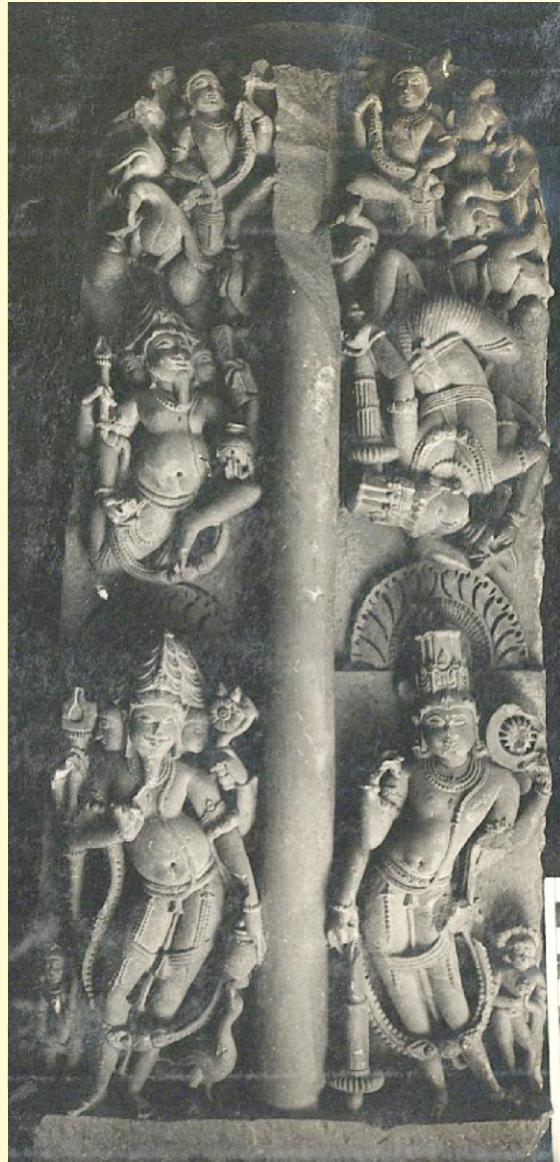




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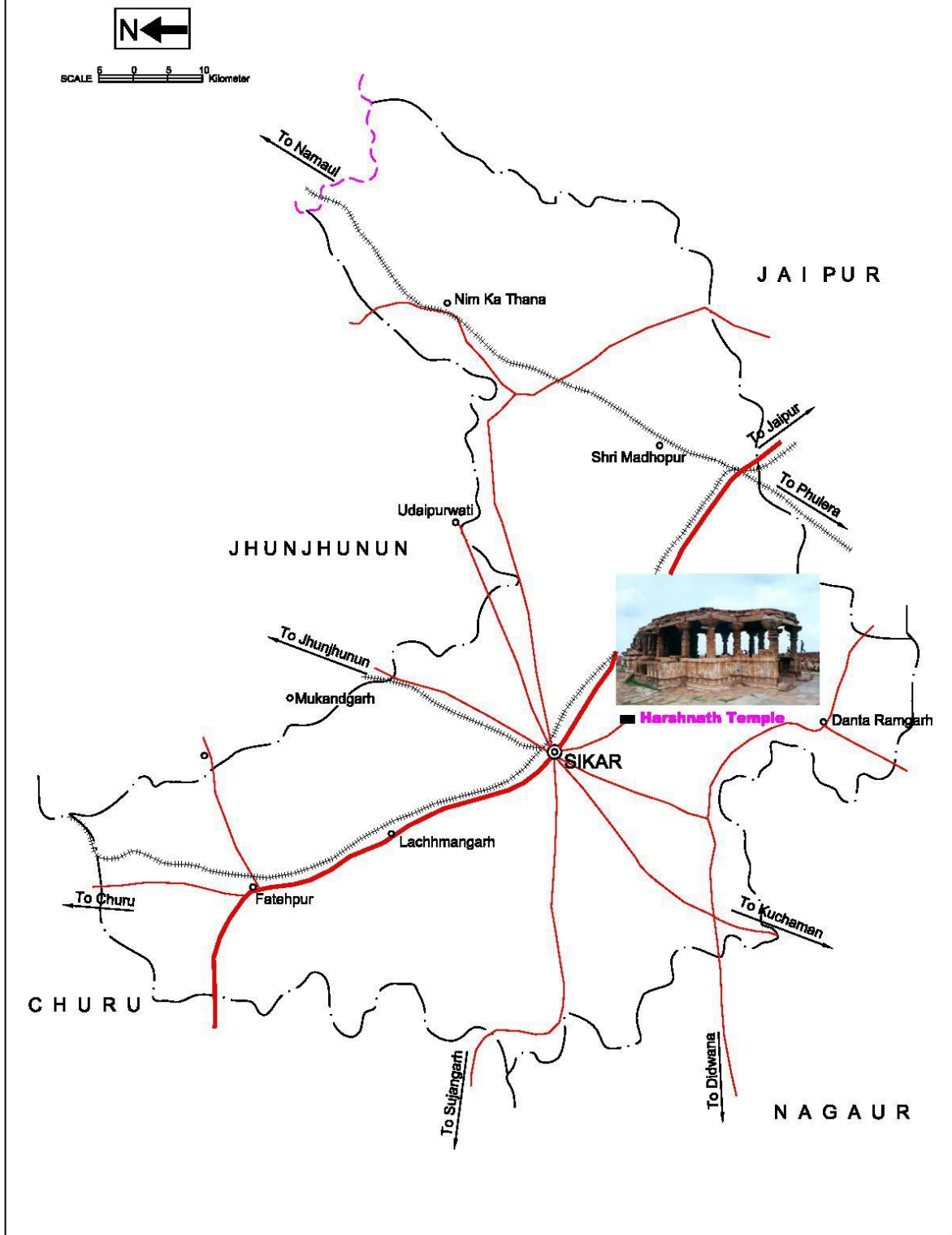
Harshnath Temple, Sikar The Abode of Siva



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Centrally Protected Monuments, Distt. Sikar



