

THE MOUSE WHO WOULD BE KING:  
INNOVATING TRADITION IN THE STATE OF CHAMBA

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## ABSTRACT

### THE MOUSE WHO WOULD BE KING: INNOVATING TRADITION IN THE STATE OF CHAMBA

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The mountain kingdom of Chamba in Himachal Pradesh is believed to be one of the oldest kingdoms in continuous existence in India, from its putative foundation in the sixth century until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The basis of this contention is the genealogical roll of the ruling family, the Chamba *Vaṃśāvalī*, a text whose only existing copy was composed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Positioning itself at this key moment in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, this dissertation attempts to trace and problematize the process of state formation in the kingdom over the *longue durée*, by analyzing the *Vaṃśāvalī*'s historical narrative in the context of extant inscriptional records, the construction of both wooden and stone Nāgara temples at the two centers of Chamba and Bharmaur, and the introduction in the 17<sup>th</sup> century of a new visual vocabulary based on painting.

A close study of the shifts and transitions in the material culture of the kingdom across the mediums of architecture, sculpture and painting sheds new light on the processes by which the rulers of Chamba formulated their ideas of kingship and identity and sought legitimacy from the past in the context of social and political developments both within their immediate neighborhood as well as North India more broadly. The 17<sup>th</sup> century in Chamba is revealed to be a period both of looking back in time to locate an ‘ancient’ and authentic past for the royal lineage of Chamba, as well as looking forward, to project an image of statehood that was in keeping with current political and cultural norms. Exploring the inconsistencies between the official history of the Chamba royal family – who claimed their descent from a *Mūṣa* (mouse) clan – and the visual and inscriptional evidence reveals the motivations behind the positioning of the rulers of Chamba at particular historical moments, during which they drew on both the past and the contemporary to create artistic vocabularies to give form to their aspirations and to survive.

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AIIS: American Institute of Indian Studies Image Archive

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### **Technical Note**

The transliterations used for Sanskrit terms in this dissertation follow the conventional system following the IAST scheme. In a few cases modifications have been made to accommodate non-specialists. While I have used the Sanskrit form for ancient place names, I have employed the anglicized version of modern geographic terms in accordance with popular usage.

## Introduction

Located between the towering peaks of the Dhauladhar and Pir Panjal ranges of the Western Himalayas, along the banks of the Rāvī River in the modern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, the former hill kingdom of Chamba is widely believed to have had one of the longest continuous royal lineages in Indian history. **(FIGS. 1, 2)** Writing in 1933, two officials of the Archaeological Survey of India, John Hutchison and Jean Philippe Vogel, stated that “Chamba is one of the oldest Native States in India, having been founded not later than A.D. 600 and perhaps as early as A.D. 550.”<sup>1</sup> The primary source for this assertion was the Chamba *Vaṃśāvalī*, a genealogical roll whose only surviving version dates to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and which provides an unbroken list of the ancestors of the Chamba ruling family, stretching from the ‘deep time’ of Puranic deities and heroes to their more recent human ancestors.

This narrative of a continuous political history comes imbued with certain other assumptions. Key among these is the inference that such a lengthy history implies a degree of stability predicated upon an isolation from the wider social, political and religious movements which swept periodically through the subcontinent. This perception of history is fundamentally resistant to the idea of change. Moreover, the correlation between ‘unchanging’ and the imagining of a particular and timeless *Hindu* authenticity is a characteristic that has become attached to the kingdom of Chamba, which has been

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<sup>1</sup> J. Hutchison and J. Ph. Vogel, *History of the Punjab Hill States*, Lahore: Superintendent, Govt. Printing, Punjab: 1933 (1999 reprint), pp. 268.



characterized in much of the scholarly literature as the bastion of a localized, reclusive, and therefore authentically ‘indigenous’ culture. The notable art historian, Karl Khandalavala, had this to say of Chamba:

“Of all the Hill States of Himachal Pradesh to which I have been, it was Chamba, even before my first visit to it several years ago, that seemed to possess a special aura. It was the aura of a far-away domain bordered by mighty mountain ranges and so sheltered that when the crusading armies of Islam invaded India, it was not in their ken, unnoticed at it was, like a ‘sleepy hollow’.”<sup>2</sup>

A closer reading of the narrative of the *Vaṃśāvalī*, however, reveals that far from being isolated by the lofty peaks of the Himalayas, the kingdom of Chamba was acutely aware of its position sandwiched between the powerful kingdom of Kashmir and the Buddhist lands to its north, and the kingdoms of the Indian plains to the south, and was actively involved in the politics of the region in the course of its history.<sup>3</sup> An examination of the material culture of Chamba – its sculpture, architecture and painting – makes these linkages abundantly clear as well. However, the potency of this myth of an ancient and reclusive Hindu kingdom has had a profound impact on the analysis and dating of the material culture of the kingdom of Chamba in the modern period. In contrast, I argue that the permeability of frontiers, both actual as well as in the Chamba imaginary, and the layering of time, played a pivotal role in the framing and projection of Chamba’s polity. In addition, the narrative of the *Vaṃśāvalī* and its desire to emphasize both the antiquity

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<sup>2</sup> Karl Khandalavala, “The Princess’s Choice,” in V.C Ohri, ed., *History and Culture of the Chamba State, a Western Himalayan Kingdom: collected papers of the seminar held at Chamba in 1983*, New Delhi: Books & Books, 1989, pp. 1-14.

<sup>3</sup> Romila Thapar, “The Mouse in the Ancestry,” in *Cultural Pasts: Essays in Early Indian History*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 797-806.

and continuity of the royal lineage have also persuaded scholars to view the kingdom along such lines, a tendency that I also argue against.

The dissertation examines the historical and art historical mechanisms whereby the later rulers of Chamba self-consciously constructed a visual, written and oral narrative emphasizing both the antiquity and continuity of the royal lineage, using, and in some cases, manipulating the evidence to support the official history of the kingdom. The dissertation covers a period of a millennium, a time period which is spanned by two categories of often-contradictory historical data – the *Vaṃśāvalī* and epigraphic sources. My analysis of the history and artistic legacy of the state begins in c. 700 A.D., the date which has been assigned on paleographic grounds to the oldest set of inscriptions ascribed to a ruler of Chamba listed in the *Vaṃśāvalī*. These inscriptions, engraved in Sanskrit on four bronze images, were commissioned by a ruler named Merū-varman, who ruled a kingdom based in the town of Bharmaur located further up the valley of the Rāvī River. These inscriptions make Merū-varman the first historically attested figure from whom the later kings of Chamba trace their descent in the *Vaṃśāvalī*.

This set of inscriptions is the earliest of a long stream of a 130 inscriptions in total that have survived in the territory of the kingdom. These range in date from approximately the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and comprise both dated and undated inscriptions on rocks, fountain stone slabs (*panihārs*), temples, images and copper plate deeds. These were painstakingly collected, documented and translated by the Dutch Sanskritist and historian, Jean Philippe Vogel, and published in two volumes by the

Archaeological Survey of India.<sup>4</sup> They provide invaluable information and tantalizing clues with which to gain insight into the religious, political and social developments taking place in Chamba over the *longue durée*.

The 17<sup>th</sup> century text of the *Vaṃśāvalī* is the other literary source that I use to problematize the narrative of state formation in Chamba. The *Vaṃśāvalī* has played a pivotal role in the reconstruction of the history of the state and the dating of its temple architecture in particular. What is often overlooked in discussions of the *Vaṃśāvalī*, however, is that it was composed as the official history of the kings of Chamba at a particular historical moment, one with its own compulsions of projecting a particular notion of identity, continuity and statehood. The tendency among scholars has been to use the *Vaṃśāvalī* uncritically as a source of history, accepting many of its claims as fact, even when these directly contradict the inscriptional as well as the built evidence. Vogel, who translated both the inscriptions of Chamba as well as the *Vaṃśāvalī*, checked the account of the latter against the evidence of the former, but his primary aim was to *corroborate* the historical accuracy of the text. Even though his analysis notes several ambiguities in the genealogical narrative, particularly prior to the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the veracity of the document itself, its intentionality, and the social and cultural processes that may have contributed to its creation are never probed.

Problematizing a ‘simple’ reading of the *Vaṃśāvalī* in conjunction with the analysis of Chamba’s material culture and inscriptions provides a unique opportunity for

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<sup>4</sup> The first volume, translated by J. Ph. Vogel, deals with the inscriptions of the ‘Pre-Muhammadan’ period, and the second with inscriptions of the ‘Post-Muhammadan’ period, compiled and annotated by Dr. B. Ch. Chhabra.

deconstructing a created synthesis of history as it is presented in the genealogy. I argue that the *Vaṃśāvalī* represents one end point in the conceptualization and recording of a state identity in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, one in which the territorial idea of the state and its socio-cultural cohesion were explicitly linked with the dynastic identity of the ruling family, from its purported genesis to the moment of writing.

The oral tradition of Chamba was another powerful tool for linking the idea of the state to the ruling family. The successful perpetuation of this oral tradition has living proof in Chamba to this day, where it is remembered and temporally re-lived through various festivals, folk songs and other commemorative events. The most potent of these stories relate to the founding of the town of Chamba in the tenth century and are tied to the figure of Sāhila-varman, the ruler credited with establishing the new capital and building numerous temples including the dynastic temple of the ruling family. The mythology of Sāhila-varman revolves around the personal sacrifices made by the ruler and his family, including the sacrifice of his children and his wife, for the successful establishment of the town and its temples. The successful perpetuation of this oral and written mythology in the historical consciousness of the kingdom has meant that the historicity of Sāhila-varman's deeds are never questioned, although an analysis of the sculpture and architecture associated with the ruler seems to tell a different story, and there is no inscriptional evidence to substantiate them.

. Chamba retains a rich built heritage in the form of wood and stone temples, as well as sculptures in both bronze and stone. This material culture too spans a period of several centuries, but the chronology of individual structures has been based in much of

the scholarship in light of the *Vaṃśāvalī*. Re-examining these temples and sculptures with fresh eyes and within a new contextual framework for the *Vaṃśāvalī* is essential for displacing some of the entrenched notions of state formation in Chamba.

The dissertation locates itself in the 17<sup>th</sup> century milieu in which the *Vaṃśāvalī* was written. It attempts to capture a moment of looking back – when the idea of having a particular type of written history and the architectural icons to support it became important for the rulers of Chamba – as well as a moment of looking forward, in which the rulers of Chamba positioned themselves as participants in the political world of the imperial Mughals, if not as equals, then as coeval partners. From the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Chamba produced a large number of works executed using the medium of painting, a medium whose popularity and range resulted in the transference of its vision across wood carving and metal repoussé works as well, and resulted in the transformation of both religious and non-religious spaces, as well as portrayals of royalty and deities. These spaces and themes were in turn used to give form to new realities and political aspirations, both temporal and religious.

A period of a millennium is not a time period that is possible to fathom or re-create in any meaningful sense, nor is that the goal of the dissertation. Some of the central questions that this dissertation seeks to explore are at what point did the rulers of Chamba reach a moment, or moments, of self-realization when it became possible for them to look back and distill a vision of their dynastic identity and begin to project it into the future? What social or political changes enabled this new level of awareness, or the ability and desire to make it apparent? What were the tools and vocabulary – textual, oral and visual

– that were chosen for this task? Where do the inconsistencies lie between the account of the *Vaṃśāvalī* and the epigraphic and visual evidence? And most crucially, what do these inconsistencies tell us about the motivations that were driving the rulers of Chamba to re-make their image at particular historical moments?

Chapter 1 is an analysis of the *Vaṃśāvalī*, beginning with a discussion of the typology of history-writing to which the text belongs. The genealogy described in the *Vaṃśāvalī* is linked to a tradition known as the *itihāsa purāṇa*, which translates as ‘thus indeed it was’. The narrative structure for describing a family’s lineage within this format stretches back to the beginning of Hindu cosmological time, to a world of gods, heroes and myths, down to the human ancestors of the king. As such the concept of history that it represents is one which switches between the recording of the past as it was perceived, as it was remembered and transmitted through oral tradition, and as it was verified through concrete sources. I argue that the manner in which these threads are woven into the text was in itself an act of history-making, rather than recording, in which mythical and historical segments, as well as the grey areas between the two were all used with a deliberate historical purpose. As a document of lineage, the core purpose of the *Vaṃśāvalī* was to legitimize the royal family and its ancestry and establish the antiquity of both the state and of the royal family in the region, tying these to the larger polity of North India, as well as to carefully chosen Brahmanical theistic symbols. I argue that the construction and writing down of the *Vaṃśāvalī* was a self-reflective process on the part of the rulers of Chamba, one that involved sifting through and knitting together both historical and art historical sources looking back over a millennium-long period, in order

to promote a distinctive image of Chamba statehood. In addition, the seamless genealogy of the family's ancestry, which was heralded as descending from Puranic deities and the heroes of the *Sūryavaṃśa* Line signified a divine consent to rule and tied the rulers of Chamba into a larger North Indian realm of Rājput royalty with whom they shared a *Sūryavaṃśa* lineage. This realm of kingship, with its roots in an ancient tradition provided an alternative source of prestige and identity from which to engage with the Imperial Mughal heartland from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

The Chamba *Vaṃśāvalī* consists of a 120 stanzas and is divided into two sections, beginning with the mythical portion which is cyclical in time, and continuing on to the historical portion which is composed in linear time.<sup>5</sup> This second segment of the *Vaṃśāvalī* provides a few 'historical' or 'factual' details about some of the key figures who are highlighted in the narrative. It is these details that have had such a pervasive impact on the re-creation of the history of the kingdom and the dating of much of its artistic and architectural legacy. Since the existence of many of the figures listed in the roll is substantiated by other sources, the tendency has been to accept all of the *Vaṃśāvalī*'s information at face value even if it is not corroborated by other sources – whether it is the continuity of the ruling family, the kingdom's primary cultic affiliations, or its visual proclamations of kingship. As the literary narration of a structure of power, written by a *brāhmaṇa* court scribe in concert with the ruler, the Chamba *Vaṃśāvalī* presents a smooth and cohesive picture of state formation from the position of the author in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, one devoid of any major breaks in sovereignty. One of the primary

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<sup>5</sup> J. Ph. Vogel, *Antiquities of Chamba State, Vol. I*, Archaeological Survey of India, New Imperial Series, vol. xxxvi, Calcutta: Superintendent Govt. Printing, 1911, Chapter 5.

goals of my research is to problematize such a ‘simple’ reading of the *Vaṃśāvalī*. This chapter analyses some of the *Vaṃśāvalī*’s proclamations and re-frames them within this new context of intentionality.

Chapter 2 examines the first phase of the kingdom’s purported history, with its locus in the small village of Bharmaur, 60 kilometers from Chamba town. The *Vaṃśāvalī* states that the political beginnings of the kingdom of Chamba and of the royal lineage are based here, where the mythical progenitor of the race, Maru, established the town for one of his sons, from whom the line descended in perpetuity to modern times. There is scanty data relating to this early period of the kingdom’s establishment, and it is only when we arrive at the figure of Merū-varman in c. 700 A.D., the eleventh descendent of the son of Maru, that we encounter historical evidence of his existence.

Merū-varman commissioned and had inscribed four bronze images – three located in Bharmaur and one in the village of Chhatrarhi, located midway between Bharmaur and Chamba. The three images in Bharmaur are of Lakṣaṇā Devī – the form of the goddess slaying the buffalo demon Mahiṣa – of Gaṇeśa, and of Nandī, the *vāhana* of the god Śiva. The image in Chhatrarhi depicts the goddess as Śakti Devī, the embodiment of Śiva’s female energy. Each of these images bears Merū-varman’s name, as well as that of the master-artist who made them, Gugga. In addition to these, the two wooden temples to Lakṣaṇā Devī and Śakti Devī have also been attributed to the patronage of Merū-varman and the hand of Gugga. The chapter consists of a detailed analysis of this sculptural and architectural legacy. From Merū-varman’s inscriptions also originates the founding myth of Chamba rulers which draws their descent from a mouse, a myth which the historian



Romila Thapar has argued is a common trope whereby obscure origins can be disguised as interludes in exile, where a royal child is guarded by a mouse.<sup>6</sup>

The two wooden temples in particular have been the subject of considerable scholarship from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. I attempt to problematize the debate about their chronology and style by locating their initial construction in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, but also pointing out that both structures are pastiches that have been considerably modified over the centuries – the Śakti Devī temple to a lesser degree and the Lakṣaṇā Devī temple more so. While some of the phases of this reconstruction can be discerned in the style, iconography and ground plan, others remain speculative.

The scholarship on these images and temples has emphasized their debt to Kashmir's artistic traditions in both style and iconography, and while this is certainly partially true, I argue that their fundamental vision and idiom remained distinct from broader traditions. I examine references to the Bharmaur region in sources such as the chronicle of the state of Kullu, accounts of the imperial rule of King Harṣa of Kanauj, as well as the Rājatarāṅgiṇī, the historical chronicle of the kings of Kashmir, to shed some light on the larger political and cultural context within which Merū-varman established his position in Bharmaur.

Merū-varman's choice of the theistic symbols that he used to proclaim his 'arrival' as a *māhārājādhirāja* (king of kings) is also revealing, particularly in light of the *Vaṃśāvalī*'s projected shift in these symbols that would occur with the move of the capital to Chamba in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. All of Merū-varman's images are of a Śaiva or

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<sup>6</sup> Thapar, "The Mouse in the Ancestry," in *Cultural Pasts*, 2003, pp. 797-806.

Śaktā affiliation; religious cults that I argue have deep roots in the land though they are Brahmanical and not part of a folk devotional tradition. I argue that these icons were deliberately chosen by the ruler, as in all likelihood was the material – wood – which was used to build the two temples, in order to legitimize his rule and the expansion of his territory, while ensuring that it remained rooted in some form to the local traditions of the land.

The period between the reign of Merū-varman in the 8<sup>th</sup> century and the supposed shift of the capital to Chamba in the 10<sup>th</sup> century is clouded in obscurity. Following Merū-varman, the next inscription to be issued by a ruler in the region is Yugākāra-varman's 10<sup>th</sup>-century land grant issued from Chamba but pertaining to lands in Bharmaur – a gap in the inscriptional evidence of two and a half centuries. While the *Vaṃśāvalī* lists the names of eighteen rulers between Merū-varman and Sāhila-varman – including the Moṣūna-varman discussed earlier – there is no evidence, either inscriptional or artistic associated with any of them. The historical and art historical details of this period are unknown, but the *Vaṃśāvalī* narrates that a significant break in sovereignty occurred in c. 800 A.D. during the rule of Lakṣmī-varman, when a tribe called the Kīras killed the ruler and occupied his realm.<sup>7</sup>

The second mouse in the ancestry of the Chamba rulers emerges at this point, when it is said that Lakṣmī-varman's infant son escaped the Kīra onslaught and was guarded by mice, so that he could grow up and reclaim his patrimony. We can speculate

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<sup>7</sup> It is unclear who exactly the *Kīras* were but historical consensus points towards their being a tribe of Tibetan origin – possibly the Tibetan kingdom of Guge – who for a period would also hold sway over the area of Bajaura in Kullu, which was called *Kīragrāma* after them. For further information on the origin of the *Kīras* see J. Hutchison and J. Ph. Vogel, 1933, pp. 281-282.

that the appearance of this mouse in the chronicle points to an actual break in the lineage of the rulers.

We know from both local inscriptions and the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, for example, that a second major rupture in the sovereignty of Chamba occurred in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, not long after the supposed foundation of the new capital by Sāhila-varman, when King Ananta Deva of Kashmir conquered the region and deposed the king. Following this conquest, Chamba had a feudatory relationship with Kashmir for a considerably long period, but this entire episode and the Chamba rulers involved in it are entirely omitted from the account of the *Vaṃśāvalī*.

Chapter 3 deals with this next phase of Chamba's history and focuses primarily on problematizing and analyzing with fresh eyes the Nāgara temples built by the kings of Chamba. One area in which the tendency to privilege the *Vaṃśāvalī* as a documentary tool has been particularly problematic is in the attribution of these temples which were built using a new 'cosmopolitan' North Indian temple vocabulary in stone. There are eight Nāgara temples located in Chamba, and two located in Bharmaur of which all, barring two dated temples in Chamba, have been dated significantly earlier in the architectural scholarship than their stylistic analysis indicates, in large part based on the account of the *Vaṃśāvalī* and the oral tradition.

One of the primary goals of this chapter is to locate temple-building activity in Chamba within the framework of dated Nāgara temples in the Himalayan region from the 8<sup>th</sup> century onwards, as well as to speculate on what additional trends in Nāgara temple morphology from the plains the rulers of Chamba might have been aware of in different

periods. I do this in order to try and understand what factors might have motivated the generation of a particular architectural vision that holds true across temples and over the centuries despite variations and the introduction of new ornamental motifs, such as those derived from Mughal ornament after the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Secondly, I analyze certain key morphological features of Chamba's Nāgara temples within a comparative perspective to gauge if the traditional chronology ascribed to some of these temples, such as the Campāvatī and Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temples, does in fact hold true in relation to one another. While I do not attempt to definitively date the temples based on this analysis – such an attempt would be unreliable – it does permit a grouping of these temples along a temporal continuum. My analysis has resulted in a significantly different picture of temple building in Chamba than the *Vaṃśāvalī* would suggest, a development which clarifies the imperatives behind the *Vaṃśāvalī*'s own historical formulation.

The architectural evidence suggests that none of the temples in Chamba, in their present form, can be dated to earlier than the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and that a major building program was undertaken by the rulers of Chamba in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries in particular – one which was designed to create the visual impression of a continuous and ancient royal existence in its built forms. The impression of structural and therefore temporal contiguity between the temples was achieved by adhering to a basic ornamental formula across temples regardless of when they were built, such that each successive temple, though it might innovate in certain respects, in essence mirrored the image of all previous temples. The Nāgara temple of Chamba thus became a repeating icon or symbol

of a larger dynastic identity, enabling successive generations of Chamba kings to add to and bolster this image. These temples and the narrative traditions associated with them became a key component for dynastic legitimation in the form of forging a connection to an unbroken past and its emblems, both real and invented.

I argue that the two Nāgara temples erected in Bharmaur were also a part of this trend, though they too have been dated many centuries earlier in the scholarship. Merū-varman's image of the bull Nandī bears an inscription describing the temple to Śiva for which the image was made. The architectural features described in this inscription could equally refer to a wooden or a stone temple, but it is visually apparent that the current Nāgara temple to Śiva in front of which the Nandī is placed, the Maṇimaheśa temple, does not date to the early 8<sup>th</sup> century. The second Nāgara temple in Bharmaur, dedicated to Narasimha, has been attributed to the queen of Sāhila-varman's son, Yugākāra-varman, in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. We have a land grant issued by Yugākāra in which he donates lands in the name of the god for the upkeep of the temple, but interestingly the part of the grant in which the name 'Narasimha' is written appears to be a later addition, thereby casting doubt on this attribution. In addition, there are grounds to speculate that the original temple in which the image of Narasimha was placed was a wooden one, as a carved wooden architectural fragment currently placed in the neighboring Lakṣaṇā Devī temple clearly belonged to a different wooden temple, and one of Vaiṣṇava persuasion. I speculate that the construction of the two Bharmaur temples was part of a later move by the rulers of Chamba to 're-make' an ancient center at Bharmaur, to lay claim to its antiquity and to Merū-varman's lineage, at a time when the political and cultural need for

such a history was paramount, a dynamic that culminated in the 17<sup>th</sup> century writing of the *Vaṃśāvalī*.

Associated with temple-building was the start of a new process in state formation defined by a growing nexus between the king and the *brāhmaṇa*. From the 12<sup>th</sup> century, but particularly so after the 16<sup>th</sup> century, land grant deeds issued by Chamba's rulers reveal that large numbers of *brāhmaṇas* were invited from outside the kingdom and settled. They played a critical role in the transition of Chamba's polity to a monarchical Brahmanical state. The bestowing of land grants was one of the central mechanisms by which the rulers of Chamba could settle new lands and bring them under their control. These *brāhmaṇa* beneficiaries would in turn be loyal to the king, play the key role in restructuring society along caste lines and validate the genealogical sanctity and caste status of the ruling family.

Religion played an important role in the transformation of the state, but this required a delicate balancing act on the part of Chamba's rulers. First, the image of the state needed to be crystallized around recognizable symbols, in this case the image of Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa as well as the *Chamba* form of Nāgara temples, compactly clustered in the two centers of Bharmaur and Chamba. Secondly, these symbols needed to be tied to the ruling dynasty in no uncertain terms. Thirdly, the new Vaiṣṇava affiliation that was emphasized, as well as the form of the temple and its ritual functions, needed to be able to compete successfully with the other modes of religiosity prevalent in Chamba, notably the cults of ancestor and hero-worship which are so prominent in the *panihārs* and hero-stones of Chamba, and the pre-existing cults of Śiva and the goddess. These were

subsumed, co-opted or accommodated into the dominant religious stream by the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Chapter 4 discusses the next artistic phase launched in Chamba from the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards. This artistic flowering originated in the medium of painting, but I argue that the particular ‘painterly vision’ that was generated traveled to the media of wood carving and metal repoussé works as well and transformed the visual arena in new ways. This was partly because in many cases the artisans responsible for works across paper, wood and metal were the same, belonging to a caste of ‘*tarkhān-chitere*’ or carpenter-painters. Once the potential of painting as a medium and its range of visual possibilities were realized, it enabled patrons and artists to re-conceptualize both sacred and royal spaces in a truly mixed media format, and one with symbolic implications.

The ‘painterly vision’ is also a mirror onto the next stage in state formation in Chamba, one that transitions away from the Brahmanical social and religious structures discussed in the previous chapter. In the realm of religion, a new era was initiated with the spread and wide-scale acceptance of the Bhakti movement, which was based on a devotional and individual relationship with god that obviated the primacy of priests. This religious shift is what is partially responsible both for the popularity of the ‘painterly vision’ and its success as a new vocabulary uniquely suited for the expression of new ideas. Framed within the context of the visual expression of this new phase in state formation, my analysis of the ‘painterly vision’ is necessarily based on a contextual approach rather than a comprehensive ‘style’ or ‘school’ based one.

Three broad threads are interwoven in the visual analysis of the chapter. The first is based on the premise that in the light of an established state identity and structure, painting offers the rulers of Chamba the opportunity to turn to the portrayal of the individual ruler in works of art. Secondly, the ‘painterly vision’ enabled rulers to position themselves within the context of a larger realm that was becoming increasingly important from the 16<sup>th</sup> century – that of the Rājput world of pan-Indian Hindu royalty.<sup>8</sup> It is not surprising that Rājā Pratāpa-simha-varman was the first Chamba ruler to add the “Singh” – a pan-Indian marker of Rājput identity – to his last name in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. I argue that links were forged with this Rājput cosmos both symbolically, through visual associations with painted depictions of the gods and heroes of the *Sūryavaṃśa* lineage and the epics of the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata, as well as through visual parallels with the royal portraits of other Rājput rulers. Thirdly, the proliferation of paintings focusing on the main deities of the Bhakti movement, Ram and Kṛṣṇa, both of whom were gods as well as kings in the human world, allowed the rulers of Chamba to create a visual parallel between worlds of the gods and their own milieu. The idea of ruler-divinity, first articulated in Chamba in a 10<sup>th</sup> century inscription, could now be visually taken to an entirely new level. An associated development was the decorative confluence of palatial and temple spaces initiated in this era and executed with the ‘painterly vision’, further blurring the line between the temporal and religious.

From the time Ananda Coomaraswamy first wrote about the paintings of the hill states of Himachal in the 1920s, this painting tradition has been largely thought of as an

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<sup>8</sup> Rājā Pratāpa-simha-varman (r. 1559-1586 A.D.) was the first Chamba ruler to add the “Singh” – a pan-Indian marker of Rājput identity – to his last name.



aristocratic folk art immersed in poetic and religious subjects, unlike the Mughal painting tradition for example, and its emphasis on portraying actual people and events. A more nuanced reading of the ‘painterly vision’ in Chamba makes it apparent that this was far from the truth, and that through allusive and symbolic associations even the religious imagery of the ‘painterly vision’ was designed to serve the essentially historical purpose of proclaiming the divine kingship of rulers cloaked in a Rājput guise, a need that was embedded in social and political realities. The painterly vision enabled the rulers of Chamba to position themselves in a new landscape, both literally and figuratively.

The phases of Chamba’s political development as a state over the *longue durée* can thus be discerned in distinct artistic and architectural trends, each with their own vision and motivations, though it must be emphasized that these phases must have certainly overlapped. The combination of Chamba’s extensive architectural record, extant painting and inscriptional records, *panihārs* and hero stones, as well as the existence of the genealogical narrative of the *Vaṃśāvalī*, provides a unique opportunity to examine how a small hill state dreamt big, changing and adapting to not just survive but to create a persisting image of statehood for the future. My integrated analysis of Chamba’s cultural history has allowed me to frame this artistic production as part of an ongoing process of innovation, adaptation and competition that lies at the heart of the politics of state formation.

## Chapter 1

### The Writing of History and the Chamba *Vaṃśāvalī*

The Chamba *Vaṃśāvalī* is the official history, in the form of a genealogical roll, of the rulers of Chamba, compiled in Sanskrit by an unknown *brāhmaṇa* author in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>9</sup> It is the story of the ruling dynasty of Chamba, written as they wished it to be remembered and recorded. Most importantly, it reflects in its structure and content a carefully crafted synthesis of a millennium-long history of the state, from its genesis to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, which is when the only known version of the *Vaṃśāvalī* ends its narrative during the rule of Rājā Pṛthvī Singh (r. 1641-64). As a synthesis of Chamba's history, it is meant to be read as a seamless, finished product – giving an account of the ancestors of the ruling family, the founding of the town of Bharmaur as the first center of the kingdom (and indirectly, an approximation of its territorial extent at that time), and the move of the center of the kingdom to the town of Chamba in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. While the *Vaṃśāvalī* is a genealogical narrative, it is not a historical narrative in the strictest sense. It is interspersed with only sparing historical and descriptive details, but these give us an idea of Chamba's relations with some of its neighboring kingdoms, as well as the virtues and accomplishments of some of its rulers, particularly in relation to the sacred architecture they commissioned in their two centers at Bharmaur and Chamba towns.

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<sup>9</sup> One of the primary roles of *brāhmaṇas*, or members of the priestly caste, was that of scribes, and genealogies, inscriptions and other written materials can be ascribed to the authorship of a member of this caste even if we do not know the identity of the scribe in question.

A close examination of the *Vaṃśāvalī* is necessary for an analysis of the processes of state formation in Chamba for several reasons. First, it must be accepted as the official history of the state, carefully knit together using the range of material and other sources available to its composer in the form of inscriptions, architecture, sculpture, prior genealogies and oral tradition. Second, the *Vaṃśāvalī* provides the chronological framework of my analysis, which stretches from the first ruler mentioned in the *Vaṃśāvalī* for whom there is inscriptional evidence – the figure of Merū-varman, who based on the epigraphic analysis of his inscriptions was a ruler in Bharmaur sometime around 700 A.D. – until the rule of Rājā Pṛthvī Singh in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Third, the study of the material culture of Chamba – its architectural, sculptural and painting traditions – should not be separated from the social, historical and cultural context which they have been given in the *Vaṃśāvalī*.

As mentioned in the introduction, the art historical study of Chamba's material culture has been greatly influenced by the narrative of the *Vaṃśāvalī* because the *Vaṃśāvalī* makes specific mention of the building programs of certain rulers. However, even a cursory examination of the *Vaṃśāvalī* makes it abundantly clear that it cannot be accepted as a historically accurate document as it is prone to errors of dating and attribution, and its narrative is often contradicted by the epigraphic evidence that we have from Chamba. 'Reading' the material culture of Chamba in close relation to the text of the *Vaṃśāvalī* offers the opportunity to present both bodies of material in a dialectical relationship, one which I believe offers new insights into the process of state formation in Chamba over the *longue durée*. The material culture of Chamba and the *Vaṃśāvalī*

juxtaposed in this manner offer the possibility of gaining a deeper insight into the imperatives that guided the political and cultural consolidation of the state, in particular ways, and at particular periods in time, than either body of knowledge would do taken in isolation.

### **History-Writing and its Implications**

“The expression of historical consciousness, it has often been assumed, takes the form of historical writing”, wrote Romila Thapar in an essay on society and historical consciousness.<sup>10</sup> The 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe were the time when history as a discipline was being established. The study of history as a discipline was based on systematizing knowledge, and from its genesis had its roots in the European tradition. This tradition in turn, looked towards the ancient Greeks and historians such as Herodotus, to define the model for historical writing. Understandably, the Greek model could not be readily found or replicated for the understanding of a great many other societies, as different societies in the past have tended to develop their own models for recording history, ones appropriate to their own needs.

There have been many models for the writing of history in India, and on India. Colonial historians of early India, in particular those who looked to Sanskrit texts as sources of history, reached the conclusion that Indians, at least prior to the establishment of Muslim empires, lacked a historical consciousness. As Wendy Doniger writes in *The*

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<sup>10</sup> R. Thapar, “The Oral and the Written in Early India,” in *Cultural Pasts*, 2003, p. 123.

*Hindus*, “The first European scholars of India believed that everything was timeless, eternal, and unchanging, and so they didn’t generally value or even notice the ways in which Hindus did in fact recognize change. Like many of the Indian branch of orientalist, Europeans picked up this assumption of timelessness.”<sup>11</sup> Early colonial views on Indian historiography shifted from A.A. MacDonell’s drastic view that early Indians wrote no history because they never made any<sup>12</sup> to E.J. Rapson’s somewhat more moderate perception that while early India’s past was certainly filled with events and movements of significance, we don’t know of them because they were not systematically recorded.<sup>13</sup> Beginning with the Mughals, from the time of Babur, the first Mughal emperor, there came into being forms of history that fitted a readily comprehensible European prototype, including autobiographical historical narratives and biographies, as well as official court histories of an Emperor’s rule by a court historian.<sup>14</sup> Mughal historical narratives – unlike early Sanskrit sources of history such as the *Vedas* and *Puraṇās*, or poetic eulogies – are rich in both dates and in factual descriptions of battles fought, places captured, and people met, of court scenes, of hunts and festivities, of food eaten, and landscapes traversed. These sources also had a greater emphasis on linear chronology and historical causation, and were, in addition, supported by a greater number of dated materials.

The contrast between the Sanskrit sources where early historians sought evidence for historical events, and these later Mughal sources, resulted in an unfortunate

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<sup>11</sup> Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, New Delhi: Penguin, 2009, p. 18.

<sup>12</sup> A.A. MacDonell, *A History of Sanskrit Literature*, London: William Heinemann, 1900, p. 11.

<sup>13</sup> E.J. Rapson, *The Cambridge History of India*, Vol. I, Cambridge University Press, 1922, p. 57.

<sup>14</sup> Examples include the *Baburnāma*, the *Akbar-nāma* and ‘Abu Fazl’s *Ain-e-Akbarī*, the *Tuzuk-e-Jahāngir* and the *Pādśāh Nāma*.

formalization of Indian history that persisted until the 1950s. Starting with James Mill's *History of British India*, which was published in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and became the standard history of the subcontinent, the discipline of Indian history was divided into three distinct phases or periods – the Hindu, the Muslim, and the British. These distinctions, besides being essentializing and inaccurate, led to corresponding interpretations of the three periods, the most pervasive of which was an interpretation of linear progression, where the Hindu period was seen as backward, unchanging and lacking in rationality, and the Muslim period was seen as an improvement upon the previous phase, but it was only with the British that true systematic change happened, ushering India towards modernity.

In contrast, a history such as the Chamba *Vaṃśāvalī* follows a different model for how the past is received and recorded. The *Vaṃśāvalī* is affiliated to a tradition known as the *itihāsa purāṇa* model of writing history. The scope of this model is a far more expansive one than the Mughal model or the European post-enlightenment model mentioned above, for the simple reason that *itihāsa purāṇas* tell the story of the past (the literal meaning of *itihāsa purāṇa* is 'thus indeed it was') stretching back to the beginning of creation. As such, *itihāsa purāṇa* begin their narration in *Puranic* times,<sup>15</sup> in a world of gods, heroes and myths, in order to arrive at their present historical moment. The phrase, "thus indeed it was," remains difficult to define, as it lies somewhere between the

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<sup>15</sup> The Puraṇās are a category of texts which were compiled around the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. They described cosmological time, genealogies, myths and legends in detail, stretching as far into the past as possible, and drew on the oral tradition of bards, perhaps in local vernacular languages such as Prākṛit, which they then translated into Sanskrit.

recording of a perceived past and historical narrative.<sup>16</sup> Compounding the problem of interpreting a history that begins its narration in this manner, such as the Chamba *Vaṃśāvalī*, is the *Puranic* nature of time which is seen as cyclical rather than linear.<sup>17</sup> An understanding of linear time and sequencing is not just fundamentally tied to the modern conception of history and history-writing but also to ideas of self-perception and self-projection, both of which are arguably integral to a “modern” consciousness. Since modern history as a discipline is based on linear time, this has placed *itihāsa purāṇas* and documents like the *Vaṃśāvalī* at a great disadvantage, resulting in their being either entirely overlooked or taken literally, when what is required is a more nuanced approach that strives to extract their embedded meaning and juxtapose it with other available data.

A closer look at the notion of the past in these texts, however, reveals that they have two categories of time that function simultaneously – the cyclical and the linear. Both these notions of time had a distinct function within the ancient texts, and this function continues in a genealogy like the Chamba *Vaṃśāvalī*. Within the Kalpa-yuga, the time of myth and the time of history are demarcated in the *Kaliyuga* by the origin story of a devastating flood which leaves a sole survivor, Manu, who escapes to safety atop Mount Merū on the back of a giant fish. Manu is the progenitor of the human race, and from him descend two lines – the *Chandravamsa* (Lunar) and the *Sūryavaṃśa*

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<sup>16</sup> For a detailed description of the origins of this tradition, see Romila Thapar, “Society and Historical Consciousness,” in *Cultural Pasts*, 2003, pp. 123-155.

<sup>17</sup> In this notion of time, cosmology and history are divided into discrete cycles or *yugas*. The *Kalpa yuga* spans the length of the universe, from creation to destruction. Within this frame, the *Mahāyuga* (the great cycle) lasts for 12,000 divine years – this number must be multiplied by 360 to get its equivalence in human years, i.e. 4,320,000 human years – and consists of four cycles of decreasing length. These are the *Kīrti yuga*, the *Tretā yuga*, the *Dvāpara yuga*, and the *Kaliyuga*. Of these, only the last, the *Kali yuga*, pertains to mankind and is the present cycle we inhabit. For an argument on the cyclical nature of time obstructing history, see M. Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Princeton, 1971.

(Solar). This episode of the flood is the first marker of the beginning of genealogical time, in which linear time also begins to be emphasized, although deities and incarnations continue to be a part of this time-period. Manu is a man,<sup>18</sup> and is succeeded by numerous other Manus within the *yuga*, yet all of these Manus live for thousands of years and therefore clearly have divine attributes. Romila Thapar has argued that this period marks the twilight period between mythology and history, the world of gods and mankind.

The second marker of time is the great battle of Kurukshetra, after which numerous ‘eras’ begin. These eras are associated with the rise and fall of successive dynasties and follow a linear framework of time. The primary purpose of a genealogical narrative like the Chamba *Vaṃśāvalī*, or a court chronicle, is to establish and legitimize dynastic succession and establish lineage, a task that is best served by linear time. Yet, as we will see, the Chamba *Vaṃśāvalī* continues to have a use for cyclical time and divine figures as well, using both conceptions simultaneously, and the transition between the two in the text is apparent.

The period after the fall of the Gupta Empire was one of political fragmentation and a multiplicity of state formation in the subcontinent, marked by the rise of regional chieftains who consolidated their control over small territories and transitioned to kingdoms. Bharmaur, which we know was established by the early 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D., is one example of such a kingdom. It was also, broadly speaking, a time when these rulers were trying to expand their territory into forested areas and pastoral lands by settling populations – of *brāhmaṇas* in particular – and giving them land grants, thereby creating

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<sup>18</sup> From the word *manu* stems the Sanskrit word ‘*mānava*’, which means ‘human’.



a power base and encouraging conversions to a standardized caste society as well. In this competitive process, the need for mythical, heroic, and royal antecedents was of acute importance, and this purpose was best served through combining the narratives encompassed by the cyclical and the linear notions of time in genealogies such as the Chamba *Vaṃśāvalī* or historical chronicles such as Kalhaṇa's Rājataranṅinī.

In deconstructing works in the *itihāsā purāṇa* tradition, Thapar has argued that the inclusion of *Puranic* genealogies in the *Vaṃśāvalīs* of many kingdoms represent the mutations from clan societies to kingdoms, and therefore the epic tradition that they draw on are also the repositories of a historical consciousness. Since genealogies were used by new groups rising in power for legitimacy, claiming connections with those who were earlier in power was a logical step. These ruling families therefore sought links with the Surayavamsa and Candravamśa lineages. In this sense, the Chamba *Vaṃśāvalī* uses this *Puranic* and epic framework with historical intent. By combining the cyclical and linear notions of time – by merging *Puranic* lineage lists with the historical biographies of individual rulers – *Vaṃśāvalīs* mark not just the passing of time, but also create a metaphorical and symbolic space within which kingdoms can come into being.

### **The Attributes of a Court Chronicler – the Rajatanrangini of Kalhana**

To colonial scholars, the singular exception to the perception that 'true' history-writing did not exist prior to the Mughals was the Rājataranṅinī (River of Kings), a chronicle of the kings of Kashmir written by a *brāhmaṇa* named Kalhaṇa in the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, the Rājataranṅinī's translator, Sir Aurel Stein, expressed the

view that Kalhaṇa's was the only true Sanskrit history in existence. The *Rajatanrangini* consists of 7826 verses, which are divided into eight books called *Taraṅgas* (waves). In these books, Kalhaṇa chronicles the history of the rulers of the Kashmir valley from the epic period of the *Mahābhārata* till the reign of Rājā Saṅgrāma Deva (c.1006 A.D.).<sup>19</sup> Kalhaṇa's work is a sequential narrative, though the early parts of his narrative in particular do fall within the liminal zone between mythology and history, gods and mankind.

Kalhaṇa's work sheds some light on the process of compiling a history with such a chronological span. He writes that he consulted several preexisting royal genealogies for the early sections of his work, which is in its entirety an expanded *Vaṃśāvalī* and not very different in methodology or intent – though not in quality or consistency – from the Chamba *Vaṃśāvalī*. In the opening *Taraṅgas* of the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* he also provides his views and insights into the process of history-writing, on the compilations of previous historians, as well as on the attributes of a scribe of history:<sup>20</sup>

Verse 7. On fairness: “That noble-minded author is alone worthy of praise whose word, like that of a judge, keeps free from love or hatred in relating the facts of the past.”

Verse 11. On citing earlier authors: “The oldest extensive works containing the royal chronicles [of Kashmir] have become fragmentary in consequence of [the appearance of] Suvrata's composition, who condensed them in order that their substance might be easily remembered.”

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<sup>19</sup> M.A. Stein, introduction to the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* in *Kalhaṇa's Rājatarāṅgiṇī, a Chronicle of the Kings of Kashmir*, trans. M.A. Stein, Westminster, 1900, pp. 30-36.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. pp. 18-22.

Verse 13. “Owing to a certain want of care, there is not a single part in Kshemendra's "List of Kings" free from mistakes, though it is the work of a poet.”

Verse 14. “Eleven works of former scholars containing the chronicles of the kings, I have inspected, as well as the *purāṇa* containing the opinions of the sage Nīlā.”

Verse 15. “By looking at the inscriptions recording the consecrations of temples and grants by former kings, at laudatory inscriptions and at written works, the trouble arising from many errors has been overcome.”

In these words, Kalhaṇa states that a scribe of history must remain unbiased towards his materials and that the task of a royal chronicler is not to write a hagiography, but to relate events dispassionately. He also points out that newer histories tend to replace and sometimes erase older ones, as the writing of a history covering a long chronological span necessitates that the historian exercise his judgment to marshal his resources selectively. In verse 13, he argues that while poetic and linguistic skills in a historical chronicle or genealogy are desirable, they don't in any way dilute the primacy of accuracy. In verse 14, he says that he did extensive research while compiling the *Rājataranṅiṇī*, but that the sifting and interpretation of these materials is the prerogative of the historian. He also draws attention to the need for historians to gather together as many types of data as possible, such as inscriptions, eulogies and other written works,

and cross-check them in order to present as accurate a picture of the past as possible. Most significantly, what these verses unambiguously indicate is that regardless of the inclusion of segments of myth in the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, it is meant to be read as a history – an account of the past.

However, in spite of these stated principles, and the value that historians have rightly placed on Kalhaṇa's work, it is also accepted that his history was replete with inaccuracies, with certain rulers given reigns that far exceed the possibility of the human lifespan, or fathers and sons being placed centuries apart. In some cases, providing exact dates, albeit incorrect ones, may have been more a way to add realism and emphasis to his chronicle. But the primary focus of his chronicle was the telling of the story of a land and its rulers. And here Kalhaṇa's account provides an insight into the way in which he and his contemporary Kashmiris understood the tradition and history of their past. Where events of great importance occurred, during the rule of the Mauryas and the Kārkotas for example, Kalhaṇa probably gave a reasonably accurate summary. In less eventful times, he may well have invented details to fill the gaps. Once the narrative draws temporally closer to Kalhaṇa, however, beginning with his account of the Kārkota Dynasty (625-1003 A.D.), the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* begins to align more closely with other historical sources.

Despite its inaccuracies and its opening segments on Puranic lore, there is little doubt that the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* is a critical source for historical information, providing us the names of the rulers of succeeding Kashmiri dynasties, their religious beliefs, their building programs, their struggles for territorial expansion, and their relations with their neighbors. In fact, the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* is also one of the only sources for information about

the early history of Chamba, a nebulous period in which it was clearly under either the influence or dominance of its far more powerful western neighbor.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Narrative Representation of Political Power**

Similarly, while the Chamba *Vaṃśāvalī* does incorporate *Puranic* lore, and devotes its opening stanzas to *Puranic* genealogy, it is nonetheless a rich source for historical information. However, mining the *Vaṃśāvalī* for historical facts and figures does not do full justice to the text, for I argue that it is most importantly a testament to an evolved historical consciousness, one that is fully aware of the processes and materials required to craft and synthesize a written history.

In his study of 17<sup>th</sup> century France and the representation of Louis XIV, Louis Marin argues that the king's historiography is the carefully chosen image of his self-apprehension. How does a ruler place himself in the acts of history? What representation of his power, through images and symbols, are published in his history's account? Royal historiography is therefore both a political and literary institution. It is a monument to the king, created with "an architecture of signs."<sup>22</sup> The relationship between the king and the narrator, moreover, requires complicity in order for the narrator to write down what the

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<sup>21</sup> Chamba finds mention in the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, and the early wooden and bronze sculpture found in situ in Chamba and Bharmaur demonstrate certain visual parallels to the sculpture and architecture of Kashmir, to different degrees and at different moments in time. These will be examined in chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>22</sup> Louis Marin, "The Inscription of the King's Memory: On the Metallic History of Louis XIV," *Yale French Studies*, No. 59, Rethinking History: Time, Myth, and Writing, 1980, p. 18.

king has seen or done, and what he wishes to see reflected in his history – “At this central point of exchange lies a double fiction, a doubly refracted simulacrum, which is power itself.”<sup>23</sup>

The writing of such a history is therefore a manifestation of the exercise of power. It is through this lens that the Chamba *Vaṃśāvalī* must be perceived. For the rulers of Chamba, the writing of the *Vaṃśāvalī* in concert with their *brāhmaṇa* scribes was a proclamation of power and identity based on two bodies of ancient tradition. The first was the ‘seamless’ genealogy of their family’s ancestry, which was heralded as descending from *Puranic* deities and the heroes of the *Sūryavaṃśa* Line and tied in to actual persons and places. This ancestry not only signified divine sanction but also tied the rulers of Chamba into a larger North Indian realm of kingship, linking them to the other ruling families of *Sūryavaṃśa* descent, and the prestige, identity and cultural system that they embodied. Second, the Chamba *Vaṃśāvalī* also demonstrates an awareness of material sources to be drawn into their narrative to bolster their claim on kingship – such as the use of sculptures and inscriptions from the past – known to have historical value, in order to present a cohesive case for an established kingdom of long standing.

### **The Chamba Vaṃśāvalī**

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 19.

The English translation of the Chamba *Vaṃśāvalī* from the original Sanskrit is based on a sole existing manuscript of the narrative dating from the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>24</sup> Vogel, in the introduction of his translation of the genealogy, writes that this version could not have been compiled any earlier than the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century because the text ends while describing the war that occurred between Chamba and the neighboring kingdom of Nurpur in that year.<sup>25</sup> The date of this manuscript of the *Vaṃśāvalī* can be further narrowed down to the early years of Rājā Prthvī Singh's reign (1641-64), because after discussing Prthvī Singh's exile from his father's land as a small child following a twelve year long war between Chamba and Nurpur, the narrative ends with his triumphant return to Chamba. The *Vaṃśāvalī* is written in Sanskrit, in the *Śloka* metric verse, though the text exhibits a poor grasp of Sanskrit. Vogel argues that, based on the poor quality and numerous grammatical and spelling mistakes in the Sanskrit, it is evident that it was written during a time when excellence in Sanskrit was no longer emphasized, which would not have been the case in the eleventh or twelfth centuries for example.<sup>26</sup> Since the genealogy covers a time-span of close to a millennium in its listing of the historical ancestry of the rulers of Chamba alone, it would doubtless have been based on previous

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<sup>24</sup> It is difficult to know whether this manuscript was compiled at the moment of writing, or whether it was based on earlier compilations or copies. Significant mistakes in the narrative leave the question open. Vogel writes that "it cannot be doubted that the compiler used documents of a much earlier date. Otherwise it would be inexplicable that the names of Rājās, who lived many centuries before, are placed in the right order of succession. Clearly these names could not have been preserved by merely verbal tradition. There is, however, no evidence of any portions of older records having been embodied in the *Vaṃśāvalī*...Already in verse 86 we find mention made of the Mughals in the reign of Vijaya-varman, who cannot have ruled later than the 13<sup>th</sup> century. It seems, therefore, that the biographical particulars contained in the *Vaṃśāvalī* are mainly derived from oral tradition." Vogel, 1911, p. 80.

<sup>25</sup> Vogel, 1911, p. 80.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 80. Dating the narrative based on the quality of the Sanskrit alone, however, might not bring us any closer to finding out the time period when it was written, as many Chamba inscriptions from the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> centuries are also written in poor Sanskrit.

written and oral histories, supplementing these with inscriptional evidence when available.

The *Vaṃśāvalī* consists of 120 stanzas. Following the established format of the *itihāsa purāṇa* tradition, these are divided into two segments, the mythical and the historical. However, it must be understood that the mythical portion contains some elements of history, while the historical segment certainly contains elements of myth. In dealing with categories such as history and myth, it is necessary to try to understand the literal and symbolic levels of both simultaneously. In addition, according to Doniger, “We have to be careful how we use history and myth to understand one another. In this context I would define a myth as a story that a group of people believe for a long time despite massive evidence that it is not actually true...Such myths reveal to us the history of sentiments rather than events, motivations rather than movements.”<sup>27</sup>

The *Vaṃśāvalī* begins with an invocation to Lord Viṣṇu (Nārāyaṇa), the creator of the universe. The rulers of Chamba wind this “string of the Solar Race,” i.e. the *Vaṃśāvalī*, around Viṣṇu’s neck in a symbolic offering to propitiate the deity – “While bowing before Nārāyaṇa who by the qualities of Illusion has created the Universe [which has been] absorbed by the end of the Kalāpa (may he protect it!) to obtain our wishes, this string of the Solar Race has been wound round His neck.”<sup>28</sup> The first 34 stanzas out of the hundred and twenty belong to the world of mythology. This part of the *Vaṃśāvalī* is drawn from within the *Puranic* tradition, or more specifically from the Bhāgavata Puraṇā, as the 112 names of kings given in this section correspond very closely to the lineage

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<sup>27</sup> Doniger, 2009, pp. 23.

<sup>28</sup> Vogel, 1911, pp. 89.



given in the Bhāgavata Puraṇā.<sup>29</sup> This *Puranic* segment consists of a string of names, with a few details provided about some of the individuals listed, seemingly at random.

Following the invocation to Viṣṇu, the text continues by mentioning the deity Brahmā, who was born of the lotus that emerged from Viṣṇu's navel, and then on to *Marīci* who sprang out of Brahmā's mind, onwards to Kaśyapa, who is named the patriarch. A few lines on, the *Vaṁśāvalī* names Manu, "the god of the funeral oblation", from whose nose, while sneezing, sprang his son Ikṣvāku. This Manu is none other than the only human to have survived the great flood by escaping to Mount Merū on the giant fish, and his son Ikṣvāku is the offspring through whom the *Sūryavaṁśa* line begins.<sup>30</sup> From Ikṣvāku, the list of names continues for several stanzas, offering only scant details about the naming of one or two individuals, such as "from Sthala sprang Vajranābha, the ruler of the earth, who was born from a beam of the sun."<sup>31</sup> In verse 20, Rāma – the hero of the epic tale of the Rāmāyaṇa and his three brothers, who together comprise the four-fold incarnation of Viṣṇu – appears but no further tale from the epic is associated with him.

The 81<sup>st</sup> figure to be mentioned in this segment is King Maru, who will go on to be a figure of significance for the rulers of Chamba. King Maru is described as being accomplished in Yoga, and after him the list continues until the line of his descendants – including Sākyamuni, the Buddha – dies out. Then, King Maru reappears as the savior of the Solar Race in the *Kaliyuga* (the age of Sin, and the current *yuga* our world is in

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<sup>29</sup> Vogel, 1911, pp. 77 (*Skandha* 9, *Adhyaya* 1-12).

<sup>30</sup> The lunar line was launched by Manu's androgynous daughter Ilā.

<sup>31</sup> Vogel, 1911, pp. 78, verse 21.

according to Hindu cosmology), which he saves from extinction through his marriage to a king's daughter and the fathering of numerous sons. This is a miraculous act and gives King Maru divine attributes, perhaps associated with his mastery of yoga, as by this time he would certainly have been well over two hundred years old.

### **The Establishment of Bharmaur**

Stanzas 35-112 concern the ruling family of Chamba, from its purported origins to the reign of Rājā Pṛthvī Singh. The transition between the mythical and historical segments in the *Vaṃśāvalī* is accomplished, in a somewhat awkward manner, through the figure of King Maru, the reviver of the Solar Race twenty-six generations previously. In the *Vaṃśāvalī*, this King Maru becomes the ancestor of King Merū-varman, the first ruler who whom we have epigraphic evidence in the town of Bharmaur. The *Vaṃśāvalī* states that King Maru, after reviving the Solar line, went to Kashmir with his eldest son Jaya-stambha, and there he founded the town of Varmapura and anointed Jaya-stambha king. Interestingly, this specific reference identifies Bharmaur as being a part of Kashmir in this indeterminate period. The Varmapura of the *Vaṃśāvalī*, established by King Maru for his son, is assumed to be the Bharmaur of today.<sup>32</sup>

The *Vaṃśāvalī* recounts that King Maru stayed on in Varmapura, practicing asceticism. Jaya-stambha had a son, Jala-stambha, who in turn had a son Mahā-stambha. Maha-stambha's son was Ādi-varman (here we see for the first time the use of the last

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<sup>32</sup> Scholars have claimed that Bharmaur is a corruption of Bharmapura, which in the local dialect is the way Varmapura would be pronounced.

name “Varman” which would be used by all the rulers of the kingdom of Chamba till Pṛthvī Singh dispensed with it in the seventeenth century) and his son was Deva-varman. From Deva-varman follow Mandarā, Kāntāra, Pragalbhaka and Ājya-varman. Ājya-varman is the first figure about whom some detail is provided. The *Vaṃśāvalī* says that Ājya-varman practiced severe asceticism in order to please the God Śiva at the confluence of the Irāvatī (the Sanskrit name for the river Rāvī) and the Budha stream, after which countless *lingas*<sup>33</sup> appeared all over Varmapura.<sup>34</sup> This detail about the location of Varmapura adds authenticity to its location, placing it firmly upon a map, and provides corroborative evidence that Varmapura and Bharmaur were the same place as Bharmaur is the only town to be located close to the confluence of the Rāvī River and the Buddhal Stream.

Having accomplished this miraculous feat of asceticism, Ājya-varman decided to anoint his son, Merū-varman – “a leader adorned with all royal virtues”<sup>35</sup> – king, and devote himself to yoga. While practicing his yoga, the *Vaṃśāvalī* says that he vanished from the earth and into the presence of Śiva. This story about Ājya-varman’s feat of piety serves two functions. First, Ājya-varman is the first person about whom the *Vaṃśāvalī* recounts a lengthy story, marking a change of pace in the narrative in preparation for the introduction of his son Merū-varman. This is of some significance as Merū-varman is the first historically attested figure in the *Vaṃśāvalī* from whose reign we have four inscribed bronze images in his capital of Bharmaur, and it demonstrates that the composer of the

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<sup>33</sup> The *linga* is the phallic symbol of the god Śiva, and the many *lingas* which are found in Bharmaur are associated with this story to this day.

<sup>34</sup> Vogel, 1911, pp. 91.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p. 91.

genealogy was well aware of the existence of the inscriptions and their import. Second, it offers a miraculous explanation for the many stone *lingas* present to this day in the town of Bharmaur, and ties their presence to a royal ancestor and his piety.

Having introduced the figure of Merū-varman, the *Vaṃśāvalī* goes on to offer several details about him. It states that he commissioned an image of Narasimha (the man-lion *avatāra* of the God Viṣṇu) to be erected by his eminent guru who was an inhabitant of Kashmir<sup>36</sup>, along with images of Bhadrakālī<sup>37</sup>, Gaṇeśa<sup>38</sup> and the bull Nandī<sup>39</sup>, and that beneath the latter he wrote his royal commandments.<sup>40</sup> Here the *Vaṃśāvalī* makes direct mention of the inscribed sculptures of Merū-varman, but with inaccuracies in what should have been well established facts. Merū-varman's inscriptions do indeed associate him with the making of four images, including the ones of Bhadrakālī,<sup>41</sup> Nandī and Gaṇeśa, but the fourth image was not of Narasimha in Bharmaur but of the goddess Śakti Devī, which is housed in the village of Chhatrarhi, located midway between Chamba and Bharmaur. Moreover, all four images bear Merū-varman's "royal commandments", not just the image of Nandī as stated in the *Vaṃśāvalī*, though the latter does have the longest inscription.

