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The Archaeology of Kṛṣṇa at Tiruvel̥l̥arai, a Site for Tamil Poetry in the 7th–9th Centuries

ABSTRACT: In many of the oldest known sites of the Pāṇḍya country located not far from the Kāverī River in Tamil Nadu, a dual Hindu obedience, Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva, was developed concomitantly.¹ Alongside these Bhakti deities, others are present in these places of communication with the sacred. As stone figures attached to the site and texts evoking the place are the two means used to give form to their deities, one would expect these two mediums to interact, but it is often difficult to correlate them in the Tamil country of the first millennium. This paper aims at exploring such possible relationships at Tiruvel̥l̥arai, the earliest remains of which date to the 8th c. The site has unique archaeological features, such as a *svastika*-shaped well and the earliest known depictions of some of Kṛṣṇa's feats; it inspired hymns of the Tamil Vaiṣṇava devotional corpus, the *Divyaprabandham*, and offers numerous inscriptions. The link between Śiva, Viṣṇu and local goddesses proves to be as remarkable here as that between texts and archaeology.

KEYWORDS: *Divyaprabandham*, Tiruvel̥l̥arai, *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, Muttaraiyar, Pallava, Kṛṣṇa's iconography

¹ The area where Tiruvel̥l̥arai is located can be considered to also belong to the Cōlanāṭu. Inscriptions recorded here are dated in Pallava regnal years, Cōla regnal years and Pāṇḍya (Pāṇṭiya) regnal years. But the practice of a double *garbhagrha* is acknowledged to the south of the zone, from Trichy, considered by some as the western frontier of the Cōlanāṭu while Trichy was alternately a Pallava, a Pāṇḍya or a Cōla city.

If impressive vestiges, some as ancient as the Pallava-Pāṇḍya period of the area (7th–9th c.), are still visible in the village of Tiruveḷḷarai located twenty-five kms to the north-west of today's Trichy, the place is mainly known as one of the 108 sites mentioned in the *Divya-prabandham* (*Tiv.*), the Vaiṣṇava Tamil devotional corpus, dated *ca.* 7th to 9th c. Under the names of Veḷḷarai or Tiruveḷḷarai, the site was praised by Periyālvār (*Tiv.* 192–201) and Tirumaṅkai Ālvār (*Tiv.* 1368–1377),² two of the twelve poet-saints who composed the *Tiv.* poems. It is, thus, a markedly Vaiṣṇava site. However, archaeology highlights a multi-devotional nature that is also encountered in the surrounding environment. This non-sectarian character may have been constitutive of the earliest identity of the site expressed through a monumental *svastika*-shaped well, each of whose branches bears a distinct deity represented in finely carved reliefs, whereas a Śaiva temple was developed from a cave whose adjacent rocks are inscribed with records of the enduring devotion paid there, from the 9th c., by Śaiva devotees. Thus, Tiruveḷḷarai seems to be an exemplary case of those sites from the Tamil country where texts they had inspired are not easy to correlate with present archaeological data.³ Poems of distinctly Vaiṣṇava character praise Tiruveḷḷarai whereas archaeology exhibits simultaneous importance of Śiva and other deities.

² The *Tiv.* is an anthology of Tamil Bhakti poetry of 4000 (*Nālāyira Tivvi-yap Pirappantam*) stanzas. Authored by 3 Nāyaṅmārs, the anthology of the *Tēvāram* is the Śaiva equivalent. The dates of both anthologies are still debated, as well as the internal chronologies of the authors, but a kind of scientific consensus places the *Tiv.* between the 7th and 9th c. and the *Tēvāram* a little earlier, probably in the 7th and 8th c. The references given here are to the complete poems consecrated to the site; Tiruveḷḷarai also appears in stanzas enumerating several sites (*Tiv.* 71 for Periyālvār; 1851 [*Periya tirumōḷi* 10.1.4], 2770 [*Periya Tirumaṅal*] for Tirumaṅkai). For text, we used the edition of Jagathrachagan 2002 and give two references wherever necessary (one reference from the whole of the *Tiv.* and one from within this or that work, as Tirumaṅkai composed several works but Periyālvār only one); translations if any are ours.

³ On the multi-religious nature of sites and modern scholarship's problems with the neat categorization of sites as Vaiṣṇava or Śaiva, see Orr 2005.

A careful examination proved worthwhile from this perspective, and it is proposed to ground the Vaiṣṇava devotional texts praising Tiruveḷḷarai on the early inscriptions and carvings at the site. Their materiality sheds light on aspects of the original project lying at the base of the composition of the *Tiv.* poems. It turns out this is not only a creative site for devotion but a place to be associated with poetry.

A minor or a major site?

With only two decades from the *Tiv.*, one of them by Tirumaṅkaiyālvār who sung about no less than 86 places in his work, Tiruveḷḷarai does not appear as a major site amongst the 108 praised places of the Bhakti Vaiṣṇava corpus that numbers ‘4000 stanzas’. From the perspective of historiography, Tiruveḷḷarai also seems minor. Its name is seldom encountered in studies of the *Tiv.*; it is a dot of the smallest encountered species in the fundamental book of F. H. Hardy (1983) on Kṛṣṇa devotion in South India and one looks in vain for it in the indexes not only of this work but elsewhere. The site is today a minor one in terms of frequentation, the village being small, and this contemporary situation may be reflected in the scholarship. Were the circumstances the same when the songs praising the site were first composed? With no less than two cave temples (Figs 1–3), one of which is consecrated to Śiva, a monumental well adorned with exquisite reliefs bearing several deities (Figs 5–11), a temple built for Viṣṇu beautified by an ornamented stone base (Figs 13–15), dozens of inscriptions (Figs 2, 11–12), and other images and artefacts of a more local character (Fig. 4), the site is a major one from an archaeological perspective.⁴ The dynasties recorded in the epigraphy of the site confirm its importance at the end of the first millennium.

To order the vestiges we may indeed follow the traditional periodization of the monuments of Tamil Nadu, where archaeology and history

⁴ It is more often cited in Champakalakshmi 1981 than in Hardy 1983, for instance, but no monographical work on the site is available.

are structured in the first millennium by the major dynasties of the Pallava, the Pāṇḍya and the Cōḷa. The regnal years their kings used to date the inscriptions they commissioned were used as well by other people when they needed to date their own records. In Tiruveḷḷarai, we encounter, in chronological order, inscriptions dated in the Pallava (Fig. 11) and early Pāṇḍya regnal years that correspond to a span of time between the 7th and 9th c.; the Cōḷa regnal years (Fig. 2), here between the 10th and the 13th; and from the 13th, the later Pāṇḍya regnal years. In addition, certain inscriptions are dated to the Śaka era, used by others but in the Tamil country mainly by the dynasty of Vijayanagara, the earliest reported one at Tiruveḷḷarai from the beginning of the 15th c. It is thus clear that Tiruveḷḷarai is a multi-dynastic site in the sense that devotion is paid here by people acknowledging their links with all the major dynasties of the Tamil country. There is more. Tamil Nadu also boasted dynasties that can be said to be ‘minor’ as they did not last long nor ruled over a large territory. That is the case of the Muttaraiyar, usually considered petty chiefs who challenged the Cōḷas but who might have been the nucleus from which the Imperial Cōḷas themselves had grown (Schmid 2020b). These Muttaraiyars were active at Tiruveḷḷarai during this early period when the poems of the *Tiv.* about the site were composed.

