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M. W. Meister

## Water in a Desert Landscape

The high rolling sand dunes of India's Thar desert begin at the edge of the village of Osian<sup>1</sup> (Handa 1984; Meister 2003a) and march west toward Pokaran, Jaisalmer, across the Rajasthan canal, and on to Cholistan (Mughal 1997). To Osian's east lies what can best be called 'scrub desert', stretching beyond Jodhpur and the great Salt Lake even beyond the city of Jaipur, Rajasthan's state capital, where tigers once roamed forests in living memory – the result of relatively recent desertification. At Osian, c. 41 miles north-northwest of Jodhpur, a group of 7<sup>th</sup>-to-12<sup>th</sup>-century temples of some reputation have been studied, if intermittently, for almost a hundred years (Bhandarkar 1912; Viennot 1976; Kalia 1982; Handa 1984; Meister 1991), yet their liminal position in this high desert landscape has hardly been noted.

The oldest Jain temple in western India (Dhaky 1968) lies at Osian – the Mahāvira temple, first established in the 8<sup>th</sup> century – as well as a goddess temple dedicated to Sacyā-mātā perhaps founded as early as the 8<sup>th</sup> century but rebuilt in the 12<sup>th</sup>. The Sacyā-mātā temple retains national as well as regional importance for pilgrims (Meister 1998). Remarkable changes have occurred to both monuments as pilgrimage centres since my first visit in 1965 (Meister 1995).

Both have been transformed by new conservation and construction. The Mahāvira temple's entry hall and court have been reformed and the levels changed. The Sacyā-mātā temple's presence for pilgrims has been expanded by the addition of a series of gates leading up the hill and by a ring of nine newly built shrines for the Nava-Durgās (Meister in press).

The foundation myth of Oswal Jains and of the lineage of the Upakeśa *gaccha* records an ancient visit by a passing sage, Ratnaprabhasūri, who settled on a hillside at Osian from the air as he was flying by (Hoernle 1890; Jñānsundarji 1930). By performing miracles and through conversations and instruction he was able to convert both a large part of the population of Osian – and the Goddess Sacyā-mātā herself – to Jainism (Meister 1998). The otherwise nondescript Lunadri hill to the southeast at Osian is still marked by a small white-



Fig. 1. Osian, dunes and hills. Detail from Indian Atlas Continuation Sheet South 20 N.E., Government of India, Survey of India Offices, Calcutta, 1888 (Harvard University Map Room).

washed shed with two votive foot-print plaques within, one inscribed in AD 1189 (Handa 1984, 224, 232)<sup>2</sup>.

J. Cort, L. A. Babb, and I have studied these shrines as part of an on-going project addressing "continuities of community patronage" at pilgrimage temples in Western India (see essays in Meister 2000)<sup>3</sup>. A dozen other temples were built at Osian from the 7<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, oriented in different ways, but clustered, in my analysis, around Osian as a catchment area for water in this high desert landscape (fig. 1).

<sup>1</sup> 26°18'N, 73°1'E.

<sup>2</sup> Handa (1984, 232): "Now people generally believe these foot-prints to be those of Ratna-prabha as is also borne out by a recent renovatory inscription of these foot-prints" (installed by Muni Jñānsundarji in AD 1909).

<sup>3</sup> This project was funded by the Collaborative Research Program of the J. Paul Getty Trust.



