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T. Lorenzetti

## Indian Sources of the *Burāq* Iconography\*

1. The supernatural mount *al-Burāq*, upon which – according to Islamic tradition – the Prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven, has its origin in an extensive interpretation of the enigmatic words contained in verses 1 of sura XVII and 1–18 of sura LIII, referring to an eschatological vision of the Prophet, who had experienced sudden transport one night from his house at Mecca to Jerusalem, and thence to heaven<sup>1</sup>. No mention is made in the *Koran* of *Burāq* but, interpreting the Koranic material in the light of theological speculation and canonical traditions (*ḥadīth*), the commentators have come up with a wealth of sidelights on the fantastic mount, whose iconography reflects manifold influences and various symbolic implications<sup>2</sup>.

Without dwelling on the first depiction of *Burāq* contained in an illuminated Persian manuscript of the *Jāmi al-Tawārikh*, 'The Collection of Histories' (c. 1318) by the historian Rashid al-Dīn, which showed an iconography never to recur, we shall consider the subsequent attestations. In fact, this first image of *Burāq*<sup>3</sup> rapidly disappears to give way to another that – although with considerable iconographic variants – would be adopted throughout the Islamic world. Here, in accordance with the literary tradition, *Burāq* takes on the appearance of a winged white horse, with a profusion of ornamentation adorning the saddle, the crowned face of a woman and a long peacock tail (figs. 1–2 – from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century).

The origin of this composite creature is uncertain although it certainly derives from syncretistic cultural elements, the main iconographical sources apparently consisting of hybrid animal or semi-human images such as the griffin, harpy, and winged horse, common to many ancient civilisations, which Islam, with its extraordinary capacity for synthesis, absorbed and re-elaborated. Of these composite creatures endowed with manifold symbolic values, a number are generally considered to be possible prototypes of the usual *Burāq* iconography<sup>4</sup>:

a. the image of a winged cow with the face of a woman, from Nimrud (9<sup>th</sup> century BC), con-

served in London at the British Museum, inv. 90954;

b. the image of a winged feline with human face, e. g. the relief from Crete (c. 10<sup>th</sup> century BC), conserved in the Ashmolean Museum of Oxford, inv. N.G.488<sup>5</sup>;

c. harpy images, e. g. the image from Fatimid Egypt (12<sup>th</sup> century) conserved in London at the Victoria and Albert Museum, inv. C47–1960;

\* I would like to thank Prof. G. Verardi (University of Naples 'L'Orientale') for the preliminary discussion and his advice towards the present article. I am also grateful to Prof. M. Fontana of the same University, Prof. A. Piemontese (University of Rome 'La Sapienza') and Prof. G. Scarcia (University of Venice 'Ca' Foscari') for their bibliographical suggestions. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to Prof. M. Spagnoli, under whose guidance I work at the University of Rome 'La Sapienza'.

<sup>1</sup> Of the most common etymological analyses of the name *Burāq* we may mention the one generally proposed by Arabic lexicographers tracing it back to the verbal stem *brq*, 'to enlighten', (E.L.<sup>2</sup>, I: 1310). Mention may also be made of hypotheses that see a connection with the Persian noun *barak*, 'horse' (Blochet 1899, 203–236), or the Arabic term *baraqa*, 'lightening', 'to flash' (Horovitz 1919, 180–183). Another interpretation proposes a connection with western classical archetypes where the denominations of animals are associated with chromatic aspects, suggesting that the name refers to a bay reddish-brown horse (Piemontese 1974, 119ff.).

<sup>2</sup> A large number of the *ḥadīth* describe *Burāq* as a swift mount, white in colour, in size somewhere between mule and ass, equipped with saddle and bridle, showing the head of a woman and two wings spanning the space between east and west. Cf. E.L.<sup>2</sup>, I: 1310; Arnold 1965, 118; Piemontese 1974, 110ff.

<sup>3</sup> In this iconography *Burāq* takes on the appearance of a centaur with face crowned by a woman bearing, presumably, the *Koran* in her hands, tail ending with a female bust equipped with sword and shield. Talbot Rice 1976, 111.

<sup>4</sup> Of the texts dealing with the *Burāq* iconography we may cite: Ettinghausen 1957, 360ff.; Arnold 1965, pl. LIV–LV; Baer 1965, 64.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. also the ivory plaque from Nimrud, in the British Museum, inv. 118863. Arnold 1965, pl. LIV a.





