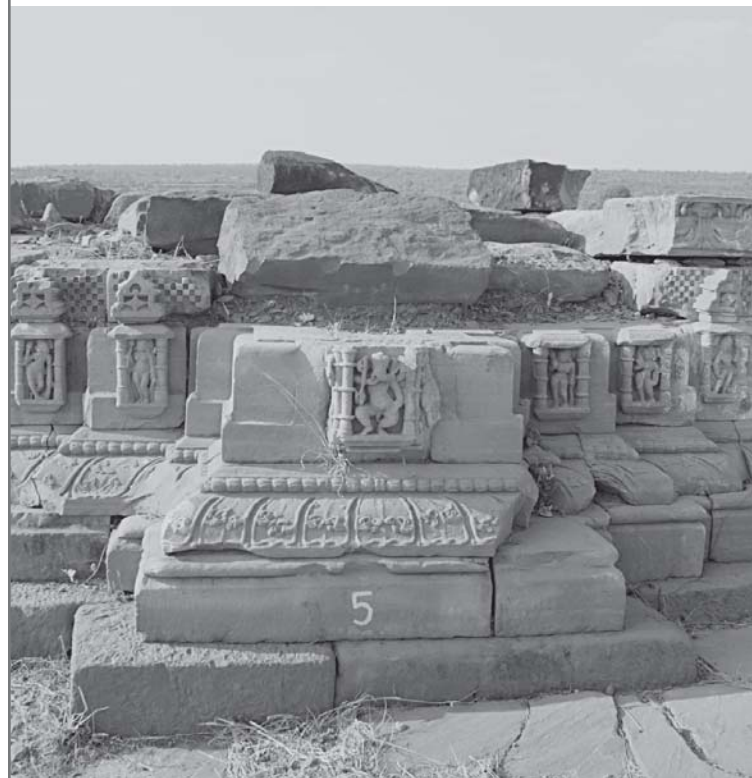


Ashapuri
Resurrecting a
Medieval Temple Site

Adam Hardy



Ashapuri

Resurrecting a Medieval Temple Site

The village of Ashapuri is about 32 km south of Bhopal, and 6 km from the famous, unfinished Shiva temple of Bhojpur, attributed to the eleventh-century Paramara King Bhoja (c.1010-55).¹ The temple remains that lie in the vicinity of Ashapuri, now under the protection of the Directorate of Archaeology, Archives and Museums (DAAM), Government of Madhya Pradesh, testify to a flourishing cult centre during the Pratihara and Paramara periods, with continuous activity in temple construction from the ninth to eleventh centuries. When Bhoja began construction of his gigantic royal temple at Bhojpur, Ashapuri would have been the major urban settlement nearby. Previously on the edge of the alluvial plain of the Betwa, when Bhoja dammed the river at Bhojpur with enormous stone blocks, Ashapuri must have become a lakeside town.

When I first visited Ashapuri in 2000, a small group of ruined medieval temples was apparent at Bilota, south-east of the village, and a small museum exhibiting sculpture and architectural fragments, of startlingly fine quality for such a little-known site. Seven years later, Dr. O.P. Mishra of DAAM showed me a far more extensive concentration of temple remains on a hill to the north of the village, sloping down to an ancient tank. At that time, the remains consisted of overgrown heaps of blackened fragments, with just the pillars and beams of one *mandapa* standing out of the rubble beside the *ghat*. Since then, DAAM have cleared, cleaned and laid out

thousands of the fragments, revealing the bases of some twenty-six temples. This site is known nowadays as the Bhutanatha (usually Bhootnath, i.e. Lord of Ghosts) group of temples, after the name given locally to the largest of them, numbered Temple 21.

Whether their destruction is due to natural or human causes is still uncertain: earthquake or warfare? Anything beyond the eleventh century is conspicuously absent from the Bhutanatha group, and from Bilota. So, did the same calamity that halted work at Bhojpur spell the end of Ashapuri at the same time?

The full historical and architectural significance of Ashapuri and Bhojpur can only be understood if the two sites are considered together. Stylistic peculiarities at Bhojpur point to Ashapuri as the main source for masons. Used to carving exquisite detail for small, intimately related shrines, the shift to the cyclopean scale of Bhojpur must have been as bewildering as it had been for their Chola counterparts a few years earlier, accustomed to *alpavimanas* and called to build the Brihadishvara at Thanjavur. The Bhojpur temple as it stands is not obviously a Bhumija temple, although I have argued elsewhere that it was intended to be; but, regardless of this, its detailing and ample other evidence at the site show it to be the creation of craftsmen specialising in this new form of temple that the Paramaras made their preferred one, exemplified most gloriously in the Udayeshvara temple at Udayapur (dedicated in 1080 CE). Unlike other temple forms, the Bhumija appears as if it has been invented rather than having evolved gradually. Beyond its legacy to Bhojpur of a new temple mode and—in terms of the characteristics and hallmarks of the school of masons—a new style, Ashapuri holds among its scattered fragments the remains of what must be the earliest known Bhumija temples.

Whether or not the new form was invented here, the site exhibits the kind of thinking underlying that invention, with its experimentation in composite temple designs and its awareness of different regional traditions.

With O.P. Mishra's encouragement, I had recently begun to take a more sustained interest in Ashapuri, when the opportunity arose to work on the site as part of a larger project funded by World Monuments Fund (WMF) in partnership with DAAM, set up to develop conservation strategies for important architectural sites under the protection of the Government of Madhya Pradesh.² For many of the sites, the task is to preserve and sensitively enhance the often crumbling fabric of relatively intact structures. In the case of Ashapuri, any meaningful plan depends on first attempting, on paper initially, to reconstruct the designs of the monuments that were there, and to ascertain which of them could potentially be there once again if enough pieces of the jigsaw puzzle remain.

