

Liminality, Court Culture or Octagonality? An Introduction to the Narrative Pillar Sculptures at the Modhera Sun Temple*

David Smith
(Lancaster University)

ORCID 0009-0002-2972-6668

DOI: 10.54103/consonanze.139.c177

Abstract

The Sun temple at Modhera (1025-1026 CE) has distinctive narrative relief sculpture on a section a little above eye-level on 8 pillars in the Closed Hall in front of the Sūrya shrine, and on 32 pillars in the Dance Hall which is between the temple tank and the main temple. The 320 sculptured panels on these octagonal pillars, not discussed in Lobo's study of the temple's iconographic programme, are varied in theme and treatment, and often problematic in content and meaning. Placed as they are on the worshipper's approach to Sūrya, the deity of the temple, might they reflect the liminal state of the worshipper, placed between the exterior world and the vision of the Sun god? The disjointed nature of the sculpture's references to the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, the fleeting presence of Sūrya in the Closed Hall, and of his son Revanta in the Dance Hall, along with frequent and insistent erotic scenes, in which naked Jain monks appear, all in the context of alternating battle and dancing, of communitas, flow, conflict and blindness, suggest a highly charged state that is different from the normal order of temples' horizontal wall friezes. This might reflect and allude to the liminal states that pertain to both halls. Alternatively, the sculptures may reflect the concerns and attitudes of the court of the presumed builder of the temple (Bhīma I, reigned 1022-1064), not least because of the dominant presence of his namesake, Bhīma, great warrior of the *Mahābhārata*. Or, the puzzling complexity might be merely the result of the pillars being eight-sided. Most of the pillars of the Closed Hall are examined in detail; in the Dance Hall, just one pillar, along with an analysis of themes, and explanation of some especially problematic panels.

* All the photos are published by gracious permission of the author, David Smith.

Keywords: Sun temple, Modhera, Sūrya, *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Mahābhārata*, Bhīma, Hanumān, Bhīma Rāja I, narrative sculpture, liminality, flow, blindness.

1. Introduction

The narrative sculptures on the pillars of the Sun temple at Modhera are remarkable for their variety of topics and treatments¹. This 11th century CE temple marks out stages of liminality for the worshipper in the clear line of access to its east-facing shrine of Sūrya. From the further and longer side of the temple tank (*kuṇḍa*) the worshipper descends the steep steps to the water, bathes, and then ascends the yet steeper steps on the west side, passes through the free-standing gateway structure (*torāṇa*) and into the Raṅga Maṇḍapa (Dance Hall, henceforward RM). The worshipper then passes amid the 32 pillars with their narrative friezes and into the Gūḍha Maṇḍapa (Closed Hall, henceforward GM) of the main temple with its 8 pillars with narrative friezes, and finally reaches the adjoining *garbha-grha* with the glorious image of the Sun god. The rays of the equinoctial rising sun are said to fall directly on Sūrya's east-facing *mūrti*, though no *mūrti* now, nor for an unknown number of centuries.

A drawing by Percy Brown recreates the temple as it once was, complete with the *sikhara*, the pyramidal roofs of the two halls, and the top of the gateway (*torāṇa*), all now missing². According to a key Sun-god text, *Sāmba Purāṇa* (Srivastava 2013), Kṛṣṇa's arrogant son Sāmba was cursed with leprosy by Kṛṣṇa, leprosy which was cured by building the archetypal temple to Sūrya (first understood to be at Multan, later at Konarak) and then worshipping him³.

A piece of stone with the date *vikrama saṃvat* 1083 (1025-1026 CE) found in a chamber beneath the *garbha-grha* seems to show that the temple was built early in the reign of Bhīma I (1022-1064). Dhaky has pointed out stylistic changes that prove that the RM is later than the main temple; and he suggests that the RM was constructed in the reign of Bhīma's son Karṇa (1064-1094 CE)⁴. The frequent appearance in the RM pillar sculptures of the *Mahābhārata* hero Bhīma, second of the Pāṇḍava brothers, noticed in the present paper, would give added point to Dhaky's closing suggestion that RM may have been «a lovely tribute» built by

1. Bharucha 1951; Tiwari 1986; Giri 1987-88. Lobo 1982, 45, fn. 46 mentions a forthcoming study of the pillars, but it was never written (Lobo e-mail 15 May 2019).

2. Brown 1956, Pl. CVII, Fig 2. Reproduced Lobo 1982, 40.

3. Srivastava 2013, xii-xiii and *adhyāya* 3.

4. Dhaky 1963.

Karṇa as «an act of reverence» to his father⁵. Alternatively, Bhīma Rāja himself might have built it in the closing years of his own long reign.

In addition to considering the narrative sculpture pillars as possibly distinctively liminal, I shall look at them as conceivably directly relevant to the court culture of the builder, Bhīma Rāja I, not least because the King might have viewed the Pāṇḍava Bhīma as his own *alter ego*.

The sculptures to be considered are panels, framed niches, on two sets of heavily carved octagonal pillars separated in time of construction and in details of form, but both with an ever-changing narrative frieze a little above eye level⁶. This particular section, termed ‘the second figural frieze’ by Lobo in what is the only detailed academic study of the temple, is in the most visible position on the pillars⁷. The bottom of GM panels is 1.87m. from the floor, the panel 37cm. high; the bottom of RM panel 1.73m. from the floor, the panel 38.5cm. high⁸.

The 256 RM panels are far more varied than the 64 of the GM, but it is true to say of both sets that the panels refer fairly often to the two Sanskrit epics; that several panels have detailed and complicated scenes which seem to be from known events, historical or otherwise, for which at present there is no certain explanation; that many panels present generic scenes which do not belong to any specific narrative: fighting, dancing, and erotic encounters sum up such scenes; and finally, that there are scenes which present peaceable group activities, the purpose of which is not clear, with a strong flavour of *communitas*.

What immediately differentiates these panels from the narrative friezes that are found on many temple walls is that the latter friezes are linear, and if textually related are sequentially ordered; whereas these pillar panels, each complete in itself (except for some GM pillars), tend to present disorder and confusion when considered in relation to each other.

What on further reflection differentiates these panels from everything else on the temple is that they are not part of the iconographic programme of the temple

5. Dhaky 1963, 222.

6. The *mūrti* of the temple deity would of course be behind its own special limen, the sculpture of the doorway of the *garbha-gṛha*, but this is beyond the scope of this paper. Other sculpture in a liminal position not referred to here include the door-frame of the GM and the two external pillars beyond it, the sculpture on the external seat-backs (*kaśāsanaś*) of RM, on the *torana* pillars at the eastern entrance to RM, and on the sides of the steps from the tank on the plinth of the eastern side of RM.

7. The first figural frieze, larger, at leg level, is of repeated standing figures, almost always *ap-sarases*; and on RM pillars there is a small third frieze, near the top, of repeated little dancing figures.

8. Detailed scale drawing of pillars in Burgess 1903, Pl. LIV; and brief analysis in Lobo 1982, 24-26, 41-43. My measurements are made from the scale drawings in Burgess.

(set out by Lobo), nor are they merely decorative patterns, ornamental designs; though they have that effect when viewed from a distance. The panels of the two friezes in GM and RM are often problematic. Could the concept of liminality assist our understanding?

Certainly, as I study these 320 panels as two collections of photos set out two-dimensionally on paper in two large rectangles, a parallel such as the choir screen



Fig.1 RM1 e.n. north

placed between the worshipper and the sanctum in medieval Christian churches is to some extent illuminating⁹. In whatever order one goes past the Modhera panels, they too are collectively a kind of screen of imagery between the outer world and the deity, instances of ambiguity at the threshold. Many things in the discourse of liminality – carnival, communitas, the erotic, and conflict, for instance, are abundantly present. One feature of liminality as seen by Victor Turner, namely ‘flow’, people acting together with total involvement is exceptionally clearly represented at Modhera¹⁰.

