

## Some Notable features of the Ambarnātha Śiva Temple

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The article documents some unusual features of the Ambarnātha Śiva temple. Stella Kramrisch has said in her book, 'The Hindu Temple' "Nothing that is seen on the temple is left unsaid in the verbal tradition nor is any of the detail arbitrary or superfluous. Each has a definite place and is part of the whole".<sup>1</sup> This article is an effort to understand the significance of the unusual features of the Ambarnātha Temple as part of the quest to understand the whole.

The west-facing Ambarnātha Śiva temple has many unusual features; three such fetures are discussed here. The first is architectural, while the second and third reflect a well thought out placement scheme for image atop the central pillars and along the sides of the small hall and *antarāla*.

The first unusual feature is a two feet wide gap between the two roofs - *ghaṇṭāsamvāṇa* roof of the hall and the *bhūmija* roof on the sanctum, (Plate 2.1). This feature is not commonly seen on *bhūmija* temples. The other contemporary *bhūmija* temples, namely Nilakanṭheśvara at Udaipur, MP and Mankeśvara temple at Jhodge, Nasik can be cited for comparison. They clearly show the absence of such a gap between the roofs of the sanctum and the hall. The line diagram (Fig. 1) shows the gap more clearly. The interesting feature of this gap is that there are two openings in the wall on either side of the gap. A full length doorway on the western side leads to the hollow walk-in portion under the roof of the hall. By contrast, a square opening on the eastern side of the gap leads through the thick wall of the sanctum roof (Plate 2.2). Above this window-like opening on the sanctum side is a sculpted panel. The doorway on the hall side of the gap has nosuch feature. The panel may be an elaborate lintel (*Uttaraṅga*) in which case it may provide a clue to a possible purpose for this gap.

The panel has plain slabs of dressed stone on the lowest and the top-most parts. In between are four rows of figure sculptures framed by pilasters on either side. Unfortunately the figure sculptures are much abraded (Pl. 2.3). The top row has human figures in different



Pl. 2.1: Ambarnātha Śiva Temple, gap between 'ghaṇṭasamvāṇa' roof of the hall and 'bhūmija' roof on the sanctum



Pl. 2.2: Gap between two roofs - window-like opening (east face) and door (west face)



Pl. 2.3: Details of sculpted panel above window-like opening

postures but details are lost. The next row has a central figure of a dancing Gaṇeśa flanked by musicians. The row below this has, on each side *dikpālas* on their mounts, facing the centre. The lowest row seems to have three figures like flying *gandharvas*, one at each end and one in the centre. They are four armed, with the upper arms in 'bhārvāhaka' posture. There are smaller figures in 'praśasti' postures on either side, between the central and the end *gandharva* figures.

For comparison, one should look at the lintel above the door to the sanctum at Jarai temple Barwāsāgara, and an interesting Śiva *liṅga* base from the museum at Vidisha.

The Jarai temple lintel consists of five rows. The top row has musicians. The next row has four *dikpālas* on their mounts on each side, facing the central figures of two Vārāhīs seated facing each other. Viṣṇu on Garuḍa is in the centre of the next row, flanked by Brahmā and Śiva with Bhikṣāṭana episode on either side. The next two rows flank the central *lalātabimba* of a sixteen armed goddess. The upper of these has three goddesses on either side while the lower has Brahmā and the *navagrahas* on one side, Vīrabhadra-Saptamātrkās-Gaṇeśa and Śiva on the other side.<sup>2</sup>

The period, region and dynasty of the two lintels are different as are their purposes. The Jarai temple lintel leads to the sanctum hence has the presiding deity on the *lalātabimba* and serves the purposes of guarding the entrance to the sanctum.

An elaborate lintel above a window in the sanctum roof at Ambarnātha suggests that this opening was for a specific purpose requiring such a lintel. It has no *lalātabimba*. The dancing Gaṇeśa (*Vighnahartā*) and the *dikpālas* may be there to protect this opening,<sup>3</sup> perhaps as symbolic *āvaraṇa-devatās*. An analogous feature can be seen on the base of the Śiva *liṅga* from the museum at Vidisha which has its base surrounded by *mātrkās*, *dikpālas* and *navagrahas*.

