

## Sculptural Representations of Bhīma In Hampi-Vijayanagara

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The Vijayanagara state was established in the mid-fourteenth century in the lower Deccan, with Vijayanagara City, the present-day Hampi, as its capital. From Vijayanagara City the monarchs of this polity ruled till CE 1565 over an empire that extended over much of modern-day Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh and almost the whole of Tamil Nadu. Thereafter, following the disastrous defeat of the Vijayanagara forces in 1565, the capital shifted further south, the empire weakened and gradually many of the provincial governors (or Nāyakas) broke away, establishing independent kingdoms in both the Tamil and Kannada speaking areas. There is a lot of continuity as well as further evolution when one compares Nāyaka art and architecture with that of imperial Vijayanagara.

Nowadays, Hampi is a village situated on the southern bank of the Tungabhadra River in the Hospet *tāluka* of Bellary district, Karnataka. The remains of the erstwhile city of Vijayanagara are spread over an extensive area of about twenty-five square kilometres from the village of Hampi in the north to Kamalapuram in the south. The outer lines of its fortifications and the suburban areas, however, include a much larger area. In its hey-day, Vijayanagara was a large and very prosperous city. "The City of Bidjanagar [Vijayanagara] is such that the pupil of the eye has never seen a place like, and the ear of intelligence has never been informed that there existed anything to equal it in the world", wrote Abdur Razzāk, the envoy from Herat who visited the Vijayanagara court in 1443. Besides the Persian Abdur Razzāk, other foreign travellers have left glowing accounts of the splendours of Vijayanagara. These include the Italian Nicolo Conti in the early fifteenth century and his compatriot Varthema in the beginning of the sixteenth, as well as the Portuguese visitors such as Domingo Paes and Fernão Nuniz of the sixteenth century.

To facilitate documentation and for a convenient differentiation between zones in this vast site, the entire area has been divided into four functional zones: the 'sacred centre', the 'intermediate irrigated valley', the 'urban core' and the 'suburban centres'. The 'sacred centre' is to the south of the Tungabhadra. Here, in the confined areas of flat land or at the summits of rocky outcrops, are located the largest temple complexes of the city, numerous smaller temples and shrines, sculptures and

inscriptions. To the south of this is an 'irrigated valley'. The paucity of buildings and potsherds here indicate that this was always an agricultural zone. The 'urban core' occupies a series of hills, ridges and valleys to the south of the irrigated valley. The greatest concentration of population was once located here, as is revealed by the traces of residences, tanks, wells, roads, stairways, pottery and also the remains of many small shrines and larger temples. This zone is surrounded by a complete circuit of fortification walls, approximately oval-shaped, more than four kilometres along its southwest-northeast axis, broken only by well-defended gateways. In the southwest end of the 'urban core' is the 'royal centre', which had its own enclosure walls, only parts of which survive, and gateways. Beyond the 'urban core' further south and west were laid out the great residential suburbs.

The extant monuments at Hampi-Vijayanagara consist mainly of religious, courtly and military buildings. As far as religious architecture is concerned, there are the remains of numerous Hindu temples as well as of a few Jaina temples and Muslim mosques, tombs and gravestones. Hindu temples include some large and elaborate ones, such as the Virūpākṣa, Rāmacandra and Viṭṭhala temples, as well as smaller temples and even tiny shrines.

The city was fortified by circuits of defensive walls. According to Abdur Razzāk there were seven circles of fortifications, one within the other, but Varthema describes only three. The only more or less intact circuit wall is the one around the 'urban core'; which rises to a height of about six metres. The fortifications are interrupted by substantial gateways that provided the city with security. Gateways were defended by barbicans which created enclosures with high stone-faced walls. The entrances to these enclosures are usually unaligned with the gateways, making it necessary for one or more turns to be taken before passing through them. Within the gateways or the enclosures there are often small shrines or images of deities such as Hanumān or Gaṇeśa.

A vast quantity of sculpture was produced at Vijayanagara and a substantial amount is still extant. Of the materials employed, the local granite was undoubtedly the most commonly used. The majority of the sculptures in granite were roughly, sometimes even crudely, executed. This, however, was not important as the sculptures and reliefs were generally covered with a thin layer of plaster, enabling the artists to conceal the unevenness of the stone and to improve on detail. Finally, they were painted in lively colours. Sculptures are found both in natural settings and in architectural settings. Among the former are the carvings on boulders and stone slabs as well as monolithic sculptures. Architectural settings include balustrades, temple walls, ceilings, parapets, towers and above all, columns and basement mouldings. The imagination of the sculptors was unrivalled. Vijayanagara sculpture is full of vigour and expression. New themes, patterns and iconographic formulas appeared at Hampi-Vijayanagara. New icons were created and themes of everyday life were also given prominence.

