Article

A Śaiva Happy Ever After: Viṣṇu as Pāśupata Ascetic—Studies in the Skandapurāṇa X

Sanne Dokter-Mersch [ID]

Leiden University Institute for Area Studies (LIAS), Leiden University, 2311 BZ Leiden, The Netherlands; s.mersch@hum.leidenuniv.nl

Abstract: The *Skandapurāṇa* is one of the many textual sources that narrates Viṣṇu's manifestation myths. It tells the stories of Narasiṃha (Man-Lion), Varāha (Boar) and Vāmana (Dwarf) in its own distinctive way. The greatest innovation is the addition of thus far unprecedented sequels to the stories. Whereas Śiva played a minor role, or no role at all, in the narratives as they were known at the time of composition of the *Skandapurāṇa*, he becomes indispensable in the "afterlife episodes" of the manifestation myths. Each afterlife episode follows the same structure, in which Viṣṇu is unable or unwilling to give up his manifested form. He is liberated from it by Śiva, who subsequently grants Viṣṇu a boon as a reward for his deeds and devotion to Śiva. From a Śaiva perspective, the boons become grander each narrative: first, Viṣṇu receives the important cosmic task in the Śaiva universe of destroying the gods' enemies, then he formally joins the Pāśupata Śaiva community by performing the Pāśupata observance, and finally, he reaches union with Śiva, i.e., liberation from the continuous cycle of rebirth, by performing another Pāśupata observance. By introducing "the principle of end weight", I will argue that this radical, new identity of Viṣṇu is expressed at a strategic place in the narrative, viz. at the very end, which is the part that is remembered most vividly.

Keywords: Purāṇa; *Skandapurāṇa*; Śaivism; Viṣṇu; manifestation myths; narratives; ending

1. Introduction

Viṣṇu's manifestation myths have been told and retold for centuries. Some have their origins in the Vedas, others only emerged in the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* or even later. Some are human characters, such as Kṛṣṇa and Rāma, others are animals, such as Matsya (Fish) and Kūrma (Tortoise). This article deals with three of Viṣṇu's oldest manifestations: Narasiṃha (Man-Lion), Varāha (Boar) and Vāmana (Dwarf). In each narrative, Viṣṇu assumes a particular shape in order to restore the cosmic order.[1] The stories are found throughout the Sanskrit literary corpus, including the Purāṇas. We find Purāṇas that share *verbatim* parallels, but also those that changed verses, paragraphs and even entire chapters. The narratives were (and still are) in constant evolution, adjusting them according to the time and place they are retold, the genre they appear in, and also the religious tradition the text is affiliated with.

Such developments are also discernible in the *Skandapurāṇa*, a North Indian Purāṇa from the sixth to seventh century CE. It has a strong affiliation with Śaivism, a religious tradition centring around Śiva and promoting devotion to him. The text narrates beautiful myths about Śiva, his wife Pārvatī, their son Skanda and other confidants of Śiva; it praises Śiva with eulogies; and its doctrinal sections teach ascetic practices of Pāśupata Śaivism in particular. However, the text does not deny other gods. Several Brahmanical deities are regularly addressed, and their stories are told. Those stories were generally well-known, but had been carefully adjusted in order to fit their new context with its own distinctive style of writing and its own religious affiliation.

Viṣṇu's manifestation myths, which must have been well-known to the *Skandapurāṇa* audience as well, likewise underwent various changes, resulting in unique new versions.

Śiva suddenly appears at crucial moments in the stories, Viṣṇu needs the other gods to help him in battle, and he and the other gods are structurally presented as Śiva's devotees. One of the greatest changes is the addition of sequels to the narratives. Whereas the stories usually end with Viṣṇu's victory over the gods' enemies and his return to his own divine shape, the *Skandapurāṇa* is the first available text that speaks of a continuation of the manifestations assumed by Viṣṇu. The sequels give the manifestation myths as they were known thus far completely new endings with far-reaching consequences. Narasiṃha comes face to face with Śiva in the form of a frightful creature called Śarabha; Varāha's son ends up in a fight with Śiva's son; and Viṣṇu is entered by a personification of sin who turns him into a dwarf again. In this article, I study these "afterlife episodes", as I refer to them, focussing on the very end of these sections. Each manifestation myth can be divided into two parts. The first narrates why Viṣṇu stays in his manifestation and how he is released from it by Śiva. The second tells that Śiva is pleased with Viṣṇu's good deeds and therefore grants him a boon (*vara*) as a reward. These boons are the topic of the article, since they are not just any *vara*. On the contrary, they become crucial in the incorporation of Viṣṇu in the narrative ideas of the *Skandapurāṇa*, including the text's religious affiliation with Śaivism. Before addressing these topics, I will first introduce the *Skandapurāṇa* and the three Viṣṇu's manifestation myths under discussion.

2. The *Skandapurāṇa*

Being composed in the sixth to seventh century CE in North India, the *Skandapurāṇa* can be counted among the early Purāṇas.[2] It is a collection of theological, cosmological and mythological material. It has strong ties with Śaivism, and in particular with Pāśupata Śaivism, an early form of Śaivism whose followers consider Śiva as the ultimate deity and are entirely devoted to him. Pāśupata Śaivism is known for its ascetics with their extreme practices, such as smearing themselves with ashes, living on cremation grounds and acting like madmen (Acharya 2011, p. 460). The *Skandapurāṇa* deals with several ascetic practices, such as the Pāśupata yoga and the Pāśupata observance, but in less extreme forms. With the right practice, this observance (*vrata*) can lead to the highest goal of the Pāśupata ascetics: union with Śiva. When the ascetic finds union with Śiva, he is liberated from the continuous cycle of rebirth. The *pāśupatavrata* features in the more doctrinal section of the text as the means to liberation (*Skandapurāṇa* chp. 174–83), but also in mythological contexts, narrating how the gods perform the *vrata*.[3]

The *Skandapurāṇa* does not only teach Pāśupata practices, but proclaims other Śaiva beliefs and notions as well, such as an ideal Śaiva universe. In this universe, all beings—both gods and their enemies—are devoted to Śiva. They praise him, meditate upon him, and receive beautiful boons in return. The presented universe is structured along a clear hierarchy. The gods usually maintain the roles that they are known for from other sources. Brahmā, for example, remains the creator, Indra the king of the gods and Skanda the leader of the divine army. However, some of these crucial cosmic tasks are assigned by Śiva, which makes him in ultimate control of the universe. Śiva shall always remain on top of the universe, accompanied by his wife Pārvatī and his loyal assistants called Gaṇas.

This religious message is obviously expressed in myths that narrate the exploits of Śiva, his family and devotees. This ideal Śaiva universe is nevertheless also upheld in narratives in which Śiva was originally absent. Characters become Śiva's devotees and the lord himself enters the stage, sometimes making crucial decisions at important moments. Viṣṇu's manifestation myths are exemplary of this type of narrative in the *Skandapurāṇa*. Śiva and the Śaiva universe were non-existent in earlier versions of the myths. Through compositional strategies, the *Skandapurāṇa* composers found ways to adjust them so that ultimately, they would match the rest of the text, including the text's affiliation with Śaivism.

3. Viṣṇu's Manifestation Myths

Each manifestation myth of Viṣṇu in the *Skandapurāṇa* builds upon the premise that the enemies of the gods called Asuras have taken control of the universe,[4] and that Viṣṇu

assuming a particular form, apt for the circumstances at hand, conquers them. The first story that follows this basic structure is the myth of Narasiṃha, "Man-Lion" (*Skandapurāṇa* chp. 70–71).[5] When the Asura called Hiraṇyakaśipu has conquered the entire universe, the gods are in distress. Due to a boon from Brahmā, Hiraṇyakaśipu cannot be killed in a number of circumstances, which makes it almost impossible to conquer him. He cannot be killed by gods nor by human beings, not by day nor by night, not by weapons nor by arrows. To escape these and other conditions to Hiraṇyakaśipu's death, Viṣṇu, wanting to help the powerless gods, becomes a Man-Lion. In this form, he is able to kill Hiraṇyakaśipu with his claw and to return the control over the universe back to Indra.

