

Zoomorphic and Avian Imagery in Early Medieval Temple Architecture: A Study of the Harihar Temple at Osian

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Abstract

The Harihar (Vishnu) Temple at Osian, Rajasthan, represents an important example of early medieval Indian temple architecture, distinguished by its rich sculptural program and symbolic complexity. This study examines the role of animal and avian imagery within the architectural framework of the temple, focusing on six representative sculptural motifs documented through detailed analytical sketches. These include a stylized mythical avian figure with a spiral motif, confronted water birds (Hamsa motif), a composite mythical beast emerging from ornamental scrollwork, an animal mask integrated into an architectural corner bracket, a lion-like creature in a dynamic crouching posture, and a simplified quadruped motif forming part of a decorative frieze. The analysis reveals that animal and bird sculptures at the Harihar Temple were deliberately designed to serve multiple functions beyond ornamentation. They acted as symbolic guardians, conveyors of cosmological concepts, and visual elements contributing to architectural rhythm and spatial hierarchy. Symmetrical motifs like the confronted Hamsas emphasize balance, harmony, and spiritual purity, particularly at transitional or sacred architectural zones. The study also highlights the coexistence of elaborate and simplified zoomorphic forms, demonstrating an intentional balance between narrative emphasis and repetitive decorative efficiency. Through sketch-based documentation and iconographic interpretation, this research underscores the sophistication of early medieval sculptors in integrating symbolism, structure, and aesthetics. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the symbolic language embedded in Gurjara-Pratihara temple architecture and reinforce Osian's significance as a major center of artistic and religious expression in early medieval India.

Keywords: Harihar (Vishnu) Temple, Osian, Rajasthan, animal and avian sculpture, sacred animal motifs.

1. Introduction

The Sachiya Mata Temple at Osian, located in the Jodhpur district of Rajasthan, represents one of the most significant religious and architectural landmarks of early medieval India. Situated on the eastern fringe of the Thar Desert, Osian functioned historically as a flourishing urban and religious center, often described as an “oasis” amidst the arid landscape. The temple complex stands as a compelling testimony to the cultural synthesis, religious pluralism, and architectural excellence that characterized the region between the 8th and 12th

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centuries CE. Constructed initially in the 8th century under the patronage of Maharaja Utpal (Upal) Dev of the Parmar dynasty and subsequently expanded during the 12th century, the Sachiya Mata Temple exemplifies the Gurjara-Pratihara architectural tradition. Built primarily of sandstone, the temple features intricately carved arches, elaborately ornamented pillars, sculptural panels depicting Hindu deities, and a prominent central shikhara. The temple complex also includes subsidiary shrines such as the Chandi Ka Mandir and the Amba Mata Mandir, reflecting continued religious patronage and architectural development over several centuries. What distinguishes the Sachiya Mata Temple from many contemporary monuments is its unique religious history, marked by the convergence of Hindu and Jain traditions. Originally associated with the worship of Chamunda, a fierce goddess who accepted animal sacrifices, the site underwent a profound transformation following the influence of Jain Acharya Ratnaprabhasuri (also known as Vijay Ratna Prabhasurji). Jain narratives describe how the goddess adopted non-violent forms of worship and emerged as Sachiya Mata, a vegetarian protector deity aligned with Jain ethical principles. This transformation played a crucial role in the emergence of the Oswal Jain community and highlights the dynamic negotiation of religious identities in early medieval Rajasthan. Beyond its religious importance, the temple provides valuable insights into the socio-cultural, political, and artistic milieu of the period. The sculptural program of the temple—featuring images of Vishnu, Lakshmi, Varaha, Durga, and other deities—illustrates theological inclusivity and artistic sophistication. As a living monument, the Sachiya Mata Temple continues to attract pilgrims, scholars, and tourists, reinforcing its enduring relevance in Rajasthan's spiritual and cultural landscape.

