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CONTENTS

- 7 INTRODUCTION
Nachiket Chanchani and Tamara I. Sears, Guest Editors
- 14 PANDUKESHWAR, ARCHITECTURAL KNOWLEDGE,
AND AN IDEA OF INDIA
Nachiket Chanchani
- 43 FOLLOWING RIVER ROUTES AND ARTISTIC TRANSMISSIONS
IN MEDIEVAL CENTRAL INDIA
Tamara I. Sears
- 78 THE TAMIL GOPURA
From Temple Gateway to Global Icon
Crispin Branfoot
- 114 THE INTERNATIONAL JAINA STYLE?
*Māru-Gurjara Temples Under the Solāṅkīs, throughout India
and in the Diaspora*
Julia A. B. Hegewald
- 141 TRANSNATIONAL ASIAN ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY
Response: Nancy S. Steinhardt
- 148 IDEA AND IDIOM
Knowledge as Praxis in South Asian and Islamic Architecture
Response: Finbarr B. Flood
- 163 ON THE TASK OF IDENTIFYING NEW ARCHIVES
Response: Nachiket Chanchani
- 167 ON GEOGRAPHY, TOPOGRAPHY, AND TRAVEL
Response: Tamara I. Sears

ON GEOGRAPHY, TOPOGRAPHY, AND TRAVEL

IN AN EXCHANGE AFTER A PANEL on the seventh to eighth century in South Asia at the 2011 Association for Asian Studies annual conference in Philadelphia, a question was asked about the paths that facilitated the transmission of artistic motifs and religious ideas discussed in a number of the presented papers. The response from the group demonstrated a wide degree of speculation and notable uncertainty. This was not surprising, given the fact that a remarkable number of smaller routes through India's interior in pre-Sultanate eras remain relatively uncharted. These should be distinguished from the international circuits connecting to littoral zones along India's coasts, the mountain passes leading into the subcontinent from the northwest, and the larger paths followed by Buddhist pilgrims. Many of those better-known routes were deciphered initially through reference to textual sources and later corroborated through archaeological remains.¹ The essays in this volume of *Ars Orientalis*, in contrast, begin with the visual and material evidence for artistic transmission discernable through built structures in order to establish paths and practices associated with mobility and travel.

Reading through Nancy Steinhardt's deeply thought response to the essays, I was greatly struck by her emphasis on the prime significance of material in developing theoretical models. She opens with an encounter with the late Oleg Grabar, in which she recounts his wise admonition that theory must come from the material. This story forms a fitting point of departure for her own observation that the most successful studies of premodern Asian architecture ask contextual (rather than explicitly theoretical) questions. Her analyses of the essays serve as a searching query as to why this is so often the case. All four essays, as she notes, are rooted in theoretical language and theoretical models, sometimes drawn from studies of premodern South Asia and sometimes from studies of more frequently trodden scholarly grounds in Europe. And yet, she suggests, given the newness of the material introduced in all four essays, it is the contextual that is most crucial. It is only from the close assessment of iconography (to understand religious practices) and style (to confirm crucial historical information not available through texts) that viable theoretical bases for deeper understandings of premodern Asian architecture can ultimately emerge.

For those of us who study premodern Asian architecture, this is an important observation that should be neither obviated nor averted. Implicit in Steinhardt's response is the notion that formal analysis remains a crucial tool for contextualization, and that contextualization must remain the basis for generating new theoretical models. Careful assessments of style and iconography can reveal clues concerning directions of movement and extents of travel that can upend expectations rooted in the present day. In her concluding paragraphs, Steinhardt reminds us that the historiography of Asian architecture is tied to histories of colonization,

proselytization, and, in more recent years, military and political engagement. While colonial-era scholarship effectively constituted a deeply entrenched historiographical frame, it also was largely determined by colonial-era routes. In the present-day, postcolonial era, our movements are shaped differently, and in some cases radically restricted, by newly drawn boundaries and heightened security concerns. This is as true in China, as Steinhardt duly notes, as it is in South and Southeast Asia, particularly along contested borders. It is a sad reality that Kingdom of Kashmir, which was crucially important in the early medieval period, has been inaccessible to scholars for so many years, and that Gandhāra, which stood at the crossroads of intercultural exchange and transregional travel, is less traversable today than it was just a few decades ago.