At least five panels show a group absorbed in passing an unknown object from one to another: it clearly flows between them, as for instance in **RM 1**

e.n. north (Fig. 1). One thing flows from another. Indeed, flow in general can be shown to be a key element of the panels, especially of RM: the ceaseless switching from one sphere of action to another in a rippling movement. Closely related to flow is symmetry: symmetry is common in, for instance, the arrangement of battle scenes and orgy scenes. In all panels it can be said that activity is concentrated, focussed, and intensive.

There are alternative explanations for the special quality of the sculpture under discussion. It could be claimed that the composition and arrangement of the panels at Modhera are governed merely by the demands of ornamentation. The ornamentation of a large number of pillars that keeps each different from another demands a large range of themes. Or again it could be claimed that these pillar sculptures constitute the intrusion of the dominant ethos of current court culture into sacred architecture.

9. Cf. Jacobs 2018. Jung 2013, p 43: screens with their «profusion of sculptural imagery» were «things to be contemplated, [...] [but] their very presence also heightened the distinctiveness of the spaces on either side and refashioned the simple act of walking [...] from one zone to another into an act of considerable ritual force». See also Jacobs 2018, 8.

10. Turner 1979, 87-90.

Yet, when the narrative panels are carefully examined, the presence of a guiding intelligence – conscious or unconscious – in their placement is inescapable, a will to construct a neutral zone, betwixt and between, free from the constraints of standard iconography and standard morality. Most striking of all is the instance of the first three pillars we shall shortly look at in detail, where the very process of worship is boldly subverted.

2. *The Pillars of GM (Gūḍhamaṇḍapa), the ‘Closed Hall’*

I shall examine the GM panels first. They are the closing stage of the liminal state of the worshipper, when one is thinking with one’s liminality cap on, so to speak; but at the same time, they are the origin of the Modhera narrative panel style. They are reviewed and summarised far more easily than those in the RM since there are only 64 of them, and with a much narrower range of themes.

The panels of the GM are positioned slightly higher than those in the RM, and are slightly narrower and shorter than those in the RM; they are obscured in the gloom of the closed hall. The position of the 8 GM pillars, all of which support the domed ceiling above them, is shown in Fig. 2.

I have numbered them in clockwise order from the entrance, and note the direction each panel faces¹¹.

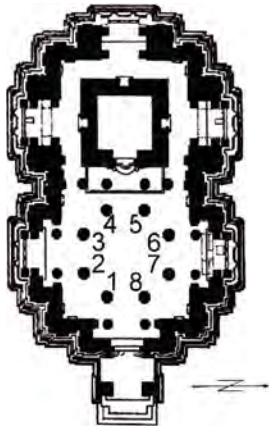


Fig. 2 Numbering of GM pillars

11. In setting out for myself all my photographs of the pillars, I positioned the panels identically, with the eastern panel on the left, and then moving to the right, north-east, north and so on. This enables the orientation of the panels to be understood at a glance; and I have continued this practice in the illustrations here when several panels of a pillar are shown together, unless adjustment is necessary to clarify narrative sequence. When describing each panel generally I refer to left and right as seen by the external observer, but with regard to body parts I refer to left and right from the point of view of the individual represented.

Fig. 3 shows **GM 1** as seen on entry to the GM and turning to face the first pillar.

GM 2 is almost completely hidden by **GM 1**, looking like a shadow down the left edge of **GM 1**.

GM 3, with the east-facing panel of Sūrya, standing holding two blooming lotuses and with his two attendants Piṅgala and Daṇḍin, is visible to the right of **GM 1**, and **GM 4** is at the right of the picture. Sūrya's empty shrine is further back to the right of **GM 4**, out of sight.

Some light comes from the window on the left, and a tiny amount from the south window to the *pradakṣiṇa* of the *garbha-gr̥ha*. So, on **GM 3** Sūrya faces east, the direction from which the deity is approached. But what looks directly east on **GM 1**?



Fig.3 GM1, GM2, GM3, GM4 looking n-e from entrance

2.1. *GM1: Pillar 1*



Fig. 4 Overview of **GM1**

(In Fig. 4, **GM 1 east** is on the left. Moving left from there we would move round the octagon to reach **GM 1 s-e**, which is on the far right of Fig. 4.)



Fig. 5 **GM 1 east**

Facing east, then, as does the *mūrti*, we see a damaged erotic panel (Fig. 5). A man to the right bends forward, about to kiss the woman who is pulling him towards her by his beard, while another woman (or the same woman subsequently) bends her head down to a wicker seat, presenting herself in the animal congress position to the man. Moving left of **GM 1 east** to **GM 1 s-e**, that is to say to the far right of Fig. 4, we see a wandering ascetic with his material possessions suspended from the staff over his shoulder (Fig. 6). Not only material objects: obtruding



Fig. 6 **GM 1 s-e**

on to the left boundary of the niche is not a pestle hanging down, but the end of his penis, which is so long it has to be thus supported. This is not at once obvious because a middle section of the penis has broken off.

Next comes a bearded man with a brahman's tuft (*śikhā*), **GM 1 south** (Fig. 7),



Fig. 7 GM1 south

well dressed and ornamented, standing behind a seated woman, whose upper left arm he grasps; and his other arm is about to seize her by the neck. Her left arm, which wears a bracelet, is perhaps also raised in indignation or exposition.

Continuing left in Fig. 4's overview, both **GM 1 s-w** and **west**

look left, and clearly the foreground people, headed by a woman, are looking at Sūrya (**GM 1 n-w**) who stands facing inwards, away from the entrance. There is a clear and continuing leftward movement in the panels from the left of **GM 1 east**.

Leaving **GM 1 south**, the man seizing the woman, unexplained for the moment, let us return to where we started, **GM 1 east**, and move instead to the right, where we come to two men each holding an arrow and a bow, the man on the right wearing a crown (Fig. 8). These two figures are readily identifiable as Lakṣmaṇa and Rāma.

That they face right suggests a rightward narrative movement, just as the ascetic in **GM 1 s-e** facing left began a leftward movement.



Fig. 8 GM1 n-e



Fig. 9 GM1 north

Continuing to the right, a crowned archer shoots an arrow upwards (Fig. 9). That this is Rāma again is confirmed by the figure sitting between the bow and Rāma's left knee, who rests a mace on his shoulder (Fig. 10). This must be Hanumān. The figure on the ground looks like a dead monkey. Despite the bed, to which I shall come back shortly, this must be the field of battle in the



Fig. 10 GM1 n (detail)

Rāmāyaṇa. As Sūrya stands to the right, **GM 1 n-w**, I suggest that Rāma has just recited the *Ādityahṛdaya*,

the hymn to the sun taught to Rāma by Agastya, according to the southern recension of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, prior to shooting his final arrow at Rāvaṇa¹². The definite presence of Rāma now explains the travelling ascetic and the scene he is moving to. He is surely Rāvaṇa in disguise, who then abducts Sītā in his form as royal brahman, lacking his ten heads¹³.

With the next three panels, **GM 1 s-w**, **west**, and **n-w**, (Fig. 11) we leave the *Rāmāyaṇa* in abeyance. **GM 1 s-w** and **west**, each comprising a group of worshippers headed by a woman, gaze devoutly to the left, the sixth face of the pillar, which is



GM1 n-w

GM1 west

GM1 s-w

Fig. 11 GM1 Partial view

Sūrya, as already described on pillar 3, holding two lotuses and with his attendants Daṇḍin and Piṅgala. So a woman, Sītā, is being ill-treated, and appropriately enough, a divine presence, Sūrya, is near at hand. Two panels of devotees look towards him.