Falling into several categories of devotion and dynasties, the many dimensions of the site do not facilitate easy approach. Its study is nevertheless, as we shall see, immensely rewarding.

The cave temples

The earliest vestiges of the site may be the two cave-temples located in two distinct parts of Tiruveḷḷarai that are today clearly identified, one as Vaiṣṇava, the other as Śaiva. We shall start our survey with the former, excavated in the rocky bulging out hill on which stands the Divyadeśa temple. This specific morphology of the site is recorded indeed in one stanza by Tirumaṅkai, speaking of the “gold above the rock at Veḷḷarai”.⁵

⁵ *veḷḷaraiyuḷ kallarai mēl poṇṇai Tiv. 2770 (Periya Tirumaṅal 117).*



Fig. 1. The cave temple of the Vaishnava compound of Tiruvellarai provided with two cellas seen from outside, with the “white rock” (vellarai) in the foreground. Photo taken by the author



Fig. 4. The Jyeshthā still worshipped near the Śaiva cave-temple, 9th–10th c. Photo taken by the author



Fig. 12. One inscription on a reused stone in the tank visible in the first precinct; ph.: EFEO/N. Ramaswami (Babu). Photo taken by the author



Fig. 14. Kṛṣṇa dances with pots, south face, 8th–9th c.; ph.: EFEO/N. Ramaswami (Babu).
Photo taken by the author

It may have given its name to the whole of the site as ‘*veḷḷarai*’ appears as a compound of *veḷ*, ‘white’, and *arai*, ‘rock’ and the cave temple it shelters on its southern side, at about half its height, is, plausibly, earlier than the one encountered in the Śaiva part of the site.

This Vaiṣṇava structure is an unfinished cave temple engraved with 11 inscriptions, the earliest of which is of the 10th year of one Nandivarman Pallava (Fig. 1).⁶ The king whose regnal year is used here may be either Nandivarman III (846–869), and then this inscription dates to the beginning of the 9th century (856–857), or Nandivarman II (731–795) and the inscription is of the middle of the 8th century (841–842). Both are plausible since the donation is made by a certain Vicayanalluṅṅa, a name also found in the inscription at the *svastika* well, which refers to Dantivarman Pallava (796–846), considered a son of Nandivarman II; in addition, Vicayanalluṅṅa is the name of the petitioner of a set of copper-plates issued under the rule of Nandivarman II.⁷ Whatever the identity of the kings concerned, this cave temple, the *svastika* well and the Pallavas are associated/linked through the presence of a dignitary of the Pallavas.

The cave is of an original multi-devotional type that characterizes the area as being of the 8th and 9th c., with two *garbhagrhas* (cellas) facing each other. If the only figure visible today is an unfinished door guardian, facing west and, on the other side of the cave, a vague form that could be a *liṅga*, a comparison with more finished caves of the region, such as the lower cave of Trichy or the caves at Tiruparaṅkunṅam, allows for the surmise that the *garbhagrha* facing west was devoted to Viṣṇu and the one facing east to Śiva. Unfortunately, the lacunary epigraph is today silent about any deity it might have referred to.

⁶ *Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy (ARE) 1905.537, South Indian Inscriptions (SII) 12.32.* Some inscriptions engraved on the rocky mound itself above the cave may be more ancient, but they are covered with cement and tiles, and it is not possible to say more about them.

⁷ These are the Paṭṭatāḷmaṅgalaṃ plates, issued in the year 61 of Nandivarman II (792), see Mahalingam 1988: 314–320.

With the 10 inscriptions provided with a Cōḷa regnal year engraved in the cave, the Vaiṣṇava character of the site is, however, established. These epigraphs record donations made to the deity of the large sacred temple of Tiruveḷḷarai (*tiruveḷḷarai periyaśrīkoyil perumāṇaṭikal*) and the two of them that are still legible, datable to the first half of the 10th c., are of that rare kind that mentions Kṛṣṇa and Rūkmiṇī as the inhabitants of the place.⁸ One of them is the earliest known record of the installation of an image of Rūkmiṇī.⁹ Amongst the many forms of Viṣṇu, these epigraphs stress the Kṛṣṇa flavour of the site and underline its link with female deities, two elements that will be encountered again.

There are no inscriptions of a later period engraved in the cave while there are nineteen reported ones from the 12th c. to the 16th c. in the temple built at the top. Was the cave temple no longer suitable for engraving inscriptions after the end of the Cōḷa period? Keeping in mind the state of documentation all that can be said is that this cave temple is linked with the first period of the development of the site. Its beginning may have been less markedly Vaiṣṇava than the following sequences. It certainly stands in contrast to the other cave-temple, located some six hundred metres east of this hill.

Facing west, the Śaiva cave today known as the Jambunathaswami is called the temple of Tiruvāṇaikkal (or Śrīyāṇaikkal Perumāṇaṭikal, etc.) of Tiruveḷḷarai in its inscriptions (Fig. 2). The meaning of the compound cannot be ascertained but the elephant-rock, with *āṇai*, the elephant, and *kaḷ*, the rock, is likely, given that rocks are compared to elephants in the Tamil country, whereas “the sacred elephant-rock of Tiruveḷḷarai”¹⁰ may refer to the rocky environment of the temple. The

⁸ ARE 1905.534, *SII* 3.132; ARE 1905.540.

⁹ Champakalakshmi 1981: 141–142 for references to a few other inscriptions mentioning images of Kṛṣṇa and her consort; the report refers to the setting of an image of Rūkmiṇī only.

¹⁰ See, for instance, “Tiruvāṇaikkallil Bhaṭṭāraḱar”, in a Cōḷa-period inscription, ARE 1905.513. The word *tiruvāṇai* also appears in *Tēvāram* 6.86.1, in a line where many place-names are mentioned but it is the second case of *tiruvāṇ*, the one having *tiru*, greatness, Śiva in this context.

unique *garbhagrha* of the cave shelters a *liṅga* whose rock-cut character cannot be ascertained but is plausible in this area at the time. On the southern side of the *garbhagrha*, a *liṅga* is carved in low relief on the wall and, on the northern side, a standing Viṣṇu and a seated Gaṇeśa (Fig. 3), whose style and iconography allow for a dating to the 8th or 9th century that matches the available epigraphical data. If no foundation inscription has been found, many epigraphs have indeed been engraved on the natural rock protruding in front of the cave (Fig. 2). The earliest is dated to Nandivarman III, the son of Danti, ruling in the 9th c.¹¹ After one brief Sanskrit preamble, the epigraph presents the Tamil praise of Cellikkōmāṇ Mallavāṇ, member of the Pallava family and maternal uncle of Mārpiḍugu Iḷāṅkōvēḷ Cāttan,¹² a Muttaraiyar name.¹³ Being one of the earliest Tamil versified stone inscriptions, the epigraph parallels both the inscriptions in versified Tamil praising the Muttaraiyar engraved at their capital city of Centalai (Schmid 2020b: 116–117), and, in Tiruveḷḷarai itself, the foundation well inscription which presents a gnomic Tamil stanza and is also associated with the Muttaraiyar. Finally, this early inscription of the Jambunathaswami shares with these poetical inscriptions its non-sectarian character.