1.1 Historical background

During the 8th century CE, Osian formed an important part of the Gurjara-Pratihara Empire, one of the dominant political powers of northern India. The Pratiharas were notable patrons of temple architecture, and Osian flourished under their rule as a religious and commercial hub. The temples erected during this period exhibit exceptional craftsmanship and stylistic maturity, reflecting the high standards of early medieval architectural practice. The artistic idiom developed at Osian later influenced temple construction across Rajasthan and adjoining regions. Following the decline of Pratihara authority, Osian came under the control of the Chauhan dynasty. By the late 12th century, particularly during the reign of Chauhan king Kumar Singh, Osian had expanded into a sprawling and prosperous city. Literary sources and archaeological evidence suggest that the town supported a vibrant population, including a strong presence of Oswal Jains, merchants, artisans, and temple functionaries. At its zenith, Osian reportedly housed more than a hundred temples, underscoring its importance as a sacred landscape. This prosperity was abruptly disrupted in 1195 CE when Turkish forces passed through the region. According to the *Upkeshgachchaprabandh*, the city suffered extensive destruction during these invasions. Temples were damaged, and the population—particularly the Oswal Jain community—was forced to migrate to safer regions. Although Osian never regained its former urban stature, its temples survived as enduring witnesses to its past glory.

1.2 Architectural and sculptural importance of Harihar (Vishnu Temple)

The architectural heritage of Osian is best understood through a detailed examination of its major temple complexes, particularly the group of Harihar temples, which collectively illustrate the religious pluralism and sculptural sophistication of the period.

Harihar Temple No. 1: Located outside the present village, Harihar Temple No. 1 is a remarkable example of early medieval temple design. Although the sanctum is now empty, the lintel prominently features Vishnu mounted on Garuda, symbolizing divine protection. Below

Vishnu are sculpted representations of the Navagrahas, indicating the cosmological concerns embedded within temple iconography. The door jambs are richly decorated with floral motifs, serpent couples (Naga-dampati), and the river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna with their attendants—elements traditionally associated with purification and auspicious entry. One of the most striking sculptural details is the depiction of a woman wringing water from her wet hair, a motif that reflects both artistic realism and aesthetic sensitivity. The exterior walls of the temple present a vibrant pantheon: Yama riding his buffalo, Ganesha as the remover of obstacles, Trivikrama with his raised left leg, Surya seated with a crescent moon behind his head, and Agni riding a ram.

The rear wall features Indra mounted on his elephant Airavata, alongside the composite deity Harihara, symbolizing the unity of Vishnu and Shiva. Flanking Harihara are Trishulpurush and Nandi on one side, and Garuda on the other, reinforcing sectarian harmony. Additional sculptures include standing Surya, seated Shiva on Nandi, Kuvera as the god of wealth, and a four-armed Mahishasuramardini. The latter, closely resembling Mathura examples though lacking a beard, emphasizes regional stylistic variations. Two damaged Dikpalas further underscore the temple's comprehensive cosmological program. The middle niche displays Narasimha, Vishnu's ferocious incarnation, while a multi-faced Brahma appears nearby. The upper register narrates episodes from Krishna's life, including his birth, Putana Vadh, Kalia Daman, Govardhanadhari Krishna, and the slaying of various demons, demonstrating the narrative richness of Osian's sculptural tradition.



Figure 1. Harihar Temple

Mini-Temples Surrounding Harihar Temple No. 1: Four subsidiary shrines encircle the main temple (Figure 1), reinforcing its Panchayatana layout. Although one shrine is now destroyed, it once housed sculptures of Kankali Mahishasuramardini and Shringar-Durga. The twelve-armed Shringar-Durga, seated on a lion and engaged in self-adornment, is particularly noteworthy, with parallels found at Abhaneri and Roda, dating to the 8th century. Another shrine

contains standing Surya and a refined depiction of Revanta, Surya's son, shown on horseback. The shrine to the right and rear displays Vishnu and Garuda-seated Vishnu. In front of the main temple, dancing Ganesha and seated Kuvera symbolize joy and prosperity, while a meditating Buddha statue to the left reflects Osian's remarkable religious inclusivity.

Harihar Temples No. 2 and No. 3: Harihar Temple No. 2 continues the sculptural narrative with panels depicting scenes from Krishna's life, alongside Ashta-Dikpalas, Ganesha, Trivikrama, Vishnu, Harihara, Surya, Shiva, Mahishasuramardini, Narasimha, and Brahma. Notably, this temple features a depiction of *Kalyan Sundar*, the wedding of Shiva and Parvati, comparable to similar representations at Kaman, Kannauj, and Ellora. Harihar Temple No. 3 follows a similar iconographic program, reiterating themes of Vaishnava devotion, Shaiva symbolism, and mythological storytelling. The repetition across temples suggests a coherent artistic vision and a well-established workshop tradition in Osian.

