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ARS ORIENTALIS VOLUME 45

TRANSMISSION OF ARCHITECTURAL KNOWLEDGE
IN MEDIEVAL SOUTH ASIA

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INTRODUCTION

1

Sarasvatī, the goddess of learning, flanked by *sūtradhāras* Kilha and Loyāṇa, Vimala Vasahī temple, Dilwara, Rajasthan, circa 1150. Photo courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies, Gurgaon

ENSCONCED IN THE CEILING OF A BAY of the Vimala Vasahī temple at Dilwara in western India is a relief carving datable to the mid-twelfth century (fig. 1). The relief portrays Sarasvatī, the four-armed goddess of learning, encircled by devotees. Two devotees, who flank the goddess with their hands folded in respectful gestures, are identified by inscriptions below as *sūtradhāra* Kilha and *sūtradhāra* Loyāṇa. The Sanskrit title *sūtradhara*, often translated as “architect,” literally means “the bearer of a cord,” the cord being both a crucial measuring tool and a symbol of knowledge that has been passed on. In this relief, the goddess holds a palm-leaf manuscript in her hands and *sūtradhāra* Kilha holds a measuring rod in his hands. Thus, this carving privileges the divine as the source of architectural knowledge that men deploy and propagate using tools such as measuring rods, cords, and hand gestures. This volume of essays investigates the sculpture’s subject: the transmission of architectural knowledge in medieval South Asia.

The clarity of the carver’s vision notwithstanding, modern scholars have struggled to identify and unravel the modes and channels through which medieval architects received and conveyed the corpus of specialized knowledge required to conceptualize and erect buildings. Consider the conundrum faced by Ram Raz, the author of *An Essay on the Architecture of the Hindus* (1834), the first monograph in English on the subject.¹ Despite his best efforts, he could find only a few of the famed sixty-four medieval architectural treatises in complete form. Furthermore, while the Brahmin literati of his day were able to read Sanskrit verses in the manuscripts, they were unable to decode specialized terminology. And although some temple builders understood the specialized terminology used in the treatises, they were unable to read the texts.

Raz attempted to reconcile the paradox, in part, by soliciting the services of a lithographer whose line drawings cleaved textual prescriptions and praxis. In Raz’s wake, Rajendralal Mitra, his younger contemporary Rakhaldas Banerjee, and other scholars writing in English and Bengali assiduously looked for more comprehensive treatises.² Another group of writers—including Alexander Cunningham and James Fergusson—adopted a different approach.³ Assembling vast photographic archives, they began to triage monuments into categories that emphasized the alleged sectarian identities of the presumed patrons, lineages to which they belonged, and centers of cultural production. They eschewed Sanskritic classificatory schemes that sought to organize building types into families as well as more modern approaches that emphasized the mobility of religious practices and artists. Like contemporary mineralogists and zoologists, Fergusson and Cunningham constructed an image of India’s architectural past that was usable for the contingencies of the colonial present.

In the early twentieth century, a generation of thinkers and writers who sympathized with India's struggle for independence from colonial rule rose in prominence. These intellectuals perceived policies that promoted assembly-line production, free markets, and protectionism as features of industrial capitalism. They also questioned discourses that promulgated the hierarchy of races, civilizations, and art forms. Ananda Coomaraswamy, who was among the most articulate of these thinkers, combined sources as varied as asides in the ancient Buddhist Jātaka tales and *au courant* practices in Sri Lanka to offer a composite portrait of what he termed an "Indian craftsman." Whether he erected dwellings, made pots, or wove textiles, an Indian craftsman in Coomaraswamy's estimate learned his trade by apprenticing in a hereditary practitioner's workshop. Furthermore, the craftsman's acquisition and execution of his trade was connected to his commitment to a moral code and to the perpetuation of a social order where he was an honored member of a village community, a responsible member of a guild, and a loyal subject of his king.⁴

