

BIRTH OF THE UNBORN:  
EMBODIMENT AND REPRESENTATION

# VEDIC MYTHOS

- Rig Veda mandalas 2-7: ~ 1900BCE – 1500 BCE
- Remaining Rig Veda mandalas: ~ 1500-1200 BCE
- Early mandalas – solar mythology:
  - heliocentric and geocentric realms
  - Descent of sun into the earth – capture by forces of darkness and release by Indra, Vayu, Rudra, Agni – helpers: Saraswati, Ila, Dakshina, Sarama
  - Panentheistic
- Last (10<sup>th</sup>) mandala – Purusha Sukta
  - Anthropocentric
  - Sacrifice of Purusha to the principle of plurality along four lines
  - Panentheistic
  - Implied reconstitution of Purusha by its fragments

# VEDIC MYTHOS

- Subjection of the Eternal and its infinite portions to the process of Time implies:
  - a dynamic eternity in cosmic and individual manifestations
  - expressing itself in the idea of the cosmic cycles, *yugas* and the individual rebirths, *punarjanma*, that repeat forever.
  - To be born is to die but to die is to be born again.
  - This is the processive understanding of the paradox of the sacrifice of the Timeless in Time.
  - To have a form is to be subject to its change and disintegration but mutation and disintegration is also subject to re-constitution.
  - This is the structural understanding of the paradox of the sacrifice of the Indivisible in Space, form and fragmentation.
  - In the Vedas and particularly so in the Upanishads, these ideas are given spiritual relevance as conditions of experience, which the human being, as living recipient and respondent of this sacrifice, is asked to realize

# MYTHOS OF DIVINE SACRIFICE

- Solar kings and hero myths in Indo-European cultures
  - Just as, in the social imaginary, sacrifice for a noble or universal cause is considered an act of heroism which fertilizes the community, leaving its seeds as inspiration and auspicious Grace
  - Early ritual practice in a variety of cultures saw a reflex of the idea of a Divine Sacrifice in the sacrifice of ideal beings – heroes, kings, virtuous women



Sacrifice to goddess,  
Indus Valley seal, c. 2700 BCE



Durga, North mandapa, Brahma Purishwara temple,  
Pullamangai, c. 10<sup>th</sup> c.

# MYTHOS OF DIVINE SACRIFICE

- In later Indic thought, this mystery of the fully conscious divine-human Being accepting freely to manifest the Original Sacrifice is known as Avatara, literally “descent.”
- The idea of the avatar arises explicitly in textual form with reference to Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita, c. 2<sup>nd</sup> – 1<sup>st</sup> c. B.C.E.
- Yet, the Vedic Sacrifice, has its precedent in the mythos of the repeated “descents” of the Sun into the darkness of night and its reappearances every morning as featured in the earliest Vedic hymns.
- This can be seen as a symbol of the self-conscious Sacrifice of the Divine and the demonstration of His conquest of Death.
- All human beings are “results” of this original Sacrifice and therefore, subject to its consequences
- But the avatar is a conscious enactment of the embodied sacrifice within the field of human subjection
- Therefore, an opportunity for other humans to receive its “blessings” and awake to its reality as their own intrinsic truth.

# THE CHRISTIAN MYTHOS



Crucifixion,  
Keshu Das, Mughal, c. 1590



# THE CHRISTIAN MYTHOS



- Christ declares his divinity, reveals his presentiments of the embodied structure of Sacrifice and bears the literal enactment of this Sacrifice in terms which could be seen as conflating the cosmological and earth-ritual significations (Campbell 2008: 120).
- To represent the paradox of radical discontinuity between illimitable and eternal Spirit and a life bounded by form and time in his embodiment, he is shown as having a virgin conception and announces himself as God who is the Son of Man.
- As one infusing the sacrificial earth-ritual with a spiritual root, he is designated the Lamb of God and the King of the Jews – the earthly king who by his sacrifice fertilizes the destiny of his people. Finally, he demonstrates his original superiority to all subjection to earthly laws by his Resurrection and Ascension.

