Idiom and innovation in the 'Gupta Period': Revisiting Eran and Sondhni

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To show how kingship was enacted and materialised in specific contexts within the 'Gupta Ecumene', writ large, this article presents a detailed analysis of two sites that served as centres for political performance, devotional practice, and artistic production between the fourth and the sixth century CE: Eran and Sondhni in the Indian heartland of Madhya Pradesh. Eran is commonly held to be a key site for the study of Gupta art and architecture and holds several important inscriptions from the beginning to the end of the Gupta period, including one issued by Samudragupta. Sondhni is marked by two inscribed columns of Yaśodharman, a former Gupta subordinate who challenged the imperial rulers using metaphors borrowed from Samudragupta's Allahabad Pillar Inscription. Examining these two sites in dialogue presents an opportunity to identify a shared cultural realm in which local polities participated and developed a transregional 'Gupta' political discourse. This study normalises a Gupta-centred imperial history and, in doing so, participates in a wider departure from dynastic history by emphasising the ways in which localised polities and rulers negotiated the political idioms of their day, challenged them, and created spaces for innovation.

Keywords: Gupta period, epigraphy, political landscapes, memorial sites, comparison

The Gupta Political Presence (and Absence)

In the historiography of early India, the Gupta rulers are omnipresent. Far more than just a lineage, the Guptas have become synonymous with cultural innovations that defined a historical period, that is, the 'Gupta Period', c. fourth to sixth century CE. These innovations include an artistic style, the flourishing of poetry (*kāvya*) and science (*śāstra*), an epigraphic script ('Gupta Brāhmī'), as well as temple and image-centred rituals and practices of statecraft the influence of which extended far from their presumed homeland in northeast India up to the major polities of Southeast Asia.[1] Yet, while looming large in the historical memory of early South Asia, the Guptas are, paradoxically, hard to find. Their political capital and homeland are unknown.[2] Few temples or other monuments can be attributed directly to their patronage. Of the 25 inscriptions that mention members of the Imperial Gupta line and refer to their regnal years, only a handful are explicitly issued by the rulers or record actions they purportedly undertook themselves.[3] This absence 'on the ground'

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[1] The 'Gupta Period' is a commonly invoked heading used to designate a high point of premodern South Asian culture. It has become synonymous with terms like 'classical' or 'Golden Age', a period of time in which artistic production flourished and great works of literature, science, philosophy, and architecture and sculpture were produced, presumably under the patronage of the Gupta rulers and their associates. Kulke and Rothermund, for example, in their much-used work *A History of India* (p. 54) begin their discussion of 'The classical age of the Guptas' in this way: 'Like the Mauryas a few centuries earlier, the imperial Guptas made a permanent impact on Indian history.' A. L. Basham makes an even more bold valuation in the introduction to Bardwell Smith's *Essays on Gupta Culture* (p. 1): 'In India probably the most outstanding of such periods was that of the Gupta Empire, covering approximately two hundred years, from the fourth to the sixth centuries A.D. In this period India was the most highly civilized land in the world [...].' In the study of religion, these centuries have been understood as critical since they mark the advent of temple and image-centred religious practices that come to define Brahmanical Hinduism. The art of the Gupta period is often termed 'classical,' a term that refers to a naturalism and restraint in ways of representing the human form that is distinguished from the extravagance of later medieval or baroque forms. Several studies in recent years have problematised elements of these classifications, for example, Partha Mitter's foreword in Hegewald, *In the Shadow of the Golden Age*, Fussman, 'Histoire du monde indien', and Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories*, on Western aesthetics in the analysis of Indian art. On the other hand, a recent exhibition in Paris (*L'âge d'or de l'Inde classique: L'empire des Gupta*, 2017) still invokes the paradigm of the Golden Age. For further discussion, see Bisschop and Cecil, 'Introduction', *Primary Sources and Asian Pasts.*

[2] Virkus, *Politische Strukturen*, p. 63, refers to two main scholarly views: Magadha with its capital Pāṭaliputra or the eastern part of present Uttar Pradesh.

[3] There are still some debates regarding these few inscriptions. The Eran Stone Inscription of Samudragupta is fragmentary (see below). The ruler Candra of the Meharauli Pillar Inscription is not explicitly identified as Candragupta (Sircar, *Select Inscriptions*, pp. 283–85). Note also the difference in scope of Fleet's original edition of CII 3 (*Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings and Their Successors*) and Bhandarkar's re-edition (*Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings*). The use of the expression 'Early Gupta Kings' in the title of both, however, is slightly misleading since most of the inscriptions included in the volume were not issued by the Gupta kings themselves (cf. Virkus, *Politische Strukturen*, p. 13). Many of the later type include a set/stock poetic account of the Gupta genealogy that serves to

stands in striking contrast to their ubiquity in models of early South Asian polities and modes of political self-styling, including the epigraphic genre of the *praśasti*. It is in this respect, as a political idiom and mode of self-representation in public writings, that the Gupta lineage affected, and continues to affect, its presence. These public writings were integral components of larger spectacles of power designed to materialise royal presence in enduring ways.

The most striking and well-known example of this kind of spectacle is the Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta.[4] Perhaps the most famous of the inscribed monuments of the Gupta period, the 'Allahabad Pillar' has been taken to exemplify some of the key innovations in public writing practices for which the Gupta rulers are most famous. First, it introduces the rulers and provides the earliest articulation of a royal genealogy. This genealogy does not begin in a straightforward way with an auspicious invocation or *jayati* verse, as one might expect, but elliptically, with an extended relative clause that is not resolved until the concluding lines, when the names of Candragupta and Samudragupta, the present ruler(s) at the time of the text's composition, are mentioned. The Allahabad inscription is also noteworthy in that it does not present a distinctly religious vision in which the ruler declares his devotion to a deity, nor does it record an act of donation or other pious deed for which the king is eulogised. The tone of the inscription is far more totalising. Rather than commemorating a specific act of charity, Samudragupta is likened to a storehouse of every imaginable virtue, ranging from martial prowess and heroism to Śāstric eloquence and generosity. Like his political power that expands without boundaries, his good qualities are presented as limitless. The geopolitical visions of sovereignty expressed in the record are similarly grandiose. As Sheldon Pollock has discussed earlier, the column inscription articulates a universal sovereignty—one

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notionally link the granting agent or locale to the larger political regime and the power of the kings. This lineage eulogy is first given in the Allahabad Pillar Inscription. See also Pollock, *Language of the Gods,* p. 250: 'The records issued in the name of the kings and queens of this dynasty, including seals, consist of a grand total of twenty-odd fragmentary documents and hardly more than 250 lines of printed text.'

[4] The inscription was published in CII 3, first by Fleet and then again, with major differences in interpretation, by Bhandarkar. Fleet takes the Allahabad inscription to be posthumous, which Bhandarkar and most other scholars after him tend to disagree with. See also Sircar, *Select Inscriptions*, p. 268, n. 8. The substantiation of something as immaterial as fame or glory (*yaśas*) is not unique to the Allahabad Pillar Inscription, but appears also quite commonly with *kīrti*, a comparable term for fame or a 'good report' that can be used to refer also to the material legacy of a ruler's glory in the form of the monuments that he or she creates. See Willis, *Archaeology of Ritual*, pp. 145; 243–46. A striking example comes from the posthumous Meharauli Pillar Inscription of Candra (= Candragupta II?), which reports the setting up of the iron column, called the 'standard of Viṣṇu' (*viṣṇoḥ dhvajaḥ*), on the hill Viṣṇupada by king Candra, who had died but whose fame remains on earth (in the form of the column): *kīrttyā sthitasya kṣitau* (line 3). There are different views about the original location of the column: Fleet (CII 3[1], pp. 140–41) thought it was in its original location (Meharauli, Delhi); Bhandarkar (CII 3[2], Introduction, pp. 57–61) rather argued for a place in the Punjab; Willis (*Archaeology of Ritual*, p. 75) holds that the Meharauli column was originally located at Udayagiri in Madhya Pradesh.

that is expansive, all-encompassing, and pervasive while, at the same time, not localised in any particular place or even a particular time.[5]

  While innovative in its poetic construction of a transcendent kingship,[6] the Allahabad inscription is not a singular epigraphic event. The Gupta epigraph is displayed strategically on an earlier monument to royal power, an Aśokan column.[7] Here we can see the interplay between innovation and idiom: the unique epigraphic event recorded on an iconic monument that represents prior models of kingship (Figures 1 and 2).[8] The Aśokan column was likely resurrected intentionally to be used as a medium for communicating the fame of Samudragupta.[9] We infer this by the text's statement that 'this column has been raised' (*ayam ucchritaḥ stambhaḥ*) and by the presence of an additional Gupta Brāhmī inscription engraved horizontally, which could suggest that it was added when the monolith was lying on the ground. This act of raising the political dead displays an awareness of the efficacy of past political practices and the power of public writings that, even if they may no longer have been legible, were clearly still intelligible as acts of political spectacle. If we assume that in ancient India, as in other premodern contexts, the power of a ruler depended on public displays of presence, the inscribed monument serves as a stand-in for the ruler himself. It is invoked as a permanent instantiation in the political landscape: as the fame, glory, and 'arm of the Earth' (*bhuvo bāhur*) held up in perpetual testament to his greatness.[10] And this fame is no abstraction, it pervades the phenomenal world and is reified and experienced in a number of spectacular ways: as a monumental solidification of glory, as a purifying brilliance,

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[5] Pollock, *Language of the Gods in the World of Men*, p. 240.

[6] Singh, *Political Violence*, p. 191: 'The Allahabad *praśasti* of Samudragupta is a soliloquy of power in which kingship talks about itself, through the voice of its composer, a high-ranking minister named Harishena.'

[7] Thapar, 'Early Inscriptions as Historical Statements', pp. 341–42, sees this as an expression of 'historical continuity'. Fussman ('Histoire du monde indien', p. 707), however, is baffled: 'C'est un texte de prestige, qui tire sa seule valeur d'avoir été écrit et gravé. Ce qui est curieux, et peu digne d'un grand souverain, c'est qu'il ait été gravé sur une colonne déjà existante et portant des inscriptions d'Aśoka: il eût été plus glorieux de le faire sur un monument érigé spécialement pour l'occasion.' The practice of adding inscriptions was continued in later times, including a Persian text by the Mughal emperor Jahāṅgīr. See Falk, *Aśokan Sites and Artefacts*, pp. 158–61.

[8] The Allahabad Pillar is not the sole instance of epigraphic participation on the part of the Gupta rulers. Skandagupta, too, commissioned an inscription on a natural boulder near the Girnār Mountain in the Junāgaḍh District of Gujarat on which the rulers Aśoka and Rudradāman had earlier left inscriptions.

[9] There has been much discussion about the question whether the pillar is in its original location or if it was moved there from Kausambi and re-erected by Samudragupta. This is based on Aśoka's schism edict which addresses the 'high officers of Kosambī' (Cunningham, CII 1, p. 116, l. 1: *kosaṃbiyamahāmata*). Fussman ('Histoire du monde indien', pp. 706–07) disagrees: 'La meilleure preuve est qu'il existe à Sarnath une version de l'inscription d'Allahabad d'Aśoka, où la mention des hauts fonctionnaires de Kausambī est remplacée par celle, incomplète malheureusement, de Pāṭa<liputra> (Patna). Personne n'a jamais pensé que la colonne de Sarnath ait été inscrite à Patna et, de là, déplacée jusqu'à Varanasi.'

[10] Cf. Smith, *The Political Machine*, p. 6: 'Sovereignty in this sense is a quintessentially archaeological category, reproduced in the domain of things over the *longue durée*.'

Figure 1. Drawing of the Allahabad Pillar and Its Inscriptions by T. S. Burt
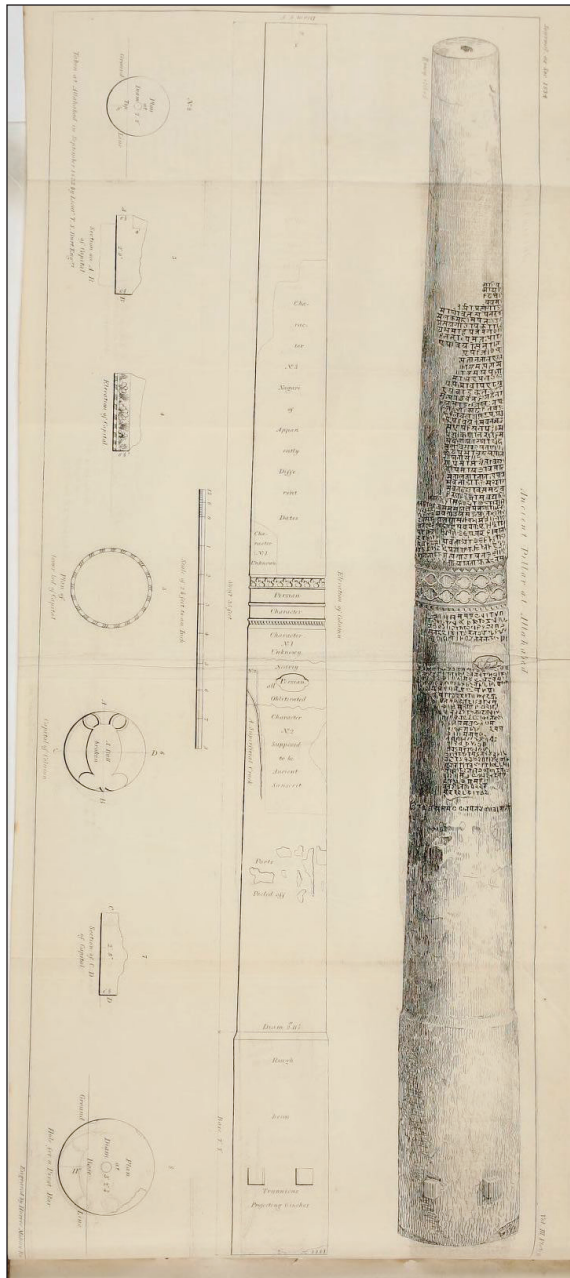
Source: Burt (1834).

