Friezes of Horses As Depicted In Hoysala Temples

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Abstract: Hoysalas who ruled Southern Karnataka ‘between’ (1050-1300) had developed a unique style of temple architecture at Belur, Halebidu and Somanathapur etc., known as Hoysala style. This new style of temple architecture was primarily the outcome of Hoysala king Vishnuvardhana’s own personality for he was deeply interested in the arts. The political, Economic, Social and religious factors were conducive for the development of Hoysala style of architecture. Technological advantage enjoyed by the Hoysalas artists lay in cutting and transporting of rocks. It became possible for them to build larger more ornate temples by bringing in to use the chloritic schist rock which was easier to carve and polish, resulted in a revolutionary change in the sculptural art of Hoysala period. The Hoysala dynasty rulers felt the need to demonstrate their own greatness and royal status by over shadowing the temples of past, whether it was starting a new temple or adding to what was already built. The more the wealth the dynasty had for its building projects the more powerful it appeared. The Hoysala rulers emphasised on the oneness of God and practised religious tolerance, King Vishnuvardhana’s faith was a Vaishnava his elder brother Ballala I was a devout Shiavite and his queen was a Jain devout and broad minded patrons promoted all sects with equal support.

In my article I’ve tried to present the horse band in the outer wall friezes of Hoysala temples in different aspects such as, horse carvings as mode of transport, horse as a cavalry wing, horse pulling chariot, decorated horses with equipment such as saddle, Bridle, Breast band, Stirrups (rikab) Pummel, Leather belt. Etc. These friezes reveal the richly imaginative and ingenious mind of artists and their intimate knowledge of the moods, habits and anatomy of the horses.

Key words: Hoysalas, horses, saddle, chariots, bridle, stirrups, Leather belt, cavalry

1. Introduction

Horses are elaborately and extensively carved in wall friezes of Hoysala temples. Cavalry formed an important wing of Hoysala army, the sculptors who chiselled the horses in different moods either they hailed from the families of warriors or they might have been artist or soldiers, hence their knowledge of this animal appears to have been both personal and intimate. Sculptors carved images out of chloritic schist (steatite), light greenish soapstone, quarried from Tumkur. This stone is easy to chisel, but attains iron-like firmness, when exposed to the atmosphere. What is not available in epigraphs or literature or foreign visitor’s record is brought before our eyes by the great sculptors of the Hoysala period. Friezes of outer wall of the Hoysala temples are surmounted with galloping horseman signifying speed of the kingdom. Within the selected panel no two horses look alike; there may not be identical specimens in the whole friezes on any single temple band

2. Objectives of the study

- To study about the antiquity of horse sculpture.
- To study about the development of the horse sculptures on the friezes of Hoysala temples.
- To study about the embellishment and equipments of horses in sculpture.

3. Scope of the Study

The study focuses on the visual art and emblematic purpose of using the horse sculptures and also highlights the depiction of horse sculptures of various moods and poses and embellishment of horses on the friezes of temple of Hoysalas

4. Data and Methodology

The data are collected from primary as well as secondary sources. The Primary data are based on visiting the sites, inscriptions, Archaeological report, gazetteers. Secondary data sources are based upon the reviews and references, books, journals, periodicals, and internet.

5. Hoysala Style of Architecture

Hoysalas had developed a unique style of temple architecture in southern Karnataka at Belur, Halebidu and Somanathapur etc., known as Hoysala style, the Hoysala temples are.
characterised by typical stellate (star) shaped ground plan and set on a high platform (jagati) with elaborate carvings, they are remarkable for fine blending of sculpture and architecture and immortalising in stone, factors such as religion legend and history. The more the number of angular affects more the space for embellishment and for exterior pradhashinapatha .Makes the temples look like ornately carved Jewell box seems as if life has been infused in stone in Hoysala temples. The intricate work of the sculptures has been often compared with the finesse of an ivory worker or goldsmith. The high plinth (adhistana) of outer wall is empellised with highly organised bands of friezes such as carvings of elephants, horse man, lion, makaras in one plane,. Hoysala sculptural work is noted for its elaborate ornamentation, every inch of wall on temples is utilised for sculpturing either independent images or continuous long friezes narrating the mythological stories or scenes

6. Antiquity of horse sculpture

The association of horse with Sun and water cosmology and fertility is well reflected in the Indian legends. Uccaisravas, the first horse rose out of ocean of milk when it was churned by the Devas and Asuras. When Surya the sun god merged in Vishnu or Narayana, he came to be known as Surya Narayana. The Aryans were fond of horse. Horse was particularly valued for its role in the Ashwamedha yaga, both the Ramayana and Mahabharata describe horse sacrifice performed by Sri Rama and Yudhistra, between Pushya mitra Sunga(2nd BC) and Samudra Gupta (5th AD) several monarchs performed Ashwamedha yaga. In the early Sculpture of Buddhist art, horse function both in symbolic and representation. The galloping horse with its tail raised has been rendered with sprit and is perhaps the best amongst the early depictions of this animal. Kantaka (horse) steed of Gauthama has found innumerable representations. The horse adored the Mauryan pillar as the crowning member. Horse and particularly the elephant were sculptured frequently, animal decoration became part of temple architecture and Shilpa shastras texts laid down cannons for the portrayals of some animals like the elephants and horse. Animal courser at certain stages of the structure and several friezes of horse and elephant became the customary feature of temple architecture.

