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Nine Ponds (*navatīrthas*) of Śrīraṅgam: Preliminary Notes*

ABSTRACT: Water bodies, being elements of the natural landscape, are often connected with religious holy sites and provide ready examples of a mutual relationship between nature and culture. The present article introduces nine holy ponds—*tīrthas* of the Śrīraṅgam Raṅganātha temple—each with its characteristic features directly connected with a particular tree, residing deity, resident *ṛṣi*, and certain boons. Short descriptions of the ponds are given in Chapter 10 of the Sanskrit text, the *Śrīraṅgamāhātmya*, which praises the glory of the holy place, *kṣetra*, and constitutes my main source material. Even though the nine ponds play an important role in the religious landscape of the site and the life of the religious community, they have not been studied till now. The article presents descriptions of the *tīrthas* found in the *Śrīraṅgamāhātmya* and supplements them with a brief report and some photographic evidence from the field research of 2020.

KEYWORDS: Śrīraṅgam, *tīrthas*, Sanskrit *māhātmyas*, culture, nature

The current article deals with one segment of the broader research dedicated to Sanskrit literature on the Kaveri (Kāverī) riverine region

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and specifically to the holy Vaiṣṇava spot which is the Śrīraṅgam island with its Raṅganātha temple.¹ The subject is viewed, among others, from the perspective of the relationship between nature and culture. Thus, the cultural ecology, acknowledging the culturally productive role of the interdependence of nature and culture, was one of many inspirations here.² Since the paper reports on a work in progress, my aim is not to exhaust the topic, but to signal the very presence of material formations, currently poorly known and mostly neglected, but featured already in the *māhātmya* of the place.

Nature and water bodies

The water bodies, being elements of the natural landscape and connected with the religious holy spots, remain one of the spectacular examples of the mutual relations between nature and culture. For this reason, they may be approached by way of theoretical reflections on cultural ecology; reflections which, after a long period of viewing nature as subdued by people and thus dependent on culture, accentuate the interdependence of the two spheres: of the natural phenomena and the human creations. The dynamics of the development and interactions of the natural phenomena may be seen, in the view of this theoretical approach, as having its counterpart in the way the culture develops and operates (Zapf 2016). One of the approaches connected with this reflection is the concept of cultural geography, referring here to the role of both real and imagined relations between human beings and places in the process of the creation of culture (Spencer 1970; Eck 1981; Feldhaus 2003; Selby, Peterson (eds). 2008; Eck 2013). Thus, physical geography, with its natural phenomena, has its analogue in cultural geography which uses the former for establishing culturally productive and meaningful places, maps, routes, and networks. In our case, it is the network of nine ponds which

¹ On more about the role of Kaveri see, for example, *Eternal Kaveri* 1999 and Czerniak-Drożdżowicz and R. Sathyanarayanan 2022.

² See, for example, Zapf 2016.

plays an important religious role in the process of wiping out sins and facilitating liberation for the devotees.

In the part of South India dominated by Tamil culture, nature and thus also water and riverine regions are inscribed into the concept of particular landscapes forming a kind of series of ecological niches (*nilams*), which are: hill—*kuriñci*, field—*marutam*, pasture—*mullai*, seashore—*neytal*, and wasteland—*pālai*. These are associated with specific kinds of cultural production, especially literature, and are immediately linked to the poetical concept of *tiṇais*, namely the setting out of a poem in one of the five given landscapes. This feature of Tamil culture speaks of the nature-bound awareness of the inhabitants of the region.

Water, in the form of a river, acts as a connecting element linking various places situated along its stream, on its banks, and on its islands. Water bodies such as ponds become, in the religious and temple-cult context, *tīrthas* which are integral parts of the holy *kṣetras* and temple space.³ Discussing different ways of understanding *tīrthas* and their meaning in Indian tradition, Eck writes (Eck 1981: 323):

In the wider Hindu tradition, these places, particularly those associated with waters, are often called *tīrthas*, and pilgrimage to these *tīrthas* is one of the oldest and still one of the most prominent features of Indian religious life. A *tīrtha* is a “crossing place,” a “ford,” where one may cross over to the far shore of a river or to the far shore of the worlds of heaven.

Thus, every temple is a kind of a *tīrtha*, as well as the ponds which are always present in the temple precincts and play an important role in the sacred geography of India. They are usually connected with

³ Rajarajan writes: “For example, the *Cilappatikāram* 11.92–103 talks of three types of miraculous pool that are called *puṇṇiyacaravaṇam/puṇyasaravaṇa*, *pavakāraṇi* and *iṭṭacitti/iṣṭasiddhi*. A dip in these three pools gives one, respectively, the power to acquire the knowledge of the celestial scripture, attain the blessings of previous birth and get anything that is desired” (Rajarajan 2018: 89).

the Brahmanical lore, but equally important are those grounded in indigenous or regional beliefs. Local traditions are largely focused on the mutual nature-and-culture relations as well as on life forces associated with those places. Eck (Eck 1981: 334) explicates:

It was a locative tradition in which *genii loci* under a variety of names—*yakṣas*, *nāgas*, *gaṇas*, *mātrkāś*—were associated with groves and pools, hillocks, and villages, wielding power for good or ill within their areas of jurisdiction.

The pilgrimage to such places was often equated with the performance of a sacrifice and recommended, for example, by a Pāñcarātrika text, *Paramasaṃhitā* (ParS 25.1–4) for those who, though devoted to god, were not able to worship him using the path of *jñānayoga*:

brahmā

ye narā jñānayogena na śakyās tvām upāsītum /
sarvadā bhaktiyuktāś ca kiṃ teṣāṃ paramaṃ hitam // 25.1

paramaḥ

teṣāṃ adhigamo dharmo vihitāḥ kamalāsana /
tīrthānāṃ śuddhihetūnāṃ vaiṣṇavānāṃ ca vartmanā // 25.2
jñānināṃ aviyuktānāṃ icchatāṃ dharmam uttamam /
abhigamyāni tīrthāni pāvanāni samantataḥ // 25.3
yatra deśe prasīdanti karaṇāṇy asya dehinaḥ /
tattīrtham iti vijñeyaṃ narānāṃ pāpanāśanam // 25.4

Brahmā: Those people, who are unable to worship you by the practice of knowledge (*jñānayoga*) and who are always engaged in devotion, what is the highest good for them?

Paramaḥ: For them, the prescribed duty is to visit *tīrthas* which give purity, by the path of the Vaiṣṇavas, O Lotus-eyed. For the knowledgeable and not detached [from life] who desires the highest *dharma*, the visits to *tīrthas* are purifying in all ways. In whatever place His devotees are enjoying deeds [the results of their deeds] this [place], this is known as *tīrtha*, destroying the sins of men.