Stella Kramrisch—Coomaraswamy's younger contemporary and the author of a two-volume study that has been a cornerstone of the scholarly edifice on the Indian temple since its publication nearly seventy years ago—neither wrote histories of particular monuments nor biographies of individual architects. But she did painstakingly examine the morphology of architectural elements and recorded continuities and shifts in design and construction. She gleaned the conceptual capacities of early India's architect-priests, brick-makers, carpenters, master masons, and stone carvers and astutely commented upon the vast transfers of knowledge that transpired in the middle of the first millennium when freestanding lithic temples began to be constructed. Kramrisch recognized the power of medieval architectural treatises and their injunctions. However, as her later essays make clear, she also understood them, and the knowledge systems possessed and deployed by builders, to be dynamic attempts by individuals striving to improve their social standing within the caste society's structure.⁵

The work of these early pioneers formed the foundation for more recent scholarship. In postcolonial India, studies of temple architecture have been fueled primarily by extensive surveys undertaken under the aegis of either governmental institutions, such as the Archaeological Survey of India, or through collaborative group projects, such as the Vijayanagara studies spearheaded by John Fritz and George Michell. While largely empirical, such projects successfully incorporated interdisciplinary approaches that have transformed the study of temples into a quest to determine architecture's capacity to store encoded forms of religious, political, and cultural knowledge.

M. A. Dhaky has done perhaps more than any other single scholar of the past generation to integrate empirical analyses, textual study, and creative inquiry. In the 1960s, Dhaky collaborated with practicing architects descended from the famous Sompura community of medieval temple builders to understand the specialized Sanskrit terminology found in treatises and the probable appearance of typologies whose specimens no longer survive. Through his engagement with lived practice, Dhaky formulated his own understanding of the genesis and development of Māru-Gurjara temples. In doing so, he infused a true sense of drama to the dynamic interactions in distinctive yet abutting regions stretching across what is today Rajasthan and Gujarat. In an approach that was simultaneously formalist and synthetic, he located agency in the monuments themselves, which came together in “a tense moment, of intense, passionate embrace” through which “the two leading styles of Western India, one virile and handsome (Mahā-Māru), the other (Mahā-Gurjara) ornate and bewitchingly beautiful ... both lost their identity” in the process of becoming something else entirely.⁶ This he followed up by shifting focus to monument makers by asking, in a short but highly influential monograph, whether architects claiming mastery of transregional architectural forms in textual sources really possessed the practical knowledge to produce them in places far beyond their original homes.⁷ Focusing his inquiry on a series of temple inscriptions and relief sculptures depicting diverse architectural models in Karnataka dating to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Dhaky differentiated between new stylistic interpretations of distinctive temple traditions and their underlying formal principles. This nuanced distinction set the groundwork for the further theorizing of the relationships among style, mode, and idiom, most prominently by Michael W. Meister and subsequently by Adam Hardy.⁸

Questions of architectural transmission are not limited to the study of monuments. The growing investment in museum studies over the past couple of decades has turned scholarly attention toward architectural fragments dispersed in international museum collections. The most successful studies have come from scholars whose foundational training was rooted in the study of buildings *in situ*. In an aptly titled catalogue essay, “Reintegrating the Cosmos: North Indic Temple Fragments,” Darielle Mason reminds her readers that North Indian carvings encountered in a gallery are best seen not as finished sculptures, but as pieces of a larger temple. She aims to “impart a sense of context” while calling attention to the “multiple variables” that make the “process of re-placing these fragments into their original built context” so challenging to modern scholars.⁹ In *Scattered Goddesses: Travels with the Yoginis*, Padma Kaimal traces the dynamic relationship between scattering and collecting. Her case study is a set of nineteen sculpted stone figurines that, over the course of a millennium, followed a circuitous route from a temple in Kanchipuram

to museum collections on multiple continents.¹⁰ Kaimal's story follows a bifurcated methodology. She self-consciously employs positivistic lines of formal and contextual analysis in order to reconstruct past meanings, yet shifts toward post-structuralist modes of inquiry to engage questions of agency, fluidity, and reinvention in tracing the modern historiography of the sculptures' rediscovery and the politics of their display.

