



HAL
open science

Review of Politische Strukturen im Guptareich (300–550 n.Chr.) by Fred Virkus; and of The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual: Temples and the Establishment of the Gods by Michael Willis

Emmanuel Francis, Arlo Griffiths

► **To cite this version:**

Emmanuel Francis, Arlo Griffiths. Review of Politische Strukturen im Guptareich (300–550 n.Chr.) by Fred Virkus; and of The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual: Temples and the Establishment of the Gods by Michael Willis. *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 2014, pp.140-143. 10.7817/jameror-iesoci.134.1.0140 . halshs-01909930

HAL Id: halshs-01909930

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01909930v1>

Submitted on 12 Nov 2018

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Politische Strukturen im Guptareich (300–550 n.Chr.). By FRED VIRKUS. Asien- und Afrika-Studien der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, vol. 18. Wiesbaden: HARRASSOWITZ VERLAG, 2004. Pp. x + 319. €78.

The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual: Temples and the Establishment of the Gods. By MICHAEL WILLIS. Pp. xiv + 375. Cambridge: CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2009. £50.

The last decade has seen the publication of a number of important studies on the Gupta period of Indian history. A beautiful exhibition was held in Paris in 2007 and led to the publication of a catalog of masterpieces of Gupta art.¹ On the occasion of this exhibition, Gérard Fussman dedicated his lectures at the Collège de France to the topic of Gupta history, and the summary of his lectures was published as a valuable essay.² Just a few years earlier Fred Virkus³ had published the first work under review here, *Politische Strukturen im Guptareich*. It was, regrettably, ignored in Fussman's essay, and is likewise almost entirely ignored in the second work under review here, Michael Willis' *Archaeology of Hindu Ritual*. With the Guimet catalog, the Fussman essay, and these two monographs, both Gupta studies per se and ancient Indian (art) history more generally have entered a new era.⁴

Virkus' and Willis' monographs could hardly be more different. The first is a sober historical study, founded on a rigorous hierarchy of sources, among which the inscriptions take first rank, being comprehensively studied to the extent they throw light on political structures under the Gupta empire. A brief introduction presents a summary of debate on "empire" and "the state" as analytic categories. The bulk of the monograph comprises a region-by-region study of the sources. Chapters on political ideology and a conclusion round out the work. An English summary makes its contents accessible for those who cannot read the German. The work is an excellent introduction to the epigraphical data on politics, government, and administration, but does not provide an ideal entry point into the study of Gupta history, about which a substantial level of basic knowledge is presumed. One or more maps and a chronological-geographical-genealogical overview of Gupta rulers as well as their vassals would have been helpful. The work is full of references to specific years and the events dated to them, but there is no general discussion of the dating of inscriptions and the eras that were in use.⁵ The index only covers Sanskrit words, text titles, personal names, and toponyms; important German concepts (e.g., Gilde, Korporation, Kupfertafelinschrift, Siegel) are not indexed. The main conclusion we retain from reading this work is the extreme geographical and typological fragmentedness of the evidence on Gupta polity, and of Gupta polity itself, which greatly complicates the formulation of any generalization valid for the "empire" as a whole. As the author himself expresses it: "even in the more highly developed parts of the Gupta empire there was no political or administrative uniformity" (p. 253).⁶

1. *L'âge d'or de l'Inde classique: L'empire des Gupta*. Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 2007. Whereas the illustrations in this catalog are excellent, the entries are too often conventional and the introductory essays perpetuate, as the title itself indicates, the myth of the Gupta period as the golden age of classical India.

2. Gérard Fussman, "Histoire du monde indien: Les Guptas et le nationalisme indien," in *Cours et travaux du Collège de France, Résumés 2006–2007*, Annuaire 107^{ème} année, 695–713. Paris: Collège de France.

3. Born in 1964, this scholar died in March 2013.

4. Mention should also be made of Cédric Ferrier, *Pouvoir et territoire sous les Gupta (Inde du Nord, IV^e-VI^e siècles)*, PhD diss. Université Paris-IV Sorbonne, 2008.

5. It is odd that Virkus' work, published in 2004, makes no reference to Annette Schmiedchen and Fred Virkus, "Die Ären der Guptas und ihrer Nachfolger: Politische Kultur, Regionalgeschichte und Zeitrechnung im alten und frühmittelalterlichen Indien," in *Vom Herrscher zur Dynastie: Zum Wesen kontinuierlicher Zeitrechnung in Antike und Gegenwart*, ed. Harry Falk (Bremen: Hentzen, 2002), 106–37.

