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Temple consecration rituals in ancient India: Text and archaeology

Ślaczka, A.A.

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Author: Ślaczka, A.A.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 General introduction

The principal aim of this book is to study three important construction rituals of the Hindu tradition: the laying of the first stones, the placing of the consecration deposit and the placing of the crowning bricks. These rituals are described in numerous Sanskrit texts on architecture and religion, which date from ca. 7th to 16th centuries AD.¹ It is therefore hardly surprising that the present study is based mainly on textual sources. The chief source is the *Kāśyapaśilpa*, a South Indian treatise on art and architecture and ritual, written in Sanskrit, usually dated 11th – 12th century AD. Three chapters from the *Kāśyapaśilpa*, which deal with the three construction rituals mentioned above, have been critically edited, translated and provided with a commentary (see Chapter 4). For this purpose, unpublished manuscripts of the *Kāśyapaśilpa* were collected in various Southern Indian libraries. In order to place the three chapters of the *Kāśyapaśilpa* in a broader context, the descriptions of the construction rituals given by cognate texts, some of them still unpublished, have also been studied (see Chapter 5).

The construction rites play an important role in Sanskrit texts on ritual and architecture. Nevertheless, this topic has thus far largely been neglected by scholars. This is particularly striking in view of the numerous publications, which have appeared on the outer appearance of temples, the technical aspects of temple building and temple worship. With the exception of Kramrisch (1946), whose interpretations should be treated with caution (see, for example, Chapter 6 note 12), there has never been an attempt to study the construction rituals as a whole and to explain their function and meaning.

For those who want to arrive at an understanding of the construction rituals, textual sources alone are not sufficient. The texts are mainly technical treatises, which provide only a very limited interpretation for the actions they describe. Moreover, for the questions about the relation between the textual data and practice the answer has to be sought outside the textual sources. Have rituals, such as those described by the *Kāśyapaśilpa* and the related works, ever been performed? And if so, were the rituals performed according to the textual prescriptions?

¹ The placing of the first stones is mentioned in a few earlier texts, for example in the 6th century AD *Bṛhat Saṃhitā* (BṛS 52.110, ed. Dvivedi; 53.112, ed. Bhat).

In order to answer this question, I began a search for possible traces of construction rituals in various fields: I looked for direct accounts that mentioned the performance of such rituals and browsed through archaeological reports and museum catalogues guided by the thought that since the construction rituals are described by a great number of Sanskrit texts, there should be plentiful traces of these ceremonies on the Indian subcontinent. The search for written accounts, however, did not prove very fruitful, at least not for the period in which the texts originated.² The study of archaeological remains, on the other hand, resulted in a mass of evidence and revealed a highly interesting pattern: there were very few material traces of construction rituals in India itself (as far as I could establish), while plenty of them were reported in other Asian countries. In fact, the search resulted in more than over two hundred archaeological remains, all most probably testimonies of building rituals, of which only around fifteen actually originate from India. The remaining two hundred were found in Sri Lanka, Nepal and in the countries of Southeast Asia: Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia. The majority of them date from the 8th to the 14th AD.³ Many of the archaeological remains correspond with the lists of objects that may be placed in a consecration deposit according to the Sanskrit texts.

The situation is thus that a group of texts is available which provide descriptions of a set of construction rituals. However, it is not sufficiently clear where (if ever) their systems were employed or in vogue. At the same time, a considerable number of archaeological remains pointing to construction rituals in a large geographical area are available, but the ideas that guided their installation are not directly evident. Bringing the two sets of data together unavoidably requires reflection on the relation between the different regions involved, especially India where the texts have originated, and the diverse places in South and Southeast Asia. It should also be noted that the extensive geographical area in which the search for the traces of construction rituals was conducted roughly corresponds with what Sheldon Pollock has recently called the ‘Sanskrit cosmopolis’, the “most complicated – and as a totality least studied – transregional cultural formation in the premodern world” (Pollock 1996: 197). This area, stretching from Pakistan to Vietnam and from Nepal to Indonesia, was the place where the political elite cultivated, or was familiar with, Sanskrit and Sanskrit texts as is testified by numerous Sanskrit inscriptions (*ibid.*, 197-198). The presence of varying but still remarkably similar construction rituals, which is evidenced by the archaeological finds, may be seen as an additional characterising

² The majority of the accounts written by witnesses of construction rituals concern the period from the end of the 19th century AD up to the present. The only exception is the Oriya manuscript *Baya Cakaḍā* dated 13th century AD (see Boner, Śarma and Das 1972 and Chapter 7.2).

