

The Gupta Temple at Behti: A New Find

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The town of Chanderi in Madhya Pradesh was an important centre under the Sultans of Mandu in the fifteenth century. In the course of conducting a study of the town with a view to developing a coordinated conservation plan, we surveyed historic places in the neighbourhood including the temple sites of the Pratihāras and other medieval dynasties. During the 2007 field-season our attention was drawn to a building at a place called Beḥṭi in the hinterland of Chanderi by Muzaffar Ahmad Khan. He had visited the spot in the 1990s

and noted the building in his book *Candery: Itihāsa aur Virāsat*.¹ Based on his comments, and with his enthusiastic support and that of others in Chanderi, we decided to visit the location. The result was the discovery of a reasonably well-preserved temple of the Gupta period. The purpose of the present notice is to bring this important find to the attention of scholars.

Historians of India need little introduction to the Gupta period and its architecture. Temple building in stone



1. *Beḥṭi Maṭh* (District Ashoknagar, MP). General view of the temple from the east.



2. *Behṭi Maṭh (District Ashoknagar, MP). West side, end of the parapet wall at the entrance to the temple compound.*



3. *Behṭi Maṭh (District Ashoknagar, MP). Platform with makara-headed spout.*

was begun on a large scale at this time and image worship – as we know it from modern practice – was inaugurated.² As a consequence, considerable scholarly effort has been devoted to locating and studying Gupta-period temples, the specific focus on Gupta architecture going back to Alexander Cunningham, founder of the Archaeological Survey of India. Although Cunningham worked extensively in central India and made an effort to locate all Gupta temples there,

the building at Behṭi escaped his attention. Subsequent scholars also missed the site, a remarkable development given its proximity to Deogarh. The lack of attention may be put down to the fact that there are neither inscriptions nor monumental sculptures at Behṭi. Although the present authors have found several ruined Gupta buildings in the Vidiśā region, and numerous architectural pieces indicating the presence of others, the Vāmana temple at Maṛhiā was the last standing Gupta monument to be located. The chronicle of this discovery, and the importance of new finds for our understanding of temple architecture, have been given by Pramod Chandra, obviating the need for an outline.³ Here it is sufficient to say that well-preserved Gupta-period temples are extremely rare, there being less than ten such monuments in north India. The building at Behṭi thus adds significantly to the architectural corpus of the fifth century.

Behṭi is a small village of recent origin about 20km south-east of Chanderi. Three kilometres from the village – in a completely isolated spot – is the building known as Behṭi Maṭh. It is situated at N 24° 36' 38.0" and E 78° 12' 05.7". The temple was constructed on raised ground at the foot of a long low plateau. A short distance away is a seasonal stream which flows in a north-easterly direction toward the river Betwā. The Betwā itself is about 10km east of Behṭi Maṭh. The famous temple at Deogarh, also on the Betwā, is located upstream at a distance of 20km. In the early 1980s a large dam was completed on the Betwā, so the river near Behṭi has become part of a massive modern lake. Fortunately the temple-site is sufficiently distant from these developments to have remained unaffected.

Behṭi Maṭh is a large square structure orientated toward the east (Fig. 1). It is built on a moulded platform, the parapet wall of which is well preserved. The parapet is semi-circular in profile with chamfered faces (Fig. 2). Parapet fragments of exactly this design were found at Deogarh but not *in situ*. The walkway behind the parapet was drained by *makara*-headed spouts, one of which is in its original position (Fig. 3). Similar spouts were found in the ruins at Deogarh, but again with no clear context. The parapet runs around the temple on three sides. On the west, in the middle, the walls turn at right angles to create an opening. This was evidently the main entrance. The exact nature of this entrance is unclear as some of the stones have been removed by stone cutters. It seems likely, however, that the parapet walls terminated in two large *gavākṣa*-s (Fig. 2).

The walls of the temple are made of carefully-cut ashlar and are devoid of decoration. The mouldings are equally simple: two courses at the bottom with a square profile and a single curved moulding above. The entablature consists of roll cornices with a recess between. Entering the building via the entrance on the west, the visitor would have been confronted with these austere walls and proceeded around the building on the processional pathway. This configuration is not found in other Gupta-period buildings

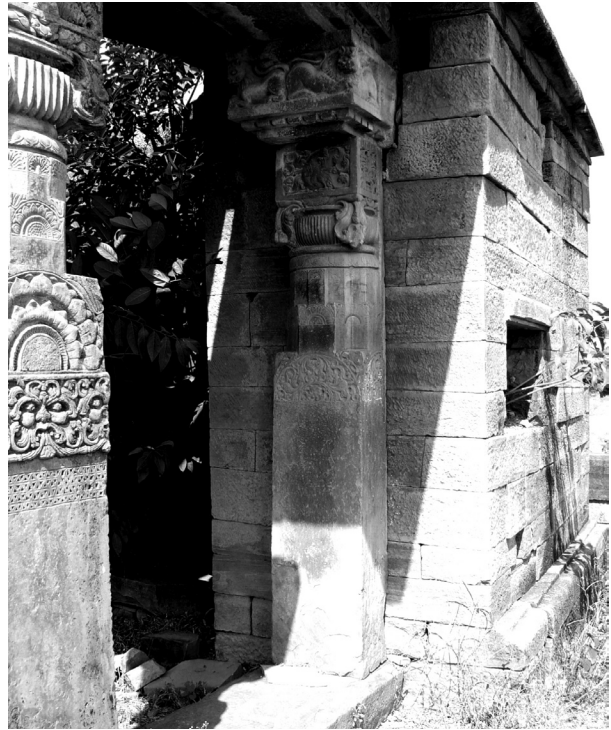
and appears to be unique. On the eastern side, the outer walls are pierced by a pillared opening. Only one of the pillared bays is standing at present (Fig. 4). It should be pointed out that the fabric of the entire structure is consistent and of one period.

