

SIMRĀONGARĪH

The Forgotten City and Its Art

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SimrāongarĪh was the ancient capital of the Tīrhut kingdom; situated in the eastern Tarai, it was founded in 1097 by King Nānyadeva who, according to local history, originally came from Karṇāṭaka. The southern origins of the Tīrhut clan (in Sanskrit, Mithilā) can perhaps be historically explained by the conquests effected in the South of India by the Cālukya; it is, in fact, possible that the kings of said dynasty paid intrepid mercenaries from Karṇāṭaka in order to continue their expansionist politics in the northern regions; this might have led to the formation of small states, such as that of the forementioned Tīrhut and of the Sena in Bengal which, with time, appears to have become independent of the central power (Petech, 1984:55-58).

Little is known for certain of the history of SimrāongarĪh; the names of monarchs and of a few important ministers have become known through Nepalese, Indian and Moslem chronicles and inscriptions (Petech, 1962:13-18; Lévi, 1905 II: 180 and ff.; Regmi, 1965 III:35). The son of Nānyadeva seems to have been called Gaṅgadeva or Gāṅgeyadeva, in his turn succeeded by Nānyadeva who suffered the first attacks by the Moslems. He was succeeded by Rāmasiṃha, renowned for his patronage and love of Sanskrit literature. Rāmasiṃha tried, without success, to invade Nepal in 1244; it seems, instead, that he was taken prisoner by the governor of Bihar. Tradition ascribes various names as his successor, among which that of Vīrasīṃha, followed by Rāmasiṃha the Second, then Sakrasīṃha or Śaktisīṃha who was defeated by Alā-ud-dīn Khaljī, becoming his vassal or his ally to the point of taking part in the conquest of the fort of Rantambhor in Rajasthan (Petech 1962: Appendix I).

The destruction of the kingdom and of its capital was wrought during the reign of Harasiṃha by Muhammad Tughlaq in 1325.

The king, his wife and a few ministers managed to flee into the Tarai forests where, according to tradition, Harasiṃha died. His widow and their son sought refuge in the kingdom of Bhatgaon (Petech, 1984: 113-117).

The history of the dynasty would seem to finish here; but the 17th century Malla kings, such as Pratāpamalla and Siddhinarasiṃhamalla declared themselves descendants of the Tīrhuts, narrating the story of Jagatsīṃha, Harisiṃha's heir, who had become the lover of Nāyakadevī, the widow princess of Bhatgaon.

Among the witnesses who adhere to this tradition, which has greatly occupied historians, is Father Cassiano (in the world Giovanni Belligatti), an Italian Capuchin missionary from Macerata. Father Cassiano visited

Nepal many times between 1739 and 1754, working in the Italian mission which were in that country from the beginning of the 17th century. The priest, an attentive observer of local usage and custom, offered much information about the traditions of the nation, including abundant historical references in his *Giornale* (Newspaper).

This interesting manuscript, forgotten for a lengthy period, was finally published in Florence in 1902 by A. Magnaghi under the title *Unpublished Relation of a Trip to Tibet by P. Cassiano Beligatti of Macerata*. Subsequently it was republished by L. Petech in *Italian Missionaries in Tibet and Nepal, Il Nuovo Ramusio*, 4 vol., Rome 1952-53, II, pp. 3-142.

In his *Giornale* the missionary describes his trip from Patna to Kathmandu in detail; to effect said voyage it was necessary to cross the Tarai forests and he was struck by the ruins of what seemed to have been a great city. He describes it as follows:

We saw various ancient ruins in different sites and some were obviously the remains of important buildings. I could not understand, how in a wood so vast, whose age-old trees showed its ancient origins, there could have existed constructions of a certain consideration. During the following years, when I made my abode in Nepal, I inquired about those ruins. I was assured by many Nepalese from Batgao that said ruins were small vestiges of the famous and very ancient city of Scimangada, from whence came their kings, and which could not be approached if not after having circled around and around it for approximately a month, the city being situated in the centre of a labyrinth closed by high walls, a labyrinth with only one entrance, and having found the right path, before arriving to the city one had to pass under four forts, which were distributed equidistant along the way within the walls of the labyrinth, each wall distant from the next 2 kos, i.e., 2 miles, and the walls which were extremely high were also proportionately thick. Between one wall and another there were delightful fields and small creeks which watered them.

(Petech, 1952-53: IV:12-13).

