

From Besnagar to Bhojpur: Tracing the Structural Origins and Nāgara Crystallization of Temple Architecture in Madhya Pradesh: A Historiographic Synthesis

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ABSTRACT

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This paper presents a historiographic synthesis of the evolution of temple architecture in Madhya Pradesh, tracing a continuous line of development from the earliest known structural shrine in the region, the apsidal Vāsudeva shrine at Besnagar, dated to the third–second century BCE (Bhandarkar, 1914-1915), through the emergence of the Nāgara prototype under the Guptas, its stylistic elaboration under the Gurjara-Pratihāras, and its culmination in the monumental Paramara-period temples at Udaipur and Bhojpur. While the individual segments of this trajectory have each received substantial scholarly attention (Brown, 1942; Kramrisch, 1946; Deva, 1969; Meister, 1983; Hardy, 2007), no existing publication draws them into a single continuous evolutionary account. Using a qualitative historiographic method based entirely on published excavation reports, epigraphic studies, and art-historical scholarship, without new fieldwork or measurement, this paper reconstructs that continuous arc and argues that it displays both marked continuity in core spatial vocabulary (the single-cell garbhagrha, the maṇḍala-derived square plan) and marked rupture in material, scale, and superstructure form. The paper further argues that this trajectory of increasing ambition culminates, at the unfinished Bhojeshwar Temple, in a documented case where design intention outpaced constructional completion, a finding that motivates, but does not itself resolve, the fieldwork-based measurement study of the Paramara corpus that this paper is intended to contextualise.

Keywords: Nāgara architecture; Madhya Pradesh; Besnagar; Gupta temples; Gurjara-Pratihāra architecture; Paramara temples; historiography; temple evolution.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background: The temple architecture of Madhya Pradesh spans one of the longest continuously documented building traditions in the Indian subcontinent, extending from pre-Nāgara structural shrines of the late first millennium BCE to the monumental, and in at least one prominent case unfinished, ambitions of the Paramara dynasty in the eleventh and twelfth centuries CE. This long duration, and the density of surviving and excavated material within a single modern administrative region, make Madhya Pradesh an unusually well-suited case for tracing the emergence and elaboration of the Nāgara temple form as a continuous historical process rather than a series of disconnected period styles.

1.2 Statement of the Research Problem: Existing scholarship treats the segments of this trajectory with considerable depth but in substantial isolation from one another. Excavation reports on Besnagar (Bhandarkar, 1914-1915) and the Heliodorus Pillar (Irwin, 1974) belong to a literature on early Vaishnava epigraphy and pre-temple religious practice; art-historical studies of the Gupta prototype (Brown, 1942; Deva, 1969; Chandra, 1970) belong to a literature on classical Indian art; measured-grid analyses of Gurjara-Pratihāra sites (Meister, 1983) belong to a literature on formal geometric analysis; and studies of the Paramara corpus (Hardy, 2007; Michell, 1988) belong to a literature on regional dynastic architecture. No publication identified in the course of this research draws these four literatures into a single, continuous evolutionary account within one regional frame. This paper addresses that gap.

1.3 Objectives

- ❖ To reconstruct, from existing published sources, a continuous evolutionary sequence of temple architecture in Madhya Pradesh from its earliest structural precedent to the Paramara corpus.
- ❖ To identify points of continuity and rupture in spatial vocabulary, material, and scale across this sequence.
- ❖ To evaluate the unfinished Bhojeshwar Temple as a historically situated end point of a documented trajectory of increasing architectural ambition.
- ❖ To establish the historiographic context required for a related, fieldwork-based doctoral study of Paramara-period measurement systems.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Foundational and Classical Scholarship: Percy Brown's *Indian Architecture (Buddhist and Hindu Periods)* (Brown, 1942) remains the standard chronological survey of Indian temple development and is the source most commonly cited for the identification of Sanchi Temple 17 as an early stone prototype of the Nāgara form. Stella Kramrisch's *The Hindu Temple* (Kramrisch, 1946) offers a metaphysical and symbolic reading of temple

form as a cosmic model, and remains essential for interpreting the ritual significance of the maṇḍala-based plan discussed throughout this paper, though her concern with measurement and chronology is secondary to her symbolic analysis. James Fergusson's *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture* (Fergusson, 1876) remains historically important as an early documentary source but reflects colonial-era interpretive assumptions that later scholarship, including this paper, treats with caution rather than as settled authority.

