

The Stepwell of Sathamba (Gujarat) and its Sculptures Scenes of Dance and Music*

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The *Vishvakarma Vastushastra*, a South Indian text elaborating the principles of architecture and sculpture, is one of the few texts of this kind which give a more or less detailed description of what a stepwell should look like. It says:

- v. 1 "Having examined where there is (underground) flow of sweet water, (which is) continuous, there one should build a stepwell (*vapi*), or well (*kupa*), as it is approved.
- v. 2 Generally it is constructed quadrangular, circular, or oblong,
- v. 6 With or without pillars, the supporting is done with skill. The construction is fixed together firmly. It is beautiful, because of pillars and stairs.
- v. 7 An entrance hall is attached and doors (niches) and so on are there. If the stepwell is circular, then the staircase is in the formation of the coils of a snake. It should be constructed firmly. (If not circular), then (it should be constructed) in a straight staircase.
- v. 9 At the rim there should be a device for pulling up water, surrounded by a courtyard, so the wise one (says). There should be sculptures of gods and ornamentation in the form of *kinnara* at the entrances and while approaching the (water-) level for a bath."¹

These lines do not give us a clear picture of what a stepwell (*vapi*) is like structurally, nor do they say how it is to be constructed. The information given is about the variation of form and the necessity for a firm construction: for example, that the stepwell can be round, rectangular or quadrangular, or that the round variety has stairs coiled like a snake, and that the other variety has a straight staircase (i.e. a descending corridor). However, the lines, which mention that a stepwell should be adorned with pillars, niches, sculptures and other types of ornamentation, are not found in other *shilpa* texts and are consequently of special interest. The commentary to the last paragraph explains: ". . . one should make exciting images of *kinnara*, *mithuna* and so on; intended is the installation of idols (*bimba-sthapana*) of gods for *punya* and *darshana*, that is of Varuna and other gods."²

Stepwells are a unique kind of well-monument. Specially in the region of Gujarat, they developed into splendid and elaborate monuments with intricate carvings at the side-walls, galleries, balconies, entrance hall, pillars and niches. Neither in structure nor in ornamentation do they lag behind the classical temples of the respective region and century. The earliest structurally built stepwells of Gujarat are found from the sixth/seventh centuries at Dhank (Saurashtra) and the tradition continues unbroken through the successive centuries even upto the twentieth century. Around 1935, the seemingly last stepwell was built by the former ruler of Wankaner (Saurashtra) out of sandstone and marble.

Stepwells are found all over Gujarat, more frequently in Northern and Central Gujarat and in Saurashtra. In these regions a number of stepwells are found which are (in their monumentality) temple-like structures, whereas in Kutch and the bordering areas of Gujarat, the stepwells are more or less plain buildings of a merely utilitarian importance.

Stepwells are basically underground monuments. Their main architectural elements are the descending corridor and the shaft of the well. The length of the descending corridor and the depth of the well-shaft depend on how deep the underground water-level is. The descending corridor is, in its full length, open to the sky on top and is intercepted by a number of pavilion-constructions (*kuta*) which structurally bar against the thrusts of the side-walls. These *kuta* also give spacious, cool and shady platforms. In their primary function, stepwells are suppliers of water for households, irrigation and travelling caravans. The social aspect of a stepwell, however, cannot be overlooked: the women of the village used to go to wells and stepwells to fetch water, wash clothes and utensils, and, often, to chat and gossip; men, even today, try to escape the heat of the day, especially in summer, by resting in the cool and airy underground spaces in the various storeys and in the pavilions and galleries. It could be that because of this twofold reason, that is the utilitarian and social function of a stepwell, it was beautifully carved and ornamented on the pillars, adorned with sculptures in the niches of the side-walls, supplied with carved backrests (*kakshasana*) on the stone-benches and relief work all around. In a sense, stepwells were also religious buildings. In an area, which is hot and arid, almost throughout the year, water becomes such a rare, essential and life-giving commodity that it is treated with special veneration; it is preserved and utilised with tremendous care. Quite often stepwells are connected with a temple, or a small shrine is built inside the stepwell. This shrine is either specially built on a platform inside the well, or a niche in the side-wall is made into the small shrine. In some stepwells, for example the Mata Bhavani stepwell in Ahmedabad and the Sindhvai Mata stepwell in Patan, North Gujarat, a priest attends day and night to the shrine in the stepwell and performs the offering for the worshippers. It is often the case even today in the villages and the fact is also mentioned, in earlier literary sources,³ that girls and women go to a stepwell to make offerings to the goddess residing in the stepwell, mainly to obtain progeny, milk of the cows, etc.

