

This document is the pre-print version of Cinzia Pieruccini's article "The *Aśoka* Groves of the *Rāmāyaṇa*: Imagery and Meanings", which appeared in *Proceedings of the Meeting of the Italian Association of Sanskrit Studies (Bologna 27-28 March 2015)*, ed. by Raffaele Torella *et alii*, Supplemento n. 2 a *RSO*, Nuova serie, vol. LXXXIX, 2016, pp. 107-118.

The document incorporates a few corrections subsequent to the publication, which are highlighted in yellow.

The *aśoka* groves of the *Rāmāyaṇa*: imagery and meanings **Cinzia Pieruccini, Università degli Studi di Milano**

The best-known garden – for now I will use the term generically – in all of Sanskrit literature is most decidedly Lañkā's *aśokavanikā*, a term usually translated as *aśoka* grove, with reference to the celebrated trees with flaming blossoms (*Jonesia asoca* Roxb., or *Saraca asoca* [Roxb.] de Wilde); here, in the *Sundarakāṇḍa* of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Hanumān at last meets Sītā, who had been abducted by Rāvaṇa (in particular, *Rāmāyaṇa* V.12-13).¹ The last Book of the poem, the *Uttarakāṇḍa*, on the other hand, conjures up another *aśokavanikā*, this time located at Ayodhyā, where Rāma and Sītā are described enjoying moments of happiness before Sītā's pregnancy is announced, and before she expresses her wish to pay a visit to the hermitages of the *ṛṣis* on the bank of the Ganges which preludes her exile (VII.41).² My aim in these pages is to analyse certain aspects of the passages in question following on directly from my previous studies on the literary parks and gardens of ancient India (Pieruccini 2014, 2015).³ I refer the reader above all to the first of these studies for general considerations on the importance and widespread circulation of the theme, as well as a comprehensive bibliography. I will also make particular reference to this study for certain basic characteristics of the gardens and parks of ancient India as they emerge from Sanskrit and, above all, *kāvya* literature. In fact, in keeping with the general qualities of the poem, these passages from

¹ The analysis presented in this paper is based on the Critical Edition of the poem, and the references to passages are as to this edition. In the footnotes, occasional reference will also be made to textual variants. It will be helpful to consult the translation directed by Madeleine Biardeau and Marie-Claude Porcher (Biardeau, Porcher 1999), which is based on the *Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki, with the commentaries Tilaka of Rāma, Rāmāyaṇaśiromaṇi of Śivasahāya and Bhūṣaṇa of Govindarāja*, ed. by Shastri Shrinivasa Katti Mudholakara, Parimal Publications, Delhi 1983, 8 vols.; this edition appears to be based on the Southern Recension of the poem (Biardeau in Biardeau, Porcher 1999: LIV), which the Critical Edition favours insofar as it is considered to preserve an earlier state of the text. Moreover, I will also take into account the **Gauḍīya** of the *Uttarakāṇḍa* published by Gaspare Gorresio in 1867, and some relevant notes in the Critical Edition.

² Obviously, from the compositional point of view this second *aśokavanikā* looks back to Lañkā's, given its successive position in the poem as well, indeed, as its very reason for existing, as will be pointed out later on. Apart from this obvious consideration, but also in confirmation of it, we must remember that on the evidence of the fundamental textual analysis of the *Rāmāyaṇa* by John Brockington the two passages belong to different stages in the composition of the poem. According to Brockington, *sargas* V.12-13 belong to what he calls Stage 2 of composition, i.e. the first stage of written composition of the poem (approx. 3rd century BCE to 1st CE), while the *Uttarakāṇḍa*, containing the second *aśokavanikā*, is assigned by him – together with the First Book, the *Bālakāṇḍa* – to Stage 3, which is thus taken to have been composed between the 1st and the 3rd centuries CE. See the scheme in Brockington 1984: Appendix, 329, 341. Despite this proposed chronology, for the sake of simplicity I will use the term 'poet' in the singular in these pages.

³ Once again, I wish to express my fond and sincere thanks to Paola M. Rossi for the inspiration she has never ceased to offer me on the subject of gardens.

the *Rāmāyaṇa* rely on an image of the garden that is already essentially that of *kāvya*. Or, better, Laṅkā's description of the *aśokavanikā*, which represents the model for that of Ayodhyā's *aśokavanikā*, appears possibly to draw upon an already settled tradition and, in turn, clearly generates an exemplary prototype. Given the importance of the *Rāmāyaṇa* itself, the importance of Laṅkā's *aśokavanikā* in the general economy of the narrative, and the strong emotional impact of the relevant passages, it can in fact be seen to take on a sort of archetypical value as far as the theme of the garden in classical Indian literature is concerned.

