Why Label Them?

Inscribed *Rāmāyaṇa* Temple Reliefs
in Early South Asia

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the little understood practice of inscribing early Hindu temple reliefs with labels. A close reading is conducted of the iconography and formal qualities of a group of seventh-century terracotta panels from Palāsbāḍī (Bogura District, Bangladesh) depicting lively scenes from the epic Rāmāyaṇa, thus allowing us to identify the various purposes and uses of the labels attached to the imagery. The article concludes that the interplay of word and image acts to enhance both media.

IN THIS ARTICLE, I ADDRESS THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS: WHY WERE CERTAIN early and medieval groups of temple reliefs depicting scenes from the epic *Rāmāyaṇa* inscribed with labels? Who were these labels for? And how can we make use of these labels today? As the principal case study through which to explore these questions, I employ the most substantial set of (extant) inscribed *Rāmāyaṇa* panels, a collection from Palāsbāḍī in Bogura District, Bangladesh, dating to the second half of the seventh century CE. In an article published in 1990, Gouriswar Bhattacharya introduced the panels, transliterated their inscriptions, dated them based on a careful palaeographic analysis, and laid the groundwork for further study. Since then, however, the panels have not been subject to any detailed scrutiny. While it is beyond this article's scope to analyze the entire collection of panels from this site, my present aim is to expand the current ways of thinking about the Palāsbāḍī panels, and narrative temple images with labels more broadly. To achieve this, I take a twofold approach that involves categorizing the various functions of labels, and examines the relations between inscriptions, iconography, formal qualities, and narrative based on a selection of sample panels.

Images with labels are found in many geographically far-flung cultures. In antiquity, this form of multimodal communication existed in, among

other places, Egypt, Assyria, Israel, China, Greece, Rome, India, and Byzantium. This indicates widespread recognition of how — as John Bateman puts it — when text and image are combined, ". . . the meanings of one and the meanings of the other resonate so as to produce more than the sum of the parts" (2014, 6). This dynamic interplay is manifest in the Palāsbāḍī panels, where the combination of word and image serves to enhance meaning, narrative recall, clarity, and — whether intentional or not — to establish a limited degree of stability or permanence regarding how the *Rāmāyaṇa*, a highly fluid, living epic, is read on this now disassembled and fragmented frieze.

As will shortly become evident, there is a robust body of scholarship on Buddhist imagery with label inscriptions. In contrast, almost no scholarship — at least not extending beyond transliteration and basic identification — exists for Hindu imagery inscribed with labels. This study thus aims to make a useful contribution to this field of inquiry.

Hindu temples began to punctuate the landscape of North India in large numbers in the late fourth century CE, during the rule of the Gupta emperors (ca. 320–550 CE). The earliest temple relief carvings representing the epic *Rāmāyaṇa* belong to this period. Moreover, it was under the Guptas, and to a lesser extent the neighboring Vākāṭakas, that descriptive labels began to appear on some Hindu temple images, commonly on narrative scenes.[1] Most often — but not exclusively — these labeled visual narratives illustrate episodes from the *Mahābhārata*, *Harivaṃśa*, and *Rāmāyaṇa*, predominantly the last. The largest concentration of Gupta-period labeled images is found in the area that comprises modern-day northwest Rajasthan and neighboring northeast Haryana, with another group unearthed at Katingara in Etah District, Uttar Pradesh (GREAVES 2018) (see Fig. 1, below).

The labels on Hindu images generally fall into one of three categories: those containing the name of a character represented; the type of character (e.g., *rākṣasa*); or a brief description of what is occurring in the scene. To illustrate, I turn to a late fourth- or early fifth-century terracotta panel from Nācharkheḍā (Jind District, Haryana) that

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1. I am familiar with only one Hindu example originating from the Vākāṭaka empire. This comprises an image of the goddess Gaṅgā inscribed with the label *gaṅgā bhagavati*, found at the site where the Paramadhāma Āśrama of Vinoba Bhave was erected in Paunar (Nagpur District, Maharashtra) (see, for example, BAKKER 1997, 155). There are also Buddhist label inscriptions produced under the Vākāṭakas at Ajantā (Chatrapati Sambhajinagar District, Maharashtra). This site is briefly discussed below.

Figure 1. Map showing sites where labeled Hindu temple images dating between the fourth or fifth and the eighth centuries have been found. The sites marked by black circles have labeled images dating to the Gupta and Vākāṭaka eras, while the images from the sites marked by red squares date to the seventh or eighth centuries. Additionally, there are several labeled images from this period with no recorded findspot. See, for example, a well-known inscribed Gupta-period terracotta panel fragment depicting Rāma at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art: https://collections.lacma.org/node/197311.

Figure 2. Inscribed terracotta panel depicting Tṛśiras flanked by two *rākṣasa*s. Late fourth or early fifth century CE. Unearthed from a mound at Nācharkheḍā in Jind District, Haryana, along with several other panels depicting scenes from the *Rāmāyaṇa*. 42 x 44 x 9 cm. Gurukul Museum, Jhajjar. Photo credit: author.

depicts a scene related to an episode in the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* of the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* (3.25.23–26.18),[2] and is inscribed with two of these label types (see Fig. 2, below). At the center of the composition, sitting in kingly pose in a pillared hall, is the three-headed *rākṣasa* Tṛśiras. His name is inscribed in Brāhmī script beside his shoulder on the left side of the panel.[3] According to the short Sanskrit verse running along the

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2. All references to, and quotes from, the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* are based on, or taken from, the Princeton University Press critical translation (GOLDMAN et al.).

3. The label reads *Tṛśira*, which is an unusual variant of *Triśiras*. On this topic, see DHAR 2023, 136 and STADTNER 2015, 215.

lower border of the panel, Tṛśiras is being informed of Rāma having slain fourteen *rākṣasa*s sent by Rāvaṇa (*cat(u)rdaśarākṣasā °a(r)jja(ś) cā◊rāmādhibhu◊śaḥ*).[4] The inscriptions on the Nācharkheḍā panels are of great significance since, though concise, they comprise the earliest surviving *Rāmāyaṇa* verses in writing.

The practice of labeling images in India was not a Gupta innovation, however, nor even a Hindu one. It had its naissance several centuries prior, around the second century BCE, under the Śuṅgas; until the Gupta period, all inscribed labels in religious contexts were found on Buddhist monuments. Labels were still being added to Buddhist visual narratives in the fifth century CE: for example, on the painted murals in the caves at Ajantā (Dehejia 1997, 208–10). Most probably, then, Hindus adopted this practice from Buddhists. In the interim period, following the Śuṅga era and prior to the emergence of the Hindu practice of labeling images, labels also featured on "secular" representations of Kuśāṇa and Sātavāhana rulers (Salomon 1998, 120–21). Moreover, Kuśāṇa- and Gupta-period coins bear images of deities with labels. While it is beyond the scope of this article to address the coin corpus, I acknowledge that coins were the most prevalent and widely circulated objects to feature labeled representations of gods, though the word/image dialogue here is considerably more restricted in breadth than in visual temple narratives. The plentiful early dedicatory inscriptions that encompass the names of deities are also excluded, since these are distinct from label inscriptions.

I now proceed to a discussion on the origins and early manifestations of the practice of inscribing images with labels in South Asia to lay the foundations for the examination of labeled *Rāmāyaṇa* reliefs at Palāsbāḍī that will follow.

The Origins of Labeling Images

"On the pillar [of the Bhārhut *stūpa*] which contains the scene of the Jetavana garden being bought by Anāthapindaka by covering the ground

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4. See Handa 2006, 108; Devakarni 2007, plate 2; Bawa 2018, 101–02; Dhar 2023, 135–36. The Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* does not have a scene in which Tṛśiras is informed of Rāma having killed fourteen *rākṣasa*s; however, the text does have him engage in battle with Rāma. During this battle, Rāma fires fourteen arrows into Tṛśiras's chest (3.26.13). Moreover, we hear several times in the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* that Rāma has slain 14,000 *rākṣasa*s.

with pieces of gold, we see indeed something that could be construed as representing that famous event; but it is doubtful whether, without the inscription underneath, anyone, even if he possessed the learning and sagacity of Mr. Beal, could have guessed at its real meaning."

<div align="right">(Müller 1874, 570)</div>

"These short records are quite invaluable, as they enable us to identify the scenes to which they are attached with absolute certainty. We thus obtain the means of distinguishing one class of people from another with confidence, and of ascertaining what legends were current and most popular at the early period when [. . . the Bhārhut] Stūpa was erected."

