

A serpentine scimitar of letters from Udaypur, district Vidisha, M.P.

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Abstract:

This paper presents a newly-discovered inscription from Udaypur (district Vidisha, Madhya Pradesh). Engraved on a rectangular sandstone slab in the parapet wall of the Udayeśvara temple, this inscription features a serpent's knotted body comprising letters of the Sanskrit alphabet along with the grammatical endings of nouns and verbs. It is accompanied by 5 lines of writing on one side that refer to the diagram as *varṇṇanāgakṛpāṇikā*, a “serpentine scimitar of letters.” The compounded designation draws attention to the unusual synthesis of aural, visual and efficacy in this inscription. The abraded surface of the stone does not afford a complete reading, but this very designation appears in dedicatory verses accompanying an identical composition at Ujjain, which is further described as a “unique magical sword” (*siddhāsiputrikā*) of the kings Udayāditya (c. 1070–93) and his son Naravarman (1094–1134). Three similar serpentine inscriptions associated with these Paramāra kings are known from Dhar and Un, allowing us to place the one from Udaypur in the late-11th century. Taken together, the epigraphic evidence suggests that such enigmatic diagrams were inscribed at royal Shiva temples as complex devices in the service of dynastic power.

Keywords:

Udaypur, *varṇṇanāgakṛpāṇikā*, Paramāra, Malwa

The Śiva temple of Udaypur in the Vidisha district of Madhya Pradesh, also known as Nīlakaṇṭheśvara or Udayeśvara, is a celebrated example of India's medieval architecture, built around 1080 in the novel *bhūmija* style associated with the Paramāra dynasty of Malwa, c. 972–1305 (Deva 1975). Less well known is its status as an extraordinary epigraphic archive with a continuous sequence of inscriptions in Sanskrit, Persian, and Hindi spanning eight centuries—from the temple's consecration in *samvat* 1137 to its archaeological restoration in *samvat* 1985. Almost all the inscriptions have been painstakingly copied and systematically listed in the annual reports of the archaeology department of Gwalior State (1923-24, 1925-26, 1927-28, 1928-29) and those of the epigraphy branch of the Archaeological Survey of India (ARIEp 1961-62, 1981-82, 1982-83). Only a selection of these have been fully published (Trivedi 1978, 1989; Mittal 1979), but taken together the corpus offers a wealth of information about the biography of a north Indian temple.

One unusual inscription found at the Udayeśvara temple during the course of my fieldwork has surprisingly remained unnoticed in scholarly publications (Fig. 1–2). It is in Nāgarī script and is engraved on a rectangular slab of pinkish sandstone 70cm high. The slab is built into the outer parapet wall (*prākāra*) of the temple, where its quadrangular courtyard projects out to the south. This stone is evidently not in its original position, for its flat inscribed surface is turned inside out while its carved face with an ornamental balustrade (*vedikā*) is turned outside in, contrary to what we find in other well-preserved sections of the courtyard wall. It is likely that the stone was reset into its present position during one of the restoration campaigns at the temple complex carried out under the Gwalior State (1923-24, 5; 1925-26, 5-6; 1928-29, 5-6) and then under the Archaeological Survey

of India (IAR 1981-82, 48; IAR 1983-84, 207). The shape of the block shows that it was part of this very parapet wall but originally faced into the courtyard.

The inscription features a striking visual composition of serpentine form and isolated letters, known in scholarly literature as *nāgabandha* or *sarpabandha* (Salomon 1998, 125-127), along with two short inscriptions on one side. The characters are worn off in several places due to the flaking of the sandstone, as seen in the photograph reproduced here, but are fairly well preserved to enable an understanding of the record. The palaeography bears close comparison to local records dating from the late-11th century, which are characterized by well-formed, inch-high characters in a rigidly rectilinear style and verticals that terminate in a sharp bend to the right (Singh 2019; Trivedi 1978, 65-6, 75-82, 98-101). The orthography exhibits the usual peculiarities seen in contemporary inscriptions, such as the use of *va* for *ba* and *sa* for *śa*, and the doubling of class consonants following *r*, as in *varṇṇa*.

The centrepiece of the inscription is the diagram containing individual letters within separate compartments (Fig. 3), which graphically visualise all the sounds of the Sanskrit alphabet as well as the grammatical terminations of nouns and verbs. Read in a vertical sequence from top to bottom, its geometrical “head” has 14 vowels (*svara*) ordered in short and long pairs, from the simple (*a*, *ā* > *i*, *ī* > *u*, *ū* > *r*, *ṛ* > *l*, *ḷ*) to the complex (*ē*, *ai*) and compound (*ō*, *au*). The tubular “body” below carries a series of consonants, from the 4 semivowels (*antahstha*) in its neck to the 5 classes of stops (*sparsha*) in the rhomboidal knot of its torso, and continuing with the 3 voiceless sibilants (*ūshman*) in its right leg. This series starts and ends with the voiced aspirate *ha*, occurring once before the semivowels and again after the sibilants, in conformity with the classical arrangement of the alphabet given in the Śivasūtras of Pāṇini’s *Aṣṭādhyāyī*. The horizontal base of the diagram has 3 *āspirates*, the labial *upadhmānīya*, guttural *jihvāmūlīya* and final *visargā*, but not the nasal *ānsvāra*, which usually counts among the 4 dependent sounds (*ayogavāha*). The left leg contains the characters *ra*, *ya*, *u*, although it is unclear why they are repeated. The tail-end of the diagram displays grammatical endings arranged in triads in the rise and fall of a vertical loop. The former has 21 terminations for nouns of all 7 classes, and the latter, 18 terminations for verbs in present tense in both active (*parasmaipada*) and middle (*ātmanepada*) voice.

