

INTRODUCTION

kiṃ karma kim akarmeti kavayo'py atra mohitaḥ

What is ritual action? What is ritual inaction?

Even inspired sages are confused about that!

Bhagavad Gītā 4: 16

The large hill known as Udayagiri, not far from Vidiśā in central India, is a crucial site for the history of South Asia. Inscriptions at Udayagiri mention Candragupta II and Kumāragupta I, the foremost kings of the Gupta dynasty in late fourth and early fifth centuries CE.¹ These inscriptions have been known for more than a hundred years and have been featured frequently in political and cultural histories of India. Equally well-known, especially to historians of art and religion, are the sculptures of Viṣṇu and his several incarnations.² The amount of writing on this material since the nineteenth century might give the impression that little of substance remains to be tackled, but such an impression is unwarranted. To be precise, there are many things at Udayagiri awaiting discovery and publication: rock-shelters and petroglyphs, ruined buildings, inscriptions, water systems, fortifications, and habitation mounds. In addition to simple exploration and rudimentary documentation, a whole history of Udayagiri needs to be written, from the second century BCE, the date of the earliest monumental remains, to the eleventh century CE, the time when the Paramāra kings controlled central India and made their own additions to the site.³ Even a glance at the earliest remains is enough to show that the site was important before the arrival of the Guptas.

These facts raise a number of important historical questions: Why did the Guptas come to Udayagiri? What compelled them to impose their religious and political identity on the site with such vigour and thoroughness? How did the

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site operate under the Guptas in theological and ritual terms? It is my aim to tackle these questions in the pages of this book. In doing so I will not attempt to write an encyclopaedic “long history” of Udayagiri, at least not directly. Rather, I will look at those features that tell us how the site was understood and modified by the Guptas. In particular, I will focus on two special features: the natural passage that cuts through the lower part of the hill and the carved tableau of Viṣṇu in or near that passage (Figures 4, 5, 6 and 23). One of the images shows Viṣṇu as Nārāyaṇa during his period of cosmic sleep, the other Viṣṇu incarnate as the boar-headed Varāha. These parts of Udayagiri, contiguous and thematically related, provide enough material to elucidate two important topics for the history of India: (a) the archaeology and politics of time and (b) the establishment of early Hindu deities as juridical personalities. The first involves a reconstruction of the Indian methods of time-keeping and calendar-making, the ritual cycles that were built on this calendar, and the ways in which the early Guptas used this system to promote their vision of kingship and dominion. The second involves the legal and social justifications for the creation of permanent religious images, the ways these images came to be installed and worshipped in temples, and the mechanisms whereby temple gods were furnished with endowments for religious service. These are my themes in Chapters 1 and 2. The arguments in these chapters are self-contained but prompt important and directly related questions. In their simplest form, these questions may be phrased as follows: Who were the key religious leaders and ritual actors of Gupta times? And what was their role in shaping Gupta kingship? I have attempted to answer these questions in Chapter 3.

The exploration of these problems has taken me away from Udayagiri repeatedly, making this book a wide-ranging exploration of the fourth and fifth centuries rather than a site monograph in the traditional sense. In the end, however, I always found my way back: as the one imperial site that survives in a reasonably complete state, Udayagiri has provided the answers – or at least many of the answers – to my main historical questions. To help keep these questions clear in the minds of my readers, especially in light of the technical detail that needs to be addressed along the way, I would like to provide a summary of my key findings in the remaining pages of this introduction. This summary will also provide an opportunity to touch on the historical and theoretical implications of the present book.

That Udayagiri had a long history as a centre of astronomy and calendrical activity can be demonstrated archaeologically by the sculptures, inscriptions, and sundials cut into the rocks at the site. Solar observations are also suggested by the name, literally “sunrise-mountain.” After Samudragupta conquered central India in the mid-fourth century, Udayagiri was modified in significant ways. It is my contention, fully argued in Chapter 1, that Udayagiri was

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reworked under Candragupta II (*circa* CE 375–415) to articulate a revitalised form of early Hindu kingship in which the ruler was envisaged as a paramount sovereign (*cakravartin*) and supreme devotee of Viṣṇu (*paramabhāgavata*). As an astronomical centre, Udayagiri helped constitute these roles because Viṣṇu is, according to textual sources, the ruler and essence of time. This inspired Candragupta to transform Udayagiri from a simple place of celestial observation into an astro-political node where the movements of the heavenly bodies were conflated with his political path and personal splendour. This ambition was achieved ritually through the *rājasūya* or royal consecration, one of the ancient Soma sacrifices. Through various ritual idioms, this performance captured the power of the celestial bodies, and thus time, in the unction fluid and transferred this power to the body of the king. This is why Candragupta (and some of his successors) came to be titled *vikramāditya*, “he who is the sun of prowess.”