This is not the case of the other, later inscriptions engraved on the rock or the wall added in front of the cave temple (Fig. 2). They record donations to Śriyānaikkal Perumāṇaṭikal at Tiruveḷḷarai, the earliest after the Pallava inscription documenting an important donation, of 120 *kalañcu* of gold, from a Pāṇḍya king in the 9th c.¹⁴ Then, twenty-seven inscriptions dated in Cōḷa regnal year attest the important devotion manifested here to the Śaiva deity between the 9th and the 12th c.

¹¹ Mahalingam 1988: 368–369 (no. 119).

¹² ARE 1905.529 and 1910.88, *SII* 12.48.

¹³ Iḷāṅkōvēḷ is used in the formula of Muttaraiyar regnal years found in several sites of the area, in the 8th and 9th c. These inscriptions are not numerous; only about a dozen are known, see Schmid 2020b: 138. On Muttaraiyar's names, Govindasamy 1965: 38–70.

¹⁴ ARE 1905.522, *SII* 13.313, dated with a Pāṇḍya regnal year for which it is impossible to give a more precise date than the 9th c.

These inscriptions are more numerous than the Cōḷa period inscriptions recorded in the Vaiṣṇava complex. That does not mean, however, that this Śaiva place was more important than the Vaiṣṇava one at that time. The number of inscriptions is not to be systematically correlated with the attractiveness of a site. Ongoing devotion makes the inscriptions disappear, along with other ancient vestiges it has produced, as the new constructions that have, since 2017, begun to cover the inscriptions in front of Jambunathaswami remind us. Still, inscriptions show that devotion was intense during the Cōḷa period on the Śaiva side of the site to become, it seems, less abundant at the end of the period, as no epigraph of a later age is recorded there.¹⁵

As usual the temple has attracted vestiges. One statue of Aiyaṅār, a deity typical of the Tamil south, has been installed in the inner courtyard. Close to the temple a stele representing the female deity called Jyeṣṭhā, the ‘Elder’, also typical of the Tamil south, is worshipped (Fig. 4). A *vṛṣabha* of Pallava style has been moved close to her. All these carvings may be dated between the 8th and the 10th c., during what appears to be an early period of development of the site when its Śaiva part was important. The figures of this cave temple are finished in contrast to the ones of the two-*garbhagrhas* cave in the Vaiṣṇava compound; the inscriptions recording donations are numerous. The name of the deity might have been coined to echo that of Tiruveḷḷarai, ‘the white rock’, that is today the base of the Vaiṣṇava complex. A Tamil composition was engraved there in the 9th c. and a Pāṇḍya king made an important donation. With the end of the Cōḷa period, however, the influence of the place seems to end. To put it succinctly, what could be considered surprising is the absence of this site from the Śaiva devotional corpus, the *Tēvāram*, whose hymns were composed between the 7th and the 9th c. Was this cave excavated only after the main period of composition of the Śaiva hymns, and in reaction to a Vaiṣṇava takeover of the site? Was that site not sectarian enough for the Śaiva devotees? The *svastika*

¹⁵ Another bias may be due to the choice of the inscriptions recorded; the post-Cōḷa ones may not have been considered interesting enough to be all reported in the *ARE*.

well towards which we now turn our attention is definitely not a solely Śaiva or Vaiṣṇava object.

The *svastika* well

The well in the shape of a *svastika* has been dug 260 meters to the south of the Vaiṣṇava site and 650 metres to the south-west of the Śaiva cave temple approximately (Fig. 5). It is a significant monument. Spread on a surface that approximates the 400 square metres, it is larger than the constructed Vaiṣṇava temple, not to speak of the Śaiva cave temple. Its depth is about 12 meters; it is cut directly into the rock and built at its top to the height of 1.50 m.

The water can be reached through one of the four deep sets of stairs occupying the *svastika* branches, accessible through doors adorned with either seated lions or door guardians. Three lintels, one on top of the other, mark the place where the stairs reach the water (Fig. 6). The lintels closest to the water are shallow but the two upper series are preserved enough for it to be possible to see that three out of the four branches are devoted to a single deity, namely Śiva on the north, facing south; Viṣṇu on the west, facing east; the goddess, on the south, facing north. Their iconography offers several peculiarities whereas the main deity of the eastern branch is more difficult to ascertain, as we shall see, starting our *pradakṣiṇa* in this eastern direction.

The lintel on the top of the eastern branch is adorned with an ascetic Narasiṃha of the usual iconography (Fig. 6). His two upper hands elevate the disk and the conch of Vaiṣṇava figures. Seated on the right (for the viewer), Brahmā is clearly recognizable by his three heads; this is not the case of the two-armed male seated on the left, who does not hold any attribute and wears one tiara. In the two haloed male figures flying outwards at the two ends of the lintel we see the sun and the moon as one holds a lotus, characteristic attribute of these deities. A lion frames the panel on each side. The panel below presents a couple of two armed figures, seated on a bench, and turned towards a pot-bellied male character standing on the left, in front of a horse that he seems to

lead towards the couple (Fig. 6). An elephant stands on the other side of the bench.

A possible identification of this couple is of Indra, the king of the gods, with his spouse, as Indra is traditionally the guardian of the east and is accompanied by his mount, the elephant. The figure may represent the human king as well, with no supplementary arms and one horse regularly associated with kingship. In that case, the figure with a tiara on the above lintel may also be a representation of the king, *indra* in Sanskrit. But the hairdo of the two figures is distinct and leads to hesitation as to their identification. Whichever it may be, kingship is honoured on this branch and the representation of Narasiṃha may well have been an allusion to a Pallava kings whose numerous surnames often include 'Narasiṃha'. The last lintel, of the east, has been heavily damaged by water; a vegetal pattern is still visible on its upper corners.

On the northern branch, facing south, the top lintel represents a four-armed Śiva holding the axe and the antelope, who, in the company of Pārvaṭī, grants a garland to his beloved devotee Caṇḍeśa in a scene typical of southern India (Fig. 7). Caṇḍeśa is kneeling and has crossed his arms in devotion. Sun and moon in the form of two haloed figures, this time each holding a lotus, fly towards them. On the lintel below a Dakṣiṇamūrti, a teaching Śiva, is listened to by two attendants on each of his sides (Fig. 8). On the left side, the tallest one, with a *jāta*, a beard and a big belly, holding a manuscript, may be Agastya, a southern figure of teaching. On the third and lowest lintel below, a beautiful vegetal pattern is still discernible.

