

Art and Architecture of The Badami Chalukyas: A Review

Dr. Bukkapuram Venkataramana

Academic Consultant, Department of History and Archeology,
Yogi Vemana University, YSR, Kadapa (D)

Abstract

The art and architecture of the Badami Chalukyas, the ruling dynasty of the Deccan from the 6th to 8th centuries CE represent one of the most formative chapters in the history of Indian temple architecture. Centred around the political and cultural capital of Badami in present-day Karnataka, the Early Chalukya period (c.543–757 CE) saw profound innovations in both rock-cut and structural temple forms. This paper examines the aesthetic and architectural achievements of the Badami Chalukyas by exploring the ideological, technical, and stylistic frameworks that shaped their monuments. Drawing on primary sources including epigraphic evidence, archaeological documentation, and the monuments themselves and engaging with secondary scholarly literature, this study situates Badami within broader cultural currents that bridged regional traditions and North–South architectural paradigms. Key contributions of the Chalukyan corpus include the evolution of cave-temple layouts adapted for Hindu ritual, the synthesis of Nagara and Dravida elements into what later scholars term the Vesara style, and an expressive sculptural idiom that advanced narrative and iconographic complexity. Through detailed analysis of selected cave temples and free-standing structures, this paper argues that the Badami Chalukyas not only established foundational prototypes for medieval Indian temple architecture but also fostered a pluralistic artistic ethos reflecting religious diversity. The enduring legacy of this period is evident in later Chalukya centres such as Aihole and Pattadakal, where the innovations initiated at Badami matured into canonical architectural tropes.

Keywords: *Badami Chalukyas, Early Chalukya architecture, rock-cut temples, Vesara, Indian temple art, iconography.*

INTRODUCTION

The Badami Chalukyas occupy a pivotal position in the evolution of Indian architectural thought. Emerging as a dominant political power in the Deccan during the early medieval period, this dynasty's artistic patronage catalysed a shift from rudimentary rock-cut shrines to increasingly sophisticated temple constructions in stone. Badami, formerly *Vatapi*, was not only the epicentre of Chalukya political authority but also a crucible of stylistic experimentation that synthesized indigenous and inter-regional influences. The architectural corpus of this period notably the rock-cut caves at Badami and the structural temples across the Deccan reflects a confluence of religious, cultural, and technical developments that contributed to the distinctiveness of early medieval Indian art and architecture.

BACKGROUND

The rise of the Badami Chalukyas in the mid-6th century CE marked the beginning of a sustained phase of cultural efflorescence in South India. The dynasty's domain stretched across

parts of the western Deccan, facilitating interactions with artistic traditions from northern and southern India. In architecture, this manifested in the co-existence and gradual integration of diverse elements from the longitudinal spatial planning of northern *Nagara* shrines to the pyramidal superstructure's characteristic of southern *Dravida* forms. This cross-pollination of ideas culminated in an architectural idiom often referred to by historians as *Vesara* (a hybrid style) a synthesis evident in the Badami Chalukya monuments and later crystallized at Pattadakal. The place of Badami within the wider Chalukyan cultural area is significant not only for its monuments but also for epigraphic records that attest to royal patronage, ritual practices, and the socioreligious milieu of the era.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is situated within historical, art historical, and architectural frameworks, using both qualitative and comparative methodologies. Primary data includes:

- **Epigraphic records:** inscriptions from the site and neighbouring regions (e.g., those dated to King Mangalesha and Pulakeshin II) that help contextualize patronage and chronology.
- **Architectural analysis:** on-site measurements, spatial plans, sculptural programs, and stylistic comparisons.
- **Archaeological reports:** documentation by the Archaeological Survey of India and other heritage conservation bodies.

