

## SIMRAONGARH REVISITED

A REPORT ON SOME OBSERVATIONS MADE AT THE RUINS OF THE FORMER CAPITAL OF  
MITHILA IN THE TERAJ OF NEPAL.

Thomas O. Ballinger  
*University of Oregon*

In March of 1958 this writer was afforded the opportunity of visiting and confirming an earlier report on the location and ruins of Simraongarh, former capital of the province of Mithila located in the Terai of Nepal. <sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to bring to the attention of interested scholars the condition of this ancient site as it stands in the mid-twentieth century. The few examples of sculpture and carving selected to support visually the commentary serve as photographic documentation of the evidence on the surface at Simraongarh. It is likely that this material, as well as the few other examples of stone carving that subsequently found their way into the Kathmandu and Patna Museums, are the "idols" mentioned by Hodgson in his earlier account:

"Some twenty idols, excavated from the ruins by pious labour of a Gosain, are made of stone, and are superior in sculpture to modern specimens of the art. Many of them are much mutilated and of those which are perfect, I had only time to observe that they bore the ordinary attributes of Puranic Brahmanism." <sup>2</sup>

The site lies fifteen miles to the south of the sub-Himalaya hill system. It is this lower range of the Himalaya that forms the southern boundary of the valley of Nepal, i. e. the Kathmandu valley. The geographical milieu of the Simraongarh area is a combination of dense growth and clearing with some cultivation adjacent to several small villages in the vicinity. This jungle area, known as the Terai, constitutes the

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1. This account is a revision of a paper presented on May 23, 1970, at the Pacific Northwest Art History Association Conference, University of California at Davis. The author wishes to express his gratitude to the following for their assistance in the preparation of this paper: Janet Gail Burkart, Librarian, School of Architecture and Allied Arts, University of Oregon; Professor Theodore Riccardi of Columbia University, who was good enough to edit and recommend appropriate changes; and finally, to Professor Clifford Jones, University of Pennsylvania, who made innumerable contributions in regard to the identification of deities in the Hindu pantheon.

2. Hodgson, Brian H., Account of a visit to the ruins of Simroun, once the capital of the Mithila province. *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol. IV., No. 39., Mar. 1835, pp. 121-124. (Reprinted in *Illustrations of the Religion of the Buddhists of the North*, Serampore, 1841, but not reprinted in the Trubner collection of 1872.)