Father Cassiano also published a drawing of the city walls which he declared to have reproduced from a carved stone slab situated in the palace of Bhatgaon (fig. 1); the design shows a labyrinth of the type consisting in a single winding path leading from the outside to the inside (Kern, 1981:93-95; 166-218; Santarcangeli, 1984; Kerényi, 1983). It is formed by seven concentric circumvolutions and is defended by four towers, each with four ramparts at its angles; such defense posts could be reached only one at a time as one gradually travelled along the long road which finally finished in the city, itself fortified by rhomboidal walls with four ramparts (F in fig. 1).

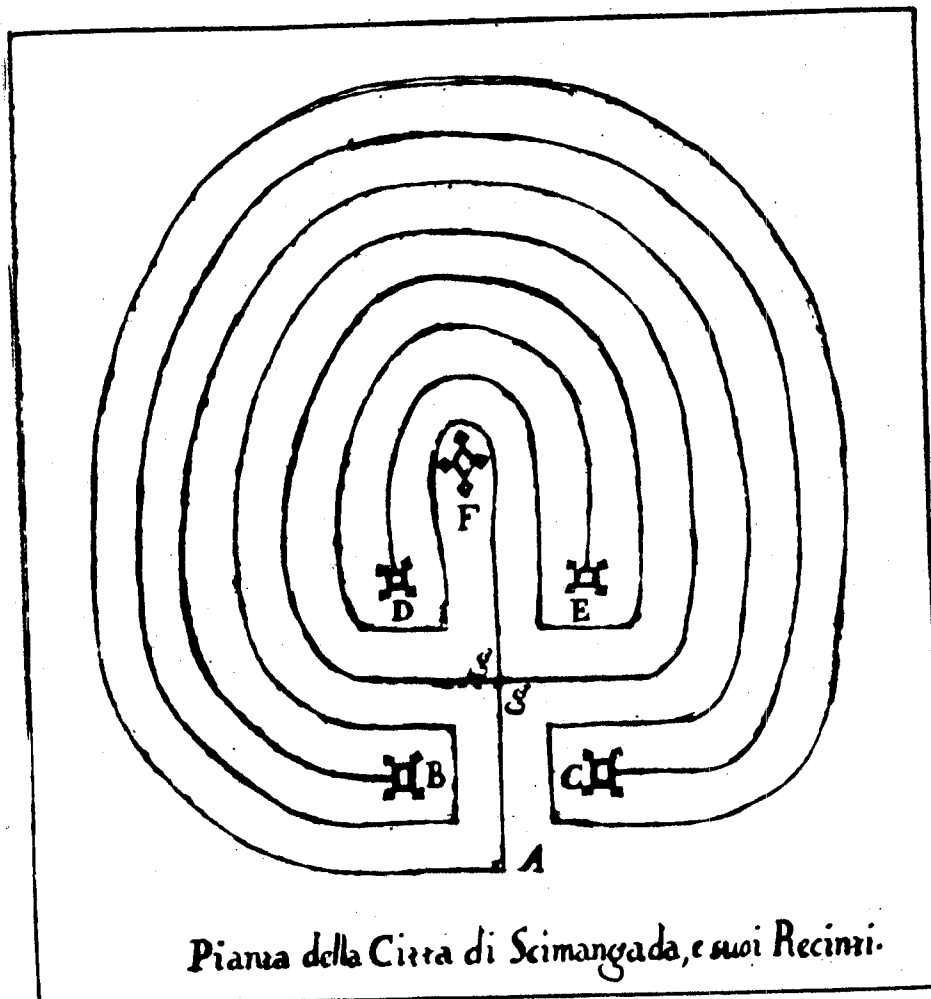


Fig. 1.

The priest also narrates a version of the fall of Simrāongarh based on stories that he solicited while he lived in Nepal but which he admits are not very credible:

The produce grown on the land inside the walls was sufficient to feed the numerous inhabitants who were ruled by a great King with a still strong dominion outside the city walls, where one of his prime ministers governed in his name. One of these governors, considering himself slighted by his king, swore to avenge the wrong by betraying his country and delivering it to the Moslems; hence, having come to an agreement with the Emperor, he captured the entrance of the labyrinth with a strong army and, having forced the opposite wall and the lateral one, entered the city and massacred its citizens before anyone could sound the alarm. Some citizens managed to flee through the breach opened by the enemy.

