



Temple or Bāolī? : Re-examining the Monument Known as *Thammen ali Baan* at Gurnal, Billawar

Sonia Slathia

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of History, University of Jammu, Soniaslathia888@gmail.com

Raj Kumar

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of History, University of Jammu, snapdot9@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The monument locally known as *Thammen ali Baan*, situated in Gurnal village near Billawar in the Kathua district of Jammu and Kashmir, has long been identified as a *bāolī* (stepwell or water reservoir) because of the perennial water accumulated within its interior. Earlier scholars have interpreted the structure differently, with Ram Chandra Kak identifying it as a sacred temple and Lalit Gupta considering it a spring-fed *bāolī*. Based on field investigations conducted in February 2025, architectural documentation, photographic recording, and a review of historical and archaeological literature, this paper re-examines the identity and original function of the monument. The study argues that the surviving architectural features including its rectangular plan, east-facing entrance, sculptured doorway, recessed wall projections, mouldings, and the remains of four monolithic pillars are more consistent with Early Medieval temple architecture than with the characteristics of a conventional *bāolī*. The accumulation of water appears to be a secondary development caused by the adjoining spring and the proximity of the Naz River, which subsequently transformed the ruined temple into a sacred water shrine in local tradition. The paper further discusses the

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monument within the broader context of Early Medieval temple architecture in the western Himalayas and examines how architectural evidence, archaeological remains, and living traditions collectively contribute to understanding the monument's changing religious significance. The study highlights the importance of reassessing neglected monuments through an interdisciplinary approach combining archaeology, architecture, and oral traditions.

Introduction

The western Himalayan region preserves a remarkable corpus of Early Medieval temples that reflect the political, religious, and artistic developments of northern India between the seventh and twelfth centuries CE. Although celebrated monuments such as the temples of Krimchi, Babour, and Avantipur have received considerable scholarly attention, numerous smaller monuments remain poorly documented despite their historical significance. One such monument is the structure locally known as *Thammen ali Baan* in Gurnal village near Billawar in the Kathua district of Jammu and Kashmir. Owing to the perennial water collected within its interior, local tradition identifies the monument as a *bāolī*; however, its architectural features raise important questions regarding its original function.

The interpretation of the monument has remained contested for nearly a century. Ram Chandra Kak regarded it as a sacred shrine associated with local goddess traditions, whereas Lalit Gupta interpreted it as a spring-fed water reservoir. Neither interpretation, however, was supported by a detailed architectural analysis or a systematic examination of the surviving structural remains. Consequently, the original nature of the monument has remained uncertain.

The present study seeks to re-examine the monument through archaeological observation, architectural analysis, and historical context. Rather than relying solely upon its present condition or contemporary local usage, the paper analyses the surviving architectural components to determine whether the monument was originally conceived as a temple or as a water structure. This approach is particularly important because many Early Medieval monuments in the Himalayan region have undergone functional transformations owing to environmental changes, abandonment, and continued ritual use. Structures originally constructed as temples have frequently acquired new religious identities after partial collapse, the disappearance of their principal deities, or the emergence of natural springs within their precincts.

The monument at Gurnal presents precisely such a case. Although its lower chamber is presently filled with water and serves ritual functions associated with bathing and local worship, the surviving architectural features suggest that water was not the primary purpose of the structure. Instead, the monument appears to represent the remains of an Early Medieval temple that gradually assumed the character of a sacred water shrine. Establishing this distinction is important not merely for identifying a single monument but also for understanding the religious landscape of Billawar during the Early Medieval period.

Historical Background

Billawar, located in the Shivalik foothills of the Kathua district, occupies an important position in the historical geography of the western Himalayas. The town lies at approximately 32.62° N latitude and 75.62° E longitude at an elevation of about 844 metres above sea level.(Fig.1) Owing to its strategic location between the plains of Punjab and the Kashmir Valley, Billawar emerged as an important political, commercial, and religious centre during the Early Medieval period.