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<sup>36</sup> It is interesting that here Kashmir is seen as a region removed from Bharmaur, whereas earlier in the narrative it states that King Maru founded the town of Bharmaur in Kashmir. There are two possible explanations for this – first, that while Bharmaur was a part of Kashmir in the time of King Maru, it was no longer a part of Kashmir in the time of Merū-varman; and second, that the geographical descriptions morphed and changed at some point in the various transcriptions of the *Vaṃśāvalī*, if one assumes that the current version of the *Vaṃśāvalī* was written based on earlier versions that no longer exist. It is also possible to speculate that making this regional distinction, whether it was politically valid or not, was a conscious choice based on establishing a sovereign existence for the later rulers of Chamba.

<sup>37</sup> A form of the goddess Durgā, in which she is shown slaying the buffalo-demon Mahiṣa, an icon more commonly known as Durgā *Mahiṣasuramardinī*.

<sup>38</sup> The elephant-headed god who is the son of Śiva.

<sup>39</sup> The bull is the *vāhana* or vehicle of Śiva.

<sup>40</sup> Vogel, 1911, p. 92.

<sup>41</sup> This image is known as Lakṣaṇā Devī on Merū-varman's inscription on its pedestal.

Between Merū-varman and Sāhila-varman, the *Vaṃśāvalī* lists eighteen rulers who are meant to have ruled from Bharmaur before Sāhila-varman shifted the center of his kingdom from Bharmaur to Chamba. Of these eighteen, none can be definitively proven to be historical figures as there are no separate inscriptions associated with them. According to the *Vaṃśāvalī* Merū-varman was succeeded by his son Suvarṇa-varman, who was followed by his son Lakṣmī-varman.

### **The House of the Mouse**

A lengthy story is told about Lakṣmī-varman and his son Moṣūna-varman. The *Vaṃśāvalī* says that during Lakṣmī-varman's reign his lands were afflicted by misfortunes. A pestilence afflicted his subjects and at the same time he was attacked by a tribe called the Kīras<sup>42</sup> and killed in battle. His pregnant queen was rescued by some ministers, and while escaping from Bharmaur with a retinue consisting of the family priest and some ministers, she gave birth to a son in a cave. She left the infant in the cave but he was rescued by the family priest, who found the new-born guarded by a circle of mice. The retinue went on to a country called Sukheta (in all likelihood the *pahārī* kingdom of Suket in Himachal Pradesh which borders Mandi) ruled by the King Parabhoga, where they sought shelter with the king's guru. One day the guru noticed signs of royalty in the footprints left by the child in the dust and asked who his mother was. The child and his mother were taken to King Prabhoga, and revealed their

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<sup>42</sup> It is uncertain who exactly the *Kīras* were, but scholars such as V.C. Ohri speculate that they were a tribe of Tibetan origin.

misfortunes to the king, who honored them with an appropriate house and lavish gifts. When the child, named Mūṣana-varman (literally “mouse-varman”), came of age, the King married him to his own daughter and gave him great wealth, a large army and the village of Pangi. Mūṣana-varman then killed all the Kīras and returned to rule his own kingdom.

The name of Mūṣana-varman is of primary importance to the story of Chamba but it also presents a chronological puzzle, as it is a reference that is to be found in Merū-varman’s early 8<sup>th</sup>-century image inscriptions. Inscribed on the bronze pedestal of the image of Lakṣaṇā Devī is the following verse:<sup>43</sup>

“Born from the *gotra* (own-house) of Mosuna and from the Solar race, the great-grandson of the illustrious lord Āditya-varman, the grandson of the illustrious lord Bala-varman, the son of the illustrious lord Divākara-varman, the illustrious lord Merū-varman, for the increase of his spiritual merit, has caused the holy image of the goddess Lakṣaṇā to be made by the workman Gugga.”

The Ganesa image inscription too bears the same lineage, while the Nandī image does not mention Merū-varman’s ancestry. The inscription on the image of Śakti Devī at Chhatrarhi says the following:

“There was an eminent chief of a pure race, the illustrious Deva-varman of celebrated fame. His son, charming by every virtue, is the illustrious Merū-varman, renowned on the earth. First, for the sake of the spiritual merit of his parents, he, out of devotion, caused the image of Śakti to be made, after having

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<sup>43</sup> Merū-varman’s four inscriptions are translated and published in both Sanskrit and English in Vogel, 1911, pp. 141-145.

conquered his foes in their invincible strongholds, he who has prolonged his life by glory, fame and religious merit.”

It is surprising that the two supposedly contemporaneous goddess images mention two different names for the father of Merū-varman – Divākara-varman in the case of the Lakṣaṇā Devī inscription and Deva-varman in the case of the Śakti Devī inscription. Even if we assume that ‘Deva’ is an abbreviation of ‘Divakara’, it does not explain why the *Vaṃśāvalī* does not list these figures as the immediate ancestors of Merū-varman. Moreover, Merū-varman’s Lakṣaṇā Devī inscription lists Moṣūna as the progenitor of his family’s lineage, and from this inscriptional mention originates one of the founding myths of the Chamba royal lineage that draws their descent from a mouse. In the *Vaṃśāvalī*, however, Moṣūna appears three generations after Merū-varman.

In an essay on the role of the mouse in certain dynastic origin myths from disparate geographic areas, Romila Thapar has suggested that the inclusion of a mouse in an ancestry was a common trope whereby obscure origins, or breaks in rule, could be disguised as interludes in exile, where a royal child was guarded by a mouse.<sup>44</sup> If we examine the chronological puzzle of the figure of Mūṣana-varman or Moṣūna in this light, it would seem logical to postulate that the compiler of the *Vaṃśāvalī* deliberately placed Mūṣana-varman after the figure of Merū-varman in the genealogy because to place him before this sole epigraphically substantiated figure might jeopardize the entire ancestry of Chamba’s ruling family. In spite of Merū-varman’s inscription stating his descent from this ‘mouse-clan’, the author of the *Vaṃśāvalī* shifted this figure in time

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<sup>44</sup> Thapar, 2003, pp. 797-806.

and narrated his story of exile in such a way as to leave no doubt about Merū-varman's place in the royal line. This interpretation also seems to indicate that genealogies were not static but rather changed over time, with lists being re-arranged in accordance with the needs or insecurities of later times.

### **The Move to Chamba**

The *Vaṃśāvalī* then lists four of Mūṣana-varman's descendants, of which the fourth had a son named Sāhila-varman. Sāhila-varman is the king who is credited for moving the capital of the kingdom from Bharmaur to Chamba. Sāhila-varman is therefore a prominent personality in the history of the ruling family and is given a long biography in the *Vaṃśāvalī*. His story is thematically similar to that of Ājya-varman, the father of Merū-varman. Like Ājya-varman, Sāhila-varman is first described as a master practitioner of yoga, who engaged in severe austerities with his wife on the southern slope of the Himalayas. From the time of the mythical king Maru, the practice and mastery of yoga is thus emphasized as an important attribute of kingship. After prolonged austerities, the *Vaṃśāvalī* says that 84 wizards or *siddhas* appeared in front of Sāhila-varman to grant him a boon. The Rājā was too weary to express his desire but the wizards intuitively knew his wish and uttered it for him – the granting of sons.

Sāhila-varman's austerities won him ten sons, of which the eldest was Yugākāra-varman. Unfortunately, the following stanza which marks the key transition to the town of Chamba is disrupted in the text. The narrative goes on to describe the Rājā's victory



over some unspecified Kṣatriyas in battle (in all likelihood the chieftains who held sway over the territory of Chamba town) with the help of his ten sons and the yogī Carpaṭi (one of the *siddhas*), and his subsequent establishment of the town of Chamba as his new capital on the bank of the river Irāvati (Rāvī). The *Vaṃśāvalī* states that the town “was adorned with *champaka* (magnolia) trees and guarded by the goddess Campāvatī, having slain the buffalo and others.”<sup>45</sup> Once again paralleling the story of Ājya-varman, the *Vaṃśāvalī* says that several Śiva-*lingas* were found at the confluence of the Irāvati and other other streams, and that with the permission of the yogī Carpaṭi, Sāhila-varman had these brought to the town. There he established the “Gupta and Candreśvara, Kūrmeśvara and other temples.”<sup>46</sup> None of the temples standing in Chamba today bear these names. In spite of this, architectural historians have attributed a number of Chamba’s temples to the patronage of this 10<sup>th</sup>-century ruler. This somewhat vague reference to Sāhila-varman’s temples has been the cause of a great deal of confusion in establishing a chronology for the temples in Chamba, and will be discussed in detail in later chapters.<sup>47</sup>

The *Vaṃśāvalī* then says that Sāhila-varman, after establishing a sanctuary for the yogī Carpaṭi, sent nine of his sons on an errand to bring him a large stone from the Vindhya mountains – the mountain range in central India that divides the subcontinent

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<sup>45</sup> Vogel, 1911, p. 93, verse 70. Campāvatī is another name for the goddess Durgā depicted killing the buffalo-demon. Here the *Vaṃśāvalī* seems to indicate that there existed a temple to the goddess Durgā in Chamba at this time, but the temple known as the Campāvatī temple which stands on top of a hill overlooking the town today dates to the eighteenth century. It is possible that an earlier temple dedicated to the goddess stood at the site, but it is equally possible that this reference was an invention on the part of the *Vaṃśāvalī*’s composer.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>47</sup> Both historians, and the Archaeological Survey of India, under whom the care of the temples fall, have extrapolated that these early temples refer to the Candragupta and Kamesvara temples, of which the former is located in the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple complex, and that they were built to house two of the *lingas* which Sāhila-varman found at the conjunction of the Rāvī river and the Sal stream.

into the Indo-Gangetic plain and South India – in order to make an idol. It is possible to interpret the reference to the Vindhya mountains both literally and symbolically – it is possible that the ruler was aware of the type of stone quarried in those ranges and wanted to acquire it to add prestige to his newly constructed temple, but it is equally likely that the mountain range could have been a stand in for establishing an awareness of the Indo-Gangetic heartland, an area of great renown from the perspective of the remote hills of Chamba.

His nine sons embarked on this long and perilous journey and brought back a large white stone (marble), but the king's guru, upon seeing it, said, "This stone is not suitable for an image of Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa. Inside it is a frog."<sup>48</sup> The king then had other images made of this stone, "of Śaṅkara, Devī and Gaṇapati," which were all installed in the same Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple, and sent his sons to procure another stone for the main image. On their way back with the stone, his sons were ambushed and killed by a band of robbers. When the king got the news, he sent his eldest son, Yugākāra-varman, "the archer,"<sup>49</sup> to slay the robbers and retrieve the stone, both of which he did. Sāhila-varman had an image of Viṣṇu made from the stone and installed it in the temple, and having installed Yugākāra as his successor,<sup>50</sup> he left the town with the yogī Carpaṭi and the eighty-four *siddhas* to devote himself to asceticism. The Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple seemingly mentioned here is the largest temple in the town of Chamba, as well as considered the dynastic temple of the Chamba royal family. However, as it currently

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<sup>48</sup> Vogel, 1911, p. 93, verse 78-79.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. Here, Yugākāra-varman is marked as a heroic figure in the image of other great archers from the epics, such as Arjuna of the Mahābhārata, or Rāma of the Rāmāyaṇa.

<sup>50</sup> The earliest copper plate deed from Chamba date to his reign, and will be discussed in Chapter 4.

stands, it cannot be dated to a period earlier than the 16<sup>th</sup> century for reasons that will be discussed in the chapter on Chamba's temple architecture.

The *Vaṃśāvalī* then resumes listing the names of Sāhila-varman and Yūgākāra-varman's descendants in the following order:

Doghda

Vidagdha

Vicitra-varman

Dhairya-varman

The next ruler to be mentioned is Asaṭa-varman. Both Asaṭa-varman's father Sālavāhana-varman and his brother Soma-varman, who preceded him on the throne, are omitted from the *Vaṃśāvalī* though we know of their existence from copper plate inscriptions.<sup>51</sup> The omission of Asaṭa-varman's brother and father from the *Vaṃśāvalī* can be explained in light of the Chamba's political context in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Both of these figures ruled in succession from c. 1040 A.D to 1080 A.D., a period of great political change and turmoil in Chamba which the compiler of the *Vaṃśāvalī* clearly preferred to omit. This was the period that King Ananta Dev of Kashmir decided to lay claim on the hill tracts bordering his kingdom as far as the banks of the Raavi. The *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* mentions that Chamba was then under the rule of a rājā named Sala, who refused to give his allegiance to Ananta Dev with the result that he was defeated and probably killed. After defeating Sala, the king of Kashmir is said to have installed another local ruler in his place, and from the copper plates issued at the time, it is clear that this was Soma-varman. The *Vaṃśāvalī*'s narrative has deliberately left out this period of

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<sup>51</sup> Vogel, 1911, pp. 180-200.

Kashmiri supremacy in Chamba, though there are references to the rulers of Chamba in the Rājatarāṅgiṇī till c.1120 A.D.

The Vaṃśāvalī continues the list after Asaṭa-varman:

Jasaṭa-varman and Dhālaka

Dhāla-varman

Ajīta

Daityari

Pr̥thvī-varman

Udaya

Lalita

Vijaya<sup>52</sup>

Rājā-varman

Sara-varman

Kīrti-varman

Ajīta and Madana

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Jīmūta

Vairi-varman

Māṇikya

Bhoṭa-varman

San̄grāma

Ananda-varman<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Here the *Vaṃśāvalī* pauses to expand by saying that king Vijaya “hastened back from the South” to defeat the Kashmiras (Kashmiris), *Kīras* (Tibetans) and Mugdalas (Mughals?), “took the land and at once gratified his people”. Vogel, 1911, p. 93. These are tall claims, and cannot be substantiated. It also says that he granted lands to *brāhmaṇas* in order to collect spiritual merit.

<sup>53</sup> The *Vaṃśāvalī* provides some details about this ruler (r. 1475 – c. 1512 A.D.). It says that he married the daughter of the Rājā of Trigarta (Kangra) and that the Rājā of Trigarta played a strange prank on him.

## Gaṇeśa-varman

The *Vaṃśāvalī* then goes on to discuss the son of Gaṇeśa-varman, Pratāpa-simha-varman (r. 1559-1586 A.D.), at some length. Interestingly, he bears the second name ‘Singh’, a pan-Indian marker of Rājput identity that was becoming increasingly common at the time, but does not replace the older family name of ‘Varman’, something that would happen only about a half century later under Prthvī Singh. The *Vaṃśāvalī* declares Pratāpa-simha-varman to be the equal of Yudhiṣṭira (the eldest of the five Pāṇḍava brothers in the epic tale of the *Mahābhārata*, who is characterized in the epic as an unswerving upholder of *dharma*) in virtue in an age of sin. It says, “When he began work on the temples of Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa and other deities,”<sup>54</sup> he was uncertain about how to fund the work, not wanting to burden his people with heavy taxes. That night Lord Viṣṇu appeared to him in a dream and told him not to worry and that the funds would be provided by the deity. The next day some villagers arrived and reported the discovery of a copper mine near Chamba, and the king “restored all the temples.” I argue in Chapter 3 that what we see today of the exterior of the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple dates to Pratāpa-simha-varman’s reign in the latter half of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century. The *Vaṃśāvalī* also states that Pratāpa-simha-varman increased the size of the state through war with King Chandra of Nāgarkot (Kangra).

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When Ananda-varman entered the palace kitchen to get some food after his wedding, he found that the Rājā of Trigarta and his servants had placed all the eating and drinking vessels out of reach. But Ananda-varman simply extended his arms till they had stretched long enough to reach the food and water. Seeing this, the Rājā of Trigarta and his people prostrated themselves before the Rājā of Chamba, and when they looked up at him they beheld two licking serpents issuing from his nostrils. Whether it is true or not, this incident illustrates that Tantrism was seen as a legitimizing medium for the magico-spiritual power of the ruler of Chamba. The ruling families of Mandi, Kangra and Kullu were great believers in Tantrism, and this story is designed to illustrate that the rulers of Chamba too were Tantric practitioners and not just great temple-builders.

<sup>54</sup> Vogel, 1911, p. 94, verse 100.

Pratāpa-simha-varman was succeeded by his son Vīrabhānu, and Vīrabhānu by his son Balabhadra, who is called “a *balikarṇa* in virtue.”<sup>55</sup> Balabhadra’s son was Janārdana-varman, of whom the *Vaṃśāvalī* says that he was the equal of Arjuna<sup>56</sup> in righteousness, archery, heroism, statesmanship and piety. Janārdana-varman was involved in a twelve year battle with the neighboring state of Nurpur, led by Rājā Jagat Singh Paṭhāniā, “the chief-councilor of the lord of the Yavanas” – the Mughal Emperor – with whom the Rājā of Nurpur had close ties. According to the *Vaṃśāvalī*, though the Rājā of Nurpur was defeated several times and had to flee the battlefield, he still managed to kill Janārdana-varman through treachery. Then, “Balabhadra’s land was burnt, his wealth carried off, and by means of the lord of the Yavanas he was even robbed of his kingdom.”<sup>57</sup> At this time, Janārdana’s son Prithvi-Simha was a child and he had to escape from Chamba to “Mandi, Kola and so on.”<sup>58</sup> His early years in exile are glossed over. Then,

“After a lapse of many years a great change had taken place and Fate had become favorable, Prithvi-Simha made an alliance with some feudatory chiefs and came with them from the Kola Mountain. Having crossed much snow through the favor of the mountain gods he expelled from the fortress the soldiers of the murderer of his father who were staying in his country, and everywhere slew them all in battle successfully. After overtaking the soldiers of the enemy who stayed in the town of Chamba...(indistinct)...and having killed the others which had invaded the country, the land was red with blood. After he had rendered the prince named Saṅgrāma<sup>59</sup> dependent on his will and given him Bhalehi, he (Prithvi-simha), eager to slay the murderer of his father, when after having made an alliance with the lord of the Yavanas Manyabhata (?) and sought refuge in the town of Kalanor,....”

<sup>55</sup> Bali and karṇa were two mythical kings who were renowned for their generosity and virtue. Vogel, 1911, p. 94.

<sup>56</sup> One of the five Pāṇḍava brothers, who was a skilled archer and the epitome of heroism.

<sup>57</sup> Vogel, 1911, p. 95.

<sup>58</sup> Vogel, 1911, p. 95.

<sup>59</sup> Saṅgrām Pāl Balauriā of Basohli.

And here the *Vaṃśāvalī* abruptly ends.

The translator of the *Vaṃśāvalī*, J.P. Vogel, was also responsible for translating the copper plate deeds issued by the rulers of Chamba. He cross-checked these with the narrative of the *Vaṃśāvalī* and concluded that while the genealogical listing pertaining to the Bharmaur rulers seems to be inconsistent and cannot be corroborated by other sources, from the period of Sāhila-varman onwards there is a greater consistency in the list, although he notices some omissions, and cases of transposed and interpolated names.<sup>60</sup> As I discussed above, some of these omissions are significant, as in the case of Sālavāhana-varman and his son, and seem to be deliberate omissions to strengthen the core purpose of the *Vaṃśāvalī* – which is to present an unambiguous statement of political power and legitimacy.

### **Emphasizing the Sacred**

One of the most prominent features of the *Vaṃśāvalī* is the emphasis in its narrative on the sacral and pious. Since the text is the work of a *brāhmaṇa* or priestly author, and the *Vaṃśāvalī* as a text was used to propagate state formation through the mechanisms of promoting a structured and hierarchical society based on the twin pillars of genealogy and religion, this is not surprising. The inclusion of a *Puranic* section and its associations with deities and epic heroes emphasizes this linkage. In a similar vein,

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<sup>60</sup> Vogel, 1911, p. 81.

associating religiously-inspired supernatural deeds with certain historical personalities such as Ājya-varman, serves to draw the linkage between these two pillars closer together.

In the establishment of the town of Chamba and the consolidation of the state, the eighty four *siddhas* and the figure of Carpaṭi in particular, play a pivotal role in furthering the existence of the ruling family. Since the *siddhas* are Tantric figures believed to be endowed with supernatural powers, much as we see many years later in the case of Rājā Ananda-varman as well (1475-1512 A.D.), an association with this cult was seen as contributing to the process of legitimizing their rule for the kings of Chamba.<sup>61</sup> The cult of *Śakti* or goddess worship is also associated with the founding of Chamba under the protection of the goddess Campāvatī. In the hills of Himachal, the cults of the goddess and of the god Śiva are closely associated with Tantric practices. After the establishment of the capital at Chamba, a new dimension enters the *Vaṃśāvalī* with the erection of temples dedicated to Viṣṇu, for which the stone for the image of Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa is brought from the distant slopes of the Vindhya mountains. The Vaiṣṇava iconography of Viṣṇu Vaikuṇṭha – the four faced image of the god depicting him in fierce and peaceable forms as well as in his boar (Varāha) and lion (Narasimha) incarnations – was also popular in Kashmir as well as among the Pratīhāras of the Gangetic plains, two seats of great power in North India, and this association too is something that the rulers of Chamba may have sought. However, as will be argued in Chapter 3, it is only after the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries that the additional religious sanction of Vaiṣṇavism, its assimilative

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<sup>61</sup> For a detailed study of the figure of Carpaṭi and his cult in Chamba see Mahesh Sharma, *Western Himalayan Temple Records: State, Pilgrimage, Ritual and Legality in Chamba*, Leiden, 2009.



ability, and its association with the warrior-gods of the *Puranic* tradition was emphasized at a later moment of historical change.

Chamba was never a particularly important state in the larger context of North India, either politically or economically. But, as the *Vaṃśāvalī* demonstrates, it was nonetheless a kingdom that was deeply engaged with creating and projecting a powerful image of statehood and prestige over time. As such, the Chamba *Vaṃśāvalī* provides a case study for the self-reflective compilation and creation of history, and the various mechanisms by which this was achieved. A text like the Chamba *Vaṃśāvalī* offers insight into a historical consciousness, “one which has been deliberately transmitted and has significance for the present, and this accounts for its legitimacy and its continuity. The record may be one in which historical consciousness is embedded: as in myth, epic and (Puranic) genealogy; or alternatively it may refer to the more externalized forms: chronicles of families, institutions and regions, and biographies of persons in authority.”<sup>62</sup> These embedded and externalized forms are not hermeneutically sealed but, as in the case of the Chamba *Vaṃśāvalī*, aspects of each form interact with one another to create a particular way of relating to the past, one which serves a purpose in the present.

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<sup>62</sup> Thapar, 2003, p.124.

## **Chapter 2**

### **The ‘Ancient’ Center – Bharmaur**

The ancient roots of the kingdom of Chamba, according to the tradition of the ruling family as noted in the *Vaṃśāvalī*, lie in a small town, indeed no more than a village today, nestled high up in the Dhauladhar range at an elevation of 7070 feet above sea level. Bharmaur is located on a *nala* or stream called the Buddhal, close to its confluence with the Rāvī River, about forty-eight miles to the south-east of Chamba town. The first king mentioned in the *Vaṃśāvalī* for whose rule there is epigraphic evidence in the region is the figure of Merū-varman. Merū-varman is listed in the genealogy as the eleventh descendent of the mythological King Maru of the *Sūryavaṃśa* lineage. The *Vaṃśāvalī* states that King Maru established a territorial domain named Varmapura for his son,<sup>63</sup> from whom Merū-varman was the tenth descendant. The historical veracity of this lineage is ambiguous, as is, arguably, Merū-varman’s connection to the rulers of Chamba, but what we do know is that a ruler named Merū-varman had the capital of his kingdom in Bharmaur.<sup>64</sup>

Four inscribed bronze images survive from his rule, three of them located in Bharmaur and the fourth in the village of Chhatrarhi, which lies halfway between Bharmaur and the town of Chamba. These images and the lineage inscribed on them

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<sup>63</sup> See the previous chapter for the link between Varmapura and Bharmaur.

<sup>64</sup> The connection between the lineage of Merū-varman and the rulers of Chamba is established entirely by the *Vaṃśāvalī* but there are no additional sources that corroborate this link; none of the inscriptions issued from Chamba from the 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards, for example, mention Merū-varman or any other ‘ancestor’ who ruled from Bharmaur.

provide the primary set of historical data on the basis of which the rulers of Chamba corroborate both their ancestry and their antiquity in the region. While the claims of the *Vaṃśāvalī* must be held up to scrutiny, the material remains from this early period of the kingdom's establishment provide an opportunity to re-create some aspects of the social, religious and political context for the development and expansion of the kingdom of Bharmaur during the time of Merū-varman.

### **The Chaurāsi Complex**

Local tradition holds that the name of Bharmaur stems from the goddess Bharmāṇi Devī, the consort of Brahmā, one of the gods of the holy trinity in Hinduism. There is a temple dedicated to the goddess at the top of a hill overlooking the town. The two earliest inscriptions to mention Bharmaur date from the 10<sup>th</sup> century and both refer to the town as Brahmapura. In his translation of these inscriptions, J. Ph. Vogel argued that the name Brahmapura could refer either to the “town of Brahmā,” or to the “town of Brahmans.”<sup>65</sup>

The cult of Bharmāṇi Devī, however, plays only a peripheral role in the life of the Bharmauri community today. Instead, the community's spiritual and physical center is a striking complex of temples emphasizing the Śaiva and Śaktā cults.<sup>66</sup> **(Pl. 2.1)** This complex of temples is known as the Chaurāsi – or ‘Eighty-Four’ – complex. According to local oral tradition, the name Chaurāsi stems from the following story. It is said that

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<sup>65</sup> Vogel, 1911, p. 7.

<sup>66</sup> Worship dedicated to Śiva, and Devī – the Goddess in her various forms, embodying female power and energy.

eighty-four *siddhas* or *yogīs* once flew into the town, disturbing the goddess Bharmāṇi Devī who froze them on the spot into eighty-four stone *liṅgas*, the phallic representation of the god Śiva.<sup>67</sup> The *Vaṃśāvalī*, on the other hand, provides an alternative explanation for the name, one that better serves the purposes of a royal genealogy. It states that Ājya-varman, the father of Merū-varman, practiced severe asceticism in order to please the God Śiva at the confluence of the Irāvātī (the Sanskrit name for the river Rāvī) and the ‘Budha’ stream, after which countless *liṅgas* appeared all over Varmapura.<sup>68</sup> Whether the *liṅgas* appeared as a result of a ruler’s piety or Bharmāṇi Devī’s wrath, today only a handful of them can be seen in the complex. Instead, the Chaurāsi complex is dominated by the towering temple of Maṇimaheśa, made of grey sandstone and dedicated to Śiva, the smaller Narasiṃha temple, also made of sandstone, and the tiny and intricately carved wooden temple of Lakṣaṇā Devī – another name for the goddess Durgā in the form of the slayer of the demon Mahiṣa. (Fig. 2.1)

### **The Gaddīs of Bharmaur**

The town of Bharmaur is also known as *Gaddeeran* after the *gaddīs*, the community of semi-nomadic pastoralists for whom the town has historically been home base. With the arrival of spring and the melting of the snows after a harsh winter, the members of this tribal community congregate in Bharmaur after spending the winter months at lower altitudes across the Dhauladhar range, traveling as far as the edge of the

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<sup>67</sup> This is one version of the story, but all the variants deal with the negotiation between Bharmāṇi Devī and the *siddhas*.

<sup>68</sup> Vogel, 1911, p. 91.

plains of North India in Kangra Valley.<sup>69</sup> Their brightly marked herds of sheep and goats can be seen clustered around the Chaurāsi complex, accompanied by the *gaddīs* themselves – dressed in their conical felt hats (*topā*) and white wool robes (*cholā*), with elaborately pleated knee-length skirts tied at the waist with nine feet of thick black wool (*dora*).

While the origins of the *gaddīs* are unknown – some claim that they came to Bharmaur from the plains of North India in the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, others argue that they fled to Bharmaur from Lahore during the reign of Aurangzeb, while yet others insist that they were the original inhabitants of the land – the *gaddīs* who make their home in the midst of the peaks and valleys of these vast mountains identify themselves as the *chelas* or followers of Lord Śiva who, like them, lives in the mountains, wandering with only the sky for shelter and his bull *vāhana* Nandī for company. They believe that Śiva personally entrusted the herding of cattle to their tribal ancestors after putting them through rigorous tests, and they refer to all the land around Bharmaur as ‘*Śiva-bhūmi*’, or land belonging to Śiva.

Every year on the eighth day of the month of Bhadon in the Hindu calendar, a festival known as the Maṇimaheśa *mela* is held in the town of Bharmaur, a festival focused on the worship of Śiva and his consort Pārvatī. Pilgrims come from all over Himachal Pradesh, indeed all across India, for the event but it is the *gaddī* community which is at the heart of the ritual functions of the festival. **(Pl. 2.2)** The *gaddīs* sacrifice a

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<sup>69</sup> *Gazetteer of the Chamba State 1904*, Punjab States Gazetteer Vol. XXII A, New Delhi: Indus Publishing Company (reprint 1996), pp. 7-9.

goat or a ram at the Mani Mehesh temple to appease the deity and embark on a pilgrimage to the sacred lake of Maṇimaheśa, located at an altitude of 13,000 feet at the base of the highest peak in the region, the Maṇimaheśa Kailāsa (18, 564 ft.). A four-faced Śiva *linga* made of white stone is located besides the lake, which the art historian V.C. Ohri has attributed on stylistic grounds to the seventh or eighth century, indicating that a pilgrimage to Kailāsa dates back to at least this period.<sup>70</sup> The *gaddīs* believe that this Mount Kailāsa is the mountain abode of Śiva and Pārvatī, and they represent this snow-clad home in the white conical *topā* they wear at all times.<sup>71</sup> (Pl. 2.3)

Of the five administrative units of the kingdom of Chamba – Chamba, Churah, Pangi, Bharmaur and Bhattiyat – each corresponding to a distinct valley bordered by mountain barriers in the form of either the Greater Himalaya, the outer Himalayas, the Dhauladhar, or the Pir Panjal ranges, Mahesh Sharma has argued that Bharmaur has traditionally had the lowest percentage of cultivated land.<sup>72</sup> Only three percent of the *wizārat* of Bharmaur was cultivated even into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and not all of this land is irrigable. It is its grasslands that have sustained the majority of livelihoods in the *wizārat*, and it is therefore possible to make the assumption that the cult of Śiva associated with the *gaddī* community has retained primacy in the region from its earliest known habitation to the present day.

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<sup>70</sup> V.C. Ohri, *Sculpture of the Western Himalayas: History and Stylistic Development*, Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, 1991, p. 21.

<sup>71</sup> This Mount Kailāsa is not to be confused with the Mount Kailāsa that lies in China above Lake Mansarovar, though both share the same name and the attribute of being the home of Śiva. Indeed, the highest peak in a range is often called ‘Kailāsa’ – as in the Mani Mahesh Kailāsa in Chamba or the Kinnaur Kailāsa in Kinnaur district – because Śiva is believed to live in the highest possible reaches, in the icy liminal zone between the heavens and earth. The sacrality of Kailāsa as a cosmic mountain is tied to it being not just the home of Śiva, but also a natural monument for the god’s manifestation.

<sup>72</sup> Sharma, 2004, p. 409.

### **Merū-varman and his Images**

The town of Bharmaur is perhaps best known for three inscribed bronze images exhibiting remarkably fine aesthetic qualities and skilled craftsmanship.<sup>73</sup> These three images, still in situ in Bharmaur, are the earliest known works of royal patronage found within the territory of the kingdom of Chamba. The size, style and quality of the images have no known precursor in this small and remote region, and their existence has long puzzled scholars of the art of this region. Made using the melted wax technique, the images are of the life-sized bull Nandī, the *vāhana* of the god Śiva, of Gaṇeśa, the elephant headed god of good fortune, and of the form of Durgā killing the buffalo-demon locally called Lakṣaṇā Devī. (PI. 2.4, 2.5, 2.6) The image of Nandī stands under a pavilion facing the present Maṇimaheśa temple, the image of Gaṇeśa is inside a wood and stone temple of fairly recent date, while the image of Lakshana Devī is enshrined within an intricately carved wooden temple located to the proper left of the Maṇimaheśa temple. All three images are strikingly distinct yet share certain stylistic and iconographic qualities. There is also a bronze image of Narasimha that will be discussed separately below.

While none of the images bears a date, their inscriptions have been assigned on paleographic grounds to the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>74</sup> All three image inscriptions

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<sup>73</sup> Though these images are commonly referred to as ‘bronzes’, they are not in fact made of an alloy of copper and tin but of brass, which is an alloy of copper and zinc. Compositional analysis of bronzes in the Western Himalayas and Kashmir has revealed that this is the most commonly used alloy, though the material is locally known as ‘*aṣṭadhātu*’ which means an alloy of eight metals.

<sup>74</sup> Vogel, 1911, p. 138.

mention the name of their patron, Merū-varman, as well as of the artist responsible for their execution, Gugga, a rare detail regarding the identity of an artist. A fourth image, of the goddess Śakti Devī, is enshrined in a wooden temple in the village of Chhatrarhi, located approximately midway between Bharmaur and the town of Chamba, and it too bears an inscription naming Merū-varman as the patron and Gugga as the artist. (Pl. 2.7) The inscriptions are not identical, rather they bear additional pieces of information that we can use to try and gain insight into Merū-varman and his times – into his ancestry, his political position, the battles he may have fought and the temples he may have built.

The inscriptions state the following:

1) Inscribed on the bronze pedestal of the image of Lakṣaṇā Devī is the following verse:

“Born from the *sva-gotra* (own-house) of Mosuna and from the Solar race, the great-grandson of the illustrious lord Āditya-varman, the grandson of the illustrious lord Bala-varman, the son of the illustrious lord Divākara-varman, the illustrious lord Merū-varman, for the increase of his spiritual merit, has caused the holy image of the goddess Lakṣaṇā to be made by the workman Gugga.”<sup>75</sup>

2) Inscribed on the pedestal of the image of Gaṇeśa is the following in prose:

“Adoration to Gaṇapati. Born of the own-house of Musuna and from the Solar race, the great-grandson of the illustrious lord Āditya-varman, the grandson of the illustrious lord Bala-varman, the son of the illustrious lord Divākara-varman, the

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<sup>75</sup> Vogel, 1911, pp. 141-142.



king of kings, the illustrious Merū-varman has caused this pious gift to be made by the workman Gugga.”<sup>76</sup>

3) Inscribed on the pedestal of the bull Nandī is the following in prose:

“After that he had himself built a temple like Mount Merū on the top of the Himavant through the manifold bliss of his good works, an upper chamber (candraśālā) delightful to the eye was added to it with various porches (*maṇḍapa*) and numerous ornaments (*citra*) turned towards the east; in front of it was set this bull fat of cheeks and body, compact of breast and hump, the exalted vehicle of the God Śiva. This is the glorious work of the illustrious Merū-varman famous over the four oceans, tending continually to increase the spiritual fruit of his parents and himself. Made by the workman Gugga.”<sup>77</sup>

The pedestal of the image of Śakti Devī located in the village of Chhatrarhi is also inscribed:

“There was an eminent chief of a pure race, the illustrious Deva-varman of celebrated fame. His son, charming by every virtue, is the illustrious Merū-varman, renowned on the earth. First, for the sake of the spiritual merit of his parents, he, out of devotion, caused the image of Śakti to be made, after having conquered his foes in their invincible strongholds, he who has prolonged his life by glory, fame and religious merit.”<sup>78</sup>

### **Who Was Merū-varman?**

Merū-varman was, if not the first, then one of the first rulers of his lineage to gain prominence in the region of Bharmaur. In the genealogy he had inscribed on these

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., pp. 142-143.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., pp. 143-144.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

images, Merū-varman names his ancestors, starting with his great-grandfather and ending with himself. The state chronicle of the neighboring kingdom of Kullu (ancient Kulūta) mentions that in the early seventh century a rājā of ‘Chamba’, along with those of Kangra, Ladakh, Suket and Bushahr, were involved in deciding on a successor to the Kullu throne when the previous rājā died without an heir.<sup>79</sup> Hutchison and Vogel speculate that this might have been Merū-varman’s great-grandfather Āditya-varman, but are also quick to point out that the Kullu chronicle is unreliable in this early period. Presumably, if ancestors preceding these had been illustrious or gained renown in their times, they too would have been mentioned in Merū-varman’s lineage.

Merū-varman was also the first ruler from his family that we know of to assume the title of *Māhārājādhirāja*, or ‘king of kings’, the title with which he prefaces his name in the Gaṇeśa image inscription, though it is missing from the others.<sup>80</sup> The assumption of such a title is significant and would have followed some kind of change in his situation, either through conquest or an elevation in political stature.

Again according to the chronicle of Kullu, a king of Chamba conquered Kullu and occupied it for several generations in the late 7<sup>th</sup>-early 8<sup>th</sup> century. Vogel, Hutchinson and V.C. Ohri have argued that the ‘Chamba’ referred to in this instance was in fact Merū-varman’s kingdom of Bharmaur.<sup>81</sup> It is perhaps following this significant victory over neighboring Kullu that Merū-varman took on the title of ‘king of kings’, and having greatly expanded the productive base of his kingdom, undertook to build temples and

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<sup>79</sup> Hutchison and Vogel, 1933, pp. 434-435.

<sup>80</sup> Vogel, 1911, p. 142.

<sup>81</sup> Ohri, 1991, p. 11; Hutchison and Vogel, 1933, p. 435; Hirananda, “Historical Documents of Kulu” in *Monuments of Himachal Pradesh*, J. Ph. Vogel, H. Hargreaves, Hīrānanda, collected by S.M. Sethi, Shimla: H.P. Academy of Arts, Culture and Languages, 2005, pp. 110-111.

consecrate the images discussed above in his center of Bharmaur, transforming it into a worthy capital. Merū-varman's artistic patronage and inscriptions in Bharmaur are very clearly the products of someone who wanted to proclaim his 'arrival' on the larger regional political stage, a sentiment that is also emphasized in his Śakti Devī image inscription, where he “...caused the image of Śakti to be made, after having conquered his foes in their invincible strongholds....”<sup>82</sup>

The early beginnings of Merū-varman and his ancestors remain shrouded in mystery. Was he a local chieftain who slowly consolidated his territories and gained economic, military and political prominence within the region? Or was he an outsider to the region who sensed an opportunity to further his position and grasped it? What relationship, if any, did he have with neighboring kingdoms, or with the powerful kingdom of the hills at the time, the Kārkota dynasty of Kashmir, or with the contenders for imperial power in North India? The control exerted by these kingdoms extended at different times into the liminal zone of the Western Himalayas which Bharmaur occupied.

### **North India at the Time of Merū-varman**

The disintegration of the Gupta Empire in the second half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, precipitated by the repeated onslaughts of Hūna invaders, resulted in a period of chaos and political competition in North India. This period was dominated by three groups – the

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<sup>82</sup> Vogel, 1911, p. 145.

Maukharis of Kanauj, the Puṣpabhūtiś of Thāneśwar and the Pratihara clans from areas encompassing present-day Rajasthan and Gujarat.<sup>83</sup> A copper plate inscription found in Nirmand, in Kullu, and dated to the sixth century, tells us that the Maukhari ruler of Kanauj, Sāra-varman, had come all the way to Kullu in pursuit of the Hūnas, who continued to be a threat.<sup>84</sup> The existence of this copper plate amply illustrates that the hills of Himachal were not so remote as to be outside the realm of strategic interest for the powers in the plains.

In the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, a powerful new ruler from Thaneswar, the son of King Prabhakara-vardhana, Harṣavardhana, came to the throne. Harṣa came to the throne in 606 A.D. and succeeded in establishing a strong and stable empire in North India, if only for the duration of his lifetime.<sup>85</sup> These two powerful families of North India – the Maukharis of Kanauj and the Puṣpabhūtiś of Thāneśwar – were further strengthened by a matrimonial alliance between the Maukhari ruler Graha-varman, the grandson of Sāra-varman (r. 576-580 A.D.) and the eldest son of Avanti-varman (r. 580-600 A.D.), and Rājyaśrī, the sister of Harṣa.

The Maukharis were not the only rulers to have chased the Hūnas all the way into the hills of Himachal Pradesh. The Harṣacarita, the account of the life and feats of king Harṣa written by the contemporary scholar Bānabhaṭa, offers some interesting insights into the history of the Western Himalayan region in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. An account from the Harṣacarita states that Harṣavardhana's older brother, Rājyavardhana, had been sent to

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<sup>83</sup> R.C. Majumdar, Gen. Ed., *The History and Culture of the Indian People, Vol. III, The Classical Age*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1988, pp. 60-174.

<sup>84</sup> Ohri, 1991, p. 17; Vogel, 1911, p. 86.

<sup>85</sup> R.C. Majumdar, Gen. Ed., Vol. III, 1988, p. 60-62.

the Himalayas at the head of a huge force to repel another advance by the Hūnas. Harṣa accompanied him for several stages of the march, but was recalled to Thaneswar because their father fell seriously ill.

The Harṣacarita cites specifically that the region in the Himalayas to which Rājyavardhana went was one “which blazes with Kailāsa’s luster,” a specific marker of place.<sup>86</sup> As discussed earlier, more than one peak goes by the name ‘Kailāsa’ in the ranges of the Himalayas. The first and most famous rises over Lake Mansarovar in present-day China and the second is the Kinnar-Kailāsa in Kinnaur district bordering Tibet. Both of these were in far too remote and inhospitable a land to be the peak referred to by the Harṣacarita. The third Kailāsa is the Mahimahesh Kailāsa of the Dhauladhar range, located near Bharmaur. Rājyavardhana’s pursuit of the Hūnas to this area is given further credence by a contemporary account called the *Kuvalayamālā*, which states that the Hūnas were settled in the region where the Chandrabhaga River flows.<sup>87</sup>

A carved boulder located outside the village of Tur, about a mile and a half from the Baleni Pass separating Chamba and Kangra valleys, adds an interesting piece to the puzzle. The Baleni Pass is one of the eight passes over the Dhauladhar Range connecting Chamba to Kangra and onwards to the plains of North India, and the ruins of an old fort near the pass bear testament to the frequent use and importance of the pass.<sup>88</sup> The carvings on the slightly slanted rock face at Tur show an elaborately caparisoned elephant and two horses running in the direction of the pass. The carving is accompanied by small

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<sup>86</sup> The Harṣacarita of Bānabhaṭa, trans. E.P. Cowell and P.W. Thomas, R.P. Shastri, ed., Global Vision, 2004, p. 132.

<sup>87</sup> The Chandrabhaga is another name for the Chenab, which flows through the valley of Lahaul.

<sup>88</sup> Vogel, 1911, p. 148.

inscriptions bearing some names. Vogel has ascribed these inscriptions to the 8<sup>th</sup> century as the paleography resembles Merū-varman's inscriptions.<sup>89</sup> It is likely that these carvings, which point towards an army of impressive power, represent the pursuing forces of Rājyavardhana.

V.C. Ohri has gone further to argue that the Hūna invaders might have spread into the mountains surrounding Bharmaur. He concludes that when Rājyavardhana was obliged to turn homewards upon receiving news of his father's illness, he would have left behind a large part of the retinue of officers and soldiers accompanying him to establish a permanent post in this area. Ohri writes, "A new kingdom seems to have been established in Bharmaur during this period of turmoil, which has bequeathed some ancient temples and the celebrated great bronzes. Before that period Bharmaur might have been only a village of some importance."<sup>90</sup> According to Ohri, therefore, Merū-varman and his immediate precursors were outsiders to the region and settled in Bharmaur as representatives of the rulers of Thaneswar.

While this is a plausible hypothesis of the origins of the ruling family of Bharmaur, it is equally possible that the Varmans of Bharmaur were local chieftains who became feudatories of the rulers of Thaneswar in order to safeguard their mutual interests against the Hūnas, thereby gaining in power and resources locally. The last name 'Varman' does not offer any real insights into the origin of the family. It was a common title at the time and one with a wide geographical spread, including the Varmans of Assam, of the Maukhari dynasty of Kanauj, and among the Pallavas.

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., pp. 172-174.

<sup>90</sup> Ohri, 1991, p. 22.

Harṣa died in 643 or 644 A.D. He left no known successor and for a half century following his death no clear ruler emerged to occupy the power vacuum he left behind.<sup>91</sup> Many scholars believe that these fifty years were marked by political disintegration and the rise of ambitious chiefs who gnawed at his territorial legacy. It is only in c. 700 A.D. that a new ruler named Yaśovarman, about whose antecedents nothing is known, emerged on the throne of Kanauj and set out on numerous campaigns to consolidate his territory. There is no evidence of any interaction between Yaśovarman and the region of Bharmaur specifically,<sup>92</sup> but historical consensus indicates that his power was demolished and his kingdom taken over in a confrontation with the Kārkota ruler of Kashmir, Lalitāditya Muktapida, in about 740 A.D.<sup>93</sup> It is therefore not surprising that it was in the early years of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, in the period of chaos following the death of Harṣa and the disintegration of his empire, that Merū-varman was able to declare himself the *māhārājādhirāja* of his kingdom. While this was also the period of ascendancy for Lalitaditya in neighboring Kashmir, as well as Yaśovarman of Kanauj, scholars including Vogel have argued that it seems probable that Kashmir's suzerainty was acknowledged by the chiefs in the upper valley of the Rāvī. There is, however, no inscriptional evidence

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<sup>91</sup> R.C. Majumdar, Gen. Ed., Vol. III, 1988, pp. 120-121.

<sup>92</sup> Although Meister has speculated that Merū-varman was perhaps a feudatory of Yaśovarman: "Were the Varmans who founded a small kingdom at Bharmaur early in the eighth century feudatories to the contemporary Varman rulers – Yaśovarman and his successors – in Kanauj?" "Mountain Temples and Temple-Mountains, Masrur," *JSAH* 65/1, March 2006 pp. 29.

<sup>93</sup> R.C. Majumdar, Gen. Ed., Vol. III, 1988, pp. 180-182. We know of Yasovarman and Lalitaditya's interactions from two sources, each of which privilege their respective regional rulers - the 12<sup>th</sup> century chronicle of the kings of Kashmir, the *Rājataranginī*, and the contemporary accounts of Yaśovarman's court poet who wrote the *Gaudavaho* eulogizing his patron's conquests. Meister has argued that historians have tended to undermine the extent of Yaśovarman's political sway in the hills, which can be deduced from the introduction of the *Nāgara* stone architecture dominant in Yasovarman's India into the region from the 8<sup>th</sup> century, and in fact its preference over the pyramidal roofed architecture of Kashmir. Meister, 2006, pp. 28-29.

suggesting that Kashmir was recognized as the paramount power in the region at the time of Merū-varman.

### **Merū-varman's Kingdom**

Indications of the extent of Merū-varman's territory are provided by his building program as well as references to him by local chieftains or *sāmantas*. He seems to have built the wooden temple to house the bronze image of the goddess Śakti Devī in the village of Chhatrarhi, located midway between Bharmaur and Chamba, extending his sway up the Rāvī valley. It is therefore evident that his kingdom extended at least that far. Even closer to the town of Chamba, on the right bank of the Rāvī river along the ancient route from Chamba to Bharmaur, in the village of Gum (called Śivapura in ancient times), a feudatory chieftain named Aṣāḍha-deva erected a stone *liṅga* pedestal on which he inscribed the following:

“The feudatory chief Aṣāḍha-deva resorting to the lotus-like feet of the illustrious prince Merū-varman (that scion of the house of Moṣūna and Sūrya, and worshipper of the most exalted Śiva), has made this pious gift – a shrine of Śaṅkaliśa in the midst of Śivapura – thanks to the service rendered to the multitude of the gods and the ancestral spirits.”<sup>94</sup>

Vogel has argued that the script of the inscription bears a closer resemblance to the seventh rather than the eighth century, and the inscription therefore dates to early in Merū-varman's rule, before he took on the title of *māhārājādhirāja*, as Aṣāḍha-deva

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<sup>94</sup> Of the “shrine to Śaṅkaliśa,” nothing remains. Vogel, 1911, pp. 145-146.



refers to him unambiguously as ‘prince’. What the inscription makes clear, however, is that even earlier on in his reign, Merū-varman commanded the allegiance of feudatory chiefs along the Rāvī Valley, extending almost to the town of Chamba.

### **The Art and Architecture of Merū-varman**

The art and architecture patronized by Merū-varman provide a valuable if not entirely clear lens into the little known political and cultural world of 8<sup>th</sup>-century Bharmaur, and they have been the subject of considerable, though often contradictory, scholarly attention. Aspects of the iconography and style of Merū-varman’s four bronze images has led some scholars to argue that these finely executed works were the product of Kashmiri artisans, and that his master artist Gugga was either a Kashmiri himself or that skilled Kashmiri artisans were a part of his workshop. A secondary factor has contributed to this Kashmiri attribution as well – the level of technical and aesthetic accomplishment that the images display seems incongruous in light of the lack of any known artistic tradition in Bharmaur preceding their making. Kashmiri art and architecture on the other hand would soon reach its zenith under the patronage of Lalitāditya, culminating in the construction of his famous Sun temple at Martand. Therefore certain parallels between contemporaneous sculptural and architectural

traditions in Kashmir and the Rāvī Valley have fuelled the debate about the nature of Kashmir's role in Bharmaur's artistic production.<sup>95</sup>

The same arguments in favor of a Kashmiri 'hand' have been put forward in the discussion of Merū-varman's architectural commissions as well. The two wooden temples which enshrine the images of Lakshana Devī and Śakti Devī, at Bharmaur and Chhatrarhi respectively, are believed by many scholars including Pratapaditya Pal to be contemporaneous with the images, and therefore dating to the reign of Merū-varman.<sup>96</sup> **(Pl. 2.8, 2.9)** The local tradition in the village of Chhatrarhi, moreover, holds that the Śakti Devī temple was built by Gugga himself – making him both a sculptor and *sūtradhāra* or architect – and that the master artist met his death by falling from the roof of the building as it reached completion.<sup>97</sup> If these two temples do date to the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, it would make them arguably the oldest extant examples of wooden architecture and ornament in India.

While both the sculpture and architecture of Bharmaur share aspects of a visual vocabulary with the trans-Himalayan belt, including with Kashmir, as well as with regions beyond it, the formation of artistic traditions in this geographic zone is a rich and historically complex one, as well as one that defies simple distinctions or categorizations.

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<sup>95</sup> See, for example, P. Pal, who argues that Gugga was an eminent sculptor of Kashmir, and was not only responsible for creating the principal icons himself, but may also have supervised the design and construction of Merū-varman's wooden temples as well; P. Pal, "Munificent Monarch and a Superior Sculptor – Eighth Century Chamba," *Marg*, Vol. 39/2, pp. 9-24. M. Postel, A. Neven and K. Mankodi similarly argue in favor of a strong Kashmiri influence in both the bronzes and architecture of Bharmaur, though they do not speculate on the identity of Gugga; in *Antiquities of Himachal*, Bombay: Project for Indian Cultural Studies (Franco-Indian Pharmaceuticals), 1985, pp. 81-92.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> *Chitrari: A Village Survey, Himachal Pradesh*, Census of India, 1961, p. 48.

We know from the chronicles of Kullu that Bharmaur exerted political control over Kullu for several generations from the time of Merū-varman, and this access to Kullu would have also opened up new artistic frontiers as the Kullu Valley was located along an old trade route connecting the plains of Uttar Pradesh to Kashmir and Central Asia. The Chinese traveler Hiuen Tsiang, who visited the valley in the seventh century, writes that it had a vibrant tradition of Hindu as well as Buddhist sculpture and architecture. Judicious borrowing and integration of various elements from these traditions with local innovations makes the sculpture and architecture of Merū-varman both vibrant and unique.

### **The Two Devīs**

The Lakṣaṇā Devī image depicts the goddess in the act of killing the demon Mahiṣa, who has taken on the form of a buffalo. The iconography and modeling of the image is in the Gupta tradition – the *devī* is four-armed, one hand driving her elaborate *triśūla* or trident into the buffalo, while with another she holds him up almost vertically by the tail. One foot is placed firmly on the ground while the other is placed over the neck of the buffalo. Her face is calm and her eyes, inlaid with silver, gaze out serenely at her worshippers. The figure of the goddess is slender and elongated, with high, round breasts and a deeply curved waist. The modeling of the figure is supple, an effect accentuated by the deep navel and the curved folds of flesh around it, the *trivali* or three creases at her neck, as well as three delicate creases above the navel. Her hair is in cork-screwed dreadlocks, cascading from a high chignon and is decorated with two crescents

and a diamond-shaped ornament. The buffalo lying at her feet, in contrast, is unornamented; his eyes are closed and his tongue hangs almost comically out of the corner of his mouth.

The image of Śakti Devī depicts the four-armed goddess standing erect in an iconic representation with her most prominent attribute, the lance, held in her right hand.<sup>98</sup> Her other hands hold a lotus, a bell and a snake. The *devī* stands in the *tribhaṅga* stance, her body slightly bent at both hip and left knee. Her body has the same basic proportions as that of Lakṣaṇā Devī, but is slightly more attenuated, though both share the defining marks of their physiognomy, including the deep navel, the folds of skin, and the creases at neck and waist. The draped clothing of both goddesses is almost identical – visible for the majority only at the ornamented hems – as are elements of their jewelry. Śakti Devī's hair, however, flows in smooth waves to her shoulders and her crown and the two small flowers perched behind her ears are different from those of Lakṣaṇā Devī. The most significant difference between the two, however, lies in Śakti Devī's sharper, more aquiline nose and her eyes, which are heavily lidded, reminiscent of the Buddhist art of Nepal in the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>99</sup> Her head too appears slightly large for her slender body.

There are no bronzes from the Rāvī valley which can be definitively dated to earlier than Gugga's images and a search for the stylistic vision behind the two *devis* has

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<sup>98</sup> Śakti means both power and 'lance'.

<sup>99</sup> See P. Pal, *Himalayas: An Aesthetic Adventure*, Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2003, p. 25, plate 2.

turned invariably towards Kashmir.<sup>100</sup> However, a stylistic comparison of the two *devi* bronzes with Kashmiri examples is complicated by two factors. The first is that, surprisingly, no bronzes of goddesses have come to light in Kashmir proper. Pratapaditya Pal used images of three bronzes of Bhairavī from the region of Chamba or Kangra as a representative sample in his book on the bronzes of Kashmir, thereby drawing attention to a perceived similarity in the sculptural traditions of the two regions. Pal states, “there are also several impressive bronzes of the goddess Durgā still in worship in temples near Chamba, but they are certainly the works of local ateliers. Because of the strong influence exerted by Kashmiri culture in these areas, it may be reasonable to assume, however, that the Chamba Durgas or the three Bhairavīs illustrated here strongly echo forms that were first conceived in Kashmir.”<sup>101</sup> While Pal doesn’t specify which Chamba temples he is referring to, the prominence of the Lakṣaṇā Devī and Śakti Devī temples make them the likely candidates. The second complication in using Kashmiri bronzes as comparanda is that the vast majority of Kashmiri bronzes lack context and have come to the public eye through the market, from Tibet and elsewhere, and categorizing all but a few of them as ‘Kashmiri’ is in itself problematic.

Pal distinguishes Kashmiri sculptures on the basis of certain stylistic attributes – “a distinct predilection for rather heavy and sturdy bodies which reflect almost a pretentious attempt at naturalistic modeling ... where the pectoral and abdominal muscles

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<sup>100</sup> Two small bronze images with rotund bodies, variously identified as Śakti devī, Yoginī or Tārā, located in the Śakti Devī temple at Chhatrarhi, have been attributed by Ohri to the 7<sup>th</sup> century, though other scholars, Mankodi, Postel and Neven among them, have dated them to the 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries. For a full discussion of their dating, see Ohri, 1991, p. 77, and Mankodi et al., 1985, pp. 69-72.

<sup>101</sup> P. Pal, *Bronzes of Kashmir*, Graz: Akademische Druk-u, Verlagsanstalt, 1975, p. 21.

are delineated in a contrived but perceptibly muscular manner. ...Such an obvious attempt to show the muscles of the torso is peculiar only to bronzes of this area.” Pal goes on to characterize the shape of faces and their physiognomic features as well, stating that Kashmiri bronzes after the 8<sup>th</sup> century (when the regional style crystallized under the building programs of Lalitaditya), “have a round and almost bloated face,” in contrast to the more delicate and oval Gandhara or Gupta features, and “thick and fleshy” features. The nose is broad rather than aquiline, with disproportionately large eyes with silver inlay.<sup>102</sup> The bronzes of Lakṣaṇā and Śakti Devī display none of these ‘Kashmiri’ stylistic features, as both have elegant, linear figures which are far from heavy, a fluidity of pose, and narrow faces with, in the case of Śakti Devī, an aquiline nose. Though the cheeks and chin are emphasized, the shape of the face is narrow and the features delicate, though the eyes are inlaid with silver.

In a discussion of the sculpture of Himachal Pradesh, Pal suggests that Merū-varman was an elder contemporary of Lalitaditya’s, at a time when the two regions shared close ties. Pal argues that an image of the Viṣṇu *avatāra* of the man-lion Narasimha, also located in Bharmaur, was the work of Gugga as well, though without convincing proof. Pal bases his argument on the presence of certain Kashmiri features in the image, as described above, but as we will discuss later in this chapter, that neither makes the Narasimha the work of Gugga, nor of the early 8<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>103</sup> The fact that Gugga chose to create the Lakṣaṇā Devī and Śakti Devī statues in a style distinct from contemporary Kashmiri bronzes argues strongly in favor of the fact that while artists in

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<sup>102</sup> Pal, 1975, pp. 30-35.

<sup>103</sup> Pal, 1975, p. 38.

Himachal were aware of artistic developments in Kashmir, they did not have to rely on them to formulate their own artistic repertoire. Nor were they politically compelled to do so. Pal mentions, correctly, that the images of the two *devis* draw inspiration from the Mathura school of Gupta sculpture, with its slim and graceful figures, to which Gugga and his atelier add additional elements to depict their own vision of the divine goddesses. To quote Pal, “these creations of Chamba masters seem the products of a more spontaneous and indigenous vision.”<sup>104</sup>

### **The Sculpted Gaṇeśa**

The image of Gaṇeśa, currently placed in a simple stone and wood construction of fairly recent date, is partially damaged as both of its legs are broken at the thigh.<sup>105</sup> The god has four arms, and holds a lotus, a tusk, an axe and a bowl of sweets in his hands. He wears a crown composed of three crescents, the central one enclosing a jeweled medallion. Ohri argues that this type of crown is peculiar to Kashmir, having been adopted there from Central Asia.<sup>106</sup> Disc shaped pendants hang from a chain upon his forehead, as well as around his neck, and these are identical to the necklace worn by Lakṣaṇā Devī. Gaṇeśa too has silver inlaid eyes and in the case of this image the parallel to the sculpture of Kashmir as classified by Pal is evident in that, somewhat ironically for a god famous for his love of sweets, the muscles of his abdomen and his pectorals are

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<sup>104</sup> Pal, 1975, p. 39.

<sup>105</sup> According to the *Vaṃśāvalī* – written centuries later – the damage occurred during the invasion of Bharmaur by the tribe of the *Kīras* – who as discussed earlier were perhaps of Tibetan origin – in the time of Merū-varman’s grandson Lakṣmī-varman. The image of the Nandī too was damaged in this raid.

