

Vārāṭa Temples: The Lost Tradition In-Between

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The *Samarāṅgaṇasūtradhāra* (SSD), ascribed to the famous Paramāra king Bhoja of Dhar (c. 1010-1055), contains twelve chapters dealing in detail with diverse kinds of temple design. These reflect different regional traditions and, in my view, were brought to Malwa in central India from various places, since not only do the temple forms they describe vary from chapter to chapter, but also the technical vocabulary and the whole way of conceiving and elaborating temple architecture.¹ Chapter 64 is about temples called Vāvāṭa, a variant of the term Vārāṭa found in other texts, and the twelve types of shrine (*prāsāda*) it describes are enigmatic, not easy to attach to a known temple-building tradition.

In my recent study of that text I dealt with Chapter 64 only briefly, noting:

‘Vāvāṭa’ relates to ancient Vidarbha (eastern Maharashtra). It would be exciting to discover here a lost, post-Vākāṭaka tradition of brick temples in Maharashtra, from which the seventh- and eighth-century temples that we know from Dakṣiṇa Kosala would have been an offshoot, and which would fill the gap in our knowledge of what went on in the upper Deccan between Ellora and the eleventh century, when Bhūmija temples took over.²

Under my observation there lurked, of course, a hypothesis. The geographical connotation of the name is a clue.³ This paper is an attempt to give some weight to that hypothesis, firstly by tracing the roots of the Dakṣiṇa Kosala tradition back to the fifth-century art and architecture of the Vākāṭakas, whose heartland was Vidarbha, and finally by showing that the temples of Dakṣiṇa Kosala provide a coherent way – as far as I can see the only one available – of visualising the Vāvāṭa of the SSD.

Dakṣiṇa or South Kosala, roughly corresponding to present-day Chhattisgarh state, is sometimes referred to as Mahākosala, or simply Kosala – not to be confused with the more ancient and more northerly kingdom of that name. This was a relatively remote region before its great era of temple building. Both Gupta and Vākāṭaka inscriptions lay claim to controlling the area at certain times. The Lakṣmaṇa temple at Sirpur, ancient Srīpura and sometime capital of the kingdom, was for a long time the region’s only well-known monument. A rich corpus has been brought to light in recent decades.⁴ None are securely dated, but it is clear that the range is from the sixth to tenth centuries, and that, at least up to the eighth century, these temples are surprisingly early for their degree of complexity. They are built of brick as well as of stone and are notable for their experimentation with stellate plan forms.

In the Gupta-Vākāṭaka era (c. fourth-sixth centuries), a virtually ‘pan-Indic’ range of timber shrine forms was monumentalised in temples of brick and stone. These seminal forms, shown at the top of Figure 1, became aedicules – shrine-images used as compositional elements. Certain ways of combining these elements to create new temple designs were the starting point for the two widespread architectural languages that became distinguishable in the sixth and seventh centuries, the Nāgara in the north and the Drāviḍa in the

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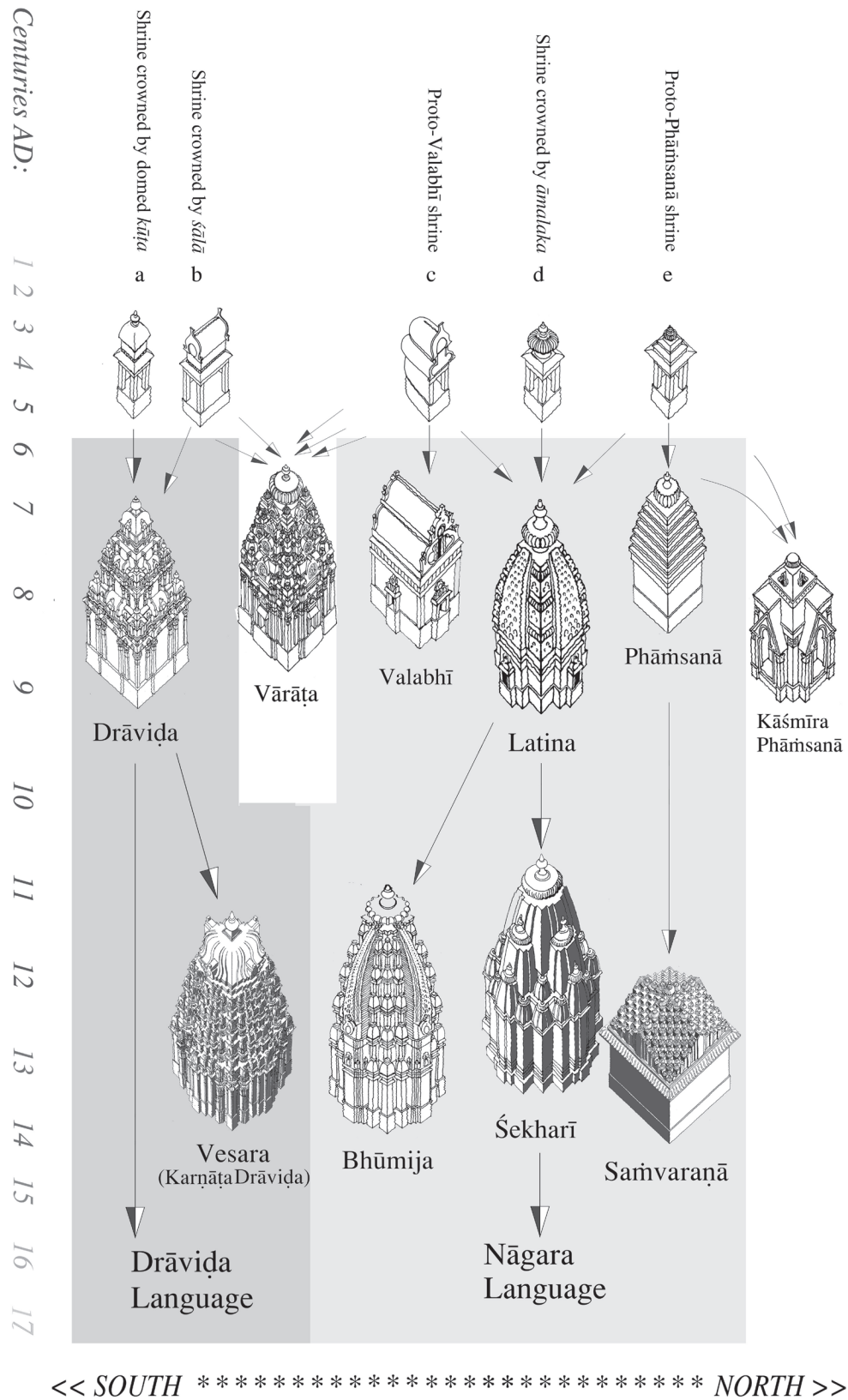


Figure 1: Overview of Indian temple typology.

south. Each had particular seminal shrine forms as its respective basis. The Kosala temples have sometimes been seen as proto-Nāgara, a characterisation that needs questioning on two counts: because they are fully formed and sophisticated in their own right, and because they contain conspicuous Drāviḍa-like aspects. I have myself, while noting their southern features, called them ‘early aedicular Nāgara’:⁵ Nāgara because their northerly aspects are indeed prominent, and aedicular because the shrine-images of which they are composed are rendered in full, taking up the full height of each storey, rather than merged into a unitary form as in the Latina mode of Nāgara. That term, however, underplays the presence of aedicules typical of Drāviḍa temples. The Kosala temples are better understood as neither Nāgara nor Drāviḍa, but as sharing inheritance with both.

This shared inheritance is the root of what I am calling the Vārāṭa tradition, of which the Kosala temples are surviving examples. It is the basis of this tradition’s particular kind of in-betweenness. It shares characteristics with the Nāgara and with the Drāviḍa because it took root in a soil alive with the seeds of both, before the two had become differentiated. That soil was the world of the Vākāṭakas. To explore their terrain one must look both to the monumental remains left at Mansar, Ramtek and related sites in Vidarbha by the main, eastern Vākāṭakas, and to the famous Māhāyāna Buddhist monastic cave sanctuaries of Ajanta, associated with the western branch of the Vākāṭaka dynasty of Vatsagulma. Several scholars have stressed the importance of Vākāṭaka influence on Dakṣiṇa Kosala,⁶ and here I hope to build on their work through an analysis of architectural typology and composition.

While my analysis begins with aedicules, with temples composed of temples, when tracing the continuum from Vidarbha to Kosala another connotation commonly attributed to Indian temples springs out compellingly: the idea of the temple as the god’s multi-storey palace. A series of little-known structures running from the Vākāṭakas to the earliest Dakṣiṇa Kosala temples hints at a moment when the concepts of temple and palace were most closely intermeshed. More specifically, these structures suggest the existence of a type of palace built for ritual rather than everyday living, hierarchically organised to assemble various grades of feudatories around an overlord. It is easy to imagine how a terraced structure of this kind could mutate into a storeyed temple where the king, instead of sitting enthroned at the summit, would minister to the deity as the highest link between the human and divine worlds.⁷

These two strands, the aedicular and the palatial, are fully intertwined, but call for separate scrutiny. I shall first survey the aedicular development, then go back again in time to trace the series of palace-like structures. The paper will end with a survey of textual treatment of the Vārāṭa, dwelling on the SSD.

