

MEMOIRS OF THE
ARCHÆOLOGICAL SURVEY OF INDIA

No. 2.

Varieties of the Vishṇu Image

BY

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CALCUTTA
SUPERINTENDENT GOVERNMENT PRINTING, INDIA
1920

Price 12 annas.

**Agents for the Sale of Books published by the
Superintendent of Government Printing, India, Calcutta.**

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Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 68-74, Carter Lane, E.C., and 25, Museum Street, London, W.C.
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VARIETIES OF THE VISHṆU IMAGE.

WHAT are commonly known as "Vishṇu images" are, as everybody is aware, extremely common in this country, and one's first general impression of them is apt to be one of almost tiring uniformity. The figure itself is generally treated more or less schematically, with little regard to modelling on naturalistic lines in many cases, and the four attributes displayed by the several hands do not strike the casual observer as being of any very special interest. We all know that Vishṇu is characterised by his mace, his lotus, his conch and his wheel (discus), or think we do, and when we see a four-armed image with these attributes we call it *Vishṇu* and pass on. In reality, however, the matter is much more complicated than at first appears. Some years ago I wrote a pamphlet in Bengali entitled *Vishṇu-mūrti-parichaya*, "The Identification of Vishṇu Images," published by the well-known Bengali literary society called the *Baṅgīya Sāhitya Parishad*, in which I set forth that according to the records of the Purāṇas and other texts, "Vishṇu" is but a general term for what in reality constitute a considerable variety of different figures, to each of which a different name attaches. These varying names represent the Deity in his several divergent aspects, which are sculpturally differentiated each from each according to the distribution of his attributes between his several hands. Thus where the lower right hand holds the attribute *a*, and the upper right holds *b*, while the upper and lower left hands hold *c* and *d* respectively, the image represents one aspect of the god, quite different from the figure represented by an identical sculpture in which the order of these attributes is changed. It is therefore obligatory upon any one who wishes to gain a real knowledge of this important branch of Hindu iconography, or who aspires to interpret these images precisely as they were conceived and understood alike by those who ordered and by those who fashioned them, to pay particular heed to these divergencies as set forth in the ancient texts called *sādhana*s. To call all these figures "Vishṇu" straight away is but a rough-and-ready method of procedure, little compatible with scholarship.

The first division of the subject with which I purpose to deal is the group in which twenty-four forms of the divinity are enumerated, the so-called *chatur-vimśati-mūrtis*. Of these we have three descriptive texts, (1) the *Agnipurāṇa* (chapter 48), (2) the *Padmapurāṇa* (chapter 78), and (3) the *Chaturvarga Chintāmaṇi* of Hēmādri, the well-known writer on Hindu Law in the XIIIth century. Unfortunately only the first of these authorities names all twenty-four of the types; the second enumerating only 21, and Hēmādri only 23, presumably owing to corruptions or omissions in the text, which should be collated from several manuscripts for final certainty. It is advisable to quote the *Agnipurāṇa* text at length before discussing them.

The *Agnipurāṇa* reads; ¹

ओं रूपः केशवः पद्म-शंख-चक्र-गदाधरः ।	तेन गदी शंख-चक्री वासुदेवोऽव्यभृज्जगत् ।
नारायणः शंख-पद्म-गदाचक्री प्रदक्षिणम् ॥ १ ॥	संकर्षणो गदी शंखी पद्मी चक्री च पातु वः ॥ ७ ॥
ततो गदी माधवोऽरि-शंख-पद्मी नमामि तम् ।	गदी चक्री शंख-पद्मी प्रद्युम्नः पद्मभृत् प्रभुः ।
चक्र-कौमोदकी-पद्म-शंखी गोविन्द उर्जितः ॥ २ ॥	अनिरुद्धश्चक्रगदी शंखी पद्मी च पातु नः ॥ ८ ॥
मोक्षदः श्रीगदी पद्मी शंखी विष्णुश्च चक्रष्टकः ।	सुरेशोऽव्यभृजश्चक्रगदी शंखी पद्मी च पातु नः ॥ ९ ॥
शंखचक्राब्जगदिनं मधुसूदनमानमे ॥ ३ ॥	अधोक्षजः पद्मगदी शंखी चक्री च पातु वः ॥ ८ ॥
भक्त्या त्रिविक्रमः पद्मगदी चक्री च शंख्यपि ।	देवो नृसिंहश्चक्राब्जगदाशंखी नमामि तम् ।
शंख-चक्र-गदा-पद्मी वामनः पातु मां सदा ॥ ४ ॥	अच्युतः श्रीगदी पद्मी चक्री शंखी च पातु वः ॥ १० ॥
गतिदः श्रीधरः पद्मी चक्रशार्ङ्गी च शंख्यपि ।	बालरूपी शंखगदी उपेन्द्रश्चक्रपद्मपि ।
हृषीकेशो गदा-चक्री पद्मी शंखी च पातु नः ॥ ५ ॥	जनार्दनः पद्मचक्री शंखधारी गदाधरः ॥ ११ ॥
वरदः पद्मनाभस्तु शंखावजारिगदाधरः ।	शंखी पद्मी च चक्री च हरिः कौमोदकीधरः ।
दामोदरः पद्म-शंख-गदा-चक्री नमामि तम् ॥ ६ ॥	कृष्णः शंखी गदी पद्मी चक्री मे भुक्तिमुक्तिदः ॥ १२ ॥

