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Decoding the Rāmāyaṇa Panel of Ellora Cave 16 in the Context of the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa

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Abstract—**Indian sculpture represents one of the most significant artistic traditions of the Indian subcontinent, through which religious narratives, philosophical ideas, cultural values, and literary traditions have been transformed into visual forms. Within this rich sculptural heritage, the Kailāsa temple at Ellora Cave 16 occupies a distinctive position, particularly for its extensive representation of themes derived from the Rāmāyaṇa. The Rāmāyaṇa sculptures of the Kailāsa temple provide an important visual interpretation of the epic narrative and demonstrate how a complex literary tradition was translated into a spatial and symbolic sculptural programme.However, the identification and interpretation of individual Rāmāyaṇa scenes at Ellora Cave 16 remain challenging, as the sculptural sequence does not always correspond clearly to a linear narrative. The absence of identifying inscriptions and the condensed visual composition create difficulties in establishing the exact identity of figures and episodes. Therefore, a systematic comparison with the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa is required to decode the selected figures and understand their narrative sequence. The present study attempts to decode eight principal figures and narrative scenes of the Rāmāyaṇa panel by examining their iconographic features, gestures, attributes, spatial arrangement, and compositional relationships, and by comparing them with the corresponding episodes in the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa. Particular attention is given to the direction of visual reading and to the manner in which individual figures and scenes are arranged to communicate a continuous narrative within the architectural space of the temple. The study also distinguishes between scenes having direct textual parallels in the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa and elements that may belong to the wider and evolving Rāmāyaṇa tradition. The study thus highlights the close relationship between literary tradition and visual representation and contributes to a broader understanding of how the Rāmāyaṇa was interpreted and transmitted through the medium of medieval Indian temple sculpture at Ellora.**

Index Terms—**Ellora, Cave 16, Kailāsa Temple, Rāmāyaṇa, Vālmīki, sculpture, iconography.**

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki is one of the foundational narratives of Indian civilization and has profoundly influenced literature, religion, art and architecture (Goldman et al., 1984–2017; Pollock, 1991). Its story of Rāma, Sītā, Lakṣmaṇa, Hanumān and the conflict with Rāvaṇa has been represented in numerous artistic traditions across India. Among these, the sculptural programme of the Kailāsa temple at Ellora occupies an important position because it transforms a long literary narrative into a sequence of visually recognizable episodes (Michell, 1988; Harle, 1994).

Ellora Cave 16, popularly known as the Kailāsa temple, belongs to the Brahmanical group of the Ellora caves and represents one of the most ambitious achievements of Indian rock-cut architecture (Michell, 1988; Dhaky, 1996). Its extensive sculptural programme includes representations from Hindu mythology and epic traditions. The Rāmāyaṇa reliefs form an important component of this visual programme and provide an opportunity to examine the relationship between Sanskrit literature and medieval Indian sculpture (Cousens, 1926; Harle, 1994).



Fig. 1

The present paper focuses on a selected Rāmāyaṇa sequence consisting of eight principal figures, each containing two, three or four narrative units. The scenes are examined in relation to the

Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, with attention to character identification, narrative order, direction of reading and textual correspondence.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study follows a textual and iconographic approach. Each sculptural scene is first identified on the basis of its figures, actions and composition and is then compared with the corresponding episode in the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa. References are given according to Kāṇḍa and Sarga, allowing the visual representation to be examined against the literary narrative.

Where an episode corresponds directly to Vālmīki's account, the identification is presented with greater certainty. Where a motif belongs to the broader Rāmāyaṇa tradition or represents an interpretive reading of the sculpture, this is indicated separately. This distinction is particularly important in the case of Hanumān's coiled-tail throne and the interpretation of the palace gateway.

