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Archaeological and Epigraphic evidence of early Vasudeva-Krishna worship

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This paper surveys the extent to which archaeology and epigraphy have validated sacred traditions in India, with reference to the worship of Vasudeva-Krishna. The evidence attested relates to the prevalence of Vasudeva-Krishna worship well before the commencement of the Common Era.

Besnagar

The earliest epigraphic reference to the cult of a Vaishnava deity found so far comes from the Garuda Pillar Inscription at Besnagar (Vidisha, renowned in ancient literature as the capital of Akara and Dasarna). The column, mounted with the image of Garuda, was erected in honour of Vasudeva, god of gods, by Heliodorus of Takshashila (Taxila.)

An inscription on the column described Heliodorus as ambassador of king Amtalikita (r. ca. 115-95 BCE) to Kasiputra Bhagabhadra (RY 14). Bhagabhadra has been identified with Bhadraka, fifth king of the Sunga dynasty, according to the *Bhagavata Purana*. The inscription dated to the first half of the 2nd century BCE (Luders *List* No. 669).

Alexander Cunningham, first Director- General of the Archaeological Survey of India, who examined the column in 1877, noted that it was still an object of veneration: "The place is visited by numbers of pilgrims, as the pillar is esteemed holy.... It may be inscribed, but the whole shaft is so thickly smeared with red lead, that it is very difficult to find the stone under the crust of vermilion" (Cunningham 1880: 42).

He thought the column belonged to the period of the Imperial Guptas. In 1909, H. Lake, superintending engineer of Gwalior State, removed some of the paint and found a fragmentary inscription, *Prasadottama* (the best temple). The entire inscription was first translated by Dr. Theo Bloch, and later by J.F. Fleet and Lionel Barnet. When John Marshall wrote his report in 1908, the column was still smeared with vermilion by pilgrims "who generation after generation have come to worship at the spot" (Marshall 1909: 1053-1055).

D.R. Bhandarkar, who carried out extensive excavations at Besnagar in 1914-15, wrote, "... the important shrine of Vasudeva which, in the middle of the second century BC, was so renowned and regarded with such veneration that even a Greek Ambassador setup a costly Garuda pillar in honour of the deity" (Bhandarkar 1917: 187).

Bhandarkar further claimed that the first of seven coins found at the site showed that the temple was in use till the mid-6th century CE. It was probably so even a century later, as was proved by the characters of the pilgrims' names incised

on one of the railing pillars found stacked in trench C (Bhandarkar 19s17: 208).

The Garuda Pillar Inscription

The Garuda Pillar Inscription is in two parts. Part I is the main epigraph; a briefer inscription (Part II) appears on the opposite side of the pillar.

Part I

Line I. Devadevasa Vasudevasa Garudadhvaje ayam
Line 2. Karate ia Heliodorena Bhaga-
Line 3. Vatena Diyasa putrena Takhkhasilakena
Line 4. Yonadutena agatena Maharajasa
Line 5. Amtalikitasa upamta sakasam rano
Line 6. Kasiputrasa Bhagabhadrasa tratarasa
Line 7. Vasena chatudasena rajena vadhamanasa.

Part II

Line I. Trini amuta-padani (iya) su-anuthitani
Line 2. Neyanti svagam dama chaga apramada (Sircar Vol. I 1942: 90-91).

Part II is striking as its two lines summed up the basic tenets of *Bhakti*: "the three immortal precepts of self-restrain, self-denial and vigilance, when practised well (in this world) lead (one) to heaven" (Banerjea 1968: 8).

Noted historian, H.C. Raychaudhuri has pointed out the marked similarity between Part II of the inscription and

the *Striparva* (7. 23-25) of the *Mahabharata* (Dutt Vol. 5 1988: 169)*;* the terms *dama, tyaga,* and *apramada* occurring in both. It seems to indicate that Heliodorus had actually heard and utilized the teachings of the Great Epic.