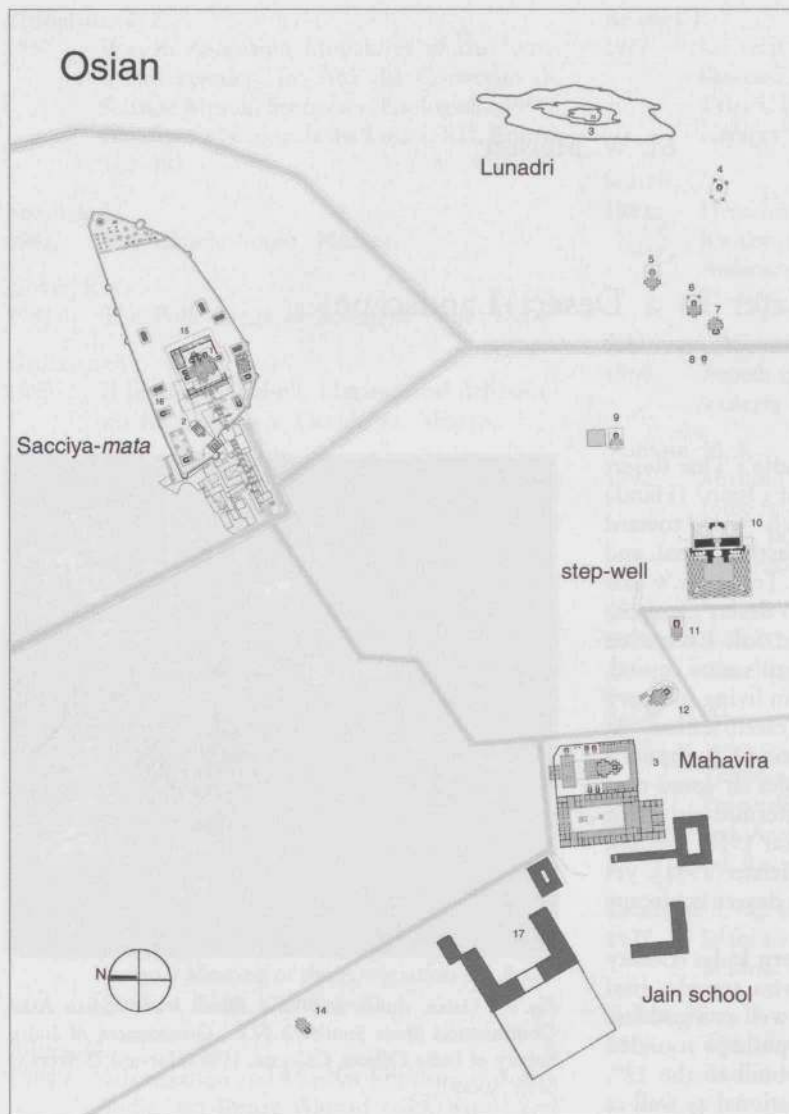


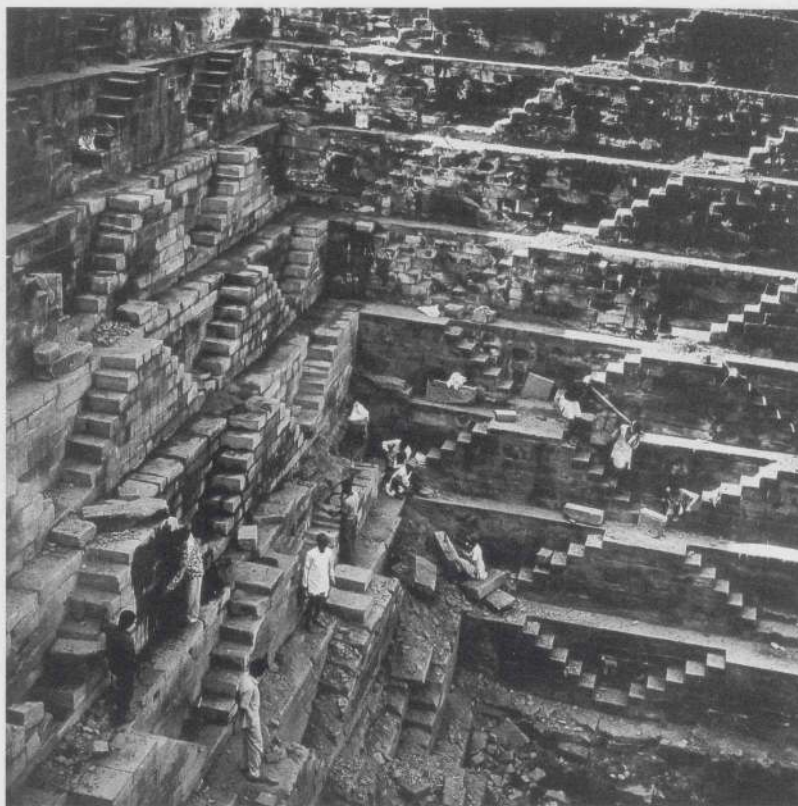
Fig. 2. Osian, site plan. M. Meister.



Fig. 3. Osian, step-well as seen from Sacciya-mata hill, 1971. Photo M. Meister.



Fig. 4. Osian, step-well under excavation. Photo R. Chapman.



A large multi-storied step-well and tank placed at the core of the sacred centre acts as the most formal expression of this function, but two other temples nearby seem also to have had small tanks (fig. 2)<sup>4</sup>. Outside of Osian to the east there are also remnants of multiple dikes (*bunds*) used to dam and collect water linking hills that border the town.