<div align="right">(Cunningham 1998 [1879], 127)</div>

The earliest labeled narrative relief images are found on the railings of the Buddhist *stūpa* at Bhārhut in Satna district, Madhya Pradesh, constructed around 150 to 100 BCE, during the rule of the Śuṅga emperors (see Fig. 3, below).[5] Since this is the earliest partially extant religious monument in

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5. Several scholars have suggested that the narrative scrolls (*pata*s) carried by itinerant bards or "picture showmen", and perhaps also used by monastic *bhānaka*s, served as a source of influence for the composition, iconography, arrangement, and content of the visual narratives carved on the railings (*vedikā*s) and gateways (*toraṇa*s) of early Buddhist *stūpa*s (Coomaraswamy 1929; Mair 1988, 17–19 and 26–27; Dehejia 1990, 377). As an aside, I would argue that the term "picture show people" be used instead, as women are, and have historically been, involved in the profession. The most tantalizing if tentative indication of the connection between scrolls and *stūpa* carvings exists in the form of carved stone *toraṇa* lintels at Sāñcī, each of which commence and culminate in a tightly-wound volute. *Jātaka* tales represented in bas-relief are situated between the volutes. There are various hypotheses as to what the volutes represent (for example, Sastri 1956, 207–10). John Marshall and Alfred Foucher (1982 [1902], 231) correctly identify the majority as depicting lotus stalks. Rowland proposes that the volutes imitate the rolled-up ends of partially unfurled painted scrolls (Rowland 1967, 59). In the context of Indian art, it is plausible that the volutes are multivocal in their conception, representing lotuses on long — even infinite — spiralling stalks, while simultaneously recalling painted scrolls.

If the lintels were accurate representations of scrolls rolled-up at both ends, the volutes would have been positioned vertically rather than horizontally. Perhaps, though, we need only problematize the lack of realism if we believe the intention was to do more than simply draw upon the format. In the painted scrolls (*paṭ*s) of modern-day Bengal, the artist/storyteller (*paṭuā*) sings the narrative as they point to the images. Once they have completed a segment of the narrative, they roll up that part of the scroll while simultaneously unfurling

India bearing elaborate relief carvings, the origins of the labeling tradition can be considered as approximately contemporaneous with the beginnings of the production of narrative carvings in non-perishable materials. Curiously, although the practice of labeling narrative reliefs in the media of stone and terracotta continued for centuries after the Śuṅga era and had a geographically widespread and trans-religious uptake, it remained a minor practice throughout its lifespan. I will shortly consider why this was.

Returning to the Bhārhut *stūpa*; not only do its railings bear the earliest surviving labeled visual narratives, but it arguably also constitutes the most illuminating case study regarding the practice of labeling in the ancient and early Buddhist contexts. These inscriptions have been discussed by Vidya Dehejia (1990, 377–78; 2007, 294–303) and more recently by Pia Brancaccio (2022), who draws together donor inscriptions (which comprise two-thirds of the inscriptions here), label inscriptions, and narrative relief imagery, to paint an insightful picture of the possible reasons for, and concepts behind, the iconographic program at Bhārhut.[6] Brancaccio comments on the shared occupation of many donors to this *stūpa*, including that of the *navakammika*, the monk who had architectural expertise and supervised the construction of the *stūpa*. This contingent of donors were *bhānaka*s ("professional reciters").[7] At the time of the

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the next segment, the result being that the scroll is wound up at both ends. The form diverges from the supposed Sāñcī scroll representations in that the modern Bengali scrolls unfold vertically, and the Sāñcī "scrolls" horizontally, as do scrolls from other parts of modern-day India (see, for example, Singh 1998, 103–05).

Due to their perishable medium, there are no extant painted scrolls of great antiquity, but on a minority of those that have survived from the past couple of centuries, the images are accompanied by labels. This has led Brancaccio (2022, 684) to hypothesise that the Bhārhut sculptors might have taken the inspiration to inscribe their relief narratives from painted scrolls with labels. While it is worth entertaining this possibility, there is no extant literary or material evidence to support this, as Brancaccio herself points out (2022, 683; see also Dehejia 1990, 377).

6. For another recent study that brings together label inscriptions, donor inscriptions, and *stūpa* imagery (especially at Amarāvatī and Kanaganahalli) and provides fascinating insights about the patrons of the monuments, see Tournier 2023.

7. On the *bhānaka* tradition at early Buddhist monastic sites, see Ray 1994–95, 349–50; on an imagining of the experience viewers might have had as they were led around the Bhārhut *stūpa* by a "mentor" who would have recounted some of

Figure 3. Detail of a Bhārhut coping stone depicting the Sasa Jātaka. Allahabad State Museum. Photo credit: author.

Bhārhut *stūpa*'s construction, the stories of the Buddha's life and his earlier incarnations (*jātakas*) were transmitted orally, thus many would have encountered the tales via *bhānaka*s. The Buddhist stories were committed to writing for the first time around the second half of the first century BCE, relatively close in time to the construction of the Bhārhut *stūpa*. Not all *jātakas* represented at Bhārhut were included in the Buddhist textual canon and have only survived in the form of these visual representations.

The labels on the Bhārhut reliefs are of various types (see LÜDERS 1963, 66–181).[8] There are labels that name the characters depicted; labels that

the stories represented en route, see DEHEJIA 1998, 22–31; it is fascinating that the *bhānaka* donors came to Bhārhut from far and wide, pointing to channels of communication existing between them. If we turn this on its head, we also have an example of how new ideas and practices spread with ease across the Indian subcontinent, where travel for work, pilgrimage, and migration, among other reasons, has been common since antiquity.

8. On these label inscriptions, Cunningham writes (1998 [1879], 127): "There is [a . . .] prominent difference between the Bharhut and Bhilsa Railings [Sāñcī], which adds greatly to the value of the former. This is the representation of Yakṣas and Yakṣinīs, and of Nāga Rajas and Devatās with their names duly attached to them, from which we learn that the old Indian cosmogony, as represented in Buddhist as well as Brahmanical books, with its *Nāga-loka*, and its Guardian Rajas of the four quarters of the universe, was all fully elaborated

name the category of character, for example, *ṛṣi*s ("sages"); labels that name the illustrated *jātaka*; labels that identify the activity occurring in the scene (e.g., "Ajātaśatru worships [the feet of] the Buddha"); labels that name objects of worship; labels that name monuments, e.g., *kauśāmbi kuṭi* ("the Kauśāmbi hut"); and labels that name geographic locations. These labels reveal that each element of a composition played an active and well-defined role in the visual narrative. Without the aid of labels, we might, for example, easily mistake the buildings depicted in the reliefs as generic signifiers of settlements, when in fact they often represent specific monuments that feature in the *jātaka* tales as told at Bhārhut. A similarly diverse array of label types is also present on the *stūpa* reliefs at Kanaganahalli (Kalaburagi District, Karnataka), (first century BCE to second century CE) (see Fig. 4, below), and on the earlier phase of the Amarāvatī *stūpa* carvings (ca. second century BCE) (DEHEJIA 1997, 143). In contrast, the labels that are featured on Vākāṭaka-era painted murals in some of the Ajantā caves, depicting *jātaka* tales, the life of the Buddha, *bodhisattva*s, and celestials, are of only three types.[9] These include names of characters; names of features such as tree species; and Sanskrit verses narrating or related to the painted stories (DEHEJIA 1997, 208). The development in image labeling at Ajantā is of significance, since labels on contemporaneous Hindu images are also limited in type.

From their placement, it is evident that the labels at Bhārhut (DEHEJIA 1990, 378) and at Ajantā (DEHEJIA 1997, 209) were added after the images were produced. Dehejia (2007, 294) proposes, however, that some of the inscriptions on the Kanaganahalli *stupa* — she uses the alternative name, Sannati — and on a narrative frieze on the Buddhist monument at Borobudur in Java were added before carving and served as instructions for sculptors as to which story to depict where (DEHEJIA 1990, 378). At Amarāvatī, there are labels that act as stand-ins for aspects of stories that have not been represented in the visual imagery (DEHEJIA 1997, 143). Other hypotheses for why Buddhist images were given labels propose that they were used as aide-memoires for reciters (DEHEJIA 1990, 378; DEHEJIA 1997, 105); for intelligibility, especially as regards the early Buddhist synoptic

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as early as the time of Aśoka. These inscriptions also teach us that the curiously shaped gateways of the Sānchi Stūpa were called by the name Toraṇa, and that the Rail-bars were named Sūcī, or 'needles,' no doubt because they seemed to *thread* all the pillars together."

