

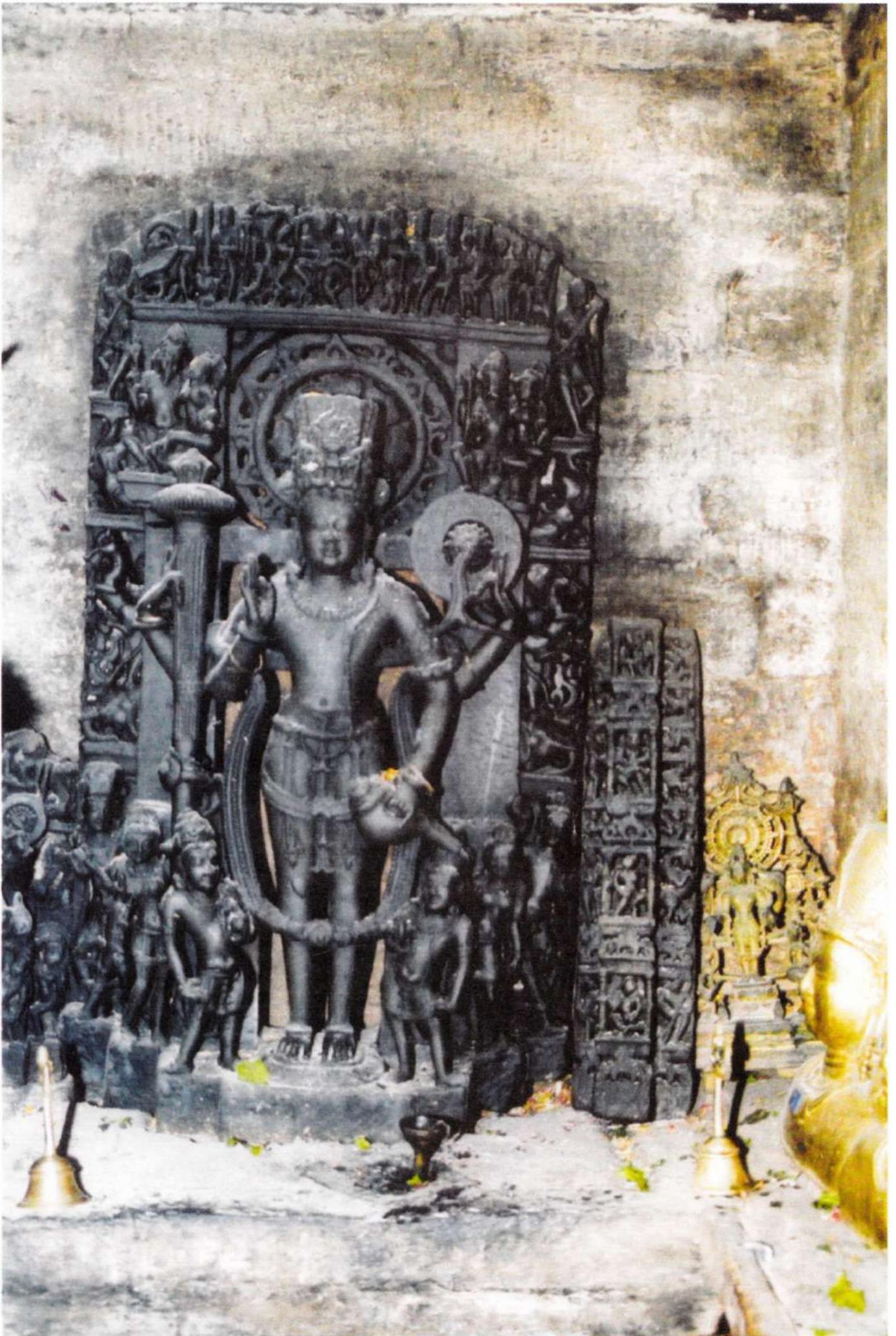
Unknown Viṣṇu Stele From Himachal Pradesh

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During the medieval period, a large number of stone temples were erected in Himachal Pradesh by the local rulers as well as wealthy merchants. Most of them have not survived due to various reasons, but their architectural and sculptural fragments, the latter in the form of carved relief panels, have been carefully preserved in the new, restored structures that were re-built on their sites by the local villagers and temple priests. Some are kept in the *garbhagrhas*, others are seen lying in the *maṇḍapas* or within the temple compounds. In the course of my travels to off-the-beaten track places, I chanced upon numerous sculptures of high, if not the highest, order. They deserve to be better known to the world of scholars. Among them, the number of Viṣṇu stone steles is the largest. In the present paper, I will draw the readers' attention to one such stele that has not seen the light of the day, nor does the world know about its existence.

