As it is well known, the Cosmos has been manifested through a primeval sacrifice mentioned by the Sāmbhitās and the Brāhmaṇas as the Sacrifice of Puruṣa. This ritual has been performed by the Gods before the beginning of the Time. They severed the Supreme Being into an unlimited quantity of pieces, originating in this way the Universal Manifestation. The loss of the metaphysical unity, better called not-duality, and the formation of the multiplicity, is to be understood as un-temporal. In the vedic symbolism one expressed this concept by the duality of the two sisters Āditi, the undivided one, and Diti, the divided one. Both the Goddesses are depicted as of dark complexion: Āditi representing the upper Darkness of the not-Manifestation, Diti the lower Darkness of the Chaos. Diti, in terms of Śāmkhya, is identified with tāmas. According to the Doctrine of the Maitrawaṇi Upaniṣad: «tamo vá idamgra āśīdekaṁ», this world was, and in beginning only tāmas alone. This means that by the cosmogonic point of view, the manifestation starts by the dark root of the Nature. Infact, the same Upaniṣad states that from tāmas developed rājas, and from rājas, sattva. The manifestation is caused by the break of the original harmony, that is to say by the Sacrifice of Puruṣa. We would like to remember now that among the figures of the Trīmurti, Śiva corresponds to tāmas. The development of the Universal Cosmos, starting from the same tāmas, follows the progressive transformation in rājas, and then, into sattva. This development, depending by the Kāla aspect of Śiva, produces the Time, that is to

* This note is referred to our «Mahiṣa: iconologia di un mito», in Annali di Ca' Foscari, XXXI, 3 (s. or. 23), 1992, pp. 161-184.
1 «Ekaṁ vā idaṁ vi babhūva sarvam.» RV, VIII, 58, 2.
2 RV, VIII, 18.
3 MaiU, V, 2.
say, the analytic production of any possibilities of manifestation. Expressing the same concept in mythic words, Diti, giving birth to her sons, the Daityas, produces the first beings, the primordial Asuras, the oldest creatures of the Universe.

As demonstrated by A.K. Coomaraswamy in his memorable «Angel and Titan» 4, the Asuras are the first and the tāmasik generation of beings, ancestors of the human beings and of the Devas. This evolution of the manifested beings overlaps to the inner development of the Trīguṇa. In this way, the Cosmic Development follows the tendency of sattva, but without getting released from the boundage of the World. This is why the Cosmos becomes for the beings the jail of the rebirths. This point of view is not exclusive. It is possible to conceive the manifestation of the World as a tidy Theophany, beginning from the bright principle of the Universe. In this case, the firstborn ones would be the Devas, sons of the Superior Darkness Āditi. An interesting controversy between the monstrous Titans and the Solar Gods for the Firstbirth is described in the Tragedy of Eskylus, «The Eumenedes», where the human beings play the role of justices.

But for our purposes we need to support the doctrine as stated in the Maitrāyāṇī Upāṇiṣad. Actually, the tāmasik manifestation of the Universe appears to be the sudden break of an equilibrium, like a pot fallen on the floor. The problem is: how to restore the previous condition? 5 The answer to this question is as follows: the single manifested being has to perform a sacrifice similar to the Puruṣa’s one, but sent in opposite direction, from the relative to the Absolute, from the particular to the Universal. For this purpose one needs the ritual rules and the knowledge of the ritual. Operating the sacrifice in this manner, the performer may collect, pick up, the fragments of his own being and reconstitute his original nature. Therefore through the sacrifice one gets released from the bondage of the samsāra. Of course, in this perspective, each sacrifice will be really a Self sacrifice (ātmya-jñā). The person who offers the sacrifice is the real victim, in the sense that he renounces his own individual ego, with the intention (śraddhā) to identify himself with his true nature, the Aīman. The oblation of the victim is the external support of the

5 This is the question, to whom the ritual reply is the preparation of the Mahāvīra in the Pravargya rite. See J.A.B. VAN BUITENEN, The Pravargya: An Ancient Indian Iconic Ritual: Described & Annotated, Deccan College Publ.s, Pune 1968.
ON SOME SACRIFICIAL FEATURES OF THE MAHIŠAMARDINI

