



Pl.I : Veda-Puruṣa Brahmā with central equine head, 11th century, sandstone, probably Rajasthan (exact provenience unknown), Approx. H. 81.3 cm, W. 55.6 cm, Photo-courtesy: Christie's Auction

The Image of Veda-Puruṣa Brahmā from Rajasthan

An Appraisal of its Unique Iconography

Devendra Handa

An image titled 'A buff sandstone stele of Bull-headed deity' from Rajasthan datable to circa 11th-12th century was auctioned by the auction house of Christies in 1999 (Pl.I).¹ The title of the image reveals that the cataloguer could not identify the image properly because of its uniqueness and also due to the non-availability of any similar image in the existing literature on the subject. The description given in the auction catalogue is as follows: "The three-headed twelve-armed deity seated in *dhyanasana* on a lotus base, issuing from a stepped plinth with the stem forming two coils enclosing seated deities and flanked by devotees in adoration, holding the attributes of a drum, snake and vessel in his left hands, wearing beaded necklaces and a garland carved in openwork spanning his back, flanked on either side by female deities arranged in a vertical column and crowned by two *apsaras* reaching across the openwork lotus nimbus." Even this description is only partially correct and does not describe or identify the eight small female figures, four on each side of the main figure.

The central figure described as three-headed is actually four-headed, the fourth head at the back to be presumed. Of the visible three heads, the frontal main or middle one has been described as that of a bull whereas it seems to me to be equine. The side faces in profile are human faces and a similar one may have been at the back. The pile of matted hair adorned with jewels and bead-strings ends in a point at the top and is common to all the three visible heads. Behind the heads there is a round aureole set with a full-blown lotus, flanked near the top by celestial minstrels in flying posture. The equine face has semi-closed eyes whereas the human faces with sharp features show drooping eyelids. Seated in a meditative pose on the pericarps of a blossomed lotus the god wears jeweled torque and triple-stringed beaded necklace, a sacred thread, beaded waist-band, armlets, wristlets and a scarf. Most of the twelve arms are unfortunately broken. The surviving lowermost right hand is disposed in boon-giving posture and the

corresponding left supports a water-pot. All the five upper right hands are broken making it difficult even to guess the attributes they may have held. The two hands above the lowermost on the left hold a snake and a *damaru* (dumb-bell or kettle-drum), the attributes of Śiva. The uppermost arm on this side bending at the elbow towards the belly supports the long shaft probably the sacrificial ladle, an attribute of Brahmā. In the volutes under the lotus seat have been depicted sages in postures of ease, their hands disposed in the gesture of reassurance. The central facet of the pedestal shows kneeling figures of male adorers in profile with folded hands while their female counterparts seated behind occupy the extreme lower corners.

Very important is the depiction of eight small figures of female deities, four on viewers' left from bottom upwards and four from top to bottom on the right, all seated in *sukhāsana* or posture of ease. The lowermost figure on the left may be identified as Brahmāṇī. Just above her is Vaiṣṇavī. The third figure is that of Māheśvarī. The figure on the top represents Kaumārī. The topmost figure on right may be recognized as that of Indrāṇī because of the thunderbolt in her back right hand. Just below her is Vārāhī, followed by emaciated Cāmuṇḍā. The last figure shown near the left knee of the main figure may be identified as Sarasvatī, the goddess of learning and also regarded as the spouse of Brahmā.

First we take up the identification of the heads of the key images. In Hindu mythology there are many gods who are depicted as multi-headed, Brahmā being the foremost. Four-headed image of Viṣṇu known popularly as Vaikuṅṭha is described in the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* (hereafter VDP) as having eight arms and bearing serene central face, lion-face to right, boar-face to left and Kapila-face at the back if the image is round otherwise only to be presumed.² When Śiva was raised to the status of supreme deity and assumed the functions of creation, sustenance and destruction, he became Mahādeva who has been described in VDP as having five faces, four serene and one fearful, and having ten hands. All the five faces of Mahādeva have three eyes representing sun, moon and fire except Vāmadeva (feminine face) which has two eyes only. Philosophic explanations for these different heads have also been provided.³ Though there are examples of depicting Śiva as having four or five heads in art, yet to avoid the clumsiness of showing the fourth and fifth head and ease of depiction his *tri-mūrtis* 'three-faced images' exceed others. In these images the fourth head at the back was to be presumed as for showing it at the back the image had to be rounded and in case of slabs and steles or on temple walls it was not possible. Snake and *damaru* in two of the surviving left hands of our image indicate its association with Śiva also. In such *tri-*

or *caturmūrtis* 'four-faced images', however, the different faces betray different expressions besides the *saumya* 'benevolent' central face; no such difference, however, is discernible in our image. So let us consider its possibility of being that of Brahmā.

