

Building Networks: Architecture, Ornament and Place in Early Modern South India¹

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In a wall painting within one of the upper interior levels of the outermost temple tower (*gopuram*) of the Nārumpūnātha (Śiva) temple at Tiruppudaimarudur in the far south of India, two pilgrims are depicted approaching a Śiva shrine surrounded by trees, a priest holding a water-pot greeting them at the threshold (figure 1). But this is not simply a generic Śiva temple, but the shrine dedicated to Śiva as Sundareśvara (Cokkanātha) in Madurai as the distinctive standing elephants emerging from the temple walls make clear to the viewer, familiar with the iconography of the deities and sacred landscape of Tamil South India. Several other important Śiva temples are also depicted in the wall paintings within the *gopuram* at Tiruppudaimarudur, emphasising the role of ornament in evoking the charisma of distant pilgrimage sites and the devotional networks that connect the sacred landscape of the Tamil region. This chapter seeks to examine a range of architectural and design perspectives on the historical construction of temple networks in early modern (fifteenth–eighteenth century) Tamil South India, from mural paintings and relief sculpture, through to the construction of shrine “replicas” and the material traces of festival processions.

Site Replication and Architectural Iconography

Reference to iconography in South Asian art normally invites consideration of the signs and symbols—the postures, hand gestures and attributes—that identify Buddhist, Jain, Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva images. But a consideration of the iconography and meanings of architecture may also offer insights into the construction and maintenance of temple networks in early modern South India. Through his study of religious architecture in medieval Europe, the much-cited Richard Krautheimer (1942)

1 Acknowledgements: The author is grateful to Ute Hüsken, Malini Ambach, Jonas Buchholz, Dominic Goodall, Emma Natalya Stein and all the other participants at the symposium at which this paper was presented for their comments, suggestions and congenial discussion. My research has been generously supported by the British Academy, Leverhulme Trust, American Academy of Religion and Arts and Humanities Research Council. I am especially indebted to Archana Venkatesan, Anna L. Seastrand and Leslie Orr for generously sharing their expertise and good humour. Archana and Leslie both made very valuable comments on my chapter for which I am very grateful.



Fig. 1: Sundaresvara (Cokkanātha) shrine in Madurai. Wall painting in *gopuram* of Nārumpūnātha (Śiva) temple at Tiruppudaimarudur, seventeenth century (photo by the author).

established the importance of the “content” or iconography of architecture. As Paul Crossley has noted, Krautheimer observed that certain ancient, venerable structures, such as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, were frequently copied in early medieval architecture, not accurately in order to produce an exact reproduction, but approximately with enough of the essential features of the prototype—the number of piers or the inclusion of an ambulatory—to evoke its meaning and enabling the viewer to experience, at a distance, the essential qualities of the original. “The associative power of architectural forms could thus be used by patrons to promote devotion, evoke holy sites, or [...] make political propaganda” (Crossley 1988, 116).

Krautheimer’s article was published in the 1940s, contemporary with Stella Kramrisch’s exploration of the meaning and symbolism of temples rather than their form alone (1946). “To Kramrisch, the need was to place the temple within a tradition that could give back to the temple its significance, then to show how that significance was given form.” (Meister 1980, 181). Historic temples were understood to be microcosms, models of the cosmos and to visually embody the process of cosmic creation; such an interpretation has been hugely influential since. In this understanding of sacred space, temples and cities recreate cosmic structure in the importance of the sacred centre with layers of ordered peripheral space around. The

challenge has been to relate such an overarching Sanskritic text-based interpretation to the historically situated devotional experience of pilgrims in specific temples, such as those built in South India from the seventh century to the present. Phyllis Granoff (1997) has questioned the validity of this cosmological model of the Hindu temple, proposing an alternative, complementary model drawing upon later *purāṇas* and contemporary inscriptions that in their descriptions of the abodes of deities suggest a more concrete and less abstract notion of the temple and all the gods and goddesses present. Temples are understood as the city and palace of the god, as heaven on earth. While she notes that the descriptions of heavens vary, just like temples, there are a number of recurrent features: “[...] heaven is always a vast metropolis, with numerous concentric areas all crammed with buildings and peopled by gods and other creatures who have come to serve the main deity. The city is watered by a river, more often by two rivers. The descriptions all proceed from the outermost precincts of this city inward. The city is surrounded by a series of walls with gateways that are carefully guarded” (Granoff 1997, 177). Such Puranic descriptions of heaven could equally describe a South Indian temple with a series of concentric enclosure (*prākāra*) walls, multiple shrines and attendant deities around the main god at the centre. In Tamil Śrīvaiṣṇava understanding some temples are considered to be Viṣṇu’s heaven Vaikuṅṭha on earth (*bhūloka vaikuṅṭha*). The vast Ranganātha temple at Srirangam, surrounded by rivers, is evocative of the mythical portrayal of Vaikuṅṭha circled by the Virajā river that forms a clear boundary separating earth from heaven. This understanding of Srirangam as *Bhūloka Vaikuṅṭha* is evident from literature, such as the fourteenth century *Guruparamparā prabhāvam*, and indeed in festival ritual. During the annual festival recitation of the entire Śrīvaiṣṇava canon (*adhyañotsavam*), that has been celebrated from the eleventh century in Srirangam, the understanding of the temple as “heaven on earth” becomes more explicit. Indeed, every temple in which this festival is celebrated is considered to be at least temporarily *Bhūloka Vaikuṅṭha* (Narayanan 1994, 115–116, Venkatesan 2019).² Madurai is similarly famed as “the world of Śiva on earth”, a title also attributed to other Śaiva shrines (Shulman 1980, 21).

Temples may serve to replicate an otherworldly structure, whether the cosmos or an image of heaven, but many more were understood to be part of the imagined, mythic and sacred landscape traversed by pilgrims. As Diana Eck has emphasised, India has no single pre-eminent sacred site, instead imagining the linking and multiplication of places to constitute the entire world. “Those things that are deeply important are to be widely repeated. The repetition of places, the creation of clusters and circles of sacred places, the articulation of groups of four, five, seven, or twelve sites – all this constitutes a vivid symbolic landscape characterized not by exclusivity and uniqueness, but by polycentricity, pluralism, and duplication” (Eck 2012, 5). In

2 The earliest inscription describing the major Śrīvaiṣṇava temple at Melukote as *Bhūloka Vaikuṅṭha* dates to 1582 (Vasanth 1991, 2).