Among these was a son of the king who fled to Nepal, where he eventually settled, crushing the natural king and seizing the kingdom. In brief, such was the information repeatedly offered me in Nepal about the city of Scimangada where, in the king's palace of Batgao, is the map of said city carved in stone exactly as I have here so roughly copied it.

(Petech, 1952-53 IV:13).

Our search, both in Bhatgaon and in Kathmandu, to trace the carved stone showing the reproduction of the labyrinth, as seen by the Capuchin father, has so far been unsuccessful.

The missionary also mentions silver coins minted by "an ancient king of Batgao" which contain "hieroglyphics" on one side and the map of Sciamangada on the other, and he explains how even at that time the coins were very rare and how the few still in existence were sold very dearly (Petech, 1952-53: II:13).

There is little historical evidence concerning the city of Simrāongarh before and after Father Cassiano's visit and none is available to verify his description of the form of the walls of the labyrinth.

The story of the Moslem historian Ferishtah (1552-1623) is of the early 17th century and tells of the capture of the Tirhut capital at the hands of Ghiyās-ud-dīn Tughlaq from Delhi: he describes the difficulties encountered by the armed enemy in crossing the thick forest which surrounded the city and of "seven ditches full of water and a high wall" (Briggs, 1829: II:i; 307).

It is, however, difficult to believe that the city had a defense system such as that described by the Capuchin priest.

In the first place, we must admit that in all of India there is no evidence of any construction fortified as a labyrinth. Generally, there are structures with more than one wall, but separated from the others and concentric, the terrain permitting, defended by ramparts of varying form which protrude directly from the walls, in which there are at least two entrances formed by corridors at 90° angles (Joshi, 1985; S. Toy, 1957, 1965; Dutt, 1925; Gutschow, 1977; Gutschow, 1975; Kölver, 1975; Slusser, 1982).

On the other hand, as a symbol the labyrinth has been widely known in the Western hemisphere as well as in India from ancient times, to signify an impenetrable way and therefore used, at times, as a perfect defensive plan. In different contexts the labyrinth assumes other meanings: as the apotropaic one, it indicates a difficult initial path, as a protective-magic symbol, it is used as a talisman or amulet or even as a tattoo (Cimino, forthcoming).

It is, therefore, possible to presume that the labyrinth form of the walls of Simrāongarh was the invention of a Malla king, who wanted to

depict the ancient capital of the family—from whom he considered himself a descendent—in an emblematic way, emphasizing its impregnability.

The few travellers who visited Simrāongarḥ after Father Cassiano speak, as he did, of the absolute ruin of the city. In 1835 the Englishman Hodgson commented on its state of abandon and the delapidation of its structures and mentioned the presence of numerous sculptures: "... many of them are much mutilated ...and are superior in sculpture to modern specimens of the art" (Hodgson, 1835: 121-124).

In 1958 Ballinger published a report containing photographs of various sculptures of Simrāongarḥ snapped in their natural location to document its state of desolation. "The few examples of sculptures and carvings selected to visually support the commentary serve as photographic documentation of the evidence on the surface at Simraongarḥ" (Ballinger, 1973:180-184). He identifies a reservoir (*Isrā pokarā*) and a temple dedicated to Hanūman in a large courtyard containing statues, already described by Hodgson more than a hundred years earlier.

The style of the sculptures, as deduced by the photographs, seems to be rather uniform, similar to that of the Pāla-Sena which must have strongly influenced it. The statues are carved from a dark stone (chlorite), probably coming from the hills about twenty-five miles north of the site and, as Ballinger says, they show "a consummate ability, and creative imagination in the treatment of symbolic mythology (Ballinger, 1973:183).

A survey conducted by the Department of Archaeology of Nepal in 1968 provides a brief summary of the present situation, with reference to some monuments, whose identification is in the recollection of the inhabitants of the small surrounding villages. In J.L. Sharma's report (1968) he identifies some sculptures which have been placed there and preserved in rather modern temples; more precisely, the statues of Sūrya, Hara Gaurī and Viṣṇu Ityād can be found within the enclosure of Kankālī Maṭh (built in 1916). Near the grave said to be of Bhairavrām bābākī, to the south of Kankālī Maṭh, there are four icons of Viṣṇu, one of Sūrya and others unidentified. At about one mile from the same temple (Maṭh) in the village of Hariharpur a statue of Viṣṇu with other sculptures has been found in a holy purification pool; and many antique statues have been found in the village of Amutaganj. Near the temple of Rāma, erected to the memory of Jang Bahādur from the name of Jāngmūktesvar Rāmamandir, three kilometers from Kankālī Maṭh, there is a mound where some ruins and the framework of the so-called "palace of Queen" (Ranivās) have been located.

