

From Mahābhārata Warrior to Sacred Ontological Figure: The Deification of Bhīma in the Late Majapahit Merapi-Merbabu Scriptorium

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Abstract

This article addresses an unresolved problem in Javanese cultural heritage: the persistent interpretive fragmentation between archaeological data and philological analysis. Focusing on Bhīma's transformation from an epic warrior in the *Mahābhārata* to a sacred spiritual entity during the late Majapahit era, the study examines how the Merapi-Merbabu scriptorium reconstructed his identity through a convergence of material sculptural evidence and esoteric textual formulas. Methodologically, the study adopts an interdisciplinary qualitative design combining philological text editing, iconographic analysis, and cross-media interpretation. Two primary corpora are analyzed: a visual-material corpus consisting of the regional Sukuh-Lawu Mountain-style Bhīma statue, and a textual corpus comprising the Bhīma Swarga manuscripts from the Merapi-Merbabu scriptorium (specifically codices 1 L 234, 1 L 333, 5 L 5, and 9 L 156), along with the *Nawaruci* text. The findings show that material survival alone does not restore cultural coherence, as sacred heritage remains fragmented across media. However, cross-media comparison successfully reconstructs recurring iconographic features, such as the *pañcanakha* (five-clawed nails) and *poleñ* (chequered) cloth, and reconnects sculptural evidence with textual memory. This process uncovers a systematic somatic ontology where Bhīma is reinterpreted as the absolute source of breath (*ambēkan*), life (*urip*), and consciousness (*pramāṇa*). The article argues that the preservation of sacred heritage becomes most meaningful when it moves beyond object visibility toward cultural legibility, allowing the late Majapahit religious identity to remain interpretable across material statues and textual abstractions.

Keywords: *Bhīma, Merapi-Merbabu Manuscripts, Sacred Heritage, Iconography, Cultural Legibility*

Abstrak

Artikel ini membahas permasalahan yang belum terselesaikan dalam warisan budaya Jawa, yaitu masih kuatnya fragmentasi interpretatif antara data arkeologis dan analisis filologis. Berfokus pada transformasi Bhīma dari seorang ksatria epos dalam *Mahābhārata* menjadi entitas spiritual yang sakral pada masa Majapahit akhir, studi ini menguji bagaimana skriptorium Merapi-Merbabu

merekonstruksi identitasnya melalui konvergensi antara bukti material arca dan formula tekstual esoteris. Secara metodologis, studi ini menerapkan desain kualitatif interdisipliner yang memadukan suntingan teks filologis, analisis ikonografis, dan interpretasi lintas media. Dua korpus utama dianalisis dalam penelitian ini: korpus visual-material yang terdiri dari arca Bhīma gaya gunung regional Sukuh-Lawu, dan korpus tekstual yang terdiri dari naskah-naskah *Bhīma Swarga* dari skriptorium Merapi-Merbabu (secara spesifik kodiks 1 L 234, 1 L 333, 5 L 5, dan 9 L 156) di samping teks *Nawaruci*. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa keberadaan material semata tidak serta-merta memulihkan keutuhan budaya, karena warisan suci tersebut tetap terfragmentasi di berbagai media. Namun, perbandingan lintas media berhasil merekonstruksi fitur-fitur ikonografis yang muncul berulang, seperti *pañcanakha* (lima jari) dan kain *poleñ* (berpola kotak-kotak), serta menghubungkan kembali bukti arca dengan memori tekstual. Proses ini menyingkapkan adanya ontologi somatik (raga) yang sistematis, di mana Bhīma ditafsirkan ulang sebagai sumber absolut dari napas (*ambēkan*), hidup (*urip*), dan kesadaran (*pramāṇa*). Artikel ini berargumen bahwa pelestarian warisan suci menjadi paling bermakna ketika bergerak melampaui visibilitas objek menuju keterbacaan budaya (*cultural legibility*), sehingga identitas religius Majapahit akhir tetap dapat diinterpretasikan melintasi arca material dan abstraksi teks.

Kata Kunci: *Bhīma, Naskah Merapi-Merbabu, Warisan Suci, Ikonografi, Keterbacaan Budaya*

Introduction

In the late Majapahit era, Bhīma was reconceptualized not merely as a formidable hero of the Mahābhārata epic but as a sacred vessel embodying salvation, vital breath, and spiritual authority. The deification of Bhīma in the Javanese highlands signifies a fundamental shift in Nusantara spirituality toward embodied divinity or internal mysticism, known as *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* (Santiko, 1986, 2017; Suparta, 2018; Atmodjo, 1986). Communities residing on mountain slopes, confronting the socio-political instabilities of a transitional era, sought a protective figure who was both resilient and somatically intimate; consequently, Bhīma was venerated as a figure of purification, an averter of calamity, and a deliverer (Stutterheim, 1956; Atmodjo, 1986; Santiko, 2011, 2017). The profound significance of this transformation lies in the birth of spiritual autonomy, wherein access to the salvation of the soul was no longer deemed an exclusive prerogative of the high deities, but rather an intrinsic potential residing within the breath of every individual.

Existing scholarship on Bhīma can be categorized into three primary trajectories. First, archaeological and iconographic studies position Bhīma statues and reliefs as crucial evidence for understanding late Majapahit religiosity, focusing particularly on his robust physique, the *pañcanakha* (five-clawed) feature, the *poleñ* (checkered) cloth, and his association with deliverance rituals at Candi Sukuh (Atmodjo, 1986; Duijker, 2010; Santiko, 2011). Second, philological and literary analyses examine the *Nawaruci*, *Bhīma Swarga*, and various Merapi-Merbabu manuscripts as repositories of esoteric teachings, *ruwatan* (exorcism) rites, and highland religious knowledge (Prijoetomo, 1934; Wiryamartana & van der Molen, 2001; Gunawan, 2017). Third, heritage and memory studies emphasize that material objects acquire meaning only when situated within networks

of narratives, practices, and interpretations that render them legible to the community (Cicourel, 2015; Lane, 2016; Tan, 2024). However, these three scholarly pathways often remain siloed, leaving the nexus between Bhīma's visual forms and the textual formulas that provide his theological grounding inadequately explained.