Laṅkā's *aśokavanikā*

As Robert P. Goldman and Sally J. Sutherland Goldman have made quite clear, the *Sundarakāṇḍa* represents, both in poetic-narrative terms and in the traditional reading of the poem, the real heart of the *Rāmāyaṇa* (Goldman, Sutherland Goldman 2007: 3-5, 79-86); and, «[i]f the *Sundarakāṇḍa* can be said to lie at the heart of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, then the heart of the *Sundara* itself must be the meeting of Sītā and Hanumān» (*ibid.*: 5). Hence the centrality to the entire poem of Laṅkā's *aśokavanikā*, where the meeting takes place, and the extraordinary literary importance and fame the passage has enjoyed. As we know, Hanumān's arrival in the *aśokavanikā* in search of Sītā follows upon his long wander through the city, and then his secret penetration into the very palace of Rāvaṇa, whom he sees sleeping in all his magnificence amongst the women of his harem. As Goldman and Sutherland Goldman put it, these are passages of an intense visual character (*ibid.*: 48-52), where, following Hanumān's gaze, the poet has the opportunity to describe at length the places, and indeed the persons, to be seen there, and this is also the case with the *aśoka* grove. It is night, but the moon lights up the way for Hanumān, and we cannot help noticing that the description of the *aśokavanikā* has nothing nocturnal about it; the place is observed as in broad daylight, with a wealth of details and vivid colours.

Although the poet evokes Laṅkā and the palace of Rāvaṇa as fabulous places, creations fantastic in their splendour, opulence and resources, or perhaps because of it, the *Sundarakāṇḍa* uses a remarkably rich terminology for the material objects (Goldman, Sutherland Goldman 2007: 93), and indeed for the architectural details, strongly suggesting that the poet took concrete architectural works for primary reference.⁴ Thus one may reasonably wonder whether, and if so to what extent, the poet had concrete spatial models in mind, and which, also when he sets about describing the *aśokavanikā*. From a general analysis of Sanskrit literature, it appears that «the gardens of ancient India basically fall into three types: the domestic garden, the garden of the royal palace, and the garden that is at least in some cases public, but at the same time 'property' of someone, in particular 'royal', extending outside the city» (Pieruccini 2014: 12); to these, we may add the gardens of temples and religious institutions. While, on the one hand, the *Amarakośa* (II.4 [1-3]), the well-known Sanskrit lexicon attributable to the 6th century, explains the various nuances of the rich Sanskrit vocabulary relating to this subject (Pieruccini 2014: 12), the lexical use of *kāvya*, with its frequent reference to these places, appears to make no distinction between those we might define, on the basis of location and dimensions, as 'gardens' and 'parks' (Wojtilla 2009: 20-

⁴ On the cities and the architectural elements in the whole poem, see Brockington 1984: 69-74.

24, 28). However, common usage suggests applying the English term ‘park’ to the extensive garden lying outside the city, like the one the future Buddha visits in the *Buddhacarita* of Aśvaghōṣa, to take a celebrated literary example. The term *vanikā*, which does not appear in Amara, is obviously a diminutive of *vana*, the standard term used there and indeed in all other contexts for ‘wood’, ‘forest’; hence the customary translation with *aśoka* grove.

This Sanskrit term, suggesting the extensiveness of a forest, appears appropriate to convey the dimensions and the wealth of flora and fauna evoked in this place. However, according, at least, to the Monier-Williams dictionary (*s. v.*), it appears to have been used specifically only in connection with the compound in question. In fact, this *vanikā* seems to be a very particular poetic construction. On the evidence of text analysis and comparison with the Sanskrit literary tradition in evoking forests, parks and gardens, it evidently seems to be conflating various and different types of places, providing a sort of fabulous, heightened synthesis, and it is quite likely that the poet was well aware of the fusion he was accomplishing.