As I struggled to develop this historical understanding, I was obliged to draw on a number of fields: epigraphy, iconology, historical astronomy, ethnography, landscape archaeology. I combined these with text-based Indology and religious studies. This approach – eclectic but not, I hope, eccentric – led me to breach disciplinary protocols and to create what I have termed the “archaeology of ritual.” Whatever theoretical bells these words might ring, this is not a project in the tradition of Michel Foucault or Ian Hodder.⁴ Rather, it represents my own effort to inject a measure of dynamism into the static, desk-bound forms of analysis that have so far governed the study of Indian inscriptions, sculpture, built environment, and landscape. Sanskrit texts have not been spared in this exercise. Detached from Indological praxis, in which texts are studied in relation to each other and set in textually defined hierarchies and typological sequences, I have tried to place literary sources “on the ground” in actual places and specific religious, political, and ritual contexts. Udayagiri was the crucible in which I forged this method and it was from Udayagiri that I have taken it across early Hindu India.

The performance of the *rājasūya* and its memorialisation at Udayagiri was the means through which Candragupta II was transformed into a king worthy of the name. This laid the foundation for his validating campaign of world conquest, a success that was celebrated in inscriptions, including those at Udayagiri. Through the medium of sculpture, the king also articulated his close relationship with Viṣṇu, especially Varāha, the incarnation connected with the salvation of the earth. By claiming devotional proximity to Viṣṇu as the god’s supreme devotee or *paramabhāgavata*, Candragupta was claiming a special relationship with the god who had saved the earth and was in ontological possession of it. This allowed the king to be called, among other things, the “Lord of the Earth” (*bhūpati*) and to advance the claim that the whole earth belonged to the crown. Kings could, for these reasons, redefine land tenure and property relations. This buttressed the

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system of rural development through land-grants to priests and temples, a system that enjoyed unprecedented encouragement in Gupta times. These issues and their implications are explored in Chapter 2.

While the working assumptions of the land-tenure system necessarily rest in the minutiae of the charters and corresponding rules in surviving legal texts, two historiographical problems can be addressed here: (a) royal legitimacy and (b) the constitution of the early Hindu state. Legitimacy is an issue that has concerned many historians of South Asia over the last fifty years. In a recent volume, Sheldon Pollock has captured the general disillusionment of academics with legitimation theory and rejected the notion that royal inscriptions and Sanskrit literature were written to legitimate royal power.⁵ Nonetheless, Pollock is prepared to admit that poetry (*kāvya*) and power (*rājya*) were mutually constitutive, even if the relationship presents “interpretive challenges.”⁶ What Pollock advocates is that the autonomous aesthetic of literary Sanskrit was not just one type of political language, but the overarching political language of South Asia par excellence. The study of aesthetics becomes, in this view, the study of power, even if a simple causal relationship did not exist between the two.

Those who read Sanskrit and approach pre-modern India through literary texts will naturally give primacy to literary texts. The risk for historical studies is that in subject areas where literary texts are the only evidence, or taken as the only evidence worth reading, such an approach will encourage, in Edwin Gerow’s incisive words, “an overconfident cultural narcissism.”⁷ Narcissism or not, the most obvious factual difficulty is that in the period when Sanskrit emerged as the dominant language of discourse, that is the Gupta period, literary texts are certainly *not* the only evidence. In this book, as a consequence, I have advocated that texts be detached from established academic tropes and placed “on the ground” with other datasets. I have already made this point in a general way. How the method can work in practice is shown in section 1.5 where the inscription in Cave 8 at Udayagiri is examined. This inscription, composed in *anuṣṭubh* verse, praises Candragupta II and records the creation of a cave-shrine by his minister. The text can appear self-contained and has the potential to yield proper sense when published in the pages of a book. Although I do seek to denigrate the importance of publishing critical editions of epigraphic records in the traditional way, my argument is that the political and social implications of the Cave 8 inscription cannot be understood unless we take it out of the books in which it has been printed and back to the place where it was first inscribed. This situates the text in the ritual landscape for which it was written and juxtaposes it with the religious images that were made to amplify the text’s political and cultural meanings. There can be no doubt that the text of the Cave 8 inscription enjoyed a high place in the hierarchy of cultural products at Udayagiri – it was, after all, composed by the king’s