As already indicated, the term *tīrtha* may be understood as denoting the whole sacred spot, preferably next to a water body but may also apply to a pond associated with such a spot or the temple. In the case of the Śrīraṅgam temple, there exists a group of nine *tīrthas* of which each has its presiding god and *ṛṣi* and visiting them bestows specific boons. The nine ponds are mentioned and briefly described in one of the texts that build the position and grandeur of this particular, sacred spot, namely in the *Śrīraṅgamāhātmya*.

Sacred ponds—*tīrthas*—are places of strong natural appeal. In the case of the Śrīraṅgam nine ponds, they are directly connected with particular trees and so are their names. The name of Candrapuṣkariṇī, which is the main central water body, refers however to Candra—the Moon god—but also to its specific, oval shape. There is a tree immediately associated with it, namely *punnāga*. The trees, being elements of the natural landscape, are often associated with particular myths referring to the beginnings of the water body, thus the interconnectedness between nature and culture, being one of the marking elements of the cultural ecology approach, is well observed in the example.⁴ *Tīrthas* are places, as Peterson, while speaking about Tamil Śaivas, underlines, to be equated with god himself. Singing in these places makes devotees aware of the interconnectedness of the place and god.⁵ The idea of

⁴ On the references to the *tiṇai* concept in the *akam* Śaiva religious poetry see, for example, Peterson 1982: 78. Peterson writes also about the ways of mixing pan-Indian and local elements: “One of the favorite blending techniques of the *nāyaṁmār* is to alternate, in the ten verses of the song, the cosmic acts of Śiva with those that he performed out of compassion for a particular Tamil devotee (often one of the earlier *nāyaṁmār*, such as Canticār or Kaṇṇappar). Often, too, the legends of Tamil devotees are interspersed with the puranic and epic myths of Bhagīrata, Arjuna and Rāvaṇa, who are considered by Tamil Śaivites to be paradigmatic of certain attitudes of devotion to Śiva” (*ibid.*: 79).

⁵ *Ibid.*: 82: “Ultimately it is in this singing of and listening to the songs that the Tamil Śaivite becomes actively aware of the interconnection of the shrines in Tamil country and of the ubiquitous presence of Śiva in this landscape.”

Ibid.: 81: “It seems then, from all the examples I have given above, that Śiva is the place, and, therefore, to sing of the place is to sing of Śiva. Throughout the *Tēvāram*, if

perceiving god as a temple in the case of Vaiṣṇava shrines, and more specifically, Śrīraṅgam, is described, for example, in the *Pārameśvarasaṃhitā*, where Nārāyaṇa appears incarnated as a heavenly *vimāna*.⁶

Tīrthas, while understood as sacred spots *per se* and consisting of temples or shrines, often have their own *sthalapurāṇas*. In the case of Śrīraṅgam, eight additional ponds are distributed with reference to the main one, namely Candrapuṣkariṇī, thus they, being elements constituting the larger temple space of the holy island, are praised in the *māhātmya* of Śrīraṅgam. As we shall see, for each of them the element of *phalaśruti*—praising the fruit of worshipping there, appears.

From originally small and frequently natural water reservoirs, the *tīrthas* often developed into architectural structures with particular features such as pavilions in the center of the pond or on its banks. Some of these general features are also present in the case of the Śrīraṅgam ponds. Temple tanks were used not only for ablutions but also for the floating festival, known in the South of India as *tepotsava*. At times such ponds were built not in the temple precincts themselves but in their vicinity.

Kramrisch, while speaking about the site at which gods are worshipped, immediately refers to water and *tīrtha* (Kramrisch 1976: Vol. I: 3–7). Thus, the temple is a *tīrtha*—the playground of gods, and water is an indispensable element of the temple premises and rituals. If a natural reservoir is not available, water should be brought into a vessel to fulfil ritualistic requirements. Pointing to the role of the natural phenomena, among them water, regarding the holy spots, Kramrisch begins her book

there is any one activity that is praised over all others, it is this: “singing of Śiva/the place.” By singing these songs the devotee makes a mental pilgrimage to the spot and reaps the same benefits as one who has actually made the pilgrimage, and the benefit is the experience of singing as a pilgrimage.”

⁶ Rastelli 2003 writes about the double process of ‘mythization:’ God is first ‘mythitized’ by His manifold manifestations constituting the world and then the temple, as the world, is considered to be constructed out of these manifestations, so the temple is equated with the world embedded within God, and in this way, the temple becomes a mythization of the transcendence. When the temple is considered to be a body of God, then the presence of God in the form of the temple is mythicized in a direct manner.

with a quotation from the *Bṛhatsamhitā* LV 8 and *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* I, CXXX.15:

*vanopāntanadīśailanirjharopāntabhūmiṣu /
ramante devatā nityaṃ pureṣūdyanavatsu ca //*

The gods always play where groves are near, rivers, mountains, and springs, and in towns with pleasure gardens.

She also refers to the quote from *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* III, 93.29–30, which she translates as under (Kramrisch 1976: 5):

*jalāśayavihīneṣu deśeṣu manujottama /
sānnidhyam naiva kurvanti kadācit tridivaukasaḥ // 29
tathā suragrhaṃ karyaṃ yathā vāme jalāśayam /
purastād vā bhavet tasya nānyatha manujādhipa // 30*

In places without tanks, gods are not present.
A temple, therefore, should be built where there is a pond
on the left, or in front, not otherwise.

Though the reservoirs are very important, there is not much research regarding them. This might be due to several reasons, for example, seeing them as purely utilitarian constructions. In her comprehensive work on water architecture in India, Hegewald writes:

Even scholars with a better knowledge of Indian architecture and a keen interest in water structures have frequently focused on their technical and engineering aspects and neglected or even denied their artistic and religious significance. (Hegewald 2002: 3)

Hegewald points out that though there are plenty of water structures in other places of the temples' precincts, there is no temple without access to water. These reservoirs, as Hegewald mentions, are called by

different names such as *kunḍa*, *vāpī*, *taḍāga*, *ghāṭ*, and *tīrtha*, which also refer to their architectural features, shapes, and functions.⁷ Their role in establishing or developing holy spots was crucial and sometimes they constitute the kernel of the further development of the temples. Hegewald observes: “Temples were not constructed to create a sacred place, but were built on a certain site because the place itself had long been considered holy” (Hegewald 2002: 23). Such seems to be the case of Candrapuṣkariṇī *tīrtha* located within the Śrīraṅgam temple. Its beauty, as the *māhātmya* claims, was one of the crucial elements that attracted Viṣṇu to it, thus he remained at its bank forever, which gave the beginning to the holy spot.⁸ For Śrīraṅgam the Candrapuṣkariṇī pond was the kernel of the holy *kṣetra*, but in the further development of the temple complex, eight additional sacred ponds appeared, creating the network of *navatīrthas*.⁹

⁷ Hegewald (2002), describing architecture of temple water tanks, gives also a kind of definitions for these diverse types of water ponds. See also our footnote 9.