³ The ‘consecration deposits boom’ happened in different periods in various regions. For the overview of the consecration deposits excavated in South and Southeast Asia, see Appendix IV.

feature of the ‘cosmopolis’, even if there are regional variations and continuities with rituals which precede the ‘cosmopolis’.⁴

An interesting feature is that while the textual sources are nearly all Hindu,⁵ the material traces of construction rituals were discovered at both Hindu and Buddhist sites. Another theme of the present book is thus the relationship between these two groups, the common elements and the differences. The discussion on this topic can be found in Chapter 7.4.

It must be stressed that just like the textual descriptions of the construction rituals, this wealth of archaeological (Hindu and Buddhist) material has also never been studied as an entity. The finds associated with building rituals have never been gathered and analysed as a group and the possible connection with the Sanskrit texts has hardly ever been suggested and certainly never examined.⁶ This is perhaps due to the fact that the majority of Sanskrit scholars do not study archaeological reports and very few archaeologists and cultural anthropologists working on Asia are actually familiar with Sanskrit, which demonstrates the importance of interdisciplinary study. Furthermore, a great deal of Sanskrit works on art and ritual has not been translated and many are still only extant in manuscript form. The archaeological data, on the other hand, are hidden either in very old reports in French or Dutch or in new ones, often written in the languages of Southeast Asia, which is yet another complicating factor in obtaining the necessary information. The precious few articles written on the subject (for instance O’Connor 1966, Lamb 1960, 1961) concentrate primarily on a particular archaeological find or area and are thus often not representative for a full range of material.

The second aim of this study is therefore to provide the reader with an as complete as possible description of archaeological remains that can be associated with the construction rituals. Hopefully, the gathered material may one day serve as a basis for future research in the areas of archaeology, temple architecture or ritual. Yet another goal is to bring these two sets of data – textual and archaeological – together in order to determine the relationship between the

⁴ The main period of the ‘cosmopolis’ is set at 300-1300 AD by Pollock (1996: 199). The only element, which might perhaps be interpreted as a reflection of an earlier tradition (e.g. the Vedic one) is the habit to place a figure of a tortoise in the foundation deposit. The placing of a living tortoise in the foundation is mentioned in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa VII, 5, 1, 1ff; VII, 4, 1, 15ff etc.

⁵ The only exception is the Mañjuśrīvāstuvīdyāśāstra, a Sanskrit text from Sri Lanka, mentioning construction rituals.

⁶ The possible connection with the Sanskrit sources was very briefly suggested by Dagens and Mitra, but always only in relation to specific finds and the idea was never further developed. See Dagens (1994: 121 note 1 and 3) about similarities of certain aspects of the foundation deposit described in the Mayamata 12 and the foundation deposits discovered in Southeast Asia, Mitra (1972) about a possible connection between the finds of the Nepalese Tarai and certain North Indian texts on architecture and Mitra (1981) about a possible connection between the Javanese ‘tortoise-slabs’ and the same texts. The majority of publications on Indian archaeology and architecture do not mention such a connection at all.

construction rituals of the texts and the practice of temple building as attested in archaeological finds. The analysis of the correspondence between the archaeological finds and the texts is found in Chapter 7. A complete list of material traces of construction rituals is given in Appendix IV.

One may well ask why, given the abundance of manuals, only one text, the *Kāśyapaśilpa*, was chosen as the main textual source for the present study. My first encounter with the *Kāśyapaśilpa*, as mentioned in the Preface, happened by chance. However, the chief reason for continuing my work on it was that the *Kāśyapaśilpa*, being mainly an art treatise, is also connected with the genre of the ritual texts of Śaiva orientation, the so-called Śaiva Āgamas (for this connection, see Chapter 2.1 – 2.2). In consequence, the *Kāśyapaśilpa* pays more attention to ritual than many other works, which are purely treatises on architecture, and yet it also describes many architectural details. Secondly, in the situation when art and ritual texts are not edited or not edited critically, it seemed necessary to choose at least one text and to study it deeply, on the basis of various manuscripts, not on the basis of the often very unsatisfactory editions. The *Kāśyapaśilpa*, for the reasons given above, seemed to be the right choice, which (hopefully) resulted in a better edition of the three chapters of this highly interesting work.

