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Along the River, towards God *raṅga* Shrines along Rivers¹

ABSTRACT: The article addresses a specific religious phenomenon found in the region of South India and connected to a group of Vaiṣṇava temples hosting the Raṅganātha form of Viṣṇu. The temples in question are located along the rivers, in this case, Kāverī and Pallar. Waters, especially rivers, perceived not only as a means of ensuring vegetation but also as endowed with certain divine attributes and often personified as goddesses, have in addition a place-connecting aspect. Keeping this in mind, the present enquiry takes as the starting point the Raṅganātha temple in Śrīraṅgam on the Kāverī-Kolliṭam river and revisits the concept of the holy sites of Viṣṇu, called *raṅgas*, situated along the banks of the rivers Kāverī and Pallar, and on their islands. The study, using, among others, some *māhātmyas* from the region, is the very first, largely preliminary attempt to broach this topic.

KEYWORDS: South India, temples, rivers, *māhātmyas*

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The connecting power of rivers

Following on the phenomena observed while studying the processes of interaction and interdependence of nature and culture which defined the field of my research for some time now,² in the present preliminary notes I would like to focus on some distinctive temples found in the riverine regions of South India. The role of water, especially rivers, in Indian culture and the harnessing of the specific quality of rivers, namely their connecting power, has been already observed by the Indologists³. However, in the current exploratory analysis I would like to discuss some characteristic Vaiṣṇava temples established along the rivers, in this case, the Kāverī and Pallar, mostly in the present-day Tamilnadu. The temples in question are usually referred to as the *raṅgas* since they, apart from being situated along or on the river, all share one common feature, namely all of them host a singular, resting form of Viṣṇu, known as Raṅganātha, where the deity is depicted as reclining on the Ananta/Śeṣa snake.

While analyzing the text of the *Śrīraṅgamāhātmya*, an example of the vast body of *māhātmya* (glorifications, eulogies) literature dated mostly between the 15th and 19th century, I have already referred to the role of water in reference to the Kāverī river as well as the presence of particular water bodies, *tīrthas*, around Śrīraṅgam temple situated on the island on the Kāverī (see fn 2). Besides this particular *raṅga* temple, I have come across several other *raṅga* temples, all worthy of note, for—as a class—they constitute yet another example of the fruitful interaction of nature and culture. However, I am aware of the very preliminary stage of my inquiry into the subject and hope to expand on it in the future.⁴

² See, for example, Czerniak-Drożdżowicz 2022; Czerniak-Drożdżowicz and Sathyanarayanan 2022.

³ For example: *Eternal Kaveri* 1999; Eck 1981 and 2012; Feldhaus 1990 and 2003; Neuss 2012; etc. Feldhaus refers also to the rivers perceived mostly as women: see Feldhaus 1990, chapter 2, “The Femininity of Rivers.”

⁴ I am grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for their in-depth reading and useful suggestions, though due to the above-mentioned reasons I was not able to incorporate all of them.

Rivers, having an indubitable impact on the lives of the inhabitants of the adjacent regions, influence religious life and the appearance of the holy sites situated along their watercourses, providing a strong stimulus to local cultural production. Their connecting role may be seen in the examples of some important rivers of South India, especially the Kāverī, but also others such as the Pallar, flowing in the region of Tamilnadu.

The riverine region of Kāverī is significant for several reasons. On the one hand, the river and its waters were and are used for practical purposes such as drinking, irrigating fields and sailing, so also for transportation of people and goods. Keeping this in view, river embankments have been elevated, and dams built to ensure proper management of water.⁵ On the other hand, the river and certain places along its watercourse have created distinct pathways and subtle networks of interconnected religious sites, thus impacting the religious life as well as the cultural production of this part of South India.⁶

We can, for example, consider the hydrometric network of the Kāverī region, stretching from the present-day Karnataka (Coorg region) and spanning the present-day Tamilnadu from the west to the east, from the perspective of cultural ecology. This perspective emphasizes the interdependence of nature and culture and points to

⁵ I have already mentioned the Grand Anicut Dam while speaking about the importance of water bodies in my presentation at the Pondicherry workshop, *Networks of Temples and Networks of Texts in South India*, Pondicherry/Kanchipuram, January 20–26, 2020, organized by Ute Hüsken and Jonas Buchholz (Heidelberg), co-organized by South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University and École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO), Pondicherry, within the framework of the project “Temple Networks in Early Modern South India,” funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). See Czerniak-Drożdżowicz and Sathyanarayanan 2022.

⁶ The article is yet another outcome of the research on the texts of the Vaiṣṇava tradition in the South of India, not only the canonical ones (mostly Pāñcarātriśa *samhitās*) but also those referring to specific sacred spots. The tendency, on the one hand, to connect some of these spots with natural phenomena and on the other, to connect them in a kind of network is one of the striking features, thus the subject is explored more thoroughly under the framework of some collaborative research projects.

their dynamic relations as well as the agency of nature in these relations. It allows us to see these mutual relations in the development of particular religious ideas by way of utilizing natural phenomena in establishing the sacredness of religious spots, in the development of specific literary works and in production of certain material objects. Moreover, the river's immediate connection with religion is seen in its personification as a woman and a goddess, often equipped with superiority surpassing even that of Gaṅgā. Such a motive is found, for example, in the eulogy of the Śrīraṅgam temple of Raṅganātha titled *Śrīraṅgamāhātmya*.⁷ Chapter 9 of this text mentions that this superiority was bestowed on Kāverī by Viṣṇu himself as he decided to take residence on the river's island.⁸ It is also present, for example, in the [Vaiṣṇava] *Kāñcīmāhātmya* [henceforth KM], where yet another important river of the South, Pallar (Vegavātī), is accorded a position higher to that of Gaṅgā.⁹

Nothing definite may be said about the dating of the *māhātmya* texts, though one could consult, for example, Buchholz (2022: 21–

⁷ This text, which may be dated between the 15th and 19th century CE, has been in the scope of our interest for some time and its critical edition is planned to be published soon; see Sathyanarayanan and Czerniak-Drożdżowicz 2023 (forthcoming).

⁸ See Czerniak-Drożdżowicz and Sathyanarayanan 2022.

⁹ Sanskrit text of the *māhātmya*, courtesy of Malini Ambach; all proposed corrections by Ambach.

iti stutas sarasvatyā bhagavān bhaktavatsalaḥ |
uvāca kṛpayodvīkṣya vāṇīm mandasmito hariḥ ||KM 15.86||
vatse vāṇi na bhetavyaṃ tvayā madbhaktyādhunā |
tavāhaṃ suprasanno [‘]smi nāpi me [‘]pakṛtaṃ tvayā ||KM 15.87||
ahaṃ te samprayacchāmi kāmḥkṣitaṃ varam uttamam |
matpādajāyā gaṃgāyā api te śraiṣṭhyam uttamam ||KM 15.88||

Praised in this way by Sarasvatī, God Hari, kind to worshippers
 said these words looking upwards with compassion [and] smiling gently:
 ‘O, child, Vāṇi, due to your devotion towards me
 you should not be scared today.

I am pleased by you, there is no offence [done] to me by you.

I will give you the highest, desired boon,

the highest superiority over Gaṅgā born from my feet

and I will live for you in this northern bank, O pure one.’

24), who, using for his case study texts connected with Kāñcīpuram, writes about problems with dating *sthalamāhātmyas* and hypothesizes on the existence of several textual layers in the extant texts. His views, taken together with those of Schier (2018) and Shulman (1980), suggest that one cannot say anything decisive about the dating of most Sanskrit *sthalamāhātmyas* apart from assuming their appearance to range sometime between the 15th and the 19th century CE.¹⁰

Speaking of the rivers, one of the features productive from the point of religious and cultural development, is their connecting aspect. Many places along the river courses may be seen as having been organized within certain pathways, clusters and networks. Such gatherings of places endowed with special value and meaning, brought together for particular reasons, were also observed by Feldhaus in case of the Maharashtra region as described in her book, *Connected Places* (2003). In that work, a ‘place’, in opposition to a more abstract ‘space’, is understood as being more concrete and differentiated. The author proposes to view region as a set of connected places, hence region may thus be taken as a specific area having a particular identity and value for people. (Feldhaus 2003: 5–8)¹¹.

