

“Narrative Relief Sculptures related to Ramayana at the Veeranarayana Temple at Gadag”.

Dr. Praveen Doddamani

Although the Veeranarayana Temple at Gadag that became popular due to its connection with Kumaravyasa might have been built in the 11-12th Century CE, based on the sculptural design and inscriptions found at the temple, we may conclude that it was renovated 3-4 times over the centuries. The *Sabhamantapa* in the temple and the *Balipeetha* and *Garudastambha* in front of the temple are additions of Vijayanagara period. It is understood from inscriptions related to this temple that in place of this temple, there were originally three different temples. “Earlier there was a Vishnu (Traipurusha) temple in 1037, Madhaveshwara Temple in 1184 and Kalideva Mahaswami Jinalaya from 1100-1231 CE. The Bharahanarayana (Vishnu) temple mentioned in the inscription of 1037 CE is the present Veeranarayana temple, that was renovated once in the 12th century (when it was a Jina temple), again in the 14-15th century (during Vijayanagara period), in the 19th century (1850) and finally in 1962 for the fourth time (only *Gopura*).” Therefore this temple is a melting pot of Chalukya, Hoysala, Vijayanagara and Modern architectural styles. The *Garbhagriha*, *Ardhamantapa*, *Navaranga* of the temple belong to the pre and post Vijayanagara times. “A spacious *Mahamantapa* and the surrounding rectangular *prakara* wall were constructed during Vijayanagara rule. A small room on the left side of the Navaranga and the walls on either sides of the *Mantapa* were extended”.¹ The beautiful life-size idol of Veeranarayana in the sanctum appears to be of the Vijayanagara period, judging from the sculptural elements. The halo of the idol has the carvings of Dashavatara. Sri Veeranarayana is seated on a *panipeetha* lotus in the *sthanaka* stance with his hand held in the *yoga mudra*. The right hands hold *chakra*, mace and *abhaya mudra* respectively. The left hands have *shankha* and lotus in them. On the right of Veeranarayana, there is an idol of Garuda and on the left, of Mahalaxmi. There are 20 pillars of Vijayanagara style in the *Mahamantapa*. Among them, the four central pillars have relief sculptures of Dashavatara and other gods and goddesses. Legend has it that Kumaravyasa used to sit leaning against the south-eastern pillar among these 4 and compose his poetry. The numerous inscriptions found in the compound wall surrounding the temple might have been built into the *prakara wall* during the renovation done in the Vijayanagara period or later.

The temple has two entrances. Among these, the southern entrance was built pre-Vijayanagara. The eastern entrance is unique and has undergone renovation time and again. “A tall *Rayagopura* was built in the Vijayanagara period. In 1850 and again in 1962, this *gopura* was reconstructed in

Vijayanagara style using mortar”.² The 5 storeyed Rayagopura displays the relief sculptures of *Keertimukhas* and gods and goddesses alongside numerous erotic sculptures. The main entrance beneath the gopura is made of stone and adorned with narrative relief sculptures of *Dashavatara*, *Ramayana* and *Bhagavata* on both sides. (Photograph 1)

Narrative Relief Sculptures related to Ramayana

“Narrative relief sculptures related to Ramayana, such as the scene of Rama giving his finger-ring to Hanumana, Hanumana crossing the sea, Hanumana presenting Rama’s ring to Sita in Ashokavana, etc, can be seen on the inner wall adjacent to the main entrance of the gopura”.³

The Conflict between Vali and Sugriv and the Assassination of Vali:

On the outer side of the *Rayagopura*, among the miniature relief sculptures on the right side wall, are the scenes depicting the fight between Vali and Sugriv, and the death of Vali. This scene has been narrated in the *Kishkinda Kanda* of the *Valmiki Ramayana* from *Sarga* 13 to 16. A brief summary of the scene is as follows:

“Rama, who had promised to kill Vali said to Sugriv – ‘We will go to Kishkinda City and hide behind the trees in the forest. You go and invite your brother to duel’. Agreeing to this plan, Sugriv reached the outskirts of Kishkinda and roared loudly. Angered, Vali came out and started to fight with him. The ensuing duel between the two was perilous. Rama readied his bow and arrow to shoot Vali. But when he was about to shoot, Rama got confused as to who was Vali among the two brothers, as they were identical twins. After some time, Sugriv, who was badly hurt in the battle, fled to the Rishimukha hill to save his life. Later, Rama tried to console a furious Sugriv by narrating why he could not kill Vali during the battle. He asked Sugriv to invite Vali for duel once again and directed Laxman to bring a garland of Nagapushpa for Sugriv, to help him differentiate between the two brothers.

When Sugriv once again gave the war cry, Vali was enraged. He rejected the advice of his wife Tara, to make peace with Rama and Sugriv. He started to fight with Sugriv. This battle too, was deadly. They fought by punching, by using their nails, elbows, knees, tree branches, stones, etc. and their bodies were covered in blood. Sugriv was growing weak from the fight. When he was looking around in despair for help, Rama once again readied his bow and arrow and shot the arrow at Vali. The arrow hit Vali, who then fell to the ground and subsequently died”.⁴

Tiny miniature narrative relief sculptures depicting the above story are carved on the wall, from left to right using straight line principle. The first scene shows Rama holding his bow and arrow at the ready and Sugriv is praying to him holding his hands in the *anjali mudra*, to kill Vali. In the second scene,

we see Rama shooting the arrow at Vali. The third scene depicts Vali and Sugriv standing face to face, dueling. In this panel, each character is shown in between the two panels of *keertimukha* in very tiny miniature sculptures.

