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Architectural Articulation of Medieval Temples in Mahārāshtra

The research we are presenting at this conference can be considered as a tribute and also as a contribution to South Asian culture. Most of us are Europeans, but we address ourselves to everybody and especially hope to be heard and understood in the subcontinent we are studying. Of course at least our colleagues there will hear us, and thus our results will become a fragment in the big stream of doing and thinking that is culture. My subject of research is the architecture of Indian temples. I try to describe the character and the richness of buildings erected long ago and I hope very much that my foreign vision will widen the vision of others, especially also those of Indians.

After this lofty thought back to the bare facts. What I do is studying old temples as they are found in the field today. My starting point is the built reality, and only after that I consider other sources. One of my aims is completeness for the surviving monuments of a region and a period. Another aim is to sort out and to classify the many details of the monuments. A third aim, finally, is to reach new conclusions about the makers of the temples, both commissioners and architects, and about the society in which the temples functioned. But this third aim is open and without any claim to be exhaustive. If the first two aims are realised, all kinds of specialists in the field of Indian culture can use my work for interpretations. I invite them to do so and will be happy, even in case I would not agree with their conclusions at all.

My aims just mentioned are not new and not original. The start with producing an archaeological survey of Indian temple architecture was made in the 19th century by the British and, already long before the end of colonial rule, they were joined by Indians. The result was the coverage of large areas but not of the subcontinent as a whole. Moreover the quality of the surveys varied greatly. In 1980, however, a survey of all old temples of the subcontinent along the same lines of detail and quality was started by the American Institute of Indian studies with an international group of authors. This huge undertaking received the name "Encyclopaedia of Indian Temple Architecture".

Up till now seven sets of two bindings each appeared and the project is far over halfway. The only serious problem left for the American Institute, I think, is to find authors for the later medieval temples of northern India, because specialists in later temples are rare.

The overview offered by the "Encyclopaedia" is impressive, what do I want to add? I can add two things. Firstly, because I select just one region and one period, I can go in much more detail, and often more detail leads to new conclusions. Secondly, I think I can describe the monuments in a different and better way. In describing elevations the "Encyclopaedia", understandably, tries to link up with the old Indian texts on architecture. The result often is a listing of many architectural elements without clear coherence. This is enhanced by the simple fact that most of the architectural components found on temple elevations have no structural function. There is no constructional necessity for their particular arrangement. Nevertheless, very clearly, they are arranged in clusters, and in my opinion these clusters show patterns that suggest compositions of embedded buildings. The key to recognise the latter is simple: as a rule, all later temples have walls with projections and recesses, and each projection is crowned with a small roof of its own and represents an embedded smaller building. In addition to the miniature roofs, other architectural decorations suggest the same. Not everybody may agree, but in any case all Indian temples are decorated with architectural components and the description should first focus on the patterns in this architectural decoration or, as I prefer to call it, on the architectural articulation of the temple. Perhaps this principle looks a little arbitrary: just listing all decorative architectural components should lead to the same result as describing an architectural articulation. In practise, however, the results are very different. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. I will discuss some Mahārāshtra temples by focusing on their architectural articulation, and I hope you will notice the difference with descriptions that simply list the architectural decorations.

Fig. 1.   Mandavgan, Devī-temple, lateral view, south.

Why Mahārāshtra? It is not a region famous for old temples, only a very few of them are well-known. However, about one hundred temples are published or at least mentioned in the three most important surveys up till now by Cousens (1931), Naik (1947) and Deglurkar (1974). Exactly by being sceptical about the quality of most monuments (Cousens) and by being quite chaotic (Deglurkar), these publications stimulated my interest in the region. Decisive for my choice, however, was my earlier study of the temples of Northern Karnātaka (Foekema 2003). My field-work there naturally led to interest in the temples of Mahārāshtra.