In the case of a group of temples situated along one river, the connecting aspect of the particular water body is spectacularly self-evident and Feldhaus writes:

¹⁰ For a more thorough elaboration on the Tamil *sthalamāhātmyas/talapurāṇams* one may consult Nachimuthu 2022.

¹¹ Feldhaus writes: “A region in this sense is not the concern of an “objective” geography that would identify, for instance, the region within which certain flora or fauna are found, the region within which the roofs of houses are made with one, as opposed to another, sort of material, or the region within which a particular script is used for the written form of languages. Rather, the kind of region this book is concerned with is one that is thought of as such by its residents and perhaps also by some others, an area with a distinct identity and significance for people who live in it and for others who think and care about it. In this sense, a region is a kind of place” (Feldhaus 2003: 5).

Rivers are a particularly good means of connecting places. Rivers are the only element of the landscape that themselves move. As they flow from one place to another, they connect the places that they move between. Rivers themselves are places too: moving, ever-changing places. Because they move, providing a physical link among places, rivers allow people to bring spatially separated places together in their imaginations. (Feldhaus 2003: 18)

Such a linking aspect of rivers seem to be highlighted also in some *māhātmya* texts praising the glory of specific holy spots. Associating a particular river with a feminine figure, that too a goddess, makes it an element of an ecological niche which welds the human aspect, the nature, and the culture into an interconnected and, in a way, sustainable whole. Viewing this relation in such a way is one of the proposals of the above-mentioned cultural ecology method and cultural ecology of literature (Zapf 2016) which stresses the role of these interrelations in giving rise to literary texts and other products of culture seen as ecological phenomena, i.e., as grounded in two axioms of ecological thought: interconnectedness and diversity.¹² In South India, in addition, the traditional concept of *nilams/tīṇais* understood as discrete ecological regions equipped with particular natural features and strongly connected with particular cultural production such as literature, makes the association of nature and culture even more immediate.¹³

The networks, or the groupings that are seen as having a significant connection, created in relation to water bodies do not only

¹² As I have already observed, this method highlights the interdependence of the sphere of natural phenomena and human creation. Czerniak-Drożdżowicz 2022: 196: “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 and Peterson (eds) 2008; Eck 2012).”

¹³ These are hill—*kuriñci*, field—*marutam*, pasture—*mullai*, seashore—*neytal*, and wasteland—*pālai*. For more about the concept, see Buchholz in this volume.

involve places along the river. For example, *Śrīraṅgamāhātmya*, being in its 11-chapter version¹⁴ one of the source materials praising the glory of the Śrīraṅgam island on the Kāverī and its Raṅganātha temple, brings references to water reservoirs such as the group of nine *tīrthas* connected with the Raṅganātha temple. These are the Candrapuṣkariṇī pond situated within the temple premises and the eight additional ponds deployed around it, as the text of the *māhātmya* attests, in more or less eight cardinal directions.¹⁵

The phenomenon of establishing temples along the river and the process of building a pilgrimage path along the Narmadā river as well as the custom of *pradakṣiṇa*, circumambulating the river while visiting temples along its waterway, was elaborated on by Neuss (Neuss 2012). In this case, it involves a complete circumambulation of the river and this specific religious journey around the river is described, for example, in the *Revākhanda*. Through circumambulation of the river, the Narmadā valley, as Neuss points out, was seen by pilgrims as a geographical, ritual and cultural unit.

Raṅgas

Some natural features of the *raṅga* places make them perfect spots for god's appearances and interventions. If such places are deployed along the river, and if this river is accorded special value, for example, by being perceived as a goddess, the places are understood as sacred—*tīrthas per se*.

¹⁴ The text has been in the scope of my and Dr. Sathyanarayanan's (EFEO, Pondicherry) interest for some years. We were preparing a new edition (to be published shortly) of the text in Sanskrit written in Telugu script, edited by Narayanaswamināyaka, revised by Ramacandra Sastri of Mūṇjūrpaṭṭu, printed by the press Vivekakalānidhi, owned by Veṅkaṭācāri (Chennai, August 1875). I owe thanks to Prof. Ute Huesken (SAI, Heidelberg) for the copy from the British Library.

¹⁵ See Czerniak-Drożdżowicz 2022 (there is also a map of these *tīrthas*) and Sathyanarayanan and Czerniak-Drożdżowicz 2023 (forthcoming).

Following on Feldhaus's proposal that a place need not be just a single spot but a whole interconnected region,¹⁶ we may take the riverine region of Kāverī to be a place.¹⁷ It is distinct for its strong bonds to the river perceived as a water reservoir, a goddess and a provider of the perfect residence for gods, and is marked by numerous temples along its stream, dedicated both to Śiva and Viṣṇu, among them, for example, the particular holy spots—*raṅgas*—connected through the image of a specific form of god namely Raṅganātha reclining on the snake. These spots, grounded in the geographical reality of the region, are perceived as places that have the power to grant several boons, among them ultimate emancipation. Reflecting on the phenomenon of such holy spots, Jacobsen writes: "[...] salvific space means a type of geographical site in which the many goals of religion, such as health, wealth, moral purity, divinity, rebirth in heaven and final salvation, *mokṣa*, are promoted as available and attainable for those who arrive there on pilgrimage" (Jacobsen 2013: 19).

The specific form of Viṣṇu that gave name to the *raṅga* temples is known as Raṅganātha. While writing about different forms of Viṣṇu and the concept of the world as a theatre for gods, Charlotte Schmid (2005) dedicates a passage to Raṅganātha. She observes that gods are perceived as manifesting themselves on the stage of this

¹⁶ In the Conclusions, Feldhaus writes: "Regions are produced by human beings. It is people who create regions, in their experience and in their imaginations. People connect places by picturing them as different parts of a single body, by thinking of them as the homes of sisters married to different men, by counting them as members of specific, numbered sets. People bring regions into being by moving across the landscape, or by picturing themselves—or a palanquin, a pole, a bedstead, a *kāvaḍ*, or a river—moving across the landscape. They tell stories about the travels of the gods, then imitate those journeys in their own pilgrimages. They remember the biography of a divine incarnation, and they visit, physically or in acts of recollection, places where he sat, slept, spoke, ate, or even defecated. People differentiate one region from others to which it is opposed, but they also connect places in one region with those in another" (Feldhaus 2003: 211).

¹⁷ For the role of the Kāverī, several myths connected with its source and watercourse and culture-productive role for the inhabitants of the region see, for example, Viswanathan Peterson 1999.

theatre-like world, thus associating the term *raṅga* with stage is plausible. Nevertheless, elaborating briefly on this particular name of god, she refers to Tamil text, the *Cilappatikāram* (5–6 century CE) and the 10th canto of its *Pukārkkāṇṭam*. In this text, the word *raṅga* appears several times not only in the meaning of “stage” but is also understood as “the little island”.¹⁸ The term *raṅga* thus can refer both to the theatre and the stage, which would be plausible, considering that these places are god’s earthly stages and locations in which he enacts his worldly *līlā/krīḍā*. But I would rather refer to its probably Tamil origin, which can mean an island located between two river courses, which in the context of Viṣṇu’s shrines along and on the river would make more sense.

