Multiplicity on the Frontier: Imagining the Warrior Goddess

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Modern Wicca, echoing nineteenth-century sources (Balfour 1873: 277), conflates many outsider goddesses — 'She is known as Kali, Hecate, Cerridwen, Lilith, Persephone, Fata, Morgana, Ereshleigal, Arianhrod, Durga, Inama, Tiamat, and by a million, million other names'.[1] Indological scholarship has been more self-contained, although the possibilities of iconographic assimilations and associations from outside India are an acknowledged part of the search for origins of early Indian representations of divinity (Mukherjee 1969; 1985).

The complexities of South Asia as a 'crossroads' during early years when images of divinities were taking form and beginning to be used in that region have been well framed in a recent article by Suchandra Ghosh in *Studies in History* (Ghosh 2007). She cites Romila Thapar's observation that 'Those who came were initially alien in custom and belief, but the mutations that had occurred among them and among the host societies expanded the cultural experience of both' (Ghosh 2007: 302; Thapar 2002: 223). She illustrates an important type of square coin found at Ai Khanum, Afghanistan, issued by the Greek Bactrian king Agathocles in the second century BCE, which bears the first anthropomorphic representations we have of two Indian divinities, Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma-Saṅkarṣaṇa, both two armed and with a single face (Fig. 1). 'It is the oldest depiction of Indian deities that we have, and as such are symbolic of an intermingling of Hellenistic with Indian cultures', according to Ghosh (Ghosh 2007: 304; Narain 1973; Holt 1988: 1-7).

Agathocles 'was indeed a man of two worlds, a Bactrian king of the borderlands between Greek and Indian culture', who had also issued many 'beautiful Greek silver coins on the Attic standard' – including a series of 'pedigree issues' delimiting his claimed lineage (Holt 1984) - as well

Fig. 1: Ai-Khanum, Afghanistan, 'drachm of Agathocles with bilingual legend in Greek and Brāhmī'; Balarāma (obverse), Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa (reverse), 2nd century BCE. (After S. Ghosh, 'Understanding Transitions,' Fig. 4)

Fig. 2: Pergamon, Turkey, Zeus Altar, goddess Hecate, 2nd century BCE (Pergamon Museum, Berlin). After mlahanas.de/Greeks/Arts/Zeus altar E.htm)

Fig. 3: Pergamon, Hecate, detail. (After mlahanas.de/Greeks/Mythology/ Hecate.html)

as these "coins of a very different world ... square or rectangular in shape, and which portrayed the gods of India rather than Greece. ... This is the money of 'Rajane Agathuklayasa', a monarch whose subjects required a native currency in the local scripts of North-West India" as F. Holt describes (Holt 1988: 1-2). In the coinage of the Kuṣāṇas centuries later coins of diverse divinities of subjects under them were also depicted including Śiva (Bactrian: Oesho), initially shown with two arms but then with four arms and multiple faces (Fig. 6) (Cribb 1997).[2]

Among coins minted for Agathocles in the second century BCE were ones with 'his skilfully carved portrait on one side, and a standing Zeus holding Hecate on the other' (Fig. 5); 'These coins suggest that Agathocles, though ruling a kingdom in Central Asia, was certainly a Greek who governed subjects of Hellenic culture' (Holt 1988: 2). W.W. Tarn in his pioneering study of the Greeks in Bactria and India remarked that 'the important figure on these coins is the three-headed Hecate; she has never been explained, but she is the key to several things'. He equates the image of this tripartite goddess with the crossroads, 'where met the three routes across the Hindu Kush from Bactria. Alexandria-Kapisa stood at the point of junction and doubtless Hecate of the Three Ways was worshipped there.' (Tarn 1938: 158).[3]

