
Grapppling as Projected in the Archaeological Finds of Ancient and Medieval India

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Abstract: *Grapppling as an unarmed form of combat that has been prevalent in India since the ancient times. Grapppling included present day forms of wrestling, Pehelvani, Jiu-Jitsu, Judo and classical pugilism. Ancient Indian literature is full of references of grapppling and other martial arts but along with that India has an undying tradition of archaeological evidences of grapppling in the form of sculptures and terracotta plates on Indian monuments right from the Sunga- Kushana period to the Vijayanagara period.*

Keywords: Archaeology, Wrestling, Grapppling, Jiu-Jitsu, Iconography, Mallayuddha, Mushti-Yuddha

Introduction

Ancient India had great and widespread martial and physical traditions. Martial Arts practiced by martial artists was known as Mallavidya. This mallavidya was practiced in earthen mud pits known as Akhadas in North India, Talim in Maharashtra and Garadi Mane in Karnataka. The mallavidya that we see today is more or less restricted to wrestling and grapppling, but during the ancient times there are references of striking like punches, knees and elbows also being used. For example, in the Harivamsha Purana there are famous bouts between Lord Krishna and his brother Balarama and wrestlers Chanura and Mushtika. If one reads the Purana one can see how fists and knees were used by the wrestlers during the bouts. (Harivamśa Purāṇa, Solis 1984).

The Mallavidya of the ancient times could now be compared to the sport of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) and to avoid confusion instead of using the word wrestling the author prefers using the term Grapppling which acts as an umbrella term for all types of grapppling martial arts that are practiced now that were prevalent back then like Jiu Jitsu, Pehelwani and Judo.

Grapppling in India: Archaeological Evidence

When one talks of Archaeological evidence it means anything that can be touched, felt and seen from the naked eye and that which is more than 100 years old. Hence as

archaeological evidence the author would like to take sculptures and terracotta plates into account. Right from the Sunga-Kushana Period which would be around 1st-2nd century AD to the fall of Vijayanagara Empire which would be around the 17th century AD, one finds numerous terracotta and stone sculptures of grappling on the monuments of various dynasties spread along the entire country. This paper will bring these evidences to light.

Terracotta Plates have been found from the Gandhara region which date back to the *Sunga-Kusana* period. The plates at Sahri Bahlol, Peshawar, depict physical education of Siddhartha or a grappling bout which he fought for the hand of Yashodhara. (Ingholt 1957) Another plate from Jamal Garhi, Peshawar has been found depicting a scene of Siddhartha fighting for the hand of Yashodhara. In these scenes, one person is giving a neck lock to the opponent while the opponent has grabbed the other's thigh trying to take him down. (Ingholt 1957). A grappling scene is also found on another plate from Sikri, Lahore belonging to the same period where two figures are facing each other holding each other's arms and shoulder trying to take the opponent down. (Ingholt 1957). In all the above scenes the grapplers are depicted wearing tight-shorts or *Jhangia* or a *Langot*. (Murthy 1977).

A fragmentary panel from Agroha, Haryana shows a grappling scene. (Handa 2006) This panel is also roughly dated to be around the same time of the above-mentioned plates. It shows a grappling scene but it's a mutilated panel. There is no definite identification but the robust bodies of the grapplers with gracefully depicted garments and the elegance with which the panel has been carved endow it with specialty. One figure is complete while only a part of a leg and the belly of the other are visible. This panel when complete might have depicted the scene of Shala-vadha or a fight between Bhima and Jarasandha or a scene of the wrestling arena at Mathura. (Handa 2006).

A panel is preserved at the Ashmolean Museum Oxford, England which depicts two figures trying to take each other down, one pulling the shoulder of the other while the other grabbing the thighs of his opponent. This panel has been termed as the Travelling Wrestlers (Auboyer 1965).

At Vinobha Ashram, Paunar, Maharashtra, there is a panel of the Gupta-Vakataka period which depicts the scene of Balarama over-powering Muṣṭika and in the background Krishna stands in pratyalidha over dead Chaṇura grabbing Kamsa by his hair (Welankar 2009). This scene depicts Krishna and Balarama as main warriors wearing *chhannavira* i.e. ornaments worn by a warrior. The entire movement and the speed of the action are also reflected in the lower garment with flying tassels (Welankar 2009). A 5th century A.D. panel from Garhwa preserved at the Lucknow Museum represents Krishna witnessing the fight between Bhima and Jarasandha. Krishna is shown holding four usual emblems of Vishnu. To the right is a mutilated figure of Arjuna holding bow and arrow. On the left-hand side there is Krishna and Bhima and Jarasandha engaged in a fight. Bhima has grasped with his hand the neck of

Jarasandha and his left leg is thrown around the waist (Desai 1973). Another grappling panel of the same period belonging to Patharghata is preserved in the Allahabad Museum. This panel depicts the fight between Krishna and Chanura (Asher 1980). In the Allahabad Museum, there is a panel depicting the scene of Pralambasura vadha from the Gangetic Valley dated to be around 6th century A.D. The scene depicts Balarama sitting on top of a demon Pralamba (Desai 1973).

