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ARTICLE

Divinized protection: a set of unique, inscribed shields from Malla, Nepal

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Abstract

This article examines a set of important but unpublished shields from Malla, Nepal, discovered in the Patan Palace Complex, by combining philology with the study of material culture. The four shields, which display images of Hindu deities, are the only known instance of inscribed textiles in pre-modern Newar art history. The paper first deciphers the shields' inscriptions to explain their overall importance for scholarship, and then seeks to uncover their iconographic scheme by studying the objects alongside unpublished liturgical texts in order to prove that they were commissioned for the worship of Ugracaṇḍā, a goddess key to Newar conceptions of kingship. I delve into the provenance and historical background of the shields and explore broader Indic ideas of the divinization of weapons to explain the ritual function and symbolic significance of these objects for royal celebrations. In doing so, we also posit the specific political context behind their creation.

Keywords: Sanskrit studies; epigraphy; Śākta Tantra; Tantric iconography; Hindu kingship; Navarātra; Nepalese art history

It may come as a surprise that the subject of this article – four large, inscribed and iconographic shields from Nepal dating from the sixteenth century – has not been yet published. Their rarity, age, and compelling beauty make them an obvious focus for academic interest. Such is the case because, until recently, these objects were stored in a sealed-off section of Mūl Cok, the principal courtyard of the Palace in Patan, one of three historic city states of the Kathmandu Valley. Their existence, before rediscovery by officials of the Patan Palace Museum during the renovation of Mūl Cok between 2010 and 2012, was known only to a handful of devotees who had ceased to worship these sacred objects for decades, precluding them from inclusion in Slusser's Museum Catalogue (2002). It was only after a later restoration of Mūl Cok, necessitated by the 2015 Gorkha earthquake and completed in 2017, that the artworks became publicly displayed and known to scholars.

The purpose of this article is to combine philology with art history to assess the historical context, iconography, and religious function of these remarkable objects. We first discuss the inscriptions and craftsmanship of the shields, arguing that these factors alone show them to be of considerable importance for Nepalese art history. We then look closely at the identity of the depicted deities using textual models relevant to their sectarian milieu. In doing so, I show that the four deities may have originally belonged to a wider pantheon of Śākta divinities from a single tradition of goddess worship. Finally, we explore the possible ritual purpose of these curious artworks and question why the shield, rather than

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any other medium, was selected as the canvas for these gods. Our task will be assisted by evidence from unpublished liturgical manuscripts which are revealing of the artworks' religious background.

Inscriptions and art historical importance

The four objects under examination are made out of fine strips of cane which have been twined with dyed cotton threads of different colours to form images of deities. These domed shields are framed with a thicker band of cane around their circumference and fixed in place with six iron struts. Each shield depicts a deity located on their mount:

1) Ugracaṇḍā[1] mounted on her lion slaying the buffalo demon;
2) Cāmuṇḍā astride a corpse;
3) Gaṇeśa atop the mouse; and
4) Bhairava also on top of a corpse (Figures 1–4).



Figure 1. Shield depicting Ugracaṇḍā Nepal; 1588/1589
Cotton thread on cane; diameter approx. 65 cm
Patan Museum, Patan, Nepal
Photo courtesy of author

My identification of these four deities, as well as questions surrounding why these specific iconic types were depicted, will become clear later.

A noteworthy feature of the shields is that most of them display threaded inscriptions, the Cāmuṇḍā being the only exception. We begin with the Bhairava shield whose inscription remains highly legible and flanks the figure's head to the left and right (64a). To the shield's left (as we face it), the inscription bears a *siddham*[2] mark followed by the word

[1] Her name is also often spelt Ugracaṇḍī in the literature of the Newars but I have used Ugracaṇḍā throughout for the sake of consistency.

[2] These marks often denote the beginning of an inscription or text segment. For more information on types of *siddham*s, see Bhattarai (2020: 102–03).

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Figure 1a. Close-up of inscription from Figure 1. Photo courtesy of author.



Figure 1b. Close-up of demons from Figure 1. Photo courtesy of author.

"*samvat*" (year). On the right of Bhairava, we have the number "709". Although Nepal had several calendars (Śāka, Mānadeva, Lakṣmaṇa, Nepāla, Vikrama), only the Nepāla Samvat (NS) could conceivably be the one in use here given its prevalence during Nepal's late Malla period (1482–1769) as well as the historic style and subject of these artworks. Thus, the year of their creation can be firmly placed at 1588/1589 CE. The same inscription with a variant in the spelling of the word "*samvat*" (the use of *anusvāra* instead of "m", giving us *saṃvat*) also preceded by the *siddham* mark is found at the bottom of the Ugracaṇḍā shield beneath the lotus pedestal (Figure 1a).

A far longer inscription is found on the Gaṇeśa shield with four lines of writing to the left of the god's head and three lines to his right from the viewer's perspective (Figure 3a). It is likely that, like the Bhairava shield, the lines would have been read continuously from left to right despite the intervening image. Much of the inscription remains illegible due to fraying of the thread. The first line on the left can be made out with confidence, this being a *siddham* followed by "*samvat* 70-" (the last numeral is damaged). Given that the final number in the date appears quite clearly on the two other shields, the year can be reconstructed as "709". This is followed by an illegible first line on the right side. On the second line, starting from the left, is the word "*śrī*", possibly followed by the numeral "3", a common honorific appended to proper names in Malla inscriptions meaning "thrice-blessed". The remaining writing on the left side of the second line is indecipherable. On the same line on the right, we can make out "*sitasaptamī*", indicating that the object was consecrated on the seventh

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Figure 2. Shield depicting Cāmuṇḍā Nepal; 1588/1589
Cotton thread on cane; diameter approx. 65 cm
Patan Museum, Patan, Nepal
Photo courtesy of author



Figure 3. Shield depicting Gaṇeśa Nepal; 1588/1589
Cotton thread on cane; diameter approx. 65 cm
Patan Museum, Patan, Nepal
Photo courtesy of author

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Figure 3a. Close-up of inscriptions from Figure 3. Photo courtesy of author.

night (*saptamī*) of a bright fortnight (*sita*) of a month likely named on the illegible first line. The third line on the left is again illegible to me but on the right, we seem to have the benediction "*śubhaṃ*" ("auspiciousness") followed by a *daṇḍa*. The final line, for which we have only the left, possibly reads "*saṃpūrṇaṃ*" ("complete"), marking the end of the inscription. Thus, my tentative reading of the inscription is as follows (the transcription conventions are provided below[3]):

Left side	Right side
[siddham mark] samvat 70(9)	- - - - -
śrī 3 - - - - i -	sitasaptamī
- - - - -	śubhaṃ |
saṃpūr(ṇa)(ṃ)	no writing

Now that the inscriptions have been read to the best of our abilities, we may take note of the peculiar technique by which the shields were created. Convex cane shields are commonly found in the Himalayas and beyond, making the base material for our four Nepali examples unsurprising. Although no secondary literature is exclusively devoted to Newar shields, the typology of cane shields from Tibet – a region whose weaponry has much in common with Nepal's – has been extensively recorded (LaRocca 2006: 92–95). LaRocca notes that both flat and domed cane shields exist in Tibet but that the latter are more common. The Tibetan shields studied by LaRocca are mostly unadorned but, if adorned, are decorated with simple geometric patterns effected by weaving strips of cane of different colours. What makes our objects remarkable is the combination of thread and cane and the meticulous method of twining the former onto the latter to create sophisticated iconography. To my knowledge, no comparable examples of this practice are found on shields anywhere else in South Asia

[3] My convention is to use a dash for an illegible character (vowel, consonant, or conjunct consonant) while letters in round parentheses represent conjectures of entirely illegible *akṣara*s or of those that are too faint to read with any confidence. Words in square brackets denote non-alphanumeric symbols. The asterisks in my edition of manuscript passages indicate that the word being emended is part of a compound.

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Figure 4. Shield depicting Bhairava Nepal; 1588/1589
Cotton thread on cane; diameter approx. 65 cm
Patan Museum, Patan, Nepal
Photo courtesy of author



Figure 4a. Close-up of inscription from Figure 4. Photo courtesy of author.

or the Himalayas. This effusive imagery makes these objects unique in the region but also raises tantalizing questions about how and when this practice emerged in the Kathmandu Valley.

