

From Palace to Heaven: *Vimāna* in the Sanskrit Epics

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Abstract

The exact meaning – and hence translation – of the term *vimāna* is often unclear. The dictionaries give several definitions, such as ‘measurement, palace, aerial car, throne, temple’, etc. It is not always easy to decide which one is appropriate in which context. This paper aims to investigate the various semantic shades of *vimāna* in the Sanskrit epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. In our conclusions, we posit that the term *vimāna*, which first means ‘measure’, then came to designate a palace – a building which has to be constructed by precise measurement; this name was then also applied to the aerial palaces of the gods, which, unrooted in the sky, were thought to move about in the manner of celestial cars, sometimes drawn by various beasts, sometimes self-moving; finally, *vimāna* came to designate a type of heaven – a meaning which is not listed in the dictionary definitions.

Keywords: *vimāna*; measurement; palace; flying palace; heaven; *Mahābhārata*; *Rāmāyaṇa*.

1. *Introduction*

The term *vimāna*, derived from the root *vi-√mā* ‘to measure, mete out, pass over, traverse’, is not easy to define clearly. We can already discern some perplexity in the definition offered by the *Monier-Williams Sanskrit–English Dictionary* (*s.v.*):

vi-māna: mf(ī)n. measuring out, traversing; m. n. a car or chariot of the gods, any mythical self-moving aerial car (sometimes serving as a seat or throne, sometimes self-moving and carrying its occupant through the air; other descriptions make the *Vimāna* more like a house or palace and one kind is

said to be 7 stories high [...]); any car or vehicle (esp. a bier); the palace of an emperor or supreme monarch (esp. one with 7 stories); a temple or shrine of a partic. form, [...]¹.

This definition appears both confusing and confused, and hardly allows us to form a precise idea of what a *vimāna* actually is. Is it a building or a chariot? Is it stationary or can it fly? But to be fair to the author of the dictionary, we must admit that there are a number of passages where it is indeed difficult to determine what is exactly meant by *vimāna*. In order to get a clearer idea of this topic, we shall presently examine the various usages of this term in the Sanskrit epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, two texts which appear to be the primary *locus* of its development.

Before turning to the epics, let us briefly examine the situation in the *Veda*. In Vedic literature, *vimāna* both occurs as an adjective meaning ‘measuring out, traversing’ and as a noun, ‘measure’, but the significations of ‘palace’ and ‘aerial chariot of the gods’ are conspicuously absent. In the *Vedas*, it is well-known that the gods were thought to travel about on *rathas*, chariots drawn mostly by horses². As Gonda (1965, 72) remarks:

[...] it is a matter of no little significance that [the gods] are described as driving swift horses (R̥V 10, 92, 6), as tireless travellers (R̥V 8, 2, 18), as approaching the sacrificers in their chariots (R̥V 1, 84, 18; 7, 2, 5). It means, first, that they are supposed to be able to move rapidly and to exert their influence in all parts of the universe, and in the second place that, as far as they were conceived as anthropomorphous, they were represented as similar to very powerful human beings of nobiliary rank who also, in war and contest, drove their chariots, which bear the same name (*ratha*).

1. And we are not even citing another, rather problematic, meaning of *vimāna* in the context of *Āyurveda*, which probably need not concern us here. See Wujastyk 2017.

2. Riding horses was not completely unknown, but references to it are still scanty in the *R̥gveda*. Historically speaking, according to Gonda (1965, 95-114), who draws his evidence from various ancient cultures including India, men learned how to drive chariots yoked to horses long before they learned how to ride horses – or other mounts for that matter. The epics, as often, represent a stage of transition: at times, the god Indra rides his chariot driven by Mātali, but at other times he travels on a *vimāna* or he rides his white elephant Airāvata. In one and the same legend, Aruṇa becomes the charioteer of the sun-god, who performs his daily rounds of the heavens riding on a chariot drawn by ruddy horses, whereas his younger brother Garuḍa becomes Viṣṇu’s mount (*vāhana*).

From this, we understand that the Vedic *rathas* used by the gods were conceived of as very similar to the chariots used by the warriors on the battlefield, but huger, more splendid, and endowed with the power to travel through the air very swiftly. We may also note at the outset – because on this point the aerial *vimānas* differ from the *rathas* – that the Vedic gods' *rathas* never serve as abodes, but are merely used as conveyances: the gods use them to travel and move about, either for the purpose of battle³, or else to go to various sacrifices⁴, to perform their daily rounds of heaven⁵, or to fly to the rescue of people in distress⁶. Also, and this is another point which distinguishes the *rathas* from the *vimānas*, *rathas* are always drawn by some animals, mostly by horses, but sometimes by other animals too⁷. While this is true for many *vimānas* as well, some of them, especially Puṣpaka, are also said to be able to move about by themselves.

The anonymous author of the French Wikipedia article on *vimāna* seems to suggest that the concept of *vimāna* evolved out of the Vedic *ratha*, due to the occasional association of both terms, since *rathas* are sometimes said to 'measure out' either space or the sky⁸. This occurs for example in *Rgveda* 2. 40. 3, in a hymn addressed to the gods Soma and Pūṣan:

3. As Macdonell (1974, 55) remarks, «the epithet 'car-fighter' (*rathesṭhā*) is exclusively appropriated to Indra». Indra, the king of the gods, is «the first of the chariot drivers» (RV 1. 11. 1). He has a splendid golden chariot (RV 6. 29. 2; 8. 1. 24), which is larger than the mountains (RV 1. 11. 1) and which is drawn mostly by two, but sometimes by a hundred or even a thousand tawny (*hari*) steeds.

4. This trait is especially prominent in the case of Agni, the god of Fire, who has a dazzling, golden chariot drawn by two or more ruddy (*rohita*, *aruṇa*) horses, with which he is wont to bring the gods to the sacrifice (RV 3. 6. 9). For Agni is the charioteer of the sacrifice (RV 10. 92. 1).

5. Thus, the Sun-god Sūrya circles the earth every day on his one-wheeled car (RV 5. 29. 10) drawn by the horse Etaśa (RV 7. 63. 2), or by many – notably seven – ruddy (*harita*) horses (RV 5. 45. 9; 7. 60. 3). See Gonda 1965, 74-76 for the evolution of Sūrya's representation.

6. The Aśvins are untiring on their golden three-fold car (it has three wheels, three fellies, etc., cf. RV 1. 118. 1-2) and their continuous course (*vartā*), «a word which with one exception is applicable to them only» (Macdonell 1974, 50), is mostly performed in order to help various creatures in distress.