Secondary sources include peer-reviewed scholarly works, monographs on Indian temple architecture, and UNESCO heritage documentation on the Aihole-Badami-Pattadakal region. Iconographic interpretation adheres to methodological norms in Indian art history, exploring symbolic meanings within textual and ritual frameworks. Comparative analysis across sites such as Aihole and Pattadakal positions Badami within a broader trajectory of stylistic evolution.

ANALYTICAL DISCUSSION USING PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SOURCES

Historical Context and Chronology

The Badami Chalukyas ruled from the late 6th century CE until the mid-8th century, with their early capital at Badami. Royal inscriptions and historical reconstructions indicate sustained sponsorship of temple construction, literary activity, and administrative consolidation. The Chalukyan era is marked by an efflorescence of Sanskrit and Kannada inscriptions, reflecting the dynasty's political ambitions and cultural investments. In this milieu, artistic patronage was not simply decorative but served as a medium for legitimizing power and articulating a cosmological worldview embedded in temple spaces.

Rock-Cut Architecture at Badami

The **Badami cave temples**, carved into the red sandstone cliffs overlooking Agastya Lake, are foundational to understanding early Chalukyan architectural innovation. These caves exhibit a systematic spatial evolution from an open verandah (*mukha-mandapa*) to a pillared hall (*maha-*

mandapa) and culminating in a sanctum (*garbhagriha*) cut deep within the rock a configuration designed to accommodate Hindu ritual practices while leveraging the natural cliff face.

Cave 1, dedicated to Shiva, features a commanding relief of *Nataraja* (Shiva in cosmic dance), alongside depictions of Ardhanarishvara and myriad attendant figures. The sculptural program here exemplifies the synthesis of dynamic expressiveness and formal balance.

Cave 2 emphasizes Vishnu's narrative cycles, including *Trivikrama* and *Varaha* episodes, reinforcing the broad devotional spectrum under Chalukyan patronage.

Cave 3, the largest and most elaborately carved, contains multiple major Vishnu images *Anantasayana* and *Narasimha* articulated with compositional depth and thematic complexity.

Cave 4, dedicated to Jain Tirthankaras, underscores the period's religious pluralism.

These caves not only demonstrate technical mastery over rock excavation but also represent a visual narrative apparatus that integrated iconography, spatiality, and movement features that would inform later structural temples.

Synthesis of Styles: Nagara, Dravida, and Vesara

One of the most debated aspects of Badami Chalukya architecture is its stylistic integration of northern and southern architectural vocabularies. The Badami monuments incorporate Nagara motifs (vertical articulation) and Dravida elements (tiered tessellated geometry) within a cohesive formal language, laying the groundwork for what scholars describe as *Vesara* a hybridized temple style. This synthesis is evident in the relief ornamentation and temple superstructures seen in later Chalukyan centres. The balanced negotiation between ornament and structural articulation distinguishes the Badami Chalukya corpus from earlier purely indigenous or localized forms.

Iconography and Religious Pluralism

The iconographic programs in the Badami caves capture a cosmopolitan visual culture. The presence of Shaiva, Vaishnava, and Jain imagery within the same complex reveals a syncretic religious landscape. Rather than privileging a single sect, the Chalukyan patronage system allowed a spectrum of devotional representations to be articulated in stone. This pluralistic ethos expanded the scope of temple art beyond narrowly sectarian boundaries, fostering an inclusive artistic language that resonated across communities.

Spatial and Sculptural Dynamics

The sculptural articulation at Badami blends narrative depth with spatial coherence. Figures are carved in relief and in the round, exploiting the soft sandstone medium to achieve detailed modelling. Relief panels often incorporate mythological episodes (e.g., legends of Vishnu's avatars) and celestial beings, weaving theological narratives into the very fabric of architecture. This blurring of sculptural and architectural boundaries creates immersive environments where ritual, narrative, and built form converge dynamically.