PLANS, AEDICULES, MOULDINGS

The five early, seminal shrine types are shown at the top of Figure 1, an overview of the principal forms of Indian temple. Single-storey temples crowned by domed *kūṭa* pavilions or barrel-roofed *śālās*, rectangular or apsidal, are at the root of the Drāviḍa tradition, which developed further forms by combining images of these two types. In the north, the barrel-roofed form best known from Buddhist *caitya* halls, with or without side-aisles, became the Valabhī temple form, while shrines with piled-up eaves became the Phāṃsanā. A simple type of shrine crowned by an *āmalaka* was crucial to the emergence of the Nāgara tradition. It was combined with Valabhī aedicules (while incorporating certain Phāṃsanā overtones), and these composite designs eventually fused into the unitary Latina form, the principal Nāgara mode for several centuries, with its curved spire or *śikhara*.

The Nāgara tradition sprang from the Gangetic and central Indian heartlands of the Gupta dynasty, in contrast to the Vākāṭaka inheritance of Vārāṭa temples. All five of the prototypical forms are found in the

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Vārāṭa tradition, and the range of aedicular forms seen later in Dakṣiṇa Kosala is prefigured in the fifth-century architectural imagery of Ajanta. Over the façade of vihara Cave 1 runs a *hāra* containing domed *kūṭas* (of two storeys) as well as *śālās* (Fig. 2). Gateways depicted in the famous Ajanta murals are of the classic *śālā*-topped kind, forerunners of southern *gopuras* and *śālā*-topped *alpavimānas*. In the façade of *caitya* hall Cave 26 (Fig. 3), the giant bodhisattvas flanking the central *caitya* arch are sheltered by *śālā*-topped pavilions. Cloister-like *hāras* of interlinked *śālās* crown the entire façade, like that of the slightly earlier *caitya* hall Cave 19. All is so far ‘proto-Drāviḍa’, as is the cushion-type pillar/pilaster that predominates; but ‘proto-Nāgara’ *āmalaka* aedicules appear over interior cell doors in Cave 20 (Fig. 4), and northerly, Gupta-related brimming vase pillars are used as a contrast to the former type. There are no Phāṃsanā forms as such, but the piling-up of eaves is common, as doubtless still in the wood-and-thatch tradition: the crowning *śālās* of Cave 26, for example, have an extra, *śālā*-like eave. As for the Valabhī, we have actual *caitya* halls, and the aisle-less form of aedicule, or what in Drāviḍa terms could be termed a *pañjara*-aedicule. This is commonly seen projecting from the middle of a *kūṭa* (Fig. 2) or a *śālā*.

The miniature architecture at Cave 26 includes interesting examples of the burgeoning game of aedicule combination. One is the frame for the standing Buddha on the front of the *stūpa* inside the *caitya* hall. It is

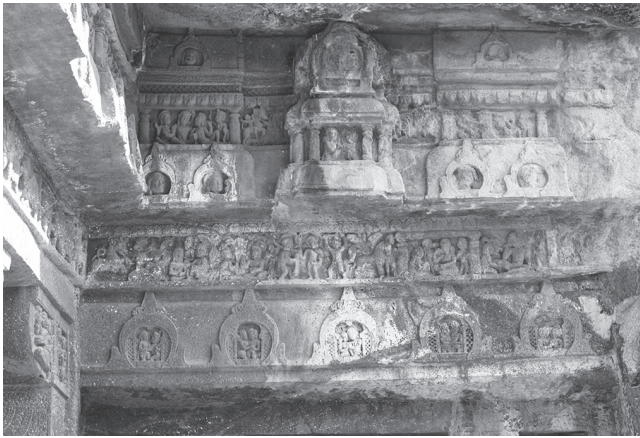


Figure 2: Cave 1, Ajanta, façade, fifth century.



Figure 3: Cave 26, Ajanta, façade.



Figure 4: Cave 20, Ajanta, interior, doorway to a cell.

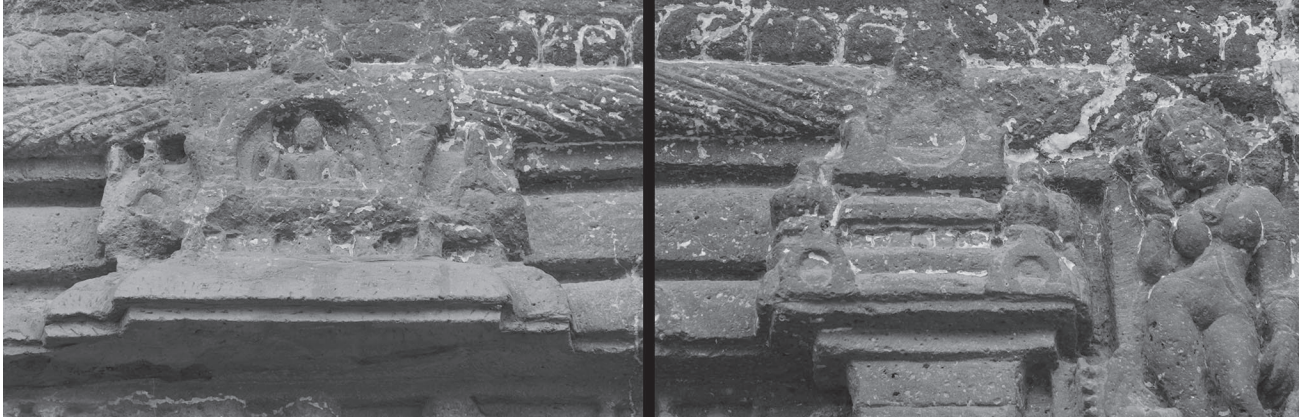


Figure 5: Cave 26, Ajanta, *hāra* over main doorway.

‘proto-Drāviḍa’, yet has *āmalakas* on its roof ridge. The shrine-images in the *hāra* over the central doorway (Fig. 5) could similarly appear as hybrid, but are in fact innocent of the later differentiation. In the middle is a double-roofed *śālā* with large emergent *pañjara*. The corner pavilions show a rather ‘proto-Nāgara’ composition, comparable to the shrines depicted on the door jambs of the Gupta temple at Deogarh, with a crowning Valabhī/*pañjara*-aedicule, diminutive *āmalaka* aedicules on the corners.

A few key examples must serve to illustrate the similarly broad aedicular palette of Kosala temples. Unfortunately the earliest ones, crucial for the discussion on palace-like temples below, have lost those parts that would have defined that aspect at the level of overall composition. Precious clues survive at Malhar, site of a magnificent temple now known as the Bhīma Kīcaka, datable to around the sixth century CE (Figs. 6, 7). This is under Archaeological Survey of India protection, and must have been brought to light quite recently.⁸ A fragment from the site shown in Figure 8 may have been part of a *hāra* over a doorway. It shows two interlinked shrines, exemplifying two types familiar from the later monuments of the tradition. On the end is a shrine crowned by an octagonal dome with central horseshoe arch and small octagonal domes at the corners. It is Drāviḍa-like, and the octagonal form perhaps suggests ancient Āndhra-Karṇāṭa roots more than Vākāṭaka ones. The finial is worn, but the equivalent octagonal domes of full-size aedicules at Rajim and Sirpur are crowned by *āmalakas*. Stepping a little forward, the adjacent shrine is the kind of Valabhī/*pañjara* seen at Ajanta. At the foot of these aedicules are a *prati* (floor moulding) surmounted by a *vedī* (rail moulding), as commonly found over Drāviḍa *adhiṣṭhānas*.



Figure 6: Bhīma Kīcaka, Malhar, sixth century, from south-west.

The surviving base of the Bhīma Kīcaka itself (Figs. 9, 10) is a treasure trove. As with the later temples of the region, its combination of elements typically thought of as either Nāgara or Drāviḍa makes a choice of terminology challenging, given that modern scholarship has deemed particular terms appropriate for one or the other. Whether we term it *adhiṣṭhāna* or *vedibandha*, or follow the SSD and call it a *pīṭha*, this moulded base is unique. A little over 2m high in the main portions, its moulding sequence is *jagatī/kumbha* with



Figure 7: *Bhūma Kīcaka, Malhar doorway.*



Figure 8: *Fragment from Malhar.*



Figure 9: *Bhūma Kīcaka, Malhar moulded base.*

outward-sweeping toe, a vase-shaped fluted *kalaśa/kumuda*, *antarapaṭṭa/gala* (recess), *kapotālī/kapota* eave, and Drāviḍa-like *vedī* with lotus petals. Horseshoe arch forms abound here. Some of the miniature aedicules are like the single-arched one in Figure 11 (centre), while others have side-aisles, already expressed as split *gavākṣas*, and already with the motifs overlapping and proliferating, long before such games became a mainstay of the Nāgara tradition. All this tends towards defining them as Valabhīs, crowned by *gavākṣas*, yet the general shape of the horseshoe arches is more southern and *nāśī*-like, with its leafy ears,⁹ and the way in which trilobite sunshades of the kind seen at Sanchi and Amaravati have acquired *caitya* hall overtones before bubbling away into loops and bosses (Fig. 11 centre and right). These are already the typical Dakṣiṇa

Kosala form. The futility of asking whether this is Nāgara or Drāviḍa is underlined by the indiscriminate use of both *ghaṭapallava* and cushion pilasters in the aedicules. Both pillar types are conspicuous in the miniature colonnades of the voluptuous recesses. This deliberate contrasting of the two is a hallmark of the subsequent tradition.