<sup>106</sup> Ohri, 1991, p. 83.

perfectly delineated, as is often seen in the naturalistic modeling of musculature in imperial Kashmiri sculpture. Gaṇeśa's torso conveys a sense of tremendous power and vitality. He is seated on a high pedestal, with a lion engraved on each side and the figure of a strange *gaṇa* or *yaksha* in between – one with elephant ears.

### **Nandī – the ‘Brazen Bull’**

Of the four images created by Gugga, no other has garnered as much attention as the life size image of Śiva's *vāhana* Nandī. It is the largest bronze Nandī known in the sculpture of North India, and its unique form – “*fat of cheeks and body, compact of breast and hump*”<sup>107</sup> – with an almost cartoon-like smiling demeanor, has made it somewhat of an art historical puzzle.<sup>108</sup> The bull stands on its inscribed pedestal, with its head slightly raised and its neck stretched, as though looking up towards Śiva, giving the image a sense of animation.<sup>109</sup> It is encircled by ornamental chains featuring alternating round disks and flowers – the very same ornament worn by Śakti Devī, while the images of Gaṇeśa and Lakṣaṇā Devī feature a chain with only the circular disc pendants. The deeply incised nostrils and the modeling of the head are almost identical to that of the buffalo demon Mahiṣa being slain by Lakṣaṇā Devī.

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<sup>107</sup> Vogel, 1911, p. 144.

<sup>108</sup> Life-size bulls made of stone are more common, including one made of black stone in the village of Saho near Chamba.

<sup>109</sup> It should be noted that the Nandi does not quite fit into its inscribed pedestal, raising the question of whether the current Nandi is the original sculpted by Gugga; alternatively the pedestal could have been damaged at the same time as the larger sculpture.



### **The Wooden Devi Temples**

The intricate carvings concentrated on the doorways, pillars and ceilings of the Lakṣaṇā Devī and Śakti Devī temples offer further grounds for the analysis of sculptural practices in wood. Since these two temples are the preeminent examples of wooden architectural ornamentation in Himachal, both temples have received a considerable amount of scholarly attention and have been analyzed from a variety of perspectives – ethno-historical, architectural and sculptural. Sir Alexander Cunningham, a British army officer who retired to become the first head of the newly formed Archeological Survey of India, traveled to the western Himalayas in the 1870s and wrote, “the temples at Chamba were first seen by Vigne, and they have since been photographed by Messrs. Bourne, and Shepherd, but except the surveyors I believe I am the only European who has ever visited Barmawar.”<sup>110</sup> Since then, a range of scholars including Hermann Goetz, J. Ph. Vogel, Subhashini Aryan, O.C. Handa and Mian Govardhan Singh have made their way to both Bharmaur and Chhatrarhi, but have managed to shed only partial light on the relative chronology of the temples, as well as on the political and cultural milieu in which they were established.

Remarkable for the quality of their wooden sculptural ornament, these temples raise a number of chronological and stylistic questions. Some of these are inherent to their medium. Wood, even the dense *deodar* in which the wooden ornament is executed, is a material that needs periodic renovation and replacement, and hence complicates the

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<sup>110</sup> A. Cunningham, *Archaeological Survey of India, A Tour in the Punjab in 1878-79*, vol. XIV, Calcutta: Government of India Central Publication Branch, 1882, p. 110.

process of dating. Incorporating a third *devi* temple, the Mirkulā Devī located in the village of Udaipur, presently in the district of Lahaul but formerly a part of the northernmost extent of the territory of Chamba, also provides a useful comparative framework for examining how the structure of wooden temples can change and evolve over time, although the earliest parts of this temple arguably date to the early tenth century.<sup>111</sup>

Much of the art historical scholarship on these wooden temples has dealt at length with the extent of Kashmiri ‘influence’ in their form, sculptural iconography and stylistic vocabulary, but this comparative framework seems overstated. Certain architectural elements employed in these temples have been termed typically Kashmiri, such as a trefoil arch set within the pent-roofed structure of the Lakṣaṇā Devī temple, or the three-pointed crowns that many of the wooden images in the doorways wear. **(Pl. 2.10, 2.11)** Arches set within triangular pediments are seen in the stone temples of Śiva at Pandrethan, the Avantisvāmin temple at Avantipur, and the sun temple at Martand built in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries in Kashmir. **(Pl. 2.12, 2.13, 2.14)** It is worth remembering that while these are all stone temples, the forms represent translations in stone of architectural elements pre-existing in vernacular wooden architecture. I argue, however, for an alternative explanation for this Kashmiri architectural feature in the Lakṣaṇā Devī temple.

Historians have posited that the Varman dynasty of Bharmaur, of which Merūvarman was one of the earliest rulers, had close ties to the rulers of Kashmir, but that this

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<sup>111</sup> V. Widorn, *The Mirkulā Devī Temple in Udaipur, Lahaul: A Wooden Jewel in the Western Himalaya and its Role in the Sacred Landscape of Lahaul*, Doctoral Dissertation, University of Vienna, 2007, pp. 152-155.

connection was severed after King Lalitāditya's death in 756 A.D and the subsequent disintegration of his kingdom. This would imply that any Kashmiri artistic influence in Himachal would have been at its strongest in the first half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Does an examination of the chronology and stylistic features of the Lakṣaṇā Devī, Śakti Devī and Mirkulā Devī temples corroborate this political interaction in the artistic sphere? Are there alternative political and architectural arenas to which we can turn to illuminate these wooden temples? Did Himachal have its own local traditions, and to what extent was its sculpture the result of a conscious and planned synthesis of features from elsewhere? What does such a study tell us about the nature of resistance and accommodation that the rulers of Bharmaur were negotiating with their neighbors to the north and south?

### **The Lakṣaṇā Devī Temple**

The most thorough historian of the history of Chamba state, J. Ph. Vogel, wrote that the temples of Lakṣaṇā Devī and Śakti Devī were built in the complex period of transition between the fall of the Gupta empire (4<sup>th</sup> -6<sup>th</sup> centuries) and the rise of the Pratihara empire of Kanauj (9<sup>th</sup> century), at a time of numerous tribal invasions from the north. Vogel argues that the two temples represent an importation of refined post-Gupta art into a barbaric milieu, at a time when Bharmaur lacked the cultural traditions to develop a local style of architecture. Vogel argued that this outer doorway of the Lakṣaṇā Devī temple links it to both Kashmiri and Gupta prototypes. He argued that this prototype of the wooden hill temple was introduced in imperial Gupta times, and that between the

6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries Gupta art gained a strong foothold in the Western Himalayas. Since the two temples still possessed their original inscribed images, Vogel dated both structures to the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>112</sup> Vogel thus argues for a time lag of about one or two centuries for “Gupta-style” art to take roots in the area.<sup>113</sup> He does not, however, make any distinction between the exterior façade of the temple and its interior elements, including the six pillars in the *maṇḍapa*, the carved lotus ceiling or the internal doorframe. In a similar vein, Goetz dated the Lakṣaṇā Devī temple to the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> centuries by looking at contextual histories and analyzing the style of the carvings.<sup>114</sup> His analysis, which relied heavily on Vogel’s field notes and photographs, remained largely unquestioned by the scholars who followed him, until recently.

This methodology for dating all of these wooden temples, however, needs to be problematized. Temple forms change over the course of centuries, even decades, based on changing ritual practices or needs, changing tastes, the economic status of a community, and the need for periodic renovations. This is particularly so in the case of the less durable medium of wood, where elements of a temple might be replaced, in some cases even with pre-existing fragments from other temples. The three wooden temples discussed here are no exception and each of them has undergone phases of expansion, renovation and perhaps even re-building. As I will discuss, in some instances these phases are possible to discern based on an examination of ground plans and the style and iconography of carved ornament, but in others cases, these conclusions can only remain

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<sup>112</sup> Vogel, 1911, p. 56.

<sup>113</sup> Vogel, “Hill Temples of West Himalaya” in *Indian Art and Letter* vol.xx, no. 1, 1946.

<sup>114</sup> Goetz visited the temple and carried out his analysis before Vogel had dated the inscription to the early years of the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

speculative. Dating a temple as a composite unit is therefore not viable. A few scholars, notably Pieruccini, Noci, Handa and Widorn, have attempted to identify these phases of expansion and renovation in the wooden temples of Chamba, and their theories will be discussed below.

In its present form, the Lakṣaṇā Devī temple has a rectangular floor plan and faces north. It has a rectangular sanctum with a rectangular *maṇḍapa* in front of it, an ambulatory path around the sanctum, and a raised portico in front of the sanctum doorway. The interior has six wooden pillars with ornamented capitals and a lantern lotus ceiling. **(Pl. 2.15)** The T-shaped doorway to the sanctum is carved with ornamental patterns. The exterior walls of the temple have been made using alternating wooden beams and stone, and it has a pyramidal roof, features common to the residential architecture of Bharmaur. The side walls have two long, narrow windows which illuminate the interior. The exterior of the temple has an impressive and elaborately carved doorway, combining figural and ornamental designs, and is surmounted by three broad registers of figurative carving and finally, a triangular pediment with a carved trefoil arch which is set into the pyramidal roof. **(Pl. 2.16)**

Of the three temples, the Lakṣaṇā Devī presents the greatest challenge in untangling its morphological development and its chronology as the temple, even at a cursory glance, is clearly a pastiche of older and later elements. Some of the wooden architectural elements are not original to the structure as they are ill-fitting additions, while yet other segments of carving seem to date to later centuries though they are

structurally located in areas that would seem to place them in the ‘original’ core of the temple.

A noticeably jarring note is the triangular gable set above the outer doorway of the temple which displays a carving of a standing figure of Garuḍa, the eagle-headed *vāhana* of Viṣṇu. Seated on the back of Garuḍa is a small figure, badly eroded by time and the elements, but still discernible as a many-armed Viṣṇu Vaikuṇṭha. (Pl. 2.10) It seems clear that this gable belonged to another temple, possibly of later date, as an image of Viṣṇu would have been incongruous in the extreme over the doorway of a *devi* temple. Structurally, the pediment does not sit flush above the doorframe, but rather seems to have belonged to a different roof structure, or to a temple of a different scale. Goetz and Vogel have both hypothesized, based on the size of the pediment that it might have belonged to an architecturally more “Kashmiri” structure with a double pent-roof. Handa too argues that the arch and pediment might have belonged to another temple, perhaps the Śiva temple to which the inscription on the Nandī statue refers.<sup>115</sup> Here too, however, to display a Viṣṇu image within the main pediment of a Śiva temple would have been incongruous. There remains a more likely possibility, to which I shall return in the discussion of the Narasimha temple later in the chapter.

While the trefoil arch set within a triangular pediment is an architectural feature seen in the lithic temples of Lalitadiya and the later temples of Avantivarman of the Utpala dynasty of Kashmir, this argument does not necessarily imply that these features were ‘imported’ from Kashmir in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. It may, however, suggest an 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Handa, 2000, p. 139. He argues that the present Mani Mahesh temple was built in the 10<sup>th</sup> century by Sāhila-varman, after the *Kīras* destroyed Merū-varman’s original wooden Śiva temple.

century date for this addition, as I will discuss later. Moreover, the rendering of the trefoil arch seems to be slightly different, with a double band of ornament surrounding the trefoil rather than the more typical single band found in Kashmir.

Analogies to the architecture of the Gupta empire are based primarily on the doorframes of the temple, which can be seen as an elaboration of the early Gupta doorways seen at temple sites such as the Pārvaṭī temple at Nacna or the *Dasāvatāra* temple at Deogarh, with bands or *śākhās* of sculptural ornamentation that widen out to form a characteristic T-shape, with a geometric arrangement of horizontal and vertical *śākhās*, in which both orders have equal prominence.<sup>116</sup> **(Pl. 2.16)** While analogies to Gupta architecture are valid, it would be prudent not to over-emphasize their importance as markers of either chronology or style, as by the 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries certain Gupta motifs – such as flying *gandharvas* converging towards the center of lintels bearing a central three-pointed crown borne by the central *gandharvas* – had been incorporated into the architecture of Kashmir as well as that of the Gurjara-Pratīhāras as seen at the temple of Masrur.

The exterior door frame of the Lakṣaṇā Devī temple has six *śākhās* on either side, and two *śākhās* have figural sculptures while the remaining four consist of vegetal and geometric motifs. Each successive *śākhā* recedes towards the interior of the *cella*. The figural *śākhās* are carved in high relief on flat panels, while the vegetal *śākhās* are semi-circular in cross section. **(Pl. 2.17, 2.18, 2.19)** The interior doorframe to the *garbhagrha*

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<sup>116</sup> The pillars of this temple's *maṇḍapa* are square for two-thirds of their height, which is followed by an octagonal segment, a circular *āmlaka* and lotus cushion, surmounted by a *ghatapallava* or pot and foliage capital with a carved square on top with a scroll motif. This pillar design too was widely used in Gupta architecture.

of the Lakṣaṇā Devī temple is framed by the pillars of the portico in front and is also ornamented but more simply than the façade, with only three *śākhās*. It too is T-shaped. All three *śākhās* have vegetal patterns, with lotus petals, scrolls and rosettes set within squares. **(Pl. 2.20)** The innermost band also has two *hamsas*, a feature that Deborah Klimburg-Salter has argued is a favored motif in the repertoire of Kashmir.<sup>117</sup> Cinzia Pieruccini believes that the motif of small lozenges filled with diminutive pinecones that we see on the outer *śākhā* can be seen in a simplified version on a door frame in the Pārvatī temple at Nacna, but I see no evidence for such a similarity.<sup>118</sup> Both the internal and the external doorways have a lion set in the upper corners of the doorways – seated upright with a highly attenuated body in the case of the sanctum door, and rampant on the external doorway.

This inner doorway has traditionally been held to be the earliest part of the temple. Both Pieruccini and Handa have argued that the original structure of the temple would have consisted only of the rectangular sanctum fronted by a small pillared *maṇḍapa*, and argued that the external doorway, triangular pediment and trefoil arch, as well as the ceiling are later additions, though they propose quite different causes and chronologies for these changes.<sup>119</sup>

Pieruccini has argued that the earliest part of the Lakṣaṇā Devī temple consisted of a single-celled structure, which today comprises the sanctum, and argues that this is an

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<sup>117</sup> Deborah Klimburg-Salter, “Ribba, the Story of an Early Buddhist Temple in Kinnaur” in *Buddhist Art and Tibetan PatroNāgae, Ninth to Fourteenth Centuries*, Leiden, 2002, pp. 1-28.

<sup>118</sup> C. Pieruccini, “The Temple of Lakṣaṇā Devī at Bharmaur (Chamba),” *East and West*, 47 (1-4), 1997, p. 216.

<sup>119</sup> Handa, 2000, pp. 137-140; Pieruccini, 1997, p. 225-226.



early Gupta-period plan. The *garbhagrha* doorframe would then belong to this original structure, and Pieruccini goes on to argue that it could date to as early as the late 5<sup>th</sup>-early 6<sup>th</sup> century, considerably earlier than other estimates.<sup>120</sup> The late 5<sup>th</sup>- early 6<sup>th</sup> century date, however, is based on the presence of a possibly 5<sup>th</sup>-century Gupta era temple molding in brick excavated in Chamba and currently at the Bhuri Singh Museum. Since nothing of this temple remains barring the lowest tier of the temple's molding, this is hardly sufficient evidence.

Re-capturing the original structure of the Śakti Devī temple – in which the phases of expansion can be far more clearly and organically discerned – would seem to indicate that these early wooden *devī* temples did originally consist of a simple sanctum. It is therefore likely that the 'original' Lakṣaṇā Devī temple too would have consisted of just a sanctum, with perhaps a *maṇḍapa* in front of it as Pieruccini has argued. Nevertheless, the present sanctum doorway of the Lakṣaṇā Devī temple certainly does not date to the late 5<sup>th</sup> or early 6<sup>th</sup> century as Pieruccini has proposed. A closer examination of the carving as well as the patina of the wood, and its comparison with the external doorway as well as with the doorways of the Śakti Devī temple suggests that the sanctum doorway was made considerably later than any of these – the carving is shallow and lacks the finesse and detailing of the others, and the figures of the two strangely elongated seated lions are completely unlike those seen on the exterior of this temple as well as at the Śakti Devī temple.<sup>121</sup> It is possible that the seated lions on the doorway represent a

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<sup>120</sup> Pieruccini, 1997, pp. 220-225.

<sup>121</sup> During a visit to the temple in 2004 on a joint field-study trip between the University of Vienna and the University of Pennsylvania, Deborah Klimbug-Salter suggested a later date for the sanctum doorway, probably not preceding the thirteenth century.

misunderstanding of the rampant lions on the outer façade at the time this doorway replaced an earlier, perhaps ‘original’ one.

Some elements of the style of the figural carvings on the *śākhās* have also been compared to Kashmiri sculpture.<sup>122</sup> Pieruccini writes that the carving on the external façade of the Lakṣaṇā Devī temple, despite the temple’s inner ‘Gupta’ structure, has “medieval” qualities, with pronounced Kashmiri/Chamba characteristics in the treatment of bodies and ornamentation, but she fails to adequately distinguish these characteristics.<sup>123</sup> The bodies of the male and female figures on the second *śākhā* from the outside, for example, while slight in proportion, display a muscular modeling and some wear tall three-pointed crowns which according to a number of scholars is a hallmark of Kashmiri sculpture.<sup>124</sup> On the fourth *śākhā* as well, the two river goddesses, Ganga and Jamuna, both wear three-pointed crowns. Also in this band are figures of Sūrya and his horses, as well as depictions of Śiva, and a three-headed Viṣṇu in his human, boar, and lion incarnations. The middle register above the door frame depicts eleven female dancing figures, also wearing three-pointed crowns, and long flowing garments.

While the art of Kashmir was perhaps one component in the development of a trans-Himalayan art, including the sculpture of Himachal as well, placing too great an emphasis on the three-pointed crowns as a Kashmiri marker might be misleading. While these wooden images are among the earliest examples of the three-pointed crown seen in

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<sup>122</sup> Pieruccini, 1997, p. 225.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., pp. 217-218.

<sup>124</sup> Pal, 1975 and Postel et al, 1985, p. 90.

the territory of the kingdom of Chamba, they go on to become ubiquitous in the temple art of the kingdom. Indeed, they are seen in other parts of Himachal Pradesh as well, including in both Kangra and Kullu districts, at the mid-8<sup>th</sup> century temple of Masrur in Kangra district for example, and have been called the ‘Himachal crown’ in recent literature. Klimburg-Salter has argued that some of these typically ‘Kashmiri’ motifs “are so ubiquitous in the art of Himachal Pradesh and Guge that the Kashmiri connection is no longer meaningful”.<sup>125</sup> Postel et al. have argued that the crown is as much a feature of Chamba as it is of Kashmir, and could well have been independently developed.<sup>126</sup> Whether this was the case or not, the sign and symbol of the crown became deeply embedded in the visual culture of Chamba, and Himachal Pradesh more broadly, reflecting in its imagery the mountain ranges of the state. As Meister suggests in the instance of Masrur, it is “a crown of mountains, a symbol of the ‘Merū-crowned, sea-girt earth’ of conquering kings.”<sup>127</sup> It is also worth emphasizing that there is no clear consensus on what might comprise a ‘Kashmiri’ style in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, a period prior to the coalescing of the ‘imperial’ Kashmiri style.

As the discrepancy in the iconography of the trefoil arch most convincingly illustrates, the temple we see today is not the original form of the Lakṣaṇā Devī temple. Its authentic core cannot really be recovered in the present structure. It is possible to speculate that the temple had a late-Gupta founding, but the sanctum was re-made at a

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<sup>125</sup> Klimburg-Salter, 2002, p. 11.

<sup>126</sup> Postel et al, 1985, p. 115.

<sup>127</sup> Meister, 2006, p. 42. The cosmology referred to here is further elaborated in the Bhāgavata Puraṇā, in which the universe is conceptualized as an island continent (*Jambudvīpa*) with eight minor sub-continent attached to it, and separated from each other by eight mountain ranges. At the center of the inner continent stands Mount Merū, made of gold, and the king of all mountains. On the summit of Mount Merū stands the golden city of the gods, square in shape and surrounded by the eight cities of the guardian deities.

much later date, possibly as late as the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The external doorway could have been added sometime in the 8<sup>th</sup> century based on broad comparisons with the Śakti Devī temple, during an expansion or re-building of the temple. The portico pillars appear to represent the earliest workmanship in the present structure but also seem to have been re-positioned during an extension of the temple, while the pediment was possibly a late 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century addition from another structure.

### **The Śakti Devī Temple**

At the Śakti Devī temple, the layout of the original temple can be much more clearly discerned – that of a square sanctum surrounded by an open ambulatory marked by pillars of the same date. The space between the pillars was later filled in to create an ambulatory path. **(Pl. 2.21)** While the present temple shows one or possibly two phases of extension, when the external doorway of the temple was placed into the outer walls and the outer porticoes on either side of this doorway were added, it is not a pastiche like the Lakṣaṇā Devī temple. The present roof and an open veranda that runs along the two sides of the temple were possible the third phase of the structure's extension. The original core of the temple remains intact, consisting of a large shrine, with an intricately carved doorframe, which was divided at a later date into a *garbhagrha* and a *maṇḍapa* area. The sanctum and *maṇḍapa* are surrounded by a gallery with twelve columns with finely carved capitals, and the outer walls of the sanctum were painted with murals of mythological scenes many centuries later. While both the internal and external doorframes of the temple are composed of *śākhās*, the external doorframe is much

simpler with some of the *śākhās* left bare. In contrast, the internal doorframe is intricately covered with figural and vegetal carving on every inch of its surface. **(Pl. 2.22)**

Pieruccini attributes this core of the Śakti Devī temple to the late 8<sup>th</sup> –early 9<sup>th</sup> century – substantially later than her own problematic 6<sup>th</sup> century dating of the core of the Lakṣaṇā Devī temple – but in this case the dating is viable. Recent work by Michael W. Meister on the rock-cut temple at Masrur, which he has convincingly dated to the middle of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, and the strong parallels in the sculptural style of the two temples, also supports a second quarter of the 8<sup>th</sup> century dating for the Śakti Devī temple, placing it in the lifetime of Merū-varman.<sup>128</sup>

The external doorway of the Lakṣaṇā Devī temple and the sanctum doorway of the Śakti Devī temple share some stylistic characteristics – the divine figures in both cases wear similar clothing and adornments – but significant differences are evident. The Śakti Devī sculptures are in a better state of preservation, and we can clearly see that while the figures are still graceful, they are not as attenuated as the figures on the Lakṣaṇā Devī temple, but have squarer proportions. Male figures have prominently displayed stomach muscles, a feature ubiquitous in Kashmiri sculpture but one that is missing in the Lakṣaṇā Devī wood carvings. **(Pl. 2.23)** Here, however, only two stomach muscles are depicted, unlike the four or six seen in Kashmiri sculpture and they have more rounded contours than are common in Kashmir. The rampant lions that flank the tops of the doorframes on the outside of the Lakṣaṇā Devī temple and the sanctum of the Śakti Devī temple are shown in identical postures, and their heads and manes are

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<sup>128</sup> Meister, 2006, pp. 26-49.

iconographically identical. The Śakti Devī lions, however, are rounder and heavier in form and have an elaborate curl or spiral scroll, on their hindquarters, mirroring the denser vegetal scrolls on the *śākhās*. (Pl. 2.24) Pieruccini has termed this scroll a “post-Gupta” element, which she associates with a medieval artistic tradition.<sup>129</sup> A more extended comparison of the stylistic features of these two doorways, however, is not possible as the Lakṣaṇā Devī doorway is severely eroded, but the common compositional features of the two doorways – the division into vegetal and figural *śākhās*, and their ‘T-shape’ – might suggest that the two were not far apart in date, although as discussed earlier it is impossible to ascertain whether the Lakṣaṇā Devī’s external doorframe belonged to the temple’s original founding.

### **The Mirkulā Devī Temple**

The third wooden temple for which the territory of the kingdom of Chamba is famous is located in the village of Udaipur in Lahaul, in the valley of the Chenab River further north from Bharmaur towards Ladakh.<sup>130</sup> It has no known association with Merūvarman, although a mountain pass connects Bharmaur and Lahaul. Indeed, the village of Udaipur was a part of the kingdom of Ladakh for a considerable period and, along with Ladakh, was earlier a part of the Tibetan kingdom of Guge.<sup>131</sup> This political history has

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 218.

<sup>130</sup> While this area was a part of the kingdom of Chamba, it is no longer included in the modern district of Chamba but rather in Lahaul.

<sup>131</sup> For a history of this region, see Widorn, 2007, pp. 17-19.

left its imprint on the life of the temple, which displays a juxtaposition of Buddhist and Brahmanical uses.

The temple of Mirkulā Devī is seen as belonging to the same architectural tradition as the Lakṣaṇā Devī and Śakti Devī temples based on the quality and detail of its even more profuse wooden carvings, though it has been attributed to a later century in the bulk of the scholarship. Its analysis too has faced many of the same challenges as that of the other two temples, as it has also undergone phases of expansion and renovation. The temple is built on a platform and faces east. As it presently stands, it consists of a square sanctum with an ambulatory path around it and a large rectangular pillared *maṇḍapa* in front of the sanctum. (Pl. 2.25, 2.26) The doorframe of the *grabhagriha*, the pillars and ceiling of the *maṇḍapa*, the ceiling architraves as well as the two large window panels on the south side are elaborately carved with depictions of, among others, Viṣṇu and his *avatāras*, a sixteen-armed dancing Śiva shown with Pārvatī, Nandī, Gaṇeśa and Kārtikeya, scenes from the Mahābhārata, as well as flying *gandharvas*, celestial musicians and a range of decorative motifs and arabesques. (Pl. 2.27, 2.28)

The groundplan of the Mirkulā Devī temple reveals that the present structure is not original – the width of the ambulatory is different on either side of the sanctum, the four central pillars of the *maṇḍapa* are of varying heights, and the outer walls are not uniform, and the middle axis of the floor plan is displaced from the center.<sup>132</sup> Based on the evidence of the Lakṣaṇā Devī and Śakti Devī temples, some scholars have argued that the Mirkulā Devī temple too must have begun as a single-celled structure to which two

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<sup>132</sup> Widorn, 2007, pp. 49-50.

portions were later added. The dating and proposed development of the temple has relied heavily once again on Goetz' analysis. Goetz argues that an original 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century structure was significantly re-shaped in the 11<sup>th</sup> century to its present form.<sup>133</sup> He dates the wood carvings on the front of the *garbhagrha* to the 11<sup>th</sup> century, along with the four main columns and the ceiling panels of the *maṇḍapa*. Noci and Pieruccini similarly argue that an older temple was substantially reconstructed in about the 11<sup>th</sup> century, and credit Queen Sūryamati, the wife of the ruler of Kashmir, Anantadeva, with its reconstruction.

Noci dates the wooden shutters of the side windows, *dvārapāla* to the east, and two pillars in front of the *garbhagrha* to the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>134</sup>

From about the 11<sup>th</sup> century, following the invasion of Kullu by king Lha-Chen Utpala, the region came under the influence of greater Ladakh till the 16<sup>th</sup> century. During this period, the Mirkulā Devī temple was dated to Buddhist use as a temple dedicated to the goddess Dorji Phagmo. Aspects of the temple's renovation may represent this period of transition to the Lamaistic art of Western Tibet.<sup>135</sup> A Hindu-Buddhist synergy is suggested by a carving of the Buddha on the northernmost ceiling panel of the *maṇḍapa*, which depicts an intricately detailed scene of the Buddha seated in meditation being besieged by the temptations of Mara, in the form of his beautiful daughters who seek to seduce him, the scene with Mara's army of demonic warriors and of Mara himself approaching in his chariot. **(Pl. 2.29)** The temple was rededicated to a Hindu shrine in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and its present image of Durgā *Mahiṣasuramardini* bears

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<sup>133</sup> Goetz, 1955, p. 91.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., pp. 104-105.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 100.



an inscription with the date of this re-conversion – 1569-1570 A.D.<sup>136</sup> Noci dates the addition of the side windows, *dvārapāla*, and two pillars in front of the *garbhagrha* to this re-consecration. This cultic synergy, however, still continues in Udaipur to the present as the temple remains a site for worship by Śaivas, Saktas and Buddhists, the goddess interpreted in different ways by the three communities and priestly rituals altered to suit these multiple devotees.

More recent scholarship by Widorn, however, proposes a new chronology for the temple, in which she identifies the sanctum as the oldest part of the temple, dating to no earlier than the 9<sup>th</sup> century. She argues that the richness of the sanctum’s façade indicates “imperial patronage, either of a Chamba ruler or a local *Rāṇā*, who was affiliated with the Chamba dynasty.”<sup>137</sup> She therefore proposes “the date of origin of the *garbhagrha* and its decoration to around the reign of Sāhila-varman in the first half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>138</sup>

This association with Sāhila-varman is problematic; his historicity is unclear and we have no evidence to suppose that Udaipur was a part of Chamba’s territory at the time. Indeed, as I discuss in the next chapter, it is not clear if the ‘kingdom of Chamba’ was even established in this period, even if Sāhila-varman did move the capital of his kingdom from Bharmaur to Chamba in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. As I discuss in the next chapter, the first two centuries of Chamba’s establishment were politically turbulent, and that Chamba was conquered by King Anantadeva of Kashmir in the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. It might be possible to suggest that the far more pronounced presence of

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>137</sup> Widorn, 2007, p. 154.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

Kashmiri elements at the Mirkulā Devī temple – particularly the architectural niches on the lintel of the *garbhagrha* doorway – indicate that it was not Sāhila-varman who patronized the temple but the rulers of Kashmir, either directly or via their representatives in Chamba.<sup>139</sup>

### **The Portrait of an Artist**

An intriguing copper image of a man holding a devotional *diyā* or lamp in both hands in a gesture of worship was found in the Śakti Devī temple at Chattrarhi and is now preserved at the Bhuri Singh museum in Chamba. **(Pl. 2.30)** According to the oral tradition of the village of Chattrarhi, and there is no other evidence to support this identification, this sculpture is a portrait of the craftsman responsible for casting the image of Śakti Devī, that is, Merū-varman's master sculptor Gugga. The figure holding the lamp is depicted wearing a simple *dhotī* around his waist and is bare-chested. He wears no ornaments barring earrings and a necklace of beads. The modeling of the face is fine, and clearly expresses the emotions of spiritual faith and reverence.

It is tempting to believe that the figure might be Gugga. If so, we have an extremely rare instance where an artist is not only identified in the inscriptions of his works but in a sculpture, and placed as a devotee besides one of his creations. It is clear from his inscriptions that Merū-varman accorded his artist a great deal of respect – indeed

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<sup>139</sup> Kashmiri rule in Chamba was indirect, and Varmans remained on the throne of Chamba though they owed allegiance to the king of Kashmir.

Pal has argued that such a relationship was unprecedented in Indian art.<sup>140</sup> The depiction of Gugga in the garb of a priest might also be symbolically apt if we believe that a knowledge of the arts was a quality held in high esteem. An architect was required to have knowledge of both the physical and meta-physical worlds, with the accompanying ability to give form to meaning and truth. What we know of Gugga from his works might seem to epitomize Stella Kramrich's definition of the role of the artist – as the creator of works of art, as the purveyor or delight by which a world beyond the senses becomes visible, as someone who makes a work of art act effectively on behalf of his patron, and as a “creator-magician” and mediator between the divine and human realms.<sup>141</sup>

### **The Manimaheśa Temple**

Two stone temples in the Chaurāsi complex, the Narasimha and Maṇimaheśa temples, belong to a different temple typology from the wooden temples discussed above. They are built in the Nāgara style of temple architecture typical of North India, and are surmounted by a high curvilinear *śikhara*.<sup>142</sup> (Pl. 2.31, 2.32) They are much later

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<sup>140</sup> P. Pal, “Munificent Monarch and a Superior Sculptor – Eighth Century Chamba,” *Marg*, Vol. 39/2, pp. 9-24.

<sup>141</sup> S. Kramrich, “Artist, Patron and Public in India,” *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 3, May 1956, pp. 335-342.

<sup>142</sup> In Stella Kramrich's words, a temple is variously a “monument of manifestation” of an all-present Brahman, the shelter for an embodied divinity, as well as a place of transformation for the worshipper. A temple is thus both a symbolic and a functional monument. Both the *Nāgara* and *Drāviḍa* temple attempt to give symbolic shape to the presence of divinity, and create ways for the worshipper to approach the divine. However, the northern *Nāgara* temple and the southern *Drāviḍa* temple emphasize different conceptions of divinity in their morphological articulation of the temple, one that can be seen in their crowning element. The top of the *śikhara* of the *Nāgara* temple represents an articulation of cosmic abstraction in the form of

additions to the Chaurāsi complex and will be discussed in the following chapter, in conjunction with Chamba's other Nāgara temples. Certain basic issues of chronology, however, must be discussed in relation to 8<sup>th</sup> century Bharmaur because the bronze images associated with both temples have been ascribed to Merū-varman.

Merū-varman's image of the life-sized Nandī stands under a wood and slate-roofed open-sided pavilion facing the entrance to the Maṇimaheśa temple but some distance away.<sup>143</sup> In addition, Merū-varman's inscription on Nandī's pedestal refers to the original temple for which it was made, stating that he "had himself built a temple like Mount Merū..."<sup>144</sup>

This inscription is of limited importance for the dating of the standing architecture of Bharmaur. While the Nandī inscription indicates that Merū-varman built a temple dedicated to Śiva, it is clear that the present Maṇimaheśa temple has no "upper chamber delightful to the eye" nor the "various porches" to which the inscription refers. It is a monumental stone temple – its size emphasized by the high platform on which it stands – but one in which the structural ornamentation is unusually abstracted and compressed, giving the temple an unfinished appearance. It is visually apparent that the Maṇimaheśa temple is considerably later than the 8<sup>th</sup> century, and therefore could not have been built

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the square upper altar from the middle of which a cosmic pillar or *axis mundi* rises, crowned by an *āmlaka*. The Drāviḍa temple on the other hand emphasizes the function of the temple as shelter or palatial residence for the deity, and replaces the pillar and *āmlaka* form with a *kuta* or "hut" form. These forms reflect the idea of the deity as an abstract and omni-present power in the case of the former, and a highly personal conception of divinity in the case of the latter. For a discussion on the symbolic morphology of the Nāgara and Drāviḍa temple forms and rituals, see Michael W. Meister, "Altars and Shelters in India." *arp* (*Art and Archaeology Research Papers*) 16 (1979): 39.

<sup>143</sup> Images of the bull Nandī are placed facing towards the entrance of Śiva temples, in a symbolic representation the relationship between the devotee and the deity.

<sup>144</sup> Vogel, 1911, pp. 143-144.

by Merū-varman in its present form. The association between the bull and the present temple, however, has been hard to break and the Maṇimaheśa temple has repeatedly and loosely been dated either to the time of Merū-varman (c. 700 AD) or to the reign of Sāhila-varman, who moved the capital of the kingdom to Chamba in the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

It is worth speculating about what Merū-varman's original temple to Śiva might have looked like. Here it is useful to take a closer look at the Sanskrit of the inscription translated by Vogel. The inscription uses fairly detailed architectural terms to describe what would clearly have been Merū-varman's masterpiece – '*prāgrīva*', '*chandrasala*', '*maṇḍapa*' and '*navanābha*' – a specific architectural vocabulary which is part of a common terminology for later Nāgara temple architecture. It does not seem likely that these terms would have been used for a wooden temple resembling Merū-varman's other wooden temples. The use of the word '*navanābha*' in particular – clearly indicating a *navagarbha* or 9x9 square plan – would be hard to associate with such a wooden temple. All this suggests the possibility that an original temple in stone dedicated to Śiva once stood in Bharmaur, though it is not the presently standing Maṇimaheśa temple.

### **The Case of the Man-Lion**

The *Vaṃśāvalī* claims that Merū-varman had cast an image of Narasimha, the man-lion *avatāra* of Viṣṇu. While a bronze image of Narasimha exists at Bharmaur, it does not preserve a readable inscription.<sup>145</sup> The stone Nāgara temple in which the

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<sup>145</sup> Cunningham reported that "The figure is seated on a Singhasan or lion-throne, and is remarkable for its ferocious aspect and horrible wide jaws. There are traces of an inscription on the pedestal, but the letters

Narasimha image is currently housed is smaller than the Maṇimaheśa temple although the two structures share similarities in both plan and ornament. It has typically been dated to the 10<sup>th</sup> century by association with a copper plate inscription issued by Sāhila-varman's son Yugākāra-varman (r. 940-960).<sup>146</sup>

This plate has been damaged and all four corners are missing, resulting in a loss of information that Vogel tried to restore in his translation. Surprisingly for a Vaiṣṇava temple, the inscription begins with an invocation to Gaṇeśa and Śiva. After a lengthy ode to his parents, “the illustrious and divine Sāhila...and Naina,” Yugākāra-varman states that he, “the supreme prince, the king of kings, the supreme lord, the illustrious and divine Yugākāra-varman, the prosperous one,” from his residence in “Campaka,” for “the temple of Narasimha, founded by the Queen, the illustrious and divine Tribhuvanarekhā, is by a formal libation of water (?) this grant bestowed” in the Brahmapura district of his domain for the upkeep of his temple.<sup>147</sup> However, the most striking aspect of this copper plate – and one that has surprisingly been entirely overlooked by scholars – is that a separate piece of copper has been fastened on with clamps to the upper part of the plate, and it is only this segment of the inscription that refers to Narasimha.<sup>148</sup> It would seem that the name of Narasimha was added to the inscription at some point after the issue of the grant, suggesting that the temple to which the copper plate refers need not be the

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are so much decayed that I was obliged to give up the attempt to copy it.” Cunningham, *A.S.R.* Vol. XIV, 1882, p. 110.

No other scholar has mentioned seeing this inscription, and while the priest of the Narasimha temple would not remove the robes that were obscuring the pedestal, he claimed that there was no inscription on the pedestal. If there were signs of an inscription when Cunningham visited Bharmaur, they would seem to have become entirely obscured in the years since then.

<sup>146</sup> This is the first known copper-plate grant issued by a ruler of Chamba.

<sup>147</sup> Vogel, 1911, pp. 163-164.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

present Narasimha temple. This is supported by a visual analysis of the temple, and comparison with later stone temples built in the town of Chamba as will be discussed in the following chapter. V.C. Ohri notes,

“It is difficult to say with certainty whether the existing stone temple of the Nāgara type is of the same period.<sup>149</sup> The quality of the workmanship of the carvings seen on the existing stone temple is not of high order; it appears inferior than one expects of works related to that period unless we assume that the available artisans were not so talented. It seems more probable that the temple built in the period of Yugākāra-varman has also not survived and the temple in which the image of Narasimha is enshrined was constructed a few centuries later.”<sup>150</sup>

We therefore have no way of knowing which temple Queen Tribhuvanarekhā patronized in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, nor to which deity it was dedicated. Nor do we know who built the currently standing Nāgara temples of Bharmaur. I will argue in the next chapter that the later rulers of Chamba re-imagined and rebuilt an ‘original’ capital for themselves at Bharmaur many centuries after Merū-varman.

If the image of Narasimha was once enshrined in a wooden temple similar to the Lakṣaṇā Devī and Śakti Devī temples, the ill-fitting wooden panel fixed on top of the Lakṣaṇā Devī temple’s gable, depicting a four-headed Viṣṇu shown seated on Garuḍa, might have belonged to this Narasimha temple and been added to the Lakṣaṇā Devī temple during some later period renovation. Its presence does suggest that a wooden Vaiṣṇava shrine once stood in Bharmaur but it is difficult to date such a shrine on the evidence of this small and eroded panel.

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<sup>149</sup> The 10<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>150</sup> Ohri, 1991, p. 85.

What we can say is that the original temple to Narasimha would have been contemporaneous with the casting of the bronze image. The Bharmaur Narasimha is an arresting figure, shown seated on a throne with his legs akimbo, two of his four hands clasped under his chin, while the other two are held up above the shoulders. He is shown not in the common narrative mode of tearing apart the demon Hiraṇyakśipu with his bare claws – a depiction which also symbolically represents the rending apart of ignorance with knowledge – but rather as an iconic representation of restrained ferocity. His human body is powerful and broad shouldered, while his leonine head is encircled by a mane of fire. His eyes are wide open in an arresting glare and his mouth is agape. **(Pl. 2.33)**

The *Vaṃśāvalī*'s claim that Merū-varman commissioned an image of Narasimha led many scholars to date the bronze to the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, despite the fact that this claim cannot be substantiated. Ohri supports Goetz' contention that the almost identical sizes of the images of Narasimha and Merū-varman's Gaṇeśa indicate both shared a common workshop and date.<sup>151</sup> Ohri, however, argues that the Narasimha image is the work of an artist other than Gugga because Narasimha does not wear an ornament with disk pendants – an element that Gugga's four bronzes all share. Ohri states that the presence of this disk ornament is a signal characteristic of the artist, as well as a feature stylistically unique to Chamba as it is not seen in the sculpture of North India and Kashmir.<sup>152</sup> This argument, however, does not take into consideration that the places where a disk necklace could feature on the image – around his neck or hanging over the forehead – are obscured by his mane which covers both these areas. Ohri attempts to

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<sup>151</sup> H. Goetz, *The Early Wooden Temples of Chamba*, Lieden: E. J. Brill, 1955, pp. 83-84; Ohri, 1991, pp. 82-85.

<sup>152</sup> Ohri, 1991, p. 83-84.



narrow down the date of the Narasimha by comparing it to the Gaṇeśa image. Noting that the image of Gaṇeśa is broken at the knees, he argues that the damage occurred during the invasion of Bharmaur by the Kīras.<sup>153</sup> Therefore, if the two images were contemporaneous, the image of Narasimha would also have been damaged had it been in existence. He therefore suggests that the image of Narasimha was made soon after the attack, in the last quarter of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, about 20 years after the image of Gaṇeśa was made.

An 8<sup>th</sup> century date for the Narasimha image, however, does not quite fit into the religious context of the times. Merū-varman's four images of Nandī, Gaṇeśa, Lakṣaṇā Devī and Śakti Devī were clearly oriented towards the Śaiva and Śaktā cults, and the introduction of a Vaiṣṇava image into this milieu would seem out of place. A carved boulder located a mile and a half outside of Bharmaur provides an interesting perspective on what might have been the 'original' shrines of Bharmaur. A description of this boulder was published by Vogel because it is also accompanied by a short inscription in Tibetan which I will discuss in the next chapter.<sup>154</sup> The carving depicts a number of scattered *liṅgas* along with three deities – the four-armed Devī slaying the buffalo-demon, Śiva standing in front of his bull Nandī, and Gaṇeśa. These are the same deities associated with Merū-varman. The scattering of *liṅgas* on the carving is clearly a reference to the Chaurāsi complex in Bharmaur. Significantly, there is no Narasimha depicted. As I argue

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<sup>153</sup> Vogel, 1911, p. 57. It is unclear who exactly the *Kīras* were but historical consensus points towards their being a tribe of Tibetan origin who for a period would also hold sway over the area of Bajaura in Kullu, which was called Kīragram after them. For further information on the *Kīras* see J. Hutchison and J. Ph. Vogel, *History of the Punjab Hill States*, 1933, p. 281.

<sup>154</sup> Vogel, 1911, p. 252.

in the next chapter, the Bharmaur Narasimha belongs to a later chapter of Chamba's history, to a period of Kashmiri political domination in the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Merū-varman and the Brahmanical State Structure**

The early history of Bharmaur is one where worship of Śiva and the Goddess – both Brahmanical deities – dominated, an association is in keeping with the sacred geography of the Bharmaur region, its *Gaddī* population and its proximity to the peak of Maṇimaheśa.<sup>155</sup> Merū-varman's devotion to the Devī as the goddess of war is also clearly spelt out in the Śakti Devī inscription, in which Merū-varman expresses his gratitude to the goddess for his victory in battle. As deities, both Śiva and Devī are Brahmanical gods and in 8<sup>th</sup>-century Bharmaur we can begin to see the early stages of the expansion of a model for a Brahmanical state, with Merū-varman seeking divine legitimacy by associating with these icons. The primary characteristic of such a state is a mutually beneficial association between rulers and *brāhmaṇa* priests. In a Brahmanical state structure the priest was a vehicle for the legitimization of the ruler because he wrote the king's genealogy and sanctified his lineage. He was also a ritual specialist, the transmitter of the scriptures and the arbiter of all religious decisions and functions. The priest also served as a loyal intermediary between the king and the people, facilitating the conversion of the land to a stratified caste society. In return, priests were given land

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<sup>155</sup> The Śaiva and Shakta cults are closely associated in Hindu mythology, where the Goddess is seen as both the consort and female energy of Śiva. Gaṇeśa too is part of the Śaiva-Shakta 'family' as he is the son of Śiva and Pārvatī.

grants by rulers as a mechanism both to gain their unequivocal loyalty and to settle newly acquired lands.

Brahmanical Hinduism as a systematized form of ritual worship channeled through *brāhmaṇa* intermediaries was a relative latecomer to this region where local deities and cults held sway and continue to be popular to this day. *Nāga* or serpent worship was common, as were the cults of local village gods represented by votive masks or *mohras*, a feature unique to Himachal Pradesh.<sup>156</sup> Water also played a central role in the spiritual life of the inhabitants of the kingdom of Chamba. Carved, and in many cases inscribed, fountain stones or *panihārs* can be found in large numbers throughout the territory of the former kingdom, dating back to at least the 6<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>157</sup> These were commissioned by royalty as well as more humble patrons, erected at locally vital water sources, and dedicated to the Vedic god of water Varuṇa and, later, to Viṣṇu Śeṣaśāyī.<sup>158</sup> These carved slabs of stone, with a spout for directing the water, are not only a useful source of dates but also demonstrate a mechanism for establishing linkages between social groups within a village community, since their inscriptions were typically memorials or short lineages. Another vibrant aspect of the social and religious life of village communities were the hero stones erected to commemorate heroic deaths. Hero stones have been found in other parts of India from the Gupta period onwards. As is the case with the fountain slabs, the worship of these deified heroes is part of a tradition of ancestor worship. An inscription we have from the time of Merū-varman indicates that

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<sup>156</sup> These *moharās* can be seen at both the Lakṣaṇā Devī and Śakti Devī temples, where they are brought out for all important temple functions.

<sup>157</sup> H. Chauhan and S.M. Sethi, *Fountain Stone Slabs of Chamba*, Jaipur: Literary Circle, 2006, pp. 2-3.

<sup>158</sup> This is the form of Viṣṇu depicted sleeping on the coils of his serpent Shesha on the cosmic ocean.

this was a period when ancestor worship co-existed unambiguously with Brahmanical practices. The inscription of the chieftain Aṣāḍha-deva of Gum (ancient Śivapura) states that he built “*a shrine of Śaṅkaliśa (Śiva) in the midst of Śivapura – thanks to the service rendered to the multitude of the gods and the ancestral spirits.*”<sup>159</sup> Aṣāḍha-deva’s inscription also tells us that even chieftains in this period were beginning to use Brahmanical symbols, perhaps in order to compete with the king.

Merū-varman’s interest in espousing Brahmanical structures is also evident in the genealogical portions of his inscriptions where both his immediate ancestors and their descent from the *Sūryavaṃśa* (Solar) Line are mentioned. His Nandī inscription points towards his desire to associate with another symbol of the Brahmanical state – the stone Hindu temple of middle India. The architectural details mentioned and the fact that the temple faced east would seem to convey his awareness of ‘correct’ architectural principles and the *Vāstuśāstras* even though he may never have built a temple in stone.

It is also clear, however, that Bharmaur during Merū-varman’s rule was not a fully developed Brahmanical state. While the ruler invokes his lineage, he does not explicitly refer to himself as divine, a change that would begin with the very first extant inscription issued from Chamba, the 10<sup>th</sup> century copper plate of Yugākāra-varman. We can only speculate about the original form of the Śiva temple he built, but he also built two temples in a vernacular wooden idiom, a form that, save for the Mirkulā Devī temple,

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<sup>159</sup> Of the “shrine to Śaṅkaliśa,” nothing remains. Vogel, 1911, pp. 145-146.

would not be repeated in the territory of Chamba until the 17<sup>th</sup> century, under the sway of an entirely different religious movement.<sup>160</sup>

Rulers based in Chamba would instead make an explicit attempt to consolidate, centralize and control religious life in the centuries to follow. The purported ‘moving’ of the capital from Bharmaur to Chamba in the 10<sup>th</sup> century by Sāhila-varman is accompanied in the *Vaṃśāvalī* by a projected religious shift in which both Vaiṣṇavism and Brahmanical rituals were deliberately emphasized and increasingly relied upon. While remembering that the *Vaṃśāvalī* is a 17<sup>th</sup> century document, this shift in religious identity would also be reflected in the later building program of the new capital, with the construction of numerous temples in a ‘cosmopolitan’ Nāgara style tied to the distant plains of North India, a demonstration of the connection between temple architecture and the expression and nature of political power. Thapar has argued that wooden architecture is associated with the vernacular, while more permanent stone temples are associated with royal patronage; the former is tied to local building traditions and the latter to more widely spread centers of power:

“The royal temple receiving patronage from the king, was additionally symbolic of the political authority of the patron, and incorporated some of the local religious idiom... Acculturation was expressed in the changing styles of temple architecture and in icons, among other things. The local shrine was often built of wood because it was the traditional medium in the hills and the patrons were people of lesser status in the community.

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<sup>160</sup> The rulers of Chamba would return to building wooden temples after the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and two such examples, the Śakti Dehrā temple and the Devī -ri-Kothi temple, will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Such temples were superseded in the capital by the royal temple built of stone.”<sup>161</sup>

The wooden temples of Merū-varman were as much a product of royal patronage as the Nāgara temples of later Chamba rulers, but the image of kingship and the nature of the *rājā-prajā*<sup>162</sup> link sought to be projected in each case was very different. Merū-varman’s sculptures and temples, whether in their eclectic amalgamation of artistic traditions into a distinct local vision or in their use of vernacular wooden architecture, were an exercise in the positioning of the ruler and his ancestors in terms of a personal, religious and community identity and affiliation, identities which in the case of Merū-varman were firmly rooted in the local traditions of the land.

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<sup>161</sup> Romila Thapar, “The *Vaṃśāvalī* from Chamba: Reflections of a Historical Tradition,” *Himal*, March 2010.

<sup>162</sup> The link between the king and his people.

### **Chapter 3:**

#### **Chamba and the Formation of Dynastic Identity**

The town of Chamba is located on a plateau above the junction of the Rāvī River and the Sal or Saho tributary, in the lower portion of the Rāvī valley. At the edge of the plateau overlooking the Rāvī is a large *maidan* (a large, flat ground) around which the town has grown.<sup>163</sup> Located at a slight height from the *maidan* is the palace of the Chamba royal family, called the Akhand Chandi palace, which was built by Rājā Umed Singh in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Immediately next to the palace is a complex of six Nāgara style temples, collectively known as the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple complex. **(Pl. 3.1)** Scattered through the town as well are numerous other temples and shrines, also built in stone and in the Nāgara style. **(Fig. 3.1)** The temple that commands the highest stature in the town today is the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple, dedicated to Viṣṇu Chaturana, after which the temple complex is named. **(Pl. 3.2)**

The temples of Chamba played an integral role in the process of legitimizing the state in the later history of the kingdom as well as in the formulation and propagation of a dynastic identity, dating back to the *Vaṃśāvalī*'s proclaimed shifting of the capital to the town of Chamba. The analysis of the temples, however, is one which is confounded by chronological uncertainties and competing historical sources which often pull an understanding of the developments of state formation and dynastic identity in competing

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<sup>163</sup> The making of this ground into a *maidan* for ceremonial purposes was probably a product of the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

directions. The challenge of re-constructing Chamba's history from the 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards is to try to piece together what *was*, as well as what was aspired to.

### **Between Bharmaur and Chamba**

The period between the reign of Merū-varman and the 'shifting' of the capital to Chamba in the 10<sup>th</sup> century is shrouded in obscurity. We know from the *Vaṃśāvalī* that a significant break in sovereignty occurred in c. 800 A.D. during the rule of Lakṣmī-varman, when a Tibetan tribe called the Kīras killed the ruler and occupied his realm. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the images carved on a rock face just outside Bharmaur are accompanied by a one-line inscription in Tibetan that seems to confirm this invasion, and perhaps also indicates that the Kīras did in fact have influence in this area for some time. The inscription, translated by the Moravian missionary A. H. Francke, states only, "The august younger prince of the Garuḍa lords." Francke has associated this prince with a noble family from Shigartse or Gyantse.<sup>164</sup> Vogel mentions in addition that the village of Gosan, below Bharmaur on the same hill, there are some devotional inscriptions in Tibetan. Francke has ascribed his inscription on paleographic grounds to between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>165</sup>

The mouse in the ancestry of the Chamba rulers re-emerges right after the attack by the Kīras, when it is said that Lakṣmī-varman's infant son escaped the Kīra onslaught and was guarded by mice so that he could grow up and reclaim his patrimony. It is a

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<sup>164</sup> Vogel, 1911, p. 255.

<sup>165</sup> Vogel, 1911, pp. 252-255.



strong possibility that the appearance of this mouse in the chronicle points to an actual break in the lineage of the rulers and the collapse of the kingdom of Bharmaur, though the *Vaṃśāvalī* bridges this gap with Sāhila-varman's 'move' to Chamba, a significant shift that the genealogical narrative never explains. From the time of Sāhila-varman's son, Yugākāra-varman, who we know from an epigraph ruled from Chamba, the *Vaṃśāvalī* becomes a great deal more reliable in listing the names of successive kings, but paradoxically it also becomes a far less reliable tool in terms of the information that it provides about these rulers.

### **Sāhila-varman and his Historical Record**

The 'official' history of Chamba begins with the figure of Sāhila-varman who, according to the *Vaṃśāvalī*, ruled in the first half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and whom the *Vaṃśāvalī* credits with moving the capital of the kingdom of Bharmaur to the town of Chamba. He is believed to have conquered the lower Rāvī valley, thereby enabling the political and territorial expansion of the state and a corresponding rise in its prosperity. As such, the *Vaṃśāvalī* places a great deal of emphasis on him, giving us multiple narratives about his personality and exploits. Despite the rich history attributed to this mythic ruler – he is a household name in Chamba to this day – we have no historical record surviving from his rule.

What epigraphic references to him exist date from the copper plate grants issued by his successors. As we saw in the previous chapter, Yugākāra-varman refers to his

father in his copper plate deed granting land in Bharmaur for the support of the purported Narasimha temple at Bharmaur.<sup>166</sup> Another copper plate issued by the son of Sālavāhana-varman, Soma-varman, and dated 1056-66 A.D., eulogizes his ancestor and gives us insight into Sāhila-varman's accomplishments by, unusually for Chamba land deeds, citing highly specific incidents. As this copper plate dates to a little over 100 years after Sāhila-varman's death, we might assume that the living memory of the town could possibly lend it some measure of accuracy. After an invocation to Śiva, the inscription records the following about Sāhila-varman:<sup>167</sup>

“From his residence at the glorious Campaka, the highly devout king Somavarman, who is an ornament of the spotless house of the illustrious Shahilla of divine descent – that great jewel adorning the race of Mūṣana<sup>168</sup> – who was a fresh rain-cloud to extinguish in a moment the mighty blazing fire of the Kīra<sup>169</sup> forces, fanned, as by the wind, by the Lord of Durgara, assisted by the Saumatākās,<sup>170</sup> whose camp was manifestly crushed by the fearful frown produced on the slope of his forehead; whose alliance was humbly sought by the ruler of Trigarta,<sup>171</sup> subdued by force; who (Sāhilla) was asked the favor of bestowing royalty in return for services by his kinsmen, the Lord of Kulūta,<sup>172</sup> anxious to render him homage; who (Sāhilla) had the fortunate name of Karivarṣa (elephant-rain) on account of the continuous and stable generation of his posterity joyfully granted by the Lord Bhāskara (the sun-god), whose mind was contented

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<sup>166</sup> Vogel, 1911, pp. 163-164.

<sup>167</sup> Vogel, 1911, pp. 186-187.

<sup>168</sup> Here Vogel clarifies that he has interpreted the script to read *Mūṣana* as opposed to *Pausna*, which would then read ‘the Solar Race’.

<sup>169</sup> As discussed earlier, there is some debate about who exactly the *Kīras* were; V.C. Ohri speculates that they were a tribe of Tibetan origin, while the *Gazetteer of the Chamba State* ascribes to them a possible Jammu origin (Durgara being the ancient name of Jammu state), and yet others have ascribed Yarkandi origins to them. This is the same tribe that invaded Bharmaur during the reign of Lakṣmī-varman, the grandson of Merū-varman, occupying its territory for a few decades.

<sup>170</sup> Who the Saumatikas were is also uncertain, but according to the *Gazetteer of the Chamba State*, they were “most likely the inhabitants of Sumurta, in the state of Basohli to the west of the Rāvī.” *Gazetteer of the Chamba State 1904*, Punjab States Gazetteer Vol. XXII A, New Delhi: Indus Publishing Company, (reprinted 1996), p. 77.

<sup>171</sup> Ancient Kangra

<sup>172</sup> Ancient Kullu

with gladness by the gift of a multitude of elephants, whose flat cheeks were covered by a swarm of bees attracted by the scent of the rut-secretion, and which were bestowed in Kurukshetra at the time of an eclipse; who (Sāhilla) has made the circuit of the seven worlds fragrant by his fame painted with the ink-brushes which were the mouths of all the princes assembled (at Kurukshetra) on that occasion; who by his unequalled kindness and compassion combined with unsurpassed bravery, generosity, firmness and unfathomable profoundness, has impaired the fame of ... Karna, Yudhiṣṭira and such-like heroes....”<sup>173</sup>

A second copper plate inscription jointly issued by Soma-varman and his brother and successor Asaṭa-varman, while containing an almost identical version of the above eulogy to their famous ancestor, also mentions an additional detail of great importance:

“...who (Sāhilla) by the weight of battle had broken, like a wide-spreading tree, the large force of the Turuṣkas, on whom wounds had been inflicted...”<sup>174</sup>

We can glean from both these accounts that Sāhila-varman was known for his skill in warfare and defeated the combined forces of Bharmaur’s traditional enemies, the Kīras, who were assisted by the Saumātakas, for which feat he earned the obeisance of the rulers of Kangra and Kullu respectively. The second inscription mentions Sāhila-varman’s defeat of the ‘Turuskas’ – a term initially used to refer to Scythians but later used as a generic term for foreign invaders in general, and Muslims in particular. The first person to translate the inscription, Professor Kielhorn, speculated that this battle might have referred to one of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni’s

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<sup>173</sup> Vogel, 1911, pp. 184-187.