The second manifestation myth is the Varāha myth, in which Viṣṇu becomes Varāha, "Boar", to fight with Hiraṇyākṣa (*Skandapurāṇa* chp. 76.14–110.end).[6] Hiraṇyākṣa is the younger brother of Hiraṇyakaśipu. He likewise conquers the universe and takes the earth with him to his dwelling place in the netherworld. The gods need once more the help of Viṣṇu. He becomes a Boar and dives into the cosmic ocean to the netherworld, where he kills Hiraṇyākṣa and rescues the earth. He puts her back into her original place and returns the power to Indra.

The third manifestation myth concerns Viṣṇu's manifestation as Vāmana, "Dwarf", to conquer Bali (*Skandapurāṇa* chp. 116.13cd–121.22).[7] It narrates how Viṣṇu takes the form of a Brahmin with the size of a dwarf to conquer the Asura called Bali who had taken control over the universe. Vāmana asks Bali for a piece of land measuring three steps made by his dwarfish legs. As soon as Bali grants him this, Viṣṇu leaves his tiny body, becoming his all-encompassing self again, and strides thrice. He is so big that he covers the earth, sky and heaven in only three steps and reclaims the power over the universe. Bali is sent back to the netherworld and Indra regains control.

In retelling these three manifestation myths,[8] the *Skandapurāṇa* composers followed the general story lines as they were known from other sources, maintained several key elements of the manifestation myths and preserved some essential characteristics of Viṣṇu.[9] At the same time, they adjusted and integrated the stories into the new context of an engaging Śaiva Purāṇa by changing narrative elements and introducing new chapters.[10] A considerable number of adjustments and innovations concerns the Śaiva ideology as expressed in the text, introducing Śiva, his superiority and his grace, and Śaiva practices and worship into the myths. The greatest innovation comes at the end of the myths. In other sources, each manifestation myth ends more or less in the same manner: Viṣṇu conquers the Asuras, returns the power to the gods and, although not always stated explicitly, leaves his manifested form and takes on his own divine body again.[11] Viṣṇu's return to his own form is to be understood here, because a manifestation should be temporary. Each crisis demands a different solution, a different manifestation.[12] It is a continuous process, as already expressed in the *Bhagavadgītā* of the *Mahābhārata* (the oft-quoted "definition" of Viṣṇu's manifestations).[13]

The *Skandapurāṇa* likewise supports the idea that Viṣṇu should always return to his own form. In the Narasiṃha myth, it is Śiva himself who reminds Viṣṇu of a boon given sometime in the past.

> *Skandapurāṇa* v. 71.68:
>
> *tubhyaṃ viṣṇo mayā dattaḥ puṇyo hy eṣa varaḥ śubhaḥ |*
> *ayonau sajjamānasya svayonau pratipādanam || 68 ||*
>
> "The following glorious and auspicious boon has been given by me to you, Viṣṇu:
> the return to your own birth, when you cling to an unnatural birth".

The boon is Śiva's promise that he will help Viṣṇu each time Viṣṇu stays in a form that is not originally his—in other words, a manifestation—by making him return to his own body.[14] Śiva redeems this promise three times, *viz.* in each manifestation myth in the *Skandapurāṇa*, for each time, Viṣṇu does not or cannot abandon his manifested form

himself and continues to live as Narasiṃha, Varāha and Vāmana, respectively, resulting in the following afterlife episodes.

4. Viṣṇu's Afterlives and Their Place in the Narrative

Already at the very beginning of the Narasiṃha myth (*Skandapurāṇa* vs. 70.11–14), we learn that even though Hiraṇyakaśipu has been killed, Viṣṇu did not give up his Narasiṃha form. Narasiṃha starts to become a threat to the universe because of his destructive behaviour. The gods are afraid that he will harm living beings, so they ask Śiva to help them. Śiva consents to their wish and will undertake action. Śiva's intervention is told after the main story of the Narasiṃha myth (*Skandapurāṇa* vs. 71.48–end). Śiva becomes a Śarabha, a fierce mythical creature with four feet on its back and sharp teeth.[15] He approaches Narasiṃha, who immediately attacks Śarabha. Since the latter does not even flinch, Viṣṇu realizes that it is Śiva and he starts praising him. Śiva is pleased with Viṣṇu's devotion and tells Viṣṇu that he would always help him to return to his own birth. Śarabha steps on Narasiṃha and reunites Viṣṇu with his own divine body. Just before departure, Śiva grants Viṣṇu a boon: he shall be the slayer of Daityas. This means that he officially becomes the protector of the gods, tasked to conquer the enemies.

When in the Varāha myth, Hiraṇyākṣa has been killed, the narrative continues with its afterlife episode (*Skandapurāṇa* chp. 108.19–110.end). The gods ask Varāha to assume his normal form again. Varāha replies that he wants to enjoy this Boar form just a little longer. In reality, a long time passes by. Varāha conceives a son called Vṛka, a real troublemaker. When Vṛka is older, he starts roaming around and arrives at the palace of Skanda, Śiva's son. He wrecks the entire palace garden, so Skanda and his Gaṇapas, the loyal assistants of Śiva, detain and torture him. Varāha decides to help his son and goes to the palace. A battle between Varāha and Skanda and his Gaṇapas unfolds, and after various confrontations with trees, Viṣṇu's *cakra*, etcetera, Skanda takes his spear, which he had just received from Śiva, and pierces Varāha's heart with it. As a result, Varāha leaves his body and assumes his old form. Viṣṇu realizes that this is accomplished thanks to Śiva and goes to him to praise him. Śiva is pleased with Viṣṇu's devotion and achievements and grants him a boon. Viṣṇu asks Śiva to teach him and the gods the Pāśupata observance (*pāśupatavrata*), in order to become victorious in battle against the Asuras. Śiva consents to Viṣṇu's request and goes to Mount Meru to instruct them.

What these two afterlives of Viṣṇu have in common is the fact that Viṣṇu deliberately clings to his manifested form. This narrative element cannot, however, be implemented in the Vāmana myth, because one of the key indispensable narrative elements of this myth is the moment that Viṣṇu casts off his dwarfish body and becomes his own, all-encompassing self again. Since Viṣṇu had already given up his manifestation, the composers had to design a different plot twist and did so as follows (*Skandapurāṇa* chp. 117.21–121.22). When Viṣṇu reconquered the universe, the gods are so happy that they praise him extensively. Viṣṇu becomes so proud of himself because of this appreciation that a personification of sin, Pāpmā, enters him and turns him into a dwarf again. To expiate Pāpmā, the gods take Viṣṇu on a pilgrimage and make him perform a horse sacrifice. Śiva completes the sacrifice and purifies Viṣṇu. Viṣṇu is grateful to Śiva and starts praising him. As a reward, Śiva gives Viṣṇu a boon. Viṣṇu wants to hear a teaching thanks to which he will no longer be contaminated by sin or asceticism. Śiva teaches him the Pāśupata *mahāvrata*, "the great observance", the most important vow for Pāśupata ascetics. Having performed the *mahāvrata*, he first attains *paramaiśvarya*, "supremacy", and then Śiva gives half of his body to Viṣṇu, which means that Viṣṇu reaches union with Śiva and is thus liberated from the continuous cycle of rebirth.

Although each manifestation and each storyline require different content for the afterlife episodes, all three afterlife episodes follow the same pattern, which can be divided into two parts. The first part concerns the new problem that arises when Viṣṇu continues to live as his manifestation. The cosmic order is only truly restored when he has taken on his own form again. The solution is provided by Śiva or one of his attendants by proxy. Śiva

makes him return to his original body[16] or provides Viṣṇu and the gods the right solution as to how this can be effectuated and completes the process himself.[17] Śiva becomes the ultimate saviour who reinstates the cosmic order. The second shared part of the afterlife episodes is the fact that Viṣṇu receives a boon from Śiva. First, he obtains a major cosmic task and then, he is taught two religious observances related to Pāśupata Śaivism, *viz.* the *pāśupatavrata*.