In the western direction, two lions face outwards at each end of the upper lintel that is divided into three compartments, each presenting a fight of Kṛṣṇa as a child. Starting from the left, the god tears the mouth of the horse demon, crushes the bull demon and tears the beak of the bird demon (Fig. 9). If these three fights sound familiar to anyone conversant with the golden legend of Kṛṣṇa, their being brought together is nevertheless surprising. The horse and the bull are old acquaintances of the Sanskrit texts, but the bird makes its appearance in the Tamil *Tiv*. There, it develops as what we have called a shadow-motif of the fight

against Pūtanā, who is a demoness sent by Kaṃsa, the fiendish uncle of Kṛṣṇa, to kill the child with her poisoned breasts. This Sanskrit episode of the golden legend gives birth to another one in the Tamil country, inspired by its ‘shadow’. Pūtanā indeed is also depicted as a bird in the *Harivaṃśa*, the earliest Sanskrit text (2nd–3rd c.) to tell of the birth and youth of Kṛṣṇa.¹⁶ Designated as a *pēy* or *pēycci*, a demoness of poisoned breast who is ‘eaten’ (*uṇtu*) by Kṛṣṇa in the *Tiv.*, where she often appears, as in the Periyālvār’s poem about Tiruveḷḷarai,¹⁷ Pūtanā is represented in the Tamil south from the 9th c. onward as a female demon without any avian features.¹⁸ But, in parallel with this episode, a fight in which Kṛṣṇa tears the beak of a bird (*puḷ*) appears in the *Tiv.*, depicted with a formula used elsewhere for tearing the mouth of the horse.¹⁹

At Tiruveḷḷarai, we see the first known representations of this fight that results from splitting into two the Pūtanā episode. The pairing of the fight against the bird with the one against the horse is too precise an echo of the closeness of the formulas of the two fights in the *Tiv.* to have been chosen by chance. It is also noticeable that in the later Sanskrit *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* (10.15), the bird is a heron, *baka*. With its long beak, the Tiruveḷḷarai bird certainly presents characteristics of a heron, which is also seen in another part of the site, in the Divyadeśa temple itself. On the lintel below, a four-armed Viṣṇu, with his typical tiara, holding disk and conch, is seated on an elaborated bench between his two spouses. Two devotees with joined hands are kneeling on each

¹⁶ The demoness is sometimes depicted as a bird in the Gupta territory as we have explained in Schmid 2013: 40–48 and Schmid 2020: 7–11, where an illustration of the relief at Deogarh is provided. For the history of the representation in northern India and north-Indian languages, Hawley 1987.

¹⁷ See “a dark demoness with red hair” (*nīrac cem mayirp pēyai*), *Tiv.* 197; “O you who have eaten the breast after having taken the demoness” (*nī pēyai ppiṭṭu mulaiy uṇta piṇṇai*), *Tiv.* 198.

¹⁸ See, for instance, the relief adorning the rooftop of the late Pallava temple of the Candramuleshvara at the site of Brahmadesam, datable to the end of the 9th c.

¹⁹ Compare, for instance, *puḷḷiṇ vāy kīṇṭāṇ Tiv.* 174, “he who has torn (*kīṇṭāṇ*) the beak (*vāy*) of the bird (*puḷḷiṇ*)” in Periyālvār’s corpus with *pari vāy kīṇṭa*, “having torn (*kīṇṭa*) the mouth of the horse (*pari*)” in Tirumaṅkai, *Tiv.* 1088 (*Periya Tirumoli* 2.5.1).

side and two attendants are flying towards the divine trio. Nothing can be said with certainty about the very shallow reliefs of the lowest lintel of this western series.

The last branch, the southern one which faces north, is devoted to female deities. The upper lintel is carved with a series of seven seated and four armed *mātrkās* (Fig. 10). Some can still be identified, even if the relief is worn. The boar-headed one, for instance, is rather visible as is the terrible Camuṇḍā positioned at the end, on the right, whereas the three heads of Brāhmaṇī allow for her identification at the other end. The series is framed with common companions of the *mātrkās*: a Śiva, four-armed and seated on the left side is paired with a seated Gaṇeśa on the right. The lintel below is not of an iconography common for the whole of India as the *mātrkās* are but it is a usual iconography for the south of India. At its center, a four-armed female deity stands, holding a disk and a conch in her upper hands (Fig. 10). Two devotees kneel at her feet, the one on the left busy cutting the flesh of his arm, the one on the right folding his hands. In the panel on the left stands an antelope, and, in the right one, a lion; both are seen in profile. The lion is a common vehicle for the pan-Indian forms of the goddess, but the antelope is a southern innovation. It is the mount of Kor̥ravai, the murderous deity to whom a chapter of the Tamil epic the *Cilappatikāram* is devoted as the one who claims offerings of human flesh and blood. Such a claim is met here by the devotee cutting his arm. This iconography is known by more than one hundred steles carved between the 7th and the 9th c., some still in worship, in a large part of the Tamil country.²⁰ In the centre of the lowest northern lintel, the clearest of its whole horizontal series, a big-bellied and four-armed male form that we identify as Gaṇeśa, is seated; the two side panels depict male pot-bellied attendants, the one on the right playing a stringed instrument.

²⁰ For representations of Kor̥ravai from the 7th c., Schmid 2011a and b. The devotee cutting his arm is often paired with one cutting off his head. The same iconography represents the goddess on the northern façade of the built temples from the Pallava period onwards.

In this well, Viṣṇu appears as a deity dominant in a multi-devotional environment. If deities were carved in the direction where he/she presides, with the western direction devoted to Viṣṇu, the southern one to Śiva, the northern to the goddess and the eastern, maybe, to Indra, the Narasiṃha of the latter makes Viṣṇu the overlord. His headship is confirmed by the three forms of Kṛṣṇa that make up representations of no less than five different forms of Viṣṇu. The goddess may be the one deity that could compete with him as female forms are numerous, with a series of *mātr̥kāś* and the spouses accompanying the male deities. But these are not as prominent as Viṣṇu's form and, provided with a disk and a conch, Korravai herself appears as a Vaiṣṇava figure. The foundation inscription of the well confirms a Vaiṣṇava dominance.

Divided into two parts, the inscription of dedication is engraved on the coping stones of its lip, starting on the western branch of the *svastika*.²¹ The first part that is the donative part, starts and ends on this branch (Fig. 11); the second part is a gnomic stanza that overlooks the water. The similarity of the letters of the two parts, their location, one after the other, and their content, lead us to consider that they form a Tamil epigraph, of a donative or foundational character, provided with a gnomic part which is the equivalent of the blessings or the curses sometimes encountered at the end of important inscriptions. By its location on the branch presided by Viṣṇu, the inscription highlights who the real lord of the well, facing east, is. Its content has other things to say.

The epigraph is beautifully engraved with Grantha letters where necessary in the first part, containing words of Sanskrit origin. It records that Kampan Araiyan, who is the younger brother of Vicaiyanallulāṅ of Ālampākkam, caused this big well to be dug at Tenṇūr of Tiruvelḷarai and named it 'the big well of Mārppidugu' (*mārppituku peruṅkiṅaru*). The well is placed under the protection of the Three Thousand (*mūvairattēlunūruvar*), a merchant guild of the settlement (*ivvūr*).