On a much larger scale, the *vedibandha* niches of the Lakṣmaṇa temple at Khajuraho have *navagrahas* forming the protective *āvaraṇa* whereas the *vedibandha* niches of Kandariyā Mahādeva temple have *Saptamātrkas* with Gaṇeśa and Vīrabhadra.<sup>4</sup>

The window at Ambarnātha could possibly be the entrance from which the image of the *prāsāda-puruṣa* would be carried to be placed inside the roof on completing the structure. A look from the opening shows the area directly above the sanctum. No further structural/physical clues are available as the spire had fallen a long time ago.<sup>5</sup>

A possible function of the 'lintel' described above is based on the following observation. The Ambarnātha temple has small sculpted panels on the central free standing pillars in its hall which portray some of the rites performed during temple construction.

Later *śilpa* texts clearly enumerate them as seven installations/consecrations (*sapta pratiṣṭhā*) and fourteen propitiatory rites (*caturdaśa śāntikāni*). The seven consecrations are as follows. The first is at the time of the installation of the symbolic support in the form of the tortoise (*kūrma*), second when installing the foundation stone (*śilā*), third when setting up the threshold at the main door (*dvāraśākhā*), fourth when the last stone slab covering and closing the dome is placed (*padmaśilā*), fifth at the time of the installation of the golden effigy (*prāsāda-puruṣa*), sixth the setting of the crowning finial of the superstructure (*kalaśa*) and the seventh when the temple flag is unfurled.

The fourteen propitiatory rites include the seven installations and seven other stages, 1. purification of the site (*bhūmyārambha*), 2. symbolic foundation (*kūrma*), 3. laying the foundation stone (*śilā*), 4. setting up implements for measurements (*sūtra*), 5. setting up the doorway (*dvāraśākhā*), 6. starting the horizontal layers *khura*, 7. *kumbha*, and 8. *paṭṭa*, 9. covering the dome with a stone slab (*padmaśilā*), 10. connection between sanctum and hall (*śukanāsā*). 11. the installation of the golden effigy (*puruṣa*), 12. installation of the cogged wheel-shaped stone binding together the four spines of the spire (*amalasāra*), 13. setting of the crowing finial of the superstructure (*kalaśa*), 14. completion of the structure symbolized by hoisting the temple flag (*dhvajapraṭiṣṭhā*).<sup>6</sup>

It is suggested that the window with the lintel was meant for the fifth installation (*pratiṣṭhā*) and eleventh propitiation (*śānti*) of the golden effigy of the *prāsāda-puruṣa*.

Thus, the presence of a gap between the roofs of hall and sanctum seems part of the original plan. The portrayal of rituals on the pillars and on the north lintel shows the importance given to rituals here and supports the above conjecture regarding the purpose of the lintel. The *śānti* is being performed before setting the crowning finial, the *Kalaśa*. Here too the scene depicting the rite is flanked by a dancing Gaṇeśa and Bhairava on either side.<sup>7</sup>

The second noteworthy feature of the Ambarnātha temple discussed in this paper is the rows of relatively small-sized sculptured images framing the central ceiling of the hall and the *antarāla*. (Fig. 2). The central slab of the hall ceiling has rows of figures on each of its four sides. Although each image in the row is only ten inches tall, the images are beautifully carved (Pl. 2.4). The placement seems to be well-planned too. The north row has seven *vyūhāntaras* of Viṣṇu, east and south sides have seven forms of Śiva including Bhairava. The west side must have had seven goddesses. It is unfortunate that the row of goddesses is partly ruined and only four images are extant. The last image is of Cāmuṇḍā which leads one to speculate that these goddesses could have been the *Saptamāṭṛkās* (Pl. 2.5).



Pl. 2.4: An image from the frieze along central ceiling of hall



Pl. 2.5: West side of frieze along central ceiling slab of hall, Cāmuṇḍā at the end

Even in these small rows of images, symmetry aspect is very carefully maintained. The north (Viṣṇu) and east (Śiva) rows have the central deity in *padmāsana* flanked by three deities on each side. East frieze has a central Śiva *yogīśvara* image. Three Śiva images on one side of the *yogīśvara* are seated in *savya-lalitāsana*, three on the other side, in *vāma-lalitāsana*. The same symmetry appears in the northern frieze where the central image is of Viṣṇu in *padmāsana* is flanked by three images in *savya-lalitāsana* and three in *vāma-lalitāsana* (Pl. 2.6).