Within these two parts, there is again one common factor: Śiva. He played a minor role, or no role at all, in the narratives until the afterlife episodes, for these parts of the storyline are adopted from other sources and had been changed in a subtler manner. However, Śiva becomes crucial, indispensable even, in the new endings which are radical innovations. The focus has shifted from Viṣṇu as the hero in the battle with the Asuras to Śiva as the ultimate saviour of the cosmic order. The message that is expressed at the conclusion of the stories is that once Viṣṇu conquered the Asuras, it is Śiva who saves Viṣṇu and who is presented as the benevolent boon-granting deity.

I would like to reiterate that the *Skandapurāṇa* is the first available text that adds such afterlife episodes.[18] Whereas the *Skandapurāṇa* composers executed consequent, but relatively limited changes in the "main story", they initiated radical innovations at the end of the narratives. The most significant innovation, in other words, has been spared for the very end to come, and it is in this part that Śiva features most prominently. This is done in all three manifestation myths of Viṣṇu and we can therefore assume that the composers made a deliberate choice to convey their most important, Śaiva message at the very end of the narrative. To explain this choice, I wish to introduce "the principle of end weight".[19] What I mean by this is the assumption that the end is the most defining part of a story because what is told at the end is what lingers in the minds of the audience and what will be remembered most vividly. Changing the end of a narrative can have a great effect on the message of the entire story. Composers can therefore take most control of a narrative, when they strategically put their most important message—that is, the message they want the audience to remember—at the end.

The story's ending has been widely studied. Frank Kermode's seminal *The Sense of an Ending* (Kermode [1967] 2000) has influenced many scholars in literary criticism on the importance of endings for a plot to be complete. Besides theoretical studies on endings, much research has been done on endings in particular genres. Barbara Herrnstein Smith's *Poetic Closure: How Poems End* (Smith 1968) contains numerous examples of the endings of poems, and how they relate to the overall structure of the poem. In *Closure in Biblical Narratives*, Susan Zeelander (2011) studies short narratives in the Book of Genesis, categorizing them on the basis of formal devices used to close them, such as formulae, morals, prayers or deviating meter. Closing formulas are also a topic in the field of folklore. Alfred Messerli (2022), for example, shows that the figure of the storyteller, who opens and closes the tale, serves to make contact with the audience. He or she introduces the audience in the world of fairy tales and eventually brings them back to reality.

The ending as a place of influence, as I argue in the case of the *Skandapurāṇa*, has been expressed in several other works as well. In *Closure in the Novel*, Marianna Torgovnick (1981) recognizes the importance of the end by stating that "an ending is the single place where an author most pressingly desires to make his point—whether those points are aesthetic, moral, social, political, epistemological, or even the determination not to make any point at all" (Torgovnick 1981, p. 19). One of the reasons for this, she argues, is the fact that "[i]n long works of fiction, [. . .] it is difficult to recall *all* of a work after a completed reading, but climatic moments, dramatic scenes, and beginnings and endings remain in the memory and decisively shape our sense of a novel as a whole" (ibid., pp. 3–4). Remembering the middle part is less of an issue in the genre of short stories. However, here too, "[t]he ending is where the forces at play in the narrative come to light", as Florence Goyet phrases it in *The Classic Short Story, 1870–1925* (Goyet 2014, p. 45). The power of endings is shown by means of stories with a "twist-in-the-tail" ending. An unexpected turn at the end can, for example, give the reader retrospective insight. Rereading the narrative with the ending in

mind, one could see hints throughout the plot, which would have been unnoticed without the unexpected closure.

Another stimulating study on the importance of endings and their force within a narrative's whole is *Closing the Book on Chaucer* by Timothy S. Miller (2014). The works of Chaucer do not always have an ending, and this void was occasionally filled by later authors. Miller notices that "[t]his study will confirm our intuitive but rarely theoretically articulated sense that the ending stands as the primary site of control in narrative, or rather the locus of attempts to control a given narrative, the place where competing voices and discourses struggle to regulate the reception and future use of the text" (Miller 2014, p. 9). Since the ending is the place of control, Miller continues, this also means that "[t]o change an ending will change what the text means in a given time and place; to reinterpret an ending can have the same effect" (ibid., p. 10). This was done, for example, by Scottish authors who "completed" those works of Chaucer that had no ending. Miller calls the result of this completion "a "Scotticization" of the Chaucer tradition effected through rewritings of the poet's endings. [. . .] Through the mediation of the endings, Chaucer becomes the property of the Scots" (ibid., p. 46). By adding Scottish endings to Chaucer's works, the Scots try to claim the works as their own.

The works of Chaucer and their retelling by the Scots reminds us of Viṣṇu's manifestation myths and their retelling in the *Skandapurāṇa*. Just as some of Chaucer's works ended up in the "hands" of the Scots, Viṣṇu's manifestation myths arrived in a Śaiva community. Even the result of a Scotticization has a parallel with Viṣṇu's manifestation myths in the *Skandapurāṇa*, because Śiva and Śaivism are structurally implemented into these narratives, in particular their endings. I will explore this by focussing on the part of the afterlife episodes where Śiva grants Viṣṇu a boon. I will critically go through each boon, putting them in the context of texts and beyond, for the boons effectuate more than "just" presenting Śiva as a benevolent god. They have a strong Śaiva character, and their goal becomes clear when put into context. More concretely, in the following analysis, I will first present a detailed study of the boons by taking a close look at their content and what they tell us about Viṣṇu's identity in the *Skandapurāṇa*. How does Viṣṇu's cosmic task fit his character; what kind of observance is the *pāśupatavrata* in these manifestation myths; is there a difference between the two *pāśupatavratas*; what is the result of the completion of the observances; and why is it particularly Viṣṇu who performs the most important vow of the Pāśupata Śaivas with the corresponding accomplishments? Then, in the conclusions, I will bring the gathered information together, looking for the red thread in the boons and applying the principle of end weight. If the end indeed expresses the most important message, what did the *Skandapurāṇa* composers want to tell us?

5. From the Asuras' Enemy to Śiva's Devotee

The first boon features in the Narasiṃha myth. Immediately after Śiva has reunited Viṣṇu with his own body, he grants him the following boon.

> *Skandapurāṇa* v. 71.72:
>
> *viṣṇave 'tha varaṃ dattvā daityaghnaṃ sa vṛṣadhvajaḥ |*
> *prakṛtistho bhavety uktvā tatraivāntaradhīyata || 72 ||*
>
> "Having given Viṣṇu the boon of slaying Daityas then [and] having said, 'stay in your natural form', the one with the bull as his banner (Śiva) disappeared right there".

Śiva grants Viṣṇu "the boon of slaying Daityas". It means that Śiva gives Viṣṇu a specific task in the Śaiva universe. He should be the conqueror of the enemies of the gods, or in broader terms, the protector of the gods and the preserver of the universe. He already fulfilled this role in this very manifestation myth, but also in many other stories. Already in the Vedas, Viṣṇu functions as the protector of the universe,[20] and later, Viṣṇu's manifestation myths in which he fights with the Asuras become exemplary of this cosmic role. In the *Skandapurāṇa*, Viṣṇu does not only have this task in the three manifestation

myths, but also in the three other myths where he has one of the leading parts.[21] It is clear that the protection of the universe is Viṣṇu's contribution to the processes and operations in the world, as reflected in his role as the protector in countless other texts.

By framing this function in the form of a boon from Śiva, the *Skandapurāṇa* composers found a way to add two important elements to Viṣṇu's cosmic role. The task first of all becomes official. It is no longer just implied that Viṣṇu should protect the universe, but he is explicitly assigned to do so. It makes Viṣṇu's presence in the universe worthwhile and firmly established. Second, the fact that Śiva grants him this task creates a hierarchy between Viṣṇu and Śiva. Although we might expect Viṣṇu to protect the universe, in the *Skandapurāṇa*, it is explained that it is only by the grace of Śiva that he may do so. Since Śiva grants Viṣṇu this task, he remains in control of the actions that take place in the universe. Taking the entire text into account, it shows that it is a narrative strategy of the composers to describe the gods as having the tasks they are known for, but at the same time, add an extra feature that they receive their duties from Śiva. Earlier, he had given Brahmā the role of creator[22] and now, he has assigned Viṣṇu the role of preserver. The execution of these major cosmic tasks may be done by others, but there is only one god able to delegate them: Śiva.