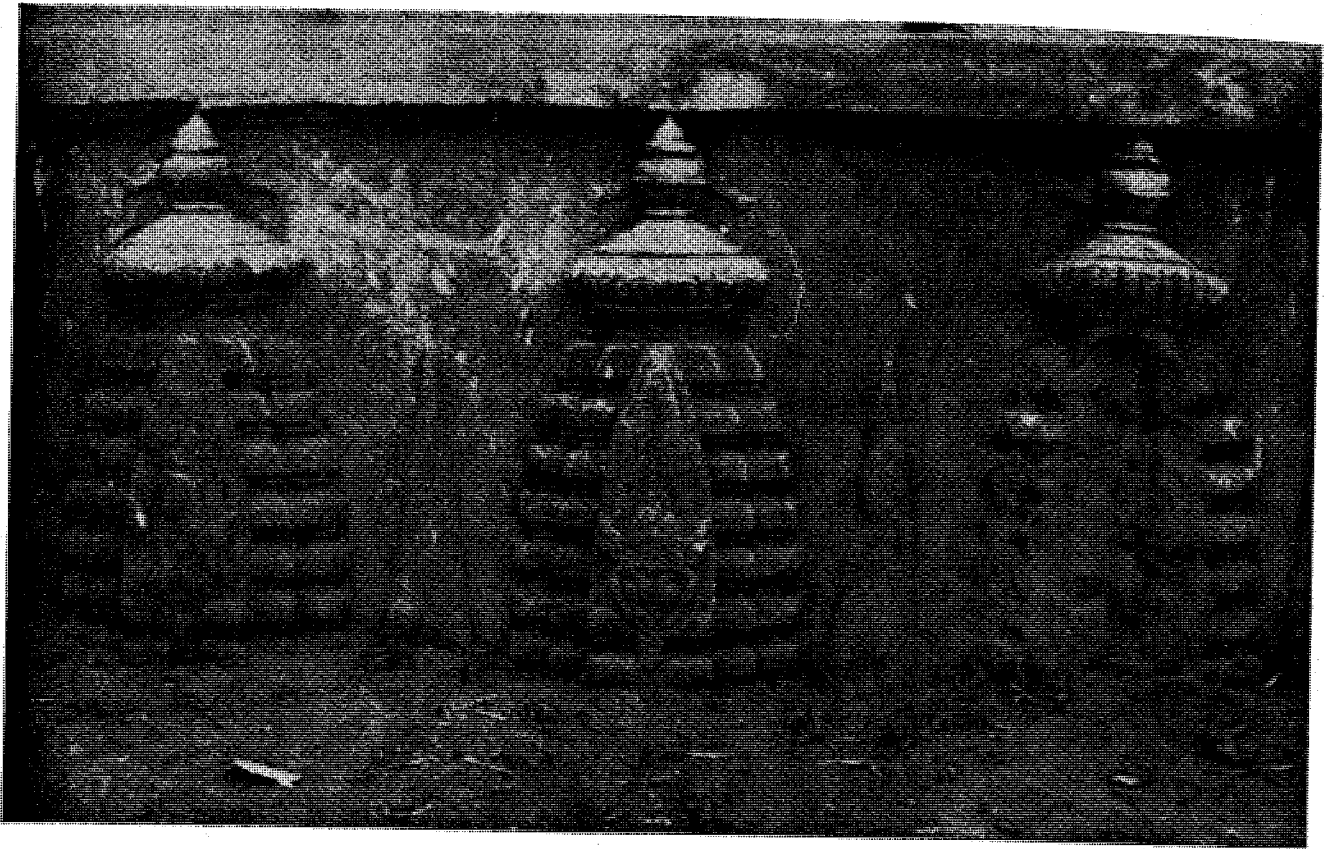


Fig. 1



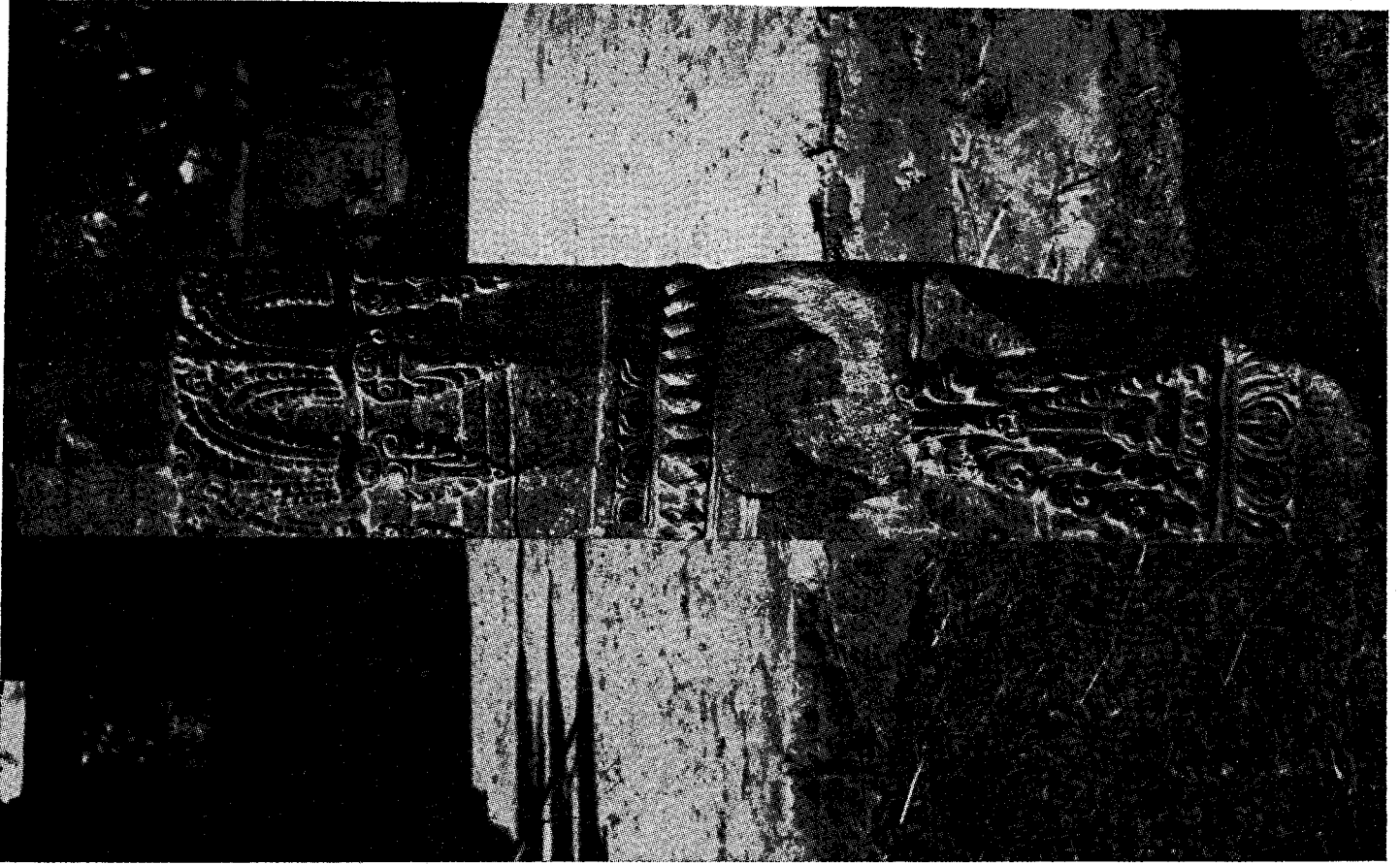