On the fact that the *aśoka* grove is ideally conceived as the private garden of Rāvaṇa’s palace there can be no doubt. From the surrounding wall of Rāvaṇa’s palace, Hanumān leaps straight onto the wall (in both cases, *prākāra*-) surrounding the *aśokavanikā*, which, as was customary with the gardens and parks of ancient India, was in fact thus enclosed to protect its precious beauty and the privacy of those enjoying it (V.12.1-2)⁵. At the same time, however, Sītā, who evidently passes the night there, is obviously a prisoner of the palace and its precincts. The crucial definition the text offers for this place is *pramadāvana*- (V.16.23; V.39.14; V.40.16), ‘women’s wood’, clearly indicating that it is meant for women. As we know, the royal palaces had gardens reserved for the women of the royal house,⁶ and Sītā found himself being watched here, as the story goes, by a fearsome rank of *rākṣasīs* in the service of Rāvaṇa. The latter, in turn, immediately upon waking in the morning enters the *aśokavanikā* directly from the royal palace, along pathways running through archways of gold and gems (*vīthīḥ ... maṇikāñcanatorañḥ*, V.16.8), which, moreover, appear to form part of the *aśokavanikā* itself.⁷

However, while clearly being the garden of a royal palace, the *aśokavanikā* is evoked by the text in grandiose terms, as indeed is everything that has to do with Rāvaṇa and his dwelling – in fact, with reference to this, such magnification of the *aśokavanikā* appears practically requisite. Thus, all is viewed as if through a magnifying glass, and every detail that seems typical of the ‘garden’ or ‘park’, and canonical in literary evocation of these places, is multiplied and heightened to the extent of conjuring up a vast and complex landscape.

One of the most striking elements here is the soaring mountain that Hanumān catches sight of (V.12.27-31), displaying a number of peaks, trees and palaces of stone (*śilāgrhair*, 28), from

⁵ For the interpretation of these stanzas, cf. Goldman, Sutherland Goldman 2007: 387, note to V.12.1.

⁶ The term *pramadāvana* calls for some comment. Literally, it actually means ‘*vana* of women’, where *pramadā* essentially refers to a young woman as subject and object of pleasure. In Monier-Williams this term, *pramadavana* (*pramada* = pleasure), *pramadakānana* and *pramadākānana* (*kānana* = ‘grove’, in turn), are all considered synonymous, in the sense of «the royal garden or pleasure-ground attached to the gynaeceum» (cf. *s. v.* *pramada*). The *Amarakośa*, in the passage cited above (II.4 [1–3]), gives the term only in the form *pramadavana*, explaining it as denoting the garden annexed to the harem. Cf. the commentator Govindarāja, who «defines the term *aśokavanikā* as the park attached to the *antahpura*» (Goldman, Sutherland Goldman 2007: 386, note to V.11.60).

⁷ In his examination of the urbanistic and architectural data that can be drawn from the entire poem, Brockington points out that the *torāṇas* «seem generally to be a feature of the interior of the city rather than part of the gateways» (Brockington 1984: 72).

which a river flows down (*nadīm*, 29). This mountain corresponds perfectly, albeit with huge dimensions, to the ‘play-hill’, or ‘pleasure-hill’, a decorative and recreative element frequently encountered in descriptions of such ‘garden’ places (e.g. *krīḍāsailaḥ*, *Meghadūta* 74; cf. below, footnote 21). To conjure up the presence of the river, a complex image is constructed which equates it with a woman who leaves her lover in anger, only to be pacified by her she-friends, and so returns, reconciled with her lover. Now, as well as being defined as a *pramadāvana*, the *aśokavanikā* itself – whose name, let us remember, is of the feminine gender – is equated with a woman. In fact, profoundly unsettled by Hanumān’s presence there, the place is compared with a young woman showing the visible consequences canonical in Sanskrit poetry – ruffled hair, smeared makeup and marks left by teeth and nails – of a passionate amorous encounter (V.12.18-19;⁸ cf. also V.12.13). These images of a feminine nature thus forge a close link between this place and amorous passion.