⁸ Śrīraṅgamāhātmya chapter 10:

śrībhagavān uvāca

ayaṁ manohara deśaḥ parītaḥ sahyakanyayā //19

candrapuṣkariṇī ceyam pāvanī śramanāśinī/

ayaṁ ca bhaktimān rājā dharmavarmā sadā mayi //20

ime ca munayaḥ puṇyā vasanty atra vikalmaṣāḥ /

atraiva vastum icchāmi laṅkāṁ gaccha vibhīṣaṇā //21

Śrībhagavān said:

This is a beautiful place surrounded by Sahyakanyā (Kāverī).

This is purifying Candrapuṣkariṇī destroying/removing fatigue,

and this is king Dharmavarma always full of *bhakti* towards me.

These virtuous, sinless Munis live here,

here I would like to live, go [back] to Laṅkā Vibhīṣaṇa!

⁹ References to ponds, especially of the *teppakulam* type meant for floating festivals, may be also found in the hymns of Āḷvārs and Nāyaṇmārs; see, for example, Rajarajan 2018: 85–91. While referring to the South Indian context, Rajarajan speaks about yet another water structures, *teppakkuḷam* (*tirukkuḷam* or *tīrtakkuḷam*), which were ponds used for the floating festivals. All these types of water reservoirs may be considered examples of *jalavāstu* (water architecture). *Teppakulam*s date probably to the early medieval time (c. 7th–9th century CE) and they became integral parts of the temple premises about the Vijayanagara-Nāyaka time (16th–17th century CE). Rajarajan,

Navatīrthas of Śrīraṅgam

I would like to refer here to the *navatīrthas* as described in the eleven-chapters-long *Śrīraṅgamāhātmya*, the Sanskrit source I have been working on in collaboration with Dr R. Sathyanarayanan (EFEO, Pondicherry),¹⁰ as well as to the presently existing structures located around Śrī Raṅga-nātha temple.

I cannot say anything conclusive about the date of my source material, namely the text of the *Śrīraṅgamāhātmya* (this seems to be a typical 17th–19th-century example of the *māhātmya* genre, dedicated to the glorification of many old, but also newly developing sacred spots), as well as about the date of the establishment of the ponds, but since my research on the text is ongoing, some new developments might appear. Nevertheless, the fact that a major part of Chapter 10 of the eleven-chapters-long *māhātmya* was dedicated to the description of the ponds, speaks about their important role in the development of the holy spot rich in natural, riverine phenomena, which made them worthy of attention.

When looking for materials concerning the actual existence of the ponds, we came across some limited information about the nine

in his article of 2018, speaks about different types of water tanks mentioned in the *dharmaśāstras*: “The *dharmaśāstras* that deal with rules pertaining to *nityakarmas* admit water as a source of ablution in domestic and temple rituals. Four types of water sources are reported. They are *kūpa* (5 to 50 cubits in length if rectangular and in diameter if circular), *vāpi* (50 to 100 cubits), *puṣkariṇī* (100 to 200 cubits), and *taḍāga* (200 to 800 cubits). This description contains no note of *kuṇḍa* (Kane 1941: 893). The vast reservoir called *taḍāga* with architectural fittings was the contribution of the Vijayanagara-Nāyaka rulers” (Rajarajan 2018: 88).

For this purpose, the Raṅganātha temple of Śrīraṅgam has to its west a separate tank that is watered by the river Kollidam. While referring to the structures outside the temple, Hari Rao (Hari Rao 1967: 64) writes that, as per the *Kōyil Oḷuku* chronicle, the *teppakulam* pond was funded by Kūranārāyaṇan Jīyar in the 13th century.

¹⁰ Critical edition (forthcoming) of the *Śrīraṅgamāhātmya* based on the *Śrīraṅgamāhātmyam* (Telugu script), ed. Nārāyaṇaswāmīnāyaka, rev. Ramacandra Sastrī of Mūñjūrpaṭṭu, in the press. Translation Vivekakalānidhi and owned by Veṅkaṭācārī, Chennai, August 1875, prepared by Marzenna Czerniak-Drożdżowicz and R. Sathyanarayanan; forthcoming.

tīrthas on the website of Ramanuja Dasan Aranganagar Vasi, obviously a resident of Śrīraṅgam, an enthusiast and freelance author of some internet content dedicated to the Raṅganātha temple.¹¹ He mentions that the ponds are presented in the *Śrīraṅgamāhātmya*, but that also Thirumaliśai Ālvār (around 7th century AD) in his *Tirucandavirutham* (song no 49 and 50) refers to 8 *tīrthas* around Śrīraṅgam and that in his *pasuram* he says that people are coming there to get rid of their sins, thus obviously all eight ponds, and not only the ninth—Candrapuskariṇī—have this purifying power. However, while looking closer at the evoked quotation from Tirumaliśai Ālvār,¹² one sees that it actually speaks about some *gaṇas*, groups, coming from eight directions. If we take the term in the sense of Gaṇas, it could allude to the deities associated with every pond in our *māhātmya*, and possibly to the idea of having eight ponds in each of these directions. However, in the quotation, there is no clear statement about the existence of such ponds.¹³ Similarly, the *Pārameśvarasaṃhitā*

¹¹ Ramanuja Dasan Aranganagar Vasi. *Nava theerthams of Srirangam*, <https://aranganagar.wordpress.com/2018/05/27/%E0%AE%85%E0%AE%B0%E0%AE%99%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%95%E0%AE%A9%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%A9%E0%AF%8D-%E0%AE%92%E0%AE%A9%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%AA%E0%AE%A4%E0%AF%81-%E0%AE%A4%E0%AF%80%E0%AE%B0%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%A4%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%A4/> (accessed on 28 August 2022).

¹² வெண் திரைக் கருங்கடல் சிவந்துவேவ முன்னர்நாள் தின் திறல் சிலைக்கை வாளி விட்ட வீரர் சேரும் உளர் எண் திசைக் கணங்களும் இறைஞ்சி ஆடு தீர்த்த நீர் வண்டிரைத்த சோலைவேல் மன்னுசீர் அரங்கமே

¹³ I am grateful to Dr R. Sathyanarayanan (EFEO, Pondicherry) and Dr Suganya Anandakichenin (Hamburg University) for checking these passages for me and providing me with a tentative translation:

Tirumaliśai Alvar (around 7 c. AD): *Tiruccandaviruttam* song 50:

எண்டிசைக் கணங்களும் இறைஞ்சியாட, தீர்த்த நீர்—, „where *gaṇas* (*dikpālas*?) from eight directions come to worship and bathe in its purifying waters;”

“The town of the Warrior who dispatched an arrow with a robustly vigorous bow in hand in such a way that the white-waved black ocean turned red and boiled on a previous day, is Raṅgam of enduring fame, which has groves with humming bees as [its] fences [and] in whose pure water crowds from the eight quarters [Gaṇas from eight quarters?] bathe worshipfully.”