III. RĀMA'S DEPARTURE FROM AYODHYĀ AND THE BEGINNING OF EXILE

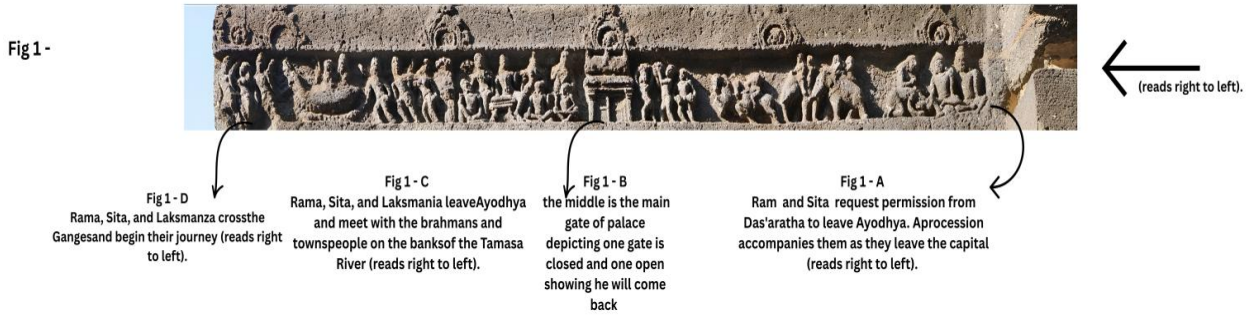


Fig. 1 Rāma's Departure from Ayodhyā and the Beginning of Exile

Fig. 1-A – Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa Leave Ayodhyā

The scene depicts Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa leaving Ayodhyā, accompanied by members of the royal household and citizens. The composition is read from right to left. The departure marks the beginning of Rāma's fourteen-year exile and the transition from royal life to life in the forest. The episode corresponds to Rāma's departure after accepting Daśaratha's command and his determination to uphold his father's promise. The citizens of Ayodhyā follow him because of their affection for him. (Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, Ayodhyākāṇḍa, Sargas 40 and 45)

Fig. 1-B – Palace Gateway

The central architectural element may be identified as the main gateway of the palace. One part of the gateway appears open while another is closed, creating a visual division between the royal space being left behind and the road toward exile. The open and closed gateway may be interpreted symbolically as representing Rāma's departure and his eventual return to Ayodhyā. However, this symbolism is not explicitly described by Vālmīki and should therefore be regarded

as an iconographic interpretation of the sculptural composition. (Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, Ayodhyākāṇḍa 40.1–3)

Fig. 1-C – Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa at the Tamasa River
The scene depicts Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa proceeding toward the Tamasa River, accompanied by Brahmins and citizens. The composition is read from right to left. The presence of the townspeople emphasizes their emotional attachment to Rāma and their reluctance to return to Ayodhyā. The Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa describes the citizens following Rāma and the party reaching the Tamasa River during the early stage of the exile. (Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, Ayodhyākāṇḍa, Sarga 45)

Fig. 1-D – Crossing the Ganges
The scene depicts Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa crossing the Ganges, and the composition is read from right to left. The river crossing represents their increasing separation from Ayodhyā and their movement deeper into the forest. The episode corresponds to Rāma's journey to Śṛṅgaverapura, where Guha assists him in crossing the Ganges. Reference: Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, Ayodhyākāṇḍa, Sargas 50 and 52.