9. Labeled narratives are found, for example, in caves 2, 16, 17, and 22.

Figure 4. Detail of a fragmented *stūpa* slab with label inscription at Kanaganahalli. Photo credit: author.

compositions, which can be difficult to read (DEHEJIA 1997, 218);[10] as aids for viewers when *stūpa*s were constructed in places new to Buddhist imagery (DEHEJIA 1997, 208); and as a means to preserve the stories and the names of local divinities in perpetuity (BRANCACCIO 2022, 677).[11]

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10. A synoptic narrative is one in which a sequence of events unfolds in condensed form with characters sometimes featuring more than once within the same frame. Moreover, the order in which events unfold is not communicated, leaving viewers with the task of unscrambling the visual narrative.

11. Regarding this hypothesis, there existed in early India a keen awareness of the varying degrees of permanence or perishability of materials. As Richard Salomon (1998, 4, fn. 8) writes regarding inscriptions: "The abundance of inscriptions in India may be attributed, in part at least, to the desire of the issuing authorities to preserve their records in a form which would survive the rigors of the Indian climate, where documents on perishable materials such as palm leaves or paper tend not to last more than a few generations. In particular, the widespread practice of recording land grants and other transactions on copper plates seems to reflect such concerns [. . .]".

     There would have been a presumption that the label inscriptions on *stūpa*s would survive for as long as the images did. Likewise, a donor to a religious

Lastly, Quintanilla proposes that labels were added to relief carvings on the Kanaganahalli *stūpa* around the second century CE, approximately three centuries after the imagery was produced, with the express intention of changing the original meanings of the visual narratives to reflect then-current religious trends at the *stūpa* site (2017, 117).[12]

Since the construction of the Bhārhut *stūpa* occurred in temporal proximity to the *jātaka*s being canonized and recorded in writing for the first time, might we consider the labeling of *stūpa* reliefs to have been an extension of this process of documentation and preservation, or a reflection of the cultural currents of the time?[13] Importantly, the earliest *Rāmāyaṇa* temple imagery likewise emerged in a period during which there existed a strong drive to commit the Hindu *śāstra*s, *sūtra*s, *āgama*s, and *purāṇa*s to writing, and the labeling of some of the images in this period might reflect this trend.

Those making the decision to add labels at a given site could have drawn from a pool of possible reasons. Thus, the impetus(es) varied between sites. Moreover, this pool of reasons changed over time. Dehejia (1997, 208), for example, expresses puzzlement that labels were included on the Ajantā murals in an age when familiarity with Buddhist imagery was a given. Therefore, the *principal* reason for labeling the Ajantā images was unlikely to be for the purposes of identification.

From the first appearance of labels at Bhārhut, we observe a general lack of uniformity regarding labels on the monuments that adopted them. On the Ajātaśatru pillar at Bhārhut, for example, labels are absent (Dehejia 1997, 103). This inconsistency is also present on Hindu monuments with inscribed images, as will be addressed later in the article. It would be a useful exercise to examine whether different hands were responsible for carving the images with and without labels on these various monuments.

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monument would want to have their donation documented in a stone inscription as a permanent record, because this was believed to secure them ongoing religious merit (see, for example, Shimada 2013, 141).

12. Quintanilla arrives at this conclusion on the grounds that the label captions often do not accurately describe what the imagery depicts (2017, 117).

13. Dehejia (1990, 378; 1997, 9) proposes the very opposite of this. When questioning why the Sāñcī narrative reliefs (ca. 50–1 BCE) are not labeled, she considers whether the Buddhist canon was committed to writing in the period between the construction of the Bhārhut and Sāñcī *stūpa*s, thereby making labels on the Sāñcī *stūpa* superfluous.

Why Were Labels Not More Widely Used?

In the pre-Buddhist and early Buddhist Chinese context, narrative pictures were often furnished with short descriptive texts. Julia Murray (1995, 19) writes:

> Because writing has held high prestige in China from ancient times onward, the juxtaposition of the written word was not considered a distraction from the pictorial image. In fact, the presence of writing would have elevated the merely pictorial by bringing it firmly into alignment with the high cultural tradition.

Do we find this same attitude prevalent in the Indian context? On the contrary, much ambiguity surrounds the reputation of writing in ancient and early India, with orality (and the concomitant skill of memorization) traditionally holding paramount status,[14] it being a manifestation rather than a reflection of language (Salomon 1998, 7–8; Bronkhorst 2002, 797).[15] Could it be, then, that many monastic centers did not subscribe to labeling narrative reliefs on their *stūpa*s, because the labels would undermine their intimate, learned-by-memory knowledge of the stories? Or, less contentiously, simply because they were not considered necessary?

The Palāsbāḍī Panels

In the late sixth and seventh centuries, approximately two centuries after first featuring on the walls of temples in the Gupta heartland, the theme of the *Rāmāyaṇa* was taken up on temples in the east of the Indian subcontinent

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14. It is widely accepted that writing was introduced to India during the reign of Emperor Aśoka Maurya (ca. 268–33 BCE), or shortly before. See Falk 1993.

15. Naturally, heterogeneous opinions existed on the value of writing in early India. On this topic, Salomon (1998, 7, fn. 2) writes: "The esteem accorded to the spoken as opposed to the written word should not [. . .] be overstated. In this connection, Kālidāsa's *Raghuvaṃśa* 3.28cd, *liper yathāvadgrahaṇena vāṅmayaṃ nadīmukheneva samudram āviśat*, 'As one enters the ocean through the mouth of a river, so did [Raghu] enter into literature by learning to write correctly,' has been cited [. . .] as an indication of the respect accorded to the written word, at least in the classical (as opposed to the Vedic) tradition. This status is also reflected in the attribution of the invention of writing to Brahmā himself [. . .]".

— in modern-day Bihar (GREAVES 2022), in Bogura and Naogaon districts in Bangladesh, and in Odisha — and in South India, namely in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Of these places, labeled narrative reliefs are found only in Bogura District (Pālasbāḍi and Saralpur) and at Paṭṭadakal in Karnataka.[16]

The village of Pālāsbāḍī is located 1 km southwest of the large fortress city of Mahāsthān (ancient Puṇḍranagara), the capital of Puṇḍravardhana (Puṇḍra Kingdom) in the ancient and medieval periods (see Figs. 5 and 6, below). When Prabas Chandra Sen visited Pālāsbāḍi in the 1920s, he observed old tanks and ruins that no longer survive.[17] Scholars have proposed that this village might correspond to ancient Palāśvṛindaka, where the Damodarpur copperplate charter 1 of Budhagupta (482 CE) was issued (SEN 1929, 10; BHANDARKAR 1981, 337–39). Numerous terracotta panels measuring ca. 25 x 31 cm were later unearthed here by a local resident and, after being reported to the authorities, were transferred to the National Museum of Bangladesh in Dhaka.[18] The findspot has never been subject to archaeological excavation or reported field surveys, and so we have no information about the archaeological or architectural contexts of the panels (BHATTACHARYA 1990, 1049).[19] The panels — many of which are inscribed — depict scenes from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and those for which the subjects can be confidently identified all represent scenes from the *Bālakāṇḍa* and *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* (books 1 and 2). Because the panels only illustrate the lead-up to the main events of the epic, it is likely that there were originally a greater number of panels, some narrating episodes from the sequentially later *kāṇḍa*s. Indeed, it would be an anomaly to have a temple frieze place such emphasis on the tragic death of King Daśaratha, but ignore the kidnapping of Sītā, the most heroic deeds of Rāma, and the overthrow

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16. *Rāmāyaṇa* friezes with label inscriptions are also found in Southeast Asia. For example, narrative panels housed at the Museum of Cham Sculpture in Đà Nẵng and believed to originate from Quảng Nam in Campā (modern-day Vietnam) have labels describing the scenes. These panels date to the ninth or tenth century CE (GRIFFITHS et al. 2012, 237–39). Many thanks to Elizabeth Cecil for drawing my attention to these panels.

