

well as Rahu, the planetary eclipse. While Brahma is considered the creator god, he is generally subservient to the other deities for whom he performs sacrificial acts. He is easily recognized by his four heads and the ritual ladle and rosary that he holds. Karttikeya, who is known variously as Kumara, Skanda or Subrahmanya, is the eternally youthful and chaste battle god who rides on a peacock. According to some legends he is the offspring of Shiva, and for this reason he is sometimes shown together with Shiva, Parvati and Ganesha. The Dikpalas, the regents of the eight directions of space, incorporate deities taken from the *Vedas*, notably Indra wielding a thunderbolt and riding on an aerial elephant, Varuna accompanied by an aquatic monster, and Agni with flame-like hair, sometimes also holding a flame. Another Dikpala is Yama, the lord of death, who displays the noose with which he drags his victims into the underworld.

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Narrative traditions

Hindu art is greatly enriched by sculpted and painted illustrations of mythological events. Some compositions are based on chapters in Sanskrit compilations of Hindu legends, such as the *Puranas*; others depict stories pertaining to particular shrines recorded in vernacular languages, known as *Sthalapuranas*. Narrative depictions often focus on single-action scenes: for example, the story of Vishnu as Varaha, stepping out of the cosmic ocean to nuzzle the goddess Bhudevi with his boar head, is generally compressed into a single tableau. Vishnu Trivikrama is represented both as the dwarf Vamana, who asks the wicked king Bali for a boon of territory, and as the giant who kicks up one leg in the act of pacing out the universe in three tremendous strides. Successive events drawn from the *Ramayana* and the Krishna legend are often combined in linear fashion, with the chief protagonists appearing repeatedly in successive scenes, a device well suited to long friezes on temple basements or painted panels on walls and ceilings. In miniature painting, such scenes are distributed over a number of different pages intended to be viewed in a predetermined sequence.

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Certain compositions focus on dramatic moments of miraculous appearance and intervention. Vishnu riding through the air on Garuda descends to earth to free Gajendra, an elephant devotee who had been trapped in a lotus pond by a mythical water creature. Shiva leaps out of the linga to rescue Markandeya, a youthful worshipper clutching the emblem so as to avert being dragged by Yama into the underworld; he steps out of a fiery linga to settle a dispute between Vishnu and Brahma, who had presumed to

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judge the linga's height; he manifests himself before the sage
Bhagiratha, whose austerities induced the god to persuade the
Ganges river to descend to earth so as to immerse the ashes of
his ancestors; Shiva then saves the earth from destruction by
receiving the mighty waters in his matted tresses.

Deities triumphing over their adversaries proliferate in Hindu
art, sometimes in compositions marked by a conspicuous violence.
Durga slays Mahisha by savagely plunging her spear down into
the buffalo demon; in a comparable scene, Shiva impales the
demon Andhaka, but here the spear is angled upwards. Scenes of
triumph follow: Durga stands on the severed head of Mahisha,
while Shiva dances in the elephant skin of another demon that he
has just slain. No less turbulent are the episodes from the story of
Vishnu Narasimha, who appears out of a pillar before his youthful
devotee Prahlada, and then proceeds to disembowel Prahlada's
wicked father, Hiranyakashipu, in an unparalleled act of fury.
Battles provided artists with unrivalled opportunities for por-
traying gods and their enemies in the company of armed troops,
horses and elephants, with arrows flying through the air and slain
victims littering the ground. One of the most frequently depicted
combats in all Hindu art is the war between Rama and Ravana, the
multi-headed demon king of Lanka, taken from the *Ramayana*.
Other combats are generally reduced to a pair of figures pitted
against each other, such as Yudhishtira and Duryodhana, leaders
of the opposing armies in the *Mahabharata*, or Arjuna grappling
with Shiva disguised as a *kirata*, or forest hunter.

The *Ramayana* is the subject of countless temple reliefs and
painted compositions. The story offers an enticing variety of set-
tings: the palace in Ayodhya where King Dasharatha lives with his
four sons, including Rama and Lakshmana; the forest to which
these two brothers, together with Rama's wife Sita, are banished,
and where they encounter their monkey allies; Ravana's strong-
hold on the island of Lanka where Sita is held in captivity and
which the allies eventually capture and destroy. Furthermore, the
Ramayana is packed with scenes of emotion and action: Rama
and his brother Lakshmana saying farewell to their father; the
combats between the heroes and the forest demons, including
the ogress Taraka; Ravana's abduction of Sita in his aerial chariot,
and the death of Jatayu, the valiant bird, who tries to inter-
cept them; the struggle between the monkeys Sugriva and Vali,
rival claimants to the throne of Kishkindha; the adventures of
Hanuman, the monkey general, while discovering the whereabouts
of Sita; the climactic battle between the armies of Rama and

15. Rama and Sita in the forest,
a scene from the *Ramayana*.
Mughal court at Agra or Lahore,
1590s; watercolour on paper.