Temples and caves of the Calukyas of Badami also provide evidence on grappling, throwing light on the warfare and physical culture of the contemporary society. Cave 4 at Badami, Karnataka shows a very detailed scene of the Krishna Lila. In the 3rd line from the bottom there are two grappling scenes, in the first one two figures are holding hands and in the second one they are trying to strike each other (Solis 1984). At Virupaksha Temple Pattadakal, Karnataka, in the given panel in the middle line one can see a figure somersaulting and another figure going after him (Solis 1984). At same temple in the given panel of the Krishna Lila in the middle, one can see one figure trampling the other under his feet (Solis 1984). In the same region at Mallikarjuna Temple, in the Krishna Lila panel, in the first and second lines one can see figures showing fists. However, these scenes seem to be faded and mutilated to a certain extent (Solis 1984). In the same panel at the Mallikarjuna Temple one can see a series of figures or an animation of one fight using fists, knees and grappling moves on each other (Solis 1984).

Kharosa Caves situated in Maharashtra also give evidence of grappling. The sculptures in these caves are hard to identify as they are carved out of laterite and due to geological processes, they show signs of weathering. At the Mahadev Cave, Cave number four, in the Krishna Lila panel under the scene of Putanavadha (Welankar 2009) one can see the figure of Krishna standing in the Alidha pose. He is depicted as two armed, both arms held just above the shoulders as though he is getting ready for a fight. In the image he is shown as wearing a low crown, earrings, necklace and a lower garment (Welankar 2009). A grappling scene is depicted on an eighth century panel at Paharpur, where Krishna and Balarama identifiable by their typical hair-styles and short tunics are shown engaged in a duel with two other figures. On the right side of the panel, one of them clasps the grappler tightly by his hand and to the left; the defeated recumbent grappler is seized by his neck and leg (Desai 1973).

The Pallava Kings were also very well known for their temple art and architecture. At Perumal Temple in Kanchi, which was built by Nandivarman, on the pillar in front of the Maṇḍapa one can see the fight scene between Vali and Sugriva in which one figure is trying to hold the other while the other is trying to retreat (Nagaswamy 2011). Colas were well versed in the temple arts as well and among their temples one can see scenes of wrestling as well. At the Brahmapurisvarar Temple at Pullamagai, Tamil Nadu one can see two figures engaged in a fight, one with a raised hand and other trying to block the blow from the opponent. These figures have been identified as Kirata and Arjuna by the scholars (Balasubrahmanyam 1971).

During the Pratiharas, grappling was one of the means of entertainment and exercise for men. This can be noticed on the panels of Krishna Lila where Krishna and Balarama are depicted in grappling bouts with the grapplers of Kamsa, Chaṇura and Muṣṭika.

There are fine panels which depict these scenes in different forms where Krishna and Balarama have grasped the two grapplers with their arms and feet and are trying to throw them on the ground. Both are displaying their strength and are trying to gain mastery. They are standing in front of them; one of them has raised his right hand and has caught hold of the wrist of the other with his left hand. From his posture it appears that he is going to hit with his right hand. Similarly, the second one has also raised his left hand and is trying to catch the other's upraised right hand. He has placed his left leg over the former's right leg. A third person is standing near them with an indistinct object in his hand maybe trying to stop the fight. Unfortunately, his frame is broken. From the panels it seems that grappling was commonly practiced by the people in the period under study (Kalia 1982).

The above-mentioned descriptions are very well depicted at the Sachiya Mata Temple of Osian Group of Temples. (Kalia 1982, fig. 19) At Sun Temple-3 among the same group of temples in the Krishna Lila panels depicting a bout between Sala and Krishna (Handa 1984). Around the same time in the Central part of the country, the Candellas built the Khajuraho Group of Temples. Elements of grappling can be observed in the Iconography of these temples as well. In the Lakṣamaṇa Temple, on the southern wall of the sanctum, Krishna slaying Chaṇura can be observed and on the western wall of the sanctum, a bout between Sala and Krishna is depicted (Desai 1996; Solis 1984).

Orissa is also known for its detailed and ornate Temples. These temples are not devoid of wrestling scenes either. At the Simhanatha Temple on the bhumi division three panels can be seen of two figures facing each other with raised fists. (Donaldson 1986) On the Vajra Mastaka portion of the temple a scene is depicted between two figures in a series of four panels. In each panel the figures are executing different moves, which show that the scene is in the form of an animation. (Donaldson 1986) In the same temple, on the Gavaksha design, a mutilated war scene can be seen in which two figures are facing each other with the left one raising his left arm. (Donaldson 1986) Similar grappling scenes can be observed in other Orissan temples like at Madhukeshvar (Donaldson 1986), Gaṇeshwarpur (Donaldson 1986: vol. 3. fig. 3826), Kishenpur (Donaldson 1986), Svarṇajaleshvara (Donaldson 1986), Shishiresvara (Donaldson 1986) and Caurasi Varahi Temple (Donaldson 1986).

Around the same time, in South India, under the Hoysalas large scale temple building activities took place. These temples are heavily ornate. Here as well one can observe depictions of grappling. At the Vira-Narayana Temple, Belavadi, Karnataka one can see a very ornate grappling scene on the ceiling of the temple in which four figures can be seen, one on his knees, one lying on the ground and rest of the two figures are engaged in a fight (Bhowmik 2012).

In Maharashtra, the major phase of temple building activity was done under the Yadavas. Evidences of wrestling scenes can be seen in their temples as well. At the Bhairavnath Temple in Kikli, among the epic panels, there is a scene of a fight between Vali and Sugriva in which two figures are facing each other with raised fists (Deshpande 1985). Similarly, on the Vijayanagara Monuments as well one comes up with the grappling scenes. For example, on the pillars of the famous Hazarama Temple in Hampi, one comes across multiple panels depicting duel between Vali and Sugriva (Dallapiccola, Fritz, Michell and Rajasekhara 1992).

