

539. Mahajanaka Jataka

Cowel No.539

There was once a king of Mithila named Mahajanaka who had two sons, Polajanaka. When the old king died Aritthajanaka became king and Polajanaka viceroy. In time the new king became suspicious of his younger brother plotting against him and had him imprisoned in chains. Polajanaka proclaimed his innocence and miraculously his chains became loosened and the prison's door opened. He was very popular with the city people, and being a strong leader he decided to make war on his brother king Aritthajanaka. Before going to battle Polajanaka made his pregnant wife promise that in the event he was killed, she had to escape from Mithila to save the unborn child, a future Bodhisatta.



She managed to collect her belongings, change into dirty garments, blacken her face and leave the city. Although she wanted to go to the city of Kadampa, she did not know the way. The God Sakka intervened disguised himself as a human to bring her there. In Kadampa, the unrecognised queen met a Brahmin of great fame to whom she had to confess to being the queen of King Aritthajanaka of Mithila, who was killed in a battle by his brother Polajanaka. The Brahmin invited her to live in his house; the queen agreed and after a while, she delivered a boy, whom she called Mahajanaka in honour of his grandfather. The boy grew strong and sturdy, but was often teased for not having a father, being simply "a widow's son". At all costs, he wanted to hear from his mother who was his father.

Having heard the truth, at the age of 16 he was determined to regain his father's kingdom of Mithila. He took only half of the fortunes offered by his mother and embarked on a ship hoping to make a fortune in trading. The ship was crowded with men and animals from seven large caravans. After seven days of sailing at full speed, the overloaded ship started to sink. The ship gradually disintegrated taking in water. Finally, it sank.

The provident Janaka, having profusely heathen sugary food and covered himself with grease, managed to survive in the waters, escaping the fate of other sailors. At the same time, unknown to him, Polajanaka had died, leaving the throne of Mithila vacant.

After seven days of floating, without food, hanging on to the mast, Mahajanaka was saved by the sea goddess Manimekhala who wanted to help him in her compassionate task. She took him in her arms and Mahajanaka fell in trance by the divine embrace. She flew him to a mango grove in the kingdom of Mithila and gently deposited him on the ceremonial stone in the middle, of the grove.

In the meantime, the ministers of the deceased King of Mithila were searching for a suitable man worthy of becoming king and who would fulfil three conditions previously imposed by the King: to be able to answer certain riddles, to string his powerful bow and please his daughter, the beautiful intelligent Princess Sivali.

No men were found filling these requisites. To find him, the ministers let loose a horse with a beautiful carriage, stating that whatsoever the animal stopped in front of a man, he was the man who had sufficient merits to become king of Mithila. This happened to be Mahajanaka while he was immersed in a deep sleep. He awoke and in hearing the whole story, agreed to accept the kingdom.

He answered all the riddles, easily strung the bow of King Polajanaka and married Princess Sivali. During his reign, he realised that the fact of 'owning' was the source of affliction. Accordingly, he renounced his throne in favour of his son and departed for a meditative life in the forest, soon to be joined by his wife.

In Cambodia, the Mahajanaka Jataka is named *Moha Chinok* (Aymonier 1906:151). Also in this version, the story of Janaka starts after a long preamble (6 chapters) on his grandfather, father and mother of the Bodhisatta Janaka. The goddess who saved Janaka from drowning is named Monimekkala; the regent to the throne is princess Simbali-tevi; the wise hermit is Nearut-Tabas (Narada). The story terminates with Janaka leaving his wife for good, being inflexible to love passions and becoming a true ascetic.

Cambodia

Mahajanaka Jataka murals



Fig.1 – Wat Sisowat Ratanaran. Full illustration of important events of the Mahajanaka Jataka, starting from the shipwreck and Janaka being saved by Manimekhala and taken to land. Then Janaka is discovered in the park and taken to the city on a chariot. To the left of the painting is the grand palace scene with princess Sivali emotionally stressed by the finding of Janaka. Later, when Janaka announces to retire to the ascetic life and leave the city, she told the commander-in-chief to create an illusion of an armed revolt with the intent to stop Janaka from leaving the kingdom.



Fig.2 – Sisowath Ratanaram. Detail of the shipwreck and the arrival of Manimekhala to save Janaka.



Fig. 3 - Wat Prey Sway Kon. Deteriorated scene of the shipwreck. Early 1900



Fig.4– Wat Bakong – Much age-damaged mural (painted around 1920) of the shipwreck scene (before 2009 restoration).