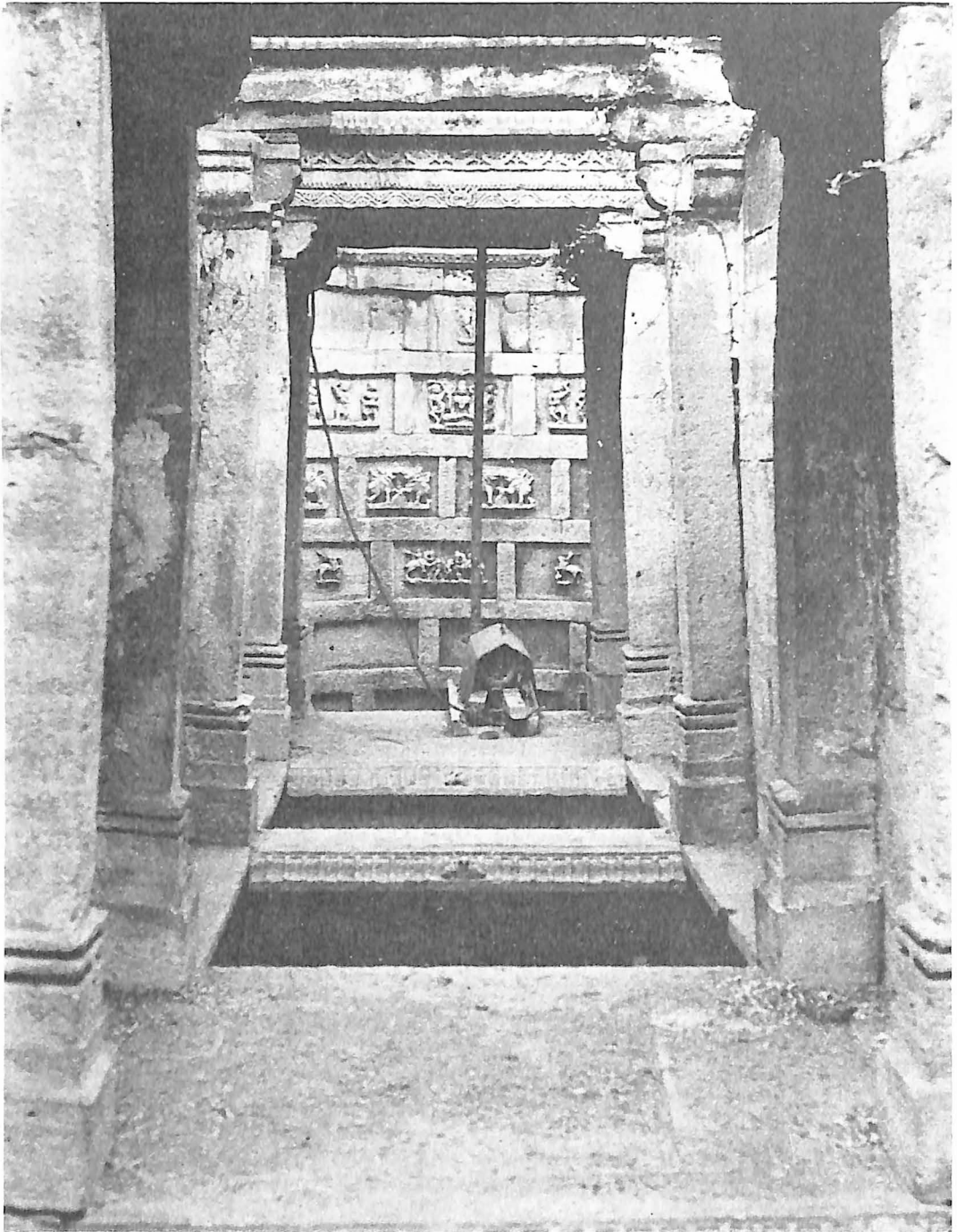
These religious implications might account for the rich and skilful ornamentation of a stepwell. The stepwell with by far the most exquisite and outstanding sculptures is Rani ni Vav in Patan (North Gujarat). Unfortunately, this stepwell is in a rather dilapidated condition. Nevertheless, from the viewpoint of sculptural beauty and variety, this stepwell is one of the most pleasing monuments, not only of Gujarat, but probably of India. Today are preserved only the magnificently sculptured well-shaft, some pillars and platforms and the entrance staircase at the other far end. But one can well imagine what a beautiful royal building this stepwell must have been. It was patronised by Queen Udayamati, the wife of Bhimadeva, the first powerful Chaulukya overlord of Northern Gujarat and mother of Karnadeva who rose to wield tremendous power. Around the same time and only 30 km away

from the then Chaulukya capital of Patan, the famous Sun Temple of Modhera was built adjacent to a square tank with magnificent sculptures. The sculptures in Rani ni Vav are still intact, although the lower portions are covered by water for many months in the year. They show figures of deities with their consorts, like Brahma and Brahmani, Shiva and Parvati, Bhairava and Kalika, Vishnu and Lakshmi; panels of *saptamatrka*, and the *ashtadikpala*; *surasundari-s* or *apsara-s* and other girls engaged in dance and music and engrossed in their toilet, or other human activities; and erotic scenes.

