

Forms of Viṣṇu in Udayagiri and Eran (Madhya Pradesh): An Art-Epigraphic Study from 5th to 6th century CE

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Abstract

Adopting a methodology of visual history two temple complexes of the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh are taken up for comparative art-iconographical study of the forms Viṣṇu unfolding on ground. Udayagiri is a rock-cut cave temple site located in the dynamic multi-faith ambience of the Bhāgavata, Buddhist and Jain cultural orbit of ancient city of Vidiśā. Eran in the Sagar district of Madhya Pradesh is known for its magnificent pillars, ruins of structural temples and colossal images of Viṣṇu in his monumental avatāras. These two contemporary sites manifest an overwhelming presence of Vaiṣṇava devotionism and sustained patronage from elite and laity which makes them an interesting case study in comparative frame to understand important formations of iconographic conventions. Both the sites are rich in epigraphic material and were geo-politically part of the ‘Gupta’ empire of ancient India. How far they were influenced by the royal patronage if any forms an important parameter of study based on field survey of sites focusing particularly on images of Viṣṇu. The time frame of this essay is from 4th to 6th centuries CE

Key words: avatāra, inscription, iconography, temple, patronage, vaiṣṇavism.

Introduction

The emergence of temples, however modest they seem in their initial stage of development, nevertheless implies an urge for public religiosity. At a temple the god manifests before the devotee in iconic form and the devotee can serve the deity with appropriate rituals and offerings. The temple god in turn responds by bestowing divine blessings, merit and wish fulfilment to a sincere

follower. Before going into the aspect of religiosity and how a temple stands as the manifestation of that urge for communication with the divine one need to find a definition of temple. Simply speaking a temple is the house of god, the Sanskrit synonym being *devāyātana*. From the 2nd century BCE onwards small modest shrines are known of Buddhist, Jain and Brahmanical faiths where divine icons or relics were worshipped. Different art historical studies have established that architectural idioms were shared irrespective of belief systems. Therefore, temple as a structure was not new in the 4th century C.E. However, in spite of epigraphic references no such architecture has survived from before 4th century C.E. This has probably to do with the structures being created from perishable materials like wood. This paper attempts to focus on two archaeological sites to understand ritual transformations, architectural innovations and iconographic developments of Vaiṣṇavism between 4th to 6th centuries CE which in a way set a convention for the subsequent times.

The period of 4th -6th centuries CE saw the beginning of flat roofed shrines which gradually acquires complexity in terms of stylistic details as well iconographic programme. While some new centres of religious significance came up during this time some already known sites acquire a new religious connotation and validity adding new dimension to their existence as a sacred place. On a comparative scale sites of Udayagiri and Eran demonstrate certain similarities and distinctiveness. The sites located in the same historical- cultural landscape of Vidiśā nurtured by the multi-faith traditions of Buddhism and Bhāgavatism. From 4th -5th centuries CE Varāha cult is becoming quite prolific in the region illustrating the formation of a common artistic idiom. Udayagiri and Eran are both commonly classified as ‘Gupta’ sites of Central India. Although archaeological findings have proved beyond doubt their much broader time line displaying pre-Gupta antecedents and post-Gupta continuity.

The Rock-cut Cave Shrines and the Avatāras of Viṣṇu at Udayagiri: Myths and Manifestations

Udayagiri has attracted art historical attention because of layered iconography of two monumental panels of Śeṣaśayi Viṣṇu (Cave no 13) and Varāha (Cave no 5). Although there are no inscriptions attached to these compositions it is generally supposed that they are more or less contemporary to the Gupta Era 82 (CE 401-02) inscription of Cave 6. The sacred complex of Eran consists of multiple temple ruins, monolithic pillar with *Cākra* and Garuda emblem, and a zoomorphic (animal) representation of Viṣṇu as Varāha (Boar) along with anthropomorphic representations of Varāha and Narsimha incarnations of Viṣṇu.

The grand panel of Śeṣaśayi Viṣṇu from Udayagiri portrays a lithic scene of Viṣṇu sleeping on the coils of serpent Śeṣanāga, accompanied by Tāmāsī, goddess of darkness, Brāhma, the creator seated and Garuḍa, the vehicle of Viṣṇu. Interestingly Garuḍa is also a royal emblem in the coins of the imperial Guptas. Some scholars have found a textual reference of the visual depiction in the *Devīmāhātmya* section of *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* (6th Century CE) with the exception of Garuḍa who was not mentioned in the text. Viṣṇu's attributes like gadā (club), cakra (discus) and saṅkha (conch) are personified as Gadādevī, Cakrapuruṣa and Śārṅgastrī (personification of Viṣṇu's bow). The sleeping lord (Śeṣaśayi) will rise from sleep to kill the demons Madhu and Kaiṭaba.¹ On the contrary some are of the opinion that literary narratives should not be followed blindly in order to indulge in an iconographic analysis of an image as variations are quite frequent.² The trend of personification of Viṣṇu's weapons and assigning them to titular deities like Gadādevī, Cakrapuruṣa and Saṅkhapuruṣa is a distinct trait of the iconography of Viṣṇu from 5th century CE onwards

with considerable popularity.³ Following the description of *Viṣṇudhārmotṭarapurāṇa* and ethnographical observation, the role of Udayagiri as an astronomical observatory is been highlighted by Michael Willis.