We have already seen who Vicaiyanallulāṅ might be; the inscription is dated of the 4th regnal year of Dantivarman, who started to rule

²¹ Mahalingam 1988, no. 97: 333–334.

at the end of the 8th c. *Mārppidugu* is a title which refers to the Andhra country through *pidugu*, a Telugu word meaning ‘thunderbolt’, and a known title of the Muttaraiyars, while *Ālampākkam* is also a place linked to those evanescent dynasts whose connections with Andhra are proven elsewhere (Schmid 2020b: 137–150).²² We do not know a lot about Muttaraiyars, but they appear as paragons of generosity in two gnomic stanzas of the *Nālaṭiyār* (200, 296), a Caṅkam anthology dated to the 9th c. The stanza of Tiruveḷḷarai that follows the donative part perfectly matches this testimony as it recommends to those living in this world (*ulakattil*) to give to be known in this world (*ulakam(m) ariya vaimmiṇēy*), that which allows going beyond ‘the day fixed by the lord’ (*paramaṇ paṭaitta nāl*). Here is a well proving the proverbial generosity of the Muttaraiyar. This is the second time we come across Tamil poetry engraved on stone on this site, a feature not commonly encountered in the 8th–9th c. yet often encountered in the small corpus of the inscriptions commissioned by the Muttaraiyar.²³

This original monument appears as a multi-devotional place where forms of Śiva, Viṣṇu and the goddess interplay. Forms typical of the south are depicted here—the devotional scene featuring Caṇḍeśa, the murderous female deity with her antelope mount and a bird-fighting Kṛṣṇa. The dominance of Vaiṣṇava forms is confirmed by the location of the foundation inscription. Such a devotional picture matches what we know from the cave temple of the nearby rocky mound. This is a place where Viṣṇu is not only the deity but the overlord, too. The importance given here to Narasiṃha can be linked with the Pallava and the Muttaraiyar in whose temples this form often appears, perhaps to recall the Andhra connection we have already spoken of as Narasiṃha is a form of Viṣṇu that is specifically valued in the Andhra territory.

²² For a reference to another well (*mārppidugu ēri*) associated with the Muttaraiyar at *Ālampākkam* see *ARE* 1909.72; *SII* 13.222.

²³ For the first inscriptions in literary Tamil, Francis and Schmid 2010: xiii–xv; for the specificities of the contribution of the Muttaraiyar to the first versified Tamil epigraphs, including a calligraphic aspect, Schmid 2020: 124–125, 130–133.

As in the case of the Śiva temple, stone remnants of the past have been assembled near the well where they highlight the part played by other, often ‘local’ deities: two *vṛṣabhas*, one of the Pallava–Pāṇḍya period, the other of a later age; three carvings of a *māṭṛka* series of the 9th–10th c. In a nearby ruined shrine, amongst carvings of a later period such as hero and *satī* stones, stands a Jyeṣṭhā whose cult statue can also be dated to the 9th–10th c. All these vestiges attest to the antiquity and the activity of a site where multiple deities were worshipped during a Pallava–Pāṇḍya period of noticeable Muttaraiyar flavour, and at the beginning of the Cōḷa period. These are deities commonly encountered in the Tamil country at that time and none of these non contextualized vestiges is of a Vaiṣṇava character. Vaiṣṇava vestiges are rather to be found attached to the Puṇḍarīkākṣa Perumāḷ complex.

The Puṇḍarīkākṣa Perumāḷ temple

Built on the top of the rocky hill, the Puṇḍarīkākṣa Perumāḷ temple is today the main attraction of the area. Its complex is surrounded by a high wall opened through an impressive if unfinished brick gopura. A second *prākāra* encloses six out of the seven tanks of the sacred place. The complex has been constantly renovated and enlarged as its composite architecture and sculpture reveal and is documented in nineteen reported inscriptions. These are visible on the rock of the first precinct or found in reused stones from a *prākāra* wall and a shrine inside the second enclosure. Their location and their condition are evidence of the disappearance of many others (Fig. 12). More inscriptions than the reported ones are also visible but, at first view, none earlier than those. Dated in Cōḷa or in later Pāṇḍya regnal years, then in the śaka era, these epigraphs date from the 12th c., at the end of the Cōḷa period only, up to the 16th c. They do not belong to the early times of the site but attest to an enduring activity since.

The lord of the Puṇḍarīkākṣa Perumāḷ temple is today named ‘Māyavaṇ’. That name was coined in Tamil where it indicates that, among the forms of Viṣṇu, the deity is Kṛṣṇa (Hardy 1983: 217–221).

Such a name comes as a confirmation, or a continuation, of the worship of Kṛṣṇa and his consort reported in the inscriptions of the cave temple of this complex. The goddess Paṅkayacelvi–Nācciyār, “the dame who is the lady of the Lotus” of three inscriptions dated between the 13th and the 16th c. might be the earlier Rūkmīṇī. But the reliefs adorning the base of the main temple are the earliest archaeological objects in the complex to express a Kṛṣṇa-devoted association in this site. Like the carvings of the well, several of them are the earliest known representations in the Tamil country—and beyond—of the episodes of the golden legend of Kṛṣṇa.

Partly covered with lime plaster, this base is a vestige of an earlier monument that may have been a brick temple with a stone foundation. On considerations of style and by following the date of the first inscriptions at the site, it is dated to the 8th–9th c.²⁴ For reasons that will appear below, the beginning of this period is more probable and the 7th c. not improbable in our eyes. On the south, west and north, a series of twenty-two vertically elongated panels is still visible.²⁵ Nine of them represent pan-Indian forms of Viṣṇu such as Trivikrama, Varāha (Fig. 13) or Narasiṃha whose legend is depicted on two panels, while five represent Kṛṣṇa in his child form. Kṛṣṇa dances with pots (Fig. 14),

²⁴ Champakalakshmi 1981: 89 gives the middle of the 9th c., probably because this scholar considers the poems of the *Tiv.* to have been composed before the carvings were done, *contra, infra*, p; 216–218.. The multiple connections with the Ālvār’s corpus incline us to consider the 8th c. as more plausible but the beginning of the 9th is possible as well, especially if you place Tirumaṅkai in the 9th c. Note that this is not the opinion of both Hardy 1983: 260–269 and Ate 2019: 6–9 who consider that Tirumaṅkai belongs to the 8th c. A beautiful pair of Nidhi of the Cōḷa period, a lotus and a conch personified, sits at the entrance to the temple; other elements may date to this period, but the access is restricted to Hindu devotees and we cannot therefore say more about this part of the complex.

²⁵ 1 panel is void, 7 adorned with floral patterns. There are 11 panels on the west, 2 on the north and 9 on the south; the eastern face is covered. The order of the series may well not be the original one. Still, the direction in which the most panels are today visible is the western one, traditionally dedicated to Viṣṇu and bearing his representations on the *svastika* well. This is also the façade where the entrance of the temple is located: it is possible that some, at least, of the panels stand in their original locations.

fighths against the bird (Fig. 15), steals butter, dances on the snake Kāliya, and lifts the Govardhana mount (Fig. 13). If the last two reliefs are the most represented of all the episodes of Kṛṣṇa's life in a pan-Indian context, the three others are markedly southern. None of them belong to the early Sanskrit texts; they all made their first appearance in Tamil texts and became all-Indian elements only with the Sanskrit *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* (Schmid 2020a). Before being part of Kṛṣṇa's feats in the *Tiv.*, the dance with pots belongs to Caṅkam literature with one verse in the *Paripāṭal* (3.83, Gros 1968: li), whereas the theft of butter is mentioned in the Tamil epic of the *Cilappatikāram* (17.32–33). Regarding the fight against a bird, that is at the Puṇḍarīkākṣa Perumāḷ of the same *baka* type as at the *svastika* well, the panel strikingly illustrates what a shadow motif is. Here, while fighting with the bird, Kṛṣṇa tramples on a demonic figure of human shape. We venture that here Pūtanā is provided with two bodies, one human and one avian.²⁶ Such a depiction documents the transition towards the depiction of two distinct episodes, one where a bird, *puḷ*, in the *Tiv.*, then *baka* in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, is the main opponent, and the other where a demon of human shape, Pūtanā, plays this role. The panel fits particularly well with the stanza 2.5 of Periyālvār (*Tiv.* 165), the only one in the *Tiv.* where the literary formula of the fight against the bird is more developed and where two fights against the *puḷ* and the *pēy* come one after the other but without any connection being drawn between them.²⁷

The three episodes of the theft of butter, the fight against a bird and the pot-dance are represented in smaller dimensions on the base of Śaiva

²⁶ To represent demons under two distinct shapes, one human and the other animal, is common for fights against demonic figures, such as the pursuit of the demon Mārīca having taken the form of a deer in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the buffalo demon against whom the goddess fights, etc.