As this is potentially nothing more or less than a chart showing the various positions of the several attributes in the distinctive forms of the divinity, a tabulation of the material in chart-form will be more useful than a translation as such, and I accordingly give below the list of the twenty-four names with their respective attributes in the arrangement appropriate to each. The only word in the text which does call for mention is the word *pradakshinam* at the end of the first *śloka*. This is the key for the understanding of the whole system, and means that the various attributes are mentioned in the following order, (1) lower right hand, (2) upper right hand, (3) upper left hand, and (4) lower

¹ Bibliotheca Indica A. S. B. pp. 137-38.

१ पाठान्तर-“चक्रो गदाश्च शंख्यपि” ।

left hand, or as in the *pradakṣiṇā*. With this much introduction we may tabulate the contents of the text as follows:—

(P = *padma*, lotus ; S = *śaṅkha*, conch ; C = *chakra*, disc ; G = *gadā*, mace.)

Name of the special form.	Lower Right.	Upper Right.	Upper Left.	Lower Left.
1. Kēśava	Padma	Śaṅkha	Chakra	Gadā
2. Nārāyaṇa	S	P	G	C
3. Mādhava	G	C	S	P
4. Gōvinda	C	G	P	S
5. Viṣṇu	G	P	S	C
6. Madhusūdana	S	C	P	G
7. Trivikrama	P	G	C	S
8. Vāmana	S	C	G	P
9. Śrīdhara	P	C	Śārṅga (a special bow).	S
9. Śrīdhara *	P	C	G	S
10. Hṛīṣīkēśa	G	C	P	S
11. Padmanābha	S	P	C	G
12. Dāmōdara	P	S	G	C
13. Vāsudēva	G	S	C	P
14. Saṅkarshaṇa	G	S	P	C
15. Pradyumna	G	C	S	P
16. Aniruddha	C	G	S	P
17. Puruṣhōttama	C	P	S	G
18. Adhōkshaja	P	G	S	C
19. Nṛsimha	C	P	G	S
20. Achyuta	G	P	C	S
21. Upēndra	S	G	C	P
22. Janārdana	P	C	S	G
23. Hari	S	P	C	G
24. Kṛishṇa	S	G	P	C

* Variant.

The text of the *Padmapurāṇa* need not be quoted in full. The list of names is the same and in the same order, save that numbers 13 and 14 are there transposed, the order being in *Padma* "13-Śaṅkarshaṇa, 14-Vāsudēva" instead of as the list given above; and save for its omission of numbers 21, 22 and 23, viz., Upēndra, Janārdana and Hari, as in the *Padma*, Kṛishṇa is himself No. 21, and the total of twenty-four is not made up. The distribution of the attributes for these several forms is also prevailingly the same in both, with these notable differences.

(a) No. 6, Madhusūdana, according to the *Padmapurāṇa*, bears in his lower right hand the *chakra*; upper right, the *śaṅkha*; upper left, the *padma*; lower left, the *gadā*. That is to say, according to the *Padma* we get, if for the sake of clearness I may so speak, the formula CSPG, instead of the formula SCPG given in the *Agnipurāṇa*.

(b) Similarly for No. 9, Śrīdhara, the *Padma* formula is GCPS instead of the PCGS of the *Agni*. But the divergent readings of the latter, and its alternative form in which the upper left hand of the Śrīdhara image holds the *Śārṅga*-bow, is to be noted.

(c) No. 10, Hṛishīkēśa, shows PCGS (*Padma*) and GCPS (*Agni*).

