

An Enigmatic Image of Varāha-Viṣṇu from Gandhāra

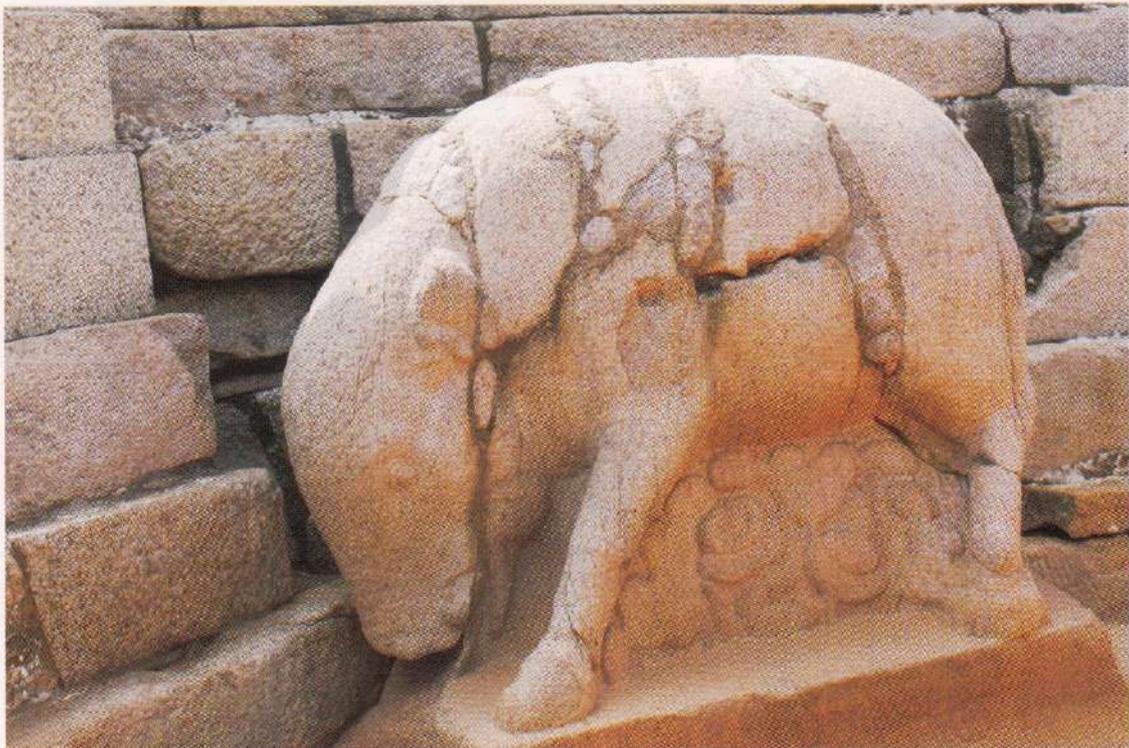
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A sculpture (height 60cm) from Gandhāra showing a hitherto unknown iconography of an anthropomorphic Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa and a zoomorphic Viṣṇu-Varāha (figs. 1A, 1B & 1C) is the focus of this article. The similarity of the sculpture, published here to the Gandhāran tradition is revealed by its excellent workmanship worthy of any classical Gandhāran sculpture, and by the fact that it is carved in grey schist commonly used by Gandhāran sculptors. This beautiful sculpture may date back to the third or fourth century of the Common Era. Behind a boar, standing to right, a frontly depicted Viṣṇu is shown wearing a long *dhotī*, jewelled necklace, a well elaborated crown and a rich *kuṇḍala*. He holds in the back right hand a *cakra*, in the front right a flower, in the back left a *daṇḍa* and in the front left hand a *śaṅkha*. The standing small figure under the right arms of Viṣṇu is difficult to identify because of its bad state of preservation. She or he may be either a *āyudha-puruṣa* or rescued Bhū Devī (Earth Goddess).

The boar incarnation of Viṣṇu as Varāha if connected to a creation myth. At the time when the whole earth was flooded, Varāha rescued the Bhū Devī (or Pṛithvī) from the bottom of the ocean where she had been imprisoned by a sea-demon. It is important to note that there are different versions of this myth in which Brahmā or Viṣṇu, either respectively or in unison, freed the Earth from the depths of the ocean¹. As far as the present sculpture (figs. 1A, 1B & 1C) is concerned, the god depicted behind the boar is undoubtedly Viṣṇu as revealed by its attributes (*cakra*, *padma*, *daṇḍa* and *śaṅkha*). In the iconography depicting this episode, Varāha is usually shown with a human body and a boar-head and the majority of sculptures capture the moment when Varāha emerges from the ocean bearing Bhū Devī who hangs on to one of his tusks² or sits on his right thigh³. The Varāha cult gained popularity during the Gupta period as attested by many panels dating back to the fifth century CE. The colossal Varāha panel from Udayagiri (Vidiśā) in Madhya Pradesh and the inscribed Varāha sculpture of the sixth century CE. are some among many depictions of the boar incarnation.⁴