²⁷ “After he saw the demon (*acuraṅ varuvāṇai(t) tāṅ kaṅṭu*) who has taken the shape of a bird (*paṛavai(y) urukkoṅṭu*), fishing and pretending this is a bird (*puḷḷitu(y) enru potukkō*), He tore out the mouth (*vāy kīṇṭiṭṭa*), O raven, come to comb his hair, comb the hair of the one who has eaten the breast of the demonic one (*pēy mulai(y) uṅṭāṅ kuḷal vārāy akkākkāy*)”.

Cōḷa-period temples in schemes similar to those of the Tiruveḷḷarai whose panels may be considered as marking the appearance of the iconography featuring Kṛṣṇa the way the latter god is praised in the south (Schmid 2002: 40–41). It is also noticeable that with two panels devoted to the narrative of Narasiṃha, the latter is given a specific importance that matches the iconography of the *svastika* well.

This only too brief review of the earliest vestiges of the site calls for comment. At Tiruveḷḷarai the two deities of the Tamil Bhakti devotional corpora were present at least from the 9th c. and probably earlier. At the time the site was excavated, and left unfinished, the cave-temple of the Vaiṣṇava hill may have offered a summary of the devotional mapping of the site, with a western *garbhagr̥ha* devoted to Viṣṇu and an eastern one to Śiva. In any case, the complementarity of these deities is illustrated in the well, of which one branch features Śiva under two of his shapes while another depicts several forms of Viṣṇu. Finally, Viṣṇu is also part of the Śaiva cave temple, where he is carved next to Gaṇeśa, the son of Śiva.

Today, Viṣṇu appears as the main deity of the Divyadeśa place while Tiruveḷḷarai does not appear in the Bhakti Śaiva corpus. This state of affairs seems to have been the same for a long time. Not only more vestiges of the site are of the Vaiṣṇava obedience but some of the earliest known depictions of the legend of Kṛṣṇa are found here as well whereas, at its exceptional well, Viṣṇu is depicted more than any other deity and the foundation inscription is engraved on the Vaiṣṇava branch. Archaeology matches the textual evidence. Archaeology and text meet to present a site where Śiva and local goddesses are more like guests acknowledging the power of Viṣṇu.

It is now time to further scrutinize the *Tiv.* poems to see if they may more precisely match such specific settings.

Back to poems

At first sight, it seems that nothing more may be learnt about the history or the archaeology of the site from the *Tiv.* poems. Be it Periyālvār or

Tirumaṅkai Āḷvār, stanzas devoted to Tiruveḷḷarai are highly formulaic. In Tirumaṅkai (5.3), Tiruveḷḷarai's mansions touch the moon (5.3.6) as usual but the sophisticated universe that emerges is characterized by the fragrances reigning in a place inhabited by bees. The jasmine breeze blows through mango orchards and streets in all directions (5.3.12); the lotus flowers spread divine fragrance (5.3.12); jasmine (*mullai*) creepers grow up to the tip of sugarcane (5.3.5). There are lakes with shoals of dark *varal* fish, cuckoos pecking mango leaves, drinking the nectar of the jackfruits, or singing on mango trees, but the bees are by far the most prominent animal species. They feed on nectar-giving flowers, fall, inebriated, into women's hair, sing *tena, tena*, over the red blossoms of the Aśoka tree, whereas bumblebees drink nectar from lotuses and hum songs. At the same time, each stanza mentions one of the *avatāras* of Viṣṇu—Paraśurāma, Hayagrīva, Narasiṃha, the adult Kṛṣṇa of the *Mahābhārata*, the boar, the turtle, Rāma, the *haṃsa* (*aṅṅam*), Trivikrama—from which list the child Kṛṣṇa is conspicuously absent while the adult Kṛṣṇa hero of the *Mahābhārata* is said to be the lord of Venkatam (5.3.14).

Periyāḷvār's poem is no less formulaic. Featuring Kṛṣṇa called in by his adoptive mother when night is falling, Periyāḷvār (2.8) praises Veḷḷarai whose golden fortified walls and jewelled mansions touch clouds or moon (2.8.1,6), a place full of brightness (*oliyutai*) and splendour (*tēcuṭai*), replete with good people (*nallārkaḷ*) and sages (*muṇivarkaḷ*). Made with the repetition of two formulas for one similar element, an identical urban environment embellishes many other places in the Periyāḷvār corpus, and, broadly, in the whole *Tiv*. If the mention of fortified walls (2.8.2, *matil*) matches the high walled first *prākāra* that today gives Tiruveḷḷarai the look of a fortified acropolis, *matil* appears elsewhere for places that do not exhibit any fortification elements.

The Tiruveḷḷarai of Periyāḷvār is a high-walled city where Kṛṣṇa acts under his child form; in Tirumaṅkai, it is a garden of delights for forms of Viṣṇu. Tirumaṅkai's Tiruveḷḷarai is a perfect illustration of the *mullai tinaḷ*, which is—amongst the five *tinaḷ*, the poetical landscapes, as defined in treatises that have standardized these as the background of

Caṅkam texts—the one presided over by Māyōṇ-Kṛṣṇa.²⁸ Tiruveḷḷarai is a *mullai tiṇai*, a jasmine landscape, characterized by the jasmine fragrance and full of the sound of bees. This is where you wait for somebody—lover or god—to come. The coming of the evening that is the time of the *mullai tiṇai*, is also vigorously illustrated in the call of Yaśodā at the end of the day in Periyālvār’s poem. Clearly, the two Ālvārs shaped their Tiruveḷḷarai as a literary landscape where devotees long for the god to appear. In Tirumaṅkai’s poem, this is specifically apparent and allows for linking Kṛṣṇa or Māyōṇ, the child and adolescent form, with Viṣṇu-Tirumāl, the adult figure.

Formulas, *tiṇais*: none of these allow the poems to echo any precise concrete reality and to invoke archaeology could well seem vain. But if we put the Tiruveḷḷarai’s praises in the background of all the works to which they belong, they take on another relief.

