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**Lesson : Structural Temples: Khajuraho**

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## Structural Temples : Khajuraho

### 3.1 Khajuraho – Introduction

Khajuraho, known as Khajurahavaka in ancient times is today a small village located in Chattarpur district of Madhya Pradesh. It was one of the capitals of Chandellas. It was at Khajuraho that the Chandella kings patronized the construction of temples that are world-famous today. The temple-building at Khajuraho is approximately contemporary to Rajaraja's temple at Thanjavur, making the turn of the first millennium a period of intense building activity in different parts of the subcontinent. The temples built during this period mark a high point in regional Hindu architecture. The temples at Khajuraho are an important example of the Nagara style of architecture.

The temples of Khajuraho were discovered by T.S. Burt, a young officer of the Bengal Engineers in 1838, more than 700 years after they had been abandoned. The temple-complex was found amidst dense forest. Fortunately, the temples remained undiscovered by the Muslim conquerors such as Mohammad of Ghur and later the Sultanate rulers.

#### Did you know?

##### The ancient name of Khajuraho

An inscription records the ancient name of the site when the temples were consecrated as 'Sri Khajuravahaka'. Sri is a prefix used in Sanskrit to denote good fortune and vahaka may have referred to an administrative division, and Khajura may have been the actual name of the place. Tradition ascribes the name to two ornamental Khajur or date-palm trees at the city-gates.

**Source:** Punja (1999, 23)

#### 3.1.1 Patronage to the temples at Khajuraho

The group of temples at Khajuraho were built by the Chandella rulers, who were originally feudatories of the Gurjara-Pratiharas, but gained paramountcy in north India after the breakup of Harshavardhana's empire in the middle of the seventh century. As their name suggests, they claimed descent from Chandra or the moon. They established their own independent principality around the site of Khajuraho in Madhya Pradesh. This regional dynasty was powerful between the tenth and eleventh centuries CE.

Culture and the arts flourished under the Chandellas as the kings patronized poets and dramatists and built numerous grand and opulent temples. We know this both from the inscriptions of the Chandella kings as well as from contemporary Muslim chronicles.

The first important ruler of the Chandella dynasty Yashovarman (also known as Lakshavarman) defied the suzerainty of the Pratiharas. We know from an inscription at Khajuraho dated to his son's reign that Yashovarman built a magnificent temple to

Vishnu. This temple has been identified with the Lakshmana temple at Khajuraho that is also dedicated to Vishnu.

Yashovarman's son Dhanga (950-1002) consolidated the rule of the Chandellas. He made extensive conquests and was also a great patron of art and architecture. He built the Vishvanatha and Parshvanatha temples at Khajuraho. His son Ganda built a Vaishnava temple, now known as the Jagadambi temple and the Sun temple, now known as the Chitragupta temple.

Ganda's son Vidyadhara (1017-29) was one of the most powerful among the line of Chandella rulers. He defeated his contemporaries, the Kalachuris and the Paramaras, who rivalled his power in the Central India region. He was also able to actively resist the attacks of Mahmud of Ghazni. Vidyadhara finds mention in the chronicle of Ibnu'l-Athir, where is referred to as 'Bida' and described as a very powerful king. After Vidyadhara's rule, the Chandellas declined. The subsequent rulers could not repel the attacks by the Muslims or subdue the power of the Kalachuris and Khajuraho was gradually deserted. The temples functioned for a few decades even after political power had declined.

### 3.2 The temples at Khajuraho

At Khajuraho, about 25 temples patronized by the Chandella kings survive today. In all more than eighty temples once existed at the site. Some of these temples, now about a thousand or more years old are in an extremely good state of preservation. The temples belong to different dates and show us an evolution in the architectural style. The earliest shrines were simple and made of granite. Later, sandstone was used as a medium of construction that enabled sculptors to finely chisel the stone and produce the exquisite art that the temples are famous for today.

The temples are dedicated to different deities and cults including Shiva, Vishnu and Jain cults, but are all built in a similar architectural style. The temples form three distinct clusters according to their location. The western group of temples is Brahmanical in affiliation, while the group to the east of the site includes a few Brahmanical as well as Jaina temples. Two temples to the far south of the site are latest in date.