The larger puzzle, in the Bhutanatha group alone, consists of twenty-six smaller puzzles, somewhat jumbled together and only provisionally sorted, with many pieces missing. To search across the site for a given piece is often made difficult by vegetation, especially during and after the monsoon. Some pieces are at the site museum, or the State Archaeology Museum or the Birla Museum in Bhopal. Ideally, it might be most fruitful to work on the whole site at once and reveal all the temple designs in one go, but realities demand that the work should proceed sequentially. For each temple, in turn, we are making a photographic database of the fragments, with key dimensions. As each numbered batch inevitably contains pieces from several of the monuments, a sense of the character of all the different temples is emerging.



Fig. 24.1. Temple 17, Ashapuri, north-west.

This paper presents the reconstructions of the two temples for which we have so far completed feasibility reports. These, namely Temples 5 and 17, are two of the earlier monuments from the Pratihara period. The paper concludes with some reflections on the later monuments, including the Bhutanatha and related temples that are so important as unique exemplars of the initial blossoming of the Bhumija mode. It was this aspect of the site that had drawn me to it again, but it quickly became evident that the 'Pratihara' works, representative of the widespread, mainstream, 'post-Gupta', Nagara tradition of central India, were no mere run-of-the-mill products of that tradition, interesting only as precursors to a moment of glory at the dawn of the Bhumija. They were fine examples; they showed the play of ideas within that tradition, and they exhibited forms known nowhere else.

TEMPLE 17

Temple 17 (Fig. 24.1) is probably the earliest monument in the group, dating from around the first half of the ninth century. A high proportion of the original stones are available – around eighty percent – so this temple would be a prime candidate for anastylosis (reassembly with a minimum of replaced stones). Facing east, the small shrine stands in a paved, sunken area, and was perhaps originally encased, gem-like, by a *prakara* wall of less durable material. The sunken level is entered from the east down steps, and the space in front of the temple is flanked to the north and south by a pair of recesses in the retaining wall, containing pedestals for images.

A *pitha* (pedestal) that supposedly supported the main deity of this temple is now in the Temple 17 stack, and a fine image of Surya kept at the site museum is thought by DAAM to be from Temple 17, although it does

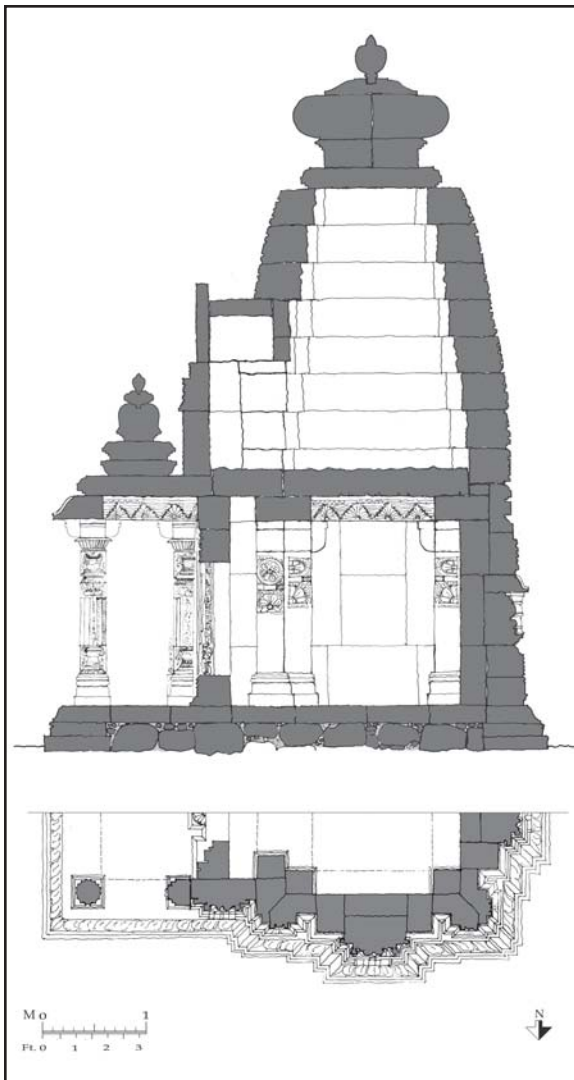


Fig. 24.2. Temple 17, reconstructed plan and section.

not fit the *pitha*. That this was a Surya temple is suggested by a Surya figure at the centre of a lintel that corresponds to the door-jambs from this shrine. The museum also contains a well-preserved giant *gavaksha* with Surya at the centre, from the crowning of a *shukanasa*. This fits the dimensions of Temple 17, but one cannot be certain that it belongs to it. If Temple 17 was indeed dedicated to Surya, we shall see that the iconography of the exterior is surprising.

The platform (*pitha*) of the temple, which consists solely of a *jadyakumbha* (cyma moulding), and the *vedibandha* (moulded base) that stands on it, though considerably dislodged, survives largely intact, with its

mainly double-skin construction clearly visible. It comprises the usual *kumbha*, *kalasha* and *kapotali* mouldings. The *kumbha* is made in one course of masonry, while the subsequent course includes both *kalasha* and *kapotali*. A *tulapitha* (joist-end moulding) takes the place of the *kalasha* in the *pratirathas*. Niches containing celestial figures appear on the *bhadras* and on the projections of the *kapili* (the wall of the *antarala*). Also in-situ are the door-sill, five pilasters and a portion of slab/beam. A *mukhamandapa* (porch) leads to an *antarala* (antechamber), then on to the *garbhagriha*. The entrance from the *antarala* is flanked by pilasters ornamented with lotus roundels, and there were originally four corner pilasters to carry the beams to support the *garbhagriha* ceiling slab.