2.2 Textual Traditions and Treatises: P.K. Acharya's translation and analysis of the *Mānasāra* corpus (Acharya, 1927) remains the standard reference for that South Indian architectural treatise; it is reviewed here for completeness but, as established elsewhere in the doctoral project this paper accompanies, is not treated as a primary source for North Indian Nāgara construction, given its Drāvida textual affiliation. M. Ramakrishna Bhat's translation of Varāhamihira's *Bṛhat Saṃhitā* (Bhat, trans., 1981) provides the textual basis for the sixth-century vastu-vidyā principles referenced in this paper's account of the Gupta-period prototype. Vohra and Dhaky's studies of the *Aparajitapṛcchā* identify it as the principal surviving textual authority for the Nāgara school as practised in the Māru-Gurjara idiom, directly relevant to the Chandravati/Abu material discussed in the related doctoral study but outside the geographic scope of this paper.

2.3 Site-Specific and Regional Scholarship: Bhandarkar's excavation reports (Bhandarkar, 1914-1915) remain the primary archaeological source for the Besnagar shrine, supplemented by Irwin's epigraphic and art-historical analysis of the associated Heliodorus Pillar (Irwin, 1974). Krishna Deva's *Temples of North India* (Deva, 1969) and Pramod Chandra's analysis of Gupta-period temple form (Chandra, 1970) together provide the standard account of the Sanchi–Tigawa–Deogarh sequence relied upon in this paper. Michael W. Meister's measured-grid studies of North Indian temple plans (Meister, 1983), together with his contributions to the *Encyclopaedia of Indian Temple Architecture*, remain the closest existing methodological precedent for measurement-based analysis of the sites discussed here, and his site-specific findings on Teli-ka-Mandir and the Bateshwar cluster are relied upon directly in Section 4.4. Adam Hardy's typological study of Indian temple architecture (Hardy, 2007) and George Michell's documentation of regional temple complexes (Michell, 1988) provide the standard references for the Paramara-period material discussed in Section 4.5.

2.4 Research Gap: The review above demonstrates that each segment of the evolutionary sequence under study is well documented in isolation. What is absent is a single account that (a) connects the pre-Nāgara evidence at Besnagar to the Gupta prototype, (b) connects the Gupta prototype to its Gurjara-Pratīhāra elaboration, and

(c) connects that elaboration forward to the Paramara corpus, within one continuous historiographic frame explicitly oriented toward the question of measurement and proportional practice. This paper is designed to fill that specific gap.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design: This paper adopts a qualitative, historiographic literature-synthesis design. It does not present new fieldwork, measurement, or site survey data of any kind. This choice is deliberate: it reflects a phased research strategy in which the long evolutionary arc treated here is established through secondary literature, while a related doctoral study undertakes primary, fieldwork-based measurement of a narrower, more tightly scoped case, the Paramara temple corpus specifically, building on the historiographic foundation this paper provides.

3.2 Source Selection Criteria: Sources relied upon for substantive claims of dating, attribution, or architectural description are restricted to peer-reviewed art-historical scholarship, published Archaeological Survey of India excavation and site reports, and published translations of primary Sanskrit architectural texts. General-audience and tertiary web sources were consulted only for initial topic orientation and are not cited as evidentiary authority for any specific claim in this paper.

3.3 Limitations: The principal limitation of this design is its complete reliance on secondary and published primary-source material rather than independent verification. Dating attributions for several sites discussed here, particularly Besnagar and the earliest phase of the Bateshwar cluster, rest on interpretations offered in the cited excavation and survey literature and are not independently re-examined in this paper. The evidentiary record across the sequence is also uneven: wood and brick construction from the earliest period under study survives far more poorly than the dressed stone of later periods, which may understate the continuity of practice across the gap between Besnagar and the Gupta prototype.

4. Findings: The Evolutionary Sequence

4.1 The Pre-Nāgara Precedent: The Vāsudeva Shrine at Besnagar: The earliest known structural shrine in the region under study lies at Besnagar, near present-day Vidisha, adjacent to the Heliodorus Pillar. Bhandarkar's excavation (Bhandarkar, 1914-1915) revealed an elliptical, apsidal foundation with a burnt-brick floor, dated on stratigraphic and epigraphic grounds to approximately the third to second century BCE. The pillar itself, erected around 113 BCE by Heliodorus, a Greek ambassador to the court of the Śunga ruler Bhagabhadra, was dedicated to Vāsudeva (Krishna) and stood before this shrine (Irwin, 1974), making Besnagar one of the earliest archaeologically attested sites of Bhāgavata worship in India.

