Michael W. Meister

Style and Idiom in the Art of Uparamala

For some years I have studied a group of temples in India located in the border region of Rajasthan touching Madhya Pradesh that is known as Uparamala (Upper Mālava). From a study of temples in this region, certain aspects of the relationship between what I call “style” and what I have called “idiom” have become clear. A statement of this relationship as a general precept can stand separate from the technicalities I might need — as an archaeologist — to analyze the group of monuments and sculptures as a whole from which the hypothesis has been derived. I hope this precept can stand here as an appropriate offering to a scholar, guide, and friend whose work has contributed much to my intellectual growth.

Some years ago, at Oleg Grabar’s request, I gave a lecture to his class at Harvard on the Qubt Mosque, then located on the outer edge of contemporary New Delhi. In relation to that earliest of dynastic monuments for Islam in northern India, I compared a second mosque, built only a few years later in what became the British imperial enclave of Ajmer. I then wrote an article on this “Two-and-a-Half-Day Mosque” for Oriental Art in which I attempted to distinguish — both stylistically and typologically — between Hindu remains reused to fit an Islamic agenda and new material made for the mosque by Hindu craftsmen.

In that early article, I made several statements about process that bear repetition here. It seemed to me then that the material remains in Delhi and Ajmer (I have since extended this search to other early Islamic sites in India) suggested four levels of acquisition: (1) reused material; (2) material made fresh by Indian craftsmen from their own tradition; (3) material made new for Islamic purposes but dependant on local conventions; and (4) material conceptualized newly, drawing on outside Islamic sources. As I wrote then:

If we can gain evidence from this example for a discussion of cultural interaction, our conclusions might be as follows: Material borrowed by the Islamic rulers from Hindu sources were several. First was material plundered and reused; second, material borrowed and modified, as the ceilings at Ajmer. Other concepts were transferred, as the torana[’s] arch or the temple[’s] moldings; both examples of a sort of empathetic response of local workmen, finding similes between elements in the local tradition and alien demands. Plunder, compromise, and simile modifying the dominant tradition: and finally, Hindu workmen themselves found stimulus from new requirements, bringing to fruition certain trends potential in their own tradition.

The permeability I found in this Islamic margin, it seems to me, set the stage for my later work in Uparamala; and distinctions I have made in that work between typology, idiom, and style continue to inform my understanding of how “Islamic” buildings were constructed and thought of in India.

Upper Mālava, a region in eastern Rajasthan, has always been a border area; it touches the Aravalli mountains and looks out over the Malwa plateau. Its art has stood between great powers for centuries and between great styles in art-historical terms — those of the Guptas and Vākāṭakas; Kalacuris and Maitrakas; Paramāras, Guhilas, and Kacchapaghātās. In this essay, I wish to write, not of the art of this region as a whole, but of what we can read of the nature of style from monuments in this region, both what style is and how it functions.

In India, art historians have tended to label styles in terms of dynasties and to characterize each by period. Although this has been questioned at times in favor of regional designations, little has been said about the political circumstances within which art was produced or the social structures that made the seemingly continuous fabric of artistic production so striking. Joanna G. Williams has applied the western model of “center” and “periphery” to artistic production in the Gupta period, but we have now only begun to incorporate insights from recent historical models that see early medieval India as still an amalgam of lineage and state societies and as the source of contemporary Hinduism.

In upper Malwa, monuments from several centuries can demonstrate the variety and the complexity of monuments in this margin. I have written elsewhere of two dated temples, on the Candrabhaga (ca. A.D. 689) and at Kansuan (A.D. 792), that can show how very different temples in this region could be within the same period.
One — a pilastered *pandal* frozen in stone (fig. 1) — suggests a wooden tradition using open clusters of pillars (the four-pillared *catuskis* of later temple halls). The other is a simple masonry shrine using dressed stone to enclose the sanctum, as if it were a cave.6

Early in the eight century A.D., at the site of Menal, between Chittor and Bundi, two shrines (later made into a “triple” shrine by the insertion of an additional sanctum between them) can also demonstrate some of the complexities in seeking a definition of style in this region (fig. 2). Essentially similar in ornament and iconography, these structures show clear differences in how proportions have been applied to their ground plans and in their interpretation of wall moldings. One subshrine pulls in the lowermost lip (*khura*) of these moldings, for example, in order to keep it within the plumbline (fig. 2); by doing so, both this temple and its central offsets, governed by the underlying grid, are slightly broadened.7

Two sculptures of Naṭeśa (Siva as Lord of Dance) that are placed in the central back niches of these shrines also seem to show what some might call archaic and advanced conventions, though both are of the same period (figs. 3, 4). Such variant conventions have, in part, regional rather than chronological implications, although they are met with, in this instance, on contemporaneous shrines that stand side by side. My conclusion, in the essay on what I called “Mālava style” in the *Encyclopaedia of Indian Temple Architecture*, was that “one favours a sculptural style allied to that of Āmrōl or of Osiān’s Sūrya temple no. 1” (fig. 3) and that “the other has sculptures whose grace and dynamism suggest a connection with the few fragments that we have from ancient Ujjayini and a source for images at Barōli a century and a half later” (fig. 4).8

Two later “medieval” temples in the town of Jhalrapatan, near the Chandrabhaga stream on which the earlier holy spot (*tirtha*) was located, also reflect the diversity of traditions characterizing the Uparāmāla region over a number of centuries. One is a Jaina temple, dated ca. 700–725 (fig. 5).