Uddhara's World: Geographies of Piety and Trade in Sultanate South Asia[1]

LUTHER OBROCK

Abstract

The stabilisation of Delhi as the centre of power in the subcontinent reorganised not only political and military structures in north India but also opened up new connections for trade and traders. This article traces the journey of one Hindu merchant family from their ancestral home in the Indus Valley to new prominence in the Sultanate capital. A close reading of a Sanskrit donative inscription written in ornate poetry from the Delhi hinterland shows the changing imagination of politics, religion and space among elite merchants. Uḍḍhara Ṭhakkura adapts the linguistic heritage of Sanskrit public presentation and creates a new and self-aware ideational language to express geography, politics and piety. Uḍḍhara's model was powerful; over the next century, other merchant families adapt it to present their own donative largess. While F. Flood has highlighted the role of Hindu traders through material culture in his magisterial work Objects of Translation *(2005), the Sanskrit literary production patronised by mobile mercantile groups can advance and nuance the picture, showing the complex negotiations in creating and presenting a public identity for Hindu groups in the Sultanate period.*

Keywords: Uddhara Thakkura; Sanskrit literary production; Pālam Bāolī inscription; new imaginations of polity

Introduction: Uḍḍhara's world

Sometime in the middle of the thirteenth century CE, a merchant by the name of Uḍḍhara moved his family from his ancestral home in Ucch in the Indus Valley to Delhi, the Indian capital of the autonomous and increasingly hegemonic Sultans. Uḍḍhara seems to have done well for himself in the heart of the Sultanate; he had three wives, nine children, achieved the rank of *purapati* and the title of *ṭhakkura*, and was wealthy enough to endow at least one stepwell for travellers in Delhi's Haryana hinterland. We know of Uḍḍhara, his life, and

pious endowment from a single inscription, dated to 13 August 1276. This inscription, known in modern sources as the Pālam Bāolī inscription, celebrates—in Sanskrit—the construction of a well (Sanskrit *vāpī* or *vāpikā*, Hindi *bāolī*) in the vicinity of Delhi, "east of the village Pālamba and west of Kusumbhapura".[2] The text of the inscription was composed by a poet named Yogīśvara and it locates the merchant Uḍḍhara and his donative largess in the reign of Sultan Ghiyath ad-Dīn Balban (r. 1265–87) in the idiom of polished classical Sanskrit.

The Pālam inscription's use of Sanskrit speaks to the larger debates of language and power in South Asia. Recently, the narrative of Sanskrit has been dominated by Sheldon Pollock's model of the 'Sanskrit Cosmopolis', which posits a unitary mode of political aesthetics in which Sanskrit articulated power and power was articulated by Sanskrit.[3] The temporal boundaries of this civilisational structure are much debated. While the colonial and nationalist model that Islam came and destroyed Hindu culture and polity has been criticised and nuanced by new scholarship, the role of Sanskrit in the second millennium continues to draw debate. For Pollock, Sanskrit was in the state of decline before the coming of Islam, spurred on by "the internal debilitation of the political institutions that had previously underwritten Sanskrit, pre-eminently the court".[4] For Jesse Knutson, the "twilight" of Sanskrit in the early centuries of the second millennium arises from the aesthetic and political changes brought about by the "new literary cultural logic of the vernacular" and the expansion and consolidation of Turkish rule in northern India.[5] Audrey Truschke sees the Sanskrit as still having cosmopolitan appeal into the Mughal Court in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.[6] In these theorisations, the key feature is how actors used the Sanskrit to describe, negotiate and affirm their relation to polity, specifically the king. Here, however, I see Sanskrit not as a mark of a civilisational *habitus*, but rather a tool used by specific agents, drawing upon certain vocabularies, embedded in specific contexts, and negotiating specific concerns. That is to say, rather than seeing "Sanskrit" instantiated within the Pālam Bāolī inscription, Uḍḍhara and the poet he employed adapt the resources and possibilities of the Sanskrit inscriptional form to do work in their changing world.

To unpack the place of the Pālam Bāolī inscription within its context, then requires a reading of the text both with and against the cosmopolitan model, which can perhaps open the possibilities of the Sanskrit for a mobile (both socially and geographically) merchant elite. The role of the king—Ghiyath ad-Dīn Balban—in the Pālam Bāolī inscription is perhaps the most remarked upon facet in the inscription, yet Sultan Balaban is just one of a number of actors depicted. While Sanskrit inscriptions tend to focus on the king as the focal point of the political structure in which he acts as the ultimate guarantor of the donative, commemorative or documentary work of the inscription, Uḍḍhara's king forms an essential yet not central part. The shift in the political imagination in the Pālam inscription points toward new imaginations of polity, piety and geography in the Sultanate period.

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[2]The well that the inscription commemorates is not known; the inscription itself was not recorded *in situ* and disappeared and reappeared several times in its modern history. See J. P. Vogel, *Catalogue of the Delhi Museum of Archaeology* (Calcutta, 1908), pp. 3–5.

[3]S. Pollock *Language of the Gods in the World of Men* (Berkeley CA, 2006)

[4]S. Pollock, 'The Death of Sanskrit', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 43, 2 (Cambridge, 2001), p. 416.

[5]J. Knutson, *Into the Twilight of Sanskrit Court Poetry: The Sena Literary Salon of Bengal and Beyond* (Berkeley CA, 2014), p. 17.

[6]A. Truschke, *Culture of Encounters: Sanskrit at the Mughal Court* (New York, 2015).

In the context of the Sultanate's political history, Uḍḍhara's gift and its commemoration in the Pālam inscription come after nearly thirty years of weak rule, palace coups, assassinations and other intrigues following the death of Iltutmish in 1236. The relative order under Ghiyath ad-Dīn Balban, a Turkish slave from Ilbari but high-ranking servant of Iltutmish, had made Delhi a viable centre of trade. While the presence of this fledgling state in Delhi is often read by historians as a violent irruption in north Indian political and cultural history, interrupting key patronage networks, and inaugurating the gradual introduction of Persianate styles of rulership, and concomitant 'eclipse' of Sanskrit learning, Uḍḍhara's inscription presents a somewhat different picture and allows us to rethink the public cultures of piety of thirteenth-century north India.

This article looks closely at the discursive elements of merchant inscriptions from the area around Delhi. While Uḍḍhara's inscription carries forward many aspects of Sanskrit inscriptional discourse, subtle new elements are introduced, which show changes in elite self-presentation among the Hindu mercantile elite. These shifts manifest most clearly in the construction of geographical space in Uḍḍhara's inscription, through which the poet weaves together a dense web spanning Delhi, Ucch and the spatial and ideological background of Sanskrit elite culture for Uḍḍhara's pious donation. While celebrating his gift in the expansive geography of the Sanskrit poetic idiom, Uḍḍhara is at pains to locate himself and his family both in the Sultanate imperium centred in Delhi and in his family's ancestral home of Ucch in the lower Indus Valley. This geography becomes the scope of moral activity in a markedly different realm of action than pre-Sultanate inscriptions, especially in the stepwell as the locus of pious donation and public self-presentation.

While containing many of the rhetorical features of previous elite political inscriptions, the Palam inscription shows many subtle differences which point toward a conceptual reorientation in the thirteenth century. Uḍḍhara's inscription sees kingship shift from the central position to become merely another factor through which the geography of piety and trade can be expressed. While the Pālam inscription does not disregard kingship, its significance is reduced and displaced. The king is no longer the focal point of good fortune and the ultimate enforcer of the stipulations of the donation, rather he exists as a more distant guarantor of political order.

While this article highlights Uḍḍhara's world, as inscribed on a stepwell in 1273, this particular imagination exerted its influence long after Yogīśvara's verses on Uḍḍhara's piety had been inscribed in stone. In the coming century, at least three other Hindu merchants patronised similar stepwells and memorialised their donations with similar inscriptions. These mercantile inscriptions also all locate themselves in the hinterland of Delhi with specific relationships to both the political and mercantile centre of the Sultanate capital. They also point to relations outside the immediate environs of Delhi. The badly worn Delhi Stone Museum inscription of 1291, the Naraina Inscription of 1327, and the Sarban Inscription of 1328 provide valuable comparative evidence for the development of a certain sort of mercantile public self-presentation in Sanskrit under the Delhi Sultans as well as a new understanding of political geography.[7]

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[7]All of these inscriptions are published in P. Prasad, *Inscriptions of the Delhi Sultanate, 1191–1526* (Delhi, 1990).

Each of these mercantile inscriptions are written in Nāgarī, and while none were found *in situ*, they all are concerned with the physical presence of a stepwell. These inscriptions share similar formal features and a similar Sanskrit register, but, more importantly, they show a similar way of conceptualising their place in the world. While drawing on older Sanskrit poetic and inscriptional models, these donative inscriptions look unlike earlier models, and stress different sorts of political and religious relations. Further, each merchant is a lay Śaiva, and each hires a Sanskrit poet to commemorate his largess.

The shifts displayed may be brought into conversation with other examples of mercantile and elite donative inscriptions. Outside of and prior to Sultanate rule, pious donation and mercantile self-presentation tended to centre around temple inscriptions, rather than more secular infrastructure such as wells. Two examples of inscriptions, donative communities and the court will perhaps bring the shift in Uḍḍhara's world into further relief. Daud Ali has traced the activities of merchant groups in South India where actors chose temples as the sites for their work. He shows in a careful reading and contextualisation of two Kannada language inscriptions from the twelfth century the way in which merchants navigated the world of trading guilds and the court as political agents.[8] While using the vernacular instead of Sanskrit, these inscriptions show that the court was an active part of mercantile life, and, indeed, that the market and court were part of a commensurable social space.

