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KŪRMA IMAGERY IN INDIAN ART AND CULTURE

*May Kūrma,
the vast expanse of whose body is tawny like the golden mountain (Meru) and
who resembles the bulbous root of the Creeper of the old (ancient) world,
protect you!*

This is an invocatory verse to Kūrma (tortoise, turtle)¹ in a specially composed *Avani-Kūrma Śataka* consisting of 109 verses in praise of the tortoise, which the Paramāra king Bhojadeva (CE 1000–1055) had inscribed on a stone slab at Dhārā in central India.² The poem speaks of the universal aspect of the tortoise, the belief that it supports the Earth and is like Meru, the cosmic mountain in the centre of the universe. Amazingly, it does not refer to the Kūrma incarnation of Viṣṇu. There are verses in this Śataka that directly address the tortoise in the first person, and show a deep attachment to this seemingly trivial reptile. The tortoise is praised as ‘the one and only one who bears the burden [of the earth]’ (v. 106). ‘You alone, O tortoise, are really born! What is the use of others who are [merely] born here on earth to no purpose, in vain? For it is you who saved the earth that was sinking down in the nether world (*pātāla*) by supporting it on your back!’ (v. 62). The mother of the tortoise is also praised in many stanzas for giving birth to the one who bears the burden of the earth without a grumble.

Far from being insignificant, the tortoise has held a special place in Indian culture and the Indian psyche since ancient times, and continues to pervade various areas of living Indian traditions. Kūrma is revered not only as an incarnation of the god Viṣṇu. As J. Gonda says, ‘The animal played, and still plays, an important role in the cosmogonic, cosmographic, and genealogical conceptions of Indian peoples.’³ In this article I show how *kūrma* imagery permeates many aspects of Indian culture, from the cosmic to the mundane, playing a role in mythology, art, ritual, and even everyday objects.

These associations seem to derive directly from features of the animal’s anatomy and physiology. The stability and strength of the tortoise’s upper shell, the creature’s associations with the ocean and longevity, and its retractable limbs all seem to inform the significance of *kūrma* in myths and ritual. The qualities that derive from *kūrma*’s body also happen to be the qualities at the heart of Viṣṇu’s

1 In the Sanskrit language there is no sharp distinction between a tortoise and a turtle as there is in English. The Sanskrit words *kūrma*, *kacchapa*, and *kamaṭha* connote both tortoise and turtle. Though technically the word ‘turtle’ (sea or freshwater reptile) rather than ‘tortoise’ (land or freshwater reptile) would perhaps be more apt in the context of the myth of Samudra Manthana (Churning of the Ocean), in this article I use the word tortoise as the traditional translation of the words *kūrma* and *kacchapa*.

2 *Epigraphia Indica* 8 (1905–06): 96, 241–60. *Kūrmaśatakadvayam*, inscribed at Dhārā by Mahārāja Śrī Bhojadeva, translated with a select glossary by V. M. Kulkarni, introduction by Devangana Desai (Ahmedabad: L. D. Institute of Indology, 2003). Accompanying the *Avani-Kūrma Śataka* is another Śataka of 109 verses on Kūrma in which King Bhoja is praised as a better support of the earth than Kūrma, the Boar, or Śeṣa (the Cosmic Serpent).

3 J. Gonda, *Aspects of Early Viṣṇuism*, 1st ed. (Utrecht: A. Oosthoek, 1954; reprint, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993), 126.

nature: an association with the ocean and longevity/preservation, an emblem of stability and support, and the husband of Bhū (Earth). Might Viṣṇu's stories have grown in some way out of earlier *kūrma* traditions? This suggests another way to think of the formulation of Kūrma as an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu: Kūrma's stories and characteristics may be among some of the oldest that Vaiṣṇava practices have appropriated.

KŪRMA AS SUPPORT

Perhaps because of the remarkable strength of a tortoise's shell, this creature is commonly represented as an emblem of support. *Kūrma* as *ādi-kūrma*, the primeval tortoise – as distinct from the tortoise as Viṣṇu's incarnation – is represented in Indian art in various capacities: as the support of the Earth goddess Pṛthvī, and as the mount (*vāhana*) of the river goddess Yamunā and others. It also supports the right foot of Varāha, the boar *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, as seen in sculptures at Khajuraho and other central Indian sites, and as mentioned in the Vāstu text *Aparājitaṭṭhā* (219, 22) and the *Matsya Purāṇa* (ch. 260). Moreover, according to the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* (58, iff), the tortoise supports the country (Bhārata). Ajaya Mitra Shastri, in referring to the theme of 'Kūrma-vibhaga' as it occurs in the sixth-century text *Bṛhat Saṃhitā*, notes a belief that the shape of the earth corresponds to that of a tortoise outstretched with its face towards the east.

Kūrma-śilā

We must again distinguish the theme of *kūrma-śilā* from the Kūrma incarnation. Here *kūrma* is not Viṣṇu's incarnation but the primeval tortoise, *ādi-kūrma*.⁴ In a drawing of *kūrma-śilā* from the Vāstu text *Kṣīrārṇava*,⁵ aquatic creatures surround *kūrma* in the centre (fig. 1). On the outer side of the diagram are the weapons of the eight *dikpālas*, the Regents of Space. As an emblem of stability, Kūrma is placed in the form of *kūrma-śilā* in the foundation of buildings at the time of Vāstu *pūjā*, or worship of the deity of the site. *Kūrma-śilā* supports the temple so that the building remains firm. Medieval Indian Vāstu texts dealing with temple architecture, such as the *Aparājitaṭṭhā* (ch. 153) and *Kṣīrārṇava* (ch. 101), mention placing the *kūrma-śilā* in a building's foundation surrounded by symbols of the eight *dikpālas*. This calls to mind the Vedic ritual performed during the construction of the northern altar (*uttara vedi*) representing the universe, in which a live tortoise was placed in the first layer of bricks (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* VII, 5, 1, 1). The tortoise in the base of the altar represents the source of all things.

