

Portrayal and Deification of Hanumān and Rāma – Fresh Evidence

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Kauṭilya's reference to the fall of Rāvaṇa because of his vanity to restore a stranger's wife indicates that the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* was well known to the people in fourth century BCE.¹ Nasik Cave Inscription of Vāsiṣṭhīputra Puḷumāvi (Regnal Year 19) refers to Gautamīputra Sātakarṇi as *Ekadhanurdhara* (the sole or great archer) and compares him in strength with Keśava, Arjuna and Bhīmasena – *Kesavārjuna-Bhīmasena-tula-parākamasa*, and with Nābhāga, Nahuṣa, Janamejaya, Śaṅkara, Yayāti, Rāma and Ambarīṣa in splendor – *Nābhāga-Nahuṣa-Janamejaya-Sakara-Yayāti-Rām-ābarīsa-sama-tejasa*.² Though scholars are not unanimous on the identity of Rāma who could also be Jāmadagnya Paraśurāma or Balarāma, yet his mention as *Ekadhanurdhara* indicates that the hero or god intended in the cited passage is *Dhanurdhara* Rāma. The Nasik Cave Inscription of the time of Nahapāna refers to Rāma-tīrtha at Śūrāpāraka (Sopara) – *Govardhane suvarṇamukhe Śorapārage ca Rāma-tīrthe*,³ but here too applies the same uncertainty of identification though its having been a pilgrim centre of Dāśarathī Rāma cannot be denied. The Vana, Droṇa and Śānti Parvas of the *Mahābhārata* make it very clear that the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* was well known during the period of its composition and the epic refers to not only the above-said Rāma-tīrtha⁴ but also to others which existed on the Gomatī and the Sarasvatī rivers.⁵ Rāma-tīrtha on the Gomatī was certainly associated with Dāśarathī Rāma. A Gupta clay sealing from Kumrahar bears the device of wheel and the legend *Rāmasvāmī*,⁶ which on the analogy of Padmanābhasvāmī, Govindasvāmī, etc. seems to refer to Dāśarathī Rāma as an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu.⁷ Kālidāsa's *Raghuvamśa*, Gangdhar inscription of Mālava year 480 (CE 423-24) comparing the Aulikara ruler Viśvavarman with Rāma and Bhāgīratha,⁸ Supia Stone inscription of the Gupta year 141 (CE 460-61) comparing Skandagupta with Rāma in righteousness,⁹ construction of a temple

dedicated to *Śārṅgin* (= Rāma) as recorded in Bhitārī stone inscription of Skandagupta¹⁰ and Aphaṣṭ inscription of the Late Gupta king Ādityasena comparing Jīvagupta I with Hanumān¹¹ together with the depiction of scenes from the epic on the Gupta temples at Deogarh¹² and Nachna¹³ leave absolutely little doubt to the popularity of the story of the epic with poets, artists and the laity. It may also be pointed out that seven sculpted terracotta bricks depicting scenes from the *Rāmāyaṇa* were obtained from the village Nachar Khera, about 15 km from Tohana in district Hisar, Haryana. They are housed in the Gurukula Museum at Jhajjar. The inscription engraved on the specimen depicting Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa with Rāma and Jaṭāyu



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

missing in the broken portion (Fig.1) is taken from Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*.¹⁴ One brick carries the scene of Pañcavaṭī where Sītā saw the golden deer and insisted Rāma to have it for her (Fig.2). A badly mutilated brick from Jind in Haryana inscribed with *Hanumān Aśokavāṭikā hantā* in Gupta Brāhmī characters shows the destruction of *Aśoka-vāṭikā* by Hanumān. Another brick bears the name of *Trisīrā* who is shown as being

informed by a soldier that the fourteen demons sent by Rāvaṇa were unable to
Jñāna-Pravāha (2)

