

## The Earliest Representation of Brahmā Numismatic Evidence

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Brahmā, associated with the act of creation in Hindu mythology and the first member of the orthodox Brahmanical triad with Viṣṇu and Maheśa as his associates, is variously named as Viśvakarman, Brahmaṇaspati, Bṛhaspati, Hiraṇyagarbha, Prajāpati, Brahma and Brahmā in the Vedic texts. The Ṛgveda (X.81) states that Viśvakarman (Hiraṇyagarbha according to X.121) shaped the sky and earth and Prajāpati is the lord of all created beings (X.71). The Yajurveda (Maitrāyaṇī Saṁhitā, IV.2,2) and the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa (I.7,4, 1ff.) record the myth of Prajāpati's incest with his own daughter Uṣas which paved way for deprecatory myths of his incest with Sarasvatī and cutting of his fifth head by Śiva in later literature. The Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa describes Brahmā as self-existent (svayambhū) and is said to have created gods and other things. From him emanated Prajāpati (Prajāpatirbrahmaṇaḥ) who is also the supporter (bharataḥ) of the universe, a function which was invariably assigned to Viṣṇu in the epic and the Purāṇas. The Taittirīya Saṁhitā (V.5, 1,2) identifies Prajāpati with Hiraṇyagarbha, describes his gradual rise and vastness (I.7,3) and also presents him as producing the Vedas (VII.1.1, 4ff.). The Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa (III.39.1), however, refers to the hair of Prajāpati's beard as the Vedas (Prajāpatervai etāni śmaśrūṇi yadvedāḥ). He is also described in various passages of the former text as the presiding deity of sacrifices.<sup>1</sup> The sacrificial cult thus seems to have introduced him as an ascetic and priest. Bṛhaspati 'lord of speech', identified with Brahmā in the Brahmanical period, becomes the lord or consort of the goddess of speech and knowledge later. The Śatarudriya text of the Maitrāyaṇī Saṁhitā refers to his four faces and lotus seat (taccaturmukhāya vidmahe padmāsanāya dhimahi) indicating that Brahmā was conceived to represent the four Vedic priests, and the lotus seat stood for the lotus in the primeval water on which Prajāpati was born. The Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa also refers to Prajāpati assuming the forms of fish, tortoise and boar which are later transferred to Viṣṇu. By the time of the Upaniṣads, the concrete concept of Brahmā as the foremost of all the gods, the creator of the universe and the protector of the world seems to have developed fully as evidenced in the Muṇḍaka

Upaniṣad (III.15 : Brahmā devānām prathamah sambabhūva viśvasya kartā bhuvanasya goptā). The concept consummates in the Mahābhārata (III.272.47) which describes him as the creator, sustainer and destroyer :

Śrayate Brahmamūrtistu rakṣyate pauruṣī tanuḥ /  
Raudrī-bhāvena śamayet tistro'varūpā Prajāpateḥ //

These are the functions which are assigned by the various sectarian Purāṇas to their respective supreme deities. The Brahma Purāṇa endorses the viewpoint of the Mahābhārata. The sectarian Purāṇas refer to the supremacy of cultic deities and also their identity with other gods as a result of which we find the adoption by them of various attributes associated with other gods. The developed iconography of Brahmā provides the four or five headed god with akṣamālā (rosary), kamaṇḍalu (water vessel), sruk (wooden sacrificial ladle), sruvā (small rounded ladle), ājyasthālī (platter for sacrificial oblations), daṇḍa (scepter), kṛṣṇājina (hide of black buck), pustaka (manuscript), kuśa-grass, etc. as his attributes, lotus or swan as his mount, Sāvitrī/Sarasvatī and Gāyatrī as his consorts, which all can be traced to the development of the concept of the god through the long period extending from the Vedas down to the Purāṇas.<sup>2</sup>

In the later parts of the epics, Brahmā's 'position is gradually weakened and his honours and activities become more or less of a titular character'.<sup>3</sup> Brahmā is pushed to the background as a deity of lesser importance in most of the other Purāṇas.

The Bṛhatsamhitā of Varāhamihira describes his four faced image as seated/standing on a lotus seat and holding a kamaṇḍalu.<sup>4</sup> These characteristics are repeated in most of the other texts, with of course additional information quite often. The Agni Purāṇa describes him as four-faced, four-armed, corpulent, having a long beard and matted hair, holding a rosary and ladle in his right hands and a flask in the left.<sup>5</sup> The Viṣṇudharmottara<sup>6</sup> enjoins that his images should be made as bearing all jewels and having four arms, seated in padmāsana (lotus posture) on a chariot drawn by seven swans, having black antelope-skin, matted locks, holding rosary and water vessel in his hands. This Purāṇa (III.46) also gives a philosophic explanation of the various attributes and characteristics of the figure – the four faces represent four Vedas, four arms are indicative of four quarters, rosary signifies time, seven swans represent the seven regions, and so on. The idea of Brahmā's chariot drawn by seven swans has been drawn probably from the Rāmāyaṇa where it appears for the first time. The Matsya (ch.260, vv.40-45), Kālikā (80, 73-75) and Āditya Purāṇa, Amśumadbhedāgama, Mānasāra, Śilparatna, Samarāṅgaṇasūtradhāra, Aparājītapṛcchā, Rūpamaṇḍana, etc. are the other important texts which contain details of images of Brahmā.<sup>7</sup>





