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On the development of a morphology for a symbolic architecture

India

MICHAEL W. MEISTER

For some years I have been working to decode the system of symbolism built into the architectural morphology of the Hindu temple.¹ This symbolism is incorporated into the temple in its plan, elevation, and decorative veneer. The present essay is intended as a prolegomenon for the study of such a symbolic morphology and as a statement that the programme for such a symbolic architecture is integral to its form, not a pastiche.²

Form of the temple

Temples to house images of divinity developed relatively late in India, long after religious speculation in the Vedic and early post-Vedic periods (ca. 1500–500 b.c.) that serves as a foundation for Hindu belief. The prototypical North Indian stone temple—developed between the fifth and ninth centuries A.D. (fig. 1: front cover)—is characterised by a square plan with cardinal offsets and a curvilinear superstructure with projecting vertical bands (*latās*, “creepers”) over the wall’s offsets; this terminates in a flat slab from which a round “neck” (*grīvā*) or shaft emerges that supports a large ribbed stone (*āmalaka*) with a stone vase as final crowning member (fig. 2).

Systemic origins

A number of suggestions concerning sources for this Nāgara temple-form have been made in the past,

1. “An Essay in Indian Architecture,” *Roopa Lekha* XLI (1973), pp. 35–47; “Construction and Conception: Maṇḍapikā Shrines of Central India,” *East and West*, new series, V (1972–1973), pp. 28–35; “Form in the North Indian Temple, a Field Survey,” Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., 1974; “Mandala and Practice in Nāgara Architecture in North India,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 99 (1979), pp. 204–219; “Altars and Shelters in India,” *aarp*, 16 (1979), p. 39; “Śiva’s Forts in Central India,” in *Discourses on Śiva*, ed. Michael W. Meister, Philadelphia, 1984, pp. 119–142; “Measurement and Proportion in Hindu Temple Architecture,” *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* X (1985), pp. 248–258; “Symbol and Surface; Masonic and Pillared Wall-Structures in North India,” *Artibus Asiae* XLVI (1985), pp. 129–148; “Prāsāda as Palace: Kūṭina Origins of the Nāgara Temple” (submitted to the A. Ghosh Commemoration Volume).

2. Compare Charles Jencks, *Towards a Symbolic Architecture*, New York, 1985.

ranging from bent bamboo frames (still used for temple-cars), to Aryan chariots, to divine headdresses (utilitarian, racial, and similitative explanations);³ James Ferguson and A. K. Coomaraswamy were the first historians to point out the formal as well as metaphoric relationship between the Nāgara temple’s tower and a multitiered palace.⁴ My own work, tracing the process of architectural conceptualization from the fourth to the seventh century A.D. that led to North India’s distinctive, symbolic temple-formula, would suggest that a systemic belief-pattern was a necessity for such a creation.

By systemic, in this context, I mean a consistent and integrated set of beliefs that had formal implications for the Hindu temple; by formal I mean an actual architectural morphology—a language of form through which a system of belief could be expressed. By expressed, in India, I mean activated, made actual, not simply a system of symbols or metaphor.

That is not to say that symbol and metaphor are not concepts applicable to the Hindu temple, as simile and allegory may be applicable to other art. For this discussion, I would accept simple dictionary definitions for *symbol* as “something that represents something else by association, resemblance, or convention, especially a material object used to represent something invisible” and *metaphor* as a “figure [of speech] in which a term is transferred from the object it ordinarily designates to an object it may designate only by implicit comparison or analogy.” Both the temple and the image within it fit such liminal definitions. *Simile* in Western art can be characterized as “a figure [of speech] in which two essentially unlike things are compared” and *allegory* as a “representation the apparent or superficial sense of

3. Percy Brown, *Indian Architecture (Buddhist and Hindu Periods)*, 3d revised edition, Bombay, 1959, p. 6, pl. V, fig. 4; William Simpson, “Origin and Mutation in Indian and Eastern Architecture,” *Transactions, Royal Institute of British Architects* VIII (1891), pp. 221–276; E. B. Havell, “Gupta Style of Architecture and the Origin of Śikhara,” *R. G. Bhandarkar Commemoration Volume*, Poona, 1917, pp. 443–446; N. C. Mehta, “The Genesis of the Śikhara,” *Rupam*, 13–14 (1923), pp. 29–30.

4. James Ferguson, *A History of Indian and Eastern Architecture*, 2d edition, London, 1910, p. 119; A. K. Coomaraswamy, *History of Indian and Indonesian Art*, New York, 1927, p. 83.

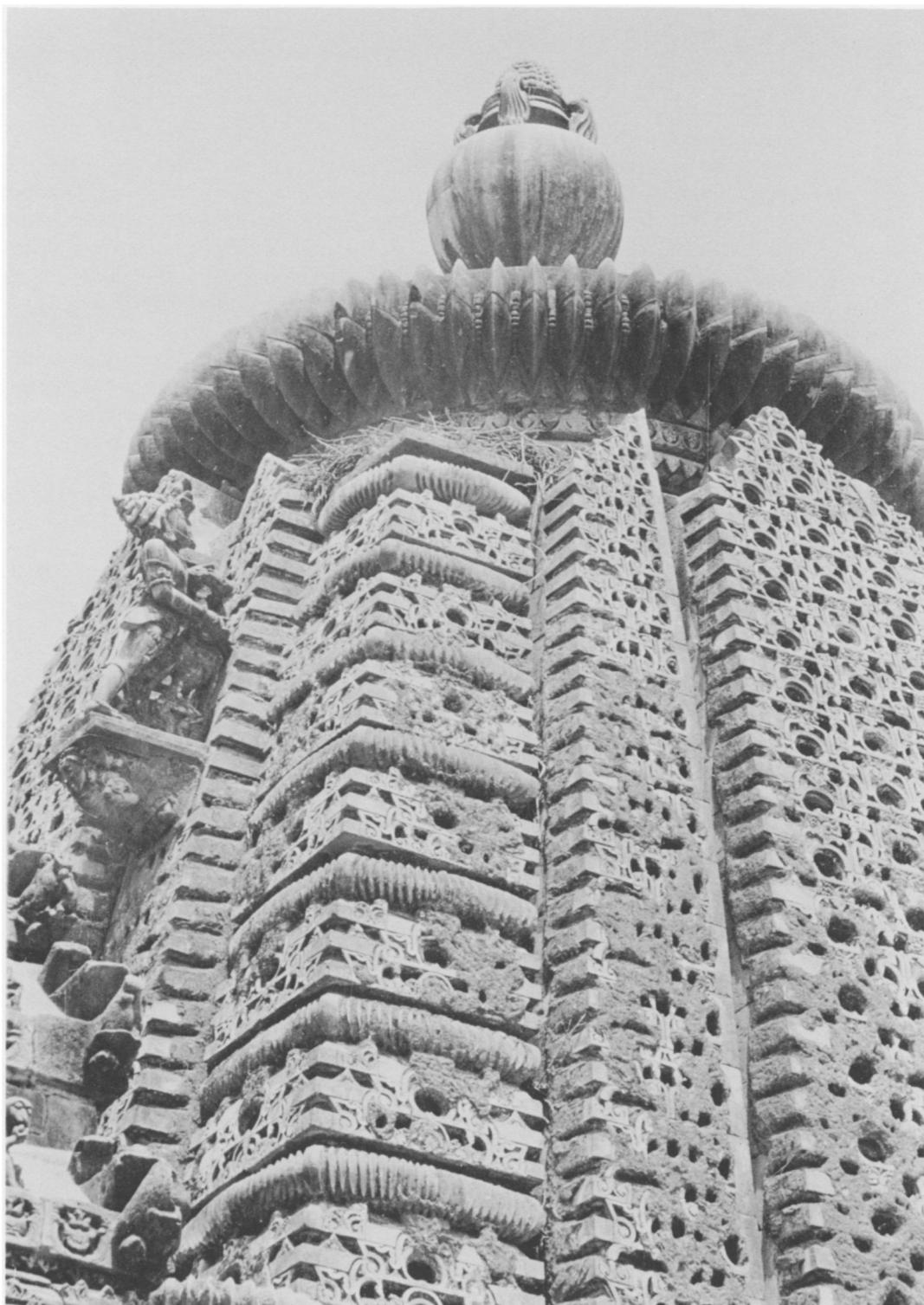


Figure 2. Badoli, Rajasthan. Ghateśvara temple, detail of superstructure, ca. early tenth century A.D.
Photograph copyright Michael W. Meister.

