

Mountains of Wisdom: On the Interface between Siddha and Vidyādhara Cults and the Siddha Orders in Medieval India
Author(s): David Gordon White
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Mountains of wisdom: On the interface between Siddha and Vidyādhara cults and the Siddha orders in medieval India

David Gordon White

THE MAIDEN, THE HORSE, AND MERCURY

Three Hindu alchemical texts (*Ānandakanda* 1.53–62; *Rasaratnasamucchaya* 1.85–88; *Rasendracūḍāmaṇi* 15.13–15) dating from the thirteenth-to-fourteenth centuries provide the following remarkable instructions for the extraction of mercury from the wells or pits in which it naturally occurs:

> Upon seeing a well-adorned maiden who, having bathed after first coming into season, [rides by] mounted upon a horse, mercury, which is found in wells, [becomes] possessed of a desire to seize her, [and] rushes up out [of that well]. Upon seeing it, she gallops away. The mercury pursues her for the distance of one *yojana* [eight to nine miles]. [When] that [mercury which is] born of Śiva then quickly returns to the well, it is caught in troughs dug in its path. That mercury, because of its heaviness, fell from the mouth of Agni [the god of Fire] in Darada deśa ['Cinnabar land']. That mercury, absorbed into the surface of the earth there, came to remain in that country. By placing that [mercury-rich] ore in a *pātana yantra* ['sublimating apparatus'], one extracts the mercury [from those ores]. Mercury is found in all of those places that the Perfecti [Siddhas] and Wizards [Vidyādharas] caused it to fall [by using that technique].

This account is remarkable for at least three reasons. The first of these concerns its provenience; the second its technological referent (the 'sublimating apparatus'); and the third its mythological referent (the Perfecti and Wizards of

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Darada deśa).

On the first score, we find that this account is not unique to India alone. We find it in the seventeenth-century Chinese encyclopedia, the *Ho han sans ts'ai t'ou hui*, whose chapter entitled '*yin-shui*' ('silver water, quicksilver'), gives the same information, but locates its mercurial well 'in the land of Fou-lin [that is, Syria] far to the west' (De Mely 1895: 332–33). This detail is corroborated by the earliest extant source that we have for this account: Syriac recensions of the alchemical works of Pseudo-Zosimus, dated to the fourth through sixth century CE, describe how mercury is induced to rise up out of its well when a beautiful naked maiden walks past it, and then runs quickly away. Young men attack the flowing metal with hatchets and cut it up into bars (Needham 1980: 337). This account is further corroborated by the Syrian toponym, Bir es Zeibaq, which means 'Well of quicksilver' (De Mely 1895: 334).

The implications of these three parallel accounts are staggering. First, they attest to the very cosmopolitan nature of the Eastern world's alchemical traditions. We can well imagine that the Silk Road, which was India's pipeline for the raw materials of alchemy, would also have served as a conduit for alchemical knowledge and legend between the Mediterranean world and East and South Asia. More than this, we may glimpse, behind the language of this extraction technique, references to another very cosmopolitan tradition—that of the unicorn. The presence of a virgin, a horse, and the theme of capturing an elusive 'game' are all present in these accounts. While the Western unicorn legend was very probably a borrowing from the Indian myth of an antelope-horned sage named Ṛṣyaśṛṅga (*Mahābhārata* 3.110.1–113.25), it is only in the West that the hunting of the unicorn—with the aid of a virgin, who tames it by grasping its horn—as well as the transmutative properties of its horn, are brought to the fore (De Mely 1895: 334).

This same mytheme appears in Persian alchemical legend as well, in an account of a wondrous creature called the 'Physician of the sea,' which may itself be a borrowing from the Indian legend of Maṇimekhalā, the 'jewel engirdled one' (Lévi 1937: 371–83). The 'Physician of the sea' is described as having a golden stone set into its forehead which, when removed, transmutes base metals into gold and cures all human and animal diseases. The ca. tenth-century Jābirian corpus of Persian alchemy describes the capture of one of these fish-like creatures which, upon being netted and brought aboard a ship off the coast of an island called Sindiyyat, shows itself, after the fashion of a mermaid, to be a beautiful woman. She remains on board the ship, bears a son by one of the sailors, and later jumps back into the sea, where she becomes a great sea monster who swallows the entire ocean during a great storm (Kraus 1986: 90–93).

It is possible to dig down to a still deeper mythological stratum, and see in

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these accounts variations on the quite widespread Indo-European theme of a well whose fiery fluid contents erupt in pursuit of a woman, but which are subsequently channeled and thereby neutralized. If this is an Indo-European mytheme (the myth is attested in Rome as well as Ireland and India), it would have to date from the third millennium BCE or earlier (Dumézil 1981 [1968], 3: 27–31; Puhvel 1986: 277–83). In this case, Pseudo-Zosimus's alchemical gloss would have been a much later addition.

These legends present more problems than can possibly be treated here. Not the least of these problems is the direction of transmission of alchemical legend, lore, techniques, and raw materials throughout the first fifteen centuries of the common era. As Joseph Needham (1980: 339–55) has demonstrated, China stands, according the best evidence, as the primal source for the world's transmutational and elixir alchemy. The Chinese technique of *kim* or *chin*, 'aurifaction,' probably emerged in China in about the first century CE; from there, it would have been carried west to the Mediterranean world in perhaps the third century CE. This Chinese term would then have been transliterated, by Pseudo-Zosimus or someone before him, into the Greek *chymia* or *chemia*, later Arabicized into *al-kīmiyā*, and finally Latinized as *alchymia*, alchemy. If this historical reconstruction is correct, then Syria, which received its alchemy from China in about the third century CE, would have exported its mythic extraction technique back to the east, via our thirteenth-to-fourteenth-century Indian sources, to China in the seventeenth century.

It is impossible to say with any certainty that this was in fact the route that this particular mythic tradition took. It is equally impossible to determine the directions in which the many alchemical exchanges of this long period, effected along the Silk Road, may have occurred. Each of the medieval world's alchemical traditions was—in spite of such striking cases of borrowing as we have just described—generally self-contained and specific to its particular cultural and religious context. So it is that just as Jābirian alchemy was Shī'ite and Chinese alchemy Taoist, so the symbol system of Hindu alchemy was overwhelmingly Śaiva.

