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Of Gods and Mortals: Līlā Cōḷa

CHARLOTTE SCHMID

*anugrahāya bhūtānām mānuṣaṃ deham āsthitaḥ |
bhajate tādṛśiḥ kṛdā yāḥ śrutvā taiṣaro bhavet ||*

“It was for the sake of bestowing grace upon beings that he took on a human body and that he took part in games such as on hearing about which one becomes devoted to him.”

Bhāgavata-purāṇa X.33, 37

In South India, the bases, or socles, of some Cōḷa temples are decorated with small sculpted panels placed one after the other to form a frieze running all around the temple. These panels portray the *līlā* of the gods: of Viṣṇu and his *avatāras*, of Śiva and his son Skanda and portray, too, the human drama through the dancers and musicians who participate in the divine adventures. These largely unpublished friezes, sometimes constituting actual “narrative cycles” interspersed with separate representations, are often inspired by epic and puranic literature and bear witness to the popularity of that literature. As we shall see, they provide firm evidence of the great popularity of the narrative genre and allow for the consideration of that genre from a fresh angle the better to comprehend the iconographic ensemble and the specificities of temples decorated with this type of representation. The Centre of the École française d’Extrême-Orient in Pondicherry has initiated the study of these series of representations.

“Narrative cycle” here refers to the continuous recounting of a story, whether in a text or on a temple. In the latter case, the cycle corresponds to the representation in images of a narrative text, made up of a succession of actions appearing in those sections of the friezes which bring onto the scene the characters in the given situations according to narrative chronology. The earliest iconographic examples of brahmanical narrative cycles

appeared, in North India, in the 4th century CE, when a new type of literature was emerging: the *Purāṇas*. The traditional five components of a *Purāṇa* (creation, re-creation, genealogies, ages of Manu and the history of dynasties) are all linked in one manner or another to the narrative genre with which puranic literature seems to be in close correspondence. The epics otherwise comprise a narrative totality abundantly drawn upon by the *Purāṇas*. The illustration, on sacred buildings, of the stories told in these texts give access to a much wider mythological range than is provided by the textual corpus alone.

Presentation of the Corpus

The first representations of the brahmanical narrative cycles appeared in North India during the Gupta dynasty. They are connected with the two most represented of the *avatāras* of Viṣṇu, Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, to be found again on the Cōḷa temples. These first cycles are mostly fragmentary and, with few exceptions (the temples of Apsaḍh (Bihar), of Deogarh and Nāchnā-kuthara (Madhya Pradesh), it is no longer possible to study them in the architectural context to which they belong. In South India, it would seem that the first extensive brahmanical cycles were Cōḷa, even if they were preceded by rather more sporadic attempts in Cāḷukya art, in Bādāmi and Paṭṭaḍakal, in the North of Karṇāṭaka. The most extensive cycles decorated the rich Hoysaḷa temples of Karṇāṭaka from the beginning of the 11th century; they are influenced by lesser known Cōḷa experiments which will be the subject of this paper. The corpus considered here is constituted by Cōḷa temples dating from the



Fig. 1 – Tiruchennampūṇḍi, Śaḍaiyār temple, 10th century. (Photo: EFEO-Evenisse N 26 30).

beginning of the 10th to the beginning of the 11th century. It comprises, in the region of the Kauverī delta, the Śaḍaiyār temple of Tiruchennampūṇḍi (Fig. 1), the Nāgeśvara of Kumbakonam, the Brahmapurīśvara of Puḷḷamaṅgai, the Naltuṅṅai Īśvara of Puṅṅai, the Tirumerratiśvara of Pāccil, the Sāmavedīśvara of Tirumaṅgalam, and farther North, near Pondicherry, the Varadarājaperumāl of Tirubhuvanai (Fig. 2). To this body corresponding to a totality of about six hundred representations, I add the small Vaiṣṇava temple of Konār, near the village of Tirumālpūr, not far from Kāñcīpuram and dating from the second half of the 10th century.¹ The narrative series in this temple appear on the pilasters² and not on the plinths but is of the same type of representation and, moreover, the Vaiṣṇava character of the temple makes it possible to add to observations made on the comparison between the Śaiva corpus of the Kauverī delta and the Vaiṣṇava Varadarājaperumāl.

The temples of the Kauverī are in fact all Śaiva. They are of modest dimensions, sometimes probably because they have been reestablished; they frequently bear a great number of inscriptions. The bas-reliefs which are of interest here would seem to have been sculpted in the

space of fifty years, most of which belong to the second half of the 10th century. The dating of these temples is an uncertain area since each one poses specific problems even though they are linked elements of one small corpus. If, however, one wishes to understand what could have been the relationships, iconographic and other, between one temple to the other, a brief reminder of the elements of the dating is necessary. With four Pallava inscriptions, the temple of Tiruchennampūṇḍi has existed in one way or another since the Pallava epoch. These inscriptions are found only on non-fonctional parts of the temple, on pillars and on the jambs of the door of the *ardhamandapa*: they may have been used for a second time during the reconstruction of a temple, Cōḷa in architecture and iconography, probably in the reign of Parāntaka I (907-955). The earliest incscription we can be certain of (*South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. VII, no. 518) is dated from the fourteenth year of the reign of Parāntaka I, that is 921.³

The dating of the temple of Kumbakonam, between the second half of the 9th and the beginning of the 10th century, has been the cause of a great deal of controversy. The epigraphy is not much help. A Pāṇḍya inscription (Rangaracharya 1919, vol. II, no. 22, p. 1235)



Fig. 2 – Tirubhuvanai, Varadarājaperumāl temple, 11th century. (Photo: EFEO-Ravindran E 75 7).

