

Digitally Reunifying The Mewar *Ramayana*: A Collaborative Indo-UK Project

The Significance of the Mewar *Ramayana* Manuscript

The Mewar manuscript of the *Ramayana* was commissioned by Rana Jagat Singh I of Mewar (1628-52), towards the end of his reign in 1649, and completed during the reign of his successor, Raj Singh, in 1653. It is notable for its vast scale, its superb depictions of complex events in the story, and for its historical connections. As one of the finest illustrated manuscripts produced in India, the digital version will be of enormous value to art historians. It also holds great potential as an educational resource, and can illuminate and inform many fields of study, including religion, literature and history, not least for the fascinating glimpses it provides of life in seventeenth-century Rajasthan – the *Ramayana* set in Jagat Singh's world and time.

Aims of the Project

1. Immediate Aim: Digitisation and Web-mounting of the Mewar *Ramayana*

The British Library has worked in partnership with Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, Mumbai and other public institutions in India to reunify the manuscript digitally. The other holders in India are: the Baroda Museum and Art Gallery, Vadodara, and the Rajasthan Oriental Research Institute, Jodhpur. In addition, 49 folios from Book I, the *Balakanda*, are held in a private collection in Mumbai, India.

The project brings together, for the first time in almost 200 years, the majority of text folios as well as paintings so that Valmiki's work can be read in the original Sanskrit. The online version, which comprises over 1,200 images, has been mounted on a Turning The Pages platform, opening up the manuscript to higher education teachers and students as well as the international research community and the general public for the first time ever. Extensive contextual material about the manuscript is presented on an accompanying webpage.

2. Longer-Term Aim

Through the sharing of curatorial and technical expertise between partner institutions in the UK and India, this pilot endeavours to demonstrate feasibility for future partnerships, and has given us an understanding of the workings of transnational digitisation projects.

It is our hope that this project will pave the way for many future collaborative projects between the British Library and CSMVS, ensuring that our institutions work together to break

institutional and geographical boundaries and share respective collections through digitisation, exhibition and research.

The Physical Distribution of the Manuscript at a Glance

Over time the Mewar *Ramayana* manuscript was split into different portions and these have been dispersed amongst a number of holding institutions. Of the c.700 folios (approximately 85% of the manuscript) which survive, 145 are held in four collections in India and the other 555 are in the British Library. It is impossible to estimate the total number of paintings originally made given their uneven distribution through the manuscript, but of the 413 known paintings, 304 are in the UK and 109 are in the various Indian collections.

The *Ramayana*'s 24,000 verses are arranged in seven books (*kandas*), distributed as follows:

Book of the Ramayana	Present Location(s)	No. of folios known	No. of paintings
Balakanda	Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, Mumbai	(out of 73) 23	23
	Baroda Museum, Baroda	(out of 2) 1	1
	Private collection, Mumbai	49	49
Ayodhyakanda	British Library, London	129	68
Aranyakanda *	Rajasthan Oriental Research Institute, Udaipur	72	36
Kiskindhakanda	British Library, London	88	34
Sundarakanda	British Library, London	(out of 141) 18	18
Yuddhakanda	British Library, London	206	90
Uttarakanda	British Library, London	114	94
Totals		(out of 823) 700	413

* It is hoped that images of folios from the *Aranyakanda* currently held at the Rajasthan Oriental Research Institute, Jodhpur, may be included in the reunified digital version in a subsequent phase.

Digitisation

Folios in the holdings of all participating institutions were photographed in accordance with agreed technical specifications to allow for standard online access and for representation of details. Images were also saved in a format appropriate for preservation. Photography of folios was undertaken in-house by each participating institution to maintain collection security.

Prior to digitisation, all folios in the holdings of the British Library were disbound and checked by preservation staff so that any required remedial conservation work could be undertaken ahead of each item being safely digitised. The folios were subsequently framed within customised mounts, and are currently stored in this manner.

The choice to return the British Library's *Ramayana* books to their traditional, unbound 'pothi' format facilitated photography, but was in fact determined by conservation concerns which arose when the British Museum bindings were found to have become damaging to the paintings.

