

Say *No*, and *No*, Until You

BY SUE RARDIN

The Penn graduate students traveling with art history professor Michael Meister had already visited a number of Indian temples. Says Mandavi Mehta, “We weren’t really expecting to come across this big mystery monument, which is what it ended up being for Professor Meister.” The professor himself, who has studied hundreds of temples in India and Pakistan, had at last been able to include in the itinerary of a study group the remote and little-known rock-cut ruins at Masrur in the Himalaya foothills of northern India. He is very glad he did.

Western scholars reporting visits to Masrur have considered it a cluster of single-towered temples or shrines — the largest at the center — that were carved and excavated to honor various deities and rulers.

Looking at the ruins that day in June 2004, Meister thought otherwise.

He judged that the complex of towers had been designed in the 8th century as a single temple to the god Shiva and that, besides having been severely damaged by earthquakes, it had never been finished. Further, he began to suspect that Masrur could prove to be an exciting historical link, a hitherto unrecognized forerunner of the “temple mountains” of Cambodia that culminated in the multi-towered, brilliantly carved 12th-century Angkor Wat, the largest religious monument in the world.

Meister’s paper supporting this view was the cover article in the March 2006 issue of the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*.

First, though, he had to study the temple’s remains and respond to his emerging interpretation in the way he tells students to respond to theirs: Say *no*, and *no*, until you have to say *yes*.

From a private balcony outside his corner office on the third floor of the Jaffe History of Art Building, Meister can look down with his architectural-historian’s eye on the buildings across 34th and Walnut streets, much as he stood on a ridge in Himachal Pradesh, India, that day, looking down into the remains of the temple at Masrur. Meister is the W. Norman Brown Professor and a specialist in the art of India and Pakistan with a focus on temple architecture. When he walks back into his office from the campus balcony, his shoulder

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East face of temple mountain ruins at Masrur, India



Have to Say *Yes*

ART HISTORY PROFESSOR PIECES TOGETHER EVIDENCE FOR A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF ANCIENT RUINS

almost brushes eight weighty volumes of the *Encyclopedia of Indian Temple Architecture*, which he edited. Darielle Mason, Gr'95, the Stella Kramrisch Curator of Indian and Himalayan Art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, who earned her Ph.D. under Meister, says his work on temples combines “meticulous analysis of structure, carving and organization with penetrating, often brilliant, interpretation to decode the historical development and embedded symbolism of these monuments.” It was these skills and 30 years of on-site research as well as knowledge of scholarly literature that Meister brought to bear on what he was seeing at Masrur.

Facing the first outcropping of India's sacred Himalayas, Masrur is unusual in being itself carved out of a mountain ridge. That is, it wasn't built stone by stone but was entirely hewn down from the top. All shaping and internal spaces were created by cutting away rock and hollowing out the inside of mountains. Envision it as a huge sculpture whose raw material is a rock ridge. Viewed from the best-preserved east side, says student Mehta, “the site really is magical.”

The study group examined the ruins for much of the day. Meister searched for clues to the site's original plan. He found several.

On the least damaged east face of the complex, an entry portico leads into a pillared hall that ends at a square central sanctum, the temple's most-sacred inner space, which is

under the central tower. Most of Masrur's other towers are shaped as though for separate temples, but none have sanctums. In fact, two towers cover stairways to the roof.

Both the north and south faces contain damaged remains of large excavations that had never been completed. Inside, Meister could see areas of remaining stone that he surmised had been intended to be hewn into pillars. These two excavations, he reasoned, might have been planned not as unrelated chambers but as additional pillared halls leading to that central sanctum. He also thought, with growing excitement, that the severely damaged west face might have been the intended site of a fourth passage to the sanctum, a complexity common in later Cambodian temples but little known in earlier Indian ones.

Back in the central sanctum, Meister studied the walls and ceiling. The ceiling was fully carved with an elegant lotus pattern, but the walls remained only roughly finished. Entrance to the sanctum is through the eastern pillared hall. But the unfinished rock face on the sanctum's other three walls suggested the plan had been not to leave those walls in place but to excavate passageways through them, creating at least two other entrances through those never-finished pillared halls on the north and south. Perhaps a fourth entry had been intended from the west as well.

