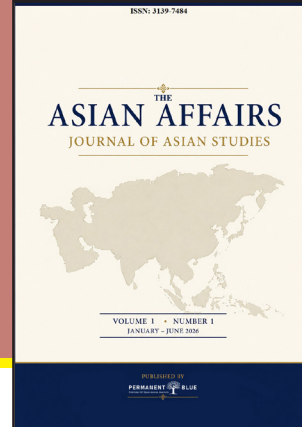




Women in Ancient and Early Medieval Odisha: A Study from Archaeological and Literary Sources

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Abstract: The historiography of ancient and early medieval Odisha (ancient Kalinga–Utkala–Odra) has traditionally privileged dynastic, military and religious narratives centred on male agents, leaving the lived experience of women fragmented across epigraphic incidentals, art-historical footnotes and vernacular literature. This paper draws together archaeological evidence – rock and cave inscriptions, copper-plate land grants, Buddhist monastic remains, temple sculpture and terracotta figurines – with literary sources, including Sanskrit silpa-sastra texts and the fifteenth-century Odia Sarala Mahabharata, to reconstruct a composite picture of women's religious, political, economic and artistic agency between approximately the third century BCE and the twelfth century CE. Particular attention is paid to the unusual case of the Bhaumakara dynasty (c. 736–940 CE), under which at least four widowed queens ruled Odisha in their own right rather than as regents, an arrangement with few parallels elsewhere in early medieval India. The study further examines the participation of women as donors and renunciants within Odisha's Buddhist “Diamond Triangle” (Ratnagiri, Lalitagiri and Udayagiri), the iconographic codification of the female body in the Silpa Prakasa and the Chausath Yogini temple at Hirapur, and the representation of women in vernacular epic literature. The paper argues that Odishan sources reveal a regionally distinctive, if uneven and class-inflected, visibility of women in ancient Indian public life, and it proposes an integrated archaeological–literary methodology for future research on gender in the eastern Indian early historic and early medieval periods.

Keywords: Alasakanya; Bhaumakara queens; Buddhist nuns; Chausath Yogini; epigraphy; Kalinga; Odisha; Silpa Prakasa; women's history

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1. Introduction

The Eastern Indian region historically known as Kalinga, Utkala and Odra – broadly coterminous with the modern state of Odisha – occupies a distinctive place in the political and religious history

of the subcontinent. Its long coastline sustained maritime contacts with Southeast Asia from the early historic period onward, its hinterland witnessed one of the earliest urban settlements of eastern India at Sisupalgarh, and its rulers, from Kharavela of the Mahameghavahana line to the Bhaumakaras, Somavamsis and Eastern Gangas, patronised an unusually plural religious landscape in which Buddhism, Jainism, Saivism, Vaishnavism and Sakta-Tantric traditions coexisted and overlapped. Within this history, women appear intermittently but significantly: as queens issuing land grants in their own name, as monastic donors and renunciants, as subjects and authors of religious poetry, and as an idealised sculptural presence on temple walls.

Mainstream historiography of Odisha, produced largely across the twentieth century by scholars working from dynastic chronicles and copper-plate corpora, has tended to treat queens and female donors as incidental to a narrative organised around kings, conquests and temple chronology. Yet a rereading of the same archaeological and literary corpus – inscriptions, monastic remains, iconographic treatises and vernacular epics – shows that women were neither marginal nor uniformly subordinate figures in Odishan society of this period. Most strikingly, the Bhaumakara dynasty of the eighth to tenth centuries CE saw at least four widowed queens rule as sovereigns in their own right rather than as regents for minor sons, a pattern without close parallel among contemporary Indian dynasties.

This paper synthesises archaeological and literary evidence on women in Odisha from the Mauryan-Kalingan period (third century BCE) through the close of the early medieval period (twelfth century CE), organised thematically around political sovereignty, religious patronage and monastic life, temple iconography, and literary representation. It does not claim to be exhaustive; rather, it aims to demonstrate the interpretive value of reading archaeological and textual sources together, and to identify avenues along which future epigraphic and art-historical research could refine the periodisation and social range of the evidence presented here.

2. Sources and Methodology

The reconstruction of women's history in ancient and early medieval Odisha faces a source problem common to much of early India: women rarely speak in their own textual voice, and their presence must usually be recovered from records authored by, or primarily concerned with, men (Shah 2001). This study therefore adopts a triangulating methodology, reading three broad classes of evidence against one another: (i) epigraphic and archaeological material, including rock edicts, cave inscriptions, copper-plate land grants and excavated monastic and urban sites; (ii) art-historical and architectural material, principally temple sculpture and the *silpa-sastra* (architectural treatise) tradition; and (iii) literary sources, both Sanskrit and vernacular Odia.

Table 1 summarises the principal categories of source material used in this study, their approximate chronological range, and the type of evidence about women that each category typically yields.

