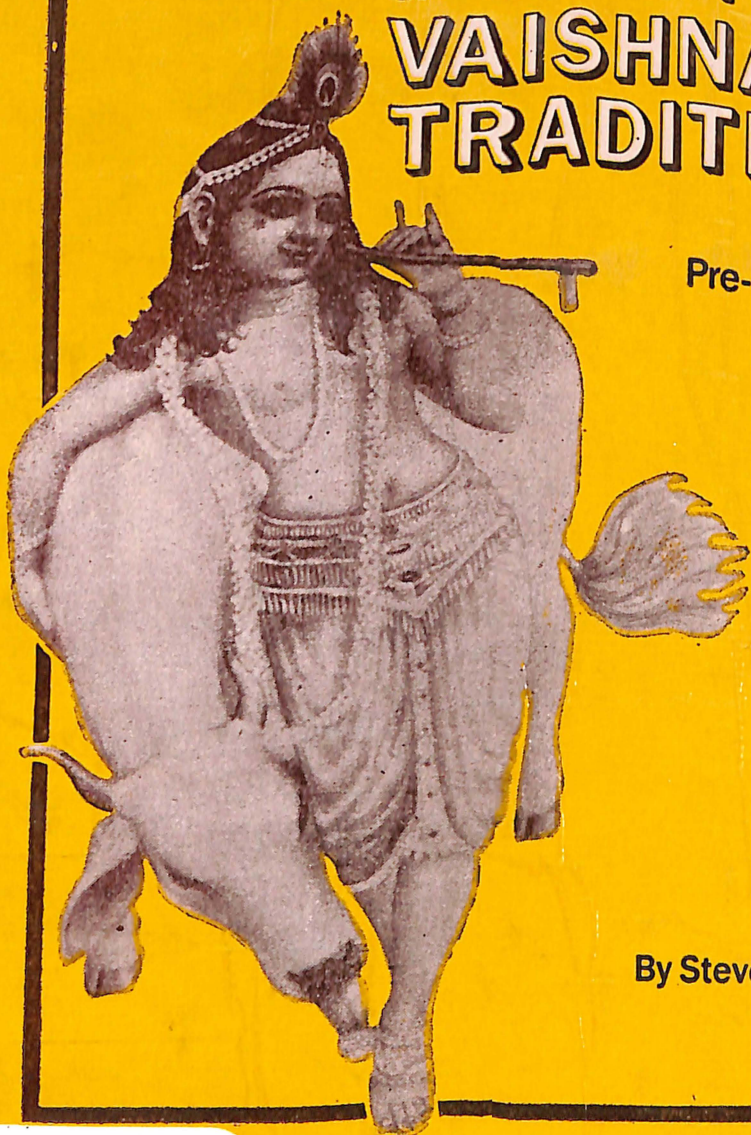


ARCHEOLOGY and the VAISHNAVA TRADITION



The
Pre-Christian
Roots
of
Krishna
Worship

By Steven Rosen

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**ARCHEOLOGY AND THE VAISHNAVA
TRADITION :
THE PRE-CHRISTIAN ROOTS OF KRISHNA
WORSHIP**

Steven Rosen



**FIRMA KLM PRIVATE LIMITED
CALCUTTA * INDIA * 1989**

Published by :

Firma KLM Private Limited
257B, B. B. Ganguly Street
Calcutta 700 012
INDIA



Library IAS, Shimla



00112339

© Steven Rosen

First Published : Calcutta, 1989

Cover Design : Barbara Berasi
Illustrations : By Courtesy of Bhaktivedanta Book Trust

Price : Rs. 65/-

Printed by : Ram Sankar Ghosh
AKHAR MALA
85, Hari Ghosh Street, Cal-700 006.

DEDICATION

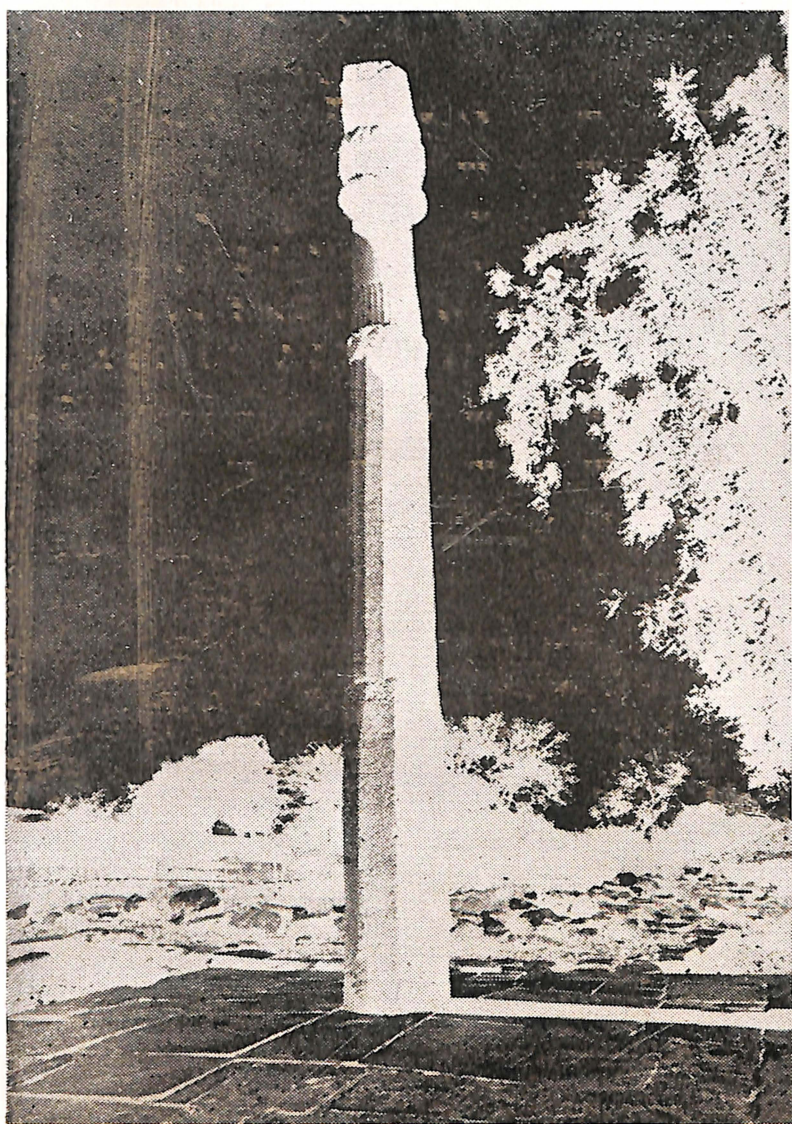
*To
the archeologists
of the world,
so
they may find
that for which
they are really looking.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks must go to His Holiness Jagat Guru Swami, for it was he who initially inspired this project. He took me to India and gave me the necessary direction to fully research the archeological finds delineated herein. I must also extend my heartfelt thanks to Sri-man Ranjit Prabhu and Sriman Nish-chintya Prabhu. Without them, this book may have never seen publication.