7. Gonda (1965, 82) notes that the god Pūṣan, a pastoral deity, is «specially concerned with the paths and consequently with the protection of the herd, the recovery of lost animals, the conveyance of souls to heaven» and «it is therefore in harmony with the god's character that he is (6, 55, 6) stated to be conveyed, on a chariot, by two sure-footed or firmly proceeding [...] he-goats. The epithet *ajāsva* 'who has goats instead of horses' is in a significant way exclusively his». (Cf. RV 1. 38. 4; 9. 67. 10). The Aśvins' car is sometimes said to be drawn by horses, but mostly by birds like *hamsas* (RV 4. 45. 4) or eagles (RV 1. 118. 4; 8. 5. 7), and even by other animals like buffaloes or an ass.

8. See <https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vimāna> (last access 29.10.2021).

*sómāpūṣaṇā rājaso vimānaṃ saptācakraṃ rātham āviśvaminvam /
viśūvṛtam mānasā yujyāmānaṃ tāṃ jinvaṭho vṛṣaṇā pāñcaraśmim* // RV 2. 40. 3 //

O Soma and Pūṣan, the chariot [=sacrifice?] with seven wheels and five reins that measures out the airy realm but does not speed everyone, rolling in various directions, being yoked with mind, that do you quicken, you bulls. (Jamison–Brereton 2014, 459).

In my opinion, however, the basic idea behind a *vimāna* is not primarily that it measures out anything, but that it is, in itself, an object that requires measuring. For as we have seen above, *vimāna* also designates a palatial, probably many-storeyed mansion, which has to be built according to strict measurements. Whether in its terrestrial or flying form, *vimāna* designates a structure with a complicated architecture, of a type which was probably not common in Vedic times – if we can draw any conclusions from the extremely scanty archaeological remains from the Vedic age⁹. It is therefore most likely that the concept of *vimāna* does not derive in any way from that of the Vedic gods' flying *rathas*, but that it is an entirely new concept that gains prominence at the time in which the epics were composed.

After examining closely all the passages in which the term *vimāna* appears in the *Mahābhārata* and in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, we come to the conclusion that *vimāna* occurs under four different meanings in these two texts¹⁰. This term can designate:

- a terrestrial palace;
- a flying structure whose use is the prerogative of divine or semi-divine beings;

9. As remarked by Bhan (2006, 178), «the Vedic Tradition [...] reveals [...] the absence of fortified cities, town planning and drainage, monumental art and architecture of burnt bricks [...]». In Vedic literature, it is on the contrary the Dāsas or Dasyus, the enemies of the Indo-Āryans, who are regularly credited with the construction of fortresses (*purāḥ*) made of stone or metal, which Indra splits by means of his *vajra*, a feat which earns him the epithet *pūrbhid*, 'fort-shatterer'. See Macdonell 1974, 60. According to this author's naturalistic interpretation, these fortresses of the Dasyus are really aerial forts and represent the rain clouds – a representation which brings us rather close to a *vimāna* like Puṣpaka, said to be made of precious metal and stone, and frequently compared to a cloud.

10. If we exclude one unique occurrence of *vimāna* in its Vedic sense of 'measuring', found in MBh 1. 3. 60, in a hymn addressed by Upamanyu to the Aśvins and composed in what Louis Renou has styled «hybrid Vedic Sanskrit». To this category also belong the *Suparṇākhyāna*, the *Bāṣkalamantra Upaniṣad*, etc. See Renou 1956, 3. On the hymn to the Aśvins, see Renou 1997.

- the heavenly flying palace Puṣpaka, an individual representative of the second category;
- a type of heaven.

I have examined elsewhere Puṣpaka's functions in the Vālmiki-*Rāmāyaṇa* and the relationship between the divine flying palace and its three successive owners, Kubera, Rāvaṇa and Rāma, who stand respectively for *artha*, *kāma* and *dharma*¹¹. Here, I propose to have a look at the term *vimāna* in its other meanings: palace, flying structure and heaven.

While the meaning of 'heaven' is probably slightly later than the other two, becoming really prominent only in some chapters of Book 13 of the *Mahābhārata*, it seems difficult to assign a chronological order within the epics to the appearance of the first two significations of the term ('terrestrial palace' and 'flying structure'): as far as the Vālmiki-*Rāmāyaṇa* is concerned, we may note that, except for Book 4 which only contains *vimāna* twice in the sense of 'terrestrial palace', all the other books of the *Rāmāyaṇa* contain instances of both meanings. On the other hand, occurrences of *vimāna* in the sense of an 'earthly palace' are much rarer in the *Mahābhārata* than in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. We find it used in this meaning without any ambiguity only in two *śloka*s of the Great Epic¹². At times, a terrestrial *vimāna* can be compared to a flying one (see *e.g.* Rm 5. 6. 7) and at other times, both shades of meaning seem intended at once. For instance, when Sītā tries to persuade Rāma to take her along to the forest, she tells him:

prāsādāgrair vimānair vā vaihāyasagatena vā /
sarvāvasthāgatā bhartuḥ pādacchāyā viśiṣyate // Rm 2. 24. 7 //

The shadow of a husband's feet in any circumstances surpasses the finest mansions, an aerial chariot (*vimāna*), or even flying through the sky. (Pollock-Goldman 1986, 135).

By semantic association with the preceding term, *prāsāda* ('mansion'), we would assume that Sītā is using *vimāna* in the sense of 'terrestrial palace', but by association with the following *vaihāyasagatena* ('flying through the sky'), we would tend to think that she means a 'flying palace'. We see that both shades of

11. See Feller 2020.

12. MBh 1. 176. 23 and 3. 198. 6. Two more occurrences of *vimāna* in the sense of 'terrestrial palace' may possibly be found in MBh 13. 20. 35 and 13. 83. 56, but the context does not allow us to decide clearly if a palace or a flying structure is meant.

meaning of the term *vimāna* – ‘palace’ and ‘flying structure’ – are simultaneously present in Sītā’s mind, and that the term *vimāna* functions as a pivot which allows her mind to leap from ‘mansions’ to ‘flying through the sky’ without any seeming incongruity. In a similar vein, when Hanumat examines Rāvaṇa’s palace looking for Sītā, we are first given an elaborate depiction of the wonderful palace of the *rākṣasa*-king seen through the monkey’s eyes. The description starts as that of a ‘fabulous house’ (*grhottama*, Rm 5. 7. 5), ‘looking like heaven fallen to earth’ (*mahītale svargam iva prakīrṇam*, Rm 5. 7. 6) and ‘having the splendour of a flying palace [...] drawn through the air by splendid *haṃsas*’ (*haṃsapravekair iva vahyamānaṃ śriyā yutam [...] vimānam*, Rm 5. 7. 7). What starts as a mere comparison between the earthly palace and a flying one then suddenly shifts without clear transition to the description of the *vimāna* Puṣpaka itself (here called Puṣpa), which is parked in a hall of the palace: ‘The great monkey gazed upon that vast and resplendent flying palace called Puṣpa.’ (*puṣpāhvayaṃ nāma vīrājamānam [...] mahākapis tatra mahāvīmānam*, Rm 5. 5. 11). This shift from Rāvaṇa’s palace to his flying palace Puṣpaka is again facilitated by the ambiguity of the term *vimāna*, which can be applied to both terrestrial immobile and celestial mobile mansions. Let us now examine the various meanings of the term *vimāna* in the two epics.