This shift to a post-structuralist from a structuralist lens, equated here respectively with the present and the past, raises a methodological quandary that resides at the center of any inquiry of regions that are understudied and in periods far removed from the present day. Because the act of recovering or reconstructing lost histories is fundamentally understood as a structuralist project, how can we, as scholars working on premodernity, move beyond simple acts of reconstruction to generate alternative ways of viewing and distinctive theoretical approaches that are not burdened by a post-Enlightenment hermeneutics?

Two relatively recent publications, published a decade apart, provide at least a partial answer to this question. The first, Finbarr B. Flood's *Objects of Translation* (2009), integrates postcolonial discourses on translation, alterity, race, ethnicity, and dislocation with a close engagement with the material and formal properties of artifacts and built environments.¹¹ Although the theoretical framework is drawn from presentist models, it becomes transformed, and even troubled, through careful excavation of object histories. The second, Ajay Sinha's *Imagining Architects* (2000), foregrounds notions of artistic creativity and the agency of architects, whose identities, in direct contrast to "the modernist stereotype of an introverted, alienated genius," were "directly connected with knowing and responding to a world outside their individual selves."¹² The world to which Sinha refers is one in which architectural knowledge freely flowed across vast regions, providing makers with the ability to self-consciously rework not only the formal but also the conceptual frame of the temple in early medieval Karnataka. Sinha's redefinition of modality in relationship to Vesara architecture, long thought of as an architectural "mule," challenges understandings of visual hybridity more frequently deployed in colonial and postcolonial contexts.¹³

As in these studies, the essays in this volume highlight a history of mobility, hybridity, and transmission spanning many centuries and traversing a wide terrain. It is this *longue durée* diachronicity and transregionality of the Indian temple that makes it an ideal locus for generating new methodological and theoretical approaches aimed at tracing and understanding the complex human processes underlying transmission of architectural knowledge. As a medium, architecture itself constitutes not a singular but a confluence of various forms of embodied knowledge, ranging from surface-level motifs and ornamentation to full-scale

reformulations of entire structural systems—technological, religious, and cultural. Drawing upon carefully circumscribed case studies rooted in premodern South Asia, each essay in this volume builds upon this rich and densely layered historiography while moving in new directions determined by the specificities of their core material. In bringing them together, we hope to generate new theoretical tools to complement the pragmatics of the *sutradhāra*'s cord in ways that will enable us to continue thinking about dynamics of transmission, transculturation, and transformation engendered by the mobility of architects and patrons in a dynamic premodern world.

A Note on the Structure of this Issue

In conceptualizing this volume of *Ars Orientalis*, we felt strongly that the central problems raised by the four main essays would be best addressed as an ongoing dialogue. To this end, we have included two sets of brief commentaries at the end of the volume. The first were penned by Nancy S. Steinhardt and Finbarr Barry Flood, who were asked to engage with the main essays and to situate them within a broader historiography. The second represent reflections on these responses by the volume's guest editors. It is our hope that the decision to extend the volume in this way, originally suggested by the *Ars Orientalis* advisory board and editor-in-chief, will encourage others to explore similarly dynamic exchanges, particularly as academic publishing expands to embrace the potentialities of a digital age.