engraved on a reused block in the shrine to the Goddess is a little later and may indicate that the foundation of the temple also predates the Cōla period. We have to notice also that, anyway, the site is attached to the corpus of the *Tēvāram*, devotional Śaiva hymns attributed to the 7th century: a temple existed here as soon as the 7th century. So here too it is a case of a reestablishment. The earliest Cōla inscription of confirmed date is 934 (Rangaracharya 1919, vol. II: no. 34, p. 1237). T.V. Mahalingam (1967: 83-84), in attributing the title “Parakeśarivarman”, found in three inscriptions, to Parāntaka I, puts the even earlier date of 910 on the first epigraphic reference. This title being, however, common amongst Cōla kings the attribution remains unconfirmed. David T. Sanford (1974: 182-183) dates the temple from the second half of the 9th century. It should be mentioned that Sanford considers the narrative series of the Nāgeśvara to be very little earlier than those in the Puḷlamanṅai temple. The dating of the later temple is also, however, a subject of controversy even if dated from the beginning of the 10th century, that means even if we do not take into account that, as a temple attached to the corpus of the *Tēvāram*, the temple has existed in one form or another

since that epoch. The eight inscriptions on the walls of the main temple give rise to discussion.⁴ One of these dates from the eleventh year of the reign of Parāntaka I, that is 918: J.-C. Harle (1958: 5) dates the temple to the very beginning of the 10th century while S. R. Balasubrahmanyam (1971: 6, 223-224) dates it from the opening of the reign of Parāntaka I, without being more precise. Sanford (1974: 175; 1987: 280-281) considers another inscription which records a donation from Śembiyan Mahāvali-Vānarāyar made in the sixth year of the reign of a Cōla king Sanford identifies as Parāntaka I: mentioned in this inscription is a title Parāntaka I had given at another time to his Gāṅga vassal, Pṛthivipati II. The inscription would thus date from 913 and the temple from 910-911, at the moment when the vassal had helped Āditya I to gain a decisive victory over the Rāṣṭrakūṭa Kṛṣṇa II. The fact that this temple is connected with the corpus of the *Tēvāram* never seems to have been considered: once again it is a matter of reconstruction.

The temple of Puñjai certainly seems to be a little later, but it offers a very wide margin for dating and the inscriptions are of very little help. The beautiful aesthetic of the temple makes it tempting to ascribe an earlier date

to it than it could possibly be accurate. Once again it is a matter of reconstruction: this is another site connected with the *Tēvāram* which means that the temple must have been in existence since the 7th century. For Balasubrahmanyam (1971: 266-267), since the earliest inscription of the complex (which is found however on the base of a secondary temple) dates from 968, the Cōḷa structure of the temple dates from the short reign of Āditya II (964-969). Sanford (1974: 178-181) sees both the architectural characteristics of the temple and the representations of donors on its South wall as corresponding with the middle of the 10th century even though D. Barrett (1974: 81-82) dates it around 940. G. Hoekveld-Meier (1981: 182-183, 204), on the basis of the convergence of three architectural criteria, dates it from the very end of the 10th century or even the beginning of the 11th. Lastly, P. Kaimal (1999: 87-89) sees 964 as a *terminus ante quem* and the temple as more likely to date from the first half of the 10th century. There are very precise iconographic resemblances between this temple and the Kumbakonam Nāgeśvara one, however, such as the two representations of Varāha threatened by a *nāga* king, a version of the myth absent from the texts, and these similarities bring either its dating back into question or that of the Kumbakonam temple which, as is clear from all the publications mentioned, is uniformly said to be earlier than the date of its epigraphic corpus.

We see that the three temples of Puñjai, Puḷḷamaṅgai and Kumbakonam are included in a relative chronology which, constructed according to the different architectural considerations of each author, does not match the one established with the aid of the inscriptions (which are not yet all published). It is possible that a detailed study of the narrative series may be of use in more accurately establishing the chronology of the three temples.

The temple of Tirumaṅgalam has three series of panels. The third series, found on the bases of the pilasters, offers an iconography which is unusual and in several places obviously linked with the deities in the niches. The positioning and the unusual iconography tend to support Sanford (1974: 173-174) who, on the basis of considerations of style, particularly architectural, puts forward the hypothesis that the series on the bases are earlier by almost a century than the one on the bases of the pilasters: the temple could have been rebuilt on an earlier base. The first two series would be from the begin-

ning of the 10th century, while the third would date from the end of the 10th or the beginning of the 11th century. A single inscription from the Cōḷa age has been found on the temple (*Archaeological Report on South Indian Epigraphy for 1929-30*, no. 251). It is dated from the 15th year of the reign of Rājarāja I, 1000. Sanford's theory is reasonable, but by no means confirmed and the dating of the series could be more accurate than it is. It is obvious that all the different series were not sculpted in the same workshop, yet several teams were able to work at the same time, rather than successively, on this important site.

Only three short reports on the four inscriptions recorded from Tirumerratiśvara of Pāccil are published in the *Annual Report for Indian Epigraphy for 1992-1993* (1998: 4-5, 67-70). The earliest inscriptions date from the third or fourth year (both dates are given in the report) of the reign of "Parakeśarivarman", a title belonging to we know not which king. The characteristics of the inscriptions correspond to the epigraphy of the 10th century. Another inscription dates from 990 and the two remaining from the beginning of the 11th century (the reign of Rājā rāja I). The iconographic analysis is difficult as many of the statues are very worn away. The architectural style corresponds to the 10th century, without it being possible to be precise.

