



**HAL**  
open science

# **An Ancestral Skill. The Decorative Motifs of Sinjali Architecture, West Nepal**

David Cornélius Andolfatto

► **To cite this version:**

David Cornélius Andolfatto. An Ancestral Skill. The Decorative Motifs of Sinjali Architecture, West Nepal. Susmita Basu Majumdar. Transcending Boundaries: Premodern Cultural Transactions across Asia, Essays in Honour of Osmund Bopearachchi, Primus Books, pp.409-427, 2024, 978-93-6177-059-3. <halshs-04707110>

**HAL Id: halshs-04707110**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04707110v1>**

Submitted on 26 Apr 2025

**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.



Copyright - All rights reserved

## Chapter 28

### *An Ancestral Skill*

#### The Decorative Motifs of Sinjali Architecture, West Nepal

DAVID C. ANDOLFATTO<sup>1</sup>

This chapter introduces the architectural iconography of western Nepal. Such a topic may appear distant from Osmund Bopéarachchi's area of work. I nevertheless chose to present it in this festschrift for two reasons. The first one is that Professor Bopéarachchi was a member of my PhD's defense jury. As a scholar interested in various fields of research, he expressed a keen interest in this matter, which was featured in the annexes of my thesis on the medieval archaeology of west Nepal. The second reason is that I was taught the meaning of this vernacular iconography by passionate souls, experts in their domain and always willing to share their knowledge. The universal, humanist, values with which this knowledge was imparted to me are the same that I (and I am sure many others) found in Professor Bopéarachchi's teachings and personality.

Sinja, in the west Nepalese district of Jumla, is a place of great historical importance (Map 28.1). The archaeological site is located at the top of a steep hill, near the village of Sahubada. It is there that, in the twelfth century, the so-called Khaśa Malla kings (or emperors) had established their summer capital. Hailing from the aristocratic milieu of the Guge and Purang kingdoms of south-west Tibet, these rulers were known by

Tibetan sources as the 'kings of Yatse' (*Ya rtse rgyal po*). While Yatse may refer to a region consisting of most of today's western Nepal, Giuseppe Tucci has proposed to equate it with Sinja.<sup>2</sup>

In 2018, while surveying the remains of the site, I was introduced to two woodcarvers from the nearby village of Hatsinja. The two men were curious about my research, and I was eager to ask them the meaning of architectural ornaments adorning the wooden doors, windows and pillars of the Kanakāsundarī Temple. Situated on the south-eastern side of the site, the temple is still in use today and was then under renovation. The programme was funded by Nepal's Department of Archaeology and the two woodcarvers were amongst the artisans mobilized for the work. My curiosity was aroused when they mentioned that some ornaments were part of a traditional repertoire of fifty-two designs, the *Dui Bise Bārha Buṭṭā*.

The woodcarvers are Dharma and Gobi Sikarmi (Plate 28.1). *Sikarmi* means carpenter and as such they belong to the Kāmi caste, a Khaśa (also Khaś) group of artisans traditionally occupying professions related to metal work.<sup>3</sup> They are cousins and generally work together. Their art is renowned outside

the Sinja valley, as they are sometimes hired to work in Mugu district, north of Hatsinja. I commissioned Dharma and Gobi to draw the *Dui Bise Bārha Buttā*, with the clear intention to share it with a wider audience. They were both enthusiastic about my interest and, for three days, spent their free time working on this unusual project.

The fifty-two motifs presented here have never been put on paper before. They were executed on the back of two A3 graph paper sheets. Preparatory drawings were first done with a pencil and then finalised with a black pen. Although I was told that no canonical system governs their organization, the artists took it upon themselves to organize the drawings in a typological way and took the care of numbering and naming each of the motifs (Figures 28.1, 28.2, and 28.3). After this work was done, Dharma and Gobi explained the meaning of the motifs, when they had one to provide.

Following our conversations on the value of their knowledge and the significance of its preservation, Dharma and Gobi took the initiative to photocopy and laminate their drawings. This was done to keep a durable version of the repertoire, that can serve as a support when teaching the trade to their children. This chapter intends to present preliminary research on this vernacular corpus of decorative motifs and their cultural context of use.

### The *Dui Bise Bārha Buttā*

*Dui Bise Bārha Buttā* literally means ‘two-twenty-twelve-motif’. According to Dharma and Gobi Sikarmi, the old Khaśa counting system was vigesimal (numbering system using the base twenty). It therefore reads as follows:

$$2 \text{ (dui)} \times 20 \text{ (bise)} + 12 \text{ (bārha)} = 52$$

In South Asia this numerical system is only found in a few areas, such as in the Munda languages of north-eastern India, in the Nuristani, Dardic and Pamir languages and amongst the Burushaski speakers of northern Pakistan and Jammu and Kashmir.<sup>4</sup> The situation is similar in Europe, where the vigesimal system is still found in languages such as Basque. Georges Ifrah has proposed to explain these European ‘vigesimal islets’ in the following manner: upon their installation throughout the continent, Indo-European populations (who used decimal systems) encountered ‘indigenous populations using counts based on the base 20’.<sup>5</sup> In this perspective, and given the possible Central Asian origins of the Khaśa,<sup>6</sup> the vigesimal system would appear as a cultural and linguistic survival from their ancestral home. Another explanation would be that this was a system already used by populations preceding the Khaśa in this part of west Nepal.

The fifty-two motifs (Nep. *butṭā*<sup>7</sup>) constitute a primer for the Jumli carpenter. Dharma and Gobi consider this corpus and their execution as an ancestral skill (Nep. *purkhyauli sip*), transmitted down to them from the time of the Khaśa Malla kings (twelfth–fourteenth centuries). They are presented here with the names given by the Sikarmis (the numbered terms), followed by the short explanations given by them (*italic text*). The emic explanations are followed by my own comments on the motifs (*regular text*). The lexicon used to name the *butṭā* is in some instances Nepali, and in others in the Jumli or Dotyali languages (Ju.). Ralph L. Turner classified the two latter idioms as ‘western dialects of Nepali’,<sup>8</sup> although they are also classified as specimens of the broader Pahāri group of Indo-Aryan languages.<sup>9</sup> For comparative purposes, and when possible, the Kumaoni (Ku.), Nepali (Nep.), Hindustani (H.) and ‘western dialect of Nepali’ (WN.)

equivalents of the terms are given according to Turner's dictionary. Some terms could not be more elaborately analysed, but it is hoped that these gaps will trigger linguistic research on this topic.

1. Suṇāsyā

*Represents blacksmiths' pincers.*

This appears to be a Jumli term. Nep. Ku. *sunār*, goldsmith. Nep. *sanāso*, pincers.

2. Tinteude

*Symbolizes the serpent gods (Nāga). The motif allows to dispense with the rituals linked to the Nāgas, such as Nāg Pañcamī.*

3. Ḍorsī Jeude

*Symbolizes a four-faced serpent, the Car Mukhe Nāg. Jeude means serpent in the secret language of the dhāmī.*

No details are given on the exact identity of Car Mukhe Nāg, except that it is not the serpent whose fat fuels the fires of Dullu's Pañcakośī.<sup>10</sup>

Nep. *dor*, rope.

4. Ghoḍā Khure

*Horseshoe. According to ancient traditions, the horseshoe protects against the grip of witches.*

The pattern can be used horizontally and vertically.

Nep. *ghorā*, horse. Nep. *khuro*, horseshoe or horse hoof.

5. Macyā Phulī

*Decorative pattern.*

In the Pahārī language of western Nepal the term *macyā* is an equivalent of Nep. *maccā*, chili.<sup>11</sup> The motif would therefore represent a chili flower.