IV. PAÑCAVAṬĪ AND THE CONFLICT WITH KHARA

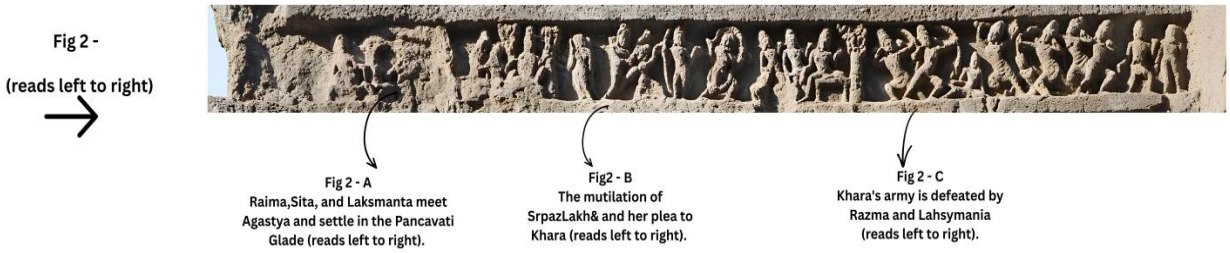


Fig. 2 – Pañcavaṭī and the Conflict with Khara

Fig. 2-A – Agastya and Pañcavaṭī
The scene depicts Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa meeting the sage Agastya and subsequently settling at Pañcavaṭī. The composition is read from left to right. The sage's presence marks the transition from their wandering through the forest to the establishment of a more permanent dwelling. Agastya directs Rāma toward Pañcavaṭī near the Godāvarī, where Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa establish their residence. Reference: Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, Araṇyakāṇḍa, Sargas 11–15.

Fig. 2-B – Śūrpaṇakhā and Khara
The scene depicts the mutilation of Śūrpaṇakhā and her subsequent appeal to Khara. The composition is read from left to right. After her encounter with Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, Śūrpaṇakhā is mutilated by Lakṣmaṇa and approaches Khara seeking revenge. The episode is directly narrated in the Araṇyakāṇḍa. Śūrpaṇakhā's complaint to Khara becomes the immediate cause of

the attack on Rāma and leads to the destruction of Khara's forces. Reference: Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, Araṇyakāṇḍa, Sargas 17–19.

Fig. 2-C – Defeat of Khara's Army
The scene represents Rāma's defeat of Khara's army, with the composition read from left to right. The martial grouping of the figures conveys the confrontation between Rāma and the Rākṣasa forces of Janasthāna. The Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa describes Rāma destroying the Rākṣasa army and subsequently killing Khara. The identification of this relief with the defeat of Khara's forces is also supported by the cataloguing of the Ellora Rāmāyaṇa reliefs. Reference: Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, Araṇyakāṇḍa, Sargas 23–30.

Fig. 3 – The Golden Deer and Abduction of Sītā

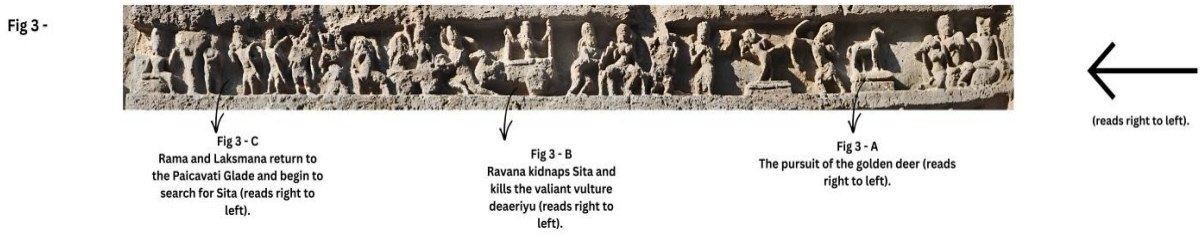


Fig. 3 – The Golden Deer and Abduction of Sītā

Fig. 3-A – The Golden Deer
The scene depicts Rāma pursuing the golden deer, and the composition is read from right to left. The extraordinary deer attracts Sītā's attention, leading Rāma to pursue it into the forest. The deer is actually the demon Mārīca, who assumes the form of a magnificent golden deer at Rāvaṇa's request. Rāma pursues and eventually kills him. Reference: Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, Araṇyakāṇḍa, Sargas 42–44.