Schmid also notes that Raṅganātha is not the only name given to Viṣṇu reclining on the snake. Thus in some texts, Viṣṇu appears also as Śeṣaśayin/Anantaśayin. This particular iconographical representation of the reclining Viṣṇu is treated in a more detailed manner, for instance, in the Vaikhānasa text the *Vimānārcanakalpa* where it is classified as being of four types. As Soundara Rajan explicates, the said four types of postures are known as *yogaśayana*, *bhogaśayana*, *viraśayana* and *abhicarikaśayana*, each differentiated by the details of the pose as well as by the accompanying figures.¹⁹

¹⁸ “The description of a grove is presented thus (though I have no direct access to Tamil texts, I quote the text itself for the benefit of specialists): “*ārru vi araṅkattu vīrru vīrrāki*” which may be translated as “[the grove] majestically situated in a unique manner on a tiny island which divides the river in two.” We may also translate this as “the stage which divides the river in two” but a stage which would be specifically related to that which forms the isle where the divinity of Śrīraṅgam resides. It seems that in this tradition the Śrīraṅgam deity appears as the divinity par excellence of the stage, to the point of conferring on a term of Sanskrit origin a meaning derived from the geographical position occupied by the temple of the god. A fragment of the earth which emerges from the cosmogonic water flowing all around it, the isle is an image of the world created by the god and, as such, a representation of the stage where he manifests” (Schmid 2005: 635).

¹⁹ Soundara Rajan describes the features of all four forms and provides a table which analysis particular attributes of images from different temples. In his opinion, the associated figures were systematized in the Raṅganātha temples from the 9th or

While writing about the island shrines, Eck mentions some other important Vaiṣṇava spots, for example, the upper course of the river in Karnataka, in the Coorg region, having its Puranic myth connected with the source of the Kāverī itself. One such spot is Kushalnagar, known now mostly for its Tibetan refugees' monastery but also having its temple of Śrīraṅganātha; then, on the border of Karnataka and Tamilnadu, she mentions Madhyaraṅga temple on the island between Kāverī's two streams, in the Shivasamudram.²⁰ There are more groupings, this time of three temples, called *triraṅga*, which are also connected with the Kāverī river. One of the groupings seems to be popular in Karnataka and the three holy spots are the Srirangapatna temple, the Śrīraṅgam temple, and the above-mentioned Madhyaraṅga temple near Shivasamudram. As noted by Sriram, the concept of five *raṅgas* prevails in the Tamil tradition while in the Kannada tradition the concept of three *raṅgas* is popular. Both traditions agree that Srirangapatna is the first of the *raṅgas*. The Kannada tradition enumerates as the second the Madhyaraṅga temple near Shivasamudram and Śrīraṅgam, known as Araṅgam, as the third one. Thus, as we can see, there are different ways of grouping the temples and some groupings are connected to regional traditions.²¹ The other grouping, to which I would like to turn now, relates to the Pallar river. In the case of this network, we have a textual source describing it.

***Triraṅga* along the Pallar river**

This particular *triraṅga* is connected with the northern part of Tamilnadu, the region of Kāñcīpuram. The group of concerned temples consists of the Pallikonda Raṅganātha temple (the Raṅganāyaka-

10th century onwards (Soundara Rajan 1967: 80). They are also described by Gopinatha Rao (Rao 1997, vol. 1, part one: 90–96).

²⁰ See, for example, Eck 2012: 191.

²¹ Article by Sriram (2017a) and his website (2017b) are two of the few sources dealing with the phenomenon of five *raṅgas*. The author, Sriram, is a historian, a writer, and an entrepreneur.

svāmi temple) known as Adiraṅga²², the Thiruparkadal Prasanna Veṅkateśvara Perumal temple known as the Madhyaraṅgam and the Śrīraṅgam temple itself, known as the Antyaraṅgam. Thus, in this case, the story begins in Pallikonda. It was there that the angry Saraswatī, feeling neglected by her husband, Brahmā, turned into a river, known later as Vegāvatī (Pallar) and tried to destroy her husband's sacred offering. Therefore Viṣṇu, in the form of Raṅganātha, lied down across the river to stop her from rolling down in fury. Cox in the *Madras District Manual* writes that the name of the place, Pallikonda, is traditionally understood as "you lie down", though he points out that the correct etymology refers to "the Pallis' hill" (Cox 1894: 424). The temple has the Raṅganātha form as the main *mūrti*, and the same is the case with the Thiruparkadal temple. The last one in the group is the Śrīraṅgam temple thus also called *antya*,²³ but such identification is found only in the above-mentioned source, namely *Madras District Manual*, which is a compilation of data gathered by the British assistant collector and magistrate of North Arcot District with probably limited knowledge about cultural and religious nuances of the region. Local tradition, however, has it that the third temple is not the Śrīraṅgam Raṅganātha but the Yathoktakārī (Fig. 7) temple in Kāñcīpuram and this seems to be confirmed by the recent research by Malini Ambach.²⁴ According to her, the

²² Prof. Ute Huesken's supposition is that it could be in fact Atti not Adi, and it would then refer to the wood of which the idol (original one?) was made. This could remind one of the wooden idol of the Varadarāja of Kanchipuram which is the place known as Satyavrata Kṣetra, thus the one to be protected by the appearance of the Yathoktakārī shrine.

²³ I owe the information about this particular group to Prof. Ute Huesken and the doctoral candidate Malini Ambach, who kindly shared with me a copy of the *Madras District Manual*.

²⁴ Personal communication with Prof. Ute Huesken and the doctoral candidate, Malini Ambach. The identification of these three holy spots on the basis of the *māhātmya* of Kāñcīpuram was done by Malini Ambach and the result of her original research on this text will be presented in her PhD thesis. I am very grateful to Malini for allowing me to mention her findings as well as to use some portions of the *māhātmya* text from her research; she also suggested some useful corrections to my understanding of the passage.

foundation myth of the Yathoktakārī speaks about the three places in which Viṣṇu appeared reclining on the Śeṣa snake to prevent flood brought about by Sarasvatī who took the form of the Pallar river.

The story references Brahmā's offering, *aśvamedha*, which he intended to perform in the *satyavratākṣetra* which is Hastiśaila, namely the Varadararāja temple in Kāñcīpuram. His wife, Sarasvatī, did not come, offended by Brahmā's previous behaviour. The text of the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya* explains the reasons for Brahmā's demeanour, mentioning also Sarasvatī's disregard of her husband's request and her refusal to attend.

The *Kāñcīmāhātmya* describes in some detail the reaction of Sarasvatī, who, filled with anger, decided to stop the sacrifice and, becoming a river, tried to destroy the sacrificial space:

sopatyakāyā nirgatya vegāt sahyākhyabhūbhṛtaḥ |
praḷayāmbudhivad ghoram garjamānā bhayaṃkarī ||KM 15.03//
prayayau prāṇmukhī roṣāt kṣetram satyavratam prati |

She, having gone down ferociously from the Lord of the one known
as Sahya [mountain],
as the water of destruction, roaring horribly [and] causing the fear,
went eastward with anger towards the place of Satyavarata.

vegena srotaso gṛhya pūrvābdhim praviśāmy aham |
iti niścīya manasā vegād āgāt prakopitā ||KM 15.09//

"I will come with impetus having taken the water of the stream"

She, having decided in mind like that, being angry, came by/with [in
the form of] a flood.

