Documentation strategies for ruined temples: the case of Ashapuri, Dist. Raisen, Madhya Pradesh

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Abstract

The temple site of Ashapuri poses challenges for conservation, consisting of twenty-six temple bases in various states of preservation and around 10,000 architectural stone fragments. This site needs to be protected and managed because of the high quality of its architecture and sculpture, and its importance for architectural history as evidence of developments in temple forms between the 9th and 11th centuries, including what are probably the earliest examples of the Bhumija mode. Over years the site has been subjected to vandalism, and clearance of debris was not systematically documented. The World Monuments Fund has funded the project to undertake research, documentation and preparation of feasibility report for Group of temples at Ashapuri, Madhya Pradesh, India, in partnership with the custodians of the site, the Directorate of Archaeology, Archives and Museums, Madhya Pradesh. The work is being carried out by Cardiff University in collaboration with the School of Planning and Architecture, Bhopal.

This paper will discuss the process, and the documentation of architectural fragments of the temples is a necessary first step for any archaeological or conservation work. The conventional method of documentation would be to draw every fragment, but here the sheer quantity of fragments demanded alternative techniques. The method being employed involves photo documentation with critical dimensioning and feasibility studies. The paper will address how intelligent documentation techniques result in innovative solutions from fragments to meaningful display.

Introduction

The archaeological remains at Ashapuri (Dist. Raisen, MP, India), under the protection of the Directorate of Archaeology, Archives and Museums (DAAM), Govt. of Madhya Pradesh, must have been a flourishing city during the Pratihara and Paramara periods between the 9th and 11th centuries. Ashapuri must have been an important cult centre with continuous activity in temple construction. There are twenty-six exposed temple bases in various states of preservation along with 10,000 architectural stone fragments lying within a fenced compound. These temples, known as the Bhoothnath Temple Complex are also referred to as Ashapuri temple Complex.

In 2010 the Department of Archaeology and Museums, Madhya Pradesh, began a vigorous program of excavation. In the enthusiasm for discovering one plinth after another, the scattered architectural fragments were stacked on the rock nearby. Unfortunately, many fragments from different temples were jumbled together making the research and understanding of the site all the more challenging.

Recent research proves that site is very important for understanding the architectural history of central India in the medieval period. The site holds crucial clues and seems to play a key role in a radical stylistic shift of style that took place in central India in the 11th century, accompanying the appearance of a new temple form or 'mode', the Bhumija. Near Ashapuri around six km is the famous, unfinished Shiva temple of Bhojpur, attributed to Raja Bhoja, the great Paramara king. The full historical and architectural significance of these two sites can only be understood if they are considered together. They have the potential to become a world heritage site.

In April 2013 World Monument Fund (WMF) signed a contract with Cardiff University for work to be carried out by the Welsh School of Architecture through its Research Centre PRASADA in collaboration with the School of Planning and Architecture (SPA) Bhopal. The contract was for Research, Documentation and Preparation of Feasibility Reports for Group of Temples and other Monuments, Ashapuri, Dist. Raisen, Madhya Pradesh, India.

Documentation a Challenge

Initiation of any project starts with good documentation as a base requirement for any successful research project. Documentation anchors the research, keeps decision making focused and helps in saving lot of effort as well as resources. The first site visit to Ashapuri had itself made the team think deeply that the documentation shall be one of the biggest challenges of the site and would require lot of innovation. Ashapuri Temple Site has more than 10,000 architectural fragments in various state of preservation lying on the spread of nearby hill. This fragmented nature of the site has been instrumental in making decisions about techniques and tools for documentation. The research required to study the site holistically included research for developing an understanding of the site; research towards understanding the inter relation between various temple and the evolution of the site; research to develop the original temple designs and planning and execution of necessary intervention requirement on site.

Fig 1: Fragmentary nature of the Ashapuri Temple Site

The traditional and ideal method of documentation requires making of extensive drawing and site recordings. Improvisations were required as this demanded rigorous and lengthy process. Hence decisions were taken to make documentation target oriented. Research was required to standardize the information required. Probabilities to use of new technologies were also explored. Equally important was that documentation has to be target oriented. The outputs and deliverables were detailed out and depending on the quantity and quality of information required innovative methods of documentation were formulated including photo documentation with critical dimensioning.

