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AN EARLY SCULPTURE OF NARASIMHA

(MAN-LION INCARNATION OF VISHNU FOUND FROM THE COASTAL

ANDHRA ALONG WITH PAÑCHA VĪRAS)

By

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INTRODUCTION

During the exploration of the site known as Kondamotu, located on the outskirts of Piduguralla, nearly 40 miles from Guntur on the road to Macherla, the sculpture in question was discovered over a hillock inside a square shrine which is now in dilapidated condition. As the site appeared to be very prolific it is proposed to find out its potentiality by taking a few trial trenches in the next field season. Some wholesome results are bound to come out which may throw some interesting light on the Socio religious aspects of this region. I am greatly indebted to Sri P.V.G. Raju Minister for Education, whose interest in the archaeology of the State is well known, for giving me all possible assistance in conducting exploration in this region and to Sri L. N. Gupta, Special Secretary to Government for his kind suggestion to refer Mora's Well inscriptions discovered in 1882 by General Cunningham, 7 miles west of Mathura city as this inscription also recorded the setting up of 5 images representing the holy Pañcha Viras. This has indeed helped me a great deal in identifying these figures depicted in the sculptured slab under reference. I am also thankful to Prof. S. K. Saraswati and Dr. R. Subrahmanyam for giving me some valuable suggestions which helped me a great deal in the contribution of this article. In the end I am thankful to Sri Syed Fakhruddin for typing this material and Sarvashri P.V.P. Sastry, and P.S. Johnstone for taking the trouble of reading the proof with keen interest. I am also thankful to Sri K.L. Manohar, Director, Swaarajya Printing Works for undertaking the task of printing this brochure. I hope that the shortcoming of this little work may receive gentle treatment by its readers and that its co-ordinating data may be of some value to archaeologists and scholars, interested to find out the missing links that created a complete lacuna in establishing the various conventions and religious practices and the general ethos of the people relating to the remote past.

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A Rare Sculptured Panel from the Village Kondamotu

District Guntur.

The locality known as Kondamotu lies on the outskirts of Piduguralla village nearly 40 miles from Guntur on the road to Macherla. Over a hillock, just by the road side, vestiges of a square shrine, constructed in bricks resembling those used in the Buddhist monuments at Nagarjunakonda, were noticed. The sculptured panel under reference was lying in the square structure and there is every possibility that it must have been installed in the shrine. It is an oblong panel of limestone measuring 1.5 x 0.61 meters carved with six standing figures in bas-relief. Considering the drapery, head gear etc., these figures are analogous to some of the sculptures of Nagarjunakonda, carved in the 3rd century A. D. during the Ikshvaku period. The figures are delineated from left to right as follows :—

The figure on the extreme left is standing in *abhāṅga* posture, his right hand resting on the *Ikshu Chāpa* (sugarcane bow) and in his left hand he holds a *makaradhvaja*. The figure next to him stands in *samabhāṅga* posture. His right hand is shown in *abhaya* pose. He carries a conch shell in his left hand which is in *kaṭyavalambita* pose. His headgear resembles very much the *kirītamakuṭa* worn by Indra as shown in some of the Buddhist sculptures in

Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda. The third is a very peculiar figure of a couchant lion with legs taut and tense and the face is devoid of teeth but in the centre of the chest is prominently shown the Vaishnavite *lānchana Śrīvatsa*. This representation seems to suggest Lakshmi who is supposed to reside in the Śrīvatsa of Vishnu '*Śrīvatsa lānchanam vadhu*'. This Śrīvatsa, which is very prominently shown resembles the Nandipāda generally noticed in Ikshvaku and early Chalukyan sculptures. To this couchant lion at the level of the neck two hands are added, shown in uplifted position holding the attributes of Vishnu, *gada* and *chakra* in his right and left hands.

The images of Vishnu as Narasimha are of two kinds - Giriya and Sthauna. The first consists generally of a single figure which should be shown seated on a *Padmāsana* in the *utkuṭika* posture, the four legs being maintained in the required position by the *Yogapaṭṭa* belt going round them and the back of the body. According to T. A. Gopinath Rao the conception underlying the name Giriya-Narasimha is that the lion comes out of a mountain cave. Kevala Narasimha is another name by which this single image of Vishnu as man-lion is called, and it may have either two or four arms. The term Sthauna Narasimha connotes a lion

that comes out of a pillar. The icon under discussion has only two arms bearing a *gada* and a *chakra* and tries to emphasize more the animal aspect i. e. the entire lion is shown in couchant form while its anthropomorphic form is suggested by its two hands which are added at the neck level.

Normal representation of Narasimha shows a human body or torso with a lion's head. Pañcharātra and the Vaikhānasaāgamas besides Silpa Ratna refer only to seated and standing forms of Narasimha having a human body with lion's head. Considering the strange nature of the representation of this icon it is quite possible to assume that in the early period i. e. early 4th century A. D. the anthropomorphic representation is an exception rather than a rule. It is only in the later period prominence was given to human form as seen at Badami and also the Kevala and Sthauna Narasimha at Ellora during the Rashtrakuta period. The text that has inspired the sculptor to carve this icon however is not available to us.