This stone stele featuring Trivikrama, one of the twenty-four forms of Viṣṇu is preserved in a Śiva temple known as the Jayāli Mātal temple in Chaupāl (Pl. 11.1), Mahāsū district, near Shimla. It surpasses the rest of the Viṣṇu images in grandeur, majesty and in the quality of its artistic carving. Four-armed Trivikrama, wielding his conventional emblems, i.e. *padma*, *gadā*, *cakra* and *śaṅkha* clockwise, stands erect in fully frontal posture on a raised *padmapīṭha* placed in the centre of the *saptaratha* pedestal. His round-ovoid face is chiselled with exquisitely delicate features: ripe full lips, slightly damaged shapely nose, contemplative eyes shaded by prominently arched eyebrows, his broad forehead leads the eye upwards to the fringe of curly hair arranged all along the hairline with great care and delicacy at the base of his rather tall, cylindrical crown. The latter is in typical Pratihāra style, decorated with pearl festoons issuing out of the mouth of the *Kīrtimukha*. Above each ear are seen the bow ends of his turban - this is another novel feature that was introduced during the Pratihāra regime and it replaced the lotus rosettes that had been the standard feature of all sculptures in metal, wood and stone in our state, since the 7th century C.E.

The calmness and serenity of Trivikrama's facial expression imbues his entire



Pl. 11.1: Viṣṇu (Trivikrama), Jayali Mātal Temple, Chaupal

physique. The volumetric compactness of his slim body is highly impressive. In spite of simple ornaments such as a jewelled torque around his neck, the *śrīvatsa* emblem engraved on his chest, ornate armlets (*keyūra*), bracelets, waist girdle holding in place his short loin garment draping only his thighs, over which hang the pendentives (*urūdāma*), a sash around the thighs echoes the curves of his jawline, waist girdle and the elaborate *vanamālā* adorned with pearls and flowers. The attenuated waist and the plastic modelling of his torso add to it the desired effect of sprightly grace. The sculptor's sensitive handling of the chisel is revealed also through the plasticity of the modelling in certain areas of the god's form. Markedly sensitive is the delicacy and finesse in the delineation of his hands and fingers and this feature is a continuum of the Gupta and post-Gupta sculptural tradition. Normal right hand of the god has been raised in *abhaya mudrā*, which held *padma* also; now the flower is missing but its stalk is visible.

On the successively receding *rathas*, Viṣṇu is flanked by his personified weapons - the *Padmapurūṣa* on the right and *Śaṅkhapuruṣa* on the left - who stand in graceful *dvibhaṅga*, holding their respective emblems in one of their hands, while the other one is placed on their waist in *kaṭihasta*. Their figures are much shorter than their lord in height, as is commonly seen in such images. They sport the tiny *karaṇḍa mukuṭas* - this is another typically Pratihāra stylistic feature common to all the images sculpted in the areas falling within the orbit of the Pratihāra regime. The benign, oval faces of these personified *āyudhas* are chiselled with delicate, sharp features. The crisp modelling of their bodies is equally impressive. Behind them stand slightly taller, slimmer and elegant elongated forms of Viṣṇu's consorts Lakṣmī and Bhūdevī, each holding a lotus flower. Both are the very epitome of exquisite beauty brought out by their delicate, attractive and pleasing physiognomical features, carved with great care and precision, right upto each hair strand of their elegant *dhammilla* coiffures. Behind them are shown Garuḍa in his personified form and another male figure standing in graceful *tribhaṅga*. Identification of this figure is problematic. Each of these figures - including the conventional motifs of the *gaja-vyālas* and the pairs of the *makaras*, the twin *Apsarāses* on the extremities of top right and left edges of the stele, Brahmā and Śiva along with their consorts - have been carved with studied competence and surety of hand.

This is the only stele from our area of study in which the uppermost section is relieved with the figures of the ten incarnations (*Daśāvatāras*) of Viṣṇu. The Matsya (Fish) enthroned and shaded by delicately chiselled lotus leaves; Kūrma (Tortoise) supporting the Mount Mandāra flanked by a Deva (god) and an *Asura* (demon) - this symbolic portrayal called *Mandaronmathana* is noteworthy, indeed, although it is not an innovation of the Himāchalī sculptor, for numerous sculpted panels or niches featuring Kūrma incarnation

exactly in this manner are available from different sites that formed a part of the Pratihāra regime, notably the 7th century CE example from Koṭā in Śivapurī, Madhya Pradesh, presently preserved in the Gūjarī Mahal Museum in Gwālior.¹ The rest of the *Avatāras*, viz. Varāha (Boar), Nṛsimha (Man-lion) slaying the demon Hiraṇyakaśipu with his claws - the stele is slightly damaged on top - Vāmana (Dwarf), Paraśurāma, Śrī Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, the Buddha and the last one, yet to come, Kalki astride his horse - are serried together. Another departure made by the sculptor who chiselled this image was in the depiction of the celestial pairs. Brahmā and Sāvitrī or Sarasvatī and Śiva and Pārvatī, seated in *lalitāsana* atop their respective *vāhanas*, the *harīsa* (gander) and *naṇḍī* respectively. Except for minor, almost negligible, damages on top of the stele, this image is still in an excellent state of preservation.