<sup>174</sup> Vogel, 1911, pp.193-197.

initial invasions at the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century but since, according to the *Vaṃśāvalī*, Sāhila and Asaṭa are separated by five reigns, Sāhila-varman could not have been a contemporary of Mahmud of Ghazni.<sup>175</sup> It is possible that the Turuṣkas referred to in the grant were a group of foreign mercenaries, perhaps employed by one of the neighboring hill rulers.<sup>176</sup>

By the middle of the 8<sup>th</sup> century a new dynasty arose in Central India that would, in the two centuries that followed, conquer and consolidate territory from the Himalayas to past the Narmada in Central India, and from the Punjab and Sindh to Bengal – a dynasty known as the Gurjaraśvara or, as they are called in a late inscription, the Gurjara-Pratīhāras.<sup>177</sup> Founded by an unknown hero named Nāgabhata, who rose out of the ashes of Yaśovarman's empire, the Gurjara-Pratīhāras came to be known, in the words of an Arab traveler, as “the greatest foes of the Mohammedan faith.”<sup>178</sup> As such they were responsible for stopping the progress of the Arab conquest beyond Sindh, which had been conquered in 712 A.D., and were engaged in campaigns against the Hindu Shahis based in Kabul as well as the Muslim rulers of Multan in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. The court poet Rājaśekhara of the Gurjara-Pratīhāra king Mahīpāla, who ruled in the 10<sup>th</sup> century from Kanauj, referred to his royal patron as the “*Māhārājādhirāja* of Āryāvarta”, describing the ruler's conquests

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<sup>175</sup> The reigns of Asaṭa's father and brother probably need to be added to this number; for details see Chapter 1, pp. 44-45.

<sup>176</sup> The use of foreign mercenaries was known at the time; Kalhaṇa, for example, mentions Turuṣka soldiers being used by Bhikṣharara, the pretender to the throne of Kashmir, against King Sussala in 1121 A.D. *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, Vol. VIII, pp. 885-919.

<sup>177</sup> The Gurjara-Pratīhāra dynasty, established from the 9<sup>th</sup> century at their center in Kanauj, is distinct from the 8<sup>th</sup> century Pratīhāra rulers of Rajasthan.

<sup>178</sup> R.C Majumdar et al., Eds., *The History and Culture of the Indian People, Vol. 4: The Age of Imperial Kanauj*, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, rep. 1988, p. xii.

to include the “Kulūtas” among others.<sup>179</sup> This reference to the kingdom of Kullu, the immediate neighbor of Chamba, points to the political control of the Gurjara-Pratīhāras in the immediate vicinity of Chamba. It is therefore possible to speculate that Sāhila-varman was for some time a feudatory of the Gurjara-Pratīhāras and assisted them in one of their campaigns against the ‘Turuṣkas’.

The copper plate also stresses Sāhila-varman’s wealth and piety, telling us that the king made the journey all the way to the North Indian plains, to Kurukshetra, on the occasion of a solar eclipse, where he gifted a multitude of elephants, presumably to a temple, earning him the honorific title of “elephant rain.”<sup>180</sup> This description suggests that Sāhila-varman was not cut off from the imperial heartland, but associated freely with other rulers who had congregated for this event.

### **The Mythology of Sāhila-varman and the Move to Chamba**

While the inscriptional evidence relating to the rule of Sāhila-varman is both limited and not contemporary with his rule, we also have two other sources, each with a distinct focus, which provide an account of his establishment of Chamba. The first of these is the *Vaṃśāvalī*. As I discussed in Chapter 1, the *Vaṃśāvalī* is more than just a dynastic roll; as a composition, it is a complex blend of historical fact, corroborated by inscriptional or artistic evidence, and a mirror to a dynasty’s historical aspirations. It is an

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>180</sup> The town of Kurukshetra is located in the present-day state of Haryana, and the district of Kurukshetra encompasses Thanesar, the former capital of King Harṣa. The pilgrimage to Kurukshetra’s Brahmā Sarovar tank on a Solar eclipse is a continuing tradition to this day.

attempt to create a cohesive and linear history for the kingdom of Chamba and its ruling dynasty from the immemorial past up to the time of its composition in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The *Vaṃśāvalī* also represents the creation and propagation of a cultural and religious identity, and as such the mention of spiritual endeavors occupies a prominent role in the genealogy. Invariably, the spiritual deeds and accomplishments of the figures who played a prominent role in the development of the kingdom, such as Merū-varman and Sāhila-varman, are dwelt upon in the *Vaṃśāvalī*.

As the founder of the ‘new’ capital, Sāhila-varman commands the most prominent position in the *Vaṃśāvalī*. Surprisingly, however, the genealogy does not emphasize or even acknowledge his motivations for moving the capital, nor the battles that the copper plate deeds of Soma-varman and Asaṭa-varman indicate he fought in order to conquer the territory where the town of Chamba is located, nor his victories against the Kīras and Turuṣkas. Rather, it is the power of his piety which is emphasized in the *Vaṃśāvalī*.

Following an established trope in the *Vaṃśāvalī* reserved for important figures, Sāhila-varman is introduced in the text as an expert practitioner of yoga, whose meditation and austerities bring to Bharmaur the eighty-four or ‘Chaurāsi’ *siddhas* after whom the Chaurāsi temple complex in Bharmaur is named. The *Vaṃśāvalī*, therefore, emphasizes here that the Chaurāsi complex in Bharmaur did not pre-date him. There is a contradiction here, as the text earlier narrates how Merū-varman’s father Ājya-varman’s austerities had caused “numberless *liṅgas* to appear all over” Bharmaur.<sup>181</sup> This shifting of the nature of these ‘Chaurāsi’ elements from *liṅgas* to *siddhas* can be interpreted as an

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<sup>181</sup> Vogel, 1911, p. 91.

attempt by the 17<sup>th</sup> century composers of the *Vaṃśāvalī* to use the figure of Sāhila-varman to symbolically ‘re-claim’ Bharmaur if, as is entirely possible, there was a break in lineage.

These superhuman tantric *yogīs* granted Sāhila-varman his unspoken wish – sons – and he fathered ten sons, as well as a daughter, Campāvatī, though there is no mention of the daughter in the *Vaṃśāvalī*. Sāhila-varman then proceeded to fight some unspecified “Kṣatriyas” (members of the warrior caste)<sup>182</sup> with the help of his ten sons and the *yogī* Carpaṭi, one of the *siddhas*. After defeating them he established the town of Chamba as his new capital on the bank of the river Irāvati.<sup>183</sup> The *Vaṃśāvalī* states that the town “was adorned with *champaka* (magnolia) trees and guarded by the goddess Campāvatī, having slain the buffalo and others.”<sup>184</sup>

### **Espousing a Vaiṣṇava Identity**

The *Vaṃśāvalī* then recounts a second, also fantastical, tale associated with Sāhila-varman. It is said that Sāhila-varman founded a temple to Viṣṇu at Chamba, and he wished to install a unique image in the *garbhagrha*, one that would be representative of the royal family. The king gathered nine of his ten sons and sent them on a long journey to bring him a stone specifically from the Vindhya Mountains to fashion an image of Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa (Viṣṇu). The reference to the Vindhya mountains is

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<sup>182</sup> These were most probably the chieftains who held sway over the territory of the town of Chamba, if indeed Sāhila-varman did establish the new capital in the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>183</sup> The ancient name of the Rāvī river.

<sup>184</sup> Vogel, 1911, Verse 73, p. 90. For a discussion of this verse and the naming of the town of Chamba, see Vogel, 1911, Chapter 1, p. 23.

significant. The Vindhya are traditionally the dividing mark between North and South India, so in a sense Sāhila-varman was sending his sons on what was known to be a perilous journey to the ends of the known world. His sons returned from the journey bearing a large white stone, presumably marble, but upon examining it king's guru exclaimed, "This stone is not suitable for an image of Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa. Inside it is a frog."<sup>185</sup> The king then ordered images, "of Śaṅkara, Devī and Gaṇapati", to be made of this stone – thereby sending the message that images of Śiva and his 'family' did not have the same stature for him. This is the first mention in the *Vaṃśāvalī* of a change in the theistic affiliation of the royal family of Chamba who had, in the time of Merū-varman, been devout followers of Śiva and Śakti.

Sāhila-varman then installed these lesser images of Śiva, Devī and Gaṇeśa in the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple he had built, and sent his sons to procure another stone for the image of the main deity.<sup>186</sup> The *Vaṃśāvalī* says that the sons managed to get the stone but were ambushed and killed by robbers on their way back home. Sāhila-varman then sent his eldest son and heir, Yugākāra-varman, called "the archer",<sup>187</sup> to slay the robbers and retrieve the stone, both of which he did successfully, thereby also proving his valor and worthiness as future king. Sāhila-varman then had the image of Viṣṇu made, then consecrated in the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple, which from then on became the dynastic temple of the Chamba royal family. After establishing the temple, Sāhila-varman

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<sup>185</sup> Vogel, 1911, p. 93, verse 78-79.

<sup>186</sup> These images, however, are no longer in the sanctum of the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple.

<sup>187</sup> Vogel, 1911, p. 93. The term "the archer" immediately identifies him as a heroic figure in the image of other great archers from the Indian epics, such as Arjuna of the Mahābhārata, or Rāma of the Rāmāyaṇa, both of whom performed acts of heroic archery early in their careers.



installed Yugākāra as his successor and left the town to devote the rest of his life to asceticism.<sup>188</sup>

### **The Sacrifices of Sāhila-varman**

Two other stories associated with the personality and rule of Sāhila-varman are not narrated in the *Vaṃśāvalī* but belong to the oral tradition of Chamba. The first of these concerns the wife of Sāhila-varman, who is named “Nenna” in her son Yugākāra-varman’s inscription,<sup>189</sup> and commonly known as Naina *Devī*. It is believed that once Sāhila-varman established his capital at Chamba, the town was discovered to have no source of drinking water. The Rājā constructed a water-course to bring the water of a nearby stream to the town, but the waters refused to enter the channel. There was clearly a water spirit which would need to be propitiated in order to bring water to the town or else the capital would be unviable. Having consulted several learned *brāhmaṇas*, Sāhila was told that he would need to sacrifice his son in order to bring water to the inhabitants of the new capital. Hearing this, his wife offered to sacrifice her life in her son’s stead. She went to where the channel joined the stream accompanied by her attendants, bare-headed and without ornaments like a *sati*, and there she was buried alive in a pit. It is said that water began to enter the channel as soon as the pit was filled with earth, and has never ceased to flow since.

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<sup>188</sup> Vogel, 1911, p. 94.

<sup>189</sup> Vogel, 1911, pp. 163-164.

This story about Naina Devī (or Suī Mata, as she came to be known after her death) could certainly be true, as the sacrifice of women for water was not an unknown practice in the hills at the time.<sup>190</sup> This act of selfless sacrifice by the queen is honored every year in the town of Chamba, at the *Suī Melā* or festival, when the women of the town gather together at the spot where she is believed to have died, up on the hill overlooking the town. Suī Mata's memory is marked by a bronze *moharā* or mask, and her head emerges from the ground mirroring the manner of her death. **(Pl. 3.3)** *Moharās* are traditional bronze masks that are prevalent throughout Himachal Pradesh but are not known outside the state. They represent both Brahmanical gods as well as the local *devatās* (deities) of different villages, and are treated as 'living deities' in ritual life. For example, at seasonal festivals across the state these *mohras* are carried in procession to different villages so that the deities too can mingle and join in the festivities.<sup>191</sup> The representation of Sui Mata as a *moharā* represents her elevation to the rank of a local *devatā* in Chamba. During the festival, the women of the town sing traditional Chambyali folk songs commemorating their queen. Interestingly, these songs do not evade the horror of her death, but rather seek to compress time and re-create it anew, so that the extent of her sacrifice is not forgotten.<sup>192</sup> This festival is one of the most important annual events in Chamba, and its popularity was such that even a Christian hymn was composed on the subject by missionaries in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. **(Appendix I)**

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<sup>190</sup> Hutchison and Vogel, 1933, p. 284.

<sup>191</sup> These deities are carried on palanquins, accompanied by the hereditary priests of their shrine and musicians, as well as the deity's associated 'goor' or spirit medium, a person who still enjoys high stature in village communities.

<sup>192</sup> A particularly famous song, for example, details the queen's fright as the earth is filled into her grave, and she implores those around her to not cover her ankles as her anklets will not be able to chime, to not cover her clothes, as they are new, to not cover her breasts as her youngest son still needs her milk, and so on.

The second story concerns Sāhila-varman's only daughter, Campāvatī, after whom, according to one legend, the town of Chamba was named.<sup>193</sup> It is said that Sāhila-varman was greatly attached to his daughter. Campāvatī had a spiritual bent of mind and used to visit the home of a *sādhū* for religious instruction. Her father grew suspicious of the relationship between the girl and the *sādhū*. He followed her to the *sādhū*'s home one day, drawn sword in hand. When he entered the *sādhū*'s house, however, he found it utterly still, with no sign of either the *sādhū* or Campāvatī. A celestial voice is said to have broken the silence. It told the king that his daughter had been transported to a heavenly realm, and that he would never see her again, since he had doubted her pure-mindedness. The voice instructed the king to build a temple to his daughter at the spot where he stood, to atone for his sin, and to prevent further calamities from breaking upon his royal house. Sāhila-varman duly built a temple at the spot, called the Campāvatī temple, and princess Campāvatī, the pure of heart, is worshipped within in the form of a *moharā* mask of the goddess Durgā. **(Pl. 3.4)** The Campāvatī temple is considered the family temple of the Rājās of Chamba to this day – as opposed to the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple, which is the dynastic temple of the kings of Chamba – and a large fair or *mela* is organized at the temple every year in the month of Baisakh.

### **Collective Memory and Sacred Geography**

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<sup>193</sup> Although according to the *Vaṃśāvalī*, the town was named after a grove of Campaka (Magnolia) trees that grew there. There is no evidence of this grove in the present.

These founding legends of Chamba are significant in several respects as they pertain to the establishment of the capital of the kingdom. According to both the oral tradition and the textual narrative of the *Vaṃśāvalī*, Sāhila-varman paid a very heavy personal price for the establishment of his new capital. Indeed, he lost his entire family, barring his heir Yugākāra-varman, for the religious sanctity and economic viability of the town. The founding of Chamba is thus inextricably intertwined with the person of Sāhila-varman and the deification of his queen and daughter. The momentous scale of his personal loss is an affirmation in the collective public memory that the town was indeed established during his reign. The role of these narratives – the textual mythology of the *Vaṃśāvalī* as well as the oral tradition of Chamba – is integral to the formation of a collective memory and a community's perception of time, place and history.

“Myth is at one level a straightforward story, a narrative; at another level it reflects the integrating values around which societies are organized. It codifies belief, safeguards morality, vouches for the efficiency of the ritual and provides social norms. It is a rationalization of man's activity in the past although the expression may take on non-rational forms. It remains socially important as long as it is a charter of belief, but becomes ineffective when seen as a myth. As a charter of belief it serves to protect cultural continuity and provides through its theme a point of cultural equilibrium. In a historical tradition therefore the themes of myths act as factors of continuity.”<sup>194</sup>

For the inhabitants of Chamba, these stories tell them who they are as well as where they are from, as they are rooted within a specific local sacred geography, one that moves between the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple, the Campāvatī temple and the *moharāmask*

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<sup>194</sup> R. Thapar, “Origin Myths and Early Indian Historical Tradition” in *Cultural Pasts*, 2003, p. 756.

of Sui Mata. Indeed, they are so deeply embedded in the public consciousness of the Chamba community that they are never questioned as ‘facts’.

As I discussed in the case of the *Vaṃśāvalī* in Chapter 1, history consists of both fact and imagination, and rulers and commoners alike have long been aware of the power of myths and legends in generating sentiments of loyalty, identity and home. As Wendy Doniger has argued, myth has been called the ‘smoke of history’. She goes on to write that the goal of scholarship is to “balance the smoke of myth with the fire of historical events, as well as to demonstrate how myths too become fires when they do not merely respond to historical events but drive them. Ideas are facts too...For we are what we imagine, as much as what we do.”<sup>195</sup> The importance of interpreting this historical memory is particularly important for the analysis of the material history of Chamba, for as we shall see, many of the temples currently standing in Chamba have been ascribed an antiquity by being attributed to Sāhila-varman on the weight of the *Vaṃśāvalī* and the oral tradition. Examining the morphology of the temples and juxtaposing it with the reign of Sāhila-varman, however, suggests that these temples in their present form are not contemporary with his reign.

### **The Kashmiri Interregnum in Chamba**

The *Vaṃśāvalī* provides a smooth and stable progression for the kingdom of Chamba for several centuries after Sāhila-varman establishes the new capital, one which

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<sup>195</sup> Doniger, 2009, p. 24.

is unmarred by political disruptions from outside the kingdom or within it. The epigraphic record in conjunction with the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, the chronicle of the kings of Kashmir, however, paints a different, more turbulent picture. The existence of king Soma-varman whose copper plate grants were discussed above, as well as his father, Sālavāhana-varman, are proven by the copper plate deeds that they issued, and we know that they ruled in succession from c. 1040 A.D to 1080 A.D. But both these figures are omitted from the *Vaṃśāvalī*, which mentions only the reign of Soma-varman's brother Asaṭa-varman.

This omission is explained by the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, which tells us that King Anantadeva of Kashmir (r. 1028-1064) attacked Chamba sometime between 1050 A.D. and 1060 A.D. as part of his plan to lay claim to the hill tracts bordering his kingdom as far as the banks of the Rāvī.<sup>196</sup> The *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* mentions that Chamba was then under the rule of a *rājā* named Sala – also called Sālavāhana-varman – who refused to give his allegiance to Ananta Dev, with the result that he was defeated in battle and probably killed. After defeating Sala, the king of Kashmir is said to have installed another local ruler in his place, and from the copper plates issued at the time, it is clear that this was Sala's son Soma-varman.<sup>197</sup>

After Kashmir's conquest of Chamba, there followed a period of Kashmiri supremacy in the territory of Chamba which lasted for over half a century. There are references to the rulers of Chamba in the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* until c. 1122 A.D., and Kalhaṇa mentions visits to the Kashmir court by the Chamba rulers Asaṭa-varman, Jasaṭa-varman

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<sup>196</sup> *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, A. Stein trans., Vol. II, p. 218.

<sup>197</sup> Vogel, 1911, pp. 187-197.

and Udaya-varman in 1087-88 A.D., 1101 A.D., and 1122 A.D. respectively. The last references to Chamba occur in Kalhaṇa's accounts of the Lohara ruler of Kashmir, Sussala's campaign against the chiefs of the Chinab and Rāvī valleys. These chiefs had supported the pretender to the throne of Kashmir, Bhikṣācara, to whom the Chamba rulers were related by marriage.<sup>198</sup> Kalhaṇa praises the king Sussala by writing that he "piously preserved in the enemy's territory Brahmapuri and its temples, and thus earned the original merit of these foundations."<sup>199</sup> The Brahmapuri mentioned here is clearly Bharmaur.

The *Vaṃśāvalī*'s 17<sup>th</sup> century composer deliberately left out this period of Kashmiri supremacy in Chamba, seeing it as a period of both political turmoil and compromised sovereignty, and therefore best omitted from his perspective in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Interestingly, however, while it seems clear that Chamba was dependent on Kashmir for these decades, the rulers of Chamba in this period never acknowledged Kashmiri suzerainty in any of their records, but rather assumed the titles of independent kings. Similarly, Kalhaṇa's references to these rulers as well use titles indicating 'king' rather than the term *sāmanta* (vassal). It therefore seems clear that the Chamba rulers governed their own territory and subjects, perhaps having to pay tribute or provide military service to the rulers of Kashmir to demonstrate allegiance.

### **Art During the Kashmiri Phase**

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<sup>198</sup> The great-grandson of Anantadeva, who was related to the Chamba royal family through Anantadeva's marriage to a Chamba princess; M. Postel et al., 1985, p. 99.

<sup>199</sup> *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, A. Stein trans., Vol. II, p. 628.

The evidence of Kashmir's political sway in the 11<sup>th</sup> and early 12<sup>th</sup> centuries can be discerned in this period of Chamba's visual history. The style and iconography of a bronze image of the god Viṣṇu as Vaikuṇṭha (the four-headed form of Viṣṇu depicting his incarnations as Varāha and Narasimha, as well as in a fierce, Kapila, and peaceable, Vāsudeva, form) of extremely fine quality, located in the Hari Rāī temple in Chamba clearly indicates heightened interaction with Kashmir. **(Pl. 3.5)** The Vaikuṇṭha form of Viṣṇu was particularly popular in Kashmir at this time.

In addition, certain striking parallels between this image and the Bharmaur Narasimha lead to the conclusion that the Narasimha image was made at about the same time. **(Pl. 3.6)** In contrast to Merū-varman's four sculptures, both the Vaikuṇṭha and Narasimha appear to be made of an alloy that contains more copper as they have a distinctive yellow luster. There are also clear similarities in the way their garments are depicted – both wear a tightly wrapped *dhotī* that covers the right leg up to the calf, while the left leg is covered only till the thigh, a stylistic feature commonly seen in the sculpture of Kashmir. The modeling of the fingers in both images, with their distinctive backward curve, is also identical, but quite different from that of Gugga's sculptures. The orderly curls into which Narasimha's mane is arranged is mirrored in the long ringlets falling to the shoulders of Viṣṇu's Kapila face.

Pratapaditya Pal has argued that the image of Hari Rāī can be dated to ca. 850-950 AD, by comparing it to bronzes of Viṣṇu Vaikuṇṭha found at sites such as the Avantisvāmin temple at Avantipur.<sup>200</sup> **(Pl. 3.7)** The political context of Chamba in the

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<sup>200</sup> Pal, 1986, p. 32.



11<sup>th</sup> century, however, makes this a more viable time period for the creation of these two images. In addition, the copper plate deed issued by Soma-varman and Asaṭa-varman discussed above records the donation of lands in various villages around the capital to two temples, one dedicated to ‘Hari’ (Viṣṇu) and one to Śiva.<sup>201</sup> While the specific Śiva temple referenced in the deed is uncertain, it is plausible that the Viṣṇu temple is the one in which this image of Hari Rāi would have been placed.

This image of Hari Rāi currently resides in a Nāgara temple known as the Hari Rāi temple. However, whether the standing structure can also be conclusively dated to the 11<sup>th</sup> century is a question that will be explored later in this chapter. The Gazetteer of Chamba State claims that the Hari Rāi temple was erected by an individual named ‘Sālākara’<sup>202</sup> although the exact basis for this claim is unclear. However if, as seems likely, ‘Sālākara’ did indeed build the temple, he is none other than Sālavāhana-varman, the name by which Soma-varman and Asaṭa-varman also refer to their father in their joint copper plate deed.<sup>203</sup> Significantly, at the time of publishing the inscriptions, Vogel mentioned that this land deed was still in the joint possession of the Hari Rāi and Campāvatī temples in Chamba.<sup>204</sup> This strongly suggests that the Hari Rāi temple in its original form dated to the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>205</sup>

No copper plate deeds exist from the time of Chamba’s establishment and Sāhila-varman’s rule, nor any relating to his construction of the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa or Campāvatī temples. While we cannot say with any certainty that he built these temples or

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<sup>201</sup> Vogel, 1911, p. 196.

<sup>202</sup> *Gazetteer of the Chamba State 1904*, p. 79.

<sup>203</sup> Vogel, 1911, p. 196, Line 23.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>205</sup> The Hari Rāi temple as it currently stands, however, has been extensively renovated at a later date.

commissioned the idol of Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa as the *Vaṃśāvalī* and oral tradition would have us believe, it is clear from the bronze images of Hari Rāī and Narasimha that from the time of Anantadeva's 11<sup>th</sup>-century conquest, the cult of Viṣṇu enjoyed a new stature in Chamba, and that the political relationship with Kashmir was at least partially responsible for the introduction of Vaiṣṇava iconography into the kingdom.

### **Political Consolidation and the Rānās of Chamba**

As we have seen, the period following the founding of Chamba was a turbulent one. While the Rājatarāṅgiṇī provides invaluable information for re-creating one aspect of the history of Chamba – its interaction with neighboring powers – we also have a large body of inscriptions from the state to help us gain some insight into the consolidation of the state's territories and polity. Fifty inscriptions have been recovered in the state dating from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and another eighty from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This is a far greater number than have been found in any other kingdom of the Western Himalayas, including Kullu, Kangra and Kashmir. The reason for the survival of these inscriptions, where the majority of those of Chamba's neighbors have been lost to history, must lie in Chamba's more sheltered position between the ranges of the Dhauladhar and Pir Panjal ranges, and at a slight remove from major trade routes to the plains of north India, Afghanistan and Central Asia. These inscriptions comprise rock inscriptions, beautifully carved and ornamented fountain slab inscriptions (*panihārs*), image inscriptions and copper plate inscriptions, and deal with land grants, consecrations and eulogies.

We know from the *Vaṃśāvalī* that the territory that Sāhila-varman conquered along the way to Chamba, as well as Chamba itself, was ruled by “kṣatriyas” whom he defeated in battle. These members of the warrior caste were the *Rāṇās* of small principalities, like Aṣāḍha-deva of Gum, scattered across the territory of Chamba, and we know of their existence from the body of inscriptions that have been recovered from different parts of the kingdom. Of the different types of inscriptions found in Chamba, those most closely associated with the *Rāṇās* are the *panihārs*. **(Pl. 3.8)** As Vogel writes, “We may assume that at most places where fountain slabs occur, there once stood the stronghold of a *Rāṇā*.”<sup>206</sup> Twenty-one out of the fifty inscriptions recovered till the 13<sup>th</sup> century in Chamba are *panihārs*, though not all can be dated with any certainty.

The fountain stone slabs of Chamba are concentrated in two areas, which we can interpret as corresponding to the areas where *Rāṇās* held the strongest hold. The first is in the central Rāvī river valley of which the towns of Chamba and Bharmaur, as well as the village of Chhatrarhi are a part. The second comprises the two most remote valleys of the kingdom of Chamba, the Pangi and Churah wazarats. Perhaps not surprisingly, it is in these two valleys, furthest away from the center of the state, that fountain stones are found in the greatest number, donated by chieftains or *Rāṇās* who were dependent on the *rājās* of Chamba but clearly still enjoyed a degree of autonomy. Unlike the *panihārs* of the Rāvī valley which tend to be devoid of inscriptions, these are inscribed with the names of the donors, and the names of their fathers and grandfathers as well, typically along with that of the *rājā* to whom they owed allegiance.<sup>207</sup> An examination of these

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<sup>206</sup> Vogel, 1911, p.34.

<sup>207</sup> As such they have been used to fix the year of accession of several Chamba rulers.

inscriptions has provided a clear indication of when these two wazarats of Chamba were incorporated into the kingdom. The fountain stones from villages in Churah, for example, tell us that till the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century Churah was contested between the states of Chamba and Balauria,<sup>208</sup> moving back and forth between the two states, and it is only at the end of the century that it became fully assimilated into the state of Chamba. The even more remote valley of Pangī is revealed to have been a part of Tibet until the 12<sup>th</sup> century when it became a part of Chamba. *panihārs*, however, are not the only art form associated with the Rāṇās of Chamba.

### **Rāṇā Bhogata's Temples and Inscription**

In the Churah wizārat, in a tiny village called Swaim in the Himgiri *pargana*, about 80 kilometers from Chamba, stands a partially ruined temple dedicated to Śiva and a small shrine dedicated to the goddess Durgā. This temple site is unmatched in the territory of the kingdom in both antiquity and refinement of stone sculpture and ornament. The temples are located in the middle of the village and enclosed within a boundary wall. Both structures are built of stone and modern concrete, and have been extensively rebuilt. At first glance, little about the standing structures indicates the antiquity of the site. Framed within the concrete of the Śiva temple, however, is the intact upper segment of the doorframe of the stone temple that once stood at the site. Scattered around the compound, propped against the two temples, and cemented into the new stone wall surrounding the complex are numerous finely-hewn images made of stone as well.

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<sup>208</sup> This is the ancient name of Basohli state.

The major images depict Viṣṇu Vaiṣṇuṭha, Kārtikeya, Gaṇeśa, Varāha, Narasiṃha, Durgā and Bhairava, among others. There is also an enormous *āmlaka* – clearly a remnant of a fairly large Nāgara temple – as well as smaller ones, an *ākāśaliṅga* emerging out of an *āmlaka* and Śiva-*liṅgas* of various sizes. All the sculpture at the site seems to belong to at least two distinct periods of artistic activity.

The main temple at the site is dedicated to Śiva, and has a large stone *liṅga* set within the sanctum. Of the architectural fragments, only the lintel of the doorframe remains intact and it consists of four bands or *śākhās*, in a Gupta-era T-shape, with alternating bands of figural and geometric and vegetal patterns, similar to those seen at Masrur as well as at the wooden temples of Lakṣaṇā Devī and Śakti Devī. **(Pl. 3.9)** One the lower edges of the “T” is a seated male figure at either end, holding a vase. The uppermost *śākhā* consists of a vegetal pattern emanating from a vase placed at the center. The second *śākhā* from the top has a row of flying *gandharvas* holding up a trefoil crown at the center of the band which are similar to the carved wooden *śākhā* of the outer doorway of the 8<sup>th</sup> century Lakṣaṇā Devī temple at Bharmaur, as well as the mid-8<sup>th</sup> century stone doorway of the temple at Masrur in Kangra district. **(Pl. 3.10, 3.11)** The third *śākhā* consists of a geometric pattern of florettes set in a repeating diamond-shaped pattern. The lowermost band, like the upper one, consists of a vegetal pattern emanating from the hands of a small seated female figure placed over the center of the doorway. In the compound is another stone fragment which would also have belonged to a doorway *śākhā*, which depicts a pair of *kinnaras* – fantastical creatures with human heads and animal bodies, from whose winged torsos emanate elaborate scrolled plumage. These are

figures that we also see in the earliest fountain stones of Chamba. All the bands are finely carved in high relief. The similarity to the doorways of the Lakṣaṇā and Śakti Devī temples in the composition, iconography and style of this doorway indicates a date no later than the 9<sup>th</sup> century for the original temple, making these the oldest extant stone architectural temple fragments in the territory of Chamba, though they date from a time before the area of Swaim came under the control of Chamba.<sup>209</sup>

On either side of the doorway, are two standing female figures that have also been embedded into the side walls with cement. The one on the left is partially destroyed, while the one on the right is in a better state of preservation. The hand of the figure on the right is still preserved and shows her holding a water pot, and the two figures must be the river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna although their identifying *vāhanas* are missing. Also in the porch of the temple is an arresting life-sized female figure, most probably Śiva's consort Pārvatī, seated on a lotus. **(Pl. 3.12)** The goddess is seated with her legs crossed and two of her four hands are held in her lap in a posture of meditation. Her face is remarkably serene. One remaining hand is held up to her side but it is unclear what she is holding. The goddess has a rounded face with full lips, a broad nose and a prominent chin, as well as a heavy figure with large breasts – proportions that are entirely different from the figures of the two river goddesses. Her ornaments too are different and simpler, with broad wrist bands, large round earrings, and a necklace that falls above her breasts. The folds and design of her lower garment are visible to her ankles. The most intricately wrought part of the image is the hair, a portion of which is tied in a knot at the top of the

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<sup>209</sup> The presence of *ākāśalinga* finials in the temple compound also supports an 8<sup>th</sup> century dating. See M.A. Dhaky, 'ākāśalinga Finial,' *Artibus Asiae* 36, no. 4, 1974, pp. 307-315.

head with ringlets cascading down the shoulders and a row of curls on the forehead that meet in a heart-shape in the center of the forehead. In the Himachal State Museum in Shimla is a stone sculpture of Durgā seated on her lion (*Simhavāhinī*) to which the Swaim *Devī* bears a striking similarity in the proportion and modeling of the figure if not the face. **(Pl. 3.13)** The Shimla Durgā was recovered from one of the temples at Hatkoti in Shimla District in eastern Himachal, and has been dated to the 8<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>210</sup>

The small shrine at Swaim dedicated to Durgā contains a sanctum in which the image of an eight-armed (*Aṣṭabhuji*) Durgā is placed. Outside the shrine stands her lion *vāhana*, and here too there is a similarity between the Hatkoti Durgā's lion and the Swaim lion, though the plumed and arched tail of the latter is different. **(Pl. 3.14)** The image of the Durgā stands over three feet high and is carved on one side of a slab of stone rather than in the round. **(Pl. 3.15)** Durgā is depicted in the act of slaying demons and stands in the 'archer pose', with one leg forward and bent at the knee, which is the favorite position of deities in their angry mood. The goddess wears a diadem, large circular earrings and numerous other ornaments including necklaces, wrist and arm ornaments and a girdle with disk ornaments. On her forehead is a prominent third eye. Her features, however, have exactly the same broad nose, prominent chin and full lips of the *Devī* outside the Śiva temple. In her many hands, she holds a trident – with a demon struggling on its tips, attempting to strike a blow at the goddess with his sword – as well as a sword, thunderbolt, mace, bell and bow. With her eighth hand she grasps another demon bearing sword and shield. These two demons are the Asura (demon) kings Śumbha and Niśumbha, whose defeat is one the *Devī*'s most notorious deeds.

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<sup>210</sup> Himachal State Museum, Shimla, image label.

The pedestal of the image is unique, as the feet of the goddess are hidden behind a balustrade supported by eight dwarf pilasters with a cross-shaped fences running between them. Between the two central pilasters is a small seated male figure. It is unclear who the image represents; it is not a *gana* as might be expected. It occupies the position commonly seen in sculptures of Sūrya for his charioteer, but there are no animals depicted here drawing a chariot. It is possible that the figure could be a representation of the donor, Rājānaka Bhogata, but typically donors are shown in attitudes conveying greater respect. Below the balustrade is the pedestal of the image which is no less unique. It depicts two lions – the *Devī*'s *vāhana* being a lion – in the act of demolishing the *Devī*'s other great foe, Mahiṣa the buffalo demon. The pedestal is therefore like an animated version of the traditional lion throne.

The image of the deity has an inscription engraved at the base of its pedestal which Vogel has dated to the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> centuries based on paleographical evidence.<sup>211</sup> The inscription records the making of the image of Durgā by the order of *Rāṇā* Bhogata, the son of Somata, who was born in the district of Kishkinda.<sup>212</sup> This inscription is the earliest document in which the word 'Rājānaka' (*Rāṇā* or chieftain) occurs and it is clear that Bhogata was the hereditary *Rāṇā* of this region. In his translation of the inscription, Vogel writes that its characters indicate that it must date from the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, corroborating the stylistic dating of the Śiva temple lintel and Devī image.

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<sup>211</sup> Vogel, 1911, p. 151. Vogel comments that the characters bear some similarity to those in the inscriptions of Merū-varman, but of a slightly later stage of development.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., p. 152. Kishkinda is in all likelihood the ancient name of the Himgiri pargana, but the name does not survive into the present.



In contrast to the Śaiva-Śaktā iconography of the 8<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> century Śiva temple and Durgā shrine, the other sculptures scattered around the compound are overwhelmingly Vaiṣṇava, and are stylistically different. They include a standing Garuḍa, two images of a seated Narasimha, Varāha rescuing the earth, two images of Gaṇeśa, and a large six-headed Kārtikeya seated on his peacock *vāhana*. (Pl. 3.16, 3.17, 3.18) None of the images lying in the Swaim compound is carved in the round.

The most striking of these exterior sculptures is a large Viṣṇu Vaikuṇṭha seated on Garuḍa, who supports his feet on his outstretched hands. (Pl. 3.19) This image is compositionally identical to another image of Viṣṇu Vaikuṇṭha currently in the Bhuri Singh Museum in Chamba, which was found in the village of Devī-rī-Koṭhī, although the style of the carving displays a different idiom in keeping with its location in the Pangī wazarat. (Pl. 3.20) The Devī-rī-Koṭhī Vaikuṇṭha is inscribed with the name of the patron – another local *Rāṇā* – and is dated 1159-61 A.D.<sup>213</sup> The Devī-rī-Koṭhī image has sharper features, and the sculpting of the body is less naturalistic and more linear than the Swaim image, perhaps indicative of a later date.

Also embedded in the wall at Swaim is a Bhairava face with distinctly Buddhist iconography, as well as the full architectural fragment surrounding the *bhadramukha* Śiva that would have belonged to the original temple, and been placed above the *śukanāsa*. (Pl. 3.21) The size of this fragment suggests that the Nāgara temple to which it belonged was a large one. The other images outside the temple have shallower and less detailed carving, and seem to belong to a later date. It is possible to speculate that a Vaiṣṇava

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<sup>213</sup> Vogel, 1911, p. 206.

temple was added to the complex in the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> century, to which the Vaikuṇṭha image belonged and to which the others were added over a period of time. However, the damaged and fragmentary nature of the entire site makes it difficult to form a comprehensive picture. Overall, the complex suggests a blend of iconographic features drawn from the plains of North India and from Kashmir. As a paleographically dated site, the Swain complex patronized by Rāṇā Bhogata provides a vital benchmark for the existence of Nāgara temple architecture in this part of the hills in the 8<sup>th</sup> century and after.

### **Rāṇā Sātyaki and the Chandrashekhar Temple**

Another inscription issued by a Rāṇā also provides a limited benchmark for the introduction of Nāgara architecture into the hills. According to Vogel, the Sarahan *praśasti* (eulogy), which consists of twenty-two verses of Sanskrit poetry, is the only inscription of any literary merit in Chamba. It records the foundation of a temple called the Candrśekhara temple dedicated to the “moon-faced Śiva”<sup>214</sup> by a local Rāṇā named Sātyaki in the village of Saho, located about ten kilometers from Chamba,. Vogel has dated the inscription to the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and the temple is therefore roughly contemporaneous with the reign of Sāhila-varman – indeed local tradition mistakenly ascribes it to that ruler. It is worth noting that nowhere does the inscription refer to the ruler of Chamba even though Rāṇā Sātyaki’s territory was in the immediate vicinity of the town of Chamba. It is possible, therefore, that the Sarahan *praśasti* dates to the eve of Sāhila-varman’s conquest of Chamba and its Rāṇās.

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

While the purpose of the inscription is the founding of the temple – “...prince Sātyaki had this temple built to Him whose diadem is marked with the stainless sickle of the moon. Victorious be He, whose diadem is the cool-rayed One (the moon) and may this temple be of high renown, as long as the wealth-bestowing one (the earth) endures and may the illustrious Sātyaki conquer the entire earth!”<sup>215</sup> – the bulk of the inscription is an extravagant paeon in praise of the beauty and virtues of his wife Soma-Prabhā, a daughter of the house of Kiṣkindha. Kiṣkindha is the ancient name of the area of Himgiri of which Bhogata of the Swaim inscription was *Rāṇā*, and it is not surprising that there were matrimonial alliances between the *Rāṇās* of the different valleys of the Rāvī.

The Candrśekhara temple appears to be a modern cement construction but retains its antique core. **(Pl. 3.22)** It enshrines a stone *linga* encased in copper repoussé sheeting of a later date. On the south, west and north sides of this east-facing temple are ornamental niches surmounted by Nāgara *śikhara*s, indicating that the original temple was in the Nāgara style, but only one of the niches retains an image – of Narasimha tearing apart the demon Hiraṇyakśipu. **(Pl. 3.23)** The doorway is the most ornamented part of the temple. The door lintel is supported by two pillars surmounted by pot and foliage capitals. On either side of the doorway stands a figure of Śiva, one showing him in his benevolent form, and the other in his angry form, though the details of both are somewhat obscured by the silver paint in which they have been covered.

The iconography of Śiva’s fierce form is extraordinary – it has three faces and six arms, with two of which he holds a thick elephant headed snake over his head. In his

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

other hands he holds a trident and the heads of demons. He wears a necklace of large human heads reaching almost to his ankles, and a snake as a ritual thread across his torso. Two *chowrie* bearers stand on either side of him. **(Pl. 3.24)** Both the iconography and the ‘folkish’ style of the image show the imprint of a distinct artistic hand and vision, perhaps closer to the sculptural vision seen in the temple of Bajaura in Kullu rather than the more ‘classical’ vision of Swaim.<sup>216</sup> Across the temple courtyard stands Śiva’s *vāhana*, Nandī, life-sized and made of black stone.<sup>217</sup> The canopy covering the bull’s back includes demonic heads and a row of geese on either side and a lotus at the center. A broken bell hangs from its neck.

### **The Nāgara Temple in the Hills**

While the parallel tradition of wooden architecture discussed in relation to Bharmaur and Chhatrarhi continued in Himachal Pradesh from the 8<sup>th</sup> century onwards at sites such as the Mirkulā Devī temple in Udaipur, from the 8<sup>th</sup> century we also begin to have examples of lithic Nāgara temples. Michael Meister has argued that this style of Nāgara temple, with offset planes and vertical bands or *latās* along the *śikhara*, was introduced into the hills of the lower Himalayas from middle India. The introduction of this temple type, argues Meister, could represent contact between Yashovarman of

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<sup>216</sup> For a discussion of the interplay between the tribal and the brahmanical at the temple of Bajaura, see S. Maxwell, “The Five Aspects of Śiva (In Theory, Iconography and Architecture),” *Art International* 35.3–4 (1982): 41–57.

<sup>217</sup> The stone seems to be black granite though the temple priest claims that the bull has been entirely blackened with oil.

Kanauj and the Western Himalayas.<sup>218</sup> As was discussed in the previous chapter, Yashovarman and Lalitaditya, formerly allies in this region, soon became rivals for imperial power over all of North India. It is therefore not surprising that elements of the artistic and architectural legacy of both these powers are visible in the material culture of Himachal Pradesh.

The remnants of stone *āmlakas* and other architectural fragments at Swaim, as well as the remains of the stone pillars, pilasters and doorway imagery at Saho, suggest a move towards Nāgara architecture in the Chamba region from the 8<sup>th</sup> century. With the rise of the Gurjara-Pratīhāras in North India from the middle of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, contact with Kashmir seems to have gradually faded in preference for architectural forms from the plains. This southern focus would become firmly established and persists to the present in the region. While the Saho and Swaim temples located within Chamba district are early examples of Nāgara temples in the immediate vicinity of Chamba, their fragmented state makes them of limited use in a discussion of Chamba's other Nāgara temples.

However, we do have other examples of conclusively dated Nāgara architecture in the hills which provide more useful benchmarks for the study of Chamba's Nāgara temples. From the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> century, we have dated exemplars of two broadly defined categories of Nāgara temples in the Western Himalayas. The first category comprises the importation of the Nāgara architecture of the plains with little dilution in form or meaning. The 8<sup>th</sup> century monolithic temple of Masrur in Kangra district and the 9<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> Meister, 2006, p. 26.

century Viśveṣvara temple in Bajaura in Kullu district are the preeminent examples of this evolved Nāgara architecture, conceptualized and refined under the patronage of the Gurjara-Pratīhāras that was imported with few modifications from the plains of North India. **(Pl. 3.25, 3.26)** The temples of Masrur and Bajaura, however, do not become the established temple typology that is followed in the hills. The second category comprises a looser simulation of this Nāgara form, one that takes on a particular regional ‘hill’ idiom. The 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century temples at Hatkoti in Shimla district, as well as the temples of Palethī and Jageshwar in Uttarakhand are examples of Nāgara temples made in this less ‘pure’ ‘hill’ idiom. **(Pl. 3.27, 3.28)** All these temples attest to the fact that a fully developed Nāgara architecture was established in the hills by the 8<sup>th</sup> - 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. During the 10<sup>th</sup> century, when Chamba was founded and the *Vaṃśāvalī* tells us that Sāhila-varman built the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple, the model of the ‘hill’ Nāgara temple – with a degree of regional and idiomatic variation – would seem to have become the established architectural vocabulary in the Western Himalayan hills. The temples of Chamba do not fall within this typology. Additionally, between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, there is a gap in the conclusively dated architectural record till we get to the 13<sup>th</sup> century temple of Baijnath in Kangra – the temple that offers us the closest parallels in both form and ornament to Chamba’s Nāgara temples. **(Pl. 3.29)**

### **The Problem of Chronology in the Temples of Chamba**

Though the town of Chamba has numerous Nāgara temples standing today, and the village of Bharmaur has two – the Narasimha and Maṇimaheśa temples – the dating

of these temples has proven to be problematic. The lack of conclusive data in the form of inscriptions, combined with the extensive renovation of many of the temples at later dates, has resulted in a great deal of confusion in their architectural study. The untangling of temple chronology in Himachal Pradesh in general has been a complex task. The temple of Baijnath in Kangra district, for example, was believed until fairly recently to date to the 9<sup>th</sup> century and was as such employed as a touchstone for Himachal temple chronology for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, until the re-interpretation of its inscription moved the date of its construction to the early 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>219</sup> The tendency in the architectural scholarship of Himachal Pradesh has been to date structures based on oral tradition and current beliefs, and this is particularly true in the case of Chamba.

There are numerous Nāgara sandstone temples built for the kings of Chamba in the town, dating from different periods in the history of the kingdom. The most important sacred area in Chamba today is the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple complex, which comprises six Nāgara temples. These are built in a single row, facing east. Three of the temples are dedicated to Śiva and three to Viṣṇu, but the dynastic temple of the Chamba royal family is the Vaishnavite Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple. The six temples, in order from north to south, are: the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple, the Rādhā- Kṛṣṇa temple, the temple of Candragupta Mahādeva, the Gaurī-Śaṅkara temple, the Trimukheśvara temple and the Lakṣmī-Dāmodar temple. **(Pl. 3.1)** The other Nāgara temples in the town are the Hari Rāī temple, the Campāvatī temple, the Baṁsi Gopāl temple, the Vajreśvarī Devī temple and the Rāma-Sītā temple. **(Fig. 3.1; Pl. 3.30 - 3.34)** The Narasimha and Maṇimaheśa

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<sup>219</sup> For a discussion of this inscription's initial dating and subsequent re-dating, from 804 A.D. to 1204 A.D., see Laxman Thakur, *The Architectural Heritage of Himachal Pradesh: Origin and Development of Temple Styles*, New Delhi, 1996, p. 78.

temples in Bharmaur date to a period after the move of the capital to Chamba, and as such need to be discussed in the overall context of Nāgara temple building in Chamba itself. (Pl. 3.35, 3.36)

Based on the historical authenticity ascribed to the *Vaṃśāvalī*, as well as the popular public founding legends associated with the town, the predilection of architectural historians has been to date many of Chamba's temples to the founding of the town in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and to ascribe them to the patronage of Chamba's founding ruler, Sāhila-varman. Even Vogel writes, "The chief temple of this group dedicated to Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa is ascribed to Sāhila. There is no reason to disbelieve tradition which is unanimous on this point, though there is no epigraphical document to support it."<sup>220</sup> In addition to the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa and Campāvatī temples, other temples too have become associated with him. The *Vaṃśāvalī* recounts the following after Sāhila had conquered Chamba: "On this same spot there were also various *lingas*, at the confluence of the Śālikā (Sal) with the Irāvatī, and at its confluence of the Kunāla, and at the confluence of the Śālikā with the Sarasvatī. Having brought these to the town with the consent of Carpaṭi, the king named Sāhila, the master of his senses, established Gupta and Candreśvara, Kūrmśvara and other temples."<sup>221</sup>

It is unclear which these temples are as none of the extant temples in Chamba bears any of these names. Architectural historians – Lakshman Thakur, Suhasini Aryan, O.C. Handa among others – as well as the inhabitants of Chamba are unanimous in ascribing the Candragupta Mahādeva temple in the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa complex to Sāhila-

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<sup>220</sup> Vogel, 1911, p. 100.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., p. 93.



varman, arguing that this is the Candreśvara temple mentioned in the *Vaṃśāvalī*. While this might be true of the origin of this structure, there is no historical evidence to support this claim, and it is worth re-emphasizing that there are no copper plates or inscriptions dating from Sāhila-varman's rule though the establishment of so many temples would certainly have involved the issuing of land deeds to those associated with the functioning of the temples, such as *brāhmaṇas*. Moreover, attribution of these three existing temples and their morphological features to the 10<sup>th</sup> century has led to the dating of other Nāgara temples of the kingdom accordingly, and in a manner that is not supported by the material remains.

Local tradition has also ascribed the building of the Gaurī-Śaṅkara temple in the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa complex to Sāhila's son Yugākāra-varman (r. 940-60 A.D.), though the only copper plate inscription from this ruler's reign is the deed he issued following the consecration of the 'Narasimha' temple. The tradition of ascribing this temple to him is buoyed by the dating of its principal image on stylistic grounds. The main image within the Gaurī-Śaṅkara temple is a 'family' grouping in bronze of Śiva and Pārvatī shown standing with Nandī. **(Pl. 3.37)** Ohri has dated this bronze image of Gaurī-Śaṅkara to the 10<sup>th</sup> century based on:

“its mixed idioms of Kashmir and North India...one sees that the modeling of the torso of the figure of Śiva is in the Kashmiri style and also some other idioms peculiar to Kashmir sculpture are seen in this group, but the type of ornaments, garments and the type of stylization in their depiction and also the facial types of these figures are different from

Kashmiri works. These facts suggest that another style from the plains of North India was exerting a strong influence in the Chamba area in the 10<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>222</sup>

While the Gaurī-Śaṅkara group does exhibit these “mixed” characteristics, in light of Chamba’s political context between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, I think it is more probable that the image was made after the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, towards the end of the Kashmiri interregnum in Chamba and after the images of Hari Rāī and Narasiṃha, with their far more pronounced Kashmiri characteristics, were made.

The idol of Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa, hewn according to the *Vaṃśāvalī* from the stone procured from the Vindhya by Yugākāra-varman, has also generally been attributed by scholars to the reign of Sāhila-varman. Ohri, the only scholar to have actually analyzed the image, instead has argued that this marble image of Viṣṇu as Vaikuṇṭha,

“shows a stage in transition from the Kashmiri style to the North Indian style. The torso of the figure of Viṣṇu is fashioned in the Kashmir idiom, and so is the stance of the standing figure. The face is round as commonly seen in Kashmir images. Lotus petals provide a halo for the head which innovation was not adopted from Kashmir or some other nearby center... The crown of this image is also of a different type from those seen in the sculptures of the earlier period. Its use in the sculpture of North India is seen from the 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards.”<sup>223</sup> **(Pl. 3.38)**

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<sup>222</sup> V. C. Ohri, “Sculpture of Chamba: A Brief Survey,” in *History and Culture of the Chamba State, a Western Himalayan Kingdom*, V.C. Ohri, Ed., New Delhi: Books & Books, 1989, p. 165.

<sup>223</sup> Ohri, 1989, p. 166.

Correlating this period of transition with the 10<sup>th</sup> century, however, remains problematic, as we do not have any comparative materials in bronze or stone from the region with which to corroborate this dating.<sup>224</sup>

Even accepting that the image of Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa is an original 10<sup>th</sup>-century image, commissioned by Sāhila-varman for a 10<sup>th</sup> century temple which is no longer in existence, cannot help us conceptualize the temple Sāhila-varman is said to have built. While the existence of a Nāgara temple in the remote village of Swaim in the 9<sup>th</sup> century might favor the argument that Sāhila-varman's temple would also have been a Nāgara one and not a wooden pent-roofed construction like Merū-varman's temples for example, no evidence for such a structure has survived in Chamba. The presence of the Hari Rāī and Gaurī-Śaṅkara images suggests that temples certainly existed in Chamba from the 11<sup>th</sup> century, but these are not necessarily the temples as they exist in their present form, despite the predilection of scholarship to date these structures according to the *Vaṃśāvalī* and local tradition.<sup>225</sup>

The only fixed markers of temple chronology in Chamba itself date to after the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The first of these is the Baṁsi Gopāl temple, dedicated to the Kṛṣṇa *avatāra* of Viṣṇu. An inscription dated 1595 A.D. mentions the consecration of this temple by

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<sup>224</sup> This image of Viṣṇu is so entirely covered in cloth and ornaments that it was not possible to analyze it.

<sup>225</sup> Even Krishna Deva has written that Sāhila-varman founded the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple, though he acknowledges that it was renovated by Pratāpa-simha-varman in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Following the local tradition, he attributes the building of the Gauri Shankar temple to Yugākāra Varman, and that of the Narasimha temple to Yugākāra Varman's wife, the latter based on the copper plate issued by Yugākāra Varman, which remains questionable for reasons discussed in the previous chapter; *Encyclopedia of Indian Temple Architecture vol. 2, North India: Period of Early Maturity, c. A.D. 700-900*, M. Meister and M.A. Dhaky, eds., Chapter 29, Himadri Temples.

Rājā Balabhadra-varman.<sup>226</sup> **(PI. 3.32)** The temple is located in the middle of one of Chamba's residential *mohallas*, and not within the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa complex. The next dated temple, also located in a residential *mohalla* of Chamba, is the Ram-Sita temple, built by Batlu, the wet nurse of Rājā Pṛthvī Singh in 1661 A.D. **(PI. 3.34)** The third dated temple is the Rādhā- Kṛṣṇa temple located right next to the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple in the main temple complex. According to its foundation inscription, it was built in 1825 A.D. by Rānī Sadha, the wife of Rājā Jīt Singh. **(PI. 3.39)** Of these 'later' temples, the Rādhā- Kṛṣṇa and Ram-Sita temples display decorative ornament showing Mughal and later contact in the form of cusped arches, carved rosettes and cypress-like trees based on a painted format. The central deities in all these temples – the divine couples of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa and Ram and Sita – are the *avatāras* of Viṣṇu whose popularity grew exponentially with the growth of the Bhakti movement in Chamba from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, as will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter. In addition, a temple dedicated to Vajreśvarī Devī located in the Sarota Valley about 10 kilometers from Chamba was extensively renovated in 1716 A.D. – “On this day, the work has been started on the temple.”<sup>227</sup>

All the remaining Nāgara temples in the territory of the former kingdom are believed to range between the 10<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, but estimates of where they fall within this continuum diverge widely in the rare instances their chronology is discussed at all. As I mentioned, there is a complete lack of inscriptional data related to these 'earlier' temples. A thorough architectural analysis of their structure or a stylistic analysis

<sup>226</sup> Chhabra, 1957, pp. 92-93. The author, however, argues that this consecration followed a renovation and not the original establishment of the temple.

<sup>227</sup> Chhabra, 1957, pp. 172-75.

of their ornamental features is also fraught with difficulties. All have been renovated to varying degrees, both in recent times by the Archeological Survey of India, as well as by the rulers of Chamba, and their external niche sculptures have been either moved around, are later additions, or missing altogether. The evidence of this pastiche is visible across all the temples, such that any differences in ‘style’ do not necessarily indicate the passage of time. **(Pl. 3.40)**

The problem of seeing past these renovations is illustrated by the case of the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple. The earliest inscriptions to mention the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple are two copper plate deeds dated 1582 A.D., which mention the ‘renovation’ of the temple by Rājā Pratāpa-siṃha-varman.<sup>228</sup> What is particularly intriguing about Pratāpa-siṃha-varman’s copper plate inscriptions is that they state that the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple was “consecrated” (*pratiṣṭha*), although the translator(s) have chosen to translate this as “renovation”.<sup>229</sup> A temple would not need to be consecrated unless it had just been built, or so extensively re-built as to be considered new. The *Vaṃśāvalī* also states that this temple was just one of many to be ‘repaired’ by the king – following the miraculous discovery of copper mines within the kingdom – but the others are not named.<sup>230</sup> The present temple does show at least two stages of construction and only the northern face of the temple seems to belong to the original structure. **(Pl. 3.41, 3.42)**

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<sup>228</sup> Chhabra, 1957, pp. 70-73. Even the explanatory plaque placed within the temple complex states that “the present structure of the temple owes much to that period”. The same plaque goes on to state that “the sculptures placed in the niches of the exterior walls of the temples (the six temples in the complex) are of a later period, from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards”.

<sup>229</sup> Chhabra, 1957, pp. 70-73.

<sup>230</sup> *Gazetteer of the Chamba State 1904*, p. 42.

### *Norms and Deviations in the Temples of Chamba*

One of the most striking aspects of the Chamba temples is their relative homogeneity in both form and ornament. By examining in what ways these temples conform to an overall architectural vision or diverge from it makes it possible to broadly group the temples according to certain architectural criteria. While this process does not yield definitive results about their dating for the reasons detailed in the preceding discussion, it does highlight a definite trend in the temple building program of the rājās of Chamba, one which lies at the heart of their image of kingship and state. In light of the difficulty in dating these temples due to the extensive renovations that are both recorded and apparent, there seem to be no elements of ‘style’ which can be used as reliable markers for creating a relative chronology. The issue of craftsmanship in carving is also therefore not a reliable criterion.

All the lithic temples of Chamba are Nāgara temples, barring the Trimukhteśvara temple which has a stepped pyramidal roof, and no wall projections. **(Pl. 3.43)** An examination of the ground-plans and the wall projections of the other temples of Chamba reveals that two out of the twelve are *dvi-aṅga* in plan – the 17<sup>th</sup> century Ram-Sita temple, and the undated Maṇimaheśa temple – with *bhadra projections* and *karnas*.<sup>231</sup> The Narasimha temple and the Lakṣmī-Dāmodar temple are *tri-aṅga* in plan, and all the others are *catur-aṅga*. Of all the temples, only the Maṇimaheśa has no *prāggrīva*, as a result of which all the four faces of the temple *śikhara* are equivalent and there is no

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<sup>231</sup> *dvi-aṅga* is a temple having only two projections or proliferations, the *bhadra* or central offset of the wall, and the *karna*, which is the corner unit of the plinth. A *tri-aṅga* plan has three projections, i.e. *bhadra*, *pratiratha* and *karna*. A *catur-aṅga* plan has four projections, i.e. the *bhadra*, *nandika*, *pratiratha* and *karna*.

pronounced *śukanāsa*.<sup>232</sup> (Pl. 3.44) All the temples are simple in structure, consisting of a *garbhagrha* in which the main deity is enshrined, and do not have a *maṇḍapa*, *ardha-maṇḍapa*, or internal ambulatory. They are approached through an *antarāla* or ornamented two-pillared portico. None of these temples displays the structural ‘unfolding’ of the temple in the cardinal directions as is so remarkably executed at the temples of Bajaura and Masrur. However, the conceptual understanding of the temple as cruciform or a ‘temple-within-a-temple’ is apparent, but executed in a highly compressed format, with the ‘unfolding’ often represented by miniaturized replicas on the projecting surfaces of the temples.

### **The Analysis of Architectural Symbols**

The twelve principal Nāgara temples of Chamba town share certain common morphological features, but they also diverge from one another in certain respects. The six temples in the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa complex, as well as four outside the complex – Hari Rāī, Campāvatī, Baṅsi Gopāl, and Rāma-Sītā – are considered in the analysis that follows. The Vajreśvarī Devī temple has been excluded from the analysis because while structurally very similar to the Candragupta Mahādeva temple, its extensive renovation has obscured some of the features under consideration here. The two temples of Bharmaur diverge significantly from these Chamba temples in form and ornament, and I will return to them in the concluding discussion. Some smaller shrines located in Chamba as well as a few within the Chaurāsi complex at Bharmaur have not been considered

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<sup>232</sup> A trefoil projection on the façade of the temple.

because they add little to the narrative of state formation associated with the rulers of Chamba.