Brahmā, the creator of the world, is known by different names like Brahmaṇaspati, Bṛhaspati, Hiraṇyagarbha, Prajāpati, Viśvakarman, etc. The *Śatarudrīya* text of the *Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā* refers to his four faces and lotus seat (*taccaturmukhāya vidmahe padmāsanāya dhīmahi*) and the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*⁴ refers to Prajāpati assuming the forms of fish, tortoise and boar which are later transferred to Viṣṇu. The *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* (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, 4 ff.). The *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* (III.39, 1), however, refers to the hair of Prajāpati's beard as the Vedas (*Prajāpatervai etāni śmaśrūṇi yadvedāḥ*). The concept of his being the creator, sustainer and destroyer, the functions of being the Supreme Lord, which were later prescribed for Viṣṇu, is consummated in the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* (III.15: *Brahmā devānāṃ prathamāḥ sambabhūva viśvasya kartā bhuvanasya goptā*), and the *Mahābhārata* (III.272, 47) and *Brahma Purāṇa* endorse it. 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 or 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.⁵

Later, as recorded in the epics, Brahmā's 'position is gradually weakened and his honours and activities become more or less of a titular character'.⁶ Brahmā is pushed to the background as a deity of lesser importance in most of the Purāṇas. According to the *Skandapurāṇa* (Avantikhaṇḍa, II.38-40) Brahmā created the four Vedas from his four cardinal faces and *Itihāsa* (history) along with its branches from the fifth face facing the sky. The *Kūrmapurāṇa* calls Brahmā as *viśvatomukha*. The sixth century iconographical text *Bṛhatsaṃhitā* of Varāhamihira describes his four-faced image as seated/standing on a lotus seat and holding a *kamaṇḍalu*.⁷ The *Āditya Purāṇa* refers to his four faces, lotus seat and Sāvitrī on his left lap. 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.⁸ The *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* (VDP, III.44, 5-7) 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. These characteristics are mentioned in most of the other texts, with of course additional information quite often. The VDP (III.46) also give 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 *Matsya* (ch.260, vv.40-45), *Kālikā* (80, 73-75), *Aṃśumadbhedāgama*, *Mānasāra*, *Śilparatna*, *Samarāṅgaṇasūtradhāra*, *Aparājitapṛcchā*, *Rūpamaṇḍana*, etc. are the other important texts which contain details of images of Brahmā holding four of the above-mentioned attributes in his four hands.⁹ Here the clue is provided by the VDP which tells us that the four faces of Brahmā represent the four Vedas. It says that the eastern (frontal) face is the *Ṛgveda*, the face to the right is *Yajurveda*, the back face is *Sāmaveda* and the left face is the *Atharvaveda*¹⁰:

Ṛgvedaḥ pūroavadanaṃ yajurvedastu dakṣiṇam /
Paścimaṃ sāmavedaḥ syādatharvaṇamathottaram / /

(VDP, III.46. 8)

In the chapter on *Devatārūpanirmāṇam* we are told that *Ṛgveda* is known as Brahmā, *Yajurveda* as Indra (Vāsava), *Sāmaveda* is Viṣṇu and *Atharvaveda* is Śambhu (Śiva):

Ṛgvedastu smṛto Brahmā yajurvedastu vāsavaḥ /
Sāmavedastathā viṣṇu śambhuścātharvaṇo bhavet / /

(VDP, III.73, 43)

In a four-faced image of Brahmā the main face would belong to Brahmā, the *paścima* face at the back not visible would be that of *Sāmaveda* (representing Viṣṇu) and the left face will be that of *Atharvaveda* (Śambhu) while the right face of the image would be that of *Yajurveda* (Vāsava, Indra).

The main image under discussion is hybrid in nature as equine head is placed over human body. Interestingly *Jayākhyā Saṃhitā*, a work of about 450 CE, refers to hybrid forms of the *Ṛgveda* etc. having the face of horse and human bodies (*Ṛgvedādyam catuṣkaṃ tu pītaṃ haya-narākṛtim*).¹¹ V.S. Pathak¹² and K.K. Thaplyal¹³ had published some clay sealings of the Gupta period found from Rajghat and

preserved in various institutions and museums belonging to Vedic *carāṇas* showing hybrid figures of human beings bearing animal heads. Pathak also quoted Hemādri's thirteenth century work *Caturvargacintāmaṇi* which describes the color of the Vedas and their different animal heads. The *Ṛgveda* is described as having white color, two arms and ass head:

Ṛgvedaḥ śvetavarṇaḥ syāddvibhujo rāsabhānanaḥ /
*akṣamālāmayaḥ saumyaḥ prītaśca vyākhyānodyataḥ //*¹⁴

Śrītattvanidhi prescribes the Vedas as having the heads of ass, goat, horse and monkey.¹⁵ Thaplyal has described four sealings from Rajghat, two in the Bharat Kala Bhavan and two in the Allahabad Museum, as showing two trees in the upper field and the Brāhmī legend *Bahavṛca-carāṇam* in Gupta characters in the lower field with the main device which has been described as "a man (*ācārya*) in *dvibhaṅga* posture flanked by two small boys (*mānavakas*) under a semi-circular canopy of trees", all figures being hybrid bearing animal heads over human bodies. *Bahavṛca* is a *carāṇa* (*śākhā* 'branch') of the *Ṛgveda*. So Thaplyal has suggested that "the main figure represents the *Ṛgveda* itself, while the two smaller figures bearing the same features as the central one, and (each) holding a *daṇḍa*, stand for its two *śākhās*."¹⁶ So we have the representation of the *Ṛgveda* on these Gupta sealings as having human body and animal head, asinine according to the *Caturvargacintāmaṇi* quoted above. R.C. Agrawala has referred to a unique twelfth century bejewelled and haloed standing icon of Brahmā from Ḍhābā in district Nagaur, subsequently shifted to the Government Museum, Bikaner, Rajasthan (Serial No.2211/91), showing three-headed god with central bearded face, carrying *sruk* 'ladle' and manuscript in upper hands, natural right hand in *varadākṣa* and left holding *kamaṇḍalu*, with swan depicted near the lower right hand and unfinished horse-headed male figure at the back without any weapons in the hands, which he identified as *aśva-vadana* 'horse-faced' *Sāmaveda* according to the VDP.¹⁷

The depiction of the Vedas as hybrid figures may be seen in free-standing sculptures also. Pratapaditya Pal¹⁸ had published in 1973-74 from the collection of the Museum für Indische Kunst, Berlin a seventh century 24 cm high bronze image from Kashmir depicting mono-cephalic four-armed Brahmā with natural right hand disposed in the gesture of reassurance (*abhaya-mudrā*) and others holding rosary, scepter and water-pot in *pradakṣiṇā* 'circumambulatory' order. The

god is accompanied by four small haloed attendant figures, two each on either side of his feet; of which the one closer to his right foot bears an animal head. These attendant figures are the four Vedas personified, the one with horse-head is identifiable with the *Atharvaveda* according to the texts quoted above.

A tri-cephalous bi-handed stone sculpture of Brahmā standing in *samapāda-sthānaka* 'equal-footed standing' posture from Morni-ka-Tal in Haryana measuring 48.5 x 41 cm datable to circa eighth century was published by me showing similar attendant figures (Pl.II).¹⁹ In this image in high-relief, the small attendant figure near the right foot of the god which is hybrid and bears the animal head over human body.

In the image (from Rajasthan) under discussion Brahmā is represented as Veda-Puruṣa and the principal frontal face is equine. Since the VDP describes *pūrva* (eastern) face as the frontal face in a *caturmukha* image it should represent the *Ṛgveda* which has been described as *rāsabhānana*, i.e. asinine face. The depiction of Sarasvatī near the left knee of the god corroborates the identification of the figure with Brahmā. Further confirmation is furnished by the depiction in the stele of small panels of Sapta-mātrkās who were created by Brahmā for the assassination of Nairṛta according to the *Suprabhedāgama*:

*Athātassaṃpravakṣyāmi mātṛnām sthāpanam param /
Nairṛtasya vadhārthāya brahmaṇā cāpi nirmitāḥ / /²⁰*

Thus it becomes clear that this image can be identified as that of Brahmā as Veda-Puruṣa with four Vedic faces representing Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Śiva and Indra. The surviving lowermost right and left hands of the image show *varada* and water-pot and the uppermost left bent at elbow supports the shaft of *sruvā* 'the round-headed ladle' and probably held the manuscript in the hand which are the attributes of Brahmā as *Ṛgveda*. Two other surviving left hands show snake and dumb-bell, the attributes of Śiva represented by the *Atharvaveda*. Śiva's attribute par excellence the trident may have existed in one of the other lost hand. Two other lost hands may have supported *vajra* 'thunderbolt' and goad as the attributes of Indra (*Yajurveda*) and the remaining damaged hands may be supposed to have supported *śaṅkha* 'conch', *cakra* 'wheel' and *gadā* 'mace' and *padma* 'lotus', the attributes of Viṣṇu (*Sāmaveda*).