Fearing the worse, all assembled deities turn to Brahmā for help and he directs Viṣṇu to harness Sarasvatī's waters. Complying with Brahmā's request, Viṣṇu appears in three successive places, preventing Sarasvatī from flowing on. The first is a place at the Bija mountain, where Viṣṇu, to stop Sarasvatī, appeared as Śayaneśa ['the reclining one']²⁵. The spot where Sarasvatī reappeared in an attempt

²⁵ *Kāñcīmāhātmya* 15.33–38:

tatra sarveṣu bhūteṣu kṣetre satyavrate tadā |

to bypass Viṣṇu is called Sārasvata.²⁶ The second place, at the distance of five *yojanas* to the west of Hastiśaila [namely the Kāñcīpuram Vararāja temple], is the one where Viṣṇu, in the form of Śeṣaśayana, appeared for the second time to prevent Sarasvatī from wrecking destruction. Thus, he is known as Pralayarodhaka [‘the one preventing destruction’].²⁷ Finally, Viṣṇu appeared as Śeṣaparyamka

*āvir āsīj jagannāthas tām niroddhum sarasvatīm ||15.33//
rakṣaṇārthaṃ ca yajñasya bhaktānām iṣṭado hariḥ |
satyavratasya kṣetrasya śīmānte pañcayoJane ||15.34//
praticyām hastiśailasya diśi bijagirer adhaḥ |
dakṣiṇottaratas tiryak chiśye [I accept reading śete of P] setur ivādbhutaḥ ||15.35//
śaṅkhacakradharaḥ śrīmān pītavāsā jagatpatiḥ |
śayānāś śeṣaparyamke dadrṣe [*]calasannibhaḥ ||15.36//
taṃ dṛṣtvācalasaṃkāśaṃ śayānaṃ harim agrataḥ |
nirvegā staṃbhitā cābhūn muhūrtaṃ sā sarasvatī ||15.37//
bijādrer uttare deśe yataś śiśye janārdanaḥ |
atas taṃ śayaneśākhyam pravadanti manīṣiṇaḥ ||15.38//*

Then, there, in the place of Satyavrata, to pacify Sarasvatī [and] to protect the sacrifice to all frightened ones appeared the Lord of the worlds, Hari fulfilling the desires of devotees.

[He appeared] on the border of the **place of Satyavrata**

in the distance of five *yojanas*,

to the western place of **Hastiśaila**, below the mountain Bīja.

[He], the miraculous one reposed crosswise as if the bridge,
from the north to the south,

holding the conch and disc, glorious, in yellow cloths, the lord of the worlds.

Reclining on the Śeṣa-bed, he was seen as similar to the mountain.

Sarasvatī, having seen Hari reclining [and] looking like a mountain,

at the beginning was quiet and stopped momentarily.

Since Janaradana reclined in the northern place of the mountain Bīja,

thus the wise ones called him **Śayaneśa**.

²⁶ *Kāñcīmāhātmya* 15.46:

*yatrotthitābhavad vegād dharām bhitvā sarasvatī |
tatra tīrtham abhūd rājan nāmnā sūrasvataṃ śubham ||15.46//*

Where Sarasvatī was gone out from the stream, having pierced the earth,
there, O king, was a splendid *tīrtha* known as **Sārasvata**.

²⁷ *Kāñcīmāhātmya* 15.52–53:

*paścime hastiśailasya pradeśe krośapaṃcake |
sa śeṣaśayano bhūtva dadrṣe girirād iva ||15.52//
praḷayābhisamāṃ roddhum nadīm śiśye yato hariḥ |*

[‘having the Śeṣa snake as his bed’] in Kāñcīpuram itself where he is also known as Yathoktakārī [‘doing what was said’].²⁸ Moreover, seeing the change in Sarasvatī’s attitude and her devotion to him, and

atas tam āhur manujā nāmnā pralayarodhakam //15.53//

In the place westward to Hastīśaila [in the distance of] the five *krośas* he, **having Śeṣa as his bed** (Śeṣaśayana) was seen as the lord of the mountain. Since, to prevent the river, he laid down equal to the ocean of destruction, thus people called him by the name **Pralayarodhaka** —the one restraining destruction.

²⁸ *Kāñcīmāhātmya* 15.75–77ab:

āvīrababhūva sahasā śaṃkhacakraḡadādharaḡ /

śayānāś śeṣaparyamḡke kundendusadrśaprabhe //15.75//

navanīlāmbudaśyāmaḡ pītavāsā jagatpatih /

pradeśe yajnaśālāyā hastīśalasya paścime //15.76//

yatrothitā cāgnikuṇḡdāt toyarūpā sarasvatī |

There appear hastily the one holding conch, disc and club, **reclining on the bed of Śeṣa**, shining like the ray in the pot.

Dark as the new blue cloud, having yellow clothes, the lord of the worlds [appeared] in the place to the west of the sacrificial abode of **Hastīśaila**, where Sarasvatī in the form of water came out from *agnikuṇḡda*.

Kāñcīmāhātmya 15.89–93:

dattaḡ mayādhunā kṣetre madīye puṇyavardhane /

yasmād vegād anuprāptā kṣetraḡ satyavrataḡ prati //15.89//

tasmād vegavatīty ākhyāḡ labdhvā vasa madājñayā |

ahaḡ cāpy uttare tīre tava vatsyāmi śobhane //15.90//

tvayā vicimṡayantyā māḡ uktaḡ pūrvaḡ ahaḡ yathā |

yāsyāmi śālāḡ deveśa tatra dehīti darśanam //15.91//

tathā tvayoktavākyena kṡtaḡ kāryaḡ mayā yataḡ |

ato yathoktakārīti nāmnāhaḡ prathito bhuvi //15.92//

vatsyāmy atra ciraḡ kālaḡ tava prīyacikīrśayā |

tvam cāsi nirgatā yasmād kuṇḡdān māḡ draṡṡum utsukā //15.93//

That by the stream you moved towards the place of Satyavrata, thus receiving the name Vegavatī live [here] due to my order.

And I will live on your northern bank, O shining one.

As I was addressed previously by you, who think:

‘I will go to the hall, O God of gods, give me [your] vision’, thus what you said was done by me.

Therefore on earth, I, being known by the name Yathoktakārī [‘doing what was said’], will live for a long time desiring to please you.

You, who went out from the *kuṇḡda* desiring to see me, stay [here].

being pleased by Sarasvatī's effort to see him, he bestowed on her, in her river-form, a new name—Vegavatī ['agitated', 'impetuous']:

*yasmād vegād anuprāptā kṣetraṃ satyavratam prati //KM 15.89//
tasmād **vegavatī**ty ākhyāṃ labdhvā vasa madājñayā |*
That you moved with impetus towards the place of Satyavrata
Thus, due to my order, you live [here] having received the name
Vegavatī.

In this portion of the *māhātmya*, the network of the three places along the Vegavatī river is thus clearly established. This is achieved, on one hand, through Viṣṇu's divine intervention in his response to Brahmā's resolve to perform *aśvamedha* and Sarasvatī's determination to prevent it, but on the other, due to Sarasvatī's desire to see the Highest God. The text gives relatively precise information about the positioning of the places along the river and thus allows Ambach's above-mentioned identification of them as the Pallikonda Raṅganātha temple (Raṅganāyakasvāmi temple), the Thiruparkadal Prasanna Veṅkateśvara Perumal temple and the Yathoktakārī temple with Viṣṇu known as Yathoktakārī.²⁹

This comparatively detailed story connects the three places in reference to the main Satyavrata Kṣetra/Hastisaila being the site of Brahmā's *aśvamedha* and one of the main Viṣṇu's shrines which is the Varadarāja temple. The natural phenomenon of water/river which sometimes causes floods and is even able to temporarily prevent sacrifices, was effectively used for plotting the story in which pan-Indian motifs appear, for example, of Viṣṇu granting the river superiority over Gaṅgā (*ahaṃ te samprayacchāmi kāmṅkṣitam varam uttamam | matpādajyā gaṅgāyā api te śraiṣṭhyam uttamam //KM*

²⁹ I was able to visit all three temples during a field trip organized by Prof. Ute Huesken under the framework of the workshop *Narratives on the Yathoktakārī Perumāḷ Temple* funded by the project "Hindu Temple Legends in South India" Heidelberg Academy of the Sciences and Humanities / École française d'Extrême-Orient.

