

Note on a Recently Reported Early Śiva Temple near Kothur (Telangana State)*

Corinna Wessels-Mevissen & Adam Hardy

In the August of 2017, images of a peculiar ancient building preserved on a remote, forested plateau in eastern Telangana, near the hamlet of Kothur (Kottūru), Jayashankar Bhupalapally District, were uploaded on a social media platform by a journalist from Hyderabad.¹ The locality is known as Dēvuniḡṡṡa, ‘God’s hill’ (18°06'54.6"N, 80°02'13.3"E). To the best of our knowledge, this temple has not previously been documented, although the local population has been using it for worship at least in recent years. Considering its relatively good state of preservation and its many special features, it is puzzling why no one should have reported or studied it yet. This outstanding edifice proves to be a veritable archive of the visual culture in this particular region during ca. 6th century CE. Such a date in this part of India suggests that the temple would have been built within the orbit of the Viṡṡu-kunḡḡin dynasty. Its unique architecture provides a missing link between early timber structures and the Drāviḡa tradition.

The path that climbs to the ‘jungle temple’ follows the bed of a stream, dry for much of the year, issuing from a pond created by a dam built across the

* This note is based on a paper read by Corinna Wessels-Mevissen, during the 24th Conference of the European Association for South Asian Archaeology and Art, held at Naples, 2-6 July 2018, hosted by the University of Naples “L’Orientale” and ISMEO. The portions on the architectural aspects were revised by Adam Hardy, after his visit to the site on 22 January 2019. This is a brief preliminary report, which we hope to soon expand considerably.

1 The first photos were taken by Sheikh Sadiq Ali, Hyderabad, while the person who shared the images with a large group of people was Aravind Arya Pakide, a very active young heritage enthusiast from Hanamkonda. The latter has since assisted several colleagues, including us, in their journeys to the temple, and he is keeping up contact with the local population, too. We wish to express our gratitude to him.



Fig. 1 Kothur, Śiva temple, eastern façade, with entrance door (lintel missing)

mouth of a hollow not far from the summit. This was surely the original tank for the temple, though locals maintain that the present earthen bund is quite recent. A natural basin in the rock outcrops close to the temple enhance this compellingly sacred setting.



Fig. 2 Kothur, Śiva temple, exterior, north wall, first upper storey, seated Mithuna couple with patches of reddish stucco remaining in the portions best sheltered from wind and rain

The rock on which and of which the shrine is built consists of sandstone, cut into dressed blocks. These are closely fitted, and were it not for traces of mortar one would assume the masonry to be dry. Facing East, the *vimāna* is a stocky pile, crowned by a circular dome (**Figs. 1, 11**). It is a little over 6 m square at the base and approaching 7 m high in its present state: the dome would have been crowned by a pot finial (*kalaśa*) or conceivably an *āmalaka* (with no traces of either surviving). Surrounding it are *kūṭa*-aedicules (miniature *alpa vimānas*) at the corners, with a *nāsī* or *gavākṣa* dormer at the centre, flanked by a pair of *nāsīs* clinging against the circular base of the dome, as in a necklace. Each *nāsī* contains a large human head.

All is in horizontal courses and teems with sculpted reliefs covering almost every available surface. Everything is now very worn, but there are still patches of reddish stucco that once would have covered the whole surface, inside and outside, and which was probably painted (**Fig. 2**). The walls of the 3 m-square sanctum display continuous reliefs. Whether it enshrined a *liṅga* cannot be certain: there is no trace of a drain for fluids, and today the cella shelters only a recently made concrete plinth. Unusually, there is no ceiling,



Fig. 3 left: Kothur, Śiva temple, sanctum interior, view towards the top; right: Gop, Zinawali temple, -dito.-. Photo: Dashrath Varotariya

and the tapering, corbelled courses are visible up to the summit, as in the ca. late-6th century temple at Gop, Saurashtra (Jamnagar Dist.) (**Fig. 3**). Fronting the shrine is a walled enclosure, seemingly not part of the original conception as it butts crudely against the temple surface.

