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The *Palmette* Motif in Bangladeshi Temple Architecture: A Hellenistic Legacy

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Abstract: The *palmette* motif is one of the most enduring ornamental designs in world art, originating in the ancient Mediterranean and widely associated with Hellenistic architecture and decorative vocabulary. This research examines its appearance, adaptation, and symbolic significance in the temple architecture of Bangladesh, with a focus on late medieval and early modern structures. The study begins by tracing the motif's origins in Egyptian lotus and papyrus designs, its transformation in Classical and Hellenistic Greece, and its dissemination across Asia through Persian, Gandharan, and Indo-Greek intermediaries. Within South Asia, the *palmette* appears in early Mauryan, Gupta, and post-Gupta architecture before becoming integrated into the brick-and-terracotta traditions of Bengal. Through comparative stylistic analysis of temples such as the Kantajew Temple in Dinajpur, and the Shiva temples of Puthia, this study identifies echoes of Hellenistic design principles. The *palmette* in Bangladesh appears as full anthemion patterns, simplified foliage forms, and hybrid compositions with vine scrolls and rosettes on lintels, arches, cornices, and deity panel frames. The findings suggest that trade and artisanal migration facilitated its transmission, while local religious traditions added new symbolic layers, making the motif a marker of cross-cultural exchange and artistic syncretism.

Key Words: *Palmette* motif, Hellenistic art, Bangladeshi temple, Cross-cultural transmission.

Introduction

The *palmette*, also known as the *anthemion*, motif is one of the most recognizable and enduring ornamental designs in world art, with roots in the decorative vocabulary of the ancient Mediterranean. Originating from stylized representations of the palm leaf, lotus, or papyrus, the motif reached its most refined form in Greek architectural ornamentation, particularly during the Hellenistic period (late 4th to 1st centuries BCE). In this context, it adorned friezes, *antefix*es, and *acroteria*, valued for its rhythmic symmetry and

association with vitality, fertility, and divine protection. The Hellenistic aesthetic, marked by a blend of naturalistic representation and formalized elegance, allowed the *palmette* to transcend its regional origins and become a part of a well-known design repertoire.

In the architectural heritage of Bengal—particularly in present-day Bangladesh—the *palmette* motif occupies a notable place within the ornamentation of late medieval and early modern temples.[1] It appears both in its full anthemion form and in locally adapted variations, often integrated into complex terracotta compositions alongside vine-scrolls, rosettes, and mythological imagery. Its recurring presence raises compelling questions about the long-distance transmission of artistic forms: how did a motif rooted in the Mediterranean world enter the visual culture of temples thousands of kilometers away?

The present study seeks to (1) identify documented instances of the *palmette* motif in Bangladeshi temple architecture; (2) investigate its possible Hellenistic origin and the cultural and historical pathways through which it reached Bengal; and (3) analyze its localized adaptations in form, placement, and symbolic significance within a regional religious context.

This inquiry focuses geographically on temples in present-day Bangladesh, including the Kantajew Temple in Dinajpur, the Shiva temples of Puthia in Rajshahi, and the *Pancharatna* temples of North Bengal, among other examples. Chronologically, the study concentrates on the late medieval to early modern period (16th to 19th centuries CE), while acknowledging earlier precedents in South Asian architecture. The emphasis is placed on ornamental and symbolic aspects, rather than comprehensive architectural analysis.

Methodologically, the research applies a comparative stylistic analysis, juxtaposing *palmette* forms from Bangladeshi temples with their Hellenistic and intermediary South Asian counterparts. It draws upon archaeological surveys, published art-historical studies, and photographic archives, while applying iconographic interpretation to assess symbolic meaning. By situating the *palmette* motif within both global and local art histories, this study aims to demonstrate that

temple ornamentation in Bengal is a tangible product of cross-cultural artistic exchange and selective adaptation.

Historical Background of the *Palmette* Motif

1. Origins in the Ancient Mediterranean

The *palmette* has its earliest antecedents in the vegetal ornamentation of ancient Egypt, where lotus and papyrus forms symbolized fertility, regeneration, and divine authority.[2] In Egyptian architecture, these botanical motifs often appeared on column capitals, friezes, and ceremonial objects. As artistic exchange intensified through Mediterranean trade and conquest, the Egyptian prototypes were absorbed and reinterpreted by Aegean and Near Eastern artisans.

Fig. 1: Egyptian Deity Ra, c. 3100 BCE and palmette.

Source: Fatima Zahra, Safrizal Shahir, *Development and Evolution of Palmette Ornament: An Influence on Islamic Architecture*, 2022, 125.

Fig. 2: Ancient Egyptian palmette, based on the features of various

flowers, including papyrus and lotus or lily representing Lower and Upper Egypt and their fertile union, before it became associated with the palm tree, around 2,500 BCE.

Source:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palmette#/media/File:Stela_of_Khonsu_MET_21.2.69_EGDP022532.jpg (left), and

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palmette#/media/File:Стела_начальника_гончаров_Пепи.jpg (right) (accessed on 10 December 2025)

Fig. 3: Minoan palmette on a Kamares vessel, 1700-1650 BCE, Archaeological Museum of Heraklion, Heraklion, Greece.