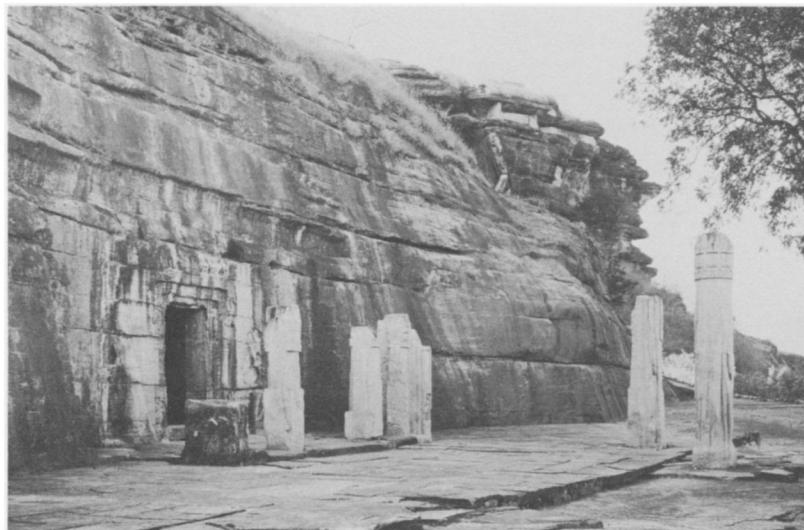


Figure 3. Udaigiri, Madhya Pradesh. Cave 19, ca. A.D. 425–450. Photograph copyright American Institute of Indian Studies, Varanasi (neg. no. 309-93).

which both parallels and illustrates a deeper sense.⁵ (The Hindu world, however, plays neither with unlike things nor superficially with surfaces.)⁶ J. Huizinga has characterized the transformation of symbolic to allegorical thinking in Europe particularly well, for me, in his *The Waning of the Middle Ages*.⁷

The major metaphors in the minds of Hindu temple-architects—as expressed both in texts and in foundation inscriptions—were those of the body of the temple as mountain and the sanctum as cave or womb (*garbha*) opening the earth to the approach of the worshiper (fig. 1). At the beginning of stone temple architecture in North India, however, as at Udaigiri in Central India (ca. A.D. 400), the cave was made an actuality, not a metaphor, carved out by architects from living rock as a means to make manifest the form of divinity present within (fig. 3). Later in the century, when a simple stone temple was constructed at the site of Nachna, the mountain on which Śiva resides was also made actual, realized by an architectural rustication on the surface of the temple's masonry that directly represented the rocks and animal-filled caverns of the slopes of Śiva's Mt. Kailāsa (fig. 4).⁸

5. Definitions taken from *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, New College Edition, Boston, 1979.

6. Meister, "Symbol and Surface."

7. New York, 1954, pp. 318–320 (first published in 1924 and translated in 1949).

8. A. Cunningham, *Archaeological Survey of India Reports X* (1874–1877), XXI (1884–1885); D. R. Patil, *Monuments of Udaigiri Hill*, Gwalior, 1948; *Archaeological Survey of India, Progress Report, Western Circle*, 1918–1919; Joanna G. Williams, *The Art of Gupta*

Architectural morphology

Inside the prototypal temple, a cubical sanctum (*garbhagṛha*; "womb") opens through an entry space and doorway to a portico that offers shelter to the individual worshiper in his approach to the divinity

India, Empire and Province, Princeton, 1982, pp. 40–49, 105–110. Williams, pl. 149, illustrates the Nachna temple as it stood late in the nineteenth century, its rusticated ambulatory walls intact, with a square masonry cell as a second story above the sanctum.



Figure 4. Nachna, Madhya Pradesh. "Pārvatī" temple, ca. A.D. 465. Outer ambulatory walls that once stood above the basement platform have been removed. Photograph copyright American Institute of Indian Studies, Varanasi (neg. no. 90-47).



Figure 5. Mukandara Pass, Rajasthan. Āmalaka from Śiva temple, ca. A.D. 425–450. Photograph copyright Michael W. Meister.

whose image appears within (fig. 1). The walls of the temple show images related to the central deity in niches on the cardinal offsets, and often have images of eight guardians of the quarters (Dikpālas) in niches on the corners.⁹

Manifestation

In Stella Kramrisch's phrase, the temple is a "monument of manifestation,"¹⁰ node between the flux of man's world and eternity, his doorway to divine realization as well as window through which the formless, eternal divine force of Hinduism is made visible and approachable as images in this world. The task facing architects in the formative period for Hindu temple architecture (from ca. A.D. 400 to 700) was to find means to develop an architectural morphology capable of expressing the complexities of a long religious tradition—through a structure intended to

9. Dikpālas appear as a consistent set on temple walls by late in the seventh century or early in the eighth century A.D. See George Michell, "The Regents of the Directions of Space: A Set of Sculptural Panels from Alampur," *aarp* 4 (1973), pp. 80–86; Michael W. Meister, "Mundeśvarī: Ambiguity and Certainty in the Analysis of a Temple Plan," in *Kalādarśana, American Studies in the Art of India*, ed. Joanna G. Williams, Delhi, 1981, pp. 77–90, and "Analysis of Temple Plans: Indor," *Artibus Asiae*, XLIII (1982), pp. 302–320; L. K. Tripathi, "Dikpāla Images on the Khajuraho Temples," *Bhāratī*, 9.2 (1965–1966), pp. 103–135.

10. Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*, 2 vols., Calcutta, 1946, p. 165; see also Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, New York, 1959.

shelter an image—in a period when worship of a personal deity had become a central focus for ritual.

In this essay, I intend primarily to outline some of the practical considerations faced by architects and some of the conceptual breakthroughs that made their final architectural formula possible.

Mimetic language

Certain aspects of the ritual and mimetic language of the Hindu temple have already been made clear by other studies.¹¹ A pot with germinating seeds is buried in the temple's foundation and, at completion of construction, the temple is consecrated by the placement of a crowning, lustrating vase as finial (fig. 2)—rituals that enliven the temple and connect it with both a cosmogony and an ecology of generation. Such a pot is also incorporated among the mouldings at the base of the temple's walls (the mouldings called *vedibandha*, the "base of the altar"; see fig. 26: front inside cover, and fig. 31).

The pillar that emerges from the top of the temple (fig. 1), crowned in North India by a capital that mimics the ribbed seed of the amala fruit (fig. 5), marks the temple as connected to myths of cosmic creation;

11. In particular, see Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*.

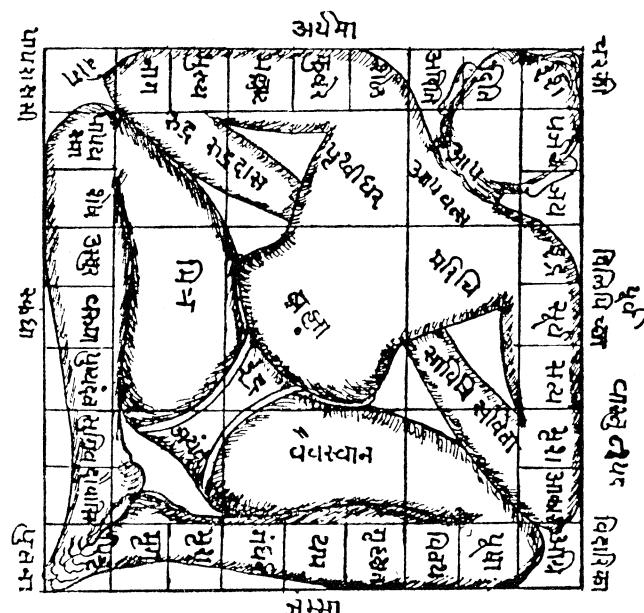


Figure 6. Vaśtupuruṣamāṇḍala. Drawing after O. Sompura.

by separating heaven and earth, the cosmic pillar makes possible the cycles of seasons and of existence.¹²

Plan

The plan of the temple takes on the square form of the Hindu universe¹³ (creation spreading from a central point toward the cardinal directions) measured by a sacred diagram called the *vāstupuruṣamāṇḍala* (fig. 6); this diagram evokes another creation myth wherein a demon's flayed skin was pinned down by a variety of divine forces, their places on the peripheries marking the boundaries of the created universe.¹⁴ This myth of the "house-spirit" seems to have its origin in the cosmogonic legend told in the *Rg Veda* of the dismemberment and sacrifice of the primeval being: fallen face downward, he is regenerated through the first ritual of sacrifice; face upward, he becomes the "lord of the *vāstu*"—both the altar and ground for building as well as cosmos.¹⁵

Used from Vedic times to construct brick altars for offerings of sacrifice,¹⁶ this square diagram marks the presence of a formless "supreme reality" (*brahman*) within its central squares and the loci for the "pinning" protective divinities in the peripheral squares.¹⁷ That the temple functioned, as had the altar in its construction, as a means toward transubstantiation by the sacrificer has been discussed by Kramrisch;¹⁸ the temple differs

12. Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*, p. 175; W. Norman Brown, "The Creation Myth of the *Rg Veda*," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 62 (1942), pp. 85–98; "Theories of Creation in the *Rg Veda*," *JAOS* 85 (1965), pp. 23–34; "Agni, Sun, Sacrifice and *Vāc*," *JAOS* 88 (1968), pp. 199–218; John Irwin, "'Aśokan' Pillars: Symbolism," *Burlington Magazine* 118 (1976), pp. 734–753; Mircea Eliade, "The Symbolism of the Center," in *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Princeton, 1974, pp. 12–17.

13. C. P. S. Menon, *Early Astronomy and Cosmology*, London, 1932.

14. Varāhamihira, *Bṛhat Saṁhitā*, trans. H. Kern, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, new series, IV–VII (1869–1874), ch. 53.43–66; Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*, pp. 29–39.