(1100–1300 AD: Rastelli 2006: 54), being a Pāñcarātrika text viewed as the elaboration—*vyākhyā*—to the *Pauṣkarasamhitā*, and connected with Śrīraṅgam,¹⁴ includes also, in chapter 10 (verses 106–304), a *māhātmya* containing a description of the heavenly *vimāna* of Raṅganātha descending to the earth in Śrīraṅgam, but the *tīrthas*, apart from Candrapuṣkariṇī (10.277ab), are not mentioned there. They are also not mentioned by Hari Rao in his *History of Śrīraṅgam Temple* (1976) though he refers to Jambutīrtha within Jambukeśvara temple and to the relationship between these two temples. Evoking the *Kōyil Oluku* chronicle, he mentions the customary annual visit of the Raṅganātha image to the Jambutīrtha. The image was taken along the imaginary boundary line running from the south to the north and dividing the Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva temples, and then to the Jambutīrtha.¹⁵ Hari Rao also mentions a conflict between the temples on one occasion when the Śaivas did not allow the Vaiṣṇavas carrying the Raṅganātha image to enter their temple and attacked them, so obviously the relationship was not always friendly.¹⁶ Since this event took place under the Vijayanagara rule, we could assume that at least the Jambutīrtha was already (namely in the 14th–15th century) present on the island.

Supplementing our vague knowledge about the dating of our source text, the *Śrīraṅgamāhātmya*, with the information about the Tirumaliśai quote, as well as the absence of any mention of *tīrthas* in

¹⁴ See *Jayākhayamhitā*'s (Adhika portion of Chapter 1) list of Pāñcarātrika *samhitās* and their association with particular holy *kṣetras*.

¹⁵ Hari Rao (1976), evoking the *Kōyil Oluku* chronicle, says it mentions that a boundary wall between Śrīraṅgam and Kilaiyur (Jambukeśvara) was erected by Uttamanambi in S.1355 or A. D.1433 (Koil Olugu: 154).

¹⁶ Hari Rao (1976) mentions the intervention of Raya (probably Kriṣṇadeva Raya 1509–1530) and the building of a boundary between the temples. He writes: "Uttamanambi ran (along) the boundary 'starting from the four-pillared mantapa with the two tiruvali (cakra) stones on the bank of the southern Kaveri,' and boundary stones were fixed in his tract (Koil Olugu: 141). The new boundary was laid north-south to the west of the Jambutirtham, which was thus declared to be outside the area of Srirangam. The Saivites were pacified. 'From that time,' says the Olugu. 'the Perumal is taken to the boundary, on the eighth day, not to the east (i.e., Jambukesvaram).'"

the *Pārameśvarasamhitā*, we cannot say anything certain regarding the date of the ponds apart from that, possibly, they appeared sometime between the 13th and the 19th century. Keeping this in mind, we can, nevertheless, confirm that nowadays, in accordance with the *māhātmya* text, Candrapuṣkariṇī does, indeed, appear at the center of the network and the eight *tīrthas* are situated in more or less eight directions from this main pond.¹⁷

The story about the central pond has it that the Moon, Candra, took a bath and was performing austerities on its bank to rid himself of Dakṣa's curse. As Viṣṇu appeared to him and wiped out Candra's sins, the pond was named Candrapuṣkariṇī.

The author of the earlier mentioned website supplements the basic information about all eight *tīrthas* by providing a map:



This limited material proved useful during our field trip to Śrīraṅgam in search of the *tīrthas*. It was worth checking the very existence of these ponds and confronting the actual position and condition of the *tīrthas*

¹⁷ There is yet another pond within the temple known as Sūryapuṣkariṇī, but it is not counted among the nine.

with the description given in the *māhātmya*. Thus, we visited the spot in 2020 and updated the localization of the ponds:¹⁸



The map update by Ramaswamy Babu (EFE0, Pondicherry)

- | | |
|---------------------|-------------------|
| 1 – Candrapuṣkariṇī | 6 – Palāśatīrtha |
| 2 – Bilvatīrtha | 7 – Vakulatīrtha |
| 3 – Jambutīrtha | 8 – Kadambarīrtha |
| 4 – Aśvathatīrtha | 9 – Āmratīrtha |
| 5 – Punnāgatīrtha | |

¹⁸ During our field research from 10.02.2020 till 12.02.2020, Dr Sathyanarayanan (EFE0, Pondicherry), Mr Ramaswamy Babu (EFE0, Pondicherry) and I, have visited all nine *tīrthas*, checked their actual positions and documented/photographed their present state.

In this article I present a brief report of this trip supplemented by the description of the *tīrthas* found in the *Śrīraṅgamāhātmya*.

Navatīrthas in the Śrīraṅgamāhātmya and in the present-day Śrīraṅgam

As already mentioned, our source material is Chapter 10 of the eleven-chapters-long version of the *Śrīraṅgamāhātmya*, an anonymous and undated text praising the glory of the holy island and its Raṅganātha temple. The text in Telugu script, edited by Nārāyaṇaswāmināyaka, revised by Ramacandra Sastri of Mūñjūrpaṭṭu, printed by the press Vivekakalānidhi owned by Veṅkaṭācāri, was published in Chennai, in August 1875.¹⁹ Thus, for the time being, this is the only certain date we can refer to as the possible latest time benchmark both for the creation of the *māhātmya* itself and of the ponds.

Dedicating a whole chapter to the description of the ponds suggests an intention to incorporate this network of water bodies into the mythological history of the holy spot with the simultaneous desire of utilizing the natural location of the *kṣetra* on the island in between rivers and with the abundance of water.

Below, I present the ponds in the order in which they appear in the *Śrīraṅgamāhātmya*, namely *pradakṣiṇa*-wise: Candrapuṣkariṇī, Bilva, Jambu, Aśvatha, Palāśa, Punnāga, Vakula, Kadamba, and Āmra. After each quote from *māhātmya*, I append a photo and a brief description of the present state of the *tīrtha*.

As may be noticed, the descriptions are not very elaborate and do not give any architectural details that would allow us to recognize their precise shape; the surroundings are also not described in detail. Since more in-depth research by art historians would be needed, we cannot assess the date of the existing, present-day *tīrthas*. The text concentrates on their religious role, mentioning their localization in reference to the Candrapuṣkariṇī and listing trees that gave names to them,

¹⁹ In our work on the critical edition of the *māhātmya*, after preparing a Devanagari transcript, we were also using the recently acquired copies of five manuscripts of the *māhātmya* from the Tanjavur Serfoji Mahal Library, as well as one from the IFP, Pondicherry.

For more information about the *Śrīraṅgamāhātmya*, see R. Sathyanarayanan and Czerniak-Drożdżowicz (forthcoming).

the deities connected with ponds, gifts to be offered, and boons to be obtained through bathing and worshipping there.