7. Breed of the horses

From the sculptures it is difficult to say anything precisely regarding the breed of the horses. Many of them are majestic and appear to be of the finest breeds which were probably imported. Much care was bestowed on the royal horses for which excellent stables must have been constructed in the palace complex

8. Horse as a mode of transport

The conveyance represented in the temple panels portrays many scenes which give us a fairly good idea of the means of transportation. Horse was used as the beast of burden; horses were used to carry a single person and were also used as a conveyance for various purposes. The sculptural representations on walls of the temples of Hoysalas reveals that horse was used both for riding and pulling carriages as well but usage of horses for riding appeared to be more common than for any purposes and appears to have been very popular during the Hoysala period. The horses are seen in royal procession; evidently the horse was not a common man vehicle and was always used by the royal people. At Keshava temple most of the horses though comparatively short, have well proportional stouts and their jumping, prancing, rearing cantering, trotting and wheeling back posses are well chiselled. But their tails are ugly and look more like those of donkeys; it is possible that the hair near the root of the tail was cut to some distance. Armed dwarfs, monkeys or creepers support the front legs of the prancing steeds.

9. Cavalry wing

Cavalry formed an important division of the army; the sculptures who carved these animals were familiar with the animals as well as their equipment. The medieval cavalry is no where depicted as and realistically, as in the Hoysala temples. The weapons carried by the mounted warriors the different ways in which they attack or succumb to their enemies, the ways in which they ride and charge into battle are shown with so much of realistic details. A frieze of horse chiselled on the basement of the temple of Hoysala temples,
shows a long line of horsemen, charging forward on their steeds. The men often wear shorts and high boots and hold spears or swords and shield. Some of them are princes since umbrellas are held over them by footman. There is a battle scene with the two central horses fighting dual on horseback. Horses at Keshava temple are more natural than those at Hoysaleshwara temple at Halebidu, perhaps due to the fact that cavalry became more important and familiar as an instrument of war. The reliefs depict the horse riders frequently, appear like a force marching to battle or involved in fight. The horses rush forward, jostling each other, stamping and crushing the fallen enemy or foot soldiers, raising the dust with their hooves, emitting hot breath. On the hero stone they are seen right in the middle of an intense fight, involved in action and surrounded by a confusing array of armed men. They appear to be unfounded by the commotion of war, the groans of the wounded, the beating of war drums and the war cries of the soldiers in action. Whether on a temple wall or on a hero stone, they are almost invariably caparisoned and mounted. The musicians accompany the battle with their instruments, the scenes look like movies immortalised in stone

10. Horses used for drawing chariots

Fig 2 At Halebidu chariot with a archer, shooting arrows, horse being driven by a charioteer.

Horses were also employed for drawing chariots as can be known from the scenes representing Mahabharata war, battle scene with dying warrior. The stately or royal chariots are seen used by royal personages in royal processions, thus an excellent example of one such stately or royal chariot appears in the panel depicting Rama and Lakshmana proceeding to wedding are found on the temple walls of Lakshminarayana at Hosavallalu, Lakshminarashima at Nuggihalli and Amrithapura. The royal chariot is a four wheeled one and drawn by two horses. As the driver of the chariot (pravarana swami) is seen seated in front and four royal persons are shown occupying the chariot at the back. At Halebidu chariots are carved with a hero archer shooting arrows from it, the horses being driven by a charioteer. He has soldiers fighting around him while between the chariots in the middle of the group is usually one soldier slaying another. The chariots consist of wooden platforms on four wheels with or without spokes, and have the hero’s banner and emblem on pillar behind him. The Hoysala sculptures also depict invariably a variety of war chariots used by royal persons or soldiers. The method of warfare adopted by the Hoysalas constitutes an enthralling aspect of their history. An excellent example of the chariot with two wheels gets its depiction in the panel illustrating “Death of Abhimanyu,” on Hoysaleshwara temple at Halebidu, the war chariot is drawn by two horses. Bowmen on carts draw their bows and turn the sky into a rain of arrows is depicted in the friezes of Somanathapur.

11. Horses decked with equipments and decoration

Fig 3 Mounted horse men with saddle, bridle, stirrups at Keshava temple

There are some minor but interesting variations are also noticed between the early reliefs of the Hoysaleshwara at Halebidu and subsequent structures, particularly on the Keshava temple. In the latter, whisks dominate the decorative idiom. The horse tails which are thick and heavy are almost invariable raised.