Analysis of Selected Grappling Panels

Cave no. 16, Kailash Cave- Ellora: On the top row of the Mahabharata Scenes one can see two scenes of wrestling one after the other. These scenes look like an animation of a fight. The two figures engaged in the duel are Krishna and Kamsa (Dhavalikar 1983). In the first one (Figure 1) two figures are leaning towards each other and grabbing each other's arms and shoulders. In the second one (Figure 2), which is mutilated as one figure's head is missing; one figure has taken the other to the ground and is on top of him. In the second scene the person on the ground is wearing a crown.



Figure 1: Kamsa Vadha

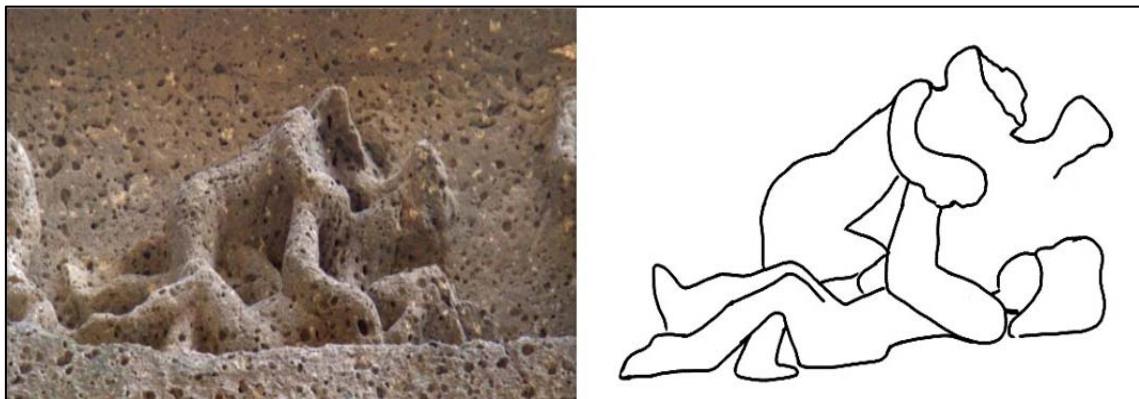


Figure 2: Kamsa Vadha

Among the Ramayana panels on the bottom most line there is a scene (Figure 3) of Hanumana fighting with a demon. In the 6th row there is a scene of Hanumana being caught and being taken to Ravana (Figure 4) (Dhavalikar 1983: 25:Pl. 27). In this his wrists are being clinched by another figure making it look like a struggle between them. In the 4th row two scenes of Vali and Sugriva duel (Figure 5) can be seen (Dhavalikar 1983). In the second scene (Figure 6) an arrow can be seen passing through the back of one figure. As mentioned above, scenes like these depict a mixture of Malla Yuddha and Mushti Yuddha.

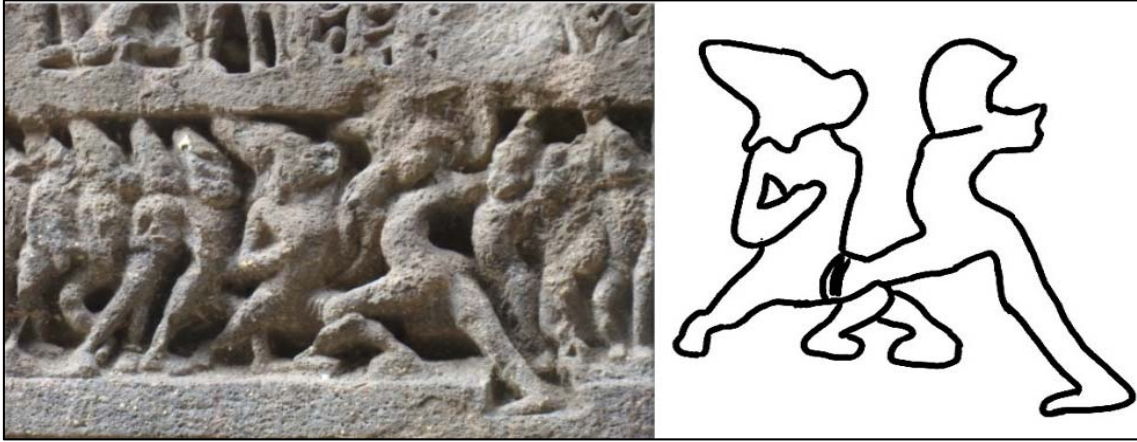


Figure 3: Hanumān Fighting a Demon



Figure 4: Hanumān Taken to Rāvaṇa

Gondeshvara Temple, Sinnar: At Gondeshvara one comes across numerous wrestling panels of what seems to be two figures with tails or Vanaras. They seem to depict the epic scene from Ramayana of the fight between Vali and Sugriva. (Deshpande 2013) Most of the depictions show two figures facing each other with raised hands and other hands on each other's shoulders. There is one in which two figures are leaning on each other and pressing against each other. Here are the photographs with line illustrations individually. This panel is on the west facing Vedika of the kakṣasana of the temple (Figure 7). Two Vanaras are facing each other with their arms raised against each other.



