



BEYOND SACRED SPACE: TEMPLE ECONOMY, LAND GRANTS, AND THE ECONOMIC LIFE OF BADAMI CHALUKYA TOWNS

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ABSTRACT

The temples of the Badami Chalukya period (c. sixth to eighth centuries CE) have generally been studied as monuments of architectural innovation, royal patronage, and religious devotion. Their economic significance, however, deserves equal attention. This article examines the role of temple institutions in the economic life of Chalukyan towns through inscriptions and archaeological evidence, with particular emphasis on land grants, endowments, agricultural resources, and the relationship between sacred institutions and urban settlements. Epigraphic records from centres such as Badami, Aihole, Pattadakal, and Mahakuta demonstrate that temples were recipients of land, villages, revenues, and other forms of endowment. These grants linked temples to agricultural production in the surrounding countryside and provided a material basis for ritual, maintenance, and associated personnel. Archaeological evidence from major temple complexes further suggests that such institutions were embedded within settlements characterized by specialized construction activity, craft production, water-management systems, and sustained royal investment. The article argues that temples should not be regarded merely as passive recipients of royal generosity. Rather, they functioned as institutions that organized and redistributed resources within local society, while their economic influence depended upon the agrarian surplus and political authority that sustained them. By integrating epigraphic and archaeological evidence, the study highlights the importance of temple institutions in connecting the urban centres of the Badami Chalukya kingdom with their rural hinterlands.

KEYWORDS: Badami Chalukyas; Temple Economy; Land Grants; Inscriptions; Archaeology; Aihole; Pattadakal; Badami.

INTRODUCTION

The Badami Chalukyas, who ruled much of the Deccan between the sixth and eighth centuries CE, occupy a prominent place in the history of early medieval India. Their political achievements, military expansion, and remarkable contributions to temple architecture have attracted sustained scholarly attention. The monuments at Badami, Aihole, Pattadakal, and Mahakuta have long been regarded as among the finest examples of early medieval Indian architecture, illustrating the development of structural temple forms and the interaction of northern and southern architectural traditions.

Yet the temples of the Chalukyan period were more than architectural monuments or places of worship. They were institutions embedded in the social, political, and economic life of their communities. The construction, maintenance, and ritual operation of a temple required resources, labour, land, and administrative arrangements. Inscriptions recording donations and land grants reveal the material foundations that enabled temples to function over time. Archaeological remains, meanwhile, provide evidence of the built environments within which these institutions operated.

The economic role of temples has been the subject of considerable debate in the historiography of early medieval India. Some historians have emphasized the growth of landed religious institutions and the transfer of revenue rights through grants to Brahmanas and temples. Others have stressed the integrative role of temples in agrarian expansion, local society, and regional economies. Rather than treating temples as either autonomous economic corporations or merely symbolic

religious centres, recent scholarship increasingly recognizes that their influence must be understood within specific regional and chronological contexts.

This article examines the economic significance of temple institutions in the towns of the Badami Chalukya kingdom, with particular emphasis on land grants and the relationship between temples and the agrarian economy. The study is based primarily on inscriptions and archaeological evidence from Badami, Aihole, Pattadakal, and Mahakuta. These sites offer a valuable opportunity to investigate how royal patronage, landed endowments, monumental construction, and settlement development interacted during the Chalukyan period.

The central argument of this article is that temple institutions formed an important link between urban centres and their agrarian hinterlands. Land grants and other endowments provided temples with access to agricultural resources, while monumental construction and ritual activity concentrated labour and services within urban settlements. At the same time, temples remained dependent upon the political authority of rulers and the productive capacity of the countryside. Their economic importance therefore lay not in complete independence from the state or local society, but in their role as enduring institutions through which resources were endowed, maintained, and redistributed.

Historiographical Context

The economic history of early medieval India has frequently been discussed through the study of land grants.