the Tamil region, networks of pilgrimage sites linked the south with shrines all over India – Kanchipuram as one of the seven *mokṣadāyaka*, the cities that ensure liberation (*mokṣa*); Rameshvaram is the site of one of the twelve *jyotirlingas* (*lingas* of light), for example. But other networks of sites wholly within the South created an imagined Tamil landscape—“the good world where Tamil is spoken [from] northern Venkatam to Kumari in the south” in the *Tolkāppiyam*—that from the eighth-ninth centuries became a built landscape of stone temples.³

Building the Tamil Landscape

Sacred sites and the temples built upon them in the Tamil region were increasingly seen as part of such an imagined landscape. Temples might replicate or evoke a connection with another sacred site by name or by dedication alone. Some sites in southern India are identified as a “southern Kashi”, Śiva’s sacred city of Benares or Varanasi on the river Ganges in North India. Kumbakonam on the banks of the Kaveri river is sometimes understood to be a “southern Kashi”, for example, an association evident from around the seventeenth century; Kanchipuram has also been interpreted in a similar manner. Up until the eleventh century the most important temple in Varanasi was the Avimukteśvara, but devotional pre-eminence shifted from the twelfth century and later to the temple dedicated to Śiva as Kāśī Viśvanātha (or Viśveśvara) (Bakker 1996; Eck 1983, 129–136; Desai 2017, 17–29). Kumbakonam’s connection with Varanasi is evident from the Kāśī Viśvanātha temple built in the eighteenth–nineteenth centuries alongside the Makāmakam tank. But a more longstanding connection with Kashi is evident from the Makāmakam festival held every twelve years in this tank that was renovated and the present series of sixteen pavilions (*maṇḍapas*) built around its irregular perimeter in the early seventeenth century under Tanjavur Nāyaka patronage. For it is here in Kumbakonam that the seven river goddesses of India, including the Ganga, coalesce in order to cleanse themselves of the accumulated sins washed off by bathing pilgrims. The southern replication of Śiva’s sacred city on the Ganges and its most important Viśvanātha temple is more explicit in the construction of the fifteenth-century Kāśī Viśvanātha temple in Tenkasi by the Pāṇḍya king Arikēsari Parākrama (reigned 1422–1463) (Sethuraman 1985; Branfoot 2007, 19–21). Before setting out on pilgrimage to northern India, he dreamt that Śiva of Kashi had asked the king to build the god a new home for, ever since the *Turuṣkas* had come to his city, Śiva had been homeless. Destroyed in 1194 by Quṭb al-Dīn Aibak, a reconstructed Viśvanātha temple in Kashi was again demolished in the late fourteenth or fifteenth century. The new Tamil temple was built for this deity, hence the town’s name: “southern” (*ten*) Kashi.

3 This definition of the Tamil land in the Sangam-era *Tolkāppiyam* (early centuries CE) is repeated in many later texts. On Tamil cultural geography see Peterson and Selby 2007, 4–6 and Stein 1977.

Though there is little architecturally or topographically that replicates the prototype, the evocation of the sacred charisma of the Viśvanātha temple in far-away Benares is evident in name alone. Viśvanātha shrines have been built within the enclosures of other temples from the fifteenth century and later, such as that within the Mīnākṣī-Sundareśvara temple in Madurai's 1000-column *maṇḍapa* built in the 1560s. In Kanchipuram, there are two Kāśī Viśvanātha/Viśveśvara temples, one in the outermost *prākāra* of the Kāmākṣī Amman temple, and another on the west bank of the Sarvatīrtha tank just to the west of the Ekāmbareśvara temple.

The Tamil region has a strong sense of the divine power of place: medieval inscriptions often refer to a deity as the “Lord of such-and-such a place” rather than indicate whether it is Śiva or Viṣṇu (or a Tīrthānkara or Buddha) (Orr 2005, 29). The wandering Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava poet-saints of the sixth to ninth centuries similarly sang in praise of the deities of the Tamil landscape, “a fundamentally locative worldview in which villages, fords, seacoasts, rivers, and hills are identified with the particular deity.” (Eck 2012, 81). As temples began to be built in brick and later stone, so they came to be connected through the movement of pilgrims into larger networks. The Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition recognises a network of 108 sacred sites, the Divya Deśas (divine abodes) that were sung into sacrality by the twelve *ālvār* poets between the sixth and ninth centuries. Of the 108 sites, two are other-worldly—the supreme heaven (Vaikuṅṭha) and the cosmic Ocean of Milk (Tiruppārkaṭal)—but the remaining 106 are terrestrial and the majority are in the Tamil country. While these sites were clearly important to the *ālvārs*, it was not until the late twelfth century, a particularly dynamic period in the history of Śrīvaiṣṇavism, that the Divine Abodes came to be systemised as a pilgrimage network through hagiography and poetry. The four most important are considered to be those to which the most *ālvārs* sang and to which the most poems were addressed: in order, Srirangam, Venkatam (Tirupati/Tirumalai), Kanchipuram and Tirumaliruncholai (Alagarkoyil). As *ācāryas* began to narrate the wonders of these sacred places and the unique character of each deity of place in order to forge the geography of an emerging Śrīvaiṣṇava community, so from the fourteenth century on did patrons expand and embellish the architecture of the temples at these sites (Dutta 2010; Young 2014). Detailed architectural histories of some of the major Vaiṣṇava temples suggest that, though founded earlier between the tenth to twelfth centuries, the main period for their expansion into the temple-cities frequented today was the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries.

A further pattern is the reproduction of the charisma of particular Divya Deśas by building shrines to the most important forms of Viṣṇu further afield. Of the four most celebrated sites—Srirangam, Venkatam (Tirumalai), Kanchipuram and Tirumaliruncholai (Alagarkoyil)—it is the construction of temples dedicated to Venkaṭeśvara, far away from the prototype at Tirumalai, that are the most widespread. Venkaṭeśvara at Tirupati is among the most important Tamil Śrīvaiṣṇava pilgrimage sites, and though established by the tenth century, the temple gained the pre-eminence it maintains to this day only from the late fifteenth century. In the early

sixteenth century under the patronage of the Vijayanagara emperors of the Tuḷuva dynasty Kṛṣṇadeva and Acyutadeva, both great devotees of Tamil Śrīvaiṣṇavism, Veṅkaṭeśvara became a South Indian rather than more narrowly Tamil deity as further devotees from the Kannada- and Telugu-speaking parts of the Deccan travelled to the temple. The Śrīvaiṣṇava turn and the increasing popularity of Tamil forms of Viṣṇu, such as Veṅkaṭeśvara, across South India is evident from the eight temples dedicated to the deity—known there as Tiruveṅgaḷanātha—built from the mid-fifteenth century on at the Vijayanagara imperial capital. Raṅganātha of Srirangam and Varadarāja of Kanchipuram were also important Śrīvaiṣṇava forms of Viṣṇu, whose presence at the capital is evident from material remains (relief sculpture and fewer, more modest temples), though neither were as important as Veṅkaṭeśvara. New temples to Veṅkaṭeśvara were also built in the far south in the sixteenth century, such as that built by the Madurai Nāyaka Kṛṣṇappa in the 1560s at Krishnapuram east of Tirunelveli (Branfoot 2008). A wider survey of the historical development and dates of dedication of Veṅkaṭeśvara temples might suggest the chronology and geography of the dissemination of the deity across southern India.