The two aedicule types of the Malhar fragment are the main compositional basis of the various temples at Rajim, including the main Rājīvalocana temple of c. 600 CE (Fig. 12). This has four tiers or *bhūmīs*, rising in diminishing steps within a straight-sided, triangular outline, with a crowning (later restored) *āmalaka*. Here the narrow *grīva* in the Malhar fragment becomes a full miniature storey with pilasters. All is fully aedicular, projections and corresponding pilasters in the wall zones aligned with pavilions above the cornice, this treatment continuing right to the summit, rather than having a uni-aedicular top tier. The Valabhī in the lower two tiers emerges from a Phāṁsanā background. Pilasters throughout are the two contrasting types, articulating planes and aedicules. Unlike Gupta and post-Gupta proto-Nāgara temples, unless we include the distinctive Bodhgaya branch in that category, the Kosala temples do not have a straight, horizontal division between each *bhūmī*. Instead, on every *bhūmī* above the first, each corner or intermediate aedicule has one pilaster visible, and one hidden behind the roof of the aedicule



Figure 10: *Bhīma Kīcaka*, Malhar, detail of moulded base.



Figure 11: A typical *gavākṣa* or *nāṣī* from Kosala (centre) compared with Nāgara (left) and Drāviḍa (right) examples. Centre: Śīva temple, Dhobini, c. 700; left, Galaganātha temple, Pattadakal, late seventh century; right, monolithic shrine at Cave 32, Ellora, late eighth century.

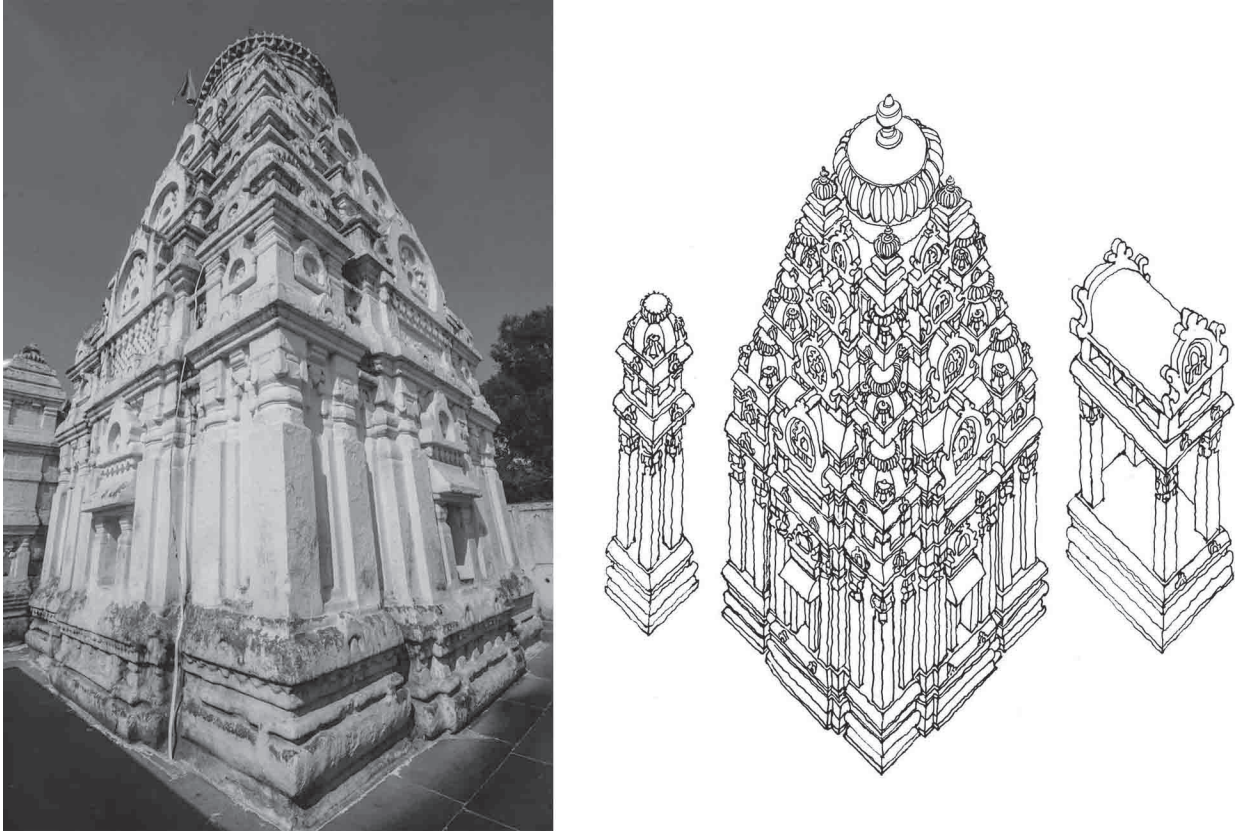


Figure 12: *Rājīvalocana temple, Rajim, c. 600.*

below, the roof in question rising above the general level of its *bhūmī*: what I call the principle of ‘one leg showing’.

The brick temple of Lakṣmaṇa, Sirpur (Fig. 13), is considerably more complex, astonishingly so for its likely date of sometime in the first half of the 7th century CE. There seem to have been five tiers, doubtless crowned by an *āmalaka*, and the superstructure has a curvature, not seen again in the tradition until around the tenth century, by which time there must have been knowledge of Nāgara temples. The fully staggered square plan (foreshadowed in the Malhar fragment) is perhaps the earliest known in the whole of India and, as well as stepping forward, the heads of the aedicules mount up towards the centre. In the intermediate projections or *pratīrathas*, the heads of the aedicules are shifted sideways to accommodate the curvature of the tower. As well as the two aedicule types already encountered, we have *āmalaka* aedicules at the corners. The three-storey temple-image at the centre (emerging from an initial projection that is storeyed and non-aedicular) is another illustration of in-betweenness. Its overlapping nave-and-aisles arch crowning the lower *bhūmī* suggests the label ‘Nāgara’, yet this sits over a *pratī-cum-vedī* moulding that looks very much like early Drāviḍa architecture.

Experiments with stellate plans begin after this (Fig. 14) including those which are basically square but with angled intermediate projections (Fig. 15). *Āmalaka* aedicules supplant octagonal-domed *kūṭas* as standard corner elements, and though no superstructures survive with their original top, they were presumably crowned by *āmalakas*. Hence, perhaps, the tendency to see Kosala temples as a kind of Nāgara; yet their southerly legacy persists in such details as *vedī* mouldings and cushion pilasters. Even when, around

