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ON THE TASK OF IDENTIFYING NEW ARCHIVES

A COPPERPLATE CHARTER ISSUED ON THE ORDERS of Rāṣṭrakūṭa Kṛṣṇarāja, 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.”¹

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.² 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 Phāṃsanā 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

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Line drawing of a segment of a base-molding unit decorated with customary ornament incised on a sandstone outcrop. Bhojpur, Madhya Pradesh, circa 950–1100. Photographs courtesy of the author

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 kinesio-logically inflected mode of instruction used to teach young Brahmin boys, the *R̥g 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 Kailāśanātha 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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Miniature Drāviḍa, Nāgara, and
Bhūmija spires set on engaged
columns. Lakṣmī Narasimha temple,
Nuggihalli, Karnataka, circa 1246

and Bhūmija spires emblazoned on the wall frieze of the Lakṣmī Narasimha 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 Koṭīśvara 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 Kailāśa mountain, the elegant, equipoised and shapely temple of Koṭīśa-Bhāva, freely ornamented with Drāviḍa, Bhūmija and Nāgara, and, with *bhadra*-offsets manipulated in many ways.⁷

Final thoughts. Using Dhaky's understanding of the Vesara as based on the Drāviḍa 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 Nāgara architecture, creatively reworked the conceptual basis and the form of a class of Drāviḍa 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 Drāviḍa.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

- 1 Ramcandra Gopal Bhandarkar, "The Rāṣṭrakūṭa King Kṛiṣṇarājai I and Ēlāpura," *Indian Antiquary* 12 (1883), 228–29, lines 14–17. The inscription likely refers to the freestanding, monolithic Kailāśanātha temple at Ellora, Maharashtra. The copperplate is currently in the collections of the British Library, London.
- 2 For a theorization of the ecstatic condition suggested by this inscription, see Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "Samvega, 'Aesthetic Shock,'" *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 7, no. 2 (1943), 174–79.
- 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 Bhojpur Line Drawings* (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts and Dev Publishers and Distributors, 2015).
- 4 For a careful documentation see Frits Staal, "Vedic Mudras," in *Agni: The Vedic Ritual of the Fire Altar*, vol. 2, ed. Frits Staal (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1983), 359–79.
- 5 For example, see the discussion on the 101 types of temples given in the seventh-century *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa* in Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*, vol. 2, (Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press, 1946), 411–26.
- 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, *Periya Puranam*, condensed English version by G. Vanmikanathan (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1985), 451–57.
- 7 Kupputur inscription of the Kotiśvara temple, translated by Dhaky in M. A. Dhaky, *The Indian Temple Forms in Karṇāṭa Inscriptions and Architecture* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1977), 3.
- 8 See Ajay Sinha, "Architectural Invention in Sacred Structures: The Case of Vesara Temples of Southern India," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 55 (1996), 382–99, and Ajay Sinha, *Imagining Architects: Creativity in the Religious Monuments of India* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2000).
- 9 Adam Hardy, "Tradition and Transformation: Continuity and Ingenuity in the Temples of Karnataka," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 60, no. 2 (2011), 180–99.
- 10 See Adam Hardy, "Designing a new Hoysala temple in Karnataka," forthcoming in *Changing Forms and Cultural Identity: Religious and Secular Iconographies: vol. 1: South Asian Archaeology and Art*, ed. Deborah Klimburg-Salter (Turnhout, Belgium: 2014), 99–118.