As in this Rani ni Vav, the sculptures in the stepwell of Sathamba are of a special interest because of two reasons: their location and their iconography. In this stepwell, too, sculptures in low relief adorn the wall of the well in various panels. Generally, in a stepwell, the sculptures are located in the niches in the side-walls, at the *rajasenaka* of the top pavilions and in the galleries, at the pediment of the entrance-pavilions, and around the pillars. Excepting these two mentioned stepwells, only the stepwell at Khedbrahma, situated opposite the famous Brahma temple, has the major part of its sculptural ornamentation around the well-wall, where a row of shrines is carved in low relief. It is obvious that, inside each shrine, a figure of a deity was installed earlier, because today only the empty niches are to be seen. Most stepwells have only small niches, with figures of Ganesha or other auspicious gods, tiny figures of fish, tortoise, snake, or horizontal panels with *hamsa*, peacocks, elephants, floral motifs and geometrical designs adorning the well-wall.

The village of Sathamba is situated in the Bayad *taluka* of the Sabarkantha district. As is often the case, the stepwell is located in the middle of the village at the main cross-road. In former times such a cross-road was the central site for social and mercantile activities. The presence of a stepwell offered additional benefit and recreation for the visiting people. There was a time when Sathamba was the capital of a small Rajput state belonging to the Idar constituency, like for example, Modasa and Lunavada.⁴ It probably never rose to any political or strategic importance, as major historical accounts are silent about this spot. However, there is a rather significant art-historical site of ruins nearby, which once upon a time must have been a rather splendid complex of temples and other structures. What remains of this complex at Kaleshvari ni Nal (in the Lunavada *taluka*) are two stepwells with the most exquisite panels of *saptamatrka*, *dashavatara*, *navagraha* and *Vishnu sheshashayin*, two temples and a *kunda* on the slope of the hill, and ruins of about three more temples on the summit of the hill. This goes to prove that the area around Sathamba was of some historical and art-historical importance, at least locally, if not politically, in the region as a whole.

The stepwell of Sathamba (Illus. 1) is of the *nanda* type with three *kuta* and one intermediate framework between *kuta* 2 and 3. In length the whole structure is around 30 m., and the inner width of the stepped corridor is 2.40 m. The pilasters are of absolutely plain *ruchaka* type, being only square at the base, shaft, *bharani* and capital. The sole decoration on the plain surface is a double cornice between the base and the shaft and a simple



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double volute bracket. A ribbed projection (*chadya*), with a pair of *hamsa* in its centre, protects the pavilions and the top platforms. The niche at the entrance staircase is framed with an elaborately carved *parikara* which has a pendant-like ornamentation at the bottom lintel, carved pilasters and a

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ribbed *chadya* with a pair of *hamsa* in the centre. The pyramidal pediment of *jali* work crowns the niche, which has sculptures of Ganesha and Bhairava, both in *dvibhanga* posture and having four arms with their respective identifying objects.



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The well is the most beautiful and profusely ornamented part in this stepwell (Illus. 2). Its wall rises in alternate layers of huge stone-blocks and narrow stone-plates, creating a projecting horizontal separation between the layers. The stone-blocks are separated from each other by vertical stone-slabs. The rim of the well is indicated by a horizontal projection carved with a row of pendants and a parapet-wall over it with the same pendant-like ornamentation. The stone-blocks in five rows, which are placed towards the middle of the entire depth of the well, bear the sculptures in low relief.