After this introduction I will give you, as Indian authors often put it, "a glimpse" of the monuments. For this paper I selected a few temples that are representative for the about one hundred that survive. Of course there are extremely interesting exceptional temples among them, but they are intendedly not selected here.

The first site I want to take you to is the small village of Mandavgan, situated in the middle of nowhere about 80 kms east of Pune. The medieval Devī-temple found here has a common plan, it consists of a shrine and a closed hall with three entrances. The temple is still in use today and houses a cult-image of a goddess. In fig. 1 the building is seen from its side, about the same view was published by Cousens (1931, pl. LXXXV). He describes it as a fair example of the class of later temples which may be called "Hemaḍpanti" (1931, 58). These Hemaḍpanti temples "are conspicuous by the absence of image-sculpture on the outside of their walls, the decoration being confined to mouldings in string courses and geometrical designs. As already surmised, this may be due to want of funds for a more elaborate building, or to the presence of the Muḥammedans in the country, who were sworn enemies to all forms of idolatry" (Cousens 1931, 58). This quote is typical for his book, he sees the later temples in Mahārāshtra as disappointingly plain and simple. But many of them are not: in Mandavgan it is only figure sculpture that is missing while architectural decorations are abundant and intricate. Fig. 2 gives a close look of the connection between shrine and hall, left a front-corner of the shrine and right a back-corner of the hall. The outline of the plan of the hall is with shallow steps. A pedestal consisting of horizontal mouldings supports an elevation decorated with horizontal bands. These bands, however, are not arbitrarily selected, they correspond with the sections and decorations of an Indian two-block pillar. From bottom to top we see a Nāgara pedestal consisting of shoulder, torus and kapota, next a pillar pedestal, a plain lower block, a plain middle of the shaft, a decorated upper block, a laśuna, a very thin ghaṭa and a phalaka. We exactly see the sequence of components found in pillars from the time and the region, the only deviating element is the nearly absence of a ghaṭa. The horizontal mouldings are not decorations standing on themselves, but have a coherence. Next we look at the wall of the shrine visible on the left of fig. 2. Here the plan is really stepped, that is: there are projections and recesses, and each projection has two faces and is like the corner of a building. Here we find the same horizontal decorative bands, but now it is much more clear that these derive from pillars. Each projection really looks like a pillar and has all the components common to later medieval Indian pillars. Above the phalaka we see a bracket-and-lintel moulding and finally a crowning kapota. Chiselling is fine. The outline of the plan of the shrine is complicated; its corner is the first embedded pillar left of the wider embedded pillar that forms the connection between shrine and hall. The

Fig. 2. Mandavgan, Devi-temple, front corner of the shrine (left) and back corner of the closed hall (right). Detail of fig. 1.

first projecting corner to its left is rotated but, unusually, the second is not. The rotation is, in principle, 11.25 degrees. Nearly always stellate plans in Mahārāshtra are based on a 32-pointed star, and nearly always three starpoints in each side are omitted by one orthogonal central projection. This results in a plan with seven projections per side, four of them rotated. I call these plans 32-interrupted stellate, and that name also applies here but, unusually, two more projections are orthogonal. All in all this shrine is a piece of remarkable architecture, both design and execution are very sophisticated.

For a short discussion of the character of pillars of the period and the region fig. 3 shows a fine example. All the characteristic components are very well articulated and decorated. Striking are two blocks. Below the lower block is a pedestal consisting of two or three mouldings clasped by a decorated triangle. The lower block is bare. The upper block is decorated with a pair of leaves. Above it the final part of the shaft, called laśuna, is clasped by decorated triangles again. The laśuna is the topping part of the shaft because here the largest piece of stone composing a pillar ends. Above it, the pillar consists of two more separate pieces of stone: the disc-shaped ghaṭa and the heavy member which I call phalaka after its upper side. With the phalaka the pillar, always consisting of three pieces of stone, ends. On the phalaka rest brackets and beams. The beauty of execution seen here is not unique but a characteristic of the pillars in many sophisticated temples. I call it a metallic beauty. For the most common decorations I invented names myself: lobed leaves, mirrored stalks, stylised petals.