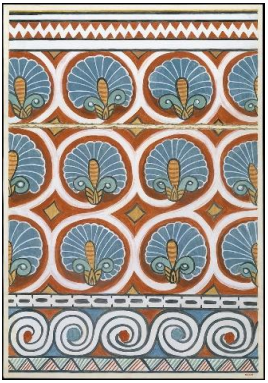

Fig. 4: Ancient Egyptian palmettes on a ceiling pattern from the Tomb of Qenamun, c.1479-1400 BCE, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.

Source:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palmette#/media/File:Pithos_Kamares-Stil_02.jpg (Fig. 3), and

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palmette#/media/File:Ceiling_Pattern,_Tomb_of_Qenamun_MET_DT10887.jpg (Fig. 4) (accessed on 10 December 2025)

Fig. 5: Palmette ornament, an Assyrian sacred tree, *9th century BCE, Pergamon Museum, Berlin.*

Fig. 6: Ancient Greek relief with palmettes from the ruins of the Temple of Apollo at Didyma, Turkey, c.300-150 BCE.

Source:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palmette#/media/File:Detail_of_a_relief_with_Ashurnasirpal_II,_favorite_of_the_gods,_9th_century_BC,_alabaster,_from_Kalhu_aka_Nimrud_(Iraq),_purchase_1855,_VA_950,_Pergamon_Museum_(03).jpg (Fig. 5), and

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palmette#/media/File:Didyma_2013-03-25q.jpg (Fig. 6) (accessed on 10 December 2025)

In Archaic and Classical Greece, the motif evolved into the formalized *palmette* or *anthemion* design, characterized by a radiating fan of stylized leaves, often alternating with lotus blossoms. By the Hellenistic period, the motif had reached a high degree of refinement, becoming a standard element of architectural ornamentation on cornices, *antefixes,* and sculptural reliefs.[3] The Hellenistic aesthetic emphasized symmetry, curvature, and rhythmic repetition, allowing the *palmette* to convey a sense of harmony and elegance that transcended purely decorative function.

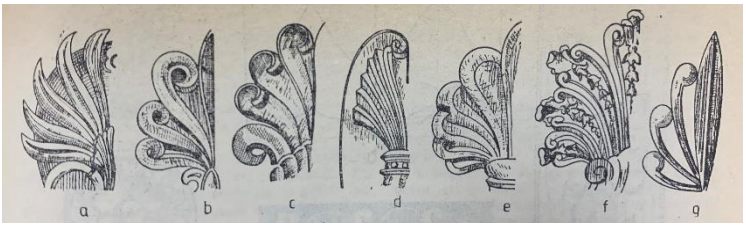

Fig. 7: Palmettes in different styles: a- Greek; b & c- Roman; d- Byzantine; e- Renaissance; f- Baroque; and g- Empire.

Source:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palmette#/media/File:Timeline_of_palmettes_in_different_styles,_each_one_beaing_notated_with_a_letter._a-Greek_b,_c-Roman_d-Byzantine_e-Renaissance_f-Baroque_and_g-Empire.jpg (accessed on 10 December 2025)

Fig. 8: Ancient Greek anthemion (palmette), Ionic frieze of the Erechtheum, or Temple of Athena Polias, Athens, 421-405 BCE.

Source: Denna Jones, Philip Gumuchdjian, *Architecture: The Whole Story*, (Thames & Hudson, 2014), 32 &

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palmette#/media/File:Detail_Erechtheum_Acropolis_Athens.jpg (left) (accessed on 10 December 2025); Fatima Zahra, Safrizal Shahir, Development and Evolution of Palmette Ornament: An Influence on Islamic Architecture, 2022, 126 (right).

Fig. 9: Ancient Greek capital of an Ionic column of the Erechtheum or Temple of Athena Polias, with a band of palmettes.

Fig. 10: Ancient Greek palmette decorated with a pair of sphinxes, at the top of the stele of Stephanos, first quarter of the 4th century BC, marble, National Archaeological Museum, Athens.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palmette#/media/File:Grave_stele_of_Stephanos_(National_Archaeological_Museum_of_Athens,_4-3-2018).jpg (Fig. 10) (accessed on 10 December 2025)

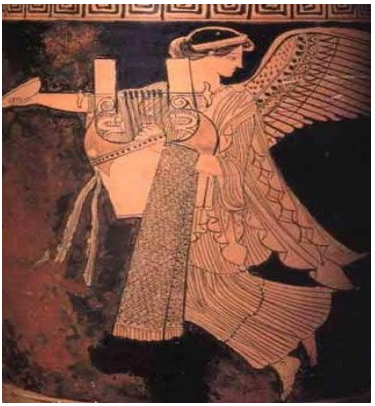

Fig. 11: Roman palmette, Nike's wings, the goddess of victory.

Source: Fatima Zahra, Safrizal Shahir, *Development and Evolution of Palmette Ornament: An Influence on Islamic Architecture*, 2022, 126.