In western India, the Devapattana Praśasti of 1216 shows the pious donation of a temple by one Śrīdhara, a member of a ministerial family connected with the Cālukyas of Gujarat. This inscription would share many features with older Sanskrit donative texts, and looks similar in many respects to Uḍḍhara's inscription. However, in this the linage of the royal Cālukyas in combined and intertwined with that of Śrīdhara's Vastrākula lineage.[9] In these cases, the royal and donative genealogy are intertwined in the temple inscriptions, in a similar way to Ali's courtly mercantile sphere of action.

Uḍḍhara's inscription shows a new way of ordering politics, piety and self-presentation. The stepwells in Haryana beginning in the thirteenth century point to a marked shift towards a different locus, producing a new iteration of public donative culture alongside (and perhaps displacing) temple inscriptions.[10] The stabilisation of the first Islamic dynasties in northern India opened new possibilities of elite culture, spurred on by new sorts of cultural exchanges. As Finbarr Flood has convincingly shown, merchants were at the vanguard of these exchanges, being their primary agents.[11] Further, the merchant-centred nature of these inscriptions cannot be overstated. While nothing may seem remarkable in itself about Hindu merchant groups digging wells for tired travellers and celebrating their largess in the language of public piety, these inscriptions preserve traces of important shifts in the religious and cultural history of the subcontinent.

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[8]See D. Ali, 'Between Market and Court: The Careers of Two Courtier-Merchants in the Twelfth Century Deccan', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 53, 1 (2010), pp. 185–211.

[9]G. Bühler and V. Ozha, 'Śrīdhara's Devapattana Praśasti', *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. II, (1894), pp. 437–446.

[10]A detailed comparative study of temple and stepwell inscriptions is to be desired in the history of Sultanate South Asia.

[11]F. B. Flood. *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval "Hindu-Muslim" Encounter* (Princeton, 2005), especially Chapter 2.

Merchant histories are often overlooked in medieval South Asian histories. Most work on the Sultanate period has utilised Persian and Arabic sources, and most has concentrated on the military and political history of the early Sultanate rulers.[12] Irfan Habib's seminal 'Economic History of the Delhi Sultanate—An Essay in Interpretation' has done much to sketch economic shifts that occurred with the formation of the first Islamic polities in northern India. Habib writes that the Sultanate brought about "the creation of a new system of agrarian exploitation, with a parasitical urban growth based on it. It united political power with economic power more fully, vesting the control over the bulk of the surplus in the hands of a ruling class….".[13] He goes on to deny a classically "feudal" system in Sultanate-period South Asia, instead opting for the general moniker "Indian medieval economy", which for Habib continues to develop past the Sultanate age into the Mughal period.[14] Habib's work concentrates on labour relations, particularly in terms of agrarian peasant and cultivator relationships and the Sultanate's reliance on slavery, but also notes the growth of commerce in the period. While he quotes Baranī's famous description of Hindu Multānī and Śāhī merchants,[15] the concentration on agrarian economies and the extractive mechanisms of the Sultanate elite elides the importance of commercial structures, merchant actors and routes between growing urban centres.

A generation earlier, Irfan Habib's father Mohammad Habib argued that an "urban revolution" took place in northern India after the establishment of the Ghurids and their successors. The main impetus for this shift is the reorganisation of cities that allowed greater integration of craftsmen, traders, and elites under Islamic rule. "[T]he Ghurian conquest had two aspects—the substitution of the Ghurian Turkish slave-officers for the Thakurs as the governing class and the removal of all discriminations from the city-workers, regardless of creed".[16] He states: "The invasions of the Ghurian Turks brought about this great social and economic revolution because the industrial and social forces in the country has been prepared for it for centuries, but their path had been barred by the ideology of the caste system and the Thakur-military regime".[17] While such a caste-based aetiology is suspect, and his reliance upon selective sources for understanding Hindu caste politics (largely Alberuni's *India* and the *Manusmṛti*) has been criticised,[18] the rise of new urban centres and new urban organisation during the Sultanate period cannot be ignored. In terms of the Palam Baoli inscription, the positioning of merchant families in relation to urban and political networks shows merchant families in motion, moving across the subcontinent for new opportunities, using existing trade networks, and using new modalities for public self-presentation.

Recently, new scholarship has highlighted merchants, cities and mobility in the formation of the Delhi Sultanate. In his seminal work, *Objects of Translation*, Finbarr Flood has shown

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[12]P. Jackson, *The Delhi Sultanate: A Political and Military History* (Cambridge, 1999); S. Kumar, *The Emergence of the Delhi Sultanate, 1192–1286* (Bangalore, 2007).

[13]I. Habib, 'Economic History of the Delhi Sultanate—An Essay in Interpretation', *Indian Historical Review* 4, 2 (1978), p. 298.

[14]*Ibid..,*

[15]*Ibid.*, pp. 291–292.

[16]M. Habib, 'The Urban Revolution in Northern India', in *Warfare and Weaponry in South Asia 1000–1800*, (eds.) Jos J. L. Gommans and Dirk H. A. Kolff (New Delhi, 2001), p. 55.

[17]*Ibid*, p. 58.

[18]See, for instance, R. Thakar, 'Segregation of Artisans in Early Medieval India: Mohammad Habib's Thesis Reconsidered', *Urban History* 24, 2 (1997), pp. 142–147.

the centrality of merchants and merchant networks to the cultural exchanges across Eurasia. Following Burton Stein's distinction, Flood argues that "In contrast to the *cognitive regions* central to the nation-state, which are characterised not only by shared conceptions of space (mythic/symbolic as well as territorial) but also by language and religious beliefs and practices, the ethnically, linguistically, and religiously heterogeneous communities that comprised the urban nodes of South Asian trade networks constituted *functional regions*, spatial elements of cultural geography marked by circulations and flows that cut across political boundaries".[19] The mercantile class was especially active at the intersections of communities, as agents exchanging goods and money at their edges. "The overlapping and intersection of different monetary spheres extended the phenomenon of the trans-frontier while facilitating the transcultural appropriation of objects and images in ways that may or may not be immediately apparent".[20] I see these inscriptions as taking part in the same larger processes adumbrated by Flood. I slightly shift *Objects of Translation*'s scope, seeing the negotiations in the context of larger state and empire formation within the Sultanate, as centres of power jostled for political and military pre-eminence.

Manan Ahmad Asif has described these networks of power centred in cities as city-states in his own work on the cultural history of the early Islamic polities in South Asia.[21] Taken together with Flood, such research demands a rethinking of imperial-centred histories of the Delhi Sultanate. Following the direction of Asif's work, I see the early phase of the Sultanate as a shifting landscape of political actors drawing strength from alliances between different military groups and urban networks. Urban nodes functioned as centres for economic, political, and intellectual activity, functioning as city-state polities. Within these polities, the networks connecting the city to the hinterland and to other urban hubs were dominated by a diverse set of actors, including agents of administration and revenue collection, religious orders (Hindu, Muslim and Jain), and merchant families. Uḍḍhara's inscription, then, not surprisingly utilises the language of politics, piety and commerce to make itself legible in the Sultanate context.

This article follows the Palam Baoli inscription and seeks to situate it within a web of contexts as Uḍḍhara uses it to articulate his own place in the late thirteenth century. The 30-verse inscription itself has a definite bipartite structure, the first half documents the contemporary geographical and political situation and the second lays out Uḍḍhara's genealogy and the pious donation. With a more granular focus the contents of the inscription can be demarcated in the following sections: a benediction (vv. 1–2) followed by a situation of the donation in Haryana (v. 3) a genealogy of the ruling Sultanate dynasty (vv. 4–5) and a praise of the ruling sultan Ghiyath ad-Dīn Balban (vv. 6–11). This first political section is bridged by a few lines detailing the cities of Delhi and Ucch, occupying the exact midpoint of the inscription itself (vv. 12–16). The text then moves to the lineage of Uḍḍhara (vv. 17–24), his pious endowment, and the donation of the well itself (vv. 25–28). The inscription concludes with another benediction, dedicating this for the happiness of all beings (v. 29–30).

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[19]Flood, *Objects of Translation*, p. 25. Italics in original.
[20]*Ibid.*,
[21]M. A. Asif, *A Book of Conquest: The Chachnama and Muslim Origins in South Asia* (Cambridge, Mass., 2016).

This model seems to have been a powerful one; the three other Sanskrit language inscriptions from the Sultanate period mentioned earlier also share in this general structure, moving from the political landscape of Sultanate Haryana to mercantile genealogies and pious donations. Rather than following the inscription's order, in this article I start in the middle, and begin by situating the relationship of Delhi and Ucch to understand the central historical context of the inscription. I then move to a discussion of the first part and the ideology of Sanskrit representations of Sultanate political geography. I conclude with the genealogy of the merchant family and the vocabulary of the pious gift. I locate the Palam Baoli inscription in conversation with the other Sanskrit-language donative inscriptions of the Haryana hinterland. Using the limited set of merchant-patronised Sanskrit inscriptions from the Delhi region allows insight into the public language of piety among geographically (and economically) mobile merchant groups in the Delhi Sultanate.