Fig. 3-B – Rāvaṇa, Sītā and Jaṭāyu
The scene depicts Rāvaṇa abducting Sītā and Jaṭāyu attempting to rescue her, and the composition is read from right to left. Rāvaṇa carries Sītā away from the forest dwelling, while Jaṭāyu intervenes and fights to prevent her abduction. The episode is directly described in the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa. Jaṭāyu fights courageously but is ultimately mortally wounded by Rāvaṇa. Reference: Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, Araṇyakāṇḍa, Sargas 47–51.

Fig. 3-C – Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa Search for Sītā
The scene depicts Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa returning to the Pañcavaṭī area and beginning their search for Sītā. The composition is read from right to left. Rāma discovers Sītā's absence and searches the forest with Lakṣmaṇa. The brothers eventually encounter the dying Jaṭāyu, who informs Rāma that Rāvaṇa has abducted Sītā. Reference: Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, Araṇyakāṇḍa, Sargas 54–60.

V. SUGRĪVA, VĀLI AND THE RESTORATION OF KIṢKINDHĀ

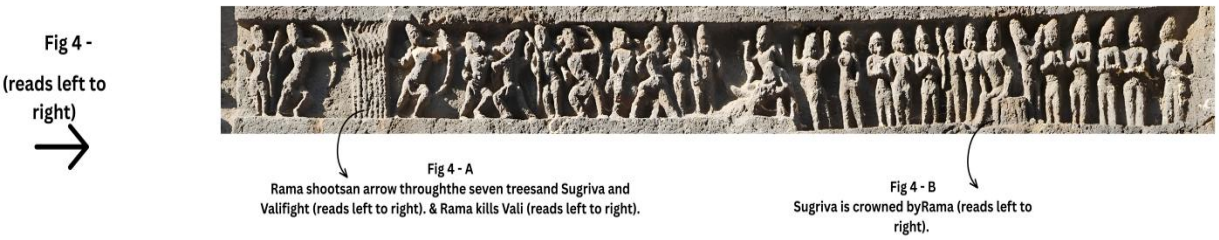


Fig. 4 – Sugrīva, Vāli and the Restoration of Kiṣkindhā

Fig. 4-A – The Seven Trees, Sugrīva–Vāli Combat and Death of Vāli
The scene combines Rāma's demonstration of his strength by shooting through the seven trees, the combat between Sugrīva and Vāli, and the death of Vāli. The composition is read from left to right. These episodes establish Rāma's alliance with Sugrīva and the restoration of Sugrīva's position in Kiṣkindhā. The Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa describes Rāma's demonstration of strength and his subsequent killing of Vāli during the second combat between the brothers. Reference: Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa, Sargas 11–17.

Fig. 4-B – Sugrīva's Coronation
The scene represents Sugrīva's restoration as king of Kiṣkindhā, and the composition is read from left to right. The episode marks the fulfilment of Rāma's promise to Sugrīva following Vāli's death. For textual accuracy, the scene should not be described as "Rāma crowns Sugrīva." Rāma facilitates Sugrīva's restoration but remains outside Kiṣkindhā because of his exile. Sugrīva becomes king and Aṅgada is appointed crown prince. Reference: Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa, Sargas 18 and 27.

VI. THE SEARCH FOR SĪTĀ AND HANUMĀN'S JOURNEY

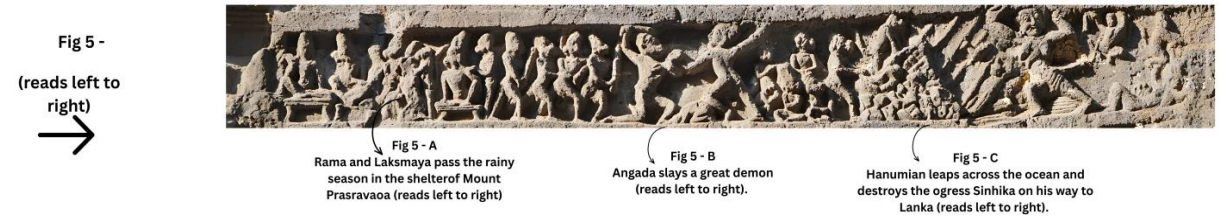


Fig. 5 – The Search for Sītā and Hanumān's Journey

Fig. 5-A – Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa at Mount Prasravaṇa
The scene depicts Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa spending the rainy season at Mount Prasravaṇa, and the composition is read from left to right. The rainy season delays the beginning of the search for Sītā and creates a temporary pause in the narrative. The Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa describes Rāma's

emotional condition during the rainy season and his expectation that Sugrīva will begin the search after the rains. Reference: Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa, Sargas 28–30.

