City of Delight, while in Kāṇcī Govinda received from Lanka two images of their lord (prabhin) and then set them up in a Saiva temple here [in Mānyakheṭa, the Rāṣṭrakūṭa capital], like two pillars of his fame.

(Bhandarkar 1925–26:246)
The epigraphical simile makes it clear that these images were to be regarded as “deaf and dumb” representatives of a Sinhala polity that had, by this very gift, accepted the overlordship of the Rāṣṭrakūtas. For Govinda III, more concerned with pillars of fame and ritual hegemony than the acquisition of territory, this was sufficient. The enforced diplomatic offering of images did dissuade the Rāṣṭrakūtas from invading the island, but only at the expense of incorporating Lanka metonymically into the Rāṣṭrakūta imperial formation.

What exactly were the images that the Sinhalese king sent to Govinda? Various possibilities have been suggested: statues of the demon Rāvana as “the most ancient and traditional ruler” of Lanka, or perhaps likenesses of the king and chief minister themselves (Bhandarkar 1925–26:241; Altekar 1934:69). In light of the general rhetoric we have investigated in this paper, it seems much more likely that Aggabodhi sent two images of the Buddha, as his own personal lord and the highest lord of the Sinhala polity. (Aggabodhi, we may recall, celebrated his royal consecration by honoring the solid-gold Buddha of the Jewel Pavilion.) It is possible, too, that the similitude of image and ruler had been drawn even more closely by casting the Buddha image according to the proportions of the king, a Sinhala practice of “reign-images” that has been documented for the tenth century if not earlier (Wickremasinghe 1912:213–29; Gunawardana 1979:175). Even without this close visual resemblance, though, none of the agents involved would have misread the clear statement of Sinhala subordination in the two Buddha images displayed “like pillars of fame” in a Saiva temple of the Rāṣṭrakūta capital.

**Imperial Sovereignty: The Capture of Rivers**

The appropriations and relocations of the art objects considered so far speak primarily of personalized relations of dominance and subordination among rulers and of the incorporation of particular kingdoms into other polities. But other targets of appropriation make more far-reaching assertions. Consider the inscriptional claims of Vinayaditya, ruler of the Calukyas of Vatāpi in the late seventh century.

The Calukyas at this time were the dominant power of the Deccan and had battled repeatedly with the Pallavas of Kānci for control of southern India. Taking advantage of a period of dynastic confusion in North India following the death of Harṣa in 647, Vinayaditya and his son, the crown prince Vijayaditya, undertook a northern campaign in about 690, where they were successful against a series of unnamed foes. They returned to the Deccan with great spoils, including a series of significant symbolic objects: the pāli-banner, the dadhakka drum, the “great sounds” (mahāalabha, probably conches), and the two rivers, “Gaṅgā and Yamunā.” Gaining these, inscriptions tell us, Vinayaditya possessed “all the insignia (cihna) of highest overlordship (paramaiśvarya), beginning with the powerful pāli-banner, which he had acquired by defeating all the lords of the northern regions” (Pathak 1907–8:202). They were passed on to Vijayaditya (r. 696–733) when he assumed the Calukya throne, and he also came to possess “sovereignty illuminated by insignia such as the pāli-banner that cause the manifestation of complete overlordship” (Pathak 1909–10:16). The Calukya inscriptions portray this particular bundle of loot not merely as the regalia or second-order signifier of a single enemy ruler but as the embodiment or representation of “universal sovereignty,” imperial lordship of the highest order.

3The recent work of Ronald Inden is particularly pertinent to this section. See, especially, his discussion of the Rāṣṭrakūta imperial formation (Inden 1990:228–62).
Evidently, we have here some extraordinary imperial objects. The *pāli*-banner (or, literally, "flags in rows"), singled out in Cālukya inscriptions as the insignia par excellence, seems to have been a particular arrangement of banners, in which a central flagstaff with the Cālukya insignia, Viṣṇu’s Boar incarnation, on top was surrounded by rows of flags bearing insignia of all other dynasties in lower and peripheral position (Chidanandamurthy 1973:85–88). It was thus, as Ronald Inden points out, an indexical sign of the Cālukya’s claim to the highest degree of sovereignty, encompassing and surpassing all other rulers of India (Inden 1990:250–52).