A methodological caution is in order. Much of the secondary historiography on Odishan queens and inscriptions synthesised here derives from early-to-mid twentieth-century epigraphic editions as read through later regional histories (Panigrahi 1981) and more recent popular and semi-scholarly synthesis. Wherever possible this paper distinguishes primary epigraphic content

Table 1: Classification of archaeological and literary sources used in this study

<i>Category of Source</i>	<i>Representative Examples</i>	<i>Approximate Date Range</i>	<i>Nature of Evidence Relating to Women</i>
Royal edicts and rock/cave inscriptions	Ashokan edicts at Dhauli and Jaugada; Hathigumpha and Manchapuri cave inscriptions, Udayagiri	3rd c. BCE – 1st c. CE	Reference to the chief queen of Kharavela (“queen of Vajiraghara”); royal genealogy through female lineage
Copper-plate land grants	Dhenkanal, Talcher, Angul, Kumurang and Baud plates of the Bhaumakara queens; Patlinga plate of Dandi Mahadevi	8th – 10th c. CE	Direct evidence of female sovereignty, administration, taxation policy and religious endowment
Buddhist monastic remains	Ratnagiri, Lalitagiri and Udayagiri (the “Diamond Triangle”)	5th – 13th c. CE	Female donative inscriptions, nuns (bhikkhuni) and female mendicants, goddess cults (Tara, Hariti)
Temple architecture and sculpture	Alasakanya/surasundari niches; Chausath Yogini temple, Hirapur	8th – 13th c. CE	Idealised and tantric representations of the female body; ritual and cosmological role of women
Silpa-sastra (architectural treatises)	Silpa Prakasa of Ramacandra Mahapatra Kaula Bhattaraka	Compiled c. 9th–16th c. CE	Prescriptive canon classifying sixteen types of female figures (alasakanya)
Vernacular and Sanskrit literary texts	Sarala Mahabharata, Vaishnava lyric and hagiographic verse	15th c. CE onward	Social imagination of womanhood; gender ideology of the Gajapati period
Terracotta and material culture	Sisupalgarh, Jaugada figurines	3rd c. BCE – 4th c. CE	Fertility imagery, domestic and cultic use of the female form

from secondary or tertiary restatement, and it flags points of ongoing scholarly disagreement – particularly regarding the precise regnal dates of the Bhaumakara queens, rather than presenting a false chronological certainty.

3. Women in Pre-Mauryan and Mauryan Kalinga: The Testimony of Sisupalgarh

The earliest archaeological window onto social life in the region comes from the fortified early historic settlement of Sisupalgarh, near modern Bhubaneswar, first excavated by B. B. Lal in 1948 and subsequently re-investigated through a long-running Indo-American collaboration led by Rabindra Kumar Mohanty and Monica L. Smith (Lal 1949; Mohanty and Smith 2006; Mohanty et al. 2007). Occupation at the site has been traced from around the seventh–sixth century BCE, with the massive rampart and gateway complex belonging to the early historic (Mauryan and post-Mauryan) horizon, situating Sisupalgarh among the earliest true cities of eastern India (Mohanty and Smith 2006).

Excavated household contexts at Sisupalgarh and at the neighbouring fortified site of Jaugada – also the findspot of a set of Ashokan Separate Rock Edicts – have yielded terracotta female figurines consistent with the wider North Indian tradition of Mother Goddess and fertility imagery found from the Chalcolithic through the early historic period. While such figurines cannot be read as unambiguous evidence of a formal “Mother Goddess cult,” their recurrence across domestic contexts indicates that female fertility symbolism was integrated into everyday ritual practice well before the codification of Puranic goddess worship. The Ashokan edicts themselves, inscribed at Dhauli and Jaugada following the Kalinga War of 261 BCE, are silent on gender specifically, but their emphasis on dhamma as a universal ethical programme addressed to “the people” has been

read by later Buddhist chronicles as part of a broader opening of religious participation that would, within a few centuries, see women recorded as significant lay donors across the Buddhist sites of coastal Odisha.

4. Queens and Consorts in the Age of Kharavela: The Hathigumpha and Manchapuri Evidence

The Hathigumpha inscription of King Kharavela, incised in Prakrit using Brahmi script in the Udayagiri hills near Bhubaneswar and conventionally dated between the second century BCE and the first century CE, is the principal source for the political history of post-Mauryan Kalinga. Although the inscription is fundamentally a royal panegyric recounting Kharavela's own reign year by year, it preserves one incidental but historically valuable reference to a woman: in the seventh year of his reign, it records, “his famous wife of Vajiraghara obtained the dignity of auspicious motherhood,” marking the birth of an heir (Hathigumpha inscription, translated in Jayaswal and Banerji).