6. Loṅg Phulī

*Clove flower.*

Ku. *lauñ*, Nep. *lwāñ*, *lawāñ*, *luwāñ*, clove.

7. Magā Botyā

*Corn plants (Ju. magā). Represented to have good harvests.*

Nep. Ku. *boṭ*, plant.

8. Canā Botyā

*Chickpea plants or flowers. Represented to have good harvests.*

9. Kutkyā

*Also called 'deval cinai' [deval building, i.e. temple], the motif was performed during the time of the Pāṇḍavas and in their honour. Nowadays the motif is carved in their memory.*

10. Hātī Sude

*Elephant horn. Represents Gaṇeśa.*

11. Tīmkyā

*Decorative motif.*

*Tīmkyā* refers to a dotted pattern used in textiles and woodcarving.<sup>12</sup>

12. Pātyā

*Leaves. For decoration but also represents the leaves of Tulasī.<sup>13</sup>*

13. Mohar Chāpyā

*Printed [or engraved, Nep. chāpnu] currency. Represented with the goal of never being short of money.*

14. Pīpal Pātyā

*The pīpal [Ficus religiosa] tree represents Viṣṇu, because he incarnated himself in it.*

*Pāt* (Nep. Ku), leaf.

15. Daicāulyā

*A tika made of rice (Ju. cāulyā) and cottage cheese (Ju. dai). This tika is only made on very auspicious occasions.*

16. Cumkyā

*A decorative motif that embellishes the sculpture.*

## 17. Bhiudī

*These motifs are carved on the doors (Ju. bhiudī) of houses and represent the doors of temples. Old temple doors looked like this.*

## 18. Tirsulyā

*Represents Śiva and protects from bhūt, picas and pret. The region was once populated by more ghosts (bhūt) than humans. This symbol was therefore used to protect the inhabitants from them.*

From Skt. *triśūla* and Nep. *triśūl*, *tirsul* (popular form).

## 19. Kalasyā

*Represents the vase (kalaśa) which is used for auspicious occasions such as religious ceremonies, weddings, etc. If the Kalasyā is carved on doors or windows, there is no need for a real kalaśa vase, since the sculptures do the same job.*

## 20. Ghāgryā

The motif has two stories.

*Women wore this motif on their headdresses during the period of the Khaśa [Malla] kings. It is in memory of this tradition that the Ghāgryā is represented. Moreover, before going to battle the warriors worshiped their swords (Ghāgryā pūjā) by crossing them.*

Sk. *ghargharī*, girdle of small bells worn by women. Ku. *ghāgrī*, woman's skirt. Ku. *ghāghārā*, long skirt.

## 21. Ligudī Pātyā

*Leaves of ligudī. This plant is only found at high altitudes and was highly prized by kings for its taste.*

## 22. Māchā Karañdyā

*Fish (māchā) skeleton (karañ). There is a mythical story in which a god incarnates himself as a fish. The fish got lost for a long time and died. Only his skeleton was found.*

Patterns 23 to 26 are grouped together in the same set:

*These ornaments are those of playing cards. They are carved in the hope of keeping the house from having gambling children.*

## 23. Iṭṭā Buṭṭe

Diamond (Nep. *hirā*, Ku. *hīrā*) motif.

## 24. Pān Buṭṭe

The card motif of heart, named after the leaf of betel tree (Nep. *pān*, leaf of betel nut).

## 25. Cīdī Buṭṭe

Clover motif.

## 26. Hukum Chāpe

Nep. *hukum*, spades.

Nep. *chāpe*, adj. bearing the government stamp.

## 27. Ghumaure

*Represents the attack strategies of soldiers.*

The name of the motif is most likely referring to its winding (Nep. *ghumāi*) lines.

## 28. Pāṭkyā

Decorative motif.

## 29. Caukhude

*Represents the four wooden structures [pillars and the wooden frame] placed at the corners of buildings such as temples, palaces and houses.*

## 30. Caupātyā

*Women wore this ornament in their hair during the time of the Khaśa kings.*

## 31. Bāgh Cālyā

*This is the game of tigers and goats.*

## 32. Tīn Bude

## 33. Śaṅkha Cakre

*The conch [śaṅkha] and the disc [cakra] are the weapons of Kṛṣṇa and Viṣṇu. The conch is also used for raising alarms, for auspicious occasions and for sending messages.*

34. Candanyā  
*Symbolizes a tika.*

Nep. *candan*, sandalwood.

35. Becautyā  
*Represents the wooden spice boxes (Ju. Becautyā) used by members of the royal family.*

36. Torī Phulyā  
*Mustard flower. Decorative pattern.*  
Nep. *tori*, Ku. H. *torī*, mustard.

37. Mundiryā  
*Represents temples' roofs.*  
The shape of this motif evokes neither 'medieval' religious architecture nor that of more recent monuments found in the Karnali region. It rather recalls the stepped roofs with curved edges of the multi-tiered *degah* temples from the Kathmandu valley.  
Sk. *mandira*, temple.

38. Aś Rupī Buṭyā  
*Symbolizes gold coins. Executed to attract wealth to the house.*  
Nep. *asirupiyā*, a gold coin worth 16 rupees.

39. Sūrya Phulyā  
*Represents an offering of flowers to the sun.*  
The motif is the same as that visible on many memorial pillars of the thirteenth–sixteenth centuries<sup>14</sup> and is interpreted as a representation of the sun.

40. Gurāsī Phulyā  
*Rhododendron flower. A decorative pattern.*

41. Gol Buṭya  
*Pattern of circle (gol).*

42. Gorkhālī Buṭṭā  
*The 'Gorkhālī motif'. It represents objects that the king of Gorkhā and his troops had to leave behind after leaving the region.*

43. Bhaurī Buṭṭā  
*The 'eyebrow pattern'.*  
WN. *ākhi-bhāū*, H. *bhaū*, eyebrow

44. Cauvānī Buṭṭā  
*Cauvānī means 'twenty-five paisa'. The motif therefore represents coins.*

45. Nāg Gāthe  
*Snake symbol. Snakes are also a symbol of God, and this design is made to honour snakes and protect the home.*

46. Lahare Phul  
*The 'climbing plant'. Represents flowering climbing plants that grow in the forest.*

47. Saṅgle  
*Chains [Nep. saṅgle] were used to tie prisoners during the Khaśa [Malla] period. The pattern represents chains and the Khaśa [Malla] period.*

48. Simī Pātyā  
*'The Bean Leaf Pattern'.*  
Nep. *simi*, Ku. *simī*, bean.

49. Belāite Buṭṭā  
*Also called Cakrasei. It was an ornament found on horse tacks during the Khaśa Malla period.*  
Nep. *belahari*, embroidery, scroll-work, and *belahari buṭṭā*, scroll-work on a *khukri* sheath.

50. Maurī Polyā  
*'The beehive motif'. The production of honey is important in the culture of the Sinja Valley. This pattern is made so that there is no shortage of honey.*  
Nep. *mauri*, bee.

51. Kuṇḍalī Buttā  
‘The hearth motif’.

Nep. *kuṇḍali*, a horoscope showing the position of the planets at the time of a child’s birth. The term here is most likely derived from Skt. *kuṇḍa*, pit.

