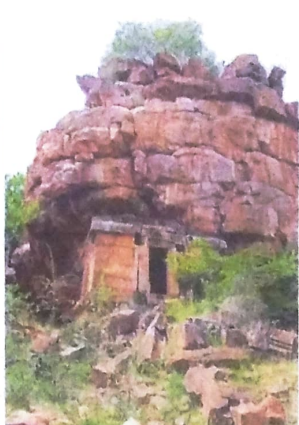
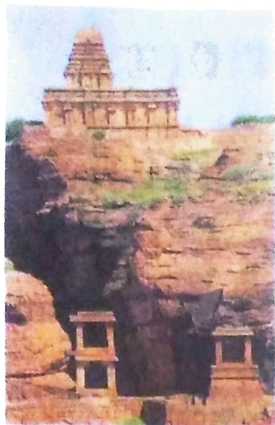


ENTERPRISING ARCHITECTS



The unfinished open mantapas at Badami, and the Upper Sivalaya; the Hire Makuteshwara Temple, at Mahakuta near Badami, which has a natural rocky outcrop as its spire; a view of the Agastya Tirtha. PHOTOS BY AUTHOR

# Vatapi's sandstone shapers

The first article in a two-part series by *Srikumar M Menon* examines how ingenious architects and sculptors at Badami incorporated the landscapes of this region into the stunning group of monuments they created

When the Chalukyan sovereign Pulakeshi I began ruling from Vatapipuri, the city he founded, the idea of building prasadas (palaces to the gods) in stone was quite new and almost unheard of in the region. Gradually, Vatapi (now Badami) attracted quite an army of craftsmen. Some of them must have been native to the region, but several came from distant lands, even from far in the north.

The Malaprabha Valley used to be called the "cradle of Indian temple architecture" by early scholars, for it is home to some of the earliest monuments in the northern Nagara as well as the southern Dravida traditions of temple-building. However, today architectural historians believe that these traditions appear to have matured by the time they appear in the Valley, their basic tenets relatively fully formed.

When the various artisans who came to Vatapi encountered the sandstone cliffs and deep, chasm-like gorges of the landscape, their creativity soared to unparalleled heights. One of the first things which Pulakeshi I did was to create a well-fortified township for his capital.

This is recounted in his famous cliff inscription of 543 CE incised into the top of a tall cliff by an artisan called Kolimanci—that Pulakeshi made "the hill of Vatapi invincible from above as well as below." The choice of Vatapi for the capital must have been strategic—the topography, with an enormous horseshoe-shaped sandstone massif, lends itself easily to fortification.

Kolimanci and his co-workers perfected the art of building fort walls, expertly running them along sheer faces of cliffs, and plugging the gaps between these with large blocks of sandstone. The open end of the horseshoe was fitted out with a bund so that the storm-water runoff could accumulate to form a tank called the Agastya Tirtha.

Within this fortified city, the monuments began to appear. The early ones, created in the second half of the sixth century, were rock-cut sanctuaries or "cave temples" as they are popularly called, hewn into the cliff faces to the south of Agastya Tirtha.

## Adventurous design

When the structural monuments, built with quarried and shaped blocks of sandstone, began to be erected from the late 6th century onwards, the Chalukyan architects got an opportunity to showcase their deep involvement with the dramatic environment they built in. Wind and water had combined



The Bhutnath group of temples.



The ephemeral waterfall of Badami.

to create this surreal landscape of masses of sandstone riven by narrow gorges and fantastic weathered forms, and the architects incorporated some of the spirit of this drama in their creations.

Drawing inspiration from the landscape, the architect Aryamanci Upadhyaya dared to place his creation—a beautiful, compact temple to Surya, now known as the Malegitti Sivalaya, on a seemingly precarious perch on a large, detached boulder.

This same spirit of adventure seems to pervade the other architectural ventures of the Chalukyan artisans, too. The structure now called the Lower Sivalaya sits on its own rocky spur jutting out from the main rock mass. Similarly, the two open mantapas, which stand out prominently in any view of the North Fort from the town, were fashioned from the very rock they stand on.

Our work has shown that these structures, accessed through a narrow cleft in the rock, together form a temple which was left unfinished for unknown reasons. The lower portions of these structures were carved out of the rock surface, while the remaining parts were built of components made by shaping blocks which were quarried out of the top of the same rock.

## Playful spirit

As an architect, one cannot but wonder at the playful cheekiness of the architect of the Upper Sivalaya, who while ignoring vast expanses of level rock at the top of the cliff, placed the structure at the lip of a deep drop.

The spire of this Vaishnava temple echoes the shape of a knob of rock on a nearby cliff, which is arguably intentional. Yet another visionary architect used a natural outcrop as the spire for the flat-topped Hire Makuteshwara shrine.

The Chalukyan architect's obsession with the landscape and the scenic was not just confined to landmasses and rock formations. The 8th century Bhutnath Temple, to the east of the Agastya Tirtha, forms the nucleus to a group of temples added on in later periods, and is scenically sited on a platform jutting into the waters of the lake.

Later architects too seem to have imbibed the spirit of their forebears, demonstrated by the siting of two shrines from the 10th century atop a big boulder nearby.

Each visit to Vatapi opens up a new facet to be imbibed, a new discovery to be made.

One such discovery, which provided a peek into the mind of the Chalukyan architect, was that the waterfalls to the southeast of the Agastya Tirtha are artificially created.

These falls formed of stormwater, last for less than an hour after the rains stop, and cascade from an artificial basin cut out at the top of the cliff.

Since the top of the cliff slopes gently towards the Agastya Tirtha, the runoff would anyway have washed down the cliff face and reached the tank. Who but the ingenious sandstone carvers of Vatapi could have conceived of this remarkable intervention which creates an endearing backdrop for their creations, while fulfilling its utility?

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