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The “Best Abode of Virtue”: *Sattra* Represented on a Gupta-Period Frieze from Gaṛhwā, Uttar Pradesh

“Poetry is a speaking picture, and painting silent poetry.”

Simonides of Ceos (ca. 556–468 BCE), quoted in Plutarch’s *De Gloria Atheniensium*¹

1 Introduction

Between 1871 and 1877, Alexander Cunningham visited Gaṛhwā (or Gaḍhwā) in Prayagraj District (formerly Allahabad District), Uttar Pradesh, three times, initially on the advice of historian Rājā Śiva Prasād.² Here, he reported a twelfth-century temple constructed in coarse gray sandstone,³ a square pillar bearing two Gupta inscriptions that had later been cut into four beams,⁴ other fragmented inscriptions, and a number of fine-grained pink sandstone architectural elements dating to the Gupta period (ca. 320–550 CE). Among the latter were jamb fragments or posts carved on three faces, and two ornate temple columns with detached capitals depicting pairs of lions sejant on each of their four faces.⁵

1 As an aside, in his “A Treatise on Painting” (1651 CE), Leonardo da Vinci lampooned this popular quote, writing: “If you call painting mute poetry, poetry can also be called blind painting.” Cited in Henryk Markiewicz and Uliana Gabara, “Ut Pictura Poesis . . . A History of the Topos and the Problem,” *A New Literary History* 18, no. 3 (1987): 538. This, I suspect, is a comment on the power of (exceptional) art to “speak” to us, as Leonardo’s own work – and, I would argue, the Gaṛhwā frieze – so brilliantly demonstrate.

2 Alexander Cunningham, *Report for the Year 1871–72* (Calcutta: Archaeological Survey of India, 1873), 53–54.

3 I would describe the stone used for many of the ninth- to twelfth-century sculptures and the medieval temple as a sandy ocher color rather than gray. The large number of blackened architectural elements lying at the site, however, suggest that Gaṛhwā might have been subjected to fire at some point in its long history, or else the blackening is due to a buildup of grime. The ocher stone was evidently quarried locally from the rocky plateau on which Gaṛhwā sits. Red sandstone is also available in the Shankargarh area.

4 Alexander Cunningham, *Report of Tours in Bundelkhand and Malwa in 1874–75 and 1876–77* (Calcutta: Archaeological Survey of India, 1880), 10.

5 On one capital, agile male figures (possibly lion tamers) crouch on the abutting flanks of the lions, and on the other, male figures leap daringly from lion back to lion back; for Joseph Beglar’s

One of the most significant discoveries at Gaṛhwā was an extraordinary Gupta-period frieze panel of almost four meters in length, broken into three pieces (Figure 1).⁶ Given its scale, it is likely that this panel spanned the entire width of an exterior wall of a monument at the time of its making. The alto-relievo figurative carvings on the frieze have been much celebrated for the sophistication of their composition; the distinctive nature of the subject material; the fluid and natural poses of the characters depicted; and the convivial interaction between them. Indeed, the frieze might be considered a remarkable demonstration of the proclivity in this era for visual imagery that seeks not only to inspire religious devotion while simultaneously delighting the senses, but that also demands intellectual engagement, at least from its more erudite observers. Moreover, there is a poetic quality to the iconography, as James Harle emphasizes, likening the poignancy of the frieze reliefs to “that other great evocation of a religious procession in Keats’ ‘Ode [on a Grecian Urn].’”⁷



Figure 1: The Gaṛhwā frieze. Lucknow State Museum. Photographs courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

photograph of the pillars and capitals taken in 1870, see <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/apac/photocoll/p/019pho000001003u00668000.html>. Accessed September 13, 2019.

⁶ The Gaṛhwā frieze underwent minimal restoration and is now in two, rather than three fragments. The frieze is kept at the Lucknow State Museum, where it is displayed in two adjacent cabinets, regrettably in the wrong order, beginning with Viśvarūpa and ending at the *sattra*.

⁷ J. C. Harle, *Gupta Sculpture: Indian Sculpture of the 4th to 6th Century CE* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 22–23. The relevant verse of Keats’s “Ode” reads as follows:

. . . Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
 To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
 Lead’st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
 And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?
 What little town by river or sea shore,
 Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
 Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?

Both because of its singularity in the corpus of early Indian religious art and because of its much-lauded aesthetic qualities, the imagery on the frieze panel has been analyzed – in some instances, fleetingly – by several scholars, including Alexander Cunningham, Nilakanth Purushottam Joshi, James Harle, Joanna Williams, and Thomas Maxwell. While each has focused on particular aspects of the panel, the meaning of the iconographic scheme in its entirety has never been understood;⁸ indeed, the imagery has at times been described as mysterious.⁹ This paper seeks to determine the manifold meanings and allegorical references embodied in the imagery by examining the relief carvings in conjunction with epigraphic data from the site, while taking into account the religious environment of Gaṛhwā in the fifth century CE, within the limitations established by the extremely fragmentary nature of the early history of the site and the absence of scientific excavations or archaeological field surveys, with the exception of Cunningham’s two brief reports. It will be proposed that the frieze represents two royal processions, one meeting at a *sattra* (charitable almshouse) – an institution recorded in Gupta-period inscriptions from Gaṛhwā – and the other at a temple. I will argue that this is the earliest and perhaps only extant visual representation of *sattra* as a charitable almshouse; a ritual institution previously believed to have survived only in the form of literary and epigraphic references.¹⁰ The frieze thus allows us a remarkable visual insight into a practice that probably began in the early years of the Gupta Empire.

And, little town, thy streets for evermore
 Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
 Why thou art desolate, can e’er return . . .

See <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44477/ode-on-a-grecian-urn>. Accessed September 13, 2019.

8 T. S. Maxwell, in his astute analysis of the frieze panel, does suggest an overarching theme (see note 54). I do not dismiss his hypothesis, but rather envisage it as being one of the many layers of meaning intended for the frieze.

9 Harle, *Gupta Sculpture*, 23; J. C. Harle, *The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 105.

10 In the early modern period, a new kind of Vaiṣṇava *sattra* (or *satra*) emerged in Assam and West Bengal. To this day, *satra* continues to be a popular type of religious institution in Assam. Assamese *satras*, however, appear to be considerably more multifunctional than the earlier Gupta-era version of the *sattra*, and are closely associated with Vaiṣṇava monasteries. Nevertheless, since one of the Assamese *satra*’s primary functions is as a dwelling place for Vaiṣṇava devotees (both celibate and non-celibate), it might be proposed that it is not entirely distinct from the form of *sattra* that began around the fourth century CE. For further information on the Assamese *satra* see, for example, Satyendra Nath Sarma, *The Neo-Vaiṣṇavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam* (Gauhati: Department of Publication, Gauhati University, 1966). *Sattra* will be explored in more detail in part 4 of this paper.

2 Location

Garhwā is situated on a stone plateau in eastern Uttar Pradesh, five miles south of the River Yamuna, and in close proximity to Shankargarh, where part of a Gupta-period red-sandstone sculpture of Viṣṇu, now on display at the Allahabad State Museum, was discovered. In the fourth to sixth centuries CE, the region encompassing Garhwā was populous and home to a number of sizable settlements, such as Bhita, seventeen miles to the northeast of Garhwā; Prayāga, thirty-two miles to the northeast; and Kauśāmbī,¹¹ twenty miles to the northwest.¹² Bāra, a town eight miles east of Garhwā, sits on a large-scale mound but has yet to be investigated (Figure 2).¹³ Garhwā, which Dilip K. Chakrabarti describes as one of the most significant temple and sculptural sites in North India,¹⁴ is situated on the ancient Dakṣiṇāpatha trade route leading from Paṭnā (ancient Pāṭaliputra), through Bhita – which was once a thriving, affluent center of trade – and onwards to Vidarbha, the heartland of the Eastern Vākātakas (fourth and fifth centuries CE) near modern-day Nagpur. About this route, Chakrabarti writes:

Between Bhita and Garhwa a road follows the river, and all along it, up to Garhwa I encountered sites: Chilla, Basahr, Shankargarh, Bara, Mankameshwar. This seems to be an early road and as D.P. Dube reminded me in personal conversations, this was probably part of the route from Allahabad/Prayag to Chitrakut. The location of Garhwa and Shankargarh is important. The main place is Shankargarh with Garhwa lying close to it. From the Shankargarh area one ventured towards the Vindhyas; the modern Allahabad-Rewa road passes through Shankargarh. It also lies on the way to Chitrakut and Banda. Further, from this side one can cross the Yamuna and after some time reach Kausambi. I tried to locate the principal ferry point for Kausambi. Where would people coming from central India have crossed the Yamuna for Kausambi? It appears that the contiguous area of Shankargarh-Mau was the most feasible point.¹⁵

Xuanzang visited both Prayāga and Kauśāmbī in the first half of the seventh century CE and describes in some detail a grand gift-giving ceremony that took place beside the confluence of the Rivers Ganges and Yamuna near Prayāga. In light of the subject of this paper, it is pertinent that the tradition

11 Kauśāmbī is described by Xuanzang as teeming with heretics, meaning Hindus and Jains; see Samuel Beal, *Si-Yu-Ki: Buddhist Records of the Western World Translated from the Chinese of Hsuen Tsiang (A.D. 629)*, vol. 1 (London: Trübner & Co., 1906), 235.