Crucifixion,  
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# BUDDHA – SPIRITUAL RULERSHIP AND SACRIFICE



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- Earliest hagiographies of the Buddha (early 2<sup>nd</sup> c. CE) already cast him in the image of the Divine Being taking birth by choice to overcome the law of suffering and show a way to humankind out of this bondage.
- Buddha’s mother is named Maya, the Upanishadic term for the mysterious cosmic agency through which the paradoxical manifestation of objects and events in space and time is projected within the formless and indescribable infinity of Spirit.
- His conception, like Christ’s is Immaculate, through a dream of his mother in which a white elephant “descends” from the sky and enters into her.
- His birth is also Immaculate, out of the side of his mother, with the Vedic gods serving as birthing assistants.

# BUDDHA – MYTHOS OF DEATH



- At the time of his “death,” Buddha is asked by his disciple, Ananda, how he would like his mortal remains to be disposed and he answers that they should be disposed as are the remains of kings.
- By Buddhist tradition and literary evidence, great kings were to be interned after death under a mound of earth (*stupa*) at the crossroads to their kingdom.
- This returns us to the earth rituals of royal sacrifice – the king’s death as a fertility symbol.

# BUDDHA – MYTHOS OF DEATH



- The symbology of the *stupa* is unmistakable in its visual and performative choices. The body of the stupa is a hemispherical mound filled with rubble and cased with stone and designated *anda*, which literally means “egg.”
- Within this mound is placed the casket with the relics of the Buddha or his venerated disciple. The surface of the stupa would be left bare of any representation or ornamentation. A stone railing (termed *vedika*) would enclose a walking path around the *stupa*.

- By the 2<sup>nd</sup> c. BCE, stupas (eg. Bharhut or Sanchi), display flowing creepers, floral ornamentation and fertility motifs such as *yakshas*, *yakshis* and *nagas*.
- Till the 1<sup>st</sup> c., the Buddha himself would never be represented in these scenes, except through symbols.
- Finally, gateways with two vertical columns surmounted with three horizontal beams (*torana*) would be placed at the four cardinal directions surrounding the *stupa*. These gateways became the sites for the most exuberant carvings of beings and themes by the 1<sup>st</sup> c. BCE.

# BUDDHA – MYTHOS OF DEATH



- Roots of aniconism in early Buddhism is related to the erasure of the Buddha's being as a consequence of the ultimate nirvana (*parinirvana*).

- The Buddha has escaped from the entrapment of suffering within the structure of temporal and spatial limitation which constrains all creation. Thus, he can no more be represented as a person within the confines of this structure.

- However, the *stupa* tells us that he has reverted to and “remains” in his “unborn” or embryonic condition, the state of unthinkable permanence beyond the cycle of creation.

- In terms of the avataric Sacrifice of Spirit, he has subjected himself to Maya, the Magician Power producing the experience of the illusory process of birth, ageing and Death, and has shown the way to the erasure of this paradoxical illusion through his nirvana.

- Now his relics embody the unthinkable Mystery beyond the processes of formal limitation and the cycles of birth, death and rebirth, permanently frozen in a germinal state, ever on the verge of the creation and ever outside its bondage.

# BUDDHA – MYTHOS OF DEATH



- The Buddha has passed through the portals of a Death which is an eternal gestation, a coming-to-birth.

- Enclosed in the hemispherical “egg,” the relics of the Buddha thus represent a transcendental fertility within the structure of space and time, ever unborn yet ever radiating a power of creation and freedom.

# BUDDHA – MYTHOS OF DEATH



Though royal mounds were more properly associated with sites on the outskirts of urban centers, and early stupas from Asoka's time (3<sup>rd</sup> c. BCE) can be found both in cave and quasi-urban monastic settlements, the metaphor of the germinal stupa within the cave relates more strongly to the cosmic metaphysics of the irreducible essence of the deceased world-emperor, reverted to seed, gestating within the penetralia of the earth and emanating as fertility therefrom.



# HINDU GODS, VISHNU, SHIVA AND DEVI



- As in Buddhism, following the cosmic symbol of embodiment, the earth cave may be seen here too as the origin for the Hindu temple.
- Within this “womb” of the earth, either the fountainhead of repeated Hindu avatarhood, Vishnu or the source of cosmic fertility, Shiva, with their consorts, the manifestations of Devi, take their eternal stations in aniconic forms, as befitting a Reality which remains free of subjection to space and time within the depths of the creation. If the Buddha is the timeless Unborn beyond Death, the Hindu gods are the same beyond and within Birth.