A more informative record survives in the nearby Manchapuri cave inscription, part of the same Udayagiri complex, which was commissioned not by Kharavela but by his chief queen herself. The inscription identifies her as “the chief queen of Kharavela... the great-granddaughter of Hathisiha and the daughter of Lalaka,” and records that she “caused to be constructed the caves for the sramanas [ascetics] of Kalinga”. This is a rare instance, for the period, of an inscription in which a royal woman is both the named patron and the historical subject, rather than merely an object of reference within a king's own record. The epigraphic corpus of the Udayagiri caves additionally attests a possible second queen, Sindhula, associated with the Svargapuri cave inscription in the same complex (Barua 1929), suggesting that the Mahameghavahana court, like the later Bhaumakara court, involved more than one politically visible royal woman.

That the queen of Vajiraghara's own religious patronage – excavating rock-cut retreats for Jain and other ascetics – has survived independently of her husband's much longer and better-preserved inscription is itself suggestive: royal women in second-century-BCE Kalinga possessed sufficient resources and standing to commission monumental works in their own name, a pattern that would recur, on a far larger scale, under the Bhaumakaras roughly a millennium later.

5. Religious Pluralism and Female Agency I: Buddhist Women of the “Diamond Triangle”

Odisha's Buddhist archaeology is concentrated in the “Diamond Triangle” of Ratnagiri, Lalitagiri and Udayagiri in present-day Jajpur district, sites that together document a continuous Buddhist presence from roughly the Kushana period (with donative inscriptions at Lalitagiri palaeographically dated to the third century CE) through the twelfth century, encompassing Hinayana, Mahayana and, at Ratnagiri especially, Vajrayana and Kalachakra-tantra traditions. The major twentieth-century excavations at Ratnagiri were directed by Debala Mitra, who is generally credited as India's first woman archaeologist and later Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India; her excavations from 1958 to 1961 uncovered two quadrangular monasteries, a large stupa and numerous Vajrayana sculptures (Mitra 1981). It is a notable, if easily overlooked, irony of the

historiography that the material record of women's participation in ancient Odishan Buddhism was substantially recovered by a pioneering woman archaeologist (Mitra 1981).

Within this Buddhist material, women appear in at least three distinct roles: as lay donors, as nuns and female mendicants, and as objects of devotional and iconographic representation. Regarding lay donation, Das's (2016) unpublished doctoral study of the Bhauma-Karas observes that “women figure in Pali literature both as giving daily alms of cooked food to bhikkhus as well as making rich donations of precious jewellery and other articles to the Buddhist sangha,” and that this pattern of independent female patronage is corroborated epigraphically in eastern India more broadly. The same source notes that a set of Bhaumakara-period copper plates from Talcher (Jagatri), issued in the name of King Subhakaradeva III and edited by Binayak Mishra, record donations “for the maintenance of the Buddhist temple” that included provision of “garments, pots, bed[s], seat[s] and medicine” specifically for the vihara's female mendicants – direct epigraphic evidence for an organised community of Buddhist nuns resident in Bhaumakara Odisha. The same unpublished study further records that the Somavamsi king Balarjuna Mahasivagupta “is also said to have donated a vihara to Buddhist nuns,” and that a copper plate of the Somavamsi ruler Karnadeva records the gift of a village to “Rani Karpurasri,” apparently a Buddhist laywoman, from the Solanapur Mahavihara of Utkaladesa – evidence that royal grants to named individual women, for religious purposes, continued into the tenth and eleventh centuries.

This regional pattern is consistent with the wider epigraphic record of early Indian Buddhism. Peter Skilling's influential survey of “nuns, laywomen, donors [and] goddesses” in early Indian Buddhism argues that female religious roles were considerably more varied and more publicly visible than later monastic historiography suggests (Skilling 2001), while Alice Collett's epigraphic study of women as teachers and disciples in early Buddhist communities demonstrates, through comparable inscriptional evidence from western and central India, that nuns could hold recognised teaching authority and be commemorated as such in donative records (Collett 2015; see also Collett 2016, on the textual biographies of early Buddhist nuns). Kirit K. Shah's monograph on the identification of women in early Indian inscriptions provides the broader methodological grounding for reading such fragmentary donative notices as evidence of social status rather than mere formulaic incidental (Shah 2001). Iconographically, the recurrence at Ratnagiri, Lalitagiri and Udayagiri of images of Tara – including the form Tara Kurukulla – and of Hariti, shown suckling a child, situates female Buddhist deities as prominent objects of devotion at precisely the sites where the epigraphic evidence for female donors and nuns is also concentrated (Mitra 1981; Donaldson 2001).

6. Jain and Brahmanical Women: The Khandagiri–Udayagiri Evidence

As discussed, the earliest epigraphically attested female religious patron in Odisha is Jain rather than Buddhist: the chief queen of Kharavela, whose Manchapuri cave inscription records her sponsorship of rock-cut retreats for Jain sramanas at Udayagiri. The Hathigumpha inscription's description of Kharavela himself as “a layman devoted to worship” and “realised in the nature of jiva and deha” situates the Mahameghavahana court firmly within a Jain devotional idiom (Jayaswal and Banerji 1933), within which, as the Manchapuri record shows, royal women could

act as independent patrons of monastic architecture rather than solely as subjects of dynastic commemoration.

