

## 1. The Significance of the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*

IF, AS WE HAVE ARGUED, the *Sundarakāṇḍa* is the heart of the *Rāmāyaṇa*,<sup>1</sup> the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, or “the Battle Book,” may be seen as the guts, as it were, of the poem. This is so not simply in the sense that the wrought emotionality of the fifth Book is here replaced with the many, long, and pervasive renderings of battle replete with graphic descriptions of the gushing blood, mangled limbs, and spilling entrails of the slain. For the massive sixth Book, nearly twice the length of the next-longest *kāṇḍa*, concerns itself with what, from an important perspective, may be considered to be the real business of the *Rāmāvatāra*.

Clearly the two most significant roles of the towering figure of Rāma are his elaborate portrayal as the ideal man, the paragon of self-control and exemplar of social *dharma*, who calmly gives up his rightful succession to the throne to preserve the truth of his father’s word, and his critical function as a major *avatāra*, or “incarnation,” of the great Lord Viṣṇu, who takes on a human birth to rid the world of the oppression of the monstrous and otherwise invincible *rākṣasa* monarch, Rāvaṇa. In a rather mechanical fashion we can, perhaps, judge the cultural significance of these two aspects of the hero by the amount of energy—in the form of the sheer number of verses—the poet and later redactors have devoted to them.

The enactment of the former of these roles forms the subject of the second longest of the poem’s seven *kāṇḍas*, the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*.<sup>2</sup> The fulfillment of Rāma’s mission in the latter constitutes the grand subject of the massive *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, which, at nearly forty-five hundred verses in the critical edition, dwarfs even the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*.<sup>3</sup> By this fairly crude calculation we can infer that the central events of the

<sup>1</sup> See Goldman and Goldman 1996, pp. 13, 79–86.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of Rāma as an exemplar of idealized social behavior, see R. Goldman 1984, pp. 49–59 and Pollock 1986, pp. 64–73.

<sup>3</sup> The critical editors of the volume have admitted 4,435 verses as belonging to their best reconstruction of the text based on the manuscripts collated for the edition. The critical edition of the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* has 3,170. Thus the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* is some 40 percent longer than the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*. Other versions of the poem, notably the popular and widely published versions of the so-called vulgate text, are considerably longer. Vaidya states that the “traditional extent of *Yuddhakāṇḍa* has only 5,710 stanzas” (Vaidya 1971, p. xxxi).

*Yuddhakāṇḍa*, comprising the bridging of the ocean, the siege of Lañkā, the prodigious battles fought before the city walls, the slaying of Rāvaṇa, the installation of the righteous *rākṣasa* prince Vibhīṣaṇa on the Lañkan throne, and the long-delayed consecration of Rāma as the divine, universal monarch,<sup>4</sup> together form the principal theme of the epic. This observation is amply confirmed by the receptive history of the poem and by the majority of the innumerable versions in which it has been rendered over the course of the last two to three millennia in all regions and virtually all languages of southern Asia.

For what, after all, is the “point” of the Rāma story, especially in its many influential Vaiṣṇava versions, if not to narrate the edifying tale of the earthly incarnation of the Lord, who, at the behest of the gods, compassionately consents to take on the role of a vulnerable and suffering mortal to save the world from the depredations of the evil and powerful Rāvaṇa and his minions and to restore a golden age of righteousness to a universe on the point of rupture? As the framing of the narrative in the *Bālakāṇḍa*<sup>5</sup> makes abundantly clear, if the *Rāmakathā* is about any one thing, it is the history of God’s descent to destroy the very avatar of evil in the world in keeping with the principle so famously stated by Rāma’s successor incarnation Kṛṣṇa at *Bhagavadgītā* 4.7–8.

With this in mind, then, it is only natural that the poet should devote the greatest portion of his narrative in this Book to a detailed, extensive, and often repetitive account of the many battles—both chaotic mass encounters and richly described single combats—that prefigure and set the stage for the culminating duel between the hero Rāma and the classic anti-hero Rāvaṇa.<sup>6</sup> Just as in the poem’s

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of this matter, see Pollock 1971, pp. 15–54.

<sup>5</sup> 1.14–16.

<sup>6</sup> The intensity of this final struggle is popularly regarded as so great that it has given rise to the formulaic verse in *MBh* and *Rām* to the effect that, although even the vast ocean and sky can find objects of comparison in each other, the battle between these two mighty antagonists beggars comparison itself. For a discussion of the textual history of these verses, see notes to 6.96.19 below. Despite this, the final duel comes off as a bit anticlimactic after the description of the extraordinary fight put up by Rāvaṇa’s incomparable son Indrajit. Indeed, many later versions of the Rāma story indicate that Rāvaṇa is, after all, not that formidable an adversary and that he is far exceeded in martial skill and power by such later creations as the much mightier subterranean demons Mahīrāvaṇa and/or his brother Ahirāvaṇa from whose clutches

sister epic, the *Mahābhārata*, with its five central “battle books,”<sup>7</sup> it is clear that the mythic heart of the tale and the culmination of its theological message lies precisely where its intended audience would no doubt find the greatest excitement and pleasure, that is, in its grand narrative of heroism and violence. It is in this sense, then, that the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, although it may seem overly long, tiresome, and repetitive to audiences schooled on the “rapid, plain and direct” style of the Homeric epics,<sup>8</sup> comes into its own as in many ways the core and culmination of the epic narrative.<sup>9</sup> It is this, together with the at-long-last permissible epiphany of Rāma as the supreme divinity without need for his sustained representation of himself and his self-understanding as a mere man, that no doubt account for much of the impact of the Book.

But the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* is not entirely given over to gory combat. Its capacious *sargas* offer plenty of room for much other material, including some of the literature’s finest discourses on *dharma*- and *nītiśāstra*, colorful renderings of fabulous and much larger than life characters, such as Indrajit and Kumbhakarṇa, and some of the tradition’s best-known and deeply loved scenes, such as the building of the bridge to Laṅkā (*setubandha*), Rāma’s emotional reunion with Bharata, and, of course, the highly iconic missions of Hanumān to bring back the mountain of healing herbs from the Himalayas to

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Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa must be rescued by Hanumān. On the legends involving these figures, see Smith 1988, pp. 145–53 and Lutgendorf 2007, pp. 211–16, *passim*. Vālmīki himself can be somewhat ambivalent in his representation of Rāvaṇa’s military prowess. Early on in the war, for example, Rāma is depicted as easily besting the demon king but then sparing his life and letting him withdraw in humiliation from the field of battle (6.47). Then, too, in the epic’s closing chapters, we learn that a *nākṣasa*, Lavaṇa, even more powerful than the slain Rāvaṇa, is harassing the sages living along the Yamunā River, and Rāma must send his brother Śatrughna to defeat him with an immensely powerful divine lance (7.59–61). On this story, see R. Goldman 1986, pp. 471–83.

<sup>7</sup> These are the *Bhīṣmaparvan* through the *Sauptikaparvan* (Books 6–10).

<sup>8</sup> Arnold 1905, pp. 41ff.

<sup>9</sup> Because of the centrality of the battle to the mission of the *avatāra* and its role as the centerpiece of this Book, the section is generally entitled the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, or “Battle Book,” although it is also called the *Laṅkākaṇḍa*, or “Book of Laṅkā,” in many, mainly northern, manuscripts.

Lañkā. It also contains some of the most interesting and controversial scenes in the epic, most notably Rāma's harsh treatment of his recovered wife and her unforgettable fire ordeal. These are discussed in greater detail below.

Let us begin with a brief synopsis of the *kāṇḍa*.