In this last system, mercury was the mineral equivalent of the semen of the phallic-god Śiva and sulfur that of the uterine or menstrual blood of Śiva's consort, the Goddess. These identifications find their etiological foundations in the origin myths of these two reagents, origin myths dating from the eleventh through thirteenth centuries. It is in the context of the myth of the divine birth of Skanda that the myth of the origin of mercury is cast, in the *Ānandakanda* (1.8–15), *Rasaratnasamucchaya* (1.23–29), *Rasendracūḍāmaṇi* (15.4–12), and a number of other alchemical sources. As in the Purāṇic mythology, Śiva sheds his seed into the mouth of Agni, who has taken the form of a pigeon. Agni in turn

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spits the seed into the Gaṅgā River, where it gives birth to the child Skanda in the midst of a clump of reeds. The alchemical sources offer the following additional detail: while on his way to the Gaṅgā, Agni, unable to bear the heat of that seed, drops some of it from his mouth. In those places where it falls, it burrows into the ground to form five wells of mercury, hundred *yojana*s (about nine hundred miles) in depth. It is there, the accounts conclude, that that semen is found today, in the form of mercury. Of the five wells in which this seed-born mercury is said to have established itself, the *Ānandakanda* (1.15) and *Rasaratnasamucchaya* (1.80) single out the northern well, in which mercury is red and pure, as superior to the other four. This northern well is identified with Darada deśa, the 'Cinnabar land' of our mercury extraction myth, a toponym that geographers have identified with Dardistan, in northern Kashmir (Sircar 1977 [1971]: 34, 68; Wink 1990: 232).

The *Skanda Purāṇa* (1.29.87) appears to refer to this myth in its account of the birth of Skanda. At one point in this myth, the gods all become pregnant because Agni, who has already swallowed the semen of Śiva, is the mouth of the gods. Then, 'after Śiva's semen had torn open their bellies, an unattractive mercurial [*pārada*] lake of that [semen], hundred *yojana*s [in expanse], was formed.'

Sulfur too has its origin myth, which parallels that of mercury inasmuch as it is the sexual essence of the Goddess that gives rise to this primary alchemical reagent, the female counterpart to male mercury (Dash 1986: 102; *Rasārṇava* 7.72, 11.82). The *Rasārṇava*, the eleventh-century Hindu alchemical classic, frames this myth within the Purāṇic account of the churning of the Ocean of Milk from which, it will be recalled, the gods gained the *amṛta* that rendered them immortal and invulnerable to the onslaughts of the antigods, the *asura*s, in their sempiternal war for universal supremacy. According the *Rasārṇava*, the Goddess, while sporting together with the Wizard-maidens, Siddha-maidens, Goddesses, and Celestial Nymphs in the Ocean of Milk off the coast of White Island, becomes aware of menstrual blood issuing from her body. Later, during the churning of the same Ocean of Milk, that blood rises to the surface, captivating the gods and *asura*s with its aroma (*gandha*). They thereby say, 'May this be called *gandhaka* ("aromatic," "sulfur"). May it be used in the calcination and fixing of mercury. May those qualities that are found in mercury also be found in this sulfur.' Thus [sulfur] is called *gandhaka* here on earth (*Kākacaṇḍīśvara Kalpatantra* 44.2–3; *Rasaratnasamucchaya* 3.2–12; *Rasārṇava* 7.57–66).

In the context of these two accounts, the use of a menstruating maiden as 'bait' makes perfect sense in the extraction of mercury account with which we began this study. Every recombination of the reagents sulfur and mercury is, for the Hindu alchemist, tantamount to a sexual union of this divine pair whose standard mode of creation and maintenance of the entire universe is, precisely, a

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sexual one. It is not for nothing that the standard iconic image of this pair, as found in temples all over India since at least the second century BCE, is that of the *liṅgam-yoni*, that is, a stylized representation of a phallus set into a vulva (Mitterwallner 1984: 18–19; Srinivasan 1984: 34).

Not all such alchemical unions occur in the laboratory, however; they are also present in nature, in the form of such geothermal phenomena as sulfur springs and gas vents, found at the Darada deśa of our extraction account and other sites. Such reactions may also be effected within the human body, through the techniques of *haṭha yoga*, a generally Śaiva tradition which emerged in India in the same period as did Hindu alchemy. In this discipline, it is through the internal channeling of sexual fluids (the yogic body being symbolically androgynous) that the sexual union of male and female principles, divine and mineral, is effected. Here, the haṭhayogic subtle body is divided, at the level of the navel, between male and female. All that lies above the navel is male, and thereby identified with male seed, with the moon that exudes vivifying nectar, and the god Śiva. It is in the cranial vault, portrayed as a downturned well, that these male elements are concentrated: semen that has been transformed into nectar through yogic practice oozes from a moon that has been filled out by that same nectar, a moon that is the abode of the seminal deity Śiva. All that lies below the navel is female, identified with female uterine or menstrual blood, with the sun that provides the thermal energy necessary to fuel the transformation of seed into nectar, and the goddess Śakti whose name means 'Energy.' At the beginning of yogic practice, these elements are all concentrated in the lower abdomen, which is portrayed as an upturned well, the complement to the downturned well in the cranial vault. This double-well configuration is one that is reproduced in alchemical apparatus, as we will now demonstrate.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE VIDYĀDHARA APPARATUS

The description of the extraction of mercury from its wells in 'Cinnabar land' concludes with the statement that mercury is today found in those places in which the Perfecti and Wizards extracted it from its ore, using the *pātana yantra*, the 'sublimating apparatus.' The medieval alchemists in fact knew of three types of sublimating apparatus for the extraction of mercury from cinnabar, that is, naturally occurring mercuric sulfide (*darada*): these are the apparatus of upward sublimation (*ūrddhvapātana*), downward sublimation (*adhopātana*), and transversal sublimation (*tiryakpātana*). In all three apparatus, mercury is made to sublimate and thereby leave behind its residual impurities in the ores in which it

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naturally occurs (or with which it is amalgamated), and thereafter to recondense through the mediation of a source of cold water (*Ānandakanda* 4.38–43; *Rasahṛdaya Tantra* 2.8; *Rasaratnasamucchaya* 9.56, 11.37; *Rasārṇava* 7.49, 10.55).