Among the epic and purāṇic stories that are found among the sculptures at Hampi-Vijayanagara, undoubtedly, the *Rāmāyaṇa* was the most popular. This is not surprising for places in and around Hampi-Vijayanagara are and have been venerated as sacred spots hallowed by Rāma's presence. Kiṣkiṇḍhā, the kingdom of the *vānaras* (monkeys), is believed to be situated across the river to the north-west of Hampi. The episodes related in the Kiṣkiṇḍhā section of the epic are believed to have occurred in and around Hampi. From the early fifteenth century, the Vijayanagara rulers patronised the cult of Rāma and within the 'royal centre' of the city in the early fifteenth century a splendid temple to god Rāmacandra was erected. A deliberate homology seems to have been drawn at Vijayanagara between Rāma, the ideal, universal monarch, and the earthly king ruling from this capital city. An inscription of the third king of Vijayanagara, Harihara II (1378-1404), dated 1379 CE, even draws a parallel between Ayodhya and Vijayanagara. It states "in the same city (Vijaya) did Harihara dwell, as in former times Rāma dwelt in the midst of the city of Ayodhya".<sup>1</sup>

At Hampi-Vijayanagara there are three sets of carvings of the entire *Rāmāyaṇa*. Two of these are in the Rāmacandra temple. The first appears on the inner face of the exterior wall, between the north and east gateways. The second is on the *raṅgamaṇḍapa*, or the enclosed pillared hall, of the principal shrine. The third is on the *gopura* of a Vaiṣṇava temple to the north-east of the Viṭṭhala temple complex. There are also two renderings in sculpture of the *Uttara Rāmāyaṇa*, the seventh and additional book of this epic, which deals with the exploits of Lava and Kuśa, the sons of Rāma. The first of these are found carved on two tiers on the exterior wall of the subsidiary shrine within the Rāmacandra temple complex. The second occurs in the front, very elaborate, *maṇḍapa* of the Viṭṭhala temple, on slabs set below the ceiling of the north aisle of this magnificent hall.

At Hampi-Vijayanagara, in contrast to the great importance given to the *Rāmāyaṇa* in sculpture, the sculptural renderings of the *Mahābhārata* seldom feature. There are no lengthy or detailed sculptural carvings of the *Mahābhārata*. Among the heroes of this epic, only Bhīma makes an appearance among the vast repertoire of sculptural themes that we find at Hampi-Vijayanagara. It is also interesting to note that of the well-known and classical stories of the *Mahābhārata* relating to the hero Bhīma, only two are portrayed at the site and these sculptures are associated with two gateways of the city.

Among these few examples of sculptures of Bhīma that are extant at the site, the best are in the so-called 'Bhīma's Gate' (Fig.1), a gateway in the circuit of walls around the 'royal centre', where there are two vividly carved panels both of which show the hero Bhīma killing Duhśāsana by tearing him open. In fulfilment of the vow that she had made when Duhśāsana had publicly humiliated her in the Kaurava court by trying to disrobe her, Draupadī is seen tying up her hair after dipping it in her tormentor's blood. These two panels (Fig.2) are set into a wall in the fairly large



Fig.1 : Bhīma's Gate

inner area of the gateway, between the two doorways of this once well-fortified gate. The two panels perhaps represent two distinct moments in this episode: in the lower panel Draupadī appears to have just tied her hair into a large bun (Fig.3); while in the upper she is probably putting the finishing touches to the bun or fixing some item of jewellery into it (Fig.4). In both the panels, Bhīma holds Duhśāsana, whom he is killing, on his lap.