17. Vincent Lefèvre has informed me that there are longer any ruins visible at Pālasbāri (personal communication, 2023).

18. Bhattacharya (1990, 1049) mentions there being more than thirty panels with inscriptions.

19. According to Afroz Akmam (1991, 384), the Pālāsbāḍī panels were collected in 1983. It was in 1984 that Gouriswar Bhattacharya was informed about them by then-Director General of the Bangladesh National Museum Enamul Haque (BHATTACHARYA 1990, 1048–49).
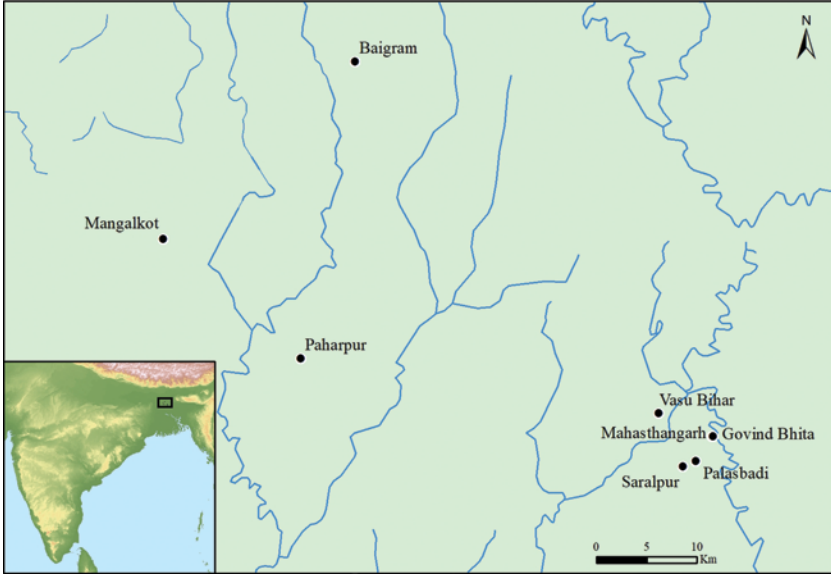
Figure 5. Map showing some of the significant archaeological sites in northwest Bangladesh.

Figure 6. Map showing the location of the ancient fortress city of Mahāsthān (Puṇḍranagara), nearby Pālasbāri, and Saralpur. Image © 2024 Google/Maxar Technologies.

of Rāvaṇa. We might hypothesize that the extant panels were positioned along one wall of a large temple platform that survived more or less intact, while the rest of the temple had vanished by the time of the panels' discovery. Certainly, monumentality was not uncommon for sacred brick architecture in Puṇḍravardhana between approximately the fifth and tenth centuries.[20]

The *Rāmāyaṇa* appears to have held some degree of popularity in this region in the seventh century, as is attested by the existence of a second series of contemporaneous inscribed terracotta panels depicting scenes from the epic. These were found at Saralpur, approximately 1.2 km southwest of Palāsbāḍī, where several archaeological mounds are (or were) located (SEN 1929, 10–11).[21] These panels were purchased by the Bangladesh National Museum in 1975 (HOSSAIN 2016, 176–97). The majority of the Saralpur panels are in poor condition, and most of their inscriptions have not been transliterated. Their style, however, seems to indicate that they were produced by the same workshop as the Palāsbāḍī panels. In addition to the Saralpur and Palāsbāḍī images, a small number of large stone relief panels dating to around the seventh century CE — discovered along the base of the terraced brick structure at the center of the Somapura Mahāvihāra at Pāhāṛpur (Naogaon District, Bangladesh), 37 km northwest of Palāsbāḍī — have been interpreted as representing *Rāmāyaṇa* scenes (DIKSHIT 1938, 40 and Plate XXXIIIb, 48, 51–53, and Plate XXXIIIa). These panels are not inscribed. The *Rāmāyaṇa* was also popular as a theme on temples in neighboring Bihar (ancient Magadha) in the sixth and seventh centuries (GREAVES 2022, 279–84).

What Do the Palāsbāḍī Panels Look Like and Why?

The Palāsbāḍī panel compositions, partly molded and partly modeled in high relief, are overwhelmingly figure-centric. Emphasis is placed on the physicality of the figures, on their actions, and on their emotional states. The movements, mannerisms, and postures of the represented figures

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20. See, for example, the multi-terraced structure at Gōkul outside of Mahāsthān (GREAVES 2020, 27–28); Pāhāṛpur (GREAVES 2020, 29); Govind Bhita; and Vasu Bīhar.

21. Twenty-one panels from Saralpur are published in a catalogue of the terracottas in the Bangladesh National Museum (HOSSAIN 2016, 176–97). These panels are recorded as measuring ca. 23 x 29 cm. All but one of the panels are in storage and the published photographs are not adequate for the purposes of reading the Brāhmī inscriptions. Peculiarly, the Pālasbāri panels are not included in this catalogue.

Figure 7. Panel from Palāsbāḍī depicting two dead *rākṣasa*s. The inscription on the top left reads *rākṣasa*; the label on the top right could not be deciphered. Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka. Photo credit: author.

are usually "exaggerated" as opposed to "naturalistic", to use terms common in drama theory.[22] Moreover, the physicality of the characters is enhanced by the reductive compositional style of the panels, for example by the near absence of middle grounds and backgrounds.[23] A relief panel from Palāsbāḍī depicts two newly deceased *rākṣasa*s in a forest setting as indicated by the presence of a single tree (see Fig. 7, below). One *rākṣasa* is lying face down, arms outstretched, and buttocks upraised. The other *rākṣasa* appears to be in motion, having just tumbled onto his

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22. I put the terms "exaggerated" and "naturalistic" in inverted commas because a person might have a natural reaction to an event that is overtly physical: for example, collapsing to the floor in pain after an accident. In physical theatre, however, all emotions or reactions are conveyed in a strongly physical manner that leaves no doubt in the eyes of the viewer as to what a character is experiencing.

23. The exception is the Sumitrā panel from Saralpur, which does have a backdrop (Fig. 13). Most other panels from Saralpur are without backgrounds.

dead companion, his body awkwardly contorted, his chest facing up with the arrow hole visible, and his head and arms flopped backward. The tree has also been pierced by an arrow — an effective detail that encourages viewers to imagine Rāma's myriad arrows hurtling through the air.

The expressive theatricality of the Palāsbāḍī imagery meant that for a viewer following the frieze around the temple, the potential must have existed for experiencing immersion in the melodrama of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The level of immersion experienced would be partly dependent on the positioning of the frieze. If the frieze was situated at approximately eye level, as were the narrative friezes at Deogaṛh (Lalitpur District, Uttar Pradesh) and Aphṣāḍ (Nawada District, Bihar) — dating to the fifth and the seventh century, respectively — a viewer could have experienced a sense of immediacy through the imagery and, by extension, the unfolding narrative.

The emphases on physicality, action, and emotion in the Palāsbāḍī reliefs indicate how the artists aimed to elicit *rasa* (aesthetic "taste") in the viewers of the *Rāmāyaṇa* frieze. This complex and highly sophisticated aesthetic theory, which was first outlined in Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* (ca. third century CE), a dramaturgical manual, is lucidly explained by Priyadarshi Patnaik (2018 [2016], 44):

> According to Bharata, *rasa* comes from the combination of *vibhāvas* (antecedents, sources or causes), *anubhāvas* (effects or consequences that emerge in response to the antecedents or causes) and *vyabhicāribhāvas* (accompanying fleeting states that intensify the mood). Gradually, their unfolding, which leads to a series of emotional responses in the perceiver, stirs certain feelings, and finally a specific emotion (say that of joy, ecstasy or disgust) intensifies to a state where we–for a few seconds or minutes–forget ourselves, submerge in the world of the art object and experience an emotion that has nothing to do with our lives. This experience makes us forget our identities, our specific time and locale, our histories, and floods us with a nameless experience — Bharata calls this *rasa*.

A fascinating eighth-century insight into the *rasa* that a visual depiction of the *Rāmāyaṇa* could invoke in viewers is found in Act 1 of Bhavabhūti's play the *Uttararāmacarita* (Pollock 2007, 81–103). To set the stage for the drama that will unfold, Rāma and Sītā are taken to view a painted mural of their own story. This experience deeply affects them, bringing them to a range of emotional states, from joy to sorrow. The distinction

between what is real and what is illusion or representation is blurred in one passage, in which Rāma asks Sītā to pay homage to the divine weapons represented in the murals so that they might protect her offspring, thereby suggesting the efficacy of the imagery (*Uttararāmacarita* 1.65–1.69, in POLLOCK 2007, 83–85). At another moment, Rāma reminds Sītā that this is only a painting, before being moved to tears only a few lines later as he re-lives the past through the imagery (1.115, in POLLOCK 2007, 97). In this remarkable scene, Bhavabhūti has conveyed the immense emotional and transcendental impact that art has upon a *rasika* (an aesthete or connoisseur of *rasa*). And of course, being king and queen, Rāma and Sītā must be considered the ultimate *rasika*s.