The inscriptions of the temple in Tirubhuvanai are being prepared for publication. As far as the temple itself is concerned, the earliest epigraphic date we can be sure of is 1017 (inscription no. 92 from the corpus of inscriptions in the territory of Pondicherry, found on the East wall of the *ardhamaṅḍapa*). This temple, literally covered with inscriptions, is certainly not much earlier than that first known inscription.⁵ The temple at Tirumālpūr seems to be a little earlier. The inscriptions of this temple converge towards the middle of the 10th century.⁶ It has been greatly renovated and the positions of the inscriptions are not always the original ones (Balasubrahmanyam 1971: 92, 226).

Vaiṣṇava Stories

From one temple to another we find the same depictions, even sculpted in exactly the same way. They belong to friezes made up of a series of sculpted panels

whose format varies between 11 × 11 centimeters and 27 × 13 and they are worthy of the name “miniature panels” sometimes given to them. Each temple comprises one to three series of panels, one above another, on the socle of the temple and then, sometimes, on the bases of the external walls.⁷ According to convention, we have numbered them from the temple ground level.

The bas-reliefs of these series are often of very high quality; myths that they represent can be the same as those that we find in the *devakoṣṭhas*, which are of much larger dimensions. The most common Śaiva myths, such as the representation of the Gajasamhāra mūrti at Tiruchennampūṇḍi and at Puḷḷamaṅgai, or that of Bhikṣāṭana in the above mentioned sites (Fig. 3), as well as in Tirumaṅgalam and Pāccil, are once again found on the friezes at the base. But these representations do not really belong to the narrative cycles. With few exceptions, Śaiva mythology is represented only in a single panel and we cannot speak of the continuity of the narration in this case: most of the cycles are Vaiṣṇava.

The friezes to which the narrative cycles belong are made up, in fact, of Vaiṣṇava narrative cycles, of independent Śaiva or Vaiṣṇava myths and of worldly repre-

sentations, such as the dancers and the musicians who often appear. The importance of the place accorded to Vaiṣṇava representations in the Śaiva context is surprising. Since certain independent panels also show Vaiṣṇava myths, such as the *avatāras* of Trivikrama, Varāha and Narasiṅha, the majority of these series of representations are Vaiṣṇava. In the present corpus, only one temple is Vaiṣṇava, the Varadarājaperumāl of Tirubhuvanai, near Pondicherry. This temple is an exception in a number of ways, which is perhaps explained by its being of a later period than the rest and not of the same region, but also because of its being Vaiṣṇava temple.⁸ These representations certainly date back to the beginning of the 11th century. If we compare it to the Śaiva corpus of the Kauverī delta, it has a very curious iconography: it does not represent any scene that we can associate with the Śaiva context. Hence, as we observe in other domains, it seems that the Śaiva movement was more tolerant than the Vaiṣṇava movement. This temple shows that we can, anyway, neither ignore the opposition between the two movements, nor consider that, in the case of narrative cycles at least, the Śaiva-Vaiṣṇava opposition was not operative, or was never operative.



Fig. 3 – Tiruchennampūṇḍi, Śaḍaiyār temple, 10th century, Śiva Bhikṣāṭana. (Photo: EFEO-Evenisse N 24 9).

Architectural Traditions and *Avatāras*

One of the first questions to arise in relation to these narrative series concerns their positioning. The panels may be placed very low down on the bases of the temple but, once again, the Varadarājaperumāḷ of Tirubhuvanai is an exception with its representations placed a little above eye-level. In all the other temples, the series of representations go upwards, one above another. The first series of the temple of Tirumaṅgalam, is level with the floor and some of its panels are today completely buried. At Puḷḷamaṅgai and Kumbakonam, the representations, belonging to the first series of bas-reliefs, are placed very low down in a sort of ditch surrounding the shrine. It is certain that the ground around the temples has risen in the course of the centuries and that the panels were much more visible in the 10th century than they are today. However, this positioning does not seem likely ever to have enhanced the visibility of the scenes represented.

We straightaway think of the kind of symbolic value these representations may have had, quasi-invisible as they are and yet often so finely wrought. It is, however, necessary first to think in terms of the architecture and of the traditional positioning in the temple. Narrative representations require a succession of scenes one after another and have their place just where the horizontal character of the structure is most marked. There are two places in the temples which are especially qualified from this point of view: the base and the meeting point between wall and roof. It is here that we find, all over India, bas-reliefs presented in the form of friezes. In South India, the finely carved narrative friezes of the Hoysāḷa corpus are found on the bases which seem to have been extended to provide space for them. Yet if these placings are, in a text devoted to architecture, such as the *Marīcisamhitā*, meant especially for *kṣatriyas*,⁹ it is perhaps because it is here that we meet with the stories which put the gods on the stage, very often doing battle, that is, behaving as *kṣatriyas*. Beyond the architectural lines of the temples, the placing of the Cōḷa narrative representations appear particularly well adapted to a symbolic function which stresses the horizontal or terrestrial element of the mythologies represented. The stories involved always have for their theme the incarnation of a deity, it may be one of the descents of Viṣṇu or a form taken by Śiva, or by the Goddess, to fight one or another



Fig. 4 – Kāñcīpuram, Kailāsanātha, Bhikṣāṭana, 7th century. (Photo: EFEO-L'Hernault 78 32a).

demon; in either case the deity descends to earth, and it is that deity's adventures on earth which are depicted.

The contrast with the traditional images featured at the centre of the exterior walls of the temples offers clarification in this respect. In most of the temples under consideration, a Dakṣiṇ āmūrti is found on the South wall, a Liṅgodbhava or a Hari-Hara on the West and, on the North, a representation of Brahmā, and also often of the Goddess standing on the head of a buffalo. These are all images belonging to worship. Hierarchical and divine, they stand isolated in the vertical space of a niche, unlike the representations of the series that are engraved horizontally. Near the ground, and defining a path of prayer which most often follows the *pradakṣiṇā*, the figures featured in the series correspond to the terrestrial aspects of the deities on the exterior walls.