Photo Documentation with Critical Dimensioning (PDCD)

This technique was primarily developed to deal with stone level documentation. Here the expertise of Prof. Adam Hardy helped in understanding the general composition of the temples of Pratihara and Paramara periods, their fine qualities, and differences in the ornamentation and stylistic evolution of these temples. This may be explained as under:
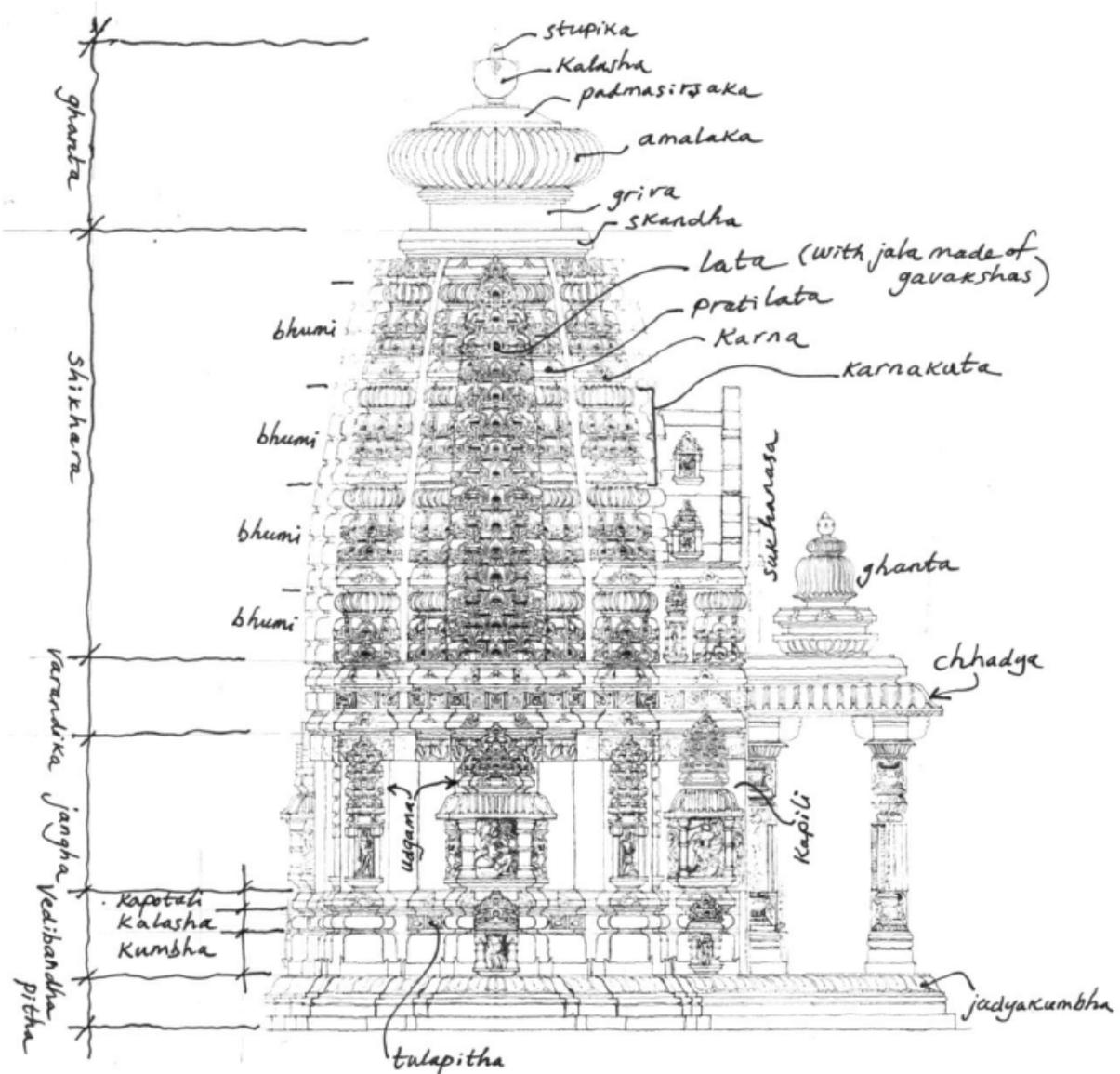
Fig 2: General composition of the temples at Ashapuri

(Source: Hardy.A, Kawathekar.V,(2015), *Ashapuri Temple Project*, Unpublished report, WMF, Cardiff University and School of Planning and Architecture Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh Drawing by Prof Adam Hardy)

On research it was understood that all members had a basic geometry to their composition on which ornamentation was laid. On developing this understanding, and working out the details required, a different approach was worked out as an alternative for extensive drawings. With the use of digital photography, the basic dimensions were recorded on site in the form of site sketches. Photographs were then taken flat on, and the critical dimensions were transferred onto the photographs. This made

feasible documentation far quicker and more useable for deducing the original designs of the temple to a great degree of accuracy.

