

Tortoise in Indian Mythology, Art and Numismatics

Devendra Handa

The tortoise, called *Kūrma*, *kacchapa* and *kamaṭha* in Sanskrit, is a water and land-dwelling reptile of the anthropological order Testudines. Unlike English, the Sanskrit words do not make any distinction between the aquatic sea turtles and fresh-water or land-moving reptiles though *Kūrma*, associated with the incarnations of Prajāpati and Viṣṇu in their act of savouring the Earth goddess from the ocean, indicates its use for the oceanic species. Tortoises vary in size from a few centimeters to two meters and generally have a long lifespan, because of which they symbolize longevity and stability in some cultures as in China. Like the aquatic sea turtles they are protected by their shell. The top part of their shell is called carapace and the underside is plastron and the two are connected by a bridge. Most of the tortoises are herbivorous but some eat worms and insects also. They are generally reclusive animals. The females are longer in size in most species, and as a general rule, have smaller tails, dropped down, whereas the males have much longer tails which are usually pulled up and to the side of the rear shell. Giant tortoises move very slowly at the speed of 0.27 kmph while the fastest recorded tortoise speed is 8 kmph. The slow speed of the tortoises has become proverbial and is well known from the story of the 'Hare and the Tortoise'. The tortoises have become symbolic of easygoing nature, patience, wisdom and working incessantly without taking rest.¹

Kūrma in Religion and Mythology

Tortoise, also called Kaśyapa, was an object of worship in the later Vedic period. In the *Vājasaneyi Saṁhitā* (XIII.31), the tortoise is raised to the semi-divine position of 'Lord of Waters'. As Kaśyapa the tortoise often appears beside or identical with Prajāpati in the *Atharvaveda* (XIX.53), where he receives the epithet of *svayambhū* (self-existent) which is generally associated with Brahmā, the god of creation. At an early period the tortoise may have thus represented Prajāpati and Brahmā and become symbolic of creation. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* also refers to Prajāpati assuming the forms of fish, tortoise and boar which are later transferred to Viṣṇu.

The *Atharvaveda* (XVIII.1, 28) identifies Kaśyapa with sun. The *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* refers to it as the eighth sun.² The quality of the reptile to draw all its limbs has also led to its identification with the sun (who withdraws his rays) and the Universal

Soul.³ Kaśyapa is the name of a seer in the *R̥gveda* (IX.114) and of a priestly family in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* (VII.27), which is frequently found in the *Atharvaveda* and later Vedic literature as that of a cosmogonic power nearly related to or identical with Prajāpati, the Creator. Since the *R̥gveda* mentions tribes like the Matsyas (Fishes), Ajas (Goats); priestly families like the Gotamas (Oxen), Vatsas (Calves), Kauśikas (Owls), Māṇḍukeyas (frog-sons), etc., Macdonell sees the survival of totemism or the belief in the descent of the human race or of individual tribes or families from animals and plants.⁴ In the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* (VIII.21) the earth is said to have been promised to Kaśyapa by Viśvakarman. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* discusses the symbolism of the tortoise in great details identifying it with the life-sap of this world, the entire universe and the sun. In the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (VII.4, 3-6) Prajāpati is described as changing himself into a tortoise in which form he produced all creatures: 'Prajāpati having assumed the form of a tortoise created the living beings; what he created, he made, and as he made he is called Kūrma; and Kūrma being the same as Kaśyapa, all the creatures are said to have descended from Kaśyapa . . . (and) this tortoise is the same as that sun'. The same text (VII.5, 1, 1) refers to the Vedic ritual performed during the construction of the northern altar (*uttara vedi*) representing the universe, in which a live tortoise was placed in the first layer of bricks. At the base of the altar the tortoise represented the source of all things as well as firmness and stability to the structure. The plastron or the lower shell of the tortoise has been identified with this world and the carapace with the sky. While piling up the fire-altar for sacrifice, the tortoise is built into it as the lord of waters as referred to in the *Vājasaneyi Saṁhitā*. In the *Taittirīya Saṁhitā* (II.6, 3), *puroḍāśa* (sacrificial cake) is said to have assumed the form of a tortoise.⁵ The *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* (III, 203, 27d) indicates the great reverence paid to the cosmic tortoise. Sages saw something wondrous in the waters which they addressed as Yakṣa. Indra revealed to them the tortoise or *kūpāra* of boundless dimensions. The *Nirukta* (IV.18) explains the term *aktūpāra* as standing for waters, ocean, sun and the tortoise. The concept of Prajāpati-Brahmā as the foremost creator of the world and foremost of all the gods had fully developed by the time of the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* (III.15: *Brahmā devānāṁ prathamam sambabhūva viśvasya kartā bhuvanasya goptā*) and the *Mahābhārata* (III.272, 47) describes him as the creator, sustainer and destroyer –

*Sṛjyate Brahmamūrtistu rakṣyate pauruṣī tanuḥ /
Raudrī-bhāṛena śamayet tisro'vasthā Prajāpatēḥ //*

The foregoing account makes it clear that *Svayambhū Kūrma* was identified with Prajāpati, the god of creation, the waters or ocean which bears the earth, and the Sun, which sustains life and symbolizes fertility. It was thus an object of reverence and worship. It became a symbol of water, earth, sun, time, longevity, immortality, stability, support, fertility and creation. The association of *Kūrma* with water and its auspiciousness is also indicated by a peculiar tortoise shaped *pūrṇa-kumbha* (full vase) from Sanchi (Pl.I.6)⁶ and a potsherd from Mughalpura near Uklana in district Hisar of Haryana showing the depiction of tortoise on it (Pl.I.7).⁷ Lakṣmī,

the goddess of wealth, too came out of the churning of the water of the ocean. As such the tortoise is believed by some people to bring wealth and good luck and they keep tortoises in their houses as harbingers of good luck.

Kūrma-vibhāga (Topography)

Topography of India is styled as *Kūrma-vibhāga* or *Nakṣatra-Kūrmādhyāya* in a chapter of the *Bṛhatsamhitā*.⁸ The connotation of *kūrma* seems to be the hemispherical dome of the back of the tortoise representing the upper half of the globular earth. The tortoise is conceived as facing east with tail in the west represent perhaps the Kaccha region. The *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* (LVIII.73-74) compares the tortoise with god Nārāyaṇa.

The *Skanda Purāṇa* (Māheśvara-khaṇḍa) refers to *Kūrmācala* and *Kūrma-vana* which has been identified with Kumaon in Uttarakhand where Viṣṇu is said to have incarnated at Lohāghāṭ to support the Mandara mountain for churning the ocean.⁹ Some people trace the origin of the Kurmi people of dubious caste belonging to Uttarakhand, U.P., Bihar and other places from *Kūrma* (the tortoise). There, however, is no clinching evidence to prove it. A part of the sea-coast in Ganjam district of Odisha is also known as *Kūrma-kṣetra*¹⁰ almost parallel to Kaccha in the east representing the face of the tortoise.

Archaeological Finds

In the history of human evolution, which has scientifically and chronologically been defined by the Hindu theory of incarnations of god (*avatāra-vāda*), the tortoise appeared after fish which is purely aquatic animal. The tortoises lived in the era of the dinosaurs, millions of years ago. Fossil of a gigantic tortoise obtained from the Shiwalik hills is preserved in the museum of the Department of Geology, Panjab University, Chandigarh. The Fossil Museum at Saketi in district Sirmaur of Himachal Pradesh contains fragmentary fossils of gigantic tortoises.¹¹ The abundance of tortoises in the hills and the river Yamuna which flows through the region and forms the boundary between Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand in the hilly region which was later deified probably led to the prescription of the tortoise as her *vāhana* (vehicle). Like other parts of the world, the earliest cultures and civilization in India also grew in the river valleys and it was but natural for the people to know the aquatic animals like fish and tortoise. The Mesolithic rock-paintings of Kerwa Ghat in district Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh depict scenes of fish and tortoise hunting from a boat (Fig.1.a-b)¹² indicating the use of tortoise flesh as food. The Mesolithic rock art of South India too shows the drawings of fishes and tortoises in gigantic size in solid wash as at Kotavaram (PLI.1) and in outlines as at Bainete (PLI.2-5) on the basis of which Wakankar felt 'that latter vedic conception of *matsya*, *kūrma* and *varāha* incarnations are rooted in these Mesolithic beliefs'.¹³ The portrayal of the tortoise with the boat also vouches that the tortoise indicated water. Excavations of the Harappan sites, Kalibangan in particular, have yielded plenty of fish bones

indicating their use for sustenance. Tortoise meat is also consumed as food by some people. Terracottas depicting tortoises during the Harappan (Pl.I.8) and post-Harappan periods are known to us.¹⁴ Faience (Pl.II.1, 20 x 9 mm) and lapis lazuli (Pl.II.2-3, 19 x 11 and 8 x 5 mm) tortoises belonging to the proto-historic period in the collection of Shri R.K. Aggarwal of Ambala indicate the importance which such