#### Did you know?

#### How the site looks today.

The site of Khajuraho with all its temples has undergone several changes since it was first discovered and documented by European explorers and archaeologists in the nineteenth century. The ancient monuments are now restored and set amidst manicured gardens. As a result, the ancient layout of the temple-complex has been lost. For example, none of the water-tanks, an integral part of temple-plans, now exist. Hence, route-map that pilgrims originally took is not traceable anymore.

The Western group of temples consists of five large and five small temples that

make up a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Many more temples would have once existed at Khajuraho. Several images are now in the Khajuraho Archaeological Museum, and these would have been originally placed in shrines now lost.

**Source:** Punja (1999, 27 and 32)

## FAQs

### Architectural terms: What is a plan? What is an elevation?

An **architectural plan** is a horizontal drawing or diagram of a building showing the structure or arrangement of something.

The **elevation** of a building is the height to which a building is raised from a reference point, such as the ground. It is the vertical view of a building when seen from the side.

**Source: Original**

There are certain typical features that are attributed to the temples at Khajuraho that make them unique in style. The temples are built in such a way that they appear to be lofty but are in fact compact structures. They have no enclosure walls. A high platform terrace or **jagati** is one of their important features and provides for an open ambulatory around the temples. The basement storey or **adisthana** is built high and decorated with relief sculptures that go all around the temples. The larger temples of the group are five-shrined – with four shrines at the four corners and the fifth principal shrine situated in the middle.

All components of the temple are inter-connected on an axis or straight line. The visitor enters into the **ardha-mandapa** and moves into the **mandapa**. Transepts are added to the **mandapa**, making the plan cruciform or cross-shaped in some of the larger temples at Khajuraho. The **mandapa** connects to the **antarala**, which finally leads to the sanctum sanctorum or the **garbha griha**, the house of the deity.

The **shikharas** of the Khajuraho temples are their most awe-inspiring feature. The roofs of the elaborately built temples rise to a spectacular height of 30 metres. Graded peaks and smaller replicas of the main **shikhara** roof decorate the spire. The indented plan of the sanctum is mirrored in the superstructure that is placed directly above it.

The interiors of the temples are richly carved with sculptures on the doorways, brackets, pillars etc. However, the architects and sculptors appear to have reached a fine balance between the temple design and ornamentation. The Khajuraho temples are extraordinary both for their architecture and their profuse imagery.

<b>Video</b>
<b>The temples at Khajuraho</b>
Click on the link below to view the picturesque temples of Khajuraho.
<b>Source:</b> - <a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ITlahqHIRg">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ITlahqHIRg</a>

### 3.2.2: The Chausath-Yogini temple

The Chausath yogini temple is the earliest among the group of temples at Khajuraho. The simple and rough construction of the temple suggests a date of around the ninth century. This temple is unusual in plan and is built on a rocky and slightly elevated area. It is made of large and roughly-hewn blocks of granite, without any use of mortar.

<b>Did you know?</b>
<b>No use of mortar</b>
Hindu architecture did not use mortar or plaster in its construction. Amazed at the ingenuity of the ancient architects, T.S. Burt the discoverer of the site and an engineer himself remarked:  "There was no masonry, I mean no plaster of any kind, used for the purpose of cementing these slabs to one another, their own weight and position alone being sufficient to give them a permanence which has lasted for ages, and would, unless disturbed by the growing of trees or other disturbing causes, sempiternally exist'  The use of mortar in India was first made in Islamic architecture.
<b>Source: Punja (1999, 36)</b>

The plan consists of a large rectangular open courtyard measuring 31.4 m x 18.3 m. Built along its sides are sixty-four small shrines that measure only about a metre in height and depth. Each of the cells has a small **nagara** style superstructure and thus looks like a miniature temple. One cell is larger than the others and is located directly opposite to the main entrance of the complex and this may have once housed the principal deity of the temple.

The temple-complex appears bare, with the exception of the **yogini** images. Originally, each of the small shrines would have housed an image of a yogini, but today only three of those survive. A yogini is an animal-headed goddess, connected with Tantric cults of the early medieval period. In the tantric cults, the feminine aspect was worshipped and given importance.