Fig. 4

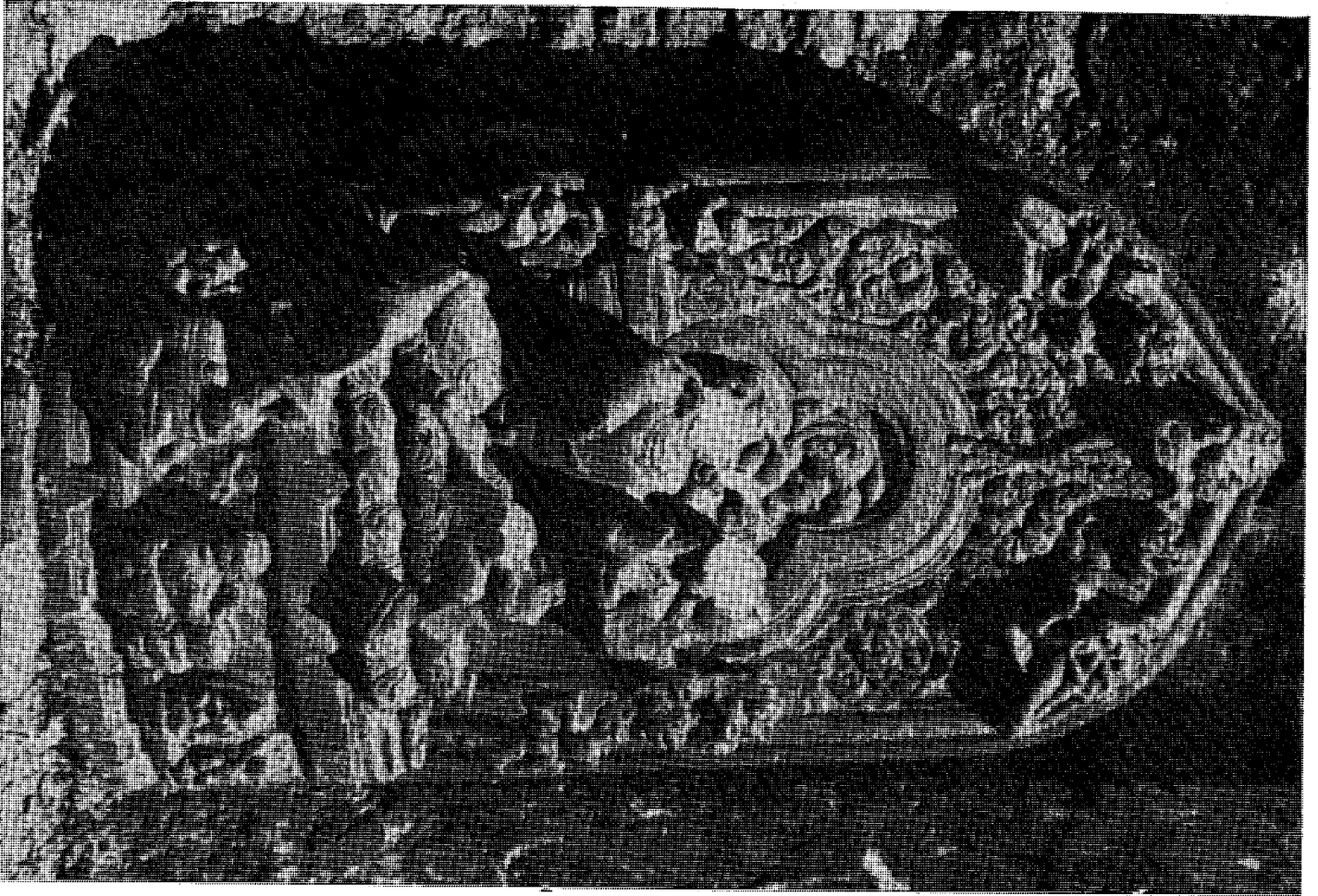


Fig. 6.



Fig. 5.

