

Bishnupur Temples: A Study of Form and Meaning in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Terracotta Sculptures of Bengal

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Synopsis

Religious and secular architecture of Bengal is based on the indigenous chala type of house with verandah. The distinctive form is influenced by the easily available clay, bamboo and thatch. The durable brick temple is modeled after the 'Thakur badi' built like a chala house with curved roof. The large temple area is divided into square and rectangular space and roofed with vaults and domes. The expedience of arcuate architecture is Islamic. In exchange the Sultans in Bengal borrowed the curved umbrella roof of chala for mosques and tombs. The brick temples named after the number of spires or chala roofs are embellished with cusped arches and sculptured terracotta panels on walls and ceilings. Hence they are known as terracotta temples. The distinctive form of terracotta temples flourished during the late medieval period. Bishnupur in the southern district of Bankura in West Bengal has a cluster of remarkable types of terracotta temples with terracotta sculptured reliefs that resemble exquisite ivory carving. The compositions have affinity to pictorial weaving of Bishnupur silk, which is an enchanting link to the rich relics of the past.