It is necessary, for the accuracy of the evolutionary claim advanced in this paper, to state plainly what Besnagar is not: it is not a Nāgara temple. Its elliptical plan, its wooden superstructure, and its complete absence of any shikhara distinguish it categorically from the square, maṇḍala-derived, stone-built form that emerges some six centuries later. Its significance here is evidentiary rather than typological: it establishes that structured, deity-specific worship at a fixed architectural site was already established regional practice well before the Nāgara form itself existed. The intervening centuries are dominated, in the surviving archaeological record, by Buddhist stupa and rock-cut architecture at nearby Sānchī rather than by free-standing Hindu temple construction, a pattern consistent with the differential survival of perishable versus durable building materials rather than necessarily an absence of continued practice.

4.2 The Gupta Prototype: Sānchī Temple 17 and the Tigawa Temple: The fifth century CE marks the emergence of the architectural vocabulary that defines Nāgara construction thereafter. Temple 17 at Sānchī, a small flat-roofed shrine consisting of a single-cell garbhagrha fronted by a pillared porch, is identified in the standard literature (Brown, 1942) as among the earliest surviving stone examples of this new type. Its modest scale and flat roof mean it lacks the curvilinear superstructure that later defines the mature Nāgara form, but its plan, the square sanctum, the axial porch, the raised plinth, establishes the spatial module on which the remainder of this paper's sequence builds.

The Kankālī Devī Temple at Tigawa, in present-day Katni district, dated to approximately 400–425 CE and forming part of a larger complex of ruined shrines, exhibits the same essential type. Deva's survey (Deva, 1969) situates temples of this class as the immediate precursors to the curvilinear-shikhara form, marking the moment at which the maṇḍala-based square plan is first executed in durable stone.

4.3 The Mature Nāgara Form: The Daśavatāra Temple at Deogarh: The Daśavatāra Temple at Deogarh, generally dated to the late fifth or early sixth century CE, is identified in the standard literature (Deva, 1969; Chandra, 1970) as the point at which the Nāgara form achieves its mature expression: a curvilinear shikhara rising directly over the sanctum, a raised and moulded plinth, elaborately carved doorways, and narrative relief panels. Though the superstructure survives only in part, reconstructions based on surviving fragments are consistent in identifying it as the earliest substantially intact example of the curvilinear form proper. Its plan is generally reconstructed as pañcāyatana, a central shrine accompanied by four subsidiary corner shrines, a configuration that recurs in varying elaboration throughout the later sequence. Chandra's analysis (Chandra, 1970) of related Gupta-period sites, including the Marhia temple, situates Deogarh within a broader regional pattern of experimentation contemporaneous with the Nachna-Kuthara temples.

4.4 Gurjara-Pratīhāra Continuity: Teli-ka-Mandir and the Bateshwar Cluster: The Gurjara-Pratīhāra period, spanning roughly the eighth to tenth centuries CE, forms the immediate architectural inheritance of the Paramara builders discussed in Section 4.5. Meister's analysis (Meister, 1983) of the Teli-ka-Mandir at Gwalior identifies its valabhī-roofed superstructure as a deliberately composite design combining Nāgara and Drāvida conventions, a striking departure from the more regionally consistent Gupta prototypes discussed above. The Bateshwar temple cluster near Morena presents a contrasting thread: Meister dates its earliest phase to approximately 750–800 CE and characterises its nearly two hundred shrines as embodying a reduced 'mandapika shrine' concept, repeated at consistent, standardised scale across the site. Where Teli-ka-Mandir demonstrates stylistic hybridity, Bateshwar demonstrates measurement standardisation at the scale of an entire temple settlement; both threads recur, transformed and enlarged, in the Paramara corpus.

4.5 Convergence with the Paramara Corpus: Udayeshwar and Bhojeshwar: The Paramara temples that form the primary fieldwork focus of the related doctoral study inherit and substantially extend the vocabulary traced above. The Udayeshwar (Nīlakaṇṭheśvara) Temple at Udaipur, Vidisha district, identified in the literature (Hardy, 2007) as the type-example of the Paramara Bhūmija style, elaborates the square Nāgara plan into a star-shaped, radiating form of considerably greater geometric complexity than any Gurjara-Pratīhāra example discussed above. The Bhojeshwar Temple at Bhojpur represents the logical extension of this trajectory: a sanctum and shivalinga of colossal scale, accompanied by full-scale architectural drawings carved directly onto the surrounding rock, yet left unfinished (Michell, 1988).