The representations in Tirumaṅgalam which correspond to the representations in the niches, in which regard this temple is exceptional, confirm that aspect of the iconography of the series. This temple offers three successive series of representations. The sculpted panels which take up the iconography used in the niches belong to the last series, the one closest to the niches. Some of these representations, in fact, flank the images in the niches. This last frieze in its series seems to be an intermediary between the horizontal series of narrative representations and the vertical images in the temple. This is the only series whose representations are similar to those



Fig. 5 – Tirumaṅgalam, Sāmavediśvara temple, 10th century, Mahiṣāsūramardīnī. (Photo: EFEO-Evenisse N 40 20).



Fig. 6 – Tirumaṅgalam, Sāmavediśvara temple, 10th century, Mahiṣa. (Photo: EFEO-Evenisse N 40 19).

of the niches: its functions as an intermediary between two parts of the temple, the base and the exterior walls, may explain this. Lastly, as in the series at Tirumaṅgalam, though placed further down in the temple, most of the series are situated on the extensions of the pilasters punctuating the walls of the buildings; their wide rectangle would certainly appear to be providing a base for the images for the worship, both those on the niches and those found inside the interior of the building.

The base of the temples is also seen to be an intermediary space, close to the ground and connected with it, where divine incarnations gamble or play the roles given them in the texts, putting on the costume of the boar, of the naked mendicant or of the Goddess mounted on a lion. This is the realm of the *līlā* of the gods, the cosmic play which intervenes between gods and humans. The prescription in the *Maṅḍiśāṅḥiṭā* may also be understood thus. According to some authors, Rāma may be represented on Cōḷa Śaiva temples as the model of the king¹⁰ but I am not sure that in this corpus Rāma has always been considered as a royal incarnation. These temples were not founded by kings; it is often a matter of reconstruction, and the link with royal power hardly appears in the inscriptions except during a specific period at Tirubhuvanai which, once more, is seen to be an exception.¹¹ It is, however, certain that the illustrations of the *Rāmāyāna*, some of the forms of the Goddess and of Śiva doing battle or, again, the stories of Kṛṣṇa, correspond to

the representation of the protective function of a god manifesting in the world of mortal beings. In the North of the Tamil land, one of the inscriptions on the site of Tiruvannamalai does link Śiva and Rāma in a formula intended to solemnise the gift made: “Śiva permeates everything, Rāma conquers all”.¹² Dated to the 17th century, the inscription is later than the temples in this study but appears as another manifestation of a religious state of mind according to which all divine forms may be seen as forms of Śiva even though Rāma is the conquering form of the god, the one seemingly most fit to solemnise the gift made to the gods on earth. Some of the iconographic characteristics of the representations allow for the setting up of a more accurate hypothesis about the integration of these Vaiṣṇava series in this Śaiva context.

The Theatre of the World

A large number of representations of Śiva appearing in these narrative series seem to be derived almost directly from Pallava art. The Bhikṣāṭana of the Kailāsanātha of Kāñcīpuram (Fig. 4) is found again in the reduced dimensions of, for example, Tiruchennampūṇḍi (Fig. 3), Puḷḷamaṅgai and Puñjai: the iconography is quasi-stereotypical. The representations of Mahiṣāsūramardīnī are the most remarkable from this point of view. The panels of Tirumaṅgalam (Fig. 5-6), of Puḷḷamaṅgai



Fig. 7 – Puḷḷamaṅgai, Brahmaṇurīśvara temple, 10th century, Mahiṣāsuramardīnī. (Photo: EFEO-Evenisse N 36 32).

(Fig. 7), of Kumbakonam and of Pāccil (Fig. 8) are constructed on the same plan as that of the famous bas-relief of Mahiṣāsuramardīnī in Mahabalipuram. It is mainly the Śaiva scenes, including those that bring the Goddess into the picture, which are constructed according to an iconography that hardly alters from temple to temple.¹³ Even if some of the representations of *avatāras* are also often very like one another,¹⁴ the sculptors have shown



Fig. 8 – Pāccil, Tirumerratiśvara temple, Mahiṣāsuramardīnī. (Photo: EFEO-Evenisse N 27 7).

more inventiveness when treating a Vaiṣṇava subject to which they were drawn to give more variety. This is not, in any case, because they lacked earlier models in the field.

This different treatment of Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva scenes brings us back to the place reserved for Vaiṣṇava images in a Śaiva context. Whatever pertains to the Śaiva domain seems to be more strictly codified. The Vaiṣṇava images may be proofs of more inventiveness, perhaps just because they stand outside the field of the worship conducted in the temples. They are not, for all that, considered as *Vaiṣṇava*, or at least not uniquely. It would seem that they are stories first and foremost. The place reserved for the series indicates their links with the terrestrial aspect of the things with which the temple is provided. The exterior walls of these temples are covered with inscriptions in with mundane matters, such as taxes, redistribution of lands and cleanings of tanks, dominate. They appear to correspond to the skin or surface of the temple, whose inner ritual is much more secret, fragile and therefore protected. The exterior walls and, even more often, the bases, are places of exchange with other worlds, divine or perfectly human. The narrative panels are imposed on the surface of the temple in contrast to the niches which carve a space, *a priori* protective, out of the exterior walls. The predominance of the Vaiṣṇava traditions is comprehensible in this case; Viṣṇu is the incarnating deity par excellence and it is unquestionably descents of the deity into the human world which are represented. Beyond these incarnations of the god, or simultaneously with them, it is observable that there always was a connection between the narrative mode and the Vaiṣṇava tradition. The epics are both Vaiṣṇava even though Śiva has some prominence in the *Mahābhārata*. In the field of narrative representations the Vaiṣṇava movements have always had primacy. Śiva is presented, first of all, in the transcendent form of the *līṅga* but Kṛṣṇa, from the first images onwards, is a divine figure. The *Purāṇas* demonstrate that there is no lack of narrative strands with Śiva as hero. Puranic literature nevertheless offers the same view of a definitive Vaiṣṇava predominance as that found on the Cōḷa bases; this is sometimes explained in terms of efforts to brahmanize a “non-Vedic”¹⁵ deity such as Śiva.¹⁶ Right from the start of brahmanical narrative art, which may be dated from the second century CE with the appearance of representa-