The most curious and intriguing items in this set of transportable objects, however, are the two rivers, Gaṅgā and Yamunā. The Gaṅgā may shift course gradually over the years, but how could the Cālukya king, ruling some 800 miles to the south of the river, claim to “take” Gaṅgā? What exactly did he appropriate? Gaṅgā and Yamunā are not just rivers but also goddesses whose images often adorn the entrances of North India temples. Is that perhaps what Vinayāditya seized?

The Cālukyas, it turns out, were not the only southerners to obtain Gaṅgā and Yamunā. Within sixty years of Vinayāditya’s northern expedition, the Rāṣṭrakūṭas had supplanted the Cālukyas as the dominant power of the Deccan and acquired the authoritative *pāli*-banner, replacing the Cālukyan Boar on top with their own insignia, Viṣṇu’s mount, Gāruḍa. Around 800, the Rāṣṭrakūṭa king Govinda III also made an expedition into North India, directed against the Gurjāra and Pāla kings, who were then battling for control of the Doab and the imperial city of Kanyakubja. He defeated the Gurjāra king Nāgabhāṣa II, then marched farther north, where the Pāla king Dharmapāla and his Kanyakubja protege, Cakreyudha, also deferred to the royal Rāṣṭrakūṭa progress. During this campaign, the inscriptions say, Govinda “took from his enemies the Gaṅgā and Yamunā, made beautiful by their waves, and acquired at the same moment that supreme lordship of which they are a visible sign” (Fleet 1883:156–65). Once again, acquisition of the two northern rivers was epigraphically linked with the attainment of imperial sovereignty.

Two hundred years after that, when the Rāṣṭrakūṭas were no more and the Colas were the dominant power of peninsular India, the Cola emperor Rājendra I sent an army from Tamilnad north to capture the Ganges. Though well aware of the historical precedents for such an expedition, Rājendra instead chose to have himself compared with the mythical ascetic who also had altered the course of the Ganges.

Mocking the great sage Bhagīratha, who had brought the Gaṅgā to earth through the power of his austerities, this light of the Solar lineage decided to purify his own domain with the Gaṅgā waters, brought there by the strength of his arms.

*(Krishna Sastri 1920:400)*

The Cola army made its way north, engaging and defeating a variety of opponents until they finally reached the banks of the holy river. From there, golden pots of Gaṅgā water were transported south, according to inscriptional accounts, carried atop the heads of kings defeated along the way (Krishnan 1984:74).

A pattern is clear. Three major peninsular dynasties of the early medieval period, each in its time the most powerful kingdom in the subcontinent, mounted military forays into the Gangetic plain, won skirmishes with whatever powers they encountered there, and claimed to have brought back to their own domains Gaṅgā and Yamunā in some sort of visible, substantive form. Moreover, none of them made any attempt in these raids to capture or retain territory in the Gangetic plain. Rāṣṭrakūṭa accounts admit this quite explicitly:
In battles Govinda seized the noble, unshakable fame of the kings Nāgabhaṭa and Candragupta, and then—holding the acquisition of fame as his highest aim—he plucked out the remaining kings, now deprived of support, from their own lands as if he were picking grains of rice, and reinstated them again in their very own places.