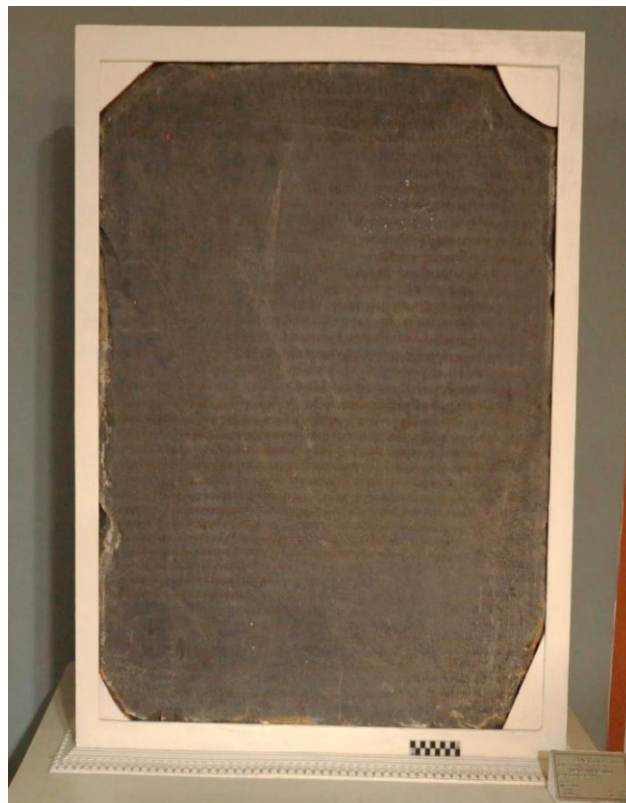
Location map of Harshnath Temple

Historical Background

Perched atop Harsha Hill, 11 kilometers south of Sikar in Rajasthan, the Harshnath Temple exemplifies the architectural and religious fervour of the Chahamana dynasty. This historical site, located in the region known as Anantagochara, is revered as the homeland of the Chauhans of Sakambhari. The temple was constructed in 973 CE by the Saiva ascetic Bhavarakta during the reign of King Vigraharaja II of the Chahamana dynasty. The Harshnath Stone Inscription found from the main temple and at present housed in the Government Museum in Sikar, provides information on the genealogy of Chahamanas and construction of the temple. The inscription mentions that the temple was constructed to replicate the abode of Bhagavana Siva, Kailasa. The temple was initiated to house the clan deity of the Chahamanas, revered as "Harsha." Over centuries, the temple endured destruction but continued to be a major pilgrimage site. Rao Shiv Singh of Sikar built an additional Siva temple in 1718 CE to complement the ancient site.

Folklore

According to local legend, the Harshnath Temple is associated with a wise sage named Harsha and his sister, Jina, who lived in the present day Churu district of Rajasthan. Their deep bond was tested when Harsha's marriage led to a dispute between Jina and his wife over his affections. In a test of his loyalty, Harsha first assisted his wife, prompting Jina to retreat to Kali-Sikhara hill in Sikar to worship Goddess Durga. A temple dedicated to Durga stands on this hill today. Harsha followed Jina and settled nearby, where he worshipped a *svayambhu* (self-manifested) Sivalinga, eventually becoming known as Harsha Bhairava.



Harshnath Stone Inscription housed in the Government Museum, Sikar

Historical and Archaeological Discovery

In 1834, Dr. G.E. Rankins and Sergeant E. Dean discovered a significant black stone slab at a tenth century Siva temple near Harsha village in Jaipur state. This slab, inscribed in 973 CE during the reign of King Vigraharaja II, details the history and patronage of the Chahamana (Chauhan) dynasty and is currently housed in the Government Museum, Sikar. The inscription highlights contributions to the Harshnath Temple, which was venerated as the family deity's shrine. Various rulers and patrons, including local merchants and Saiva-Pasupata ascetics, supported the temple.

Scholarly debates exist regarding the temple's original patronage. Bhandarkar attributes the temple's construction to Guvaka I in the 9th century, while Krishna Deva and Michael W. Meister credit the ascetic Allata in 956 CE, with subsequent additions by his disciple Bhavadyota. King Simharaja is noted for renovating the temple and granting lands, further enhancing its significance.

Archaeological evidence at the site reveals a complex of multiple temples, distinguished by their Brahmanical affiliations. Remains of various architectural elements and sculptures suggest that these temples were constructed over different periods, with some predating the Harshnath Temple. Among these is a semi-rock-cut temple located to the south of the Harshnath Temple, dedicated to Mahishasuramardini.

A total of fifty-two inscriptions has been found from the Harshnath Temple Complex. Two notable inscription which can be dated to tenth century are housed in the Government Museum, Sikar. Most of the inscriptions are of pilgrims and date to twentieth century. A dozen of inscription remain untranslated due to their present condition.



Archival image of the Harshnath Temple Complex from the year 1905-1910

In 1718 CE, Rao Shiv Singh, a local chieftain, constructed a new Siva Temple adjacent to the historic Harshnath Temple, continuing the tradition of Saiva worship on Harsha Hill. The Harshnath Temple Complex has suffered considerable damage over the centuries, majorly due to its destruction at the hands of Islamic iconoclasts and then natural factors like wind, rain, human vandalism etc. Despite evidence of multiple temples at the site, including some that predate the Harshnath Temple, there is no mention of these earlier structures in the Harsha inscription or other historical records.



Archival image of the Harshnath Temple from the year 1942-1943

Harshnath Temple (10th Century CE)