A tale of two cities: The political and geographic context of Uḍḍhara's well

In terms of political history and dynastic succession, the Pālam Inscription records a simple genealogy of the Delhi Sultanate, with no mention of either particular events or personages in Ucch or any struggle between the rulers in Delhi and Sindh; the political genealogy is completely Delhi-based, even as the geographical imaginary is centred on Ucch. The inscription presents the rulers from Moḥammad Ghūr (who is called Shihāb ad-Dīn) to the reigning Ghiyath ad-Dīn Balban in a straightforward linear descent. Yogīśvara composes the following genealogy:

ādau sāhavvadīnas tataḥ paraṃ ṣuduvadīnabhūpālaḥ |
jāto 'sya samusadīna[ḥ] ppherūjasāhir bbabhūva bhūmipatiḥ ||4||
paścāj jalāladīnas tadanantaram ajani maujadīnanṛpaḥ |
śrīmān alāvadīno nṛpativaro nasaradīnapṛthvīndraḥ ||5||[22]

First was Sāhavvadīna (Shihāb ad-Dīn Ghūrī=Moḥammad Ghūrī, r. 1191–1206), then king (*bhūpāla*) Ṣuduvadīna (Khuda ad-Dīn=Qutb ud-Dīn Aibek, r. 1206-11). Samusadīna (Shams ad-Dīn Iltutmish, r. 1210-35) was born to him. Pherūjasāhi (Rukn ad-Dīn Firūz Shāh, r. 1235-36) became king (*bhūmipati*). 5. Afterward [was] Jalāladīna (Jalāl ad-Dīn Raziya, r. 1236-40),[23] and after her was born the king (*nṛpaḥ*) Maujadīna (Mui'zz ad-Dīn Bahrām, r. 1240-42), the illustrious Alāvadīna ('Alā' ad-Dīn Masūd, r. 1241-46), the best of kings (*nṛpati*) [and] the king (*pṛthvīndraḥ*) Narasadīna (Nāsir ad-Dīn Mahmūd, r. 1246-65).

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[22]Here and throughout I cite from my own provisional edition of the inscription, which I have re-edited from photographs of the stone given in Prasad, *Inscriptions of the Delhi Sultanate*. Where readings have diverged significantly, I have indicated in the notes.

[23]Jalāl ad-Dīn Raziya reigned as the daughter of Rukn ad-Dīn Firūz Shāh. In the inscription, the name is clearly in the masculine grammatical gender. While noting this confusion, I translate *tadanantaram* as "after her" following the historical record against grammatical choices of the verse. It should be noted that perhaps the author of the inscription assumed Jalāl ad-Dīn was a man. For more on Raziya and the complexities of gender, see Alyssa Gabbay, 'In Reality a Man: Sultan Iltutmish, His Daughter, Raziya, and Gender Ambiguity in Thirteenth Century Northern India', *Journal of Persianate Studies* 4,1 (2011), pp. 45–63.

These three verses taken together give a sense of historical awareness of the Delhi Sultanate to the inscription. While secondary scholarship on the Pālam inscription has noted this engagement of the Sanskritic/Hindu culture with the Persianate/Muslim political dispensation, this engagement has been little theorised. The inscription presents the early Delhi sultans as a simple lineage, when the truth was anything but clear cut. For instance, in the third *pāda*, the inscriptions states "after [Jalāl ad-Dīn Raziya], Mui'zz ad-Dīn Bahrām was born (*ajani*)". The inscription makes it sound like Bahrām was Raziyya's son, when, in reality, Bahrām was her brother and had her imprisoned and killed in 1240.[24] Further, this inscription places Balban in a direct line with Nāsīr ad-Dīn Mahmūd, when many in the contemporary tradition sees Balban as a usurper and regicide.[25]

The engagement then with the political realities of the Delhi Sultanate is anything but simple. It seems less important for the inscription to get the facts straight than to perform the work of an inscription. That is, for Uḍḍhara to validate his meritorious action publicly, the political function of an inscription must also be filled. Yet, as a merchant, the king-centred model of inscription discourse must be reshaped for new political and social realities. While the ingredients of earlier king–and–court–centred inscriptions are all present, Yogīśvara recasts and reorganises them to suit Uḍḍhara's changing political present. In the Pālām Bāolī inscription, the political genealogy becomes embedded within the geographical and historical, and thus part of a larger story of Uḍḍhara's world, rather than the centre from which the authority of the text emanates.

The Pālam inscription's geographical, historical and political horizons are delimited by two poles: Uḍḍhara's ancestral hometown of Ucch on the lower Indus (Sanskrit Uccapūrī, also spelled Uch and Uchchh) and the Sultanate capital of Delhi (Ḍhilli/Yoginīpura). Uḍḍhara's family had moved from Sindh to Delhi at some point in the middle of the thirteenth century and had flourished in their new home. The merchant family's relocation takes place at the same time as other seismic shifts in the political history of the subcontinent as the warring heirs to Mui'zz al-Dīn Muḥammad bin Sām Ghūr (commonly known as Muḥammad Ghūrī) and his sprawling conquests in the early thirteenth century jostled for position and power. The early thirteenth century saw the rise of Delhi as the political centre of Muslim South Asia, usurping the pre-eminence of other cities further to the west. Peter Jackson writes: "The events that followed Mu'izz al-Dīn's death represented a disjunction from previous developments. Hitherto Delhi had been merely one of the Muslims' forward bases, and Lahore had remained the capital of Mui'zz al-Dīn's [Muḥammad Ghūrī's] Indian province just as it had been of the Ghaznawid territories in India.[26] However, political power shifted to Delhi as Muḥammad Ghūrī's successors vied for primacy and new invaders from Central Asia tried to establish footholds in the subcontinent during the first half of the thirteenth century.

The result of the political machinations of the early thirteenth century was a reorganisation of South Asia centred Muslim states. The history of Uḍḍhara's own migration from Ucch to Delhi mirrors the reorganisation of routes of political power and religious prestige to the centre of gravity in Delhi in the time of the Sultanate. This consolidation was carried

[24]For an account of these tempestuous years and the complex mechanics of succession, see Jackson, *The Delhi Sultanate*, Chapter 3, 'Sultans and Sources', especially pp. 46–49.
[25]Both the contemporary writers 'Ibn Battuta and 'Isāmī claim that Balban murdered Nasīr ad-Dīn.
[26]Jackson, *The Delhi Sultanate*, p. 26.

out through the political ascendency of Muḥammad Ghūrī's generals in Delhi, Quṭb ad-Dīn Aibek and his successor Iltutmish, and effected the military and political weakening of the Ghūrid successors in the Indus Valley. The Pālam inscription shows its effects in the context of Hindu merchant families. While the migration of Uḍḍhara's family from Ucch to Delhi is central to this inscription, the background of mercantile mobility has received no mention in the epigraphical notices nor any attention in secondary literature. However, this record of a family's relocation provides clues to the historical context of the Pālam Bāolī inscription and the religious implications of commemorating such an act of public piety. Further, while we cannot know for certain why Uḍḍhara chose this specific site, it is perhaps likely that it formed a part of the mercantile route that formed the basis of his wealth and influence.

After the benediction and a description of the ruling Sultanate Dynasty and the contemporary ruler Ghiyath ad-Dīn Balban, the Palam Inscription reaches is poetic climax in the description of Ucch and Delhi. This is the focal point of the entire text, for it is in this landscape that the Uḍḍhara's genealogy and his pious donation is embedded. Occupying the exact centre of the inscription, the two verses laud the city of Delhi, followed by four praising the city of Ucch. The centrality is not accidental; this axis defines the central source of Uḍḍhara's prosperity and the historical circumstances that allowed for the rise of a merchant family in a new place. Yogīśvara writes:

asyānekamahāpurī śatapate rājño manohāriṇī
ḍhillīnāma mahāpurī vijayete bhallīva vidveṣiṇām |
yā pṛthvīva [vāḥ] vicitraratnanilayā dyaur ivānandinī
yā pātālapurīva daityanilayā māyeva yā mohinī ||12||
śrīyoganīpuram iti prathitābhidhāne
ḍhillīpure purapati sukṛtī vabhūva |
śrīmān aśeṣaguṇarāśir apetadoṣo
dhīmān udattamatir uḍḍharanāmadheyaḥ ||13||

12. May the captivating metropolis (*mahāpurī*) of that king [=Ghiyath ad-Dīn Balban], the lord (*śatapati*) of many other metropolises, called Ḍhillī [=Delhi] be victorious like an arrow (*bhallī*) to enemies. Like the earth, it is a storehouse of a dazzling array of gems; like heaven (*dyauḥ*), it gives bliss; like the city of the underworld, it is the abode of the demons (*daitya*s), like the Power of Illusion (*māyā*) it is bewitching.

13. In that city of Ḍhillī, renowned as the City of the Yoginīs (*śrīyoginīpura*),[27] there was a *purapati* of good deeds by the name of Uḍḍhara, illustrious, a mass of qualities without exception, from whom faults had fled, wise, with a noble mind.

The poet presents a completely conventionalised description of the city, but the inscription introduces its patron in connection with Delhi, even naming the rank of *purapati*.[28]

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[27]This name for Delhi is known from other sources although it is not clear if this is another name for the entirety of the city, designates a section of the city, or denotes some town nearby. For instance, Jonarāja's *Rājataraṅgiṇī*, completed in 1459, speaks of the citizens of Yoginīpura (*yoginīpurapaura*) in verse 381 "lord of Yoginīpura" (*yoginīpuranātha*) in verse 441. Both references come during the account of Shihāb ad-Dīn, who reigned from 1355–73. See also S. L. Sadhu, *Tales from the Rājataraṅgiṇī* (Srinagar, 1993), p. 83 n. 131.