The Nārāyaṇa panel (Śeṣaśayi) in its intricate composition and positioning is infused with symbolic meaning. A particular ritualistic purpose of the same can be surmised from contemporary epigraphic sources.⁴ In fact the possibility of the political allegory imbibed in the kneeling figure of the Nārāyaṇa panel which might represent the Gupta emperor Candragupta II performing a ritual function has also been suggested by scholars.⁵ That the two representations of a similar figure in the Varāha and the Śeṣaśayai Viṣṇu panel without bearing any iconographic connection with the main image might have portrayed the Gupta king Candragupta II was suggested by James Harle which was further reinforced and explained by Willis.⁶ It is a remarkable coincidence that Candragupta II happens to be the first Gupta ruler to proclaim the epithet of *Paramabhāgavata*. However inscriptions of Udayagiri depict a picture of religious toleration and cultural syncretism.⁷ Cave 7 of Udayagiri was excavated as a shrine dedicated to Sambhu (Śiva) by a patron called Virasena who came here from the metropolis of Patāliputra accompanied by his king.⁸ Though undated, the inscription of Cave 7 is almost unanimously placed in the same time bracket of Cave 6 inscription of a vassal of Candragupta II belonging from the erstwhile non-monarchical

group of the ‘Sanakāṇikas’.⁹ The sectarian affiliation of Udayagiri Cave 6 is problematic in the absence of the original image at the sanctum but the iconography of the outer facade of the cave with Mahiṣāsūramardinī and Gaṇeśa panels strongly suggest Śiva worship. The purpose of the two Viṣṇu images on the door of the shrine accompanied by door guardians was that of subsidiary nature.¹⁰

Undoubtedly the monumental panels with definite religious connotation and political allegory are Vaiṣṇava in Udayagiri. But it will be a blatant generalization if on the basis of that overwhelming Vaiṣṇava presence an attempt is made to designate the site as Vaiṣṇava. In fact, an in-depth survey of Udayagiri compels to rethink certain clichéd parameters of conceptualization. Udayagiri represents a shared sacred domain of different faiths like Buddhism, Jainism and various sects within Hinduism in a single site where early Vaiṣṇavism was accorded a vital presence.

The positioning of the Nārāyaṇa and the Narasiṃha images in adjacent, the location of Cave 7 at the eastern mouth of the passage at Udayagiri are not haphazard placements. They were carefully stationed at strategic junctures to bestow upon them cosmological and astronomical significance. If the icons are discussed separately they do not convey the meaning that they are supposed to as a part of an integrated and interrelated complex of both ritual and visual meanings. However, one curious specimen which seemed to have escaped the required attention is a gigantic rock with high relief curving resembling the Narsimha (anthropomorphic Man-lion) form of Viṣṇu. The rock locally known as Narsimha rock (śīla) in its present position is quite removed from the concentration of the Vaiṣṇava images along the central passage of Udayagiri. The question is to contextualize the image in the overall Vaiṣṇava pantheon at the site and further research is awaited.

The outer wall of Cave 5 with a colossal *Varāha* image, symbolizes a gradual progression from the *Nārāyaṇa* panel a “theological starting point for the iconographic programme at Udayagiri”.¹¹ This *Varāha* panel is the best documented and widely discussed relief both in terms of the development of the Vaiṣṇava iconography and its allegorical representation of the political aspirations of the imperial Guptas. The relief depicts an anthropomorphic *Varāha*, the boar incarnation of Viṣṇu, rescuing the Earth Goddess (*Bhūdevī/Prthvī*) from engulfing Ocean. *Varāha* lifts *Bhūdevī* on his massive shoulder, his foot subduing a man-serpent who folds his hands in submission and adoration, probably an allegory of Samudragupta’s conquest of the local *Nāga* rulers controlling the region, while gods and sages surround the *Varāha*. Unlike the Kuṣaṇa rulers who directly assumed divine status by tracing a lineage from the divinity, Guptas adopted ‘lithic’ allegory. The *Varāha* panel of Udayagiri is a case in point of fusing temporal authority of royalty with cosmic events and ritual symbolism. The *Varāha* cult appears to be a clear favourite in this scheme of conveying multiple meanings and acts as a symbolic metaphor for royal vigour.¹² Joanna Williams suggests that the *Varāha* cult and related iconography was moulded by pragmatic, worldly preferences more than religious or mythological provisions.¹³ Frederick Asher opines that the association of royal endowments with this cult represents the “panegyric extolling the valour of the king more than his virtue and piety.”¹⁴ A symbolical connection is evident between the wheel of Viṣṇu and the Buddhist concept of wheel of law (*dhārma cakra*), signifying righteousness. Inspired from Buddhist philosophy *Cakra* adopted in the Brahmanical context implies the concept of *Cakravārtin*, the ideal