## VISHNU, FOUNTAINHEAD OF AVATARS



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- Vishnu, who is a solar Vedic god, is represented by the aniconic icon of the *shalagram*, an ammonite fossil from the environs of the Gandaki river, symbolizing the latent presence of Life in inorganic Matter, the evolutionary “seed” of things, both “dead” as Matter and bearing the impress of the origins of Life in the oceans.
- With its coiled ribs, it is also reminiscent of the “bed” of Vishnu, the unending coils of the Serpent, Ananta, whose name literally means eternity and represents the possibility of perpetual unfoldment as earth history.
- It has also been compared in texts to Vishnu’s weapon, the lethal discus, *sudarshan*, itself a spoked-wheel, and reminiscent of that form of transport as a major innovative leap in human civilization.
- Again, it is the root form of the *chakra*, the centre of energetic action in the occult physiology of the human being dealt with in yoga and Tantra.



# VISHNU, FOUNTAINHEAD OF AVATARS



- Vishnu as the Preserver of evolving forms in the cosmos, repeats himself in new forms in his avatars at critical stages in earth history, each time incarnating as the victorious power of new creation and transformation within the structure of space-time.

- The Sacrifice of Purusha is here seen as a free acceptance of the process of time and the limitation to form, with the ability to break its laws and to create new laws within its structure.

- These many forms of the avatar and their exploits are the history of Vishnu in Time and mark the steps of his Play as the cosmic process. These are thus the multiplied forms surrounding the shrine on its outer walls.

- The avatars are described in the Puranas, particularly Vishnu Purana and Bhagavat Purana



# SHAKTI AND SHIVA – ETERNAL CONCEPTION OF THE UNBORN



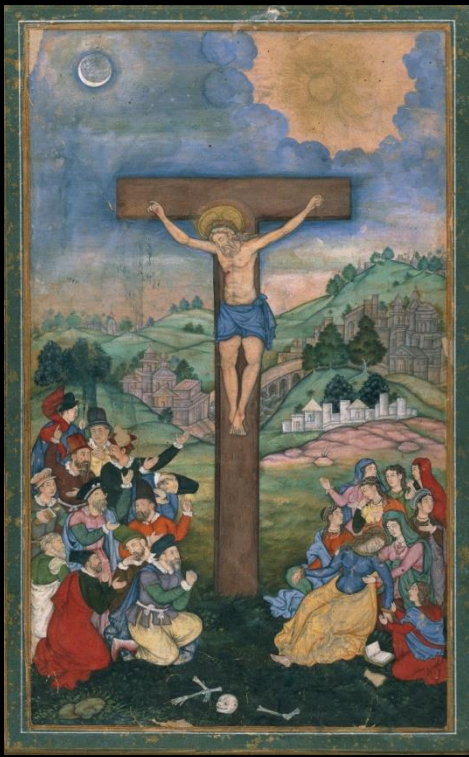
- In iconography, Shiva is seen as the power of infinite fertility.
- Though human embodiments are not properly the province of Shiva, the entire creation and all its events are seen as his embodiment, the Transcendental born as the cosmos and all its beings into Time and Space through the mysterious power of Shiva's own executive Will or Shakti.

# SHAKTI AND SHIVA – ETERNAL CONCEPTION OF THE UNBORN



- The mystery of this Divine Birth of the Unborn is the act of coitus eternally poised at the threshold of the Creation and present in all its moments and acts, through all forms, and their birth, growth and death.
- This is symbolized in the aniconic icon of Shiva, the erect male phallus, *linga* held within the *vagina*, *yoni*, and secreted in the womb, *garbha*, of creation.
- Once again, from the cave to the temple, this symbol is extended in the form and once again, the outer walls of the temple become the cosmic manifestations in multitudinous forms of the central symbol.
- The aniconic lies at the heart of the multiplication of iconic forms.

# SHAKTI AND SHIVA – ETERNAL CONCEPTION OF THE UNBORN



As the Christ resurrected is the Unborn eternal within Death, as the Buddha in the *stupa* is the Unborn eternal beyond Death, and as Vishnu in the *shalagram* is the Unborn eternal within the evolving Creation, Shiva-Shakti in the *linga-yoni* are the Unborn eternal at the threshold of Birth. The relation of the eternal Formless with the world of forms subject to time is the paradox at the heart of the Indian site of worship and represented in its architectural context by a primordial relationship between the Aniconic and the Iconic.