defeat Rāma. Probably all these bricks were inscribed originally but because of mutilation inscriptions are seen only on a few pieces now.¹⁵ Kala had observed, “*Rāmāyaṇa* subjects in Indian sculpture are unknown in the pre-Christian era.”¹⁶ A terracotta showing a 'man carrying a woman in his arms' from Kauśāmbī displayed in the Allahabad Museum and assignable to the second-first century BCE described and illustrated by Kala himself¹⁷ has been identified by Sengupta¹⁸ and Sivaramamurti¹⁹ as Rāvaṇa abducting Sītā. Recently Prof. B.B. Lal too has endorsed this identification.²⁰ Though this terracotta figurine furnishes the earliest available evidence of the plastic representation of the epic scene yet the earliest portrayal of Rāma in art is recognized in the terracotta figurine of Rāma (Fig.3), 47 cm in height and fired brown, from village Nachar Khera, gifted by Marilyn Walter Grounds to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art Collection (Acc. No. M.83.221.6), and published by Pratapaditya Pal.²¹ It also bears the identifying inscription *Rāma* in Gupta Brāhmī letters near the left thigh of the god. Lal²² dates it to the third century CE. Large, open eyes, obliquely sweeping eyebrows and elongated ears characterize the face which is expressive of his strong personality. Here also Rāma is dressed like a warrior in a tunic resembling those of the Gupta monarchs on their coins. Also vividly depicted are the cross-belt (*channavīra*), the bow in the left hand and a quiver full of arrows, behind the right shoulder. The right hand is raised in the gesture of reassurance. The figure is detached from a larger composition. It seems that all these bricks adorned some Vaiṣṇava temple at Nachar Khera during the Gupta period. Some panels from Nāgārjunakoṇḍa in Andhra Pradesh datable to third century CE also depict scenes from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, which show Rāma and Hanumān.²³ The depiction of Rāma and Hanumān thus goes back to the third century CE as per the evidence available till now.



Fig. 3

Two very notable features in the depiction of Rāma in most of these

portrayals are to show him as two-handed holding bow and arrow and wearing a cross-belt called *channavīra*. Rāma is often described in literature as a great archer (*Dhanurdhara*) and this became his characteristic iconic feature. *Though the Brhatsamhitā* (LVII.30) refers to the images of Rāma without giving any specific details and the *Viṣṇudharmottara* describes him as endowed with royal marks (*Rāmo Dāśarathih kāryo rājalakṣaṇalakṣitaḥ*),²⁴ the *Agni Purāṇa* (49.6) is perhaps the earliest text to give details of his iconography : *Rāmaścāpī śarī khadgī śaṅkhī vā dvibhujah smṛtaḥ, i.e., Rāma should be shown as two-armed with bow and an arrow; and with sword and conch as well when four handed.* The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (IX.10, 9) describes him as *Kodaṇḍapāṇi* – holding a bow in the hand. Even in later iconography Rāma is generally depicted as two armed holding bow and arrow and this is well attested by the *Vaikhānasāgama* which prescribes that he 'should never have more that two arms and should hold an arrow in the right hand and a bow in the left'.²⁵

Figures of Rāma may thus be recognized by the bow and arrow in the hands or by a quiver at his back and the cross-belt even if the hands are damaged. A terracotta figurine of the Gupta period found from Sandhaya, a village located about 3 km northeast of Kapāla-Mocana, an ancient and well known pilgrim center, located about 25 km northwest of Sugh, in district Yamunanagar of Haryana, well illustrates it (Fig.4). It measures 18 X 11 cm and is now displayed in the Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh. It is baked red and represents a male figure whose head, left arm and legs are completely lost. A quiver at the back of the right shoulder and bandolier (*channavīra*, cross-band), however, help us to identify the figure. As we have noted above bow and *channavīra* are characteristic features of Rāma in Gupta art. The presence of the quiver indicates that the bow may have



Fig. 4

been held in the left hand, now broken. The right hand held near the chest may have held an arrow. Stylistically, this terracotta may be dated to *circa* fifth century CE. The comparatively larger size of the figure also indicated that it adorned some religious establishment. Another broken part of a brick showing Rāma fettered by a Nāga 'serpent' has also been found from this site. It may be added here that some more bricks carved in the typical Gupta style indicating the existence of a Gupta temple have also been found from this place.²⁶