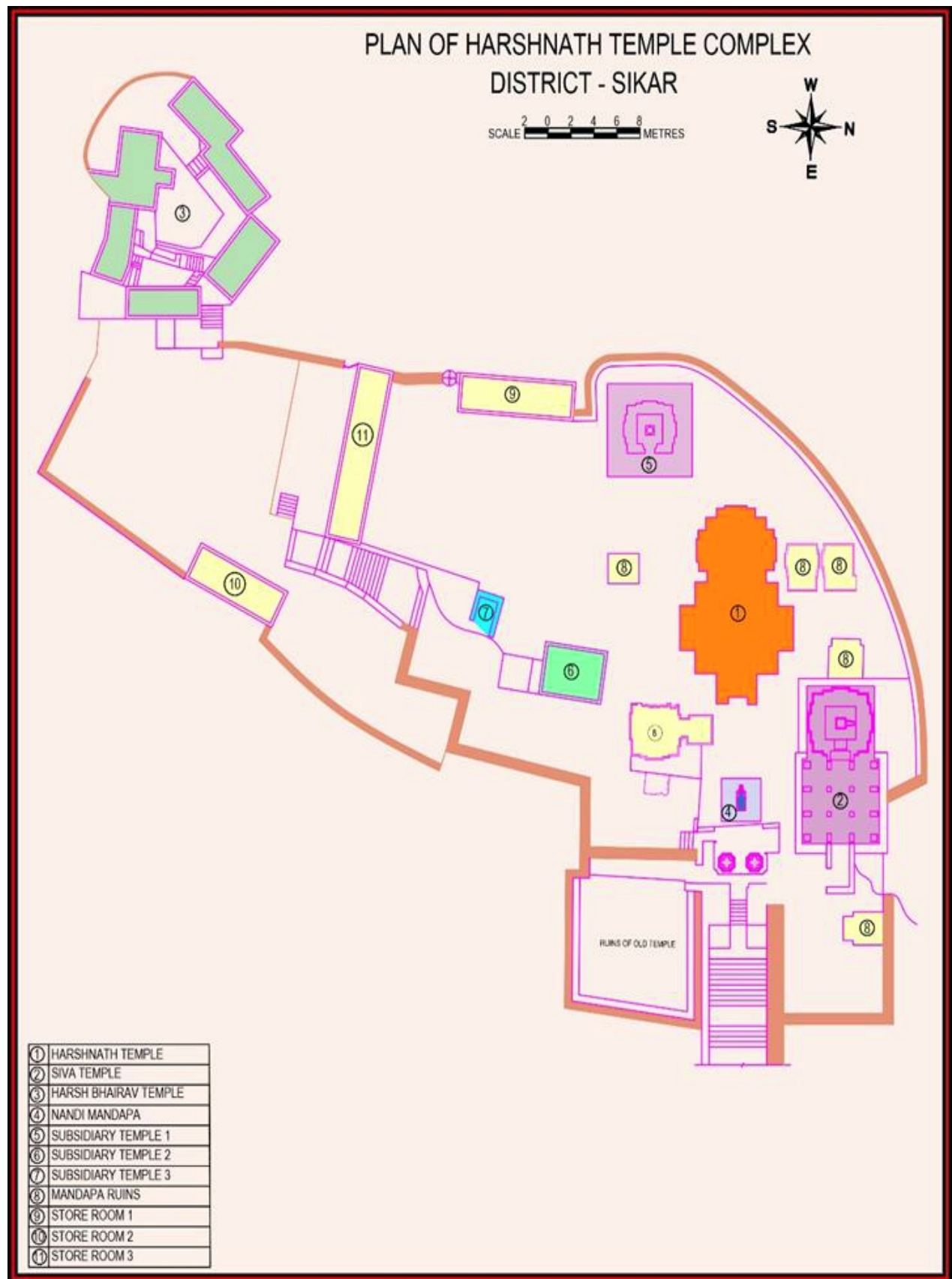
Dedicated to Bhagavana Siva, this east-facing temple follows a *pancharatha* plan with a sanctum (*garbhagriha*), ambulatory (*pradakshina-patha*), vestibule (*antarala*), and pillared hall (*mandapa*). Originally, it featured a *torana* entrance adorned with intricate carvings, though now only fragments survive. The temple contains a unique sculpture of Parvati engaged in *panchagnitapasa*, attended by sixteen forms of the goddess. The sanctum is framed by elaborately carved pilasters, and the presence of *kakshasana* railings indicates an organised seating arrangement for rituals.



Archival image of the Siva Temple from the year 1942-1943.

Siva Temple (1718 CE)

Constructed by Rao Shiv Singh (as per the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*), this temple stands on the ruins of an older structure. While dedicated to Siva, it lacks the architectural grandeur of the original Harshnath Temple but remains an important religious site.



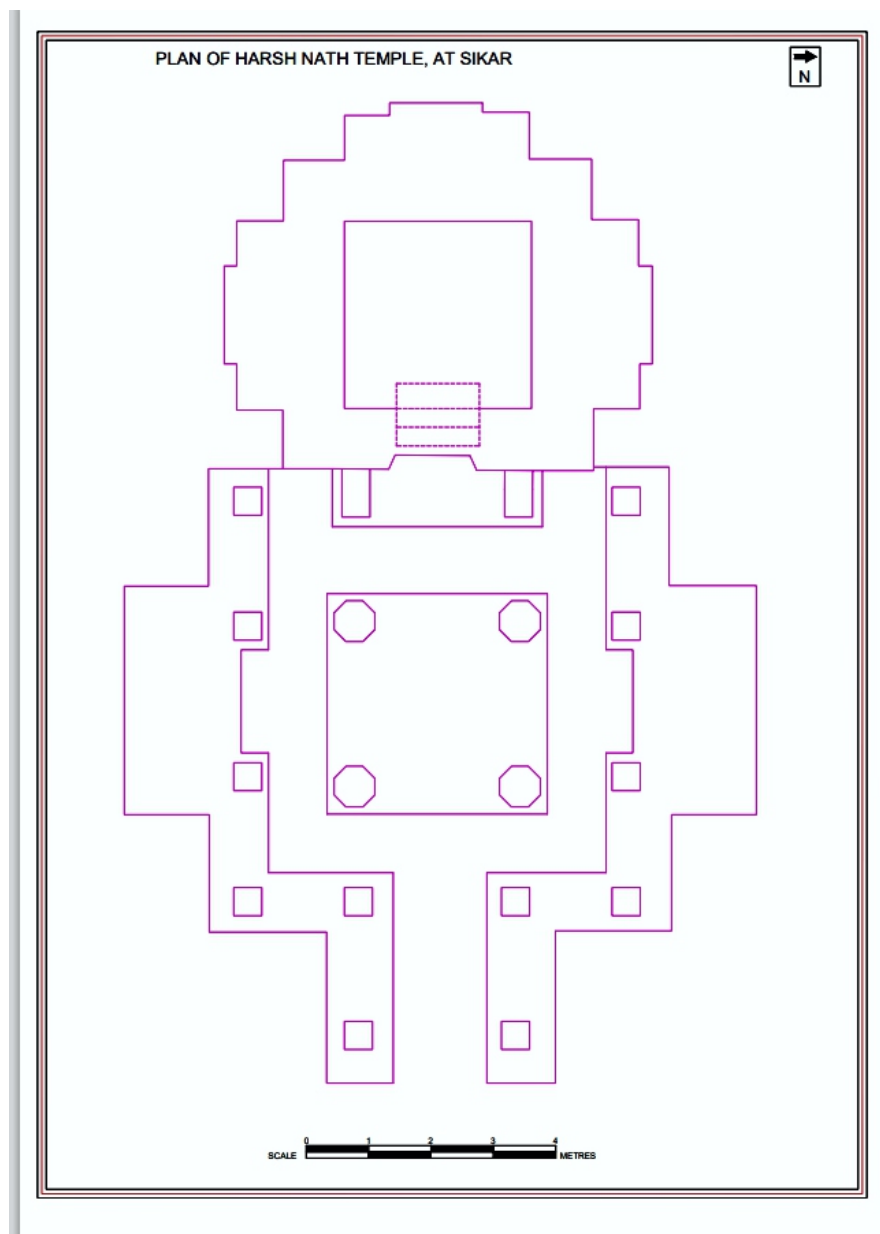
Plan of Harshnath Temple Complex

Harsha Bhairava Shrine (Un-dateable, Possibly Early Medieval)