Figure 5: Vali and Sugriva Yuddha

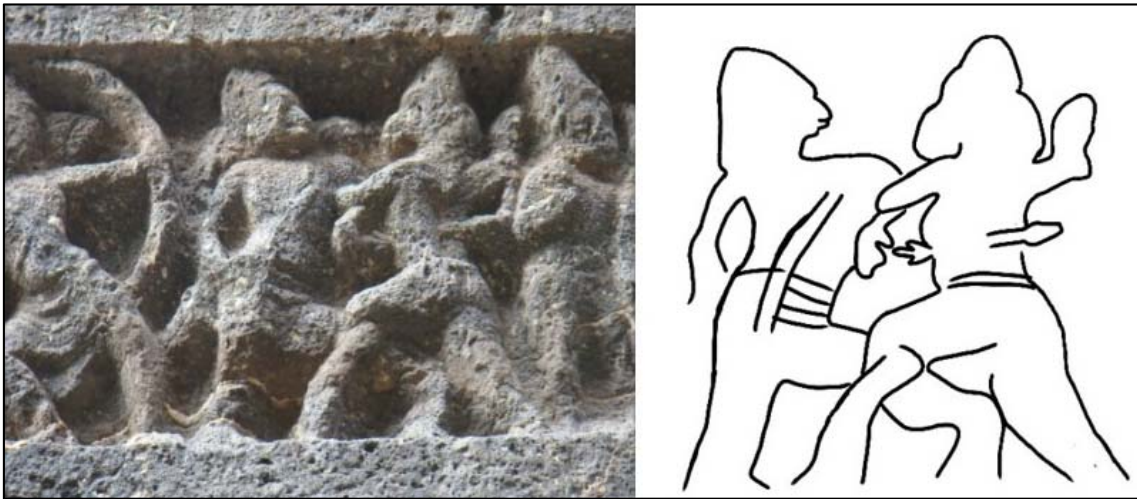


Figure 6: Vali and Sugriva Yuddha



Figure 7: Vāli and Sugrīva Yuddha

Another panel is on the east facing Vedika of the kakṣasana (Figure 8). There are three scenes on the panel, the right most one is the grappling scene with two Vanaras facing each other with their arms raised and legs intertwined. Another grappling scene is on

the north facing Vedika (Figure 9). Two figures can be seen facing each other grappling each other's arms and wrists. On the north facing jangha right above the devakoṣṭha on the right and left there are two scenes of wrestling (Figure 10). In both the scenes there are two Vanaras facing each other with inter-twined arms and raised hands. Both the scenes are partially mutilated hence the complete scene is not visible. Two panels are on the west facing jangha of the temple (Figure 11 and 12). In both images there are two Vanaras facing each other with raised hands. Both the figures have tails and are wearing a crown as well.



Figure 8: Grappling Scene 1



Figure 9: Grappling Scene 2



Figure 10: Grappling Scene 3

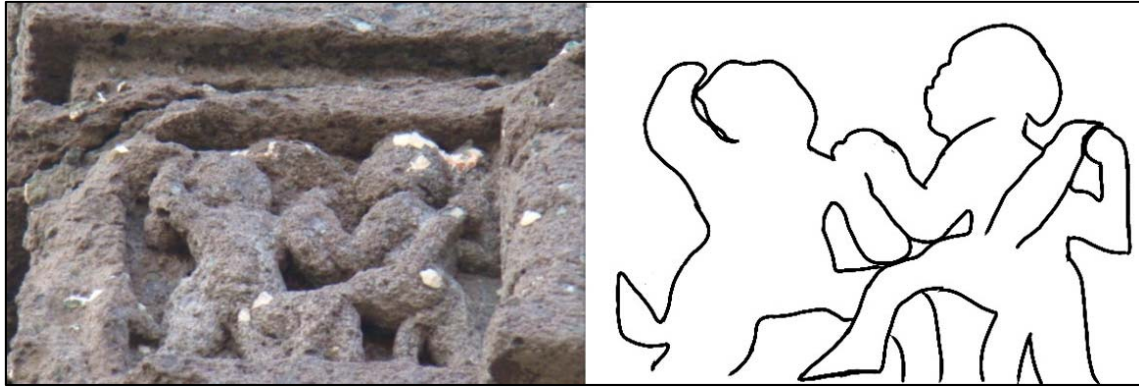


Figure 11: Grappling Scene 4

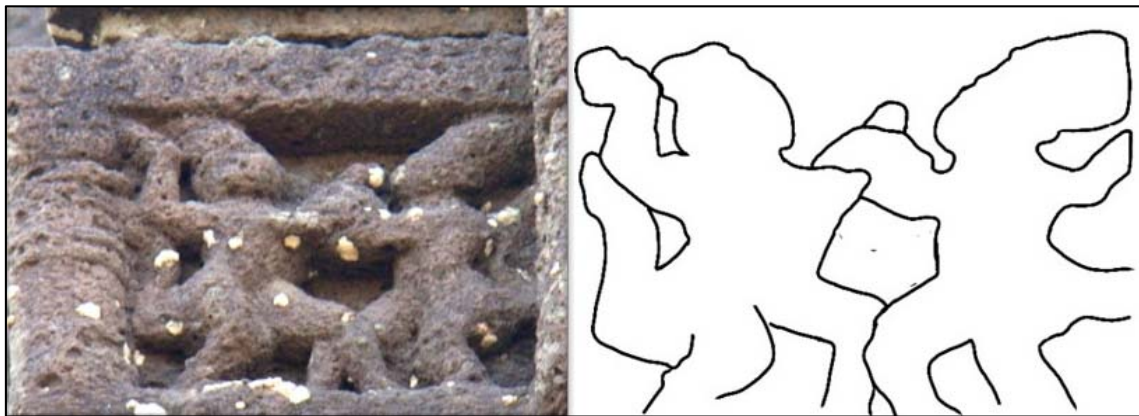


Figure 12: Grappling Scene 5



Figure 13: Vali and Sugriva Yuddha

On the ceiling of the south maṇḍapa there is a war scene between Vali and Sugriva (Figure 13) in which one figure is pushing the other with arms and shoulders. On the right pillar facing the south maṇḍapa there is a mutilated panel on which three figures are shown (Figure 14). The center one is flexing his arms towards both the directions and trying to choke the other two images. On the same ceiling of the south maṇḍapa there is another mutilated scene of grappling (Figure 15) in which two figures are