[28]Prasad's understanding of *purapati* as "householder" seems unlikely to me (Prasad, *Inscriptions of the Delhi Sultanate*, p. 13). In his *Indian Epigraphical Glossary*, Sircar translates the term as "mayor of a town" and gives a few synonyms. See D. C. Sircar, *Indian Epigraphical Glossary* (Delhi, 1966), p. 266. While it is unclear what exactly it would

While such an inscription praising the city of Delhi would seem to be expected in an inscription that was situated in the immediate hinterland of the city, the Palam Baoli inscription only devotes one full stanza to its praise. And while the poet carefully locates the patron of the inscription as an important member of that city, the actual geographical focus of this text, perhaps surprisingly, stands elsewhere. The inscription immediately moves from a description of Uḍḍhara's place in Delhi to a three-stanza description of Uccāpūrī/Ucch on the banks of the lower Indus in Sindh. The poet writes:

vitastāvipāśā śatadrūbhir ābhir
mmilitvāmalā candrabhāgā vibhāgā |
purastād udastais taraṅgair abhaṅgai[ḥ]
sthitā yatra sindhuḥ subandhus sabandhuḥ ||14||[29]
mudhā madhu mudhā sīdhu mudhā divi sudhārasaḥ |
yena sindhu sudhā pītā tasya jñātasudhāpy adhaḥ ||15||
tatsindhudivyasudhayā paridhautabhūmim
bhārasthālaiḥ sakalatāpahare pavitre |
uccai rūḍaṃcati hasaty amarāvatīm apy
uccāpūrī suradhunī taṭavāsinīṃ sā ||16||

14. Where, after having combined with the Vitastā, Vipāśā, and Śatadru Rivers, the pure Candrabhāgā is undivided opposite to where with high and unbroken waves the Sindhu stands as a good friend (*subandhu*) among its friends (*sabandhu*).

15. Honey is useless, rum (*sīdhu*) is useless, ambrosia in heaven is useless, for him by whom the nectar of the Sindhu (=Indus) is drunk the nectar of knowledge too [is considered] base.

16. In the land washed by the heavenly nectar of the purifying river, that Uccāpūrā (Ucch) resounding loudly (*uccaiḥ*) mocks even Amarāvatī, situated on the bank of the River of the Gods.

These verses stress a geography that, although described in conventional terms, speaks to the real and lived-in landscape of the mercantile elite in the Sultanate period. We see conventionalised tropes of the descriptions of cities (so lofty they dwarf the city of the gods) washed by holy rivers, however the named rivers of the Panjab and their routes in upper Sindh speak to the routes and landscapes that make Uccāpūrī so important within the context of the Sultanate world. The rivers of the Panjab (importantly all five are mentioned here) precede the description of the city. The riverine geography invokes both the agricultural aspects of the land to which Ucch is tied and the routes in which Ucch stands as an important node. Delhi is not placed within such a context; there is no mention of the Yamunā or any other broader

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mean to be "mayor" of Delhi during the Sultanate, from context it does appear to be a rank of some public importance. Incidentally in a parallel worthy of further exploration, the Raṣṭrakuṭa rulers recognised an Arab "governor" of the port of Sanjan on the Arabian Sea. This post seemed to be the head of the local Muslim community. See D. C. Sircar, 'Rashtrakuta Charters from Chinchani', *Epigraphica Indica* 32, 2 (1957), pp. 45–60.

   [29]This verse is slightly obscure, but I translate it according to the geography of the region of Ucch, situated downriver of the confluence of the Sutlej (=Śatadrumā) and Chenab (=Chandrabhāgā) but before the confluence of the Chenab and the Indus (=Sindhu). Ucch thus occupies the space where the Chenab and the Indus can stand as "friends", closely connected but with separate identities.

landscape, it is rather merely the seat of political power and the centre of Uḍḍhara's commercial ambitions.

The centrality of Ucch in Uḍḍhara's spatial history cannot be overestimated in the context of this inscription. As commemorated in Yogīśvara's poetry, the descriptions of Delhi and Ucch occupy the sequential and conceptual midpoint of the Palam inscription. The poet here bridges the political praise of Sultan Ghiyath ad-Dīn Balban and his family (occupying verses 3–11) and the description of the merchant Uḍḍhara's lineage and their pious donation (verses 17–30). An attention to the text's own record of the resettling of the family read against the historical situation in the thirteenth century, especially the shifting politics of the various city-states that served as the base for Muslim polities in the western part of India.

The changing networks between different cities, polities and groups in pre-Mughal South Asia have only begun to be studied in earnest. Research stepping away from political and military-historical accounts of the Sultanate period are beginning to offer new models for understanding the complex dynamics of cultural history. Particularly salient for the discussion of the Ucch and its relationship to other urban centres in South Asia is Manan Ahmad Asif's *A Book of Conquest: The Chachnama and Muslim Origins in South Asia*. In his revisionist reading of the *Chachnama* and the history of Ucch, Asif insists on seeing the urban and political centres of the frontier zone of South Asia as "nodes of trade and power, with multiple networks connecting one node to another".[30] He positions the Persian *Chachnama*, long considered to be a translation of an earlier, eighth-century Arabic text, within the political history of thirteenth-century Sindh.

Uḍḍhara's family is not alone in migrating from Ucch to Delhi. Minhaj Sirāj Jūzjānī, the author of the universal history the *Tabaqāt-i Nāsirī*, mirrors the movement of Uḍḍhara's family recorded in the Palam inscription. From a family based in the Indus Valley that frequented the courts of Ghazna, Ghur and Lahore, Jūzjānī came to Ucch in 1227 at the behest of Nasir ud-Dīn Qabacha. After Qabacha's death, Jūzjānī relocated to Delhi where he served at the behest of Iltutmish and his daughter, Raziyya, until his death in 1260.[31] Further, in concentrating on the life of one Ṣūfī saint from Ucch, Sayyid Jalāl ad-dīn Bukhārī Makhdūm-i Jahāniyān, Amina M. Steinfels shows the deep connections of the intellectuals of Ucch not only to the wider Islamic world but to the temporal powers in Delhi.[32]

The Pālam Bāolā's invocation of public piety then is to be understood within the world in which religious and economic routes were being refigured by new regional centres of gravity and new congeries of military and political power. Uḍḍhara had the well dug in 1276, during the reign of Ghiyath ad-Dīn Balban (r. 1266–87). Balban's reign as the Sultan in Delhi comes as part of the stabilisation of the Delhi-based Sultanate as the paramount power in South Asia.[33] The rise of the Delhi Sultanate and the increasing centralisation of power in the city of Delhi should be seen in light of the longer story of political heirs to the conquests of the Ghūrid rulers. Beginning as petty chieftains in the mountains east of Herat,

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[30]Asif, *A Book of Conquest*, p. 49.
[31]*Ibid*. See Chapter 2, especially pp. 48–55.
[32]See A. M. Steifels, *Knowledge Before Action: Islamic Learning and Sufi Practice in the Life of Sayyid Jalāl al-dīn Bukhārī Makhdūm-i Jahāniyān* (Columbia, SC, 2012).
[33]The reign of Balban becomes a touchstone for later sultanate genealogies. In the *Tārīkh-i Firūz Shāhī* of Baranī, the Tughluq Dynasty locates their genealogical origins in Balban's administration.

Muḥammad Ghūrī (=Pālam inscription Shihāb ad-Dīn, r. 1191–1206) looked eastward to India for expansion of his dominion.

By 1192, Muḥammad Ghūrī permanently established control of Delhi and ruled territory stretching from Afghanistan to Bengal. With the help of his powerful general Qutbuddin Aibek,[34] his control expanded further into the subcontinent. After Muḥammad Ghūrī's death in 1206, Aibek declared himself sultan, leading to a power struggle between himself and Sām Ghūr's other powerful generals. Aibek's own death in 1211 exacerbated the divisions between the powerful regionally entrenched slave-generals in former centres of Ghurid power: Delhi, Ghazna, Bengal and Sindh. Of these two, the most important for understanding the contents of the Pālam inscription are the establishment of Shams ad-Dīn Iltutmish in Delhi and Nāsir ad-Dīn Qabacha in Sindh.

Shams ad-Din Iltutmish slowly began building a power base after the death of Aibek. Although based in Delhi, this was only one base of power among many in northern India. In fact, even the claim of the status of 'sultan' occurred later in his rule; he first referred to himself simply as 'king' (*malik*). Slowly he began consolidating power, defeating his rival from Ghazna in 1216. Soon Iltutmish's Delhi-based kingdom's greatest rival was Qabacha in Ucch.

In the Indus Valley, a second powerful Ghūrid successor state based in Ucch emerged. Nasīr ad-Dīn Qabacha took control of cities there in the aftermath of Aibek's death in 1211, but developments in Central Asia on the other side of the Hindu Kush ensured that his reign would be troubled and short. The Mongols under Chingiz Khan were beginning their conquests, pushing out from the Central Asian steppes. The Khwarazm Shahs, based in Samarkand, fell to the Mongols in 1215–18. Fleeing the Mongol onslaught, the Khwarazm Shah ruler 'Ala' ad-Dīn Muhammad crossed the Hindu Kush and entered the subcontinent. When Qabacha refused to help 'Ala' ud-Dīn Muhammad in his fight against Chingiz Khan, 'Ala' ud-Dīn Muhammad's son Jalāl ad-Dīn sacked the city of Ucch in 1224. While Qabacha was able to defend Multan against Chingiz Khan in 1224 and the invasion of the Khwarazm Shahs, the combined pressure from the northwest and his rival Iltutmish in the east proved too much. David Jackson writes that Qabacha "was to receive the *coup de grâce* not from the northwest but from Delhi".[35] He died in 1228, drowned in the Indus River.