Process of PDCD includes:

Critical dimensioning was recorded in form of sketches on site.
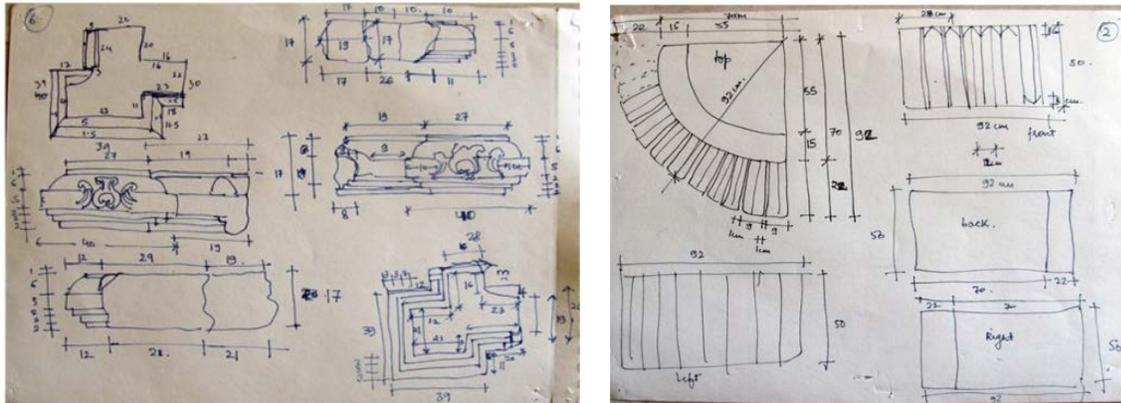
Fig 3 and 4 Samples of site recordings

(Source: Hardy.A, Kawathekar.V,(2015), *Ashapuri Temple Project*,Unpublished report on Methodology for documentation and process of research, WMF, Cardiff University and School of Planning and Architecture Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh)

Photographs

Photographs were taken of individual architectural fragments as far as possible in true elevation including top, bottom, front, rear and side surfaces as well as one or two views.

Fig 5 and 6 Photographs of architectural fragments in true elevation and view

(Source: Hardy.A, Kawathekar.V,(2015), *Ashapuri Temple Project*,Unpublished report on Methodology for documentation and process of research, WMF, Cardiff University and School of Planning and Architecture Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh)

Data Sheets

The critical measurements were then transferred on the photographs in a systematic way where all information of a single stone is organized on a datasheet with clearly mentioned stone number.

Fig 7: Datasheet of an architectural fragment

(Source: Hardy.A, Kawathekar.V,(2015), *Ashapuri Temple Project*,Unpublished report on Methodology for documentation and process of research, WMF, Cardiff University and School of Planning and Architecture Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh)

Fig 8 and 9: Drawings developed of a single architectural fragment or in combination

(Source: Hardy.A, Kawathekar.V,(2015), *Ashapuri Temple Project*,Unpublished report on Methodology for documentation and process of research, WMF, Cardiff University and School of Planning and Architecture Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh)

Drawing

Wherever required, this information was feasible to be translated into drawing. The potential to make a drawing is always possible through this database and saves many efforts for deeper analysis. For analysis it was important that lot of data is available at a glance. For the purpose a database was formulated.

Database for Temple Architectural Fragments

The database gives a comprehensive view of the architectural fragments of a given temple together. Along with the pictures of the architectural fragment in the database, information was given in relation to the following: the location where the architectural fragment was found; location at which where the architectural fragment is currently found; location of the architectural fragment on the external/ internal façade of the temple, e.g. the pitha, vedibhandha, jangha, varandika, shikhara or ghanta (or 'probable location' where position is uncertain, possibly not belonging to the temple in question); present condition of the architectural fragment, including noting of conditions such microbiological growth, part(s) missing, loss of sharp edges, traces of lime plaster etc.; value of the architectural fragment , designated as of exceptional value, very high, high, moderate or low value; and risk to the architectural value including risk due to storage, loss of strength etc. Format and sorting of the database is possible using the excel program. This information was organized temple by temple for all 26 monuments.