Brahmanical religious patronage by women becomes epigraphically visible somewhat later, and is discussed in Sections 7 and 8 below in connection with Sakta-Tantric temple foundation and the Bhaumakara queens' broader programme of temple construction, which the sources indicate was not confined to any single religious tradition.

7. The Shakta-Tantric Feminine: The Chausath Yogini Cult and the Temple at Hirapur

Among the most distinctive material expressions of the sacred feminine in early medieval Odisha is the Chausath ("sixty-four") Yogini cult, associated with a small number of open-air, roofless circular shrines built between roughly the eighth and thirteenth centuries CE, of which only a handful survive across India (Dehejia 1986). Odisha preserves two of the most significant examples: the Mahamaya temple at Hirapur, near Bhubaneswar, and the larger Chausathi Yogini Pitha at Ranipur-Jharia in Bolangir district (Dehejia 1986; Donaldson 2002). The Hirapur temple, rediscovered only in 1953 despite its proximity to Bhubaneswar, houses sixty-four (of which fifty-six survive intact) chlorite-stone images of yoginis – fierce, composite goddess-figures combining human, animal and skeletal iconography – arranged around a circular enclosure originally centred on an image, now lost, believed to represent Kali (Dehejia 1986).

Art-historical opinion dates the Hirapur temple, on stylistic grounds relating to the modelling of its figures, to the ninth or tenth century CE, contemporary with the Bhaumakara dynasty, and popular and semi-scholarly tradition specifically associates its construction with the Bhauma queen Hiradevi (Dehejia 1986). Vidya Dehejia's foundational study of the yogini cult notes that, unlike the erotic and disrobing motifs found in some yogini assemblages elsewhere in India, the Hirapur yoginis combine ferocity of iconography with an almost complete absence of overt sexual imagery, and situates the temple's female pantheon alongside the wider repertoire of semi-divine female figures such as nayikas, salabhanjikas, apsaras and alakanyas that populate Odishan temple art more broadly (Dehejia 1986; Roy 2015). The yogini cult is conventionally understood as one manifestation of the broader Shakta-Tantric current that, alongside Vajrayana Buddhism at the Diamond Triangle sites, made early medieval Odisha one of eastern India's principal centres of tantric religious practice, in which the female body and female divine agency occupied a structurally central, rather than peripheral, position (Donaldson 2002; Mahapatra 1953).

8. Sovereign Women: The Bhaumakara Queens

The single most striking body of evidence for female political agency in early medieval Odisha concerns the Bhaumakara dynasty, which ruled the Toshali–Utkala region of northern and central coastal Odisha (encompassing modern Jajpur, Cuttack and Balasore) from approximately the eighth to the tenth century CE. Following the death of King Santikara Deva I around 845 CE, and the premature death without heir of his son Subhakar III, the Bhauma succession fell into crisis, compounded by earlier military reverses at the hands of the Pala king Devapala (Subuddhi 1978; Misra 1934). It was in this context that Tribhuvana Mahadevi I, widow of Santikara I and a princess of the Western Ganga dynasty of Karnataka by birth, assumed the Bhauma throne – not,

as the sources are at pains to specify, as regent for a minor grandson, but as sovereign in her own right (Subuddhi 1978; Misra 1934).

Her own Dhenkanal copper-plate charter describes her accession in explicitly triumphal terms, recording that local feudatory kings “bowed at her feet” in submission and that peace was restored throughout the kingdom (Misra 1934; Subuddhi 1978). Later Bhauma inscriptions state that the widowed queen “took upon the burden of administration of the entire kingdom and shone like Seshha, holding up the entire earth on her hood” (Misra 1934) – an image of cosmic sustaining power conventionally reserved, in Puranic literature, for male figures. Secondary historiography credits Tribhuvana Mahadevi with commanding a substantial mixed-sex royal guard, appointing officials on grounds of probity, administering a comparatively light tax regime, and using the royal treasury to fund temples, monasteries and almshouses for the poor (Subuddhi 1978); precise figures for the size of her guard vary across secondary sources and should be treated with caution pending corroboration from the primary epigraphic corpus, but the underlying claim of extensive temple and monastic patronage is consistent with the Buddhist donative evidence discussed in Section 5.