Fig.1. Billawar town

According to local traditions and later historical accounts, the kingdom was founded by Raja Bhog Pal of the Balouria Rajput dynasty after defeating the local ruler Rana Billo, from whom the settlement is believed to have derived its present name.ⁱ Earlier references describe the region as *Balor* or *Billwārā*, indicating the antiquity of the settlement and the political prominence of the Balouria rulers. Whether every element of these traditions can be accepted historically remains uncertain; nevertheless, they indicate the existence of an established polity in the region by the Early Medieval period.

The historical importance of Billawar is further reflected in Kalhana's *Rājataranginī*, which refers to *Vallāpura* in the southeastern frontier of Kashmir.ⁱⁱ Although scholarly debate continues regarding the



precise identification of this locality, the reference illustrates the political and cultural interaction between the Himalayan principalities and the Kashmir Valley. During the Early Medieval period, Billawar also occupied an important position along regional trade routes connecting the plains of northern India with the hill states and Kashmir. Such commercial prosperity encouraged the patronage of religious institutions and the construction of temples by ruling elites, merchant communities, and local guilds.

The archaeological landscape surrounding Billawar supports this historical picture. The region preserves numerous temples, sculptures, memorial stones, and sacred springs dating from the Early Medieval period, demonstrating the flourishing of temple architecture in the area. The nearby temple at Gurnal, together with the monument examined in this paper, suggests that the locality once formed an important religious complex rather than an isolated shrine. These remains indicate that temple construction in the region was influenced not only by royal patronage but also by broader patterns of religious and commercial activity characteristic of the western Himalayas.

Historiography

The monument at Gurnal has received only limited scholarly attention, and its interpretation has remained inconsistent. The earliest detailed description was provided by Ram Chandra Kak in *Antiquities of Basohli and Ramnagar*. Kak regarded the structure as an ancient sacred shrine closely associated with local traditions of goddess worship.ⁱⁱⁱ Although he recorded the legends surrounding the monument and recognised its ritual significance, his interpretation remained descriptive and did not include a detailed architectural analysis.

A different interpretation was later proposed by Lalit Gupta, who identified the structure as a spring-fed *bāoli*.^{iv} Gupta emphasised the presence of perennial water and explained that the monument was locally known as *Thammen ali Baan* because of the four stone pillars standing within the water-filled chamber. His interpretation reflected the monument's contemporary ritual function rather than its architectural characteristics.

Despite these valuable observations, neither scholar undertook a systematic comparison between the monument and Early Medieval temple architecture elsewhere in Jammu. Consequently, the relationship between the building's architectural form and its present ritual identity remained unresolved. The absence of detailed archaeological documentation has further contributed to the ambiguity surrounding the monument.

The present study attempts to bridge this gap by integrating field observations with architectural comparison and archaeological interpretation. Rather than treating the monument solely as a water structure because of



its present condition, the study evaluates its plan, masonry, sculptural programme, structural elements, and spatial organisation within the wider tradition of Early Medieval temple architecture in the western Himalayan region.

Methodology

The present study is based on primary field investigation conducted at Gurnal village. The fieldwork involved systematic visual examination of the monument, photographic documentation of architectural features, recording of its orientation, construction technique, sculptural remains, and present condition. Particular attention was paid to the plan of the structure, masonry, doorway, pillars, mouldings, and evidence of water management.

Primary observations were supplemented through consultations with local residents, who provided information regarding the site's present religious practices, local traditions, and oral histories. These accounts were critically examined alongside historical sources rather than being accepted as historical evidence.

Secondary data were collected from published books, research articles, reports of the Archaeological Survey of India, and previous studies relating to Billawar and Early Medieval temple architecture. Comparative architectural analysis formed an important component of the methodology, enabling the surviving features of *Thammen ali Baan* to be evaluated against established characteristics of temple architecture in the western Himalayan region.