Copper-plate charters and stone inscriptions recording donations of villages, fields, and revenue rights have been central to debates about political decentralization, agrarian expansion, and the growth of religious institutions.

One influential interpretation viewed the proliferation of land grants as evidence of the weakening of centralized political authority and the emergence of a feudal order. In this perspective, grants to Brahmanas and temples transferred fiscal and administrative rights away from the state and contributed to the formation of localized centres of power. Other historians challenged this model, arguing that land grants often represented attempts by expanding states to incorporate frontier regions, promote cultivation, and establish ideological legitimacy.

Within this historiographical debate, temples have occupied an important position. They are often described as recipients of agricultural resources, but the consequences of those grants require closer examination. A grant of land or revenue did not automatically make a temple an independent economic estate. The resources still depended upon cultivation by local communities, the collection of produce or revenue, and the political framework within which the grant was recognized.

The Badami Chalukya evidence is particularly valuable because it combines inscriptions with substantial archaeological remains. The inscriptions illuminate acts of patronage and endowment, while the temples themselves reveal the scale of construction and the durability of institutions that received such support. Taken together, these sources permit a more nuanced understanding of temple economy than either type of evidence could provide in isolation.

The present study therefore approaches temple institutions as historically situated organizations. It asks how they acquired resources, what kinds of resources were endowed to them, and how their presence shaped the economic life of the settlements in which they stood.

Sources and Methodology

This study relies on two principal categories of evidence: inscriptions and archaeology.

Epigraphic Evidence

The inscriptions associated with the Badami Chalukyas include royal records, dedicatory inscriptions, and records of donations. Sites such as Badami, Aihole, Pattadakal, and Mahakuta have yielded inscriptions that shed light on political authority, religious patronage, and the material resources assigned to sacred institutions.

For the purposes of this study, particular attention is paid to inscriptions that mention:

- Grants of land;
- Gifts of villages or agricultural resources;
- Donations to temples;
- Endowments intended for religious purposes;
- Individuals associated with temple patronage.

Such records provide direct evidence for the relationship between temples and landed resources.

Archaeological Evidence

The archaeological evidence consists primarily of temple complexes, settlement remains, water-management

features, and traces of monumental construction. The sites of Badami, Aihole, Pattadakal, and Mahakuta differ in character, but together they illustrate the range of environments in which Chalukyan temples functioned.

Archaeology cannot by itself reveal the legal terms of a land grant or the precise revenues assigned to a temple. It can, however, demonstrate the scale of investment, the organization of sacred landscapes, and the enduring presence of temple institutions within settlements.

The methodology adopted here is therefore one of correlation. Inscriptions are used to identify patterns of endowment, while archaeology is used to situate those endowments within the physical and economic landscapes of Chalukyan towns.

The Urban Centres of the Badami Chalukyas

The principal centres examined in this study—Badami, Aihole, Pattadakal, and Mahakuta—were interconnected yet distinct.

Badami

Badami, ancient Vatapi, served as the political capital of the Chalukya kingdom for much of its history. Its dramatic sandstone cliffs, cave temples, structural temples, fortifications, and reservoirs indicate a settlement of considerable political and ceremonial importance. As the royal capital, Badami concentrated administrative authority and monumental patronage.

Aihole

Aihole is remarkable for the density and variety of its temples. Rather than a single monumental complex, the site preserves numerous shrines constructed over an extended period. This concentration of religious architecture suggests sustained investment and a community in which temple institutions occupied a prominent position.

Pattadakal

Pattadakal is best known for its monumental temples commissioned under royal patronage. The concentration of large, architecturally sophisticated structures reflects the close relationship between kingship and sacred architecture. It also implies substantial mobilization of labour and resources.

Mahakuta

Mahakuta occupies a different setting, centred on a sacred complex associated with springs and natural features. Its temple group demonstrates that religious institutions were not confined to capitals or major ceremonial centres. They also flourished in pilgrimage landscapes that connected sacred geography with local settlement.