Each side of the *vimāna* is taken up mostly by a broad central projection (*bhadra*), the first tier of which has a pair of niches crowned simply by *nāsīs*, flanking the narrow doorway, guarded by *dvārapālas*, on the east side (**Fig. 1**); on the other three sides a spectacular mythological panel (**Figs. 5, 6, 8**) stands on a simple foot-moulding (*jagatī*). Above rise three further tiers defined by relief-encrusted string courses, and divided rather haphazardly into bays by plain pilasters. A *kapota* (eave moulding) crowns the *bhadra*, with only the central *nāsī* in the dome integrated, a little weakly, with what comes below. The *vimāna* corners are treated differently, approaching the Drāviḍa logic of representational mouldings and aedicular storeys. Four tiers line up with those of the *bhadra*, but here, the conceptual storeys call for interpretation in terms of *kapotas* and *kūṭa*-aedicules. As well as the crowning ones, another set appears in the second tier, slightly camouflaged by carvings set into their domes. In the third tier is another, putative one, with what would be a very squat dome over the *kapota*, but these mouldings more likely represent a pair of thatched eaves forming a *varaṇḍikā* cornice. At their base, the corners rise from a chunky band of *gaṇas* supporting a *kapota*, the same treatment extending to the paired niches.

A pilaster with two lions carved on it, in low relief, seems to be another forerunner of southern practice (**Fig. 5**, right side), but typically Drāviḍa pillar mouldings are absent, while several pilaster capitals and bases show vases (*ghaṭa*), widespread in early Buddhist works and later typical of Nāgara temples.

This stone temple is reminiscent of earlier timber forms with octagonal domes, rather than circular ones, notably the three-storeyed Buddhist shrine depicted in a ca. 2nd-century relief from Ghantasala, now in the Musée Guimet, Paris.² The shrine at Kothur, in the elements clustered around its summit, foreshadows the fully-Drāviḍa, 7th-century octagonal-domed temples of the Early Calukyas at Badami and Mahakuta.³ Its mouldings, mainly rectangular and covered in reliefs, are not yet concerned with formalizing timber constructional details into sequences of shapes in stone, as seen in Calukya temples already by the early 7th century. Indian temple architecture, while inherently representational, develops a range of abstracted and regularized elements. At Kothur, drawing on no such system, the vision of a palatial heaven profuse with divine beings is created less as an architectonic composition than as a big sculpture.



Fig. 4 Kothur, Śiva temple, limestone fragment of stūpa railing post, roughly dressed at the top (due to reuse?)

An unexpected find at the site are three large limestone fragments leaning against the wall of the courtyard, one of them a carved post, supposedly from an Amaravati-style *stūpa* railing (**Fig. 4**). The limestone could either have been ‘reused’ in order to obtain the calciferous mortar used for constructing the temple, or the post could have once been erected somewhere at the temple in the past. It is difficult to imagine from where these spoils of a Buddhist *stūpa* could have been brought, as the nearest sites with *stūpas* known to us are more than 100 km away from Kothur.

The three large relief panels on the *bhadras* are among the most important pieces of sculptural evidence. These exhibit a homogenous sculptural style essentially reminiscent of Gupta art and other sculptural idioms present in this early period. Clearly, the shapes have been hewn out of the dressed stones already put in place. The large panel on the rear (west) side of the sanctum, highlights the Ardhanārīśvara aspect of Śiva (**Fig. 5**). It typifies the crowded composition of the reliefs on this temple. Ardhanārīśvara is four-armed and

2 HARDY 1995: 407 fig. 10n (drawing); OKADA 2000: 42-44, cat. 14 (with colour plate).

3 HARDY 1995: 487 figs. 90b, c, d, e; pl. 8; EITA 1986, 2: pl. 122.



Fig. 5 Kothur, Śiva temple, exterior, west wall, bhadra, *Ardhanārīśvara* panel

assumes a frequently-seen posture emphasizing the female hip on the figure's proper left. However, the lower right arm is resting on what appears to be a small figure of Gaṇeśa – just one of its unique characteristics. The left frontal arm is held in a graceful *dola*-like position, touching down on a figure that seems to be Skanda(?) as a young child, while the rear arms hold a double-petalled lotus (right) and a square-shaped mirror (left). Another peculiar feature is the bovine head appearing on the right side of *Ardhanārīśvara*, close to the deity's head. This motif recurs twice on the temple, obviously, in this particular style, a marker for the *vāhana* of the god (cf. **Fig. 8**).

On the deity's right stands a two-armed female, with her left hand resting on her hip. It may show *Umā*, positioned on the proper right side of her husband as on the interior, which would be unprecedented for *Ardhanārīśvara*, always understood as embodying both the male and female principles, therefore appearing without a separate partner. Her coiffure gives a hint at probable precursors: the highly specific hairstyle of the probable *Umā/Pārvatī* has a parallel in a seated goddess from the *Vākāṭaka* site of Mandhal (Nagpur Dist.).⁴

4 BAKKER 1997: pls. XV-XVI, and cover of dust jacket. He discusses the evidence on pp. 113-117, interpreting the Mandhal image as a *Mātrkā*.



