

The Function of Weapons in the Kṛṣṇa-Cycle¹

Abstract

When Robert P. Goldman argued that the legendary Kṛṣṇa may have been rooted in two unrelated figures, he drew attention to an often-overlooked difference between Kṛṣṇa's work as the cowherd of Mathurā and as the prince of Dvārakā. According to this, the Kṛṣṇa of Mathurā was involved in bare-handed combat (*niyuddha*), unlike the Kṛṣṇa of Dvārakā, who was celebrated as a discus-wielding warrior.

In this article I am keen on investigating how the available sources interpret Kṛṣṇa's involvement in these two types of combat. When the *Bhagavadgītā* (2.31–32) introduces warfare as the most convenient way for the warriors to attain heaven, it immediately attributes some divine power to the weapons as the physical vehicles that transport the fallen heroes to the celestial world. In the context of the unarmed combat, on the other hand, the *Harivaṃśa* (76.40) affirms that the absence of weapons in combat causes an unfruitful death and leads the fallen one to hell. These approaches unfold two opposing roles of Kṛṣṇa's earthly career, which are punishment and salvation. My aim is to show how the appearance of weapons in different sources (*Mahābhārata*, *Harivaṃśa*, *Brahma-*, *Viṣṇu-* and *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*) transforms the divine hero from punisher to saviour.

Introduction

It is a commonly observed phenomenon that heroic death has a significant value in different cultures. According to Plutarch's account, Spartan mothers bade farewell to their sons on their way to the battlefield with the words: Come back with your shield – or on it (*Moralia* Vol. 3. p. 465). In the European context, it is also a historical commonplace that Pope Urban II promised religious salvation to those who would die in the Crusades (Peters 1998: 32).

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The question of the hero's death was also a focus of interest in ancient India. Heinrich von Stietencron collected a number of myths designed to legitimise war, and on the basis of these he was interested in reconstructing how the judgement of the heroic death had changed over time (Stietencron 2023: 142). In this process, Stietencron attributed a key role to the *Bhagavadgītā*, Kṛṣṇa's famous speech, in which he proved the legitimacy of the warrior's struggle, even if he had to kill his own relatives (Stietencron 2023: 157). Among his arguments, Kṛṣṇa referred to the *kṣatriya dharma*, the laws of the warriors. According to this, going to war and possibly dying a hero's death was an essential part of the duty of the *kṣatriyas* (Malinar 2007: 67). Furthermore, the *Bhagavadgītā* (2.32, *Mahābhārata* 6.24.32) directly identifies the epic war on Kurukṣetra with the gate of heaven being opened to fallen heroes:

yadrecchayā copapannaṃ svargadvāram apāvṛtam|
sukhinaḥ kṣatriyāḥ Pārtha labhante yuddham īdrśam||
(Bhagavadgītā 2.32, Mahābhārata 6.24.32)

O Pṛthā's son, the fortunate warriors reach this accidental war as the opened door of heaven.

It also declares that there is no better way for warriors to reach heaven than through war:

dharmyād dhi yuddhāc chreyo 'nyat kṣatriyasya na vidyate||
(Bhagavadgītā 2.31.cd, Mahābhārata 6.24.31.cd)

There is nothing better for warriors than legitimate war.

To get a fuller picture of the perception of the hero's death, it seems useful to supplement these thoughts with the *Harivaṃśa*'s treatment of the disgraceful death in connection with the fall of Kāṃsa, the evil king of Mathurā:

asamgrāme hataḥ Kāṃsaḥ sa bāñair aparikṣataḥ|
kañthagrahān nirastāsur vīramārgān nirākṛtaḥ||
(Harivaṃśa 76.40)

Kāṃsa was killed without a fight. He was not wounded by arrows. He died of strangulation and was excluded from the course of the heroes.

Since Nīlakaṇṭha, the 17th-century commentator on both the *Mahābhārata* and the *Harivaṃśa* (Austin 2009: 608), claims that the course of the heroes consists of heaven and glory (*svargaḥ kīrtiś ca vīramārgaḥ*, Nīlakaṇṭha comm. ad *Harivaṃśa Vulg.* 76.40, p. 229), the quoted verse may give a general message about the afterlife of the dead *kṣatriyas*. According to this, those warriors who are killed with their bare hands in unarmed combat are excluded from heaven.

Elsewhere, in the description of the wrestling match organised by Kāṁsa to kill Kṛṣṇa, the *Harivaṁśa*, moreover, takes the opportunity to compare the armed combat with unarmed wrestling:

raṇe vijayamānasya kīrtir bhavati śāśvatī|
hatasyāpi raṇe śastrair nākapṛṣṭhaṁ vidhīyate||
raṇe hy ubhayataḥ siddhir hatasyāpi ghnato 'pi vā|
sā hi prāṇāntikā yātrā mahadbhiḥ sādhu pūjitā||
ayaṁ tu mārgo balataḥ kriyātaś ca viniḥṣṛtaḥ|
mṛtasya raṅge kaḥ svargo jayato vā kuto ratiḥ||
(*Harivaṁśa* 75.25–27)

The one, who is victorious in battle, achieves eternal glory, while the one, who is killed there by a weapon, deserves heaven. Both of them, the one, who kills, and the one, who is killed, can succeed in the war. [This is the reason why] the great men rightly revere this destructive way. Our way, [on the other hand], is born purely of power and labour. [So] where is the heaven for the one, who falls in the wrestling field, and what is the joy of the one who triumphs there.

These verses may shed some light on the reason why the referees of the contest warned the contestants to stop the fight if there were any injuries:

nirghāṇānantaraṁ kiṁcin na kartavyaṁ vijānatā||
(*Harivaṁśa* 75.14.cd)

When [a wrestler] notices an injury, he should not perform any more actions.