2. Vimāna as a Palace

In both epics, most occurrences of *vimāna* in the sense of ‘palace’ are found in town-descriptions, in close association with semantically proximate terms, such as *prāsāda* (‘terrace, top-storey of a lofty building, lofty palatial mansion, palace, temple’), *harmya* (‘large house, palace, mansion, any house or large building’, or ‘residence of a wealthy person’) and *grha* (‘house’). More rarely it appears in connection with *valabhī* (‘top or pinnacle of a house, turret’, as in Rm 2. 82. 5), *gopura* (‘town-gate, gate, ornamented gateway of a temple’, Rm 6. 55. 64; 3. 198. 6) or *aṭṭālaka* (‘watch-tower’, MBh 3. 198. 6)¹³. This can be seen in the following examples.

In Rm 2. 53, Sumantra, Daśaratha’s charioteer, reports to the aged king how the townspeople reacted when they saw him come back without Rāma, whom he had just left in the forest. Here *vimāna* is listed with *harmya* and *prāsāda* as the dwellings from which the women of Ayodhyā watch Sumantra’s return:

13. These meanings are given in the *Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary*.

harmyair vimānaiḥ prāsādair avekṣya ratham āgatam /
hāhākārakṛtā nāryo rāmādarśanakarśitāḥ // Rm 2. 53. 9 //

From mansions (*harmya*), many-storied buildings (*vimāna*) and palaces (*prāsāda*), the women observed the chariot come, and they raised cries of woe, tormented at losing the sight of Rāma. (Pollock–Goldman 1986, 197).

In the *Mahābhārata*, *vimāna* occurs in the sense of ‘palace’ in an extremely lively description of Mithilā, king Janaka’s city, which an ignorant Brahmin visits in order to be enlightened by a hunter. Here again, the term *vimāna* is found surrounded by a cluster of related architectural terms, such as *gopura* (‘gates’), *aṭṭālaka* (‘watchtowers’), *gṛha* (‘houses’) and *prākāra* (‘walls’):

tato jagāma mithilāṃ janakena surakṣitām // 5 //
dharmasetusamākīrṇāṃ yajñotsavavatīṃ śubhām /
gopurāṭṭālakavatīṃ gṛhaprākāraśobhitām // 6 //
pañyaiś ca bahubhir ramyāṃ vimānair bahubhir vṛtām /
pañyaiś ca bahubhir yuktāṃ suvibhaktamahāpathām // 7 //
aśvai rathais tathā nāgaiḥ yānaiś ca bahubhir vṛtām /
hṛṣṭapuṣṭajanākīrṇāṃ nityotsavasamākulām // MBh 3. 198. 5c-8 //

At length [he] came to Mithilā, which was well governed by Janaka. It was a city demarcated by the boundaries of the Law, rich in sacrifices and festivals, holy, defended by gates and watch towers, and adorned with houses and walls. He entered the lovely town, which was surrounded by many palaces (*vimāna*), filled with many wares, with the main streets well laid out, crowded with many horses, chariots, elephants, and wagons, teeming with happy, well-fed people, and bristling with constant festivals. (van Buitenen 1975, 619).

If the phrase *vimānair bahubhir vṛtām* is indeed to be understood in the sense of ‘surrounded by many palaces’ and not simply as ‘filled with many palaces’, then it appears that the palatial *vimānas* are built on the edge of the town, somewhat in the manner of the villas of modern-day suburbia – and perhaps opposed to the more modest *gṛhas* of the town-centre.

In Book 6 of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, when Rāma’s army reaches Laṅkā, an extraordinary sight meets their eyes:

śikharaṃ tu trikūṭasya prāṃśu caikam diviṣṭam /
samantāt puṣpaṃchannaṃ mahārajatasam nibham // 18 //

śatayojanavistīrṇaṃ vimalaṃ cārudarśanam /
ślakṣṇaṃ śrīman mahac caiva duṣprāpaṃ śakunair api // 19 //
manasāpi durārohaṃ kiṃ punaḥ karmaṇā janaiḥ /
niviṣṭā tatra śikhare laṅkā rāvaṇapālītā // 20 //
sā purī gopurair uccaiḥ pāṇḍurāmbudasaṃnibhaiḥ /
kāñcanena ca sālana rājatena ca śobhitā // 21 //
prāsādaś ca vimānaiś ca laṅkā paramabhūṣitā /
ghanair ivātapāpāye madhyamaṃ vaiṣṇavaṃ padam // 22 //
yasyāṃ stambhasahasreṇa prāsādaḥ samalaṃkṛtaḥ /
kailāsaśikharākāro dṛśyate kham ivollikhan // Rm 6. 30. 18-23 //

There, reaching into the sky, stood one of the lofty summits of Mount Trikūṭa. Covered on all sides with flowers, it seemed to be made of gold. It was bright and lovely to behold, and its breadth was a hundred leagues. It was beautiful, grand, and majestic and impossible for even the birds to reach. It was impossible for men to scale, even in their imagination, let alone in reality. And there, on that peak, stood Laṅkā, under the protection of Rāvaṇa. The citadel was adorned with ramparts of gold and silver and with lofty gateway towers resembling white clouds. Indeed, Laṅkā was as magnificently adorned by its palaces (*prāsāda*) and mansions (*vimāna*) as are the heavens, Viṣṇu's middle step, with clouds at summer's end. In the city could be seen a palace (*prāsāda*) adorned with a thousand columns, which, seeming to scrape the sky, resembled the peak of Mount Kailāsa. (Goldman–Sutherland Goldman–van Nooten 2009, 195-196).

Here we are given a measurement – the breadth of the city is a hundred leagues (*yojanas*) – and again, we meet many architectural terms: gateway towers (*gopura*), ramparts (*sāla*), palaces (*prāsāda*), mansions (*vimāna*) and pillars (*stambha*). All these lofty constructions, whose combined colours are gold, silver and white, built upon the top of an even loftier mountain peak, seem to 'scrape the sky' (*kham ivollikhan*). Indeed, the city is built so high up that it is said to be 'impossible for even the birds to reach'. In short, it looks as if it were floating in the sky, an impression which is reinforced by the comparison between its towering buildings and clouds. We are here reminded of certain descriptions of the flying palace Puṣpaka, which is an equally dazzling architectural construction made of precious materials, and said to be so huge that, like Laṅkā, it is frequently compared to a mountain and seems to 'scrape the sky' (see e.g. Rm 5. 7. 12-15 and 6. 109. 22-27).