From these standing portions, along with the surviving fragments, we are able to reconstruct the temple design (Figs. 24.2–24.3). It belongs to the Latina (single-spired) mode of Nagara temple, and is *pancharatha* (of five projections) with the *pratirathas* (intermediate projections) merged with the *bhadra* (central projection). Over the niches of the *bhadras* were ribbed *chhadyas* supporting *udgamas* (pediments). The *pratirathas* and adjacent recesses are plain, except for the *kinkinikajala* (band of small bells) that runs all along the top of the *jangha*. The *karnas* (corner projections), each displaying a niche, are not made out of single blocks, or of coursed corner blocks; instead, each *karna* comprises two blocks running the full *jangha* height, joined at a mitred corner. The two *karna* faces abutting the junction with the *kapili* are a little more than half the width of the others, with a correspondingly truncated niche.

Fortunately, the five principal images from the exterior walls have survived, together with the flanking pilasters and *shardhulas* (leonine monsters). The deities and their disposition are unusual for a Surya

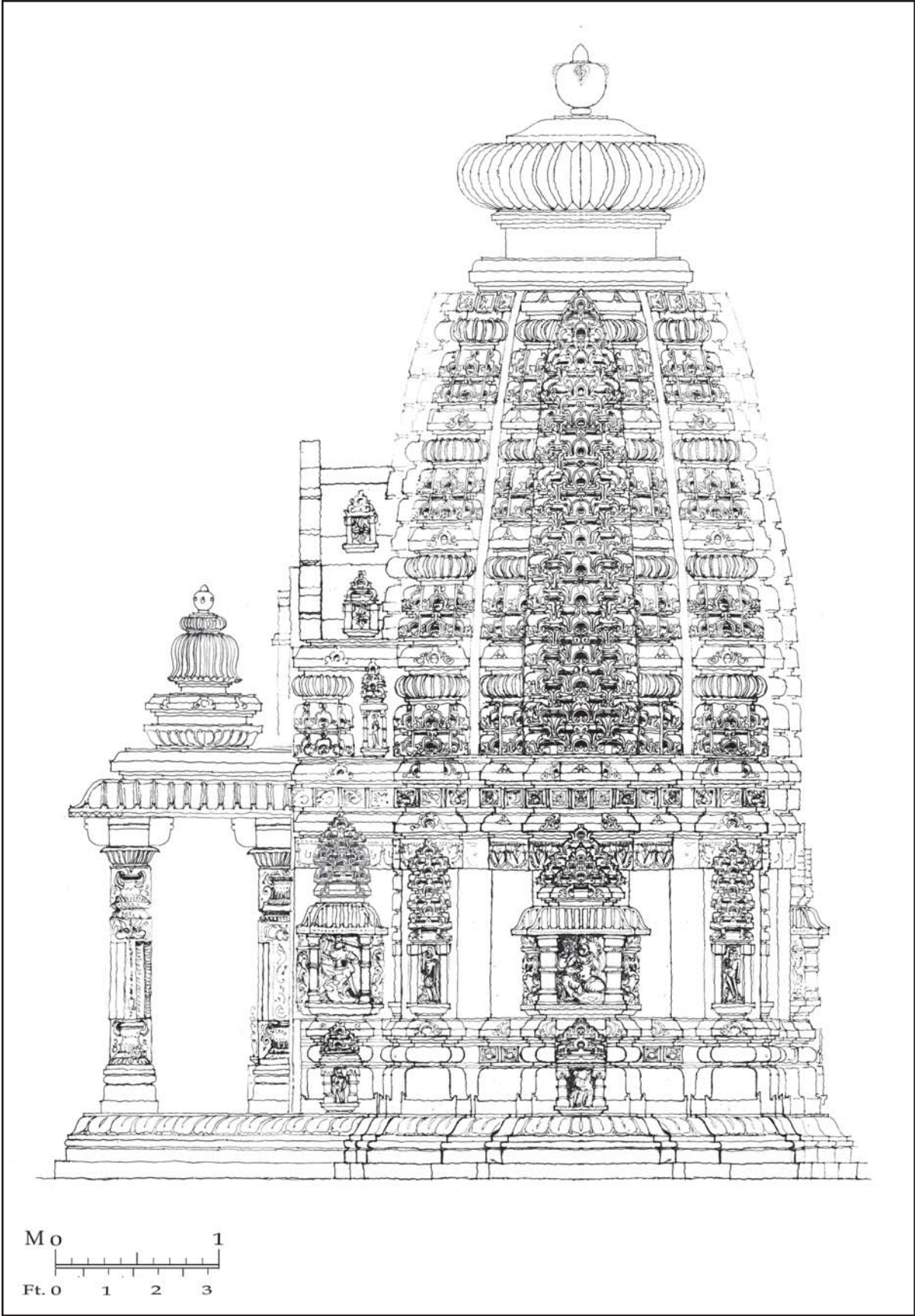


Fig. 24.3. Temple 17, reconstructed north elevation.



Fig. 24.4. Ganesha from west *bhadra* of Temple 17, now at Ashapuri site museum.

temple. In the *bhadrās* we do not find Surya, as generally seen, unproblematically, in central Indian Surya temples of the ninth century, such as those at Mandkheda and Umri. We have Karttikeya, Ganesha (Fig. 24.4), and Kubera, no doubt in the south, west and north, respectively. The south *kapili* niche contained an image of Parvati in penance, the north *kapili* niche Durga Mahishasuramardini. Each *karna* face displays a niche containing a Dikpala (guardian of the direction).

