

An Iconographic Study of the Sūrya Images from North India with special reference to the Kushinagar District

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Abstract: Sūrya worship has been an integral paradigm of Indian religious and cultural aspects, with its roots extending back to prehistoric times. This worship evolved through various stages, from symbolic representations in the Vedic age to anthropomorphic forms during the sixth century BCE to the first century CE, and eventually to the installation of Sun images in temples during the early medieval period, receiving significant royal patronage. However, despite the prominence of Sun worship across India, eastern Uttar Pradesh has not presented much evidence of this ancient practice. This paper aims to undertake iconographic study of the Sūrya images recovered from the Kushinagar district of Uttar Pradesh.

Keywords: Iconography, Kushinagar, North India, Saura cult, Sūrya.

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INTRODUCTION

Icons symbolise abstract religious ideas and concepts in a concrete form, and represent the religious leanings of a community (Welankar 2009: 1). The Sun has been the object of veneration and a source of energy all over the world from time immemorial. Every age and every race have woven myths around the Sun and has given place to him in art, literature, astrology, philosophy, and science (Srivastava 1996: 20). The earliest expression of Sūrya in art is seen in the prehistoric rock paintings, where men understanding the usefulness of Sūrya, represented it in form of a circle (Tiwari 2004: 257). A figure of the Sun has been found in a primitive painting on a sandstone rock in the range of hills immediately east of the Manda River near Singhanpur (Pandey 1971: 1). Another evidence of early Sun-worship is found in the neolithic 'graffiti' discovered from the Kapagallu hills in the Bellary district (Pandey 1971: 2). The evidence of sun-worship in the Indus Valley is provided by the symbols and designs marked on the seals and potteries which have come to light because of the excavation at Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro, Lothal, Rupar, Rangpur, and Kalibangan etc. (Pandey 1971: 4). In Indian mythology, he is by extension the source of all knowledge and the origin of solar energy, of the laws that govern the universe and human society (Mitchell 1992: 1). Sūrya is referred to in several hymns of the *R̥gveda*, various epithets of this god are also mentioned (Singh 1977: 116). Sūrya is synonymous

with Indra in the *Atharvaveda*. In the *Yājñavalkya Sūtra*, Sūrya is mentioned as one of the *Navagrahas* such as Ravi, Soma, Maṅgala, Budha, Bṛhaspati, Śukra, Śani, Rāhu and Ketu (Singh 1977: 117). The epics and the *Purāṇas* identify Sūrya with various deities, such as Viṣṇu, Indra, Brahmā, Prajāpati and Agnī (Singh 1977: 117). In the *Bhaviṣya Purāṇa*, the Sun is described as being attended to by *Apsaras*, *Yakṣas*, Snake-demons and others who are frequently associated with water and fertility (Singh 1977: 117–8). The symbolic worship of Sūrya began with the worship of the *Sūrya mandala* and later on, worship of the iconic form became more popular. However, the *mandala* and the iconic form also appear together. The figures of Sūrya appear on early coins of India in both symbolic and anthropomorphic forms. The figures of a wheel and lotus on the punch-marked coins, the rayed disc on the cast coins of Kāda, and the tribal coins of Sūryamitra and Bhānumitra seem to represent Sūrya in the symbolic form (Singh 1977: 118–9). Anthropomorphic representations of the deity appear on the coins of Indo-Greeks and Kuṣāṇas, the figure is referred to as Helios or Mihira etc. (Singh 1977: 119). Some Sun images carved in the time of the Kuṣāṇas rulers, two images are kept in the Mathura Museum, and the oldest sculptures of Sūrya must have been fashioned in the same way as the well-known statues of the Kuṣāṇa kings (Disalkar 1932: 31). Another image of the same period comes from the Gandhāra region, where the Sun god is seated at ease on his chariot drawn by four horses (Pandey 1971: 77). However, it is interesting to note that the earliest anthropomorphic figure of Sūrya is to be found on a pottery shreds of the Mauryan age from Patna in which the deity is standing with Aruṇa on a four-horsed chariot (Singh 1977: 119). A terracotta images of Sun god, belonging to the Śuṅga age has been found from Chandraketurah and Anantagumpha cave Khandagiri hills in Odisha (Pandey 1971: 68–9). A figure of Sūrya is to be found on a railing pillar at Bodhgaya, the deity is seated on a one-wheeled chariot drawn by four horses, the relief is purely Indian. The image of the Sun from Bhaja is also shown riding a four-horse chariot (Singh 1977: 119). In north India, a new variety of the image of the Sun emerged in the Kuṣāṇa period under the Iranian influence with Indo-Scythian dress (Singh 1977: 120). The images from the late Mauryan to the early Kuṣāṇa period bear almost similar iconographic features. This might be the first stage in the development of the Sūrya in anthropomorphic form (Singh 1977: 120). The age of the Guptas in India was the period of India's prosperity, materially as well as spiritually. Under these Hindu emperors, who followed the policy of toleration towards every religious faith and beliefs, all the branches of Hinduism could flourish freely. There is plenty of architectural, epigraphical, sculptural, and literary evidence to show that the Sun-worship flourished in this age. Sun-God has been invoked in several inscriptions of the period. Mandasaura inscription of Kumāragupta I and the Indore copper plate inscription of Skandgupta commence with a prayer to the Sun God. There are many sculptural pieces of evidence found to testify to the wide prevalence and the nature of the Sun-worship in the Gupta age onward, such as the Niyamatpur Sūrya image, the Sun image inside a *caitya* window of the Bhumara Śiva temple, etc. contemporary technical works give good details about Sun-icons, they inform about solar iconography and other information.