Towards the end of Book 7 of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, two towns are founded by Rāma's younger brother Bharata, Takṣaśilā and Puṣkarāvātī. These are said to contain palaces (*vimānas*) of the same colour:

*ubhe puravare ramye vistarair upaśobhite /
gṛhamukhyaṇṇaḥ surucirair vimānaiḥ samavarṇibhiḥ // Rm 7. 91. 13 //*

Both of these splendid cities were charming and adorned with great wealth, as well as with extremely beautiful mansions and seven-storied palaces (*vimāna*) of identical colour. (Goldman–Sutherland Goldman, 2017, 427, modified).

While *gṛha* can designate a simple house, the terms *prāsāda*, *harmya* and *vimāna* designate a palace or a lofty building. It is difficult to ascertain from the passages at hand if the poet really intended to assign a different shade of meaning to each one of them, or if they are all listed together to achieve a cumulative effect stressing the huge size and luxury of the buildings and the opulence of their inhabitants. I would rather tend towards the second hypothesis. We see that Goldman *et alii* are not really systematic in their translations of the term *vimāna* in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. At times, they translate it as 'mansion' (cf. Rm 6. 30. 22 quoted above) and at other times as 'palace' or more specifically as 'seven-storied palace' (see Rm 7. 91. 13 quoted above), following the commentators' gloss *saptabhūmiprāsādaḥ*¹⁴. A *vimāna* would thus be a sub-type of *prāsāda* with many (or specifically seven) storeys. But the text of the *Rāmāyaṇa* itself never explicitly alludes to (seven) storeys, even though they can probably be deduced from the sheer height of the buildings described¹⁵. As we see from the above examples, palatial *vimānas* occur mostly in town descriptions, be it Ayodhyā, Laṅkā, Mithilā or other towns. While the *vimānas* of human towns are probably made of ordinary materials, we see that those of Laṅkā are made of costly materials such as gold, silver and precious stones whose descriptions evoke superhuman, if not divine splendour.

While towns are said to contain palaces – in other words, *vimānas* of the terrestrial type – taken as a whole, they can also be compared to celestial *vimānas*. Thus, in Rm 1. 5. 19, Ayodhyā is likened to 'a palace in the sky that perfected beings had gained through austerities' (*vimānam iva siddhānāṃ tapasādhigataṃ*

14. See Goldman–Sutherland Goldman 2017, 1195.

15. As far as I could ascertain, the only occurrence in the Sanskrit epics of a *vimāna* with 'seven storeys' (*saptabhauma*) is found in MBh 13. 110. 66, where this epithet is applied to a flying palace.

divi). In Rm 1. 69. 3, the auspicious-looking Sāṃkāśyā, the town belonging to Kuśadhvaja, King Janaka's elder brother, is compared to the *vimāna* Puṣpaka (*sāṃkāśyāṃ puṇyasaṃkāśāṃ vimānam iva puṣpakam*). Inversely, flying *vimānas* can also be likened to towns, as in Rm 1. 42. 9, where the gods flock together by means of various conveyances to witness the Gaṅgā falling onto the earth:

*vimānair nagarākārair hayair gajavarais tathā /
pāriplavagatās cāpi devatās tatra viṣṭhitāḥ* // Rm 1. 42. 9 //

Even the gods, gathered there in their flying chariots looking like cities, with their horses and splendid elephants, were awed. (Goldman 1984, 206, modified).

In my opinion, the main characteristics shared between towns and flying *vimānas* is that they are both huge and built of lofty and luxurious mansions. From these comparisons, we understand that the celestial *vimānas* are not “mere” flying chariots but look rather like flying palaces or even flying towns consisting of many palaces.

3. *Vimāna as a Flying Structure*

Let us now turn to the second category of *vimānas*, namely, the aerial, flying variety. The overwhelming majority of occurrences of *vimāna* in the *Mahābhārata* designate a sort of flying palace or even town (given that *vimānas* are sometimes said to carry great numbers of heavenly musicians and nymphs)¹⁶, enjoyed by the gods and other divine beings who use them either to fly about in the sky or to come down to earth. From these passages, we understand that *vimānas* are essentially used as a means of transportation. We may note that the only books of the *Mahābhārata* which do not contain any references to aerial *vimānas* are Books 10, 11 and 16, in which the term *vimāna* does not appear at all.

Towards its beginning, the Great Epic provides a genealogy of the gods and other supernatural beings. The divine architect Viśvakarman, the son of Prabhāsa the eighth Vasu, is here said to be the maker of all divine *vimānas* – an honour which is the sole prerogative of Puṣpaka in the *Vālmiki-Rāmāyaṇa*:

16. For instance, in Rm 3. 33. 20 and 7. 68. 11.

viśvakarmā mahābhāgo jajñe śilpaprājāpatiḥ /
kartā śilpasahasrāṇāṃ tridaśānāṃ ca vardhakiḥ // 27 //
bhūṣaṇānāṃ ca sarveṣāṃ kartā śilpavatāṃ varaḥ /
yo divyāni vimānāni devatānāṃ cakāra ha // MBh 1. 60. 27-28 //

Thus was born the lordly Viśvakarman, progenitor of the crafts, creator of the thousands of crafts, and carpenter to the Thirty Gods; greatest of craftsmen, he created all ornaments and fashioned the divine chariots of the Gods. (van Buitenen 1973, 149).

In the *Mahābhārata*, the *vimānas* can be yoked to various animals, most frequently of course to birds such as *haṃsas* (MBh 13. 14. 141; 13. 109. 52; 13. 109. 54), *cakravākas* (MBh 13. 109. 43a), *sārasas* (MBh 13. 109. 45a) or peacocks (MBh 3. 83. 29c), but also to white horses (MBh 7. 18. 5c), lions and tigers (MBh 13. 109. 49), elephants and rhinoceroses (MBh 13. 110. 67) and even once to the divine *ṛṣi*s, in the story of King Nahuṣa, who is of course swiftly punished for his insolence and thrown out of heaven (MBh 5. 15. 20). Likewise, in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *vimānas* can be drawn by a great variety of beasts. For instance, when Hanumat jumps from the mainland to Laṅkā, he meets many such conveyances on the way:

siṃhakuñjaraśārdūlapatagoragavāhanaiḥ /
vimānaiḥ sampatadbhiś ca vimalaiḥ samalamkṛte // Rm 5. 1. 159 //

[That aerial path] was adorned with shining chariots that flew along, drawn by lions, elephants, tigers, birds, and serpents. (Goldman–Sutherland Goldman 1996, 112).