This research aims to examine the reinterpretation of Bhīma as a locus of spiritual authority within the Javanese highland tradition. Specifically, it addresses two research questions: 1) How did the Merapi-Merbabu scriptorium community construct Bhīma's sacred identity through the convergence of material iconography and esoteric textual formulas? 2) What does this cross-media reinterpretation reveal about the formation of religious identity and cosmological thought in late Majapahit Javanese society? These questions are addressed through a textual-iconographic analysis that maps the correspondence between statuary features and textual formulas, with the aim of restoring cultural legibility to the Merapi-Merbabu scriptorium tradition.

This study is grounded in two primary arguments regarding memory and spiritual autonomy. First, the cult of Bhīma in the Merapi-Merbabu scriptorium represents a strategy of memory preservation enacted through the reconstruction of a somatic ontology, which transformed Bhīma from a heroic figure into an absolute entity (*Śūnyatā*) governing life, consciousness, and breath. Second, a deliberate theological subversion occurred among highland communities, positioning Bhīma as the origin or source of vital energy for Bhaṭṭāra Guru to achieve religious independence from the waning doctrines of mainstream Śaivism. Thus, through the mastery of Bhīma's esoteric knowledge, late Majapahit religious identity successfully maintained its continuity across statues and manuscripts as a resilient system of salvation.

Literature Review

Transformation of Bhīma: From Epic Protagonist to Javanese Sacred Icon

Bhīma initially occupied a central role as a premier warrior figure within the Indian *Mahābhārata* tradition, characterized by his immense physical prowess, heroic temperament, and pivotal influence on the epic's narrative trajectory (Juynboll, 1906; Fokker, 1938; Phalgunadi, 1994, 1997; Obrock, 2019). These early representations, echoed in the reliefs of Cambodia and South India, consistently portray Bhīma as a frontline protagonist of the *Bhāratayuddha*, typically depicted wielding a *gadā* (club) and possessing a volatile, fiery disposition (Duijker, 2010; Poerbatjaraka & Hooykaas, 1934; Teeuw, 1950). However, within the evolution of Javanese tradition, Bhīma was not merely transposed verbatim from the Indian epic; rather, he underwent a profound process of localization and reinterpretation. His identity was recalibrated to align with Javanese religious, cosmological, and

spiritual values, facilitating a transformation from a martial hero into a complex symbol of internal spiritual power.

In Javanese literary and oral traditions, particularly within the *kidung* genre such as the *Nawaruci* and *Dewaruci*, Bhīma's role transcends the traditional boundaries of the warrior to become a focal point for the pursuit of esoteric knowledge, purification, and spiritual authority (Stutterheim, 1956; Atmodjo, 1986; Prijohoetomo, 1934; Santiko, 2011, 2017). He is cast as both a devoted disciple and a semi-divine hero embarking on an esoteric quest to obtain the *amṛta* (water of life), aimed at achieving soul salvation and the liberation of ancestral spirits through *ruwatan* (exorcism/purification) rituals (Santiko, 2011, 2017). While prior scholarship has frequently addressed Bhīma in a fragmented manner, viewing him alternatively as an epic character, a shadow puppet (*wayang*) protagonist, or a ritual element, there remains a critical lacuna in understanding Bhīma through the lens of a unified status transformation. This study seeks to bridge this gap by asserting that in the late Majapahit-era Javanese tradition, specifically within the *Bhīma Swarga* of the Merapi-Merbabu collection, Bhīma attained the status of a sacred icon, venerated for his transcendent mental and spiritual fortitude rather than his mere physical dominance on the battlefield.

The Textual and Iconographic Convergence of Bhīma

The representation of Bhīma within the cultural landscape of late Majapahit Java manifested through two primary media channels: visual-material evidence embodied in stone statuary and reliefs, and esoteric textual evidence such as the *Nawaruci* and *Bhīma Swarga* manuscripts. Distinctive iconographic details, including the *pañcanakha* (five-clawed), the use of *polèn* (checkered) cloth, robust physical proportions (*muka gagahan*), and the *gadā* (club) attribute cannot be understood in isolation; rather, they must be interpreted in tandem with the poetic descriptions and esoteric teachings embedded within the texts (Duijker, 2010). It is precisely this convergence between material form and verbal narrative that imparts a theological dimension to these artifacts, whereby static statues acquire a spiritual essence and authority as the epicenter of salvific discourse for their constituent communities.

A fundamental issue in extant scholarship lies in disciplinary fragmentation, where sculptural remains are often treated as purely archaeological data while manuscripts are viewed as disparate philological sources, leading to a disconnection in the continuity of Bhīma's sacred identity (Duijker, 2010). Moreover, previous research has leaned heavily on the *Bhīma Swarga* *kidung* from the Balinese tradition, which is deemed less relevant due to the significant spatial and temporal distance from Javanese archaeological sites. Conversely, the *Bhīma Swarga* manuscripts from the Merapi-Merbabu scriptorium itself remain largely marginalized in scholarly discourse (Salim, 2018). This article intervenes by proposing a cross-media approach, a textual-iconographic convergence strategy

to elucidate how Bhīma's sacred identity was actively constructed and transmitted as a resilient infrastructure of collective memory, enduring well beyond the political decline of the Majapahit empire.