On the basis of the passages quoted from the *Harivaṁśa*, the weapons, or more precisely the fatal wounds inflicted by weapons, turn out to be the passport that entitles the deceased heroes to enter heaven through the battle-formed gate. For the *kṣatriyas*, therefore, weapons are not only articles of personal use, but also sacred devices. It is not surprising, therefore, that the principal heroes of the *Mahābhārata*, both the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas are trained from childhood to acquire skill in the use of weapons. The only conspicuous exception is the career of Kṛṣṇa.

Although Kṛṣṇa is known as a *kṣatriya*, a prince of Dvārakā in the *Mahābhārata*, in his youth he led the life of a cowherd in the neighbourhood of Mathurā, as first reported by the *Harivaṁśa*. The fact that Kṛṣṇa appears in Indian mythology as both a warrior and a cowherd has attracted the interest of many scholars. Since the *Mahābhārata* seems to be largely unaware of Kṛṣṇa's youthful exploits,² the scholars

2 Although the reconstructed of the critical edition of the *Mahābhārata* does not actually give details of Kṛṣṇa's early years, there are some manuscripts that do report them (*Mahābhārata* 2.35.29.d*21.1–1612).

have tried to explain the difference between Kṛṣṇa's two periods of life on the basis of the connection between the *Mahābhārata* and the *Harivaṃśa*.

Some of them, such as Biardeau (1978: 204–220), were convinced that the *Harivaṃśa* served merely as a genuine supplement and deliberately included those legends which for some reason had been omitted from the *Mahābhārata*. In contrast to this view, others, such as Tadapatrikar (1929: 324) and Hardy (1983: 70), have proposed that Kṛṣṇa, as he is now known, is a composite of two geographically separate, originally unrelated figures. This latter hypothesis has been supported by Robert P. Goldman, who has pointed out that Kṛṣṇa became skilled among the cowherds in *niyuddha*, unarmed combat rather than in the use of weapons, in which he became proficient only after the fall of Kaṃsa (Goldman 1986: 479–480).

In this article, I would like to elaborate on Goldman's observation and examine how the available sources interpret Kṛṣṇa's involvement in two types of combat, with particular reference to the teaching on weapons presented earlier. First, I will focus on the absence of weapons and examine the fall of Kaṃsa mentioned above. Then I will examine Kṛṣṇa's armament and transformation from cowherd to warrior.

Niyuddha – Kṛṣṇa, the cowherd

In Kṛṣṇa's earthly career, the killing of Kaṃsa marks a turning point. The wicked king of Mathurā, was the last, and possibly the only, human being other than the wrestlers to be killed by Kṛṣṇa with his bare hands. The report of the *Harivaṃśa* about that Kṛṣṇa strangled Kaṃsa may not have been welcome, since as a *kṣatriya* the evil king would have deserved a more heroic death. Moreover, strangulation is regarded as an extremely cruel method of murder, which, according to the later *Garuḍa-purāṇa* (2.40.5–6), immediately takes the victim to hell.

Apparently, even the compilers of the *Harivaṃśa* may have taken care to soften this cruelty when they added that Kṛṣṇa himself regretted his deed:

sa <Ugrasenaḥ> dadarśa gr̥he Kṛṣṇaṃ Yādavair abhisamvṛtam|
paścānutāpād dhyāyantaṃ Kaṃsasya nidhanāvilam||
Kaṃsanārīpralāpāṃś ca śrutvā sukaruṇān bahūn|
vīgarhamāṇam ātmānaṃ tasmīn Yādavasamsadi||
aho mayātibālyena nararoṣānuvartinā|
vaidhavyaṃ strīśahasrāṇāṃ Kaṃsasyāsya kṛte kṛtam||
(Harivaṃśa 78.2-4)

Ugrasena saw Kṛṣṇa among the Yādavas in his house. He was confused about Kaṁsa's death and suffered from remorse. Hearing the many lamentations of Kaṁsa's wives, [Kṛṣṇa] reproached himself in the assembly of the Yādavas: Ah! Because of my infancy, I tried to imitate the anger of men, and so, thanks to Kaṁsa, I made a thousand women widows.

On the other hand, Kṛṣṇa's enemies never forgot to remind him of his heartless behaviour towards Kaṁsa. In the *Mahābhārata*, for example, Śiśupāla drew attention to the fact that Kṛṣṇa had caused the death of his own bread and butter:

yasya cānena dharmajña bhuktam annaṁ balīyasaḥ|
sa cānena hataḥ Kaṁsa ity etan na mahādbhutam|| (Mahābhārata 2.38.11)

O knower of the dharma, he killed the mighty Kaṁsa, whose food he ate. This is no great miracle.

In addition to the epic, the condemnation of Kṛṣṇa from Duryodhana's mouth is also in the *Dūtavākya*, one of the Trivandrum-plays:

DURYODHANA:
syālaṁ tava gurora bhūpaṁ Kaṁsaṁ prati na te dayā|
katham asmākam evaṁ syāt teṣu nityāpakāriṣu||
VĀSUDEVA:
alaṁ tan maddoṣato jñātum|
kṛtvā putravīyogārtāṁ bahuśo jananiṁ mama|
vṛddhaṁ svapitaraṁ baddhvā hato 'yaṁ mṛtyunā svayam||
DURYODHANA:
sarvathā vañcitas tvayā Kaṁsaḥ|
(Dūtavākya 26–27, p. 38)

DURYODHANA:

You showed no mercy even to your father's brother-in-law, Kaṁsa. How can you have mercy on us when we always do evil to you?

VĀSUDEVA:

Enough of that to be considered my fault!

After making my mother suffer for the loss of his sons several times and chaining his old father, he was killed by Death himself.

DURYODHANA:

In any case, you cheated Kaṁsa.

Although Kṛṣṇa here denied that Kaṁsa's death was his fault, he seems to have accepted that by deceiving his enemy he had acted improperly towards him. These recriminations suggest that the compilers of the *Harivaṁśa* may have needed to explain Kṛṣṇa's seemingly merciless behaviour. For this, the divine plan behind Kṛṣṇa's earthly activities provides a capable answer.