A feature noted previously is a correspondence between the images inside (in the hall) and those on the outside (*janṅhā*) of the temple : sixteen images on lower faces of the central pillars (section 'c' in Fig. 3) correspond to images on the *janṅhā*<sup>8</sup>. Similarly, there seems to be some match between the small figures lining the central ceiling slab and those outside (Pl. 2.7).

The frieze along the rectangular *antarāla* is equally noteworthy. Its east face (facing the *garbhagṛha*) is the longer side of the rectangle and has Śiva family : Umā-Maheśvara in centre, Gaṇeśa-Siddhi on south half, Skanda alone in the north half (Pl. 2.8) contrast, the opposite (west face) has Viṣṇu on Garuḍa, Narasimha (Vīrabhadra?)<sup>9</sup> and other deities (Pls. 2.9, 2.10). The shorter sides have only three images each, one set being the trinity, the other too abraded to identify with certainty.

Another intriguing features of the temple is the set of six images (2 feet tall) at the highest level above the central pillars on the outer side of the *catuṣkī*, placed where they are not even noticed though each seated figure is nearly 2 feet tall. (section 'h' in Fig. 3).

There are four central pillars labelled NW, NE, SE and SW in the Fig. 2. The east faces of the tops of NE and SE pillars facing the *antarāla* do not have these images. *Pradakṣiṇā*-wise, these images are Viṣṇu on Garuḍa, a goddess with a *ghaṭa*, a *nīlotpala* and a bird *vāhana* (Pl. 2.11), Lakulīṣa (or Skanda?), a goddess with a *triśūla* and *sarpa* and two un-identifiable Śaivite images.

In conclusion, the Ambarnātha temple has some unique features. The present article documents a few and searches for possible interpretation.

## Footnotes

1. Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple* (1980 reprint).
2. R.D.Trivedi, *Temples of the Pratihara Period from Central India*, p. 173; S.D.Trivedi, *The Jarai temple at Barwa Sagar Jhansi*, 1985, Pls. 4, 5.
3. It may be noted in passing that the *navagrahas* do not appear anywhere on the Ambarnātha temple. Sūrya is depicted on the *pratiṣṭhāna* but as a deity, not as a mere *graha*.



Pl. 2.6: Northern side of frieze - Viṣṇu in padmāsana flanked by Viṣṇu in 'savya' and 'vāma lalitāsana'