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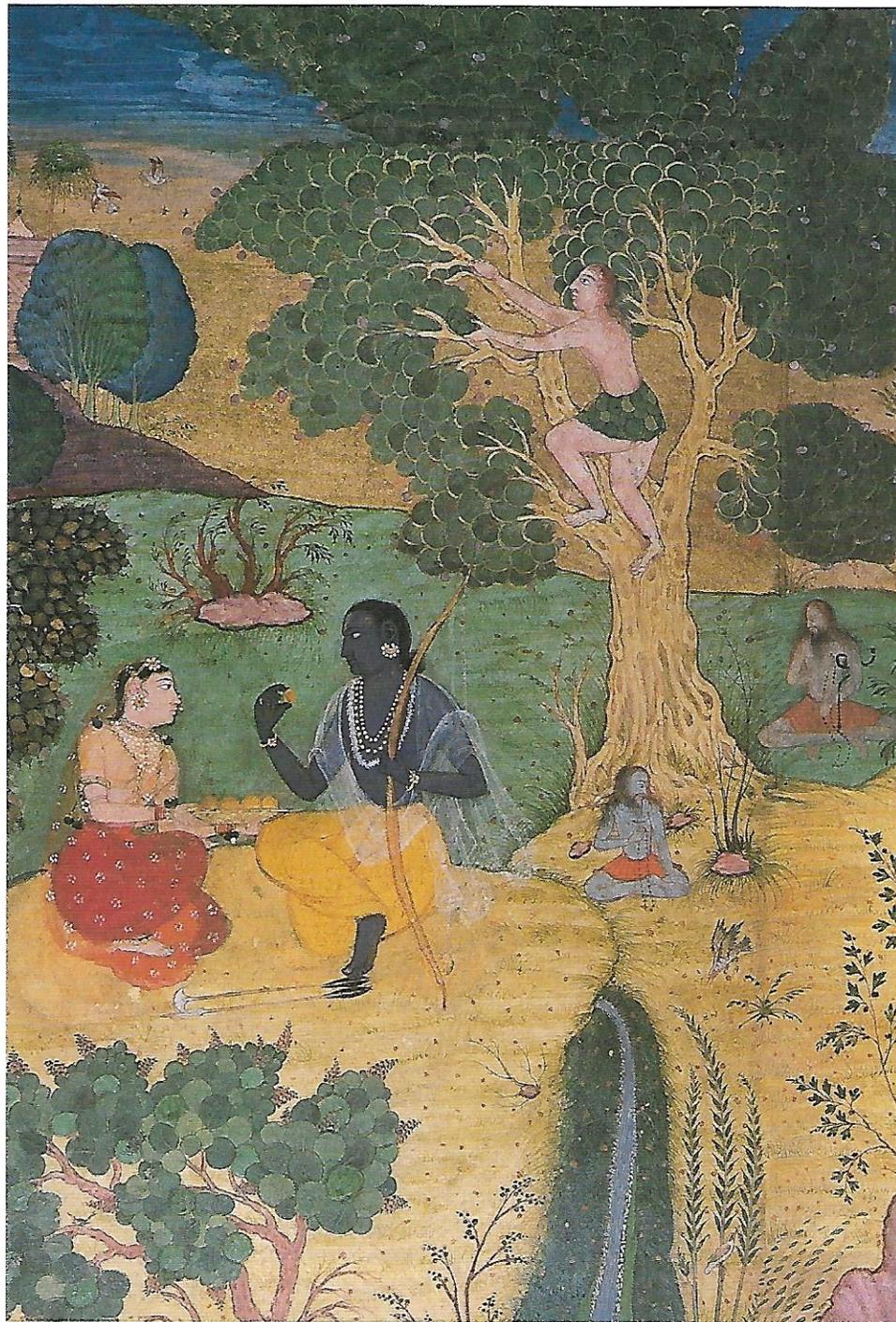
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Ravana that has already been noted; Sita's ordeal by fire after her rescue, in order to demonstrate her innocence to the doubting Rama; and, bringing the epic to a triumphal conclusion, Rama's coronation in Ayodhya.