Over the *jangha*, the *varandika* (cornice zone), typically, consists of a pair of *kapotali* mouldings with a *tulasangraha* (joist-end moulding) in between. In the *bhadrās* and the *kapili*, the top *gavaksha* of the *udgama* penetrates the lower *kapotali* – the beginnings

of an upward growth of the *bhadra* element into the base of the *shikhara* (cf. Fig. 24.10). The *shikhara* has four *bhumis* (levels). Five would be more usual for a *pancharatha* plan: comparable temple designs at Terahi (Shiva temple) and Umri (Surya temple) have respectively five and seven *bhumis*. Yet the profile is elegant and not at all stunted. The *pratilatas*, like the *karnas*, are articulated with *amalaka*-topped *kutas*, giving a ‘double *venukosha*’ (Fig. 24.5). Construction is in eight courses of even height throughout, each comprising two mouldings. While many of the *karnas* are made from two blocks, with a vertical joint, the *latas* and *pratilatas* are carved together from single large blocks. The *ghanta* at the summit of the *shikhara* would have consisted of the usual *griva* (neck), *amalaka*, *padmashirshaka* (inverted lotus moulding) and *kalasha* (pot-finial).

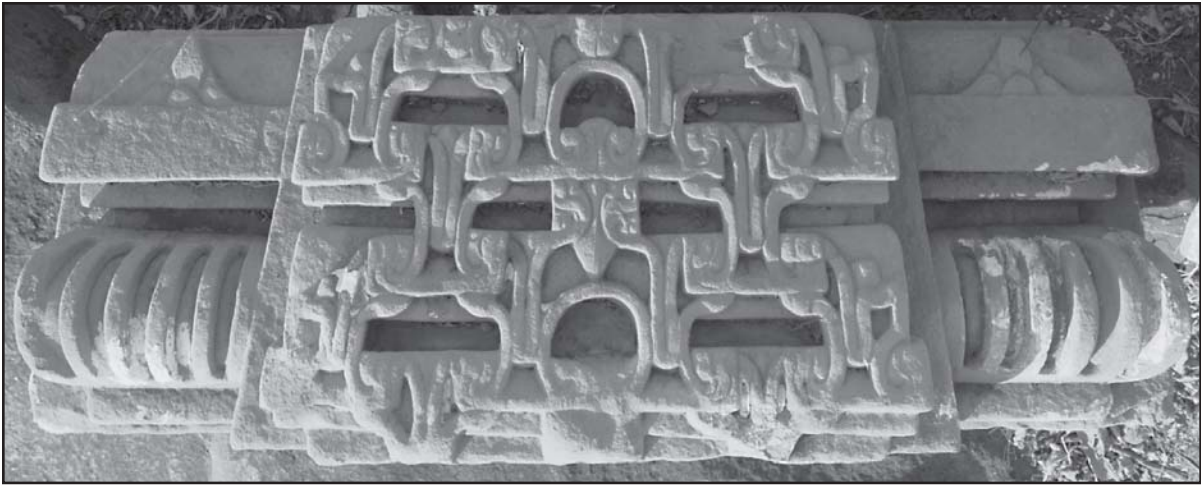


Fig. 24.5. Temple 17, course from *lata/pratilatas*.

TEMPLE 5

Temple 5, belonging to around the end of the ninth century or the beginning of the tenth, is among the most lavish of the Pratihara temples at Ashapuri. Only around twenty percent of the stone fragments from this temple have so far been located. Others may come to light in different parts of the site, but reassembly does not seem at present to be a viable option. However, the design of the

mulaprasada (shrine proper) can be worked out with a fair degree of certainty; and sections of the temple could be put together to make sense for the visitor. The carving retains much of the sensuousness of the three-centuries old mainstream central Indian Nagara tradition that created it, while arriving at an unprecedented degree of proliferation in its *saptaratha* (seven-projection) plan, deducible from the elaborate *pitha*, which has survived reasonably intact (Fig. 24.6). This west-facing temple would have comprised the



Fig. 24.6. Temple 5, Ashapuri, *pitha*, south.

same basic elements as in Temple 17 – *mukhamandapa*, *antarala* and *garbhagriha*. The exact size of the *garbhagriha* (cella) and *skandha* (shoulder platform) are not known, but can be estimated with reasonable accuracy on the basis of comparative examples and textual prescriptions.

The bottom layer of a beautiful cusped ceiling survives from the *mukhamandapa*, together with the third, innermost layer. The porch superstructure as shown in the drawings is largely conjectural at this stage, but it must be layered to accommodate the ceiling, and it may eventually be possible to locate the ribbed *ghanta* ('bell') that fits. A lintel and a pair of door jambs (Fig. 24.7) fit together to make a superb doorway.

In the design of the *mulaprasada* (Figs. 24.8–24.9), Temple 5 is one of the monuments at Ashapuri that begin to fill another of the gaps in the architectural history of central India, beyond the story of the emergent Bhumija. This is the time when the Nagara tradition in this region begins to experiment with composite temple forms. In parallel with similar developments in western India, the unitary Latina form of Nagara temple proliferates into composite (*anekandaka*) forms from the second half of the ninth century, eventually developing into the fully blown Shekhari form, familiar at Khajuraho. Evidence of the transitional stage is rare in central India, the Maladevi temple, Gyaraspur, being the earliest example intact, from perhaps a little after the middle of the ninth century. The remains of Temple 5, and others at Ashapuri of a similar late-ninth/early-tenth century date, contain segments of miniature *shikharas*. Temple 5 turns out not to be truly *anekandaka*, as the miniature *shikharas* that belong to it fit in the *jangha* (wall) as a crowning to the *bhadra* (central projection), rather than clustering around the base of the main *shikhara*. Thus, it exhibits a beautiful precursor of the Shekhari concept in the form of a miniature *shikhara* crowning the



Fig. 24.7. Temple 5, right hand door jamb, with Jamuna.

bhadra to create a lesser temple form emerging at the centre of the whole.