Content Metadata

As part of the project, item-level metadata was created to the same standards for painting folios held in India and the UK. This ensures that anyone accessing the Mewar *Ramayana* on the Web will be able to search the entire manuscript using embedded key words e.g. a search on "Hanuman" will retrieve all images where the metadata includes a mention of Hanuman.

Two art historians, J.P. Losty and Roda Ahluwalia, specialists on the Mewar *Ramayana* manuscript, have provided interpretative descriptions of every illustrated folio. Roda Ahluwalia is the author of all texts describing the paintings contained in Book 1, the *Balakanda*. J.P. Losty is the author of all interpretative texts for the paintings contained in Books 2, 4, 5 and 6, the *Ayodhyakanda*, the *Kiskindhakanda*, the *Sundarakanda* and the *Yuddhakanda*. Both authors have worked together to produce descriptions for the final book, the *Uttarakanda*.

This level of interpretation will open up the *Ramayana* books to the general public as well as academic researchers, enabling everyone to enjoy the manuscript's illustrations and their part in the story, without any prior knowledge of the *Ramayana* tale.

The Online Resource

The online resource comprises the reunified Mewar *Ramayana* manuscript mounted on Turning The Pages and an accompanying webpage. The latter includes essays by J.P. Losty on the Mewar *Ramayana* manuscript and its history, and art historical overviews for each of the seven books of the epic by J.P. Losty and Roda Ahluwalia. An essay by John Brockington on the Sanskrit text of the Mewar *Ramayana* is also included.

Contributors

Roda Ahluwalia gained a Masters degree in the Arts of South Asia from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) University of London. Subsequently she worked

extensively on the Indian Painting collections of the British Museum and British Library in London, and authored a book on the Rajput Painting collection of the British Museum, titled 'Rajput Painting, Romantic, Divine and Courtly Art from India' (2008). She currently lectures on Mughal, Deccani and *Pahari* Painting for the Post Graduate diploma in Indian Aesthetics offered by *Jnanapravaha* in Mumbai.

John L. Brockington is emeritus Professor of Sanskrit at the University of Edinburgh, a Vice President of the International Association of Sanskrit Studies, and the author or editor of several books and numerous articles, mainly on the Sanskrit epics and the history of Hinduism, including *Righteous Rāma: the evolution of an epic* (1985), *The Sanskrit Epics* (1998) and *Epic Threads: John Brockington on the Sanskrit Epics* (2000); he is the translator with Mary Brockington of *Rāma the Steadfast: An Early Form of the Rāmāyana* (2006).

Jeremiah P. Losty was for 34 years a curator in the Asian departments of the British Library, firstly of Sanskrit manuscripts and books and afterwards of Indian visual materials. He has published extensively on illustrated Indian manuscripts and painting in India. His books include the ground-breaking *The Art of the Book in India* (1982) and *Calcutta City of Palaces* (1990). He has worked extensively on the Mewar *Ramayana* volumes in the British Library including the exhibition and accompanying catalogue *The Ramayana: Love and Valour in India's Great Epic – the Mewar Ramayana Manuscripts* (2008).

Sudha Bhuchar is Artistic Director of Tamasha Theatre Company, which she co-founded in 1989. She is the narrator of the Mewar *Ramayana* interpretative texts.