Table 2: The Bhaumakara women rulers, their epigraphic attestation, and principal recorded acts. Dates are approximate and reconstructed from secondary historiography; see main text for sourcing and caveats

<i>Ruler</i>	<i>Relationship / Path to Throne</i>	<i>Approx. Regnal Period (CE)</i>	<i>Principal Epigraphic / Secondary Source</i>	<i>Notable Recorded Acts</i>
Tribhuvana Mahadevi I	Widow of Santikara Deva I; assumed rule after death of her son Subhakara III	c. 845–863	Dhenkanal and Talcher copper-plate charters	Suppressed feudal rebellion; restored administration; extensive temple and monastic patronage; reportedly commanded a large mixed-sex household guard
Prithvi Mahadevi (Tribhuvana Mahadevi II)	Widow of Subhakaradeva IV	c. 894	Baud copper plates	Retrospectively credited predecessor Subhakaradeva I with founding Buddhist monasteries; asserted succession over rival claimants
Tribhuvana Mahadevi III	Widow of Sivakaradeva III	Late 9th century	Later Bhauma records (secondary attestation)	Continued the pattern of widow-succession within the dynasty
Gauri Mahadevi	Queen of Subhakaradeva V, the last male Bhauma ruler	Early 10th century	Bhauma dynastic records (secondary attestation)	Traditionally associated with construction of the Gauri temple, Bhubaneswar
Dandi Mahadevi	Daughter of Gauri Mahadevi	Mid-10th century	Patlinga copper-plate grant (Girish, 2006)	Noted for vigorous administration; reign ended prematurely
Dharma Mahadevi	Widow of Santikara Deva III; princess of the Bhanja lineage	Mid-10th century	Angul copper plate	Last ruler of the Bhaumakara line; succeeded by the Somavamsi king Dharmaratha

Remarkably, Tribhuvana Mahadevi I was not an isolated case. Bhauma inscriptions and the secondary historiography built upon them identify at least three further widowed queens who assumed sovereign rule in succeeding generations – Prithvi Mahadevi, who took the regnal name Tribhuvana Mahadevi II; Tribhuvana Mahadevi III; and, following the death of the dynasty's last male ruler, Subhakaradeva V, an unbroken succession of at least three further female rulers:

Gauri Mahadevi, her daughter Dandi Mahadevi, and finally Dharma Mahadevi, under whom the dynasty came to an end and was succeeded by the Somavamsi king Dharmaratha (historyofodisha.in 2024; Subuddhi 1978). A modern historical summary of the dynasty observes that “during the Bhaumakara period, women held prominent positions in society... a distinguishing feature of the Bhauma rule was the presence of several female rulers,” and draws the contrast, standard in Indian constitutional and dynastic practice, between the dowager-queen-as-regent model found elsewhere in early India and the Bhauma pattern in which “women ruled independently in their own right” (historyofodisha.in 2024; Subuddhi 1978). Table 2 summarises the currently reconstructed succession, together with its principal sources and the important caveat that exact regnal years remain disputed among specialists working from the copper-plate corpus.

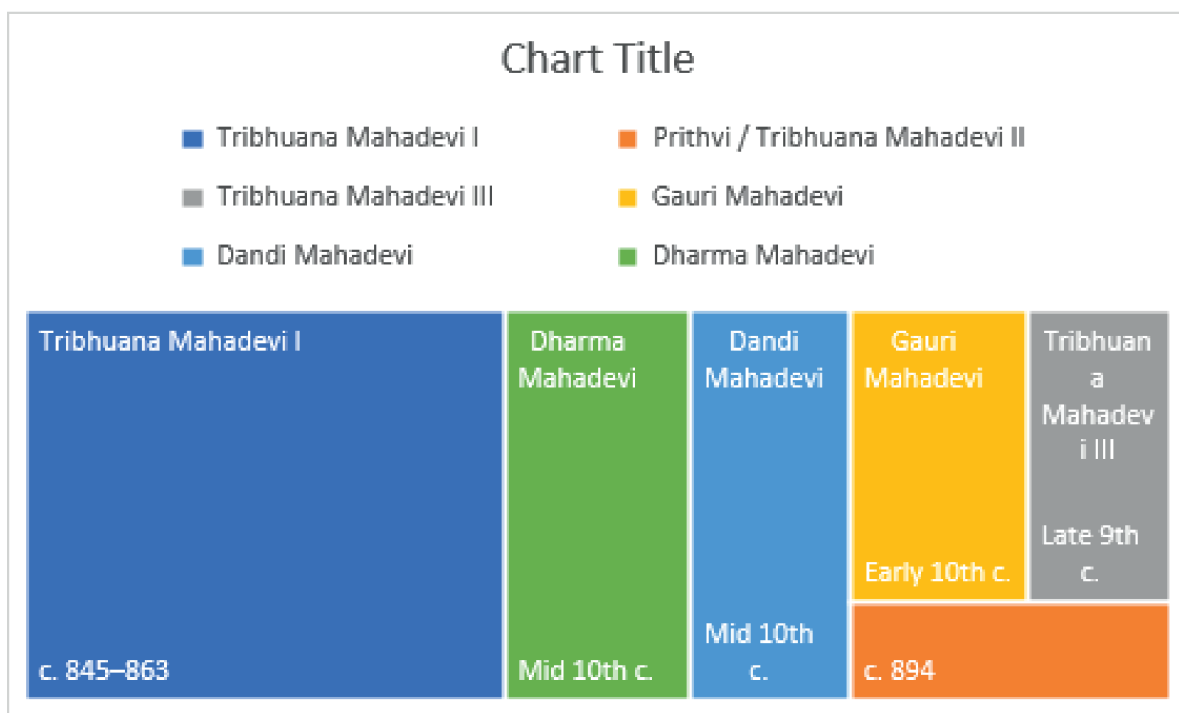


Figure 1: Approximate regnal spans (in years) reconstructed for the Bhaumakara women rulers from secondary historiography. Figures are illustrative rather than epigraphically certain and are intended to convey relative, not absolute, duration; see Table 2 and accompanying discussion for sourcing