The sculptures with scenes of dance and music are arranged in one horizontal line of nine panels, four of which are placed on either side of the central panel with a figure of Goddess Lakshmi (Illus. 3). All these nine panels are of equal size, about 50 cm long and 30 cm high, and with a similar composition of three figures each. Goddess Lakshmi, flanked by two female flywhisk-bearers, is seated in a full *padmasana* pose on a low, flat stool held up by the nine pots which could symbolise the concept of *navanidhi*, nine-fold wealth. Her four hands carry the usual identifying emblems. The upper hands have two lotuses formed as vegetative creepers, very similar to those of the *chauri*-bearer from the Hastisala of Vimala Vasahi, Delvada, Mt. Abu.⁵ The lower left has an ewer and the lower right a rosary (*akshamala*). Her heavy breasts are adorned with a flower-garland and dominate over the extremely slim waist covered by an ornamental garment. Her face bears a subdued, serene smile and the loveliness of her face is accentuated

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by the almond-shaped eyes, even eyebrows and delicately curved lips as prescribed by the *Vishnudharmottarapurana* for heavenly beings. Long ears, ending in round earrings, and a crown made up of horizontal tapering tiers encircle her face. A similar type of crown is also met with in the sculpture of a many-armed goddess found in Dabhoi, probably belonging to the twelfth century.⁶ The two *chamaradharini*, although not dancing figures as such, stand in poses clearly derived from dance poses. Both have their bodies bent in *tribhanga*, the right figure shows in addition the *svastika* position of the legs. Both figures have the outward flexed *kshipta* position of the knees and the *kunchita pada*. Both these are first met with in the *yakshi*-s of the pillar-reliefs of Bharhut and they developed persistently during the successive centuries leading to more stylisation.⁷ The right, resp. the left, leg of each figure is in *samapada* and carries the weight of the body. In this position the hips (*kati*) are *udvahita*. One arm is raised upward and holds in a *mushti hasta* a flywhisk, whereas the other arm rests on the thigh.

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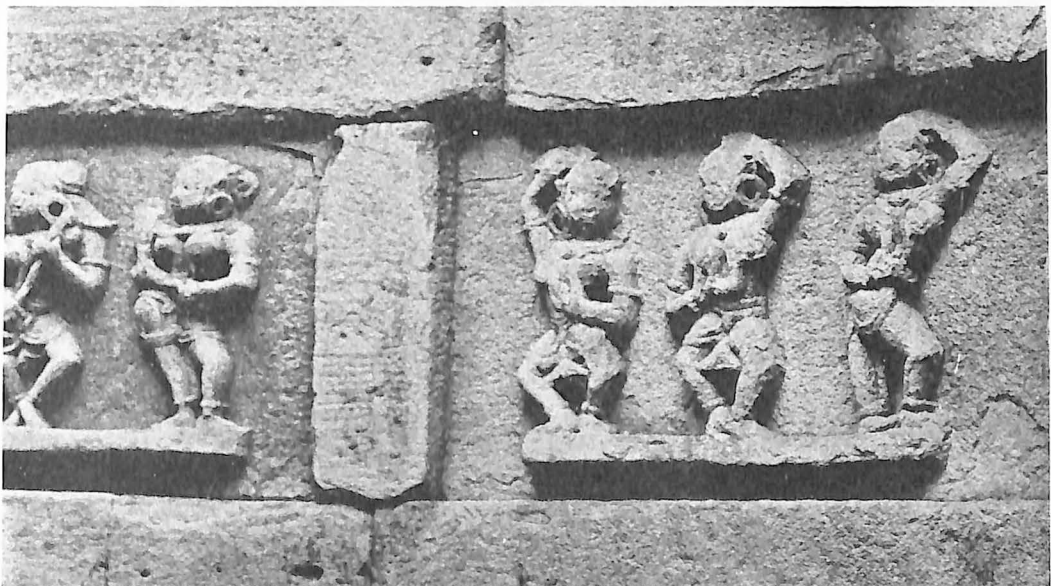
Panel A 1 (Illus. 4)

Panel A 1 is composed of three girls playing musical instruments. All three have their heads bent towards the panel of Goddess Lakshmi. Figure 1 could be an example of the *mandala sthanaka*, with both knees bent outwards. Although the musical instrument is not easily recognisable, it is likely that the girl was playing the cymbals (*kanjira*) which is indicated by the position of the hands. In the natural movement of the hands while playing the *kanjira*, one hand is raised towards the head and the other is kept at the level of the waist (in a kind of *pakshavanchita* position). Both hands are in *hamsasya hasta* which is the usual position while playing the *kanjira*. Figure 2 (in the middle) stands in a pose which could be similar to the *ayata sthana* prescribed in the *Natyashastra* as a walking posture for women. One foot is in *samapada*; the other foot, however, is in *kunchita* (and not as prescribed by Bharata in *tryashra*) with one hip slightly raised.⁸ She is shown playing the *vina*. Figure 3 seems to be, as it were, moving her limbs to the rhythm of the music; standing in *tribhanga*, her hip moves upward in a kind of *udvahita* pose, keeping her leg straight and the other one in a slight *kshipta* position, whereas her feet are placed heel against heel, indicative of the *mandala* position. She carries an object which could be identified as a horn-like musical instrument.