We go back to the architectural articulation of the temples. A second typical temple for the times and
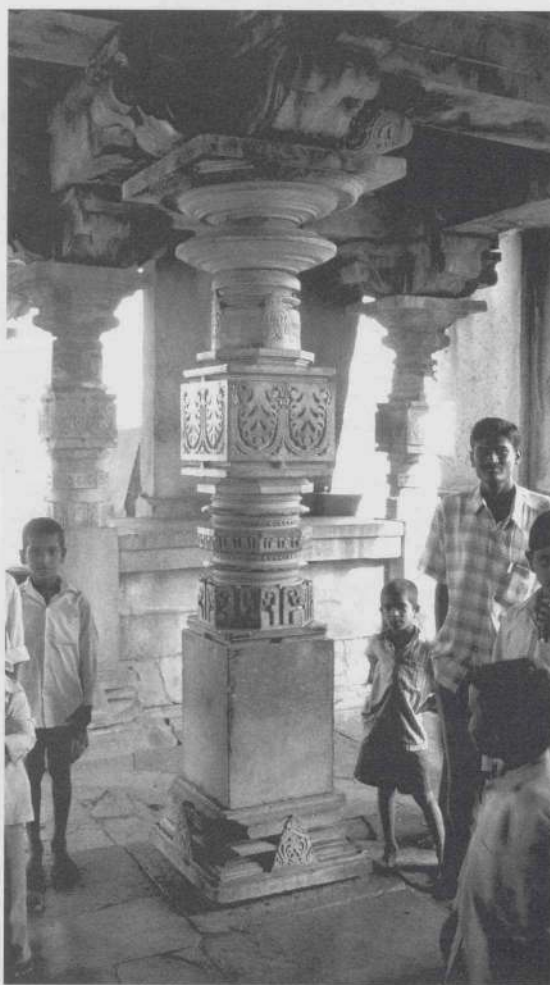

Fig. 3. Hotal, Pārvatī-temple, full pillar of the open hall.

Fig. 4. Sirpur, Jaina temple, back corner of the closed hall, south.

Fig. 5. Sirpur, Jaina temple, lateral side of the shrine, south.

the region is found in a village called Sirpur. This Sirpur is 60 km south of Akola in the east of Mahārāshtra. Its medieval temple is Jaina, still in use and well-maintained. Also this temple has the common plan of a shrine preceded by a closed hall with three entrances. Fig. 4 shows a back-corner

of the hall. Again we see the sequence shoulder-torus-kapota as the pedestal of the elevation. The steps of the wall are separated by weak recesses, very narrow in the pedestal, less narrow in the wall above. Again we see horizontal decorative bands, but thanks to the recesses their pillar-origin is much easier to see. The embedded pillars occur in pairs here, and so does the horizontal band that corresponds to the pillar pedestal. Thus here we can see that indeed the pedestal of the temple is topped by the kapota and not by the upper most horizontal layer! The pairs of pillars are beautifully detailed and clearly show all the traditional components. Above the lower blocks the shaft is decorated with the mirrored-stalks motif and also with a plain band. The upper block has a variation of mirrored stalks. The laśuna is high, the ghaṭa very thin, the phalaka voluptuous. Fig. 5 shows the shrine. Here the pillar-character of the elevation is clearer still. Above the upper blocks, here decorated with pairs of diamonds, pediments are added. They suggest icons to be sheltered, but there are no images. Nevertheless we can call this temple ornate, ornate with architectural ornamentation. The plan here is more common than in Mandavgan: 32-interrupted stellate with four rotated projections per side.