12 I have measured the distances using modern roads, some of which might, by and large, be the same routes taken in the early centuries CE.

13 Thanks to Dr. M. C. Gupta for informing me of this.

14 Dilip K. Chakrabarti, *Archaeological Geography of the Ganga Plain: The Lower and the Middle Ganga* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), 260.

15 Chakrabarti, *Archaeological Geography of the Ganga Plain*, 264–265.

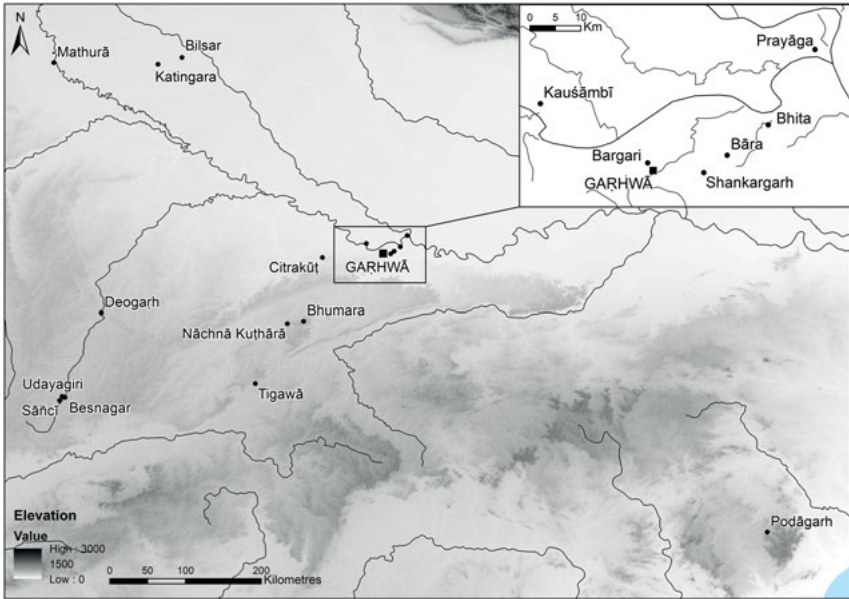


Figure 2: Map showing Gaṛhwā and other sites featured in this paper.

of gift-giving by royals was practiced on a lavish scale not far from Gaṛhwā. Xuanzang writes:

To the east of the capital, between the two confluents of the river, for the space of 10 li or so, the ground is pleasant and upland. The whole is covered with a fine sand. From old time till now, the kings and noble families, whenever they had occasion to distribute their gifts in charity ever came to this place, and here gave away their goods; hence it is called the great charity enclosure. At the present time Śīlāditya-rāja,¹⁶ after the example of his ancestors, distributes here in one day the accumulated wealth of five years. Having collected in this space of the charity enclosure immense piles of wealth and jewels, on the first day he adorns in a very sumptuous way a statue of Buddha, and then offers to it the most costly jewels. Afterwards he offers his charity to the residentary priests; afterwards to the priests (from a distance) who are present; afterwards to the men of distinguished talent; afterwards to the heretics who live in the place, following the ways of the world; and lastly, to the widows and bereaved, orphans and desolate, poor and mendicants . . . After this the rulers of the different countries offer their jewels and robes to the king, so that his treasury is replenished.¹⁷

¹⁶ Śīlāditya-rāja is thought to be King Harṣavadhana, whose capital was at Kannauj.

¹⁷ Beal, *Si-Yu-Ki*, 233.

Garhwā, meaning “fort,” is enclosed within pentagonal parapet walls with four bastions. The perimeter of the fort is approximately 355 meters, while the surface area of the enclosure covers in the region of 8,800 square meters. According to Cunningham, the parapets, which are not believed to have served a defensive purpose, were constructed in the mid-eighteenth century by Rāja Vikramāditya.¹⁸ A large haveli-style house, which Cunningham has estimated to be of the same date, sits at the center of the fort, and a stone bearing Gupta-period inscriptions, embedded in a wall of one of its rooms, was found by Rājā Śiva Prasād.¹⁹

The fort sits on a river bed with its western and eastern parapet walls acting as embankments.²⁰ I would suggest, though, that in the Gupta period, the built structures were situated in the usual way, close to the riverbank rather than on the riverbed itself.

Most of the pre-eighteenth-century sculptures and architectural elements surviving at Garhwā date from between the ninth and twelfth centuries CE. Three large-scale sculptures produced around the tenth century CE and depicting Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva, bear inscriptions recording them to be gifts of yogī Jwālāditya, son of Bhaṭṭananta.²¹ Cunningham suggests that the latter was responsible for the establishment of the village of Bhaṭṭagrām, which he hypothesizes was probably situated between Garhwā and the village of Bhaṭṭgarh (modern Bargari), approximately one mile to the north, since he found the whole area liberally scattered with broken bricks.²² Without further exploration, however, it is not possible to determine the scale of the settlement during the Gupta period.

The ruins of an elegant temple placed on a tall *jagatī* (platform) are situated in the southwestern corner of the fort. Joseph Beglar’s photograph shows the *śikhara* (tower) partly intact in 1870, but it has since completely collapsed.²³ The temple, which was probably dedicated to Viṣṇu, bears several inscriptions dating to the twelfth century CE.²⁴ Two identical tanks clad in ashlar sandstone are situated to the fore of the temple, one in front of the other (Figure 3).

18 Cunningham, *Report for the Year 1871–72*, 53.

19 Cunningham, *Report for the Year 1871–72*, 55.

20 At the time of my visit to Garhwā in March 2019, the riverbed was dry. Cunningham notes that an outlet for excess water in the monsoon season was cut into the fields to the north. See Cunningham, *Report for the Year 1871–72*, 53.

21 Cunningham, *Report for the Year 1871–72*, 56.

22 Cunningham, *Report for the Year 1871–72*, 60.

23 For Joseph Beglar’s photograph of the medieval temple at Garhwā, see <http://www.bl.uk/onlinnegallery/onlineex/apac/photocoll/t/019pho000001003u00654000.html>. Accessed September 13, 2019.

24 Cunningham, *Report for the Year 1871–72*, 58–60.



Figure 3: The twin tanks to the fore of the 12th century temple at Gaṛhwā. Author's photograph.

3 Gaṛhwā Frieze: Temple and Almshouse

Turning now to the frieze, at the center of the composition stands Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa in his Viśvarūpa (all-encompassing) form, wearing a *vanamālā* (garland) reaching down to his ankles (Figure 4). At only 25 cm in height, this figure is considerably smaller than other Gupta-period Viṣṇu Viśvarūpa images, yet, despite its scale and worn condition, the deity, with its myriad heads and floating forms emitting flames, is a spectacular example of this most awe-inspiring, wondrous manifestation of the god.²⁵ Viṣṇu's head has suffered considerable damage, lending it an unnaturally elongated appearance that culminates in what could be interpreted as a pronounced chin. To Harle, this elongation suggests that Viṣṇu might have been depicted with the head of a horse or lion.²⁶ However, Viṣṇu is

²⁵ Maxwell describes it as the smallest known sculpture of Viṣṇu Viśvarūpa. See T. S. Maxwell, *Viśvarūpa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 190.

²⁶ Harle, *Gupta Sculpture*, 47, note 73. If Viṣṇu's head was intended to be equine, then it is worth noting that in the *Nārāyaṇīya* of the *Mahābhārata*, to which we will return later in this paper, Nārāyaṇa (Viṣṇu) reveals himself to Brahmā in a form with a horse's head (12.321–339). The theophany is not described in any detail, however, Maxwell writes that no sculptural evidence exists of a Hayaśiras or Hayagrīva (horse-necked or horse-headed) emanation of Viṣṇu surrounded by



Figure 4: Detail of Gaṛhwā frieze showing Viṣṇu Viśvarūpa. Author’s photograph.

wearing a *kīṛṭa* (crown), and it is just about possible to distinguish where on his head the crown rests. This indicates that his face is more likely to have been of a normal (human) scale, albeit with a decidedly chiseled jaw in contrast to the round faces of the other characters depicted. This chiseled appearance could potentially be the result of erosion, unless, as Harle proposes, the face was indeed zoomorphic. The absence of a defined neck is consonant with the other figures on the frieze.²⁷

Four diminutive figures stand at Viṣṇu Viśvarūpa’s feet. The two figures on his left-hand side probably represent the *āyudhapuruṣas* (personification of

flames and/or a multitude of small figures (see Maxwell, *Viśvarūpa*, 193) This does not mean that the horse-head hypothesis should be dismissed outright, but it should be treated with caution.

²⁷ Harle and Maxwell both note that the head of a horse appears to be portrayed above Viṣṇu (Harle, *Gupta Sculpture*, 47, note 73; Maxwell, *Viśvarūpa*, 192). To some extent, this miniature horse mirrors the head of Viṣṇu below (in its current state).

weapons). Of the two figures to his right, at least one is female and if she is not also the personification of a weapon, then she might represent Śrī, Viṣṇu's consort, as proposed by Maxwell.²⁸ According to Maxwell, this is the only known Viṣṇu Viśvarūpa image depicted in a narrative scheme.²⁹ Yet this does not seem to be a theophany of Viṣṇu Viśvarūpa in a known mythical setting. Instead, two walls contain the deity, and in agreement with Joshi and Maxwell, I believe this to be a depiction of a temple; more specifically, the inner sanctum of a temple containing the enshrined deity, with an outer porch in which the parasol-holder stands.³⁰ Early-fifth-century CE temples such as those at Sāñcī, Tigawā, and Udayagiri in eastern Madhya Pradesh share this same simple floor plan.