The Krishna legend is no less appealing, its various episodes providing abundant scope for animated storytelling in both sculpture and painting: the escape of the child Krishna from the murdering intent of Kamsa, the evil king of Mathura; Krishna and his brother Balarama being raised by the cowherd Nanda and his wife Yashoda; Krishna as a child mischievously stealing butter, 164 kicking the cart, and dragging a stone mortar to which he is chained; Krishna as a youth killing the ogress Putana by sucking at her breast, protecting the herds of cows from Indra's wrath by 118 lifting up Mount Govardhana, drinking in the flames of the forest 132 fire to save the flocks, and subduing the wicked serpent Kaliya by 115 dancing on its hoods. Throughout painted illustrations of these scenes, Krishna is distinguished by his blue skin, a characteristic explained by his name, which literally means 'blue-black'.

By far the most frequently depicted episode of the Krishna story is that in which the god appears as an amorous cowherd flirting with the gopis. Krishna entertains them by playing the flute or 126, dancing with them in a circle; he teases them by stealing their 145 clothes and hiding up a tree; he flirts unashamedly with Radha, his 116 favourite. When he comes of age, Krishna returns to Mathura; he wrestles with animal demons to gain admittance to the palace of Kamsa; finally, he grabs Kamsa's hair and pulls the king down from the throne and beheads him. With this last act of revenge, 130 most carved and painted cycles of the Krishna legend are brought to an end.

The number and variety of portrayals of Krishna with Radha far exceed the relevant chapters in the *Bhagavata Purana*; such scenes, in fact, are partly inspired by the verses of the *Gita Govinda* emphasizing Radha's longing for the absent Krishna, and her ultimate union with her lord. Other literary sources are also relevant here, most notably the *Ragamalas*, or Garlands of Melody. These descriptions of Indian musical modes, conceived in male and female form as *ragas* and *raginis*, are visualized as romantic-erotic situations in aristocratic settings. The courtly lovers who appear in the different phases of love-making are often 128 impersonated by Krishna and Radha.

No account of Hindu narrative art would be complete without notice of the Tamil saints. A bounty of miracles attends the tales of the deified devotees of Shiva: Sambandar cures the Pandya

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ruler by applying holy ash, and restores a beautiful twelve-year-old girl who had died of a snakebite; Sundarar delivers a child from the jaws of a crocodile, and sings a hymn that causes the waters of the Kaveri river to part so that he might visit a shrine on the other bank; Chandesha cuts off his father's leg when the latter disrespectfully kicks the linga; Kannappa, the hunter, plucks out his own eyes to offer them to the blind linga of Shiva.

Magical protection

Other than the icons of deities and representations of their mythical exploits, there exists in Hindu art a wealth of accessory themes that have a crucial role to play in the magical protection of religious monuments. As the settings for the major cults of Hinduism and attendant rites of worship, temples require shielding from negative forces; hence the need for an effectively auspicious imagery. Such themes express the opposite but complementary tendencies of naturalism and fantasy that are such a feature of Hindu art.

The ritually protective purpose of temple sculpture and painting is taken literally. The *dvarapalas*, or guardian figures, placed on either side of shrine doorways have fierce expressions and are invariably armed with clubs; they also bear the same emblems as those of the god or goddess whom they are defending. Dvarapalas are sometimes accompanied by dwarfish ganas, the custodians of the treasures of the earth. Human warriors also contribute to the ritual protection of the temple, and martial themes commonly adorn basements and column shafts. Such compositions offer a valuable insight into contemporary military life, complete with elephants, infantry, cavalry, musicians, standard-bearers and war-chariots. Warriors on leaping horses or fantastic beasts are singled out for special attention in many of these compositions.