Flanking the left side of this icon is a standing image shown in *tribhaṅga* holding a flute and a bow in his right and left hands. His right hand is shown in *kaṭyavalambita* pose. Next to this figure there is another shown in standing position holding a tyron or a wine goblet in his right hand and the left in akimbo. The last figure carries in his right hand a sword which resembles the incurved blade or the modern Gorkha Kukri as mostly seen in the paintings of Ajanta, and a shield in his left hand. There might be another

figure by the side of the first figure mentioned above as it can be seen clearly that the demarcating pilaster which is shown on the right side is conspicuous by its absence on the left side where the slab is broken. This has disturbed the symmetry of the entire composition but in its original state it appears that the sculptor had maintained perfect symmetry and balance by carving a group of three figures on either side of the central figure Narasimha.

An attempt will be made below to identify these figures from left to right according to the set canons of Iconography. By about the 4th century A. D. Vaishnavism and the worship of Vishnu seem to have taken certain set forms due to the increasing influence of the Bhakti cult. Vāsudeva Krishna the Sāvata hero along with the members of his family were elevated to the positions of gods. Generally speaking, in the Vaishnava creed, worship of Vishnu is conceived as Para, Vyūha, Vibhava, Antaryāmi and Archa forms. Para, the highest soul and Nārāyaṇa are designated as Paramātma and Para Vāsudeva. The Vyūha concept gained popularity and the members of the Vishnu clan, Samkarashaṇa, Pradyumna, Aniruddha, Sāmba, were added and they were collectively known as 'Pañchavīras'. In later times Sāmba was however dropped from the list. The systematizers of this cult took, but little time in transforming the 'Vīra' concept around the central deity and the Vyūha or 'emanation' to which was added the 'Vibhava' or incarnation aspect. The sculptured panel under reference is a representation of hybrid conception of these cult gods.

The first figure which carries Ikshuchāpa (sugar-cane bow) in his right hand and a Makaradhvaja in his left, apparently looks like Manmatha or Kāma, Pradyumna the eldest son of Krishna through Rukmiṇi. The next figure may be identified with two armed Vishnu, the right hand is in *abhaya* pose, the left one carries a conch shell. This identification tallies with the description given in Brhatsamhita of Varahamihira (C. 57 v. 35). 'Dvibhujasya tu Śāntikaro dakṣiṇahasto aparascha Śaṅkhadharah'.

The third figure is of Narasimha in its Kevala form. Some difficulty arises in identifying the fourth figure. Vāsudeva is not generally shown holding a bow or *dhanus* like Rama. No doubt the flute that he carries in his right hand helps us in identifying it as Krishna. But according to Vāikhānasāgama the image of Krishna should hold a Kṛiḍāyaṣṭi or a flute in his right hand and the left hand has to be raised to the level of the elbow and shoulder and the remaining features should be as in the case of Rama, 'dakṣiṇena hastena Kṛiḍāyaṣṭidharam vāmodiyata kara kūrparahikkasūtrādadhastādath-ordhva kara manyat sarvam Rāghavas-yokta mārgena'. (Elements of Hindu Iconography Vol: I, Pt. 2, App. C. P. 45-46). Hence this is an indication that Krishna can also be represented holding a *dhanus* or bow. According to Elements of Hindu Iconography (Vol. I, Pt. I, page 210), where Krishna is shown with eight hands *dhanus* is also shown as one of his weapons as seen in the sculpture of Madanagopālamūrti from Tenkasi in the Tinnevely District. In the Appendix C page 48 in part-II of Hindu Icono-

graphy by Gopinatha Rao the description of Madanagopālamūrti with 10 hands is given as follows :--

"Raktavarṇo dasabhujās sarvālakāra bhūṣitaḥ saṅkha chakra gadā padma pāśa aṅkuṣa sumāsugān ikṣhukodaṇḍa manyābhyaṃ vād-ayan veṇu mā darāt...(Pañcharātra)

The fifth figure standing on the left hand side of Vāsudeva who carries a wine goblet in his left hand might be Saṅkarshaṇa as sometimes he is shown holding a drinking vessel or Pānapātra emphasizing his inebriety. It is also stated in Bhāgavata purāṇa (X-65) that Saṅkarshaṇa or Baladeva is said to have dragged Kālindi or Yamuna in an intoxicated mood due to his over-drinking of *madhu*. After this incident Baladeva at times is represented with red eyes showing his state of drunkenness. Brhatsamhita describes Baladeva as 'hala pāṇirmada vibhrama lochanaścha, kartavyo vibhrat kuṇḍalamekam śaṅkhen-dumṛṇāla gauravapuḥ', (Brhatsamhita, Ch. 57 v. 36). As such it will not be incorrect to identify this figure with Baladeva or Saṅkarshaṇa.