(d) No. 11, Padmanābha, shows CPSG (*Padma*) and SPCG (*Agni*).

(e) No. 13, Vāsudēva, shows PCSG (*Padma*) and GSCP (*Agni*).

It is also noticeable that in the *Padma* text both Keśava and Pradyumna hold their attributes in the order "PCSG." But it is possible that some if not all of these discrepancies would disappear on proper collation of the manuscripts. Without such collation it is impossible to choose between them, and to say which one is right.

As mentioned above, the list in Hēmādri, (1st chapter of the *Vratakhanda*, where he quotes from the *Siddhārtha-saṁhitā*), comprises only twenty-three names, and in an order altogether different from that of the other texts. It will simplify things for our present purposes, however, to retain the order already given, and the former enumeration will therefore be retained so far as this paper is concerned. Similar considerations led me in the previous paragraph to omit mention of the fact that the order in which the *Padma* considers its attributes is also divergent in the original from the order in the *Agnipurāṇa*, but we may take the *pradakṣiṇam* of the latter as our norm, and the more easily since the text of Hēmādri also takes the attributes in this order, beginning with the lower right hand as before. It is not the letter, but the content of the texts, with which we are concerned.

As for the discrepancies between Hēmādri and the other texts, the following are noteworthy, but may best be seen in tabular form:—

Name.	Hemādri.	Agni.	Padma.
2. Nārāyaṇa	PSGC	SPGC	SPGC
6. Madhusūdana	CSPG	SCPG	CSPG

Name.	Hemadri.	Agni.	Padma.
7. Trivikrama	PGSC	PGCS	PGCS
9. Śrīdhara	PCGS	PCGS	GCPS
10. Hṛishikēśa	GCPS	GCPS	PCGS
11. Padmanābha	SPCG	SPCG	CPSG
12. Dāmōdara	PCGS	PSGC	PSGC
13. Vāsudēva	GSCP	GSCP	PCSG
15. Pradyumna	CSGP	GCSP	PSCG
19. Nṛisimha	CPS—	CPGS	CPGS
21. Upēndra	PGCS	SGCP	..
23. Hari	SCPG	SPCG	..

A further important discrepancy is the fact that in Hēmādri the figures of both Adhōkshaja and Trivikrama (Nos. 7 and 18 in our list) are said to carry their attributes in one and the same way, which cannot very well be correct; and that the name of Vishṇu occurs twice over. This again must be due to textual corruption, for it is clear from the attributes these two figures hold that one of the two, numbered 23 in Hēmādri's list, must be Kṛishṇa, whose name otherwise does not appear, curiously enough. This seems to show a special need for an examination of the text in Hēmādri's case, and since where he differs from the order given in the *Agnipurāṇa*, the latter text is sometimes supported and confirmed by the evidence of the *Padma*, the order given in the *Agni* may be looked upon as the most authoritative of the lot, just as its list of names is the most orderly and most complete.

The figures where the arrangement of attributes is identical in all our three authorities, and which accordingly may be considered as definitely settled and established, are as follows:—

3. Mādhava	GCSP, Agni, Padma, Hēmādri.
4. Gōvinda	CGPS, „ „ „
5. Vishṇu	GPSC, „ „ „
8. Vāmana	SCGP, „ „ „
14. Saṅkarshāṇa	GSPC, „ „ „
16. Aniruddha	CGSP, „ „ „
17. Purushōttama	CPSG, „ „ „
18. Adhōkshaja	PGSC, „ „ „
20. Achyuta	GPCS, „ „ „
24. Kṛishṇa	SGPC, „ „ „

The inclusion of Kṛishṇa in this list is based upon the assumption that he is meant where formula SGPC occurs in Hēmādri against the name of Vishṇu.

ments of their attributes. This overlapping will be clearer from the following table :—

Order of Attributes.	Deity.	Authority.
PSCG	Pradyumna	Padma.
	Kēśava	Agni and Padma.
GCSP	Pradyumna	Agni.
	Mādhava	Agni, Padma, and Hēmādri.
PGSC	Adhōkshaja	” ” ” ”
	Trivikrama	Hēmādri.
PGCS	Trivikrama	Agni and Padma.
	Upēndra	Hēmādri.
PCGS	Śrīdhara	Agni and Hēmādri.
	Dāmōdara	Hēmādri.
	Hṛishikēśa	Padma.
GCPS	Śrīdhara	Padma.
	Hṛishikēśa	Agni and Hēmādri.
SCPG	Madhusūdana	Agni.
	Hari	Hēmādri.
SPCG	Hari	Agni.
	Padmanābha	Hēmādri, and Agni also.
CPSG	Padmanābha	Padma.
	Purushōttama	Agni, Padma and Hēmādri.
PCSG	Vāsudēva	Padma.
	Janārdana	Agni and Hēmādri.