Fig. 6 Kothur, Śiva temple, exterior, north wall, bhadrā, (probable) Balarāma panel

In this hairstyle, two lateral strands are more voluminous than the rest of the hair. A similar hairdo is seen in several other female figures on this temple, its conspicuousness suggesting that certain features of 5th-century Vākāṭaka art recur at Kothur. Another example from Mandhal can be adduced for the double-petalled lotus in Ardhanārīśvara's rear right hand.⁵

A relatively close parallel for the arm positions of this Ardhanārīśvara comes from the Early Calukyan site of Mahakuta, dating already from the latter half of the 7th century.⁶ At Mahakuta, several Ardhanārīśvara images are

5 BAKKER 1997: pl. XXIII. The position of the fingers of the right hand and the length of the stalk differ, though.

6 EITA 1986, 2: pls. 122-123. The features of Ardhanārīśvara are not date-specific, however.

preserved, all of them exhibiting the ‘resting/leaning motif’, with the right hand seen in profile and assuming a horizontal position. In 5th-century Ajanta, the motif of a goddess leaning on a shorter assistant or on another device in this manner had been a predominant visual topos.⁷

The panel on the northern wall shows a rare depiction that may be identified as Balarāma slaying Pralambāsura (**Fig. 6**).⁸ Balarāma stands on his right leg. With his left knee he presses down on the back of the Asura, whose neck he is clutching with his left hand. His right arm is dramatically raised, signifying the moment just before executing the fatal blow on the demon’s head. The depiction of the demon’s left arm close to Balarāma’s left forearm, as if reaching out and trying to free himself from the god’s grip, emphasizes his struggle for his life. He supports himself with his right arm, pressing his hand on the ground. Below, on the viewer’s left, squat two male worshippers. The upper one bears some similarity with the “squatting ascetic” from Tala, Chhattisgarh.⁹ While all this is already unusual, probably the most surprising feature is the group of four Vaiṣṇava *āyudhapuruṣas* floating in the upper part of the panel. From left to right, we can see Cakrapuruṣa, Padmapuruṣa, Gadādevī (viewer’s left), and Śaṅkhapuruṣa (viewer’s right).

Another important motif on the exterior shows Lakulīśa surrounded by his four disciples (**Fig. 7a**). He is not, as is usual, ithyphallic, although this feature might have been executed in stucco. Seated with legs folded, he holds his typical club with the right hand. A relatively close parallel, again with respect to the format of the panel, is found at Badami, Cave 2, dating from the early 2nd half of the 6th century (**Fig. 7b**). Here, Lakulīśa is ithyphallic and four-armed, while at Kothur an additional pair of arms is absent, as well as the phallus.

Other motifs that recur on the exterior are Mithuna couples (e.g. **Fig. 2**), in the lower levels, and battle scenes, restricted to the upper levels. It is impossible to decide at this point whether one or more specific battles were intended to be shown. Foot soldiers occur as well as those driving chariots, and war elephants are also present.

The large panel on the southern side of the monument is difficult to interpret (**Fig. 8**). It probably portrays Śiva in a royal attitude, flanked by a young,

7 SPINK & YAGUCHI 2014: 272-299.

8 A few early depictions of this incident are known, with none of them rendering the motif in a closely similar way, e.g. from Candausi, see AGRAWALA 1967: fig. 11 and p. 279. (Further examples and a discussion will be provided elsewhere.)

9 BOSMA 2018: 131 pl. 3.31. The full lips and the knotted beard compare particularly well.



Fig. 7 above: Kothur, Śiva temple, exterior, west wall, first upper storey, Lakulīśa panel (with a sixth human head appearing on the viewer's extreme right, probably as a kind of 'witness');

right: Badami, Cave temple 2, capital with Lakulīśa panel



prince-like figure on the viewer's right, and, most likely, Pārvatī on the left. The key to the identification seems to be another bovine head on the proper right of the central figure. His sitting posture is relaxed, and there is a dwarf kneeling below him, probably a Śivagaṇa. The standing youth appears to be touching Śiva's left foot with his right hand in a gesture of respectful salutation.