15. *Rg Veda* 10.90.1–16, in Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, trans., *Hindu Myths*, Hammondsorth, 1975, pp. 27–28; Varāhamihira, *Bṛhat Saṁhitā*, ch. 53.2–3; Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*, pp. 73–97.

16. Geometric texts of the fourth through the third centuries B.C. describe means to construct a cardinally oriented square for the altar; see P. N. Apte, "Some Points Connected with the Constructive Geometry of the Vedic Altars," *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* VII (1926), pp. 1–16; D. N. Bose, S. N. Sen, B. V. Subbarayappa, eds., *A Concise History of Science in India*, New Delhi, 1971, pp. 138–146.

17. Varāhamihira, *Bṛhat Saṁhitā*, ch. 53.43–66; Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*, pp. 46–61.

18. *The Hindu Temple*, p. 69: "In building up the sacrificial

Figure 7. *Mandala* of sixty-four squares used for temples in North India. Drawing after Kern.

from the altar, however, in that it offers to the worshiper a new means for approaching the transubstantiated world through the image within.

Temple architects took the squares surrounding the central "place for *brahman*" (*brahmasthāna*) in the *vāstupuruṣamāṇḍala* and used them to define the sheltering interior space (*garbha*, "womb") of the temple, within which was placed the image or object that was to act as "seed" for divine manifestation. On the outer walls of the temple, cardinal projections measured both the sacred central *brahmasthāna* and the space of the interior sanctum (fig. 8), making the temple's interior visible on the exterior walls.¹⁹

Such a use of the brick altar's sacred diagram to delimit temples intended to house images began at least by the fifth century A.D., as recorded in Varāhamihira's early sixth-century text, the *Bṛhat Saṁhitā*.²⁰ Its practical application to temple-plans extends through the whole history of Indian architecture, with variations and elaborations that tend to underscore the flexibility

body, the altar, the sacrificer in so doing becomes the very altar itself; he builds for himself a sacrificial body and by doing so he is beyond time and death."

19. Meister, "Mandala and Practice."

20. Varāhamihira discusses the *vāstupuruṣamāṇḍala* in his chapter "On Architecture" (ch. 53) and its application to houses, palaces, and cities; temples are a special case he discusses in ch. 56.

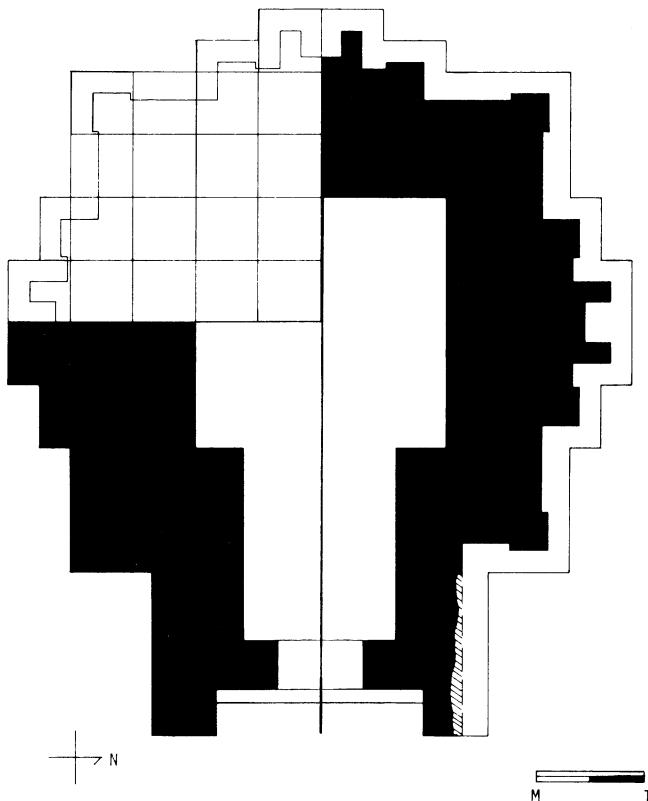


Figure 8. Mahua, Madhya Pradesh. Śiva temple, ca. mid-seventh century A.D., plan at wall frieze (right), base mouldings (lower left), and with constructing grid (upper left). Drawing copyright Michael W. Meister.

of master architects in making a design, but also their respect for the potency such a diagram gave to a structure.²¹

Elevation

The elevation of the North Indian temple focuses first on the pillar that acts as a symbolic axis rising through the structure (fig. 9). Physically present only as the circular neck (*grīvā*) and crowning ribbed capital (*āmalaka*) at the top of the temple (fig. 1), the pillar iconically surrounds the *brahmasthāna* at the center of the sanctum, and the worshiped image is encased by (or projected from) its negative presence (fig. 10).

The slab terminating the curvilinear superstructure at the top of the temple extends the inner dimensions of

21. Meister, "Maṇḍala and Practice" and "Measurement and Proportion."

the sanctum, forming an "upper altar" (*uttaravedī*) open to the sky, as were the sacrificial altars of ancient India. Texts refer to this slab both as altar (*vedī*) and "shoulder" (*skandha*),²² and certain late seventh- and early eighth-century temples actually place a small *vedikā* (pillared altar-platform) above this slab (fig. 11).

22. *Skandha* can also mean the branching crown of a tree, or particularly "that part of the stem where the branches begin" in the Rg Veda; a variant, *skanda*—meaning "spurting out, spilling, shedding"—could relate this *skandha* to the altar as the ground that receives the seed of the primordial father ("he pulls back, his seed falls down to earth, the place of sacrifice . . . and out of this [the gods] gave shape to Vāstospati, the guardian of the dwelling": Stella Kramrisch, *The Presence of Śiva*, Princeton, 1981, p. 3).

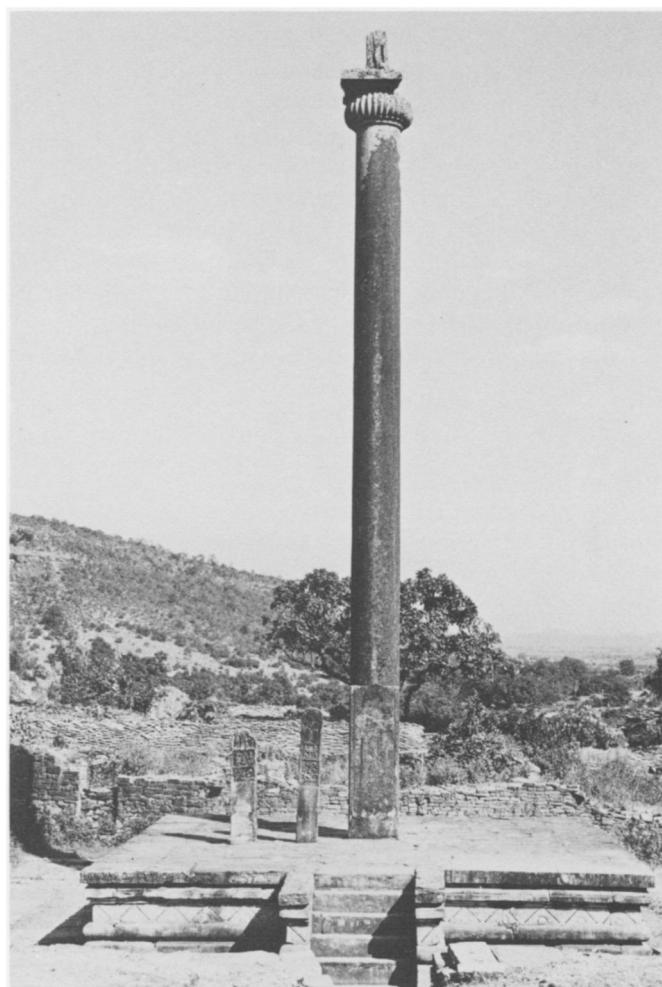


Figure 9. Pathari, Madhya Pradesh. Śiva temple, "Bhīmgajā" pillar, inscribed A.D. 860. Photograph copyright American Institute of Indian Studies, Varanasi (neg. no. 81-56).