All the temples have been designed with a distinct notion of vertical division into segments comprising of the *pīṭha* (plinth), *jaṅghā* (body), *kaṇṭha* (throat/constriction), and the *śikhara* (curvilinear superstructure). Many individual elements like the doorways, *dvārapāla*, lintel ornamentation, and other motifs show noticeable variation but none in a way that demonstrates a discernable trend within the set of temples. The external ornamental scheme of these temples is centered around recursive temple motifs that use the notion of ‘a temple within a temple’ to give feature to the *jaṅghā* and *śikhara* following common Nāgara models, but these remain referential rather than actualized in three dimensions. In conjunction with the presence of these two-dimensional temple simulacra, there is an attempt to create the illusion of the lateral unfolding of subsidiary *śikhara*s and shrines away from the *cella* in a manner identifiable in Nāgara temples elsewhere at sites such the temple of Masrur in Kangra. The emphasis in the carving of the external facades of the temples is on architectural rather than figural motifs. Barring the doorway to the temples, figural sculpture is used primarily in the niches of the *jaṅghā* and prominently in the three-faced Śiva *bhadramukha* motifs on all the temple towers regardless of their cult affiliation. In a few cases, we see panels of erotic scenes on the *kapilī* walls of the temples, and animal heads on the sides of the *śukanāsa*. The emphasis in the exterior ornamentation is on using the symbolic conceit of lateral unfolding as decoration. Therefore, the analysis of temple features will emphasize the ways in which their makers dealt with representing this symbolic vision across the temples. It is



important to emphasize that while the Chamba temples refer to this unfolding semantically, there is no effort to replicate either the cruciform pattern of Masrur and Bajaura, not the *Śekhara* formula that was also popular in western and central India from the 9<sup>th</sup> century onwards, at notable sites such as Khajuraho.<sup>233</sup> (Pl. 3.45)

The simulation of a telescoping multitude of temples within temples is reinforced by the fact that each miniature temple, in imitation of the main temple, also has a clearly demarcated *vedibandha*, *jaṅghā*, *kaṇṭha* and *śikhara* segment, as well as niches. The radiation of divinity from within these sub-shrines is represented symbolically using a *ratna* or diamond motif in smaller shrines units and by idols only in the lowermost tier of the *jaṅghā*.

Compressing the three-dimensional Nāgara temple layout without losing its meaning poses certain visual challenges that have been dealt with in different ways across the nine temples considered in this discussion. Examining features that reflect different ways of uniting form and symbolic function may help to isolate steps in the morphological development of the temples.

### **The 5-element Shrine Motif**

On the *śukanāsa* of all of the Chamba temples, and represented as part of the *śikhara* of the *bhadra* shrine model of some of the temples, there is a recurring motif

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<sup>233</sup> The ruin of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Gujjar Dev temple in Dwarahat, in the Almora district of Uttarakhand, is a unique example of the direct importation of this *Śekhara* model into the hills of the Western Himalayas. The existence of such a temple in the hills makes it apparent that the rulers of Chamba wished to refer to rather than replicate such a model, while adhering to their own architectural vision.

consisting of five elements. **(Pl. 3.46)** On the *śukanāsa*, these five elements consist of a central, two-dimensional shrine motif inserted below the *chandrasala* of the temple *śikhara*. The *śikhara* of this shrine motif is topped by a crowning *āmlaka* and finial. This shrine motif is centered on the *bhadra* projection of the temple's *śikhara*. It is abutted on either side by a narrower shrine (secondary motif), approximately half the width of the central shrine motif and also topped by a crowning *āmlaka* and finial. These secondary shrine motifs are flanked by a rectangular motif (corner motif) crowned by a flattened *āmlaka*. The *āmlaka* appears to support the cornice of the temple's fronton and represent the notion of a structural element since it does not have a *śikhara*. These corner motifs wrap around the corners of the *śukanāsa* and are the outermost elements in this five-element motif. The corner motif has a niche space at its base occupied by a *ratna* flanked by two *ardharatnas*, the latter representing the corner motif's three-dimensionality. The central shrine motif, secondary shrine motif and corner motif all have a three tiered *vedibandha* at their base. The shrine niche at the base of the secondary shrine motif and corner motif are occupied by full *ratnas*. Within the *śikhara* of the central shrine motif, there is a subsidiary two-dimensional *śukanāsa*, with a *chandrashala* below which is a recursive, smaller, 5-element motif in all of these temples. **(Pl. 3.47)**

This is missing from the Narasimha and Maṇimaheśa temples in Bharmaur. While this 5-element motif pays obvious reference to 13<sup>th</sup> century Nāgara forms – adorning the four faces of the temple *śikhara* with it, almost like an ornamental *moharā*– the motif here becomes a symbolic abstraction that points towards its later date.

This 5-element motif is not unique to Chamba; we can see it in the temple ruins in Kangra Fort, on the *śukanāsa* of the Śiva temple in Naggar, Kullu, or in a much earlier and more authentic form at Masrur. (Pl. 3.48) It is absent in the temples of Kashmir and Uttarakhand and seems to be absent from the temples of the larger Gurjara-Pratīhāra movement in the plains. In Chamba, however, the frontal view of the temple emphatically emphasizes this motif and its associated optical allusion, making it the strongest unifying feature of these temples.

While all the temples have this motif on their *śukanāsa*, only the Ram-Sita, Maṇimaheśa and Narasimha temples repeat the 5-shrine motif on the other three sides of their *śikhara* s as well. In four of the Chamba temples – the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa, Lakṣmī-Dāmodar, Candragupta Mahādeva and Rādhā- Kṛṣṇa – this 5-element motif appears as part of the *śikhara* of the *bhadra* shrine-models on the other three faces of the temple as well.

### **The Position of jaṅghā Shrine-models**

Another source of variation in the vision of these temples can be observed in the way in which shrine-models are positioned on the *jaṅghā* of the temple. The temple *jaṅghās* have two shrine-models on either side of the *bhadra* projections. Since the Maṇimaheśa temple is *dvi-aṅga* in plan, it only has one niche on either side of the *bhadra*. The 17<sup>th</sup>-century Ram-Sita temple and the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Rādhā- Kṛṣṇa temple only have a central *bhadra* niche. In the other two *tri-aṅga* temples, Narasimha and

Lakṣmī-Dāmodar, the shrine-models are located on the *prathiratha* projection and the *karna*. In all the other *catur-aṅga* temples, the *jaṅghā* shrine-models occupy the *nandikā* and *pratiratha* projections, while the *karna* has none.

The *jaṅghā* itself is divided into two sections by a secondary *kaṇṭha*. This secondary *kaṇṭha* allows for the separation of the central alcove on the *bhadra* from its *śikhara* , and creates two tiers of shrines on the remaining projections on either side. With the exception of the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple – which has images in the alcove on both levels – the shrines on the lower tier have an alcove for an image, while those on the upper tier contain a *ratna* motif.

The temples can be separated into two groups based on the manner in which these shrine-models have been positioned on the projections – an issue which is central to the problem of representing three-dimensionality in the overall vision of the temple. In the first set, both tiers of shrines are seen placed in the center of their respective projections. Here the *jaṅghā* makes no attempt at lateral projection via the shrine-models. **(Pl. 3.49)** In the second set, however, the lower tier of shrines is moved towards the outer edge of the projection, with the second tier shrines placed directly above. **(Pl. 3.50)** At this point, the architect(s) introduce a further innovation wherein the finial of the upper tier shrine aligns with the edge of the projection as it enters the *śikhara* zone of the temple, making these shrines truly project from the wall, creating the semblance of the *jaṅghā* transitioning into the *śikhara* with a curve.

In Chamba, the temples which fall into this latter grouping are the Gaurī-Śaṅkara, Candragupta Mahādeva, Campāvatī, Baṅsi Gopāl, and Hari Rāī temples. The Lakṣmī-

Nārāyaṇa and the Lakṣmī-Dāmodar temples fall into the first grouping, displaying the two tiers of niches in the center of their projections.

### **Recesses and Wraparound Shrines**

In temples in other regions with a fully elaborated three-dimensional structure, whether *Śekhari* or *bhūmija* in plan, the niches on the *jaṅghā* projections are fully developed on three sides. This necessitates the creation of a recession in the *jaṅghā* and base moldings between projections in order to make space for the niches so that they can be viewed on the sides of the projection. Among the temples of Chamba, the Hari Rāī temple has shrine-models partly visible on the lateral sides of wall projections that conceptually allude to the cruciform nature of the shrine. To accommodate these niches, a recession was created along the entire length of the structure, between the *bhadra*, *nandikā* and *pratiratha* projections, down through the *vedibandha* but stopping at the plinth. **(Pl. 3.51)** These kinds of recesses appear in temples elsewhere as early as the late 8<sup>th</sup> century but are not a chronological measure here.

The Campāvatī and Gaurī-Śaṅkara temples also have ‘wraparound’ shrine-models but the appearance of the recesses between offsets at the *jaṅghā* level is different and neither has recesses extending into the *vedibandha*. Visible in the three temples above, and absent from the other Chamba temples, is a motif with the appearance of a staircase. These stepped motifs are visible on the side of wall offsets, and suggest the shadow of an *udgama* for niches on these sides of the offsets. In all three temples, this ‘step’ motif is

visible on the niches located on the lower tier of the *jaṅghā*. On the niches on the upper tier of the *jaṅghā*, the *śikhara* is fully represented and the ‘step’ motif occupies its rightful place within the *śikhara* . (Pl. 3.52)

In the Candragupta Mahādeva temple, as in the Hari Rāī temple, wall offsets are divided by a recess through the *vedibandha*, but surprisingly the recess does not extend into the *jaṅghā* level. Here, *jaṅghā* shrine-models are flanked by shallow ornamented pilasters on either side and are not carved on the sides of the offsets. (Pl. 3.53) In this case the recess at the *vedibandha* level, therefore, serves no structural purpose whatsoever.

### **The Problem of Dead Space and Pilasters**

The edges of *bhadra* and *karna* offsets are decorated with pilasters on all the Chamba temples being discussed, with the exception of Rādhā- Kṛṣṇa where only the *bhadra* has pilasters with a vegetal pattern. Pilasters appear on two levels of the *jaṅghā*, creating a multi-storeyed appearance. Pilasters immediately below the *śikhara* give the illusion of supporting the superstructure.

These decorative pilasters in Chamba are composed of a sequence of motifs that is adhered to with great consistency. The capital is represented by a cornice, *pūrṇghaṭa*, and half-lotus followed by a band representing the base. The cornice has stylized engravings that depict birds or lions; the band representing the base has vegetal patterns. (Pl. 3.54) In some temples, the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa for example, there are two *pūrṇghaṭa*

while in others the cornice and *pūrṇghaṭa* are separated by a rectangular floral motif. The shaft below rests on a *pūrṇghaṭa*.

The Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa and Lakṣmī-Dāmodar temples frame shrines-models with pilasters on both levels of the *jaṅghā*. **(Pl. 3.55)** The pilasters on the *pratirathas* and *pratibhadras* consist of a thin shaft with vegetal pattern with a half- *pūrṇghaṭa* below and a bracket above – a simplified version of the pilasters bordering the *bhadra* and *karna* projections. The role of these pilasters is to fill the ‘dead-space’ that arises from having the shrine-models positioned in the centers of the offsets, particularly around the curvilinear towers of the shrine-models.

In contrast, shrine-models on the Hari Rāī temple’s intermediate offsets are not framed by pilasters. These shrine-models are representations of 3-dimensional architectural forms on a flat surface. There is no real curvature of the *śikhara* towards the centre of the temple (the cella), nor is there an attempt to represent the *śikhara* on the lateral faces of the projection. These lateral faces only suggest a *śikhara* by using a step motif. To either side of the two-dimensional taper of the *śikhara* on the front of these offsets are barely sketched in pilaster motifs framing the top of the *śikhara* s. **(Pl. 3.56)**

In the Gaurī-Śaṅkara and Campāvatī temples, brackets representing these pilasters are barely reproduced on either side of the crowning *āmlaka*, and only on the front side of the masonry making up each offset. The *śikhara* occupies the full width of the projection on which it is located. **(Pl. 3.57)** On these temples as well as the Hari Rāī temple, shrine-models on the upper tier of the *jaṅghā* have no pilasters. Shrines on the upper tier stand

freely, only half embedded in the masonry of the walls, their *śikhara* s allowed to curve laterally, terminating in a finial aligned with the *śikhara* above. **(Pl. 3.58)**

In the Candragupta Mahādeva and Bañsi Gopāl temples, shrine-models shown on the lower tier of the *jaṅghā* are framed by pilasters which wrap around the edges of the offsets, filling the ‘dead space’ and dispensing with the need to have the shrine’s lateral faces depicted. On the upper tier, shrines-models displaced from the center of their offsets are topped by three-dimensional *śikhara* s. **(Pl. 3.59)**

In the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa and Lakṣmī-Dāmodar temples, representations of shrines are centered on their projections at both levels of the *jaṅghā* framed by pilasters with *pūrṇghaṭa* motifs at the base and top. **(Pl. 3.60)** On Lakṣmī-Dāmodar, the *tri-aṅga* layout of the temple means that the pilasters on the *karna* offset are not symmetrical – one pilaster has plain vegetal ornament while the other is differentiated into a base, shaft, capital and cornice. **(Pl. 3.61)**

The Ram-Sita temple is *dvi-aṅga*, with no shrine-models, only pilasters. The Rādhā- Kṛṣṇa temple does not conform. Despite the fact that remaining projections are blank, the *bhadras* have pilasters with vegetal patterns.

### **Analysis**

Based on the features discussed above, the temples of Chamba fall into three groups. The first consists of the Hari Rāī, Gaurī-Śaṅkara and Campāvatī temples; the



second comprises the Baṅsi Gopāl, Candragupta Mahādeva, Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa and Lakṣmī-Dāmodar temples; and the third, the Rāma-Sītā and Rādhā- Kṛṣṇa temples.

Hari Rāī, Gaurī-Śaṅkara and Campāvatī are separated in form from the rest in a number of ways. The orthogonal projection of the shrines-models on the lower tier of the *jaṅghā*, the continuous upper molding of the *vedibandha*, the absence of the five-element-motif on the *śukanāsa* of the *bhadra* shrines and the absence of pillared porticos on the *nandikā* and *pratiratha* shrines bring these three temples into close proximity. Candragupta Mahādeva, Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa and Lakṣmī-Dāmodar form the second group, with pilasters used to frame the shrines on the *jaṅghā*, and where the topmost molding of the *vedibandha* is broken into the segments below the *jaṅghā* shrines. Baṅsi Gopāl lies within this group but a step closer to the Hari Rāī group as the *vedibandha* here is continuous. Within the third group, the Rāma-Sītā temple shows some conformity in the use of symbols on the temple exterior - the use of pilasters on the *bhadra* and *karna* projections as well as in the order of elements within the pilasters. In the other Chamba temples, the 5-element motif is used on the *śukanāsa* and the *śikhara* surmounting the *bhadra* shrine. With *dvi-aṅga* walls, the Rāma-Sītā has only a single shrine-motif on each wall, but has the 5-element motif on each face of the main *śikhara*. Its *dvi-aṅga* wall layout and single storeyed *jaṅghā* is a significant departure from the Chamba style of Nāgara.

While it might be tempting to attribute a relative chronology to these temple groupings – with the first group as the oldest and the third as the most recent – it is equally possible that the variations in the deployment of ornamental or architectural

features between the first two groups is related to differing practices in architectural guilds, with the first being more innovative.

There is, however, a progressive transition in the visualization of the temple exterior. At Hari Rāī and Gaurī-Śaṅkara, multiple shrine-models are used to suggest a ‘mount Merū’ of temples. From the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa and Lakṣmī-Dāmodar temples onwards, shrines no longer appear to project orthogonally from the *jaṅghā* and are instead centered on their respective projections, reducing the 3-dimensionality of the temples. The progressive compression of forms is a trend that culminates in the Rāma-Sītā and Rādhā- Kṛṣṇa temples, where only features that were semantically essential were retained, such as the 5-element motif and the ubiquitous three-faced Śiva *bhadramukha*, which like a *moharā* mask is the unifying feature of all Chamba Nāgara temples. By the time we reach the Rādhā- Kṛṣṇa temple, surface ornament reduces symbolic multiplicity to a single unified form (as also in the stone temples at Bharmaur). These two late temples reveal a great deal about the priorities of temple building in Chamba. Both continue the basic concept of the Nāgara temple as developed in earlier temples, reduced to signal simplicity. Though the Rādhā- Kṛṣṇa temple displays some late ornamental motifs drawn from contemporary artistic realms in Rajasthan and Mughal India, there is no further innovation in the development of *śikhara* s or the modulation of walls. **(Pl. 3.62)** It is clear, however, that with their emphatic architectural ‘*mohra*’, they too were consciously built to blend in visually with the corpus of Chamba town’s temples.

This increased compression of form brings us back to the two Bharmaur temples of Maṇimaheśa and Narasiṃha, of which the walls of the former are *dvi-aṅga* and the

latter *tri-aṅga*. They can be distinguished from the Chamba temples based on certain shared characteristics. Their base moldings are identical, and different from those seen at Chamba, following a very basic structure. (Pl. 3.63, 3.64) Both temples use niche-shrines, framing pilasters, and 5-element frontons on the *śikhara* following the Chamba model, but much degenerated in form and lacking the semantic power of their predecessors. (Pl. 3.65)

These characteristics point towards a later date for these temples, as well as a localized idiom that unites them. While it is impossible to say with any certainty which of these two temples is earlier – indeed one could have been made in the ‘image’ of the other – the Maṇimaheśa is most compressed.<sup>234</sup> Unlike the Narasimha and the majority of the Chamba temples, even its *janṅhā* is not divided with two levels of niches. I would therefore hypothesize that these temples could not have been built much before the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and join the Rāma-Sītā and Rādhā- Kṛṣṇa temples as expressions of a continuing assertion of state identity through the architectural ‘mirroring’ of dynastically important older temples, most notably through the ‘*mohra*’ of the ‘5-element motif’ and three-faced Śiva *bhadramukha*.

An analysis of certain key characteristics of the temples of the kingdom of Chamba highlights the pitfalls of relying on either oral tradition or the *Vaṃśāvalī* in dating these temples. It also highlights the pitfalls of interpreting inscriptional evidence

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<sup>234</sup> Vogel writes that “In temples of a later period we usually find two female figures flanking the entrance to the sanctum. But their true meaning has become lost, and the characteristic vehicles of the two river-goddesses have either been omitted or changed into meaningless animals. This is the case in the temple of Mani Mahesh, where the crocodile and tortoise have developed into birds, apparently geese.” Vogel, 1911, p. 144.

based on these two traditions. While the oral tradition and the *Vaṃśāvalī* might lead us to believe that the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa is the oldest temple in Chamba, the stone structure that survives may be one of the latest, a conclusion that is supported both visually and epigraphically.<sup>235</sup>

The examination of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Vaidyanātha temple at Baijnath in Kangra – the only Himachal temple to share a visual affinity with both Chamba’s first two groups of temples – supports the view that the Chamba temples succeeded rather than preceded it. The temple is *tri-aṅga* and comprises a large *maṇḍapa* – absent in Chamba’s temples – in front of its *mulaprasada*. The *jaṅghā* of the *mulaprasada* is two-tiered and has a central shrine on the *bhadra* projection, and two tiers of shrines on the *pratiratha* and *karna* projections. The use of prominent pilasters to center and frame the shrines on these projections, as well as the pilaster ornamentation is similar to the deployment seen in the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa and Lakṣmī-Dāmodar temples in particular. The most striking difference between the Vaidyanātha temple and those of Chamba however is in the *śikhara* – the Vaidyanātha temple does not display Chamba’s ‘*mohra*’ of the ‘5-element motif’ and Śiva *bhadramukha*; instead it is ornamented by a lattice of *gavākṣas* on the *bhadra* and *karna* projections of the *śikhara*, in stark contrast to Chamba’s unadorned masonry.

The Vajreśvarī Devī temple, located in the Sarota Valley about 10 kilometers from Chamba, provides additional indicators towards a post-13<sup>th</sup> century dating of Chamba’s temples. We know from inscriptions that the Vajreśvarī Devī temple was

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<sup>235</sup> Mahesh Sharma has also argued that Pratāpa-siṃha-varman built the shrine at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century based on an analysis of the “consecration” inscription. Sharma, 2004, pp. 429-430.

extensively ‘renovated’ or re-built in 1716 A.D. (the inscription states that, “On this day, the work has been started on the temple.”<sup>236</sup>) Besides the inscription that mentions the date of the renovation, there are eighteen short inscriptions carved on the temple’s walls. These detail the names and craft specializations of artisans responsible for what was clearly an extensive renovation.<sup>237</sup> The marked similarity of ornament and form between the Vajreśvarī Devī temple and the Lakṣmī-Dāmodar temple would seem to place the latter at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This implies that of all the temples discussed here, the majority date to a period following the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Land Grants**

Associated with Nāgara temple typology is the spread of an accompanying socio-political trend, that of the Brahmanical state structure and its reliance of priests as the arbiters of social change and cultural consolidation. We saw the early beginnings of the Brahmanical state in Merū-varman’s Bharmaur, and the two temples of Saho and Swaim indicate that the interest in Brahmanical deities and lineages was one that *Rāṇās* also adopted. From the time of Yugākāra-varman in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the king’s divinity began to be emphasized in the inscriptions of Chamba: “He the supreme prince, the king of kings, the supreme lord, the illustrious and divine Yagakara-varman, the prosperous one...” This association with the divine role of the king was one that was legitimated by

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<sup>236</sup> Chhabra, 1957, pp. 172-75.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

*brāhmaṇas*, and it remains a constant in all the inscriptions of the rulers of Chamba that follow.

The land grant deeds of the *rājās* of Chamba from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards also indicate a marked social change, in that they consist almost entirely of land grants to *brāhmaṇa* families.<sup>238</sup> Another indication of the growing prominence of *brāhmaṇas* in the state structure can be discerned in the details of these inscriptions. The 11<sup>th</sup> century copper plates of Soma-varman and Asaṭa-varman mentioned the names of important officials of the state as well as the scribes responsible for writing the deed: “The messenger on this occasion was the Prime Minister, the illustrious Rāṇā Rihla; the Great Record-Keeper, the illustrious Rāṇā Kahila... Written by the writer of legal documents, the ka[yastha] De[vapa?].”<sup>239</sup> We know from this part of the inscription that by the 11<sup>th</sup> century Rāṇās had been incorporated into the state’s structure in prominent posts. We also know that the scribe of the land deed was a member of the *kayastha* community and not a *brāhmaṇa*. In the inscriptions of Chamba after the 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries, however all deeds are written by *brāhmaṇa* scribes, and almost all the deeds concern land grants to *brāhmaṇas*.

The erection of temples is closely associated with the issuing of land grants to *brāhmaṇa* families. There was an exponential increase in the land grants issued by the state to *brāhmaṇa* families during the reign of Pratāpa-simha-varman in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, which saw a further leap during the reign of his successor Balabhadra-

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<sup>238</sup> B. Ch. Chhabra, *Antiquities of Chamba State*, Vol. II, 1957.

<sup>239</sup> Vogel, 1911, p. 187.

varman.<sup>240</sup> An astonishing fifty-six copper plates dealing with the granting of lands were issued during the reigns of these two rulers, a number far exceeding grants issued during any other period in Chamba's history.<sup>241</sup> This trend seems to support the argument that the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries were a period of large-scale temple building in Chamba. Goetz argued that the high number of grants issued under Balabhadra-varman could in part be ascribed to "the conscious renaissance of medieval civilization."<sup>242</sup>

### **Architectural Conformity and Dynastic Identity**

Why did the official history of the kings of Chamba go to such lengths to attribute so much of the kingdom's material culture, both sculptural and architectural, to earlier centuries and personalities? The agendas driving this move can be examined within the framework of the importance of certain structures and theistic identities in forging a particular notion of the state. As Thapar writes:<sup>243</sup>

"One might begin with the historical point at which the awareness of being a region, and having a history, is first expressed... The historian's interest lies in analyzing the roots of this consciousness – whether they result from an administrative or political coherence, or from linguistic or religious urges or a combination of several factors. In analyzing this consciousness it is equally imperative to consider that which preceded it and that which came subsequently."

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid. The piety of both these rulers is highlighted in the *Vaṃśāvalī*; the former for his renovation and building of numerous temples, and the latter for his ruinous generosity to *brāhmaṇas*.

<sup>241</sup> For a detailed and fascinating analysis of what these epigraphs reveal about the relationship between *brāhmaṇas* and the state, see M. Sharma, 2004.

<sup>242</sup> Goetz, 1954, p. 26.

<sup>243</sup> R. Thapar, "Regional History: The Punjab in Cultural Pasts," in *Cultural Pasts*, 2003, pp. 97.

The *Vaṃśāvalī* is the first written articulation we have of the conscious ambition on the part of Chamba rulers to formulate a cohesive identity for the state, with a lineage that established their authority over the territory from its earliest known history at a time when authority in the plains was claimed by a superior power, the Mughals. The deliberate manner by which architectural details relating to the sacred geography of the state are placed in the narrative of the *Vaṃśāvalī* indicates that temples were carefully chosen symbols around which this cohesive Chamba identity was being claimed – in this case the Vaiṣṇava Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa image and temple, and the other Nāgara architecture attributed to the founder of the town, Sāhila-varman. The ‘antiquity’ of the architecture became the visible foundation for the antiquity of the lineage, a linkage corroborated through the oral tradition. The construction of two Nāgara temples in Bharmaur, arguably no earlier than the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and the reformulation of this ‘ancestral’ center was a part of this same dynamic, placing the ‘*mohra*’ of the state at the site where the ruling family claimed the origins of their lineage.<sup>244</sup> **(Fig. 3.2)**

This imperative to associate temples with dynastic identity also explains the uniformity in certain key structural elements across all the temples, amounting to a deliberate revival of an old architectural type. The basic Chamba version of the Nāgara temple remained intentionally identifiable. Clustering these temples at two sites – the ancient capital and the current capital – was a marker of dynastic lineage and the centralization of state culture, rather than a marking of the territorial extent of the state. The idea of centers marked by temple complexes to which successive generations of

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<sup>244</sup> For a discussion of the popularization of the cult of Mani Mahesh as part of a sacred pilgrimage route that brought together the sacred geography of Chamba and Bharmaur in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, see M. Sharma, 2009, pp. 104-115.



rulers could add, through ‘renovation’ replicating antiquity, was a way to perpetuate this dynastic identity in real time.

The Nāgara temple was associated with the imperial dynasties of North India, and as such had been a prestigious model for temple construction from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> centuries in neighboring kingdoms in Himachal Pradesh and Uttaranchal as well. The legitimizing structures of a Brahmanical state that accompanied the Nāgara temple model were a vital ingredient for establishing and validating caste and authenticating roots through a genealogy that founded ancestry in Puranic frameworks.

The rulers of Chamba actively sought to transform their state through these processes. The *Chamba* form of Nāgara temple gave Chamba’s rulers the ability to project their dynastic identity, and to position themselves within a larger North Indian theistic and architectural movement. We can only speculate about why the composers of the *Vaṃśāvalī* chose to emphasize the state’s Vaiṣṇava identity at this 17<sup>th</sup> century moment, save as an identifiable means to compete with the many other streams of cult affiliation that already had deep roots in the region, including Śaiva and Śaktā cults as well as *Nāga* and ancestor worship, although these forms of worship continued alongside and were either co-opted, incorporated or assimilated into the state structure at different points of time.<sup>245</sup> The growing popularity of the Vaiṣṇava incarnations of Rāma and Kṛṣṇa with the advent of bhakti would also have made this cultic shift a powerful legitimizing tool for the consent to rule.

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<sup>245</sup> The later inclusion of hero stones commissioned by royalty inside the Baṃsi Gopāl temple in Chamba is one example of the negotiation between ‘folk’ and ‘classical’ traditions, and a signal of concessions by the Brahmanical system.

Thapar has argued that in history it is often “the gradual but noticeable change of symbols (which provide) indicators in the changing process of those who ruled.”<sup>246</sup> I would like to argue that in the case of Chamba it is equally in understanding the perceived lack of change in these symbols that provides a lens into understanding the dynasty’s conception and consolidation of the state over the *longue durée*.

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<sup>246</sup> R. Thapar, “The Mouse in the Ancestry,” in *Cultural Pasts*, 2003, p.797.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Chamba and the ‘Painterly’ Vision**

#### **The Practice of Painting**

Miniature paintings from the *pahārī* (hill)<sup>247</sup> kingdoms that once dotted the foothills and steep slopes of the Western Himalayas conjure up temporal and spiritual worlds that are vividly imagined and meticulously detailed. *pahārī* paintings have aroused the admiration of scholars and the viewing public alike, but have remained fundamentally enigmatic. From the second quarter of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Chamba was one of the first hill courts to turn to the medium of painting. Appearing seemingly out of nowhere, the practice of painting at *pahārī* courts proliferated rapidly from the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, arguably in response to Mughal and Rajasthani models, but remained self-consciously distinct from these contemporaneous traditions in composition, subject matter and style. Once painting was elevated to the status of a court art, it became the primary medium for artistic and cultural expression in Chamba, and created a transformation in the visual culture of the kingdom.

The relative isolation of the hill courts from the imperial Mughal heartland and the difficulty in piecing together their early history contributed misleadingly in early scholarship to categorizing *pahārī* paintings as quintessentially spiritual and emotive in intent, and by implication detached from political and social realities. Ranging from the

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<sup>247</sup> Paintings from all the kingdoms of the Punjab Hills are therefore collectively called ‘*pahārī*’ paintings.

bold and stylized to the delicate and naturalistic, the aesthetic qualities of *pahārī* paintings are readily apparent, as are the windows they open into a rich world of poetry and mythology. The goal of my research is to integrate these attributes with a deeper understanding of the overall state culture for which they were produced and in which they enjoyed their ultimate fulfillment.

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, the first scholar to bring *pahārī* painting to the attention of audiences in India and the West, characterized it as an aristocratic folk tradition, created to engage the senses and portray idealized, abstracted forms – in contrast to Mughal painting, for example, and its interest in depicting actual people and events.<sup>248</sup> Even though Coomaraswamy pioneered the appreciation of the lyrical qualities of *pahārī* art, his characterization risks essentializing the *pahārī* courts where these paintings were produced as static and a-historical. While the generations following Coomaraswamy have considerably advanced our knowledge of aspects of the *pahārī* painting tradition, the scholarship on the subject has focused largely on curatorial or connoisseurship-based approaches, dividing this vast body of work into regional schools and styles, creating periodizations, identifying families of artists who moved between royal patrons, and evaluating works on aesthetic grounds. These studies, however, have done little to challenge the perception that the context and content of *pahārī* painting is a-historical, a problem that is magnified by the segregation of scholarship by artistic medium.

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<sup>248</sup> A. Coomaraswamy, *History of Indian and Indonesian Art*, London: Dover, 1927 (rep. 1985), p. 128; *Rājput Painting* (2 Vols.), New York: Hacker Art Books, 1916 (Rep. 1975), Introduction.

My analysis draws on folios, wall paintings, as well as contemporaneous practices in wood carving and metal repoussé work, all of which underwent a stylistic and iconographic transformation in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, to frame the artistic production at Chamba in this period as part of an ongoing process of innovation, assimilation and adaptation that lies at the heart of the politics of state formation. One of the primary objectives of this chapter is to locate the paintings of Chamba within a more complete political, historical and cultural framework, as well as within the context of other artistic developments taking place at the time, in order to demonstrate that the visual vocabulary arising from painting was a powerful new tool for conceptualizing and projecting ideas of kingship and cultural identity for the rulers of Chamba.

### **The ‘Origins’ of *pahārī* Painting**

Scholarly opinion has remained divided on how and when painting began in the *pahārī* kingdoms of the Punjab Hills and the story of the origin of *pahārī* painting remains unknown. Milo Beach has argued that the tradition of painting in India as a whole was a natural outgrowth of “an unbroken artistic tradition of great antiquity and extraordinary brilliance,”<sup>249</sup> in which Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain religious sanctuaries had long been decorated with carved and painted figures, and that these were often accompanied by illustrative wall murals and ornamental designs.<sup>250</sup> He states that as early as the fifth century, the Kāma Sūtra had mentioned that painting was an established and

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<sup>249</sup> M. C. Beach, *The New Cambridge History of India, I: 3: Mughal and Rājput Painting*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 3.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

expected social accomplishment, and mentions that the contemporaneous paintings at the Buddhist site of Ajanta are among the most sensuous and sophisticated visual images known from any source. “Even today,” he continues, “both unpretentious village houses and royal palaces are decorated with paintings on ceremonial occasions, a longstanding practice, while village storytellers continue to perform in front of narrative scrolls painted in traditional style.”<sup>251</sup>

Ananda Coomaraswamy argued in a similar vein that Rājput painting (which includes both *pahārī* and Rajasthani painting) was a continuation of the old tradition of Indian painting, as well as Indian visual culture more broadly.<sup>252</sup> V.C. Ohri looked for the existence of other genres of painting in the *pahārī* region, and argued that the continuing tradition of *bāṅgadvārī* painting in Chamba – a ritual folk painting done on either side of the main doorway of houses on ceremonial occasions – indicates that a tradition of wall painting was in all likelihood prevalent in Chamba before the introduction of a large scale atelier for the production of ‘miniature’ paintings in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>253</sup> He further argued that some of the motifs used in these *bāṅgadvārī* paintings, such as the striped dome which invariably tops the painted panels on the sides of the door, as well as the *makara* head projecting out of the sides, are commonly seen in the 16<sup>th</sup> century paintings of North India from manuscripts such as the Laur-Chandā, the Caurapañcāśikā, or early *rāgamālās* from Rajasthan. **(Pl. 4.1, 4.2)** These motifs that *bāṅgadvārī* wall paintings share with painted manuscripts from the 16<sup>th</sup> century North Indian plains,

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>252</sup> Coomaraswamy, 1916, p. 16.

<sup>253</sup> V. C. Ohri, *On the Origins of Pahārī Painting: Some Notes and a Discussion*, Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study & Indus Publishing, 1991, pp. 15-16.

therefore suggest that they were made by families of artists from North India who moved to the hills.<sup>254</sup>

B.N. Goswamy's research in the *bahis* or records kept by priests in the temple town of Haridwar has revealed that families of painters from Chamba had their names recorded in the registers kept by priests while on pilgrimage to the city. In these *bahis*, in two entries dated 1670 and 1676 A.D. respectively, these painters are referred to as 'Gujarati *chitere*', or painters from Gujarat, but they have also called themselves *basis* or natives of Chamba.<sup>255</sup> This implies that they had been living in Chamba for at least two or three generations prior to this, if not longer. Ohri argues that the most likely explanation for their moving to the hills from Gujarat would have been to work on the new fort and temples being constructed by Rājā Bas Dev of Nurpur (r. 1580-1613 A.D.), perhaps via the Mughal atelier in Lahore.<sup>256</sup> Nurpur was the most powerful of the hill states at the time and Rājā Bas Dev was a *maṁsabdār*<sup>257</sup> under the Mughals. He was supposed to have been a great favorite of the Emperor Jahāngīr and in his capacity as a *maṁsabdār* had spent many years outside his kingdom. He was therefore familiar with both the painting and architectural traditions prevalent in North India.

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<sup>254</sup> Ohri, 1991, pp. 15-18.

<sup>255</sup> B. N. Goswamy, "Genealogies of Some Artist Families of Chamba," in *History and Culture of the Chamba State, a Western Himalayan Kingdom*, V.C. Ohri, ed., New Delhi: Books & Books, 1989. pp. 174-175.

<sup>256</sup> He hypothesizes that Rājā Bas Dev might have first encountered the artists in the Mughal atelier in Lahore. After Akbar's death in 1605, Jahangir moved the Mughal capital from Lahore to Agra, and some of the Lahore artists might have moved in search of new patrons to the neighboring hill states to the east. Ohri, 1991, pp. 7-15.

<sup>257</sup> A *maṁsabdār* was a member of the imperial Mughal bureaucracy, who governed regions and commanded an army in the Emperor's name. *Maṁsabdārs* were usually aristocrats but their position in the Mughal state was not hereditary but a mark of imperial favor.

Ohri argues that the rājā brought many artisans to Nurpur to build forts and temples at the new capital of his state at Dhameri,<sup>258</sup> and that the ‘Gujarati *chitere*’ who would later call themselves natives of Chamba were from one such family, moving to neighboring Chamba when their work in Nurpur was done. Ohri further argues that the ruins of one of the temples at Nurpur, the Kṛṣṇa temple which Rājā Bas Dev had built based on the plans of the temple of Harideva at Govardhan, built by Rājā Bhagwan Das in 1557 A.D. and the Gobinda Deva shrine at Brindaban, built by Rājā Man Singh in 1590 A.D., has figurative carved stonework on the plinth – including scenes from the life of Kṛṣṇa – that indicates that the artists who were involved in the project were familiar with the painting tradition of the North Indian plains in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>259</sup> (Pl. 4.3, 4.4) Ohri believes that these fragments represent the first instance of the composition and subject matter of the painting tradition of the North Indian plains to be seen in the hills of Himachal Pradesh.

Karl Khandalavala, in contrast, argued that some of the kingdoms of the Punjab Hills became tributaries of the Mughals from the time of Akbar onwards, and that this political relationship, and the influence of the Mughal tradition of maintaining a painting atelier, was responsible for ushering in the advent of painting at hill courts.<sup>260</sup> Elsewhere, Khandalavala has argued that the proximity of Lahore, a sometimes-Mughal capital, to the hill states gave vital impetus to *pahārī* painting, and that following the dismantling of the Lahore atelier, many artists moved to the hills in search of patronage. Khandalavala

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<sup>258</sup> The town was later renamed Nurpur. Ohri, 1991, p. 9.

<sup>259</sup> V. C. Ohri, “The Origin of *pahārī* Painting,” in *Souvenir: Bhuri Singh Museum Centennary*, Vijay Sharma, ed., Shimla: Dept. of Language and Culture, 2008, pp. 61-69, p. 62.

<sup>260</sup> Ohri, 1991, p. 13.



further argued that all paintings prior to 1680 found in the Punjab Hills were the product of itinerant Mughal artists, working in the Mughal idiom, and that local workshops were only set up after 1680, beginning with the *pahārī* court of Basohli, and followed by the courts of Mandi, Chamba and Nurpur.<sup>261</sup> Other scholars, B.N. Goswamy among them, have looked towards the Buddhist areas of Lahaul, Spiti, and Ladakh, where a tradition of wall paintings existed from at least the 13<sup>th</sup> century, as well as further east to Nepal, to postulate the impact of their artistic traditions on *pahārī* painting. While all of these factors, in all likelihood, played varying roles in the development of painting in the Punjab Hills, there is little in the way of concrete evidence to enable scholars to reach any definitive conclusions on the origins of *pahārī* painting.

It can certainly be argued, however, that the nature of Mughal patronage provided new impetus for innovation in painting. The majority of paintings found in India prior to the advent of Muslim rule – first in the form of the Delhi Sultanate, and later in the regional sultanates and in the Mughal empire – were illustrations of Hindu, Jain and Buddhist religious themes. There are no surviving paintings attributable to the Delhi Sultanate, but with the Mughals we have a new pattern in painting emerging. For the Mughals, painting was primarily a court art, not a religious one. Commissioning illustrated manuscripts and folios on a broad range of themes was a mark of prestige in the Mughal court, and therefore an emblem of power and sophistication. The painters employed in Akbar's expansive *kitabkhana* or atelier included many painters whose only

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<sup>261</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

prior experience was with Hindu and Jain religious manuscripts.<sup>262</sup> Working on the range of themes, both secular and religious, demanded by their Mughal patron forced these artists to experiment and innovate across a range of subject matter, combining prior techniques and compositional types with new ones. The inherent flexibility of paper as a medium, as well as its low manufacturing cost, helped facilitate these experiments.

### **The Possibilities of Painting**

My approach to painting in Chamba is a contextual rather than a comprehensive one. My focus, therefore, is not on what constitutes either a ‘Chamba school’ or a ‘Chamba style’. The fact that a sizable percentage, if not the majority, of paintings from this kingdom were destroyed in a devastating fire in the Chamba *tosha-khānā* (treasury) in 1735 also limits a comprehensive analysis of Chamba painting as it is unclear how representative the examples we do know of might be. In addition, as I will argue, the introduction of painting created a visual transformation in Chamba that was not limited to that medium alone, but extended to works in metal, wood and stone. My goal is to examine the relationship between these various media from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, under the rubric of state formation. Painting provided a new vocabulary for the rulers of Chamba, one with flexibility and a range of representations that neither temple architecture nor sculpture had hitherto permitted. An examination of the iconography and subject matter of this new vocabulary across media, as well as across both religious and

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<sup>262</sup> On early Mughal manuscripts and atelier practices, see John Seyller, *The Adventures of Hamza: Painting and Storytelling in Mughal India*, Washington, DC : Freer Gallery of Art, 2002 and Pramod Chandra and Daniel J. Ehnbohm, *The Cleveland Tuti-nama Manuscript and the Origins of Mughal Painting*, Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1976.

non-religious sites, provides a new insight into how the rulers of Chamba constructed and represented their identity at a new juncture in their dynasty's history.

Regardless of whether the tradition of painting existed in *pahārī* kingdoms before the 17<sup>th</sup> century, either in the form of wall paintings or as folios, it was at this moment in time – in the second quarter of the 17<sup>th</sup> century – that painting took hold of the imagination of *pahārī* rulers as the new medium for the expression of individual and cultural identity, and flourished. I argue that the rulers of Chamba patronized painting not only because it was a novel medium and in fashion in the Imperial Mughal court and the Rājput courts of Rajasthan, but also because they recognized the inherent new potential of the medium. For the rulers of Chamba, painting offered a vast vocabulary for the expression of individual, cultural, and dynastic identities. An analysis of this vocabulary and how it was strategically employed offers insight into how these rulers were positioning themselves with regard to their diverse populations, their hill neighbors, as well as the Imperial and Rājput courts located further afield. Painting offered the Rājās of Chamba the opportunity to re-imagine themselves and their notions of kingship at a particular historical moment.

### **A Portrait of a King**

The earliest known Chamba painting depicts the ruler Balabhadra-varman of Chamba (r. 1589-1641) seated on a throne watching a dance performance, surrounded by his younger son Mīān Bīsamber and other attendants. (Pl. 4.5) The painting has been

dated to c. 1630-40 A.D. The painting is partially burnt, with the bottom half missing, but fortunately the figures of father and son, as well as an inscription along the top border identifying the Rājā, are intact. Rājā Balabhadra-varman is shown seated cross-legged on an elaborately ornamented throne, leaning against a large bolster with a floral pattern. Behind him stands a female attendant holding a yak-tail whisk or *chowrie*. His son, Mīan Biśam̐ber, stands before him with his hands folded in respect towards his father. Bishamber is dressed in an orange *jāmā* and turban and wears no ornaments save earrings. Behind Bishamber, three partially damaged dancers can be seen, one playing the castanets, one holding a drum and the third dancing with a scarf held in her hands. The women are dressed in bright hues and are richly ornamented. Rājā Balabhadra-varman, in contrast, is dressed in a simple white *jāmā*, turban and scarf, his status signified by his elevated seat on the throne, and by being the object of every gaze in the composition. His white clothing offers a striking contrast to the plain sage green ground. The inscription identifying him is directly above his head on the red border of the painting. It labels him “Balī-Karaṇa” (the sacrificer), the name by which he was known for his piety and charitable deeds – a charitable impulse so extreme that he ultimately bankrupted the treasury of Chamba and had to be removed from the throne in favor of his elder son, Janārdana-varman. This painting was painted in Balabhadra-varman’s lifetime, and it is a clear demonstration of the potency of the vocabulary of painting to project a distinct image not just of kingship but also of an individual ruler, a potential that neither architecture nor sculpture offered in such a direct manner. It shows Balabhadra-varman partaking of a distinctly royal pastime – watching a dance performance – in his palace,

and in the company of his son. His white clothing not only makes him leap out of the folio, but also re-enforces the purity of character for which he was known.

### **The Convergence of Media**

The recognition of the possibilities of painting also resulted in developments in the related fields of wood-carving and metal repoussé work, both of which are closely related to painting in Chamba. As mentioned earlier, painter families living in Chamba have a tradition that their original home was in Gujarat, and this has been corroborated by B.N. Goswami in his exploration of the records of priests' *bahis* at Haridwar. Three early entries, one from 1670 and two from 1676, mention these painters, calling them 'Gujarati *Chitere*' or Gujarati painters, of the '*Tarkhān*' or carpenter caste.<sup>263</sup> In several other instances, Chamba painters are referred to as '*Tarkhān-chitere*', or carpenter-painters. In the Haridwar records that B.N. Goswami, Vijay Sharma and V.C. Ohri have examined, the fact that these painters called themselves '*basis*' or inhabitants of Chamba attests to the presence of their vocation – painting and woodworking – in Chamba from the early 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>264</sup> We also know that members of this caste were engaged in the making of works in metal repoussé, silver, gold and copper as well.<sup>265</sup>

Since the same artists were responsible for executing works in wood, metal and paper, as well as wall paintings for their royal patrons, it is not surprising that works in all

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<sup>263</sup> Goswami, 1989, pp. 178-179.

<sup>264</sup> Goswami, 1989, p. 174; Ohri, 1991, p. 23-24; Vijay Sharma, "New Documentary Evidence on *pahārī* Painter Families," *Marg*, Vol. 55, Issue no. 1, September 2003, pp. 49–62.

<sup>265</sup> Sharma, September 2003, pp. 54-58.

three media ascribed to a unified vision. A shared artistic vocabulary grew and coalesced across the three media, one with shared subjects and themes, though different elements of this vocabulary were chosen depending on the sites where they were deployed.

Unlike folio paintings, which were typically produced for private consumption by royal patrons, works in the repoussé technique and wood carving, as well as wall paintings, were more widespread in the public domain, either at temple sites or in the public and private chambers of royal buildings. As such, they offer the potential for a closer study of their contextual role in the relationship between the patrons who commissioned them and the viewing public. In addition, viewing these different media as being in dialogue with one another, both at common sites as well as across sites, has helped cast new light on both stylistic developments and craft practices, and helped to clarify some ambiguities in the chronology of Chamba painting.

Wall paintings, wood carving and metal repoussé work are found in several locations across the former kingdom of Chamba – at Bharmaur and Chamba, as well as in the Pangi and Churah valleys. One site which drew the mediums of wood and painting together was the State Koṭhī or royal palace built by Rājā Pṛthvī Singh in 1652 in Bharmaur. Though the State Koṭhī was destroyed in a fire, fragments of painted and carved ornament survive and are now located in the Bhuri Singh Museum in Chamba and at the Himachal Pradesh State Museum in Shimla. From the traces of pigment that can still be seen on some of these wood carvings, it is clear that they were originally painted. Moreover, the carvings themselves are made according to the norms of “miniature”

painting prevalent in Chamba at the time, in both the themes they depict as well as in style.

### **Opening the Doors of the Kingdom**

The most striking of the works on display from the State Koṭhī is a carved and inscribed wooden door. **(Pl. 4.6)** The door is divided into four panels, with a large figure set within each, framed by a cusped arch. Two royal figures wearing *jāmās* and turbans, and carrying their weapons stand facing each other on the upper register. On the proper right is the figure of Rājā Pṛthvī Singh holding a large fish in his hands,<sup>266</sup> standing with his head slightly inclined towards the figure on the opposite panel, Prince Dārā Shikoh, the eldest son of the Mughal Emperor Shāh Jahān . Both figures are youthful. Dārā Shikoh is holding a falcon on his wrist, perhaps a gift from the Chamba Rājā, as these hill falcons were greatly in demand at the Mughal court.<sup>267</sup> The lower register is separated from the upper by a row of eight-pointed stars which, along with the cusped arches with flowers and leaves carved at the corners, are a clear indication of an adopted Mughal motif. The lower register also has two carved figures, a warrior bearing sword and shield below Pṛthvī Singh, and a nobleman holding a shield in one hand and smelling the rose he holds in the other. These two represent the attendants of the royal figures.

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<sup>266</sup> The title of “*Mahi*” or “*Mahi-o-moratib*”, which means fish and dignity, was one of the titles and insignia conferred by the Mughals upon high ranking generals in their army or others held in high regard. Since Rājā Pṛthvī Singh was the first rājā of Chamba to hold a *mansab* in the Mughal army, this scene in all probability refers to the granting of this insignia of honor. For further detail on the *maṁsabdārī* system and the bestowing of Mughal titles, see William Irvine, *The Army of the Indian Mughals*, New Delhi, 1962.

<sup>267</sup> Vijay Sharma, *Chamba Painting: Origin and Development: Exhibition catalogue on the eve of Chamba Millennium*, Shimla, 2006, p. 22.

Rājā Pṛthvī Singh, the grandson of Rājā Balabhadra-varman, spent his early childhood in exile in Mandi after Rājā Jagat Singh of Nurpur attacked Chamba in 1623, killing the regent, Janārdana-varman. Pṛthvī Singh, then an infant, was brought up under the care of Rājā Hari Sen of Mandi. It was only in 1641 that Pṛthvī Singh, with the help of the Rājās of Mandi and Suket, was able to drive out the troops of Nurpur from Chamba and regain his kingdom. Pṛthvī Singh is known to have visited the Mughal court several times, and was the first Chamba ruler to have been made a Mughal *maṁsabdār*, having been given 3000 troops and 2000 horses by the Emperor Shāh Jahān.<sup>268</sup> During his time at the Mughal court, Pṛthvī Singh also became a close associate of Prince Dārā Shikoh. He served in the Mughal army in Kabul and Kandahar, where he is believed to have distinguished himself.<sup>269</sup> He also appears to have participated in the Mughal army's defeat of the states of Mankot and Nurpur, once the latter rose in rebellion against the Mughal Empire. The Pādśāh Nāma says the following about this episode:

“On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of Ramzan (16<sup>th</sup> December A.D. 1641) the highborn Prince Murad Bakhsh, in accordance with the sublime orders, sent Prithvi Chand, the Zamindar of Champa, whose father had been killed by the outcast Jagat Singh, and who was at this time enrolled among the royal servants on the recommendation of the ministers of the State, to the royal threshold, the abode of great kings, along with Alla Vairdi Khan and Mir Buzurg, who had gone to bring him....Prithvi Chand, the Zamindar of Champa, was honored with a *khilat*,<sup>270</sup> an inlaid dagger, the title of ‘Commander of One Thousand’, and the actual command of four hundred horsemen, the title of Rājā and a horse. As the mountain on which Jagat Singh had laid the foundations of the fort of Taragarh was in Chamba, and had been taken by the Rājā in violence; and as the back of the fort joined on the above-

<sup>268</sup> *Gazetteer of the Chamba State*, 1904, p. 90.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>270</sup> A *khilat* is a ceremonial robe.



mentioned territory, and had in that direction an eminence commanding it, the possession of which was essential to the taking of the fort, he was ordered to go home that he might make the necessary preparations to deliver an attack with a proper force from the back of the fort, and, capturing the eminence, reduce the besieged to straitened circumstances.”<sup>271</sup>

Since Pṛthvī Singh was a familiar at the Mughal court, it would have been natural for him to have witnessed and experienced the status and potential of painting as the new medium for artistic and imperial expression, and utilized it to this end once he regained his throne in Chamba. Indeed, it is a symbol of this close relationship with the imperial center – a first for the rulers of Chamba – that Pṛthvī Singh chose to memorialize on the carved wooden door of the State Koṭhī at Bharmaur, as a mark both of his authority and status, as well of his personal friendship with the Mughal prince Dārā Shikoh. On the carved door, the two meet as equals, in amity, Dārā Shikoh’s higher status hinted at only by Pṛthvī Singh’s inclined head.

In a double portrait on folio published by V.C. Ohri,<sup>272</sup> we see Pṛthvī Singh’s relationship with the Mughal court being emphasized yet again. **(Pl. 4.7)** The painting portrays Rājā Pṛthvī Singh and Emperor Shāh Jahān standing facing one another. Here it is Rājā Pṛthvī Singh who has a falcon on his gloved wrist, which he seems in the process of offering to Shāh Jahān. Shāh Jahān holds one hand out towards Pṛthvī Singh, while with the other he holds a sword over his shoulder. There is nothing else in the painting barring the two figures who are portrayed in a remarkably naturalistic and fine manner. The emphasis of the painter is on the rendering of the two faces, and Shāh Jahān is

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<sup>271</sup> *Gazetteer of the Chamba State*, 1904, p. 92.

<sup>272</sup> Ohri, 1991, Plate 19. This painting is in a private collection.

immediately recognizable. This painting was originally in the collection of a Chamba *tarkhān-chitere*, Hira Lal, and is now in a private collection. It seems probable, therefore, that it was produced in Chamba. Moreover, it is doubtful that the Mughal emperor would have had an interest in such a double portrait. It bears an inscription in Takri, a script of the Punjab Hills, which reads: *Shāh Jahān darshan*, or “audience with Shāh Jahān .”<sup>273</sup> The painting has been dated sometime between 1655-1658 A.D., as it shows Rājā Pṛthvī Singh in his prime, while the Emperor has a white beard and is reaching the end of his reign, which was in the year 1658. The background of this painting is a dark green monochrome, and the style, palette, composition and brushwork bear an affinity to the Mughal art of portraiture, which had by then reached its apogee.<sup>274</sup> The double portrait of Pṛthvī Singh and Shāh Jahān also bears a resemblance to the portrait of Balabhadra-varman and Mīan Biśamber, in the monochrome green background, in the fine etching of individual features and in the emphasis on accomplishing an actual likeness. However, the painting of Balabhadra-varman lacks the volume and emphasis on weighted form that the highly naturalistic double portrait of Shāh Jahān and Pṛthvī Singh embodies.

The carved wooden door of the Bharmaur State Koṭhī and the double portrait described above share a subject matter – both are double portraits, though the former is in wood and the latter on folio – one designed to establish a relationship between the Rājā of Chamba and the Mughals. Such a subject matter could not have been alluded to as directly before the advent of painting. Both also share compositional features. They show their main subjects in profile, facing one another, and caught in the midst of an

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<sup>273</sup> Ohri, 1991, p. 46.

<sup>274</sup> By Shāh Jahān’s rule all Mughal art – both painting and architecture – was a projection of the self of the Emperor, in a manner reminiscent of the Sun King, Louis XIV’s phrase, ‘L’Etat c’est Moi’.

interaction, of proffering a fish and perhaps a falcon in the case of the former, and a falcon in the case of the latter. A striking feature of both sets of portraits is that the relationship portrayed is not one between imperial master and subject, but between equal partners in a mutually beneficial political alliance. While the borders of the double portrait on folio are no longer visible due to damage, the painting would certainly have had a border to frame the composition. On the wooden door from the State Koṭhī, the figures are framed in cusped arches, a framing device also used in a contemporaneous portrait on folio of Rājā Pṛthvī Singh. (Pl. 4.8)

In this portrait, Pṛthvī Singh is shown with his face in profile, holding a flower. He is shown only from the chest upwards, seated or standing at a balcony with a flowered carpet hanging over the edge, and is framed within a cusped arch decorated with floral motifs. This arch along with its decoration is almost identical to the wooden arch framing the carved figures on the door from the Bharmaur State Koṭhī, and as such was clearly a popular framing device for portraits at the time. Moreover, it is evident that the sketches for both the wood carvings and paintings would have been composed and executed by a member of the *tarkhān-chitere* community, drawing upon the same pool of popular prototypes for royal portraiture. Other fragments of carved wooden panels from the State Koṭhī depict, for example, seated couples framed within cusped arches in a manner that is shared in the composition of couples – both royal and divine – at leisure both in folio and wall paintings. Here we also see figures depicted in three-quarter profile, with elaborate turbans of non-local provenance, which seem to indicate that the artists designing the

cartoons for the carvings had at their disposal a range of figurative types, including those popularized in Mughal ateliers. **(Pl. 4.9)**

In the case of metal repoussé work as well, it is clear that the same artistic vocabulary was at work. Rājā Pṛthvī Singh commissioned a temple dedicated to Hidimba Devī, another name for the goddess Durgā, at the village of Mehla, a few kilometers outside Chamba. The copper pedestal on which the idol of the goddess stands was embellished with two figures in repoussé. **(Pl. 4.10)** One is a bare-chested figure wearing a *dhotī*, and holding a bow and arrow. He also wears a five pointed crown. The second figure is holding a spear, and wearing a *jāmā*, and appears to be wearing a crown as well. It is unclear who these figures are – identifying the first figure as Rāma, as seems to be indicated by the bow and arrow, is problematic as the figure has a moustache, an attribute never seen on images of Rāma. Both these figures, however, are based on figural prototypes which are also seen in paintings from Chamba in the period after Pṛthvī Singh.

### **The ‘Painterly Vision’ Across Media**

The discussion above has illustrated that a unified vision, sharing themes, subjects and compositional attributes, coalesced across media in Chamba from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Works in all three media – wood, metal and paper – were commissioned for different purposes across the territory by the same royal patron, and executed by a common caste of carpenter-painters.

This was by no means the first instance of a shared vision and artistic vocabulary across media in the art of Chamba. As discussed earlier, the wood carvings on the temples of Lakṣaṇā Devī in Bharmaur and Śakti Devī in Chhatrarhi draw their inspiration from a post-Gupta stylistic and iconographic vocabulary based on sculptures from lithic temples, which in turn were based on wooden prototypes. The carved wooden figures on the doorways of the two temples, like their stone counterparts, are conceptually *sculptural*, in that they are three-dimensional in intent – they are carved in high relief and the three-dimensionality of the figures is emphasized by their naturalistic physiognomy, their articulated musculature and proportioning. **(Pl. 4.11, 4.12)** This holds true for the 10<sup>th</sup>-century narrative carvings at the Mirkulā Devī temple in Udaipur as well, such as the scenes on the ceiling panels where the depth of carving is reminiscent of three-dimensional carved stone narrative friezes from sites such as Sanchi in Madhya Pradesh. **(Pl. 4.13)**

With the emphasis in art shifting to painting, this ‘sculptural vision’ changed fundamentally to a particular ‘painterly vision’ across stone, wood, and painted media. The distinguishing characteristic of this painterly vision, perhaps somewhat anachronistically, was the favoring of line over volume and mass, the two-dimensional over the three-dimensional. In describing the cave frescoes at Ajanta, Milo Beach states, “the majority of paintings from Ajanta evoke that sense of three-dimensional volume that is so distinctive of Indian sculpture. By the sixteenth century, however, the wall paintings at such shrine sites as Lepakshi were instead most expressive through two-dimensional surface design. This was due in part to the relative decline of the sculptural tradition in

India, as well as to greater specialization among artists – painters no longer felt obliged to create sculptural effects.”<sup>275</sup> In Chamba, this is true not just of works done on paper but of wood carving and metal repoussé works as well. The carving on the wooden door of the State Koṭhī, and the two figures in silver repoussé at the Hidimba temple in Mehla are done in very shallow relief, and nowhere on the figures is there any attempt to create naturalistic modeling or the illusion of weight and mass. Arguably, this is not an indication of the impoverishment of the tradition of wood carving, but a deliberate preference for a new visual prototype and the flexibility of subject matter and depiction that it allowed. With the advent of ‘painterly’ compositions, there was no longer the need to compress meaning into a single, readily identifiable, image or icon.