Figure 2. Rubbing of the Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta
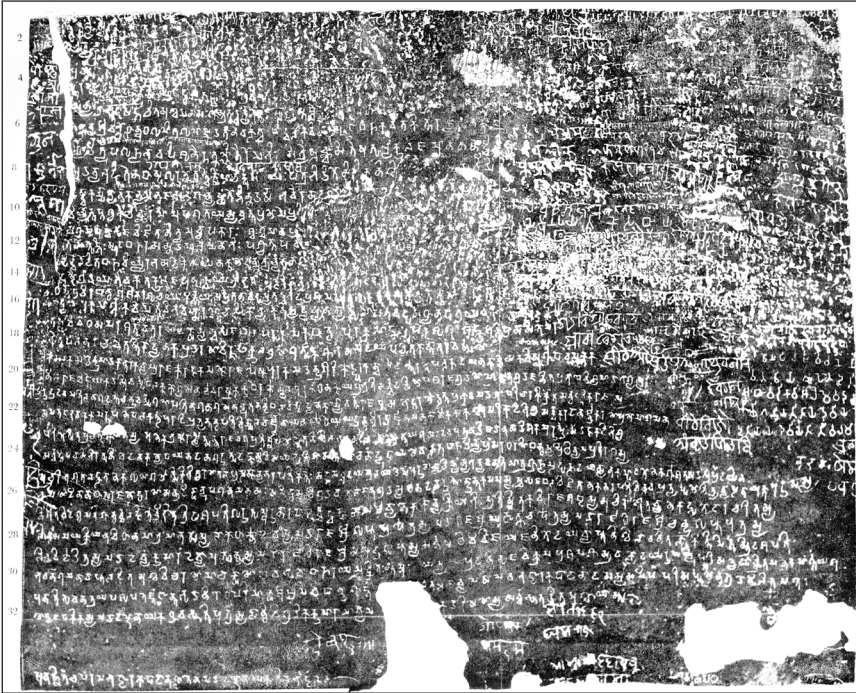
Source: CII 3¹, plate i.

as an epiphany of Bhūdevī, and in the language of the inscription itself, a versified eulogy composed for recitation.[11]

Regardless of whether or not the literary message of either Aśoka or Samudragupta was widely accessible, there can be little doubt that the monument wielded a significant symbolic force in the minds of the Guptas and their contemporaries. The innovative geopolitical vision first expressed in the Allahabad Pillar Inscription became a widely deployed political idiom, as has been convincingly shown in Pollock's model of the 'Sanskrit Cosmopolis'.[12] This model overlooks, however, the material dimensions that communicate and perpetuate the message. The focus on the universal aspects of the expression of sovereignty also neglects the particular contexts in which these idioms were expressed and the specific local agents who employ them for their own political purposes by subsuming

[11] Singh, *Political Violence*, p. 195: 'Perhaps the inscription was read out on special occasions marked by political ceremony. News of the content of this brilliant composition inscribed on a majestic pillar must have reached the ears of other kings.' For a similar perspective from another culture, see Harmanşah, 'Source of the Tigris'.

[12] Pollock, *Language of the Gods*, pp. 239–43.

under the general heading 'Gupta' which is in fact a disparate range of historical agents, localities, and practices.[13] To show how kingship was enacted in specific contexts, within the 'Gupta Ecumene', writ large, which is too often conceived in terms of poetic forms and political aesthetics,[14] this article presents a detailed analysis of two 'sites', that, is, two particular locales that served as centres for political performance, devotional practice, and artistic production (both material and literary) between the fourth and sixth century CE, Eran and Sondhni, in the Indian heartland of Madhya Pradesh. Eran is commonly held to be a key site for the study of Gupta art and architecture and holds several important inscriptions from the beginning to the end of the Gupta period, including one issued by Samudragupta. Sondhni is marked by two inscribed columns of Yaśodharman, a former Gupta subordinate who challenged the imperial rulers using metaphors borrowed from Samudragupta's Allahabad Pillar Inscription.

Examining these two sites in dialogue presents an opportunity to identify a shared cultural realm in which local polities participated and developed 'Gupta' political metaphors.[15] This study normalises a Gupta-centred imperial history and, in doing so, participates in a wider departure from dynastic history by emphasising the ways in which localised polities and rulers negotiated the political idioms of their day, challenged them, and created spaces for innovation.[16] By situating the 'Gupta paradigm' in the spatial and material contexts of Eran and Sondhni, we show how practices of sovereignty in the fourth and sixth centuries gave rise to two distinct political landscapes.

The Layered History of the Gupta Site at Eran

The monumental site at Eran in present-day Madhya Pradesh features in numerous studies of early Indian history, archaeology, and art history as a paradigmatic example of the 'classical Gupta Age'. Yet a closer look troubles these Gupta associations, since the connection between the iconic monuments and inscriptions and the rulers of the Gupta dynasty is tenuous; for example, the so-called Eran Stone Pillar Inscription of Budhagupta, is not really Budhagupta's inscription. It is dated to the time of his reign, but it records the work of a local ruler. Nor does the famous theriomorphic image of the Varāha, dated in the first year of the Hūṇa ruler Toramāṇa, bear a Gupta inscription. To the contrary, the inscription signals the end of Gupta rule. The agents responsible for the setting up of both the inscribed column and the Varāha image were the two brothers Mātṛviṣṇu and Dhanyaviṣṇu,

[13] On this point as it relates to Southeast Asian epigraphic sources see Ali, 'The Early Inscriptions of Indonesia.'

[14] The typical example of this approach is Ingalls, 'Kālidāsa and the Attitudes of the Golden Age'.

[15] See also Bakker, for a comparative study of Udayagiri and the Vākāṭaka sites of Mandhal, Mansar and Rāmagiri. On the heuristic value of the comparative method, see Lincoln, *Apples and Oranges*.

[16] See also Virkus, *Politische Strukturen*.

members of a local lineage group called the Viṣṇus. Who were these two brothers and what was the position of the Viṣṇu family within the Gupta polity?

What Came Before: Constructing a Tīrtha at a Battleground

Revisiting the epigraphic and material sources from Eran shows that the Viṣṇu brothers were not investing in an unknown locale. Their contributions, while highly visible interventions, participate in a longer history of political investments at Eran. The column and the Varāha are enduring memorials at a site with a long, albeit now fragmentary, history as a place for political memorial-making. The earliest inscription at Eran dates to the time of Śrīdharavarman (early fourth century)[17] and was engraved on a column found in the fields a short distance from the Viṣṇus' memorial site. In addition to Śrīdharavarman's inscription, the object also displays the later, posthumous inscription of Goparāja (Gupta Year 191 = 510–511 CE), which is the first epigraphic record of the performance of sati/*suttee* (see below) (Figures 3 and 4). While fragmentary, Śrīdharavarman's record initiates the practice of memorial-making at Eran and does so using phrases that Samudragupta and the Viṣṇu brothers subsequently adopted to describe the place and their engagement with it.

The inscription, dated in the 27th regnal year of the Mahākṣatrapa Śrīdharvarman, records two events. First, the construction of a ford *(tīrtha)*[18] by [Nārā]yaṇasvāmin at the river[19] in the town *(adhiṣṭhāna)* of Erikaṇa, in the territorial division of Bāhirikā, in the district *(āhāra)* of Nagendra, 'for the well-being of the *adhiṣṭhāna* headed by the cows and Brāhmaṇas, (and) for the increase [of the religious merit of his mother and father]'.[20] This *tīrtha* would presumably have been a flight of steps (or *ghat*) along the Bīnā River that encircled the village (Figure 5). Second, the inscription tells us that a pillar *(yaṣṭi)* was erected by Satyanāga, the general *(senāpati)* and officer *(ārakṣika)* of the king, 'for the removal of calamities, for the attainment of prosperity, and for the happiness and well-being of all creatures'.[21] The inscription ends with a benediction: 'While (our) king is ruling over the wide earth … may (this) *yaṣṭi*, (raised) by the Nāgas themselves, remaining unimpaired, proclaim by its form the duty of the warlike people…, for this is the (meeting) place of (all) people—friends as well as foes—in (a spirit of) service and reverence!'[22]

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[17] Mirashi, 'Eran Stone Pillar Inscription of Sridharavarman', CII 4.2, pp. 605–10.

[18] The verb is lost, but Mirashi conjectures *kāritam*.

[19] The name of the river is not given, but Mirashi restores it as Venvā, which would correspond to the modern Bīnā river. The pillar itself lies a few yards from the left bank of the river.

[20] Lines 5–6: *gobrāhmaṇapurogasya cādhi* [*ṣṭhānasya svastyarthaṃ*] *mā*[*tāpitro puṇyā*] *bhivṛdhyārtham*. The reconstructions proposed by Mirashi in a footnote (*Ibid.*, p. 610, n. 1) are based on the use of a similar expression in the column inscription of the time of Budhagupta. All quotations from this inscription follow Mirashi's translation.

[21] Line 7: *śāntikarddhisarvvasatva*[*su*]*khahitāya*.

[22] Lines 8–10: *pṛthupṛ*[*thivīm ī*]*śa*[*mā*]*na(ne) narendre nā*[*gai*]*r e*[*va*] … *vapuṣā kṣatrarāṣṭra*[*sya*] *dharmmā*[*n*|] *yaṣṭiś śiṣṭām akhaṇḍasthiti ta* … *s*evādararipu[*su*][*hṛdāṃ*] *sthānam etat prajānām*.

Figure 3. 'Goparāja Pillar' at Eran Showing Side with Posthumous
Inscription of Goparāja

Source: The authors.

Figure 4. 'Goparāja Pillar' at Eran Showing Side with Śrīdharavarman's
Original Inscription
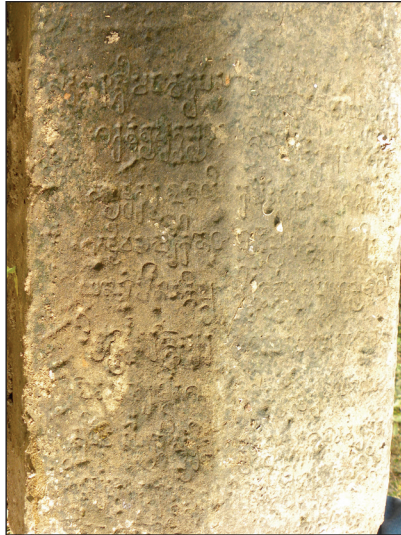
Source: The authors.

Figure 5. Map of Eran

Source: Google Earth.

This inscription establishes Eran as a locale for political memorial-making, particularly those commemorating a battle or a military victory. Several sculptures on the pillar 'showing a horseman holding the reigns of his horse in the left hand and a sword or javelin in the right,'[23] along with concluding benediction, suggest that these monuments were established after a battle.

Territorial Investments: A Temple of Samudragupta

The next inscription from Eran records a donation by Samudragupta, one of the very few records that commemorates such an act by a member of the imperial family.[24] Inscribed on a rectangular slab of red sandstone, it was found by Cunningham at a short distance to the west of the ruins of the Viṣṇus' memorial site (and is now held in the Indian Museum in Kolkata). It refers to the place as 'Airikiṇa [Eran], a town in his [i.e., Samudragupta's] territory'. The text is incomplete–a large

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[23] Mirashi, CII 4.2, p. 608.

[24] Sircar has suggested that the initial reference to the donor is not Samudragupta, but another, local ruler. Since the remainder of the inscription, however, clearly describes Samudragupta and there is barely any space for the introduction of another person before the quoted line, we maintain that the Gupta ruler is the sole subject of the record. Sircar, *Select Inscriptions*, p. 270, n. 1.

