

Visual Representations of Four Sacred Sites of Tamil Nadu

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There are 108 Vaiṣṇava and 275 Śaiva sacred sites in the southern Indian tradition. These are sites whose praises were sung by the Vaiṣṇava *bhakta* saints, or *āḷvāras* (ones immersed, drowning in God), and by the Śaiva saints, the *nayanmārs* (leaders), and which were later collected together in the *Nālāyira Divya Prabandham* and the *Tevaram*, respectively. These

saints of the sixth to ninth centuries through their devotional songs facilitated the decline of Jainism and Buddhism and the revival of Hinduism in the Tamil region. They celebrated and sang in Tamil the praise of a particular aspect of Viṣṇu or Śiva, as the case may be, i.e. Viṣṇu or Śiva of a specific place and his manifestation there. The songs of these saints are recited to this day testifying



Fig.1 : Chanting of the Prabandham in the thousand pillar hall, Srirangam

thus to the tremendous impact they had and still have through the whole of the Tamil speaking zone. For example in the great Vaiṣṇava temple of Śrī-Raṅganātha at Srirangam the entire *Prabandham* of four thousand verses is chanted over a period of twenty days in the Tamil month of *Mārghazi* (December-January). The recitation takes place in the thousand pillar hall, a late-Coḷa period construction, within the fourth *prākāra* of this temple complex. During this festival of the recitation of the *Prabandham* the *utsava-mūrtis* of Raṅganātha and of his consort, Raṅganāyākī, are enthroned on the central platform which is fashioned as a horse-drawn chariot; the images of the *āḷvāras* and *ācāryas* revered by the Śrī-Vaiṣṇavas are also brought to this hall and the recitation takes place in the presence of the *utsava-mūrtis* and the *mūrtis* of the saints (Fig.1).

It would be hard to find a place, especially in the Kaveri basin which has not been praised in the songs of these saints. For example, Tiruppukalur ('Tiru' in Tamil

means holy, hence this is the holy Pukalur), is a small and remote village on the south bank of the Kaveri. In it is a temple dedicated to Śiva as Agnīśvara. Except by people of the locality and nearby areas this temple is hardly known; nor is it a much frequented one. Yet, Appār, one of the greatest of *nayanmārs* (he lived in the seventh century), has sung the praises of Śiva of this place. I saw these verses painted on the walls of a farm-house at Tiruppukalur :

*As water, as fire, as earth, as sky
As glorious rays of the sun and moon
As the Lord whom the Himalayan gods supplicate
As the Deity hard to comprehend
The Lord of holy Pukalur
Who dances in many places
Is the highest God among gods.*

Although a few of these sacred sites identified by these poet saints are in northern India, most of them are in south India, with the maximum concentration in Tamil Nadu. Among the Śaiva sacred sites only five are in northern India; Vaiṣṇava *divya-kṣetras* sites outside of southern India include Ayodhya, Dwaraka and Puri. Pilgrimages to sacred sites became popular only from the Vijayanagara-Nāyaka periods (i.e., from the mid-14th to mid-18th century CE) onward due to the great importance of Śrī-Vaiṣṇava and the Śaiva Siddhānta sects during this time.

The iconography of a sacred site is based on certain elements, all of which may or may not be present in any one image : the *mūrti* (or the representation of another form of the god who dwells in the temple), the sacred tree, the geographical aspects of the sacred site, and the *tīrtha* or important water source associated with the site. The goddess particular to the site may also be depicted. In addition, aspects related to the *Sthalapurāṇa* of the site or saints associated with it may sometimes also be represented.¹ *Sthalapurāṇas* (site-legends) are stories related to a specific sacred site. A *Sthalapurāṇa* is a 'polysynthetic work that includes the history of the site, the activities of deities, saints, and important people at the site, and the names of the sacred tree, water source, and deities particular to the place'.² In the Tamil Nadu they began to gain importance from the fourteenth century and this was mainly due to the growth of Brahmin and non-Brahmin *maṭhas*.³ This was more in the case of Śaiva sites as compared with Vaiṣṇava ones and this fact can be explained by the importance gained by the Śaiva Siddhānta sectarian leaders and *maṭhas* at this time. However, it was in the sixteenth century that these texts began to be composed on a wide scale, a process which continues right up to this date.⁴ *Sthalapurāṇic* texts sing the praises of a specific place, enhance its status, and create a flow of pilgrims.⁵