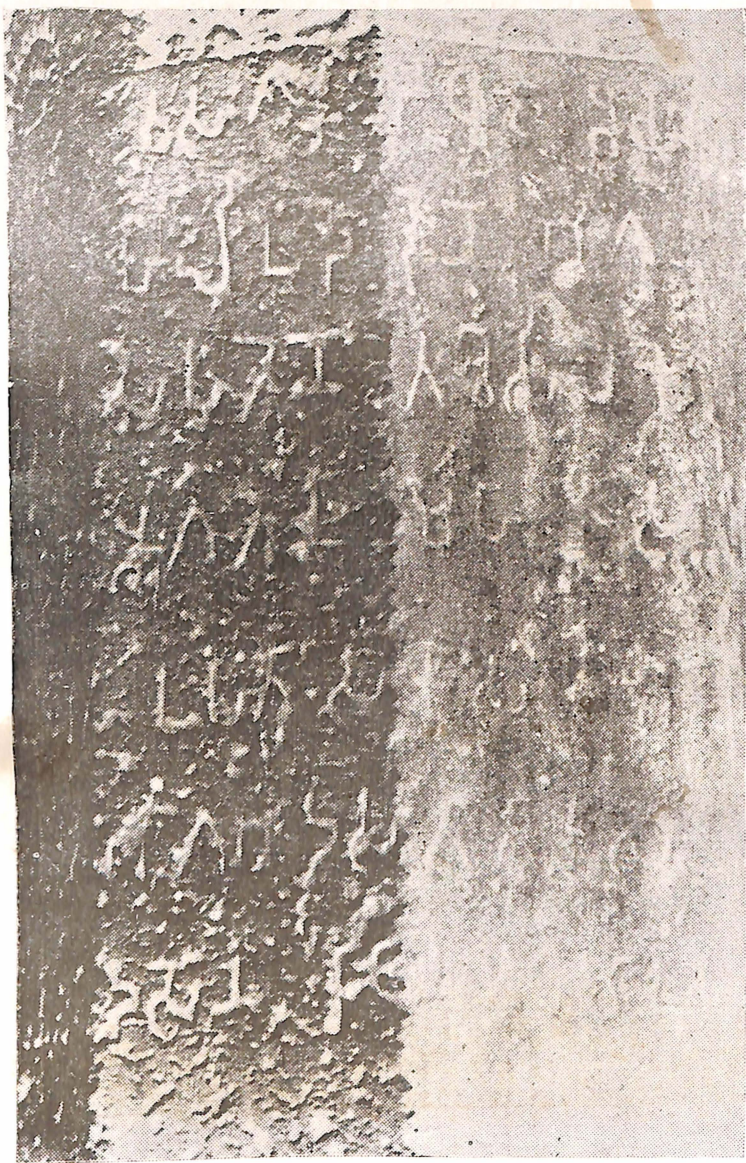
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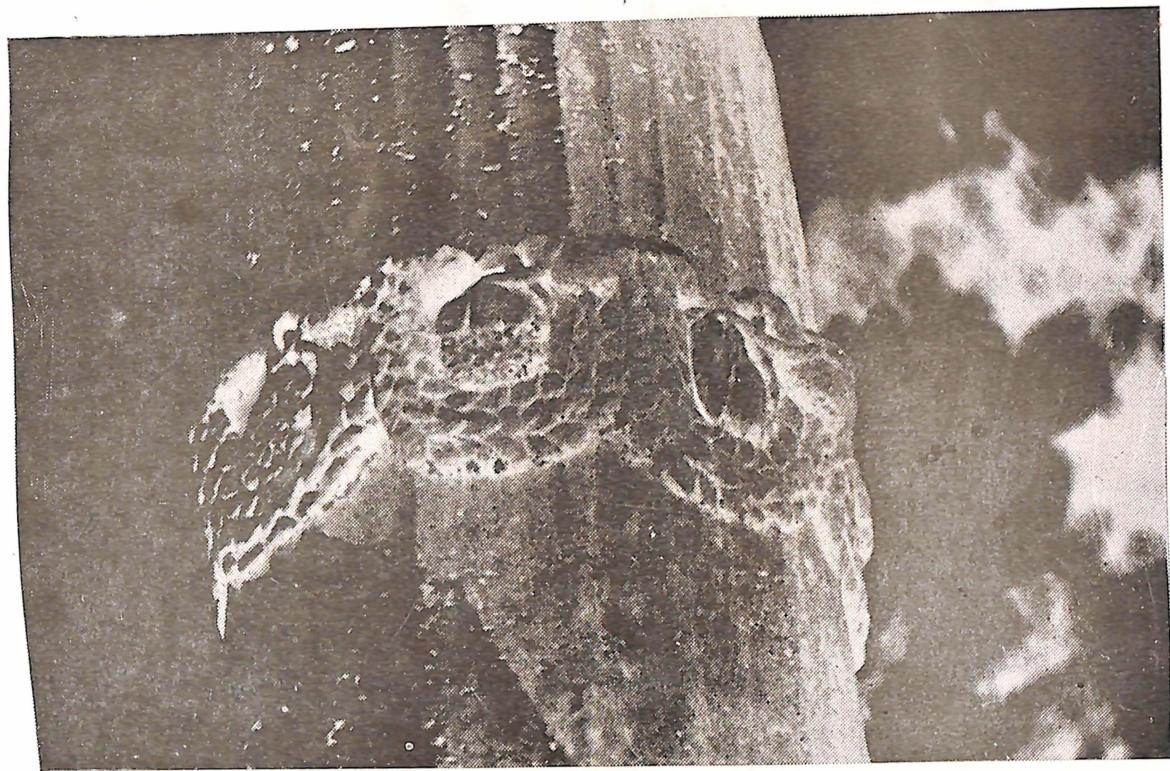


Heliodorus Column (See pp. 18 ff)

Photographs by Jack Hebner.

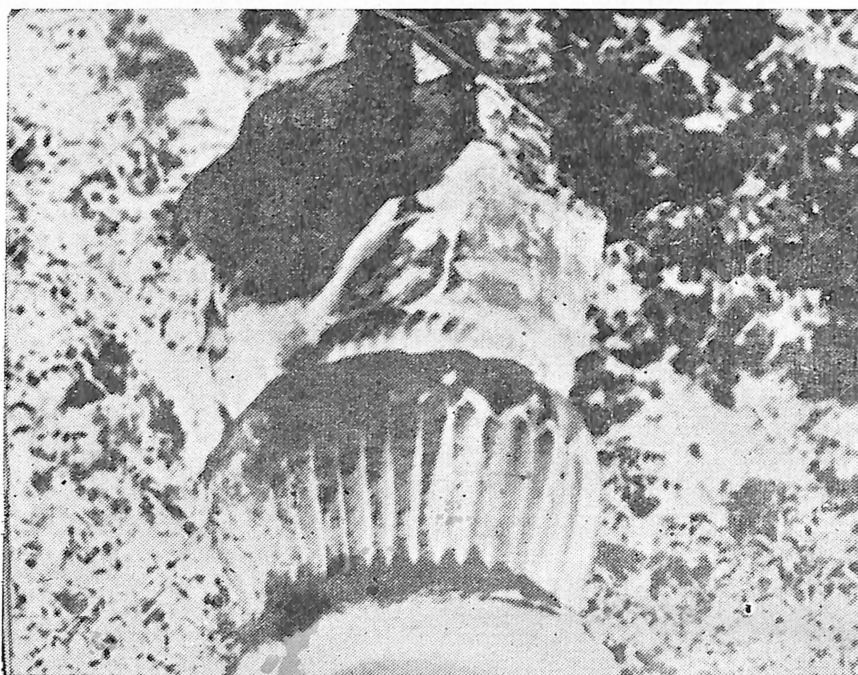


Heliodorus Column (See pp. 18 ff)
Photographs by Jack Hebner.



Helicodorus Column (See pp. 18 ff)

Photographs by Jack Hebner.



Heliodorus Column (See pp. 18 ff)

Photographs by Jack Hebner.



