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# Serpentine Scimitars and Sarasvatī's Speech: The Materials of Knowledge in Medieval Malwa, c. 1000–1400

## Abstract

This paper looks at a corpus of stone inscriptions in the mosque of Kamāl Maulā in Dhar, built after the Paramāra kingdom of Malwa (970–1305) was annexed by the sultanate of Delhi (1305–1398). On a pair of pillars reused to support the mosque's central dome are two unique diagrams with the alphabet and the grammatical rules of Sanskrit set in the knotted body of snakes. An accompanying verse refers to them as a "serpentine sword of letters" of king Udayāditya (1070–1094), to be fixed on the chest of poets and kings for maintaining linguistic and social order. Another set of inscriptions reused as wall and floor slabs comprise large black tablets inscribed with long literary compositions in Sanskrit and Prakrit in praise of the Paramāra kings. Covering extensive polished surfaces, such serried rows of rectilinear letters were conceptualised in an 11th-century ekphrasis as "mechanical reproductions" of the neck-pearls of Sarasvatī, the goddess of learning. Unlike didactic or documentary texts, these materials raise important questions about the performative uses of writing and the enduring interest of old Indic inscriptions among the local Muslim community.

*Keywords:* writing; reuse; knowledge; temple; mosque.