During the Vijayanagara-Nāyaka periods sacred sites and *Sthalapurāṇas* came to be painted in temples in southern India, including full sets of the Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva holy places. Often the sites are identified by captions in Tamil or Telugu or both. The pilgrim while visiting a temple which had such a representation of sacred sites could thus do a virtual pilgrimage of the sacred sites associated with Śrī-Vaiṣṇavism or

Śaivism as the case may be. Sets of the 108 Vaiṣṇava sacred sites (probably of the late seventeenth or eighteenth century) survive from the Nāyaka period in two Vaiṣṇava temples, namely the Varadarāja Perumāḷ temple at Kanchipuram in northern Tamil Nadu and the Kallapirasvāmī temple at Srivaikuntham in southern Tamil Nadu. In both cases the paintings are around the walls of the inner-most enclosure around the main shrine of the deity. Both are in a fairly dilapidated condition. A full set of the 275 Śaiva holy sites of the Nāyaka period is found only in one temple in this region, namely the Ātmanātha temple at Avudaiyarkoil where they are painted on the ceiling of the front entrance hall of this temple complex. There are also fairly extensive sets of Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava sacred sites of the Nāyaka period on the ceiling of a *maṇḍapa* in the Kailāśanātha temple at Nattam, the walls of Rāmaliṅga Vilāsam or the *darbāra* hall at Ramanathapuram and within the *gopura* of the Narumbunātha temple at Tiruppudaimarudur.

Besides murals of sacred sites and *Sthalapurāṇas* there are also reliefs, mostly on pillars, of select sites in temples of the Vijayanagara-Nāyaka periods.

The tradition of painting sacred sites and *Sthalapurāṇas* continues to some extent even nowadays. For example along the innermost enclosure wall of the Āṇḍāḷ shrine at Srivilliputtur there is a modern painted set of the Vaiṣṇava *divya-kṣetras*. Relief sculptures of sacred sites however are not made nowadays. In place of these is a modern variant, which does not have a counterpart in the earlier periods, namely the representation in a succinct manner of a particular sacred site and / or its *Sthalapurāṇa* placed on the exterior in some prominent location within the specific site. This is done in the form of painted three-dimensional figures or statues set against a painted background within an arched niche or alcove constructed over an entrance porch or a pavilion of the temple or elsewhere. The niche and the figures in it are made out of cement concrete or plaster. The basic elements of the sacred sites are present in such depictions so that a person who is familiar with the representations of the deity and the stories associated with the temple would immediately identify the sacred site just from looking at the painted concrete images in such niches.

Now, examples from four sacred sites from Tamil Nadu, one Vaiṣṇava and three Śaiva, are given to illustrate both how these sites are represented in temples both in traditional formats of painting and sculpture and in the more recent types in cement concrete.

The holiest of the Vaiṣṇava sites among the *divya-kṣetras* is the Raṅganātha Temple on Srirangam Island in the Kaveri River. The legend which accounts for the situation of the temple on the Island associates it with the legendary hero-devotee, Vibhīṣaṇa, the younger brother of Rāvaṇa, from Lanka, and with the Coḷa rulers whose original capital city was Uraiyur on the south bank of the Kaveri, near Srirangam Island. According to this myth, Vibhīṣaṇa, who had sided with Rāma, after the war in Lanka, accompanied Rāma back to Ayodhya for his coronation. Rāma rewarded him with a shrine containing the image of Viṣṇu (Fig.2). While returning to Lanka with this shrine, Vibhīṣaṇa rested on Srirangam Island for a while and left the image



Fig.2 : Relief of Vibhiṣaṇa carrying the shrine of Viṣṇu from the Srirangam temple

and do a brief comparison of them: one from the Rāmaliṅga Vilāsam at Ramanathapuram (Fig.3) and two from Śaiva temples, namely those at Tiruppudaimarudur (Fig.4) and Nattam. As mentioned above, the reclining form of Viṣṇu at Srirangam has his head towards the viewer's left and feet towards the right; the right hand of the deity is shown lying loosely downwards. While the images at Ramanathapuram and at Tiruppudaimarudur have got the details right, in the one at Nattam the image is in reverse form. In the image at Tiruppudaimarudur devotees and priests are also included and the deity is within a golden shrine as is the case of the actual image of Raṅganātha at Srirangam; here the left hand of the deity is raised and does not rest along his body. In those at Ramanathapuram and Nattam the

there while he visited his friend, the Coḷa king. When he attempted to proceed on his journey he found that the image could not be moved and the deity informed him that he wished to remain on this island but would face south, so that Vibhiṣaṇa could pay homage to him from Lanka.

