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Storied Hills

On Landscape, Narratives and Sacredness of Ahobilam¹

ABSTRACT: Taking as the point of departure the *Ahobilamāhātmya* narratives that depict local hills as Narasiṃha's residence, the paper considers those hill narratives as a product of interrelatedness of nature and culture and examines the crucial role such a product may play in vesting Ahobilam with the notion of sacredness. To this end, the narratives' ability to mediate various concepts is explored from the wider perspective of cultural ecology of literature, which allows them to be viewed as a site where besides nature and culture other domains can be reintegrated and reconciled, e.g., the elements of local and Brahmanic traditions. In addition, as I argue, such narratives may also convey some shifts in perceiving the landscape.

KEYWORDS: Ahobilam, sacredness, nature, culture, *Ahobilamāhātmya*, Narasiṃha, cultural ecology of literature, landscape

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Introduction

The sacred space of Ahobilam, currently situated in Kurnool district of Andhra Pradesh and popularly known as the *navanarasimhakṣetra* (the territory of the nine Narasimhas), consists of the so-called Lower and Upper Ahobilam. The former corresponds to the village and its closest surroundings located at the foot of the nearby hills; the latter stretches uphill, up to the temple of the ferocious (*ugra*) Ahobilarasimha, the Lord of Ahobilam, and other shrines situated on the higher levels of the slopes. The hills in question belong to the range known as the Nallamalla Hills. The Ahobilarasimha of the Upper Ahobilam is perceived as presiding over Ahobilam, and the temple located there as the earliest at the site. Apart from this temple, nowadays connected with the Lower Ahobilam by an asphalt road, the group of nine comprises of eight other temples that host various aspects of the god, i.e., Jvālā, Lakṣmī/Mālōlā, Vārāha/Kroḍa, Karañja, Bhārgava, Yogānanda, Chatravaṭa, and Pāvana, the first three scattered along the trail which runs across upper reaches of peaks known as Garuḍācala, Vedācala and Acchāyācalameru. Although the Vijayanagara style dominates the temple structures, in some of them certain architectural elements may be dated to the Kākatīya times, i.e. 12th–14th cent. (Sitapati 1982: 13–14). Besides the nine shrines, there is one more temple, which—most likely because of its later construction ca. 15th/16th cent.—does not belong to the traditional cluster. Dedicated to Narasimha in his peaceful aspect called Prahādavarada, and accompanied by Lakṣmī, the tenth temple is situated in the heart of the Ahobilam village. Today, due to its easy accessibility, this is the very temple that attracts most pilgrims throughout the year.

Textually sanctioned by the Sanskrit glorification of the site (*Ahobilamāhātmya*, henceforth AM),² and materially mirrored in

² So far I was able to identify only one inscription at the site, no 57 of 1915, which mentions the term ‘grouping of nine Narasimhas’; it is engraved in the Prahādavarada temple of the Lower Ahobilam and records construction of the

the nine temples—yet strongly rooted in local lore and natural surroundings—the cluster of the nine Narasiṃhas offers a valuable insight into the trajectories of mutual begetting and transforming of various processes that led to a composite character of Hindu traditions in general,³ and the Ahobilam Vaiṣṇava tradition in particular. Considering the socio-religious past of Ahobilam, characterized by a long-term, dynamic intermingling of the local beliefs of the once hunter-gatherer Chenchu tribe, the Vaiṣṇavism of Tamil Ālvārs, and the Sanskritic traditions of the Brahmanic and royal circles, I examine the selected hill-related narratives encapsulated in the AM in the wider perspective of cultural ecology of literature. Even if not originally meant to be used in the context of the old textual traditions of India, Hubert Zapf’s concept of “a reintegrative interdiscourse” in line with which:

literature brings together the civilizational system and its exclusions in new, both conflictive and transformative ways. [...] the alternative worlds of fiction derive their special cognitive, affective and communicative intensity from the interaction of what is kept apart by convention and cultural practice—the different spheres of a society characterized by institutional and economic specialization and differentiation, public and private life, social roles and personal self, mind and body, the conscious and unconscious, and, pervading them all, the basic ecological dimensions of culture and nature [...] (Zapf 2016: 114)

matches the presiding intentions of the Sanskrit *māhātmya* texts, i.e., the glorifications of sites, as a genre which, with its primary function to advertise a religious center, rejoins various traditions that have intermingled there over centuries (Shulman 1980: 3–11). As I also

kṣīrābdhi-navanarasimhamanṭapa for the god Ahobaleśvara (Rangacharya 1919: 969).

³ Wendy Doniger calls such a process “cross-fertilization” (Doniger 2009: 5–7), that is a fusion of the so-called Sanskritization process, conceived as a way of how Brahmanic values and practices are assimilated by local popular traditions, and a simultaneous, albeit opposite, movement of absorbing and transforming the same local traditions by the Sanskritic circles.

suggest, the “reintegrative” narratives, additionally ‘read’ and ‘reenacted’ by devotees through the act of walking among the shrines,⁴ contribute to constructing and expressing the sanctity of the place, but may also influence and channel some shifts in perceiving the natural setting.

A hostile or a welcoming place?

If you wish to behold and enjoy a bewitching natural scenery, move about in the vast forests of Ahobilam, rich in green foliage with tall trees on the lofty hills and the Bhavanasini river gliding on by your side in a fine valley. Natural scenery we may find elsewhere also, but not of this kind which produces a supernatural effect on our minds. The whole region is pregnant, as it were, with the presence of Lord Narasimha who instills in our minds an inexplicable divine joy and makes us feel that we are in a super-human world.

