

An Empirical Analysis of Role and Structure of Architecture Under Hoysala Empire

Dr. Mahesh Kumar D.H.

Assistant Professor, Department of History, University College of Arts, Tumkur University, Tumkuru, Karnataka-572103

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Abstract

This study examines the architectural innovations and structural intricacies of the Hoysala Empire (c. 10th – 14th centuries CE), with a particular focus on its distinctive temple architecture. Drawing on empirical data from key monuments at Belur, Halebidu, and Somanathapura, the study highlights advanced construction techniques, intricate sculptural detailing, and the sociocultural influences that shaped the Hoysala architectural style. Central to this style are elaborately designed temple complexes featuring key elements such as the mantapa, vimana, and sculptural iconography. The mantapa, a pillared outdoor hall or pavilion, served as a space for public rituals. The vimana is the tower that rises above the sanctum (garbhagriha), which houses the image of the presiding deity. These architectural components collectively reflect the aesthetic sophistication and religious significance of Hoysala temple design. This study primarily focuses on two objectives: 1) to examine the role and construction of architecture within the Hoysala Empire, and 2) to analyze the structural composition and key architectural elements characteristic of Hoysala temple architecture. This study investigates that Hoysala architecture is known for intricate vimanas (temple towers), a stellate design with rhythmic projections, and sculptures depicting feminine beauty, crafted from soft soapstone for detailed artistry. This study also investigated important temples, including Chennakesava Temple at Belur (1117 CE), Hoysaleswara Temple at Halebidu (1121 CE), and Chennakesava Temple at Somanathapura (1279 CE), along with others at Arasikere (1220 CE), Amritapura (1196 CE), Belavadi (1200 CE), and Nuggehalli (1246 CE).

Keywords: Architecture; Role; Construction; Elements; Great Architecture

1. Introduction

The architectural legacy of the Hoysala Empire, which flourished between the 11th and 14th centuries in the region now known as Karnataka, India, stands as a testament to the dynasty's artistic innovation and cultural sophistication. This empirical analysis explores the structural elements, construction techniques, and stylistic features that define Hoysala architecture. By examining surviving monuments such as the Chennakesava Temple at Belur, the Hoysaleswara Temple at Halebidu, and the Kesava Temple at Somanathapura, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the unique characteristics that distinguish Hoysala temple architecture from other contemporary styles. Furthermore, the paper considers the socio-religious influences that shaped the design and ornamentation of these monumental structures.

Temples constructed prior to Hoysala independence in the mid-12th century reflect significant Western Chalukya influences, while later temples retain some features salient to Western Chalukya architecture but have

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additional inventive decoration and ornamentation, features unique to Hoysala artisans. Some three hundred temples are known to survive in present-day Karnataka state and many more are mentioned in inscriptions, though only about seventy have been documented. The greatest concentrations of these are in the Malnad (hill) districts, the native home of the Hoysala kings.

Hoysala architecture is classified by the influential scholar Adam Hardy as part of the Karnata Dravida tradition, a trend within Dravidian architecture in the Deccan that is distinct from the Tamil style of further south. Other terms for the tradition are Vesara, and Chalukya architecture, divided into early Badami Chalukya architecture and the Western Chalukya architecture which immediately preceded the Hoysalas. The whole tradition covers a period of about seven centuries began in the 7th century under the patronage of the Chalukya dynasty of Badami, developed further under the Rashtrakutas of Manyakheta during the 9th and 10th centuries and the Western Chalukyas (Later Chalukyas) of Basavakalyan in the 11th and 12th centuries. Its final development stage and transformation into an independent style was during the rule of the Hoysalas in the 12th and 13th centuries.

2. Objectives of the Study

- To examine the development, significance, and role of architectural practices within the Hoysala Empire.
- To investigate the structural composition and define architectural features characteristic of Hoysala temple architecture.