The last figure next to Saṅkarshaṇa who carries a sword in his right hand and a shield in his left might be Aniruddha the grandson of Vāsudeva who according to Gopinath Rao's description in Vol: I, Pt. 2, Appendix C, page 65 usually carries Khaḍga in his right hand and a Kheṭaka or shield in his left. The original text is quoted below :--

"Vāma pārśve Aniruddham
dvibhujam
Khaḍga Kheṭaka dharam"
(Vāikhānasāgama)

As described above, the sixth figure which is completely missing now might have been of Samba, another son of Krishna by Jāmbavati.

By the perusal of the above description it is clear that Vāsudeva, Saṅkarshana, Pradyumna and Aniruddha were worshipped as 'Pañchavīras' in such early date in the coastal Andhra from where this panel has been recovered. It will be interesting to record here that in 1882 General Cunningham discovered a large inscribed slab which formed part of the terrace of an ancient well at Mora, a small village 7 miles west of Mathura city. This inscription was published in *Epigraphia Indica* Vol: XXIV, which recorded the setting up of five images representing the holy Pañcha Vīras of the Vṛishnis in a stone temple. It is far more probable that this inscription originally belonged to a Bhagavata temple where the five images were enshrined. It can therefore be presumed that the worship of Pañchavīras along with Vishnu became popular in coastal Andhra during the early part of the 4th century A. D., as can be seen from the sculpture under reference, due to the contacts with the north and especially the influence of the above cult that travelled from Mathura to the region from where this sculpture has been recovered. This particular cult must have been very popular and dominant during this period and had a great appeal for the masses.

Stylistically these sculptures belong to the late phase of the Ikshvakus as is evidenced by the headgear and drapery with central tassel hanging like a loop between the two legs. Even the orna-

ments like heavy *makarakuṇḍalas*, armlets, necklaces and the *kiriṭas* bear very close resemblance to the sculptures carved during the Ikshvaku period. The *kiriṭamakūṇa* worn by the standing image of Vishnu is a derivative or evolute from the fez cap type of head-dress worn by Indra or Sakka of Buddhist Iconography generally met with in the early sculptures of Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda. The representations of *makaradhvaja* and the attributes of Vishnu are also typical of the same school. The importance of this sculptured panel has to be assessed from its provenance and the period to which it belongs. Its discovery in the coastal Andhra is significant and the coastal Andhra in the beginning was fervently devoted to the creed of Gautama perhaps upto the fall of the Ikshvakus. With the rise of the Pallavas and Bṛhatphalayanās, Anandagotrins and the Abhiras under whose aegis Buddhists received a set back and Hinduism with its sects like Saivism and Vaishnavism received encouragement, there must have been a school of reformists which aimed at the establishment of the glory of Hindu *dharma* and the sculpture under discussion may be the manifestation of the spirit of the age when people conceived numerous forms for their pet gods and goddesses and Vishnu along with Siva was shown in all hybrid forms. Pañchavīra, Pañchavyūha and Daśāvātara cults became popular although it is a matter of great surprise that no text of Iconography assignable to this period can be made available to us.

It may not be far from truth if we assume that the codification of the rules

regulating the preparation of icons might also have been started in Circa 4th century A. D. That is why we find the tendency in early sculpture to represent gods and goddesses in usual human forms. The Vishnu of this panel who holds the conch in one hand is shown in no way superior to the other members of Pañchavyūha depicted in the panel. The other important thing which one can notice in this panel is that symbolism still continued and persisted as Lakshmi is not shown in human form but is suggested as in the early Buddhist sculptures by the symbol like Śrīvatsa on the chest of the image of Narasimha.

We know from the inscriptions discovered at Nagarjunakonda that in the last quarter of 3rd century A. D. due to the impact from the west particularly from the Abhira country, Vaishnavism slowly gained ground in this tract

as references are made to Vaishnava deities like Aṣṭabhujaśwāmi etc., while the Abhiras are themselves described as devotees of Vishnu as evidenced from their appellations, *Devapramadevasya Purānapurushasya Nārāyaṇasya* etc. The importance of this sculptured slab can be gauged from the fact that no sculpture of Vishnu ascribable to such an early date was discovered in the Andhra area though references are available to us from the inscriptions such as the one found at Nagarjunakonda referring to the icon of Aṣṭabhujaśwāmi though a complete figure was not found. This sculptured panel showing Vishnu in anthropomorphic form and also in animal form is perhaps the first and the earliest extant. As such it is a rare and unique discovery which I am sure will be welcomed by the archaeologists and lovers of art and those interested in Iconography.





AN EARLY SCULPTURE OF NARASIMHA
(Man-Lion Incarnation of Vishnu found from the Coastal
Andhra along with Pañcha Viras—Circa 4th Century, A. D.)