Chapter 5
Bathing in every Tirtha: Patterns of Worship, Pilgrimage and the Saint Poets.

i) Hypothesis

We have seen that the Śrīvaśiṇava tradition argues powerfully for an unbroken link from the Ālvār saints, who sang between the sixth and ninth centuries their devotional songs to Viṣṇu, and the sectarian religious system that was consolidated between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries and continues, albeit with important changes and developments, to present times. We have seen too that some modern scholars largely support this view,¹ while others see a perceptible break between the Ālvār bhakti tradition and the religious system that was formulated by the ācāryas.² The development of the pilgrimage itinerary as we now know it and the apotheosis of the saints can both be seen as aspects of the project of consolidation of the sectarian community, a concern of the later tradition. On the other hand, there is overwhelming evidence for both the pilgrimage tradition in the Tamil land and the worship of the saints in iconic form in the period before the ācāryas.

The Tamil land is dotted with several hundred historic shrines dedicated to numerous deities among which the temples to Śiva and Viṣṇu are the most prominent. A significant number of these shrines date back over a thousand years though most of the temples have acquired their modern forms in later centuries. It is, of course, a moot point that several shrines which were in worship in earlier ages have now fallen into ruin; inscriptions from such dilapidated structures help at times to reconstruct some aspects of their past.³ A surprisingly large number of temples however continue to remain in worship and are sites of popular pilgrimage. Most of these shrines claim a unique status—as the locus of the world, as the site of some significant event in the Sanskrit epics or the Purāṇas, or of some other specific act of the chief deity, Śiva or Viṣṇu, derived from local mythology. Many at least of these myths and their associations

² Friedhelm Hardy, Viraha Bhakti: The Early History of Kṛṣṇa Devotion in South India, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1983.
with specific shrines go back to very ancient times, as is seen from references to these stories and shrines in very early literature, in the hymns of the saints, and in inscriptions as well. Composition of sthalapurānas, which detail the origin myths, specific glories and chief legends associated with each shrine and the benefits that would accrue to the pilgrim visiting it, began in the medieval period. This activity, spurred as it was by the composition of similar sthalapurānas in numerous shrines, was clearly situated in a religious system that privileged pilgrimage, and was in turn aware of the importance of glorification of the specific site a particular sthalapurāṇa pertained to above all others. This henotheistic character extends beyond individual shrines to clusters of shrines as well. Taking the Śaiva example, one may point to the set of eight shrines which are venerated as the āttavirattānam (Sanskrit astavirasthānam, the eight sites of heroic deeds of the Lord) or the five bhūtalinga shrines which claim to be the natural representations of the deity—sites of the linga as one each of the five fundamental elements, earth, water, fire, wind and ether/ākāśa. One of the most important ways in which this henotheistic pilgrimage tradition has elevated certain shrines above others is through the association of a few hundred of the temples with the Ālvars and Nāyaṇmārs. While the Tevāram poems of the Śaiva mūvar, i.e., Appar, Sundarar and Jñānasambandar, are usually associated with individual shrines, and can almost be considered pilgrimage literature, a significant number of poems in the Nālāyira Divya Prabandham too praise the sacred sites of Viṣṇu. Nammāḷvār underlines this multiplicity of sacred centres,

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5 Pēriya Tirumōli 2.6.9, 7.3.2; Tirukkūṟunṭāṭakam 19.

6 Mahalingam, 1985, Vol. VI, p. 426, Sm 55. Ref.: ARE 1960-61, no. 292; EI xxxvi, no. 18 (B), 137. An 8th century CE inscription from the Ranganātha cave temple in Nāmakal, Salem district, gives a list of names of gods, demi-gods and asuras associated with the principal deity in the śayyā grha, obviously referring to the figures carved on the walls of the sanctum around the reclining Viṣṇu: Mārkaṇḍeya, Parṇa [Suparṇa, i.e., Garuḍa], Varuṇa, Brahma, Iṣa, Daśa, Śāsi, Surya, Tumbur, Nārada, Guru, Bhṛgu, Sānga, Kaumodaki [Cakra], Nandaka, Pāñcajanya, Śrī, Madhu & Kaitabha.


8 Personal visit.


10 Of the total of 797 patikams of Appar, Sundarar and Sambandar, all but 6% mention, in the refrain, the name of the temple in which they were sung. See MSH Thompson, “The Agastya Selection of the Tamil Saivite Hymns”, Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, Vol. 4.4, 1928, p. 761.
"The Lord of tulasi garland, a radiant form of knowledge by his wondrous glory appears in many famous spots and sports on earth, then swallows Śiva, Brahmā and all else in a trice".11

The conception of the sacred site embraces the larger settlement in which the shrine is situated.12 The Śaiva sacred spots, the pāṭal pērṇa talam, i.e., the ‘sites which have been sung of’, number 274 in Tamil Nadu. These are distributed thus: Coḷanaḍu: 190; Tōṅṭaināḍu: 32; Naṭunāḍu: 22; Pāṇṭiyanāḍu: 14; Kōṅkunāḍu: 7; Vaṭanāḍu: 8; Ilanāḍu (Sri Lanka): 2; Tuḻvanāḍu: 1; Malaināḍu: 1. Another 263 shrines are mentioned in passing in the hymns. The addition of these latter, the vāyppu talam, brings the number of sacred spots of Śiva in the Tamil land to 537. The Vaiṣṇava tradition claims 108 divya kṣetras. This number is, however, arrived at by an artificial calculation, no doubt because of the holiness attributed to the number itself. Several Āḻvārs have, in their hymns, praised one or more of the holy places of Viṇu either by dedicating hymns to the shrine or by mentioning them in passing.13 Nammāḻvār has sung of twenty seven holy places besides mentioning seven more;14 the hymns praising sacred centres are, however, randomly scattered through the Tiruvāyuvam. The only Āḻvār to have systematically sung of sacred spots is Tirumankai.15 In all, the Āḻvārs sang of 97 shrines of Viṇu in the Tamil region and its immediate environs (including thirteen in present Kerala and two in present Andhra Pradesh). These, along with the hymns dedicated to, or references in the hymns to remoter northern sites such as Badari, Ayodhya, Mathura and Dvaraka, sacred in the mythology of Viṇu, make another nine sites, while the holy number, 108, is arrived at by adding the two other-worldly residences of the Lord—TirupPāKaṭal, the milk-ocean where he reclines on his serpent bed, and Vaikuṇṭha. Many of the legends that are elaborated in the early medieval commentaries and late medieval sthalapurāṇas find reflection in earlier sources—largely in the hymns of the saints themselves, but also sometimes in epigraphs.

11 Tiruvāyuvam 3.10.9.
13 It might be said that the Śrīvaishnava tradition does not distinguish between the ‘pāṭal pērṇa talam’ and the ‘vāyppu talam’ as does Śaiva terminology.
14 The thirty four includes the two northern sites, Dvārakā (Tuvarai) and Mathurā (Maturai). It also includes his mention of Vaikuntam/ Tiruvaikuntam which has been elaborated as a pilgrim centre named Śrīvaikuṇṭham. See Table VI d.
15 The Pēriya Tirumāḍi is systematically arranged as a pilgrims’ progress from the northern sites to the southern, taking an upward curve in the clockwise direction after reaching the southernmost shrine. It is tempting to conjecture that this emphasis on pilgrimage is the reason the ācāryas attributed the Pēriya Tirumoṭal, one of the unsigned works in the NDP which reads almost like a list of pilgrim sites, to Tirumankai. See also, Tables VI c and VI e.
It is clear then that the ritual of pilgrimage was significant in the Vaiṣṇava saints’ conception of the religious life, but it does not appear, except in the case of Tirumankai, to have been the central focus. It would be more accurate to say that the bhakti of the Ālvārs was temple-oriented, in that their devotion was primarily directed not to a transcendent god but to a deity enshrined in a temple, who was nevertheless imaged as the transcendent Lord who had incarnated in several forms and performed numberless cosmic acts. The emphasis on pilgrimage which is likely to have begun towards the later part of the bhakti period was elaborated upon and consolidated in the subsequent age. Both scriptural and epigraphic references attest to the growing importance of pilgrimage to these venerated shrines. I shall argue that while the Śrīvaiṣṇava notion of pilgrimage, as it was shaped under the guidance of the acāryas, did mark important changes, it also displayed strong continuities from the older bhakti tradition. Since there is evidence that some shrines lost their importance or were abandoned in subsequent centuries, it will be interesting to examine the reasons for the same.

The apotheosis of the saints is clearly an important development of the second millennium of the common era. It is tempting to believe that this at least is a feature introduced by the leaders of the emerging community of the faithful. Related to the question of the apotheosis of the Ālvārs is the introduction of their hymns in the temple ritual. Inscriptional evidence suggests that both these may have a longer history than the commentarial and hagiographical traditions suggest. We have already seen how the hymns of the saints, both Ālvārs and Nāyānāmārs, were considered by their respective traditions as lost and rediscovered, and also examined the epigraphic evidence that clearly points to the popularity of the hymns from at least the early tenth century. It is interesting that while the claims of the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition in this specific instance must be refuted, the larger claim of continuity is actually bolstered. It will be interesting to also look at some of the ways in which the hagiographies have contributed to the development of the pilgrimage movement, the cult of saints and the consolidation of the forms of worship by their reconstruction of the very lives of the saints.

The notion of continuity is powerfully articulated in the hagiographies through the presentation of the preceptorial lineage. The original teacher in Śrīvaiṣṇava understanding was Viṣṇu, who taught the lore to Śrī, who in turn instructed Viśvaksena, the divine commander, and who in his turn transmitted it to Nammālvār. The accent on flawless transmission of scriptural knowledge from the Supreme Lord to the contemporary leaders of the Śrīvaiṣṇava religious community may account for the centrality of the story of Nāṭhamuni being

16 See Chapter 1, section on Sources.
miraculously granted apprehension of the Tiruvāyuvēli and, indeed, the entire corpus of the Alvārs, upon meditative repetition of Madhurakavi’s Kaṇñinunciruttāmpu. However, it is clear from the hagiographical accounts that Rāmānuja was not a direct disciple of Yāmuna, grandson of Nāthamuni. This break is smoothed over in the traditional accounts by the stories of Rāmānuja’s discipleship under five teachers, to each of whom Yāmuna had entrusted a part of his knowledge. The earlier one, i.e., between Nāthamuni and Nāmāḷvār, and the mythology around it, may indicate more than just a ‘break’ in tradition. Rather, it suggests the appropriation of a deeply rooted regional tradition, that of bhakti of the Alvārs, by a brahmanical Vaiṣṇava one and the consequent consolidation of an integrated Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition. This, indeed, is my central thesis.

I have so far argued that the hagiographies were carefully constructed in the period between the twelfth and fourteenth–early fifteenth centuries in order to serve a variety of purposes such as the consolidation of a broad-based community and the transmission of important theological, social and sectarian concerns of the leaders. However, the examination of the hagiographical accounts has made it abundantly clear that they were not simply works of imaginative fiction, as the acāryas subjected the hymns of the Alvārs to close analysis before constructing the ‘life-stories’ of the saints. All the same, there is little hymnal corroboration from the corpus of the NDP for numerous episodes in the lives of the saints that are elaborated in the hagiographies. It would appear, then, that these episodes are fictional, and woven into the stories of the saints for the purposes discussed above. However, the evidence does not always permit us this confidence. I have long wondered as to why the stories of the three Mutalāḷvārs are so brief, almost skeletal in fact, while that of Tirumalicai is as complex as it is, considering that these are all ‘ahistorical’ persons. Why did the acāryas refrain from creating elaborate bildungsromans for the three earliest Alvārs as they have for Tirumalicai—rich with motifs that might help further their theological or social agenda? While I have no clear answers to these questions, I would like to examine the constraints within which the acāryas recreated these stories. I use the word ‘re-create’ rather than simply ‘create’ since the inscriptive evidence suggests that popular legends regarding the saint-poets might have circulated in oral form for some centuries before the hagiographies were composed.

17 See Chapter 1, section on Sources.
18 See Chapter 4, Ḫaiyāḷvār Vaibhavam.
19 See Chapter 3, Tirumalicai Alvār Vaibhavam.
Evidence from the Hagiographies

ii) Evidence from the Hagiographies

a) Mutalalvārkal Vaibhavam

The Agpp tells us that Brahmā performed an aśvamedha yajña in which Viṣṇu appeared. Since Brahmā is ‘ka’, the spot of his sacrifice came to be known as Kāncī. The Mgpp, on the other hand, informs us that of the seven places that grant mokṣa, Kāncī is the best. In this holy Kāncī, during the dvāpara yuga, in the month of Aippaci, under the Tiruṇaṇa asterism was born the saint Pōykkai, the first of the Mutalāḷvārs in the womb of a lotus in a tank. He was an amśa of Pāncajanya, the conch of Viṣṇu. Pūtattālvar, an amśa of Kaumudiki, the Lord’s mace, took avatāra next day, in a mādhavi flower grove (Agpp)/ nilotpala (Mgpp) in Māmmalapuram by the sea in the Aippaci month under the asterism of Aviṭṭam. An amśa of Nandakam, Viṣṇu’s sword, was born on the third day in the heart of a red allī flower in the tank of the temple of Ādikeśava Pērumāl in Mayūrapuri, in Caṭaya nakṣatra. Being filled with the madness of Viṣṇu bhakti, he became ‘pey’. The three ayonija saints, i.e., of immaculate births, without rajas or tamas guṇas and filled with deep devotion, would not stay more than one night in any place. They wandered (each separately) from one shrine of the Lord to another. Desiring to bring His three great devotees together, the Lord caused a mahā andhakāra (great darkness) and thunderstorm one day in Tirukkoṭilūr/ Tirukkoṭalūr, forcing the three to take shelter in a narrow vestibule. The three Āḻvārs then felt the presence of a fourth among them, the Lord being inseparable from his devotees just as Hari is present wherever there are tulasi gardens and light where there is Bhāskara. The Lord ‘pressed them as sugarcane in a cane press’ to make rasa stotra flow out in the form of antādīs.

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20 Sanskrit Śrāvaṇa.
21 Pōykkai means tank; the name derives from his birth in one. The Sanskrit DSC calls him Kāśārayogi.
22 (Sanskrit) Bhūtām+ (Tamil) Āḻvār= Pūtatt-Āḻvār. The DSC calls him Śrī Bhūta Sūri.
23 Sanskrit Dhanisṭha.
24 Mayilai or Mylapore in modern Madras.
25 Sanskrit Śaṭabhiṣā.
26 Tamil form of Sanskrit preta (ghost). The Alvar’s name, therefore, is Peyāḻvār. The DSC calls him Mahadāvāvaya Sūri.
27 See discussion of their caste in Chapter 3, footnote no (right under the chart of the Alvars’ castes).
28 This detail comes from the Agpp, Mutalāḷvārkal Vaibhavam.
29 Itaikkalil reḷi in Tamil, deḥali in the Sanskrit text.
30 Agpp, Mutalāḷvārkal Vaibhavam.
31 DSC, sargah 2, verses 18-19. Interestingly, Vedānta Deśīka uses the same image in his poem, Dehalīśāstutī.
In oral tellings, the story has greater drama. The first Ālvār to reach the passage is said to have lain down there. When the second Ālvār arrived, they sat down together but the arrival soon thereafter of the third seeking refuge from the storm forced them to stand up huddled against each other. As they stood thus, they felt further crowded by the presence of a fourth, unseen one, whom they perceived with their inner eyes and celebrated in their songs.

b) Pēriyālvār Vaibhavam

Forty six years after the beginning of the Kali yuga, in the month of Āni under the Svāti asterism, on a śukla ekādaśi Sunday, was born, in a family of pure munukutuṇi Vedic brāhmaṇas of the Veyar clan, in Śrīvilliputtūr, an amśa of Guruṇa. After learning the Vedas and Vedāṅgas of the Yajurveda Śākhā, Viṣṇucittar began to perform the kainkarya (service) of stringing flower garlands for the Lord. He was especially devoted to the Lord in his form as the baby Kṛṣṇa.