Together these sites demonstrate that temple institutions operated in a range of urban and semi-urban contexts within the Chalukya realm.

Land Grants as the Material Foundation of Temple Institutions

The most important economic relationship between temples and society was established through land grants and endowments.



Inscriptions of the Chalukya period record acts of donation in which rulers or other patrons assigned land, villages, or revenues for religious purposes. Such grants provided temples with a continuing material base beyond the initial construction of a shrine. The resources derived from endowed land could support ritual activity, maintenance, and the personnel associated with the institution.

The significance of these grants lies in their durability. A temple built through a single act of royal patronage required continuing resources if it was to remain active. Landed endowments addressed this need by linking the institution to agricultural production.

The relationship can be represented schematically:

Royal or elite patronage → land or revenue endowment → agricultural production → resources for temple maintenance and ritual

This sequence demonstrates that the economic life of a temple extended beyond the immediate urban settlement. Its material support often originated in villages and agricultural lands situated in the surrounding countryside.

The granting of land also illustrates the ideological role of rulers. By endowing temples, kings associated themselves with religious merit and public acts of patronage. Yet the grants were not purely symbolic. They created lasting institutional relationships between sacred establishments and productive resources.

It is important, however, to avoid assuming that every temple possessed extensive landed estates. The evidence varies from site to site, and inscriptions must be examined individually. What can be established is that land grants formed a significant and recurring mechanism through which temples acquired economic support.

Temples and the Agrarian Hinterland

The towns of the Badami Chalukya kingdom did not exist in isolation from the countryside. Their political and religious institutions depended upon agricultural production from surrounding regions.

Temple endowments provide one of the clearest examples of this connection. When land or the revenue from land was assigned to a temple, part of the agricultural surplus generated in the countryside became available to support an urban or semi-urban religious institution.

This relationship linked several groups:

- Cultivators who worked the land;
- Local authorities responsible for recognising or administering grants;
- Temple personnel who received the resources;
- Patrons whose donations established the arrangement.

The temple thus served as a point at which agricultural production entered the institutional life of the town.

Such a relationship also helps explain the permanence of many Chalukyan temples. Monumental stone construction ensured physical durability, but economic endowments helped sustain ritual continuity. The survival of an institution depended upon both.

The economic importance of temples therefore lay partly in their ability to channel resources from dispersed agricultural communities toward a fixed institutional centre.

Temple Construction and the Mobilization of Labour

The archaeological remains of Chalukyan temples testify to substantial investments of labour and skill.

The temples at Pattadakal, Aihole, and Badami required:

- Quarrying stone;
- Transporting building materials;
- Preparing foundations;
- Carving architectural members;
- Culpting decorative programmes;
- Constructing roofs and superstructures.

Such projects necessarily involved a range of skilled and unskilled workers.

Although archaeology cannot identify every occupational group involved, the scale and sophistication of the monuments make clear that temple construction was a significant economic activity. Royal patronage concentrated resources and created demand for specialized craftsmanship.

The repeated construction of temples at sites such as Aihole and Pattadakal suggests that this was not a single isolated event. Instead, temple building occurred over generations, sustaining traditions of architectural knowledge and artisanal expertise.

The economic effects of this activity would have extended beyond the finished monument. Workers required food, tools, and other supplies, creating indirect demand within the surrounding settlement. While the evidence does not permit a detailed reconstruction of local markets, it does demonstrate that monumental construction represented a substantial mobilization of resources.

Temples as Centres of Redistribution

Temple institutions also played a redistributive role. Resources endowed to a temple were not necessarily retained in a single form. Agricultural produce or revenue supported various aspects of institutional life, including worship, maintenance, and associated personnel. In this sense, the temple acted as an institution through which resources were received and subsequently used.