Hanumān

Hanumān, likewise may be recognized easily by his monkey face and chinless mandible. Son of the wind-god Mārūti and Añjanā²⁷ according to popular Hindu belief, Hanumān got this name because his chin was broken by Indra who hurled his *vajra* (thunderbolt) at him²⁸ as the monkey child, after his birth, took the glittering sun as an object of food, jumped at it but finding Rāhu to be bigger, diverted to him. On seeing Airāvata (Indra's elephant), he tried to eat it but was hit by Indra with his thunderbolt.²⁹ The *Campū Rāmāyaṇa* (IV.10) also supports this view but the *Padma Purāṇa* says that he got this name as he was born at a place known as Hanuruha. In the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* and most other texts, he is described as a monkey. The *Rudra Saṁhitā* of the *Śiva Purāṇa* (XX, vv. 4-6 and 9) describes him as an incarnation of Rudra, who appeared in the form of monkey to render assistance to Rāma. Some scholars consider him to be of non-Aryan origin. On the advice of his guru Sūrya, he accepted the minister-ship and companionship of Sugrīva (Sūrya's son). The *Gheruṇḍa Saṁhitā* records a tradition that Hanumān learnt the secrets of breath control from his mother Añjanā, who had learnt them from Vāyu. He was unequalled in bravery, courage and competence and observed strict celibacy. He possessed the power of reducing (*Aṇimā*) or expanding (*Mahimā*) his size and could assume any form. The *Padma Purāṇa* endows him with all the knowledge of arts and letters, besides being a literary genius. His devotion and obedience to Rāma is unprecedented. The *Brahma Purāṇa* identifies the Vṛṣākapi of the *Ṛgveda* with Mahākapi Hanumān of the epic and Puranic literature.³⁰

Earliest Portrayal of Hanumān

The earliest definite representations of Hanumān in the plastic art known so far go back to the Ikṣvāku and Gupta periods as noted above. The monkey-god was perhaps worshipped in the Sātavāhana period as well as is indicated

by a recently found round terracotta sealing of 6.5 X 7.0 cm from Chandrakheḍā in district Chandrapur of Maharashtra.³¹ It bears four-lined Brāhmī legend in a square incuse with laterally placed railed post and other symbols below (Fig.5). The legend is important and has not been properly interpreted though Kulkarni deciphered it almost correctly as *Raño Siri Sātakarṇi/sa tise sarvachare sava/tobhada donamukhasa ka/pisa sakaṭakāraṇi*. Both Bhandare and Kulkarni suspect a reference to



Fig. 5

Kapisa in Gandhāra in this legend but the last part of the legend should be read as *Kapisasa kaṭakāraṇi* which helps us to interpret the legend sensibly.

Sarvatobhadra (four-fold) images were well known in the Kuṣāṇa-Sātavāhana period. *Donamukha* (*Droṇamukha*) according to Kauṭilya is the headquarters of four hundred villages which the village of Chandrakheḍā with its extensive mound seems to have been. The legend thus tells us that 'this four-fold (*sarvatobhada*) image of Kapīśa (Hanumān) belonging to the *donamukha* (i.e., *Droṇamukha* = Chandrakheḍā) was carved in the thirtieth year of the illustrious king Sātakarṇi.' The coins and inscriptions, particularly the Nāṇeghāṭ record, explicitly record the performance of various sacrifices by Sātakarṇi and his inclination towards the Vedic rituals and Bhāgavata religion is very clear. We



Fig. 6

thus have a dated reference to the four-fold image of Hanumān at Chandrakheḍā in Vidarbha which formed part of Sātakarṇi's dominions then. It is interesting to note that Allan had referred to the depiction of Hanumān on a silver punch-marked coin.³² The illustration of the coin does not permit of definiteness but if Allan's identification is accepted, the antiquity of the depiction of Hanumān on coins will go back to the Mauryan period.