In addition, a few words should also be said about the three rituals that are the core of the present study. Two of them, the placing of the first bricks and the placing of the crowning bricks, are analogous. They form a kind of a bracket in which the physical construction of a temple is enclosed. The first marks the end of the foundation works and the beginning, after the technical and ceremonial preparation of the soil, of the actual construction of a building. The second indicates the successful accomplishment of the work. In short, both rituals consist of a ceremonial installation of (four, five or nine) bricks or stones in the prescribed location – either in the lower part of the temple or in the superstructure. In the middle of the bricks a small deposit of precious stones and other items is placed.

During the third ritual – the placing of the consecration deposit (*garbhanyāsa*) – a specially constructed box, usually divided into compartments, is placed either in the base of the building in the case of a deposit for an edifice, or in an indicated plot of land in the case of a deposit for a settlement.⁷ The box is filled with objects of symbolic value. They mainly include various ‘riches of the earth’, such as minerals, grains, metals, precious stones, herbs and earth taken from different locations. Specific objects are prescribed for temples of particular deities or for residences of people belonging to a particular caste. The auspicious date for the performance of the rituals has to be set by an astrologer.

The descriptions of these three rituals vary among the texts with respect to detail, but the core remains largely the same: they all consist of smaller units and

⁷ While the first bricks and the crowning bricks are installed exclusively for buildings, the consecration deposit (*garbha*) may also be installed for a settlement – a town or a village.

elements, some of which are confined only to a particular rite, while others might be employed on other occasions as well. The analysis of the structure of these three rituals on the basis of the Kāśyapaśilpa is given in Chapter 4.4. The descriptions of these rituals in other Sanskrit texts are dealt with in Chapter 5.

While the first two ceremonies are referred to in the textual sources by quite obvious terms like *prathameṣṭakā-nyāsa*, ‘the placing of the first bricks’ and *mūrdheṣṭakā-nyāsa*, ‘the placing of the crowning bricks’ (or ‘top bricks’) respectively, the third rite bears the curious name *garbhanyāsa*, which may be translated as ‘the placing of the embryo’. The word *garbha* in Sanskrit may mean ‘embryo’, ‘womb’ or ‘seed’, but also ‘the inside, interior of anything’ (Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary, pp. 349-350). In architecture it occurs, for example, in the technical term for the main temple chamber in which the image of the principal deity is housed, the *garbhagrha* (the ‘*garbha*-house’). The latter term was often, in my opinion misleadingly, translated as ‘womb-house’ (Kramrisch 1946: 162, Michell 1988: 62, Blurton 1992: 234; see the discussion in Chapter 6 note 12). With respect to the *garbhanyāsa*, there are indications that the term *garbha*, in a certain sense, reflects the nature of the ritual. The plausible interpretations of the term and the supposed function and meaning of the *garbhanyāsa* and the other two construction rituals described in the Kāśyapaśilpa are discussed in Chapter 6.

At this point it should be noted that the *prathameṣṭakā*, *garbhanyāsa* and *mūrdheṣṭakā* are not the only construction rituals described in the Sanskrit architectural and ritual treatises. Apart from these three, the texts also mention the placing of the consecration deposit for an image of a temple deity (usually referred to as *ratnanyāsa*),⁸ the placing of the deposit consisting of six objects in the centre of the foundation (known as *ṣaḍādhāra* in Kerala),⁹ the installation of the jars on the summit of the temple,¹⁰ and so forth. However, due to the limitations of time and space, it would have been impossible to extend the present study to all construction rituals described in the Sanskrit texts. Besides, the main textual source under consideration, the Kāśyapaśilpa, only provides a detailed description of the three construction rituals discussed above, that is, the *prathameṣṭakā*, the *garbhanyāsa* and the *mūrdheṣṭakā*. The remaining rituals are thus only briefly mentioned in the present study, for example in Appendix IV where the relation between all material traces of construction rituals and all available textual descriptions of such rituals is dealt with.