In fact, the theological framework that reveals the reason for Viṣṇu's descent in the form of Kṛṣṇa is given by both the *Ādiparvan* of the *Mahābhārata* (1.58.1–59.6) and the *Harivaṃśa* (40.36–45.49). These sources also maintain that the divine intervention was implied by the suffering of the earth goddess from her extremely heavy burden caused by the *kṣatriyas*, but they interpret this in different ways.

According to the *Ādiparvan*, demons were reborn on earth and became the leaders of human kings. Since the goddess of the earth was thus under the rule of cruel demonic beings, she inevitably suffered. Kṛṣṇa, therefore, appears here as a new Bhārgava Rāma to destroy the evil *kṣatriyas*.

In contrast to the first book of the *Mahābhārata*, the *Harivaṃśa* separates the multitude of the *kṣatriyas* from the earthly manifestations of the formerly defeated demons, and it uniquely links two, different purposes to Kṛṣṇa's appearance on earth (Brodbeck 2021: 79). On the one hand, as a genuine supplement of the *Mahābhārata*, the *Harivaṃśa* follows the plot of the great epic and shares the view that Kṛṣṇa had to carry out the destruction of the warriors, from whose overgrowth the earth goddess suffered. In this case, however, the crucial difference is that the *kṣatriyas* are described as virtuous, *dharma*-followers, and it was their great number, and not their wickedness, that caused the earth goddess pain, as Brahmā's speech to the assembly of gods attests:

mānavānām ca patayaḥ pārthivās ca parasparam|
ṣaḍbhāgam upayūñjānā na bhedaṃ kurvate mithaḥ||
te prajānām śubhakarāḥ karadair avigarhitāḥ|
akarair viprayuktārthāḥ kośam āpūrayan sadā||
sphītāñ janapadān svān svān pālayantaḥ kṣamāparāḥ|
atīkṣnadaṇḍās caturo varṇāñ jugupur añjasā||
nodvejanīyā bhūtānām sacivaiḥ sādhu pūjitāḥ|
caturaṅgalair yuktāḥ ṣaḍguṇān upayūñjate||
dhanurvedaparāḥ sarve sarve vedeṣu niṣṭhitāḥ|
yajanti ca yathākālaṃ yajñair vipuladakṣinaiḥ||
vedān adhītya dīkṣābhīr maharṣīn brahmacaryayā|
śrāddhaiś ca medhyaiḥ śataśas tarpayanti pitāmahān||
naiṣām aviditaṃ kiñcit trividhaṃ bhūvi vidyate|
vaidikaṃ laukikaṃ caiva dharmasāstroktam eva ca||
te parāvaradr̥ṣṭārthā maharṣisamatejasāḥ|
bhūyaḥ kṛtayugaṃ kartum utsahante narādhipāḥ||
teṣāṃ eva prabhāvena śivaṃ varṣati Vāsavaḥ|
yathārthaṃ ca vavur vātā virajaskā diśo daśa||
nirutpātā ca vasudhā supracārās ca vai grahāḥ|

candramās ca sanakṣatraḥ saumyaṃ carati yogataḥ||
anulomakaraḥ sūryo ayane dve cacāra ha|
havyaiś ca vividhais tṛptaḥ śubhagandho hutāśanaḥ||
evaṃ samyakpravṛtṣu nivṛtṣv aparādhataḥ|
tarpayatsu mahīm kṛtsnām nṛṇām kālabhayaṃ kutaḥ||
teṣām jvalitakīrtinām anyonyam anuvartinām|
rājñām balair balavatām pīḍyate vasudhātalam||
seyaṃ bhārapariśrāntā pīḍyamānā narādhipaiḥ|
pṛthivī samanuprāptā naur ivāsann aviḥlavā||
yugāntasadrśaṃ rūpaṃ śailoccalitabandhanam|
jalotpīḍākulā svedaṃ darśayantī muhur muhuḥ||
kṣatriyāṇām vapurbhiś ca tejasā ca balena ca|
nṛṇām ca rāṣṭrair vistūrṇaiḥ śrāmyatīva vasuṃdharā||
(Harivaṃśa 41.5–20)

The lords of the men and the earth collect their taxes and do not fight each other. They bring prosperity to the creatures. They are never accused by their tributaries. Though their wealth is diminished by [the support] of the needy, their treasuries are always full. The very patient kings are eager to protect their own prosperous lands. Their punishments are not cruel. They truly guard the four *varṇas*. Living beings have nothing to fear from them. They are duly honoured by their ministers. They have armies of four bodies, and they practise the six acts [of a king in war]. They are devoted to the science of archery, and are well versed in all of the Vedas. They perform the sacrifices in due time, and [their priests] are handsomely rewarded. Having dedicated themselves to the Vedas with consecration rites and to the great sages with chastity, they satisfy their ancestors with hundreds of pure *śrāddha* ceremonies. There is nothing on earth of the threefold, religious, secular and legal [knowledge] of which they would not be aware. They have a clear purpose for both their ancestors and their descendants. Their glory is equal to that of the great sages. They are able to restore the Kṛta yuga. Because of their power, Indra benevolently sheds rain, the winds blow appropriately and all ten directions are free of dust. There is no public calamity on the earth. The planets move in a right course. The moon moves auspiciously together with the *nakṣatras*. The rays of the sun are in order as it takes its two paths. The fire smells pleasantly, and it is satisfied by the various offerings. Why should the people fear death, when [kings] who act righteously and turn away from sin satisfy the whole earth? While these mighty kings of glorious fame pursue one another, the earth suffers under their armies. The earth is worn out by her burden and is under the torment of the kings. She is here and looks like a ship that has not yet sunk. Her shape resembles the end of the world. The mountains are out of place. As water gushes out of her, she seems to sweat. The earth was almost exhausted by the bodies, glory and power of the *kṣatriyas* and the great kingdoms of men.

