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Vāstuvidyā between text and practice

1. THE PROBLEM OF DEFINITION

Terminology matters: *vāstuvidyā* ≈ *vāstuśāstra*, but ≠ *śilpaśāstra*, *ganita*, *jyotiṣa* ... (although historically linked to all of those)

Working definition: *vāstuvidyā* is a set of rules regarding the selection of the plot and the orientation and/or proportions of the (residential) building with reference to time (catarchic astrology), place (cardinal and intermediate directions), and person (harmonisation with the “biodata” of the owner). The fundamental parameters of these rules are *śubha* (auspicious) and *aśubha* (inauspicious).

2. THE QUESTION

“What was the relationship between the textual transmission of *vāstuvidyā* and the practice of geomancers, builders, ritual specialists etc. ?”

3. METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

3.1 The nature of the evidence: the texts are preserved, but not the practice. Hence, no interviews, participant observation etc. Archaeological study possible, but application of *vāstuvidyā* leaves few direct traces in the layout of the building.

3.2 Textual archaeology: texts, especially śāstric texts, can be thought of as consisting of different strata (even if they were demonstrably composed by a single identifiable author). As in “real” archaeology, context is everything:

- regional context
- historical context
- generic context (e.g. chapters on *vāstuvidyā* in *purāṇas*, astrological texts, *śilpaśāstras* ...)
- context provided by intertextual relations
- (socio-)linguistic context: presence or absence of “vernacular” versions and/or commentaries

4. HISTORICAL SKETCH

Phase 1: proto-*vāstuvīdyā* (before 100 CE)

A geomantic practice concerned with ascertaining the auspicious and inauspicious properties of a building site; testing the soil, detecting “faults” (*doṣa*) underground. Mention of geomancers (*vatthuvijjācariya*, *vāstuka*) in the Pāli Jātaka, in Kauṭilya’s Arthaśāstra, and in Jaina texts. Some of the rules preserved in later texts. Place and time of origin unknown, but almost certainly regional or local in character, with different traditions existing side by side.

Phase 2: divinational *vāstuvīdyā* (ca 100 – 1000 CE?)

Geomantic practice (phase 1) augmented with builders’ thumb rules (e.g. width of rooms relative to the width of the building etc). Full exposition in the (as yet unedited!) *Gargasamhitā* (ca 1st century CE) and in Varāhamihira’s *Bṛhatsamhitā* (6th century CE), the context of divinational astrology probably significant (although at this stage no strictly astrological rules for house building!). Strong focus on *cāturvarṇya*, different rules for *brāhmaṇa*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya*, and *śūdra*. Orientation of the building with reference to the cardinal directions, different rules for different varṇas. Connection with the royal court?

Other texts (close to *Bṛhatsamhitā*): several chapters in the *Matsyapurāṇa*, *Viśvakarma-prakāśa* (roughly 1500 verses). Other (lost) texts attributed to generic ṛṣis quoted in Utpaladeva’s commentary on Varāhamihira (Kashmir, 10th century CE). Various *purāṇas*.

Phase 3: the *vāstu-* and *śilpāśāstras* (ca. 1000 – 1600 CE)

Treatises on architecture composed in western and southern India (later also in Orissa and the Kathmandu Valley) typically contain chapters on *vāstuvīdyā*; continuing the tradition of phase 2 with some innovations, e.g. the *āyādi* formulae (*āya*, *nakṣatra*, *vyaya*, *mūlarāśi*, *aṃśaka*, *tārā* – sometimes expanded to ten). Important “northern” texts include the *Samarāṅgaṇasūtradhāra* (Malwa, 11th century) and the *Aparājitaṣṭakā* (Gujarat, 13th century), “southern” texts include the *Mayamata* and the *Mānasāra* (probably 14th century).

Regional phases (ca 1400 – 1600 CE?):

a) Mewar, ca 1400 – 1600: family of Sūtradhāra Maṇḍana; texts: *Rājavallabhavāstuśāstra*, *Vāstusāra*, *Prāsādamaṇḍana*, *Rūpamaṇḍana*, *Vāstumāñjarī*. Closely connected to the tradition of the *Samarāṅgaṇasūtradhāra*.

b) Kerala, ca 1500 – 1600 CE (?): Nīlakaṇṭhan Mūsat and others, central text: *Manuṣyālayacandrikā*. Several treatises and commentaries in Malayalam!

c) Nepal, probably 17th – 18th centuries CE (?): Several treatises in Newar, almost entirely unedited and unstudied.

d) Orissa, ca 1600 onwards: *Śilparatnakośa*.

Phase 4: astrological compendia (ca 1000 – 1600 CE)

Roughly coterminous with phase 3, apparently starting in Maharashtra, “exported” to the Vārāṇasī area in the 16th century; treatises on catarchic astrology begin to incorporate chapters on *vāstuvīdyā*, building on phase 2 but with a strong focus on astrological calculations. *Jyotiṣaratnamālā* (1050 CE), *Muhūrtacintāmaṇi* (1600).

5. AUTHORS AND PRACTITIONERS

- no one-size-fits-all explanation possible, each phase and each regional tradition has to be studied on its own merits;
- function of the texts is crucial: repositories of (practical) information, or sources of legitimacy (“Sanskritisation”)? Incorporation of *vāstuvidyā* into *purāṇas* almost certainly to be seen in this context, possibly also true for (most) *śilpaśāstras*
- intertextuality: absence of commentaries and monological nature of most treatises is striking (revealed truth, rather than debated doctrine)
- socio-linguistic factors: the further removed from the “Great Tradition” a cultural practice is, the more problematic the (exclusive) use of Sanskrit becomes. Less relevant for astrology, perhaps, but crucial in the context of house construction. Existence of “vernacular” treatises and/or commentaries in Malayalam and Newar highly significant!
- manuscript culture: study of colophons can tell us much about the custodians of the tradition

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