52. Dyāre Buttā  
*Motif of a plant named dyāre and which symbolizes evil forces.*

### The Motifs in Use

Gobi and Dharma Sikarmi indicated that they employed these motifs for the decoration of temples (Plate 28.2) and dwellings alike, although only the wealthiest families can afford them. In both cases the presence of carved decorations and their fineness of execution is a sign of the patrons’ means. It is also a way of marking one’s piety to the gods. The use of these motifs on other supports, such as terracotta and metal ware or jewellery, was not indicated. As for the medieval period, archaeologists who excavated the site of Sinja (see below) have unearthed 345 sherds. The few adornments they noted consist of ‘incised lines [...] and occasional impressed lozenge shapes probably stamped’.<sup>15</sup> Thus the issue of the motifs’ use outside of architecture will remain unanswered until additional archaeological material is brought to light.

It is necessary here to say a few words of the temples in question. Religious life in the Jumla district and in other parts of the Karnali Basin is in part manifested through oracular consultations of the gods. Often of local origin, these gods manifest themselves through mediums, called *dhāmī*. In Jumla, these oracular consultations take place inside and in front of two types of temples: the ‘forest temple’ (Nep. *ban thān*, Plate 28.3) or the ‘village/house temple’ (Nep. *caukhā/*

*ghar thān*).<sup>16</sup> The medium sits on an elevated area located near the sanctum. This place is known as the throne (Nep. *gaddi*, *gādī*, sometimes also *caukhā*). A medium can be possessed by the deceased, deified ancestors or deities. The latter are generally part of an important local pantheon constituted of the Twelve Maṣṭā Brothers (*Bāra Bhāi Maṣṭā*) and the Nine Durgā Sisters (*Nau Durgā Bhavānī*).

A particular aspect of this ‘oracular religion’ is that divinities are either localized in empty niches, represented by uncut stones, or not represented at all. A consequence of this ‘iconographic silence’ is that religious art is mainly confined to the sanctum’s door and the columns and spandrels of the colonnade preceding it. They are executed at the time of construction, and it is not rare to see the name of one or multiple donors engraved with the construction or renovation date.

The mediums themselves can be represented in art. In the village of Manma, in the nearby district of Kalikot, stone reliefs representing mediums in configurations indicating their possession by incarnated divinities have recently been identified on *śikhara* temples dating from the fourteenth/fifteenth century.<sup>17</sup> These are the earliest known west-Nepalese figurations of mediums.

Besides some of the fifty-two motifs, most oracular temples are also decorated with anthropomorphic, zoomorphic and other patterns not listed here. With regards to the anthropomorphic figures, locals are usually oblivious of who they represent (especially if the carvings are of some ancestry, i.e. > fifty years). This is partly due to the absence of specific attributes, the characters being mostly represented standing or with bent legs, both hands joined in *añjali mudrā*. The iconography is the same as that of wooden statues representing ancestors (Nep. *pitra*, Skt. *pitṛ*) or devotees, often deposited in front of oracular temples.<sup>18</sup>

## The Semantic of the Motifs and their Historical Significance

It is notable that a number of these ornaments have an apotropaic or propitiatory role. The apotropaic vocation, of warding against evil forces such as witches (Nep. *boksi*) and evil spirits, is locally explained by the belief that the region was once populated by more ghosts (Nep. *bhut*, *picās*, *pret*) and other supernatural entities than humans. The propitiatory function is justified by the need to ensure abundant harvests. Certain ornaments also have a performative value, in the sense that they operate for what they represent, like the *Kalasyā* (no. 19), which represents the *kalaśa* vase. This vase is sometimes placed in pairs, in front of houses' entrances, with fresh flowers in it. The sculptural representation of the vessel has the same semantic value. Acting as such, its presence in carving conveniently dispenses the placing of real ones (according to Dharma and Gobi).

The memorial role of certain motifs is interesting in more ways than one since it establishes, in the eyes of the informants, the antiquity of ornaments and, with it, of their art and culture. Dharma and Gobi have often insisted that certain motifs are produced 'in memory' of an ancient practice, such as the *Ghāgryā* motif (no. 20), which is said to depict the headdress of women of old. This past often refers to the period of the *Khaśa* Malla kings (twelfth–fourteenth centuries). The era occupies a significant place in the collective memory by evoking glorious times, when rulers of the *Karnali* controlled most of the central Himalayas.<sup>19</sup>

*Sikarmis* claim to be of *Kumaoni* origin. They explain their coming to the *Sinja* area by referring to the *Khaśa* Malla conquest of the region: 'The king needed accomplished artists in his capital, and when he saw how skilful

the *Sikarmis* from *Kumaon* were, he invited them there.' The narrative is identical to that of the *Kafle* lineage of priests in charge of the *Kanakāsundarī* Temple (located in *Sahubada*, near *Hatsinja*). I was told by *Yuddha Nanda Kafle*, acting *pujāri* during my visit in May 2018, that *Krācalla* (r. 1223–39?) brought the *Kafles* from *Kumaon* to the *Sinja* valley after his conquest of the region. The king provided land to the lineage members and settled them in *Deharpata* (*Jumla* district). The donation of lands to brahmins is indeed historically attested, as the vast majority of surviving medieval documents—mainly copper-plate inscriptions—are concerned with land grants to brahmins.<sup>20</sup>

As a matter of fact, the eastern part of *Uttarakhand* came under the sway of the *Khaśa* *Mallas* during the reign of *Krācalla*, who took over *Kārtripura* (*Kārtikeyapura*, the capital of the *Katyuri* kingdom) in 1223.<sup>21</sup> If the narrative of the *Sikarmis*' coming to *Sinja* from *Kumaon* is to be taken to the letter, and there are at this point no elements to disagree with it, this would situate their arrival in the region some eight centuries ago.

In this context, one may rightfully question if the arrival of *Kumaoni* artists had a traceable impact on the art and architecture of the *Karnali* region. The oldest instance of architecture that can be securely dated is a *śikhara* temple (locally called *deval*, from Skt. *devālaya*, 'temple'<sup>22</sup>) located in the village of *Binayak* (*Achham* district). The style of the *śikhara* temple corresponds to what has been termed as 'simplified *latina* shrine', due to the sobriety of their ornamentation.<sup>23</sup> These monuments developed in *Uttarakhand* between the tenth and twelfth centuries. The *Binayak* temple bears an inscription dated of 1280 (śs 1202) and mentions that it was built by an architect named *Nāgadeva*, for a certain *Achejamalladeva*.<sup>24</sup> *Achejamalladeva* may be a misspelling for *Akṣayamalla*, a

grandson of Krācalla, unless it is another king. In any case, the donor belongs to the Karnali's aristocracy. Nāgadeva on the other hand is a rather common Indic name that one can hardly identify as coming from one place or another.

Stone temples were already built in far-western Nepal before 1280. These early instances of *śikhara* architecture may be datable from the eighth–tenth century. The monuments found in Chipur and Deval Divyapur (both in the Dadeldhura district) attest the presence (or influence) of architects active in pilgrimage centres of Uttarakhand such as that of Jageshwar.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, during the tenth–twelfth centuries, architects and master sculptors from western India (or central Himalayan people trained in the Māru-Gurjara style from Gujarat-Rajasthan) deployed their art at the Kakrevihar Temple (Surkhet district). Later, from at least 1280, the 'simplified *latina*' type of architecture spread throughout the Khaśa Mallas' territory.<sup>26</sup>

### The King's Palace and the Fifty-two Motifs

The narratives affixed to the fifty-two motifs provide necessary motives to consider and analyse this contemporary sculptural repertoire as a historical record. Indeed, not only are some of the motifs semantically related to the 'medieval' period, but a historical perspective is given to the fifty-two ornaments individually and as a group. This is illustrated in the stimulating—though highly speculative—description the Sikarmis gave of the kings' palace. The two artisans pointed to some protruding ruins in the north-western side of Sinja as the remains of the kings' palace. This palace, they say, was constituted of fifty-two rooms, with each room named after one of the motifs. This emic interpretation can be contextualized

with the only documented archaeological excavation of the Khaśa Mallas' capital.