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minister. However, if we allow ourselves to consider the text as an autonomous literary work detached from its surroundings, we simply perpetuate the nineteenth-century divide between literary, epigraphic, iconographic, theological, and archaeological knowledge. In this book, I aim to reconsider the wider archaeological context of inscriptions and combine this with relevant evidence from legal, liturgical, and religious sources – not just literary ones.⁸ I have been inspired to pursue this method because, as Ronald Inden has argued, conditions in historic India were not fixed. The transcendent truth may have been seen as immutable, but everyday political and religious relations were subject to constant transformation and recreation, a situation that was understood well by people living in those times.⁹ I am inclined to think, for these reasons, that totalising theorisations about South and South East Asia over more than a millennium have little or no explanatory power. These grand narratives gives us neither the tools for understanding new kinds of data nor the models for reinterpreting and synthesising that which is already known.¹⁰ This methodological conclusion prepares us to return to the general problem of legitimacy. When we juxtapose the doubts raised about legitimacy as an explanatory device with the detailed assessment of Udayagiri as the locus of imperial ritual in the early fifth century, there can be little doubt that the Guptas used Sanskrit inscriptions, texts, and rituals to confer authority, nobility, and sublime qualities on themselves and their subordinates – in other words, to give themselves legitimacy. I hasten to add that my argument does not represent a simple reactivation of legitimation theory as an intellectual project. Rather, the sources have compelled me to explore the evolving debates that surrounded kingship in the fourth and fifth centuries and the rich matrix of constitutive and distributive acts through which the Guptas, Vākātakas, and their subordinates controlled their ritual polity and negotiated its relationship with ecology and the means and relations of production.

Closely related to legitimacy are questions about state formation and the degree to which the Guptas and their successors ruled a unified political entity or bureaucratic regime. The historiography is well developed, and there is ongoing debate about the models and terminology. A useful point of entry into the problem is a recent book by Fred Virkus.¹¹ Based on a critical survey of the epigraphic evidence, Virkus has suggested that the Gupta kingdom was essentially fragmented, subordinate rulers being independent yet contained politically because they controlled small geographical areas. The significance of the Guptas, and their so-called golden age, certainly appears to lose its lustre if we simply plot epigraphic and numismatic find-spots on a map.¹² However, the geographical distribution of data, and the family affiliation of particular inscriptions, needs to be read against the actual content of the records. As noted in Chapter 2, the Sanskrit imprecations given in the charters, and the organisation of information otherwise, indicate that land-tenure across India was

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informed by shared ideas and common practices. It is especially remarkable that the wording of the imprecations varies little from northern Bengal to the Deccan and Tamil Nadu, an area even larger than that controlled by the Guptas, Vākāṭakas, and their tributaries. The implications of this are clear and important: quite apart from the territories controlled by individual kings and particular families, there was an effective legal system across most of India by the early fifth century and transactions involving land were conducted according to it. And the transactions, lest we forget, were conducted in the Sanskrit language. In addition to this juridical unity (and the cadres of specialists in *dharma* it documents), religious and ritual systems prevailed over wide areas with the knowledge of the particulars conducted and transmitted by individuals learned in Sanskrit. If we follow Nicholas Dirks and hold that religion and ritual structured a unified polity rather than simply reflecting it, then contra Virkus and others, religious and ritual conformity means, in essence, political unity.¹³ These and other considerations have led me to accept Inden's model of "imperial formation" as a standard for organising the competing and contradictory claims made in the epigraphic corpus and for understanding the hierarchical constitution of India in the fourth and fifth centuries.¹⁴ The idea of a "circle of kings" found in Indian manuals on statecraft is especially useful for explaining how a plurality of lordships was coordinated to create an ideologically coherent polity. The legal network just mentioned finds a place in this model, and even dissenting political and ritual views could be accommodated, as shown in Chapter 3.

Leaving these theoretical concerns and returning to the question of land, gifts to brāhmaṇas learned in the Veda were sanctioned by tradition, so formalised land-grants were not seen as contentious when they were introduced in the fourth century. Grants to temples, however, were fraught. This was because temple deities were not regarded as "real" by the Vedic priesthood. This powerful circle of orthodox specialists were responsible for royal sacrifices, including the *rājasūya*, and they were prepared to sanction only those rituals and theologies that conformed to and confirmed the ancient Vedic way of doing and thinking. Their objection was that temple gods were not sentient beings and that they were not, as a result, able or entitled to accept what was offered to them. In other words, they were not juridical personalities with rights to offerings and gifts of land and money. To meet these objections, grants were sometimes held by trustees and priests. Simultaneously, the legitimacy of image worship was asserted by transferring Vedic rituals from the domestic setting to the temple environment. As explained in Section 2.6, the argument in favour of temple *pūjā* was carried forward by analogy and appropriation: just as important guests were traditionally welcomed in well-to-do homes and offered things that pleased them, so too were the gods welcomed in temple-homes and offered things that pleased them. This, if nothing else, settles the origin of *pūjā*.