As the temple was slightly set back from the edge of the platform, it is not possible to determine the details of the plan directly from the *pitha*, but they can be deduced from the dimensions of the various surviving pieces from the *vedibandha*, the *jangha* and so forth. The *vedibandha* comprises the usual *kumbha*, *kalasha* and *kapotali* mouldings, crowned by a lush *manchika*. In the *pratibhadra*, the *kapotali* is replaced by a *tulapitha*, as in the *pratiratha* of Temple 17. Every projection has a pedimented niche. In the *jangha*, the projections are fronted by niches. The (now empty) deep one in the *bhadra* and those in the *karnas* have *chhadya* canopies. No doubt, Dikpalas were housed in the *karnas* (corner projections), while intermediate projections house heavenly maidens. The *pratibhadra* takes the form of a *ghatapallava* pillar, like

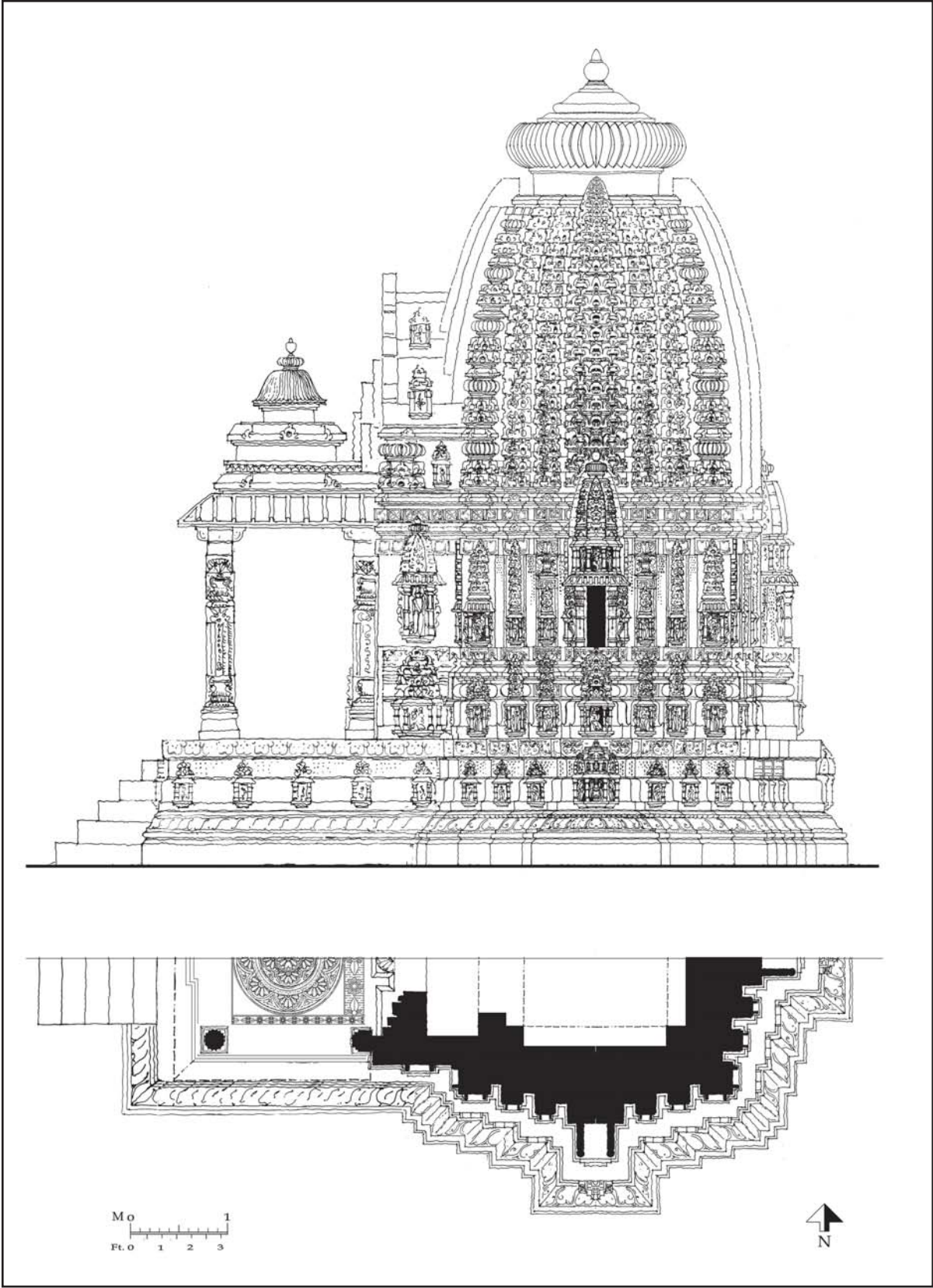


Fig. 24.8. Temple 5, reconstructed plan and south elevation.