facing each other. On the kakṣasana of the south maṇḍapa there is scene of what can be said to be Hanuman fighting a demon at the Ashoka Vatika (Figure 16). One figure with a tail is holding the other by the throat with a raised hand.

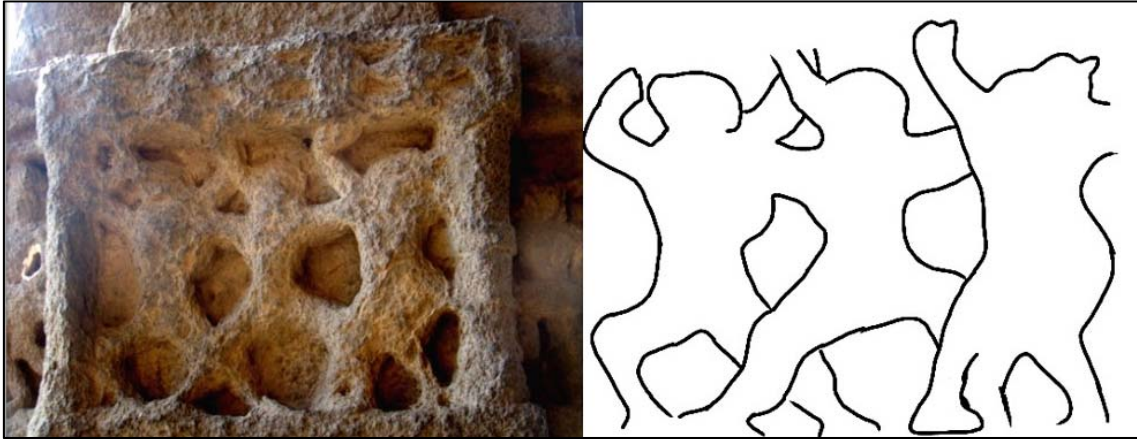


Figure 14: Grappling Scene 6

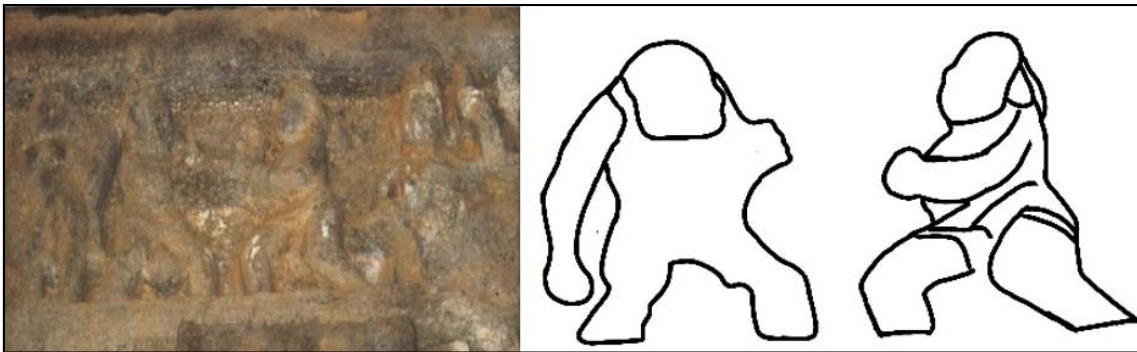


Figure 15: Grappling Scene 7



Figure 16: Hanumana Fighting Demons

Lakshmi-Narayana Temple, Pedgaon: This panel (Figure. 17) is also on the south facing pilaster but it is right in front of the Fig. 4 panel. In this panel like the previously mentioned panel the grapplers are executing the Leg Sweep move. Behind the

wrestlers two more figures can be seen on both the ends. Right opposite the Figure 17 panel towards the northern face on another pilaster inside the garbhagrha is a panel (Figure. 18) which depicts two figures, the one on the right is trying to either grab the other's arms or give him an arm or a wrist lock. Another panel (Figure 19) is on the north-eastern pillar inside the temple, on the left hand side of the pillar. On this panel a scene of grappling is depicted in which two grapplers have inter-twined each other's body and are executing a move which is now known as the waist lock. Both are wearing lower garments which look like a girdle.