Fig. 1. Muhammad on *Burāq*, Tabriz, XIV cent., Topkapı Museum (Istanbul). Illustration from Grossato 1999, 119.

d. sphinx images, e.g. images from Iran (12<sup>th</sup> century), conserved in Paris, Musée du Louvre, Section islamique, inv. OA7356<sup>6</sup>.

Of course, mention must also be made of the winged horse image in general, attested among many peoples of the ancient East, which certainly found its way into the Muslim world. As for the ancient Eurasian world, this singular creature is believed to evoke an approach to the heavens, the realm of the divine, and thus spiritual ascent. This symbolic value also seems to apply to the image of *Burāq*: associated with the wind, emblematic of sunlight in its white radiance, it bears the Prophet towards the theophanic experience<sup>7</sup>. This mythical figure also exhibits various other symbols dear to Iranian tradition, such as the peacock, bird of paradise emblematic of Iranian royalty, whose circular polychromatic tail evoked the cosmic deployment of the Divine Spirit (Burekhardt 1955, 74). It also shows a female face, that could be associated with a concept of generation, beauty and capacity to create and transform, contained in the female figure. Woman is the door through which life comes into the world and, for this reason, in many ancient traditions, she is the way leading from the phenomenal world to the transcendental, and thus guidance towards the divine.

The *Burāq* image can, therefore, be seen to reflect several influences, deriving from that composite substratum typical of Islamic culture. Nevertheless, when considering the many and varied influences, we should also take into consideration some rather more obscure sources of Indian origin in general and Tamil derivation in particular.

2. Contacts between Islam and India began towards the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century along the Malabar Coast, where Arab merchants had settled to con-

duct their trade, and here a culturally and religiously mixed population had formed, living together in relative peace<sup>8</sup>. Not long after, the Arabs launched their first expedition for the conquest of Sind. It was only after the 10<sup>th</sup> century, however, with repeated incursions of Turco-Afghan invaders and, in particular, the foundation of the Sultanate of Delhi (1206) and the Moghul Empire (1526), that the flow of reciprocal influences between the Hindu and Muslim worlds set in, bringing deep-reaching changes in the cultural, religious and political panorama of the Indian subcontinent.

In fact, while Islamic civilisation absorbed and diffused elsewhere elements of Indian culture that it had picked up, in the case of India herself fruitful interactions were generated with original forms of synthesis in the arts, letters, folk traditions and indeed in philosophical-religious thought. As the centuries rolled by, the confrontation that had grown up between the two cultures showed no signs of flagging; Islamic communities, now present throughout the Indian subcontinent, prospered and interesting forms of interaction were ever more burgeoning, affecting the social and religious spheres as well as the folk traditions.

It must, however, be remembered that the Islamic communities of India were – and indeed still are – of a regional nature, in the sense that the variety and diversity of interrelations with the Hindu population varies from one geographical area to another (Siddiqui 1992, 95 ff.). It is in Tamil Nadu that these communities show partic-

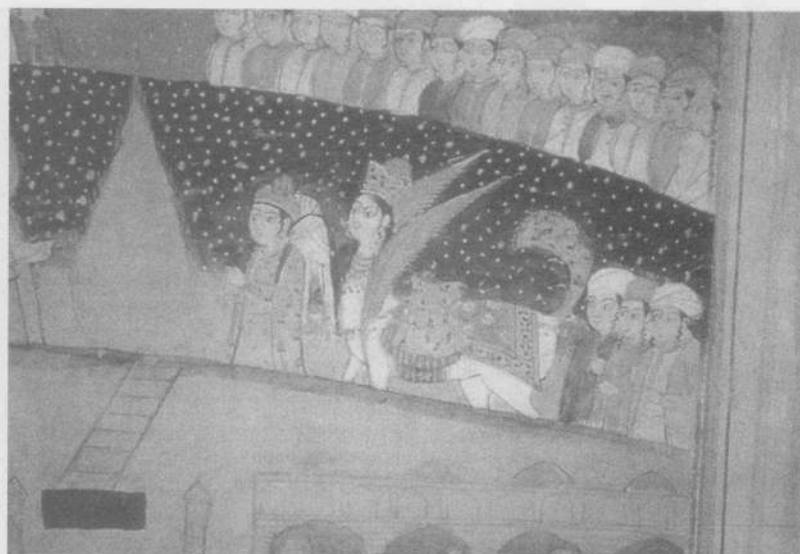
<sup>6</sup> Cf. also the paintings from Rayy, in the British Museum, Dept. of Ceramics, inv. 13270–3. Arnold 1965, pl. LV a, b.