About this time, Vallabhadeva the ruler of Madurai, heard a religious man recite the following sloka: “One must strive for eight months for a few months of rain, during the day for the night, for one’s old age during youth and for the next life in this one”. He asked his priest, Cēlva Nampi, for advice and was told to summon a vidvat goshti (an assembly of scholars). The king did so after having a bag filled with gold hung up as vidya sulka (fee for learning) in the sabhā mandapa of the palace. Many Vaiṣṇavas feared that the debate might reflect negatively on the glory of the Lord. Vaṭāpērunkoyil-udaiyān appeared in Viṣṇucittar’s dream and asked him to establish the identity of the supreme Lord in the royal court and collect the reward. He appeared in Cēlva Nampi’s dream too, and the latter therefore arranged for Pēriyālvār to be received with appropriate honour. This, however, angered the other vidvāns gathered and they prepared for a hair-splitting examination of Pēriyālvār’s words. But as he expounded the Puruṣasūkta along with the Smṛtis and the Purāṇas, the prize bag tore itself and fell into his lap. Everyone present acknowledged the truth of his exposition and the Paṇṭiya king bestowed

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32 A brahmaṇa clan where the men wear their hair in a top knot just above the forehead.
33 The Lord of the Great Banyan temple—so called because the Lord takes the form of Vaṭāpatraśāyi, baby sleeping on a banyan leaf, there. Pēriyālvār / Viṣṇucittar was supposed to have been a priest of this temple. Interestingly, however, the actual representation of the deity in this temple is the familiar one of Viṣṇu reclining on Ananta—personal visit. Dennis Hudson, “A New Year’s Poem for Kṛṣṇa: The Tiruppallāntu by Villiputtūr Viṣṇucittan (‘Pēriyālvār’),” Journal of Vaisnava Studies, Vol. 7, no. 2, 1999, p. 100, explains this feature thus: “Because each story of Vasudeva easily refers to all others, the reclining stucco icon in new Town [i.e., Villiputtūr] could be viewed as Madhusūdana; or as Krishna growing up disguised as a cowherd; or as Mārkaṇḍeya’s baby lying on the banyan branch in primordial Darkness”.

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upon him the title of Paṭṭar Pirān,\textsuperscript{34} had him seated on a caparisoned elephant and taken in procession to the accompaniment of musical instruments. Just as parents come to witness and rejoice in the success of their children, Ėmpērumān (the Lord) and His consort came riding on Garuḍa, like a cloud-laden golden mountain, to bless him for having established His supremacy in the world of men. Even as the Ālvār worshipped the Lord, he began to worry—like a father would about a son—that He should have left His heavenly abode and come down to the world in this Kaliyuga. Using the elephant’s bell as cymbals for rhythm, he sang \textit{mangalaśāsana} to Nārāyaṇa.\textsuperscript{35}

Eventually, he returned to Villiputtūr and devoted himself to the Lord’s service, and growing increasingly attached to His \textit{Krṣṇāvatāra}, sang his experiences of the Lord’s \textit{bāla-līlā} in the \textit{Pēriyālvār Tirumōli}.

c) An incident from Tirumankai Ālvār \textit{Vaibhavam} in the \textit{Agpp}

The Lord Himself instructed the Ālvār’s companions\textsuperscript{36} to build a temple, complete with \textit{gopuram}, \textit{prākāram} and \textit{maṇḍapam}\textsuperscript{37} in TirukKuraiyalūr,\textsuperscript{38} the town where the Ālvār was born, and to establish his image therein. The followers did so, and established a \textit{vigraha} of Kumudavalli Nācciyār as well. Regular festivals were then performed, and the couple in their \textit{arcā rūpa} blessed all devotees.

d) An incident from Tirumankai Ālvār \textit{Vaibhavam} in the \textit{DSC}

Hearing the \textit{stotras} of Parakāla, the Lord grew eager to hear the songs of Śaṭhakopa.\textsuperscript{39} Accordingly, he sent summons to the \textit{divyasūri} (the Ālvār) through his \textit{parijanas} with all the appropriate honours such as sandal paste and garlands. Śrī Śaṭhakopa immediately set out and in the thousand pillared hall in Srirangam, the Lord Ranganātha heard the \textit{Veda pārāyaṇa}

\textsuperscript{34} Prince among/ Lord of Bhaṭṭas (learned men). Pēriyālvār frequently signs himself thus.
\textsuperscript{35} This is the famous \textit{Pallāṇṭu} hymn with which the \textit{Nālāyira Divya Prabandham} opens wherein Pēriyālvār blesses the Lord, His consort and His appurtenances with everlasting glory. It seems, too, to be the model for numerous \textit{mangalāśāsanas}, composed in both Sanskrit and Tamil, over the following centuries and which have become an integral part of Śrīvaiṣṇava worship in both domestic shrine and temple.
\textsuperscript{36} A loose translation since the meaning of the Tamil word is not entirely clear.
\textsuperscript{37} Familiar architectural features of Cola temples.
\textsuperscript{38} Since the same account began with saying that the Ālvār was born in TiruvĀli-TiruNagari, this reference to TirukKuraiyalūr as his birthplace is strange unless these are alternate names for the same place.
\textsuperscript{39} Since this is a translation from the Sanskrit \textit{DSC}, I am using the Sanskrit spelling for Čaṭakopan.
along with the *Drāvida Veda* over twenty days in the month of Śravaṇa.\(^{40}\) Thus, every year, all the *divyasūris* leave their hometowns and their disciples to go and participate in such festivals.

e) Variant telling of the above from the Tirumankai Āḻvār *Vaibhavam* in the *Mgpp*

[It is curious that this tale of Tirumankai Āḻvār which forms the basis for the popular understanding of the origin of a very important Śrīvaṁśa festival should be omitted by the *Agpp*\(^{41}\), especially as it is the Tēnkalai sect which is intimately connected with the worship and rituals at the Srirangam temple.] Once during the Kārttikai festival, during the *tirumaṅjanam* (sacred bath of the divine couple), Tirumankai asked the Lord to grant the status of the *Veda* to Nammāḻvār’s *Tiruvāyōmōḷi*. The recitation of the *Tiruvāyōmōḷi* was established alongside *Veda pāṛāyaṇam*. As Pērumāḷ consented to the arrangements, the *Tiruvāyōmōḷi* was sung on the ten days following the *śukla ekādaśi* (eleventh day of the bright half of the moon) of the month of Mārkali.\(^{42}\) The *vigraha* (image) of Nammāḻvār was duly brought from TiruNagari to Srirangam, and established opposite that of Alakiya Maṉavāḷan, the processional idol of Srirangam, in a *maṇḍapa* called the *paramapada vācal* (gateway to heaven) that Tirumankai Āḻvār had built for the purpose. The festival, called *adhyayanotsava*, was made an annual feature.

### iii) Historiography

George Hart believes that the basic orientation of Tamil religion since earliest times has been towards deities that inhere in a place, or are immanent rather than transcendent.\(^{43}\) Friedhelm Hardy contends that in Tamil religious understanding, the divine is not only envisaged within the confines of concrete reality but is also dynamic and mobile.\(^{44}\) He accordingly assumes that the *arcā vigraha* (the idol in the temple) which is not mobile is a northern concept.\(^{45}\) The Āḻvārs, Hardy postulates, resolved this tension by conceptualising a mystically active but

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\(^{40}\) In the present time, the *adhyayanotsava* festival in which the hymns of the Āḻvārs are sung (and performed where resources and availability of skilled *araiyars* [traditional performers] allow) is conducted in the month of Mārkali, i.e., December-January.

\(^{41}\) The text which establishes this connection is the *Koil Oluku*, the remarkably detailed chronicle of the Srirangam temple from circa fifteenth century. See, VN Hari Rao (ed. and trans.) *Koil Olugu: The Chronicle of the Srirangam Temple with Historical Notes*, Rochouse and Sons, Madras, 1961, p. 9-11.

\(^{42}\) December- January.


\(^{44}\) Hardy, *Viraha Bhakti*, op cit., p. 468.

\(^{45}\) Hardy, ibid, p. 468.
physically immobile god.\textsuperscript{46} As Māyon was envisaged as active in the Tamil land, the sthalapuraṇās were born.\textsuperscript{47} From his analysis of the Tamil Purānas, David Shulman draws the conclusion that the myths are imbued with the belief that the sacred presence is revealed in individual localized manifestations.\textsuperscript{48} Indira Peterson points out that "the shrine is a centre in more senses than one: it is situated at the centre of the sacred landscape in a palpable manner; it is, at the same time, identified with the centre or navel of the universe, the spot through which passes the axis mundi linking heaven, earth, and the nether regions."\textsuperscript{49} The Census of India, 1911, rather perceptively points out, "It seems not unlikely that the virtue of a pilgrimage arises mainly from the sacred character attaching to the place itself and not so much from the desire to honour the deity whose shrine it is".\textsuperscript{50} Though most scholars would agree with this evaluation of the centrality of the geographical site per se, the importance of the deity enshrined therein cannot be lost sight of in the Tamil context with its well-developed tradition of devotion to a personal god.

Burton Stein argues that brahmanical centres became, in the medieval period, religious centres with respect to a group of villages and other institutions as a result of the 'Hindu revival' which made the brahmanical temple the most significant institution for bhakti worship. The rise of temples was the result of religious developments of the medieval period.\textsuperscript{51} Temples became economic as well as religious centres. Temple worship and pilgrimage were important aspects of the new sect religions. Popular temple-centred religious activity encouraged the growth of pilgrimage centres which also became market centres of importance.\textsuperscript{52} Stein places the beginning of the 'great age of religious pilgrimage in the Tamil country' in the twelfth century.\textsuperscript{53} DN Jha sees the unprecedented growth of temples and religious establishments, tirthas and the development of temple-centred Tamil bhakti as serving not only as major props

\begin{footnotes}
\item[46] Hardy, ibid, p. 469.
\item[47] Hardy, ibid, p. 469.
\item[48] Shulman, Tamil Temple Myths, op cit., p. 88.
\item[49] Peterson, Poems to Śiva, op cit., p. 143.
\item[51] Burton Stein, "The State, the Temple and Agricultural Development: A Study in Medieval South India", in Burton Stein, All the Kings' Mana: Papers on Medieval South Indian History, New Era Publications, Madras, 1984, p. 175.
\item[52] Stein, ibid, pp. 201-202.
\end{footnotes}
of brahmanism but also as agencies of legitimating feudal monarchy. He believes that the bhakti movement may have provided some kind of moral order in early medieval south India as feudal class relationships and its corresponding ideology are suggested by analysis of its literature. Champakalakshmi argues that bhakti stressed idol-worship and the temple or house of god as the centre of all socio-religious activities. Puranic religion and Agamic forms of worship were popularised in the Tamil land through the ideology of bhakti.

iv) Analysis

The role of bhakti in making the temple an institution of central importance in the socio-economic structure of Tamil Nadu has been well documented and analysed. It also seems clear that temple building activity was spurred in the later Pallava and the Co. periods by the ideology of bhakti: shrines sung of by the Ālvārs and Nāyaṇmārs expanded into great temples with elaborate ritual structures as a result of royal and community patronage. The fact that Rājarāja I commissioned the composition of a hymnal work to glorify the great temple at Tanjavur attests to the importance of the saints’ hymns in sanctifying a particular shrine. The Anbil plates of Parāntaka I praise Āditya I for erecting in stone, a number of lofty and impregnable temples to Śiva on the banks of the Kaveri, along its whole course from the mountains to the sea. It is likely that many of these were temples sung about by the

55 Jha, ibid, p. 94.
56 Champakalakshmi, “Religion and Social Change in Tamil Nadu AD 600-1300”, in NN Bhattacharyya (ed), Medieval Bhakti Movements in India, Sri Caitanya Quincentenary Commemoration Volume, Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi, 1989, pp. 164-165.
57 R Champakalakshmi, ibid, pp. 164-165.
59 Karuviar Tevar’s Tiruvicaiippā is dedicated to the Lord Rājarājeśvara.
60 Epigraphica Indica, Vol. XV, p. 50.
While many temples were rebuilt in stone, there were others which were built for the first time directly in stone. Some poems in the Tevāram, in fact, refer to certain temples as karrali (structures of stone). Mahendravarman I’s boast, recorded in the early seventh century, of having constructed a temple without brick, timber, metal or mortar is well-known. The presence of a large number of stone temples in the pre-Colā period is, all the same, unlikely, for stone temples require a great amount of resources which could be harnessed in appreciable measures only with the establishment of an imperial structure like that of the Colas. The majority of the temples sung about by the saint-poets must, therefore, have been brick shrines, or indeed, made of even more perishable materials. Indeed, the very fact that some temples are specifically described as karrali points to the rest not being so.

Analysis of the sthalapurāṇa literature and study of the architectural, sculptural and social aspects of the temples in question may give us an idea of the antiquity of the shrines, of the diverse means employed for political legitimation of the consolidation of social relationships and hierarchies, or of messages embedded in the site myths. However, one aspect which is overlooked even in dense temple studies is the physical distance between the different sacred places. It is not only modern means of transport that reduce the travelling distance but also the density of settlements along the way and the network of roads which are likely to have been very different five or ten centuries earlier. Most historians are, naturally, likely to factor in


62 Mahalingam, 1985, Vol. II, p 372. SA 1600. Ref.: ARE 1900, no. 123; El vii, no. 20 (K) is an 11th century record of the dilapidated brick structure of the central shrine of the Trivikrama Pērumāl temple in TirukKoyilūr having been rebuilt in granite. Mahalingam, 1985, Vol. VII, p 99. Tj 430. Ref.: ARE 1931-32, no. 134 is a record from the Prāneśvara temple in Tiruppēnturai, Kumbhakonam tāluk, dated to the reign of Cola Kulottunga III (accession CE 1178). It purports to be a copy of an inscription engraved on stone when the original brick temple of Tiruppēnturai-ūṭaiyar was converted into a stone temple in the reign of KariKāla Cola, where the inscriptions previously engraved on door jambs and caves of stone were copied on the temple walls.


64 Vidya Dehejia, The Namakkal Caves, State Department of Archaeology, Govt of Tamil Nadu, 1977.

65 C Minakshi, The Historical Sculptures of the Vaikuntha Perumal Temple, Kanchipuram, Memoirs of the ASI, no. 63. Manager of Publications, Govt. of India Press, Delhi, 1941.


67 Shulman, Tamil Temple Myths, op cit.
these important differences and assume that a journey which takes about six hours today might have been a week’s expedition in older times. The converse of this is what interests me, however. Most modern studies fail to remark on the extreme nearness of some of the sacred shrines celebrated in the hymns. Let me illustrate this with some prominent examples. There are eleven divya deśas in TiruNāṅkūr/ Tiruvāḷi— of which six are not more than a few hundred metres from one another while the other five, and two more are comparatively further, between four and eight kilometres distant and all are celebrated in the hymns of Tirumankai Alvār. Modern Kāncīpuram houses thirteen Śrīvaiṣṇava divya deśas, among which some are scarcely a five minutes’ walk from one another while others are scattered at reasonably greater distances. In fact, as pilgrims’ guides conscientiously inform pilgrims, the three divya deśas of Nīrakam, Kārakam and Kārvāṇam are supposed to be incorporated in a single temple, that of Īrakam in Kāncī where the central shrine houses a majestic stucco image of Ulakālanta Pērumāl (the Lord who measured the earth, as Vāmana-Trivikrama). Temple functionaries helpfully point out sculptured niches in the prākāra walls as the other divya deśas to anxious ‘108-oriented’ pilgrims. Similarly, several of the nine divya deśas (now designated the nava-Tiruppati) sung by Nammālvār in the Tirunēlveli region around his hometown, TirukKurukūr/ Īlvār Tirunagari, are within two to three kilometres of each other; indeed, two of them are within a minute’s walk of one another.

I have some very tentative explanations for this peculiar, though by no means rare phenomenon. An interesting pattern emerges when one plots the sacred shrines on a map of

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68 Peterson, “Singing of a Place”, op cit., pp. 69- 90, notes that during a field trip to the Śaiva pilgrim shrines, she found that most of the shrines in the Tanjore region were within 10 to 15 kms of one another.
69 Adding the divya deśas of Kāli-cīrāma-viṇṇagaram (modern Cīrkāli) and TiruĀḷi to the Nāṅkūr eleven would actually give us thirteen temples in close proximity to each other. I have followed the conventional pilgrims’ manuals in enumerating eleven Nāṅkūr divya deśas.
70 Personal visit. Most pilgrims’ guides-cum-sthalapurāṇas do specify that the eleven Nāṅkūr divya deśas are within a few kilometres of each other. See, for example, Eṭṭ̣ṭ̣rajan, 108 Vaiṭṭ̣na Divya Deśa Stala Varāḷāru, Vaiṭṭ̣nava Siddhānta Nūrpatippuk Kāḷakam. Kāraikkūṭi (Tamil), 2003, pp. 188- 236.
71 Tirumankai claims in several of his signature verses to belong to Āli.
72 Personal visit.
73 Personal visit.
74 Nearly 160 of the 274 Śaiva pātal pērṇa talam are located along the lower Kaveri basin, roughly between the Tanjavur district and the mouth of the river. This implies a similar density of sacred centres. (George Spencer, “The Sacred Geography of the Tamil Shaivite Hymns”, Numen Vol. 17, Fasc. 3, 1970, p. 236, says that the Tanjavur district alone houses 160 shrines but the map included in the article on p. 237 is inaccurate. Also, Peterson, “Singing of a Place”, op cit., pp. 69- 90, mentions 160 shrines along the Kaveri.)
the Tamil region.\(^{75}\) Both the Āḻvārs and the Nāyaṉmārs have sung about a large number of sacred places in certain areas such as Kāñcipuram and its immediate environs, the Kaveri delta, the Kumbhakoṇam–Tanjavur–Tiruccirāpalḷi region and the Madurai–Tirunelveli region. There are almost no Vaiśṇava shrines which have been ‘sung about’ in the modern districts of Vellore, Dharmapuri, Salem, Erode, Coimbatore, Dindigul and Teni.\(^{76}\) Other than this clustering of shrines along the eastern coastal belt—“never broader than about sixty miles”, in Hardy’s words\(^{77}\)—there is a further smattering in Malaināḍu or modern Kerala.