The reclining form of Viṣṇu as Raṅganātha at Srirangam has his head towards the viewer's left and feet towards the right; the right hand of the deity is shown lying loosely downwards or folded and resting under his head which is supported on a bolster; his left hand usually rests lengthwise against the reclining Viṣṇu (the image is two-armed). Often within the representation of Srirangam the *utsava-mūrti* or processional image of this temple (a standing form of Viṣṇu named Azhagiya Maṇavālan, who holds the *cakra* and *śaikha* in his upper hands with the lower right in the blessing mode and the lower left resting on the *gadā* or mace) is found and also the consort goddesses.

The sacred site of Srirangam is found depicted in quite a few of the extant murals of the Vijayanagara-Nāyaka period. We mention three



Fig.3 : The sacred site of Srirangam from Ramanathapuram



Fig.4 : The sacred site of Srirangam from Tiruppudaimarudur

utsava-mūrtis are found and also consort goddesses. At Ramanathapuram the group is flanked by *dvārapālas* at the base and other divinities at the top. If we compare the Nāyaka period renderings of the site with a late-nineteenth or early-twentieth century painting of Srirangam from within the Raṅganātha temple complex (Fig.5) we note that the depiction has remained the same. Here, too, the main deity and his consort as well as the *utsava-mūrtis* are all found. Also the deity is within a golden shrine as is the actual case in this temple. The image is flanked by *dvārapālas* and other deities.

While representations of Srirangam and of Śrī-Raṅganātha are fairly common within temples, this theme is very rare in sculpture. Indeed, in contrast to the numerous depictions of Viṣṇu in the standing and seated forms, representations of Viṣṇu reclining on Śeṣa are hardly ever depicted in temple pillar reliefs of southern India. Among the



Fig.5 : The sacred site of Srirangam, late 19th or early 20th century painting from Srirangam

very few examples that I have noted is a pillar relief on a column within the colonnade around the enclosure wall of the Jalakanṭheśvara temple at Vellore (Fig.6). The direction of the deity's head and the way in which his lower right and left hands are placed fits in with the iconography of Raṅganātha. However, here the deity is four-armed and holds the conch and discus in his upper two hands. Perhaps this relief is that of the deity of Srirangam.

Of modern cement concrete representations we have a good example on a *mandapa*, known as the Amma *mandapa*, at Srirangam on the banks of



Fig.6 : Pillar relief of reclining Viṣṇu from Vellore



Fig.7 : Raṅganātha of Srirangam in a niche, from Amma maṅḍapa near the Kaveri at Srirangam

the river Kaveri. On this pavilion there is a niche on the top of the side facing the river, which contains such a representation of Raṅganātha of Srirangam (Fig.7). The depiction of the sacred site is in the same style as in the painted versions of Śrī-Raṅganātha. Thus, on seeing the figures within the niche, at a glance, the viewer would be able to identify this image as representing the deity and the sacred site of Srirangam.

The Jambukeśvara temple at Tiruvanaikka, also on Srirangam Island, is a well known Śiva temple that is included in the 275 sacred Śaiva sites; it houses the water

liṅga, one of the five 'elemental' *liṅgas* in the southern tradition; the other four being the earth, fire, ether and air *liṅgas*. These are at Chidambaram (ether), Tiruvannamalai (fire), Srikalahasti (air) and Kanchipuram (earth). In murals representing the site of Jambukeśvara, the deity within is represented as a *liṅga*. However, what distinguishes this image from those of other Śaiva holy places are the references to the *Sthalapurāṇa* of the site, namely that of an elephant and a spider worshipping the *liṅga*, by pouring water over it from its trunk (thus doing *abhiṣeka*) and by spinning a web to protect it from the sun, respectively. The elephant and spider are believed

to be two Śaiva devotees who were born in animal form but continued their devotion to Śiva. There is also the presence of the sacred tree associated with this site, namely the rose apple or Jambu tree. It is believed that this tree grew from the head of a sage who was seated in worship of Śiva at this place. The consort goddess of this sacred site, namely Akhilāṅḍeśvarī, is also often represented in the composition.