Located south-west of Harshnath Temple, this shrine is dedicated to Bhairava, a fierce form of Siva. Integrated into a natural cave, it contains reused architectural elements from older temples. The shrine exhibits Tantric undertones, with *Yogini* and *Matrika* sculptures.

Architectural Element

The Harshnath temple complex represents an important architectural and religious site in Rajasthan, with remains dating from the tenth to the eighteenth centuries CE. The approach to the complex includes a long staircase leading to the remains of columned structures, followed by a raised terrace housing an old marble image of Nandi. Although the pavilion that once sheltered the Nandi has not survived beyond its plinth, its remnants suggest an originally elaborate architectural setting.



Plan of Harshnath Temple

The complex contains several shrines dating from the tenth to eleventh centuries, dedicated to different deities. Unlike the formal *panchayatana* layout, the shrines at Harshnath are arranged in a less symmetrical manner. The principal shrine, dedicated to Bhagavana Siva, was constructed in the tenth century and faces east, adhering to traditional auspicious orientation. The temple consists of a *mulaprasada* with a *tri-anga* design and is accompanied by a *rangamandapa* with an interior ritual platform. Notably, the structure rests on a single plinth course rather than a fully developed *pitha*, which is unusual for temples of this period.

Dating approximately to 956–973 CE, the Harshnath (Mahadeva) Temple, though now roofless and partially ruined, remains a significant example of early medieval temple architecture. Originally, it comprised a sanctum with an ambulatory, a vestibule, and a pillared hall with lateral transepts containing subsidiary shrines. A porch likely existed, and the temple once featured an ornate *torana* framing the sanctum entrance. The temple follows a *pancharatha* plan with five projections and a central *bhadra* supported by carved pilasters. Interior features include *kakshasana* railings and a Nandi *mandapa* aligned with the central Nandi image, possibly the same one referenced in the Harshanatha Prasasti.

The *mandapa* of the main temple features two distinct types of intricately carved pillars. Both have an octagonal base with a sixteen-faceted central shaft, divided into multiple sections with decorative foliage, sculptural bands, and friezes. The carvings include various figures, musicians, deities, and attendants arranged in niches, along with ornamental motifs.



Mandapa Pillars

The upper sections of one time are adorned with additional sculptural elements, including figures of *apsaras* engaged in different activities and Parvati in penance depicted alternatively. Some pillars also feature inscriptions engraved at the base, adding to their historical significance.

Art and Sculptural Elements

The Harshnath Temple complex features a wealth of sculptural artistry, reflecting the architectural brilliance and religious devotion of its era. The various sculptural elements within the temple complex include depictions of deities, divine attendants, and intricate narrative reliefs.

Sculptures within the Main Temple

- **Main Sivalinga**

The Chaturmukha Sivalinga, set on a square-shaped *yonipitha*, is positioned in the *garbhagriha* with its yoni *panavattam* facing north. The four faces—Sadyojata, Tatpurusha, Vamadeva, and Aghora—are heavily mutilated, while the fifth, Isana, is represented at the top of the Linga.



Sivalinga

- **Parvati**

This figure represents a four-armed female deity standing on her *vahana*, an iguana, adorned with elaborate drapery and some ornaments, including *kanganas*, *bajubandha*, *katisutra*, *nupuras*, *mekhala*, *kundalas*, a headband, and a *mala* signifying her divine status. Her hair is styled in a *jatamukuta*, and she holds a *padma* in both hands. On right *padma*, Siva is seated in *padmasana*, holding a *bilvaphala* and snake, while on the left flower, Ganesa sits in *padmasana*, holding a *parasu* and a *modakapatra*. Below the deity, four female attendants, two on each side, hold *padma*, while two kneeling figures are carved in *namaskara mudra*. The panel behind the deity is framed with four fires, two on either side, symbolising her penance, depicting Godhasana Gauri performing *panchagni tapas*.



Parvati in penance “panchagni tapas”

- ## Sixteen Divine Forms

Sixteen intricately carved sculptures adorn the *garbhagriha* surrounding the Godhasana Gauri in the main temple, each depicting a female figure standing gracefully in *tribhanga mudra* atop a lotus pedestal. Richly adorned with intricate drapery that accentuates their waistline.



Sixteen Divine Forms of Parvati

The figures wear *kanganas*, *bajubandhas*, *katisutra*, *nupuras*, *mekhala*, and *kundalas*. Their elegantly styled buns enhance their regal appearances. The sculptures hold various objects, including a *vina*, *chauri*, *mala*, flower basket, conch, and *mashal*, while one figure appears to be singing. However, some figures have broken arms, making it difficult to identify the original objects they once held. These sculptures in all probability represent the sixteen forms of Parvati.

Harshnath temple, dedicated to Siva, places strong emphasis on Parvati's penance and her eventual marriage to Siva. Inside the *garbhagriha*, sixteen female sculptures flank a central image of

Parvati in austerity. Although they resemble *Alasyakanya* figures in posture and ornamentation, their placement within the sanctum suggests a sacred rather than decorative function.

In Odishan iconography, Parvati in penance may be accompanied by attendant figures, sometimes depicted as miniature duplicates of the goddess herself. The *Siva Purana* describes Parvati performing sixteen ritual offerings, while the *Skanda Purana* mentions her being accompanied by companions during her austerities. These textual references support the interpretation that the sixteen figures at Harshnath may represent forms of Parvati or her attendants engaged in devotional service.



Sixteen Divine Forms of Parvati

- ***Dikpalas***

The northern and southern walls of the temple feature the intricately carved figures of four *Dikpalas*—Agni, Indra, Isana, and Kubera—positioned in their designated cardinal directions. Each deity is enshrined within an ornately decorated niche and depicted alongside their respective *vahanas*. Due to the temple's ruined state, the remaining *Dikpalas* no longer survive.