2. Spread to the East

The eastward diffusion of the *palmette* motif was facilitated by the Achaemenid Persian Empire, which adopted and adapted many Mediterranean decorative forms into its monumental art.[4] After Alexander the Great's conquests (late 4th century BCE), the Seleucid and Greco-Bactrian kingdoms served as important intermediaries, blending Greek ornament with local traditions.

The Gandhara region, straddling present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan, emerged as a pivotal transmission hub. In Gandharan Buddhist reliefs from the Kushan period (1st to 3rd centuries CE), *palmette* and *anthemion* motifs frequently appear framing narrative panels, adorning pilasters, or integrated into vine-scrolls.[5] This adaptation reveals both continuity with Hellenistic prototypes and an openness to hybridization with Indic floral symbolism. From Gandhara, such motifs entered the broader North Indian artistic repertoire, traveling along trade routes, religious networks, and artisanal migrations.

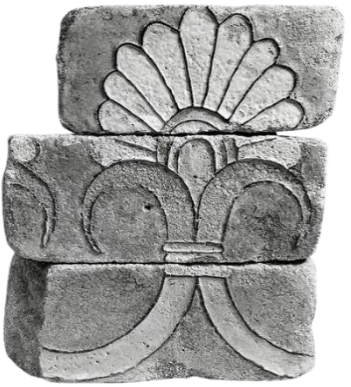

Fig. 12: Achaemenid glazed ceramic bricks with a palmette, c. 6th-4th century BCE, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Fig. 13: Several antefix with 'flame palmette' designs, Ai Khanoum (Afghanistan), 2nd century BCE.

Source:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palmette#/media/File:Bricks_with_a_palmette_motif_MET_hb48_98_20a_c.jpg (Fig. 12), and

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pataliputra_capital#/media/File:AntefixSharp.jpg (Fig. 13) (accessed on 10 December 2025)

Fig. 14: Indo-Corinthian capital with palmette, 2nd century CE, Gandhara.

Fig. 15: Indo-Corinthian capital with a palmette and the Buddha at its center, 3rd-4th century CE, Gandhara.

Source:https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greco-Buddhist_art#/media/File:Kushan,_Brahma,_Indra,_Indian.JPG (Fig. 14), and

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pataliputra_capital#/media/File:Buddha_Acanthus_Capitol.jpg (Fig. 15) (accessed on 10 December 2025)

3. Presence in South Asian Decorative Art

The *palmette*'s introduction into the Indian subcontinent predates the Kushans, with early evidence in Mauryan-period architecture (3rd century BCE), particularly in the carved railings of Bharhut and Sanchi, where vegetal motifs—including proto-*palmette*s—frame Buddhist imagery.[6] By the Gupta period (4th to 6th centuries CE), the motif appears in more formalized anthemion compositions, often incorporated into temple doorframes and lintels alongside lotus medallions and scrollwork.[7]

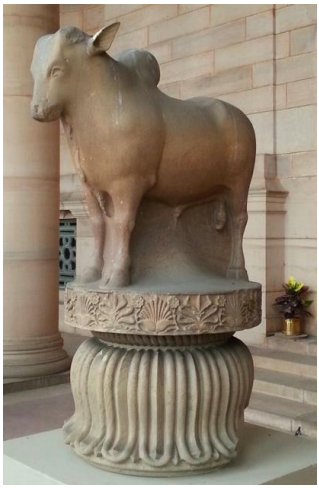

Fig. 16: 'Flame palmettes' around a lotus, on the Rampurva bull capital, one of the Pillars of Ashoka, now located in the Presidential Palace (Rashtrapati Bhavan), New Delhi, 3rd century BCE.

Source:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rampurva_capitals#/media/File:Rampurva_bull_in_Presidential_Palace_high_closeup.jpg (left), and
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palmette#/media/File:Rampurva_bull_capital_detail.jpg (right) (accessed on 10 December 2025)

Fig. 17: Bharhut pillar capital, lions with flame palmette, rosette and beads-and-reels, 2nd century BCE.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pataliputra_capital#/media/File:Bharhut_pillar_capital.jpg (accessed on 10 December 2025)

In the post-Gupta and early medieval periods, the motif persisted in both stone and brick architecture, sometimes as a purely decorative flourish, other times imbued with symbolic associations of fertility, divine abundance, and protection. Across regions, the *palmette* proved remarkably adaptable: in some cases retaining its symmetrical Hellenistic form, in others merging with indigenous lotus and foliage patterns into hybrid compositions.

In the Islamic era, architectural decoration flourished and developed characteristics that define it in terms of design, artistic production, theme, and style. Painting and drawing on stucco was a part of the creative creation, either by direct engraving or by mechanical molding. It was common to use mosaic and vibrant stone for engraving on stone and wood, whether in the smooth, flowing style or the perforated style. Several plant-related motifs, such as stems, single, double, and interwoven branches, leaves that were whole, in half, clustered in two, three or five parts, or perforated, palm

leaves, lotus flower, and various types of fruit, served as the inspiration for architectural decoration.[8]

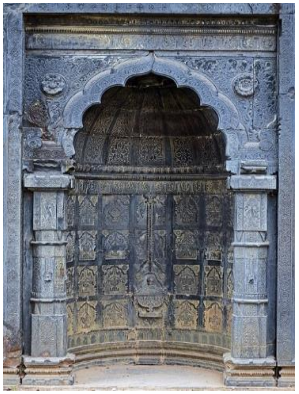

Fig. 18: Lotus motif at the ceiling of the takht in the Adina mosque.