The colophon in Chapter 10 gives its title as “The description of the supernatural power of the nine ponds (*tīrthas*)” (*navatīrtha-prabhāvarṇanam*), but the presentation of the *tīrthas*, with the subtitle “The narration about the gods, the lords of Gaṇas, etc., of respective [sacred] ponds” (*tattatīrthānāṃ devatāgaṇādhipādīkathanam*), runs from the verse 3 till verse 42. This is followed by the description of the additional boons obtained by worshipping god in these places and other water bodies equated with the holy Kāverī (verses 43–54), and then a passage subtitled “The fruit of listening to the *Śrīraṅgamāhātmya*” (*śrīraṅgamāhātmyaphalaśrutiḥ*; verses 54ab–69). The concluding Chapter 11 is dedicated to the description of the glory of the Śrīraṅgam itself.

Such a position of Chapter 10 within the structure of the text speaks about the valuable role of the *navatīrthas* for the author(s) of the *māhātmya* who obviously wanted to impart meaning to these water bodies. Maybe, since the description of the ponds follows the *pradakṣiṇa* order, the pilgrimage to all these *tīrthas*, as supplementing the visit to the Raṅganātha, was postulated and was one of the reasons for introducing such a passage, however, the text is not explicit on this matter.

The *Śrīraṅgamāhātmya* (chapter 10. 3–42) presents nine *tīrthas* as follows:²⁰

Candrapuṣkariṇī

Śrīraṅgamāhātmya 10.3–14:

3. Where there is a pond [called] **Candrapuṣkariṇī** which removes sins if people take bath there, it removes all misfortunes.

4. O Nārada! Previously by the curse of Kāśyapa, Brahmā was made powerless, [then] by [doing] service to this [Candrapuṣkariṇī] he regained great power.

²⁰ The Sanskrit text of the *māhātmya* and its translation according to the critical edition by Sathyanarayanan and Czerniak-Drożdżowicz (forthcoming).

5. There [near the pond], there is a shady, fragrant Punnāga tree that was planted and grown by king Candramas.

6. By seeing it, one becomes free from sins, by touching [it] one receives prosperity, by embracing it one becomes wise, therefore, one should salute it.

7. Gift (*dānam*), recitation (*japaḥ*), oblation (*homaḥ*), worship (*arcanam*), and giving food offering to ancestors (*pitṛñām piṇḍadānam*) performed in its shade is declared as highly undecaying (*mahadaḥṣayam*).

8–9. O best of Munis! Pārāśarya of great power [Vyāsa] was there, Puṣkara, Puṣkarākṣa, Kumuda, Kāla, all these attendants of Viṣṇu are protecting this pond, always. There, in that place, the name of God is praised as Vāsudeva.

10. Having saluted the Lord of Gaṇas [Viṣvakṣena], having bathed, having sipped [water] according to the rules, having praised Vāsudeva, one should recite this [following] mantra.



Fig. 1. Candrapuṣkariṇī (photo by Marzenna Czerniak-Drożdżowicz)

10.1 The story about the lord of the Gods and Gaṇas of respective [sacred] ponds.

11. O supporter of the whole universe! (*aśeṣajagadādhādhāra*), O holder of conch, discus, and club! (*śaṅkhacakraḡadādhara*) Give me permission to use [for bathing] your pond.

Rudra:—

12. Having said this [along] with the root mantra (*mūlamantra*) or with the hymn of Puruṣa (*sūktena puruṣasya* = *Puruṣasūkta*), one should please the god by taking bath, calling Him “O Vāsudeva”

13. [One] should please sages in this manner, and the same way Gaṇanātha, and one should give the gift according to his capacity to get rid of all sins.

14. The gift of sesame seeds is especially praised in this place, bathing and giving gifts there will remove all sins.²¹

²¹ Śrīraṅgamāhātmya 10.3–14:

candrapuṣkariṇī yatra sarasī pāpanāśinī /
tatra snānaṃ manuṣyānāṃ sarvāriṣṭānīvāraṇaṃ //3
purā kāśyapaśāpena nistejaskaḡ kṛto vidhuh
tatsevāya mahātejāḡ pratyapadyata nāradaḡ //4
pracchāyaś ca sugandhiś ca punnāgas tatra tiṣṭhati /
purā candramasā rājñā pratisthāpya vivardhitaḡ //5
taḡ drṣṭvā mucyate pāpāt sprṣṭvā lakṣmīm avāpnuyāt /
jñānavān syāt taḡ āśliṣya tasmāt taḡ abhivādayet //6
tacchāyāyāḡ kṛtaḡ dānaḡ japo homas tathārcanam /
pitṛnāḡ piṇḡadānaḡ ca mahadakṣayyaḡ ucyate //7
pārāśaryo mahātejās tarāste munisattama /
puṣkaraḡ puṣkarākṣaś ca kumudaḡ kāla eva ca //8
śrīviṣṇupārṣadā hyete tīrthaḡ rakṣanti sarvadā /
vāsudeveti devasya tatra nāma praśayate //9
gaṇanāthaḡ namaskṛtya snātvācamya yathāvidhi /
kīrtayitvā vāsudeavaḡ mantram eted udāharet //10
[tattattīrthānāḡ devatāgaṇādhipādīkathanam]
aśeṣajagadādhāra śaṅkacakraḡadādhara
anujñāḡ dehi me deva yuṣmatīrthanīṣevāḡ //11
śrīrudraḡ
ityuktvā mūlamnatreṇa sūktena puruṣasya vā /
snātvā santarpayed devaḡ vāsudeveti nāmataḡ //12
rṣīṇ santarpayed evaḡ gaṇanāthaḡ tathaiva ca /

It is the main *tīrtha* within the premises of the Raṅganātha temple, in its third *prakāra*, in the north-western part of the temple. The text associates it with the *pumṇāga* tree (*Rottleria tinctoria* or *Calophyllum inophyllum* L.) which has dried out, but the new one has been planted behind the fence, close to the old one. This spectacular pond of unusual oval shape and of over 150 square meters was renovated together with the whole temple complex.²² It is surrounded by a fence and is locked, very well maintained, with clean water and fish. The tradition has it that Candra came to earth and observed severe penance at this *tīrtha* and through this, he obtained the grace of God, thus came about its shape and name.

Bilvatīrtha

Śrīraṅgamāhātmya 10.15–19:

15–16. O great sage! Eastward of this pond [namely Candrapuṣkariṇī], there is a pond [by name] **Bilva** (*bilvatīrtham*). Earlier in the sacrifice conducted by Vairocana [Mahābali], a mistake was made towards the Lord, indeed, Uśanas [Śukrācārya] underwent severe penance there to get rid of that [sin], and [he] planted a bilva [Aegle Marmelos] there to have a vision of Śrīkara [Viṣṇu].

17. There [at Bilvatīrtha] the sage is known to be Bhārgava, and the [presiding] deity [also] is Kavi [Bhārgava] himself, in that [holy] pond God is praised as Śrīnivāsa.