It is fairly evident that some of the above-mentioned temples are so close to each other that it is not the expansion of modern towns that has resulted in several of them now falling within the limits of the same municipality/town but that, even six or seven centuries earlier, each of these shrines could scarcely have been the locus of a separate settlement. It is also equally apparent that the maximum concentration of temples is in and around the most fertile, rice-cultivating regions of the Tamil country. Temples are said to have been central in the organisation and expansion of agriculture,\(^{78}\) an argument that needs to be nuanced considering the extreme proximity of a number of these shrines and their concentration in regions which are among the earliest agrarian centres of the Tamil land.

Let us recall here the legend of Tirumankai Āḻvār’s poetical contest with the Nāyaṉar Sambandar. Apparently, the Āḻvār’s ‘speech could not flower’ in a town where there was no vigraha of Viṣṇu. It was only after he had worshipped the Viṣṇu idol that a bhāgavaṭa woman/arcaka had in her/his keeping\(^{79}\) that he could compose his poetical tour de force, the Tiruvēḻukūṟirukkai.\(^{80}\) A common Tamil proverb says that one must not live in a town without a temple.\(^{81}\) There is of course, no reason to assume either that the legend is based on historical fact, or that the proverb is a millennium old. What they may however point to is a deeply held Tamil notion that places derive their auspiciousness from the presence of the divine. It follows, then, that the Āḻvārs expressed their belief in the presence of their chosen deity in and

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\(^{75}\) See Hardy, *Viraha Bhakti*, op cit., pp. 256-261, including maps.

\(^{76}\) I suspect that this holds largely true for Śaiva pāṭal pēṭra talam too. Spencer, “The Sacred Geography”, op cit., pp. 236-238, also points to the concentration of temples in certain districts.

\(^{77}\) Hardy, ibid, p. 258. However, the band is approximately 150 kms wide around Madurai and tapers southwards.


\(^{79}\) Agpp/ DSC versions. See Chapter 3.

\(^{80}\) It is an unsigned composition. See Chapter I, discussion on Sources.

\(^{81}\) “Koyil ʻillā ūril kuṭiyirukkāte”.

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around their own hometowns in numerous hymns and in diverse ways, leading to the eventual elaboration of each of these expressions into distinct temples. It is likely, too, that the Āḻvār sang of the Lord in the places they actually visited, or perhaps stayed at, en route to the older and more established shrines such as Venkaṭām and Srīrangam. A hymn of Nammāḷvār’s in the voice of a lovelorn maiden’s mother is telling. “For her, all temples that house idols of any deva are temples of the ocean-hued one”. 82 No doubt this expresses the saint’s own feelings since it is the very same passion he describes in the ‘girl’ that moves him. Autochthonous deities might in this fashion have been absorbed in the Vaiṣṇava or Śaiva pantheon by the hymnists who saw the greatness of their chosen god in every village shrine; considering the intense emotionality of bhakti in the case of most saints and, additionally, the strong missionary zeal of some such as Tirumankai and Sambandar, this would certainly have served to propagate and spread Puranic religion. While the saint-poets may have worshipped at local shrines in the hamlets where they halted, singing impassioned hymns in praise of the Lord whose inherent magnificence they perceived even in humble structures, it is even possible that there may have been no actual temple or shrine in at least some of the places when the Āḻvārs actually sang of them; in that sense, they can be said to have literally sung these shrines into existence.83

A couple of examples will illuminate this point further. In a poem expressing the despair of separation, Nammāḷvār, in the voice of a lovelorn girl, accuses Māyakkūṭan of southern Kuḷantai of having left her, mounted on his bird.84 Māyakkūṭan translates into the one who dances the dance of māyā. We saw that the acaryic tradition took care to avoid portraying the Lord as māyi!1 in order to defend against Advaitin attacks, their conception of a saguṇa Lord as free from any blemish.85 Nammāḷvār’s addressing the Lord as Māyakkūṭan is, therefore, accommodated not as an attribute of the Lord but as a proper noun, the name of the utsava mūrti in the temple at Kuḷantai.86 The references in the verse are further elaborated in the temple legend and architecture such that Garuḍa is represented as only a processional image,87 probably indicating his potential of imminent departure. What is equally interesting is that in

82 Tiruvāyumōḷi 4.4.8.
84 Tiruvāyumōḷi, 8.2.4. This is not a poem dedicated to a shrine. Kuḷantai finds only passing mention.
85 See Chapter 2.
86 See Chapter 2, page 83, footnote no. 152.
the said hymn, the Lord is described as being in the west as well as in southern Kuḷantai. The image of the Lord accordingly faces the west in this temple, which the sthalapurāṇa claims as a rarity.

What we have, therefore, is the elaboration of a temple complex to fit with the hymnal tradition. It is certainly possible that in this case, there already was a temple, or at least a small, local Viṣṇu shrine at Kuḷantai. Noting the hymns devoted to different shrines scattered throughout the Tiruvāymoli, Kaylor and Venkatachari point out, “All of [them] have become now, if they were not already in Nammalvar’s time, places of religious pilgrimage”. Tirumankai’s hymns praising eleven separate shrines in TiruVālī–TiruNāṅkūr give the impression that they were all majestic structural temples. Was there actually so dense a cluster of temples in this area as early as the 8th-9th centuries? Or, was the Ālvār in his zeal, projecting the immense popularity of Viṣṇu worship in his hometown, describing wayside shrines as great mansions with the same poetic license that made him sing of the Kaveri washing down gemstones and pearls from the hills and parrots reciting the Vedas in the streets of TiruNāṅkūr? Was this abundance of temples in TiruNāṅkūr in the Pēriya Tirumoli, which perhaps had not acquired impressive structures even till the period of the composition of the hagiographies, considering the bias of patronage towards the Śaiva faith in Cola times, that was responsible for the localizing of the legend of Tirumankai being unable to compose poetry in the absence of a Viṣṇu vīgraḥa?

88 Tiruvāymoli 8.2.4.
90 David Kaylor and KKA Venkatachari, God Far, God Near: An Interpretation of the Thought of Nammalvar, Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute Series, no. 5 (Supplement), Bombay, 1981, p. 34.
91 Pēriya Tirumoli 3.5 to 4.8 (140 stanzas).
92 Pēriya Tirumoli 5.1.9, 5.4.9, 5.7.10.
93 Pēriya Tirumoli 3.8.8
94 The eleven temples of TiruNāṅkūr and the two others in nearby Cīrkāli and Tiruvālī (see footnote no. 69 above) are rather modest structures even today, and to the untrained eye at least, seem comparatively late. To one familiar with the Vaikuṇṭha Pērumāḷ koyil in Kāṅcipuram as Tirumankai certainly was and, in all likelihood, the ‘shore temple’ in Mahabalipuram as well, the Nāṅkūr temples, even if they had existed in his day—which is highly improbable—could have scarcely seemed impressive.
95 The site mentioned in the hagiographies is Kāḷī-cīrāma-viṁṇagaram, i.e., modern Cīrkāli, the birthplace of Sambandar. This is within the rough circumference of TiruĀḷi/ Nāṅkūr.
The famous ‘shore temple’ at Mahabalipuram that enshrines an image of Viṣṇu in the šayana pose seems to have been created in the reign of Narasimhavarman II alias Rājasimha (CE 680-720).  

Less than a kilometre from the shore is the Talaśayana Pērumāl temple, considered a divya deśa. Since the latter is a comparatively modern structure with carving and workmanship dateable to the Vijayanagara period, it could not have been the temple of which Tirumankai Āḻvār sang. 

In fact, Tirumankai’s description, “Along with the Pingala Lord Śiva who frequents the cremation ground, resides our Lord with the discus in Maḻai Katalmallai Talaśayanam where celestials in hordes offer worship”, agrees entirely with the layout of the shore temple which houses shrines of both Śiva and Viṣṇu separated by a narrow porch.

The description of the Lord as Kaṭalmallai Talaśayana (the one who is sleeps on sthala, land, in Mallai-on-the-sea), is particularly interesting, especially as the location of the temple in Mallai is repeated in the phraseology. Was it because of the extreme nearness of the sea here, so that the presence of the temple at the very edge of land invited remark? The entire complex of the ‘shore temple’ was apparently buried under a thick deposit of sand till the middle of the last century. It is impossible to determine with accuracy when the elements had effaced the Pallava temple from view, but if this had happened within a few centuries of its construction, it is reasonable to suppose that in the Vijayanagara period, when the pilgrimage network was being consolidated, a new temple was built near the shore and given divya deśa status. Indeed, this process can be seen to have continued into fairly recent times. The Ranganātha temple in Vṛndāvana, which too is counted as one of the 108 divya deśas, is known to have been constructed some time in the middle of the nineteenth century.

What becomes clear is that the developing Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition elaborated the hymns of the Āḻvārs not merely in textual commentaries but also in physical space as temples. Let us look at a stanza by Tirumankai. “Oh Lord who are in water, atop lofty mountain peaks, in the soft radiance of the moon! Oh you who are in prosperous Kacciyūr! In the bathing ghāt of Vēhā!

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96 C Sivaramamurti, Mahabalipuram, published by the Director General Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, 1978, pp. 29-32.
97 Sivaramamurti, ibid, p. 29.
98 Pēriya Tirumōli 2.5.1-10 and 2.6.1-10.
99 Pēriya Tirumōli 2.6.9.
100 Sivaramamurti, Mahabalipuram, op cit. pp. 29-32.
101 The old name of the town is Mamallapuram or Mallai/ Māmallai. Kaṭal means ocean.
102 Sivaramamurti, Mahabalipuram, op cit., p. 32.
103 Personal visit, and communication from Srivatsa Gosvami ji, scholar and guru of the Caitanya sampradāya. In fact, aracakas at the temple were fairly clear on both points and evidently didn’t see any contradiction in claiming that a sacred site mentioned by Āṇḍāl [Nācciyār Tirumōli 14.1-10] was only about 160 years old.
In the hearts of those who melt for you! In Kārakam praised by the world! In the dark skies! Thief! On the southern banks of the beautiful Kaveri which has great fame/name, and forever in my heart! I desire your auspicious feet”.\(^{104}\) This verse can also be translated very differently, by seeing the descriptive attributes as place names. “Oh Lord in Nīrakam, atop lofty Venkaṭaṁ, in Nilāṭinkaḷuṇṭaṁ! Oh you who are in Īrakam in prosperous Kacci! In the port of Vēhkā! In the hearts of those who melt for you! In Kārakam praised by the world! In Kārvāṇaṁ! Thief! On the southern banks of the beautiful Kaveri in Perakam, and forever in my heart! I desire your auspicious feet”.\(^{105}\) and \(^{106}\) The second is, in fact, the more traditional reading. This stanza seems to have generated several divya deśas, so much so that three sites mentioned in it have not, despite acquiring divya deśa status, ‘become’ temples even now.\(^{107}\) Though Īrakam might have denoted a distinct shrine as the Tiruccanta Viruttam speaks of the Lord there in the sitting posture,\(^{108}\) it seems doubtful if a separate shrine is intended in the verse quoted above or if the reference is merely to the īr of Kacci (Kāṇci). Besides, the deity at Īrakam is not seated but Trivikrama as we saw above.\(^{109}\) The divya deśa called Nilāṭinkaḷuṇṭaṁ is a small subsidiary shrine in the important Śiva temple of Ekāmreśvara in Kāṇci.\(^{110}\) Finally, Vēhkā is too far inland to have ever been a port, even assuming that the coastline could have shifted over the centuries.\(^{111}\) The Śrivaiśṇava exegetical tradition projected the above verse as an expression of actual pilgrimage undertaken by Tirumankai Ālvār but, lacking, as it does, the specificity of his pilgrimage hymns in his Pēriya Tirumōli, it seems doubtful that distinct shrines were intended. Similarly, while most Ālvārs including

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\(^{104}\) Tirunēṭuntāṇṭakam 8. Translation by Kanaka Jagannathan.


\(^{106}\) Nīrakam, Venkaṭaṁ, Nilāṭinkaḷuṇṭaṁ, Īrakam, Vēhkā, Kārakam, Kārvāṇaṁ and Perakam/ TiruPer are counted among the 108 divya deśas. In fact, perhaps even Kārakam can be broken up to mean “within darkness”. However, it remains true that some of the phrases which may be read as descriptive are also place names. Per, for instance, is mentioned in Pēriyālvār Tirumōli 2.5.1, 2.6.2, and 2.9.4, in Nāmukkaṇ Tiruvantādi 36 and in Pēriya Tirumōli 1.5.4, 5.6.2 etc.

\(^{107}\) Nīrakam, Kārakam and Kārvāṇaṁ. See above.

\(^{108}\) Tiruccantaviruttam 63, 64.

\(^{109}\) The four forms of Viṣṇu as sleeping, sitting, standing and walking (or any one or more of these) are mentioned in several hymns, Mūtal Tiruvantādi 77, Tiruccanta Viruttam 63, 64.

\(^{110}\) It is both a pāṭal pērta talam and one of the five bhūtalinga kṣetras.

\(^{111}\) The common translation of turai is port or harbour, and several translations of this verse render it as the port of Vēhkā. See, for example, the translation by Srirama Bharati, The Sacred Book of Four Thousand, op cit., p. 428. However, dictionaries gloss the word as just way/path, and as bathing ghāṭ, particularly in the construction, ‘nīr turai’. The phrase used in Tirunēṭuntāṇṭakam 8 is “ōn turai nīr Vēhkā”.
Nammāḻvār have mentioned Vaikuṇṭham, two stanzas of Nammāḻvār referring to the Lord residing in Vaikuṇṭham are read by the commentators as referring to a terrestrial abode, namely, Srivaikuṇṭham, in the Tirunelvelvi region. Again, it appears that a divya deśa has been ‘created’ in order to make up the requisite numbers.

Our hagiographies indicate that the Tiruvāyūmōli was a spontaneous outpouring of Nammāḻvār’s upon being granted a vision of the Supreme Lord. Local legends stress that the deities of various divya ksetras themselves came to TirukKurukūr and had Nammāḻvār sing of them. The legend of his having sat in unbroken meditation till the age of sixteen when he uttered his first words, an esoteric answer to Madhurakavi’s esoteric question, also underlines the belief that Nammāḻvār did not actually journey to the various shrines of the Lord that he sang about. Nammāḻvār himself seems to suggest in at least one stanza that the power of a pilgrim site is such that merely thinking of it is sufficient to receive its rewards. "Even as I said, ‘TiruMāliruṇkolai’, Tirumāl entered my heart, filled it entirely."

This is not to suggest that Nammāḻvār composed all his hymns on various shrines based merely on hearsay though it is likely to be true of Venkaṭam and Vēhka since he has not sung of any other place north of Coḷanāḍu. On the other hand, since most of the divya deśas in modern Kerala are known (in the Śrīvaiṣṇava context) only from Nammāḻvār’s hymns, he might have travelled to Malaināḍu. It remains possible, however, that some of these were established

112 Mutal Tiruvantāṭadi 76, Tiruccanta Viruttam 84, Pērumāḻ Tirumōli 10.10, Tiruppāvai 9, Tiruvāyūmōli 9.10.5, etc.
113 Tiruvāyūmōli 9.2.4 & 9.2.8.
114 The sthalapuruṇa claims that the Lord appeared before Brahmā and granted him the secrets of creation which had been lost. Since he had arrived directly from Vaikuṇṭha, Brahmā requested him to assume the same form here as he took in his divine abode. Ref.: Eṭirajan, 108 Vaṭiṇava Divya Deśa Stala Varaliiru, op cit., pp 475-477. Also, Navathiruppathi, Temple History, op cit., (pamphlet literature).
115 The legend was recited by several arcakas in the ‘Nava-Tiruppati’ temples, a cluster in the Tirunēlvelvi region around the Āḻvār’s hometown. (See Table VI d, nos. 13 - 21). It is also mentioned in the sthalapuruṇa of Āḻvār Tirunagari. This is now re-enacted in an annual festival where (the processional images of) the deities of the nine shrines arrive at Āḻvār Tirunagari to visit Nammāḻvār. The same legend is responsible for the interesting feature that none of these temples possess either a shrine or an image of Nammāḻvār though almost all of them house images of the other Āḻvārs in a group, often along with Rāmaṇa and some other ācārya.
116 See Chapter 3, Nammāḻvār Vaibhavam.
117 R David Kaylor and KKA Venkatachari, God Far, God Near: An Interpretation of the Thought of Nammalvar, Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute, Series no. 5 (Supplement), Bombay, 1981, p. 55.
118 Tiruvāyūmōli 10.8.1.
119 Nammāḻvār has sung of 12 shrines in Kerala of which three have also been sung by Tirumāṇkai.
local-regional pilgrimage centres and that he could have heard of them owing to their nearness from his hometown. In fact, the tenor of many of the hymns addressed to the Lord in the Malaināḍu shrines suggests a wish to visit these places rather than a record of an accomplished pilgrimage. What seems important is that the Śrīvaishṇava tradition itself did not firmly hold that the holy places of the Lord sung of by Āḻvār were necessarily material, physical spaces.