Site Description and Architectural Analysis

The Site

The monument known locally as *Thammen ali Baan* is situated in Gurnal village (32.36° N, 75.35° E), approximately 300 metres from the historic town of Billawar in the Kathua district of Jammu and Kashmir. The structure lies on the left bank of the Naz River, immediately behind an Early Medieval temple, suggesting that both monuments once formed part of a larger sacred complex. The surrounding landscape is characterised by dense vegetation, including mature peepal (*Ficus religiosa*) and other indigenous tree species, which now partially obscure the monument and have contributed to its gradual deterioration.

Access to the site is gained by crossing the Naz River and following a narrow path through cultivated fields and woodland. Although the monument is presently isolated, its proximity to the historic settlement of Billawar indicates that it originally occupied a prominent position within the religious landscape of the

region. The existence of the neighbouring temple, scattered architectural fragments, sculptural remains, and memorial stones further demonstrates that the locality once supported sustained religious activity.

At present, the structure remains partially submerged due to perennial water emerging from a nearby spring and seasonal fluctuations in the Naz River. While no longer functioning as an active temple in the conventional sense, the monument continues to serve as a sacred place where villagers perform ritual bathing during special occasions and worship the images preserved within the chamber. This continuity of ritual practice has ensured the survival of the monument despite its deteriorating physical condition.

Architectural Description

The monument is a rectangular stone structure constructed entirely of finely dressed sandstone ashlars laid in regular horizontal courses. The surviving remains represent only the lower portion of the original building, while the superstructure has completely disappeared.(Fig.2) Nevertheless, sufficient architectural elements survive to permit an assessment of its original form and function.

The monument is entered through a doorway on its eastern side. The eastward orientation is noteworthy because it corresponds with one of the most common planning principles of north Indian temple architecture, where the principal entrance generally faces the rising sun.^v The remaining three sides contain large recessed projections pierced by comparatively small openings that admit natural light into the interior. Externally, these openings were originally protected by projecting stone roofs supported on two square columns with horizontally filleted capitals.(Fig.3) Although portions of these projections have suffered damage, enough survives to indicate that considerable attention was devoted to both structural stability and external ornamentation.



Fig. 2. Outer view of the temple



Fig. 3. Recesses in the temple wall.

The exterior walls are comparatively plain but are articulated by moulded horizontal bands around the plinth. Such restrained decoration is characteristic of several Early Medieval temples in the western Himalayan region, where architectural emphasis was frequently placed upon proportion and moulding rather than elaborate sculptural programmes. The surviving masonry exhibits a high degree of craftsmanship, with carefully dressed stone blocks fitted without the extensive use of mortar, reflecting construction techniques commonly employed during the Early Medieval period.

Above the eastern doorway survives a sculptured image of Lord Ganesha.(Fig.4) Although weathering has affected the carving, the icon remains clearly identifiable. In North Indian temple architecture, Ganesha commonly occupies the *lalatabimba* above the entrance, symbolising the removal of obstacles and sanctifying entry into the sacred space.^{vi} The placement of this image constitutes one of the strongest pieces of evidence supporting the monument's religious function, since decorative entrance sculptures of this type are uncommon in structures designed primarily as water reservoirs.

The interior chamber is presently filled with water, leaving only the upper portions of its architectural elements visible. At the centre stand the remains of four monolithic stone pillars, now represented largely by their submerged bases.(Fig. 5) Local tradition associates these pillars with legendary golden columns or with the resting place of local rulers; however, from an architectural perspective they were almost certainly structural members supporting an elevated platform, canopy, or shrine within the building. Their symmetrical arrangement suggests deliberate architectural planning rather than an adaptation associated with water storage.



Fig.4. Ganesh sculpture on the doorway.