To the left of the shrine is a less familiar type of structure accessed via a gateway or building with a barrel-vaulted superstructure, only part of which has been represented.³¹ Next to this is a triple-tiered monument with a row of pillars running along the upper platform (Figure 5). Figures crouch on the platforms and are fed and watered by three people. To begin with, like Harle,³² I interpreted two of the triad as matronly women. Upon closer examination, however, it became clear that the figure portrayed leaning forward to fill the plates of two seated characters does not have breasts and moreover, is dressed differently from the other women on the frieze who all wear elegant form-fitting draped saris without blouses.³³ I surmise then that this figure is probably male. The gender of the second server is likewise not immediately apparent, although there is a suggestion of breasts and a narrower form. This figure wears

28 Maxwell, *Viśvarūpa*, 191. In light of the fact that Sūrya and Candra have both been depicted with their consorts, it is likely that Viṣṇu has also been depicted with his wife or wives.

29 Maxwell, *Viśvarūpa*, 190.

30 Maxwell, *Viśvarūpa*, 190; N. P. Joshi, *Catalogue of the Brahmanical Sculptures in the State Museum, Lucknow*, part 1 (Lucknow: The State Museum, 1972), 87.

31 The composition is constrained by the space available on the frieze. Because of this, it might be tentatively conjectured that were this architectural complex based on a real monument at Gaṛhwā, and if the barrel-vaulted structure was not intended as a gateway but rather a pavilion or religious building of some sort, then the “real” structure might have been positioned atop the pyramidal platforms. In part 5 of this paper, an alternative hypothesis will be explored. In personal communication (2019), Adam Hardy has dissected the barrel-vaulted structure. He suggests that over the pillar is a *kūṭa* (an aedicula topped with a finial) and above this a large *gavākṣa* (a horseshoe-shaped arch) crowned by a loose representation of an *āmālaka* (the ribbed crowning element of a North Indian temple, resembling a lightly squashed gooseberry).

32 Harle, *Gupta Sculpture*, 23.

33 In art-historical terminology, this look is defined as “wet drapery”; essentially, the clothes provide modesty while simultaneously drawing attention to the shape and form of the body.



Figure 5: Detail of Garhwā frieze showing the *sattra*. Author’s photograph.

a particularly unusual turban-like headdress from which a long scarf flows behind the head and shoulders. If the pair does comprise a male and female, then they might represent a married couple. They are assisted by a bare-chested male carrying a basket over one shoulder. As an example of the animated detail in this frieze, a wide-eyed recipient is portrayed hungrily biting into his food (Figure 6). He and his companions at the receiving end of this charity are ascetics, mendicants, or *brāhmaṇas* (religious specialists). The gathering seems to be taking place at an almshouse of sorts and despite Joanna Williams’s commenting that the Gupta-period inscriptions found at Garhwā are not associated with any of the images, and in fact predate them,³⁴ I suggest that the inscriptions are directly linked to the almshouse represented on the panel and possibly to the long-lost building on which the frieze was displayed.

³⁴ Joanna Gottfried Williams, *The Art of Gupta India: Empire and Province* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 152.



Figure 6: Detail of Garhwā frieze showing one of the beneficiaries of the *sattra* mid-mouthful. Author's photograph.

4 Inscriptions

There are four fragmentary Gupta-period Sanskrit inscriptions from Garhwā, one from the reign of Candragupta II, dating to 407/408 CE; two from the reign of Kumāragupta I, one dated to 417/418 CE;³⁵ and one from the close of the reign of Skandagupta in 466/467 CE. Of the latter inscription, little survives, but it appears to record that a *vaḍabhi* temple – most probably a derivative of *valabhī*, a temple either with a barrel-vaulted roof or with beams, i.e. flat-roofed – was constructed and feet³⁶ of the god Viṣṇu Anantasvāmin were installed.³⁷ Furthermore, some

³⁵ The date is missing on one of inscriptions from the reign of Kumāragupta I. See John Faithfull Fleet, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, vol. 3, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings and their Successors* (Calcutta: Superintendent of Govt. Printing, 1888; repr., Varanasi: Indological Book House, 1960), 39.

³⁶ Fleet writes. “The use of the word *pāda*, not *pada*, shews that the inscription does not refer to the foot-prints or impressions of feet, which are so frequently objects of worship. So, also, just below this passage, ‘the feet of the divine (god) Chitrakūṭasvāmin’ means simply ‘the divine (god) Chitrakūṭasvāmin’” (see Fleet, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* 3, 268, note 10).

³⁷ This inscription has been translated by Fleet; D. R. Bhandarkar, “A List of Inscriptions of Northern India in Brahmi and Its Derivative Scripts, from about 200 A.C.”, in *Epigraphica Indica*, vols.

provision – probably money – was given to the treasury of a second image of Citrakūṭasvāmin, which may have been an image installed in a preexisting temple.³⁸ This inscription is immediately interesting for two reasons; firstly, because, as mentioned above, the reliefs on the frieze include the cross section of a barrel-vaulted *valabhī* roof or gateway seemingly belonging to the almshouse structure. Secondly, Citrakūṭasvāmin (Lord of Citrakūṭa) is an uncommon name for Viṣṇu in his Rāma *avatāra*.³⁹ Since there exists a tradition of naming the central deity of a temple after its patron, Citrakūṭa might refer to a historical personage; or, instead, it might recall the forested area fifty-five miles to the west of Gaṛhwā, where Rāma is described as having lived during the first part of his exile. For this reason, Citrakūṭ is considered a place of tremendous sanctity, much visited by pilgrims. Incidentally, as quoted above, Chakrabarti notes that an ancient route running from Prayāga to Citrakūṭ probably passed through or close to Gaṛhwā.⁴⁰ The occurrence of this name at our site in the Gupta period tentatively indicates that there might have been a drive to create a sacred Vaiṣṇava landscape here, even if on a small scale, and indeed, the surviving sculptural fragments from the Gupta period to the twelfth century indicate that the religious environment here was predominantly Vaiṣṇava in its orientation.

The other three inscriptions are carved on the damaged stone block that was found in a wall of the mid-eighteenth-century house at Gaṛhwā.⁴¹ The inscriptions are fragmentary, but all record generous monetary donations, ranging from ten to twelve *dināras* (gold coins) for the perpetual maintenance of a

19–23 (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1929), 1280; and Prithvi Kumar Agrawala, *Imperial Gupta Epigraphs* (Varanasi: Books Asia, 1983), 37. The Sanskrit text is available at <http://siddham.uk/incription/in00063>. Accessed September 13, 2019. Dániel Balogh has made a more convincing reading, which I have used here (personal communication, 2018).

38 The inscription records the provision as twelve . . . The following part of the inscription is missing, but it probably stated *dināras*.

39 This is also fascinating because – with the tentative exception of a shrine constructed under the Vākāṭaka queen Prabhāvatīguptā – we do not know of any temples dedicated to Rāma prior to the twelfth century CE; for further information on this subject, see Hans Bakker, *Ayodhyā* (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1986), 65–66. However, the Bhitari pillar inscription of Skandagupta informs us that a Śārṅgadharma temple was constructed during his reign. *Śārṅga* is the name of Viṣṇu’s bow, but could potentially refer to Rāma. Sheldon Pollock writes, “[. . .] were this [Śārṅgadharma temple] in Ayodhyā (and more, were it a Rāma temple) it might suggest a royal cult of Rāma in the late fifth century [. . .],” but dismisses this possibility; see Sheldon Pollock, “Rāmāyaṇa and Political Imagination in India,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 52, no. 2 (1993): 265. **40** Chakrabarti, *Archaeological Geography of the Ganga Plain*, 264–65.