Figure 6. Eran Stone Inscription of Samudragupta, Indian Museum, Kolkata

Source: The authors.

section of the left half has been cut away–but the surviving portion is significant for the history of the Guptas and of Eran in particular (Figures 6 and 7).[25] These lines, composed in the Vasantatilakā meter, include a *praśasti* of Samudragupta. Although certainly not modest—the poet praises the power and martial prowess of the king at length—the tone is not transcendent, but grounded. The language of 'groundedness' is introduced in Verse 5 in which the Goddess of Wealth (Śrī) or, in an alternative interpretation, Samudragupta's bride Dattadevī, settles down in his house as a faithful wife who bestows good fortune and wealth upon his

Figure 7. Eran Stone Inscription of Samudragupta, Displaying His Name
(*samudraguptaḥ*) Followed by a Gap in Engraved Text
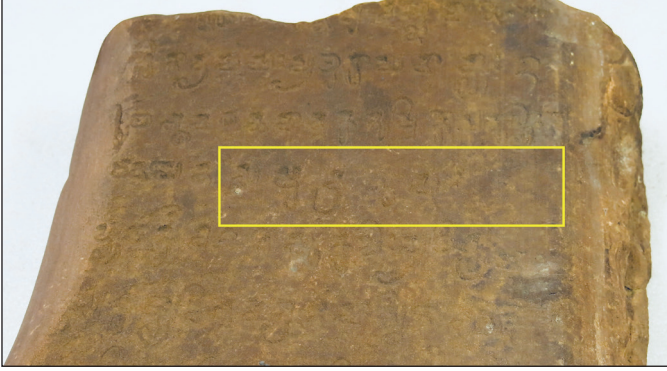
family.[26] The fragmentary Verse 7 informs us that he 'established' something—the
word is missing, possible candidates that have been considered are a pillar or a
temple—'in the place of Airikiṇa, a town in his own dominion, for augment-
ing his glory' (*svabhoganagarairikiṇapradeśe… [saṃ]sthāpitas svayaśasaḥ
paribṛṅhanārttham*). The fragmentary nature of the inscription has led to many
hypotheses about what it was that he established in Eran. Perhaps a temple or some
other kind of monument.[27] If we assume that the epigraphic findspot coincides with
the site of Samudragupta's memorial, it would have been located at the same place
where Dhanyaviṣṇu and Mātṛviṣṇu established their monuments about a century later.

While the claims to universal sovereignty put forth on the Allahabad Pillar
Inscription of Samudragupta have become synonymous with the Gupta polity and
ideologies of kingship,[28] this focus on a particular register of epigraphic produc-
tion has obscured the importance of other inscriptions in which a more personal

[26] Bhandarkar, CII 3², p. 223, n. 3 argues that the missing subject of this verse is Śrī. Fleet, CII 3¹,
p. 21, n. 2 rather thinks this refers to Samudragupta's wife, Dattadevī. He is followed in this by Sircar, *Select
Inscriptions*, p. 269, n. 3, who reconstructs Verse 5 as follows: [*dattā*]*sya pauruṣaparākkramadattaśulkā*
[*hastya*]*śvaratnadhanadhānyasamṛddhiyukt*ā [|] [*nitya*]*ṅgaheṣu muditā bahuputrapautra*[*sa*]*ṅkrāmiṇī
kulavadhuḥ vratinī niviṣṭā* [||].

[27] Various suggestions have been put forward: *devālayaḥ* (Bhandarkar), *stambhaḥ* (Sircar). *devaḥ*,
kīrtiḥ, or *mūrtiḥ* are other possibilities. Bhandarkar, CII 3², p. 222, n. 20, proposes to restore *devālayaś
ca kṛtinātra janārdanasya*. Sircar, *Select Inscriptions*, p. 270, n. 1, rather considers the subject to be
stambhaḥ and he takes it to have been established by another local ruler mentioned in the missing portion.
Willis, *Archaeology of Hindu Ritual*, pp. 193–94, draws attention to two fourth-century fragments of two
female figures that, he argues, may have belonged to the railing surrounding Samudragupta's monument.

[28] See in particular Pollock, *Language of the Gods*, 239–41, and Singh, 'Power of a Poet', with
reference to the parallels between Samudragupta's *digvijaya* in the Allahabad *praśasti* and that of
Raghu in Kālidāsa's *Raghuvaṃśa*.

and localised construction of sovereignty is expressed. In Samudragupta's Eran inscription, we are presented with a vision of political power that is emplaced, and one that refers specifically to the ruler's donative act. Rather than an abstract region conquered and its people subjugated, what the poet expresses with the phrase (*svabhoganagarairikiṇapradeśe*) is an identity or affinity with a place, a connection that is strengthened by the fact that this is the only known inscription that explicitly locates the activities of the king in a specific locale. The idea of *bhoga* could indicate that Samudragupta enjoyed the revenues of Eran as it fell within his sphere of control, yet the use of the reflexive in the context of describing a donative act suggests a personal or perhaps a familial connection that surpasses a notionally administrative or economic affiliation.[29] And this personal connection is expressed, significantly, with a phrase that echoes Śrīdharavarman's earlier inscription, if we accept Mirashi's reconstruction *sva*[*bhogādhiṣṭhānairikiṇe*] in Line 7 of Śrīdharavarman's inscription.[30] Samudragupta's inscription concludes with a statement from the ruler, presented as direct discourse (*nṛpatir āha* 'the king says').[31] What Samudragupta 'says' is now lost, but the evocation of direct discourse serves again to localise the power of the polity in a manner comparatively absent in the Allahabad inscription.[32]

A recently identified Gupta period fragment from Eran may yield some new clues about the nature of the monument established by Samudragupta (Figure 8). It is presently kept in a shrine dedicated to Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa in the village.[33] Unfortunately only a handful of syllables survive and only one expression can be made out for certain, but it is one that is rather suggestive: *pratisaṃskārārttham* 'for the sake of repair'. This fragment is paleographically very similar to Samudragupta's inscription, and we hypothesise that the records are contemporaneous.[34] The wording of the inscription suggests strongly the existence of a religious structure, since the term *pratisaṃskāra* is commonly used in inscriptions to refer to donations that are meant for the repair of temples or monastic residences that are broken or damaged in the course of time. This interpretation is supported further by one more syllable that can be read in the next line, namely the syllable *-rttham*, indicating

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[29] The possible meaning of the phrase *svabhoganagara* has been much discussed. For example, see Sharma, *Personal and Geographical Names*, pp. 220–21; Bajpai, 'Svabhoganagara'. On *bhoga*, see also Sircar, 'Bhumara Pillar Inscription'.

[30] Mirashi, CII 4.2, p. 610, n. 6.

[31] Except for *vo,* the syllables preceding *nṛpatir āha* are lost, but note that the sequence appears identical with a passage in *pāda* d of Verse 4 of the same inscription, which likewise has three illegible syllables (long-long-short) followed by *vo nṛpatir.* For that passage, Bhandarkar, CII 3², p. 222, n. 12, proposes to reconstruct *bhūvāsavo nṛpatir* 'the king, Indra on earth'.

[32] We will return to this difference in discourse below, in relation to the Allahabad Pillar Inscription.

[33] This fragment was reported and photographed during fieldwork in January 2017.

[34] Inspection and comparison with the Eran Stone Inscription of Samudragupta kept in the Indian Museum in Kolkata shows, however, that it is not a missing fragment of the same stone. The characters on the newly found inscription are much bigger than the remarkably small ones on the Eran Stone Inscription.

Figure 8. Fragmentary Inscription of the Gupta Period, Eran
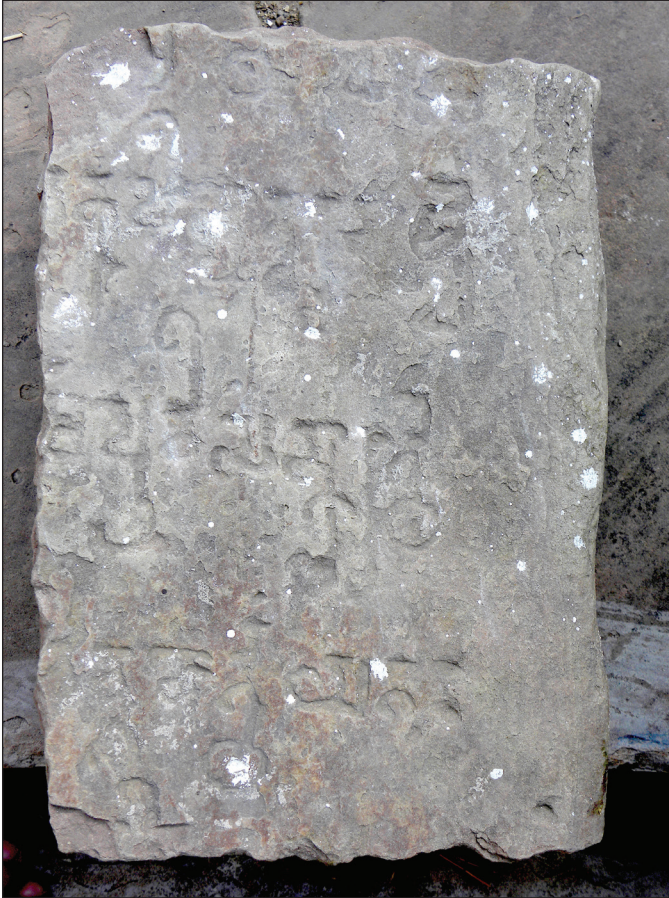
Source: The authors.

another compound ending in 'for the sake of…' This second compound may have included a reference to the performance of *bali*, *caru*, and *sattra*, which is frequently encountered in early inscriptions in combination with provisions provided for repairs of a temple.[35] On the basis of both inscriptions, we can surmise that Eran had fallen under the control of the Guptas by the time of Samudragupta and that there was a religious monument, either founded or supported by him, that included a land donation for its maintenance. Keeping this scenario in mind, we can now return to the inscriptions of Mātṛviṣṇu and Dhanyaviṣṇu.

[35] See Willis, *Archaeology of Hindu Ritual*, pp. 92–93.

Figure 9. Boar and Column, Eran

Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Mātṛviṣṇu and Dhanyaviṣṇu: A Tale of Two Brothers

The inscribed monuments commissioned by the brothers Mātṛviṣṇu and Dhanyaviṣṇu continue a long tradition of political commemoration at Eran, yet while participating in this larger historical pattern, the built interventions of the Viṣṇu family initiate the development of Eran as a designed landscape, that is, a site in which the intentional placement of monuments and the display of inscriptions materialised particular social aspirations and religious affiliations. Two inscribed monuments—a Garuḍa-topped column and a colossal boar (Figure 9)—function as the anchors of the larger architectural assemblage. The position of the objects facing each other at less than 30 m apart creates a strong visual connection between them. This connection is reinforced by the text of the inscriptions, which employ clear parallels in structure and syntax to show that the inscribed boar was made to accompany an earlier inscribed Garuḍa column. Together they formed a pair. These paired texts provide a unique opportunity to study epigraphic intertextuality in material context. The format of the Eran column inscription and the Eran boar inscription can be summarised as follows:

1. Invocation of Viṣṇu (verse);
2. record of the date and the contemporary ruler (verse);
3. genealogy of the two brothers (prose);

4. record of the installation of the object and its responsible agent (prose); and
5. prayer for the well-being of all beings (prose).

The following section provides a comparative analysis of both inscriptions, drawing attention to the parallel phrases and expressions used in both inscriptions, as well as some of the important differences. This detailed discussion allows us to trace the evolution of an innovative memorial site.

Invocation of Viṣṇu

Both inscriptions commence with a *jayati* invocation of Viṣṇu in a verse composed in Āryā metre. In the column inscription, Viṣṇu is invoked as 'the four-armed Lord, whose bed is on the massive waters of the four oceans, the single cause of the preservation, creation, and destruction of the world, whose standard bears the Garuḍa'.[36] The last epithet (*garuḍadhvaja*) clearly alludes to the form of the column itself, which is marked by two addorsed Garuḍa figures, facing east and west, respectively. In a comparable manner, the boar inscription invokes Viṣṇu as 'the God, who causes the mountains to tremble by the blows of his hard snout as he lifts up the Earth in the form of the Boar, the [supportive] pillar of the great house that is the triple world'.[37] Here, Viṣṇu is invoked in the form of the Boar (*Varāhamūrti*), which again identifies the very monument that bears the inscription. But the use of the word *stambha* in the final compound also hints at the earlier column that was erected at the site.[38] In addition, it materialises the central theological message: Viṣṇu is an unwavering support for his devotees.

Record of the Date and the Contemporary Ruler

The column inscription continues after the opening invocation, with two verses in Āryā metre recording the date of the setting up of the column. The date is given as the (Gupta) year 165, when Budhagupta was lord of the earth (*bhūpati*), on the 12th day of the bright half of the month of Āṣāḍha, on a Thursday. Following this, the year is once more given in numerical symbols. The next verse mentions that at the time, an otherwise unknown king (*mahārāja*) called Suraśmicandra was ruling the land between the Kalindī and the Narmadā rivers. This refers to the more specific territory in which the town of Eran itself was located. The boar inscription, by contrast, in a verse written in Anuṣṭubh, is dated in the first year of

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[36] Lines 1–2: *jayati vibhuś caturbhujaś caturarṇṇavavipulasalilaparyyaṅkaḥ jagataḥ sthityutpattinya[yādi]hetur ggaruḍaketuḥ.* Edition Fleet, CII 3¹, pp. 88–90.

[37] Line 1: *jayati dharaṇyuddharaṇe ghanaghoṇāghātaghūrṇṇitamahīddhraḥ devo varāhamūrttis trailokyamahāgṛhastambhaḥ.* Edition Fleet, CII 3¹, pp. 158–60.