The 'inverted' positioning of husband and wife that we seem to encounter here, as in the Ardhanārīśvara panel, has a parallel on the interior, where Śiva and Pārvatī are seated at the apex of the relief panel on the rear wall, accompanied by Śiva's bull vehicle (**Fig. 9**, upper portion). With a figure occurring in between them, this motif might, in principle, foreshadow the Somaskanda

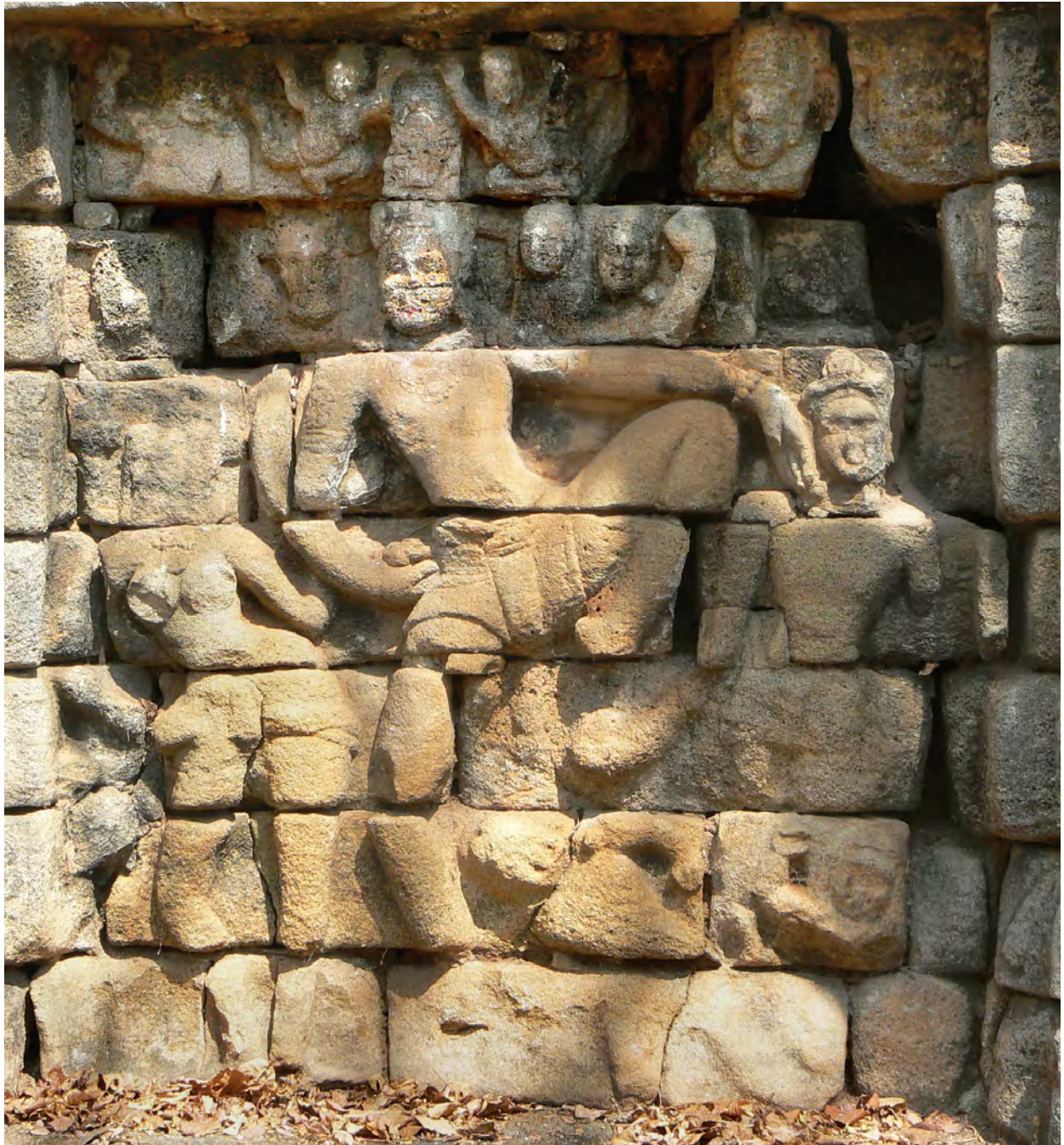


Fig. 8 Kothur, Śiva temple, exterior, south wall, bhadrā, Śiva seated in royal ease

familiar in the sanctum of Śiva temples built by the Pallavas in the south. A parallel for the inverted positions of Śiva and Pārvatī can be observed at the roughly coeval site of Sarada in Chhattisgarh.¹⁰

The extensive interior decoration of the rear wall is made up of three superimposed layers, which is best perceived on the central axis (**Fig. 9**). Starting from the lowest level, these are: another Ardhanārīśvara with only two arms, a seated male who is probably a *guru* holding his right hand in the

10 NIGAM 2004: 153 pl. 11.20; cf. also a – very probably later – instance in Tamil Nadu (at “Tiruppaṅkili”, elsewhere called “Tirupaṅjili”; see L’HERNAULT 1978: 74, ph. 22).