In 2000, a British team of archaeologists led by Christopher Evans excavated parts of the site of Sinja. One of the unearthed structures, a rectangular 'building range/ruin', is oriented north-east–south-west. The 'range' is built with stone masonry and mud mortar. Wall thickness do not exceed 65 cm. The structure comprises a dozen rooms, or 'cells', and appears to have been extended over time.<sup>27</sup> A reconstitution of the building's elevation suggests that it had four terraces of one or two stories. According to the authors this layout agrees with medieval descriptions of the palace as it would have created, when looking at the monument from the west, the impression that it has four stories<sup>28</sup>

Three inscriptions contain descriptions of the Khaśa Malla kings' palace and of their Kalyā successors. They are dated of 1356 (śs 1278, issued by King Pṛthvīmalla, r. 1338–58),<sup>29</sup> CE 1393 (śs 1315, issued by King Medinīvarmā, r. 1393–1404) and of 1404 (śs 1326, issued by King Balirāja, r. 1400–45). Archaeologists have based the interpretation of their finds on a problematic reading of one of these inscriptions published by Ram Niwas Pandey. Pandey paraphrased the text of Medinīvarmā's inscription and wrote that the latter 'ruled the subjects from the four-storeyed, whitewashed, moon-complexioned palace of Semja [Sinja]'.<sup>30</sup> Mahes Raj Pant provided a more accurate translation: 'In the best towns named the illustrious Sījā, which is lovely for the songs of women on the roof-terraces of whitewashed palaces abounding in good fortune, which [palaces] contain four halls, [and have been constructed according to] Svastika and Nandyāvarta [designs] [...].'<sup>31</sup>

Where Pandey read 'storey', Pant translated the Sanskrit *śālā* as 'hall'.<sup>32</sup> This makes more sense if one considers

the mention of *svastika* and *nandyāvarta* plans, inherited from the Śilpaśāstras. The structure excavated in Sahubada (the medieval Sinja<sup>33</sup>) shows a rectangular floor plan. It thus become difficult to satisfactorily identify a *svastika* or a *nandyāvarta* plan.<sup>34</sup> As showed elsewhere<sup>35</sup> the already mentioned Kanakāsundarī Temple, standing in the south-eastern end of the site, fits such a description. It is constituted of four connected wings enclosing a courtyard with the temple standing in the centre. These four wings evoke a *svastika* design like that of the so-called Svastika Vihāra at Sirpur (Chhattisgarh). At this point of our knowledge of the site's morphology, it appears relevant to propose that, if a regal monument was ever built in the *svastika* plan, this monument would be the Kanakāsundarī Temple. The original palace would thus have been converted into a religious structure, most probably after the fall of the Kalyāl kings, around the end of the eighteenth century.

We find ourselves with three types of sources describing the Khaśa Mallas' palaces: epigraphic, oral and archaeological. Although they appear irreconcilable, it is important to note that learned references to *svastika* and *nandyāvarta* plans may be but literary metaphors. Likewise, and this is probably the most important point to keep in mind, the inscriptions mention multiple palaces. One should, of course, be cautious when attempting to link partially excavated structures from a partially excavated site with oral traditions or with epigraphic records. Furthermore, epigraphic sources are intrinsically hagiographic compositions, and this dimension calls for additional precautions.<sup>36</sup>

Regardless of the actual existence of a 'fifty-two motifs palace', the historicist discourse formulated about it by the artists hints at

a post-Khaśa Malla dating in several cases. The claim of a twelfth–fourteenth century Khaśa Malla antiquity does not agree with some of the motifs and their terminology. The motif of 'maize plants' (Magā Botyā, no. 7) for instance is a demonstration of what must be interpreted either as a later addition to the corpus or as a terminological and semantical modification of a pre-existing motif. Maize was only introduced—probably by Portuguese traders—in the Indian subcontinent and in China during the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries<sup>37</sup> and it therefore cannot have been represented during the considered era.<sup>38</sup> In another case, the 1789 annexation of the region to the Gorkhali kingdom is recalled in the Gorkhālī Buttā (no. 42). It represents 'objects that the King of Gorkhā and his troops must have abandoned' after the conquest. Likewise, the Mohar Chāpyā (no. 13) is said to represent banknotes, despite its circular shape evoking coins. The first Nepalese banknotes were in circulation from 1945, while the British Raj introduced paper money in the 1860s. The Mohar Chāpyā's interpretation as a motif representing a banknote can therefore be understood as a modern semantic shifting.

With regards to a 'fifty-two motifs palace' that would date from the Khaśa Mallas or their Kalyāl successors, the patterns discussed here appear anachronic. That is not to say that the motifs themselves are but recent creations on which one has affixed a convenient historical depth. Decorative carvings are found on the *śikhara* temples, on stone memorial pillars (Skt. *vīrastambha*, *kīrtistambha*, Nep. *birkhamba*, *khamba*) as well as on the stone facings of certain fountains. One especially recurrent pattern is the spiral, arranged in friezes on the lintels and doorjambs of *śikhara* temples (Plate 28.4). These spirals recall the 'Elephant Horn' motif (Hātī Sude, no. 10), which is said to represent Gaṇeśa.

Its shape evokes the profile of an elephant's trunk (Nep. *hāti sūre*). Gaṇeśa is the only deity figured on *śikhara* temples, where the god is always found carved on the lintel's central part (Skt. *lalāṭa*). The spirals' liminal location is the same as that traditionally held by Gaṇeśa. It would thus be tempting to suggest that the medieval spiral motif carries the same allegoric meaning as the Hāti Sude. Although this would yet be a far-stretched conclusion, the modern local understanding of what may be a more recent development offers a stimulating perspective on medieval architecture and its decorum.

In this way it is possible to connect other motifs from the *Dui Bise Bārha Butṭā* corpus to medieval instances while some, such as the *kōlam*-like motifs of Tīnteude (no. 2) and Ḍorsī Jeude (no. 3), seem to be encountered only on the wood carvings of oracular temples. This brings the question of the latter motifs' antiquity. We have seen that oracular practices are attested since the fourteenth–fifteenth century. In the village of Manma (Kalikot district), one of the *śikhara* temples presenting figurations of mediums in relief also contained decorative motifs evocative of those seen on modern oracular temples (Figure 28.4). It is plausible that the Manma carvings were executed by artisans used to work on wood, or by stone workers influenced by what was done in wood at the time. This reasoning would imply the existence of wooden oracular temples (yet unattested by archaeological evidence) and that of a tradition of adorning them with carved motifs from an early period.

### Concluding Remarks

This brief study of the *Dui Bise Bārha Butṭā* unveils a rich and overlooked folklore. Its motifs are embedded in a canvas coalescing mythical<sup>39</sup> and historical elements. While

the mythical is mainly rooted in Hindu references, it is worth noting again that historical references are mainly concerned with the twelfth–fourteenth century Khaśa Malla era and, in one case, with the 1789 Gorkhali conquest of Jumla. The corpus thus appears as a multi-layered artistic creation set in a mythico-historical landscape and in a seemingly constant development.