18–19 Kumuda and Gaṇanātha are the guards of that [holy] pond. There, silver should be given as a gift, and above all, gold. Also, Keśava forgives his [the one who commits mistake] unbearable faults [towards God]. Moreover, bathing and giving gifts there will remove the [great sin of] killing a brahmin.²³ (Fig. 2)

dadyāc ca śaktito dānaṃ sarvapāpāpanuttaye //13

tiladānaṃ viśeṣeṇa tasmin deśe praśasyate /

tatra snānaṃ ca dānaṃ ca sarvapāpāpanodanam //14

²² Major renovation took place in 2014–2015 and was acknowledged and awarded with the UNESCO Asia Pacific Award of Merit 2017 for cultural heritage conservation.

²³ *Śrīraṅgamāhātmya* 10.15–19:

purastāt tasya tīrthasya bilvatīrtham mahāmune /

ṛtāpacāro devasya purā vairocaner mukhe //15

The pond is located towards the east of the Raṅganātha temple and to the north of the Jambukeśvara temple, very close to this last temple. Nowadays it is very much deteriorated and abandoned. Due to difficult access, it is hard to estimate its size. There is no water in it and no *bilva* tree can be identified. It has an accompanying *maṇḍapa*, which is also not in a good condition. On the other side of the tank, there is a Śaiva *maṇḍapa* of the goddess and a kind of small ditch.

Jambutīrha

Śrīraṅgamāhātmya 10.20–23:

20–23. Towards South-East of that [holy] pond stands my *jambu* [tree]. Earlier, by the command of Parameṣṭin [Brahmā], I created the wrong scriptures. To get rid of that fault, I have undergone severe penance. There [in Jambutīrtha] the sage is Ahirbudhnya, the deity is Me–Maheśvara; Sunanda and Gaṇanātha [are the guards], name of the [presiding] God is Acyuta, food must be given there also [while chanting] “let Acyuta be pleased” (*acyutaḥ priyatām*). Indeed, there [the Lord] Hari completely removes the faults of [His] devotees; taking bath and offering gifts there removes the sin related to food.²⁴ (Fig. 3)

*uśanā kila tacchāntyai tatra tepe mahattapaḥ /
bilvaś ca sthāpitas tatra śrīkarasya ca darśanāt //16
tatraṣīr bhārgavo jñeyo devatā ca kavis svayam /
śrīnivāseti devasya tatra tīrthe praśasyate //17
kumudo gaṇanāthaś ca tasya tīrthasya rakṣakau /
tatrāpi rajataṃ deyaṃ hiraṇyaṃ ca viśeṣataḥ //18
asahyānapacārāṃś ca kṣamate tasya keśavaḥ /
tatra snānaṃ ca dānaṃ ca brahmahatyāpanodanam //19*

²⁴ *Śrīraṅgamāhātmya* 10.20–23:

*āgneyyāṃ diśi tīrthasya jambus tiṣṭhati māmakaḥ /
asacchāstrāṇyahaṃ pūrvaṃ ājñayā parameṣṭhinaḥ //20
atapam tatra tacchāntyai tapaḥ paramaduścaram /
ahirbudhnya ṛṣis tatra devatāhaṃ maheśvaraḥ //21
sunando gaṇanāthaś ca nāma devasya cācyutaḥ /
annaṃ pradeyaṃ tatrāpi acyutaḥ priyatām iti //22
bhaktāpacāram akhilaṃ harate tatra vai hariḥ /
tatra snānaṃ ca dānaṃ ca hyannadoṣāpanodanam //23*

The pond is located within the Śaiva Jambukeśvara temple premises, to the south-east of the main Śiva shrine and the Raṅganātha temple. Like the whole temple, it is presently very well maintained and fenced all around. It is fair-sized (about 100 square meters?), its water is clean and, on its north-east side, there is a small shrine of the god, probably Murugan, as the *māhātmya* of Jambukeśvara temple has it.²⁵ The pond has a field of sugar cane on one side; on its western side, there is a fenced Jambu tree. The presence of the Vaiṣṇava pond within the Śaiva temple, and in addition, its inclusion of a shrine, possibly, of Murugan, speaks for the relation between these two distinctive and important shrines. To some extent, this could result from their close, insular localization.

Aśvatthatīrtha

Śrīraṅgamāhātmya 10.24–27

24–26. Towards South of that [Candrapuṣkariṇī], there stands a tall *aśvattha* tree [Ficus Religiosa], having approached Ahalyā, god Śatakratu [Indra] underwent penance there [to get rid of the sin].

The Ṛṣi [of that place] is Gautama by name, the deity is Balasūdana [Indra], there in the [sacred] pond, God is praised by the name Ananta. Nanda, the chief of Gaṇas is the protector of that [holy] pond, especially the gift of cloth [is recommended] [while uttering] “let Ananta be pleased.”

27. Offering a bride [to the bridegroom] (*kanyādāna*) is praised here to please the god, by taking bath there, one is purified from the sin of approaching a woman who should not be approached.²⁶ (Fig. 4)

²⁵ See https://temple.dinamalar.com/en/new_en.php?id=314. https://temple.dinamalar.com/Popupimage.aspx?Photo=G_L4_314.jpg. I am grateful to Dr Anna Ślaczka for pointing it out to me.

²⁶ *Śrīraṅgamāhātmya* 24–27:
tato dakṣinato vṛkṣas tiṣṭhatyaśvattha ucchritaḥ /
gatvāhalyāṃ tapas tatra tepe devaś śatakratuḥ //24
ṛṣis tu gautamo nāma devatā valasūdanaḥ /
ananto nāma devasya tatra tīrthe praśasyate //25

The pond is located to the south of the Raṅganātha temple, very close to the Raja Gopura, on Gandhi Road, near Pankajam Hospital. Nowadays there is no access to it since it is completely surrounded by buildings, thus the only access to the *tīrtha* is through the closed *maṇḍapa* at Gandhi Road. We could see the pond from the top roof of the Pankaja Hospital, being allowed to enter and take photos. The photo on the earlier mentioned website does not represent this very *tīrtha*. At present, the pond of about 80 square meters has no water.

Palāśatīrtha

Śrīraṅgamāhātmya 10.28–30:

28. Towards the Southern [bank of the river] [and] behind [the river] there is a tree of *palāśa*. There, Guha [Skanda], my son, acquired the weapon *śakti* by [undergoing] penance.

29–30. Ahirbudhnya is the sage there, the deity is Guha, who has six faces, Hari's name here is Govinda, and [the protector is] Bhadra, the chief of Gaṇas. Especially the cow should be given [here as a gift], [while uttering] “Let Govinda be pleased.” Bathing and offering gifts there [will] remove the sin of association [with other four great sinners = *mahāpātakins*].²⁷ (Fig. 5)

It is situated on the other side of Kāvērī to the south-west of the Raṅganātha temple, near Jeeyapuram Mandapa on Tiruchi Karur Main Road. It

*nandas tu tasya tīrthasya rakṣako gaṇanāyakaḥ /
vastradānaṃ viśeṣeṇa anantaḥ prīyatām iti //26
kanyādānaṃ praśamsanti bhavatprītaye 'tra vai /
agamyāgamanāt pāpāt tatra snātvā viśudhyati //27*

²⁷ *Śrīraṅgamāhātmya* 10.28–30:

*tato dakṣiṇataḥ paścāt pālāśas tiṣṭhati drumah/
guho mama sutas tatra tapasā śaktim āptavān//28
ahirbudhnya ṛṣis tatra devatā ṣaṇmukho guhaḥ/
govinda iti harer nāma bhadraś ca gaṇanāyakaḥ//29
gauḥ pradēyā viśeṣeṇa govindaḥ prīyatām iti/
tatra snānam ca dānaṃ ca saṃsargāghavināśanam//30*

is located in a small village and has a *maṇḍapa* at its side. The *tīrtha* is of a reasonable size (around 80 square meters?) and not much dilapidated but abandoned and dirty. There is no *palāśa* tree visible nearby.