Women head the two groups, and it is possible both foreground groups are

12. Cf. Goldman 2009, 1341ff.

13. It should not be thought that the five discs to the right side of Rāvaṇa's hair visible in the first small photograph of **GM 1 south** taken in 2006 (Fig. 4, overview) represent so many of his ten heads: they are made by animals or insects, and are not present in the larger photo (2020) of the panel (Fig. 7).

meant to be all women. The repetition of the scene could be for emphasis which would be appropriate here, but other pillars have similar duplication of a panel for other reasons. Sometimes, in RM, the sculptor has a second go because the first attempt was not satisfactory; or, as might be the case here, because they could not think of anything else to do to complete the octagon.

The upper figures in both panels, who do not look to the left, are fillers of neutral significance as upper figures on GM and RM so often are. Nevertheless, it should be said that this pillar is exceptional, unique in its double narrative sequence.

Nor have we yet finished with it. Where does the erotic panel **GM 1 east** (Fig. 5) fit in? Could it be Rāvaṇa enjoying himself in his *antaḥpura*, prior to snatching Sītā? One woman is shown synoptically, before and during intercourse, or two women are enjoying the man's attentions. The man is thinner than the rather chubby travelling ascetic. Examination of other panels both in the GM and RM will suggest that what in fact we have here is the first of many instances of the wilful and insistent insertion of the erotic where it does not normally belong. This sex scene splits apart what is the *Rāmāyaṇa* in a nutshell, the two halves of the kernel being Rāvaṇa abducting Sītā and Rāma's slaying of Rāvaṇa. The narrative is, as it were, cracked apart.

It is unnecessary for the love-makers of **GM 1 east** to be standing on a bed; it is even more unusual for Rāma to be shooting an arrow from his bed. In the epic he is on his war chariot. But beds and bedroom scenes are so much the favourite locus of the Modhera sculptors that they do not hesitate to place Rāma in his crowning heroic action on a bed.

2.2. GM 2: Pillar 2

Moving on to the second pillar (Fig. 12), just three contiguous panels call for discussion. The other five panels (unshown) have couples canoodling and groups cavorting.



Fig. 12 GM 2 Partial view

The north panel in Fig. 12 is perhaps the significant one.

A tall man plays the flute, accompanied by two drummers (Fig. 13). The right drummer, if indeed it is a



Fig. 13 GM 2 north

were so excited by the handsome young man that the juice (*śukra*) of their *yonis* was apparent on their lotus seats¹⁴.

drum he holds by his side, is strangely inactive, perhaps entranced by the sound of the flute. Behind the tall man's head a woman leaps excitedly, her legs widespread, though her left leg is not visible.

If it were possible to show a connection between Modhera and the Sāmba of the *Sāmba Purāṇa*, this might be Sāmba. Sāmba, Kṛṣṇa's son, himself a great lover, and archetypal worshipper of Sūrya, was tricked by Nārada into entering Kṛṣṇa's *antaḥpura*, and the women there



Fig. 14 GM 2 n-w

14. Srivastava 2013: *Sāmba Purāṇa* 3. 37 and 44.

It was on seeing this that Kṛṣṇa cursed his son to become a leper, a condition from which Sāmba freed himself by building the temple to Sūrya at Multan, and worshipping Sūrya there.

In fact, I don't think there is reference here to Sāmba, but the story just referred to does relate to the erotic sculptures at Modhera, insofar as cunnilingus with its excitement and lubrication of women's *yonis* plays a relatively prominent role here.

Moving to **GM 2 n-w** (Fig. 14) we see a large man, a woman presenting herself in the position for animal copulation in front him, while he turns his head to give cunnilingus to the substantial woman he holds above his shoulder.

This woman's placement is strongly analogous to that of the woman above the flute-player, and though the figure of the central man differs considerably between the two panels, given the limited powers of this and many other of the sculptors of these panels, I would suggest the two scenes are connected.

The woman in the arch of the panel rises triumphantly, continuing and developing the position she held in the previous panel. The large man's penis is missing. The watching man behind him is analogous to the drummer on the right in the previous panel.

The narrative movement spills over slightly into **GM 2 west** (Fig. 12 Partial view of **GM 2**), where a group of monkeys fills the panel. At the top a monkey sniffs the bottom of the monkey who bends down in front of him.

Quite possibly this action is prompted by the example of the preceding panel. Apart from this detail, the group is an instance of a common type of panel, especially in RM, where a group, human or monkey, performs some group activity or task in unison, with an evident sense of *communitas*. Here two old monkeys ponder in the foreground, while younger monkeys are more active above.

2.3. GM 3: Pillar 3



Fig. 15 GM3 Partial view

Pillar 3 (Fig. 15) has the only other image of Sūrya on the GM pillars (and there is none on the RM pillars – except for a rare composite, Sūrya-Revanta), and its panel pertinently faces east. One sequence is clear: the three men in **GM 3 s-e** are standing before Sūrya. I think the other three (**GM 3 w, s-w, s**) might all relate to Bhīma, whom I take as the big powerful man holding an elaborate mace as he dances in **GM 3 s**¹⁵.

In GM he lacks the characteristic hairstyle he has in RM, as discussed later. Beyond the two instances in GM of two men fighting with maces, the frequency of Bhīma in RM makes his presence in GM more plausible. Here in **GM 3** we see, conceivably, the same tilted head at the top of the west, south-west, and south panels.

What stands out, of course, in **GM 3 s-w**, is the degree of resemblance of the seated foreground figure to the Sītā in **GM 1 south** (Fig. 7). The standing man's hand is perhaps visible holding the foreground figure's left elbow from beneath. But the woman, seated comfortably on a cushion, with her right hand raised to her chin, seems almost to be simpering. Is it she herself subsequently, or another woman simultaneously, who, behind the seated woman, has her right hand on a

15. The *Ratnamālā* describes Bhīma I as «dark, stout, tall, and hairy, handsome, haughty, fond of war» (Majumdar 1956, 56).

tall man's shoulder? That standing woman, whoever she is, has her back arched because, presumably, the man draws her to him with his unseen right arm.

In **GM 3 west**, conceivably the same man and the same foreground woman of **GM 3 s-w** are dancing in the foreground, and making love in the missionary position above, the woman with at least one leg lifted up. Note that in **GM 3 west** both the foreground left figure (whom I take to be a woman, the woman in question) and the woman above on her back have their arms flung out in a gesture of wild abandon; and the woman in the quasi 'Sītā' posture has one arm thrown out.

Stronger and simpler is the case of the other two panels, Sūrya and his worshippers (Fig. 16); but there is an interesting nuance. Unlike the two panels on GM1 where a group of women look in adoration at Sūrya, here the figure nearest to Sūrya looks not towards Sūrya but back over his shoulder to the two others, who are standing straight upright, eyes fixed on Sūrya (**GM 3 s-e**).

The figure looking back is clothed, with a necklace. Of the other two, the rear one is naked, with his penis clearly visible in my 2006 photograph shown here (but covered over with fresh mortar in 2020); stone is missing from the pubic region of the middle figure.

Although they lack the tell-tale mark of the peacock feather broom¹⁶, I suspect they are *kṣapaṇakas*, naked Jain Digambara monks, who are certainly present on the next two pillars. On this reading, the foremost figure, looking back expressively, is a Hindu who is introducing the two Digambaras to the god Sūrya.



Fig. 16 GM 3 Partial view

16. Part of the broom handle is perhaps visible across the middle man's chest. The front man's hand before his groin shows awareness of the nudity of the men behind him, as they stand before Sūrya.