Two interpretive points merit emphasis. First, the Bhauma pattern cannot be dismissed as an accident of dynastic failure alone (i.e., simply the repeated absence of adult male heirs), since the epigraphic record itself frames these women's rule in the vocabulary of sovereignty – issuing land grants in their own regnal years, receiving the formal submission of feudatories, and being credited with independent administrative and religious acts – rather than as a stopgap measure. Second, comparative material from elsewhere in early medieval India, such as the later reigns of Rudramadevi of the Kakatiyas in Warangal and Mangammal of the Nayakas of Madurai, indicates that female sovereignty, while rare, was not sui generis to Odisha; the Bhauma case is nonetheless unusual for the sheer frequency and near-continuity with which it recurred across a single dynastic line (Subuddhi 1978).

9. Epigraphic Evidence of Women's Economic and Religious Agency: The Copper-Plate Corpus

Beyond the queens discussed in Section 8, the Bhaumakara and Somavamsi copper-plate corpus offers a wider window onto women's participation in the region's land-grant economy. The Patlinga copper-plate grant, issued in the name of Dandi Mahadevi and edited for the Odisha state government's Orissa Review by S. N. Girish, documents an individual act of royal land donation and provides one of the clearest single-inscription illustrations of a woman ruler exercising the standard prerogatives of Odishan land-grant kingship – defining boundaries, specifying the recipient, and invoking the customary religious merit formulae associated with such grants (Girish 2006).

Other plates illuminate women's position as recipients, rather than issuers, of royal favour. As noted in Section 5, a Somavamsi-period grant of King Karnadeva records the donation of a village to “Rani Karpurasri,” apparently in connection with the Solanapur Mahavihara, while the Baud plates of Prithvi Mahadevi (Tribhuvana Mahadevi II) retrospectively commemorate the monastic foundations of an earlier male ruler, Subhakaradeva I – itself an act of religious and dynastic memory-work undertaken by a female sovereign. Read cumulatively, this corpus indicates that women in Bhauma and Somavamsi Odisha occupied at least three distinct positions within the region's characteristic land-grant economy: as the issuing authority (queens regnant), as named individual beneficiaries of royal grants, and as the institutional recipients of grants made on behalf of monastic communities that, as shown in Section 5, included resident nuns and female mendicants.

10. Women in Temple Art and Architectural Texts: The Silpa Prakasa and the Alasakanya

The most visually pervasive representation of women in early medieval Odishan material culture is not epigraphic but sculptural: the recurrent placement, from at least the eighth century CE onward, of female figures in niches, brackets and wall panels of Odishan temples. These figures are collectively discussed in Indian art history under the Sanskrit term *surasundari* (“celestial beauty”), of which the Odishan textual tradition recognises sixteen canonical types, termed *alasakanya* (“indolent maiden”) in the region's own architectural treatise, the *Silpa Prakasa* (Sharman 2020; Donaldson 2001).

The *Silpa Prakasa*, attributed to Ramacandra Mahapatra Kaula Bhattaraka and conventionally dated to around the tenth century CE (though the surviving manuscript tradition is later), is a Sanskrit treatise on Odishan temple architecture that was first identified, edited and translated into English by the Swiss art historian Alice Boner, working with the Puri priest-scholar Pandit Sadasiva Ratha Sarma; their translation was first published by E. J. Brill in 1966 and subsequently re-edited, with Bettina Baumer, Rajendra Prasad Das and Sadananda Das, for a revised edition issued jointly by the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts and Motilal Banarsidass in 2005 (Boner and Sharma 1966; Bhattaraka 2005). The text is unusual among surviving *silpa-sastra* literature for the specificity with which it addresses the placement, posture and iconometric proportions of female figures, and it states explicitly that a temple constructed without such female imagery is considered structurally and ritually deficient – a claim that Sharman's (2020) survey of

alasa kanya iconography glosses as evidence that these figures carried genuine symbolic weight within the ritual architecture of the temple, rather than functioning merely as decorative or, in a later colonial-era reading, “voyeuristic” ornament (Sharman 2020).