Also within this gate is a large relief on a stone slab of Bhīma in a striding pose, holding the *gadā*, his characteristic weapon, in one hand and a flower in the other (Fig.5). For a long time I had wondered why Bhīma is shown holding a flower in this relief, for that is not how this hero is normally depicted. It has now come to my attention that this relief represents the Saugandhika episode of the Vanaparvan of the epic, in which Draupadī expressed her wish to get more of these wonderful smelling flowers one of which the wind had carried near her. Bhīma set out and entered the garden of Kubera to get them for her. He killed many watchmen who guarded the pond where they grow. Strangely, Kubera himself was not offended. It turned out later that Bhīma's act released him of a curse. The flower is referred to as Saugandhika, namely the one that smells good. This is not a theme that is popular in sculpture, but it is known in dramatic performances, for example in Kathakalī dances.<sup>2</sup>



Fig.2 : Bhīma killing Duhśāsana and Draupadi tying up her hair, Bhīma's Gate



Fig.3 : The lower sculpted slab, Bhīma's Gate



Fig.4 : The upper sculpted slab, Bhīma's Gate

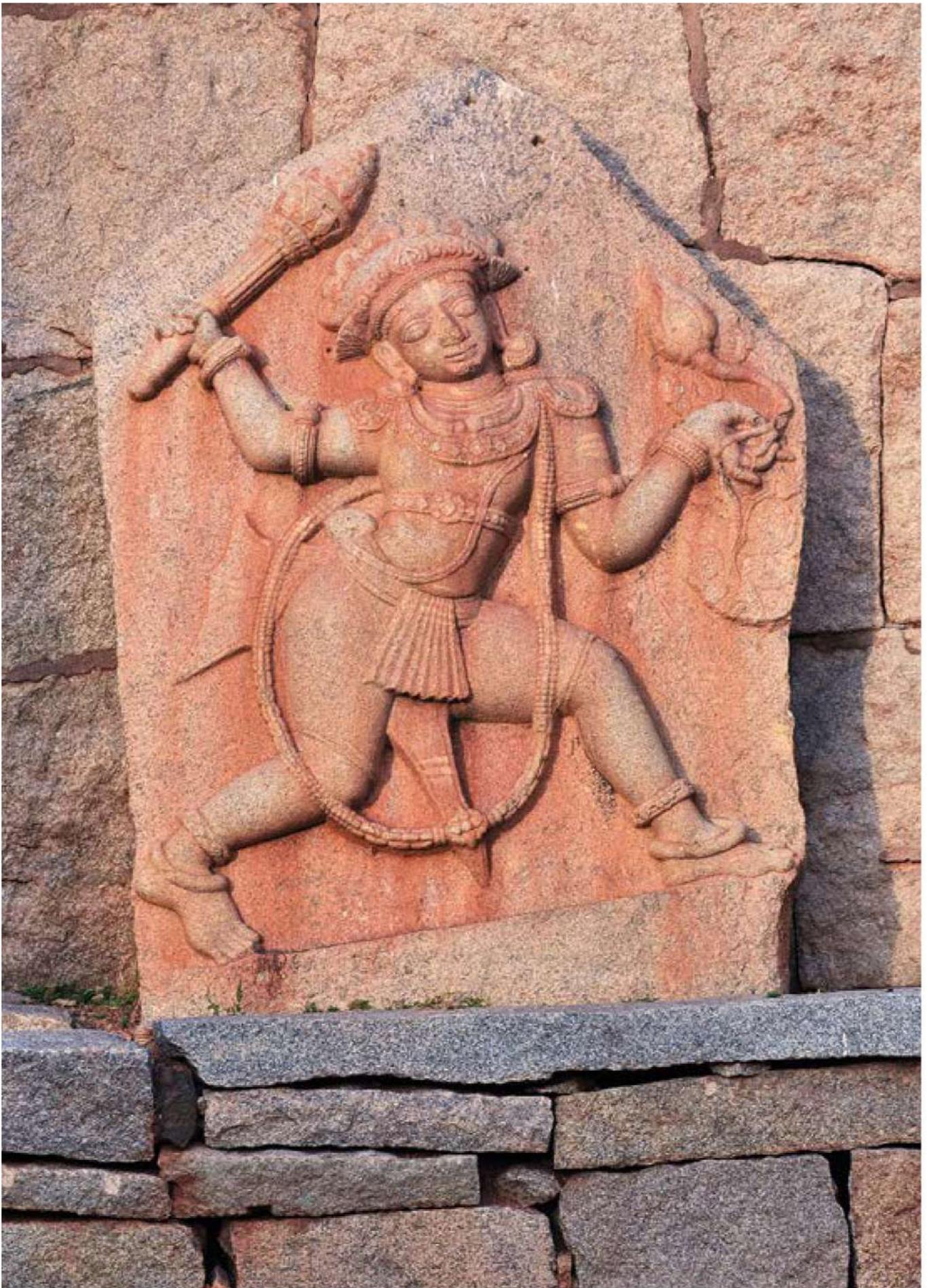


Fig.5 : Bhīma bringing the Saugandhika flower, Bhīma's Gate

A fairly similar, though unfinished, relief of Bhīma is found on a large boulder that is in front of a major gateway in the circuit of walls around the 'urban core' of the city (Fig.6). This image has only been roughly cut on the boulder; when compared with the one on the stone slab in the so-called 'Bhīma's Gate', it is clearly evident that this carving of Bhīma on the boulder was never completed.