15.88//). Such a motif is also known from the *Śrīraṅgamāhātmya* where Viṣṇu grants superiority to Kāverī.³⁰

From the above-mentioned examples, one can see the frequent usage of the concept of a group of temples imagined as a mutually connected network of holy spots hosting a particular form of god. This network has its spatial representation dependent on natural phenomena, in this case, rivers, and their surroundings. One may note that many rivers of the region were perceived as special or even holy, among them Kāverī—which probably enjoyed the greatest authority—or even the smaller ones like Pallar. The name of the last may be derived from the Tamil *pāl*—meaning ‘milk’—a detail which accords with the notion of perceiving the river as the milk ocean on which Viṣṇu, supported by the Śeṣa snake, reclines. Thus, the real river becomes the most appropriate water (or milk) reservoir to host god.

Five *raṅgas* along Kāverī

Yet another grouping of places associated with Raṅganātha in Tamil tradition is the group of five temples known as *pañcaraṅgas*.³¹

The *Pārameśvarasamhitā*, which is one of the Pāñcarātriśa texts connected with Śrīraṅgam and associated with Śrīraṅgam in the *adhikapaṭha* (added chapter) of the Pāñcarātriśa *Jāyākhyasamhitā*, in the 10th chapter praises the Raṅganātha *vimāna* but does not mention any other *raṅga* shrines. Yet the concept is known in Tamilnadu and applies to certain temples. Some clues may be gleaned from what Eck writes about the island shrines on the Kāverī in her book, *India: Sacred Geography*, specifically in the section, “The Island Shrines of the Kāverī” (Eck 2012). *Pañcaraṅgas* are often the places where

³⁰ See Czerniak-Drożdżowicz and Sathyanarayanan 2022.

³¹ About pilgrimages and circumambulation, see, for example, Stein 1978; Neuss 2012. Feldhaus writes: “A number of pilgrimages associated with rivers serve to dramatize regions watered by the rivers, making the regions into circulatory and thus also, at least potentially, conceptual units” (Feldhaus 2003: 28).

rivers join, else the islands on the river, and what characterizes them is the presence of Viṣṇu in the Raṅganātha form.

These shrines, according to the Tamilian tradition, are: 1) the Śrīraṅganātha temple in Srirangapatnam (in the present day Karnataka); 2) the Śrīraṅganātha temple in Śrīraṅgam; 3) the Koviladi Appala Raṅganātha temple, known also as the Sri Appakkudathān Perumal (near Lalgudi); 4) the Trivikrama temple near Sirkali or, alternatively, the Śārṅgapāṇi temple in Kumbhakonam; and 5) the Parimala Raṅganātha temple in Indaluru (Mailaduturai).

The five *raṅgas* are temples not only of different sizes but also invested with different values and having different impact on the culture of the region. In the case of this network, so far I have not managed to find any particular Sanskrit text that mentions or describes the *pañcaraṅga* concept *per se* though such concept is known in Tamilnadu and addressed, for instance, by Eck (Eck 2012) and the above-mentioned historian Sriram (2017a, 2017b). The five temples in focus are listed among the 108 Vaiṣṇava *divyadeśas*, thus they have high status as having been visited and praised by the Ālvārs. This could speak of the early provenance of these holy sites which, however, might not necessarily be of the same date as the appearance of the concept of grouping them into a cluster of five. One could suppose that in such a case the concept of them being connected appeared later, in an attempt to associate them with Śrīraṅgam, though the temples themselves are of a different dating. A brief appraisal of the temples brings out their different origins and dates.³²

³² Most of the basic information about these temples, apart from the Śrīraṅgam and Kumbhakonam temples, I gathered from various internet sources concerning pilgrimage places, from articles in Indian newspapers, for example, *The Hindu*, as well as from publications concerning the 108 *vaiṣṇava divyadeśas*. I have visited 3 of the *pañcaraṅga* temples: the Raṅganātha temple in Śrīraṅgam, the Śārṅgapāṇi temple in Kumbhakonam, and the Appalla Raṅganātha temple in Koviladi. In the last two, I was able to see the main *mūrti* of Raṅganātha. The fourth temple I have visited, namely the Trivikrama temple, turned out not to be the actual *pañcaraṅga*.

The first of the *raṅgas*, the Srirangapatnam Raṅganātha temple, is the only one situated in the present-day Karnataka, but one must remember that the region in question belonged originally to Tamiḷakam or the area dominated by Tamil culture and described as stretching from the Veṅkatam Hills (Tirupati) to Kanyakumari and from the Bay of Bengal to the Arabian Sea.³³ The temple, situated on the bank of the Kāverī river, is relatively well known and was built probably in 894 CE by the chief Tirumaliah, a vassal of the Ganga Dynasty.³⁴ However, as in the case of most of the holy spots, tradition ascribes its beginning to one of the ancient sages, in this case, the sage Gautama. The expansion of the temple premises took place under Hoysalas in the 11th century CE. Afterwards, under Nāyakas, the fort was added and thus the temple complex expanded. Under the Vijayanagara dynasty, it acquired some elements of the Vijayanagara style seen in its entrance towers—the *gopuras*. The main image, Raṅganātha, reclines on a five-headed serpent and according to the local legend, is said to be 3600 years old and supposedly a gift from Viṣṇu himself. The processional chariot of the temple was gifted by Tipu Sultan's father, Haidar Ali, which proves the reverence of the later rulers for the sacred spot. As Brittlebank writes:

As one of the three island sites in the Kaveri where it is believed the god Vishnu sleeps (in which form he is known as Ranganatha), Srirangapatna was regarded as a potent source of sacred or divine power. In south India, where there was a perceived continuum between sacred and royal power, this made it an ideal spot for a capital. (Brittlebank 1999: 50)

Thus, the city was established in 1610 by Raja Wodeyar as the capital of the Mysore kingdom. The Raja took over the island from Tirumala, the viceroy of the Vijayanagara empire, which at that time was in decline. The temple and the island always lay in the sphere of

³³ See for example Rajamani 2009.

³⁴ However, for example, Brittlebank 1999 gives the early 13th century as the possible date.

interest of local rules irrespective of their religious affiliation, thus the Tipu Sultan's fort on the island is integrally connected with the temple premises. The temple, being the most western and the first of the group, is known as Pūrva Raṅganātha Kṣetra.

The Śrīraṅgam Raṅganātha temple, though the second on the list, is the most important being in the middle and in central location in relation to the rest of the group, thus obviously easy to reach from both directions—the west and the east. It can be dated in its oldest parts probably to the 6th century CE, being mentioned, for example, by the early Ālvārs.³⁵ The temple belongs to the best known Viṣṇu shrines and is equated with the heaven on earth and thus called *bhūlokavaikuṇṭha*. It constitutes the biggest temple complex in India.³⁶ The temple is situated on an island between the Kāverī and Kollidam rivers and has 7 courtyards—*prākāras*, of which the outer ones are the regular streets with very lively city life. Viṣṇu is worshipped there in the monumental sculpture representing the god reclining on the snake Śeṣa. The sculpture in the main shrine (*mūlasthāna*) is 7 meters long.

Śrīraṅgam is one of the few places, among them Melkote and Tirupati, in which Viṣṇu revealed himself his out of his own will in a particular iconographical form, thus both, the idol and the shrine (*vimāna*) in which he resides are of the self-manifested type—*svayamvyakta/svayambhuva*—namely “one in which god manifests himself by his own will” (Hari Rao 1967).

The story of the temple known from its *māhātmya* and also from the temple chronicle *Kōil Oḷugu*, mentions two Cōla kings, Dharmavarman and Killi, as those who built and rebuilt the temple.