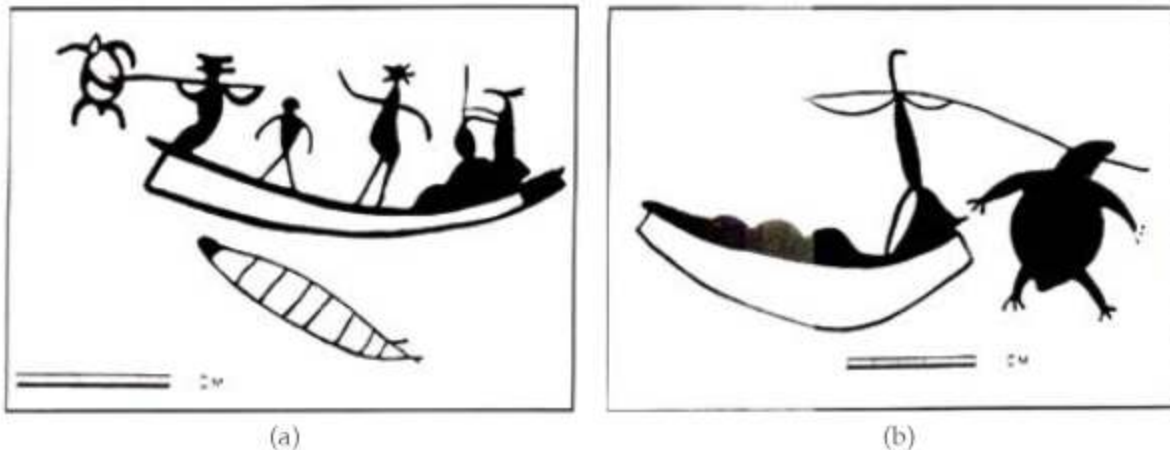
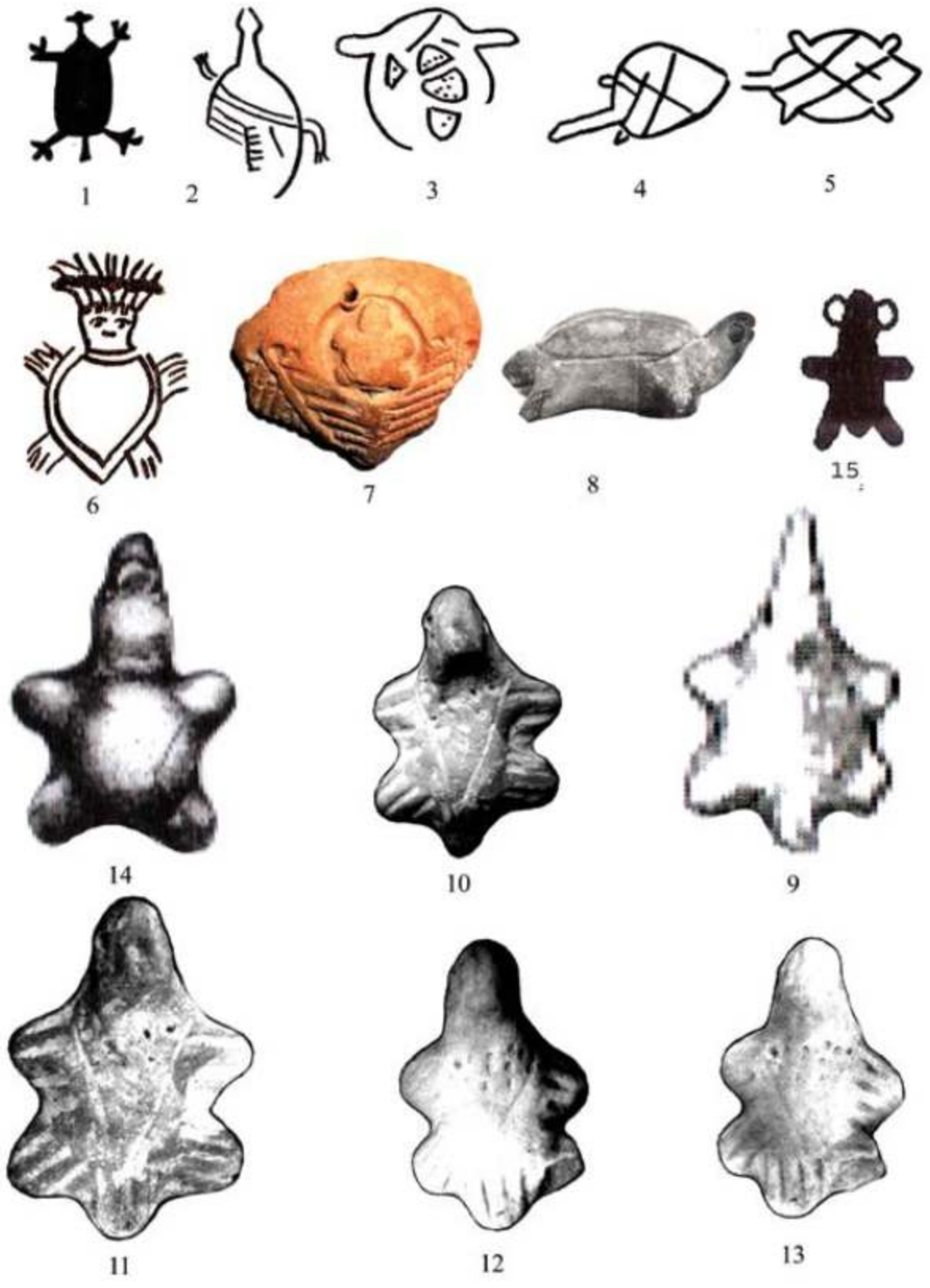


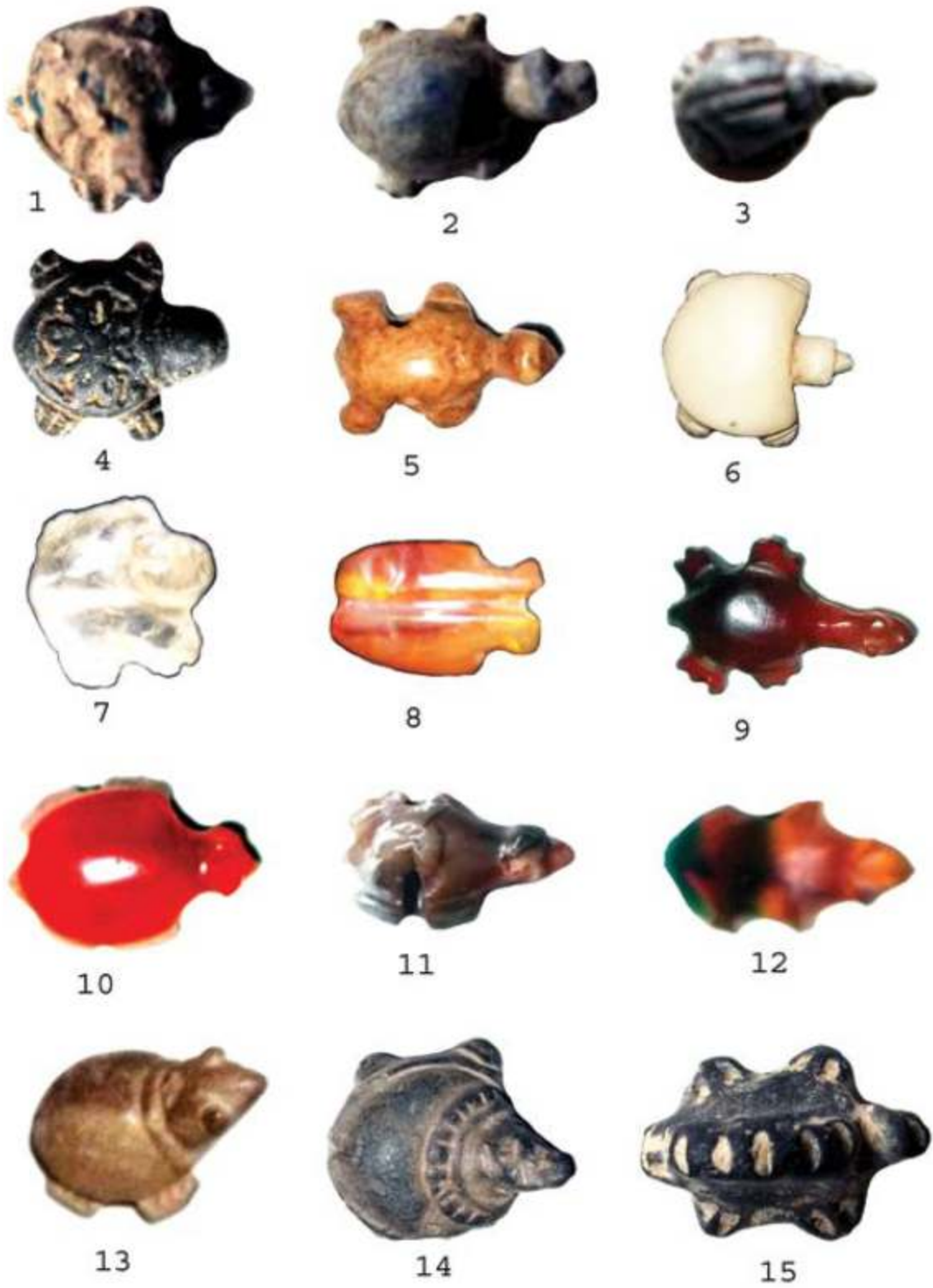
Fig.1. Mesolithic rock-paintings: fish and tortoise hunting, Kerwa Ghat

figures carried at that time. Animal remains from late Harappan levels recovered from excavations at Daulatpur near Kurukshetra have yielded a piece of the charred tortoise shell indicating the roasting of the turtles for food. The shell was used for making designs on the exteriors of the pots.¹⁵ Different species of tortoises and turtles survive on land and in water.

Excavations at Maheshwar yielded a fragmentary terracotta tortoise from the Mauryan level¹⁶ and excavations at Ujjain have yielded some terracotta figurines of tortoises belonging to the Śuṅga period (Pl.I.9).¹⁷ The ancient site of Sugh in district Yamunanagar, Haryana has yielded some Kushan terracotta figurines of the tortoise all of which bear linear indentations on the four feet and tail, pin-pricks and V-shaped engraving on the back and transverse hole in the mouth or nostrils for stringing indicating their use as toys (Pl.I.10-13).¹⁸ Many early historic figures of tortoises and tortoise-shaped beads of copper (Pl.II.4, 17 x 14 mm) embossed with lotus design on their back and probably representing it as *dharaṇī-dhara*¹⁹, crystal (Pl.II.7, 1.3cm), agate (Pl.II.8-12, 13x7.5, 18x11, 15 x 6, 12 x 10 and 8 x 3 mm, respectively), shell (Pl.II.6, 15 x 13 mm), ivory (Pl.II.5, 12 x 7 mm), stone (Pl.II.13, 17 x 11 mm) and terracotta (Pl.II.14-15, 22 x 16 and 28 x 19 mm) from Sugh and other sites are preserved in the collection of Shri Aggarwal. Tortoise beads have been excavated from many early historic sites like Bhokardan, Kaushambi, Rajghat, Taxila, Ter, Ujjain, etc. The Bharat Kala Bhavan (BHU, Varanasi) collection contains twenty-five tortoise-shaped beads made of carnelian, clay, garnet, etc.²⁰ Tortoise-beads, amulets and charms may have been used for longevity, protection and good luck in early historic period. Sculptures of *ganās* (goblins) wearing tortoise amulets



Pl.I : Tortoise, Archaeological finds



Pl.II : Tortoise, Archaeological finds

from Gupta period onwards have been found from Nachna, Vidisha, Elephanta, etc. An Odishan sculpture of Gaṇeśa in the British Museum and that of Kārttikeya in the Philadelphia Museum of Art actually show these deities wearing necklaces with tortoise amulets.²¹ Beaches and coasts of Odisha are the well known nestling sites of turtles. Impressed by the long life of the turtles the common folk in Odisha must have used tortoise amulets from early times.