6. Three other reviews of Virkus' work have come to our attention. The first two, having appeared in traditional journals, are by Herman Tiekens (*Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* 50 [2006, appeared 2007]: 222–24) and Oskar von Hinüber (*Indo-Iranian Journal* 50 [2008]: 183–92). Both are quite positive. The third review, by Georg Berkemer, who is markedly more reserved, appeared in *Internationales Asien Forum / International Quarterly for Asian Studies*, May 1, 2007 (<http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P3-1318911341.html>).

The second book, Willis' *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual*, consists of an introduction and three parts. The first, which is a nearly exact republication of an article already published in 2004,⁷ is dedicated to the archaeology and politics of time at Udayagiri, aiming to show that the part of this site that is richest in archaeological remains "functioned as a center of imperial ritual under the early Gupta kings" (p. 10). The second contains several studies of aspects of ancient Indian land grants, assembled under the heading "The establishment of the gods." The third part, again composed of a number of separate thematic studies, is entitled "Ritual action and ritual actors." Both the second and the third parts are still focused on the Gupta age and the site of Udayagiri. The book lacks a proper concluding chapter that would recapitulate the argument and return to issues raised in the introduction. Two short notes by colleagues, dealing with technical matters, are presented as appendices. The bibliography entries are grouped subjectwise, in a manner that we find quite inconvenient to use. The quality of photographic illustrations is often poor, but this may sometimes be compensated for by the excellent photos that appeared in the Parisian catalog (compare, e.g., fig. 40, showing the fragment of a *torāṇa* from Pawāyā, with Paris catalog entry 74).

This book is a flamboyant and eclectic interdisciplinary study that is certainly worth reading. Among points we appreciated is the discussion of the *pañcamahāyajñas* in §2.6 and in particular the term *sat(t)ra* when it means not a Vedic 'sacrificial session' but 'hospice' and also 'hospitality to guests' (see index entry, add p. 331 n. 262),⁸ for the intended sense of this word is sometimes overlooked even in philological studies of the highest order.⁹ The discussion of political metaphor in art in §1.7 was also enlightening for us.

But we were on the whole unable to read this book without a certain sense of discomfort caused by various aspects of the author's rhetoric. Virkus' sensitive work is almost entirely ignored, and where it does find mention, earns no more than lip-service (p. 6) or *ex cathedra* rebuttal, while his name does not figure in the index: it is hard to escape the impression that Virkus' work is ignored because its conclusions are incompatible with Willis' approach (cf. p. 157 with n. 329). While the work of some colleagues (notably Sheldon Pollock and Joanna Williams) is presented in a negative light at every possible occasion, a small selection of other scholars are repeatedly singled out for more praise than seems useful. Moreover, Willis constantly makes arguments hinging entirely on a leap of faith; after the leap has been taken, the hypothesis is accepted as fact without further caveats, and then becomes the basis for elaborate further discussion, often interesting, but of little pertinence if the original hinge of the argument becomes undone. For instance when, in his revelation of Udayagiri as a *mise en scène* of the waking up of Viṣṇu from sleep (p. 44), Willis observes that the sunset lights the sleeping Viṣṇu during a period of the year when he is supposed to sleep. To accommodate his argument Willis considers the "stump of a large doorframe" standing in the vicinity and suspects that "this may have been part of a door that was used to block the setting sun during the sleeping period." He further hypothesises that "[w]hen the day came for Viṣṇu to be roused, the leaves could have been opened to admit light" and even raises the possibility of some sort of "ritual closure."

This is just one of the several chains of suppositions to which Willis must have recourse because of his conviction that the site of Udayagiri, near ancient Vidiśā in Western U.P., was "an imperial Gupta site" (p. 81) and may be considered "the starting point for all that is fundamental to the temple culture, social dispensation, and political constitution of the medieval world" in India (p. 166). The reader may ask how it is possible to attribute such a status to a site that has yielded not a single Gupta inscription in the strict sense of the term (i.e., an inscription issued by a Gupta king).¹⁰ Likewise, in §2.1 on copper-plate charters (*tāmraśāsana*), he speaks of "the direct promotion of copper-plates from the mid-fourth

7. Michael Willis, "The Archaeology and Politics of Time," in *The Vākātaka Heritage: Indian Culture at the Crossroads*, ed. Hans T. Bakker (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 2004), 33–58.

8. See also D.C. Sircar, *Indian Epigraphical Glossary*, 306. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1966.

9. Hans T. Bakker and Harunaga Isaacson, *The Skandapurāṇa Volume IIA Adhyāyas 26–31.14: The Vārānasi Cycle. Critical Edition with an Introduction, English Synopsis & Philological and Historical Commentary*. Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 2004. See p. 187, rendering *sattra* in Skandapurāṇa 26.46 as 'sacrifice'.