The surviving images include Brahmani, Maheshvari and **Mahishasuramardini**. These are among the oldest images at Khajuraho. The images have been dated to the ninth

century on the basis of **palaeography** of the short **label inscriptions**, the style of the sculpture and architecture.

### Did you know?

#### Other Yogini temples

In north India, fourteen temples dedicated to the Yogini cult have been discovered and identified. Notable ones are situated at two sites in Madhya Pradesh – Dudhai in Jhansi and Bheraghat in Jabalpur; and another at Hirapur near Bhubaneswara in Orissa. All these temples are circular in plan while the one at Khajuraho is rectangular.

**Source: Punja (1999, 30)**

### 3.2.3: The Lakshmana Temple

The Lakshmana temple is one of the most complete temples at Khajuraho. The overall design of the temple has survived in the original form. According to an inscription found at the base of the temple, it was consecrated in 954 CE, during the reign of King Dhanga who ruled from 950-1002. We know on the basis of an inscription that the temple was probably built by his father, Yashovarman alias Lakshavarman.

The Lakshmana temple is oriented to the East and has all the features of the fully-developed temples of Khajuraho. The plinth is high, with four subsidiary shrines located at each of the four corners. The shrines are similar in design and have a small **garbha griha**. An image of an avatar or incarnation of Vishnu may have been enshrined originally in the shrines.

Placed on an axis from east to west are the main components of the temple. First the **ardhamandapa**, followed by the **mandapa**, the **maha mandapa** and the **vimana** over which was built the **shikhara**. When looked at from outside, each constituent of the temple is clearly distinguishable by the separate roofs. Each of the roofs rises successively higher from east to west. The roofs of the three mandapas are pyramidal in form, while the shikhara of the shrine is rounded, a typical feature of the nagara style of temples built in north India. Around the largest shikhara is a cluster of smaller replicas of the main one.

The Lakshmana temple, when seen in profile, presents an impressive view of successively rising roofs to the viewer. The inscription of Dhanga proudly states that the rising roofs of the Lakshmana Temple can be compared with high mountain peaks. Indeed, mountain peaks are a frequently used metaphor when referring to the shikharas of Hindu temples.

Another important feature of the temple is the sculptural decoration all around the plinth of the temple. A frieze of reliefs runs all around the base of the temple. It shows horses and elephants in procession, warriors and a few erotic panels. It has been suggested that these scenes may actually portray lives of the Chandella rulers. The exterior of the temple is a seamless blend of deeply carved blocks of stone

The interiors of the temple are also richly sculpted. The mahamandapa or the great hall has richly carved pillars and coffers. Sculptural panels portray women in beautiful poses. The sanctum enshrines a three-headed and four-armed image of Vishnu shown as **Vaikuntha**. The central head is human while the side-heads are that of a boar and lion. Some other interesting sculptural reliefs at the Lakshmana Temple include scenes from Krishna's life including the subjugation of the serpent Kaliya and the killing of the demoness Putana.

### 3.2.4 The Varaha, Vishvanatha and Nandi Temples

The **Varaha Mandapa**, as the name suggests, enshrines the image of Vishnu as Varaha, his boar incarnation. This sculpture of Varaha is colossal and monolithic and carved with 674 miniature representations of gods and goddesses on its body. Next to the boar, a standing figure of **bhu-devi** or the Earth goddess existed at some point, but now only foot-prints of her image remain. On the pedestal, the serpent Shesha is also depicted. The shrine is built entirely of sandstone. The pavilion that houses the image is oblong, with a pyramidal roof that rests on fourteen plain pillars. The structure is datable to the early tenth century CE.

The Vishvanatha temple has all the features of the developed temples at Khajuraho that we discussed above. This temple is important as it was built sometime between the Lakshmana temple and the Khandariya Mahadeva temple. This is known from its architecture which although is simpler, anticipates the architecture of the Khandariya Mahadeva. An interesting inscription of Dhanga dated to 1002 CE says that two lingas – one of emerald and the other made of stone were enshrined in this temple. Now, only the stone linga survives. Beautiful depictions of women and divine couples decorate the interior of this temple. As Shiva temples almost always have a shrine dedicated to his vehicle, it is not surprising that a huge Nandi image rests under the canopy of an open, square pavilion facing the Vishvanatha Temple.