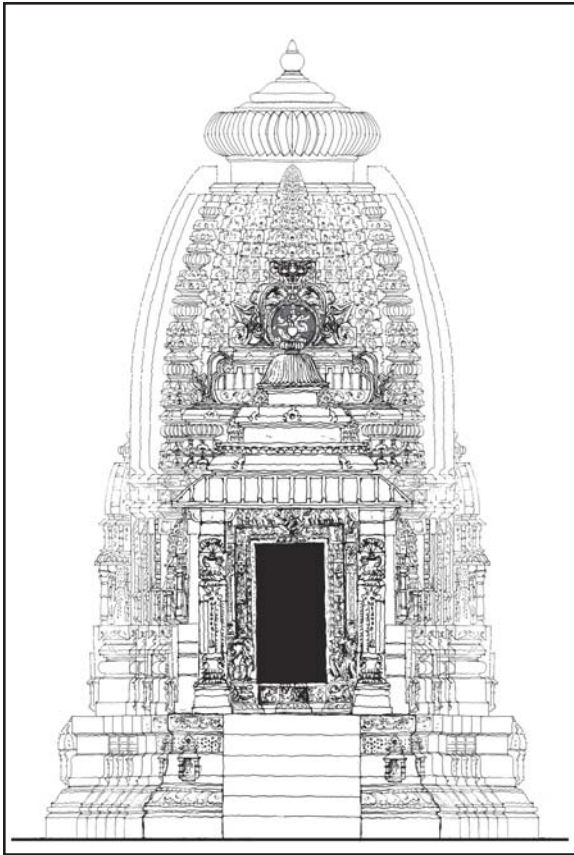


Fig. 24.9. Temple 5, reconstructed west elevation.

the sole *pratiratha* of many ninth-century temples in this tradition (e.g. Surya temple, Madkheda, Shiva temple, Terahi). Along the top of the *jangha* runs the usual *kinkinikajala* (band of bells).

Of the deities from the *jangha*, only a niche slab housing Vishnu (?) can be located at present. It seems to fit the *jangha* of the *kapili*, and to have been crowned by a miniature *shikhara* that would have terminated in the *varandika*. Now that the niche sizes are known, it is possible that some of the other deities – the three main ones from the central niches, along with the Dikpalas – may be identified among the pieces housed in museums.

The *varandika* follows the same design as in Temple 17, and is penetrated by the remarkable miniature *shikhara* that completes the projecting shrine forming the centrepiece of the whole composition (Fig. 24.10).

Surviving pieces from the ascending chain of *karnakutas* (corner pavilions) from the *shikhara* exhibit a sequence of diminishing sizes that point to a five-*bhumi* (storey) composition. This would give a height of 1.07 times the width (plausible though a little lower than would be expected) and a radius of about three times the width (*trigunasutra*). The intermediate facets (*pratikarnas* and *pratilatas*) follow the same coursing as the *karnas*. However, the central *lata* spine has wider courses, and consequently a larger-scale *jala* (network) of *gavakshas*. This is not typical, and would have caused a vertical break in the structure, difficult to overcome with the usual iron clamps.

THE LATER PHASES

Among the stone fragments are *kutas*, close in date and style to Temple 5, in the form of miniature *shikhharas* that clearly belong at the corners in a girdle of pavilions at the base of the *shikhara* of the temple. In other words, they belong to temples that are *anekandaka*, though not yet Shekhari (with *urahshringas* or half-*shikhharas* over the *bhadra*). At least one such temple at the site is of the next stylistic phase, firmly into the tenth century. A distinctly different character has arisen by this time. It is a little less plastic, more linear, tending to leave ornament stencil-like rather than fleshing it out. Its unfailing hallmark lies in the shape of the *gavakshas*, squarer at the shoulders, and with the flat tops of the ears protruding out to the limit of their bounding grid (Fig. 24.11).³ This stylistic shift appears to have been worked out within the long-established Nagara workshops. But not in isolation: as much as the progressive proliferation of aedicular temple components, this latest transmutation of the horseshoe arch motif takes hold across the varied regional idioms of central and western India, from Khajuraho to Kiradu. The Nagara schools continue to develop, as seen in the temples of



Fig. 24.10. Temple 5, miniature *shikhara* over the *bhadra* penetrating the base of the *lata*.

the Chandellas and Kachchhapaghatas to the north of Malwa, and of the western Indian schools that coalesced in western India into the widespread Maru-Gurjara style.

The next shift is different. While the Nagara schools go on developing the new 'Bhumija tradition', as it may be called, though not isolated from those strands, shows a distinct character that gives the impression of having arisen through deliberate choice and through contacts with more southerly, Deccani practices. The already known Bhumija temples of central India are manifestly the creations of guilds or workshops specialising in that mode. Moulding shapes are precise, many with pronounced double flexions, and with a certain hardness counterbalanced by a linear, graphic quality bound up with the process of drawing on the stone before cutting and carving it. This general character also takes hold during the eleventh century in the

lower Deccan, and links with the south are evident in many aspects of Bhumija monuments, including the pillar type used ubiquitously, the *vedi* moulding forming the *skandha* platform at the top of the *shikhara*, the form of the *mahanasi* at the base of the *lata* spine (Fig. 24.12), and indeed the whole *bhadra* element of which this is the crown, termed the *shala* in the *Samaranganasutradhara*. That text – like



Fig. 24.11. *Udgama* from a tenth-century temple at Ashapuri.



Fig. 24.12. Part of one of the *mahanasis* over a *bhadra* from the Bhutanatha temple, Ashapuri.

Bhojpur, another of Bhoja's monumental enterprises – also specifies for given Bhumija temple types that particular elements should be either Nagara or Dravida.⁴ The Dravida (or *dravidakarma*) *kuta* is widespread in Bhumija temples, often visible as a constituent element of the *kutas* (miniature *shikharas*) crowning the *kutastambhas*. Whereas the *kutastambhas* of the early Bhumija temple at Bilota are crowned by miniature Latina *shikharas*, those of the Bhutanatha (Fig. 24.13) already have composite *kutas*, with lesser, diminutive *kutas* on the corners that may have been conceived as Dravida.