Firstly, among the Alvārs, Periyālvār is the poet who devotes the least space to praising places. The first and larger part of his work, often called *Bālacarita* (1.1–4.8), focuses on Kṛṣṇa’s birth, his childhood, the way he becomes a grown-up who is no other than Nāraṅān (Nārāyaṇa). In Tiruveḷḷarai (Periyālvār 2.8), we listen to the call of Yaśodā, who wants to protect Kṛṣṇa against the black eye as the evening is coming. We hear of the mischief of the one who has ruined the houses of sand built by the milkmaids (*Tiv.* 194) and killed the dark *pēy* of red hair, Pūtanā of the poisoned breast (*Tiv.* 197–198), an enraged elephant (*Tiv.* 199), and demoniac trees, as well as a cart demon (*Tiv.* 198).

In his *Bālacarita*, Periyālvār sometimes names sites of north India where Kṛṣṇa was born and raised, such as the ‘northern Mathurā’ (*Tiv.* 569).²⁹ A whole decade is consecrated to the Govardhan place where Kṛṣṇa lifted the mountain (*Tiv.* 264–274; also, *Tiv.* 341); Dvārakā

²⁸ Ramanujan 1967 (1994) is the classical text on *tiṇais*, one of the most original and best-known characteristics of Classical Tamil literature.

²⁹ It is not always possible to differentiate between the city of the north and Maturai, see st. 430 praising the lord of Śrīraṅgam and mentioning Maturai. If *āyppāṭi*, the cowherd’s village, is considered as a reference to Vraj or Gokula in the Mathurā region, then mentions of the northern area are more numerous.

and Ayodhyā also appear, the latter in stanzas once gathered in the same decade, Badrīnāth and Śālagrāma in the Himalaya's buttress are mentioned. Enumerated in *Tiv.* 399 together with the celestial place of Vaikuṅṭha, the upper world, these northern places seem situated more on an equal, phantasmatic plan than does this abode.³⁰ But of the Tamil country, only ten places, including temples, are mentioned while, for instance, in Tirumaṅkai's works we encounter no less than 86 temples.³¹ Only four of those ten Tamil places of Periyālvār are praised in a whole poem: Śrīraṅgam, Māliaruṅcōlai, Kōṭṭiyūr and Tiruveḷḷarai. It thus appears that Tiruveḷḷarai is part of a very select group, together with three of the most praised sites of the Tamil country.³²

Śrīraṅgam's decade is a matter of inevitability: this is the most often named of all Tamil sites, a sole object of praise in two of the Ālvārs' works. One of Tirumāl's sites of the Caṅkam, Māliaruṅcōlai, is just below it in fame³³ Mentioned in Puttatālvār's poems, one of the earliest works of the *Tiv.*, Kōṭṭiyūr is a special site for Periyālvār who locates the birth of Kṛṣṇa there and, thus, causes it to appear in the *Pallāṅṭu*, the poem that opens his work.³⁴ Śrīraṅgam, Māliaruṅcōlai and Kōṭṭiyūr's fame is far from being peculiar to Periyālvār. This is not the case of Tiruveḷḷarai which, in addition to that, is the only Tamil site other than Tirukkōṭṭiyūr to be related to Kṛṣṇa's childhood in Periyālvār's Tirumolī.

³⁰ *vaṭaticai maturai cāḷakkirāmam vaikuntam tuvarai ayōtti/ iṭamuṭaivatari() iṭavakai(y) uṭaiya em puruṭōttaman i rukkai*, "the northern regions of Mathurā, Śālagrāma, Vaikuṅṭha, Dvārakā, Ayodhyā are the ones of our Lord who is (also) the one of Badrīnāth".

³¹ Young 2006: 350, for the number of places mentioned by the Ālvārs and the percentage of space they devote to them.

³² For a table of the 10 most cited sites, that comprises the three sites of Śrīraṅgam, Māliaruṅcōlai and Kōṭṭiyūr, see Hardy 1983: 258. Tirukkōṭṭiyūr ranked 9 and the only site not commented upon by F. Hardy; on this site also see, *infra*, note 34.

³³ Hymn 15 of the *Paripāḷal*.

³⁴ The *Pallāṅṭu* is one of the most often recited poems of the *Tiv.* In its stanzas, Tirumāl is compared to the "adorned king of Kōṭṭiyūr", Kṛṣṇa. Appearing also in the part devoted to pilgrimage after praises to Māliaruṅcōlai, Kōṭṭiyūr is placed on equal terms with this site in Periyālvār, whereas Tirumaṅkaiyālvār acknowledges its specific status by placing it at the very end of his pilgrimage circuit.

How did Tiruveḷḷarai become important to a poet whose attention to places is so limited? It seems to us that the archaeology of the site provides an answer. The carvings express a special link with Kṛṣṇa's childhood that may well have appealed to a poet who devoted the greater part of his work to it. In Periyālvār's *Tirumoli*, the god is born, and this is followed by the events of the growing up of a child in South India, with its rituals such as the piercing of the ears, mentioned in poem after poem. Illustrating distinct feats of Kṛṣṇa's childhood, some typical of southern India, the sculptures at Tiruveḷḷarai deliver a similar message. One amongst other forms taken by Viṣṇu, Kṛṣṇa is nevertheless more represented than any other Vaiṣṇava figure at Tiruveḷḷarai where he is more important, too. Such staging fits with Tirumaṅkai's and Periyālvār's poems. The first indicates how Tiruveḷḷarai is linked to Tirumāl-Viṣṇu and the second focuses on the childhood of Kṛṣṇa that is the specificity of Tiruveḷḷarai. We would assume that the silence of Tirumaṅkai about the child Kṛṣṇa is meant to express that the latter is one form of Viṣṇu-Tirumāl amongst others. With their two distinct perspectives on Tiruveḷḷarai and Kṛṣṇa, the two Ālvārs acknowledge the archaeological data that may be considered as approximately contemporary with them or earlier.

For us, it is doubtful if Periyālvār created the association of Kṛṣṇa's childhood with Tiruveḷḷarai.³⁵ The chronology of the Ālvārs is debated and the dates of the first known inscriptions of the site not set. But the formulaic character of the Ālvār's poems and the donative character of the inscriptions speak in favour of a deity whose profile was already defined when epigraphs and hymns were composed. The texts record the fame of the site. The carvings of the well and the Puṇḍarikākṣa Perumāḷ and the inscriptions of the unfinished cave-temple attest that

³⁵ Since A. K. Ramanujan (1967) wrote that the Tamil Bhakti poets sang the sites into existence, it is often accounted that the places appeared together with their praises, or because of these praises. Our examination of the Tiruveḷḷarai's data shows that, in this case at least, Ramanujan's statement should rather be understood as stressing the growth of the place's fame with the poems; the site did not start its existence then.

the young Kṛṣṇa was a conspicuous aspect of the Vaiṣṇava deity at Tiruveḷḷarai, where he was fighting animal demons, dancing with pots, stealing butter and lifting a mountain.

But, above all, Periyālvār's poem seems to have recorded another specificity of the site, the devotion paid there to Śiva. In the 8th verse of Periyālvār's poem, the strange silhouette of a *kapāli*, 'the one with a skull', appears: "there, look, the man of the staff and skull" or "the man with the skull from the pillar".³⁶ *Kapāli* is 'skulled-one' and its association with either a staff or a pillar (*kampam*) cannot but be an allusion to Śiva himself, under his form of mendicant, very present in the Tamil country and designated as *kapāli* in the *Tēvāram* itself. Having cut off the fifth head of Brahmā, Śiva wanders, with Brahmā's skull as his begging bowl, till Viṣṇu fills the skull.³⁷ In the *Tiv.* the term *kapāli* is proper to Periyālvār.³⁸ Tiruveḷḷarai's verse is odd since it does not present Śiva paying homage to Viṣṇu as is the usage in the *Tiv.*, including in the first verse of that very poem. Here, the one with a skull is supposed to frighten the child. The imperative 'look', *kāṇ*, of Yaśodā is followed by clear advice "and come having quickly run to be protected!" (*kaṭitu oṭik kāppiṭa vārāy*).