This study aims to document and describe the different iconographic representations of Sūrya, to understand the iconographic development based on comparative analysis. The adopted methodologies are reading, reviewing and analysing published and unpublished data on the topic. The present study is required because iconographical studies of imageries have not been attempted before. For the data collection, snowball sampling method has been used. The documentation of Sūrya images in the Kushinagar district including photography, measurements and onsite report was done. The collected data was analysed and synthesised.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are several works done by renowned scholars and historians about this specific field and period. The earliest and important among them is by D. B. Disalkar, who wrote an article in the *Journal of the United Provinces Historical Society* entitled 'Some Brahmanical Sculptures in the Mathura Museum' in which he discussed several interesting images representing the Sun-God that have been found in Mathura. There are at least half a dozen images of Sūrya in the Mathura Museum which he discussed (Disalkar 1932: 31–6). In another important work Prof. Pramod Chandra (1970) made an extensive catalogue of Allahabad Museum entitled '*Stone Sculpture in the Allahabad Museum*' published by the American Institute Of Indian Studies, which he made a catalogue of 509 images total 7 images of Sūrya, all are reported from north India including Bhita, Chillaha, Kara, Karchana, and Kaushambi.

Another notable work is carried out by H. K. Narain in his article entitled 'Two Rare Surya Images from Village Tripathi in District Deoria' published in *The Journal of Bihar Puravid Parishad* notes that the *Ṛgveda* is the earliest script in India which refers to Sūrya in detail. He records that in Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh, the worship of the Sun God is very popular and a very big festival is held on the of *chaṭha* in the months of *kārtika* and *caitra*. In this festival every year, sacred water is offered to the Sun God for peace and prosperity. After that, he mentioned, that in the Deoria district, there is a village Tripatti, on the Kasia-tamhkuhi road, one km south of *Bazar* on a *kaccha* road. In the village, there is a mound which yielded the sculptures of Hindu deities, besides two images of Sūrya, traces of brick structures which indicate that there must have been a brick temple of Sūrya in this village. He also describes the general iconographic features of these images (Narain 1979: 104–6). The next notable work was carried out by Kamal Giri and Maruti Nandan Tiwari, they jointly wrote an article entitled 'Symbolic Representation of Sun in Varanasi', in which both of them initially discussed the antiquity of the Sun worship textually and archaeologically, also discussed the recently known Sun temple, located in Surya Kunda Muhalla near Nai-sadak area of Varanasi, presently known as Sūrya Nārāyana temple and mention that Kashi, Varanasi was well known for the worship of the twelve Ādityas and the Ādityas are represented mainly in the form of lotus or disc or disc with rays having the face of Sun in the centre. The twelve *Ādityas* are 1.Aruṇāditya 2.Draupdāditya 3.Gaṅgāditya 4.Keśavāditya 5.Khakhokāditya 6.Lolārka 7.Mayukhāditya 8.Śāmbāditya 9.Uttarārka 10.Vimlāditya 11.Vridhāditya 12.Pramāditya. They also referred to the twelve wells dedicated to the Sun. Excepting the Śāmbāditya, all other Ādityas are found represented mainly in different Siva temples. They prove beyond doubt that during the medieval times, Varanasi was an important centre of Sun worship where the symbolic as well as the figural representations were running parallel and hand in hand (Giri 1985: 241–6). Durga Prasad Pandey in (1989) in his book '*Surya Iconographical Study of the Indian Sun God*' traced the evolution of the Indian sun image.