<sup>7</sup> Scarcia 1983, 88 f.

<sup>8</sup> Arnold 1984, 264. For more on the subject, cf. also Fossil 1942, 14 ff.



Fig. 2. *Burāq*, North India, XIX cent., Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Paris). Illustration from M. Bernus Taylor 2001, fig. 189.



ularly strong integration and interaction with the Hindu population, giving rise to many and various syncretistic phenomena, especially in the field of folk traditions and religious rituals<sup>9</sup>, on a much larger scale than happens in the North of India<sup>10</sup>. A number of authors (Mines 1984, 67; Murray 1979, 163f.) attribute this phenomenon in part to the centuries-long relatively peaceful coexistence – given that a large proportion of Tamil Muslims are descendants of the Arab merchants who had become fairly well integrated with the autochthonous populations as early as the 8<sup>th</sup> century –, and in part to the fact that the Tamil Nadu Muslims derived largely from converted Hindus (or descendants of converts), who tended to incorporate some of the social customs that belonged to their ancestors<sup>11</sup>.

3. Turning now, more specifically, to the possible Indian influences on the image of *Burāq*, let us consider a well-known figure in Tamil culture, namely the supernatural cow *Kārāmpaṣu* ('the black cow'), endowed with the face of a woman, the wings of a bird, and dwelling in the heaven of the god Indra (Winslow 1984, 287). This figure seems to emerge mostly from the popular literature of autochthonous origin, which sees a convergence of folklore versions of the classical Hindu epic on the one hand, and local ballads, legends and songs on the other<sup>12</sup>. These works, handed down orally by bards and singers over the centuries – and in some cases also immortalised in palm-leaf manuscripts<sup>13</sup> – span the historical ages. Many compositions, including ballads, seem to date back to periods even earlier than the large-scale sanskritisation of the South of India, which we can place roughly between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century of the Christian era (Vanamamalai 1981, 20; Zvelebil 1975, 49ff.).

So that we find the name of *Kārāmpaṣu* recurring in some popular ballads, like the story of *Cinnattampi* (Nirmala Devi 1987, 2), set out in palm-leaf manuscripts, or the popular *Aṇṇamar Kāmi Katai*, which also mentions various winged horses traversing the heavens to the dwelling of Viṣṇu (Beck 1992, 422. 424). However, popular Tamil tradition also features black cows with black tongues and udders, semi-divine and similarly denominated *Kārāmpaṣu* (Winslow 1984, 287), and we must therefore bear in mind that reference is often to these rather than Indra's mythical winged beast with a woman's face (Beck 1992, 14f.).

<sup>9</sup> For more on the subject, cf. Sulaiman 1977, 7ff.; Mines 1984, 74ff.

<sup>10</sup> For more on the subject, cf. Mayer 1970, 19f.; Mines 1984, 66, 71ff.

<sup>11</sup> This tendency is more notable in rural contexts (cf. Sulaiman 1977, 6). It must, however, be noted that, despite the centuries-long interaction of the Muslims of Tamil Nadu in local society, the last fifteen years have seen a process of increasing Islamization and definition of a Muslim identity, actually differing from that of the other Indian Muslims. Although in Tamil country this process is limited to the northern urban areas, it is, however, becoming a general problem throughout India. Cf. Mines 1984, 67ff.

<sup>12</sup> Vanamamalai 1981, 2ff.; Zvelebil 1987, xi–xii; Gover 1981, vi–xxvii.

<sup>13</sup> The palm-leaf manuscripts, most of which are conserved in the Department of Palm Leafs Manuscripts of the University of Tanjavur, the 'Saraswaty Mahal Library' of Tanjavur, the 'Government Oriental Manuscripts Library' of Madras and the 'Archives of Tamil Nadu Government', as well as various European libraries, belong mostly to a span of time between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Many are copies of the originals.





Fig. 3. Kārāmpaṣu/Kāmadhenu, XI cent., Marunthiśvarar Temple, Chennai (Tamil Nadu). Photo T. Lorenzetti.