Śiva grants another boon in the Varāha myth. When Viṣṇu has left his Boar form, he goes to Śiva's abode and starts praising Śiva. Śiva is pleased with Viṣṇu's devotion and effort, so he tells him that he can choose a boon, and Viṣṇu asks the following.

> *Skandapurāṇa* vs. 110.27–28:
>
> *yadi tuṣṭo 'si no deva yadi deyo varaś ca naḥ |*
>
> *tataḥ pāśupataṃ divyaṃ vratam ādeṣṭum arhasi || 27 ||*
>
> *yad āśritya vayaṃ sarve saśakrāḥ sārvakāmikam |*
>
> *yuddhe jeṣyāma daiteyān duḥkhaśokavivarjitāḥ || 28 ||*
>
> "If you are pleased with us, oh God (Śiva), and a boon should be given to us, then please teach the divine *pāśupatavrata*, so that, after having taken refuge [to that vow], which fulfils all desires, we all, including Śakra (Indra), will be victorious in battle against the Daityas, free from suffering and pain".

In other words, Viṣṇu wants Śiva to teach him and the gods the Pāśupata observance, so that they will conquer the Daityas—or more generally, the Asuras—in battle. Śiva promises them to teach the *vrata*.

> *Skandapurāṇa* v. 110.29:
>
> *ahaṃ vaḥ kathayiṣyāmi guhyam etat sanātanam |*
>
> *vrataṃ pāśupataṃ divyaṃ yena kāmān avāpsyatha || 29 ||*
>
> "I will tell you this secret, eternal, divine *pāśupatavrata*, through which you will obtain [your] desires".

In the sentences that follow, it is told that Śiva goes to Mount Sumeru to teach the *vrata*, but the reader does not get to hear the actual teaching or any additional information.

The specifics of the *vrata* remain, therefore, limited, and to know more about the observance, we should gain information elsewhere and compare that with Viṣṇu's requested boon in the Varāha myth. The first source that I will use is the *Skandapurāṇa* itself, for the Pāśupata observance in this narrative is not a unique case. As already mentioned above, it features in other mythological narratives and it is the topic of a doctrinal section of the *Skandapurāṇa* (*Skandapurāṇa* chp. 174–83), referred to here as "the Pāśupata section". The second source is the *Pāśupatasūtra*, the foundational text of Pāśupata Śaivism.[23] Both sources teach the rules and practices that Pāśupatas should follow. One of the key customs is to bathe in ashes—that is, to smear oneself with ashes—as proclaimed in *Skandapurāṇa* v. 180.17b[24] and in *Pāśupatasūtra* v. 1.2.[25] The goal of the observance is to reach union with Śiva (*Skandapurāṇa* v. 180.17cd[26] and *Pāśupatasūtra* v. 5.32).[27] For Pāśupata Śaivas, reaching union with Śiva means to be liberated from the continuous cycle of rebirth. Since liberation

is a goal of ascetics, the *vrata* is directed to Pāśupata ascetics specifically who are willing to give up their mundane life and dedicate their life to Śiva.

The short passage in the Varāha myth does not provide information on what kind of practices Viṣṇu has to do in the context of the *pāśupatavrata*. However, based on Viṣṇu's goal with the *vrata*, we can deduce two crucial differences between on the one hand, the *pāśupatavrata* as established elsewhere in the *Skandapurāṇa* and in the *Pāśupatasūtra*, and on the other hand, the *vrata* performed by Viṣṇu. First of all, the goal is different: a spiritual goal of liberation versus a mundane goal of victory over one's enemies. Although Viṣṇu's wish with the observance matches his role in the *Skandapurāṇa* as the preserver of the universe—which he fulfils in the narratives told after the Varāha myth, such as the Vāmana myth—it does not match the goal as it is stated elsewhere. Second, based on the spiritual goal of liberation, we can assume that the people who perform the *vrata* are ascetics. However, up to the Varāha myth and in the narratives on wars that follow, Viṣṇu belongs to a different class of people: the *kṣatriyas* (kings, warriors, etcetera). Since there are still a number of wars with the Asuras to be fought, it is not possible for Viṣṇu to give up his mundane life as the preserver of the universe and to become an ascetic who is solely dedicated to Śiva. We are, in other words, dealing with a different kind of *pāśupatavrata*.

I suggest that we may be dealing with a vow to officially become a Pāśupata devotee through initiation, while at the same time remaining a *kṣatriya* and observing the rules of the warriors. There is, in fact, a medieval practice of initiation of kings into Śaivism. In 'The Śaiva Age', Alexis Sanderson shows that from the seventh century CE, there is epigraphical evidence for granting the king "Śaiva initiation (*śivamaṇḍaladīkṣā*)" (Sanderson 2009, p. 254). Whereas the initiated Śaiva usually has to adhere to severe rules, "early in the development of the Mantramārga, the Śaivas, no doubt in order to extend their recruitment and hence their influence, admitted a category of initiates who in consideration of the fact that they were incapable of taking on these onerous duties were exonerated from doing so" (ibid.). Initiated kings generally adopted an initiation name, and names ending in -*gaṇa* were reserved for *kṣatriyas* (ibid., p. 291–92, note 695). At the time of the *Skandapurāṇa*, Śaiva initiation was thus not exclusively for ascetics, but kings from the *kṣatriya* class were also able to be officially initiated as Śaivas.[28] The *pāśupatavrata* performed by Viṣṇu, with a *kṣatriya*-related goal, could be an allusion to this royal practice. In that case, Viṣṇu, being a king, continues obeying his obligations as *kṣatriya* in general and as protector and Asura-slayer in particular, while at the same time, he officially becomes a Pāśupata Śaiva, an initiated follower of Śiva. After having officially attained a task in the Śaiva universe, he now formally joins the Śaiva community.

Even though Viṣṇu asks Śiva to teach the *vrata* to him *and* the gods, the request essentially concerns Viṣṇu. It is, after all, Viṣṇu who is assigned to fight with the Asuras and granted a boon in the first place. The fact that it is Viṣṇu who receives the *pāśupatavrata* and officially joins the Śaiva community must be a strategic choice of the *Skandapurāṇa* composers. At the time of the composition of the Purāṇa, Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism were two of the major religious traditions that had their own communities of worshippers, sought financial support from royal courts and created temples, monuments, material art and texts.[29] The *Skandapurāṇa* composers must have been aware of the significant presence of Vaiṣṇavism and the prominent role Viṣṇu takes in the living community of that time. By making Viṣṇu an official follower of Śiva and an adherent of Śaivism, they communicate a supremacy of Śiva over Viṣṇu and that of Śaivism over Vaiṣṇavism.

Viṣṇu's incorporation into the Śaiva community and his devotion to Śiva become even more encompassing in the Vāmana myth. When Viṣṇu is freed from Pāpmā, he realizes that this was thanks to Śiva and he goes to Śivakūṭa to perform a horse sacrifice[30] and worship Śiva for 1006 years and six months. Because of Viṣṇu's devotion to Śiva, Śiva offers him a boon.

Skandapurāṇa v. 121.16:[31]

bhagavan pāpmanā vāpi tapasā vāpi lokapa |

lepo[32] *na me yathā syād vai tan mamācakṣva kālahan* || 16 ||

"Oh lord, oh protector of the world, oh slayer of time, tell me how there may be no contamination by sin or asceticism for me".

Viṣṇu's request not to be polluted by sin or asceticism is essentially a request to stay pure and faultless. It is significantly different from Viṣṇu's request in the Varāha myth, for which he had a mundane goal in mind. The present boon, as will become clearer as we read on, has a spiritual aim. The means to reach the non-contamination is provided by Śiva in the next verse: "perform the secret *mahāvrata* ('great observance')" (*guhyaṃ cara mahāvratam*, *Skandapurāṇa* v. 121.17d). The following verses give us more information on this vow and speak of Viṣṇu performing it.