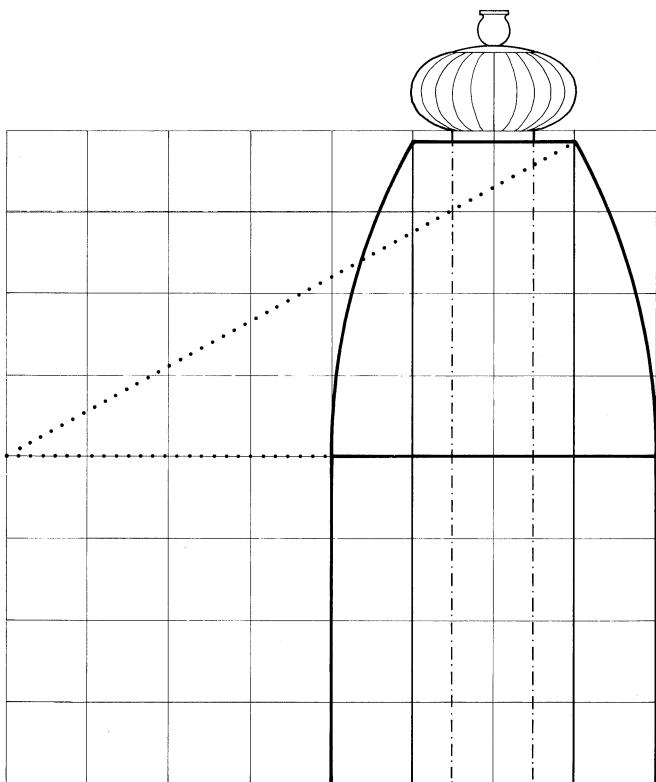


Figure 10. Determination of curvature. Drawing copyright Michael W. Meister.

as base for the pillar's "neck" and crowning āmalaka-stone.²³

The curvilinear tower of the North Indian temple thus forms a zone of transition between the outer dimensions of the *vāstumāṇḍala*, measured by the walls of the temple, and the interior dimensions of the sanctum, marked at the top of the temple by the upper *vedī* (fig. 10). The height of the temple in most instances is determined by a segment of a circle that is cut off by the dimensions of the upper and lower *vedīs*. The radius of this circle is a multiple of the width of the temple at the base of the superstructure; the larger the multiple, the shallower the curvature is and the higher the temple becomes (fig. 12).²⁴

Shelter

If the temple thus has incorporated into it both pillar and altar, emblems of creation and order (the sacrificial pillar and altar still acting separately as foci for rituals

23. Meister, "Construction and Conception."

24. In Orissa, a system with multiple centers of curvature was used.

of spiritual transformation by man),²⁵ it also houses divinity and gives shelter to the images by which divine forces become vulnerable and manifest. This sheltering role also is programmatic for the Hindu temple. Neither pillar nor altar can by itself shelter the divine image. A morphology for divine shelter, as well as for divine manifestation, was a requirement facing architects who turned to the development of a Hindu temple in the middle of the first millennium A.D.

In South India, stone temples surviving from ca. the seventh century A.D. onward take the form of terraced palaces (fig. 13). Concentrically organized, with a central axis, each pillared terrace (fig. 14) is ringed by an enclosure marked by square domed structures on the corners (*kūṭas*) with rectangular barrel-vaulted halls (*śālās*) set between. These are connected by vaulted cloister-lengths or balustrades (*hāra*) sometimes marked by dormer-roofed niches (*pañjaras*). On the top terrace, at the center, sits a large structure, taking the form of a domed "hut," which can be square, octagonal, or round.²⁶ The walls of this structure are called *grīvā* ("neck," as is the upper part of the symbolic pillar

25. A. K. Coomaraswamy, "Svayamāṭṛṇā: Janua Coeli," in Coomaraswamy, I: Selected Papers, Traditional Art and Symbolism, ed. Roger Lipsey, Princeton, 1977, pp. 465–520.

26. Kramrisch calls this the "High Temple," *The Hindu Temple*, pp. 194–196; the hut as shelter for the forest ascetic (*rishi*), whose acquired power (*tapas*) allowed him both to ascend toward divinity and to call divinity down to earth, provides an ancient prototype for the temple's sheltering function.



Figure 11. Pattadkal, Karnataka. Galagnātha temple, ca. early eighth century A.D. Photograph copyright American Institute of Indian Studies, Varanasi.

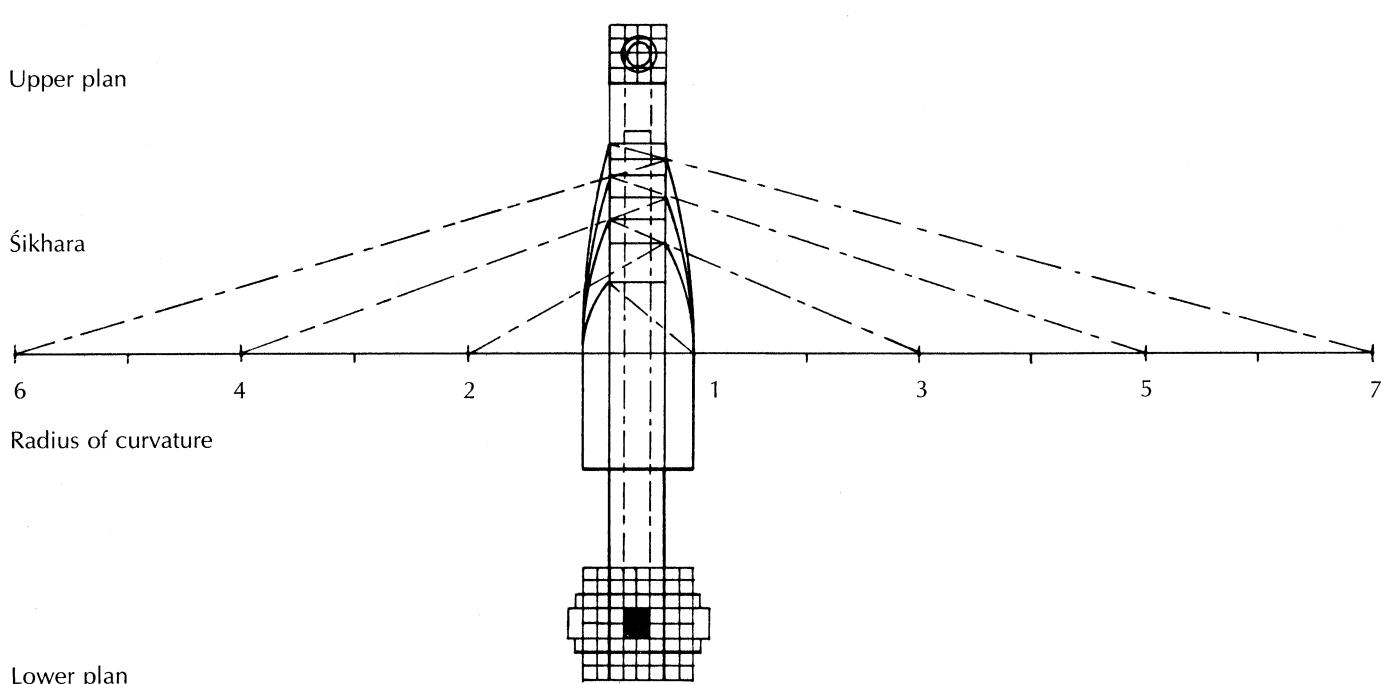


Figure 12. Radii of circles determining different heights and curvatures of *sikhara*. Drawing copyright Michael W. Meister.

piercing the temple in North India); its domical roof is called *sikhara* ("crown"), in contrast to the use of this term in North India, where the entire curvilinear tower is given that name.

South Indian temple architecture uses the morphology of early urban architecture in India²⁷—domed or barrel-vaulted structures, dormer windows in the shape of the vault's arched end, open pillared pavilions, balconies, fence railings, wooden braces, pillars, rafter ends, and so on—organized to suit a symbolic purpose. Carved or constructed in stone, the temple miniaturizes and compresses these forms (the ring of structures around each open terrace, for example—gradually losing its freestanding status—increasingly becomes a part of a decorative veneer) but the architectural forms referred to remain visually clear. As shelter for divinity, the temple in South India preserves the appearance of a royal palace; terraces increase in number but decrease proportionally as temples grow larger, built increasingly to a cosmic scale (fig. 15).

The upper structure—cap to the temple's vertical

27. A. K. Coomaraswamy, "Early Indian Architecture," *Eastern Art* II (1930), pp. 209–236; III (1931), pp. 181–217.

axis—retains much larger proportions than the lower terraces, but its form remains that of the domed hut sheltering the forest ascetic in ancient India. Although archetype for the power attainable by worshiper and sacrificer to transcend this world, the ascetic still remains vulnerable through his mortality; he too requires shelter, as does the tender seed planted as source for divine manifestation within the temple's sanctum.

As seed encapsulates the germ and womb the child, so also the temple encases the image manifesting divinity. That his house on earth takes the form of a royal palace is appropriate both to his status and to the level of his interaction with Hindu society.²⁸ The South Indian temple, by its emphasis on a morphology of shelter, suggests divine entry into and interaction with this world; the temple in North India, with its emphasis on a vertical axis and the placement of an upper *vedī*, suggests the temple's role for the worshiper as door from this world, through ritual, toward a divine realm beyond form.²⁹

28. See Burton Stein, ed., *South Indian Temples*, New Delhi, 1978.

29. Meister, "Altars and Shelters."

Complexity of symbolic surface

The temple in North India sheaths the axis of cosmogonic origination with the body of an altar, the square shape of which marks order in the created universe; it still clothes the body of that altar, however, with a veneer that makes the temple into a palace, sheltering the divine manifestation within. Ribbed āmalaka stones set within the corner bands of the temple's curvilinear tower divide it into stories; a fine lamination of cornices carved along the surfaces of curved facing stones fill the spaces between (figs. 1, 2). Across these cornice layers is carved a web of interlocking arched—"window" motifs that ultimately refer back to the arched vaults and dormers of early urban architecture in India. The great Indian art historian A. K. Coomaraswamy years ago recognized that these layers of cornices also represented roof-units,



Figure 13. Mahabalipuram, Tamil Nadu. Dharmarāja ratha, ca. mid-seventh century A.D. Photograph copyright American Institute of Indian Studies, Varanasi.

