

Lakshmana Temple, Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh, India



Top left Map showing the location of Khajuraho. Digital image courtesy of UPSC with Nikhil

Top right Lakshmana Temple, Khajuraho. Digital image courtesy of Wikimedia

Bottom left Kandariya Mahadev Temple, Khajuraho Group of Monuments. Digital image courtesy of John Ubinger / flickr.com

Date: Dedicated 954 CE

Patron: Commissioned by King Yasovarman (925-950 CE) of the Chandellas, and consecrated by his son in 954, marked by an inscription fixed to the porch. The Chandellas were becoming a major dynasty and culture during the medieval period.

Site and scale: Part of a complex of 85 temples built from 900 to 1150 CE (25 now exist) dedicated to Vishnu and built primarily for the purpose of worship in a secluded and safe rural location.

Monumental in scale c. 100 feet (30.5m) in length, built on a raised platform 2.5m high.

Materials and processes: Finely grained local sandstone, no mortar, raised on a granite base.

Sculptures carved in pale buff, to pink and yellow sandstone.

Function: Hindu temple dedicated to Vishnu, and built primarily for the purpose of worship but also as a social and cultural centre.

Style: Indo Aryan Nagara style of architecture, embellished with a profusion of sculptural work.

CORE CONCEPTS

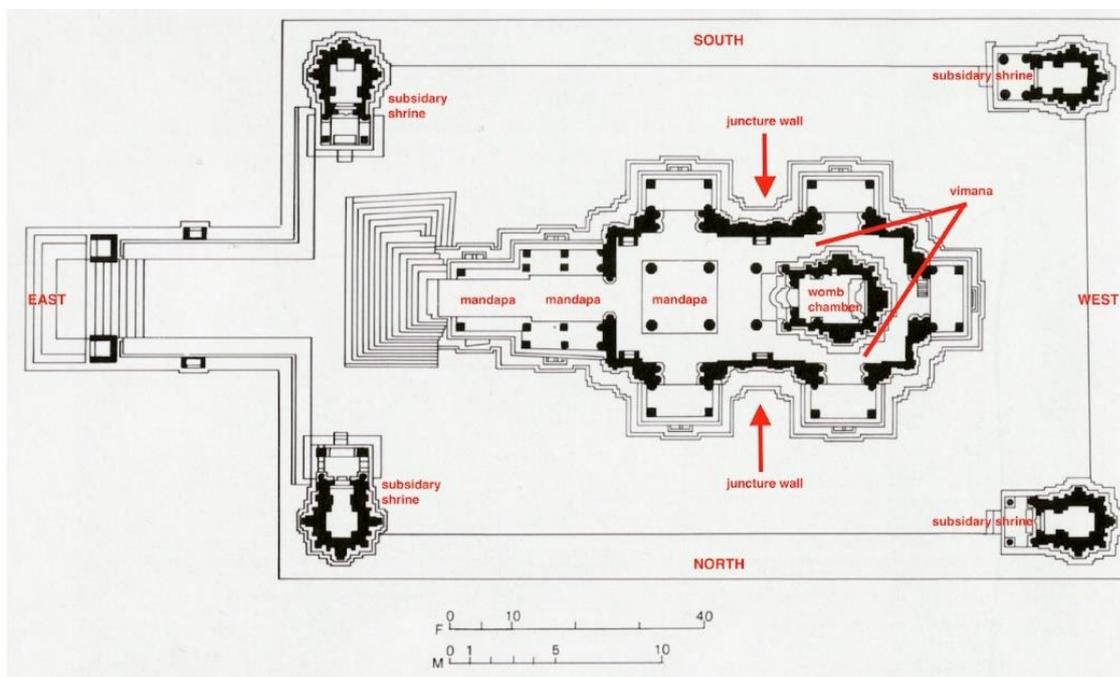
Function: Khajuraho was primarily a place of worship with temples and tanks. It was an active religious and cultural centre dedicated to charitable works where religious texts were recited, dance and music performed, and people came seeking cures for disease. The Lakshmana was one of three major temples.