In addition to the Divya Deśas, other smaller networks of temples are identified by Śrīvaiṣṇavas. Though not as widespread as temples dedicated to Veṅkaṭeśvara, a network of five temples dedicated to Raṅganātha, the *pañcaraṅgakṣetras*, follow the course of the Kaveri down river from Srirangapatnam near Mysore, to Srirangam, then the Appakkūṭattāṅ Perumāḷ temple at Koviladi, the Parimaḷa Raṅganātha temple at Tiruindalur near Mayiladuturai, and the Raṅganātha Perumāḷ in Vadarengam.⁴ Neither the Varadarāja at Kanchipuram nor the Aḷakar temple at Alagarkoyil are replicated to the same degree as the Veṅkaṭeśvara temple upon Venkatam hill above Tirupati.⁵ One explanation for a limited number of subsidiary shrines to site-specific deities in another far-off temple may be explained by the historic circumstances following the disruption in the Tamil region from the late thirteenth century. A series of incursions into the Tamil country by the Hoysaḷas of southern Karnataka and others were followed by raids by the Khaljī and Tughluq sultanate from Delhi in 1310–1311, 1318, and 1323. Within a brief period of time, many of the old polities of southern India disappeared. In this disruptive period, hiding or removing images elsewhere to safer temples became an important means of preservation (Davis 1997, 127–142). Such flights from perceived danger inspired literature of exile and return, enhancing the status of the mobile deity and that of its protectors through miraculous stories of adventure, heroism and sacrifice (Davis 1997, 129). Shrines may then have been constructed for the mobile deity fleeing to a distant temple, material legacies of past migration at times of threat. At Tirumala, for example, shrines were built in the

4 The Śārṅgapāni temple in Kumbakonam, also dedicated to Viṣṇu in his reclining form, is sometimes considered one of the Pañcaraṅga Kṣetras in place of Vadarengam, especially as this temple has fallen into disrepair as a result of the changing course of the river. The antiquity of this group remains uncertain at present.

5 On some “replicas” of Alagarkoyil, see Orr 2018.

early fourteenth century for Varadarāja, Raṅganātha and Narasiṃha within the first two *prākāras* when the Venkaṭeśvara temple “served as a sort of refugee camp for Vaiṣṇavite idols of antiquity” (Viraraghavacharya 1977, vol. 1, 65). Raṅganātha did indeed reside at Tirumala for several decades before being restored to his home in Srirangam in the 1370s by the victorious Vijayanagara armies, as inscriptions at the latter temple record (Davis 1997, 131).⁶

Other Śrīvaiṣṇava temple networks within the larger group of Divya Deśas may relate to the hagiography of individual *ālvārs*. One such group is the network of nine Vaiṣṇava temples—the Navatirupati—situated on both banks of the river Tamraparani in the far south of the Tamil region. These are all connected to Nammālvār, from his birthplace at Alvar Tirunagari and the eight other sites nearby to which he sang in praise. Today pilgrims begin their journey at either Srivaikuntam on the northern bank or at Alvar Tirunagari located on the southern bank, almost directly opposite, travelling via the other seven less distinguished temples. Furthermore, contemporary festival performance connects them all: deities from all temples congregate at Alvar Tirunagari in Vaikāci (May-June) during the Garuḍasēvai festival. But the construction of the temples was not uniform: Alvar Tirunagari and Srivaikuntam are of individual distinction and the earliest evidence for their construction is in the thirteenth century, and there is no clear uniformity of design or layout among all Navatirupati temples. Yet by the sixteenth–seventeenth century, perhaps under the patronage of the Tenkasi Pāṇḍyas and Madurai Nāyakas, these nine closely related temples came to be considered a connected pilgrimage network. The Vijayanagara emperor Kṛṣṇadevarāya (reigned 1509–1530) is reported to have visited the Navatirupatis on his imperial pilgrimage through the far south, according to the Telugu *Rāyavācakamu* (“Tidings of the King”), an account of his reign composed at the Madurai Nāyaka court ca. 1600 (Wagoner 1993, 158).⁷ Further evidence for the network’s identification and wider recognition comes from a mural dated to the 1830s in the *citramaṇḍapa* (painted hall) of the Venkaṭaramaṇasvāmi temple just north of the Jaganmohan Palace in Mysore. The murals depict many of the sacred sites that the Madhva brahmin Subbarāyadāsa visited during an immense pilgrimage sponsored by Mysore’s Kṛṣṇarāja Wodeyar III (reigned 1799–1868) not only to the most important sacred sites in the Mysore kingdom, but also to those in greater South India and some in North India. As Simmons argues, the paintings display Mysore as the centre of pan-Indian sacred devotion with local, regional and pan-Indian sacred geography reconfigured as sovereign territory under the watchful gaze of the ideal king-devotee and his lineage (Simmons 2020, 212–226). Among the paintings of sites that he visited are several Divya Deśas, including Melukote, Kanchipuram, Kumbakonam and the group of nine temples of the Navatirupati, identified as such in a Kannada label.

6 Varadarāja did not flee his temple at times of danger in the fourteenth century but he did in the 1680s (Hüsken 2017).

7 I am grateful to Archana Venkatesan for drawing my attention to this.

Tamil Śaivas also developed a network of sacred sites though, in comparison with the systemization of the Śrīvaiṣṇavas' 108 pilgrimage sites by the twelfth century, the generation of a comprehensive list of 276 Śaiva sacred sites was relatively recent and the identification of a *Tēvāram* place may be contested or debated, or may even shift (Orr 2014).⁸ These are the “places that have received a hymn” (*pāṭal perṛa talaṅkal*), the sites that were celebrated by Appar, Cuntarar and Campantar and compiled together in the *Tēvāram*. Cēkkiḷār's twelfth century *Periyapurāṇam* draws upon the *Tēvāram* telling the stories of the poet-saints as narratives of journeys to shrines sacred to Śiva in which the poems are represented as spontaneous outpourings of praise and devotion to the particular manifestation of Śiva at that site. Around seventy percent of the 276 sacred places are in Cholanadu, the central region of Tamilnadu that includes the Kaveri delta (Spencer 1970; Peterson 1982). It may have been the printing and circulation from the 1860s of the *Tēvāram* and *Periyapurāṇam* that enhanced the Tamil Śaiva sense of community embedded in the network of temples that collectively created a Śaiva sacred landscape even if not an actual programme of pilgrimage. Prior to this, smaller networks of Śaiva temples were considered of greater regional significance, some of which were constituted around the legendary lives of individual poet-saints rather than their hymns.