Fig. 19: Lotus motif at the mihrab at the Adina Mosque.

Source: Sudeshna Guha & Dr. Abir Bandyopadhyay, Terracotta Temples of Bengal: A Culmination of Pre-existing Architectural Styles, *The Chitrolekha Journal on Art and Design*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2017, 55.

DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.21659/cjad.v1n1.v1n105 (Fig. 18), and

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Adina_Mosque_central_mihrab_on_large_basalt_wall.jpg (Fig. 19) (accessed on 10 December 2025)

In Bengal, where brick and terracotta became the dominant architectural medium, such vegetal ornaments found fertile ground for reinterpretation.[9] By the late medieval period, particularly from the 16th century onwards, Bengal's temple ornamentation displayed a vibrant combination of local and foreign design elements. The *palmette*, though transformed in execution and scale, remained identifiable within friezes, pilaster capitals, and panel frames, testifying to the motif's long and complex journey from the ancient Mediterranean to the riverine temples of Bengal.

Thus, the *palmette* motif's historical trajectory demonstrates a pattern of artistic mobility and transformation across centuries and cultures. Its persistence across vastly different architectural contexts suggests not only the resilience of a

decorative vocabulary but also the interconnectedness of artistic traditions across Afro-Eurasia. The following sections will examine how this long history is materially reflected in the temple architecture of Bangladesh, and how local artisans adapted a motif with deep Hellenistic roots to express regional aesthetic and religious sensibilities.

Temple Architecture in Bangladesh

1. Overview of Temple Forms

The temple architecture of present-day Bangladesh reflects a synthesis of North Indian and regional Bengali traditions, shaped by religious, cultural, and environmental factors. While the overarching stylistic influence derives from the *nagara* style of North India—characterized by curvilinear spires (*śikhara*s) and articulated vertical divisions—Bengal developed distinctive forms adapted to its alluvial landscape and building materials.[10]

In Bengal, stone was scarce, leading to the extensive use of brick and terracotta as the primary construction and decorative media. This material condition profoundly shaped the region's architectural vocabulary, allowing for intricate molded and carved surfaces that could accommodate dense ornamental programs. By the late medieval period (16th to 19th centuries CE), temple architecture in Bengal had developed several characteristic forms: the *rekha deul* with its soaring tower, the *ratna* (pinnacled) temples with multiple turrets, and the *chala* (roofed) temples with curved cornices imitating rural thatched huts.[11]

Decorative elements were integral to these structures. Facades, cornices, and plinths were often covered in narrative and floral panels, with vegetal motifs—including variations of the *palmette*—serving both as framing devices and as filler ornaments. The adaptation of the *palmette* into terracotta reliefs demonstrates the capacity of Bengali artisans to translate stone-carving traditions into a medium that permitted both fine detail and mass repetition.

2. Kantajew Temple

Among the most celebrated examples is the Kantajew Temple in Dinajpur, constructed in the early 18th century under the patronage of Maharaja Prannath. The temple is a *navaratna*

(nine-towered) structure whose entire surface is clad in terracotta panels depicting mythological scenes, floral scrolls, and geometric borders. The *palmette* motif appears in various guises—sometimes as a complete *anthemion* design at the apex of arches, sometimes as a simplified fan-shaped foliage within friezes—demonstrating its integration into both structural and ornamental schemes.[12]

Fig. 20: Kantajew Temple, Dinajpur, Bangladesh.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kantajew_Temple#/media/File:Kantaji_Temple_Dinajpur_Bangladesh_(12).JPG (accessed on 10 December 2025)

Fig. 21: Palmette, or anthemion (fan-shaped foliage), Kantajew Temple, Dinajpur, Bangladesh.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kantajew_Temple#/media/File:Kantaji_Temple_Dinajpur_Bangladesh_(19).JPG (accessed on 10 December 2025)

3. Govinda Temple

The Govinda Temple of Puthia, in Rajshahi district, also exhibit *palmette* variations, particularly in the *Pancharatna* temples where vegetal designs frame deity niches. Here, the motif is often combined with lotus medallions, creating hybrid patterns that fuse indigenous and foreign-derived floral forms. The terracotta ornamentation in Puthia is notable for its plastic modelling, with *palmette*s frequently serving as transitional motifs between narrative figural panels and abstract geometric borders.

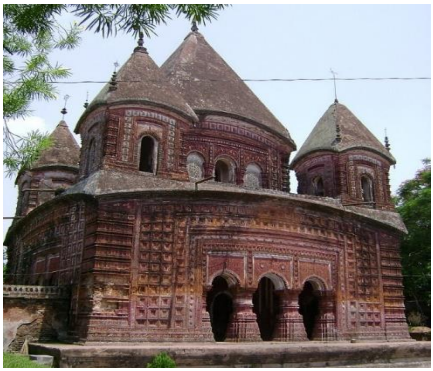

Fig. 22: Pancha Ratna Govinda Temple, Puthia, Rajshahi, Bangladesh.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puthia_Temple_Complex#/media/File:Puthia_Mandirs10.JPG (accessed on 10 December 2025)

Fig. 23: Palmette, or anthemion (lotus medallion), Govinda Temple.

