

# Of temples & megaliths

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**About 5 km northwest of the celebrated temples of the Pattadakal World Heritage Site, north of the Bhadra Nayakana Jalihal village, at Huligemmanna Kolla, is a sandstone rock shelter rearing up dramatically within a dense grove of trees, near a natural spring.**



The long aerial roots of trees precariously clinging on to the cliff trail past the overhang within which a collection of deities hold court. On the rear wall of the rock shelter created by the overhang are sculpted images of the Trimurtis, Saptamatrikas and Ganesha, dated to the Early Chalukyan period. There is also a large Nandi, beautifully carved, but bearing the ignominy of recently applied garish paints, facing a linga enshrined in a portion of the shelter. Several loose sculptures, some broken, others sporting layers of whitewash, are arranged in a corner.

A beautiful image of Nagaraja is stacked next to two images of Lajja Gauri from Chalukyan times and some badly broken images identified as Bhairava and Bhutamata from late 12th century.

A modern shrine to Huligemmanna occupies a part of the shelter while another modern shrine to Lakkamma or Lakshmi Devi has been built into the western end of the shelter, along with kitchen and living quarters for the present day caretakers.

## Scattered structures

As one gazes out southwards from the rock shelter, one's field of view is filled with the abundant riparian vegetation that crowds the valley. A small whitewashed shrine peeps from the foliage high on the eastern slope enclosing the valley. There are 8 other shrines scattered on the slopes on either side of the valley, at different levels. Seven of these are simple structures, just a sanctum in sandstone, sporting simple shikharas, with a pillared porch in front. The porches have collapsed in some of the shrines, tell-tale sockets in the plinths where pillars once stood.

Descending to the valley floor, one stumbles across 2 rough, unfinished temples in a clearing. Both are flat-roofed. The larger temple, on the north, has a broken Nandi image facing it. It consists of a closed mantapa preceding the smaller garbha-griha with a linga inside. The dvarapalas flanking the entry to the mantapa are unfinished. To the right of the right-hand side dvarapala is an inscription in early Kannada that offers a vital key to the purpose of this mysterious site. It refers to Vikramaditya II, the penultimate ruler of the Early Chalukyan dynasty, and states that Bennamma, son of Devari, sponsored this heavenward vehicle of the casket. This has been interpreted to mean that the temple was raised over the mortal remains of the king placed in a casket.

The scholar and epigraphist K V Ramesh even goes so far as to speculate that Vikramaditya II, along with his entire retinue, perished in an ambush at this very spot, to account for the other temples at the site. Interestingly, the site also contains a modern memorial shrine to a local holy man who died a few decades ago. He was instrumental in rescuing these temples from neglect some 60 years ago and reinstating worship.

Though the ambush conjecture appears rather far-fetched, especially since there is no account anywhere of the manner in which Vikramaditya II met his end, a few metres north of this tomb-temple lies an important pointer that this site has some connection with commemoration of the dead.

A natural boulder of sandstone has been carved into a hero stone. Hero stones were erected to commemorate persons who died valorous deaths, till late medieval times. The unknown hero commemorated in this case seems to have died protecting cattle in a raid, as indicated by the bottom panel in the carving. Hence it looks like this grove

was a commemorative site, perhaps even before the temples came to be erected.

Seeing my interest in the inscription, Lakshmana, the aged caretaker of the site, tells me there are other inscriptions nearby. We reach a boulder where there is a short inscription in early Kannada. Later, Prof Shrinivas Padigar, an eminent scholar and historian, translates this as 'Sri Selebhutu', probably the name of one of the Early Chalukyan artisans who worked on this site.

All around are vestiges of those ancient artisans — wedge holes, masons' marks, line sketches of sculptures. The Malaprabha Valley, where the sites of Aihole, Pattadakal and Badami are located, is rich with a culture of commemoration from the very early times. At Bachinnagudda, nearer to Pattadakal, by the side of the Badami-Pattadakal road, is a megalithic dolmen built in granite.

It is a grand monument from the Iron Age preceding Chalukyan rule, probably commemorating some dead person of importance. Nearby, in the fields is another commemorative megalith, built of thick, rough sandstone slabs. The renowned archaeologist Prof A Sundara opines that these 2 are the remnants of what must have been an extensive megalith field once.

On the shoulder of Bachinnagudda Hill, in alignment with the axis of the granite dolmen, is a shrine locally called Bachilingeshwara Gudi, which consists of a sanctum enshrining a linga and a ruined porch now renovated to form a plastered platform. The Archaeological Survey of India had unearthed the remains of a brick temple in the fields very near the dolmens. It looks highly likely that the temples are carrying forward the commemorative tradition of the dolmens in later times.

The spatial proximity of temples with megaliths are seen elsewhere too in the Malaprabha Valley, notably at Aihole, reinforces this conjecture. Local stonemasons inform that their name for the dolmens is 'dabkal gudi', which loosely translates as 'capstone shrine' — a good indication that they too consider the megaliths to be shrines.

### **A dark grove of mystery**

As one wanders among the spectacular cluster of magnificent temples at the main World Heritage Site at Pattadakal, it is easy to miss a multitude of smaller shrines that are overshadowed by the splendour of the larger monuments. These miniature shrines consist of only a small sanctum containing a linga with a Nandi figure facing it from a porch. The construction of some of these shrines are startlingly similar to that of megalithic dolmens.

Even accepting that most, or even all, of the temples at and near Pattadakal are commemorative, there are plenty of loose ends which refuse to be tied up. Why would the mighty Chalukyan King Vikramaditya II have a modest and obviously unfinished shrine as his memorial, tucked away in a remote valley far removed from the main site of Chalukyan magnificence containing the splendourous temples commemorating his queens Lokamahadevi and Trailokamahadevi? Was Huligemmanna Kolla really the site of an ambush which claimed the life of the king? Or does the alleged memorial have nothing to do with him? The answers to all this and more brood in the dark grove of mystery at Huligemmanna Kolla.