What is interesting is that all these sculptural representations of episodes from the classical *Mahābhārata* tradition in which Bhīma plays a central role are associated with gateways. Probably, given his extraordinary strength and prowess in battle, Bhīma's blessing and protection was invoked in providing security to the city and, therefore, his images occur in or near two gateways of the city.

To the best of my knowledge the above-mentioned themes of Bhīma do not appear in Vijayanagara period monuments outside of the capital city, nor are they found in the sculptural themes of the Nāyaka period. Besides Bhīma, the other *Mahābhārata* hero who is seen in Vijayanagara sculpture is Arjuna; however there is no sculpture or relief at Hampi-Vijayanagara that can definitively be identified as that of Arjuna. In other Vijayanagara period sites, occasionally Arjuna winning the hand of Draupadī by shooting the Matsya-*yantra* is found in sculpture, for example on a pillar in the front open *maṇḍapa* of the Chiṅtala Venkaṭramaṇṇa temple at Tadpatri. More commonly, the sculptural renderings of the Kirātārjunīya story is found at a few sites of the Vijayanagara period, though not at Hampi-Vijayanagara. In most of them (e.g. on the outer wall of the Mallikārjuna temple at Srisailam of the fourteenth-fifteenth centuries, on the plinth mouldings of the Vidyāśaṅkara temple at Sringeri and the Jalakaṅtheśvara temple at Vellore, both of the sixteenth century), the story is spread over a two, three or more sculpted panels, 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 recognised the *kirāta* and his wife as these divinities in disguise, and then receiving from Śiva the boon of the Pāśupata weapon. More extensive sculpted series of the Kirātārjunīya are found in the fifteenth century Śiva temple at Penugonda and the sixteenth century Vīrabhadra temple at Lepakshi; in both cases they occur on wall surfaces.

If, besides the ones mentioned earlier, there are no other renderings in Vijayanagara sculpture of Bhīma derived from the classical *Mahābhārata*, there is a story from a local version of the *Mahābhārata* that makes its appearance in sculptures both at Hampi-Vijayanagara and at other contemporary sites, namely, that of the contest between Bhīma and Puruṣamṛga. There are only five renderings of this theme at Hampi-Vijayanagara; all of them are found in temples. This theme, though not very prominent at Hampi-Vijayanagara, was to make its presence felt in Vijayanagara and Nāyaka period monuments elsewhere. These sculptural reliefs at Hampi-Vijayanagara had intrigued me for a long time. What I had first noted in them was a man with a raised *gadā* or mace in one hand, apparently running away from a *liṅga*. Five such



Fig.6: Unfinished relief of Bhīma on a boulder

reliefs are extant in Hampi: the first is on a plinth moulding of the sub-shrine in the Rāmacandra temple of the early fifteenth century (Fig.7); the second is on two facets of a pillar in the detached *maṇḍapa* of the Prasanna Virūpākṣa temple (Fig.8), which is popularly known as the 'Underground Temple'; this *maṇḍapa* is probably of the early sixteenth century; the third, fourth and fifth appear on the exterior walls of the enclosed *maṇḍapa* and the *vimāna* of the great Virūpākṣa temple; possibly dating from the late fifteenth or early sixteenth centuries. In the Virūpākṣa temple, one relief is on the north external wall of the *vimāna* (Fig.9), the next on the east exterior wall of the enclosed *maṇḍapa* (Fig.10) and the last on the south external wall of the same pillared hall. In all these reliefs, behind the *liṅga* is seen a composite being, half man and half lion, who is generally shown with an *ārati* in one hand and a bell in the other. For a long time I did not realise that the two figures form one narrative. A reason for not connecting the two is that the composite being also occurs by himself in some monuments at Hampi-Vijayanagara. Also, in the examples from the Virūpākṣa temple the two figures are separated by a pilaster and they occur on walls filled with other reliefs; in the Prasanna Virūpākṣa temple the two are on adjacent facets of the pillar and not on the same one, while the relief in the Rāmacandra temple complex is so small that it is not easily noticeable.<sup>3</sup>