Кршна. Agathocles coin, Ai Khanoum, Afghanistan;
2nd century B.C., from *Arts Asiatiques*, v. 26, 1973,
(See "Afterword," p. 37)



Balarāma. Agathocles coin, Ai Khanoum, Afghanistan;
2nd century B.C., from *Arts Asiatiques*, v. 26, 1973,
(See "Afterword," p. 37)

FOREWORD

We live in an age when light from the East shines with increasing brightness on the West. It may seem strange, in such circumstances, that something as firmly established as the pre-Christian antiquity of Krishna worship should be disputed. But this is apparently the case where knowledge and understanding are limited. Whether or not resistance to the facts is connected with, for instance, the resurgence of fundamentalist Christianity in countries like the United States, or with similar reactions against the new philosophies now circulating, is difficult to determine precisely.

But the resistance is not new, as Steven Rosen documents in the course of this useful book. Writing from within a western Vaishnava point of view, he offers both an *apologia* for the precedence of Krishna worship over that of Christ and a compilation of archaeological and textual data that summarizes the earliest recorded history of Vāsudeva Krishna. Although much of this historical information is available elsewhere in widely scattered form, it has not to my knowledge been brought together in so comprehensive and carefully researched a manner as it is here. Information on the recent excavations at Dwarka in particular is a new addition to the scholarly storehouse.

The keystone for this research is Megasthenes, the third century B.C.E. Ionian whose chronicle of India is preserved in the narratives of Diodorus, Strabo, Aelian, and Arrian. The collected translations by John McCrindle are available in *McCrindle's Ancient India*, edited by Ramchandra Jain (New Delhi : Today & Tomorrow Printers & Publishers, 1972). Sent by Seleucus I to the court of the first Mauryan emperor. Chandragupta, Megasthenes assembled a great deal of reliable information about India. His account of an endogamous and craft-exclusive social hierarchy is probably inaccurate, but shows the institutionalization of class divisions that was already occurring in Mauryan times.

Megasthenes also refers to the Buddha and the philosophical schools, although there is no direct mention of Shāivism or Vaiṣṇavism ; to the magnificence of Chandragupta's gilded wooden palace and the enormous dimensions of his capital, Pāṭaliputra ; and to the well-organized economy of his empire and its powerful army. And, as Rosen details, Megasthenes mentions the god "Heracles" (Hari-kul-eesh), who was worshiped as the Supreme Lord in the district around Mathura where Krishna originated and whose name (Hari) is one commonly used for Krishna.

Alexander the Great's successors were shrewd, and it is to their political acumen that we owe Megasthenes' chronicle. Defeated by Chandragupta in his attempt to expand eastward in about 303 B.C.E., Seleucus not only made peace but established diplomatic relations. He also ceded Gandhara and eastern Arachosia and Gedrosia to Chandragupta. According to Strabo (xv, 2, 9), "Seleucus gave them to Sandracottus [Chandragupta] on terms of intermarriage and receiving in exchange 500 elephants."

The value of elephants as a military arm was first recognized by the Greeks when Alexander used them at the battle of Takṣaśilā (Taxila) on the Hydapses (now Jhelum) river. It was from the same city that Heliodoros journeyed almost two centuries later and ambassador to the court of Bhāgabhadra. The inscription of the column that Heliodoros erected in honor of Vāsudeva (Krishna) at Besnagar, north of modern Bhopāl, mentions "Amtalikta" as the king of Takṣaśilā. This is probably the Antialkides of Greco-Bactrian coins of the second century B.C.E., and is our primary evidence for dating the column. Its capital is a figure of Garuḍa, the bird that is Vishnu's (Krishna's) distinctive vehicle.

There are various speculations surrounding the origin of Krishna himself. It may be that the god whose identity coalesced into he who is known and loved today came from several sources : the Krishna who was the deified hero and guru of the Yādavas, the Vāsudeva revered by the Vṛishnis, and the Gopāla of the Ābhīras. Syncretism is a natural force

in the development of any religious system, a process embodying the search to recognize or formulate the identity of God. Certainly Vasudevism represents the earliest known phase of Vaishnavism, and as the prototype of Krishna, Vāsudeva is the accurate focus of archaeological research into the Lord's origins.

The modest book that you are reading is not written by an archaeologist—nor does Steven Rosen pretend to be one—but he has an excavator's knack for assembling diverse sherds of information into a coherent and meaningful whole. His narrative offers a lens through which we may gain insight into the beginnings of a powerful and enduring religion.

—Andrew Rasanen,
Editor of *the Bulletin*, Center for the Study
of World Religions, Harvard University.

INTRODUCTION

Those with a spiritual bent are not swayed by archeological conclusions. Having identified with the eternal soul, true spiritual seekers have little need to confirm their beliefs by poking and categorizing bones. For such exalted souls, the archeological method is seen to have severe limitations. Consequently, this work is not meant for these people. Unless, of course, these spiritual benefactors mercifully attempt to enlighten those who still enjoy a rigorous archeological debate or those who are still given to the art of mundane wrangling. In such cases this book may have some value.

Archeology experts themselves, however, tend to doubt the veracity of their own science. According to William Fixx, author of *The Bone Peddlers : Selling Evolution*, there is a virtual "catalogue of fiascos" in the world of archeology. Fixx attributes these errors not only to the "sincere-but-wrong." His well-documented book reveals that many archeologists and researchers are more interested in publicity, funding, and reputation than in truth. To protect their pet theories and speculations, says Fixx, researchers have deliberately ignored or dismissed evidence that detracts from their claims. Archeologists are people. And people are motivated.

But even beyond motivation, there are limits to what can be done with the archeological method. One can only dig up so many bones at a given time—one

can only do so much research. Thus archeology, like the other sciences, is always being revised. This naturally gives rise to anomalies, for just as one "fact" is being confirmed, another is being debunked. Specifics are related in Fixx's book, and these tend to make the whole archeological process fallible.

In short, people make mistakes, fall into illusion, have the propensity to cheat, and are beleaguered by imperfect senses. Not only do we *collect* datum with these limitations, but we *interpret* them in the same way. Archeologists are not an exception to the rule.

The Birth Of Indology

In India, the study of archeology began as an antiquarian pursuit, thanks to the interest shown by a small group of enthusiasts who, in 1784, established the "Asiatick Society" in Calcutta. This was, in a very real sense, the birth of Indology, a study that continues to grow as knowledge of ancient languages, such as Sanskrit, continues to grow.

The first Westerner to master Sanskrit was Sir Charles Wilkins (1749-1830), who went to Bengal in 1770 as a writer and researcher for the East India Company. Soon, Wilkins assisted Sir William Jones (1746-1794), who was somewhat naively glorified as "the greatest Orientalist of the period," in learning Sanskrit. Sir William later declared that without the aid of Wilkins, "I should never have learned it..."¹

In Sir Charles Wilkins' obituary, which was published in *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1836, it was noted that prior to Wilkins' mastery of the Sanskrit langu-

age, "the language was not merely unknown, but supposed to be unattainable by Europeans."² A letter to Wilkins from Sir William Jones, dated October 6, 1787, had this to say : "You are the first European who ever understood Sanskrit, and will, possibly, be the last."³ Three years earlier, in 1784, Jones had written Wilkins that the "warriors of the *M'hab'harat* appear greater in my eyes than Agamemnon, Ajax, and Achilles appeared, when I read the *Iliad*."⁴

After Wilkins completed his English translation of *Bhagavadgita* in 1785 (the first time the *Gita* had ever been translated into English), it was quickly published. Two years later came his translation of *Hitopadesh*. Indological study was a new field, and many scholars found themselves ready, willing, and (almost) able to rise to the task. Because it was still a new field, many translations eventually came to be regarded as premature.

One of Wilkins' most memorable achievements was to take place, however, when he aided Sir William in organizing the Asiatick Society in Bengal. An enthusiastic and productive scholar, Wilkins helped Jones with this important Indological institution well after Jones had passed on. Wilkins, it is said, was an able scholar and consummate Indologist. But given the scarcity of information available to him at the time and the prejudices of his age, he was not without error in his interpretations.⁵ The four defects mentioned in the beginning of this book come to mind.

