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# Analytical Study of the Zoomorphic form of Varahavatara

Govind Singh Meena<sup>1</sup> and Rajnish Kumar<sup>2</sup>

- <sup>1</sup>. Archaeological Survey of India, Jaipur Circle, Patel Marg, Mansarovar, Jaipur, Rajasthan – 302 020, India (Email: [gsmiina.asi@gmail.com](mailto:gsmiina.asi@gmail.com))
  - <sup>2</sup>. Archaeological Survey of India, Aurangabad Circle, Aurangabad - Nandgaon Road, Sangita Colony, Padegaon, Aurangabad, Maharashtra – 431 002, India (Email: [rajnish.kdu783@gmail.com](mailto:rajnish.kdu783@gmail.com))
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**Abstract:** *Dasavatara of Vishnu is a popular sculptural motif represented in Hindu temples. Among these, the third incarnation of Vishnu as Boar or Varaha occurs independently and also as part of the panel containing the ten incarnations. Varahavatara occurs in Zoomorphic and Therianthropic forms and both these forms in North India, starts to appear from Gupta period. In the Gangetic doab, Varahavatara representations gains popularity during Pratihara-Chandela period. This article discusses the iconography of a few Zoomorphic representations of Varahavatra from north India, not reported earlier.*

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**Keywords:** Varahavatara, Silparatna, Visnudharmottara Purana, Vishnu, Dasavataras, Chaturmukhishivalingam, Zoomorphic Depiction

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## Introduction

India is a land of myths, traditions, rituals, stories, legends and much more from time immemorial and much of these have been passed on through generations either verbally, literally or material remains and survive in one or another form. The Vedic rituals is a significant tradition which was first orally transmitted through epochs and finally came to be codified and even in practice today. The Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, Epics are valuable sources mentioning a number of traditions, myths etc., entangled with social and historical perspectives of our glorious past. The myths and traditions have been a topic of interest always as it draws attention to the very edge of believing it or not. These myth/legends and stories had severe impact on the people's belief, and we see a number of sculptural carvings based on them throughout the country. The sculptural carvings/depictions/embellishments were also based on the region and the devotions of the rulers to Shiva/Vishnu/ Devi or other deities.

The *dasavataras* of Vishnu has been a common theme of depictions throughout the human history and depicted in a number of ways with regional variations. The *avatars* of Vishnu are a consequence of Sukra's curse as per which Vishnu had to take birth again and again in order to set the wheel of righteousness as per Sections 231-233 of

*Matsya Purana*. The number of incarnations or *avatars* of Vishnu varies from text to text as *Bhagavata Purana* mentions twenty-two incarnations whereas according to Sukra's curse he had to take ten incarnations.



Figure 1: Images of Dasavataras in the lintel of the door panel of one of the temples in Bateswar Group of Temples, Morena, Madhya Pradesh



Figure 2: Closer view of images of Dasavataras in the lintel of the door panel

The story of ten incarnations is generally accepted one and is mentioned in Sanskrit works like the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Vishnu Purana*. The ten *avataras* are mostly of Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Narasimha, Vamana, Parasurama, Rama, Krishna, Buddha and Kalki, though sometimes Balrama is given instead of Buddha (Rao, 1968). The ten *avataras* are noticed in lintels of many temples and the one from Bhateshwar group of temples is interesting (Figures 1 and 2).

This article tries to focus on the *Varahavatara* or the boar form, the third *avatara* of Vishnu. A number of sources describe about *Varahavatara* and possibly the earliest reference is in *Satapatha Brahmana* and it goes as Emusha, the wild boar lifted the earth from the depths of the lower regions. The *Taittiriya Aranyaka* mentions about the earth being lifted by a black boar with a hundred arms and the *Ramayana* also states of lifting up of earth by Vishnu in the form of Brahma who became a boar. In *Bhagavata Purana* Vishnu has been mentioned lifting up the earth in the form of a boar ("the boar issuing from the nostrils of Brahma"). Brahma has been mentioned as the uplifter of the earth in the *Vishnu Purana*, the *Linga Purana* and the *Garuda Purana*; however at the same time Brahma has been identified with Vishnu. The *Agni Purana* also gives more or less the same account of the *avatara*. The *Padma* as well as *Vayu Purana* gives the same account of the *avatara*. The *Brahmanda Purana* describes Brahma who takes the form of boar to rescue the earth submerged deep into the waters. *Varahavatara* has been discussed both in morphic i.e. animal (boar) form and as composite – anthropomorphic i.e. man animal (boar) in ancient texts (Rao, 1968).