tions of Kṛṣṇa fighting against Keśin at Mathurā, the small numbers of Śaiva narrative representations is noticeable.¹⁷ The fact that the epics are predominantly Vaiṣṇava may be significant here yet it may equally be said that the epics are Vaiṣṇava because the Śaiva movements were much less interested in the narrative genre.¹⁸

In the first Cōḷa series the narrative mode appears, in any case, to be essentially Vaiṣṇava and, as with the placing of the friezes, this Vaiṣṇava thematic must have been connected with their mundane character. In fact representations connected with the world of dance and music (Fig. 9) are quite numerous in these temples, on the order of 15 and 20 per cent per temple. They are sometimes inserted for the sake of solution of continuity with the cycles, all the more so as the dancing forms of gods are equally present: those of Śiva (Fig. 10) but also those of Kṛṣṇa dancing with pots and playing the flute (Fig. 11). In the Hoysāḷa temples this type of representation often marked the boundary between one narrative cycle and the next: it remains very common. We are familiar with religious festivals whose atmosphere seems very close to the presiding spirit of the representations on the bases. At the time of festivals dedicated to Śiva, plays were performed featuring the *avatāras* of Viṣṇu, such as the *Mahāvīracarita* and the *Uttararāmacarita* of Bhavabhūti, which have Rāma for their hero and were performed in honour of Lord Kālapriya, one of the forms of Śiva. The inscriptions evoke, too, the drummers who made their instruments resonate during those festivals just as they do



Fig. 10 – Pullamaṅgai, Brahmapuriśvara temple, 10th century, dancing Śiva. (Photo: EFEO-Evenisse N 37 22).

today.¹⁹ The drummers are by far the best represented musicians on our narrative series and they often accompany Śiva dancing.

The presiding spirit of these representations in Vaiṣṇava narrative cycles appearing in series of otherwise Śaiva representations, and scenes of dance and music corresponds very well with the spirit of these rejoicings. The world of the theatre, of the divine action represented and played out on the earth, comes close to the Cōḷa Śaiva series on the bases. The way they are divided into small panels irresistibly evokes the sequence of scenes of



Fig. 9 – Puñjai, Naltuñai Īśvara temple, 10th century, musicians. (Photo: EFEO-Evenisse N 6 30).



Fig. 11 – Tiruchennampūṇḍi, Śaḍaiyār temple, 10th century, Kṛṣṇa playing flute. (Photo: EFEO-Evenisse N 24 28).



Fig. 12 – Tirumaṅgalam, Sāmavedīśvara temple, 10th century, the fight of Sugrīva and Vāli. (Photo: EFEO-Evenisse N 42 5).

a play in a theatre. The poses taken by certain characters evoke the world of dance in the same way. The fight between two monkeys, Sugrīva and Vāli, in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, for example, is obviously in the form of a dance (Fig. 12) and sometimes has no significance beyond its decorative value. We find it represented completely out of context in Śaiva temples such as that at Darasuram, where it is the only representation having to do with Rāma but where it is, however, represented at least four times. It may, too, have inspired the pose of Narasiṃha fighting Hiranyakaśipu, which also appears in distinctly dancing mode in, for example, the temple in Tirumaṅgalam (Fig. 13). The outstandingly aesthetic nature of these representations where the wrestlers' limbs correspond to one another emphasizes the theatrical character of certain narrative representations. It is true that other representations of deities, such as those of battles or of leaping gods and demons, indirectly evoke the world of dance and theatre. The base of a temple is a theatre where the living gods appear and where "appears adorned with peacock feathers, red ochre and with buds, Mukuṇḍa-Kṛṣṇa who sometimes dresses up to play the role of a wrestler, friend !"²⁰

The Lord of the Stage

The spirit which animates the theatrical representations in the temples is close to the little world populating the narrative series and it evokes one of the fundamental concepts of the Vaiṣṇava tradition. André Couture (2001) in the course of a study of the use of vocabulary referring to the idea of the *avatāra*, brings to light the special link apparent in the *Mahābhārata*, the *Harivaṃśa* and the *Purāṇas* between the world of theatre and the manifestations of Viṣṇu. This connection seems to me to be illustrated by the narrative series of the Cōḷa temples too. *Avatarāṇa* designates, in the theatre, the entrance of the actors onto the scene, *raṅga*, just as the same term designates the appearance of the god here below. The fight of Kṛṣṇa against his uncle's wrestlers staged by Kaṃsa, on a *raṅga*, in the town of Mathurā, is also represented as the scene in which are revealed the powers of the god who manifests himself in the world. It is, however, the whole collection of episodes from the childhood of Kṛṣṇa, in the *Harivaṃśa*, which must be considered as an entrance onto the scene, an *avatarāṇa*.²¹ It may be said that what appears on the scene is the visible form of the god, human or visible to the human eye, which Kṛṣṇa evokes in the *Bhagavadgītā* (XI, 8), that which plays on earth amongst men and women after having put on the cos-



Fig. 13 – Tirumaṅgalam, Sāmavedīśvara temple, 10th century, the fight of Narasiṃha and Hiranyakaśipu. (Photo: EFEO-Evenisse N 39 20).