The upward-sublimation apparatus is composed of two superimposed vessels, whose mouths are sealed together with several layers of mud-smeared cloth stretched across their interface. A slow fire beneath the lower vessel heats a mixture of herbs and powdered mercuric sulfide. The mercury that evaporates upwards condenses on the inner surface of the downturned base of the upper chamber, which is cooled from above by a cloth soaked in cold water (or by a superimposed cold-water recipient). The mercury that has condensed on this downturned inner surface has a smoky luster to it: when rubbed with a cloth, it immediately takes on the properties of fluidity, luster, and so on one associates with pure quicksilver. In the bottom of the lower vessel there remains the dross of this reaction: free sulfur together with other mineral and plant matter, oxidized and devoid of its original mercury content (*Rasaratnasamucchaya* 9.24–25).

Because of the function it serves, this apparatus is known as the *ūrddhvapātana*. This is not, however, the sole name by which it is known: a number of medieval alchemical sources also call it the *ḍamaru yantra* ('Śiva's two-headed drum apparatus') (*Rasaratnasamucchaya* 9.57), the *śāmbhavī mudrā* (the 'hermetic seal of Śambhu,' that is, of Śiva), and the *vidyādhara yantra* (the 'Wizard apparatus') (*Rasendracūḍāmaṇi* 4.42, 5.51–52). This first designation clearly refers to the shape of this apparatus; the second to a technique of *haṭha yoga*; and the third to both such a technique and to the mythic Wizards who were the innovators of a body of techniques that, precisely, fused alchemical and yogic practice into a single Śaiva discipline. Here, *vidyādhara*, literally 'bearer of wisdom,' is a technical term: we will, however, continue to translate it as 'wizard.'

The structure and dynamics of this apparatus recall the dynamics of yogic reversal—known, from the time of the *Mahābhārata* onwards, as *ūrddhvaretas* ('upward-tending semen'). In the subtle physiology of the yogic body, it is in the head and torso that the two chambers of the sublimating apparatus find their homologues. As has been noted, these two poles or 'chambers' of the haṭhayogic system are further identified with the visceral sun and cranial moon, through the interaction of which the *yogin* comes to partake of the cooling nectar (mercury, the refined semen of Śiva) that 'condenses' to ooze downward from the top of the cranial vault, also called the lunar circle. As in the alchemical apparatus, the system is activated through the interplay of thermal energy (the burning sun below and the cooling moon above) and female and male sexual fluids (uterine blood below and refined semen above). These parallels are made explicit in a number of medieval texts. In the fifteenth-century alchemical *Rasendracintāmaṇi*

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of Ḍhuṇḍhukanātha (Prakash 1960: 575), this bicameral alchemical apparatus is termed *śāmbhavī mudrā*. Now, this same term is employed, in the *Amanaskayoga* (2.15) of Gorakṣanātha, a haṭhayogic text of a slightly earlier period, to introduce a yogic technique that that text appears to further identify with the *vidyādhara yantra*: 'Here is the description of the *śāmbhavī mudrā*: The [?] fist (*muṣṭi*) above and the gaze (*dṛṣṭi*) below, the cleft (*bheda*) above and the channels (*sirāḥ*) below, one becomes liberated in the body (*jīvanmukta*) by using the *dhāra yantra*.'

In this description, the *yogin* is clearly standing on his head, with the 'channels below' being the 'network' or 'ganglia' of subtle energy channels that meet in the region of the throat. A classic haṭhayogic technique, called the *jālamdhara bandha*, the 'lock of the net-bearer,' uses this network of channels to seal off the head as the bearer or recipient (*dhara*) of the nectar that is held up in the cranial vault. The haṭhayogic 'hermetic seal of Śambhu' (*śāmbhavī mudrā*) or 'Wizard apparatus' (*[vidyā-]dh[a]ra yantra*) described in this verse is an upside-down version of the 'lock of the net-bearer': the two chambers of the alchemical apparatus are the head and torso of the *yogin*; the mud-smeared layers of cloth stretched across their mouths the network of channels in the throat, and the nectar that is held in the head is the mercury that condenses on the incurved inner surface of the downturned upper chamber. The 'lock of the net-bearer' is described in verse 62 of what was likely Gorakṣanātha's (or Gorakhnāth's) earliest work on *haṭha yoga*, the late twelfth-century *Gorakṣa Śataka* ('Hundred verses of Gorakh,' although there are actually 201!). Other verses (131a, 138c) of the same work mention a pool (*dhāra*) of lunar nectar in the cranial vault, which the *yogin* is to drink internally, lest it fall into the sun in the lower abdomen.

Most alchemical sources enjoin the practitioner to follow his use of the *ūrddhvapātana yantra*, with that of the *adhopātana yantra*, the 'downward-sublimation apparatus': after having sublimated mercury three times in the former, one is to do so seven times in the latter (*Rasaratnasamucchaya* 11.38). The *adhopātana yantra* is identical to the *ūrddhvapātana* with the sole difference being that, in this case, the 'cool' chamber is placed rightside-up in a hollow dug into the ground. Its mouth is bonded to that of the 'hot' chamber, here placed face-down, with the cooking fire burning atop the latter's upturned base. In this case, one smears the inner surface of this downturned 'hot' chamber with an amalgam of mercury ore and copper. When this is heated, the mercury sublimates and falls down into the 'cool' chamber, which is this time filled with water. There, it recondenses into its natural, but purified and stabilized, form (Dash 1986: 58–61; *Rasaratnasamucchaya* 9.9, 11.39).

The downward-sublimation apparatus is in fact a closer homologue to the

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upside-down yogic posture described in the *Amanaskayoga* than is the upward-sublimation apparatus. In both the alchemical apparatus and the haṭhayogic technique, the seminal fluid (mineral or human), transformed by a heat source located above, drips downward to remain (held there by gravity) in the reversed upper chamber of the apparatus or, in the yogic case, the cranial vault. This posture also evokes the *viparītakaraṇī* or 'reverse practice' of *yoga*, which Gorakhnāth praises in his *Gorakṣa Śataka* as a foolproof method for retaining in one's head the precious nectar one has so carefully distilled from 'raw' semen. Here, the description of the posture itself is clearly the inspiration for that of the Wizard apparatus in everything but name:

> That which rains down from the downturned mouth of the moon is swallowed by the upturned mouth of the sun. The practice [of *viparītakaraṇī*] is to be performed as a means to obtaining the nectar [which would otherwise be lost]. The navel above, the palate below; the sun above and the moon below... (*Gorakṣa Śataka* 133–35; *Haṭhayogapradīpikā* 3.77–79; *Yogamārtaṇḍa* 121–22a, 123b).