In the cases of this sort it is to be feared that a decisive identification is not always possible in the present state of our documents. But it is to be noticed that even so the preponderance of authority is generally determinable, and the matter is less complex than appears. For instance, when we find that both Purāṇas agree in giving to the image with the arrangement PSCG the name of Kēśava, and that the attribution of this order to Pradyumna is only a piece of inconsistency in the *Padma* itself, we need not feel undue uncertainty about

it. And similarly when we see that all our three authorities describe the order GCSP as being characteristic of Mādhava, it is fairly clear that the *Agni* is mistaken when it calls this figure also Pradyumna. Thus, while we may admit that a certain amount of uncertainty remains, still, each individual case will have to be considered on its merits, and when so considered is not likely to prove insoluble in the majority of instances. Doubtful cases must be marked as such.

In concluding this portion of our present study I append two further tabulations. The first of these shows in what order the twenty-four varieties of the Vishṇu image ought to hold their attributes according to all three authorities, and is thus a joint table of the foregoing material, for ease of reference.

Table of the Twenty-four Varieties.

Name of Deity.	Arrangement of Agni.	Attributes according to	
		Padma.	Hēmādri.
1. Kēśava	PSCG	PSCG	Omits.
2. Nārāyaṇa	SPGC	SPGC	PSGC
3. Mādhava	GCSP	GCSP	GCSP
4. Gōvinda	CGPS	CGPS	CGPS
5. Vishṇu	GPSC	GPSC	GPSC (also SGPC, ?Krishṇa)
6. Madhusūdana	SCPG	CSPG	CSPG
7. Trivikrama	PGCS	PGCS	PGSC
8. Vāmana	SCGP	SCGP	SCGP
9. Śrīdhara	PCSār. S or PCGS	GCPS	PCGS
10. Hrishikēśa	GCPS	PCGS	GCPS
11. Padmanābha	SPCG	CPSG	SPCG
12. Dāmōdara	PSGC	PSGC	PCGS
13. Vāsudēva	GSCP	PCSG	GSCP
14. Saṅkarshaṇa	GSPC	GSPC	GSPC
15. Pradyumna	GCSP	PSCG	CSPG
16. Aniruddha	CGSP	CGSP	CGSP
17. Purushōttama	CPSG	CPSG	CPSG

Name of Deity.	Arrangement of Agni.	Attributes according to	
		Padma.	Hemadri.
18. Adhōkshaja.	PGSC	PGSC	PGSC
19. Nṛisimha	CPGS	CPGS	CPS—
20. Achyuta	GPCS	GPCS	GPCS
21. Upēndra	SGCP	..	PGCS
22. Janārdana	PCSG	..	PCSG
23. Hari	SPCG	..	SCPG
24. Kṛishṇa	SGPC	SGPC	..

To facilitate the identification of sculptures by their attributes, I further append a list or table showing the several groups of these attributes in classes according to the attribute held in the lower right hand. The order here as elsewhere in this article is lower right, upper right, upper left, and lower left, so that if we are trying to identify an unknown image in whose lower right hand we see the conch, "S," if this is followed by say the *gadā*, the *padma* and the *chakra*, in this order, we shall be able to identify it with Kṛishṇa, on the authority of the Purāṇas.

Table for the Differentiation of Vishṇu Images by their Attributes.

GROUP I.—Where the lower right hand holds the PADMA (lotus).

Attributes.	Deity.	Authority.
PSCG	Kēśava	A. and P.
PGCS	Trivikrama	A. and P.
PGSC	Trivikrama	H.
PCSārnga S	Śrīdhara	A.
PCGS	Śrīdhara	A. and H.
PSGC	Nārāyaṇa	H.
PCGS	Hṛishīkēśa	P.
PSGC	Dāmōdara	A. and P.
PCGS	Dāmōdara	H.
PCSG	Vāsudēva	P.

Attributes.	Deity.	Authority.
PSCG	Pradyumna	P.
PGSC	Adhōkshaja	A., P. and H.
PGCS	Upēndra	H.
PCSG	Janārdana	A. and H.