In the foundation of the sanctum of Śiva temples in south India, a tortoise figure is placed on an auspicious pot (*kuṁbha*) with lotus. The *kūrma* supports a pipe (*yoga-nāla*) on which is placed a stone slab (*napuṁsaka śilā*). This in turn supports a pedestal (*pīṭha*), which is topped by the *liṅga*. The temple's finial lies exactly above the *liṅga*, forming an *axis mundi*. Thus the *kūrma* supports the cosmic axis.⁶

4 The word *ādi-kūrma* (primeval tortoise) is used by Dr. N. P. Joshi in *Brahmanical Sculptures in the State Museum, Lucknow*, part 2, vol. 1 (Lucknow: State Museum, 1989), 138.

5 Viśvakarmā, *Kṣīrārṇava*, edited with a translation in Gujarati and Hindi by Sthapati Prabhashankar O. Sompura (Ahmedabad: B. P. Sompura & Bros., 1967).

6 S. S. Janaki, ed., *Śiva Temple Worship in Kerala* (Madras: The Kuppaswamy Shastri Research Institute, 1988), 11.

In a significant find, a casket of copper with a lid fashioned in the shape of a tortoise was excavated by the Archaeological Survey of India from the foundation of a temple in Gudnapur, in the Uttara Kannada district of Karnataka.⁷ It is assigned to the fifth or sixth century CE. It contained nine semi-precious stones and a gold-inlaid stud. Even today, the practice of putting nine jewels underneath a metal tortoise under the foundation of a building for Vāstu worship continues in western India, including Mumbai.

Kūrma-silā slabs forming the central foundation stones of buildings along with the guardians of space, the *dikpālas*, and lotus have been found in Java, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and other countries.⁸ A ninth-century metal image, for example, of Brahmā as a *dikpāla* (of the sky's zenith), along with Indra, Agni, and others, was found in a Buddhist monastery in Sri Lanka. It is now in the Metropolitan Museum, New York. Significantly, this Brahmā stands on a tortoise.

In Southeast Asia, the tortoise has been used to support Buddhist pillars. A Meru water chute (*praṇāla*) of the fourteenth century from Indonesia is supported on the back of a tortoise.⁹ Tortoise figures have also been discovered in the foundation deposits at some of the Cham sites in Viet Nam.

Kūrma as a support of Mount Kailāsa is represented in a metal sculpture from the seventeenth century (Nāyaka period), now in the National Museum, Delhi.¹⁰ The demon king Rāvaṇa is shown shaking Kailāsa, which is topped by Śiva's bull carrying a vessel to hold a *liṅga*. Though B. N. Sharma interprets this tortoise as the *Kūrma avatāra* of Viṣṇu, I suggest that it is the *ādi-kūrma*, or universal form of *kūrma*, that supports the mountain here. An exquisitely carved temple of Viṣṇu in ivory, now in the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, is supported by a *kūrma*. Similarly, temple *rathas* are often supported by a *kūrma*. In these examples, it is not *Kūrma avatāra* of Viṣṇu, but *kūrma* as *ādi-kūrma* that is shown as a solid support (*ādhāra*). We must remember that in different eons or time periods, Viṣṇu assumes different forms – Matsya (the fish), Varāha (the boar), *Kūrma*, and so on – for the specific purpose of saving humanity and restoring order. In the *Kūrma avatāra* the specific purpose is to support and steady Mount Mandara, which is used as a rod for churning the Ocean of Milk (as we will see below). Viṣṇu does not incarnate to support Mount Kailāsa or the temple *rathas*. The *kūrma* that supports these objects is *ādi-kūrma*. Just as not every fish or boar represents Viṣṇu, so not every tortoise is Viṣṇu's *avatāra*.

In south Indian temples, the marriage hall (*kalyāṇa-maṇḍapa*), where the marriage of divinities is performed during annual festivals, is supported on the back of a tortoise. Such representations are possibly associated with the ideas of permanence and solidity. At the Varadarāja Perumal in Kanchipuram a *kalyāṇa-maṇḍapa* was added under the Vijayanagara king Kṛṣṇadeva Rāya (1509–1530). Joanna Williams has aptly pointed out that in the benedictory verse recited at weddings, the *nidhis*, or jew-

7 “Explorations and Excavations,” *Indian Archaeology: A Review* (1990–91): 32, pl. 29-B.

8 Debala Mitra, “Observations on Some Carved Slabs and Deposit-Boxes in Museum Pusat, Jakarta,” in *Indian Studies: Essays Presented in Memory of Prof. Niharranjan Ray*, ed. Amita Ray, H. Sanyal, and S. C. Ray (Delhi: Caxton, 1984), 44–49.

9 Jakarta Museum, acc. no. 4535.

10 B. N. Sharma, “Rāvaṇānugrahamūrti: A Unique Bronze in the National Museum, New Delhi,” in *Madhu: Recent Researches in Indian Archaeology and Art History*, Sbrī M. N. Deshpande Festschrift, ed. M. S. Nagaraja Rao (Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, 1981), 267–68.

els, which are obtained at the time of Churning, bless the wedding couple.¹¹ The pot carrying the Tulasī plant, one of the treasures that emerged from the Churning in some versions, is supported by the tortoise in the Goa and Karnataka regions.