³⁵ As, for example, recent work of Eva Wilden shows, it can be dated to the late 6th and early 7th century CE. She wrote: “The three old *Tiruvantāti*-s by Poykai-, Pūtam- and Pēyālvār form, together with the small oeuvre of Kāraikālam-maiyār on the Śaiva side, the earliest works of bhakti literature transmitted in Tamil, or in fact, for that matter, in the whole of India.” Tiruvarambānam (Śrīraṅgam) occurs in these three works six times (Wilden 2020); also, Orr supposes the 6th century CE; see Orr 1995.

³⁶ See, for example, Auboyer 2006 [it covers an area of about 631,000 square metres (156 acres) with a perimeter of 4 km].

The main, central shrine, Śrīraṅgavimāna, is believed to have descended from heaven and has a *svayamvyakta* representation of Raṅganātha, who is said to have appeared from the ocean as the result of the ascetic practices of Brahmā. The story goes that after some time Ikṣvaku, of the Sūrya family, brought the *vimāna* from the abode of Brahmā (*brahmaloka*) to Ayodhya, where it was worshipped for a long time. Later, the prince Rāma gave it as a gift to Rāvaṇa's brother Vibhīṣana, who put the *vimāna* on his head to take it to Laṅkā. When he reached the bank of the Kāverī river, he stopped to rest. The next morning surprised Vibhīṣaṇa found he could not move the *vimāna*, as, overwhelmed by the beauty of the place, Lord Raṅganātha decided to stay on there. Śrīraṅgamāhātmya, chapter 9 reads:³⁷

16–17 On Sunday, before the sunrise, the king of Rākṣasas [Vibhīṣaṇa] setting off [for Laṅkā], having summoned Dharmavarmā, Brāhmaṇas [and] sages residing there, wanted to take [Raṅga]vimāna on his head. The Rākṣasa could not himself lift the Raṅga[vimāna] even using all his strenght.

18–19b Giving up his efforts, the king then sank down in deep sorrow. Viṣṇu, seeing Vibhīṣaṇa falling at His feet with his face full of tears, said—“My child, get up, get up!”

Śrībhagavān said:

³⁷ Śrīraṅgamāhātmya 9.16–21:

*maitre mitrodayāt pūrvam prastathe rākṣaseśvaraḥ /
dharmavarmāṇam āmantrya tatratyān brāhmaṇān ṛṣīn ||9.16||
vimānam aicchadādātum śirasā rākṣasas svayam /
nāśakṛd raṅgam uddhartum api sarvaprayatmataḥ ||9.17||
niṣprayatnas tato rājā niśasāda suduḥkhiṭaḥ /
tam āśrupūṇṇavadanam patitaṁ pādamūlayoḥ ||9.18||
uttiṣṭottiṣṭha vatseti viṣṇur āha vibhīṣaṇam |
Śrībhagavān uvāca
ayaṁ manoharo deśaḥ parītas sahyakanyayā ||9.19||
candrapuṣkariṇī ceyam pāvanī śramanāśinī |
ayaṁ ca bhaktimān rājā dharmavarmā sadā mayi ||9.20||
ime ca munayaḥ puṇyā vasanty atra vikalmaṣāḥ |
atraiva vastum icchāmi laṅkāṁ gaccha vibhīṣanā ||9.21||*

19c–21 This is a beautiful place surrounded by the daughter of Sahya (Kāverī) and this Candrapuṣkariṇī is holy and removes fatigue. And this king Dharmavarmā is always devoted towards me. And all these virtuous, sinless saints (*munayaḥ*) reside here. [Therefore] I would like to stay here, O Vibhīṣaṇa. You go on to Laṅkā!

To show his mercy to Vibhīṣaṇa, Raṅganātha reclines in the *vimāna* with his face directed to the south, towards Laṅkā.

The passage of the *māhātmya* referring to the beginnings of the temple proves the special attitude of the local community towards the river and natural phenomena, such as the island in the middle of it. The natural beauty of the place was therefore acknowledged by the god himself, which makes nature an active agent in the mythological story of the beginnings of the holy site. At the same time, the passage explains the unusual orientation of the temple, which is also connected with the natural phenomena and geographical orientation of the place linked to the story of the inhabitants of different regions, among them Ayodhyā and Laṅkā. One more important aspect is the reference to the pan-Indian tradition by associating the story directly with the protagonists of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

The temple remained in the sphere of interest of many local dynasties. The great religious teacher and philosopher Rāmānuja (11th–12th c. CE) spent several years there, re-organizing the temple life and administration and making the Śrīraṅgam temple a powerful religious centre with substantial economic and political influence. He dedicated to the temple one of his three religious hymns—*gadyas* titled *Śrīraṅgagadya*.³⁸ Moreover, Śrīraṅgam is the mighty centre of the Teṅkalai Pāñcarātrikas and Śrīvaiṣṇavas, namely the *mārjāra-nyāya* (cat-analogy) followers, who are more Tamil language-oriented and who also use Tamil religious texts in their temple rituals. The temple itself is considered exemplary, recalled and replicated in the other *raṅga* temples of the region.

³⁸ The three *gadyas* are: the *Śaranāgati Gadya*, the *Śrīraṅga Gadya* and the *Śrīvaikuṇṭha Gadya*.

The Koviladi Appala Raṅganātha temple, the third on the list, known also as the Śrī Appakkudathān Perumal or the Tirupair Nagar temple, is located on one of the islands on the Kāverī (close to Tiruchennampundi; one can reach it by crossing Grand Anicut Dam). The place is called Koviladi because it is believed that the shrine predates (*adi*) Śrīraṅgam temple. Many of the inscriptions on the temple walls, though recorded in the *South Indian Inscriptions*, still wait for analysis and translations, to bring more information, for example, on the dating of the temple and some affiliations with local dynasties and private donors.³⁹ The temple has a three-tiered *rājagopura* facing west and its elevated structure, approached by 21 steps, gives a view of the Kāverī river. The main deity in the form of Raṅganātha is facing west, thus the direction of Śrīraṅgam, and is accompanied by two goddesses, Bhūdevi and Kamalavalli Tāyar. The temple is considered number eighty-one among the 108 *vaiṣṇava* divine locations—*divyadeśas*—and the monumental sculpture depicts Raṅganātha laying down while leaning slightly on his right side, with his arm stretched and his eyes closed. The temple tower is in the shape of Indra's chariot; it encompasses the shrine of Vinayaka (Gaṇeśa), and is considered as *adi*—a forerunner—in relation to the Raṅganātha temple at Śrīraṅgam.⁴⁰ One of the traditional stories about the place says that king Upamanyu and *ṛṣi* Parāśara were worshipping Viṣṇu there, and as the king offered *appam* (pancake) as food offering to the god, this fact gave the name Appakkudathaan to the form of Viṣṇu residing in this place. As tra-

³⁹ One can consult *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. VII (Texts) ed. K. V. Subrahmanya Aiyer 1932.

⁴⁰ Sriram (Sriram 2017a and Sriram 2017b) writes that the temple was praised also by Tirumangai Ālvār, who referred to Raṅganātha as being surrounded by the perennial river and he also speaks about high walls, perhaps protecting the temple from a flood. Also Nammālvār, in *Tiruvaymoli* praises the place, its tall buildings and groves, full of parrots and bees. The temple has also been praised by Tirumalisai Ālvār. The temple's natural environment was used not only as a convenient spot for establishing a temple but it was creatively utilized by the poets—Ālvārs being influenced and attracted by the elements of the natural surroundings of the place.

dition has it, this form of Viṣṇu destroyed the pride of Indra and removed the fear of death from the mind of ṛṣi Mārkaṇḍeya; the king Upari Siravasū was freed here of sins and curses. Among the Ālvārs mentioned in connection with this place is Pariyālvār who was singing in front of god a hymn in praise of Viṣṇu before he attained salvation, and sometimes also Nammālvār, who began his journey to salvation here. The Koviladi is one of the three Raṅganātha temples established on the Kaveri islands.