41 Fleet reports that the stone bearing inscriptions was moved to the Imperial Museum in Calcutta (later the Indian Museum, Kolkata) (see Fleet, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* 3, 36).

sattra in the context of a charitable almshouse rather than for an extended ritual, which is the more ancient usage of the term *sattra*.⁴²

42 The inscription from the reign of Candragupta II, dated to 407 to 408 CE, records that the endowment was gifted by the wife of a householder (both names are lost) who wished to increase her religious merit (see Fleet, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* 3, 39, lines 12–15). *Sattra* in its more ancient form is a ritual that is given much importance in the *Mahābhārata*. In the *Āstika* of the *Ādiparvan* (book 1), the Kuru king, Janamejaya, holds a *sarpasattra* (an extended ritual snake sacrifice that involves regular intervals and has its origins in the Vedas) in Takṣaśilā (Taxila), with the objective of removing all snakes from the world after his father was killed by one. C. Z. Minkowski describes the *sarpasattra* as the frame story of the *Mahābhārata*, with the epic story being narrated to Janamejaya during the intervals of the *sarpasattra*. The ritual comes to a close at the end of the epic, but not before the *sattra* has been interrupted and the snakes saved. See C. Z. Minkowski, “Janamejaya’s *Sattra* and Ritual Structure,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 109, no. 3 (1989): 402–405, and for a detailed exploration of the textual history and ritual of the *sarpasattra*, see 413–416. Minkowski defines *sattra* as an elaborate extended ritual “with its cyclical daily activity and its long breaks, during which the king as *dikṣita* [the consecrated one] must remain in his state of consecration by following only elevating pursuits and speaking only true things . . .” (“Janamejaya’s *Sattra*,” 403). Later, elaborating on the meaning(s) of *sattra*, Minkowski writes:

The term *sattra* is used to describe soma sacrifices [a Vedic sacrifice involving the Soma plant] in which there are twelve or more days of soma pressing. There is a subclass of these *sattras*, termed *sāmvasarikas*, which last for a year or longer. Certain unusual rules prevail in *sattras*. There is no distribution of sacerdotal duties, and, by consequence, only Brahmins may perform them. Rather, all the *sattrins* are equally the *yajamāna* or sponsor. There is, by consequence, no *dakṣiṇā* or gift to the officiants. (“Janamejaya’s *Sattra*,” 413)

Interestingly, as Minkowski notes, the rules that govern *sattra* are somewhat disrupted by the *sarpasattra* in the *Mahābhārata*, since it is performed by King Janamejaya rather than by a *brāhmaṇa* (“Janamejaya’s *Sattra*,” 413). This might indicate that *sattra* is more encompassing or flexible, and thus amenable to change, than is generally thought. In book nine of the *Mahābhārata*, a twelve-year *sattra* takes place in the Naimiṣa Forest (a location where many *sattras* happened and where the Vedas record the very first *sattra* being performed; see “Janamejaya’s *Sattra*,” 416) on the banks of the Sarasvatī River in North India. Many *brāhmaṇas* gathered for the *sattra*, and once the ritual had come to a close, this sanctified area continued to attract innumerable ascetics. Indeed, so great was the influx of ascetics here that there was insufficient space to accommodate them all. Thus, in order to facilitate sacrificial rites by creating abodes for the *brāhmaṇas*, the River Sarasvatī changed her course (*MBh* 9.37.37–55). In this story, a connection is forged between *sattra*, living quarters, and *brāhmaṇas*, and as such, *sattra* as a charitable almshouse does not seem so far removed from its earlier incarnation; see Justin Meiland, trans., *Mahābhārata Book Nine, Shalya*, vol. 2, Clay Sanskrit Library (New York: New York University Press and JJC Foundation, 2007), 121–125. A rather fascinating

Michael Willis describes the newer form of *sattra* as being connected with Manu’s *atithi* (hospitality) or *manuṣyayajña* (sacrifice to men), laid out in the *Manusmṛiti Dharmasāstra* (*the Laws of Manu*). This would imply that the ritual aspect, while heavily modified, was still very much part of the institution of *sattra*.⁴³ Further epigraphic and textual references to *sattra*, most of which are explored in Willis’s book *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual*, help to flesh out what this institution constitutes. In close temporal proximity to the Gaṛhwā inscriptions are identical inscriptions on a pair of pillars from Bilsar dating to 415 CE, soon after the advent of Kumāragupta I’s reign. These describe how a *sattra* – the best abode of virtue – was constructed at a temple of Kārttikeya by a virtuous and venerable *brāhmaṇa*, Dhruvaśarman, who accrued superhuman powers through his actions.⁴⁴ Willis has suggested that “the best abode of virtue” means that virtue came to Dhruvaśarman through his establishment of a *sattra*;⁴⁵ however, it might also connote the dwelling of virtuous people, or the place where virtue flourishes. A mid-fifth-century pillar inscription from Poḍāgarh in Odisha records a king’s endowment for the establishment of a temple enshrining Viṣṇu’s footprints, along with a *sattra* in which to feed *brāhmaṇas*, ascetics, and the wretched, helpless poor for the purposes of worship (*pūjā*).⁴⁶ Thus, feeding *brāhmaṇas* and the needy is considered an act of worship in itself and is closely affiliated with temple worship, which involves – among other rituals – clothing and offering food to the deity housed in the sanctum. Another fifth-century reference to *sattra* is included in the encyclopedia of Amarasimha (the *Nāmaliṅgānuśāsana*), where it is defined as a perpetual giving of garments.⁴⁷

An interesting sixth-century copper-plate inscription from Madhya Pradesh records a gift, from *mahārāja* Bhūta, of two villages in addition to some tax revenue to support a Viṣṇu temple established by his mother, Vīrāḍhyā. While

aspect of *sattra* as prescribed or described in the Vedas and in the *Mahābhārata* is the recommendation that, during the intervals that take place throughout the extended sacrifice, heroic stories be shared as a means of teaching *dharma*, particularly stories that occur at royal sacrifices (Minkowski, “Janamejaya’s Sattra,” 417).

43 Michael Willis, *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual: Temples and the Establishment of the Gods* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 104–5.

44 Fleet, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* 3, 42–45. One of the pillar inscriptions had suffered heavy damage, so only the better-preserved inscription is included in Fleet’s corpus; however, he describes them as duplicates (see 42).

45 Willis, *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual*, 104.

46 Willis, *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual*, 105 and 289, note 118.

47 Willis, *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual*, 107.

the term *sattra* is not explicitly mentioned here, as Willis notes,⁴⁸ its existence is clearly implied in the grant:

[. . .] and from now onward, support – medicine and restorative food – is to be given here to mendicants, to male and female slaves in the service of the god and to those bereft of food, clothing etc., who come to the habitation acquired by that [temple].⁴⁹

The *Śivadhamottara*, placed by Florinda De Simini in seventh-century CE North India,⁵⁰ prescribes a pillared pavilion for a *sattra* in the east of a Śaiva hermitage complex (10.131);⁵¹ a later copper-plate inscription found in Gaonri, southeast of Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh, dated 930 CE, records the gifts of King Govinda IV. Among these were land and money for temples and *pūjā*, as well as a village donated in order to establish a *sattra* in which *brāhmaṇas* could be fed and clothed.⁵²

In light of these epigraphic and textual references, as mentioned in the introduction, it might be posited that the frieze panel depicts a *sattra* (probably the very same *sattra* recorded in the donatory Gupta-period inscriptions at Gaṛhwā), and an adjoining temple dedicated to Viṣṇu or one of his *avatāras*. The occupants of the *sattra* portrayed on the frieze are being offered food, while the figure heading up the procession on the left-hand side of the composition is presenting an article – fabric or maybe a rolled garment – to the figure at his feet. Thus, both the giving of clothing/cloth and food that characterize the institution of *sattra* as a charitable almshouse are pictured here. This makes the image an extraordinarily valuable visual documentation of a practice that seems to have been initiated in the Gupta era.⁵³ Moreover, fortuitously, the very first surviving epigraphic occurrence of *sattra* as a charitable almshouse is recorded in the inscriptions at Gaṛhwā.

48 Willis, *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual*, 106.

49 This translation is by Michael Willis, *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual*, 105.

50 Florinda De Simini, *Of Gods and Books: Ritual and Knowledge Transmission in the Manuscript Cultures of Premodern India*, Studies in Manuscript Cultures, eds. Michael Friedrich, Harunaga Isaacson, and Jörg B. Quenzer, vol. 8 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 22.

51 De Simini, *Of Gods and Books*, 386.

52 De Simini, *Of Gods and Books*, 174–5.

53 Although the earliest surviving mention of *sattra* as a charitable institution occurs in the Gupta period, the mid-second century CE Mathurā inscription of Huviṣka (year 28) records the establishment of an endowment, the purpose of which was the king's spiritual benefit. Money was to be given to guilds, and from the interest earned, *brāhmaṇas* and the poor were to be fed at a *puṇyasālā* (a house of meritorious acts) – perhaps a precursor to the institution of *sattra*, but not necessarily directly affiliated with temples. See Willis, *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual*, 288, note 114.

5 The Tiered Structure in the Gaṛhwā Frieze

Based on the structures that survive at Gaṛhwā today, there is another tentative yet tantalizing hypothesis that I would like to propose, which, while impossible to verify, is nevertheless worth exploring briefly. The walls of the twin tanks in the fort have three receding tiers. Running behind the tanks at ground level is a long colonnade belonging to the eleventh or twelfth century CE (Figures 7 and 8). Each of the pillars has a square capital with rounded corners (*bharana* pillars). Both tanks are accessed by staircases, the central staircase having a gateway that, based on style, was probably an eighteenth-century addition. This architectural scheme is strikingly analogous to the tiered structure depicted on the frieze, which has columns with square, round-cornered capitals running along the upper platform and a *valabhī*-style gateway or pavilion of some sort. Could the visitors to the *sattra* be sitting on the side of one of the tanks, perhaps in order to keep cool? And could the medieval colonnade have replaced a Gupta period equivalent?



Figure 7: A view of a tank at Gaṛhwā with an 11th or 12th century colonnade running behind. Author’s photograph.



Figure 8: A view of the medieval colonnade, temple, and one of the tanks at Garhwā. Author's photograph.