It is interesting to note that lamp-stands (*dīpa-stambhas*) in the temple courtyards of Kerala and Karnataka in south India have a tortoise as the base of their shaft (fig. 2). Even brass lamps for *ārati* (waving lights before an image) represent a tortoise in Karnataka (fig. 3). The lighting of lamps has a sacred function, and the depiction of a tortoise at the base gives firmness to the lamp. The tortoise at the base of the lamp may also express the idea of *akhaṇḍa*, or perpetual light, which does not flicker and keeps on burning. One is reminded of the 'Fire Turtle' of Bali. J.-Ph. Vogel observes:

The temple – either a Meru, with a high pagoda-like roof, or a *padmāsana* dedicated to the Sun-god – is supposed to rest on a tortoise whose head, four legs, and tail are shown emerging, as it were, from the basement of the building. This animal represents the 'Fire Tortoise' called Kūr-māgni, Bedawang Gni, or Bedawang Nala (Skt. *anala*) on which the earth is supposed to rest.¹²

S. A. Dange adds that Badwāgni or Badwānala is Sanskrit *vaḍavāgni*, the submarine fire.¹³

The Meru Śrī Yantras made in present times of metal and crystal rest on the back of a tortoise (fig. 4). The Śrī Yantra is considered to be 'a condensed image of the whole of the creation', and as Meru it is the centre of the universe. Kūrma thus supports the cosmic axis.

During the Kalaśa ceremony, performed in south Indian temples, the priests sit on wooden tortoise platforms (*kūrma-pīṭhas*). Preferably made of *udumbara* wood, the platforms are of oval shape and feature the face and feet of a tortoise.¹⁴ Among the Nambudiri Brahmins of Kerala, tortoise seats (*kūrmāsanas*) are used for devotional purposes and for bridal couples during the wedding ceremony.¹⁵ Some wooden seats are a meter across for a holy man to sit on to meditate.

In Tantric Yoga, the Kuṇḍalinī *śakti* (psychic energy), believed to lie dormant in each individual, is said to rest on *kūrma* at the Mūlādhāra *cakra*, the subtle centre of the human body at the base of the spine. The spinal column is identified with Mount Meru, the cosmic axis. Joanna Williams refers to the 'reading of the macrocosmic event as an image of the microcosm, the human consciousness . . . The spirit rises along an inner psychological axis toward enlightenment or release.'¹⁶

11 Joanna Williams, "The Churning of the Ocean of Milk: Myth, Image, and Ecology," in *Indigenous Vision*, ed. Geeti Sen (New Delhi: India International Centre, 1992), 153.

12 J.-Ph. Vogel, *Indian Serpent-Lore* (Reprint, Delhi: Indological Book House, 1972), 284.

13 S. A. Dange, *Legends in the Mahābhārata* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1969), 264.

14 Described in a Tamil work cited in T. A. Gopinatha Rao, *Elements of Hindu Iconography* (Reprint, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1985), vol. 1, pt. 1, 20.

15 S. T. Moses, "Turtle Lore," *Quarterly Journal of the Mythic Society* 39, 2 (October 1948): 123.

16 Williams, "Churning of the Ocean of Milk," 148; Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1958), 234–35. See also Philip Rawson, *The Art of Tantra* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 167–68.

The Tortoise as a *Vāhana* (Mount)

The tortoise is associated with the river goddess Yamunā as her mount, and since the fifth century CE personified sculptured images of Yamunā at the entrance of shrines stand on a tortoise. The tortoise is also a mount of the serpent Ananta or Śeṣa, and of the Planet Śani in some Jaina versions. In some folk paintings Rāhu is seen riding a tortoise. The Jaina *yakṣas* Ajita, Kinnara, Pārśva (Śvetāmbara), and Dharaṇendra (Digāmbara) and the *yakṣīs* Mahākālī, Padmāvātī (in some instances), and Vidyādevī Gāndharī all have a tortoise as a *vāhana*, whereas the tortoise is a cognizance (*lāñchana*) of Muni Suvrata, the twentieth Tīrthaṅkara.¹⁷

The Tortoise in front of Nandi in Śiva Temples

We must remember that the tortoise in front of Nandi, Śiva's bull, is not seen in early temples, for example the Gupta temples or the Khajuraho temples of the tenth to the eleventh century. Such representations are seen only after the fifteenth century, in the regions of Gujarat, Maharashtra (fig. 5), Karnataka, and Goa. Among the various interpretations of the animal's meaning in those later contexts, there is one that suggests that the *kūrma* 'carries the devotee's soul to Śiva'.¹⁸ There is also a common folk belief that the space between Nandi and Śiva-liṅga should not be traversed by devotees, and so a solid tortoise is placed in front of Nandi.

In this connection I would like to draw attention to a sculpture of the eleventh or twelfth century from Andhra Pradesh, which depicts the Churning of the Ocean (fig. 6). It possibly represents the churning staff as a *liṅga*, for Nandi is shown in the lower left of the panel. The gods and demons are churning the Ocean, which is represented in the form of a *kalaśa*. One wonders whether such depictions are precursors to representations of *kūrma* in front of Nandi.

THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF KŪRMA IN THE CHURNING OF THE OCEAN

Thanks to his ability to support enormous weight on his shell, Kūrma plays a pivotal role in the cosmogonic myth of the Churning of the Ocean, called Samudra Manthana or Amṛta Manthana.¹⁹ There are many versions of this myth: it is found in the *Mahābhārata* (Ādi Parva, XVII–XIX); the *Rāmāyaṇa* (I. 45), the *Matsya Purāṇa* (ch. 249), the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* (I, 9), the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (canto 8, ch. 5–12),

17 B. C. Bhattacharya, *The Jaina Iconography*, 2nd rev. ed. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1974), 56, 74, 77, 83, 96, 129. In addition, Marutinandan P. Tiwari, *Khajuraho ka Jaina Puratattva* (Khajuraho: Sahu Shanti Prasad Jaina Kala Sangrahalaya, 1987) provides tables on the iconography of the Tīrthaṅkaras, *yakṣas*, *yakṣīs*, and Vidyādevīs.

18 Williams, "Churning of the Ocean of Milk," 151. Gopinatha Rao, *Elements*, vol. I, pt. I, 43, pl. D, illustrates a stone sculptural relief of Viṣṇu as Kacchapa paying homage to the *liṅga* in the shrine called Kacchapeśvara at Kanchi. But this is not an illustration of a tortoise in front of Nandi.

19 V. M. Bedekar, "The Churning of the Ocean," in *Vaisnavism in Indian Arts and Culture*, ed. Ratan Parimoo (New Delhi: Books & Books, 1987); V. M. Bedekar, "The Legend of the Churning of the Ocean in the Epics and the Purāṇas: A Comparative Study," *Purāṇa* 9, 1 (1967): 7–61; Williams, "Churning of the Ocean of Milk," 145–55.

the *Agni Purāṇa* (ch. 3), *Padma* (VI. 25), and other *purāṇas*. It is a secondary creation myth, which relates how various treasures are churned out of the Ocean. It is interesting to note that the *Amṛta Manthana* was the first play written by god Brahmā in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* of Bharata Muni, which when staged pleased both the gods and demons, as they could see their own actions.

Salient Features of the Myth

Because of the curse of the sage Durvāsā, Indra, king of the gods, lost prosperity and was abandoned by Lakṣmī, goddess of wealth. The gods became powerless and exhausted. They required an elixir to regain their strength. Viṣṇu and Brahmā advised them to call a truce with the *asuras* (demons) and together churn the Ocean of Milk to obtain *amṛta*. They were advised to use as their churning rod Mount Mandara, a huge mountain, and to use the snake Vāsuki as a rope to tie around the mountain. The gods and *asuras* undertook different means to bring the heavy mountain to the Ocean. In the epic *Mahābhārata*, we read that when the mountain was sinking in the waters, the gods and demons approached the ‘king of tortoises’, Kūrma-Rājan (not here identified with Viṣṇu), to support Mount Mandara. Kūrma in the myth is one million miles wide. He is called ‘Akūpāra’, meaning boundless and unlimited.

But in the *Purāṇas*, it is Viṣṇu who assumes the form of a giant turtle to support the mountain, not the ‘king of tortoises’ as in the *Mahābhārata* story. In the mythology of the *purāṇas*, Kūrma is elevated to an incarnation of Viṣṇu.²⁰

The Churning of the Ocean in Sculpture

It is interesting to note that sculptures at various temple sites represent Mount Mandara as a long staff placed on the back of Kūrma. At several sites the churning staff is placed in a vessel (*kalaśa*). Significantly, *kalaśa* is the name of the ocean in the *Mahābhārata*,²¹ so the *kalaśa* represents the Ocean. The *devas* and *asuras* come together to churn the Ocean. The event is a ‘collaboration of the opposites’, as Joanna Williams has pointed out.

Scenes of this collaboration of opposites are placed on the door or *torāṇa* lintel of both religious and secular monuments, as given below. One of the earliest visual representations of the Churning of the Ocean is seen on a *torāṇa* lintel at Pawaya near Gwalior, dated to about CE 410. Slightly later in date (about CE 440) is a Samudra Manthana depicted on the entrance of Udayagiri Cave 19, near Vidisha, Madhya Pradesh. In the sixth century the theme was represented in the cave at Badami near Dharwad. Small-scale representations of Samudra Manthana are also seen on pillars, ceilings, and the *narathara* row of the plinth depicting figural carvings at many temple sites in India, such as Pattadakal in Karnataka (eighth century) and Jagat and Kiradu in Rajasthan (tenth and eleventh centuries).

An eighth-century deification of Kūrma has been found at Chitod, Rajasthan, on the wall of the Kālikā Mātā Mandira, originally a Sūrya temple. Here Kūrma is placed on a lotus pedestal. Lakṣmī

20 Suvira Jaiswal, *The Origin and Development of Vaiṣṇavism: Vaiṣṇavism from 200 BC to AD 500*, 2nd rev. ed. (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1981), 144.

21 Dange, *Legends in the Mahābhārata*, 248.

has just emerged from the Ocean and is shown on top of the churning staff, i.e. Mount Mandara. The staff is placed in the *kalāśa*, which represents the Ocean. Perhaps slightly earlier in date is a sculptural relief now in the Gurukul Kangari Museum, Hardwar, which also shows the churning staff in the *kalāśa* on Kūrma's back.²² V. S. Agrawala appreciates 'the force and dynamic application of power as appropriate to the occasion of the churning of the ocean' in the figures of eight *devas* and one *asura*. At Gadhwa near Allahabad, a ninth-century Kūrma is treated as an incarnation of Viṣṇu and placed along with the other nine *avatāras*. The Gadhwa sculpture also represents Mount Mandara in the form of a long staff placed in a *kalāśa*, which is supported by a huge Kūrma (fig. 7).