The painterly vision opened up a new range of subject matter and compositional formats, both religious and temporal, for patrons and artists, with shared attributes unifying images across media. It enabled them to conceptualize such works of art as the wooden door of the State Koṭhī in Bharmaur, depicting two rulers, one local and one imperial. Painterly norms also permitted the artist to show the two figures in profile, an innovation for non-narrative wooden sculpture, as nowhere in the temples of Lakṣaṇā Devī and Śakti Devī does one see figures carved in profile except by walking around them. This holds true for the two figures in metal repoussé at the Hidimba Devī temple at Mehla as well.

The painterly vocabulary and its emphasis on line required the flattening out of the image surface where novel themes were being depicted. But the shift from the three-

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<sup>275</sup> Beach, 1992, p. 4.

dimensional to the two-dimensional also holds true for wood carvings of subjects that were common to older temples such as the Lakṣaṇā Devī and Śakti Devī temples. Both the Lakṣaṇā Devī and Śakti Devī temples, for example, have elaborately carved wooden lotus ceilings, done in high relief, with each layer of lotus petals clearly carved out in three-dimensions. (Pl. 4.14, 4.15) The lotus ceiling is deeply recessed into the ceiling, set within rotating squares and ringed on four sides by flying *gandharvas*, indicating the celestial nature of the temple domain. The flying *gandharvas* can also be seen at the top of the pillars in the *maṇḍapa* area of the temple, keeping the temple airborne. (Pl. 4.16) In both these areas, the *gandharvas* are carved in great detail, their hair in corkscrew curls, their rounded features carefully chiseled, their pectorals and navel modulated. (Pl. 4.17) Their posture – with one leg bent below them and the other one bent to the side – gives the impression of motion in flight.

The Chamunda Devī temple on a hill overlooking the town of Chamba was built sometime in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, after painting was established in the Chamba court. The temple was partially destroyed and only the portions of wood carving and the sanctum image of the goddess Durgā date from the original construction. The wooden pillars of the temple and its ceiling panels are elaborately carved and like at the temples of Śakti Devī and Lakṣaṇā Devī the *maṇḍapa* area in front of the *garbhagrha* has a recessed lantern lotus ceiling. (Pl. 4.18) Here, however, while the ceiling is recessed into rotating squares following the format of the older temples, there is no attempt to give the lotus three-dimensional depth, and the carving is flat. The Chamunda Devī lotus ceiling refers back to the flying *gandharvas* ringing the lotus as well, but here the

iconography shifts significantly. The celestial creatures depicted in the Chamunda Devī temple consist of a head and lavish wings, without a body attached. Whereas the flying *gandharvas* in the Lakṣaṇā Devī and Śakti Devī temples indicated flight through their posture and were not winged, here the airborne nature of the celestial creatures is depicted by their wings. These figures resemble nothing so much as the European winged *putti* that can be seen in Mughal paintings, such as the famous portrait of the Mughal Emperor Jahāṅgīr and the Safavid ruler Shah Abbas, *Jahāṅgīr Embracing Shah Abbas I*, by the artist Abu'l Hasan. **(Pl. 4.19)** Wooden fragments of these *putti* or cherubic figures have also been recovered from Pṛthvī Singh's State Koṭhī at Bharmaur and are now in the Bhuri Singh Museum in Chamba. **(Pl. 4.20)** The flying *gandharvas* located at the top of the *maṇḍapa* pillars too are significantly different. Whereas the ones in the Lakṣaṇā Devī and Śakti Devī temples are similar in posture and carving to the ones around the lotus ceiling, at the Chamunda Devī temple they are flattened and compressed in both form and volume, with both the legs raised up to either side of the head. **(Pl. 4.21)** The motion of flight that they seek to represent becomes apparent here only by their location at the top of the pillars.

### **Re-Contextualization of Established Dynastic Sites**

The temples of Chamba were also the site for a re-contextualization of established sacred spaces with the infusion of this newly privileged painterly vision from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The dynastic temple of the Chamba royal family, the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple, was one such site. Vijay Sharma has published the details of a dated and



inscribed breastplate, called a *kavacha* in Sanskrit or a *kanchua* in Chambyali, worn by the main idol of Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa. The *kavacha* bears an inscription stating that it was originally offered to the deity by Rājā Balabhadra-varman (r. 1589-1623). It subsequently broke and was later repaired by Rājā Udai Singh (r. 1690-1720), who added gold and jewels to it. A seven line inscription in *Devanāgarī* script and in the local *Chambyali* dialect bears this information and is dated *Śāstra Samvat* 91, i.e. 1715 A.D. **(Pl. 4.22)** The *kavacha* is extravagantly embossed in gold. It is decorated with figures of the ten *avatāras* of Viṣṇu as well as other gods from the Hindu pantheon, accompanied by decorative floral patterns. This *kavacha* is significant for many reasons. It is dated, and it bears the name of not only the donor, but also of the goldsmiths who made it, as well as of the priest and other individuals from the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple establishment. The translation of the inscription was published by Vijay Sharma and runs as follows:

(Line 1) Hail! May LakṣmīNārāyaṇa ever be our protector. King Bali Karṇa had offered a *kanchua* to the Lord, which fell down and got broken. Gold weighing 104 *tolā* and 91 *baṇi* recovered from that old *kanchua* was melted on the first day of Vaishakh of Samvat 91.

(Line 2) Illustrious Udai Singh, the great king, performed his religious duty by adding more gold (weighing 69 *tolā*, 2 *māśa*, and one *rati*) and *baṇi lāl*. Gold weighing 31 *tolā*, 6 *māśa*, and two *baṇi lāl* were used.

(Line 3) In addition, 16 more were then given. *Kundan* weighing 26 *tolā* and 8 *māśa* was used in making it. Gold weighing 2 *tolā*, 1 *māśa*, and 5 *rati* went waste due to heating and scraping. Gold of 5 *māśa* was used for soldering. Gold of 5 *māśa* and two *rati* was wasted in the melting of the old *kanchua*. Gold weighing 6 *tolā*, 9 *māśa*

and *baṇi lāl* were kept in a box in the store. The total weight of the gold comes to 179 *tolā*, 11 *māśa* and 1 *rati*.

(Line 4) The king provided more emeralds, small pieces of rubies numbering 396, from the store of Sisa. Furthermore, jewels worth rupees 66 were purchased. The king gave 150 valuable jewels in addition. Precious jewels belonging to the temple itself were used in addition. Sanju Narihara and Chipda Gajadhara were the storekeepers.

(Line 5) The work was executed under the supervision of Sanju Narihara and Chapda Gajadhara, the viziers to the Lord. It was prepared on the 7<sup>th</sup> day of *Māgha* of the year (Śāstra Samvat) 91.

(Line 6) Commenced during the tenure of the priest Kolua Pipa and on completion, the *kanchua* was offered to the Lord, during the period of the priest Kolua Palu. Gujhun baniya also cooperated (?). Gajadhara, Debu and Deu were the craftsmen of the goldsmith caste who worked on it and the jewels were studded by these three. Gajadhara did the embossing of the decorative floral work. Debu, Gajadhara, Chandu, Sadu, ...

(Line 7) Parasu, Bulaki, Bimtu, and coppersmith Hira were employed for simple engraving work. Jadhaon Nārada served as attendant. Goldsmith Gajadhara incised the inscription. The gross weight of the engraved breastplate was 111 *tolā* and 6 *māśa*. The remaining jewels were kept securely and put in the box under the custody of Narihara, Palu, and Pipa, the priests.<sup>276</sup>

All the figures in gold repoussé are representative of the stylistic attributes of Chamba painting in the first quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. At the top center of the *kavacha* is the image of Viṣṇu reclining on the serpent Śeṣa with his consort Lakṣmī, floating atop

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<sup>276</sup> Vijay Sharma, "A Decorated Kavacha in a Temple at Chamba," *Marg*. Vol. 57, no. 1, 2005, pp. 58-73.

the cosmic ocean. **(Pl. 4.23)** Viṣṇu is flanked on either side by Brahmā and another image of Viṣṇu. In the middle, right above the inscription, are shown the standing figures of Gaṇeśa and Śiva, facing one another. The ten incarnations of Viṣṇu are depicted on vertical panels on either side of this central composition – Matsya, Varāha, Vamana, Rāma and Buddha on the left, and Kūrma, Narasiṃha, Paraśurāma, Balarāma and Kalki on the right. **(Pl. 4.24)**

Vijay Sharma argues that the facial types seen in these depictions are unmistakably in the Chamba idiom, “the face of Viṣṇu is noticeably round, his eyes are elongated, and a kind of shading is discernible over the cheeks, which is a typical feature of the painting style of Chamba and can be seen in the wall paintings of Gand Dehrā and Ragamala paintings from Chamba workshops.”<sup>277</sup> In addition, he argues, “the rendering of the typical crown of Viṣṇu, the collared blouse of Lakṣmī, and the pointed and small, round, chins of their faces are characteristics of the Chamba painting style of this period.” The decorative floral motifs, too, are “invariably seen in the woodcarvings from Chamba.”<sup>278</sup> Moreover, Sharma writes that some of the figures, including the seated, four-headed figure of Brahmā flanking Viṣṇu Śeṣaśāyī and the standing Śiva, have two circular, breast-like forms on the chest, suggesting chest muscles, a distinctive stylistic feature which is seen only in Chamba paintings from the time of Rājā Chhattar Singh (r. 1664-1690) onwards. **(Pl. 4.25)** Indeed, this feature is distinctly visible in the wall paintings of a temple built in the village of Gand Dehrā, called the Śakti Dehrā temple, which is located about 20 kilometers outside Chamba and which was built during the

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<sup>277</sup> Sharma, 2005, p. 63.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

reign of Rājā Ugar Singh (r. 1720-1735). (Pl. 4.26) The standing figure of Śiva, his right leg lifted in the yogic posture of *bhujanga-trasta*, bears a striking similarity to a carved wooden panel depicting a *sādhū* at the temple of Devī-rī-Koṭhī in District Pangi. (Pl. 4.27) Both the Śakti Dehrā and the Devī-rī-Koṭhī temples will be discussed in greater detail in the next segment of this chapter.

This dated *kavacha* provides an important benchmark in the development of Chamba painting as it depicts, in both composition and style, the trends prevalent in Chamba painting in the first quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Because the images are in embossed metalwork, their graphic effect is like that of a cartoon, and gives a clear idea of the decorative and iconographic details and proportions in painting traditions.

The *kavacha* is also significant because it gives the name of the artists involved in its making and points towards the craft specializations prevalent at the time. The artists mentioned on the *kavacha* are called *sunyāra-kārigar* (goldsmith), *jadia* (fixer of precious stones) and *Thathiār* (coppersmiths). Significantly, the *kavacha* does not name a *tarkhān-chitera* (carpenter-painter) as the artist responsible for the design of the figures to be embossed, yet it is unlikely that someone entrusted with this crucial task should be left out altogether. Therefore it is highly probable that the goldsmith Gajadhar, who is referred to in the inscription, was responsible for both drawing and engraving the figures and decorative motifs on the *kavacha*.<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>279</sup> Vijay Sharma has argued that some of the *tarkhans* of Chamba were also goldsmiths.

In the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the ruler of Chamba, Rājā Dalel Singh (r. 1735-1748) commissioned an embossed silver *toraṇa* or decorative arch, once again for the dynastic Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple. **(Pl. 4.28)** Unfortunately the *torāṇa* is partially obscured by the idol's vestments, but the details that are discernable show individual deities in repoussé, set within separate arches. They are shown both seated on animal skins as well as standing, in profile as well as front-facing. Each composition is a discrete entity, in the manner of a series of pages on iconic representations of divinities.

An inscription on the temple identifies the creators of the images on the *torāṇa* as the *tarkhān-chitere* (carpenter-painter) Laharu and Mahesh.<sup>280</sup> Both these artists were responsible for a number of significant painted manuscripts produced at the Chamba court. Both artists were contemporaries, believed to have worked for the rājās of Chamba from c.1730 to c.1770 A.D., a period encompassing the reigns of Dalel Singh, Umed Singh and Rāj Singh. Of the works attributed to Laharu is a c.1757-58 Bhāgavata Puraṇā series in horizontal format, which utilizes bold colors and stylized figures. It was commissioned by Mīān Śamser Singh, the younger brother of Rājā Umed Singh, who is portrayed on the last folio of the series, standing with folded hands in front of an enthroned Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī **(Pl. 4.29)** The faces of both Lakṣmī and Viṣṇu bear a striking similarity to the images on the *kavacha*, as well as the *torāṇa*.<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>280</sup> For further details on these two artists and their works, see *Painters of the Pahārī Schools*, V. C. Ohri and Roy C. Craven, Jr., Eds., Marg Publications, Vol. 50-1, and E. Fischer and B. N. Goswamy, *Pahārī Masters: Court Painters of Northern India*, Zurich: Artibus Asiae Publishers, 1992.

<sup>281</sup> A Rāmāyaṇa series dated to the same period (c. 1750-75), and also attributed to Laharu displays a stylistic shift – the color palette becomes cooler, and details of fabrics, architectural ornament and foliage more refined, indicating Laharu's move towards greater naturalism in painting.

The Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple was not the only site where elements of the painterly vision were added. The outer sanctum walls of the ancient wooden temple of Śakti Devī at Chhatrarhi were also embellished with wall paintings, to “update” as it were, this 8<sup>th</sup> century shrine once painting was fully established as a new medium. About sculpture on Indian temple walls, Stella Kramrisch wrote, “the divine power enshrined in the inner cell of the Hindu temple is viewed by architects...as though projecting itself through the walls of the temple and expressing itself on and beyond the walls as images.”<sup>282</sup> The wall paintings in this and other temples function like the sculpture on lithic temples, organizing images and presenting them to the beholder as either narratives or icons of divinity. Framed by cusped arches set within elaborate floral borders at Śakti Devī are a series of wall paintings running around the perimeter of the sanctum. **(Pl. 4.30, 4.31)** The elaborately carved doorway of the sanctum is flanked by partially destroyed paintings dating from about the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. On the proper right are images of Śiva and Pārvatī sitting in their mountain abode, of Durgā seated with two attendants, and a *Rāsa Līlā* (the depiction of Kṛṣṇa dancing with the *gopis*). On the proper left are images of Rāma and Sita seated with Hanumāna, and Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa depicted standing with two cows. Appropriately, on either side of the doorway are two badly damaged seated tigers, the *vāhana* of the goddess Durgā, who is another form of the Goddess Śakti Devī.

Moving clockwise around the sanctum, on the proper right wall, in two registers, are the Churning of the Cosmic Ocean (also a depiction of the Kūrma *avatāra* of Viṣṇu),

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<sup>282</sup> S. Kramrisch, “Walls and Image in Indian Art,” in *Exploring India’s Sacred Art: Selected Writings of Stella Kramrisch*, B.S. Miller, ed., Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983.

the Matsya *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, Viṣṇu reclining on the Cosmic Ocean on his serpent Śeṣa, Durgā seated on a lotus, Durgā killing a demon from her perch on her tiger, Durgā killing the buffalo-demon Mahiṣa, two scenes from the Rāmāyaṇa, Rādhā, Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma, the Narasimha *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, the Varāha *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, the Vamana *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, Kṛṣṇa, Subhadrā and Balarāma (?), and the Kalki *avatāra* of Viṣṇu depicted as a dark warrior with a winged horse. The paintings on the back wall are in poor condition, but some of the compositions can be discerned. There are two images of Durgā seated on a mountain with Viṣṇu, Śiva and Brahmā pleading with her to vanquish the demons who were destroying the earth, two images of Durgā in battle against the demons, Kṛṣṇa killing a demon in the swirling waters of a river, Kṛṣṇa in a shrine playing the flute, Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa seated on a *jhūlā* or swing, Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa standing in the rain, images of Kālī devouring the heads of demons, four scenes of Durgā fighting demons, both on foot and seated on her tiger, and Durgā seated in audience on a mountain receiving grateful men and beasts. On the proper left wall, which is also partially destroyed, the following images can be made out – Kṛṣṇa as a cowherd, Kṛṣṇa stealing the *gopis*’ clothes, Śiva and Pārvatī, Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa playing the game of *chaupad*, Kṛṣṇa lifting Mount Govardhan, Kṛṣṇa defeating the python-demon, Kṛṣṇa milking a cow, Rādhā waiting for Kṛṣṇa in a garden, two images of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa looking into a mirror, and an image of Hari-Hara – half Śiva and half Viṣṇu.

The wall paintings thus cover all the major sects of Chamba – Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava and Śaktā. The individual frames encompass iconic as well as narrative images of the various deities, and show them partaking in a range of activities, both at war and at

leisure. The arrangement of the wall paintings on the exterior walls of the sanctum is like a picture gallery for the pilgrim undertaking ritual circumambulation. More than anything else, they provide the pilgrim the opportunity to view, experience, and learn about the sheer range and diversity of the divine spirit emanating from the sanctum. The iconographic program is not entirely cohesive, with narrative images intermingling with iconic ones, and no discernible ordering of the two registers of images. Nor do the narrative episodes from the life of Kṛṣṇa and the exploits of the goddess follow their established episodic order. However, there is a hierarchy of imagery, with the proper right wall where ambulation begins dominated by the ten *avatāras* of Viṣṇu, the rear wall with images of the goddess and proper left wall with images from the life of Kṛṣṇa. The final image of the ambulatory path is Hari-Hara, paying obeisance to both these cults within the shrine to the goddess. The primary change that occurs in religious iconography with the introduction of painting is the inclusion of detailed narratives associated with the gods and their deeds, and in particular with the *avatāras* of Viṣṇu. As I will discuss later in this chapter, pictorial narratives of the Rāma and Kṛṣṇa *avatāras* in particular proliferate, accompanied by changes in the nature of religious practice as well as cultural identification for the *rājās* of Chamba.

### **Redefining the Temple Space**

The eighteenth century was also a time when new temples were built in which the painterly vision was given center stage. Two of these, the Śakti Dehrā temple and the Devī-rī-Koṭhī temple, combined the mediums of wood carving and wall painting to



expand the boundary of the meaning and experience of a temple space. Located about twenty kilometers from the town of Chamba is a small, wooden pyramidal temple in a village called Gand Dehrā. **(Pl. 4.32)** It has an enclosed sanctum of plastered mud walls, and an ambulatory around the sanctum. All four walls of the sanctum are painted with frescoes, and the wooden ceiling and pillars of the temples are elaborately carved. The wall paintings at Śakti Dehrā are believed to be the oldest wall paintings extant in Chamba and can be dated to c. 1720-1730.<sup>283</sup> Interestingly, the doorway into the sanctum is made of stone, as is the lone *jālī* window looking into the sanctum. **(Pl. 4.33, 4.34)** Parts of the structure currently standing are later renovations, and many of the wall paintings are partially destroyed and in a poor state of preservation. Here too the paintings are presented as a series of folios in two registers, separated by maroon borders, as was the case with contemporaneous folio paintings, and compositions are set within cusped arches with rosettes in the corners, further framing the composition. **(Pl. 4.35)**

On either side of the entrance, the wall paintings that are discernible are a narrative scene from the life of Kṛṣṇa and two iconic representations, the first of Viṣṇu as Vaikuṇṭha – the same composite image of the four forms of Viṣṇu which is enshrined in the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple complex in Chamba – and the second of Kṛṣṇa, Subhadra and Balarāma. **(Pl. 4.36, 4.37)** Both these wall paintings are images of idols, and are shown as such, standing upon pedestals and with *torāṇa* arches above them. The image of Viṣṇu Vaikuṇṭha is identical in iconography to the image in the dynastic Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple of the Chamba royal family. Here Vaikuṇṭha is shown with a bare-chested and *dhotī*-clad priest in attendance to one side. The figure on the other side of the

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<sup>283</sup> Ohri, 1991, p. 17.

image can no longer be seen in its entirety but the edge of a full-skirted *jāmā* indicates that it was in all probability a member of Chamba royalty. The image of the iconic Vaikuṇṭha being worshipped by a *brāhmaṇa* and a king on the front façade of the temple, in this village on the route to Pangi Valley must be seen as a strategic marker of dynastic identity.

Besides narrative paintings of scenes from the life of Kṛṣṇa from the Bhāgavata Puraṇā (Pl. 4.38), as well as images of Durgā in battle with demonic forces (Pl. 4.39), the Śakti Dehrā temple also has a series of images that depict scenes of courtly life and leisure. This marks an iconographic shift within temple premises for Chamba, and one that was facilitated by the painterly vocabulary. On all three walls of the temple, interspersed between scenes of the gods, are images of aristocratic figures depicted with established attributes of royalty. There is a painting of an aristocratic figure on a piebald horse, and another of a prince on an elephant. (Pl. 4.40, 4.41) There is a portrait of an unidentified king followed by his two young sons, as well as depictions of a ruler with a bow and arrow, along with that of a prince carrying weapons and a shield. (Pl. 4.42, 4.43, 4.44) There are also numerous images of royal couples, standing facing each other within the arch of the painted frame. (Pl. 4.45) The inclusion of these themes of royalty at a site frequented by villagers and travelers served to familiarize the populace of the kingdom of Chamba with emblems of royalty that they would not have encountered otherwise, and built valuable linkages between the *rājā* and the *prajā* – the king and the people. Creating a visual parallel between royalty and the gods, united within the precincts of the temple, further strengthened this link, serving to both elevate the aristocracy to the ranks of the

divine and make them more accessible by placing them in a public forum. At Śakti Dehrā we see that even the almost life-sized carved wooden *dvarpala* looks like an aristocratic kṣatriya warrior. (Pl. 4.46)

The combination of painterly depictions of the religious and the temporal, and of gods and kings in particular, that we see at the Śakti Dehrā and Devī-rī-Koṭhī temples was mirrored in the Rang Mahal or ‘painted palace’ at Chamba. The Rang Mahal was a gallery which was richly ornamented with wall paintings in the palace of the Chamba royal family. These paintings were commissioned during the rule of Rājā Carat Singh sometime during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and while this makes them considerably later in date from the Śakti Dehrā wall paintings, the thematic parallels between the two are noteworthy. None of the paintings are currently *in situ*, but fragments of these paintings, as well as painted wood carvings, are preserved in the Bhuri Singh Museum in Chamba, the Himachal State Museum in Shimla, and the National Museum in New Delhi.

These painted frescoes reveal that the palace of the kings too was a visually rich environment, with depictions highlighting various aspects of courtly life, both in the realm of the gods as well as humans. These depictions include portrayals of the Śīva-*parivāra* or Śīva’s family seated in a relaxed fashion in the mountains, scenes of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa seated in a court, standing at a marble balcony, or romancing beneath the trees, Kṛṣṇa cavorting with the *gopis*, and Rāma and Sita seated in a courtyard of the palace at Ayodhya. The Rang Mahal paintings also have numerous depictions of *nāyikās* and royal couples, a large painting of the ladies of the court praying at a small, pyramid-roofed Śīva

shrine constructed in the local style, accompanied by two rams that are doubtless to be sacrificed to the god, paintings of musicians and dancers, as well as depictions of flowers and animals. (Pl. 4.47, 4.48, 4.49, 4.50, 4.51, 4.52) In many of these paintings, in particular those in which the gods are shown in a court setting, it is difficult to distinguish the gods from the kings, so closely tied are the depictions of the two types of images in terms of the clothes and ornaments worn, the details of court life and kingly accoutrements, as well as the architectural details of royal chambers, audience halls, terraces and gardens. Often the only cues for distinguishing the celestial from the terrestrial are the blue hue of Rāma or Kṛṣṇa, or the presence of readily identifiable figures from epics and Puranic lore.

A wall painting showing an iconic representation of Viṣṇu as Vaikuṇṭha is particularly striking in its resemblance to the image of Viṣṇu at the Śakti Dehrā temple. (Pl. 4.53) Here too, the image of Vaikuṇṭha is shown standing on a metallic pedestal, engraved with the image of Garuḍa, with a *toraṇa* arch above the deity in the same material. The color of the pedestal and the arch indicate that they were, in all probability, meant to show silver. The faint line engraving of the figure of Garuḍa on the pedestal indicates that he was made in metal repoussé. Both of these attributes are perfectly in keeping with the actual image of Vaikuṇṭha enshrined in the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple in Chamba, which stands on a silver pedestal with the image of Garuḍa embossed on it, and with a silver *toraṇa* framing it. Moreover, the two faces of Viṣṇu as Narasimha and as *Varāha* are painted the same shade of yellow as Viṣṇu's golden ornaments, and indeed

the heads of these two *avatāras* are made of gold in the Vaikuṇṭha image in the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple. (Pl. 4.54)

To one side of the image stands a bare-chested priest, holding a bell in one hand and making offerings with the other. To the other side stands another priest who belongs to the *gaddī* community. He is immediately identifiable by his distinctive robe of white wool gathered at the waist by a long black belt wound several times around his waist, gathering the robe into voluminous pleats which flow down from the waist – a dress worn by *gaddīs* to this day. (Pl. 4.55)<sup>284</sup> That he is also a priest is indicated by the *dhotī* which peeks out from beneath his *gaddī* dress, as well as the fact that he is blowing a conch shell. Also included in the painting are the two diminutive figures of a royal couple, possibly Rājā Carat Singh and his wife, who stand on either side of the image with folded hands.<sup>285</sup> While the image of Vaikuṇṭha standing on his pedestal served to bring a vital emblem of the dynastic center to the village of Gand Dehrā in the case of the Śakti Dehrā temple, at the Rang Mahal, located in the heart of Chamba, the inclusion of a *gaddī* priest standing besides the icon of Viṣṇu Vaikuṇṭha serves to symbolically incorporate an emblematic figure from the peripheries of the land and locate him at the center of the kingdom.

The temple of Devī-rī-Koṭhī, located in the heart of Pangi valley on an old trade route to the valley of the Chandrabhaga River and surrounded by the majestic peaks of

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<sup>284</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2, the *gaddīs* are a semi-pastoralist community centered around the town of Bharmaur. They are fervent worshippers of Śiva, and every year lead the community of Bharmaur in the worship and offerings made to Śiva at Mani Mahesh temple, following which they make the *yatra* or pilgrimage to the nearby peak of Manimahesa Kailāsa, which they believe to be the abode of Śiva and Pārvatī. They wear the traditional garments depicted in this painting to this day.

<sup>285</sup> The small size of these figures is an established manner of visually and metaphorically minimizing their importance in this scene.

the Pir Panjal range, took this transformation of the temple space a step further.<sup>286</sup> Built in 1754 by Rājā Umed Singh, this temple, like the Śakti Dehrā temple, is dedicated to the goddess Durgā, and stands in a village named after the temple. The temple of Devī-rī-Koṭhī is a modest wooden and plastered mud structure with a pyramidal roof, unimpressive from the outside. **(Pl. 4.56)** Once one enters the open wooden ambulatory that runs around the sanctum, however, the space is visually transformed by the intermingling of painted and carved surfaces that cover the entirety of the temple interior. On either side of the entrance to the sanctum are two life-sized *dvārapāla*, dressed like kṣatriya warriors, wearing crowns and carrying weapons. **(Pl. 4.57)** Figures of gods carved in wood are placed in niches over the doorway. The plastered walls around the sanctum are entirely painted, and the wooden ceilings and pillars are covered with a variety of carved images and designs. **(Pl. 4.58)**

Both the painting and the carving display a higher level of accomplishment, with finer detailing and greater fluidity, than seen at the Śakti Dehrā temple. An inscription on the temple tells us that the *tarkhāns* Gurdev and Jhanda were responsible for the carvings as well as the wall paintings. The designs chosen and the deployment of media within the temple show a great deal of flair, as well as elements that are entirely new to Chamba's visual culture, such as the strange demonic faces woven into the wide border that frames the wall paintings. **(Pl. 4.59)** The wall paintings too are entirely distinct from those at the Śakti Dehrā and Śakti Devī temples.

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<sup>286</sup> For a detailed study of this temple, see Eberhard Fischer, V. C. Ohri and Vijay Sharma, *The Temple of Devi-Kothi: Wall Paintings and Wooden Reliefs in a Himalayan Shrine of the Great Goddess in the Churah Region of the Chamba District*, Himachal Pradesh, Zurich: Artibus Asiae Publishers, 2003.

Here the paintings are not presented as a series of single folios, each with its individual frame, but instead an entire wall is taken as a single compositional field or canvas. The artists then used a variety of strategies to create a narrative flow depending on the requirements of the story being told. The sophistication of the story-telling is one that takes into account the ambulatory path of the worshipper clockwise around the sanctum, although each of the three walls is compositionally discrete.

Almost two entire walls of the temple are devoted to the exploits of the goddess Durgā to whom the temple is dedicated. The proper right wall is devoted to the goddess in action against various demonic contingents. **(Pl. 4.60, 4.61, 4.62)** The wall surface is not divided into registers or frames of any kind, but there is nonetheless a clear sense of progression, emphasized by the repetition of the figure of the goddess involved in different action sequences against demonic forces. These images of the goddess also serve as individual focal points, which together anchor different parts of the painted surface together. From the perspective of the worshipper, Durgā moves alongside and in the same direction on the wall as the ambulation progresses, always by the side of the devotee. The impact of this compositional format is to impart a full sense of the magnitude of the battle fought by the goddess – to immerse the viewer in the battlefield – as well as establish the extent of her powers, since she appears to be in all places at all times, even as the demons multiply and swarm all around her.

The rear wall of the sanctum is also devoted to the goddess, but here the painters follow a different narrative format. The wall is divided into two registers, meant to be ‘read’ from the upper left side, across the length of the register, on to the lower register

which is read from right to left, once again in keeping with the ambulatory path of the worshipper. Here the narrative has temporal progression. It begins with the gods, hands folded in supplication, approaching Durgā who is shown majestically seated on a throne, to ask for her help in defeating the demon army. **(Pl. 4.63)** As the narration progresses in the upper register, she battles demons on the battlefield. In the lower register she is aided in her efforts by Kālī, depicted as oversized in relation to the demons and the few trees around her, as well as in relation to Durgā. She stands on the battleground, naked, barefoot, haggard, and formidable. Her extended tongue frames the bottom of almost the entire wall, catching the drops of blood from the wounded and maimed demons before they can touch the ground and regenerate into yet another demon. **(Pl. 4.64)** In this manner, Kālī too is everywhere at once.

The proper left wall is devoted to the story of Kṛṣṇa. Here the narrative structure is yet again different, and in order to do justice to the greater complexity of the composition the artists have used a unique and innovative compositional device to unify the entire wall. The wall painting depicts numerous and detailed incidents from the life of Kṛṣṇa, from his birth and rescue from his evil uncle, through his entire childhood and adolescence in Vrindavan. Since the wall painting covers a large number of separate and famous incidents from the Bhāgavata Puraṇā, the artists have divided the wall into four registers, and the stories can be seen and understood in sequence by ‘reading’ across the registers, beginning from the left side of the uppermost register and culminating with the left side of the lowest register. Although the different vignettes are not separated by frames, the artist has used elements from each narrative – such as elements of



architecture or nature – to segregate the stories. The thematic and pictorial cohesion of the whole, however, is maintained throughout the surface of the wall by having the Yamuna river flowing through each of the registers, integrated into the illustrations of the many important occurrences that happened by (or in) the river during Kṛṣṇa's childhood and infancy. (Pl. 4.65, 4.66, 4.67, 4.68)

Both these compositional formats seen at the Devī-rī-Koṭhī temple mark a distinct stylistic and compositional shift from the wall paintings at the temple of Śakti Dehrā. The Devī-rī-Koṭhī temple paintings are both more fluid and innovative in creating narrative cohesion and flow, and are conceptualized as *wall* paintings, in contrast to the wall paintings at Śakti Dehrā, which are conceptualized as a series of paintings on paper. Writing about the relationship between the tradition of wall painting and Rājput painting, Ananda Coomaraswamy wrote, “both in composition and technique, the Rājput paintings, notwithstanding their generally small size, are clearly derived from and related to an art of wall paintings. The Hindu paintings have stepped from the walls of the shrines and palaces where their traces linger still.”<sup>287</sup> In the case of the known wall paintings of Chamba, this is clearly not the case. Rather, the earliest extant wall paintings at Śakti Dehrā draw from contemporary folios in composition, subject matter and style.<sup>288</sup> At Devī-rī-Koṭhī, we see that with greater practice comes greater innovation, and the

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<sup>287</sup> A. Coomaraswamy, *Rājput Painting* (2 Vols.), New York: Hacker Art Books, 1916 (Rep. 1975), pp. 3 and 5.

<sup>288</sup> For example, a *Dasavatāra* series from Chamba has a folio of the Matsya *avatāra* of Viṣṇu where the *avatāra* is shown emerging out of the gaping mouth of a giant fish, while the head of the demon who is killed by the fish-incarnation of Viṣṇu emerges from beneath the belly of the fish. This figure is similar in composition and style to the wall painting of Matsya *avatāra* depicted on the front wall of the Shakti Dehrā temple.

compositions truly move off the page and onto the wall. While it would be unfeasible to generalize about the relationship between folio paintings and wall paintings in Chamba, it is clear that the relationship was not a static one, but in all likelihood changed directions over a period of time.

The temple of Devī-rī-Koṭhī is also unique for the range and variety of its wood-carvings. The ceiling of the temple is entirely covered with carved wooden figures – of gods and goddesses, birds and animals, fairies, kings and mendicants. The entire natural world hovers overhead, and the images seem designed to represent the sheer virtuosity of the artists. Animals are shown running, fighting, sitting and standing; birds are shown soaring or at rest; *sādhūs* are shown combing their hair. While such images, presented here as discrete cameos within individual carved frames, were enabled by the painterly vocabulary and the range and flexibility of both painterly subject matter as well as the medium of wood, these carvings at the temple of Devī-rī-Koṭhī are unmatched in their range of depictions in any medium. Unlike the wood carvings at the temples of Śakti Dehrā and Chamunda Devī, which primarily depicted religious images, here there is an effort to depict the entirety of both the celestial and natural worlds, co-existing in harmony. (Pl. 4.69 - 4.75)

The 18<sup>th</sup> century temples discussed above were both experientially different from the lithic Nāgara temples that had come before them, as well as conceptually different. As I discussed in earlier chapters, a temple is both a symbolic and a functional monument and the North Indian Nāgara temple and the South Indian Drāviḍa temple use specific symbolic forms to represent particular cosmological frameworks. Temples attempt to

give symbolic shape to the presence of divinity, and create ways for the worshipper to approach the divine. Yet ways to conceive of the divine for the purpose of worship differ. A temple can thus be variously described as an altar where *Brahman* manifests itself, a palatial shelter built for an embodied deity, and a *tīrtha*, a place of transition where the mortal world meets the celestial and the worshipper makes the spiritual journey into the presence of divinity.

Temples evolved in India as part of a process that attempted to give built form to ideas about divinity and its worship. These ideas share a core throughout the Indian subcontinent, yet ideas about the nature of worship differ from region to region. Hinduism as we know it today, involving the worship of a pantheon of male and female anthropomorphized images of deities, emerged out of Vedic rituals, the Upanishads and the Brahmanas, but retains to this day a multiplicity of belief patterns and rituals.

Notwithstanding this multiplicity, divinity can be thought of in two broad categories – in terms of an abstract power or as a “personal God.”<sup>289</sup> The former is the idea of *Brahman* as it developed in the Vedic rituals of North India, where ritual and societal norms valued the abstract conception of divinity. The symbolic morphology of the Nāgara temple, therefore, emphasizes an articulated representation of cosmic abstraction in the form of the upper altar surrounding a cosmic pillar or *axis mundi* crowned by an *āmlaka*. In the latter conception of divinity, a highly personal idea of, and relationship with, the divine is valued, and this in turn is mirrored in the morphology of South Indian Drāviḍa temples.

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<sup>289</sup> J. Waghorne and Norman Cutler, Eds., *Gods of Flesh, Gods of Stone*, Anima Publications, 1985, pp. 159.

The architectural symbolism of the Nāgara temples of Chamba, as is the case with all Nāgara temples, refers primarily to the abstract concept of divinity in its built form, despite the embodied deity who resides in the sanctum. The 18<sup>th</sup> century wood, mud and plaster temples of Chamba, in contrast, are built according to a local architectural idiom, using the same materials and building techniques employed in domestic architecture, but with the addition of certain palatial elements, most notably the attenuation of the pyramidal roof. This type of structure, like the Drāviḍa temple, emphasizes the residential nature of the temple as the abode of the deity. Moreover, the addition of a painterly vocabulary in the form of both wood carving and wall painting transformed these temples from conceptually abstract spaces into narratively rich ones. The combination of religious and non-religious themes depicted in the Devī-rī-Koṭhī temple, particularly the addition of depictions of royalty sharing equal ground with narratives of Durgā and Kṛṣṇa, facilitated the merging of deity, royalty and devotee at this *tīrtha* or meeting place.

### **The Assertion of a Rājput Identity**

While there is evidence that painting in Chamba existed during the rule of Balabhadra-varman, it was during the rule of Rājā Pṛthvī Singh (1641-1664) that painting was fully established at the Chamba court. It is from the period of his rule, moreover, that there is clear evidence of the formation of a painterly vision and its components across media. Pṛthvī Singh's numerous visits to the Mughal court, as well as the years he spent

in Mandi as a child,<sup>290</sup> no doubt catalyzed his interest in patronizing painting as the newly privileged art form. Examples of numerous Mughal and Deccani drawings and pounces have been found in the family collection of Chamba painters, indicating that they were familiar with the kinds of paintings produced in those workshops.<sup>291</sup> (PI. 4.76)

Once Pṛthvī Singh became a *maṁsabdār* under the Mughals, the kingdom of Chamba transcended its regional geographical moorings by becoming associated with the imperial center. More importantly, because of the *maṁsabdārī* system, the boundaries of the state were accorded recognition as an entity, with the result that territorial establishment and consolidation were no longer the primary focus for the ruler. Marking territory through architecture and emphasizing the dynastic center of the town of Chamba with the erection of lithic temples were no longer the imperatives that they had been in the past. The attention of rulers thus shifted to the assertion of other notions identity.

The most significant of these was the growing assertion of a Rājput identity. Chamba's political ties with the Mughals meant that the rājās of Chamba now needed to distinguish themselves from their contemporaries on a national platform not a local or regional one; it also meant that they needed to establish a distinct identity vis-à-vis the Mughals. As the compositions of the double portraits of Rājā Pṛthvī Singh and Prince Dārā Shikoh, as well as Rājā Pṛthvī Singh and the Emperor Shāh Jahān , make apparent the nature of the alliance that is emphasized in these portrayals is of that between equals – in both cases the ruler of Chamba stands eye to eye with the Mughal. Since the rulers of

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<sup>290</sup> In an article on Mandi painting, "Early Painting in Mandi," *Artibus Asiae*, vol. 44, no. 1, pp. 21-64, Catherine Glynn argues that a group of paintings hitherto attributed to Bikaner , c. 1680, instead indicate a Mandi provenance, c. 1640, making this one of the earliest centers of *pahārī* painting. These paintings show strong Mughal stylistic attributes which later Mandi painting moves away from.

<sup>291</sup> Ohri, 1991, p. 23.

Chamba were politically vastly less powerful than the Mughals, the grounds for this equitable status were sought on the basis of culture, and of a Rājput culture in particular. The association with a Rājput identity provided an alternative sphere of cultural and individual identification, one imbued with a rich history of religio-cultural, moral and political distinction.

It is significant that Pr̥thvī Singh was the first Chamba ruler to drop ‘Varman’ from his name, and instead chose to use only the last name ‘Singh’. As discussed in Chapter 1, the surname ‘Singh’ is a broad pan-Indian marker of Rājput identity and refers to the warrior community of Kṣatriya caste.<sup>292</sup> Many of the most prominent ruling families of Hindu kingdoms belonged to this community. Pr̥thvī Singh’s decision to drop the last name, which had associated his dynasty with the seat of power in the territory of Chamba since the time of Merū-varman in the eighth century, marks a definitive shift in the way the dynasty wanted to position itself at this moment in history. It points instead to Pr̥thvī Singh’s interest in affiliating himself with the other Rājput ruling dynasties of the Punjab Hill states, of Rajasthan, and beyond. By changing his dynastic name, Pr̥thvī Singh was both announcing and making readily identifiable his identity as a member of an ancient and powerful community of royal privilege and power.

There was no medium better suited to giving visual form to this identity than painting. Sculpture as a medium, growing as it did out of the context of temple architecture in Chamba, was better suited to representing religious iconography. Even when a narrative or story was told, it was in the context of a single image with the

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<sup>292</sup> The literal meaning of the word ‘Rājput’ is “son of a king”.

narration compressed within it – as in the case of images of Durgā killing the buffalo-demon Mahiṣa, for example. **(Pl. 4.77)** Hero stones, the only other form of stone carving not strictly associated with temples, were not a suitable medium for the representation of a Rājput identity either, since their primary purpose was commemorative. As discussed earlier, hero stones are fundamentally symbolic markers, and therefore neither the individuality nor the cultural attributes of the figure depicted on them was emphasized. While Chamba has a prodigious number of hero stones, there is only a single one of a Chamba ruler, Rājā Udai Singh (r. 1690-1720). The image of the ruler here is designed to give symbolic weight to memorializing his death. **(Pl. 4.78)** As such, he is shown on a plaque with six levels, with the topmost register showing Viṣṇu reclining on Śeṣa, with Lakṣmī by his side. In the register below, Udai Singh is seated with a bolster behind him and with two of his consorts or queens on either side. The three registers below that have rows of his consorts, all of whom are identical, their sheer numbers indicating the high status of the only male shown on the stone plaque. On the lowest register is a saddled but rider-less horse, indicating the death of the ruler.

Paintings, on the other hand, permitted a range of representations of kingship that could be adapted to suit the needs and personalities of diverse rulers, while remaining unified by the presence of certain royal attributes. Rulers could now be depicted in both secular and religious settings, they could be shown in public forums or in the privacy of their apartments, and they could exchange and circulate portraits between royal courts. The portraits already discussed in this chapter – of Rājā Balabhadra-varman and of Rājā Pṛthvī Singh – are two examples of the potential of paintings to position a ruler in widely

different contexts, and project a particular facet of their personality. The most common portrait type made in Chamba shows the Rājā seated in a courtly setting surrounded by selected items that indicate his station and identity, such as a *hookah* or weapons, or dressed in elaborate textiles and jewels seated with a queen, alone on a pavilion, or giving audience. (Pl. 4.79, 4.80) We also have paintings of rulers partaking in courtly activities such as watching a dance, absorbed in religious contemplation or engaged in worship.

But the realm of painting where an association with a Rājput identity was truly forged was, perhaps surprisingly, in paintings of a religious nature. As discussed in Chapter 1, Rājputs draw their origin myths from *Puranic* legends, tracing them through the *Sūryavamśa* and *Chandravamśa* (Solar and Lunar) lines into the historical present. As I discussed in detail, one of the primary goals of the Chamba *Vamśāvalī* was to make this connection apparent, and therefore the first part of the genealogical roll is devoted to listing these *Puranic* ancestors who are then connected to the lineage of the Rājās of Chamba. Once these *Puranic* myths and legends are formally incorporated into a dynasty's history, and into a kinship tree that branches out into large parts of the Indian subcontinent, they enter the realm of both historical and art historical analysis.

One of the primary reasons that *pahārī* paintings have been perceived as a-historical, even as inhabiting a world of fantasy, is because such a large number of them deal with religious or mythical subjects. Royal portraiture as a genre deals unambiguously with the person of the ruler and his position, and as such contributes to the historical data related to a court. Mughal painting, by the time it reached the reign of Shāh Jahān , had become almost exclusively an art of portraiture and imperial rule,



paralleling the detailed historical narratives that often accompanied the paintings.<sup>293</sup> Once painting began in earnest in the *pahārī* courts in the latter half of the seventeenth century, it was a sharp counterpoint to the Mughal tradition. Here, paintings often dealt with religious themes and figures, such as illustrations of the epics of the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata or the Bhāgavata Puraṇa. In order to arrive at a full realization of the meaning of these paintings, however, they have to be examined both in light of the sites and viewership for which they were produced – as in the case of the 18<sup>th</sup> century temples discussed above – as well as within the full socio-political and religious context of the times.

In Chamba, the realm of kingship was not limited to actual depictions of sovereignty and power. It can be argued that the proliferation of *pahārī* paintings illustrating the great Indian epics of the *Mahābhārata* and the Rāmāyaṇa, as well as stories drawn from sacred texts, was not merely an act of piety but a significant attempt by rulers to locate themselves visually within an illustrious genealogy of divine and heroic figures – paralleling the *Vaṃśāvalī*'s textual association. It seems to be no coincidence that the only surviving versions of the royal genealogies or *Vaṃśāvalīs* of *pahārī* kingdoms such as Chamba, Kullu and Mandi date from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, coinciding with the growth of painterly depictions centered around the *avatāras* of Viṣṇu in particular. As many *pahārī* rulers, including those of Chamba, drew their descent from the *Sūryavaṃśa* or *Chandravaṃsa* lines, lineages that incorporated the figures immortalized in these epics, royal patrons actively cultivated these associations. The

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<sup>293</sup> See, for example, Shāh Jahān's *The King of the World: The Padshahnama: An Imperial Mughal Manuscript from the Royal Library, Windsor Castle*. M.C. Beach and E. Koch, eds., London, Azimuth Editions, 1997.

painterly vision – in the form of both folios and wall paintings, as well as depictions in metal repoussé and wood carving – thus played an integral role in the process of state formation constructed around a re-nascent Rājput identity and its cultural and philosophical attributes.

Rāma, one of the *avatāras* of Viṣṇu, is the hero of the Rāmāyaṇa and a member of the *Sūryavaṃśa* line. Though the epic of the Rāmāyaṇa has many layers of embedded meaning, it is at a fundamental level a story about the qualities of kingship, with Rāma as the embodiment of the ideal king in the temporal world. At another level, it is the story of the adventures of an exiled prince, and his triumphant return to his throne – paralleling Rājā Prthvī Singh's escape from Chamba in the wake of an act of treachery, his years of exile in Mandi and his triumphant return to Chamba. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Tulsidas's re-telling of the Sanskrit Rāmāyaṇa in Hindi, the *Rāmacarita-Mānasa*, served to popularize the text across North India, and familiarity with the Rāma story grew exponentially. As Wendy Doniger has argued, *avatāras* were particularly popular with kings, who often had their conquests or their qualities linked to particular *avatāras*, perhaps suggesting that the king too was an *avatāra*.<sup>294</sup> For the rulers of Chamba, *pahārī* paintings represented a powerful new artistic vocabulary for the articulation of a pan-Hindu religio-cultural identity, and in this context must be seen as narrative representations of political power in both style and subject matter.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the association between kingship and divinity was established from the first copper plate inscription issued by a ruler from the town of

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<sup>294</sup> Doniger, 2009, pp. 474-475.

Chamba – the copper plate inscription of Sāhila-varman’s son Yugākāra-varman, in which he calls both his parents and himself “divine.”<sup>295</sup> But it is from the reign of Pṛthvī Singh that the transposition of kingship and divinity are fully realized. Karuna Goswamy refers to a story about the ruler’s time at the Mughal court which was often repeated to me in Chamba.<sup>296</sup> It is said that Pṛthvī Singh had a dream in which Shāh Jahān , being pleased with him, asked him to name a gift of his choice. A voice told the rājā to ask for the “measuring stone” – a stone that the emperor used to weigh his jewels. Indeed, some time later, Shāh Jahān did ask Pṛthvī Singh what he wanted and the rājā named the stone, much to the emperor’s surprise. Pṛthvī Singh told Shāh Jahān about the dream, and the emperor gifted him the stone – which according to some versions of the story was an idol of Rāma – which the rājā then brought back to Chamba with him and installed as a deity in the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple. This stone, called the Raghubīr stone or the Śālagrāma, became the personal idol of the royal family, and was ultimately moved from the family’s dynastic temple to the royal palace at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, as the culmination of the idea of the ruler as divine. This story also has additional layers of meaning and metaphor. In the eyes of his *prajā*, Pṛthvī Singh managed to both ‘rescue’ Rāma from his Muslim ‘captor’ and simultaneously receive favor from his imperial master, and both these accomplishments were legitimized by the divine sanction of a dream-revelation.<sup>297</sup>

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<sup>295</sup> Vogel, 1911, p. 163.

<sup>296</sup> Karuna Goswamy, “Portraits from Chamba: Some Notes on their Meaning and Context,” in V.C. Ohri Ed., *History and Culture of the Chamba State, a Western Himalayan Kingdom*, New Delhi: Books & Books, 1989, p. 209.

<sup>297</sup> The revelation of the Raghubīr stone is also related to the concept of a *rāśtra-devatā* (protective deity of the state) in which the ‘miraculous’ appearance of a deity often marks political change. One such myth is associated with the founding of the Sisodia Rājput clan of the Maharanas of Mewar. The dynastic lore of

### **The Bhakti Movement**

From the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries onwards, a powerful new religious sentiment also began to hold sway in North India, corresponding to the growing allegiance to a Rājput identity. The Bhakti movement was a devotional and participative mode of worship which emphasized a personal and intimate relationship between deity and devotee, without necessitating the presence of *Brahmin* intermediaries or a temple infrastructure. The followers of the path of Bhakti, known as *bhaktas*, can be broadly classified into two groups – those who visualize divinity as *nirguṇa* – a fundamentally abstract conceptualization, where the divine has no discernible attributes, and those who have a highly personalized vision of the divine, one which enables the development of an intimate and multi-faceted relationship between the two.

The Bhakti movement grew out of South India, and under the Cholas and Pallavas, kingship provided a model for Bhakti which from its very inception superimposed the divine upon the royal.<sup>298</sup> Rāma and Kṛṣṇa were the primary foci of the *Vaiṣṇava* Bhakti movement in North India, and both these *avatāras* of Viṣṇu were both Rājput princes and gods. In the case of Kṛṣṇa, he appears as a prince in the

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the royal family holds that a Śiva-*linga* appeared miraculously to the founder of the dynasty, Bappā Rāval, and a later four-faced version of this sculpture (it was destroyed during a raid) is still worshipped as the royal and spiritual legitimation of the Mewar royal family's power to this day. Housed in a 15<sup>th</sup> century temple, the Eklingji temple, outside Udaipur, it is a potent dynastic symbol that is often depicted in Mewari court painting.

<sup>298</sup> Doniger, 2009, pp. 338-341.

Mahābhārata,<sup>299</sup> while in the later texts of the Harivaṁśa and Bhāgavata Puraṇā, his childhood spent in hiding from his evil uncle as a village boy in a cow-herding community is dealt with at considerable length. He is therefore commoner, royalty and god all at once. Through the prism of Bhakti, the worshipper could feel a kinship to Kṛṣṇa at all three levels simultaneously. As a child, Kṛṣṇa is depicted as mischievous and endearing, a universal son. **(Pl. 4.81)** As a young boy he is charismatic and carefree, luring the *gopis* – the wives of the village cowherds – ineluctably to him by the singing of his flute, and as such is a universal lover. And as prince and god, he is a wondrous subject of worship, the destroyer of evil, the remover of obstacles and the source of guidance.<sup>300</sup> **(Pl. 4.82)** The episodes of Kṛṣṇa's youth in particular, detailed in the texts of the Harivaṁśa and the Bhāgavata Puraṇā, spent amidst ordinary rural pastoralists and agriculturalists served to facilitate a personal rapport between him and his worshippers, and contributed substantially to his growing popularity across North India.

The impact of the Bhakti movement in Chamba too was significant. Some of the copper plates issued in this period bear the incantation '*Rāma-Rāma-Rāma*', indicating the Paraśurāma, Rāma and Balrāma incarnations of Viṣṇu which developed prominence in this period. Several of these copper plates were land grants and their language

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<sup>299</sup> Krishna's disquisition to Arjuna, to whom he served as charioteer, on the battlefield immediately preceding the war of Kurukshetra, a war that would pit Arjuna against a branch of his family as well as his venerated *guru*, is the Bhagavad Gita. This text on duty and right action in the face of both tremendous odds as well as moral ambiguities is arguably the most venerated if not the central text of Hinduism.

<sup>300</sup> The scene of the *Rāsa Līlā*, the subject of countless Rājput paintings, where Krishna dances in a grove by moonlight with the *gopis*, multiplying his form so that each one has the sensation of being alone with him, is the ultimate metaphor for Bhakti. At the end of the *līlā*, Krishna vanishes, leaving the *gopis* forlorn. The relationship between the deity and the devotee in Bhakti is akin to that between two lovers who are separated, and where the worshipper constantly yearns for union with the beloved.

indicates that they were being gifted out of devotion to Kṛṣṇa as they include the words, ‘*Srī Kṛṣṇa Prityarthe*’, or ‘lovers of Srī Kṛṣṇa’.<sup>301</sup> We also have a portrait of Rājā Chhatar Singh (r. 1664-1690), the son of Pṛthvī Singh, worshipping at a Rāma-Sītā shrine. Rājā Chhatar Singh is bare-chested and dressed in a plain white *dhotī*, with a black, embroidered shawl draped over his shoulders. He is shown accepting *praśāda* from a priest after having completed his prayers. To one side of the painting is a domed shrine<sup>302</sup> within which Ram and Sita are seated on a *takht* supported by four lions. The monkey-god Hanumāna, his hands folded in devotion, stands besides them. Outside the shrine, a cow is being fed and given water. **(Pl. 4.83)**

The rājās of Chamba also erected lithic temples as well as smaller shrines dedicated to the incarnations of Rāma and Kṛṣṇa respectively. Rājā Balabhadra-varman (r. 1589-1641) is believed to have built a small Kṛṣṇa shrine in one of the town’s old *mohallas*, near the Rang Mahal palace, and as we discussed in the previous chapter, the Bansi-Gopal temple was probably built by a Chamba rājā in the sixteenth century.<sup>303</sup> On the stone doorway leading into this temple’s courtyard we can see a few features of the painterly vocabulary rendered in stone **(Pl. 4.84)**. The Sita-Ram temple was erected by Batlu, the *dai* or wet-nurse of Rājā Pṛthvī Singh in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and in 1825 A.D., the *Rānī* of Rājā Jīt Singh built the Rādhā- Kṛṣṇa temple next to the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple in the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple complex in Chamba, with a small wooden pavilion set in front of it for the singing of community *bhajans* or

<sup>301</sup> Vijay Sharma, *Chamba Painting: Origin and Development*, Shimla, 2006, p. 6.

<sup>302</sup> This kind of domed shrine does not exist in Chamba, and is clearly a ‘type’, perhaps taken from Rajasthani painting.

<sup>303</sup> ‘Bansi-Gopal’ means the flute-playing Krishna.

devotional songs dedicated to Kṛṣṇa. **(Pl. 4.85)** This pavilion was also ornamented with wooden carvings of gods and trees in the painterly vocabulary. **(Pl. 4.86)** While all these temples are executed in the same Nāgara style of architecture seen in Chamba's older temples, they include elements of a painterly vocabulary executed in stone. **(Pl. 4.87)**

The religious perspective of Bhakti and its ritual manifestations, as well as its emphasis on *humanizing* the gods, had a significant impact on the visual depictions of gods in *pahārī* paintings. Depictions of the god Śiva, for example, bear the symbolic imprint of the Bhakti movement, with the preponderance of paintings of the god produced in Chamba focusing on the theme of the Śiva-*parivāra* – showing Śiva in the midst of his *parivāra* or family, engaged in mundane activities with his wife and sons Gaṇeśa and Kārtikeya, as well as all of their *vāhanas* – a domestication of sorts of this most forbidding of gods. **(Pl. 4.88)** While painting narratives from the Rāmāyaṇa, the Mahābhārata, the Bhāgavata Puraṇa and the Gīta-Govinda as well, artists visually bridged the divide between the divine and royal qualities of Rāma and Kṛṣṇa. Both princes were frequently shown in palace settings, dressed as princes and partaking in court activities, with only their blue hue distinguishing them from the portraits of Chamba rulers. **(Pl. 4.89)** This combining of the imagery of Rājput rulers on the one hand and of representations of divine princes on the other, was a deliberate statement of cultural and lineage-based identity, as well as an assertion of the divine rights of kingship.

The *pahārī* court in which this synchronicity was most emphatic visually was not Chamba but Mandi, under the rule of Rājā Sidh Sen (r. 1684-1727). Rājā Sidh Sen was a prolific patron of painting and architecture, and commissioned a large number of

paintings during his rule, of both portraits of himself as well as religious paintings, both narrative as well as iconic. In religious narratives, he frequently had himself inserted as a player in the story, as is the case in this Mandi painting from a Bhāgvata Puraṇā series, where he bears the infant Kṛṣṇa away to safety from the palace of his evil uncle. **(Pl. 4.90)** In many of his portraits, moreover, he is depicted in the guise of Śiva, with the god's attributes of dreadlocks, animal skins and serpents, while remaining readily identifiable because of his extremely tall and somewhat stooped posture, and dusky complexion. **(Pl. 4.91)** This painterly apotheosis of Rājā Sidh Sen is one example of the culmination of state formation in the Punjab Hills.

### **The Holi of the Gods**

A large wall painting from the Rang Mahal, now preserved at the Himachal State Museum in Shimla, depicts the festivities on the occasion of Holi, the festival of color that heralds the beginning of summer. **(Pl. 4.92)** The scene is set outdoors, under the sky and the trees. In the foreground, a row of crowned and *dhotī*-clad musicians play their instruments as female dancers sway to the music; in the middle ground, noble women spray colored water on one another with *pichhkaris*; and in the top right corner of the painting sits Śiva accompanied by his family, while Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa sit in the opposite corner with a few *gopas* or cowherds. These divine characters are participating in the earthly festival of Holi, playing with one another and with a cluster of dancers and musicians. Perched in the clouds are two minute figures – Indra, the king of the gods on his elephant Airāvata, and Nārada with his *tānpurā*, both watching the joyful scene on the



ground. While the divine personalities are readily identifiable, the other characters in the painting could be either royal or divine, as the imagery in the painting does not distinguish between the two. Visually and symbolically, this wall painting from the erstwhile royal palace of Chamba, draws together the worlds of gods and humans, mythology and kingship, the realm of the religious and the temporal, and the two sects of Vaiṣṇavism and Shaivism, in an lyrical and seamless manner that was enabled by the conjunction of the sentiment of Bhakti and the scope of the painterly vision.