Temples No. 4 and No. 5: Temples No. 4 and No. 5 maintain the stylistic continuity seen in earlier structures. Temple No. 4 is distinguished by a standing Vishnu sculpture crowning the structure, while Temple No. 5, located near the *bawadi* (stepwell), features Dikpalas, Ganesha, Surya, Vishnu, and Mahishasuramardini. Their proximity to water structures further highlights the integration of sacred architecture with urban planning. Osian's temples collectively represent a pinnacle of early medieval Indian art, architecture, and religious synthesis. Despite the city's destruction in the late 12th century, its sculptural wealth continues to offer invaluable insights into the political, cultural, and spiritual life of the period. Like Khajuraho, Osian stands as a monumental archive in stone—yet with an even earlier lineage—affirming its significance as one of India's most important ancient temple towns.

1.3 Review of literature

The Sachiya Mata Temple and the Osian temple complex has been sustained due to its architectural merit and religious significance. Early archaeological surveys by Cunningham (1871) and later systematic documentation by the Archaeological Survey of India highlighted Osian as an important temple town of western India, noting the presence of over a hundred temples during its peak period. These studies emphasized Osian's strategic and commercial importance along ancient trade routes connecting Marwar with Gujarat and Central Asia. Art historians such as Percy Brown (1959) and Stella Kramrisch (1976) examined the temple within the broader framework of early medieval Indian temple architecture, identifying the Sachiya Mata Temple as a refined example of the Gurjara-Pratihara style. Their analyses focused on structural elements such as the use of sandstone, corbelled domes, sculpted toranas (arches), and iconographic programs that blend Shaiva, Vaishnava, and Shakta themes. Jain historical traditions and inscriptions have been extensively discussed by scholars like Jain (1990) and Cort (2001), who explored the role of Acharya Ratnaprabhasuri in transforming local religious practices. These works underline the significance of non-violence (*ahimsa*) in reshaping ritual traditions at Osian, particularly the abolition of animal sacrifice and the redefinition of Chamunda as Sachiya Mata. Such narratives are crucial for understanding the interaction between Jain monastic movements and local cults during the early medieval period. Regional historians including Sharma (2002) and Tod (revised editions) provided contextual insights into the Parmar dynasty's patronage of religious institutions. They highlighted Maharaja Upal Dev's role in temple construction and religious reforms, situating the Sachiya Mata Temple within the political history of Marwar. Ethnographic studies further note the continuing reverence of Sachiya Mata as the *kuldevi* of the Parmar and Oswal communities across Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Madhya Pradesh. More recent studies have adopted an interdisciplinary approach, integrating archaeology, art history, and religious studies to interpret the temple as a site of cultural convergence rather than

sectarian dominance. These works emphasize that the Sachiya Mata Temple is not merely an architectural monument but a living symbol of Rajasthan's pluralistic spiritual heritage.

2. Material and methods

The present study was carried out on 21 December 2025 with the objective of analyzing the use of avian and zoomorphic imagery in early medieval temple architecture, with special reference to the Harihar (Vishnu) Temple located near the Sachiya Mata Temple, Osian, Jodhpur district, Rajasthan. (Latitude: 26° 25' 48" N, Longitude: 72° 32' 60" E). The study adopted a qualitative, descriptive, and iconographic research approach commonly used in art-historical and archaeological investigations. Primary data were collected through on-site visual documentation of sculptural elements depicting animals and birds integrated into the temple architecture. Care was taken to ensure that no physical disturbance, alteration, or damage was caused to the temple structure or its sculptures during documentation. High-resolution photographs of relevant sculptural panels, friezes, brackets, and reliefs were captured under natural lighting conditions to record form, placement, surface texture, and weathering patterns. Subsequently, detailed analytical sketches were prepared based on the collected images. These sketches were used as primary analytical tools to examine stylistic features, symbolic motifs, compositional balance, and degrees of abstraction in the avian and animal forms. Comparative analysis was conducted by correlating the observed motifs with established iconographic traditions of early medieval Indian temple art. Secondary sources, including published literature on Gurjara-Pratihara architecture and zoomorphic symbolism, were consulted to support interpretation and contextual understanding.