Kūrma *avatāra* is depicted along with other *avatāras* in a tenth-century lintel from Khajuraho, now in that site's Archaeological Museum (fig. 8). The scene represents the goddess Lakṣmī seated on Kūrma, supported by the Dig Gajas, the Elephants of the Quarters. The churning is in progress, as an *asura* and *deva* are pulling the churning rod. We are reminded of the invocatory verse in the Khajuraho inscription of the Lakṣmaṇa (Vaikuṅṭha) temple, consecrated in CE 954: 'May god protect you, on whose famous breast (*vakṣasthala*), broad like the wall of the Añjana mountain, covered with drops of water so that it appeared like the star-covered sky . . . fell, withdrawn from all other inhabitants of heaven, many glances of Lakṣmī, agitated with the confusion at the proximity of the Mandara mountain!'²³ The artist has shown a dotted design on the body of the turtle, possibly implying the drops of water mentioned in the inscription.

A rare sculptural depiction of Samudra Manthana can be found at Kālañjar, a fortress town and pilgrimage centre about sixty-five kilometers from Khajuraho. A drawing based on the sculptural relief (fig. 9) was made by Lt. F. C. Maisey, who visited Kālañjar in 1847.²⁴ Mount Mandara, in the form of a rod, is shown with a human face while the demon king Bali holds the head of the snake Vāsuki. Behind him are the sage Śukrācārya and others. Above the human-faced mountain is a rare depiction of the bird Garuḍa, who along with Viṣṇu transported the heavy mountain to the sea (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* canto 8, ch. 6) after the effort of the *devas* and *asuras* had failed. Here too the churning staff is placed in a *kalāśa* (vessel).

The theme was quite a favourite in this region and was treated in a three-act drama called *Samudra-Manthana*, which was staged at Kālañjar.²⁵ Written by Vatsarāja, the poet-minister of the Candella king Paramardi (CE 1163–1203), the play features the characters Viṣṇu (Vaikuṅṭha), Indra, Kubera, Brahmā, Śiva, Bali, the *dikpālas*, Lakṣmī, Samudra, Garuḍa, and others.

The longest relief depicting the Churning of the Ocean is seen, not in India, but at Angkor Wat, Cambodia, on a Viṣṇu temple from the early twelfth century. It is 48.7 meters long. The entire southern half of the rear of the gallery surrounding the temple is devoted to the Churning. The majestic relief shares many features with the version of the myth in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (canto 8, ch. 5–7). There are ninety-two *asuras* on the left and eighty-eight *devas* on the right in the relief. The mountain, shown as a pillar, resembles a *liṅga* and is supported on the back of Kūrma, who wears a crown.

22 V. S. Agrawala, *Studies in Indian Art* (Varanasi: Vishwavidyalaya Prakashan, 1965), 267–68.

23 *Epigraphia Indica* 1 (1892; ASI reprint 1983), 125, 130.

24 F. C. Maisey, "Description of the Antiquities of Kalinjar," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 17, 1 (1848).

25 *Samudra-Manthana*, in *Rupaṣatakam: A Collection of Six Dramas of Vatsarāja*, Gaekwad's Oriental Series, No. 8 (Baroda, 1918).

Numerous water creatures that were disturbed by the vigorous Churning (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* canto 8, ch. 7, v. 12–13) are depicted. Four-armed Viṣṇu, also seen in the middle of the pillar-like mountain, guides the operation. At the top, Indra is shown steadying the mountain. (Indra is seen in this role in some other Indian sculptural representations of the Churning scene, as for instance in a tenth-century depiction at Badoh-Pathari near Bhopal in central India; however, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* mentions not Indra in this role, but the thousand-armed Viṣṇu himself steadying the mountain.) Numerous *apsarās* that emerged from the Ocean, as described in the text, are flying above. The Angkor Wat artist has also introduced the *Rāmāyaṇa* characters Hanuman, on the side of the *devas* holding the tail of Vāsuki, and the *asura* king Rāvaṇa, holding the five-hooded head of the serpent. Since these two are not found in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the artist must have used another version (or versions) of the story. The main version, however, appears in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. At thirteenth-century Bayon in Angkor Thom, Mount Mandara in the form of a column rests on the back of Kūrma. The *devas* and *asuras* are portrayed three-dimensionally pulling the snake Vāsuki at the entrance of the temple.

The Churning of the Ocean in Painting

In the seventeenth-century Bundela structure at Orchha, nineteen kilometers from Jhansi on the Betwa River, the Samudra Manthana scene is depicted on the door (fig. 10), reminding us of ‘the collaboration of the opposites’ at the entrance of Cave 19 at Udayagiri (fifth century CE).

There are several representations of the Churning of the Ocean in miniature paintings. An interesting book of pictures from Nepal called *Kalāpustaka*, dated circa 1600, illustrates Kūrma in the Samudra Manthana scene based on the story in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.²⁶ A painting from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* series from Mewar, now in the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, illustrates the effort by the gods and *asuras* to transport the heavy Mount Mandara before the Churning begins. As the mountain needs a solid support to remain steady in the Ocean when it is rotated, Viṣṇu assumes the form of Kūrma to support the mountain. A painting from Mandi, dated CE 1790, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, illustrates the end result, the fruit, of churning. The laborious task of churning has been carried out and the jewels have been obtained. The theme is popular in the Kalighat and Company schools of paintings.