Among the many Śaiva pilgrimage sites in Tamilnadu, Rameshvaram is of pan-Indian significance not only because it is the southernmost of the four *dhāms* (“holy abodes”) and one of the twelve *līngas* of light (*vyotirliṅgas*) that map Śiva's presence across the country, but also for its prominence in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Another important group of Śiva temples is located within the Tamil country, the five “elemental” temples (*pañcabhūtasthala*) dedicated to the *līngas* of air, earth, fire, water and ether (*ākāśa*), a network that can be traced as early as the tenth-century *Sūta Saṃhitā* (Smith 1996, 14). These are located respectively at the Kālahastīśvara at Srikalahasti, the Ēkambareśvara in Kanchipuram, the Aruṅācaleśvara at Tiruvannamalai, the Jambukeśvara at Tiruvannaikka on Srirangam island and the Naṭarāja at Chidambaram. Without elaborating detailed building histories for each, all these temples can be traced to the seventh to ninth centuries, were substantially expanded to reach their present scale in the twelfth to sixteenth centuries and were all substantially renovated around 1900. Chidambaram is also included among a further group of five temples where Śiva performed his cosmic dance (*pañcanṛtyasabhā*); the others are Tiruvallangadu, Madurai, Tirunelveli and Kuttralam. Such networks of five deities and temples has its counterpart in the *pañcakṛtya*, the five cosmic functions of Śiva, his five faces and the five syllable Śaiva *mantra* (*pañcākṣara*) (Eck 2012, 253). Networks of four temples also mark territory with the suggestion of directionality to north, south, east and west and – with the addition of a fifth to suggest the centre – of completeness. The network of six sites sacred to Murugaṅ, the Tamil deity *par*

8 The number also varies, two additional sites having been added to the earlier list of 274 following the discovery of an additional poem by Campantar inscribed on a temple wall and an additional poem by Cuntarar in a manuscript.

excellence, that define the extent of his domain take this concept further, the four cardinal directions together with the zenith and the nadir representing the three-dimensional cosmos in its totality (Eck 2012, 33; Clothey 1978, 116–131).⁹

Another pattern, more often associated with Śaiva temples than Vaiṣṇava, is the replication of site-specific shrines clustered around the temple's main deity at the site. Establishing a clear periodisation for this practice is difficult given that few small sub-shrines have dated inscriptions, but stylistic evidence suggests this development is contemporary with the growth of site-specific mythic literature (*talapurāṇam*, Sanskrit *sthalapurāṇa*) in Tamil in the sixteenth-nineteenth centuries. At some temples, only a single shrine to a site-specific form of Śiva may be included. At Tenkasi, for example, a small shrine to Mīnākṣī and Sundareśvara of Madurai was built in the late 1550s¹⁰ on the north side of the second *prākāra* alongside the main shrine to Kāśī Viśvanātha and in an adjacent shrine his consort Lokanāyakī (or Ulaku) Ammaṇ. This modest shrine—and others like it elsewhere—was constructed precisely when the Mīnākṣī-Sundareśvara temple in Madurai was beginning a long period of renovation and expansion under the Nāyaka rulers of the city, and when the myths in Madurai's best-known site-history, the *Tiruvīlaiyātāl Purāṇam*, were circulating more widely.¹¹ Parker has suggested that this location both spatially and ideologically subordinated Mīnākṣī of Madurai to the “Mother of the World” (Ulakammaṇ); the iconography of both goddesses is similar, standing and holding a green parrot (Parker 2007, 163).¹² At other sites there may be multiple such site-specific deities installed in subsidiary shrines.

9 Temples were built at the five undisputed Murukaṇ sites by the ninth-tenth centuries; the sixth is every other Murukaṇ temple, emphasising his pervasive presence in the Tamil region. During the Tamil Neośaiva revival from the late nineteenth century, the Murukaṇ temples at Palani, Tiruchendur, Tiruttani and Swamimalai were all extensively renovated and expanded.

10 An inscription on the Kāśī Viśvanātha temple's *mahāmaṇḍapa* mentions the shrine's construction in 1558/1559 (*Annual Report on Epigraphy* [hereafter *ARE*], Madras: Government Press no. 530 of 1917); another inscription on the shrine itself is dated 1560/1 (*ARE* no. 579 of 1917).

11 Branfoot 2007, 27–30 and Fisher 2017, 143–149. An earlier instance of the migration of Sundareśvara of Madurai is evident from an inscription dated 1258 at Chidambaram recording the gift of land for offerings to the image of Tiruvālavāyuṭaiyār Aḷakiya Cokkanar for the welfare of the Pāṇḍya king (*ARE* no. 153 of 1961–1962). I am grateful to Leslie Orr for bringing this to my attention.

12 For the mythic connections made between Mīnākṣī of Madurai and Āṅṅāl of Srivilliputtur, another goddess identified by the parrot in her hand, see Venkatesan and Branfoot 2015, 34–36.