Its claimed antiquity as a Khaśa Malla heritage cannot be verified in the present state. Some of the motifs, or variations of them, were indeed in use throughout this period, during which they were carved on temples, fountains and memorial pillars.<sup>40</sup> From this group, some of these motifs' individual origins can be traced back to Indian architecture.<sup>41</sup> They were probably introduced in the region by architects and sculptors coming from Uttarakhand, where the Karnali temple architecture originates from. Other motifs, such as the Tīnteude (no. 2) and Ḍorsī Jeude (no. 3), are also found in the Nuristani wood carving tradition of eastern Afghanistan.<sup>42</sup> The similarities between these Nuristani motifs and the Sinjali ones are striking. This shared visual heritage makes a *prima facie* case for the Khaśa's alleged Central Asian origins, as one of the possible ancient migration routes followed by this population (like that of the Śaka tribes) goes from the Pamir to north-west India by way of northern Afghanistan.<sup>43</sup> The postulate of a historical connection between the Khaśa of Nepal and the Hindu Kush, and its manifestation in vernacular arts, would undoubtedly benefit from further in-depth research in both sculptural traditions and that of the regions in between. And while armed conflicts, economic and environmental issues or lack of institutional interest stand in the way of vernacular knowledge transmission, one can only hope that future generations of artists

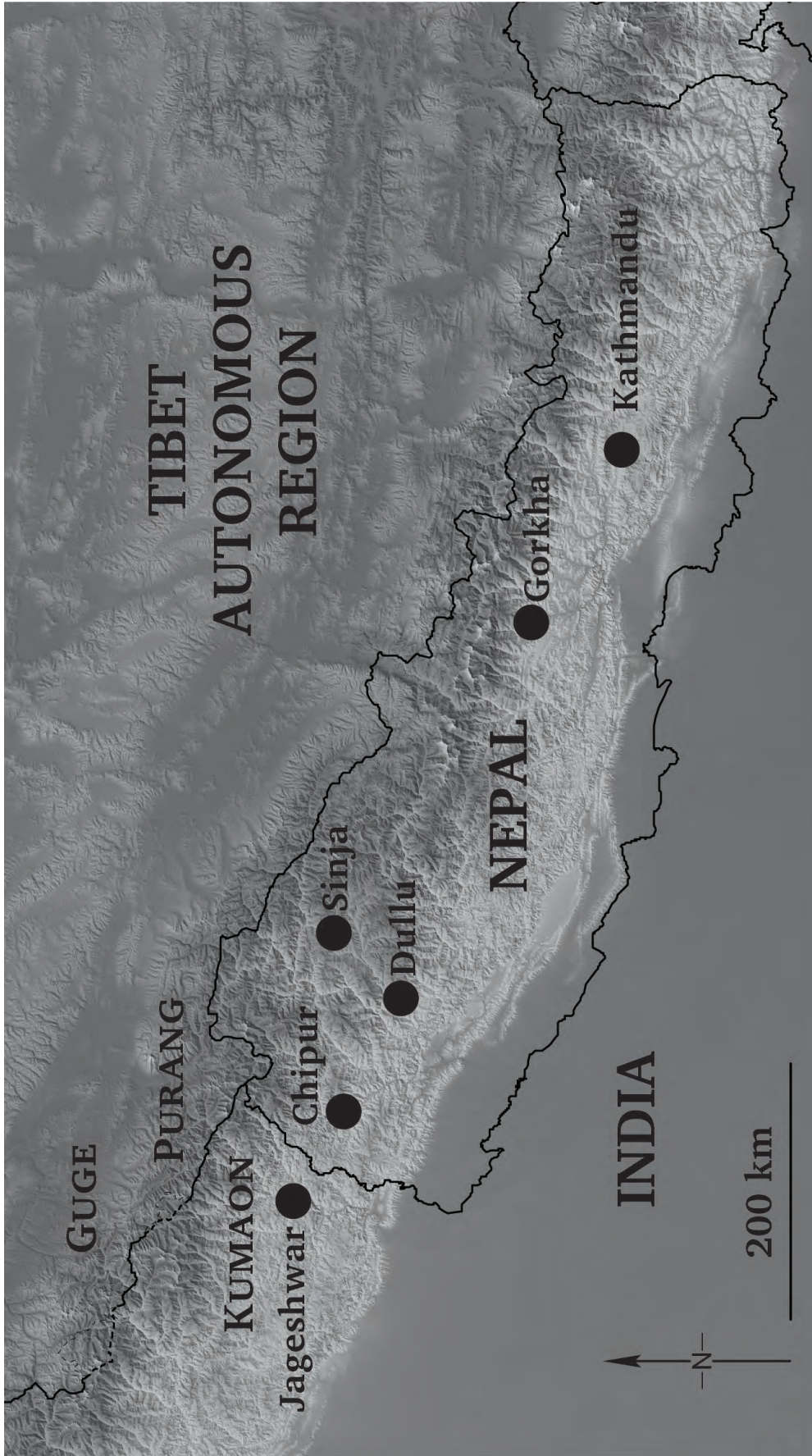
will perpetuate the tradition left for them by people like Dharma and Gobi Sikarmi.

## Notes

1. The author wishes to thank Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, Sangita Rai, Sunita Rai, Man Bahadur Shahu, Dharma Sikarmi and Gobi Sikarmi for their help in the redaction of this article.
2. Giuseppe Tucci, *Preliminary Report on Two Scientific Expeditions in Nepal*, Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1956, pp. 115–16.
3. Kāmi (blacksmiths) are registered as a group of untouchables in the *Muluki Ain* of 1854. Newar blacksmiths from the Kathmandu valley (New. *Kou*) were not relegated to this impure position. See András Höfer, *The Caste Hierarchy and the State in Nepal. A Study of the Muluki Ain of 1854*, Kathmandu: Himal Books, 1979; repr., 2004, p. 74.
4. John D. Bengtson and Blažek Václac, ‘On the Burushaski–Indo-European hypothesis by I. Čašule’, *Journal of Language Relationship*, vol. 6, 2011, pp. 25–63.
5. Georges Ifrah, *Histoire Universelle des Chiffres. L’Intelligence des Hommes Racontée par les Nombres et le Calcul*, Paris: Robert Laffont, 1994, p. 100.
6. The theory of the Central Asian origins was first emitted by Edwin T. Atkinson, *Gazetteer of the Himalayan Districts of the North Western Provinces of India*, Vol. 1, Allahabad: N.W. Provinces and Oudh Press, 1882, p. 379.
7. Turner translates *butṭā* has ‘embroidery; braid; filigree work’, and as ‘ornamentation’. See Ralph Lilley Turner, *A Comparative and Etymological Dictionary of the Nepali Language*, 1931; repr., New Delhi: Adarsh Books, 2016, p. 452.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Theodore Ricardi, ‘Nepali’, in *The Indo-Aryan Languages*, ed. George Cardona and Dhanesh Jain, Abingdon: Routledge, 2003; repr., 2014, p. 596.
10. Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, ‘The Panchakoshi of Dullu. The Fire Frame of the Malla Imperial Capital’, in *Bards and Mediums: History, Culture and Politics in the Central Himalayan Kingdoms*, ed. Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, Delhi: Alhora Book Depot, 2009c, pp. 253–76.
11. Marie Lecomte-Tilouine (personal communication).
12. Man Bahadur Shahu (personal communication).
13. *Ocimum tenuiflorum*.
14. David C. Andolfatto, ‘Le Pays aux Cent-Vingt-Cinq-Mille Montagnes: Étude Archéologique du Bassin de la Karnali (Népal) entre le XII<sup>e</sup> et le XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle’, PhD thesis, Paris Sorbonne Université, 2019, pp. 105–17.
15. Christopher Evans et al., ‘The Sinja Valley Excavation in 2000 AD’, *Ancient Nepal*, vol. 153, 2003, p. 31, fig. 7.
16. Gabriel J. Campbell, ‘Consultations with Himalayan Oracular Gods: A Study of Oracular Religion and Alternative Values in Hindu Jumla’, PhD thesis, Columbia University, 1978; Satya Shrestha-Schipper, ‘Religion et Pouvoir chez Indo-Népalais de l’Ouest du Népal (Jumla)’, PhD thesis, Université Paris X, 2003; and Hayami Yasuno, *Manifesting Gods and Remedial Faults. The Masta Cult of Western Nepal*, Kathmandu: Vajra Books, 2018.
17. Andolfatto, ‘Le Pays aux Cent-Vingt-Cinq-Mille Montagnes’, pp. 201–54 and David C. Andolfatto, ‘The Mediums’ Dance and Iconographic Silences: Medieval Representations of Oracular Practices in the Karnali River Basin (West Nepal)’, in *Encounters with the Invisible: Revisiting Spirit Possession in the Himalayas*, ed. Anne de Sales and Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, London and New York: Routledge, forthcoming in 2024.
18. Bertrand Goy and Krauskopff, Gisèle, *Wood Sculptures in Nepal. Jokers and Talismans*, Paris: 5 Continents, 2009; Jean-Luc Cortes and Jean-Claude Brezillon, *The Primitive Statuary of Western Nepal*, Paris: Heritage, 2011.