Cult images of Brahmā are very few. His earliest representations in art known so far go back to the Kushan period. The Mathura Museum houses three images of the deity (Acc. nos. 382, 2134 and 2481). The first one belonging to the Kushan period shows the god with three juvenile faces in a row and one superposed over the central head to complete the number of four heads. The second figure shows similar arrangement of heads but with bearded faces and matted locks. The third belongs to the Gupta period and shows the two-handed standing god with right hand disposed in abhaya (fear allaying pose), having three heads with the fourth at the back to be presumed. The central head is bearded.<sup>8</sup> Brahmā figures as a subsidiary figure in some early Gandhāra Buddhist images also as an acolyte of Buddha or in Nativity scenes, garbed as a Brāhmaṇa having dishevelled hair, beard and moustache and holding a water vessel in one of the hands.<sup>9</sup> A magnificent haloed image of tri-cephalous quadrumanous Brahmā probably from Rabatak is preserved in a private collection in Pakistan depicting the god standing in double flexion on a lotus seat with natural right hand in cinmudrā or vyākhyāna-mudrā (posture of explaining) and the additional one holding a rosary, the principal left supporting a flask and the back left the shaft of probably the ladle (its upper part is broken), wearing exquisitely carved diaphanous dhotī with one end wound around the left arm and bearing matted locks combed upwards and held in position by a pearl string with some locks falling gracefully on the shoulders. All the three faces are juvenile. Flanking him on his right is a bearded sage standing turned towards him with folded hands and having a nimbus behind the head. On his left stands another bejewelled haloed figure wearing beautiful coiffure with his right hand in jñāna-mudrā supporting the hem or some other unidentified object with suspended left hand. It is an image of rare beauty, perhaps the best discovered so far (Fig.1).<sup>10</sup> The antiquity of all the known images of Brahmā thus goes back to the Kushan



Fig. 1

period and none predating it is known to us.

I have come across some coins which bear mono-cephalous two-handed figure of the god and push back the antiquity of Brahmā's anthropomorphic representation considerably.

It is well known that Ujjain coins contain human figures like  and  the identification of which has been quite controversial and the figures have variously been identified with Śiva and Kārtikeya.<sup>11</sup> Though most of the Ujjain coins bear the typical symbol of cross with four circles popularly called Ujjain symbol (  or  sometimes with additional and modifying marks) yet there are examples of various other marks, like a frog, svastika, six-armed symbol, four nandipadas (taurines), crescented arched hill, etc. on the reverse, which in some cases are even blank.

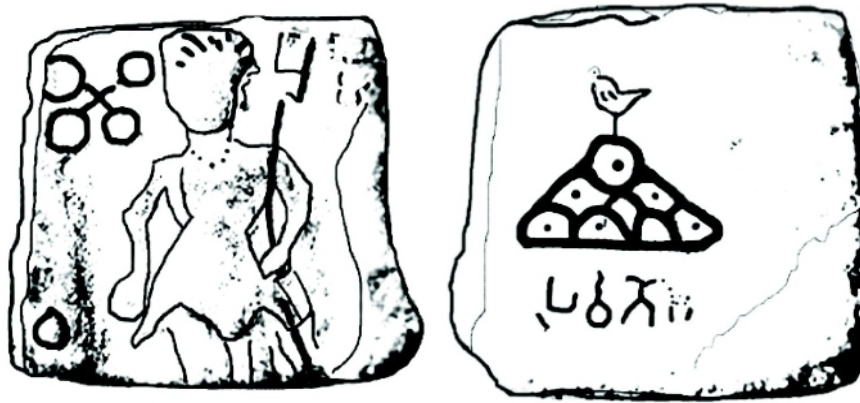
In the collection of Shri Girish Sharma of Indore<sup>12</sup> there are some coins which show on the obverse the god wearing typical Ujjain dress and bearing matted locks holding a curved staff in his right hand and a water vessel in the left bearing the label inscription in early Brāhmī characters of c. 2nd century BCE as 'Bramhā' in the top right corner and Ujjain symbol in the top left corner indicating that the god represented is neither Śiva nor