If we consider facilitating the viewer experience of *rasa* as being among the principal objectives of the Palāsbāḍī artists, then we can understand why certain elements of a narrative are prioritized over others. For instance, locational setting is less likely to incite *rasa* than the actions of the depicted characters, and therefore is only minimally considered in these panels. If the speed of production was also an important consideration, then we can again understand the choice to focus only on the most essential elements of a narrative.

Spreading Eastward

The pronounced emphasis on physicality in the Palāsbāḍī panels is not novel. The artists here closely adopt a long-standing iconographic tradition that took shape further to the west during the Gupta period. There is a particularly striking stylistic affinity between the Palāsbāḍī panels and the inscribed narrative terracotta panels from Katingara (see, for example, Fig. 8, below). Both the lengthy distance between these two sites (one thousand kilometers as the crow flies) and the time lapse between them (approximately two centuries) tentatively suggest that there were once brick and terracotta temples with *Rāmāyaṇa* friezes of a similar style (and possibly inscribed) located closer in time and space to the Palāsbāḍī temple.[24]

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24. A Gupta-period temple once stood at Baigrām (ancient Vāyigrāma) in Dinajpur District, Bangladesh, about 50 kilometers northwest of Palāsbāḍī as the crow flies. This is testified by a copper-plate inscription (448 CE) recording a land donation for repairs and maintenance to a Vaiṣṇava temple dedicated to Govindasvāmī. Excavation has uncovered the foundations of a brick temple,

Figure 8. Terracotta panel from Katingara (Etah District, Uttar Pradesh) dating to the early fifth century CE and measuring 31.7 x 52.1 cm. This inscribed panel depicts the *rākṣasī* Siṃhikā (a guardian of Laṅkā) trying to attack Hanūmān (the caption next to the monkey reads haṇū/mā). This episode features in lines 1.165–178 in the the Sundarakāṇḍa of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*. In a private collection. Photo credit: Donald Stadtner.

The Labels

We come now to the various functions served by the labels on the Palāsbāḍī panels, and to the additional ways in which they are useful for us today. I refer to Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* for textual comparison, since it is the earliest surviving, most extensive and, at that point in time, most influential *Rāmāyaṇa*. By the seventh century CE, there were multiple written *Rāmāyaṇa* or *Rāmāyaṇa*-inspired plays and poems in existence, but no records exist documenting which of these were known in Puṇḍravardhana. More commonly, the *Rāmāyaṇa* would have been transmitted orally, each telling varying in length, content, and emphases. Inevitably, not knowing what narrative source or sources the Palāsbāḍī artists were drawing inspiration from limits our interpretive possibilities and will sometimes unwittingly lead to a distorted comprehension of why

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but no surviving sculpture (Deva 1988, 24–25). The possibility exists of the temple having been adorned with terracotta relief imagery. *Rāmāyaṇa* imagery, however, does not appear to have been adopted in the east of the Indian subcontinent until around the mid-sixth century CE.

a particular composition looks as it does. In the analysis below, I will point out where this issue appears most problematic.

Labels as an Aid for Clarity

Most of the labels on the Palāsbāḍī panels contain names of the depicted characters or character types. One panel, however, is inscribed with a label that briefly describes the scene. This panel represents the body of the newly deceased King Daśaratha preserved in a vat of oil before the funeral rites could be conducted (see Fig. 9, below). This scene recalls lines 2.60.12–14 of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, which read as follows:

> "The ministers then took the lord of the world and placed him in a vat of sesame oil, and thereupon they assumed all the royal duties, as they were empowered to do.

> "The counselors, being prudent men, were reluctant to administer the final rites without a prince at court. And so for the meanwhile they kept watch over the lord of the earth.

> "When the women learned that the advisors had laid the lord of men in a vat of oil, they broke out in lamentation, crying 'oh he is dead!'"

The label on the panel reads *rāja daśaratha t(ai)lya droni*, or approximately, "King Daśaratha in a vat of oil". Would we be able to identify this scene without the inscription? It is not likely, and even less so today, as the panels are out of *situ* and we thus do not have the narrative sequence to aid its identification. Presumably even the artist thought that viewers might struggle to recognize this scene, hence the descriptive label. This conveys that clarity, or "readability", was an important consideration for the artists and/or others involved in the patronage, construction, and ritual activities of this temple. It also reveals that artists here might have been assessing the success or shortcomings of their own compositions.

This panel constitutes the only visual depiction of Daśaratha's body being preserved in a vat of oil that I have encountered in temple sculpture.[25]

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25. John and Mary Brockington have compiled a very helpful list of all visual representations of narrative *Rāmāyaṇa* images in temple sculpture dating until the seventeenth century CE, in which they also record the Palāsbāḍī panel as the only example of a depiction of King Daśaratha preserved in a vat of oil. See their

Figure 9. Panel from Palāsbāḍī depicting King Daśaratha's body being preserved in a tub of oil. Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka. Photo credit: author.

Clearly it was not a commonly represented scene, thus there was unlikely to have been an established iconography for it in circulation.

Labels as Keys to a Wealth of Information

Even the simplest of labels has the capacity to unlock a wealth of information for viewers, and I argue that the Palāsbāḍī artists were aware of this fact when adding inscriptions. A panel depicting the deceased King Daśaratha being mourned by his wives Kausalyā, Kaikeyī, and Sumitrā is an excellent example of this inherent capacity (see Fig. 10, below).[26] The labels reveal that the three queens have been pictured in order of age and seniority (in decreasing order from left to right), and because of this adherence to hierarchy, in addition to the visual characterization of the women, we would likely identify them accurately without the aid of labels. However, the labels give us a certainty that we would otherwise not have had. Indeed, without the labels, we would not be able to ascertain whether the artists themselves had differentiated between the three women they depicted.

"Development and Spread of the Rāma Narrative (Pre-Modern)" at the Oxford University Research Archive: https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:8df9647a-8002-45ff-b37e-7effb669768b.

26. The iconography recalls Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* 2.59.10–14, 2.60.1–11.

Figure 10. Panel from Palāsbāḍī depicting King Daśaratha being mourned by his wives Kausalyā, Kaikeyī, and Sumitrā. Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka. Photo credit: author.

The image shows Daśaratha's body lying on a carved bed and covered in a diaphanous shroud. The woman leaning over his head, wearing a gentle expression on her face, is the chief queen Kausalyā. Collapsed in grief on the floor at the foot of the bed is the youngest queen, Sumitrā. And in the center, wailing, arms in the air, her curvaceous form accentuated, is Kaikeyī, the alluring wife who hastened the death of Daśaratha by insisting that he send Rāma, her stepson, into exile, so that her own son, Bharata, could ascend the throne. The artist seems to have personified Kaikeyī as a hypocrite by illustrating her mourning highly conspicuously, while endowing her with a deep frown on her brow and a gaping mouth — both common features of *rākṣasī*s and raging figures in Indian art, but never of virtuous women or benign goddesses. The sensuous form of Kaikeyī's body, and the brazen way in which she holds it, are strikingly juxtaposed against the overt modesty of the other wives. This serves to remind viewers of how Kaikeyī used her husband's weakness for her beauty and seductiveness to obtain her goal.[27] The labels in conjunction with

27. There are numerous references to Kaikeyī's enchanting beauty in the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*, and of Daśaratha's attraction to her and his love for her over

the iconography serve as a mnemonic to recall this crucial, tumultuous episode of the *Rāmāyaṇa* more effectively than the imagery in isolation would have been capable of doing.

Labels as a Substitute for Iconographic Detail

In a similar vein, the labels allow artists to keep iconographic detail to a minimum without sacrificing readability. Thus, forest scenes are indicated by the presence of only one tree; palace scenes are denoted by the inclusion of a piece of furniture and sometimes a pillared enclosure; and sacrifices take place with characters sitting before a *yūpa* (a sacrificial post). This approach is far removed from early Buddhist art, where strong emphasis is placed on the physical environment of a story. As previously noted, however, it does closely align with the spare approach to composition that was often applied to narrative imagery in the Gupta period, especially in the medium of terracotta (Greaves 2018). Seventh-century *Rāmāyaṇa* reliefs carved in stone, such as those at Rājaona and Aiholē, are sometimes considerably more intricate, though this often amounts to the compositions being more peopled rather than including significantly more backdrop. This comparison, however, indicates that the medium played a significant role in guiding compositional choices.