Skandapurāṇa vs. 121.18–19:

pañcārthaṃ kṛtarakṣaṃ taṃ[33] *sarvadharmāvahaṃ śubham |*

yogaṃ yantraṃ vrataṃ caiva paramaiśvaryasādhanam || 18 ||

yat tat pāśupataṃ divyaṃ vidhānaṃ sārvakāmikam |

tac cīrtvā dvādaśa samāḥ paramaiśvaryam āptavān || 19 ||

"Having performed for twelve years that divine, wish-fulfilling Pāśupata practice (*yat . . . samāḥ*, 19a–c), which is [known as] *pañcārtha*[34] and protects, which is the vehicle of all *dharmas* and glorious, which is the [best] practice, instrument and observance, and leads to supremacy, he (Viṣṇu) obtained supremacy".

In light of the Varāha myth earlier, it is striking that the *mahāvrata* is also qualified as "*pāśupata*". Having already performed a *pāśupatavrata* together with the gods in order to be victorious against the Asuras, Viṣṇu now performs another *pāśupatavrata*. This time, he performs it alone and for the sake of non-contamination. In order to get a better understanding of what kind of *pāśupatavrata* this is, we can compare it again with passages of the Pāśupata section of the *Skandapurāṇa* and the *Pāśupatasūtra*.

The *mahāvrata* itself is described in the Pāśupata section of the *Skandapurāṇa* (*Skandapurāṇa* vs. 180.10–11). It is qualified as "the totality of practices [related to] ashes" (*bhasmasādhanamātram*, *Skandapurāṇa* v. 180.10c), and "by performing it, [the practitioners] are liberated" (*sevanād yasya mucyante*, *Skandapurāṇa* v. 180.11c). This is reminiscent of the *Pāśupatasūtra*'s description of the *pāśupatavrata*. The *Pāśupatasūtra* prescribes practices involving ashes, including bathing (*Pāśupatasūtra* v. 1.2, see note 25), sleeping (*Pāśupatasūtra* v. 1.3, *bhasmani śayīta*, "one should sleep in ashes"), and "bathing again" (*Pāśupatasūtra* v. 1.4, *anusnānam*). These are all done for the sake of liberation, which is understood as complete union with Śiva (*Pāśupatasūtra* v. 5.32, see note 27). The fact that the *mahāvrata* is qualified as *pāśupata* in the Vāmana myth therefore strongly suggests that we are dealing with this kind of *pāśupatavrata*, that is, one directed to a Pāśupata ascetic who abandons his mundane life (instead of one directed to a king who formally joins the Pāśupata community as assumed in the Varāha myth). When we learn about the result of Viṣṇu's performance of the *mahāvrata*, it becomes even more apparent that Viṣṇu performed the *pāśupatavrata* as it is imagined in the Pāśupata section of the *Skandapurāṇa* and the *Pāśupatasūtra*.

The result is that Viṣṇu attains *paramaiśvarya*, "supremacy". Someone who has reached this state is able to become very small or very big or adopt one of the other "eight qualities" (*aṣṭaguṇa*).[35] This state is not for everybody. On the contrary, it is often ascribed to the Siddhas, the "accomplished" Yogins, who are in an advanced stage in their spiritual path to liberation. The state of *paramaiśvarya* has a particularly interesting parallel with the Pāśupata section of the *Skandapurāṇa*, where several references to *paramaiśvarya* are found. According to *Skandapurāṇa* v. 180.8, someone who has received a teaching in the *pāśupatavrata*, obtains knowledge and supremacy in *yoga* and is liberated.[36] This is exactly the same path that Viṣṇu treads. After practicing the observance, Viṣṇu attains *paramaiśvarya* and final liberation is, in fact, the last step, as can be deduced from the following verse.

Skandapurāṇa v. 121.20:

tasya devaḥ svayaṃ śūlī tuṣṭaḥ prekṣya tathāvidham |

śarīrārdhaṃ dadau tasmai tad abhūd viṣṇuśaṃkaram || 20 ||

"God (Śiva) himself, the one with the trident, being pleased with him (Viṣṇu), having watched [him] in that state [of *paramaiśvarya*], gave half of his body to him. [As a result,] that (*tad*) [body of Viṣṇu] became Viṣṇu-Śaṃkara (Viṣṇu-Śiva)".

This is the penultimate sentence of the Vāmana myth, and something extraordinary happens at this very last moment: Śiva gives half of his body to Viṣṇu,[37] so that Viṣṇu's body becomes one with Śiva's.[38] This is a narrative representation of the highest goal of a Pāśupata ascetic, which is to reach union with Śiva. In other words, Viṣṇu becomes liberated from the continuous cycle of rebirth. Viṣṇu's final liberation is the climactic state of his adherence to the ideal path of the Pāśupata ascetic, which starts with complete devotion to Śiva, continues with the attainment of supremacy and concludes with union with Śiva, which is granted by Śiva himself.[39] The fact that it is Viṣṇu who fulfils the ideals of the Pāśupata ascetic is telling for the same reasons as why Viṣṇu officially became part of the Śaiva community: to incorporate Viṣṇu, who had an established religious tradition of his own in the historical landscape of the *Skandapurāṇa*, into the *Skandapurāṇa* and Śaivism at large. Since Viṣṇu and the religious tradition related to him were a force to reckon with, the composers gave him a special treatment. He is not just any Śiva worshipper, not just any Pāśupata Śaiva, he is the ideal Pāśupata ascetic who reaches their highest goal: union with Śiva.[40] By fully incorporating Viṣṇu into Śaivism, absorbing him, as it were, into Śiva's body, the hierarchy between Viṣṇu and Śiva is indisputable.

6. Conclusions

The concluding section of an article is usually the place where the author brings the most important findings together, recapitulating the outcomes that the reader should remember. The *Skandapurāṇa* composers did not finish with a summary, but given the content of the closing chapters of their retellings of Viṣṇu's manifestation myths, the composers probably wanted their audience to remember their concluding message in particular. This "principle of end weight" that the end contains the most important message and that it is the most defining part of a narrative where the most control can be exercised, can be observed in these retellings, for the contrast between the afterlife episodes and the "main stories" as found in other Purāṇas could not be bigger.

Although the *Skandapurāṇa* retellings of the Narasiṃha, Varāha and Vāmana myth are unique from beginning to end, the main story lines have been largely followed, and Śiva plays only a minor role or no role at all until the afterlife episodes. It is a completely different story when we reach the final part. Since Viṣṇu is attached to his manifestation—either voluntarily or against his will—he becomes dependent on Śiva for a solution. After Viṣṇu had bravely conquered the Asuras, Śiva suddenly appears on the stage as the ultimate saviour, because it is he who releases Viṣṇu from his manifested form and thus truly restores the cosmic order.

And Śiva's presence does not end there, nor the power dynamics between Śiva and Viṣṇu. When Viṣṇu has returned to his own form, he realizes that this is thanks to Śiva and starts praising him. We get to know Śiva as a benevolent god, because he wants to grant Viṣṇu a boon as a reward for his devotion. Looking at the three boons together from a Śaiva ideological perspective, the boon gets more valuable. With the first *vara* in the Narasiṃha myth, the boon of slaying Daityas, Viṣṇu obtains a prominent and permanent role in the Śaiva universe as the protector of the gods and the universe. Since Śiva gave him this position, Śiva remains in control and on top of the Śaiva universe as it is presented throughout the text. The hierarchy between the two deities becomes even more apparent in the following two afterlife episodes, where Viṣṇu performs the most important observance for Pāśupata Śaivas twice: the *pāśupatavrata*. The first performance of the *vrata* narrated in the Varāha myth seems to be a king's initiation into Pāśupata Śaivism. Viṣṇu becomes an

official royal member of the Śaiva community, which incorporates him into Śaivism. In the next afterlife episode of the Vāmana myth, he is even presented as the ideal Pāśupata ascetic, performing the *pāśupatavrata* as it is known from ascetic treatises, achieving *paramaiśvarya*, "supremacy", and reaching union with Śiva—the highest goal of the Pāśupata ascetic.

Throughout the epic and Purāṇic corpus, Viṣṇu has many faces and forms. However, the *Skandapurāṇa* is the first and perhaps the only Purāṇa to present him as a Pāśupata ascetic. This unprecedented identity switch teaches us about the hierarchy between Śiva and Viṣṇu, about to whom one should devote one's time, money and, ultimately, one's life. According to the *Skandapurāṇa*, Viṣṇu becomes absorbed in the Śaiva universe, in Śiva's body and in Śaivism at large. And this new characterization of Viṣṇu is expressed precisely at the very end of each manifestation myth; the part that will linger in the minds of the audience.

