



Temples, Inscriptions and Misconceptions

Charles-Louis Fábri and the Khajuraho *Apsaras*

• ANNA A. ŚLĄCZKA •

The Rijksmuseum's collection of Indian art contains a stone statue of an *apsaras* (Sanskrit for celestial nymph), the property of the Asian Art Society in the Netherlands. Although the statue has been published several times, it has never been subjected to detailed research. Even its original location was unknown until now. This study, carried out in part in the temple complexes of Khajuraho in Central India, sheds new light on the origins of the statue.

The story of the way the *apsaras* came to the Netherlands is a fascinating one. The Asian Art Society in the Netherlands (founded in 1918 as the Society of Friends of Oriental Art) tried to go on expanding its collection in the 1930s despite the economic crisis. Correspondence between the members of the board at that time reveals that this was far from easy.¹ Many old members had resigned from the Society, and recruiting new members proved difficult. The membership fee was relatively high, and investing in art in those uncertain times was seen as a luxury. At the same time, prices of Oriental statues on the art market were rising sharply. A solution had to be found if the Society was to continue to collect top quality items. And so on 2 June 1934, at a meeting of the executive committee, it was proposed that henceforth art

Detail of fig. 2

should be bought direct from the source in order to circumvent the high prices in Europe. This would obviously require the services of a trustworthy middleman. Theodoor van Erp, an archaeologist and a member of the Society's board since its foundation, reported that he had already found such a person – Charles-Louis Fábri, who was then temporarily resident in India. Fábri was prepared to go in search of 'outstanding sculptures' for an 'appropriate emolument'. Decisions about possible transactions would be taken on the basis of photographs he would send to the Society by post.²

Fábri

Charles-Louis Fábri (fig. 1) was indeed a perfect candidate for such a mission.³ Born in Budapest in 1899 into an assimilated Jewish family, he grew up in the multicultural and multilingual society the Austro-Hungarian Empire then was. He studied philosophy, Indology, Oriental art and art history at the University of Pécs. Fábri attained his doctorate in 1927, but finding a suitable job proved difficult. The first anti-Jewish laws had been introduced in Hungary in 1920 and anti-Semitism was on the rise. There was no chance of an appointment at a university in Hungary for him. Thanks to his international contacts, Fábri managed to get a job with the Univer-



Fig. 1
Portrait of
Charles-Louis Fábri,
year unknown.
Photograph:
courtesy of the
Society of Friends
of the Kern Institute.

sity of Leiden's Kern Institute, initially as an assistant in the library and later as a curator. It was probably there that Van Erp first came across him. Even though Fábri was highly valued,⁴ the economic crisis meant that his appointment in Leiden could not be renewed in 1933. Calling again on his international network, he was able to get a post as a lecturer in Santiniketan in Bengal in 1934 – no less a person than the Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore had requested him for the position. Visva Bharati College in Santiniketan, founded by Tagore, which was awarded university status in 1951, was already enjoying a degree of fame in India and abroad. When Van Erp contacted him on behalf of the Society, Fábri had been living in Bengal for some months.

India was not unknown territory to the young art historian. He had already spent some time in the Punjab and Baluchistan in 1931 as a member of an expedition following in the footsteps of Alexander the Great.⁵ It was led by the world-famous archaeologist Aurel Stein, with whom Fábri shared a

similar Jewish-Hungarian background.⁶ Then, too, his input was praised. Stein described Fábri as 'thoroughly business-like, an indefatigable worker and in addition very modest and genuinely attached'.⁷ During that expedition Fábri had the chance to visit many sites and to meet new fellow archaeologists and art historians. Aurel Stein himself was obviously an extremely valuable contact who might also be of help in finding an 'outstanding sculpture' for the Society's collection.

Fábri accepted the Society's offer immediately. His position in Santiniketan, although prestigious, was still temporary, and it seems safe to assume that his financial situation around that time was precarious.⁸ Inside two months he found a suitable statue, which was approved by the Society on the basis of the photographs he sent. As early as 23 July 1934 a sum of 2,030 guilders was sent to Calcutta for the 'expenses in regard to the purchase of an Indian statue, 1,911 of which for the work itself and the rest for the additional costs'.⁹ In those days 1,911 guilders was a considerable amount of money – more than Fábri's annual salary when he was working at the Kern Institute¹⁰ – but a great deal less than European art dealers would ask for such a work of art. On 12 October 1934, having been stored at the port of Calcutta for some three months, '1 case Antique Stone' left India on board the Java-Bengal Line's *ss Hoogkerk*; it arrived in the Netherlands a month and a half later.¹¹

Disappointment

The packing case contained a magnificent light pink sandstone sculpture of a young woman chosen by Fábri (fig. 2). She is an *apsaras* (plural: *apsarasas*) or *surasundari*, a celestial 'nymph'. *Apsarasas* are stunningly beautiful and have supernatural powers. They live in heaven but also come to earth, often to seduce men, with all the attendant consequences. The Society's *surasundari*



Fig. 2
Celestial Beauty,
 India (Khajuraho),
 c. 950.
 Sandstone, h. 96 cm.
 Amsterdam,
 Rijksmuseum,
 inv. no. AK-MAK-185;
 on loan from the
 Asian Art Society
 in the Netherlands.

stands under a mango tree. Her face is turned away, and her rather dreamy, preoccupied look and the marks of fingernails on her left temple and shoulder tell us that she has just been with her lover. With her left hand she clutches the hem of her loincloth in an attempt to defend herself against a monkey that is pulling playfully at it. There are two other monkeys in the tree; they look as though they are just about to jump down from it. In the woman's raised right hand she holds a yak-hair fly-whisk (*cāmara*), with which she tries to drive the monkeys away. Her long shawl has slipped from her shoulders and falls in soft waves. The shawl looks opulent and heavy in contrast to the gossamer-thin material of the loincloth. As becomes a heavenly being, the *apsaras* wears expensive adornments: earrings, chains, bangles, armlets, anklets and rings. There is an oval *tilaka*¹² on her forehead. Her hair is combed back and tied at the neck with a ribbon and a string of beads. There are six little curls on each side of her forehead. Her hair is dressed with a jewel and flowers that look like blossoms from the Ashoka tree (*Saraca indica*). The workmanship of the fabric and the jewellery on the main figure is of particularly high quality: the hanging chain, the undulating shawl and the thin material of the loincloth are quite lifelike. The *apsaras* is accompanied by an attendant: a much smaller female figure standing on her left.