### 3.2.5 The Khandariya-Mahadeva Temple

The Khandariya Mahadeva temple (Khandhariya meaning 'Shiva as an Ascetic One' and Mahadeva meaning 'great god') represents the point of perfection in Central Indian architecture and art. The temple has been dated on stylistic grounds and it was probably built in the reign of Vidyadhara (1017-1029). It was probably once part of a temple-group. We know this as it shares a high plinth with two other small temples that may have once enshrined Vishnu images. But the Khandariya Mahadev is dedicated to Shiva and is the most imposing and magnificent of the three. A linga is worshipped in the sanctum sanctorum of this temple.

As is characteristic of temples at Khajuraho, the Khandariya Mahadeva stands on a steep plinth and is topped by a soaring shikhara that rises over 30 metres. The emphasis in the plan of this temple is clearly on verticality. The shikhara is decorated by numerous smaller replicas of itself and the overall effect is breathtaking. On top of the shikhara rests the **amalaka** and at the pinnacle, the **kalasha**.

Like the other temples at Khajuraho, the plan of the Khandariya Mahadeva temple is axial, with lateral transepts. This means that the floor-plan looks like a double-armed cross. The projections and recesses of the plan are highly elaborate both in the plan and in the elevation of the temple.

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The walls are minutely sculptured in horizontal bands with an assortment of sculpture on display. The figures sculpted include – gods, goddesses, mithunas and sura-sundaris on the projections and the vyalas and nagis on the recesses. The interiors of the temple are similar to other temples at Khajuraho but are more elaborately sculptured with exquisite makara toranas or gateways.

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/banzainetsurfer/4504562908/> entrance Pl check copyright

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/ejhrap/4934932716/> Khandariya mahadeva temple Pl check copyright

Compare	
Brihadishvara temple and Khandariya Mahadeva Temple	
Look at the pictures below. Can you see the differences in architectural features of the Brihadishvara temple and the Khandariya Mahadeva temple. Both the monuments are nearly contemporary but differ in basic architectural styles.	
<a href="http://www.flickr.com/photos/14601516@N00/329147681/">http://www.flickr.com/photos/14601516@N00/329147681/</a>	Khandariya Mahadeva Temple Pl check copyright
<a href="http://www.flickr.com/photos/fabindia/2365321352/in/photostream/">http://www.flickr.com/photos/fabindia/2365321352/in/photostream/</a>	
Brihadishvara temple Pl check copyright	
<b>Source:</b> Original	

### 3.3: The sculptures at Khajuraho

#### 3.3.1: The significance of the imagery at Khajuraho

There is an abundance of sculpture both on the outside and the inside of the temples at Khajuraho. The Khandariya Mahadeva temple is the most elaborately sculptured of the group. The sculptural programme at Khajuraho can be divided into five categories. These are – cult images; family or attendant deities or parivara shrines and Dikpalas; apsaras or sura-sundaries; scenes showing domestic life, teachers and disciples, musicians, erotic groups or couples and lastly sculptures of mythical animals such as vyala and shardula. The artists were particularly skilled at making beautiful images of women, which are found maximum in number and are among the finest. However, it is figures in explicitly sensual acts and poses have attracted most attention from scholars.

The erotic nature of some of the sculptural panels at the Khajuraho temples shocked the early discoverers. European writers on Indian art such as Alexander Cunningham, James Fergusson, Percy Brown and others described the scenes of love-making sculpted at Hindu temples as great masterpieces of art. But at the same time, a few western scholars described the art at Khajuraho as 'indecent', 'offensive' and 'obscene'.

The unambiguous portrayal of sexual acts in the sculptural relief at Khajuraho was a puzzling aspect for scholars, especially because the sculptures were carved in a religious context. Loving couples or groups are sculpted alongside the gods of the Hindu pantheon. More so, the sculptures are not hidden from the devotee, but are depicted all

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around the temple, where they could be easily seen. Indian scholars have given several interpretations of Khajuraho art and this has culminated in a lively debate on the nature and function of erotic art in religious contexts.

One major critique of Western interpretations of Indian art by Indian art-historians has been that any artistic expression needs to be understood in its context. In other words, what may seem taboo and unacceptable to us now, may have been socially acceptable in earlier times.