Kapila Vatsyayan's study of classical Indian dance situates the *alasa kanya* and related *surasundari* types within the broader vocabulary of Indian performing-arts iconography, in which sculpted feminine postures directly encode the technical vocabulary of dance and music treatises (Vatsyayan 1968), while M. L. Varadpande's survey of woman in Indian sculpture situates the Odishan *alasa kanya* tradition within a pan-Indian development of the female sculptural form from the early historic *salabhanjika* (“woman-and-tree”) motif, first attested at Bharhut in the second century BCE, through to the fully developed *surasundari* programmes of medieval temple architecture (Varadpande 2006). A Chitrolekha journal study specifically devoted to “secular female imagery in Orissan temple architecture” catalogues the individual *alasa kanya* types described in the *Silpa Prakasa* – for example, a figure described in the text as turned to the right, her face shown in profile, “beautiful shoulders,” and a left arm crossing the torso in a specified triangular composition – demonstrating that the Odishan architectural tradition developed a remarkably precise, almost choreographic, vocabulary for depicting the female form.

It is worth noting, finally, that from around the tenth century CE onward a smaller number of Odishan temples – a development K. C. Panigrahi traced to the influence of Tantric Saivism and Vajrayana Buddhism during the Bhaumakara period – also carry explicitly erotic (*maithuna*) sculptural programmes on their upper wall registers, a phenomenon for which no surviving *silpa-sastra* text offers an explicit doctrinal justification, and whose precise ritual or apotropaic function remains debated among art historians (Panigrahi 1981).

11. Women in Literary Tradition: Sarala Das and the Vaishnava Poets

The Odia literary tradition proper begins in the fifteenth century CE with Sarala Dasa (born Siddheswara Parida), a poet of non-elite (*Chasa*) caste background traditionally honoured as the *adi kavi* (“first poet”) of Odia literature, whose *Sarala Mahabharata* – the first rendering of all eighteen parvas of the Sanskrit *Mahabharata* into any regional Indian language – was composed under the patronage of the Gajapati king Kapilendra Deva (Mansinha 1962). Although Sarala Dasa followed the broad narrative outline of Vyasa's Sanskrit epic, he substantially localised its characters, settings and social texture to reflect fifteenth-century Odishan society, and departed freely from his source in ways that scholars of the text have found especially revealing for the study of gender.

In a critical study of three marginalised female figures across Odia puranic literature – Draupadi in the *Sarala Mahabharata*, the goddess Lakshmi in Balarama Das's sixteenth-century *Lakshmi Purana*, and the goddess Alakshmi in the eighteenth-century *Kartika Mahatmya* of Mahadeva Das – B. N. Patnaik argues that Sarala's retelling endows its female characters with “intensely human attributes” rather than the more purely mythic or exemplary qualities of their counterparts in Vyasa's Sanskrit original, producing women who are psychologically vivid but not always “likeable and reasonable” by the conventional moral standards of epic heroism (Patnaik, n.d.). Patnaik's broader analysis, following the earlier sociologically oriented reading of Sarala's epic by the twentieth-

century scholar and activist Sarala Devi, situates this humanisation of female characters within Sarala Dasa's wider project of grounding the itihasa-purana tradition in the observed social world of fifteenth-century Odisha (Mansinha 1962).

A further, and chronologically later, strand of women's literary agency in Odisha emerges with the regional Vaishnava bhakti movement associated with the Panchasakha poets and their successors, in which named women authors – including Brundavati Devi and Madhavi Dasi – are recorded as having composed devotional literature that directly challenged prevailing social restrictions on women, including child marriage and the social ostracism (Puradaha) historically imposed on widows and outcast women (Dash, n.d.). A recent study argues that the devotional idiom of Odia Vaishnavism provided one of the few socially sanctioned avenues through which women could publicly “abandon... Puradaha and engage in open discussion” from the medieval period onward (Dash, n.d.), suggesting a longer-term continuity between the qualified public visibility of women documented epigraphically for the Bhaumakara period (Section 8) and the more constrained, but still literarily attested, forms of female authorship that followed in the subsequent Ganga and Gajapati centuries.

12. Ethnographic Continuities: Women-Centred Ritual and the Maritime Past

A final body of evidence, more ethnographic than strictly archaeological or textual, nonetheless bears directly on the historical argument of this paper: the survival, into the present day, of women-centred ritual traditions in coastal Odisha that are explicitly understood by their practitioners, and by the scholars who have studied them, as commemorating the region's ancient maritime past. The most extensively documented of these is Khudurukuni Osa, a ritual observed by unmarried girls on successive Sundays of the Odia month of Bhadraba (August–September), performed for the wellbeing of brothers, and connected in regional memory to the historic seafaring activity that linked ancient Kalinga to Southeast Asia.

A recent study of the ritual situates it within a broader complex of maritime commemorative practice, noting that Odisha's more than four-hundred-kilometre coastline sustained “internal and external linkages” from the early historic period onward, substantiated by “archaeological findings, literary references, and sculptural representations,” and that these maritime “accomplishments had a constructive effect over society, through various rituals and festivals that commemorate this history”. The same study documents the traditional boat-types – Bhela, Chapa, Padhua, Pota and Nauka – recalled in the material culture surrounding the festival, and situates the specifically female performance of the ritual as a durable, if informal, archive of the region's maritime history, functioning in a manner broadly analogous to the goddess-centred ritual complexes considered in Section 7.