The Śrī Raṅganātha Perumal (4a) in Vadarengam/Vata Ranga is considered the fourth temple. Though Sriram claims that the temple in question is rather the Trivikrama temple near Sirkali, in fact, these are two different temples, namely one called Trivikrama in Sirkali, and the other one, in Vadarendam, towards north-west.⁴¹ The name could come from the fact that once there was a forest of banyan trees (Skr. *vāṭa*) there. It is the most northern of all the *pañcaraṅga* shrines. Sriram, obviously confusing these two, claims that similarly to the Śrīraṅgam temple, the Trivikrama temple is also accompanied by a Śaiva temple called Jambukeśvara, but this definitely refers to the Vadarenga. As Sriram writes, one of the legends associated with this temple says that since the main idol of Raṅganātha here is very small, it is known as Balaraṅgam.

Knowing about the existence of these two different temples of Viṣṇu, it is now difficult for me to judge if all the details given by Sriram indeed refer to the Vadarengam Perumal temple. Considering Trivikrama's geographical position, namely quite far from the bank of Kollidam, I presume that some elements of the story referred to by Sriram could apply to the Vadarengam temple. It seems to be a very special place since the river Kollidam bents around and goes here from the south to the north which is seen as a very auspicious sign. Thus, the natural phenomenon of the changing river course was interpreted in favour of establishing one of the Viṣṇu's holy

⁴¹ The fact that these are two different places appeared during my field research and personal communication with the priests of the Trivikrama temple in January 2023 (27.01.2023). Unfortunately, I was not able to see the Vadarengam temple myself.

spots in its vicinity. The area was destroyed by floods at the beginning of the 20th century and from that time onwards the Kumbhakonam Śārṅgapāṇi temple became more popular and listed among the *pañcaraṅgas* instead of the Vadarengam/Sirkali temple.

The Śārṅgapāṇi (4b) temple in Kumbhakonam, which appears on the list of the *pañcaraṅgas* interchangeably with the Sirkali Vadarengam, is, according to a legend, associated with the ṛṣi Hema, who practised there his penance. While he was doing so, Viṣṇu came to him from heaven in his chariot. Thus, the temple depicts such a scene in the main shrine and is also constructed in the form of a chariot.⁴² The name of the temple is associated with the processional image—Śārṅgapāṇi, namely Viṣṇu holding in hand his bow (*śārṅga*). The main deity, called Aravamudan, is again a monumental figure of a reclining Viṣṇu.

Kumbhakonam is a place of many temples as well as one of the biggest temple tanks in India called Mahāmakam. The tradition has it that it was created from the pot, containing nectar and the seeds of creation, drifting due to the deluge. When it reached Kumbhakonam, Śiva pierced the pot with an arrow. Thus, one of the main temples here is called Kumbheśvara. Most of the nectar flowed where there is now a tank. It is believed that all river goddesses live in this pond and in the nearby Kāśīviśvanātha temple there are sculptures of rivers goddesses, with the Kāverī river in the middle.

The *sthalapurāṇa* of the Śārṅgapāṇi temple speaks of the sage Bhṛgu, who entered Vaikuṇṭha and, out of arrogance, kicked Viṣṇu on the chest. For removing this sin Bhṛgu was reborn as ṛṣi Hema who undertook in Kumbhakonam a penance, due to which goddess Lakṣmī was reborn as his daughter in the Mahāmakam tank. The ṛṣi offered her in marriage to Viṣṇu in the form of Śārṅgapāṇi.

The temple probably existed in the Pallava period but was rebuilt in the period of Vikrama Cōla (1121 CE onwards). The spectacular 11-tiered gopura was completed by the Vijayanagar rulers

⁴² The temple tank known as Pottramarai, according to the legend was previously a hermitage of the ṛṣi.

and on its first tier, it has sculptures depicting *bhāratanaṭyam karaṇas* (sequences of movements).

Of the Ālvārs connected with this temple, the earliest were Peyālṅvār and Bhutataṅvār, then Periyālṅvār, Āṇḍāl, and Tirumaṅgai Ālvār (8th century). The tradition claims that Tirumalicaī Ālvār spent there his last years and Nammālṅvār sang of this temple; the temple is also linked to the name of one of the first *śrīvaiṣṇavācāryas*, Nathamuni, who compiled the works of the Ālvārs.⁴³

The Parimala Raṅganātha Perumal, in Thiruvilandur [near Ma-iladuthurai], the fifth temple on the list, is known also as the Indalur temple.⁴⁴ It is associated with Parakāla, a robber who become an Ālvār and was known under the name Tirumaṅgai. Tradition has it that Viṣṇu himself transformed him by teaching him the eight-syllabled *mantra* (*aṣṭākṣaramantra*).⁴⁵ One of the mythological stories of the temple speaks about king Ambariṣa's vow to fast during the Ekadaśī and the plan of the sage Durvasa to prevent the king from fulfilling the vow. While being chased by the ghost created by Durvasa, Ambariṣa seeks refuge at the feet of Viṣṇu who himself intervenes and protects Ambariṣa. For Durvasa, this becomes the proof of the king's devotion. When Ambariṣa was asked by Viṣṇu about his wish after completing the fast, he requested Viṣṇu to stay and bless the devotees of the place. Thus, Viṣṇu resides in this particular temple known as the Parimala Raṅganātha.

As one may see, the five *raṅgas* do not seem to be connected by one, particular mythological story addressing all five places; rather, what connects them is the replication of the particular form of Viṣṇu and their location along the river. Therefore, the idea to view them as connected could be the result of later efforts inspired by the developing pilgrimage movement.

⁴³ See, for example, the temple website: <http://www.templenet.com/Tamilnadu/df012.html>.

⁴⁴ Its name Indalur refers to the moon, Candra or Indu, who according to the legend was relieved there from a curse.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Woźniak 2019: 204.

To conclude

The concept of the *raṅgas*, be they three or five in number, accords with a particular approach towards pilgrimage places. As Jacobsen writes:

A typical feature of Hindu pilgrimage sites is that they are connected to other places. In the narratives, pilgrimage sites are thought to travel to other pilgrimage places, they are hierarchized in accordance with the strength of their ability to remove impurity—that is, their salvific power—there is a competition between places and pilgrimage sites can be replicated at other pilgrimage places. (Jacobsen 2013: 122)

The concept fits also with the specific understanding of the role of natural phenomena and the environment. It uses the river and its characteristic features, such as its water's purifying power, to attract devotees' attention and to build a link creating a pathway of interconnected sacred spots. The journey towards god, for example, the pilgrimage route along the Kāverī river, takes the devotee from the river source in the Kodavu region through several places in which he can meet the particular form of god, with its middle point culminating in the vision of the most spectacular and holy Raṅganātha temple of Śrīraṅgam. The story of the beginnings of the river is attested in the religious literature, among others in the *māhātmyas* of the Kāverī itself.⁴⁶ Its sources are connected with the goddess Parvatī who herself promised to appear in its waters.⁴⁷ Considering the vastness of the region stretching along the river, we have to acknowledge that the stories concerning the beginnings of the holy river have their local versions which impact mostly the communities leaving nearby. These versions are not necessarily known elsewhere,

⁴⁶ See Czerniak-Drożdżowicz and Sathyanarayanan 2022, being the result of the presentation about Kāverī's *māhātmyas* during the Pondicherry workshop in January 2020.