(Bhandarkar 1925–26:245)

The seemingly unacquisitive character of the expeditions perplexed earlier dynastic historians, who generally dismissed them as inconsequential, quixotic, and purposeless. The rulers themselves clearly did not regard their campaigns as inconsequential, however, for they repeatedly proclaimed them in inscriptions. First of all, the “plucking and replanting” maneuver incorporated the subjugated opponents into the imperial system, even while leaving them in place. Further, the raids were concerned predominantly with, in Rāṣṭrakūṭa terms, the “acquisition of fame”—and fame that could be objectified in the capture of particular symbolic objects. The peninsular powers regarded these objects as necessary to “manifest” or “make visible” their claims to supreme sovereignty. In medieval India, appropriating these signs of imperial sovereignty was a crucial part of constructing what Ronald Inden calls an “imperial formation.”

An imperial formation in medieval India, as Inden describes it, was not a single state under centralized administrative control, nor was it a congeries of petty states warring against one another. Rather, it was a single complex polity ruled by a king of kings who exercised his sovereignty, directly or ritually, over other would-be claimants throughout the subcontinent (Inden 1990:29–33, 213–17). In the “scale of kingships” (or “circle of kings,” as Indian treatises on statecraft put it), other kings would be compelled to recognize the imperial sovereign as pre-eminent, for instance, by rendering ceremonial homage at his court or through the forced attendance of an iconic stand-in at the imperial capital. They became, willingly or not, subordinate sharers in the transcending sovereignty of the king of kings who managed to create or maintain an imperial formation. Of course, subordinated rulers could always contest the ruling hegemony by claiming autonomy and seeking to construct their own “circle,” but always with the risk that the empire might strike back. Given the considerable strategic problems in holding together such a polity, only a few dynasties succeeded in constituting longstanding imperial formations in medieval India, and the Rāṣṭrakūṭas of the eighth through tenth centuries and the Colas of the eleventh and twelfth centuries were the most formidable exemplars.

What did the rivers Gaṅgā and Yamunā have to do with all this? Prior to the time of the Cālukya ruler Vinayāditya, every major imperial kingdom of India had been centered on the Gaṅgā-Yamunā river system. The Magadha and Maurya empires had ruled from Pātaliputra, and the imperial Kuṣāṇas had maintained a capital at Mathura. The Guptas originated at Prayāga, the very confluence of Gaṅgā and Yamunā, and ruled from there or Pātaliputra. From the time of Candragupta II, imperial Guptas prominently featured statury of Gaṅgā and Yamunā in shrines throughout their domain, evoking their own political center even as they invoked the presence of the two goddesses (Goyal 1967; Williams 1982:45–46). Later, Harṣa moved his capital from the relatively peripheral Sthāneśvara, along the upper reaches of the Yamunā, to the more central Kanyakubja when he attained imperial status.

Faced with this political Gangocentricity, a regional power aspiring to more encompassing imperial sovereignty had a choice of moving to the center, as Harṣa did, or of attempting to relocate the center at one’s own capital. The Cālukyas, Rāṣṭrakūṭas, and Colas evidently chose the second option. In their own version of
Muhammad-and-the-mountain, they brought not only the mountain—in the form of the Mount Kailasa-style temples of Śiva that they each constructed—but also the river that issued from that mountain to their own sovereign selves, remaking in the process the imperial topography of the subcontinent (Inden 1990:256–62).

In what form did they effect this? In the case of the Colas, inscriptions state explicitly that Rājendra had Gaṅgā water transported in pots. With the Cālukyas and Rāṣṭrakūṭas, the evidence is not so clear. Gaṅgā and Yamunā are simply mentioned in lists of insignia, along with other items of regalia such as banners and musical instruments, indicating only that they are material things of some sort. A Rāṣṭrakūṭa inscription does tell us that Gaṅgā and Yamunā are “made beautiful by their waves,” which describes the rivers themselves, of course, but would also apply to banners waving in the breeze or to graceful sculpted images. Scholars have offered at least three hypotheses: the Cālukyas and Rāṣṭrakūṭas seized images of the goddesses Gaṅgā and Yamunā; they seized banners with Gaṅgā and Yamunā imprinted on them; or they took pots containing water from the two rivers. All are plausible. In light of the recurrent plundering of images to make political statements during the medieval period, however, I consider it most likely that the Deccan powers looted images of Gaṅgā and Yamunā from existing temples at Prayāga or Kanyakubja.

