

Indus Temples and Saurashtra

Michael W. Meister

By the beginning of the sixth century CE, Saurashtra saw the rise of the Maitraka kings of Valabhi, under the suzerainty of the Gupta dynasty in Central and Northern India. Droṇasimha (ca. 520–50) was the first to use the Gupta Era in his charters. At the time, Gārulaka chieftains ruled as Maitraka vassals in western Saurashtra. According to M. A. Dhaky's summary of their patronage and rule, the Maitrakas' ascent "as an eminent power begins from the reign of Guhasēna (ca. 555–570), ... by whose time the power of the Guptas had considerably declined."¹ During Maitraka rule, distinctive stone temples began to be built in Saurashtra; many were Śaiva but also Saura (Dharapaṭṭa, ca. 520–550, had declared himself a "Parama-Āditya-bhakta") and other sects.² Dhaky commented that, with few exceptions, "temples of the Maitraka period fall in areas which incidentally had been within the reign of the Gārulakas. Only near the middle of the eighth century do the Saindhavas appear as rulers in the same territory."³ Dhaky modified his much earlier

view of these temples,⁴ writing that

If lower western Surāṣṭra is accepted as having been under Gārulaka, and not direct Maitraka rule, Varāhadāsa's claim, in A.D. 549, that he had founded many temples would suggest that we might reconsider the date of the stylistically earliest structures in western Surāṣṭra, previously placed between c. 575–650. ... Surāṣṭra buildings are quite austere, weatherworn, and the chronological discussion presented here must therefore remain somewhat tentative.

Temples in the Salt Range and along the Indus in Pakistan, built under the hegemony of Turk Śāhis ruling from Kabul and Hund in the seventh and eighth centuries, represent a regional school of architecture, evolving from an earlier 'Gandhāran' construction, that gave local expression to a new 'Nāgara' temple vocabulary developed in Gangetic India to house Hindu, Jain, and occasionally Buddhist images for worship.⁵ Kuwayama has argued that the preceding Kinghal dynasty had extended its reach to the west bank of the Indus by the seventh century — to Hund, which became its winter capital, but also to Bannu and possibly even Dera Ismail Khan — a region with a large Brahmanical population

¹ M. A. Dhaky, "Maitrakas of Valabhī and Gārulakas of Western Surāṣṭra," in *Encyclopaedia of Indian Temple Architecture*, Vol. II, part 1 [hereafter *EITA* II.1], edited by M. W. Meister, M. A. Dhaky, and Krishna Deva, New Delhi: American Institute of Indian Studies & Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 168.

² J. M. Nanavati and M. A. Dhaky, *The Maitraka and the Saindhava Temples of Gujarat* (Artibus Asiae Supplementum 26), Ascona: Artibus Asiae, 1969.

³ Dhaky, "Maitrakas ... Gārulakas," p. 170.

⁴ Nanavati and Dhaky, *Maitraka and Saindhava*, passim.

⁵ Michael W. Meister, "On the Development of a Morphology for a Symbolic Architecture: India." *Res, Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 12 (1986): 33–50.

alongside Buddhists.⁶ Cultic and architectural expressions in both regions might suggest that there had been some connections between the distinctive early temples in Saurashtra and those of the Northwest, through north–south links along the Indus River (Pl. 4). If so, these likely would have been weakened by the end of the seventh century, leaving both schools of temple architecture to find their separated ways.⁷ Sixth- and seventh-century temples in these regions, however, offer rare examples of experiments widely disbursed across the subcontinent that contributed to the foundation of the *latina* Nāgara temple as the preeminent symbolically charged architecture of its day.

Some comparable elements in early temples in both regions include plinth-and-torus underpinnings of moulding typologies; courses of ‘brick-like’ stone masonry (laterite or tufa) finished in plaster, even making up each of the roll cornices in the superstructure (*vide* figs. 4–6); some pilaster types; experiments compacting *kūṭina* elements of the *śikhara*; and, initially, square-based plans, often within ambulatory halls, with central projections (*latās*) only in the tower above. These are suggestive, not definitive, comparisons that faintly shadow a connection; the presence of Sun temples in both regions may be another.

I wish to focus especially on the compound of

Temple D at Bilot (Pl. 2), perhaps the most complex sacred monument along the Indus. The earliest temple in Bilot’s fort, Temple D was built on a large rectangular plinth, now stripped of most of its surface cladding. Square in plan, the walls of the sanctum have pilasters cantoning the corners; paired central pilasters flank chambers framed by shrine models on each wall (Pl. 3, right). Above these pilasters are sockets and a broad fillet that suggest beams and the ceiling of an enclosing ambulatory hall, possibly wooden. A landing and flight of steps gave access to this plinth from the east (Pl. 4, lower left).

Temple D’s compound was expanded in several phases.⁸ Extensions enclosing domed, ground-level, east-facing chambers were added to either side of the access stairway by late in the seventh century at the same time Temple A was built lower down the mountainous slope to the east and Temple H (Pls. 1; 5, bottom) to the north.⁹ South-facing chambers with conjoined Nāgara *śikharas* (F/G) were built on the

⁸ Michael W. Meister, “The Problem of Platform Extensions at Kafirkot North,” *Ancient Pakistan* 16 (2005): 41–48.

⁹ Stein’s pencil plan, “checked and completed” by H. Hargreaves, and published by him in the *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India, Frontier Circle, 1920-21*, lists eight temples: “A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H” (Pl. 1). E is a south-facing sub-shrine on the northeast corner of Temple D’s platform. Three conjoined chambers, two with surviving *śikharas*, added to the NE corner of Temple D’s compound, are designated ‘F’; a shrine added to the north of Temple D is identified as G. A ruined small platform between Temples D and A, no longer with surviving remains, is marked H. Recent scholarship in Pakistan has called the two NE chambers with *śikharas* Temples F and G, and the ruined temple north of Temple D, Temple H (Pl. 2). I have expressed my support of this recent renaming (Meister 2010: 38) on the grounds that it may “better order the surviving subsidiary shrines as part of Temple D’s expanded complex.”

⁶ Shoshin Kuwayama, “Historical Notes on Kāpiśī and Kābul in the Sixth–Eighth Centuries,” *Zinbun* 34 (1999): 25–77. According to Kuwayama, the Kingal Dynasty “came into existence in parallel with the political weakening of the Hephthalites toward the middle of the sixth century and lasted until the rise of the Turks in Kābul in the middle of the seventh century.”

⁷ Michael W. Meister, *Temples of the Indus: Studies in the Hindu Architecture of Ancient Pakistan* (Brill Indological Library, vol. 35), Leiden: Brill, 2010.

northeast corner of an enlarged compound, with a steep flight of steps on the east climbing up from below (Pl. 2). Perhaps half a century later, Temple E, a south-facing Nāgara shrine, was built on the northeastern platform extension, above the east-facing domed chamber below (Pls. 4, lower left & 5, top).