It is apparent that the artists responsible for our artworks have mastered this challenging craft and, out of restrictive methods and materials, created objects full of both vibrancy and precision. The outlines of the figures as well as their limbs and facial features are rendered in a convincing and naturalistic way. The artist is also meticulous in the depiction of minor details. Elements such as the fine patterning of the deities' clothes, their armour and particularities of their ornaments are portrayed with care. The composition of coloured threads to create shading and contrast or to heighten the linearity of the profiles is also

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Figure 5. Folio 4v from Cambridge Kalāpustaka (Add.864) Nepal; late sixteenth century
Watercolour on paper; 17.8 × 23.8 cm per folio
Cambridge University Library
Photo © Cambridge University Library

striking. The fact that these shields manage to incorporate many of the admirable elements we associate with Newar painting of the same period, a far more pliable artform, is a testament to the skill of the shields' creators.

By exploring the context of early Newar textiles, the art historical value of these objects becomes more evident. Very little has been written on pre-modern Newar textiles with scholarship mostly focused on the art of embroidery. In a short but important article which remains the sole work to deal with the dating of such objects, Crill (1989) has shown that pieces of medieval Nepalese embroidery, rather than being derivative of Sino-Tibetan textile traditions as earlier assumed, possess their own distinctive techniques and styles of stitching. Crill also disproves preconceptions in scholarship on the antiquity of pre-modern Newar textiles which had placed such works in the eighteenth or nineteenth century. Through radiocarbon dating of two pieces, which provided a respective date range of 1220–1430 CE and 1440–1650 CE (illustrated here as Figure 5, we now know surviving Newar textiles to be several centuries older than earlier imagined.

Despite this progress, the chronological range afforded by radiocarbon dating is imprecise, offering a timeframe that is centuries wide. Our shields are therefore important not only as an addition to the small handful of recorded medieval Newar textiles but also as the only known objects in this medium to be inscribed. They thus constitute the sole group of Newar textiles that can be dated to a specific year. Their specificity may allow us to use their style as a touchstone for dating other objects of this kind and to plot more accurately the history of this medium of Newar art in the future.

Ugracaṇḍā

Following our overview, we may now treat the shields individually. We first examine the shield which I identify as Ugracaṇḍā, a Tantricized form of the buffalo-slaying goddess (*mahiṣāsuramardinī*) popular in medieval Nepal. Her arms number 18 and hold an array of weapons. Like the deities on the other shields, she is one-faced and three-eyed, with ornate dress and ornaments. Her upper body is covered with a fish-scale pattern chain mail. Her lower body is dressed in a long skirt with a delicate pattern of dotted squares now almost

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imperceptible. On her head, we find a headdress embedded on its lower band with five now very faint skulls. At the sides are seen the crescent moon and sun representative of the goddess's cosmic power. Below these, fixed into her coiffure, are a pair of flags ubiquitous in later Malla depictions of martial deities (Blom 1989: 12, 45). Her ears display two large hoop earrings also common to the Cāmuṇḍā and Bhairava shields. Her arms are adorned with armlets and bracelets. Towards the shield's base, we see her right foot planted on the back of a roaring lion while Mahiṣāsura lies slain beneath her left side. Another pair of near identical demons, armed with a sword in their right hand, flank the lion and Mahiṣāsura and are tilting away from the goddess. All five figures are supported by a ten-petalled lotus pedestal beneath which one finds the inscribed date.

The archetype of the buffalo-slaying goddess is found across the Hindu world, but this template is particularized according to specific time periods and regions, leading to the emergence of goddesses with distinct identities. We can establish the identity of this buffalo-slayer as Ugracaṇḍā by examining the system of Navadurgā worship in Nepal for which Ugracaṇḍā is the central deity. The tradition of worshipping a central Durgā surrounded by eight other Durgās is found in various iterations across the Indian subcontinent (Blom 1989: 51, n. 37; Sanderson 2009: 111–12; and Sarkar 2017: 232, 253). The Newar system of nine Durgās has the same names and sequence as the pan-India *Agnipurāṇa*'s (Rudracaṇḍā, Pracaṇḍā, Candogrā, Caṇḍanāyikā, Caṇḍā, Caṇḍavatī, Caṇḍarūpā and Aticaṇḍikā with Ugracaṇḍā at their centre) (Zotter 2018: 69–70; 74, n. 17). What is distinct about the Newar system, however, is the visualization of these nine deities, which Zotter (2018: 65–6) notes is seemingly unique to Malla Nepal. The most common means of depicting the nine Caṇḍās in Malla Nepal was to portray the central Ugracaṇḍā with 18 arms and her ancillary deities with 16. Whereas Indian sources also prescribe this numerical arrangement of arms for the central Durgā and her retinue,[4] their hand implements in the Newar and non-Newar models differ. With this in mind, three factors verify that the shield's goddess is Ugracaṇḍā. First, she has 18 rather than 16 arms with her discernible hand implements matching the Newar textual templates as elaborated below. Second, our deity has the colour prescribed for Ugracaṇḍā in Newar *paddhati*s, which is said to be bright and resplendent, or as the visualization translated below describes it "the colour of burning gold" (the eight other Caṇḍās are each prescribed their own colour). Finally, the most common way for artists to portray the two additional arms belonging to Ugracaṇḍā lacking in her retinue is to show them as two upright arms constituting her seventh pair, the right holding the *ḍamaru* and the left the *khaṭvāṅga* as explained in Zotter (2018: 66–7). Despite damage, our deity's seventh pair of arms are indeed upright, while the long slim handle of the *khaṭvāṅga* can still be discerned in her proper left hand.

Although the iconography of Ugracaṇḍā is explored by the above-mentioned scholars, a full visualization of this goddess from Malla-era *paddhati*s has not been published in any secondary literature. It is therefore worth providing a complete *dhyāna* here which may be of use to scholars researching Ugracaṇḍā and for comparison with our shield. Most of the Malla-era *paddhati*s studied by me present one of two specific *dhyāna*s for Ugracaṇḍā which are very close. Both *dhyāna*s (here called Dhyāna 1 and Dhyāna 2 for simplification) provide salient details of the goddess's appearance as well as descriptions of the slaying of Mahiṣāsura and the distinction between her hand implements and those of her retinue. Dhyāna 1, which is the more descriptive of the two, can be found in such *paddhati*s as the *Ugracaṇḍādevyarcana* (NGMPP A 231-12: fl. 10r6–11r2), *Ugracaṇḍāpūjāvidhi* (E 1878-1: 6b, l.2–7a, l.7) as well as several Siddhilakṣmī liturgies, including the *Siddhilakṣmīkramasthaṇḍilārcanavidhi* (A 249-6: fl. 127r3–127v1) and *Siddhilakṣmyadhivāsanasthaṇḍilārcanavidhi* (B 198-2: fl. 44r4–44v6).

[4] Sarkar (2012, n. 117) gives the iconographic configuration for the nine Durgās according to the *Agnipurāṇa*.

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Meanwhile, Dhyāna 2 is preserved in three *paddhati*s which I have examined, namely the *Siddhilakṣmīkramārcana, Ugracaṇḍādevyarcanavidhi* (E 1497-3: exposures 7a, l. 1–b, l.3) and an unnamed *Ugracaṇḍāpaddhati* (A 148-1: fl. 123r6–v4).

Since *paddhati*s commonly share material and a single *paddhati* may derive its instructions from multiple scriptural sources, it is unfeasible to identify the *locus classicus* for these two *dhyāna*s. I should also explain my incorporation of Siddhilakṣmī sources into our study of Ugracaṇḍā since we will return to these sources later. The cults of Siddhilakṣmī and Ugracaṇḍā are so closely aligned as to be inseparable in many instances. Both deities are understood as the lineal goddess of the Malla Kings, with Ugracaṇḍā often appearing as the exoteric manifestation of both Siddhilakṣmī and Taleju, the prime royal goddess of the Mallas whose true identity remains a complicated matter.[5] Furthermore, the more extensive liturgies of Siddhilakṣmī invariably include the worship of Ugracaṇḍā in their sequence, using her propitiation as a preliminary to that of Siddhilakṣmī in its routine worship and prescribing instructions for the Navarātra worship of Ugracaṇḍā as is found in all three Siddhilakṣmī *paddhati*s cited above. Ugracaṇḍā is also grouped together with Siddhilakṣmī and Guhyakālī in Newar religious literature as the patron goddesses of the Kaula's Northern Transmission (Uttarāmnāya), showing them to be in some sense synonymous (Sanderson 2004: 367).