A terracotta figurine of tortoise recovered from a layer of the Kṣatrapa period from Avra in district Mandasaur (Pl.II.14) shows the tip of the nose or mouth perforated for passing a string²² suggesting its use as a toy. The tradition may have continued from early times as a tortoise with two rings is found depicted on punch-marked coins also (Pl.II.15).²³ Use of terracotta figurines as toys in ancient India is indicated by *Kāśyapa Saṁhitā*, *Dioyāvadāna* and *Abhijñāna-Śākuntalam* also. The stories of the former births of the Buddha include the story of *Kacchapa Jātaka*²⁴ a slightly different version of which exists in the *Pañca-Tantra* also. It has been found depicted on the back of a railing pillar from Mathura datable to the first century CE.²⁵ The tortoise here is depicted in its natural form being beaten by sticks by two persons. Bāṇa specifically mentions a group of terracotta artists who specialized in toy making and prepared the terracotta figurines of crocodile, tortoise, coconuts, plantains and betel-nut trees on the eve of the marriage of Rājaśrī.²⁶ That tortoise figurines continued to be popular in the early medieval period is indicated a find from Antichak.²⁷

A broken clay figurine of tortoise of the early historic or Sātavāhana period is known from Nevasa in district Ahmednagar also.²⁸ A clay seal from Bhita²⁹ bears the tortoise device but it is difficult to relate it to any divinity in the absence of any definite evidence.

The Patna Museum contains a simple Kushan terracotta figurine of a tortoise (Acc. No.4312, 5 x 3.5 cm) from Bulandibagh³⁰; three others of the same period from Patna bearing Acc.Nos.8777 (hollow, roughly impressed with lines, 6 x 3 cm), 6096 (5 cm long) and 9293 (flat, asterisk shaped buff), respectively³¹ and one (Acc.No.1904, 2 cm) from Vaiśālī (Basarh) baked black belonging to the Gupta period.³² D.B. Spooner too had obtained a finely executed clay tortoise of the Gupta period in his excavations at Basarh about a century back.³³ The transformation may have happened sometime after the Kushan period as we find the earliest reference to Viṣṇu identified with Varāha, Kṛṣṇa and Rāma in the Bagh inscription of *Mahārāja* Bhulūṇḍa of the year 47 (probably of the Gupta era which started in CE 319-20).³⁴ The depiction of Śiva in various forms on Kushan coins³⁵ compared with the representation of Vāsudeva on a single gold coin-type of Vāsudeva³⁶ also indicates in the same direction. Severed and separated from their cultural contexts, most of the terracotta figurines of tortoises discovered so far do not show any signs of respectability or pedestals (or lotus-pedestals) and Vaiṣṇava attributes and thus cannot definitely be identified as representations of the incarnations of Viṣṇu.

Kūrma in Art and Iconography

With the passage of time Hindu deities have seen vicissitudes of ascent and descent. Prajāpati-Brahmā who was an important member of the Hindu triad lost much of his importance later.³⁷ Viṣṇu, who did not occupy a very significant and important position in the Vedic mythology, rose to the Supreme position subsequently. The taking of three strides by the latter to traverse the earth and the terrestrial spaces as reflected in his epithets of urukrama, vikrama and urugāya has led scholars to ascribe him a solar origin.³⁸ Gonda believes that Kūrma played an important role in the cosmogonic, cosmographic and genealogical conceptions of the Indian people. Viṣṇu was a god of fertility and vegetation initially³⁹ but Kūrma and Kaśyapa, associated with creation and fertility, ultimately came to be identified with Viṣṇu who is well known to have assumed the incarnations of Fish, Tortoise and Boar which were earlier assumed by Prajāpati.⁴⁰ In the Kūrma Purāṇa⁴¹, Viṣṇu as the Supreme Deity (Nārāyaṇa) narrates the story of the assumption of this form directly to the sage Nārada who narrated it to Sūta and the latter in his turn narrated it to the assembly of sages.

The only important part which Kūrma played as an incarnation of Viṣṇu was to serve as a support for the mount Mandara or Meru, or Śiva-liṅga, all of them representing the axis of the world, in the Churning of the Ocean described in details with some differences in the *Rāmāyaṇa* (I.41) and the *Mahābhārata* (I.16ff). The former tells us that the sons of Kaśyapa begotten by Diti and Aditi (i.e., the *Daityas* (demons) and *Devas* (gods)), decided to churn the ocean in order to obtain *Amṛta* (nectar) and the riches of the nether world using Mandara mountain as the churning staff and serpent Vāsuki as the churning rope. Various objects like the moon, Airāvata elephant, Uccaiśravas (the white horse), Lakṣmī, Surabhi (cow of plenty), Vāruṇī (wine), Kaustubha jewel, Pārijāta (coral tree, *erythrina indica*) and Dhanavantari (divine physician) with a vase of nectar came out and the two groups fell out at the end on the division of nectar resulting in the defeat, death and banishment of the demons. The story as given in the *Mahābhārata* refers to the tortoise in the *Samudra-manthana* episode as *Kūrma-rājan* which is not connected with Viṣṇu in any way though the *Nārāyaṇīya* section includes *Kūrma* as one of the incarnations of Viṣṇu. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (VIII.6-7) also contain this legend. The *Kūrma* incarnation is represented by the Churning of the Ocean scene as for example in the relief inside a small temple at Pathari (Madhya Pradesh) of the late Gupta period, where Beglar recognized all the incarnations except the Fish.⁴² The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* (I.9) and the *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa* (III.85, 59), however, give a fully Viṣṇuised version describing the tortoise as an incarnation of Viṣṇu. In some Vaiṣṇava reliefs where all or some of the ten incarnations have been depicted the Fish and Tortoise are generally shown as simple aquatic animals, sometimes on a lotus pedestal also as we see them in the individual stone sculptures. Numerous *Daśavatāra* panels from Gaya published recently by Gerd J.R. Mevissen show this second incarnation as an animal on a lotus pedestal or by simple churning scene.⁴³ A richly carved tenth century lintel from Kumher

now preserved in the Bharatpur Museum (Reg.No.54, 147.5 x 87.5 cm) shows the ten *avatāras* (incarnations) in a row with the *Kūrma* represented by the simple churning of the ocean scene.⁴⁴ All the ten *avatāras* do not appear together before the ninth century. In the *parikara* (surrounding frame) of a Viṣṇu image from Gujjar Kheri (district Sonipat, Haryana) where the ten incarnations have been shown *Kūrmāvatāra* is represented by a simple churning scene.⁴⁵ Some individual images also depict the Fish and Tortoise as realistic creatures, often perched on blossomed lotus pedestals as for example the Fish incarnation, Chamba, Himachal Pradesh (10th century CE)⁴⁶ and *Kūrma* incarnation, Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba, 10th century CE (Pl.III).⁴⁷ Āhaḍ near Udaipur in Rajasthan has yielded two beautiful tenth century reliefs depicting Fish and Tortoise (Pl.IV) incarnations perched on a *Kalpa-vṛkṣa* (wish fulfilling tree) with the mace, wheel, conch and lotus shown below in the coils of a *nāga* (snake).⁴⁸ Not un-often, they are shown in a hybrid way where the human form emerges from the mouth of the Fish or Tortoise, as in the *Mīrā Mandira* at Ahar, Udaipur



Pl.III : Kūrma incarnation, Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba, 10th century CE



Pl.IV : Matsya and Kūrma incarnations on Kalpavṛkṣa, Ahar, Udaipur

(Pl.V). Sometimes they emerge from the necks of Fish and Tortoise placed on a full vase, pedestal, lotus pedestal or throne. A relief from the step well at Bundi, however, is interesting as it shows the four-handed Viṣṇu emerging from the up turned wide-opened mouth of the reptile with a vase having a churning stick on left and a small human figure (Dhanavantari?) holding a vase in his up raised hands on the right at the back of the tortoise. Viṣṇu is supporting mace in his upper right hand and wheel and conch shell in the additional and natural left hands while with the principal right hand he holds the two ends of the string wound around the churning stick

(Pl.VI). The half-tortoise half-man form has been more popular in south India though a black stone image from Mahanad (Hoogly) now in the Indian Museum, Kolkata is also known.⁴⁹ It is interesting to note that the Boar incarnation is also represented in theriomorphic and hybrid ways.

The Churning of the Ocean is represented in two forms, simple and elaborate. In the former as referred to above the tortoise serves as the support for the churning rod with Vāsuki serpent wound around it and used as the churning string. On either side are shown gods or a god and a demon holding the tail and hooded mouth of the snake. Sometimes a god or goddess is shown as surmounting the churning staff and objects churned out of the ocean or some deities are also depicted above. There are some examples in which the tortoise is missing and the churning rod is placed in a *kalaśa* (vase) only, as at Kiradu. The vase assumes the symbolism of missing tortoise and represents the waters or ocean.⁵⁰ We have referred to above *Kacchapa* as a support for the mount Mandara or Meru, or Śiva-*liṅga*, all of them representing the axis of the world. It is interesting to note that a stone relief in the



Pl.V : Kūrma and Matsya incarnations, Mira temple, Ahar, Udaipur

Kacchapeśvara shrine at Kanchi the *Kacchapa* is shown as paying homage to the *liṅga*. *Kacchapa* here probably represents Viṣṇu. Devangana Desai has referred to the tradition of representing tortoise in front of Nandi in the late medieval temples of western India in the Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa and Karnataka regions.⁵¹ Illustrated here is an example from Shamlaji (Gujarat) which depicts the tortoise in front of the bull (Pl.VII). What, however, is of interest is the fact that the carapace of the reptile bears a lotus flower in an octagonal frame in the centre with conch at the back and heart-shaped marks in parallelogram-like compartments on the rest of the available surface.