The difference between square and stepped plans is fascinating. Many writers on Indian temples are a little confused by their difference, and still more so in case the steps are rotated. Stellate and stepped are not essentially different. But stepped and square are different, I can show it beautifully with the help of the temple in Umarga, a small town along the Pune-Hyderābād road. It is a trikūṭa called Mahādeva housing several liṅgas and also cult-images of Brahmā and Viṣṇu. It has a central shrine with the plan of a stepped diamond and two lateral shrines that also have projections and recesses but are square (fig. 6). Both lateral shrines have five projections per side, each of them an embedded pillar, but only the projections at the corners of the shrines themselves have two faces. The central shrine has also five projections per side, but here all the projections save the central one have two faces. Each projection is like the corner-projection of the square shrine. Though devoid of figure sculpture this Mahādeva-temple is extremely impressive, simply by means of an intricate architectural articulation that has been sculptured carefully and beautifully. Its inside also is very sophisticated.

Another instructive example of the variation in outlines of plans are two temples in Ambājogāi, a small town 300 kms east of Pune. The Kholeśvara-temple (fig. 7), has the plan of a stepped diamond. The Kāśiviśvanātha-temple (fig. 8), has a square plan with shallow steps only. Because recesses are missing in the latter, the pillar components form decorative horizontal bands. The origin of these
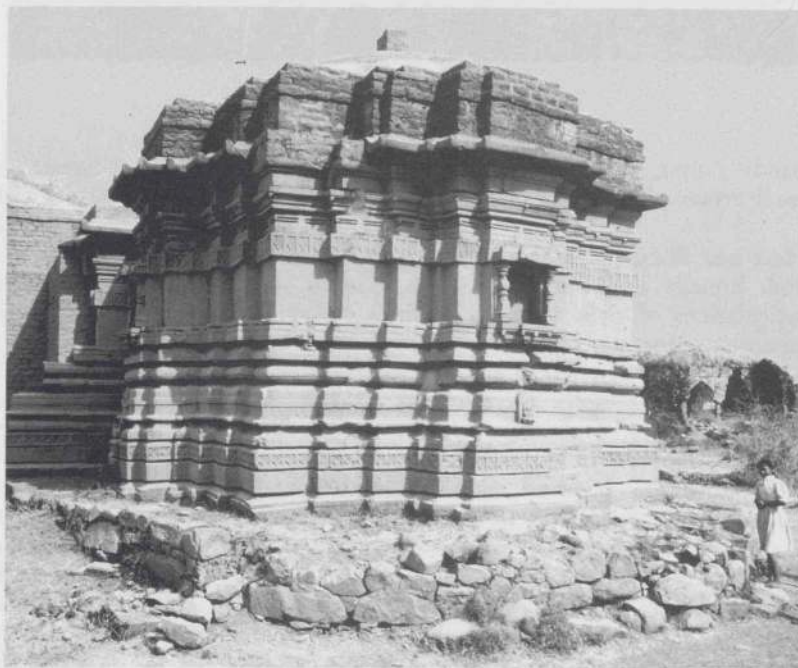
Fig. 6. Umarga, Mahādeva-temple, rear view, west.

Fig. 7. Ambājogāi, Kholeśvara-temple, lateral side of the shrine, south.