Pl. 2.7: South frieze along the hall ceiling, last image Bhairava



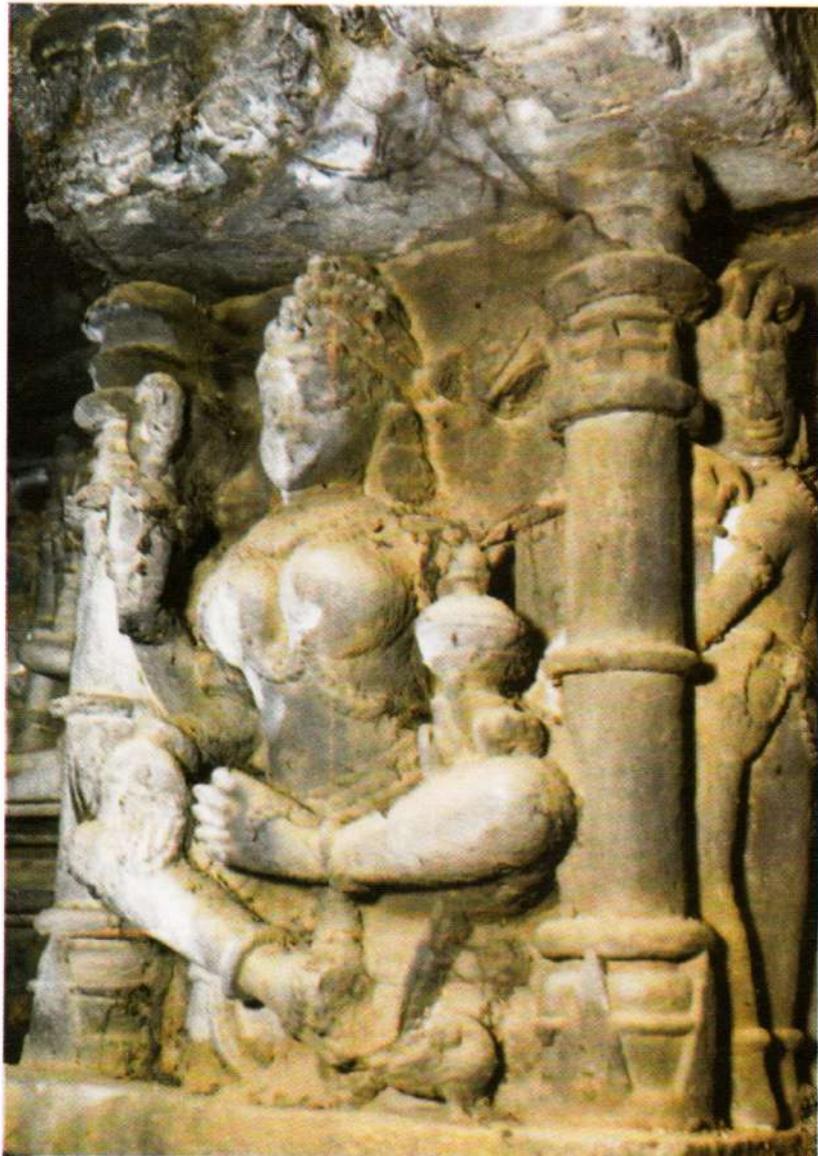
Pl. 2.8: Skanda, east face of long side of rectangular frieze along the antarāla



Pl. 2.9: Viṣṇu on Garuḍa, Narasiṃha, west face, long side of rectangular frieze along the 'antarāla'



Pl. 2.10: Deities, west face, long side of rectangular frieze along the 'antarāla'