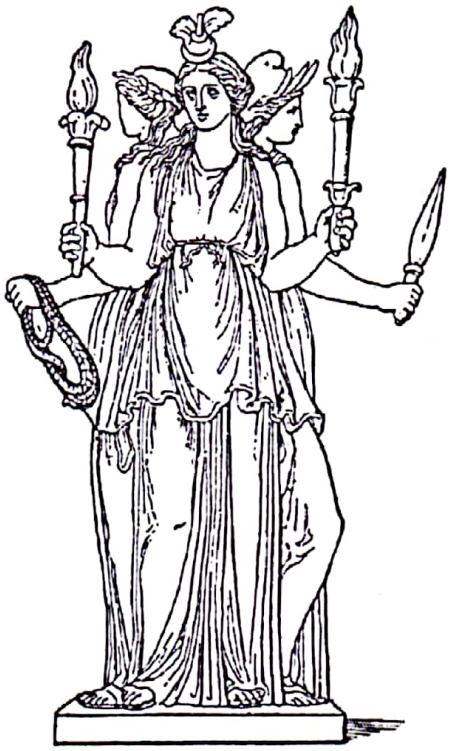

Fig. 4: Rome, Capitoline, tripartite Hecate. (After 1911ency-clopedia.org/Hecate.)

Fig. 5: Agathocles tetradrachm, 2nd century CBE; reverse, Zeus holding image of Hecate. (After Numismatica Ars Classica)

Fig. 6: Kuṣāṇa coin, Oesho/Śiva, 3rd c. CE (After mupam.com/kushan1.htmil)

'According to the generally accepted view [Hecate] is of Hellenic origin, but Farnell regards her as a foreign importation from Thrace', according to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 11th ed.; 'Hecate was never incorporated among the Olympian gods'.[4] She is associated with crossroads, thresholds, the underworld, magic.[5] Pausanias in his travelogue in the second century CE attributed to the fifth-century BCE sculptor Alkamenes the creation of a triple-bodied sculpture-type for Hecate that stood on the Acropolis in Rome (Fig. 4) (Edwards 1986). Her image among the Gigantomachy of the Pergamon Zeus altar shows her with one body, six arms, and two visible heads (Figs. 2–3).

In this brief exploration of crossing thresholds I wish to address the thorny issue of 'multiplicity' in the representation of deities in southern Asia. The 'multiplicity convention' has been thoroughly studied by Doris Srinivasan, who traces it to origin myths in the *Rig Veda:* "The Rig Veda envisions the birth of the universe as analogous to human birth through labour. In this view, the creator god creates the universe by emitting all forms which lie dormant in his middle. ... Being thus pregnant with the forms of the phenomenal world until he is ready to give birth, the creator god is with multiple bodily parts and/or forms much like mother is 'with child'." (Srinivasan 1997: 5; Meister 2007).[6]

Yet images of anthropomorphic deities are not the focus of early Indic worship. These emerge only by the early centuries BCE and CE and become central to the practice of later Hinduism only as the praxis of temple worship evolved (Davis 1991). How were images perceived? How were they used and assimilated? How integrated and eventually transformed? India's reception of anthropomorphized images makes the Purāṇas possible. The great originality of later Hinduism depends on the development of narrative icons and their mythic variety. Standing in the Pergamon Museum, Berlin, a few years ago, looking at the remarkable second-century BCE reliefs of the east frieze of the Zeus Altar and its representation of the Gigantomachy — the battle of the Olympian gods and titans — I was struck by a familiarity. A marine giant, Klytios, his legs turning into serpents, attacks the Goddess Hecate — six arms, two visible faces — as her dog bites him below (Fig. 2). 'With a burning torch, spear and swords the Goddess with the many hands attacks Klytias' (Fig. 3).[7] How suggestive this seemed of the totemic medieval image of Goddess Durgā slaying demon Mahīṣa from

Fig. 7: Mathura, 'Warrior Goddess' (Bharat Kala Bhavan, Varanasi) (Courtesy: American Institute of Indian Studies)

Fig. 8: Mahamallapuram, Tamilnadu, Durgā slaying the buffalo demon Mahīsa. (Courtesy: author)

later Hinduism, not as a source, of course, but as a shared idea (Fig. 8). That idea is multiplicity, a multiplicity of intercourse as much as of body parts.

