


A Rare Image of Eight-Handed Viṣṇu from Osian

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Viṣṇu is the central figure of the Hindu triad and thousands of his images in various media belonging to the period from about second-first century BCE onwards have been found from various parts of the Indian subcontinent. His early two-armed images are rare compared to his four-armed images which have generally remained popular through the centuries. Though his multi-armed images have also been described in the iconographic texts and are also known from different places yet the quadrumanous images far exceed other varieties.

R.G. Bhandarkar had adduced sufficient evidence to establish that a religious cult centering on Vāsudeva had come into existence as early as the 4th-3rd century BCE.¹ The image of Herakles installed in front of the army of Porus on the bank of the river Vitastā as referred to by Greek historian Curtius, is identified as that of Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa by R.G. Bhandarkar and many other scholars indicating his worship in the fourth century BCE.² Ptolemy also refers to the people around Vitastā as the worshippers of Vāsudeva.³

Punch-marked coins ascribed to the Mauryan period⁴ showing a human figure holding a wheel in his uplifted left hand (, and the stick-like object in the right hand which I recognize as mace)⁵ identified with Viṣṇu seem to corroborate the fact of the divinity and worship of the god in 4th-3rd century BCE.

The depiction of the god on punch-marked coins holding disc and mace is significant and it is to be noted that the earliest reference to Nārāyaṇa (i.e. Vāsudeva/Kṛṣṇa) in the *Mahābhārata* (Ādi Parva, 58.49) also describes him as two handed holding these very attributes (*cakragadāpāṇiḥ*). The god is described similarly in the *Viṣṇu-Purāṇa* (II.11, 130) also. The *Viṣṇudharmottara-Purāṇa* too endorses it saying that the lord has a single face and two hands holding the mace

and the discus (III.60, 2A: *Eka vaktro dvibāhuśca gadācakradharaḥ prabhuḥ*/).

That Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa continued to be depicted on coins is evident from a piece in the collection of Dr. Wilfried Pieper of Germany on which the god is shown in human form supporting a wheel in his extended right hand (the left hand probably holding the club downwards but not very clear) with hybrid Garuḍa standing independently in front (Fig.1).

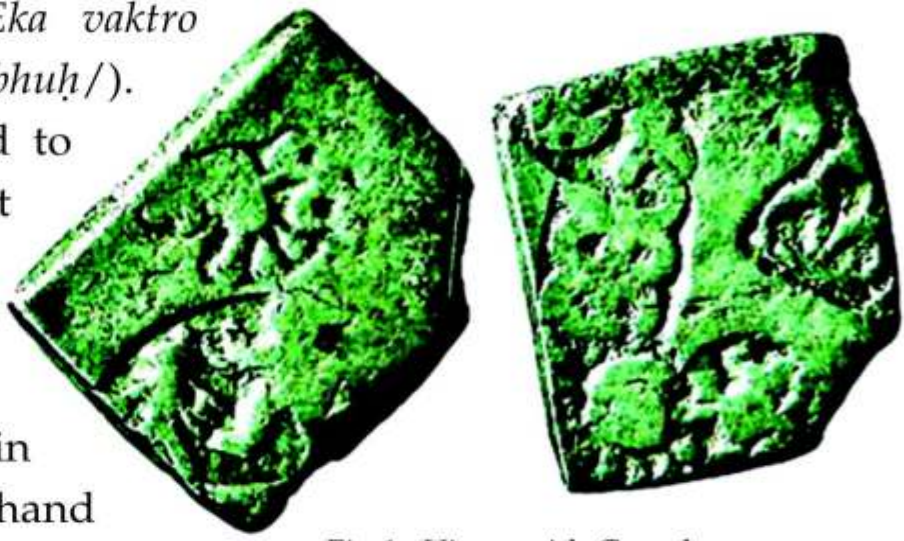


Fig.1 : Viṣṇu with Garuḍa

The celestial bird has the beaked and crested head with winged arms but the lower body is like that of human beings with two legs, though carved somewhat crudely and stylistically. This is the earliest depiction of Viṣṇu with Garuḍa in the realm of Indian art. The Garuḍa-*dhvaja* pillar of Heliodorus at Vidiśā, however, clearly vouches for the association of Garuḍa with Viṣṇu as his cognizance. Remains of a Viṣṇu temple were also discovered near the Garuḍa-*dhvaja* of Heliodorus.⁶ There are punch-marked coins with typical Mathura tree dated to the second century BCE which depict two-handed Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa holding disc and mace along with Saṁkarṣaṇa-Balarāma carrying plough and pestle (Figs.2-3).