Fig. 14 – Puḷḷamaṅgai, Brahmapurīśvara temple, 10th century, Raṅganātha. (Photo: EFEO-Evenisse N 38 16).



Fig. 15 – Tirubhuvanai, Varadarājaperumāl temple, 11th century, Raṅganātha. (Photo: EFEO-Ravindran E 75 2).

tumes (*veṣa*, as quoted by Couture, *Id.*: 323) which gives him a human or half-animal form.²²

A detail of the organisation of the narrative cycles in the space of the Cōḷa temples corresponds very closely to that textual aspect of the manifestation of the *avatāras*. In our Cōḷa corpus, the representations of Viṣṇu Śeṣaśāyī, Viṣṇu sleeping on a serpent, precedes the entrance onto the scene of the *avatāra* at Puḷḷamaṅgai (Fig. 14) and Tirubhuvanai (Fig. 15). In the Hoysaḷa corpus, that figure marks in the same way, but in a quasi-systematic manner, the beginning of a narrative cycle. It may correspond to the beginning of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, where the gods come to ask Viṣṇu to incarnate, or, in a more general way, with the beginnings of the stories of *avatāras* when the gods come in procession to ask Nārāyaṇa to descend and relieve the Earth of her burden. But, in fact, this form of the god appears to be related in a very general way, since the first images of it in the North of India, to manifestations of the god, very often as *avatāra*. Uniting human and animal forms in one double-bodied god, Viṣṇu resting on a serpent deity, reveals a flesh and blood body rising up from another world invisible to mortal eyes as an intermediary between the world of the gods and that of humans. His image representing a transition from the non-manifest to the manifest, is very well adapted to the representation of the beginnings of the narrative cycles which are the cycle of the *avatāras*. In Tamil Nadu moreover, that form of the god seems to maintain a specific relationship with the idea of theatrical representations; Viṣṇu on the serpent is known by the name of Raṅganātha, the Lord of the Stage. This cosmogonic figure of Viṣṇu sleeping on his elder brother, the serpent, marks

the introduction of a new universe. In the Cōḷa cycles, amongst others, the act of creation by the Lord of the Stage may correspond to the introduction of the new scene, the *raṅgāvatarāṇa*, the importance of which is emphasized by Couture, for it must be set out so that the actor-*avatāra*, usually Kṛṣṇa or Rāma, is able to manifest. The Āḷvārs in their poetry like to place the figure of Viṣṇu on the serpent before the evocation of his incarnations.²³ In Tamil Nadu the special link between the figure of Viṣṇu sleeping on the serpent with the idea of the *avatāra* of god as the visible form of the deity appears from the first known images onwards. First of all, these figures are most often the ones carved *in situ*, as the image dated to the 7th century in the Shore Temple of Mahabalipuram. The meeting with the terrestrial world where the divine manifestations take place is marked, above all, by an inalienable relationship between that form of the god and the place where he appears. The earth takes the form of god; god gives her her form. Moreover this title “Raṅganātha” belonging to this manifestation of the god on the serpent deity is profoundly connected with Viṣṇu resting on a serpent in the island town of Śrīraṅgam, “The Stage”, a divine “scene”, as it were, at the beginning of the delta that irrigates the region where the Śaiva temples of our corpus are situated. The name of this small island appeared in Vaiṣṇava devotional poetry, many of whose poems are dedicated to Śrīraṅgam. The concept of the god of the *raṅga* at Śrīraṅgam seems to be even older and part of the mythical landscape which the isle is: a fragment of land emerging from the waters just as does, in a Vaiṣṇava framework, the whole created universe.²⁴ The profile of Śrīraṅgam, washed by the Kauverī, evokes that

land encircled by water which Āṅṅāḷ presents as submissive to the lord of Araṅkam (Śrīraṅgam):

“Sovereign Lord who faultlessly rules / the heavenly spheres, / the earth / encircled by billowing seas– / my lord of splendour / of scepters and crown / who reigns in holy Araṅkam– / surely my bangles can add naught to his perfections.” (*Nācciyār Tirumoli*, 11, 3; trad. Dehejia 1990: 115-116).²⁵

The Kauverī represents oceanic turbulences as well as that eternal sea symbolized by the serpent, on which rests the god, qualified to create the world wherein tinkle the bracelets of Āṅṅāḷ. The black divinity sleeping on the serpent is the Lord of the stage whose manifestation must needs precede that of the *avatāra*. He is the god who brings into being the earthly scenes. The evocation, in the *Paripāṭal*, of the city of Madurai/Mathurā draws forth the image of that scene which first appears in the navel of the god:

“The renowned town is comparable to a lotus flower / blossoming on the umbilical cord of the Dark one. Her streets are the same / as the petals of the flower; and the same as the precious fruit / which is in the middle of these petals, the palace of the Lord” (*Paripāṭal*, fragment no. 8).²⁶ At the centre of the world stage, the temple, where the gods play, opens its petals.