The word *Varaha* can be split into two parts *Vara* and *aha* which means as the principal of force (*vrinotiitivrah*). A number of epithets of *Varaha* form have been given in the sources discussed above like those of *Ekasringa* (single tusk), *Mahasringa* (huge tusk), *Nrvaraha* (man boar form), *Adivaraha* (rescues the earth from primeval waters) and *Bhuvvaraha* (rescue the earth from deep sea waters) (Nagar, 1993).

The *Varahavatara* has been sculpted/depicted in various ways right from Sunga and Kushana period (Nagar, 1993). From Gupta period onwards, *Varahavatara* occur in zoomorphic and theriomorphic forms in open air shrines like at Eran, and in rock cut



caves at Udaigiri caves Vidisha; Ellora caves, Aurangabad; Mahabalipuram caves; Badami cave. The Varahavatara idols are also noticed in structural temple Rajiv Lochan Temple Rajim, Raipur District, Khajuraho and other places. The earliest representation of the *avatara* appears to be the zoomorphic form closely followed by therianthropic as seen from the Gupta times at Eran and Udaigiri in Madhya Pradesh.

Symbolically *Varahavatara* has been used throughout history by various dynasties like those of Chalukyas, Chedis, Kalchuris, Silharas and Vijayanagar rulers as their state banners or royal emblems. The Varaha figure has played a prominent role in Buddhism and Jainism as well. In Buddhism the chariot of Marichi (connected with the worship of sun) is driven by seven *varahas*. In Jainism Varaha serves as a vehicle to the Jaina goddess Bala or Vijaya. Garuda Yaksha is depicted riding a black boar and noticed on the southern face of the pillar near the entrance gate to Deogarh Fort serving as an attendant to Santinatha and also happens to be the symbol of thirteenth Jina of Jainism, Vimalanath (Nagar, 1993).



Figure 3: Varaha, Government Museum, Jhalawar

This paper primarily focuses on the zoomorphic depiction of the *Varahavatara*. The *Silparatna* and *Visnudharmottara* puts forward that the *Varahavatara* may be exclusively made in the form of a boar with thick snout, broad shoulders, long tusks and a colossal body to live in the midst of the *asuras*. According to *Silparatna* the zoomorphic figure may be depicted with a thick snout, broad shoulder blades, long tusks and a big body

covered with up-turned bristles (Rao, 1968). The earliest depiction of the *avatara* in animal form is possibly from Eran as mentioned above and has been described by Cunningham as “Thus Varaha is interesting for its size and beauty and for being the oldest known Brahmanical statue so far as I call to mind in this part of India...”. Another from the Gupta period in Zoomorphic form is traced to Vishnu Temple, Apsad, Bihar. Two other images of zoomorphic form Varaha have been reported from Dudhai (Jhansi) and the other has been kept in the State Museum at Jhansi. Another one is reported from Vijapur in Gujarat (Nagar, 1993).



Figure 4: Varaha, Government Museum, Jhalawar

A number of sculptures of zoomorphic type have been traced from other regions as well and this study basically deals with the ones from Government Museum, Garh Palace, District Jhalawar (Archaeology and Museums Department, Rajasthan), Ancient Ruins and Structural Remains, Krishna Vilas, District Baran (Rajasthan) which is a centrally protected site of Archaeological Survey of India (hereafter ASI) and the one traced by ASI, Aurangabad Circle from the village Anjaneri, located in the district of Nasik. The sculptures discussed in the paper have not been studied or reported widely.

The first zoomorphic figure dated to 10<sup>th</sup> century CE is carved in sandstone of the dimensions 34 cm x 52 cm from the Government Museum, Jhalawar and is collected from Budi Kalmadi, Jhalrapatan which is situated 35 km from Jhalawar District Headquarters (Figure 3). All the three legs except the front right leg are broken and the mouth in front is partially broken. It is shown with wide open mouth showing rows of

teeth, thick folds of skin around the neck, fleshy face and forehead, wide open eyes, pointed ear and muscular torso present a powerful image of the god. The body of the figure is covered with miniature figures of gods and sages leading divinity to the boar figure and in addition to this many scenes and deities are embellished on the body like those of churning of the ocean, matrikas, navagraha etc. A garland composed of small human figures sculpted on a band is carved around its neck. Its front right leg is adorned with images of sages. Two tusks of the figure can be seen lying below on the pedestal.