A panel from Palāsbāḍī representing the angry ascetic Paraśurāma ("Rāma with an ax"), watching Rāma firing Viṣṇu's bow, contains little detail that would facilitate the identification of this scene (see Fig. 11, below).[28] Paraśurāma wears a deep frown and has matted hair fashioned into a topknot, both features that identify him as an angry ascetic. However, the battle-ax he wields in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* (1.73.16–19) is absent, and by this stage in the narrative, he has already handed Rāma the bow and arrow that he usually carries. Moreover, in the textual episode, the natural environment plays an important role, with the sky turning ominously dark and a gale suddenly blowing as the ascetic figure appears on the scene (1.73.13–14). There is no attempt to evoke these phenomena in the terracotta panel. The labels, which name the two depicted characters, support the rather minimalistic visual representation, enabling a confident identification of this scene. John Dixon Hunt's comment on the value of the

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his other wives. For instance, in 2.10.25, we learn how the king had granted the queen a boon in his mad passion.

28. In the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*, Paraśurāma is called Rāma Jāmadagnya; the former name represents a later development.

label inscriptions on Ancient Greek vases decorated with narratives seems apt here. He writes (2010, 36):

> When otherwise generic illustrations (without visual attributes that identified them) were verbally identified [by labels], it allowed the viewer to recall an event and then project a recollection of it upon the visual scene; in the moment of reading the words that identify the participants, their story springs to life.

The narrative sequence on the Palāsbāḍī frieze would also have helped with identification, and perhaps this panel too was originally one of a series narrating the episode at greater length.

Using Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* for textual comparison here could be problematic. An influential and widely circulated *Rāmāyaṇa* poem composed by Bhaṭṭi around 600 CE (Fallon 2009, xxi), for example, encompasses a very contracted version of the Paraśurāma episode (2.50–54 in Fallon 2009, 33), which includes neither a battle-ax nor stormy weather. It could be regarded, then, as a misapprehension to judge certain elements of the story as "missing" from the imagery.

Figure 11. Panel from Palāsbāḍī representing Paraśurāma watching Rāma fire an arrow from Viṣṇu's bow. Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka. Photo credit: author.

Why Are Some Panels Not Labeled?

Most of the panels from Palāsbāḍī are inscribed, but there are exceptions. One such panel (see Fig. 12, below) depicts four pallbearers carrying the deceased King Daśaratha to the funeral pyre, which is pictured in a further panel. The pall (*śibikā*) is covered in pleated fabric with three flower garlands laid across it. The pallbearers are shown straining under the weight of their dead king. Perhaps this is intended to convey their weak emotional states, or the greatness of their beloved king. There are no inscriptions on this panel, and I suggest that there are two reasons for this. First, this image is one of a lengthy sequence of panels representing the death and funeral of the king (see Bhattacharya 1990, 1059–63). Thus, by this stage in the visual narrative, it would be readily apparent to most viewers what was occurring here. Secondly, Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* (2.70.14) describes this scene as follows: "Disconsolate and choked with sobs, his attendants raised the lifeless king onto a litter and bore him out." Similarly, we can surmise that the characters represented in the panel — aside from the king, whose dead body is concealed — are attendant figures, and thus effectively anonymous.

Figure 12. Panel from Palāsbāḍī depicting four attendants carrying the *śibikā* bearing the body of King Daśaratha. Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka. Photo credit: author.

Additional Ways in Which the Labels Are Useful Today

Indication of Missing Panels

Labels can sometimes point to scenes that must have existed but are now lost. To illustrate this, I turn to an inscribed terracotta panel from nearby Saralpur (see Fig. 13, below). This scene depicts Queen Sumitrā reclining on a bed with her twin infant sons, Lakṣmaṇa and Śatrughna. Since all three wives of Daśaratha gave birth at the same time (Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* 1.17.6–10), and Sumitrā is the youngest queen, it is certain that additional panels once existed depicting the chief queen, Kausalyā, with her infant son, Rāma, and the middle wife, Kaikeyī, with her son Bharata.

Figure 13. Panel from Saralpur depicting Sumitrā reclining on a bed with her twin sons, Lakṣmaṇa and Śatrughna. Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka. Photo credit: author.

The Saralpur panel is the earliest extant visual depiction of one of Daśaratha's queens with her newborn(s). The mothers with their infants became a popular theme on *Rāmāyaṇa* friezes after the ninth century CE, and especially on Hoysaḷa and Vijayanagara temples. Occasionally only Kausalyā and the infant Rāma are depicted — for instance, on the Cōḻa period Nāgeśvara Temple in Kumbakonam, Tamil Nadu — but never solely one of the other two queens.

When the Visual Differs from the Textual

None of the early or medieval *Rāmāyaṇa* temple friezes closely resembles a surviving textual narrative. In terms of the Palāsbāḍī panels, while all the episodes represented do feature in the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki, certain components of the visual episodes differ from the text. The marriage ceremonies of Rāma and Sītā, and of Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā's sister, Ūrmila, are a case in point (see Figs. 14 and 15, below). The *abhiṣeka* (ablution) ceremonies that Sītā and Ūrmila are pictured undergoing are not mentioned

Figure 14. Panel from Palāsbāḍī representing King Daśaratha performing Ūrmila's *abhiṣeka*. Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka. Photo credit: author.

Figure 15. Panel from Palāsbāḍī representing King Janaka performing Sītā's *abhiṣeka*. Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka. Photo credit: author.

by Vālmīki.[29] Secondly, King Daśaratha is depicted performing the *abhiṣeka* for Ūrmila, and Sītā's father, King Janaka, for Sītā. In the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* (1.72.14–23), only Janaka is involved in officiating the marriage ceremonies. The labels inscribed on these two panels could be considered essential for enabling viewers to identify the characters, since little attempt has been made to differentiate the two couples through their iconography. It is possible, however, that the narrative sequence would have helped here, since the ablution of Sītā would likely have been positioned before that of Ūrmila. Moreover, the platform on which Sītā and Rāma stand is more ornate than that of the other couple. It is impossible to be certain, however, whether this detail was intentionally employed to signify hierarchy.

Narrative Sequence

Since the panels are out of *situ*, the labels can aid us in reassembling them in their original order, albeit with an unknown number of panels missing.

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29. The *abhiṣeka* of brides is detailed in the *Śiva Purāṇa* (2.48.55) in relation to the marriage of Śiva and Pārvatī (see SHASTRI 2000 [1950]).

This is not a foolproof exercise, however. First, the precise narrative sequence of events in the *Rāmāyaṇa* differs between texts, although usually in minor ways (see, for example, GREAVES 2022, 278). It cannot simply be assumed, then, that the order in which the events unfold on the Palāsbāḍī frieze would have precisely matched the narrative sequence in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*.[30] The second problem we face is that when labels provide only the name of the character(s) represented, and not a description of the episode shown, in some cases a panel may apply to more than one part of the narrative. An image from Palāsbāḍī depicting Bharata on his chariot, for example, could either represent him hurrying home from Rājagṛha to Ayodhyā after his father's death (Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* 2.64. 22–23), or his journey to Citrakūṭa to implore Rāma to come home (Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* 2.77.1) (BHATTACHARYA 1990, 1062, Fig. 12). Bhattacharya is mostly likely correct in identifying this panel as representing the former episode, since Bharata's chariot is shown racing along at speed, and a sense of urgency pervades the scene (BHATTACHARYA 1990, 1061). But while this depiction better matches our textual accounts of the earlier episode, since visual *Rāmāyaṇa*s are not faithful illustrations of texts, a question mark must hang over the identification of this scene.

Prevention of Misinterpretation

One of the most useful functions of labels for us today is the prevention of misidentification. When it is transmitted in the form of sculpture, the epic — with its multitude of princes, sages, talking monkeys (or *vānara*s), and *rākṣasa*s — can be a challenge to interpret. Some characters are furnished with strong defining physical features — Rāvaṇa's sister Śūrpaṇakhā with her sliced-off nose, for example, or the unfortunate *rākṣasa* Kabandha, who was cursed to have his face located in his abdomen. Other characters, such as Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, who always share an identical appearance in relief sculpture, can be less easy to distinguish from one another.

