

Victorious Across Eternity

The Lives of the Jain Tīrthāṅkaras

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Any first-time visitor to a large-scale Jain temple in India will at once be overcome by a wealth of impressions: the brightness and ornateness of the marble architecture, the pervasive sounds and scents of worship, the reverential if genial demeanor of devotees of all ages, and in particular the gleaming images seen in various parts of the shrine (Fig. 1.1). Our visitor will be aware that the principal object of worship in the temple is the icon of a human figure sunk in meditation, installed in the central shrine room, and he will note that it is flanked by similar albeit slightly less prominent images (Fig. 1.2). If he strolls around the outer wall surrounding the main shrine, he will likely see a row of twenty-four images, often housed in mini-shrines, which are much smaller in dimension and receive very little ritual or devotional attention compared to the main image of the temple but are otherwise identical in appearance to it. On closer inspection, these little images will be identifiable by a cartouche symbol particular to each of them and often also by a name engraved on the plinth on which each figure sits. Our visitor will learn that all these images, large and small, represent the Tīrthāṅkaras, the twenty-four saving teachers of this particular time cycle, and that the main image to which the Jain temple is dedicated represents one of these individuals.¹

Seated in cross-legged impassivity or standing in an ascetic posture with arms hanging down, with elongated ears and painted, wide-open eyes indicative of superhuman powers of apprehension, images of Tīrthāṅkaras are invariably highly stylized, and their religious significance is physically inscribed

on their obviously male and at the same time somewhat asexual forms.² As personifications of restraint and liberating knowledge, the Tīrthāṅkaras represent both a spiritual type and specific teachers whom, in the light of the reverence directed toward them, our visitor to the Jain temple might be tempted to designate “saints” or even “gods.” However, neither divinity nor sainthood as understood in a monotheistic (Judaean-Christian-Muslim) context are sufficiently adequate explanatory categories.

It is true that Jains use the expression “Bhagvān,” which can be rendered as “God,” to refer to the Tīrthāṅkaras, but in fact this designation relates to these figures as a totality in terms of everything they represent, sometimes also called Paramātman (“Supreme Soul”), and acknowledges the innate and common capacity of human beings to transform their own innermost beings in the same way as the great teachers. Jains pay homage to this inner spiritual dimension when they worship the Tīrthāṅkaras, and there is no question of these figures exercising any creative or regulatory role within the cosmos. Sanctity in the sense of moral perfection is no doubt a primary attribute of all the Tīrthāṅkaras, but the notion of sainthood in the sense of a postmortem ability to intervene positively in the lives of devotees does not serve to define what is significant about these Jain teachers; as dead renunciants who have achieved deliverance from rebirth, they cannot become involved in human affairs. While the “vita” of a Christian saint is defined by one lifetime and very often a single climactic act of piety or martyrdom, the career of each Tīrthāṅkara is played out over a vast span of time, during which innumerable vicissitudes of rebirth are undergone. Furthermore, as we shall see, the trajectories of the culminating existence of each Tīrthāṅkara are necessarily identical.

A Tīrthāṅkara, literally a “maker of a ford (*tīrtha*),” is a human teacher, one of a line of twenty-four similar figures recurring



1.1 | Jina (opposite page)

India, southern Rajasthan, probably vicinity of Mt. Abu

Dated by inscription to 1160 CE (Samvat 1217)

White marble with traces of polychromy

23 1/2 x 19 x 8 1/2 inches (59.69 x 48.26 x 21.59 cm)

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond. The Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund

Photograph by Katherine Wetzel © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts



1.3 | Rṣabha
Gupta period; 5th Century
H: 5 7/8 inches (14.9 cm)
Dr. Siddharth Bhansali Collection
Photograph by Judith Cooper