These words incidentally harmonise well with the *Bhagavadgītā*'s identification of the battle on Kurukṣetra with the door of the heaven being opened for the *kṣatriyas* (*Bhagavadgītā* 2.32, *Mahābhārata* 6.24.32), and introduce Kṛṣṇa as a saviour rather than as a punisher.

After establishing the necessity of the Bhārata war, the *Harivaṃśa* also touches upon the problem of the reborn demons, emphasising that each of the demons must be defeated twice because they are reborn on earth from time to time after their fall in the divine sphere:

durvṛttasya hatasyāpi tvayā nānyena śrīdhara|
divaś cyutasya daityasya gatiḥ bhavati medinī||
vyuthitasya tu medinyāṃ hatasya nṛśarīriṇaḥ|
durlabhaṃ svargagamaṇaṃ tvayi jāgrati Keśava||
(Harivaṃśa 44.78–79)

O possessor of fortune! Although you and no one else killed the evil demon, he found his place on earth after falling from heaven. If you were to kill this human-shaped [monster] that has reappeared on earth, it would be very difficult for him to return to heaven, provided you are vigilant, Keśava.

In this way, the *Harivaṃśa* introduces Kṛṣṇa's other duty to kill Kaṃsa, in whose body the former chief of the demons, Kālanemi, was reborn on earth:

tasya <Ugrasenasya> putratvam āpanno yo 'sau Viṣṇo tvayā hataḥ|
Kālanemir mahādaityaḥ saṃgrāme Tārakāmaye||
Kaṃso nāma viśālākṣo Bhojamaṃsavivardhanaḥ|
rājā pṛthivyāṃ vikhyātaḥ siṃhavispaṣṭavikramaḥ||
(Harivaṃśa 44.61–62)

O Viṣṇu, the great demon called Kālanemi, whom you killed in the Tārakāmaya war, is reborn as the son of [Ugrasena]. This big-eyed man is called Kaṃsa and increases the line of the Bhojas. He has become a famous king on earth, and his heroism is as evident as that of the lions.

tavāvatarāṇe Viṣṇo Kaṃsaḥ sa vinaśiṣyati|
setsyate ca sa kāryārtho yasyārthe bhūmir āgatā||
(Harivaṃśa 44.8)

O Viṣṇu, when you appear [among the people], Kaṃsa will die, and the purpose for which the earth has come will succeed.

Since Kaṃsa, as a royal personage, belonged to the *kṣatriyas*, Kṛṣṇa, according to the teachings of the *Bhagavadgītā*, had no choice but to kill Kaṃsa with his bare hands, otherwise the demon, who had died a heroic death, might have returned to heaven.

While the *Harivaṃśa* apparently introduces the fall of Kaṃsa as a punishment that excludes him from the great war on Kurukṣetra, often conceptualised as a great sacrifice (Feller 2004: 257), the evil king of Mathurā seems to have found his way to heaven in many other sources.

Even the last book of the *Mahābhārata*, the *Svargārohaṇaparvan* (18.5.14.c), mentions Kaṃsa's name along with those evil warriors who went to heaven after their fall.

But according to the teachings of the *Bhagavadgītā*, it is difficult to imagine that he was not killed in armed combat. Incidentally, some South Indian manuscripts of the *Sabhāparvan* claim that Kṛṣṇa was victorious in a war against Kaṃsa:

nirjitya yudhi Bhojendram hatvā Kaṃsam mahābalaḥ|
abhyaṣiñcat tato rājya Ugrasenaṃ viśāṃ pate||
(*Mahābhārata* 2.20.34*6.65–66)

After the mighty Kṛṣṇa killed Kaṃsa, the king of the Bhojas in battle, he consecrated Ugrasena king. O king!

Remarkably, the verse emphasises that the king was defeated in *yudh*, in a war, which is apparently merciful, as opposed to *niyuddha*. In this way, these lines may provide an explanation for Kaṃsa's appearance in the sky in the *Svargārohaṇaparvan*, and at the same time suggest that there may have been a different version of the story of the killing of Kaṃsa from that in the *Harivaṃśa*, in which the king of Mathurā died a heroic death.

Kṛṣṇa's use of a weapon against Kaṃsa is also not unprecedented, as it occurs in the Buddhist and Jaina versions of the story. Among them, the Buddhist *Ghaṭa-jātaka* tells that Kṛṣṇa killed Kaṃsa and his brother, Upakaṃsa, with his discus:

tasmim̐ khaṇe Vāsudevo cakkam khipi taṃ dvinnam pi bhātikānaṃ sīsāni patesi|
(*Jātakakathavaṇṇanā* 10.16. p. 82)

At that moment Vāsudeva threw his discus, and it cut off the heads of the two brothers.

Punnāṭa Jinasena's *Harivaṃśa-purāṇa*, one of the Jaina elaborations of the Kṛṣṇa legend, reports that Kṛṣṇa took away Kaṃsa's sword, and probably used it against him:

<Kṛṣṇaḥ> abhipatadarihastāt khaḍgam ākṣipya keśeṣv atidr̥dham atigr̥hyāhatya
bhūmau saroṣam|
vihitapurūṣapādākarṣaṇas taṃ śilāyāṃ tad ucitam iti matvāsphālya hatvā jahāsa||
(*Harivaṃśa-purāṇa* 36.45)

Taking the sword of the attacking enemy, Kṛṣṇa vehemently grabbed his hair and threw him to the ground in anger. He dragged the man by the foot onto a stone. This will do – he thought, and threw him on it. After killing [Kaṃsa], he laughed.