Pl.VI : Viṣṇu emerging from tortoise, Stepwell, Bundi

In elaborate form we find detailed depictions characteristically illustrating the Paurāṇic narrative. The elaborate forms of the Churning of the Ocean started in the Gupta period with the depiction on the stone lintel of a *toraṇa* (ornamental frame) showing numerous figures from Pawayā and continued later as exemplified by specimens from Garhwa (Pl.VIII) and another tenth century figure preserved in the Gujri Mahal Museum, Gwalior.⁵² It has been depicted in the eighth century Kālikāmātā Temple, Chittoregarh⁵³; in frieze of the Viṣṇu Temple-5 in Saciyā-mātā Temple complex at Osian (Pl.IX)⁵⁴, the ruins of the *nāṭya-maṇḍapa* (dance pavilion) of the tenth century at Jagat in Rajasthan, Jageśvara Temple at Sadari near Ranakpur (10th century), and at Abaneri, Arthuna, Harshanth, etc.⁵⁵ An image representing the



Pl.VII : Tortoise in front of bull, Shamlaji, Gujarat

simple churning scene exists on the wall of Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple at Chamba in Himachal Pradesh (Pl.X). Depiction of the ten incarnations of Viṣṇu individually also on the medieval temples of Himachal Pradesh was quite popular. A naturalistic depiction of *Kūrma* on the wall of a Śiva temple at Baijnath illustrates it well (Pl.XI). The theme was popular with medieval painters also.⁵⁶

Śrī-Kūrma Jayantī (The Illustrious Tortoise Anniversary)

Śrī-Kūrma Jayantī is celebrated nowadays on Vaiśākha Pūrṇimā (full moon day) which generally falls in the month of May. This is the day of the celebration of Budhha's birthday also (Budhha Pūrṇimā). According to the *Dharmaśāstras*, however, Viṣṇu incarnated as *Kūrma* to aid the process of churning the ocean on the twelfth day of the bright fortnight of the lunar month of *Pauṣa* (January) when images of the tortoise supporting Mount Mandara were to be donated to the Brāhmaṇas.⁵⁷ The low-caste people such as the Doms of Bengal worship their deity Dharma or Dharma-ṭhākura in the shape of a tortoise or simple aniconic stone and it is interesting to note that the name Dharma is derived from the Austric word *durum* or *duram* which means



Pl.VIII : Samudramanthana



Pl. IX : *Samudramanthana*, Sachiya Mata temple complex, Osian

tortoise.⁵⁸ In this non-Brahmanical cult daily worship consists of oiling and bathing of tortoise-shaped or non-iconic stone. D.C. Sircar has traced the antiquity of this cult to the 10th-11th century CE.⁵⁹ Long back Haraprasad Shastri had proposed Buddhist origin of the *Dharma* cult.⁶⁰ The association of the worship of tortoise seems to have brought about the cultic fusion and the shifting and celebration of the *Kūrma Jayantī* on Buddha *Pūrṇimā*, i.e. the full moon day of the month of *Vaiśākha*.



Pl.X: *Samudramanthana*, Lakṣmi-Nārāyaṇa temple, Chamba, Himachal Pradesh



Pl.XI : Kūrma, Śiva temple (wall), Baijnath

Tortoise in Architecture

We have already referred to the placing of a tortoise in the first layer of bricks in the construction of northern altar as referred to in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*. Besides being a source of all things the tortoise may have served as an emblem of firmness and stability. This concept seems to have developed further later on as in the *Vāstu-pūjā* it became almost customary to place a *kūrma* in the form of a *kūrma-śilā* (tortoise slab) in the foundation of temples and other buildings so that they may be firm and stable. The *Aparājitapṛcchā* (chapter 153) and *Kṣīrāṇava* (chapter 101) prescribe placing of the *kūrma-śilā* with symbols of the regents of quarters in the foundation of a building. The tradition has actually been corroborated by many temples and buildings not only in India but also in

the countries like Nepal, Sri Lanka, Java, Indonesia, Vietnam, etc. influenced by Indian culture and traditions. Devangana Desai⁶¹ has referred to the tradition of putting tortoise figures placed on auspicious pots with lotus flowers in south Indian temples and *kalyāṇa-maṇḍapas* (marriage halls) and the actual find of a casket of copper with a lid fashioned in the shape of a tortoise excavated from the foundation of a 5th-6th century temple at Gudnapur in the Uttara Kannada district of Karnataka. Actual finds from the foundations of old temples and other buildings corroborates the tradition of depositing tortoise figures or *kūrma-śilās* throughout the medieval period and it is interesting to know that some people bury such figures, sometimes with jewels and coins or metals, while laying the foundations of their houses or

business establishments even now.⁶² The priests also used to sit on wooden tortoise platforms (*kūrma-piṭhas*) during the *Kalāśa* ceremony in south Indian temples. *Kūrmāsanas* (tortoise seats) are used for devotional purposes by the Nambudiri Brahmins of Kerala and for bridal couples during the wedding ceremonies.⁶³

In Tantric Yoga, the *kuṇḍalini śakti* (psychic energy), believed to be dormant in each individual, is said to rest on the *kūrma* of the *Mūlādhāra cakra*, the subtle centre of the human body at the base of the spine, which is identified with Mount Meru, the cosmic axis.⁶⁴ Like the *Śrī-yantras* we have *Kūrma-yantras* also indicative of the elevation of the tortoise to the high divine position.

Tortoise compared to a Self-Disciplined Person

Śrīmad-Bhagavad-Gītā (II.58) says that a person of steady mind withdraws his senses from the sensual objects as a tortoise withdraws its limbs within its shells to protect itself –

*Yadā saṁharate cāyaṁ kūrmo'ṅgānīva sarvaśaḥ /
Indriyāṅḍrayārthebhyastasya prajñā pratiṣṭhitā //*

It is interesting to note that there is a unique representation of tortoise at Nachna in Central India belonging to sixth century showing the animal with a human face holding a rosary like an ascetic (Pl.XII).⁶⁵ Devangana Desai holds that this imagery of *kūrma* likened to a *muni* (sage) anticipates the idea expressed later in the *Avani-Kūrmasataka* attributed to the scholar-king Bhojadeva (c.1000-55) of Central India who got the two *śatakas* (collection of hundred verses) on *kūrma* inscribed at Dhārā, his capital.⁶⁶

The *ūrdhva-meḍhra* (penis erectus) of the famous image from Tala (District Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh) is represented by a tortoise. Two bell-like testicles are designed as forelimbs of the animal.⁶⁷ Penis erectus signifies control over sensual emotions which is symbolized by the tortoise as indicated in the *Gītā*.

Tortoise in Indian Iconography

The *Matsya Purāṇa* (246.75), *Skanda Purāṇa* (II, *Vyaṅkaṭeśvara Māhātmya*, 2, 16b), *Śīlparatna* (XXV.113-15), *Devatāmūrtiprakaraṇa* (V.72-76), etc. prescribe one foot of Varāha on a tortoise and the other on the hood of the serpent Śeṣa. This is seen in some sculptures including an interesting therianthropic figure of Varāha *avatāra* preserved in the State Museum, Lucknow (No. H-123). Kalpana Desai has observed that it “seems to signify, like the *nāga* figures associated with the god, the nether world which the god had entered to rescue the goddess Earth”.⁶⁸ This depiction follows the description of the Varāha as given in the *Matsya Purāṇa* (246.75) which says that while raising up the earth the Varāha placed one foot on the tortoise who was supporting the earth and came up from *Rasātala* (the nether world) (*Kūrma-priṣṭhe*



Pl.XII : Kūrma with human head, Nachna (Central India), 6th century CE

padani nyasya niścakrāma rasātalāt). Elsewhere also in this very text it is ordained that the image of Varāha should have one foot on the *Kūrma* and the other on the forehead of Nāgendra (Lord of the serpents).⁶⁹ Since the nether world is indicated by the *nāga* figures in the said relief, there was no necessity to corroborate it further by the tortoise. We, therefore, prefer to interpret the presence of the tortoise under the foot of the god to signify the firm support and stability as noted in the episode of the Churning of the Ocean. The *Aparājitapṛcchā* (219.22) corroborates the statement of the *Matsya Purāṇa*.

Referring to the Fish and Tortoise incarnations of Viṣṇu, Banerjea has observed that “These two incarnations are represented in two ways, either in purely theriomorphic manner or as hybrid forms in which the upper half is human and the lower half, animal.” He continues to state that “There can be no question of finding any Vaiṣṇava emblems in the purely theriomorphic forms of these two *Avatāras*. But in their hybrid forms, the human part (upper) invariably holds the usual attributes in the four hands.”⁷⁰ Banerjea’s observation is based on the *Agni* and the *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa* which enjoin that the image of the *Kūrma* incarnation should be made exactly in the form of a tortoise. Some later texts like *Śrī-Tattvanidhi*, *Sāttvata Saṁhitā*, *Meru-Tantra*, etc. describe his images in hybrid form with Vaiṣṇava attributes.⁷¹ Though it is difficult to identify purely realistic figures of the tortoise as representing the

incarnatory form of the god yet they can be distinguished from the former if placed on a raised pedestal, a full vase or a lotus pedestal or a throne. In Vaiṣṇava fanes and reliefs fish and tortoise are often paired. As simple aquatic animals representing incarnations of Viṣṇu in Punjab, fish and tortoise may be seen at the top corners of a Viṣṇu image from Janer and a Vaikuṅṭha image from Kharar, both datable to *circa* twelfth century.⁷² In the twelfth century Viṣṇu image from Kosli (Haryana) also these two incarnatory forms have been represented as simple aquatic creatures.⁷³

In the *Kūrma Purāṇa* (II.44, 67 ff.) we find sages addressing *Kūrma* as the Supreme Being - Nārāyaṇa, Vāsudeva, Yogajña (knower of Yoga), Yogīśvara and Teacher of Yoga. The *Agni* (272.19) and the *Matsya Purāṇas* (LIII.46-47) also mention the discourse of Viṣṇu in the form of a tortoise to Nārada and other sages. The sculptural representation of this may be seen in a panel of the southern upper niche of the Lakṣmaṇa Temple at Khajuraho where "Kūrma-Nārāyaṇa is seated in the lotus posture with lower hands in *dhyāna* gesture, and holding a mace and a discus in the upper right and left hands respectively. In the foreground on the right the seated ascetic seems to be Nārada. The six standing ascetics and the one seated behind Nārada are the Seven *Ṛṣis*. The emaciated ascetic (with his head now broken) seems to be conversing with the figure on the extreme left."⁷⁴ Here the Lord is seated on a tortoise with his lower two hands in *yoga-mudrā* and the upper two hands holding the disc and the mace. A parallel figure of Yoga-Nārāyaṇa seated on a fish is also shown.