The Merapi-Merbabu Scriptorium as a Space for Religious Knowledge Production

The Merapi-Merbabu scriptorium is not merely a passive site for manuscript production or copying, but serves as a dynamic arena for the systematic production and transmission of religious knowledge managed by Javanese scholars (Wiryamartana & van der Molen, 2001). This environment was intricately linked to the *karesian* or *mandala kadewaguruan* traditions, where the slopes of Mount Damalung functioned as a hub for literary and religious studies that supported ascetic practices such as *tapa* and *samādhi* (Kriswanto, 2016; Suparta, 2018). Despite its geographical distance from the formal power centers of Majapahit, this scriptorium remained engaged with the wider world, functioning as an active infrastructure of memory that documented philosophical inquiries, ethical guidelines, and traditional medicinal techniques (Setyawati, 2006; Wiryamartana & van der Molen, 2001). The utilization of the *aksara buda* or *aksara gunung* (mountain script) within this milieu underscores the intellectual autonomy of the *karesian* community in preserving sacred traditions that proved resilient well beyond the collapse of central political authority (Kriswanto, 2019; Wiryamartana & van der Molen, 2001).

Within the specific context of the Merapi-Merbabu environment, Bhīma's sacred identity underwent a fundamental recategorization, linking his figure to the most intimate dimensions of human ontology. Bhīma was reinterpreted not merely as a heroic warrior but as an entity governing the vital functions of the human body, encompassing breath (*bāyu*), life (*urip*), and profound internal consciousness (Setyawati, 2006; Suparta, 2018). This categorization positions Bhīma as the locus of spiritual authority within the salvific systems (*sawab*) and soul-liberation practices that formed the core of the highland community's intellectual repository (Dwiadmojo, 2023; Kurniawan, 2017). Consequently, this section establishes a critical foundation for viewing Merapi-Merbabu as a space that actively facilitated Bhīma's status transformation from an Indian epic protagonist into a sacred spiritual icon holding the key to the liberation of the human soul during the late Majapahit era.

Method

This study is delineated to the late Majapahit period, specifically spanning the 14th to the 17th centuries. The 14th-century lower bound is established to capture the formative phase of Bhīma's cultic development within the Majapahit religious landscape, preceding the construction of Candi Sukuh (ca. 1437 CE) and the earliest Merapi-Merbabu manuscript production. This earlier horizon is necessary because the iconographic conventions that crystallized at Sukuh did not emerge in

isolation; they presuppose a longer tradition of devotional reinterpretation whose roots can be traced to the Majapahit court culture of the 1300s, particularly through early *kakawin* literature and the consolidation of Śaivist-syncretic theology under Hayam Wuruk (r. 1350–1389) (Santiko, 1986; Zoetmulder, 1991; Atmodjo, 1986). This timeframe is critical as it marks a significant shift in the relationship between central power structures, ascetic communities and the production of religious symbolism in highland regions. These temporal boundaries are essential to avoid the conflation of Bhīma as an Indian epic protagonist, Bhīma in the pre-Majapahit Javanese tradition, and the Bhīma of the later developing *wayang* (shadow puppet) tradition. The upper bound of the 17th century acknowledges that the Merapi-Merbabu manuscripts continued to be produced and copied well after Majapahit's political collapse (conventionally dated to ca. 1527 CE) (Kriswanto, 2016; Kriswanto, 2019). This overlap is not an inconsistency but a deliberate methodological choice: the scriptorium's textual traditions represent the survival and elaboration of late Majapahit religious thought beyond its political substrate (Wiryamartana & van der Molen, 2001; Suparta, 2018), and tracing this continuity into the early 17th century is essential for understanding how Bhīma's sacred identity was preserved as an active, living tradition rather than a fossilized artifact of a defunct polity (Setyawati, 2006; Kurniawan, 2017).

The study utilized two primary datasets: visual-material data and textual data. Visual data were obtained through an inventory of Bhīma statues and reliefs from the Candi Sukuh site, formerly part of the K.R.T. Hardjonagoro collection and currently held by the Ministry of Culture. Meanwhile, textual data are sourced from Old Javanese manuscripts containing the esoteric teachings of Bhīma. The primary textual sources include the *Bhīma Swarga* Merapi-Merbabu manuscripts from the National Library of the Republic of Indonesia (Perpusnas RI), specifically codices 1 L 234, 1 L 333, 5 L 5, and 9 L 156, as well as the *Nawaruci* text.

Data collection was conducted through field observations and archival research. Field observations were directed at documenting the morphological features of the statuary, including the presence of the *pañcanakha* (five claws), *poleñ* cloth, hand gestures (*mudras*), bodily ornaments, and visual proportions that characterize the late Majapahit Bhīma style. Documentation prioritized the object's positioning, anatomical details, and spatial context within collections or sites. Archival research involved an in-depth examination of the *Bhīma Swarga* Merapi-Merbabu manuscripts, existing text editions, prior scholarship, and literature regarding Javanese iconography, Śaivism, and ascetic traditions. This stage was designed to capture both the physical attributes and the fragmented theological meanings embedded within the manuscripts.

The data analysis follows interdisciplinary protocols between philology and iconography. In the philological domain, the manuscripts underwent stages of description, variant comparison, selection

of text witnesses, and the preparation of editions and translations to produce an authoritative text. In the archaeological domain, a comparative cataloging of anatomical elements was performed. The final analysis utilizes Panofsky's (1939/2018) tripartite framework: 1) Pre-iconographical description to identify the visual forms of the statues and the literal narrative of the texts; 2) Iconographical analysis to map the correspondence between the physical anatomy of the statues and the metaphorical enumerations in the text (such as the *poleñ* cloth measuring eleven *depa*); and 3) Iconological interpretation to uncover the shifting theological paradigm from a heroic figure to the transcendental origin of Bhaṭāra Guru.