The members of the Society awaited the arrival of the statue with impatience.¹³ When the sculpture finally arrived, Herman Visser, the Society's founder and a member of the board, was delighted with the purchase which he described as 'very fine'.¹⁴ The members of the board discussed the statue at length during their next meeting – but not everyone was charmed by it. The then chairman of the Society, H.K. Westendorp, was particularly critical. In the minutes we read that he did not like the work,

'... the colour is unpleasant, the fall of the folds unattractive'.¹⁵

This negative response is rather remarkable. Unfortunately it is hard to say what the precise background to this criticism was. There is no detailed record, nor have any of the photographs of the statue that Fábri sent to the Netherlands been found. Perhaps European prudishness was unable to cope with the voluptuousness of the form and the nymph's obvious eroticism. The loincloth, pulled to one side as it is, clearly reveals the erogenous zone, which still shows traces of a red pigment on the pudenda. Or were the proportions of the body and the pose seen as unnatural and at odds with 'classical' ideals? At that time there was certainly often a lack of understanding of the singularity of 'mediaeval' Indian art. Even the statue of Buddha from Sarnath, now regarded as a masterpiece, was strongly criticized at the beginning of the twentieth century because of its 'poverty of plastic technique' and the 'flabbiness of surface modelling'.¹⁶ Be that as it may, it was decided that the Society would not buy any more works without the members seeing them for themselves first. With that, the short-lived working relationship between the Society and Fábri came to an end.

The Region

In the Society's minutes and on the invoices the celestial beauty is simply referred to as an 'Indian statue' or a 'statue from Calcutta', because it was sent from there. There is no further information. In 1935, shortly after the statue was added to the collection, the art historian Pierre Dupont published an article about the work in the *Maandblad voor Beeldende Kunst*.¹⁷ In it he described the *apsaras* as representative of the art of Orissa and stated that identical female figures were to be found in the Rajarani Temple in Bhubaneswar. He dated the statue to the twelfth or thirteenth

century. This provenance and dating was accepted for at least twenty years, for we also find it in the catalogue of the 'Museum of Asian Art in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam', published in 1952.¹⁸ A current authority on Indian art would probably see straight away that Bhubaneswar cannot be right and that the statue has entirely different stylistic characteristics from its equivalents from Orissa. It must, though, be borne in mind that at that time very few people went to India and that good publications on Oriental art were few and far between. This also explains why the *apsaras* was not correctly described as originating from Khajuraho in Central India until a new catalogue was published in 1985. This time she was dated to the eleventh century.¹⁹

Khajuraho

Between the tenth and the thirteenth centuries, Khajuraho, now a tiny village in the modern federal state of Madhya Pradesh, was an important temple city under the royal dynasty of the Chandellas. It was still famous in the fourteenth century as the residence of many *yogis*, as the Arabic traveller Ibn Battuta, who visited the city in 1335, reported.²⁰ The last known inscriptions in Khajuraho date from the fifteenth century. After that the city seems to have been forgotten and the temples were finally overrun by the jungle. It was not until the nineteenth century that the site was rediscovered by the outside world. Captain T.S. Burt, a British engineer, visited the area in 1838 and reported on what he had found in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*.²¹ The name 'Chandella' had also resurfaced in the early nineteenth century, when Lieutenant William Price gave a lecture to the Asiatic Society of Bengal on a Sanskrit inscription found near Chhatarpur (Madhya Pradesh), in which this dynasty was named. However a more in-depth study of the temple complexes

only began with Alexander Cunningham's expeditions in the 1850s and 60s.²²

Khajuraho lies far from all the important centres of modern India. This isolation and the fact that the place had been sunk in oblivion for centuries meant that the monuments had survived almost unscathed, making the site one of best preserved temple complexes in North India. Tradition has it that some eighty-five temples were built in Khajuraho. Twenty-five, dating from around 900 to around 1130, still stand. The best known are the Hindu temples: the sixty-four *Yoginis* (c. 900) and the 'Western Group', including the temples of Lakshmana (c. 950), Visvanatha (c. 999) and Kandariya Mahadeva (c. 1030). There is also an important cluster of Jain temples known as the 'Eastern Group', the best known being Parsvanatha (c. 950-70).²³

In the past the celestial nymph in the Rijksmuseum was correctly attributed to the Khajuraho region on the basis of the overall styling with accents on the clothes, hair and jewellery.²⁴

The Temple and the Date

If the celestial nymph in the Rijksmuseum actually does come from Khajuraho, which temple did she come from and where did she stand originally? As a rule it is extremely difficult to attribute an individual sculpture from a museum collection to a specific monument, particularly when there is scant information about the purchase. However, there are a number of pointers which allow us to say with great certainty that the *apsaras* in Amsterdam came from the Lakshmana Temple.²⁵ The Amsterdam nymph's flower-shaped earrings, wide, flat necklace and double bracelets can be seen on many other sculptures there (fig. 3). They do, it is true, appear in other temples, too, for instance the Visvanatha, Kandariya Mahadeva and Devi Jagadamba, but to a far lesser degree. The female figures in these



temples – in the Kandariya Mahadeva, for example – are slimmer, with long legs and slender thighs and with less accentuated waists. The *apsaras* in the Lakshmana Temple are much curvier and more voluptuous, with broad hips and full breasts. The way the long, dangling shawl is depicted, the very specific hairstyle and the decoration of the broad hem of the loincloth with a foliage pattern are also typical of the *apsaras* from the Lakshmana Temple (fig. 4). The nail marks can also be seen on many female statues there (see fig. 3). Given that the Lakshmana Temple was built around 950, the *apsaras* must be redated to the middle of the tenth century.