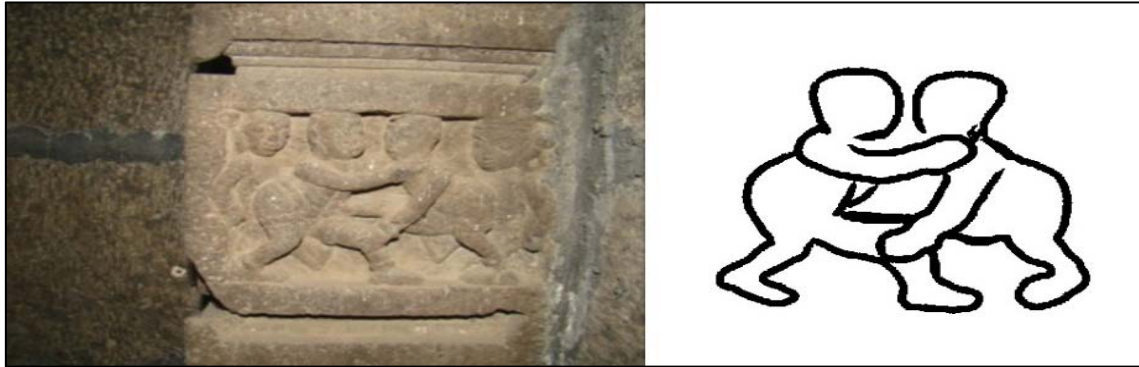


Figure 17: Two Figures Executing a Single Leg Sweep

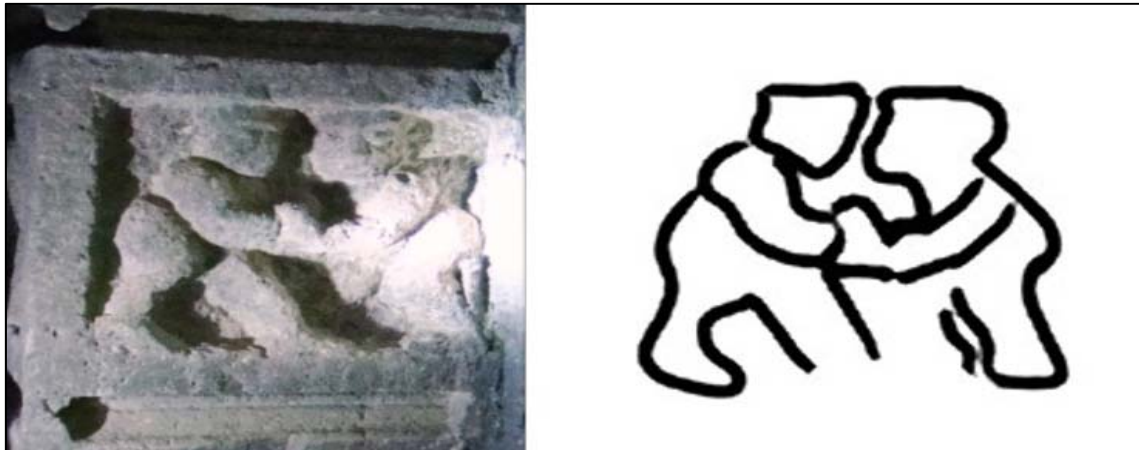


Figure 18: Two Figures Executing a Wrist Lock



Figure 19: Two Figures Doing Shoot and Sprawl

On the front side of the north facing pillar inside the temple one can see a war scene (Figure. 20) in the center of which Vali and Sugriva (Deshpande 2013: 55, fig 77) can be seen inter-twining their arms and raised fists towards each other. Both the figures are heavily ornamented. On the right-hand side of the west facing pillar inside the temple, there is a depiction of (Figure. 21) Hanumana is teaching Lava and Kusha (Deshpande 2013: 55, fig. 81). They are doing the rights of touching the floor before starting their bout. Another scene (Figure. 22) is depicted on the back side of the south facing pillar inside the temple (Deshpande 55, fig.78). The moves shown in the scene are like that of Fig. 8, but the only difference is that the depiction here is more like a flow compared to the one in Figure 8.