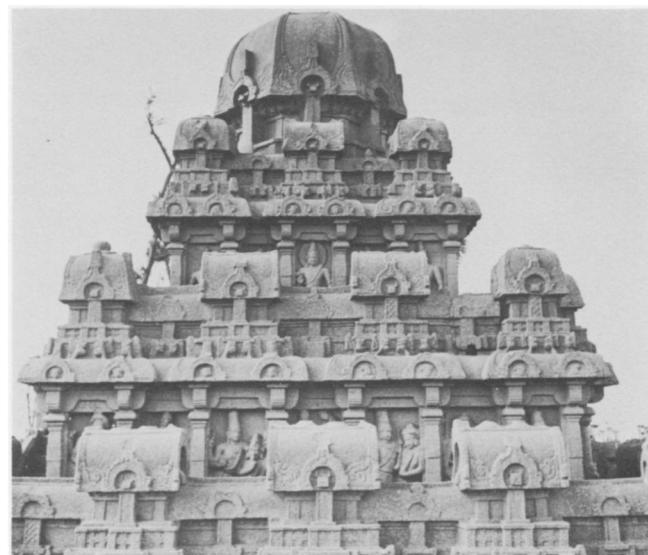


Figure 14. Dharmarāja ratha. Detail of superstructure. Photograph copyright American Institute of Indian Studies, Varanasi.

and he suggested two phases in the development of the veneer of the North Indian śikhara:

. . . the arrangement of gavākṣas [dormer-window motifs] along a cornice moulding representing a roof-unit is retained [and] with the decorative reduplication of vertically compressed roof-units . . . we arrive at the familiar medieval śikhara, composed of successive superimposed cornices.³⁰

The complexity of symbolic surface that developed for the North Indian temple's śikhara is greater than Coomaraswamy recognized, however. While some temples show only simple cornice layerings (fig. 16), the veneers of a number of seventh- and early eighth-century structures (figs. 11, 17, 26, 30) retain elements that suggest that the palace compacted into the body of the North Indian temple also was multiterraced, each having an enclosure, with corner kūṭas and sālās at cardinal points connected by cloister-balustrades, as was the case in South India (figs. 13–16).

Key to understanding this construction of the veneer of the North Indian temple is an analysis of the broad recess appearing between the corner bands, marked by āmalakas, on the towers of these early temples, and the

30. "Early Indian Architecture: III. Palaces," *Eastern Art* III (1931), p. 203.

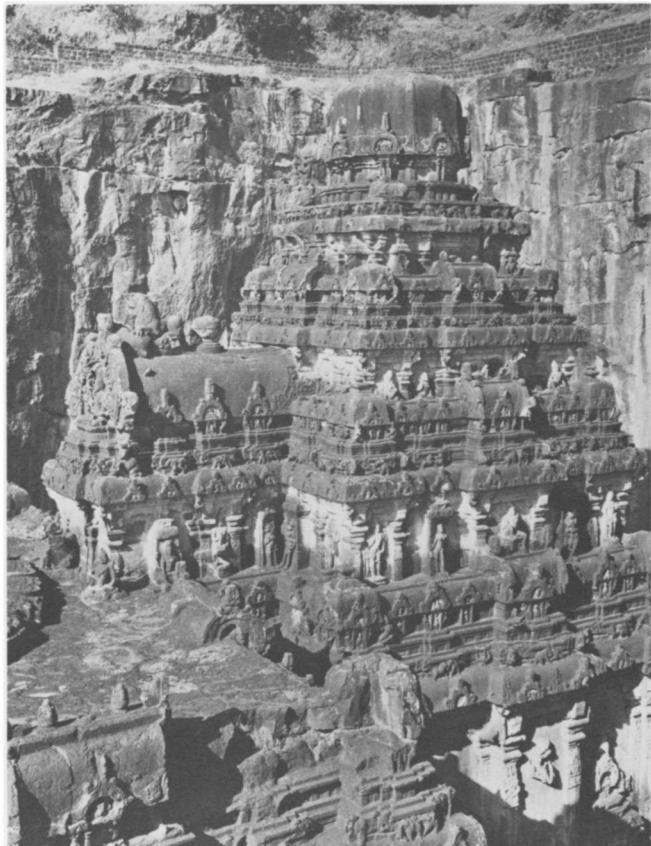


Figure 15. Ellora, Maharashtra. Kailāsa temple, ca. A.D. 750–775. Photograph copyright American Institute of Indian Studies, Varanasi (neg. no. 84-54).

central bands, made up of cornices covered by a screen of dormer-window motifs (fig. 17). These recesses retain small dormer-topped niches (*pañjaras*) consisting of two pillars supporting a pediment set against paired cornices, above which appear the tops of other pillars; each such unit is parallel to one of the stories marked on the corner bands of the *śikhara* by ribbed *āmalakas*. (These decorated recesses disappear from most North Indian temples by about A.D. 800.)³¹

This chain of *pañjara*-niches (*bālapañjara*)³² must be

31. Meister, "Prāsāda as Palace."

32. Architectural texts of a later period call the central spine of the temple's superstructure *pañjara* and the flanking bands *bālapañjara*. *Bāla* means "young," "waxing," as in a budding plant; *pañjara* is a "cage" or "aviary"—a formal simile, but symbolically a reference to the web of form on the temple's surface and to the phenomenal world.

understood to represent the cloister-balustrades (*hāra*) enclosing the palace's terraces, as in South India (fig. 14); the half-pillars above represent the pillars of the interior structure within this enclosure that supports the next story (fig. 18). In such a deconstruction of the temple's decorative surface (fig. 19), each unit (*khanḍa*) crowned by *āmalaka* along the outer band of the *śikhara* represents a freestanding aedicule, equivalent to the *kūṭas* of the South Indian tradition (or the domed corner pavilions of later Rajput palaces); the central bands of the *śikhara*—made up of a series of cornices covered by a net of dormer-window motifs—represent a decorative compaction of the out-turned *śālās* (wagon-vaulted halls) and fronting pediments that act as superstructure for actual entrances to temples in North India (fig. 1; compare figs. 26 and 27).³³

The metaphysics of manifestation implicit in the plan of the temple in North India makes each cardinal projection and the image placed on it an "entrance" to the divinity within (figs. 1, 30). A cross-plan of out-turned *śālās* can in fact be seen in the South Indian context on rare temples with four actual entrances, as on the structure in front of cave no. 32 at Ellora (fig.

33. Drāvida temples in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka also use such projecting *śukanāsas* (fig. 15); see B. R. Prasad, "Śukanāsā in Drāvidian Architecture," *Journal of the Oriental Institute*, Baroda, XX, 1 (1970), pp. 62–69.

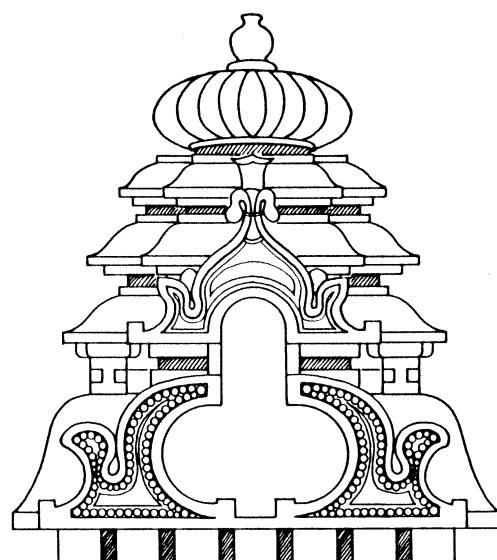


Figure 16. Sarnath, Uttar Pradesh. Shrine model on Buddhist lintel, ca. early sixth century A.D. Drawing by Michael W. Meister.

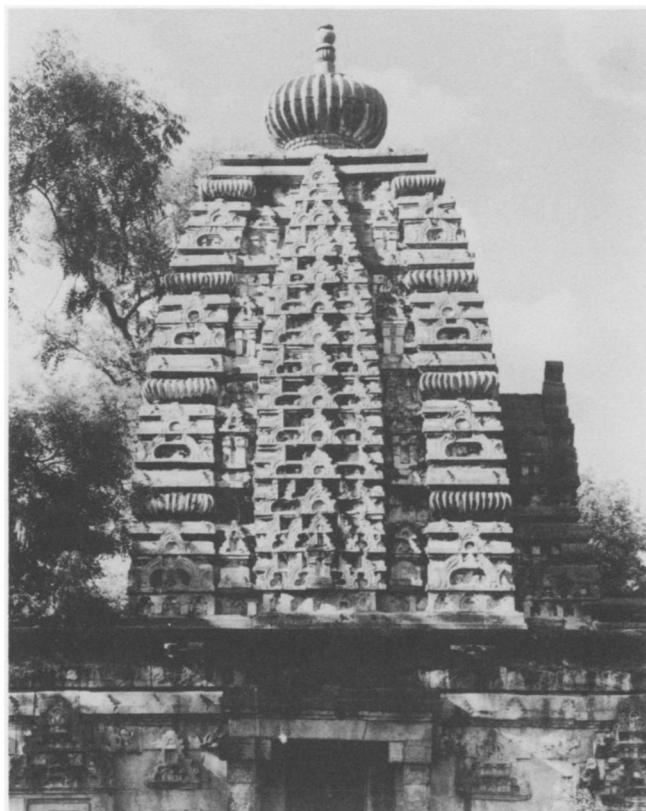


Figure 17. Alampur, Andhra Pradesh. Svarga Brahman temple, ca. A.D. 680–696. Photograph copyright American Institute of Indian Studies, Varanasi (neg. no. A17-14A).