At the same time, in America, a similar phenomenon was occurring. The American Oriental Society

was founded in 1842, and some years later, with the evolution of Sanskrit research, Edward Elbridge Salisbury (1814-1901) was deemed the first American Orientalist of any repute. He taught at Yale (Elihu Yale was himself an Indophile and he had a profound respect for Indian philosophy), influencing many others of high standing.

One of Salisbury's students at Yale, William Dwight Whitney (1827-1901), went on to become a greatly respected Sanskritist. In 1854, he became a senior professor of Sanskrit language and literature at Yale, wrote his classic *Sanskrit Grammar* (1879), and became an inspiration to all students of Indology.

Archeology In India

As this research was going on in Europe and America (and rarely in India), General Alexander Cunningham (1814-1893) started a thirty-year expedition in the land that gave birth to the Sanskrit literature so admired by the Occidental Indologists. By studying India and her indigenous Vedic tradition, scholars were beginning to uncover a culture so alluring and fascinating that India was beginning to be seen as the superlative holy land. While this was pleasing to some, others, particularly Christian missionaries, balked at the prospect of having to acknowledge the sanctity of a tradition other than their own. Cunningham's expedition was commissioned by both the sincere Indophiles and by Christian missionaries. The archeological debates and conclusions that were instigated by Cunningham's research make up a considerable portion of this book.

From 1861 to 1866, the first Archeological Survey of India—which is often identified with the goals of Alexander Cunningham—was born. In its early days, it functioned intensively. But it suddenly ceased to exist.⁶ The initial findings of the Archeological Survey were obscure, necessitating divergent explanations. Philosophical hermeneutics and complex polemics came into play. In addition to this confusion, there followed a few years of debate : Why should Western scholars bring to light the antiquity and profundity of Vedic culture ? Perhaps European culture, and Christianity in particular, was more ancient and, indeed, more profound. Cunningham, for one, needed to know for sure.

By 1871, Cunningham returned to his post as director-general of the reformed Archeological Survey. Eighteen years later, however, the institution once again dissolved. This time due to the suggestion of James Burgess, Cunningham's successor, who plainly saw that all archeological and epigraphical evidence was bearing testimony to the antiquity of Vedic culture—to the pre-Christian worship of Lord Krishna. This was not the conclusion that Burgess had hoped he would find. Four years later, in 1902, the Archeological Survey was reformed once again—this time for good.

The results of the Survey's early work, especially the years in which Cunningham was presiding, are preserved in the volumes of the *Reports of the Archeological Survey of India*, the *New Imperial Series*, and the *Epigraphia Indica*. All are used as references in this short work.

Archeology And The Vaishnava Tradition

Ample archeological evidence exists for the antiquity of Vaishnavism, and most of this evidence is due to the work of the Archeological Survey. Even to-day, B. B. Lal, a top Indian archeologist, continues to uncover important finds. Director-General of the Archeological Survey from 1968 to 1972, Lal is still working diligently in his chosen field. In fact, he is currently directing an Indian national project : "Archeology of the Ramayana Sites." First conceived in 1977 by the Indian Institute for Advanced Study in Shimla and the Archeological Survey of India, the project calls for rigorous work, although it should see completion sometime later this year.⁷ The goal of the project is to prove the historicity of the stories in the *Ramayana*, a Sanskrit Vedic text comprising over 14,000 verses. Great success has already been achieved.⁸

Such scholarly work can easily be appreciated by the intelligentsia of both Eastern and Western nations. But, once again, such work is also considered unnecessary from the perspective of the devotional tradition. After all, archeological evidence is, as mentioned in the beginning, imperfect at best. In fact, it requires a sort of devotional tradition of its own. A sort of beguiled faith. For its truths can never be consistently confirmed. Its adherents can never be certain.

Far be it from us, however, to minimize their faith. If faith is reasonable, and reposed in something worthwhile, then it serves a purpose and, in-

deed, enriches one's life. Further, it can even serve as a catalyst for deeper commitment, expressed in a more mature, developed kind of faith. It is said that St. Thomas, for instance, lacked faith in Jesus. He was thus known as "Doubting Thomas." But Jesus did not turn Thomas away. No. Rather, he gave Thomas evidence that he could understand. And so Thomas eventually became a believer. Thomas developed faith in Jesus *through his faith in empirical evidence*.

In a sense, this book will serve a similar purpose. Vedic culture actually speaks for itself. Anyone who is a practicing devotee of Lord Krishna, researching Vedic culture by taking part in it, has no problem with the antiquity of Krishna worship (Vaishnavism). Its primeval nature is obvious. Its pristine purity evident. Despite bogus accusations that Krishna worship is some "new cult" or "the work of the devil," in point of fact it is the most comprehensive and time-honored religious tradition known to man. This can be documented in the books of His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada and by prominent Indologists and historians the world over.

Now, as a humble offering at the lotus feet of my spiritual master and Godbrothers, I would like to submit that since so much work has been done in the field of Indology, presenting archeological, epigraphical, and numismatic evidence for the historicity and antiquity of Vaishnavism, I find it incumbent upon myself to use this evidence in the service of the Lord. If this evidence encourages even one person to take Vedic culture more seriously, then I will consider the publication of this book to have been successful.

Notes

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2. Ibid., p. xx.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., p. xxii.
6. Maurizio Taddei, *India: Monuments of Civilization*, (New York, Grosset and Dunlap, 1978), p. 182.
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8. Ibid.

MEGASTHENES

Compiled some 5,000 years ago, the Vedic literature is the world's chief source for information regarding the religion and culture of ancient India. Studied within the proper lineage of disciplic descent, the Vedas offer not only a storehouse of information for the sincere student of Indology, but a spiritual way of life that is both practical and profound.

Nonetheless, the literary work of Megasthenes (302-288 B.C.) has proven indispensable in regard to substantiating the pre-Christian roots of Krishna worship. In his writings, scholars find the earliest non-Vedic accounts of ancient Vaishnavism, her theology and culture. According to Megasthenes' view, the worship of Lord Krishna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, was a central theme in India's devotional life. And he wrote on this subject extensively.

Unfortunately, none of Megasthenes' original writings has survived. But fragments of his work—and most certainly the essence—have been preserved through the medium of his early Greek and Latin commentators, such as Arrian, Diodorus, and Strabo.¹ These writers took great pains to salvage Megasthenes' *Indica*, which is today perhaps the most important work in the realm of Indological research.

Megasthenes journeyed from the Hellenistic world to India sometime in the third century B.C. He was an ambassador to the court of Chandragupta at Patliputra, where he was sent by the king of Taxila.² Little did our adventurous friend know that his preoccupa-

tion with pen and paper—notes on India and Indian religion—would be used in the twentieth century to finalize the ongoing debates concerning the comparative historicity and antiquity of Christianity and Krishna worship.

The Debate

It was with the British colonization of India and the development of Indology (largely by Christian missionaries) that a great debate over the relationship between Christianity and Krishna consciousness ensued. Perhaps the earliest claim that Christianity antedated Krishna worship, or Vaishnavism, was made by P. Georgi of Rome in 1762.³ His claim was that the Sanskrit name *Krishna*, often pronounced *krishta*, could have easily been derived from the Greek name *Christ*. And yet he gave no reason why it could not be the other way around. Especially since Sanskrit, even then, was known to be much older than Greek. Today, it is rarely even questioned : Krishna—His name and His religion—is unequivocally accepted as the older of the two. Exactly how this fact came to be discovered, however, recalls some of the most interesting pages in the literature of Indological study.