3. Methodology of the Study

This research is primarily based on secondary source analysis, utilizing an extensive review of existing scholarly and historical literature on Hoysala architecture and history. The study adopts an analytical and descriptive approach to achieve its stated objectives. The data for this study have been systematically collected from a wide range of sources, including epigraphic records, monographs and historical texts, digital and open-source reference materials, published and unpublished academic theses and dissertations, as well as peer-reviewed articles from journals focusing on art history, archaeology, and the architectural traditions of South India.

4. Role and Construction of Architecture

Hoysala architecture served a multifaceted role in the empire, acting as a statement of royal power, a hub for religious and social activity, and a medium for artistic expression. The construction was innovative, blending regional traditions with a unique emphasis on intricate detailing and the use of soft soapstone. Hoysala architecture extended beyond its religious function to influence the social, economic, and political spheres of the empire in as briefly explained.

Political Declaration: The construction of grand temples was an assertion of imperial identity and power, distinguishing the Hoysalas from their predecessors and rivals, such as the Chalukyas and Cholas. For example, King Vishnuvardhana built the Chennakesava Temple at Belur in the 12th century to celebrate his victory over the Cholas.

Socio-economic Centers: Large temples functioned as wealthy institutions similar to monasteries, employing hundreds of skilled artisans from various guilds, including sculptors, architects, and goldsmiths. They also served as centers for community gatherings and commerce.

Religious Hub: Temples catered to diverse Hindu sects, including Vaishnavism, Shaivism, and Jainism, promoting a degree of inclusivity. They also served as educational centers for literature and the arts.

Cultural Record: The temple walls and friezes served as stone libraries, visually narrating episodes from Hindu epics, including the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Puranas. They also depicted scenes of courtly life, music, dance, and warfare, providing a rich record of Hoysala society.

Construction Elements of Architectural in Hoysala Empire

There are important elements of the architecture in the Hoysala empire and it is constructed famous Kings of Hoysala empire period are following below: 1) Mantapa, 2) Vimana, and 3) Sculpture.

a. Mantapa

The mantapa, also known as a mandapam, is a pillared outdoor hall or pavilion commonly found in Indian temple architecture. It serves as a functional space where groups of people gather for public rituals and communal prayers. In Hoysala temples, the entrance to the mantapa is typically adorned with a highly ornate overhead lintel known as a makaratorana. Hoysala temples often feature an open mantapa, which acts as an outer hall leading to a smaller, enclosed mantapa and the sanctum (garbhagriha). These open halls are a distinctive element of larger Hoysala temples. Spacious mantapas frequently include seating areas made of stone, with the parapet wall serving as a backrest. These seats often follow the staggered-square layout characteristic of Hoysala design. The ceiling of the mantapa is supported by numerous intricately carved pillars that create multiple bays even the smallest open mantapa typically contains at least 13 bays. The staggered-square layout is a hallmark of the Hoysala architectural style. The outer walls feature parapets with half-pillars supporting the roof edges, allowing natural light to flood the space and illuminate the detailed sculptural work. The ceilings themselves are richly decorated, featuring both mythological and floral motifs. These ceilings often include deep, domical structures adorned with sculptural elements such as banana bud designs and other ornate decorations, showcasing the high level of craftsmanship typical of Hoysala architecture.

Structure of Mantapas

The closed mantapa, well decorated inside and out, is larger than the vestibule connecting the shrine and the mantapa and has four lathe-turned pillars to support the ceiling, which may be deeply domed. The four pillars divide the hall into nine bays. The nine bays result in nine decorated ceilings. Pierced stone screens (Jali or Latticework) that serve as windows in the navaranga (hall) and Sabhamantapa are a characteristic Hoysala stylistic element. A porch adorns the entrance to a closed mantapa, consisting of an awning supported by two half-pillars (engaged columns) and two parapets, all richly decorated. The closed mantapa is connected to the shrine by a vestibule, a square area that also connects the shrines. Its outer walls are decorated, but as the size of the vestibule is not large, this may not be a conspicuous part of the temple. The vestibule also has a short tower called the sukanasi or nose, upon which is mounted the Hoysala emblem. In Belur and Halebidu, these sculptures are quite large and are placed at all doorways.