Isana



Indra



Agni



Kubera

- **Secular Figures**

The figures flanking the *Dikpalas* on the northern and southern walls of the temple depict elegantly adorned female figures standing in *tribhanga* on lotus pedestals. Richly ornamented with multiple necklaces, large earrings, a *mekhala*, *keyuras*, *nupuras*, *kanganas*, a choker, and *urudama*, they hold various objects, including a kohl stick, *vina*, flute, and *chauri*, while some are depicted tying an anklet or waistband.



Surasundari

Female sculptures are a significant component of temple iconography, represented as divine, semi-divine, and ornamental figures. At Harshnath temple, these figures appear conventional at first glance. The earliest textual reference to such female figures appears in the *Silpa Prakasa*, an eighth-century Odishan treatise on temple architecture. It describes the *Alasyakanya* as the sixteen types of decorative female figures meant to enhance the aesthetic and spiritual vitality of temples.

- **Nandi**

In front of the temple stands a marble sculpture comprising a fodder bowl and a seated Nandi. Nandi, depicted with closed eyes, truncated cylindrical horns, a large hump, and a prominent dewlap, is adorned with a *mala* featuring bells and petal motifs, along with a chain-like band on its neck and a bridle on its face.



Nandi

Sculptures within the Bhairava Temple

- ***Matrika* Figures**

The Bhairava Temple houses several *Matrika* figures, many of which are broken or partially embedded in the floor. These predominantly four-armed deities, likely seated in *lalitasana*, are adorned with large *kundalas*, *bajubandha*, *kanganas*, *mekhala*, and a *mukutasutra*, with a partially visible halo behind them. While most remain unidentified, notable figures include Chamunda, Mahishasuramardini, and a rare depiction of Vinayaki.



Chamunda



Vinayaki



Mahishasuramardini

The temple is dedicated to Bhairava but the now broken idol of Mahishasuramardini is worshiped as the central deity next to Bhairava, the slayed demon Mahishasura depicted at the broken section is kept in the same temple. The temple could have been previously dedicated to *matrikas*, with Mahishasuramardini reigning as the central deity.



Karttikeya

Sculptures within the Temple Complex

This unique sculpture depicts a six-headed, ten-armed deity, partially embedded in the ground below the torso. The right-side face resembles a lion, while the front face features a *kiritamukuta* and the others a *jatamukuta*. The deity is adorned with *kundalas*, *yajnopavita*, *sarpamala*, *katibandha*, and a *srivatsa* on the chest. Though the six heads suggest Karttikeya, the complete identification remains uncertain due to damage. Locally, it was considered as a combined form of five Pandava brothers along with Vasudeva but it should be identified either as Karttikeya or Bhairava only.

The Sculptural Panels of Harshnath Temple

The sculptural panels at Harshnath temple have been relocated and repositioned in various parts of the site; these panels can be broadly categorised into three distinct groups.

- **Depictions of Musicians and Dancers:**

They include smaller panels likely from the *mandapa* base walls and fragments of larger compositions, though their original placements remain uncertain. Ceiling members can be clearly linked to the main temple, while other panels have ambiguous provenance.



- **Depictions of Social Life:**

The panels at Harshnath Temple provide insight into the social and ritual life of the period through varied depictions, including royal or warrior couples bearing weapons, making offerings, or engaged in daily activities. Other scenes portray soldiers conducting a purchase, women performing domestic chores, *samskara* ceremonies, battle scenes, and a *Vaidya*-like sage examining a pregnant woman. Warrior panels are sometimes intermingled with those of musicians and dancers, suggesting thematic complexity.



The moulding niche depicting a sage examining a pregnant woman



The panel depicting samskara ceremony



The panel depicting mithuna, warriors, and other narratives

Although *mithuna* figures are present, they are less elaborate and sensual than those at Khajuraho or Odisha, which is notable given the Sakti affiliation of the site. Erotic depictions are limited to a few ceiling members and a single sculpture without clear tantric association.

- **Depictions of Mythological Narratives at Harshnath Temple**

The sculptural panels at Harshnath Temple offer a vivid portrayal of various mythological narratives, particularly those associated with Krishna and Siva, which are integral to the temple's iconographic program. Among these, the Krishna-*lila* scenes are particularly noteworthy. These panels include depictions of key episodes from Krishna's life, such as what appears to be the birth of Krishna and the iconic scene of Krishna stealing butter from pots, an episode that resonates deeply within the popular imagination of Krishna's childhood exploits.



Frieze depicting Krishna-lila



Frieze depicting Krishna killing Kesin

A particularly significant panel, now affixed to the ceiling of the *garbhagriha* (sanctum sanctorum) of the main Harsha temple, has suffered considerable damage. This panel portrays Indra, the king of gods, enthroned on his elephant Airavata, holding his thunderbolt weapon *vajra* in his left hand, and accompanied by his charioteer Matali and a group of *apsaras*.



Frieze depicting Indra's procession during Siva-vivaha

An alternative interpretation of this panel posits that it may depict the marriage procession of Siva and Parvati, a significant event attended by various deities, including Indra.

Another notable panel features a four-armed Siva seated with Parvati, engaged in the game of *chausara*. This depiction further confirms the idea of the builder of the temple to impart it an aura of Sivaloka.



Frieze depicting Siva and Parvati playing chausara while the musicians surround them

Representation of the Male Divinity

- **Siva**

As the principal deity of the main Harsha Temple, Siva is prominently represented across door jambs, panels, and lintels, reflecting the temple's strong Saivite affiliation. His forms include Uma-Mahesvara, Bhairava, and possibly Lakulisa, aligning with the Pashupata sect mentioned in inscriptions. Fragments of Siva seated on Nandi and multiple *ganas* further reinforce Saivite imagery. Two Sivalingas, including a Chaturmukha linga in the garbhagriha and another in the mandapa, affirm the centrality of Siva worship. Depictions of Bhairava, possibly five- or six-faced, and the Andhakasura-vadha episode highlight Siva's fierce and protective aspects.



Siva depicted in a padmasana holding his ayudhas



Siva slaying the demon Andhakasura



Lakulisa - Siva



Frieze depicting Siva in his Natesa form surrounded by musical procession

- **Vishnu**

Vishnu holds significant presence within the complex. A prominent lintel in the main temple and others from the Vishnu temple emphasises his stature. Doorjamb depictions of Varaha and Narasimha, along with a detailed Dasavatara sculpture and Seshasayi Vishnu, demonstrate the importance of his incarnations. An early 8th-century Vaikuntha image, older than the Harsha temple inscriptions, underscores the antiquity and prominence of Vaishnavite worship at the site.