Pl.XIII : Yamunā on Kūrma, Osian

The *Viṣṇudharmottara* (III.52, 7) and the *Agni Purāṇas* (L.17a) prescribe tortoise as the vehicle of Yamuna. Numerous images of Ganga on crocodile and Yamuna on tortoise (Pl. XIII) have come to light from various parts of India. These two river goddesses were particularly popular for depicting them on the doorframes of temples from

The *Viṣṇudharmottara* (III.52, 7) and the *Agni Purāṇas* (L.17a) prescribe tortoise as the vehicle of Yamuna. Numerous images of Ganga on crocodile and Yamuna on tortoise (Pl. XIII) have come to light from various parts of India. These two river goddesses were particularly popular for depicting them on the doorframes of temples from

Gupta period onwards. They are generally depicted as standing on their vehicles or on a lotus seat placed on the back of the animal. The *Viṣṇudharmottara* (III.52, 19b) states that the crocodile and tortoise, the vehicles of the river goddesses, symbolize virility and time (*Virya-kālau vinirdiṣṭau tathā makara-kacchapau*).

In the Jaina pantheon, tortoise is the *vāhana* (vehicle) of the twentieth Tirthaṅkara (path-finder) Muni Suvrata and also of Ajita, the yakṣa acolyte of the ninth pontiff Suvidhinātha (according to the Śvetāmbara tradition) or Puṣpadanta (according to the Digambara tradition) and Kinnara, the yakṣa of the fifteenth pontiff Dharmanātha (Śvetāmbara). Pārśva or Dharaṇa, the yakṣa of the twenty-third path-finder Pārśvanātha also rides the tortoise. Mahāvidyā Gāndhārī too has the tortoise as her vehicle. Amongst the yakṣis only Mahākālī (Digambara) accompanying Puṣpadanta and sometimes Padmāvati (yakṣī of the penultimate path-finder) rides the tortoise. Independent images of the yakṣas and yakṣis are rare but the metal and stone sculptures of the Tirthaṅkaras with yakṣas and yakṣis belonging to a period of ninth-tenth centuries onwards sometimes depict them as seated on their *vāhanas*.⁷⁵ The depiction of tortoise as the vehicle perhaps indicates the full control of the tirthaṅkaras, yakṣas, yakṣis and Mahāvidyās over senses and sensual pleasures. The tortoise is also the mount of Ananta or Śeṣa, and of the planet Śani in some Jaina versions. In some folk paintings Rāhu is also seen as riding a tortoise.⁷⁶ *Kūrmāsana* signifies a tortoise which serves as the seat of a deity (e.g. Yamuna, Pṛthvī, Yoga-Nārāyaṇa, etc. as noted in this article) or a sitting pose in which 'the legs are crossed so as to make the heels come under the gluteals'.⁷⁷

On the pedestal of the Vaikuṅṭha image in the sanctum of the Lakṣmaṇa temple at Khajuraho there is a snake-hooded goddess seated on a tortoise flanked by snake-hooded therianthropic figures in *añjali-mudrā* (salutation pose). A similar figure occurs on Hari-Hara, Vāmana and other Viṣṇu images of Khajuraho and central India. Elsewhere, while representing the *Kūrma* incarnation on a door-lintel now preserved in the site Museum, Lakṣmī has been shown seated on the tortoise holding a pot in her left hand as she emerged when churning the ocean.⁷⁸ R. Awasthi⁷⁹ and Krishna Deva⁸⁰ have identified her as Lakṣmī. The placement of such a figure on the pedestal, however, better suits her identification with Pṛthvī as indicated by the *Matsya Purāṇa* (257.11) and suggested by N.P. Joshi.⁸¹ She is seated on the *Ādi-Kūrma* (cosmic tortoise) and the *nāgas* flanking her symbolize the nether region. Pṛthvī seated on a tortoise may be seen in the second century BCE railing of Stūpa No.2 at Sanchi as also in the centre of the threshold of the Kandariya Mahadeva temple also displaying *abhaya*, a manuscript along with a spiral lotus stalk and a water pot flanked by water divinities holding a vase in their hands.⁸² *Gauḍaraho* of Vākpatirāja, a Prākṛt work of 8th century, describes Mahākūrma as supporting the Earth.⁸³ A verse of the *Avanikūrma-śataka* ascribed to king Bhoja Paramāra (CE 1000- 1055) also tells us that the chief of the tortoises supports the earth on the word of Śiva.⁸⁴ This work also refers to the qualities of the tortoise like working non-stop, doing good to others, firm determination like a sage, providing a path for others to follow, and so on. It

repeatedly describes the tortoise as *Dharaṇi-dhara*. The *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* (58.1ff) states that the tortoise supports Bhārata and the *Kūrma-vibhāga* of the *Bṛhatsamhitā* records a belief that the shape of the earth corresponds to that of a tortoise facing east. Devangana Desai has illustrated a brass turtle with a lotus embossed in the centre of its back similar to the copper bead (Pl.II.4) described above and notes that it is generally placed in the centre of a hall (*maṇḍapa*) or in the open space in front of the temples at Kolhapur in Maharashtra. She has also referred to and illustrated a colossal brass turtle carved in low relief facing the Khaṇḍobā Temple at Jejuri near Pune noting the fact that it is so large in size that devotees sit, rest and play on it and that its centre bears an embossed lotus design which is offered flowers and worshipped.⁸⁵ Earlier, Joanna Williams too had recorded large tortoise figures measuring more than five and ten metres in diameter carved in low relief on the floor facing the temples at Gokarn where people stood for worship.⁸⁶ It may also be mentioned that the *vīṇā* (lyre) of Sarasvati is called Kacchapī, perhaps because of similarity of shape.

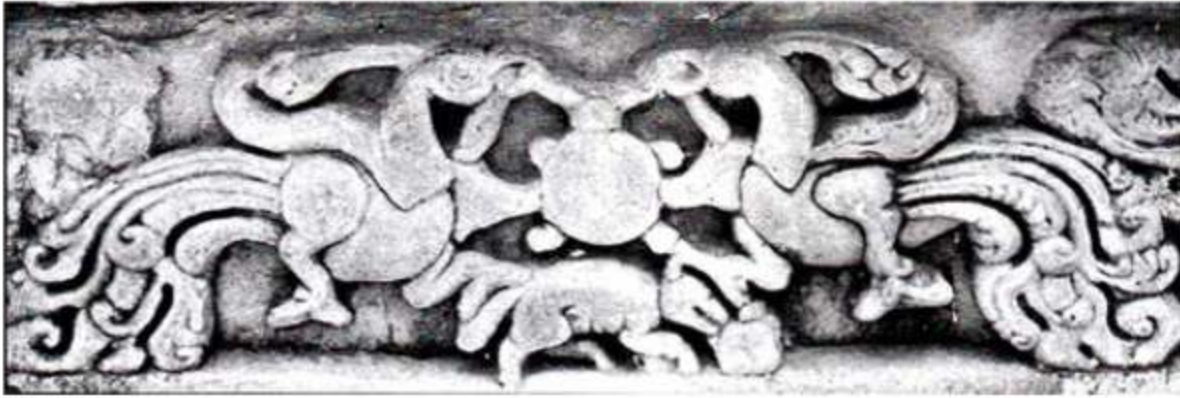
Tortoise in Astrology and Folk-Lore

Primal Astrology believes that the zodiac sign of a person represents his/her animal spirit or the instinctive nature. Tortoises have the Tropical Sun sign of Sagittarius. Hindu astrology connects tortoise with Kubera and keeping of a tortoise figure or amulet is considered as a lucky charm for getting wealth and riches. The story of the friendship of the geese and tortoise forming part of the *Pañcatantra* of Viṣṇugupta of *circa* second-first century BCE has been found depicted in stone along with some other stories in the eleventh century Tripurātakesvara Temple at Balligave in Karnataka (Pls.XIV-XV).⁸⁷

Numerous beads of semi-precious stones referred to above (Pl.II) seem to indicate the antiquity of this belief. A tortoise-shaped terracotta rattle decorated with *dakṣiṇāvarta* and *vāṃāvarta savastika* symbols engraved on its back and beads of shell found from Naurangabad indicate the decorative and lucky nature of the tortoise during the early historic period.⁸⁸

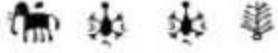


Pl.XIV : Swans and tortoise, Tripurātakesvara temple, Balligave, Karnataka



PL.XV : Swans and tortoise, Tripurantakesvara temple, Balligave, Karnataka

Tortoise on Coins

The earliest occurrence of the figure of tortoise exists on half *kārsāpana* (approximately 1.7 g) silver coins of the Aśmaka Janapada (State) bearing four symbols where the tortoise with small crescent marks has been punched twice (). The Aśmakas occupied the territory between the Godavari and Narmada rivers now represented by the districts of Nasik, Dhule, Aurangabad and Jalgaon (Fig.2). These coins are dated to 5th-4th century BCE.⁸⁹

Tortoise, sometimes with taurine and other subsidiary symbols has been depicted on punch-marked silver coins of the universal or Imperial Series also (Fig.3) datable from about 500 to 200 BCE.⁹⁰ Copper punch-marked coins from Ujjain also show a tortoise (PL.XVI.1). A *kāñsika* (bell-metal or bronze coin) of the Narmadā valley belonging to 3rd-2nd century BCE too carries the figure of a tortoise along with that

of a fish ().⁹¹

The punch-marked coins show very few human figures which have generally been accepted as those of gods. Animals like elephant, bull, etc., have however been punched frequently. Coomaraswamy thinks that such symbols were the precursors of the deities in human form and were codified in later texts as their vehicles and attributes.⁹² As such the depiction of the tortoise on these coins may thus be taken to represent Prajāpati-Brahmā. Some un-inscribed copper coins datable to *circa* third and second century BCE from Ujjayinī also bear the figure of tortoise (PL.XVI.2),



some times in a square indented frame or accompanied by taurine symbols (), ) as noted earlier.⁹³ Some late third or early second century BCE coins from Ujjain actually carry the labeled figure of Brahmā. Since the tortoise represented Brahmā only at such an early stage, its depiction on un-inscribed coins has to be associated with this god only and not Viṣṇu.⁹⁴