Interestingly, the *Mahabharata* itself explicitly states that it was first recited at Takshashila by Vaisampayana (one of the five disciples of Vyasa). The *Adi Parva* (1. 19-21), says: ".... it was beautifully narrated in the great Snake-sacrifice of Raja Janamejaya by Rishi Vaishampayana as directed by Krishna Dwaipayana himself (Vyas)" (Dutt Vol. I 1988: 1; Dutt Vol. V 1988: 555).

The audience at the recital included Ugrashravas Sauti (a disciple of Vyasa), who would later narrate the Epic to a group of sages at Naimisha Forest, from where it was further disseminated. Indeed, Raychaudhuri believed the city of Takshashila had something to do with the spread of Vaisampayana's version of the *Mahabharata*.

No less significant, the grammarian Panini's *Ashtadhyayi* contained some of the early references to the *Mahabharata* (*Sutra* IV.3.98; Katre 1968 Part II: 512). Panini was a native of Salatura, not far from Takshashila, which formed part of the Gandhara kingdom. Panini's testimony showed that the *Mahabharata* was known to the people of Gandhara well before the time of Heliodorus (Raychaudhuri 1923: 269-271).

The evidence of the *Svargarohanaparva* (Book of the Ascent to Heaven) suggests that the *Mahabharata* was recited by *Vachakas* or *Pathakas* in the presence of the great men of Taxila (Raychaudhuri 1923: 271). It stated that

at the conclusion of the snake sacrifice of king Janamejaya, Ugrashravas Sauti addressed the assembled gathering: "I have now told everything the Vaisampayana narrated, at the command of Vyasa, unto the king at his snake sacrifice. .... That learned man who recites this history of sacred days in the midst of a listening auditory becomes cleansed of every sin, conquers Heaven, and attains the status of Brahma. Of that man who listens with rapt attention to the recitation of the whole of this Veda composed by (the Island born) Krishna, a million sins.... are washed off..." (Ganguli 2002: 8).

The *Mahabharata* (1, 33.16-17) has enunciated the relationship between Garuda and Vishnu. It stated that Garuda, in return for boons granted to him by Vishnu, offered himself to Vishnu. Hence Vishnu asked Garuda to be his vehicle and made him the emblem of his flag saying, "Thou shalt stay above me." The mention of *Garudadhvaja* in connection with Vasudeva in the Heliodorus inscription demonstrated that at the time of the erection of the column, the identification of Vishnu with Vasudeva was an accomplished fact (Chanda 1920: 152). [It is important to note that instances of Garuda-*dhvaja* banners were also represented at Bharhut in the mid-2nd century BCE; one held by a male rider and another by an Amazonian rider; Bachhofer Vol. I 1926: Plates 17, 22].

The Heliodorus inscription also supported the statement of the Roman historian, Quintus Curtius (1st century). In his *Histories of Alexander the Great*, he recorded that an

image of 'Hercules' (Krishna) was carried in front of the army of Porus as it advanced towards Alexander:
"An image of Hercules was borne in front of the line of infantry, and this acted as the strongest of all incentives to make the soldiers fight well..." (Majumdar 1960: 119-120).

Megasthenes (350-290 BC), the Greek diplomat and historian, in his book *Indika*, had also mentioned Hercules (Krishna) in connection with the Saurasenas and Mathura (McCrindle 1877: 201).

The British classical scholar, W.W. Tarn was of the view that the similarity with passages from the *Mahabharata* could not be regarded as definite proof of Heliodorus's personal acquaintance with the *Mahabharata.* The passages could have been found for him by an Indian assistant. However, if the inscription meant that Heliodorus pledged himself to the three virtues, then it was conclusive evidence of his familiarity with the Great Epic.

Professor Tarn presented another instance of Greek familiarity with the *Mahabharata*. The name Pandava occurred in Ptolemy's account of India (McCrindle 1885: 121) as well as in Dionysius's *Bassarica* (the earliest poem on the conquest of India by the god Dionysus). The Pandavas were not known to have played any part in, or been mentioned in, history in the period when the Greeks were acquainted with India. The Pandavas were a people of the Epic, and the ultimate common source for Ptolemy and Dionysius

could only have been a Greek who had read the *Mahabharata* and taken the name directly from it (Tarn 1922: 380- 381).