The early reference to the image of Hanuman in the Chandrakheḍā sealing, however, is substantiated by the famous archaeological site of Sugh near Jagadhari in Haryana which has yielded some terracotta figurines indicating the popularity of Hanumān at an early period. One small figure (Fig.6), 5.0 X 3.5 cm, representing only

the moulded head shows round eyes with prominent eyeballs, protruding prognathism with heavy upper and thin lower lip and negligible chin. A conical crown with a crest is placed on his head. It is the crown which distinguishes it from ordinary monkey figurines and helps us to identify it as the head of Hanumān. Stylistically, it may be placed in *circa* second-third century CE.

Another head (Fig.7), which measures 9.5 X 3.0 cm, is similar in conception though crude in execution. A tenon below it indicates that it was meant to be attached to a modelled body. On stylistic grounds it seems to be slightly later than the preceding example. A small terracotta moulded head of Hanumān with a typical conical headdress and a tenon below at the neck is known from Thanesar also (Fig.8).



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

Still another moulded head of Hanumān from Sugh measuring 5.25 x 2.75

cm

(Fig.9) betrays the popularity of the god in the region. The hair are drawn upwards and held by a fillet on the forehead and fan outward above (Fig.10). Oblique lines on the sides going up to the ears separate the head and the face. The facial features show a decline in the terracotta art. Stylistically, it may be assigned to *circa* fifth-sixth century CE.³³



Fig. 9



Fig. 10

All these figurines in clay show the popularity of Hanumān amongst the common folk. The moulded heads further indicate that such figurines were produced on a large scale to cater to the demand of the masses.

Earliest Representations of Rāma

Amongst the numerous Śuṅga terracotta figurines found from Sugh is a

moulded piece measuring 12.0 X 9.6 cm and baked red (Fig.11). The hair are coiled on the left and supported by a flowery wreath. The figure is shown as wearing triple earrings and a torque composed of tiny rosettes. Small rosette-like marks exist on the chest and left shoulder also. A projecting ridge indicates that he wore a *dhotī*. A very conspicuous feature, however, is the presence of a quiver full of arrows behind the left shoulder. The left arm is broken but it seems to have been extended to left. The right hand seems to have been raised above the shoulder with a deep groove indicating that it was meant for insertion of some object, probably the upper end of a bow made of wood or bamboo stick. The face is oval with round open eyes, long nose, plump cheeks and a small mouth with thick lower lip. The strokes of the use of a fibrous brush are visible on the bust. Unfortunately the piece is broken below the abdomen. The coiled hair supported by flowery wreath, sparse ornamentation, bare bust, quiver on the back and the groove in the right hand probably for holding a bow indicate that the terracotta represents Rāma. If the proposed identification is accepted, this terracotta will be the earliest evidence of the depiction of Rāma in plastic art.³⁴