Besides being proportionate in size, the horses are dressed and decorated with self command and are properly spaced on the cornic. The horse chiselled in the reliefs is having rich trappings or an ornament covering horse is depicted in friezes from the Keshavatemple, Somanathapur are well caparisoned horse. Generally horse is fitted with a bridle reigns, pummels, and stirrups and decked with bells, whisks, leg ornament etc. The Hoysala sculpture whether of humans or animals can be understood with decorations. Despite the immense variety and skill exhibited by the Hoysala artists in these friezes the horses often appears as fantastic
and conventionalised. This can be explained by vast number of reliefs they carved and the great attention they paid to make the head of one animal different from others.

11.1 Horse with saddle

The equipment of the horse consisted of large padding kept on its back on the rider’s seat a croupier which is trellised, on some horses the back is covered with a saddle, or spring less Saddle (Paryana). Saddle provided comfort to the rider; saddle is a concave shaped piece of cloth or leather, studded with bells, beads, pendants along the border. It expands gradually from the top and covers the major part of the body of the horse, often its ends are left open either at the back or at the front, but usually it is open on three sides; at front below the neck; at the back as a gripper, at the haunch (one of the back leg of horse) as a girth (a band attached to a saddle and fastened around the a horse belly). The moving actions of the horses are depicted naturally. Blinkers are generally absent.

11.2 Bridle

Bridle or lagam were introduced in India in the Ramayana age, bridle was also found employed in the Macedonian horses in the battle of Hydaspes this was one of the reason of their being excellent mounted archery. Friezes of Horse band in Hoysala temples are decked with bridles. Bridle is a set of leather straps that are put around horse head to allow riders to control it. The bridle consists of a thin three strap presumably of leather one going across the upper portion of the horse, another over forehead and third vertically rising and falling on either side of the head and includes a forehead band, check piece and horse band, the bridle is simple and plain and appears to have been knotted or served on to the bit. Two rings are attached at the corners of the metallic bit holds the strap of the bridle corner immediately at the back of the ears. Sometimes another strap is found at the lower portion of the neck, linking itself with girth.

11.3 Breast band

Apart from the saddle and bridle the horse is further embellished with breast band (kakashya) and another similar band at the back passing from below the tail. Near the frontline of the saddle and in the side-bands are to be seen the decorations of huge rosette-shaped bosses called chakrakas. The mane of the horses is not hacked.

11.4 Stirrups (rikab)

Stirrups were not known in India during the pre and proto historic times; these were still unknown to the cavaliers of the Ramayana and Mahabharata no stirrups were known to the Buddhists Nikyas. They do not appear even in the days of Alexander the great who himself was a splendid horseman and had an efficient cavalry and a body of mounted archers in his army. In fact, the stirrups were not known anywhere in the world until we find them in India among the sculpture of Sanchi, Bhaja, Pitalknora, Mathura and in Hoysala friezes. In the earliest stage when the stirrups were not known the cavalry men was instructed to place his right hand on the animal’s back and seizing the mane and reigns in his leg, to vault up to his seat. If he carried a lance, it could be used as vaulting pole in his left hand. The reins being transferred to the right, this kind of mounting would have sometimes proved dangerous. Stirrups were introduced; the stirrups have been used universally, their advantages were so obvious that their use spread very rapidly. Stirrups are a light frame or a ring that holds the foot of a rider attached to the saddle by a strap. One of the noteworthy features of the horse depicted in the frieze is that the horse is shown being driven by a spearman and he is seen using a stirrup. He is keeping his leg in to the stirrups to get hold while riding. The stirrups are formed of a ring like object with broad flat foot rest. They are linked with straps, issued from under the saddle cloth or pad. But the strings that link them are not alike; some resemble a simple rope of cotton, some flat thong of leather and some other a spiral chain. That the horse riders used stirrups can be known clearly from the horses on the temple walls at Basrad, Nuggihalli, and Hosavalalu also reveal stirrups attached to the saddles.

11.5 Pummel

Pummel is put on the saddle, varied types of pummels are noticed; some with a raised back, reaching almost the waist of the riders; others hardly raised.

11.6 Leather belt

A part from the sculptural representation, the contemporary Kannada work Lilavathi prabandam gives a fine description of leather belt (varathre) which is tied to the horse and to the horse stable, tassels or small bells near the ears are frequently carved, Kudureyalaya which gives a peep in to the decorations of the horses of the Hoysala period. Attesting this, the epigraphy of the period also provides a graphic account of horseman and horses in the royal horse stables.
12. Conclusions

The rich material culture portrayed in the Hoysala sculptures picturises vividly the panoramic cultural pattern of life that thrrobbed during the Hoysala period in the 10th and 13th centuries. Horses riding appeared to be very popular during the Hoysala period; horses were robust and were used for riding and in wars. Horses were all well caparisoned. Hoysala sculpture is certainly capable of representing movement of men and animals. Trappings of these animals usually consisted of trellised saddle, sometimes borders with small jingling bells of pendants the stirrups were commonly used by horseman during Hoysala period. Hoysala artists found in them an opportunity to exhibit his imaginative skills. Hoysala temples are a veritable museum of sculpture containing thousands of carved figures. Nictely, refinement and minuteness of details are the special merits in which Hoysala artists universally excelled.

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