On account of their ubiquity and consistency across liturgies, we may assume that the two *dhyāna*s were the principal textual templates for Malla-era artists and are thus important for the study of the Ugracaṇḍā shield. I therefore give an edition and translation of Dhyāna 1 below as transcribed from the *Ugracaṇḍādevyarcana* whose colophon informs us that it was written during the reign of Bhūpatīndramalla (r. 1696–1722). Those familiar with late Malla Sanskrit will be aware of certain peculiarities in the language.[6] I have tried to refrain from amending the original as far as possible since most of these anomalies are shared across our witnesses and are not scribal errors. However, when such anomalies render the text incomprehensible, I make minor emendations.

AIṂ 5 HRIṂ |
taptacāmīkaravarṇā nānāpuṣpopaśobhitā (em.: *puṣpapasobhitā Cod.) |
divyavastraparidhānā mahiṣāsanagāminī || 1 ||
kirīṭakuṇḍalākāraiḥ keyūrair maṇinūpuraiḥ |
ratnamālāvicitraiś ca hāramālāvalambitaiḥ || 2 ||
aṣṭādaśabhujākrāntā pīnavakṣastanūruhā |
sarvālaṃkārasaṃyuktā taḍitkoṭisamaprabhā || 3 ||
khaḍgaḥ śaras tathā cakraṃ vajrāṃkuśadharā śubhā |
varadaṃ ḍamaruhastā śūlapātrasuśobhitā || 4 ||
dakṣiṇe ca karā ete (em.: etā Cod.) yathā śobhās tathāpare|
kheṭakaṃ dhanurhastā ca gadā ghaṇṭā suśobhitā || 5 ||
pāśaṃ ca tarjanīhastā khaṭvāṅgaṃ keśapāśakaṃ|
bindumudrā tathā sindhusiṃhāsanoparisthitā || 6 ||
adhaḥ sthitvā śiraśchinnaṃ mahiṣaṃ ca mahāsuraṃ |
tadgrīvān nirgatadaityaṃ mahābalaparākramaṃ || 7 ||
bhedayitvā triśūlena vidhṛtā sā śiroruhā |

[5] This phenomenon is observable in the way Ugracaṇḍā acts as the public manifestation of the goddess in temples of Siddhilakṣmī (Siddhilakṣmī of Darbār Square and Nyātāpola, Bhaktapur) and Taleju (Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur). At these sites, although the central icon is not that of Ugracaṇḍā, she is nonetheless the figure who adorns the publicly accessible decorative elements of these temples (the niches, porches, struts, and tympanums).

[6] These commonly include fluid genders for nouns, especially between masc. and neut., confusion between accusative and nominative cases, inverted compounds and awkward syntax.

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evaṃ dhyatvā mahādevī sarvakāmaphalapradā|| 8 ||
śeṣā ṣoḍaśahastā ca khaṭvāṅgaḍamaruṃ vinā|

AIṂ 5 HRIṂ (*mantra* of the goddess)

(Ugracaṇḍā) has the colour of burning gold and is adorned with myriad flowers. Her upper garment is a divine cloth and she is astride the buffalo demon. She is endowed with 18 hands as well as earrings and a diadem, armlets, bejewelled anklets and various garlands of gems and pendulous necklaces. Arising from her body are thick breasts. She is enjoined with all ornaments and shares the brightness of a crore of lightnings. (On her right) there are the sword, arrow and discus. Beautiful, she also holds the *vajra* and the elephant goad. There is (also) the fearlessness gesture, a hand with the *ḍamaru* drum. She is splendid with the spear and skull-cup. Just as her hands on the left are beautiful so too are the others. (On the left), there is the shield, a hand with a bow, the club, beautiful bell, noose, hand in *tarjanī* gesture, skull staff and the lock of (*asura*'s) hair and the *bindumudrā*. She is seated atop a white lion mount. Standing below (her) is the Great Asura who is a buffalo, his head cut off. Piercing the *daitya* of great strength and power that emerges from its (the buffalo's) neck with her trident, she grasps his hair. Having imagined her thus, the Great Goddess becomes the granter of the fruits of all desires. The remaining (eight goddesses) are without the skull staff and *ḍamaru*.

As is quite evident, this *dhyana*, as well as our shield, contain the standard elements of the medieval archetype of the buffalo-slayer, some aspects of which are already present in the third chapter of the *Devīmāhātmya*, oft-considered the classical textual source for this goddess while others are elaborated in subsequent Purāṇas and manuals.[7] Thus, in both the *dhyāna* and shield, we find widespread tropes such as the slaying of Mahiṣāsura using a trident, his decapitation, the emergence of his true *daitya* form from the slain buffalo's body, and the grasping of his hair. The last aspect is particularly emphasized by Newar *paddhati*s and is also reflected in the depiction of the thick strands of hair clutched by the goddess on the shield. Other, more particular details also chime between the *dhyāna* and shield, especially the textual prescription of the varied ornaments (earrings, diadem, armlets, anklets, and garlands), all of which are seen clearly on our textile.

Although the *dhyāna* does not explain the identity of the two other demons on our shield (a close-up of each demon is found in Figure 1b) who are being strangled by the goddess's snake nooses, their presence is accounted for elsewhere in Newar *paddhati*s. The presence of these two, a common and almost unvarying feature of Newar depictions of Ugracaṇḍā, is noted by scholars. Pal (1981: 42) states that "it is difficult to ascertain whether they depict a particular pair of generals, such as Caṇḍa and Muṇḍa or Śumbha and Niśumbha". Meanwhile, Blom brings our attention to an artist's model book of nineteenth-century origin which labels these two figures Śumbha and Niśumbha (Blom 1989: 41). We may argue that the Malla-era *paddhati*s also show that centuries earlier, ritualists had also understood these two figures to be Śumbha and Niśumbha. In all such *paddhati*s, there are instructions for the worship and installation of the goddess's "seats" (*āsana*s) or the tiers above which the goddess should be positioned in her visualization. Although the total number of tiers in this sequence of worship may differ, the elements found in all texts are: 1) the lotus pedestal; 2)

[7] An influential purāṇic visualization is to be found in *Kālikāpurāṇa*: 61.10–20, while an example of a late manual containing an expanded visualization is Vidyāpati's Durgābhaktitaraṅgiṇī: 136–9.

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Figure 6. Detail from embroidered temple panel (IM.24-1936) Nepal; 15th–16th century
Embroidered cotton with silks; 37.5 × 130 cm
Victoria and Albert Museum
Photo © Victoria and Albert Museum

the lion mount; 3) Mahiṣāsura; 4) Śumbha; and 5) Niśumbha.[8] All these elements are found in this as well as many other depictions of Ugracaṇḍā.

The three demons on our shield are also the features that most readily enable a stylistic comparison with contemporaneous artworks in other mediums. Pal, who laid much of the groundwork for the accepted chronology of Newar painting, notes that the period around 1575–1625 saw the development of a very particular style of painting in the Valley. He makes a convincing argument that paintings from this period are discernible on account of the "decorative exuberance" of the vegetative patterns in their background as well as specific "figurative types with ... distinctive features" (Pal 1978: 97). Pal (1978: 99) explains the peculiarity of these types as follows:

> The faces are almost always shown in three-quarter profile and are distinguished by long noses, prominently looped chins and bow-shaped eyes with their ends projecting slightly. In profile, therefore, the further eye appears to protrude somewhat.

Even a quick glance at the shields' demons shows them to match almost exactly this description.

To elaborate, one of the most extensive sources for this sixteenth-century style of painting is a *kalāpustaka* (illustrated book) held in the collection of the Cambridge University Library (UL Add.864), a text dated by scholars to roughly the same period as our shields and one whose importance has been well-recognized (see Pal 1967 and Cuneo 2017). This manuscript is a vast and eclectic document but since it also contains scenes from the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa, Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*, there are ample depictions of *asura*s. Any of the *asura*s taken at random from this *kalāpustaka* show a strong affinity with our shield. However, we might draw particular attention to the similarities between our three demons and those on the upper row of fl. 4v of this manuscript (Figure 6) which depicts the *samudramanthana* (churning of the ocean of milk).