3. Result

The temple complex of Osian, Rajasthan, represents one of the most significant centers of early medieval Indian temple architecture, renowned for its rich sculptural vocabulary and stylistic maturity. Among its many monuments, the Harihar (Vishnu) Temple stands out for its extensive use of animal and bird motifs integrated into architectural elements such as friezes, brackets, lintels, and corner projections. These zoomorphic and avian sculptures are not merely decorative embellishments but form an essential part of the symbolic and functional language of the temple. In early Indian temple architecture, animals and birds served multiple roles—as guardians, cosmic symbols, narrative devices, and ornamental rhythm-makers. Their representations often embodied philosophical ideas such as protection, balance, movement, and the interconnectedness of nature and divinity. At Osian, these motifs reflect a synthesis of Vaishnava, Shaiva, Shakta, and regional folk traditions, characteristic of the Gurjara-Pratihara artistic milieu between the 8th and 12th centuries CE.

This study examines six sculptural representations of animals and birds from the Harihar Temple, documented through high-quality analytical sketches (Sketches I–VI). These sketches allow for a detailed examination of form, symbolism, erosion patterns, and architectural placement. By focusing on stylized avian forms, confronted water birds (Hamsa motifs), composite mythical beasts, animal masks on architectural brackets, lion-like guardian figures, and simplified quadruped motifs, the paper aims to understand how faunal imagery functioned within the temple's visual and spiritual framework. The objective of this research is to analyze the iconographic significance, artistic treatment, and architectural role of animal and bird sculptures in the Harihar Temple and to highlight their contribution to the broader tradition of early medieval Indian temple art.

3.1 *Stylized mythical avian creature with spiral motif (Sketch-I)*

This high-quality sketch represents a stylized avian or semi-mythical creature carved in relief, characterized by a prominent curved beak, raised crest, and a distinctive spiral motif forming the body or tail. The sketch effectively captures the sculptural depth of the original stone carving through fine pencil shading, emphasizing erosion marks, surface granularity, and chiseling patterns. The avian head is shown in profile, with a hollowed eye cavity that suggests both symbolic abstraction and age-induced weathering. The spiral element is particularly significant, as it is a recurring motif in early Indian and Indo-Islamic architectural ornamentation, often symbolizing continuity, cosmic movement and life force. In this depiction, the spiral appears to merge organically with the creature's body, blurring the boundary between animal form and ornamental geometry. This fusion indicates that the carving was not intended as a naturalistic representation but as a symbolic or guardian figure integrated into architectural design (Figure 2).

The sketch artist has skillfully rendered the layered stone courses surrounding the animal, reinforcing the architectural context of the relief. The horizontal banding suggests that the carving formed part of a frieze or cornice, possibly adorning a temple, stepwell, or fort structure. The soft tonal gradation in the sketch conveys the sandstone's porous texture, while darker strokes accentuate recesses and shadowed contours. From an iconographic perspective, such avian forms may represent protective spirits, mythological birds like the *Garuda* in stylized form, or regional folk-symbolic creatures. The absence of explicit wings reinforces its ornamental rather than narrative role. The carving's placement within a repetitive architectural sequence suggests it contributed to rhythmic visual continuity rather than serving as a standalone icon. This sketch stands as an excellent documentation of a symbolic architectural animal motif, capturing both artistic intent and material decay. It offers valuable insight into traditional stone craftsmanship, where symbolic abstraction, structural integration, and aesthetic harmony converge.



Figure 2. (Sketch-I & Original Creature)

3.2 *Confronted pair of water birds (Hamsa motif) – Sketch II*

This sketch depicts a symmetrical composition of two confronted water birds, likely *Hamsas* (sacred swans), whose elongated necks curve inward to form a heart-like or floral central motif. The high-quality rendering carefully emphasizes bilateral symmetry, a hallmark of classical Indian architectural ornamentation. The birds' bodies are softly contoured, with subtle textural variations suggesting feather patterns and stone erosion. The *Hamsa* holds deep symbolic significance in Indian philosophy, representing purity, wisdom, and spiritual discernment. Its ability to separate milk from water metaphorically associates it with knowledge and enlightenment. In architectural contexts, paired *Hamsas* often symbolize harmony, balance, and cosmic duality. The sketch effectively preserves this symbolic essence through its precise

structural alignment and mirrored forms. The artist has used controlled shading to differentiate raised surfaces from recessed backgrounds, lending the drawing a sculptural realism.