Fig.5 – Wat Bovil, shipwreck scene of the Mahajanaka Jataka (the 1920s)



Fig.6 – Wat Sopheas, shipwreck scene of the Mahajanaka Jataka.
(From Fig.4 to 9, all murals painted after 1975)



Fig.7 - **Wat Sosor Miroi**, Manimekhala rescuing Janaka Notice a crocodile in open oceanic waters. (painted after 1975).



Fig.8– **Wat Swai Meas**, shipwreck scene.



Fig.9 – Wat Stung Trend, Manimekhala saving Janaka.



Fig.10– Wat Kuk Nokor, shipwreck scene (murals painted after 1975)



Fig.11 - Wat Lolei, Manimekhala recovering Janaka (painted 2000)



Fig.12 – Wat Einklosei, Left: King Janaka venerated by his people. Right: The shipwreck (painted around 1920s ?)

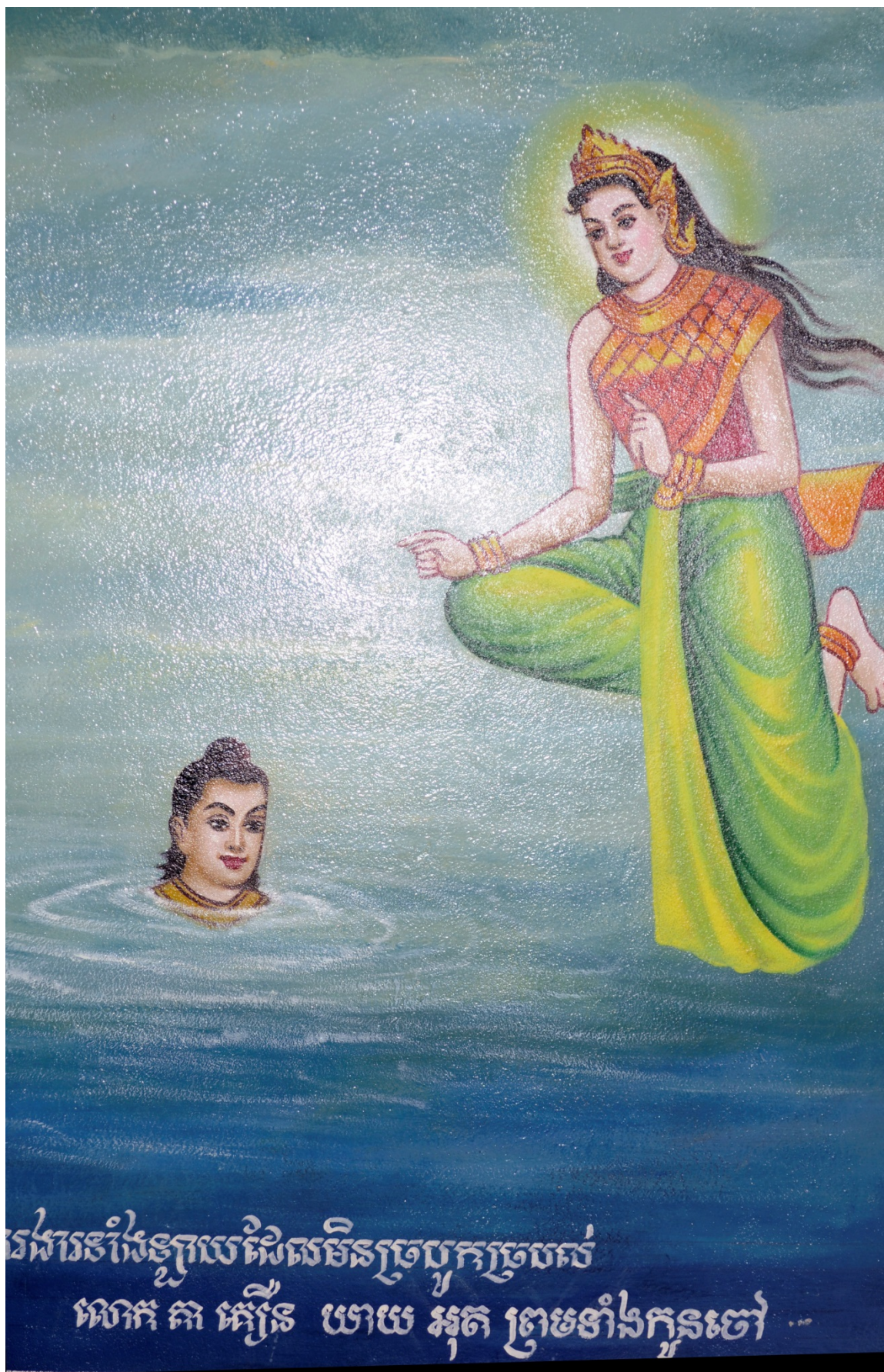


Fig.14 – Wat Tmei. Janaka finally rescued by Manimekhala (painted after 1975).