Seshasayi Vishnu with a Navagraha panel depicted crowning it



A Vishnu sculpture surrounded by parikaras on three sides depicting his Dasavataras

Brahma

Brahma appears less frequently, mainly on lintels, with only two independent sculptures. More commonly, he is depicted alongside his consorts, appearing three times in such contexts.



Brahma with his consort



Brahma depicted in a moudling, the red stone suggests this fragment did not belong to the main Harshnath Temple

- **Surya**

Surya is one of the prominent deities, depicted with the Asvini Kumaras, Danda, Pingala, and Aruna. An 8th-century Surya image predates the temple, and another elaborate sculpture, now in the Ajmer Museum, portrays him with Usha, Pratyusha, and attendants.



An 8th-century Surya depiction predating the Harshnath temple



The Surya sculpture similarly crafted as the Dasavatara Vishnu, housed in the Ajmer Museum

- **Composite Forms**

The temple complex includes composite deities reflecting its syncretic character. Sculptures combining Brahma, Vishnu, Siva, and Surya are found, including examples in the Sikar and Ajmer Museums. Vaikuntha composites emphasising Varaha and Narasimha. A Hari-Hara image further integrates Vaishnavite and Saivite elements.



Hari-Hara Sculpture



Sculpture depicting a syncretic idol of Brahma, Vishnu, Siva and Surya, housed in the Government Museum, Sikar



Lingodbhava

The sculpture represents the Lingodbhava episode, illustrating the manifestation of Siva as an infinite *linga* and the ensuing search by Brahma and Vishnu to find its limits. The narrative is arranged vertically, unfolding in multiple registers that depict different moments of the myth.

In the lower section, the linga emerges between Brahma and Vishnu, who are shown in a moment of contention regarding their supremacy. Brahma, depicted with multiple faces and four arms, stands to the left accompanied by his vahana, the swan, while Vishnu stands on the right with his attributes and his vahana Garuda. Their placement on either side of the linga establishes the central axis of the composition and emphasises the divine manifestation of Siva.

The middle register illustrates their search for the origin and end of the linga. Brahma is shown ascending in an attempt to locate the summit, while Vishnu descends in search of its base. Brahma holds a *ketaki* flower, alluding to the episode in which he falsely claimed to have reached the top of the pillar. Vishnu's downward movement conveys his attempt to trace the foundation of the endless column. At the top, the *linga* is flanked by two *maladhari ganas*, attendants of Siva, while birds and minor motifs enhance the celestial setting. The composition visually conveys the central message of the Lingodbhava myth: that the divine nature of Siva is infinite and beyond the comprehension of other deities.



- **Ganesa**

Ganesa is widely represented, mainly in *ekdanta* form and sometimes with his consort. He appears on door jambs, *Navagraha* panels, and mouldings, often associated with Siva through serpent imagery.



- **Karttikeya**

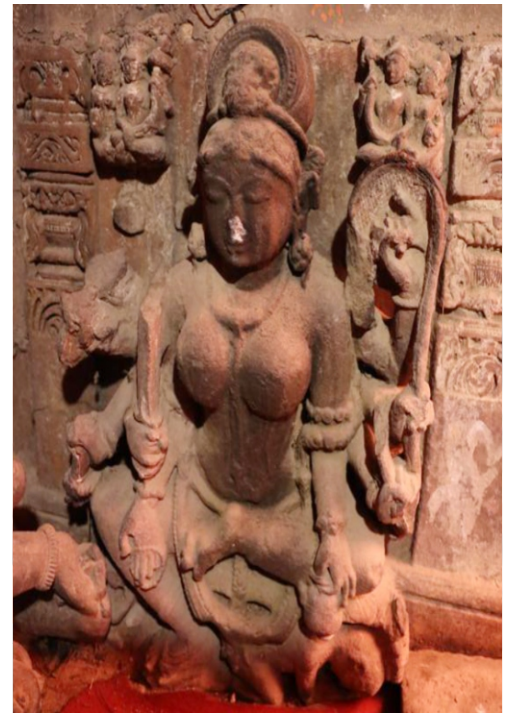
Karttikeya appears on a *torana* and in a three-faced sculpture holding a sword, accompanied by his peacock and rooster symbols.

- **Representation of Sakti**

Sakti worship is prominently reflected in the iconography of Harshnath Temple, where a significant number of sculptures have been identified as Yoginis by scholars, alongside other depictions of goddesses that do not fit the Yogini classification.

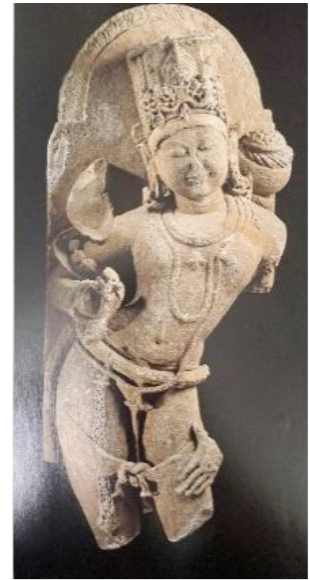
The sculptures identified as Yoginis at Harshnath share attributes with those found in other Yogini temples, such as the presence of skull cups, weapons, and similar iconographic features observed at the Chaunsath Yogini Temple and the Kamakhya Temple. However, the absence of a circular temple complex, Harshnath's role as a Yogini centre is not definitive. Instead, the site likely represents a broader Siva-Sakti worship tradition.





The Secular Figures

Several sculptures from Harshnath Temple remain unidentified and are no longer in their original locations. Most depict standing human figures holding bowls, weapons, or unidentified objects. A female figure now placed in the *garbhagriha* holds a bowl, and a stylistically similar male figure in the Sikar Museum holds one as well. Their resemblance suggests they may represent a royal couple or donor pair. Another sculpture of a bearded man, possibly once holding a staff, appears to represent a sage.



The colossal sculptures which were identified as the Pandava Brothers with Draupadi

The Harshnath site, despite its ruinous state and the absence of many structural and decorative elements, retains its historical and cultural significance as a prominent centre of worship. The Harsha Stone Inscription provides insight into the construction of the principal Harsha Temple as well as the community's involvement in its creation; however, it represents only a glimpse into the extensive and complex history of the site. The Harshnath Temple showcases intricate styling and craftsmanship which, in its quality and detail, equals the celebrated artistry of medieval India. The remarkable ornamentation, detailed hairstyles, and refined iconographic elements demonstrate the skill and artistic dedication invested in the temple's creation and convey a sense of the grandeur it once embodied.