Both the open (outer) and closed (inner) mantapas of Hoysala temples feature distinctive circular, lathe-turned pillars topped with four brackets. These brackets typically support sculpted figures known as salabhanjikas or madanikas—graceful female figures often depicted in dynamic, sensuous poses. Each pillar is unique, frequently adorned with intricate ornamental carvings, highlighting the artisan's creativity and the Hoysala emphasis on artistic individuality. This elaborate treatment of pillars marks a clear departure from the stylistic conventions of their early overlords, the Western Chalukyas. While Chalukyan pillars often featured sculptural detailing limited to the base, leaving the upper portions plain, Hoysala pillars are richly decorated throughout, especially at the capital.

The lathe-turned pillars in Hoysala temples are typically 16, 32, or 64-pointed in cross-section. Some are bell-shaped and exhibit polished surfaces that reflect light, enhancing the aesthetic experience within the temple. A notable example is the Parsvanatha Basadi at Halebidu, which showcases this refined pillar style. As architectural historian Percy Brown observes, the monolithic pillars crowned with four brackets carrying śālabhañjikā or madanikā figures are a distinctive feature of Chalukya-Hoysala temple architecture. K.A. Nilakanta Sastri further emphasizes the uniqueness of Hoysala pillars, noting that the square base, combined with a lathe-turned shaft rendered in varied forms, represents one of the most remarkable features of Hoysala craftsmanship.

b. Vimana

The vimana, also known as the cella, houses the most sacred shrine of the temple, where the image of the presiding deity is enshrined. It represents the spiritual core of the temple. Architecturally, the vimana is topped by a superstructure or tower, which presents a striking contrast between its interior and exterior forms. Internally, the vimana is typically plain and square in layout, reflecting its solemn ritual function. Externally, however, it is elaborately decorated and often features a stellate (star-shaped) or staggered-square plan, resulting in numerous projections and recesses. These complex surfaces interact dynamically with natural light, creating an ever-shifting play of shadow and form that enhances the aesthetic impact. Hoysala temples are classified into five types based on the number of vimanas (shrines) they contain:

1. Ekakuta – A temple with a single shrine and vimana.
2. Dvikuta – A temple with two shrines and vimanas.
3. Trikuta – A temple with three shrines and vimanas.
4. Chatuskuta – A temple with four shrines and vimanas.
5. Panchakuta – A temple with five shrines and vimanas.

Each type of Hoysala temple reflects variations in spatial layout, ritual function, and architectural complexity, demonstrating the architects' mastery in harmonizing form and function. The majority of Hoysala temples are of the ekakuta, dvikuta, or trikuta type, with Vaishnava temples more commonly adopting the trikuta form. However, in some cases, even trikuta temples have only one tower (vimana) usually above the central shrine making the term trikuta somewhat symbolic rather than literal in architectural terms. In temples with multiple disconnected shrines such as the twin temples at Mosale each shrine includes its own complete set of architectural elements, maintaining symmetry and balance. This duplication emphasizes the aesthetic and ritual importance of architectural harmony in temple design. In early Hoysala temples, particularly those constructed before the 13th century, a single horizontal eave typically runs along the structure. Below this eave are rows of miniature decorative towers (aedicules), contributing to the rhythmic and ornate exterior.