Other shrines of Vasudeva at Besnagar

The Heliodorus Pillar Inscription was not the only early epigraphic evidence of Vasudeva worship in the region. A fragmentary inscription on the shaft of another octagonal Garuda column found in a narrow street of Bhilsa by H. Lake, which was evidently from Besnagar, has confirmed the existence of other votive columns. The inscription, in Brahmi of the late 2nd century BCE, records,

"this Garuda column of the excellent temple (*prasadotama*) of the Bhagavat was erected by Gautamiputra (Gautami's son)..., a Bhagavata (Vaishnava), in the 12th year after the installation of Maharaja Bhagavata" (Chanda 1920: 152).

Maharaja Bhagavata has been identified with the Sunga king of the same name, who may have been ruled around 100 BC. Both the Garuda pillars have affirmed the existence of one, if not two, temples of Vishnu at Vidisha at the time of their erection.

Capitals of columns – *tala* and *Makara*

Two other column capitals were found at Besnagar, though their shafts remain untraced. They were shaped as a *tala* (fan palm), and a *makara* (crocodile); and were clearly parts of votive columns *taladhvaja* and *makaraketana*, dedicated

to Samkarsana and Pradyumna of the five Heroes of the Vrisni clan (which also included Samba and Aniruddha). The cult of the five Heroes was the first stage in the development of the Bhagavata religion; it was followed by the doctrines of *Vyuha* and *Avatara***.** The discovery of the *garuda*, *tala*, and *makara* capitals suggest that shrines dedicated to three *Vyuhas* of the five worshipful Vrisni-*viras*, namely Vasudeva, Samkarsana, and Pradyumna existed in the locality (Banerjea 2016: 104).

Temple structure at Besnagar excavated

During excavations between 1963 and 1965, M.D. Khare of the Archaeological Survey of India, found traces of an elliptical structure adjacent to the Heliodorus pillar, dated to around the 3rd-4th century BCE. It had all the basic components of a temple, *garbha-griha, pradaksina-path* (both elliptical), *antarala*, and *mukha-mandapa*, a brick plinth, and superstructure of wood, thatch and mud, proved by the availability of bricks, iron nails, and post-holes. Nothing of the superstructure has survived. After it was damaged by floods, another temple was constructed on a raised platform, the rubble retaining walls of which were preserved.

Khare's excavations exposed seven pillars to the east. They revealed that there were eight pillars in front of the Vasudeva temple of the 2nd century BCE, six of them in alignment with the Heliodorus pillar and the seventh in front of the central pillar. All were firmly set on thick stone basal slabs and fixed by steel wedges. The temple was contemporary with the pillars (Khare

1967: 22; Khare 1975: 92-96, Khare 1989: 62). The purpose of the pillars was religious, not decorative as argued by John Irwin (Irwin 1975-76: 166-176**).** Each pillar had a capital associated with the Vrisni cult (Khare 1975: 95). Khare made a conjectural drawing of the temple.

According to Herbert Hartel, however confusing the existence of several capitals of similar size at the same site could be, it was undeniable that other pillars with capitals were installed besides the Garuda pillar. Khare's excavations, which provided "evidence of the pillars for three of the *pancaviras* makes it obvious that in this temple at Besnagar also all the five heroes were worshipped" (Hartel 1987: 579-580).

The excavations showed that the cult of Vasudeva was popular in Vidisha, well before the installation of the Heliodorus pillar. It was also significant that of the five types of columns used in Indian architecture, the octagonal one is called *Vishnu-Kant* (Acharya 1956: 534-536). The Heliodorus pillar was basically octagonal; more than half its height being octagonal.

Though no archaeological evidence has survived to indicate instalment of images in the temple, they, like the superstructure of the temples, were likely made of perishable material, like wood. The slightly raised flooring in the *garbhagriha* of the elliptical temple could have served as a low platform for images. The Besnagar *Yaksha* and *Yakshis*, now in Vidisha District Museum, were retrieved from

river beds; which showed the damage floods caused in those times (Khare 1975: 95).