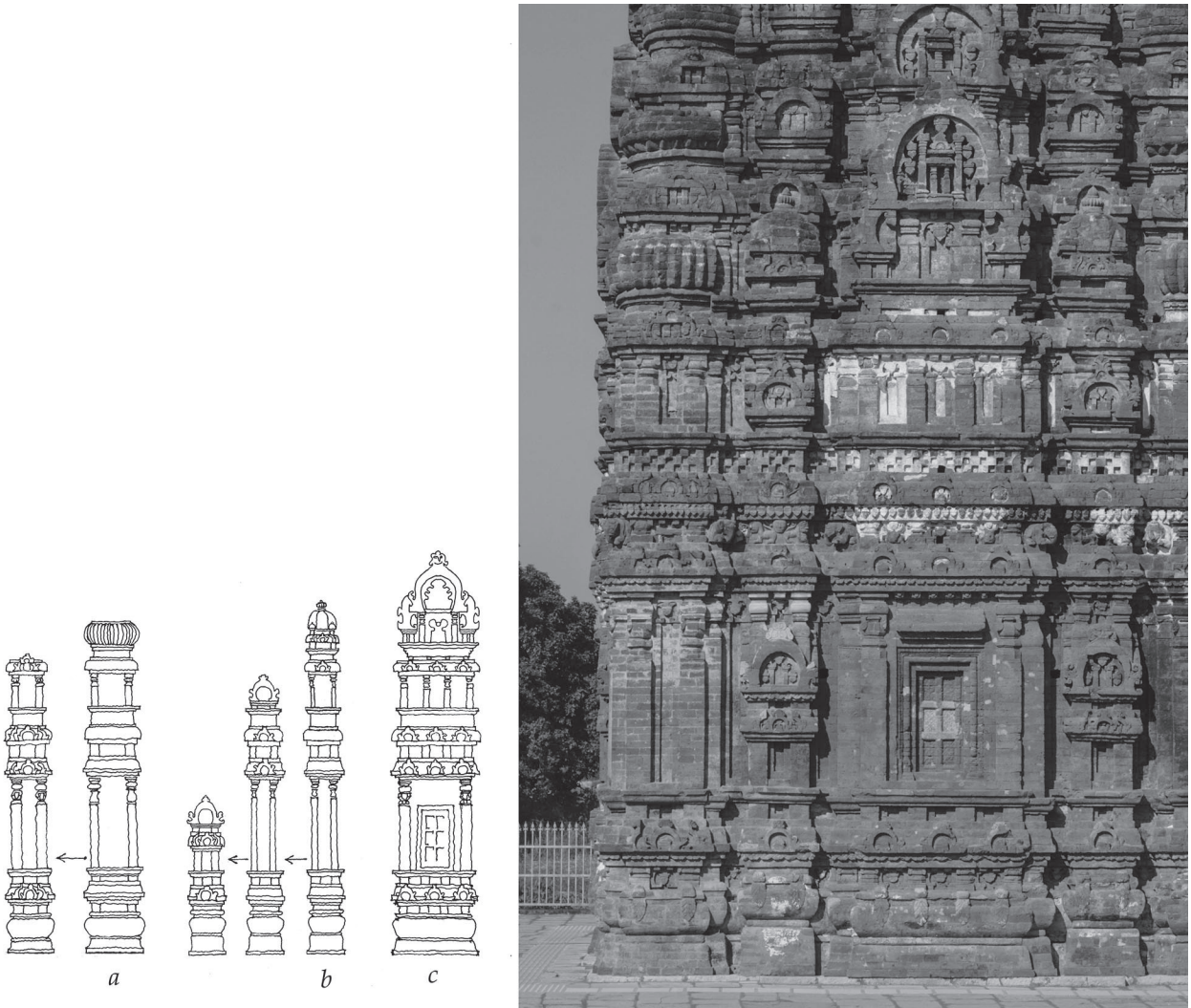


Figure 13: *Lakṣmaṇa temple, Sirpur, early seventh century.*

the tenth century, aedicules lose definition and curved *śikhara*s are fully established, this tradition is still distinct, not so much absorbing Nāgara influences as transforming its own ingredients.¹⁰

When it comes to temple plan forms, there is clear evidence of inheritance from the eastern Vākāṭaka heartland of Vidarbha. At Mansar, the eastern Vākāṭaka capital, is the recently-excavated base of a stellate, brick temple (Fig. 16). The plan, comparable to the Dhobini temple in Kosala (Fig. 14), has eight points, with square corner turrets placed on the angles of an octagon. Though restored almost as soon as discovered, with a circular sanctum calling for scepticism, the mouldings are authentic. Over the *jagatī* is a rounded *kalaśa/kumuda*, in turn supporting a floor moulding (*pratī*) with bricks projecting out at the corners. By comparison with an equivalent moulding at Tala (see below), as well as with Drāviḍa conventions, it seems to me that these projecting bricks were an armature for *makara* (crocodile monster) heads to be added in stucco. The panelled surface above could either have been capped to make a rail moulding, or be a *gala* (recess) shaded by some kind of *kapota/kapotālī* cornice. The walls above would have supported a necklace of *kūṭa* pavilions, whether domed ('proto-Drāviḍa') or *āmalaka*-topped ('proto-Nāgara'). This temple may be Vākāṭaka, or perhaps a little later, contemporary with the early Kosala works.



Figure 14: Śiva temple, Dhobini, c. 700



Figure 15: Siddheśvara temple, Palari, c. late seventh century.



Figure 16: Base of stellate temple, Mansar, c. sixth century.

PRĀSĀDA AS PALACE¹¹

Several very large, ruined, brick structures from around the fifth century CE consist of a stepped series of platforms, originally crowned by some kind of chamber or shrine. The platforms are reminiscent of those more familiar as bases for *stūpas*, as seen in Gandhara, but with more ample room. Terraced structures of this kind are found in the Gupta domains at Pawaya and Ahicchatra,¹² generally assumed to have been temples.

A comparable monument at Mansar is the vast brick mound known as MNS 2. It has a distinctive plan, barely understood until now because of later accretions, which seems to have been influential in the subsequent tradition. This structure has previously been interpreted as a temple, a *stūpa* base, or a monastery, but Bakker has argued that it is the palace of King Pravarasena II (c. 400-415).¹³ The form can now be seen more clearly with the help of a digital model by Kailash Rao (Figs. 17, 18).¹⁴ What is visible, post-excavation, is a ruined terraced monument of the Vākāṭaka period, with a rectangular plan measuring 50m x 43.3m. This stood in the vast central courtyard of what, from its foundations, does indeed seem to have been a great palace. The terraced part is smothered by later brick ruins, through which it peeps at various points. One can see that the original Vākāṭaka structure, fronted by flights of steps to the west, stood on an outer platform with corner projections, with a re-entrant angle at the corner itself. Oddly, an identical base appears immediately (1.25m) behind the outer one, apparently without even a narrow walkway between the two, as if reflecting some change of intention (Fig. 19).

The inner layer rises to around 3m above ground level, with remains of a cloister of cells around its perimeter. These seem not to be original, as the second tier of the pyramid, when complete, would have protruded over their entrances. Moreover, on the north side the fin walls of the cells butt up crudely against the Vākāṭaka base mouldings of the second tier.¹⁵ Though rudely obscured by the 'buttresses', these mouldings are largely intact at this point, revealing that the wall of the second tier was made up of a whole series of projections separated by narrow recesses.

A lofty third terrace is also surrounded by projections, but probably not original as the plan is a little irregular and the walls plain. Raised on one further platform is a rectangular cella, with an antechamber and what looks like an ambulatory. These upper portions, with yet more confusing cubicles, are not convincingly Vākāṭaka, but may well reflect the general form of the original structure.

The Vākāṭaka platform bases (Figs. 19, 20) begin with a tall *jagatī* or foot moulding, with some projecting bricks in the upstand on top for some kind of decorative treatment in stucco. The next moulding is treated differently in the first and second tiers. In the former (Fig. 19) it is like a simple Drāviḍa *vedī* or rail moulding, its rounded upper member suitable for lotus petal treatment, while in the upper tier (Fig. 20) this component is transformed into the equivalent of a Drāviḍa *pratī* or floor moulding, with a recess at its base and three bricks stepping out at the corners, as if intended for *makara* heads. On top is a full-size *vedikā* or conceptual railing, above which can be seen vestiges of the wall itself, with recessed panels. The wall was probably capped by a *kapota* cornice and a parapet treated as a railing – if not a real wooden railing. Looking forward

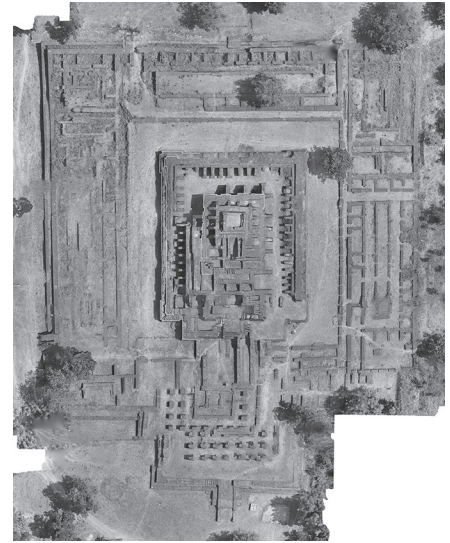


Figure 17: MNS 2, Mansar, early fifth century and later.
Digital scan by Kailash Rao.