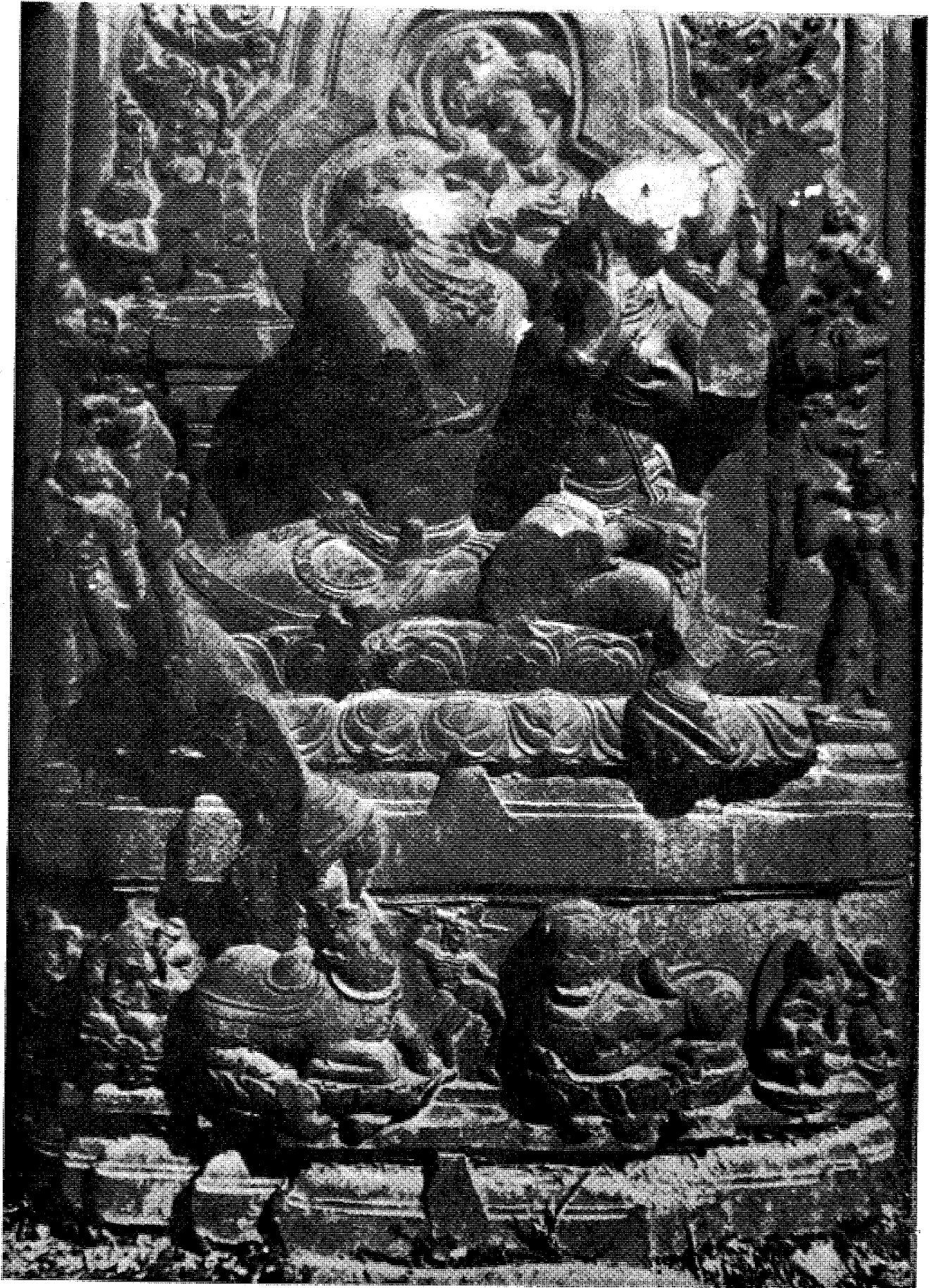


Fig. 7

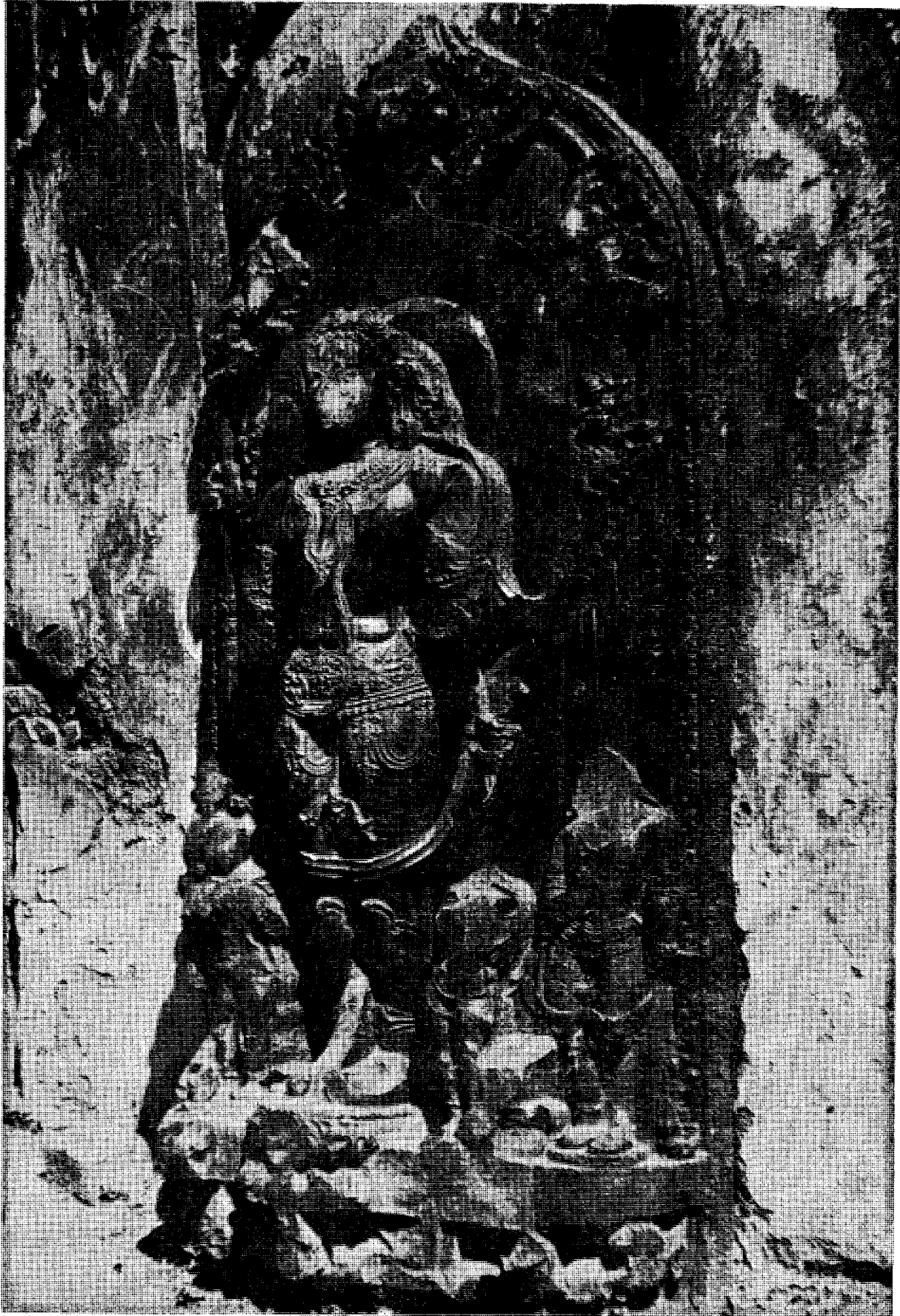


Fig. 8



Fig. 9

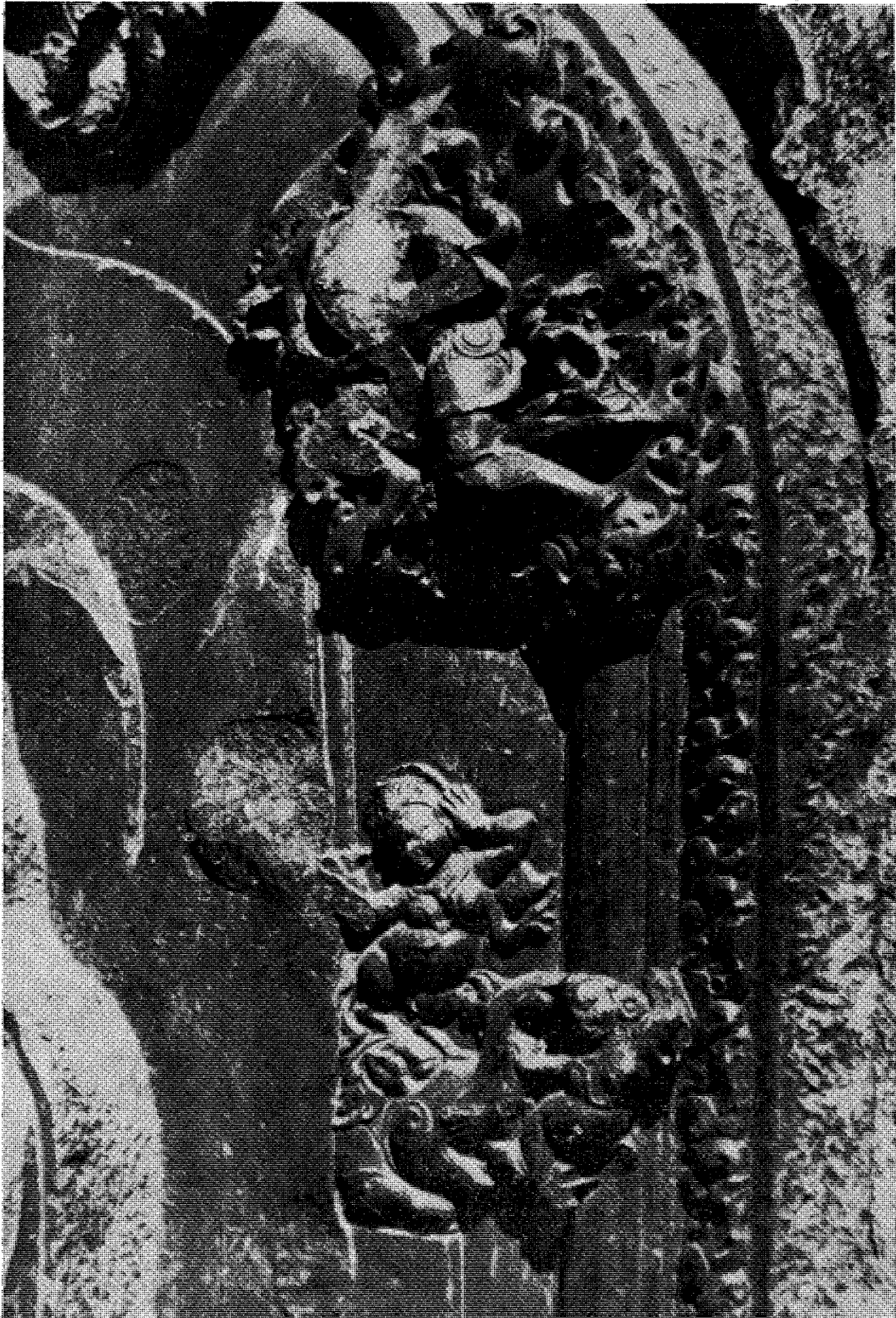


Fig. 10





**Fig. 11.**

northern terminal point of the vast Indian plain north of the Ganges River. For many centuries the inhospitable environment of the Terai has served as a successful barrier against invaders from the south.

In regard to the founding of and the eventual destruction of Simraongarh, historical accounts differ.<sup>3</sup> It is well within reason, however, to use the first half of the twelfth century as the time when Naya Deva established the kingdom. Some two hundred years later King Hara Singha Deva reigned as sovereign. Dhana Bajra Bajracharya, in *Itihas Samsodhan*, offers a detailed account of this period.<sup>4</sup> It is almost certain that prior to the Bengali campaign of 1381 the commander of the Muslim forces, Ghazi Malik Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq, after assassinating the Sultan of Delhi (1377 A. D.) swept into Tirhut and the Simraongarh area with the intent of total destruction of all remaining Buddhist and Hindu culture. The facial mutilation of all deities found on the stone carving is testimony to such zeal.

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3. Petech, Luciano, *Mediaeval History of Nepal*. (c. 750-1480) Serie Orientale Roma, Materials for the Study of Nepalese History and Culture. Vol. X. Istituto Italiano Per Il Medio Ed Estremo Oriente, 1958, Rome. p.52.