autosacrifice. In other terms, the oblations of victims, are mere substitute of the patron of the yājña. As well explained by Vasudev Sharan Agrawala⁶, there is the sacrifice of two Puruṣas: the first one is the Universal and Macrocosmic Virāt Puruṣa, which provokes the śṛṣṭi; «and the individual Purusha, who follows the model of the Virāt», is the second one. Carrying on with the same direction, we can formulate a new equation: every sacrifice is an ātmāyājña, and every ātmāyājña is a puruṣamedha. The topic of the human sacrifice is indeed very delicate. Most of the scholars maintain that the puruṣamedha is only a symbolic expression that never has been performed, even in remote epochs. Actually this view is not in opposition with the archaeological evidences from Kausambi. The skulls discovered in the Vulture Altar are not necessarily proofs of a ritual killing of any men: in many periods of Indian History human bones have been used both by Hindus and Buddhists for ritual purposes, collecting them in the cemeteries. It could become the first historical remains of tantric cults. But this would carry us away by our subject. Coming back to the puruṣamedha, we have maintained that most of scholars question the human sacrifice as historically performed in the official Brahmansim; on the contrary, it seems that some of the so-called extremist sects performed this and other abominable acts during their hidden rituals.

The Vedic Literature and its development in the smṛti have crystallized the ritual principle of the self-sacrifice in mythical figures, such as Puruṣa. All these Gods express in paradigmatic forms, different aspects of the ritual, being, in the same time, the personifications of the sacrifice. Puruṣa and Prajāpati are offered in sacrifice by the Gods. The Gods are inner to Puruṣa, because he was alone. This means that in the individual puruṣa the Gods are the individual faculties, indriyas, and so on. Coomaraswamy demonstrated that Vṛtra is the same Universal Puruṣa, who refused to self-sacrifice. He kept the water potentialities of the Manifestation, and obstructed the śṛṣṭi. For this reason Vṛtra is depicted as an Asura. Wounded by Indra, Demiurgic God, he emptied out all the worlds and beings. But other figures are to be enumerate as variants of the same model. Puruṣa, Prajāpati, Soma and Vṛtra⁷ suffer their own dismembration,

⁷ But sometimes also Vṛtra is beheaded: RV, I, 52, 10.
instead Dadhyac, Namuci, Dakṣa, Mākha, Viṣṇu, suffer only the decapitation. Following the interpretation of Coomaraswamy, this second list of figures mostly represents the sacrifice of the individual puruṣa. And we recognize that the Mahiṣāsura is to be included in this list, along with Rahu, Cinnamasta and other protagonists of similar Myths in Purāṇas and Tantras. But before carrying on, one needs to focus our attention on the victim of the bloody sacrifice.

Keith, commenting Aitareya Brāhmaṇa, informs us that in exceptional cases, the bloody sacrifice may substitute even the agniṣomīya oblation. In same cases a Godness prefers a specific animal for this nirūḍhapāśubandha, but the buffalo may substitute any class of animals. This is very important for our theory, because in the symbolic language of the sacrifice, also the puruṣa plays the same role. In Rgveda, Puṣan and Viṣṇu offer in sacrifice to Indra one hundred buffaloes, and in an other passage, one sacrifices three hundred buffaloes to Agni. But more interesting is the passage concerning a gift of one hundred heads of buffalo. Here one must clear up that the term buffalo, mabiṣa has been used sometime for the bison, gaura, bos gaurus. This has been possible because both the wild bulls represent the same chaotic power. In the interpretation of V.S. Agrawala, the gaura is the Vedic symbol of the region of the potentiality Paramēṣṭhi.

On the other hand, the domestic bulls and the wild ones have been always definitively distinguished. The tade bull is the symbol of the life power. In this way buffaloes and bulls, are two classes of opposite and complementary animals. The buffaloes belong to the mṛga category of animals, that is the animals of the jungle. This term

8 M. Bloomfield, «The Story of Indra and Namucis», JAOS, XV-XVI.
9 RV, X, 171, 2.
10 SB, XIV, 1, 1.
11 In the same view V.S. Agrawala wrote: «The fight between Indra and Viṭra is the primary pattern leading to many other similar formulations, such as Rudra and Tripura, Skanda and Tāraka, Rāma and Rāvana, Gaṇapati and Vighna, Devī and Mahiṣa, Viṣṇu and Madhu-Kaiṭabha, etc.» Ibid., pp. 81-82.
12 Ait, II, 1 and II, 2, 14.
14 RV, VI, 17, 11.
15 RV, V, 28, 7.
16 RV, VIII, 5, 37.
17 V.S. Agrawala, Devī Mahātmīyā, the Glorification of the Great Goddess, All India Kashmir Trust, Varanasi 1963, p. 72.
18 RV, IV, 58, 3.
ethymologically comes from root *mṛg, «to pursue», or «to keep the tracks» of the game, from which the word *marga, trail: *ete ārṣantyūr-
mayo ghṛtasā mṛgā ava kṣipanorīṣamānāh \(^{19}\), these streams of ghṛta discend upon the fire, like wild beast that fly the hunter. In this view, the *mṛga is the object of the chase by hunters, and the conclusion of this pursuit usually is the bloody shoot down of the animal.