[38] The expression has a parallel in the opening verse of Bāṇa's *Harṣacarita*. See Cecil and Bisschop, *Columns in Context,* p. 386, n. 60.

the *mahārājādhirāja* Toramāṇa, indicating a sea change in power relations.[39] The following verse returns to the Āryā metre of the opening verse and specifies the day as the 10th day of the month of Phālguna. Also included in this verse is the expression 'thus, according to the regnal year, month, and day, on this aforementioned date, on the aforementioned [date] which is furnished with its own characteristics'. The expression itself is a versified rendering of the start of the prose passage in the column inscription, a clear case of intertextuality between the two inscriptions.[40]

Genealogy of the Two Brothers

The following section introduces the lineage of the Viṣṇus. Since both inscriptions concern two brothers, their pedigree is the same. Indeed, the wording of the genealogy is identical in both inscriptions, except that in accordance with the syntactical structure, the words *prapautra* (great-grandson), *pautra* (grandson), *putra* (son), and their accompanying qualifications are given in the instrumental and the genitive, respectively. The two brothers' pedigree is traced back three generations and presents a remarkable transformation in the social identity of the family from ritual specialists to rulers. First, the great-grandfather Indraviṣṇu is introduced as a Brahminical sage (*viprarṣi*), attentive to his own duties (*svakarmābhirata*), a performer of sacrifices (*kratuyājin*), who had mastered Vedic recitation (*adhītasvādhyāya*), and was a bull among the Maitrāyaṇīyas (*maitrāyaṇīyavṛṣabha*). In other words, Indraviṣṇu was a learned and highly accomplished Brahmanical priest affiliated with the Maitrāyaṇīya school of the Yajurveda. His son, Varuṇaviṣṇu, the two brothers' grandfather, is said to have taken after his father (*piturguṇānukārin*). The latter's son, Hariviṣṇu, the two brothers' father, likewise followed the model of his father (*pitaramanujāta*), but he is further described as one who was 'the cause of the growth of his line' (*svavaṃśavṛddhihetu*), possibly hinting at his new political aspirations,[41] or the expansion of the line through the two brothers. It is conceivable that the great-grandfather was the recipient of a land grant around Samudragupta's time, which could account for the flourishing of a family of Brahminical landowners who became local rulers.[42]

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[39] For the historical circumstances of this change in the political landscape, see Bakker, *Monuments of Hope, Gloom, and Glory*.

[40] Compare *asyāṃ saṃvatsaramāsadivasapūrvvāyāṃ* (line 3 of the column inscription) and *ity evaṃ rājyavarṣamāsadinaiḥ etasyāṃ pūrvvāyāṃ | svalakṣaṇair yuktapūrvvāyām |* (lines 2–3 of the Varāha inscription). For the meaning of *asyāṃ pūrvāyām* or *etasyāṃ pūrvāyām* and its origins in Kuṣāṇa period Prakrit inscriptions, see Bhandarkar, CII 3², p. 241, n. 1, and Damsteegt, *Epigraphical Hybrid Sanskrit*, p. 195. As for *svalakṣaṇair yuktapūrvāyam* (line 3 of the Varāha inscription), we take this to refer to the auspicious characteristics of the day in the ritual calendar.

[41] Willis, *Archaeology of Hindu Ritual*, p. 198, argues that 'this implies that Hariviṣṇu had become active in political matters'.

[42] *Ibid*., pp. 190–91), more speculatively, hypothesises that Indraviṣṇu might have served as a priest for the *rājasūya* of Candragupta II and its memorialisation at Udayagiri.

Next follows the description of Mātṛviṣṇu, the eldest of the two brothers. With Mātṛviṣṇu, the transformation of the family of Viṣṇus (Indraviṣṇu > Varuṇaviṣṇu > Hariviṣṇu > Mātṛviṣṇu) is complete. Mātṛviṣṇu is introduced as a 'great king' (*mahārāja*), who was 'as it were chosen at a *svayaṃvara* by the Royal Goddess of Fortune through the will of the Creator' (*vidhātur icchayā svayaṃvarayeva rājalakṣmyādhigata*). This poetic description expresses a major transformation in occupation and self-identification—from a family of Vedic ritual specialists to a local ruler aspiring to the highest ideals of Gupta period kingship. Moreover, the fact that it is Rājalakṣmī herself who is said to have chosen him indicates that Mātṛviṣṇu had not inherited this position by birth right.[43] The three epithets that follow each express a royal ideology using the standard idioms of the 'Gupta Period': 'his fame spread to the borders of the four oceans' (*catuḥsamudraparyya ntaprathitayaśas*), 'his honour and wealth were inexhaustible' (*akṣīṇamānadhana*) and he was 'victorious in battles against many enemies' (*anekaśattrusamarajiṣṇu*).

Record of the Installation of the Object and Its Responsible Agent

It is in the part that records the ritual act, its agent, and its purpose that we encounter the most notable and intriguing differences in expression. The column is presented as the work of Mātṛviṣṇu in cooperation with his younger brother Dhanyaviṣṇu, who is said to be 'obedient to him' (*tadanuvidhāyin*) and 'accepted with favour by him' (*tatprasādaparigṛhīta*). The language clearly indicates that Mātṛviṣṇu is the one in charge and that his younger brother accepted this hierarchical relationship. The column itself, referred to as the 'banner column' (*dhvajastambha*) of Janārdana, is dedicated to the merit of their mother and father (*mātṛpittroḥ puṇyāpyānārtham*). By the time of the installation of the Varāha image, however, Mātṛviṣṇu had died— in the words of the inscription, he had 'gone to heaven' (*svargata*). In this case, Dhanyaviṣṇu is responsible for the pious act, but he shares the merit with his late brother, Mātṛviṣṇu (*tenaiva sahāvibhaktapuṇyakriyeṇa*). As with the column, the Varāha is dedicated to the brothers' parents. There is a cross mark in the inscription after the words 'accepted with favour by him' (*tatprasādaparigṛhīteṇa*). Could this indicate that the expression was copied from the column inscription but then elided (on second thought) in view of Mātṛviṣṇu's premature death?[44]

The column was a popular medium for political and religious pronouncement in the Gupta period,[45] but the installation of the Varāha image introduces a stunning new iconic form.[46] The innovative nature of the monument is also expressed

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[43] Dezső, 'Meaning of the Word '*Ārya*', discusses other examples of the use of this image in Gupta inscriptions.

[44] Fleet thinks that this indicates that the words *tenaiva [sa]hāvibhaktapuṇyakkriyeṇa* should have been engraved here before *dhanyaviṣṇunā* (CII 3¹, p. 160, n.1).

[45] See Cecil and Bisschop, 'Columns in Context'.

[46] See Becker, 'Not Your Average Boar'.

Figure 10. Boar Inscription of Dhanyaviṣṇu, Eran

Source: The authors.

in the epigraphic description. The Varāha image is referred to as the 'stone temple of the blessed Nārāyaṇa in the form of a boar, he who is devoted to the world' (*eṣa bhagavato varāhamūrtter jagatparāyanasya nārāyaṇasya śilāprāsādaḥ*). The parallel with the language and idiom of the column inscription is unmistakable (*eṣa bhagavataḥ puṇyajanārddanasya janārdanasya dhvajastambho*). However, the reference to the Varāha image as a 'stone temple' (*śilāprāsādaḥ*) is remarkable. Placed prominently (in a specially prepared area) on the chest of the boar, the inscription is an integral part of the icon (Figure 10). It tells us that 'this' (*eṣa*), in other words, the Varāha image itself, namely the boar's body, made up of all the sages and gods, is the 'temple' (*prāsāda*) of Nārāyaṇa. It is the material receptacle for divine presence. The image stands on an open platform and no traces of an enclosing structural temple survive at the site; the Varāha would probably have stood on an open, square pavilion (*maṇḍapa*), just like the slightly earlier theriomorphic boar at the Vākāṭaka memorial site at Rāmagiri (Ramtek).[47] The unique use of the term *prāsāda* to refer to the image itself, rather than a structural temple, as the 'abode'

[47] See Bakker, *The Vākāṭakas,* pp. 138–39, drawing attention to the same set-up of the much later Varāha at Khajuraho. Becker, 'Not Your Average Boar', p. 123, n. 2, also argues that a *maṇḍapa* would have originally enshrined the image.

of the God is matched by the innovativeness of the icon itself.[48] The Eran Varāha is the first known example of the theriomorphic boar depicted with all the divine principles on its body. In the words of Becker,[49] it is an 'iconographic invention' and a 'watershed image' that became the most popular form for representing Varāha in his theriomorphic manifestation for centuries to come.

Much valuable work has already been written on the Eran Varāha and we do not venture a reappraisal here. That said, there is one more enigmatic feature of the sculpture that may be understood through reference to the inscription, namely the stump-like object on the back of the boar.[50] Recalling that the deity is invoked in the opening verse as 'the pillar of the great house that is the triple world', this object could represent the top of the pillar. The three worlds that make up the universe would then be represented by the *nāga*s at the base of the image (the netherworld), Varāha itself with the Earth on its tusk in the middle (the earthly realm), and the top of the pillar with four seated figures facing the four directions (heaven).[51] The column and the Varāha thus present us not only with a case of intertextuality but also of intervisuality at the same site. These are two objects in direct dialogue with each other.

Finally, the boar inscription adds one more piece of information that is lacking in the column inscription in this part of the inscription, namely that it was commissioned 'here, in Arikiṇa, in his own territory' (*svaviṣaye 'sminn airikiṇe*). This, a clear claim to Dhanyaviṣṇu's local power following the demise of his brother, recalls the earlier words of inscription of Samudragupta: 'in the place of Airikiṇa, a town in his own dominion' (*svabhoganagarairikiṇapradeśe*), which itself again echoes the expression *sva*[*bhogādhiṣṭhānairikiṇe*] used in the inscription of Śrīdharavarman.

Prayer for the Well-being of All Beings

The final parallel is contained in the final line, which is common to both inscriptions: 'Let it be well for all subjects, beginning with cows and brahmins!' (*svasty astu gobrāhmaṇapurogābhyaḥ sarvvaprajābhya iti*). While the expression of welfare for cows and brahmins is not unique to these examples, the particular formulation *gobrāhmaṇapuroga* in these two inscriptions from Eran echoes that of the earlier inscription of Śrīdharavarman (*gobrāhmaṇapurogasya cādhi*[*ṣṭhānasya*

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[48] That the term *prāsāda* was used to refer to a temple building in this period is attested by the famous Silk Weavers Inscription from Daśapura. Verse 35 refers to the Sun temple that it commemorates as the *prāsāda*. The same usage is attested in the *prāsādalakṣaṇa* chapter in Varāhamihira's *Bṛhatsaṃhitā*. For the cosmological dimensions of the concept of *prāsāda*, see Dhaky, 'Prāsāda as Cosmos', pp. 211–26.

[49] See Becker, 'Not Your Average Boar'.

[50] This feature has not yet been identified and has prompted a range of different interpretations, which are summarised in Becker, 'Not Your Average Boar', pp. 130–32.

[51] Regarding the *nāgas* as a representation of the netherworld, see Mersch, 'Visual Story-Telling in Text and Image'.

svastyarthaṃ]) and is not found anywhere else to the best of our knowledge,[52] showing that intertextuality not only exists between the column and the Varāha but also with this earlier inscription from Eran.

The column compelled participation from a wider audience, as is evinced by the many epigraphs that adorn the object. These smaller inscriptions have not been studied or put into context until recently.[53] The Eran column is liberally adorned with so-called shell inscriptions,[54] as well as several other small inscriptions (Figures 11 and 12). These are all found on the lower square part of the column and on all four sides. Richard Salomon calls the one along the right edge of the south side 'perhaps the most beautiful of all the shell inscriptions'.[55] Attention to these records may help us to better understand how people engaged and interacted with the column and the site. The graffiti report the names of several individuals, including 'Sāmanta-Doṣa', 'Sāmanta-Raṇeśvara', and 'Jagacchaśāṅka'. None of these individuals are known from the history books, but their titles suggest that they were members of a local ruling class who added their names as testimony of their visit, thus participating in the practices of memory-making at the site. The title 'Sāmanta-Doṣa' in particular is intriguing. The title 'Sāmanta' designates an affiliate or subordinate of a more powerful lord, but the 'Doṣa' suffix in names is uncommon since it bears a negative connotation (i.e., a 'fault') in Sanskrit. A lineage of ministers with names ending in 'Doṣa' feature prominently in the fifth- and sixth-century inscriptions of the Aulikaras from Mandasor and Sondhni, the subject of the second part of this article.[56]

[52] The words added between brackets are Mirashi's reconstruction (CII 4.2).

[53] The very first publication on the Eran column inscription (Prinsep, 'Inscription from a Temple of Varáha') contains a facsimile and an attempt at transcription of some of them by T. S. Burt. After this, however, they have been neglected in scholarship. New readings have been provided most recently by Balogh, *Inscriptions of the Aulikaras and Their Associates*, pp. 238–39.

[54] Richard Salomon has identified more than 600 examples of shell script (*śaṅkhalipi*) inscriptions from across the Indian subcontinent, with the exception of the deep south, dated between the fourth to eighth centuries CE. For a survey of his publications on the subject, see Salomon, 'A Recent Claim to Decipherment', p. 313, n. 1. Many of the Aśokan pillars have been decorated with shell inscriptions as well: Falk, *Aśokan Sites and Artefacts*, p. 163 (Figure 3), p. 175 (Figure 2), p. 203 (Figure 2), and—for an example of a non-Aśokan pillar—p. 237 (Figure 4).