GROUP II.—Where the lower right hand holds the ŚAṆKHA (conch).

Attributes.	Deity.	Authority.
SPGC	Nārāyaṇa	A. and P.
SCPG	Madhusūdana	A.
SCGP	Vāmana	A., P. and H.
SPCG	Padmanābha	A. and H.
SGCP	Upēndra	A.
SPCG	Hari	A.
SCPG	Hari	H.
SGPC	Kṛishṇa	A. and P.
SGPC	Vishṇu	H.

GROUP III.—Where the lower right hand holds the GADĀ (mace).

Attributes.	Deity.	Authority.
GCSP	Mādhava	A., P. and H.
GPSC	Vishṇu	A., P. and H.
GCPS	Śrīdhara	P.
GCPS	Hṛishikēśa	A. and H.
GSCP	Vāsudēva	A. and H.
GSPC	Saṅkarshaṇa	A., P. and H.
GCSP	Pradyumna	A.
GPCS	Achyuta	A., P. and H.

GROUP IV.—Where the lower right hand holds the CHAKRA (discus or wheel).

Attributes.	Deity.	Authority.
CGPS	Gōvinda	A., P. and H.
CSPG	Madhusūdaṇa	P. and H.
CPSG	Padmanābha	P.
CSGP	Pradyumna	H.
CGSP	Aniruddha	A., P. and H.
CPSG	Purushōttama	A., P. and H.
CPGS	Nṛsiṃha	A. and P.
CPS—	Nṛsiṃha	H.

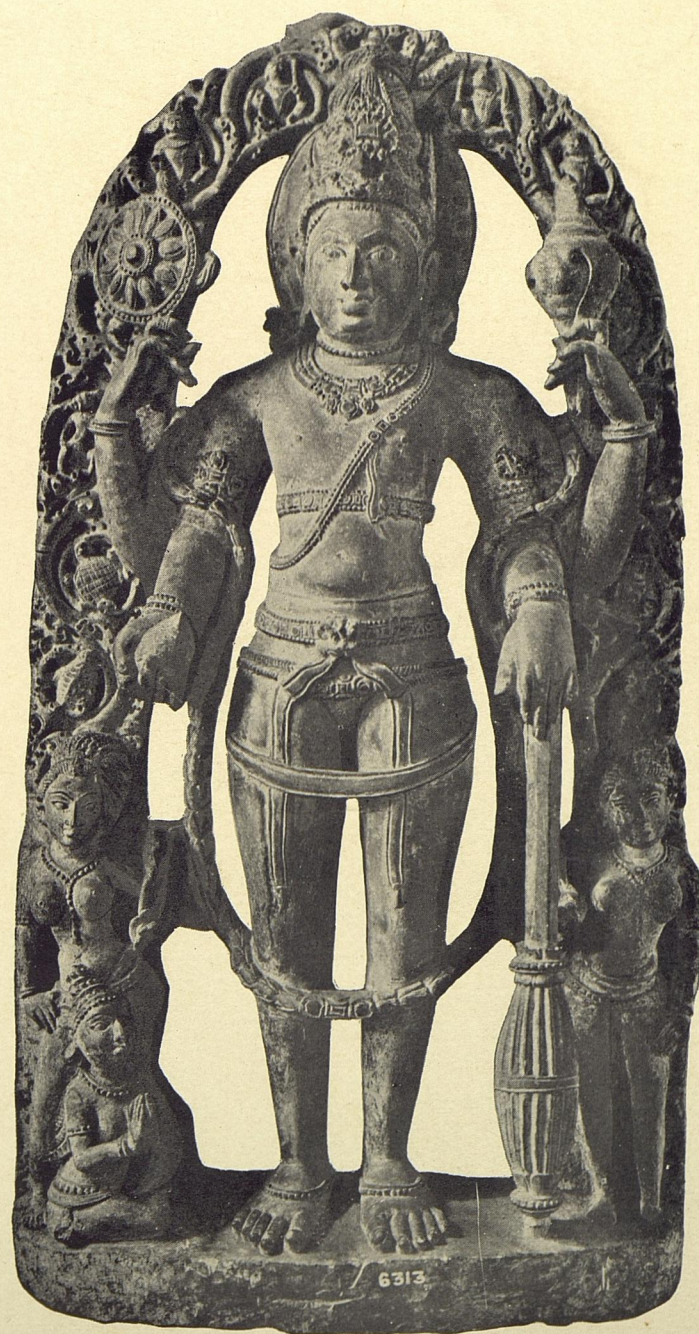
It would be interesting to apply these data as a test to the so-called Vishṇu images now in our collections, to determine how many of these varieties are actually represented, and how many are (so far as our materials allow of our determining), of purely schematic or literary currency. It is a surprising fact that, under this test, the Indian Museum collection in Calcutta is found to possess not a single image of the technically correct Vishṇu as such, and to show a preponderance in favour of the formula PGCS, which, according to the Purāṇas, is to be interpreted as Trivikrama (Plate VII, fig. a), or Upēndra, according to Hēmādri.

