

Mulasthaneswar Aspidal Temple at Pottapi in Kadapa District - A Study

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Abstract: *The Mulasthanesvara Temple at Pottapi in Andhra Pradesh represents an important example of apsidal architecture in the Brahmanical tradition. Its distinctive plan, curved rear wall, vaulted roof, and chaitya-like façade reflect architectural features shared by early Buddhist and Brahmanical religious structures. The temple's historical background is closely associated with Pottapi, an important centre of the Telugu Cholas. Architectural features, inscriptions, and archaeological discoveries from nearby sites provide valuable evidence for understanding its origin and development. Although the temple resembles a Buddhist chaityagriha, no definite archaeological evidence establishes its Buddhist association. The apsidal design may reflect architectural traditions derived from early residential structures and subsequently adapted for religious purposes. An inscription dated A.D. 1193 records Telugu Chola connections but does not establish the temple's foundation date. Based on its architectural characteristics and historical context, the original shrine is tentatively assigned to the second century A.D., with later renovations possibly undertaken during the late twelfth century under Siddharasa. The temple offers valuable insight into the continuity of early architectural traditions, religious influences, and regional temple development in Andhra Pradesh.*

Keywords: Mulasthanesvara Temple, Apsidal Architecture, Pottapi, Brahmanical Temples, Telugu Cholas

1. Introduction

The apsidal plan is an important architectural feature found in Buddhist and early Brahmanical architecture. In Buddhist architecture, apsidal forms are particularly associated with chaityagrihas, both rock-cut and structural, which were generally constructed according to this plan. Recent studies and excavations have also revealed several Brahmanical temples built in an apsidal form. In Brahmanical architecture, this design was known as *gajaprishtakriti* and was classified under the Vesara style. Some notable examples of Brahmanical temples with apsidal plans are found at Taxila, Sanchi and Ter in North India; Badami and Chikkamahakuta in the Deccan; and Nagarjunakonda, Pottapi, Chezerla, Chilamkur, Satyavole and Gudimallam in Andhra Pradesh. Similar examples are also found at Mahabalipuram, Tirumiyachchur and Pennadam in Tamil Nadu.

Pottapi is on the left bank of the Cheyyeru River, about 38 km northeast of Rajampet. It is a pleasant village surrounded by natural springs and gardens. The name Pottapi is traditionally explained as being derived from the Telugu words *pottu*, meaning association, and *yepi*, referring to a type of tree. Thus, Pottapi is understood as a village associated with *yepi* trees¹. Pottapi acquired considerable historical importance when the Telugu Cholas established their capital there. The surrounding region subsequently came to be known as Pottapi-nadu. The earliest reference to Pottapi as a capital occurs in an inscription of Nandichoda dated A.D. 1157. According to this inscription, his ancestor Dasavarman conquered Pakarashtra and ruled from Pottapi². The village is believed to have served as the capital of the Telugu Cholas from around the tenth century A.D. Telugu Chola rulers such as Balliya Chola Maharaja (c. A.D. 928–938)³, Bijideva Chola Maharaja⁴ (c. A.D. 1077), and Bettarasa (A.D. 1120–21)⁵ are mentioned in inscriptions relating to this region.

Other Telugu Chola rulers associated with Pottapi included Siddharasa⁶, Vimaladitya (A.D. 1125–26)⁷, and his grandsons Mallideva and Somesvara⁸. Following the battle of Donnagalasani around A.D. 1160, Pottapi-nadu came under the control of the Telugu Cholas of Nellore. An inscription found on a slab incorporated into the floor of the garbhagriha of the Mulasthanesvara Temple at Pottapi, dated Saka 1115 (A.D. 1193), refers to the Chola king Tribhuvanachakravartin Kulottunga Choladeva, identified with Kulottunga III. It also mentions Maduraantaka Pottapi Chola Sitti Aaraiyan (Siddharasa)⁹ and Nalla Siddha II, rulers of the Telugu Cholas of Nellore.

2. Description of the Temple

The Mulasthanesvara Temple is located on the western side of the village and faces east. It is enclosed by a prakara, with an entrance on the eastern side. The prakara wall is now in a completely ruined condition and does not contain a gopura gateway. The principal components of the temple are the garbhagriha, mukhamandapa and two sub-shrines, situated on either side of the mukhamandapa. The garbhagriha has an apsidal plan, with a prominent curved rear wall connected to the straight portions by two massive parallel arms. There are no adhishtana mouldings, and the massive stone walls rise directly from the ground. As they rise, the walls slope slightly inward.