The Location in the Temple

The temple, nowadays known as ‘Lakshmana’, was built by order of King Yasovarman of the Chandella dynasty (fig. 5) From the Sanskrit inscription found nearby, now mounted in the wall by the entrance, we learn that the temple was built

to house an important statue of Vaikuntha, a manifestation of the god Vishnu.²⁶ Lakshmana is one of the very few temples still standing that were dedicated to Vaikuntha. The statue, originally from Kashmir, was acquired by King Yasovarman from King Devapala of the Pratihara Dynasty. This meant that the temple was also a symbol of the supremacy of the Chandellas over the Pratiharas, whose vassals they had once been. It was consecrated in 954. Yasovarman must have been dead by then, since the inscription names his son Dhanga as the ruling monarch.

Lakshmana is the earliest temple in Khajuraho in the mature Nagara style and the first built entirely of sandstone.²⁷ As such it marked a new phase in architectural development and is visible evidence of the growing power of the Chandellas – all the earlier temples in Khajuraho are rather small and less impressive. The temple is surrounded by four subsidiary shrines –

Fig. 3
Apsaras. Khajuraho,
Lakshmana Temple,
mahā-maṇḍapa.

Fig. 4
Apsaras. Khajuraho,
Lakshmana Temple,
exterior wall of
the sanctum.



Fig. 5
Khajuraho,
Lakshmana Temple
(954), seen from
the north.

the only ones in Khajuraho that are well preserved. The entire complex stands on a high platform. The ground plan of the main building (fig. 6) is typical of mature Nagara temples, with a portico (*mukha-maṇḍapa*), an entrance hall (*maṇḍapa*), a great hall with transepts (*maha-maṇḍapa*), a vestibule (*antārāla*) and the sanctum (*garbha-gr̥ha*) encircled by an ambu-

latory passageway (*pradakṣiṇa-patha*). This sanctum currently contains a monumental stone statue of Vaikuntha-Vishnu.²⁸ The chambers are topped with a number of pyramid roofs (above the portico, *maṇḍapa* and *maha-maṇḍapa*) and a tall tower (the sanctum). The external walls of the main temple and the subsidiary shrines are covered all over with sculptures (fig. 7).

Fig. 6
Ground plan
Lakshmana Temple,
Khajuraho. After
D. Desai, *The Religious
Imagery of Khajuraho*,
Mumbai 1996,
p. 127, fig. 11.
Courtesy of
Devangana
Desai, Franco-
Indian Research,
Mumbai and the
Archaeological
Survey of India.
The arrows mark
the locations
of the missing
apsaras (added
by Anna Ślaczka).

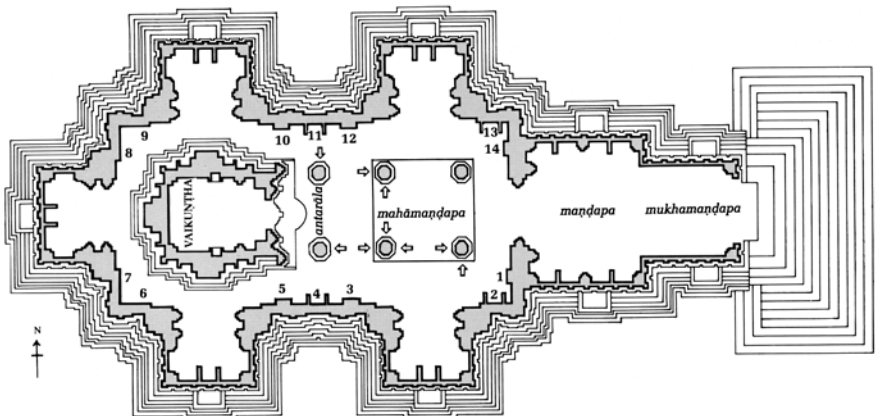




Fig. 7
Khajuraho, Lakshmana
Temple, northern
junction (*kapili*) wall.

Around the sixth century the temples in North India started to become larger and larger and the ornamentation more exuberant. The sculptures – with the exception of the images of the most important gods which were installed in the main niches – increasingly function as a part of a group, an element in the whole, resulting in a multiplication of types. The external walls of the later Khajuraho temples, including those

of the Lakshmana Temple, display countless figures of greater and lesser deities, heavenly attendants, mythological beings and *apsaras*, as well as the explicitly erotic scenes that Khajuraho is primarily known for today. The *apsaras* stand in all kinds of poses and hold various attributes that a beautiful, wealthy woman should not be without: a mirror, a kohl stick, a box of cosmetics. Some are occupied

with their hair, others are shown as they wash, trying to wring water from their long tresses or removing a thorn from a foot. No two figures are the same.

It was long thought that the nymph in Amsterdam also stood on an outside wall.²⁹ However this does not appear to be the case. The figures there were carved in high relief on a stone slab that forms part of the temple wall, and as such is an essential part of the structure. What is more, the *apsaras* on the exterior wall almost never stand under a tree, or at any rate not in Khajuraho. The few examples where this is indeed the case differ significantly from the Amsterdam figure in size and finish (fig. 8). The original location of the *apsaras* in Amsterdam is more likely to be found inside the temple.