Gorakhnāth also refers to this posture in one of his vernacular mystic poems, in which he says to hold the *yantra*, the bodily apparatus, upside-down (*ulaṭi yantr dhare*) by standing on one's head (Barthwal 1979 [1942]: 242).

VIDYĀDHARAS AS WIZARDS AND STRUCTURES

Returning yet again to the account of the extraction of mercury with which we began, we should also note that *vidyādhara* is not only an alternative name for the sublimation apparatus with which the alchemist extracts mercury from the ores in which it naturally occurs, but that it is also the name for the original alchemical Wizards who performed this operation *illo tempore*. It is with this observation that we now move from alchemical technology to alchemical mythology, specifically to the mythology of the Wizards, the Vidyādharas, and Perfecti, the Siddhas of medieval India. These two groups are, in fact, a permanent fixture in the Indian pantheon of gods and demigods, falling in the middle range between the wholly transcendent and auspicious high gods and the wholly immanent but noxious genie and demonic spirits of the earthly and subterranean spheres. Their place in the pantheon is delineated in the fifth century CE lexicon entitled the *Amarakośa* (1.1.11), which states: 'The Wizards, Nymphs, Dryads, Protectors, Celestial Musicians, Centaurs, Ghouls, Hidden Ones, Perfecti, and

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Beings: these constitute the class of the demigods.'

In Buddhist and Hindu traditions alike, these demigods, inhabiting the interface between earth and sky—mountaintops and the atmospheric region—were standard fare in the adventure and fantasy literature of the Indian middle ages, and the stuff that many medieval Indian dreams were made of. Gradually, however, the notion arose that the specific worlds or levels of the Wizards or Perfecti were also accessible to certain humans, who could reach them through esoteric practice, or simply by traveling to their far-flung abodes. In this way, an elite corps of exceptional humans ('self-made gods,' in the words of Charlotte Vaudeville [1974: 96]) have come, over time, to swell the ranks of these denizens of the empyrean—although they have never supplanted them. It is for this reason that a number of Tantric sources distinguish between three 'streams' of Perfecti —those of divine (*divyaugha*), 'Siddha' (*siddhaugha*), and human (*mānavaugha*) descent (*Kulārṇava Tantra* 6.63–68; *Paraśurāmakalpasūtra* 4.10). Throughout the Indian middle ages, a growing pool of such Wizards and Perfecti has come to be shared, together with an expanding body of legend on their subject, by Hindus, Buddhist, and Jains alike. One even finds them in Burma, where Buddhist Theravāda monks, alternatively called *weizkas* (Vidyā-[dharas]) or *zawgyis* (Siddhas), have been ingesting mercury, well into the present century, to immortalize, or at least pickle their bodies (Aung 1978: 41–50; Needham 1976: 166; Spiro 1970: 163–71).

Vyāsa, a fifth-century commentator on the *Yogasūtras* of Patañjali, provides us, albeit in an apophatic way, with what can only be termed a charter for those persons aspiring to this semidivine status. This he does in his commentary on *Yogasūtra* 3.51, in which Patañjali states: 'When invited by the celestial beings, that invitation should not be accepted nor should it cause vanity because it involves the possibility of undesirable consequences.' Vyāsa's commentary reads as follows:

> The celestial beings residing in lofty regions, noticing the purity of the intellect of those who have attained unalloyed truth...try to invite them by tempting them with enjoyments available in their regions in the following manner: 'O Great Soul, come and sit here and enjoy yourself. It is lovely here. Here is a lovely lady. This elixir prevents death and decay. Here is a vehicle which can take you to the skies. The tree which fulfils all wishes is here....Here are the Perfecti and the great seers. Beautiful and obedient nymphs, supernormal eyes and ears, a body of adamantine strength, all are here (Aranya 1981: 334).

This goal, of transforming oneself into a demigod and of dwelling with the immortal Perfecti and Wizards, was not reserved for alchemists alone in

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medieval India. A number of other medieval mystic traditions also made such transformations their highest goal. Many of these groups called themselves Siddhas: these include the Māheśvara Siddhas of the Deccan region, the Sittars of Tamil tradition, the north Indian Nāth Siddhas, and even the Mahāsiddhas of Indian Buddhism. What differentiated these groups from one another were the means they employed toward the realization of this common end. So, for example, the Nāth Siddhas mainly relied on the techniques of *haṭha yoga*—pioneered by their founder, Gorakhnāth—to effect such transformations, while for the Rasa Siddhas, it was a combination of laboratory and haṭhayogic operations that elevated the practitioner to demigod status.

In the medieval literature however, it is most often innately divine, rather than human Wizards, who are evoked. Matsyendranāth, the legendary *guru* of Gorakhnāth and founder of a number of other Tantric orders, twice mentions Vidyādharīs (Wizard-maidens, the female counterparts of the male Vidyādharas) in his ca. tenth century CE *Kaulajñānanirṇaya*. In both cases, he describes techniques for attracting and sexually exciting these female demigods, as a means to gaining access, through sexual union with them, to the all-powerful god Bhairava (*Kaulajñānanirṇaya* 14.40, 55–56, 63–65). The *Harṣacarita* (3.112–28), a seventh-century work by Bāṇabhaṭṭa, features a Śaiva ascetic named Bhairavācārya, whose goal it is to transform himself into the lord of the divine Wizards. In a tenth-century Sanskrit play, the *Caṇḍakauśika* of Kṣemīśvara, the final apotheosis of the hero, superintended by the Hindu god of righteousness (Dharma) who has disguised himself as a Śaiva alchemist, is effected through an aerial car, brought to him by the Wizards (Gupta 1962: 109–11). In the late eleventh-century play entitled *Prabodhacandrodaya*, a Kāpālika claims he can fetch with his power any virgin Dryad-, Wizard-, or Serpent-maiden he chooses (Nambiar 1971: 124–30). So too, a Śaiva *mahāvratin* seeks to become a Wizard in the *Kathāsaritsāgara* tale of Devadatta the gambler (Penzer 1924–28, 2: 236).[1]

