

Narrative Reliefs of the Kirātārjunīya Story in the Śiva Temple at Penukonda, Andhra Pradesh

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This paper discusses a set of narrative sculpted reliefs of the Kirātārjunīya story in the Vijayanagara period Śiva temple at Penukonda in Andhra Pradesh. Penukonda in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries was one of the provincial headquarters of the Vijayanagara state. It gained in greater importance after CE 1565 when, following the disastrous defeat of the Vijayanagara forces in the Battle of Talikota and the subsequent sack of the capital, the court shifted itself to Penukonda. There are the remains of palatial buildings as well as of temples in this regional centre. Of the latter, the two important ones are the Rāma temple and the Śiva temple. The Rāma temple does not have any foundational inscriptions to help date it; however, on stylistic grounds it has been assigned to the second quarter of the fifteenth century, namely to the reign-period of Devarāya II (CE 1424-1446).¹ The twin Śiva temple nearby appears to be a sixteenth century copy of the Rāma temple.² These two temples are in the Tamil style of temple architecture that became the dominant style of religious architecture from the fifteenth century onwards.

Both the Rāma and Śiva temples have reliefs carved on their exterior walls, which is not very common in Vijayanagara period temple art. While in the Rāma temple these exterior reliefs are naturally of Vaiṣṇava themes, those on the Śiva temple are of Śaiva themes including representations of *sthalapurāṇas* of a couple of important Śaiva sacred sites. However, the focus of this paper is not on the sculptures found on the exterior but on a set of narrative reliefs that are found carved on the outer walls of the sanctum and the antechamber of the Śiva temple which can only be viewed from the enclosed circumambulatory passage around them.

The Śiva temple is a medium sized east-facing temple laid out in a long rectangle. It contains an east-facing *garbhagrha* and *antarāla* which are surrounded by an enclosed colonnaded *pradakṣiṇāpatha*. The walls of the sanctum and

antechamber have niches which contain sculptures of deities (Brahmā and Durgā on the north; Dakṣiṇāmūrti, Vīrabhadra and Bhairava on the south; Tripurāntaka on the west).³ Besides these niches, the wall surface is adorned with pilasters and *kumbhapañjaras* (decorative pilasters that are surmounted by a shrine-like member and which stand within pots with foliage). The wall surfaces between the niches, pilasters and *kumbhapañjaras* are adorned with four tiers of relief carvings. The entry to the colonnaded circumambulatory passage is through the western doorway of the enclosed *maṇḍapa* which is entered from outside through doorways on the other three sides. The tower above the sanctum is two-storeyed (Fig.1). The entry doorways into this temple are kept locked except at the time of



Fig.1 : Śiva temple at Penukonda, general view

pūjā. Hence, unless one is present at the site during the time of the *pūjā*, one is unable to see the inside of this temple. Therefore, although I had visited Penukonda earlier, I had never been inside the Śiva temple till my visit to this historic site on 18th January 2016 when I was fortunate that my visit to the Śiva temple coincided with the time of the morning *pūjā*. The temple priest was extremely obliging and he allowed us to go around the enclosed circumambulatory passage (Fig.2). We were able to study and photograph the four tiers of reliefs on the walls of the sanctum and antechamber (Fig.3). The pillars of the circumambulatory passage too have pillar reliefs. Photography of the narrative reliefs of the Kirātārjunīya was difficult for two reasons: firstly there was very little



Fig.2 : Exterior wall of the sanctum and antechamber and the enclosed circumambulatory passage

light and secondly the pillars of the colonnade at times came in the way of photographing long horizontal panels of reliefs.

A careful study of the reliefs on the sanctum and antechamber walls of this temple prove that on the lower two tiers the reliefs are predominantly of the Kirātārjunīya story. This is perhaps the most detailed and complete sculptural rendering of the Kirātārjunīya in the Vijayanagara period repertoire. Hence, this visit to the Śiva temple at Penukonda widened the scope of my knowledge about narrative sculptures of the Vijayanagara period.