The cattle, bulls and cows, on the contrary, belongs to the category of the *pāśu,s, the domestic animals. This term derives from *pāśa, the noose used by the owner (*pati), to keep them in captivity. But the *pāśa is not only the leash of Pāṣupati; it is also the noose used by Yama and Varuṇa to strangle the mortals, that is to say, all the manifested beings. We meet so with two kinds of Deaths: the Death by strangle is representative of the natural end of life \(^{20}\), whose principal symptom is the last breath before the final suffocation. The second kind of Death is the provoked one and performed with bloodshed \(^{21}\). On this same subject, Keith informs us that during the nirūḍhapāśubandha, the buffalo was tied up to the yūpa, anoint with butter, and finally his throat was cut; but sometimes the victim was strangled. This ritual is exactly the same which was performed in conclusion of the solemn rite of *āśvamedha. It is well known that the Queen played an important function in this rite, being as *mabhiśi, the symbol of the Ṛājya, and the true power or śakti of the King. But, being the rājanya representend in the rite by the sacrificial steed, it is very significant that the Queen be a she-buffalo \(^{22}\). It would be interesting to develop the relations between the symbolism of the horse and the buffalo, remembering that Yama \(^{23}\), in his solar aspect of Vivasvat’s son, rides a horse, or is himself a horse. Kālo aśvo vahati sapīraśmiḥ, says the Atharvaveda \(^{24}\); Kāla drives a horse with seven reins. But a research in this direction could lead us astray from our subject.

\(^{19}\) RV, IV, 58, 6.

\(^{20}\) But the Old Age kills with an arrow. See the episode of Kṛṣṇa and Jara. MBb, XVI, 5, 19-25.

\(^{21}\) But not only with the killing: tubhāyam eva jarīman vardhatām ayāṁ memamanye mṛtyavo bhimśiḥ satam ye... (AV, II, 28, 1) «proprio destinata a te, o vecchiaia, questa persona cresca; non le nuociano le altre morti che sono cento...» R. Lazzeronì, «Il nettare e l’ambrosia: su alcune rappresentazioni indoeuropee della morte», in Studi e Saggi Linguistici, XXVIII, suppl. «L’Italia dialettale», vol. LI, 1988.

\(^{22}\) RV, V, 25, 7; SB, XIII, 2, 5.

\(^{23}\) RV, I, 153.

\(^{24}\) AV, XIX, 53, 1.
Studying the different classes of animals, Agrawala concludes with these words: «The Shatapatha Brahmana has clearly brought out this distinction of the tame and wild animals in its symbolical signification, viz. the Earth is the type of the domestic animals and the Heaven of the wild ones (SB, XIII, 2, 4, 1). Once we invoke the imagery of heaven and earth with reference to the two classes of animals, and also the intermediate region of the air for the third, we are faced with the flood of meanings associated with these well-defined symbols of Vedic thought» 29. Now it is clear why the sacrifice of a wild animal is a tremendous event, mostly even with bloodshed. It is true that the former iconographic images of the Mahišāsuramardinī, dated back to Kuśāna period, represent the Devī strangling the buffalo. In those cases «the Devī subjugates the demon in animal form by breaking his spine and strangling him with her main hands, which carry no weapons. Here one can mark an implicit assertion of power of the Goddess without reference to a heroic deed, but the emphasis is portrayed with weapons, which do not appear to have played any part whatsoever in the battle. This type also tries to provide a clue to the old tradition, where she is called Mahišāsuramardinī or Mahišāmardinī, the crusher of Mahišāsurā. The term «mardini» is derived from the root «mrd» meaning «to press violently, or to crush» 30. It is notable that to break the spine is the sign of the simple suppression of the evil, as well as Śiva Nāṭraja does to the dwarf Muyālaka, and other terrible Gods of Hinduism and of Vajrāyāna. But anyhow these images of the Devī Chaṇḍikā are not very relevant in this view conflicting, as they are, with the scriptural descriptions. The beheading of the buffalo will be canonized in Gupta era as the most perfect symbol overlapping to the letter and the spirit of the sacrificial message.