Fig.7 : Bhīma and Puruṣamṛga, Rāmacandra temple

A few years ago, my colleague, Anna L. Dallapiccola, came across a narrative that explained these reliefs. It is a story found in the *Kannaḍa Bhārata* by Kumāravayāsa, a Kannada version of the *Mahābhārata*, written in the fifteenth century. Not only is this story absent from the original *Mahābhārata*, but it is also not present in all the extant copies of the *Kannaḍa Bhārata*. This hints at this episode being a later interpolation. Originally it may have been a local, oral tradition prevalent in various parts of South India. According to the story, the composite being is Puruṣamṛga, a great devotee of Śiva, who lived on Mount Kailāsa. Bhīma was entrusted with the



Fig.8 : Bhīma and Puruṣamṛga, Prasanna Virūpākṣa temple

mission of inviting Puruṣamṛga to the consecration ceremony of Yudhishtira. On his way to Kailāśa, Bhīma encountered Hanumān who presented him with three of his hairs which had magical properties, namely, each hair if dropped would produce a million *liṅgas*. Puruṣamṛga accepted the invitation on the condition that he would closely follow Bhīma and kill him if he caught him on the way. Bhīma accepted the challenge and began running, with Puruṣamṛga hot on his heels. Twice, when Bhīma was on the verge of being caught, he dropped a hair of Hanumān and Puruṣamṛga stopped to worship the million *liṅgas* that had been created. Finally, just



Fig.9 : Bhīma and Puruṣamṛga, Vimāna, Virūpākṣa temple

as the two were near the great sacrificial hall, Bhīma, who was exhausted, stumbled and fell across the threshold; at that point Puruṣamṛga grabbed him by the waist and claimed that he had won. However, Lord Kṛṣṇa, who was present in the hall, decided that Bhīma had not been defeated because the most important part of his body, namely the head, was already in the hall when Puruṣamṛga caught him. In most of the representations at Hampi-Vijayanagara, Bhīma holds a *gadā* in one hand, while his other hand is in the pose of throwing something down. However, in the one on the south side of the Virūpākṣa temple's enclosed *mandapa*, his hand is not outstretched, but at his side, the man-lion is shown worshipping a *liṅga*. Thus, the reliefs of this story at Hampi-Vijayanagara depict the moment in the narrative when Bhīma threw down one of Hanumān's hairs, as evident, in all but one instance, by his outstretched or raised hand, resulting in the creation of one million *liṅgas* (symbolically represented in these reliefs by one *liṅga*) which Puruṣamṛga stopped to worship usually by waving an *ārati* and ringing a bell, though in the case of the one on the east face of the enclosed *mandapa* of the Virūpākṣa temple, the man-lion is doing his worship by placing flowers on the *liṅga* (Fig.10).<sup>4</sup>

Outside of Hampi, this theme is found on the wall that encloses the Mallikārjuna temple at Srisailam in Andhra Pradesh. Since this wall has, on stylistic grounds, been dated to the late fourteenth century or early fifteenth century, this relief of Bhīma and Puruṣamṛga is one of the earliest ones of the Vijayanagara period. In this depiction, the chase and the dramatic throwing down by Bhīma of a hair of



Fig.10 : Bhīma and Puruṣamṛga, Maṇḍapa, Virūpākṣa temple

Hanumān, and the creation of the *liṅga(s)*, which Puruṣamṛga stopped to worship, is very clearly delineated.

Besides Hampi and Srisailam, reliefs of this story are occasionally found in other monuments of the Vijayanagara period in Karnataka or Andhra. In all such reliefs, which are, on the whole, very few in number, in Karnataka and Andhra it is the same moment in the story that is depicted, namely, the throwing down of a magical hair by Bhīma and the worship of the *liṅga(s)* by Puruṣamṛga. As compared to the few Vijayanagara, and even post-Vijayanagara, representations of this story in Karnataka and Andhra, Bhīma and Puruṣamṛga appear quite frequently in the Nāyaka period temples of Tamil Nadu, particularly in southern Tamil Nadu. Here they are sometimes found as reliefs carved on pillars, usually on two facets of the same pillar block although occasionally they appear on the same facet. More frequently in Tamil Nadu, Bhīma and Puruṣamṛga appear as a pair of large, almost three-dimensional, figure sculptures on composite pillars. Sometimes both are carved on the same pillar, at other times on adjacent pillars or on pillars that face each other. Unlike in the Karnataka and Andhra examples of the Bhīma-Puruṣamṛga reliefs, in the Tamil depictions the *liṅga* is generally absent; instead both Bhīma and Puruṣamṛga brandish *gadās*. Thus, while in Hampi and other sites in Karnataka and Andhra it is the moment when Bhīma throws down a magical hair, thereby creating a million *liṅgas* which Puruṣamṛga stopped to worship, that is captured in the reliefs, in Nāyaka sculptures of Tamil Nadu it is usually the race between the two that is highlighted.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, of the depictions of Bhīma in sculptures at Hampi-Vijayanagara, and also elsewhere in the Vijayanagara Empire and in the territories of its successor states, stories of this hero from the classical version of the *Mahābhārata* are extremely rare.