Description of the sacred residences of the Lord through hearsay is not uncommon in the NDP. When Āṇḍāḷ asks to be taken to Mathura, the banks of the Yamuna, Bhaktavilocaṇam, Govardhana and Dvārakā, it is not to physical locations but to the mythological ones associated with Kṛṣṇa. Pēriyāḻvār’s decad on Khaṇḍam (Devaprayāg) could be about any site but for the qualifier, “on the banks of the torrential Ganga”. It is generally accepted by modern historians that actual pilgrimages were probably not undertaken by any of the Āḻvārs to the northern sites mentioned in the hymns as the descriptions of the northern sites are either formulaic or patently notional. The trend seems to continue in the hagiographical literature as well. The stories of most Āḻvārs carry some motifs of their travels to different holy centres; indeed, it is only Tiruppāṇāḻvār and Tōṇṭarāṭippōṭi who are supposed to have remained steadfastly in Srirangam, no doubt because their hymns themselves are entirely oriented to the Lord of Srirangam. It is, however, not merely in these general descriptions of peregrinations in the hagiographies that we find the idea of pilgrimage reinforced but in specific tales that knit in verses of the saints with specific experiences attributed to them. Tirumankai’s verses on Aṭṭabuyakaram (Sanskrit: Aṣṭabhumājaka) describe various aspects of Viṣṇu and end with the refrain, “Who could it be?” and the answer, “I am the Lord of Aṭṭabuyakaram”.

120 Tiruvāyumōḷi 5.9.1-11 on TiruVallalā; 6.1.1-11 on TiruVaṇṇanṭūr; 7.8.1-11 on TiruVāṇṇivilai; 8.3.7 on TiruVaṇṇaricāram; 9.7.1-11 on TiruMūḷikkaḷam; 9.8.1-11 on TiruNāvāy.

121 Nācchiyār Tirumōḷi 12.1.
122 Nācchiyār Tirumōḷi 12.5.
123 Nācchiyār Tirumōḷi 12.6.
124 Nācchiyār Tirumōḷi 12.8.
125 Nācchiyār Tirumōḷi 12.9.
126 Pēriyāḻvār Tirumōḷi 4.7.1.
127 See. For example, Hardy, Viraha Bhakti, op cit., p. 424, where he speaks of Āṇḍāḷ’s imaginary pilgrimage to Mathurā, Gokula, Vṛndāvana, Dvarakā etc.
128 Pēriya Tirumōḷi 1.2.1-10, 1.2.1-10, 1.4.1-10, 1.5.1-10 and 1.6.1-10 are dedicated to Piriti (Jośīmaṭha), Badari (two decads), Śāligrāma and Naimisāraṇya respectively, all in the Himalayan region.
129 Pēriya Tirumōḷi 2.8.1-10.
story of the Álvár having met the Lord of Attabuyakaram disguised as an old Vaiṣṇava while the former was journeying to Venkaṭam.

Considering the intensity with which the saints praised the spots in which the Lord supposedly dwelled, including perhaps many where there was no temple of any note, why did they not sing of certain shrines which we know to have been in existence from the sixth-seventh centuries? A Sanskrit inscription of circa CE 610 from a pillar in front of a cave shrine tells us that the temple of Muräri named Mahendra Viṣṇugrha was excavated out of the rocks on the banks of the Mahendra tāṭai in the city of Mahendrapura. The Laksminarasimha temple and the Ranganātha temple in Nāmakkal tāluk, Salem district, are both cave temples of some antiquity. Two 8th century Sanskrit inscriptions in the Grantha script from the Ranganātha cave temple record the excavation of this shrine, called the Atiyanātha Viṣṇugrham, by King Guṇaśīla of the Atiya kula. Several caves in Mahabalipuram are sculpted with Vaiṣṇava motifs, notable being the Mahiśāsurasamardini cave and the Varāha cave. Another temple known as the Mukunda temple also belongs to the period of Rājasimha. The Cinkappērumāl Koyil, about forty kilometres south of modern Madras city, is also another cave temple that dates from Pallava times. Why did the Álvārs not compose any hymns in praise of these temples, whose existence they could scarcely have been unaware of, considering the familiarity of Tirumankai and Pūtam with Māmallai and the fact that the Cinkappērumāl temple is only a minor detour from the straight route between several sacred shrines in and around modern Madras and modern Kāṇći? This peculiarity has been

130 See Chapter 2-iii-c, An Episode from the Parakāla Sūri Vaibhava in the DSC.
131 I have used the term cave-temple/shrine to refer to shrines excavated out of living rock. These are not necessarily natural caverns, nor particularly deep. The central image in these shrines is, similarly, carved out of the living rock, and is usually in relief, not in the round. The structural temple is often elaborated with free-standing architecture that projects from the hill or boulder face. In all the cases, the hillock or boulder out of which the shrine has been carved can be perceived.
133 The older Salem district has been subdivided since 1985 into others. In speaking of the near-absence of divya desas in Salem district (among others) above, I intended the current political division.
134 Mahalingam, 1985, Vol. VI, p 426. Sm 52 & 53. Ref.: ARE 1960-61, no. 291; EI xxxvi, no. 18 (A), 137 & ARE 1906, no. 7; EI xxxvi, no. 18(D), 138.
135 Not far from the Arjuna’s Penance panel in Mahabalipuram is a realistic sculpture from living rock of a group of three monkeys, the mother picking lice out of the child’s head. The monkeys unmistakeably bear Śrīvaiṣṇava caste marks on their foreheads! I suspect that these caste marks (nāmam) were etched by some zealous Śrīvaiṣṇava(s) in later centuries.
136 Sivaramamurti, Mahabalipuram, op cit., p. 34.
137 Tamil Cinka= Sanskrit Simha. Temple of the lion-god, i.e., Narasimha.
138 Personal visit and observation.

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noted with respect to the Śaiva context as well. Appar, known for bringing Mahendravarman to the Śaiva faith, failed to sing of a single temple consecrated by the king. Sundarar and Sambandar have similarly ignored cave temples in the vicinity of temples they have sung of. To quote BGL Swamy, "There appears to be an opinion in some quarters (not published as far as I know) that the āgamas prescribe only structural temples worthy of consecration and worship of Śiva and not rock-cut cave shrines; and that for this reason, the [Tevāram] trio did not visit the Pallava-founded temples". Swamy dismisses this as a sentimental explanation, suggesting instead that the Nāyānmārs be dated in the 10th century when a large number of structural temples were in existence. Apart from the fact that this still fails to answer the apparent neglect of cave temples by the hymnists, his solution is incompatible with both the larger socio-economic picture and the abundant inscriptional evidence of the hymns being recited in the ninth and tenth centuries.

The earliest of the Pañcarātra Samhitās, the Jayākhya, is dated, on account of some architectural elements it contains, between CE 600 and 850 by Gonda. An 8th century CE inscription from the Sundaravarada Pērumāl temple in Uttiramerur, Chingleput, in Sanskrit/ Pallava Grantha, records that the said shrine was built by “truthful and dexterous” Paramēśvara Takṣaka of Pāṭaka, in conjunction with the āgamikas of the village versed in the Agamic principles and practice. This Agamic literature is mainly concerned with the construction of temples and images, the rules of rituals, in short, the rules of religious praxis. Prescriptive texts are not created in a vacuum but evolve through practice.

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140 Swamy, "The Date of the Tevaram Trio", op cit., p 148. The opinion seems to be shared by Prof. R Champakalakshmi—personal communication.
141 Swamy, ibid, p 148.
143 See Chapter 1, section on Sources.
146 M Matsubara, Pancaratra Samhitas, op cit., p. 35.
147 R Champakalakshmi, “Śankara and Puranic Religion”, in Ishita Banerjee-Dube and Saurabh Dube (eds), Ancient to Modern: Religion, Power and Community in India, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2009, p. 50 points out, “Later Purāṇas followed new modes of legitimation of the brahmanical order (varṇa) whenever and wherever this order was threatened. In the process, the Āgamas/ Tantras came to be recognized as an important source of authority in religious matters, particularly temple worship, rituals and sectarian practices”.232
seems, thus, unlikely that worship in cave temples could have been prohibited by the Agamas in so early a period as the sixth-seventh centuries. What seems probable is that as structural temples came to vastly outnumber cave temples, the latter came to be considered insufficiently sacred in the prescriptive literature. The relative abundance of bhakti poetry in praise of structural temples—brick-and-mortar, as well as stone—in comparison to those glorifying rock-cut shrines would have contributed to the crystallization of this position.

The assumption that cave temples were not considered worthy of hymns by the saint-poets is brought into question by the interesting exceptions of the Tayumāṉavar shrine in Tiruccirāpalī, the Puṇḍarikākṣa Pērumāl temple in TiruVellarai and the Śiva and Viṣṇu temples in TiruMēyyam. Most surviving rock-cut shrines are situated in Tōṇtaimāṇḍalam and Pāṇtīmanḍalam. It would be interesting to examine through field visits

148 JAB van Buitenen, Ágama Prāmāṇyam of Yāmuna (Sanskrit Text and English Translation with Introduction), Ramanuja Research Society, Madras, 1971, p. 5, points out that the “Pāñcarātra texts abundantly demonstrate that they had grown out of temple service and recorded practices that had been observed since long”.

149 The Tayumāṉavar shrine in Tiruccirāpalī is a cave temple dedicated to Śiva built high up on a hillock (called the rock-fort). Personal visit. Appar and Sambandar have devoted one palikam each to the shrine. The upper levels of the hill have yielded stone beds of Śrāmanas with traces of obliterated writing dated to the 7th century, probably names of monks and titles of Pallava kings. Other Jaina epigraphs in natural caverns in the same hill are dated to the 3rd–4th centuries CE. Ref.: Ekambaranathar, & Sivaparakasar, Jaina Inscriptions, op cit., pp. 444-448.

150 A temple to Viṣṇu carved out of whitish rocks near Srirangam. Personal visit. Tirumankai has dedicated a decade to the shrine, Pēriya Tirumōli 5.3.1-10.

151 Mahalingam, 1985, Vol. VIII, p 104. Tp 486. Ref.: ARE, 1905, no. 541; SII xii, no. 40, p 16; EL, xi, no. 16, pp 154-58 is a Tamil inscription of the 5th regnal year of Pallava Dantivarman, i.e., CE 805, from this temple. Dantivarman is said to have been born in the Pallavatilaaka family which sprang from the Bhāradvāja gotra. The inscription records the digging of a great well at Tēnūṟū, a suburb of TiruVellarai, by a private individual and a verse on the transient nature of worldly life, enjoining all to do charitable deeds before they are caught in the clutches of old age so as to perpetuate their name.

152 Personal visit. The two temples are nearly adjacent to one another and carved out of the same hill. The Śiva temple is a vāyppu talam mentioned by Appar while the Viṣṇu temple has been mentioned by Tirumankai in Pēriya Tirumōli 2.5.8; 3.6.9; 5.5.2; 6.8.7; 8.2.3; 9.2.3; 10.1.5 and 11.7.5. Interestingly, the name of Śiva here is Satyagirīśvara and that of Viṣṇu, Satyāmūrti. The Tamil word mēy (from which the place-name is derived) means truth.

153 Inscriptional evidence shows that the cave temple was in existence by at least the early eighth century. Mahalingam, 1985, Vol. VI, p 205. Pk 834. Ref.: ARE 1906, no. 402; IPS no. 13; Ibid (Trans), pp. 14-15 is written in archaic Tamil of the second half of 8th century CE on a parapet slab in the west prākāra of the central shrine in the Satyagirinātha Pērumāl temple. It records a renovation, probably of the temple, by a lady, and the gift to the central shrine (umalikaippuram) of the temple of lands including cultivation and proprietary rights (kārānmai and mīyārci).

154 The topography of much of Coḷāmaṇḍu is plains irrigated by the Kaveri. Two of the above-mentioned, ‘living’ cave temples are, however, in the heart of Coḷāmaṇḍal.
if some structural temples that have been hymned are found in the vicinity of neglected cave shrines. I present here, a very conjectural hypothesis. The above evidence indicates that there may not always have been physical structures when the Āḷvārs sang of a sacred spot of Viṣṇu, that many of the ‘hymned temples’ came into being in a later period, and that the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition itself recognizes that the Āḷvārs’ pilgrimages may sometimes be more notional than real. On the other hand, there are ‘unsung’ old cave temples, sometimes proximate to comparatively newer ones which have been hymned. It seems probable, then, that the later tradition, being strongly influenced by the Āgamas, rejected the cave temples mentioned by the saints and preferred to invest more recent, structural temples that agreed with Agamic architectural prescriptions with the sanctity of the NDP hymns wherever possible.  

155 Where patronage may not have been forthcoming for the construction of structural temples, where the descriptions of the temple or the Lord within by the saint-poets was far too specific to allow imaginative interpretations, or where an older local tradition of worship in and pilgrimage to the cave shrine was strongly established, the older cave shrines came to be counted within the standardised scheme. Intensive field research and superimposed mapping of rock-cut shrines with divya deśa temples would, however, be required before this can be stated with authority. Finally, it is also possible that the Śaiva and Śrīvaiṣṇava pilgrimage networks deliberately chose to underline Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava presence in Jaina strongholds.  

156 In fact, Champakalakshmi has argued that Śaivas may have appropriated the old Jaina site of

155 I am not familiar with the primary sources of the Agamas, but in none of the secondary literature describing the rules of cāryā and kriyā have I come across any specific injunction against cave-temples. Perhaps this supposed Agamic prohibition of worship in such temples is merely derivative. Agamic rituals prescribe clockwise circumambulation of the shrine, always keeping it to one’s right, since this is supposed to confer auspiciousness and power on it. It is possible that cave temples were frowned upon as circumambulation of the central shrine is not possible as in the case of structural temples where a prākāra encircles the garbha grha.

156 Tirumuṇyam in the Putukkoṭṭai district, a little south of the Tanjavur-Kumbhakonam zone, is very close to Cittanavācal, Nārātāmalai and several other Jaina centres. The earliest inscriptions from Cittanavācal date from the 1st-2nd centuries BCE. Continued Jaina presence here up till at least the 13th century and in several neighbouring sites is attested by inscriptions. See Jaina Inscriptions Topographical Charts. The hilly area of Ammācātram in the same district was the site of an important Jaina monastery and temple, the Tirupaḻimalai, which received endowments in the late ninth century. (ARE, 1941-42, nos. 209-210). Seven inscriptions from various temples in the Tirumuṇyam taluk itself, dated to different periods, recording grants of land refer to [Jaina] palliccantam land being excluded from the said grant. Ref.: A Ekambaranathar and CK Sivaprakasam, Jaina inscriptions in Tamil Nadu. A Topographical List, Research Foundation for Jainology, Madras, 1987, pp. 462-464. Finally, an undated inscription that mentions Gūnasena (probably a Jaina monk) enunciating the art of playing the parivādini, a musical instrument, has been found to the left of the entrance of the above rock-cut temple itself. Ref.: Ekambaranathar, & Sivaprakasam, ibid, pp. 313-314. Also Mahalingam, 1985, Vol. VI, p 660. Pk 660. Ref.: ARE 1940-41, no 221; IPS, no. 4 Ibid. (Trans), pp 10-11.
Tiruccirāpaḷḷi around the seventh century when Mahendravarman Pallava recorded, in the same hill, his conversion from Jainism to Śaivism. I suggest a similar process in the case of the rock-cut shrines at TiruMēyyam; it is possible that Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava symbols were either superimposed on Jaina ones at this site, or obliterated and replaced them. I further suggest that this process was one that was not limited to the high-point of the bhakti movement alone as argued above but may have been carried out even in the second millennium, in the course of consolidation of pilgrimage networks. Agamic reservations regarding cave temples could probably be overlooked in the larger battle against the heterodox faiths.

The relationship of the pilgrimage tradition with the hymnal one is brought out by an interesting example of a kind different from those considered above. We have seen instances where several divya deśas are incorporated in the same temple, partly because the hymns had traditionally been read to signify shrines where they may not have been intended by the saints, and failed eventually to be successfully elaborated in architectural form. The reverse is the case with the Tañjai-mā-mani-k-koyil in Tanjavur. Three separate temple structures separated by a few hundred metres from one another are said to together constitute one divya deśa. None of the four references to this shrine in the hymns of Pūtam and Tirumankai specify the form of the deity or temple. We have seen that the Tanjavur region in the heart of the fertile Kaveri basin has perhaps the highest concentration of temples in the Tamil country. I suggest that more than one patron decided, probably at different points of time, to consecrate as temples, the hymns on Tañjai-mā-manī and deference to the politically, economically or socially powerful patrons caused all three temples to be considered embodiments of the hymns.