Fig.3 : Four tiers of reliefs on the wall of the sanctum and antechamber

The earliest carvings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Mahābhārata* and *Bhāgavata* narratives in southern India occur in the seventh-eighth century temples of the Early Cālukyas at Badami, Aihole and Pattadakal. The tradition of narrative sculptures was continued by the Hoysalas (circa 1006-1306): *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Mahābhārata* and *Bhāgavata* appear on the basement mouldings of numerous Hoysala temples. Such carvings are also found in the Coḷa temples of Tamilnadu, generally on basement mouldings. The tradition of carving narrative reliefs, mainly of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and also of the *Bhāgavata* continued during the Vijayanagara and post-Vijayanagara periods (mid-fourteenth to mid-eighteenth centuries) in south India. However, in the placement of such reliefs there is now a major difference; namely, they are generally found on the wall surfaces and not on the plinth mouldings. But, narrative reliefs are no longer as ubiquitous as in temples of the earlier periods. Again, when they do occur, the *Rāmāyaṇa* narratives are more common; *Bhāgavata* narrative sculptures are also found in a few monuments. However, narrative sculptures of the *Mahābhārata* were no longer as popular as they were in the earlier periods.

Of *Mahābhārata* themes in Vijayanagara period sculpture, the most important undoubtedly is *Kirātārjunīya*, which relates the story of Arjuna and the *kirāta* or hunter (who was in fact Śiva himself in disguise). This episode, of which the earliest version survives in the *Vanaparva* (Book of the Forest) of the *Mahābhārata* was retold and developed further by the sixth century Sanskrit writer Bharavi in his *Kirātārjunīyam*.⁴ As per the story, sage Vyāsa advises Yudhiṣṭhira and his brothers of the importance of obtaining from Śiva the *pāśupata* weapon for their forthcoming war with the Kauravas. Arjuna proceeds to the forest after worshipping the Śiva-*liṅga* in order to embark on severe austerities. The fierceness of Arjuna's penance is reported to Indra by a sage. Indra sends *apsaras* to distract Arjuna from his penance. When they fail in their mission, Indra sets out himself to the place of Arjuna's austerities. Disguised as a Brahmin, Indra tries to distract Arjuna; failing to do so, Indra reveals himself in his divine form and blesses Arjuna. However, the force of Arjuna's austerities releases tremendous heat in the forest which disturbs the *ṛṣis* who go to complain to Śiva himself. Śiva sends the *asura* Mukha, as a giant boar, to attack Arjuna; the latter shoots at the boar with his bow and arrow. At the same time, Śiva, disguised as a forest hunter or *kirāta*

appears in the forest and claims that he had killed the boar. A fierce fight ensues between Arjuna and the *kirāta*. Finally, Arjuna, when he fails to defeat the hunter, realizes that the *kirāta* is none other than Śiva himself. He prostrates before Śiva who now manifests himself in his divine form and blesses Arjuna and gifts to him the *pāśupata* weapon.

As mentioned above, the Kirātārjunīya is repeated in sculpture at a few sites of the Vijayanagara period. In most of them, the story is spread over two, three or more sculpted panels, generally beginning with Arjuna in penance, the appearance of the magical boar, the fight between Arjuna and Śiva, dressed as a *kirāta* or tribal hunter, both claiming to have killed the boar, and finally Arjuna worshipping Śiva-Pārvatī, after he has recognized the *kirāta* and his wife as these divinities in disguise. The earliest Vijayanagara period representation of this episode is on the outer enclosure wall of the Mallikārjuna temple at Srisailam, where this story is seen on the south wall in the midst of various Śaivite themes. The other Vijayanagara sites where the story appears are the Virabhadra temple at Lepakshi and the Vidyāśaṅkara temple at Sringeri of the 16th century. At Lepakshi the story appears on the north and west walls of the inner *maṇḍapa* while at Sringeri they are on the basement mouldings of the temple itself. Of these three renderings, the most extensive is the one at Lepakshi. However, the one that is carved on the rather inaccessible location of the walls of the sanctum and the antechamber of the Śiva temple at Penukonda, which can only be seen from the enclosed circumambulatory passage around them, is more extensive in detail than even the one at Lepakshi. These narrative panels are explained in sequential order below (only the scenes pertaining to the Kirātārjunīya story are listed; the sculptures in the wall niches are omitted because they do not pertain to this story but are of deity figures and so are other panels that are carved on the wall).

The narrative begins on the lowest tier of reliefs on the south side. Here from east to west are found first the seated Śiva and Pārvatī, then there is a relief of *ṛṣis*; then are seen four of the *dikpālas* and a devotee; in the following panel are two more *dikpālas* (Indra and Agni) and a *kirāta* and *kirātī*; in the next are Śiva and Pārvatī on Nandi; the following panels depict a *ṛṣi*, a woman next to a tree and two standing males who each hold a bow and an arrow. It is not clear whether or

not these panels on the lowest tier on the south side pertain to the Kirātārjunīya story. But the next panels that are carved on the lowest tier on the west side definitely do. Here we see first the seated Yudhiṣṭhira with the standing Bhīma and Arjuna behind him (Bhīma can be identified by the mace he holds and Arjuna by his bow); it is not clear who the small seated figure at the feet of Yudhiṣṭhira is (Fig.4). The figures of this group are looking towards the following panel which depicts a seated sage, who is obviously Vyāsa, behind whom is a standing ṛṣi (Fig.5). Although these two groups are separated by two pilasters and a *kumbhapañjara*, it is evident the two together form one composition in the narrative, namely that of Vyāsa advising Yudhiṣṭhira and his brothers about the necessity of obtaining the *pāśupata*. Next is a relief of Arjuna standing with hands