Both the Nāyaka period sets of sacred sites at Tiruppudaimarudur and Nattam have panels representing this sacred site. The spider and the sage are only found

at Nattam (Fig.8); but the elephant and the sacred tree are found in the images at both sites. Sculptural representations of this sacred site, with all the details as mentioned above, are almost never found in the Vijayanagara-Nāyaka period. No doubt, occasionally we do find pillar reliefs of an elephant pouring water over a *liṅga*. However, the spider and its web, the sacred tree, the sage and the goddess are not



Fig.8 : The sacred site of Jambukeśvara from Nattam

during the end of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century gave lavish benefactions for the refurbishment of most of the major Śaiva temples of the Tamil region.⁶

In the Jambukeśvara Temple there are two concrete arched niches containing figures that identify both the site and also relate its *Sthalapurāṇa*. One (Fig.10) is on top of a four pillar *maṇḍapa* in the outer enclosure of the temple, while the second is over a larger pavilion not far from the shrine of the goddess Akhilāṇḍeśvarī. In both, the sacred site of Tiruvanaikka is immediately identifiable by the elephant and spider devotees worshipping the *liṅga* that are present in the tableau as well as the sacred tree that is growing from the head of a seated ascetic. In both instances, the goddess of this site, namely Akhilāṇḍeśvarī, is also found.

present in these reliefs and, hence, one cannot conclude definitively that such reliefs represent Tiruvanaikka and the Jambukeśvara temple. However, from within the Jambukeśvara temple complex there is a late-nineteenth or early twentieth century pillar relief (Fig.9) in which the site is clearly represented in the exact manner in which it is shown in paintings of the Nāyaka period and in the more recent examples of cement concrete representations. This relief is on a pillar in the colonnade added during the renovations to this temple carried out due to the patronage of the wealthy Nattukkottai Chettiar community, devout Śaivas, who



Fig.9 : Pillar relief of Jambukeśvara, within Jambukeśvara temple, Tiruvanaikka



Fig.10 : Jambukeśvara at Tiruvanaikka in a niche within the temple complex

The Ekambaranātha temple at Kanchipuram is another revered Śaiva sacred site because it too houses one of the elemental *liṅgas*; in this case it is the earth *liṅga*. According to the local tradition, the earth *liṅga* under a mango tree at this site was worshipped by Kāmākṣī, the resident goddess of Kanchipuram. The name of the deity, namely Ekambaranātha or Ekambareśvara, is derived from the sacred mango tree, reputedly with just one mango on it, of this site just as the name of the god of Tiruvanaikka, Jambukeśvara, is from the sacred Jambu tree of that site. According to the

Sthalapurāṇa of the Ekambaranātha Temple, the goddess Umā came to earth as Kāmākṣī to expiate the sin of covering with her hands the eyes of her husband, Śiva. She worshipped the god of Kanchi in the form of a *liṅga* fashioned out of earth. In order to test her, Śiva gathered all the waters of the world into the river Kampai, which flooded the town. Umā embraced the *liṅga* to save it from the flood, and the *liṅga* grew soft in her embrace. Śiva arrested the flood, and ever since the *liṅga* at Kanchi reputedly bears the marks of Kāmākṣī's breasts and the bracelets she wore on her arms. This motif is a popular in Tamil myths.

To date I have not come across any Vijayanagara-Nāyaka period mural depicting this sacred site. However, it does appear occasionally in pillar reliefs of this period. For example, in the large open pillared hall in the outer-most enclosure of the Ekambaranātha temple there are a couple of such reliefs. The goddess embracing the *liṅga* and the



Fig.11 : Pillar relief of Ekambaranātha within the Ekambaranātha temple complex



Fig.12 : Ekambaranātha, temple complex niche, Kanchipuram

sacred mango tree are clearly visible in them (Fig.11).