There, like the demons on our shields, the *asura*s are shown in the same three-quarter profile, the ends of their eyes also narrowing into a black line stretching to the end of their faces. The similarity between these demons and the Mahiṣāsura of the shield is especially marked. For instance, the demons in the *kalāpustaka* display multi-coloured faces due to the

[8] See, for instance, *Ugracaṇḍādevyarcana* (NGMPP A 231-12: fl. 10r5–6) and *Ugracaṇḍāpūjāvidhi* (NGMPP E 1878-1: 6a, l.7–b, l.2)

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horizontal visor-like strip that forms between the eyelids and eyebrows coloured differently to the rest of their face. This peculiar colouring is also observed in the central demon on the shield for whom this strip is blue-green against his whiteish face. Further similarities exist between their dress, especially their crested and striated headdresses and their earrings which are made from multiple inset hoops. We may also note the chain mail armour worn by the *kalāpustaka* demons whose pattern bears a strong resemblance to that of the Ugracaṇḍā and Gaṇeśa shields. Such similarities go to show that the makers of the shield and draftsmen of the period shared the same visual vocabulary. It is almost certain then that the artists responsible for the shields' design, if not its actual threading, were local and came from the Newar community of draftsmen and painters (*citrakara*), a point already noted by Crill (1989: 35) in relation to works of embroidery.[9]

Cāmuṇḍā

The next shield under examination (Figure 2) is unmistakably a depiction of Cāmuṇḍā. Her bright red colour and emaciated body make this identification obvious. This emaciation is portrayed using lines of white thread accentuated by a thin band of black which covers her body and gives the impression of bones and sinews. This colour combination is also painstakingly applied in circular formations on her wrists, elbows and ankles to portray joints and used to intensify her facial features. In addition to ornaments worn by Ugracaṇḍā – the headdress, pair of flags, and hoop earrings – we find macabre adornments typical of Cāmuṇḍā; she wears a garland of heads reaching down to her ankles and her lower body is decorated with a bone girdle resting on top of her skirt. Her upper body remains bare, with the declivity of her hollow belly shown in white. She is six-armed and stands atop her standard mount – a human corpse. To enhance this horrifying appearance, the artist has fastidiously given her long, sharp nails.

The six-armed Cāmuṇḍā from Malla Nepal is rarer than the four- or eight-armed version.[10] I have yet to find a textual template that exactly matches the Cāmuṇḍā on our shield, although some *dhyāna*s come very close. We may, however, make a few observations on this Cāmuṇḍā type by comparing her to other Newar visual depictions. The majority of the six-armed Cāmuṇḍā icons known to me share a close affinity in the arrangement of implements with the Cāmuṇḍā on our shield.[11] In these examples, the lower four hands of Cāmuṇḍā consistently display the same implements in the same sequence as those on the shield (proper right: chopping knife and skull cup; and left: chopped head and *bindumudrā*). It is only the upper two arms that are variable. In our shield, these upper two hands hold the sword (right) and *daṇḍa* or staff (left). Amongst the implements found in these two hands in other six-armed Newar Cāmuṇḍās, in addition to the sword and staff, are the shield, skull staff and trident paired together in various combinations.

[9] It should be noted that we also have evidence of Newar textiles depicting deities of a later period (possibly late eighteenth century) – this time of dyed cloth (*kalamkārī*) – in which the production was undertaken by foreign artisans from the Indian Coromandel coast while the templates for their design were Newar (Slusser 1990). A comparison with the figuration in these pieces shows how far styles of depiction had diverged in the few centuries.

[10] The most exhaustive record on the depiction of the eight mothers in the Kathmandu Valley, and thus also Cāmuṇḍā, can be found in Tachikawa (2004), who has documented 15 temples that have substantial *mātṛkā* iconography. From his account, one can observe the predominance of the four- or eight-armed types over the six-armed one.

[11] Examples of the six-armed Nepali Cāmuṇḍā conforming to this scheme include: 1) a copper repoussé at the Art Institute of Chicago (ref. number 1996.805); 2) gilt bronze Cāmuṇḍā sold at Bonham's de Marteau Collection, June 2023 (lot 13); 3) copper alloy Cāmuṇḍā in private hands published in Himalayan Art Resources (no. 61663); 4) (stone ?) image found on the altar of the Bhadrakālī temple, Tundikhel as published in Tachikawa (2004: plate 184); 5) unpublished stone sculpture kept in the Vidyāpīṭha room, Patan Palace Museum not included in the 2002 Museum Catalogue; 6) unpublished gilt bronze sculpture kept in the same location also not in the Museum Catalogue.

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After examining two shields closely, we notice certain iconographic patterns emerging. The most obvious element common to the four shields is that the deities' principal pair of hands display the skull cup and *bindumudrā*, these items all being in their proper right and left hands except for the Gaṇeśa shield where they are reversed. The *bindumudrā*, although not unique to Newar art, is far more common in the Kathmandu Valley than in other regions of the Indian subcontinent. It is a gesture particularly associated with Tantric rites, or as Bühnemann (2013: 319) explains: "the *bindumudrā* is the *mudrā* of offering as libations (*tarpaṇa*) – by flicking the fingers of one hand – drops (*bindu*) of a liquid (an alcoholic beverage or blood) contained in a skull-cup held in the opposing hand". Other than acting as a trope that synthesizes the iconography of all the shields, the depiction of the skull-bowl and its impure contents suggests that the shields belonged to a cult where transgressive offerings such as blood sacrifices were the norm, a point that will be confirmed in our examination of the shields' historical context.

Finally, the presence of Cāmuṇḍā hints at the overall schema of the shields. Although Cāmuṇḍā is an important goddess in her own right in the Kathmandu Valley, with temples dedicated to her, she is commonly depicted as the seventh mother in a group of eight mothers (*aṣṭamātṛkās*). As we will show later, the presence of the Ugracaṇḍā, Gaṇeśa and Bhairava shields strongly suggest that the patron of these artworks did not see Cāmuṇḍā as an independent icon but as part of a pantheon belonging to a single cult, most likely including all eight mothers who were worshipped together on a common occasion.

Gaṇeśa

The Gaṇeśa shield depicts the elephant-headed deity as white, four-armed and one-faced. Many of his ornaments – the headdress affixed with flags, flowing scarf, and armlets and bracelets – are shared with the other deities. His face is more wrathful than usual depictions of this largely benign god. This is especially suggested by his knitted brow (*bhrūkuṭila*), a common feature of fierce figures in Hindu iconography. His long trunk extends to the skull cup held in his lower left hand. His large ears are outlined with foliate-like lines while the soft inside of the ears is masterfully depicted by interspersing the white skin with flecks of red thread in a brick pattern. The armour worn by Gaṇeśa on his upper body is a fish-scale chain mail similar to Ugracaṇḍā's. On top of this armour, a sacred thread traverses his upper body. This thread is formed from a snake (*sarpayajñopavīta*), a feature common among Śaiva divinities. His lower body is protected by armour, the straps of which are visible on his calves. His feet indicate a dynamic posture of dance while below him is his mouse vehicle.

Multiple modes of visualizing Gaṇeśa have been recorded in Hindu iconography throughout the millennia in which he has been worshipped, Tantrism being particularly fertile ground for Gaṇeśa forms.[12] The forms of Gaṇeśa in the Kathmandu Valley alone are innumerable, due to his immense popularity and the many ritual functions he occupies. However, by looking at the types of Gaṇeśa found in the Valley's Tantric Śākta liturgies, the likely sectarian milieu of our artworks, we may narrow down the range of possible templates for the image on our shield. In doing so, we may come to better understand the ritual context of this particular Gaṇeśa. The *dhyāna* that exactly fits the appearance of our Gaṇeśa is prescribed in Siddhilakṣmī *paddhati*s for a type of Gaṇeśa who acts as one of the four guardians of Siddhilakṣmī and Ugracaṇḍā's *maṇḍala*. We will return to the significance of his role as a maṇḍalic guardian but, first, the visualization is as follows (*Siddhilakṣmīkramasthaṇḍilārcanavidhi*: f. 13v10–14r2):

[12] See Rao (1914: 51–63) for an overview of different forms of Gaṇapati, and Bühnemann (2016, vol. 1: 31–34) for Tantric forms.

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dhyānam ||
śaṃkhakundendusaṃkāśaṃ gajavaktraṃ gaṇeśvaraṃ |
mūṣāsanasamārūḍhaṃ trinetraṃ parameśvaraṃ ||
jāpyamālākuṭhāraṃ ca bindupātraṃ tathaiva ca |
sarpayajñopavītaṃ ca gajarājāya te namaḥ ||

Visualization:

(One should imagine) the Lord of Gaṇas who is elephant-headed with the colour of the conch, the moon or jasmine. This supreme lord is three-eyed and mounted on the mouse vehicle. (He bears) the prayer beads and axe (in his upper arms) and the *bindu* gesture and (skull) cup (in his lower arms) as well as a sacred thread made from a snake. Praise be to you, O King of Elephants!