At Kāfirkoṭ North, the two earliest temples that survive, Temples B and A, are also square in plan, with chamfered walls, cantoning pilasters, sockets and recess for an ambulatory roof, a projecting central *latā* only in the superstructure.¹⁰ Temple B has three cornice levels that survive, but no corner ribbed markers (*āmalakas*), making it more of a *bhūmi-prāsāda*. Temple A (Pl. 3, left), on the other hand, advertises its *latina* Nāgara connections with a first level in the *śikhara* marked by *bhūmi-khaṇḍa* units on the corners that consist of two cornices, thin ‘*vedī*’ slab, and an *āmalaka* directly above with no necking. The broad central projection on this level also pairs two *bhūmi-khaṇḍas*, which are not, however, repeated up the next storeys.

Bilot’s larger Temple D is both more complicated and earlier (Pl. 3, right). Square in plan, its mouldings include a broad recess with sparsely spaced floral bosses and *puṣparatnas* (floral diamonds). The roll cornice (*kapota*) that tops these mouldings and those of the *śikhara* above have bold bands of beam-ends below. At the center of each wall is a small sunk chamber framed by a scale model of a temple (Pl. 4, upper right). Its vestibule is represented as having a trefoil vault that

extends up into a central *latā* of roll cornices (*kapota*) crowned by a small *āmalaka*. To either side, corners of the slightly curvilinear tower are marked by two levels of paired cornices crowned by *āmalakas*; between three *āmalakas* at the top are two pillarets supporting an upper platform (*uttaravedī*) from which the necking supporting the upper *āmalaka* appears. Together, these parts make an appropriate schema for an early or proto-Nāgara temple.

Above the sockets and seating for beams and an ambulatory roof at the top of the sanctum’s walls, the temple’s *śikhara* has a basal storey marked by corner pillars and ‘perforated’ ‘screens’, the one on the broad central projected section flanked by lotus medallions (Pl. 3, right). Between the modillion brackets of the cantoning pilasters is a shallow ‘saw-tooth’ fringe. The tower above consists of a series of roll cornices (*kapotas*)—each made up of several courses of kanjur ‘bricks’ (Pl. 7, top)—each underpinned by a band of beam-ends. Each cornice has a central *candraśālā* motif, flanked by a conjoined one-and-a-half *candraśālā* motif on either side, with small ‘florets’ filling their cavities; this pattern is adjusted in scale on each cornice to allow for a slightly curved ascent.

The corner faces of the base storey of the *śikhara* are defined as small pillared pavilions, each with a superstructure—consisting of two cornices (the lower ornamented with split *candraśālā*, the upper a central *candraśālā* with flower infill), ‘*vedī*’ platform, and *āmalaka*—separated from the cornices of the central *latā*. Between these corner *āmalakas* and corresponding cornices of the *madhyalatā*, small pillarets are placed that correspond in part to the pillarets supporting the *uttaravedīs* at the top of shrine-models on the sanctum walls (Pl. 4, upper right). Similar pillarets form

¹⁰ M. W. Meister, “Chronology of Temples in the Salt Range, Pakistan,” in *South Asian Archaeology 1997*, edited by Maurizio Taddei and Giuseppe De Marco, Rome: Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente, 2000, pp. 1321–1339.

part of the superstructure of Temple A at Kāfirkoṭ and a loose pillaret was found in the excavation of Temple E. My deconstruction of Temple D's 'compacted' superstructure (Pl. 7, bottom) makes it possible to see these as parts of pavilions that make up the corner '*kūṭas*' of the next storey

The square plan of the walls of Temple D, with central offsets only in the *śikhara* above, suggests that an ambulatory hall once surrounded the sanctum; sockets for wood beams are visible above the wall, as is a broad fillet for positioning the roof, as also is the case for Temple A at Kāfirkoṭ (Pl. 3). Such an enclosed sanctum, set on a platform approached by a projecting flight of stairs (Pl. 4, bottom), can be compared to the plan of the sixth/seventh-century Bilvanātha Temple, Bileśvara, Saurashtra.¹¹ Of the superstructure of the Bilvanātha temple (Pl. 6), Dhaky wrote

The clearly demarcated storeys, independent karṇakūṭas and gavākṣas that show no suggestion of integration into jāla ... , and the heaviness of the āmalaka itself suggest that the temple represents, if not a stage in the formal development of Nāgara, at least one of the experiments that preceded the emergence of Nāgara form.

The Bilvanātha temple has narrow pilasters and bracketing on its outer walls, roll cornices in the *śikhara* underpinned by heavy bands of beam ends, rows of non-intertwined *candraśālās*, and a fixation on corner aedicules (*kūṭas*) comparable in part to those in the

Northwest (Pl. 6). Archaic as Temple D's experiments at Bilot may seem (Pl. 7), they suggest a somewhat greater—if still distant—connection to the '*kūṭina*' experiments of early Nāgara temples elsewhere in the seventh century (Pl. 8).

At Bāṇasarā in Saurashtra, Dhaky classified a further group of early stone temples as 'pseudo-Drāviḍic' and 'proto-Nāgara'.¹² Temple 1 is square in plan, without an ambulatory hall; its superstructure consists of roll-cornice 'storeys' marked by abbreviated corner pedestals with tiny *āmalakas* but with no central projecting *latā*. A series of *candraśālās*, with the central *candraśālā* flanked by half *candraśālās*, on each cornice storey, however, gives the suggestion of consolidation toward the center (Pl. 9). Dhaky saw these ornamental changes as "a new trend of far-reaching significance ... the gradual transformation of the superstructure into the Nāgara *śikhara* form" determined by the "coalescence of the tiers or storeys into one total form," "transmutation of the *candraśālā* motif by a coalescence into *jāla*," and "integration of the corner aediculae."¹³ These changes, as an organic and self-conscious transition, may more clearly be seen at Bilot's Temple D than in these examples from Saurashtra. To leap from Bileśvara's Bilvanātha Temple and Bāṇasarā's Temple No. 1 to a Nāgara structure such as the Sun Temple at Akhodar required knowledge assimilated from other regions of India (Pls. 6, 9). But what a transition it was.

The Sun Temple at Akhodar is *sāndhāra*, its square sanctum set within an ambulatory hall;

¹¹ Dhaky, "Maitrakas ... Gārulakas," p. 184, while wondering "Is the temple of the Gārulaka period, and could Varāhadāsa II [A.D. 549] have been its builder ... ?", chose to conclude that "parallels sensed with other architectural styles might hint at a date no earlier than the end of the sixth or early in the seventh century."

¹² Nanvati and Dhaky, *Maitraka and Saindhava*, pp. 28–29.

¹³ Ibid., p. 30.

the *śikhara* above the ambulatory roof, however, has central, flanking, and corner offsets (a tripartite scheme seen for the first time in the Salt Range on the brick temple at Kālar¹⁴). Paired pillars and awning, a *khaṇḍa* of two *kapotas*, with *candraśālā* facing, and a crowning *āmalaka* suggest *kūṭa* pavilions on the corners that extend up the tower as a *veṅkośa* sheath. The flanking offsets shift half-*khaṇḍas* down, staggering their *āmakalas* for only a couple of storeys, faced by partial *candraśālās* clasping the central *latā* with its larger *candraśālās*, suggesting an incipient *jāla* (Fig. 9, upper right). Dhaky concluded that the “general disposition of the *śikhara* favours a date in the second quarter of the seventh century A.D. A date around A.D. 650–675 seems safer, however, keeping in mind the archaisms peculiar to this area.”