In dealing with the subject, special attention has been paid to religious and political events which have exercised their influence on the history of art and literature. Another important work was done in the year 1996 by Krishna Deva and S. D. Trivedi entitled 'Stone Sculpture in the Allahabad Museum volume II' published by the *American Institute of Indian Studies* in which he includes 397 stone images of Allahabad museum he made a catalogue of it according to the deity out of that four images belongs to the Sun including one from Kaushambi and site of three image is unknown.

Another important work done by Jalaj Kumar Tiwari, he wrote an article in *Prāgdhārā: A Journal of U.P. State Archaeology Department* entitled 'Two rare Sūrya Nārāyana sculptures from Chandimau' in which the author discussed the earliest expression of Sūrya in art and its representation in the text

also. He also discussed a little bit about the Saura cult and attempted a comparative study of the Saura and Vaiṣṇava cults. Further, he mentions those two sculptures (Tiwari 2003: 257–9).

STUDY AREA

The data is collected from the Kushinagar district of Uttar Pradesh. The region has been selected because it provides a concentration of three images with slight variations in terms of size, stone and stylistic range. The study area of eastern Uttar Pradesh occupies a very important position as far as the geography, religious and political history are concerned.

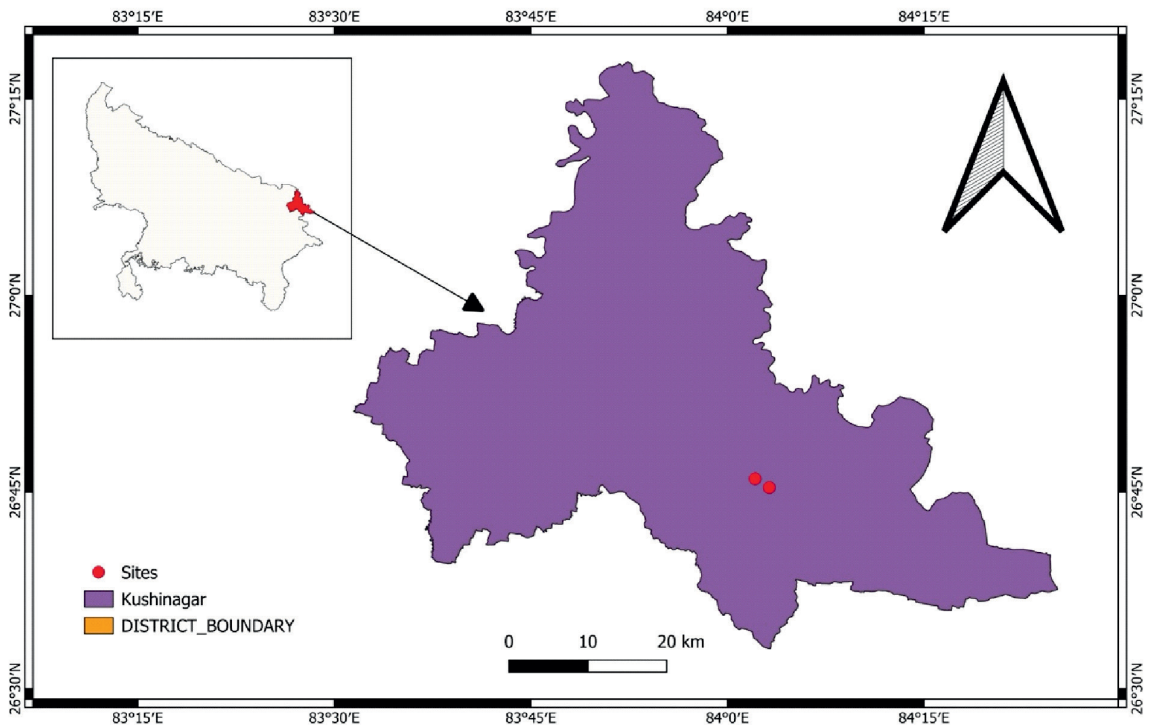


Fig. 1: Map showing Study area

ICONOGRAPHIC STUDY OF THE SŪRYA IMAGES IN THE KUSHINAGAR DISTRICT

The depiction of the deity Sūrya in this region is as per the traditional Indian iconography which is characterized by several distinctive features. Sūrya is typically depicted standing erect upon a lotus pedestal, holding two fully bloomed lotuses, each positioned just above his shoulders (Singh 1977: 123). This portrayal often includes a gentle, smiling countenance, with a radiant halo encircling his head. The deity's form is adorned with armour, imparting a sense of strength and protection (Singh 1977: 124). Notably, his attire includes a decorative girdle encircling the waist, complemented by a draped scarf. Unlike other deities within the Indian pantheon, Sūrya is depicted wearing high boots, obscuring his feet and lower legs (Singh 1977: 127).

Adjacent to Sūrya stands a diminutive female figure, likely representing an attendant, while before them stands Aruṇa, the legless charioteer of Sūrya. Aruṇa is depicted wielding a whip in his right hand, with reins held beneath his left, indicative of his role in guiding the celestial chariot (Singh 1977: 125). This chariot, drawn by seven horses, is depicted with a single wheel, symbolising the movement of the Sun across the heavens.