It is necessary to fix now the following principle: the sacrificial rituals aimed to restoration of a lost armony, are to point out symbols of transformation, in the real sense of overcoming the form (rūpam). The God is hidden under an asuric disguise; Purusottama has got the form of an individual puruṣa, the light is covered by darkness, the immortality lives under the appearance of mortality. Beheading the Asura, the Deva is unveiled; killing the Death the amṛta surfaces; the serpents shelling out from their old skin, become suns 31. Why, then, in the Myth we are examining, do we find just

29 V.S. Agrawala, VL, p. 27.
31 Pañcaviṃśa B., XXV, 15, 4. Mātrariṇam twirls Agni from the buffalo shape,
the buffalo? We can reply with the Viṣṇudarmottara Purāṇa 28: yo mṛdo mārane nṛman viśñeyo mahiṣastu saḥ; know the buffalo as the confusion of the mind that people experience during the death. His dark colour, his furious nature, his unpredictable behaviour, evoke in the human imagery the mental conditions of the dying ones. The sacrifice of the buffalo becomes in this way the death of the mortality and the affirmation of its immortality 29. By this point of view, the iconography of Mahiṣamardinī corresponds strictly with the tantric image of Kālī, dancing on the corpse of Kāla 30.

The killing of the Death is the symbol of the realized initiatic death, and the visual description of the immortality. After the experience of this terrifying passage, the demonic sloughs fall and the shining nature of the true being emerges 31.

This is the reason why the head of Viṣṇu, cut by the spring of his bow, rolling in the sky, became the Sun. This is why the head bones of Dadhyac changed in the vajra. In the puranic tale, the head of Rahu, which tasted the amṛta, became immortal, while his body fell down in the patalas. In the classic sources, the triumphant divinity is embodied by Parvati, the daughter of the Himavat 32; this has been translated in the iconography with the Devi subjugating and piercing the mabhiṣa. But the glory of the self realization and the precipitation of the asuric corpse are fixed in image by Chanḍikā standing up on the head of the buffalo. This head supports the daughter of the mountain in axial posture, as well as the kuṇḍalinī is the dark root of the Meruḍanda. This is the canonic version of many puranic tales, first of all the Devī Mahātmāyā 33; but also the Vāmana, the Varāha, the Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇas. In the Aruṇacala Mahātmāyā of the Skanda Purāṇa we find an interesting variant. From the headless body of the mabhiṣa, a jottirlingam springs, revealing the hidden

were he lay hidden. RV, I, 141, 3.

29 SB, X, 5, 2, 3.
30 Similar meaning has the icons of Śiva Kālāntaka or Mārkandeya. It should be interesting also an approach to the tantric buddhist image of Yamāntaka; in fact even the killer of the buffalo-Yama has the head of buffalo.
31 The most touching relate of this intimate experience is the tale of Ramana Maharsi.
32 The mountain and the buffalo are always opposed each other: see the myth of Medhavin and Dhanusakṣa, MBh, III, 136; also the legend of Mahasu, reported by P. Jayakar, The Earthen Drum, National Museum Publications, New Delhi 1980, p. 26.
nature of the buffalo. He was indeed an asuric form of Lord Śiva, and his murder pollutes the Devī as well as the vedic killing of Vṛtra polluted Indra. This version is nearer to the vedic concept of Sacrifice; the killed victim is transformed in a heavenly being, avoiding in this way the dualism God-Goddess. In a previous essay we have focussed the problem of the religious place of the myth of the Mahiśāsuramardini in the development of the Hinduism from the V to XI century. The result of such iconographic and literary comparison have been that the puranic tales have been put in order in the same period of the sākta reforms of the pāśupata sects. This may explain the spiritual supremacy of the Devī on the male figure of the Asura. In an interesting, but often rush book 34, W.D. O’Flaherty, correctly interprets the mahaśa as a demonic impostasis of the God Śiva. The proofs she was right does not rest in her freudian arguments, but in the not sākta version of the Aruṇacala Mahātmyā. From the behead buffalo jumps up the jotiriṅgam of Śiva. In this way the axis mundi is the same male God.

One more metaphor for the transformation is the conversion of the Asura: this is the conclusion of the tale in the Kalika Purāṇa, text not only important for the ritual of Dasara, but even for the iconographic canon. Mahiśāsura becomes bhakta of the Devī. The Goddess is very much pleased with him and she recognises him as her own consort Śiva under tamasīk hide; for this she let him to seek some favours. Mahiśa selects two boons: to became the preferred victim for all the sacrifices, and to perform eternally her seva. The choice of the first boon is the mythical reference to the establishing buffalo sacrifice of the Dasara, concluding the Navaratri festival.