The interior of an Indian temple – certainly by comparison to the magnificence of the exterior – makes a relatively bare impression. Nonetheless they also contain sculptures of gods and other divine beings. *Apsaras* can be found in three places in the interior of the Lakshmana Temple: in the ambulatory passage, on the upper part of the tall pillars which support the great hall (*mahamandapa*) and the vestibule (*antarala*), and between these pillars and the ceiling. The celestial nymphs in the passage are very like the ones on the exterior walls (see fig. 4). They were hewn in relief out of a stone slab and never stand under a tree. Furthermore, the shape of the pedestal on which they are placed is not the same as that of the Amsterdam *apsaras*. But the figures on the pillars and near the ceiling are a different matter. Carved in very high relief, almost in the round at the sides, without a stone slab behind them, they bear a strong resemblance to the sculpture in Amsterdam (fig. 9). The pedestal is also of the same type, even identical in a number of cases. Moreover all these



Fig. 8
Apsaras under a tree. Khajuraho, Lakshmana Temple, north-eastern subsidiary shrine, west wall.



Fig. 9
Apsaras on the top of a pillar. Khajuraho, Lakshmana Temple, vestibule (*antarala*).



Fig. 10
Top of a pillar
decorated with
alternating
apsaras and
vyālas. Khajuraho,
Lakshmana Temple.

figures stand under a tree similar to the mango that shelters the *apsaras* in Amsterdam. This is particularly true of the figures on the pillars; in the case of the celestial nymphs near the ceiling the tree is more stylized, with marked, sharp lines, possibly because they had to be clearly legible from the ground. Taking all this into account, we can say that the *apsaras* in Amsterdam corresponds most closely to the female figures on the upper section of the pillars.

There are other indications that the Society's celestial nymph did indeed grace the top of one of the pillars. To confirm this we must look more closely at the way the female figures are mounted on the pillars. On the upper part of each pillar there are four wider, projecting stone shelves or 'false brackets' on the four points of the compass, with four smaller ones between them. The *apsaras* stand on the wider shelves, while the narrower shelves support *vyālas*: mythological

beasts with the body of a lion and the head of a mythical animal (fig. 10). The tops of the *apsaras* and the *vyālas* are secured with a mortise and tenon joint to the bottom part of the crossbeams of the ceiling (in the case of the *apsaras*) or to an element that supports the female figures in the ceiling (the *vyālas*). Figures that were mounted like this often still have remains of the tenon on the top. This is very evident on a number of *apsaras* and *vyālas* in different museum collections (fig. 11).³⁰ The tenons and the mortise holes can be either round or square. In the Lakshmana Temple the *apsaras* were attached using round tenons; those of the *vyālas* were round or square (fig. 12).

The heavenly beauty from Amsterdam also originally had a round tenon, but it must have broken off a long time ago. It probably happened when the statue was still in India, as it cannot be seen in the photograph in Dupont's article.³¹ The spot where the tenon



Fig. 11
 Apsaras from
 the top of a pillar,
 India (Rajasthan,
 Harshagiri), second
 half of the 10th
 century. Sandstone,
 h. 54.6 cm. Cleveland,
 The Cleveland
 Museum of Art,
 inv. no. 1967.202;
 a gift of Mr and Mrs
 Severance A. Millikin.

Fig. 12
 Top of a pillar showing
 the mortise holes.
 Khajuraho, Lakshmana
 Temple.





Fig. 13
Detail of the *Celestial Beauty*: location of the broken-off tenon on the top of the statue.

broke off is still clearly discernible, however: on the top part of the tree, towards the back (fig. 13). It is in the same place as the tenons of the pillar figures in the Lakshmana Temple, which means that the *apsaras* in Amsterdam was attached to the ceiling beams at the same angle of about twenty degrees to the pillar. Lastly, the dimensions of the *apsaras* tally: the height is identical to the distance between the ‘false bracket’ at the bottom and the mortise hole in the decorative element of the ceiling beams, and the same goes for the width of the pedestal.³²

Six pillars each with four *apsaras* and four *vyālas* originally stood in the great hall and in the *antarāla* of the Lakshmana Temple. The two pilasters at the sides of the entrance to the sanctum each had an *apsaras*. In total, therefore, there were twenty six *apsaras*. Seventeen of them are still in their original places; nine are missing (see fig. 6). It is highly likely that one of the missing *apsaras* has been in the Society’s collection since 1934.³³

The Inscriptions

One interesting aspect of the Amsterdam beauty has not yet been discussed: the inscription on the pedestal (fig. 14). In the 1952 catalogue this was dis-

missed in a single sentence as ‘only partially decipherable’.³⁴ After that the inscription seems to have been forgotten, even though it is an important factor in establishing precisely where the statue stood.

We know of several long, carefully composed texts from Khajuraho, among them the inscription to mark the consecration of the Lakshmana Temple. But there are also countless short texts, usually consisting only of a few letters, on walls, pilasters, plinths and door frames. The majority are in the Lakshmana Temple, which is almost entirely covered with script and is effectively one huge textbook. There are short texts in the Visvanatha Temple and the Kandariya Mahadeva Temple too, but to a somewhat lesser degree in the latter. Older temples have few, if any, such inscriptions.³⁵ It would therefore seem that the practice of placing inscriptions on temple walls began in Khajuraho around the tenth century, reached its peak in the middle of that century – when the Lakshmana Temple was built – and gradually fell into disuse after that.