To illustrate this problem, I will refer here to early inscribed *Rāmāyaṇa* images that were misinterpreted before their labels were correctly read. An example I have mentioned in a previous article (2018, 124) is that of

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30. There is a further complication here, since the Princeton critical addition of the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* is based largely on the southern recension of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The Palāsbāḍī visual narrative, however, is more likely to have loosely resembled a northeastern recension. The various recensions present the episodes with minor differences in order.

a Gupta-period panel from Katingara depicting Hanūmān battling the *rākṣasī* Siṃhikā (see Fig. 8, above). Siṃhikā was interpreted instead by the Glenbow Museum, Calgary, as a representation of Sītā, which is rather surprising, given the fearsome iconography. A Gupta-period terracotta panel from Haryana at the Linden-Museum in Stuttgart was identified as representing Ghaṭotkaca, a character from the *Mahābhārata* who has a bald, pot-shaped head, before the label was re-read and the image correctly identified as Tṛśiras by the same author (STADTNER 2015).[31]

The Inscriptions: Materiality and Scribes

The positioning of label inscriptions on visual temple reliefs varies from place to place. At Palāsbāḍī, all the captions are located on the panel borders next to their subjects. Most labels are inscribed horizontally along the top and bottom borders. Where space is tight, however, as in Fig. 17 (see below), labels are also engraved sideways along the vertical borders. The labels are written in late Brāhmī script and are engraved in cursive form. The language used is a Prākrit (a local language) rather than Sanskrit. There are some differences from the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*: for example, here Lakṣmaṇa is called Lakṣaṇa. In terms of the materiality of the inscriptions, it is evident that they were not the work of a skilled *likhita* ("scribe"), or even of a highly literate person; indeed, some of the inscriptions are partly illegible, and there are frequent variations in spelling. The inscriptions were sketchily incised into the clay before firing, thus the person (or people) responsible for producing them must have been present at the workshop. Bhattacharya (1990, 1055) notes that there is at least one instance in which the labels are placed in the wrong order (see Fig. 16, below).

Apparently, the mistake lies in the switching of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa's names, meaning that Rāma is supposedly sitting behind Lakṣmaṇa, when, according to hierarchical norms, it should be the reverse. There is another instance of this unconventional arrangement among the Palāsbāḍī panels (see Fig. 17, below). A scene illustrating Viśvāmitra's sacrifice has four inscribed names, but only three characters are depicted. A fourth figure might have been squeezed into the composition above the sacrificial fire — a fragment of panel now missing. This scenario is not unlikely if we observe the busy composition in Fig. 18 (see below). According

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31. Both interpretations feature in the same article, with the correct reading included in the addendum.

Figure 16. Panel from Palāsbāḍī depicting (from left to right) Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, Viśvāmitra, and the *upādhyāya* (preceptor). Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka. Photo credit: author.

to the labels in Fig. 17, from left to right we should have the *upādhyāya* (preceptor), Viśvāmitra, Rāma, and Lakṣmaṇa. Through a comparison with other panels from Palāsbāḍī, the sage to the fore can be identified by his appearance as Viśvāmitra. The *upādhyāya*, then, is missing. The second oddity regarding this panel is that according to the labels, it is Lakṣmaṇa rather than Rāma who is firing an arrow at the *rākṣasa*s trying to disrupt Viśvāmitra's sacrifice.[32] This might be a mistaken reading, however, because the name Rāma is in fact inscribed under the archer, while Lakṣmaṇa's name is inscribed along the vertical border on the righthand side. The decision to place the labels this way around might have been compelled due to there being too little space left on the lower border to fit Lakṣmaṇa's longer name. If Rāma is indeed the archer here, then it was probably constraints of space that dictated his positioning at the

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32. The hair on one of the princes in Fig. 17 has fallen off. The dots on his head indicate a practice still used in clay work today, in which dots or cross-hatching are employed to help better fix an appendage to the surface.

Figure 17. Panel from Palāsbāḍī depicting Viśvāmitra's sacrifice. Four names are incised here, but only three figures are depicted. From left to right, the names are: *upādhyāya*, Viśvāmitra, Rāma, and Lakṣmaṇa. Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka. Photo credit: author.

Figure 18. Panel from Palāsbāḍī depicting a sacrificial scene. The characters, from left to right, are: Lakṣmaṇa, Rāma, Viśvāmitra, Janaka, and the *upādhyāya*. Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka. Photo credit: author.

rear of the composition. If he had been placed behind Viśvāmitra, then he would have partly concealed the sage's face as he fired his arrow, which would surely have been a mark of disrespect. Both Fig. 16 and Fig. 17 tentatively raise the question of whether the scribe was the same person who designed or made these two panels.

Who Were Labels for?

Temples as palaces (*prāsāda*s) of gods are places where, funds allowing, mortals present all the best things they have to offer: dance, music, poetry, theater, wrestling matches, food, fragrances, flowers, jewels, silks, and painted and sculpted imagery. Why not add writing to this heady amalgam? Just as sound emitted in the form of a correctly enunciated *mantra* is believed to carry the power of the deity invoked (Burchett 2008, 808, 815), and consecrated temple images vibrate with the presence of the gods they represent, and perfumes used during worship can be perceived as "the material expression of the agency of the god" (McHugh 2011, 175), would not written words become animated when engraved on temple walls? What such efficaciousness would imply in terms of the label inscriptions, however, is indeterminate. It is doubtful that the makers of the temples (or most temples) would wish to invoke the *rākṣasa*s, for instance, but if we consider the visual narratives in their entirety, we (would expect to) witness Rāma returning order to the cosmos.[33] And indeed, the subduing or slaying of *rākṣasa*s by gods is a common theme in temple imagery.

The main stakeholders in the creation of a temple are the patrons, priests, architect(s), and the god(s). Perhaps these stakeholders would not be overly concerned by who could read the labels beyond themselves, but they might be aware that the presence of inscribed labels would contribute to the impressiveness of a temple, regardless of whether they would be read. As Anna Seastrand argues in an article on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century South Indian temple murals with label inscriptions, the inscriptions — many of which could not be read even by a literate visitor, being located high up or in dark spaces — act to heighten the aesthetic experience a sensitive visitor would have in the temple (2019, 215).

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33. This is especially so if visual narratives culminate on a happy note, for instance with the coronation of Rāma and Sītā. And it so happens that all the complete visual *Rāmāyaṇa*s dating from the fifth to the eleventh century CE (my period of study) exclude the complicated and tragic occurrences of the *Uttarakāṇḍa* (the seventh and final book).

What Happened Next?

Between the mid-sixth and mid-eighth century CE, a multitude of temples were built under and by the early Cāḷukyas, some — at Bādāmi (ancient Vātāpi), Aihoḷe, Mahākūṭa, Ālampur, and Paṭṭadakal — bearing relief carvings of *Rāmāyaṇa* episodes. It is only on the later temples at Paṭṭadakal, however, that any of the reliefs are accompanied by label inscriptions.

There are several *Rāmāyaṇa* reliefs on the exterior walls of the Virūpākṣa temple (ca. 740 CE), and on pillars in its *raṅgamaṇḍapa* ("dancing hall") (FILLIOZAT n.d., 158–60; 185–90; 191–94). A bas-relief on one of the interior pillars depicts scenes from the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The names of the major characters represented are inscribed in Old Kannaḍa on the borders running above each pictural register (see Fig. 19, below) (see FILLIOZAT n.d., 158–60). The several other *Rāmāyaṇa* reliefs in the same temple do not have label inscriptions (for example, Fig. 20, below).[34]

The Pāpanātha temple at Paṭṭadakal (ca. 720–750 CE) was probably patronized, at least in its latter stage, by King Kīrttivarma II, and might have been a site of coronation. The southern wall of the temple is adorned with *Rāmāyaṇa* reliefs, while a smaller number of *Mahābhārata* reliefs run parallel on the opposite side of the temple. It is interesting that the *Rāmāyaṇa* reliefs are accompanied by label inscriptions in Old Kannaḍa (see Fig. 21, below), but the *Mahābhārata* reliefs are not. An inscription engraved on the temple informs us that the southern wall was carved by the architect Caṭṭara Revaḍi Ovajja. The opposite wall might have been the work of a different artist.

The sporadic, inconsistent use of labeling on the Virūpākṣa and Pāpanātha temples was evidently not perceived as an issue for either the architects or patrons. Here, it seems that decisions about labeling were made by the sculptors. Several factors no doubt informed such decisions, the foremost being the literacy of an individual sculptor: could they write? Or if they had migrated from elsewhere, could they write in the local language? And if they *could* write, did they want the opportunity to display their skill? Other factors might have included what information a sculptor felt the viewers needed, be they human or divine. Whether they considered labels to enrich, or conversely, disturb a viewing experience; whether they wanted to assist performers, or elucidate a visual narrative. Their training, too, would have influenced their views on labeling.