This redistributive function should not be overstated. The surviving inscriptions do not provide complete accounts of temple finances, and it would be inappropriate to describe every Chalukyan temple as a fully developed economic corporation. Nevertheless, the existence of endowed resources and continuing ritual obligations indicates that temples managed material support over extended periods.

Their economic role therefore rested on continuity. Unlike temporary royal projects, temples were intended to endure, and their endowments created lasting relationships between patrons, agricultural resources, and religious institutions.

The Temple and Urban Economy

How did these institutions influence the towns themselves? First, monumental temples formed prominent elements of the urban landscape. Their construction



concentrated labour and materials within particular settlements. Second, their maintenance required continuing institutional activity. Even without detailed financial records, it is reasonable to infer that temples depended upon personnel responsible for ritual and upkeep. Third, temple complexes often became enduring centres around which settlement

developed. At Aihole, for example, the remarkable concentration of temples reflects the long-term importance of the site as a religious centre. At Pattadakal, royal temples created a monumental sacred landscape that reinforced the political and ceremonial significance of the settlement.

Economic sphere	Temple influence
Agriculture	Endowments linked temples to land and produce
Construction	Monumental building mobilized labour and materials
Employment	Ritual and maintenance required continuing personnel
Settlement	Temple complexes formed enduring institutional centres
Redistribution	Endowed resources supported religious and institutional activities

The economic influence of temples on towns therefore operated through several channels:

This influence was significant, but it remained embedded within the wider political and agrarian economy.

Royal Patronage and Temple Economy

The close relationship between Chalukyan kingship and temple patronage is visible in both inscriptions and archaeology. Royal rulers commissioned temples and issued grants to religious institutions. Such acts enhanced royal prestige and expressed religious devotion, but they also created durable institutions whose economic foundations extended into the countryside.

Aihole as a Case Study Durga Temple, Aihole



The monumental temples of Pattadakal are especially illustrative. Their scale and artistic refinement reflect the resources available to the Chalukya monarchy. Yet once established, such temples required continuing support. Endowments helped transform royal acts of construction into enduring institutions.

This relationship was mutually reinforcing. Kings gained religious legitimacy through patronage, while temples received the material resources necessary for their continuity. The economic life of temples was therefore inseparable from political authority. Their endowments were recognized within a royal order, and their ability to maintain resources depended upon the stability of that political framework.

Aihole provides one of the most useful examples for examining the relationship between temple institutions and settlement.

The site contains a large number of temples representing different architectural forms and periods. This density indicates sustained religious and institutional activity rather than a single episode of construction.

The archaeological landscape suggests repeated investment in sacred architecture. Such continuity implies that temples occupied an important place in the life of the settlement. Their construction would have required skilled artisans, while their maintenance required lasting institutional support.

The epigraphic evidence complements this picture by demonstrating the broader practice of religious endowments during the Chalukya period. Although not every temple at Aihole can be linked to a surviving grant, the site illustrates how temple institutions could become embedded within a long-lived urban community.

Aihole therefore represents a settlement in which sacred institutions contributed to the continuity and identity of the town while remaining connected to wider networks of patronage and resource allocation.

Pattadakal as a Case Study

Pattadakal presents a somewhat different pattern. The temples here are closely associated with royal patronage and ceremonial architecture. Their monumental character reflects the political ambitions of the Chalukya rulers.

From an economic perspective, Pattadakal demonstrates the scale of resources that could be mobilised for temple construction. Large quantities of stone, skilled craftsmanship, and organised labour were required to produce the surviving monuments.



The long-term maintenance of these temples, however, depended upon more than the initial building campaign. Endowments and institutional support were necessary to sustain religious activity.

Pattadakal thus illustrates the transition from royal monument to enduring institution. The economic significance of the temple did not end with its construction; it continued through the resources assigned to support its operation.

Badami as a Case Study

As the Chalukya capital, Badami occupied a distinctive position. The concentration of cave temples, structural shrines, fortifications, and water-management features indicates a complex urban environment shaped by political authority and religious patronage.