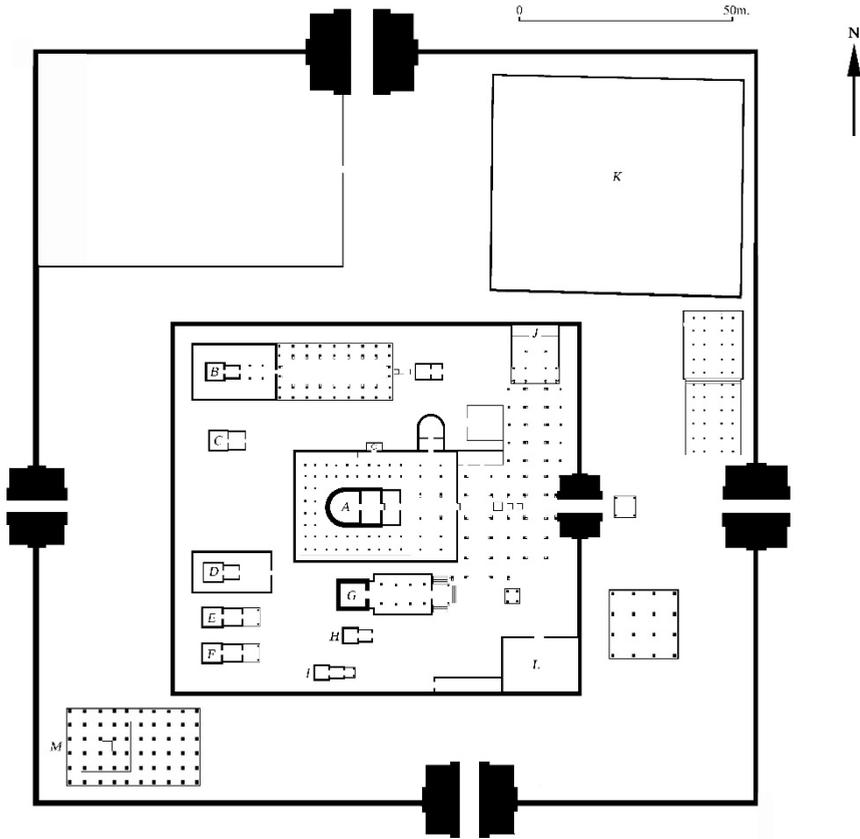


Fig. 2: Ground plan of the Bhaktavatsala (Śiva) temple, Tirukkalukkundram (plan by the author).

Just below the summit of Vedagiri, the hill at Tirukkalukkundram between Kanchipuram and Mamallapuram, is one of the earliest Pallava cave-temples known. The hill is also known as Pakṣitīrtham (“place of the birds”), for two eagles sent from north and south come to feed here each day. The much larger Bhaktavatsala (Śiva) temple at the foot of the hill with huge *gopurams* on the four sides of three large *prākāras* largely dates to the sixteenth century, although there are fragmentary remains of shrines dating to the seventh-eighth and on into the twelfth centuries (figure 2). The apsidal main shrine to Bhaktavatsala stands within the dark, enclosed innermost enclosure, but a much wider range of Śaiva deities are installed in ten additional shrines in the open second *prākāra*. The most substantial is the shrine for Bhaktavatsala’s consort Tripurasundarī (*B*) and, as is common practice, there are additional shrines for Śiva’s children—Vaṅṭuvaṅa Piḷḷaiyār (Vināyakar, Gaṇeśa) (*F*) and Ārumukam (“six-faced”, Skanda) (*D*)—and another in the standard northeast

corner facing south for Naṭarāja (*J*). A comparatively large shrine directly south of the main Śiva shrine in the first *prākāra* contains Somāskanda (*G*), the *utsavamurti* of Vēdagirīśvara, the “Lord of Vedagiri” rather than Bhaktavatsala, for the two nearby temples are ritually connected. But in addition to these shrines, further site-specific forms of Śiva are present: Ekāmbareśvara (*H*), Aruṇācaleśvara (*C*), Jambukeśvara (*E*) and, in place of another of the “elemental” *liṅgas*, the anticipated Kālahastīśvara, there is a shrine to Ātmanātha (*I*), Śiva at Avudaiyarkoyil (figure 3). Māṅikkavācakar received initiation from Śiva here and appropriately enough there is a shrine to the Śaiva poet-saint facing Ātmanātha west of the kitchen; an inscription on its south wall may suggest its presence by 1135.¹³ None of the other subsidiary shrines have inscriptions to offer reliable clues as to their construction, nor were they built in the same period, but their gradual construction took place between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries. The spatial distribution of shrines within the temple at Tirukkalukundram does not replicate any geographical logic—Ekāmbareśvara of Kanchipuram is not the most northerly, for example—though at other temples, such as the Kurṛālanātha temple at Kuttralam such a concept does seem to have been practiced.



Fig. 3: Subsidiary shrines, Bhaktavatsala (Śiva) temple, Tirukkalukkundram (photo by Emma Natalya Stein).

13 Gopalakrishnan 2005, 86 citing *ARE* no. 186 of 1932–1933.

Kuttralam at the foot of the Western Ghats near Tenkasi is the site of the *Citrasabhā*, one of the five places where Śiva danced. In the western *prākāra* at the Kurrālanātha temple at the site, a row of six shrines house selected gods and goddesses not of the whole Tamil region but more narrowly of Pandyanadu in the far south. The northernmost of the shrines are the two adjacent ones that house Sundareśvara and Mīnākṣī of Madurai. Attached to these is the shrine for Pālvaṅṅānātha of Karivalamvandanallur together with his consort, then next is Śaṅkaranārāyaṇa of Sankaranayinarkoyil, and finally in this line of attached shrines is Nārumpūnātha of Tiruppudaimarudur. Further to the south are two stand-alone shrines for Nellaiyappar and his consort, of Tirunelveli, and for the god and goddess of Papanasam (in the hills to the west of Tirunelveli). According to Leslie Orr, the inscriptions at Kuttralam do not indicate when these deities arrived here, or who was responsible for installing them, or what was the logic of their inclusion and arrangement (Orr 2015). The architectural design offers few clues to the date either, given their unelaborated appearance, though probably no earlier than the fifteenth century and perhaps even as late as the nineteenth. Of note here at Kuttralam is the spatial arrangement of the shrines: the distribution of the six shrines from north to south corresponds with their geographic distribution. Furthermore, in seeking to explain why these various forms of Śiva were chosen to be installed alongside Kurrālanātha, it is worth noting that the Tamil-wide distribution of five “elemental” Śivas mentioned above has its own replication within Pandyanadu: Pālvaṅṅānātha of Karivalamvandanallur is a local version of the fire-*liṅga* at Tiruvannamalai, and Śaṅkaranārāyaṇa of Sankaranayinarkoyil an earth-*liṅga*, as at Kanchipuram.¹⁴ The examination of these subsidiary shrines within the growing temple complexes of the Tamil region after the twelfth century thus demonstrates the need to consider not only which deities are replicated and when their shrines were built, but also their spatial arrangement in relation to each other and the temple’s “centre.”

Ornament, Temple Networks and Temple Design

Temples and shrines may also be replicated in architectural ornament – in relief sculpture and later in wall and ceiling paintings – visualising connections in the language of design between temples in the immediate neighbourhood or much farther afield. Representations of sacred sites or temples may be reduced to the distinctive iconography of the main deity. *Liṅgas* can be hard to distinguish, so the related goddess, site-tree (*sthalavṛkṣa*) and water-source, or another site-specific feature may indicate the precise deity and thus location if inscriptions or labels are absent (Seastrand 2013, 79). The *sthalavṛkṣa* of many temples is often a distinct tree

14 The remaining “elemental” *liṅgas* of Pandyanadu are located within fifteen miles north and west of Sankaranayinarkoyil including the northernmost Naccāṭai Tavirttaruḷiyanātha temple at Devadanam (ether) on the Rajapalayam to Sivagiri road, and the Madhyasthanātha temple at Darugapuram (water) and Tripuranātha temple at Tenmalai (air) between.