Further consolidation of this local *latina* formula can be seen on the Sun Temple at Ḍhāṅk (Pl. 10, bottom).¹⁵ We still are sorting out the sixth and seventh centuries, the period in which Nāgara architecture first took firm shape; Saurashtra and the Indus region offer exceptional evidence for the resilience of the form, and the intensity of the search for its architectural expression. If the fifth century had perhaps provided a rationale and ‘set of parts’,¹⁶ the sixth century ‘engineered the machine’.

If the many widely disbursed sites we now identify as representing proto-Nāgara

explorations—such as those of Bileśvara, Bilot, Bhāṇasarā, Kāfirkoṭ, Rajim, Sirpur, Ālampur, Akhodar, and Ḍhāṅk—had one central reference point, it would have been the ‘Gupta’ Temple at Deogarh, M.P. (ca. 525–550), among the first fully formed Nāgara temples surviving. Its architects marked both door jambs with representations of two earlier experiments from the previous century (Pl. 10, right), but built a much more successfully integrated tower following a newly reasoned architectural form. We can now reconstruct its proto-Nāgara *śikhara*, in relation to remains at the site, but with much greater confidence gained from the history of comparable experiments scattered widely across the Indian sub-continent (Pls. 6–10).¹⁷

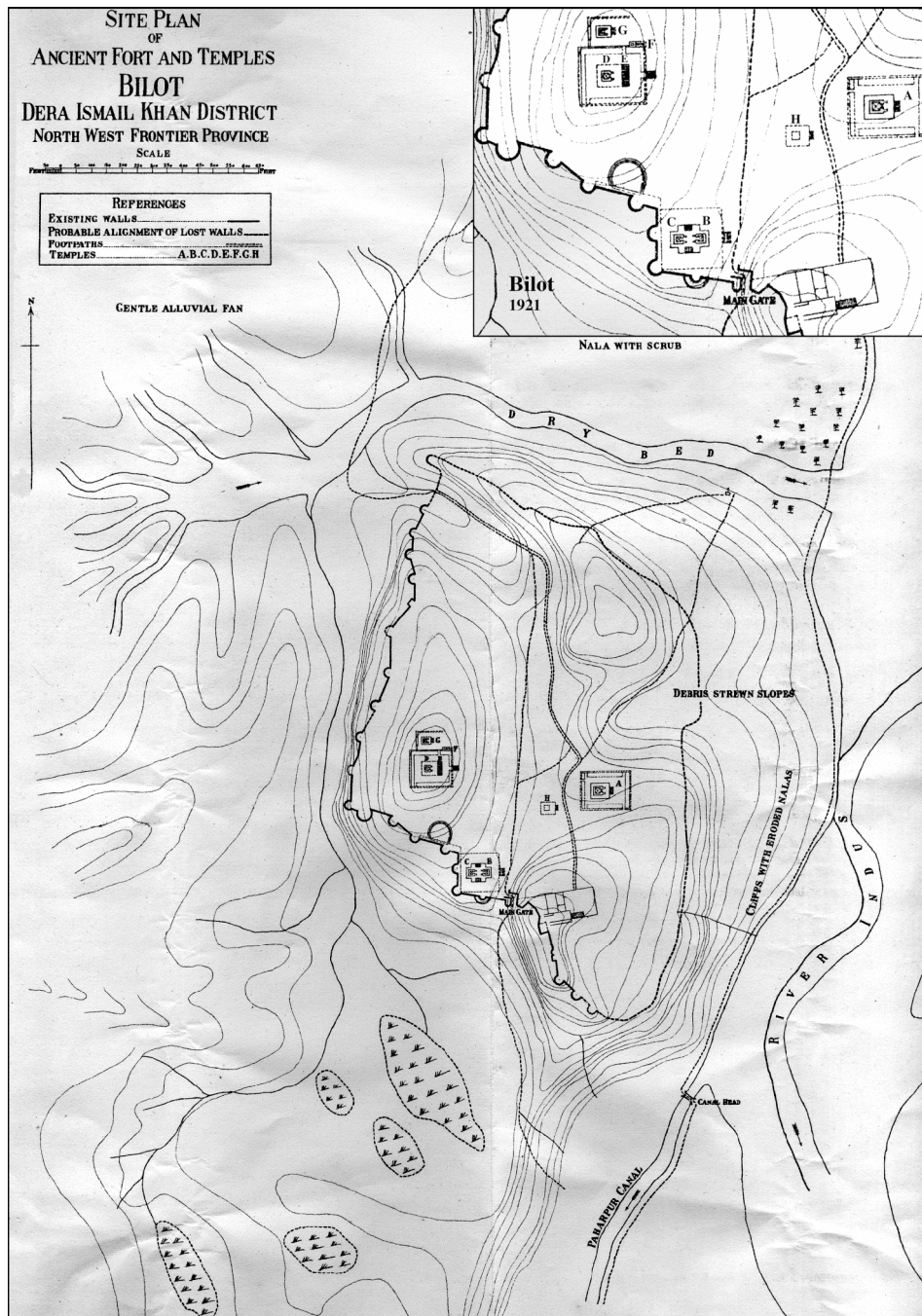
¹⁴ Meister, “Chronology,” pp. 1329–1330 & Fig. 12.

¹⁵ M. A. Dhaky, “Maitrakas of Valabhi,” *EITA* II.1, 202–204.