In other words, this stanza of Periyālvār acknowledges the presence of Śiva at Tiruveḷḷarai and considers it a menace. Mentions of Śiva associated with a place in the *Tiv.* are rare and this is one more detail that makes us think that Periyālvār composed his poem with a knowledge of what Tiruveḷḷarai appears to be in the archaeological settings extant today. It is not plausible that Periyālvār took part in the creation of the Śaiva aura of Tiruveḷḷarai. The Śaiva element of Periyālvār's poem offers a Vaiṣṇava

³⁶ *Kampak kapāli kāṇ aṅkuk*. The unmarked *kampam* can be understood as a pillar or a staff and its relationship with *kapāli* can be of several natures. A staff would be an allusion to an item of the equipment of mendicants, a pillar to the *liṅga* said to be a never-ending pillar in which Śiva appears in the south of India, or to the Narasiṃha myth in which Viṣṇu emerges from a pillar under the form of a man-lion.

³⁷ This myth is recounted, for instance, in Periyālvār 1.8.9 (*Tiv.* 105).

³⁸ *Tiv.* 199, 451; also, *kāpāli* in *Tiv.* 45. These terms designate Śiva or his aspect as mendicant who became a guardian deity (Bhairava).

Bhakti perspective of a rather sectarian type on a site whose multi-devotional character is nevertheless proved by archaeological elements. Tirumaṅkai is considered by all scholars to belong to the 8th c. Periyālvār's case is more complicated, but he is said to be more recent than Tirumaṅkai and F. Hardy (1983: 267–268) assigns him to the 9th c. Keeping these dates in mind, we are inclined to assume the carvings of both the Puṇḍarīkāṅka Perumāḷ and the *svastika* well were made in the 8th c, at the latest.

Conclusion

There is more to explore in Tiruveḷḷarai than the archaeology of the 7–9th c. of the site and its links with the Tamil Bhakti corpora. The later inscriptions, the building of the precinct walls, the erection of the tall and still unfinished brick gopura, the elaboration of the *sthalapurāṇa* of the site still have much to say. But we can, at least, draw a first draft of one site marked at an early period by Kṛṣṇa's childhood in a multi-devotional environment, using the evidence of the sketch of the cave of what is today the mound of Kṛṣṇa. Tiruveḷḷarai was the object of the attention of merchants, who may have been more Vaiṣṇava than Śaiva, of a Pāṇḍya king who donated to the Śaiva deity of the site, and of people gravitating around the minor dynasty of the Muttaraiyar who may have had a special feeling for Narasiṃha. Typical southern forms of deities are prominent, be they Kṛṣṇa whose original Tamil forms are represented here, or Aiyaṅār and Jyeṣṭhā. The association with the Bhakti corpus is striking. Murukaṅ is not depicted at Tiruveḷḷarai where Śiva is praised and Viṣṇu assumes his child form, Kṛṣṇa. But, beyond its devotional characteristics, this site is remarkable for the many samples of Tamil poetry it is linked with. Praise of the king, gnomic stanza, poems of the *Tiv.* praising the place: several genres of Tamil poetry have come together at Tiruveḷḷarai, whose *svastika* seems to be the monumental equivalent of the protection Yaśodā wants Kṛṣṇa to obtain—a call for a poetical charm to be spread in all directions:

“Supreme one! Come for being protected!” (*Tiv.* 2.8.7d)

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List of illustrations

1. The cave temple of the Vaiṣṇava compound of Tiruveḷḷarai provided with two cellas seen from outside, with the “white rock” (*veḷḷarai*) in the foreground.
2. The Viṣṇu of the 8th–9th c. carved inside the Śaiva cave-temple; the Gaṇeśa is visible on the right.
3. Inscriptions of the Cōḷa period (10th and 11th c.) engraved in front of the Śaiva rock-cut temple.
4. The Jyeṣṭhā still worshipped near the Śaiva cave-temple, 9th–10th c.
5. The *svastika* well, view from its top, from the east, 8th–9th c.
6. The *svastika* well, view of the western stairs and lintels, facing east, with boys swimming.
7. Śiva, Pārvatī and Caṇḍeśa, upper lintel of the southern direction.

8. Dakṣiṇamūrti, middle lintel of the southern direction.
9. The three fights of Kṛṣṇa; from left to right: the fight against the horse, the fight against the bull, the fight against the bird; middle lintel of the western direction.
10. The *mātrkāś* and Koruvai, upper and middle lintels of the northern direction.
11. The first part of the foundation inscription, on the western branch with the beginning of the stairs.
12. One inscription on a reused stone in the tank visible in the first precinct; ph.: EFEO/N. Ramaswami (Babu).
13. Kṛṣṇa lifts the Govardhana mount (left); Varāha (right), north face, 8th–9th c.; ph.: EFEO/N. Ramaswami (Babu).
14. Kṛṣṇa dances with pots, south face, 8th–9th c.; ph.: EFEO/N. Ramaswami (Babu).
15. Kṛṣṇa fights against the bird, south face, 8th–9th c.; ph.: EFEO/N. Ramaswami (Babu).

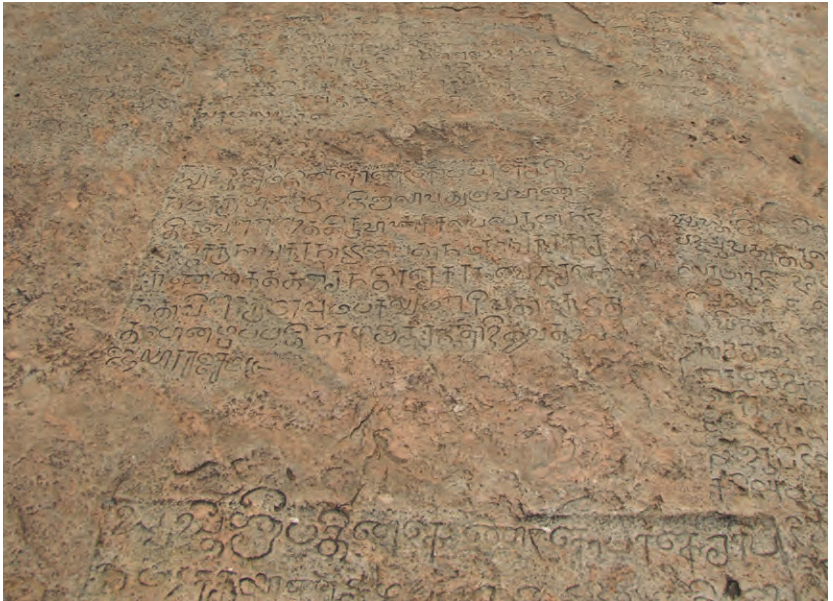


Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 13



Fig. 15