Although he frames his response differently, Finbarr Flood draws attention to another core problem: understanding the “more obscure ... cognitive and/or cultural mechanisms that facilitated or impeded” the circulation and use of architectural knowledge. Particularly useful is his distinction between the diachronic and synchronic approaches undertaken by Branfoot and Hegewald on the one hand and Chanchani and Sears on the other. In their diachronic studies of Mahā-Gurjara and the South Indian *gopura* respectively, Flood notes, Hegewald and Branfoot draw attention to the ways in which established architectural forms, with tightly circumscribed early histories, become portable across broad geographical regions in later periods. Implicit here is the capacity for such tracings of transregional flows to both transcend and trouble territorial boundaries that have become more fixed and tightly regulated through processes of postcolonial nation-building. In considering Chanchani’s essays and mine, in contrast, Flood highlights the utility of empirical approaches in unraveling the paths and processes through which architectural knowledge traveled in premodern South Asia. While the methodological basis for the two pairs of essays may vary in crucial ways, they all share a number of core theoretical concerns, including a deep investment in questions of agency, expectations, patrons, and viewers; the dynamics of dissemination; and the constancy and/or transformation of modes of signification on both the local and transregional levels.

Thinking through the threads that tie the essays together leads to a highly fruitful rumination on issues of repetition and displacement, which in other contexts, as Flood notes, were associated variously with the mobility of artisans and patrons or claims of cosmopolitanism through “the staging of architectural difference.” This is to be contrasted with acts of revival, which suggest a seamlessness and historical continuity that may be intentionally constructed but is not necessarily true in fact. Both cases depend greatly on recognition and cognition, on the ability of makers and audiences to recognize the temporal/historical and spatial/geographic asso-

ciations of particular architectural forms. In this matter, the degree of historical distance matters much in determining the methodological approach. Tracing “processes of adaption, mediation, and replication” in earlier periods, for which there is a dearth of contemporary textual sources, requires an empirical approach. This observation dovetails well with Nancy Steinhardt’s emphasis on the utility of formal and comparative analysis in establishing both the fact and process of transmission.

Similar to Steinhardt, Flood concludes his response by considering the mechanisms for transmission and the paths that ideas followed. In the absence of a codified system of notation, Adam Hardy’s recent work on Bhojpur notwithstanding, transmission of temple forms in particular worked through combinations of verbal communication, embodied knowledge, and miniature portable shrines.² The latter were particularly pertinent in cases of wholesale replication, such as suggested by Chanchani in his discussion of a Drāviḍa temple in Himachal Pradesh or, even more concretely, through the documented movement of models of famous pilgrimage sites such as Bodh Gayā.³ In all cases, transmission was dependent on the movements of objects and people who followed routes also used more broadly for travel, trade, and pilgrimage.

Both Flood and Steinhardt’s responses are attentive to the centrality of geography and travel in the transmission of visual, cognitive, cultural knowledge. Geography, in particular, is considered both in spatial and imaginary terms as territory that can be practically traversed, culturally associated, virtually reenacted, or unnaturally parceled through the distribution of national boundaries. Geography envisioned in such a manner appears to be quite flat. Thus, I would like in my own concluding remarks to reinsert the vertical, or topographic, dimension of not merely geography but variations in terrain. From an etic perspective, the first step in knowing a place is through its physical landscape. This is true not only from the vantage point of a modern, scientific epistemic frame, but also in much earlier eras. In his circa 1030 account of India, Alberuni considers geography in distinctly topographic terms. In addition to chapters on rivers and mountains, both sacred and real, he describes paths of pilgrimage as moving from one topographic feature (mountains and ponds) to another.⁴ Mountains played a similarly important role for the Mughal emperor Babur, whose description of “Hindustan” opens with the ocean and the mountains.⁵ Later in his account, it becomes clear that the landscape itself has cognitive and geographic associations. Babur’s sense of displacement, for example, comes through in his disgust with the desolate nature of the Indian landscape, which was very different from that of his homeland in central Asia, but he tried to tame it through the planting of gardens.⁶ The British residents of colonial-era Calcutta similarly approached what Swati Chattopadhyaya has described as the uncanny flatness and linearity of the landscape through architectural projects.⁷