The birds' beaks and necks converge toward a central vertical axis, which may represent a stylized lotus stem or sacred axis (*axis mundi*), reinforcing the spiritual connotations of the motif. Weathering details—such as chipped edges and softened contours—are delicately indicated, highlighting the antiquity of the carving. The surrounding stone layers are sketched with minimal distraction, allowing the viewer's focus to remain on the symbolic interaction between the two birds (Figure 3).

Architecturally, such motifs were commonly placed on lintels, friezes, or temple walls, where they functioned as auspicious symbols guarding sacred spaces. The sketch succeeds in translating the original relief into a refined monochrome study, suitable for academic analysis and heritage conservation records. This artwork stands as a visual testament to the integration of spirituality, symmetry, and craftsmanship in historic stone architecture.



Figure 3. (Sketch–II & Original Creature)

3.3 Composite mythical beast emerging from ornamental scrollwork – Sketch III

This sketch illustrates a composite mythical animal emerging from dense ornamental scrollwork, blending zoomorphic and vegetal elements into a single cohesive form. The creature's head appears lion-like, with a powerful jaw and rounded eye cavity, while the surrounding scrolls resemble stylized foliage or waves, suggesting motion and vitality. The artistic rendering excels in capturing the interplay between solid mass and decorative fluidity. Pencil strokes vary in intensity to articulate depth, giving prominence to the animal's head while allowing the ornamental background to recede. This compositional hierarchy reflects the original sculptor's intent to balance narrative symbolism with decorative continuity.

Such hybrid forms are common in medieval Indian architecture, especially in temple friezes and palace ornamentation. They often function as protective figures (*vyalas* or *yalis*), believed to ward off negative forces. The sketch preserves this protective aura by emphasizing the creature's assertive posture and forward orientation. The eroded stone texture is meticulously conveyed through uneven shading and broken outlines, underscoring the carving's age and exposure to environmental elements (Figure 4). This realism enhances the sketch's documentary value, making it suitable for archaeological reference. The integration of animal and scrollwork also reflects a philosophical worldview where nature, mythology, and architecture are inseparable. The sketch captures this synthesis elegantly, offering insight into the symbolic language of historic stone artisans.

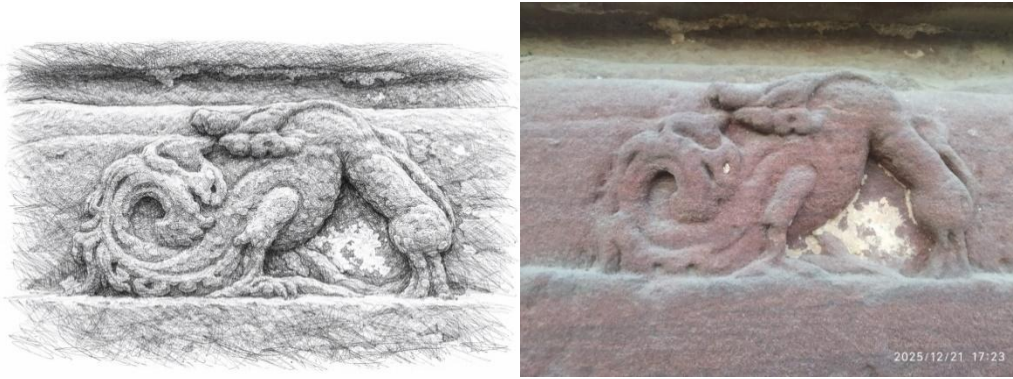


Figure 4. (Sketch–III & Original Creature)

3.4 Architectural corner bracket with animal mask and scroll motifs – Sketch IV

This sketch documents a complex architectural corner element featuring an animal mask integrated with swirling decorative motifs. The carving appears to serve both structural and ornamental purposes, likely functioning as a bracket or capital. The animal face—possibly leonine or mythical—emerges from layered scrollwork, creating a dramatic visual focal point. The sketch's perspective effectively conveys the three-dimensionality of the corner placement. Shading is strategically applied to emphasize depth, recesses, and overhangs, allowing the viewer to understand the carving's spatial relationship within the structure (Figure 5).