10. On the fundamental epistemological distinction between inscriptions issued by kings themselves as against inscriptions issued by non-royal persons, see Virkus, p. 13, and chapter III in Emmanuel Francis, *Le discours royal*

century under Gupta influence” (pp. 81–82), but does not explain how the postulation of such Gupta influence can be compatible with the fact that not a single copper-plate grant has ever been discovered that can be confidently said to have been issued by an “imperial” Gupta king.¹¹

Other scholars have already pointed out that the argumentation for associating this or that text with the Gupta period is often very weak, and the conclusions drawn on the basis of such chronological association hence lose their chronological underpinning.¹² It is also difficult to follow Willis when he argues that “the basic reason for observing the position of the sun and determining the time of the solstice was that it could be used to anticipate the arrival of the rains” (p. 23), for any adult person having grown up in India is sufficiently acquainted with the passing of the seasons to know when to expect the coming of the rains. The reasoning becomes even more inscrutable when it is argued in the next paragraph that the shell-script inscriptions at Udayagiri indicate “that observations in anticipation of the monsoon were made [. . .] before the Gupta period.” We do not understand how inscriptions whose writing system still defies decipherment could indicate any such thing. The argument in the section on the Purohita (§3.2) needs to be revised in the light of relevant publications which apparently arrived too late to be taken into account in this book.¹³ In §3.4–5 Willis tries to prove that Brahmins of the Maitrāyaṇīya school of the Black Yajurveda played a special role at the Gupta court, but his argument is fraught with problems, one of which is again the use of epigraphical evidence emanating from Gupta vassals as though this evidence pertains to the Gupta court itself.

In §3.5 Willis’ interpretation of Śabara’s statement about the ownership of the earth as a brahmanical effort to counteract the increasing gifts to temples and gods at the expense of atheistic Mīmāṃsakas, in what he calls an already lost “battle against the temple-gods” (p. 214), must also be read with caution. When Śabara argues that the king owns only taxes on land and not the whole earth, he is only dealing with private lands. In the same way that there are royal and non-royal inscriptions, there are royal and private lands on which the king owns respectively “absolute title” or “tax entitlements,” to use Willis’ terms (p. 213). If a king wanted to confer absolute title on a private land, he thus had to purchase it first (p. 216). As Willis is forced to acknowledge that “Vedic pundits were frequent beneficiaries” (p. 212), that is, during the first millennium copper-plate grants were issued mostly in favor of Brahmins and much less commonly for temples, one can equally understand Śabara’s statement as directed against royal attempts to infringe on the rights of donees, whether gods, temples, or Brahmins.

The selection of illustrations often seems of limited relevance to the discussion at hand and determined more by the chance fact that the illustrated artifact is held in the collection of the British Museum. Willis is certainly a very erudite scholar, who cites with ease from secondary literature in German, French, and even Italian, besides Anglophone sources published on both sides of the Atlantic. But the use of secondary literature nevertheless tends to be a bit haphazard. To give just one example: although the admonitory verses on *bhūmidāna* so common in Indian land-grants are discussed already on pp. 84–89, the reader is referred to the fundamental publication of D. C. Sircar only the second time around, when the same topic comes under discussion again on pp. 153–58 (see n. 330 on p. 308): the

dans l’Inde du Sud ancienne: Inscriptions et monuments Pallava, IV^{ème}–IX^{ème} siècles, vol. 1. Publications de l’Institut orientaliste de Louvain, vol. 64. Louvain-la-Neuve: Université catholique de Louvain, Institut orientaliste, 2013.

11. Presuming that the Vainyagupta who issued copper-plate charters in Samatāta around 500 CE is not the same as the *mahārājādhirāja* Vainyagupta of the “Nālandā clay seal of Vainyagupta” (CII III, rev. ed. 1981, no. 33), the only possible candidate would be the “Nālandā copper-plate inscription of Samudragupta” (CII III, rev. ed. 1981, no. 3), but this is probably a spurious record, and is, presumably for this reason, not mentioned anywhere (as far as we can see) either by Virkus or by Willis.