19. Surya Mani Adhikary, *The Khasa Kingdom. A Trans-Himalayan Empire of the Middle Age*, Delhi: Nirala, 1988; repr., 1997; and Andolfatto, 'Le Pays aux Cent-Vingt-Cinq-Mille Montagnes'.
20. Mahes Raj Pant, 'Towards a History of the Khasa Empire', in *Bards and Mediums: History, Culture and Politics in the Central Himalayan Kingdoms*, ed. Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, Delhi: Almora Book Depot, 2009, pp. 293–326.
21. The event is reported in the Baleshwar copper plate inscription. See Maheshwar P. Joshi, 'Advent of Politics in Uttarakhand (Kumaon and Garhwal)', in *Bards and Mediums: History, Culture and Politics in the Central Himalayan Kingdoms*, ed. Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, Delhi: Almora Book Depot, 2009, pp. 327–71.
22. David C. Andolfatto, 'Les temples *deval* de la Karnali: réflexions sur leur datation et leur vocation', *Arts Asiatiques*, vol. 76, 2022, pp. 31–46.
23. Nachiket Chanchani, *Mountain Temples & Temple Mountains: Architecture, Religion, and Nature in the Central Himalayas*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019.
24. Pant, 'Towards a History of the Khasa Empire', pp. 320–1.
25. See Chanchani, *Mountain Temples & Temple Mountains*, for a recent study of architectural developments in medieval Uttarakhand.
26. These rapid historical considerations only concern stone architecture. Monuments in less durable materials such as wood were also erected in western Nepal before and during the medieval period. The rarity of archaeological excavations and the acidity of the mountainous soil undoubtedly limit our understanding of the region's history and material culture.
27. Evans et al., 'The Sinja Valley Excavation in 2000 AD', p. 23.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
29. Adhikary, *The Khasa Kingdom*, pp. 182–4.
30. Ram Niwas Pandey, *Making of Modern Nepal: A Study of History, Art and Culture of the Principalities of Western Nepal*, Delhi: Nirala, 1997, p. 144.
31. Pant, 'Towards a History of the Khasa Empire', p. 302.
32. Bruno Dagens translates *śālā* in 'main building' and 'house'. See Bruno Dagens, *Mayamatam: Treatise of Housing, Architecture and Iconography*, 1994; repr., 2 vols., Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2007.
33. Giuseppe Tucci's proposal that *Sijā/Sinja* is to be identified with the *Yatse* (Tib. *ya rste*) mentioned in Tibetan sources has so far remained unchallenged. Tucci, *Preliminary Report on Two Scientific Expeditions*. See also Amy Heller, 'A Sculpture of Avalokiteśvara Donated by the Ruler of Ya tse (Ya rtse' mnga' bdag)', in *Nepalica-Tibetica: Festgabe for Christoph Cüppers*, ed. F.-K. Erhard and P. Maurer, International Institute for Tibetan Buddhist Studies, 2013, pp. 242–7; Andolfatto 'Le Pays aux Cent-Vingt-Cinq-Mille Montagnes'; and David C. Andolfatto and Laura Weinstein, 'Royal *Saugatas* across the Himalayas: A Reassessment of the Khasa Malla Metal Statuary Considering Archaeological, Religious and Stylistic Materials', in *Proceedings of the 16<sup>th</sup> IATS Conference*, ed. Yannick Laurent and David Pritzker, forthcoming.
34. These guiding concepts of urban planning and architecture are described in *Śilpaśāstra* treatises such as the *Mānasāra* and the *Mayamata*, as well as in the *Bṛhatsamhitā* and the *Suprabhedāgama* (Prasanna Kumar Acharya, *Architecture of Mānasāra, Translated from Original Sanskrit*, London: Oxford University Press, 1946; Prasanna Kumar Acharya, *An Encyclopedia of Hindu Architecture*, London: Oxford University Press, 1946b; and Dagens, *Mayamatam*).
35. Andolfatto, 'Le Pays aux Cent-Vingt-Cinq-Mille Montagnes', pp. 145–6.
36. Besides these sources it is necessary to mention the important corpus of *vaṃśāvalī*, or lineage genealogies. These chronicles may be written down or transmitted orally. See Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, 'From the Bards' Grandeur to the Kings Orders.

- History in Various Forms', in *Bards and Mediums: History, Culture and Politics in the Central Himalayan Kingdoms*, ed. Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, Delhi: Almora Book Depot, 2009, pp. 173–88; Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, 'The Hudke Bard as Genealogist. The Raskoti Vamshavalis and their Context of Performance', in *Bards and Mediums: History, Culture and Politics in the Central Himalayan Kingdoms*, ed. Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, Delhi: Almora Book Depot, 2009, pp. 189–224.
37. Ping-Ti Ho, 'The Introduction of American Food Plants into China', *American Anthropologist*, vol. 57, no. 2, 1955, pp. 191–201.
38. A bold (and since abandoned) theory published in 1989 supported the idea of a pre-Columbian diffusion of maize in India based on representations of fruits on twelfth–thirteenth century Hoysala sculptures. See Carl L. Johannessen and Anne Z. Parker, 'Maize Ears Sculptured in 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> Century AD. India as Indicators of Pre-Columbian Diffusion', *Economic Botany*, vol. 43, no. 2, 1989, pp. 164–80.
39. As illustrated with the Kutkyā motif (no. 9), that allegedly dates to the time of the Pāṇḍavas, the use of myths as an explanatory basis follows a narrative often encountered for monuments. The legendary brothers are said to have resided in the region. This presence has left its mark in the local topography (near Sinja is the Pāṇḍava Guphā, the 'Pāṇḍava cave') as well as in vernacular readings of medieval architecture. Groups of śikhara temples are indeed often said to have been constructed by the Pāṇḍavas.
40. Andolfatto, 'Le Pays aux Cent-Vingt-Cinq-Mille Montagnes'.
41. See Margaret Prosser, *Ornament in Indian Architecture*, Newark: Delaware Press, 1991; and Madhusudan A. Dhaky, *The Indian Temple Traceries*, New Delhi: American Institute of Indian Studies, 2005.
42. See Lennart Edelberg, *Nuristani Buildings*, Copenhagen: Aarhus, 1984, fig. 23, 109, 166 and 274.
43. David C. Andolfatto, *The Lions of Yatse: Architecture, Art and History of the Karnali Basin, West Nepal*, Kathmandu: Vajra Academics, forthcoming.