While this research focuses on the transformation of Bhīma's ontological status and his role in late Majapahit salvific practices, certain limitations must be acknowledged. These include the fragmented and damaged physical condition of many Merapi-Merbabu manuscripts and the scarcity of direct written records regarding the interactions between highland ascetic communities and the Majapahit central authority. Consequently, the interpretation of theological subversion in this study relies extensively on the strength of internal textual evidence, corroborated through the correspondence analysis of available iconographic features.

Results and Discussion

The transformation of Bhīma from a *Mahābhārata* epic warrior into an absolute spiritual entity in Java represents a trajectory of sacralization that transcends conventional heroic narratives. This shift in sacred status reveals how the interpretative fragmentation between archaeological and philological evidence was bridged through active theological reconstruction at the Merapi-Merbabu scriptorium. This process fundamentally reshaped the cosmological foundations and religious identity of Javanese society during the late Majapahit period. Ultimately, massive statuary, esoteric texts, and cultic practices no longer function as disparate domains; instead, they intertwine as mutually reinforcing archives within a resilient sacred tradition.

Textual and Iconographic Convergence in the Sacred Representation of Bhīma

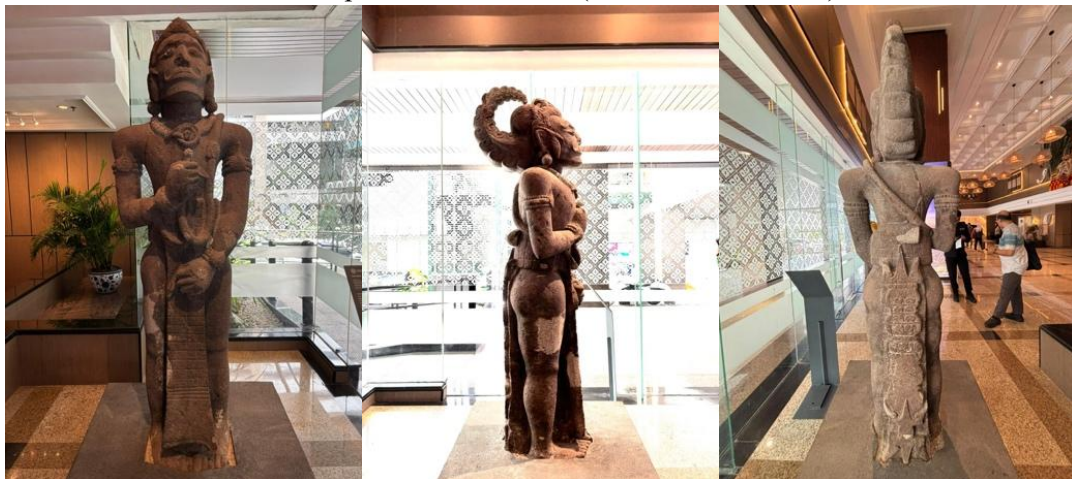
Analysis of the corpus in this study indicates that the representation of Bhīma during the late Majapahit era did not manifest as isolated fragments but emerged simultaneously through intertwined material and verbal dimensions. Visually, the figure of Bhīma persists in the cultural landscape through stone statues occupying sacred spaces across various mountain sites; literarily, he remains central to spiritual discourse within Old Javanese manuscripts such as the *Nawaruci* and *Bhīma Swarga*. The existence of these two media is not mutually exclusive; rather, they mutually validate Bhīma's identity as a figure of unique standing within the Javanese religious system. However, the mere availability of this data does not inherently produce interpretative wholeness. What is observed

in statuary is frequently decoupled from its textual narrative, despite these texts being the very source that imparts vitality and spiritual authority to the static material forms. Without synthesizing these two dimensions, the understanding of the Bhīma cult remains interpretatively fragmented.

This fragmentation is significant because Bhīma is not merely a collection of arbitrary morphological features, but rather an iconographic tradition whose intelligibility relies on a network of recurring visual markers. Marijke Duijker (2010) standardized the primary feature patterns, including the fierce countenance (*muka gagahan*), rigid arm positions, and elongated nails. A quintessential specimen of the 15th-century Sukuh-Lawu regional style is the Bhīma statue from the K.R.T. Hardjonagoro collection (Surakarta), currently held by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Indonesia. Morphologically, this statue displays an upright posture with robust proportions, with the pañcanakha (five claws) on the hands positioned in the *muṣṭi mudrā* (ritual gesture). The iconography encompasses the *poleñ* attire (black-and-white checkered patterns) with trailing *kunca* (floating tails) extending to the feet. Supplementary ornaments include the *gelung supit urang* (shrimp-claw hairstyle), a triangular necklace of jewels, and triple-layered bracelets. While such standardization preserves access to semantic meaning, it does not automatically guarantee a culturally profound relationship. Figure 1 depicts Bhīma from Candi Sukuh, constructed during the late Majapahit era.

Figure 1.

Bhīma Statue from Candi Sukuh, Displayed in a Public Exhibition Area of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Indonesia (front, side, and back).



Source: Photograph by the author, 2026

Within the archaeological corpus, Bhīma's features persist primarily as massive stone carvings. Conversely, within the Merapi-Merbabu scriptorium, these attributes are preserved through textual and mnemonic forms. The mere physical existence of the statuary does not, in itself, elucidate how this cultic tradition endured beyond the political collapse of Majapahit. Without reconnecting these artifacts with Javanese textual records, such as the poetic details concerning the eleven fathoms long

poleñ cloth in the *Bhīma Swarga* text, the statuary collection risks being perceived merely as a series of decontextualized sacred objects. What is lost in such fragmentation is not only visual continuity but also the cultural legibility that once bridged material imagery, narrative memory, and local reinterpretation.