Figs.2-3 : Saṁkarṣaṇa and Vāsudeva on Mathura type punch-marked coins


The popularity of Viṣṇu worship seems to have spread far to the northwest and even aliens were impressed by it and adopted the Bhāgavata religion. This is evident from the coins of the Indo-Greek ruler Agathocles which

depict Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa and Saṁkarṣaṇa (Fig.4).

The depiction of Saṁkarṣaṇa and Vāsudeva on the coins of Agathocles (*circa* 180-165 BCE) show the former as supporting pestle and plough in his right and left hands and the latter holding conch and wheel in his hands bears evidence to the acceptance of these objects as the attributes of these gods.



Fig.4 : Saṁkarṣaṇa and Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa on Agathocles' coins

Coins of Pāñcāla Viṣṇumitra in the British Museum show on the reverse probably a conch in the right and wheel in the left hand (). Wilfried Pieper has acquired a coin of this ruler showing crudely drawn figure of the deity holding perhaps a club in the right hand and a wheel in the left hand (Fig.5).

Pāñcāla coins are well known to the students of Hindu iconography for depicting various gods in



Fig.5 : Viṣṇu on the coin of Pāñcāla Viṣṇumitra (Pieper Collection)

human form corresponding to the names of the rulers. So we have the depiction of Agni, Indra, Viṣṇu, etc. on their coins. Viṣṇu on the coins of Viṣṇumitra holds a disc and probably the club.

Archaeological remains of *pūjā-śilā-prākāra* (temple) of Vāsudeva-Saṁkarṣaṇa called *Nārāyaṇa-vāṭikā* from Ghosundi⁷ together with an epigraph from this place and another at Nagari near Chittore amply prove that Vāsudeva-Saṁkarṣaṇa were worshipped popularly by the people during the second century BCE. The Mora well inscription provides solid evidence for the prevalence of the worship of the images of the five Vṛṣṇi-Vīras, installed in a temple in the first century BCE. The shrine was got constructed by Toṣā, possibly

a Greek lady, who must have been converted to the Bhāgavata sect. Śoḍāsa's inscription from a door-jamb at Mathura, also datable to the first century BCE, refers to a great temple (*Mahāsthāna*) of Vāsudeva containing the ornamental archway (*Vedikā-toraṇa*), confirming further to the erection of temples and the popularity of Vāsudeva's worship, even by aliens.

The *Bṛhatsamhitā* is the earliest text which describes images of Viṣṇu having two, four or eight hands.

A copper coin of Huviṣka showing a deity, generally believed to be Viṣṇu, as bearing eight hands, of which some are damaged, and with attributes in hands not very clear, standing behind a tree from the British Museum collection has been put on the face book by Shailendra Bhandare recently indicating that not only the four-handed images but also the octomanous representations emerged during the Kushan period (Fig.6).



Fig.6 : Eight-armed Viṣṇu on the reverse of Huviṣka's coin

A similar pre-Gupta stone image showing the deity wearing a long garland (*vanamālā*) holding a conch in the normal hands at the chest level and a very prominently carved wheel in one of the *pralamba* (suspended) left hand with other hands broken and feet supported by a female (Goddess Pṛthvī) belonging to the Gandhāra region (Fig.7) too reveals that eight-armed images continued to be created.

Like the figure of the deity with a tree in front as seen on Huviṣka's coin, this image too shows the tree in front of the deity with a child emerging from it, indicating probably the vegetal origin or association of the deity. It is for the first time that we find the feet of Viṣṇu supported by a female figure (goddess Pṛthvī) who is looking fondly upwards towards the god. The depiction of a tree in front

of the god seems to have been a regional characteristic of Gandhāra. The physiognomy and expression too betray Roman impact. This image thus is a good example of the Gandhāra region being the rendezvous of the eastern and western arts and cultures.

Octomanous images, however, were not as popular as the four-armed icons as revealed by a gold coin struck by Huviṣka's successor Vāsudeva I which depicts the four armed Viṣṇu holding the mace in the natural right hand, conch in the additional right, wheel in the back left hand with normal left resting on the waist (Fig.8).⁸

The Mathura Museum also possesses some eight-handed images of Viṣṇu belonging to the early Gupta period but unfortunately they are much damaged. The *Bṛhatsamhitā* (LVII.31-33) describes besides two and four handed images of the god, eight-armed ones as holding the sword, mace, arrow in the right hands with one disposed in *abhaya-mudrā*, and the left hands carrying the bow, shield, disc and conch:



Fig.7 : Viṣṇu from Gandhāra region

*Khadga-gadā-śarapāṇirdakṣiṇataḥ śāntidaścaturthakarah /
Vāmakareṣu ca kārmukakheṭakacakraṇi śaṅkhaśca //*