The struggle for power between Delhi and Ucch ultimately reorganised the structure of polity in South Asia and the routes that connected and defined northern India. After the death of Qabacha, Delhi assumed greater importance, eclipsing Lahore and the older Muslim centres in the Indus Valley, particularly Ucch and Multan. After conquering Bengal in 1231, Iltutmish became the paramount Muslim leader in India. This reorganisation of power also shifted routes of travel and trade, with the axis of power mirroring the axis of movement from Delhi to the northwest, rather than an older axis of trade and power that extended

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[34]The inscription calls him Ṣuduvadīna, which presents some problems. It seems to be somewhere halfway between Khuda ad-Dīn and Qutb ad-Dīn. The Perso-Arabic *kh* sound is often transcribed with the Sanskrit retroflex sibilant *ṣ* (and vice-versa), while the Perso-Arabic *q* is usually transcribed with the Sanskrit *k*. A more literal transcription would lead to the nonsensical Khudub ad Dīn. Noting this difficulty, I present both possible readings of the name.
[35]Jackson, *The Delhi Sultanate*, p. 34.

down the Indus from Lahore, through Multan and Ucch to the Indian Ocean. Qabacha's death, accordingly, brought with it the extinction of Ucch as a power centre. The growing political pull of Delhi was mirrored by the Pālam inscription's displacement of the political lineage to Delhi while retaining an Ucch-centred geography.

As a last aside, the evidence from the other Haryana inscriptions does show perhaps some nods to a transregional mercantile world, but it is in no ways as dramatic as the Palam inscription. For instance, the Sarban Inscription states after a discussion of the Mohammad Shāh Tughluq: "There is in that city [=Delhi] a lineage of merchants who were inhabitants (*nivā-sinām*) of Agrotaka […]",[36] and the Naraina Stone Inscription, after its own praise of Mohammad Shāh, could also point to another lineage between the family's current village and their ancestral dwelling elsewhere.[37] While both speak of more mysterious and local networks of mobility, it is worth noting that the form of the Pālam inscription is replicated in these later, more spatially circumscribed, donative inscriptions. This is an indication that spatial reach and familial mobility continued to be an essential part of the inscription as merchant lineages publicly asserted themselves in the language of Sanskrit piety.

Layering geographies and thick histories: A Sultanate ruler in Sanskrit verse

So how does Uḍḍhara see his political world? To what literary models does Yogīśvara turn in order to describe and memorialise Uḍḍhara's act of piety? What role does the idealised spatial imagination of Sanskrit play in the representation of the Sultanate? How is the political space of the ruling Sultanate relevant? And, finally, how does the political geography map onto other geographies central to the well's donation? Uḍḍhara's inscription turns to older Sanskrit models, but it reconfigures the older royal model of self-presentation to suit a new mercantile context. The political geography of the Pālam inscription becomes just one level of the inscription's multi-layered field of pious activity. Although the geographic crux of the inscription is its Delhi-Ucch axis, in his account of Uḍḍhara, the poet Yogīśvara juxtaposes spatial imaginations drawn from different sources and hearkening to different literary models: the enduring geographical space and the political geography in the *kāvya* register shown through the trope of the *digvijaya* or conquest of the directions and the familiar geography of the Sanskrit epics and *purāṇa*s. Each of these geographies highlights a different aspect of Uḍḍhara's world; taken together, they overlap and stand in contradistinction.

The beginning of the Pālam inscription introduces Haryana as the field of pious action in which the donation operates as well as embedded in a long history of different dynasties. The inscription reads:

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[36]*tasyām pury asti vaṇijām agrotakanivāsinām | vaṃśaḥ* … Prasad, *Sanskrit Inscriptions of the Delhi Sultanate*, p. 29, v. 7.

[37]See the Naraina Stone Inscription, v. 6, and the discussion by Prasad, *Sanskrit Inscriptions of the Delhi Sultanate*, pp. 22–27. While the find-spot of the Naraina Stone Inscription is unknown, M. S. Ahluwalia argues that this Naraina is Jaipur in present-day Rajasthan, which would speak to another geographical connection commemorated in stone. See M. S. Ahluwalia 'The Sultanate's Penetration into Rajasthan & Central India', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 28 (1966), p. 148. The Delhi Museum Stone Inscription is too worn to say anything definitive, however, there does appear to be the demonym Rohītaka used where one might expect such a discussion. See Prasad, *Sanskrit Inscriptions of the Delhi Sultanate*, pp. 15–18, especially p. 16.

abhoji tomārair ādau cauhāṇais tadanaṃtaraṃ |
hariyānakabhūr eṣā śakeṃdraiḥ śāsyate 'dhunā ||3||

At first it was enjoyed by the Tomāras, after them by the Cauhāṇas, this land of Hariyā-naka is now ruled (*śāsyate*) by Śaka kings.

This verse both normalises and decentralises the Sultanate rulers and foregrounds the land itself as the sphere of pious activity. The current political dispensation is seen as part of a longer sequence of rulers, contingent and mutable. This is not simply the idiosyncratic state-ment of a single inscription; rather it seems deeply imbricated in the worldview of the mer-chant elites of Delhi and its hinterland. The undated Delhi Stone inscription restates the Pālam Baoli's sentiment almost word for word and shows the importance of this idea to the political and geographical imagination of these Sultanate merchant elites. Although the concluding half of the verse is illegible, a shared imagination of the land and its past is clear. The brāhmin author of the inscription, Uttama son of Hariścandra, writes:

deśe śrīhariyāṇākhye vartate ḍhillikā purī |
tomaraiś cāhamānaiś ca…[38]

In the land called Śrī Hariyāna there is a city, Ḍhillikā (=Delhi). By the Tomaras and the Cāhamānas….

The Naraina Stone Inscription from 1327 takes this even further, and abstracts the real geo-graphical space into the space of the great Hindu epic, the *Mahābhārata*:

hariyānakasaṃjño[39] *[']sti deśaḥ puṇyatamo mahān |*
kṛṣṇaḥ sapa[rtho] vyacarad yatra[40] *pāpaughaśāṃtaye ||3||*

This great, most holy land is called Hariyāna, where Kṛṣṇa wandered along with Pārtha [=Arjuna] in order to pacify the flood of sin (*pāpa*).

The legendary heart of the Bhārata War, the site of the sermon of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, now becomes the locus of the pious activity of Delhi's elite merchants. Haryana is a field with a history that precedes and undergirds the real political history of kings and rulers. While the other two inscriptions gesture toward this perduring aspect of the land, the Naraina inscrip-tion makes explicit its epic identification as a "field of *dharma*", a place for such pious activity to bear fruit because of its connections with *purāṇic* geographies.[41]

The inscriptions all jump immediately from the deep historical or *purāṇic* description to a deeply political description of the current dynastic dispensation. In the Pālam inscription, the next six verses introduce the contemporary ruler, Ghiyath ad-Dīn Balban (Sanskrit

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[38]I have re-edited this inscription from pictures of the stone.

[39]The reading of *hariyānaka* is suspect to me. It seems to me that the inscription would more likely read *har-itālaka*, which meaning "yellow" may be included to provide a sort of folk etymology for the name of the area. However, given the context, it is clear that Hariyāna is meant.

[40]Prasad reads *vyacarachatra* which yields no good sense. The inscription clearly shows a *dya* for Prasad's *cha*.

[41]The Naraina Stone Inscription gestures toward the foundational story for the settlement of Haryana, the burning of the Khāṇḍava Forest. In this purifying forest fire, the wilderness was cleared for Vedic ritual and human habitation. Further the inscription draws to mind the ultimate field of *dharma*, Kurukṣetra, the site of the revelation of the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

śrī-hammīra-gayāsadīna-nṛpati) in the normative register of Sanskrit *praśasti*.[42] Such a shift is marked by shifts in meter and language. The poet Yogīśvara describes the martial might and kingly splendour (*pratāpa*, v. 9) of the Sultan in Sragdharā and Śārdūlavikrīḍita stanzas, the meters themselves emphasising the loftiness and nobility of his subject.[43] The first task of the poet is to create a sphere of action for the sultan, an imagined geography of overlordship. This is, of course, very much in line with the expectations of court-centred *praśasti* literature. Underlying much of the praise of Balban is the idea of the *digvijaya*, or the conquest of the directions, a description of conquest common to Sanskrit literature.[44] While William S. Sax has written about political *digvijaya*s prior to the stabilisation of Muslim polities in South Asia, he sees the *digvijaya* as a living practice exclusively of Hindu kingship. In the case of the Pālam Baoli inscription, the *digvijaya* is a way of representing political space. The poet Yogīśvara uses the tropes familiar to a student of Sanskrit *kāvya* or *praśasti* to speak of the Sultanate as readily as a "Hindu" emperor or empire. He writes:

āgauḍād gajjaṇānta[ṃ] draviḍajanapadāt setubaṃdhāt samaṃtād
antassaṃtoṣapūrṇṇe[45] *sakalajanapade prājyasaurājyarājye* |
yatsevāyātayātakṣitipatimukuṭoddhaṭṭanabhraṣṭaratna-
jvālājālapravālair bahati vasumatī vanyavāsaṃtalīlāṃ ||6||
gaṃgāsāgarasaṃgamaṃ pratidinaṃ prācyāṃ pratīcyāṃ api
snātuṃ sindhusamudrasaṃgamam aho yatsainyam ādhāvati |
helāndolitapāṇika[ṃ] kaṇaraṇatkāreṇa vārāṃganā
yānty āyānti ca nirbhayā yad udayāc citrāmbarāḍambarāḥ ||7||

6. When the entire country (*sakalajanapada*), from Gauḍa (Bengal) to Gajjaṇa (Ghaznī), from the entire country of the Dravidians (*draviḍa*), [which is the] Setubandha, [to the north],[46] was full of inner contentment (*antassaṃtoṣa*) having a well-ruled kingdom for a long time (*prājya*), the earth bore the charming habits of spring through the shoots which have the disguise of rays from the jewels loosened from the uncovering of the crowns of defeated (*yāta*) kings who had come to render allegiance (*sevā*) to him.