It has frequently been noted that bhakti introduced a deeply emotional form of worship that privileged simple devotion expressed through offerings of flowers, leaves, water etc in place of elaborate rituals. However, the reading of the inscription remains controversial.

An analogous example is Badarinath, an important centre of Vaiṣṇava pilgrimage, where the image of the deity in the central shrine is clearly that of Buddha. Personal communication from Prof Narayani Gupta, after her visit to the temple.

Pēriya Tirumōli 1.1.6; 2.5.3; 7.3.9, Iranṭām Tiruvantādi 70.

Personal visit. The sthalapurāṇa recites how three demons were killed, two by the Lord Viṣṇu which explains two of the temples and the third by Devi, who also has a related shrine in Tanjavur. The third temple that constitutes the Vaiṣṇava divya kṣetra is supposed to signify the site of the Lord’s original appearance in response to the gods’ plea for help against the demons.
of the older, Sanskritic forms. The word \textit{pujā} is said to derive from the Tamil \textit{pū-çēy}, i.e., to ‘do’ with flowers. Jarl Charpentier has however derived the word from the Tamil \textit{pucu}, meaning, to smear or daub, and concluded that the most characteristic feature of \textit{pujā} is washing or sprinkling the image with water, honey or curds, or daubing it with red paint in lieu of earlier blood sacrifices. Both anointing the image of the deity with ash, vermilion and sandal paste and offering flowers, fragrant substances and betel nut to the deity appear, from the Āḻvārs’ hymns, to have been established forms of worship in the second half of the first millennium CE. It also appears that certain temple rituals which are assumed by the Śrīvaisnava tradition and its literature to have been in existence from times immemorial may have had their beginnings in the seventh-eighth centuries. The ritual of waking the god with the singing of the \textit{Tiruppalliyēlucci} in the temple at Srirangam is today replicated in most temples, sometimes with \textit{Suprabhātams} composed for the specific deity enshrined therein. It seems from an examination of the ten stanzas of the \textit{Tirupalliyēlucci} that there was pre-existing tradition of ritually opening the temple in the morning with offerings of flowers and garlands—easily imagined as the temple demarcates sacred space from profane space. Tōṇṭaraṭippiṭṭi’s addressing a hymn to the Lord describing the beauties of dawn and the eagerness of both humans and celestials to worship him with music thus created and elaborated a pattern of ritual to which additions and variations accrued over the centuries.

In fact, we find at least two inscriptional records of the performance of śribali and \textit{tiruppalli elucci} ceremonies from the tenth century itself. The earlier record comes from the Sundaravarada Pērumāl temple in Uttiramerūr (CE 968-969). It is tempting to conjecture that the ritual involved singing of Tōṇṭaraṭippiṭṭi’s hymn since it is a Viṣṇu temple. The second record comes from the Karkotakeśvara temple in Kumaraśavalli, Uṭtaiyārpālayam \textit{tālk} (CE 968-969).

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162 Personal communication from Prof J Parthasarathi—attributed by him to Suniti Kumar Chatterjee.
164 The ‘wake-up’ song composed by Tōṇṭaraṭippiṭṭi.
165 A good example is the \textit{Venkateśa Suprabhātam} for the Lord of Tiruppati which is perhaps the most popular of the genre.
References to such ceremonies in the eleventh-twelfth centuries become substantially greater.

It is clear that already by the ninth-tenth centuries, many of the ritual practices and festivities associated with temples had a fair degree of currency and popularity in the Tamil country. In the Valliśvara temple in Māṅkāṭu, Sriperumbudur tāluk, an inscription of Pallava Nandivarman III’s reign, dated to circa CE 863, records some provision made by the Čelivāniyar (merchant community) of Kuṇrattūr in Puliyūrkkūṭikottam for offerings in the local temple on the Tiruvāṭirai, new moon (ṭalaivuvā) and full moon (tinkal nilavu) days, throughout the sabhā of Tiruvēḷlikil.169 A record from the Lākṣmināraṇyaṇa temple in Kāvāntaṭalam, Chingleput tāluk, dated to the 18th regnal year of Pallava Kampavarman, i.e., circa CE 887, records a gift of gold with which the sabhaiyār of the caturvedimangalam in Tamaṇūr nādu undertook to maintain (among other things), the celebration every year of the Cittirai Tiruvonam festival for 7 days, providing daily 100 lamps engaging 16 drummers (ṭatṭaḷi kōṭṭikal), performing the sacred bath (snāpanam) of the god and offering sacred food offerings for 7 days.170 From the Pūndarikākṣa Pērumāl temple (mentioned above) in TiruVēḷḷarai, Lākuṭi tāluk, an inscription of CE 978 registers a gift of 20 kal תנע of gold for offerings to the deities Kṛṣṇa and his consort, Rukmini-pirāṭṭiyār, in the Pēriya Śrīkoyil (big temple) at TiruVēḷḷarai by Irāyirandevi Ammanār, wife of Uṭaiyār-āṇaimerūcčinār (Rājāditya). The offerings (4 nāḷi of rice) were to be given on the days of full moon and new moon, asṭami, and sankrānti, and another gift of gold was made for a lamp.171 Donations for offerings on sankrānti, feeding devotees on the occasion of Māci Makam festival,172 celebrations of Mārkāḷi Tiruvāṭirai and Vaikāci Tiruvāṭirai (auspicious days: Tiruvāṭirai asterism of the months of Mārkāḷi and Vaikāci) with the performance of Cākkai kūṭtu dances,174 consecration of the image of the goddess Umā Bhaṭṭāraki (adopted as a daughter by

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the donor, a woman) in the local temple and celebration of her marriage with the god, establish the elaboration of the temple culture by the first millennium.

An inscription from the Varadarāja Pērumāḷ temple in Kānci dated to CE 1135 records a gift of bathing with 81 pots of water the Lord Aruḻāla Pērumāḷ who was pleased to take his stand at TiruvAttiyūr. This inscription assumes significance as it was for the daily bath of this deity in this temple that Rāmānuja is supposed to have performed the nitya kainkarya of bringing pots of water. Since Rāmānuja was well established by this time as the darśana pravartaka in Srirangam—indeed, he would have been 118 years old if the standard dating of his life is correct—repetition of a ritual performed by the great ācārya might have been considered a particularly meritorious act.

The hagiographic legend of Pēriyāḻvār and Āṉḍāl demonstrates the integration of such cultic practices through their sanctification as practices of the revered saint-poets. That Pēriyāḻvār was a temple priest in Śrīvilliputtūr and particularly attached to the form of Kṛṣṇa as a child is fairly evident from his own hymns. The episode of Pēriyāḻvār's debate with scholars of other persuasions and his eventual victory replays the motif of the ācāryas' debates with Advaitins and reiterates the superiority of the Vaiṣṇava faith. Equally significant is the finale to the story—the Lord’s appearance in all his glory before the Āḻvār, which serves various purposes. For one, it explains the composition of the unique poem, the Tiruppalliṭṭu. This hymn of eleven stanzas that has given birth to an entire genre of hymnal literature called the mangalāsāsana is extraordinary in that a human being—the Āḻvār—bestows blessings on the Supreme Lord, wishing Him, His consort and His accoutrements everlasting life and glory. Secondly, it underlines the Śrīvaiṣṇava belief that the Lord is Himself attached to His devotee and can scarcely bear separation from the latter. Finally, it outlines celebratory rituals which came to feature prominently in temple festivities: the Lord’s appearance among his

177 Aruḻāla is the Tamil equivalent of Varadarāja, and Attiyūr or Hastigiri is the old name for this temple.
178 Tiruppalliṭṭu 11.
179 Pēriyāḻvār Tirumōḻi 1.2.1-10, 1.3.1-21, 1.4.1-10, 1.5.1-10, 1.6.1-11 etc.
180 Strictly speaking, many crores of hundred thousand years.
181 The theme is reiterated in several of his poems addressed to the baby Kṛṣṇa, especially one where Yaśoda urges the child to come so that she can perform the rites to ward of the evil eye. See Pēriyāḻvār Tirumōḻi 2.8.1-10. This solicitousness towards the Lord is almost unique to Pēriyāḻvār though other Āḻvārs have also sung of the Lord as a child.
human devotees in secular spaces beyond his divine realm is re-enacted in the procession of the *utsava mūrti* with music and chanting of Sanskrit and Tamil hymns in the streets immediately around the temple walls, and on various specified occasions, even further beyond. The story of Ānḍāḷ has Pēriyāvār reciting the glory of the different places where the Lord resides; this, indeed, seems to be the occasion when the concept of 108 *divya deśas* is first articulated. However, none of the three hagiographies, the *DSC*, *Agpp* and *Mgpp*, actually describes more than a few places in this context even though they all agree that Ānḍāḷ chose the Lord of Srirangam after hearing about all 108. In fact, many more sites are actually mentioned by the three hagiographies in the sections describing Tirumankai and the Ācāryas Nāthamuni and Rāmānuja. I am not aware when the enumeration of the *pātāl perra talankaḷ* was carried out in the Śaiva tradition but by the twelfth-thirteenth centuries, when the earliest Śrīvaiśṇava hagiographies were composed, the fact that several hundred of Śiva’s beloved places had been hallowed by the hymns of the Nāyaṉmārs must have been reasonably well-known, especially since the last two or three centuries would have seen the elaboration of a great number of these shrines into structural temples under the aegis of the Cola monarchs. I suggest that since the Śrīvaiśṇava Ācāryas would have known—from their careful examination of the *NDP*—that the number of shrines dedicated by the Ālvārs to Viṣṇu were markedly lesser, they decided upon 108, a number believed to be sacred. A preliminary delineation of the sacred geography is also seen in the elaboration in the *DSC*, in Śaṭṭhakopa’s words, in the context of Godā’s *svayamvara*, of the number of shrines in Coladeśa, Pāṇḍyadeśa, Keraladeśa, Toṇḍir, Madhyadeśa and the north.[182] While the residences of the Lord sung of by the Ālvārs would have been identified with specific sites, and a few score temples might already have come to be elevated as especially revered shrines by the thirteenth century, the actual elaboration of a specifically Śrīvaiśṇava pilgrimage network took place later; indeed, it was a process that was carried out over several centuries.

The concept of *tīrtha* and the practice of *tīrthayāṭrā* as acts of piety are first mentioned in the *Viṣṇusmṛti*, a work of the third century.[183] Hazra’s proposal of dates between CE 700 and 1400 for the Puranic chapters on holy places[184] should be seen in the context of the *bhakti* evidence of journeys to different sacred sites. Epigraphic evidence is not wanting either. In CE 1012, a grant was made in the Alakiya Narasimha Pērumāḷ temple, Ėṇnāyiram, Viḷūppuram *tāluk* for,

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182 Since this episode features in the *DSC*, I have used the *DSC*’s Sanskritised version here for Coḷaṇādu, Pāṇṭiyānādu, Maḷaiṇādu, Toṇṭainādu, Naṭanādu, and Vaṭanādu.
184 Nandi, ibid, p. 47.
among other things, feeding 1000 Vaiṣṇavas and dāsas who came to witness the festival of Āṁi-Aṅulam. Two inscriptions from the Vīrattāneśvara temple in Tiruttaṇi dated to CE 1013 register sale of land to a private individual for feeding pilgrims going to and returning from Venkaṭam.\textsuperscript{185} Even the notion of pan-Indian pilgrimage had seems to have been established by the early medieval centuries as seen from a fascinating inscription dated to CE 1050 from the Ammainātha temple in the Ambāsamudram tāluk of Tirunēlveli district in the deep south of India which registers a gift from Yogadeva and Somadevi, belonging to Kaśmīradeśam, for burning a perpetual lamp in the temple of Kayilāyamūṭaiya Mahādeva at Nigarilicoḷa-caturvedimangalam, a brahmadeya in Muḷlināṭū.\textsuperscript{186}

The emphasis on pilgrimage and on numerous shrines of each god would have served to accommodate local deities and pre-existent sacred centres, in fact, as early as the period of the saint-poets of both Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava persuasions, ‘elevating’ the local shrine to the status of the great god of the brahmanical pantheon and on the other hand, making the latter accessible. This would of course have larger implications as well—the role of the Āḷvārs and Nāyaṇmārs in popularising brahmanical worship and the socio-economic consequences of the same have been discussed by several scholars.\textsuperscript{187} I suggest that beside these well-known reasons, pilgrimage could also be an attempt to accommodate the essential polytheism of the masses. Indeed, the monotheism of the Tamil saint-poets incorporates a deeper polytheism: the Āḷvārs singing of Narasimha, Vāmana–Trivikrama, Rāma and Kṛṣṇa may be explained as expressions of the vyūha concept,\textsuperscript{188} but acceptance of these as incarnations of Viṣṇu is itself a historic process of accommodation and integration.\textsuperscript{189} Further, I suggest that the Āḷvārs and Nāyaṇmārs, like the majority of the people among whom they lived, were also imbued with ‘ideal polytheism’,\textsuperscript{190} which, however, due to their focus on and deep devotion to a particular


\textsuperscript{186} Mahalingam, 1985, Vol. IX, p 53. Tn 244. Ref.: ARE, 1916, no. 613; SII xiv, no. 197, p 112.

\textsuperscript{187} See Chapters 3 and 4, sections on historiography.


\textsuperscript{190} See Chapter 4 for a discussion of this concept.
god, found expression by imaging him in different forms. Their singing of their chosen Lord, whose heroic, amatory and compassionate deeds they glorify in shrine after shrine, is also an expression of this polytheism. The acaryic tradition, in the Śrīvaiṣṇava case at least, gave pattern, over a period of several centuries, to this old polytheistic culture through its formalisation of the pilgrimage network and, in the process, also wove in more contemporary communitarian concerns. On the other hand, local legends and origin myths found a larger area of circulation and came to claim Puranic status through their absorption into the brahmanical temple just as locally important communities found representation in its ritual activities.

The distinct identities and attributes of the mūla and utsava mūrtis in each temple both reinforce ‘ideal polytheism’ and signify the successful integration of local myths and communities. The mūlar in the temple at Śrīvaikunṭham in the Tirunelveli district is called Śrīvaikunṭhanāthan and the utsavar Kaḷḷapirān/ Koranāthan. The sthalapurāna attributes its origin myth to the Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa. When Brahmā’s satyaloka was inundated with water during the pralaya, the demon Somakāsura stole the rahasya granthas pertaining to creation. Brahmā meditated in this spot and pleased Viṣṇu who retrieved the granthas. Since the Lord had appeared here directly from Vaikuṇṭha, the site is known as Śrīvaikunṭham. The second story in this sthalapurāṇa bears an uncanny resemblance to some of the legends about Tirumankai Āḻvār. A thief called Kāłatūcan always prayed to the Lord in the above temple before setting out on his robbing expeditions and offered a generous share of the booty to the temple. Caught when robbing the royal palace once, he prayed to the Lord who took the form of the devotee and appeared before the king. When the king questioned him, the Lord showed him His heavenly form and admonished him for not discharging his kingly duties properly. The penitent ruler asked him to remain in the temple in the form he had appeared before him— as the lord of thieves. It must be noted that the local kaḷḷar community has an important ritual presence in the temple and the chief of the kaḷḷars is entitled to specific honours during various temple festivities.