Read against the sequence established in this paper, Bhojeshwar's incompleteness carries specific evidentiary weight. The temple does not represent a failure of architectural knowledge, the carved drawings demonstrate a fully worked-out design, but it does represent a point at which the trajectory of increasing scale, traced here from the modest shrines of Tigawa through the standardised cluster at Bateshwar to the star-shaped complexity of Udayeshwar, reached a threshold at Bhojpur where design ambition and constructional completion diverged.

5. Discussion

5.1 Continuity in Spatial Vocabulary: The core spatial vocabulary of the single-cell garbhagrha and the maṇḍala-derived square plan, first attested in durable form at Sānchī Temple 17 and Tigawa, persists as the generative unit of every subsequent development discussed in this paper, including the far more elaborate Bhūmija plan at Udayeshwar. This continuity, spanning roughly six centuries from the Gupta prototype to the Paramara corpus, suggests a remarkably stable underlying grammar even as surface form

diversified considerably.

5.2 Rupture in Material, Scale, and Form: Against this continuity stands a pattern of discontinuous change. The shift from wood and brick construction at Besnagar to dressed stone at Sānchī and Tigawa, and the subsequent shift from the flat roof of the Gupta prototype to the curvilinear shikhara at Deogarh, each represent abrupt technological and formal transitions rather than gradual elaboration. The stylistic hybridity introduced at Teli-ka-Mandir likewise represents a departure from, rather than a refinement of, the preceding Gupta pattern.

5.3 The Trajectory of Ambition and the Bhojeshwar Question: A trajectory of increasing scale and geometric ambition runs from the modest, standardised shrines of Bateshwar through the star-shaped complexity of Udayeshwar to the colossal, unfinished Bhojeshwar Temple. This trajectory's end point invites a specific, testable question: whether measurement and proportional technique kept pace with the architectural ambitions it was asked to serve, or whether Bhojpur represents a case in which scale outran the practical means of completion. This paper's synthesis of secondary literature can identify and motivate this question but cannot resolve it; resolution requires the direct measurement-based comparison of textual prescription against constructed and carved evidence undertaken in the related doctoral study.

5.4 Implications for the Study of Paramara Measurement Systems: The sequence reconstructed here establishes that the Paramara builders at Udayeshwar and Bhojpur were not working in a vacuum but were extending a spatial and proportional grammar with roots extending back through the Gurjara-Pratīhāra period to the Gupta prototype and, in its most basic evidentiary sense, to Besnagar itself. This historical depth provides the necessary interpretive frame for the related doctoral study's central question, whether political subordination shifted the Chandravati branch of the Paramara dynasty away from the textual tradition of its own Malwa core, by establishing what that shared tradition, inherited by both branches, actually consisted of.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary of Findings: This paper has reconstructed, from existing published excavation reports and art-historical scholarship, a continuous evolutionary sequence of temple architecture in Madhya Pradesh spanning from the pre-Nāgara Vāsudeva shrine at Besnagar to the mature, monumental, and ultimately unfinished ambitions of the Paramara dynasty at Bhojpur.

6.2 Contribution to Knowledge: The paper's contribution lies not in new archaeological or textual data but in the synthesis itself: connecting four literatures, on early Vaishnava epigraphy, Gupta-period art history, Gurjara-Pratīhāra measured-grid analysis, and

Paramara regional architecture , that have not previously been drawn into a single continuous historiographic account oriented toward the specific question of measurement and proportional practice.

6.3 Limitations and Directions for Future Research: As a literature-based synthesis, this paper's conclusions require verification against primary measurement and fieldwork data before they can be treated as more than a historiographic framework. This is precisely the task undertaken by the related doctoral study of the Paramara corpus, and the sequence established here should be read as the necessary historical context for that fieldwork, not as a substitute for it. Future research extending fieldwork-based measurement to the earlier periods discussed here , particularly the Gurjara-Pratīhāra sites at Teli-ka-Mandir and Bateshwar, treated in this paper through secondary literature only , would allow the full sequence to be verified on a consistent primary-data basis.

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Mr. Akash Bhushan Dubey – Ideation, Data Collection, Analysis and Writing

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Statement of Conflict of Interest

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