Even if they were not themselves images, though, the appropriation of Gaṅgā and Yamunā had an important bearing on the art of their new homes. Both Cālukyas and Rāṣṭrakūṭas appear to have commemorated their acquisitions by constructing shrines with Gaṅgā and Yamunā prominently featured. At Lād Khān temple in Aihole, probably built during the reign of the Cālukya king Vijayāditya, images of the two river-goddesses are located on the outer columns of the porch, displayed like trophies (illustration 4). Further, Gaṅgā and Yamunā appear as
important icons in Cālukyan art only from this time on. It is not a matter of a slowly permeating northern iconographic figure finally reaching the Deccan. Rather, it appears that the Cālukyas only now felt that they had attained the degree of sovereignty where they could display with confidence (and without fear of retribution) the North Indian river-goddesses. As for the Rāṣṭrakūṭas, Govinda III was probably responsible for construction of the shrine of the Three River-Goddesses at Ellora, an adjunct to the great Kailāsa rock-cut temple built there by his predecessor Kṛṣṇa I (Goetz 1974:91–107). Three large panels on the rear wall depict Gaṅgā at the center flanked by Yamunā and Sarasvatī, the subtle river that joins the other two at Prayāga. After the Rāṣṭrakūṭa exploits in the Doab, the Rāṣṭrakūṭas began to include Gaṅgā and Yamunā on their imperial seals, just as the Cālukyas had.

The most dramatic commemoration of Gaṅgā-capture, however, was that of
Rajendra. When the waters reached the Cola territories, Rajendra had a “liquid pillar of victory” made of Ganga-water, designated the “Cola-Ganga,” constructed in the new capital that he had just built, Gangaikondacholapuram, the “city of the Cola king who took the Ganga.” Presiding over the city was a new Kailasa-like imperial Siva temple (illustration 5). Rajendra furnished the city and the temple with objects and images seized in the course of his conquests: from the Cakrlikyas a Sun-pedestal, several images of Durga, and a Ganesha image; from the Eastern Cakrlikyas, a resting Nandi, Siva’s bull mount; from the Kalingas of Orissa, three large stone images of Bhairava and Bhairavi and an awesome eight-armed Kali image; from the Pulas of Bengal, a bronze image of Siva dancing on Nandi’s back; and undoubtedly many more since removed by plunderers (Balasubrahmanyam 1975; Nagaswamy 1970; Sivaramamurti 1964a). At the four entry gates of the fortified city, Rajendra placed images of the goddess Durga or Kali to act as guardians of the community within. One of the guardians, at least, was a Cakrlikyan conscript: a dramatic stone image of eight-armed Durga defeating the Buffalo-demon, her left foot firmly planted on the back of the demon, who is on his knees and fading fast (illustration 6). Though the pālī-banner itself was no longer a target of imperial aspiration, the new capital Rajendra built was a sort of city-scale pālī-banner, with the tower of the Siva temple looming over the rows of loot, insignia of the kings he had subordinated.

Destruction and Devotion

Of all modes of expropriation, certainly the most radical involves the destruction of images. Here it is not just a matter of change in proprietor but a radical transformation in form. The image is reduced to its material elements, denying or extinguishing any divine presence that may have inhabited it and risking in the process the possibility of divine retribution. Instead of continuing to exist as a second-order signifier, the object is at one moment deconstituted in an act powerful in rhetorical impact but limited in duration.

There is no question that medieval Hindu kings frequently destroyed religious images as part of more general rampages. When the Paramaras sacked the Rāṣṭakūṭa capital of Mānyakheśa or when the Colas leveled the Cakrlikya capital at Kalyāṇi, we must presume that the many temples and images of those royal centers could not have been spared. However, Hindu narratives and inscriptions seldom describe destruction of images as a directed, politically meaningful act. (Abundant narratives of intentional image destruction come with the entry of Islam into the subcontinent, but that is another story.) When they do, they most often treat it as an extraordinary action, something morally ambiguous that may be justified only in extreme situations. Take, for instance, the muddled image raid of the Gauḍa soldiers, described by Kalhana in his Rājatarangini (RT) (Stein 1892:56; Sitaram Pandit 1935:125–26).