It is, however, in the technical literature of the Nāth Siddhas and Rasa Siddhas that we encounter the most elaborate descriptions of this transformation from man to superman. So it is that the twelfth-century *Rasendra Maṅgala* (fol. 28b. 8–10, 29a.1) of Nāgārjuna describes how an alchemist who has succeeded in fully transmuting his body swoons and then recovers to find himself transformed into the three-eyed, four-armed Gaṇanātha (lord of Śiva's host). The Perfecti and Wizards come *en masse* to view the transformed alchemist, and, together with these denizens of this atmospheric region, he flies through the air and is brought before Māheśvara, whom he worships. This apotheosis corresponds quite closely to the mystic goal of the old Śaiva Pāśupata order, as described in the *Pāśupata Sūtras* (1.33–38): '[one] moves unobstructed everywhere; being equipped with these qualities one becomes the great chief of the *gaṇas* of Bhagavān Mahādeva'

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(Gonda 1977: 218). According to the ca. thirteenth-century *Mātṛkabheda Tantra* (7.36), the practitioner who follows its instructions becomes a 'Siddha who is the manifest equal of Śiva.' So too, the *Śiva Saṃhitā* (4.46; 5.202, 204), a relatively late Nāth Siddha manual of *haṭha yoga* ends with the promise that the *yogin* may through his practice gain a vision of the (divine) Siddhas, and control over the Vidyādharas.

It is, however, in the eleventh-century *Rasārṇava* that we find the most extended references to this apotheosis to the level of the Perfecti and Wizards. So, for example, this source concludes its description of *khecarī jāraṇa* ('flight-calcination') by stating that the alchemist who ingests mercury that has been calcinated by means of this technique is immediately uplifted into the presence of the gods, Perfecti, and Wizards, with whom he flies through the air at will (*Rasārṇava* 11.104b–6, 12.337). The entire work also ends on a similar note. Its final twenty verses (18.208–28), which open with a description of the ultimate alchemical operation, in the process of which the alchemist himself becomes the *corpus alchymicum*, conclude with an account of his final apotheosis.

First, then, the description of the operation itself: 'Diamond-bound' mercury that has proven its efficacity by restoring cripples, freaks, and mutants to wholeness and transmuting ten million times its mass of base metals into gold is to be employed in the ultimate alchemical Work, the transformation of the entire person of the alchemist into a Siddha. This he does by plunging himself—after a preliminary worship ritual—into a man-sized cauldron of superheated oil into which pellets of diamond-bound mercury have been placed.

Once the alchemist has plunged himself into the cauldron, his laboratory assistant serially adds the alchemical equivalents of the five subtle elements (earth, water, air, fire, and ether) to the mixture, culminating with *kha* ('ether,' but also 'mica,' another mineral equivalent of the Goddess's sexual emission), which is to be placed inside the alchemist's skull (presumably all that remains of his gross body at this point). Then,

> pumping the bellows [until the mix has] the look of molten gold, [the assistant] should add an alkaline substance (*kṣāra*). No sooner has this been done than [the transformed alchemist] rises up with a mighty bellow: 'Huṃ!' He mounts into an aerial car made of divine gold studded with divine gemstones and rubies, and filled with flowered garlands and banners, and the roar of conches and musical instruments. Thereupon, a divine maiden, a singer of nymphen melodies and an alluring dancer, decked out in divine finery and garlands—a lusty beauty and a veritable image of Love in a female form—comes to him, and takes that consummate practitioner [with her] to dwell in the world of the Perfecti. There, having bathed, wined, and dined him, and

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having clothed him in divine finery, the love-starved Siddha-maiden sports with him for hundreds and thousands of years (*Rasārṇava* 18.222–27).

This passage is remarkable on a number of counts. First, it is the sole Hindu description of an alchemical operation in which the alchemist actually enters into his apparatus (a mercurial well!) in order to directly effect the transmutation of his body. Second, it is a description with a mythic correlate. Abū Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī, the Muslim savant who accompanied Maḥmūd Shāh of Ghaznī in his conquest of western India between CE 998 and 1030, relates a number of Indian alchemical legends, including the following:

In the city of Dhāra, the capital of Mālavā, which is in our days ruled by Bhojadeva [1000–1055], there lies in the door of the Government house an oblong piece of pure silver, in which the outlines of the limbs of a man are visible. Its origin is accounted for by the following story: Once in olden times a man went to a king of theirs, bringing him an elixir, the use of which would make him immortal, victorious, invincible, and capable of doing everything he desired. He asked the king to come alone to the place of their meeting, and the king gave orders to keep in readiness all the man required.

The man began to boil the oil for several days, until at last it acquired consistency. Then he spoke to the king: 'Spring into it and I shall finish the process.' But the king, terrified at what he saw, had not the courage to dive into it. The man, on perceiving his cowardice, spoke to him: 'If you have not sufficient courage, and will not do it for yourself, will you allow me myself to do it?' Whereupon the king answered, 'Do as you like.' Now he produced several packets of drugs, and instructed him that when such and such symptoms should appear, he should throw upon him this or that packet. Then the man stepped forward to the cauldron and threw himself into it, and at once he was dissolved and reduced into pulp. Now the king proceeded according to his instruction, but when he had nearly finished the process, and there remained only one packet that was not yet thrown into the mass, he began to be anxious, and to think what might happen to his realm, in case the man should return to life as an *immortal*, *victorious*, *invincible person*, as has above been mentioned. And so he thought it preferable not to throw the last packet into the mass. The consequence was that the cauldron became cold, and the dissolved man became consolidated in the shape of the said piece of silver (1983 [1910], 1: 191–92; emphasis in original).

This mythic account of a failed alchemical experiment nonetheless retains the principle, already delineated in the *Rasārṇava* quoted above, that in order for the

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alchemist to fully join the ranks of the Perfecti and Wizards, he must physically enter into his alchemical apparatus. This is a principle also found in a number of Chinese alchemical sources—sources in the light of which this and a number of other elements of Hindu alchemical lore are brought into higher relief.