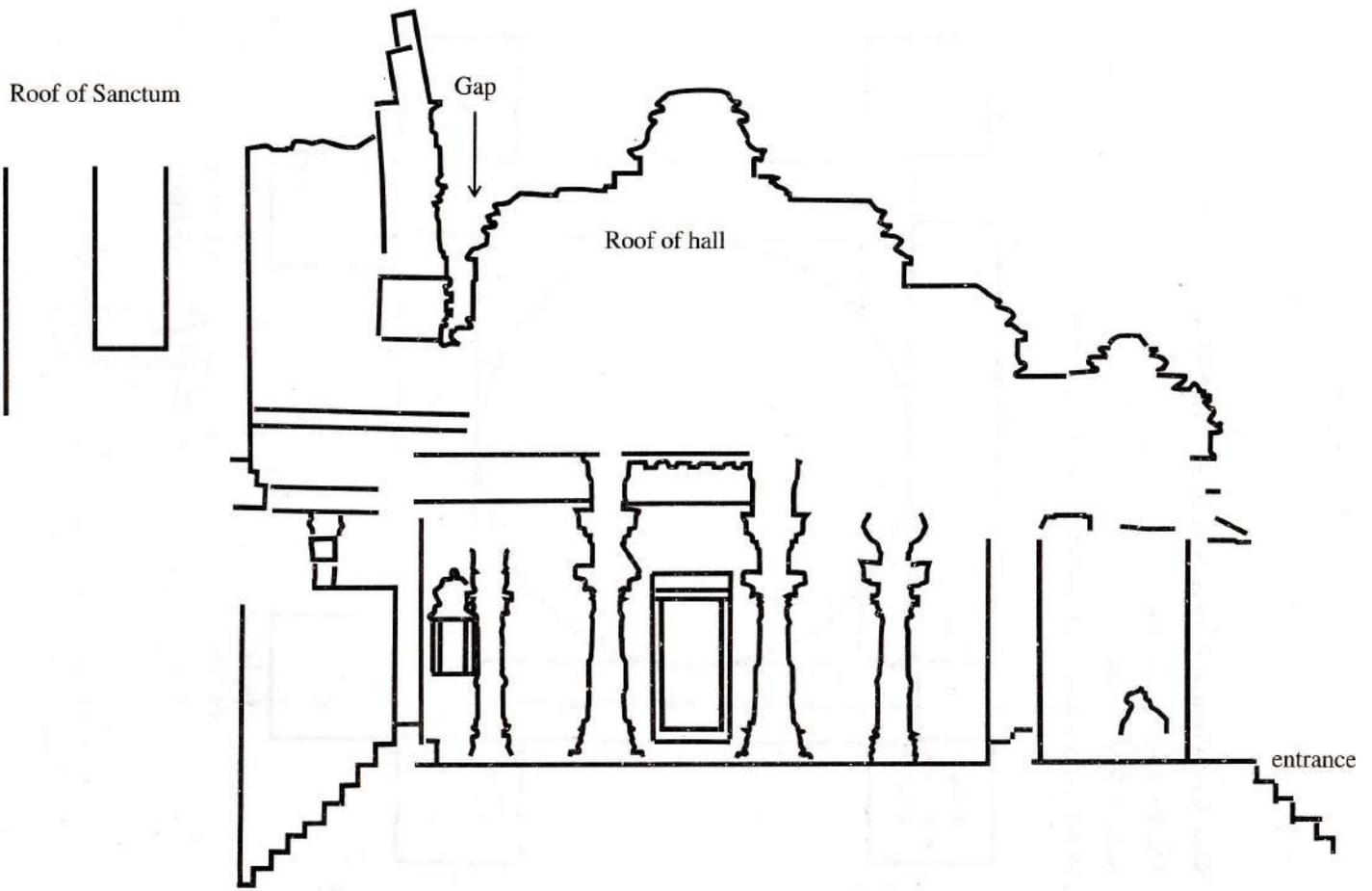


Pl. 2.11: Goddess with 'ghaṭa', 'nīlotpala' and bird 'vāhana'

4. Devangana Desai, *Religious Imagery of Khajuraho*, p. 135, 165.
5. A nineteenth century tank nearby has pieces of the broken spire embedded in its wall showing that the spire had fallen in before that time.
6. K.D. Kanitkar, Ambarnātha temple, p. 77, *Archaeology and Text, The temple in South Asia*, Ed. Himanshu Prabha Ray, Oxford University Press, 2010.
7. Another possible interpretation of this sculptured panel (viewed as *uttaraṅga* in the discussion above) is as the lower part of a 'Rāvaṇānugraha' panel shows an empty frame for a panel atop the *śukanāśi*. An Umā-Maheśvara panel found in the debris and now in the storage shed at the site may have been in that frame. Its dimensions and size are commensurate with those of the empty frame. If indeed the Umā-Maheśvara image had occupied the frame, then a second possibility, that the sculptured panel is part of a 'Rāvaṇānugraha' panel, can be considered. This conjecture is based on comparison of the last row of the panel with Rāvaṇānugraha image in the Lucknow Museum (Rāvaṇānugraha, G. 22.11, Pl. 82 and 59.32, Pl. 86 which show a small figure identified as Rāvaṇa flanked by caryatids in this gesture. No other explanation for the *bhāravāhaka* type figures comes to mind.  
N.P.Joshi, *Brahmanical Sculptures in the State Museum Lucknow*, Part 2, Volume 1, page 107. The State Museum, Lucknow, 1989.
8. K.D.Kanitkar, *Journal of Asiatic Society of Mumbai*, pp. 76-88, Vol 80, 2005-2006
9. K.D.Kanitkar, *The Ambarnath Temple, Different Strokes*, p. 47, Teachers' Academic Forum, Jai Hind College, Mumbai, 2009. Panel 59 on *jaṅghā* and panel 'c' on the SE Pillar in the hall - Dakṣavadha by Vīrabhadra.

**Courtesy :** Pl. 2.2-2.11, Archaeological Survey of India.

### Ambarnātha Temple, Longitudinal Section



stairs of sunken *garbhagrha*

Fig. 1 : Longitudinal section showing the gap

# Garbhagr̥ha

## Antarāla

East : Śiva, Śiva, Viṣṇu on Garuḍa, Narasimha, Śiva, Śiva, ?