4. Bajracharya, Dhana Bajra, "Some Thoughts on the Tirhut, i. e. Hara Singha Deva's Invasion of the Nepal Valley", No. 7 (No. 39 in the series *Itihas-Samsodhan Corrections of History*.) Translated from Nepali by Bhuwan Lal Joshi: "In the first half of the twelfth century (Vikram era) Nānya Deva had established a kingdom at Simraongarh of Tirhut in the eastern Terai of Nepal. These Tirhutiyas of Simraongarh used to invade the Nepal valley periodically whenever they felt that the internal conditions in the valley from Tirhut [sic] (original in Sanskrit). "Again in the Magha of N. E. 411 the Tirhutiyas entered" (Gopal Raj Vamsavali.) Like the Khas and the Moslems of an earlier period they could not gain a foothold in the valley. (The invasion of the Khas and the Moslems will be considered in a separate publication.) In the first half of the fourteenth century Vikram, King Hara Singha Deva, descended from Nānya Deva, was reigning at Simraongarh. After assassinating the Sultan of Delhi, Hushro, in V. E. 1377, the commander Ghazi Malik Ghiyasuddin Tughalak had ascended the throne in Delhi. He had served for a long period (?) in the army of Allaudin. Towards the end of his reign Ghiyasuddin Tughalak invaded Bengal in V. E. 1381. He returned by way of Tirhut. Therefore, a battle took place between Hara Singha Deva and Ghiyasuddin Tughalak. When the army of Ghiyasuddin destroyed Simraongarh, Hari Singha Deva had to flee to the mountains. He entered the hilly regions of Nepal."