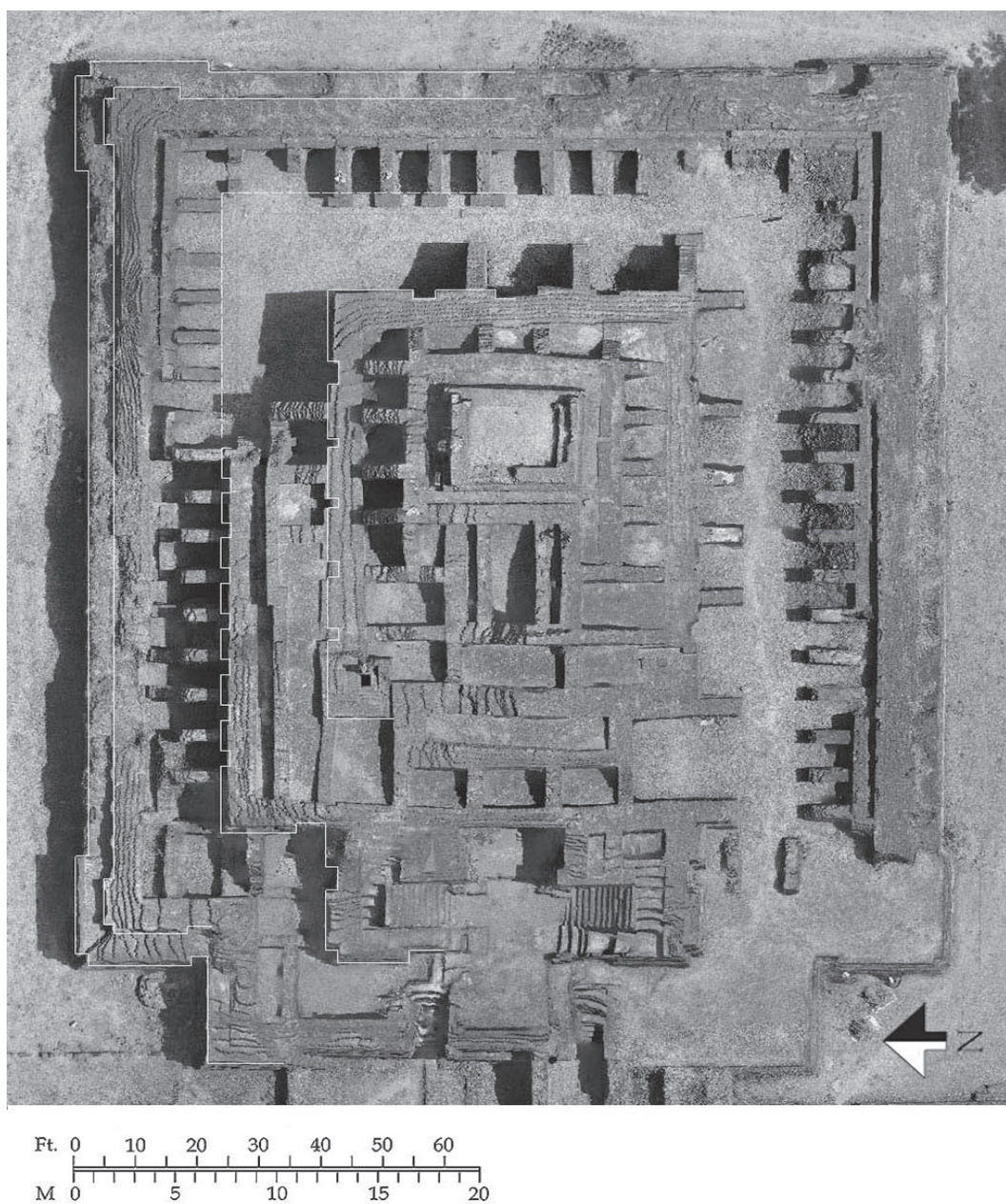


Figure 18: *Digital scan of MNS 2, Mansar, modified to show outlines of terraces.*



Figure 19: MNS 2, Mansar, moulded base of first tier (in two layers), from east.

to later temple architecture, and backward to the rock-cut palatial imagery in the Ajanta *caitya* hall façades, the projections would most likely have carried wooden pavilions in the form of *kūṭas* or *śālās*, possibly of two storeys and all interlinked to make a cloister-like courtyard.

The big question is whether the brick cells and the wooden pavilions were for deities or humans. In a Buddhist context, the stone Buddhas in the *caitya* hall façades had human counterparts in the monks sitting in their cells and, as the Ajanta murals show (Cave 17), real-life holy men could also be on display within the framework of a storeyed building (Fig. 21). By analogy, the Mansar mound could have housed and structured a great courtly assembly. The scale of projecting bastions would certainly have been suitable, their brick and stucco, no doubt richly painted, giving way above to wood and thatch inhabited by real people: not holy men, but pearl-laden kings and queens, princes and princesses, and beautiful lotus-eyed ladies of varied shades. Like the god-inhabited courts of a puranic heaven encircling the dwelling of Śiva or Viṣṇu,¹⁶ the grades of sheltered feudatories would have culminated in the king of kings in his high pavilion. So, if this was a palace, it would surely have been a ritual one, not for everyday courtly living, but ceremonial enactments of the social and metaphysical order.¹⁷

A brick structure of the Vākāṭaka period at Nagra (Nagarā), Bhandara District (Fig. 22), has striking similarities to the Mansar monument. The scale, though considerably smaller than at Mansar, is nevertheless large, the rectangular base measuring 41.9m x 26.2m. This has been assumed to be a temple platform.¹⁸ Cell-like spaces on top seem, in this case, to be remnants of the widespread technique of building box-line cells to be filled in to form a terrace. The front part is now much lower, having lost all but its lowermost

courses, but the rear part is also truncated. Extensive restoration has recently been carried out by the Maharashtra State Archaeology Department. What we now see, with successive tiers mounting up to a sanctum containing a *liṅga*, seems to be the restorers' regularisation and perpetuation of later alterations that happen to have survived. Only the incomplete first tier can confidently be said to reflect a Vākāṭaka original. This is the part that recalls Mansar, with its closely-spaced projections, its mouldings and recessed wall panels. When complete up to its cornice, it could easily have supported a wooden cloister of pavilions encircling at least one further platform and culminating in a *garbha* for god or monarch. Is this a temple, or the ritual palace of a local ruler, a minor Mansar mountain? Did the king have his seat in the middle, or did he climb to the inner temple as supreme human officiant to the deity? It would, in any case, be a small step from one to the other, and from either to a temple with a tower for only the mind to climb, integrating the imagery of palaces and shrines.



Figure 20: MNS 2, Mansar, moulded base of second tier, north-west corner.

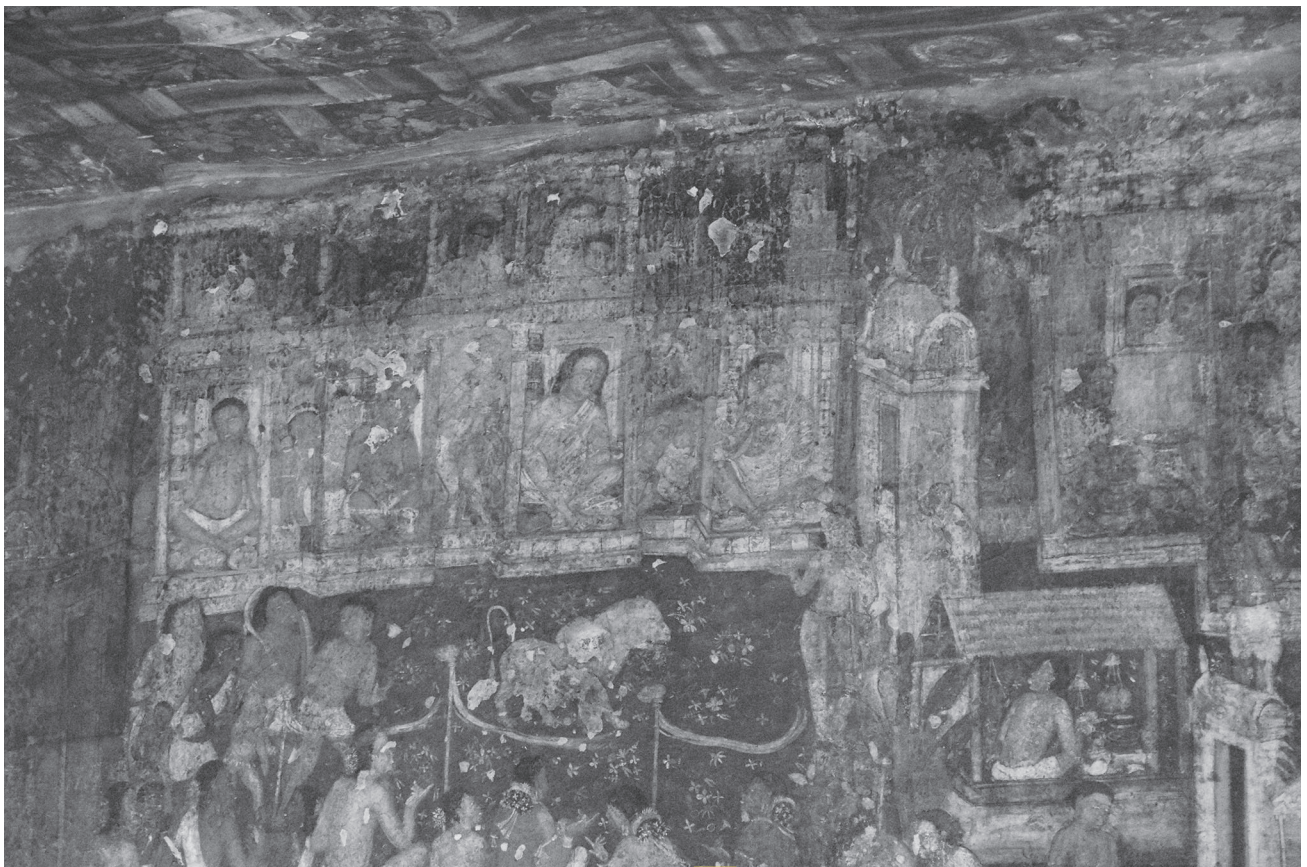


Figure 21: Ajanta, Cave 17, painting of a seated building with seated ascetics.



Figure 22: *Brick temple, Nagra, c. fifth century, from south-east (above) and south-west (below).*

Such a temple, echoing Mansar and Nagra at a much-reduced scale, can be sensed in what can be discerned of the original plan of the Rudra-Narasimha temple at Ramtek.¹⁹ Standing originally on a platform, this had widely-spaced, roughly even projections around its walls, with a re-entrant angle on the corner, as at Mansar. At the centre of the *vimāna* is a square bay defined by four pillars, containing Narasimha's image. A superstructure probably rose from this bay, surrounded by a flat or gently sloping roof behind a parapet, which would have been a symbolic terrace at the foot of the god's heavenly abode.