It has been pointed out by R. Nath (1978, 59-63) that Mithuna figures or loving couples are not a new feature in the art of Khajuraho, but are depicted in other contexts, datable as early as the second century BCE. Loving couples are found in Indian art across regions and belong to the decorative scheme of several religious shrines – Buddhist, Jains, Vaishnavas, Saivas and Shaktas, that is, they are not particular to one sect.

By the early medieval period, we find a profusion of erotic imagery in Hindu temples. Devangana Desai argues that the depiction of sensual scenes was not improper for medieval Indians for none of the major treatises on art and architecture such as the *Vastushastras* and the *Shilpashastras* nor the later writers such as Kalhana, Bilhana and Krishna Mishra of the Chandella court seem to have critiqued the display of explicit sexual imagery. In addition, since the art decorated a sacred space, religious sanction must have been there.

Some have considered the sculptures at Khajuraho to be visual representations of the sexual postures described in ancient treatises on sensual pleasure – the *Kamasutra*. However, this suggestion has been refuted by Desai who argues that the *Kamasutra* was a secular text and that the art at Khajuraho, and indeed at other medieval temples of Orissa was religious in nature. Thus, the erotic art at Khajuraho must have some religious or philosophical basis.

The paradox of the portrayal of explicitly erotic art in Hindu sacred spaces of the early medieval period has been explained in detail by Devangana Desai. Desai (1975, 52) offers the explanation that sexual practices were connected with fertility and vegetation cults from ancient times. Even though Hinduism evolved with time, it was a vast and complex philosophy and it continued to retain some beliefs and practices connected with fertility and vegetation. The depiction of sensual acts needs to be seen in its association with good luck and prosperity, as an auspicious *alankara* or ornamentation of medieval Indian art.

An analysis of erotic imagery has been made according to the placement of erotic images in the overall scheme of architecture of the temples. Desai notices that most of the loving couples are placed where the *mahamandapa* and the *garbha griha* intersect. She argues that the function may be 'magico-defensive' – that is the images protected the monument and the scenes portray the important yogic-philosophic concept of non-dualism.

The figures at Khajuraho are highly stylised, that is the bodies are not a naturalistic depiction. Perfection in the figures is emphasized upon by the artists. The women in the reliefs are shown as examples of the ideal beauty. They have been depicted with attractive bodies with slim waists, slender limbs, broad hips and rounded breasts. They

are portrayed as beautiful, sensuous and poised figures, often aware and comfortable with their sexuality.

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/25298281@N02/4021542170/in/photostream/> sculpture  
Pl check copyright

The frank depiction of the body and uninhibited display of sexuality of the woman in ancient India needs to be seen in the function of that art. Dehejia (1997) has dealt with the issue of female imagery in ancient Indian art, its purpose, audience and the role of women in the production of sexually explicit themes. She argues that women were closely associated with nature and fertility in the ancient Indian context, and by extension, were seen as semi-divines. The adornment of gateways, doorways and reliefs with beautiful women figures (*yakşis*) and languorous couples like *gandharvas* (sky-dwelling deities) and *mithunas* (couples in union) was understood to be auspicious and fruitful. As regards the spectatorship of such imagery, it is clear that they would have been encountered by anyone who visited the sacred shrine, not just men. Hence, the art of Khajuraho needs to be understood in the overall religious and social context of the period

An alternative argument that explains the depiction of erotic art at Khajuraho has been offered by Shobita Punja (1999). Punja's study combines a study of architecture, art, literature, mythology and living traditions at Khajuraho. She makes a description of the marriage of Shiva and Parvati, in the Shiva Purana and its re-enactment in the Maha-Shivaratri festival celebrated at Khajuraho every year. She understands the art-reliefs and figures on the temple walls as a representing various aspects of that great event.

So we have seen that scholars have extended different theories to explain the presence of erotic art at the temples of Khajuraho. The most plausible of these theories views the art within the overall cultural milieu of the time. All the theories regarding the sensual art at Khajuraho notwithstanding, it needs to be remembered that the erotic element of the art at Khajuraho has been emphasized upon at the cost of other kinds of sculpture such **makaras, apsaras, shalabhanjikas** and other cult images.

