

Abduction of Sītā – Two Interesting *Rāmāyaṇa* Panels at Bhitargaon

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The well-known brick temple at Bhitargaon near Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh is one of the finest examples of the mature Gupta period assignable to the middle of the 5th century CE. A marvel of the early historic brick architecture, the monument is located in a non-descript village named Bhitargaon in the Ghatampur Tehsil of Kanpur District. Following the Kanpur-Fatehpur highway it can be reached via Sarsaul by road at a distance of 32 km. Alternatively, taking slightly longer route it is also approachable via Ghatampur covering a distance of about 41 km.

The temple was first noticed by General Alexander Cunningham in 1877, who published a brief account of the monument in his report for the year 1877-78.¹ The monument remained neglected for almost three decades after Cunningham's visit and was next visited by J.Ph. Vogel, assisted by A.H. Longhurst, who published a detailed account of the temple in 1908-09.² There after almost all the scholars working on one or the other aspect of the Gupta history, especially those who dealt with the art and architecture of the period, have given an account of the temple. Some of them include R.C. Singh,³ J.C. Harle,⁴ Joanna G. Williams,⁵ R. Nath,⁶ M. Zaheer,⁷ P.K. Agrawala⁸ and Krishna Deva.⁹ We had a chance to visit the monument in April 2012 for an on the spot study that proved to be rewarding as it provided fresh insights into several issues.

When Cunningham visited the place the temple was in a very bad state of preservation rather in a decaying condition, which continued till the time of Vogel. The latter scholar has observed with lament the collapse of the porch in front of the temple since the time of Cunningham's visit and extensive damage done to it in the three decades that elapsed between the two visits.¹⁰ The temple

is now preserved by Archaeological Survey of India. As noted by early writers no inscription or any other evidence has come to light from the site that may throw some light on the date of the temple or identity of its builder. Even the name of the village provides no clue in this direction. Yet the extensive ruins at the site especially that of another brick temple adjacent to the one under discussion, indicate that the place must have been important and flourishing at one time. Stylistically, the temple has been rightly assigned to the mature Gupta period in middle of the fifth century CE. Most notable feature of the temple is its beautiful carved bricks and a large number of niches on the walls that were adorned with exquisite terracotta panels depicting scenes from Indian mythology, decorative motifs in variety of design and forms, animal figures, combat scenes, *mithuna* figures and scenes from the epic stories of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Unfortunately, most of these panels are either badly damaged or have simply vanished both due to the falling bricks because of decay and as the act of vandals. Some of them have found their way in various museums also and have been published from time to time.

We examined the existing panels on the walls of the temple and in the niches afresh. Most of them were earlier published by J.Ph. Vogel,¹¹ R.C. Singh,¹² M. Zaheer,¹³ Pratapaditya Pal,¹⁴ P. Banerjee¹⁵ and J.C. Harle.¹⁶ Two panels attracted our attention and are relevant to the present discussion. The first is located in the niche on the top of the north-western recess of the western wall in the eighth row of panels. It depicts a lady slightly bent forward, clad in *sārī* the folds of which are artistically depicted with incised lines clinging to her body. She is shown without any jewellery, carrying a vessel with offering of alms standing in front of a cottage. The doorframe with a projection above with a semi-circular *caitya*-window like top is depicted in the background. A pigeon is shown seated on the projection above the door of the cottage. The head of the lady is unfortunately damaged and lost. A tall man in a hermit's dress with right arm in front of his abdomen and the left, which is broken, extended towards the lady, is shown standing in front of her. He is wearing a *dhotī* above the knees tied with a decorative clasp in the middle and a richly decorated upper garment with its folds going above his left shoulder and under the right arm. He seems to be carrying a bag like object on his back. Though his head is completely damaged and missing, his posture indicates as if he is hesitant to move forward. Mohammad Zaheer described the panel as "Female figure

offering bowl to male figure” though he doubtfully said that “one could hazard a guess that it may represent Rāvaṇa coming to Sītā’s hut”.¹⁷ The correct identification was later given by P. Banerjee.¹⁸ The scene is clearly that of

Rāvaṇa in the disguise of a hermit begging for alms from Sītā when Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa had gone after Mārīca in the guise of a golden deer (Fig.1). Here it is interesting to note that a broken terracotta panel assignable to c. 5th