This paper draws on documentation carried out at Osian by a multi-disciplinary team, but directs that documentation toward the link between landscape and temple symbolism to answer a question that I, as the sole art historian on the team, was frequently asked: "Why were all of these temples built here?"

Located midway in the sacred zone, the large well, tank, and step-well complex at Osian was still substantially buried when I first visited it in 1965 and 1971 (fig. 3). It at present is surrounded by dense thorn thickets planted by the Government to keep the desert sands away. Two ornamented pavilions, with broad niches at the back and pillars with beautifully carved capitals, once acted as viewing platforms half-way up the height of the cistern.

This vast tank in recent years has been excavated and in part restored under the auspices of the Rajasthan State Department of Archaeology and Museums (fig. 4). Local sculptors and artisans were called upon to do this work (one, Chuna Ram Prajapat, is a head local sculptor also called

upon to carve replacements for damaged images at the Mahāvira temple). The rebuilt tank unfortunately is still not appropriately maintained. At my last visit sewage from nearby habitation trickled in from the northwest corner, producing a mass of plant-growth and slime.

At the tank's centre, the rectangular basin has seven stepped layers of steep stairs (*ghaṭs*) on north, west, and south, to provide access to water (fig. 5). On the east, there were once two, narrow, L-shaped, stairway-corridors that allowed users to descend from ground level to doors into the two balconies. These viewing pavilions over-looked a central gap or sluice-gate that allowed ground water from the shaft of a deep draw-well behind to flow or be transported into the tank.

At desert level on the east there are remains of a gatehouse that enclosed a circular space perhaps meant to allow oxen to draw up skins of water from this deep well (fig. 6). Placed in relation to the Mahāvira Jain temple and the Sacyā-mātā hill, and with two other later temples with remains of tanks (*kunds*) nearby, this giant water-construction marks not merely public works and public service, but a rationale for Osian as a *tirtha* or holy place marked by many temples (fig. 2).

<sup>4</sup> The Sūrya-Viṣṇu and Pipalā-devī temples (no. 9 and no. 12 on site plan, fig. 2).



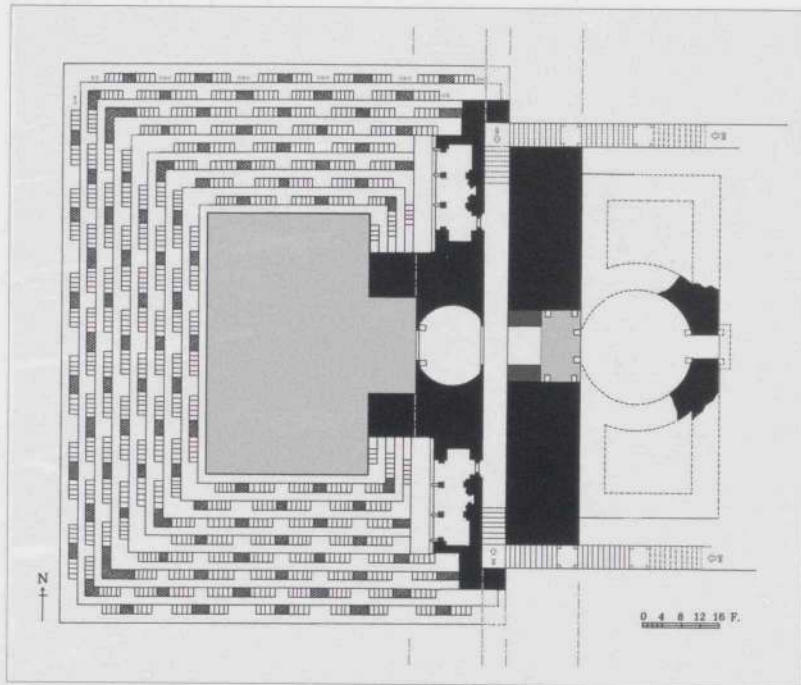


Fig. 5. Osian, step-well, ground-plan. M. Meister.