Unlike the long inscriptions, most of which have been published and translated, these short texts – sometimes rather contemptuously referred

to as 'graffiti', perhaps because they are often very carelessly written – have been largely ignored. They are simply not mentioned in the majority of publications about Khajuraho. Cunningham devoted some attention to them when he visited the area in the mid-nineteenth century. He took the view that the one-word inscriptions – at first sight meaningless – were the names of the artisans and stonemasons who had made the sculptures and the parts of the buildings.³⁶ The only other study into this phenomenon I know of is by A.K. Singh, who transcribed and published a number of examples of this 'graffiti'.³⁷ He agreed with Cunningham's theory and likewise thought that the short inscriptions referred to the names of the makers. Singh included a list of some of these minor inscriptions in various temples, including the Lakshmana, in his article. Given that many – but by no means all – of the little texts in the Lakshmana Temple end with the letter 'ga', he suggested that this was an abbreviation for the Sanskrit word *gaṇa* (a flock, troop or class) and hence an indication of an artisans' guild. The word *gaṇa* does indeed follow a number – but not a very large one – of these 'names'.³⁸

The inscription on the base of the Amsterdam *apsaras* is an example of the same type of very short, one-word texts. It consists of three letters: 'bhá', 'i' (or possibly 'i') and 'la'. The script is similar to that of the inscription from Dhanga and other texts in the Lakshmana Temple. This means that the letters probably date from the middle of the tenth century and may well have been carved while the temple was being built or immediately afterwards.

Bhaila or *bhaila* does not resemble any known word. So might it then be the name of an artisan? And would this apply to all these kinds of inscriptions? I believe that this theory should be revised. The analysis of the texts in the Lakshmana Temple has shown that they are hardly ever repeated. As far as I could determine, there are only a few inscriptions that occur in more than one place.³⁹ They include *ghaghaga* (on two pilasters in the transepts), *jakhaga* (on two figures on the exterior wall of the sanctum and three on the outer temple walls, two of which are side by side) and *chitulaga* (two female figures in the transepts, one on the exterior of the sanctum and two figures on the exterior wall of the temple; fig. 15).⁴⁰ However the vast majority of the

Fig. 14
Detail of the *Celestial Beauty*: inscription on the base.





Fig. 15
'Chitulaga' inscription
on the base of an
apsaras. Khajuraho,
Lakshmana Temple,
exterior wall of the
sanctum.

words occur only once. In view of the large number of inscriptions does this mean that dozens of artisans and stonemasons (fifty or sixty) were involved in the building, each of them working on a small section of it? If so, it would seem that only a few of them 'signed' several sculptures, whereas most made do with leaving their mark on just one (many sculptures do not have inscriptions).⁴¹ If we compare the figures and motifs that bear identical inscriptions we find that they do not correspond stylistically. It therefore seems unlikely that sculptures with the same inscriptions were made by one and the same artisan. The differences between these sculptures are no smaller than those between other sculptures from the same temple chosen at random.

Obviously arguments to the contrary could be adduced. Perhaps there actually were fifty or more artisans at work – after all, we know extremely little about how a temple was built in the tenth century. There are still 'artisan villages' in India in which almost everyone has the same trade. And – if the texts do indeed indicate guilds – perhaps the individual members of a guild each worked in their own style, and as a result the

sculptures that bear the same name nonetheless differ. But this still leaves a number of questions unanswered. Why were some sculptures, also important and impressive, not given an inscription? Why are there sometimes two different texts on a sculpture? And finally, if the letter 'ga' actually is an abbreviation of *gaṇa* in the meaning of 'guild', why do we only find it in the Lakshmana Temple? The inscriptions in the Visvanatha Temple very rarely end with a 'ga', but on the other hand very often begin with 'śri'.⁴² I should like to suggest that the short texts may be the names not of the artisans, but of the clients (which for that matter could also have been guilds), the sponsors of particular sculptures in the temple. Names of sponsors, donors and patrons appear on sculptures in India more often than names of artisans.

In the Lakshmana Temple nearly all the *apsaras* that are on pillars bear an inscription. From what I have been able to see, they are not repeated elsewhere. Some of the inscriptions are illegible. *Bhāila* cannot be found anywhere else, although Singh does refer to the inscription A 23 *bhāita gaṇa* on the north-westerly subsidiary shrine.⁴³ As the letters 'ta' and 'la' resemble one

another and it is very easy to a mistake 'bha' for 'bhā', *bhaita* and *bhāila* could perhaps be the same. In my opinion it is quite possible that *bhāila* or even *bhāila|bhaita gaṇa* is the name of a patron, be it an individual or a group, who paid for this *apsaras* to be made. The number '23' may then indicate the number of sponsored sculptures.

Obviously this is only a hypothesis. For greater certainty it would be necessary to catalogue all the sculptures and inscriptions in the Lakshmana Temple. Then we would have to find out if patterns could be identified, particularly in terms of the style of writing, iconography and distribution in the temple. Until this is done, doubts will remain about the true meaning of these short inscriptions and we may well wonder whether Singh's theory might have been accepted too quickly.

Calcutta

This leaves us with the question as to how a sculpture from a pillar in the Lakshmana Temple found its way to Fábri. There is no reference to this in the Society's records. The money was sent to Fábri and no other middleman is mentioned. As far as we know Fábri did not visit Khajuraho during that period. However it is interesting to note that there are four sculptures that are very like the *apsaras* in Amsterdam in the Indian Museum in Calcutta (figs. 16-19). This similarity is no coincidence: the four female figures, as well as two *vyālas*, also originally came from the Lakshmana Temple.⁴⁴ Their dimensions correspond closely to those of the heavenly beauty in Amsterdam;⁴⁵ the proportions of the body, the jewellery and the pedestal are of the same type (see figs. 16 and 19 for the chain and figs. 17 and 18 for the hairstyle) and there are nail marks on the bodies of two *apsaras* (see figs. 18 and 19). The bases, like that of the *apsaras* in Amsterdam, bear short inscriptions dating from around 950.⁴⁶ But there is more. For a long time the

group of sculptures in the Indian Museum was thought to have come from Bhubaneswar in Orissa. This view was finally disproved by Krishna Deva in 1959.⁴⁷ Furthermore these statues also had tenons, which seem to have broken off long ago. This is unlike many similar 'bracket figures' in museum collections, but exactly the same as the Rijksmuseum *apsaras*.⁴⁸