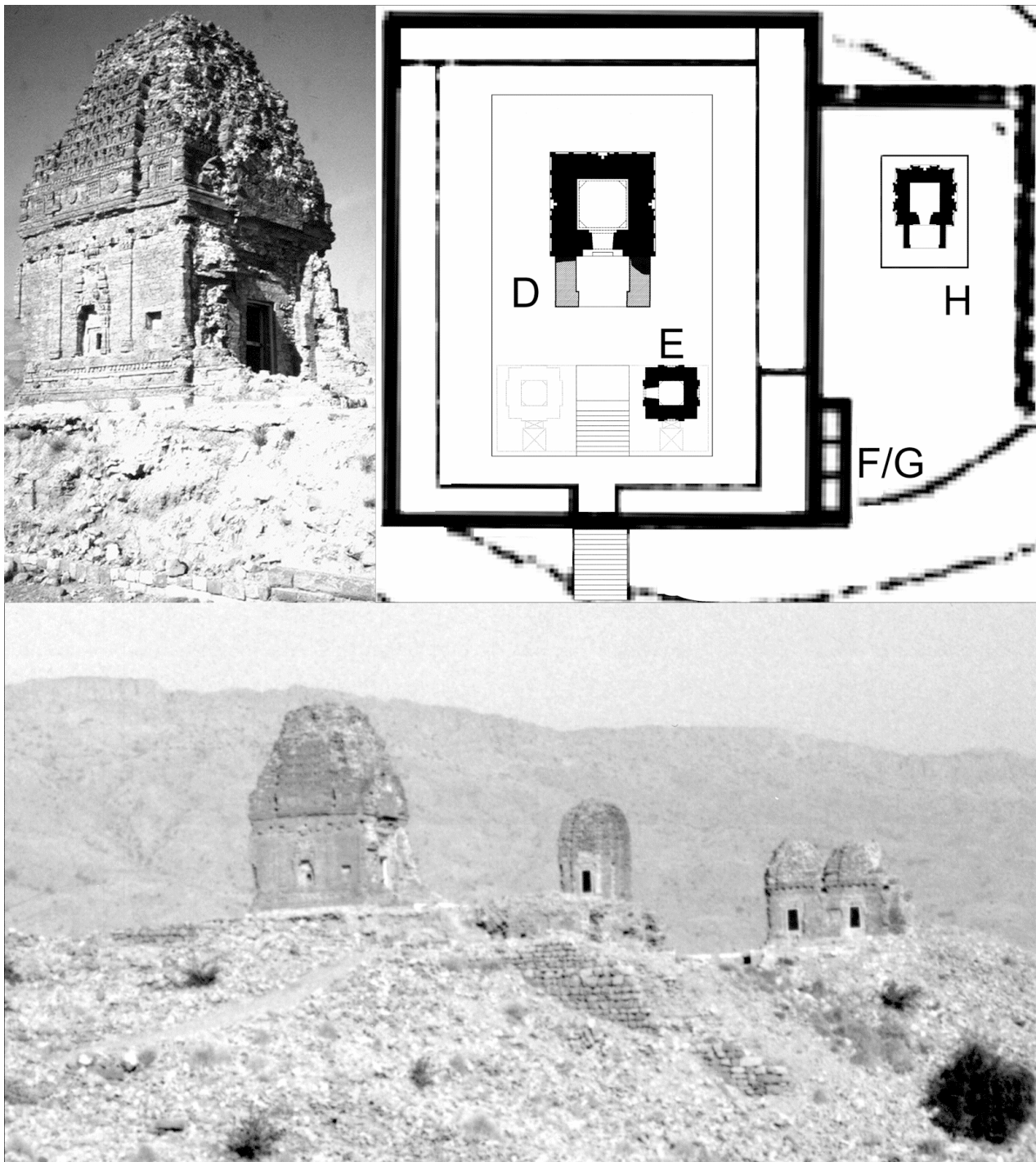
¹⁶ Michael W. Meister, “Dārā and the Early Gupta Tradition,” in *Chhavi II, Rai Krishna Dasa Felicitation Volume*, edited by Anand Krishna, Banaras: Bharat Kala Bhavan, 1981, pp. 192–205.

¹⁷ M. S. Vats, *Gupta Temple at Deogarh* (Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India, No. 70), Delhi: Manager of Publications, 1952, provided a much different reconstruction based on the limited evidence available to him at the time of his excavation. My reconstruction of the lower level of the Deogarh superstructure was first published in *EITA* II.1, Fig. 21a. My tentative reconstruction of the full tower published here uses Vats’ drawing of the east face of the sanctum as foundation.

Plates

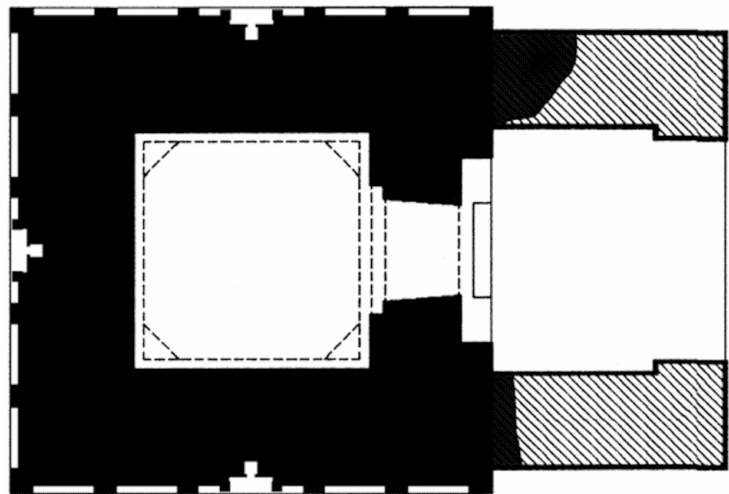
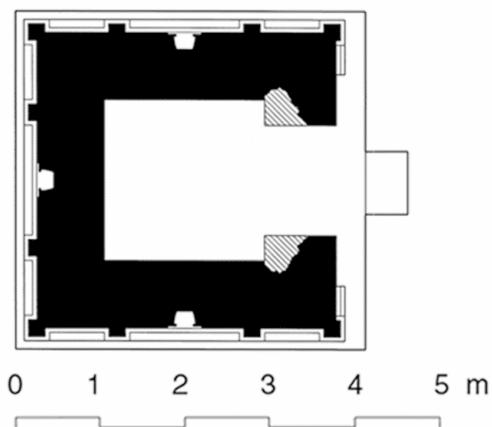
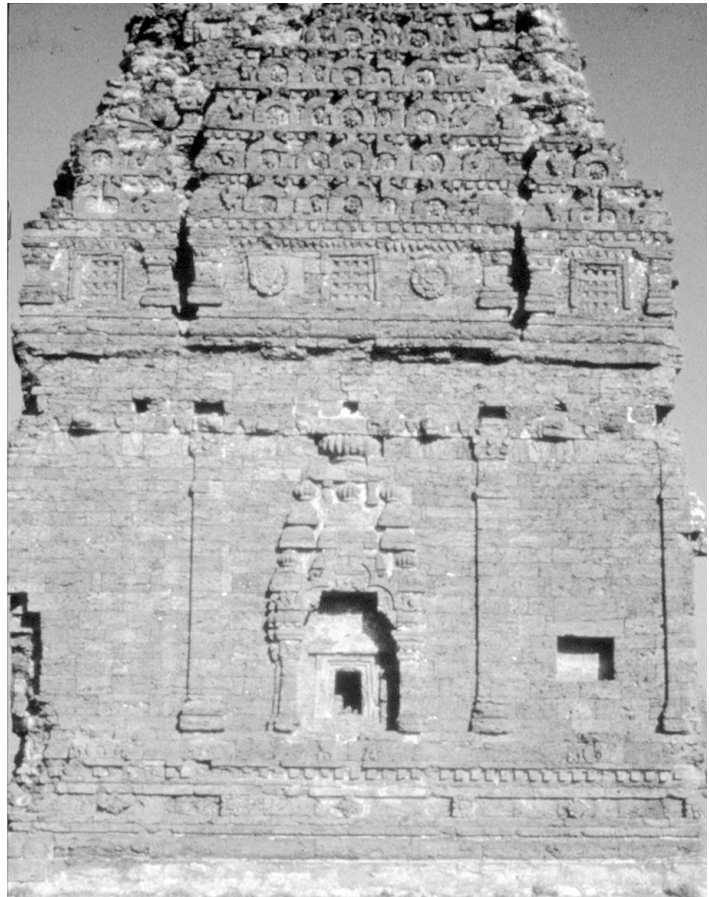


Pl. 1. "Site Plan of Ancient Fort and Temples, Bilot, Dera Ismail Khan District, North West Frontier Province." Pencil drawing by Sir Aurel Stein, ca. 1911-12, "checked and completed" and then published by H. Hargreaves, Superintendent, Archaeological Survey on India Frontier Circle, *Progress Report*, 1920-21, appendix; inset: temple compounds, with temples as designated A-H in 1921.