Map 28.1: Map of Nepal showing Sinja (Jumla district)  
Source: David C. Andolfatto

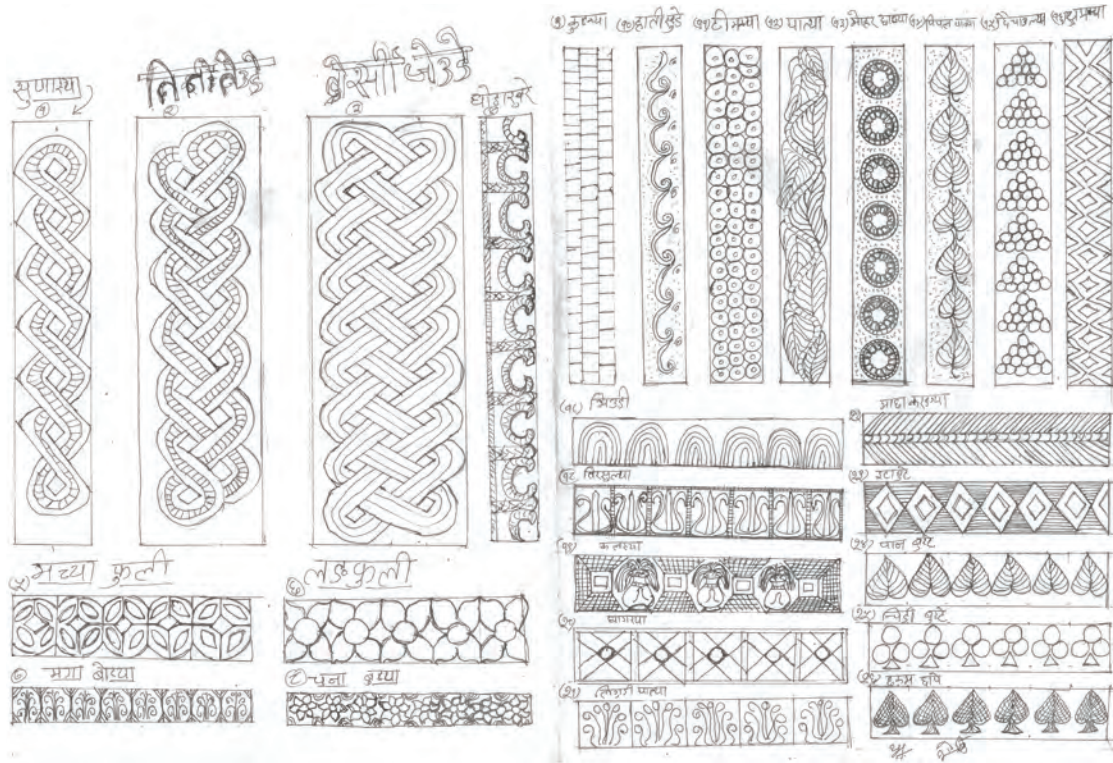


Figure 28.1: The *Dui Bise Bārha Buttā*, motifs 1 to 26; drawing by Dharma Sikarmi and Gobi Sikarmi  
 Source: Author's collection

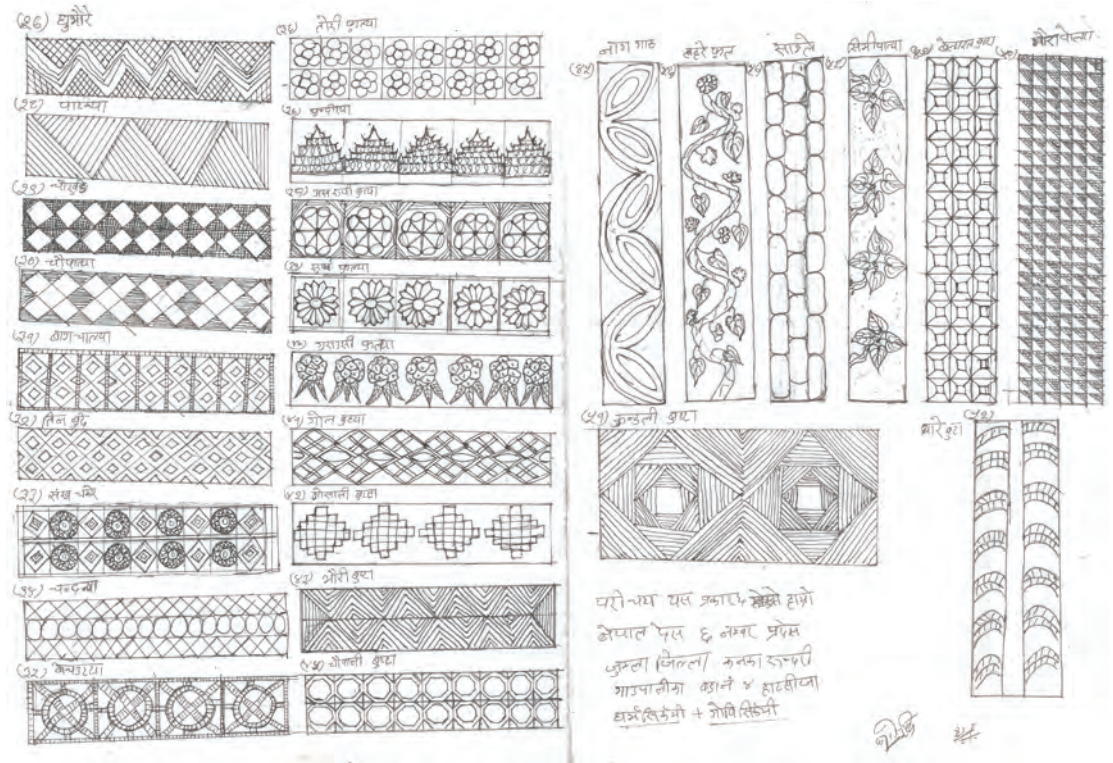


Figure 28.2: The *Dui Bise Bārha Buttā*, motifs 27 to 52; drawing by Dharma Sikarmi and Gobi Sikarmi  
 Source: Author's collection



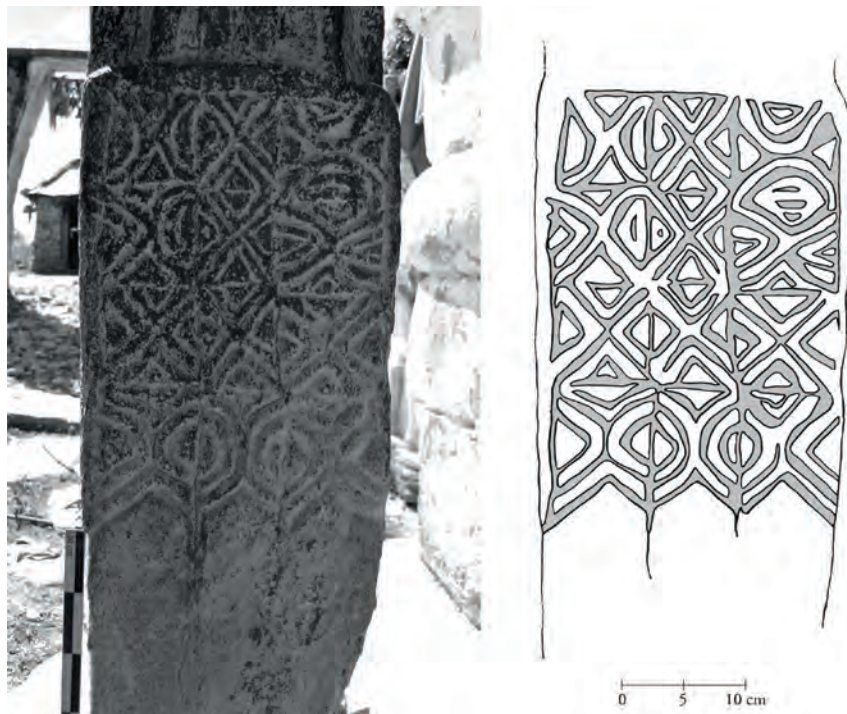


Figure 28.4: Carved stone pillar of a *śikhara* temple in Manma (Dailekh district), fourteenth–fifteenth century

Source: David C. Andolfatto, September 2016



Plate 28.1: Dharma Sikarmi (left) and Gobi Sikarmi (right) explaining the carvings at the Kanakāsundarī Temple.