Fig. 11

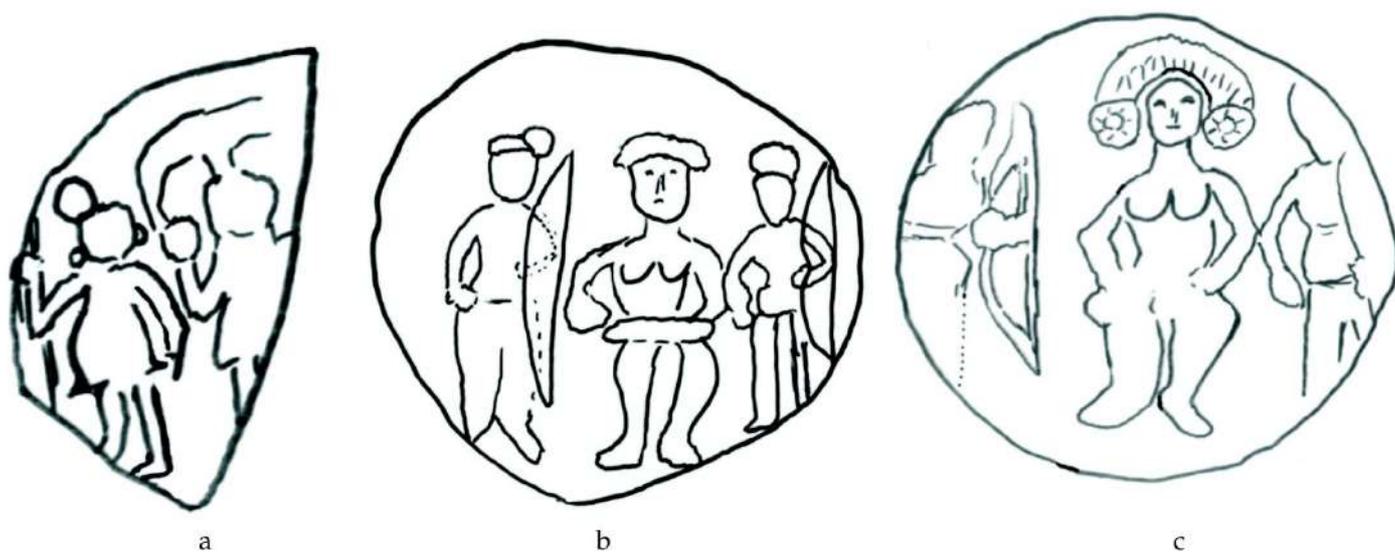
Another similar but badly mutilated piece measuring 9.0 X 7.0 cm in its extant form, probably prepared from the same mould, indicates the popularity of such pieces at Sugh. Stylistically these pieces may be assigned to *circa* second-first centuries BCE. It is well known that babies in India are sometimes christened after the names of deities. The scions of the Gupta dynasty named Skandagupta, Kumāragupta and Rāmāgupta are the glaring examples. Coins of the Mathura king Rāmādatta datable to *circa* second century BCE³⁵ and the Kauśāmbī ruler Rāmamitra of *circa* first century BCE/CE³⁶ indicate that Rāma was a well known and popular god in the second-first centuries BCE. Two clay sealings inscribed with the names of Rāmādāsa, Rāmādatta (and Śivadatta) in

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second-first century BCE Brāhmī characters recovered recently in the excavations at Pakkakot in Balia district of eastern Uttar Pradesh also point in the same direction.³⁷

More clinching evidence, however, comes from the field of numismatics and is discussed below.

Allan³⁸ had listed a broken round copper piece showing two of three figures on the obverse and Ujjain symbol on the reverse (Fig.12.1, LD.1a). Allan thought that the figures were similar to those found on some punch-marked silver coins. A careful perusal, however, shows that the figures do not resemble



Line Drawing (LD) – 1a-c

those of the punch-marked coins and show different stances and features. The leading figure on viewer's left wearing *dhotī* and matted top-knot on the head holds perhaps a bow in his right hand with suspended left hand touching the corresponding shank. The female figure to his proper left (in central position) stands with her right hand raised to the level of the shoulder supporting some object, perhaps a flower. Her left hand and the third figure are lost because the coin is broken. It is somewhat difficult to identify the figures with certainty but may be compared with an oval copper (or potin?) piece measuring 23 X 20 mm and weighing 4.15 g in Dr. D.L. Neema's collection at Indore which shows three similarly standing human figures on the obverse with the other side completely rubbed off (Fig.12.2, LD.1b):

All the figures stand slightly turned to their right. The female figure in the center has her face almost to front with her left leg slightly bent at the knee

indicating a walking posture. The male figure on either side supports a bow in the left hand with right akimbo or perhaps holding an arrow. The piece is very much worn out and the details are difficult to be made out properly. The male on viewer's left, however, is shown as wearing a *dhotī* with hair wound together on the left of the head as in the Śuṅga style. The dress of the female figure compares very well with the dress of numerous human figures which figure on Ujjain coins and leaves little doubt to its being an indigenous piece of



Fig. 12

the area. The three figures with two males holding the bows seem to represent Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa going in the forest and recall to our mind the description given in the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* (Araṇya-kāṇḍa, XI.1) –