Now, as has been amply evidenced in the relevant studies, and in particular a seminal article by Daud Ali, in Sanskrit literature the garden or park is a place closely connected with the idea of an amorous encounter, not infrequently clandestine – the secluded place offering privacy – and in any case with desire and passion. This is particularly so with the luxuriance of spring, which, moreover, the sources show to be associated with celebrations in honour of Kāma, the god of love (cf. Ali 2003: 235-239 in particular). A further point worth stressing is that the *aśoka* trees themselves, which blossom in the spring, were to find their way into a long and extremely rich literary current of associations with the erotic sphere,⁹ although it is hard to tell with any certainty just how well-established these associations had become at the time of the composition of these passages of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, or on the other hand how much the latter may have contributed to them. In any case, it is in springtime when the scene of the *aśokavanikā* takes place (cf. V.12.2, 12) – the season, the text tells us, when people are stirred by pleasure (*prahr̥ṣṭamanuje kāle*, V.12.8). And it is in the throes of his irrepressible passion that Rāvaṇa, newly awakened and still in his untidy nightwear, makes a dash at dawn to the *aśokavanikā* to regale Sītā, under the hidden eyes of Hanumān, first with his allurements and then, on being rejected by her, with his terrible threats (V.16 ff.). In his amorous fury he is explicitly compared with Kandarpa, i.e. Kāma (cf. V.16.19). Rāvaṇa’s encounter with Sītā in the *aśokavanikā* is effectively one of demoniacal wooing – a dark, dramatic skirmish of passion – Rāvaṇa’s uncontrollable sensual longing contrasting with Sītā’s unfaltering devotion to her distant spouse. The poet depicts a garden where passion is a terrible threat and legitimate love distant and uncertain, but the garden is in any case charged with eroticism.

⁸ In Biarreau, Porcher (1999: 1600, Chapitre XIV, note 3), the note to the passage argues that the comparison plays on the devastated image of the *aśokavanikā* and the disconsolate air of Sītā: «La femme a l’éclat terni, défaits de ses ornements et lacérée, évoque l’image de la veuve, de la femme privée de son mari». However, it is evident that the passage actually uses the classical language evoking the results of erotic passion: in stanza 18 of the Critical Edition, *vidhūtakeśī yuvatīr yathā mṛditavarṇikā / niṣpūtaśubhadantoṣṭhī nakhair dantais ca vikṣatā //* ‘resembled a young woman, her hair dishevelled, her makeup smeared, her lovely teeth and lips bruised with kisses [lit. emptied by drinking], and her body wounded by nails and teeth’ (trans. Goldman, Sutherland Goldman 2007: 150, my square brackets).

⁹ The poetic and, indeed, iconographic repertory is very extensive and, at least in part, very well known. Notable, too, is the fact that according to the Āyurveda this plant provides remedies for problems of the uterus. For an overview of the poetic, iconographic and medicinal implications of the *aśoka*, cf. Sītā Rām 1914, interesting although limited; Biswas, Debnath 1972; Syed 1990: 77-115.

The idyllic beauty of the *aśokavanikā*, extolled at length in the passage, obviously serves to create a contrast with Sītā's despair and the dramatic dialogue with Rāvaṇa. This contrast is, of course, made explicit with the play on words based on the name of the trees of *aśoka*, which means 'sorrow-less'. Indeed, the play on words is there right from the first mention of the term *aśokavanikā*, in relation to the 'sorrow' which Hanumān intends to inflict on the *rākṣasas* (V.11.55-56), and taken up in various contexts (*aśokaiḥ śokanāśanaiḥ*, V.13.7), above all in direct relation with the anguish experienced by Sītā.¹⁰ Moreover, it is echoed with the frequent occurrence of the word *śoka*, 'sorrow', in the *sarga* in question. However, we find here not only *aśoka* trees 'in thousands' (*sahasraśaḥ*), of various colours – *śātakumbhanibhāḥ*, 'like gold', *agniśikhopamāḥ*, 'like tongues of fire', *nīlāñjananibhāḥ*, 'like dark collyrium' (V.13.10)¹¹ – but also many trees and plants of other species. The description of the *aśokavanikā* in V.12-13 specifically names at least another dozen, and in general the *aśoka* trees are given no particular prominence unless serving to introduce a play on words with the term *śoka*, 'sorrow', and of course being evoked by the name of the place itself (we will be returning to this point).¹² Actually, Sītā's favourite is a *śimśapā* tree, in the foliage of which Hanumān hides to survey the events (e.g. V.12.40; V.22.9; 12-13; V.40.19). Another remarkable feature of this passage is that, in various contexts, these tree names are actually presented in lists (cf. in particular V.12.3; V.13.8-9). As I have pointed out elsewhere, these lists constitute an 'epic' stylistic feature in the description of the forest. As such, we encounter them in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, as well as in some highly significant passages of the *Vessantara Jātaka* (Pieruccini 2002: 96-97; 2006: 106). In turn, these lists clearly contribute to extending the dimensions of the landscape: the *aśokavanikā* is, in its way, a veritable forest.¹³