However, the story of the race between Bhīma and Puruṣamṛga, from a local version of the *Mahābhārata*, was more prevalent. In different places the moment in the story that is captured in sculpture vary: at Hampi-Vijayanagara and in the Vijayanagara and post-Vijayanagara representations in Andhra and Karnataka, it is the dramatic moment when Bhīma throws down one of the hairs gifted to him by Hanumān forcing Puruṣamṛga to pause in order to worship the *liṅga(s)* that are formed that is highlighted, while in Nāyaka Tamil Nadu it is the chase that is portrayed. But, in all of them it is undoubtedly the same story.

The question can be posed as to why of the two great epics, the *Rāmāyaṇa* was more widely depicted than the *Mahābhārata* at Hampi-Vijayanagara and also in Vijayanagara period sculpture elsewhere. The answer to this possibly lies in the fact that the *Rāmāyaṇa* has a much clearer and simpler story line, with just one main hero and one principal villain; hence it was much easier to depict in sculpture. On the other hand, the *Mahābhārata* is a complex story with not only many sub-stories and sub-plots, but also with a number of heroes and villains. Sculpted narratives have to be easily 'read'. This is obviously much easier in the case of the *Rāmāyaṇa* than the *Mahābhārata*. Moreover, much of Vijayanagara sculpture is not detailed and intricate, as compared to early Chālukyan, Hoysaḷa or Choḷa sculpture, and, hence, less complicated themes were generally favoured.

The further question that needs to be addressed is why, but for a few minor exceptions, the most popular representations of the *Mahābhārata* in Vijayanagara-Nāyaka art are those of the Kirātārjunīya from the classical text and of the Bhīma and Puruṣamṛga story from the local version. The reason probably lies in the fact that both are action-packed stories, in which even one relief (in the case of the competition between Bhīma and Puruṣamṛga) or two or three reliefs (of the Kirātārjunīya incident) can easily capture the whole story.

The fact that the most often depicted of the *Mahābhārata* incidents in Vijayanagara-Nāyaka art, especially in sculpture, is the story of Bhīma and Puruṣamṛga can also be explained by the fact that during this period the sculptors concentrated more on carvings on temple pillars rather than on decorating the walls or plinths of temples. This theme lent itself very well to pillar sculpture, whether reliefs on the square blocks of the pillar or three-dimensional figures that emerge from the shaft of a column. Therefore, it was this local addition to the great epic that appealed to the sculptors and their patrons of the Vijayanagara and Nāyaka times more than the numerous, more complex, plots and sub-plots of the *Mahābhārata*.

## Endnotes

1. Cited by B.A. Saletore, *Social and Political Life in the Vijayanagara Empire (A.D. 1346 to 1646)*, 2 Vols., Madras, B.G. Paul and Company, 1934, Vol.I, p.121.
2. This information was provided to me by Prof. Heidrun Brückner (via email, dated November 25, 2014).
3. In an earlier publication I have mentioned that I was not aware of what these reliefs represented: see Dallapiccola, Anna and Verghese, Anila, *Sculpture at Vijayanagara: Iconography and Style*, Manohar Publishers and the American Institute of Indian Studies, New Delhi, 1998, p.122.
4. For more details see Dallapiccola A.L. and Verghese, Anila, "Narrative Reliefs of Bhima and Purushamriga in Vijayanagara Sculpture", *Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol.18, 2002, pp.73-76.
5. This paper is based on extensive field-work; the focus of which from 1985 to 2001 was on the site of Hampi-Vijayanagara and which, since 2002, has been on the Vijayanagara and post-Vijayanagara sites in southern India.

Photo Courtesy: Figs.1-5, 7-10 - C. Ganesan; Fig.6 - Author