This fusion also marks a shift in the way in which state formation was conceptualized and projected in Chamba. While the earlier period of temple building and dynastic consolidation looked towards the antiquity of an imperial cosmopolitan North Indian model of Nāgara temple architecture to project an ancient claim on the land and garner legitimacy for the state through *brāhmaṇa* intermediaries and a Sanskritized ‘high’ culture, by the reign of Pṛthvī Singh the garnering of royal legitimacy relied increasingly on the more personalized approach enabled by the visual and ideological conjunction of royal and religious or mythological figures. While the earlier Brahmanical state was embedded in a religiosity and social hierarchy embodied by Nāgara temples, with their fundamentally abstract symbolic morphology, established canonical iconography, and the necessity for priests to serve as interpreters of ritual practice, the advent of Bhakti fundamentally changed the relationship between the deity and the devotee, and thereby the legitimizing mechanism between the *rājā* and the *prajā* as well. The flourishing of painting at this same moment in the history of the state enabled painters to give form to

new ways of imagining the divine, often in ways that were imbued with whimsy and leaps of fantasy.

At the same time, the political climate of North India was also changing slowly but inexorably. By the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Chamba was far more closely linked, politically and culturally, both to the imperial heartland as well to North India more broadly. These new circumstances necessitated new mechanisms for forging an identity both within the state and outside it. The rulers of Chamba drew from current trends in visual culture to do this, but sought to forge a distinct image of themselves within this milieu – one that was based on the personalized image of individual rulers, a closer association with the gods, and on the blending of this religious association with their re-nascent Rājput identity. In this socio-political and religious climate, both the idea of the ‘dynasty’ and its antiquity, as well as its reliance on a religious orthodoxy, ceased to be as important as they had been in the past.

The vibrant image of the gods playing Holi in a scene reminiscent of a court festivity exemplifies the cultural and religious leap that Chamba had made by the 18<sup>th</sup> century, one in which the image of the state had transformed into a personalized realm of kingship that was closer to its regional roots on the one hand, but entirely universal on the other. This final flourish of the imaginary and historicity of state formation was enabled by the rise of the Bhakti movement and the expressive capabilities of the painterly vision.

## **Conclusion:**

### **Towards a New Cultural History**

#### **Chamba and Historical Consciousness**

The story of ‘the Mouse who would be King’ is at its heart about the process of history-making and history-writing. The dissertation does not attempt to reveal and represent the factual history of the kingdom over a millenium. Instead, it demonstrates that for the rulers of Chamba in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, ‘recovering’ a sense of their history was essential to achieving both a sense of selfhood and statehood in the present. The ruler(s) and scribe(s) who compiled and wrote down the *Vaṃśāvalī* were motivated by circumstances in their present to become the architects of their history, projecting it into the past and creating an image for the future which has persisted in Chamba till the modern era. They achieved their purpose through the legitimacy derived from the written word in the *Vaṃśāvalī*, the strategic use of narrative hierarchies, both written and oral, and they projected their personal and dynastic identity in the visual realm through the painterly vision, architecture, and sculpture.

For the modern-day historians of Chamba’s past, the ancient and un-interrupted picture of state formation painted by the *Vaṃśāvalī* has been a compelling one and one which has remained largely unquestioned. Perhaps here too the desire to ‘recover’ an ‘authentic’ and ‘indigenous’ cultural realm has made historians reluctant to probe too deeply into the cultural processes that culminated in the *Vaṃśāvalī*. An uncritical reading

of the genealogy presents the image of an ancient, continuous and stable kingdom which flourished unhindered in its mountain abode. A more nuanced analysis of the text, however, when juxtaposed with the epigraphic evidence and material culture of the kingdom, reveals a dramatically different picture. As I have attempted to demonstrate, ‘problematizing’ a simple reading of the *Vaṃśāvalī* as a thin record of facts and events, as well as locating it in its 17<sup>th</sup> century context, reveals the imperatives, processes, and vision that contributed to its creation, all of which were imbued with a keen historical consciousness.

The 15<sup>th</sup> century was a period of transitions and transformations in South Asia. The 1398-9 A.D. sack of Delhi by the Turco-Mongol ruler Timur precipitated the decline of the Tughlaq dynasty and the end of the Delhi Sultanate as a powerful territorial empire. The period between this decline of centralized rule and its gradual re-establishment under the Mughal dynasty beginning in 1526 A.D. was one which saw the establishment of new regional kingdoms across the subcontinent, marked by accompanying experiments and innovations in art and architecture.

This period of resurgent regionalism has only recently begun to attract the attention of scholars, and important studies have come out on the formation and artistic formulations of regional Sultanates in Bengal, the Deccan, Malwa, Jaunpur and Gujarat. These studies fill an important void in our understanding of the establishment of new Islamic centers of regional authority in a field that has tended to privilege imperial Islamic dynasties centered in Delhi. Far less attention, however, has been directed at non-Islamic courts during this fertile moment of change and self-fashioning, perpetuating the

legacy of early colonial writings on South Asia that divide chronological time into Hindu/Early, Muslim/Medieval and British/Modern periods. This historiographic framework not only imposes the heavy hand of religious essentialisms and distinctions on secular events, but leads to the misconception that non-Islamic kingdoms were unaware of or uninvolved in the larger political, social and cultural trends that were revolutionizing landscape of the subcontinent.

The consolidation and expansion of Mughal rule in the subcontinent also resulted in the re-formulation and projection of the dynastic identities of existing kingdoms. In Chamba, one area in which this was manifested was in the growing emphasis on a Rājput identity and the accompanying writing down of an official history in the form of a genealogical roll. The genealogy conferred a written antiquity to the royal lineage and attested to its continuous presence in the hills and this, along with the prestige of a pan-Indian Rājput identity, provided the rulers of Chamba a platform from which to engage with the Imperial Mughals.

The 17<sup>th</sup> century writing of the *Vaṃśāvalī* in Chamba was the culmination of a larger social, cultural and religious process that had certainly begun by the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It was during the reign of Rājā Gaṇeśa-varman (r. 1513-1558 A.D.) that copper plate land grants became more numerous and it was his son Rājā Pratāpa-simha-varman who first introduced the Rājput 'Singh' into his name. From the reign of Rājā Pratāpa-simha-varman in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, copper plate land grants to *brāhmaṇas* increased significantly, heralding a significant social, economic, religious and political shift in the

structure of the kingdom towards a Brahmanical, monarchical state organized around Sanskritic theistic symbols.

An analysis of Chamba's temple architecture supports this trend. In particular, I argue that the dynastic temple of the ruling family, the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple, was built rather than renovated by Rājā Pratāpa-siṃha-varman in 1582 A.D. At this time, the idol of Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa was consecrated and elevated to the role of the *rāśtra-devatā* of the kingdom.<sup>304</sup> An emphasis on Vaiṣṇavism in the 16<sup>th</sup> century is concurrent with the spread of the Bhakti movement which would soon be manifested in the realm of architecture with the construction of temples dedicated to Ram and Kṛṣṇa as well as in Chamba's 17<sup>th</sup> century painting tradition. It also reflects horizontal linkages with the cultural norms of the traditions of the plains which were emphasized by the *brāhmaṇa* priests brought to Chamba from outside the state in this period. The *Vaṃśāvalī*'s deliberate claim that the temple dates to the founding of the town by Sāhila-varman in the 10<sup>th</sup> century – accompanied by great personal sacrifices – is unsurprising in the context of the text's aim of establishing heroic and divinely sanctioned antecedents for the royal family in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

My architectural analysis also indicates that the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries were a time of artistic flourishing marked by temple building activity not just in Chamba but in Bharmaur as well, in which Bharmaur was both re-claimed and 're-made' as the ancient seat of the Chamba ruling family. For the later rulers of Chamba laying claim to the past

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<sup>304</sup> It is also noteworthy that while the *Vaṃśāvalī* claims the inscribed historicity of Merū-varman's bronzes, these Śaiva and Shakta images themselves are never given venerated status within the text.

of all the territories that they controlled was vital, and therein lay the importance of Bharmaur with its inscriptionally substantiated ancient history.

### **The Narrative Representation of Political Power**

By the reign of Rājā Pṛthvī Singh (r. 1641-1664 A.D.), when the *Vaṃśāvalī* in its only known version was written, the religious and political climate of the subcontinent had changed. Mughal rule was firmly established, and its reach into the foothills of the Western Himalayas was growing. Chamba joined the imperial administrative system of alliance-building when Pṛthvī Singh became a Mughal *maṃsabdār*, and he is known to have been a frequent visitor to the Mughal court. The importance of having an established genealogy that derived its legitimacy from an alternate yet equally legitimate and illustrious religio-cultural sphere became particularly important in this new political milieu. Having a genealogy which was written in Sanskrit and followed an established literary framework embedded in the Puranic tradition allowed rulers like Pṛthvī Singh to engage with the world of the imperial Mughals while maintaining their cultural sovereignty. It is therefore not surprising that the surviving genealogies of other hill states including Kullu and Mandi also date from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and must be viewed in light of the contingencies of Mughal rule.

A study of the Chamba *Vaṃśāvalī* reveals that the process of compiling the genealogy involved awareness of the inscriptional record, the oral tradition, as well as the material history of the kingdom's past, but that all of these were ultimately harnessed for

the purpose of establishing a Rājput genealogy for the royal family. This genealogy dated to the beginning of Hindu cosmological time, to a world of gods, heroes and myths, down to the human ancestors of the king. A common critique of narratives such as the *Vaṃśāvalī* has implied that they are not ‘histories’ in the conventional sense of the term; that the intermingling of the mythical and the historical makes them unreliable as sources; and most significantly, that their use of both cyclical and linear concepts of time indicates a lack of interest in an empirically substantiated understanding of the past. In contrast, I argue that the manner in which these threads are woven into the text was in itself an act of history-making, in which history and myth, as well as the many grey areas in between were all used with a deliberate historical purpose.

### **The Mouse who would be King**

Perhaps the most striking example of the dynamism of this process lies in the recurrence of the mouse in the ancestry of Chamba’s rulers. The earliest mention of the mouse dates to the epigraphs of Merū-varman, the first known ruler of Bharmaur from whom the later rulers of Chamba claim descent. His 8<sup>th</sup> century inscriptions begin by stating his descent from the “*śva-gotra* (house) of Mosuna (mouse)”, thereby listing a mouse as the progenitor of his clan’s lineage. In the *Vaṃśāvalī* however, the figure of Mosuna appears three generations after Merū-varman. The *Vaṃśāvalī* narrates that during the rule of Merū-varman’s grandson, Lakṣmī-varman, a tribe called the Kīras killed the ruler and occupied his realm. In the *Vaṃśāvalī*, the mouse in the ancestry of the Chamba rulers emerges at this point, when it is said that Lakṣmī-varman’s pregnant wife



escaped the Kīra onslaught and gave birth to a son, Mūṣana-varman or ‘Mouse-varman’, in a cave where he was guarded by mice.

We can speculate that the appearance of this mouse in the chronicle points to an actual break in the lineage of the rulers, one which was bridged a century and a half later in the text of the *Vaṃśāvalī* by Sāhila-varman’s ‘move’ to Chamba, a shift that the narrative never explains. In the *Vaṃśāvalī*, however, while Moṣūna-varman grows up in exile, he eventually reclaims his kingdom. The compiler of the *Vaṃśāvalī* deliberately ignored the first mouse in the ancestry and placed it after the figure of Merū-varman, indicating that the compiler was aware of the existence of Merū-varman’s inscriptions and their importance for establishing the antiquity, but also realized that placing the Mosuna clan as the progenitor of Merū-varman’s ancestry would jeopardize the ‘origins’ of Chamba’s ruling family.

Other historical traditions have used similar devices to establish dynastic origins and claim kṣatriya status, perhaps covering obscure family lineages. The Guhilas of Mewar, for example, derive the etymology of their name from a prince who was born in a cave (*guha*), after his father lost his kingdom, and who went on to re-claim his kingdom with the assistance of Bhil tribesmen.<sup>305</sup> The reference in this tradition to the inheritance of a patrimony strengthened the Guhilas’ claim to the land during the formation of their kingdom. Another common thread between the Chamba and Guhila traditions is in the emphasis on *siddhas* and the Tantric cult associated with them. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century origin myth of the Guhila dynasty, Bappā Rāval, the mythical founder of the dynasty is initiated

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<sup>305</sup> J. Tod, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*, Oxford, 1920, vol. 1, pp. 173.

by a Śaiva ascetic and later meets the *yogī* Gorakhanātha who plays the key role in his victory over Chittor – much in the way Sāhila-varman's conquest of Chamba was enabled by the *yogī* Carpaṭi.<sup>306</sup> It is not surprising that Chamba aspired to a connection with the Mewar royal family as it stood as a bulwark against Mughal hegemony in North India at the time of writing the *Vaṃśāvalī*. Even though Pṛthvī Singh had close ties to the Mughal court, the symbolic link to Mewar's dynastic lineage was a way to establish cultural rather than political vitality and gain equal footing with the Mughals.

### **The Figural Representation of Political Power**

The study of painting in the Rājput courts of North India was initiated in the early 1920s by Ananda Coomaraswamy. In his pioneering work on the painting traditions of Rajasthan and the Punjab hill states, Coomaraswamy categorized these paintings as being quintessentially *Indian*, the outgrowth of a vibrant indigenous tradition that was locally rooted, and removed from external 'influences'. This understanding of the essence of Rājput painting parallels the way in which much of the history and material culture of Chamba has been framed by scholars.

In the post-war and post-industrial climate in which Coomaraswamy was writing, the idea of a 'timeless and 'spiritual' tradition was perhaps particularly potent. However, many of Coomaraswamy's initial observations about this painting tradition continue to guide their study to this day. Coomaraswamy's interest in the cultural iconography and

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<sup>306</sup> The fact that the figure of Gorakhanātha dates to a period after the founding of the Guhila kingdom is ignored in this myth.

meaning embodied in the painted forms and themes of Rājput paintings, as well as his desire to distinguish Rājput from Mughal paintings, resulted in an initial theoretical and methodological bifurcation in the study of the development of these two broadly defined ‘styles’. Till today, Rājput paintings are predominantly seen as an aristocratic folk art with an interest in conveying emotion and giving form to a Hindu spiritual tradition. This is in contrast to Mughal paintings, in which a concern for portraying ‘reality’ is more marked, most notably in the form of secular historical narratives and observational studies even if these sometimes encompass allegories or metaphors.

The analysis of Chamba’s paintings from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, as well as works in the closely related media of wood carving and metal repoussé, when placed within the religious, cultural and political context of the times, reveal a practice that far from being a-historical, was deeply engaged in conceptualizing and projecting ideas of divine kingship through its imagery in both terrestrial and heavenly realms. In some ways mirroring the process of writing the *Vaṃśāvalī*, this ‘painterly vision’ enabled the individual rulers of Chamba to establish visual associations with the broader world of Rājput kingship in which depictions of princes and gods – particularly Kṛṣṇa and Rāma – overlapped in symbolically significant ways, while simultaneously engaging with the privileged art form of the Mughals.

### **The Architecture of Signs and Symbols**

The continuum of state formation in Chamba when reflected in the realm of art and architecture over the *longue durée* demonstrates a clear linkage between shifting theistic symbols and the legitimation of the right to rule. Many fundamental ambiguities remain in determining the actual continuity of the royal line, the regnal dates of some of the rulers of Chamba, architectural attributions, the political disruptions and challenges faced by the state, as well as many other aspects of the territorial reach, economic, social and political life of the kingdom. Nonetheless, we can identify three broad phases in this association between religious structures and the public proclamation of identity and kingship.

From the time of Merū-varman in the opening years of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, till the 18<sup>th</sup> century, three separate trends associated with distinct modes of artistic expression can be discerned, though it must be emphasized that these phases were far from hermeneutically sealed from one another. Each of these phases seem to have been launched following a key moment of change, either political or geographic or both, in the evolution of the kingdom, though these changes do not find mention in the official chronicle of the kingdom.

Examining the religio-cultural symbols and icons used to create and perpetuate a *longue durée* history of the state is one method of gaining insight into the ruling family's own self-conscious creation of their own sense of history. Once we accept that the Chamba *Vaṃśāvalī* is a constructed *sense* of history, written at a particular historical moment to meet the need for an ancient and continuous dynastic identity and give the rulers of Chamba a platform from which to engage the Mughals, it becomes possible to

‘read’ these symbols and icons with fresh eyes over time. The picture that emerges is not one that necessarily fills in the many gaps that exist over a thousand year period, but it provides some glimpses of social, political and religious processes.

In the first phase of artistic expression, which deals with the first instance of the political ‘arrival’ in the territory of the kingdom, we have the opportunity to analyze four inscribed bronze images commissioned by Merū-varman from his center in Bharmaur and executed on a grand scale by his master artist Gugga. These images were the vehicles of Merū-varman’s proclamation of political and military success, and it is significant that all are of Śaiva and Śaktā affiliation. The predominance of the Śaiva imagery is consistent with the sacred geography of the land – locally known as *Shiv-bhūmi* – the proximity of the mountain of Mañimaheśa Kailāsa which is believed to be the abode of Śiva, and the associations with Śiva fostered by the dominant local lifestyle of high-altitude pastoralism. The Śaktā imagery provided a valuable legitimating symbolism for Merū-varman as well, as the figure of Durgā as Mahiṣasuramardini as well as Śakti Devī are associated with success in war. This reverence for the *devīs* as goddesses of war is made apparent in Merū-varman’s inscription on the image pedestal of Śakti Devī which states that the ruler had this image made “after having conquered his foes in their invincible strongholds”, here a reference to his conquest of at least one of the principalities of Kullu.<sup>307</sup>

Merū-varman’s four images were erected at his center in Bharmaur, as well as at the frontier of his realm in Chhatrarhi, where the Śakti Devī temple was a marker of his

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<sup>307</sup> Vogel, 1911, p. 145.

dominance over the land and a proclamation of his arrival as a *māhārājādhirāja* or king of kings. Merū-varman's sculptures are characterized by their adoption and assimilation of a range of motifs into innovative works of art that represent a unique vision that remained rooted in a local idiom. Merū-varman's interest in inscribing his lineage on the images, and the deliberate emphasis on his awareness of the *Vāstuśāstras*, indicates a move towards the legitimizing structures of the Brahmanical state, but in this phase of state formation they are still nascent.

The 'move' from Bharmaur to Chamba, or rather the founding of the town of Chamba as the capital of a fledgling power, is a major point of transition in the history of the kingdom as reflected in the *Vaṃśāvalī*, constituting even in this text a re-founding of the dynastic line with the insertion of a mouse in the ruling family's ancestry. There is good reason for this, as it becomes clear that the period from the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century was one of great turbulence in Bharmaur. Bharmaur's conquest by the Kīras is described as a catastrophic event in the *Vaṃśāvalī*.

This 'move' of the capital of the kingdom to Chamba in the 10<sup>th</sup> century opens a new and complex chapter in the history of the state and the Varman dynasty. The history of the state from its capital in Chamba is inextricably intertwined in the *Vaṃśāvalī* as well as in the oral tradition with the figure of Sāhila-varman. It is this ruler who is credited with establishing the new capital, sanctifying it with the sacrifice of his entire family barring his heir, and erecting a dynastic Vaiṣṇava temple dedicated to Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa, as well as the family temple of the Chamba royal family, the Campāvatī temple. Rather than using the *Vaṃśāvalī* to 'explain' this new phase in the evolution of

the state, it must instead be understood as the central manifestation of a culminating moment of a historical, regional and dynastic self-realization by the rulers of Chamba in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In this context, and from the perspective of the *Vaṃśāvalī*, the importance of ‘claiming’ familial ties to Bharmaur stemmed from its inscriptionally corroborated antiquity, as well as its locus as the place that held the purported roots of the ruling family.

The analysis of Chamba’s Nāgara temples reveals that they have been dated significantly earlier in the scholarship than their visual analysis suggests, an outcome directly related to positioning of particular temples within the narrative of the *Vaṃśāvalī* in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. While the temples were built spanning a temporal continuum, their adherence to a relatively constrained architectural vocabulary and the resulting homogeneity in the essential symbolic morphology of the temples – one which seems to negate the passage of time – points towards the desire to project the temples as repeated ‘icons’ or signatures of a dynastic identity across successive generations in Chamba’s two dynastic centers. The perceived antiquity of the architecture in Chamba was a fabrication of a historical moment – the time of scripting the *Vaṃśāvalī* – but what emerges is that it was a consistent construct. Before the author(s) of the *Vaṃśāvalī* ever sat down to narrate the Varman history from its origins to the moment of writing, the rulers who built the Chamba temples had done so through their architecture. This selection of the Nāgara temple as a symbol of the state, with all its associations of divinely sanctioned kingship, was emphasized by the propagation of a rich oral tradition which tied many of the temples to the founding of the town by Sāhila-varman. A key socio-political facet of the

period of temple building by the rulers of Chamba from the 13<sup>th</sup> onwards was the strengthening of ties between rulers and *brāhmaṇas*, a growing nexus that is reflected in the land grant inscriptions of the state, which reached a peak in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

In the next phase of artistic flourishing in Chamba, from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the rulers of Chamba turned to the vocabulary of painting, transposing it across the media of wood-carving and metal repoussé work as well to further develop their image of kingship and sovereignty. The inherent possibilities of painting, both as a medium and as a narrative format, enabled new ways of tying together facets of kingship and theistic symbols. The ‘painterly vision’ unfolded across Chamba in folio paintings, in wall paintings at both religious and non-religious sites across the land, as well as in depictions in wood and metal, encompassing a wide variety of themes.

This development of themes in the painting tradition of Chamba was closely tied to the devotional Hinduism of the Bhakti movement, whose ritual practices enabled a hitherto unfeasible merging of the attributes of kingship and divinity, along with the ability to make this association visually apparent. Both palaces and temples were embellished with the painterly vocabulary across media in which the depictions of royalty and the gods overlapped to a considerable extent. Rājā Pṛthvī Singh, during whose rule the *Vaṃśāvalī* was also written, was the ruler under whom the habit of painting at Chamba truly began, and who used the medium to its full symbolic potential as a vehicle for projecting his own image as a personal embodiment of Chamba’s statehood and sovereignty, notably at a time when Chamba’s associations with the Imperial Mughal court were at their closest. It is during the rule of Pṛthvī Singh as well that the



transposition of the idea of the palace as temple, and the temple as palace also reached its culmination with the shifting of the Raghubīr idol from the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple to the Chamba royal palace.

A dynamic that emerges from the analysis of the material culture of Chamba, as well as in the incorporation of the *itihāsa purāṇa* formula for writing history in the *Vaṃśāvalī*, is the desire of Chamba's rulers to consciously integrate themselves within the larger cultural ethos of North India, while simultaneously struggling to create a cohesive 'Chamba' identity. The construction of lithic Nāgara temples associated with the cosmopolitan imperial dynasties of North India, the decision to drop the last name 'Varman' in favor of the ubiquitous marker of Rājput identity, 'Singh', as well as patronizing painting partially because it was the newly privileged art form in courts across North India, were all efforts by the rulers of Chamba in this direction. One lens through which to view state formation in Chamba is as an intermittent process of adaptation in trying to maintain a balance between these two imperatives.

In conclusion, an examination of the material culture of the state of Chamba in conjunction with the 17<sup>th</sup> century narrative history of the *Vaṃśāvalī* and the inscriptional data reveals a small polity that carefully chose from and manipulated the archaeological record in order to position itself in relation to history. A detailed study of Chamba's history reveals a dynamic of cultural competition in the spheres of art, architecture and narrative history. The architecture patronized by the rulers of Chamba was the visual embodiment of a forged connection to a past, both real and invented, and designed to create the visual impression of a continuous royal existence in its built forms. Using a

vocabulary of architectural elements that were mirrored across the temples of Chamba like a '*mohra*', and through strategic appropriations of the architectural and sculptural emblems of past rulers, these Chamba kings built new dynastic temples and re-contextualized older ones to legitimize their rule in the face of social and political challenges, most notably that posed by Mughal rule. A detailed analysis of the art and architecture of Chamba, viewed from within the rubric of state formation, allows us to capture moments both of looking back and of looking forward in order to project sovereignty and forge an identity in the present.

My integrated analysis of the architecture, sculpture and painting of Chamba have allowed me to frame this artistic production as part of an ongoing process of innovation and adaptation that lies at the heart of the politics of state formation, but this too must be interpreted as just one 'sense' of Chamba's history. While this analysis deals with only one polity within the map of early modern South Asia, one suspects that there are many other specific cultural histories of other polities that need to be examined with the same interdisciplinary approach, with the aim of historicizing, differentiating and variegating the cultural history of this period.

## The Rani's Sacrifice.

*Song.\* Chorus of Christian Maidens.*

Sing how of yore the Saviour died,  
Died on the Cross for thee, for me;  
Tell how they pierced His sacred Side,  
How His Blood flowed for me, for thee.  
Many our sins and black our guilt,  
Yet for our sakes His Blood was spilt,  
When rending rocks and darkened sky  
Saw the world's Ransom bleed and die.

*(Refrain.)*

Sing of the living stream that flowed,  
Flowed from His Side for me, for thee,  
Flowed from His Side for thee, for me,  
Sing of the living stream!

Now by the throne He stands above!  
Now intercedes for thee, for me;  
Now grants the death-bought gift of  
love.

Water of Life for me, for thee,  
All who amid earth's dust and heat,  
Thirsting and faint, with weary feet,  
Tread the rough path your Master trod,  
Drink, freely drink "the gift of God."

*(Refrain.)*

Sing of the living stream that flows,  
Flows from God's throne for me, for  
thee.

Water of Life for thee, for me,  
Sing of the living stream.

*Recitation. Christian Maiden—*

You tell us how the Rani bled  
To save from death the son she bore;  
The Lord of Heaven's Blood was shed  
To win us life for evermore.

You say her memory remains,  
Embalmed in her people's love;  
The Lord of Heaven living reigns,  
Risen, ascended, throned above.

You say her blood-bought crystal rill  
Its waters with the river blends;  
Each craving heart to cleanse and fill  
His Spirit's mighty stream descends.

Listen, listen, Sisters dear,  
While we sing another lay,  
May the message that you hear  
Echo in your hearts for aye.

*Song. Chorus of Christian Maidens.*

Come to Me and rest evermore,  
Ye who tread Life's storm-beat way;  
Rest for evermore.

\* Or Solo and Chorus if preferred.

Price 6d. per dozen; 2s. per 100. With Music and Directions, price 8d.

To be obtained from the C.E.Z.M.S., 27, Clancery Lane, W.C.; or from MARSHALL, BROS., LTD.,  
Kewick House, Paternoster Row, E.C.

## Church of England Zenana Missionary Society.

### A MISSIONARY CANTATA.

## THE RANI'S SACRIFICE:

*A Legend of Chamba, N. India. (Words only.)*

### I. Prologue.

*(Sunrise at Chamba.)*

*Recitation—*

O'ER eastern hills the monarch of the  
day

Ascending darts his all-transform-  
ing ray;

A rosy blush o'erspreads the snowy  
height

Half hid mid veiling clouds, all virgin  
white.

Now steals the sunlight down the  
mountain side,

Where rugged crags o'erhang and  
glaciers glide;

Now pierces dusky nooks, where cedar  
trees

Whisper responses to the sighing breeze.  
Now on the peasant's hut the radiance

falls,  
Now on the prince's stately palace walls,

Regilds the trophy on each ancient fane,  
And priest, prince, peasant, wakes to

life again.  
Then lower still descends the morning

gleam,  
And seeks in rocky depths the Ravi's

stream.  
Which through the gloomy night has

held its way  
Unwearied pouring forth its changeless

lay.  
And now while currents darkle, eddies

splash,  
The dancing wavelets murmur, foam,

and flash.

### II. Songs, Dialogue and Narrative.

*(Enter: A PARTY OF PANJABI  
CHRISTIAN MAIDENS.)*

*Song. Chorus of Christian Maidens—*

Arise, arise, celestial Light,  
Send forth thine all-subduing might,

And chase away the age-long night  
That overhangs this place.

Bid sleep-bound souls awake to see  
God's love displayed in rock and tree,

And flowing through eternity  
The river of His grace.

*(Enter: A PARTY OF CHAMBA HINDU  
MAIDENS, CARRYING GARLANDS, AND*

*WEARING JEWELS AND BRIGHT  
CLOTHING.)*

*Recitation. Christian Maiden—*

In the light of early morning,  
Bright-hued festal garments wearing,

Sparkling gems your forms adorning,  
Sisters, where are you repairing?

Fruit and fragrant blossoms bringing,  
Toilsome hillside paths ascending,

Lays both sweet and plaintive singing,  
Sisters, whither are you wending?

*Recitation. Hindu Maiden—*

Where these rock-bewn steps ascend,  
Overhung by crag and pine,

\* For music see P. 4 Note.

## The Rani's Sacrifice.

Thither, Sisters, would we wend  
To the Rani's lonely shrine.  
Yearly on these sacred days  
Fruit and fragrant flowers we bring,  
And, in sweet, but plaintive lays,  
Tell her tale, her praises sing.

*Recitation. Christian Maiden—*

Let her story be repeated,  
Let us hear you sing her praises,  
In yon shady hollow seated,  
Where the pine its crest upraises.

*Recitation. Hindu Maiden—*

One day, long centuries ago,  
The Raja rode in state and pride,  
And saw the maidens wending slow  
Adown the rugged mountain-side;  
And mid the river's murmuring  
He heard them thus lamenting sing:

*Song.\* Chorus of Hindu Maidens—*  
See the Ravi swiftly floweth,  
Dancing o'er its rocky bed;  
While the sunshine fiercely gloweth  
In the blue summer sky o'erhead.  
(*Refrain.*)

And our feet are sore and weary,  
Sleep and rugged the path we tread;  
Though the river sparkling floweth,  
Fierce the sun shineth overhead.

Cold and grand each lordly mountain  
High upreareth its hoary head;  
Would, (ah, would some crystal fountain  
From those snow-shrouded heights  
were shed!

(*Refrain.*) For our feet are, etc.

Chamba, see thy toil-worn daughter  
Reach the Ravi's low, rocky bed,  
Draw its cooling, limpid waters,  
Back to thee now by love are led.  
(*Refrain.*) Yet our feet are, etc.

*Recitation. Hindu Maiden—*

Said the Raja to his men:  
"Let the mountain side be rent;  
Let your heavy blows resound,  
Till some flowing stream be found  
In its stony bosom pent."

In vain, in vain

Their toil and pain,

No longer, for fountain flows;

Again, again,

With might and main

They deal their ringing blows—

In vain, in vain

All toil and pain;

No prayed-for streamlet flows

\* This Song can be rendered as Solo and Chorus if preferred.

## The Rani's Sacrifice.

*Solo.\* Solo and Chorus—*

*Solo. Hindu Maidens—*

Bitter my anguish! Heavy my sorrow!  
Hear, Powers divine, a mother's  
moaning!

Hear, Powers divine, a people's  
groaning!

Say, must my son perish to-morrow?

Heavy my sorrow!

*Chorus.*

Bitter our anguish! Heavy our sorrow!

Hear, Powers on high, look down in  
pity!

Help, Powers on high, this mourning  
city!

Say, must our Prince perish to-morrow?

Heavy our sorrow!

*Solo.*

Bitter my anguish! Heavy my sorrow!

See, Powers above, my heart is given!

Oh! let my life for his be given!

Bid not my son perish to-morrow.

Heavy my sorrow!

*Chorus.*

Bitter our anguish! Heavy our sorrow!

Hear, Powers of Heav'n, our sad  
lamenting!

See, Powers of Heav'n, our deep  
repenting!

Bid not our Prince perish to-morrow.

Heavy our sorrow!

*Recitation. Hindu Maiden—*

See, the morning dawns,

The we-worm maidens sleep;

See, the dark grave yawns

In yonder rocky steep.

See, the Rani pale

Forsakes her tear-drenched bed,

Casts aside her veil

And bows her queenly head.

Now she mounts the hill

And lays her down in peace;

Ló! a sparkling rill

Long pent has found release.

Now at last the stream is given;

Welcome, death-bought gift of heaven!

Where the bird singeth,

Where the breeze singeth,

Where the stream singeth,

Sleeping she lieth.

*Song (Dirge.) Chorus of Hindu Maidens*

Weep, oh weep, for the noble loving

heart now is still:

\* This Song reproduces the lament of the Rani and her Attendants singing alternately. (The Solo may be omitted if preferred.)

Said the Raja to his page:  
"Go, salute the Brahman old,  
Bid him in the sacred shrine  
Watch, and ask the Powers divine  
Why their blessing they withhold!"

Through the silent night,

While all the city slept,

By the pale moonlight

The priest his vigil kept.

Faint the lamp-light's gleam

Within the sacred shrine,

Was it but a dream,

Or spake a Voice divine?

"Bid the Raja know

When he shall bow his pride,

Shall the fountain flow

Adown the mountain side.

"When in contrite woe

His bitter tears outburst,

Shall the waters flow

To quench his people's thirst.

"When before our shrine

The one his heart loves best

Dies—by Powers divine

His labour shall be blest."

Was it but a dream,

Or spake a Voice divine?

Morning's ruddy gleam

Now floods the mystic shrine.

This answer to the Prince was sent,

The tidings through the city spread,

The Rani's heart with grief was rent,

The haughty Raja bowed his head.

And vowed, "To quench my people's

thirst,

My son, my best-beloved, my pride,

Shall die; then may the torrent burst

And ripple down the mountain-side.

"To-morrow, when morn's blood-red

glow

Shall gleam o'er yonder ghostly height,

Thy death-freed spirit, pure as snow,

Shall sky-ward soar, O Son of Light."

All day the Rani weeps,

All night her vigil keeps,

While all the city sleeps,

Her maidens round her throng,

They rend their tresses long,

And tell their grief in song.

\* The Rani of Chamba belong to the "Sura" Banu line—Children of the Sun.

Sigh, winds, sigh as ye wander mid the  
pines on the hill.  
Bloom, flowers, bloom round the lone  
beloved grave by the rill.  
Weep, oh weep, etc.

*Recitation. Hindu Maiden—*

To the spot we love the best  
Year by year we wend our way;  
Where she laid her down to rest,  
There we sing our grateful lay.

*Song. Chorus of Hindu Maidens—*

Toil no more, O Chamba's daughters,  
Where the sunshine scorching glows;  
Draw no more the soil-stained waters,  
Where the Ravi sparkling flows:

The Powers divine, no more resenting,  
Grant now the pledge of their relenting;  
See how the torrent now gushing flows!  
How the streamlet rushing flows!  
How the streamlet rushing flows!

Toil no more, O Chamba's daughters,  
Where low the Ravi darkling flows.

Praise ye him who gave his treasure  
When the breeze of morning blows,  
Gave his heir, his pride, his pleasure,  
Where the Ravi sparkling flows.

The Rani praise who so bravely perished,  
Her own life gave for the son she  
cherished;  
Hail to the fountain that dancing flows!  
Hail to the streamlet glancing flows!  
How the streamlet dancing flows!

Toil no more, etc.

Come, sweet-scented, gaylands bringing,  
When the east at dawning glows;  
Maidens, come, with gladness singing,  
Where the streamlet sparkling flows.

Come, year by year, repeat her story,  
Come, year by year, renew her glory,  
Long as the rivulet dashing flows,  
While the streamlet flashing flows,  
While the streamlet dashing flows,

Toil no more, etc.

*Recitation. Christian Maiden—*

We have listened to your story,  
We have hearkened to your lays,  
May the noble Rani's glory  
Long outlive our fleeting praise!

Listen, while we tell a story,  
Sing of yet remoter days,  
Of a Sacrifice whose glory  
Far outshines our feeble praise.

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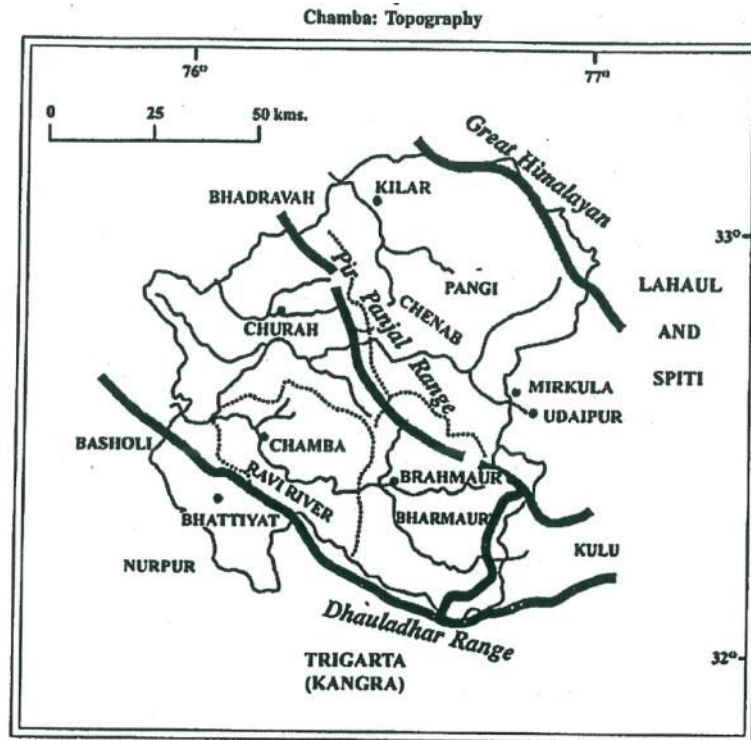


Fig. 1

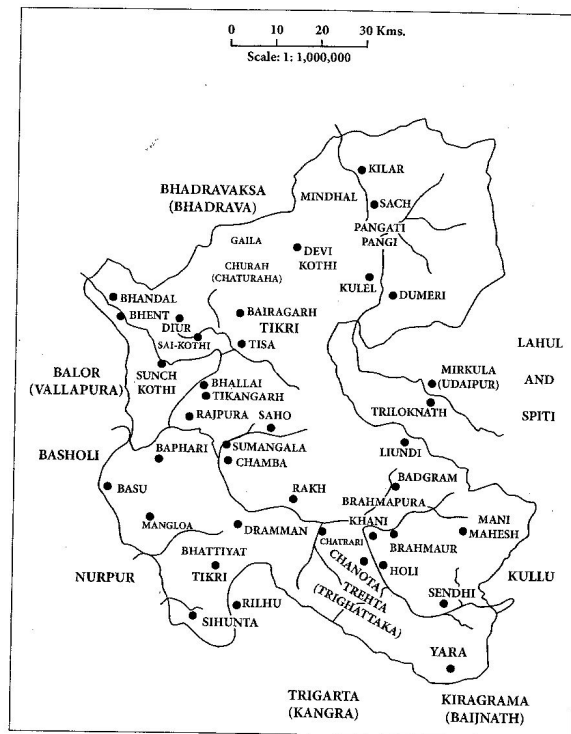


Fig. 2



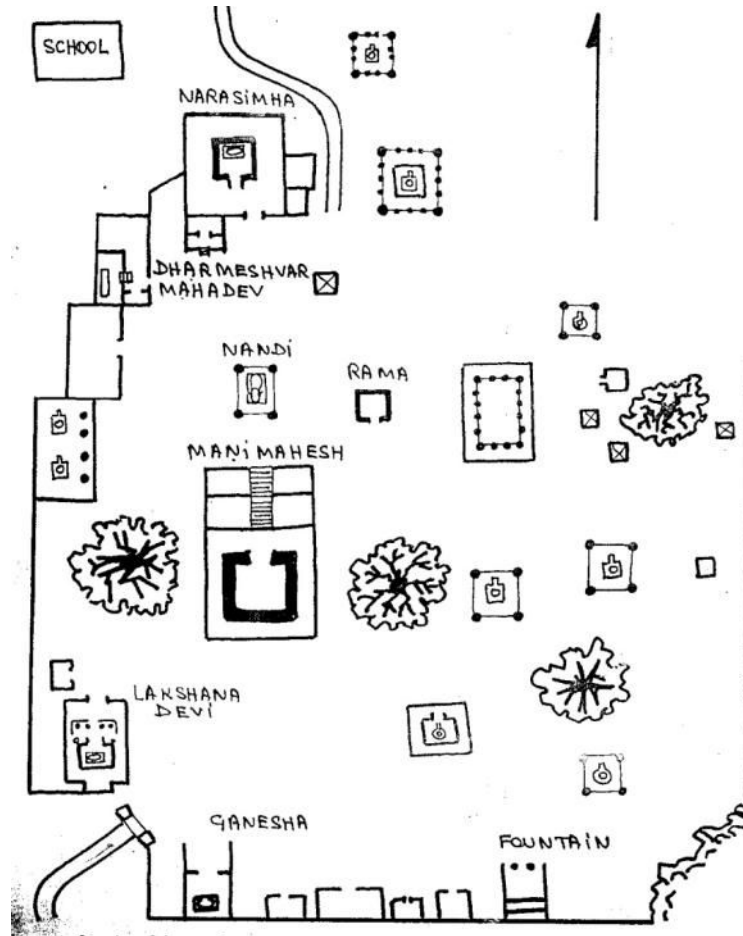


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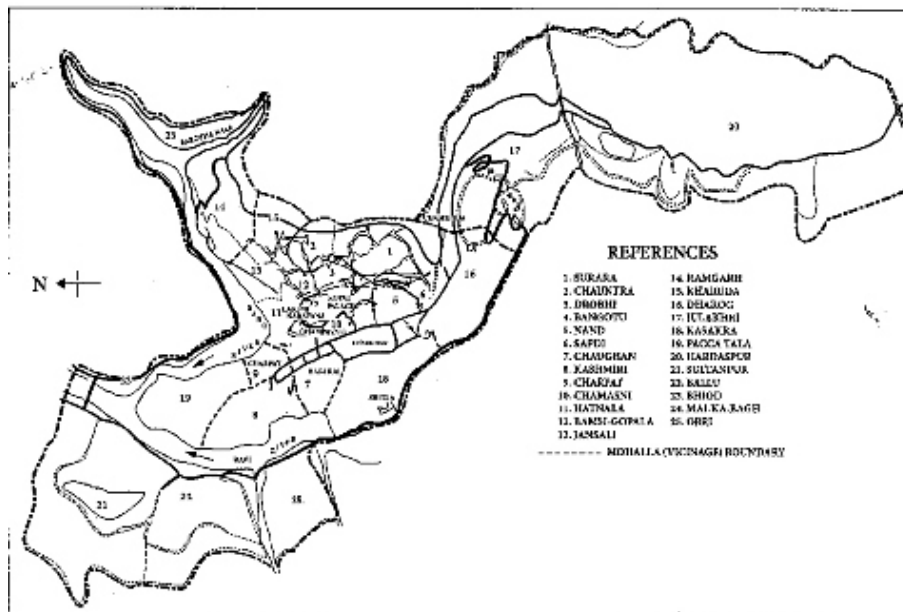


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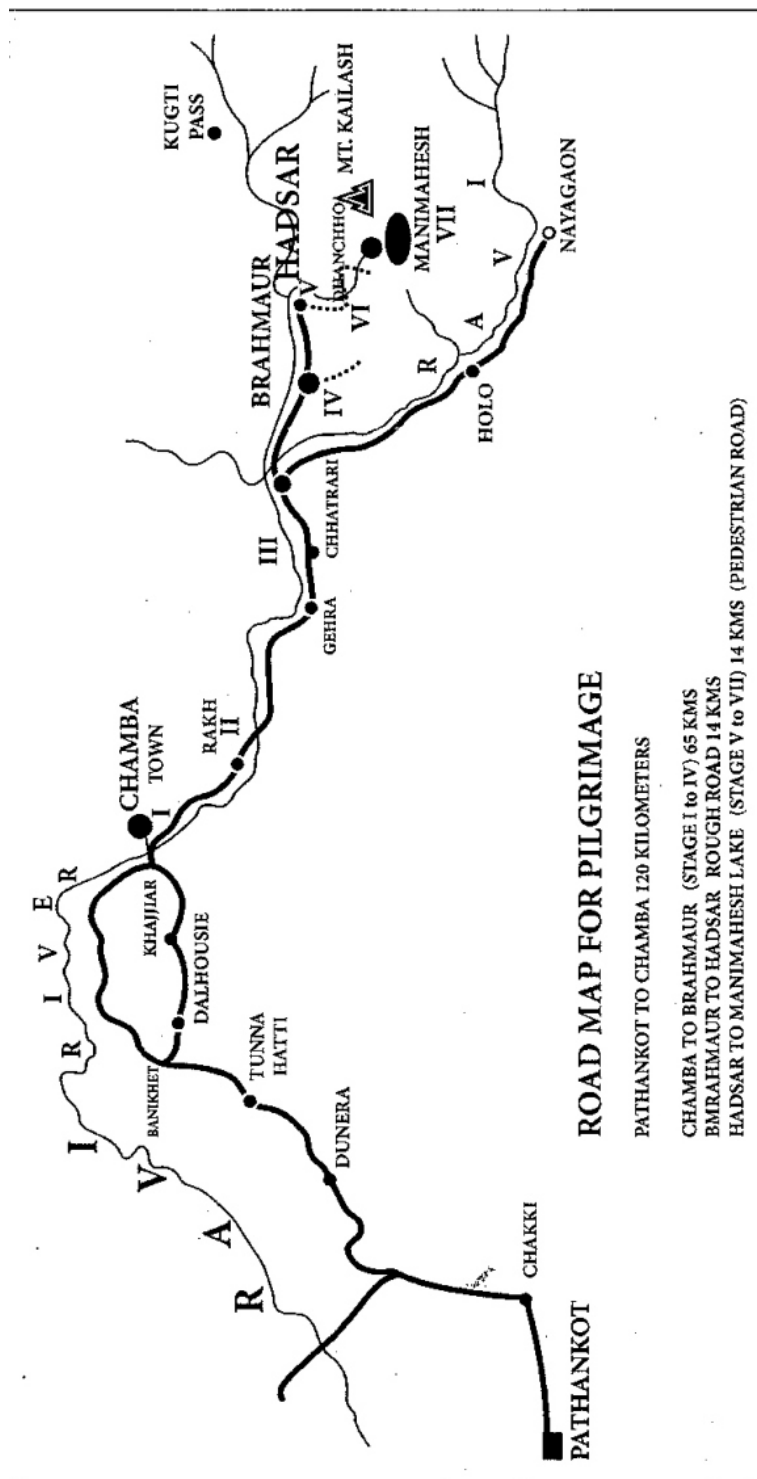


Fig 3.2



Pl. 2.1



Pl 2.2



Pl. 2.3



Pl. 2.4



Pl. 2.5



Pl. 2.6



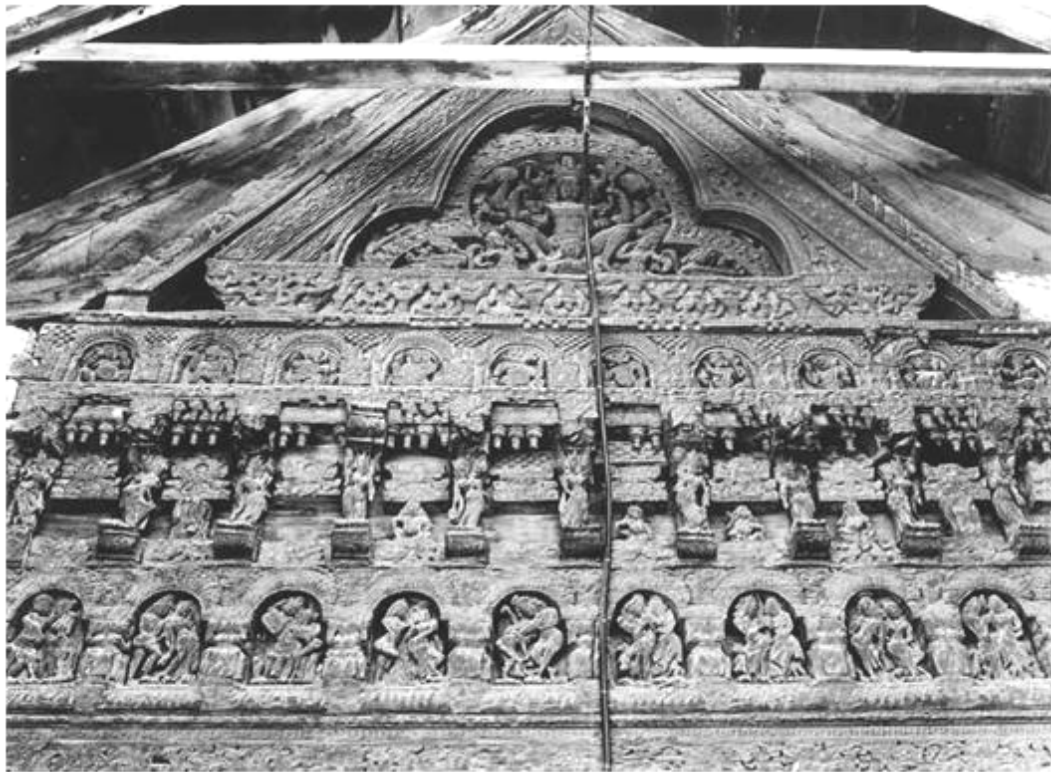
Pl. 2.7



Pl. 2.8



Pl. 2.9



Pl. 2.10



Pl. 2.11



Pl. 2.12

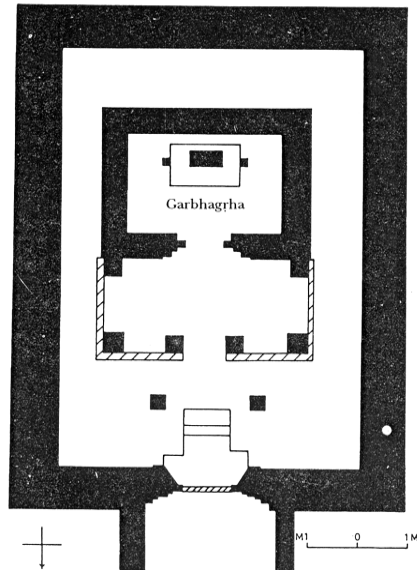




Pl. 2.13



Pl. 2.14



Pl. 2.15



Pl. 2.16



Pl. 2.17



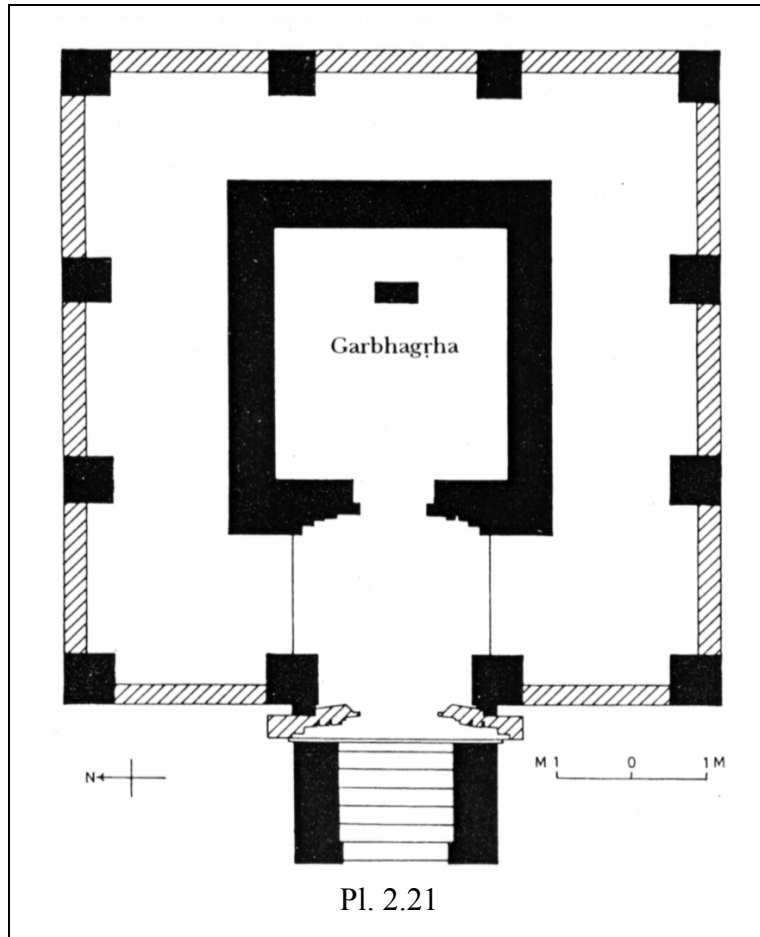
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Pl. 2.19



Pl. 2.20



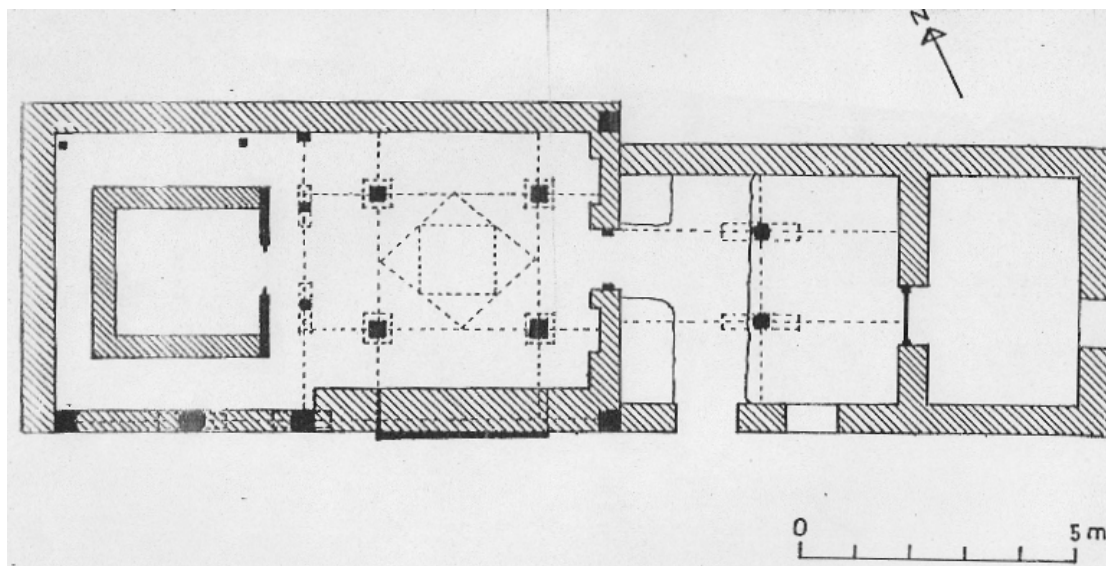


Pl. 2.23



Pl. 2.24





Pl 2.25



Pl 2.26



Pl 2.27



Pl 2.28





Pl 2.29



Pl 2.30



Pl 2.31



Pl 2.32



Pl. 2.33



Pl. 3.1



Pl. 3.2



Pl. 3.3



Pl. 3.4



Pl. 3.5



Pl. 3.6



Pl. 3.7



Pl. 3.8





Pl. 3.9



Pl. 3.10





Pl. 3.11



Pl. 3.12



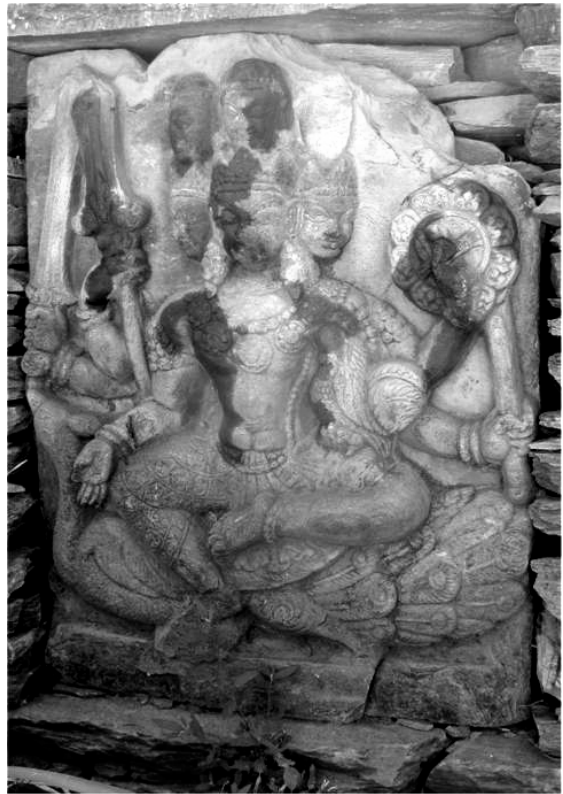
Pl 3.13



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Pl. 3.15



Pl. 3.16

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Pl. 3.20



Pl 3.21



Pl 3.22



Pl 3.23



Pl. 3.24





Pl. 3.25



Pl. 3.26





Pl.3.27



Pl. 3.28



Pl. 3.29



Pl. 3.30



Pl. 3.31



Pl. 3.32



Pl. 3.33



Pl. 3.34



Pl. 3.35



Pl. 3.36



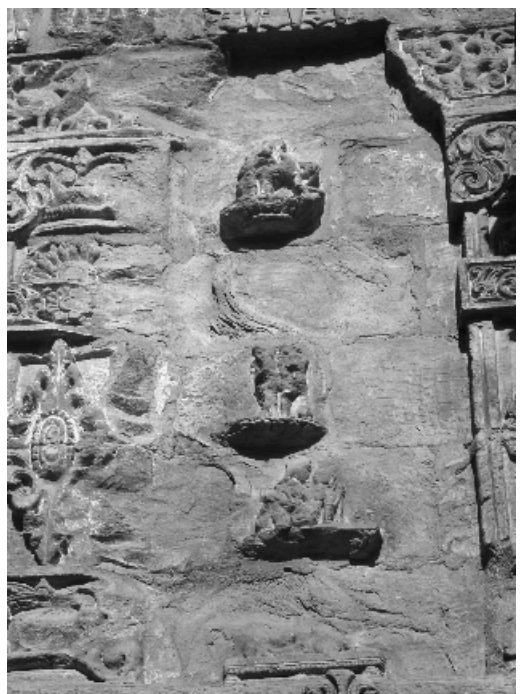
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Pl. 3.39