(Note: No editing to or of the above translation has been undertaken by the author.)

Hodgson in his publication refers to two Hindu-Sanskrit ślokas which state that Simraongarh was founded in 1097 A. D. by Nanyupa Deva, and that six kings reigned there until 1322 A. D., i. e. (1) Nanyupa; (2) Ganga (3) Nara Sinha (4) Rama Singha

Based upon the information in the earlier report (Hodgson), our party was able to locate and identify the site.<sup>5</sup> On the crest of the highest hill, located at the southwest corner of the area, we found a large courtyard surrounding a Hindu temple dedicated to Hanuman. In the courtyard, surface material included several examples of stone plinth and foundation fragments with relief carving. Fig. 1 shows the upper part of early Indian *śikhara* temple forms carved on such a base. In the center of each form is a *garuḍa*, vehicle of Vishnu. The lower section of the carving is buried beneath the soil. Other stone fragments found on the surface showed animal and flower motifs. An example of this is found in Fig. 2. An eight-petal flower form serves as a design beneath a deep relief profile carving on a lion figure. Behind the lion figure is the head of a *makara*, a mythological creature associated with water and watering places (*praṇāli*) in Nepal. Another sample of the courtyard material is a damaged stone carving of what seems to be an eight-armed manifestation of Mahiṣāsūramardini.