Source: Author's private archive (left), and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puthia_Temple_Complex#/media/File:Massive_terracitta_work_at_govinda_mandir_of_puthia.jpg (right) (accessed on 10 December 2025)

In North Bengal, the *Pancharatna* and *Navaratna* temples—characterized by their multi-towered silhouettes—incorporate the *palmette* motif within cornice friezes and pilaster capitals. The multiple repetitions of the motif across these surfaces create a visual rhythm reminiscent of Hellenistic decorative friezes, though executed in a softer, more organic style due to the malleability of terracotta.

Smaller rural temples, many from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, often preserve more 'raw' examples of the *palmette* motif. These lack the refined symmetry of urban or royal commissions, yet retain the essential radiating leaf pattern that marks the design's lineage. In such contexts, the motif's endurance may reflect artisanal transmission through local craft guilds and itinerant masons who carried ornamental templates between regions.

The variety of these examples demonstrates that the *palmette* was not confined to elite or monumental architecture. Rather, it permeated different strata of temple building, from grand state-sponsored shrines to modest village sanctuaries. This broad distribution suggests a widespread appreciation of the motif's aesthetic appeal and its symbolic associations, which would have been reinforced by its repetition across sacred architecture.

In the context of Bangladesh's temple architecture, the *palmette* motif thus occupies a dual position: as an element of continuity linking Bengal to wider Indo-Mediterranean artistic traditions, and as a locally reinterpreted ornament woven into the fabric of regional religious expression. The following section will examine the formal qualities, placement, and stylistic variations of the motif in greater depth, with direct comparisons to its Hellenistic antecedents.

***Palmette* Motif in Bangladeshi Temples**

1. Forms and Variations

The *palmette* motif in Bangladeshi temple architecture manifests in several distinct forms, ranging from direct *anthemion* reproductions to highly stylized abstractions. In its classical form, the *palmette* consists of a central vertical axis flanked by symmetrically radiating leaves, often terminating in volutes or scrolls. This design, seen in Hellenistic

ornament, is echoed in some of the more elaborate terracotta panels at Kantajew Temple and in the Puthia temple complex.[13]

Full anthemion compositions—complete with alternating lotus and *palmette* elements—are relatively rare in Bengal, likely due to the limitations of terracotta molding compared to stone carving. More commonly, artisans employed a simplified fan-shaped foliage, sometimes without volutes, that could be easily repeated along cornices and friezes. In some examples, the *palmette* merges seamlessly with indigenous lotus forms, resulting in hybrid motifs that blur the distinction between imported and local design traditions.

Combinatory patterns are also noteworthy. In several temples, the *palmette* is integrated into continuous vine-scrolls, its radiating leaves emerging from tendril-like stems that loop across the architectural surface. In others, the motif is paired with *rosette*s, either as alternating units in a frieze or as central medallions framed by *palmette* foliage. This tendency to incorporate the *palmette* into larger ornamental networks reflects a Bengali aesthetic preference for dense, interconnected decoration.[14]

2. Placement and Architectural Function

The distribution of the *palmette* motif across temple surfaces reveals its functional versatility. On monumental structures like Kantajew Temple, *palmette*s are strategically placed above arched entrances, serving as crowning ornaments that emphasize the threshold between sacred and profane space. In Puthia's Shiva temples, they frequently appear on the spandrels of arches, where their radiating forms visually echo the curvature of the opening.

Along cornices, continuous *palmette* friezes create a unifying horizontal band, visually binding the various narrative and decorative panels into a cohesive whole. On pilaster capitals, the motif serves as a transitional element, mediating between the vertical shaft and the horizontal entablature—a role directly analogous to its placement in classical architecture. In deity panels, smaller-scale *palmette*s frame the central icon, their vegetal forms reinforcing the theme of divine fecundity and auspiciousness.

In rural examples, the placement is often more pragmatic, with *palmette*s filling available spaces within panel grids. This suggests that, while in elite commissions the motif's positioning was carefully considered, in vernacular contexts it functioned more as a readily recognizable decorative filler with symbolic overtones.

3. Stylistic Comparison with Hellenistic Examples

The comparison between *palmette* motifs in Bangladeshi temples and Hellenistic originals reveals both continuity and adaptation. In terms of continuity, the essential symmetrical leaf arrangement and vertical central axis remain consistent, as does the use of the motif to articulate architectural boundaries. The repetition of *palmette*s in friezes or as crowning ornaments above arches directly parallels their use in Hellenistic entablatures and *antefixes*.[15]

However, significant adaptations are evident. Hellenistic *palmette*s often exhibit a high degree of sculptural depth, with sharply incised leaf divisions and finely modelled volutes. In Bengal's terracotta architecture, the softer medium and mold-based production techniques produce shallower reliefs with less emphasis on individual leaf articulation. Instead, the focus shifts to overall silhouette and rhythm, creating a more graphic, linear aesthetic.