To examine the interpretive convergence in the representation of Bhīma, this study maps the correlations between standardized morphological features and the verbal descriptions found in key manuscripts from the Majapahit era. As demonstrated in Table 1, the data corpus is geographically expansive and textually rich, yet it is mediated through disparate formats between archaeological and philological evidence. This formal disparity shapes how iconographic continuity is perceived, compared, and interpreted beyond its physical material constraints.

Table 1.
Processed Mapping of Bhīma Iconographic Features and Textual Descriptions

Category	Primary Feature	Iconographic Evidence	Textual Evidence	Analytical Significance
Anatomy 	Elongated Nails	Long thumb nails on Bhīma's hands (<i>pañcanakha</i>)	<i>Sinuduk ... riñ kuku pañcanakha</i> (Struck ... with the long nails) [BhS MM 1 L 234, p. 59r]; <i>aglis manuduk ing pañcanakha</i> (immediately striking with the claw nails) (Prijoetomo, 1934, p. 28)	Marker of prowess, spiritual penetration, and somatic authority.
Anatomy 	Fierce Countenance and Robust Posture	Upright, powerful stance with large-scale physical proportions	<i>Anggrēgut anahut rawis</i> (Grasping and pulling the whiskers/ moustache) (Prijoetomo, 1934, p. 30)	Visualization of the <i>kshatriya</i> figure transformed into a sacred icon.
Attire 	<i>Poleñ</i> Cloth or Sash (<i>Sampur</i>)	Patterned checkered cloth or textile attributes on the statue's body	<i>Acawēt poleñ sawēlas dēpa dawane</i> (Wearing checkered cloth eleven fathoms long) [BhS MM 1 L 234, p. 45r].	Signifier of liminality, purification, and ritual identity.
Ornaments 	<i>Sumping</i> and <i>Kundala</i>	Ear ornaments and elaborate body jewelry	<i>Asumpiñ mēnur tētēlu</i> (Wearing three jasmine ear ornaments) [BhS MM 1 L 234, p. 45v]; <i>asumping ēmas winarṇa puḍak</i> (Wearing gold ear ornaments in the shape of pandanus flowers)	Reinforcement of sacred status through somatic aesthetics.

			(Prijoetomo, 1934, p. 61)	
Ornaments 	Earrings	Specific ear pendants and decorative jewelry	<i>Antiñ-antiñ mās winarṇa maṅgis</i> (Gold earrings in the shape of mangosteens) [BhS MM 1 L 234, p. 45r]; <i>Anting-anting mirah winarṇa manggis</i> (Ruby earrings in the shape of mangosteens) (Prijoetomo, 1934, p. 61)	Reinforcement of sacred status through somatic aesthetics.
Ornaments 	Necklace or <i>Ulur-ulur</i>	Neck ornaments on the Bhīma figure	<i>Akakalung sarpa wēlang</i> (Wearing a necklace of a striped snake) (Prijoetomo, 1934, p. 61)	Correspondence between the body, esoteric power, and cosmic symbolism.
Weaponry 	Grip or Martial Attributes	Hands positioned in a powerful grip or holding weapons	<i>Aṅgēgēm prep</i> (Firmly gripping [the weapon/fist]) [BhS MM 1 L 234, p. 45r].	Traces of epic identity reoriented toward religious and salvific functions.

Table 1 illustrates that Bhīma's morphological attributes do not persist as a monolithic or uniform archive. Instead, they constitute a heritage corpus dispersed across the lithic evidence of statuary and the textual evidence of manuscripts. While this distribution broadens the empirical scope, it simultaneously risks interpretive fragmentation, as artifacts and texts are often encountered within disparate epistemological environments. Certain attributes manifest as tangible sculptural data, whereas others most notably the esoteric dimensions of the *poleñ* cloth remain accessible only through textual imagination. Consequently, this heritage landscape reveals that material availability does not inherently secure cultural intelligibility. What remains fragmented is not merely the archive itself, but the visual and narrative continuity that once unified these objects as part of a coherent, transregional iconographic tradition.

Reinterpreting the Cult of Bhīma within the Merapi-Merbabu Scriptorium

This section elucidates how the reinterpretation of Bhīma was actively constructed within the intellectual milieu of the Merapi-Merbabu scriptorium. Within the *karesian* (ascetic) context of the highland slopes, Bhīma's iconographic memory persisted not merely through the mechanical repetition of visual motifs in statuary but was reconstructed through textual formulas that elevated Bhīma from an epic warrior to an absolute ontological entity. This scriptorium did not function as a passive scribal center; rather, it served as an active preservation medium that distilled Indian heroic narratives and re-transmitted them through the lens of a more intimate Javanese mysticism. In this framework, Bhīma is positioned as the primordial breath (*prāṇa*) that enables the entire divine pantheon to exist.

This theological reconstruction culminated in a profound subversion of traditional Majapahit hierarchies, specifically through the proclamation of Bhīma as The Uncreated Creator (*Ayuga Tan Yinuga*). Through textual witnesses from Merapi-Merbabu, the spiritual genealogy was radically inverted: Bhīma was positioned as the "Father: or the source of vital energy for Bhaṭāra Guru (Śiva), who typically occupies the apex of formal Śivaist theology. This deconstructive strategy demonstrates that the scriptorium's textual tradition was not merely a literary residue, but a conscious memory infrastructure designed to elevate a localized-heroic figure to the locus of spiritual authority. Consequently, access to the sacred was no longer mediated by centralized priestly institutions but was instead predicated on mastery of batin (internal essence), or innate knowledge (*wruh tan winarah*), inherent in the figure of Bhīma.