Prior to a consideration of the major sculpture we located and photographed, it may be of interest to the reader to learn that our party made some effort to validate certain aspects of Hodgson's report. We found the *Isrā* tank (*pokrā*) to be still intact and our measurements (paces) proved to be approximately the same as the previous findings indicated.<sup>6</sup> Rectangular in shape, the inner and base walls of the tank appeared to be of a fine, high-fired brick. The tank seems to have suffered some deterioration since the visit by Hodgson. This is particularly noticeable on the finishing edges above the current water level where loose bricks have fallen down into the tank. The causeway referred to in the early observations was almost indistinguishable. Hodgson did not identify the precise location of this "50 to 60 yard area" and we presumed it to be the east-west axis leading past a few small temples and down to the edge of the *Isrā pokrā*.

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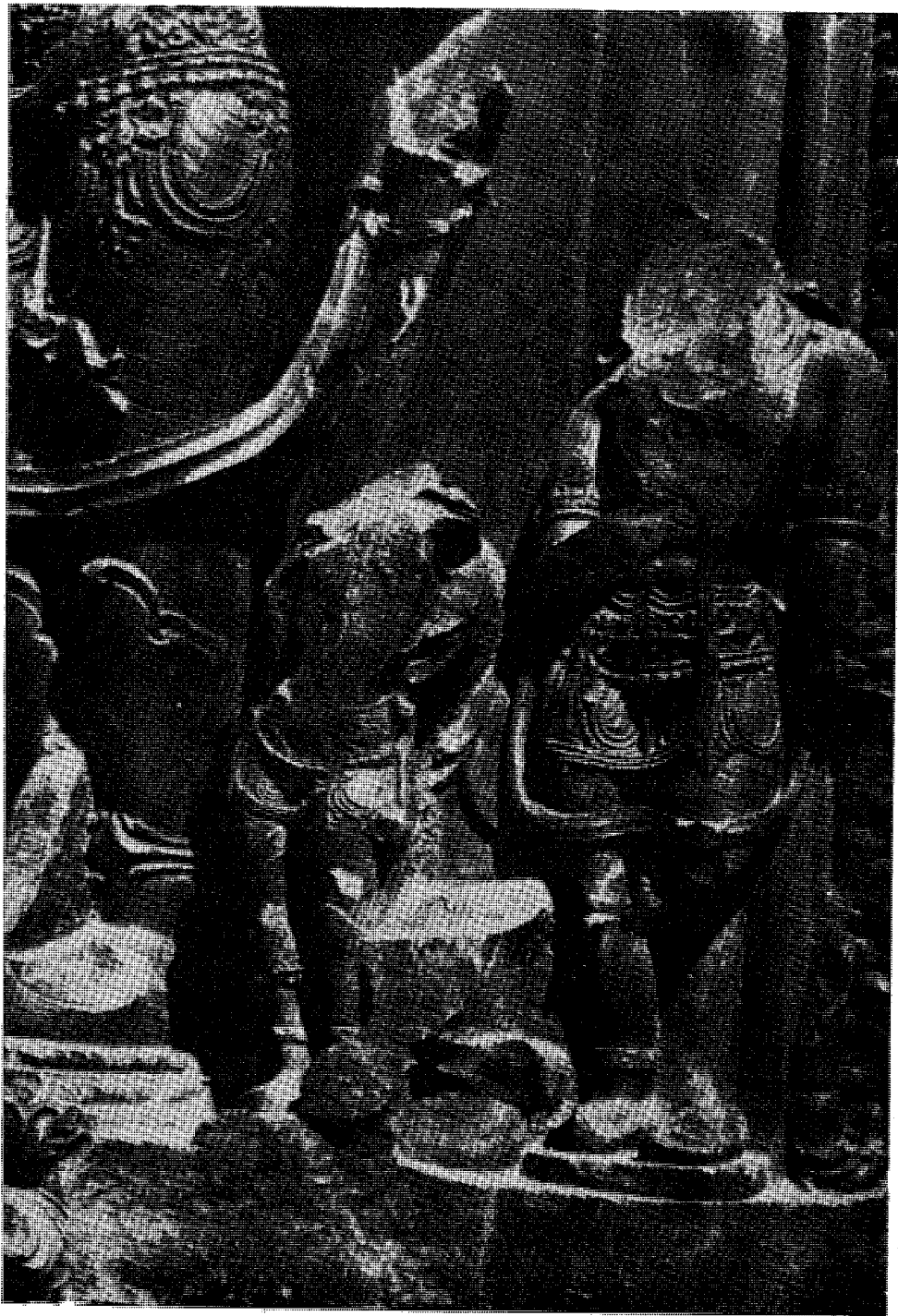
(5) Sakti Sinha (6) Hari Sinha. All of the above had the cognomen Dēva. The Moslem annals give 1323 as the date of the destruction by Toglak Shah. (Peteck in his *Mediaeval History of Nepal* p. 112, corrects previous dates attributed to the above event to read December 14, 1325,

5. The survey party consisted of Purna Harsha Bajracharya, Nepalese authority on Buddhist culture, Werner Jacobson, Danish archaeologist and photographer, and the author's wife, Joy Ballinger.