Finally, I would like to add a few words about terminology. In the present book, the items deposited in the course of the three mentioned rituals, namely the

⁸ See Bṛhat Saṃhitā 59.17 (ed. Dvivedi), Matsya Purāṇa 266.9, Garuḍa Purāṇa 48.91-92, Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa 110, Agni Purāṇa 6, Ajitāgama 18, Īśānaśivagurudevapaddhati 39.92, Somaśambhupaddhati IV.3, Atri Saṃhitā 18.57, Kriyādhikāra 8, Hayaśīrṣa Pañcarātra 38, Pādma Saṃhitā 11.30, 13.55-58, Viṣṇu Saṃhitā 18.22ff, Aparājitaṭṭhā 153.

⁹ See Tantrasamuccaya 1.74-80 and Śilparatna 10.6cdff.

¹⁰ See Īśānaśivagurudevapaddhati 34.20cd-26ab.

compartmented box with its contents, the stones or bricks and the objects installed among them, are referred to as ‘consecration deposits’. In a large number of publications, the archaeological remains associated with the building rituals are referred to as ‘relics’ and the deposit receptacles as ‘reliquaries’. However, it should be remembered that ‘relic’ and ‘consecration deposit’ are, despite a certain outer similarity, two distinct conceptions and should not be confused. A short discussion on obvious, but not always accepted, differences between relics and consecration deposits is enclosed in the following section.

1.2 Terminology

Since the three chapters of the Kāśyapaśilpa, which are the main focus of the present study, deal with building consecration rituals, it is important from the very outset to distinguish between the terms ‘relic’ and ‘reliquary’ on the one hand and ‘consecration deposit’ on the other. These terms are surprisingly often confused in works dealing with consecration deposit boxes of the type described in the Kāśyapaśilpa. There are very few publications in which the distinction between these two terms may be found.

1.2.1 What is a relic?

According to the Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics “A relic is first and foremost the bodily remains of a holy person – the whole of these or any part of them, even the most minute...” (MacCulloch 1971: 654-655). Also “... anything which had been possessed by, or had been in contact with or in proximity to, a holy person or his relics might in turn become a relic.” (ibid., 655). Consecration deposits, on the other hand, contain neither bodily remains¹¹ nor objects that are believed to have been in physical contact with a hero, a saint or a deity. Moreover, relics are enshrined at a well-known location in order to be accessible to the believers who come to pay respect to them. Consecration deposits, as known from the Sanskrit texts, should be placed ‘well hidden’ (*sugupta*) in the indicated spot within the building.¹² Another crucial aspect of a relic is that it can be almost endlessly divided without losing its ‘power’ – a single hair or a bone is as sacred and is as much worshipped as the whole body of a saint. This can be seen in the later Christian tradition as well as in the story of the dividing of the bodily remains of the Buddha among the eight kings as described in the

¹¹ The ‘ashes and bones’ found in some Javanese consecration deposit boxes, thought in the past to be of human origin, were proved to be of animal origin (see Soekmono 1995).

¹² See, for example, Pādma Saṃhitā 6.23cd: *tasmāt yatnena kartavyaṃ suguptaṃ bhittimadhyataḥ* and Viṣṇu Saṃhitā 13.24cd: *suguptaṃ tad yathā bhittau bhittimānena vā bhavet*.

Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (see MacCulloch 1971: 653-658 and Smith 1971: 658-661). The consecration deposit, on the other hand, is ‘valid’ only when prepared strictly following the rules given by the texts - it should contain all the prescribed items and be installed while uttering various mantras. A deposit that is incomplete, not installed according to the rules, and which has not been ‘mantrified’ has no power. Finally, the worship of relics is a custom that is generally unfamiliar to the Hindu religion. It would therefore be highly unusual to find relics in a Hindu temple.