The reconstructive power of the Merapi-Merbabu *Bhīma Swarga* becomes evident when Bhīma's macrocosmic and microcosmic dimensions are synthesized into a coherent theological system. Bhīma is reinterpreted not merely as an external object of worship but as a cosmic center encompassing universal elements, such as the sun, moon, and wind, within the functions of the human body. Thus, the static Bhīma statuary acquires its deepest significance through texts that explain the figure's presence within life (*urip*), consciousness (*pramāṇa*), and breath (*ambēkan*). To clarify the convergence between this absolute origin, cosmic elements, and somatic functions, Table 2 maps the total ontological integration of Bhīma within the Merapi-Merbabu tradition.

Table 2.
The Ontological Integration of Bhīma in the Merapi-Merbabu Tradition

Dimension of Manifestation	Esoteric Identity	Correspondence	Key Textual Formula	Theological & Philosophical Significance
I. Absolute Dimension (The Origin)	Saṅ Hyaṅ Asthitijāti / Hananiṅ Tuṅgal	<i>Kamūlaniṅ kamūlan</i> (The Source of all Origins)	<i>Ayuga tan yinuga, agawe tan ginawe</i> (The uncreated creator, the unmade maker) [BhS MM 1 L 234, p. 44v]	The absolute, uncreated entity; the "zero point" of existence and the non-produced producer.
	The Progenitor (Father of Guru)	Supreme Spiritual Genealogy	<i>Aku wiśeṣa iri kita, Bhaṭāra Guru</i> (I am the sovereign over you, Bhaṭāra Guru) [BhS MM 1 L 234, p. 44v]	Bhīma as the primordial source of breath that precedes and sustains Bhaṭāra Guru (Śiva).
II. Macro-Cosmic Dimension (The Universe)	Bāyupuruṣa / Awak Bāyu	Universal Wind / World Breath	<i>Amupusi huripiṅ dewatā kabeh</i> (Binding the life-force of all deities) [BhS MM 1 L 234, p. 60r]	The primary kinetic energy that animates the entire divine pantheon and the cosmic order.
	Paṇawak Rāditya & Wulan	The Sun, Moon, Stars, Earth, and Sky	<i>Aku paṇawak rāditya, wulan, tārāṅgaṇa, prṭhiwī, ākāśa</i> (I am the embodiment of the sun, moon, stars, earth, and sky) [BhS MM 1 L 234, p. 18v]	Bhīma encompasses all luminous dualities and celestial bodies within his essence.
	Dharmajāti	Absolute Truth (<i>Dharma</i>)	<i>Bhī araniṅ anuṅkēbi rāt kabeh</i> (<i>Bhī</i> means to encompass the entire universe) [BhS MM 1 L 333, p. 16v]	The personification of absolute morality and the inherent laws of the universe.
III. Micro-Cosmic Dimension (The Somatic Body)	Saṅ Hyaṅ Jagatwiśeṣa	Within Life (<i>Duk hana riṅ urip</i>)	<i>Wiśeṣa huripiṅ prawatēk dewatā</i> (Sovereign over the life of all gods) [BhS MM 1 L 234, 44v]	Bhīma as the physical animator of humanity within the material world.
	Bhaṭāra Asihīṅ Prāṇa	Within Consciousness (<i>Duk hana riṅ pramāṇa</i>)	<i>Wruh tan winarah, waspada tinḥalku</i> (Intuitive knowledge, watchful is my sight) [BhS MM 1 L 234, p. 45r]	The epistemological authority and the manifestation of compassion toward the life-force of all beings.
	Bhaṭāra Bāyu	Within Breath (<i>Duk hana riṅ ambēkan</i>)	<i>Pakumpulanīṅ bāyu-sabda-hiḍēp</i> (The synthesis of force, vibration, and thought) [BhS MM 1 L 234, p. 45r]	The most intimate quintessence of life; the presence of the Divine within every inhalation and exhalation.

The integration table above demonstrates that the nexus between Bhīma's material iconography and the textual memory of the Merapi-Merbabu scriptorium is structurally reconstructive, positioning Bhīma as a holistic identity that encompasses the entire cosmos (*anuṅkēbi rāt kabeh*). This layered framework reaffirms that the reconstruction of sacred heritage is not solely predicated upon the visual evidence manifest in statuary; instead, it depends on how textual witnesses reactivate iconographic intelligibility through a somatic ontology. Within this paradigm, digitized archives of statues and manuscripts no longer exist as isolated repositories. Rather, they serve as a unified infrastructure to

re-stitch dispersed sacred traditions, restoring the cultural legibility that establishes Bhīma as the vital energetic epicenter animating the entire divine and human order.

The Formation of Cosmology and Religious Identity in Late Majapahit-Era Javanese Society

The deification of Bhīma during the late Majapahit period fundamentally altered the cosmological paradigm and religious identity of Javanese society. Within a conventional framework, Bhīma is often understood through the narrow lens of his role as a warrior in epic narratives. However, the findings of this study demonstrate that the cult of Bhīma transcended these literary boundaries, transforming into a total religious system that integrated micro- and macro-cosmic elements. This phenomenon did not merely expand the divine pantheon; rather, it shifted the logic of veneration from a reliance on centralized institutions toward an autonomous spiritual authority rooted in the localized wisdom of the mountain slopes (*karesian*). The resulting religious identity was no longer merely a subordination to Indian traditions but a novel cultural formation that positioned Bhīma as the central nexus for understanding the universe.

To clarify the significance of this shift, Table 3 synthesizes the primary findings from the analysis of the Merapi-Merbabu *Bhīma Swarga* and prior iconographic evidence, identifying their broader analytical implications. This table illustrates how ontological reinterpretation, inverted spiritual genealogies, and somatic functionalization collectively reshaped the cosmological foundations of Javanese society during the Majapahit transition.