A modern cement concrete depiction of the holy site of Ekambaranātha of Kanchipuram is found on top of the entrance to the small enclosure containing the *sthala-vṛkṣa* (sacred tree), of the temple, located to the rear (west) of the main shrine (Fig.12). In this neatly and well executed tableau, the goddess is shown embracing the *liṅga* which is under a mango tree; however, here the tree has abundant fruit hanging from its branches. The same theme in three-dimensional form, but in more detail, is found in the alcoves that decorate the top of the eastern end of the large open pillared hall mentioned above. Here first is seen the goddess covering the eye of Śiva with her hand. Next she is shown in penance. The scene of her embracing the *liṅga* which is under a mango tree to save it from the flood occurs

after this. A very recent depiction of the *Sthalapurāṇa* of this sacred site is found within the inner south *gopura* of the temple (Fig.13). Here we can see the flood that Śiva sent down to test the devotion of the goddess who then embraced the earth *liṅga* to save it from being washed away. Unlike in all the other examples cited where the artist who executed the image is not known, here the name and mobile number of the artist is found in one corner of the tableau!

Among the set of 275 sacred Śaiva sites painted on the ceiling of the entrance *maṇḍapa* of the Ātmanātha temple at Avudaiyarkoil is this particular sacred site (Fig.14). The site is identified by a caption in Tamil which reads 'Tirupperunturai' which was the earlier name of Avudaiyarkoil. This depiction has almost all the features that mark the iconography of a sacred site, namely the



Fig.13 : Modern depiction of Ekambaranātha, inner south gopura of the temple, Kanchipuram

main *mūrti* (in this case the *līnga*), the sacred tree, which at this site is the Kurunthai tree (*Atalantia monophilla* D.C.) or the wild lime, and the tank representing the *tīrtha*. The saint associated with the site, namely the great Śaiva saint Māṇikkavācakar and the *Sthalapurāṇa* are also represented. As per the story related to this site, Māṇikkavācakar, an unusually talented youth, born of Brahmin parents, attracted the attention of the Pāṇḍya king of Madurai and became his chief minister. Sent by the monarch with a large sum of money to buy horses, Māṇikkavācakar met a Śaiva guru (Śiva in disguise) at Perunturai (now Avudaiyarkoil, near Pudukottai). Forgetting his mission, he spent the king's money in refurbishing or constructing a temple to Śiva at Perunturai. The enraged king imprisoned him, but after a series of miraculous events, released him to follow his chosen path.