NOTES

- 1 Ram Raz, *Essay on the Architecture of the Hindus* (London: Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland 1834). For a recent appraisal of Raz's project, see Madhuri Desai, "Interpreting an Architectural Past: Ram Raz and the Treatise in South Asia," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 71, no. 4 (2012), 462–87.
- 2 For example, Rajendralal Mitra, *The Antiquities of Orissa* (Calcutta: Wyman & Co., 1875) and Rakhaladas Banerjee, *Bangalar Itihas* [in Bengali] (Calcutta: Bengal Medical Library, 1915, 1917).
- 3 Alexander Cunningham's approach is perhaps best illustrated by his study, *The Bhilsa Topes, or, Buddhist Monuments of Central India; Comprising a brief historical sketch of the rise and decline of Buddhism, with an account of the opening and examination of the various groups of topes around Bhilsa* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1854). See also James Fergusson, *One Hundred Stereoscopic Illustrations of India*, photographs by Major Robert Gill (London: Cundall, Downes, 1864); James Fergusson, *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture* (London: J. Murray, 1876). For an insightful essay on photography as a way of knowing and ordering, see Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "The Monument as Image: The Compulsions of Visual Representation in Colonial India," in *Traces of India: Architecture, Photography, and the Politics of Representation*, ed. Maria Antonella Pelizzari (Montreal: Canadian Center for Architecture, 2003), 108–39.
- 4 See Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Medieval Sinhalese Art* (Broad Campden: Essex House Press, 1908); Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Indian Craftsman* (London: Probsthain & Co., 1909).
- 5 See Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*, 2 vols. (Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press, 1946); Stella Kramrisch, "Artist, Patron and Public in India," *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (1956), 335–42; Stella Kramrisch, "Traditions of the Indian Craftsman," *Journal of American Folklore* 71, no. 281 (1958), 224–30.
- 6 On occasion, their collaboration resulted in publications in classical and vernacular languages. For example, Prabhashankar O. Sompura and Madhusudan Dhaky, "Svargārohaṇaprāsāda" [in Gujarati and Sanskrit], *Svādhyāya* 5, no. 2 (1968), 191–95. For Dhaky's creative understanding of the Māru-Gurjara form, see M. A. Dhaky, "Genesis and Development of Māru-Gurjara Architecture," in *Studies in Indian Temple Architecture*, ed. Pramod Chandra, (New Delhi: American Institute of Indian Studies, 1975), 120.
- 7 M. A. Dhaky, *The Indian Temple Forms in Kārṇāṭa Inscriptions and Architecture* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1977).
- 8 While Meister foregrounds the agency of artists and architects in the transmission and production of new architectural forms, Adam Hardy privileges the formal language of the monument, which carries within it the potentiality and impetus for experimentation and variation. See Michael W. Meister, "Bīṭhū: Individuality and Idiom," *Ars Orientalis* 13 (January 1, 1982): 169–86; Michael W. Meister, "Style and Idiom in the Art of Uparāmala," *Muqarnas* 10 (1993), 344–54; Michael W. Meister, "Art Regions and Modern Rajasthan," in *The Idea of Rajasthan: Explorations in Regional Identity*, vol. 1, ed. Karine Schomer, Joan Erdman, Deryck Lodrick, and Lloyd Rudolph (New Delhi: Manohar, 1994), 143–76; Adam Hardy, *The Temple Architecture of India* (Chichester: Wiley, 2007); Adam Hardy, "Indian Temple Typologies," in *Glimpses of Indian History and Art: Reflections on the Past, Perspectives for the Future*, ed. Tiziana Lorenzetti and Fabio

- Scialpi (Roma: Sapienza Università Editrice, 2012), 101–25.
- 9 Darielle Mason, “Reintegrating the Cosmos: North Indic Temple Fragments,” in *Fashioning the Divine: South Asian Sculpture at the Ackland Art Museum*, ed. Pika Ghosh (Chapel Hill, NC: Ackland Art Museum University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2006), 78.
 - 10 Padma Kaimal, *Scattered Goddesses: Travels with the Yoginis* (Ann Arbor, MI: Association for Asian Studies, 2012).
 - 11 Finbarr B. Flood, *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval “Hindu-Muslim” Encounter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).
 - 12 Ajay Sinha, *Imagining Architects: Creativity in the Religious Monuments of India* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2000), 25.
 - 13 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994). Monica Juneja recently called attention to the limited utility of the term *hybridity* in considerations of modern and contemporary art in “Global Art History and the ‘Burden of Representation,’” in *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture*, ed. Hans Belting, Jakob Birken, and Andrea Buddensieg (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 2011), 285.