This iconographic representation of Sūrya embodies various symbolic elements, such as the lotus symbolising purity and spiritual enlightenment, the armour denoting protection and valour, and the chariot symbolising the daily journey of the Sun across the sky (Singh 1977: 127). Such depictions serve not only as artistic expression but also as visual embodiments of philosophical and religious concepts within Indian culture (Singh 1977: 122).

SŪRYA IMAGE FROM TURKPATTI

The image under consideration is reported from Turkpatti village in Kushinagar District, Uttar Pradesh, and is presently enshrined within a temple locally designated as the *Guptakālīna Sūrya Mandira*. It is executed in basalt and measures 73 cm in height and 40 cm in width. The precise geographical coordinates of the site are 26°45'58" N and 84°04'08" E. The icon represents the Sūrya, depicted standing in *samapada-sthānaka* posture upon a pedestal. Below the pedestal is rendered a one-wheeled chariot drawn by seven horses, with the charioteer Aruṇa carved near the deity's feet. The principal figure is two-armed, holding fully blossomed lotus flowers in both raised hand, positioned such that the *padma* rise upto the shoulder. The hands are in *Sūrya-mudrā*, in which the tips of the thumb and ring finger are joined. The deity is adorned with a *kirītamukūṭa*, long earrings (*cakra-kunḍala*), a necklace (*hāra*), the sacred thread (*yajñopavīta*), a waist belt (*mekhalā*), and bracelets. Although the lower part of the image is partially obscured by modern drapery, it is evident from earlier observations (Narain 1979) that the boots extend up to the knees, a characteristic feature of Sūrya iconography. Flanking the deity are the female Rājñī and Nikṣubhā, identified on iconographic grounds by their attributes: each holds a *caurī* (fly-whisk), with the second arm resting on the thigh. Also represented are Daṇḍī and Piṅgala on either side. Daṇḍī (*āyudha puruṣa*) stands to the left of the deity, crowned with a *kāraṇḍa-mukūṭa*; his right hand displays *vyākhyāna-mudrā*, while his left hand rests upon the thigh in *ūru-hasta* position, just above the handle of a staff or sword. Piṅgala, wearing a heavy turban, holds a pen and inkpot, symbolising his role as recorder of human deeds. Notably, all the attendant figures are adorned with ornaments comparable to those of Sūrya. Additional iconographic details include *vyāla* figures positioned on either side of the pedestal, with two *bhāravāhaka* (weight-bearers) carved beneath them, and a pair of *mālādhārīs* figures above the head of the deity. The facial expression of the main image is important, conveying a fierce and intense aspect. On stylistic and iconographic grounds, the sculpture can be assigned to the tenth–eleventh century CE.