The theme of Samudra Manthana continues to be depicted in popular art on Gañjifā playing cards. One eighteenth-century card just 8.3 centimeters in diameter from Sheopur, Madhya Pradesh, shows Lakṣmī and Viṣṇu seated on a lotus above Mount Mandara, which is supported by Kūrma.²⁷ There are several Kūrma cards in the Daśāvātāra sets from various regions of India.

26 Pratapaditya Pal, “A *Kalāpustaka* from Nepal,” *Bulletin of the American Academy of Benares* 1 (Nov. 1967): fig. 51. The *Kalāpustaka* is in the collection of the Cambridge University Library (AA 864).

27 This playing card is in the collection of Kishor Gordhandas of Mumbai, who has a rich collection of Gañjifā cards. For Kūrma cards, see Sarla Chopra, *Ganjifa: The Playing Cards of India in Bharat Kala Bhavan* (Varanasi: Banaras Hindu University, 1999).

The Central Perforation or Protuberance on the Back of the Tortoise

At Markandi in Maharashtra, an eleventh-century Kūrma in his animal form as an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu is portrayed on a stone pedestal (*pīṭha*) (fig. 11). There may have been an arrangement for ritual water to flow here, as on another pedestal below. Vishnu's emblem, the mace (*gadā*), is placed on the side. Significantly, there is a perforation on the back of the Kūrma which must have held a pole to support the mountain, as seen in the sculpture at Gadhwā (fig. 7).

Other noteworthy examples include the central protuberance on the backs of metal tortoises, as well as the circles drawn on the backs of tortoises in Madla tribal paintings from Madhya Pradesh. These recall the central pole or axis in the Churning of the Ocean myth.

We are reminded of the instructions in medieval texts which mention that a tortoise image with Mount Mandara was to be placed in a copper vessel full of ghee and to be donated on the day of Kūrma *dvādaśī* (the twelfth day of the lunar month of Pauṣa, in January) in order to gain merit.²⁸ This indicates that figures of the tortoise supporting the mountain or with a central protuberance were made for ritual purposes and associated with the Kūrma *avatāra* of Viṣṇu.

Similarly, a brass tortoise with a lotus embossed in the centre of its back (fig. 12) is generally placed in the centre of a hall (*maṇḍapa*) or in the open space in front of temples at Kolhapur in Maharashtra. At Jejuri near Pune, a colossal brass turtle carved in low relief faces the Khaṇḍobā temple. It is so large that devotees sit, rest, and pray on it (fig. 13). The centre of this turtle is emphasized by an embossed lotus design, which is offered flowers. When I visited the Khaṇḍobā temple, turmeric powder (*balḍī*) was sprayed everywhere. The temples at Gokarn, as Joanna Williams notes,²⁹ have tortoises roughly 10.7 and 5.5 meters in diameter carved in low relief on the floor so that the worshipper stands on or near the head, facing the shrine.

KŪRMA-SHAPED TANKS

Water imagery often accompanies representations of *kūrma*, and not only in scenes of the Churning of the Ocean of Milk. At Nagarjunakonda, on the Krishna River in Andhra Pradesh, a turtle-shaped brick tank (*kuṇḍa*) from the third century CE was found by the Archaeological Survey of India.³⁰ This stepped tank was connected by an underground drain on either side to two square wells or soak-pits, built of brick in two tiers. The head of Kūrma projects towards the west. The tank is situated in the fortified area; nearby is a site supposedly for Aśvamedha *yajña* where 'animal-bones, presumably of a horse and a goat' were found. The Ikṣvāku kings, who ruled over the region, performed Vedic sacrifices. This tank, as Shobhana Gokhale suggests, could have been for ceremonial use, as for the *Avabhṛtha snāna*, the final purificatory bath which the Yajamāna and his wife had after the rite.³¹ Fire-altars (*yajña*

28 P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmasastra: Ancient and Medieval Religious and Civil Law in India* (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1962–75), 5:287.

29 Williams, "Churning of the Ocean of Milk," 155.

30 *Indian Archaeology, A Review* (1956–57): 37, pl. 55.

31 Dr. Shobhana Gokhale, personal communication.

kuṇḍas) in the shape of a *kūrma* are also mentioned in the *Baudhāyana Śrauta Sūtra* (IX, 1–2). Tortoise-shaped *yajña kuṇḍas* are reported in the Poona region of Maharashtra.³²

KŪRMA AS THE CREATOR

As a story of origins, the Churning of the Ocean of Milk is about the creation of the world. Yet Kūrma is associated with creation in earlier contexts as well. In Vedic mythology the creator god Prajāpati assumed the form of *kūrma* to create offspring. Kaśyapa (Kacchapa), the tortoise, is mentioned as the Creator in the *Atharva Veda* (8.5.14). In the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (VII, 5, 6), it is said: ‘having assumed the form of *kūrma*, Prajāpati brought forth all creatures . . . What he created, he made; and as he made he is called Kūrma. And Kūrma being the same as Kaśyapa, all the creatures are descended from Kaśyapa. This tortoise is the same as the yonder sun.’ In the *Vājasaneyi Samhitā* (13, 31), Kaśyapa is called the Lord of the Waters. Thus the tortoise symbolizes both the sun and the waters and is the Lord of Creation in Vedic mythology.³³ Because of its shape, the tortoise is regarded as a symbol of the three worlds in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (VII, 5, 1, 2). Its lower shell is this terrestrial world and its upper shell the sky; in between is the atmosphere. This concept is also found in Chinese cosmology.³⁴

To Prajāpati, who in the form of a tortoise creates living beings, the earth was promised by Viśvakarmā.³⁵ The tortoise, as a husband, lay with the representative of the Earth goddess.³⁶ The Earth goddess is considered to be the wife of the tortoise. This recalls a second-century BCE sculptural depiction at Sanchi of the tortoise and a female figure, possibly the Earth goddess, holding lotus flowers (fig. 14). Her sitting posture resembles the birth-giving *uttānapāda* posture. A lotus rhizome emerges from her navel, symbolizing the creation of plant life. The name Kāśyapī is synonymous with the Earth Goddess (Bhū) in the fifth-century CE *Amarakośa* (II, 2, 1.38).