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Notes

[1]   I use the term 'manifestation' instead of the Sanskrit word *avatāra* ("descent") to refer to the forms that Viṣṇu assumes. Even though *avatāra* has become an accepted term in secondary literature, I have adopted the English 'manifestation' because the text under discussion in this article, the *Skandapurāṇa*, does not apply the Sanskrit *avatāra* to the figure of Viṣṇu. Instead, it structurally speaks of Viṣṇu's "forms" or "bodies" (*rūpa* and *vapus*). In a later part of the *Skandapurāṇa*, the text does speak of the descending, *avatīrṇa*, of a deity on earth, namely of Śiva (*Skandapurāṇa* vs. 167.112ff.).

[2]   The first edition of the *Skandapurāṇa* was made by Kṛṣṇaprasāda Bhaṭṭarāī (see *Skandapurāṇa* 1988). Since the 1990's, the text has received renewed interest from an international group of leading Purāṇa scholars, resulting in a new critical edition based on more manuscripts. Six volumes have been published thus far, covering chapters 1 to 112, each preceded by an introduction on the text's content, composition and transmission. For example, a detailed overview of the possible development of the *Skandapurāṇa* from its first redaction to later transmissions can be found in Yokochi 2013, pp. 54–58 (see *Skandapurāṇa* 2013). I use this new critical edition for chapters 1–112 and Bhaṭṭarāī's *editio princeps* for the remaining chapters. The *Skandapurāṇa* studied in this article is different from another publication going under the name of *Skandapurāṇa*. This is a later collection of individual texts compiled in seven *khaṇḍas*, "books". For this edition, see *Skandapurāṇa* ([1910] 1982).

[3]   For example, when the gods are hunted by a fury of Devī ("Goddess", Śiva's wife) in the form of Kālakarṇī, they dive into a heap of ashes. As soon as Devī sees the gods being smeared with ashes, she remembers her own practice of the *vrata*. She realizes that the gods have now become Pāśupatas and stops Kālakarṇī (*Skandapurāṇa* vs. 32.100–113). For the Sanskrit text and a synopsis of the myth, see Bakker, Bisschop and Yokochi 2014 (see *Skandapurāṇa* 2014).

[4]   The Asuras are the archenemies of the gods. The most prominent lineages of Asuras are the Daityas and the Dānavas. The Daityas are descendants of Kaśyapa and Diti, and the Dānavas are descendants of Kaśyapa and Danu.

[5]   The myth appears, for example, in *Mahābhārata* v. 12.326.73e–f, *Harivaṃśa* vs. 31.31–67, *Harivaṃśa* App. 1 No. 42A, *Purāṇapañcalakṣaṇa vaṃśa* vs. 2C.16–22 (found in the *Brahmāṇḍapurāṇa* and *Vāyupurāṇa*) and *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* chp. 1.54. Several studies have been done on the Narasiṃha myth, such as Hacker (1960, 25ff.), Swain (1970) and Soifer (1992, pp. 73–99). For the Sanskrit text and a synopsis of the *Skandapurāṇa* retelling of the Narasiṃha myth, see Bisschop and Yokochi 2018 (see *Skandapurāṇa* 2018).

[6]   From the epic and early Purāṇic period onwards, the Varāha myth exists in two major variants. The first is a cosmogonic myth, explaining how the universe is (re-)created, after Varāha had rescued the earth from the cosmic ocean. It is as old as the Vedas (for example, it is told in *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* vs. 7.1.5.1.1–12, where Prajāpati takes up this task) and is told countless times afterwards (for example, *Mahābhārata* v. 3.100.19, *Purāṇapañcalakṣaṇa sarga* 3, *Harivaṃśa* vs. 31.21–30 and *Harivaṃśa* App. 1 No. 42, ll. 1–488). The second is an Asura-slaying myth, of which the first references are found in the *Mahābhārata* (*Mahābhārata* v. 7.13.44, chp. 12.202 and vs. 12.326.71–73ab) and the *Purāṇapañcalakṣaṇa* (*vaṃśānucarita* v. 5B.77), but the first full accounts of the myth are found in the *Harivaṃśa* (*Harivaṃśa* App. 1 No. 42, ll. 489–662) and the *Skandapurāṇa*. There are many studies on the Varāha myth, such as Gonda ([1954] 1969, pp. 129–45), Gail (1977), Brinkhaus (1992) and Dokter-Mersch (forthcoming a). For the Sanskrit text and a synopsis of the *Skandapurāṇa* retelling of the Varāha myth, see Bisschop and Yokochi 2021 (see *Skandapurāṇa* 2021).

7 Some elements of the story have their roots in the Vedas, such as Viṣṇu's three strides for the sake of mankind (*Ṛgveda* v. 6.49.13); Viṣṇu's manifestation as Vāmana appears for the first time in the Brāhmaṇas (*Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā* v. 3.7.9); and Bali becomes Vāmana's opponent in the epics (for example, *Rāmāyaṇa* chp. 1.28). Full accounts of the myth can be found in the Purāṇas (such as *Harivaṃśa* App. 1 No. 42B, *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* chp. 1.21 and chp. 1.55 and *Matsyapurāṇa* chp. 244–46). For studies on the Vāmana myth, see, for example, Gonda ([1954] 1969, 55ff.), Tripathi (1968) and Rai (1970). For the Sanskrit text of the Vāmana myth in the *Skandapurāṇa*, see Bhaṭṭarāī 1988 (see *Skandapurāṇa* 1988), and for a summary of this retelling, see Dokter-Mersch (2021, pp. 256–59).

8 I would like to make clear that the three manifestation myths are not told directly after each other. They are intertwined with other narratives, but I will nonetheless treat them as if they form a set and are told in one sequence. The first reason to do so is because these are the only manifestation myths of Viṣṇu in the *Skandapurāṇa* and therefore share the basic narrative structure of Viṣṇu manifesting himself. The second reason is that all three myths have undergone similar changes, including, as already mentioned, new endings. The structure of the myths show many similarities in general, and the boons granted at the end of each manifestation myth in particular show a gradual build-up to a climax in the Vāmana myth.

9 Purāṇas belong to the genre of anonymous literature, and there are no biographical data about their composers. Nevertheless, I refer to "the *Skandapurāṇa* composers", because studying the text as a whole, the text shows structural features reflecting compositional skills, narrative techniques and a deep knowledge of the rich epic-Purāṇic repertoire and language employed by skilled professionals. Based on these features, it is possible to hypothesize on the composers' intentions and aims.

10 Some changes concern a reorientation of specific details known from other sources. For example, Viṣṇu's weapon of choice in the Varāha myth is usually the *cakra*, "discus". As shown in Dokter-Mersch (forthcoming b), this weapon is also used for killing Hiraṇyākṣa in the *Skandapurāṇa*. However, there is one important difference compared to other sources: the *cakra* is said to originate from Śiva. This is not the only case of Śiva's involvement in the *cakra*, Viṣṇu's primary weapon. Almost each time the *cakra* is mentioned as Viṣṇu's weapon, it is said to belong to Śiva or to be granted by him. It is, in other words, a structural adjustment throughout the *Skandapurāṇa* to make Śiva the agent of the *cakra* and as a result, the mastermind behind the death of the enemies of the gods.

11 One of the retellings where this is made explicit is the Narasiṃha myth in the *Harivaṃśa*.
Harivaṃśa App. 1 No. 42A ll. 579–81:
kṣīrodasyottaraṃ kūlaṃ jagāma prabhur īśvaraḥ | | *579* | |
nārasiṃhīṃ tanuṃ tyaktvā sthāpayitvā ca tad vapuḥ | *580* |
paurāṇaṃ rūpam āsthāya yayau sa garuḍadhvajaḥ | | *581* | |
"The lord, the master, went to the Northern shore of the Kṣīroda ocean. Having abandoned his Narasiṃha-body and having established this body, having assumed his old body, the one with the Garuḍa as his banner (Viṣṇu) left". Translations are my own, unless stated otherwise.