And yet this forest is by no means the work of nature; features of various kinds show it clearly to be a human product, thus associating it with the characteristic conception of the literary garden or park of ancient India, and more specifically of *kāvya* literature, where, as the ample bibliography on the subject demonstrates, and as I have summarised elsewhere, «[t]here are artificial hills, caves, bowers, pavilions, seats, swings and so forth, offering secluded spots to rest and sport» (Pieruccini 2014: 13). In the first place, large-scale human intervention is to be seen in the *aśokavanikā* in the form of buildings and structures. We have already seen the surrounding wall,

¹⁰ E.g. *aśokavanikāmadhye śokasāgaram āplutām*, 'drowning in a sea of sorrow there in the midst of the *aśoka* grove' (V.15.24, trans. Goldman, Sutherland Goldman 2007: 161); cf. V.14.31; V.23.6-7; V.32.11; also V.12.46, and V.57.6-7. In V.23.6 Sītā steadies herself holding on to an *aśoka* branch, which she lets go of in V.32.11, and in both cases the poet exploits the play on words.

¹¹ The *aśoka* are famed for the red-orange blossom. Apparently, here the reference to gold (see below) is not to the precious metal, for there appear to exist varieties of the tree, or closely related trees, bearing yellow or whitish blossoms. Cf. in this regard the celebrated *aśoka* tree invited to blossoming in the *Mālavikāgnimitra*, regularly described as 'golden' (Prkr. *tavañīa-*, Skt. *tapanīya-*, e.g. 3.2), and the relevant note by Balogh, Somogyi 2009: 254-255. Reference to the dark colour here, however, is not so easy to explain, unless the three colours refer to the different phases of blossoming – early, full and withering (Syed 1990: 82).

¹² Besides the mention in V.13.10, they feature as elements of the vegetation unconnected with 'sorrow' in V.12.3 and V.13.5. In stanza V.13.7, alongside the play on words with 'sorrow' (see above), a specific image of luxuriance is developed around the blossoms of these trees.

¹³ We find a similar device in V.2.9-13 in the description of the parks of Lañkā: here everything is of extraordinary dimensions and characteristics. These lists of trees, according to Brockington, are **are typical of Stage 2 of composition** (Brockington 1984: 103; see above, footnote 2); as elsewhere in the poem, he points out, Lañkā's *aśokavanikā* brings together «trees of scarcely compatible habitat» (*ibid.*: 104). In the «much more restricted flora» which Brockington attributes to Stage 3, the list of trees in the description of Ayodhyā's *aśokavanikā* (see below) represents an isolated feature (*ibid.*: 107).

the jewelled archways and the ‘palaces of stone’ on the mountain. We also find various other extensive palaces (*prāsādaiḥ*) there, said to have been built by Viśvakarman himself, the architect of the gods (V.12.34; cf. V.13.3, *armyaprāsādasambādhām*). Moreover, Sītā herself is pictured in the vicinity of a soaring, gleaming palace (*caityaprāsādam*, V.13.15),¹⁴ standing in the middle of a thousand pillars and with stairways made of coral and railings of burnished gold (V.13.15-17). Furthermore, the grove is said to have numerous underground rooms (*bahubhūmigṛhāyutām*, V.13.4), which seem to correspond to the artificial underground grottoes (*guha*) so well documented in the literature and inscriptions regarding pleasure gardens and parks (cf. Ali 2003: 232). Later on, when Hanumān rages in the *aśokavanikā*, destroying it, the text succinctly provides us with further details (V.39.15-16, trans. Goldman, Sutherland Goldman 2007: 227, my square brackets):

Once its trees had been smashed, its ponds ruined, and the crests of its hills ground to dust, that grove looked most unpleasant.

Its vine-covered pavilions and its picture galleries [*citragṛhaiś*] wrecked, its great serpents, wild animals, and deer scattered, and its grottoes [*śilāgṛhair*] and cottages torn down, that extensive grove was utterly ruined.¹⁵

And while the *aśokavanikā* is repeatedly said to be teeming with birds, often in generic terms (but cf. e.g. V.12.24), as well as other animals, we also come to the mention of fascinating *īhāmṛgas* (V.16.8), which might be interpreted as indicating the presence of sculptures or reliefs depicting animals.¹⁶ As for the trees, parasols, benches and raised platforms of gold (*pādapās ... sacchatrāḥ savitardīkāḥ sarve sauvarṇavedikāḥ*,¹⁷ V.12.35) are conveniently placed by them, and they are decorated with hundreds of tinkling little bells (*kinḅiṅī-*, V.12.39). There are also thickets defined as ‘artificial’ (*kānanaiḥ kṛtrimaiś*, V.12.34), and an artificial pool (*kṛtrimām dīrghikām*) is described with staircases of precious stones and pearls instead of sand (V.12.33).