191 Śiva is imaged as Dakṣiṇāmūrti, Lingodbhavamūrti etc.
192 The temple has divya deśa status through two mentions by Nammāḻvār which may simply refer to the Lord’s cosmic station, i.e., Vaikuṇṭha. “Reclining in Puḻinkuṭi, seated in Varaguṇamankai, standing in Vaikuṇṭha…” Tiruvāyūmōḷi 9.2.4 and “You who are in TirupPuḻinkuṭi of mansions which touch the moon/O Lord of Tiru-Vaikuṇṭha…” Tiruvāyūmōḷi 9.2.8.
193 Both the Tamil and Sanskrit names mean ‘the lord of thieves’.
With the development of the pilgrimage tradition, sanctity came to be attributed to and claimed by different temples not only because of their localization of pan-Indian Puranic myths and also specifically Tamil ones, but also because of their claim to association with one or more of the Ālvars or Nāyaṉmārs. Thus, the temple tank of Kavittalam (Sanskrit: Kapisthalam) is claimed to be the site of Gajendramokṣam, i.e., where Nārāyaṇa killed a crocodile to save a devout elephant.195 TiruNaraiyur derives its uniqueness from (among other things) being the only shrine where the virāhas of all 108 divya deśas can be worshipped. The deities of all the temples apparently came here to oblige an aged bhakta who desired to see them but was unable to make the pilgrimage. The sthalapurāṇa of TiruvĀtaṇur demonstrates how the shrine derives its special character from association with an Ālvār. Once, when Tirumankai Ālvār was engaged in the construction of the prākāra walls of the Srirangam temple, he ran out of money and asked the Lord to bail him out. Taking the form of a merchant (vaniya) with a merchant’s headdress and carrying a marakkāl (a measure/ a large measuring vessel), the Lord of Srirangam appeared before the Ālvār saying that Ranganātha had directed him to help him. The Ālvār asked him why he had then come with an empty marakkāl, upon which the merchant replied that if one prayed sincerely to Īmpērumān, submitting in saranāgati thrice, one could get whatever one wanted. The Ālvār said he wanted the workmen paid. The ‘merchant’ proceeded to measure out the sands on the banks of the river, saying that the marakkāl would convert the sands into gold for those who had worked sincerely, but would give out only sand to shirkers. The onlookers were angered at what they presumed was a ruse to short-change them. The merchant fled but Tirumankai Ālvār gave chase on his horse. He finally took refuge in Ātaṇur and is, accordingly, enshrined there. Since he had picked up, en route, an olai (palm leaf) to write some accounts, that village is known as Olaippati. The Lord in Ātaṇur is represented in the sayana pose, with a marakkāl under his head and holding a palm leaf in his hand.196 This delightful story has no basis in the more authoritative hagiographies.197 Ātaṇur is enumerated in a long list of sacred spots in the Periya Tirumāṭal.198 As the poet says a few words distinguishing or qualifying the Lord in enumerating shrine after shrine, he199 praises him as ‘measurer of time/ master of all three

196 Etirajan, ibid, pp. 88- 94.
197 Other motifs woven into the story, such as the centrality of saranāgati and the caste in which the Lord chose to appear, and which He continues to represent through the iconography by the unusual accoutrements of olai and marakkāl underline other concerns of the community. See Chapters 2 and 3.
198 Ascribed to Tirumankai.
199 It could, of course, be a she.
phases of time in the context of Ātaṇūr. It is likely that this reference gave rise to the unique iconography in this temple and the above legend. In another instance of association, the varaḷuru of Kuṭantai claims that the temple chariot was the gift of Tirumankai. Similarly, the sthalapurāṇa of TirupPer Nagar claims that the site has salvific properties being the kṣetra of Nammāḷvār’s last temple decade and hence, of his mokṣa.

Indeed, with the growth in the numbers of temples, such associations might have been stratagems employed by different temples to establish themselves as unique and as capable of conferring special blessings, merit, relief from specific ailments etc. The legend of the Lord favouring an Āḻvār or Nāyaṉār in a particular shrine would have helped to enhance its popularity. Such associations with Ranganātha of Srirangam are naturally numerous. Tiruppāṇāḷvār and Aṇḍāḷ were both absorbed into him by his divine grace; he was the focus of the worship of Tōṉṭaraṭīppōṭī. Nammāḷvār, singing of the Lord in Kumbhakoṇam, described him as Ārāvamutan, nectar that never satiates, a phrase that, despite having become familiar as the given name of the Lord in the said temple, never fails to amaze by its beauty. The iconography of the garbha grha in Kumbhakoṇam has associations with Tirumalicaic Āḻvār. Some of these associations may, however, be secondary in that the shrines which claim special or miraculous relationships with individual Āḻvārs or Nāyaṉārars may have also been already revered shrines. Thus, the Śiva temple in Tiruvōrriyūr (a suburb north of modern

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201 “annavaḷai Ataṇūr alakkum aiyanai”. Kanaka Jagannathan tentatively suggests an alternate reading: “The Lord who ruled, measures Ātaṇūr”/“The Lord of Ātaṇūr who ruled with measure”.
202 Pērīya Tirumataḷ 71/130. (There are two systems of counting the Ciriya and Pērīya Tirumataḷs).
203 Sthalapurāṇa of Kuṭantai, Vaishnava name for Kumbhakoṇam.
204 Eṭirajan, 108 Vaiṇava Divya Deśa Stala Varalāru, op cit., p. 98.
205 Tiruvāyuvālō 10.8.1-10.
207 Nammāḷvār describes the Lord as Ārāvamutan elsewhere too, see Tiruvāyuvālō 2.5.4 & 2.5.5. The decad beginning with this word addressed to the Lord in Ārāvamuta elsewhere too, see Tiruvāyuvālō 2.5.4 & 2.5.5. The Lord addressed to the Lord in Kumbhakoṇam is supposed to be the one recited by the pilgrims in Viranārāyaṇapuram. Nāṭhamuni is said to have given the name Ārāvamutan (ie, transformed a descriptive phrase into a proper noun) to the Lord at Kumbhakoṇam. See Mgpp, Nāṭhamunika Vaibhavam.
208 It is translated into Sanskrit as aparyāptāmyta, but the translation fails to capture the nuances of the Tamil.
209 See Chapter 3, Tirumalicaic Āḻvār Vaibhavam, page 103 and footnote 54.
Madras) where Śiva is said to have facilitated the marriage of the Nāyānār Sundarar to his lady love, Cankili, also has hoary associations with the serpent deity.

An important sacred centre known from the late Sangam works Pērumpānāṟṟupatāi and Paripātal is Vēhkā in modern Kānci. The early Ālvārs—Pōykkai, Pey and Tirumāḻicai (though not Pūtam)—have sung of the Lord reclining in Vēhkā/ Kacci-Vēhkā. An interesting aspect of the iconography at Vēhkā is that Viśṇu is represented here as reclining with his head supported on his left hand (and consequently, with his head to the right hand of the viewer) which is exceedingly rare. According to the sthalapurāṇa, Sarasvatī in the form of the river Vegavatī repeatedly foiled Brahmā’s attempts to perform a yajña in the holy site of Kānci by sweeping away the sacrificial site with her torrential waters. Brahmā prayed to Viśṇu for help; the Lord accordingly lay down on his serpent bed across the path of the furious river and tamed (and shamed) her. The site is said to derive its name from a corruption of Vegavatī. The peculiar posture of the Lord in the site is explained by a legend which draws in one of the early Ālvārs. Before examining the myths, however, let us try and situate the oddity as it were. Considering that the image in question is six to eight feet long, and can be presumed to have taken a fair amount of time to create and the involvement of several artisans as well, the possibility of it being a ‘mistake’ can be discounted. The second possibility is that both left-facing and right-facing Viśṇus were familiar in an earlier period before śilpa and āgama prescriptions standardised the correct posture as the left-facing one, and that practically no other examples of the latter have survived. An example from the parallel Śaiva tradition will illuminate this argument. Śiva in the Ānanda-tāṇḍava is invariably represented with his right foot on the ground (trampling the demon Apasmara) and the left one upraised. I am told that there exists a bronze sculpture of the Ānanda-tāṇḍava in the Mīnākṣi temple at Madurai

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211 Shulman, Tamil Temple Myths, p. 119.
212 Hardy, Viraha Bhakti, op cit., p. 230 and p. 607.
213 Mutal Tiruvantādi 77; Mūnṟām Tiruvantādi 26, 62, 64; Nāṁmukan Tiruvantādi 36.
215 This myth seems to be a very old one as there are at least two inscriptions dated to CE 944 and 1032 in the Yathoktakāri temple that refer to the Lord who lay as an anicut (dam/ bridge) at TiruVēhkā. Mahalingam, 1985, Vol. III, pp 153-4. Cg 628. Ref.: ARE 1921, no. 21; ibid, part ii, p 95 and Mahalingam, 1985, Vol. III, p 155. Cg 635. Ref.: Are 1921, no. 23.
216 See Chapter 3, Tirumāḻicai Ālvār Vaibhavam
217 Personal visit; the observation on size is approximate.
where Śiva stands on his left leg. According to a popular story that explains this peculiarity, two sages devoted to Śiva overcome by solicitude for the Lord begged Him to rest His right leg which had been eternally bearing His weight in the dance. Śiva immediately obliged his devotees by shifting to the other foot, and the sculpture is said to be a representation of this act of grace. This story naturally belongs to a period when the standardisation of the iconographic form of the Ānanda-tāṇḍava had already taken place. Bronze sculptures of this form of Naṭārāja became common from the middle of the tenth century and were created with further elaborations in iconographic details through the eleventh century.

There can be several reasons why this particular statue differed from the norm. Some temples may choose to enshrine a peculiar iconic form or adopt an out-of-the-way pattern of worship as a special feature to attract pilgrims in a competitive environment. The temple in question should, however, be one that has a reasonable degree of confidence in being able to carry off the exception without inviting censure from more orthodox elements. Artisans can also be mischievous; they may wish to express their individual creativity in surprising ways. This explanation too may have more substance than appears at first sight. Among the hundreds of sculptures in a pillared hall of the Viṭṭhala temple in Hampi are two portrayals of Narasimha breaking out of a pillar in Hiṃyakaśipu’s netherworld-palace in response to the devotion of the child Prahlāda. At much the same height from the ground, on two nearly adjacent pillars, these two remarkably different sculptures project either the individual visions of two different craftsmen or, the creative endeavour of the same sculptor to explore and interpret a given theme in distinct ways. A third possibility is that at a particular juncture in history, a politically or ritually powerful group may decide to invest a particular iconographic form with legitimacy and choose to suppress those that go against the norm thus established. Considering that Śiva is represented dancing (not necessarily the Ānanda-tāṇḍava) on the left leg as often as on the right in stone sculptures on temple walls in the eighth-ninth centuries

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218 Personal communication from Prof NS Sadagopan.
220 This explanation was suggested to me by Prof John Stratton Hawley. He quoted the example of the Banke Bihari temple in Brṇāvana which accentuated its uniqueness sometime in the middle of the last century by shortening to a few minutes at a time, the deity’s revelation of himself to worshippers. This brevity enhanced the excitement of darśana dramatically.
221 This explanation was suggested by Prof Vijaya Ramaswamy.
222 Personal visit.
223 This explanation was suggested by Dr. PK Basant.
and that the Cola rulers adopted the Naṭarāja form as almost their dynastic deity in the tenth, this could be equally valid.

Let us try and see if any of the explanations for the unique Naṭarāja fit the unique sleeping Viṣṇu. Since Vēkā is among the earliest-known Viṣṇu shrines in the Tamil country, and since commissioning a massive new stone icon to replace an old and familiar one suggests almost insuperable obstacles, the first explanation must be discarded. The second is only partly convincing as the image in question is unlikely to have been independently executed by a single individual. On the other hand, it must be remembered that the iconic representations of Viṣṇu in a majority of the divya deśas are said to have some distinguishing features. While the bronze utsava mūrtis (processional images) are largely standardised, Viṣṇu invariably represented standing, usually flanked by Śrīdevi and Bhūdevi, also standing, and sometimes accompanied also by an additional set of seated consorts, the mūla mūrtis made of stone, stucco or wood, are specific to the site despite conforming to a general norm. In the seated posture, for example, Viṣṇu may be shown as Narasimha (again, with variations as ugra or yoga, in the act of killing Hiraṇyakaśipu or with Lakṣmi in his lap) or “at home” enthroned upon the coils of Ananta. There is similar variety in the reclining posture, the Lord portrayed as Padmanābha with a lotus bearing Brahmā issuing from his lap, solitary in yogasayana or surrounded by his consorts and select devotees in bhogasayana, resting the head on an arm and gazing towards the viewer/ worshipper or with outstretched arm and face turned upwards. Most of these are, however, elaborated within a basic formulation, i.e., the left-facing one. The most likely explanation, then, is that the Vēkā image belongs to a period before the standardisation of the śilpa norms. Perhaps other Viṣṇus resting the head on the left hand were executed in more perishable materials. This explanation is bolstered by the fact that the mūla mūrti in TiruVattaru is a right-facing Viṣṇu. Interestingly, the sthalapurāṇa of the divya kṣetra elaborating the origin myth makes no mention of the posture of the Lord except to

225 Personal observation from pilgrimages.
226 Art historians would however be able to distinguish differences in styles—indeed, one of the methods of dating bronzes from Tamil Nadu is by identifying the style. The Naṭarāja figure, for example, despite a certain standardisation, evolved from the mid-tenth through the twelfth centuries. See Dehejia, Art of the Imperial Cholas, op cit, pp. 40-46, with photographs.
227 There are some exceptions. The face of the utsava mūrti named Peraruḷāṇ in the Varadarāja temple in Kācīcipuram is badly pocked and pitted. This is explained as the result of the Lord having emerged from Agni during a great sacrifice performed by Brahmā.
228 “Virirunta Perumāḷ”, a specific description of the seated Lord.
229 This is one of the sacred shrines in the Kerala region sung by Nammāḷvār.
state that the rays of the evening sun fall upon his face. We know that the Vaikhānasa and Pāñcarātra Āgamas were never really accepted in Kerala; considering that it is the Āgamic literature that prescribes only the right-facing position as proper for the reclining Viṣṇu, it is no surprise that the TiruVāṭṭāru image did not give rise to any legends explaining its oddity. The silence of all the Ālvārs who have mentioned Vēhkā regarding the unusual posture suggests that it did not appear as unique to them as it does to us. However, of the five Ālvārs who have mentioned this shrine, Nammālvār may not have actually visited it as he mentions only two sites north of Kuṭāntai–Viṣṇakar, viz, Tiruppati and Vēhkā, both of which may have been honoured by him simply as old centres of Viṣṇu worship. Again, even if he did actually journey to Vēhkā, he may not have found the right-facing image strange, being familiar with a similar one at TiruVāṭṭāru. Tirumankai refers to Vēhkā twice and the Lord as reclining in Kacci once; in any case, the right-facing image did not excite comment from him any more than from the early Ālvārs who, it has been suggested, belonged to a different devotional milieu from the later ones.

The myth of the tamed river suggests that Kāñcī was perhaps the cult-centre of a powerful goddess who was eventually subjugated by the male god Viṣṇu. It also carries suggestions of older, autochthonous patterns of worship that were resistant to brahmanical forms such as the performance of Vedic sacrifices. That Kāñcī continued to be counted as an important centre of

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231 The sthalapūrṇā of TiruKurunkuṭi says that during a pilgrimage to TiruvAnantapuram, Rāmānuja is said to have attempted to systematise worship in the temples there according to Pāñcarātra doctrine but was entirely unsuccessful. Apparently, the Nambūdiri priests of Kerala tried to harm Rāmānuja, and the Lord, either out of consideration for him or heeding the prayers of his priests in the temple, had Garuḍa bodily lift Rāmānuja and deposit him in TiruKurunkuṭi while he slept at night. John Carman, The Theology of Ramanuja: An Essay in Inter-Religious Understanding, Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute, Bombay, 1981, p. 43, mentions a slightly different version. I cannot find the source of this story in the DSC, Agpp, Mgpp or Rāmānujiya Divya Caritai. Carman says it is told in the late text, Prapannāmṛta. Was it the Sanskrit text that borrowed the legend from the sthalapūrṇā or the other way round?

232 This is significant since the Ālvārs often describe the image of the Lord in His different beloved places carefully, remarking on any feature that distinguishes one standing, sitting or reclining Viṣṇu from another. See Chapter 3, Tirumaljiçai Ālvār Vaibhavam for the Ālvār’s association with the slight peculiarity of the image in Kuṭāntai.

233 Tiruviruttam 26 mentions celestials worshipping the Lord in Vēhkā.

234 Tiruvāyumōli 10.6.1-10.

235 Pēriya Tirumōli 2.6.5, and Tirunēṭuntāṇṭakam 8.

236 Pēriya Tirumōli 10.1.7.

237 Hardy, Viraha Bhakti, op cit., pp. 281-293.
goddess worship and to be considered one of the sakti pīthas, as the site of the goddess' sexual power (Kāmākṣi) indicates that the subordination of the goddess was never entirely successful though she was clearly forced to relinquish important spaces, both physical and ritual, to brahmanical deities. An examination of this process is beyond the scope of this work, however.