Although both the Buddhist and the Jaina sources agree with the *Harivaṁśa* that Kṛṣṇa assassinated Kaṁsa, the appearance of the weapons makes his fall a little less gruesome than the *Harivaṁśa* did. The Jaina work directly claims that Kaṁsa attacked Kṛṣṇa before he died, implying that there was a struggle between them.³

Apart from these versions, some of the *purāṇas*, such as the *Brahma-* (181.1–212.95), the *Viṣṇu-* (5.1.1–38.93) and the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* (10.1.1–90.46), also tell the story of Kṛṣṇa’s life. Unlike the Buddhist and Jaina works, these sources are mainly based on the plot of the *Harivaṁśa* (Preciado-Solís 1984: 42), but they seem to have been careful to remove allusions to Kṛṣṇa’s cruelty.

The first difference between the *purāṇas* and the *Harivaṁśa* is that they reformulate Kṛṣṇa’s purpose. They adopt the explanation of the *Ādiparvan* and claim that Kṛṣṇa was sent to kill the demons manifesting as human kings on earth.

tatsāmpratam ime daityāḥ Kālanemipurogamāḥ|
martyalokaṁ samākramya bādhante 'harniśaṁ prajāḥ||*
Kālanemir hato yo 'sau Viṣṇunā prabhaviṣṇunā|
*Ugrasenasutaḥ Kaṁsaḥ sambhūtaḥ sa mahāsuraḥ**||*
Ariṣṭo Dhenukaḥ Keśi Pralambo Narakas tathā|
Sundo 'suras tathātyugro Bāṇas cāpi Baleḥ sutah||
tathānye ca mahāvīryā nṛpāṇāṁ bhavaneṣu ye|
samutpannā durātmānas tān na saṁkhyātum utsahe||
*akṣauhiṇyo 'tra*** bahulā divyamūrtidhṛtāḥ surāḥ|*
mahābalānāṁ dṛptānāṁ daityendrāṇāṁ mamopari||
tadbhūribhārapīḍārtā na śaknoṃy amareśvarāḥ|
vibhartum ātmānam aham iti vijñāpayāmi vah||
kriyatāṁ tan mahābhāgā mama bhārāvatarāṇam|
yathā Rasātalaṁ nāhaṁ gaccheyam ativihvalā||
(Brahma-purāṇa 181.8–14, Viṣṇu-purāṇa 5.1.22–28)
**samākramya] Vp samāgamya Brp, **sa mahāsuraḥ] Vp sumahāsuraḥ Brp*
****'tra] Vp hi Brp*

Now that they have reached the earth, these demons, led by Kālanemi, torment the creatures day and night. Kālanemi, the great demon, who was killed by Lord Viṣṇu, was reborn as the son of Ugrasena by the name of Kaṁsa. I cannot enumerate Ariṣṭa, Dhenuka, Keśin, Pralamba, Naraka, Sunda, the asura, Bāṇa, the very fierce son of Balī, and the other evil, very powerful demons, who appeared in the houses of the kings. O gods! There are great armies of mighty, proud demon kings upon me. O lords of the immortals! I tell you

³ Incidentally, this motif is found in the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, where Kaṁsa similarly held a sword when he was attacked by Kṛṣṇa (*Bhāgavata-purāṇa* 10.44.35).

that I cannot hold myself, [for] I am suffering from the pain caused by their great burden. O most fortunate [gods]! Let my burden be taken away from me, lest I go to hell in affliction.

bhūmir dr̥ptanṛpavyājadaityānīkaśatāyutaiḥ|
ākṛāntā bhūribhāreṇa Brahmāṇaṃ śaraṇaṃ yayau||
(Bhāgavata–purāṇa 10.1.17)

The earth, oppressed by hundreds and myriads of demons disguised as proud kings, turned to Brahmā for protection.

The *purāṇas* seem to relativize the central role attributed to Kaṃsa in the *Harivaṃśa* by claiming that Kṛṣṇa had to destroy many other demons besides him. In this way, Kṛṣṇa of the *purāṇas* becomes a true demon slayer, while his role as the saviour of the virtuous *kṣatriyas* is relegated to the background.

This immediately implies further changes in these sources. Kṛṣṇa's remorse after the killing of Kaṃsa disappears, and instead both the *Brahma–* and the *Viṣṇu–purāṇa* add that the hero felt contempt when he killed his enemy (*Brahma–purāṇa* 193.78.a, *Viṣṇu–purāṇa* 5.20.79.c).

Although the *purāṇas* claim that Kṛṣṇa had to fight with demons in human disguise, the compilers of these texts may have been somewhat uncomfortable reporting the strangulation of Kaṃsa, and therefore so they only say that Kṛṣṇa simply hurled Kaṃsa down from his raised seat and then threw himself on top of him:

utplutyāruhya taṃ mañcaṃ Kaṃsaṃ jagrāha vegataḥ||*
keśeṣv ākr̥ṣya vīgalatkirītaṃ avanītale|
Kaṃsaṃ sa pātayām āsa tasyopari papāta ca||
(Brahma–purāṇa 193.72–73.ab, Viṣṇu–purāṇa 5.20.73.cd–74)
**utplutyāruhya] Vp utpatyāruhya Brp*

He jumped up and climbed into the [royal] box, then quickly grabbed Kaṃsa. When he pulled his hair, the [king's] diadem fell off. Then he pushed him to the ground and threw himself on him.

pragr̥hya keśeṣu calatkirītaṃ nipātya raṅgopari tuṅgamañcāt|
tasyopariṣṭāt svayam abjanābhah papāta viśvāśraya ātmatantraḥ||
taṃ samparetam vicakarṣa bhūmau harir yathebham jagato vipaśyataḥ|
hā heti śabdaḥ sumahāṃs tadābhūd udīritaḥ sarvajanaḥ narendra||
sa nityadodvignadhiyā tam īśvaraṃ pibann adan vā vicaran svapan śvasan|
dadarśa cakrāyudham agrato yatas tad eva rūpaṃ duravāpam āpa||
(Bhāgavata–purāṇa 10.44.37–39)

When he grasped [Kaṃsa's] hair, the [king's] diadem trembled. When he had thrown him down from his high throne into the wrestling ring, [the god] whose navel is a lotus, on whom the whole world rests and who depends only on himself, himself jumped on him.