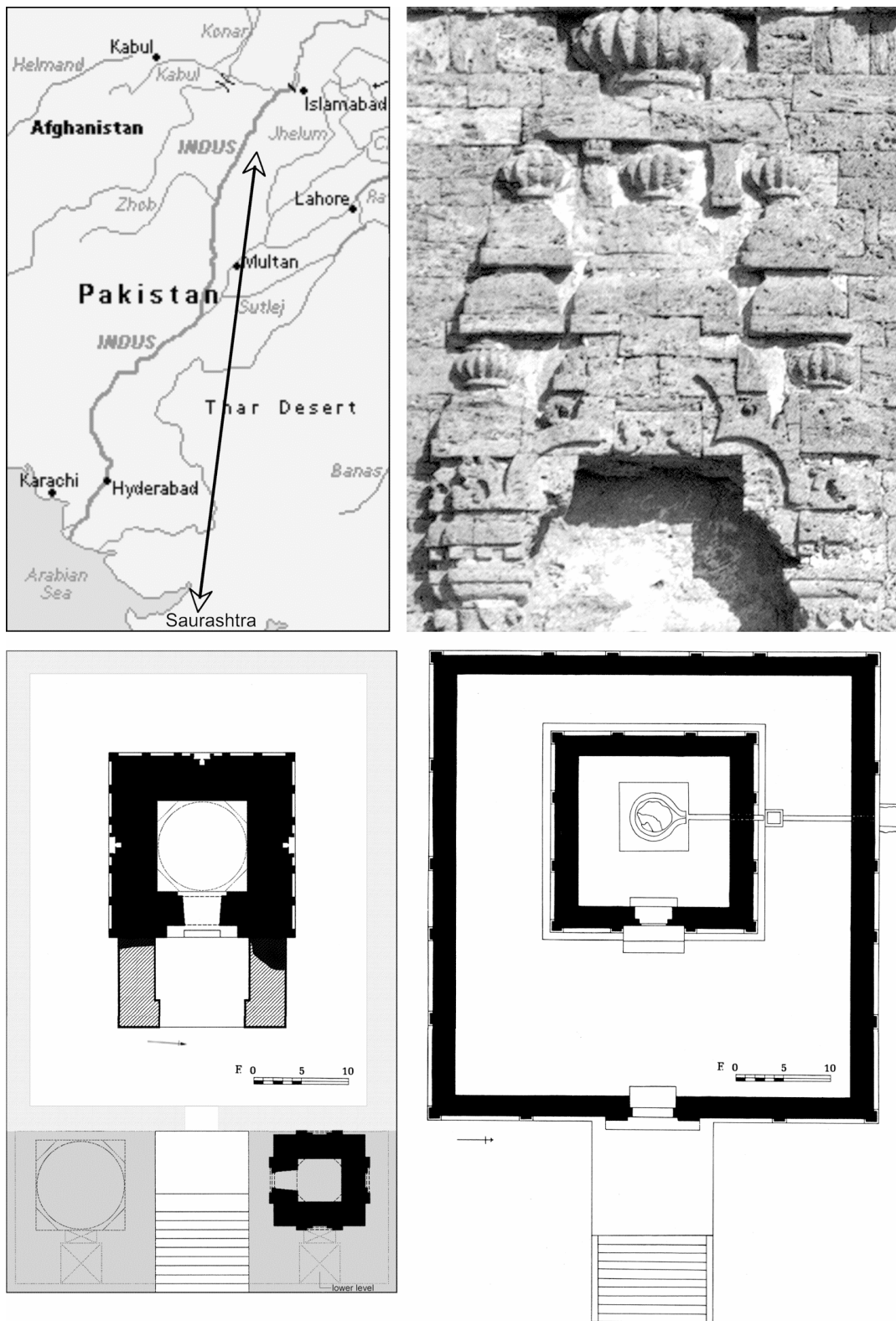


Pl. 2. Bilot Kāfirkoṭ, Temple D: site and sanctum from southeast;
plan of compound with modern designations for Temples F-H.

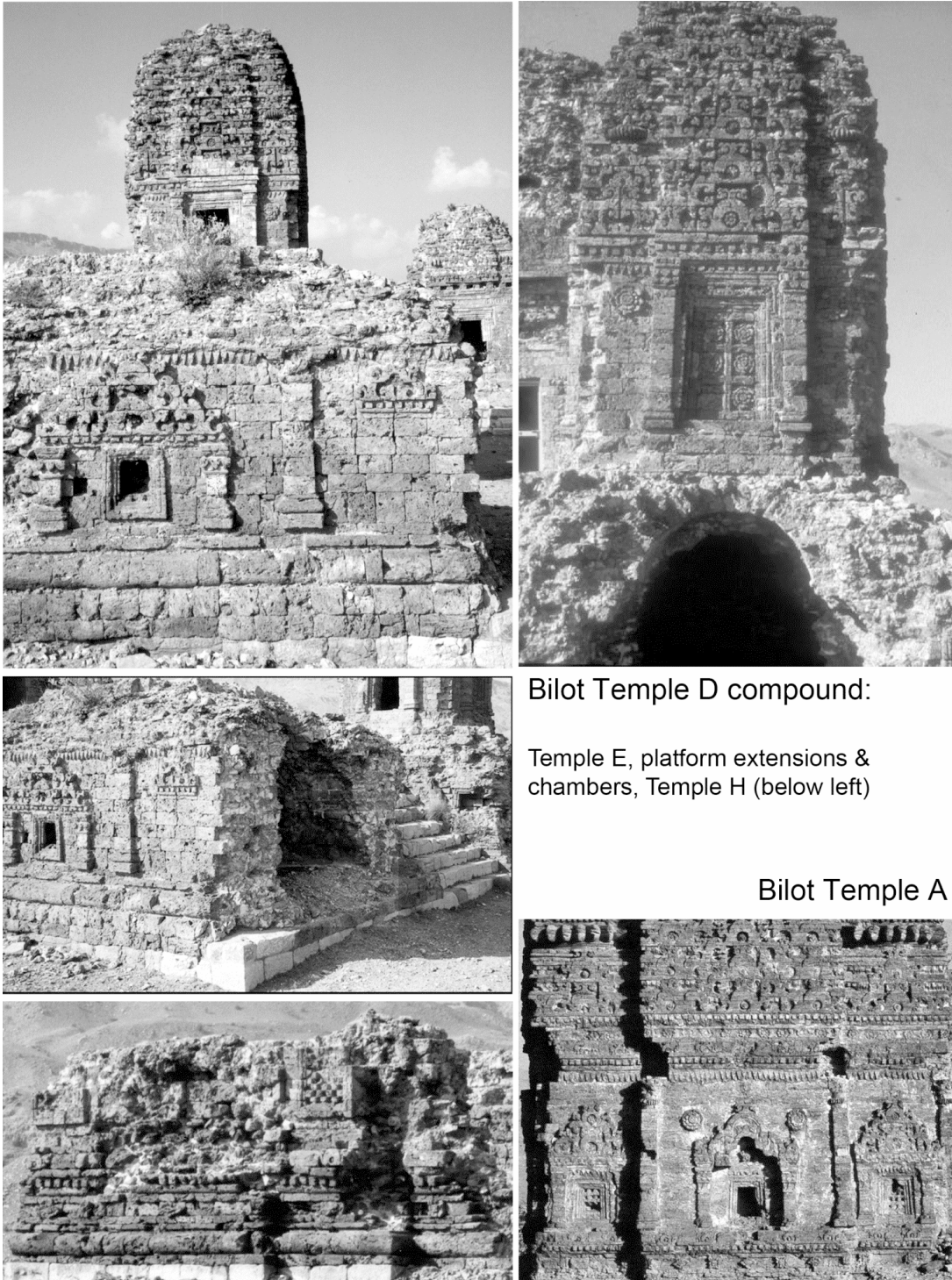
Kafirkot A and Bilot D



Pl. 3. Kāfirkoṭ North, Temple A, west, and Bilot Kāfirkoṭ, Temple D, south, and ground plans.