6 Other Figures on the Panel

Returning now to the frieze, the composition comprises two processions culminating, on the left side, at the *sattra*, and on the right side, at the temple, which takes the most illustrious position in the hierarchy, at the center. The first figure on the left is the sun god, Sūrya, framed by the orb-shaped non-anthropomorphic sun (Figure 9). He rides a chariot drawn by seven horses and is flanked by two diminutive female archers, his consorts Uṣā and Pratyūṣā, engaged in banishing the darkness of night by shooting down sunrays. Adjacent to Sūrya are two men facing each other, standing arm in arm, one wearing a helmet and the other holding a sword. Next, we have men carrying goods on their heads and banghy bearers, punctuated by a taller man carrying a curved sword slung over his shoulders. To the fore of the procession stands the illustrious male figure mentioned earlier, with his hair tied in a topknot, gifting cloth or garments. A parasol is being held over his head, which identifies him as a royal personage. The man with the topknot standing to his side could be his *guru* or priest, or, as



Figure 9: Detail of Gaṛhwā frieze depicting Sūrya. Author’s photograph.

Joshi suggests, a minister.⁵⁴ All figures including the prince or king have naked upper bodies, with the exception of the four figures closest to the *sattra* (or possibly the tank connected with the *sattra*), which might indicate that they belong to the latter institution. Notably, only men participate in the procession winding its way to the *sattra*, in contrast to the procession leading to the temple, which includes women.

To the right of the panel is a charming depiction of Candra, god of the moon, gazing down at one of his wives seated beside him on the inanimate crescent moon (Figure 10). Of his twenty-seven wives – the twenty-seven *nakṣatras* or lunar mansions – Candra loves only Rohiṇī. Since this is an affectionate scene, it can be assumed that she is his companion here. The temporal dimension of the ritual taking place on the frieze has been lucidly emphasized by the positioning of the sun and moon gods at the beginning and end of the frieze, respectively.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Joshi, *Catalogue of the Brahmanical Sculptures*, 98.

⁵⁵ On the positioning of the sun and moon, Maxwell writes:

My own interpretation of the lintel as a whole is that it represents the *trisaṅdhya*, the three divisions of the day, at the junctions of which the ritual is performed to “join” the stages of time (symbolically including the *trikāla*- past, present and future) together: sunrise, noon, and nightfall. Thus the sun as Sūrya rises on the left of the frieze (presumably the lintel was seen from the north) and moonrise occurs at the opposite end as Candra,



Figure 10: Detail of Garhwā frieze showing Candra and Rohiṇī. Author's photograph.

Next to the lunar couple stand six tall, sinuous women, each holding a fly whisk (Figure 11). The two women closest to Candra stand in a semi-embrace, mirroring the two men standing beside Sūrya at the opposite end of the frieze. Unlike the other women and men portrayed, these six figures do not seem to be doing very much in particular. I propose that they simultaneously represent the chief women of a royal household and the six Kṛttikās who together form one of the *nakṣatras* and correspond to the month of *kārttika*, which spans parts of October and November. Incidentally, the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* describes both Kṛttikā and Rohiṇī as auspicious *nakṣatras* under which to perform rituals (2.1.2), and significantly, Kṛttikā is positioned next to Rohiṇī in the *nakṣatra* system.⁵⁶

the course of the day being upheld at noon, when the sun is in the zenith, at which point Viṣṇu as the blazing *axis mundi* is manifest. (Maxwell, *Viśvarūpa*, 193–194)

The emphasis in the panel on the times of day is rather interesting in light of the Vedic form of *sattra* being cyclical and involving the pressing of the Soma plant in the morning, at noon, and in the evening (Minkowski, “Janamejaya’s *Sattra* and Ritual Structure,” 416).

⁵⁶ The Kṛttikās are also the surrogate mothers of the god Kārttikēya (known by many names, among them Kumāra and Skanda), who, according to one story in the *Mahābhārata*, was born from their six wombs in a forest of reeds (*Mbh* 13.2.86). It is tempting to hypothesize that this is a clever, if remote, allusion to Kumāragupta I, or even Skandagupta if the panel is later than



Figure 11: Detail of Gaṛhwā frieze showing six tall females. Author’s photograph.

The scene next shifts to five petite women holding poles that support a canopy protecting a special dish of food, carried by a male figure who rests it on the crown of his head (Figure 12). A further tall woman leads the way; perhaps she is the chief queen. She carries an object that might be a lamp or a censer with a long handle. She follows behind a man with a flat and heavy platelike object on his shoulder. In front of him is a band of male musicians playing a variety of instruments including drums, cymbals, and flutes (Figure 13). Finally, heading up the procession is a royal figure, sheltered by a parasol, kneeling with palms together before the deity in the inner sanctum of the temple. The extraordinary element of this scene is that Viṣṇu is giving the royal figure a full theophany of himself in his all-encompassing form.

I believe. In the same vein, Candra and Rohiṇī could be read as an allusion to Kumāragupta I’s parents, Candragupta II and Dhruvadevi. It is more probable, however, that if these women do indeed represent the Kṛttikās, that they are signifying the time at which the monument was consecrated or when the ritual was performed.



Figure 12: Detail of Gaṛhwā frieze showing figures carrying a canopy protecting a special dish. Author's photograph.

7 Which Theophany?

There are a few occurrences, in the *Mahābhārata*, of Viṣṇu revealing his Viśvarūpa form. The iconography on the frieze, however, can be alluding to one of only two of these happenings. In the soteriological text, the *Nārāyaṇīya* – eighteen chapters contained within the *Mokṣadharmaparvan* of the *Śāntiparvan* (12.321–339) – Yudhiṣṭhira listens to Bhīṣma narrating the story of Sage Nārada's magnificent vision of Viṣṇu in his cosmic form, which occurred in the Kṛta Yuga.⁵⁷ Nārada is rewarded with this theophany after performing lengthy austerities and then singing a *stotra* (hymn) in praise of the god on the fabled White Island (Śvetadvīpa), north of Mount Meru, a place “inhabited only by the purest

⁵⁷ The *Nārāyaṇīya* synthesizes *bhakti* worship, *ahiṃsā* (nonviolence), *yoga*, sacrifice, and philosophical inquiry with the aim of obtaining *mokṣa* (final liberation). A brief comparison of the *Nārāyaṇīya* and *Bhagavadgītā* is included in John L. Brockington, “*Bhagavadgītā*: Text and Context,” in *The Fruits of our Desiring – An Enquiry into the Ethics of the Bhagavadgītā*, ed. Julius Lipner (Calgary: Bayeux Arts, 1997), 34–5; for an extensive study of the *Nārāyaṇīya*, see Peter Schreiner, ed., *Nārāyaṇīya Studien* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1997).



Figure 13: Detail of Garhwā frieze showing musicians. Courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

devotees of Nārāyaṇa [Viṣṇu], pure-white, umbrella-headed creatures devoid of senses, who sit in perfect meditation upon God.”⁵⁸ Nārada sees Nārāyaṇa thus:

[. . .] His pure Self was somewhat like the moon, yet somewhat different in certain respects. Somewhat the colour of fire, the Lord was somewhat like a star. (2)

He was somewhat the colour of a parrot’s wing, somewhat crystalline. He was like a mound of dark collyrium, yet in places he was golden. (3)

He was the colour of the spikes of coral, yet in places he was like lapis lazuli. (4)

He looked like the dark blue lapis lazuli and in places like sapphire. He had the colour of a peacock’s neck, and in places resembled a necklace of pearls. (5)

Bearing many and various colours on his body, the eternal and blessed one of a thousand eyes, a hundred heads, a thousand legs and a thousand torsos and arms was in places still unmanifest. With his mouth he sang the syllable *om*, and thereafter, the Sāvitrī. (6–7)

⁵⁸ James W. Laine, *Visions of God: Narratives of Theophany in the Mahābhārata* (Vienna: Nobili Research Library, 1989), 191.

With his other mouths did the controlling god, Hari Nārāyaṇa, sing the Āraṇyaka, the treasure that arises from the four-fold Veda. (8)

The God of gods, Lord of the sacrifice, bore in his hands an altar, water pot, *darbha* grass, stones in the form of round gems, an antelope hide, a wooden staff, and a blazing fire. (9) [. . .]⁵⁹

During this vision, Nārāyaṇa explains to Nārada how to obtain *mokṣa* (final liberation). The devotees on the White Island will obtain *mokṣa*, he informs Nārada, because they have succeeded in transcending the *guṇas* (approximately, darkness, passion, and harmony constituting the material world), and have their whole attention on Nārāyaṇa (12.326.18–19).

None of Viṣṇu's theophanies are quite so dramatic as the centerpiece of the *Bhagavadgītā* (eighteen chapters in the *Bhīṣmaparvan*, book 6 of the *Mahābhārata*), when the Pāṇḍava prince, Arjuna, is granted a vision of the god in his true form, as radiant as a thousand suns, with his infinite heads and eyes, flaming mouths and fangs, and weapons, his boundless form encompassing the forms of all the other gods.⁶⁰ Below is an excerpt of the vision:

[. . .] Then Arjuna, seized by wonder,
with his hair standing up on end,
with joined hands raised to his bowed head
in reverential gesture, said,
'I see all gods, O God, within your body,
and every kind of being all collected,

and the Lord Brahmā seated on his lotus,
with all seers and with sacred serpents.
'I see you crowned and armed with mace and discus,
a splendid mass of many-sided brilliance
almost impossible to grasp completely,
limitless blazing of the sun and fire!