14.1: A,B,C-Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa and Zoomorphic Viṣṇu-Varāha, Gandhāra, 3rd-4th century CE



14.2: A,B,C-Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa and Zoomorphic Viṣṇu-Varāha, Gandhāra, 3rd-4th century CE

In the sculpture under discussion, the absence of the mythical serpent (Ādiśeṣa) and of Bhū Devī - if the small figure to the left is not her - is noteworthy (figs. 1A, 1B & 1C). Obviously the remarkable sculpture does not represent the moment when Viṣṇu-Varāha rescues the Earth from the deep waters, yet it shows very clearly the god represented here as both Varāha and Viṣṇu, in another words anthropomorphic Viṣṇu-Nārāyana and zoomorphic Viṣṇu-Varāha. There are few sculptures evoking the boar incarnation of Viṣṇu. The massive fifth century sandstone sculpture, in round, from Eraṇ is no doubt the largest and earliest example of the purely zoomorphic Varāha.⁵ The Earth goddess (Bhū Devī) with her left hand hanging to the right tusk of animal is analogous to the accounts in the sacred texts. Depictions of the boar alone, without Bhū Devī, are also known. The zoomorphic image of Varāha is attested in a relief from a pillar of the Lad Khan temple at Aihole.⁶ The so-called 'Shore Temple' at Māmallapuram built in part atleast by Rājasimha, also has depiction of the boar (fig. 2).

We now have evidence to demonstrate that there was a tradition of the Varāha cult before the *Parama-Bhāgavata* rulers, like Guptas, came to the power. N.P. Joshi in 1965 drew the attention to an acquisition made by the Archaeological Museum, Mathura of a fragmentary panel depicting a Kuṣāna Varāha in anthropomorphic form.⁷ The central headless figure, wearing a *dhotī*, according to N.P. Joshi, is Viṣṇu-Varāha holding the Earth (Bhū Devī or Pṛithvī) over the left shoulder near the face. He further concluded that this sculpture bridges an important gap and pushes back the antiquity of Varāha worship by atleast two hundred years. The two-armed Varāha image from Banu, now in the National Museum of Pakistan, Karachi is no doubt the earliest depiction of Viṣṇu-Varāha rescuing the Bhū Devī.⁸ Viṣṇu incarnated as Varāha, is shown with a human body and boar head holding the club in the right hand and trampling the Nāga with both legs in an exultant pose of triumph. Bhū Devī is propped up against his left shoulder in similar fashion to the great relief of Udayagiri.⁹

However the sculptor of sculpture under discussion attempts to creat an image of the Viṣṇu-Varāha based on the passages in the sacred texts. This unorthodox iconography, as compared to other images which do respect to the later descriptions formulated in the holy texts, is more freely sculpted. The Gandhāran sculptors seem to have enjoyed some independence in a growing cosmopolitan atmosphere created by the politics of Kuṣāṇas.

The sculpture discussed in this short article is thus characterised by innovative attempts as revealed by other forms of plastic art that resulted from a multitude of interactions taking place in a region where civilisations from diverse horizons merged at the crossroads of Central Asia and North-West India.¹⁰

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. For a detailed account of these different versions see T.A. Gopinath Rao. '*Elements of Hindu iconography*, Madras, 1914', vol. 2, part 1, pp. 128-35 and N.P.Joshi, 'Kuṣāṇa Varāha sculpture, *Arts Asiatiques*', vol. xii, 1965, p. 113.
2. The best known and one of the earliest and longest panels depicting this scene is at Udyagiri (Vidiśā), Cave no. 5 of the early fifth century, cf. J.C. Harle, *The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent*, New Haven and London, 1994, p. 95, fig. 71.
3. This scene is depicted in one of the panels of Varāha cave Temple of Māmallapuram, cf. A.M. Loth, *Vedisme et hindouisme images du divin et des dieux*, Paris, 2003, p. 64, fig. 45.
4. J.C. Harle, *The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent*, p. 95, fig. 71 & p. 98, fig. 74.
5. *ibid*, p. 98, fig. 74.
6. A.M. Loth, *op. cit.* 2003, p. 64, fig. 45.
7. N.P. Joshi, *op. cit.*, p. 128-35.
8. D.M. Srinivasan, Hindu Deities in Gandhāran art', *Gandhāra- The Buddhist Heritage of Pakistan : Legends Monasteries and Paradise, Exhibition Catalogue*, Mainz 2009, p. 134, fig. 7.
9. J.C. Harle, *op. cit.*, p. 95, fig. 71.
10. For a detailed study of such new sculptures see, O. Bopearachchi, Les premiers souverains kouchans : chronologie et iconographie monétaire, *Journal des Savants*, January-June, 2008, pp. 3-56.