First of all, transforming oneself into an immortal by entering into one's alchemical apparatus is a commonplace of Taoist alchemy. In the Chinese case, the apparatus in question, called *hu-lu*, is formed out of two superimposed spherical gourds, a configuration at once identified with the head and torso of the subtle body, a double-mountain located to the far east or west of China, and an abode of the Immortals (*hsien*) (Stein 1942: 53–55, 58). Entering into one's alchemical apparatus is, in the Taoist sources, somewhat less dramatic than the operation described in the *Rasārṇava*: its results are, however, wholly as transformative as those promised in the Hindu alchemical tradition. Taoist alchemical sources dating from the first half of the first millennium CE are particularly rich in legends on this subject, of which the following:

> Che Ts'ouen, who came from Lu, was a student of the Great Alchemical Path. After meeting Chang Chen, he became the administrator of Yun-t'ai (i.e., the mountain called Chiang-su). It was his habit to suspend a *hu[-lu]* vessel of about ten liter's volume [from the roofbeam of his house]. This *hu[-lu]* vase transformed itself into Heaven and Earth; it contained sun and moon. Che Ts'ouen passed his nights there, and called himself 'Heaven in a [Double-] Gourd' (*hu-t'ien*). The people called him the 'Old Man of the Gourd.' Following this he realized the Tao [and became an immortal] (Stein 1942: 57).

In the Chinese sources, these identifications—between a bicameral alchemical apparatus, a configuration within the subtle body, a double-mountain, and an abode of the immortals—are made much more explicitly than they are in the Hindu sources we have reviewed to this point. To be sure, the Hindu use of the term *vidyādhara*, wizard, applies equally to a bicameral apparatus, a haṭhayogic technique, and the mountain-dwelling alchemists who mastered them. What is lacking in the Hindu material is the explicit identification of these semidivine figures and alchemical apparatus with these sacred mountains themselves, an identification which the Taoists make with especial reference to two immortal abodes. These are the mountains H'un-lun and K'un-lun, located to the far east and west of China respectively. The names of both of these peaks are derived from the same root (*hu*) as the term for the double-chambered gourd of Taoist alchemy: more than this, both of these mythic mountains retain the shape of the alchemical apparatus: mount H'un-lun has the form of two superimposed spheres, while K'un-lun that of two superimposed cones joined at their apex.

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These mountains are, moreover, situated within the subtle body of the alchemist, in his lower abdomen and head, respectively. As such, they are further identified as the Gates or Wells of Earth (H'un-lun) and Heaven (K'un-lun) (Stein 1957: 176, 185).

Now, the Hindus also know of a mythic double-mountain: this is Meru, the pivot of the Hindu universe which, located to the north of India, has the form of two cones or truncated pyramids joined at their tapered ends (Ali 1973 [1966]: 48; *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 5.16.7).[2] Like the Chinese H'un-lun, Meru has its microcosmic homologue as well: it is identified with the spinal column (called the *meru-daṇḍa*, 'Meru-rod') of the subtle body, along whose vertical axis the nectar of immortality is drawn upwards. Epic and Purāṇic descriptions of Meru locate gods and demigods of the likes of the Wizards and Perfecti on its slopes, and describe its summit as an extensive plateau, hemmed in by a ring of peaks, so as to have the form of a basin or saucer (Ali 1973 [1966]: 49; Mabbett 1983: 68, 71).

MOUNTAINS OF WISDOM IN HINDU COSMOLOGY AND SACRED GEOGRAPHY

It is perhaps incorrect to state that the Hindus made no explicit identification between their immortal Wizards, their alchemical apparatus, and their sacred mountains. The Sanskrit term *dhara*, generated from the root *dhṛ*, means, as has already been noted, 'bearer' or 'recipient.' One of the senses of *dhṛ*, however, is 'to support,' a meaning that generates another reading of *dhara*: a 'mountain' (*dhara*) is that which supports (*dhṛ*) the earth or the mineral riches within the earth. In this case, *vidyādhara* may be read as 'mountain of wisdom' or 'wisdom mountain,' while the Vidyādharas, the Wizards may be considered to be not only the denizens of such mountains, but also the mountains themselves. What we are suggesting here is that behind the medieval Indian cults of divine Wizards and Perfecti as denizens of mountains there lay a more archaic cult of these mountains themselves as a group of demigods.

A number of medieval Indian works have much to say on this subject. An important example is the great Tantric opus entitled the *Svacchanda Tantra* (10.424–51) much of whose cosmology is adapted nearly verbatim by the Trika theologian Abhinavagupta in his massive *Tantrāloka* (8.119–38). Here, in an enumeration of the atmospheric levels located above the terrestrial disk and separated from one another by distances of either one hundred or five hundred *yojana*s, this source describes cloud masses (*meghāḥ*) (*i*) that strike down trees

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on earth [with thunderbolts]; (*ii*) that cause rains of fish, frogs, and turtles to fall; and (*iii*) that cause disease-inducing poison rains to fall. It then continues:

> Five hundred *yojanas* higher is [the abode of] the Wind [named] 'Lightning-streak.' Here at [the abode of] 'Lightning-streak' are stationed...the 'lowest-level Vidyādharas.' These are beings who, when in the [prior] form of human wizards (*vidyāpauruṣe*) carried out cremation ground-related practices. When they died, that *siddhi* [rendered them] Siddhas, stationed in the midst of the 'Lightning-streak' wind....Five hundred *yojanas* higher...there at Raivata itself are the primal Siddhas (*ādisiddhāḥ*) [named] Yellow Orpiment, Black Antimony, and Mercury-ash (*Tantrāloka* 8.133).[3]

This passage goes on to describe ever higher levels, inhabited by superior (*viśeṣa*) Vidyādharas who, together with the celestial musicians, sing the praises of Śiva Parameśvara, the highest god; and still higher levels in which the most elevated (*uttama*) Vidyādharas are stationed. We will, however, dwell for a moment upon the particular case of the toponym Raivata and the clearly alchemical *siddhis* and Siddhas with which it is associated. Concerning the latter, we first reproduce the *Svacchanda Tantra* (10.452) passage upon which Abhinavagupta bases his description:

> On Raivata are indeed stationed those great-souled Siddhas. Having undertaken the practices [dealing] in yellow orpiment, the black antimony [of invisibility], the ash [of transmutation], the shoes [of magical flight], the hairy-skin [of the tiger, goat, or dog worn or carried by the Śaiva *mahāvratin* or renouncer], and so on, these great-souled ones became Siddhas.