Pl. 4. Map: Indus River and Saurashtra; Bilot, Temple D, shrine model on south wall; Temple D, ground plan with extended platform (domed sub-chambers and Temple E above); Bileśvara, Saurashtra, Bilvanātha Temple, ground plan (after *Encyclopadia of Indian Temple Architecture*).

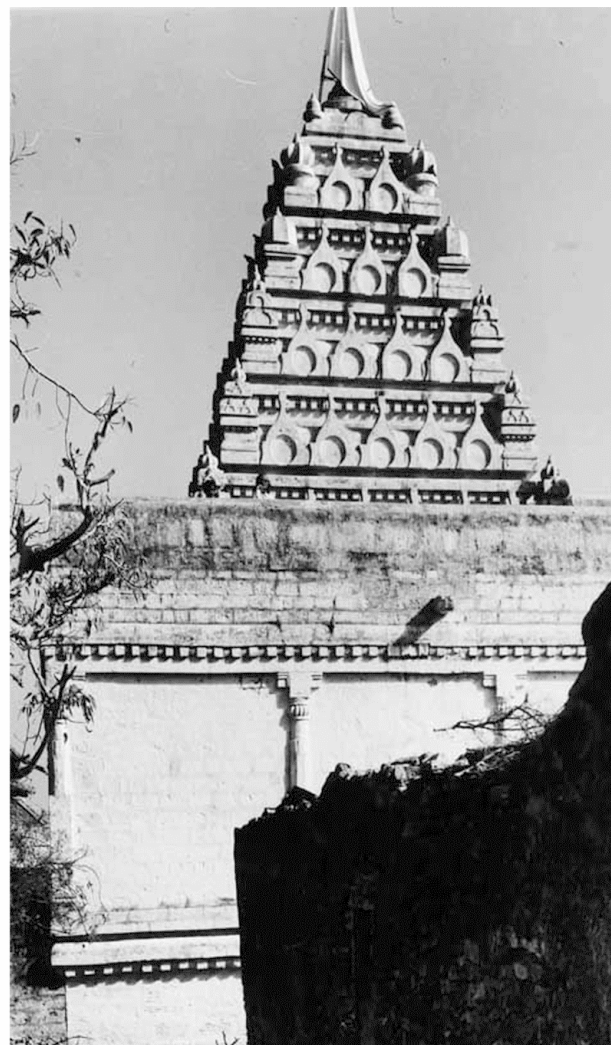
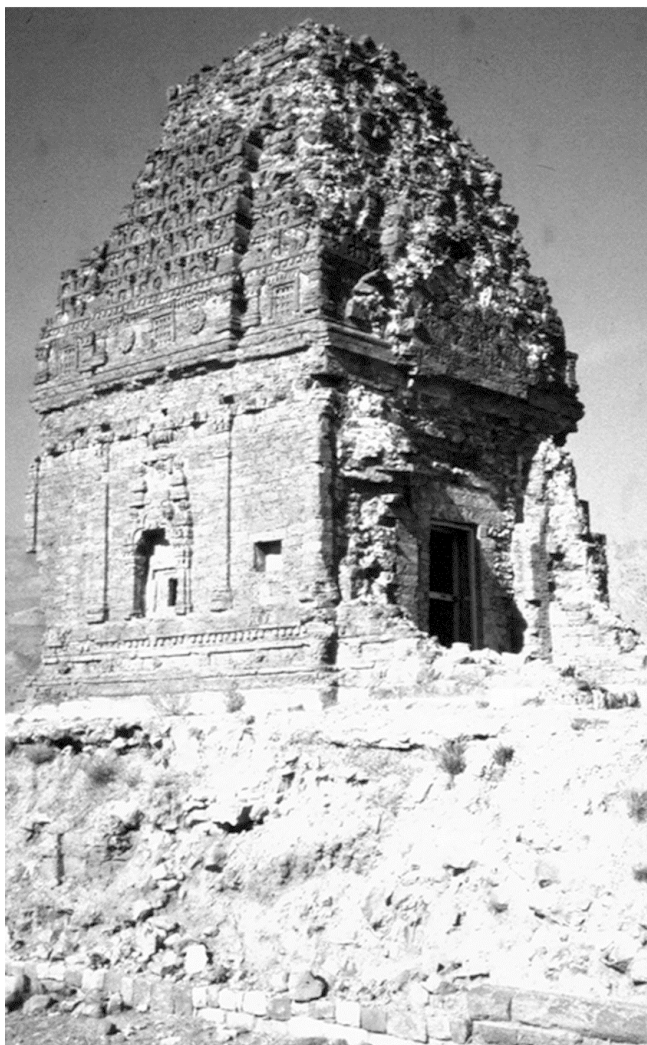
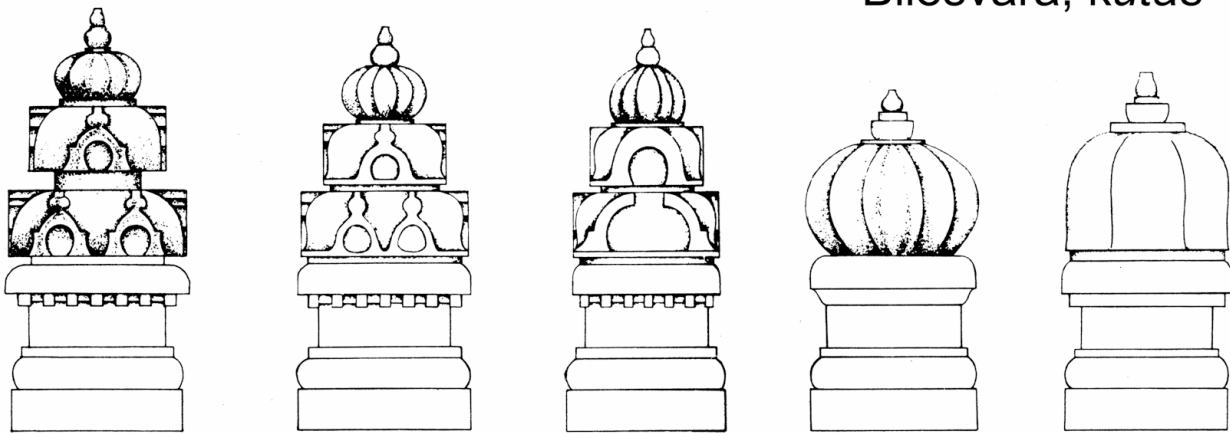


Bilot Temple D compound:

Temple E, platform extensions & chambers, Temple H (below left)