Panel A 2 (Illus. 5)

All the three figures of this panel could depict varieties of *karana*-s, or if not *karana*-s then it is likely that they depict frozen moments within a specific dance sequence. Figure 1 has both knees in *kshipta* position and

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both feet in *samapada*. Her arm movement is suggestive of the *uromandala* hand position. All three figures have their arms in a *pakshavanchita* position in which one hand in *tripataka* is placed on the head and the other in the same *hasta* is held at the waist-level. Figure 3 could be depicting some variation of the *bhujangatrasita chari*,⁹ a walking movement within a dance sequence, for which the turning around of the hips is prescribed.

Panel A 3 (Illus. 6)

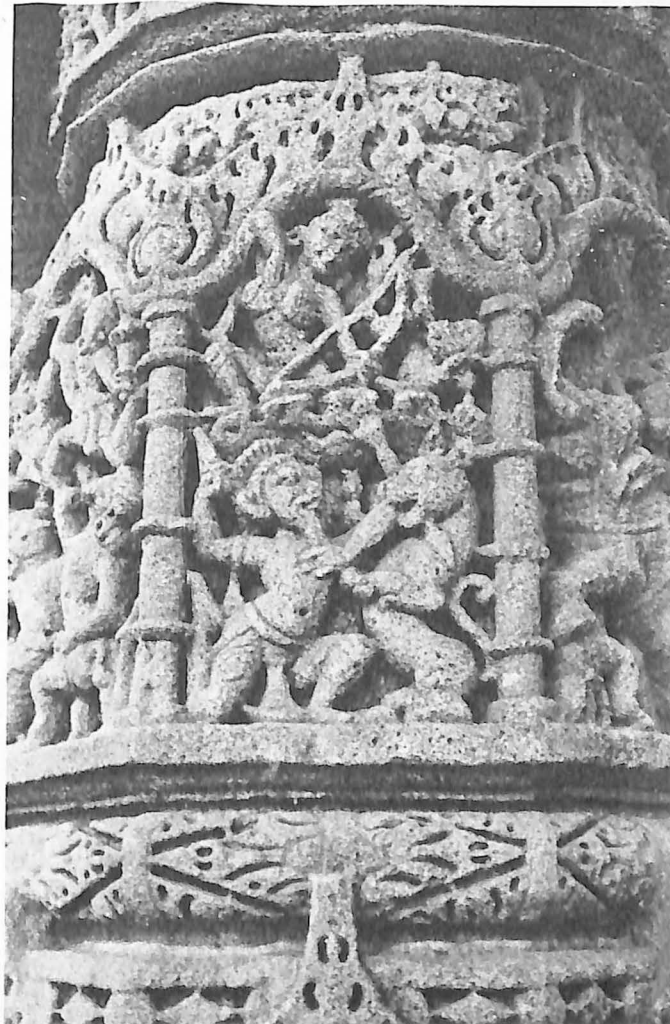
This panel shows all three figures not in dance poses, as such, but more as aspects of *surasundari*-s engaged in various activities. Here it is fighting. Fighting scenes seem to have been part of some dancing sequences, since there is a full chapter in the *Natyashastra* related to dramatic movements as representing fights.¹⁰ In these verses, the hand positions, movements of legs and the manner of manipulating and releasing the weapons are described. Figure 1 of this panel is in a clear *svastika* pose with her neck bent towards the right in *kunchita*. In front of her breasts she holds a bow. The pose of the central figure reminds one of the classical pose of *mahishasuramardini*, the goddess killing the buffalo-demon, but here she seems to be stepping towards her lion-vehicle rather than the buffalo-demon. Her body is bent towards the animal and her weapons are directed towards it, it,

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as if she is on the point of killing it. This sculpture seems to represent a dramatic pose, rather than depict the legend of this theme. The female figure is shown lifting her left leg, and about to step on the small lion underneath. Her left arm is extended straight, holding a shield; the right one is raised, holding a weapon. [This iconographic representation finds a parallel in a sculpture on a pillar in the *nrttamandapa* of the Sun Temple of Modhera (Illus. 10), where the goddess in an accentuated pose of releasing the arrow (*mokshana* pose according to Bharata), with *udvahita* shoulder and elbow, and knee as *urdhvajanu*, has shot an arrow at the lion underneath her, whereas her attendant in a clear *vrshchika* leg position with *samapada* foot is holding the lion with one hand and about to pierce the dagger into the