Fig. 2: Sūrya

SŪRYA IMAGE FROM TURKPATTI

The image under consideration is also found from Turkpatti village in Kushinagar District, Uttar Pradesh, and is enshrined in a temple locally known as the *Guptakālīna Sūrya Mandira*. Carved in sandstone, the sculpture measures 97 cm in height and 49 cm in width. The site is situated at 26°45'58" N and 84°04'08" E. The deity Sūrya is depicted standing in *samapada-sthānaka* posture upon a pedestal. The original carving of the pedestal, which formerly displayed horses and a wheel, is now broken. Between the feet of the deity appears the figure of Aruṇa, the charioteer of the chariot. Significantly, the earth goddess Bhūdevī Mahāśvetā is shown between Aruṇa and the feet of Sūrya. The image is two-armed, holding fully blossomed lotus flowers in each raised hand; the lotuses are positioned so that they reach up to the shoulders. The *kānti-maṇḍala* (halo) behind the head of Sūrya is prominently depicted. The deity wears a *kīrīṭa-mukuṭa*, long earrings (*cakra-kunḍala*), a prominent necklace (*hāra*), the sacred thread (*yajñopavīta*), and a waist belt (*mekhalā*). The knee-length boots, characteristic of Sūrya iconography, are still visible in the lower part of the image. Flanking the main figure are Rājñī and Nikṣubhā, identified on iconographic grounds by their attributes: each holds a *caurī* (fly-whisk) in one hand, with the other resting on the thigh. Daṇḍī (*āyudha puruṣa*) and Piṅgala are also present on either side. Daṇḍī (*āyudha puruṣa*), on the left, is crowned with a *kāranda-mukuṭa*; his right hand appears to be in *vyākhyāna-mudrā* (although the depiction is partly weathered), while his left hand rests upon the thigh in *ūruhasta* position, above the handle of a staff or sword. Piṅgala, likewise crowned, holds a pen and inkpot, signifying his role as recorder of human deeds. At the bottom of the image, two attendant figures are carved Uṣas and Pratyuṣas, each holding a bow and arrow and represented as dispelling darkness — a motif closely associated with the saura cult. Above the head of the main deity appear two *mālādhārī* figures. The facial expression of the deity is notably calm. On stylistic and iconographic grounds, the sculpture may be assigned to the Late Gupta period. At present, the surface of the image is covered with *sindūra*, indicating its continued ritual practice.



Fig. 3: Sūrya

SŪRYA IMAGE FROM CHHAHUN

The image under consideration is housed in a newly constructed temple locally known as the *Sūrya Maṇḍira* at Chhahun village, Kushinagar District, Uttar Pradesh. Carved in sandstone, the sculpture measures 123 cm in height and 60 cm in width. The site is located at 26°46'20" N and 84°02'59" E. The Sūrya is depicted standing in *samapada-sthānaka* posture upon a chariot. The chariot, characteristically one-wheeled, is drawn by seven horses, with the charioteer Aruṇa rendered near the feet in a driving pose, holding the reins. Between the feet of Sūrya and above Aruṇa stands Bhūdevī Mahāśvetā,

signifying the earth goddess in association with the saura cult. At the upper corners of the panel, a pair of *mālādhārīs* figures are carved with clarity, accompanied by celestial beings in *añjalī-mudrā* on either side. The main figure of Sūrya is two-armed, holding fully blossomed lotus flowers which rise to shoulder level. Both hands displayed in *Sūrya-mudrā*, in which the tips of the thumb and ring finger are joined. The deity is richly adorned with a *kīrīṭa-mukuta*, *prabhā-maṇḍala* (halo), long earrings (*cakra-kunḍalas*), a broad necklace, sacred thread (*yajñopavīta*), bracelets, and a girdle. Uṣas and Pratyuṣas are represented on either side, dispelling darkness with their bows and arrows. The consorts Rājñī and Nikṣubhā flank the deity, holding a fly-whisk and a vessel respectively. The attendant figures Daṇḍī (*āyudha puruṣa*) and Piṅgala are placed at the bottom right and bottom left of the composition respectively. Daṇḍī (*āyudha puruṣa*), depicted with a heavy beard and turban, holds a pen and inkpot, while Piṅgala carries a *Daṇḍa*. Both are emblematic of the recording of human deeds. Additional iconographic motifs include *vyāla* figures carved on either side, with a single elephant depicted below each *vyāla* and *gaja-vyāla* figures positioned above. The knee-length boots of Sūrya, an identical mark of his iconography, are clearly visible in this image. On stylistic and iconographic grounds, the sculpture may be assigned to the tenth century CE. All the carvings on this panel are remarkably well preserved and clearly executed.