Fig.4 : Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma and Arjuna



Fig.5 : Vyāsa and attendant ṛṣi

in *añjali*. In the following panel, Arjuna takes leave of Yudhiṣṭhira and departs for the forest in order to do the needful for obtaining the marvelous weapon; Bhīma is seen standing behind his elder brother. The narrative then continues on the lowest tier on the north wall. In the first panel on this wall Arjuna is seen meeting two Brahmins; in the next one Arjuna worships a *liṅga* which is within a shrine; in the subsequent one Arjuna is seen worshipping another *liṅga*; this is followed by a more elaborate scene of Arjuna worshipping at a Śiva shrine in front of which is a *pujārī*. After having worshipped Śiva in a number of shrines, in the subsequent panel Arjuna is shown worshipping Viṣṇu (Fig.6). It is interesting to note that



Fig.6 : Arjuna worshipping Viṣṇu and Arjuna in penance

Viṣṇu is shown here in his reclining form. As per the story, Viṣṇu tells Arjuna that he must do penance in order to propitiate Śiva; hence at one end of the same panel we see Arjuna in penance. The story then takes a dramatic turn: in the following panel we see Indra being told by a *ṛṣi* about Arjuna's penance and forthwith Indra sends two *apsaras* to tempt Arjuna and divert him from his severe austerities (Fig.7). They obviously fail, because in the next panel Indra himself is shown visiting Arjuna and asking him how an ascetic can be with a bow. In the following



Fig.7 : A *ṛṣi* tells Indra about Arjuna's penance and *apsaras* sent by Indra try to distract Arjuna

panel we see Indra disguised as a Brahmin meeting Arjuna who is in penance (Fig.8). Finally, having failed to distract Arjuna from his austerities, Indra too tells Arjuna to worship Śiva.



Fig.8 : Indra disguised as a Brahmin meets Arjuna

The story then proceeds on the second tier from the bottom; once again the panels are to be viewed from the south side onwards. First we see Śiva and Pārvatī as a *kirāta* and *kirātī*; Śiva sends the *asura* Mukha as a boar to attack Arjuna. Following the killing of the boar, in a number of panels the fight between Arjuna and Śiva disguised as a *kirāta* is depicted very graphically. They first fight with bows and arrows (Fig.9), then with swords and finally they engage in a fierce hand to hand combat against each other. In the final panel of this narrative we see Śiva



Fig.9 : The fight between Arjuna and *kirāta* with bows and arrows

and Pārvatī on Nandi with the standing Arjuna in front of them hands joined in adoration (Fig.10). Although the handing over of the *pāśupata* weapon is not depicted, it is evident to the viewer that this is the depiction of Śiva in his divine form, very pleased with Arjuna's devotion, gifting the magical weapon to Arjuna. The rest of this tier and the top two tiers are filled with forest scenes, tribal hunters, *ṛṣis* and so forth.



Fig.10 : Śiva and Pārvatī with Arjuna
Śiva gifting the *pāśupata* weapon to Arjuna

temple at Penukonda are small. This set is hardly known not only because of the relative inaccessibility of the site but even more because they are carved on a part of the temple structure to which normally the devotee or the visitor would not have access. Of course, the question arises as to why such an elaborate set of reliefs were carved on walls that are not visible from the outside. The answer to this could be that perhaps the Śiva temple at Penukonda was built in two phases, both in the Vijayanagara period. The sanctum and the antechamber with their elaborate reliefs on the exterior walls may have been built first. Subsequently, at some later stage, they came to be enclosed when the closed circumambulatory passage and the enclosed *maṇḍapa* in front were added, as a result of which the reliefs on the exterior walls of the sanctum and antechamber could no longer be seen from outside the temple. The fact there is a difference in quality between the fairly finely cut reliefs on the walls of the sanctum and antechamber as compared with the rather roughly carved reliefs on the walls of the outer walls of the Śiva temple gives credence to this supposition.

References & Notes :

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