Fig. 5-B – Aṅgada and a Demonic Figure
The scene depicts Aṅgada confronting a powerful demonic figure, and the composition is read from left to right. The episode may be connected with the activities of the southern search party led by Aṅgada. However, the identification of a specific "great demon" being slain by Aṅgada cannot be established with sufficient certainty from the Vālmīki text. It is therefore preferable to describe the figure cautiously as Aṅgada confronting a demonic figure. Reference: Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa, Sargas 41–53.

Fig. 5-C – Hanumān Crosses the Ocean
The scene depicts Hanumān's leap across the ocean and his encounter with Siṃhikā, and the composition is read from left to right. Hanumān begins his journey toward Laṅkā and encounters Siṃhikā, who captures his shadow. Hanumān defeats Siṃhikā and continues his journey toward Laṅkā. The episode is clearly described in the Sundarakāṇḍa. Reference: Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, Sundarakāṇḍa, Sarga 1.

VII. HANUMĀN IN LAṄKĀ

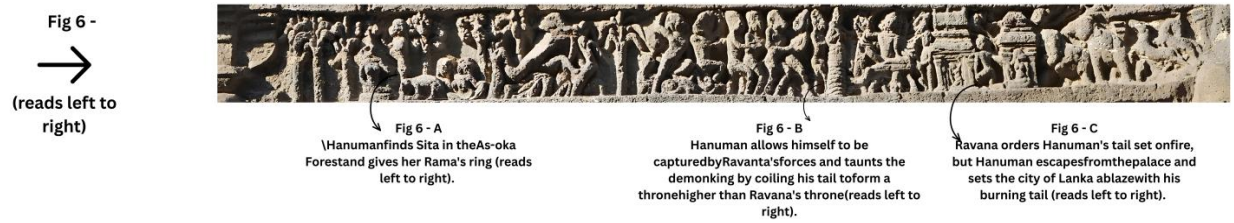


Fig. 6 – Hanumān in Laṅkā

Fig. 6-A – Hanumān Meets Sītā
The scene depicts Hanumān finding Sītā in the Aśoka grove and presenting Rāma's ring to her, and the composition is read from left to right. Hanumān identifies himself as Rāma's messenger and uses the ring as a sign of his authenticity. Sītā recognizes the ring and receives assurance that Rāma is searching for her. Reference: Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, Sundarakāṇḍa, Sargas 33–36.

Fig. 6-B – Hanumān Before Rāvaṇa
The scene depicts Hanumān being captured and brought before Rāvaṇa, and the composition is read from left to right. Hanumān deliberately creates an opportunity to enter Rāvaṇa's court and boldly communicates Rāma's message. The Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa describes Hanumān's appearance before Rāvaṇa and his fearless speech. However, the specific motif of Hanumān forming a throne from his coiled tail and sitting higher than Rāvaṇa is not found in Vālmīki's account and

should be treated as a later or broader Rāmāyaṇa tradition. Reference for the Vālmīki episode: Sundarakāṇḍa, Sargas 47–52.

Fig. 6-C – Burning of Laṅkā

The scene depicts Rāvaṇa ordering Hanumān's tail to be set on fire, followed by Hanumān's burning of Laṅkā. The composition is read from left to right. Hanumān transforms the punishment imposed upon him into an opportunity to attack the city. After escaping his captors, Hanumān moves through Laṅkā with his burning tail and sets buildings ablaze before returning toward Sītā. Reference: Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, Sundarakāṇḍa, Sargas 52–54.