12 For example, Viṣṇu becomes a Brahmin specifically because of the setting of the narrative. At the moment that the gods need Viṣṇu's help, Bali is consecrated in a horse sacrifice. Part of the ritual is to give presents to Brahmins who visit the sacrifice. When Viṣṇu attends the sacrifice in the disguise of a Brahmin, Bali should give him whatever he asks for.

13 *Bhagavadgītā* vs. 4.7–8 (see *Mahābhārata* 1933–1966):
yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānir bhavati bhārata |
abhyutthānam adharmasya tadātmānaṃ sṛjāmy aham | | *7* | |
paritrāṇāya sādhūnāṃ vināśāya ca duṣkṛtām |
dharmasaṃsthāpanārthāya saṃbhavāmi yuge yuge | | *8* | |
"For whenever the Law languishes, Bhārata, and lawlessness flourishes, I create myself. I take on existence from eon to eon, for the rescue of the good and the destruction of the evil, in order to reestablish the Law" (translation by Van Buitenen 1981, p. 87).

14 For other references in the Narasiṃha myth of the *Skandapurāṇa* to the obligatory temporariness of Viṣṇu's manifestation, see Dokter-Mersch (2021, pp. 147–48).

15 The choice for Śarabha as the opponent of Narasiṃha echoes a common narrative theme in which a Śarabha fights with a lion and ultimately wins. For an engaging study on Śarabhas, see Slaje (2017).

16 Even in the Varāha myth, where Skanda effectuates the actual return to Viṣṇu's own body with his spear, Śiva turns out to be indispensable, since the spear is given to Skanda by Śiva. With this crucial detail, Śiva becomes responsible and thus laudable for the deed.

17 Although Viṣṇu and the gods perform the horse sacrifice themselves, the ritual has to be completed by Śiva.

18 It also remains one of the few Purāṇas that adds an afterlife episode directly after the manifestation myth in question. To the best of my knowledge, only three later Purāṇas share this construction. The *Śivapurāṇa* (*Śivapurāṇa Śatarudrīyasaṃhitā* chp. 10–12) and the *Liṅgapurāṇa* (*Liṅgapurāṇa* chp. 1.95–96) add an afterlife episode to the Narasiṃha myth and allude to an afterlife of Varāha. The *Kālikāpurāṇa* (*Kālikāpurāṇa* chp. 25–31) adds an afterlife episode to the Varāha myth, within which Narasiṃha has an afterlife as well (*Kālikāpurāṇa* chp. 29–30). For a summary of each retelling, see Dokter-Mersch (2021, pp. 141–42, note 320). For a comparison between the afterlife episode of the Narasiṃha myth in the *Skandapurāṇa* and the one in the *Śivapurāṇa* and *Liṅgapurāṇa*, see Granoff (2004, pp. 118–19). Besides these afterlife episodes told directly after the manifestation myth at

issue, there is at least one famous story of another son of Varāha called Naraka. When Varāha lifted the earth, the earth got pregnant with Naraka. As Naraka grows up, he performs various bad deeds, such as steeling Aditi's earrings, and ultimately, he is killed by Kṛṣṇa. The first references to this story are found in the *Mahābhārata*, and full accounts are narrated in the *Harivaṃśa*, *Viṣṇupurāṇa*, *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* and *Kālikāpurāṇa* (for references and summaries, see Brinkhaus (2011–2012)). Although there is a clear link between Naraka, Varāha and Varāha's act of lifting the earth, I consider the Naraka story as separate from the Varāha myth, told in a different context than that of the Varāha myth. I therefore do not consider it an afterlife episode of the Varāha myth.

19   I adopted the term "end weight" from the field of grammar, where end weight refers to the principle that the new, heavier, longer and more important part of the sentence is placed at the end.

20   For Viṣṇu's primary task of protecting the universe, his relationship with kingship and references to Sanskrit sources, see for example Gonda ([1954] 1969, p. 164).

21   During the Amṛtamanthana war, Viṣṇu fights with Prahlāda (*Skandapurāṇa* chp. 113, 115); during the Tārakāmaya war, Viṣṇu kills Kālanemi (*Skandapurāṇa* vs. 122.1–13); and later, Viṣṇu fights once more with Prahlāda (*Skandapurāṇa* chp. 172).

22   In the creation myth (*Skandapurāṇa* chp. 3–4), Brahmā creates all kinds of beings after Śiva had granted him *prajāpatitvaṃ*, "the state of being the lord of offspring" (*Skandapurāṇa* v. 3.22c) as a reward for the severe asceticism that Brahmā had practiced for the sake of offspring. For the Sanskrit text and a synopsis of the myth, see Adriaensen, Bakker and Isaacson 1998 (see *Skandapurāṇa* 1998).

23   The *Pāśupatasūtra* is one of the earliest Pāśupata scriptures available to us today, which may be dateable to the second century CE (Sanderson 2014, p. 8). It prescribes some of the unconventional Pāśupata practices, such as behaving like a bull and adopting unethical and unorthodox behaviour. All practices are dominated by the sole devotion to Śiva for the sake of liberation.

24   *Skandapurāṇa* v. 180.17b: *yaḥ snānaṃ bhasmanā caret*, "he performs [the practice of] bathing with ashes".

25   *Pāśupatasūtra* v. 1.2: *bhasmanā triṣavaṇaṃ snāyīta*, "at dawn, noon and sunset, one should bathe using ashes".

26   *Skandapurāṇa* v. 180.17cd reads: *bhasmanā śivayogena mucyate pāśabandhanāt*, "he will be liberated from the binding of fetters, through ash and union with Śiva".

27   *Pāśupatasūtra* v. 5.32: *labhate rudrasāyujyam*, "one obtains union with Rudra (Śiva)".

28   I would like to clarify that Sanderson's examples do not come from the Pāśupata branch of Śaivism. They are from the Mantramārga type of Śaivism, which was a tantric tradition that "promised not only liberation but also, for those initiates consecrated to office, the ability to accomplish supernatural effects (*siddhiḥ*)" (Sanderson 2014, p. 4). The Pāśupata tradition expressed in the *Skandapurāṇa*, on the other hand, is an ascetic tradition, often referred to as Atimārga (even though Atimārga sources generally do not seem to use this terminology themselves, see Bisschop (2020) for this observation and an exception). We should be reluctant in projecting practices of the Mantramārga onto those of Pāśupata Śaivism because they are quite distinct from each other. However, the correspondences between the royal initiation of the Mantramārga examples and Viṣṇu's *kṣatriya*-related goal of the *pāśupatavrata* in the *Skandapurāṇa* are certainly worth mentioning. In fact, Hans Bakker has noted similar initiatory names ending in -*gaṇa* for kings who are associated with Pāśupata Śaivism. In *The World of the Skandapurāṇa*, Bakker mentions a sixth century Pāśupata king from Ujjain, whose name "Śaṃkaragaṇa may itself have been a Śaiva initiation name ending in *gaṇa*" (Bakker 2014, p. 205). This could point to a practice of the initiation of kings into Paśupata Śaivism.

29   For a historical sketch of the religious landscape of the *Skandapurāṇa* (consisting of Śaivism, Vaiṣṇavism, as well as other religious traditions), see Bakker (2014, pp. 4–10). I am aware of the fact that there is not just one "Vaiṣṇavism", just as that there is not just one "Śaivism". I use the term Vaiṣṇavism as a collective of religious communities that venerate Viṣṇu as the highest deity, visit temples dedicated to Viṣṇu, listen to the great deeds of the god in the form of narratives, etcetera. This does not mean that these communities deny other gods or that they are not interested in the narratives of other gods, but their focus is primarily on Viṣṇu. I consider works such as the *Harivaṃśa* and the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* as textual outcomes of this collective "Vaiṣṇavism".

30   The fact that Viṣṇu performs a horse sacrifice supports the idea that at this point of the narrative sequence, Viṣṇu is still a king (who should adhere to the rules of the *kṣatriyas*). A horse sacrifice is a ritual reserved for kings (Steiner 2010, p. 370).