According to the 1883 catalogue of the Indian Museum, the Calcutta statues were a gift from Captain Markham Kittoe (1808-1853), who spent some time in Orissa, to the Asiatic Society of Bengal.⁴⁹ When the Indian Museum was established in 1875 these statues became part of the collection. Devangana Desai recently proved that the sculptures were not a gift from Kittoe, who probably never visited Khajuraho, but from General Charles Stuart (1757/58-1828), a colourful character better known as 'Hindoo Stuart'.⁵⁰ Stuart collected Indian sculptures and had even set up his own 'museum' in his house in Chowranghee in Calcutta. His collection contained works of art from the area around Khajuraho, as well as from Bihar and Orissa. In 1924 he apparently gave a number of inscribed stone slabs to the Asiatic Society. According to Desai it is quite possible that Stuart visited Khajuraho between 1819 and 1822, during his time as head of the Saugor (Sagar, now in Madhya Pradesh) Field Force.⁵¹ Stuart's collection was sold in London two years after his death.⁵²

Returning to the celestial beauty in Amsterdam – is it possible that she was removed from Khajuraho at the same time as the Indian Museum statues and brought to Bengal? Perhaps even by Charles Stuart himself? Part of that group may then have been given to the Asiatic Society where it was erroneously entered in the records as a gift from Kittoe. The *apsaras* in Amsterdam may have ended up in a private collection or in Stuart's 'museum', if he was indeed



Fig. 16
Woman Adjusting
her Garments,
 India (Khajuraho,
 Lakshmana Temple).
 Sandstone, h. 94.6 cm.
 Calcutta,
 Indian Museum,
 inv. no. BR 2 / A25228.
 Photograph: John
 C. Huntington.
 Courtesy of
 The Huntington
 Photographic
 Archive of the Ohio
 State University.



Fig. 17
Woman Fondling
a Child,
 India (Khajuraho,
 Lakshmana Temple).
 Sandstone, h. 92.7 cm.
 Calcutta,
 Indian Museum,
 inv. no. BR 1 / A25230.
 Photo: John
 C. Huntington.
 Courtesy of
 The Huntington
 Photographic
 Archive of the Ohio
 State University.



Fig. 18
Woman Writing
a Letter,
 India (Khajuraho,
 Lakshmana Temple).
 Sandstone, h. 95.9 cm.
 Calcutta,
 Indian Museum,
 inv. no. BR4 / A25231.
 Photo: John
 C. Huntington.
 Courtesy of
 The Huntington
 Photographic
 Archive of the Ohio
 State University.



Fig. 19
Woman Looking
into a Mirror,
 India (Khajuraho,
 Lakshmana Temple).
 Sandstone, h. 97.2 cm.
 Calcutta,
 Indian Museum,
 inv. no. BR3 / A25229.
 Photo: John
 C. Huntington.
 Courtesy of
 The Huntington
 Photographic
 Archive of the Ohio
 State University.

the one who brought the statues to Calcutta. In any event it is reasonable to assume that when Fábri was shown the Amsterdam nymph it had been away from Khajuraho for a long time – long enough for the place of origin to have been forgotten. It also seems likely to me that the *apsaras* was kept somewhere in or near Calcutta. At that time Fábri was living in Santiniketan, some 180 kilometres north of Calcutta, so he could easily have come into contact with the then owners. Further research, into Fábri's correspondence for example, ought to be undertaken to be absolutely certain and to fill in the missing links in the tale of the *apsaras*.

It is also quite likely that the Amsterdam *apsaras* was attributed to Bhubaneswar because of its similarity to the statues in the Indian Museum. This probably happened even before the Society bought the statue and was done by someone who knew the

collection in Calcutta well, possibly Fábri himself.⁵³ On the other hand, the association with Orissa is not that surprising, given that at that time this region had been far better studied than Central India and the temples there were known everywhere for their splendid figures of women in erotic poses. It is remarkable that Fábri never corrected this error himself, seeing that later, when he became curator of Lahore Museum, he must certainly have known the difference between art from Central India and art from Orissa. Furthermore he wrote at length about both regions. Perhaps he did not want to reflect on his short working relationship with the Asian Art Society in the Netherlands, which unexpectedly resulted in mutual disappointment. For all that, Fábri turned out to have a very good eye for art, so it is regrettable that his collaboration with the Society was not continued.

NOTES

* Photographs figs. 3-5, 7-10 & 12-15 by Anna Ślaczka.

- 1 Asian Art Society in the Netherlands Archives (VvAK), Rijksmuseum.
- 2 See *Notulen van de Vergaderingen van het Dagelijksch Bestuur der Vereeniging van Vrienden der Aziatische Kunst, 1934-1941*, 2 June 1934, in the Rijksmuseum.
- 3 See M. Köves, 'The English Curator and the Buddhist Doctor: Charles Fábri's Identities in India', *Research-in-Progress Papers: 'History and Society'*, New Delhi 1997, pp. 1-47 and G. Bethlenfalvy, *Charles Louis Fábri. His Life and Works*, New Delhi 1980.
- 4 He also worked on the *Annual Bibliography of Indian Art and Archaeology Index* (ABIA). In the preface to the first volume of that series it states: 'Acknowledgements are due to all scholars who in some way or the other have helped us to accomplish our task. In particular we wish to mention the name of a promising Hungarian student, Dr C.L. Fábri, who ... has rendered us invaluable help in making this work ready

for the press', see *Annual Bibliography for Indian Archaeology for the Year 1926*, Leiden 1928, p. 8.