Fig.2. Aśmaka Territory

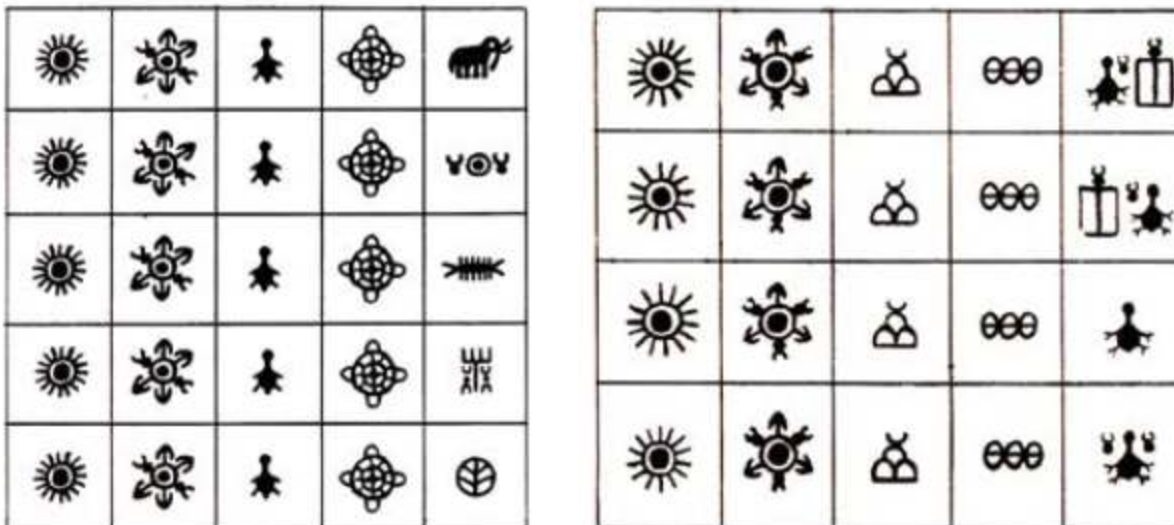
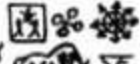


Fig.3. Tortoise on Imperial punch-marked coins

It may also be pointed out here that some Eran-Ujjayinī copper coins of *circa* second-first centuries BCE show aquatic animals like fish, tortoise, etc. in square or rectangular

tanks () or the double undulating or straight lines representing rivers



(Pl.XVI.3-8). An interesting un-inscribed cast copper coin from Kauśāmbī in the collection of Jan Lingen and some Pandyan coins also show a tortoise along with fish in a square tank (Pl.XVI.9). Sometimes the auspicious symbol like the *svastika* was also shown with other symbols in the depiction of the river (Pl.XVI.10). It continued up to the time of Sātakarṇi who annexed this region and issued Eran type punch-marked coins (Pl.XVI.11). A lead coin from Tripuri (2.16 cm, 9.0 g) shows on the obverse the figure of a tortoise in the center with a standing human figure on left and the Brahm» legend reading *Rājño Abhaya[datasa]* in *circa* first century BCE characters. The reverse carries the depiction of a railed tree and frog. Another lead un-inscribed coin from the same site datable to the same period also shows a frog on the obverse and a railed triangular symbol accompanied by a linear human figure holding in his right hand a spear pointing downwards.⁹⁵ It is difficult to make out the significance of the devices specifically but both the frog and the tortoise being aquatic animals may represent the river Narmadā which flows by the side of Tripuri. The depiction of tortoise on the said and numerous other coins may alternatively be regarded as symbolic of the longevity and stability of the regime or as one of the nine treasures of Kubera:

*Mahāpadmaśca padmaśca śaṅkha makara-kacchapau /
Mukunda-kunda-nīlāśca kharvaśca nidhaya nava //*

Tortoise in Tantra and Popular Belief

The Madias of Madhya Pradesh worship the tortoise because of their belief that it saved life on earth and use tortoise-shaped combs.⁹⁶ The tortoise continues to be believed as the harbinger of good luck as noted above and the Tantriks suggest the worship of *Kūrma-yantras* on the pattern of *Śrī-yantras* for fulfillment of desires and recommend keeping the figures of the tortoise in different media of metal (gold, silver, copper/bronze or aluminium), stone, ivory, terracotta and even the paintings for prosperity. Tortoise figures have been used as the support for lamp-stands and lamps for *ārati* in the temples, for decorative purposes, for preserving valuable objects in boxes, covers, etc. for a long time as also for omens, ritualistic and religious purposes⁹⁷, and symbols of health, wealth and good luck. For desired results tortoise amulets and even keeping of living tortoises is recommended. This has given rise to keeping them as pets resulting in illegal trading of turtles. Different rare varieties are smuggled from some distant places and even from abroad. An official of the Wildlife Crime Control Bureau of Chandigarh has referred to a recent case in which a person purchased an Indian Tent Turtle procured from Australia for Rs. 1.1 million. Most of the people perhaps do not know that different species of the



Pl.XVI: Tortoise on coins

turtles have been declared protected in the country under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 under different Schedules. Confining of Schedule-I protected turtle is a non-bailable offence and entails three to seven years' imprisonment while confining of Schedule-IV protected turtles entails a fine of Rs. 25000.00 and imprisonment of

two years.⁹⁸ The arrest of two small time turtle traders in North Kolkata in August 2015 led to the apprehension of 20 persons from Uttar Pradesh, 12 from Maharashtra, 5 each from Karnataka and Bengal and 2 from Delhi. The racket was involved in smuggling various species of tortoises and turtles for both the pet industry and for their meat. Small species like tent turtle, star tortoise and crowned river turtle serve the pet industry and the large ones such as the Gangetic and Indian Soft Shell are killed for their meat. From Kolkata they are smuggled through Bangladesh to Malaysia, Thailand and China, the last one being a big market for the amphibians.⁹⁹

The foregoing account makes it clear that tortoise was known to man from very early times. In the evolution of life on earth it appeared after the purely aquatic animal fish. Tortoise can live in water as well as on land and thus represents the next evolutionary stage. It was followed by the quadruped boar (Varāha) from which evolved the half-animal half-man form perceived by the Hindu seers as Nara-sirṁha. Then from the emotional and sub-developed stages to those of enlightenment and emancipator futuristic forms the Hindus developed the concept of *avatāra-vāda* or the Theory of Incarnations first met with in the Nārāyaṇīya section of the great epic *Mahābhārata*. The evolutionary stages of life were thus perceived by the seers in India at an early period and were substantiated scientifically by Charles Darwin in the West in the eighteenth century CE.

Since life evolves from water which is equated with life itself (*jalam jīvanam*) the tortoise was conceived as representative of water which sustains and produces life. As such, it was identified with Svayambhū (Brahmā) (self-born), the god of creation in Hindu mythology, who assumed various forms to sustain life and creation. In early Hindu religious texts we find Brahmā assuming the forms of fish, tortoise and boar to rescue life. Till some time before the start of the Gupta era, tortoise represented Brahmā in the theriomorphic form besides being an aquatic and land-dwelling animal. When Viṣṇu assumed the supreme position, the tortoise along with the fish and the boar started representing him in art and thought. Since Viṣṇu assumed the form of a tortoise to support the Mandara Mountain which was used as the churning rod by gods and demons in order to obtain ambrosia, the tortoise came to be represented in Indian art by the scene of churning of the ocean.

Churning of the Ocean resulted in the appearance of various objects, including Lakṣmī, the goddess of wealth and good luck, which Viṣṇu took as his spouse. The tortoise representing Viṣṇu is thus related to Lakṣmī and shares with her the characteristics of wealth and good luck. The relationship of tortoise with Lakṣmī is also endorsed as both are born of water. Water is the source of fertility, fecundity, growth and riches which are shared by both, the goddess and the tortoise. It is thus no wonder that the tortoise is counted amongst one of the treasures of Kubera, the god of wealth and riches. Tortoise represents water and may be seen performing this function in the representation of the river on Eran-Ujjayinī coins as noted above. The capability of the tortoise to withdraw its limbs to safety has made it a symbol

of withdrawing oneself from the dangers of emotional outpours and self-control. Its similarity with penis erectus is also likened to self-control. Being a vehicle of the Earth goddess and that of the Mandara Mountain in the churning of the ocean episode makes it symbolic of steady support. As a vehicle of Yamuna the tortoise represents time. For having a long life it symbolizes longevity and eternity. The tortoise has thus remained symbolic of water and life; the Supreme Creator and the creation itself; of fertility, fecundity, growth, riches, wealth and good luck; of a treasure of Kubera; of steady support, stability and self-control; long life and eternity, etc. and has therefore remained popular as such in Indian art, thought and literature through the ages.

Acknowledgements

I am thankful to Shri R.K. Aggarwal for bringing to my notice the conch fossils, tortoise-shaped beads and potsherd with tortoise in his collection. Dr. K.K. Maheshwari obliged me by sending the scans of Ahad, Bundi and Shamlaji and also forwarding to me Dr. Devangana Desai's learned paper on 'Tortoise' published in the *Artibus Asiae*. I have benefited a lot from Dr. Desai's paper and copied the Nachna figure from her work. Dr. Hari Chauhan kindly supplied the scans of Himachal figures and Garhwa scan has been taken from Dr. D.P. Dube's illustration put on the internet. Figures illustrating the story from the *Pañcatantra* have been adopted from Dr. C.B Patil's article. Coins and line-drawings with tortoise figures have been from the collections and archives of Prashant Kulkarni, Girish Sharma, Dr. Major M.K. Gupta, Dr. D.L. Neema and various other friends.