Lakshmana Temple as a representation of the divine: Indian temples are built according to the canons laid down in texts called the Vastushastra. These cover every aspect of the building from selection of site; to construction from plinth to spire, with the proportions of different portions; and details of adornment for walls and pillars. Adornment or decoration is considered auspicious within Hindu art. The Puranas (comprising Hindu myths and legends) apply the terminology of the human body to the temple, with the base as the foot (*pada*), the wall as the thigh (*jangha*) and the spire as the head (*shikhara*).

The Lakshmana exemplifies a composite religious practice – Tantric-Puranic – and is a major Vishnu temple, enshrining the esoteric icon of the god as Vaikuntha. During this period orthodox Brahmins were reasserting themselves against extreme Tantric sects (which referred to non-Vedic texts and magic rituals for union with the Supreme Being). Both believed in the role of female energy (*Shakti*) in the creation and dissolution of the universe.

Hindu Gods: The Supreme Being is both transcendent (above physical human experience) and unmanifest (formless), but also immanent (pervading the universe) and manifest (visible to the eye) in graded powers and elements through various images. There is a hierarchical order of images: the principal divinity housed in the centre/sanctum of the temple, and its emanations and sub-emanations in the surrounding halls. The architects present the 'temple as cosmos' with the numerous projections, and indentations on the exterior and interior accommodating a vast pantheon of sculptural figures. The Lakshmana Temple houses the Vaikuntha-Vishnu image - a three headed image of Vishnu, bearing a human, a boar and a lion head.

Ground plan: The design and layout of the temple is unique to Kharjuraho, and is a 5-part ground plan for the main temple with 4 smaller shrines (like miniature temples) at the corners of the site on a high platform. This raises the sacred space above the temporal, material world. The temple is aligned from east to west with the entrance at the east. The visitor climbs the high platform to be greeted by the ornamental gateway at the entrance of the porch and hence the other elements of the temple. This large temple has a processional pathway (“ambulatory”) around the central shrine, so devotees can circle around the deity (always clockwise) as a gesture of respect and worship. This plan is known as a *sanhara* temple. The circumnavigation of the temple symbolises the circumambulation of the cosmos.



Plan of Lakshmana temple. Digital image courtesy of Smarthistory

Using European terminology, it is a double-cross with arms of equal length.

Elevation: There are three main divisions. Firstly the plinth or basal storey with ornamental mouldings of human activities and geometrical designs; secondly the wall divided into two or three sculptural zones, that joins the large hall and sanctum decoration with erotic groups; and thirdly the roofs. The porch and halls have pyramidal roofs, while the spire over the sanctum is curvilinear with graded peaks around it. The progressive ascent of these roofs from east to west, before descent, resembles a mountain, Mount Meru, the centre of the Universe. An *amalaka* – a stone disk, usually with ridges on the rim – sits atop the temple’s main tower. According to one interpretation, the *amalaka* represents a lotus, and thus the symbolic seat for the deity below. Another interpretation is

that it symbolises the sun, and is thus the gateway to the heavenly world. The *amalaka* is crowned with a *kalasha* (finial), from which a temple banner is often hung.

The true arch (in which the parts of the arch support each other in tension) was unknown in India at this time. The arches in Khajuraho's temple are made by corbelling, where a dome or arch is created by overlapping masonry courses - this accounts for the step-like construction.

Style: The Khajuraho temples are a pinnacle of the North Indian *Nagara* architectural style. The *Nagara* style's primary feature is a central tower (*shikhara*) which is curvilinear in form. This is surrounded by smaller, subsidiary towers (*urushringa*) and intermediate towers; these naturally draw the eye up to the highest point, like a series of hills leading to a distant peak. Setting the temple on a raised base (*adhithana*) also shifts the eye upwards, and promotes this vertical quality.