- 5 Fábri received permission from the Kern Institute to take part in this expedition and keep his job in Leiden, see *Jaarverslag Instituut Kern 1930-1933*, Leiden, p. 3.
- 6 Aurel Stein likewise came from an assimilated Jewish family in Budapest. As Fábri did years later, he applied for British citizenship and was naturalized in 1904.
- 7 Köves, op. cit. (note 3), p. 10.
- 8 Fábri's family lost all its money during the war. While was studying in Pécs, Fábri had to support himself by giving language lessons: French, English and German. See Köves, op. cit. (note 3), p. 8.
- 9 See invoice dated 23 July 1934 in the Rijksmuseum.
- 10 Fábri was initially paid 100 guilders a month. Later, when he became a curator, he received an annual salary of 1,800 guilders. See *Kern Institute (Leyden), Biennial Report 1927-1929*, Leiden 1929, pp. 8-9.

- 11 Including minor additional expenses the transport cost 88 rupees, 7 annas and 3 pies. See the invoice dated 10 October 1934 sent to the director of the Museum of Oriental Art, in the Rijksmuseum.
- 12 A *tilaka* or *bindi* is a dot made on the forehead of Hindu women.
- 13 In the correspondence between H. Visser and H.K. Westendorp we read for example, 'The statue from Calcutta will be in Rotterdam around 23 Nov.', and 'Calcutta statue should arrive in Rotterdam around tomorrow'. See letters dated 4 and 26 November 1934 from H. Visser to H.K. Westendorp at the Rijksmuseum.
- 14 'I wrote to Van Erp about the statue from Calcutta, very fine.' See letter dated 6 December 1934 from H. Visser to H.K. Westendorp at the Rijksmuseum.
- 15 See *Notulen van de Vergaderingen van het Dagelijksch Bestuur der Vereeniging van Vrienden der Aziatische Kunst, 1934-1941*, 20 December 1934, in the Rijksmuseum.
- 16 E.B. Havell, *Indian Sculpture and Painting*, London 1908, p. 41.
- 17 P. Dupont, 'Une statue féminine de Bhuvanesvar', *Maandblad voor Beeldende Kunst* 12 (1935), pp. 190-91.
- 18 H.F.E. Visser, *Museum van Aziatische Kunst in het Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam*, cat. Amsterdam 1952, p. 64.
- 19 P. Lunsingh Scheurleer (ed.), *Asiatic Art in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam*, cat. Amsterdam 1985, p. 140.
- 20 D. Desai, *The Religious Imagery of Khajuraho*, Mumbai 1996, p. 23.
- 21 Khajuraho (Kajrow) featured on a map drawn by the military surveyor Cornet James Franklin in 1818, but probably only a few people were aware of it at the time. See D. Desai, 'The Chandella Hari-Hara in the British Museum', in D. Desai and A. Banerji (eds.), *Kaladarpaṇa: The Mirror of Indian Art. Essays in Memory of Shri Krishna Deva*, New Delhi 2009, pp. 177-83.
- 22 Desai, op. cit. (note 20), pp. 23-24.
- 23 Dates according to Desai, op. cit. (note 20), p. 1.
- 24 Lunsingh Scheurleer, op. cit. (note 19), p. 140.
- 25 This was also suggested recently by Desai. See D. Desai, 'Who brought the Khajuraho Apsaras to the Asiatic Society?', *Lalit Kala* 29 (2004), pp. 7-13.
- 26 J. Burgess, *Epigraphia Indica. A Collection of Inscriptions Supplementary to the Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum of the Archeological Survey*, vol. 1, Calcutta 1892, pp. 122-35.
- 27 The mature Nagara style is a North Indian temple style characterized by a complex ground plan – consisting of the sanctum encircled by an ambulatory passage and preceded by a number of halls – and more exuberant sculptural decorations. The sanctum is topped with a tall tower (*sikhara*), the highest element in the temple complex.
- 28 There are doubts as to whether this statue of Vaikuntha is the one that Yasvarman installed. See Desai, op. cit. (note 20), pp. 211-17.
- 29 This is implicitly suggested in the 1985 catalogue: 'This is only one of the very many statues that cover the walls of temples at Khajuraho.' See Lunsingh Scheurleer (ed.), op. cit. (note 19), p. 140.
- 30 See V.N. Desai and D. Mason (eds.), *Gods, Guardians and Lovers: Temple Sculptures from North India A.D. 700-1200*, exh. cat. New York (The Asia Society Galleries) 1993, cat. nos. 41-46.
- 31 Dupont, op. cit. (note 17), p. 190.
- 32 *The apsaras* in Amsterdam is 96 cm tall, the pedestal is 25.5 cm wide at the top. The distance from the 'bracket' at the bottom to the mortise hole, measured on one of the pillars in the hall, was 96.5 cm, the width of the pedestal of the *apsaras* on the same pillar was 25 cm (measured in January 2012). I would like to thank Rahul Tiwari of the Archaeological Survey of India, Khajuraho for making it possible to measure the *apsaras*.
- 33 At present it is impossible to determine which pillar the *apsaras* was originally attached to. The study of the iconographic characteristics of all the figures still *in situ* has not revealed any fixed distribution patterns. We do know that erotic figures were chiefly displayed in 'transition zones', such as entrances, reflecting the belief that figures like these had protective powers that could be very useful in such crucial, potentially 'dangerous' places. In the temples of Khajuraho, and very obviously in the Lakshmana Temple, the explicitly erotic scenes were therefore affixed to the *kapili* wall, which forms the connection – making it a 'danger zone' – between the great hall and the sanctum. See Desai, op. cit. (note 20), pp. 178-81. *The apsaras* in Amsterdam is one of the few female figures with exposed erogenous zones. Might she have come from one of the pillars in the *antarala* – the room between the great hall and the sanctum and encircled by the *kapili* wall? The *antarala* has two pillars that lack two figures. The second *apsaras*, which is almost naked,