As indicated above, the differences between the relics and consecration deposits are numerous. The most essential ones are presented in the table below:

Relic	Consecration deposit
Can be divided	Are valid only when complete ¹³
A building is constructed for the sake of the relics	A consecration deposit is inserted for the sake of the building
Has ‘power’ by itself	Has ‘power’ only when ‘mantrified’
Should be venerated	Is venerated only during the installation
Installed on a visible, well-known place	Hidden within the building or in the ground, ¹⁴ the location is not marked
The believers are aware of the presence of relics and their location	The believers (or the visitors to the house or to a village) are usually unaware of the presence and location of a consecration deposit
In the <i>stūpas</i> of Sri Lanka: installed in the relic chamber	In the <i>stūpas</i> of Sri Lanka: installed under the floor of the relic chamber
No specific textual prescriptions for the location	Should be installed in a prescribed location
Not required for all temples and <i>stūpas</i>	Required for all types of buildings
Can function outside a building	Is connected with a specific building, image or settlement and has no function outside of it

¹³ See, for example, Mānasāra 12.2: *nānādravyasusampūrṇaṃ garbhaṃ sarvaśubhapradam | hīnadravyamanaiśvaryaṃ garbhaṃ tadaśubhapradam ||*

¹⁴ The consecration deposit may also be installed for secular buildings and for settlements – towns and villages; see Chapter 6.1.

It is easy to see that, despite some similarities in appearance (being often installed within a temple or other religious building, being enclosed in a box often made of precious metal, containing sometimes precious stones and flowers cut out of gold leaf, etc.), a relic deposit and a consecration deposit do not have much in common. Nevertheless, such a juxtaposition of these two terms seems necessary because, as mentioned above, both terms are often confused in publications.¹⁵

1.2.2 Why do I prefer not to use the term ‘ritual deposit’?

In certain publications the archaeological finds that can be linked with consecration rituals are referred to as ‘ritual deposits’.¹⁶ While this term is certainly not wrong and much more suitable than a ‘relic deposit’ or a ‘reliquary’, it is also not very precise. In addition to the consecration deposits, it may, for instance, also refer to votive deposits or even to relics, the installation of which is also connected to a specific ritual. I thus propose the term ‘consecration deposit’, which stresses the main function of the deposit and suggests that such a deposit does not contain a relic.

¹⁵ Wales (1940: 34-35) calls the consecration deposit box from Kedah a ‘reliquary’ and the space near the entrance where it was found – a usual location for a consecration deposit – a ‘relic chamber’, interchangeably with ‘deposit chamber’. O’Connor (1966: 53-54) uses the terms ‘reliquary’ and ‘relic casket’ interchangeably with ‘deposit box’ for the finds from Kedah (even if in the title of his article he uses the term ‘ritual deposit boxes’) and Lamb (1961: 6-9) refers to the Kedah and Javanese finds as ‘reliquaries’. The same is found in Harrison and O’Connor (1967: 219). Bandaranayake (1974: 404) lists the *yantragalas* (the consecration deposit containers of Sri Lanka; see Chapter 7.4) under ‘stone reliquaries’ in his Index. Sirisena (1978: 260) also explains *yantragalas* as reliquaries. Such examples are numerous. Among more recent publications, Silva (1988: 29) explains *yantragalas* as ‘small-scale relic chambers’ and ‘relic boxes’. This is the more surprising in the context of Sri Lanka where both relic chambers (for housing relics) and consecration deposit boxes (*yantragalas*) were employed, often within one and the same building. Soekmono (1995: 10, 116, 118, 120, 122 etc.) who refutes the theory that the consecration deposit boxes of Java were burial urns and contained human ashes, still calls the consecration deposit boxes ‘reliquaries’. The same is found in a recent publication of Kinney (2003: 54). One of the few exceptions is a remark by Bosch (1961: 487 n 3): “So long as the purpose of these objects is not quite clear it seems recommendable not to denote them as ‘reliquaries’ as Mr. Lamb has done, but to use a more neutral term like ‘caskets’.” The two other exceptions are the 1972 article by Treloar (who uses the terms ‘ritual deposits’ and ‘deposit boxes’) and the 1981 article by Mitra (who uses the terms ‘deposits’, ‘deposit containers’ and ‘chambered boxes’).

¹⁶ For instance by O’Connor (1966).