The very delapidated defense walls, *coukidār*, which surround the site for eighteen kilometers are also mentioned, though no indication is given as to their form.

Awaiting a publication which contains all the sculptures of Simrāongarḥ still in place, we present three votive steles from this city (now in the Museum of Kathmandu) to demonstrate the importance of the

art treasure that the forgotten city still contains and the prestige that the Tirhut dynasty must have enjoyed, promoting the arts and arriving to such qualitative heights (fig. 2-3-4).

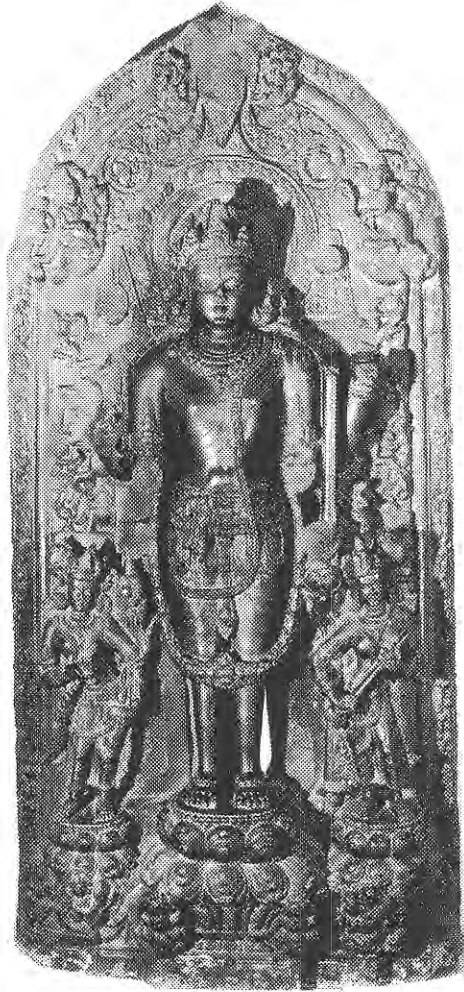


Fig. 2.

small waistline. The pointed chin, the wide-open eyes with heavy lids, the facial features in general, take on a more academic aspect resembling other examples of the 12th century (Banerjea, 1956: PL XLVII, 2; Lippe, 1970: fig. 40; Benerji, 1933: PL XVII d; Bhattasali, 1929; Plates XXXI, XXVI a-b).

Vishnu Nārāyana is standing on a lotus blossom (*padmapīṭha*); he has four arms but they are mutilated; the rear left hand probably held a

These steles are similar to the Pāla-Sena art. In the words of Banerjee, "The Sena have been constantly in contact with their northern neighbors and as a consequence cultural exchanges between the peoples took place in ample measure. This is to be seen in the sphere of art especially sculpture as well as their religious and social life. The influence in the field of sculptural art is noticed in the lengthening of the images though they did not lose their proportions, and in the tendency to over-ornament the figures. *Simrāongarh* in the Tarai area became the springboard and new centre of the artistic expression that gained ground under the impact of the Senas." (Banerjee, 1980:37).

The three sculptures in dark stone, well preserved and of remarkable beauty, represent Vishnu Nārāyana (150.5 x 81 cm.), Brahmā (76 x 47 cm.) and Simhāvāhini Durgā (107 x 56 cm.). The statues are adorned by numerous carved motifs of the late period (12th century); moreover, the lotus-shaped pedestals with their many rootstalks which decorate the base of the statues are typical of the areas of Bihar and North Bengal. The bodies of the personages have fuller torsos and hips than the images of the Pāla period and accentuate the

gadā since part of the stick is visible; one hand must have held a cakra and one a śaṅkha; the fourth must have been in varadā hasta.

On his head he has a narrow kirīṭa-makuṭa; from his left shoulder a long yajñopavīta falls to his thigh; he is decked in rich necklaces (hāra), his fore-arms covered in thick bracelets (kundaḷa) and with two gaiters (jālakā) at his ankles. Even the belt which swathes the light, short dothī has rich garland decorations. A light cloth is softly draped in a small ring close to the central buckle. A thick garland (vaijayantī-mālā) falls from shoulders to knees. Behind his head is the śiraścakra with two triangular elements flanking it, probably the schematic representation of a niche; this one in turn, is decorated on the outside by garlands of flowers which fall from high above, perhaps from a ruined Kirṭtimukha (an animal mask).