						Ashapuri Temples Project, Database: Temple 5									
Volume No.	Fragment No.	Front	Rear	Right	Left	Top	Bottom	View 1	Old No.	Where Found	Where Stored	Original Location	Condition of Fragment	Value	Risk
2	51								Z 51	Stack 5 B	Temple 5 mound	Shikhara	Water Stagnation, Loss of sharp Edges, Microbiological Growth,	High	Loss of Strength, Trapped Water, Storage
2	53								Z 53	Stack 5 B	Temple 5 mound	Shikhara	Loss of sharp Edges, Missing Details , Traces of Lime Plaster	Very high	Loss of Strength, Trapped Water

Fig 10: Database of the architectural fragments

(Source: Hardy.A, Kawathekar.V,(2015), *Ashapuri Temple Project*,Unpublished report on Methodology for documentation and process of research, WMF, Cardiff University and School of Planning and Architecture Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh)

Stitching the architectural fragments together

The database helped immensely to stitch the architectural fragments together. This helped many purpose including defining the architectural and stylistic nature of each temple; to aid the development of the designs of the temples reconstructed on the basis of the surviving parts; and to estimate the proportion of carved stones surviving from each temple.
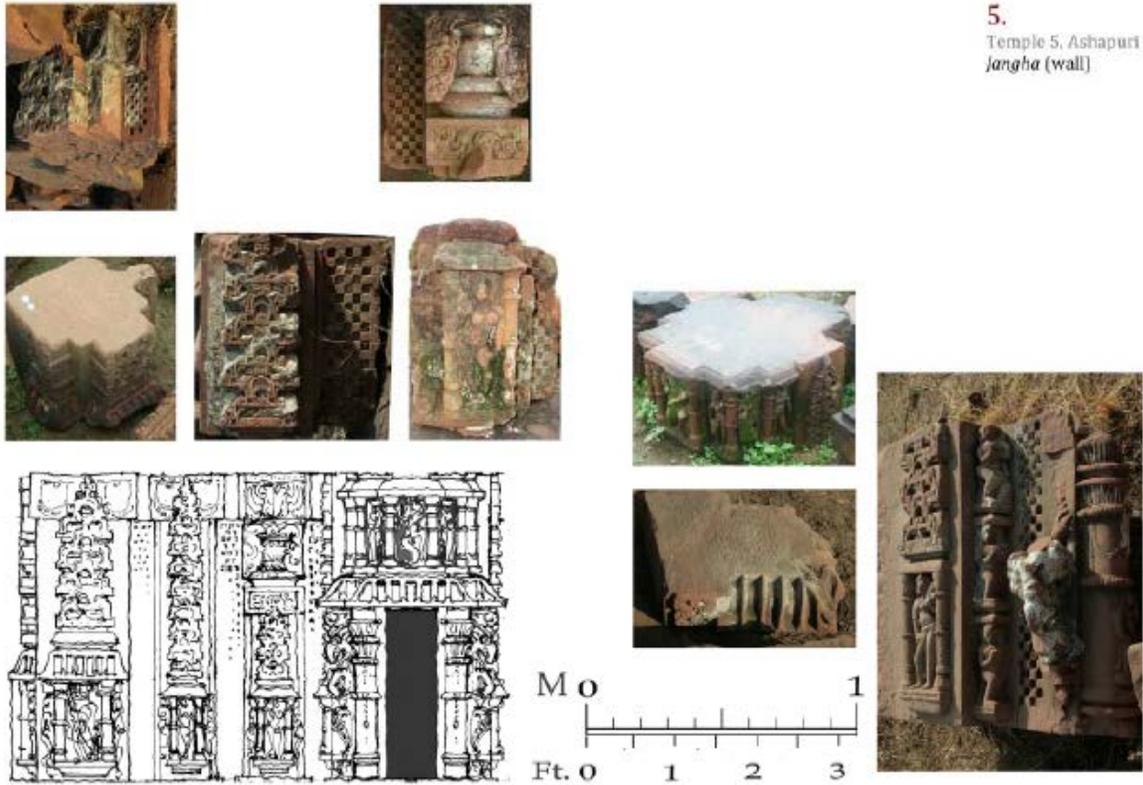
Fig 11: Stitching the stone pieces together for Jangha in temple no 5

(Source: Hardy.A, Kawathekar.V,(2015), *Ashapuri Temple Project*, Unpublished Feasibility report of temple no 5, WMF, Cardiff University and School of Planning and Architecture Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh. Drawing : Prof Adam Hardy)