The narrative model gives the shape to the bases of these temples. It is the first level of interpretation, in the same way as is the mythology recited to an attentive audience who may sometimes perhaps have seen it playing before their very eyes just as it is shown on the base of the buildings. The deities it brings onto the scene introduce the people of earth to the worlds of the gods in an intermediary space – earth and sky, interior and exterior – of the temples which facilitated the meeting of several universes, human, divine and religious. Images and texts also meet in this space. The correspondences, both established and impossible to establish, between these representations and the texts to which we have access, make us aware of a number of narrative traditions. The concept of *avatāra*, as it appears in certain texts, and especially in the *Harivaṃśa*, allows us to explain, at least to a certain extent, the important place that Śaiva temple complexes devoted to Vaiṣṇava representations. The base of the temple reveals itself as a space where gods, demons and men meet in the midst of the prominent musicians and dancers: the theatre of the world. The succession of scenes occupying the panels evokes a theatrical action, which in the *Harivaṃśa* corresponds to the concept of *avataraṇa*, the appearance of God on earth, conceived as a scene from a drama where men and gods mingle: then the story begins.

NOTES

¹ The narrative friezes of the Mēlaikkaṭampūr temple, dating from the beginning of the 12th century (the first inscription is from 1113), are mainly consecrated to the Nāyaṅmārs. The same Śaiva saints also appear in certain places on the last frieze of the Tirumaṅgalam temple, which seems to be later than the other two, and are found again on the pillars at Darasuram, dating from the second half of the 12th century (the first dated inscription in this temple corresponds to the year 1167; for P.N. Srinivasan in L’Her-nault 1987: 16, the temple was completed before the 13th year of Rājārāja II, which means before 1160). It is possible that this non-puranic Śaiva corpus had been exploited only from the 11th century because of modifications in the orientation of religious movements it is impossible to be more exact about at the moment.

² The pilasters of Cōḷa temples often have a decorative band on the upper tiers. At Tirumālpūr this band bears the narrative representations

which appear on the bases in the rest of the corpus. On the pilasters below, note 8.

³ On the dating of this temple see Balasubrahmanyam 1971: 56-58, 22.

⁴ *South Indian Inscriptions*, Vol. XIII, no. 257, vol. XIX, no. 63, 138, 168, 188; *Varalāru*, vol. 2, no. 16 & vol. 3, no. 9.

⁵ The epigraphic corpus of the Varadarājaperumāḷ of Tirubhuvanai is to be published. Some of the inscriptions are from the 10th century but it is not clear whether they belonged to the original building which was reconstructed in the thirties, as Pattabiramin (1948: 27) pointed out.

⁶ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. XIII, no. 29-34, 105, 132, 330, vol. III, no. 142 and 197, vol. XIX, no. 197, 220, 318, 319, 341, 445; *Epigraphia Indica* 1906: 265-344.

⁷ The only series situated on the base of exterior walls is found at Tirumaṅgalam. Considered as later by nearly a century than the first two series of representations, it is, with the unique series of Tirubhuvanai dated from the beginning of the 11th century, the one which is placed in the most

visible position in the temple. It appears that the series have a tendency to move upwards on the building of the temple, finishing in the Hoysala corpus where they are most often found at eye level. Elsewhere, the iconography of the narrative series is sometimes used on the pilasters of a temple. This is certainly the placing chosen for the representations of a cycle about Kṛṣṇa at Tirumālpūr, probably towards the middle of the 10th century. At Puñjai, one of the pilasters at the entrance to the shrine is decorated in the same place with a representation of the Goddess dancing, which is found again in the second series of the temple. On the South face of the temple of Puḷḷamaṅgai, one of the pilasters is decorated with representations of Kṛṣṇa episodes. On the temples of Pāccil and Tirumaṅgalam, various of the pilasters are ornamented by representations of gods. At Paṭṭaḍakal, 7th century, the interior pillars of some temples bear narrative representations: perhaps these Cōḷa pilasters are reviving a more ancient tradition. In the second half of the

12th century, the pillars of Darasuram (see above note 2) are covered with representations from bottom to top.

⁸ On the Vaiṣṇava representations of the Varadarājaperumāl see Schmid 2002.

⁹ See the study of this text by Gérard Colas 1983: 6.

¹⁰ See for example Sanford 1987: 279-280 who emphasizes the epigraphical comparisons of Cōḷa kings with Rāma. There is without doubt a strong connection between Rāma and the royal function but Rāma is above all a divine form, a god descended here below and mixing with human beings: an *avatāra*.

¹¹ The site of Pāccil also seems weak as a link between representations of *Rāmāyaṇa* and the king: three temples, two Śaiva and one *Vaiṣṇava*, form a Cōḷa group on the site. The Śaiva temple, other than that carrying narrative cycles, bears several inscriptions linking it to the royal family even though no single inscription qualifying as royal appears in the Tirumēṇṇi śvara. In a conference entitled “Mapping Movement in Sacred Spaces in Medieval Tamil Nadu”, presented at the “36th International Congress of Asian and North African Studies” in year 2000, at Montreal, Leslie Orr raised the question of the importance of the link between the Cōḷa kings and the temples. The examples considered by the author correspond to famous foundations such as Chidambaram and Tiruvannamalai as well as to lesser known temples such as those of Kattumāṇṇargudi.

The network of relationships between these temples gives little place to the king (his capital, his foundations, etc.). In the case of temples bearing narrative cycles it would certainly seem that the link with the king is in fact a very distant one.

¹² *civamaṇṇam rāmaceyam*, Srinivasan 1990; an inscription on a copper plate dated from the 17th century and including Śaiva representations.

¹³ This type of example suggests that there exists a very close relationship, at least in the iconographical field, between the first Cōḷa temples decorated with narrative cycles. It is possible that the same teams of craftsmen worked on these temples. The style of the panels however is sometimes different from one temple to another (on occasion even in the same temple) and the chronology would rather indicate that teams of craftsmen transmitted the models, perhaps from father to son, and we may also imagine iconographical models circulating between teams of sculptors.