Another notable difference lies in integration with other motifs. Whereas in the Mediterranean tradition the *palmette* is frequently an isolated emblem or part of a strict alternation pattern (e.g., *anthemion* friezes alternating *palmette*s and lotuses), in Bengal it often fuses with other vegetal designs into continuous ornamental fields. This reflects a local decorative sensibility that prioritizes visual abundance and interconnectedness over strict motif isolation.

Finally, symbolic interpretation diverges. In the Hellenistic context, the *palmette* could function as an abstract emblem of beauty, fertility, or divine presence, without necessarily bearing specific religious iconography. In Bengali Hindu temples, however, its placement around deity niches and sacred thresholds suggests an added protective and auspicious function, aligning it with indigenous concepts of sacred flora such as the lotus or *kalpavṛkṣa* (wish-fulfilling tree).[16]

4. Implications of Stylistic Adaptation

The stylistic modifications seen in the Bangladeshi context underscore the *palmette* motif's adaptability. Rather than functioning as a direct import, it became part of a hybrid ornamental vocabulary that reflected both its Hellenistic origins and centuries of local reinterpretation. The technical constraints of brick and terracotta encouraged simplification and stylization, while the symbolic framework of Bengali temple art infused the motif with meanings distinct from its Mediterranean antecedents.

This dual identity—as both a vestige of cross-cultural transmission and a thoroughly localized design element—positions the *palmette* as a valuable case study for understanding the processes of artistic syncretism in South Asia. Its persistence across centuries and its ability to merge seamlessly into different decorative systems suggest that the motif's survival was not merely a matter of ornamental preference, but a testament to its resonance within evolving religious and aesthetic contexts.

The following section will examine the historical and cultural mechanisms that enabled the *palmette* motif's journey from the Hellenistic Mediterranean to the temples of Bengal, including trade routes, artisanal networks, and the Islamic era patronage systems that facilitated its integration into the architectural heritage of Bangladesh.

Routes of Transmission and Cultural Context

1. Possible Historical Pathways

The appearance of the *palmette* motif in Bangladeshi temple ornamentation reflects a long and multifaceted trajectory of artistic transmission, spanning centuries and vast geographic distances. One plausible route begins with the Hellenistic Mediterranean, where the *anthemion* was a standard decorative form, moving eastward via the Achaemenid and Seleucid empires.[17] Following Alexander the Great's conquests in the late 4th century BCE, Hellenistic art reached the Gandhara region, which became a critical nexus for the fusion of Greek, Persian, and indigenous artistic traditions.[18]

Gandhara's Buddhist monasteries and reliefs demonstrate early integration of *palmette* motifs into architectural and

sculptural programs. These motifs were further disseminated through trade networks, itinerant artisans, and the mobility of artistic workshops throughout northern India. The Kushan period (1st to 3rd centuries CE) reinforced this diffusion, embedding the motif into local religious and decorative vocabularies, often in combination with indigenous lotus or vine-scroll forms.[19] From northern India, the motif traveled along both overland and riverine routes to Bengal, where it was incorporated into terracotta temple ornamentation during the late medieval period.

Islamic era architectural practice further facilitated the motif's transmission. Islamic workshops, especially Mughal, active across northern India, often employed artisans who were familiar with both Hellenistic-derived ornament and regional traditions. These artisans migrated or were commissioned in Bengal, bringing with them template designs and ornamental vocabularies, including the *palmette*.[20] This migration helped institutionalize the motif in the decorative lexicon of Bengal's temple architecture, creating continuity between elite and vernacular contexts.

2. Symbolic Significance

Beyond its formal characteristics, the *palmette* motif carried layered symbolic meanings that facilitated its adoption and reinterpretation. In Hellenistic art, the motif was associated with fertility, beauty, and the presence of the divine, often framing sacred spaces or crowning architectural elements.[21] Its radiating symmetry suggested harmony and cosmic order, making it suitable for both secular and religious ornament.

In the Bengali Hindu context, these associations were reinterpreted within local cosmology. The motif frequently appears around deity panels, temple entrances, and plinths, reinforcing auspiciousness and sanctity. Its integration with indigenous motifs such as the lotus or *kalpavṛkṣa* further enhanced its symbolic resonance, aligning it with ideas of divine abundance, spiritual purity, and cosmic fertility.[22] By bridging Hellenistic abstraction and indigenous religious symbolism, the *palmette* became more than a decorative element; it functioned as a visual mediator between global artistic trends and local spiritual expression.

3. Synthesis of Transmission and Local Adaptation

The journey of the *palmette* from the Mediterranean to Bengal demonstrates a dynamic interplay between continuity and adaptation. While the motif retained recognizable formal characteristics, each stage of transmission introduced modifications—technical, aesthetic, and symbolic—that reflected regional material culture and religious priorities. In Bengal, terracotta construction necessitated simplification of leaf details and encouraged integration with existing decorative systems, while the motif's symbolic meaning was reframed within Hindu cosmology.