The people saw him dragging the dead king along the ground like a lion dragging an elephant. Ah! Ah! – all the men made a very loud noise. (O king!) Because whenever [Kāṃsa] drank, ate, was awake, slept, and breathed, with his anxious thought he always saw [Viṣṇu], whose weapon is the discus; in the same form, which is difficult to attain, he met [the god].

Moreover, the compilers of the *purāṇas* not only withdrew the mention of Kāṃsa's strangulation, but also slightly suggested that Kṛṣṇa was actually armed with the tusks of the fallen Kuvalayāpīḍa, the war elephant, whom Kāṃsa had ordered to kill Kṛṣṇa before he entered the wrestling hall:

*hatvā Kuvalayāpīḍaṃ hastyārohacoditam|
madāsṛganuliptāṅgau gajadantavarāyudhau||
mṛgamadhye yathā siṃhau garvalīlāvalokinau|
praviṣṭau sumahāraṅgaṃ Baladevajanārdanau*||
(Brahma-purāṇa 193.30–31, Viṣṇu-purāṇa 5.20.30–31)*

* *balabhadrajanārdanau] Vp baladevajanārdanau Brp*

Having killed Kuvalayāpīḍa, whom the elephant-driver had incited against them, Baladeva and Janārdana armed themselves with the best elephant tusks. Their bodies were covered with musth and blood. They charged into the great arena like two lions between gazelles. They looked around with pride and charm.

*vṛtau gopaiḥ katipayair Baladevajanārdanau|
raṅgaṃ viviśatū rājan gajadantavarāyudhau||
(Bhāgavata-purāṇa 10.43.016)*

(O king!) When Baladeva and Janārdana, accompanied by some cowherds, entered the arena, they were armed with the finest elephant tusks.

This recognition of the elephant tusk as a weapon is also found in many sculptural panels of the life of Kṛṣṇa, as they often show the hero killing Kāṃsa with a tusk in his hand (Stadtner 1987: 133–135). The use of the elephant tusk as a weapon relieves Kṛṣṇa of the shame of having killed his enemy in an improper manner, but it also involves further explanations regarding to Kāṃsa's afterlife.

While Kṛṣṇa was very careful not to send Kāṃsa to heaven by killing him in the *Harivaṃśa*, the *purāṇas* do not seem to be concerned with this problem. On the basis of the *Bālacarita*, another piece of the Trivandrum plays, it seems that over time the reappearance of demons in the sky had become common and accepted:

*yatra yatra vyaṃ jātās tatra tatra trilokadhṛt|
dānavānām vadhārthāya †sauvartta† samvṛtto Madhusūdanaḥ||
bhavatu|
Viṣṇunā hatasyāpy akṣayo loko me bhaviṣyati|
tasmād yuddhaṃ kariṣyāmi|*

(*Bālacarita* 3.13 p. 46)

Wherever we are born, the destroyer of Madhu, the lord of the three worlds, appears to kill the demons.

All right!

If Viṣṇu kills me, I will reach the eternal world. So, I will fight.

Kṛṣṇa's reply to Ariṣṭa also indicates that weapons are deprived of their role in salvation, and suggests that the battle with the deity is in itself capable of leading to heaven:

*giriṭaṭakathināmsāv eva bāhū mamaitau
praharaṇam aparaṇ tu tvādṛśām durbalānām|
(Bālacarita 3.11.ab, p. 45)*

Here are my arms. They are attached to shoulders as solid as the slope of a mountain. Only those as weak as you need other weapons.

On the other hand, the idea that Kṛṣṇa saved even those who were hostile to him, has given rise to some interpretations that Kāṃsa prospered in heaven, as it is attested earlier only by the *Svargārohaṇaparvan*.

Among these, Nīlakaṇṭha may have been influenced by the idea that certain devices, such as the elephant tusk, could substitute for weapons in battle. In his explanation of the *Harivaṃśa*, he suggested that it was Kṛṣṇa's fingernails that were used instead of weapons to save Kāṃsa from hell. When the *Harivaṃśa* says that Kṛṣṇa dug his nails into Kāṃsa's body, this seems cruel, but according to Nīlakaṇṭha, it actually proves that the wounds caused by his nails, like those caused by the weapons, led the dead king to heaven:

*svargaḥ kīrtiś ca vīramārgaḥ tadubhayabhraṣṭa ity arthaḥ| athāpy asya sadgatir
astīty āha tasyeti|
tasya dehe prakāśante sahasā Keśavārpitāḥ|
māṃsacchedaghanāḥ sarve nakhāgrā jīvitacchidaḥ||
(Nīlakaṇṭha comm. ad Harivaṃśa Vulg. 76.41–42)*

The course of heroes consists of heaven and glory. This means that Kāṃsa was deprived of both. Yet he returned the path of good men, as the next verse says:

Suddenly, the killing, cutting of flesh, and hard fingernail-tips of Keśava became visible in his body.

While Nīlakaṇṭha argued for Kāṃsa's salvation on the basis of the *kṣatriya-dharma*, some commentators on the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* were under the influence of the Bhakti tradition, which introduced personal devotion as the key to liberation (Brockington 1981: 130), and claimed, on the basis of the not universally accepted doctrine of the *saṃrambhamārga*, that extreme hatred of the Supreme could be as fruitful as extreme

devotion (Sheth 1999: 167). For example Vīrarāghava interpreted Kaṃsa of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* (10.44.39) as having attained liberation through his hatred of Kṛṣṇa, because he was always meditating on the Supreme Being with his hateful thoughts (Vīrarāghava comm. ad *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* 10.44.39).