20). A few rare brick structures from early in the seventh century A.D. in Central India represent the relatively deconstructed form of a four-faced, terraced, palatial structure on which the North Indian temple was partially modeled (fig. 21).

Symbolic substitution

This *kūṭina* palatial formula for the North Indian temple, with its corner aediculae (*kūṭas*) and enclosures for each story, although implicit in the temple's decoration at all stages does not fully explain the North Indian temple's final form or its process of origination. For the final formulation of the temple, two levels of substitution are still of considerable importance, one practical, the other symbolic.

The first replaces full stories by simple, molded, stone slabs, sometimes with a narrow pillared necking between—an appropriate expedient for early stone

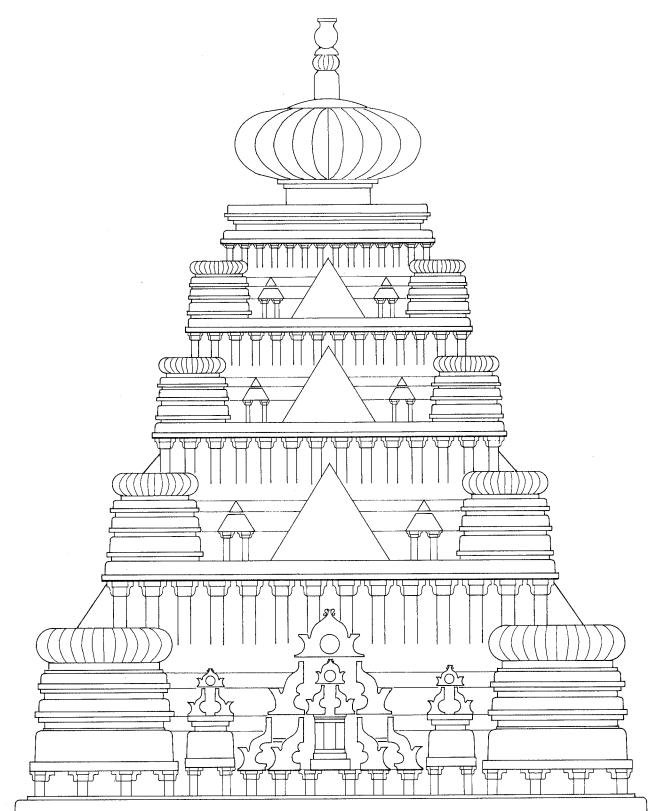


Figure 18. Structural implications of the Svarga Brahman temple's decorative veneer. Drawing copyright Michael W. Meister.

construction (fig. 16). This lamination of cornices continued to provide the ground for the decorative surfacing of the North Indian stone temple—more noticeable on early structures (fig. 30), but present throughout its history—supplying, in fact, a unit by which the veneer could be measured and controlled (fig. 2).

A second level of substitution had to do with the temple's systemic significance, allowing "morphemes" of symbolic potency to replace practical units of the palace's morphology. Simple platforms, for example, supporting *āmalakas* (figs. 22, 23), could act as corner aediculae, supplanting the palace's domed corner pavilions (fig. 21). Such a process of "symbolic substitution" preserves a morphology of symbolic significance—that of the sheltering palace—but replaces practical elements of that morphology (i.e., corner pavilions) by architectural elements that had greater symbolic potency than their utilitarian

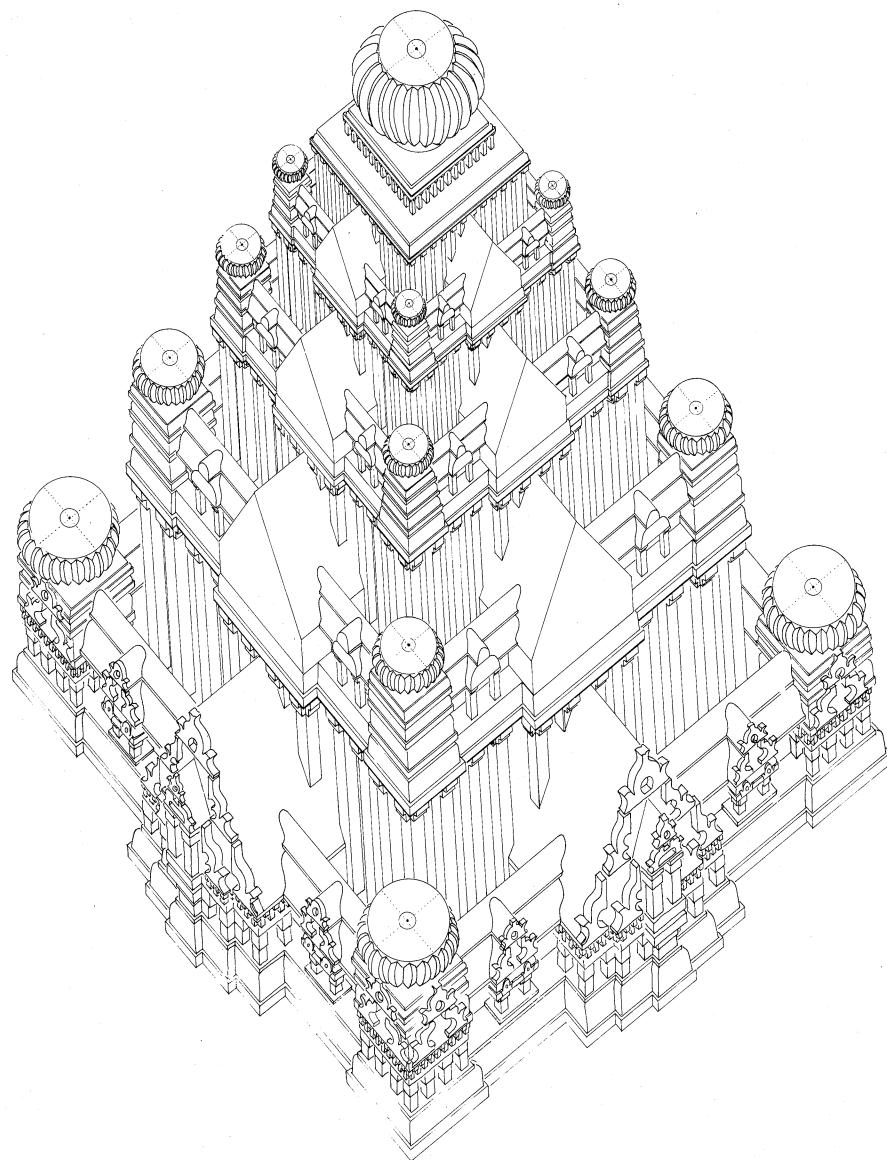


Figure 19. Axonometric drawing based on Viśva Brahmanā temple, Ālampur, and on figure 18. Drawing by Robert de Jager.

counterparts (i.e., altar platforms carrying āmalakas), and was a process essential for the final evolution of a morphology for the North Indian temple. Both constructional expediency and systemic potency contributed to this process of evolution.

Early versions of this process of symbolic substitution can be found in stone structures in the fifth century A.D. Simple lithic elements in such temples were used to suggest the more complex morphology of utilitarian

structures built of other materials. Inscriptions from the period refer to "towering" temples that "scrape the sky"³⁴—in the spires of which the Sun's chariot catches

34. Ganghadhar inscription of A.D. 423 in J. F. Fleet, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings (Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum III)*, Calcutta, 1888, pp. 76, 83; see also Richard Salomon, "Translation and Interpretation of the Kusumā Inscription," in *Indian Epigraphy, Its Bearing on the History of Art*, ed. Frederick M. Asher and G. S. Gai, Delhi, 1985, pp. 111–114.

its wheels—yet actual remains are considerably more modest.

Some structures, such as those represented on an early sixth-century lintel from Sarnath (fig. 16), simply had a series of stone slabs, moulded on the edges, to represent a series of roofs, crowned by an āmalaka. A stone temple constructed in the Mukandarrā pass in Rajasthan early in the fifth century A.D. used such simple stone stories, with a large projecting dormer, but āmalakas also stood on the corners of at least the lowermost story (fig. 5).³⁵

At Deogarh, early in the sixth century A.D., a small shrine-model carved on the jambs of the Viṣṇu temple's doorway shows simple cornice-stories faced by dormer windows; corner aediculae are presented as small stone platforms supporting āmalakas with freestanding finials

35. Michael W. Meister, "Darrā and the Early Gupta Tradition," *Chhavi II*, Varanasi, 1981, pp. 192–205. I date this temple to ca. A.D. 425–450.