Patanjali, who flourished around the time Heliodorus erected his column, in his comment on Panini (IV. 3.98), clearly stated that the Vasudeva contained in the *Sutra* was the name of the "worshipful," i.e., of one who was pre-eminently worshipful i.e., God. That indicated the worship of Vasudeva was at least as old as Panini (Bhandarkar 1982: 4). It was evident from Patanjali's *Mahabhashya* that temples dedicated to Kesava (Vasudeva-Krishna), Balarama, and Dhanapati Kubera were in existence in the 2nd BCE (*prasade dhanapati-Rama-Kesavanam,* II.2.34) (Agrawala 1951: v).

Nagari

Not far removed in time from Besnagar, an epigraphic reference to the worship of Samkarsana and Vasudeva came from Nagari (ancient Madhyamika), eight miles north of Chittorgarh in Udaipur, Rajasthan (Luders *List* no. 6). The site was first visited by A.C.L. Carlleyle, assistant to Alexander Cunningham, who failed to notice a unique structure now called Hathi-bada and Ubh-dival.

During his survey of Nagari in 1904, D.R. Bhandarkar found an inscribed slab, originally stuck inside the entrance of a step-well in village Ghosundi, nearly four km north-east of Nagari. The fragmentary Ghosundi inscription read,

1. … (Bhagava) [t](e)na Gajayanena Parasari-putrena sa…

2. …[ji]na bhagavabhyam Samkarshana-Vasudevabhyam
3. …bhyam puja-sila-prakaro Narayana-vate ka(ritah)
(Bhandarkar 1920: 119).

It recorded the erection of a worship stone enclosure (i.e. a stone enclosure round an object of worship to distinguish it from enclosures surrounding it, like palatial buildings) on a site called Narayana-vata by Gajayana, son of Parasari, in connection with the divinities Samkarsana and Vasudeva. The language of the inscription was Sanskrit and the inscription was assigned to the period between 350 and 250 BCE. It was the first inscription in Sanskrit, and indicated that the language was being still spoken (though not widely), along with Prakrit dialects of that period (Bhandarkar 1920: 119).

Narayana-vata appears to be the name of the site on which the temple of the divinities stood. It suggests that Vasudeva had come to be identified with Narayana as early as the 4th century BCE. Bhandarkar found that Hathi-bada was originally an enclosure around a shrine of Samkarsana and Vasudeva of 300 to 250 BC, who continued to be worshipped there till 700 CE. That made it the first remnant of a Vasudeva temple discovered so far, after Besnagar. The Hathi-bada enclosure and the railings around all stupas were *puja-sila-prakaras* (Bhandarkar 1920: 129-130).

The ground plan of the Nagari temple dedicated to Vasudeva was not fully recovered. It seemed like other contemporary elliptical structures, and also had a wooden superstructure.

Thereafter a stone edifice was built which stood at the site till 700 CE. The *Ubh-dival* (vertical lamp), was also associated with the temple of Samkarsana and Vasudeva, most probably as a Garuda-*dhvaja*. It possibly had an image of Vishnu on its upper most layer. A worn out inscription on the western wall of the Hathi-bada had the words, *Sri Vishnupadabhyam* in the characters of the 7th century CE (Bhandarkar 1920: 131-132).

Mathura

Some epigraphic evidence from Mathura of the early CE attested to temples dedicated to Vasudeva, and heroes of the Vrisni clan to which he belonged.

The Vasu door jamb, dated to the time of Mahaksatrapa Sodasa (an Indo-Scythian king ruling in Mathura in 15 CE), was an impressive eight and a half feet in height. It once formed part of what must have been a grand Vishnu temple. On the side of the jamb was a fragment of an inscription, which stated that the doorjamb was donated by Vasu, for a temple to Vasudeva. R.P. Chanda, who first translated the inscription, read it as,

"By...Vasu a quadrangle enclosed by four buildings (*catuhsalam*), a pillared gateway (*toranam*) and a square terrace in the middle of the courtyard (*vedikah*) have been built (at the shrine at) the great place of the Bhagavat Vasudeva. May Vasudeva be pleased. May (the dominion) of the lord, the *mahaksatrapa* Sodasa, endure" (Chanda 1920: 169-172).