12. See for instance the sober dismantling of Willis’ arguments for associating the Nītisāra with the period of Candragupta II in Upinder Singh, “Politics, Violence and War in Kāmandaka’s Nītisāra,” *Indian Economic & Social History Review* 47 (2010): 29–62. See p. 32 n. 10. See also P. Olivelle, *King, Governance, and Law in Ancient India: Kauṭilya’s Arthaśāstra*, 37. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

13. See the contributions by Alexis Sanderson (“Atharvavedins in Tantric Territory”) and Annette Schmedchen (“Epigraphical Evidence for the History of Atharvavedic Brahmins,” particularly pp. 174–75) in *The Atharvaveda and Its Paippalādaśākhā: Historical and Philological Papers on a Vedic Tradition*, ed. Arlo Griffiths and Annette Schmedchen. Indologica Halensis, vol. 11. Aachen: Shaker, 2007.

use of endnotes, particularly unsuitable to a work of this kind, is here an extra complicating factor. With regard to the theoretical (*dharmaśāstra*) foundations of the use of such verses, only the Viṣṇusmṛti is cited, but the much fuller discussion, using this text as well as others, is given in a publication of Julius Jolly that is not referred to.¹⁴

The title of Willis's monograph promises a treatment of comprehensive scope but the work is actually limited to a particular period in the history of Hindu ritual, and there too the arguments are so often tentative that it is impossible for us to join the majority of previous reviewers in their generally very positive reception of this book.¹⁵ Nevertheless, especially when read under the moderating influence of Virkus's work and along with other publications mentioned above, *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual* may certainly be recommended as a rich introduction to the study of the Gupta age.

EMMANUEL FRANCIS and ARLO GRIFFITHS
CNRS, PARIS EFEO, JAKARTA

14. Julius Jolly, "Beiträge zur indischen Rechtsgeschichte," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 44 (1890): 339–62. See especially pp. 350–59.

15. John E. Cort, *Religious Studies Review* 38 (2010): 243; Edith Parlier-Renault, *Arts Asiatiques* 65 (2010): 148–50; Ronald M. Davidson, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 74 (2012): 502–4; Janice Stargardt, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 22 (2012): 600–602; Vittorio Magnano, *Durham Anthropology Journal* 18 (2012): 219–21. The only reserved review that we have seen is that of Leslie C. Orr in *South Asian Studies* 26 (2010): 238–42, to whose criticism we fully subscribe.

Tamil Love Poetry: The Five Hundred Short Poems of the Aiṅkurunūru. By MARTHA ANN SELBY. Translations from the Asian Classics. New York: COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2011. Pp. 195 + xii. \$84.50 cloth; \$27.50 (paper).

In this beautiful book, acclaimed translator Martha Ann Selby provides us with a complete, updated translation of the *Aiṅkurunūru*, a classical Tamil anthology of love poetry. This anthology is one of the earliest five of the eight anthologies of poetry that constitute the first literature in Tamil, dating between the first and third centuries C.E. The *Aiṅkurunūru* is longer than the other early classical collections of Tamil poetry, which contain 400 poems apiece, including the three collections of love poems entitled the *Kuruntokai*, the *Narriṅnai*, and the *Akanānūru*, as well as the collection of poems of war, the *Puraṅānūru*. It is also set apart from these anthologies by the small number of poets who contributed to the anthology—only five, as compared to 150–200 poets each for the other collections. Selby argues convincingly for the special coherence of the *Aiṅkurunūru*: "We know from the colophon that the text was a Cēra imperial commission and its compiler was Pula-t-turai Murriya Kūṭalur Kīlār. The *Aiṅkurunūru* is, in fact, not an 'anthology' in the same way in which its sister anthologies are. The structure of the text as a whole is deliberate, and it is clear from the way in which it is assembled that its commissioner had a specific plan in mind, and that the compiler carried out the commissioner's orders to the letter. . . . I would argue that these five brilliant [poets] formed a short-lived atelier" (p. 4).

A marker of the text's distinctiveness and coherence is that it reorders the sequencing of landscapes and matching lovers' moods that are a central element of classical Tamil poetry. The early Tamil grammar, the *Tolkāppiyam*, describes the order as *kuriṅci* (usually a clandestine meeting of the lovers at night in the mountains), *neytal* (usually the lovers' separation and suggestion of abandonment, indexed by the seashore), *pālai* (usually the hero traveling across a wilderness to elope with or marry the heroine), *mullai* (usually married heroine waiting for her husband's return from a journey in the evening), and *marutam* (usually jealous quarrelling between husband and wife related to his perceived infidelities). The *Aiṅkurunūru* devotes one hundred poems to each of these themes, in ten sets of ten on a specific theme. However, the *Aiṅkurunūru* begins its collection with jealous quarrelling (*marutam*), followed by *neytal*, *kuriṅci*, and *pālai*, before concluding "with one hundred poems devoted to the