At Ashapuri, the Bhumija wave arrived sometime around the last years of the tenth century. Regardless of whether this was where that wave was set in motion, a fascinating aspect of the site is that it rolls out among the plentiful currents of the continuing Nagara tradition. However, I am beginning to doubt

my earlier sense that there we can see something of a transition. The style as well as the form of the Bhumija monuments is different from the start, though it is difficult to unravel whether this was through a local effort to transform the way things were done, assimilating foreign influences and perhaps with an influx of artists from elsewhere, or



Fig. 24.13. Fragment of *kutastambhas* from a Bhumija *shikhara* at Ashapuri, probably the Bhutanatha.

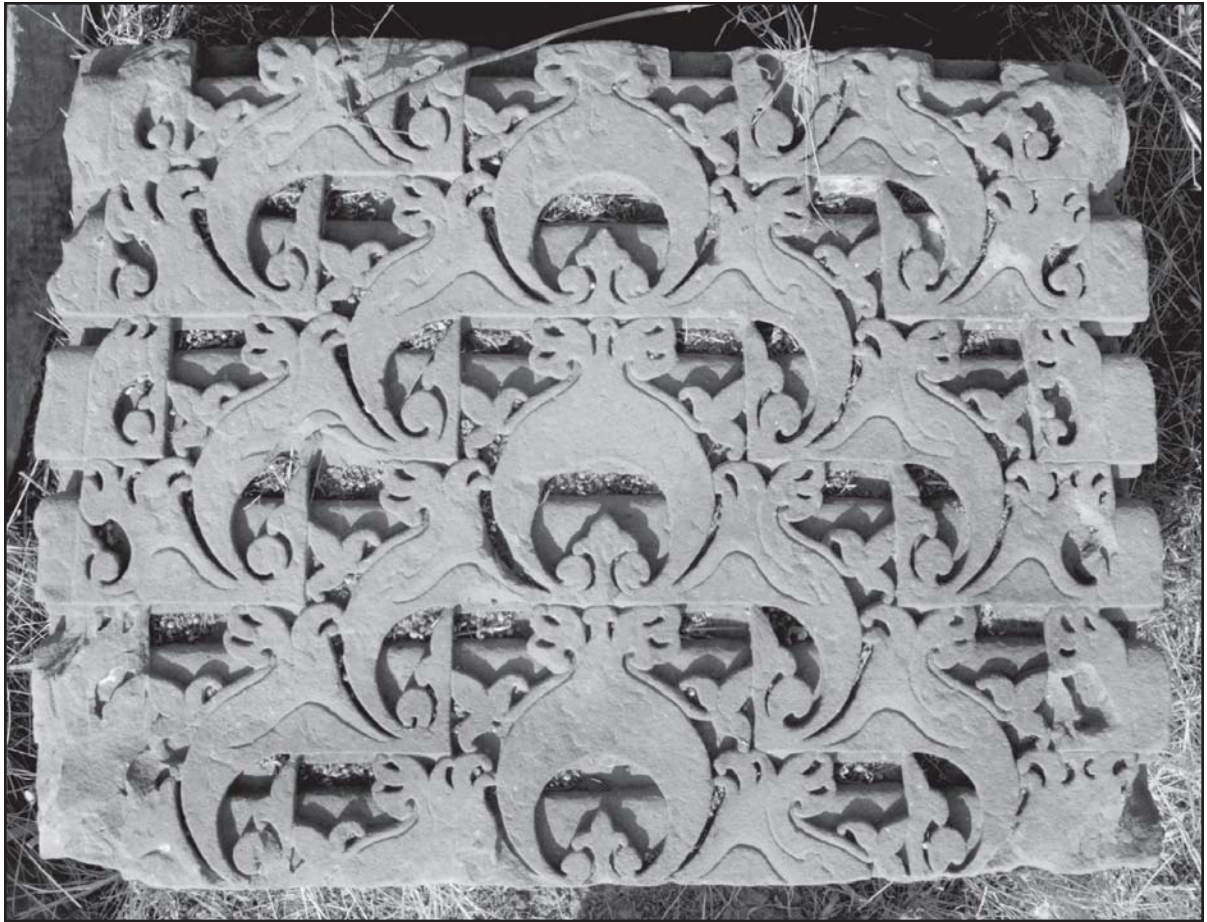


Fig. 24.14. Part of a *lata* from a Bhumija *shikhara*, probably from the *Bhutanatha*.

whether the Bhumija works could somehow be the products of an entirely new school. Where would they have come from? However, it may have happened, the sensuous, vivacious sculpture, and a delight in linearity (Fig. 24.14) and crisp, curvaceous mouldings, give the creations of Ashapuri at the turn of the eleventh century a freshness and life that subsequent Bhumija monuments rarely live up to. Bhojpur, in its sheer scale, is inevitably drier in quality.

The Bhumija works so far discovered among the temple bases and fragments at Ashapuri and neighbouring Bilota are the small one at the latter site, the large Bhutanatha and two adjacent shrines, and another small temple presently outside the gate of the Bhutanatha compound. All are

orthogonal, no doubt created before the stellate possibilities of the Bhumija mode were developed, although star shapes begin to appear in the ceilings of the Bhutanatha. The earliest of the Bhumija monuments seems to be the exquisite little Bilota temple. Of the Bhutanatha, the *pitha* remains (Fig. 24.15), with some pieces of the *khura* (hoof) and of the lower part of the separate *kumbha*. The plan of the Bhutanatha, visible in the *pitha*, is of an east-facing temple with the main shrine to the west, and with two half-shrines projecting from the sides of the *mandapa* to the north and south. This almost *trikuta* arrangement is one of the aspects redolent of Deccani connections. Of these southern links, the most remarkable manifestation is found in fragments, probably from the Bhutanatha, of Dravida *kutas* (Fig. 24.16). Though not what a south Indian *sthapati* would recognise as Dravida, these are far from the ultra-stylised