As is evident, the type of Gaṇeśa described in this liturgy matches our shield in terms of the deity's colour, his four hand implements and the order in which they are depicted, and the sacred thread made from a snake. We may further note that elements not mentioned by the *dhyāna* confirm his role as a guardian deity. His irate expression and his protective equipment all show him to occupy a martial role quite distinct from our usual idea of him as a childlike boon-granter. Such a protective role is also occupied by the next figure to be examined – Bhairava – and will have important implications for our analysis of the group of shields as a whole.

Bhairava

The image on the final shield is perhaps the most striking of the four. As with Gaṇeśa, a plethora of Bhairava forms is attested from medieval Nepal. Our form is one-faced, six-armed and dark blue. The artist's use of colour on this figure to generate depth is particularly eye-catching. The shading on Bhairava's head and limbs, achieved through a combination of three different hues of blue, grants a convincing solidity. The careful use of these shades alongside strands of red, especially around his eyes and beard, enhances his threatening appearance. The skill of the artist is seen in the delicately rendered elephant skin garment held in the two upper hands, cloaking Bhairava's body from behind. The skin is still freshly flayed as indicated by the brick pattern of red and white also used for the insides of Gaṇeśa's ears. The elephant's lifeless head is tucked between the god's upper and middle right arms. Bhairava shares the ornaments of the other deities but some of them are given a grisly twist. His headdress is adorned with a chopped head flanked by skulls, now almost indiscernible due to damage. He wears armlets and bracelets but, unlike the conventional ones displayed by the other deities, these are made from snakes. Like Cāmuṇḍā, he is adorned with a garland of heads reaching down to his ankles. He stands in the *pratyālīḍha* posture above a lifeless corpse as per convention.

A search through the Siddhilakṣmī *paddhati*s that furnish us with a template for Gaṇeśa also yields a visualization for this very Bhairava. The visualization, taken from the *Siddhilakṣmīkramasthaṇḍilārcanavidhi* (f. 37r3 – v1), is as follows:

dhyānaṃ ||
aiṁ 5
mahāpretasamārūḍhaṃ raktakṛṣṇasutejasam |
ekāsyaṃ trilocanaṃ ca varvarordhvaśiroruham || 1 ||
piṅgākṣaṃ bhrūlasatkeśaṃ mahākāyamahodaram |

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vyāghracarmaparīdhānaṃ gajacarmottarīyakam || 2 ||
ratnasarpāsthyalaṃkāraṃ (em.: ratnāsarpāsthyalaṃkālaṃ Cod.)
naupurādivibhūṣitam |
khaḍgapheṭakapātrādibindukhaṭvāṅgahastakam (em.: *khaṭvāhastakam Cod.) || 3 ||
vidyutkoṭimahātejaṃ kabandhahārabhūṣitam |
brahmaviṣṇusurendrānāṃ śirasā ghṛṣṭapādukam (em.: *pādukām Cod.) || 4 ||
śvāśivāśavapheṭkāragṛdhrolūka(em.: *gṛddholūka Cod.)ravākule |
bhūtapretapiśācānāṃ klikilā[13] ravasaṃkule || 5 ||
smaśāne ca mahāraudraṃ yoginīgaṇamaṇḍitam |
nṛtyamānaṃ mahādevaṃ lokānāṃ hitakārakam || 6 ||
namāmi śrīmahākālaṃ bhairavaṃ bhuvaneśvaram |
yaḥ paṭhet śṛṇuyād vāpi śatrurogavināśanam || 7 ||
sarvasiddhim avāpnoti sadā vijayavardhanam|

Visualization:

aiṃ x 5 (*mantra*)
(One should visualize him) as mounted upon a large corpse, with a darkish red splendour, one-faced and three-eyed, his hair wild and rising. His eyes are red while his hair flashes in front of his brow, his body and his belly great. His lower garment is a tiger skin and his upper an elephant's. He has gems, snakes and bones as his ornaments and is adorned with such things as anklets. In his hand, he holds the sword, shield, (skull) cup, *bindu* gesture, skull staff, etc. He has the effulgence of a crore of lightnings and is ornamented with a garland of heads. His feet are rubbed by the heads of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Indra. He who is very terrifying is in a cremation ground full of the howls of dogs, jackals and corpses and the cries of vultures and owls, filled with the shrieks of demons, ghosts, and fiends. He is thronged by a group of *yoginī*s and is dancing, causing the expedience of the worlds. I pay homage to that Blessed Mahākāla Bhairava, the Lord of the World. He who should read or listen to this (visualization) which destroys enemies and disease always obtains all attainments that increase victory.

The Bhairava shield conforms to the visualization in several ways. There is, for instance, an almost exact correspondence in hand implements. The only difference is that the visualization names only five implements and lacks the *ḍamaru* drum. However, we know that a sixth implement is demanded by the textual model since a deity with an odd number of arms is implausible. Moreover, the use of *ādi* (meaning "etc.", "such as" or "beginning with") in the compound describing the implements shows that one or more of the implements remain unspecified. This missing implement must be the *ḍamaru*. We see other details also corresponding between text and image, particularly the elephant skin upper garment, the snake ornaments, and Bhairava's red eyes. Although the colour of our Bhairava does not follow the "darkish red" of the text, his dark blue colour would not be out of place for Mahākāla Bhairava, the name the text ascribes to this visualization and a form of Bhairava commonly depicted with this hue (Blom 1989: 53). It is further important to note that this six-armed Bhairava in the Siddhilakṣmī/Ugracaṇḍā liturgies is known by the alternative name of Kṣetreśvara/Kṣetrapālā and belongs to the same set of earlier mentioned guardians as Gaṇeśa.

[13] The shortened *klikila* is used instead of the conventional *kilikila* (an onomatopoeic word for "cries") for the sake of meter.

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The cult and pantheon of the shields

The fact that the three inscribed shields share a common date of creation indicates that the entire set was commissioned on a single occasion as part of the same pantheon. The existence of Ugracaṇḍā alongside Cāmuṇḍā leads us to the identity of this pantheon. As has already been touched upon, Ugracaṇḍā is rarely worshipped without the accompanying eight Durgās surrounding her. Although we discussed how, in the tradition of the Kathmandu Valley as well as the pan-Indian one, these Durgās have individual names involving the term *caṇḍa*, they also possess a concurrent identity that is just as important. In Newar worship, these Caṇḍās are seen as synonymous with the eight mothers (*aṣṭamātṛkā*s), the group of eight goddesses whose names are largely feminized forms of common orthodox gods. Like the Caṇḍās, the configuration and names of the mothers may change according to place and tradition. However, the common set worshipped in Nepal consists of Brahmāṇī, Maheśvarī, Kaumārī, Vaiṣṇavī, Vārāhī, Indrāṇī, Cāmuṇḍā, and Mahālakṣmī.

According to the Newar system, therefore, the retinue of Ugracaṇḍā can be represented as either eight 16-armed buffalo-slaying Caṇḍās or the corresponding *mātṛkā*s, a scheme documented by Zotter (2018: 67–68). In their manifestation as the mothers, the ancillary goddesses of Ugracaṇḍā are portrayed with far fewer arms, mostly four, six or eight, and, unlike the Caṇḍās, are not shown in the buffalo-slaying pose. The Ugracaṇḍā liturgies, in their sequence of worship for Ugracaṇḍā's retinue, recognize the synonymity between the Caṇḍās and mothers by interchangeably addressing these goddesses using their "caṇḍa" names and their designation as mothers (for instance, the seventh goddess in Durgā's retinue is called both Cāmuṇḍā (her *mātṛkā* name) and Caṇḍarūpā, her Caṇḍā name in the *Siddhilakṣmīkramasthaṇḍilārcanavidhi*; f. 13r2–6). The eight Caṇḍās/*mātṛkā*s are worshipped both as part of a single Ugracaṇḍā *maṇḍala* positioned on the eight petals which surround Ugracaṇḍā in the cardinal and intermediate directions and as a sequence during the nine nights of Navarātra. In their sequential worship, each night preceding the ninth night of Navarātra is dedicated to a mother, their sequence following the order listed above with the climactic ninth night dedicated to Ugracaṇḍā (Zotter 2018: 67–68).

The presence of the Cāmuṇḍā shield strongly suggests that the original group of shields was consecrated as part of the worship of Ugracaṇḍā alongside her retinue in their *mātṛkā* form. It is likely that the Cāmuṇḍā shield is the only survivor of a group of eight mothers who would have formed the core pantheon of Ugracaṇḍā. Thus, originally an additional seven shields depicting the remaining mothers could have existed. Another possibility is that Cāmuṇḍā, as one of the most popular mothers, served *pars pro toto* as a representative of the whole group of eight, foregoing the need for the depiction of each mother individually. However, as I show later, the hypothesis that all eight once existed is highly feasible.