31   The manuscripts show some variation for verses 16 until 19 (quoted below), and Bhaṭṭarāī has introduced several emendations in his edition (1988, see *Skandapurāṇa* 1988). Based on manuscript evidence, I sometimes deviate from Bhaṭṭarāī's edition, whose readings are given in the notes. For the manuscript variants and a detailed explanation of the decisions, see Dokter-Mersch (2021, pp. 171–73).

32   Bhaṭṭarāī (1988, see *Skandapurāṇa* 1988) reads *lopo*, "violation", instead of *lepo*. My choice for *lepo* is first of all based on the manuscript evidence. *Lepo* is the reading of the oldest available manuscripts, whereas *lopo* is the reading of the younger manuscripts (see Adriaensen, Bakker and Isaacson 1998, 31–38 and Bakker and Isaacson 2004, 10–12 (see *Skandapurāṇa* 1988, 2004) for an overview of the available manuscripts, their script, dating and location of production and preservation). Furthermore, the verse has a close parallel with both the Pāśupata section of the *Skandapurāṇa* and the *Pāśupatasūtra*. In the former, it is first stated that the Yogin "may not be contaminated by actions that are bound by ignorance" (*na lipyeta karmabhir mohabandhanais*, *Skandapurāṇa* v. 179.17ab), and then that "the Yogin is not contaminated by sins either" (*yogī tathā pāpair na lipyate*, *Skandapurāṇa* v. 179.19ab). In the latter, it is reported that "the accomplished Yogin is not contaminated by action, nor by sin" (*siddhayogī na lipyate karmaṇā pātakena vā*, *Pāśupatasūtra* v. 5.20). Viṣṇu's request not to be polluted thus shows close parallels to the Pāśupata teaching in these sections.

33   Bhaṭṭaraī (1988, see *Skandapurāṇa* 1988) made the following conjecture: *sa cātha kṛtarakṣas taṃ*, "and then he (Viṣṇu), by whom a *rakṣa* (protection ritual) was done, having performed (*cīrtvā*, *Skandapurāṇa* v. 121.19c) it (the *vrata*) . . . " This conjecture is, however, not needed and it is possible to stay closer to the manuscripts instead.

34   This refers to the five categories in the Pāśupata teaching as defined in the *Pañcārthabhāṣya*, a commentary on the *Pāśupatasūtra* by Kauṇḍinya (fourth century CE according to Acharya (2011, p. 459), but composed between 400 and 550 CE according to Sanderson (2014, p. 8)). The five categories are "(1) Kārya: effect (=worldly existence); (2) Kāraṇa: cause (=God); (3) Yoga: union (with God); (4) Vidhi: prescribed regimen (=ritual praxis); (5) Duḥkhānta: end of suffering (=the goal)" (Bisschop 2014, p. 28). Since the Pāśupata practice described here is qualified as *pañcārtha*, it is considered to belong to this system.

35   The *Skandapurāṇa*, for example, speaks of *aṣṭagunam aiśvaryaṃ*, "eightfold supremacy" (*Skandapurāṇa* v. 29.116c and v. 114.67c). The complete list is: *aṇiman* ("minuteness"), *mahiman* ("bigness"), *laghiman* ("lightness"), *gariman* ("heaviness"), *prāpti* ("obtaining [everything one wants]"), *prākāmya* ("irresistible will"), *īśitva* ("superiority") and *vaśitva* ("subduing to one's own will").

36   *Skandapurāṇa* v. 180.8:
vrataṃ pāśupataṃ prāpya ṣaḍmāsāj jñānam āpnute |
yogaiśvaryaṃ mahad vyāsa yad avāpya vimucyate || *8* ||
"Having received the *pāśupatavrata*, one obtains knowledge after six months [and] having obtained great supremacy in yoga, oh Vyāsa, one is released".

37   The image sketched here also suggests the concept of Harihara. Harihara is a combination of Viṣṇu (Hari) and Śiva (Hara), each forming one half of the body. The composite icon is represented both in narratives and in iconography. For examples, see, for instance, Adiceam (1966, p. 84), Agrawala (1970, p. 348) and Lavy (2003).

38   The last verse is a *phalaśruti*, "the reward for listening [to the narrative]". In this verse, it is stated that the merged entity should be worshipped.
Skandapurāṇa v. 121.21:
ya imaṃ śṛṇuyān martyaḥ sadā parvasu parvasu |
arcayec chivaviṣṇum ca sa gacchet paramāṃ gatim || *21* ||
"The man who always listens to this [story], chapter by chapter, and worships Śiva-Viṣṇu, he shall go to the highest state".

39   It should be noted that Viṣṇu's liberation forms a potential problem for the narratives that follow, in which Viṣṇu is again one of the (main) participants in a war between the gods and the Asuras. In fact, immediately after the Vāmana myth, the Tārakāmaya war is told, in which Viṣṇu kills Kālanemi. There is no doubt that Viṣṇu is back in his role as Asura-slayer, which does not agree with his state as liberated soul. This forms precisely the problem that we were able to solve in the Varāha myth by assuming a Śaiva initiation of king Viṣṇu. The issue can, however, be explained from the perspective of the composition. As explained in note 8, the three manifestation myths can be treated together as if they form a set based on their shared features. The three manifestation myths build up to the climax of liberation in the Vāmana myth, and this section is therefore, in a way, concluded. What follows might still be connected on other thematic levels, but Viṣṇu's manifestations end here. This sense of conclusion is strenghtened by the fact that the Vāmana myth ends with a *phalaśruti*. As Greg Bailey has argued in *Gaṇeśapurāṇa*, the *phalaśruti* is found at the end of the entire Purāṇa, functioning as "a boundary to the text, analogous to the way in which an individual myth included in a Purāṇa is bounded by a *phalaśruti*" (Bailey 1995, p. 10). Even though in the case of the Vāmana myth in the *Skandapurāṇa*, the chapter does not end after the *phalaśruti*, the individual myth does end here and is closed through a *phalaśruti*.

40   A similar process has been observed in the figure of Vyāsa by Peter C. Bisschop in *After the Mahābhārata: On the Portrayal of Vyāsa in the Skandapurāṇa* (2021). Some of the arguments in this article concern Vyāsa's importance as the composer of the *Mahābhārata*, his identification in the epic, and his identification in the *Skandapurāṇa*. Being the composer of the *Mahābhārata*, Vyāsa was, like Viṣṇu, a very important figure at the time of the composition of the *Skandapurāṇa*. Finding connection with the epic could grant a new composition, in this case the *Skandapurāṇa*, "a mark of authority" (Bisschop 2021, p. 50). The link is found, among others, in the figure of Vyāsa and a well-known story of him and his son Śuka (see ibid., passim). However, the religious orientation of the *Mahābhārata* is different from the *Skandapurāṇa*. "While the epic may not have started out as a religious document, it had been infused with a Kṛṣṇa and Nārāyaṇa theology by the time of its written Gupta redaction, which is what most scholars see as the form of the text as we find it more or less represented in the main text of the Poona critical edition" (ibid., pp. 50–51). This "Bhāgavata character", as Bisschop calls it, refers "to early traditions of Viṣṇu worship" (ibid., p. 50 note 17). Since the *Mahābhārata*, a work with a Bhāgavata orientation, is traditionally seen as being composed by Vyāsa, he is easily associated with Bhāgavata traditions as well; just as Viṣṇu is, needless to say, associated with Vaiṣṇava traditions. The source corpus of both characters has therefore a Vaiṣṇava character. How the *Skandapurāṇa* composers then portrayed Vyāsa is likewise remarkably similar to Viṣṇu: he becomes a Pāśupata ascetic. In chapter 182 of the *Skandapurāṇa*, Vyāsa is explicitly instructed "to practice the Pāśupata observance himself" (*Skandapurāṇa* v. 182.50) and "with this bold move [. . .] the composers of the *Skandapurāṇa* have managed to turn the celebrated author of the epic *Mahābhārata* into a dedicated Pāśupata ascetic" (ibid., p. 55). Not only that, the text continues with "several prophesies about Vyāsa as well: he will become a yogin, he will compose the Purāṇa, he will divide the Veda into four, he will institute the Dharmas, and finally, he will attain absorption in Īśvara (*Skandapurāṇa* vs. 183.59c–60b)" (ibid.). In other words, like Viṣṇu, Vyāsa will reach union with Śiva, final liberation.

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