The only other forms which occur in the Indian Museum are Janārdana (PCSG) (Plate VII, fig. b), Adhōkshaja (PGSC) (Plate VIII, fig. c), and Śrīdhara (PCGS) (Plate VIII, fig. d), the last group being also identifiable as Hṛishikēsha or Dāmōdara according to the varying authorities.

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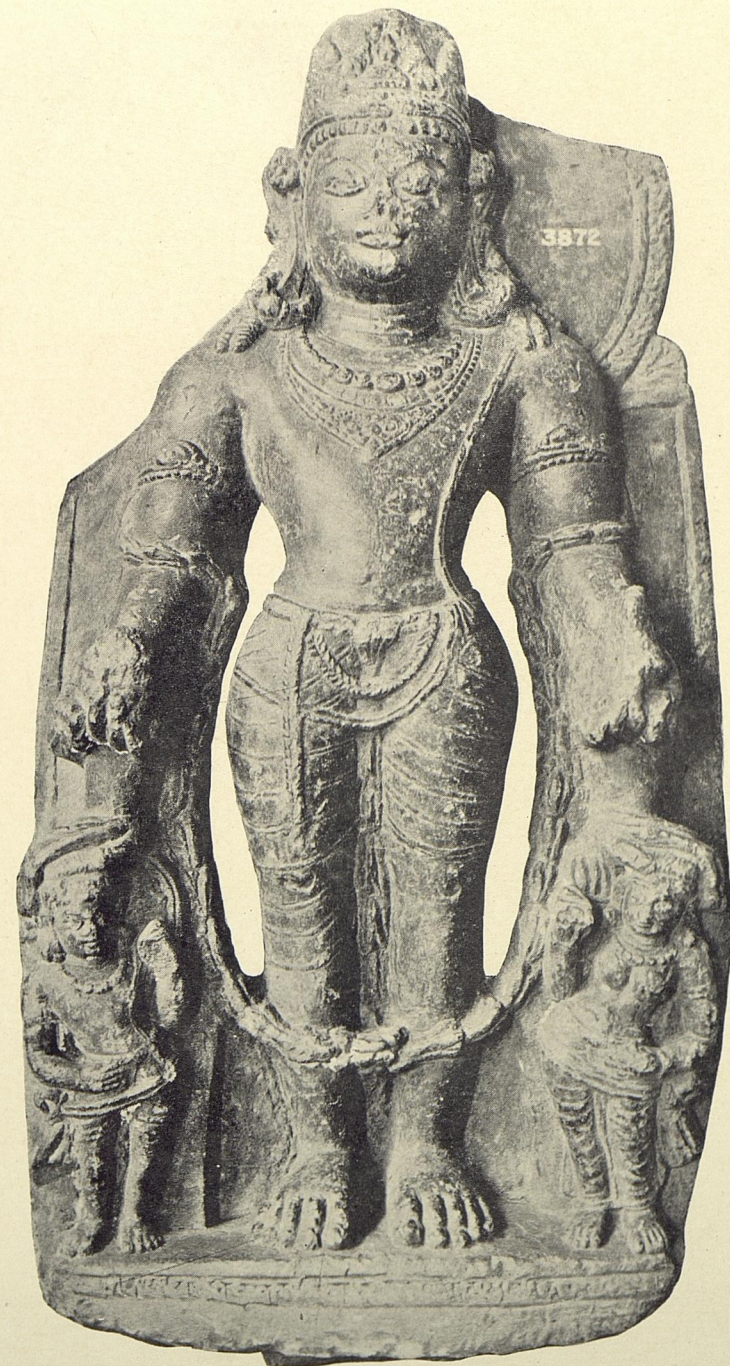
a. TRIVIKRAMA.
(PGCS).



b. JANARDANA.
(PCSG).



c. ADHOKSHAJA.
(PGSC).



d. SRĪDHARA.
(PCGS).