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From the mid-fourth century, kings granted land to two types of institutions: (a) tax-free estates held by brāhmaṇas learned in the Veda and (b) tax-free estates held by or for temple gods and run for the benefit and worship of those gods. The first was termed *agrahāra*; the second, *devāgrahāra*. The workings of these institutions, with examples, are given in Chapter 2. The charters making the grants were composed in Sanskrit, the implication being that Sanskrit learning was sustained and advanced in landed estates. The way large numbers of brāhmaṇas were sometimes settled together means that substantial estates for learned men were being established. These were, in effect, “Sanskrit colleges” with many – sometimes hundreds – of pundits. The find-spots of the charters show that these places were in the hinterland (i.e., away from the court or the royal camps whence charters were normally issued). This has some bearing on Pollock’s theories about the “Sanskrit cosmopolis” and the historic use of the language. His stated aim was “to capture *practices* and then ask what sort of social explanation – discourse of power or whatever – may account for these practices.”¹⁵ Despite this ambition, the understanding offered is formal and linguistic with no account of actual institutions (i.e., *agrahāra*, *devāgrahāra*), actual places (i.e., documented geographical locations), or actual applications of Sanskrit knowledge in particular settings (i.e., legal codes used in specific courts, Bhāgavata texts applied as a living theology at specific times among specific groups, etc.).¹⁶ The historical career of Sanskrit, in Pollock’s view, is that it “only slowly and reluctantly . . . emerges as a political language . . . from the sacerdotal environment in which it was most at home.”¹⁷ This is nothing more than the old division of church and state in fancy dress, transmuted by academic discourse into a polarity between fine art or literature and the workaday world of popular culture. Modern people may choose to organise their thinking along these lines, but the question for historians is whether the Guptas and their contemporaries actually did so. Little can be safely concluded about early Indian history, but given that almost every record in the epigraphic corpus is concerned with the establishment of temples, the record of religious acts, or the provision of religious endowments, any attempt to divide politics, property, religion, and ritual can be rejected as wholly misguided. One example proves the point at the very beginning of the history of Sanskrit as a public and political language: the fourth-century Valkhā charter given in Section 1.11. In this charter, *mahārāja* Bhulūṇḍa uses elements of Sanskrit verse to proclaim his devotion to Viṣṇu, his subordination to and participation in the royal cult of his Gupta overlords, and his readiness to assign land for the maintenance of worship in a temple.

People in early India, like all people I suppose, believed in the constitutive power of the act. Competing hermeneutics normally focused on the nature and implication of various acts, ritual or otherwise. Moreover, it is a simple fact of the Sanskrit language that the word *karma* refers to all kinds of acts, even

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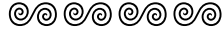
grammatical ones.¹⁸ In Gupta times, image worship was developed and confirmed as a valid act by the appropriation of time-honoured elements from the Vedic tradition, as just noted. Simultaneously, the Vedic sacrifices – the mighty acts of antiquity including the *rājasūya* – were reconceived and renovated in theistic terms. This was made possible through an elaborate series of homologies centred on time. The organisation of time, and of the Indian calendar and ritual cycle, were determined by solar, lunar, and stellar observations. At Udayagiri, to come back to our imperial site, the necessary observations were facilitated by the geographical features of the hill, features that were modified and supplemented in the Gupta period to enhance and symbolically enrich the observations. In the field of speculative thought, correspondences were built between the calendar and the rituals organised by that calendar. The year, therefore, was the royal consecration – because the consecration took a year to perform – and the year was the sacrificial horse – because a horse was the central offering in the yearlong horse sacrifice that confirmed the king's paramount status as *cakravartin*. The year was also Viṣṇu because he was seen as the essence of time and, according to ancient lore, absorbed the sacrifice, and thus the year, into his body. The year was also the firm foundation of created things – all life exists in time and is conditioned by it. As a place where time was known and the year made, Udayagiri became a natural site for visualising and memorialising time and the sacrifice, and so also Viṣṇu, the theistic embodiment of both. This is how the mountain became a sacred landscape in every sense, a place where knowledgeable pilgrims directly encountered time and the living god who embodied it. Udayagiri is, for these reasons, a key node in the history of Indian religious thought because it stands on the cusp between the sacrifices sanctioned by the Veda and the theistic modes of worship and devotion advocated in early Hinduism. These modes of worship were conducted in temples whose inhabitants were accepted as permanent juridical personalities. This explains why temples made of permanent materials were built in significant numbers only from the early years of the fifth century.