Georgi's theory was severely opposed by several important scholars, most significantly by Sir William Jones, who believed Krishna to be "one of the more ancient gods of India."⁴ Jones, however, was also lacking in evidence. And so was Edward Moore, who convincingly asserted that the popular myths of the Greeks and other cultures had some basis in reality and were derived, ultimately, from India. But this was all conjecture. Solid proof seemed scarce.

The Borrowing Theory

The debate soon gave rise to "the borrowing theory." Many scholars came to support this perspective, which asserted that the religion and culture of ancient India was not so ancient after all. In fact, according to the theory, Vedic ideology was simply "borrowed" from a ready and waiting Christianity.

The early proponents of this idea were many. Most of them, naturally, were Christians. Albrecht Weber, F. Lorinser, and Edward Washburn Hopkins were the most prominent scholars favoring Christianity as the older of the two religions.

Weber's monograph, *Über die Krishna Janmash-tami*, centered around the birth of Krishna. It brought to light many similarities involving the two divinities. Specifically, Weber pointed out that both Christ and Krishna's parents were involved with paying taxes at the time of the divine birth. He also made much of the fact that the activities of Kamsa and Herod, in the lives of Krishna and Jesus respectively, were almost identical. Finally, Weber was adamant about the connection between the divine names, Krishna and Christ. He went so far as to claim that the whole Vedic system of *avatar* ("divine incarnation") was "borrowed" from the conception of Christ's incarnation.

Lorinser added insult to injury with his comparative study of the *Bhagavad-gita* and the New Testament. He found great harmony between the two religious classics. But he insisted that the original, of course, was the New Testament, and that *Bhagavad-gita* was simply an expurgated derivative.⁵

And then there was the work of Edward W. Hopkins, noted for his essay entitled *Christ in India*. His comparative study of the *Gita* and the Gospel of John was considered brilliant and was noted by contemporary scholars around the world. Hopkins' version of "the borrowing theory," moreover, engendered a slight variation on the others. He contended that although Krishna worship was perhaps earlier, the personality originally worshiped became an entirely new god,—just as Christianity arrived in India. In other words, Krishna was merely some "tribal god" who achieved "Supreme Godhood" when His followers were influenced by Christian thought.⁶

Thus Hopkins believed that Christianity exerted a marked influence on the characteristics of Krishna due to the preaching of St. Thomas, one of the original twelve Apostles. Exactly how this is supposed to have taken place is unknown. All that is certain about St. Thomas' stay in India is that his following was small and that he eventually was martyred.⁷

As the supporters of the "borrowing theory" came forward with new arguments for the originality of Christianity, their opposition grew even stronger, often using the very facts and figures that were uncovered by the opposing side. Each would interpret the data in their own way. The similarity between the names—Krishna and Christ—became a focal point in such debates. But despite decades of two-way arguments, it was eventually determined that the name *Christ* was taken from the Greek *Christos*, which is derived from the Sanskrit *Krishta*, or *Krishna*.⁸ Just the opposite of what Georgi taught.

Megasthenes

The roof started to cave in as scholars from within the Christian tradition, such as Auguste Barth, began to challenge Weber, claiming that the ancient, respectable tradition of Krishna worship antedated Christianity.⁹ "At least," Barth had written, "both religions existed simultaneously and each had evolved independent of the other."¹⁰

Dr. R. G. Bhandarkar, a scholar of Indian origin, discovered convincing evidence that Vaishnavism existed before the Christian Era. The allusions to Krishna in Patanjali's *Mahabhasya* went undisputed among the proponents of the borrowing theory. However, this work was undeniably composed *before* the Christian Era, thus establishing the pre-Christian roots of Krishna worship.

If this evidence went largely unnoticed, Bhandarkar further pointed to a passage in the *Panini Sutra* (4. 3. 98), where the word *vasudevar junabhyam-vun* is mentioned. Here, Vasudeva (Krishna) is worshipped in connection with Arjuna, His devotee. According to Bhandarkar, this verse would place Krishna worship in *at least the fifth century B.C.*¹¹ Still, there were arguments pro and con. Much was left unsettled.

Finally, Dr. Christian Lassen was the first to bring Megasthenes into the discussion.¹² In his book, *Indische Altertumskunde*, Lassen refers to Megasthenes' *Indica*, wherein "Krishna" is clearly described under the pseudonym *Heracles*. Both the River Yamuna and the town of Mathura are mentioned, and this "Heracles" is seen as the Supreme

Lord, worshiped by the residents of Mathura.¹³ Scholarly research has since conclusively established that the name "Heracles" was derived from the Sanskrit *Hari-kul-eesh* (i.e., "a manifestation of the Supreme Controller, Hari [Krishna]").

Since Megasthenes was known to have lived during the third century before Christ, the borrowing theory suffered a tremendous setback. Even the most fundamentalist of the Christian missionaries were now forced to ask themselves : Who was borrowing from whom ? In scholarly circles, the antiquity of Krishna worship was quickly becoming accepted, especially among the well-informed Indologists and Sanskritists.

One prominent Indologist, Richard Garbe, was even more outspoken than Lassen, and claimed that the testimony of Megasthenes was incontestable.¹⁴ Garbe's analysis of the situation was so convincing and eloquent that Alan Dahlquist, who is generally aligned with the proponents of the borrowing theory, was virtually forced to admit that Garbe "exploded Weber's theory once and for all."¹⁵

At the very beginning of the twentieth century the subject was laid to rest by John M. Robertson, researcher extraordinaire, who wrote, "Krishna is proved by documentary evidence to have flourished in India before the Christian Era."¹⁶ After a lifetime of study, the same scholar reported, "...It is settled that the most conservative Sanskrit scholarship on the continent not only admits but insists on the pre-Christian character of Krishna."¹⁷

This, along with the other archeological evidences

subsequently discovered (and recorded in this book), have led a good number of scholars to support Lassen in his conclusions, to the extent that the official statement on the subject was recorded for all time in *The Cambridge History of India* : Krishna worship predates Christianity.¹⁸

Of course, from the spiritual perspective, Krishna and Christ are both *eternal* personalities. Thus there is no question of which came first, and any attempt to categorize them in this way may be considered *a priori* absurd. Theologically, Krishna is the father, as is stated in *Bhagavad-gita*, and Christ is the son, according to the New Testament. Both the Supreme Lord and His son are completely transcendental, and they exist beyond time. It is said, in fact, that in the spiritual realm, time is conspicuous by its absence. As far as their manifest pastimes in the material world, however, Krishna is considered to have come first, appearing some 5,000 years ago. Christ, as we know, appeared only 2,000 years ago.

Conclusion

This archeological survey does not adhere to spiritual dogma per se, and so we must proceed according to the parameters of our chosen discipline. Megasthenes is accepted by all Indologists as the most important literary evidence in regard to the antiquity of Krishna worship. Megasthenes establishes the God of Mathura from at least the third century B. C.—and this is considered important because it allows Krishna worship to stand alone, uninfluenced by Christianity, which came later. Certainly the name Krishna came first, and this has been documented conclusively by the scholars who have studied Megasthenes.

But more important than the writings of Megasthenes is the Vedic literature. According to *Shrimad Bhagavatam*, Lord Krishna appeared on earth 5,000 years ago, and He was worshiped as the Supreme Personality of Godhead from the very beginning of His appearance. This knowledge has been passed down in an unbroken preceptorial succession.

This succession embodies a “borrowing” process of its own. Vedic knowledge is originally enunciated by the Lord to the first created being, who is known as Brahma. Next, Narada Muni, a celebrated sage, “borrowed” the information and delivered it intact to Shrila Vyasadev. In this way, Vedic knowledge is carefully passed down, person to person, and today it has been preserved in the books of His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. The reader is advised to “borrow” this knowledge as well. And then to pass it on to everyone he meets.