2.4. GM 4: Pillar 4

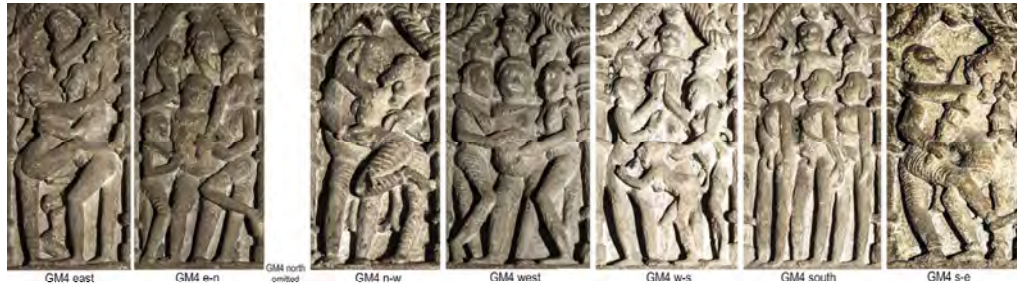


Fig. 17 GM 4 Incomplete overview

In **GM 4 south** (Fig. 17) we come upon three naked men avidly gazing to the left. Their brooms under their left arms prove them to be *kṣapaṇakas*. Although they are lined up like the worshippers of Sūrya in **GM 1** and **GM 3**, it is not the god



Fig. 18 GM 4 s-w

who is the object of their gaze. In the erotic scene to the left (**GM 4 s-w**) with its three naked participants, the man on the right is shown to be himself a *kṣapaṇaka* by the broom under his arm (Figs. 17 and 18). What might look like a beard is in fact unfinished carving; the figure immediately above him is also unfinished. His straight broom aligns with the upraised arm of the woman immediately behind the foreground threesome, who is expressing horror at what is going on by covering her eyes with her hands and also fascination by peeping through her fingers¹⁷.

The participant on the left wears an earring and has his hands in *añjali*: he is a Hindu venerating the Jain at the other end of the woman; or, more likely, thanking him for initiating the erotic event. The *kṣapaṇaka* is pulling the woman's hair.

17. Such a gesture is common in erotic sculpture at this period, and to my knowledge always includes looking through the fingers that ostensibly hide the eyes, whenever the sculpture is adequately detailed.

The other four panels shown (Fig. 17 above) all feature a Bhīma-esque man who could conceivably represent Bhīma Rāja. In **GM 4 s-e**, on the grounds of the evidence of RM pillars, he fights Duryodhana, though unlike RM there is no attempt to distinguish the two contestants. In **GM 4 n-e** he stands amid a group, holding a club-like mace, and his left hand is raised in what might be seen as self-affirmation. The man with a woman on either side is strong and bulky, with Bhīma's characteristic square head. Possibly the man copulating in **GM 4 e** and embracing in **GM 4 n-w** is Bhīma too. As for the man on the left in **GM 4 s-w** with his hands in *añjali*, the absence of the square head and burly form both characteristic of Bhīma rule him out; indeed, the very gesture of *añjali* is unlikely for the Bhīma of Modhera.

2.5. GM 5: Pillar 5



Fig. 19 GM 5 Partial view

In **GM 5 n-e** we have the last group of onlookers in GM (Fig. 19). Again, I think they are probably meant to be all women, all gazing raptly to the left, excitedly grasping the elbows of the person in front. There can be no doubt that the **GM 5 n.** pair of archers are hurriedly proceeding left, their eyes fixed on what lies before them. Neither wears a crown, but given their earlier appearance in **GM 1 n-e**, they have to be Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa.

The object of the women's and archers' gaze is a damaged and perhaps unfinished panel (**GM 5 east**), wherein is to be found a copulatory couple on a bed, and above them a male standing as he receives *fellatio* from a large woman in the centre of the panel, and leans over to kiss another woman.

With carefully rendered pigs' ears, both the male figures indeed really are elongated pigs.



Fig. 20 GM 5 n-w

Also included in this selection from **GM 5** is a powerful male dancer with a heavy double necklace, and squarish head – perhaps Bhīma or Bhīma Rāja (Fig. 20).

Unshown here are three well rendered single woman dancers (**GM west, s-w, and south**); and lastly a male figure with head strongly resembling the male dancer in **GM 5 n-w**, who gives *cunnilingus* to a woman who fellates him.

She, hanging upside-down with her back to us, her elbows on his akimbo knees, raises her face to look out at us, as does the man, who supports her outstretched knees with his hands.

This latter scene, facing south-east, is prominent as one looks towards to the shrine from the entrance to the GM.

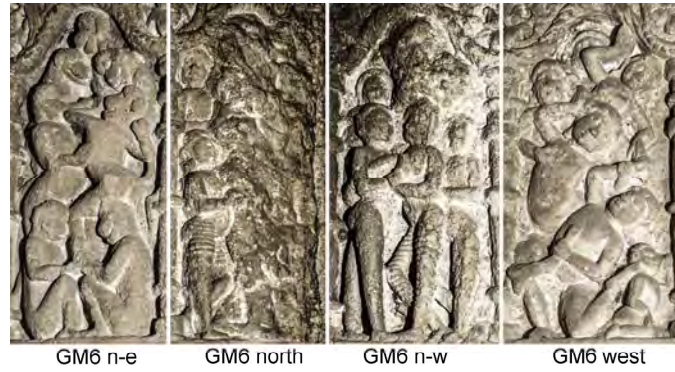
2.6. *GM 6: Pillar 6*

Fig. 21 GM 6 Partial view

On pillar 6 there is another appearance of *kṣapaṇakas*, whom we met before on pillar 4, and possibly also on pillar 3. Here (Fig. 21) they are neither having *darśana* of Sūrya nor watching an orgy. In **GM 6 n-w** a *kṣapaṇaka* left foreground, his peacock feather broom tucked under his right arm confronts two clothed men, the

nearer one, the same height, holds with his left hand the right wrist of the Jain. The man behind is smaller.



Fig. 22 GM 6 w

Another figure is in the background above, and most of the background is uncarved. **GM 6 north** is unfinished but looks as if it might have been intended to be a different version of **GM 6 n-w**'s meeting. To the right, **GM 6 w** (Fig. 22), the same figures, it would seem, are engaged in a wild dance. The *kṣapaṇaka* dominates the foreground, left knee on the ground, leaning back with his peacock broom held out before him and his right arm raised.

Above him what I take to be the same two clothed figures who were meeting him on the west face, now likewise with their upper bodies bent back. Strange is the small figure bottom right, not unlike the small

figures at the bottom of sculptures at Khajuraho, but there they are onlookers, while here the figure looks away.

Is he just an unimportant space-filling figure, or a someone who disapproves of what is going on? Does his small size show his small-mindedness? However, what is really remarkable in this panel is that the *kṣapaṇaka* holds in his upraised right hand a dagger that pierces the left lower arm of the uppermost leaning back figure, and the dancing man immediately above the *kṣapaṇaka* is holding and restraining the wrist of the stabbing hand; and we should remember that the figure right in front of the *kṣapaṇaka* in the panel to the left grasps his right wrist there, holding it against his own chest.

The **n-e** panel of this pillar has in a group of monkeys a somewhat parallel instance of dancing (Fig. 23). The bottom two monkeys are sitting on the ground, and one holds the other's wrist in a friendly way. Above them and most fully in view are a pair of monkeys their bodies in seemingly ecstatic motion, and at the top three monkeys seem to confer with each other. In both panels can be seen a clear presentation of *communitas*. However, in the human instance, the threat of the dagger somewhat hinders such an interpretation.