1.4 | Rṣabha
Gupta period; 5th Century
H: 4 3/8 inches (11.1 cm)
Dr. Siddharth Bhansali Collection
Photograph by Judith Cooper



narrative that eventually came to be associated with Rṣabha (literally, “bull”) locates him many millions of years ago, at the beginning of the third phase of the current time cycle. At this time, as well as enacting the standard career of a Tirthaṅkara, he introduced a variety of practical and social skills to human beings and also participated paradigmatically in the very first act of giving (*dāna*) by a lay follower to a renunciant: at the end of a long period of fasting in the wilderness, he received sugar-cane juice as alms from a king. Those who argue for Rṣabha’s historicity point to depictions of bulls and cross-legged, vaguely ascetic-looking human figures on the clay seals found at excavation sites such as Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro belonging to the Indus Valley Civilization (around 2500–1800 BCE) to support their claim. They also adduce occurrences of the word “Rṣabha” in the poems of the *R̥g Veda*, India’s earliest literary compositions from around 1400 to 1000 BCE, as further corroboration that the first Tirthaṅkara should be viewed as a genuine historical figure. Unfortunately, the context of the Indus Valley seals is far too uncertain to bear the interpretative weight placed on them, while inspection of the use of “Rṣabha” in the *R̥g Veda* makes clear that it is regularly employed as no more than an epithet of the mighty Vedic god Indra.

The possible historicity of the twenty-second Tirthaṅkara, Nemi, who is said by the *Kalpa Sūtra* to have lived for one thousand years some eighty-five millennia ago,¹¹ raises rather different issues. All Jains are familiar with the story of how Nemi turned away from his marriage ceremony, organized by his cousin

1.5 | Nemi’s wedding

Folio 64 from a *Kalpa Sūtra* loose-leaf manuscript, verso
Western Indian style, Patan, Gujarat, India; 1472
Opaque watercolor and ink on gold leaf on paper
4 3/4 x 10 1/4 inches (11 x 26 cm)
Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Dr. Bertram H. Schaffner, 1994.11.72

Kṛṣṇa, after hearing the anguished cries of the animals being slaughtered to feed the (non-Jain) guests and then renounced the world to embark on the final course of asceticism that led him to omniscience (Fig. 1.5). For the Jain, the location of this story in the vicinity of Mount Girnār in Gujarat, the site of Nemi’s enlightenment and death and an important pilgrimage place to this day, and the role within it of Kṛṣṇa (more familiar as a Hindu deity and an incarnation of the god Viṣṇu but viewed by Jains as a princely layman and, as in Hinduism, a historical figure) are a guarantee both of the veracity of this narrative and the ancient presence of Jainism in the western peninsula.¹² For the historian, however, this story can be read in a different manner: as deriving from the period of the gradual shift of the Jain community, which originated in the east of India, to the west of the subcontinent around the early centuries of the common era and its attempt to forge relations with the Vaiṣṇava devotees of Kṛṣṇa in that region by assimilating their deity and transforming him into a subordinate associate of Nemi.

The evidence for the historicity of the twenty-third Tirthaṅkara, Pārśva, is more complex. Regarded as having lived for a span



1.11 | Interpretation of dreams (above)

Folio 32 from a *Kalpa Sūtra* loose-leaf manuscript, verso
 Western Indian Style, Patan, Gujarat, India; 1472
 Opaque watercolor and ink on gold leaf on paper
 4 3/4 x 10 1/4 inches (11 x 26 cm)
 Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Dr. Bertram H. Schaffner, 1994.11.40

1.12 | The great gift

Folio 45 from a *Kalpa Sūtra* loose-leaf manuscript
 Western Indian Style, Patan, Gujarat, India; 1472
 Opaque watercolor and ink on gold leaf on paper
 4 3/4 x 10 1/4 inches (11 x 26 cm)
 Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Dr. Bertram H. Schaffner, 1994.11.53



1.13 | Mahāvira on his way to renounce the world (above)

Folio 47 from a *Kalpa Sūtra* loose-leaf manuscript
 Western Indian Style, Patan, Gujarat, India; 1472
 Opaque watercolor and ink on gold leaf on paper
 4 3/4 x 10 1/4 inches (11 x 26 cm)
 Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Dr. Bertram H. Schaffner, 1994.11.55

1.14 | Mahāvira's renunciation

Folio 48 from a *Kalpa Sūtra* loose-leaf manuscript, verso
 Western Indian Style, Patan, Gujarat, India; 1472
 Opaque watercolor and ink on gold leaf on paper
 4 3/4 x 10 1/4 inches (11 x 26 cm)
 Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Dr. Bertram H. Schaffner, 1994.11.56