[55] Salomon, 'Preliminary Report (Part I)', p. 13. About the dating of this inscription, Salomon observes: 'At Eran, the shell inscriptions on the Garuḍa pillar are evidently later additions to the pillar itself, which was erected, according to the Brāhmī inscription on it, in 484 A.D. Furthermore, inscription no. 1 at Eran is inscribed in a position in which it partly obliterates an evidently earlier graffito in Gupta Brāhmī characters (see the lower part of Figure 11). This Brāhmī inscription itself must have been a later addition to the pillar, and the shell inscription later yet. Thus at the earliest the shell inscription is a relic of the declining days of the Guptas in the late fifth or early sixth century; and it may even be considerably later' (Salomon, 'Preliminary Report (Part II)', p. 40).

[56] Also see Balogh, *The Aulikaras and Their Associates*, p. 239, who speculates on the historical circumstances of Sāmanta-Doṣa's visit: 'The reason for his presence in the region may have been a campaign against Toramāṇa, who took control of Eran sometime close to the turn of the sixth century, and whom Prakāśadharman, in whose service Doṣa began his career, claims to have defeated'.

Figure 11. Shell Inscriptions and Graffiti on Eran Column

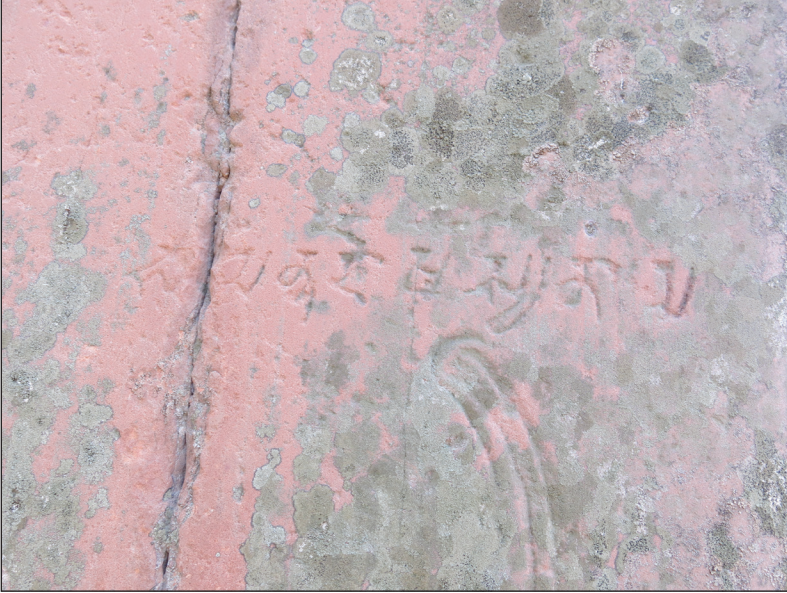**Source:** The authors.

Conclusion: A Memorial Site

The many memorial stones and monuments erected at Eran are a clear indication of its importance as a battleground.[57] Most well-known is the posthumous inscription of Goparāja that was added to the earlier pillar of Śrīdharavarman. Dated in

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[57] During our fieldwork (January 2017), we found many hero stones in the fields around the village.

Figure 12. Graffito on Eran Column, Reading *sāmantadoṣasya nāma*

Source: The authors.

the reign of Bhānugupta (Gupta Year 191), it tells us that Goparāja accompanied the Gupta king in a major battle (*yuddhaṃ sumahat*), died, and went to heaven. His devoted wife accompanied him onto the funeral pyre (*anugatāgnirāśim*).[58] It seems plausible that Eran acquired the characteristics of a memorial site, a place in which significant relationships and events were commemorated over time, precisely because it served as a natural battleground through the centuries (the road from Vidisha to Ujjain ran through Eran, which was thus the gateway to Malwa)—a region Hans Bakker has poignantly called a 'theatre of broken dreams'.[59] Seen in this way, the contributions of the Gupta and associated rulers to the memorial site at Eran are far more participatory than they are innovative. Samudragupta engages with the earlier memorial inscription of Śrīdharavarman in making his own personal investment. The Viṣṇu brothers and Goparāja continue these practices that, while clearly engaging with the established idioms, also develop their own distinct modes of memorial practice.[60]

[58] 'Eran posthumous pillar inscription of Goparāja, The Year 191'. Edition Fleet, CII 3[1], pp. 91–93.

[59] Bakker, 'Theatre of Broken Dreams'.

[60] As a memorial site with a strong Vaiṣṇava character—in addition to the Varāha and the Garuḍa-topped column there is also a Gupta period Narasiṃha—Eran's monumental landscape displays significant echoes of the memorial site of Rāmagiri (present Ramtek) in the neighbouring Vākāṭaka

To conclude, it is worth reflecting on the differences between Eran and the con-temporaneous site of Udayagiri, about 90 km southwest. Art historians have drawn parallels between the artistic representations of the Narasiṃha and Varāha at Udaya-giri, but the differences between the two sites are in fact just as noteworthy. While Udayagiri has a plural religious identity, with cave temples dedicated to Vaiṣṇava as well as Śaiva deities, and a Jain cave complex at its edge, Eran's monumental site remained largely Vaiṣṇava through the medieval period.[61] An explanation for this phenomenon may well be found in the memorial character of the site. The complex at Eran was developed by the Viṣṇu family, building upon the earlier foundations of Samudragupta, and its early, distinctly sectarian identity was reinforced by later interventions that developed further a Vaiṣṇava affiliation.[62] This univocal identity stands in contrast to the nearby caves at Udayagiri, which accommodated different ritual specialists, devotees, and members of the elite who shared spaces for worship.

The Aulikara Political Landscape

In 1885, J. F. Fleet reported remains of two monumental columns bearing 'identical inscriptions' lying scattered in pieces and half buried in the fields around Sondhni, a small hamlet 4 km southeast of Mandasor in Madhya Pradesh (Figure 13).[63] Known in ancient times as Daśapura, Mandasor was the capital of

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polity. See Bakker, *The Vākāṭakas*, pp. 84–87. Like Eran, this was also a key site for the articulation of early politicised Vaiṣṇavism, this time sponsored by the Vākāṭakas. As Bakker has shown, the Vākāṭaka temples on Rāmagiri were established for the merit (*puṇya*) of deceased members of the royal family. Rāmagiri shows a remarkably similar constellation of shrines, centring around the three main manifestations of Viṣṇu: Varāha, Narasiṃha, and Trivikrama. Only the latter is missing in Eran. One more early shrine on Rāmagiri is the so-called Bhogarāma temple. A twin shrine, it was dedicated by the princess Atibhāvatī for the merit of her two brothers, Dāmodarasena and Pravarasena II. Bakker has suggested that this twin shrine may have housed images of the two divine brothers Vāsudeva/Kṛṣṇa and Saṃkarṣaṇa/Balarāma. One of the remarkable features of Eran's monumental landscape is that it incorporates the foundations of a rare twin shrine as well. The *garuḍa*-bannered column of the two brothers was directly aligned with this twin shrine. It seems probable that the erection of the column before the shrine reflects an effort to create a visual and spatial resonance between the two brothers and the two enshrined deities, thereby underscoring this fraternity. We hypothesise that the Eran complex included a shrine dedicated to the two divine brothers as well.

[61] In this respect, Eran again displays similarities to the Vākāṭaka site of Rāmagiri, which has likewise retained its Vaiṣṇava identity. Early Medieval Vaiṣṇava remains at Eran include, among others, a colossal standing Viṣṇu, a huge Anantaśāyin image, and a Trivikrama panel.

[62] The growth in the practice of land granting in this period may have had a major impact on the development of new kinds of designed memorial landscapes like the one at Eran. It is conceivable that an original land donation to a member of the Viṣṇu family, perhaps going back to the time of Samudragupta (see above), contributed to the development of this specific kind of site. The land grant would have given the family the impetus to take control of the site and secured its continuity and religious affiliation in the subsequent centuries.

[63] Remains of a third column were reported from about 50 m away. But because of the decorative pattern on the third column Fleet thinks they did not belong together. Reported in Fleet, 'Mandasor Stone Pillar Inscription of Yaśodharman', CII 3², pp. 142–50.

Figure 13. Sondhni Before Excavation

a ruling family called the Aulikaras in the sixth century. The Aulikara clan(s) first came to power as allies of the Imperial Guptas but asserted their independence in the early sixth century under a ruler named Prakāśadharman, a stance further augmented by his successor Yaśodharman.[64] Yaśodharman may have vanished into obscurity were it not for the pair of massive stone columns erected in his honour and artfully engraved with eulogies that memorialise his defeat of the Hūṇa ruler Mihirakula around 532 CE–the same Mihirakula whose father Toramāṇa, of the Eran boar inscription, had defeated the Guptas and their local allies, the Viṣṇus, just a few decades before.[65] In addition to their function as monuments to Yaśodharman's greatness, the columns, and the site in which they are located, served the further aim of articulating a state-sponsored religion oriented around Śiva, the ruler's chosen deity and tutelary deity of the Aulikara polity.

[64] Presumably, they were allied in the fifth century, but the fact that the Aulikaras use the Mālava rather than the Gupta era to date their records could suggest a degree of independence. The debates on this Gupta–Aulikara relationship are summarised in Salomon's, 'New Inscriptional Evidence for the Aulikaras of Mandasor', pp. 25–27.
    More recently, Hans Bakker has made further strides in untangling these relationships. See Bakker, *The World of the Skandapurāṇa*, p. 34, and 'Theatre of Broken Dreams'.
[65] For the chronology of the second Hunnic war, we rely on Bakker, *Monuments of Hope, Gloom, and Glory*.

The inscriptions from Daśapura are important historical records and have been addressed in a number of important studies of premodern Indian history and polity.[66] Despite this attention, some important questions about the Sondhni columns and the site in which they were erected remain. What purposes did the inscribed monuments serve within the larger political landscape of Daśapura and the surrounding area? What other structures (i.e., temples or memorials) were located there and how did they function as an architectural assemblage? And, finally, why are there two seemingly identical columns bearing the same inscription at the same site. What is the function of the pair? Attention to these questions will allow us to better understand how text and object were designed to actualise the power relationships, religious affiliations, and social aspirations of their creators.

Yaśodharman and the Aulikaras

Early historiography has tended to cast Aulikara Yaśodharman as a pivotal figure in the post-Gupta political world, to the exclusion of the broader political networks in which he was enmeshed and which presumably supported his rise to power.[67] As discussed below, Yaśodharman's inscriptions may suggest a universal sovereign, but these self-aggrandising or hyperbolic claims are better interpreted as rhetorical flourishes of the *praśasti* genre, rather than indications of a historical reality. Neither Yaśodharman nor his Aulikara predecessors ruled alone. They were aided by a lineage of prominent merchants, who called themselves 'Naigamas' (merchants; people from the *nigama* or market town). The Naigamas occupied a hereditary position as ministers to the Aulikara rulers in Daśapura and exerted some political power in the Chittorgarh-Nagari area as well.[68] An alliance with a newly independent and successful group of political elites like the Aulikaras would certainly have elevated the social status of the Naigama family. The Aulikaras, too, would have benefitted from their ties to this prominent local merchant group, who may have helped them to control the surplus from trade and commerce in the area. Together the Aulikaras and the Naigamas formed a corporate political entity that established control over a region strategically located at the heart of the North Indian economic and political landscape. Attention to the Aulikara–Naigama alliance is also helpful in understanding the practices of pious giving

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[66] Salomon, 'New Inscriptional Evidence', Bakker, *Monuments of Hope, Gloom, and Glory*; most recently in Cecil and Bisschop, 'Columns in Context'; Balogh, *The Aulikaras and Their Associates*, and Cecil, *Mapping the Pāśupata Landscape*, pp. 48–76.

[67] Salomon ('New Inscriptional Evidence') challenges the established narrative reflected in the repeated quote by R. C. Majumdar that Yaśodharman 'rose and fell like a meteor'.

[68] Bhagavaddoṣa of the Naigama line served as the *rājasthānīya* under Prakāśadharman, his brother, Abhayadatta under Prakāśadharman or Yaśodharman, and Abhayadatta's son, Dharmadoṣa, under Yaśodharman. See Salomon's 'Genealogical Chart 2,' p. 16. It is perhaps significant to note that administrators with names ending in *–datta* also appear in a set of fifth-century copper plate inscriptions found at Darmodarpur in Bangladesh, which record land transactions under three Gupta rulers in the area.

recorded in the early Aulikara inscriptions, in which the Naigamas emerge as important donors.[69]

With the theme of idiom and innovation in mind, the present discussion revisits the Aulikara sources, particularly those of Yaśodharman from Sondhni. The sixth-century date of the inscriptions and the material evidence place them on the edges of the temporal boundaries of the 'Gupta Period' as it is typically defined.[70] Yet Yaśodharman's court poets, artists, and sculptors were actively engaged in and responding to modes of cultural production popularised by their predecessors. These patterns are most clearly evident in the column inscriptions of Yaśodharman. Eschewing the boundaries and convention of his predecessors, these monuments and the inscriptions that adorn them present a declaration of independence, but independence did not mean isolation. As the following pages will show, the literary metaphors employed in the Sanskrit texts of the inscriptions, the political uses of monumental forms, such as the column, as well as the political ideology expressed, borrow from quintessential Gupta monuments and sites, most notably Allahabad and Eran. These idioms are put to use in the promotion of Śaivism as the new state religion, a supplanting of the established Vaiṣṇava-inflected political self-styling through innovative iconographic forms and theological claims.