Having dealt with the relationship between Ugracaṇḍā and Cāmuṇḍā, the logic behind the inclusion of Bhairava and Gaṇeśa becomes clearer. Before expanding upon their specific role in the Ugracaṇḍā *maṇḍala*, we should note that since the earliest evidence of their worship, the *mātṛkā*s have commonly been grouped with pairs of male Śaiva divinities understood as their guardians. Scholarship on conventions in *mātṛkā* depictions show that since at least the seventh century, there was a common pan-Indic tradition pairing the eight mothers with either Gaṇeśa on his own or Gaṇeśa with another male Śaiva divinity, often Kumāra or Vīṇādharaśiva in the late or post-Gupta period or, less frequently, Vīrabhadra (Meister 1986: 234–5; Törzsök 2009: 80). This tradition of depicting the *mātṛkā*s with accompanying deities continued in Nepal until the late medieval period. The deities which were included alongside the *mātṛkā*s in the Kathmandu Valley were either: 1) Gaṇeśa on his own; 2) Gaṇeśa and Bhairava as a pair; or 3) Siṃhinī and Vyāghriṇī (tiger and lion-headed goddesses), a practice well-acknowledged in scholarship on the eight mothers in Nepal (Slusser 1982: 345).

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More relevant to this research, Gaṇeśa, on his own or with Bhairava, is a very common feature of the depiction of *mātṛkā*s in the visual arts of medieval Nepal. For instance, the covers of a Nepali manuscript of the *Devīmāhātmya* from the British Library dated by Pal (1981: plate 1) to the twelfth century shows Gaṇeśa alongside the *mātṛkā*s, positioned on the furthest left niche of its back cover. Here, he is white and displays the same implements in his four hands as our shield. Similarly, a manuscript cover of a Nepali *Devīmāhātmya* from the Newark Museum of Art (accession no. 71.84A-G as recorded in Pal 1981: 41), closer in date to our shields (1477), depicts both Gaṇeśa and Bhairava alongside the eight mothers, Gaṇeśa again sharing all the key features of our shield, including his colour and implements. Furthermore, this tradition is noted in artists' sketchbooks. Blom notes how Gaṇeśa and Bhairava frequently appear as the guardians of the mothers in these manuals and provides examples of this convention (Blom 1989: 44 and fig. 41 and 59).

We may, however, go further in our analysis and show that the depiction of Gaṇeśa and Bhairava alongside the eight mothers is not merely an artistic convention but, in fact, became a formal part of Ugracaṇḍā worship prescribed in Malla-era liturgies. Although the configuration of Ugracaṇḍā *maṇḍala*s may differ slightly from text to text or image to image, there are certain features common to them all. One of these features – the eight mothers or Caṇḍās on an eight-petalled lotus surrounding the central Durgā – is already described. A second feature also prescribed without fail in the *maṇḍaloddhāra*s (raising of the *maṇḍala*) of these liturgies is the installation of four guardians on the four corners of the *maṇḍala*'s final square enclosure.

These four guardians are: 1) Bhairava also known here as Kṣetrapāla; 2) Vaṭuka; 3) Gaṇeśa; and 4) Yoginī. The four are evidently a Tantricized version of the standard Śaiva holy family (Śiva, Kumāra, Gaṇeśa and Pārvatī) and are recorded in other Tantric Śākta traditions as well. Although in the Ugracaṇḍā *paddhati*s, the names of these four guardians and their location at the corners of the *maṇḍala* are a fixed convention, the exact corner on which they are installed is not stable. Thus, for instance, the corners of the square enclosure in the *Ugracaṇḍādevyarcana* (fl. 13r5–v2) and *Ugracaṇḍādevyarcanavidhi* (exposures 8b l.3–5) differ as follows: the southeastern corner (Kṣetrapāla in the former and Vaṭuka in the latter); southwestern (Gaṇeśa in the former and Kṣetrapāla in the latter); northwestern (Yoginī in both texts); and finally, on the northeastern (Vaṭuka in the former and Gaṇeśa in the latter). The Siddhilakṣmī tradition, a sect closely aligned with that of Ugracaṇḍā, also maintains these two layers in its *maṇḍala* (the eight mothers and the four guardians). In this sect's *maṇḍaloddhāra*, however, the guardians are not located at the four corners of the outermost square but are guarding the doors on its sides.[14] Unlike their locations in the Ugracaṇḍā *maṇḍala*s, the doors to which they are assigned are unchanging from liturgy to liturgy and are as follows: Yoginī on the Eastern door, Gaṇeśa on the Southern, Kṣetrapāla on the Western and Vaṭuka on the Northern.

In short, the invariable installation of these four guardians in the Ugracaṇḍā *maṇḍala* as well as other Śākta *maṇḍala*s indicate that the Bhairava and Gaṇeśa shields were created, much like the Cāmuṇḍā shield, as key components of the Ugracaṇḍā pantheon. They are thus present not only as part of a generic artistic convention of pairing mothers with two male divinities, but principally as a way of replicating the *maṇḍala* of Ugracaṇḍā using the medium of shields. We can cautiously posit that two additional shields depicting Vaṭuka and Yoginī may have once existed to complete the tetrad. This possibility is supported by the fact that all four deities are commonly found in other artworks which portray the *maṇḍala* of Tantric Śākta deities.

Although medieval Ugracaṇḍā *maṇḍala* paintings are rare, an example exists in the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco (accession number: B87D22, illustrated here as Figure 7) which

[14] See Pangsrivongse (2024: 9) for a description of this *maṇḍala* according to Malla-era tradition.

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Figure 7. Ugracaṇḍā Maṇḍala (B87D22) Nepal; 1450–1550
Colours on cotton; 78.1 cm x 64.1 cm
Asian Art Museum of San Francisco
Photo © Asian Art Museum of San Francisco

justifies this schema for our shields. Here, we also find the Ugracaṇḍā *maṇḍala* reduced to two principal components: 1) Ugracaṇḍā in the centre surrounded by eight ancillary goddesses represented on lotus petals as four-armed *mātṛkā*s rather than 16-armed Caṇḍās; and 2) four guardians deposited on the corners of the final square of the *maṇḍala*. Like our shields, all deities here also bear the skull cup and *bindumudrā* in their principal hands. Although the specific corners occupied by the guardians are not identical to the directions prescribed in the two *paddhati*s cited, these deities remain easily identifiable on account of their mounts, a feature which is also clearly set out in the liturgies (a corpse for Bhairava, mouse for Gaṇeśa, peacock for Vaṭuka and lion/bull for Yoginī). Moreover, other details of the guardians in this painting tally with our shields. Gaṇeśa (bottom right corner) is thus white and holds the same implements as the Gaṇeśa on our shield while Bhairava/Kṣetrapāla (top left), although only four-armed, is dark blue and wields four implements all found amongst the six displayed by the Bhairava shield.

From this cursory survey, we understand the well-defined functions that Cāmuṇḍā alongside the seven other mothers, and Gaṇeśa and Bhairava alongside the two other guardians, play in the worship of Ugracaṇḍā, as well as their systematic depiction in various art forms. This gives support to the theory that all four shields were components of Ugracaṇḍā's *maṇḍala* and that it is conceivable that a total of 13 shields (Ugracaṇḍā, the eight mothers and four guardians) may have once existed.

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The significance of the shield as a medium

The artists of Nepal had a plethora of more conventional mediums – wood, bronze, stone, and painted cloth – to draw from. Indeed, examples of Ugracaṇḍā depictions exist in all such materials. We must therefore ask why in this instance shields have been selected as this subject's canvas, especially given the challenging technique required for their production. To answer this, we should examine the purpose and symbolism of shields in Nepal as furnished by both textual and anthropological evidence. Before moving on to the case of the Kathmandu Valley in particular, we may note that in the Hindu world, the relationship between weaponry, kingship, and ritual possesses an ancient and complex history. Even before the co-option of kingship rituals into Śākta-Śaiva traditions by medieval Indian courts, including Malla Nepal, the blessing of weapons thought to embody the King's own martial power had long been part of Indian kingship rituals. Thus, scripture from the Vedic period onwards calls for the worship and lustration (*nīrājana*) of the king's weapons and army during Navamī in Āśvina as part of autumnal preparations for warfare (Sarkar 2017: 222–3; Sanderson 2005: 258, n. 70–71). The installation of symbols of martial power like banners, weapons and armour as objects of worship was also commonplace in classical prescriptions of royal consecration ceremonies (Sanderson 2009: 255–7).