Figure 20. Ellora, Maharashtra. Cave 32, forecourt, four-faced shrine, ca. early ninth century A.D. Photograph copyright American Institute of Indian Studies, Varanasi.

(fig. 22). Such stone altar-platforms used as architectural elements have been found from a number of fifth- and early sixth-century sites, and are represented on an

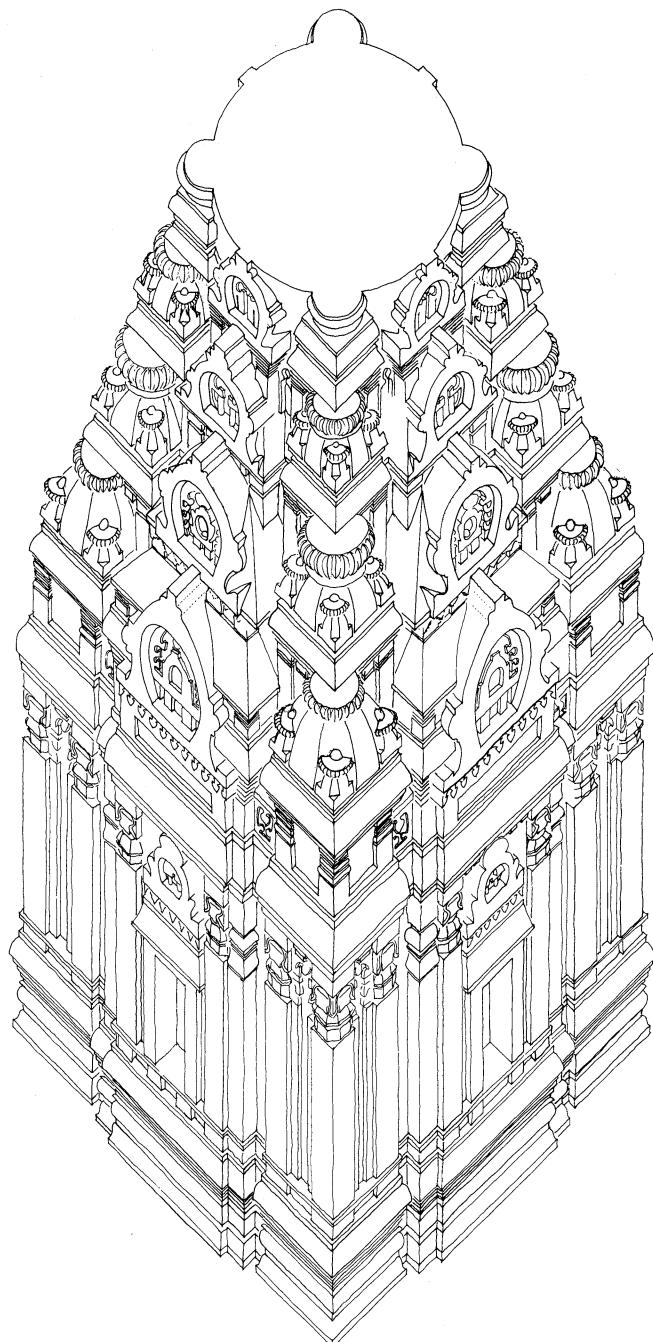


Figure 21. Rajim, Madhya Pradesh. Rājivalocana temple. Axonometric drawing by Robert de Jager.



Figure 22. Deogarh, Uttar Pradesh. Viṣṇu temple, shrine model on doorjamb, ca. early sixth century A.D. Photograph copyright Michael W. Meister.

early sixth-century lintel from Nagarī as aediculae flanking a pent-roofed structure (fig. 23).

A well-preserved representation of such a simplified shrine also survives, in brick, as a model placed on the surface of a small votive stūpa at Nālanda (fig. 24), taking the form of an early structure built of stone. The ground story has āmalakas or round bases set above the corners; two additional stories rise above, represented by broad recesses and overhanging cornice slabs, with a fronting dormer, and with a crowning āmalaka and finial. In such a simplified structure, its parts reduced to prototypical elements but its programme of proliferation clear, lies the root for the Nāgara temple's ultimate architectural flowering (fig. 32: back cover).³⁶

Material of construction

Brick may well have been the material in which the plastic potential for compaction of palatial forms into a symbolic surface first was recognized.³⁷ It was a

36. Pillars marking the four quarters are discussed in Menon, pp. 161–162; see also Stella Kramrisch, "The Four-Cornered Citadel of the Gods," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 75 (1955), pp. 184–187.

37. The process of developing a decorative, if not yet a symbolic, architectural facade out of elements taken from the urban architecture of ancient India had already begun as part of the Buddhist rock-cut cave-tradition from ca. the first century B.C. to third century A.D.

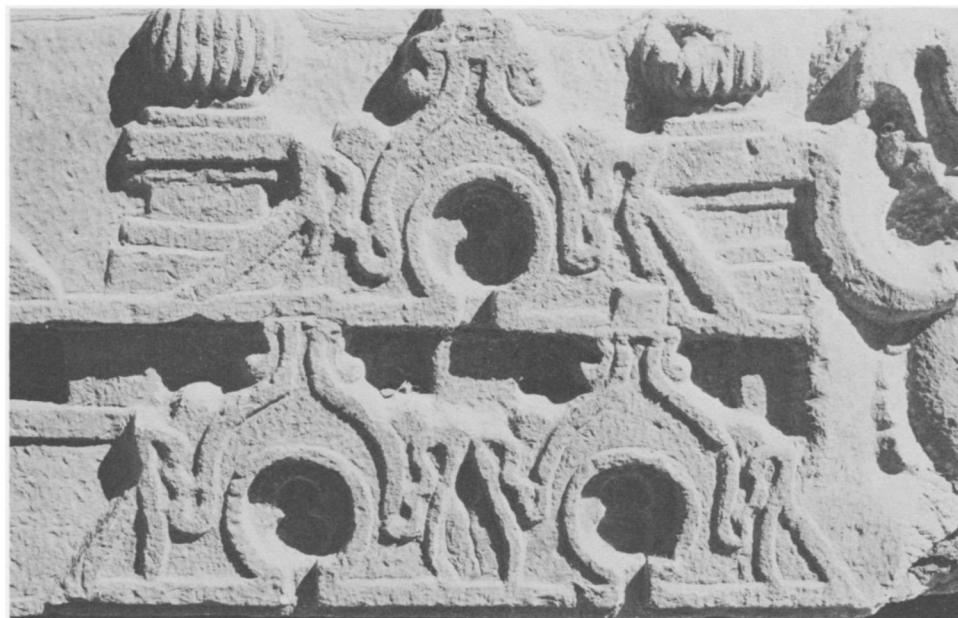


Figure 23. Nagarī, Rajasthan. Architectural model on lintel of gateway, ca. early sixth century A.D. Photograph copyright Michael W. Meister.

material used widely for structures in the Gangetic valley from the first to the seventh century A.D. The famed Buddhist temple at Bodhgayā, built first in the second and third century A.D., took the form of a tall pyramidal tower, its surface representing the facade of a storied palace. (Its sixth-century rebuilding, now much restored, added corner aediculae with āmalakas [fig. 25: back inside cover] as a reference to the abbreviated Nāgara formulas then developing in stone.)³⁸

Stone construction, however, provided strong reinforcement for simplification, and only the systemic substitution of elements first made by architects in that medium made possible a final formulation for the North Indian temple. A comparison of the superstructures of several seventh-century brick temples in Central India (figs. 25–28) and early stone-temple superstructures (figs. 17, 30) can perhaps make my distinction clear.

Corner kūṭas of the brick Rājivalocana temple at Rajim are represented as actual pavilions, with four pillars supporting a dome crowned by a small āmalaka (figs. 21, 27); central pavilions over cardinal offsets are pent-roofed, with large out-turned dormers. Although the form of this temple already has taken on illusionistic aspects, accordinig its elements and playing with scale to expand the effect its superstructure presents, its original architectural references remain visible.

The corner elements on the brick Lakṣmaṇa temple at Sirpur and successor temples in the region, however, take on a different form (figs. 28, 29), that of a simple pillared platform, above which appears the round neck and ribbed āmalaka of the cosmic pillar; this altarlike structure substitutes for the palace's domed corner pavilions, echoing the systemic substitution of each temple for the cosmos itself.³⁹

Stone temples further abstract these corner altar-pavilions into platforms made of a series of cornices (most often with no pillars below) on which āmalakas rest (figs. 1, 2, 11, 17, 30).