Śaivism as a Civic Religion

The religious landscape of the greater Daśapura area in the early fifth–sixth century was extremely diverse: inscriptions commemorated temples to Sūrya, Viṣṇu, donations to Buddhist monastic communities, and shrines to the bellicose mother goddesses.[71] We can, however, see Śaivism gaining prominence among the rulers and elites of the sixth century. Invocations of Śiva and Śaiva theology become part of a political idiom employed in Aulikara inscriptions in which devotion to Śiva was integrated within discourses of power and political hierarchy. Moreover, asserting a religious preference and affiliation with an elective cult, in this case Śaivism, served as a language to commemorate relationships between political actors who did not share kinship or caste bonds.

This use of Śiva religion as a practice through which to enact political relationships and alliances is established in the early Aulikara inscriptions from Daśapura. To commemorate his victory over the Hūṇas, Prakāśadharman's Rīsthal

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[69] 'Mandasor Stone Inscription of Yaśodharman alias Viṣṇuvardhana,' CII 3[1], pp. 150–58; Sircar, *Select Inscriptions*, pp. 411–417. For the Rīsthal inscription see Salomon, 'New Inscriptional Evidence'.

[70] Note that panels from Sondhni are often included in studies of Gupta art, most recently in the catalogue from the 2007 Paris exhibition: *L'âge d'or de l'Inde classique*.

[71] On the Sūrya temple see Sircar, *Select Inscriptions*, pp. 299–307; idem, *CII* 3[1], pp. 79–88. On the dedication of a Viṣṇu temple (404/5 CE): Shastri, 'Mandasor Inscription of the time of Naravarman'; a reservoir for Buddhist monks (417/418 CE): Chakravarti, 'Bihar Kotra Inscription'; a shrine for fierce Mātṛs and Viṣṇu temple (423/4 CE): 'Gangdhar Inscription', CII 3[1], pp. 72–78; a Buddhist stūpa (467/8 CE): Garde, 'Mandasor Inscription of Malava Samvat 524'; Sircar, 'Two Inscriptions of Gauri'.

inscription (515 CE)[72] records the offering of certain commodities and spoils of war taken from Toramāṇa as ritual gifts.[73] Although this inscription is one designed to commemorate a military victory through the dedication of a temple to Śiva, the opening benediction requests the blessings of the 'peaceable right half of Pinākin' (*pinākinaś śāntividheyam arddhaṃ vāmetaraṃ*).[74] The verses that follow provide an extensive Aulikara lineage and praise Prakāśadharman's pious acts following his great victory. Some of these donations included temples. Verse 20 mentions a temple (*sadman*) constructed in honour of Śiva, initiated by Prakāśadharman.[75] In Verse 22, a temple of Śiva is mentioned again; here, it is called the Prakāśeśvara temple (*prakāśeśvarasadman*) which stands in Daśapura as a 'mark of Bhārata' (*lakṣma bhāratavarṣasya*).[76] Although the connection between the shrine introduced in Verse 20 and that of Verse 22 is not entirely explicit, they probably refer to one

[72] The edition and translation referred to here are from Salomon's edition, 'New Inscriptional Evidence'.

[73] *ā toramāṇanṛpater nṛpamauliratnajyotsnāpratānaśabalīkṛtapādapīṭhāt/*
hūṇādhipasya bhuvi yena gataḥ pratiṣṭhāṃ nīto yudhā vitathatām adhirājaśabdaḥ //16//
saṃgrāmamūrddhani vipāṭhanipātānāṃ tasyaiva yena madavārimucāṃ gajānām/
āy(ām)idantaghaṭitāni taponidhi(bh)y(o) bhadrāsanāni rucimanti niveditāni //17//
tasyaiva c(ā)havamukhe tarasā jitasya yenāvarodhanavarapramadāḥ pramathya/
lokaprakāśabhujavik[r]amacihnahetor viśrāṇitā bhagavate vṛṣabhadhvajāya //18//

'He falsified in battle the Hūṇa overlord's title of 'Emperor,' which (had) become established on the earth up to (the time of) Toramāṇa, whose footstool was colored by the rays of light from the jewels in the crowns of kings. [16] He presented to holy ascetics beautiful (ivory) seats made from the long tusks of the rutting elephants of that same (Toramāṇa), which he brought down with his arrows at the forefront of the battle. [17] And he carried off and dedicated to Lord Vṛṣabhadhvaja (Śiva) the fairest ladies of the harem of the same (Toramāṇa) whom he had defeated easily in the thick of battle, as a token of the power of his arms which illuminate the world [18]' (Translation Salomon).

[74] A reference to the ritual of *śānti* (appeasement) in connection with the potential calamities of the battle may be implied.

[75] *etac ca nṛttarabhasaskhalitendulekhāvāntāṅsuvicchuritamecakakaṇṭhabhāsaḥ /*
sthāṇos samagrabhuvanattrayasṛṣṭihetoḥ prāleyaśailataṭa(ka)lpam akāri sadma //20//
sadvyabdasaptatisamāsamudāyavatsu pūrṇṇeṣu pañcasu śateṣu vivatsarāṇām /
grīṣmerkkatāpamṛditapramadāsanāthadhārāgṛhodaravijṛmbhitapuṣpaketau //21//
lakṣma bhāratavarṣasya nideśāt tasya bhūkṣitaḥ/
akārayad daśapure prakāśeśvarasadma yaḥ //22//

'And (he) also built this temple, which resembles the slopes of the snowy mountains (the Himālayas), of Sthāṇu (Śiva), the source of the creation of the entire three worlds, whose dark throat shines with the mingling of the rays poured forth by the crescent moon that has slipped down (from his head) in the violence of his dance. [20] When five hundred years, to which is added seventy years plus two more, had passed [i.e., in the year 572], in the summer when Puṣpaketu (Kāma) was blooming with the fountain rooms that were peopled by young women who were overcome by the heat of the sun, [21] he [*yaḥ* = Bhagavaddoṣa] had constructed in Daśapura the Prakāśeśvara Temple, the symbol of Bhāratavarṣa (India), at the command of that King (Prakāśadharman) [22]' (Translation Salomon).

[76] This verse does not explicitly identify the temple as a Śaiva dedication, but we think the inference is justified considering the common practice of naming a *liṅga* in honour of a particular individuals. Moreover, it seems quite likely that the reference in Verse 27 to a temple of Śiva (*śūlinas sadma*) refers to the same shrine as in verses 20 and 22 since it is not preceded by any reference to a second temple.

and the same monument.[77] Verse 21 marking the date also marks the beginning of a new section of the inscription in which certain donative acts promised or intended by Prakāśadharman, are actually carried out by his Naigama minister, Bhagavaddoṣa. These donative details are significant because they evince the levels of social participation that accompanied the building of a temple or religious monument and highlight the multivalent character of the monument itself. Bagavaddoṣa's construction of the *liṅga* shrine in the name of the king was an act of memorialisation that linked the minister, his overlord, and the deity in a highly visible and tangible way. Further, the references to building projects in these and subsequent verses specify that they were undertaken in the city of Daśapura itself.[78]

From Peaceful Pinākin to Raging Bull

Approximately 20 years after Prakāśadharman's victory, Yaśodharman's inscriptions record another victory against the Huṇas: his success is against Mihirakula, the son of Toramāṇa.[79] The relationship between this Aulikara sovereign and his predecessor is unclear since he makes no mention of Prakāśadharman or his earlier victory. In its articulation of a Śaiva ideology, the nine-verse inscription also departs from the idiom of the earlier Rīsthal inscription. The benedictory verse refers to Śiva as the trident bearer (*śūlapāṇi*) and invokes the power of the deity's banner (*ketu*) which bears the image of the bull (Figure 14). Described as wild and destructive, the image of the bull provides a fitting opening for an inscription dedicated to praising military, might, and victory. The change in Śaiva idiom from irenic to bellicose is also expressed through a theological innovation: an early reference to the wild bull as Śiva's vehicle.[80] The description of the bull running amok and terrorising the

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[77] Balogh, *The Aulikaras and Their Associates*, pp. 143–45, on the contrary argues that these are two different monuments. This point remains open to further debate, but it does not affect the main point of the argument that these building practices cement the political alliance between the Aulikaras and the Naigamas.

[78] See verses 22 and 23.

[79] Yaśodharman's twin columns bear the same inscription. The inscription survives intact on the standing column. The other is broken in half, but in its surviving portion shares the features and content of the other. The text is beatifically presented on the column and divided so that each line of text presents a single metrical verse. In the case of the final *śloka*, the engraver has carefully spaced the characters so as to insure the significantly shorter verse also occupies the same space on the column as the others.

[80] Fleet, 'Mandasor Stone Pillar Inscription of Yaśodharman', CII 3[1], pp. 142–50, verse 1:
vepante yasya bhīmastanitabhayasamudbhrāntadaityā digantāḥ
śṛṅgāghātaiḥ sumeror vvighaṭitadṛṣadaḥ kandarā yaḥ karoti |
ukṣāṇaṃ taṃ dadhānaḥ kṣitidharatanayādatta(pañcāṅgulā)ṅkaṃ
drāghiṣṭhaḥ śūlapaṇeḥ kṣapayatu bhavatāṃ śatrutejāṃsi ketuḥ ||.
'May that flying banner of Śūlapāṇi (i.e., Śiva) destroy the forces of your enemy; the banner that bears the Bull, who is marked by the five fingers of the daughter of the mountain (i.e., Pārvatī), due to whose terrific bellowing the quarters vibrate and the demons are gripped with fear, and who cracks the

Figure 14. Fragmentary Column Inscription of Yaśodharman, Sondhni
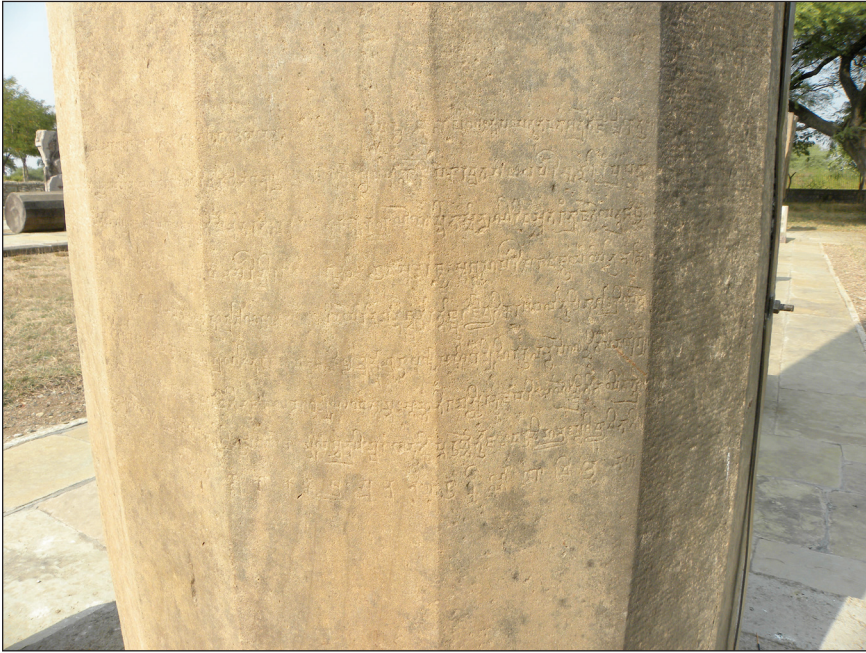
Source: The authors.

Daityas recalls a foundational myth of Śiva's vehicle given in the *Skandapurāṇa*, in which a similarly uncontrollable animal is finally subdued by all the gods who take up residence in various parts of his body and the pacified animal is adopted by the Lord as his mount.[81]

The opening verse featuring the extensive or lofty (*drāghiṣṭhaḥ*) bull banner seems to refer explicitly to the column itself which, as we suggest below, would have been topped with an image of the bull. Thus, the monument serves as an instantiation of that powerful *dhvaja* of Śiva that is capable of destroying one's

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rocks of the cliffs of Mount Sumeru by the pounding of his horns' (Translation: Bakker, *Monuments of Hope, Gloom, and Glory*, p. 30).

[81] This narrative also displays parallels with the Varāha myth, but in the latter instance, it is Viṣṇu's manifestation who needs to be empowered rather than subdued by the entry of the gods in his body. The apparent knowledge by the Aulikara poet(s) of theological innovations also recorded in the early *Skandapurāṇa* is evident in the Naigama inscriptions as well, for example, in the Mandasor Stone Inscription of Yaśodharman, verse 2, Śiva is credited with making Brahmā the 'progenitor'. A similar myth is recorded for the first time in the *Skandapurāṇa*—here Brahmā realises he is the son of Śiva and the Lord makes him a *prajāpati*. For the myth that recounts the adoption of the bull as Śiva's vehicle see Bakker, Bisschop & Yokochi, *Skandapurāṇa (Vol. IIB)*, Chapter 33. For the relationship between Brahmā and Śiva see Adriaensen, Bakker & Isaacson, *Skandapurāṇa (Vol. I)*, Chapter 3.

enemies according to the benediction. The parallel between this verse and the opening of the Eran column inscription is striking (see above). Like the Eran inscription, the Sondhni verse styles the column as a *dhvaja* or *ketu*. Yet the intended purpose of these monuments varied greatly. Framed fully in the ideology of an emplaced and domesticated sovereignty, Viṣṇu's *dhvaja* was intended to honour the Viṣṇu brothers' parents and augment their merit. Yaśodharman, on the other hand, commemorates an act of aggression with an enemy-crushing *ketu* that strikes fear in the hearts of enemies. In much the same way as the Gupta rulers sought to homologise themselves to Viṣṇu, and particularly the saviour *avatāras* like Varāha and Narasiṃha, Yaśodharman also employed religious rhetoric in expressing his political identity, but rather than the god of the Guptas, he venerated Śiva. Considering the conflicts that linked these ruling families and defined the region's political geography, we should read Yaśodharman's monuments at Sondhni in light of the Vaiṣṇava memorial landscape of Eran, a monumental dialogue among contemporaries and competitors.