Table 3.
Synthesis of Bhīma Cult, Cosmology, and Religious Identity

Key Finding	Interpretive Category	Conceptual Shift	Cosmological Relevance	Identity Implication
Bhīma is proclaimed as the Uncreated Creator (<i>Ayuga Tan Yinuga</i>)	Absolute Progenitor	From a heroic figure to an Absolute Entity (<i>śūnyatā</i>).	Bhīma serves as the "zero point" and the ultimate terminus of all creation (<i>Asthiti-Jati-Pralina</i>).	Theological autonomy from formal divine hierarchies (Śiva-centrism).
Bhīma's body encompasses universal elements (wind, fire, sun, moon)	Totalizing Cosmology	From a kshatriyaphysique to the macrocosmic center (<i>pañawak</i>).	The universe is comprehended through the somatic manifestation of Bhīma's form.	The cosmos is no longer alien; it is integral to personal spiritual existence.
Bhīma manifests in breath, life, and consciousness (<i>ambékan, urip, pramāṇa</i>)	Somatic Ontology	From external veneration to internal mysticism.	The unification of the microcosm and macrocosm within the physical body.	Access to the sacred is attained independently through breath cultivation.
Spiritual genealogy positions Bhīma as the Father or Origin of Bhaṭāra Guru	Theological Subversion	From a divine incarnation to the primordial source of divine life.	Bhīma (Bāyu) functions as the energetic infrastructure animating the entire divine order.	Cultural resilience of highland communities against the influence of centralized religious authority.

Bhīma guards the mysteries of life, death, and soul liberation	Eschatological Authority	From an epic warrior to a Savior/Deliverer.	Bhīma acts as the absolute intermediary in the process of soul and ancestral salvation.	Strengthening of religious identity based on localized and pragmatic devotion (Bhakti).
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Source: Authors' synthesis based on the analysis of the Merapi-Merbabu Bhīma Swarga manuscripts and related iconographic evidence of Bhīma in the late Majapahit tradition.

Table 3 demonstrates that the significance of the Bhīma cult in this context lies not merely in the addition of a new figure to the divine pantheon but in a fundamental paradigm shift regarding how reality is perceived and maintained. When the somatic form of Bhīma is read in conjunction with Javanese textual memory, cosmology becomes inherently relational, interpretive, and trans-dimensional. The scriptorium environment functioned not as a site of passive transcription, but as an active milieu that reshaped the parameters of cultural connectivity, comparison, and comprehension. In this state, late Majapahit religious identity proved invaluable not because it supplanted older traditions, but because it facilitated the restoration of interpretive continuity amidst the prevailing social and political fragmentation.

Viewed from this perspective, the Merapi-Merbabu tradition provides empirical evidence of both historical transformation and resilient cultural transmission. The iconographic and theological memory of Bhīma did not dissipate as Majapahit's central influence waned; instead, it persisted through textual reformulation and, subsequently, through performative circulation within *wayang* traditions and ancestral salvation rituals. In a contemporary context, this reconstruction adds a new layer of transmission, allowing dispersed visual and textual traces to be reassembled into a cohesive interpretive framework. The enduring significance of this cult lies in its capacity to sustain Javanese cultural intelligibility across epochal shifts, in which Bhīma is not merely documented as a historical artifact but is preserved as a living locus of meaning.

Discussion

This study demonstrates that within the late Majapahit Javanese tradition, Bhīma was no longer perceived merely as a warrior from the *Mahābhārata* epic but had been reinterpreted as a sacred spiritual icon. Based on a cross-media synthesis of Candi Sukuh-style statuary, the *Bhīma Swarga* Merapi-Merbabu manuscripts, and the *Nawaruci*, three primary findings emerge. First, Bhīma's representation persists through visual markers, such as the *pañcanakha* (five-clawed nails), *poleñ* (checkered) cloth, a robust posture, and specific bodily ornaments, as well as through textual formulas that sustain his iconographic memory. Second, the Merapi-Merbabu scriptorium elevated Bhīma to an ontological standing that transcends heroic functions, positioning him as the primordial source of life (*urip*), breath (*ambĕkan*), and consciousness (*pramāṇa*). Third, the sacralization of

Bhīma catalyzed a Javanese cosmology that unified the human body, the macrocosm, and localized spiritual authority into a single, cohesive system of meaning.

These findings reflect a shift in how late Majapahit Javanese society conceptualized the sacred through a somatically significant cosmology. Bhīma's physique is no longer merely the powerful body of a warrior; it is a symbolic space where spiritual power, esoteric knowledge, and the hope for salvation converge. While statuary preserves Bhīma's visual form as a potent and authoritative figure, the texts maintain the esoteric interpretations that render this form religiously legible. The nexus between these two media suggests that materiality never functions in isolation in the construction of sacred meaning. From a cultural memory perspective, this phenomenon indicates that heritage is sustained through interpretation, ensuring that objects remain readable across generations. Thus, the cult of Bhīma is better understood as a preservation of meaning rather than a mere preservation of objects. This reflection underscores that cultural legibility is the key to understanding how Javanese society maintained its religious identity amidst profound historical transitions.

The tendency toward Bhīma's sacralization can be explained through the socio-religious and political landscape of the late Majapahit era. During this period, the weakening of centralized political authority provided an opening for highland religious communities to reorganize the sources of spiritual authority. The ascetic environments (*karesian*) and the Merapi-Merbabu scriptorium offered an intellectual milieu that allowed texts, ascetic practices, and theological speculation to flourish with relative autonomy (Suparta, 2018; Wiryamartana & van der Molen, 2001). In such spaces, Bhīma emerged as a fitting figure for reinterpretation; he possessed established narrative legitimacy as a powerful epic hero yet remained flexible enough to be integrated into Javanese cosmology.