Yuddha – Kṛṣṇa, the warrior

After Kaṃsa was killed, all of the available sources on Kṛṣṇa’s life agree that Kṛṣṇa abandoned his former life and began to behave like a real warrior. In the various biographies, this usually means one with Kṛṣṇa’s acquaintance with the weapons. The only exception to this is the *Ghaṭa-jātaka*. Although the Buddhist work, like the other sources, attests a change in Kṛṣṇa’s career from villager to king and then emperor, this does not affect the hero’s fighting style. Although the *cakra* (*cakka*) used by Kṛṣṇa to kill Kaṃsa clearly appears here as a weapon, its status as a warrior’s mark is less certain in the early sources. The earliest images of Kṛṣṇa show him holding a wheel (Babkiewicz – Sellmer 205), and the *Mahābhārata* also contains a few verses referring to his *cakra* as a wheel rather than a discus (Babkiewicz – Sellmer 210).

According to the *Harivaṃśa*, after the elimination of Kaṃsa and his associates, Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma were initiated into the use of weapons by a Kāśya teacher called Sāṃdīpaṇi at Avantipura (*Harivaṃśa* 79.3–8), and then became armed to lead the law-abiding, but earth-damaging *kṣatriyas* to heaven. The *Harivaṃśa* also announces this new purpose of Kṛṣṇa at the attack of Jarāsaṃdha, the emperor of Magadha, who, as Kaṃsa’s father-in-law, laid siege to Mathurā to take revenge:

ime te pṛthivīpālāḥ pārthive vartmani sthitāḥ|
ye vināśam iheṣyanti śāstradr̥ṣṭena karmaṇā||
prokṣitāḥ khalv ime manye mṛtyunā nṛpapuṃgavāḥ|
svargagāni tathā hy eṣāṃ vapūṃṣi pracakāśire||
(Harivaṃśa 81.10–11)

Here are the earthly rulers who will pass away because of what they have done, as a rule.

I believe that these king-bulls have already been killed by Death, because their bodies are already visible in heaven.

These words are emphasised further by the fact that the *Harivaṃśa* lists all the rulers of the known world as participants in the battle (*Harivaṃśa* 80.10–16). Since the conflict here looks like a universal war, the reader can easily get the feeling that this is the great war that Kṛṣṇa has been entrusted to organise. This idea also has a parallel in

the Jaina elaboration of the *Mahābhārata*, which claims that, instead of the war of the Bhārata succession, the main conflict was Kṛṣṇa's battle with Jarāsaṁdha on Kurukṣetra (De Clercq 2009: 402–404).

The attack of the Magadhan emperor, on the other hand, coincides with the arming of Kṛṣṇa:

tābhyāṁ mrdhe prayuktābhyāṁ Yādavābhyāṁ matir babhau|
āyudhānāṁ purāṇānām ādāne kṛtalakṣaṇā||
tataḥ khān nipatanti sma dīptāny āhavasamplave|
lelihānāni divyāni mahānti sudṛḍhāni ca||
(*Harivaṁśa* 81.55–56)

The two Yādavas, who went into battle, were clearly thinking of using ancient weapons. Then shining, destructive, divine, powerful and very hard weapons fell from the sky into the crowded battle.

According to the *Harivaṁśa* and also to the *Viṣṇu-purāṇa*, Kṛṣṇa was given two weapons, Śārṅga, the bow, and Kaumodakī, the mace. It is noteworthy here that although the *Harivaṁśa* tells us that Kṛṣṇa subsequently used his discus against both Naraka (*Harivaṁśa* 91.56–57) and Bāṇa (*Harivaṁśa* 112.102–105), it does not reveal the origin of the discus, which may explain its uniqueness among the other weapons. The compilers of the *Brahma-purāṇa*, on the other hand, may have sensed this omission and added the discus to the weapons that appear here:

anantaraṁ cakrasārṅge tūṇau cāpy akṣayau śaraiḥ|
ākāśād āgatau vīrau tadā Kaumodakī gadā||
(*Brahma-purāṇa* 195.6)

Then a discus, a bow, two inexhaustible quivers full of arrows and Kaumodakī, the mace, descended from heaven to the two heroes.

Both the *Harivaṁśa* and the *purāṇas* make it clear that Kṛṣṇa's weapons are not mere gifts, but are the same as the divine weapons of Viṣṇu, which manifest either for their owner, or for their own sake. They are not ordinary devices; they behave like real companions. His discus, for example, performed a heroic deed individually, when it burnt Vārāṇasī (*Brahma-purāṇa* 207.41–43, *Viṣṇu-purāṇa* 5.34.41–43).

Some sources also claim that the divine weapons never left Kṛṣṇa alone, but followed him on his earthly mission from the beginning. This idea may first appear in the *Brahma-purāṇa*, which, while accepting the above story linking the descent of the weapons with Jarāsaṁdha's invasion, it suggests that the divine weapons, namely the discus and the mace, were present at the birth of Kṛṣṇa, but were hidden so as not to unmask the deity in his cowherd-form:

*jñāto 'si devadeveśa śāṅkhacakraḡadādhara|
divyaṃ rūpaṃ idaṃ deva prasādenopasaṃhara||
(Brahma–purāṇa 182.14)*

I have recognised you, lord of the gods bearing conch shell, discus and mace. Please, god, kindly hide this divine form.

A similar way of thinking is also found in the two above-mentioned pieces of the Trivandrum plays. In the *Dūtavākya*, the weapons seem to help Kṛṣṇa to frighten Duryodhana (*Dūtavākya* 46–52, p. 44–46), while the *Bālacarita*, similarly to the *Brahma–purāṇa*, testifies that they descended just after Vasudeva entrusted his newborn son to Nanda (*Bālacarita* 1.22–27, p. 16–17). The play also suggests that the weapons, just like their owner, disguised themselves as cowherd boys. This early appearance of the weapons reveals that Kṛṣṇa never actually killed with his bare hands, since his weapons, disguised as his playmates, contributed to his heroic deeds in his early years. This idea seems to be parallel the theological shift away from Kṛṣṇa’s punitive role and towards his involvement in salvation.