Here, we can see that whereas the *Svacchanda Tantra* evokes a certain number of mineral preparations instrumentally—to explain that the Siddhas of Raivata are those beings who, while human, gained the *siddhis* of invisibility, transmutation, magical flight, and so on, through the practices of alchemy and renunciation—Abhinavagupta transforms these alchemical staples into a group of demigods whom he terms the 'primal Siddhas.' Here we are reminded of a group of Siddhas named Fire, Sun, and Moon who, according to the *Kubjikānityāhnikatilakam*, a twelfth-to-fourteenth-century document (Bagchi 1934: 67; Shastri 1905, 1: lxiv, 111–12) of the Paścimāmnāya, the 'Western tradition' of Kaula Tantrism, aided a figure named Śrīnātha in founding that Tantric lineage (Schoterman 1982: 36–39). In both cases, these founding Siddhas are nothing other than elements of the Siddha gnosis itself, here elevated to the station of abstract deities. Homologous to this ambivalent treatment of the Siddhas, who are now

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portrayed as humans and now as atmospheric demigods, is that accorded to the Wizards. In these sources, it is clearly stated that the 'lowest level of Vidyādharas' is composed of those beings who, while still human, had been Vidyāpuruṣas ('men of occult wisdom') whose cremation ground practices had won them an atmospheric station after death.

These descriptions are for us proofs of a point we have been arguing throughout this paper; that is, that the human practitioners of the Siddha disciplines of alchemy, *haṭha yoga*, and erotico-mystical ritual considered themselves to be divine or semidivine Siddhas *in potentia*, and that beyond the supernatural powers and bodily immortality that were their immediate goals there lay the higher end of apotheosis to the loftier realms of the semidivine Siddhas and Vidyādharas. In India, certain mountaintops, lofty pivots between the worlds of the gods and demigods and the world of men, have been singled out since the medieval period as sites at which to realize the various *siddhi*s that enabled one to become a Siddha. Primary among these are the holy peaks of Śākta-Śaiva tradition named Śrīśailam (Kurnool District, Andhra Pradesh), Kedārnāth (Chamoli District, Uttar Pradesh), Mount Abu (Sirohi District, Rajasthan), and Girnār (Junagadh District, Gujarat).

This brings us back to the passages just cited from the *Svacchanda Tantra* and the *Tantrāloka* which, in the midst of their descriptions of atmospheric levels located thousands of miles above the earth's surface, suddenly present the reader with a terrestrial toponym which they identify, precisely, with the alchemical 'primal Siddhas' named Yellow Orpiment, Black Collyrium, and Mercury-ash. This is the toponym Raivata which was in fact a medieval name for the cluster of peaks known today as Girnār. In praise of this site, the Jain *Raivatācala Māhātmya* (a portion of the *Śatruñjaya Māhātmya*) calls it the fifth of the twenty-one Jain *siddhādri*s (Siddha-mountains) and states that '[here] sages who have ceased to eat and who pass their days in devotion...worship Nemīnāth. Here divine nymphs and numerous heavenly beings—Gandharvas, Siddhas, Vidyādharas, and so on—always worship Nemīnāth' (Burgess 1971 [1876]: 157). A number of Purāṇas, beginning with a ninth century addition made to the 'original' *Matsya Purāṇa* by a Śaiva resident of Maharashtra, also devote long descriptions to the site, which they term Raivataka (Bharadvaj 1973: 66–67; Hazra 1975 [1940]: 46). The ca. eleventh-to-twelfth-century *Prabhāsa Khaṇḍa* of the *Skanda Purāṇa* (Hazra 1975 [1940]: 165) devotes no less than fifteen chapters to the wonders of this site (in which it describes wells of mercury, *rasakūpikā* [*Skanda Purāṇa* 7.2.6.8]), which it alternatively calls Raivāta or Vastrāpatha. A CE 1333 Jain source, the *Vividhatīrthakalpa* of Jīnaprabhāsūri, contains much similar material on this site (Cort 1990: 251–58).

We clearly appear to be in the presence, in this wide array of sources, of a

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direct identification of the modern Girnār as both a terrestrial site to which human experts in the esoteric sciences could come to perfect themselves through Siddha techniques, and an atmospheric or celestial realm they would come to inhabit in their definitively transformed state of semidivine Siddhas. This pedigree of Girnār goes back further still, being found in earlier Hindu texts under yet another name: Gomanta (Mani 1975: 294). We find this early toponym for Girnār mentioned once in the *Mahābhārata* (2.13.53), in the context of the episode of Jarāsandha, a regicide king and very early devotee of Rudra-Śiva, who hailed from the Kathiawad region of present day Gujarat.[4] Another peak mentioned in the *Mahābhārata* has also been identified with Girnār: this is Ujjayanta, which the epic (3.86.18–20) describes as one of the holy places of Saurāṣṭra (that is, western Gujarat). The same source (*Mahābhārata* 2.42.8) also names, without describing it, a Raivatāka Hill, which it also locates in Gujarat.

A much more detailed description of Gomanta may be found in the ca. fifth century CE *Harivaṃśa* (2.40), often taken to be an 'appendix' to the *Mahābhārata*, which also relates it to the figure of Jarāsandha.[5] While this appears to be no different than a great number of other praises of heavenly mountains, this text is important for two reasons: on the one hand, the mountain in question is Girnār; on the other, this is an early source in which we see the Siddhas and Vidyādharas being brought 'down to earth' at specific geographical site.

> The [mountain] called Gomanta, a singular peak surrounded by a group of [lesser] peaks, is difficult to scale, even by the Sky-goers....[I]ts lofty twin summits have the form of two shining gods....The interior of this mountain is frequented by Siddhas, Cāraṇas, and Rakṣasas, and the surface of the peak is ever thronged with hosts of Vidyādharas (*Harivaṃśa* Appendix 17, lines 381–82, 386; Appendix 18, lines 448–49).