Fig. 4: Relief sculpture of shrine, Citra *gopuram*. Nampirāyar Perumāl temple, Tirukkurunkudi, seventeenth century (photo by the author).

species and an explanation may be mentioned in the temple's site-history (*sthalapurāṇa*). Artists were clearly conscious of such distinctions and thus the type of tree can be a visual shorthand for Tamil sacred geography: bamboo for Nellaiyappar in Tirunelveli, for example, or three mango trees for Vāṇamāmalai Perumāl at Nanguneri. The paintings within the Tiruppudaimarudur *gopuram* mentioned at the outset include nine distant sites with no immediate or obvious connection to the temple. The Citra *gopuram* of the Nampirāyar Perumāl temple at Tirukkurunkudi is notable for the many unusually large and detailed sculpted reliefs on the wall surfaces and within the horseshoe-arches (*nāsi*, *kuḍu*) of the curved *kapota* (cornice) at the top of the stone base. Some of the scenes of small *vimānas* (*Drāviḍa* shrine) in the *kuḍus* initially seem to be generic images of small temples. However, upon closer inspection, the peacock or mouse making offerings to the Śiva-*liṅga* together with the different site-tree (*sthalavṛkṣa*) above the *nandimaṇḍapa* suggest that a specific shrine is depicted that was connected with the Nampirāyar Perumāl temple at the time of the *gopuram*'s construction in the seventeenth century (figure 4). Explanations for why specific deities or shrines are represented on a different temple in small-scale reliefs or paintings, often at a considerable distance away, is a largely untapped mode of enquiry, that requires closer analysis of the relevant site-myths, festival practice and networks of patronage.



Fig. 5: Wall paintings of the 108 Divya Deśas. Kallapirāṇ (Perumāl) temple, Srivaikuntam, eighteenth century (photo by the author).

Sculptures of individual or small numbers of related sites seem to be the norm in the fifteenth–seventeenth centuries. It is only from the later seventeenth, or more likely eighteenth, century that much larger networks of temples start to be depicted, especially in wall and ceiling paintings. Although the systemization of the 108 Divya Deśas had occurred by the thirteenth century in Śrīvaiṣṇava literature, among the earliest extant visualisations of the complete series of standing, seated and reclining images of Viṣṇu at each sacred site is painted on the walls within the dark first *prākāra* corridor surrounding the Kallapirāṇ temple at Srivaikuntam, probably dating to the later eighteenth century (Seastrand 2019) (figure 5). As mentioned above, the comparable systemization of the Śaiva sacred sites did not take place until much later, perhaps not until the increasing circulation of printed texts in the nineteenth century.

However, perhaps the earliest clear evidence for the conception of a network of Śaiva sacred sites is their depiction in ceiling paintings at the Ātmanātha temple at Avudaiyarkoyil (Seastrand 2013, 164–167, 214–224). The *mandapa* in which the paintings are shown was completed by 1739 thus establishing the earliest date for the paintings. Four larger panels of Kanchipuram, Mount Kailasa, Madurai (labelled Vaigai after the river) (figure 6) and Chidambaram have the remaining sites depicted on a smaller scale and arranged geographically following the *talamurai* order of the *Tēvāram*: east to west along the north bank of the river Kaveri, then west to east,

then south before the northern sites.¹⁵ As Seastrand has convincingly demonstrated, the order relates both to their geography in the *Tēvāram* and to the movement of the pilgrim-viewer looking up. Each site is indicated by a Śiva and goddess shrine, a water tank and sometimes the *sthalavṛkṣa*, though not all can readily be identified individually. As is increasingly common from the eighteenth century, identifying labels are included which aids the identification of similarly depicted sites, essential in the seriality of representation in which the specific place only has meaning within the context of other places (Seastrand 2013, 217).

The likeness or “copy” of a site-specific deity of pilgrimage fame elsewhere is a common practice in the far south of India, as discussed above, yet this rarely extended to the conscious replication of a temple’s design, layout or topography until around the past century. The Raṅganātha temple at Srirangam and the Ātmanātha at Avudaiyarkoyil both, for example, unusually face south rather than the more common temple alignment of east or west, yet shrine “copies” to these deities elsewhere do not necessarily face south in conscious evocation of their prototype. Shrines dedicated to Naṭarāja are positioned either within a small shrine in the interior of the *mahāmaṇḍapa* (“great hall”, outer of the series of enclosed halls before a temple’s *garbhagrha* or *sanctum sanctorum*) or later, from the twelfth–thirteenth centuries, as a larger structure in the northeast corner of one of the outer *prākāras* of Śiva temples, but in both cases they normally face south (Orr 2021). Such an alignment and the later southward extensions to such shrines may have evoked the pre-eminent Naṭarāja temple at Chidambaram, where the main image of dancing Śiva is unusually aligned in that direction. Any similarities of temple layout may then be indicative of shared ritual functions or other factors, some of which may be evident in *āgamic* literature, rather than the conscious architectural emulation of a specific temple. But some temple layouts are sufficiently unusual to suggest explanations based upon shared religious affiliation, patronage or specific groups of mobile architects (*sthapati*).

15 The poetic hymns to Śiva in the *Tēvāram* are arranged in two ways: according to musical modes (*paṇ*) in *paṇmuṛai* editions and according to places and regions (*talam*) in *talamuṛai* editions. See “The *talamuṛai* arrangement of *Tēvāram*” in Jean-Luc Chevillard & S.A.S. Sarma (eds.), *Digital Tēvāram*. https://www.ifpindia.org/digitaldb/site/digital_tevaram/.



Fig. 6: Ceiling paintings of the 275 Śaiva sacred sites. Ātmanātha (Śiva) temple, Avudaiyarkoyil, early eighteenth century (photo by the author).



Fig. 7: Kūṭal Aḷakar temple, Madurai, mid-sixteenth century (photo by the author).