This study reveals that Bhīma's sacred identity endured not through the mere durability of material objects, but through the persistence of relations, abstractions, and cultural memories spanning multiple media. The deification of Bhīma signifies a fundamental shift in Javanese spirituality toward embodied divinity or internal mysticism, later encapsulated in the concept of *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* (Setyani, 2017; Zoetmulder, 1991). Bhīma became the personification of cultural resilience for highland communities seeking a protective figure who was both formidable and somatically intimate. The profound significance of this transformation lies in the birth of spiritual autonomy, in which access to ancestral salvation was no longer viewed as the exclusive prerogative of high deities but as an intrinsic potential inherent in the breath of every individual.

A critical trend identified in this study is that Bhīma's transformation was triggered by the need for cosmological stability amidst socio-political uncertainty. The Merapi-Merbabu and Lawu regions, acting as liminal spaces, enabled a deconstruction of traditional theogonic hierarchies. In this context, spiritual genealogies were inverted, positioning Bhīma as the "Father" or the primary energy source

for Bhaṭāra Guru. The fragmentation of the transitional era was addressed by establishing Bhīma as the authority of esoteric knowledge (*wruh tan winarah*). Consequently, the Merapi-Merbabu scriptorium community successfully maintained their spiritual autonomy from the fading dominance of formal state doctrines. Bhīma was thus not merely a mythological figure but a strategy of memory preservation that allowed religious identity to remain legible across fragmented archives and histories (Atmodjo, 1986; Santiko, 1995).

In contrast to previous scholarships, most notably Duijker's (2010) and Stutterheim (1956) seminal studies, this research shifts the analytical lens from morphological standardization toward a cross-media reconstruction of meaning. While Duijker and Stutterheim provided a comprehensive mapping of Bhīma's physical attributes in highland regions, this research fills the interpretive lacuna by correlating these material features, such as the *pañcanakha* (five-clawed nails) and *poleñ* (checkered) cloth, with the theological logic preserved within textual traditions. This study extends Duijker's findings by asserting that the visual consistency observed in the statuary at Candi Sukuh is not merely an artistic convention or a vestige of ascetic influence. Instead, it reflects a systematic Śivaist doctrine in which every physical attribute of Bhīma corresponds directly to the soul's eschatological trajectory toward final liberation.

Furthermore, this article offers a significant contribution by synthesizing corpuses that have traditionally been treated as disparate. Prior research on the *Bhīma Swarga*, *Serat Centhini*, and *Lakon Murwakala* has largely approached these materials as isolated philological or ritual sources (Subalidinata et al., 1985; Thoyib, 1989; Wijayanto et al., 2025). This study, however, reinterprets these Javanese sources as active archives of iconographic preservation. The utilization of local dialects and esoteric syntax within the Merapi-Merbabu scriptorium demonstrates a deliberate mnemonic reactivation of iconographic knowledge. Bhīma's enduring power lies in his capacity to transition from a material lithic form into a textual abstraction that encompasses the universe, thereby ensuring that his cultural intelligibility remains durable across epochal transitions (Aryandini Sumaryoto, 2000).

The findings highlight the need for a more integrated approach toward the preservation and re-actualization of sacred heritage. This research underscores the urgency of re-actualizing *Bhīma Swarga* wayang performances by drawing on authentic references from the Merapi-Merbabu manuscript collection. As Hinzler (1981) emphasized the importance of this *lakon* in purification rituals, re-actualization efforts must move beyond technical documentation toward building infrastructures that support sustainable cultural intelligibility. By reconnecting material statuary with textual witnesses and performative practices, we do not merely preserve artifacts; we restore a

transregional memory system that bridges imagery, narrative, and local reinterpretation for contemporary society.

Conclusion

This study elucidates that the material existence of sacred heritage does not, in itself, safeguard the integrity of its meaning. A significant finding is that Bhīma's transformation persisted not as an isolated heap of artifacts, but as a living spiritual tradition whose continuity can only be grasped when the lithic traces on mountain slopes and the textual formulas within the scriptorium are read in tandem. Contrary to assumptions based on a limited material record, the waning of Majapahit's centralized political authority did not erase iconographic memory. Instead, this memory was reconstructed through theological subversion, the internalization of somatic functions, and active memory preservation strategies within the *karesian* (ascetic) domains. The unexpected result is that the fragmentation of archives and history during this transitional era does not necessarily indicate loss; rather, it reveals a profound cultural resilience that becomes legible only through the cross-media reconstruction of esoteric texts and material iconography.

Regarding its scholarly contribution, this research proposes a paradigm shift in Javanese cultural studies by moving away from fragmented object analysis toward a holistic, interdisciplinary reconstruction of meaning. Rather than merely confirming the assumption that technical documentation suffices for preservation, this study argues that preservation becomes truly meaningful when it restores cultural intelligibility across fragmented manuscript collections and archaeological sites. Simultaneously, it expands the discourse on Bhīma by positioning him not only as a heroic figure but as an absolute ontological entity, while also redefining the Merapi-Merbabu tradition as an active archive of iconographic preservation. In this sense, this article contributes a novel analytical framework where historical fragmentation, theological reconstruction, and cultural legibility are understood as an integrated whole.

This research acknowledges specific constraints regarding its corpus selection, data access methodologies, and the scope of the *karesian* tradition. The study is based on a selected corpus of Sukuh-Lawu regional statuary and textual witnesses from the Merapi-Merbabu scriptorium, relying heavily on digital surrogates, text editions, and field documentation rather than a direct physical examination of all extant objects. Consequently, the level of interpretative granularity may be uneven due to the fragmented or damaged physical state of many manuscripts. Furthermore, the study is limited to a single sacred ascetic tradition and has not yet tested the applicability of this reconstructive model to other spiritual figures in the Nusantara. Therefore, further research is required to expand the comparative corpus, incorporate performative traditions such as the *Bhīma Swarga* wayang, and

examine how modern society interacts with sacred heritage that has been intellectually reconnected in contemporary practice.

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