Fig. 23 GM 6 n-e

2.7. Summary of GM Pillars

In the foregoing treatment of the GM pillars, which support the ornate circular ceiling, we have ourselves circled round six of the eight pillars, taking each pillar as we find it, tackling their respective panels in a variety of ways, attempting to follow what seems to be a logic varying from pillar to pillar. The pillars each stand apart, separate in the gloom. In the GM one is led, forced, to examine one pillar at a time. The first three pillars strongly suggest a narrative structure from panel to panel on each pillar; though any such structuring seems to wither away in the remaining pillars. Perhaps the guiding vision of the architect ceased to be applied.

In **GM 3 se** I have suggested a Hindu is introducing *kṣapaṇakās* to the worship of Sūrya. One should be careful of labelling *kṣapaṇakās* shown in Hindu temples as necessarily representatives of Jainism in any specific sense.

Kṣapaṇakās in erotic scenes, as at Khajuraho and elsewhere, are there as exemplars of the ascetic's superabundance of semen and consequent sexual power, all the more powerful from the Hindu point of view, on account of the transgressiveness of their heterodoxy. Nevertheless, these scenes could refer to particular contacts with specific *kṣapaṇakās*.

As well as the summing up of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in pillar 1, there are as already mentioned two instances of two men fighting with maces, who might well be Bhīma and Duryodhana.

This is all the more likely because in **GM 7 east** it is highly probable, in the light of RM, as we shall soon see, that Bhīma is pulling off Duṣśāsana's arm; a portion of uncarved stone is exactly where Draupadī would be expected to be witnessing the deed. There is none of the generalised fighting or standing groups of warriors so common in RM and temples in general.

Without a doubt, pillars 3 and 4 are linked, and worship of Sūrya is paralleled with watching orgiastic sex. With the exception of pillar 3, every GM pillar has at least one scene of sexual intercourse. This bending of boundaries, this distortion of normal limits suggests that we are in the realm of liminality.

Alternatively, the sexual force of what may fairly be called Bhīma Rāja's court culture could be said to distort and pull apart the righteous world of the *Rāmāyaṇa* here, bringing Rāma firmly into the Rāja's own louche ambit. Aside from Rāma and Sītā, the only divine presence on the pillars themselves has been the two panels of Sūrya.

If there is a visible liminal process at Modhera, it is in these GM panels a process liable to misdirection, diversion, one might even say perversion. The powerful figure of a proto-typical Bhīma has everything his own way, so to speak, within the organising consciousness that governs the pillars.

Here he has inserted himself into the narrative as his brother mace-bearing Hanumān, and turned aside from holy Rāma and Sītā. Like him, the very style of these pillars is brash, bold and bulky. Love-making and dancing predominate in what can be summed up as luxurious court scenes economically presented.

3. *RM: Raṅgamaṇḍapa, the 'Dance Hall'*



Fig. 24 Twelve narrative pillars of RM viewed from s-w.

RM is open on all sides, flooded with light. Not only are the friezes here illuminated, they are much more closely positioned, and it is easy, indeed unavoidable, to see many panels at once. In Fig. 24 we see 9 north-east facing panels, and partial views of 23 panels. Amid the rich overall carving, the narrative panels do not stand out as they do in GM, and their scenes, vibrant though they are, cannot be taken in at a distance. Prominent are the figures on the larger figural frieze below, who are mainly *apsarases*. Above the narrative frieze a smaller frieze of repeated dancing figures also distracts.

Whereas with the GM I was able within the scope of this paper to discuss a third of the panels, with the 256 panels of the RM I must abbreviate my treatment considerably, and mainly resort to analytical summaries. The rudimentary narrative guidance provided by a few of the panels in the GM is entirely lacking, but is perhaps made up for by the repetition of themes, repetition which shows which themes are particularly significant to the designer and makers.

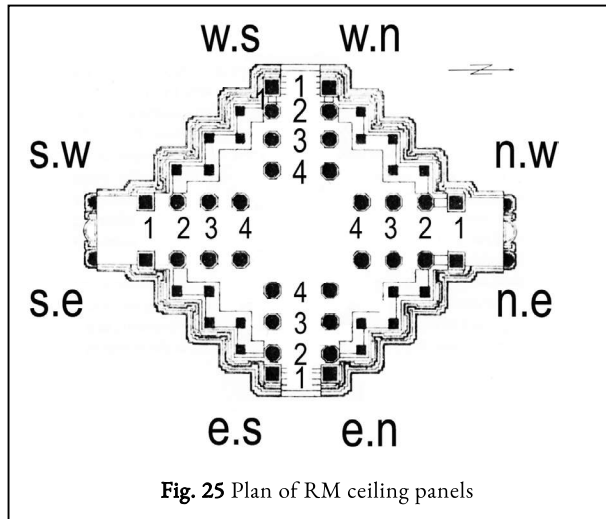


Fig. 25 Plan of RM ceiling panels

The outermost pillars, all numbered 1 on the plan (Fig. 25) have square bases and a goddess on each of the four sides before becoming octagonal and exactly like the other pillars.

On the ceiling (Fig. 26), four oblique slabs each contain 10 square narrative panels, related to the pillar panels, but which are simpler in content and more rudimentary in technique. Just three of these ceiling

panels will be mentioned later. RM has four identical entrances.

Where to start? Considering only the outward-facing panels with a deity on the outermost pillars, **1 e.n. east** has a scene of *linga* worship (and **1 e.n. south** has Śiva killing Andhaka). **1 s.e. south** has an eroded Revanta, Sūrya's son, the hunter, as usual shown on horseback, under a *chattra*.

Lastly, and most significantly, **1 w.n. west**, facing the worshipper as they leave the GM and go towards RM, has the rare and imposing form of Sūrya-Revanta, crowned, on horseback, and under a *chattra*, and the same time holding the two blooming lotuses; and Revanta as well on another panel of the same pillar (**1 w.n. s-e**) I shall select this pillar as my one complete example of a RM pillar (Fig. 27) and centre my presentation of RM on it.

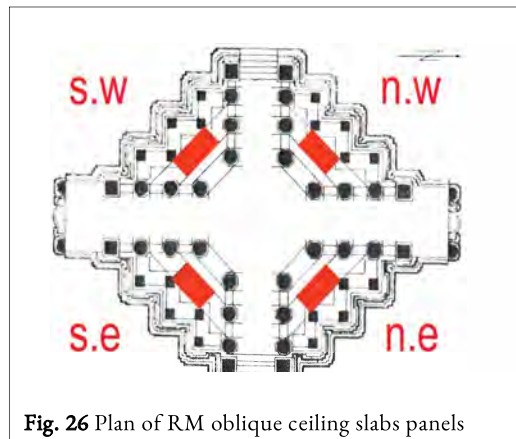


Fig. 26 Plan of RM oblique ceiling slabs panels

3.1. *RM Pillar 1 w.n.*



Fig. 27 1 w.n. – Example of a complete RM pillar



Fig. 28 Sūrya-Revanta (1w.n. west) and Revanta (1w.n. s-e)

Other than his special form in **1 w.n. west** (Fig. 28) Sūrya does not appear in the RM, nor does Revanta appear at all in the main temple. Revanta is here (**s-e**), accompanied by warriors and is hunting a pig. In RM every one of the four pairs of open passage-ways formed by the narrative frieze pillars has at least one representation of Revanta: the west the two just mentioned (Fig. 28), the east two (**4 e.n. east**; **4 e.s. south**), the south four (**1 s.e. south** with *chattra*, **2 s.e. east**, **2 s.e.**

w-s, **4 s.e. east**), the north one (**3 n.e. n-w** with *chattra*).