Tamil temples tend to be arranged on a single level, and the interior of *vimānas* are hollow above the enclosed *garbhagrha*. Here it is important to emphasise that the external design of a Drāviḍa *vimāna* divided into multiple storeys or *talas*, characterised by rows of miniature buildings, does not necessarily correspond with a functional interior layout: only a few *tritāla vimānas* have three vertically arranged *garbhagrhas*. But some Tamil temples do have multi-storey interiors, especially a small group of Vaiṣṇava temples with three vertical shrines, one above the other, containing the three forms of Viṣṇu within: one standing, one seated and one reclining (*sthānaka*, *āsana*, *śayāna*). The earliest surviving temple of this type may also be the best known: the later eighth-century Vaikuṅṭha Perumāḷ at Kanchipuram. Others include the ninth-century Sundaravarada at Uttaramerur in northern Tamilnadu, which may have been in conscious emulation of the former, and many more in Pandyanadu further south, including the Rājagopāla temple at Mannarkudi near Ambasamudram, the Saumyanārāyaṇa at Tirukkoshtiyur and the Kūṭal Aḷakar in Madurai, all rebuilt in the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries on earlier foundations (figure 7). Some currently single-storey temples may have been originally three-storeyed prior to later renovations. Dennis Hudson has sought to demonstrate that the Vaikuṅṭha Perumāḷ temple at Kanchipuram and its sculpted programme was designed according to a single yet complex religious vision consistent with the *Bhagavadgīta*, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the *Pāñcarātra Āgama* and the poems of the *ālvārs*, and was considered a three-dimensional *maṇḍala* through which devotees would move through (Hudson 2008, 11). Whether this architectural and religious vision was shared with other three-storey temples, even those with differing orientation or vertical arrangements for the three forms of Viṣṇu, and whether the conception stemmed from Kanchipuram and was disseminated south to create an unfolding network of related temples across the Tamil South remains as yet unclear.

A curious, unique layout for a temple may be found in the two-storey Vaṭapatra-śāyī temple in Srivilliputtur, with seated Narasiṃha and his consort in a small lower shrine (rarely visited) with reclining Viṣṇu above. Was this intended to have three rather than two storeys, with seated and standing Viṣṇus above and below the reclining image in its upper shrine? It may be possible that the seated image of Narasiṃha with his *śakti* in the lower shrine is a later replacement, but there is little in the temple's design to suggest a change of conception. The Vaiṣṇava poet-saints Periyālvār and Aṅṭāl make no mention of the three postures of Viṣṇu in their praise for the lord of Srivilliputtur, unlike their visualization of Perumāḷ in the three-storey Kūṭal Aḷakar temple at Madurai. In the earliest inscriptions no mention is made of Narasiṃha or multiple forms of Viṣṇu; the Lord's temple is named Vaṭaperuṅkōyil, "the great temple of the banyan leaf". This unusual temple at Srivilliputtur may be compared with another important Tamil Vaiṣṇava temple, the Varadarāja in Kanchipuram far to the north that reached its greatest extent with four enclosure walls and multiple large *gopurams* in the seventeenth century. Here, Varadarāja stands upon an artificial mound named Hastigiri in a shrine similarly capped by a

rectangular *sālā* roof, a design normally reserved for wide *garbhagr̥has* containing reclining images or numerous adjacent deities. Beneath Varadarāja is a small shrine within the hill containing Narasiṃha, as at Srivilliputtur, but here seated in *yogāsana* and without his consort. Āṅṅāl is also present, together with the local consort Malaiyāḷa Nācciyār, in east-facing shrines on the same level as Narasiṃha and below Viṣṇu as Varadarāja. The connection between Tenkalai Srivilliputtur and predominantly Vaṭakalai Kanchipuram may seem striking given the historic tension between the “southern” and “northern” sects of Śrīvaiṣṇavism. But the polarity between the two may have been over-stressed in theological terms, the conflicts are largely recent and only from the nineteenth century, and there was certainly a greater degree of ritual overlap in the past between the two worshipping communities. In Srivilliputtur, the great Vaṭakalai *ācārya* Vedānta Deśika is highly regarded; Kanchipuram was his hometown and Varadarāja the focus of his devotion.



Fig. 8: ‘Vijayanagara symbols’ on third *prākāra* wall. Periyānāyaki Amman temple, Devikapuram, early sixteenth century (photo by the author)

Patrons, Artists and Temple Networks

Another way in which we might consider the formation and maintenance of temple networks from an architectural perspective is by considering clusters defined by patronage or dynasty. It is common-place to describe Tamil temples as being built in a “Chola style”, as if the temples built by the dynasty could be distinguished in terms

of form or aspects of design from other contemporary temples built in the Tamil Drāviḍa tradition by other patrons. Given the paucity of evidence for the royal patronage of temples, apart from some well-known exceptions, and the negligible direct evidence that named individual patrons had any impact on temple design, any sense of connections between temples in terms of design may better be understood regionally rather than stemming from shared patronage. Some regional distinctions and preferences may be discerned: the very shallow niches with no space for sculpted images of deities in tenth-twelfth century temples in Pandyanadu, for example, in contrast to temples of a similar date built in Cholanadu or the central Kaveri delta region (Kaimal 1996; Orr 2007). But this is a symptom of artistic practice not the agency of patrons and we know precious little about medieval and early modern Tamil *sthapatis* (architect, master builder, stone-mason)—their names, birthplaces, relationship with patrons, rates of pay, working methods, education, mobility—until around 1900.

But sometimes artistic evidence—a particular design, motif or sculptural arrangement—may suggest connections between temples that can then be explored through other evidence, such as literature or inscriptions. For example, a striking and suggestively imperial motif disseminated across the Vijayanagara Empire was the “Vijayanagara symbol”: the boar in profile alongside an erect sword and often with an adjacent sun and moon.¹⁶ The striking proliferation of this motif on the monumental *gopuram* at Srikalahasti built by Krishnadeva (reigned 1509–1530)—there were fifty such symbols, each ca. thirty by forty centimetres—and on other monuments from the same period in the Tamil country suggested that this might have been a visual marker of Kṛṣṇadeva’s or perhaps the Tuḷuva dynasty’s patronage (ca. 1490–1570).¹⁷ High up on the outer walls of the Periyāyaki temple at Devikapuram, largely dating to Kṛṣṇadeva’s reign and later, a band of the Vijayanagara emblem spreads all around between a row of horses and elephants (figure 8); a similar proliferation of the symbol runs all around the outermost wall of the Vaṭāraṇyēśvara temple at Tiruvalangadu. A wider survey of this emblem’s deployment on temple architecture indicates that it cannot be so defined chronologically to the Tuḷuva dynasty alone for it appears on a few monuments before the 1490s at Vijayanagara and further south. But it remains a suggestive indicator of Vijayanagara periodisation—though not reliably of patronage—for a structure dating from the late fifteenth through the mid-sixteenth century but not later in the Tamil region.

Imperial patronage of temples, including the Venkaṭeśvara at Tirupati, and other religious institutions by Kṛṣṇadeva and his successors served to integrate conquered

16 The boar or Varāha *avatāra* as a royal symbol was used by a number of dynasties in the Deccan and South India from the seventh century, but not in combination with the sword, which was new in the Vijayanagara context. The sun and moon are included with inscriptions to indicate their perpetuity (Saletore 1982, 183–184).