This language of military prowess and conquest aligns well with the Allahabad Pillar Inscription and it is in dialogue with this record that the majority of the parallels emerge. Like the Gupta inscription, Yaśodharman's record is, in essence, a eulogy to universal sovereignty that follows the model of a *digvijaya*. As such, it does not include any explicit reference to a donative act, nor does it refer to the larger landscape within which it is situated. Noting this shared geopolitical vision, there are some differences. While the Allahabad inscription includes a substantial genealogy enumerating the many laudable rulers in the lineage, Yaśodharman mentions no one from his family nor does he even mention his lineage title, Aulikara. Since the Rīsthal inscription and the Naigama inscription issued only decades before refer to a line of Aulikara rulers,[82] Yaśodharman's omission could be read as a deliberate act of disregard. Presented in intentional isolation, he emerges as a singular and universal sovereign.

Epigraphic Intertextuality: from Banner to Arm

The Aulikara monumental landscape at Sondhni was designed to elevate the ruler Yaśodharman to the status of transcendent sovereign while also promoting a state-sponsored Śiva religion. In expressing this aim, the column inscriptions from

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[82] The Rīsthal inscription praises the names of five Aulikara rulers who preceded Prakāśadharman. See Salomon, 'New Inscriptional Evidence'.

Verse 6 of the 'Mandasor Stone Inscription of Yaśodharman' (CII 3[1], pp. 150–58) refers to those kings who bear the *aulikara* mark (*lañchana*) and to Yaśodharman as part of that family. Verse 10 refers to the Naigama minister who is the servant of the kings who established the lineage of that lord (i.e., Yaśodharman):

tasya prabhor vvaṃśakṛtāṃ nṛpāṇāṃ pādāśrayād viśrutapuṇyakīrttiḥ /
bhṛtyaḥ svanaibhṛtyajitāriṣaṭka āsīd vasīyān kila ṣaṣṭhidattaḥ // 10//

'The servant of the kings who founded the family of that lord, was Shashtidatta,–the fame of whose religious merit was known far and wide through the protection of (*their*) feet; who by his resoluteness conquered the six enemies (*of religion*); (*and*) who was indeed very excellent' (Translation Fleet).

Sondhni engage in a kind of call-and-response with the Allahabad Pillar Inscription by adopting several of the earlier inscription's metaphors and themes and then expanding upon them in a display of political one-upmanship.

In the inscription from the Gupta column at Allahabad, the poet describes the object as a monumental piling up of the fame (*yaśas*) of Samudragupta. This image of a heaping mass of glory extending higher and higher into the air conjures a vertical ascent that lends a striking bi-directionality to the lines recording the ruler's conquest of the four corners of the earth. Power extends both horizontally, across the plane of the earth, and vertically, up to the abode of the gods.[83] The glorious accretion of fame suggests the monumental height of the column itself. Adding to that image, the poet likens the monument to the arm of the Earth, the ruler's divine consort, raised up to bear eternal witness to his greatness. Finally, we are introduced to an aquatic metaphor: the king's glory is liquefied and, like the divine waters of the sacred Gaṅgā river, purifies the earth with its radiance.

> This column has been raised, a [lofty] arm of the Earth, as if communicating that the fame of the king of kings, the glorious Samudragupta which has pervaded the entire surface of the earth—its expansion occasioned by his victory over all the earth—has [now] obtained a playful and pleasant course for traveling from here to the abode of the Lord of the gods (Indra).[84]

> Whose fame, which has been raised up in heaps higher and higher in many ways by his manifesting charity, physical strength, composure, and eloquence, purifies the three worlds, just like the bright Gaṅgā water which is quickly released after being confined in the caves within the matted hair of Paśupati.[85]

It appears that Yaśodharman's court poet, Vāsula (the same poet who notably composed the earlier inscription of his predecessor Prakāśadharman),[86] was aware of the

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[83] Compare also the trope on Gupta coins about the king winning heaven after conquering the earth. For example, about Candragupta II: *kṣitim avajitya sucaritair divaṃ jayati vikramādityaḥ* 'Having conquered the earth with good deeds, Vikramāditya conquers heaven'. Allan, *Coins of the Gupta Dynasty*, p. 35. See also Raven, 'Samudragupta's Aśvamedha Coins', pp. 109–11.

[84] Lines 29–30: *mahārājādhirājaśrīsamudraguptasya sarvvapṛthivīvijayajanitodayavyāptanikhilāv anitalāṃ kīrttim itas tridaśapatibhavanagamanāvāptalaḷitasukhavicaraṇām ācakṣāṇa iva bhuvo bāhur ayam ucchritaḥ stambhaḥ* (Fleet, CII 3[1], p. 267).

[85] Lines 31–30: *yasya|*
pradānabhujavikkramapraśamaśāstravākyodayair
uparryuparisañcayocchritam anekamārggaṃ yaśaḥ[]
punāti bhuvanatrayaṃ paśupater jjaṭāntarguhā-
nirodhaparimokṣaśīghram iva pāṇḍu gāṅgaṃ [payaḥ] [||] (Fleet, CII 3[1], p. 267).

[86] Note that Vāsula uses the same stock signature line in both inscriptions, but with reference to two different kings:
iti tuṣṭūṣayā tasya nṛpateḥ puṇyakarmmaṇaḥ /
vāsulenoparacitā pūrvveyaṁ kakkasūnunā //

Gupta exemplar at Allahabad. In the Sondhni inscription, the column is again evoked as an arm of the earth that was brought to be erected in that place (*stambhaḥ [...] ucchritiṃ nāyito 'tra*), recalling the words *ayam ucchritaḥ stambhaḥ* of the Allahabad Pillar Inscription (see above). In the Allahabad inscription, the Earth raises up her arm in witness to the pervasive fame of Samudragupta. This gesture communicates that, having already suffused the horizontal plane of the earth, the Gupta king's fame had reached heaven along an easy course. Yaśodharman's Earth, however, is far less placid. The column is likened to her arm thrown up out of passion (*rāgād utkṣipta uccairbhuja iva*). Here the Earth does not simply point the way for his fame; enflamed with passion, she takes a pen in hand to inscribe the virtues of Yaśodharman on the face of the moon (*utkarṣaṃ guṇāṇāṃ likhitum iva yaśodharmaṇaś candrabimbe*).

   This participation in Gupta poetic idioms does not imply that Yaśodharman was attempting to establish a positive line of affiliation or succession with the earlier rulers. Like the rebellious and raging bull his inscription invokes, Yaśodharman shows no deference to those who aspired to the title of ruler in the past. He disparages them sarcastically as mere interlopers upon whom the title of 'ruler' shone as much as would a flower offering bestowed on a dust pile (*rājasv anyeṣu pāṃsuṣv iva kusumabalir nābabhāse prayuktaḥ*). By contrast, in the same verse, Yaśodharman likens himself to four archetypical rulers: Manu, Bharata, Alarka, and Māndhātṛ.[87] The cruel and unworthy kings he criticises have been taken as a reference to the Huṇas, whom Yaśodharman explicitly claims to have defeated. The pregnant silence regarding the forefathers of his own lineage could also indicate his desire to establish himself as independent from them. Verse 4 describes Yaśodharman as operating with contempt or disrespect for the boundaries of his own house (*svagṛhaparisarāvajñayā*). This claim could indicate a dissatisfaction with the more limited territorial scope of his predecessors or, even more forcefully, a rejection of the lineage house in its entirety.

   Neither are the Guptas spared from Yaśodharman's poetic posturing. Although acknowledging the Gupta 'lords' (*nātha*) had surpassed even the Hūṇas in claiming territory, Yaśodharman exceeds them both and, in his *digvijaya*, claims to have conquered the entire subcontinent. Whereas the Allahabad inscription made a similar claim supported by specific georeferences and the enumeration of conquered dynasties, Yaśodharman mentions only the topographic features that designate the east/west expanse of his territory.[88]

   (Rīsthal Inscription, verse 29, where *nṛpateḥ* refers to Prakāśadharman)
   iti tuṣṭūṣayā tasya nṛpateḥ puṇyakarmmaṇaḥ /
   vāsulenoparacitāḥ ślokāḥ kakkasya sūnunā //
   (Mandasor Pillar Inscription, verse 9, where *nṛpateḥ* refers to Yaśodharman)
   [87] Verse 3. Compare the Gupta stock phrase in which Samudragupta is likened to the four deities: Kubera, Varuṇa, Indra, and Yama, 'Allahabad Pillar Inscription', l. 26).
   [88] Fleet, 'Mandasor Stone Pillar Inscription of Yaśodharman', CII 3[1], pp. 142–50, verse 5ab:
   ā lauhityopakaṇṭhāt talavanagahanopatyakād ā mahendrād,

Site Syntax

The inscriptions that adorn the columns at Sondhni mark a radical declaration of
independence, a surpassing of the venerable old dynasty of the Guptas, the Hūṇa
invaders, and even the rulers of Yaśodharman's own lineage (*svagṛha*). This king's
efforts to transcend the boundaries (*parisara*) placed upon him by his family can be
read in the monumental landscape of Sondhni itself. The distinctiveness of Sondhni
as a place of religious activity is evident by its siting in the physical terrain. The
Aulikara capital, the city of Daśapura, was strategically located along the ancient
highway that connected the political centre to other major economic and political
centres in the region, such as Ujjain (149 km to the southeast) and Chittorgarh
(115 km to the north). Prakāśadharman's donative inscription refers explicitly to
the fact that his Śiva temple and the other shrines he commissioned were situated
in the city of Daśapura, which was celebrated as a cosmopolitan urban centre
in literary and epigraphic sources.[89] Yaśodharman's columns, by contrast, were
erected at a considerable distance from the centre—4 miles south of the old fortified
settlement and located on the north side of the Shivna River. Since it was located
at a distance from the settlement, Sondhni was also removed from the ritual and
cult centre of the polity, the Paśupatināth temple positioned on the southern bank
of the Shivna River. The fifth- to sixth-century remains at Paśupatināth include
an 8-faced (recarved) *liṅga* still under active worship.[90] Paśupatināth's riverside
location is fitting for a sacred centre in South Asia since it conforms to what
we would expect for a *tīrtha*. The same term for an auspicious pilgrimage place
is used in the earliest inscription from Eran. The Allahabad column was erected
at a sanctified space near the confluence of the Ganges and Yamuna rivers.
Sondhni's columns, by contrast, stand in a flat, undifferentiated landscape
without any natural features to distract the viewer from the towering 40-foot-high
monuments. Considering the strategic placement of the monuments, we suggest

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ā gaṅgāśliṣṭasānos tuhinaśikhariṇaḥ paścimād ā payodheḥ /

'from the borders of the Lauhitya River to the foot of the Mahendra Mountain with its impenetrable
palmyra woods, from the Snow Mountains (Himālaya) whose tablelands are embraced by the
Gaṅgā River up to the Western Ocean' (Translation: Bakker, *Monuments of Hope, Gloom, and
Glory*, p. 31).

[89] Note the lengthy descriptions of Daśapura's architecture in the Silk Weavers' Inscription (CII 3[1],
pp. 79–88, tr. Fleet):

prāsādamālābhir alaṁkṛtāni dharāṁ vidāryyaiva samutthitāni /
vimānamālāsadṛśāni yattra gṛhāṇi pūrṇṇendukarāmalāni //12//
yad bhāty abhiramyasarid[d]vayena capalormmiṇā samupagūḍhaṁ
rahasi kucaśālinībhyāṁ prītiratibhyāṁ smarāṅgam iva //13//

'Here, cleaving asunder the earth, there rise up homes which are decorated with successions of
stories; which are like rows of aerial chariots; and which are as pure as rays of the full moon. [12]
The (city) is beautiful being embraced by two charming rivers, with tremulous waves, as if it were the
body of Smara (embraced) in secrecy by (his wives) Prīti and Rati, possessed of (heaving) breasts. [13]'

[90] On this *liṅga* and related material evidence see Williams 'On the Edge of What?'

that Sondhni reflects an effort to design a new type of monumental landscape—a space in which the imbrication of religious and political ideology found unique expression.