Undoubtedly, this unique image of Veda-Puruṣa Brahmā is a superb example of the iconic sculptures from medieval Rajasthan.



Pl.II : Tri-cephalous bi-handed Brahmā with personified *Vedas*, sandstone, 8th century, Morni-ka-Tal (Haryana)
Approx. H. 48.5 cm, W. 41 cm

Notes and References

1. Christies' Auction, New York, Park Avenue, Sale 9084, 23rd March 1999, Lot No. 34.
2. Bhattacharyya, D.C. (1991), *Pratimālakṣaṇa of the Viṣṇudharmottara*, New Delhi: Harman (hereafter VDP), III.44, 11-12; III.47.
3. *Ibid.*, III.44, vv. 14-20; III.48.
4. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, I.8, 1, 1ff.; III.5, 2, 1; VII.4, 3, 5; VII.5, 1, 5; etc. See also *The Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, Volumes 12, 26, 41, 43 and 44 of The Sacred Books of the East Series, Delhi-Varanasi-Patna: MLBD, Reprint, 1966 for details.
5. Basu, S.P. (1986), *The Concept of Brahma (its Origin and Development)*, Delhi: Sundeep Prakashan.
6. Banerjea, J.N. (1956), *Development of Hindu Iconography*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, p. 512.
7. *Bṛhatsaṃhitā*, LVII.41a: *Brahmā kamaṇḍalu-karaścaturmukhaḥ pañkajāsanasthaśca /*.
8. For details see Rao, T.A.G. (1916), *Elements of Hindu Iconography*, Madras (reprint, Varanasi, 1971), Vol.II, Part II, pp.243-47; Basu, *op.cit.*, pp. 303-310.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Bhattacharyya [(1991), p.20, fn.2] has explained that though *pūroa*, *paścima*, *uttara* and *dakṣiṇa* are the cardinal directions for east, west, north and south, their relevance in a four-faced image is that *pūroa* stands for the frontal principal face, and *paścima* will thus be the face at the back, i.e. the front and back faces represent eastern and western directions. *Uttara* and *dakṣiṇa* faces in the *caturmūrti* will thus be the faces to the left and right of the principal frontal face.
11. *Jayākhya Saṃhitā*, Edited by E. Krishnamacharya, Baroda: Gayakwad Oriental Series, 1967, p.97, XII.10.
12. Pathak, V.S. (1964), 'A Sealing of the Ātharvanika Charaṇa', *Journal of the Numismatic Society of India*, XXVI (2), p.215.
13. Thaplyal, K.K. (1971), 'Therianthropic Representation of the Ṛigveda and its Two Śākhās', *Bulletin of Museums & Archaeology in U.P.*, Lucknow, No.7, pp.25-28 & plate; (1972), *Studies in Ancient Indian Seals*, Lucknow: Akhila Bharatiya Sanskrit Parishad, pp.28-56, Pl.XXVI.12.
14. Thaplyal has also quoted this verse from some other edition of the *Caturvargacintāmaṇi* (edited by Bharata Chandra Siromani, Calcutta, Saḍvat 1934, p.104 which substitutes *adhyayanodyataḥ* for *vyākhyānodyataḥ*. This text also lays down that the *Atharvaveda* should have the face of a monkey: *Ātharvaṇābhido vedo dhavalō markāṭānanaḥ*.

15. As quoted by Joshi, N.P. (1998-99), 'Association of a Horse with the Vedas', *Kala - The Journal of Indian Art History Congress*, Guwahati, Vol. V, p.6.
16. Thaplyal (1972), pp.249-50. The two *śākhās* of Bahavṛca *caraṇa* of the *Ṛgveda* are the Āśvalāyana and Śāṅkhāyana *śākhās*.
17. Agrawala, R.C. (1999-2000), 'Association of Horse Head with Brahma', *Kalā The Journal of Indian Art History Congress*, Volume VI, pp.13-15; (2009), 'Horse-head on the Back of Medieval Icons' in *Kalādarpaṇa The Mirror of Indian Art: Essays in Memory of Shri Krishna Deva*, edited by Devangana Desai & Arundhati Banerji, New Delhi: Aryan Books International, pp. 230-32.
18. Pal, Pratapaditya (1973-74), 'A Brahmanical Triad from Kashmir and Some Related Icons', *Archives of Asian Art*, XXVII, pp.34-35, Fig.2.
19. Handa, Devendra (2005), *Sculptures from Haryana: Style and Iconography*, New Delhi-Shimla: Aryan Books International/Indian Institute of Advanced Study, pp.207-209, Pl.280.
20. As quoted by Rao (1971), *op.cit.*, Volume I, Part II, Appendix C, p.143.