17 The huge *gopuram* at Srikalahasti collapsed in May 2010 and a new one was built by 2017.

areas and link them culturally to the state at the height of the trans-regional Vijayanagara empire (Stoker 2016, 132–133). Kṛṣṇadeva travelled widely on pilgrimage across southern India, visiting many of the most important Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva temples including Tirupati and nearby Srikalahasti and further south to Tiruvannamalai, Chidambaram, Srirangam and Rameshvaram. At some sites he made donations of jewels for the deity or villages and land to support temple rituals for their honour; at others he sponsored the construction of new festival *maṇḍapas* for the display of deities and monumental *gopurams*, as at Srikalahasti and Tiruvannamalai. The widespread epigraphic evidence for his pious donations is joined by a few examples of donor portrait-images, such as the near life-size copper alloy images of Kṛṣṇadeva and his two wives set up at Tirupati and a small stone image identified as the king in a niche within the gateway of the north *gopuram* of the Natarāja temple at Chidambaram that was completed following his visit in 1516. The location of life-size portrait sculptures of the Madurai ruler Tirumalai Nāyaka (reigned 1623–1659) at several temples in the far south of Tamilnadu are similarly suggestive of the institutional links between these sacred sites that he may have sustained. Among the best-known Tamil portrait sculptures are the genealogical series of Tirumalai Nāyaka and his nine predecessors within the “New Hall” (*putumaṇṭapam*) built around 1630 adjacent to the Mīnākṣī-Sundareśvara temple in Madurai. Further images identified as Tirumalai Nāyaka and his brother Muttu Vīrappa are located in both Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava temples across southern Tamilnadu, including Alagarkoyil, Tirupparankundram and Tiruppuvanam around Madurai and to the north in the Raṅganātha temple at Srirangam and to the south at Srivilliputtur and Padmanabhapuram. Collectively they testify to the spread of the king’s patronage of temples across the territory ruled by the Madurai Nāyakas in the early seventeenth century (Branfoot 2012, 2018).

Temple Urbanism, Pilgrimage Networks and Festival Ritual

Temple networks may be ritually performed by pilgrims moving from one shrine to another, such as between the Navatirupatis mentioned above. Pilgrims to Rameshvaram on the *setuyātrā*, the pilgrimage to the Setu or “causeway” to Lanka, for example, may also visit other nearby sites and temples associated with events in the *Rāmāyaṇa*: these may include the Ādi Jagannātha Perumāḷ temple at Tiruppullani on the mainland where Rāma lay on the grass in penance (*darbhaśayāna*) to propitiate the ocean before building the bridge to Lanka; around the island upon which Rameshvaram is located, such as to Danushkodi where Rāma broke the bridge to Lanka with the tip of his bow after defeating Rāvaṇa; as well as a series of *tīrthas* (sacred water pools) within the temple itself, as they retrace Rāma’s route (Vanamamalai Pillai 1929). Such pilgrimage practices have an architectural and spatial dimension in the historical development of temples, *maṇḍapas*, water-filled tanks and other seemingly insignificant structures built at and between a connected group

of sacred sites. Networks of temples may also be performed in the festival movement of deities in and around cities, to related temples nearby and further afield, occasionally as much as twenty-thirty miles away. Contemporary ethnography of festival practice can reveal the occasions when deities are on the move and the routes taken, as well as the occasions when different temples' festivals collaborate, intersect or overlap. Some festivals can be historicised from the increasing volume of inscriptions naming and dating them. But few temples have such extensive, site-specific evidence for the antiquity or provision of festivals and processions. Inscriptions referring to festivals do not routinely mention processions, instead more commonly referring to food offerings for the deity and devotees, the bathing and adorning of the god's image, and other arrangements such as the provision of lamps, garlands and the singing of hymns (Orr 2004). Furthermore, inscriptions only occasionally mention the spaces and buildings of processions, or the objects carried and thus how processions may be understood spatially remains difficult to reconstruct for the past. The historical development of buildings specifically designed for festival use, such as festival pavilions (*utsavamāṇḍapas*) and temple tanks for the floating festival (*teppakulam*s), may also reveal the impact of ritual change both on an individual temple and its subsidiary structures, and its connections with other temples nearby (Branfoot 2020).

Further fruitful collaborative research might develop more detailed building histories of temples and their related festival structures within the urban fabric of cities, in order to establish what was built and when. This may provide additional evidence to reconstruct such festival routes and connections alongside the dynamic evidence of modern temple practice and the study of site-specific *māhātmyas* and *sthalapurāṇas* to our exploration of the construction of temple networks in early modern (fifteenth-eighteenth century) Tamil South India. In Srivilliputtur, for example, the Āṅṅāl and Vaṭapatraśāyī temples at the centre of the town are animated by the movement of devotees inward and around the various shrines, and by the processions of the deities themselves within each of the respective temple's walls and out and around town. The processions of major festivals, including those with the goddess Āṅṅāl and Reṅgamannar (Viṣṇu) on a variety of "vehicles" (*vāhanas*) and for the annual "chariot" (*tēr*) procession proceed around the wider outer streets. Less important festival processions, such as those for the male *ālvārs*' birthday processions move around the inner streets. The ritual network of these two adjacent temples spreads into the surrounding town and further afield to several other temples up to twenty miles away, whose deities periodically travel to Srivilliputtur for festival occasions (Venkatesan and Branfoot 2014, 85–96). A comparable examination of the ritual landscape of Kanchipuram in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has identified the respective routes taken by Varadarāja (Viṣṇu), Ekāmbareśvara (Śiva) and the goddess Kāmākṣī, mapping and spatializing the intersecting and competing networks of festival processions within the city (Hüsken 2017).

Conclusion

What then can the study of temple architecture—their locations within urban fabrics, their spatial layouts and details of design or ornament—offer to the interpretation of the making, sustenance and meanings of temple networks in early modern Tamil South India? The creation of links and connections between temples and their construction and visualisation in design and ornament was only a gradual process from the fourteenth–fifteenth century, even if the roots can be traced earlier, especially for the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition. It is only from the fifteenth–seventeenth centuries that the expansion of such temple networks began to be consolidated by artists and builders, as the artistic record suggests. This is evident in the increasing numbers of subsidiary shrines dedicated to distant site-specific deities, shared aspects of design or layout, or the depiction of particular sites in sculpted reliefs or painted murals. Religious specialists, sectarian institutions and leaders may have used their authority to create links among temples and such connections may be evident in contemporary literature or inscriptions; indeed, the major period for the composition of *sthalapurāṇas* in Tamil is between 1500 and 1900. But networks between temples are also performed by deities carried in procession and by pilgrims traversing the landscape between sacred places, and for these we need to look carefully for their material traces.

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