In both epics, the gods and other denizens of heaven mostly use *vimānas* in order to fly about in heaven, for instance to visit each other, as in the case of the deceased King Pāṇḍu and his wives who frequently use this conveyance to visit Indra, as the latter informs Yudhiṣṭhira who has just arrived in heaven:

eṣa pāṇḍur mahesvāsaḥ kuntyā mādryā ca saṃgataḥ /
vimānena sadābhyeti pitā tava mamāntikam // MBh 18. 4. 16 //

Here is the great archer Pāṇḍu, united with Kuntī and Mādri. Your father always comes into my presence on his *vimāna*. (My transl.).

Or else, the inhabitants of paradise come down to earth on *vimānas* to witness noteworthy events, such as, for instance, Draupadī's *svayaṃvara*:

*athāyayur devagaṇā vimānai
rudrādityā vasavo 'thāśvinau ca /
sādhyāś ca sarve marutas tathaiva
yamaṃ puraskṛtya dhaneśvaraṃ ca // MBh 1. 178. 6 //*

Then riding the chariots (*vimāna*) came the Gods,
Ādityas and Rudras and Vasus and Āśvins,
The Sādhyas all and the Maruts too,
Placing Yama ahead and the Lord of Wealth. (van Buitenen 1973, 351).

In Rm 3. 27. 30, they flock together to watch Rāma's fight against the *rākṣasa* Khara; in 6. 105. 3, they rush to Laṅkā on their divine flying palaces similar to the sun (*vimānaiḥ sūryasaṃnibhaiḥ*) to witness Sītā's ordeal and, in Rm 7. 100. 2-3, when Rāma decides to go back to heaven after his long reign, he is met by 'Brahmā [...] surrounded by all the gods and great seers and accompanied by hundreds of millions of celestial flying chariots'¹⁷. The god Brahmā, due to his continuing involvement with his creation, is particularly fond of visiting the earth on his *vimāna*, and there are many other instances where he comes down from heaven on this conveyance to grant boons (*e.g.* Rm 7. 5. 11) or to intercede in conflicts (*e.g.* Rm 7. 23. 8).

But *vimānas* are used not only by the gods to come down to earth, but also by recently deceased meritorious people to go up to heaven. The *vimānas* thus function as the outward sign of their newly-acquired divine status. For instance, in Rm 2. 58. 42, the young ascetic killed by mistake by king Daśaratha while hunting 'ascended straightway to heaven upon a heavenly chariot of wonderful construction' (*divyena vimānena vapuṣmatā āruroha divaṃ kṣīpram*). In Rm 3. 10. 90, the perfected beings (*siddhas*) residing in Agastya's hermitage, go to heaven 'in aerial chariots gleaming like the sun' (*vimānaiḥ sūryasaṃnibhaiḥ*). In Rm 3. 68. 6, the monster Kabandha, who has just been slain by Rāma, suddenly appears before him in divine form, 'standing upon a luminous, glorious aerial chariot harnessed with geese' (*vimāne bhāsvare tiṣṭhan haṃsayukte yaśaskare*). At the very end of the story, after Rāma has regained his divine form as Viṣṇu,

17. *brahma [...] sarvaiḥ parivṛto devair ṣṣibhiś ca mahātmabhiḥ / [...] vimānaśatakoṣibhir divyābhir abhisamvṛtaḥ // Rm 7. 100. 2-3 //*

Brahmā grants a boon to all his devotees and allows them to accompany him to heaven (Rm 7. 100. 21): ‘Then each one, casting off his or her human body, mounted a flying chariot’ (*mānuṣaṃ deham utsṛjya vimānaṃ so ’dhyarohata*).

In the *Mahābhārata*’s Forest-Book, Vyāsa tells Yudhiṣṭhira the story of sage Mudgala, who earned considerable merit due to his extremely frugal lifestyle as a gleaner, and who is consequently visited by a messenger of the gods who wishes to reward him by taking him to heaven on a beautiful *vimāna*. Here, we get a rather detailed description of this luxurious *vimāna*, flattering in equal measure to the eye, the ear and the nose:

devadūto vimānena mudgalaṃ pratyupasthitaḥ // 30 //
haṃsasārasayuktena kiṅkiṇījālamālinā /
kāmāgena vicitreṇa divyagandhavatā tathā // 31 //
uvāca cainaṃ vipraṣiṃ vimānaṃ karmabhīr jītaṃ /
samupāroha saṃsiddhiṃ prāpto ’si paramāṃ mune // MBh 3. 246. 30c-32 //

The Envoy of the Gods approached Mudgala on a celestial chariot, which was harnessed with swans and cranes and sported a circlet of tiny bells; the chariot could go where it wished and it was colorful and fragrant with divine perfumes. He said to the brahmin seer, “Mount this chariot that you have earned with your deeds, for you have attained to the ultimate course, hermit.” (van Buitenen 1975, 703).

The Envoy of the Gods then describes paradise at length to Mudgala. But upon learning that the stay there is not eternal and that one falls back to earth after partaking of heavenly bliss, the sage wisely decides to renounce paradise and to strive instead for complete extinction (MBh 3. 247)¹⁸.

By contrast, Arjuna, who, as Indra’s son, receives the extraordinary honour of going up to heaven while he is still alive in order to pay a visit to his father, is taken there on Indra’s chariot (*ratha*), driven by the charioteer Mātali. As it arrives, this awe-inspiring chariot is described in a manner which sharply differs from the more peaceful *vimāna*-descriptions and makes it clear that this chariot is used for war¹⁹:

18. This is one of the rare instances where a *vimāna* appears in a *nivṛtti*-context (only to be discarded), whereas the use of *vimānas* is otherwise closely connected to a *pravṛtti* one – going to heaven after one’s death.