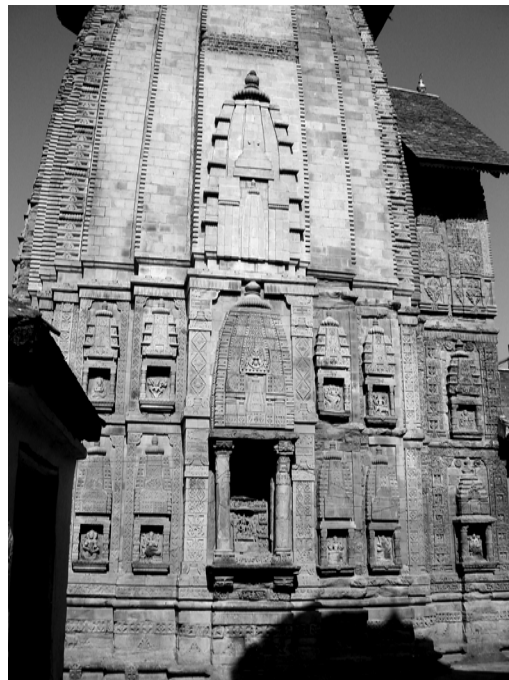


Pl. 3.40





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Pl. 3.42





Pl. 3.43



Pl. 3.44



Pl.3.45



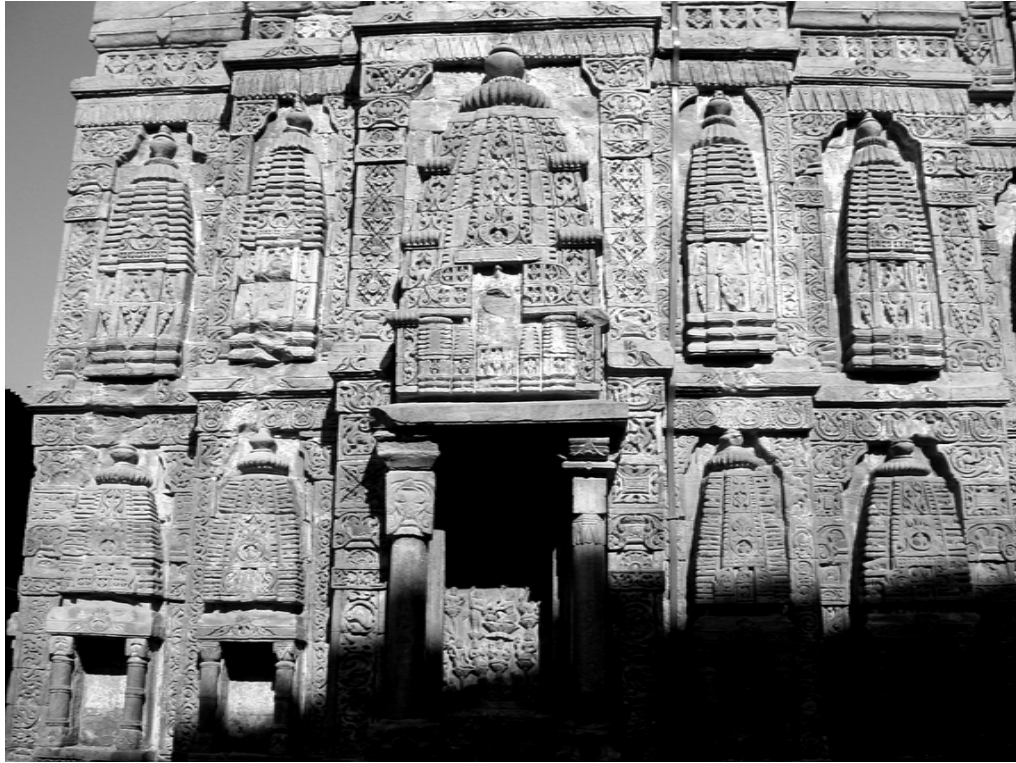
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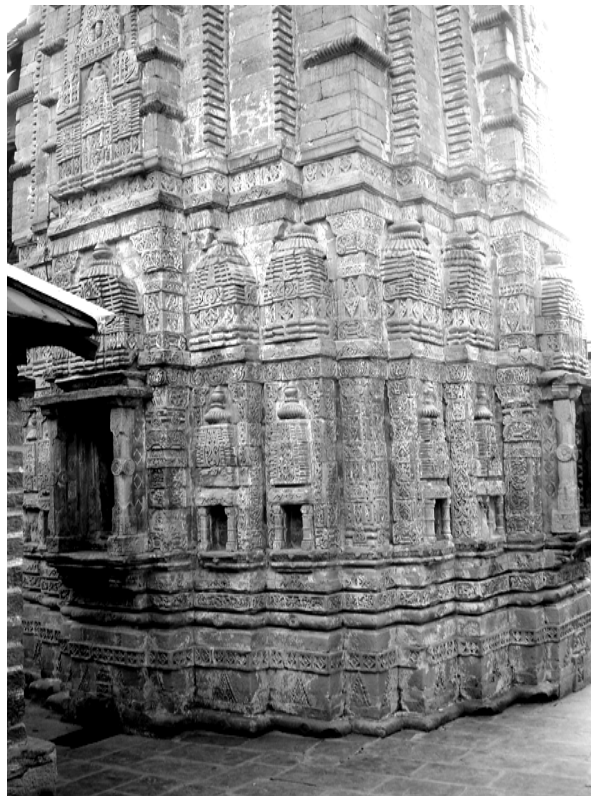
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Pl. 3.48



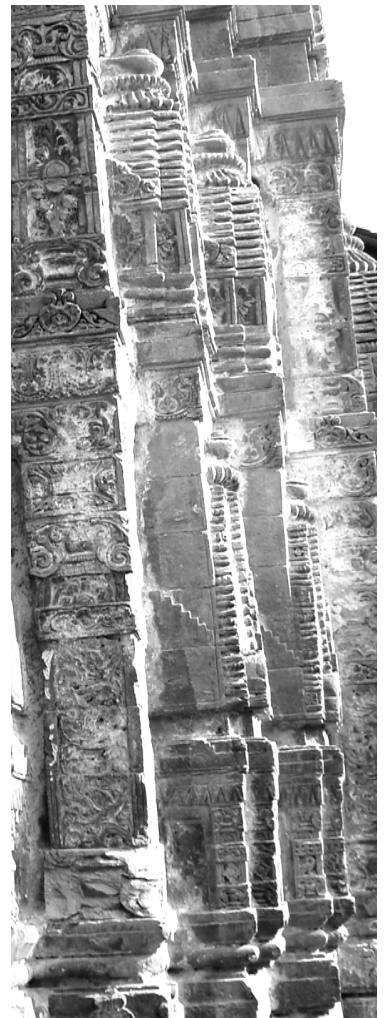
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Pl. 3.53



Pl. 3.54





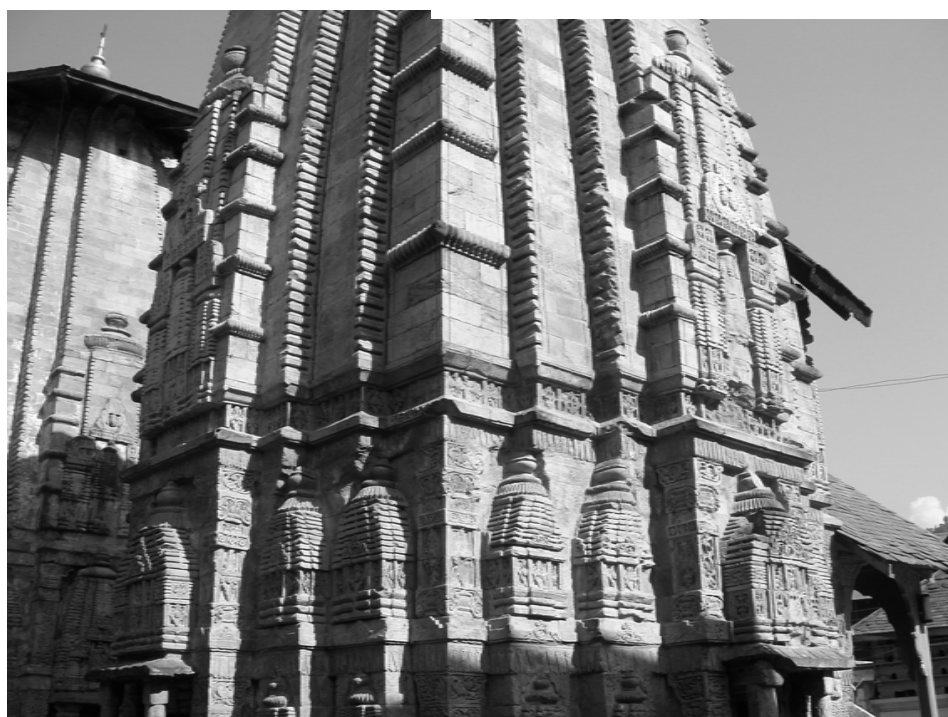
Pl.3.55



Pl. 3.56



Pl. 3.57



Pl 3.58





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Pl 3.60



Pl. 3.61



Pl. 3.62



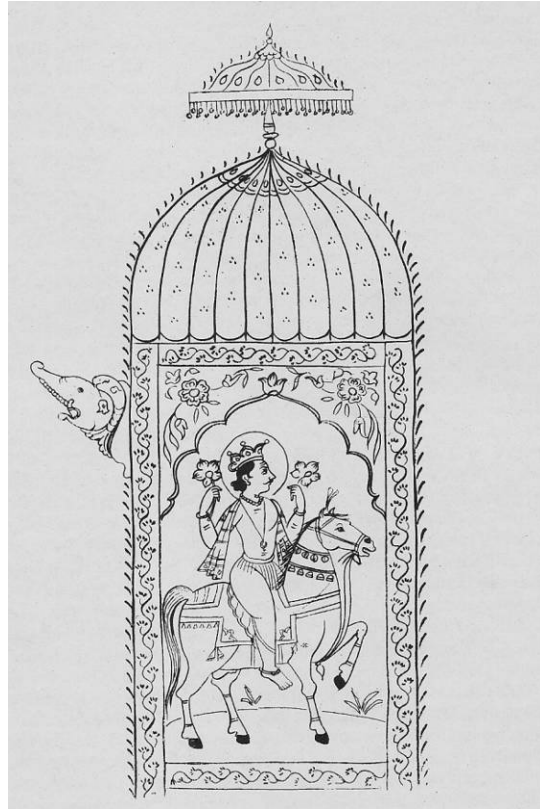
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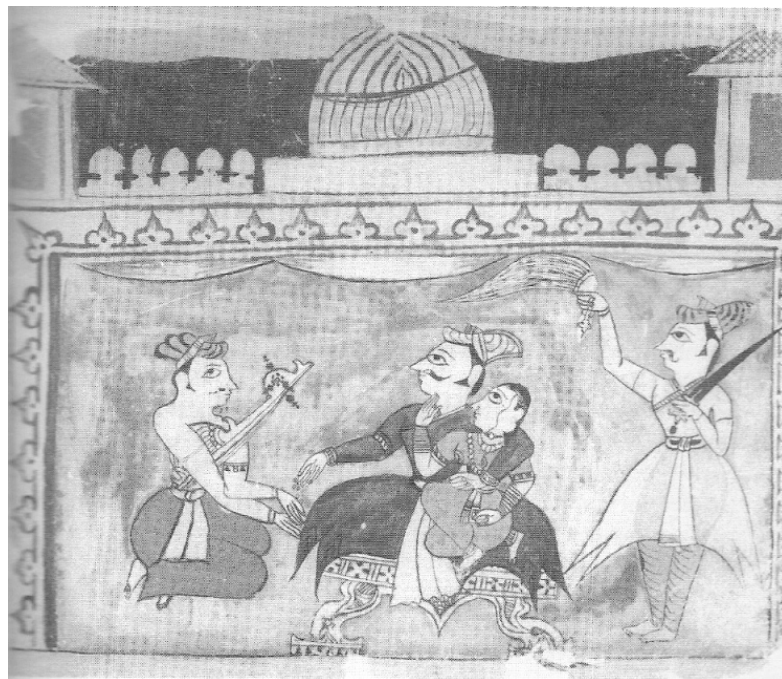
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Pl. 3.65



Pl.4.1



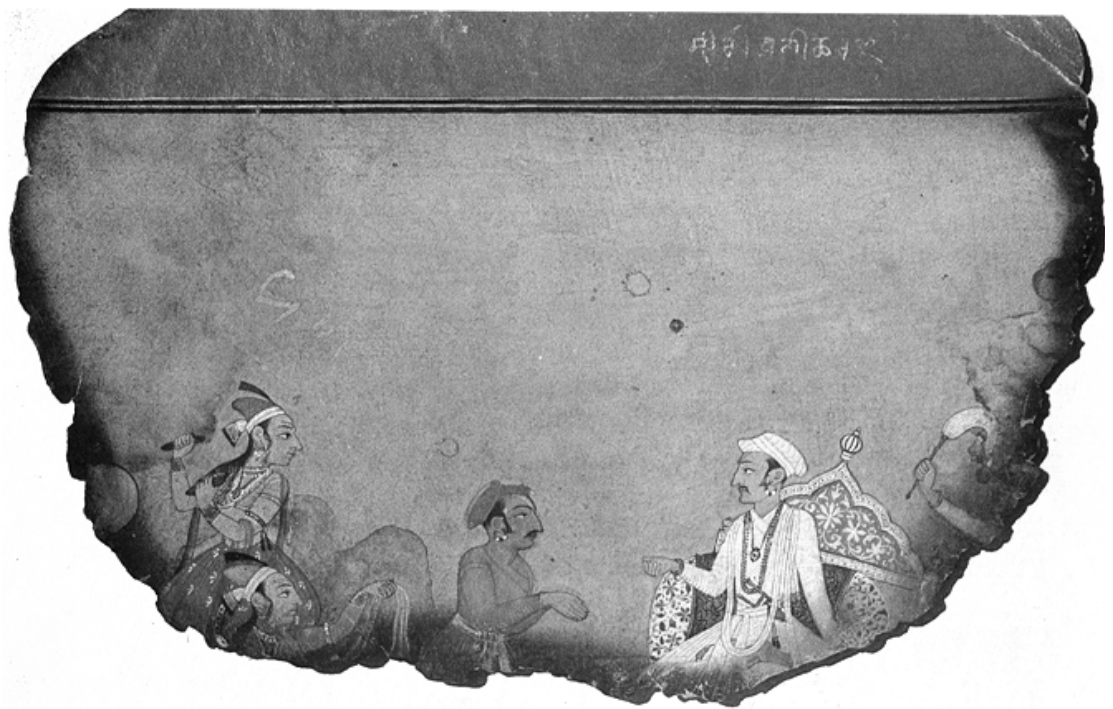
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Pl. 4.4



Pl.4.5





Pl. 4.6



Pl. 4.7

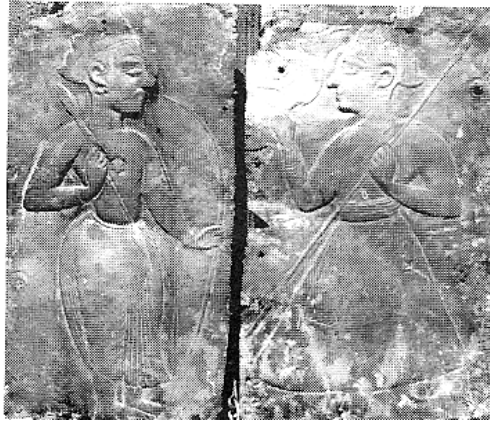




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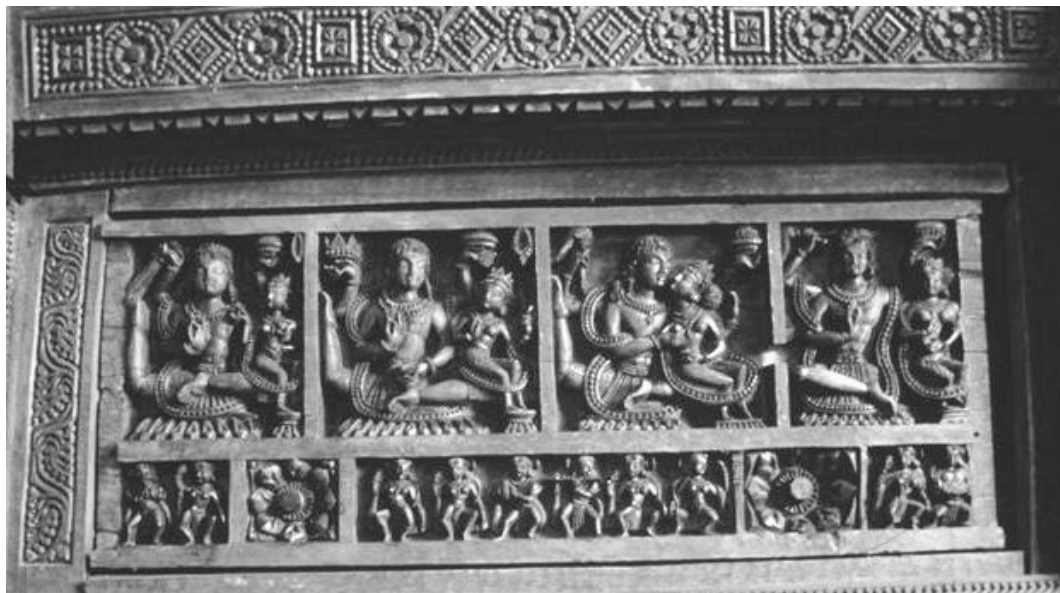
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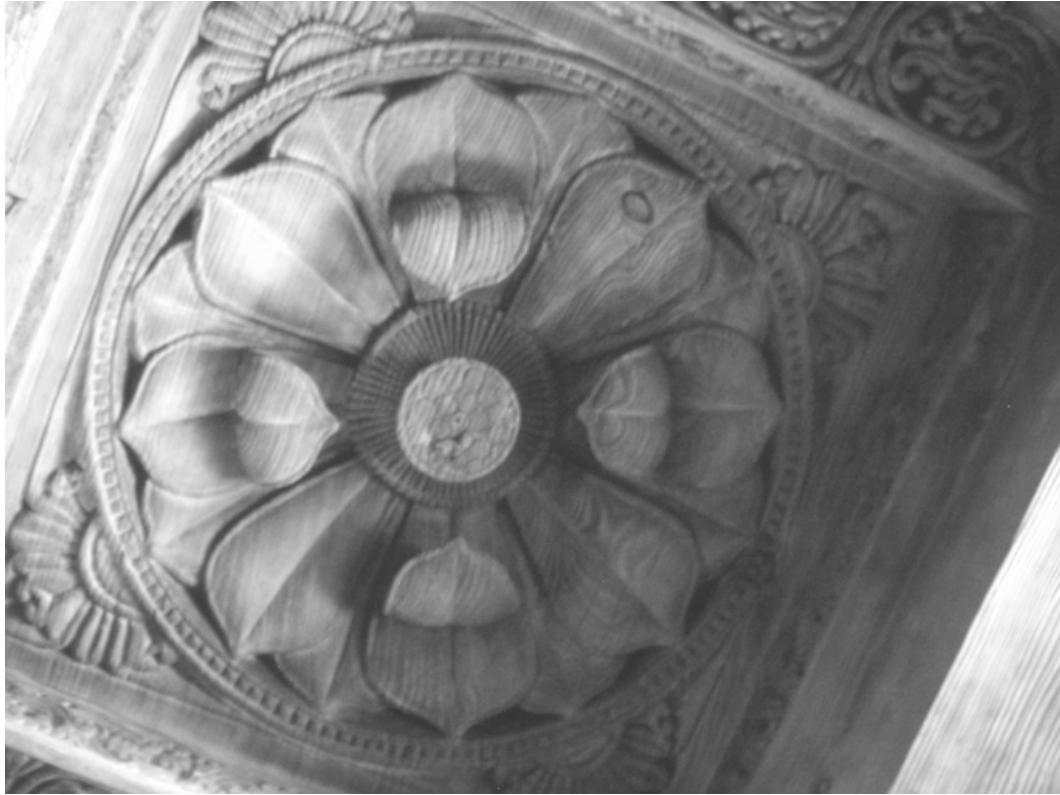
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Pl. 4.12



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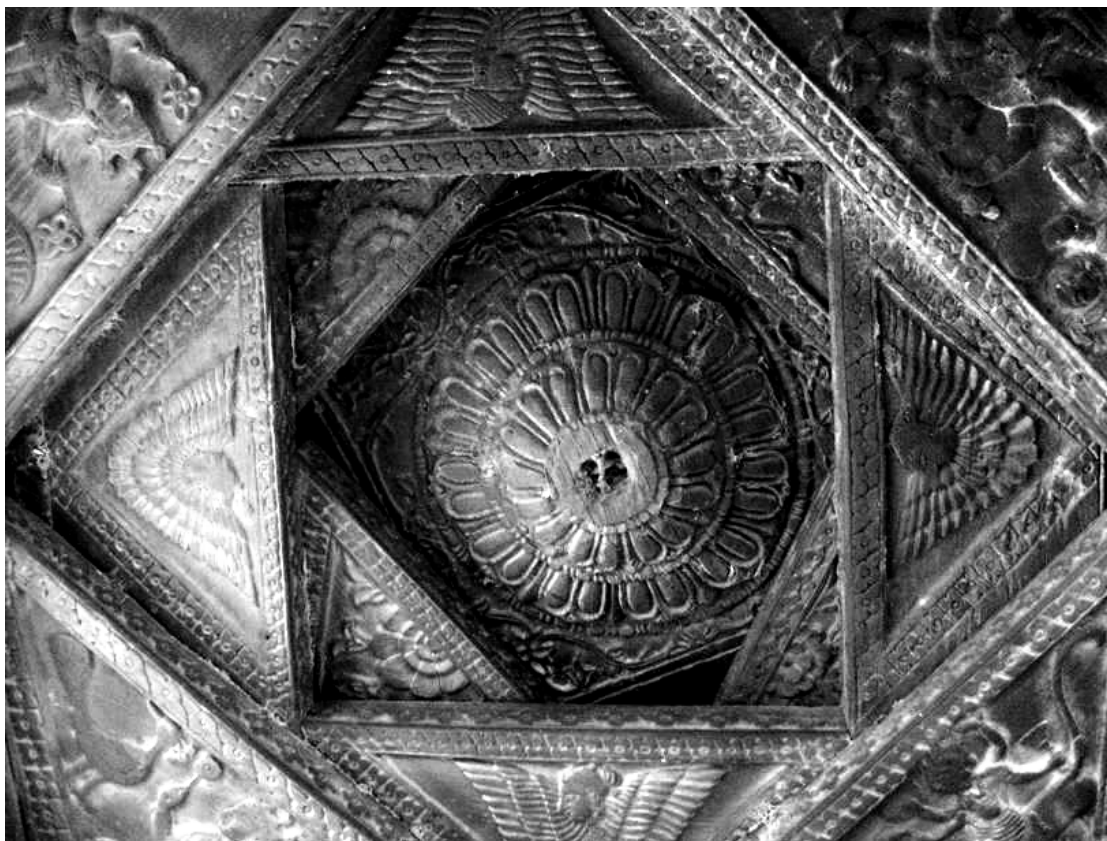
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Pl. 4.28



Pl. 4.29





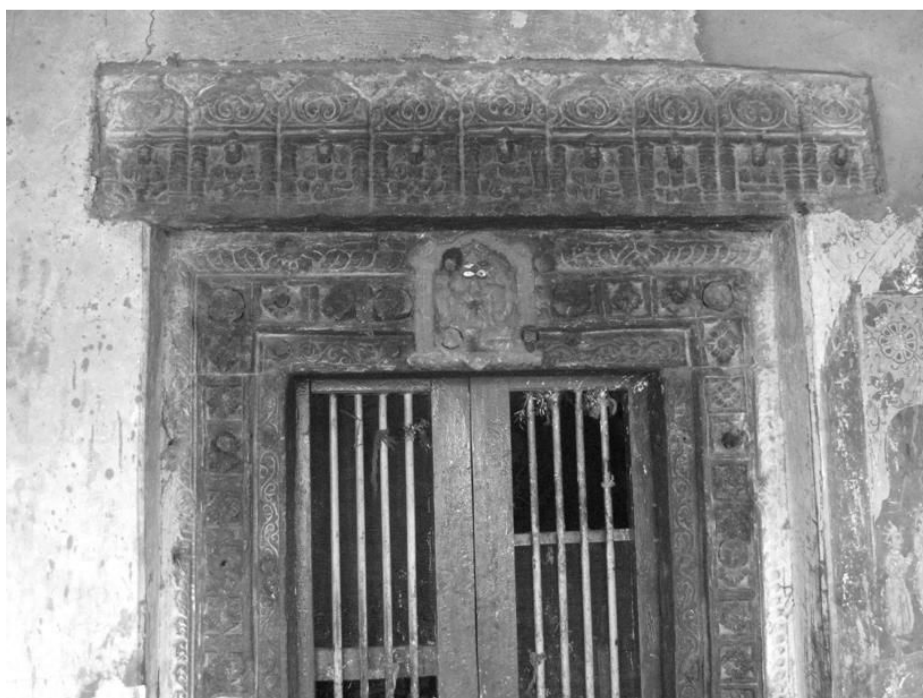
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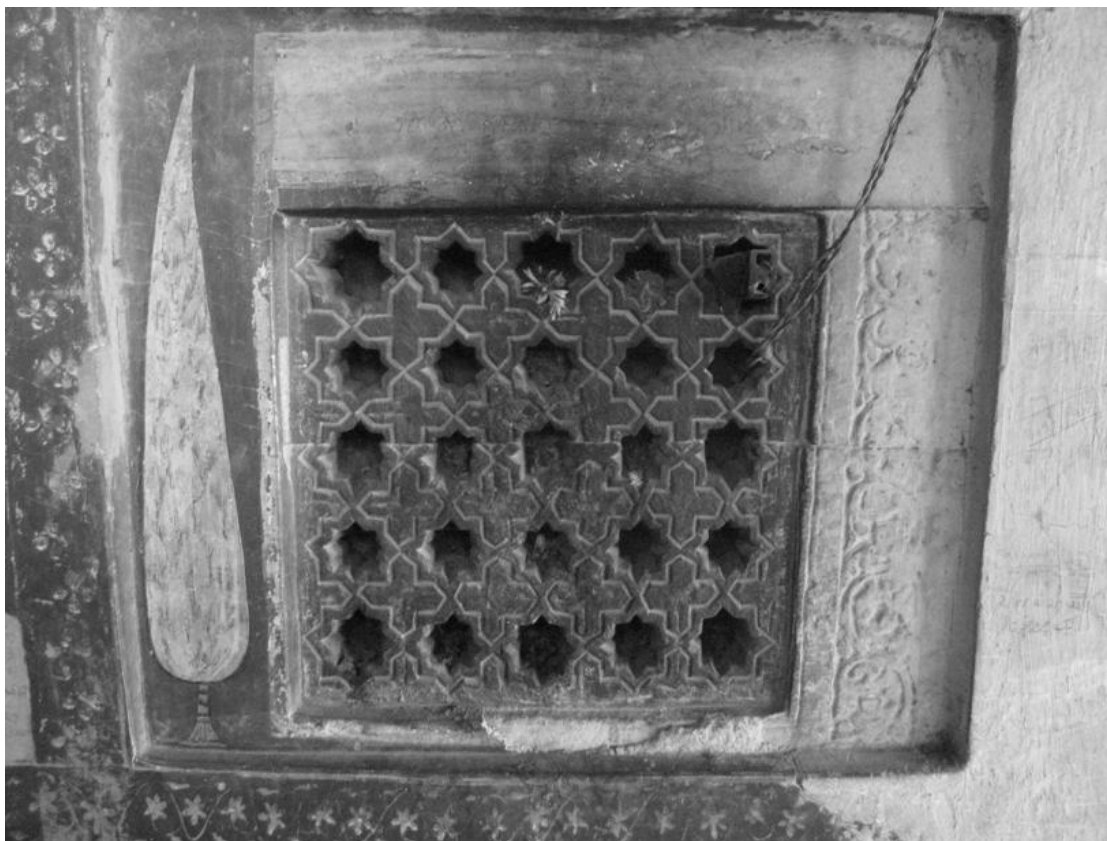
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Pl 4.32



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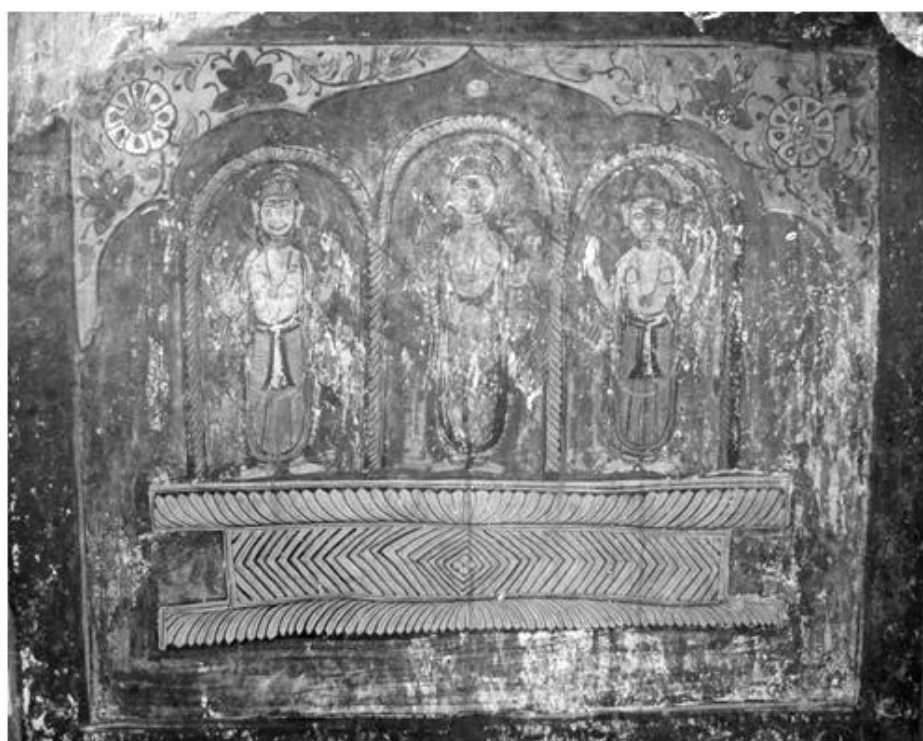
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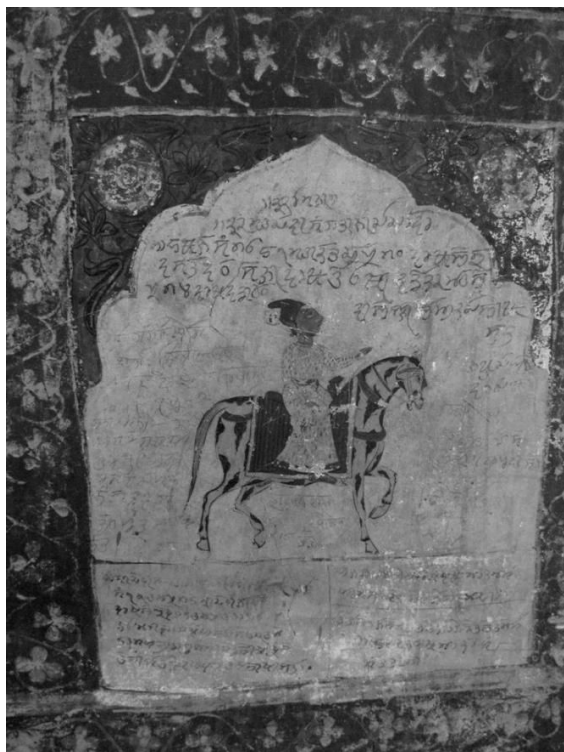


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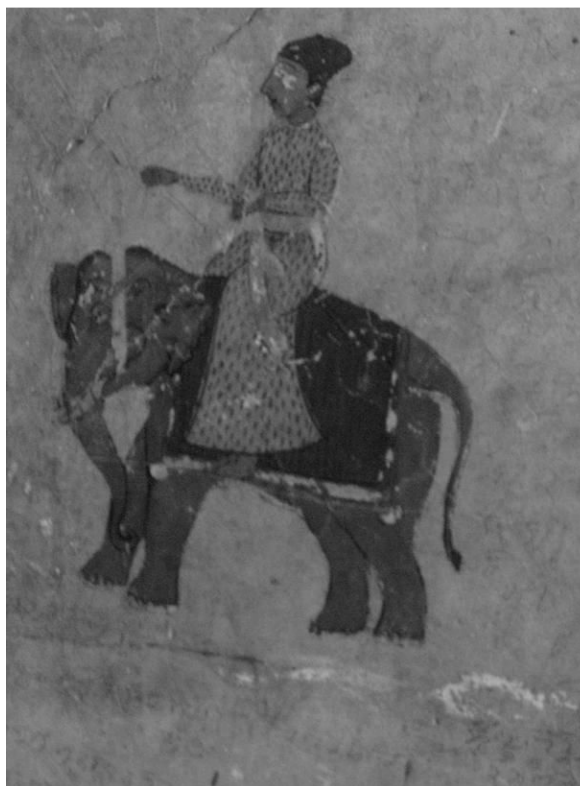


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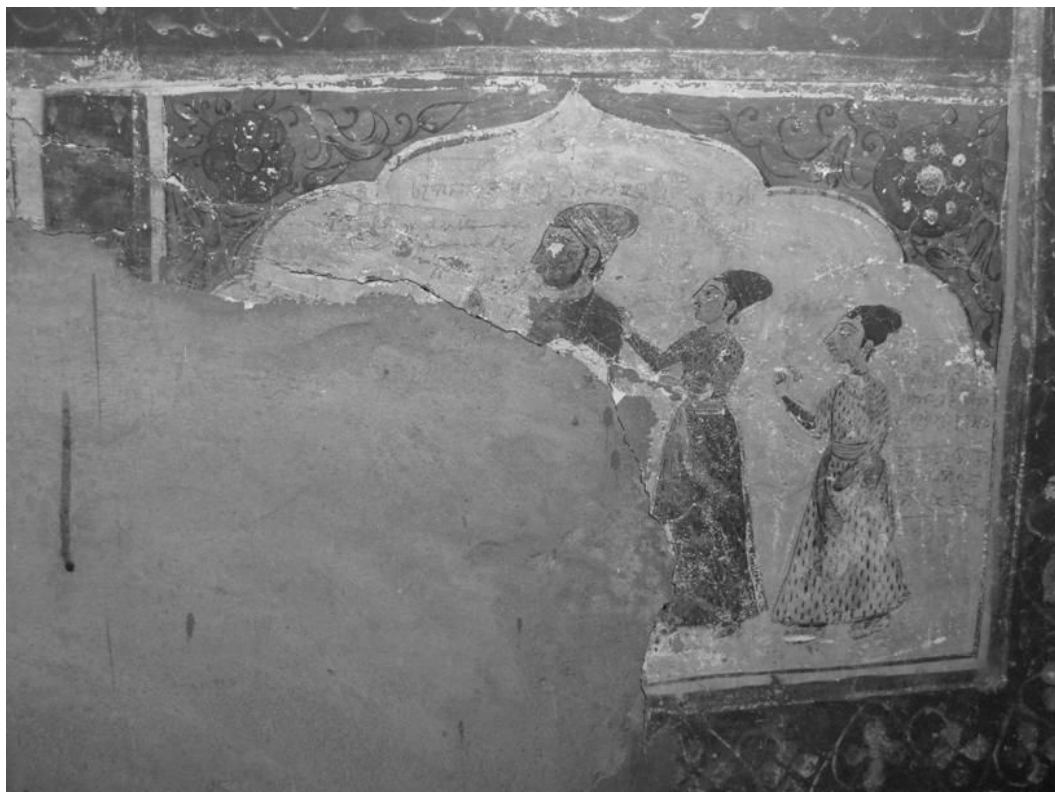




Pl. 4.40



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Pl 4 42



Pl. 4.43



Pl. 4.44



Pl.4.45



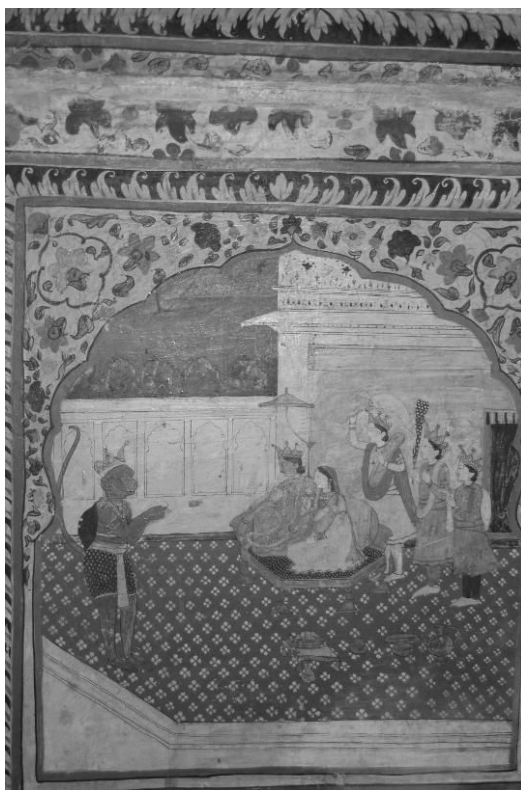
Pl. 4.46



Pl. 4.47



Pl. 4.48



Pl. 4.49



Pl. 4.50



Pl 4.51



Pl.4.52



Pl. 4.53





Pl. 4.54



Pl. 4.55





Pl. 4.56



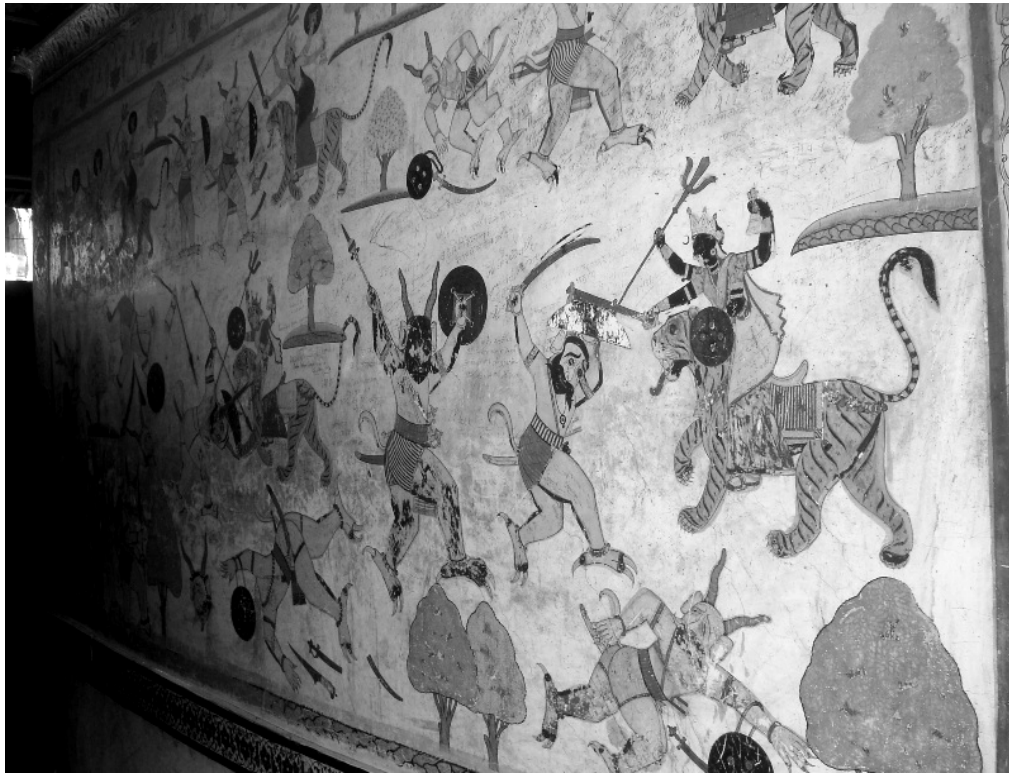
Pl. 4.57



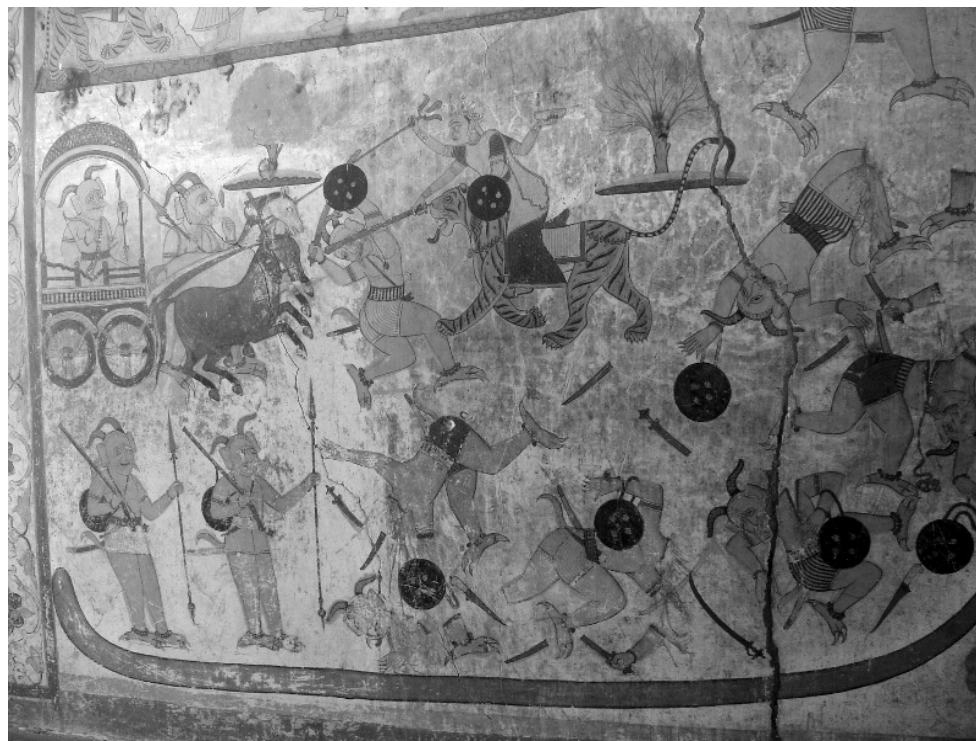
Pl. 4.58



Pl. 4.59



Pl. 4.60



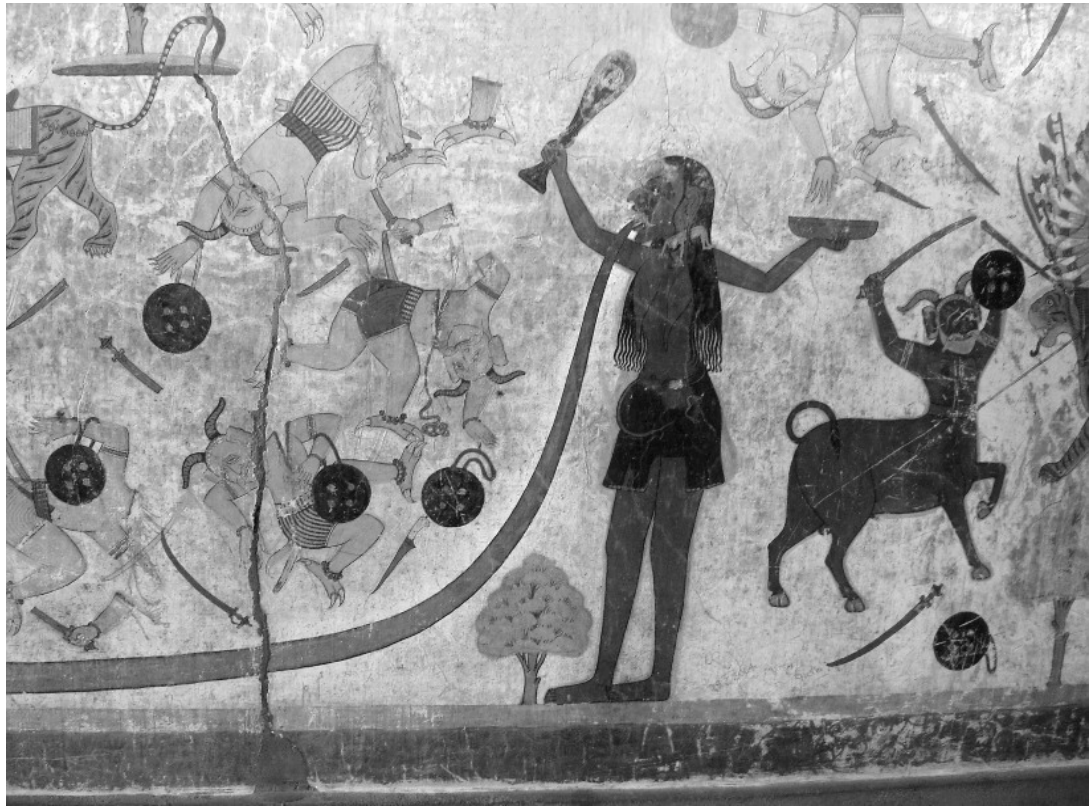
Pl. 4.61



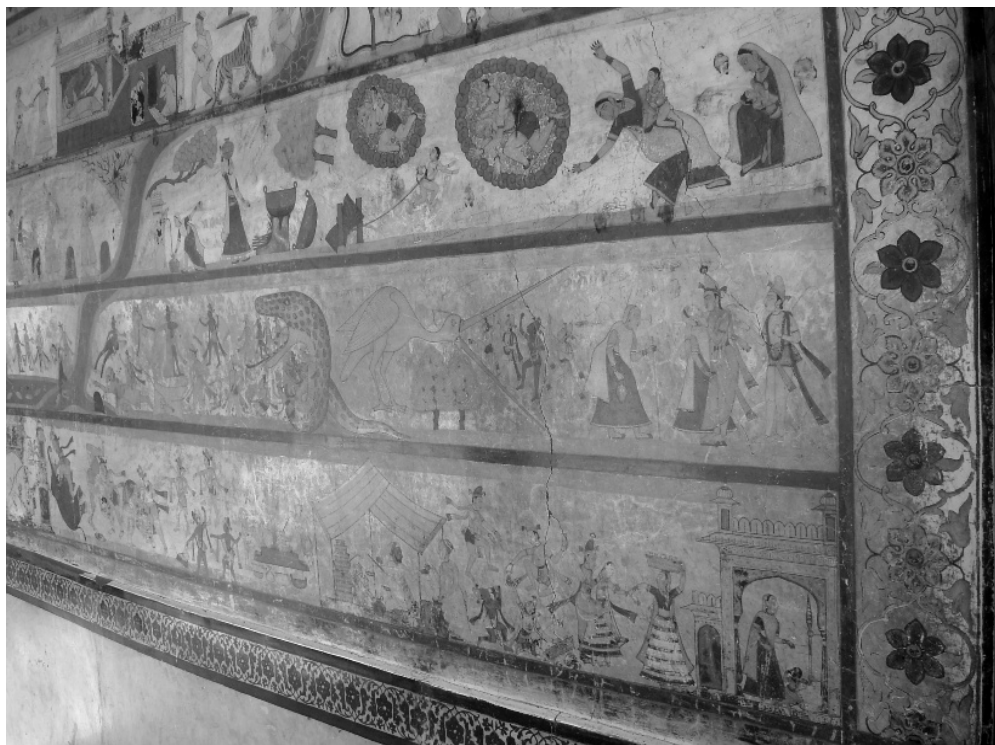
Pl. 4.62



Pl. 4.63



Pl. 4.64

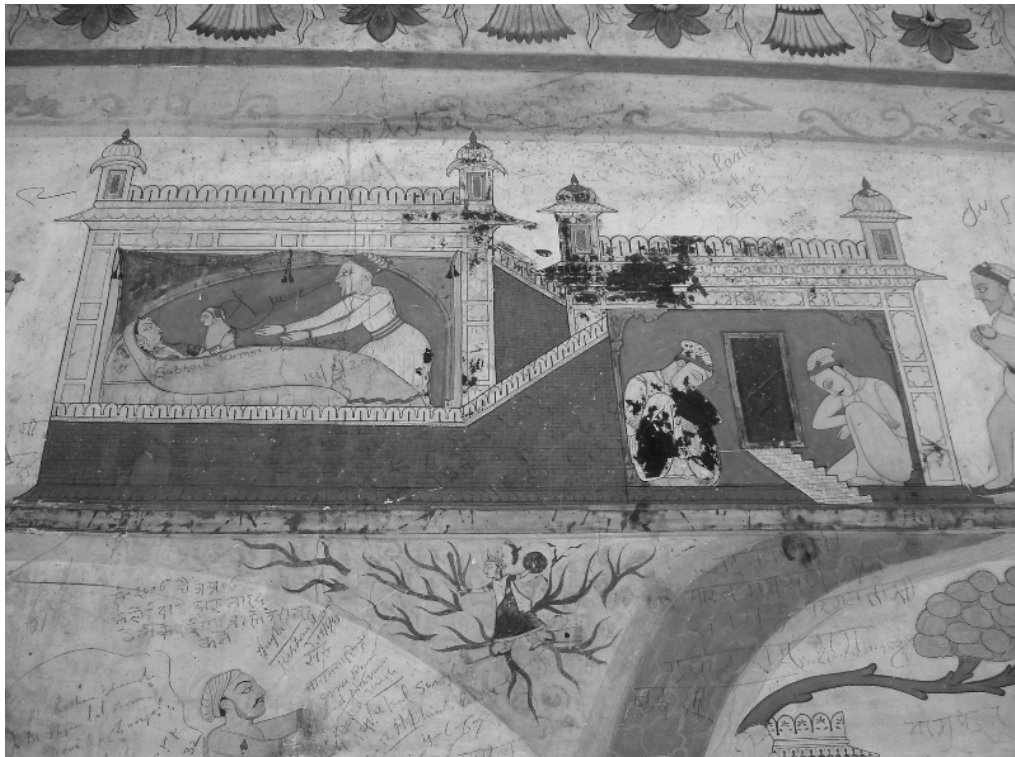


Pl. 4.65





Pl. 4.66



Pl. 4.67



Pl. 4.68



Pl. 4.69



Pl. 4.70



Pl. 4.71





Pl. 4.72



Pl. 4.73



Pl. 4.74



Pl. 4.75



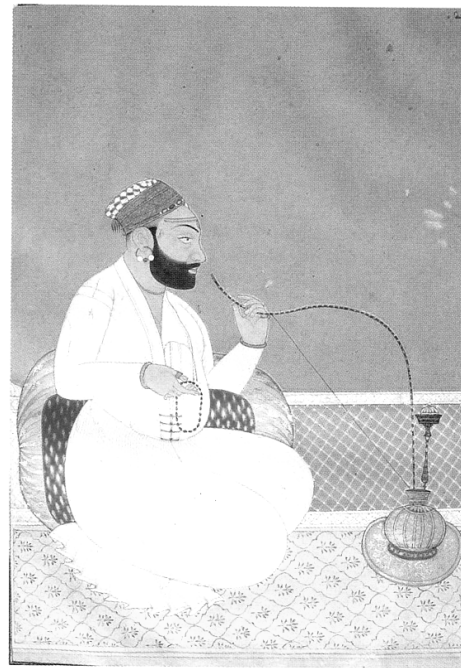
Pl. 4.76



Pl. 4.77



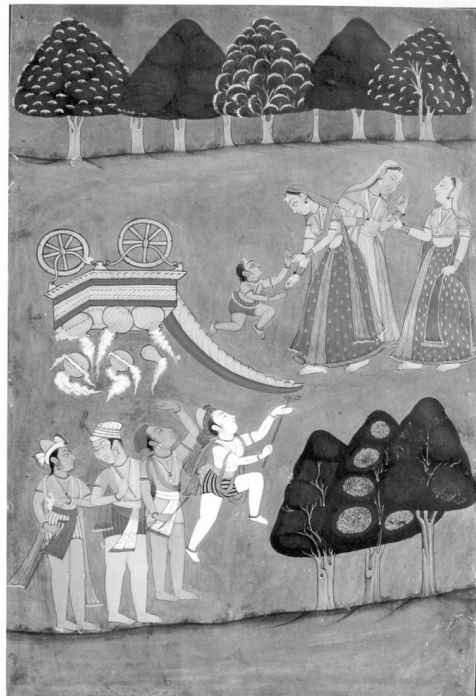
Pl. 4.78



Pl. 4.79



Pl. 4.80



Pl. 4.81



Pl. 4.82



Pl. 4.83





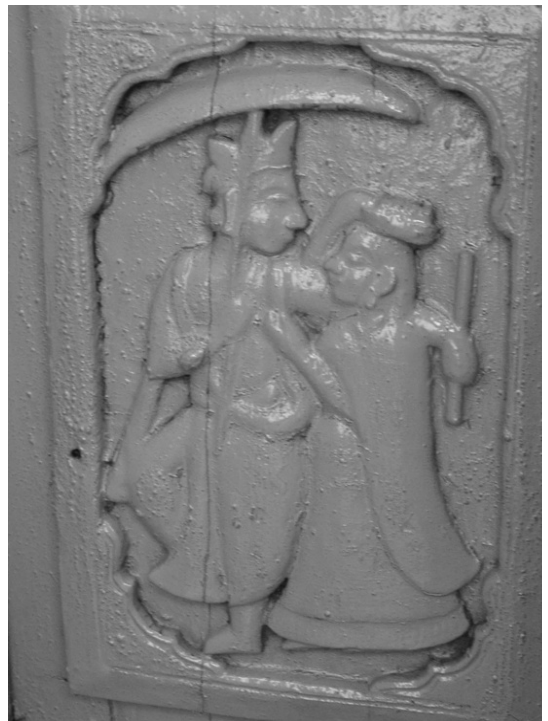
Pl. 4.84



Pl 4 85



Pl. 4.86

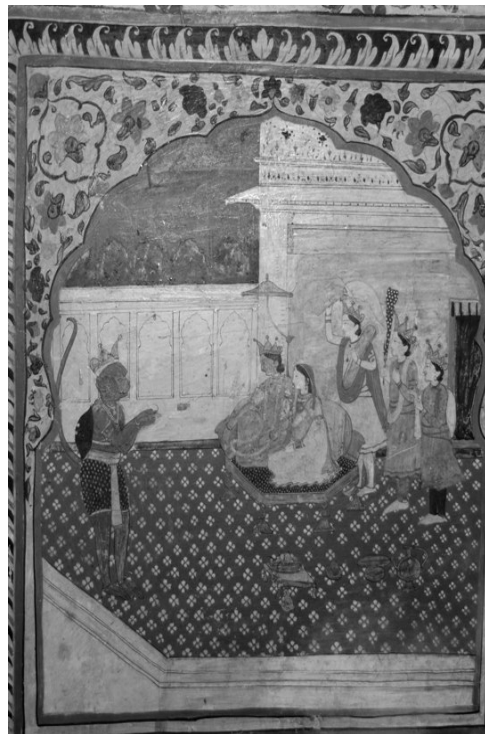


Pl 4 87

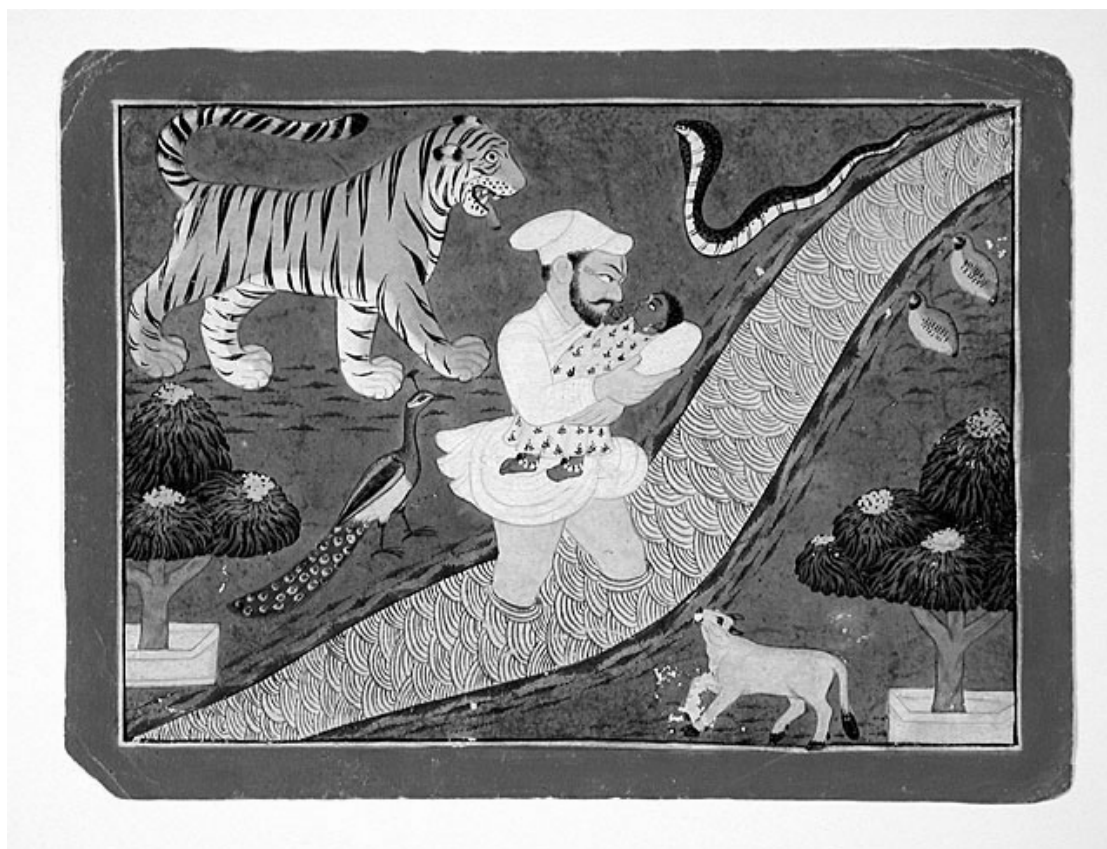




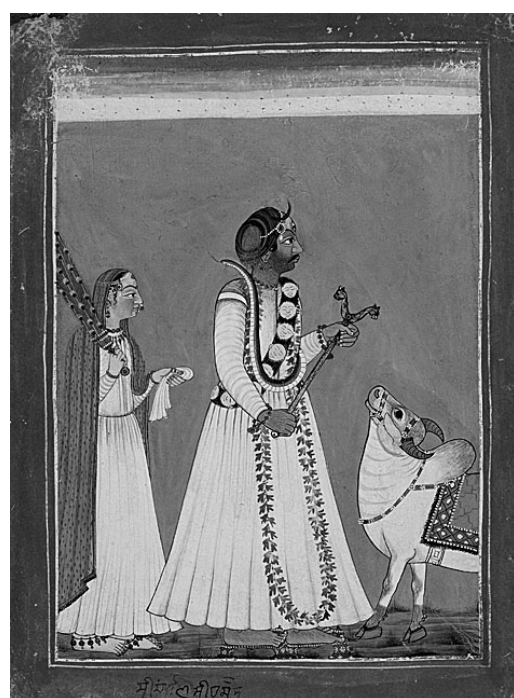
Pl. 4.88



Pl. 4.89



Pl. 4.90



Pl. 4.91



Pl. 4.92