Revanta's pervasiveness is reflected by the fact that the common theme in *Mahābhārata* friezes on other temples of two opposing bowmen facing each other on their chariots, usually Arjuna versus Karṇa, and which is found as normal on the RM n-e oblique ceiling slab, when it is executed on the **3 n.e. east** and **3 n.e. n-e** pillar panels has 3 pigs added in front of each bowman, so that the battle becomes a hunting scene as well.

There is added weight to Revanta's frequent appearances when the rare appearance of other deities in RM is considered. Viṣṇu appears twice, as Varāha lifting Bhūmi and Lakṣmī, and as Narasiṃha; and Śiva twice as Andhakāntaka, both sets of appearances showing the two deities as wild and terrible. In the Andhakānta panel **3 s.e. north**, a giant figure of Bhīma appears faintly to the left of Śiva. Possibly the Bhīma is left over from a different plan for that panel; but it could be argued

that the fact that those just mentioned panels are the only appearances of the two great gods, suggests they are the only forms worthy of paralleling mighty Bhīma, a suggestion his presence beside Śiva would confirm.

Also Gaṇeśa appears three times, twice on the same pillar which also includes a war elephant (**2 w.s. n-w** and **south**). Kṛṣṇa from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* occurs just twice, once as a boy reaching into the butter churn, and once standing above the butter churn and lifting up Mt Govardhana. The dominant presence of Revanta, the roaming hunter, might be taken as relating to the element of wild freedom in the panels' wide-ranging choice of topic.

Returning to our specific pillar, **1 w.n.**, my photo of **1 w.n. n-e** (Fig. 29) is not very clear but in fact shows a warrior holding a curved sword sitting on a kind of platform over an elephant's head, a structure that occurs several times on the RM pillars. Here is the common depiction of generic warfare, in an image of weight and power. More frequent are scenes of warriors as coherent and symmetrical groups. Then again, a large figure sometimes occurs who fills the arch of the niche without doing anything specific, just dominant and awesome or threatening. Probably in such cases, the sculptor just felt they had to fill the empty space with something, but an uninterpretable large figure remains a brooding presence in sev-

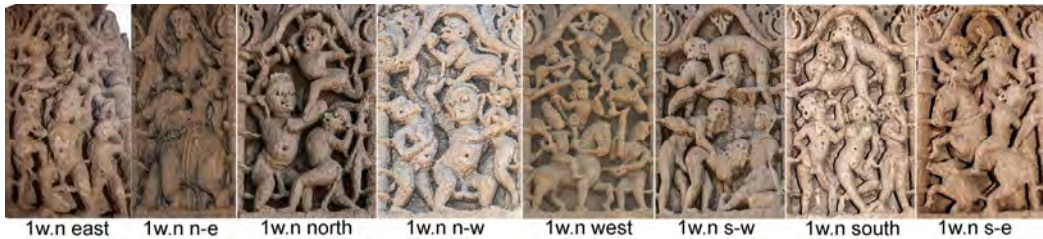


Fig.29 1 w.n. – A complete example of an RM pillar (Fig. 26 repeated).

eral RM panels¹⁸. No less than three panels here in the specimen pillar show the *Rāmāyaṇa* monkeys attacking the giant Kumbhakarna, with Hanumān taking the lead, wielding his own mace in **east** and **north** panels. Not only is this a popular theme, occurring additionally some eight times, but there is a marked similarity between representations of the demon and those of Bhīma. Only the large ears distinguish the former from Bhīma. Both are big and strong and wield a mace.

18. A good example is found below, in a panel I classify as erotic (**3 w.s. south**. Fig. 34).

Sometimes, as in all three examples in this pillar, Kumbhakarṇa is not even very tall. The clinching factor, that shows the similarity to be deliberate, is the identity of hairstyle.

A fine example of Bhīma's headpiece shows the hero smashing Duryodhana's thigh as the defeated warrior lies on the ground (Fig. 30 **4 w.s. west**). It is common for Bhīma's hair in sculpture to resemble the hair of demons and Bhairava; and his nature in the epic has demonic elements¹⁹, but here we see it only with Bhīma and Kumbhakarṇa. It is not clear to me whether a hat is involved as well as an arrangement of hair.



Fig. 30 **4 w.s. west**

In **3 s.w. north** (not shown) a very tall Kumbhakarṇa lacks the special hairstyle and Hanumān leaping overhead has his own hair in that style or holds that head-piece.

Fig. 31 is similar, with the flying figure clearly holding a sort of crown, except that here Kumbhakarṇa is as normal with Bhīma-like hair; is Hanumān shown twice? It is of course entirely appropriate for Hanumān to adopt this aspect of Bhīma, for they are brothers, both sons of Vāyu, god of wind. Their borderline natures are inherently liminal²⁰.

Note how Hanumān's tail in Fig. 31 seems to extend and swell up into the tip that looks like an enormous arrowhead beneath his mace, perhaps suggesting he is about to increase in size.

The **east** panel (Fig. 29, far left) shows Hanumān as tall as Kumbhakarṇa. RM rejoices in Bhīma and Hanumān. They are the two dominant images. Hanumān leaps overhead carrying the hill of herbs.

At least twice Bharata as defender of Ayodhyā, in a story not in Vālmīki, shoots an arrow at the unknown intruder; at other times Hanumān is not really separable from an unknown person leaping out of sheer exuberance over the top of fighting warriors, who sometimes are Bhīma and Duryodhana.



Fig. 31 **1 w.n.north**

19. Sattar 1990, Chapter 3; Loizeau 2017, Chapitre 10; for Bhīma's hairstyle, see Loizeau 2017, 437-438.

20. Sattar 1990, Chapter 4.

Once Hanumān stands before Rāma who sits in state as Viṣṇu. Very often he is fighting Kumbhakarṇa, a Kumbhakarṇa who, as we have seen, looks like Bhīma.

Bhīma, for his part, is big and strong like Kumbhakarṇa: fighting Duryodhana (eight times) he twice smashes Duryodhana's thigh; he rips off Duḥśāsana's arm in front of Draupadī four times, once holding up the removed arm. He lifts up an elephant, presumably to throw at Karṇa, on three panels.

Pillar 4 e.s. gives us Bhīma holding the elephant over his head (**north**), a war elephant and rider (**n-w**), Bharata shooting at Hanumān as he flies overhead with the hill of herbs, three more war elephants (**s-w**, **south**, **s-e**), and Hanumān fighting Kumbhakarṇa (**east** and **n-e**).

In addition, as in GM, a figure who may well be either Bhīma the Pāṇḍava or King Bhīma I, dances and besports himself.



Fig. 32 1 w.n. s-w and 1 w.n. south

The two remaining panels of the pillar that is being examined in detail (**1 w.n.**) are erotic (Fig. 32), and if it is correct to give special weight to the appearance of Sūrya-Revanta facing people as they leave the main temple, should not also some emphasis be allowed here to the juxtaposition of the erotic to the sacred? We have seen it clearly enough in GM.

Throughout the RM there are surprising conjunctions, distortions of expected reality, which could be satisfactorily classified under the heading of liminal states.

It is only here in **1 w.n. s-w** that the *kṣapaṇakās* occur in RM, at this closest point to GM. Note the very unusual representation of the *picchikās* that here look more like closed *chattras*.

The two contiguous scenes of orgy on the **1 w.n.** pillar (Fig. 32) are bounded by images of Sūrya-Revanta and Revanta, the holy next to the transgressive.