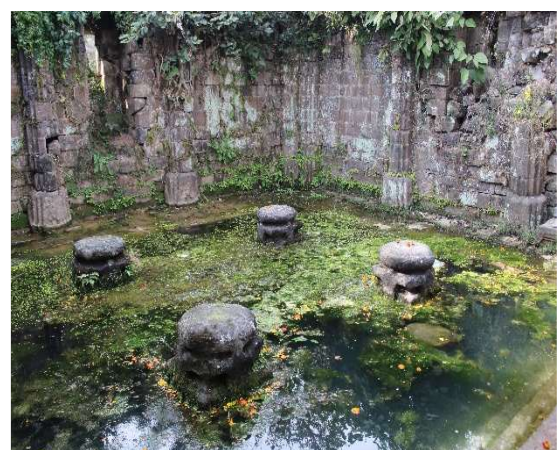


Fig. 5. pillars submerged in water.

Several sculptural fragments, *Shiva lingas*, and memorial stones are presently installed within the chamber. While some may belong to the original monument, others appear to have been introduced during later



phases of ritual use. Their presence demonstrates the continued sanctity of the structure even after its original architectural function had been forgotten.

Evidence preserved around the monument also indicates the existence of an earlier hydraulic system. Local traditions recall that water once flowed from the adjacent temple through a stone channel before draining into the Naz River. Although only fragmentary traces of this system survive, the evidence suggests that water management formed part of the broader temple complex rather than representing the primary purpose of the monument itself.

Architectural Analysis

The identification of *Thammen ali Baan* as either a temple or a *bāolī* depends principally upon its architectural characteristics rather than its present condition. Monuments frequently undergo functional transformations over long periods, particularly when environmental conditions alter their original setting. Consequently, the accumulation of water within the structure cannot by itself determine its original purpose.

Several architectural features indicate that the monument was designed as a temple. The east-facing entrance follows one of the most consistent planning principles of Hindu temple architecture, symbolically orienting the shrine towards the rising sun. Although exceptions exist, this orientation is far less significant in the planning of stepwells and water reservoirs, where practical considerations generally determine access.

The sculptured image of Ganesha above the entrance further supports this interpretation. In Early Medieval North Indian temples, Ganesha commonly occupies the doorway lintel or *lalatabimba*, protecting the sanctum and marking the threshold between the secular and sacred worlds. Comparable doorway arrangements occur in the temples of Krimchi and Babour, where entrance iconography forms an integral component of the architectural programme. The survival of this feature at Gurnal strongly suggests that the monument originally housed a deity.

The recessed walls and projecting architectural members likewise correspond more closely to temple architecture than to hydraulic engineering. Rather than facilitating access to water, these projections create rhythm and articulation across the exterior elevations, enhancing the monument's visual appearance. Such treatment reflects aesthetic considerations associated with religious architecture.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature is the arrangement of the four central pillars. Conventional *bāolīs* are characterised by descending flights of steps leading to a water source, frequently accompanied by multiple storeys of pillared galleries or retaining walls designed to facilitate access to fluctuating water levels. In



contrast, the Gurnal monument lacks these defining characteristics. Instead, its four centrally positioned pillars appear to have supported a structural or ritual element occupying the middle of the chamber. Their placement would have obstructed movement if the building had been intended primarily as a water reservoir, but it is entirely consistent with the support of a canopy or shrine associated with temple worship.

Similarly, the surviving mouldings, dressed ashlar masonry, and decorative architectural treatment correspond with construction techniques observed in several Early Medieval temples across Jammu and neighbouring hill regions. Although the upper portion of the monument has disappeared, the proportions of the surviving walls suggest that they once supported a substantial superstructure, most probably a *śikhara*. Fragments of moulding indicate that the elevation was architecturally articulated rather than purely functional.

Comparison with contemporary monuments further strengthens this interpretation. The temples of Krimchi, Babour, and other Early Medieval sites in Jammu display similar use of dressed stone masonry, moulded plinths, sculptured doorways, and restrained external ornamentation.^{vii} While the Gurnal monument differs in certain respects owing to its present ruined condition, its surviving architectural vocabulary belongs more naturally within the regional tradition of temple construction than within the architectural tradition of stepwells.