universal ruler.¹⁵ Some scholars find an assertion of the political geography of the imperial Guptas represented by the personified portrayal of the river goddess Gaṅgā and Yamunā in the Varāha panel.¹⁶

The imperial Guptas who projected themselves as supreme devotees of lord Viṣṇu in their coins and inscriptions may have tried to visually assert the same kind of relationship between the king and the deity. The placement of the image should be considered in order to visualize its iconographic importance. It is carved into a shallow niche and protected by an overhang, but is otherwise open to the outside, where there was originally a water tank.¹⁷ This association of water imparts a symbolic aspect to the deity as the Varāha is rising out of the cosmic water also implying the “unction fluid of the royal consecration or *rājasuya*.”¹⁸ Following the duties of a true *Cakravartin*, the ruler is represented as a supreme devotee discharging ritualistic duties as a *yajamāna* of the Vedic mould and simultaneously as first believer in the community of the faithful.

The Monumental Vaiṣṇava Complex at Eran: An Analysis of Images and Inscriptions Among the Vaiṣṇava antiquities of Eran, the free standing *in-situ* Narsimha image of early or mid-5th CE is held as the earliest sculptural specimen of the complex. Sir Alexander Cunningham thought it to be originally installed in the ruined temple of the north east corner of the site. This temple believed to be the earliest structural construction in the complex dedicated to the worship of this deity.¹⁹ Although the stylistic treatment bears similarity with Udayagiri a later date has been attributed by James Harle on the basis of the smoothness in the execution of certain physical features showing “considerable advance on the earliest free standing image of Viṣṇu in the man-

lion incarnation to have survived”.²⁰ From the surviving fragments of it is inferred that the pillars and plans of this temple had resembled that of the other 5th century structural temples of Sāñchī, Udayagiri and Tigawa.²¹ It is noteworthy that from Gupta period onwards a definite trend is visible of dedicating shrines to this incarnation of Viṣṇu as cult images of *Narsimha* are found in structural Gupta temples of Eran and Tigawa.

In this context reference to a Narasimha image from Nachnā is to be taken note of, where the depiction of the myth of the assumption of such a form by Viṣṇu in order to destroy the demon Hiranyankaśipu is shown. The influx of this particular representation of Viṣṇu from quite a few 5th-6th century sites may be indicative of the development and crystallization of the complex myth of *Narsimhaavatāra* gradually emerging in the narrative compilation of the Purāṇas. The Narsimha images indicate the gradual evolution and the unfolding of the elements of Vaiṣṇava bhākti in a formative stage prior to the introduction of Prahlāda in textual or visual narrative.

The monolithic pillar standing at the site has been referred as *dhvājastambha* or flag staff of lord Janārdana by an inscription. Though Janārdana is a name of lord Viṣṇu, the iconographic texts are silent regarding the different attributes of this particular representation of the deity.²² The inscription is dated in the Gupta Era 165 (CE 484-485) mentions the reigning monarch as Budhagupta.²³ The mounting emblem of Cakra or wheel along with two faced Garuḍa image connote not only religious symbolism but a political allegory invoking the vision of the universal righteous king- the Cakravartin.²⁴ In 5th -6th Centuries CE personification of

Chakra in the form of Cakrapuruṣa crystallised as an iconographic convention in Eran and Pawaya.²⁵