3.2. Some RM Problem Panels

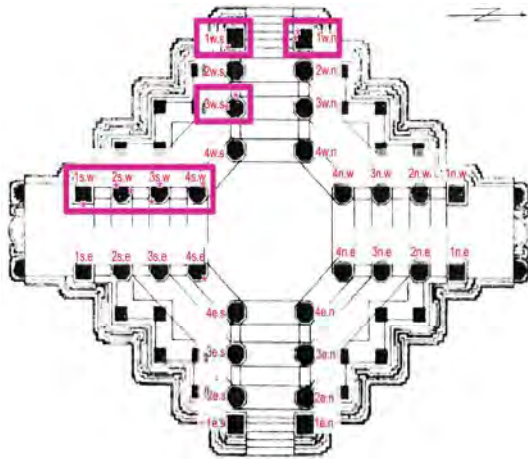


Fig. 33 Map of RM erotic panels

There are considerable differences between erotic scenes in the two halls. Whereas GM has more than one male taking part only twice, and in one of these panels the plural male performers are pigs not men, RM is more varied, has *cunnilingus* thrice in rich and artistic arrangements, but the erotic plays a proportionally much reduced role.

In GM, erotic scenes are present on all but one pillar. In RM I was surprised to discover that all the eleven erotic panels are on the west and south axes (Fig. 33).

One highly unusual panel presents in a novel way an erotic encounter just before it takes place. In **3 w.s. south** (Fig. 34) a naked woman bends to kiss a dog, a man behind her has his hand on her back, a man in front of her holds up a pot. The man holding the pot is clothed; but a hand, either his or the bending woman's, has pushed aside his lower garment to reveal his penis. A very tall woman behind, with parts of her breasts and her face missing, presents an indecipherable emotion.



Fig. 34 3 w.s. south

However, there can be no doubt that the pot the man holds is going to be placed on the ground for the woman at the front to lean on as she performs with both men at once. The panel is a meditation on the purity of a woman's mouth vis-a-vis *fellatio*.

Several of the RM panels are very puzzling, but one difficult panel becomes explicable by looking at the other set of narrative panels in RM, those found on the oblique ceiling slabs. They are considerably simpler than the pillar panels but they are not easy to see.

Two panels from the s.w. oblique ceiling slab are combined in **RM 2 w.s. s-w**. Because of its complexity, I give two separate photos of **RM 2 w.s. s-w**. Above top right (Fig. 35b) on the ceiling, Rāma shoots an arrow at Mārīca, the demon dis-



Fig. 35a 2w.s. s-w (2 views):

Fig. 35b ceiling slab s-w

guised as the golden deer, and who is shown coming forth from the slain animal²¹. With the brio sometimes found in RM pillars, on the pillar (top left, Fig. 35a) the demon casts aside the deer's head with his left hand, throwing it off like a mask. In the ceiling version (Fig. 35b), the deer's head is on the ground. In the lower part of the pillar panel, as the ceiling panel parallel makes clear, Rāvaṇa, shown as holding what looks like a casket in his left hand, with no sign of Sītā, holds the curved sword with which he is about to cut off Jaṭāyu's wing. Jaṭāyu occurs three times in the ceiling panel, flying up, attacking Rāvaṇa, and fallen to the ground with his wing cut through.

The artist of the pillar panel is bold and incisive; not only that, he arrogantly, or carelessly, dispenses with any attempt to delineate Rāma or Rāvaṇa in their

21. I am grateful to Corinna Wessels-Mevissen for confirming my identification of Mārīca by pointing to another example of a human Mārīca emerging from the theriomorphic form, this time from Hangal in Karnataka (Kanitkar 2020).

proper forms. The demon flings off the deer's head; the artist flings aside the bother of accuracy. It might of course be the case that the artist was not capable of fitting in Rāvaṇa. The casket Rāvaṇa holds is explained by a 13c version from Karnataka of Rāvaṇa fending off Jaṭāyu: the demon holds in just the same way a miniature Sītā in a miniature hermitage²². The casket here is the hermitage, a sacred container with Sītā inside but not visible. At any event, strange though 'Rāvaṇa' is, the sculptor far surpasses the rudimentary ceiling squares.



Fig. 36

Right next to this panel is another puzzle, a man on a camel and a woman coming to him (Fig. 36: **2 w.s. south**), perhaps referring to a romantic ballad like the centuries later Ḍhola-Maru where King Ḍhola finds and brings home his forgotten first wife. This is certainly not an abduction, and it is possible that it is intended to be a deliberate contrast to Rāvaṇa's taking of Sītā. Another version of the scene, (Fig. 36: **1 n.w. east**), is shown beside it, eroded but with a better camel.

I close this brief presentation of RM pillars by showing a few of several prominent panels (Fig. 37) which in addition to expressing flow, mutuality, and symmetry, feature a particularly horrible act, namely stabbing someone in the eye. These are part of general scenes of battle, with no specific reference (though one has a Bhīma figure). Stabbing the eye does not bring complete darkness, and it is a thoroughly practical procedure in sword and dagger fighting, the eye being a soft and easy target. Nevertheless, the dagger plunging into the eye is the bringer of darkness, of the closing down of coherence and order, even in the sunlit complexity of the Dance Hall. Two features of the sun often mentioned in texts are that his radiant heat is dangerous, and that his brightness destroys darkness and ignorance. Prior to the Sun's presence being gained in the *garbha-gṛha*, the worshipper

22. Loizeau 2017, 212, fig. 83; Loizeau 2010, 15, fig. 33.

is flooded with imagery, but they are also blinded, as it were, by the dangerous multiplicity of the everyday world that the pillars sum up.



Fig. 37

RM is later than GM, but the greatest difference between their panels arises from the arithmetic. Eight pillars allow a slow and ponderous working through of a few themes, themes which by the last two pillars are reduced to the interaction of loving couples and a couple of appearances by Bhīma. Thirty-two pillars demand considerable change of topic if the pillars, bathed in light, are to maintain novelty and freshness of appearance. Avoiding undue repetition, RM is necessarily kaleidoscopic. RM builds on the sculptural examples of the GM pillars, but takes them much further. RM presents an amplified situation, freed from a single entrance and exit, and freed from any goal within its own confines. Although one can take a straight line from the further side of the tank through to Sūrya in his shrine, quite possibly the RM was usually entered as now predominantly from the south. The appearance of the erotic in RM solely on the inner axes of south and west is an interesting problem, among the many that Modhera presents. Perhaps this was the most popular route to the *mūrti*.

4. Conclusions

I hope that this brief introduction to Modhera's narrative panels has made an initial case for them to be more fully examined as complex works of art. I will in conclusion summarise my preliminary findings, briefly recapping two alternative

explanations for the special character of these sculptures, before summing up the case for liminality as the key factor.

In the first place, one basic fact of architecture is a possible explanation for the special character of the sculpture of the two halls. The architect, or architects, evidently wanting to produce a highly ornamental temple, opted for eight-sided pillars, with narrative sculpture on the set of panes a little above eye-level. The mere necessity of ringing the changes from pane to pane, extreme because of the octagonality, might conceivably have produced as a kind of by-product the strange concatenations of imagery here described. However, another consequence of octagonality is, I believe, of even greater significance; namely the large number of panels that are more or less directly in the onlooker's field of vision. The effect is all the greater amid the multiple pillars of RM, which also benefit from the increased natural illumination. This multiplicity of lines of vision causes a cross-contamination of imagery, presenting an almost overwhelming variety of narrative sculpture to the moving eye.

Secondly, there is the question of social background. As noted above, the frequent representations of Bhīma, mighty warrior of the *Mahābhārata*, especially when combined with a very similar looking figure in music and dance scenes, and even perhaps in love-making, suggest that all these figures should be understood as multiforms of Bhīma I, the king who built the temple. In which case, might not all the various tensions and distortions found in the imagery we have examined be nothing more than a reflection of the quality and tone of life in the court of Bhīma I, and also that of his son if it were he who built RM?

