

The Vrsnis' Slow Process from Tribal Heroes to Their Vaisnava Divinization

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Fin dal rinvenimento di raffigurazioni di Balarāma e Vāsudeva del clan Vrsni su monete d'argento battriane risalenti al II secolo AEC, la scoperta suscitò scalpore, portando a ritenere che, più di duecento anni prima di diventare divinità di Mathura e infine divinità *vaiṣṇava*, il culto indù di Balarāma e Vāsudeva fosse esistito in Afghanistan.

Questo articolo contesta questa ipotesi di lunga data con un'analisi alternativa e più articolata, supportata da 1) ampi confronti iconografici tra numismatica, terrecotte, petroglifi e oggetti ornamentali tra il IV secolo AEC e il II secolo EC, da 2) resoconti classici, da 3) importanti sviluppi politici e religiosi, in particolare nelle iscrizioni e nel Mahābhārata, e soprattutto da 4) una nuova interpretazione della cruciale iscrizione di Besnagar.

Ne deriva una nuova narrazione che delinea le origini umane di queste divinità indù. Questo potrebbe essere l'unico esempio nell'Induismo in cui sembra possibile far risalire gli dei alle loro reali origini mortali.

Ever since the figures of Balarāma and Vāsudeva of the Vrsni clan were found on Bactrian silver coins dating to the 2nd century BCE, the finding caused a sensation. More than two hundred years before becoming Mathura's deities and eventually *vaiṣṇava* gods, the Hindu worship of Balarāma and Vāsudeva was assumed to have existed in Afghanistan.

This paper challenges this long-held assumption with an alternate, more nuanced analysis which is supported by 1) widespread iconographic comparisons on numismatics, terracottas, petroglyphs and ornamental objects between 4th century BCE- 2nd century CE, by 2) Classical accounts, by 3) major political and religious developments especially in inscriptions and the Mahābhārata, and importantly by 4) a new reading of the crucial Besnagar inscription.

A fresh narrative arises as a result. It outlines the human origins of these Hindu gods.

This may be the only example in Hinduism where it seems possible to trace gods back to their actual mortal beginnings.

The Problem: Mathura's Vṛṣṇis on BCE Bactrian Silver Coins

The 1970 find of the Bactrian coins representing Vāsudeva and Balarāma remains more perplexing today than it was fifty years ago. What causes images of Mathura's heroes (or *vīrās*) to be worthy of depiction in ancient Afghanistan roughly two to three hundred years before occurring in their homeland of Mathura, the cradle of Brahmanic/early Hindu iconography?¹ That is the question I have been asking myself for decades. And why, in the first place, would they be on coins found in the Hellenistic

¹ Srinivasan forthcoming. The paper discusses how the Brahmanic culture, dominant at Mathura, succeeded in devising aspects of Hindu iconography, including some of Vaiṣṇava Imagery.