⁴⁷ Parvatī incarnated in the form of Brahmā's daughter, sage Kavera's foster daughter, and the wife of the sage Agastya—Kāverī. See for example Czerniak-Drożdżowicz and Sathyanarayanan 2022.

but they all build the awareness of the role of interconnectedness and interdependence of the inhabitants with the river. Even though the sources of the Kāverī are located in the Kannada-speaking region and local stories are added mostly to establish the identity of people leaving there, they all belong to the broader story of the river and the reflections of the beginnings of the Kāverī are present in the minds of the devotees who visit the region on pilgrimages.⁴⁸ For the devotee, all these stories and associations referring to the places are valuable elements of the formation of his own and his community's identity and belonging, and as such, of the formation of his world.⁴⁹ For the South Indian Vaiṣṇavas such seems to be the Kāverī region marked with five *raṅga* temples. Locating temples along the river makes them geographically distributed mostly in reference to their position and orientation towards the river, thus one of the *raṅgas* is called *adi*—first, considering its anteceding position along the stream, namely by being situated in the upper part of the river course whereas the main *raṅga* is called *madhya*—central one.

Similar ideas seem to guide the narration about the Pallar river and its three temples with Raṅganātha as the presiding deity. Here the story about the three places accords with the myth concerning the Kāñcī Yathoktakārī and temple as the main point of reference. This temple is immediately connected with the Varadarāja temple, a

⁴⁸ As we have already mentioned, Srinivas (Srinivas 1965), while speaking about Kāverī in the context of Sanskritization also draws attention to the detail that the all-Indian worship of Gaṅgā facilitates the absorption of the worship of the local rivers and mentions the Kāverī as an example for this [namely Sanskritization] strategy Srinivas also acknowledged the pan-regional role of the Kāverī myth: “There is also a belief that there exists an underground passage connecting the source of the Kāverī with the Gaṅgā in Benares. Pilgrims, similarly as those in Benares, take water from the Tāla Kāverī to their homes to use it for purification and drinking on particular days (...)” (Czerniak-Drożdżowicz and Sathyanarayanan 2022: 138).

⁴⁹ While referring to the region as a place, Feldhaus says: “The kind of geographical awareness involved in a sense of a region as a place is not merely knowledge about the region. It is not merely, for example, the ability to list and describe all the places in the region. At a more fundamental level, a sense of place is formative of one's cosmology and basic orientation to the world” (Feldhaus 2003: 3).

very authoritative Vaiṣṇava shrine that was spared from the flood by Rāṅganātha's intervention. This particular network utilizes the topoi that are present in the region and re-used by the *sthalapurāṇas*, often being elements of both realms: religion/culture and nature. The river is the point of reference that has the power to connect. The interconnectedness of the natural phenomena observed in the example of the river and many holy spots situated along and on the river is then reproduced in a culture that notices and exploits the opportunity of creating a network of culturally productive places, shrines, and temples. It is observed in religious ideas and also in literary works such as *māhātmyas*, addressing the issues of connected places, approached through pilgrimages along the connecting river, and enabling bodily, actual presence in these locales, which establishes particular bonds between the region and its inhabitants.

The two groups of temples mentioned above have also distinctive features: Pallar's *triraṅga* is depicted in the text of the KM, in a rather elaborate passage, while *pañcaraṅga* is not presented, to my knowledge, in a single, particular text. One of the supposed reasons could be that the story from the KM has a more local character and describes places not far from the main point of reference, namely Kāñcī. This is not the case for the *pañcaraṅga* temples which are distributed along one of the biggest rivers of India and this probably explains the absence of one particular text dedicated to them. The *triraṅga* description in the KM presents the consistent story of the places immediately connected by a particular mythological event and a particular god's intervention, while in the case of *pañcaraṅga*, such a plot probably does not exist. The reason for creating such groupings in both cases could be the same—attracting pilgrims, but the method used in the case of *triraṅga* due to its place within the *māhātmya* of Kāñcī could be more convincing and attractive to devotees. These are however only our suppositions. As far as the concept of *pañcaraṅgas* is concerned, especially considering the lack of texts referring to them as a network and presenting one coherent story connecting them, we cannot say anything decisive about their real culture-creating or community's identity-creating role. This

“network” therefore can be just a grouping of temples only theoretically or artificially connected. They, however, obviously attract pilgrims and are noticed by tourist agencies offering tours to visit them.⁵⁰

Yet another factor to be taken into consideration while studying the networks of temples is their connection to and dependence on state development. The issue drew the attention of scholars, who dedicated their works, for example, to the observations concerning the Cōla era (for example Stein 1960 and 1978; Karashima 1984; Champakalaksmi 2011; Hall 2014). Hall, presenting his critique of the previous works by Stein and Karashima, shares in many respects the views of Champakalakshmi (for example, Champakalakshmi 2011) in perceiving the development of the temples at that time as directly connected with the Cōlas’ preference for and imposition of *bhakti* related traditions which had as their main temples Śrīraṅgam and Chidambaram. As Hall writes, the integrative function of temples had an immediate impact on the system of further redistribution of wealth acquired by specifically networked society, thus: “In summary, the Cōla monarchy and *Bhakti* temples integrated local non-landowning social groups with landed population into vertically and horizontally linked networked regional society” (Hall 2014: 253). He presents the possible schedule of the networking among different types of temples: pilgrim temples, royal temples, major temples and local temples. While speaking about later, post-Cōla developments, Hall writes:

(...) the pilgrimage and small temple networking that remained from the Chola era would continue to have significance in south-east India for some time. There, central *Bhakti* temples retained their critical role

⁵⁰ See for example <https://tamilnadu-favtourism.blogspot.com/p/pancha-ranga-kshetrans-of-south-india.html>; <https://www.nativeplanet.com/travel-guide/pancharangams-in-south-india-003071.html?story=1>; https://www.tripadvisor.in/ShowUserReviews-g2288630-d4089186-r527281421-Parimala_Ranganathar_Temple-Mayiladuthurai_Nagapattinam_District_Tamil_Nadu.html (accessed on 15.08.2023).

as the most prominent regional recipients and agents of redistribution that was foundational to societal stability. (Hall 2014: 257)

Thus, the socio-political and economic aspects of the networking of holy spots should not be overlooked.

The questions posed at the beginning of this article are still waiting for precise answers. How old is the concept of *pañcarāṅgas* or *trirāṅgas*, how well is the concept known and does it appear in the older or canonical Vaiṣṇava religious literature? Though the myths about these places could be earlier known from the tradition, the concept of gathering them into particular groups is not mentioned in the *Pāñcarāstrasamhitas* available to me. Their appearance in some regional *māhātmyas*, for example, KM, could speak about the development of the concept over time and the attempt to use the already existing temples, located in particular natural environment, to establish pilgrimage routes. This process could have taken place within a long period in which local traditions were creating texts praising places (*sthalapurāṇas/māhātmyas*), as already mentioned, probably in the 15th–19th centuries. Very limited material concerning these temples perceived as a group, especially in the case of their relation to such an important holy spot as Śrīraṅgam, could speak to the rather limited knowledge about their supposed connections. Nevertheless, the pilgrimages to these temples, perceived as creating a kind of network, are now offered to the Vaiṣṇava devotees in Tamilnadu and advertised by travel agencies.⁵¹ The subject, therefore, needs further study of textual sources as well as field research.

⁵¹ See for example <https://tamilnadu-favtourism.blogspot.com/p/pancha-ranga-kshetrams-of-south-india.html> (accessed on 15.08.2023); for more see the bibliography.

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Fig. 1. Raṅganātha temple, Śrīraṅgam



Fig. 2. River Kāverī at Śrīraṅgam



Fig. 3. Raṅganātha temple, Koviladi



Fig. 4. Śarṅgapāṇi temple, Kumbhakonam



Fig. 5. Raṅganātha temple, Pallikonda



Fig. 6. Raṅganātha temple, Thiruparkadal



Fig. 7. Yathoktakārī temple, Kāñcīpuram



Fig. 8. Trivikrama temple, Sirkali