Both explanations could each stand alone, but they are both more plausibly seen as contributions to the argument for the influence on the artwork of its liminal situation. Modhera is undeniably a treasure-house of liminal themes. From the very first pillars of GM to the scattering of instances of violent blinding in RM, the orderly progression of normal Indian temple imagery is shattered. The panes are virtual theatres, displaying an ever-changing variety of scenes, scenes that destroy certainty, disrupt calm; with the occasional exception of scenes of communal peaceful cooperation! Images of Sūrya himself and his son Revanta are occasionally present in the mêlée, as also fierce forms of Śiva and Viṣṇu, but as merely incidentals in the heaving tumult of human and animal life, deftly and powerfully portrayed. All this is the highly charged anteroom to the *mūrti* of Sūrya.

The notion of liminality has mushroomed since its origins in the ideas of van Gennepe and Turner. Its sphere has developed from tribal ritual to being an all-

pervasive feature of modern life²³. The liminality at Modhera is at a kind of mid-point between those two poles. Early in this chapter I made a passing reference to recent work on liminality in medieval western art, which lies on the same mid-point. Here, just as there, a leap of imagination is necessary to find liminal art in a liminal situation when there is no evidence of deliberate intent on the part of the art's creators. Frequently visible within the panes themselves is the leaping overhead of Hanumān, like Bhīma son of the god of wind, like Bhīma wielder of the mace; an inherently liminal figure, Hanumān is emblematic of leaping imagination. As Lynn Jacobs argues in the case of medieval and early modern Netherlandish art, the art itself can be seen to have agency in liminal situations²⁴.

As already mentioned, the parallel of the medieval church altar screen occurred to me because I had set out in front of me the entire surface of narrative 'liminal' sculpture at Modhera, reducing it to a flat surface not entirely unlike a screen. In fact the total actual lifesize surface area of the Modhera sculpture which I class as 'liminal' is approximately 4 square metres in GM, and 17.3 square metres in RM. In reality, of course, the sculpture presents itself on octagonal surfaces, and can only be seen in full by twisting and turning one's body on a journey of many metres in distance.

There has been no scope in this chapter to bring out how greatly this 'liminal' sculpture differs from everything else at Modhera. The oblique ceiling panels briefly referred to each contain ten panels, but these are not framed in the same way as on the pillars; they are not in the least theatrical, and they lack narrative force, and liveliness. Figs 35a and 35b make the contrast crystal clear. Secular friezes on the outer walls of the main temple necessarily stretch out, lack focus, are merely linear, lack dynamism. The standard iconography, set out by Lobo, is formal, drab, extensive, measured, whereas the 'liminal' panels grab the attention, pull you by the arm.

A key factor, which is visible on every photograph here, is framing: pillars and arches frame every panel. Each panel is a kind of theatre, a stage, on which a particular performance is represented. Many are specific performances, such as musicians and dancers, and groups of monkeys, in for instance solemn conclave, imitating humans. Again in many scenes of duelling with clubs, we have either Bhīma in the *Mahābhārata*, or King Bhīma I showing his skill with his mace; or again, an actor on the stage imitating either of them. To repeat, each panel is a

23. Cf. Szokolczai 2017 and the Contemporary Liminality Series of books that he edits for Routledge.

24. Jacobs 2018, 28.

stage, a viewing point, a window into intense and complex life. Ambiguity and uncertainty serve as prelude to the divine glory of Sūrya, the Sun god.

Two particular sets of panels may stand for all the others, in that they are emblematic of the representation of liminality at Modhera. Firstly in GM where panes on pillars 1, 3, 4 and 5 play about with the very notion of *darśana*, similar groups of people looking spellbound at the divine and then at the erotic. As noted above, the first panel directly facing the viewer is erotic, featuring very probably Rāvaṇa; but elsewhere on that pillar two groups of worshippers behold Sūrya. On pillar 3, two naked Jain monks and a Hindu behold Sūrya. But on pillar 4 three naked Jain monks watch an orgy; and on pillar 5 three women and even Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa view another orgy²⁵. Secondly the weird representations of the abduction of Sītā in GM and RM, utterly different from each other, but both extreme distortions. An unconcerned seated Sītā is grabbed from behind by a Rāvaṇa resembling a landlord from an early Bollywood film²⁶; and in an extremely ambitious panel we have both Rāma shooting an arrow at the golden deer, and Rāvaṇa about to strike Jaṭāyu as the bird seeks to rescue Sītā from Rāvaṇa's sky-chariot²⁷, with Sītā invisible in the chariot reduced to a casket, and most notably the dissolving of all physical attributes belonging to Rāvaṇa, so that he is simply a lithe young warrior. In sum, all the panels present a distorted dream world, a world of rampant liminality.

25. Figs. 11, 16, 17, 19.

26. Fig. 7: **GM 1 south**.

27. Fig. 35a: **RM 2 w.s. s-w**.

References

- Bharucha 1951 = S. Bharucha, *The Sun Temple at Modhera*, «Marg» 5/1 (1951), 50-56.
- Brown 1956 = Percy Brown, *Indian architecture: Buddhist and Hindu Periods*, Taraporevala, Bombay (n.d. [1941]) 3rd rev. ed. 1956.
- Burgess 1903 = James Burgess, *Architectural Antiquities of northern Gujarat*, Bernard Quaritch, London 1903.
- Dhaky 1963 = M. A. Dhaky, *The date of the dancing hall of the Sun temple, Modhera*, «Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bombay» 38 (N.S.) (1963), 211-222.
- Giri 1987-88 = Kamal Giri, *The cultural life as depicted in the sculptures of the Sun Temple of Modherā*, «Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bombay» 62-63 (N. S.) (1987-1988), 48-58.
- Goldman 2009 = Robert Goldman, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki: An Epic of Ancient India. VI: Yuddhakāṇḍa*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2009.
- Jacobs 2018 = Lynn F. Jacobs, *Thresholds and Boundaries: Liminality in Netherlandish Art (1385-1530)*, Routledge, London 2018.
- Jung 2013 = Jacqueline E. Jung, *The Gothic Screen: Space, Sculpture, and Community in the Cathedrals of France and Germany, ca. 1200—1400*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Kanitkar 2020 = Kumud Kanitkar, *Bhuleshvara Shivalaya. A Photo Essay*, Aprant, Pune 2020.
- Lobo 1982 = Wibke Lobo, *The Sun-Temple at Modhera*, Verlag C. H. Beck, München 1982.
- Loizeau 2010 = Rachel Loizeau, *Viradha and Ravana – The abductors of Sita*, Asian Civilizations Museum, Singapore 2010.
- Loizeau 2017 = Rachel Loizeau, *Traditions narratives dans la sculpture du Karnataka: Les représentations épiques, l'enfance de Kṛṣṇa et autres mythes puraniques dans les temples hoysala (XIIe-XIIIe siècles)*, Presses Universitaires Paris-Sorbonne, Paris 2017.

- Majumdar 1956 = Asoke Kumar Majumdar, *Chaulukyas of Gujarat*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay 1956.
- Szokolczai 2016 = Arpad Szokolczai, *Permanent Liminality and Modernity: Analysing the Sacrificial Carnival through Novels*, Routledge, London, 2016.
- Srivastava 2013 = V. C. Srivastava, *Sāmba Purāṇa: An Exhaustive Introduction, Sanskrit Text, English Translation, Notes & Index of Verses*, Parimal Publications, Delhi 2013.
- Sattar 1990 = Arshia Sattar, *Hanumān in the Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki: A Study in Ambiguity*, Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1990.
- Tiwari 1986 = M. N. P. Tiwari, *Mahābhārata scenes on the Sun Temple at Moḍherā*, «Journal of the Oriental Institute» 35/3-4 (1986), 195-200.
- Turner 1979 = Victor Turner, *Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality*, «Japanese Journal of Religious Studies», 6-4 (Dec., 1979), 465-499.