- is on a pillar in the *antarala*; the third is in the Indian Museum in Calcutta.
- 34 Visser, op. cit. (note 18), p. 64.
- 35 Among the few known examples from the early tenth century are the inscriptions on two statues of goddesses from the temple of the 64 *Yoginis* which indicate the names of these goddesses. See A. Cunningham, *Reports of a Tour in Bundelkhand and Rewa in 1883-84; and of a Tour in Rewa, Bundelkhand, Malwa, and Gwalior, in 1884-85, Calcutta 1885*, p. 57 and pl. xx.
- 36 'I take the single names which are found on many of the stones to be those of the masons who prepared them.' Cunningham, op. cit. (note 35), p. 60.
- 37 A.K. Singh, 'Minor inscriptions of Khajuraho', *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bombay* 64-66 (1989-91), pp. 222-37.
- 38 Research should be undertaken to determine whether this term does indeed have this meaning, particularly in the inscriptions from this period and region. One of the words that does occur in the inscriptions in the meaning of a 'guild' is *śreṇī*. See B.D. Chattopadhyaya, 'Historiography, History and Religious Centers. Early Medieval North India c. 700-1200', in Desai and Mason, op. cit. (note 30), pp. 33-47.
- 39 Many sculptures and, no doubt, inscriptions are located high up, so I was unable to see them. On the other hand, there are few repeats in the quite extensive list of inscriptions published by Singh.
- 40 *Chitulaga* is not mentioned by Singh. Singh read the text on one of the figures in the transepts as *chinutpaga* and interpreted it not as a name but as a 'label', in other words probably a description of the figure itself: the Sanskrit root *chid* means 'to cut off' and the figure in question clutches a severed head. However I did not read a *tpa* ligature there.
- 41 The explanation given nowadays by the temple guides is that the inscriptions indicate where the sculptures had to be placed. However in view of the large number of totally different texts this seems to me to be highly unlikely.
- 42 Sanskrit: lustre, splendour. Frequently used as an honorific prefix.
- 43 Singh, op. cit. (note 37), p. 229 and fig. 2.12. Unfortunately I did not see this inscription.
- 44 See Desai, op. cit. (note 25).
- 45 For the quoted height of fig. 17 see Desai, op. cit. (note 25), p. 10. ARTstor.org was consulted for the heights of figs. 16, 18 and 19. With regard to fig. 18 there is a discrepancy in the measurement stated: according to D. Desai the height is 110.5 cm, whereas ARTstor.org assumes 95.9 cm.
- 46 The inscriptions read *kavāṭa* (BR4 / A25231), *radhuta* (BR2 / A25228) and *gāṅgata* (BR1 / A25230), see Desai, op. cit. (note 25), p. 10. One statue has no inscription (BR3 / A25229). However the letters have been applied rather carelessly, so the readings should be seen as tentative; the reading *gāṅgata* seems particularly doubtful.
- 47 '[The Kandariya Mahadeva Temple] has yielded some of the masterpieces of medieval art, including the three well-known sculptures in the Indian Museum – woman with a child, woman writing letter and woman looking into a mirror – which were erroneously believed to have come from Bhubaneswar but which, from identity of style, material, dimensions and inscribed graffiti, may now definitely be ascribed to the Lakshmana temple at Khajuraho.' K. Deva, 'The temples of Khajuraho in Central India', *Ancient India* 15 (1959), pp. 43-65. The wording of the labels in the Indian Museum was changed after this publication. It is not clear why Krishna Deva speaks of only three female figures. The fourth – a woman adjusting her garments – appears not to have been shown for a long time (this was certainly the case in January 2011), but she is mentioned in the catalogue of the Indian Museum (1883). Before Krishna Deva, Sivaramamurti also expressed his doubts about Bhubaneswar as the place of origin, see C. Sivaramamurti, *A Guide to the Archaeological Galleries of the Indian Museum*, Calcutta 1954, plate Va: 'Woman writing love letter ... Bhubaneswar, Orissa or more probably Vindhya Pradesh [a former state in Central India, now a part of Madhya Pradesh].'
- 48 John Anderson, *Catalogue and Hand-book of the Archaeological Collections in the Indian Museum*, Patna 1977 (orig. publ. 1883), p. 220: 'All of these sculptures seem probably to have formed the balusters of a railing, or some other part of a building, as each has had a tenon above.'
- 49 Anderson, op. cit. (note 48), pp. 216-21.
- 50 For a lively description of 'Hindoo Stuart' and his life in India, see W. Dalrymple, *White Mughals*, London 2003.
- 51 Desai and Banerji, op. cit. (note 21), pp. 177-83.
- 52 *A Catalogue of the Very Extensive and Valuable Oriental Museum, Comprising MSS, Sculptures, Bronzes, Articles of Female Dress and Ornament, Weapons and Natural*

History, which was Formed at Great Expense by the Late General Charles Stuart of Bengal ... which will be Sold by Auction by Mr Christie (London, 11-12 June and 14 June 1830). A major part of this collection found its way to the British Museum. See M.D. Willis, 'Sculpture from India', in M. Caygill and J. Cherry (eds.), *Nineteenth-century Collecting and the British Museum*, London 1997, pp. 250-61.

- 53 It is also theoretically possible that this *apsaras* was given to the Asiatic Society together with the other sculptures from the Lakshmana Temple, without being noted in the records, and afterwards had a different owner. For example, because she is the only one whose nose and chin are slightly damaged or because the statue looks like one of the other statues (BR2 / A25228, see fig. 16): the left hand holds the end of the loincloth and there are monkeys in the tree. The 1883 catalogue, however, mentions four, not five, female figures. It is unclear whether there was ever any search conducted for this missing documentation in the Indian Museum.