The second zoomorphic figure is carved in sandstone with the dimensions 42 cm x19 cm. This sculpture is received from the ancient site of Sankhdhara, Jhalrapatan, District Jhalawar (Lat. 24° 32' N; Long. 76° 10' E) (Figure 4). All the four legs of the figure are broken which stands on a wooden pedestal and the front portion of the mouth is partially broken. The eyes and ears in this figure have been shown beautifully. There are carving of deities on the body and a garland with a width of about 3½ inches composed of small human figures can be seen sculpted around the neck. A fringe like necklace embellished with miniature figures can be seen on his head and a broken image can be seen above the eyes. Also some minute detailing can be seen on both sides of the broken ears.



Figure 5: Varaha, Krishna Vilas, Rajasthan





Figure 6: Varaha, Krishna Vilas, Rajasthan

The zoomorphic sculptures mentioned here after are from the centrally protected site of ASI, Krishna Vilas, District Baran (Lat. 25° 02' N; Long. 76° 44' E). The site was famous by the name of Vilasa which is an ancient site with the ruins of a number of temples and old fort dating to *circa* 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> CE and was then a flourishing town (Jain, 1972).

The third zoomorphic figure with the dimensions 53 cm x 32 cm x 30 cm is carved in sandstone (Figure 5). All the four legs and the front portion of the face are broken. The body of the figure is covered with miniature figures of gods and sages lending divinity to the boar figure. A garland composed of small human figures sculpted on a band is carved around its neck. The decoration and fineness in this figure are comparatively less in comparison to others though the other attributes are the same.

The fourth zoomorphic figure with the dimensions 63 cm X 33 cm X 53 cm is carved in sandstone (Figure 6). The front half of the face is completely broken. The figure stands on a stone pedestal. The body of the figure is covered with miniature figures of gods and sages lending divinity to the boar figure. A simple garland can be seen carved around the neck of the sculpture. Two figures one behind the other with broken head portion can be seen in seated posture in front of the *varaha*. As per the coiled legs of the female figure it seems that it is of *naag kanya*.





Figure 7: Varaha, Krishna Vilas, Rajasthan



Figure 8: Varaha, Krishna Vilas, Rajasthan



The fifth zoomorphic figure with the dimensions 95 cm X 33 cm X 54 cm is carved in sandstone (Figure 7). All the four legs and the head of the figure is completely broken. The body of the figure is covered with miniature figures of gods and sages lending divinity to the boar figure.



Figure 9: Varaha, Krishna Vilas, Rajasthan



Figure 10: Varaha, Krishna Vilas, Rajasthan



The sixth zoomorphic figure with the dimensions 90 cm X 32 cm X 49 cm is carved in sandstone (Figure 8). The figure is in good state of preservation. The body of the figure is covered with miniature figures of gods and sages lending divinity to the boar figure. A garland composed of small human figures sculpted on a band is carved around its neck. He is shown with wide open mouth showing rows of teeth, thick folds of skin around the neck, fleshy face and forehead, wide open eyes, pointed ear and muscular torso present a powerful image of the god. His legs and ears are adorned with images of sages. The image of four heads on his back just behind the head indicates the presence of Brahma which can be identified as of *chaturmukhishivalingam*.

The seventh zoomorphic figure with the dimensions 104 cm X 46 cm X 50 cm is carved in sandstone (Figure 9). The figure is in fragile condition as the front legs are completely broken and the face has partially weathered. The body of the figure is covered with miniature figures of gods and sages lending divinity to the boar figure. A garland composed of small human figures sculpted on a band is carved around its neck.



Figure 11: Varaha, Krishna Vilas, Rajasthan



The eighth zoomorphic figure with the dimensions 110 cm X 46 cm X 53 cm is carved in sandstone (Figure 10). The figure is in fragile condition as all the legs are completely broken and also a portion from the sides has weathered. The body of the figure is covered with miniature figures of gods and sages lending divinity to the boar figure. A garland composed of small human figures sculpted on a band is carved around its neck. The image of four heads on his back just behind the head indicates the presence of Brahma which can be identified as of *chaturmukhishivalingam*.