You, the unchanging object of all knowledge,
you, the ultimate refuge of this cosmos,
you, the eternal law's immortal champion,
And, as I now believe, primeval spirit! [. . .]'
(11.14–19)

Because of the distinctly royal character of the principal figures in the Gaṛhwā frieze, it strikes me as more credible that the artist has been inspired by Arjuna's

⁵⁹ *Mahābhārata* 12.326.2–9, quoted from Laine, *Visions of God*, 191.

⁶⁰ *Bhagavadgītā* 11.9–49, quoted from *The Bhagavad Gita*, ed. Gavin Flood, trans. Gavin Flood and Charles Martin (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015), 56–60.

vision, rather than Sage Nārada’s.⁶¹ Moreover, the flames surrounding the cosmic image of Viṣṇu in the frieze correspond to the description in the *Bhagavadgītā*.

Is this then Arjuna kneeling at Viṣṇu Viśvarūpa’s feet? Well, firstly, this is undoubtedly not a direct depiction of the *Bhagavadgītā* episode, which takes place on a battlefield and not in a temple or ritual context. However, there is a possibility that this scene is intended to conjure parallels with the *Bhagavadgītā* theophany. Similarly, whether or not this figure actually represents Arjuna is of minor importance. What is more significant here is that this image would inspire favorable parallels between Arjuna and local kings or other notable people who might perform *pūjā* at this temple and make offerings to the inhabitants of the *sattra*.⁶²

8 The *Mahābhārata* at Gaṛhwā

It has been tentatively proposed by Joanna Williams that at least four of the five Pāṇḍava brothers – *kṣatriya* princes and protagonists of the *Mahābhārata*, of whom Arjuna is one – might be represented on the left-hand side of the panel.⁶³ The twins Sahadeva and Nakula are the youngest of the Pāṇḍava brothers. They descend from the Aśvin twins, the sons of Sūrya. With this in mind, the two men at the rear of the procession, standing beside Sūrya, might conceivably represent Nakula and Sahadeva, the half embrace connecting them being

⁶¹ After the talk I gave at the conference Asia Beyond Boundaries: Transdisciplinary Perspectives on Primary Sources from the Premodern World (August 27–31, 2018, Leiden University), James Fitzgerald suggested that the panel might depict the theophany of the *Nārāyaṇīya* rather than that of the *Bhagavadgītā*. It is not possible to be conclusive about the artist’s influence, since the frieze image appears to be an indirect allusion to a textual source, rather than a faithful reproduction of one. However, the image depicts a prince or king receiving a theophany, and not a sage, and in my opinion, this alone is enough reason to consider the *Bhagavadgītā* episode as the more probable source. Maxwell also believes the imagery to be recalling the *Bhagavadgītā*. He writes, “Here, surely, is the scriptural source of the central panel of the Gaḍhwā relief; and the *kṣatriya* figure kneeling to pay homage to the image is following the example of Arjuna in worshipping this ferocious cosmic vision of Viṣṇu [. . .]” (Maxwell, *Viśvarūpa*, 193).

⁶² Arguably, this scene constitutes the earliest surviving image alluding to the *Bhagavadgītā* – albeit indirectly. As such, this representation is of tremendous importance, since it indicates that the *Bhagavadgītā* must have been familiar enough by the early fifth century CE that it could be referenced on this frieze, presumably with the expectation that the allusion would be widely recognized.

⁶³ Williams, *The Art of Gupta India*, 154, note 168; Williams stresses that this is a highly speculative hypothesis unless the scenes on the frieze can be identified.

a signifier of their relationship as twins (Figure 14). Bhīma is the second eldest of the Pāṇḍava brothers and is known for his sheer physical strength. His name means “awe-inspiring” in Sanskrit. The towering, sword-carrying figure at the midway point of the procession could represent Bhīma (Figure 15). King Yudhiṣṭhira, the oldest of the brothers, is the embodiment of righteous conduct and in the *Mahābhārata* is a very generous giver of gifts to *brāhmaṇas*. He might be the dutiful king depicted here (Figure 16).



Figure 14: Detail of Gaṛhwā frieze showing twins. Author’s photograph.

A second Gupta-period frieze fragment (98 × 25 cm) from Gaṛhwā depicts the fight between Bhīma and Jarāsandha, with Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna watching (Figure 17).⁶⁴ Jarāsandha, a devotee of Siva, plays an important role in the *Mahābhārata*. His two daughters were married to Kaṁsa, the despotic uncle of Kṛṣṇa. After the kill-

⁶⁴ This frieze panel is on display at the Lucknow State Museum, Uttar Pradesh.



Figure 15: Detail of Garhwā frieze showing tall soldier. Author’s photograph.

ing of Kāṁsa by Kṛṣṇa, Jarāsandha took revenge and repeatedly attacked Mathurā until Kṛṣṇa moved to the impenetrable coastal city of Dvārakā. Jarāsandha then began preparations for a grand *yajña* (sacrifice) to Siva in order to be granted a boon of greater power by the god. The *yajña* would involve the sacrifice of a hundred kidnapped rulers. To rescue these unfortunates, Kṛṣṇa devised a plot (*MBh* 2.14–24) whereby he appealed to Yudhiṣṭhira, who was intent on becoming emperor, by informing him that the only obstacle standing in the path of his performing the *rājasūya*, or royal consecration sacrifice (involving copious and lavish gifts to *brāhmaṇas*), was Jarāsandha. With Yudhiṣṭhira’s blessing, Bhīma and Arjuna, in the guise of *brāhmaṇas*, attended a *pūjā* (*MBh* 2.19.20) held by Jarāsandha, following which the king offered them a gift. They asked that he wrestle one of them. Jarāsandha chose Bhīma and, after fourteen days of fighting, the



Figure 16: Detail of Gaṛhṇā frieze showing a king or prince offering clothing or fabric to a figure kneeling at his feet. Author's photograph.



Figure 17: Gupta-period frieze from Gaṛhṇā depicting Bhīma wrestling with Jarāsandha. Lucknow State Museum. Author's photograph.

king finally met his demise after being split in two, a tactic suggested by Kṛṣṇa. While this subject matter is interesting in view of the Viṣṇu Viśvarūpa frieze, the two panels are unlikely to have belonged to the same monument. The stone used for the Jarāsandha frieze is of an ocher color, in contrast to the deep pinkish-red of the Viśvarūpa panel. Moreover, aside from a notable difference in style, the artists have exhibited a dissimilar approach to composition, especially apparent in the treatment of perspective evidenced by the architectural structures portrayed.

The depictions of Arjuna and Bhīma in the second frieze panel, while embodying typical paradigms, do not resemble any of the characters on the Viṣṇu Viśvarūpa frieze.

At the start of the paper, the remnants of extraordinary Gupta-period posts from Gaṛhwā were mentioned (Figures 18a and 18b).⁶⁵ The style, treatment of composition, execution, and type of stone indicate that these have been carved by the same expert hands as the Viṣṇu Viśvarūpa frieze. The emotive scenes in deep relief on the posts are particularly eroded and fragmentary. A regal, pot-bellied male figure in a turban appears twice and might depict Kubera, the *yakṣa* lord of wealth (Figures 19a and 19b), or Māñibhadra, lord of property (also called Pārśvamauli in *Rāmāyaṇa* 7.15.8–10, ‘he of the sideways diadem’). Other scenes portray women, children, lovers, and – of interest in relation to the *sattra* – at least three mendicant-like or elderly male figures, each carrying a stick (Figure 20). Some of the scenes depict narrative events taking place in a courtly setting, and Williams suggests that the *Mahābhārata* might have been their source.⁶⁶ This hypothesis is most persuasive with regard to a scene depicting a game of dice between two men who might represent Yudhiṣṭhira and Śakuni, and to a further scene depicting a woman being dragged by a man in the presence of a soldier (Figures 21 and 22). This could represent Draupadī being forcibly removed by Duṣśāsana after Yudhiṣṭhira gambles away everything, including her, in that fateful game of dice.⁶⁷ Worthy of mention is the exquisitely crafted foliate ornamentation on other faces of the posts. The vines with their furled leaves are inhabited by several slender figures, both male and female, some of whom playfully swing from the stems while others rest languidly against the borders of the posts. One female figure holds a manuscript or a letter in her open palms (Figures 23a and 23b).

9 *Sattra* and the *Mahābhārata*

If the Pāṇḍavas do number among the characters in the Viśvarūpa frieze, then this imagery constitutes an entirely original narrative for the brothers. Essentially, there is no textual counterpart to this processional image in the *Mahābhārata*. Indeed, the institution of *sattra* as a charitable almshouse did not even exist when

⁶⁵ The posts are still at Gaṛhwā, but I was only able to examine them through the bars of the site shed, which is owned by the Archaeological Survey of India.

⁶⁶ Williams, *The Art of Gupta India*, 154.

⁶⁷ Williams, *The Art of Gupta India*, 154.