The free will of Kṛṣṇa’s weapons seems to be emphasized as much in their disappearance as in their appearance. Although the *Harivaṃśa* does not report the end of Kṛṣṇa’s earthly life, the *Brahma–* and the *Viṣṇu–purāṇa* say that the weapons left their divine owner before the collapse of the Yādava clan.

cakraṃ tathā gadā śārṅgatūṅī** śāṅkho 'sir eva ca|
pradakṣiṇaṃ Hariṃ*** kṛtvā jagmur ādityavartmanā||
(Viṣṇu–purāṇa 5.37.47)*

tathā gadā] Vp gadā tathā Brp, **śārṅgatūṅī] Vp śārṅgaṃ tūṅau Brp, *Hariṃ]
Vp tataḥ Brp*

After respectfully encircling Hari from the right, his discus, mace, quiver, conch shell and sword set off on the path of the sun.

This idea may have been borrowed from the *Mahābhārata* (16.4.3), which takes a very different view of Kṛṣṇa’s weapons. According to this, Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna were given divine weapons together just before the burning up of the Khāṇḡava forest. Kṛṣṇa received a discus from Agni, the god of fire, and a club from Varuṇa, the lord of waters:

*Vajranābhaṃ tataś cakraṃ dadau Kṛṣṇāya Pāvakaḥ|
āḡneyam astraṃ dayitaṃ sa ca kalyo 'bhavat tadā||
abravīt Pāvakaś cainam etena Madhusūdana|
amānuṣān api raṇe vijeṣyasi na saṃśayaḥ||
anena tvaṃ manuṣyāṅāṃ devāṅāṃ api cāhave|
rakṣaḥpiśācadaityāṅāṃ nāḡāṅāṃ cādhikaḥ sadā|
bhaviṣyasi na saṃdehaḥ pravaraṅinibarhaṇe||*

*kṣiptaṃ kṣiptaṃ raṇe caitat tvayā Mādhava śatruṣu|
hatvāpratihatam saṃkhye pāṇim eṣyati te punaḥ||
Varuṇaś ca dadau tasmai gadām aśaniniḥsvanām|
daiṭyāntakaraṇīm ghorām nāmnā Kaumodakīm Hareḥ||
(Mahābhārata 1.216.21–25)*

Then Pāvaka gave the discus called Vajranābha, the dear weapon of fire, to Kṛṣṇa. He became strong when Pāvaka addressed him [with the following words]:

O destroyer of Madhu, with this you will defeat even your nonhuman [enemies] in battle. There is no doubt about it. With this [weapon] you will always surpass in war the men, the gods, the *rākṣasas*, the *piśācas*, the demons and the *nāgas*. O Best, there is no doubt about that [this] will be able to destroy the enemies. O Mādhava, whenever you use this [discus] against your enemies in battle, it will return to your hand without hindrance.

Varuṇa gave to Hari the terrible mace called Kaumodakī, which roars like a thunderbolt and destroys the demons.

Since the *Mahābhārata* touches on the origin of Kṛṣṇa's mace, this myth seems to be independent of the tradition of the *Harivaṃśa* and the *purāṇas* linking its appearance with Jarāsaṃdha's attack. Furthermore, Kṛṣṇa's weapons are presented here quite differently from the previous sources. They appear to be inanimate instruments used to protect their owner from nonhuman enemies. Another notable difference is that receiving weapons does not imply a change in Kṛṣṇa's lifestyle, and thus the story of the *Mahābhārata* places less emphasis on his armament.

Conclusion

On the basis of the sources examined, Kṛṣṇa's figure is twofold. On the one hand, as a cowherd, he was engaged in destroying the demons born among the people; on the other hand, as a royal prince, he was attempting to lead the virtuous *kṣatriyas* to heaven. To fulfil these two duties, Kṛṣṇa used two different methods. He usually killed the demons with his bare hands, and the kings with weapons. The killing of Kaṃsa is problematic in this context because he was both a human king and the earthly manifestation of Viṣṇu's former nemesis, Kālanemi.

The *Harivaṃśa* introduces Kaṃsa as the head of the demons, thus suggesting that Kṛṣṇa really had no choice, but to kill him in an unarmed fight. Although the *Ādiparvan* also refers to the danger of demons in human form, the other parts of the *Mahābhārata*, especially the *Bhagavadgītā*, focus more on the salvation of the *kṣatriyas*. Thus, Kaṃsa is also included among the rulers who were saved during the conflict of the Bhārata

house, and the Buddhist and Jaina elaborations of Kṛṣṇa's life, together with some *Mahābhārata* texts directly claim that Kāṃsa was killed by weapons.

Although the idea that weapons were such sacred devices, guaranteeing the bliss of the afterlife for the fallen warriors, gradually disappeared in later traditions, it may still have influenced Nīlakaṇṭha in the 17th century. The commentator of the great epic probably found it problematic that Kṛṣṇa was then commonly worshipped as the saviour of the *kṣatriyas* and used a very cruel means, strangulation, to kill his own relative. To reduce this contradiction, Nīlakaṇṭha suggested that Kṛṣṇa's nails played the role of weapons when he killed Kāṃsa.

With the eclipse of the *kṣatriya* dharma, the weapons of Kṛṣṇa, though conceived as minor deities, lost their relevance in liberating the people. First, the manifestation of Viṣṇu in the body of the killer or more precisely, the performer of the war sacrifice, and then the personal relationship between the god and the devotee took over their former place. This led to the doctrine of *saṃrambhamārga*, according to which not only the devotion but also extreme hatred of the Supreme can serve one's salvation.

In summary, although Kṛṣṇa's involvement in unarmed and armed combat, as Goldman pointed out, may be rooted in two main sources of the figure of Kṛṣṇa, it seems that the interpretation and reinterpretation of this dichotomy has characterised the development of the worship of Kṛṣṇa from time to time.

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