Bṛhatsamhitā (LVII.33)



Fig.8 : Vāsudeva-Viṣṇu on a gold coin of Vāsudeva I

The *Matsya Purāṇa* (258.7) too prescribes sword, mace, arrow and lotus in the right hands and bow, shield, conch and disc in the left ones:

*Khaḍgo gadā śaraḥ padma-divyaṃ dakṣiṇato hareḥ /
Dhanuśca khetakaṃ caiva śaṅkhacakra ca vāmataḥ //*

Though there is no dearth of eight-armed images of various deities in the medieval period, yet images of Viṣṇu having eight arms are few and far between. And those known are mostly damaged and incomplete.

We publish here an eight-armed image of Viṣṇu from Osian, district Jodhpur, Rajasthan which stands almost complete and in situ between two *rucaka* pilasters with *ghaṭa-pallava* bases on the fronton of the north-eastern sub-shrine of the *pañcayatana* (quincunx) Harihara Temple no. 1 (Fig.9).⁹

The god stands to front in *sama-pāda-sthānaka-mudrā* on a round lotus seat with downwards drooping petals held by the Earth goddess on her head with the support of both of her hands. She is flanked by hybrid Nāga-Nāgī figures with folded hands. Just above the heads of the Nāga and Nāgī are depicted the donor couple, the female on the proper right and bearded male on his left in profile in a kneeling posture and *añjali-mudrā*. Viṣṇu has his hair combed backwards with crown placed above bearing lotus design in squarish front. He wears beaded *karṇa-kunḍalas* in long ears, torque, *aṅgadas*, *kaṅkaṇas*, etc. with floral long garland and *dhotī* held in position with a waist-band showing two loops drooping down and free ends falling on the legs touching the knees. He has *kambu-grīvā* and a squarish face. Weathering, encrustation and wearing out have hidden and lost the finer details. The proper right hand of the god is held upwards and has suffered