Notes

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2. Alan Dahlquist, *Megasthenes and Indian Religion*, (Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1962), p. 9.
3. P. Georgi, *Alphabetum Tibetanum*, (Rome, 1762), p. 253.
4. J. W. McCrindle, *Ancient India as Described by Megasthenes and Arrian*, (Bombay, Thacker & Co., 1877), p. 201.
5. Dahlquist, op. cit., p. 13.
6. Ibid.
7. A. Faber-Kaiser, *Jesus Died in Kashmir*, (England, Gordon & Cremonesi, 1976), p. 81.
8. Dahlquist, op. cit., pp. 15-16.
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18. *The Cambridge History of India*, Vol. 1-6, (Cambridge, 1922-32) Suppl. Vol., Cambridge 1953, p. 167.

THE HELIODORUS COLUMN

Heliodorus was a Greek ambassador to India in the second century before Christ. His political *savoir-faire* and diplomacy, however, are not the traits for which he is best remembered. It is his monumental pillar, erected in B. C. 113¹ at Besnagar, Central India, that today establishes his importance. Known as the Heliodorus column, it stands as one of the most significant archeological finds on the Indian subcontinent.

Sent to the court of King Bhagabhadra, Heliodorus was representing Antialkidas, the Greek king of Taxila. The kingdom of Taxila was part of the Bactrian region in northwest India, conquered by Alexander the Great in B. C. 325. By the time of Antialkidas, the area under Greek rule included what is today Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Punjab.²

The Discovery

The Heliodorus column first came to the attention of Western eyes in 1877, during an archeological survey by General Alexander Cunningham. The column's inscription, however, went unnoticed, because of the thick coating of red lead that engulfed it. According to tradition, pilgrims who worshiped there smeared the column with vermilion paint. The inscription was thus temporarily obscured.

The column, Cunningham deduced from its shape, was from the period of the Imperial Guptas³ (A. D. 300-550). Thirty-two years later, however, when the

inscription was finally brought to light, it became clear that the monument was several centuries older.⁴

In January 1901, an independent researcher discovered what he thought was obscured, worn-out lettering on the lower part of the column, and removal of some paint proved him correct. After about eight years, Dr. J. H. Marshall, who accompanied this nameless researcher, described the newly found lettering in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*. In his article, Marshall explained that Cunningham had been mistaken about the age of the column and “could little have dreamt of the value of the record which he just missed discovering....A glance at the few letters exposed was all that was needed to show that the column was many centuries earlier than the Gupta Era. This was, indeed, a surprise to me,” confessed Dr. Marshall, “but a far greater surprise was in store when the opening lines of the inscription came to be read.”⁵

A reproduction of the inscription, along with a translation of the ancient Brahmi text, is given here as it appeared in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* :

A

“This Garuda column of Vasudeva [Krishna], the God of gods, was erected here by Heliodorus, His worshipper. I, the son of Dion, and an inhabitant of Taxila, came as Greek ambassador from the great King Antialkidas to King Kasi-putra Bhagabhadra, the savior, then reigning prosperously in the fourteenth year of his kingship.”

B

“Three immortal precepts (footsteps)...when practiced lead to heaven—self-restraint, charity, and conscientiousness.”

It is thus clear from the column that Heliodorus was a Vaishnava, a devotee of Krishna. Further, Heliodorus' endorsement of self-restraint (*dharmo*), charity (*chago*), and conscientiousness (*apramado*) further corroborates his status as a devotee of Krishna : the late Indologist, H. C. Raychaudhuri, remarks that the three virtues mentioned above are inscribed on the column in the exact order as they appear in a famous verse from the Mahabharata (11.7.23),⁶ held so dear by worshippers of Krishna. Raychaudhuri accepts this as “conclusive evidence.”

In addition, he is impressed that Heliodorus is said to come from Taxila : “It was at that city that Janmejaya heard from Vaishampayana the popular story of the Kurus and the Pandus.” Raychaudhuri then goes on to suggest that “Heliodorus of Taxila actually heard and utilized the teaching of the great Epic, since we know from Panini that the Epic was well known to the people of Gandhara long before the Greek ambassador.”⁸

In 1965, Dr. M. D. Khare sought to uncover more about the Heliodorus column and the nature of Krishna worship in the pre-Christian period of the Greek Ambassador. After tremendous research, he noted that “seven more pits, with similar material like alternating layers of laterite, black earth, occasionally mixed with brick-bats and small pebbles, and a number of steel and stone wedges placed on the

basal slabs, show that there were eight pillars in front of a Vasudeva temple of the second century before Christ.”⁹ In other words, Khare found the remains of a monumental temple complex, centering around the worship of Krishna. Could Heliodorus have worshiped there ?

After examining much of the evidence, Professor Kunja Govinda Goswami of Calcutta University conservatively issued his official statement that Heliodorus was “at least well acquainted with the texts dealing with the *Bhagavat* (Vaishnava) religion.”¹⁰

The First Western Devotee

To those familiar with Vaishnava Indological study, Heliodorus is famous as the earliest Westerner on record to actually convert to Vaishnavism. But some scholars of considerable importance, most notably Tom Hopkins and the late A. L. Basham¹¹, are of the opinion that Heliodorus was not the only foreigner to convert to Krishna consciousness. Hopkins, Chairman of the Department of Religious Studies at Franklin and Marshall College, has said, “Heliodorus was presumably not the only foreigner who was converted to Vaishnava devotional practices—although he might have been the only one to erect a column, at least one that is still extant. Certainly there must have been many others.”¹²

It must also be noted that the column has other historical merits—in the same vein as does the Megasthenes evidence. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it may be remembered, a number of Indologists (Weber, Macnicol, and Lorinser, to name

a few) had acknowledged points of similarity between the Vaishnava philosophy of unalloyed devotion to Krishna and Christian doctrine. They had argued that devotion to Krishna must have been a perverted offshoot of Christianity, and they had cited the comparable stories of Krishna and Christ to further support their claims. But the discovery of the inscription on the Heliodorus column laid their speculations to rest. Here was conclusive epigraphical proof that the Vaishnava tradition antedated Christianity by at least two hundred years.

The Heliodorus column struck down another erroneous notion : For centuries it was the common belief that India's orthodox tradition did not accept converts. An Islamic historian, Abu Raihan Alberuni, who went to India in A. D. 1017, tried to explain in his book *Indica* (not to be confused with Megasthenes' book of the same title) why the Indian orthodoxy did not admit foreigners. Alberuni suggested that the practice developed only after the Muslim incursion into India, sometime after A. D. 674.¹³ The nonconversion policy existed, apparently, largely because of the consistent antagonism between Muslims and Hindus.

For many centuries prior to the Muslim presence, however, there was no bar to conversion into the orthodox fold, and today there are case histories of such conversions in supplementary Vedic texts. The story of Heliodorus is yet another example of this phenomenon. Thus Vaishnavism need not have been confined to India. Evidence indicates that it was not. In the words of historian/Indologist J. W. McCrindle :

“The Besnagar [Heliodorus] record testifies to the proselytizing zeal of the *Bhagavats*, or *Vaishnavas*, in the pre-Christian centuries, and it shows that their religion was excellent enough to capture the hearts of the cultured Greeks and catholic enough to admit them into its fold.”¹⁴

Notes

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THE MORA WELL INSCRIPTION

About seven miles west of Lord Krishna's birth-place, Mathura, stands a small village named Mora. This ancient dwelling place for sages remains an unimposing relic, a humble smattering of the past with a message for today. That message, embodied in the Mora Well Stone Slab Inscription (First Century B.C.), is that Krishna was lovingly worshiped before the Christian Era—and not alone, but with His associates.¹

According to the inscription, "the five heroes of the Vrishni clan" were considered divine, and these "heroes" have been identified by thorough, scholarly research : Krishna, Balarama [Vasudeva and Sankarshan], Pradyumna, Samba, and Anirudha.² The credit for the discovery goes, once again, to Alexander Cunningham.

