The Causeway Episode of the Prambanan
Rāmāyaṇa Reexamined

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Introduction

The presence at the ninth-century Prambanan temple complex of bas-reliefs with scenes of the Rāmāyaṇa is too well known to need much comment. First recognized and partially identified by Isaac Groneman (1893), the reliefs have since been admired and studied by numerous visitors. After a long and arduous process of reconstruction of the main temples by colonial Dutch and independent Indonesian archaeologists, most of the Rāma reliefs are now believed to be installed in their original positions on the inner balustrade walls of the Śiva and Brahmā temples. Thanks to the efforts of dedicated art historians and scholars of ancient Java, almost all of the events depicted have been identified with reference to various literary renderings of the epic—both those more or less contemporaneous, such as the Kakawin Rāmāyaṇa (KR), commonly referred to as ‘the’ Old Javanese Rāmāyaṇa, and specimens several centuries older, like Vālmiki’s Rāmāyaṇa (VR), or several centuries younger, such as the Hikayat Sĕri Rama (HSR).

1. The basis for this article is a paper with the title ‘The bridge of Rāma in Southeast Asia: The Causeway Reliefs of Prambanan and Phimai Reexamined’, which was presented at the Jakarta workshop on the Old Javanese Rāmāyaṇa (Jordaan 2009). This extensive paper has been deposited in the KITLV library in Leiden for public use. Regarding the present article, it was decided to focus the discussion solely on the Rāmāyaṇa causeway relief of Candi Prambanan, and to leave the full description and analysis of the causeway lintel at the Khmer temple of Phimai, in northeast Thailand, for another occasion.

While researching this fascinating yet complex subject I have on several occasions benefited from the help of friends and colleagues. For the revision of the original paper to make it more suitable for publication in the proceedings, I owe a debt of gratitude to the editors of this volume, John and Mary Brockington, and Siebolt Kok for their corrections, comments, references and other forms of support. Thanks are also due to the École française d’Extrême-Orient for the invitation to participate in the Jakarta workshop.
The discovery of the usefulness of the HSR for the interpretation of the Rāmāyaṇa reliefs of Caṇḍi Prambanan we owe to Willem Frederik Stutterheim, who demonstrated that some of the scenes depicted on the Śiva temple, which defied explanation in comparison with the ‘classical’ text of Vālmīki, became more intelligible with the help of the HSR (Stutterheim 1925, 1989). Among the large number of deviations from VR he had detected, thirteen episodic details in the sculpted rendering of the Rāma story on the Śiva temple of Prambanan were shared with the HSR. For the purpose of their discussion later in this paper, three examples from Stutterheim’s enumeration (1989:146) deserve to be mentioned here, namely the absence of a scene in which Rāma shoots an arrow into the sea to vent his frustration and anger over the default of the God of the Sea; the swallowing of the stones by the fish during the construction of the causeway; the appearance of a daughter of Daśaratha.

The HSR’s usefulness was (and still is) amazing as it is not a contemporaneous Old Javanese text, but a Malay narrative whose gestation period dates from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century. Although Stutterheim’s rather negative appraisal of the correspondence between the VR and the KR texts and the Rāmāyaṇa reliefs has at times been contested, the heuristic value of the HSR was recently reconfirmed by Jan Fontein with respect to the bas-reliefs depicted on the Brahmā temple. To quote Fontein’s conclusion (1997:198): ‘The reliefs of Caṇḍi Brahmā are similar to those of Caṇḍi Śiva in that they follow the general flow of the narrative of Vālmīki’s epic, with occasional deviations than can usually be satisfactorily explained by consulting the contents of the Hikayat Seri Rama’.

In this paper, I want to reexamine the closing reliefs of the series on the Śiva temple. They concern the construction and the crossing of the causeway by Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, and their monkey allies. Those who know my work on the Prambanan temple complex will understand that my interest in the causeway episode stems from my theory about the design of the temple’s central courtyard as an artificial reservoir, that is to say a reservoir of sanctified or holy water (amṛta) (Jordaan 1989, 1991, 1995). It is my contention that the causeway relief fits perfectly within this overall design, marking as it does, appropriately with a scene of water, the transition of the Rāma story from the Śiva temple to the Brahmā temple. However, not wanting to repeat myself unduly, the theory itself will not be presented in detail here. If mentioned, it is primarily to adduce further evidence on the heuristic value of the HSR for art-historical research on Caṇḍi Prambanan.