Puṁnāgatīrtha

Śrīrangamāhātmya 10.31–34b:

31–34b On the Western side of [Candrapuṣkariṇī] there is a great tree *puṁnāga* [Calophyllum Inophyllum]. Previously having approached Kṛttikās (constellations connected with Agni), the god of fire (*hutāśana*), undertook severe penance to atone for this sin.

The sage there is called Marīci, and the deity is Havyavāhana. The name of God is Śrīpati, and Subhadra is the protector of the [sacred] pond.

Clarified butter (*ghṛta*) should also be given there and Śrīpati himself is pleased [by this offering]. One will be purified from the sin of adultery by taking bath there.²⁸ (Fig. 6)

The pond is located to the west of the Raṅganātha temple, near Melur village, on the way to the Butterfly Park. The place is nicely maintained, and the fair-sized tank (around 50 square meters?) has some water. It is accompanied by a well-maintained Lakṣmīnārāyaṇa *maṇḍapa* nearby, and as our informant there told us, they are planting new *puṁnāga* trees there.

Bakulatīrtha

Śrīrangamāhātmya 10.34c–37b:

34c–37b. Then, behind the Northern [bank of the river], there is a tall *bakula* tree [Mimusops Elengi]. There the Ṛṣi is Bṛhaspati,

²⁸ *Śrīrangamāhātmya* 31–34b:

*pratīcyāṃ diśi punnāgo vidyate pādapottamaḥ /
gatvā tu kṛttikāḥ pūrvaṃ tatra devo hutāśanaḥ //31
taddoṣāntaye tepe tapaḥ paramduścaram /
ṛṣir marīcis tatrokto devatā havyavāhanaḥ// 32
śrīpatir nāma devasya subhadras tīrtharakṣakaḥ /
ghṛtaṃ pradeyaṃ tatrapi prīnāti śrīpatis svayam //33
paradārakṛtāt pāpāt tatra snātvā viśudhyati /*

who is the priest of (*purohita*) of gods, the deity is Sahasrākṣa [one with thousand eyes = Indra], the name of Viṣṇu is Mādhava. Caṇḍakopa, the lord of Gaṇas, is the protector of that [sacred] pond; there, the cloth is to be given [as a gift] for increasing the life span, by taking a bath a man will be cleansed from [the sin of] killing a cow [and] also killing a woman.²⁹ (Fig. 7)

This pond is situated on the other side of Kollidam, towards the north-west of the Raṅganātha temple, close to Tiruvaṣi village on Tiruchi Salem Main Road. This fair-sized (about 100 square meters) pond, abundant with water and rather shallow, is situated in the field near the road. There is a cremation ground in its vicinity. It does not have a fence and there is no trace of *maṇḍapa* and no tree.

Kadambatīrtha

Śrīraṅgamāhātmya 10.37c–39:

37c–9. In the North [of the Raṅganātha's shrine; there is] a *kadamba* tree [Orthocephalous Chinensis], and the name of Hari is Uttama; Janaka performed a sacrifice there, therefore he is known as Ṛṣi [of this place], the deity is Brahmā (*padmayoni*), [and] Garuḍa is the protector there [of the pond]. One has to offer there pepper rice (*mṛṣṭam annam*) for the improvement of health, he is purified by taking bath there [in the pond] from the sin of receiving gifts (*pratigraha*).³⁰ (Fig. 8)

²⁹ *Śrīraṅgamāhātmya* 34c–37b:

tataḥ uttaraṭaḥ paścād vakulo druma ucchritaḥ //34
br̥haspati ṛṣis tatra devatānām purohitaḥ /
devatā ca sahasrākṣo nāma viṣṇuś ca mādhaveḥ //35
caṇḍakopo gaṇādhiśas tasya tīrthasya rakṣakaḥ /
tatra vāsaḥ pradātavyaṃ āyuso 'bhivṛddhaye //36
tatra snātvā naraś śudhyed govadhāt strīvadhāt api /

³⁰ *Śrīraṅgamāhātmya* 37c–39:

kadamba uttare vṛkṣa uttamo nāma vai hariḥ //37
iyāja janakas tatra sa tasmād ṛṣir ucyate /
devatā padmayoniś ca garuḍas tatra pālakaḥ //38
tatra mṛṣṭam pradātavyaṃ ārogyavṛddhaye /
pratigrahaḥ kṛtāt pāpāt tatra snātvā viśudhyati //39

This *tīrtha* is also located on the other side of the Kollidam river, to the north of the Raṅganātha temple, near Utthamar Kovil Divya Deśa. It is localized behind the paddy field and has a *maṇḍapa* in some meters distance, but with no access and is fenced among trees and plants. *Tīrtha* is of size of around 50 square meters, with no water and no traces of the distinct Kadamba tree. Recently it was renovated by the local community.

Āmratīrtha

Śrīraṅgamāhātmya 10.40–42:

40–42. From there [Candrapuṣkariṇī] towards North and on the other side [of the river] there is an *āmra* tree [Mangifera Indica], Vasiṣṭha is mentioned as Ṛṣi there, and the deity is Divākara [sun], in that [sacred] pond God is praised as Hṛṣīkeśa, splendorous Viṣvaksena is the protector of this [sacred] pond, people are praising the gift of land for the increase of universal sovereignty, one is purified from the sin [committed] towards mother and father.³¹ (Fig. 9)

The pond is the third pond on the other side of the Kollidam river, situated to the north-east of the Raṅganātha temple, in the small village Thalakudi on the Tiruchi Lalgudi Main Road, near Thalakudi Asthana Mandapa. It is a small pond of around 50 square meters, very much derelict, has no water and there is no distinct *āmra* tree and there is a *maṇḍapa* in its vicinity.

After describing all nine *tīrthas*, in the concluding verses of the passage, the *māhātmya* summarizes:

³¹ *Śrīraṅgamāhātmya* 10.40–42:

tata uttarataḥ pūrvam āmras tiṣṭhati pādapaḥ /
 ṛṣir vasiṣṭhas tatrokto devatā ca divākaraḥ //40
 hr̥ṣīkeśeti devasya tatra tīrthe praśasyate/
 viṣvakseno mahātejās tasya tīrthasya rakṣakaḥ //41
 bhūmidānaṃ praśaṃsanti sarvasāmrājyavṛddhaye /
 mātāpitṛkṛtāt pāpāt tatra snātvā viśudhyati //42

43–44b. In all the [above] places one should properly please with handfuls of water (*udakāñjalibhiḥ*) Ṛṣi, deity, [and] presiding God, chief of Gaṇas, Brahma, Sūrya, Ikṣvāku and Rāghava, and Vibhīṣaṇa, and Me [Maheśvara] and you [Nārada].