Making the Manuscript Accessible on the Web

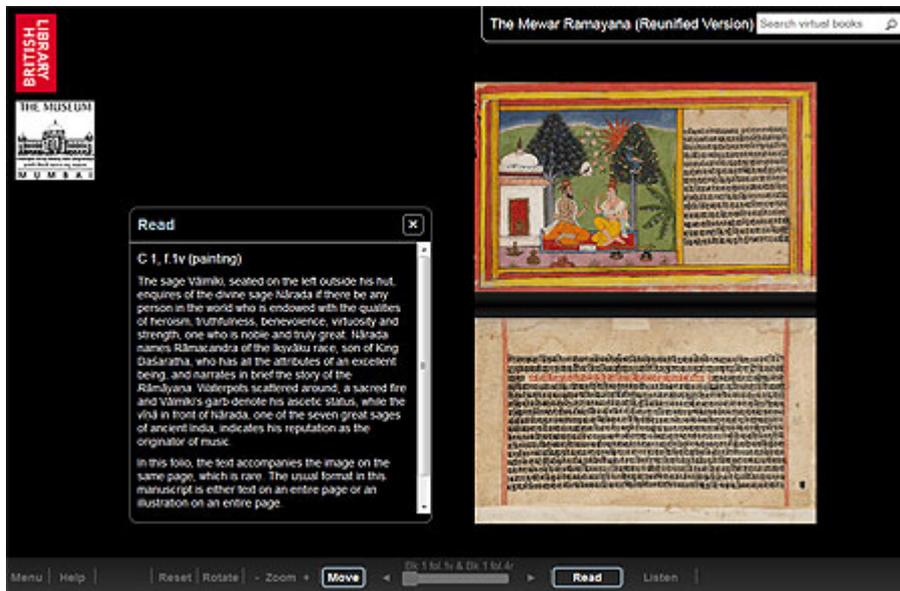
The original sequence of folios in the manuscript has been recreated by 'interfiling' the digital images from all participating institutions. The digital platform chosen to mount the images is that of Turning The Pages, an interactive animation of books, developed by the British Library to allow the user to leaf through the pages of a rare book or manuscript virtually in a highly realistic manner. This has been customised to reflect the traditional, unbound '*pothi*' format of the Mewar *Ramayana*.

The TTP software has utilised a new 'deep-zoom function', which will allow viewers to study and enjoy the text and illustrations in the minutest of detail.

A customised toolbar allows book to book navigation and displays folio numbers within each book. Shelfmarks identifying holding institutions are provided at the head of each interpretative pop-up text.

A distinguishing feature of this manuscript is that pictorial representation is provided for all the events in the *Ramayana*; the interpretative texts explain the significance of each painting and also narrate the story.

A Kiosk version of the reunified *Mewar Ramayana* TTP has also been created for use in exhibition galleries.



The Reunified Mewar Ramayana on Turning the Pages

Target Audience

This project will open up access globally, so anyone anywhere will be able to see and use images of our manuscripts in an evolving virtual research environment. However, we have proactively targeted three distinct groups:

- HE institutions (students and faculty) – we are particularly interested in targeting art history and religious studies students and faculty, across India as well as overseas. For these groups, the online resources will provide a unique opportunity to access the majority of text and painting folios and to forge new areas of research. We will actively promote the site to art history and religious studies course providers.
- Individual researchers – One can imagine new research lines being stimulated by the availability of digital images, such as exploring the view of 17th-century Rajput society presented by the *Mewar Ramayana*.
- General public – our decision to mount the digitised manuscript on a Turning the Pages platform was largely determined by a desire to reach the widest possible audience. We felt that the TTP, with enhanced deep-zoom feature, would be of particular appeal not only to researchers but also to the general public, since it offers a virtual experience of leafing through the pages of the manuscript, and also allows interpretative information to be presented as text or audio.

Hosting, Storage, Maintenance and Protection of the Data

The digital Mewar *Ramayana* is hosted on the British Library website; it is accessible through hyperlinks on the websites of other partners.

In order to ensure that the data remains available over the web and is preserved for future generations, the British Library will initially store the data on dedicated servers. In the longer term, it will add the data to its Digital Library System, a secure, reliable and scalable management system for all of the Library's digital content assets.

Curatorial Responsibility and Project Management

The British Library, as holder of the largest portion of the surviving manuscript, has lead and co-ordinated the project overall, while the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya has been responsible for leading and co-ordinating all activities in India.

Marina Chellini, Project Curator, The British Library

Vandana Prapanna, Project Co-ordinator, CSMVS, Mumbai

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The digital reunification project builds on an earlier project to digitise a selection of folios of the Mewar *Ramayana* from the holdings of the British Library, generously funded by Sir Gulam Noon. This first selection was presented on Turning the Pages in 2008 simultaneously with a major exhibition at the Library focusing on the Mewar *Ramayana* manuscript.