In Rājasthān, Uttarānchala, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Haryāṇā, the Pratihāra sculptors chiselled numerous more or less identical images of Viṣṇu, along with the accompanying figures between the 8th and 13th centuries. Most of them have passed their way into the museums abroad such as the British Museum, and the museums in the USA. Some of them are iconographically related to our present stone stele. The most elaborate and crowded image of this type is in the collection of National Museum, New Delhi, and had been collected from Mehrauli.² On the basis of its inscription, it has been dated to 1147 CE. Its over elaborate *torāṇa prabhāvalī* consists of four vertical uprights, each of which is relieved with a profusion of *rathikās*, each sheltering the Hindu divinities. Fragments of triple vertical uprights of the *torāṇa prabhāvalīs* lying in a few temple compounds and *garbhagṛhas* in different parts of Himachal Pradesh indicate that probably more or less identical *torāṇa prabhāvalīs* and images were sculpted here also. They got damaged due to so many reasons, the commonest being the rolling down boulders that are a frequent occurrence. There is however, one image of Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa under worship in the *garbhagṛha* of a small shrine known as the Thākurdwārā - an appellation commonly used for all Viṣṇu temples in our region - located in the heart of a residential locality in Nirmand village in Outer Sarāj, Kulu district. The statues of the worshipped deities, along with their *torāṇa prabhāvalī*, have survived intact till now, thanks to the zealous efforts of the temple priest and the local villagers. The ornate *torāṇa prabhāvalī*, profusely decorated with the figures of the Hindu deities, set within *rathikās*, surmounted by Nāgara style *śikharas* of the stone temples, prominent semi-circular *makara torāṇa* arch with the *kīrtimukha* at its apex surrounds very competently carved, slim and well proportionate figures of Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī astride their Garuḍa *vāhana*. It is in an excellent state of preservation. But compared to the Mehrauli sculpture, it is a much simpler version. Its morphological features and style are typically Pratihāra, that is, the regional variant of the Pratihāra sculptures. All the scholars who have examined it have squarely ascribed its date to the 10th century C.E. and

there can be no two opinions about that. A large number of icons of worship and stone steles from Himachal temples, examined by me are datable to the same period on stylistic basis.

Compositionally, iconographically and stylistically, our Trivikrama Viṣṇu stone stele from Jayāli Mātal temple in Chaupāl is an excellent sculptural creation of high order. Certain iconographical similarities are discernible between our present image and another stone stele of Viṣṇu from Uttar Pradesh, presently in the collection of Norton Simon Museum at Pasadena.³ Pratapaditya Pal has dated it to 1100 C.E. In view of its comparative simplicity, I am inclined to place our present stone stele at a slightly earlier date, that is between 1050-1100 C.E. Our Trivikrama image has striking morphological and stylistic affinities with the Sūrya sculpture lying inside the *garbhagr̥ha* of the Lākḥāmaṇḍala temple in Uttaranchala. My researches on sculptures from Himachal have established that influences were flowing into our region from that region on account of its greater geographical proximity, rather than from Rajasthan or Uttar Pradesh. The Viṣṇu images from these provinces are neither slim nor as graceful.

Stylistically, our Trivikrama Viṣṇu stele represents an altogether new idiom within the local or regional variant of the Pratihāra sculptures. The physique of Viṣṇu is chiselled with an elegant sensitivity of the plastic surface discernible in his smooth anatomical modelling. The uninterrupted continuity of his body contours is not loaded with the exuberance of superfluous ornaments. The loin garment covering only his thighs enhances the aesthetic look of his body and is free from the redundant carvings. His face bears the stamp of the divine grace that the image actually stands for.

Footnotes

1. Ranesh Roy & Jain van Alphen, *TEJAS : Eternal Energy : 1500 Years of Indian Art*, Belgium, 2007, p. 88.
 2. C.Sivaramamurti : *Indian Art*, Lucien Mazenod, Paris, 1974; fig. 576. p. 400 (french ed.)
 3. Pratapaditya Pal, *Art of the Indian Subcontinent : Asian Art in Norton Simon Museum Collection*, Vol. 1, Mapin International, Ahmedabad; 2003; p. 100.
- The Viṣṇu image under reference deserves attention for two of its aspects. One is combination of *abhaya* with *padma*, because *abhaya* has often been noticed with *akṣamālā* only. The other is appearance of a male figure on the corresponding side of Garuḍa. Who he can be? For answer perhaps we have to wait for some other parallels coming to light in future.

-Editor