From the puranic variant of the conversion, a series of folk traditions derives. Among them sometimes the Asura remains a buffalo, as in the story of Potu Raju, Matoba and Gaudakona; some other times the same figure changes into a wild hunter half-brute, half-human. In the poetic tale of Kālaketu the Candi Mangala, one loses the ritual of a bloody sacrifice 35. As the same name suggests, Kālaketu is a figure for Śiva. He is a wild hunter out of caste, or maybe a tribal. With the Grace of the Goddess he is converted and

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35 See S. Mukhopadhyay, Candi in Art and Iconography, Agan Kala Prakashan, Delhi 1984. In the iconography the sākta sacrifice corresponds to the mardana or mardini images, such as, for instance, Gajasuramardana, while the bhakta conversion, to the mokṣa images, such as Gajendramokṣa.
becomes the supreme priest of a new cult of Caṇḍi. We can note that the conversion, the service, the Grace, are new contribution of the Bhakti to the ancient śaktī motif. But the theme of the wild hunter remains mysterious and strictly connected with our subject.  

Recently Alf Hiltebeitel proposed an interesting reinterpretation of the celebrated seal of Mohanjodaro, representing the so-called Proto-Śiva or Paśupati. He supposed that the four wild animals, elephant, rhinoceros, tiger and buffalo, surrounding the central figure, are symbols of the rulers of the cardinal points. Regarding the buffalo, he suggests that he is related with the South, being this direction of the space ruled by Yama in the further Hinduism. Many scholars agree to this view and, by our part, we might reinforce this hypothesis observing that also in the Indus Valley Civilization, the cemeteries were situated out of the towns in southern direction. Analysing the main figure, instead of three faces, Hiltebeitel identifies a muzzle of buffalo. With this interpretation, the myth of the mahaśa becomes the key of the representation. The God of Death, ruler of the South, performing a hard tapas, becomes Indra, or, in other words, he usurps the throne of Paśupati, the king of the beings. This scholar finds a confirmation to his own view in the tiger in the left lower corner of the seal. In fact, this animal, who is the symbol and vāhana of the Devī, is engraved in actitude to attack the buffalo-headed central figure. This hypothesis is rather well based; and it is supported by other elements; in the seals of the Indus Valley the only ones struggle scenes show men fighting against tigers or against buffaloes. In an other seal, for instance, one might notice of a human figure sacrificing a buffalo in the same canonic posture of the Gupta and post-Gupta Mahiṣamardini. In other seals there are men fighting with tigers, or men taking refuge from the tigers on a branch of a tree. The opposition buffalo-tiger finds a compromise in some seals in which the tigers have the horns. 

We cannot forget here the bronzes of Daimabad. Three animals coincide with those of the Proto-Śiva of Mohanjodaro: buffalo, elephant, rhinoceros. Unfortunately the tiger is missing, and we do not know even if it is existed out of our imagination. But the forth statue is quite significant, representing a hunter in a chariot; four

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56 We mentioned Jara in the Kṛṣṇa’s myth: an other wild hunter, in the śaiva myth is Kīrata. MBh, Vanaparva, 37, 41.

heads of cobra cover the phallus of the figure. On the central pole of the chariot a dog is standing. All these features refer to the theme of the wild hunter, that is to say Yama or Pāśupati.

In my before quoted study on mahîśa, I have approached also the cult of the Devî in the extremist śākta sects and in some tribes. The statement of the Mahābhārata let understand that the cult of the daughter of the Himavat was very diffused among the tribes of the mountains, like Sabaras, Pulindas and other Barbarais. She was worshipped with obscure rites, with bloodshed, spirits and meat. In fact the human sacrifice has been performed till last century by many tribes. And it is significant that when the low forbade the ritual murder, they substitute the human victim with the buffalo. During their festivals, while the performer of the sacrifice wears a headdress very similar to the famous seals of Mohanjodaro, the dancers wear masks of lions, tigers, elephants and so on. Among the Naga tribes, the human sacrifice had taken the form of the headhunting, according to the ancestral customs of their ethnic origins. But there were more relevant features in their ritual hunting of skulls. First of all, the hunter considered himself to be a tiger, up to the point that their shamans were trying hard to became were-tigers. In their perspective the tiger had to be a divine animal. On the contrary, the human game was considered by them to be a buffalo; actually, on the skull-trophy, they stuck a pair of buffalo or bison horns. It is very possible that some extremist sect of the Saktism had been influenced by the cruel rites of some tribes, especially in Eastern India. In this way the sacrifice of the buffalo, since the oldest roots of Indian Civilization, through the vedic rites, the puranic traditions, the folk tales, even through the degeneration of some sects, but especially through the images and the performed sacrifice of Dasara, reached us till this conclusion of the twentieth century.

36 HV, III, 3.
39 HV, II, 22.