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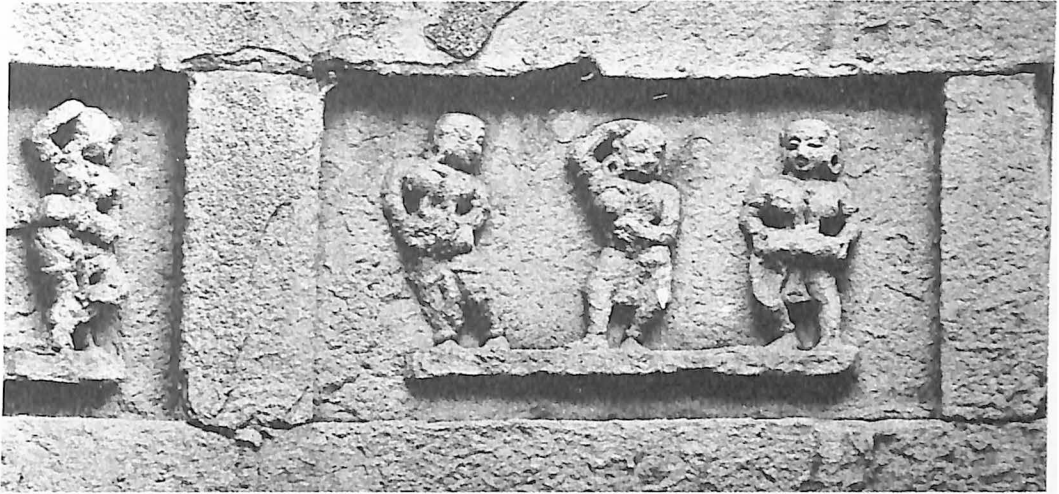
animal with the other.] Figure 3 has both feet in *samapada*, with one leg slightly bent forward in *nata*. Her head is bent down sharply to create a direct line between the eyes and the deer below at which she is shooting with bow and arrow. A sculpture on the same theme is found in the original parts of the *jangha* of the Adinatha Temple at Mt. Shatrunjaya (Saurashtra), however here with *urdhvajanu* and *vivartita* waist.

Panel A 4 (Illus. 7)

This panel also shows three dancing figures. Figure 1 is in a full *svastika* pose, with both feet in a *kunchita* position. Figure 2 has both feet in *samapada* and both the knees bent outwards, whereas Figure 3 stands in *samabhanga* with *samapada* feet. She might be carrying a musical instrument. This panel is in a slightly dilapidated condition, so that the identification becomes difficult.

Panel B 1 (Illus. 8)

This panel shows a scene of music with two girl drummers and the central one playing the *kanjira*. All three figures have their feet in *samapada* and their legs slightly bent in *kunchita*. The girl playing the *kanjira* holds her arms in a clear *pakshavanchita* pose with one hand raised to the head and the other one bent in front at the waist-level, since it is the most natural pose to assume while playing the *kanjira*, when the body moves to the rhythm of the beat.



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Panel B 2

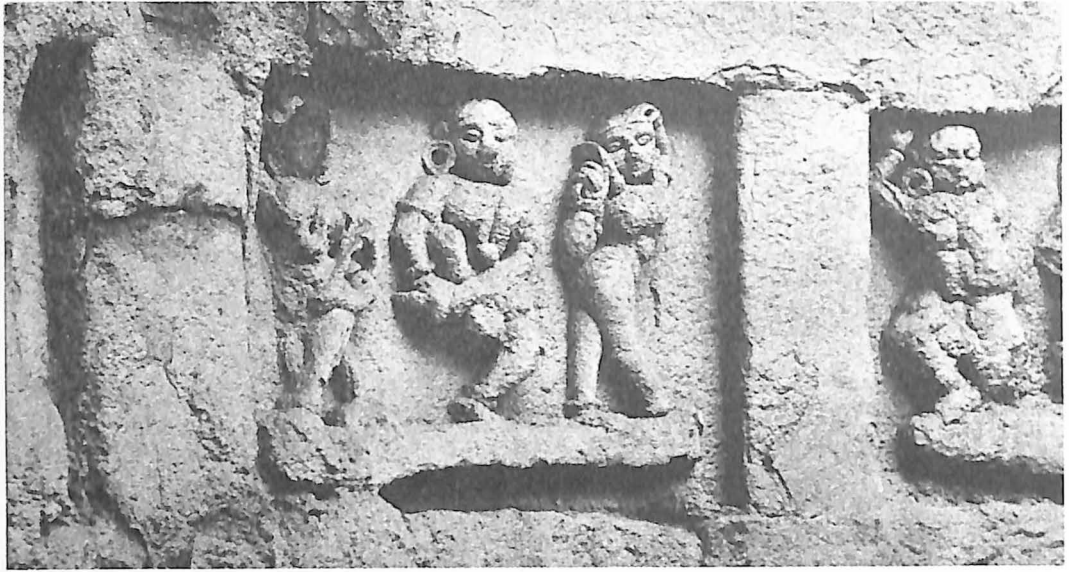
Here again a dancing scene is depicted with two girls dancing and the third one holding an object, perhaps a musical instrument. The central figure seems to be in the *ayatana* position where one foot is in *samapada* and the other is placed in *tryashra*, while the hip is raised in *udvahita* and both arms are in the *pakshavanchita* pose. Figure 1 has a *svastika* position of the legs, where the left leg is placed in front of the other and the foot seems to be in *suchipada*. Figure 3 is rather defaced; however, she seems to be carrying a musical instrument in her left hand.