Fig. 2

Kārtikeya but Brahmā, the Creator (Fig.2.1). The legend on some of the specimens is so faint that it is hardly visible (Figs.2.2 & 2.4). The syllable 'mhā'

reminds us of the characteristic Aśokan style of forming the conjuncts with the second consonant placed above the first and indicates the early date of the coin. The reverse is either blank (Fig.2.4) or shows a multi-arched hill or caitya with dots visible in some of the arches and is surmounted by what looks like a bird (swan?) on post (Fig.2.2-3) in the centre with Brāhmī legend below, probably carrying the name of the issuing king in the legend which may be 'Parvata(sa)' or 'Sarvat(o) - '. Dr. Wilfried Pieper of Germany also possesses a coin showing a similar figure with traces of what could be a svastika or the Brāhmī letter 'bra' near the left shoulder of the deity on the obverse and multi-arched caitya surmounted by some emblem (goose on post?) with Brāhmī legend below the caitya on the reverse (Fig.2.3) :






Narendra Kothari too has illustrated a coin with a similar figure but with the two attributes in the hands swapped (  ).<sup>13</sup> A similar figure exists on a coin of Richard Wells of United Kingdom.<sup>14</sup> I think that the deity depicted on these coins too may be Brahmā. Coins illustrated by Kothari and that of Wells show a jaṭājūṭa or kaparda-like coiffure. All these coins have been struck from different dies.


Some of the features of these coins deserve some discussion. The daṇḍa in the hand of the god shows curvature and differs from the straight scepter held by the deity in most other specimens. It is more like a natural wooden stick than a sophisticated scepter. It may stand for some ritualistic function or may have some sacrificial bearing. It is possible that it represents samidh (sacrificial wood) or fuel for the sacrifice. The Padma Purāṇa describes Brahmā as supporting a stick of Audumbara tree and antelope-skin.<sup>15</sup> Audumbara tree is regarded as auspicious for Vedic sacrifices and favourite one to god Brahmā. If, however, it is a scepter it may represent the aspect of Dharma in his concept which goes well with his ascetic

character.<sup>16</sup> The reverse device of a caitya with surmounting bird which I feel inclined to identify as a swan is also significant. Elsewhere I have tried to explain the arched symbol as representing a temple.<sup>17</sup> The temple with swan emblem atop indicates it to be a shrine dedicated to Brahmā.<sup>18</sup> Since the coins noticed above have been struck from different dies it is likely that they were issued over a period of time or perhaps at the time of the consecration of different temples dedicated to Brahmā.

Mention may also be made here of some Ujjainī coins which show a tortoise



(  ).<sup>19</sup> Originally the tortoise incarnation was ascribed to Prajāpati

as described in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa (VII.4,5,3; VII.5,1,5) and Taittiriya Āraṇyaka (I.23,1). The Mahābhārata too does not associate the tortoise of the Samudra-manthana (Churning of the Ocean) episode with Viṣṇu and refers to it as the king of tortoises.<sup>20</sup> This ascription was transferred to Viṣṇu later and we get details of it in the Agni, Bhāgavata and Kūrma Purāṇas which all belong to a date posterior to the period of circulation of these coins, i.e., c. 3<sup>rd</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE. In early tradition Prajāpati's form of tortoise is designated as Kaśyapa who is associated with the water-cosmology of ancient India and is identified with Āditya (Sun) also. Since sun has been represented in the form of a rayed solar symbol, tortoise on these coins has to be associated with Brahmā only. The depiction of tortoise on the Ujjain coins may thus be the theriomorphic representation of Prajāpati-Brahmā. Similarly, fish which symbolizes fertility and is represented as the single device on some Ujjain coins ()<sup>21</sup> is actually a representation of the Fish incarnation of Prajāpati-Brahmā as described in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa (I.8,1, 1ff.) and the Great Epic<sup>22</sup> for the reason that it came to be associated with Viṣṇu in the Gupta period only.

Be as it may be, the coins discussed above present the earliest evidence of the depiction of Brahmā and take back the antiquity of his representation in art by at least two centuries if not more. The monocephalic and two-handed form corroborates the early date of these coins.