Rites involving the worship of weapons, however, became more elaborate and central in the medieval Śākta celebrations of Navarātra, an activity that is especially prescribed for the eighth night of the festival, or Mahāṣṭamī. Texts that accord particular emphasis to the worship of weapons are found within both the Purāṇic and Tantric fold such as the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa, Devīpurāṇa, Kālikāpurāṇa, Agnipurāṇa*, and *Netratantra* among others (Einoo 1999: 49–54; Sarkar 2017). This practice is also adopted by the Ugracaṇḍā *paddhati*s of the Newars where, in the same vein as the better-known East Indian manuals, weapons are personified and worshipped through specific *mantra*s beseeching each to fulfil their given purpose in battle. This ritual step is known as the *saṃgrāmavādyāstrapūjā* ("worship of weapons to be uttered in warfare") in these Newar manuscripts.[15] The most important object in the Navarātra rite and in Śākta-Śaiva worship, both in Nepal and across the subcontinent, is the king's sword, thought to be imbued with the very essence of the goddess's power and to grant the king and his descendants the legitimacy to rule. As such, rites involving the sword are central to the Newar Navarātra to this day, especially its installation for worship (*khaḍgasthāpana*) and its procession, which occur between the eighth and tenth nights (Zotter 2018: 59–60). Although not as symbolically charged as the sword, the shield is also sometimes listed amongst objects to be worshipped in Purāṇic literature (Sāmrājyalakṣmīpīṭhikā: 108.1–28 in Sarkar 2017: 268; *Nāradapurāṇa* in Einoo 1999: 42) and later Indian liturgies (Sarkar 2012: 383).

Within the Newar context, and even more so within the Ugracaṇḍā cult, the use of the shields is especially cogent. Zotter (2018: 67) has noted, drawing from the Navarātra handbooks available to her, that during this festival, Ugracaṇḍā is to be invoked into a number of ritual objects, many of which are common to other Tantric settings. The embodiments of the goddess during Navarātri that Zotter notes include an earthen mound (*sthaṇḍila*), sword (*khaḍga*), book (*puthi*), statue (*pratimā*) or jar (*kumbha*). Other *paddhati*s examined by the present author, however, also highlight the shield (*pheṭaka* Newar or *kheṭaka* Skt.) as one of the principal vessels for worship (*Siddhilakṣmīkramasthaṇḍilārcanavidhi*: fl. 37r4–6; and *Siddhilakṣmyadhivāsanasthaṇḍilārcanavidhi*: fl. 41r7–v1). Thus, these liturgies make clear the shields' status as cult objects and not just utilitarian tools in line with the rich Indian tradition of divinizing weapons.

[15] For instance, the unnamed *Ugracaṇḍāpaddhati* contained in A 148-10: fl. 126v2–127r1 and *Ugracaṇḍādevyarcanavidhi*: exposures 17b, l.3–18a, l.4.

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The worship of "divinized shields" is also attested by these objects' recent history. As mentioned above, the four shields were only rediscovered in 2012 when the restoration of Mūl Cok necessitated the opening of long-sealed segments of the building. Amongst the rooms to be unsealed were those on the first floor of Mūl Cok's west wing, a section of the building which rests directly above the courtyard's entrance from Durbar Square. The shields were found in the room at the furthest left of the west wing when facing the courtyard. Their appearance at first confounded their discoverer, Mr Suresh Man Lakhe, Museum Officer. However, their existence and function soon became clear once word of their discovery had reached Mr Samrajya Shrestha, Head of the Mūchẽ Āgama Guṭhi.

A *guṭhi* (Skt. *goṣṭhi*) is a caste-based association linked to a religious site responsible for administration and finances related to the site's upkeep, rites, and festivals. The building which this *guṭhi* administers, the Mūchẽ Āgama, was devastated by the 2015 earthquake, but had played an important role in the religious history of Patan. Located to the north of the Patan Palace complex and known as the Maṇichẽ, this small building is considered by many to be the original shrine of the goddess Maneśvarī, a deity reputed to be the ancient patron goddess of the Licchavis. It also serves as the *āgāchẽ*, the shrine housing the clan deity, of the Jośīs of Bakhumbāhāla and the Kisis (Śreṣṭha) of Ombāhāla.[16] Equally important is the fact that the Mūchẽ Āgama was once home to over 30 swords reputedly belonging to deceased Malla Kings, making the association between this *guṭhi* and other martial cult objects more compelling.[17] The Kisis also play a key role in the royal Navarātra worship of Patan and, as an ancient Chatharīya (Skt. *kṣatriya*) caste of this city, are entitled to perform their Navarātra rites in Patan's Mūl Cok. This worship is officiated by the Rajopadhyāyas of Patan and lasts for the first 14 nights or the bright half of the month of Āśvina (an extensive documentation of Kisis involvement in royal Navarātra rites can be found in Toffin 1996, paras 17–24).

It is as part of these rites, according to Mr Shrestha,[18] that the shields were once used. Mr Shrestha recalls that in his childhood, the shields were kept for most of the year in the Jyeṣṭhavarṇa Mahāvihāra, also known as Taṅgaḥ Bāhāḥ, one of Patan's ancient Buddhist monasteries with possible Licchavi origins.[19] The objects were brought from the *vihāra* each Navarātra and transported to Mūl Cok to receive worship. They would arrive the day preceding the reception of the *phūlpāti*, the traditional floral offering to the goddess that marks the climactic period of the celebrations which begin from the seventh night onwards.[20] The shields would also undergo an installation ceremony (*pratiṣṭhā*) much like conventional icons, and receive typical offerings reserved for icons for seven nights until the fourteenth day of the bright half of Āśvina when they would be dismissed and returned to the Buddhist *vihāra*. We should note that their storage in a Buddhist *vihāra* is not as peculiar as it seems given the syncretistic environment of Patan where the active participation of the Buddhist community in Navarātra is well-recorded.[21] Moreover, the storage and display of Hindu cult objects in Buddhist monasteries is a long-established custom in the Valley.[22] However, there is no precise explanation for why this *vihāra* came to be associated with the martial goddess cult.

[16] See entry for the Mūchẽ Āgama in the DANAM database (https://danam.cats.uni-heidelberg.de/report/409cfb82-e6c3-11e9-b125-0242ac130002).

[17] See Mūchẽ Āgama in the DANAM database.

[18] The author's interview with Mr Shrestha, who supplied invaluable information, was conducted in December 2023 in Patan. The author wishes to thank Mr Shrestha for his detailed recollection.

[19] See the entry for this *vihāra* in DANAM (https://danam.cats.uni-heidelberg.de/report/63987fea-cd6d-11e9-92b4-0242ac140002)

[20] Toffin (1986, paras 32–38) details the meaning and significance of the *phūlpāti*.

[21] See Toffin (1986, paras 105–14).

[22] For instance, Slusser (1982, vol. I: 241) describes how Pratāpamalla customarily displayed a Viṣṇuviśvarūpa icon he commissioned in the monastery of Lākyū-bahil during Janai-pūrṇimā.

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Mr Shrestha explains that their presence in Mūl Cok is accounted for by the fact that, around 35–40 years ago, a decision was made to move the shields permanently to their present room in the western wing of this courtyard (the room where their historic and present-day worship is also undertaken) due to poor upkeep in the *vihāra*. Around 20 years before their rediscovery, the room was sealed. Financial and logistical circumstances had prevented the continuation of the Kisi's Navarātra rites in Mūl Cok, thus rendering the room obsolete. It was only after the stabilization and reopening of Mūl Cok that the Navarātra worship of the shields by the Kisis, which had lapsed for several decades, was again revived. Stains from the smoke of unguents and lamps as well as the bright red *sindūra* on the foreheads of the deities on all four shields attest to both recent and historic worship. In addition, we will recall that the Gaṇeśa inscription informs us that the shields were consecrated on the seventh night of the bright half of a certain month whose inscribed name is illegible. If this month were Āśvina then it would suggest the date of their consecration corresponds to the first day of the most essential period of the autumnal festival.

Mr Shrestha's information and the shields' find site also supports our hypothesis concerning their original schema. Mr Shrestha states that many more shields existed in his youth and that the whereabouts and condition of these shields are unaccounted for. This suggests that the four shields are only a part of a larger pantheon. Additionally, next to the room where the shields are housed is a chamber now known as the Vidyāpīṭha on account of a portable Śākta Tantric shrine made out of three wooden cabinets discovered there. This room, also unsealed during the restoration process, is dated to the seventeenth century[23] and contains, besides this wooden shrine, a set of free-standing sculptures representing Ugracaṇḍā, the eight mothers, and Gaṇeśa.[24] Such a set was indisputably worshipped as the Ugracaṇḍā *maṇḍala*. It is therefore possible that the schema represented by these sculptures would have been reproduced by the shields in the adjacent room.

