

ŚYENACITI

K. Ramasubramanian and K. Mahesh

Cell for Indian Science and Technology in Sanskrit
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Bombay
Powai, Mumbai 400 076, India

e-mail: kramas@iitb.ac.in

ABSTRACT

The word *Śyenaciti*, whose earliest reference is found in *Kṛṣṇa-yajurveda* (*Taitt Sam 5-4-11*), refers to a particular type of sacrificial altar employed by Vedic priests—to perform religious rites that are optional in nature (*kāmya-karma*)—to obtain a certain desired result. *Śyenaciti* is a *samastapada* (a compound word) formed of the two words *śyena* and *citi*. Though as per the definition presented by thesaurus *śyena* can refer to any bird that consumes meat (*kravyāda*), generally it is taken to mean the rapacious bird eagle belonging to the falcon family. The etymology of the word *citi* can be given as: ‘*cīyate asyām iti*’ – meaning ‘[the locus] unto which things are brought into [and arranged]’. In fact, *citi* itself is derived from the root *ci*, which means ‘assembling or bringing in’ (*samvṛtyādānayoḥ*). Thus the word *Śyenaciti*, appearing in the Vedic corpus in the context of different sacrifices being described for different purposes, refers to an altar in which the bricks are arranged in the form of the bird eagle.

Constructing an altar of a given area in the form of a bird belonging to the falcon family, merely by arranging bricks without employing any kind of mortar is not a trivial task. It requires special geometrical skills to design bricks of suitable sizes and shapes. In fact, for constructing *Śyenaciti*, geometers of the *Śulbasūtra* period (prior to 800 BC) seem to have employed six types of bricks, whose arrangement would produce the shape of the head, tail, wing and so on of a falcon. Moreover, from the description present in the Vedas, it is clear that *Śyenaciti* is not merely a few inches in height. Starting from 1.5 feet, it could even run to 6 feet, which only implies that several layers of bricks need to be arranged in such a way that the resulting arrangement is quite sturdy. This obviously means alternate layers of the bricks used to increase the height of the *citi* have to be arranged differently so that the bricks could interlock among themselves to provide the necessary stability. The details of the geometry involved in the construction of *Śyenaciti*—as described in the *Śulbasūtra* texts—will be presented during the talk besides highlighting its religious significance as expounded in the Vedic literature.