In 1882, only five years after he discovered the Heliodorus Column, Cunningham came upon a large inscribed slab that formed part of the terrace of an ancient wall (the Mora Well inscription). Soon, a transcript and a facsimile of the inscription were published in the Archeological Survey of India's *Annual Report*.³ At that time, the inscription was already incomplete, more than half of it having peeled away on the right side. And since then it has become much more seriously damaged. Although the most important parts can still be read.

Attempted Forgery

Several decades after Cunningham initially discovered it, the valuable stone slab was moved to the

Mathura Museum by a fledgling archeologist named Dr. Vogel, who worked under the supervision of renowned scholar Pandit Radha Krishna.⁴ It has since been brought to light that Vogel had attempted to edit the Moral Well message at that time.⁵ However, the original contents of the inscription were by then (1909) too well known in scholarly circles. It was already recorded for posterity.

The attempt to edit the inscription is instructive. Many early archeologists in India were Christian—and they made no bones about their motivation. In the early 1800s, for instance, some of the greatest progress in the field of Sanskrit and Indological study was made at Oxford University. H. H. Wilson became the first Boden Professor of Sanskrit at that particular school. His successor, the famous professor M. Monier-Williams, has clearly delineated the original purpose and motivation for Indological study: “I must draw attention to the fact that I am only the second occupant of the Boden Chair, and that its founder, Colonel Boden, stated most explicitly in his will (dated August 15, 1811) that the special object of his munificent bequest was to promote the translation of scriptures from Sanskrit—so as to enable his countrymen to proceed in the conversion of the natives of India to the Christian religion.”⁶

In eighteenth-century Europe, religion meant Christianity—plain and simple. One was irreligious if one was not a Christian. And one was illiterate if one could not read the English Bible. Nevermind the exalted Vedic texts—hundreds of volumes in length—written in the highly sophisticated Sanskrit language

(Indeed, *sanskrit* means “highly evolved” or “polished” !). To those who actually made an in-depth and unbiased comparative study, it gradually became clear that racism and religious prejudice were the sole motivating factors behind the enthusiastic and “municipal” attempts of the early Indologists. One Indian historian summed up these ideas in the following way: “This attitude of Europeans toward Indians was due to a sense of racial superiority—a cherished conviction which was shared by every Englishman in India, from the highest to the lowest.”⁷

Racial Prejudice

Consequently, Alexander Duff (1806-1878) soon founded Scots College, in Calcutta, which he envisioned as a “headquarters for a great campaign against Hinduism.”⁸ Duff’s avowed mission was to convert “the natives” by enrolling them, oftentimes freely, in English-run schools and colleges ; at these schools he placed emphasis on learning the English language, “inadvertantly” teaching Christianity through the medium of literacy. Inevitably, in learning English, the Indian people were virtually forced to learn the Bible, even though they were initially quite satisfied with their own religion. The Indian people were deliberately taught that Christianity was the superior form of spirituality, and that their own religious heritage was backward and uncivilized.⁹

This state of affairs was precipitated, of course, by the Battle of Plassey, in 1757, when the Indian army was defeated by the British East India Company. As history relates, the British gained full control of India just after this historic battle. And they

immediately began to impose their beliefs upon the Indian people. Some background information on this phenomenon has been given in Satsvarupa Das Goswami's *Readings in Vedic Literature* (in the chapter called "the First Indologists").

Dr. Vogel, in attempting to distort the Mora Well inscription, was right in line with many of his predecessors in the world of Indology and archeology. Nonetheless, Cunningham's work, published in an authoritative scholarly journal, was done prior to Vogel's attempt, and he clearly establishes the supremacy of Krishna, Balarama, and the other three Vrishnis.¹⁰ The Mora Well inscription, dating from before the time of Christ, is thus an indispensable addition to the purpose of this book, and scholars around the world agree on the importance and significance of the discovery.

Notes

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DVARAKA : KRISHNA'S MAJESTIC ABODE

The apparent remains of ancient Dvaraka, the city in which Lord Krishna reigned as king some 5,000 years ago, were recently discovered by a team of archeologists exploring the Arabian Sea off the coast of present-day Dvaraka (in the Jamnagar district of Gujarat).

According to the Vedic scriptures, Lord Krishna lived there as a king with large palaces, retinue, and chivalrous pastimes of royal glory. So magnificent are the accounts of His activities in Dvaraka, that prior to the recent discoveries many refused to believe that Lord Krishna really displayed His divinely majestic abode on this earth.

Expert divers have discovered ruins and large building blocks for ancient temple structures deeply embeded underwater at the entry point of the long-standing harbor at mainland Dvaraka. Structures of the submerged land of Krishna and lustrous redware pottery were also found in the area.

Official Conclusions

Archeologists have concluded that these artifacts date from the time of the Harappan civilization, which came to a mysterious end at about B. C. 3000, corresponding with the last days of Krishna's manifest pastimes. These and other recent evidences suggest that the ancient kingdom, Dvaraka, was inundated by the Arabian Sea between B. C. 1500 and 1300. Many scholars, however, believe the relics are much

older. And the Vedic tradition, again, says that Krishna's kingdom flourished no less than 5,000 years ago.

The diving expedition used sophisticated underwater vacuum tubes and side-scan sonar to locate the Dvaraka site. "This project is helping us to learn about our history, our culture, and our religion," said V. V. Varadachari, the director of India's National Institute of Oceanography.

The expedition on Dvaraka, carried out by S. R. Rao of India's same Institute, is part of a three-year program for exploring the submerged parts of Dvaraka and Kaveripoompatnam, and for retrieving at least one historically significant shipwreck in Indian waters. The findings, however, continue to vastly exceed the explorers' expectations.

Thus far five cities have been identified in this area, each traceable to the time of Krishna. The latest findings are believed to be the central core of Krishna's main city, which was originally constructed by the demigod Vishvakarma on an island covering a space of 96 square miles. Upon Krishna's disappearance, the island was engulfed by the ocean.

On shore, archeologists have unearthed an entire temple-like structure beneath the present-day Dvaraka temple, which is itself 2,000 years old and includes a chamber said to date back to the time of Krishna. Other findings include sculpted pillars and carved figurines of celestial beings similar to decorations within the present temple. Research continues to bear fruit.

THE GHOSUNDI INSCRIPTION

In addition to the Heliodorus column and the Mora well, there is another, similar find of equal importance. The Ghosundi inscription has been praised by Indologists and archeologists as conclusive evidence in determining the antiquity of Krishna worship.

First brought to the attention of scholars by Kavi-raja Shyamala Dasa in *The Journal of the Bengal Asiatic Society*,¹ the Ghosundi inscription is now located in the Victoria Hall museum at Udaipur and was founded at the village of Ghosundi, in the Chitor District of Rajasthan.² The inscription is almost identical to that of Hathi-vada, which was found nearby. Both inscriptions are invaluable to scholars who seek to establish the pre-Christian roots of Krishna worship.

The composed text of both the Ghosundi and Hathi-vada inscriptions is only partially revealed, and it has been translated as follows :

“[This] stone enclosure, called the *Narayana Vataka*, for the worship of bhagavan Shankarshan and bhagavan Vasudeva, the invincible Lords of all, [was erected] by the [Bhaga] vata king of the line of Gaja, Sarvatata the victorious, who performed an ashvamedha sacrifice...”³

The original characters of the inscription are in northern Brahmi script, which is a form of Sanskrit from the later Maurya or early Sunga period (corresponding to the second century before Christ).