Endnotes

1. Introductory information contained in this paragraph has thankfully been culled from the Wikipedia.
2. *Taittiriya Āraṇyaka*, XVII.1: *Kaśyapaḥ ārogabhṛājādi saptasūryāpekṣayā aṣṭamaḥ sūryaḥ*.
3. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, VII.5, 1-2. Kalpana Desai (*Iconography of Viṣṇu*, New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1973, p. 65) remarks that "It is possible that the disc-like shell of the tortoise, its slow movement and the act of withdrawing within its shell, may have inspired the poets to compare it or to identify it with the sun."
4. A.A. Macdonell (1971), *The Vedic Mythology*, (Reprint, Varanasi-Delhi: Indological Book House, p.153).
5. *Ibid.*, pp.41, 151 and 153.
6. N.P. Joshi (1967), *Life in Ancient Uttarāpatha*, Varanasi: BHU, p.124, Fig.333.
7. I am thankful to Shri R.K. Aggarwal of Ambala for bringing it to my notice and also providing its scan. He has also allowed me access to his vast collection of terracottas and beads many of which bearing the tortoise figures have been referred to and illustrated here.

8. Ajay Mitra Shastri (1996), *Varāhamihira's India*, New Delhi: Harman Publishing House, Vol.I, p.40.
9. N.L. Dey (1927), *The Geographical Dictionary of Ancient and Medieval India*, 3rd ed. (New Delhi: Orient Books Reprint Corporation, 1971), pp.109-110.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Sirmour Gazetteer* (edited by Thakur Singh Negi), Shimla, 1969, p.35. Fibre glass models of gigantic tortoises based on the evidence of the fossils obtained from the region have also been put up in the Fossil Park at Saketi.
12. E. Neumeyer (1993), *Lines on Stone – The Prehistoric Art of India*, New Delhi, p. 297; Alok Tripathi (2013), "Ships in Ancient India: Continuity and Change (From Earliest Times to Gupta Period)" in Ashvini Agrawal (Ed.), *Legacy of Indian Art Continuity in Change*, New Delhi: Aryan Books International, pp.224-26, Figs.26.8-10.
13. V.S. Wakankar (1991), "Rock Art of South India", in C. Margabandhu, K.S. Ramachandra et al (editors), *Indian Archaeological Heritage (Shri K.V. Soundara Rajan Festschrift Volume)*, Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, Vol.I, pp.63-67, Fig.13.
14. Arundhati Banerji (1994), *Early Indian Terracotta Art circa 2000-300 BC (Northern and Western India)*, New Delhi: Harman Publishing House, pp.30 and 126.
15. A.K. Sharma (2002), "Animal skeletal remains from Daulatpur", in C. Margabandhu, A.K. Sharma & R.S. Bisht (Eds.), *Puratan Emerging Trends n Archaeology, Art, Anthropology, Conservation and History (In Honour of Shri Jagat Pati Joshi)*, 3 vols., Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, Vol.I, p.126.
16. H.D. Sankalia, B. Subbarao and S.B. Deo (1958), *The Excavations at Maheshwar and Navdatoli (1952-53)*, Poona.
17. *Indian Archaeology – A Review*, 1956-57, p.23, Fig.11 and p.28.
18. Devendra Handa (2010-11), "Terracottas from Sugh", *Kala*, Vol.XVI, pp.20-21, Pl.III (animal figurines). A similar figurine of a clay tortoise from Sugh is preserved in the museum of the Department of Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology of the Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra (Acc.No.81.492, 6.5 x 5.5 cm). S.P. Shukla (*Sculptures and Terracottas in the Archaeological Museum Kurukshetra University*, Kurukshetra: Kurukshetra University, 1983, p.68, no.227, Pl.LV.7) has dated it to 4th-5th century CE. For the figurine from Agroha see Virjananda Daivakarāṭi, *Agrohā (Agrodaka) ki Mṛṇmūrtiyān*, Jhajja:Gurukula, 2008, fig.565.
19. The *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa* (VDP), III.46, 14 and *Matsya Purāṇa*, 169.6, compare the lotus with Earth (*mahi*).
20. Kamal Giri (1981), 'Animal and Bird Beads', *Chhavi-2: Rai Krishnadasa Felicitation Volume*, Varanasi: Bharat Kala Bhavan, pp.314-16.
21. Devangana Desai (2009), "Kūrma Imagery in Indian Art and Culture", *Artibus Asiae*, Vol.LXIX, No.2, p.331.
22. H.V. Trivedi (1962), "Excavation at Avra", *Journal of the Madhya Pradesh Itihas Parishad*, Bhopal, No.4, p.36.
23. P.L. Gupta and T.R. Hardaker (2014), *Punchmarked Coinage of the Indian Subcontinent Magadha-Maurya Kārṣapaṇa Series*, Anjaneri (Nashik): IIRNS, p.82.
24. E.B. Cowell (1957), *The Jātakas*, Cambridge, No.215.
25. N.P. Joshi (1965), *Mathura ki Mūrtikala* (Hindi), Mathura: Archaeological Museum, p.40, Figure 23.
26. Urmila Sant (1997), *Terracotta Art of Rajasthan (From Pre-Harappan and Harappan Times to the Gupta Period)*, New Delhi: Aryan Books International, p.5.
27. Bhagwant Sahai (1989), "Archaeological Excavations at Antichak", in Devendra Handa (Ed.), *Ajaya-Sri Recent Studies in Indology (Prof. Ajay Mitra Shastri Felicitation Volume)*, 2 vols, Delhi: Sundeep Prakashan, 1989, Vol.I, p.131.

28. IAR, 1954-55, p.8, Fig.2.
29. *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1911-12*, p.48, no.2, Pl.XVII. See also K.K. Thaplyal (1972), *Studies in Ancient Indian Seals*, Lucknow: Akhila Bharatiya Sanskrit Parishad, p.168.
30. Naseem Akhtar (Ed.) (2001), *Patna Museum Catalogue: Terracottas and Metal Images*, Patna: Directorate of Museums, Bihar, p.44, no.225.
31. *Ibid.*, p.64, nos.224-26.
32. *Ibid.*, p.97, no.141.
33. D.B. Spooner (1913-14), 'Excavations at Basārḥ', *Annual Report, Archaeological Survey of India*, p.121, Pl.XLIV.5. Complete absence of Vaiṣṇavite symbols and even the lotus-pedestal suggests it to be a depiction of the water creature and not Viṣṇu's incarnation. Cp. Kalpana Desai (1973), *op.cit.*, pp.67-68.
34. K.V. Ramesh and S.P. Tiwari (1990), A Copper Plate Hoard of the Gupta Period from Bagh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi-Mysore: ASI, p.1, text lines 1-5: *Bhagavataḥ sur-āsura-nara-oraga-guroḥ amara-vara-ripu-rudhira-sṛta-śara-prasarasy-aikārṇava-vipula-vimāla-paryāṅka-tala-śāyinaḥ nābhī-sambhav-ārvinda-śaṭapad-opagṛyamāna-nidrasya śaṅkha-bāṇa-śakti-cakra-nandaka-jvalāṅgad-āgra-śūla-bhāṣvar-aṣṭa-bāhu-śālinah Bali-Naraka-namuci-vara-turaga-bhujaga-Daśavadana-Kaṁsa-Cāmūr-ariṣṭa-Śiśupāla-darppa-matha-nasya jaga-skann-oddharaṇa-Varāhasya anādi-madhya-nidhanasya sura-gaṇ-ālaṅkariṣṇos-trailokya-prabhaviṣṇor-asura-gaṇa-jīṣṇor-Viṣṇoḥ.*
35. Joe Cribb (1997), 'Shiva images on Kushan and Kushano-Sasanian coins', in K. Tanabe, et al (Eds.), *Silk Road Art and Archaeology, Special Volume*, pp.11-66; Laura Giuliano (2004), "Studies in Early Āiava Iconography: the Origin of the Trisūla and Some Related Problems," *Silk Road Art & Archaeology*, Vol.10, pp.51-96; Osmund Bopearachchi (2008), 'Les Premiers Souverains Kouchans: Chronologie et Iconographie Monétaire', *Journal des Savants*, Paris, pp.3-52. I am thankful to Dr. Bopearachchi for a copy of this as well as Giuliano's article.
36. Craig Alden Burns (1985), "1984 Yields Two Unique Kushan Coins", *Numismatic Digest*, Vol.IX, pp.52-54.
37. Whereas there are thousands of ancient temples dedicated to Viṣṇu, Śiva and other deities, only three historical shrines dedicated to the Kūrma incarnation – Kurmai in Chittor district, Sri Kūrmam at Sri-Sailam in Andhra Pradesh and Gavirangapur in Chitradurg district in Karnataka – are known.
38. Macdonell (1971), *op.cit.*, pp.37-39.
39. J. Gonda (1954), *Aspects of Early Viṣṇuism*, Utrecht, pp.1-11 and 126.
40. A.B. Keith (1964), *Indian Mythology* (Mythology of All Races, Vol.VI), New York, p.29; E.W. Hopkins (1895), *The Religions of India*, Boston, p.56; etc.
41. The Kūrma Purāṇa is divided into two parts – the Pūrvabhāga containing 53 chapters and the Uttarabhāga containing 46 chapters. The Nārada Purāṇa (L.106, 1-22) gives a brief overview of the four sections of the original Kūrma Purāṇa as having the Brāhmi Samhitā of 6,000 verses, Bhagavati Samhitā of 4,000 verses, Sauri Samhitā of 2,000 verses and Vaiṣṇavi Samhitā of 5,000 verses. The present text of the Kūrma Purāṇa completely agrees with the Brāhmi Samhitā. The Padma Purāṇa regards Kūrma Purāṇa as a Tamas Purāṇa (Purāṇa of darkness or ignorance).
42. J.D. Beglar (1878), *Archaeological Survey of India Report*, VII, Calcutta, (reprinted, Varanasi, 1966), p.77. Like Badoh (1959), the tortoise in the Samudra-manthana scene at Khajuraho, is shown as based on 'dik-kuṅjaras' [*Arts Asiatique*, VI(2), Figs. 9 and 7 respectively].
43. Gerd J.R. Mevissen (2013), "Daśavatāra Panels at Gaya" in M.N.P. Tiwari and Kamal Giri (Eds.), *Bilvapatra Treasures of Indian Art Dr. N.P. Joshi Felicitation Volume*, New Delhi: Research India Press, pp.69-79, Figs.46-50.
44. Shivasaran Lal, *Sculptures from the Bharatpur Museum, Bharatpur*, Jaipur: Department of Archaeology and Museums, Govt. of Rajasthan, no date, Pl.XXIII.