6. Approximately 210 paces on the north-south ends of the tank, 333 paces (Hodgson) vs 310 paces (Ballinger) on the east-west lateral. Continued deterioration since the Hodgson report could account for this variable. In the Hodgson article he quotes, "After the war with Nepal, Lt. Boileau, I think, surveyed these ruins and drew up a plan of them. What is become of it I know not." Dr. Leo Rose of the University of California has made an extensive search for the Boileau survey but to date it remains lost.



Fig, 12



**Fig. 13**

A 5' x 1'  $\frac{1}{2}$ " stone column was found lying face down along the edge of the causeway where it was serving as a stepping stone (Fig. 4). It was finely carved on three sides, the back being rough-hewn stone and reminiscent of earlier examples found on the columns in Buddhist caves in central India. Such carving was to eventually find its way north into the valley of Nepal where at some later date Newar artisans would use a modified design on both wood and stone façades and porticos of Buddhist and Hindu ecclesiastical architecture. It is of interest to note that to date no stone inscriptions have been reported found on the site.

As reported in the earlier account the hard, black stone material (chlorite) found on the site was not indigenous to the immediate area. It must have been quarried and hauled down from the second range of foothills, some 25 miles distant to the north.

In the courtyard temple compound we found a stone fragment depicting a heraldic griffin with a seated rider astride its back (Fig. 5). The griffin stands upon its hind legs over the prostrate form of an elephant. This is the rampant lion configuration which has as its prototype identical examples adorning the façades of *Orissan* temple structures in southeastern India. In depicting various forms of this familiar leogryph motif the *Orissan* sculptor shows (as did the carvers of the *Pala* and *Sena* periods) a consummate ability and creative imagination in the treatment of symbolic mythology. The conception of the lion habitually preying on the elephant occurs in the *Devī-Purāṇa*, a literary contribution believed to have been written as early as the 7th century but no later than the 9th century A. D.

An 11th century carving of *Shiva* and *Pārvati*, as *Uma-maheshvara*, has also suffered extensive damage to both faces and heads of the deities (Fig. 6). This stele in high relief shows a *kirtimukha* at the peak. The two central figures are seated in the *lalitasana* posture on a lotus base resting on a pedestal. Above them *apsaras* carry garlands. Below the architectural profiles of the pedestal (*saptaratha*, Fig. 7-detail) we find, reading right to left, an attendant or a devotee, *Uma's* lion followed by a skeletal *Chamunda* (or *śrṅgi* ?) the dreaded aspect of the goddess; *Shiva's* bull *Nandi*; and on the far left several unidentified figures.

The largest stone carving we located was a chlorite carving of *Sūrya*, the sun god (Fig. 8). An outstanding example of the craftsmanship and skill of the artisans may be found in the treatment of the girdle on the central figure (Fig. 9). Its high relief complements the flesh and muscle structure of both stomach and rib cage. The two smaller attendant figures which have suffered much mutilation are probably *Usa* and *Sandhya*. The entire stele is crowned with a *kirtimukha* (Fig. 8). Above and to the right are celestial beings (*vidyadhara-s* *apasaras*- Fig. 10). One of these flying angels appears to be emerging from the mouth of a *makara* (Fig. 11).

The final example of sculpture our party located was a life-size stone head and upper torso of a male *nāga* deity resplendent in necklace, bracelets, epaulets and moustache. His head is crowned with coras and the carving is a form of *Shiva* (Fig. 12).

In conclusion, it is of interest to note the comments of Heinrich Zimmer, the distinguished scholar of Indian art and culture. In referring to the general geographical area where *Simraongarh*, the former capital of Mithila, lay in ruins in the Nepalese Terai, Zimmer makes the following observations:

“In this introductory chapter I shall not enumerate all the schools of Hindu art that carried forward and transformed the heritage of the Gupta period, but shall indicate only two more outstanding styles and close with a glimpse of Indian influence abroad. One of the most remarkable inflections of the Gupta tradition was in Bengal under the Pāla and Sena dynasties (c. 730-1250 A. D. ) where a style developed of a peculiarly rich, sweet flavor. The works were important historically because of Bengal’s geographical position between Nepal and Tibet in the north, and Java, with its famous centers of Buddhist learning, in the southeast. Bengal inspired to a remarkable degree both the arts and the philosophies of these two realms.”<sup>7</sup>

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7. Zimmer, Heinrich, *The Art of Indian Asia*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1955, pp. 15-16.