When the study trip ended, Meister returned to Philadelphia armed with photographs and meas-

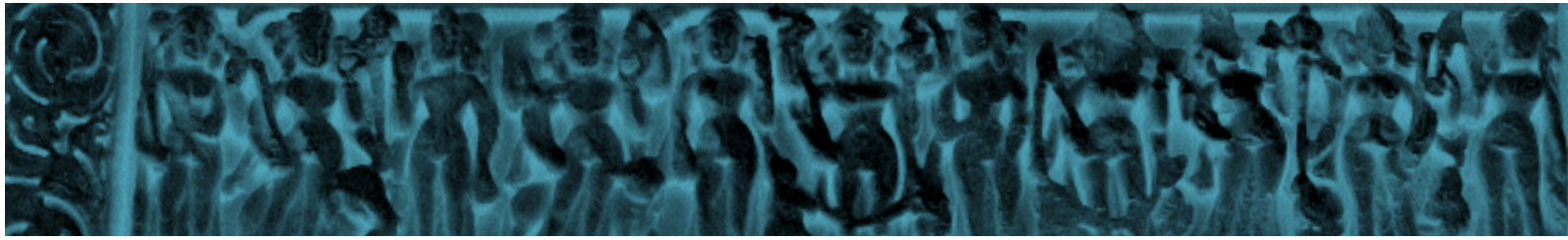
urements, eager to study the sparse literature about Masrur against his own findings and determined to say *no* as long as it was necessary. Most of all, he went home to work on his computer with three old and very important drawings.

Meister is not the only observer to conclude that Masrur is a single temple. In 1913, the first European known to have visited the site, a British colonial civil servant,

Michael Meister



Jon Perlmutter



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perceived the monument's unity and reported it in an obscure publication. He sent his material on to a British archaeological officer, who rushed to the site with his professional staff. The archaeologist's report of 1915-16 "corrected" the observations of his less-credentialed predecessor and described the site as containing a multitude of temples. But the senior Indian draftsman on the archaeologist's team had visited Masrur as early as 1887. This man produced three exceptional drawings of the monument, which were published with the archaeologist's report. Although credited there for "excellent drawings," the Indian draftsman remains forever unnamed. Meister believes he saw Masrur as a single temple — even, perhaps,

with four entries — and his precise drawings provided evidence to help prove it.

Arriving at home, Meister greeted his wife and then headed to his basement study to put the materials into Adobe Photoshop. He scanned the Indian draftsman's ground plan, which included precisely measured details of the temple's single existing portico on the east side and the pillared hall and sanctum to which it leads. Reproducing those internal elements digitally, he superimposed them on the ground plan to the north and to the south, exulting each time the rudimentary excavations on the drawing precisely received his hypothesized additional halls and porticos.

He also used the draftsman's other two drawings, a roof plan and a cross-section, in tandem with his own findings to build compelling evidence of the unity and complexity of what he believes is the original plan for the unfinished temple. The accuracy of the old drawings made that possible. "For me to have replaced those drawings from scratch or to have recovered evidence visible early in the last century would have been an almost impossible task."

But to the most exciting part of Meister's hunch, the original plan for a fourth entrance on the west, he still had to say *no*. There was not yet enough evidence to say *yes*. Little but rubble remained, where much damage from earthquakes and collapse had occurred. The draftsman's drawings did detail a few west-side base moldings that

had survived till his era, but these needed to be confirmed.

So four months after his first trip, Meister returned to Masrur. His companions this time included grad students John Henry Rice and Melissa Kerin. The team searched the west side of the ruins for remnants of moldings that could be compared with the old drawings and with corresponding moldings and ornamentation on the better preserved east face. Rice's own high point on this expedition was brushing aside a clump of vegetation and finding surviving moldings.

Meister reports, "We came back with enough fragments of evidence to say 'these drawings are accurate; there were other stairways and halls, and a fourth entrance was intended on the west face.' Then I could finally say, 'OK, I have the right to take the existing east plan and flip it over to the west,' which immediately suggests a complexity that forms a model for Angkor Wat" and the Cambodian temples that preceded it.

As a historian, Meister had to seek context for what is unique about Masrur. Why those striking differences in its design and its unusual location so near the Himalayas?

While some aspects of the temple, such as the design and decoration of its towers, were typical of 8th-century middle India, the hypothesized four faces with multiple entries and towers were not. The typical Indian temple had one entry and one tower, which was meant to suggest a mountain peak rather than a range. Further, Masrur was located in a hill area thought to



Angkor Wat, Cambodia

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have been under the political influence of Kashmir at that time.

Back in Philadelphia, Meister spent the next several months studying historical literature and found evidence that during the 8th century the power of a king of the wide Indian plains expanded into the lower ranges of the Himalayas, introducing a new style of architecture there. Further, during that period, the Indian mythical ideal for the most exalted temples also included the simulation not of a single peak but of a mountain range, which meant religious monuments with multiple towers. Foreshadowing later temple mountains of Cambodia, this image certainly matches Masrur, which is cut out of a ridge of mountains as if to echo the first range of snow-capped Himalayas facing the temple on the northeast. Mandavi Mehta had noticed that: “It did look like a mountain range, carved out of a mountain range. That was amazing.”