Temples at two Kosala sites, Tala and nearby Malhar, can be ascribed, on stylistic grounds, to the 6th century. Their surviving parts are largely of stone. Best known is the Devarānī (Śiva) temple at Tala (Fig. 23). Previous scholars have treated this as somewhat separate from the later and more complete temples of the region, surprised by what they have seen as its Drāviḍa resonances.²⁰ As with the Rudra-Narasimha, and another Vākāṭaka work at Ramtek, the Kevala-Narasimha, the sanctum is preceded by a very slightly narrower antechamber, projecting further forward, in this case, as a shallow porch with spectacularly carved pillars and doorway. The *vimāna/mūlaprāsāda* exterior, which has lost its (brick?) superstructure,

is about 7.3m square, with a pair of projections on each side, widely spaced either side of a *makara-toraṇa* (archway motif issuing from the jaws of a *makara* pair) – bringing to mind both Ajanta and Drāviḍa temples. All the angles are treated as plain, chunky pilasters. Reminiscent of Mansar and Nagra are the sunken panels in each projection and wall bay (originally with inset sculpture panels?), and the moulded *vedibanda/adhiṣṭhāna*. Very worn, this seems to have followed different designs in different places, the best preserved parts comprising a tall *jagatī* plus a *pratī*, now with carved *makaras*, bold and fearsome, on the ‘beam ends’. While we cannot be sure exactly what cloistered pavilions surrounded the superstructure, it is not difficult to imagine the general pattern of the heavenly palace. The adjacent Jīṭhānī temple, bigger and more magnificent, is in a sadly ruinous and confusing state, though full of astonishing carving, with *makaras* and *gaṇas* (dwarves) prominent.

Thankfully, the Bhīma Kīcaka temple, Malhar, is reasonably intact at base level, as already discussed. The exterior of the west-facing *vimāna* is a little over 13m square, fronted by an antechamber with a superb monumental doorway (Fig. 7). Above the moulded base the ASI have rebuilt the walls in dressed stone up to about 4m high. The interior of the sanctum (Fig. 24) has the same treatment, and the floor, with a *lingapīṭha* at the centre, also looks restored, so we cannot be sure what the original interior was like. In the exterior are wide corner projections and an extremely wide *bhadra* or central projection, from which emerges one further projection, standing out all the more forcefully by virtue of the smaller scale of its moulded base, which nevertheless follows the same sequence as the rest.

The *vimāna* design of the Bhīma Kīcaka can be imagined in the light of the aedicular fragment described earlier (Fig. 8). Even with the rebuilt walls, which are very thick, the internal ceiling span is about 5.8m, far too wide for a single beam. So it is possible that there would have been four columns, as in the two Vākāṭaka temples of Narasimha temples at Ramtek, or, more likely, the sanctum had solid walls within an ambulatory, supporting a superstructure of at least two tiers. The outer walls quite likely carried octagonal domed *kūṭas* at the corners, with a large *Valabhī*-aedicule at the centre projecting from a very wide *śālā*. As the *Valabhī*-aedicule would be standing out on the lower portion of moulded base, it probably, like the equivalent element in the Devarānī temple, Tala, had a *kapota* lower than the general cornice level, and its *nāsī* gable emerging below another one in the middle of the *śālā* roof. Given the lush pillarets in the recesses of the *vedibhanda* as well as the general grandeur, the wall projections, defining the two-storey aedicules, would doubtless have had moulded pilasters and not mere corner piers, and very likely of the two contrasting varieties.



Figure 23: Devarānī temple, Tala, sixth century, from south-west.



Figure 24: Bhīma Kīcaka, Malhar, restored interior.

If I am right about its original form, the Bhīma Kīcaka, with its echoes of a Vākātaka ritual palace, beautifully embodies the idea of the temple as a terraced, cosmic palace girdled round with gods' abodes. Its surviving details (Figs. 7, 9, 10) embellish the idea, with miniature colonnades graced with heavenly-courtly beings – divine-royal groups, flying couples and slender maidens.

VĀRĀṬA IN THE TEXTS

This final section will give a brief overview of the Vārāṭa (Vāvāṭa) chapter of the *Samarāṅgaṇasūtradhāra*,²¹ pointing out its connections with the temples discussed in this paper. Two other *vastu saśāstra* texts should be mentioned that give the Vārāṭa more than a passing reference: the *Kāmikāgama* (KA), a south Indian work of around the eleventh century, and thus roughly contemporary with the SSD, and the twelfth-century *Aparājitapṛcchā* (AP) from western India.²² Chapter 49 of KA, dealing with temples, discusses Nāgara, Drāviḍa, Vesara, Sarvadeśika, Kaliṅga and Vārāṭa.²³ Before describing the respective buildings (not explicitly temples), it ascribes the six categories to geographical regions between Himācala and Kanyakumari, each said to have a specific mixture of the primordial qualities (*guṇas*). The text seems distant from architectural practice, and interested mainly in creating an elaborate classificatory system. Its treatment of Vārāṭa is cursory. The passage on Vārāṭa temples in the AP,²⁴ unlike its extensive sections on Nāgara temples, also seems rather abstract and theoretical rather than close to practice. Proportions for plans and elevations are sufficiently clear for translation into drawings, but these can only be schematic because of a lack of detail. Details could, of course, be provided by someone working within the tradition, or with the help of a *guru*. Nevertheless, for the AP, Vārāṭa temples seem to represent something foreign and, as in the SSD, relatively southern.²⁵

The relevant chapter of the SSD is far more detailed. It is entitled *athadigbhadradiprāsādalakṣaṇamnamacatuṣṣaṣṭitamodhyāyaḥ* (Sixty-fourth chapter: the distinguishing trait of the temples starting from the Digbhadra). The first verse informs us that these temples are Vāvāṭa. Digbhadra is the first of twelve types, the instructions for nine of which survive more or less intact in the published text.²⁶ Seven of these are shown in Figure 25. As usual, instructions begin with a square plan and continue with the elevation (*ūrdhvamāna*), in this twice as high as the width.²⁷ There are diminishing storeys (*bhūmīs*), with setbacks and no curvature.²⁸

While each temple chapter of the SSD has its own kind of architectural approach and its own logic to the sequence of temple types, as well as specific technical terms and ways of using these, the respective chapters on Drāviḍa, Bhūmija and Vāvāṭa which set them apart from those dealing with Nāgara temples. Their technical terminology, if judged by the norms established by modern scholarship, jumps between northern and southern, while much of the usage that they share is not touched upon by the contemporary conventions. For the projections in the plan, corners are *koṇas*, while the central aedicule is the more southerly *śālā*, and the intermediate element a *pratīratha*, a *pratyāṅga*, and sometimes a (southern) *pañjara*. Horseshoe arches are (southern) *nāsikās*, but we also have *śūrasenakas* on the *varaṇḍī* (= *kapota*/ *kapotālī*). Each storey has a *jaṅghā* (wall) treated as a *stambha* (pillar, i.e. with a pilaster or paired pilasters), of which the upper, moulded part is called the *ucchālā*,²⁹ surmounted (on the corner projection) by a *kūṭa*. A *kūṭa*, and the entire temple, is crowned by a *ghaṇṭā* (bell). *Ghaṇṭā* is the term used in the SSD both for the Drāviḍa dome or *śikhara* (Chapter 62), and for the crowning element of a Bhūmija shrine (Chapter 64), commonly a rounded cushion, staggered or stellate in plan³⁰ rather than a ribbed Nāgara *āmalaka*. According to the text, the *ghaṇṭā* sits over a *vedī*, as in Drāviḍa and Bhūmija temples, but not Nāgara ones.