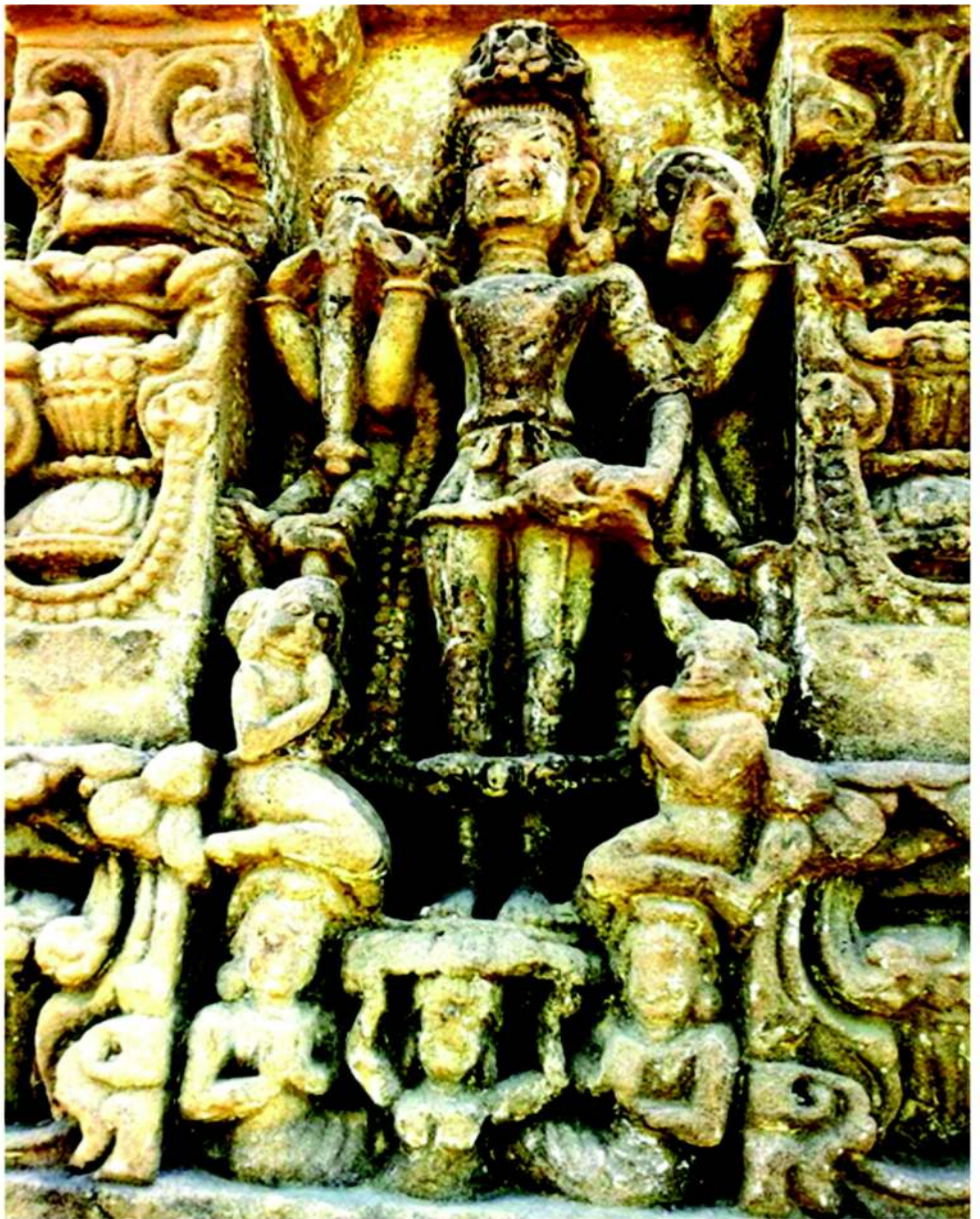


Fig.9. Eight-armed Viṣṇu, Harihara Temple No.1, Osian

some diminution. It may have originally held the lotus or may have been disposed in *abhaya-mudrā*. The additional right hand holds the mace with its thicker end upwards. The corresponding natural left hand holds the conch horizontally near the waist while the additional next hand supports the wheel at the level of the shoulder. The third and fourth additional hands on both sides are held downwards. Those on the proper right seem to be placed on a pestle¹⁰ and plough and the corresponding ones on the left are not clearly visible but they certainly are not the sword and shield or bow and arrow as prescribed by the *Bṛhatsamhitā* and the *Matsya Purāṇa*. They seem to be holding a flask and placed on a personified attribute(?). This thus is a unique figure as no such image is known from anywhere else in India.

References & Notes

1. R.G. Bhandarkar, *Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism and Minor Religious Cults*, Strassburg, 1913 (reprint, Poona, 1928), pp.4ff.
2. *Ibid.*, p.26. Megasthenes in his *Indica* also refers to a class of people who worshipped god Heracles. See also Ajay Mitra Shastri, "Herakles in Front of the Infantry of Porus", *Journal of Indian History*, Vol.XLII, pp.119-26.
3. As quoted by Kalpana Desai, *Iconography of Viṣṇu*, New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1973, p.5.
4. P.L. Gupta and T.R. Hardaker, *Ancient Indian Silver Punchmarked Coins of the Magadha-Maurya Karshapana Series*, Anjaneri: IIRNS, 1985, pp.23-24; revised edition, Anjaneri: IIRNS, 2014, p.59.
5. Devendra Handa, "Numismatic Evidence on the Evolution of Early Iconography of Viṣṇu", *Kalā The Journal of Indian Art History Congress*, Vol. XX (2014-2015), p. 15.
6. G.H.Khare, 'Discovery of a Viṣṇu Temple near Heliodorus Pillar, Besnagar', *Lalit Kala*, No.13.
7. *kārito ayaṁ rājñā bhagavatena Gajāyanena Parāśarīputreṇa sarvatātena aśvamedhayājinaṁ bhagavadbhyāṁ Saṁkarṣaṇa-Vāsudevābhyāṁ anāhitābhyāṁ sarveśvarābhyāṁ pūjā-śilā-prākāro Nārāyaṇa-vāṭikā - Epigraphia Indica*, XVI, pp.25ff.
8. Craig Alden Burns, "1984 Yields Two Unique Kushan Coins," *Numismatic Digest*, Vol.IX (1985), pp.52-53.
9. It has been missed by all scholars who have written books and articles on Osian.
10. The *Sāttvat Samhitā* (XII.224) suggests mace, pestle, disc and sword in the right hands and conch, goad, noose and bow with arrow in the left hands of eight armed Viṣṇu:

*Gadā-musala-cakrāsīnaṣṭabāhustu dakṣiṇai /
Śaṅkhamāṅkuśapāśau ca vāmeṣtu saśaram dhanuḥ //*

Photo Courtesy: I am thankful to Dr. Wilfried Pieper for Figs.1 & 5, Jan Lingen for Figs.2-3, Dr. Osmund Boppearachhi for Fig. 4, Dr. Shailendra Bhandare for Fig. 6, Dr. Subhash Kak for Fig.7 and Prithvi Raj Ojha for Fig. 9.