Methodologically, such living traditions cannot be treated as unmediated survivals of ancient practice; ritual forms are reshaped by every generation that performs them, and the historian must be cautious about reading present-day observance directly back into the early historic or early medieval record. Nonetheless, the coincidence between the epigraphically and archaeologically attested prominence of women in ancient Odishan religious life (Sections 4–9) and the persistence, specifically in coastal Odisha, of women-centred commemorative ritual addressed to the region's

maritime and dynastic past, suggests a longer-term cultural continuity that merits further interdisciplinary investigation combining archaeology, epigraphy, and ethnographic fieldwork.

13. Discussion: Continuity, Change and Regional Distinctiveness

Read together, the evidence surveyed above resists any single, linear narrative of either uniform female subordination or straightforward proto-feminist agency in ancient and early medieval Odisha. Several patterns nonetheless emerge with reasonable consistency across independent bodies of evidence. First, religious patronage – across Jain, Buddhist, Saiva and Sakta-Tantric contexts alike – recurs as the single most consistent avenue through which women's individual names and acts entered the epigraphic and art-historical record, from the unnamed-but-titled chief queen of Kharavela in the first century BCE/CE (Section 4) through the nuns and female donors of the Diamond Triangle (Section 5) to the temple-building queens of the Bhauma dynasty (Section 8). Second, the Bhaumakara evidence indicates that under specific dynastic and political conditions – notably a succession crisis compounded by military defeat – elite women could exercise not merely religious but full sovereign political authority, and could do so repeatedly across successive generations of the same royal house, rather than as an unrepeated exception. Third, the iconographic and literary evidence (Sections 10–11) suggests that the female form and female interiority were subjects of sustained cultural elaboration in Odishan visual and literary culture, whether through the codified *alasakanya* types of the *Silpa Prakasa*, the fierce tantric iconography of the Hirapur yoginis, or the psychologically individuated female characters of the *Sarala Mahabharata*.

At the same time, the evidence is heavily skewed toward elite and religiously affiliated women – queens, monastic donors, nuns, temple patrons and, in the literary material, women writing from within an established *bhakti* institutional framework. The lived experience of non-elite women, agricultural labourers, artisans and members of tribal communities inhabiting the Odishan hinterland during this period remains almost entirely invisible in the surviving textual and epigraphic record, and can at present be approached, if at all, only obliquely through material culture such as terracotta figurines (Section 3) and through cautious ethnographic analogy with surviving matrilineal and goddess-centred ritual practices among Odisha's tribal communities – a comparison that lies beyond the scope of the present study but that represents a promising direction for future interdisciplinary research combining archaeology, epigraphy and anthropology.

14. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study is a synthesis rather than a primary epigraphic re-edition, and it is accordingly subject to several limitations that should guide future work. First, the precise regnal chronology of the Bhaumakara queens (Table 2) remains disputed among specialists working directly from the copper-plate originals, and the approximate dates offered here should be treated as illustrative rather than definitive pending a fresh critical collation of the full Bhauma epigraphic corpus. Second, several of the sources drawn upon in Sections 5, 7 and 8 are semi-popular or tertiary syntheses of primary epigraphic material rather than the primary editions themselves; a fully primary-source study would require direct consultation of the relevant volumes of *Epigraphia Indica*, the

Journal of the Asian Society, and unpublished Archaeological Survey of India excavation reports for Ratnagiri, Lalitagiri, Udayagiri and Sisupalgarh. Third, comparative quantitative work – for example, a systematic count of female-authored or female-addressed donative inscriptions across the Diamond Triangle sites, of the kind undertaken by art historians for the stupa at Amaravati – has not to date been undertaken specifically for Odisha and would substantially strengthen future claims about the relative scale, rather than merely the existence, of women's religious patronage in the region.

15. Conclusion

This paper has argued that women occupied a more varied and, at moments, more publicly authoritative position within ancient and early medieval Odishan society than conventional dynastic historiography has generally acknowledged. From the unnamed queen of Vajiraghara who commissioned monastic caves for Jain ascetics in the first century BCE/CE, through the nuns and female lay donors documented at the Buddhist monastic complexes of Ratnagiri, Lalitagiri and Udayagiri, to the four or more Bhaumakara queens who ruled ancient Toshali-Utkala as sovereigns rather than regents, the archaeological and epigraphic record of Odisha preserves a regionally distinctive tradition of female religious and political agency. This tradition coexisted with, and was culturally reinforced by, an elaborate visual and literary vocabulary for representing women – the *alasakanya* of the *Silpa Prakasa*, the tantric yoginis of Hrapur, and the humanised heroines of the *Sarala Mahabharata* – that together constitute one of early medieval India's richest regional bodies of evidence for the study of gender. Realising the full potential of this evidence will require sustained collaboration between epigraphists, archaeologists, art historians and literary scholars, building on, but moving beyond, the synthesis offered here.

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