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ON THE TASK OF IDENTIFYING NEW ARCHIVES

A COPPERPLATE CHARTER ISSUED ON THE ORDERS OF RĀṢṬRAKUTA KṚṢṌṆĀṆṆĀṆA, who reigned over the Deccan in the second half of the eighth century, reads:

[The emperor]… caused to be constructed, a temple on the hill of Elāpura, a wonderful structure—on seeing [it] the best of immortals who move in celestial cars, struck with astonishment, [say] “this temple of Śiva is self-existent; in a thing made by art, such beauty is not seen”—a temple, the architect-builder of which … was himself suddenly struck with astonishment, saying, “Oh, how was it that I built it.”

This inscription evinces that at one site in early medieval South Asia the corpus of architectural knowledge was understood as a pulsating force. The resultant aesthetic could leave the gods ecstatic. Moreover, a temple’s marvelous design and construction could be unfathomable to the very individual who built it. The inscription also raises a fundamental question: how might we—scholars of architectural history living in the twenty-first century—query architectural knowledge and its transmission in precolonial South Asia?

As the essays by Crispin Branfoot, Julia Hegewald, Tamara Sears, and myself have demonstrated—and as Finbarr Flood and Nancy Steinhardt have acknowledged—medieval temples themselves are crucial archives for investigating this issue. Our studies of temple forms and factures alongside reconstructions of their place within shifting cultural, ecological, geopolitical, and social landscapes have yielded intriguing possibilities and, on occasion, preliminary answers.

To more thoroughly query the transmission of architectural knowledge in South Asia, we ought to identify and probe new sets of archives. Line drawings are one such archive. Here are two sites where such drawings survive. At Osian, in Rajasthan, two sandstone slabs currently embedded into the fabric of Harihara temple 2 seem to have once served as drawing boards for eighth-century architects. The curvature of a spire is carved on one slab. A complex Phāṁsānā roof is incised on the second slab. At Bhojpur hill, in Madhya Pradesh, about fifteen drawings are incised on a gently undulating sandstone outcrop. Most seem to date to the tenth or eleventh century. They range in size from a few centimeters to more than fifteen meters across. Some feature temple plans; others are renditions of base-molding sequences replete with customary ornament, pillar types, spires, and superstructure varieties (fig. 1). Although weathered, difficult to photograph, and hard to trace, they merit serious study. From them, might it be possible to learn how contemporaneous builders erected the temples that stand nearby? Can these drawings help an investigator piece together the roles of visual vis-à-vis verbal guides in the process of planning and constructing an edifice? Might they also permit an inquiry
on the subject of whether late-medieval builders ever regarded “publically” accessible “templates” from the past as resources?³

Any serious study of the drawings preserved at Osian and Bhojpur will need to begin with the twin tasks of earning the Archaeological Survey of India’s support and the goodwill of communities living in their vicinity. What types of relationships and resources might a modern investigator require in order to access collections of other knowledge systems that medieval builders possessed but never incised on rocks? Ethnography, it seems to me, might allow us to dip into the world of embodied knowledge. For instance, from meticulous observation of the kinesiologically inflected mode of instruction used to teach young Brahmin boys, the Ṛg Veda at Thrissur in Kerala, can we picture medieval sthāpatīs being taught metrical structures and grammatical rules that governed key verses of śilpa śāstras alongside sequences of hand gestures and head movements?⁴

Architecture is not merely the product of its builders’ hands. Had imagination not been valued and cultivated in the medieval period, today we would neither encounter the incredible diversity of forms and layouts of temples that stand across South Asia nor find descriptions of a multitude of shrine types in the purāṇas and śilpa śāstras.⁵ Furthermore, as the hagiography of Saint Pūcalār—who built a temple in his mind and invited Śiva to abide in it even as a king was erecting the lithic Kailaśanātha complex in Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu—makes clear, a temple could satisfactorily exist solely in the imagination.⁶ How then might one begin to chart the imaginations of medieval builders? Carved representations of architectural forms and lucid epigraphs are invaluable documents in this regard. Consider, as an example, the models of known and new types of Nāgara, Drāviḍa,

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and Bhûmija spires emblazoned on the wall frieze of the Laksâmi Narasinâha temple built in 1246 CE at Nuggihalli, Karnataka (fig. 2). Standing in parallel to this diversity is an inscription engraved at the late-twelfth century Koṭiśvara temple at Kuppatur, Karnataka. The inscription, as translated by the eminent architectural historian, M. A. Dhaky, reads:

[Within this village of Kuppatur] was built, as if by Viśvakarma himself, out of sublime devotion for the Lord of the Kailâsa mountain, the elegant, equipoised and shapely temple of Koṭiśa-Bhâva, freely ornamented with Drâviḍa, Bhûmija and Nâgara, and, with bhadra-offsets manipulated in many ways.⁷

Final thoughts. Using Dhaky’s understanding of the Vesara as based on the Drâviḍa tradition as a point of departure, Ajay Sinha, a doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania in the early 1990s, meticulously studied plans and elevations of temples built in Karnataka between the seventh and thirteenth centuries. At the end his study, Sinha concluded that from the early eleventh century onward, some architects in Karnataka, who knew about northern Indian Nâgara architecture, creatively reworked the conceptual basis and the form of a class of Drâviḍa temples and created Vesara.⁸ Roughly concomitantly, Adam Hardy, then a doctoral student at Birmingham Polytechnic, assiduously drew and interpreted an overlapping group of temples in Karnataka and arrived at a different understanding of Vesara’s relationship to Drâviḍa.⁹ This understanding, in turn, shaped Hardy’s grasp of the forms, design principles, construction methods, and proportioning systems of temples patronized by the Hoysala dynasty who ruled over large parts of Karnataka between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries. Sinha and Hardy’s divergent viewpoints demonstrate, in part, the impress of divergent training. Meanwhile, Hardy’s self-conscious leadership role in the design of a sprawling “Hoysala temple” currently under construction at Venkatapura in Karnataka—seven hundred years after the last temples in the tradition were erected—should serve as a reminder that how one acquires an understanding of architectural knowledge also inflects how one transmits it.¹⁰ Maybe, it is time that we architectural historians ask ourselves, “Oh, how was it that I built it?”
NOTES


3. Since the submission to this essay to *Ars Orientalis*’ publisher, I have learned about Adam Hardy’s *Theory and Practice of Temple Architecture in Medieval India: Bhoja’s Samarāṅgasūtradhāra and the Bhojapur Line Drawings* (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts and Dev Publishers and Distributors, 2015).


6. In the twelfth-century, the Tamil poet Cekkilār (sometimes also transliterated as Sekkizhaar) recounted Pucālar’s life in his *Pēriya Purāṇam*. For a recent translation, see Sekkizhaar, *Pēriya Purāṇam*, condensed English version by G. Vannikanthan (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1985), 451–57.