The complex theology of early Hinduism and its formal architecture did not emerge in a subconscious or organic fashion from some kind of socio-religious plasma. It was rather created and made possible by the priesthood. Priests not only developed the ideas and wrote the texts, they created and enacted the rituals that constituted these realities. As ritual authors and actors, the individual priests of the fourth and fifth centuries are not usually known by name. Nonetheless, their roles and responsibilities can be reconstructed from texts and inscriptions. My argument, set out in Chapter 3, is that a spiritual triumvirate dominated the Gupta court: the royal chaplain (*purohita*), the cadre of sacrificial priests (*ṛtvij*), and the spiritual guide (*ācārya*). Each controlled a discrete domain of sacred knowledge and played a part in the constitution of the king's religious and political identity. I suspect that this analysis will be

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greeted with utter dismay by those who have struggled to dismantle the Orientalist picture of India as ridden by priests, overtaken with superstition, and enthralled to religion. Against this, however, is Inden's attempt to show how "human agency" can be restored to the people of India's villages and towns, that is, how the Indians themselves ordered their world.¹⁹ The historian is simply not in a position to judge if he or she uncovers a world structured by agents that some find unacceptable or unpalatable. The rich political and cultural dynamics that are unlocked once we accept the idea of agency in Indian history is well illustrated by James Heitzman's *Gifts of Power*, a book of such innovation and creative scholarship that its lessons are being assimilated but slowly.²⁰

As the writing of this book progressed, I began to reconsider my wider subject and think about how historians have approached the visual and textual cultures of pre-modern India. The normal and apparently natural view, unconsciously or consciously informed by secularism and structuralism, is that socio-cultural products – including religion – reflect or express more basic relationships of an economic and political nature. It should be clear from what has been said in this introduction that I cannot believe this dogma anymore. Since the emergence of religious states in the second half of the twentieth century, there is sufficient modern evidence to show that this explanatory framework has to be turned on its head. Historically speaking, the Gupta age shows that the explanation of religion as a kind of decorative cultural accessory, at best, and an embarrassing relic of *pensée sauvage*, at worst, will not serve. The Vaiṣṇava faith and the religious institutions described in this book were dynamic historical forces, driven forward by historically knowable agents with clear motives and certain purposes. These agents – kings, priests, and their clients – leave no doubt whatever that religious ideology and religious institutions structured the political and economic relationships of the Gupta age rather than vice versa. The detailed proof of this lies in the pages that follow.



ONE

THE ARCHAEOLOGY AND POLITICS OF TIME AT UDAYAGIRI

ādityāj jāyate vṛṣṭir vṛṣṭer annaṃ tataḥ prajāḥ
From the sun comes rain, from rain comes food,
wherefrom come living creatures.

Manu¹

Near the ancient city of Vidiśā in central India, just west of the old earthen ramparts, is a rocky hill known as Udayagiri – “the mountain of the sunrise” (Figures 1 and 2). The hill is U-shaped and consists of two plateaux joined in the middle by a low ridge (Figure 3). The northern plateau has steep cliffs on three sides and is flanked by the river Bes; it was once edged by strong walls and crowned by a great temple, now in ruins. The southern plateau has no surviving buildings apart from a single cave shrine. The low ridge linking the two hills is less dramatic in topographical terms, but is rich in archaeological, sculptural, and epigraphic material. It is this ridge that is the primary focus of the present chapter.

Combining an account of the physical remains on the ridge with relevant Sanskrit texts and inscriptions, my aim here is to show how this part of the site functioned as a centre of imperial ritual under the early Gupta kings. My key findings, to anticipate in summary form what follows, are that Udayagiri had a long history as a centre of time-keeping, and this made it an ideal location for (a) scheduling and memorialising the royal consecration or *rājasūya*, most notably of king Candragupta II, and for (b) celebrating the rainy season observance or *varṣāmāsavrata* during which the god Viṣṇu is “put to sleep” during the Monsoon. This festival had its naissance in the Gupta court and enjoyed their special patronage because the Guptas were ardent followers of the Vaiṣṇava dispensation to which the festival belonged.