Animal masks in architecture often symbolize guardianship and authority. Their placement at corners or junctions reinforces structural symbolism, marking transitions between spaces. The sketch preserves this intent by highlighting the mask's forward projection and expressive contours. Surface erosion, chipped stone, and softened edges are carefully rendered, lending authenticity and historical context. The drawing serves not only as an artistic interpretation but also as a precise architectural record.

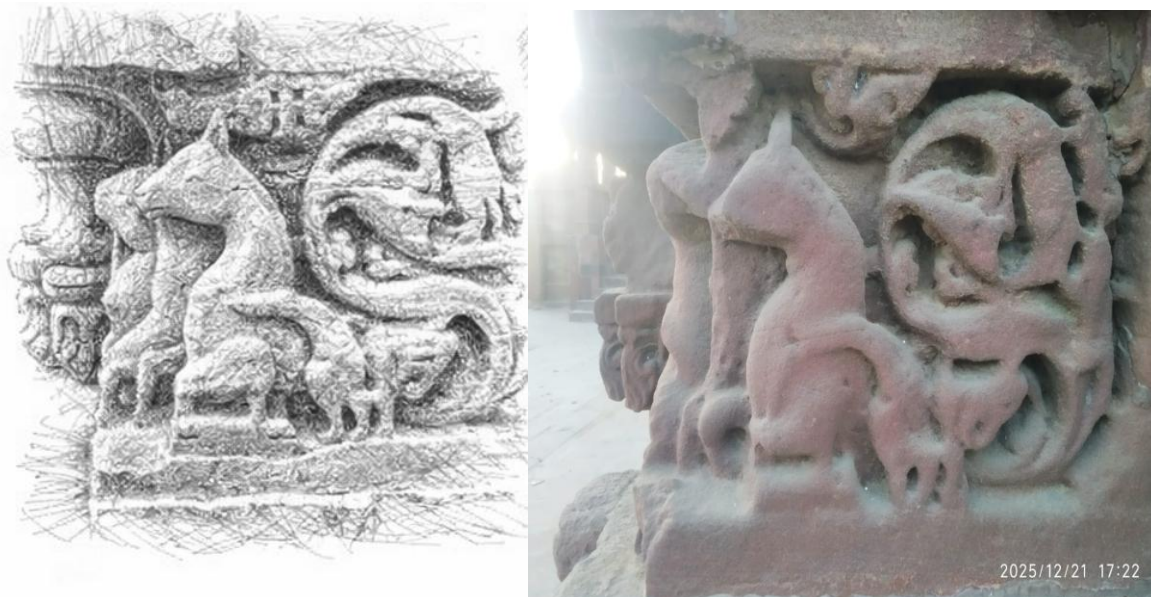


Figure 5. (Sketch–IV & Original Creature)

3.5 *Lion-like mythical creature in dynamic crouching posture – Sketch V*

This sketch portrays a powerful lion-like creature in a dynamic crouching position, with a spiraled mane and muscular limbs. The posture suggests readiness and controlled aggression, typical of guardian figures in temple architecture. The artist has skillfully rendered anatomical strength while maintaining ornamental stylization. The spiral mane connects the animal to cosmic symbolism, while the crouched stance implies vigilance. Shading techniques emphasize musculature and depth, creating a convincing sense of volume despite the monochrome medium (Figure 6). Such figures often served apotropaic functions, guarding sacred or royal spaces. The sketch successfully conveys this protective symbolism while documenting the carving's artistic sophistication.