Much before medieval images of Durgā as Mahiṣāsuramardinī, there were myths and images of a 'warrior goddess' in South Asia (Yokochi 2004). In her cogent chapter on 'The Enigma of the Multi-Armed Warrior Goddess', however, Srinivasan observed that the 'Kuṣāṇa Warrior Goddess does not have four faces, and, four arms is not her characteristic number of multiple arms. Six is. And that is extremely problematic' (Fig. 6). Her conclusion, argued in detail, was that a 'warrior goddess whose characteristic number of multiple arms are six, raises expectations that her imagery is founded upon concepts significantly different [from] those governing *Śaivite and Vaiṣṇavite* images. Indeed, much of the iconography of the Warrior Goddess reflects foreign sources' (Srinivasan 1997: 293-294). Indeed, much of her multiplicity may have passed through that 'permeable membrane' separating multiple societies (Meister 1994).

What is the problem with our perceptions of such multiplicity? When we perceive it as having 'centres'- Greece, Mathurā, the Vedas, Śivaism, Europe, France — we undermine the creative varieties of 'frontiers'. Scholarly speculation in the 'colonial' period about Apollonian origins of the Buddha image, Malraux's comparisons of Buddhist stucco heads from Hadda with heads from Gothic France, or arguments about the 'influence' of Egypt on Trinitarian Christianity ignore that changes need not be 'centred', canonical; (Rowland 1977; Barthoux 1930; Griffiths 1996) reception is multiplex, a mixture of many communities, and creative reuse is a form of cultural transformation. We may have limited means to trace these structural interactions, yet they permeate the worlds we study. I can end only by echoing Srinivasan's conclusions about the Warrior Goddess: 'A great synthesis took place and

possibly her popularity is because she meant so many (and different?) things to so many (and different?) people.' (Srinivasan 1997: 304).

Notes

[1] See, for example, paganspace.net/profiles/blogs/hecate-2 (accessed on 14 June 2009).

[2] The Metropolitan Museum of Art's ancient near eastern art collections have a rare terracotta with gauche votive panel, ca. 3rd century CE, showing Śiva/Oesho with four arms and three faces. Of this the museum writes 'Here, the rich intercultural style that developed in the Kushan realm is most clearly displayed: Indian divine iconography; the Iranian type of two-figured composition; and Greco-Roman naturalism in the drapery and pose, as well as in the use of light and shadow to suggest modeling': metmuseum.org/works_of_art/collection_database/ancient_near_eastern_art/panel_fragment_with_the_god_sivaoesho/objectview.aspx?collID=3&OID=30006521.

[3] Michael Lahanas, 'The Pergamon Zeus Altar and the Gigantomachy—East Frieze', 'She had a special role at three-way crossroads, where the Greeks set poles with masks of each of her heads facing different directions', mlahanas.de/Greeks/Arts/ZeusAltarE.htm.

[4] 1911encyclopedia.org/Hecate; Lahanas, 'The Pergamon Zeus Altar'.

[5] "Roman mythology also saw her as the goddess of the Trivia 'the three ways', a folk belief, whether Celtic or Roman, that survived into the 7th century CE among the pagans of Flanders. There Eligius was wont to remind his recently converted flock. 'No Christian should make or render any devotion to the gods of the trivium, where three roads meet, to the fanes or the rocks, or springs or groves or corners'" (mlahanas.de/Greeks/Mythology/Hecate.html).

[6] My own discussion of the ambiguities of multiplicity in an image excavated at north Kafirkot can be found in M.W. Meister, "Image Iconopraxis and Iconoplasty in South Asia," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 51 (2007): 13– 32.

[7] Lahanas, 'Pergamon Zeus Altar'.

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