VIII. THE BRIDGE AND THE WAR IN LAṄKĀ

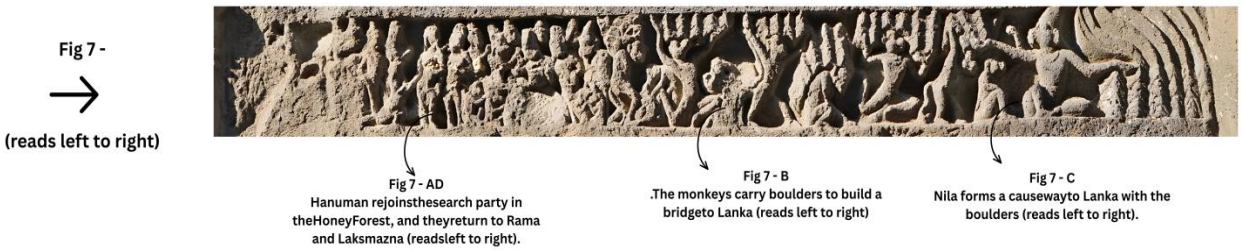


Fig. 7 – The Bridge and the War in Laṅkā

Fig. 7-A – Hanumān Returns with the News of Sītā

The scene represents Hanumān rejoining the southern search party after his successful mission to Laṅkā, and the composition is read from left to right. Hanumān reunites with Aṅgada, Jāmbavān and the other vānaras, after which they proceed toward Rāma to report the discovery of Sītā. The vānaras celebrate their success at Madhuvana before returning to Rāma. Hanumān then gives Rāma the account of his meeting with Sītā. Reference: Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa, Sargas 61–67.

Fig. 7-B – Vānaras Carry Stones and Boulders

The scene depicts the vānaras carrying stones, boulders and trees toward the ocean for the construction of the bridge to Laṅkā. The composition is read from left to right. The large number of figures emphasizes the collective effort required for the construction of the causeway. The Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa states that the vānaras bring trees, rocks and stones for the construction of the bridge. The work is organized under Nala's direction. Reference: Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, Yuddhakāṇḍa, Sargas 22–23.

Fig. 7-C – Nala Constructs the Causeway

The scene depicts Nala directing the construction of the causeway across the ocean, and the composition is read from left to right. The vānaras transport and place the materials while Nala undertakes the principal task of constructing the bridge.

The Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa specifically identifies Nala, the son of Viśvakarmā, as the builder of the bridge. This identification should be distinguished from Nīla, who appears later as a warrior in the battle against Prahasta. Reference: Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, Yuddhakāṇḍa, Sargas 22–23.