19. Arjuna’s purpose in heaven is of course also war: for Arjuna is not (yet) going there to enjoy the rewards of a meritorious life, but to obtain divine weapons, and while sojourning in

ratho mātaliṣaṃyukta ājagāma mahāprabhāḥ // 2 //
nabho vitimiram kurvaṇ jaladān pāṭayann iva /
diśaḥ saṃpūrayan nādair mahāmegharavopamaiḥ // 3 //
asayaḥ śaktayo bhīmā gadās cograpradarsanāḥ /
divyaprabhāvāḥ prāsās ca vidyutās ca mahāprabhāḥ // 4 //
tathaivāśanayas tatra cakrayuktā huḍāguḍāḥ /
vāyusphoṭāḥ sanirghātā barhimeghanibhasvanāḥ // 5 //
tatra nāgā mahākāyā jvalitāsyāḥ sudāruṇāḥ /
sītābhrakūṭapratimāḥ saṃhatās ca yathopalāḥ // 6 //
daśa vāḥsahasrāṇi harīṇām vātaramhasām /
vahanti yaṃ netramuṣaṃ divyaṃ māmāmayam ratham // MBh 3. 43. 2c-7 //

[...] the resplendent chariot arrived, driven by Mātali. Lifting darkness from the sky and shredding the clouds, it filled all of space with a roar like the thunder of the monsoon cloud. It held swords, terrible spears, clubs of ghastly aspect, missiles of divine power, and lustrous lightning flashes, as well as thunderbolts, wheeled battering rams, bellows that raised gales, loud like peacock and thunder cloud; Giant Snakes it carried, with fiery mouths, most terrifying, tall like white clouds and hard like mountains; ten thousand bay horses, fast as the wind, drew this eye-fetching, divine, magic chariot. (van Buitenen 1975, 307).

This terrifying car drawn by ten thousand bay steeds is certainly reminiscent of the Vedic Indra's flying chariot²⁰, but the choice of this particular term and vehicle used here to convey Arjuna to Indra's paradise also indirectly confirms that the use of *vimānas* is the sole prerogative of the immortals and the deceased who have gained heavenly worlds, and that they are not meant for ordinary mortals²¹.

heaven, his father Indra requests his help to fight the demons called Nivātakavacas, whom Arjuna defeats riding on Indra's same *ratha*.

20. Elsewhere, Indra is said to move about on a *vimāna*, as for instance in MBh 1. 51. 9, where he is helplessly drawn to King Janamejaya's snake-sacrifice with Takṣaka in his lap.

21. This supposition is corroborated by MBh 1. 57. 14, where Indra grants to a still living king the exceptional boon to travel about on a celestial chariot:

tvam ekaḥ sarvamartyeṣu vimānavaram āsthitaḥ /
carīṣyasi uparistho vai devo vighrahavān iva // MBh 1. 57. 14 //

Among all mortals you alone shall stand upon a grand and sky-going chariot, and indeed, you will ride there above, like a God come to flesh! (van Buitenen 1973, 131).

Elsewhere, however, the *Mahābhārata* emphasises the similitude between *rathas* and *vimānas*, especially – but not exclusively – in the war-books, where battle-chariots are frequently compared to *vimānas*, and their owners to gods. Thus, Karṇa, setting out for battle on his glorious *ratha*, is compared to the god Indra standing on his *vimāna*:

*hutāśanābhaḥ sa hutāśanaprabhe
śubhaḥ śubhe vai svarathe dhanurdharaḥ /
sthito rarājādhirathir mahārathaḥ
svayaṃ vimāne surarāḍ iva sthitaḥ // MBh 7. 2. 37c //*

Blazing like fire, he was surrounded by fire; in his gleaming chariot (*ratha*) he gleamed, wielding his bow. Warrior of warriors, the son of Adhiratha stood there and blazed, like the king of the gods in a car of the sky (*vimāna*). (Pilikian 2006, 53, modified)²².

In a more pessimistic mood, comparisons between warriors falling from their mounts and heavenly beings falling from their *vimānas* illustrate that victory in the war is no more permanent than a sojourn on a *vimāna*, which lasts only as long as the merit gained in the previous life subsists, and is inexorably followed by a fall back into the pristine lowly earthly condition:

*hayasyandananāgebhyaḥ petur vīrā dviṣaddhatāḥ /
vimānebhyo yathā kṣīṇe puṇye svargasadas tathā // MBh 8. 8. 7 //*

Struck by their enemies, the heroes fell from their horses, chariots and elephants, like the inhabitants of heaven fall from their *vimānas* once their merit is exhausted. (My transl.)²³.

As we can see from this example and from other similar ones, the denizens of heaven are said to fall directly from their *vimānas* once their merit is exhausted, and not from heaven. It appears as if the *vimānas* served them not just as conveyances, but as permanent abodes during their heavenly sojourn.

22. See also MBh 9. 13. 9.

23. Similarly, in MBh 9. 22. 86.

4. *Vimāna as Heaven*

In some examples of heavenly *vimānas* adduced above, we have already noticed certain indices that make us suspect that these flying *vimānas* are sometimes more than mere conveyances, but seem to serve as permanent places of sojourn in heaven. There are other clearer instances of this trend – especially in the *Mahābhārata* but also, to a lesser extent, in the *Rāmāyaṇa* – where the meaning of the term *vimāna* seems to overlap with that of *svarga* or *dīva* (‘paradise’). Thus, by semantic shift, this term comes to designate no longer merely the vehicle which takes the deceased to paradise, but the heavenly abode itself²⁴. For instance, just before Rāma slays the *rākṣasa* Khara, he tells him:

adya tvām nihataṃ bāṇaiḥ paśyantu paramarṣayaḥ /
nirayasthaṃ vimānasthā ye tvayā hiṃsitāḥ purā // Rm 3. 28. 13 //

The supreme seers you killed in the past shall now look down upon you, they in their aerial chariots and you, slain by my arrows, in hell. (Pollock–Goldman 1991, 146).

Here *vimānastha* (‘standing/residing on a *vimāna*’) is juxtaposed to *nirayastha* (‘standing/residing in hell’), as if *vimānas* were the ultimate destination of well-doers, as opposed to hell, which is of course the final abode of evil-doers. In MBh 5. 100. 15 we find a description of the Rasātala, the other-worldly abode of the holy cow Surabhi, which is said to be an even more pleasant place to live in than the world of Snakes, or paradise, or the *vimāna triviṣṭapa* – Indra’s heaven:

na nāgaloke na svarge na vimāne triviṣṭape /
parivāsaḥ sukhas tādṛg rasātālatale yathā // MBh 5. 100. 15 //

Neither in the world of the Snakes
Nor heaven or Indra’s paradise (*vimāne triviṣṭape*)
Is the living as easy as in
The World of Rasātala! (van Buitenen 1978, 391, modified).

The phrase *vimāne triviṣṭape* stands for the more usual *triviṣṭapa-* (or *tripiṣṭapa-*)*dīva*. We see that here *vimāna* is used as a perfect synonym for *dīva*, or

24. We may note that this meaning of *vimāna* as ‘heaven’ or at least ‘type of heaven’ is not listed in the dictionaries.

paradise. Similarly, in the following passage which lists the merits gained by pilgrimages, the expression *gavāṃ vimāne* appears to be synonymous with *gavāṃ loke*, ‘in the world of cows’:

*ye jīryante brahmacaryeṇa viprā
brāhmīṇ vācaṃ parirakṣanti caiva /
manasvīnas tīrthayātrāparāyaṇās
te tatra modanti gavāṃ vimāne // MBh 13. 105. 44 //*

Those brahmins who grow old practising restraint and ever cultivate the sacred word, who are wise and perform pilgrimages, they enjoy themselves there, in the world of cows. (My transl.).