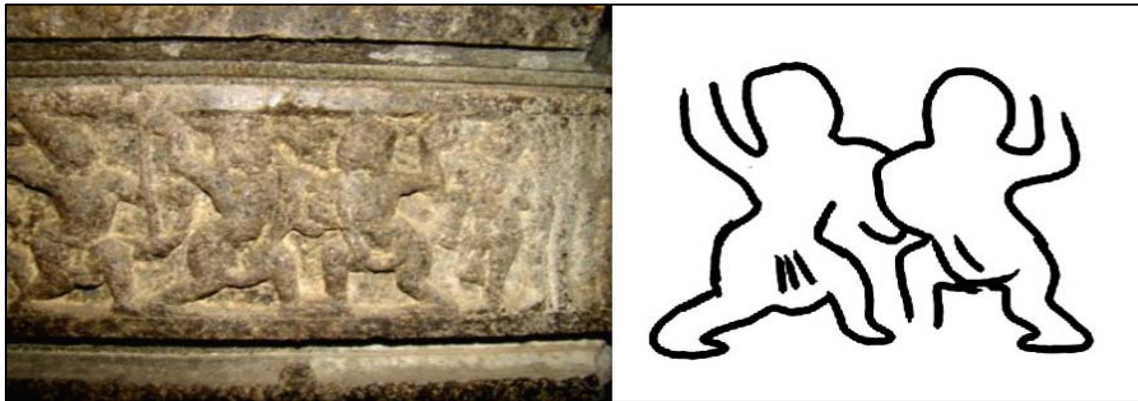


Figure 20: Vali and Sugriva Yuddha



Figure 21: Hanumana Teaching Lava and Kusha

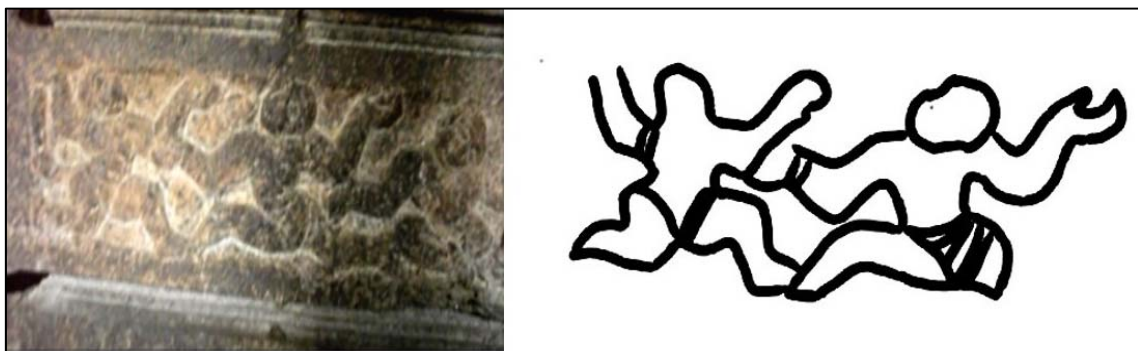


Figure 22: Grappling Scene 1

On the front side of the right pillar of the south mukhamandapa (facing the river), two scenes of wrestling are depicted (Figure. 23). In the both the scenes two figures are facing each other with their one arm entangled with that of the other and both raising other arms to strike the opponent in the form of fists. These two depictions are hard to make out due to excessive weathering of the rock. One can faintly make out that the figures are wearing a girdle like lower garment. Another panel is on the jangha portion of the temple (Figure 24). It is partly mutilated, and it depicts the war scene between Vali and Sugriva (Deshpande 2013: 51, fig. 59). Other panel is on the jangha portion in which two figures are executing waist locks like in the fig. 20 (Figure 25). They are both giving each other waist locks trying to pin the opponent down.

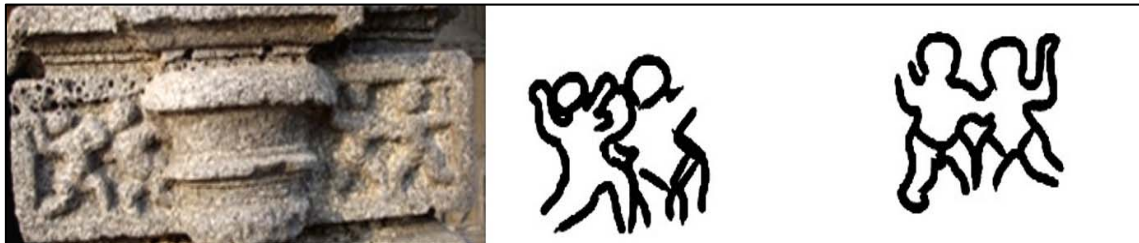


Figure 23: Grappling Scene 2



Figure 24: Vali and Sugriva Yuddha



Figure 25: Two Figures Shoot and Sprawl

A panel is on the jangha (Figure 26) depicts two Vanaras facing each other with raised arms inter-twined with each other. Figure 27 is almost similar in nature. In the other panel on the jangha, Vanaras are facing each other and one figure is giving a wrist or an arm lock to the other (Figure 28). A panel on the jangha depicts Vanaras with raised hands facing each other (Figure 29).