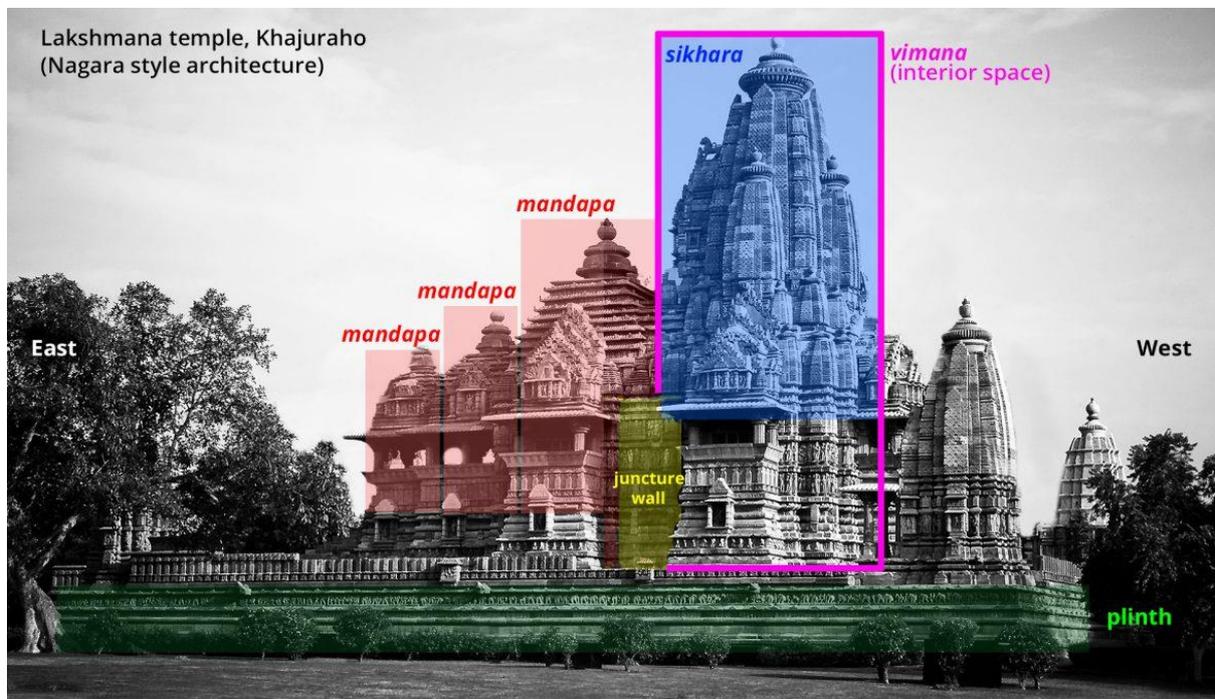
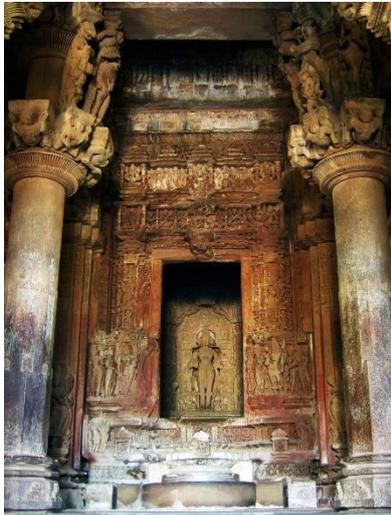


Diagram of Lakshmana temple, Khajuraho (Nagara style architecture). Digital image courtesy of Smarthistory

Interior of the temple: Inner Sanctum (*Garbhagrha*). This contains the image of the temple's primary deity. The basic function of a Hindu temple is to serve as the deity's dwelling-place (the most common word for temple, *mandir*, simply means "house"), and devotees come there to interact with and worship the resident deity. It is a dark, peaceful place where the devotee is reborn to a higher life. As a hollow chamber it resembles a cave and its centre is considered the centre of the universe. In this respect, Hindu temples are for individual and family worship, different from places of worship in many other religious traditions, which serve as centres for congregational worship. The word *garbha* can

mean either “womb” or “embryo”; both meanings connote potentiality, hiddenness, and a sense of development. The *garbhagrha* was located directly below the summit of the highest tower, with the primary deity directly under the highest point. This is conceived as the cosmic axis connecting heaven and earth. In the three cardinal niches are the three incarnations of Vishnu.