A particularly scintillating set of stanzas include a description of more pools of the sort (V.12.21-23, trans. Goldman, Sutherland Goldman 2007: 150):

As he roamed about, the monkey saw charming grounds paved with gemstones, silver, and gold.

Here and there were pools of various shapes filled with the purest water with costly, jewel-inlaid stairways leading down to them.

¹⁴ On interpretation of the term, cf. Goldman, Sutherland Goldman 2007: 391, note to V.13.15.

¹⁵ *tad vanaṃ mathitair vṛkṣair bhinnaiś ca salilāśayaiḥ / cūrṇitaiḥ parvatāgraiś ca babhūvāpriyadarśanam // 15 // latāgṛhaiś citragṛhaiś ca nāsitair mahoragair vyālamṛgaiś ca nirdhutaiḥ / śilāgṛhair unmathitaiś tathā gṛhaiḥ pranaṣṭarūpaṃ tad abhūn mahad vanaṃ // 16 //*. Despite Brockington’s observation to the contrary (1984: 73), the reference contained here in 16 is not the only one in the poem concerning ‘houses of stone’ (‘grottoes’ in Goldman, Sutherland Goldman’s translation), because the same term, *śilāgṛha-*, also appears in V.12.28, in the description of the mountain of *aśokavanikā* (see above; ‘stone buildings’ in Goldman, Sutherland Goldman’s translation).

¹⁶ Cf. V.6.12-13, for animals made of precious materials in the palace of Rāvaṇa, and Goldman, Sutherland Goldman 2007: 401, note to V.16.6-9.

¹⁷ We follow the example of Goldman, Sutherland Goldman 2007 in translating the term *vedika-*; for the interpretation, cf. *ibid.*: 389, note to V.12.35 and the references provided.

They had pearl and coral in place of sand, their bottoms were inlaid with crystal, and they were adorned with beautiful golden trees set along their banks.¹⁸

A significant feature here are the ‘golden trees’. We come across trees defined as ‘golden’, and occasionally also ‘silver’, at various points in the passage (V.12.5; V.12.37-39), and the definition also includes the *śimśapā* tree (V.12.36); golden lotuses and water lilies (*kāñcanotpalapadmābhir*, V.13.4) appear in the pools, and later we find mention of the presence, in the *aśokavanikā* itself, of a golden grove of banana trees (*kāñcanam kadalīvanam*, V.56.50). How are we to interpret these definitions? As elements occurring naturally generated by bountiful nature, or rather as works of man which, like all the other clearly artificial elements that have been mentioned, contribute in turn to rendering the *aśokavanikā*, in accordance with the definition in the text itself, ‘everywhere decorated’ (*sarvataḥ samalaṃkṛtām*, V.13.2)? Alongside the continual insistence on the abundance of fruit and flowers, the text also evokes trees that blossom in all the seasons (V.13.5, *sarvartukusuma-*; 13); although the stanzas in question are not indisputably clear on this point, reference would appear to be to trees each of which are constantly in blossom, and possibly at the same time bearing fruit. Thus we have a description of a place that, although explicitly evoked in the luxuriance of spring, is at least in part untouched by the seasonal rhythm of nature, given the presence of both incorruptible precious materials and perennial blossoming. Now, in the light of documentation and considerations that I have already presented elsewhere, this ‘nature’ made up of precious stones and metals, like the ceaseless blossoming and bearing fruit, representations of eternal, immutable beauty and well-being, are prominent features in descriptions of places to some extent magical and unworldly in fundamental phases of Sanskrit literature. Images of this type feature here and there in the *Mahābhārata*, and play a crucial part in the description of Indra’s heaven in the *Saundarananda* by Aśvaghōṣa, culminating in the depiction, in terms of extraordinary magnificence, of the paradises of Mahāyāna Buddhism, as in the *Saddharmapundarikasūtra* and the two versions of the *Sukhāvativyūhasūtra* (cf. Pieruccini 2014: 18-19, 21-25; 2015).¹⁹ Lotuses of precious substances and golden banana trees are among the most recurrent plants transformed into jewels.