The iconography present at Harshnath hints at a wide array of deities from the Hindu pantheon. Nonetheless, the exact number of shrines or temples and whether they coexisted or were established during different periods remain uncertain. The primary Harsha Stone Inscription does not explicitly refer to any additional shrines; however, D.R. Bhandarkar suggests that it might allude to the construction of

two temples: one atop the hill, revered as the main Harsha Temple, and another at its base. If Bhandarkar's interpretation is accurate, the second temple might correspond to the Jina Mata Temple, a conclusion that aligns with local traditions about Harsha and Jina. However, the lack of corroborating references from other scholars leaves this interpretation open to question.

In assessing the number of original shrines or temples, the presence and count of *dikpalas* (directional guardians) offer a potential clue. Typically, each temple includes one complete set of *dikpalas*; therefore, multiple appearances of *dikpalas* suggest the presence of multiple temples. Agni, the guardian of the south-east direction, appears the greatest number of times, suggesting the presence of at least nine shrines or temples. However, no single complete set of *dikpalas* has been found, making it challenging to pair and attribute these figures conclusively. The site also presents a mix of architectural elements and motifs on its pillars and other structures which appear stylistically consistent, suggesting that these elements may have belonged to a single cohesive structure. Yet, the widespread loss and relocation of architectural members from the site complicates such analysis.

Following the desecration of the temple, several of its architectural components were transferred to the "Mahamandir" (Museum), Sikar by the senior officer A. W. T. Webb (Mishra 1999: 21–22). Unfortunately, the museum was later destroyed, and the whereabouts of some architectural members remain unknown. Although the museum at present includes pieces from the original "Harshagiri" collection, there is lingering uncertainty regarding their origins. The loss of these architectural members has left significant gaps in our understanding of the site's original structure, iconography, and religious significance.

The structural remains at Harshnath, as presented in the site map, suggest the presence of multiple constructions; however, most of these are too small to be considered shrines, let alone fully developed temples. Some areas that may have served as temple foundations are currently concealed or partially buried, further complicating efforts to assess the site's original layout. Notably, a medieval Siva temple located north of the main Harsha Temple appears to be constructed on the foundation of an earlier structure. Portions of this original foundation protrude visibly from the left and back ends of the present Siva temple, providing tangible evidence of the site's layered history.

The sculptural remains at the site present a distinct and extensive representation of Matrikas and Yoginis, indicating a strong association with the Yogini tradition. More than thirty sculptures have been identified as belonging to this sect, demonstrating a well-established presence of Yogini worship in the region. Several of these sculptures are affixed within the Bhairava temple, where the Yoginis are depicted in a seated posture. This suggests the possible existence of a Chausatha Yogini temple at the site. However, among the recovered fragments there are also partially broken sculptures portraying Yoginis in a standing position. This is significant because within a single Yogini temple the deities are usually depicted in a uniform posture, either seated or standing. The presence of both seated and standing Yogini figures strongly suggests the existence of two distinct Yogini temples at the site rather than a single structure.

In 1835, Sargent Dean provided a detailed account along with a map. In his observations he mentioned the presence of three additional temples, one dedicated to Ganesha and another to a Devi,

situated between Harsh village and the Harshnath Temple. Nearly two centuries later his account has proven to be remarkably accurate, as recent work confirms the existence of three temples within this ten-kilometre stretch. These newly identified temples contain architectural fragments that closely resemble those found at the Harshnath site. This similarity in design and construction suggests a historical and cultural connection between these structures, indicating that they may have been part of a larger temple complex or religious network in the region. It is possible that some of the sculptural remains, including the Yogini figures, originated from these temples rather than from a single Yogini shrine. The architectural layout and distribution of these remains, along with the iconographic details, indicate that the site was once an important centre for Yogini worship. Further archaeological investigation and study of the fragmentary sculptures may provide a clearer understanding of the original temple complex and its religious significance.

The origins of the Harshnath site remain uncertain; yet the presence of the cave currently revered as the Bhairava Temple hints that it may have been the hill's earliest shrine and remains the most revered spot of the entire hill for pilgrims today. The sacredness of the hill, possibly enhanced by the presence of a natural water source in ancient times, likely contributed to its longstanding reverence. The presence of a regularly flowing water stream at Harsha Hill, though small, is confirmed by the Harsha Inscription when it compares the stream with the sacred Ganges. On inquiry it was found that the stream flowed near the cave itself in the past until about six or seven decades ago, but it has since disappeared. It seems that naturally available or *svayambhu murtis* were worshipped here since time immemorial. While their original dedication is unknown, the Sakta sculptures now housed within the cave suggest that the site might have held importance for Sakta or Saiva-Sakta traditions. This sanctity persisted through the centuries and appears to have been amplified when the Chahamanas constructed a significant temple at the site.

The Chahamanas, who emerged as feudal lords in the vicinity of Harsha Hill, were likely well acquainted with the hill's sacred status. This may have influenced their decision to establish a major temple there to honour their clan deity. The temple's grandeur and intricate design reflect the Chahamanas' reverence for the site, which in turn reinforced its prominence as a religious centre.

There is also a plausible scenario in which the local community or the rulers established additional shrines and temples, possibly dedicated to Vaishnava deities or Surya, in recognition of their own devotional inclinations. This could have occurred over time due to the site's established sacredness. Alternatively, it is conceivable that temples affiliated with Surya might have predated the Chahamana construction, although the exact chronology remains unclear. Despite the lack of precise historical records, it is evident that the site's inherent sacredness ensured its continuous prominence and supported the development of what may have been a complex of temples and shrines. This enduring sanctity, which began long before recorded history, has preserved Harshnath's cultural significance and status as a sacred centre into the present day.