### Interesting detail

#### Women in Khajuraho art

The artists at Khajuraho made beautiful renditions of women in various beautiful and charming poses. They are shown as Nayikas, Apsaras and Shalabhanjikas. We see celestial nymphs hiding their faces either in embarrassment or modesty. Others are shown playing with a ball, examining self in the mirror, waiting on the threshold, removing a thorn from the foot, bathing, dancing and singing.

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/soumavp/5056343755/> women pl check copyright

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/25298281@N02/4021573580/> taking thorn out pl check copyright

**Source:** Original

## Summary

- The temples at Khajuraho situated in the heart of the Indian subcontinent were built by Chandella rulers in the tenth-eleventh century CE.
- The cluster of temples belong to different dates and help in the understanding of the evolution of architectural styles at Khajuraho.
- The earliest temple of the group is the Chaunsath yogini temple. It is a simple structure made of granite blocks and the rudimentary fashion in which it is built makes it clear that it was one of the earliest structures to be built at Khajuraho.
- The main features unique to Khajuraho temples include emphasis on verticality that is provided by a high platform terrace or **jagati**, and a high basement storey or **adisthana**. The plinth is decorated with relief sculptures that go all around the temples. The larger temples of the group are five-shrined. The different parts of the temple are inter-connected on an axial plan that takes a cruciform shape. The tall **shikharas** of the Khajuraho temples are their most awe-inspiring feature.
- Sculptural decoration of the interiors of Khajuraho temples are also noteworthy. They are richly carved with sculptures on the doorways, brackets, pillars etc.
- The architects and sculptors appear to have reached a fine balance between the temple design and ornamentation. The Khajuraho temples are extraordinary both for their architecture and their profuse imagery.
- The art at Khajuraho depicts several themes both religious and secular. Scholars have speculated over the explicit erotic nature of the art.

## Exercises

- 3.1 Write a short note on the Chaunsath Yogini temple.
- 3.2 What are the main features of the temples built in the typical Khajuraho style?
- 3.3 Write a short note on the monolithic sculptures found at Khajuraho.
- 3.4 Describe the architectural plan and form of Lakshmana and Khandariya Mahadeva Temples. What is so special about the elevation of these temples?
- 3.5 How can we understand the sculptures that adorn the Khajuraho temples?

## Glossary

**Amalaka:** Literally means "fruit". A flattened, fluted round form as a crowning member of the superstructure of northern-style Hindu temples. A repeating decorative motif on such superstructures.

**Antarala:** An antechamber or intermediate space between the main shrine and the ardhmandapa.

**Apsara:** A female minor divinity that dwells in the sky. Apsaras are wives of the gandharvas and are often shown dancing or making music.

**Ardha-mandapa:** A closed hall or mandapa that may be connected to the main shrine of a temple by an antarala.

**Dikpala:** the guardians of the eight directions or quarters.

**Garbha-griha:** The "womb-chamber". The inner, principal compartment of a temple in which the image of the deity or the linga is housed and worshipped.

**Jagati:** In architectural terms, a terrace, a plinth, or platform; the basement of a temple.

**Kalasha:** Literally meaning a water-pot. The crowning emblem of a Hindu temple.

**Label-Inscription:** An inscription that is inscribed near an art-relief or on the pedestal of an image and often describes the scene or image portrayed.

**Makara** A mythological quasi-crocodilian creature that is a symbol of auspiciousness and the primal life force. A makara combines the elements of fish, crocodile, lion and elephant. It is also the vehicle of goddess Ganga.

**Mandapa:** A temple-hall.

**Mithuna:** A loving couple, a symbol of union.

**Palaeography:** The study of ancient forms of writing, as in inscriptions to be able to determine their age and date.

**Shalabhanjika:** A tree goddess who grasps the sal tree.

**Shardula:** A leogryph; a winged lion or tiger.

**Shikhara:** In North Indian architecture, the spire or tower over the shrine of the temple. In south Indian architecture the term does not refer to the entire superstructure, but only to the globular or domical roof of the upper-most element in the superstructure.

**Vimana:** the shrine portion of a temple and its superstructure

**Vyala:** A horned lion

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### Suggested Readings