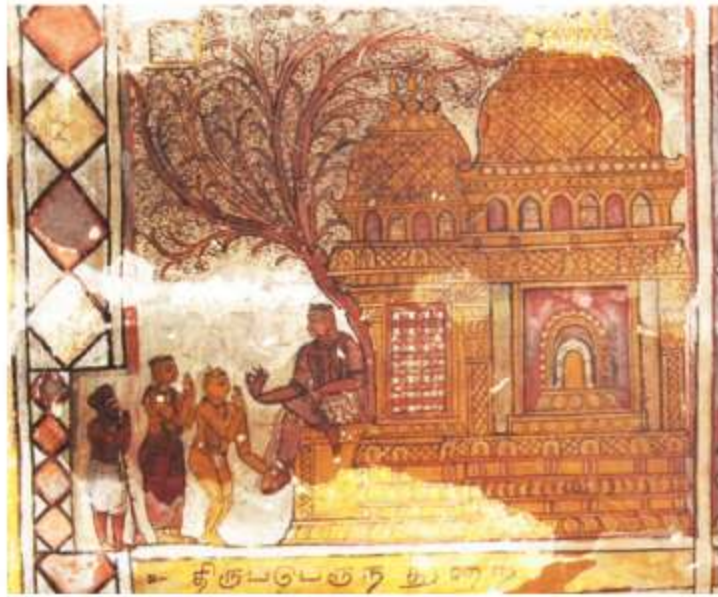


Fig.14 : The sacred site of Avudaiyarkoil, within temple complex

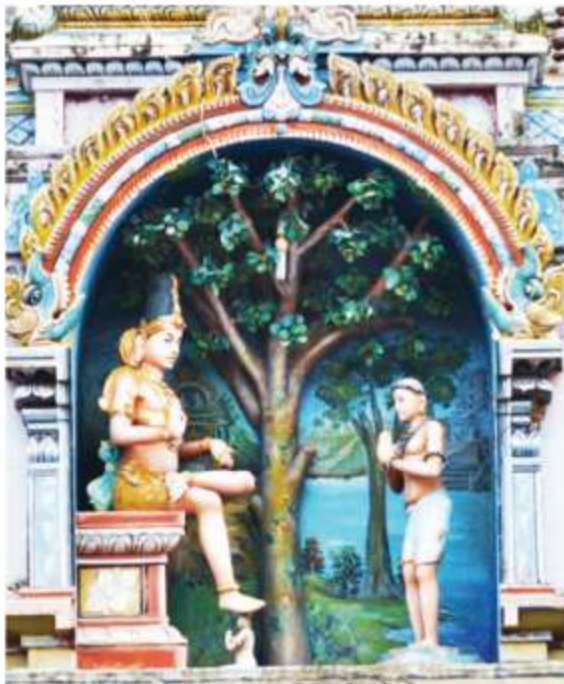


Fig.15 : Modern depiction of Avudaiyarkoil, within temple complex

The representation of this sacred site is also found in a three-dimensional form on top of a modern concrete pillared porch in front of the hall where the Nāyaka period painted set of the Śaiva sacred sites is found. On the top of the porch is arranged a series of shrine-like forms in concrete. The central one, which has a barrel shaped roof, has in the middle a niche containing a set of figures: Śiva seated under a tree, teaching an ascetic who is standing with hands joined in devotion in front of him. A painted backdrop, of a river with a couple of trees on its banks, completes the scene (Fig.15). Here in a very pithy and concise manner the sacred site of Avudaiyarkoil, with deity of the place, the site legend, the sacred tree and the saint associated with it, are all found.

We note that the depictions of sacred sites were popular in the Vijayanagara-Nāyaka periods and they continue to be popular even in modern times. However, while in the Vijayanagara-Nāyaka periods within temples they were mostly represented in the form of murals and sometimes through relief carvings, in modern times, though painted versions do exist, a new type has emerged and is popular, namely the niches with figures made out of cement concrete or plaster. This represents a new way of depicting sacred sites that has become prevalent in temples in Tamil Nadu. These modern representations of sacred sites that have been discussed in this paper are neatly executed and pleasing to look at. They are usually made out of cement concrete, which has largely replaced stone or stucco which was in use earlier. Such depictions seem to have gained in popularity over the painted versions that were more common in the Vijayanagara-Nāyaka periods. They are placed in strategic locations within their respective temples or sacred sites so as to edify and educate the pilgrims and visitors. Being made of a sturdy and durable material, namely cement concrete, these niches containing depictions of sacred sites can be placed on the exterior of temples, unlike murals which had to be sheltered from the elements. Therefore, though quite small and compact, these modern depictions, placed as they are in very prominent locations, are more immediately visible and accessible than the painted versions of sacred sites of the Vijayanagara-Nāyaka period which were generally executed on ceilings of *mandapas* or on walls of circumambulatory passages around the shrines. The idea of presenting the sacred sites in an artistic manner to the pilgrims who visit temples has thus continued from Vijayanagara-Nāyaka times to the present, but the medium and manner of doing so has undergone some changes.

Endnotes

1. Anna Lise Seastrand, 'Praise, Politics and Language: South Indian Murals 1500-1800', Ph.D. thesis, Columbia University, 2013, pp.76-77.
2. *Ibid.*, p.103.
3. *Ibid.*, p.22.
4. David Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Saiva Tradition*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1980, p.32.
5. Seastrand, *op.cit.*, p.126.
6. Crispin Branfoot, 'Temple Sculpture in Colonial Madurai: the Reconsecration of the Minakshi-Sundareshvara Temple in the 1870s', in Anila Verghese and Anna L. Dallapiccola (eds.), *Art, Icon and Architecture in South Asia: Essays in Honour of Devangana Desai*, New Delhi, Aryan Books International, 2015, pp.277-292.

Photo Courtesy

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