Interior of Lakshmana Temple. Digital image courtesy of wonderfultourism.blogspot.com

Great Hall (*Mahamandapa*). The temple’s main entrance-hall, separated from the central shrine by a short vestibule, distinguished by transepts (bumped-out portions perpendicular to the temple’s main axis). The ceiling is decorated with geometric and floral designs.

Vestibule (*Antarala*). A transitional space between a temple’s main hall and the inner sanctum. This architectural element marks the liminal space between the exterior world and the divine world. Decorated with sexual figures to indicate that sexuality and encountering the divine are both liminal experiences that force us out of ourselves.

Hall (*Mandapa*). A hall in the temple, forming a transitional space.

Entrance Porch (*Mukhamandapa*). The entrance porch formed a transitional area between the outside world and the hall, and its gateway is decorated with mythic aquatic animals.

Secondary Tower (*Urushringa*). Smaller towers on the temple’s exterior to lead the eye up to the highest point. Their shape often replicates that of the tallest central tower, and serves to draw the eye upwards towards it.

Base Platform (*Adhishsthana*). The raised base on which the temple was built. These are particularly high in the temples at Khajuraho, and by their height accentuate the temple's upward thrust.

The complex forms were designed to be seen from various viewpoints and have a sense of stability with the horizontals of the bases, balconies and awnings.

Sculptural Decoration: The Lakshmana is dedicated to Vishnu, the god who preserves the universe. He is associated with royalty and regal power and hence is an appropriate choice for the King. Vishnu assumed ten incarnations or avatars in order to overthrow evil, three of which appear in this temple. The Boar who lifts the Earth Goddess out of the nether region; Vaman (meaning 'small in stature' in Sanskrit) the 5th avatar of Vishnu; and Vaikuntha, a composite form with faces of a Boar, a Lion and a Human. His avatars in the niches include a fish, tortoise, and so forth. He is also seen as a Yogeshvara seated in the lotus posture giving discourse to sages, on the upper cardinal niches at Lakshmana.

The other figures are shown as sensuous in a variety of poses and attitudes. They are not muscular like classical Greek and Roman sculptures, but curvaceous forms revealed through diaphanous clothes. They are all harmoniously integrated with the architecture and add to the rhythm of the monuments in a unified design. Hundreds of divinities are carved on the walls and niches of the inner halls and conceptually integrated with the central divinity in the sanctum. Each individual sculpture is part of a preconceived order.

Eight categories of sculpture:

The architect has presented the temple as Mount Meru, the centre of the universe, around which the planetary divinities revolve in sculptural form.

1. Cult icons – including goddesses installed in the sanctum.
2. Attendant and surrounding divinities – in round high reliefs, e.g. in cardinal niches.
3. Demi-gods – such as dynamic flying figures on the top row symbolising the celestial world.
4. Celestial women/divine nymphs – in various activities from front, back and side views, such as applying make-up, removing a thorn from a foot, carrying a baby, dancing. The ancient Vastu text suggests 16 types and says; "*As a house without a wife, as frolic without a woman, so without a figure of a woman the monument will be of inferior quality and bear no fruit.*"
5. Amorous couples – erotic scenes with auspicious and protective symbolism, each about a metre in height on the main wall of the temple. There are several explanations for what they represent: desire (karma), the aim of life to delight the lay visitor, or they are designed to

test spiritual strength. Tourist guides often say they represent postures from the Kamasutra but this is not so, as they show activities (such as oral sex) condemned there, and were more likely designed to mock the practices of extreme Tantric sects. They go back to ancient fertility cults and appear in Hindu, Buddhist and Jain art and are often metaphoric. It is suggested they combine the polar opposites of man/woman, inhalation/exhalation, and hence unification as in Yoga. During the Chandellas' time, men were polygamous but there was no concept of 'free love', and women were confined to their one husband and often stayed indoors. The architect of the Lakshmana was the first to place these coupled figures symbolically on the juncture wall of the great hall and the sanctum.