7. His army ventured forth to bathe every day in both the confluence of the Gaṅgā with the sea in the east and the Sindu (Indus) with the sea in the west. After his ascendency, the courtesans come and go without fear, [even though] they [make] a loud din with their clothing through the jingling from the hands that are moving amorously.

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[42]For a theorisation of *praśasti*, see S. Pollock, *Language of the Gods in the World of Men* (Berkeley CA, 2006), especially pp. 138–145.

[43]Kṣemendra. *Suvṛttatilaka* in Suryakanta. *Kṣemendra Studies: Text with English Translation*, (ed.) R. K. Panda (Delhi, 2010).

[44]While the idea of the *digvijaya* can be traced back to the epics, its appearance in inscriptions dates back to the fourth-century Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta. As a *kāvya* set-piece, the *digvijaya* appears in Kālidāsa's *Raghuvaṃśa* and continued to be deployed in praise of kings and other extraordinary men throughout the history of Sanskrit literature. For an overview of the performance of the *digvijaya* in classical and medieval South Asia, see William S. Sax, 'Conquest of the Quarters: Religion and Politics in Hinduism', *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 4, 1 (2000) pp. 42–45.

[45]Prasad reads *antasatoṃṣapūrṇṇe*.

[46]It seems the ablatives need an accusative pair to mirror the first portion of this *pāda*. Since we moved from the east to the west, it makes sense to supply the north after the ablatives representing the south. Incidentally, east to west and south to north are movements frequently described in *digvijaya* literature.

Here and throughout the *digvijaya* section, Yogīśvara pulls out all the rhetorical stops, as is appropriate for the fulsome praise the description of king and kingdom requires. Two key features of an Indic emperor—sovereignty in verse six and erotic enjoyment in verse seven—are framed by the expansive geography of the Sanskrit poetic imagination.

As the inscription continues, Balban is placed in the stereotyped world of Indic polities known from almost a millennium of *digvijaya* texts. The poet continues:

yasmin digvijayaprayāṇakapare gauḍā nirāḍambarā
andhrā randhraparāyaṇā bhayavaśān niṣkelayaḥ keralāḥ |
karṇṇā[ṭā] api kandarāśrayaparā bhraṣṭā mahārāṣṭrajās
tyaktorjjāḥ kila gurjjarā samabhavan lāṭāḥ kirāṭā iva ||10||

10. When he was intent on setting out on a conquest of the directions (*digvijaya*), the Gauḍas put away their war-drums, the Andhras sought refuge in holes (*randhra*) under the power of terror, the Keralas stopped having fun (*niṣkelaya*). The Karṇāṭas too became intent on finding shelter in ravines (*kandara*) and those from Mahārāṣṭra were ruined (*bhraṣṭa*). The Gurjaras abandoned their might (*ūrja*) and the Lāṭas became as if Kirāṭas.

The verse presents a conventionalised picture of military might written in a conventionalised sort of Sanskrit. Here the fate of the kingdoms discussed is not tied to any historical event, but rather to the phonetic shape of that kingdom's name. In this way Bengalis (*gauḍa*) becomes without its prideful drums (*nirāḍambara*), those in Andhra hide in caves (*randhra*), and so forth.[47] While P. M. Joshi has argued that "[t]he inscription bears testimony to the ambitions of the Sulṭāns of Delhi to one day subdue the South", such an attribution of motive in a text like this seems unlikely.[48] Rather the poet here speaks of Sultanate kingship in the typical Sanskrit register. Here the donative inscription speaks not to an insular or inward-looking religious community, but rather outward (and perhaps backward) to an imagined Sanskritic polity.

The next verse even goes so far as to attribute the world-preserving function of Viṣṇu to the Sultan. The Palam Baoli poet writes:

asmin rājani vvibhrati kṣititala[ṃ] śeṣo [']pi niḥśeṣato
bhūbhāraṃ samapāsya vaiṣṇavamahāśayyāṃ padaṃ saṃśritaḥ |

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[47]Such a conventionalised vocabulary of kingship, geography, and conquest is found throughout Sanskrit literature. To give one parallel, in the *Rājendrakarṇapūra*, an unjustly understudied encomium of king Harṣa of Kashmir (r.1089–1101), the ruler's entirely fictitious conquests are described as follows:

jahāti nagarīṃ galatkanakakaṅkaṇaḥ kauṅkaṇo
vanaṃ vaśati vihvalaḥ skhalitakuntalaḥ kauntalaḥ |
kim anyad krudhi tvayi mṛgendrabhīmāravaṃ
taṭaṃ viśati māravaṃ cyutaramālavo mālavaḥ ||12||
The *king* of the Koṅkan abandons his city, his golden bracelets (*kaṅkaṇa*) slipping off;[47] the distressed King of Kuntala dwells in the wilderness, his hair (*kuntala*) in disarray; when you are enraged, how else could it be? The King of Mālava, deprived of the last portion of his kingly splendour,[47] enters the edge of the desert (*mārava*),[47] [filled with] the terrible roaring of the lord of beasts (*mṛgendra*=lion).

This verse provides an almost exact parallel, using the same meter and the same tropes where word play and allophony provide the geography and modes of conquest.
[48]P. M. Joshi, "Ala-ud-Din Khalji's first Campaign against Devagiri', in *Dr Ghulam Yazdani Commemoration Volume*, (ed.) H. K. Sherwani (Hyderabad, 1966), p. 203.

lakṣmīvakṣasi so [']pi viṣṇur adhunā prakṣipya rakṣāvidhau
cintāsantatim āptadugdhajaladhir vvidrāvya nidrāyate ||*11*||

11. When this king [Balban] rules the earth, Śeṣa having completely given up his bearing of the earth, betakes himself to the bed of Viṣṇu. Viṣṇu for his part having reached the ocean of milk now places himself on the breast of Lakṣmī, gives up incessant worrying [about the maintenance of the world] and sleeps.

Balban seems to have been completely normalised within the formulaic conventions of a Sanskritic (and perhaps even Hindu) political imagination. Yet I think here it would be an oversimplification to claim that this is a kind of ghostly or marginal afterlife of cosmopolitan Sanskrit after the collapse of Sanskritic kingship.[49]

While the inscription shows the mapping of Sultanate political space on a completely conventionalised description of the subcontinent, there are a few places that show the cracks, as Sanskritic formulaic *praśasti* vocabulary comes up against the shape of the shifting politics of the Sultanate world. While the effective control over the far reaches of southern India are a fiction derived from conventional idioms of conquest, the western region of this idealised realm of power is striking. Usual world conquest poems speak of only the western ocean as the farthest limit of Indic kingship. Here, however, the term *gajjaṇa,* the Sanskrit name of Ghazna in present-day Afghanistan, is included in Sanskrit *digvijaya* vocabulary.[50] While perhaps this single mention of a toponym outside of Sanskrit political poetry's normalised scope should not be given too much import, I believe that it shows that the imagined geography of the world is shifting in Sultanate Sanskrit.[51]

It must be stressed these verses in the *kāvya* style do not speak to any documentary historical reality nor do they attempt to present a specific court-centred or even Sultanate Delhi-centred vision of polity. The invocation of the *digvijaya* rather hearkens back to the language and style of elite public pronouncements legible by Sanskrit-speaking and -valorising agents. The political lineage is here not central to the donation, rather it is a mere part of the larger geography of power in which the donor and his pious act is to be embedded. For Uḍḍhara, royal sovereignty is a necessary part of being in the world, but it is not an essential part of acting within it.

Despite its repeated and self-aware hearkening back to king-centred geographies, the Pālam inscription does not intend to operate in an idealised *digvijaya*-defined space. The 'real world' of the mercantile cosmopolis and the historical contexts surrounding Uḍḍhara's mercantile activity is quite literally put in the centre of Yogīśvara's *praśasti*; the idealised geography of political power gives way to the more pragmatic geography of Uḍḍhara's

[49]The theorisation that I am thinking of is obviously Sheldon Pollock's concept of "the death of Sanskrit", as outlined in his article with the same name, 'The Death of Sanskrit', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 43, 2 (2001), pp. 392–426.

[50]Ghazna is also found in Jonarāja's 1459 Sanskrit history of the Sultans of Kashmir, *Rājataraṅgiṇī*. Describing Sultan Shihāb ad-Din's (r. 1355–73) own *digvijaya*, the name occurs with slightly different spelling *gājinī*. Again, Ghazna serves as the north-westernmost boundary of this Sultan's conquests, speaking to a similar imagined scope of political activity.