The great eighth-century Kashmiri ruler Lalitāditya, according to Kalhana’s reckoning, was for the most part a high-minded monarch, but he was also capable of duplicity in the service of imperial policy. Once, after making a promise of safe conduct to the king of Gauḍa (Bengal) and offering as surety (madhyastha; literally, “intermediary”) the image of Viṣṇu Parihāsakeśa, Lalitāditya treacherously ordered the king assassinated. Such a brazen act clearly departed from all standards of proper royal conduct and called for revenge. As we might expect, the reprisal was directed not at the perpetrator of the deed but at its intermediary. A troop of the murdered king’s dedicated attendants sneaked into Kashmir posing as pilgrims and made their way toward the temple of Parihāsakeśa.
Now Parihasakesava was not just any image. After Lalitaditya's successful conquest of the directions in the mid-eighth century, making him the premier ruler of North India, he returned to Kashmir and established a new capital at the confluence of the Vitasta and Sindhu rivers, Parihásapura. In and around the new capital, Lalitaditya and his retinue established a number of shrines, but the dominant one was a sarvatobhadra temple dedicated to Viṣṇu Parihasakesava (Inden 1985). A sarvatobhadra temple was the highest form of temple structure, and the immense, silver Parihásakesava that stood at its center was an image of Viṣṇu Vaikunṭha, the cosmic overlord whose four visages, facing in the cardinal directions, represented Viṣṇu's four primary emanations. This was the principal ruling image of the empire that Lalitaditya had established, and to attack it was to threaten the very center of that polity.

Outside the temple, the Gauḍa soldiers mustered, preparing to destroy the imperial image. Fortunately for Lalitaditya, however, the priests of Parihásakesava were a vigilant lot, and the Gauḍa image raiders were not well-acquainted with the fine points of Kashmiri images.

Though the king was abroad, the priests observed that the soldiers wanted to enter, and they closed the gates of the Parihásakesava shrine. Aroused with boldness, the soldiers got a hold of the silver Rāmasvāmin image, which they mistook for Parihásakesava. They carried it out and ground it into dust. And even as Lalitaditya’s troops who had come out from the city were killing them at each step, the Gauḍas continued to break it into particles and scatter them in every direction.

(\textit{RT} 4.326–28)

The image of Rāmasvāmin, silver as was Parihásakesava, had been excavated some years earlier by Lalitaditya in a remote part of Kashmir (\textit{RT} 4.265–76). The king had it brought to the capital, and a small stone shrine was built for it near the Parihásakesava temple. Although supposed to be an ancient image (Lalitaditya claimed it had been established by Rāma himself), it certainly did not possess the imperial grandeur of Parihásakesava. As clearly indicated by the shrine housing it, Rāmasvāmin occupied a position subordinate to the imperial image of Viṣṇu within the hierarchy of Kashmiri divinities.

By this token, then, the image raid of the Gauḍa avengers was a botched affair. They failed to destroy Lalitaditya’s central ruling image, the image that had stood as deceitful assurance of their own king’s security, and they mistakenly crushed a lesser icon. But this is not the moral that Kalhaṇa draws from the incident. Rather, he chooses to praise the extraordinary devotion that the raiders showed to their former lord.

The showers of their blood illuminated their uncommon devotion (bhakti) to their lord, and the earth itself was enriched. . . . What a lengthy path they traveled! And what devotion they showed to their deceased ruler! The Creator himself could not accomplish what the Gauḍa soldiers achieved that day.