45. Devendra Handa (2006), *Sculptures from Haryana Iconography and Style*, Shimla-New Delhi: Indian Institute of Advanced Study & Aryan Books International, p.92, Pl.51.
46. Kalpana Desai (1973), *op.cit.*, Figs. 53 and 55 respectively.
47. I am thankful to Dr. Hari Chauhan of the State Department of Archaeology and Museums, Himachal Pradesh for information and scans of the representations of Kūrma from Himachal Pradesh.
48. Kalpana Desai (*op.cit.*, Pl.56) has mistaken the Tortoise as Fish.
49. Enamul Haque (1992), *Bengal Sculptures Hindu Iconography up to c.1200 A.D.*, Dhaka: Bangladesh National Museum, 1992, p.103, Pl.75.
50. Devangana Desai (2009), *op.cit.*, pp.322-23.
51. *Ibid.*, p.321.
52. B.C. Bhattacharya (1954), *Indian Images*, Vol.I, Calcutta, p.14, Pl.VIII.2; Kalpana Desai, *op.cit.*, pp.68-69.
53. Neelima Vashishtha (1989), *Sculptural Traditions of Rajasthan*, Jaipur-Indore: Publication Scheme, pp.65-66, Pl.XV.
54. Devendra Handa (1984), *Osian: History, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, Delhi: Sundeep Prakashan, p.85, Pl. 49.
55. The Churning of the Ocean scene from eleventh century Someśvara Temple at Kirāḍu does not show the tortoise below the churning staff and five gods led by Gaṇeśa are shown on the left side while a single demon is there on the right side. For details see R.C. Agrawala (March, 1959), "Kiradu", *Marg* (Rajasthani Sculpture Number), Vol.XII, No.1, pp.45-48, Fig.3; (July 1965), 'Rājasthāna kī Mūrti-kalā men Samudra-manthana', *Maru-Bhārati*, Vol.XIII, No.2, pp.2-3.
56. Gauriswar Bhattacharya (2013), "A Unique Stone Sculpture of Dhanavantari from the Russek Collection", *Bilvapatra*, p.247, Figs.1-8.
57. P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmasāstra*, Vol.V, p.287.
58. Jawahar Sircar (2006), "The Aniconic Cult of Dharma in Bengal", in Harsha V. Dehejia (Ed), *Gods Beyond Temples*, Delhi: MLBD, pp.241-46.
59. D.C. Sircar (1971), *Studies in the Religious Life of the Ancient and Medieval India*, Delhi: MLBD, p.200.
60. Harprasad Shastri (1895), "Discovery of Living Buddhism in Bengal", *The Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol.I, Part I, p.2 as quoted by Devangana Desai (2009), *op.cit.*, p.332.
61. Devangana Desai (2009), *op.cit.*, pp.318-19.
62. *Ibid.*, p.320.
63. *Ibid.*
64. *Ibid.*
65. Devangana Desai (2013), 'Reflections on Art and Literature – A Dialogue', Presidential Address, Indian Art History Congress, 22nd Session, 25-27 October, 2013, Heras Institute, Mumbai, p.30, Fig.16.
66. Devangana Desai (2001), *Introduction to Kūrmasatakadvayam*, Two Prakrit Poems on Tortoise by the Paramāra king Bhojadeva of Dhārā, translation in English and Glossary by V.M. Kulkarni, Ahmedabad: L.D. Institute of Indology.
67. L.S. Nigam (1994), "The Image of Śiva from Tālā: Issues in Identification and Interpretation of the Symbols Therein", in P.K. Sharma and S.K. Sullerey (Eds.), *Heritage of India Past and Present (Essays in Honour of Prof. R.K. Sharma)*, 2 vols, Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, Vol.I, pp.229-34.
68. Kalpana Desai (1973), *op.cit.*, p.78, Fig.62.
69. *Matsya Purāṇa*, Ānandāśrama Series, Poona, 259, 30: *Kūrmopari tathā pādamekaṇi nāgendramūrdhani / Saṁstūyamāno lokaśaiḥ samantāt parikalpayet / /*

70. J.N. Banerjea (1956), *The Development of Hindu Iconography*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, p.413.
71. For details see Kalpana Desai (1973), *op.cit.*, pp.67-70. See also Enamul Haque (1992), *loc.cit.*
72. Devendra Handa (2011), *Sculptures from Punjab Iconography and Style*, New Delhi: Aryan Books International, p.56, Pls.19-20 and 64.
73. Handa (2006), *op.cit.*, pp.57-58, Pl.64.
74. Devangana Desai (1996), *The Religious Imagery of Khajuraho*, Mumbai, pp.117-18. The north wall depicts the Matsya-Nārāyaṇa.
75. For details see A. Ghosh (Ed.) (1975), *Jaina Art and Architecture*, 3 vols, New Delhi: Bhāratīya Jñānapīṭha; U.P. Shah (1987), *Jaina Rūpa-Manḍana*, Vol.I, New Delhi: Abhinav Prakashan; Maruti Nandan Prasad Tiwari (1981), *Jaina Pratimā-Vijñāna* (Hindi), Varanasi: Pārśvanātha Vidyāśrama Śodha Saṁsthāna.
76. Devengana Desai (2009), p.321.
77. *Gūḍham nipīḍya gulphabhyaṁ vṛutkrameṇa samāhūtaḥ/ Etatkūrmāsanaṁ proktaṁ yogasiddhikaraṁ param/ /* (e.g. Śiva-Paśupati on Mohenjodaro and Harappan seals), Banerjea (1956), *op.cit.*, pp.269-70.
78. Devengana Desai (1996), *op.cit.*, p.101.
79. Ramashraya Awasthi (1967), *Khajurāho kī Deva-Pratimāyen*, Agra, p.134.
80. Krishna Deva (1990), *Temples of Khajuraho*, Vol.I, New Delhi: ASI, p.50.
81. N.P. Joshi (1989), *Brahmanical Sculptures in the State Museum, Lucknow*, Part 2, Vol.I, Lucknow: State Museum, p.138.
82. Devangana Desai (2009), *op.cit.*, Fig.14 and (1996), *op.cit.*, p.153, Pl.164.
83. *Gauḍavaḥo* of Vākpatirāja, edited and translated by N.G. Suru, 1975, p.2, gāthā 17.
84. *Kūrmasatakadvayam*, translation by V.M. Kulkarni, Ahmedabad, 2003, verse 3, p.17.
85. Devangana Desai (2009), *op.cit.*, p.329, figs.12-13.
86. Joanna Williams (1992), "The Churning of the Ocean of Milk: Myth, Image and Ecology", in Geeti Sen (Ed.), *Indigenous Vision*, New Delhi: India International Centre, p.155.
87. Channabasappa S. Patil, "The Pañcatantra Sculptures in the Tripurāntakeśvara Temple at Balligave, Karnataka", in Jagat Pati Joshi (Chief Editor), *Facets of Indian Civilization Recent Perspectives Essays in Honour of Prof. B.B. Lal*, 3 vols., New Delhi: Aryan Books International, Vol.II, p.410, Pl.47.2-3.
88. Virjānanda Daivakarāṇi (2008), *Nauraṅgābāda (Bāmalā) kī Mṛṅgamūrtiyāṅ* (Hindi), Jhajjar: Gurukula, p.22, fig.155.
89. Dilip Rajgor (2001), *Punchmarked Coins of Early Historic India*, California: Reesha Books International, p.86, no.488.
90. John Allan (1936), *Catalogue of the Coins of Ancient India*, London: British Museum, pp.xxx, 27 (no.26, Pl.V.15), 29 (nos.13-16, Pl.VI.10 and XLI.6); P.L. Gupta and T.R. Hardaker (1985), *Ancient Indian Silver Punchmarked Coins of the Magadha-Maurya Kārṣapaṇa Series*, Anjaneri: IIRNS, pp.55-56 (Series I, Nos.251-57) and 80 (Series VIb, Nos.556-59), associated with taurine and other marks in the latter group; (revised edition, 2014), four-symbol coins of *Janapada* or pre-Imperial series, pp.83-85 (Series 0, nos.015 and 023); etc.
91. Prashant P. Kulkarni (Jan-March 2007), 'Uninscribed Kāmsikā Coins and the Origin of Coinage in Narmadā Valley', *Indian Coin Society Newsletter*, No.42, pp.4-9.
92. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1927), *History of Indian and Indonesian Art*, New York: Dover Publications, p.45.
93. D.B. Diskalkar (1948), "Sixteen Ancient Copper Coins from Malwa", *JNSI*, X, pp.38-42; R.R. Sethi (1988), 'Ring and Ball Symbol of Ujjayini Coins' in S.K. Bhatt (Ed.), *Professor Ajay Mitra*

Shastri Felicitation Volume: Journal of the Academy of Indian Numismatics & Sigillography, Vol.VI. Indore: Academy of Indian Numismatics & Sigillography, p.50; W.H. Pieper (1992), 'Frogs and Tortoises from Ujjain', *ONS Newsletter*, No.134, p.6; (1993), 'A Coin Hoard from Ujjain', *Ibid.*, No.135, pp.3-5, coin nos.38-39; (1994), 'The Local Copper Currency of Ujjain in Central India (ca.200 BC-ca.50 BC)', *Ibid.*, No.142, pp.6-8; Osmund Bopearachchi and Wilfried Pieper (1998), *Ancient Indian Coins*, Turnhout: Brepols, Pl.9, coin no.8; Kothari (2005), *op.cit.*, p.79, RB#68; p.85, RB#117; p.106, RB#285; etc.

94. Devendra Handa (2011-12), "The Earliest Representation of Brahmā - Numismatic Evidence", *Jñāna-Pravāha Research Journal*, Vol.XV, pp.38-45.
95. R.R. Bhargava (1988-89), "Two New Coins from Tripuri", *Numismatic Digest*, Vols.12-13, pp.6-8.
96. Niranjan Mahavar (1994), "Culture through Combs", *India Today*, August 31 issue as quoted by Devangana Desai (2009), *op.cit.*, p.332, fn.41.
97. Excavations at Nagarjunakonda in Andhra Pradesh have revealed the existence of a small tortoise-shaped brick *kuṇḍa* (tank) which must have been used for a ritualistic and religious bath. For details see *Indian Archaeology A Review 1956-57*, p.37, Pl.LV.B.
98. *Times of Chandigarh*, May 8, 2013, p.3.
99. *Hindustan Times Chandigarh*, December 31, 2015, p.11.