Bilot Temple A

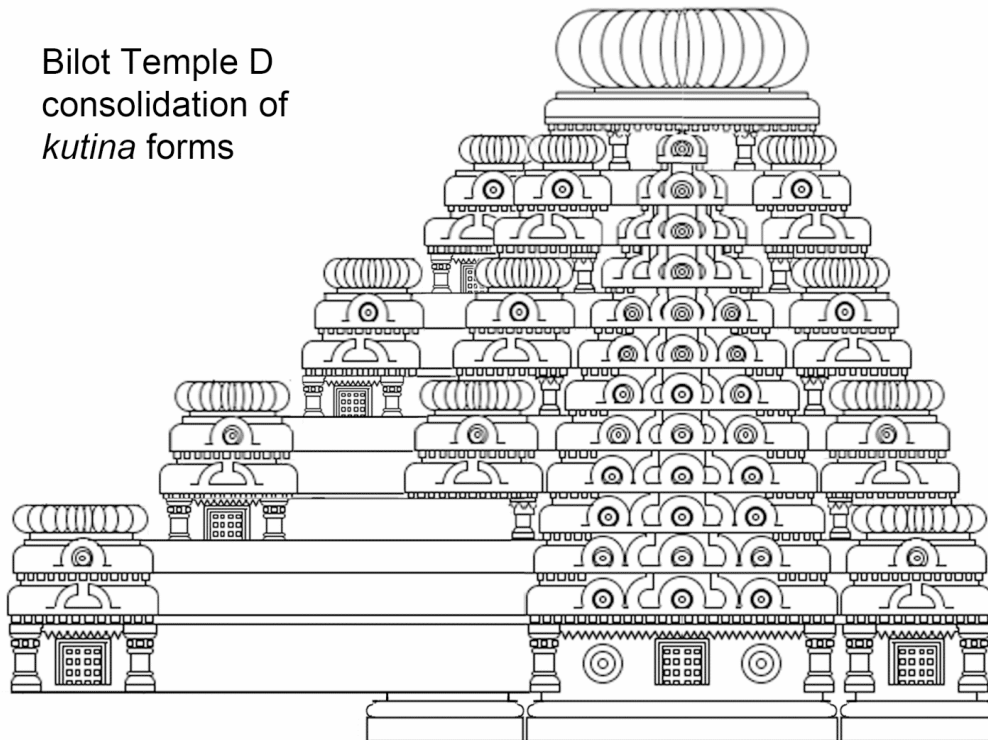
Pl. 5. Bilot, Temple D compound: (top) Temple E & SE extension, south; Temple E, east façade above platform chamber (Temple F in background); (middle) SE extension and chamber, southeast; (bottom) Temple H (north of Temple D); Temple A, south.

Bilesvara, *kutas*

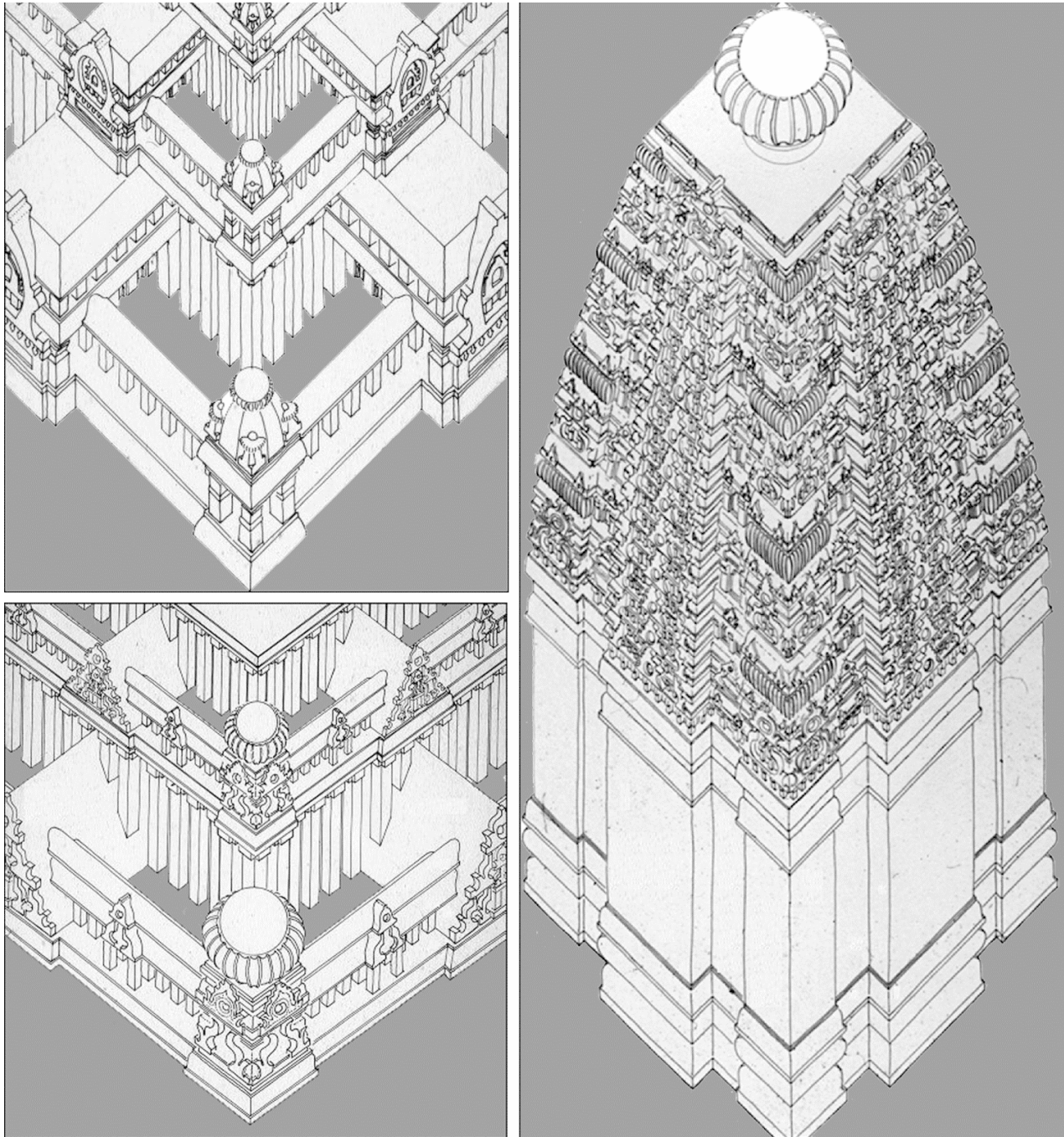
Pl. 6. Bileśvara, Bilvanātha Temple, corner *kūṭas*, 1st to 5th storeys (after *Encyclopaedia of Indian Temple Architecture*)(top). Bilot Temple D, Sanctum, southeast, and Bileśvara, Bilvanātha Temple, east, with enclosing hall (below).