Agrataḥ prayayau Rāmaḥ Sītā madhye suśobhanā /

Pṛṣṭhatastu dhanuṣpāṇir=Lakṣmaṇo'nujagāma //

Another similar piece of copper (1.7 cm, 5.0 g) in the collection of Dr. Major M.K. Gupta of Burhanpur (Fig.12.3-3a, LD.1c) seems to corroborate this identification. It carries on its obverse similar three figures and traces of the Ujjain symbol on the reverse. The central female figure on this coin stands to front wearing a *dhotī* and perhaps an upper garment resting her hands on the

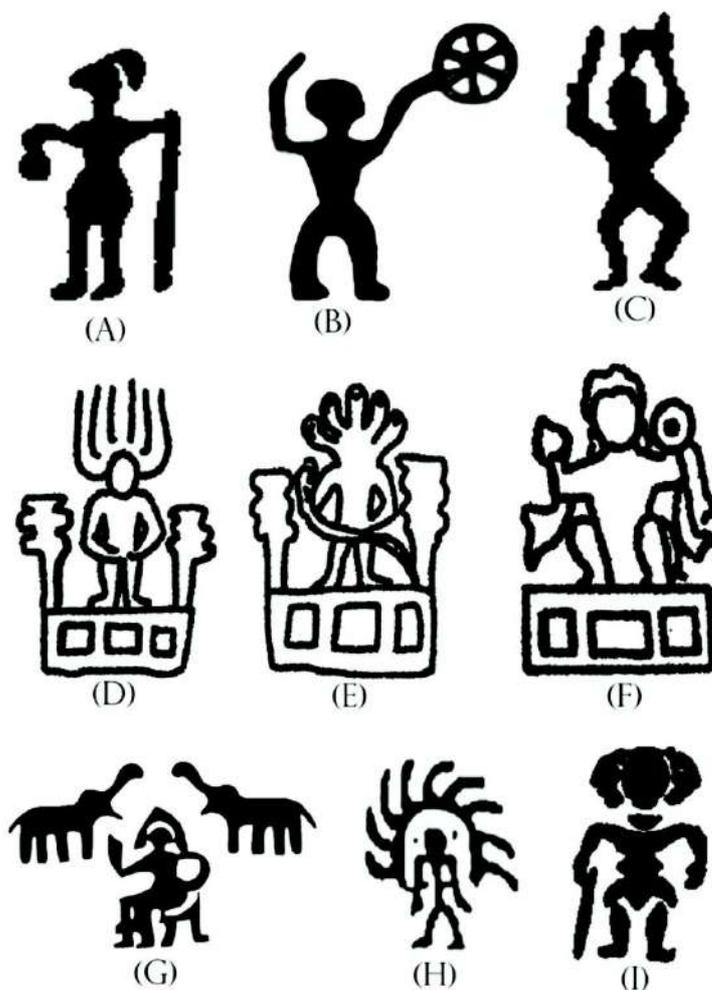
corresponding hips. Her feet are splayed outward slightly. A canopy-like decoration or coif shown above her head can well be compared with a similar feature on the head of Lakṣmī as shown on Mathura and other coins³⁹ as well as in sculptures.⁴⁰ The male figure to her right is accommodated partially on the flan but the surviving portion clearly shows his left hand holding the bow. The figure to her left is also partially accommodated but is certainly that of a male.

All these three coins are un-inscribed cast copper coins from Ujjain region. It may be pointed out that un-inscribed cast copper coins of Ujjain region continue to carry devices like the helmeted human figure, wheel, arched hill, tree in railing, etc. from the punch-marked series and seem to have been contemporaneous or followed the said series without a break. As such, they may be dated to the late third-early second century BCE.