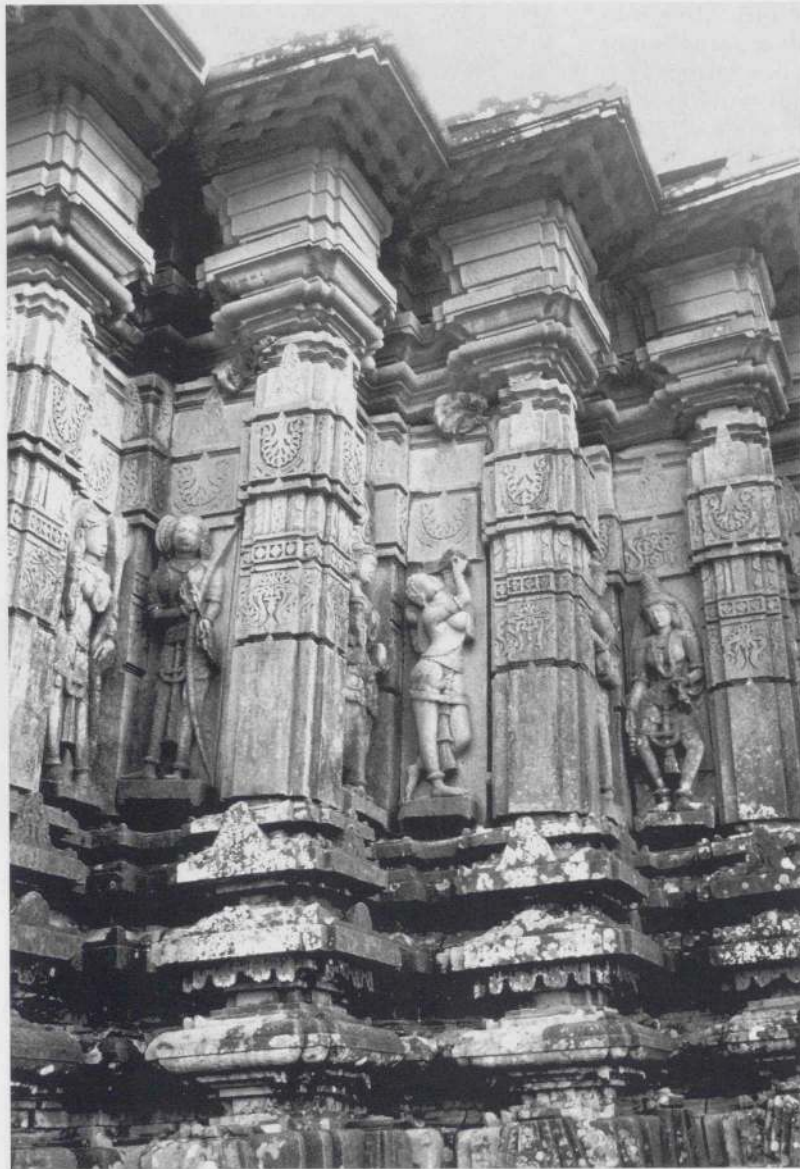*Fig. 8.* Ambājogāi, Kāśiviśva-nātha-temple, back of the shrine, west.

Fig. 9. Hotal, Śaṅkara-temple, corner of the shrine, north-west.

bands is clear, simple temples imitate the architectural articulation of the richer ones.

Here our discussion of architectural details must end. Equally important as outline of plans and articulations of walls are the characters of superstructures. Most superstructures are lost, but enough are left to say that nearly all of them were Bhūmija. In all Indian temples there is a clear relation between outline of plan, articulation of the walls and the character of the superstructure.

Visiting one hundred surviving old temples known in Mahārāshtra is an exciting undertaking. I do not agree with Cousens about the poor character of most temples, and I doubt his suggestion that Muslim presence caused their outer walls to be left bare. Muslim rule only started in the beginning of the 14th century, long after most

of the medieval temples were built. There are many typical temples with figure sculpture added to their architectural articulation. If the icons are added in the recesses of the elevation only, the pillar character of the projections is stressed. Thus figure sculpture can underline the architectural articulation. As example fig. 9 shows the shrine of the Śaṅkara-temple in Hotal, a village in Mahārāshtra close to the borders with Karnātaka and Andhra Pradesh. It is a stepped-diamond shrine with icons in the recesses. Because only the recesses have icons, it becomes clearly visible that not only each projection, but also each recess has two faces. Here figure sculpture underlines both the plan of the shrine and its architectural articulation.

I expect to finish my fieldwork in Mahārāshtra in the 2004–05 season, and to publish a monograph on its medieval temples in 2006 or 2007.

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