The shield as a statement of kingship

Additionally, we may look to the shields' inscribed dates to make further conjectures about their historical context. If we are to assume that the shields were created in Patan, then their date of creation – NS 709 – has interesting implications since it falls into an almost century-long period when Patan was governed not by a branch of the Malla dynasty but a family of traditional feudal lords. Although nobles of several feudatory families (*mahāpātra*s) of Patan had held sway over the city state since the reign of Ratnamalla (r. 1482–1520), Regmi has argued that a single *mahāpātra* – Viṣṇusiṃha – became its sole overlord as early as NS 650 (1530 CE) (Regmi 2007: 262). That this Viṣṇusiṃha saw himself as a monarch is shown by how a palm leaf grant names him the King of Patan (Manigalādhipati) (Regmi 2007: 263). His three sons – Uddhavasiṃha, Narasiṃha and Purandarasiṃha – would rule jointly following his death, which most likely occurred before NS 680, with the last of these brothers eventually becoming the sole ruler. The inscriptional evidence shows that the three brothers were both aware of their non-royal origins yet had clear aspirations of kingship as is expected of a dynasty not truly secure in its power (Regmi 2007: 264–5). These aspirations are evident, for instance, in all three brothers' endowment of Viṣṇu temples and the accompanying *praśasti* inscriptions where they unequivocally stake their kingship claims (Bledsoe 2004: 117–28).

If the rule of the Viṣṇusiṃhas was indeed the context for the creation of our shields, then it is not surprising that they should have chosen Ugracaṇḍā and her retinue as their subject.

[23] See the KVPT's "Final report on the restoration of the Patan Royal Palace complex" (2014: 7). Descriptions of the courtyard's appearance prior to and following the Trust's work can be found in its reports between 2006 and 2016 as uploaded on the DANAM database (https://danam.cats.uni-heidelberg.de/pdfs).

[24] A detailed description and images of this room can also be found in DANAM's entry for Mūl Cok under "Object: Bhidhyāpīṭa shrine" (https://danam.cats.uni-heidelberg.de/report/39bb2040-e9fd-11e9-8bc4-0242ac130002).

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Sponsorship of the cult of Durgā and her autumnal festival are, after all, the archetypal display of medieval kingship across the subcontinent. Ugracaṇḍā has particular pertinence for kingship in Nepal since, embodied in the King's sword, she becomes his very martial power. Furthermore, she is widely considered the exoteric manifestation of the Malla kings' lineal goddess, Taleju. Although Taleju's true icon and *yantra* are only revealed to the king and his priests, it is forms of Ugracaṇḍā that predominate in the publicly accessible iconography of the three royal Taleju temples of the Valley. Thus, in the minds of the Viṣṇusiṃhas, to depict Ugracaṇḍā was perhaps to appropriate a prestigious symbol of authority that had belonged to the well-established Mallas who they briefly usurped. The year of the shields' creation, however, suggest an additional motive related to the projection of power. If we are to follow Regmi's (2007: 266–8) line of argument, it is likely that Purandarasiṃha had assumed sole lordship over Patan by at least NS 710 (the date of Narasiṃha's death) if not significantly earlier. The evidence which Regmi highlights as unequivocally proclaiming Purandarasiṃha's single authority is an inscription in the Bhandharkal of Patan which describes him as "Mahārāja" dated NS 709 (2007: 266), the same date as our shields. Thus, we may very tentatively hypothesize that the shields not only served as a statement of the longed-for royal legitimacy of the Viṣṇusiṃhas generally but, more specifically, the unique mandate of Purandarasiṃha.

Before concluding, two other factors concerning the shield as a medium may be discussed. These are the practical advantage of the shield as a canvas for artistic depiction over other martial implements, and the correspondence between the protective function of shields and the role played by mother goddesses in Newar society. Although the sword may be the pre-eminent object for invoking the goddess, its shape with its thin tapered blade and short hilt poses clear challenges to the depiction of complex iconography. Newar artists have attempted to make swords the canvas for iconography by incorporating cast images into the sword's hilt. An example of such an object exists in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Accession Number 1982.471.3), the backdrop of its creation also being Śākta, given the figure of Mahiṣāsuramardinī attached to it. However, one could hardly expect such swords to be an effective surface for a depiction of the full cast in an Ugracaṇḍā composition (the goddess with her 18 arms, three demons, the buffalo and the lion). The same limitations as a canvas for artistic depiction also applies to many other martial objects that receive worship, such as spears, tridents, bows and arrows, armour, and drums. The shield with its relatively smooth flat surface and an expanse that matches large-scale *paubha*s renders it, bar perhaps flags and banners, the item in the classical Indian armoury most suited as a medium for iconographic depiction.

If our conjecture about the arrangement of the shields is correct, then the eight mothers form the dominant subject of the icons depicted by the original group of shields (either eight out of 11 or eight out of 13 depending on whether we include all four guardians). It is only natural then that the shields were invoked as the vessels of these goddesses given the alignment in the protective function of both the shield and the mothers. The protective role of the *mātṛkā*s is remarked upon by several scholars in their studies of Newar settlements who note that the shrines of the *aṣṭamātṛkā*s, which are most often aniconic open-air *pīṭha*s, are dotted around a settlement's periphery just beyond the historic city walls. These *pīṭha*s often roughly correspond to the compass points associated with each mother. Their position, serving as the threshold between the untamed countryside and the civilized urban space, mark these shrines out as the sacred bulwarks of the Newar settlement. The mothers can thus be conceived as protecting a specific segment of the city corresponding to their traditional compass point, while the ninth and central goddess – understood as one or another high Tantric divinity – presides over the city's centre as the centrifugal source of the other mothers' power. This function has been extensively elaborated by Levy

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in his study of Bhaktapur (1990: 156–9, 307–12) but it also exists in a less formal manner in Patan (Pickett 2005: 247–51). With this in mind, we must understand the invocation of these goddesses into shields as apposite since it is the shield above all the martial implements commonly worshipped during Navarātra that best encapsulates the *aṣṭamātṛkā*s' protective function.

We may also add that the king's worship of these protective deities installed on an implement of protection may be considered another means of bolstering his own regal legitimacy. In the Hindu conception of kingship, it is predominantly the King's ability to protect the earth and his subjects which qualifies him for his role. This is evident in the numerous compounds involving the root "*pa*" (protect) which denote king in Sanskrit (e.g. *bhūpa, nṛpa, narādhipa, prajāpa, avanipa*). As such, these iconic shields can be understood as the royal cult objects *par excellence* in that they are the materialization and sacralization of this kingly function. Interestingly, this reasoning behind the shield as a medium for the invocation of the goddess is further supported by an observation made by anthropologists concerning the choice of objects into which the goddess is summoned in Navarātra. Levy (1990: 539), amongst others, notes that on the eighth day of Navarātri, it is common for an individual of a particular profession to worship the goddess through the tool essential to his trade, such as the pot for the potter or the loom for a weaver.[25] It is not far-fetched for us to posit that the king, whose primary role was to protect the kingdom, would have summoned the goddess into the instrument of his own profession – the shield.

Conclusion

We have unravelled the meaning and significance of the Patan Palace shields as far as our evidence allows. In doing so, we have proffered ideas on the cult to which they belonged, the original pantheon which they may have depicted, their significance for the study of Newar textiles, and their ritual use. However, although direct evidence of them is unavailable to us, we should note that many more shields of this kind may have once existed and perhaps still do. As we will recall, Mr Shrestha noted the existence of several additional shields in the past. Toffin, for instance, also documents the presence of shields in a handful of processions during Navarātra (1996: paras 24, 33 and 83). Meanwhile, officials at the Patan Museum confirm the existence of six shields of this kind belonging to the Patan Taleju temple, hidden from sight and accessible only to the Rājopadhyāyas during Navarātra. Our study of these four shields is thus only the beginning of research into a whole category of ritual objects that have been neglected in scholarship. This article will hopefully invite scholars to uncover and document further examples which will enrich our understanding of these tantalizing artworks.

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[25] Toffin also notes this practice of venerating the tools of one's trade during Navarātra amongst the Vajrācāryas and Śākyas (1986: para 113).

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