¹⁴ There are two very similar representations of the boar *avatāra*, above p. 8.

¹⁵ Śiva is unarguably a Vedic divinity; he has a peripheral status in the Vedas however and is sometimes contrasted with Viṣṇu who is considered to be more orthodox.

¹⁶ See for example Rocher 1984 who, bringing up the question of the sectarian character of the *Purāṇas*, emphasizes the elements of the reciprocity between Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava movement

in the same texts, rather than considering the tolerance and intolerance of the two movements towards one another. The iconography of the Vaiṣṇava temple at Tirubhuvaneī may correspond to a more sectarian tendency (vedically inspired?) among other tendencies.

¹⁷ The Śaiva narrative representations from the Gupta period are very scarce: a terracotta from Raṅg-Mahal in Rājasthān, representing the descent of the Ganges, another which belongs to the site of Ahichattrā in Uttar Pradesh and represents the destruction of the sacrifice of Dakṣa, (NMD 62.238, Kreisel 1986: A 27), and a sandstone bas-relief from Mathurā of the demon Rāvaṇa shaking mount Kailāsa (MM 2577, *Id.*: 160, 238-239, pl. 109).

¹⁸ One of the themes from the *Mahābhārata*, which is found in three different temples, (Tiruchennampūṇḍi, Kumbakonam and Puñjai) is that of the Kīrātārjunīya which puts on the scene a Vaiṣṇava hero in the framework of Śaiva devotion. This must without doubt be considered in the same category of representation as the adoration of the *līṅga* by Rāvaṇa at Kumbakonam. It is a matter of the integration of a Vaiṣṇava corpus used as a narrative corpus in the Śaiva totality of the temple. In the Hoysāḷa temples this myth is also often found, as in the temples of Javaggaḷ, photos Evenisse-EFEO N 45 8-10.

¹⁹ Inscription no. 25 of Rājārāja I found on the interior gopuram of the Bṛhadīśvara of Tañjore mentions the donations given to the musicians beating their drums at festivals dedicated to Śiva (South Indian Inscriptions, vol. II: 125-126. Two of the six Cōḷa inscriptions of the temple at Pāccil (see above p. 6) evoke the same world; one is a donation to a singer and the other a donation made for the dances (*māimāṭṭi*) and the drums (*karāṭṭikai*).

²⁰ *barhīṇastabakadhīpallavair baddhamallapari-barhaviṅkambāḷi / karhi cit sabala āli sa gopair gāḷi sa māḷvayati yatra mukundaṃ ||*. The translation given in the text corresponds with the first half of the verse only.

²¹ A. Couture (2001: 322) offers a quotation which is particularly clarifying in this respect: *tavāvataraṇe viṣṇo kaṃsaḷ sa vinasīṣyati*, “O Viṣṇu, at the moment of your descent (or entrance) [on the stage at Mathurā], Kaṃsa will perish”, *Harivaṃśa* 44, 82, this may apply to the birth of Kṛṣṇa at the same time as to his appearance on the stage where he must fight against the wrestlers in the pay of his uncle.

²² It is noticeable that the animal *avatāras*, Varāha and Narasiṃha, who often appeared on Cōḷa temples are always represented in a semi-human form. This is, it is true, the most common form but the Varāha *avatāra* may equally appear in an entirely animal form as sometimes occurs when it is the boar who is searching for one of the extremities of the *līṅga* of Śiva.

²³ See for example the *Periyatirumōḷi* of Tirumaṅkai Āḷvār, 3, 1 and the *Nācciyār Tirumōḷi* of

Āṅṭāl 11, 3; and there are many other examples.

²⁴ T.V. Gopal Iyer and V. Desikan of the centre of the EFEO in Pondicherry gave me clarifying indications on the appearance of the term *raṅga*, tamil *araṅgam*: it appears in the *Cilappatikāram* in circumstances which seem to indicate that in this text it was already linked to the town of Śrīraṅgam as a place suitable for the manifestation of Raṅganātha. In the 10th canto of the *Pukāṅkkaṇṇam*, the word appears several times in its Sanskrit meaning of stage but one of these occurrences is an equivalent of the tamil *turutti*, little island. The description of a grove is presented thus (though I have no direct access to Tamil texts, I quote the text itself for the benefit of specialists): “*ārru vi araṅkattu vīrru vīrākki*” which may be translated as “[the grove] majestically situated in a unique manner on an tiny island which divides the river in two”. We may also translate this as “the stage which divides the river in two” but a stage which would be specifically related to that which forms the isle where the divinity of Śrīraṅgam resides. It seems that in this tradition the Śrīraṅgam deity appears as the divinity par excellence of the stage, to the point of conferring on a term of Sanskrit origin a meaning derived from the geographical position occupied by the temple of the god. A fragment of earth which emerges from the cosmogonic water flowing all around it, the isle is an image of the world created by the god and, as such, a representation of the stage where he manifests.

²⁵ *poṅkōtam cūḷita pavaṅṅiyum viṅṅulakum / aṅkā tuṅ cōṛāṇē yāḷkīṅṅra vempurumāṅ / ceṅkō luṅṅaiya tiru varāṅkac celvaṅṅār / eṅkōḷ valāiyā līṅṅatirva rāḷkāṅ.*

²⁶ *māyōṅ koppūḷ malarnta kāmaraiṅ / puveraṅṅu puraiyūṅ civūṅ pūvīṅ / itaḷakat taṅṅaiya teruva mīḷaḷakat / tarumpotuṅṅaittai yaṅṅal koyil.*

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