What is relevant for us is that the subordination of the cult of the goddess by the worship of Viṣṇu had already been achieved by the period of the late Sangam texts and, even if the iconography did not invite comment in the earlier period, it had begun to call for justification by the time the explanatory legend was composed. It is tempting to credit the Śrīvaiśṇava hagiographers with the construction of this myth, especially since we have seen how the stories about the Āḻvārs blend information available from their hymns with much that cannot be proved. Indeed, I have argued that the hagiographies served as another, perhaps more popular, mode of exegesis beside the comparatively dense commentaries and philosophical works. Since a corollary of this position might be that the hagiographies were merely purposive fiction, I would like to modify it. While the genre of hagiography might be thought to have allowed the ācāryas greater freedom in articulating their vision of the Śrīvaiśṇava community, they were not by any means entirely free to tell a story as they wished. The second myth related to TiruVēhkā, indeed, the one mentioned in the Śrīvaiśṇava hagiographies, finds insessional corroboration well before the composition of the earliest among them. The earliest of these, dated to CE 1075, is found in the Pāṇḍava Pērumāḷ koyil in Pēriya Kāṇci. The record registering a grant of some land to the above temple mentions buying the same from the fīr of Orirukkai. The latter happens to be a village in the outskirts of Kāṇci and claims to derive its name from a corruption of oru-rāvu-irukkai meaning, one-night’s stay. The next two inscriptions come from the Yathoktakari temple itself. Dated to CE 1090 and CE 1104, they record orders of the Cola king Kulottunga I granting two & three

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238 Kāṇci is metaphorically divided into Cinna (small) Kāṇci also known as Viṣṇu Kāṇci and Pēriya (great) Kāṇci which is Śiva Kāṇci. A third section, slightly removed geographically, is Jina (Jaina) Kāṇci. This division roughly corresponds to the spatial distribution of temples in Kāṇci though there are some important Vaishnava divya deśas in Pēriya Kāṇci. Cinna Kāṇci is dominated by the Varadarāja Pērumāḷ temple which was the locus of the ācāryas of the Sanskrit school of Śrīvaiśṇavism and benefited from patronage during the Vijayanagara period. The goddess has been completely relegated to Śiva Kāṇci where, despite being mistress of her own temple as Kāmākṣi, she is usually considered the spouse of Śiva as Ekāmresvara.

239 See Chapter 3, Tirumalaići Āḻvār Vaiṭhavam.


241 "He who did as told". This is the name of the Lord in the said temple since he is said to have rolled up his serpent-mat and left the village as his devotee asked him to.

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velis respectively of land for the temple of TiruvAnekatangāta-paṭamūtaiya Mahādeva, i.e., the Lord who does not stay more than one (night) and (rests under) the canopy of the serpent.

The dependence of the hagiographers on hoary oral traditions is seen again in the case of the Mutalālvārs. Even though only two of the three Ālvārs who are said to have huddled together during the storm in an itaikali (passageway) have mentioned TirukKovalur in their hymns, the hagiographies, usually so careful in using the evidence from the hymns, are clear about the poets of the three Tiruvantādis having come together. The correspondence is emphasized by the ācāryas glossing the first stanza of each of the three Tiruvantādis as a record of the particular divine experience. To a ‘secular’ reader, however, there seems little connection between the verses in question and the experience they are supposed to refer to. Pōykai does, however, speak of being granted a vision of the Lord in an itaikali in the context of Kovalur.

In fact, Tirumankai, a later Ālvār, also refers to the Lord of Kaṇṇamankai as the One who appeared in an itaikali in Kovaḷ. An inscription from the Trivikrama Pērumāl temple in TirukKovalur dated to CE 1008, recording donations for the conduct of a tirumaṇjana ceremony on the days of uttāraṇam and daksīṇāṇam refers to the deity as TiruvIṭaikali Ālvār (‘the sacred-passageway–Lord’). Three other inscriptions dated to the 11th and 12th centuries from the same temple speak of the deity by this name. The popular name of the deity in this temple evidently preserves memories of an old myth, possibly a local legend which however had gained sufficiently wide currency by the eighth century for Tirumankai to refer to it. Clearly then, there were older popular traditions about the Ālvārs that the

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244 Pōykai, Mutal Tiruvantuṭaḍi 1, “The earth is my lamp, the ocean my oil, the radiant sun the flame. I offer this garland of songs at the feet of the discus-bearing Lord to cross the ocean of misery.” Pūtam, Iraṇṭam Tiruvantuṭaḍi 1, “Love is my lamp, eagerness the oil, my heart the wick. Melting, I light this lamp and offer this Tamil garland of knowledge.” Pey, Müṇṟam Tiruvantuṭaḍi 1, “I have see Tiru, I have His golden frame! I have seen His radiant complexion. I have seen Him of the lovely discus and the right-whirled conch.”

Tiru = Sanskrit Śrī and can be read both as a proper noun and as auspiciousness. The Śrīvaiṣṇava ācāryas interpret this reference to Tiru as indicative of the inseparability of the Lord and Śrī—a theological concept of central importance. Translation by Kanaka Jagannathan.
245 Pōykai, Mutal Tiruvantuṭaḍi 86.
246 Pēriya Tirumōḷi 7.10.4.
hagiographers could at best embellish and embroider with some details; if these older narratives provided them with a stock of colours with which to paint their canvases, they also circumscribed the final picture. In other words, it was within very well-defined limits that these hagiographical accounts could be articulated.

The inscription from the Caurirāja Pērumāl temple in TirukKaṇṇapuram, Nānnilam tāluk dated to CE 1128 that refers to the deity as ‘CauripPērumāl sung by Tirumankai Āḻvār’ may not be remarkable, for the tradition of singing the hymns of the Āḻvārs and Nāyaṉmārs was clearly well-established much earlier. What is interesting is that far more elaborate traditions regarding the saint-poets had been already either constructed or existed by this time, for an inscription of CE 1127 from the Aṣṭabhujakaram temple in Kānci records a donation for the requirements of worship on the 13 keṭṭai days of every year, keṭṭai being the birth nakṣatra of Pōykaiyāḻvār and Pūttatāḻvār. A Kotai-Āṉḍāl nandavanam (garden) is referred to in an inscription of CE 1126 from Srirangam. An inscription of CE 1188 from the Srirangam temple registers a gift of land by a resident (name lost) of Malli nāḍu for rearing a flower garden called Cūṭikōṭuttāl, and for the supply of a garland to the god. The use of the name Cūṭikōṭuttāl and the combination Kotai-Āṉḍāl are significant. Even if we assume that the earliest hagiography, the DSC, was being composed or had recently been composed by this time, it is very unlikely that a purely textual construction of brahmanical ācāryas would have immediately found resonance in popular discourse. Again, therefore, it appears that there was an older tradition around which the hagiographical narratives were constructed. Two taniyāns (free standing stanzas of praise) composed by Pēriya Nampi and Tirumalai Nampi, both disciples of Yāmuna, speak of Tiruppāṇāḻvār as munivāhana. Was there an oral tradition revolving around an outcaste saint that these early ācāryas absorbed, and transferred to the unknown poet of the Amalanāḍīpirān?

253 ‘She who gave what she had worn’, a reference to Āṉḍāl.
254 A reference to his having been carried into the sanctum of the Srirangam temple by the priest, Lokasārangamuni. See Chapter 2, Tiruppāṇāḻvār Vaibhavam.
255 The example of the 63 Saiva Nāyaṉmārs is illuminating. Even from the elliptical references in the Tiruttōṇṭartōkai, it is evident that Sundarar was drawing on oral traditions about old devotees of Śiva. Many details in the stories that have finally come down to us through the medium of Cekkilār’s Pēriya Purāṇam may, however, owe to the circumstances and contexts of the latter composition.
The dependence on oral traditions might explain the incompleteness of some stories and the entirely miraculous and unrealistic one of Tirumalıcai. This begs the question of whether the narratives of Kulaşekhara and Töŋtaratıpöti also have some basis in oral traditions. It is not possible to give a satisfactory answer with the available evidence. A perusal of the hagiographical accounts of the Ālvārs (and for that matter, even the ācāryas) shows that many of them seem largely believable, with just a hint of magic to the realism. Perhaps some of the episodes in the accounts that cannot be substantiated by the hymnal evidence can be traced back to popular narratives. This might also explain why the accounts of the Mutalālvārs are so brief: perhaps the composers of the hagiographies simply did not have enough to work on.

The installation of images of the Nāyaṇmārs in Rājarāja’s great temple at Tanjavur in the beginning of the eleventh century attests to their apotheosis at least some time earlier. There are two earlier references dated to CE 995 and 997, of gifts for some offerings in “the shrine of Nampi Ārūrān (Sundarar) who composed the Tiruppatiyam” from the Āmravaneśvara temple in Kūkūr, Kumbhakoṇam tāluk. The epigraphic evidence from the Vaiṣṇava stream is, as usual, less abundant, and later in time. A shrine to Kulašekhara Pērumāl was set up by a private individual in the Gopālasvāmi temple in Mannārkoil, Ambāsamudram tāluk in CE 1021. A gift made to the shrine of Tirumankai Ālvār in the Caurirāja Pērumāl temple in TirukKannapuram, Nannilam tāluk, in CE 1082, shows the Ālvār was already apotheosized. It is believed that Tirumankai was the first of the Ālvārs to be represented in iconographic form. The earliest epigraphic evidence for an image of Tiruppāṇālvār seems to be the one dated to CE 1275 from the Vaikuṇṭha Pērumāl temple in Tiruvēṇainallūr, TirukKoyilūr tāluk. Arguing that non-brāhmaṇa temple participation in the case of Vaiṣṇavism became significant only after Rāmānuja, Champakalakshmi further says, “the worship of the twelve Ālvārs, including the śūdra Nammālvār and the bard Tiruppāṇālvār was, [to an extent], the result of liberalism in temple worship introduced by Rāmānuja—who tried to bring about a synthesis between the Vedic and Tamil traditions, between the metaphysical severity of

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256 Eight of twelve accounts.
257 Mahalingam, 1985, Vol. VII, pp 598-619, Tj 2636 to 2732 are from the great temple at Tanjavur; a number of these inscriptions refer to the installation of the images of the Nāyaṇmārs.
262 R Champakalakshmi, “Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India: A Review Article”, The Indian Economic and Social History Review Vol. 18, 1981, no.3-4, p. 421.
Vedānta and the personal and emotionally powerful bhakti and between the varṇa basis of Vedic social division and the sectarian orientation of bhakti in south India.263 While we do not possess early epigraphic evidence for the apotheosis of the archetypal low-caste saints, Nammāḻvār and Tiruppāṇāḻvār, the late-tenth century Ukkal inscription referring to Tiruvāyumōḷi-deva is significant.264 Secondly, though we have already seen the role of the acaryic tradition in shaping a comparatively egalitarian community, it needs to be asked whether it was the acāryas/Rāmānuja who liberalised temple worship or if they were themselves inheritors of a complex temple tradition that involved the larger community and were essentially providing scriptural justification for the same.

Hardy has suggested that though the temple culture—which he deems a northern introduction—was stimulated and developed in the south through the ecstatic devotion of the saint-poets, temple ritualism and Tamil devotionalism remained “separate and potentially antagonistic entities” such that the “elitism of the institution and its refusal to permit certain sections of the populace... to participate in its ritual events... meant that certain members of the Tamil devotional movement were excluded from the source of its own religion (the entrancing sight of the god in his temple)”265. Apart from the fact that this view is incompatible with some invaluable suggestions he himself has made elsewhere266 regarding the history of Āḻvār bhakti, it falls into the common error of regarding the story of Tiruppāṇāḻvār as representative of the period of the bhakti movement.267 My point is not to argue that temples were open to members of all castes in the late first millennium; brahmanical orthodoxy was firmly enough established to rule that possibility out. Rather, it appears that the temple culture268 exhibited, even as it developed, features derived from and grounded in the bhakti tradition. This points to a role of the larger community, including several non-

263 R Champakalakshmi, “Religion and Social Change in Tamil Nadu AD 600-1300”, NN Bhattacharyya (ed), Medieval Bhakti Movements in India: Sri Caitanya Quincentenary Commemoration Volume, Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi, 1989, p. 171.
266 These will be discussed shortly below.
267 This is particularly surprising since Hardy was among the earliest to point out the ascription of authorship of unsigned compositions by the acaryic tradition.
268 I am not in a position to enter the debate on whether the temple was a northern or southern phenomenon in its origins, but considering the early evidence of the hymns of the Āḻvārs and Nāyānmar as well as the inscriptive evidence, there seems little reason to speak of the temple culture as we know it to be a northern introduction into the south.
brahmāṇa castes, in the shaping of the institution which was, however, in all likelihood, dominated by brahmāṇas. It was to this institution that Rāmānuja succeeded, so to speak. His ‘reforms’ must, therefore, be seen not so much as liberalising temple worship as an attempt to acquire wider brahmanical sanction for unorthodox customs established in the Tamil land which probably were disapproved of by the more conservative smārta establishment. I will return to this point shortly.

Our hagiographies suggest that both the worship of the Ālvārs and the recitation of their hymns were customs of hoary antiquity. In fact, they attribute the initiation of the custom of reciting the hymns over a period of twenty days in the month of Mārkali to Tirumankai Ālvār. On the other hand, we have seen that the hymns were believed to be lost till they were rediscovered by Nāṭhamuni who set them to music and re-established the practice of singing them in temples. The epigraphic evidence does point to an older tradition of reverence for both the saints and their hymns. Besides, it is likely that the hymns of at least Pēriyālvār and Āṇḍāl, closely related to popular worship practices, and often with a folksong-like quality, were adopted by the ordinary masses in their daily and life-cycle rituals.

v) The Integration

It is clear that the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition, believing in an ancient tradition of worship of the Ālvārs and tracing its spiritual-preceptorial lineage to them, was faced with an awkward gap in the guruparamparā which it resolved by the tale of Nāṭhamuni’s miraculous apprehension of the hymns of the saint-poets and his hailing them as the Drāvida Veda. Let me point out again here that the claim of Vedic status for the Tiruvāymōli had been made already in the Kaṭṭinunciruttāmpu. In fact, the tensions inherent in this claim can be seen in the Tamil poem itself, for Madhurakavi says that scholars versed in the four Vedas consider him low and impure, but Catakopan is his father, mother and master. That this claim needed reiteration even later, by the brahmāṇa-led Śrīvaiṣṇava movement, is brought out by the hagiographic tale of Madhurakavi having to subject the Tiruvāymōli to the Sangam test in which, needless

269 See above, an incident from Tirumankai Ālvār Vaibhavam in the Agpp; an incident from Tirumankai Ālvār Vaibhavam in the DSC; variant telling of the above from the Tirumankai Ālvār Vaibhavam in the Mgpp.

270 Nāṭhamuni is also said to have learnt of the forgotten practice of performing the adhyayanotsava in the month of Mārkali and re-instituted it along with such ancient rituals as having the processional image of Nammālvār being brought to the Srirangam temple for the same. See Agpp, Mgpp, Nāṭhamunikal Vaibhavam.

271 Kaṭṭinunciruttāmpu 3.
to say, he was vindicated. Further, Madhurakavi is said to have had an image of Nammāḻvār consecrated as an arca and arranged for the performance of rituals and worship to the same. In the absence of epigraphic evidence for the worship of the Āḻvārs in image form before the late tenth century, it is tempting to dismiss this as a fabrication meant merely to underline a long tradition of revering Nammāḻvār. However, certain aspects of the larger story compel us to consider this legend with care. For instance, the fundamental break between the Āḻvārs and the acaryic tradition could have been glossed entirely by describing Nāthamuni as a descendant or direct disciple of Madhurakavi whom the hagiographies regard as a brāhmaṇa. That the hagiographical literature chooses rather to retain the ‘gap’ is significant. Thirty eight years ago, JAB van Buitenen noted,

"... the fact stands out that Nāthamuni had to go to the common people in order to collect the hymns of the Āḻvārs that had been rejected by the orthodox authorities. Although the Tamil scriptures had not received official sanction for use in temple worship, they were current among the people and certainly also in use at their devotional worship. What Nāthamuni in effect did was to incorporate the scriptures, henceforth known as Dravida Veda, into the temple worship at Śrīrangam."  

Walter Neevel built on Buitenen’s path-breaking insight through analysis of the role of the four earliest ācāryas in the integration of originally non-Vedic popular movements, not only Pāñcarātra but also the bhakti of the Āḻvārs into the classical Vedic tradition. Hardy furthered the argument by suggesting that the legend of Nāthamuni’s recovery of the hymns indicates the acquisition by a brāhmaṇa family of the Cola country of the knowledge of Nammāḻvār’s works and their acceptance as the Tamil Vedas. Hardy argued that Madhurakavi was probably not a direct disciple of Nammāḻvār’s, but a devotee of the saint.

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272 Agpp, Madhurakavi Āḻvār Vaibhavam. See Chapter 3.
273 Agpp, Mgpp, Madhurakavi Āḻvār Vaibhavam. See Chapter 3.
274 JAB van Buitenen, Āgama Prāmāṇyam of Yāmuna, op cit., p. 3. Though this observation is of fundamental significance for understanding the formation of Śrīvaiṣṇavism, the statement that the hymns of the Āḻvārs had been rejected by the orthodox authorities presumes an earlier ‘confrontation’ in which the Tamil hymns were rejected. Secondly, the epigraphic evidence points to the gradual growth of the influence of bhakti devotionalism with its attendant features, including singing of the saints’ songs in temples from the ninth century itself, particularly in the Śaiva case where a revolutionary intervention such as Nāthamuni’s is not known.
275 Walter G Neevel, Yamuna’s Vedanta and Pancaratra: Integrating the Classical with the Popular, Scholars Press, Missoula, 1977, p. x. I have had access only to the first few pages of this work, nearly at the end of my own.
who had been apotheosized in a temple in his native TirukKurukur.\textsuperscript{277} This appears doubtful\textsuperscript{278} but does not impact the analysis that follows.