The walls on each side of the eastern entrance are well preserved on one side. In this wall there is a niche for a sculpture, but the image is missing. Above, in the centre of the wall, is a small niche with an image, now much abraded. It does not admit of secure identification.

The interior of the building is divided in to nine pillared bays, some of which have collapsed. The arrangement is exactly like Cave 19 at Udayagiri. On this basis it is reasonable to suppose that the object of worship was placed in the central bay. It may have been a Śiva *līṅga* or an image of Viṣṇu; fragments of both were found a short distance to the east beside a modern shrine. The pillars of each bay are elaborately carved with lotus scrolls, peacocks, *kīrtimukha*, couples and other motifs characteristic of Gupta art. One example is illustrated here in Fig. 5. The carving on the pillars is in keeping with the style of mature Gupta sculpture and can be dated to the second-half of the fifth century. The lintels, mostly *in situ*, and also carved with lotus scrolls, lion-headed dentils and other motifs of the period. A few of the roof slabs are in position, as are some of the spouts. One part of the roof parapet is preserved (Fig. 6). This is especially noteworthy as features of this kind have not survived in other Gupta buildings. There is no sign of a superstructure and no architectural fragments of such a feature in the immediate vicinity.

The area in front of the building is littered with architectural parts. The exact configuration is unclear due to the accumulation of debris, however a large semicircular stone (now broken) can be seen. This was probably placed in front of the central bay on the temple's eastern side. There is no trace of a door frame, apart from a single fragment in a soft white sandstone carved with a chequer pattern and a vase with a long stem sprouting scrolls. In addition there is a badly eroded river goddess figure in the L-shaped format typical of the Gupta-period. This may have been part of the upper-portion of the door. The eastern side of the building was originally enclosed by a compound wall, the line of which is visible but covered with bushes and debris.

The archaeological, hydrological and geographical features of the site merit brief comment. The area around the temple is marked by fallen walls, indicating that the monument stood at the centre of large complex. On the southern side, about 15m distant, a slag heap indicates that metalworking took place there. On the bank of the stream to the north-east there are traces of a stepped *ghāṭ*. In the area between the temple and *ghāṭ* there are a number of broken sculptures and architectural fragments dating to the Gupta and post-Gupta periods. These show the site continued to be occupied for many centuries after the Guptas, a conclusion confirmed by the broken Hanumān



4. Beṭṭi Maṭh (District Ashoknagar, MP). Pillared bay on the eastern side of the temple



5. Beṭṭi Maṭh (District Ashoknagar, MP). Pillar detail.



6. *Behṛi Math (District Ashoknagar, MP). Roof parapet with cap stone.*



7. *Beḥṭi Maṭh (District Ashoknagar, MP). General view from the temple toward the east with tank in the middle ground.*

which lies beside the small modern shrine to the east. This probably dates to the Paramāra period. This modern shrine (just visible to the right in Fig. 7) was built beside an old temple, the foundation stones of which have been badly disturbed by treasure hunters.

To the east of the temple is a large square area surrounded by low earthen barrier, evidently an agricultural zone that was flooded for cultivation. Further east is a large tank. This was made by building a dam, orientated in an east-west direction (Fig. 7). Although broken and repaired in the centre, the outer edges of the dam, made of large blocks of stone, are well preserved. These show that the temple was set in an intensively developed network of fields and water features. In the further distance is a prominent conical mountain. The main temple is orientated directly toward this mountain and it seems likely that remains will be found there when it is investigated. To the immediate south of the conical mountain is a high plateau with sheer stone cliffs typical of central India. In some of these cliffs are rock-shelters and shrines.

The Archaeological Survey of India has been informed about the finds at Beḥṭi Maṭh and mechanisms are being pursued by the authorities to bring the temple under appropriate protection. The present authors intend to undertake further fieldwork at the site to document the building in full and record the wider religious and cultural landscape of Beḥṭi Maṭh. It should be emphasised that the temple has not been subject to the well-meaning but ill-conceived conservation found at Deogarh and other Gupta temple sites and that the neighbourhood has not been disturbed by modern development. Beḥṭi Maṭh thus offers an especially significant opportunity for understanding both Gupta architecture and the landscape context in which it was developed.

NOTES

- 1 Muzaffar Ahmad Khan, *Candery: Itihāsa aud Virāsat*, Candery, 2005, p. 152.
- 2 The origin of temple *pūjā* is dealt with in Willis, *The Archaeology of Ritual: Udayagiri and the Establishment of the Gods in Gupta India* (in press).
- 3 Pramod Chandra, "A Vāmana Temple at Maṛhiā and Some Reflections on Gupta Architecture", *Artibus Asiae* 32, 1970, pp. 125-45.