Fig. 4: Sūrya

STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Each image of Sūrya maintain core iconographic elements but demonstrates stylistic differences influenced by material, dimensions, and artistic evolution. Fig. 4 appears the most elaborately detailed and about the material context, images vary slightly. Two images belongs to sandstone while one image is made up of basalt. All the images depict Sūrya, in *sampada* posture on a chariot. The variations are seen in terms of the chariot because, one image does not have chariot, and the celestial being in *añjali mudrā* is depicted in only Fig. 4 while in the other images probably the celestial being is broken. The similarity in the *Sūrya mudrā* and holding of lotus flowers is noticed, though Fig. 4 shows enhanced embellishments and attire details. Common depictions of Uṣas, Pratyuṣas, Rajñī, Nikṣubhā, Daṇḍī, and Piṅgala, across all images, can be noted with slight variations in their presentation. Fig. 4 stands out with more ornate details such as ornamentation, attributes, than the other images.

A similar type of image of Sūrya is reported from the Karchhana, Prayagraj (Allahabad) district. The image is made up of buff stone and dated to the tenth century CE (Chandra 1970: 140). While these images are of sandstone and basalt. Similarities are in the *mukuta* which is the tall crown, attendants being on the right and left side of the God are similar, the *vyāla* figure is similar. These comparisons underscore the continuity and adaptation of iconographic traditions over the centuries across different materials and artistic contexts.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The standing Sun image is the exact prototype of the Gupta art, and the indigenous type of Sūrya image, squatting on a chariot drawn by horses, slightly like the images from Bodhgaya, Bhaja and other places. In the Gupta period, the Sūrya image further evolved towards elaboration. The *udīcya* dress persists with Persian coat, trousers and buskin boots. The number of the horses in the chariot increased to seven somewhere few may be broken. The attendants and the other figures, such as Daṇḍī, Piṅgala, Rajñī, Nikṣubhā, Aruṇa, Uṣas and Pratyūṣas are also included with the Sūrya.

In the medieval period, the evolution of Sūrya image has reached its maturity by assimilating foreign influence as an indigenous feature. Sūrya is shown either standing on a chariot drawn by seven horses, without a vehicle or seated on the chariot drawn by seven horses and the charioteer Aruṇa. The deity wears a *kiriṭamukūṭa*, haloed with *kantimaṇḍala*, necklace, ear-rings, *vanamālā*, long boots and embroidered dress and carries lotuses in his hands. The attendants, Daṇḍa, Piṅgala, Uṣas and Pratyūṣas his other images such as Aśvinī Kumāras, Bhūdevī- Mahāśvetā, Brahmā, Śiva and Vidyādharas etc, are also depicted.

The first black stone image is stylistically poor in workmanship and can be assigned to the tenth-eleventh century CE, and the second grey sandstone image of Sūrya, based on the artistic style, can be dated in the late Gupta period (Narain 1979: 106). The third sandstone image of Sūrya, based on artistic style can be dated to the tenth century CE. On the evidence of these images, it can be said that there must have been a temple existing from the late Gupta period to the early medieval period.

In conclusion, the comparative study of the Sūrya images carved in basalt and sandstone reveals the evolution of artistic styles and iconographic traditions over centuries in north Indian sculptural style. The images date from the late Gupta period is to the ninth-tenth century CE. Fig. 2, carved in basalt shows advancements in detailing such as visible attire and an ornate stela, likely placing it in the tenth-eleventh century CE. Fig. 3, carved in sandstone represents an early example with relatively simpler ornamentation and a focus on the basic iconographic elements, likely placed in the late Gupta period. Fig. 4, the most elaborate, carved in sandstone, highlights a refined portrayal of Sūrya and accompanying images possibly dating to the ninth and tenth century CE. These sculptures illustrate how Sūrya depiction evolved from early to more complex and detailed forms. Overall, the study underscores rich artistic evolution of the iconography of the Sūrya as a divine symbol.

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