Temples at Badami were part of the capital's ceremonial landscape. Their construction reflected royal resources, while inscriptions associated with the broader Chalukya tradition demonstrate the importance of endowed religious institutions.

The capital also illustrates the relationship between sacred and secular investment. Fortifications, reservoirs, and temples were all components of a settlement supported by royal authority. Temple institutions were therefore integrated into the economic and political life of the capital rather than existing apart from it.

Mahakuta and Sacred Landscapes

Mahakuta adds another dimension to the discussion. Unlike Badami or Pattadakal, Mahakuta developed around a sacred landscape characterized by temples and natural water sources. Its significance demonstrates that temple economy was not confined to administrative capitals.

Sacred sites attracted continuing investment because of their religious importance. The maintenance of temple complexes in such locations required resources and institutional continuity, linking pilgrimage landscapes with local economic life.

Mahakuta therefore broadens the argument by showing that the economic significance of temples extended across different types of settlements within the Chalukya kingdom.

Limits of the Evidence

A careful interpretation of the evidence is essential. The surviving inscriptions do not provide complete financial accounts of Chalukyan temples. We do not possess detailed ledgers showing annual income, expenditure, or the precise number of workers attached to every institution.

Similarly, archaeology reveals monumental construction but does not always identify the social organization behind it. Consequently, several conclusions must remain cautious.

It is well supported that

- Temples received land and other endowments;
- Such endowments linked them to agricultural resources;
- Temple construction required substantial labour and materials;
- Temple complexes formed enduring institutions within settlements.

It is less certain to claim that

- Every temple controlled extensive estates;
- Every temple dominated local markets;
- Temples functioned as autonomous economic corporations.

The available evidence supports the former conclusions much more securely than the latter.

DISCUSSION

The combined epigraphic and archaeological evidence allows several broader observations. First, temple institutions were materially grounded. Their survival depended upon resources, and land grants formed an important means of securing those resources. Second, temples connected towns with their rural hinterlands. Agricultural production in the countryside could support institutions located in urban or ceremonial centres. Third, monumental construction had economic consequences. The temples of Aihole, Pattadakal, and Badami represent significant investments of labour, skill, and material. Fourth, temples contributed to institutional continuity. Because they were endowed and intended to endure, they provided stable centres within settlements across generations.

Finally, the temple economy was embedded within political authority. Royal patronage established and protected many of these institutions, and their economic influence depended upon the wider agrarian and political order. The evidence therefore suggests neither a purely religious interpretation nor an exaggerated vision of temples as independent economic powers. Instead, temples should be understood as institutions that mediated between rulers, agricultural resources, skilled labour, and local communities.

CONCLUSION

The temple institutions of the Badami Chalukya period played an important role in the economic life of towns, particularly through their relationship with land grants and agricultural resources. Inscriptions demonstrate that rulers and other patrons endowed religious institutions with land, villages, or revenues, providing a material basis for their continued operation. These endowments connected temples with the productive countryside and enabled them to sustain ritual, maintenance, and associated personnel.

Archaeological evidence from Badami, Aihole, Pattadakal, and Mahakuta complements the inscriptions by revealing the scale and permanence of Chalukyan temple institutions. Monumental construction required the mobilization of labour and materials, while temple complexes became enduring features of urban and sacred landscapes.

The evidence does not justify portraying every temple as an autonomous economic estate or as the dominant force in local commerce. Rather, it demonstrates that temples occupied an important institutional position within the wider economy. They received and utilized resources derived from agricultural production, concentrated labour through construction and maintenance, and provided durable centres around which communities and settlements developed.

The economic significance of the Badami Chalukya temples therefore lay in their ability to connect political patronage, agrarian resources, and urban institutions. Far from



being merely sacred spaces, they formed an important part of the economic and social infrastructure of the Chalukya kingdom.

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