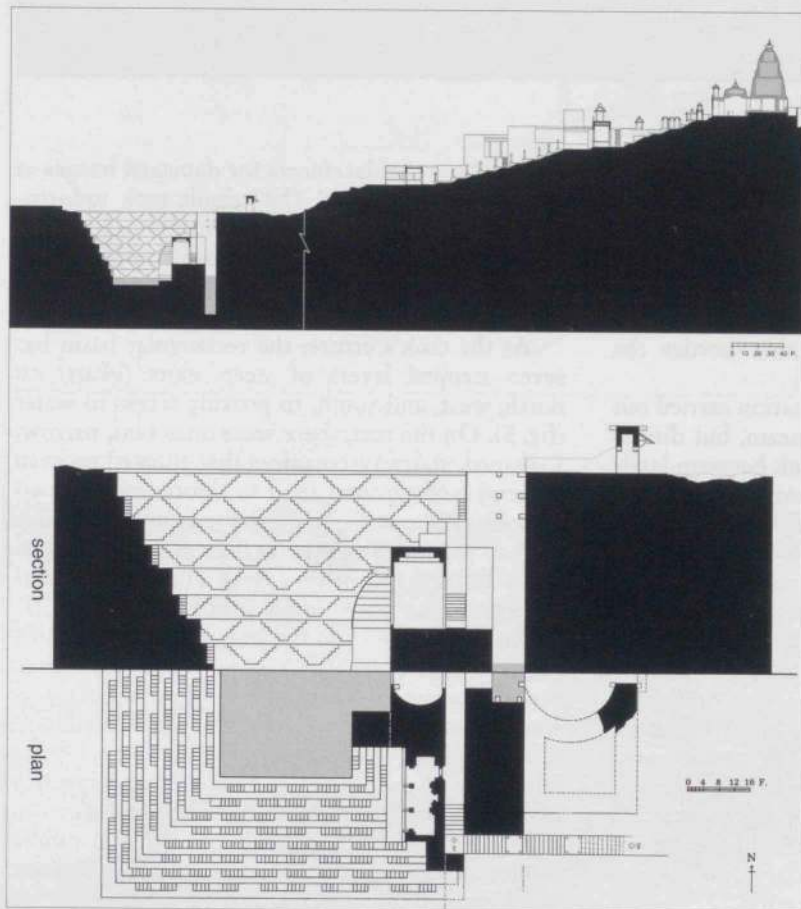


Fig. 6. Osian, step-well and Saciyā-mātā hill, section and plan. M. Meister.



Fig. 7. D. C. Mali, illustrations from *Jain Jāti Mahoday* (Jñānsundarji 1930): Ratnaprabhasūri (left), 1928; Ratnaprabhasūri meets Svayamprabhasūri (right).



On the east of the step-well's *kund* and exposed by recent excavation, two massive masonry buttresses look like shrines, with ornamented curvilinear *sikhara*-like superstructures, yet they had no *sancta* nor housed a deity. They rather frame the gateway channel through which water from the sacred earth entered into the tank (fig. 6).

Water was the origin of Osian's sacrality and temple building, as water was the source of all things in India's ancient cosmology (Coomaraswamy 1993). In this desert landscape, to locate water and to create access was to open up the cosmos. In its presence, local goddesses or Jain sages could take up residence as witnesses on hills nearby; land and hills themselves were conceived as stemming from cosmic waters, to which Osian's *tirtha* gave a gate.

Osian's sacred landscape subtly nestles into the scenery, desert seeming to deny the water that lies beneath (fig. 3). The original line of temples built on the desert through the 8<sup>th</sup> century stretched from the Lunadri hill on the east to the present Jain temple and school on the west. Beyond this, dunes of the high desert begin (fig. 2). It is precisely the almost unperceived dip in the desert between that captures available groundwater and makes it accessible to wells and tanks temple builders made to mark the site. To the northwest, *Saciya-mātā*'s hill appropriately deflects to the south-southeast, the direction of this sump, seeming even to bow to this source. Both the earliest small shrine surviving on the hill – the present Satya Narain temple and its gateway – and the last temple built on the desert plane in the 9<sup>th</sup> century – the present Viṣṇu temple no. 2 –, one facing west, the other east, are oriented fully southeast/northwest<sup>5</sup>.

That temples have tanks or should be located near sacred waters is a cliché of texts on temple

building from the time of Varāhamihira in the 6<sup>th</sup> century (Meister 2003b, 255), yet the empowerment of water – its capacity to make the sacred – is nowhere more apparent than at Osian.

A similar large tank-and-well was built in Rajasthan near the Vaiṣṇava temple at Abaneri early in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, but the tank there should be seen as the ground for the temple, not the temple the rationale for the well (Meister/Dhaky 1991, 237). Perhaps, by its location on axis, the remarkable rectangular tank built in the 11<sup>th</sup> century in front of the Modhera Sun temple in Gujarat more fully pronounces its sacred (as well as secular) functions (Herdeg 1967; Lobo 1982; Hegewald 2002), but both root the temple to the earth. At Modhera there is also a small step-well outside the temple compound.