In its soteriological passages, most particularly in the *Anuśāsanaparvan*²⁵, the *Mahābhārata* lists several means by which one can earn merit and consequently gain heavenly *vimānas*. Pilgrimages are one of them, and descriptions of *tīrthayātrās* (‘tours of holy fords’) enumerate the various sacred spots where one should perform ablutions in order to obtain *vimānas* – either as conveyances to reach heaven, but sometimes also as permanent places of residence in heaven. The equivalence between *tīrthayātrās* and sacrifices – traditionally regarded as the means *par excellence* to gain heaven – shows how the great epic is here trying to establish various parallel, yet equally effective, ways of gaining *puṇya* in an age where the performance of sacrifices was no longer acceptable in certain *milieus*. In all the following examples, we see that the text does not mention the world obtained by the virtuous person, but only the *vimāna* – as if the latter had come to represent heaven itself:

*dakṣiṇaṃ sindhum āsādy brahmacārī jīvendriyaḥ /
agniṣṭomaṃ avāpnoti vimānaṃ cādhirohati // MBh 3. 80. 72 //*

Carrying on to the Southern River, while remaining chaste and the master of one’s senses, one obtains [the equivalence] of an *agniṣṭoma* and ascends a celestial chariot. (van Buitenen, 1975, 375, modified)²⁶.

25. As Sutton remarks (2000, 87): «The subject of gaining admission into heaven is discussed most exhaustively in the *Anuśāsaṇa* and is a major theme of the teachings presented therein. Different sections of the *Anuśāsaṇa* give different pious acts that bring rewards in the afterlife [...]».

26. Similarly, in MBh 3. 82. 139; 3. 82. 143; 3. 83. 29.

The gift of cows is another means by which a *vimāna* can be obtained in the afterlife, as in the following passage which enumerates the virtues of cows and explains how they should be honoured:

gopradānarato yāti bhittvā jaladasaṃcayān /
vimānenārṅkavarṇena divi rājan virājatā // MBh 13. 78. 24 //

He who delights in giving away cows goes, splitting the multitudes of rain clouds and shining in the sky, on a dazzling, gold-coloured *vimāna*. (My transl.).

Good deeds in general (*puṇya-karman*) can lead to the same result:

vimāneṣu vicitreṣu ramaṇīyeṣu bhārata /
modante puṇyakarmāṇo viharanto yaśasvinaḥ // MBh 13. 80. 28 //

O Bhārata, those who performed good deeds enjoy themselves on charming many-coloured *vimānas*, sporting about full of glory. (My transl.).

Fasting (*upavāsa*) is one more way of obtaining a favourable destiny after death. This topic is developed at length in MBh 13. 109-110²⁷. These two chapters are particularly interesting, because at first glance they seem to display obvious unity and similarity in intent and content – explaining various fasts by means of which one can obtain different heavens after death –, but upon closer inspection they reveal some subtle differences. That these two *sargas* are not unitary seems also confirmed by the fact that, at the beginning of 13. 110, Yudhiṣṭhira again asks Bhīṣma to describe fasts, saying that «the grandfather has just explained sacrifices, but please explain now how a poor man, unable to perform sacrifices, can reach heaven», as if Bhīṣma had not just expounded on fasting at length in 13. 109.

At the beginning of MBh 13. 109, Yudhiṣṭhira asks Bhīṣma to explain the ways of fasting. Bhīṣma complies with his wish and enumerates various types of fasts which always conclude with the final journey to heaven, mounted on a *vimāna*, of the person who has performed the fast. In chapter 13. 109, these *vimānas* are mere vehicles or conveyances, which, for the sake of variation, are said to be drawn by different species of beasts, and whose use seems restricted to

27. Due to these two *sargas*, the *Anuśāsanaparvan* is the book which contains the greatest number of occurrences of *vimāna* in the MBh.

the journey from earth to heaven. Thus, we repeatedly find the phrase: ‘he goes by means of a *vimāna* and then enjoys himself in heaven’ (*vimānena sa gacchati* [...] *divi modate*) (e.g. 13. 109. 45; 49; 52), with a clear distinction between heaven itself and *vimāna* as the means to reach it. As in the case of pilgrimages, the merits of fasting are always weighed against the merits of sacrifices, which, “by default” so to say, appear as the method *par excellence* whereby one can earn merit and consequently heaven.

In MBh 13. 110, fasting is presented specifically as an alternative means by which the poor (*daridra*), who cannot afford to offer costly sacrifices, can reach heaven (13. 110. 2-4). Bhīṣma enumerates various fasts, starting with fasts in which one eats twice a day (morning and evening) and going on up to eating only once a month. This practice is rewarded by increasingly long sojourns in various heavenly worlds (*loka*). What is especially interesting for our purpose in this long enumeration (*sarga* 13. 110 contains no less than 137 verses) is that it always contains a reference to the *vimāna* which is attributed to the person who goes to heaven. Whereas in MBh 13. 109 the *vimānas* appear as mere means of transportation (with emphasis on the various animals used to draw them), in MBh 13. 110, they increasingly seem to be described as the permanent palatial flying residences attributed to individual meritorious persons within the various heavens of gods. These *vimānas* are drawn by a great variety of animals, but are also sometimes said to be fashioned in the form of animals, especially *haṁsas* (see e.g. MBh 13. 110. 12; 21: *vimānaṁ haṁsalakṣaṇam*), as if the actual draught animal had become a mere decorative item²⁸. These *vimānas* are furthermore said to look like towns (*nagarākāre*, MBh 13. 110. 126), a shape and size which is certainly more suitable to a permanent residence than to a mere chariot. They are filled with beautiful women who provide for sensual pleasures²⁹, and with great numbers of *apsarases* and *gandharvas* who take care of the musical entertainment. Instead of the phrase ‘he goes on a *vimāna*’, we now find expressions like ‘a man obtains a *vimāna*’ (*vimānaṁ labhate naraḥ*: MBh 13.110.17; 37; 82), ‘he climbs on a *vimāna*’ (*vimānam adhirohati*: MBh 13. 110. 34; 67), ‘he will gain a *vimāna*’ (*vimānaṁ sādhayet*: MBh 13. 110. 43; 56), ‘he is established on a choice *vimāna*’ (*vimānavaram āsthitaḥ*: MBh 13. 110. 89; 92; 95; 109), ‘he lives on a *vimāna*’ (*vimāne* [...] *vasati*: MBh 13. 110. 126-127). Sometimes, a *vimāna* is said to be established (*pratiṣṭhita*) in a particular heavenly

28. Admittedly, the expression *haṁsalakṣaṇa* is rather vague: ‘having the mark of a swan’ or ‘characterised by swans’ might also mean that they are drawn by them.