Source: David C. Andolfatto, May 2018

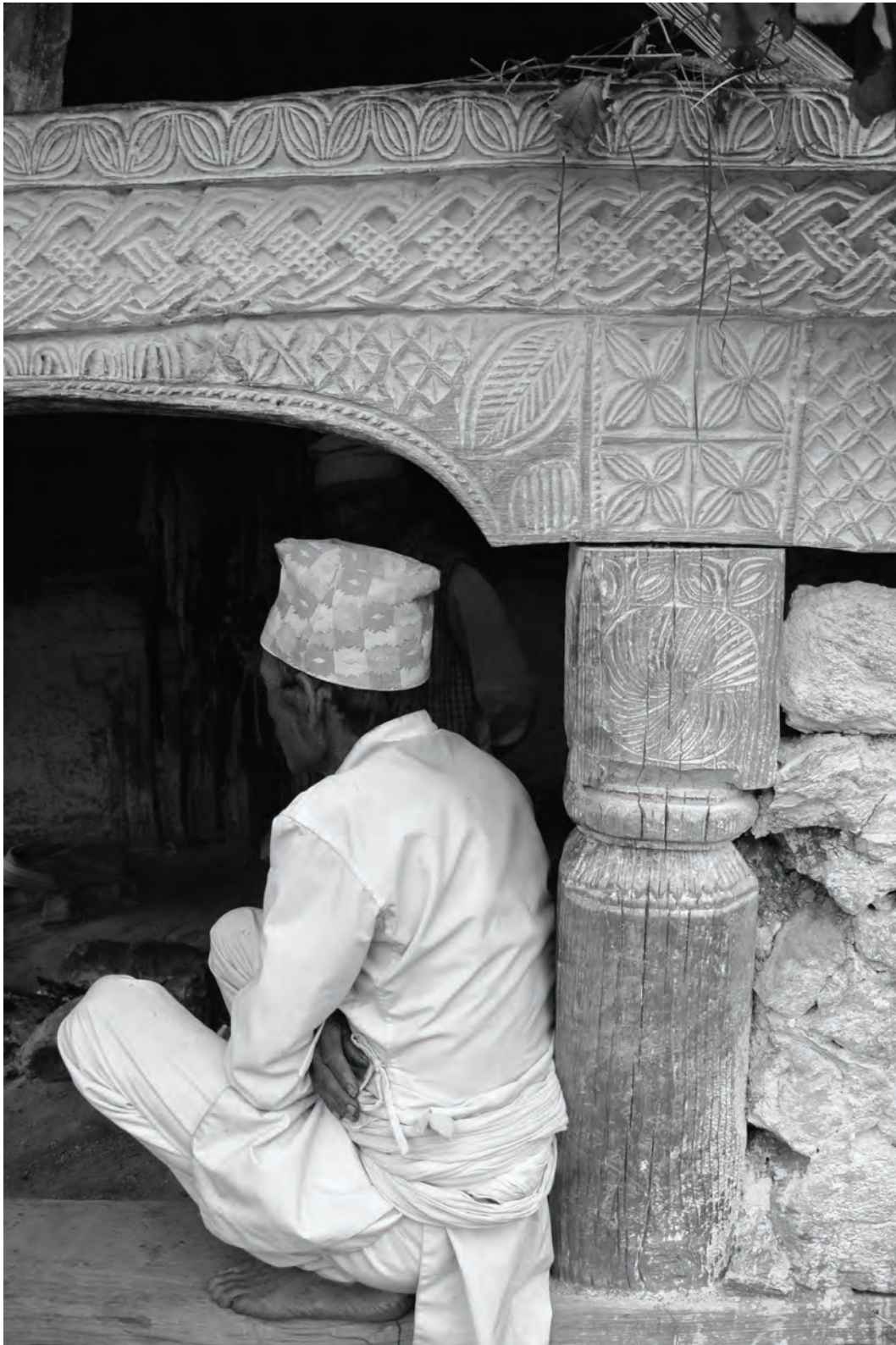


Plate 28.2: Carved colonnade at the Maṣṭā Temple in Bhudki (Jumla district). The motifs of Ḍorsī Jeude (no. 3), Bhiudī (no. 17), Loṅg Phulī (no. 6) and Nāg Gāthe (no. 45) are carved on the pillar, spandrel and entablement.

*Source:* David C. Andolfatto, September 2015



Plate 28.3: Forest temple (*ban thān*) of the god Lāmā in Lekhpur (Jumla district)

Source: David C. Andolfatto, May 2018



Plate 28.4: Doorframe of a *śikhara* temple in Tarpibada (Jumla district), thirteenth–fifteenth centuries

Source: David C. Andolfatto, May 2022

# TRANSCENDING BOUNDARIES

Premodern Cultural  
Transactions across Asia

ESSAYS IN HONOUR OF OSMUND BOPEARACHCHI

EDITED BY  
SUSMITA BASU MAJUMDAR



*Transcending Boundaries*  
*Premodern Cultural Transactions across Asia*

ESSAYS IN HONOUR OF OSMUND BOPEARACHCHI

*edited by*

Susmita Basu Majumdar



PRIMUS BOOKS

*An Imprint of Ratna Sagar P. Ltd.*  
Virat Bhavan  
Mukherjee Nagar Commercial Complex  
Delhi 110 009

*Offices at*

CHENNAI LUCKNOW

AGRA AHMEDABAD BANGALORE COIMBATORE  
DEHRADUN GUWAHATI HYDERABAD JAIPUR JALANDHAR  
KANPUR KOCHI KOLKATA MADURAI MUMBAI  
PATNA RANCHI VARANASI

© *Susmita Basu Majumdar for Introduction and editorial selection*

© *Individual contributors for their respective essays*

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of Primus Books, or as expressly permitted by law, by licence, or under terms agreed with the appropriate reproduction rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the above should be sent to Primus Books at the address above.

*First published 2024*

ISBN: 978-93-6177-059-3 (hardback)

ISBN: 978-93-6177-824-7 (PoD)

Published by Primus Books

Typeset by Manmohan Kumar  
manmohankumar2015@gmail.com

Printed and bound in India by Replika Press Pvt Ltd.

This book is meant for educational and learning purposes. The author(s) of the book has/have taken all reasonable care to ensure that the contents of the book do not violate any existing copyright or other intellectual property rights of any person in any manner whatsoever. In the event the author(s) has/have been unable to track any source and if any copyright has been inadvertently infringed, please notify the publisher in writing for corrective action.