Detailed Review: Art and architecture

Badami, Pattadakal, and Aihole, developed by the Early Chalukyas (5th-7th century CE) in Karnataka, constitute the "cradle" of South Indian structural temple architecture. They pioneered the Vesara style—a hybrid of Northern (Nagara) and Southern (Dravida) styles—featuring rock-cut caves at Badami, experimental structures at Aihole, and perfected, eclectic, free-standing stone temples at Pattadakal.

Badami Temple Architecture (Rock-Cut Mastery)

Location/Context: Carved into red sandstone cliffs overlooking Agastya Lake in the 6th–7th century.

Style: Primarily four major rock-cut cave temples, featuring ornate interiors with detailed pillars, sculptures (Shiva, Vishnu, Jain Tirthankaras), and finely carved ceilings.

Key Features: Blends earlier cave traditions with emerging structural designs, showcasing superior, detailed carving directly into the rock.

Pattadakal Temple Architecture (Structural Perfection)

Location/Context: A UNESCO World Heritage Site featuring 10 major temples (9 Hindu, 1 Jain) representing the pinnacle of Chalukyan experimentation.

Style: A distinct mix of architectural styles, featuring four temples in the Dravida style, four in the Nagara style, and others combining both.

Key Monuments:

Virupaksha Temple: The largest, built (740-745 CE) in Dravida style, featuring a detailed, multi-story vimana.

Sangameshwara Temple: An early Dravida-style temple (693-733 CE).

Papanatha Temple: A hybrid style bridging Northern and Southern techniques.

Aihole Temple Architecture ("Laboratory of Ideas")

Significance: Known as the "cradle" of Indian temple architecture, where early, experimental, free-standing stone temples were constructed before the maturity seen at Badami and Pattadakal.

Features: Houses over 100 temples (e.g., Durga Temple, Lad Khan Temple) that reflect a transition from wood to stone and the evolution of the Shikhara (tower) and Mandapa (hall).

Common Characteristics of Chalukyan Architecture

Vesara Style: The defining fusion of Nagara (straight, curvilinear spires) and Dravida (stepped, pyramidal towers) styles.

Material: Built predominantly using local red sandstone.

Layout: Typically includes a Garbhagriha (sanctum), Mandapa (pillared hall), and Shikhara (spire).

Innovations: Transitioned from rock-cut caves to freestanding, structural,, and often ornate, stone temples.

Badami, Aihole and Pattadakal – A glimpse of Karnataka’s rich heritage

North Karnataka is a treasure trove when it comes to historical sites and monuments. When Hampi is it’s most popular child, the smaller town of Badami is still unknown to many. Cave temples, ancient ruins and a beautiful lake sandwiched between sandstone cliffs – Badami is a place that will easily steal your heart with its rustic beauty. Not only this, Badami also serves as a gateway to the nearby towns of Aihole and Pattadakal which are famous for their stunning temples from the Chalukya era. Since Badami is just a night’s train journey away from Bangalore, you can easily cover it in a weekend trip combined with Aihole and Pattadakal.

Getting around in Badami

Badami is a small town and the attractions are located at a closer distance to the main town area. So the best way to explore the town or the attractions is by foot. But if you want otherwise, then there are auto-rickshaws available easily with affordable prices. We found the auto drivers to be very kind and helpful. For visiting nearby villages of Pattadakal and Aihole, auto-rickshaws as well as taxis can be availed.

Places to see in and around Badami

There are mainly 5 attractions to see in Badami – Cave Temples, Agastya Lake, Bhutanatha temple, Northern Hill and Archeological Museum. All these attractions are closely located and can be covered by foot.

Cave Temples

Carved out of the sandstone cliffs and overlooking the beautiful Agastya lake, the cave temples of Badami are the most famous among tourists. There are total 4 cave temples out of which 3 are dedicated to Hinduism and one to Jainism. Every cave has exquisite carvings, pillars with beautiful motifs and incredible lifelike statues. The caves also provide amazing views of the surrounding sandstone cliffs, Agastya lake and the town of Badami. During sunset, the caves and the surrounding look incredible with the golden rays of the sun scattered all over them. And while you enjoy the beauty of the caves, be mindful about your bags or food items as the monkeys in the area are experts in snatching. All the caves are well connected by steps. But the steps are a bit steep and it may get difficult for older people or people with orthopaedic ailments to climb the steps. The caves are very well maintained and enough information is displayed about them in the boards in front of each cave. Still if you need a guide, you will find them at the footsteps of the cave temples.