Deification of the Deities

Punch-marked coins which are generally dated between BCE 500 – 200 carry some human figures. Punch-marked coins with three arched hill surmounted by a crescent are now almost universally accepted to belong to the Maurya period.⁴¹

The figure of a crested human (Fig.13(A), LD.2(A)) on punch-marked and Ujjain coins and three or six headed figure on the latter series (Fig.13(F), LD.2(I)) are generally identified with Śiva or Kārttikeya.⁴² Two human figures holding a wheel and plough in their hands on punch-marked coins (Fig.13(B) & (C), LD.2(B) & (C)) are recognized as Vāsudeva (Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa) and Saṁkarṣaṇa (Balarāma).⁴³ These deities figure on the coins of Indo-Greek ruler Agathocles (*circa* 180-165 BCE) also (Fig.13(D) & (E)). Ujjain coins show



Line Drawing (LD) – 2(A)-(I)



(A)



(B)



(C)



(D)



(E)



(F)



(G)



(H)

Fig. 13

figures of Kārttikeya with a lance and Brahmā with label inscription datable to third-second century BCE (Fig.13(G) & (H) respectively) as well besides Lakṣmī and Gaja-Lakṣmī.⁴⁴ Punch-marked coins of Kosala and Saurāṣṭra *janapadas* 'tribes' also depict Gaja-Lakṣmī and Sūrya (LD.2(G) & (H)).⁴⁵ Some Pāñcāla coins too show the deities like Agni, Bhūmi, Viṣṇu, (LD.2(D) & (F)), etc. corresponding to the names of kings who issued them.⁴⁶ These examples leave little doubt to the deities being depicted on coins from third century BCE onwards. Certainly therefore the deities depicted were worshipped as gods. The reference to the image of Hanumān in the sealing of king Sātakarṇi's time and terracotta heads of the money-god furnish evidence of his worship in the early centuries. It is a general belief amongst the historians and Indologists that only the first and last canto of the *Rāmāyaṇa* depict Rāma as a god and these are later interpolations but the depiction of Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa on Ujjain coins of third-second century BCE corresponding to the description in the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* of the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* thus bears evidence to his deification before that period and has a great bearing on the authenticity of the epic and its date.

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 27. Different texts, however, describe him as the son of Śiva, Rāma (according to the Indonesian version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*), incarnation of Brahmā or even of the Hindu trinity, incarnation of Nandi (Śiva's bull), an *aṁśa* (part) of Nārāyaṇa, and born of milk from Daśaratha's *yajña* (sacrifice) consumed by Añjanā. See for details Shanti Lal Nagar, (1995), *Hanumān In Art, Culture, Thought And Literature*, New Delhi: Intellectual Publishing House.
 28. *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* IV.66, 24: *Tadā śailāgra-śikhare vāmo hanurabhajyata / Tato hi nāmadheyarṇ te Hanumāniti kīrtitam //*.
 29. Nagar, *op. cit.*
 30. *Ibid.*, pp.3 ff.
 31. Shailendra Bhandare, (2005), 'Important inscribed Satavahana Sealing', *News Bulletin Chandrapur Coin Society*, No. 2, p. 3; Prashant P. Kulkarni (2007), 'Important Seals and Sealings from Central India' in *Nidhi*, Vol. II, Nagpur: Indian Coin Society, pp. 27-30; etc.
 32. John Allan, (1936), *Coins of Ancient India*, London: British Museum, pp. xxxvi & 286, Pl. XLVI.17.
 33. Handa (2006), pp. 111-12, Pls. 124-28.
 34. *Ibid.*, pp. 105-06, Pl. 115.
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 36. Prashant Srivastava, (2012), *Encyclopaedia of Indian Coins*, Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, Vol. II, p. 321.
 37. Sitaram Dubey, (2012), *Methodology of Numismatic Study and History-Writing*, New Delhi: Research India Press, pp. 241-59, Pls. I.5 & IV.3.
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 39. *Ibid.*, pp. 177-84, Pls. XXIV-XXVI; Devendra Handa, (2007), *Tribal Coins of Ancient India*, New Delhi: Aryan Books International, p. 19, Pl. V.1-2, XVIII.2, XXXI.5; etc.
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 43. *Ibid.*, p. 24; Devendra Handa, (2007a), *Coins and Temples: Numismatic Evidence on the Evolution of Temple Architecture*, Mumbai: Reesha Books International, pp. 30-34.
 44. Allan (1936), pp. 252 & 256.
 45. Dilip Rajgor, (2001), *Punch-Marked Coins of Early Historic India*, California: Reesha Books International, p. 209.
- Allan (1936), pp. cxvii-cxix & 192-204.