29. Not surprisingly, the people who enjoy these heavens are apparently all men!

world, for instance in the world of Brahmā: *vimānaṃ* [...] *brahmaloke pratiṣṭhitam* (MBh 13. 110. 52-54). Once, even gods like Śiva and Brahmā are said to live in *vimānas*:

*abhiḡacchen mahādevaṃ vimānasthaṃ mahābalaṃ /
svayaṃbhavaṃ ca paśyeta vimānaṃ samupasthitam* // MBh 13. 110. 47 //

He will go to Mahādeva of great puissance, who resides on a *vimāna*, and he will see Svayaṃbhū sojourning on a *vimāna*. (My transl.).

We may note that in this long enumeration, the *vimānas* obtained after death by the adepts of fasts are frequently given more prominence than the worlds they reach, which are even completely omitted on a few occasions. By contrast, the *vimānas* are often lavishly described. This is the case for the person who eats only once a fortnight. We may quote this passage at length as an example. Here, there is no mention of a heavenly world, but only of the *vimāna* obtained as a reward, which clearly appears to be the ultimate abode itself:

*yas tu pakṣe gate bhunkte ekabhaktaṃ jitendriyaḥ /
sadā dvādaśa māsāṃs tu juhvāno jātavedasam /
rājasūyasahasrasya phalaṃ prāpnoty anuttamam* // 64 //
*yānam ārohate nityaṃ haṃsabarhiṇasevitam /
maṇimaṇḍalakaś citraṃ jātārūpasamāvṛtam* // 65 //
*divyābharaṇaśobhābhīr varastrībhir alaṃkṛtam /
ekastambhaṇi caturdvāraṇi saptabhaumaṃ sumanīgalam /
vajrayantīśahasraiś ca śobhitaṃ gītanisvanaiḥ* // 66 //
*divyaṇi divyaguṇopetaṃ vimānam adhirohati /
maṇimuktāpravālais ca bhūṣitaṃ vaidyutaprabham /
vased yugasahasraṃ ca khaḍgakuṇḍjaravāhanaḥ* // MBh 13. 110. 64-67 //

He who eats only one meal at the end of every fortnight, keeping his senses under control and constantly sacrificing to the fire for twelve months, obtains an unsurpassable reward [equivalent to] a thousand *rājasūya* sacrifices. He always rides a vehicle (*yāna*)³⁰ attended by swans and peacocks, set with heaps of precious stones, and plated with gold. He mounts a divine *vimāna* endowed with celestial qualities and graced with splendid women glittering with divine ornaments. This (*vimāna*) is highly auspicious, with one pillar, four gates and seven storeys, embellished by thousands of banners and by the sounds of

30. We may assume that *yāna* is used here as a synonym of *vimāna*.

songs. It is decorated with gems, pearls and coral and shines like lightning. He will live [on this *vimāna*] for a thousand *yugas*, drawn by elephants and rhinoceroses.” (My transl.).

We thus see that there is a gradual shift between *sargas* 13. 109 and 13. 110, from *vimāna* used as a chariot-like flying conveyance to go from earth to heaven, to *vimāna* becoming the palatial or even town-like permanent residence of heaven-dwellers. The *vimānas* come to resemble individual capsule-like heavens floating in the sky within the perimeter of the heavenly worlds of the gods, somewhat like smaller intergalactic vessels surrounding a mother-spaceship – if we may be allowed this comparison borrowed from the realm of science-fiction.

As we see, this passage from the *Anuśāsanaparvan* insists on the luxury of the *vimānas* obtained in the next world and describes them with a wealth of detail and an enumeration of costly and luxurious materials which evoke an irresistible picture of paradisiacal wealth and beauty. Such descriptions were probably meant to dazzle and attract the poor – whom we must imagine as living in squalor forming a radical contrast to the fabulous worlds described here – and encourage them to behave meritoriously in the manner prescribed by the text in order to reach a more pleasant state of being in the afterlife. Thus, these descriptions of heavenly *vimānas* are essentially used in a *pravṛtti* world-view³¹, which sets forth paradise – and not liberation – as the ultimate goal.

In all these points, the term *vimāna* as it is used in MBh 13. 110 cannot fail to remind us of *vimānas* as they are described in the *Vimānavatthu*, or ‘The Stories about *Vimānas*’, a Pāli Buddhist Canonical text belonging to the *Khuddakanikāya* of the *Suttapiṭaka*. The *Vimānavatthu* is composed in verse and contains 83 edifying stories showing how a simple meritorious deed can be rewarded by heavenly pleasures on *vimānas*, described as mobile mini-paradises, comprising palaces, gardens, ponds, etc. In her introduction to the first English translation of this text, the editor, Mrs Rhys Davids (1942, vi) remarks that: «“Vimāna” is hard to render well. It is a Sanskrit, not a Pāli word». The word may be Sanskrit, but the concept of *vimāna* as a mini-heaven such as it appears in the Pāli *Vimānavatthu* may in turn have influenced the *Anuśāsanā*’s representation of the same. But this topic deserves further investigation, especially into the relative dates of the two texts.

31. We remember Mudgala’s decided rejection of the same in a passage extolling the *nivṛtti* world-view.

5. Conclusions

Drawing from the observations we have made so far, we can posit the following hypothesis as to the development of the concept of *vimāna* in the epics:

- *vimāna* first designates a palace, a building of some size and luxury, which has to be built according to precise measurements (the first signification of the term *vimāna*).
- From the very time when palaces started to be built, people must have started to imagine that the gods too inhabit similar buildings in paradise³², only on an even grander and more magnificent scale, looking like flying towns built of palaces. Perhaps the sight of cities built on elevations and seeming to float in the sky may have helped to give rise to the notion of celestial *vimānas* in heaven.
- Since the gods' palaces were of course up in the air, and therefore not rooted to the ground, it must have followed that they could move about and need not be fixed to a given point in the atmosphere.
- To allow them to travel in the sky or to come down to earth, the *vimānas* were imagined to be drawn through the air by various beasts – in this, resembling the Vedic gods' *rathas*, only looking more like mobile palaces or towns, not like chariots.
- Since not only the gods, but also newly deceased meritorious people were imagined as using *vimānas* to go up to their final abode, the name of the conveyance used to reach paradise gradually came to designate, by semantic shift, paradise itself, or at least one particular type of individual mini-heaven, sometimes located within the sphere of a given divine world.

Heaven is in the image of a well-measured palace.

32. We have seen that it is not really possible to assign an earlier date to either the meaning of 'palace' or 'flying structure' in the epics.

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