TORTOISE AMULETS

The turtle and tortoise are associated with longevity in South Asian cultures. Some species live for more than two hundred years. Thus amulets representing tortoises are believed to bestow good health and long life. There is evidence of tortoise amulets from prehistoric times; among the earliest specimens are those excavated from the Chalcolithic site (1700–1300 BCE) at Prakash, on the banks of the river Tapti in western India.³⁷ Tortoise beads have also been excavated from early historic sites at

32 Hukam Chand Patyal, “Tortoise in Mythology and Ritual,” *East and West* 45, 1–4 (1995): 106. See also S. T. Moses, “Turtle Lore,” *Quarterly Journal of the Mythic Society* 39, 2 (1948).

33 Patyal, “Tortoise in Mythology and Ritual.”

34 Sarah Allan, *The Shape of the Turtle: Myth, Art, and Cosmos in Early China* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1991).

35 *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* VIII, 21, 10; *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* VII, 4, 35 and VII, 5, 1, 5. A. K. Coomaraswamy, *Yakṣas* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1971), 53; Jaiswal, *Origin and Development of Vaiṣṇavism*, 143; Gonda, *Aspects of Early Viṣṇuism*, 118.

36 Gonda, *Aspects of Early Viṣṇuism*, 127; Dange, *Legends in the Mahābhārata*, 260.

37 *Ancient India* 20 (1964) and 21 (1965): 110, figs. 37, 31.

Ujjain, Ter, Bhokardan, Taxila, Kausambi, and Rajghat. The Bharat Kala Bhavan collection contains twenty-five tortoise-shaped beads made out of carnelian, garnet, stone, clay, and other materials.³⁸

Sculptures of goblins (*gaṇas*) wearing tortoise amulets from the fifth century onwards have been found at Nachna, Vidisha (in central India), and Elephanta (near Mumbai). Medieval images of Gaṇeśa and Kārttikeya from Orissa wear tortoise amulets as well. An interesting sculpture originally from Orissa, now in the British Museum, shows Gaṇeśa wearing a necklace of tortoise amulets (fig. 15). A Kārttikeya from Orissa, now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, also wears a tortoise amulet, as do other images of this deity *in situ* in Orissan temples. This is significant in the context of the beach at Gabhirmatha on Orissa's coast: in this well-known nesting site thousands of Olive Ridley turtles lay their eggs each winter. Olive Ridley turtles live for one hundred years.

There is a remarkable brass frame in the shape of a tortoise enclosing a Tamil manuscript from the eighteenth century, now in the collection of the British Library, London.³⁹ The tortoise's characteristically long life may have influenced the shape of this unique manuscript holder, which was intended to preserve the manuscript for a long time. Everyday objects such as coconut scrapers and flower holders have also been made in the shape of a tortoise and are seen in traditional homes throughout India. Just as tortoise amulets express the hope that the reptile's longevity may be passed on to the human wearer, so these tortoise motifs suggest a wish to make these objects long-lasting.

KŪRMA AS A MODEL FOR THE SELF-CONTROLLED MAN

The ability of the tortoise to withdraw its limbs within its shell makes the tortoise a model for the self-restrained man – one who has command over his senses (*indriyas*) and withdraws from sense objects. This symbolism can be found in numerous sources, including the Śānti Parva (247, 4) of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* (36, 33ff). A well-known verse in the *Bhagavad Gītā* (II, 58) talks of the *sthitaprajña* man, whose understanding is secure and who controls his senses. The eleventh-century *Kūrma Śatakas* ascribed to King Bhojadeva also emphasize this concept: the *kūrma* withdraws its limbs within its shell (v. 22); it is an instance of those who are steady and firm (v. 24); 'Look at a *muni* and a *kacchapa*, and see their determination' (v. 30).

THE TORTOISE IN TRIBAL AND NON-BRAHMANICAL COMMUNITIES

The tortoise plays a role in the creation myths of the numerous Indian tribal groups. Many of the Ādivāsī (aboriginal) communities claim the tortoise as their ancestor, along with the serpent. It is a totem of many tribes in central India and of all the tribes of Bastar. In North India, the Kacchīs and Kacchawāhā Rajputs trace their names to *kacchapa*, the word for tortoise. The Kurmis relate their name to

38 Kamal Giri, "Animal and Bird Beads," *Chhavi-2: Rai Krishnadasa Felicitation Volume* (Banaras: Bharat Kala Bhavan, 1981), 314–16.