Figures 18 a and b: Gupta period carved posts from Garhwā. Photographs courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

(a)



(b)



Figures 19 a and b: Relief carvings from Gaṛhwā probably depicting Kubera or Māñibhadra. (a) Author’s photograph (b) courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

the *Mahābhārata* was composed. However, as already addressed, there are several occasions in the epic when Yudhiṣṭhira does lavish gifts upon *brāhmaṇas*, most notably during the *rājasūya* and *aśvamedha* sacrifices – the latter in which Yudhiṣṭhira offers the *brāhmaṇas* three times the stipulated fee for the sacrifice. In these instances, the gifts are opulent and include gold and such like. In contrast, in our image, the gifts appear to be limited to cloth and food. Because of Yudhiṣṭhira’s history of giving to *brāhmaṇas*, perhaps it is not absurd to suggest that the artist has placed the *sattra* in an imagined *Mahābhārata* setting, one that was invented and yet is perfectly conceivable, and by doing so is attempting to furnish the actual institution at Gaṛhwā with a long and illustrious history in order to elevate its ritual importance, heighten its glory, and inspire awe and donations. Earthly rulers, of course, have a propensity to model themselves in the image of the great kings of the Sanskrit epics, Rāma and Yudhiṣṭhira. The Supiā pillar inscription (459–60 CE) of Skandagupta, for example, describes the prosperous *mahārāja* as



Figure 20: Relief fragment from Garhwā possibly depicting a humiliated Draupadī being aided by the blind Dhṛtarāṣṭra who in turn is speaking with Duḥśāsana or Yudhiṣṭhira. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

resembling “a *cakravartin* in strength and valor, Rāma in righteous conduct, and Yudhiṣṭhira in truthfulness, conduct, and self-control.”⁶⁸

10 Ambiguity and the Art of Double Meaning

The key characters in the frieze procession have persistently evaded conclusive identification because they have not been depicted with detailed signifiers or

⁶⁸ The inscription is available at <http://www.siddham.uk/index.php/inscription/in00037>. Accessed September 13, 2019.



Figure 21: Relief carving on a Gupta-period post from Gaṛhwā possibly depicting Yudhiṣṭhira and Śakuni placing dice. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

attributes. We would, for instance, expect Arjuna to be portrayed with a *channa-vīra* (crossbelt) and bow, or otherwise pictured in a scenario where he is usually recognizable, such as hunting the boar in the *kirātārjuniya* myth. I would like to suggest, however, that this ambiguity was exactly what the artist was seeking; he was, after all, an exceptional master of his craft, and moreover, the Guptas were no strangers to the subtle art of double or indeed multiple meanings, enabling mythical, astrological, and human worlds to converge. We could perceive the characters who take part in the processions as representing, on the one hand, soldiers, wives, servants, and courtiers accompanying an earthly ruler – perhaps modeled on a historic scenario or at least the type of scenario that would be familiar to people viewing the frieze. On the other hand, there appears to be a vivid analogy to the Pāṇḍava brothers, with the ruler on the left recalling Yudhiṣṭhira, the model of *dharma*, and the ruler on the right suggestive of Arjuna, being blessed with the vision of Viṣṇu Viśvarūpa. This iconographic ambiguity arguably serves to flatter and further the cause of both kingship and of the *sattra* with remarkable flair and sophistication.

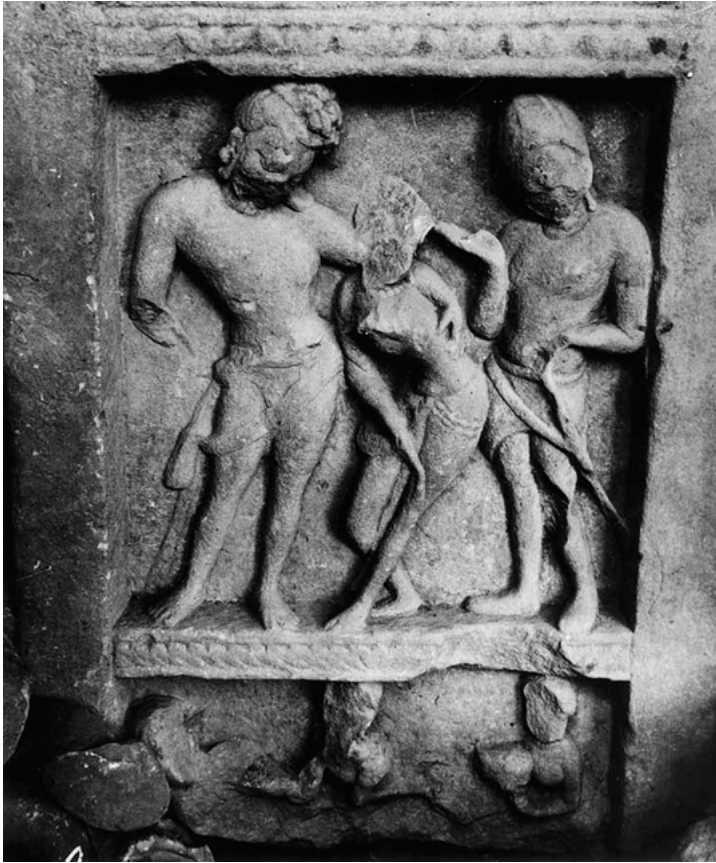


Figure 22: Relief carving on a Gupta-period post from Garhwā depicting a woman being dragged away by a soldier. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

11 Religion, Politics, and Wonder-Working

Beyond the most wondrously luminous universal form of Viṣṇu at the center of the frieze, to which all eyes are naturally drawn, there are convoluted power relationships at play. On the left side of the composition, a person kneels before the royal personage – either a *brāhmaṇa* or an impoverished mendicant. Mirroring this, on the right side of the panel, a king kneels with humility before the god. Surely in a frieze where each detail is so considered, this symmetry is not accidental. The relationship between kings and *brāhmaṇas* is reciprocal and

(a)



(b)



Figures 23a and b: Gupta-period posts from Gaṛhwā depicting vines inhabited by slender figures. (a) courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

mutually advantageous.⁶⁹ Kings enrich *brāhmaṇas*, and *brāhmaṇas* legitimize kings and ensure the continuation of their bloodline, the protection or expansion of their territory, and so on, by performing the necessary sacrifices. As for the poor, it is the duty of a righteous ruler to look after his subjects.⁷⁰ Thus, while the image portrays a hierarchy that descends from god to king to *brāhmaṇas* and persons deemed wor-

⁶⁹ See, for example, Vijay Nath, *Dāna: Gift System in Ancient India, c. 600 B.C.–c. A.D. 300. A Socio-Economic Perspective* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1987).

⁷⁰ Willis notes that giving to mendicants and the poor was considered to deflect threats and increase merit (Willis, *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual*, 104).

thy of charity, it also demonstrates that the king has to perform correct *pūjā* protocols by venerating the inhabitants of the *sattra* before performing worship at the temple and receiving a *darśana* – a sight – of god. And what a *darśana* he receives.

12 Dating and Artistic Networks

James Harle draws attention to the strong narrative element of the Gaṛhwā fragments, which he likens to Kuṣāṇa-period doorways and lintels from Mathurā. The pictorial scenes on doorjambs, he points out, later make way for *mithuna* couples, so in this regard the Gaṛhwā carvings belong to an earlier tradition. Likewise, the intertwining flora depicted on the panels is considered to be of the early Gupta type. However, due to the jaunty sideways hairstyle sported by some of the figures on the pillars, in addition to the way the goddess Gaṅgā is depicted with her *makara* vehicle and a parasol,⁷¹ Harle places the Gaṛhwā fragments in the late fifth century. He later proposes instead that they belong toward the end of Kumāragupta I's reign – i.e., not much earlier than 455 CE.⁷² He believes the images to predate the Gupta temples at Deogaṛh, Bhumara, and Nāchnā Kutthārā.⁷³ Joanna Williams initially places the Gaṛhwā frieze and pillar fragments in the middle decades of the sixth century⁷⁴ and later revises this to the late fifth century.⁷⁵ She observes, however, that the Gupta-period carvings from Gaṛhwā have little stylistic affinity with the art of the surrounding ancient sites:

Though the site lies 40 kilometres south of Allahabad, the Gaḍhwa images share little with those of Kauśāmbī or other sites in the Sangam area. Equidistant from Nāchnā and Sārnāth, Gaḍhwa lacks the regional style of the former and the conservatism of the latter. At most there is enough in common between these carvings and those of Bhumara to suggest that Gaḍhwa may represent a source for one of the Bundelkhandi idioms.⁷⁶

Arguably, this surprising stylistic dissimilitude implies that the Gaṛhwā artifacts have been placed too late in the fifth century. Indeed, it is quite possible that the

⁷¹ Williams correctly asserts that the river goddesses are portrayed in a multitude of ways from early on and thus cannot be used in isolation to date the Gaṛhwā fragments (Williams, *The Art of Gupta India*, 152).

⁷² Harle, *The Art and Architecture*, 107.

⁷³ Harle, *Gupta Sculpture*, 23.

⁷⁴ Joanna Gottfried Williams, "A Recut Aśokan Capital and the Gupta Attitude towards the Past," *Artibus Asiae* 35, no. 3 (1973): 237.

⁷⁵ Williams, *The Art of Gupta India*, 152.

⁷⁶ Williams, *The Art of Gupta India*, 152.

artistic styles and forms Williams compares are separated by a significant number of years, and are therefore the products of disparate, though related, fashions, influences, and developments. On this note, I tentatively propose that the majority of the Gupta-period Gaṛhwā reliefs and architectural elements should be placed in the first years of Kumāragupta I’s reign, or possibly even earlier, toward the end of Candragupta II’s reign.