Fig 1: The cave temples, Badami

Agastya Lake and Bhutanatha Temple

A large green coloured lake sandwiched between the cave temples and the Northern Hill, Agastya Lake truly enhances the beauty of Badami. The best views of the lake can be enjoyed from the cave temples. But up close, you will find locals taking bath and washing clothes in the lake. Irrespective of this, the whole area of the lake is very picturesque and definitely worth a visit. We loved strolling around the lake and sitting on its shore for a while enjoying the gentle breeze.

Agastya Lake as seen from the caves

At the far end of Agastya Lake, lies the famous Bhutanatha Temple. It takes around 15-20 minutes to reach the temple by walk from the Southern Caves. The location of the temple is very scenic with the large sandstone cliffs forming a stunning backdrop. In monsoon, two waterfalls come alive in those cliffs feeding water to the lake and creating an enchanting scenery. If you have time, we recommend visiting the place during sunrise when it looks the most beautiful.

You can also visit two other temples on the shores of Agastya Lake, one is the Mallikarjuna Temple not very far from the Bhutanatha Temple. There is also another one (not sure about its name) which is closer to the cave temples and comes on the way to Northern Hill.

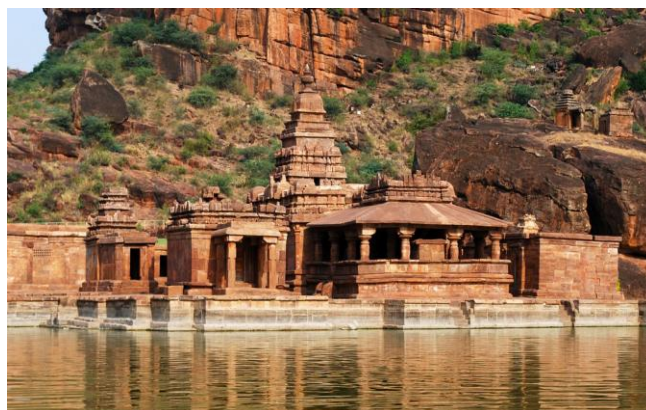


Fig 2: Bhutanatha Temple, Badami

Northern Hill

Housing the Badami fort and two ancient temples, Northern Hill is the attraction we liked the most in Badami. When most of the people prefer spending time at the cave temples, this place is visited by very few and that is why the whole area is absolutely peaceful. Except for the artists who were engrossed in painting the beautiful surrounding on their canvas, we hardly saw other people on our way to the Northern hill top. One of the reasons why Northern Hill is not visited by many is the short trek required to reach the top. The trek takes around 30-45 minutes depending on your speed and number of stops made on the way. It's a fairly easy trek with well laid steps covering most part of the route. Climbing the long set of steps to the top of Northern Hill was definitely tiring on a sunny afternoon. But walking through the narrow pathway between towering sandstone cliffs was an unique experience. The naturally formed sandstone structures of different shapes looked almost outwardly. It took us around 15 minutes to reach the 1st temple on the hill called the Lower Shivalaya and then another 15 minutes to reach the temple at the top called the Upper Shivalaya. On the way, you can witness the ruins of Badami Fort too. Though both temples provide good views of the town, Agastya Lake and the surrounding rocky landscape, we personally liked Upper Shivalaya more. Being at a higher point, Upper Shivalaya provides uninterrupted views of the surrounding and it was absolutely tranquil with no other soul around.