This documentation and simultaneous analysis lead to theoretical reconstruction of the temple. Designs of three temples no 5, 12 and 17 were reconstructed under this project.
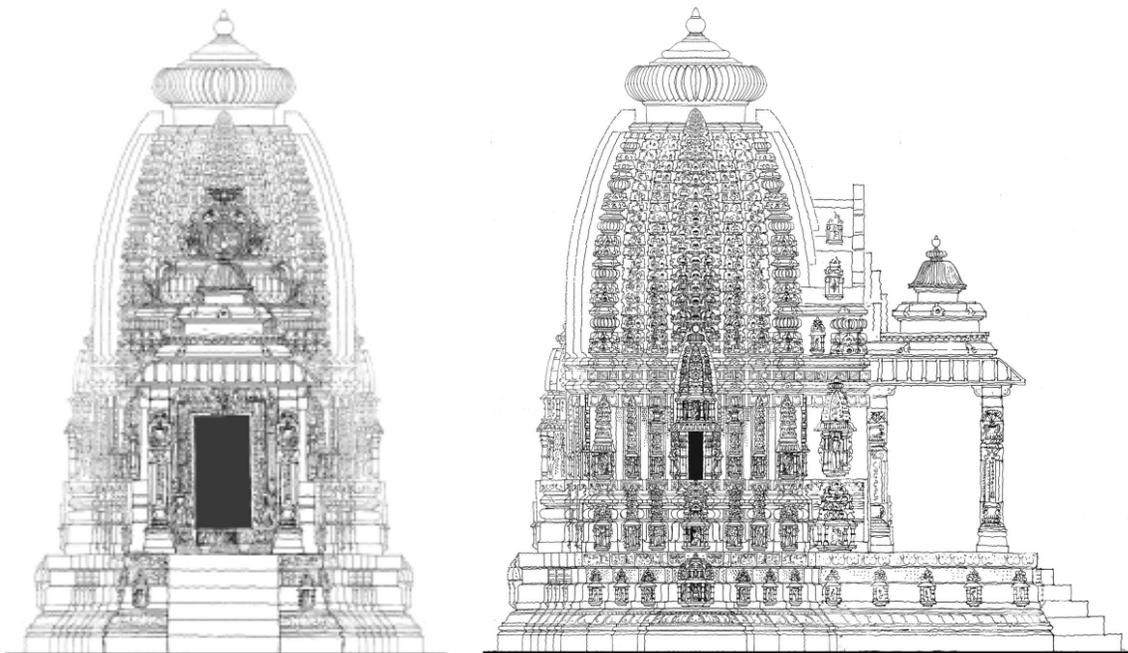

Fig 12 Reconstructed Design of the temple no 5 at Ashapuri

(Source: Hardy.A, Kawathekar.V,(2015), *Ashapuri Temple Project*, Unpublished Feasibility report of temple no 5, WMF, Cardiff University and School of Planning and Architecture Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh Drawing : Prof Adam Hardy)

Interpretation of ruins/ temples

Temple construction is a science and a tradition. There is immense knowledge is embedded in it. With time, much of this knowledge is lost. Interpretation is called for, based on understanding of the context in which a temple was created, the context in which it now exists, and also the future context for which interpretation is needed.

In Ashapuri, some portions of the temples are intact, while in many places the architectural fragments are standing precariously. Many temples are partially or completely in ruins. Ruined temples may be lying scattered on the site, or some of their pieces may be in the Ashapuri site museum – or other museums such as the State Museum of Madhya Pradesh, Bhopal, or a private museum like the Birla museum in Bhopal. Some of these pieces are also used for construction by the locals in the vicinity. These conditions create gaps and missing links, making it more difficult to understand the original form of the temples. The challenge, then, is how to analyse and interpret these ruins on the bases of such fragmented knowledge.

This can only be done with thorough knowledge of the appropriate temple architecture. This has to be acquired by studying the similar (Pratihara and Parmara style) temples still standing in the region, through patient research. Insight is also to be gained from the study of texts. The well-known Samranganasutradhara, as compiled by Raja Bhoja, is the text of immediate relevance in context of Ashapuri, and has recently been analysed and illustrated by Prof. Adam Hardy in his book "Theory and Practice of Temple Architecture in India" (IGNCA and Dev Publishers & Distributors, New Delhi, 2015).