Fig.1

century CE from Pawāyā (ancient Padmāvati) and now preserved in the

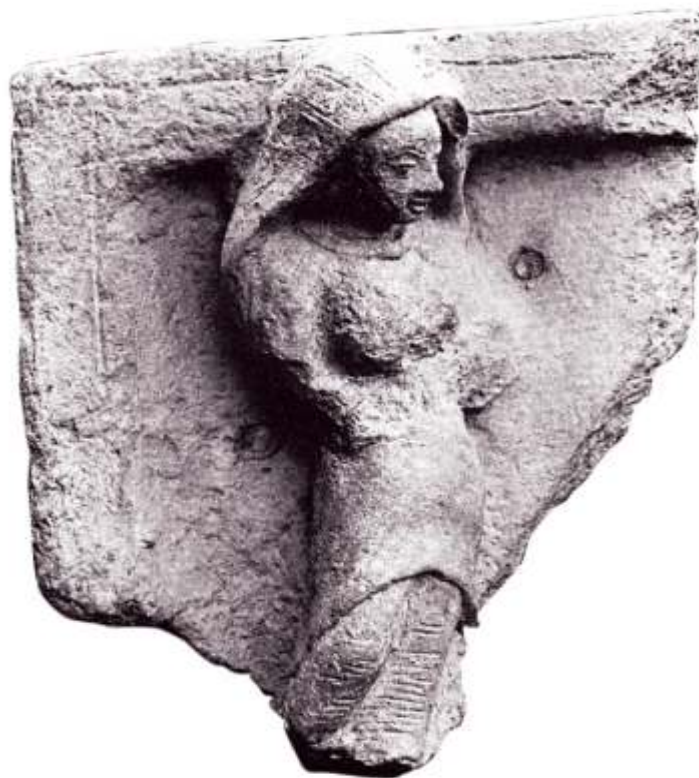


Fig.2

Archaeological Museum, Gujari Mahal, Gwalior has been published by Rekha Morris.¹⁹ The extant part has the image of a lady wearing a *sārī* with her head covered and slightly bent forward in a graceful manner. She is not wearing any jewellery except for a necklace. Both her hands are in front, unfortunately broken, in the posture of holding something. Her right leg is slightly bent and the left leg is straight as if she is stepping out of some place. Morris has simply described it as “lady walking”²⁰ (Fig.2). Some faint traces of a doorway may be noticed in the

background. We are inclined to identify the figure in the panel as Sītā. The broken portion probably had the figure of Rāvaṇa standing in front.

Another badly mutilated but very interesting panel in a similar niche at Bhitargaon, which has so far escaped the notice of scholars, has attracted our attention. It is located in the third row of panels on the northern wall in the north-eastern recess. The panel depicts a sturdy male standing with right leg bent forward and left leg straight. His body is bent forward from waist upward as in the posture of applying force. In his front is the figure of a female with legs crossed, right hand hanging downwards and left hand is broken. She is shown wearing a beautiful wreath of flowers (*veṇī*) in

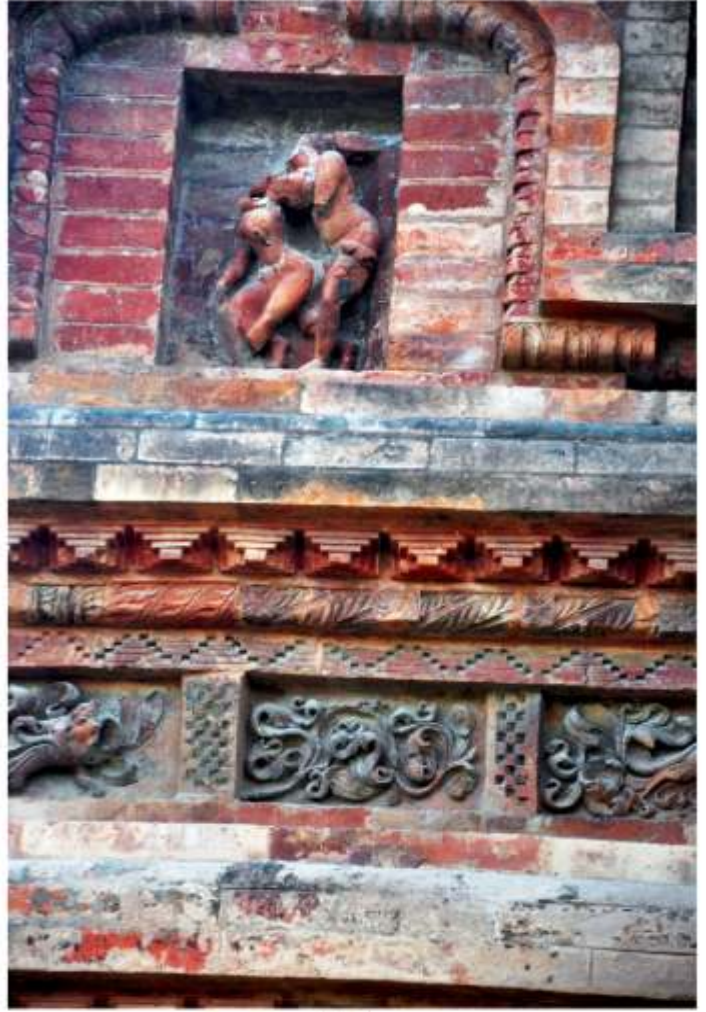


Fig.3

her hair on the top though her garments look dishevelled. Her head is bent backward with the force of her hair being pulled by the right hand of the male. The left hand of the male is broken and so is his head (Fig.3). M. Zaheer, who is the only scholar to have published it so far, mistook it to be an image of a *mithuna* couple and described it as such, though he noted the unusual style of the male's *dhotī* as also the distinctive style of the lady's hair.²¹ He failed to notice that the figures are not that of an amorous couple. They clearly show the brutal force being applied on the female by the sturdy male figure. The scene instantly reminds us of the forcible abduction of Sītā by Rāvaṇa and exactly fits the description given in the *Rāmāyaṇa* in the following verse:

Vāmena Sītām padmākṣīm mūrdhjeṣu kareṇa saḥ /
*Ūrvostu dakṣiṇenaiva pariagrāha pāṇinā //*²²

'He caught the head of the lotus eyed Sītā from her hair with his left hand and lifted her by putting his right hand under both her thighs'.

This is exactly what is shown in the panel with a small exception that Rāvaṇa is shown pulling her with the right hand and putting the force of his right leg from behind her thighs instead of his hand. Such minor changes can easily be explained as the artist's perception of the scene but the identity of the images in the panel and the scene portrayed here is beyond doubt.

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