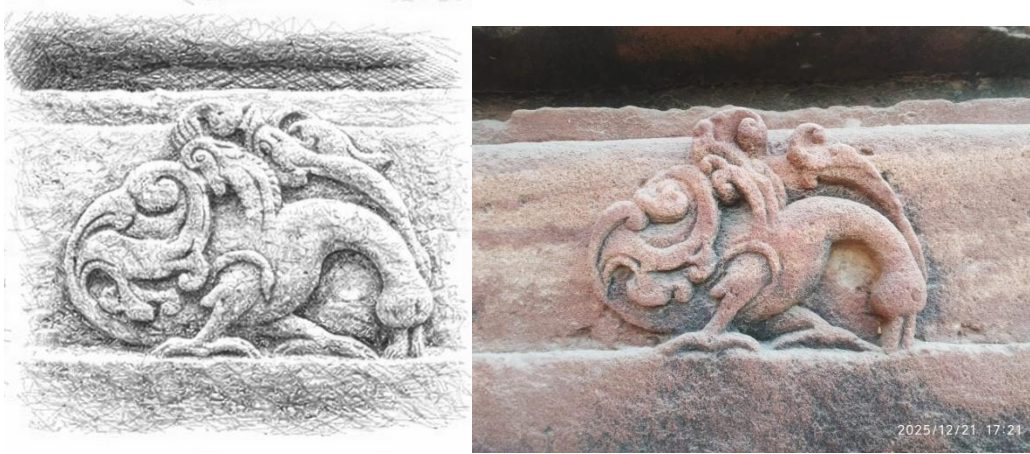


Figure 6. (Sketch–V & Original Creature)

3.6 *Simplified quadruped motif in architectural frieze – Sketch VI*

The final sketch depicts a simplified quadruped animal rendered in a minimalistic style. Unlike more elaborate figures, this carving emphasizes form over detail, suggesting it was part of a repetitive frieze sequence. The sketch highlights this simplicity through clean outlines and restrained shading (Figure 7). Despite its simplicity, the animal conveys motion and balance. Its integration into horizontal stone bands underscores its decorative role within architectural rhythm. The sketch effectively captures the understated elegance of utilitarian ornamentation. This drawing is particularly valuable for understanding how repetition, symbolism, and efficiency coexisted in traditional stone architecture.



Figure 7. (Sketch–VI & Original Creature)

4. Results and discussion

The analysis of the six sculptural sketches from the Harihar (Vishnu) Temple demonstrates a highly refined and purposeful use of animal and avian imagery that integrates symbolic meaning with architectural design. These motifs are not merely decorative but function as visual expressions of cosmology, protection, and aesthetic order within early medieval temple architecture. The stylized mythical avian figure with a spiral body (Sketch I) reflects abstract symbolism rather than naturalistic depiction, using geometric forms to convey ideas of cosmic movement, continuity, and eternal life. The confronted pair of water birds or Hamsa motif (Sketch II) emphasizes symmetry, harmony, and spiritual balance, reinforcing the sanctity of temple spaces through its association with purity and cosmic order. The composite mythical beast emerging from ornamental scrollwork (Sketch III) illustrates the seamless fusion of animal and vegetal elements, symbolizing protection and the interconnectedness of nature and mythology. Similarly, the animal mask on the architectural corner bracket (Sketch IV) highlights the dual structural and symbolic role of zoomorphic imagery, marking spatial transitions and asserting guardianship. The lion-like crouching creature (Sketch V) conveys vigilance and strength, reinforcing its apotropaic function, while the simplified quadruped motif (Sketch VI) demonstrates how repetition and restraint contribute to architectural rhythm and visual harmony. Collectively, these sculptures reveal the sophistication of symbolic planning in the Harihar Temple's artistic program. Collectively, these results indicate that animal and bird sculptures at the Harihar Temple were carefully planned components of a symbolic architectural system rather than isolated artistic expressions.

5. Conclusion

The animal and bird sculptures of the Harihar (Vishnu) Temple at Osian represent a vital dimension of early medieval Indian temple art. Through a combination of realism, abstraction, and symbolic stylization, these faunal motifs fulfilled multiple roles—as guardians, cosmic symbols, and ornamental devices enhancing architectural rhythm. The six analyzed sketches demonstrate a remarkable consistency in artistic intent, reflecting the Gurjara-Pratihara emphasis on harmony between structure, symbolism, and aesthetics. The integration of avian, aquatic, terrestrial, and mythical creatures reveals a worldview in which nature and divinity were deeply interconnected. The presence of both elaborate and simplified animal forms suggests a hierarchical approach to decoration, balancing narrative emphasis with repetitive ornamentation. Moreover, the careful rendering of erosion and weathering in the sketches underscores their value as documentary tools for heritage conservation and archaeological study.

In conclusion, the animal and bird sculptures of the Harihar Temple are not peripheral decorations but essential conveyors of meaning, embodying protection, continuity, and spiritual order. Their study enhances our understanding of Osian's artistic legacy and contributes to broader discussions on symbolism and architectural integration in early medieval Indian temples.

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