The temple at Rajim (figs. 21, 27) in North India stands parallel to the Dharmarāja-ratha at Mahābalipuram in South India (fig. 13) in its representation and partial compaction of a structural

38. A terracotta plaque from Kumrahar is often said to represent the earlier form of the Mahābodhi temple. See A. Cunningham, *Mahābodhi, or the Great Buddhist Temple at Buddhagaya*, London, 1892; Prudence Myer, "The Great Temple of Bodh-Gayā," *Art Bulletin* XL (1958), pp. 277–298.

39. The Āpastambha Śrautasūtra, a text from the fourth or third century B.C., states that "all the surface of the earth is *vedi* [altar]. . . Still, selecting a particular part of it and measuring it they should perform the *yajña* [sacrifice] there" (Apte, p. 14).



Figure 24. Nālandā, Bihar. Shrine model on votive Buddhist stūpa, ca. sixth/seventh century A.D. Photograph copyright Michael W. Meister.

model. The brick Lakṣmaṇa temple at Sirpur, however (fig. 20), suggests something else. The North Indian temple does not merely miniaturize and compact palatial forms; at Sirpur, as in stone temples, an element having symbolic potency has replaced the sheltering corner-pavilion of the palace. The fine laminate of cornice "roofs" is missing, however, that

one sees as part of the formulation of stone temples in this period (fig. 30), making this brick temple and its successors more illustrations of the systemic structure of the North Indian temple's final morphology than a primary source for it.

New language of form

The earliest evidence available for the consolidation of such formal elements into a symbolic surface for a stone temple comes from the early sixth-century Viṣṇu temple at Deogarh.⁴⁰ There, a surviving small fragment

40. M. S. Vats, "The Gupta Temple at Deogarh," *Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India*, no. 70, Delhi, 1952; Meister, "Darrā," p. 202.

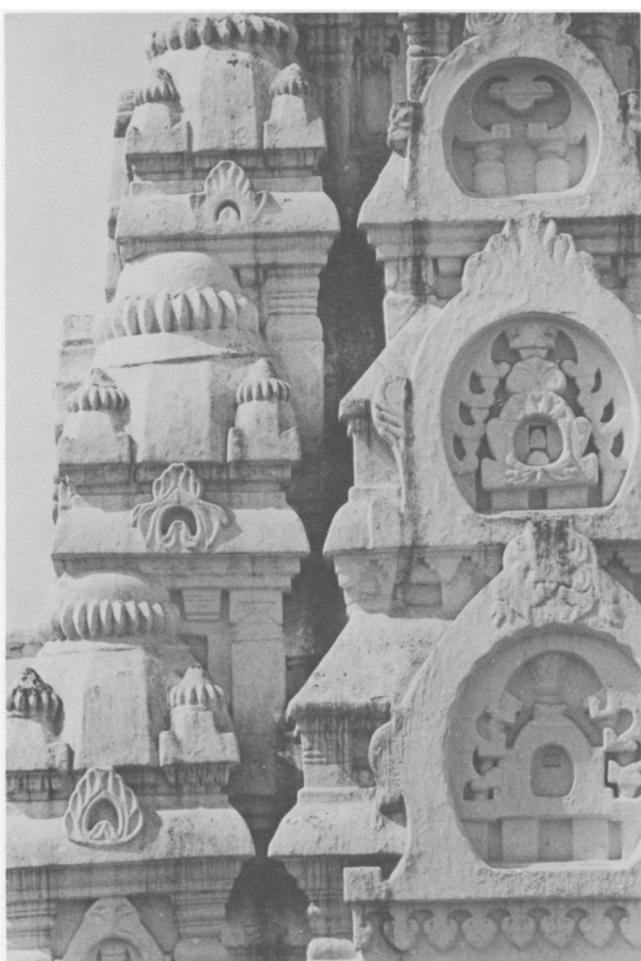


Figure 27. Rajim, Madhya Pradesh. Rājivalocana temple, superstructure detail, ca. A.D. 600. Photograph copyright Michael W. Meister.



Figure 28. Dhobini, Madhya Pradesh. Šiva temple, superstructure, detail of corner, ca. A.D. 650–700. Photograph copyright American Institute of Indian Studies, Varanasi (neg. no. 325-75).

of the original superstructure on the northeast shows that its corners were marked by small platforms of cornice mouldings, separated from the broad central projection by a narrow recess with a simple pañjara niche set within it (fig. 29). The central offset also was made up of cornice mouldings, the lower broader than that above, ornamented with split dormer-window motifs (echoing in the small pillars and niches in their interiors the temple's infinite architectural extension).

The use of cornices as substitutes for entire stories must have been a constructional expedient at first in the building of stone temples (fig. 16). Such temples in fact continued to be built in different parts of India for a number of centuries, indicating a series of stories merely by piling up cornice-slabs.⁴¹ The use of such

41. Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*, p. 181, fig. b; such shrines exist in all parts of India, from the Himalayan foothills to at least Karnataka, except for the deep South.

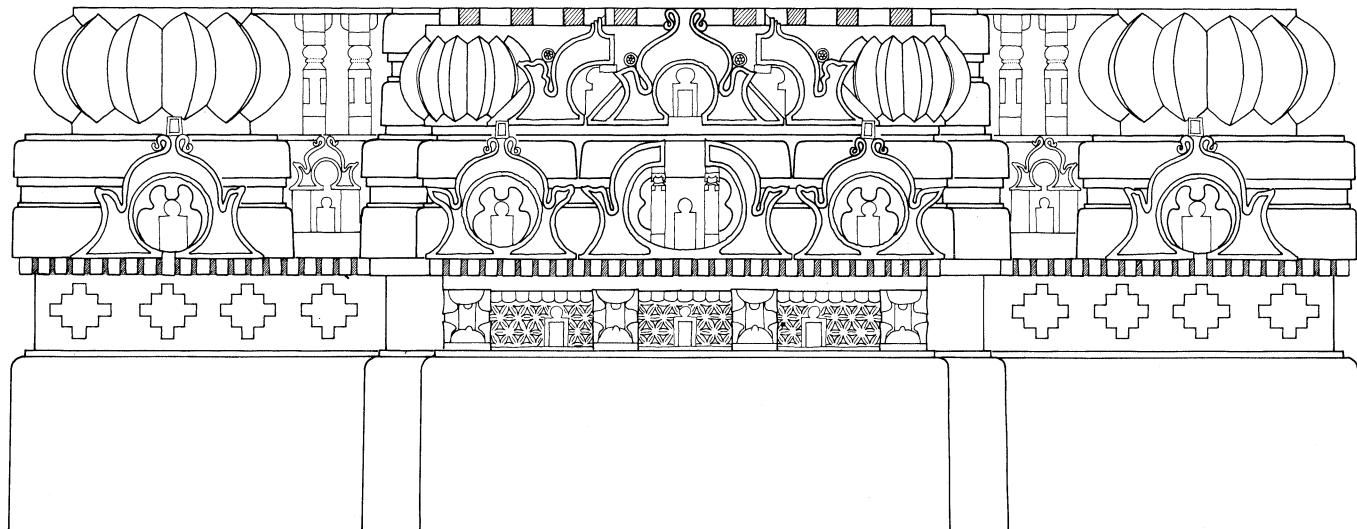


Figure 29. Deogarh, Uttar Pradesh. Viṣṇu temple, first level of superstructure. Restoration by Michael W. Meister. Drawing by Robert de Jager.



Figure 30. Bhubaneswar, Orissa. Paraśurameśvara temple from south, ca. A.D. 600–650. Photograph copyright American Institute of Indian Studies, Varanasi (neg. no. 48–45).

roof-cornices in organizing the Kūṭina body of Nāgara stone temples in this period, however (figs. 2, 11, 17, 30, 32), also had a symbolic value, enriching and extending the architectural reference of the temple's surface. The utility of such mouldings as a means of controlling and consolidating a complex symbolic surface for the stone temple also gradually was recognized—as at Deogarh—allowing the architect an integration of morphological elements first fully realized in temples surviving from early in the seventh century A.D. (figs. 17, 30). In these, the temple-tower takes on an independence from its architectural roots, emerging as a formal architectural element of great potency in its own right.

This new unified form created by architects itself became a potent symbol for emergent Hinduism, acting as morpheme in a new language of architecture with its own history, subject to growth and change. In some instances, plans were rotated around the stable center of the sanctum's axis (fig. 31), marking the path of time and buttressing the shrine—as image of the created cosmos—against chaos.⁴² Subspires could cluster around the central core, replicating the main spire (fig. 32: back cover) as every temple in India participates in the profligacy of original creation. This architecture, as it evolved, fitted the temple ever better to the older metaphors of cave and mountain, incorporating within its architectural morphology the

42. Michael W. Meister, "The Udayeśvara Temple Plan," *Śrīnidihiḥ. Perspectives in Indian Archaeology*, Madras, 1983, pp. 85–93; and "Analysis of Temple Plans" and "Śiva's Forts."



Figure 31. Indor, Madhya Pradesh. Śiva temple, detail of north wall, ca. mid-eighth century A.D. Photograph copyright American Institute of Indian Studies, Varanasi (neg. no. 49-304).

temple as axis, altar, fortress, palace, and marker of time—and thus as appropriate container for the germinating presence of the manifest image presented for worship within.