## Notes and References

1. Viṣṇu too is identified with sacrifice (yajño vai viṣṇuh – Taittirīya Saṁhitā, II.5, 5, 2; also Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, III.2, 2, 4; XIV.1, 1, 6). Numerous texts establish the identity of Brahmā and Viṣṇu, e.g., Harivaṁśa, III.10, 49 : Aham nārāyaṇo brahmā sambhavaḥ sarvadehinām; Viṣṇu Purāṇa : Brahmā Nārāyaṇākhyo'sau kalpādau bhagavān yathā; etc.
2. S.P. Basu (1986), The Concept of Brahma (its Origin and Development), Delhi, Sundeep Prakashan.
3. J.N. Banerjea (1956), Development of Hindu Iconography, Calcutta, University of Calcutta, p.512.
4. Brahmā kamaṇḍalu-karaścaturmukhaḥ pañcakāśanasthaśca /  
Bṛhatsaṁhitā, LVII.41a
5. Caturmukhaścaturbāhurbṛhajjaṭharamaṇḍalaḥ /  
Lambakūrco jaṭāyukto Brahmā haṁsavāhanaḥ //  
Dakṣiṇe cākṣasūtrañca sruvaṁ vāme tu kuṇḍikā /  
Ājyasthālī Sarasvatī Sāvitrī vāmadakṣiṇe //  
Agni Purāṇa (149.3-5)
6. Brahmāṇam kāryed vidvān devam saumyam caturmukham /  
Baddhapadmāsanam toṣyam tathā kṛṣṇājīnāmbaram // 5 //  
Jaṭādham caturbāhum saptahaṁse rathe sthitam /  
vāme nyastam karatale tasyaikam doryugam bhavet // 6 //  
Ekasmin dakṣiṇe pāṇāvākṣamālā tathā śubhā /  
Kamaṇḍalurdvītiye ca sarvābharaṇadhāriṇaḥ // 7 //  
Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa (III.44)  
Elsewhere in this text (III.46) the significance of attributes and features has also been enunciated.
7. For details see T.A.G. Rao (1916), Elements of Hindu Iconography, Madras (reprint, Varanasi, 1971), Vol.II, Part II, pp.243-47; Basu, op. cit., pp.303-310.
8. V.S. Agrawala (1937), 'Brahmanical Images in Mathura', Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art, Calcutta, p.123; Banerjea, op. cit., pp.517-18.
9. Banerjea, loc. cit.; N.P. Joshi (2004), 'Brahmanical Sculptures in the Gandhāra Art', in R.C. Sharma and Pranati Ghosal (eds), Buddhism and Gandhāra Art, Shimla-Varanasi-New Delhi, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Jñāna-Pravāha and Aryan Books International, p.141.
10. Osmund Bopearachchi (2008), 'Les Premiers Souverains Kouchans : Chronologie et Iconographie Monétaire', Journal des Savants, Paris, pp.34-35, fig.14. I am thankful to Dr. Bopearachchi for a scanned copy of this article along with the image.
11. John Allan (1936), Catalogue of the Coins of Ancient India, London, British Museum, pp.cxlī-cxliī and 245-52; Banerjea, op. cit., pp.117ff. I have dealt with this controversy in an article to be published elsewhere.
12. I am thankful to Mr. Girish Sharma (Indore) and Dr. Wilfried Pieper (Germany) for the coins illustrated here from their collections.

13. Narendra Kothari (2006), Ujjayini Coins (Edited by Dilip Rajgor), Mumbai, Reesha Books International, p.104, RB# 268.
14. Oriental Numismatic Society Newsletter, London, No.141, Summer 1994, p.13, coin no.2.
15. Audumbaradaṇḍena prāvṛto mṛgacarmanā /  
Mahadhvare tadā Brahmā dhanmā-svenaiva śobhate //  
Padma Purāṇa, Sṛṣṭi-khaṇḍa, 16, 191
16. Basu, op. cit., p.313.
17. Devendra Handa (2007), Coins and Temples : Numismatic Evidence of the Evolution of Temple Architecture, Mumbai, Reesha Books International, pp.21-29.
18. The existence of shrines dedicated to Brahmā is indicated by the Mahābhārata, Vanaparva, 84, 103-04 : Tato gaccheta rājendra Brahmasthānamuttamam . . . //
19. 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 (c. 200 BCE - c. 50 BCE)', Ibid, No.142, pp.6-8; Osmund Bopearachchi and Wilfried Pieper (1998), Ancient Indian Coins, Turnhout : Brepols, Pl.9, coin no.8; Kothari, op. cit., p.79, RB# 68; p. 5, RB# 117; p.106, RB# 285; etc.
20. Ucuśca Kūrmārājānamakūpāre surāsurāḥ surāsuraiḥ /  
Adhiṣṭhānam girerasya bhavān bhavitumarhati //  
Mbh, I.14, 11
21. Kothari, op. cit., p. 106, RB# 284. Dr. R.C. Thakur of Mahidpur near Ujjain has obtained from the Śiprā river about a hundred metallic fish-shaped pieces which include one specimen bearing coin-devices and legend [H.D. Pathak and R.C. Thakur (2006), 'Unique Fish Shaped Coins from Ujjain', JNSI, LXVIII, pp.38-39, pl.I.9-14].
22. Aham Prajāpati-Brahmā matparam nādhigamyate /  
Matsyarūpam yūyam ca mayāsmānmokṣitā bhayāt //  
Mbh, III.185, 48