IX. THE VĀNARA ARMY AND THE WAR IN LAṄKĀ

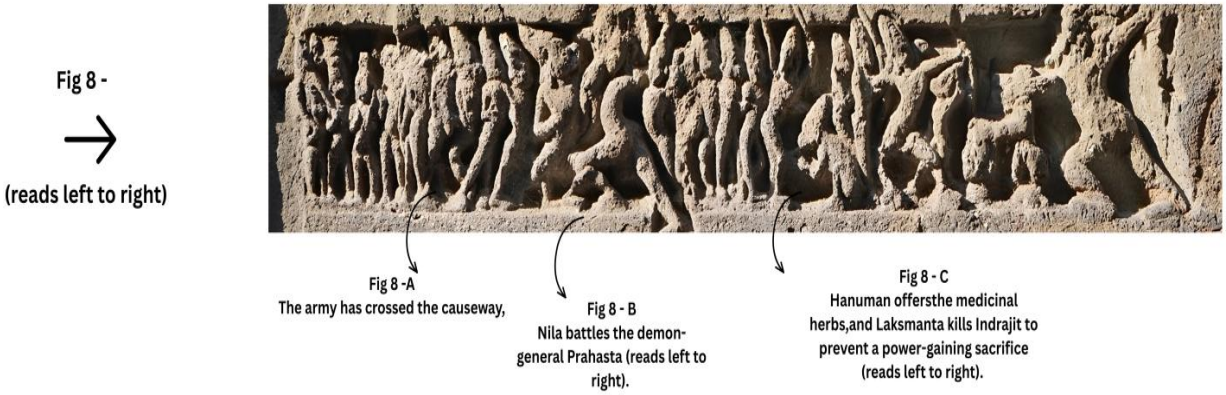


Fig. 8 – The Vānara Army and the War in Laṅkā

Fig. 8-A – The Army Crosses the Causeway
The scene depicts Rāma's vānara army crossing the causeway toward Laṅkā. The composition represents the continuation of the military expedition following completion of the bridge. The crossing transforms the ocean from a natural barrier into a route for Rāma's army. The episode corresponds to the Yuddhakāṇḍa, where the bridge is completed and the army crosses toward Laṅkā to begin the final campaign against Rāvaṇa. Reference: Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, Yuddhakāṇḍa, Sargas 22–26.

Fig. 8-B – Nīla Battles Prahasta
The scene depicts Nīla battling Prahasta, the chief commander of Rāvaṇa's army, and the composition is read from left to right. The confrontation represents one of the major engagements between the vānara and Rākṣasa forces. Nīla ultimately kills Prahasta in battle, thereby weakening the military leadership of Laṅkā. Reference: Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, Yuddhakāṇḍa, Sarga 46.

Fig. 8-C – Hanumān and the Medicinal Herbs; Lakṣmaṇa and Indrajit
The scene combines Hanumān's bringing of the medicinal herbs and Lakṣmaṇa's final battle with Indrajit, and the composition is read from left to right. Hanumān brings the medicinal herbs after Lakṣmaṇa is severely wounded, while the later portion of the scene relates to Indrajit's Nikumbhilā ritual and Lakṣmaṇa's subsequent battle with him. According to the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, Hanumān brings the mountain containing the medicinal herbs to restore the wounded warriors. Later, Lakṣmaṇa interrupts Indrajit's Nikumbhilā ritual and engages him in battle, ultimately killing him. Reference: Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, Yuddhakāṇḍa, Sargas 74–77 and 80–87.

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X. CONCLUSION

The Rāmāyaṇa panel of Ellora Cave 16 presents a condensed yet remarkably extensive visual narration of the epic. The eight figures examined in this study collectively cover the principal stages of Rāma's story: departure from Ayodhyā, forest exile, the abduction of Sītā, alliance with Sugrīva, Hanumān's search, the discovery of Sītā, the burning of Laṅkā, construction of the bridge and the war against Rāvaṇa's forces.

The comparison with the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa demonstrates that most of the principal identifications have clear textual parallels. At the same time, the sculpture should not be regarded as a literal illustration of every verse. The sculptor selected visually powerful episodes and compressed lengthy narrative passages into recognizable compositions. In several cases, one sculptural unit represents more than one event, while architectural elements and gestures provide additional narrative meaning.

The study also demonstrates the importance of distinguishing between textual evidence and iconographic interpretation. The identification of Nala as the bridge-builder and Nīla as the warrior who battles Prahasta is particularly important. Similarly, the coiled-tail throne of Hanumān should be recognized as a motif of the broader Rāmāyaṇa tradition rather than directly attributed to Vālmīki. Such distinctions strengthen the reliability of the interpretation.

The Ellora panel may therefore be understood as a visual re-narration of the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa. Through the selective arrangement of figures, gestures, architecture and dramatic actions, the sculptural programme transforms the Sanskrit epic into a spatial narrative accessible through visual observation. The panel consequently provides valuable evidence for understanding not only the continuity of the Rāmāyaṇa tradition but also the manner in which medieval Indian artists interpreted, condensed and transmitted epic literature through sacred art.

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