It seems reasonable to think that, whatever may have been the original context of this glorification of ‘nature’, as it were, whether in the reality of the earthly garden as a place enhanced by human intervention, or in fantasies involving higher, magical worlds, these two processes – concrete and fantastic – fuelled one another reciprocally. Imagining an otherworldly garden and seeking to recreate it on earth or, on the other hand, creating a ‘paradisiacal’ place on earth and projecting the image of it into the otherworldly can clearly come into a reciprocal relationship. A possible evidence of such concrete practices is to be seen, many centuries later, in the *Manasollāsa*, composed at the court of Someśvara, sovereign of the Western Chalukyas, who reigned between 1126 and 1138, authorship of the work being traditionally attributed to the sovereign himself. As is

¹⁸ *sa tatra mañibhūmīs ca rājatīs ca manoramāḥ / tathā kāñcanabhūmīs ca vicaran dadṛṣe kapiḥ // 21 // vāpīs ca vividhākārāḥ pūrṇāḥ paramavāriṇā / mahārhair mañisopānair upapannās tatas tataḥ // 22 // muktāpravālasikatāsphāṭikāntarakuṭṭimāḥ / kāñcanais tarubhīs citrais tīrajair upaśobhitāḥ // 23 //*

¹⁹ It is worth mentioning that this type of imagery is not exclusive solely to Indian antiquity. A couple of examples: in the *Epic of Gilgameš*, the Garden of the Gods visited by the hero seeking immortality has plants and fruits made of precious stones (Foster 2001: 70-71); in the garden, or orchard (ὄρχατος, κήπος) of Alcinoüs in the Island of the Phaeacians (*Odyssey*, VII.112-132) the trees and plants flourish and bear fruit ceaselessly throughout the year.

eloquently demonstrated by the analysis conducted by Ali (2012), in the Fifth Section of this work directions are supplied as to how the royal gardens (here called *vana* and *upavana*)²⁰ are specifically to be conceived, and these directions are strongly reminiscent of certain details in this long story of celestial gardens. To confine our attention here to some aspects that find echo as early as Lañkā's *aśokavanikā*, according to Ali's reading of the relevant chapter of the *Manasollāsa* (V.1) not only is the forcing of trees in order to obtain blossoms and fruit outside the natural season recommended, but artificial embellishments are prescribed, including precisely trees and lotuses made of precious substances, as well as pools whose banks are of golden mud, pearls and jewels (cf. Ali 2012: 44-45).²¹

As is the rule in Sanskrit literature when it comes to glorifying an earthly garden, Lañkā's *aśokavanikā* is compared to Nandana, the paradisiacal garden of Indra, as well as Caitraratha, the garden of Kubera (V.13.3; V.13.11; V.39.9). Furthermore, the palace of Rāvaṇa, too, suggests a divine place to Hanumān: cf. in particular V.7.27, where he tells himself it must be heaven (*svargo 'yam*), the world of the gods (*devaloko 'yam*), or the city of Indra (*indrasyeyam purī*).

The *aśokavanikā* of Ayodhyā, and the reasons for the name

We come to this second *aśokavanikā*, as previously mentioned, at the point in the poem preceding Sītā's exile in the hermitage of Vālmīki. This is the setting in the brief *sarga* VII.41 of an equally brief period of happiness enjoyed by the royal couple after their many adventures, and after Sītā has already demonstrated her innocence with the ordeal by fire. According to the text, the two pass their time here in a cool season (*śīśirah*, 17),²² banqueting on meats (*māṃsāni*, 14), fruits and honey wine (*madhumaireyam*, 13), entertained by splendid young girls expert in singing and dancing (15).²³ Again, the description of this *aśokavanikā* brings together a great many canonical elements of parks and gardens, including an abundance of flowers, fruits, birds and bees, as well as pools full of lotuses and water lilies, with staircases of jewels and crystal for the bed of the pool (cf. 7-8). We find walls of various types, and stone slabs (*prākārair vividhākāraiḥ, śilātalaiḥ*, 8), seats (*āsana-*, 11, 12; cf. V.13.4), 'houses' and pavilions of climbing plants (*bahvāsanagrhopetām*

²⁰ Note that according to the *Amarakośa*, in the passage cited above (II.4 [1-3]), *upavana* ('sub-*vana*') means 'artificial *vana*' (*kṛtrimam vanam*).