Over the past decades, the area where the columns were first reported has been subject to a number of interventions by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). One of the columns has been (re)erected and the second fragmentary piece has been set up beside it with the crowing elements displayed in front of the two columns. Other loose sculptures and carved architectural fragments have been preserved in on-site storage as well as in the National Museum in New Delhi, the Bhopal State Archaeological Museum, and the local museum in Daśapura. These elements suggest that there would have been a temple at the Sondhni site, although structural remains have not survived nor is a temple mentioned in the inscription. A partial reconstruction is possible, however, using the earliest reports and photos made by C. E. Luard, which provide a larger material context for the columns and the inscriptions.[91] Luard surveyed and photographed the area immediately surrounding the two columns in 1908. Drawing upon local memory of the place, he identified the remains of two pillars, which may have supported a doorframe, and two massive *dvārapālas* (whose *jaṭā*, third eye, and accompanying *triśūlapuruṣas* clearly evince a Śaiva affiliation). Most significant, however, was Luard's discovery of the foundation of a brick structure to the west of the columns, built upon a terraced mound approximately one-and-a-half meters above the surrounding land. This terraced mound is still clearly visible at the contemporary ASI protected site where a small staircase conveys the visitor down the small hill to the re-erected columns. According to Luard's report, the mound was formed from a brick foundation of what was likely a larger brick structure. The remains of that structure were already lost at the time of his visit. Within the remains of the brick foundation, a massive *sahasra liṅga*—a phallic emblem of Śiva covered with innumerable smaller *liṅgas*—was found (Figure 15). This *liṅga* is still visible on top of the mound at the base of a pipal tree.[92] If we assume that the *liṅga* is contemporaneous with the rest of the sixth-century remains of the site, it would be the earliest known example of this iconographic form.[93]

Integrating these various archival sources permits, for the first time, a vision of the site as a whole. Considered in light of other remarkable material remains and architectural fragments found scattered around the fields, the temple at Sondhni would have been dedicated to Śiva and the *sahasraliṅga* mentioned above may well have been the cult icon under worship.[94] The columns, then, would have

[91] C. E. Luard, 'Gazetteer Gleanings in Central India'.

[92] This *liṅga* was not reported by Fleet or Luard and the circumstances of its discovery remain unknown to us. Given its current location, under the pipal behind the terraced area, and given its massive proportions, it is likely not far from its original location.

[93] According to von Mitterwallner, 'Evolution of the *Liṅga*', p. 22, the *liṅga* is likely contemporaneous with the other early sixth-century remains.

[94] Cecil and Bisschop, 'Columns in Context', pp. 387–92.

Figure 15. *Sahasraliṅga*, Sondhi

Source: The authors.

been oriented in direct line with a temple housing a unique new type of *liṅga*. The crowning elements of both of Yaśodharman's columns are now missing, but it is plausible in view of the reference to Śiva's bull banner in the opening verse of the inscription that each would have been topped with the image of the bull.[95] The martial tone of the inscriptions combined with the intimidating monuments materialised the association between the innovative Śaiva monument and Yaśodharman's political ascendancy.

[95] Since the crowing elements of one of the columns are displayed at ground level at the site, it is possible to see the circular pattern of carved joins set around a central socket on top of the lion-carved abacus. This is a clear indication that there was a final crowning element, which has been lost.

Daśapura's Defining Doubles

The most unique feature of Sondhni is yet to be addressed; namely, why are there two seemingly identical columns with the same inscription at the same site. While multiple epigraphs inscribed on individual monuments are well attested, the repetition of the same epigraphic text on a pair of pillars at the same site has only one comparable case: the Gupta period temple at Bilsaḍ (Aliganj District UP). The Bilsaḍ temple to Skanda was framed by two free-standing columns engraved with identical dedicatory inscriptions.[96] As at the site of Bilsaḍ, the Sondhni columns were designed to frame the temple and the larger sanctified space with a political message that created an intervisibility between political and religious ideologies. Hence, while the remains of Sondhni display clear signs of innovation, the design of the landscape also suggests that the sponsors and artisans were influenced by comparable sites in the region.

While the spatial articulation of the site is now clear, questions remain about the significance of the two columns. What did the artisans and architects intend to communicate with this doubling? A number of interpretations are possible. The framing columns could express a desire for visual symmetry and balance within the site. We could also interpret the doubling as a materialisation of the inscription's poetic metaphor, that is, that the columns were the two arms of the Earth raised up in testament to Yaśodharman's greatness. To the structural and symbolic functions of this pair of columns, we may add a third layer of significance. Given that the Aulikara epigraphic corpus attests to the strong alliance between the Aulikara ruling house and the Naigama merchant ministers, and their history of collaborative donative acts, these twin monuments could stand in commemoration of this political partnership. The decision to erect the columns in front of a temple to Śiva provides a way of framing the relationship between these two groups through the expression of a shared religious affiliation.

The presence of a Naigama's hand in the development of the Sondhni site is not evident from the primary display inscriptions on the columns which, as mentioned above, refer only to Yaśodharman's activities. There is, however, another inscription to consider, a small label inscription engraved on the abacus of one of the columns (Figure 16). It has been read hitherto as *sadharmmaḥ nirddoṣaḥ*.[97] The second word, *nirddoṣaḥ*, is striking because it is also the name given to the Naigama minister who would have served the Aulikara court at the time of Yaśodharman.[98] This Nirdoṣa,

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[96] 'Bilsaḍ Stone Pillar Inscription of Kumāragupta I: The Year 96', CII 3², pp. 267–70. Both Fleet and Bhandarkar refer to Yaśodharman's pillars as '"*jayastambhas*" or "columns of victory", that were not connected with any building; whereas the two inscribed Bilsaḍ pillars seem to have had a direct connection to the temple' (CII 3², p. 268). As discussed above, Yaśodharman's pillars were, in fact, connected to a temple, although it is not mentioned in the inscription.

[97] Bakker, *Monuments of Hope, Gloom and Glory*, p. 23.

[98] See table in Appendix I of Bakker, *Ibid*.

Figure 16. Abacus of One of the Two Columns at Sondhni, with Inscription Reading *bhādharmmaḥ nirddoṣaḥ*

Source: The authors.

had a name with the signature -*doṣa* suffix shared by many in the Naigama lineage. Taking Nirdoṣa as a proper name, we can then propose the reading 'Nirdoṣa is possessed of *dharma*'. Alternatively, reading a positive play on the name with a suffix that means 'fault', 'He, possessed of *dharma*, is faultless'.

These interpretations depend on the reading of the first character as *sa*. Upon further consideration, however, and by comparing the character of the label inscription with the Sondhni column inscriptions, we conclude that the *sa* reading is unlikely. Indeed, the character would be an unconventionally formed *sa*. Much more likely is the reading of this character as *bhā*: *bhādharmmaḥ nirddoṣaḥ*. This new reading works from a clear affinity between the debated character and *bha*/*bhā* as recorded in the column inscription and by comparison with examples from the Indoskript database.[99] Having amended the reading of the first character, the translation also needs to be revised. One option is to read them both as proper names, 'Bhādharma

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[99] Indoskript 2.0: http://www.indoskript.org (last accessed 10-11-2019). See in particular the character *bha* in the Karamdanda Inscription of Kumāragupta (436–37 CE). We first presented this reading at the 17th World Sanskrit Conference in Vancouver in 2018. This reading has subsequently been adopted by Balogh, *The Aulikaras and Their Associates*, pp. 236–38.

and Nirdoṣa' or to take *nirdoṣa* as a description of the person named Bhādharma: 'Bhādharma is faultless'. Given the identity between the *nirddoṣaḥ* of the inscription and the name of the Naigama minister, we propose to read both words as proper names. The question then remains, who was Bhādharma?

Material and epigraphic evidence clearly shows that Daśapura and its environs constituted a major centre of Śaiva activity. Given that Daśapura was such a diverse and dynamic place, we might infer that networks of Pāśupata specialists were also part of the scene, although the columns' inscriptions do not mention communities of ascetics or lineages of preceptors.[100] However, if we take Bhādharma as a name indicating religious affiliation, the enigmatic label inscription would include the name of a Pāśupata specialist since names beginning in *bhā* or *bhāva* are very common among Pāśupatas.[101] As recorded in the *Abhinavabhāratī*

… *yathā pāśupatānāṃ bhāpūṣan bhāsarvajña ityādi saṃbhāṣaṇam*; …

'the form of address for Pāśupatas, for instance, [might be] "Bhā-pūṣan", "Bhā-sarvajña" or the like'.[102]

Reading the small label inscription as recording two names, that of the Naigama minister Nirdoṣa and a Śaiva religious specialist called Bhādharma, contributes a new perspective on the monuments at Sondhni. This was a site of religious innovation that materialised a politically inflected Śiva religion through the use of the monumental *dhvajas* to frame the *sahasraliṅga* temple. The design of the site further mobilises Śaiva religion in the service of a political agenda by memorialising the alliance between the Aulikara rulers, their merchant ministers, the Naigamas, and Pāśupata religious specialists whose influence supported the Śaiva innovations that defined the Sondhni site.

Conclusions and Further Questions

This comparative study of Eran and Sondhni was occasioned by the observation of certain similarities in the syntax of these two Gupta period sites in North India, particularly in the use and symbolism of monumental columns styled as *dhvaja*s and engraved with elaborate Sanskrit inscriptions commemorating the deeds of their founders. The imagery and phrasing employed in Yaśodharman's two monumental columns at Sondhni evoked that of the Eran column of the time of Budhagupta and prompted the hypothesis that the poet of the former was aware of the latter. A subsequent site visit and closer investigation of the Eran column confirmed this

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[100] The earliest evidence for Pāśupata lineages in the region comes from an early eighth-century inscription found in Indragarh, north of Daśapura: Deva, 'Indragaḍh Stone Inscription of Naṇṇapa'. See Cecil, *Mapping the Pāśupata Landscape*, pp. 93–102.

[101] Note that Bakker has argued that Bhāravi, the author of the *Kirātārjunīya* and likely a Pāśupata as well in view of his name and the subject of his poem, may have lived at the court of Yaśodharman. *The World of the Skandapurāṇa*, p. 36.

[102] Abhinavagupta's *Abhinavabhāratī*, as cited by Goodall 2015, 'On K. 1049', 26.

initial hypothesis and provided further impetus to 'read Yaśodharman's monuments at Sondhni in the light of the Vaiṣṇava memorial landscape of Eran, a monumental dialogue amongst contemporaries and competitors'.[103] In addition to the resonance between the 'official' inscriptions engraved on the monument, we read the small graffito recording the name of Sāmanta-Doṣa on the Eran column as indicative of a broader social network in which these monuments were incorporated. More specifically, that a member of the Naigama family, whose history is thoroughly entwined with that of the Aulikaras of Yaśodharman, may have actually visited the site of Eran and left his signature on the column.

A consideration of the political uses of the monumental columns in these two locales prompted a comparison of other remarkable features of Eran and Sondhni. Perhaps the most important of these concerns the iconographic innovations that anchor both sites: the theriomorphic boar with all divine principles depicted on its body in Eran and the massive *sahasraliṅga* with numerous small *liṅga*s clustered around the central *liṅga* at Sondhni. The visual resonance between these iconographic forms is unmistakable. Since previous studies have tended to view these images and sites in isolation this striking parallel in form has not been noticed. While they represent distinct theological visions within the developing Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva traditions, these expressions of plurality inherent in a single divine form mark artistic revolutions of the Gupta period that would become idiomatic in subsequent centuries.

The project of comparison is not solely to draw attention to similarities. A focused study of these sites has also brought to light some significant differences in the ways in which landscapes are shaped and monuments deployed to serve political agendas. Eran is a place with a long local and regional history, both before and after the Gupta period. We have argued that Samudragupta and the two Viṣṇu brothers participated in an ongoing process of investment in the locality through claiming personal ties with the place. In contrast with the emplaced, domesticated articulation of sovereignty at Eran, Yaśodharman's paired columns express an aggressive and totalising vision of power. Inspiration for this totalising vision came from the famous *praśasti* of Samudragupta at Allahabad. Yaśodharman's hyperbolic claim to have conquered lands that eluded even the Guptas demonstrates the power of the Gupta idiom even as it works to surpass them. Comparison of both sites has also brought to the fore the unique position of Sondhni within the Aulikara political landscape. Rather than augment the *tīrtha* and thriving capital of Daśapura nearby—an engagement that would parallel the development of the *tīrtha* at Eran—Yaśodharman's monuments were displayed in a flat open space independent of family and tradition.

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[103] Cecil and Bisschop, 'Columns in Context', p. 387. Compare also Bakker, *Monuments of Hope, Gloom and Glory*, p. 22: 'I would not be surprised if a comparative study of both sites revealed that the Sondhni architect had had a very good look at Eran.'

In his 'Theses on Comparison', Bruce Lincoln has advocated 'comparison of weaker and more modest sorts that (a) focus on a relatively small number of comparanda that the researcher can study closely; (b) are equally attentive to relations of similarity and those of difference; (c) grant equal dignity and intelligence to all parties considered; and (d) are attentive to the social, historical, and political contexts of religious and literary texts'.[104] Our comparative study began with two sites. This initially modest and circumscribed project was expanded gradually in response to the historiographical construction and idealisation of the 'Gupta Period', through which these two landscapes have traditionally been approached. In doing so, this study has accomplished two things. It enhances our understanding of two significant places in North India in terms of their regional embeddedness and their place within a transregional political discourse. Moreover, this work of contextualisation, so integral to the comparative method, contributes to a rethinking of a pivotal period of Indian history through close analysis of the regional landscapes and localised polities that defined it.

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