[51]In the immediately following verse, the eastern and western limits of the Sultanate are given as the delta of the Ganges (*gaṅgāsāgarasaṃgama*) and the Indus (*sindhusamudrasaṃgama*). While the idea of the Ganges delta as the easternmost boundary of the Indic world is not unheard of, to my knowledge the Indus delta is never used in that context.

mercantile activity. The densely layered geography of the Pālam inscription mimics the complex marshalling and deployment of spatial imaginaries to embed Uḍḍhara and his pious donation. While drawing on older imaginaries like the idealised political space of the *digvijaya*, this space is both historicised (since political dispensations are markedly shown to be transitory on the land) and overlain with other centres, routes and stories.

Heaven on earth and public self-presentation: wells and piety in the inscriptional record

The Pālam inscription closes with the expansive wish for Uḍḍhara to be happy in his mercantile world, defined by the political power of the Sultans, marked by his pious donations, and populated by relations and friends. Yogīśvara writes:

> *astu svasti samastavastuviṣayā bhogopabhogyātmabhir*
> *bhāvaiḥ putrakalatramitrajanatāyuktāya yuktātmane |*
> *bhaktāyoḍharaṭhakkurāya mahate svargāpavargodayā-*
> *nandāyendukalāvataṃsacaraṇadvandvaikaniṣṭhātmane ||30||*

May there be good fortune (*svasti*) which encompasses all things for [Śiva's] devotee, the great U[ḍ]dhara Ṭhakkura—along with his sons, wives, friends, and dependents—who is intent upon his existences which are to be enjoyed, whose joy is the coming forth of heaven and spiritual liberation, and whose soul is intent only upon the two feet of him whose crowning ornament is the crescent moon [=Śiva].

This great stage of worldly and religious action provides a crescendo for the inscription's account of Uḍḍhara's world. The panoptic vision of the verse, encompassing worldly, next-worldly and liberative happiness, speaks to the complex web of relations in which Uḍḍhara's public piety is embedded. At Pālam Baoli, both devotion to Śiva and spiritual liberation intertwine, inscribed in stone and memorialised in architecture.

The well exists ideationally as a paradise on earth, linking its worldly existence to its supramundane goals. That the inscription idealised the stepwell's real existence is central; the thickly-described historical, geographical and political space of the inscription is grounded in the transcendent and meritorious site of the well, which brings heaven to earth (and those on earth to heaven). This public presentation of the well is crucial to both the built reality of the stepwell and its role in the political, social and religious life of Uḍḍhara. Each of the donative inscriptions for stepwells of Haryana's merchants share a similar mode of presentation, a similar ideational space for the built environment, and a similar public aspiration. All four stepwells describe themselves as heaven on earth. For instance, the Naraina Stone Inscription of 1327 describes the paradise of stepwell in the Haryana hinterland in its final verse. The poet Madana writes on behalf of the merchant Śrīdhara:

> *kimu surasaridaṃbhaḥ śītalaṃ miṣṭam iṣṭaṃ*
> *kim iha tad amarair vvā kṣiptam atrāmṛtaṃ yat |*
> *iti pathikasamūhas tasya kūpasya pītvā*
> *madhuram udakam acchaṃ prastuvan yāti gehaṃ ||16||*

Is this the cool, sweet, choice water from the divine Gaṅgā?

Or is it here that the undying gods sent down immortal nectar?
The groups of travellers drink the sweet clear water of the well
        and go home praising it.

The paradisiacal vision of the well and its waters engenders confusion in the traveller: has he been transported to another world? This confusion in the traveller's mind remains unresolved; the last half of the verse instead moves from his inner subjective world to the objective situation. Interestingly, even the traveller's poetic fancy is tied to the real world; line two uses two words for 'here', *iha* and *atra*, the word *iha* in particular having connotations of 'in this world' as opposed to the hereafter. The verse is also anchored by the word *geham* or 'home', showing that the moment of experience of heaven and the moment of respite is tied immediately with the maps and routes and lived experiences of actual people moving in the world. The traveller is entranced for a moment by the merchant's donation, and then continues on toward his real home, with the memory of the heaven like moment at the well on their lips. The pious endowment spreads the renown of the merchant among travellers and traders.

The Delhi mercantile inscriptions speak of a specific type of well, in Sanskrit *vāpī* or *vāpikā*, which in modern Hindi is called a *bāolī* and is often translated as a stepwell. Dry-zone South Asia saw a vast increase in the number of stepwells in the twelfth to the seventeenth centuries. These stepwells, like *canvaserais*, came to define the networks of communication and exchange that connected religious orders, political formations and commercial interests. The routes that the merchants used were not only plied by fellow merchants, but by a variety of religious groups, from Jains to Muslims, each with their own traditions of meritorious benefit and public piety. In South Asian stepwells, the well shaft is approached through a long, stepped corridor, the *nāla*, on one side, which takes a visitor from ground level to water level. The stepwell then is to be contrasted with other types of South Asian water features like *kuṇḍas* and *kūpas* through the built features of the stepped approach. The galleries and porticos along the *nāla* point to the extended use of the stepwell.[52] As Julia Hegewald writes: "The main function of stepwells is to provide water, but because stepwells frequently have galleries built along the long corridor of steps and around the storage basins, integrating stone benches with sloping backrests into their design, they are also used as cool retreats from the summer heat by villagers and travellers".[53]

The Pālam inscription speaks of such a well in similar terms to the Naraina inscription, but in a more complex idiom and situated in a more densely structured literary form. The paradise of the well echoes the description of the city of Ucch in v. 16, in which the city appears as an earthly paradise, mocking even Amarāvatī, the City of the Gods. In describing the stepwell endowed by Uḍḍhara, the poet Yogīśvara repeats the trope of a real geographical place mocking an idealised or divine locale. He writes:

pīnottaṃgapayodharā pariluṭhaddhārāvalī vibhramā
tṛṣṇābhrāmyadanekakāmukajanakleśapraśāntipradā |

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[52]For a further discussion of stepwells and their features, see J. Hegewald, *Water Architecture in South Asia: A Study of Types, Development and Meanings* (Leiden, 2002), pp. 155–177, and F. W. Bunce, *The Iconography of Water: Well and Tank forms of the Indian Subcontinent* (Delhi, 2013).

[53]Hegewald, *Water Architecture in South Asia*, p. 155.

phullanmaulitaru[54]*prasūnapaṭalaśreṇiśriyā moditā*
vāpī kāpi mahāmudaṃ diśatu vaḥ kānteva kāntā dṛśāṃ ||27||
mānasam api hasati matāṃ[55] *bijaprasādena*[56] *kaluṣam iti vanuṣā*[57] |
nijaviśrāntavidhātrī vidyevā[58]*dhyātmavedināṃ bhāti* ||28||

May this marvellous (*kāpi*) stepwell spread forth (*diśatu*) the highest joy (*mahāmuda*) for you,
Like lovely woman (*kāntā*)
Whose breasts (*payodharā*) are high and ample,
 The well is swollen and full of water.
Like lovely woman, beguiling,
Whose necklaces are swaying
 The well, rippling, has eddying (*pariluṭhat*-) streams and currents.
As a beloved woman quells
The pain of many lovers, beguiled by desire (*tṛṣṇā*)
 The well quells
 The pain of many yearning [travellers] wandering about in thirst (*tṛṣṇā*)
As a lovely woman causes joy
through the beauty of her crowns of leaves and flowers from the trees' blossoming crowns
 The well causes joy
 by the beauty of the rows of leaves and flowers of the trees' blossoming crowns.
28. For good people, [the well at Pālam] mocks even the Mānasa Lake, with its tranquil form/beauty (*vapuṣā*), thinking [the Mānasa Lake to be] turbid. For those with spiritual insight (*adhyātmavedinām*), [the *baolī* at Pālam] seems to exist as [liberating] knowledge (*vidyā*) as it grants its own rest (*viśrānta*).

In these culminating verses, the poet is careful to juxtapose the well's earthly beauty and the possibility for a moment's cool respite in its shade with the ultimate idea of paradise and liberation. Verse 27, which I perhaps over-translate to give voice to the paranomasia (Sanskrit *śleṣa*) embedded within it,[59] demands to be read twice, once in terms describing the stepwell and once in terms which describe a beautiful woman. Such a double reading requires one to take full advantage of the lexical and morphological properties of the Sanskrit language (for instance, the compound *pariluṭhaddhārāvalī* must be read *pariluṭhad + dhārāvalī* for the well, but as *pariluṭhad + [d]hārāvalī* for the beautiful woman). While verbal pyrotechnics of this sort are common in elite Sanskrit literary production, this verse appeals to the aesthetics of worldly desire, linking the charms of the well with the desired object *par excellence* in the Sanskrit literary tradition, the beautiful woman.

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[54]Ed. reads *-tarū*.
[55]In the translation I follow the edition and read as *satāṃ*.
[56]Ed. reads *nijaprasādena*, however the stone reads clearly *bija-* which makes no good sense.
[57]Ed. reads *kaluṣam iti vihṛṣā*. The stone reads clearly *kaluṣamitivinuṣā*, from which I cannot extract a satisfactory meaning. Here I tentatively conjecture *kaluṣam iti vapuṣā*. I translate accordingly.
[58]Ed. reads *vidhevā-*
[59]Paranomasia, a term used to translate the Sanskrit tropological term *śleṣa*, is a sort of extended pun based on phonological congruence. This pun contains within it an implicit comparison as the image of the well is overlaid with that of the woman.