Of the short inscriptions, the one towards the middle of the slab contains three lines but the lacunae due to damage make it difficult to decipher (Fig. 4). The other, towards the top, has two faintly visible lines, but with the help of an eye copy prepared onsite I was able to read many of the characters (Fig. 5). One letter is chipped off at the end of the first line, and the second line ends abruptly with three characters following the verse number, perhaps because the surface was found unsuitable for engraving. These two lines form a metrical verse that reads:

1. bhāradvāṃ jīvihitv=ēmāṃ varṇṇa-nāga-kṛpāṇikāṃ [[] hitvāpāshaṇicāṇālā_
2. pālaḥ pālayatu gāṃ || 1 || ja°abha

The action specified by the imperative verb *pālayatu* follows a causative construction, having as its agent of causation *–pālaḥ* and its agent of action, *varṇṇa-nāga-kṛpāṇikāṃ*, giving the following sense: “may the protector cause this serpentine sword of letters to protect...” The object of protection is unclear but the main agent along with its pronoun, *imāṃ varṇṇa-nāga-kṛpāṇikāṃ*,

clearly refers to the adjacent diagram. This compounded designation would have us conceptualise the graph as a weapon for protection—a sword that is simultaneously serpentine and letterist. To follow its imagery, vowels constitute the hood of a snake, consonants its coiled body, and grammatical terminations its tail; in like manner, the snake's hood would correspond to the barbed blade of a sword, its knotted body to an ornamental hilt, and its winding tail to a strap. The inscription, thus, presents an unusual synthesis of aural, visual and efficacy.

Further information about this inscription may be gleaned from another diagram, identical in all details and bearing the same designation, from the famous Mahākāla temple of Ujjain (Sastri 1960). A verse accompanying this diagram states it to be a “snake-scimitar of letters marked with Udayāditya's name” (*udayāditya-nāmānka-varṇṇa-nāga-kṛpāṇikā*), which was “composed along with other poetic gems by the friend of talented poets,” apparently an epithet of Naravarman himself. This indicates that the graph was composed in the late-11th century, perhaps not long after king Udayāditya's death in 1093 and the succession of his son Naravarman (Trivedi 1978, 84, 103). The purport of the diagram is specified in lines 24-26 of the inscription, which describe it as “an ornament (*vesha*) to be affixed on the chest of both poets and kings, a unique magical sword (*siddhāsiputrikā*) of Śiva's worshippers, kings Udayāditya and Naravarman, meant for the preservation of language and social order (*varṇnasthityai*).”

What this shows is that the serpentine graph was not so much an educational tool devised to school young boys in Sanskrit, as scholars have routinely remarked (Trivedi 1978, 88-89; Pollock 2006, 177). Rather it was a complex device pressed into service of the Paramāra kings who owed their allegiance to the cosmic overlord Śiva, praised in the Ujjain inscription as a personification of language itself (Salomon 1982, 556-557). This is perhaps why a copy of the remarkable composition was inscribed at the leading Śiva temples of the Paramāra kingdom—at Ujjain the nerve centre of Malwa but also at Udaypur, a town whose temple and tank were founded and named after king Udayāditya in 1080. The grammatical inscription from Udaypur, together with those from Ujjain, Dhar, and Un, thus, forms an important addition to the corpus of “serpentine scimitars of letters” attributed to Udayāditya and dateable to the last decade of the 11th century.

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Fig. 1: Udayeśvara temple at Udaypur, view from the southeast locating the inscription on the parapet wall.



ता र द्वांतीविरिद्वेमां वर्द्धना ग कृ पा लिकां हि वा पा ष ट्ठि च्चा गु ला
पा ला ः पा ल द्य तु गा म् ॥ १ ॥ ३ ॥ अ न

Fig. 5: Detail and eye-copy of the short inscription at the top.



Fig. 2: Inscription on the parapet wall of the Udayeśvara temple, Udaypur



Fig. 3: Detail of the serpentine graph.

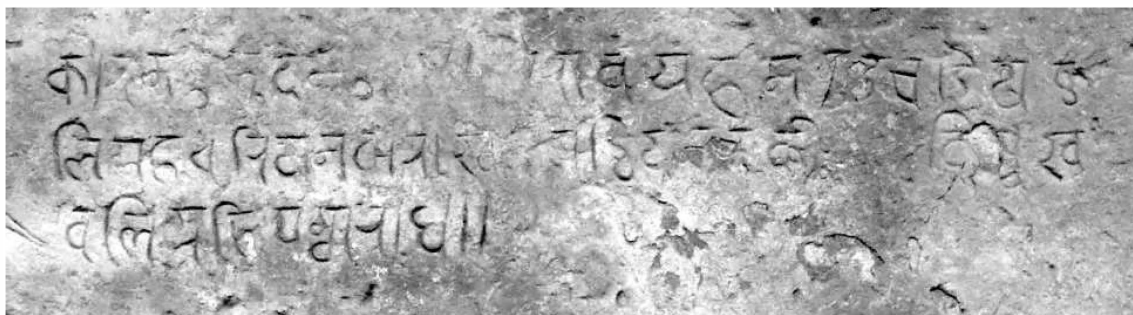


Fig. 4: Detail of the short inscription in the middle.

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