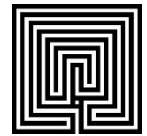


The Ondavalli Labyrinth

Paul Hyland



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Mr Ananth of Samrat Tours and Travels in Vijayawada, at the head of the Krishna delta, summoned Krishna Satyam of Shiva Durga Taxi Travels to arrange my visit to the 'heavenly city' of Amaravati and the cave temple at Ondavalli. With driver Prakash and his boy in the front of an old Ambassador, getting to the Buddhist relics at Amaravati was hair-raising but straightforward... Finding Ondavalli was not so easy.

Prakash drove back towards Vijayawada across country on a rutted mud road often running alongside irrigation channels. It was an intensely fertile, conscientiously worked landscape. Women waved from the fields. Scarecrows gaped. A flock of tan-and-white sheep hurried as if on high heels. A red tractor drove in small circles, perilously packing down layers of rice straw round the central pole of a growing rick.

I repeated the name 'Ondavalli' like a mantra, but sensed from their animated and apparently inconclusive discussions that Prakash and the boy had no idea what I wanted to see. We herded a flock of blue-and-white schoolgirls with oiled plaits and arms full of books. They giggled and pointed. In the village ahead we stopped at a garish temple. I didn't know where I was going but I knew I wasn't there. We pressed on. A mournful pye dog stood in the road with pups hanging in clusters from her teats.



The pillared facade of the Ondavalli Temple, Guntur district, Andhra Pradesh, S. India. Photo: © Paul Hyland

"That's it, there it is" I shouted, pointing at shadowy apertures in a rocky hillside. It had to be the place. "OK," said Prakash tentatively. He and his boy were seeing the cave temple of Ondavalli for the first time. It stood, four storeys cut into the hill - stepped plinths, stairways and deep pillared halls - supported by massive masonry. A path flanked by trimmed shrubs led up to it. The sun was low. The road was orange. The rock was warm. The darkness inside was profound, perfumed with sandal paste and spices. This monument of the sixth or seventh century was empty, but not abandoned.

I climbed to the second floor and with my finger traced the lotus blossom cut into a capital. I stood by a huge pillar carved as an elephant's head and trunk, and felt the weight of the place. A man in a white banian and dhoti, with staring eyes and buck teeth, appeared from nowhere. He lit a lamp and rang a bell. Devotees soon approached up path and steps. On the third level gods or sages sat in the lotus posture, and stylised lions with bulbous eyes gazed across the rich alluvial valley and the Krishna River to Vijayawada and the hills.

In the dimness I began to distinguish carvings on the inner pillars: yakshas and yakshis in relief, dancing as they might on a medieval church. The man with teeth beckoned me. I slipped off my sandals and followed him through a gate he'd unlocked into still deeper darkness. The inner sanctum was close and aromatic. The floor was sticky with libations. He lit a candle. Fitfully a mighty figure manifested itself. So near, my eye could not encompass what seemed larger than the blackness it displaced, and yet lay cramped as if in a procrustean cave. Lord Vishnu it was, vast, dark faced and vivid eyed, asleep upon the coiled serpent Sesha, head and feet pressed at the walls; head sheltered by Sesha's five-hooded head, feet massaged by the goddess Lakshmi; and growing from his navel a lotus on which sat four-headed Brahma, god of creation. The cave was full of him.

I edged out with the devotees. The sky was deep blue, Vishnu's colour, the colour of infinity. I found myself standing on a carved graffito that, with a start, I recognized; one which felt cruder and older than these gods and lions and lotuses. It was a labyrinth, mirror image of ones I'd recently seen near Tintagel in Cornwall. Precisely the same maze appears on coins from Knossos, on a tablet from Pylos, circa 1200 BC, and scored on a crimson-painted pillar in the House of Lucretius, Pompeii, with the words *Labyrinthus Hic Habitat Minotaurus*.

I rose from my knees, a millennium or two adrift. I'd come here today, exactly where I wanted to come, thanks to Mr Ananth, Mr Satyam, Prakash and his boy. Now, rising and staring out over the valley, I didn't know where I was.

Paul Hyland, Devon, England; 1993

Adapted, with kind permission, from *Indian Balm* by Paul Hyland, published in the UK by HarperCollins in 1994.



*The labyrinth inscription at Ondavalli
Photo: © Paul Hyland*

This graffito could have been cut at any time during the long history of the site - the temple itself dates to the 6th or 7th century - but the construction method is clearly of the familiar 'seed pattern'

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