²¹ Notable, too, is the central importance taken on by the 'pleasure hill' (here *krīḍāparvata*) in the treatment of the *Manasollāsa*, to the extent that we seem practically to find a distant echo of the majestic mountain of Lañkā's *aśokavanikā*. Cf. Ali 2012: 44, 46, and 49-50 for observations on the approach which, by virtue of the practices of forcing which the treatise recommends, apparently aims at freeing the royal garden from the natural flow of time so that the loveliest of seasons, spring, can reign there uninterrupted. An allusion to the work of the gardener as 'magical' master of eternal blossoming emerges in all evidence in the Gorresio's *Rāmāyaṇa*, in the passage on the *aśokavanikā* of Ayodhyā: *akālapuṣpās taravaḥ śilpibhiḥ parikalpitāḥ / te puṣpitā bahuvīdhā babhur māyākṛtā iva //* 'there were trees blossoming out of season, produced by experts, with flowers of many kinds, which seemed to be crafted by magic' (Gorresio's edition, VII.45.3). Cf. the footnotes to VII.41.8 of the Critical Edition.

²² Unless otherwise indicated, all the references in this section are to the stanzas of *Rāmāyaṇa* VII.41 of the Critical Edition.

²³ In the complementarity of the two passages (see the remarks below), these young women seem to some extent to stand in for the horrid *rākṣasīs* of Lañkā's *aśokavanikā*. It is worth noting that the text translated in Biardeu, Porcher 1999: 1330 brings more elements into play, mentioning among the devices of this entertainment also celestial beings, namely *apsarases*, *uragas* and *kinnarīs*, while *apsarases* appear in Gorresio's edition, VII.45.23. Cf. the notes to VII.41.15 in the Critical Edition.

latāgrhasamāvṛtām, 11), and this place, too, is compared to Nandana and Caitraratha (10). On the whole, however, it appears far less hyperbolically magnificent than Lañkā's *śokavanikā*, and decidedly more earthly; for example, there are no trees or flowers made of precious substances. Nevertheless, here, too, we find a lengthy 'epic' list of the trees adorning the grove (2-3), but what is indeed surprising is that, although the place is termed *śokavanikā*, the passage makes not the slightest mention of *śoka* trees.²⁴

One can hardly get away from the impression that this second *śokavanikā*, which is moreover far less important in the economy of the poem, was deliberately introduced by the poet in counterpoint to the one associated with Sītā's imprisonment, and as if reversing its significance. If Lañkā's *śokavanikā* was the place of dark and dangerous passion, this is a veritable garden of love, or at least conjugal harmony, although the happiness it brings is doomed to be very short-lived. Despite the name, there are no *śoka* trees here,²⁵ but it is also true that the dazzling description of Lañkā's *śokavanikā* dwelt, as we have seen, relatively little on these trees as such, apart from the verbal play on the term 'sorrow', and, possibly, the already established associations of these trees with amorous passion. Thus the poet shows no great interest in the magnificent blossoming of the *śokas*; his attention focuses above all on the feelings that this word, *śoka*, at the same time evokes, glorifies and denies. Indeed, it may well be that he took this play on double senses yet further: **possibly**, the *śokavanikā* of Ayodhyā was never really meant to be a garden dedicated to these trees, so much as, for a brief, fleeting period, precisely a garden 'without sorrow'.

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²⁴ Compare stanzas V.13.10 and VII.41.6, largely identical, although in the former, quoted above, the various different colours of the *śokas* in Lañkā's *śokavanikā* are mentioned, while in the latter these characteristics are attributed to generic 'trees' (*pādapāḥ*). The *śoka* trees do not appear to be named also in the corresponding *sarga* (VII.42) of Biarreau, Porcher (1999: 1329-1331). It is, on the other hand, worth noting that Gorresio's text mentions them twice (VII.45.2, 7), though almost casually (albeit in the first place in 2) together with other trees, perhaps precisely for the sake of greater consistency. For some textual variants of these passages, more or less coinciding with Gorresio's, where the *śokas* are cursorily mentioned along with other trees, cf. the footnotes to VII.41.2 and 8 of the Critical Edition.

²⁵ At least considering the text of the Critical Edition and the Southern Recension of Biarreau, Porcher 1999, see above, footnote 24.

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