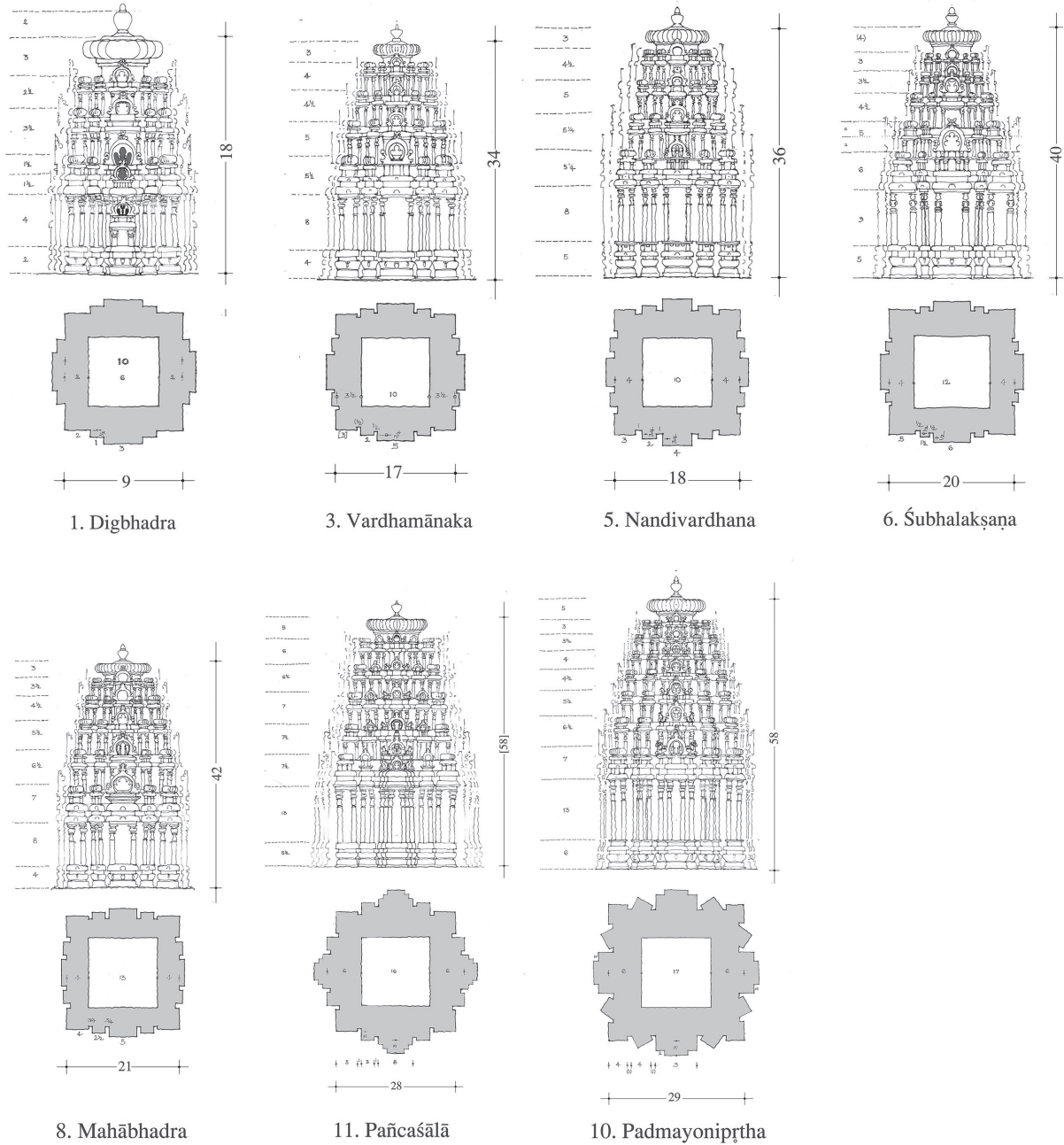


Figure 25: Vāvāṭa/Vārāṭa prāsādas drawn from Chapter 64 of the Samarāṅgaṇasūtradhāra.

One incomplete passage in Chapter 61 is close in vocabulary and approach to a part of the Drāviḍa chapter (62), with nothing comparable elsewhere in the SSD. Mounting up the temple, this enumerates, for the Vardhamānaka type, every little sub-moulding, giving its modular dimension (Fig. 26). One verse (32) provides striking evidence that Vāvāṭa temples are composed of aedicules that would usually be thought of as respectively Drāviḍa and Nāgara. Having reached the top of the *kūṭa* it gives an option for the crowning element, as either a *ghaṇṭā* or an *āmalasāraka*. In my sketches (Fig. 25) I have interpreted the crown of the entire shrine as a cushion rather than a ‘Drāviḍa’ dome, because it fits the proportions better. For this *kūṭa*,

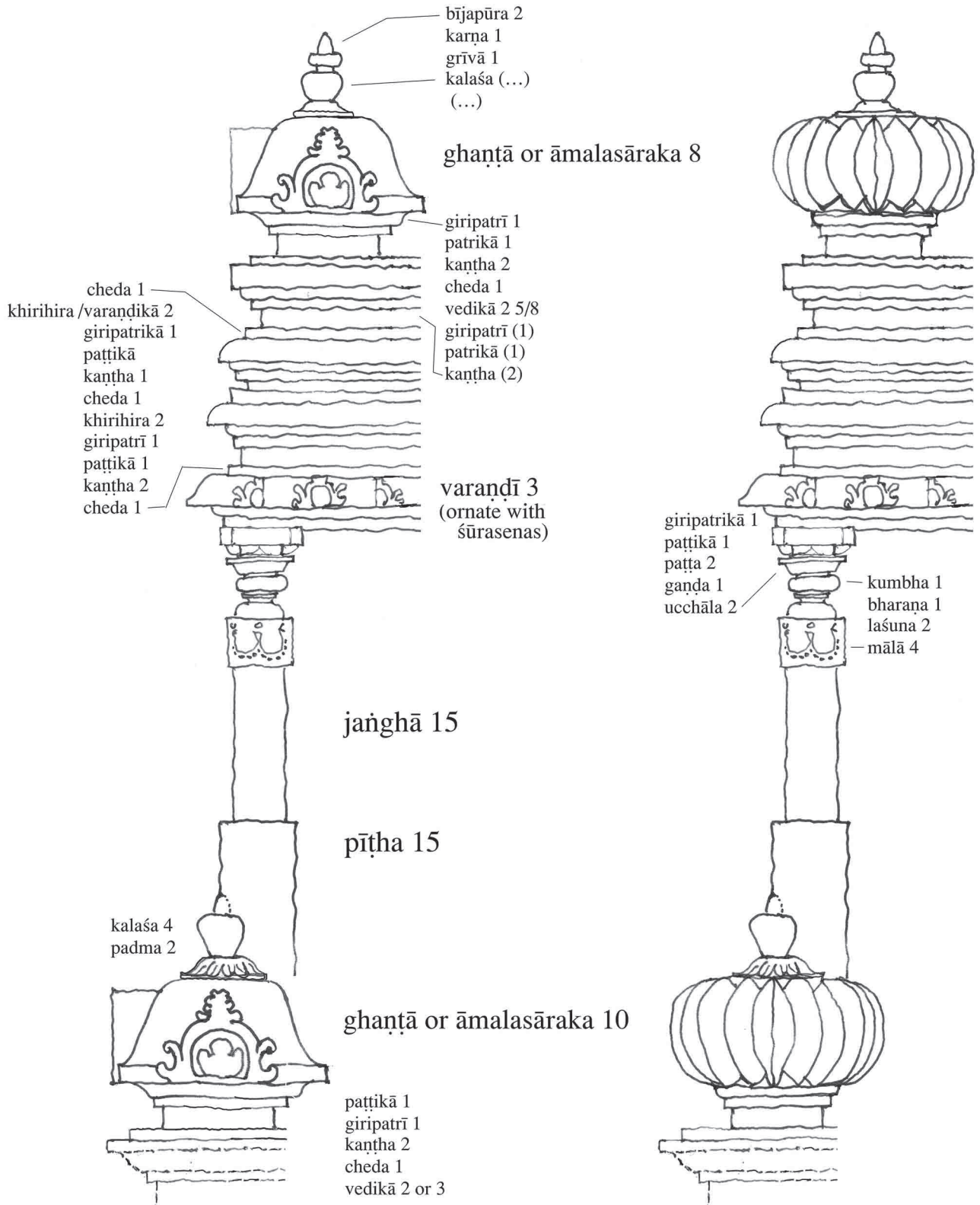


Figure 26: Detailed prescription for wall elevation drawn from SSD 64, vv. 20-34.

however, the dome works well, and I feel that, as in Dakṣiṇa Kosala, this was an available choice.

One final passage (v. 92) links the Vārāṭa of the SSD compellingly to the Kosala tradition. The type in question, the Padmayoniprṥtha, is the tenth in the sequence, though the number of parts in the plan (29) as well as the degree of complexity suggest that it originally came after number 11, the Pañcaśālā.³¹ Having specified the width of the ‘*pratyaṅgas*’, verse 92 states *parivarttanakartavyāparasparamamīsubhāḥ* (These should be made beautifully turning towards one another). This is like the stellate temples of Kosala, where the plans are typically not rotated squares, but square plans with angled intermediate projections. Admittedly, these more often turn gracefully away from each other, as at Palari (Fig. 15), but at the Rāma temple, Sirpur (Fig. 27) they can be seen as facing inwards.



Figure 27: Rāma temple, Sirpur, c. early seventh century.

CONCLUSION

In a number of ways, unearthing this Vārāṭa tradition modifies the overall picture of Indian temple architecture. A new form appears on the typological chart, neither Nāgara nor Drāviḍa, lying somewhere between those two architectural languages, with its own kind of in-betweenness. This is distinct from the ways in which the later Vesara and Bhūmija modes fall between the northern and southern traditions: the Vesara through continuous transformation of Drāviḍa forms to the extent that they share Nāgara characteristics,³² and the Bhūmija as a new invention consciously incorporating both Nāgara and Drāviḍa elements. The Vārāṭa is rooted in a time when there was neither Nāgara nor Drāviḍa, sharing a cultural and architectural matrix from which Nāgara and Drāviḍa each drew its selected features and shrine forms. The Vārāṭa, in-between – central and not merely liminal – built on the entire range available.

While the basis of this process is the creation of temple forms out of temple forms, delving into the Vākāṭaka roots of Vārāṭa temples points to the temple's connection to another building type, the palace, and more specifically a ritual palace built for ceremonial assemblies of rulers. A series of structures running from the Vākāṭakas to the earliest Dakṣiṇa Kosala temples suggest a progression from ritual palaces to terraced royal temples, leading on to temples where the echoes of this concept linger even more freshly than in the familiar tiered towers of the Drāviḍa. The Bhīma Kīcaka at Malhar is a key example. Along with the sadly-ruined Jīṭhānī temple at Tala, it is of a grander scale than their successors in Kosala, and more sumptuously adorned. Though we know little of the prevailing dynasty, this was clearly a dynastic and cultural apogee. The *vimāna* of the Bhīma Kīcaka is of a scale and lavishness on a par with the great 8th-century imperial temples of the Pallavas and Cālukyas in the south. These are also *sāndhāra* (with ambulatory), with a cloister of aedicules standing apart from their tiered and layered towers, but they are well over a century later. The history of Indian temple architecture would have been written differently if the Malhar temple had been discovered earlier, if it were more complete, and all the more if surviving inscriptions had told glorious tales of its no-doubt royal patron.