Nor is the symbolic protection of the temple restricted to male figures. Hindu art is also celebrated for its female figures, especially the maidens known as *surasundaris*, or 'heavenly beauties'. They appear as young women with generous hips, small waists and full breasts, and bewitching smiling countenances. They are shown in alluring postures that express the guises of female sexuality: attending to their toilette, holding a bird, recoiling from a scorpion, fending off a mischievous monkey. Surasundaris accompany dvarapalas at shrine doorways where, as Yamuna and Ganga, the personifications of the sacred Jumna and Ganges rivers, they stand respectively on a tortoise and a *makara*, a type of aquatic beast; as *shalabhanjikas*, clutching a branch or a creeper,



16. Mithuna couple beneath a fruiting tree. Bracket at the entrance to the Vishnu cave-temple at Badami in Karnataka, 578; sandstone.

they grace temple gateways, porches and balconies. Maidens adopt dance postures and play the *vina*, a stringed instrument, as well as cymbals and drums, thereby illustrating of the importance of music in temple worship. 100

Maidens appear together with male companions as embracing couples known as *mithunas*, a felicitous and ubiquitous motif in Hindu art. Standing couples adorn shrine doorways and porch brackets, while flying couples appear on temple ceilings, their draperies billowing outwards. The mithuna topic is sometimes developed into an overtly sexual theme, with couples engaged in copulating acts, even orgiastic groups. The facial expression of these figures is generally human and tender, imbuing such scenes with a lyrical erotic flavour far removed from pornography. Though sexual compositions are sometimes interpreted as portrayals of esoteric rites associated with Tantric cults, their presence in Hindu art is better understood as part of a widespread belief in the magical efficacy of sex to protect a sacred monument, hence their placing at the ritually vulnerable parts of temples.

Animals and flowers are a constant presence in Hindu art, attesting to the beneficial powers of nature. Animals provide a symbolic support for the temple, and for this reason plinths are often sculpted with processions of mighty elephants. Horses appear in leaping postures in conjunction with spoked wheels, transforming the temple into a chariot, the most celebrated example being the thirteenth-century sanctuary of the god Surya at Konarak in Orissa. The innate vitality of animals is evident in the fantastic beasts with terrifying eyes, tusks and horns, known in various parts of India as *vyalas* or *yalis*. These imaginary creatures guard the gateways to temples or line the approaches leading to the sanctuary; reduced to *kirttimukhas*, or 'monster heads', they animate towers and parapets. 109 1 17 42

Such fantastic visions contrast with the more obvious naturalism of bulls, which in Hindu art appear as placid agricultural animals. Nandi is seated comfortably, the bulk of the body displaced to one side, ceremonially decked in bells and clappers. Cobras, known in India as *nagas*, are much favoured for their magical powers connected with the underworld. Multi-headed nagas rear up protectively over the linga; Ananta or Shesha, the cosmic serpent supporting Vishnu, has already been noticed. Hybrid cobras appear with male (*naga*) or female (*nagini*) torsos and serpent hoods, sometimes paired in male-female groups. Aquatic creatures also populate this sacred bestiary, especially geese and crocodile-like makaras, both with fanciful tails. 101 18



17. Guardian... TEMPLE AT KONARAK

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17. Guardian vyalas trampling elephants, in front of the Surya temple at Konarak in Orissa, mid-thirteenth century, khondalite.



18. Naga king (above) and queen (below). Detail of the aquatic figures in the Ganges river, from a relief at Mamallapuram in Tamil Nadu (see p. 84 and Ill. 65), second half of the seventh century; granite.

Leafy scrollwork constitutes an entire repertory of decoration in Hindu art, much of it derived from the intertwining stalks, tendrils and petals of the lotus. This floral decor is distributed throughout the temple, with petalled garlands and pot-and-foilage designs on columns, friezes of undulating leafy stalks on doorway jambs and thresholds, and full lotuses with concentric rings of deeply cut petals on ceilings.

The architectural setting

Whether figural, animal or vegetal, the prolific imagery of Hindu art only gains meaning from the architectural setting which provides it with a ritual and symbolic context. Worship within a temple conforms to a simple pattern that appears relatively unchanged over some fifteen hundred years or so; nor do these rites vary substantially according to the requirements of the different cults. Worshippers approach the temple sanctuary in order to make visual contact with the sculpted image or emblem of the deity placed inside the *garbhagriha*, or 'womb chamber'. This act of seeing, called *darshana*, is central to all forms of veneration in India. The concern with direct visual contact means that sacred monuments are laid out so as to emphasize the progression from the entrance towards the sanctuary doorway. This axial principle is observed in the simplest shrines, which consist of little more than a *garbhagriha* with a doorway sheltered by a porch, as well as in large and elaborate complexes with sequences of walled enclosures, gateways, columned halls and corridors.