The walls are plain and lack decorative embellishments. Above them is a convex arched roof constructed of bricks and lime, resembling a *gajaprishta* sikhara. Immediately above the point where the brick structure begins is a narrow projecting band of stucco known as the *kapota*. A series of gables is arranged along the *kapota*. Viewed from the east, these features create the appearance of a semicircular chaitya front, crowned by a *kirtimukha* with a denticulated edge. The denticulated mouldings closely resemble those found on the Kapotesvara Temple at Chezerla. At the centre of the chaitya

or gable, there appears to have been a stucco figure of Siva, although it has now largely faded away. The garbhagriha of the temple now contains a truncated linga placed on a square yonipitha. The pranala projects through the northern wall of the sanctum. Later additions to the apsidal shrine include the mukhamandapa and two subsidiary shrines. The mukhamandapa functions as a common hall for the two subsidiary shrines, which are situated opposite each other. The adhishtana is constructed of stone and has simple mouldings, while the walls of the mukhamandapa and subsidiary shrines are made of brick. The mukhamandapa contains four pillars at its centre. The subsidiary shrines are dedicated to Virabhadra and the goddess locally known as Mulasthanesvaramma. To the east of the mukhamandapa are the Nandi mandapa, dhvajastambha, and balipitha, arranged consecutively along the same axis.

3. Origin of the Apsidal Temple Form

The origin of the apsidal form of Brahmanical temples may be traced to the secular thatched houses or huts of early India, examples of which can still be observed in tribal settlements and rural areas. The square, circular, and oblong forms of these village houses, together with their thatched roofs, appear to have provided models for the development of early temple architecture. The apsidal form seems to have originated mainly from huts found in pastoral and primitive settlements¹⁰.

These huts were generally constructed on an apsidal or oblong plan, with a semicircular rear portion and a barrel-vaulted roof supported by flexible wooden or bamboo rafters covered with grass or leaves. Anthropologists have referred to these elongated or apsidal structures as beehive-shaped huts.

The Buddhists found this architectural form suitable for housing stupas and images of the Buddha. Such structures subsequently came to be known as chaityagrihas. Similar architectural forms are also found in contemporary Brahmanical temples. This suggests that both Buddhist and Brahmanical architects may have drawn inspiration from existing models of residential houses and huts.

For a long time, scholars believed that some Brahmanical apsidal temples were originally Buddhist Chaityagrihas. The Kapoteswara temple at Chejerla, for example, was examined from this perspective¹¹. However, excavations conducted by Dr. I. K. Sarma revealed a manchaka-type basement and other features that did not support a Buddhist origin. No definite Buddhist material was discovered at the site. Therefore, in the absence of supporting evidence from the temple's earliest phase, there is insufficient basis for questioning its Brahmanical affiliation¹².

Dr. Sarma further observed that there was no structural or sculptural evidence establishing a Buddhist origin for the temple. The limestone images and pillars decorated with lotus medallions indicate their association with Brahmanical temples. The use of limestone for sculptural work is also considered comparable to the practices of the late Satavahana–Ikshvaku period¹³.

The apsidal structural form appears to have been adopted and developed by Buddhist architects in the construction of Chaityagrihas. Influenced by these Buddhist structures, Brahmanical architects subsequently incorporated the chaitya model into their own temples. Since builders and architects may have worked for both religious traditions, architectural interaction between Buddhism and Brahmanism was natural. With the decline of Buddhism in the region, Buddhist places of worship and viharas gradually disappeared, whereas Brahmanical temples continued to develop under sustained patronage from different sections of society and ruling groups. Over the centuries, these temples attained their mature forms and became important centres of social activity during the medieval period.

4. Mulasthanesvara Temple

Early temples with gajaprishta shikharas over the sanctum generally possess an apsidal plan. Usually, the walls and shikhara are separated by an intervening griva. The Mulasthanesvara temple, however, differs from this arrangement. Its garbhagriha walls and vaulted roof are plain and lack such a division.

Above the doorway on the front façade is a broad gable decorated with stucco work, including a central figure that has largely faded. In terms of both its plan and elevation, the temple resembles a Buddhist Chaityagriha. Nevertheless, there is no definite evidence demonstrating that the Pottapi temple had any association with Buddhism. On the contrary, several Siva lingas have been identified in and around Pottapi.

A Buddhist site was discovered on a hill at Adapur near Nandalur, approximately 20 kilometres west of Pottapi along the banks of the Cheyyer River. Excavations conducted by the Department of State Archaeology and Museums, Andhra Pradesh, in 1979 brought to light stupas, viharas, an inscribed Buddhapada, and Satavahana coins. The discovery indicates that the region had an established Buddhist presence and that its cultural history can be traced back to approximately the second century B.C.¹⁴. Stone was extensively used, along with brick, in the construction of the stupas and other structures at this site. The extensive use of stone may have been influenced by the local availability of the material.

An inscription found inside the garbhagriha of the Mulasthanesvara temple led some scholars to suggest A.D. 1193 as the date of its foundation¹⁵. However, the inscription is considerably damaged and does not explicitly mention the date of construction. Moreover, the architectural form of the temple does not support this date.

The Telugu Cholas of Pottapi, who were among the feudatories of the Imperial Cholas in the south, may not have preferred such a small and relatively modest structure for their headquarters, particularly when they had constructed a tall and impressive gopura gateway for the Saumyanathaswami temple at Nandalur. On the basis of these architectural and historical considerations, the Mulasthanesvara temple was probably constructed around the second century A.D. It appears to have undergone renovation during the last quarter of the twelfth century A.D., associated with Siddharasa,

whose name is mentioned in the inscription found inside the temple.

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