The highest point of the temple, known as the kalasha, is a finial shaped like a water pot, symbolizing fertility and abundance. It traditionally sits atop the main tower of the vimana. Due to age and weathering, many original kalashas have been lost and replaced with modern metallic versions. Directly beneath the kalasha is a large, intricately carved domical structure made from stone, resembling a helmet in form. This element adds to the grandeur of the tower and serves both symbolic and structural purposes.

c. Sculpture

According to Adam Hardy, Hoysala art marks two significant departures from the more austere style of Western (Later) Chalukya art: ornamental elaboration and the profuse use of iconography, particularly in figure sculpture. These characteristics are evident even on the superstructure (vimana) above the sanctum, highlighting the comprehensive nature of Hoysala decorative schemes. One key factor enabling this intricate sculptural work was the use of soft chloritic schist (soapstone) as the primary building material. This stone's malleability allowed Hoysala sculptors to achieve an extraordinary level of precision and detail, contributing to a distinct virtuoso carving style.

Hoysala artists are celebrated for their meticulous attention to detail, whether in complex narrative panels depicting episodes from the Hindu epics or in the abundance of decorative motifs. Common motifs include mythical creatures such as yali and makara (aquatic monsters), kirtimukha (gargoyle-like masks), aedicula (miniature decorative towers on pilasters), hamsa (mythical birds), spiral foliage patterns, and various animals like lions, elephants, and horses. Sculptors also captured everyday elements such as contemporary hairstyles, clothing, and ornaments, giving the temples a deeply human dimension. A particularly notable form in Hoysala sculpture is the salabhanjika or madanika, rooted in an ancient Indian artistic tradition dating back to Buddhist sculpture. Etymologically, sala refers

to the sala tree and bhanjika to the maiden who breaks its branch symbolizing feminine grace and fertility. In Hoysala temples, these madanikā figures are placed at an angle near the roofline on the outer walls specifically designed to be visible to devotees during circumambulation (pradakṣinā).

Another sculptural form, the sthamba buttalikā (pillar images), shows stylistic traces of Chola art a legacy likely resulting from the employment of artists from the Chola country by the Hoysala court. These figures blend Chalukyan structural sensibility with Chola figural grace, underscoring the syncretic and pan-South Indian nature of Hoysala temple sculpture.

Apart from these sculptures, entire sequences from the Hindu epics have been sculpted in a clockwise direction starting at the main entrance. The right-to-left sequence is the same direction taken by the devotees in their ritual circumambulation as they wind inward toward the inner sanctum. Depictions from mythology, such as the epic hero Arjuna shooting fish, the elephant-headed god Ganesha, the Sun god Surya, the weather and war god Indra, and Brahma with Sarasvati are common. Also frequently seen in these temples is Durga, with several arms holding weapons given to her by other gods, in the act of killing a buffalo, and Harihara holding a conch, wheel, and trident. Many of these friezes were signed by the artisans, the first known instance of signed artwork in India.

Profile of Structure of Architecture in Hoysala Empire

Architectural Element	Compositional Feature	Significance
Star-shaped Plan	The temple base (Plinth or <i>Jagati</i>) is often designed as a star, forming numerous projections and recesses.	Allows for extensive surface carving and creates unique light-and-shadow effects.
Raised Platform	The temple stands on a platform, typically 3-4 feet high, used for the pradakshina (circumambulation).	Differentiates the Hoysala style and provides a stage for the main structure.
Vimana	The tower over the sanctuary (<i>garbhagriha</i>), often intricately carved with miniature decorative towers (Aedicules).	Highly ornate and relatively shorter than the <i>gopurams</i> of the Dravidian style.
Intricate Carvings	The horizontal friezes (<i>patta</i>) on the outer walls, depicting elephants, horses, mythical beasts, and Puranic narratives.	The hallmark of Hoysala art, showcasing incredible detail in chloritic schist.
Pillars and Ceilings	Lathe-turned pillars and highly ornate, deep-domed ceilings with stunning relief work in the <i>mandapa</i> (hall).	Demonstrates exceptional craftsmanship in stone turning and sculpting.