Thailand

Mahajanaka Jataka murals



Fig.15 – **Ayutthaya Samdet Buddhasaiwan Chapel.** One of the few paintings that survived almost the total degradation of the chapel's murals. It illustrates the sinking ship with Janaka on board although it could be a ship carrying Buddha's relics to Thailand because there are a few monks depicted in a ship's cabin.

This and the following murals is a rare survivors of the chapel walls, lonely exemplary of the end of Ayutthaya style (end 17-18th century). See Somsak Taengphan



Fig 16 -- **Ayutthaya Samdet Buddhasaiwan Chapel.** Another mural of the same chapel is one of the few that can be interpreted. It illustrates Janaka reclining on the sacred stone under palm trees of the royal park, where he was deposited by Manimekhala. (see Somsak Taengphan 2008)



Fig.17 – **Wat Chong Nonsi**. Curiously Manimekhala is shown as a mermaid and Mahajanaka a little boy (controversial dating of 1600 or later, difficult to say because of several re-touching and restorations).



Fig.17 – **Wat Chong Nonsi**. On the upper part of the picture is depicted the cortege of the people going to find Mahajanaka in the royal park.



Fig. 18 - **Wat Chong Nonsi**. Detail of above



Fig.19– **Wat Chong Nonsi**. Procession with the royal chariot going to retrieve Mahajanaka



Fig.20 – **Wat Chong Nonsi**. To the right of the picture is the assembly in the tight hermitage of the naked hermit, who should advise on Mahajanaka appointment as a King.



Fig. 21 - **Ratchburi, Wat Chung Kraham**. In a stylised cloud, Janaka holds on Manimekhala over an equally stylised stormy sea. Then, amongst dense vegetation of the royal park, a chariot and a cortege are visible, probably bringing Mahajanaka to the royal palace. (bottom right) (painted 19th Century).



Fig.22 – **Wat Yai Intharam**. Refined complete illustration of the Mahajanaka Jataka. (19th century)



Fig.23 - **Wat Yai Intharam**. Detail of the discovery of Janaka sleeping on the ceremonial stone of the royal park (19th century)



Fig.24 – **Wat Suwannaram**. Janaka sleeping in the royal park



Fig.25 – **Wat Suwannaram**. The cortege with the royal chariot going to collect Janaka

(all Thai paintings shown in these photographs are from the 19th century)



Fig.26 - **Wat Suwannaram**. Detail of the shipwreck and Manimekhala bringing Janaka onshore to the Himavanta Mountain



Fig.27 – **Wat Saket**. Detail of the shipwreck scene; then to the land on the right of the picture, is Janaka sleeping on the ceremonial stone of the royal park. Curiously in the foreground is a dinghy boat sailed by western men.



Fig.28 - **Bangkok National Library.** The shipwreck and Manimekhala.



Fig.29 - **Bangkok National Library.** The shipwreck and Manimekhala saving Janaka in the rough sea.

Laos

scenes of the Mahajanaka Jataka



Fig.30 - Wat Xieng (luan Prabang). Gold stencils were applied to all the inner walls and columns. Here is the MahaJanaka Jataka story.

Burma

- In Burma this Jataka is locally named **Maha Zennekka Jataka**.



Fig.31 - Wood and a guided panel of the **Mandalay Golden Palace**. Wood panel carved with the early part of the Burmese Jataka (or Zedek).

The visual narrative examined here shows on the right half of the panel, a battle between the king and his elder brother Paula Zenakka's elephants. The queen heard about the King's death and ran away. She collected her jewellery in a basket, wore old dirty clothes and left the city. To help her, gods sent on earth a deva in the clothes of an old man riding a coach. The latter is probably carved in the lower middle part of the panel. At that time the sage Udiccha and his disciples invited her to their home, pledging to look after her like a sister. Eventually, she gave birth to a boy named Maha Zannekka, so named in memory of his grandfather. When the boy grew up he wanted to retake his rightful kingdom. Thus he joined in mercantile trade and embarked on a ship that is probably carved at the extreme left of the panel as a miniature steamboat. Zennaka is shown probably leaving his mother and adoptive brother or his father Udiccha. The panel doesn't have any indication of shipwrecking or Manimekhala (Mayakhana in Burmese). Carved sometimes in the 10th century)



Fig.32 - Detail of the above picture showing the steamboat or wheel-boat probably in use or anchoring somewhere in Burma when the artist carved this story. Possibly Janaka is shown going towards the boat, restrained by his friends.



Fig.33 Glazed plate from Pagan, possibly 6/7th century



Fig. 34 – a modern mural from Chiang Mai area