Now, the Girnār peak which the Jains identify as Nemīnāth has long been known to Hindu pilgrims by the name of Dattātreya (Burgess 1971 [1876]: 159), the semidivine founder and leader of the Nine Nāths of western Indian, especially Marathi, tradition. Dattātreya is in fact one of a pair of rocky crags that dominate the formation of Girnār, the other being Gorakh: these twin peaks, having a height of 3450 and 3470 feet respectively, are by far the highest and most impressive features of the rim of mountains that form a basin some six miles in circumference. Girnār has furthermore constituted one of the most important centers of Nāth Siddha activity in western India, as evidenced in references to it, from the thirteenth century onwards, in legends concerning their founders (Kaviraj 1962–64, 1: 197; Mallik 1954: 10; *Nāthacaritra* 1.2, 2.1–13). Both of these crags are the sites of simple and apparently very ancient shrines to Dattā-

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treya and Gorakhnāth respectively, shrines whose custodians are members of the Nāth Siddha order. Here, we wish to argue that the peaks of 'Gorakh' and 'Dattātreya' at Girnār are so-called not only because they feature shrines to these Nāth Siddhas, but because they *are* these Siddhas, these Perfecti. The original Siddhas were divine mountaintops before they became identified with the *yogin*s who frequented those mountaintops. In other words, the bedrock for the presence and veneration of 'human' Nāth Siddhas at Girnār are the semidivine Siddhas whose ranks the latter succeeded in joining through their practice. The semidivine Siddhas dwelling *inside* Gomanta (within the basin formed by the rim of peaks?) and the Vidyādharas dwelling on its surface (on the outer slopes of those peaks?) preceded the likes of the twelfth-to-thirteenth-century Gorakh and Dattātreya, who replaced them, and thereby became the demigods identified with its highest twin peaks. In this light, it is tantalizing to note that the *Kulārṇava Tantra* (6.66) lists Dattātreya and Raivataka in immediate succession as two of the ten *guru*s of the *siddhaugha*, the Siddha stream of the Kaula preceptors.

Data from other regions of the Indian subcontinent appear to support this argument. Gorakh, who is called a Vidyādhara in the Bengali 'Song of Maṇik Candra' is depicted in the Punjabi 'Legend of Pūraṇ Bhagat' as flying through the air at the head of 5200 visible and invisible disciples (Grierson 1878: 209; Temple 1963 [1884–86], 2: 375). Popular tradition maintains that the founding Nāth Siddhas continue to inhabit the Himalayas, as the guardian spirits of the Himalayan peaks. In the mountainous Gulmi District of central Nepal, a nondescript 'god of the summit' is named 'Siddha' (Dasgupta 1976 [1946]: 207; Lecomte-Tilouine 1993: 159–62). In the mountainous Chamba District of the Punjab, generally nameless 'Siddhs' are worshipped, in the same fashion as serpents and minor goddesses, in primitive temples or shrines (*Punjab States gazetteer* 1910: 183–84). Elsewhere, there is evidence that the 'historical' Gorakhnāth of Gorakhpur, the present day center of Nāth-dom, is so named for having discovered a shrine there to the Nepali (Gurkhā) Siddha demigod named Gorakh, into whose service he devoted himself. Over time, this mountain godling and the human *yogin* became fused into a single figure: Gorakhnāth (whose name may be translated as 'He whose Lord is [the semidivine Siddha] Gorakh'), the founder of the Nāth *sampradāya* at the site of Gorakhpur (Alexander 1881, 6: 371, 436).

In the light of this evidence, we must conclude that such historical Siddhas as Gorakhnāth and Dattātreya, whose acts and lives defined the religious landscape of a certain epic and post-epic India, became fused in the Indian imagination with certain classes of gods and demigods, in whose number the *divine* Siddhas and Vidyādharas must be counted; and that it was at such peaks as Girnār, in western India, the heartland of early and medieval Śaivism, that such identifi-

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cations first occurred. While we cannot say to what extent these figures were and remain identified with the sacred peaks themselves, our reading of Vidyādhara as 'Mountain of wisdom' should not be entirely far-fetched, especially in the light of the *Harivaṃśa* description of Gomanta.

This peak, which we have identified with Girnār, is said to be inhabited both inside and out by Siddhas and Vidyādharas. Like many sacred mountains, Girnār is a site riddled with caves, of which at least two are identified with Nāth Siddhas (Bhartṛhari and Dattātreya)—and what is a mountain cave, if not the macrocosmic replica of the cranial vault of the meditating *yogin*, or the upper chamber of an alchemical apparatus within which the alchemist transforms himself into the *opus alchymicum*? As in the Taoist case, the moebius universe of the Siddhas is so constructed as to permit its practitioners to at once identify cosmic mountains with their own subtle bodies and alchemical apparatus, and to enter into those mountains to realize the final end of their practice, their transformation into the semidivine denizens of those peaks.

So it is that these myriad allusions, found in various Śaiva, Siddha, Tantric, and even Jain sources, are so many literary vestiges of an archaic cult of divine Siddhas and Vidyādharas who, like the Immortals (*hsien*) of Taoism, came to be joined in their ranks by heroic humans (Pāśupatas, Kāpālikas, Nāth Siddhas, and Rasa Siddhas) who, through their dangerous and difficult trials, transcended their human condition. This is the Siddha foundation of 'high' Kaula Tantrism: the archaic goal of gaining power over divine Siddha and Vidyādhara wizards and nymphs funneled into the Tantric cults of the *yoginī*s, which were in turn internalized into the practices of *haṭha yoga* and alchemy, as practiced by superhuman Nāth and Rasa Siddhas, and the more refined and abstract ritual practices of Kaula Tantrism.

Notes

1. *Mahāvratin* is a generic term for a Śaiva ascetic—a Pāśupata or Kāpālika—referring as it does to the 'great vow' (that is, the slaying of a Brāhmaṇa followed by twelve years of expiation) undertaken by them in their initiation.

2. The *Bhāgavata* and a number of other Purāṇas describe that portion of Meru which rises up from the earth's surface: a mirror image of this mountain extends below the surface of the earth, into the subterranean worlds of the demonic beings who inhabit them. The 'lower half' of Meru is of lesser dimensions than the upper half.

3. The names of these Siddhas are [Go]rocanā, Añjana, and Bhasma. *Gorocanā* is in fact an organic dye having the same intense yellow color as orpiment. *Gorocanā* is made from the urine of the cow.

4. This reading is found in the Bengali ($B_{1m.2-5}$) and Bombay Government collection

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(D) manuscripts only. The critical reading is Bhavanta. The site has also been called Girinagara and Girināràyaṇa, of which Girnār is a vernacularization.

5. The passage concerning Gomanta is found only in the Bombay and Calcutta recensions of the *Harivaṃśa*, entitled 'The climbing of Gomanta' or 'The journey to Gomanta'; in the critical edition, it forms a portion of Appendix 17 and all of Appendix 18 (lines 380–507 of the sequentially numbered appendices).

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DAVID GORDON WHITE is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

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