Next, architectural history. What support could Meister find for those four sides and the placement of towers? Among Masrur’s towers, Meister’s reconstruction identified five as primary: the largest, central tower and a tower over each of four pillared entry halls. Of these last four towers, only two remained, with no pillared halls beneath them, though the two unfinished excavations were appropriately located. And as Meister knew, putting such a tower over a pillared hall was not a common option.

He found significant support in an important 8th-century text studied by Stella Kramrisch, Hon’81, the great doyenne of Indian art who was Meister’s predecessor at Penn and a curator at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In her study of this ancient text, which lists 101 types of temples, Kramrisch recorded that the premier 101st type “has 5 [towers], 4 [pillared halls] and 4 doors. The [halls] being in the four

directions, the entrances at the cardinal points, this cross-shaped temple would have one central [tower] and each [hall] would have a lesser [tower] of its own.”

There it was. That was what he had found at Masrur. Meister said yes.

Kramrisch herself, in her extensive survey of Hindu temples, had never seen such a temple. Writing in 1946, she observed, “Where in reality [this temple] was built and when, cannot be said as yet.”

Saluting his revered predecessor and India’s skilled draftsman of nearly a century ago, Meister believes that, with the temple at Masrur correctly understood, Kramrisch’s wistful conclusion need no longer stand. The evidence seems firm that where and when this exalted type of temple was created can finally be said. ■

Sue Rardin writes for magazines, nonprofit institutions and corporations.

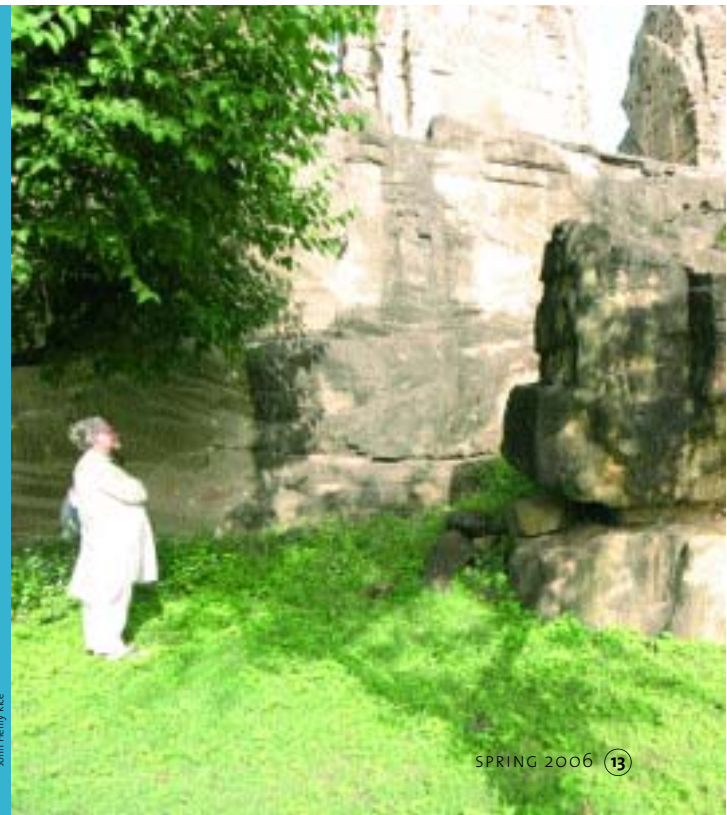
BEING THERE

Grad students Mandavi Mehta, Beth Citron and Pushkar Sohoni joined

Michael Meister in the first exploration of the Indian temple at Masrur, and Citron says it was inspiring to be “working towards a critical understanding of the site together.” But what Meister proceeded to do with that day’s work amazed them. “We were there with him,” says Mehta. “We spent as much time looking at the temple, and what’s fascinating to me is that he came away and had the tools to create this whole paper out of it. Just that whole process of being there with him, seeing the same thing and then seeing what he could do with it was revelatory.”

On the second excursion, students John Henry Rice and Melissa Kerin were familiar with Meister’s developed hypothesis about the temple and knew what to help him look for. It was extraordinary, says Rice, “to see that raw, first-order analysis and excitement as it was happening in real time, before it’s distilled through decades and decades of scholarship and pedagogy.” Kerin says they watched Meister “doing what he always demands of us: not to get carried away with what we want to see. Always say ‘no’ about a hypothesis or idea until you have proven it with the visual evidence.”

—SUE RARDIN



John Henry Rice