(\textit{RT} 4.330–32)

Utter devotional commitment to a lord (whether divine or human) may in certain circumstances transcend normal moral evaluation. Where the provocation is great, devotion may transmute normally immoral acts into exemplary ones. The Gauḍa raiders, however, were not the only ones to demonstrate loyalty to their superior.
When those Gauḍa demons (rākṣasas) brought destruction, the holy Pariḥāsaṅkeśava, the king's favored image, was protected through the sacrifice of Rāmasvāmin.

*(RT 4.334)*

Images, too, are capable of *bhakti* toward their lords.

**Final Destinations**

The story did not necessarily end there for these images. Many of the objects referred to in this article did suffer subsequent destruction. The solid-gold Buddha of the Abhayagiri monastery, for example, undoubtedly was destroyed in the 1017 Cola raid carried out by Rājendra on Anurādhapura:

They broke into the relic chambers in the three chambers and throughout Lanka, stealing many costly images of gold and other metals. They violently destroyed all the monasteries everywhere, and like *yakṣas* sucking blood they took away all the treasures of Lanka.

*(CV 55.20–21)*

The two Buddhas sent by Aggabodi VIII to appease the Rāṣṭrākūta threat were destroyed either in the 972 razing of Māṇyakheṭa by the Paramāra ruler Haṛṣāsiyaka or in the 1007 sack by Rājendra Cola. The bejeweled Kāliyavadha Kṛṣṇa image that Laksmanarājā Kalacuri stole from Orissa and gave to the deity at Somanātha was no doubt expropriated during Mahmūd's 1026 destruction of the temple and, following Ghaznavid policy, it would have been melted down along with other metal idols to gild the mosque at Ghaznā.

Several of the images, though, have escaped such fates and have been able to continue their lives resituated as art objects in Indian museums. Thus, the small stone Bālakṛṣṇa carried by Kṛṣṇadevarāya from Udayagiri to his own capital in 1512 was thrown from its pedestal and its arms broken, perhaps in 1565, when Muslim armies overran the city. Such desecration and mutilation would have excluded the object from further ritual use. For art objects, however, a degree of mutilation is not necessarily a debit, for it may serve to certify age and authenticity. So, when the archaeologist A. H. Longhurst found the image lying among the debris of its disused temple in the early twentieth century, he sent it off to join the collection of the Government Museum in Madras.

Museums are contexts too, of course, and the Udayagiri Bālakṛṣṇa once again has taken on a new significance in its new location as part of a museological narrative of national identity. As we have seen, the appropriated Child-Kṛṣṇa image had been previously set up in its temple at Vijayanagar both to be worshiped as an icon of the god Kṛṣṇa and to serve as a synecdoche for the Gajapati kingdom subsumed within the encompassing Vijayanagar imperial formation. But the political formations and agonistic relations within which such rhetorical claims were stated and made sense were themselves transient, and, when Gajapati and Vijayanagar existed no more as polities, the metonymic role of the Udayagiri Bālakṛṣṇa would no longer have any currency.

Its new role derives, rather, from the colonial and postcolonial project of constructing an Indian national identity, a project in which past antagonisms are effaced whenever possible in pursuit of a more encompassing unity. This unity most often has been considered to lie in the cultural domain rather than in any past political formation, for, as the Government Museum's centennial souvenir volume
put it, "in spite of its great diversity, Indian culture has a common basic pattern." During the twentieth century, religious objects and artifacts of all sorts, embodying the collective artistic heritage of the Indian nation, have been collected, dated, organized, and exhibited in the Madras Museum. Since 1939, the sculptural arts of India have been arranged chronologically, grouped according to major imperial periods, to present to the Indian public an account of its own artistic history in images. Here the Udayagiri Bālaṅkṛṣṇa that once signified Gajapati subordination takes its place as a representative of the "Vijayanagar Period (1300–1600)."

For it, as for many Indian objects, the medieval rhetoric of objects, of victory and incorporation, has given way to the museological rhetoric of historical sequence and cumulative cultural heritage.

List of References