However, the paranomasia of the stepwell and the beautiful woman suggests a further homology. The vocabulary of these verses leads one to equate the built environment of Uḍḍhara's well to the religious vision of the text as a whole; a further *śleṣa* permeates the entirety of the text. For instance, the idea of those who are wandering about thirstily includes the idea of the sort of delusional wandering (*bhram*)[60] in the illusory and transitory world of *saṃsāra*. This is caused by *tṛṣṇā*, a word literally meaning 'thirst' but always containing the extended meaning of a mental disposition which obstructs the attainment of liberation. The stepwell then stands in as vision of heaven or liberation.

The use of bivalent religious terminology continues into verse 28. Although my understanding of the first line of the verse is tentative, the verse clearly moves toward its culmination as the poet compares the well to liberating knowledge (*vidyā*).[61] The use of the adjective *nija*, 'its or one's own, innate', further positions the stepwell as a specific piece of paradise on earth, acting as if it were paradise, but enclosed within the circumscribed built environment of Uḍḍhara's pious donation.

The juxtaposition of earthly and heavenly rest physically located in the stepwell ties the layered geographies of the inscription together. Structurally, two earthly paradises—the description of Ucch and the donated well—bracket the genealogical description of Uḍḍhara's family. By placing the genealogy between these two sections, the inscription highlights that it is Uḍḍhara and his family who link Delhi to Ucch, the well to thirsty travellers, and the paradise of the well to the paradise of the next world. This genealogy, then, functions as a vital link between the various histories, geographies and functions underlying the pious donation. In terms of literary merit, the verses comprising the genealogy (vv. 17–24) are rather flat and documentary. The inscription records four generations on his father's side and nine on his mother's. It also records the names of the sons and (some) daughters of each of his three wives, linking the past and future of Uḍḍhara's family, between their ancestral home in Ucch and their wishes for further success in this world and the next embodied in the well.

The inscription presents the Uḍḍhara's experience almost as a cosmology. Geographies, families, polities, histories and theologies are centred on an act of pious donation in the Haryana hinterland. It is within such webs that this inscription should be read, the circulation of people within a new political sphere opened up by the stabilisation of the Delhi Sultanate. The geographical positioning of the well mirrors its ideological function: on one hand, it is to benefit the spiritual merit of merchant and his family, and on another it is to benefit the actual physical wellbeing of weary travellers. Yet both of these concerns are subservient to another goal, the renown of the merchants within the world. Importantly, the poet positions the act of praising the well as a continuous action performed by travellers as they make their way to their final destinations. Within the expansive yet increasingly interconnected

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[60]Paul Hacker argues that in Vedāntic contexts, the use of the root √*bhram* suggests "a confusion resting upon a false identification" in 'Śaṅkara the Yogin and Śaṅkara the Advaitin: Some Observations', in *Philology and Confrontation: Paul Hacker on Traditional and Modern Vedanta*, (ed.) Wilhelm Halbfass (New York, 1995), p. 110. This also recalls the confusion we have already noted in the Naraina Stone inscription.

[61]There might be some debate as to whether the figure of speech here is *upamā* 'simile' or *utprekṣā* 'poetic fancy'. I have understood it as *utprekṣā* and translated accordingly. The theological difference in understanding, however slight, may be important. In such a way, liberating knowledge is not *like* the well, but rather the well seems to shine (*bhāti*), i.e. exist as or act as, liberating knowledge for those who know spiritual truth.

geography outlined in the previous section, the fame of the well becomes an instantiation of the reach and reputation of the merchant.

In the context of elite gardens in South Asia, Daud Ali and Emma Flatt write that "the idea of the garden gains its specific cultural meanings only through its relation to other ideational spaces".[62] In the same way in the context of a stepwell, Uḍḍhara embeds the worldly and spiritual fortunes of his family within this stepwell, this little piece of heaven on earth, to the east of Pālamba and to the west of Kusumbhapura. The ideational geography, stretching from the banks of the Indus to Delhi, including the Sultanate rulers and his own kin, spans the apolitical land of Haryana as the field of *dharma* as well as the political praise of Sultan Balban.

Conclusion

Acts of donation have been accompanied by inscriptions since the beginning of writing in South Asia, and in that way Uḍḍhara (and the other merchant-patrons of Haryana's sultanate stepwells) are taking part in a long history. While Aśoka's edicts show the first appearance of wells in the subcontinent's inscriptional record and speak to a similar public association of wells with prosperity (both material and spiritual) in Mauryan times, dry-zone South Asia saw a vast increase in the number of stepwells in period from the twelfth to the seventeenth centuries. The merchant who patronised the Pālam Bāolī inscription used the built environment of the stepwell and its ideational resonances to negotiate a place for himself and his family within the newly solidifying sultanate state in Delhi. In attempting to do so, he was forced to deal with new social and political realities on the ground within accepted methods of self-presentation. As such, the Pālam inscription is simultaneously a reassertion of old Sanskrit *kāvya* and *praśasti* models of elite self-presentation and a new statement on mercantile self-assertiveness as agents of history.

This inscription should be read in the context of the circulation of people, goods, and ideas within a new political sphere being opened up by the stabilisation of the Delhi Sultanate. This political reorganisation of the city-states of northern and western India had a profound impact on routes of trade, piety, and commerce. After the political turmoil of the thirteenth century that allowed the Ghūrid successor state of Iltutmish based in Delhi to assert its paramouncty, the centres and routes of the merchants came to be concentrated around a newly centralising Sultanate state. The routes of the merchants were not only plied by fellow merchants, but by a variety of religious groups, from Sufis to Jains. While alternate routes—specifically the north-south axis of the Indus River Valley leading to the trading ports of the Arabian Sea (and from there to West Asia)—continued to be used,[63] the axis of Muslim power shifted to the east-west route connecting Delhi to the Gangetic plain on one side, and Panjab and Afghanistan on the other.

This is the time of political, economic and social reorganisation in which the Pālam Baoli inscription is embedded and to which it speaks. It is precisely these shifting routes to which

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[62]D. Ali and E. Flatt, 'Introduction', in *Garden and Landscape Practices in Pre-Colonial India: Histories from the Deccan*, (eds.) D. Ali and E. Flatt (New Delhi and London, 2011), p. 6.

[63]The little-studied *Jagaḍucarita* speaks to the connections of Cambay to the western India hinterland and the Arabian Sea in the twelfth century. It develops overlapping geographies of trade and piety in a way parallel to the Pālam inscription, but its spatial and temporal imagination is embedded in a different historical dispensation.

Uḍḍhara claims access and memorialises in the Delhi hinterland. Ghiyath ad-Dīn Balban's centre is now enmeshed in larger geography and history, supported by the movement of those mobile and moneyed Hindu merchants from Sindh. Baranī's misgivings aside, these merchants did play an essential role in stabilising the Sultanate states of South Asia. While the work of Finbarr Flood tells us to pay more careful attention to the mercantile contexts of circulation and exchange in the Sultanate period, Hindu mercantile families have received little notice. While agreeing with Flood's stress on the centrality of material objects for the study of the Sultanate period, Sanskrit textual sources must be brought into the conversation. The Pālam inscription displays shifts in compositional style, register and patronage, all of which can be brought into fruitful conversation with the changing politics and culture of Sultanate South Asia. Sanskrit epigraphical data most clearly demonstrates the ideological shifts that underlie cultural and economic changes occurring on the ground.

In some ways, Uḍḍhara followed tried and tested models of ornate Sanskrit donative inscriptions: a poet was hired to commemorate his largess in *kāvya* style and meter, the markers of elite 'courtly' discourse. However, the political aesthetic of Sanskrit inscriptions was dissociated from the fully integrated wholeness theorised as a Sanskrit Cosmopolis. The nexus of king, geography and piety was shifted toward a more complex and unstable arrangement in which the merchant patrons made kingship a part of the landscape of political and religious concerns. The interplay of the political and the mercantile and donative is shown by the poet's careful layering of geographies in the text of the inscription. Reading these layers of representation provides a history through which we can understand the rise of a new use of Sanskrit among mobile mercantile elites. Using *praśasti* vocabulary, meters and ideas, merchants repurposed Sanskrit as the medium of public self-assertiveness for the mobile Delhi trading community.

Perhaps here it would not be out of place to provide a final note on Sanskrit as such in my reading of the Pālam inscription. Too often it seems that Sanskrit is seen as an entity with its own integrity, marching to its own rhythms and dictating its own terms. It seems more productive, however, to see historically situated agents using Sanskrit to communicate to others and negotiate their own status. That is to say, Sanskrit does no work; rather, people do work with Sanskrit, and creatively repurpose its rich intellectual heritage and cultural caché. The inscription is less an aping of prior declarations of donative largess and more of an articulation of Uḍḍara's place in the world, framed in Sanskrit literary language, ruled by a newly stabilised Sultanate, and bounded by specific histories and geographies. The ideation of the paradise of the stepwell is capacious enough to include Delhi and Ucch, the past and present politics of Haryana, and past and future generations of Uḍḍhara's family. Uḍḍhara sought, through public endowments and literary language, to make his self-awareness into a way of being a public merchant in the Sultanate world. And this self-awareness is self-assertiveness. A close reading of the Pālam Baoli inscription and allied texts in their historical contexts provides a fresh perspective for dealing with the creation of the Indo–Persian world.

LUTHER OBROCK
University of Toronto
luther.obrock@utoronto.ca