Meaningful Display

It is at the temple site itself and in the physical presence of the displayed stone pieces that many aspects of understanding and interpretation can best be conveyed. Of primary importance is meaningful display of the material itself, i.e. that it should be arranged in a way that gives an understanding of the original whole. Where feasible, the best way to do this will often be the reinstatement of pieces to their original locations. The process of reaching the necessary degree of understanding for full or partial reassembly is a gradual one, and for some of the temples it may never be possible to reinstate more than one or two pieces from the base. At this stage, therefore, and probably for years to come, numerous pieces will need to be meaningfully displayed in the shelters. This is further illustrated below
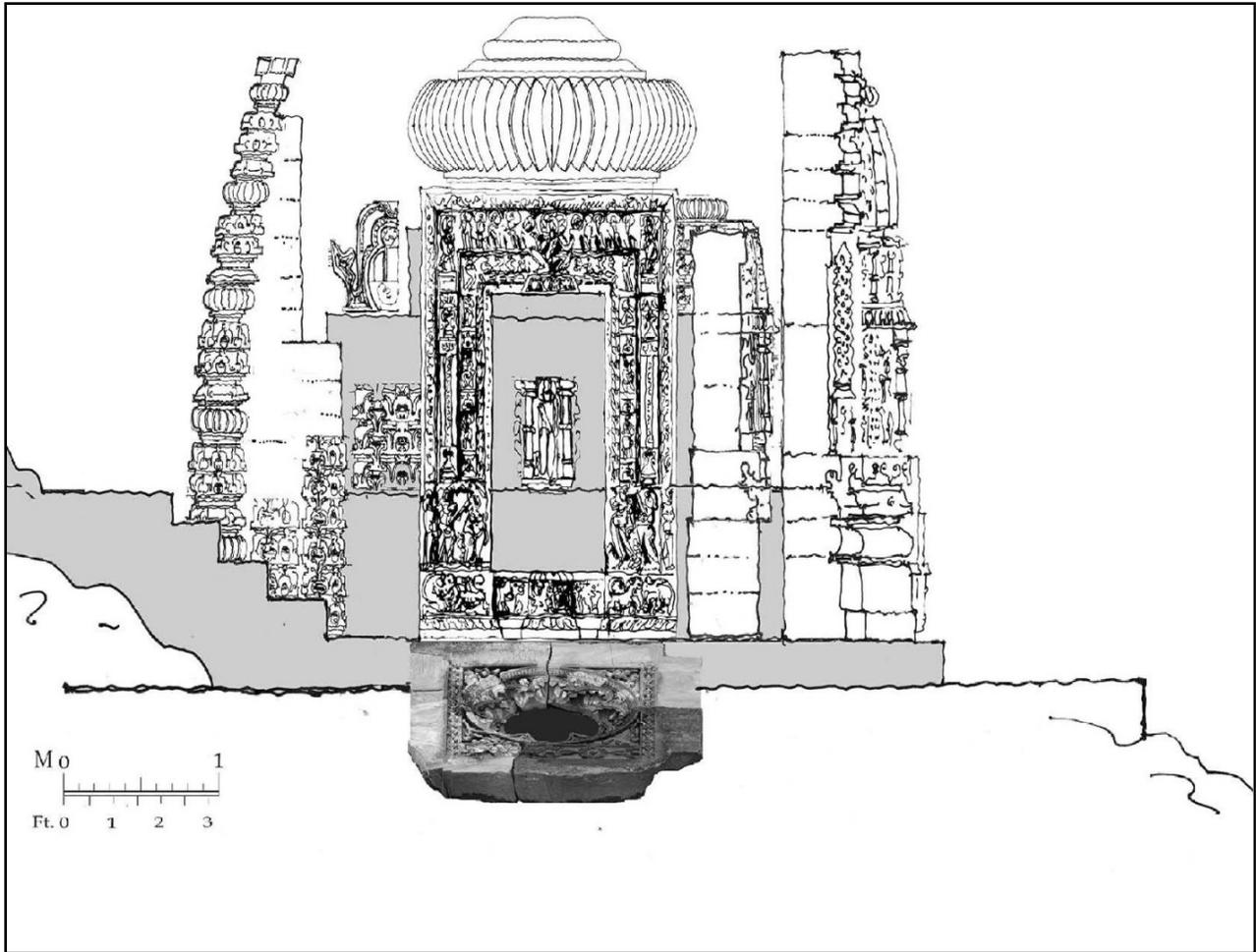
Fig13: Meaningful display organized from the fragments of temple no 5 at Ashapuri

(Source: Hardy.A, Kawathekar.V,(2015), *Ashapuri Temple Project*, Unpublished report, WMF, Cardiff University and School of Planning and Architecture Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh. Drawing : Prof Adam Hardy)