Panel B 3

This whole panel is in a rather dilapidated condition so that one can hardly recognise any distinct position, except a *kshipta* position of the knees and a *pataka hasta* in Figure 3 and a *pakshavanchita* position of the arms in Figure 2.

Panel B 4 (Illus. 9)

This panel shows three girls beautifying themselves. In Figure 1, the twisting of the body around the vertical axis is gracefully caught by the sculptor. This pose suggests the *janita* movement of the *janita chari*, where the legs are crossed at the thigh level and the *vivartita* movement of the waist is indicated. Her head is bent towards the right to gaze into a mirror which she holds in her right hand. The left hand is raised to comb her hair. Figure 2 lifts her right leg up in *urdhvajanu*, with the knee raised to the chest-level and both her arms join at the level of the ankle, whereas the other leg



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is bent outwards in *kunchita*. Figure 3 is in a rather dilapidated state, but one can still recognise that both her legs are in *svastika* position and the body turned around at the waist-level. In her left hand, she seems to be carrying a musical instrument, probably a kind of harp, whereas the other arm is raised to the head.

With surprising frequency one comes across figures with dancing poses in the temples and other monuments of Gujarat. These figures may not have been intended to represent moments within a dance sequence, as such, but they clearly derive their postures from dance. Such figures of *surasundari*-s, *apsara*-s, *gandharva*-s and other heavenly beings or narrative panels with dancing scenes are not only found on the side-walls of the temples, the carved back-rests around the *mukhamandapa* (*kakshasana*), on the pillars and pediments, but very frequently one also finds that the ceilings of the main shrines and front halls are carved in various panels displaying these. A rare early example in stone depicts the scene of Kaliyadama in the *samatala vitana* ceiling in the temple of Odeda (belonging to the Saurashtra style), Saurashtra.¹¹ Here the *nagini*-s begging for mercy to Krishna evolve out of the water in a similar pose as the flying figures, for example, of the Gupta and post-Gupta age. With their body extended upwards and bent backwards in a *prasarita* pose, they give the impression of moving forward in the air, for which Bharata gives a variety of possibilities in his *Natya-shastra*.¹² In the limited space of the square ceiling panels, the sculptor naturally adopted the convention of filling the corners with heavenly beings in flying postures, though here they are shown with snake-tails thrown backwards in a half-circle instead of the leg position. Ceiling panels and panels

on entablatures of later centuries, for example the Mahavira temple at Kumbharia (*circa* A.D. 1062), the Vimala Vasahi at Mt. Abu (*circa* third quarter 11th cent.), the temples at Taranga hill (*circa* 12th cent.), the Luna Vasahi at Mt. Abu (*circa* A.D. 1231), to name only a few, display innumerable scenes of dance and music. In these temples, the figures of heavenly beauties are often depicted and in the case of a Jaina temple the Vidyadevi in dancing poses (see Illus. 13 with *svastika* leg position, one *samapada*, one *agratalasanchara* foot, *udvahita* hip.).