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34. A small number of relief panels in the Virūpākṣa temple depicting stories other than those from the *Rāmāyaṇa* are labeled. See, for example, some inscribed *Mahābhārata* episodes (FILLIOZAT n.d., 181–82).

Figure 19. This panel on a pillar inside the Virūpākṣa temple (ca. 740 CE) at Paṭṭadakal depicts scenes from the *Rāmāyaṇa* displayed in four registers and bearing labels in Old Kannaḍa. The label inscriptions read, from left to right by row: (top row) Kara-Dūshaṇam Suppaṇagi Lakkaṇa Suppaṇagi Lakkaṇan Rāman Site; (second row from top) Rāvaṇan Suppaṇagi Kara-Dūshaṇan Rāman Lakkaṇan Site; (third row from top) Pochchaṛi Rāma Pochchaṛi Rāma Pochchaṛi Lakkaṇa Rāma Site Marichchan Marichchan Rāvaṇan; (bottom row) Supāriśva Rāvaṇa Jaṭāyu Rāvaṇa Site Rāvaṇan Site Lakkaṇa Site (Fleet 1984 [1881], 168). Photo credit: author.

Figure 20. Panel on a pillar in the *raṅgamaṇḍapa* of the Virūpākṣa temple (ca. 740 CE) at Paṭṭadakal. The panel depicts scenes from the *Sundarakāṇḍa* of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in three registers. Photo credit: author.

Figure 21. A relief on the Pāpanātha temple at Paṭṭadakal (ca. 720–750 CE) depicting Śūrpaṇakhā entreating her brother Rāvaṇa to seek revenge on Rāma. Photo credit: author.

After the early Cāḷukya epoch, labels were no longer inscribed on *Rāmāyaṇa* temple reliefs, though the labelling practice did not disappear. In later centuries, labels were sometimes included on narrative murals, in miniature paintings, and on painted scrolls. Moreover, a particularly interesting example in the context of this article are labels painted in modern Devanagari script on the borders of stone *Rāmāyaṇa* reliefs adorning an important Pratihārā temple (9th century CE) — the Dadhimati — located near Manglod, Nagaur District, Rajasthan (see Fig. 22, below). These labels, which name some of the characters represented in the imagery, were later removed when the temple was restored.

The discontinuation of the minor tradition of engraving *Rāmāyaṇa* relief sculptures with labels coincides with changes in approaches to temple architecture. Prestigious temples became larger, yet simultaneously more complex and intricate in form. No longer was the "readability" of temple imagery a dominant concern. As an example, at the mid-thirteenth-century Hoysaḷa Chennakeshava temple in Somanathapura, near Mysore, in Karnataka, episodes from the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* feature on one of the several bands that run around the base of the temple (see Fig. 23, below). The visual narratives are delicately carved, small in scale, and compete for attention within a rich and visually dazzling tapestry of imagery (see Fig. 24, below). The new mantra in temple architecture was "more is more," and this synthesis of monumentality and delicacy would no doubt have given rise to awe and wonderment in most visitors, as it continues to do today.
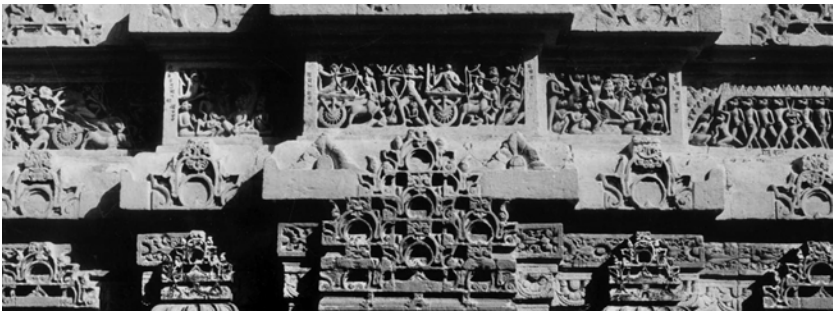
Figure 22. Detail of the ninth-century Dadhimati temple near Manglod, Nagaur District, Rajasthan. Labels in modern-day Devanagari script have been painted on the borders of panels representing scenes from the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The labels comprise names of the depicted characters. This photo was taken in 1982. Photo credit: American Institute of Indian Studies, Accession Number: 58974.

Figure 23. A view of the mid-thirteenth-century Hoysaḷa Chennakeshava temple, Somanathapura, Karnataka. Photo credit: author.

Figure 24. A detail of a *Rāmāyaṇa* episode on the Hoysaḷa Chennakeshava temple, Somanathapura, Karnataka. Photo credit: author.

Conclusion

The relationship between word and image on the Palāsbāḍī panels is symbiotic but unequal. The imagery would succeed without the labels, as indeed most visual temple narratives in South Asia do, but without the imagery, the labels would amount, for the most part, to a list of names. In fact, the imagery gives shape and form to the labels, bringing "to life" as it were, to the characters from the epic. In examining the Palāsbāḍī reliefs, then, it is essential to resist ever persistent 'modern presumptions about the hegemony of text and the servitude of the image' (Squire 2009, 9). Having said this, the labels do play a decidedly more significant role than their brevity might suggest. They augment clarity and readability; they serve as simple mnemonic devices to help viewers or performers recall episodes of the epic more fully; and they enable the artists to forgo incorporating many of the details — for example, attributes — that would aid identification of characters or scenes. This suggests that the use of label inscriptions could, to an extent, influence iconography. Moreover, the labels have additional benefits for scholars today. They can, at times, point to scenes that must have been represented on a frieze but are now missing; they can aid identification of scenes in which a visual telling differs from extant textual *Rāmāyaṇa*s; they can prevent misidentification when a character has no markedly distinguishing features; and lastly, they can assist in the reassembling of out-of-*situ* panels.

This article has demonstrated that the practice of labeling images was adopted by Hindus from Buddhists around the late fourth century CE, when temples began to be constructed in greater numbers. We learn that the practice of labeling transformed over time; that it varied from place to place in both function and in application; and that it was never prescriptive.

The label types on earlier Buddhist narrative images are more plentiful than those produced after approximately the third century CE, in either Buddhist or Hindu contexts. As far as Buddhism is concerned, this indicates that in the later period, the familiarity of the depicted narratives effectively resulted in some label types becoming obsolete. The *longue durée* approach taken in this article makes it apparent that the drivers for inscribing images with labels differed between the two religions. Hindu visual narratives include the names or types of characters represented, and sometimes also brief descriptions of what was occurring in a scene. When these labels are viewed in conjunction with iconography and composition, it becomes evident that the dominant foci of the artists are on the relationships between the represented characters, their individual

emotional states, and the action(s) occurring. Arguably, emphasis on these aspects was intended to give rise to the experience of *rasa* in a viewer. The ancient Buddhist approach to labeling, besides identifying characters, places immense importance on the physical environment of a narrative and on naming objects of worship.

Labeling was a practice employed on relatively few monuments in either Hinduism or Buddhism, and I suggest that this might reflect diverse attitudes toward writing and preservation or documentation, as opposed to orality and memorization, especially in the earlier period. Additionally, it indicates varying attitudes toward the importance of the readability of visual narratives.

The agency of artists in South Asia is chronically underplayed in scholarship. This stems — to paraphrase Squire's words above — from the tendency to inflate the authority of texts over other media including orality, thereby suggesting art as derivative by default. As a result, little credence is given to the possibility that the creative expression of an artist might be, or is, at play *within* the bounds of the visual language of the day. Certain examples included in this article, I think, demonstrate that whether or not to use labels was the choice of the artist, who in many cases would have been the scribe. This is best shown by the very sporadic use of labeling on narrative reliefs in the Virūpākṣa and Pāpanātha temples at Paṭṭadakal. Thanks to inscriptions, we know that multiple sculptors worked on these monuments, but only a minority opted to label their works. This indicates that it was not the patron or the chief architect who imposed a requirement for labels — at least at this site. Instead, the choice resided with the artist.

Finally, it is hoped that the methodological approach taken in this article — whereby a close reading of the iconography has enabled the identification of the various functions of the labels — will be useful to scholars working on label/image dialogues in South Asia as well as other cultural contexts.

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