Consequently, the *palmette* in Bangladeshi temple architecture exemplifies both artistic mobility and selective localization. It illustrates how motifs originating in distant cultural contexts can achieve longevity through adaptation, reinterpretation, and incorporation into local symbolic frameworks. The following section will compare these manifestations directly with Hellenistic and Islamic examples, emphasizing stylistic evolution, hybridization, and regional creativity.

Comparative Analysis

1. Case Study Comparisons

A systematic comparison of the *palmette* motif across regions reveals both continuity and transformation in form, function, and symbolism. Gandharan examples, particularly from the Kushan period, display *palmette*s with pronounced volumetric depth, sharply articulated leaves, and integration with vine-scrolls framing narrative panels.[23] The motifs often crown architectural elements such as pilasters and column capitals, reflecting their Hellenistic heritage while simultaneously adapting to Buddhist iconographic contexts.

In Bengal, particularly in temples such as Kantajew and the Puthia Shiva temples, the *palmette* motif retains its essential symmetry and radiating leaf structure but is rendered in shallow terracotta relief. This medium limits sculptural depth but allows for dense repetition and integration into larger ornamental panels. The motif frequently combines with lotus medallions, vine-scrolls, and rosettes, creating a visually rich

and continuous decorative field that differs from the relatively isolated treatment in Gandhara.[24]

Islamic era floral ornament provides another point of comparison. *Palmette*-inspired motifs in Islamic architecture, especially Mughal architecture—seen in decorative plasterwork, jali screens, and miniature painting borders—exhibit stylized, elongated leaves and rhythmic repetition similar to Hellenistic precedents. However, Islamic designs often emphasize abstraction and two-dimensional patterning, which aligns more closely with Bengali terracotta adaptations than with the three-dimensional Gandharan reliefs.[25]

2. Adaptation and Localization

Across these contexts, several patterns of adaptation are evident. In Bengal, artisans simplified the *palmette*'s leaf divisions to suit terracotta molding techniques, emphasizing silhouette over sculptural detail. Repetition along friezes and cornices created a rhythmic visual effect reminiscent of Hellenistic friezes, yet the motifs were often fused with indigenous lotus patterns, producing hybrid compositions unique to the region.[26]

The motif's symbolic significance also evolved. While Gandharan palmettes were largely ornamental within Buddhist contexts, and Islamic *palmette*s often served aesthetic and emblematic functions, in Bengal the motif acquired additional layers of meaning. Positioned around deity panels, temple thresholds, and plinths, it conveyed auspiciousness, protection, and sacredness, reflecting Hindu cosmology and temple ritual practice.[27]

This comparative framework highlights the *palmette* motif's dual character: it is both a bearer of cross-cultural stylistic lineage and a flexible element capable of localization. Its trajectory illustrates the complex interplay between external influence and internal innovation, showing how a motif with Mediterranean origins could be adapted to suit diverse religious, material, and aesthetic contexts across Afro-Asian art histories.

3. Synthesis

The analysis demonstrates that the *palmette* motif did not merely migrate as a static design; rather, it was continuously transformed by technical constraints, regional taste, and religious symbolism. Gandharan, Islamic, and Bengali *palmette*s form a continuum in which the motif's basic structure is preserved but its execution and interpretive significance are modified. In Bengal, this process of hybridization and localization resulted in a distinctive architectural ornamentation that simultaneously reflects its Hellenistic heritage and embodies regional artistic identity.

The following section will further interpret these findings, discussing the *palmette* as a marker of cross-cultural exchange, evidence of artistic syncretism, and a defining element of Bengal's temple architectural identity.

General Assessment

The preceding analysis provides substantial evidence that the *palmette* motif in Bangladeshi temple architecture represents a tangible legacy of Hellenistic ornamentation. The motif's essential structure—central vertical axis with radiating symmetrical leaves—remains identifiable across centuries and continents, linking Mediterranean antecedents to South Asian adaptations. Its persistence in Bengal, despite differences in medium, scale, and surrounding decorative elements, suggests not mere imitation but selective appropriation and adaptation by local artisans.

The *palmette* motif functions as a clear marker of cross-cultural exchange. Its journey from the Hellenistic Mediterranean through Gandhara, northern India, and ultimately to Bengal demonstrates the mobility of artistic ideas facilitated by trade networks, artisanal migration, and imperial patronage systems, including Islamic workshops.[28] The motif's integration into Hindu temple ornamentation indicates that such transmission was not passive; rather, the design was actively interpreted, adapted, and embedded within local religious and aesthetic frameworks. In terracotta temples of Bengal, *palmette*s often appear in combination with indigenous motifs, such as the lotus or vine-scrolls,

producing a hybrid ornamental vocabulary that reflects both continuity and transformation.