In Gujarat, depictions of the *Rasaliila* dance are met with very frequently not only in stone and wood, but also in local embroideries of *chakra* (wall-hangings), *chakli* (small square wall-pieces), *toran* (door-friezes), the skirts of girls. Many a wooden temple or household shrine, or wooden *haveli* (domestic structure), is profusely carved. Balconies, window

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panels, pillars, ceilings, brackets and entablatures display almost everywhere some carved panels of scenes with dance and music and the *Rasalila*.¹³

Dancing figures find powerful expression in the temples of the 10th, 11th and 12th centuries in Gujarat. For example, at Kotai (Kutch), Modhera, Anandpur, Sejakpur, to name only a few. It appears that by this time dancing poses were well-established as part of the sculptural ornamentation. Illustration 11 from Kaleshvari ni Nal (Panchmahals Dist., circa 10th/11th cent.)

is one of the most impressive sculptures of a dancer in low relief. The turning around the axis of the upper body, the outward projection of the elbows at sharp angles, the turning down of the face and straightened knees capture in a masterly fashion the movement of the dance. The joyful play with a

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monkey (who is climbing up the veil-cloth) is the theme of Illus. 12, belonging to the group of *shalabhanjika* or *yakshi* (in playful actions or moods) found as railing figures in the very early periods of Indian art. Here the initial stages of a *parivartita* (turning back) of the leg is indicated. The *udvahita* shoulder makes the upper body and head bend downwards towards the monkey underneath. In this mood of playful action, the girl raises her right arm, holding a branch of a mango tree above her head so as to encircle it completely.

The sculptures in the stepwell of Sathamba belong in region and style (though may be a century later) to this group of sculptures at Kaleshvari ni Nai in which the vigorous impetus of movement and the discipline of the bodily action is as it were revealed in the carved stone.

References:

- * For valuable discussions on these I am grateful to Kumudini Lakhia, Smita Shastri and Guru Shri Acharyallu (all from Ahmedabad). The panels, numbered 1 to 4, are on both sides of the central panel of Goddess Lakshmi; the panels on the right are described as A, those on the left as B.
- 1. *Vishvakarma Vastushastra*, ed. V. Shastri, Tanjore Saraswati Mahal Library, No. 85 (Tanjore 1958), Ch. 33.
- 2. *Ibid.*
- 3. R. E. Enthoven, *Folklore Notes*, Vol. I, Gujarat (Bombay 1914), p. 42.
- 4. A. K. Forbes, *Ras Mala*, Vol. II (London 1924), pp. 136-140.
- 5. U. P. Shah, 'Some Mediaeval Sculptures from Gujarat and Rajasthan', in: *Western Indian Art*, Special number of *JISOA*, 1965-66, Fig. 53.
- 6. *Ibid.* Fig. 57.
- 7. K. Vatsyayan, *Classical Indian Dance in Literature and the Arts*, (Delhi, 1968), p. 313.
- 8. *Ibid.*, pp. 321-322, see also *Natyashastra*, transl. Manmohan Ghosh (Calcutta 1967), Ch. XIII, 163 ff.
- 9. *Natyashastra*, *op. cit.*, Ch. XI, 42
- 10. *Ibid.*, Ch. XI, 72-95.
- 11. See J. M. Nanavati and M. A. Dhaky, *The Ceilings in the Temples of Gujarat* (Ahmedabad 1963), Fig. 12.
- 12. Vatsyayan, *op. cit.*, pp. 326 ff.
- 13. See, for example, the wooden temple of Parshvanatha from Patan (*circa* 17th/18th cent.), now in the Metropolitan Museum, New York.

Illustrations:

1. Sathamba, stepwell, 12th cent.
View through the descending corridor towards the carved back-wall of the well.
2. Sathamba, stepwell, 12th cent.
Back-wall of well. Panels with scenes of dance and music, fighting elephants and fighting horses.
3. Sathamba, stepwell, 12th cent.
Back-wall of well. Panel of Goddess Lakshmi.
4. Sathamba, stepwell, 12th cent.
Back-wall of well. Panel A1.
5. Sathamba, stepwell, 12th cent.
Back-wall of well. Panels A1 and A2.
6. Sathamba, stepwell, 12th cent.
Back-wall of well. Panel A3.
7. Sathamba, stepwell, 12th cent.
Back-wall of well. Panels A2, A3, A4 and with fighting elephants.
8. Sathamba, stepwell, 12th cent.
Back-wall of well. Panel B1.
9. Sathamba, stepwell, 12th cent.
Back-wall of well. Panel B4.
10. Modhera, Sun Temple, *mukhamandapa*, third quarter of the 11th cent.
Pillar with sculpture of goddess shooting an arrow at an animal.
11. Kaleshvari ni Nai, temple-ruin on top of hill, *circa* 10th/11th cent.
Figure of dancing girl in low relief at pilaster.
12. Kaleshvari ni Nai, temple at foothill, *circa* 10th/11th cent.
Surasundari playing with monkey climbing up her veil-cloth.
13. Mt. Abu, Vimala Vasahi, 12th cent.
Pillar with dancing girl.
Photo: Courtesy Shri and Smt. S. Shastri, Ahmedabad.

(All photographs are by the author, unless otherwise mentioned.)