North : 3 Śaivite images, Abraded

South : Brahmā, Śiva, Viṣṇu

West : Skanda on peacock, (--) Umā-Maheśvara, Gaṇeśa-Siddhi,

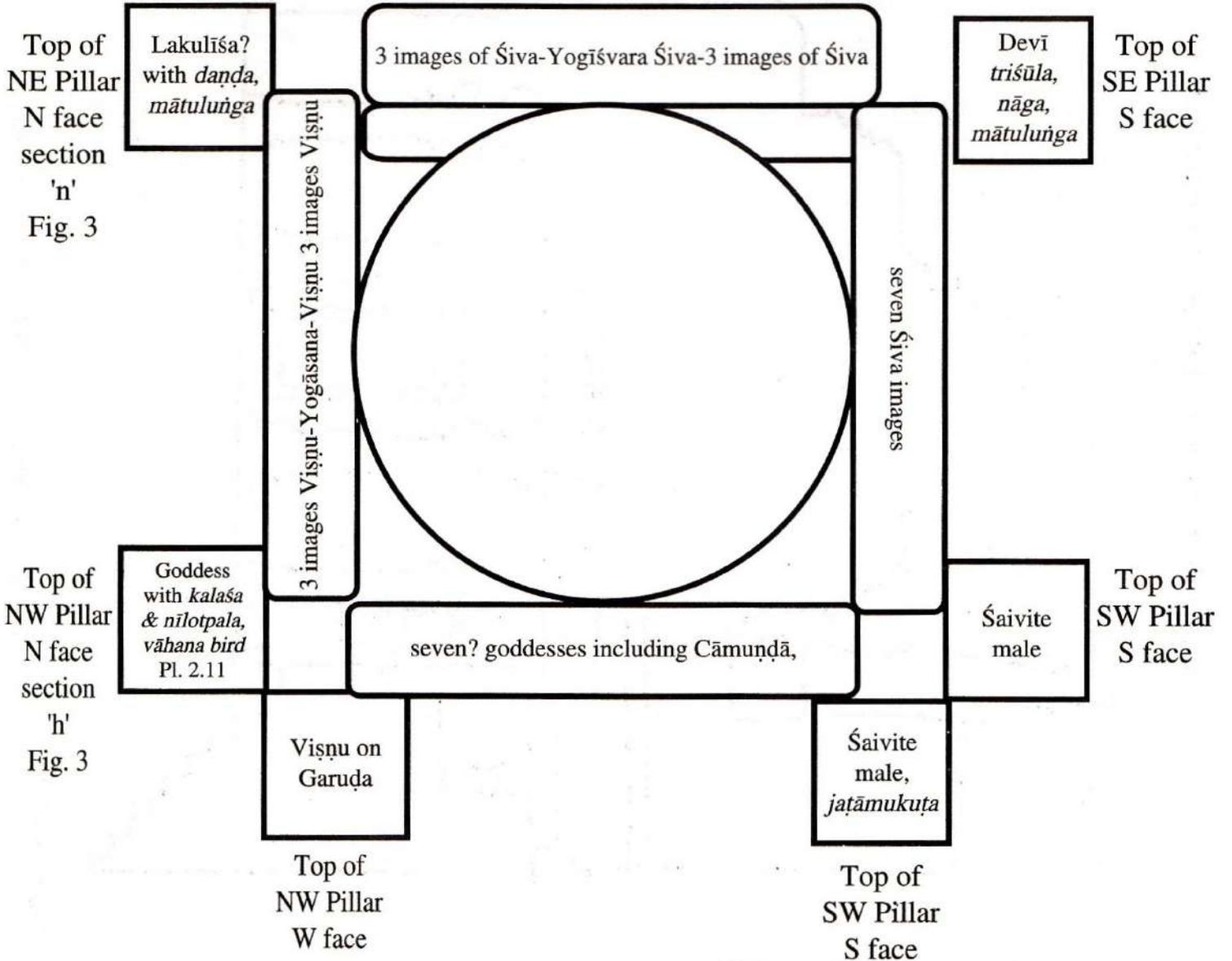


Fig. 2 : Placement of images in friezes around the central ceiling, slab of the hall and along the rectangular *antarāla* ceiling