It seems fairly clear that—whether Madhurakavi was separated by several generations from Nammālvār and was merely a devotee of his who had inherited the tradition of reciting his hymns or whether the two were actually master and disciple and Nathamuni met in TirukKurukur descendants of Madhurakavi who had preserved a tradition of reciting the hymns of the master—there was, by the mid-tenth century, a strong local tradition of worship of the saint-poet, possibly as a separate cult centred around the sthalavrksa\textsuperscript{279} outside the main Viṣṇu temple of the village. Some resistance on the part of at least some sections of the brāhmaṇa community to the apotheosis of the saint and the claim of Vedic status for his hymns seems likely\textsuperscript{280} especially as this cult seems to have had little regard for the hierarchies of the orthodox caste order.\textsuperscript{281} It must be remembered too that this was a Vaiṣṇava community; the hymns of Nammālvār are clearly focussed on Viṣṇu as the Supreme Lord and are frequently polemical with regard to other deities.\textsuperscript{282} The bhakti of the Ālvārs (and Nāyaṇmārs) had always a strong communitarian aspect to it; it was not a introverted meditative devotion—whatever the hagiographies might say about Nammālvār—but one which exuberantly called out to fellow men (and women) to join in the worship of the chosen deity. This is evident not only in the phalāṣruti verses but in numerous stanzas throughout the corpus of the NDP as well. Kulaśekhara Ālvār says of the Lord of Arangam, “The crowds of His devotees sing and dance and call out ‘Rangā!’ When will I join them?”\textsuperscript{283} Āṇḍāl invites her girlfriends to join in the performance of the pāvai nompu.\textsuperscript{284} Periyaḷvār urges people to name their children after the Lord Dāmodara who smote the cart, and exult.\textsuperscript{285} “Come and

\textsuperscript{277} Hardy, ibid, pp. 41-42.
\textsuperscript{278} See Chapter 1-iii, discussion on dates and Chapter 3-iv.
\textsuperscript{279} The tamarind tree under which Nammālvār is supposed to have meditated for sixteen years is evidently an ancient one of impressive dimensions. (Personal visit). Temple functionaries say that the leaves of the tree do not ‘sleep’, i.e., close at night unlike normal tamarind trees’—which I could not verify—and that this tree flowers and fruits but that the fruits do not ripen. The branches were heavily laden with tamarind pods; again, I cannot distinguish unripe pods from ripe ones, but with pilgrims visiting the shrine throughout the year, this account would be difficult to maintain if untrue.
\textsuperscript{280} See reference to Kaṇṇinuciruttāmpu 3 cited above.
\textsuperscript{281} Nammālvār says in Tiruvāyāmolfi 3.7.9, “The servant’s servant of even a caṇḍāla among lowly caṇḍālas below the four jātis is my master if he is a true devotee of my gem-hued Lord who bears the discus”.
\textsuperscript{282} See Chapter 4.
\textsuperscript{283} Pēṟumāl Tirumolfi 2.1.
\textsuperscript{284} Tiruppāvai 1-30.
\textsuperscript{285} Pēriyāḷvār Tirumolfi 4.6.6.
offer worship with fresh flower garlands and hearts filled with love in TirukKurunkuti where sharp-beaked egrets rejoice with their mates in fields filled with water birds”, says Tirumankai.286

Nāthamuni, by all accounts, seems to have belonged to a priestly brāhmaṇa family287 deeply influenced by the Pāñcarātra, a cult which accepts the supremacy of Viṣṇu. Indeed, it is even possible that he belonged to the community that called itself Śrīvaiṣṇava—an inscription from Srirangam dated to CE 945 mentions Śrīvaiṣṇavas as the recipients of a gift of gold for the deity’s bath.288 The community is mentioned by name in Tiruppati in an inscription of CE 966,289 and in another tenth century inscription from a ruined Viṣṇu temple in Arakkonam.290 The Śrīvaiṣṇavas appear in almost all these early epigraphic records as important temple functionaries291 and may have been largely brāhmaṇas. Was this community in general and Nāthamuni’s family in particular influenced by the bhakti of the Āḻvārs, and if so, to what degree? Considering the popularity of Tiruppatiyam singing in temples in the tenth century,292 and the strong temple-orientation of a number of the bhakti saints, it is likely that Nāthamuni would have been aware of bhakti devotionalism and its widespread popular appeal. In any case, he did learn of the cult around Nammāḻvār—possibly through pilgrims from Nammāḻvār’s native Kurukūr who visited his temple as the hagiographies have it—and set about incorporating this worship system into the brahmanical Vaiṣṇava one. I believe that the hagiographies record a historical fact when they speak of his sojourn to TirukKurukūr to learn

286 Pēriya Tirumoli 9.6.8.
287 R Champakalakshmi, “From Devotion to Dissent and Domination”, in R Champakalakshmi and S Gopal (eds), Tradition, Dissent and Ideology, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1996, pp. 145, cites George Hart III, The Poems of the Ancient Tamils: Their Milieu and their Sanskrit Counterparts, Berkeley, California, 1975, pp. 51-58, “There were several kinds of brahmans in the Tamil land, each showing different degrees of assimilation of the indigenous culture”. Hierarchies in status between these different groups meant that Nāthamuni as a temple priest was more likely to have been receptive to the folk culture represented by Āḻvār devotionism than a Smārta brahmaṇa.
292 See inscriptive evidence in Chapter 1, section on Sources.
the ‘thousand’ stanzas\textsuperscript{293} of the Tiruvāyūmōli. The recitation of Nāmāḻvār’s hymns and probably even Madhurakavi’s Kāṇṇinunciruttāmpu was, in all likelihood, a living tradition in the saint’s hometown. Further, I suggest that Nāthamuni’s subsequent pilgrimage (which seems rather restricted by the usual standards of the guruparamparās) was made with the specific purpose of recovering other hymns of Vaiṣṇava saints.

This appropriation of an older and well-established tradition would have generated its own tensions and demanded certain accommodations from the Śrīvaishnava community. One of the ways in which this was articulated was the acknowledgement of Vedic status for the hymns of the Tamil saints, something which was accepted within the Tamil cult itself long before it was recognized by a brahmanical tradition. Indeed, the Kāṇṇinunciruttāmpu’s declaration that Caṭakopan rendered the inner meaning of the Vedas in Tamil\textsuperscript{294} only makes explicit what seems implicit in the verses of several other Ālvārs.\textsuperscript{295} The sanctity of Tamil is, of course, emphasized in a number of hymns where the signature stanza mentions the rewards to be got from recitation/ singing of the Tamil poem.\textsuperscript{296} More significant is the parallelism between the Tamil songs and Sanskrit Vedas suggested in several hymns. Kulaśekhara describes the Lord of Srirangam as sweet Tamil songs and as the northern tongue.\textsuperscript{297} Tirumaliçai Āḻvār says, “The name of the red-eyed Lord is sweet to the ear. Know that it is the refuge of men. I have found it excellent substance for my poetry. It is the very substance of the Vedas”.\textsuperscript{298} Tirumankai Āḻvār says, “The Lord resides with joy in Āḻuntir where meritorious brāhmaṇas adept in reciting pure Tamil and northern works\textsuperscript{299} perform fire sacrifices whose smoke clouds the skies”.\textsuperscript{300} He praises the Lord as himself the five elements, Tamil poetry and northern works, the sun, the moon, the four quarters, the essence within the Upanisads.\textsuperscript{301} Nāmāḻvār’s repeatedly saying that the Lord Himself sings His own praises in His own words through him\textsuperscript{302} suggests that his songs are sruti like the Vedas. Indeed, Nāmāḻvār’s mystic pronouncements often indicate his identification with the Supreme Lord, an aspect noted and recognized by the post-tenth century Śrīvaishnava tradition, and probably well before that by

\textsuperscript{293} The Tiruvāyūmōli comprises 1102 hymns but the eleventh stanza of most decades have as their refrain, “These ten of a thousand…”

\textsuperscript{294} Kāṇṇinunciruttāmpu 8, 9.

\textsuperscript{295} A parallel claim can be seen in some hymns of the Nāyānārs Appar and Sambandar too.

\textsuperscript{296} Nācciya Tirumōli 6.10, Tiruppāvai 30, Pērumāḻ Tirumōli 2.10 etc.

\textsuperscript{297} Pērumāḻ Tirumōli 1.4.

\textsuperscript{298} Nāmukkan Tiruvantādī 69.

\textsuperscript{299} The words are, “cēntamilum vatakalaiyum tikalnta nāvar…”.

\textsuperscript{300} Pēriyā Tirumōli 7.8.7.

\textsuperscript{301} Tirunēṭuntāṇṭakam 4.

\textsuperscript{302} Tiruvāyūmōli 7.9.1-10; 10.7.5.
the Tamil cult around the poet-saint. Yāmuna’s Āgama Prāmāṇya that argues for the Vedic validity of the Pāñcarātra was a further step in this process of accommodation. It has been argued that it was only under the ācāryas Yāmuna and Rāmānuja that the “northern schemata of Viṣṇu and his avatāras, and of ParaVāsudeva and his vyūhas and vibhūtis replace[d] the more archaic and simple conceptions of the south.”303 This argument is scarcely tenable considering the deep familiarity of almost all the Āḻvārs with the various avatāras of Viṣṇu and the complex ways in which they conceive the Lord, identifying the temple arcā with the various avatāras and with the supreme cosmic Lord as well. While I do not believe, unlike Hudson,304 that the entire corpus of poetry of several Āḻvārs is essentially an exposition of Pāñcarātric principles, his argument does establish the Āḻvārs’ awareness of these concepts. The influence of Pāñcarātra on the temple cult appears, from the inscriptional evidence itself,305 not to speak of the way the saints imaged the temple in their hymns, to have been substantial. Nāṭhamuni’s appropriation of the Tamil cult of worship of the Āḻvārs in temples had been essentially articulated in a vernacular idiom. The composition of Sanskrit treatises by his grandson was essential to legitimise it in a brahmanical framework. However, the Pāñcarātra Āgama texts have no place in Vedānta or Uttara Mimāmsa306 and the Vedic compatibility of the Āḻvār tradition remained a sectarian viewpoint.

The second ‘break’ in the preceptorial lineage, between Yāmunācārya and Rāmānuja, and the latter’s writing exclusively in Sanskrit has led to much theorising about Rāmānuja’s relationship to the entire Āḻvār tradition. Robert Lester has disputed the authorship of the three Gadyas and the Nityagrantha where Rāmānuja displays a ritualistic attitude not seen in his major philosophical works.307 John Carman and Vasudha Narayanan have taken pains to point out that whether the account of Tirukkurukai Pirān Pillān writing the first commentary on the Tiruvāymōli at Rāmānuja’s explicit wish is historically accurate or not, the former’s use of phraseology is close to and sometimes identical with the language of Rāmānuja. Spelling out the question of the extent of the unacknowledged influence of the entire Āḻvār tradition on Rāmānuja’s writings which are exclusively in Sanskrit and silent over the Tamil hymns, they

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303 Hardy, Viraha Bhakti, op cit., p. 221.
305 See early references to various temple rituals above.
307 See Chapter 2. It appears that Lester has revoked his earlier objections to Rāmānuja’s authorship of these texts. Personal communication from Prof KKA Venkatachari, May 2009.
believe that the key to this may lie in the works of his immediate disciples. Hardy’s argument about the erasure of emotionalism from the Āḻvārs’ hymns in the commentarial tradition also assumes a fundamental shift in the religious conception that occurred from the Āḻvārs to the acāryas. I agree that important shifts and changes did take place but I see them as the function of the coming together of three diverse streams than as changes in the course of the evolution of a unitary tradition.

Let us briefly review relevant aspects of the hagiography of Rāmānuja. Our texts are unanimous in portraying his family as a Vedic brāhmaṇa one. The choice of Yādava Prakāśa, an Advaitin, as guru for the boy is indicative of its Vedantic moorings. On the other hand, the association of Rāmānuja’s maternal uncle, Pēriya Tirumalai Nampi, with the Viṣṇu temple at Tiruppati underlines the Vaiṣṇava orientation of the family. The well-known episodes of disagreements between Rāmānuja and his teacher over the interpretation of various Upanisadic passages indicate the growing perception in the young scholar’s mind that his devotional orientation was incompatible with the teachings of Advaita Vedānta. His final break with Yādava and subsequent exposition of Viśiṣṭādvaita as a philosophical system were crucial for establishing the devotionalism of the Āḻvārs and the religious system it had generated as a valid one in the pan-Indian, Sanskritic-brahmanical context. Thus, far from disputing Rāmānuja’s reverence of the Tamil saint-poets, I suggest that Rāmānuja entered the Śrīvaiṣṇava ‘movement’ in order to legitimise its fundamental religious conceptions which, by the eleventh century, were a composite of a Tamil tradition of bhakti deriving from and deifying the Āḻvārs, and a brahmanical Vaiṣṇava one. The hagiographical tradition is not far from the truth in suggesting that Rāmānuja was not a direct disciple of Yāmunācārya but the lesson there is not that Rāmānuja was indifferent to the Āḻvārs. In fact, as one observes the hagiographies bending over themselves in trying to establish that Rāmānuja was the true spiritual heir of Yāmunācārya, having acquired all the learning he would have from the master himself through the medium of his five disciples—and I might add, wondering where the


[309] There naturally occurred further and important changes over the next several centuries in the evolution of a ‘unified’ tradition in response both to changes in the socio-political situation and the internal dynamics of the sectarian religious community. I have considered some of them in the previous chapters.

[310] CJ Bartley’s, *The Theology of Ramanuja*, op cit., p. 2, perceptively points out, “Ramanuja was an agent of Vedanticisation in what was originally a non-Vedic tradition. He sought to harmonise the tenets of his bhakti cult with those of the classical Vedantic tradition...”. I differ from him in his explanation for Rāmānuja’s silence on the Tamil Veda. “For him, bhakti is a contemplative and an intellectual rather than an emotional phenomenon”. Ibid, p. 3.
‘catch’ is—one tends to overlook a far more critical point; a point, moreover, so obvious as to scarcely need ‘discovery’. The Vedantin Rāmānuja adopted the latter’s school as being more compatible with his own religio-philosophical ideas.311 According to the hagiographical accounts, Rāmānuja composed his important philosophical works after he came to head Yāmuna’s school as its most influential ācārya. There can be little doubt, however, that the germ of the ideas elaborated in the Śrībhāṣya and other texts was already present when he finally broke with Yādava; indeed, the differences between student and teacher were over interpretations regarding the nature of the supreme soul—Rāmānuja’s being a theological one as opposed to Yādava’s insistence on a nirgūna Brahman.

The account of Rāmānuja’s discipleship under five of Yāmuna’s pupils underlines his attempt to fully understand and integrate the older tradition with his philosophical principles eventually elaborated as Viśiṣṭādvaita. Śrīvaiṣṇavism, thus, came to denote from the period of Rāmānuja onwards, a religious system that revered a set of Tamil saint-poets and their hymns, and the Vedantic philosophical system of Viśiṣṭādvaita. It took its distinctive name from the brahmanical community which had appropriated the Tamil cult and which paved the way for it to acquire a pan-Indian Sanskritic legitimacy. In the process of this integration, the old community of Śrīvaiṣṇavas necessarily shed its exclusive brahmanism, initially integrating those non-brāhmaṇa groups who had been the original custodians of the fundamental religious beliefs of the sect and accommodating, over the next few centuries, numerous others.

Though Viśiṣṭādvaita was formulated as the philosophical basis for the bhakti of the Āḻvārs, the older tradition, nourished on different impulses, could not always fit neatly into the Vedantic framework. One can scarcely put it better than Kaylor and Venkatachari,

“Later Śrīvaiṣṇava ācāryas follow the general Hindu tendency to systematize and regularize the religious experience, and they incorporate Nammāḻvār’s hymns into their system which is only partly derived from it... Nammāḻvār’s hymns reflect primary religious experience; as such, they are pre-philosophical and pre-theological and pre-prescriptive; though they certainly contain philosophy and theology and ritual indications, they are not expressed for the purpose of prescribing in any of these areas, and they are resistant to later attempts to find in them normative thought and normative action”.312

311 Rāmānuja’s ‘entry’ into the tradition is critical for the additional reason that unlike Nāṭhamuni and his grandson Yāmuna, he belonged to the more orthodox Śmaṭa brāhmaṇa group and was, thus, uniquely in a position of arguing Vedic compatibility for the Tamil tradition. See also footnote 287 above.

312 Kaylor and Venkatachari, God Far, God Near, op cit., p. 67.
The resultant tensions, doctrinal as well as social, necessitated continuous interpretation and elaboration of the older tradition of the Āḷvārs, which was carried out through the composition of hagiographies, commentaries, praise-poems and philosophical works.