A particular term for an Indian temple form can never be the ‘correct’ one, since the terminology varied from time to time and region to region. Yet, if the Sanskrit texts are trawled judiciously, some names can be deemed more authentic than others. Vārāṭa temples are remote for the southern KA and the western Indian AP, and they treat it in an abstract and theoretical manner. For the SSD, however, compiled in central India and appropriating building wisdom from all directions, Vārāṭa temples are neighbours to the south, designed in a frame of mind not totally foreign to the eleventh-century Malwa *sthāpatis* busy formulating the theory and practice of Bhūmija architecture. The chapter in question recalls both northern and southern traditions in its terminology and in the temple forms that can be gleaned from its instructions. These forms can be sketched most plausibly as something like those that germinated in Vidarbha and blossomed in Kosala.

Tracing the development of such forms reveals a tradition, and the SSD weighs in favour of calling the works of that tradition Vāvāṭa/Vārāṭa, the Vidarbha form of temple. The *prāsādas* in that text are not exactly like the (later) Kosala ones, and it is more likely that the compilers of Bhoja’s treatise on *vāstu* would have gathered their material from neighbouring Vidarbha. All this begins to explain the almost total gap in the record of temples in Maharashtra between the heyday of rock-cut architecture, known most famously at Ajanta and Ellora, and the upsurge of Bhūmija temples in the eleventh century. It seems that the Vārāṭa tradition continued, in its native Vidarbha, into the tenth and eleventh centuries. Its creations, probably mostly in brick, have crumbled long ago, forgotten.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

1. Adam Hardy, *Theory and Practice of Temple Architecture in Medieval India: Bhoja’s ‘Samarāṅgaṇasūtradhāra’ and the Bhojpur Line Drawings* (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts with Dev Publications, 2015).
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 28–9.
3. It relates to the region of Varada (Berar) or Vidarbha, as noted by Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1946).
4. Michael Meister, M.A. Dhaky and Krishna Deva (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Indian Temple Architecture* Vol. II, Part 1, *North India, Foundations of North Indian Style, c. 250 BC–AD 1100* (New Delhi and Princeton: AIIS and Princeton University Press, 1988).
5. Adam Hardy, *The Temple Architecture of India* (Chichester: Wiley, 2007), pp. 170–173.
6. Deva, in Meister et al. (eds.), *EITA* 1988, p. 225; Donald Stadtner, ‘Vidarbha and Kosala (Ajanta, Sirpur, Rajim)’, in *The Vākāṭaka Heritage*, ed. by Hans Bakker (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 2004), pp. 2–29; Hans Bakker, ‘Mansar and its Eastern Neighbours: Mansar Architecture and the Temples in Nagarā and Dakṣiṇa Kosala’, in *Mansar: The Discovery of Pravaresvara and Pravarapura Temple and Residence of the Vākāṭaka King Pravarasena II, Proceedings of a Symposium at the British Museum London, 2008*, ed. by Hans Bakker (University of Groningen, <http://mansar.eldoc.ub.rug.nl/root4/Mansar/>); Natasja Bosma, ‘The Mansar Sculptures and Ajanta’, in Bakker (ed.) 2008.

7. See Ronald Inden, 'The Temple and the Hindu Chain of Being', in *L'espace du temple: etudes, 1: Espaces, itineraires, meditations*, ed. by Jean-Claude Galey (Paris Collection Puruṣārtha, 1985), pp. 53–73.
8. Since writing the article I have seen Natasja Bosma's new book, which shows an early photograph of the temple, known as the Deur, as a heap of stones, and three photographs taken during an ASI restoration of 2008–9. See Natasja Bosma, *Dakṣiṇa Kosala: A Rich Centre of Early Śaivism* (Groningen: Barkhuis, 2018), p. 122. Bosma feels that the temple belongs to the seventh century.
9. cf. the relatively 'Gupta' ears of the *gāvakṣas* at Ajanta.
10. As in the c. tenth-century temple at Ranipur Jharial, Orissa. See Hardy, *The Temple Architecture of India*, p. 173.
11. Reference to Michael W. Meister, 'Prāsāda as Palace: Kūṭiṇa Origins of the Nāgara Temple', *Artibus Asiae*, 49 (1989), pp. 254–80.
12. See Laxshmi Rose Greaves, 'The Hindu Pyramids: Sacred Stepped Architecture in the Indian Subcontinent and its Development', in this volume; and Laxshmi Greaves, 'Pawāyā: An Early Terraced Brick Temple', *South Asian Studies*, 30.2 (2014), pp. 181–205; A comparable structure of similar date, in a Buddhist context, on top of the rock fortress of Sigiriya, Sri Lanka, is known as a palace, and seems to have been a palace for ritual rather than living in.
13. Hans Bakker 'Introduction', and 'Mansar and its Eastern Neighbours', in Bakker (ed.), 2008.
14. The digital scan (by kind permission of the Archaeological Survey of India, Nagpur Circle) has been created by Kailash Rao, with SPA Bhopal, supported by Michael Willis's European Research Council project 'Beyond Boundaries: Religion, Region, Language and the State', and my Leverhulme Trust project 'The Nāgara Tradition of Temple Architecture: Continuity, Transformation, Renewal'.
15. The cells therefore had no entrances, suggesting that, despite their regularity, they may have been built to be filled in to make a new terrace during a later phase. Their 'doorways', apparent in the eastern range, may be more recent.
16. Phyllis Granoff, 'Heaven on Earth: Temples and Temple Cities of Medieval India', in *India and Beyond: Aspects of Literature, Meaning, Ritual and Thought*, ed. by Dick van der Meij (London: Kegan Paul, 1977), pp. 170–193.
17. Inden, *op. cit.*
18. Arvind Jamkhedkar in Meister et al. (eds.), *EITA* 1988, pp. 64–5. Bakker in 'Mansar and its Eastern Neighbours' is not sure that the structure is Vākāṭaka.
19. Deva, in Meister et al. (eds.), *EITA* 1988: plan Fig. 28, p. 68; Plates 117–123.
20. Stadtner, 'Vidarbha and Kosala'.
21. A full translation and analysis of this chapter is planned, along with Chapter 175 of AP.
22. Śivācāryar K. Cuvāmināta, *Kāmikāgamaḥ* (Madrās: Dakṣiṇabhāratārcakasaṅghaḥ, 1975); A version with a translation by S.P. Sivaratnam Sivacharyar (University of Hawaii) is available at <https://www.himalayanacademy.com/view/kamika-agama-purva-pada-part-1> (accessed 2.4.2019); P.D. Mankad (ed.), *Aparājitaṣṭhā* of Bhuvanadeva (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1950).
23. Kramrisch (*The Hindu Temple*) cites the KA and SSD, dwelling on the former. She notes that this text describes Vārāṭa temples concisely, concluding that the description 'would more closely fit the temples known as Chalukyan than those of Vidarbha.'
24. M.A. Dhaky, citing Kramrisch on Vārāṭa, goes further in trying to pin a form to the name. He considers the KA's descriptions "insufficient for identifying the Varata form", and, surprisingly, finds the SSD not very helpful "despite its elaborate treatment of the class". It is the AP's "very succinct description" that, for Dhaky, throws some light on the question. The passage that he quotes is not from the chapter devoted to the Vārāṭa (Chapter 175), but Chapter 106. This description, Dhaky suggests, could correspond to the rather crude and abbreviated versions of the Bhūmija mode seen in certain shrine models carved in the walls of later Cālukya and Hoysālā temples. He points to some of the miniature *vimānas* flanking flights of steps at Belur as being of this kind. This is plausible in relation to the passage from Chapter 106 but not for Chapter 175. See Dhaky, *The Indian Temple Forms in Kārṇāṭa Inscriptions and Architecture* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1977).

25. "In the Varāṭa and Drāviḍa, the elevation is known to culminate in a *ghaṇṭā*" (AP 175, v. 36).
26. V.S. Agrawala (ed.), *Samarāṅgaṇasūtradhāra* (Baroda: Gaekwad's Oriental Series, 1966).
27. AP 175, v. 59. This is borne out by the arithmetic when the heights of storeys are added up.
28. AP 175, v. 87: The setback (*praveśa*) of each storey should be built as one *bhāga*.
29. From the context, here and in other chapters of SSD, we can glean two meanings. One is the dish (*phālaka+maṇḍi*) near the top of the southern 'cushion' pillar type; the other (as in this verse) is the entire moulded portion crowning this type. *EITA* glossaries define it as a small upper pillar, which does not work in SSD.
30. AP 175, v. 1: "The *kūṭa* should be installed with half that size, endowed with beautiful works. The *ṣaṭ* *aṇṭa* should be three *bhāgas* in height, with several *aśris* (corners?)." *Kūṭa* and *ṣaṭ* *aṇṭa* are again Bhūmija/Drāviḍa terms for SSD. *Ghaṇṭa* for Bhūmija is the rounded cushion or *āmalaka*, whereas for Drāviḍa it is clearly the *kūṭa* dome. Here it can be interpreted as either a cushion or a dome, but not an *āmalaka* as it is a staggered square with 'several corners'.
31. The text for number 12, Pṛthivīja, is incomplete.
32. Adam Hardy, *Indian Temple Architecture: Form and Transformation* (New Delhi: IGNCA and Abhinav Publications, 1995).