Fig. 4. Kārāmpaṣu/Kāmadhenu, XI cent., Marunthiśvarar Temple, Chennai (Tamil Nadu). Photo T. Lorenzetti.

The story of the celestial Kārāmpaṣu is recounted in a widespread Tamil myth<sup>14</sup> (a different version of which is known in Bengal and Bihar – see Shulman 1980, 100), where this figure often appears superimposed on that of the well-known Kāmadhenu, the cow of plenty of Indian classical tradition (e. g. *Liṅga Purāna* V, 2, 36). The Tamil myth, which recounts how the sage Vasiṣṭha obtained Indra's celestial cow to sprinkle milk on Śiva's *liṅga*, but afterwards ended by cursing the creature and turning her into a common 'earthly' cow, makes no mention of Kārāmpaṣu. From beginning to end the story, which concludes with the redemption of the cow and her return to heaven, refers to this creature as Kāmadhenu. We can, however, deduce that Kārāmpaṣu was identified with Kāmadhenu on the evidence offered by the sculptural decoration of the temple of Marunthiśvarar<sup>15</sup> at Tiruvāṇmiyur in Tamil Nadu<sup>16</sup>. In this sanctuary, in fact, the central nucleus of which is dated back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century of the Christian era, as attested by various Cōḷa inscriptions<sup>17</sup>, the story is evoked with two bas-reliefs – set on two columns of the *maṇḍapa* facing the *garbhagṛha* – in keeping with the practice in the Tamil world of connecting each myth with a particular shrine.

In one relief Indra's cow is portrayed with the divine attributes of Kārāmpaṣu – woman's face and wings – in the act of aspersing Śiva's *liṅga* with

the milk (fig. 3). Opposite, the creature displays her 'earthly' form, assumed following the sage's curse, in the act of licking and sprinkling the symbol of Śiva to betoken devotion (fig. 4).

The former relief representing the cow with divine attributes is the only ancient image of Kārāmpaṣu that I have been able to find in Tamil country so far. On the contrary, most of the Cōḷa temples belonging to a period comprised between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries show the 'earthly' appearance of Kārāmpaṣu/Kāmadhenu, albeit with a few iconographic variants. We may, therefore, deduce that the myth and the figure of the celestial cow were such a common feature in Tamil country at the time to appear in both the folk and the classical tradition, where Kārāmpaṣu and Kāmad-

<sup>14</sup> *Tiruvāṇmiyur Sthalapurāṇavacaṇam* 1966, 30ff. This myth has many versions and appears often in mythology as well as in folk tales, which have obviously been lumped together. Shulman 1980, 96 f.; Rajagopalan 1995, 58ff.; Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1987, 48ff.

<sup>15</sup> For a detailed study of the Marunthiśvarar temple, see: Rajagopalan 1995.

<sup>16</sup> Tiruvāṇmiyur is an ancient sacred area in the region of Madras, already attracting pilgrims in the Pallava period.

<sup>17</sup> Inscriptions of the sovereigns Rajendra Cōḷa (1014–1047) and Rajadhiraja Cōḷa (1052–1063). Cf. Annual Report of South Indian Epigraphy, p. 65, nos. 77–83.



henu seem to have been assimilated. As a matter of fact the interaction between the autochthonous Tamil culture and classical Sanskrit culture was already very much under way in the 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> centuries, as demonstrated in our particular case by the fact that *Kārāmpaśu*, just like *Kāmadhenu*, is Indra's celestial cow (e. g. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, IV, 2, 3, 6).

The shortage of early sources specifically referring to the winged *Kārāmpaśu* with a woman's face might be ascribed to her primary connection with folk tradition rather than classical culture, where *Kāmadhenu* – enjoying a long standing tradition in learned and more well-to-do brahmanical environments – could possibly be more easily represented in literature and art. In this respect, a point worth considering is that in Bihar, too, the figure was known and portrayed (with a woman's face, but no wings) only in the folk art, such as the art of Madhubani, for instance (fig. 5)<sup>18</sup>. Moreover, in the Tamil country of the Cōla period the fact that the 'earthly' *Kārāmpaśu* iconography prevailed over the depiction of her 'divine' form could attest to a preference in representing the particular feature of the *liṅga* worship by the cow, better befitting the religious attitude of the time.