Mora doorjamb

The Mora doorjamb was dug out of an old well in Mathura (Muttra) Cantonment in 1913, along with an inscription carved on a stone slab, which states it was made in the reign of Mahaksatrapa Sodasa**.** In its unbroken state, the Mora doorjamb was 8 ½ feet (2.5 meters) in height. According to H. Luders, it likely formed part of the entrance of the Bhagavata shrine that housed the five images of the Vrisni Heroes mentioned in the Mora Well Inscription.

The inscription recorded the gift of a *torana, vedika* (railing), and another object (variously read as *catuhsalam, devakulam* or *sailam*) in the *Mahasthana* (a large temple or sanctuary) of Bhagavat Vasudeva during the time of Mahaksatrapa Sodasa (Chanda 1920: 169-171).

Mora Well Inscription

The Mora Well Inscription, also of the time of Mahaksatrapa Sodasa, was recovered by Alexander Cunningham from Mora, a small village near Mathura, in 1882. It was edited by J. Ph. Vogel (Vogel 1910: 109). It refers to a Vasudeva shrine with images of the Pancaviras of the Vrsnis,

"...The images of the holy *pamcaviras* of the Vrsnis (*Bhagavatam vrsnina[m] pamcaviranam pratima*[*s*])... the stone shrine (*sailadevagr* [*he*])... whom the magnificent matchless stone house of Tosa was erected and maintained ... five objects of adoration (*arcadesam*) made of stone, radiant,

as it were with highest beauty (*paramavapusa*)..." (Luders EI Vol. 24: 194-202; Quintanilla 2007: 261).

The Mora Well Inscription was one of several indicators of beliefs prior and leading to, the formation of Vaishnavism. Vaishnavism was preceded by the Bhagavata religion, of which the first stage was the cult of the Pancavira Vrisnis (Srinivasan 1997: 211).

In 1911, sculptures of two male torsos were dug up from a mound adjacent to the well where Alexander Cunningham had found the Mora Well Inscription (Vogel 1910: 110). The male torsos were likely contemporaneous with the inscription. J.N. Banerji and V.S. Agrawala identified the male torsos as among the five *Vyuhas* (Vasudeva, Samkarsana, Pradyumna, Samba, and Aniruddha), described as 'heroes of the dynasty of the Vrsnis' in the *Vayu Purana* (97.1-2) (Quintanilla 2007: 211-212).

An image of a female figure carved in the round, along with the pedestal of a standing image of which only the feet remained, and the pedestal and lower half of a standing female statue, were also recovered. The female image was probably a goddess or *yakshi* (the name Tosa was mentioned in the inscription). It appears to have been carved later than the two male torsos. The inscription on her base could include the name of the Kusana king, Kaniska (Vogel 1910: 109). Heinrich Luders held that the Mora Well Inscription was about a century older than the inscription on the base of the female statue (Luders EI Vol. 24: 199-202; Quintanilla 2007: 211). Doris M.

Srinivasan speculated that the female could well be Ekanamsa, a Vrsni and sister of Samkarsana/Balarama and Vasudeva-Krsna (Srinivasan 1997: 213).

A newly acquired Bharhut medallion in the reserve collection of the National Museum (Acc. No. 80-751) depicts a pillared structure housing a *Yaksha* statue. The structure was an oblong hall with an entrance porch. The main hall was elliptical in plan. A circular *Bodhi – Ghara* depicted in a panel from the same place also shows similar features (Barua 1937: pl. XXXVII). As per excavated evidence, structures having elliptical or similar plans were popular during the early historic period. Most of them were religious structures of the Vaishnavas, Buddhists, and Jains. Their assigned date ranged from the 5th century BCE to 1st-2nd century CE. The plan of the Besnagar Vishnu temple was identical with the conjecture plan of the structure in the Bharhut relief, and roughly belongs to the same period (Hegde 1987: 37-30). That presented an interesting perspective on early religious structures in the Indian subcontinent.

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