Figure 12: Varaha, Anjaneri, Nasik

The ninth zoomorphic figure is carved in sandstone of the dimensions 140 cm X 70 cm X 133 cm (Figure 11). The figure is in fair state of preservation as the front portion of the face has partially eroded. It is shown with upright neck, wide open mouth showing rows of teeth, thick folds of skin around the neck, fleshy face and forehead, wide open eyes, pointed ear and muscular torso present a powerful image of the god. The body of the figure is covered with miniature figures of gods and sages lending divinity to the

boar figure. A garland composed of small human figures sculpted on a band is carved around its neck. His front right leg is adorned with images of sages. The image of four heads on his back just behind the head indicates the presence of Brahma which can be identified as of *chaturmukhishivalingam*. A Naga placed below the neck of the Varaha is rhythmically spreader and encircled his tail below the body of the boar. The legs of a figure can be seen on the left hand side of the boar which may be assigned to the earth in feminine form.

The tenth zoomorphic figure is traced from Anjaneri (Lat. 19° 56' 49.33" N; Long. 73° 35' 27.24" E) with the dimensions 64 cm x 60 cm has been represented both anthropomorphic and zoomorphic forms with Vishnu depicted in the form of wild boar and earth in the feminine human form (Figure 12). There are a group of temples at Anjaneri dated to 12<sup>th</sup> c. CE of which 16 now stand in whole or part (Cousens, 1985). The *varaha* has been carved very beautifully with thick folds of skin around the neck, fleshy face and forehead, wide open eyes, pointed ear and muscular torso. It has been shown with an upright neck, wide open mouth showing rows of teeth and jutting out tusks. He is in a mobile position as his front left leg is bent while the right is half bent. The legs and ears are adorned with images of sages and the body of the figure is devoid of any images making it different from the others mentioned above. The image of four heads on his back just behind the head indicates the presence of Brahma which can be identified as of *chaturmukhishivalingam* and also probably a figure of seated Goddess Lakshmi can be seen on the circular front portion of his nose. Other remarkable feature of the sculpture is; he has been shown standing on the *aayudhas* like *gada* in his front right leg, lotus bud below the back right leg and a *chakra* below the back left leg. The Earth has been shown in a feminine form holding the left tusk of the boar with her right hand and holding a lotus bud in her left hand. Her ornamentation has been done with many detailing like an elaborate necklace made of 5 rows of beaded chains, matching earrings made of beads placed in circles of three rows adorn her earlobes, armlets, bangles and anklets. Her hair has been neatly done with partition in the middle and tied in a bun at the back of her head and a sash is hanging from her right arm. A Naga with five hoods is placed below the neck of varaha with a *karandamukuta*, necklaces and earrings and the female counterpart is shown coming out of the back legs of the *varaha* below with a tangled tail (Subramanyam, AMV, Bajpai, Garge 2017).

## Conclusion

The animal boar has been represented in Indian Art since the prehistoric times like the paintings of Bhimbetka. The *avatars* of Vishnu has been represented in a variety of ways in the caves, temples and other structures throughout India but this particular form has been given a lot of shades for example in the zoomorphic form his body covered with figures of miniature sages giving divinity to the figure, the man boar form. The *varaha* has been used symbolically by a number of dynasties throughout history. Also in recent studies done by the scholars based on the evolution theory this has been considered as one of the stages in the evolution; the Matsya being the first



with Kurma coming after it followed by *varaha*. Also as mentioned in the beginning the representation of *varaha* has been an important part in Buddhism and Jainism as well, particularly the zoomorphic form was common in other faiths too. The depiction of the form varies from region to region like the one from Anjaneri is devoid of any miniature figure carvings on it i.e. in a sense it is simply plain but on a broader basis it is almost same in other detailing. The main difference in the zoomorphic form of varahavatara can be seen in the form of the embellishments on the body of the boar; somewhere it is starkly plain while in others miniature like figures can be seen on it. The depiction and carving of this zoomorphic form has been prominent variously throughout the human history.

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