It is worth noting that almost all these iconographies display luxuriant vegetation or a tree, that not only recall the earthly sojourn of the celestial cow but also – at a deeper level – appear as an emblem of the ever present connection between the female principle and nature. *Kārāmpaśu*/*Kāmadhenu* is in fact one of the symbols of the Primordial Mother, the universal sustainer; woman, goddess (*Padma Purāṇa*, I, 48,135–136), *prakṛti* (*Liṅga Purāṇa*, I, 16, 32–34); *śakti*, endowed with the power to create, but also to guide man towards self-realization. In fact, she is *māyā*, the power of illusion (*Liṅga Purāṇa*, I, 16, 32–34), but, inversely, also knowledge (*Devī-Māhātmya*, XCI, 4–5; XCII 2–3). Thus *Kārāmpaśu*/*Kāmadhenu* is the source of transformation and liberation, symbolizing the path followed by every human being from heaven to earth and then back towards the celestial heights where the gods have their dwelling.

4. Going on, now, from the symbolic-mythical plane to the sphere of ritual, an interesting point worth noting is how, in Tamil culture, *Kārāmpaśu* is often celebrated and borne in procession with the image of a goddess – generally *Parvatī* – set on her back (fig 6). The Tamil people are strongly attached to the cult of certain divine or semi-divine figures, used as 'vehicles' for the more important divinities in the processions celebrating temple festivities. Fashioned with a wealth of detail in bronze, wood, or plaster and brightly painted, they are believed to spread the power of the gods they carry onto the community of devotees. These mounts include not only the traditional *vāhanas*,

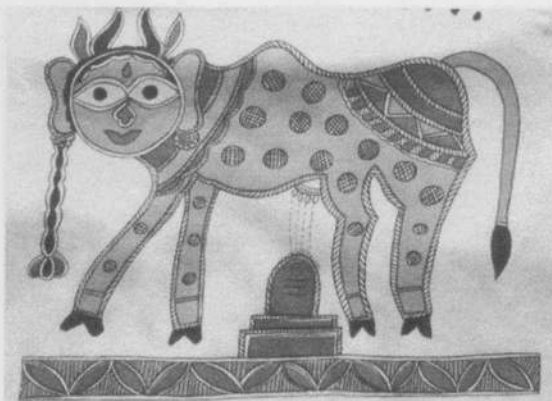


Fig. 5. *Kāmadhenu*, Modern mural, Madhubani (Bihar). Photo T. Lorenzetti.



Fig. 6. *Kārāmpaśu*/*Kāmadhenu* with *Parvatī* on her back, XIX–XX cent., Kapaliśvara Temple, Chennai (Tamil Nadu). Illustration from Waghorne 1992, fig. 2.

but other supernatural beings, too, often belonging to the pantheon of the ancient autochthonous communities – as in the case of certain demons (*vākṣasa*) – and incorporated in the classical ritual tradition with a status similar to that of the

<sup>18</sup> The folk art of Madhubani, which finds inspiration in the local legends, saw vigorous development in the 17<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> centuries.



*vāhana*. Some authors (Smith 1980, 12ff.; Waghorne 1992, 16ff.) hold them to be true *vāhanas* even though, as they are not invariably associated with the same deity carried on their backs, they cannot be taken as such. Nevertheless, it is also true that the borderline between the status of these secondary divinities and that of the traditional *vāhanas* is becoming increasingly indistinct in Tamil culture.

Be that as it may, Kārāmpaśu, already identified with Kāmadhenu, also becomes the 'vehicle' of the Great Goddess in ritual processions.

5. Now, turning back to the image of the Prophet's mount, we cannot help noting some fundamental iconographic similarities with the figure of Kārāmpaśu. However, the similarities do not stop here since, albeit within their respective traditions, the two images also show a certain iconological affinity. In fact, from the symbolic-mythical point of view both Kārāmpaśu and *Burāq* not only belong to that mythical bestiary with soteriological value (Piemontese 1974, 115ff.), but both are connected with the idea of a 'journey' between earth and heaven, with the deeper implication of a spiritual progress. In the case of *Burāq*, in fact (although taking a general viewpoint since the manifold symbolic meanings, to our knowledge, have not yet received systematic study), we can nevertheless observe that this extraordinary creature is the 'vehicle' for the journey from the Mecca to Jerusalem and thence to heaven, accomplished bodily according to some versions, spiritually according to others<sup>19</sup>, and representing the exemplary model of the ecstatic experiences of Islamic mystics, who saw in it the prototype of their own 'ascension' (Schimmel 1960, 32). It was indeed particularly in this sphere that the Prophet's 'journey' represented a spiritual progress towards that dissolution (*fanā*) and that permanence (*baqā*) in the divine qualities, or, in other words, that return to the one primordial condition<sup>20</sup>.