Artistic syncretism emerges as a central theme in this interpretation. The *palmette* motif exemplifies how external visual stimuli can be assimilated into a distinct cultural milieu without losing local significance. While retaining its formal elegance and symbolic connotations of beauty, fertility, and sacredness, the motif was re-contextualized in Bengali religious art to align with Hindu cosmology and temple ritual. This duality—heritage of a distant artistic tradition and expression of localized identity—underscores the adaptive capacity of Bengal's artisans and the integrative nature of regional temple ornamentation.[29]

Furthermore, the motif's placement and repetition suggest conscious choices in both aesthetic and symbolic programming. Its use to frame deity panels, crown entrances, or articulate friezes demonstrates an awareness of spatial hierarchy, visual rhythm, and the symbolic potency of vegetal forms within sacred architecture. The *palmette* thus operates simultaneously on multiple levels: as a decorative device, a conduit for historical memory, and a semiotic marker reinforcing the temple's sacredness.

Finally, the study underscores the broader methodological value of motif-based research in art history. By tracing individual ornamental elements across time and space, scholars can illuminate networks of cultural interaction, transmission routes, and processes of localization that may remain obscured in conventional architectural analyses. The *palmette* motif, therefore, provides both concrete evidence of Hellenistic influence and a lens through which to understand the dynamics of cross-cultural artistic synthesis in South Asia.

In sum, the *palmette* in Bangladeshi temples is not merely a decorative flourish; it embodies centuries of artistic migration, technical adaptation, and symbolic reinterpretation. Its study reinforces the thesis that Bengal's temple ornamentation reflects a sophisticated interplay between global stylistic currents and local cultural identity, illustrating the enduring power of motifs as carriers of both aesthetic and cultural meaning.

Conclusion

The investigation of the *palmette* motif in Bangladeshi temple architecture demonstrates a clear stylistic lineage from its Hellenistic origins to local interpretations in Bengal. The motif's formal characteristics—symmetry, radiating leaves, and central axis—can be traced from ancient Mediterranean contexts through Gandharan and Islamic intermediaries, illustrating the long-distance transmission of artistic ideas. At the same time, its adaptation to terracotta construction and integration with indigenous floral motifs reflect the selective localization and creative reinterpretation characteristic of Bengal's temple ornamentation.[30]

The study confirms that the *palmette* motif functions as more than a decorative element. Its placement on cornices, friezes, pilasters, and around deity panels underscores its dual role as an aesthetic and symbolic device. In the Bengali context, the motif conveys auspiciousness, fertility, and sacredness, demonstrating how imported design vocabulary can be reframed to align with regional religious and cultural frameworks. Such adaptations exemplify the process of artistic syncretism, whereby motifs travel, transform, and acquire new meanings while maintaining a recognizable formal identity.

These findings have broader implications for the study of South Asian art. First, they highlight the importance of detailed motif-level analysis for understanding patterns of cross-cultural exchange and artistic mobility. The *palmette* motif serves as a tangible example of how Mediterranean and Central Asian influences were selectively integrated into local traditions. Second, the research underscores the potential of comparative approaches—examining Gandharan, Islamic, and Bengali examples—to illuminate the trajectories of visual culture across centuries and regions.

From a personal perspective, the study also reveals the ingenuity and adaptability of Bengali artisans, who successfully synthesized foreign forms with indigenous aesthetic sensibilities. The continued presence of the *palmette* motif in both monumental and rural temples suggests a deep appreciation for its formal qualities and symbolic resonance,

indicating that ornamentation functioned not only as embellishment but also as a medium of cultural continuity.

Finally, this study opens avenues for further research. A comprehensive catalogue of *palmette* motifs in Bengal, including variations across regions, periods, and materials, would provide a more robust dataset for comparative analysis. Moreover, expanding such studies to include Southeast Asian and Central Asian temples could further illuminate networks of artistic exchange across the broader Indo-Mediterranean world.

In conclusion, the *palmette* motif exemplifies the dynamic interplay between global stylistic currents and localized interpretation. Its journey from Hellenistic ornamentation to Bengali temple terracotta demonstrates the enduring capacity of motifs to convey aesthetic, symbolic, and cultural meaning, affirming the value of focused art-historical research in tracing the pathways of cross-cultural influence.

Notes and References

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6 James Fergusson and James Burgess, *The Cave Temples of India*, (London: W.H. Allen & Co., 1880, 121-123).

7 D.C. Mitra, *Bengal Temples: Iconography and Ornamentation*, (Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1971), 214-216; Bimal Kumar Datta, *Bengal Temples*, (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1975).

8 The Muslims generally view God-centered aesthetics and beauty as pleasing and appealing. Depictions of animals, as well as transcendental concepts, were forbidden to Muslims. Therefore, several factors contribute to the aesthetic of Islamic ornaments, such as a sense of hierarchy, a desire to use symbolism, a love of opulent ornamentation that serves purposes beyond the mere display, and a tendency to use color. See Y. Abdullahi & M.R. Embi, Evolution of abstract vegetal ornaments in Islamic architecture, *Archnet-IJAR: International Journal of Architectural Research*, 2015, 9(1), 31; L.I. Al Faruqi, Muwashshaḥ: a vocal form in Islamic culture, *Ethnomusicology*, 1975, 1-29; Fatima Zahra, Safrizal Shahir, Development and Evolution of Palmette Ornament: An Influence on Islamic Architecture, *Scientific Journal of Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies Landscape Architecture and Art*, Volume 21, Number 21, December 2022, 128-129, DOI: 10.22616/j.landarchart.2022.21.13.

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