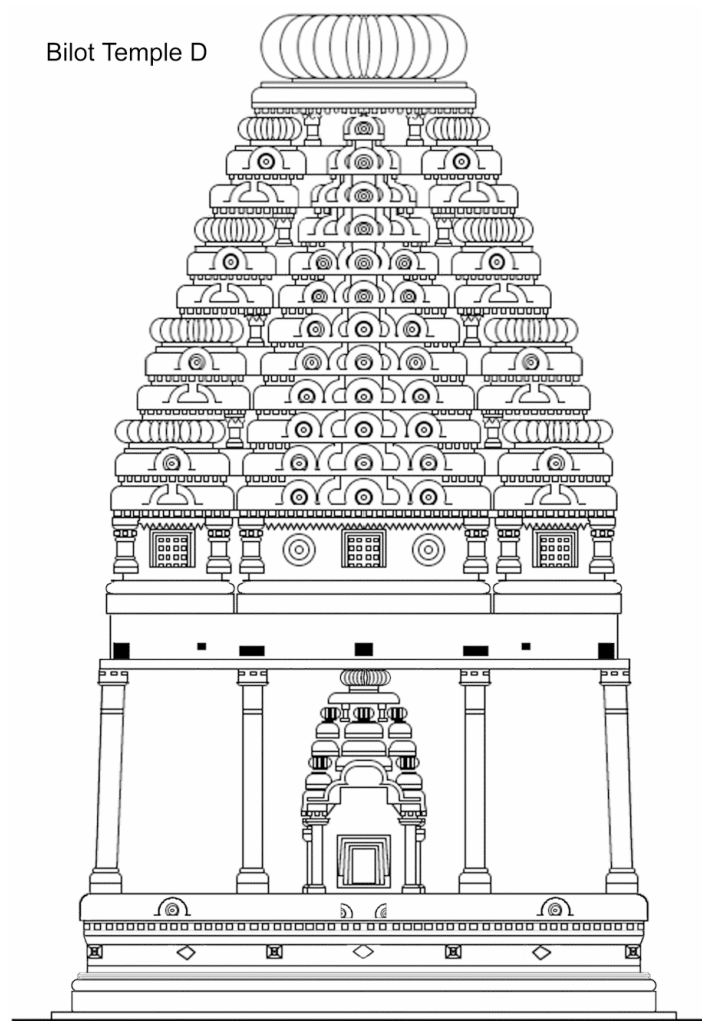
Bilot Temple D
consolidation of
kutina forms



Pl. 7. Bilot, Temple D, *shikhara*, detail of southwest corner; drawing to suggest consolidation of *kutina* forms



Pl. 8. Kūṭina origins of Nāgara, summary comparisons: deconstruction of 'kūṭina' Nāgara śikhara at Rajim, Chhattisgarh (upper left) and 'latina' Nāgara śikhara at Ālampur, A.P. (lower left); axonometric drawing of Ālampur Nāgara temple, ca. late 7th-century (right).

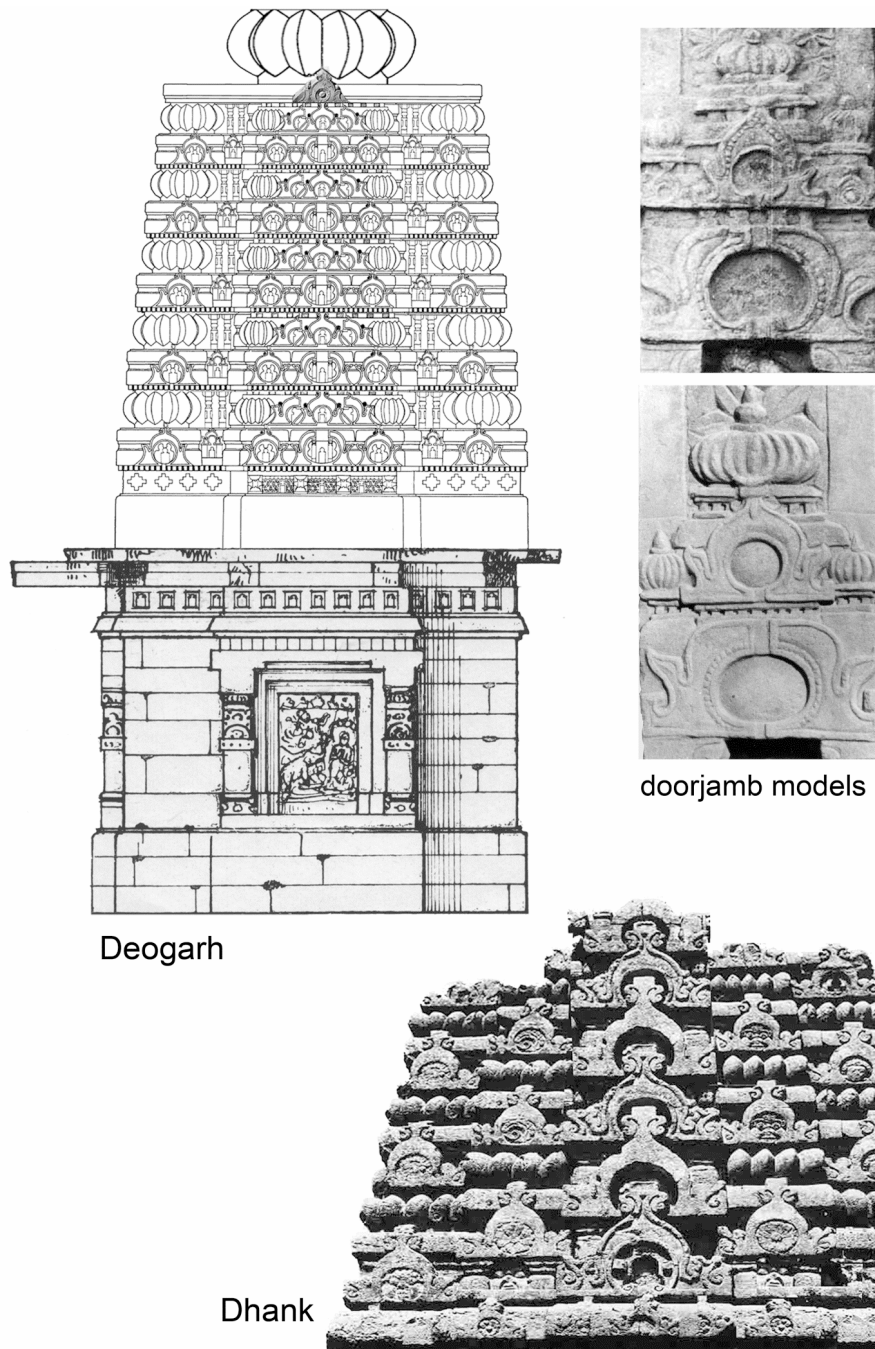


Akhodar, Sun Temple



Banasara Temple 1

Pl. 9. Bilot, Temple D reconstruction; Akhodar, Saurashtra, Sun Temple, early Nāgara *śikhara*; Bhāṇasārā, Saurashtra, Temple No. 1, pre-Nāgara *śikhara*.



Pl. 10. Deogarh, Madhya Pradesh, 'Gupta' Temple, sanctum, reconstruction of proto-Nāgara *śikhara*; Deogarh, 'Gupta' Temple, door jambs, architectural models; Dhāṅk, Saurashtra, Sun Temple, Nāgara *śikhara* (partly restored).

Photographs and drawings of Indus and Central Indian temples are by the author; plan and photographs of Saurashtra temples and Deogarh jambs, courtesy American Institute of Indian Studies, Gurgaon.