The zoomorphic representation of Viṣṇu in his Varāha incarnation at Eran contains an eight-line inscription. The inscription denotes the construction of a temple dedicated to lord Nārāyaṇa (Viṣṇu) depicting the deity's Varāha incarnation by Dhanyaviṣṇu, younger brother of maharaja Mātṛviṣṇu in the first regnal year of the Huṇa ruler “*Mahārājadhirāja Tormana*”.²⁶ In the inscription on the *Budhagupta* Pillar at Eran these two brothers were mentioned as the donors of the *dhvājastambha*. This change of allegiance of Dhanyaviṣṇu from the Guptas to the Huṇa ruler Tormana is a proof of the penetration of the Huṇa power in Central India and the sign of the setting off the imperial Guptas. Huṇas who were known to have patronized Saivism adopted a somewhat tolerant attitude to other sects as in Eran donation was made to a Vaiṣṇava monument in the reign of Huṇa ruler Tormana.²⁷ The Huṇa rule over the eastern Malwa is not a temporary affair and it continued for a considerable period. The findings of silver and copper coins of Tormana's son Mihirakula along with his Gwalior inscription of the year C.530 CE further supports this assumption of the substantial Huṇa domination over the region. Although this inscription is not dated it is certainly later than that of the Viṣṇu pillar at the site and therefore of a late 5th to early 6th century CE development.²⁸

This particular form has been designated as *Adivarāha* or *Yajñavarāha*. The body of the Boar is almost entirely covered by miniature figures whereas upon the protruding tip of the Boar's tongue stands a female figure identified as *Bhūdevī* or the earth goddess also depicted on the statue of the anthropomorphic Varāha from Eran. The positioning of the Earth goddess in this image and

that of the anthropomorphic boar is quite similar in style and execution with the Varāha of Cave 5 of Udayagiri. This is a curious example of the representation of Varāha incarnation entirely in the animal form and probably the first of its genre.²⁹ Michael Willis makes a point on the textual reference of *Viṣṇupurāṇa* stressing that Nārāyaṇa was the ‘theological starting point’ for the iconographic programme at Udayagiri where *Varāha* is projected as the refuge of the world. Curiously enough this textual position seems to find its echo in the prevalent mode of the visual manifestation of the Vaiṣṇava theology in the 5th century CE at Eran.³⁰ Sir Alexander Cunningham in his survey report speaks highly about an anthropomorphic Viṣṇu-Varāha sculpture which he Cunningham saw in the house of a local Brahman been worshipped as his family deity or *Kulādevāta*. The statue was later acquired and preserved by the Sagar University Museum. A short inscription of two lines viz, ‘*Śrī Maheśvāradattasya Varāha-dattasya*’ is inscribed on it which probably denotes a joint gift of this statue. It is implicit that such colossal images involved a considerable degree of artistic excellence along with the existence of a patronage instrumental for their creation.

Other than the shrines dedicated to the incarnations of Viṣṇu, Eran has a shrine of a four-armed Viṣṇu. The remains of this temple show a similarity with the flat roofed varieties of Tigawa and Sāñchī temple No 17, although this temple from Eran is quite elaborate in size. It is inescapable to notice the much well-preserved structure of this temple particularly its richly decorated doorway in comparison with other structures of Eran. The shrine demonstrates a sunken floor design which according to some scholars was a deliberate one for installing a gigantic image which still stands *in situ*.³¹ Cunningham suggests, that the temple as we

see today was not built at a time and that the doorway and the portico were the later additions to the pre-existing shrine which was for some reason left unfinished or deteriorated later. The temples of Eran are assigned a late 5th century CE date on the basis of the pillar inscription of CE 485. Cunningham attempted to conceptualize the chronological arrangement of temples from the manifestation of river goddesses on either side of the entrance gateway, where a projection at the top denotes an earlier date comparing to those placed at the bottom of the door frame.³² But art historians like S.K. Saraswati had emphasized the need to be cautious in applying such generalized framework in determining the chronology of any temple, as its futility can be easily glanced in the case of the *Daśavatāra* temple at Deogarh.³³

Conclusion

Why the Varāha incarnation of Viṣṇu was chosen above other as the subject of monumental sculptures is a question which explains suitability of the Varāha myth in the intricate framework to project royal prowess. In fact, water forms an intrinsic part in the overall iconographic framework of the Varāha panel at Udayagiri. This kind of water management mechanism to accentuate the Varāha iconography is not visible at the site of Eran in spite of Eran being a completely Vaiṣṇava site unlike Udayagiri, where other faiths are also represented if not in the same magnitude. Vaiṣṇavism continued to assert its presence in Udayagiri up until 11th century CE when Cave 19 receives a donation from a devotee who takes pride in mediating at the feet of lord Viṣṇu.³⁴ Whereas from apparent perspective such claims seem like a standard expression of devotion, the political undertone of it is amply demonstrated by inscriptions of the feudatory rulers

who acknowledged Gupta suzerainty in different parts of Central India.

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Figures



Udayagiri Varāha, 5th century CE



Eran Zoomorphic Varāha, 6th century CE



Śeṣaśayi Nārāyaṇa, Cave 13, Udayagiri, 5th century CE



Narasimha, Udayagiri, early 5th Century CE



Narasimha at Eran, 5th century CE