39 J. P. Losty, *The Art of the Book in India* (London: British Library, 1982), 8.

Kūrma.⁴⁰ Combs shaped like tortoises recall a popular tribal myth of the Madias of Madhya Pradesh, who worship the tortoise because they believe it saved life on earth.⁴¹

The deity Dharma or Dharmathākur is worshipped in the shape of a tortoise or a simple aniconic stone by low-caste people such as the Doms in many districts of Bengal, for example Purulia, Birbhum, Bankura, Midnapore, Burdwan, Hooghly, Howrah, and the Twenty-four Parganas.⁴² The name Dharma is derived from the Austric *durom* or *duram*, meaning tortoise. The antiquity of the cult can be traced to the tenth or eleventh century, according to D. C. Sircar.⁴³ It is essentially a non-Brahmanical cult whose daily worship consists of oiling and bathing the tortoise-shaped or non-iconic stone. Significantly, the annual Dharma *mela*, which draws thousands of participants, takes place on the day of Vaiśākha Pūrṇimā (the full moon) in the month of May; this is also the day of Śākyamuni Buddha's birth as well as of Kūrma Jayantī, as marked in present-day Vikrama Samvat calendars. Thus some sort of association of Dharma with the Kūrma of Brahmanical religion and with Buddha is suggested by the common day of celebration. A century ago Haraprasad Shasti proposed a Buddhist origin of the Dharma cult,⁴⁴ but his hypothesis is still debated by scholars. It is worth noting that in an earlier Kūrma Jayantī tradition, recorded in Sanskrit texts of the twelfth century, a different day marked Viṣṇu's incarnation as Kūrma to aid the process of the Churning of the Ocean. This was the twelfth day of the bright half of the lunar month of Pauṣa (January). Annually on this day a tortoise image supporting Mount Mandara was to be donated to the Brāhmaṇas.⁴⁵ So it is very likely that the non-Brahmanical Dharma cult of the Bengal region was largely instrumental in shifting the date of the Kūrma anniversary from the month of Pauṣa (January) to the day of Buddha's birth on the Vaiśākha full moon (in May).

KŪRMA AND VIṢṆU

The highest honour is paid to Kūrma by representing him as Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa at Khajuraho.⁴⁶ He is seated in *padmāsana*, the lotus posture, his lower hands making the *dhyāna* gesture, and he holds a mace and a discus. As a source of the Universe, Kūrma as Nārāyaṇa gives a discourse to Nārada and other sages on ultimate knowledge. Praying to Kūrma, the sages in the *Kūrma Purāṇa* (II, ch. 44, v. 67 ff) address him as the Supreme Being Nārāyaṇa, Knower of Yoga, Yogeśvara. The *Agni Purāṇa* (ch. 272, v. 19) and the *Matsya Purāṇa* (ch. 53, v. 46–47) also mention the discourse of Viṣṇu in the form of a tortoise to Nārada and other sages.

40 W. Crooke, *An Introduction to the Popular Religion and Folklore of Northern India* (Allahabad, 1894; reprint, Whitefish, Mont.: Kessinger Publishing, 1994), 282.

41 Niranjan Mahavar, "Culture through Combs," *India Today*, 31 August 1994.

42 Rita Banerjee, "The Ideology of a Peripheral Religious Cult and the Subaltern Quest for Identity: A Study of the Rites of Dharmathākur in West Bengal," *Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences* 10, 2 (Winter 2003): 71–81; Jawahar Sircar, "The Aniconic Cult of Dharma in Bengal," in *Gods Beyond Temples*, ed. Harsha V. Dehejia (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2006), 241–46.

43 D. C. Sircar, *Studies in the Religious Life of Ancient and Medieval India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1971), 200.

44 Haraprasad Sastri, "Discovery of Living Buddhism in Bengal," *The Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta* 1, pt. 1, 2 (1895); Sircar, "The Aniconic Cult of Dharma," 244.

45 Kane, *History of Dharmasastra*, 5: 287.

46 Devangana Desai, *The Religious Imagery of Khajuraho* (Mumbai: Franco-Indian Research, 1996), 117–18, fig. 118.

Although the tortoise was deified in the Purāṇas as an incarnation of Viṣṇu from about the fourth century onwards, and its images in Daśāvatāra sets are found in many regions of India, it is surprising that the Kūrma incarnation has almost no temples dedicated to it, except the one in Andhra Pradesh at Śhrī Kūrmam, twelve miles east of Shrikakulam, believed to be from the twelfth century.⁴⁷

CONCLUSION

Multiple facets of the tortoise are reflected in Indian culture. It is recognized in Vedic texts as the Lord of Creation. Its pivotal role in the Churning of the Ocean myth is well known in several texts and in visual renderings. It is revered as an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu in the Purāṇas, and its images are found along with those of other *avatāras* of Viṣṇu. Present-day metal tortoises (placed in *mandapas* or in front of shrines) marked with a central protuberance recall the central pole symbolizing Mount Mandara (Meru) used in the Churning of the Ocean. The tortoise is honoured in the eleventh-century poems the *Kūrma Śatakas*, especially made to be inscribed in stone by the scholar-emperor Paramāra Bhojadeva of central India. These poems emphasize the mythic role of the tortoise as *dharaṇi-dhara*, supporter of the earth. The importance of the tortoise in the Vāstu texts and in actual practice is seen in its placement in the foundations of buildings in the form of *kūrma-śilā*. Its magico-protective function is seen in amulets and beads dating as far back as 1700 BCE. It supports the *dīpa-stambhas*, or lamp-stands, in the Kerala and Karnataka regions. Its presence in front of Nandi is seen in the post-fifteenth-century Śiva temples of Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Gujarat, and some areas of Rajasthan. Finally, Kūrma is a symbol of the self-controlled man in various religious texts. We end with a verse from the *Bhagavad Gītā* (II, 58) recited by many Indians daily: ‘When, like the *kūrma* (tortoise) drawing in its limbs from every side, a man draws his senses from their objects, his understanding is secure.’

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47 N. Ramesan, *Temples and Legends of Andhra Pradesh* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1962), 149ff.