One significant yet often overlooked aspect of the Harshnath Temple is its architectural design, which serves as a deliberate replica of Mount Kailasa. The construction of this temple was motivated not only by the Chahamanas' affiliation with the site but also by its geographical features, including its status as the second highest peak in the Aravalli range of this region. The surrounding hills further enhance the

resemblance to Kailasa's natural placement, reinforcing the temple's association with this sacred mountain. The inscription associated with the temple reinforces this connection by associating it with Mount Meru, another pivotal axis mundi in Hindu cosmology. As noted in verse 12, the inscription beautifully captures the temple's grandeur:

"Glorious is this mansion of the holy Harshadeva which is charming with the expanse of its spacious chapels, embellished with eggs of gold, and pleasing like the sons of Pandu by reason of the courtyards which are formed by the flights of buildings along its sides. Surpassing in height the peak of Meru, it is beautified by an excellent porch at which a bull is skilfully carved and is endowed with manifold objects of enjoyment" (E.I. Vol. II, 1894: 116–130)."



View of Harshnath Temple Complex which depicts the essence of its comparison to Kailasa, an abode for the Harsha form of Siva which Chahamanas worshiped

Archival Photographs and the Question of Dispersed Heritage

Recent study of archival material has brought to light an important visual record of the Harshnath Temple site dating to first half of the twentieth century. These photographs document sculptures that were once preserved in the Sikar Museum and nearby collections, capturing a moment when many fragments remained locally accessible and in better condition than today. The images reveal that several sculptures recorded in this survey are now missing, while others have since entered collections in international museums. Their absence represents not only a physical loss but also a disruption in the archaeological and art-historical continuity of the Harshnath complex. Although archival photographs provide valuable secondary evidence, they cannot replace the material presence of the sculptures themselves.

The dispersal of these works across institutions in India and abroad has fragmented the integrity of Harshnath as a unified sacred and artistic landscape. Temple sculpture in the Indian tradition formed part of an integrated architectural and ritual programme; once removed from its original context, the relationships between imagery, space, and meaning are significantly altered. For a site like Harshnath,

where reconstruction of the original sculptural scheme is already difficult due to damage and relocation, the continued absence of these objects further limits scholarly understanding. Many sculptures that now reside in foreign museums should therefore be viewed not as isolated art objects but as components of a historically layered temple complex. Their return to India would allow them to be studied within their original cultural and architectural context and would contribute to restoring the integrity of the site. Repatriation would also strengthen regional heritage identity and reconnect the sculptures with the community and landscape to which they historically belonged. Since many of these images are documented in India from the Harshnath site (mostly housed in the Sikar Museum), there is a case for standing on high moral grounds for their collectors in the western museums by coming forward, accepting their possession as doubtful and offer these art objects forming part of a religious landscape of Harshnath site to the Government of India as part of their repatriation.



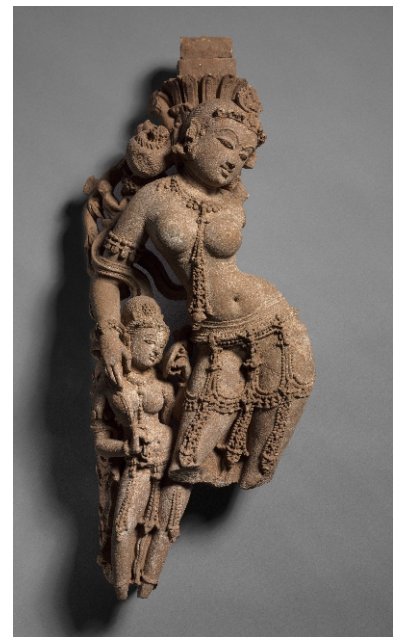
The top image depicts an Archival record of a missing frieze showcasing Vishnu over his vahana, Garuda. The stylisation of the frieze is similar to the bottom frieze depicting Uma-Mahesvara and their vahana, Nandi. The bottom frieze is currently housed in the Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, USA.



The archival image of a Vishnu sculpture similar to the Dasavatara sculpture as well as the Surya sculpture housed in the Ajmer Museum. The whereabouts of this sculpture at present are not known.



A side by side comparison of the Archival images (left) of colossal sculptures and the sculptures present in the Norton Simon Collection, USA (right). The sculptures were stolen from the Harshanath collection.



Sculptures from the Harshnath Temple Complex now present in various international museums, namely; Cleveland Museum of Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art, in USA and Musée Guimet collection, Paris, France.



Another image of a sculpture from the Norton Simon Collection, USA. The reported sculpture by Pratapaditya Pal, clubs it with the duo he called as “Pandava Brothers.” This sculpture which according to him depicts Bhima, is part of the Harshnath sculptural corpus.



The archival image depicts the sculpture similar to the ones currently housed in the Norton Simon Collection. The sculpture is untraceable at the moment. It appears quite similar to the images identified as Pandavas.

Temples Contemporary to Harshnath (Brief Overview)

The region around Harshnath preserves several early medieval temples that help contextualize its religious and cultural environment. Important among these are the sites of Raghunathgarh, Sakrai, Jina Mata Temple, and Khandela.

Raghunathgarh, located northeast of Sikar, contains a rebuilt but originally early temple of Mahadeva and an inscription dated V.S. 1150 referring to Chandela rule. Sculptural finds, including a marble Mahishasuramardini, indicate the site’s early medieval importance.

Sakrai is known for the Sakambhari (Sankaradevi) Temple, with inscriptions dated between the 7th and 10th centuries CE that record mandapa construction, renovations, and land grants. The discovery of a damaged Vaikuntha image at the nearby Varahi Mata shrine suggests the coexistence of Vaishnava and Shakta traditions and points to earlier temple destruction.

Khandela retains remains of several early shrines and an inscription of 807 CE recording the construction of a Siva–Parvati temple by a merchant patron. Sculptural fragments found in and around the town reflect the dispersal and reuse of medieval temple material.

Collectively, these temples demonstrate the active religious patronage, inscriptional activity, and architectural development in the region during the early medieval period, paralleling the cultural milieu of Harshnath.

Jina Mata Temple, situated at the foot of a hill, preserves an ancient sabhamandapa likely dating to the 10th century CE. A memorial stone dated V.S. 1029 (972 CE) and early sculptural fragments attest to its antiquity, although modern renovations have obscured much of the original structure.



Archival Image of Jina Mata Temple, ASI Jaipur Circle

Conservation Works

The Jaipur Circle of Archaeological Survey of India has undertaken a number of conservation works at Harshnath Temple site, particularly since 2022. Few of the important works are described below:



Before



After



Before



After



Before



After



Before



After



Before



After



Before



After



Before



After



Before



After



Before



After



Before



During

Construction of a sculpture shed at Harshnath (work in progress)



Temple sculptures and architectural fragments have been arranged in a store at the Harshnath site in proper order by the Jaipur Circle recently.

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