The presence of perennial water, therefore, should be interpreted as a secondary development rather than the defining characteristic of the monument. Springs and sacred water sources frequently occur in association with temples throughout the western Himalayas.^{viii} Over time, changes in drainage patterns, structural collapse, and abandonment may result in water collecting within temple precincts, gradually altering both the appearance and perceived function of the monument. The transformation of *Thammen ali Baan* from a temple into a sacred water shrine appears to represent precisely such a process.

Taken together, the orientation, sculptural programme, architectural planning, masonry, central pillars, and contextual relationship with the adjacent temple provide substantial evidence that the monument was originally conceived as a religious structure. Although later ritual practices have emphasised the sacred qualities of its water, the surviving architecture indicates that water was incorporated into the monument's ritual landscape rather than constituting its primary purpose. Consequently, the monument should be understood as an Early Medieval temple that acquired the identity of a *bāolī* only during a later phase of its history.



Discussion

The present study re-examines the monument locally known as *Thammen ali Baan* through an integrated analysis of its architecture, archaeological context, and living traditions. Although the monument is presently regarded as a *bāolī* because of the perennial water accumulated within its interior, the surviving structural evidence indicates that this identity represents a later phase in the monument's history rather than its original function. This distinction is important because the interpretation of archaeological monuments should be based primarily upon their architectural characteristics and contextual evidence instead of their present condition or contemporary ritual use.

The architectural evidence presented in this study strongly favours identifying the monument as an Early Medieval temple. The east-facing entrance, sculptured image of Ganesha above the doorway, carefully dressed ashlar masonry, moulded plinth, recessed wall projections, and the remains of four centrally placed monolithic pillars collectively constitute a group of features commonly associated with temple architecture in northern India. Individually, none of these elements is conclusive; however, when considered together, they form a coherent architectural programme that is difficult to reconcile with the functional requirements of a conventional *bāolī*. The absence of stepped approaches, multiple descending levels, or other features typically associated with water reservoirs further supports this interpretation.

The location of the monument also provides important contextual evidence. Rather than standing in isolation, *Thammen ali Baan* is situated immediately behind an Early Medieval temple and within a landscape containing sculptural remains, memorial stones, and traces of an earlier water-management system. This spatial relationship suggests that the structure originally formed part of a larger religious complex. Sacred water has long occupied an important position in Hindu religious practice, and many temples were intentionally constructed near springs, rivers, or tanks used for ritual purification. Consequently, the association between the monument and a natural water source should not automatically lead to its identification as a hydraulic structure. Instead, the available evidence suggests that water constituted one component of a broader sacred landscape centred on temple worship.

The reinterpretation of the monument also illustrates the dynamic nature of sacred spaces in the western Himalayas. Archaeological monuments rarely retain their original functions unchanged over centuries. Political instability, environmental change, structural collapse, and changing patterns of worship frequently alter the way communities interact with ancient religious sites. At Gurnal, the collapse of the superstructure and the gradual accumulation of water appear to have transformed the monument into a sacred spring, while the installation of *Shiva lingas*, memorial stones, and other icons enabled its continued ritual use. Rather



than representing a break in religious tradition, this transformation demonstrates the remarkable continuity of sacred landscapes in which abandoned temples are reinterpreted and incorporated into contemporary devotional practices.

The oral traditions associated with the monument reinforce this process of cultural reinterpretation. Local legends connecting the site with the Pāṇḍavas, the Balouria rulers, buried golden pillars, and the divine play of the Goddess reflect the tendency of communities to embed ancient monuments within broader mythological narratives. Although these traditions cannot be treated as historical evidence for the monument's construction, they remain valuable sources for understanding how local communities perceive and preserve archaeological heritage. The continued use of the monument by women for ritual bathing, together with the presence of bangles and bindis around the site, demonstrates that the structure continues to function as a living sacred place despite the loss of its original architectural identity. Such practices illustrate the interaction between tangible and intangible heritage, where physical remains acquire new meanings through changing religious traditions.