Now, if we consider the following points:

- the fundamental iconographic similarities between Kārāmpaśu and *Burāq*;
- the common function of mediation between the earthly and heavenly realms;
- some iconographies above described and to be considered as possible *Burāq* prototypes belong to very remote ages, while Kārāmpaśu precedes the first images of the fantastic steed by only a few centuries;
- and, finally, the phenomena of assimilation and interaction characterizing contacts between Islamic and Indian traditions, especially in Tamil country,

then we may suppose that the various elements prompting realization of the figure of *Burāq* included – perhaps even predominantly – aspects from the Indian world.

Furthermore, it is also to be remembered that the Muslim world often readily accepted many eastern iconographies *in toto*, especially through the Mongols. Such is the case with the dragon and simurgh – originally from China – which, although in the Islamic context they find their way into autochthonous traditions, taking on rich new significance, ever retain the iconography of the country from where they originated.

6. We now come to another point worth considering, namely that the most recent depictions of Kārāmpaśu, particularly numerous in Tamil Nadu, show iconographic elements characteristic of the Prophet's mount, including the decorated saddle and peacock tail (fig. 7). The introduction of these elements in the Kārāmpaśu iconography, with the consequently increasing resemblance to *Burāq*, prompts two, apparently different, hypotheses.

- The first would lead to the conclusion that these new Kārāmpaśu attributes (saddle and peacock tail) derived from the *Burāq* iconography. If so, the common iconographic features would prove further evidence of the particular interaction between Islamic and Hindu culture, amply documented and undoubtedly very substantial in Tamil country. Moreover, it could point to an ideal connection – coming about at some unclear time in the past – between the two supernatural figures, of which some affinities were perceived. In this respect, it is worth remembering that the image of Kārāmpaśu endowed with new features is quite late, coinciding with, or following shortly, the diffusion of the *Burāq* iconography, which might in fact have stimulated the elaboration.
- The second hypothesis prompted would be to attribute distinctly Indian derivation to the new iconographic elements acquired by Kārāmpaśu. Let us not forget that the peacock symbol holds great importance in the Indian world, and even now is counted among the emblems of the country itself. Moreover, this creature represents the *vāhana* of both Sarasvati and Murugan/Kārttikeya, with frequent occurrence in

<sup>19</sup> Anawati/Gardet 1968, 78, note 10; Bernus Taylor 2001, 282.

<sup>20</sup> Anawati/Gardet 1968, 104ff.; Lings 1997, 33ff. The interior, spiritual value of Muhammad's 'ascension' also seems to find confirmation in the itinerary of the 'journey' itself, the Prophet being borne "horizontally" (*isrā'*) from Mecca to Jerusalem before achieving "vertical" (*mi'rāj*) ascent, since only by leaving from the virtual centre of the earthly state (symbolized by the holy city of Jerusalem), i. e. from the highest level reached by man, is access possible to the superhuman states, up to the encounter with Allah (Lings 1997, 36; cf. also Guénon 2000, 25f.; Burckhardt 1955, 96; Valsan 2000, 112ff.).



Fig. 7. Kārāmpaśu/Kāmadhenu, XIX cent., Marunthiśvarar Temple, Chennai (Tamil Nadu). Photo T. Lorenzetti.



sculpture and painting. It is precisely the idea of Kārāmpaśu as 'vehicle' of the Goddess (generally Parvatī) that may well have favoured the borrowing, in her iconography, of elements appearing on other *vāhanas* such as, indeed, the peacock tail (see Sarasvatī's peacock), or a decorated caparison, a characteristic common to several of them (think of Śiva's bull and Durgā's lion).

Actually, the contrast between these two hypotheses is less striking than could appear at first sight. In fact, given the Indian genius for assimilation and gathering elements to re-elaborate through a process (although without excluding conflicts), a possible conclusion would be to consider the recent Kārāmpaśu iconography as the outcome of diverse influences, coming to ripeness and interdependence in a multi-religious environment that often sees symbolic forms flowing from one set of mythical conceptions to another, mutating or taking on new value according to the contexts within which they are interpreted.

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