Fig. 9 Kothur, Śiva temple, interior, west wall

gesture of reassurance, and finally, Śiva and Pārvatī, apparently seated on their abode Mount Kailāsa. The south and north walls, too, are structured according to the same scheme.

Also on the rear (west) wall, is another important and puzzling figure that, at first glance, resembles Śiva's Ekapādamūrti (**Fig. 10a**). The male personage is only two-armed, however, as he is shown standing between four *agnikunḍa* fires (all aligned), pointing to the actual practice of severe penance. The *tapasvin* holds what may be a sword or sacrificial knife in his right hand, with an undulating blade, and an indistinct round object is in his left, possibly a small shield, or a skull-cup, shown with its opening exposed. On the interior of the southern wall appears a figure with raised arms, turning out to be a female yogic practitioner (*tapasvinī*) (**Fig. 10b**). Here the *agnikunḍas* are less discernible. As far as can be said at this stage, no apparent visual narrative connects all these images. The presence of several persons in praying attitude suggests that this is basically a gathering of deities and their devotees (**Fig. 9**). The latter might refer to the donors of the temple.

An important task lying ahead will be trying to identify more of the figural contents of the extensive reliefs. The emphasis on Ardhanārīśvara as placed in the centre of the rear wall, both inside and outside, is an unknown configuration so far, testifying to specific cultic requirements. The visual expression



Fig. 10 a. Kothur, Śiva temple, interior, west wall, tapasvin (see also on Fig. 9, above, on the viewer's right); b. Kothur, Śiva temple, interior, south wall, tapasvinī

seen in this temple conveys originality and a creative vigour that would have been, to a great extent, drawn from a local substratum. This substratum appears to contain elements of the art of Nagarjunakonda (in particular, the crowded composition).

Regarding the period proposed for the temple, a date in the 6th century, as suggested by several indicators, would fit in well with the spread of a pre-Tantric form of ascetic Śaivism to the South of India. One of the unique and important features of the temple is the placement of Ardhanārīśvara both on the interior and on the exterior of the rear wall of the sanctum. The only attribute of the two-armed Ardhanārīśvara on the interior is a large *triśūla*, held in his right hand (**Fig. 9**, below, centre). The extensive relief decoration of the interior evokes, and almost doubtlessly precedes, certain Pallava temples located further to the South.¹¹

11 E.g., L'HERNAULT 1978: ph. 18 (from the Mātaṅgeśvara temple, Kanchipuram).



*Fig. 11 Isometric view from southwest, prepared from a digital scan
by Kailash Rao (24 February 2018)*

Postscript

The structure of the temple is relatively well preserved, with the exception of the damaged overdoor portion on the east (**Fig. 1**), and a long vertical cleft on the west wall (**Fig. 11**) that has already resulted in the loss of the portion on the extreme left of the Ardhanārīśvara panel (**Fig. 5**). In a further article, to be authored together with Kailash Rao (School of Planning and Architecture,

Vijayawada), who has created a digital scan, we plan to explore conservation issues as well. We wish to thank Kailash for permitting us to include this important digital record in our note.

Photographs, if not otherwise labelled, are by Corinna Wessels-Mevissen (24 February 2018).

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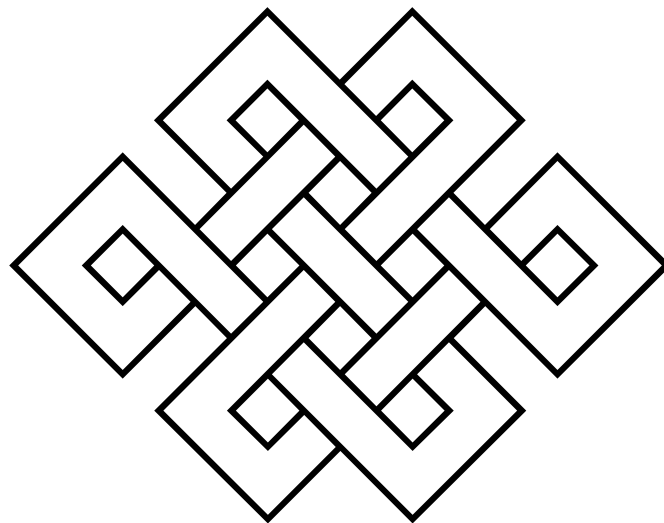
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