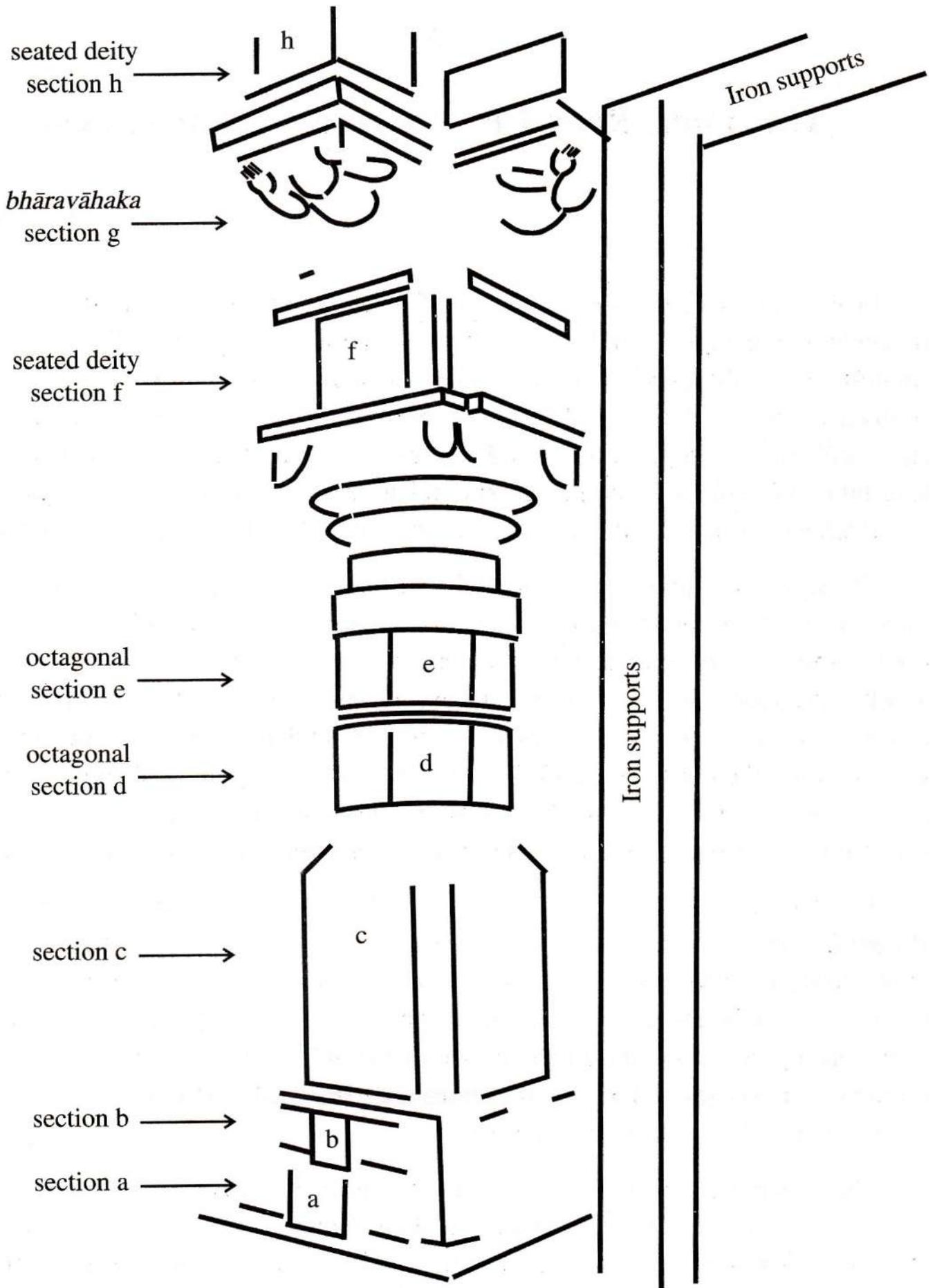


Fig. 3 : Sections of Pillars