Whatever the scale of the Hindu monument, the *garbhagriha* is inevitably massive, dark and confined. Such qualities give the impression of a cave, reminding devotees of the natural grottoes where gods and goddesses like to manifest themselves. The *garbhagriha* doorway is of paramount importance since it signifies the threshold of the innermost sacred zone. Its jambs and lintels are adorned with the auspicious figural and vegetal motifs that have already been mentioned.

Alignments within the temple are not restricted to the horizontal axis: a symbolic vertical axis connects the image or emblem of the divinity inside the *garbhagriha* to the summit of the tower that rises above. The finial that crowns the apex of the superstructure is always positioned over the middle of the sanctuary beneath; in northern India, the summit is marked by a ribbed, disc-like element known as an *amalaka*, with a pot-like finial above. If the *garbhagriha* is reminiscent of a natural cave, then the tower represents a sacred mountain: hence the term *shikhara*, or 'peak',

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19. Crouching figure of *varaha*, the cosmic man. The four arms define the squared base on which the *garbhagriha* of the temple is to be built. From a manual on temple construction.

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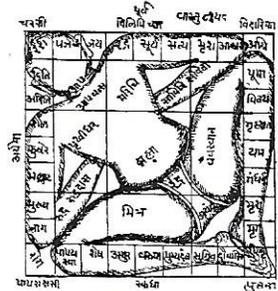
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by which this feature is known in northern India. Shikharas present characteristic curved profiles, often multiplied into clusters of secondary components to suggest an actual mountain range. The sacred imagery that crowds the upper stages of the towers affirms that the temple is truly a *devasthanam*, or 'seat of the gods'. Shiva himself resides on the summit of Mount Kailasa in the Himalayas; temples dedicated to him as Kailasanatha, the lord of Kailasa, are intended as replicas of his lofty abode. 70

The vertical axis of the temple is accompanied by other axes of symbolic relevance. The central points of the sanctuary walls are marked by niches housing accessory icons; these are aligned with the image or emblem that receives worship within. On visiting a temple, devotees circumambulate the garbhagriha in a clockwise direction, an act of homage known as *pradakshina*. Such rites explain the sequence of imagery on the sanctuary walls, sometimes contained within a walled-in passageway, as well as the distribution of shrines, pavilions, altars and flag-columns in the compounds of larger sacred complexes. 60

In order to ensure the correct ritual and symbolic functioning of the temple, priestly scribes encoded much of this lore into building manuals known as the *Vastu Shastras*, some examples of which, like the *Manasara*, are traced back to the seventh or eighth century. These works classify information about the selection of the temple site, the laying out of the ground plan of the building, the merits of different materials, the proportional relationship between plan and elevation, and the mouldings of basement, cornice and tower. Temple diagrams, or *mandalas*, are usually squares subdivided into lesser squares, each representing a 'seat' of a god. Some mandalas are occupied by a figure called the *vastu purusha*, or cosmic man, whose limbs regulate the overall layout of the monument. That temple sanctuaries were actually erected on mandala plans described in the *Vastu Shastras* is revealed by their mathematically regular square layouts. 19

19. Crouching figure of *vastu purusha*, the cosmic man, whose limbs define the squared diagram on which the garbhagriha of the temple is to be built. From a manual on temple construction.



This obsession with numbers permeates all aspects of the sacred building; the garbhagriha in southern Indian temples is even termed *vimana*, 'well measured'. Plans and elevations are geometrically related, with the horizontal and vertical dimensions being derived from the size of the image or emblem that receives worship inside the garbhagriha. This numerical control symbolically links the temple with the mathematically determined structure of the universe.

Royal patrons

If the symbolic basis of Hindu architecture is bound up with seemingly timeless beliefs and practices, the actual construction of sacred monuments is related to historical events and individuals. Inscriptions on buildings and works of art record the pious donations of kings and queens, not to mention courtiers, commanders and merchants. One reason for the close relationship between royal figures and sacred art is the assumption that the ideal Hindu ruler was the upholder of *dharma*, traditional law, and the agent of moral well-being and prosperity. Accordingly, it was his or her duty to erect temples and commission carved and painted depictions of Hindu divinities.

While rulers were expected to assert their military power and display their authority whenever possible, they were also responsible for the spiritual welfare of their people. As chief worshipper, the king or queen generously endowed temples with gifts and grants of income from land so that rituals of devotion would be maintained at all times. He or she was rewarded for these benefactions by blessings from the deity which guaranteed victory for the ruler's troops and prosperity for the people. Only after promoting a particular divinity in this way could monarchs expect to gain sufficient power and influence. Displays of royal sponsorship in temple construction and religious ceremony were a crucial means of achieving legitimacy and maintaining control.