As a result of recent conservation carried out at Modhera, this tank now mostly remains dry. This is because a mistake was made by sealing the well, thus making it waterproof, when its stones were replaced. What this has done is to seal the groundwater out, making clear why similar tanks, as at Osian, needed no drains. They are designed as filters, to pull natural groundwater in. Existing water makes the temple possible.

That water underlies growth and maturation of the cosmos, its differentiation, might seem a logical position in India's ripe agrarian landscapes; yet to see water under the desert, as at Osian, sets an extreme frame for understanding India's "water cosmology" (Coomaraswamy 1993).

I am struck, going back to early-20<sup>th</sup> illustrations of the story of Jain conversion at Osian (fig. 7), that the sage Ratnaprabhasūri is shown

<sup>5</sup> These are no. 2 and no. 14 on site plan, fig. 2.



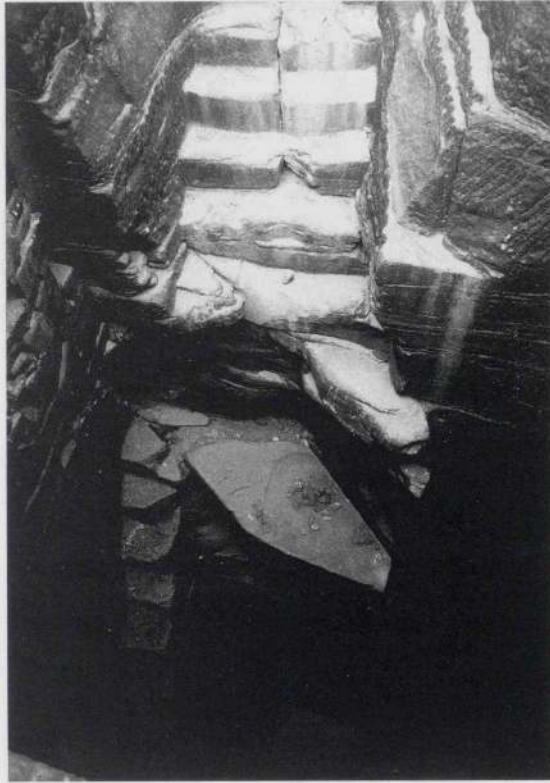


Fig. 8. Left: Mandor, rock-cut step-well, dated AD 685. Right: Image of Mahādeva carved on the rock-face above. Photos M. Meister.

most often in a water-filled landscape, not a desert landscape like that of Rajasthan<sup>6</sup>. In one of these two images from Osian's narrative (fig. 7, right), labeled "Ratnaprabhasūri meets Svayamprabhasūri", Ratnaprabhasūri is shown seated on a lotus, its stem growing up from water.

That so powerful a mythic world has persisted into 20<sup>th</sup>-century sources is a testament to a world-view that can see beyond the desert's veil; and could tap water that was actually present without having to build a concreted Rajasthan canal, a leaky branch pipe-line of which is the reason for the Osian village's considerable recent urban growth (Agrawal/Narain 1997).

At Mandor, near Jodhpur, a small ancient L-shaped step-well (fig. 8, left) was cut through solid rock and inscribed in the 7<sup>th</sup> century (Meister/

Dhaky 1991, 125). Carved to either side were two sculpture panels, one with the seven mothers dancing with Gaṇeśa and Naṭeśa, and one to the left of cosmic Śiva seated on a lotus, much like Ratnaprabhasūri, its stalk growing up from the waters flanked by snake-devotees (fig. 8, right). It is this same cosmically centered model that early 20<sup>th</sup>-century illustrations of Ratnaprabhasūri invoke, as does the site of Osian.

It is from the presence of very real water, hidden by desert sands, that Osian's temples spring; their deities embody cosmic creation. Because of this water *Osia-tirtha* exists. It is the water of the cosmic ocean that 20<sup>th</sup>-century images invoke to portray the reality of Osian – invisible water made visible by temples sprouting in a desert landscape.

<sup>6</sup> Both illustrations from Jñānsundarji 1930 are signed "D. C. Mali"; the one on the left is dated 1928. Muni Jñānsundarji helped found the Jain school at Osian early in the century and did much to recreate the myth of Osian for Jains (*vide* Jñānsundarji 1930; n.d.). He installed an inscription concerning renovation of the footprint shrine on Lonadri hill in AD 1909 (Handa 1984, 232).



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