6. Secular scenes – royal hunts, armies, domestic, educational and trading scenes, on the platform and plinth.
7. Animals – mythical and realistic, for example elephants on the basement.
8. Geometric and floral designs



Lakshmana Temple (details), Khajuraho. Digital images courtesy of Wikimedia

MATERIALS, PROCESSES AND TECHNIQUES

The temple complex was built using local materials – granite for a strong base, sandstone without mortar for the exterior walls and roofs, with some ashlar for the supporting walls. Historians know the names of many of the architects, masons and sculptors but this building was not conceived as architect-designed or individual to the designer as all temples followed the same template/canon of design of ground plan, and decorative scheme.

CULTURAL, SOCIAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

The Chandellas aimed to legitimise their new social and political status by temple building – an effective way to associate themselves with the Brahmin class (rather than their humble tribal origins), and bring fame and merit (*punya*) on themselves. It was by acquiring the prestigious Vaikuntha-Vishnu image as a war trophy that established the Chandellas as an independent power. The King also installed a huge iconic statue of the Boar (Varaha), the third incarnation of Vishnu, who rescued the Earth Goddess from primeval waters, in front of the temple. This was a political metaphor which “*symbolised the king saving the earth by vanquishing enemies. By installing the mighty board, Yashovarman asserted his regal power*” (Devangana Desai). The Lakshmana Temple dedicated to Vishnu is the first in the new Nagara style, which is considered to be the greatest achievement of Northern Indian temple builders. Khajuraho was never intended to be a hub of trade but a centre of culture; the Chandellas developed plays in Sanskrit and celebrated religious festivals appreciated by the elite refined culture of both Hindus and Jains.

Religious background: Sanskrit texts, the Vedas (recording historical events) and the Upanishads, which focused not on deities but on abstract ideas, are the basis for the later Hindu religion: *Brahman* (universal spirit or world soul), *Atman* (one eternal human soul) and *Maya* (the cosmic flux which animates all things). The aim was to absorb the *Atman* into the *Brahman* to liberate the soul from *Karma* (successive reincarnations of human and animal forms determined by conduct). Belief in *Karma* led to the caste system. The Bhagavad Gita from 200 BCE marks the emergence of the Hindu religion with the trinity of Brahma (creator of universe), **Vishnu (preserver and supporter)** and Shiva (destroyer), all identical in substance with interchangeable roles. In other words, they represent the male and female, destructive and creative, proceeding from the one divine Absolute. In other words, Hindus are not pagan as they do not worship many gods but many manifestations. Humans can have a personal relationship with the manifestations of god. Hindu temple architecture emerged from the 6th BCE and culminated in the major phase from the 10th to 13th. At this time the first sculptures of gods appear and representation is codified in the Manasara Silpasastra. These representations can be consecrated, and charged with divine spirit through ritual but are not objects of worship as such.

WAYS IN WHICH IT HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED

Despite tourist myths of Tantric sex-rituals, the Lakshmana Temple is still visited as a divine site and place of worship by thousands of devout Hindus, although the cultural context within which it was built has long since disappeared.

Bibliography

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Quiz questions to check understanding:

1. Is it appropriate to talk about national identity in relation to this temple?
2. Is it appropriate to talk about ethnic identity in relation to this temple?
3. This work is primarily an expression of the divine. Which God does it relate to? And at which stage of their being?
4. Why might a king choose to dedicate a temple to Vishnu?
5. How is God manifested in the design and lay-out and construction of the temple?
6. How is God manifested in the decoration of the temple?
7. How are the representations of deities different from that of other religions (choose one religion as your example)?
8. What is the relationship of the worshipper to the deity and how is it manifested in the architecture?
9. This temple is dedicated to a male deity. Does this affect the design of the temple and one's relationship to it?