Two pairs of vidyādhara covered with garlands of flowers and hanging from clouds decorate the sides of the niche.

Flanking the god lower down there are two figures of śārdūla in a rampant position. This mythical animal with the lion's body symbolizes majesty in all its splendour which emerges from bestiality, represented by the dark form of the elephant underneath. Above another two vidyādhara spout from the mouths of two makara.

Lower down, there are two female divinities, standing on a lotus flower in tribhaṅga-hasta. The devī to the right of the god Lakṣmī, holds a fan and a small jar of ambrosia (amṛtaghaṭa) in one hand, while the other rests on her hip; around her left arm is furled the stem of a lotus blossom which rises to the height of the goddess's head, spreading open its corolla.



Fig. 3.

To the left of the god is Saravsatī with a musical instrument (*Vīṇā*) in her hands and a lotus blossom with its petals closed spouting from her shoulders.

At the feet of the god there are adoring figures among which a semi-nude *sādhu* with a long beard.



Fig. 4.

thighs holds up her light trousers, which are decorated with carved vegetable and geometric motifs. In her rear hands are a sword (*Khadga*) and a shield (*khētaka*), while in her front hands, it is probably a *trīśūla* with the terminal part erased.

In the background of the stele, in front of and behind the lion, are two skeletons. Up high there is a *kīrttimukha* with stylized leaves

There are many similarities with Pāla-Sena steles which are widely diffused. The iconographic and stylistic characteristics are typical of the Bihar production of the second half of the 12th century, especially the ornaments: the large belt, the pedestal and the pair of *vidyādhara* (Mishra, 1978: plates VI, 11-12; VII, 13; Picron, 1980: 282-302: figs. 11-12; 1985: 437-481; plts Xa, XIII 6; 1985: Fig 17; 1978: 57-97: Note 20).

The goddess Durgā (whose iconograph is rather rare) is represented riding a lion with a rich, ringed name held by a double ribbon (Banerjea, 1956 plate XLIII. 4.) On the upper part of the thigh and on one cheek there is a stylized decorative floral motif. The goddess herself is richly adorned with necklaces, earrings and bracelets both on her wrists and on her forearms. She has an elaborate head-dress from which hang numerous ornaments and a three-point crown; a wide belt which falls in festoons onto her

flowing from its open mouth. Another decoration of stylized leaves runs along all the outer edge of the stele. The entire image reposes on a great open-petaled lotus blossom.

The ornaments of the goddess are characteristics of the art of Bihar from the 11th century onward (Huntington, 1984: fig 74; Picron, 1985; 27: 7918). Particularly typical of this region is the complicated braided head-dress (Huntington, 1984: figs. 137-138; Picron, 1978; figs 71-72), the three-pointed crown and the big lotus flower, with the figure of two rhizomes which fall to decorate the base of the stele (Picron, 1978: fig. 70-72; Huntington, 1984: figs. 74-75, 80-84). Both the pedestal and the *kīrttimukha* can be compared to the production in the district of Madhubani to the south of Nepal.

The image of Brahmā, also quite rare (Picron, 1984: 93-99: figs. 5-6-10), is represented by three bearded and moustached heads with high hair styles (*jaṭā-makuṭa*). They are surrounded by a great halo containing two triangular elements at the lower extremities.

The four arms are mutilated. He is wearing a wide necklace, earrings, the *yajñōpavīta*, a short, light *dothī* decorated with pearls and a long garland which falls to his knees. He is standing on a lotus flower from whose main stem branch out other stems and flowers; these form an ornamental spiral motif inside which there are some adoring personages and a swan (*haṁsa*), the god's vehicle.

Two female divinities in *tribhaṅga-hasta* are also on lotus flowers; the figure on the right of the god holds a book (*pustaka*), while the one on the left holds a small flask and perhaps a flower; they probably represent the goddesses Sarasvatī and Sāvitrī.

A *gandharva* above and four ascetics—three of whom have their knees bound with a cloth which helps them remain a long time in a praying position—surround the main image.

The image also presents some typical iconographic elements of the Madhubani district—the extremely elaborate braided head-dress and the pedestal covered with rhizomes. The ornamental elements as well as the beard belongs to the 12th century. It can be seen how here Brahmā used the *vanamālā*, a typical ornament of Viṣṇu, as he had in other cases (Picron, 1984:95).

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