Interpretation

Scholars believe that the stone enclosure referred to in the text was a temple dedicated to the worship of Sankarshan (Balarama) and Vasudeva (Krishna), who are described as “the invincible Lords of all.” Thus, the inscription carries much the same message as the Mora well : Krishna and Balarama were worshiped together well before the time of Christ.

Alternative View

There is another view of “the stone enclosure” that is particularly interesting and relevant to our treatment of the subject. Indian academician J. C. Ghosh contends that the interpretation of the Sanskrit word *pujashilaprakar* should not be “the stone enclosure [*shilaprakar*] for worship [*puja*],” as is commonly understood.⁴ Rather, he saw it as “a rampart for the stone object of worship.” Ghosh further contends that the “stone object” was clearly Shalagram Shila, a type of stone that is to this day worshiped as Vishnu, or Krishna.⁵ Whether one accepts the view that the “stone object” refers to the remains of a temple or to the sacred Shalagram Shila, the Ghosundi Inscription supports the premise of this book.

Shrimad Bhagavatam

Archeological evidence aside, tradition teaches that Krishna and Balarama were worshiped long before this period. And the *Bhagavat-purana*, also known as the *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, gives elaborate details about Their transcendental activities some fifty centuries ago. These activities were glorified and worshiped even as they were enacted.

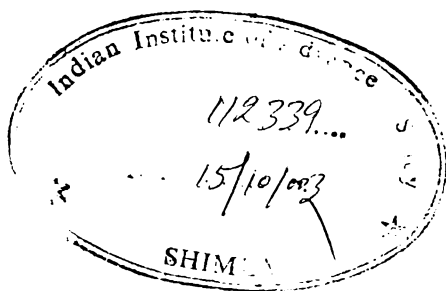
According to the *Bhagavatam* (1 : 1 : 20), "Lord Shri Krishna, the Personality of Godhead, along with Balarama, played like a human being, and so masked He performed many superhuman acts." His Divine Grace Srila Prabhupada comments, "The specific mention of the word *Bhagavan* in this text indicates that Balarama and Krishna are original forms of the Lord....Krishna is the Supreme Personality of Godhead, and Balarama is the first plenary manifestation of the Lord. From Balarama comes the first phalanx of plenary expansions, Vasudeva, Samkarshan, Aniruddha and Pradyumna, expands. Lord Sri Krishna is Vasudeva, and Balarama is Samkarshan." While the Vedic concept of Incarnation is quite complex, it is evident that Krishna and Balarama were understood to be manifestations of God, even in the *puranic* period.

But the Ghosundi Inscription tells us something more about Krishna/Balarama worship. It tells us something about the caliber of devotee who worshiped Them. Many scholars assumed that, since Krishna, in His earthly pastimes, played the role of a *ksatriya* king, He was worshiped only by the *ksatriya* class. And the same scholars that make this claim also present the theory that Krishna was a "pious king from Mathura" who became celebrated in legend after his death and later became elevated to the position of a *deva*, or god. Both notions, however, have been proven erroneous.

According to K. P. Jayaswal, of the Archaeological Survey of India, the inscription at Ghosundi shows that the followers of Krishna included *brahmins*, the

priestly or intellectual class.⁶ Research in this area has laid all debate to rest.

And as far as whether or not Krishna was some “pious king” who was later deified, there are endless *puranic* quotes that establish the fact that He was known as the Lord in His own time. All of the great sages proclaim this of Him. Devala, Vyasa, Asita, Narada, Brahma—they attest to Lord Krishna’s Lordship unequivocally. Even Arjuna, the hero of *Bhagavad-gita*, India’s unexcelled treatise on metaphysics, declares Krishna to be “Lord of lords : God of gods ; the source of all spiritual and material worlds.” The tradition speaks for itself.



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AFTERWORD

There are other evidences for the antiquity of Krishna worship as well—archeological, epigraphical, numismatic. While there is a vast array of archeological finds that support the premise of this work, we have deliberately elaborated only upon those evidences that are unanimously accepted in the world of archeology. The Nanaghat Inscription, for instance, is another tribute to the dual worship of Krishna and Balarama.¹ From the Deccan, in the modern state of Maharashtra, the Nanaghat Inscription of Queen Naganika in the Nanaghat cave, Thana District, mentions the names of Vasudeva and Sankarshan, and equates Them with the Supreme Lord.² This inscription has been conclusively proven, on epigraphical grounds, to come from the second half of the first century before Christ.³

The *Arthashastra* of Kautilya (Chanakya Pandit), generally accepted as originating in the fourth century B. C., reveals a *mantra* which can force animals to sleep. One of the introductory lines of this *mantra* mentions Krishna and Kamsa (the Lord's avowed enemy) and refers to the story of Krishna's birth as well.⁴ Another line refers to the Vrishni Dynasty into which Krishna appeared.⁵ All scholars familiar with these statements from the *Arthashastra* attest to their antiquity.

And then there are the grammatical works. Panini and Patanjali were already mentioned. But even before Panini, in the *Nirukta*, Yaska's brilliant etymo-

logical work ascribed to the fifth century B. C.,⁶ there is mention of an incident that presupposes the existence of Krishna. All of the elements of the stealing of the Syamantaka Jewel are described, along with a description of two of Krishna's wives, Jambavati and Satyabhama.⁷

In the *Baudhayana Dharma Sutra*, attributed to the fourth century B. C.,⁸ there exists an invocation to Vishnu wherein He is respectfully called by twelve different names, and among them are three very popular names for Krishna : Keshava, Govinda, and Damodara.

Further evidence for the antiquity of Vaishnavism can be gleaned from the writings of travellers. Megasthenes has already been mentioned, but the serious reader may research Quintus Curtius and Ptolemy, who have both written extensively on the subject.⁹

The numismatic evidence is just as compelling. The coins of the Kushana kings attest to the antiquity of Krishna worship. Excavations at Ai-Khanum, along the border of the Soviet Union with Afghanistan, conducted by Dr. P. Bernard of a French archeological delegation, brought to light six rectangular bronze coins issued by the Indo-Greek ruler Agathocles (about 180-165 B.C.).¹⁰ These coins, with copy in both Greek and Brahmi scripts, show Vishnu, or Vasudeva, carrying a *chakra* and a pear-shaped "vase" (or conchshell) on the reverse.¹¹ Such numismatic evidence is not uncommon.

Nonetheless, there are many who will maintain that the Krishna religion is new, a *cult*, despite all

evidence to the contrary. This view is obviously ill-founded, although it may hold merit for those who find it convenient, for those who find the truth too jarring. Still, if Vaishnavism is to be considered a new cult, then Christianity must be considered so as well, for as we have seen, Krishna worship predates the Christian religion. If the Krishna religion is indeed a new one, however, then it need not upset one's reality. One may in fact believe that Christianity, for all it has become, is still the best of all possible paths. The path from which all others are derived. This was precisely the view that was held by many of the early Indologists in India. They suffered a rude awakening.

If Krishna religion is recognized as primeval—the original form of religious truth—then a sincere soul would have a difficult time rationalizing his avoidance of it. In fact, one would have to at least investigate it more thoroughly, to find out if it is actually the source of all subsequent religious truth. For one can learn more about one's own religion by studying its source. There are no bones about it.

Notes

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Steven Rosen is a free-lance writer living in New York City. He is the author of several books including *Food For The Spirit : Vegetarianism and the World Religions* and *India's Spiritual Renaissance : The life and times of Lord Chaitanya*.

He was introduced to Vaishnava theology by the grace of Shila A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, whom Mr. Rosen took initiation from in 1975.