Fig. 24.15. *Pitha* of the Bhutanatha, west side.

dravida karmakutas found in most Bhumija temples, which hardly anyone recognises as Dravida. Over the *kapota*, as seen in the most intact of these fragments found so far, instead of the usual curly leaf passing for the *prati/vyalamala* moulding—what the *Samaranganasutradhara* calls the *makara*—we see a clutch of magnificent, fully-fledged *makaras* frothing out over a jewelled *prati* or floor-plank moulding.⁵

Only after such a moment could the *Samaranganasutradhara* have been conceived, with its awareness of the range of architectural forms and regional varieties, of the hitherto predominant Nagara traditions, and of the Dravida too, and with the desire both to incorporate and to surpass these in a newly created form, the Bhumija. Chapter 65, on Bhumija temples, stands out for its coherence and its complexity. With an invented form, the text did not need to incorporate passages from venerated earlier texts. Without many built

examples to draw upon, it could lay out the possibilities inherent in the system. Surviving Bhumija temples are relatively close to the prescriptions of the *Samaranganasutradhara*, no doubt because the theory and practice developed side by side. But the Bhumija works at Ashapuri were almost certainly built before the text was written, and would have loomed large in the minds of those who were working out the theory.

While hundreds of fragments from the Bhutanatha temple have been laid out at the site, many more remain strewn down the ghat and into the tank, accessible only when the tank is dry. A good season of salvage archaeology is required before the jigsaw puzzle can be solved for this jewel in the crown of the conservation project. To understand the significance of each puzzled out temple, it is necessary to reflect not only on the site as a whole, but on the much larger picture that is the architectural history of central India, and of Indian temple architecture more broadly. In turn, each newly revealed temple design

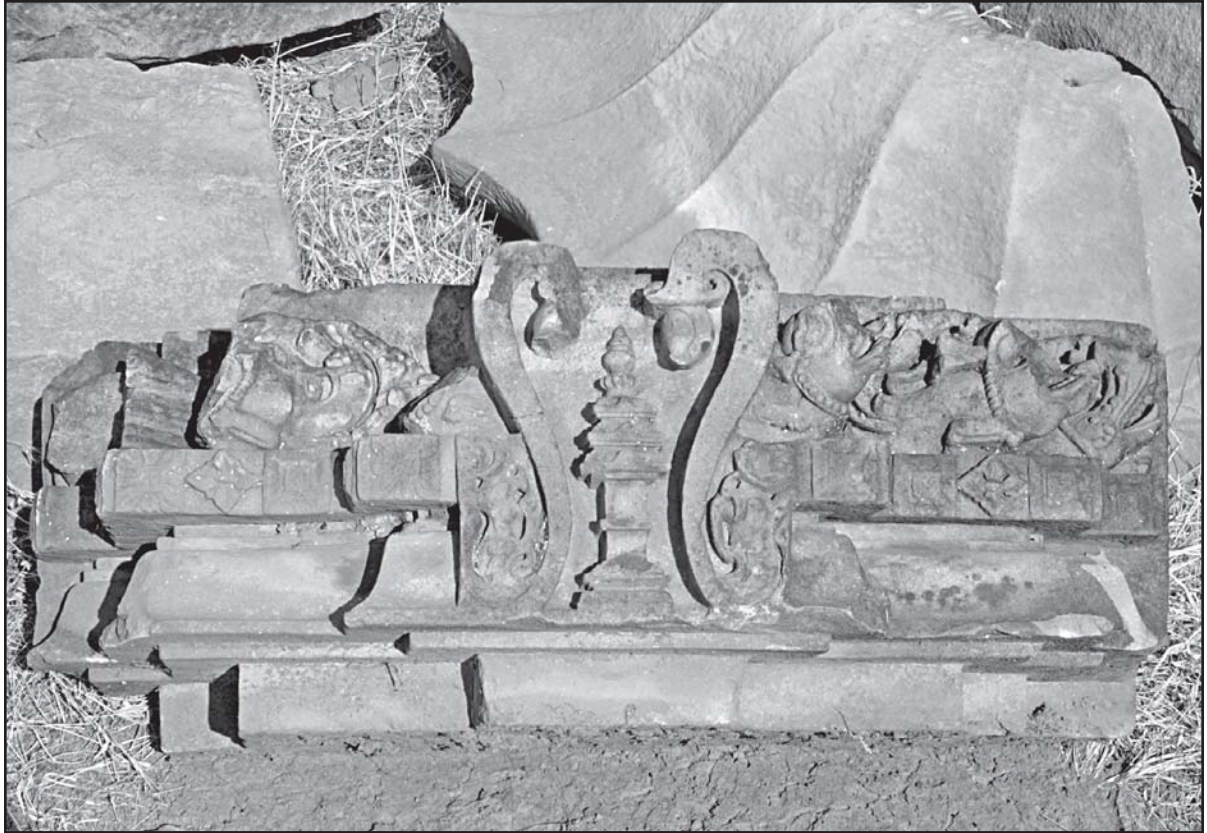


Fig. 24.16. Dravida *kuta* from a Bhumiya temple at Ashapuri, probably the *Bhutanatha*.

adds another piece to that larger, still unfinished puzzle.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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3. Adam Hardy, 'Parts and Wholes: The Story of the Horseshoe Arch', in Adam Hardy (ed.), *The Temple in South Asia*, London, BASAS, 2007.
4. Adam Hardy, *Theory and Practice*, Chapter 5.
5. The Ambaranatha temple, Ambaranath, Maharashtra (1060 CE) has strange, snakey *makaras* in this position.