44c–45. The wise man should perform recitation (*japa*), oblation (*homa*), worship (*arcanam*), gift (*dānam*) as well as pleasing brahmins in the respective names of Hari, [and one should] utter the [words of] prayers to please Him, and [one should] make the brahmins perform the utterance of blessings to please every one of them [gods with their respective names].

46. In all the places where Kāverī [flows] and especially in Śrīraṅgam, at the time of bathing, one should recite the *mantra* which has been stated in the branches of the Sāma [Veda].³²

The text of the *māhātmya* does not give information about architectural details, but from what we have seen *in situ*, the *tīrthas* in Śrīraṅgam, as far as it can be assessed from the collected material documenting their present state, seem to be of two types: the tank type, namely rather shallow water body, with a large surface and not many steps; and the *kuṇḍa* type, which are “deep and with small water area in relation to their top delineation” (Hegewald 2002: 77). Overall, all of them, apart from those within the premises of the Raṅganātha temple and Jambukeśvara temple, are rather neglected and it was not easy to find them. Nevertheless, at least one—Puṁnāgatīrtha—is better kept, while Kadambatīrtha was quite recently thoroughly renovated, as mentioned and shown in photos on the Facebook profile of the Srirangam Today

³² Śrīraṅgamāhātmya 10. 43–46:

*sarvatreva ṛṣindevamadhīdevam gaṇādhipam /
brahmāṇaṃ sūryaṃ ikṣvākuṃ rāghavaṃ ca vibhīṣaṇam //43
udakāñjalibhissamyak māṃ ca tvāṃ caiva taryayet /
japahomārcanandānaṃ tathā brāhmaṇatarpaṇam //44
tatannāmnā hareḥ kuryāt prītiṅcāviśeṣaṃ vadet /
vācayedbrāhmaṇān tatra tattatprītyaivāśīṣaṃ budhaḥ //45
sarvatreva ca kāveryāṃ śrīraṅge ca viśeṣataḥ /
snānakāle japenmantraṃ sāmāśākhāsu coditam //46*

Community (25 March 2021),³³ however, it is mistakenly described there as the Bilvatīrtha.

As we were told by people living nearby and as we could see, apart from collecting rainwater or being fed by channels, the *tīrthas* probably get also underground water from the Kāvērī and Kollidam, being situated on the island itself or on the nearby banks of these rivers.

While considering the place of the passage within the structure of the whole *māhātmya* and seeing the list of nine *tīrthas*, one observes that it alludes to the eight directions. Worshipping Viṣṇu in all cardinal and intermediate directions beginning with the center makes the space of the island and its surroundings a complete, coherent whole. The concept of nine ponds evokes also some other lists of holy spots containing nine elements, such as, for example, the list of the Śaiva Navagrahas, being the shrines accompanying main Śaiva temples, especially that Śukra and Candra are connected also with two of the traditional stories of the *navatīrthas*. In both cases, by visiting these places, one gets rid of particular sins—*doṣas*. In the Vaiṣṇava context, one encounters also, for example, a list of nine Narasiṃhas known in Ahobilam and residing in nine separate shrines. They are represented in some murals within the Kanchipuram Varadarāja temple.³⁴ Yet another is the group of Nava Tirupati, Vaiṣṇava shrines established in the southern part of Tamilnadu along the Thamiraparani river but associated with the Tirupati Venkatanātha temple. Thus, gathering elements into a nine-fold group is not unique. Associating them with a specific holy spot could have an impact on the developing pilgrimage movement, enhancing the main temple's position as well as the popularity of accompanying shrines. At the same time, the development of these sites is connected to the wide use of the natural phenomena of the region. The mutual relation of man and nature was not limited only to the practical sphere

³³ See: Srirangam Today Community. 25 March 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/SrirangamToday/photos/pcb.3537320769727589/3537320523060947> (accessed on 27 August 2022).

³⁴ See, for example, Dębicka-Borek 2022.

of using natural resources for maintaining daily existence and accumulating goods but has a much deeper aspect whereby nature creates the environment and space for the development of particular cultural phenomena, in this case, holy spots included in and constructing a kind of religious geography.

The *tīrthas* of Śrīraṅgam exemplify the valuable role of the natural phenomena, in this case, water, for the establishment and the religious efficacy of the holy spots. In this particular case, it could have been the river, Kāverī, that influenced the appearance of the concept of nine ponds. The abundance of water around the temple established not only in the vicinity of the river but right in the middle of it, on the island, also enabled the establishment of the network of nine holy tanks multiplying the religious boons of the coming devotees. This made Śrīraṅgam distinctively auspicious and unique holy *kṣetra* in which nature and people created the perfect abode for God who was unable to resist its beauty. This natural beauty, coupled with religious merits, was then described and reproduced in the creations of culture such as literature, visual art, and music, but also enriched other dimensions of human culture such as the material, the economic, and the social. A place like Śrīraṅgam enhances the welfare and well-being of the inhabitants who profit not only from nature, especially the abundance of water but also from the income brought by the devotees to the temple and to the region. The nature-culture interplay, present also in the nine ponds concept, operates therefore on several levels and in diverse dimensions which are worthy of further inquiry.³⁵

³⁵ Since the newly acquired text of the one-hundred-eight-chapter version of the *Śrīraṅgamāhātmya* appears to include short chapters dedicated to some of the *tīrthas* around the Raṅganātha temple, I intend to continue my research on the ponds in the just about to begin a research project on the temple networks in South India.

I am very grateful to both anonymous reviewers for their meticulous reading and many very useful suggestions which I was trying to use as much as possible, though due to the limitation on the article size as well as limitations in my knowledge about some aspects touched upon in the text, I was not able to consider all of them.

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Fig. 2 Bilvatīrtha (photo by Marzenna Czerniak-Drożdżowicz)



Fig. 3 Jambutīrtha (photo by Marzenna Czerniak-Drożdżowicz)



Fig. 4 Aśvatthatīrtha (photo by Marzenna Czerniak-Drożdżowicz)



Fig. 5 Palāśatīrtha
(photo by Marzenna
Czerniak-Drożdżowicz)



Fig. 6 Purnnāgafīrtha (photo by Marzenna Czerniak-Drożdżowicz)



Fig. 7 Bakulatīrtha (photo by Marzenna Czerniak-Drożdżowicz)



Fig. 8 Kadambatīrtha (photo by Marzenna Czerniak-Drożdżowicz)



Fig. 9 Āmratīrtha (photo by Ramaswamy Babu)