

The Eightfold Mystery: Exploring the Evolution of Aṣṭamūrti Across Eras



Cultural and Religious History Department Colloquium

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The concept of Aṣṭamūrti, or the eightfold manifestation of Rudra-Śiva, represents a fascinating and enduring theme within Sanskrit literature and culture. Spanning the Vedic corpus, Purāṇas, Tantras, Kāvya (classical poetry), inscriptions, and Stotra literature, this idea reflects both continuity and transformation in Rudra-Śiva's theological and iconographic representations. Textual traditions variously enumerate the eight forms and their guardians or recount how Rudra-Śiva assumed these manifestations. Scholars have located the origins of Aṣṭamūrti in the Śatapatha-brāhmaṇa (7th–6th century BCE),

which links Rudra-Śiva to eight "guardians of forms" through the mythical narrative of Rudra's birth.

In this talk, I propose that the roots of this concept extend deeper into the Vedic tradition, particularly to the Atharva-veda (7th–6th century BCE). Remarkably, the Atharva-veda references seven forms rather than eight, suggesting that the canonical number of eight was a later development. This reinterpretation is further substantiated by iconographic evidence, such as a 6th-century CE sculpture discovered near Mumbai, now housed in the Prince of Wales Museum.