Archeological Museum

Located at the base of Northern Hill, Archeological Museum is not to be missed if you are interested in the culture and history of Badami. Though small in size, the museum houses many pre-historic artefacts, stone sculptures, art and inscriptions. It also provides information about the various attractions in and around Badami. Photography is prohibited inside the museum

Pattadakal

Pattadakal or Pattadakallu is a village located around 22 kilometres from Badami. The main attraction at Pattadakal is its Group of Monuments which is also a World Heritage Site. This group of monuments is actually a cluster of Hindu and Jain temples arranged beautifully inside a large compound by the banks of river Malaprabha. Now these temples are unique as they are built using two different architectural styles – the Dravidian Style which is followed in South India and the Nagara Style followed in the North. Along with architectural grandeur, the temples of Pattadakal also exhibit profusion of sculptural work and finest carvings. We recommend taking a guide if you want to understand more about the architecture and the history behind.



Fig 3: Aihole

Aihole

Aihole takes another 15 minutes by car from Pattadakal. Unlike Pattadakal the monuments in Aihole are scattered through the village. The sites here are again a mix of Hindu, Buddhist and Jain origins and their different designs indicate the experimentation in architectural styles. Sadly some of the lesser known temples in the village lack maintenance and we could see locals using them for drying clothes while passing through.

Since there are several sites of interest in Aihole (approx. 120), it is totally up to you what you want to see depending on your preference and available time. We had limited time and decided to just visit the Durga Temple as we were always fascinated by its architecture. The temple looks very unique with its oval shaped base through which runs a pillared corridor. The inside of the temple is even more beautiful with its walls, pillars and roof of the porch having elegant carvings all over. No wonder this temple is the most photographed in Aihole.



Fig 4: Durga temple of Aihole

Some other places of interest in Aihole:- Ravana Phadi Cave Temples, Lad Khan Temple, Meguti Jain Temple, Surya Narayana Temple.

Other Pointers

The attractions in Badami, Aihole and Pattadakal are protected monuments. So photography or videography using drones or tripods is strictly prohibited.

CASE STUDIES

Case Study 1: Cave 1 (Shiva and Nataraja)

Cave 1 stands as a quintessential example of Chalukyan rock-cut mastery. Its centerpiece Shiva as *Nataraja* with multiple arms embodies cosmic dynamism and theological complexity. The cave's plan, with its measured progression from verandah to sanctum, orchestrates the devotional experience, guiding the devotee inward toward the divine presence. The interplay of natural light and sculptural depth further amplifies the sensory impact of the reliefs.

Case Study 2: Cave 3 (Vishnu Narrative and Inscriptional Evidence)

Cave 3's reliefs are among the most richly articulated in the Badami complex. An inscription attributed to Mangalesha (dated to 578 CE) not only provides a precise chronological anchor but also testifies to the historical context of patronage. The depictions of *Anantasayana* (reclining Vishnu on the serpent Adishesha), *Narasimha*, and accompanying celestial forms showcase the narrative and symbolic breadth of Chalukyan art.

Case Study 3: Transition to Structural Temples

While the rock-cut caves are the most celebrated, the Badami Chalukyas also paved the way for free-standing stone temples. The planning principles and sculptural vocabulary developed at Badami influenced later monuments at Aihole and Pattadakal, where fully developed shikhara forms and mandapa configurations appear. This transition marks a critical shift from rock-cut experimentation to canonical stone temple architecture.

Conclusion

The art and architecture of the Badami Chalukyas represent a formative period in the history of Indian temple construction. Through innovative rock-cut temples and the stylistic integration of diverse architectural vocabularies, the Chalukyas established prototypes that profoundly influenced medieval Indian architecture. Their monuments demonstrate technical skill, narrative richness, and religious pluralism that resonate with symbolic and cultural depth. The legacy of Badami is not confined to its cliffs but extends to the canonical temple traditions that define the subcontinent's artistic heritage.

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