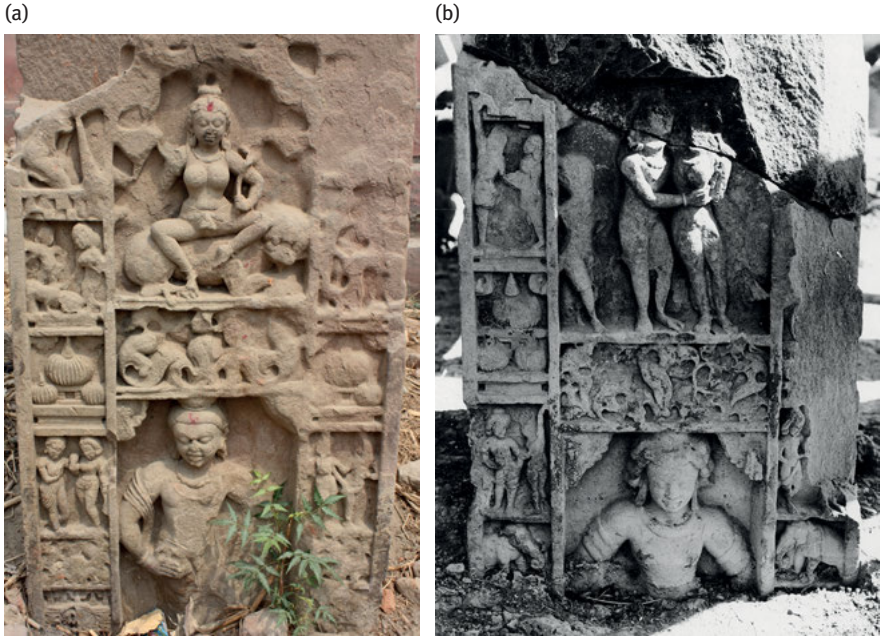
In order to position the Gaṛhwā reliefs within a wider stylistic context, I believe it necessary to turn to the west and southwest – to Bilsar and Katingara in Etah District, Uttar Pradesh, and to Besnagar and Udayagiri in Vidiśā District, Madhya Pradesh. As already discussed, pillar inscriptions at Bilsar commemorate the construction of a *sattra* at a temple of *Kārttikeya*. The same inscriptions also record the making of a gateway, parts of which still survive. Because these exquisitely carved remnants of gateway pillars are securely dated to 415 CE, they act as a chronological benchmark here. The Bilsar pillars are more complex in design than the Gaṛhwā posts, having central panels containing deity images carved in mezzo-relievo, flanked by small side-niches with depictions of temples, couples, and narrative scenes (Figures 24a and 24b). In contrast, the Gaṛhwā posts have single panels arranged vertically. In terms of artistic style and execution, however, there is an extraordinary resemblance between the reliefs from the two sites.⁷⁷ This affinity can be witnessed in facial and bodily features, figurative stances, mood, *rasa*,⁷⁸ and in the treatment of composition.

Eighteen miles southwest of Bilsar lies the small archaeological site of Katingara. Numerous terracotta plaques were unearthed from temple mounds here.⁷⁹ They depict narrative scenes from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Mahābhārata*, and *Harivaṃśa* alongside images of lesser divinities and amorous couples. While the medium of terracotta brings with it a unique set of characteristics, parallels with the Gaṛhwā reliefs can be seen in the relatively spartan compositions, the theatrical, clever, humorous, and sometimes poignant iconography, and the soft, slightly fleshy, yet slender-waisted figures and their supple movements (Figure 25).

⁷⁷ Cunningham also notes the similarity between the carved posts from Gaṛhwā and the gateway pillars from Bilsar. See Cunningham, *Report of Tours in Bundelkhand and Malwa*, 11.

⁷⁸ *Rasa*, literally meaning “taste” or “flavor,” is an Indian theory of aesthetics outlined in Bharata’s *Nāṭyaśāstra* (ca. second century BCE to second century CE).

⁷⁹ See Laxshmi Rose Greaves, “Locating the Lost Gupta Period Rāmāyaṇa Panels from Katingara, Uttar Pradesh,” *Religions of South Asia* 12, no. 2 (2018): 117–153.



Figures 24a and b: Stumps of gateway pillars from Bilasar, Etah District, Uttar Pradesh. (a) Author's photograph (b) courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

A further comparable panel in red sandstone originates from Besnagar and is now on display at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.⁸⁰ The panel once formed a single element of the surrounding of a temple door and depicts the goddess Gaṅgā with attendant figures. On the basis of style, it has been dated by the museum to ca. 405 to 415 CE. The goddess bears a close resemblance to the relief carving of Durga on one of the Bilasar gateway pillars, and moreover, the composition displays the same delicate balance between grace and playfulness evinced on the Gupta-period architectural elements at both Gaṛhwā and Bilasar.

Williams compares the iconographic style of the Gaṛhwā frieze with a Gupta-period abacus on a lion capital from Udayagiri depicting astrological figures, each sitting within an orb.⁸¹ Between these orbs – which call to mind the images of Candra and Sūrya on the Gaṛhwā frieze – are additional standing figures (*rāṣi* or

⁸⁰ For a photograph of the Besnagar Gaṅgā, see <https://www.mfa.org/collections/object/ganga-28951>. Accessed September 13, 2019.

⁸¹ The lion capital is at the Gujari Mahal Museum, Gwalior.



Figure 25: Gupta-period terracotta plaque from Katingara, Etah District, Uttar Pradesh, in a private collection.

animal-headed zodiac figures) and a repeating motif of three flat circles. Williams places the abacus in the sixth century CE.⁸² Meera Dass, however, notes that the only precedent she has seen for this motif of three circles (in the case of the abacus, Williams suggests this design represents stars⁸³) is on a panel from Amarāvati held at the British Museum (ca. third century CE).⁸⁴ This panel depicts three scenes from the life of the Buddha, arranged horizontally. The scenes are divided by three circular dots placed in vertical rows as on the Udayagiri abacus. Each central orb contains a seated figure. It might be proposed that the circular dots on both the Amarāvati reliefs (a recurring pattern) and on the Udayagiri abacus represent *stūpa* railings with roundels. This minor iconographic connection with the Amarāvati panels tentatively suggests a considerably earlier date for the abacus than that given by Williams.

⁸² Williams, “A Recut Aśokan Capital,” 237–239. Further photographs of the abacus are published in Harle, *Gupta Sculpture*, plates 36 and 37.

⁸³ Williams, “A Recut Aśokan Capital,” 239.

⁸⁴ Meera I. Dass, “Udayagiri: A Sacred Hill: Its Art, Architecture and Landscape” (PhD diss., Cardiff University, 2001), 146.

Lastly, according to Ellen Raven,⁸⁵ an early date for the Viṣṇu Viśvarūpa frieze and posts at Gaṛhwā is further supported by coins from the reigns of Candragupta II and Kumāragupta I, which share a comparable iconographic style.

13 Conclusion

Gaṛhwā is home not only to the earliest epigraphic mention of a *sattra*, but also, I believe, to the earliest known image of a *sattra* – in point of fact, the only image of *sattra* surviving from the Gupta period. Moreover, the frieze is an excellent example of iconography that seamlessly weaves together the concepts of time, kingship, devotion, and some of the intricacies of *pūjā* worship, not only in terms of the types of offerings made, but also in the relationships between the various groups of people involved, some of which are quite ambiguous and can be read in more than one way. The frieze might be described as an efficacious liminal space where gods, celestials, mythical heroes, and mortals come together, while simultaneously giving us a rare and valuable window into how religion was actually practiced at this locale in the Gupta era.

The magnitude of the donations given to the *sattra* at Gaṛhwā, when considered together with the finesse of the relief carvings and architectural elements, indicate that the temple complex here was affluent and, as such, of some consequence, possibly having a reputation that ranged beyond its immediate environs. Furthermore, its position on or near an important trade route would have facilitated pilgrimage – and certainly the *sattra* would have been a magnet for wandering ascetics and the poor, as well as those more wealthy, seeking to increase their spiritual merit through charitable giving.

In striking contrast to literature on the Vedic form of *sattra*, textual references to *sattra* as a charitable almshouse are primarily found in endowments or commemorative records, rather than in more verbose prescriptive or mythological texts. In lieu of such texts, the Gaṛhwā frieze is tremendously important for the shape, form, texture, context, and even potency it brings to *sattra*, a ritual institution about which we have limited knowledge. In turn, textual references enable us to comprehend aspects of the imagery that might otherwise seem oblique, or even purely fictional. The rich iconography provides a visual documentation of the close relationship between temple and *sattra* hinted at in the Bilsar and Poḍāgarh inscriptions and reveals that the giving of clothing and food at the *sattra* was a ceremonious affair and one that was considered to

⁸⁵ Personal communication, 2018.

greatly increase the merit of the benefactor. The imagery also tentatively indicates – as we would expect – that astronomical and temporal factors were important considerations for those involved in ceremonious giving to the inhabitants of the *sattra* and subsequent worship at the temple. Moreover, the frieze imagery gives the impression that the institution of *sattra* received royal support. This theory is proven by the copper-plate inscriptions of King Bhūta and King Govinda IV and the inscription from Poḍāgarh, which inform us that *sattras* received royal patronage in the Gupta, post-Gupta, and early medieval periods, both in terms of ritual giving to existing *sattras*, and sometimes in their establishment.

Looking ahead, a study that explores the seemingly erratic evolution of *sattra* from Vedic times up to the present day is a desideratum.

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