Miniature Episodes:

A panel of carvings depicting episodes from Ramayana in miniature form can be seen on the left wall on the inner side of the main entrance. In the initial scene, Rama is giving his ring to Hanumana. The story related to this scene as narrated in the 63rd Sarga of *Kishkinda Kanda* of Ramayana goes as follows:

*“Even though Sugriv had sent Monkey-warriors out in all four directions, he had faith that his work could be completed by Hanumana alone. So, he called Hanumana separately and told him thus – ‘You, the son of Vayu can go wherever you want on land, in the skies or in water. The work of finding Sita must be done by you’. Hearing these words, Rama addressed Hanumana in the following words – ‘Sita might express doubt upon seeing you, she might get frightened. In order to avoid both these scenarios, take my ring bearing my name and show it to her’. He gave the ring bearing the name Sriramachandra to Hanumana and continued – ‘As soon as she sees my ring, Sita will be assured that you are my representative’. Hanumana took the ring from Rama and placed it upon his own head with devotion. Then he bowed to Rama and left for the mission along with his other companions”*⁵

In the second section of this narrative panel, the carving depicts Hanumana crossing the sea. The story related to this scene is narrated in the 63rd Sarga of *Kishkinda Kanda* of Ramayana. Its summary is as follows:

“When all the monkey-warriors were deep in contemplation as to how they would cross the 100 yard long stretch of sea in order to see Sita, Hanumana alone sat looking at the sea. Then, Jambavanta said to him – ‘You are a hero among heroes. It is possible for you alone to fly across the sea to Lanka’. These words encouraged Hanumana. He magnified his body to several times his normal size and got ready to fly across the sea. Seeing this, all the monkey-warriors gathered around him and began to praise him. His body kept growing in size. Finally he addressed the monkey-warriors thus – ‘There is no equal or match to me in flying through the winds’, and then kicked off to fly across the sea, from the Mahendra mountain”.⁶

The third scene in this narrative panel shows Hanumana meeting Sita. The story related to this scene as narrated in the 36th Sarga of *Sundara Kanda* of Ramayana goes as follows:

“Hanumana sat on the top of a tall tree in Ashoka Vana, trying to spot Sita. The garden was full of various kinds of trees, plants and vines. Hanumana saw a small temple like structure surrounded by trees,

near which, under a tree sat a woman guarded by ogresses. Based on the description given by Rama and judging by the silk scarf and jewelry, Hanumana understood that the woman is Sita and he went ahead to converse with her and presented her Rama's ring”⁷

The narrative panel that depicts the three above-mentioned scenes is long and follows the straight line principle in carving. In the first scene, Rama has his right hand outstretched, giving his ring to Hanumana. Behind him, Laxmana is depicted standing with his bow in hand. Hanumana is bowing to Rama in a devotional posture, accepting the ring from Rama. (Photograph 2)

In the second scene, Hanumana is in the standing posture, having increased the size of his body several times its normal dimensions, and is preparing to fly off across the sea. Adjacent to this scene, another scene depicts Hanumana flying. The sculptor has shown his tail waving above his head and the waves of sea are carved in front of him.

The third and last scene shows Sita sitting in the Ashokavana. Hanumana has been depicted sitting in front of her in two different forms. On the right side, he is shown as a huge-bodied being, conversing with Sita, perhaps giving his introduction. On the left side, Hanumana is depicted in a tiny size, standing in front of Sita, presenting Rama's ring to her. A tree is carved behind Sita.

Photographs:

1. Battle between Vali and Surgiv, and the assassination of Vali, Veeranarayana Temple, Gadag
2. Rama giving his ring to Hanumana, Veeranarayana Temple, Gadag
3. Bali-Vamana scene, Veeranarayana Temple, Gadag



(Photograph-1)



(Photograph-2)



(Photograph-3)

Footnotes and Bibliography:

1. Sundara A. : “*Gadag Betageriyalliruva Pracheena Devalayagalu*” , 1975, Kidiyuru H R (Ed): “*Namma Gadugu-Betageri*”, Directory Publishers, Gadag, pg.481
2. Haridas M H, *op.cit.* pg.47
3. Sundara A., *op.cit.* pg.484
4. Shrihari (trans.), “*Shrimad Valimiki Ramayana- Kishkindakanda*”(Vol 5), 1988, Bharat Darshan Publication Committee, Bengaluru, pg. 1751-1767
5. Shrihari and Shrinivasaraya N V, “*Shrimad Valimiki Ramayana- Kishkindakanda*”(Vol 6), 1988, Bharat Darshan Publication Committee, Bengaluru, pg. 1944-1948
6. Shrihari and Shrinivasaraya N V, *op.cit.* pg.2025-2030
7. Shrihari and Shrinivasaraya N V, “*Shrimad Valimiki Ramayana- Sundarakanda*”(Vol 7), 1990, Bharat Darshan Publication Committee, Bengaluru, pg. 2259-2275