Figure 26: Grappling Scene 3



Figure 27: Grappling Scene 4

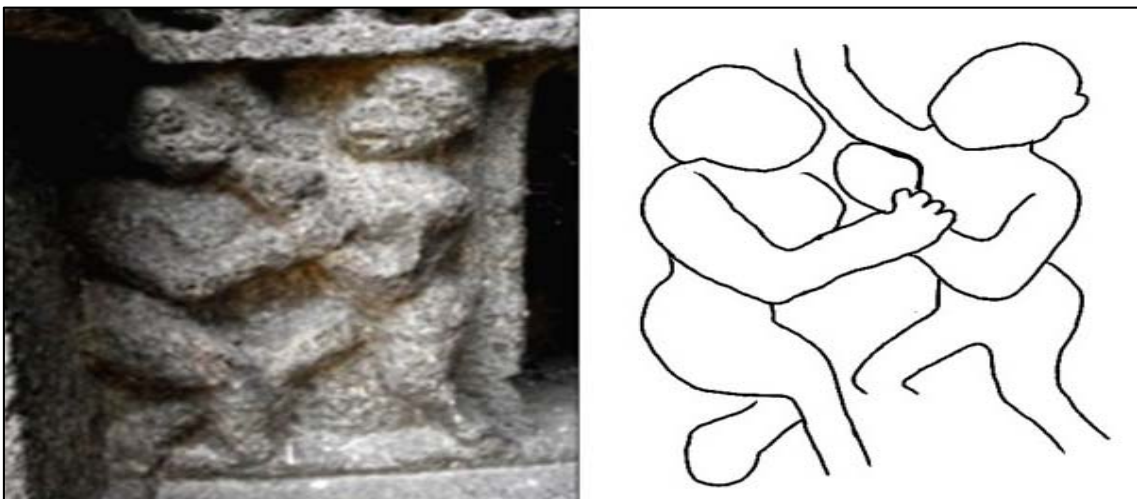


Figure 28: Two Vanaras Executing a Wrist Lock

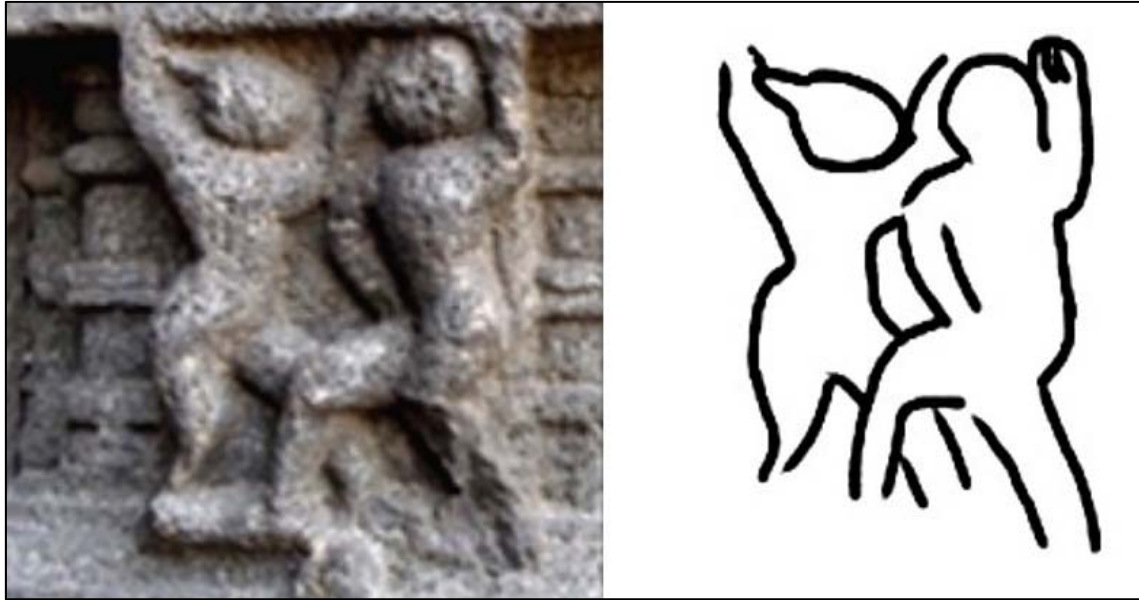


Figure 29: Grappling Scene 5

Jabreshvara Temple, Phaltan: The panel (Figure 30) is located on the west side of the north-facing temple. The panel depicts the grappling match between Bahubali and Bharata. In this panel one figure is on top of the other and had locked his feet around the waist of the other figure; this is a classical leg guard and the move being executed is an arm bar which is still practiced, and this move can be executed in many ways. One can also see a third figure holding a baton kind of thing over-seeing the match. Two brothers had readied their armies to war against each other. Their councilors intervened and suggested that to avoid a large-scale blood-shed the brothers should fight only among themselves and spare the armies. They agreed and fought each other with different weapons. Bahubali won every time. The last scene was a wrestling match (Kanitkar 2015).



Figure 30: Bharata and Bahubali Grappling

Bhuleshvara Temple, Yavat: On the east facing jangha of the outer wall of the temple, constructed during the Maratha Period 5.4 and 5.7 meters from the ground respectively one can see two out of the context panels which are hidden between the new and the old construction. One must take prior permission and climb the ladder to the upper platform of the temple to study these panels. In the first panel (Figure 31.), two separate grappling bouts can be observed. In the first one from the left, one can see that one figure on top has grabbed the other persons leg at the bottom and the person from the below has inter-twined his legs with the lower body of the one on top. The second scene in the same panel is fairly mutilated but one can see the person on the top is in a commanding position as he has inter-twined his feet to the other person's waist at the bottom and has also grabbed his left arm.

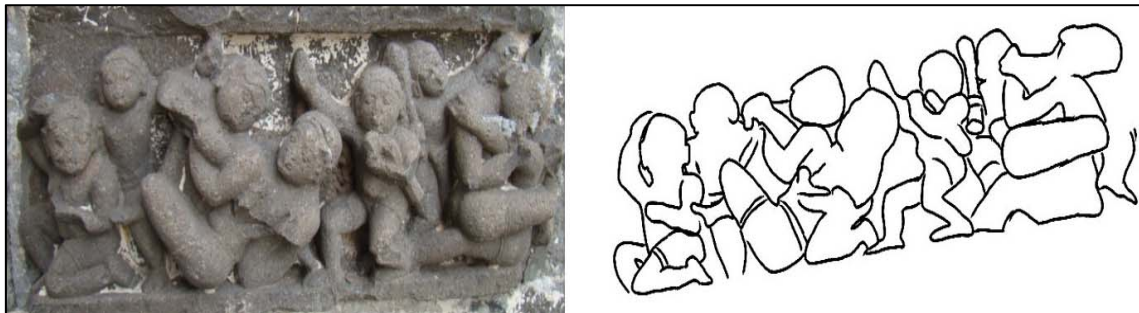


Figure 31: Grappling Scene 1



Figure 32: Grappling Scene

In the second panel (Figure 32) as well one can see two bouts taking place simultaneously. In the first bout i.e. second from left one can see a figure on top with raised fists and a mutilated figure facing the fist in the bottom. In modern MMA

terminology this move is known as the ground pound as one person gets on top of the other and gives him/her blows from fists and elbows till the match ends. In the second scene of the same panel which is the last depiction again like the previous panel one can see a person on top grabbing the person at the bottom with his feet and grabbing one arm. In both the panel another thing noticed is an individual figure over-seeing the bouts with a baton like thing in his hand and number of spectators or other figures can be seen in the back drop of the matches.

Conclusion

One comes across scenes of grappling on the terracotta art and the monuments across various dynasties and regions of India. This shows that grappling was an important art which was given due importance and patronage by the various kings from the ancient to the medieval period.

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