The role of kings and queens as worshippers finds expression throughout Hindu art. Royal figures, generally shown with the palms of their hands joined in the typical attitude of adoration, appear beside temple deities or in front of sanctuary doorways. Such portraits of royal patrons include a pair of sandstone figures from Khajuraho in Madhya Pradesh. The stately costumes and sumptuous jewels of this royal couple are clearly delineated, so too their elegantly arranged hands performing a significant rite. Among the many other examples of royal portraiture in Hindu art is a mural on the linga shrine of the Brihadishvara temple at



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20. A royal couple performing a rite of temple worship. From Khajuraho in Madhya Pradesh, eleventh century; sandstone, H 42 cm.

Tanjavur in Tamil Nadu. This shows Rajaraja I, the eleventh-century Chola patron of the monument, in the company of his spiritual adviser.

Many Hindu dynasties associated themselves with a particular divinity who was considered the guardian of the royal household. As a potent source of power, goddesses were of special importance in this regard. Such protective deities appeared on regal documents and war banners to become a highly visible part of the king's domain. Temples expressly built for them were situated within the palace precinct to serve as private chapels for the king and his household. Where the deity was worshipped in a sanctuary some distance from the capital, a replica image or a schematic representation of the shrine in which it was housed might be painted onto the walls of the royal audience hall or private prayer chamber. Examples are the representation of Vishnu Padmanabha in the king's own shrine room within the eighteenth-century palace at Padmanabhapuram (named after the god), which served as the residence of the kings of southern Kerala, and the view of the Shrinathji shrine at Nathdwara that appears in the murals of about the same period

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that adorn the fortified headquarters of the Rajput rulers of Bundi in Rajasthan. There were, however, occasions when an auspicious image could actually be brought to the capital itself. Such was the case with an icon of Krishna under the name of Govinda-deva, removed from a temple at Vrindaban on the Jumna in Uttar Pradesh, and accommodated within a newly built shrine in the eighteenth-century palace of Sawai Jai Singh II in Jaipur in Rajasthan.

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Rulers and their retinues made frequent pilgrimages to their chosen deities at far-off shrines. The twelfth- and thirteenth-century Ganga rulers of Orissa, for example, visited the Jagannatha temple at Puri, while the sixteenth-century Tuluvas of Karnataka were followers of Vishnu under the name of Venkateshvara worshipped in the hilltop shrine at Tirumala, as well as of Shiva in the riverside shrine at Kalahasti, a short distance apart in southern Andhra Pradesh. In fact, Achyutaraya, one of the most powerful of the Tuluvas, celebrated his coronation ceremony at both Tirumala and Kalahasti in 1529. Queens too were ardent devotees of deities at pilgrimage sites, none more so than Ahilyabai, the eighteenth-century Maratha queen who ordered the construction of the Vishvanatha temple at Varanasi, the most important of all Hindu sacred cities, situated on the left bank of the Ganges in Uttar Pradesh.

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Some Hindu temples fulfilled the needs both of divine worship and of royal commemoration. Two sister queens of Vikramaditya II, the Early Chalukya ruler of Karnataka, commissioned a matching pair of temples at Pattadakal in the early eighth century to celebrate a military victory of their lord. Some three centuries later, the Chola king Rajendra I erected a temple at Gangaikondacholapuram to glorify his successful march northwards as far as the Ganges. A carved panel on the monument possibly depicts the royal founder as a saint receiving a victory garland from Shiva himself. Temples in later times were sometimes built in memory of a deceased king or queen, thereby serving as a funerary monument, though without enshrining any human remains. Known in northern India as *chhatris*, such structures usually accommodated a small linga that represented the deified presence of the royal figure.

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Royal sponsorship of Hindu shrines in India is now a thing of the past, though the descendants of some royal families continue to participate in temple ceremonies. These acts sustain the crucial relationship between rulers and gods that has underpinned so much of Hindu art and architecture in the past.

21. Column of Heliodorus, at Besnagar near Vidisha in Madhya Pradesh, Shunga period, first century BC; H 6.5 m. The image of Garuda that topped the column, and the associated sanctuary of Vishnu under the name of Vasudeva, have vanished.