The study also contributes to the understanding of Early Medieval temple architecture in the Billawar region. Historical sources indicate that Billawar occupied an important position within the political and commercial networks of the western Himalayas. Its connections with neighbouring regions, together with the presence of numerous temples and sculptural remains, suggest that the area experienced significant religious and artistic activity between the eighth and eleventh centuries CE. The monument at Gurnal should therefore be viewed within this wider cultural landscape rather than as an isolated structure. Its architectural similarities with other Early Medieval temples in Jammu indicate the existence of a shared regional architectural tradition while simultaneously reflecting local adaptations to the environmental setting.

Although the evidence presented here strongly supports the identification of the monument as a temple, certain questions remain unresolved. The complete loss of the superstructure prevents precise reconstruction of its original elevation, and the absence of archaeological excavation limits understanding of the monument's construction sequence and chronology. Similarly, many sculptural fragments presently located within the structure may represent secondary deposits introduced during later phases of worship. Future archaeological investigations, including limited excavation, architectural documentation, three-dimensional recording, and scientific conservation, would help clarify these issues and contribute to a more complete understanding of the monument.

The monument also raises important questions regarding the preservation of archaeological heritage in the Shivalik region. Dense vegetation, waterlogging, weathering, and the absence of systematic conservation



threaten the long-term survival of the structure. While continued religious use has undoubtedly contributed to its preservation, the lack of formal protection has accelerated structural deterioration. Detailed documentation, vegetation clearance under archaeological supervision, and conservation of the surviving masonry are therefore necessary to safeguard the monument for future research. Given its historical significance and its association with the Early Medieval temple complex at Gurnal, the site deserves greater scholarly attention and appropriate heritage management.

Overall, the reinterpretation of *Thammen ali Baan* demonstrates the importance of integrating architectural analysis, archaeological context, and local traditions when investigating poorly documented monuments. Reliance upon present-day function alone can lead to misleading conclusions regarding the original purpose of historical structures. By examining the monument within its broader architectural and cultural context, the present study offers a more comprehensive interpretation of its evolution from an Early Medieval temple to a sacred water shrine.

Conclusion

The monument locally known as *Thammen ali Baan* represents one of the most significant yet least studied archaeological remains in the Billawar region of Jammu and Kashmir. Although the structure has traditionally been identified as a *bāolī* because of the perennial water collected within its interior, the present investigation demonstrates that its architectural characteristics are more consistent with an Early Medieval temple than with a water reservoir. The east-facing entrance, sculptured image of Ganesha, ashlar masonry, moulded plinth, recessed wall projections, and the remains of four centrally placed pillars collectively indicate that the monument was originally conceived as a religious structure.

Rather than contradicting this interpretation, the presence of water appears to reflect a later transformation in the monument's history. The proximity of a natural spring and the Naz River gradually altered the physical environment of the building, while the continued ritual significance of the site encouraged local communities to reinterpret it as a sacred water shrine. The installation of later icons, memorial stones, and the continuation of ritual bathing illustrate the adaptability of sacred spaces and the continuity of religious traditions in the western Himalayas.

The study therefore proposes that *Thammen ali Baan* should be understood as an Early Medieval temple that subsequently acquired the identity and ritual functions of a *bāolī*. This interpretation not only resolves the long-standing ambiguity surrounding the monument but also contributes to a broader understanding of the evolution of sacred landscapes in Jammu. At the same time, the paper highlights the urgent need for detailed



archaeological documentation, conservation, and further comparative research. Scientific excavation, architectural recording, and interdisciplinary investigation have the potential to clarify the monument's chronology, patronage, and relationship with the neighbouring temple complex. Such efforts would significantly enhance our understanding of the Early Medieval cultural heritage of Billawar and ensure the preservation of one of the region's most important yet overlooked monuments.

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