History of the Hoysalas – Of Great Architecture

The three most famous examples epitomise the genius of Hoysala architecture such as Kesava Temple, Chennakesava Temple and Hoysaleswara Temple. Hoysalas are one of the most celebrated dynasties in South Indian history, specifically known for their unique and sophisticated architectural style. Their reign, primarily from the 11th to the 14th century, marked a golden age of art and culture in the Deccan region. Originally minor chieftains under the Western Chalukyas, the Hoysalas rose to prominence through strategic military conquests and astute administration, eventually establishing a powerful kingdom. However, it is their architectural legacy that truly defines their place in history. The Hoysalas fostered a unique style marked by intricate carvings, innovative structural designs, and the use of soapstone to achieve unparalleled sculptural detail. Their temples not only served as centers of worship but also as social and cultural hubs, reflecting the empire's prosperity and religious devotion. The period witnessed the

construction of over a hundred temples, many of which survive today as a testament to Hoysala craftsmanship. Notable among these are the Kesava Temple at Somanathapura, the Chennakesava Temple at Belur, and the Hoysaleswara Temple at Halebidu—each exemplifying the pinnacle of Hoysala architectural achievement.

Kesava Temple, Somanathapura

The Kesava Temple at Somanathapura, also known as the Chennakesava Temple, was constructed in 1268 CE under the reign of King Narasimha III. This temple is a significant example of Vaishnava architecture, dedicated to Lord Vishnu and featuring three shrines devoted to different avatars of the deity. Built primarily from soapstone, the temple is renowned for its finely crafted lathe-turned pillars, symmetrical layout, and intricate sculptural details that adorn its walls and ceilings. The exquisite craftsmanship and balanced proportions make it one of the finest surviving monuments of Hoysala architecture.

Chennakesava Temple, Belur

Belur served as the original capital of the Hoysala Kingdom. In 1117 AD, King Vishnuvardhana commissioned the construction of the temple, initially named the Vijayanarayana Temple. Scholars remain divided on the temple's primary purpose—whether it was built to commemorate his victory over the Cholas in the Battle of Talakad or to mark his conversion from Jainism to Hinduism. Regardless of its origins, the temple represents a significant development in the Hoysala architectural style. The temple is particularly renowned for the 48 intricately carved pillars within its main hall (mantapa). Among these, the Narasimha Pillar and Mohini Pillar stand out as masterpieces of sculptural art, showcasing the exceptional skill and creativity of Hoysala artisans. The detailed iconography and craftsmanship reflect the religious and cultural richness of the period.

Hoysaleswara Temple, Halebidu

In the 12th century, the Hoysala capital shifted to Halebidu during the reign of King Vishnuvardhana. It is believed that the city's wealthy and influential Shaiva followers commissioned the construction of the Hoysaleswara Temple as a response to the grandeur of the Chennakesava Temple at Belur. This temple complex is renowned for its intricately carved sculptures that cover nearly every surface, depicting scenes from Hindu mythology, everyday life, and a vast array of deities. The Hoysaleswara Temple stands as a testament to the artistic excellence and religious diversity of the Hoysala Empire, showcasing the elaborate craftsmanship and architectural innovation that defined this period.

Concluding Remarks

This study concluded that the architectural style developed during the Hoysala Empire (11th to 14th centuries) represents a unique and highly refined form of temple construction, shaped by the successive rulers of the dynasty. Centered in present-day Karnataka, the Hoysala architectural influence reached its peak in the 13th century, dominating the Southern Deccan Plateau. Numerous large and small temples built during this period stand as enduring examples of this style, including the Chennakesava Temple at Belur, the Hoysaleswara Temple at Halebidu, and the Kesava Temple at Somanathapura. Additionally, temples at Belavadi, Amruthapura, Hosaholalu, Mosale, Arasikere, Basaralu, Kikkeri, and Nuggehalli reflect the widespread impact and excellence of Hoysala craftsmanship throughout the dynasty's reign. Studies of Hoysala architecture reveal minimal Indo-Aryan influence, with a much stronger connection to Southern Indian architectural traditions. This highlights the dynasty's role in fostering a distinctive regional style that continues to be celebrated for its artistic and cultural significance.

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