In such cases, the transmission of architectural knowledge, as manifest in building projects, is closely tied to efforts to tame the alterity of the natural landscape by transforming it into something familiar. This is particularly true of Hegewald's study of Jaina temples in Africa and the West, but possibly also of the choice to build a Drāviḍa temple in Himalchal Pradesh.⁸ In Branfoot's case, the act of building a *gopura* constitutes a vertical transformation; in effect, the *gopura*'s sheer visual prominence enables it to overtake the skyline and direct movement in nearly any type of setting. As a result, the movement of *gopuras* across regions can serve to homologize a wide variety of landscapes, making them familiar through both practical and imaginary associations. In my own study, topography plays a different role in determining paths and directions of movement in sometimes unexpected directions. In all cases, topography is fundamental also to the materiality of monuments; building a Drāviḍa temple on the northwestern frontier out of locally available gray sedimentary sandstone in medieval India is a very different enterprise than chiseling a similarly styled building out of granite in Tamil Nadu. It is also quite different from a modern case in which great efforts are made to move materials, sometimes already sculpted, across regions, as in the cases of Jaina temples in Europe and America outlined in Hegewald's essay.

Perhaps it is in this type of broad comparative framework across temporal dimensions, in this case through the comparison of the medieval and the modern, that a possible solution can be found for what Flood refers to as a tension between emic and etic forms of representation and what Steinhardt describes as a need to generate new, internally produced theoretical models. By looking diachronically as well as comparatively and collaboratively across regions, we can generate new questions and ways of seeing. Hopefully the essays in this volume, both as individual contributions and through their juxtaposition, will encourage other scholars to continue to seek out new ways to approach such problems.

NOTES

- 1 The literature on trade and pilgrimage routes in premodern South Asia is too vast to cite in its entirety. The classic study is Moti Chandra's *Trade and Trade Routes in Ancient India* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1977). More recent contributions include Nayanjot Lahiri, *The Archaeology of Indian Trade Routes Up to the Century 200 B.C.: Resource Use, Resource Access and Lines of Communication* (Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Jason Neelis, *Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Networks* (Leiden: Brill, 2011); Himanshu Prabha Ray, *The Archaeology of Seafaring in Ancient South Asia* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Dilip Chakrabarti, *The Archaeology of the Deccan Routes: The Ancient Routes from the Ganga Plain to the Deccan* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2005).
- 2 Adam Hardy, *Theory and Practice of Temple Architecture in Medieval India: Bhoja's Samarāṅgaṇasūtradhāra and the Bhojpur Line Drawings* (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts with Dev Publications, 2015).
- 3 See, for example, John Guy, "The Mahabodhi Temple: Pilgrim Souvenirs of Buddhist India," *The Burlington Museum* 133 (1991), 356–67.
- 4 Edward Sachau, trans., *Alberuni's India*, 2 vols. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1888, 1910).
- 5 W. M. Thackston, trans., *The Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor* (Washington, DC: Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 1996, 2002), 330–31.
- 6 Thackston, *The Baburnama*, 363–64.
- 7 Swati Chattopadhyay, *Representing Calcutta: Modernity, Nationalism, and the Colonial Uncanny* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).
- 8 A similar case can be noted of a South Indian style temple in Banaras. See Diana Eck, *Banaras: City of Light* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 223.