Serving as a blurb printed on the back cover of *The Glory of Ahobilam Shrines*—a booklet (altogether 53 pages) by S. Rangachar, published in English in the early 1990s in Mysore, current Karnataka—the above quotation grasps the spirit of the *māhātmya*, a Sanskrit genre aimed at eulogizing holy sites and their natural surroundings. The promotional piece, excerpted from the main body of the text (Rangachar 1993: 9), promises content that glorifies a place—note here the appropriation of the Sanskrit term *māhātmya* as English “glory” in the title—where communing with nature equals communing with Narasimha, the god who, as explained in the booklet, in his unique nine forms is believed to preside over Ahobilam and reside there. Likewise, in another contemporary book, namely Ramaswamy Ayyangar’s *Descriptive History of the Forgotten Shrines of Ahobilam (In the Kurnool District)*, published in Walajabad, current Tamil Nadu (Ramaswamy Ayyangar 1916)—

⁴ The expression “to read the landscape through walking” I borrowed from Haberman who speaks about a “storied landscape that is read by parikrama” (Haberman 2020: 27).

book aimed at promoting Ahobilam through, as aptly articulated by Andrea Pinkney in reference to modern *māhātmyas* of Uttarakhand, “exploit[ing] the conventions of the classical Sanskrit genre in distinctively modern ways” (Pinkney 2013: 234)—the choice of English as a medium of communication suggests that the booklet’s target were reader-devotees from beyond the Telugu speaking area to which Ahobilam belongs else Telugu speaking devotees who only read English. Another important group of recipients appears to be the urban better-off class for whom emphasis on a link between the sacredness of a place and its natural surroundings might be particularly alluring when it comes to a decision which holy spot should they visit when time allows. Ramaswamy Ayyengar puts it quite explicitly: “If you think that an enjoyment of the above scenery is a well earned bliss after the bustle and toils of the money making and bread making world, then please take the earliest opportunity to catch a small holiday to go to Ahobilam” (Ramaswamy Ayyengar 1916: 11).

The advertising piece of Rangachar’s booklet built on setting forth the scenery’s supernatural impact on people’s minds due to Narasiṃha’s presence there indicates that for the authors and/or publishers of these two contemporary guides to Ahobilam its scenic beauty must have been a particularly attractive tool to draw potential visitors to the site (and to purchase the promotional product into the bargain). The concept of a god’s omnipresence in all the living and non-living beings is of course not a contemporarily invented mercantile product. It is one of the features of the *māhātmya* literature, and, actually, Rangachar’s words seem to echo certain lines from the Sanskrit *māhātmya* of the place, the AM. In the text’s fourth chapter a statement—that there has never been and will never be a sacred site devoid of Narasiṃha, for the god pervades everything: earth, living beings, wind, speech, fire, ambrosia, sky, body, gold, shadow,

sacrifice, forest, wilderness (*vanatā*)—immediately precedes verses eulogizing the god’s nine aspects.⁵

However, contrary to modern glorifications of Ahobilam which tempt pilgrims by promising, besides spiritual experiences, a perfect place to relax in the open outdoors, the earliest literary depictions of the Ahobilam landscape present it as rather rough, arid and challenging. Sucharita Adluri notes that while extolling Ahobilam (under the Tamil name *Siṅgaveḷ Kuṇṇam*, “The Mountain of a Youth Lion”) in his *Perīya Tirumoli* (1.7.1–10), Tirumaṅgai Āḷvār (ca 9th cent.) identifies it as a place that is hard to reach due to scarcity of water, difficult terrain and threat of wild animals, robbers and hunters. She further observes that in nearly half of the verses the poet uses terms denoting mountains/hills (*kuṇṇu*) or rocks (*kal*), describing the site as rugged mountains, where rocks which, along with sweltering heat, make the journey demanding, are overgrown and split by roots and creepers, and punctuated by clumps of bamboo (Adluri 2019: 174). Clearly, ferocity of Narasiṃha who is believed to have manifested himself there to kill the demon Hiraṇyakaśipu—a concept brought out also by Tirumaṅgai Āḷvār in his poem—resonates with the starkness of Ahobilam’s landscape. For

⁵ AM 4.16–18: *nṛsiṃharahitaṃ kṣetraṃ na bhūtaṃ na bhaviṣyati | nṛsiṃhanāyako viśvaṃ vyāptavān puruṣottamaḥ ||16|| bhūmau nṛsiṃho bhuvane nṛsiṃho vāyau nṛsiṃho vacane nṛsiṃhaḥ | agnau nṛsiṃho ‘py amṛte nṛsiṃho ‘py ākāśadeśe ‘py akhile nṛsiṃhaḥ ||17|| kayo nṛsiṃhaḥ kanakaṃ nṛsiṃhaś chāyā nṛsiṃhaḥ savanaṃ nṛsiṃhaḥ | vanam nṛsiṃho vanatā nṛsiṃho yad asti yan nāsti ca tan narasiṃhaḥ ||18||*; comp. “Significantly, every stone, every plant, every tree, why, the very atmosphere there is pregnant with the presence of Narasiṃha” (Rangachar 1993: 12).

All passages from the AM I quote from its recently published edition in Devanagari script, supplemented with English translation (2015). However, as at places I find the translation more descriptive than accurate, unless otherwise stated, all translations from Sanskrit are mine. According to the book’s Introduction (p. vii–viii), this edition is based on the text in Telugu script provided by Sri Paravastu Srinivasachariar of Hyderabad from his own archives and consulted with the Grantha version, published in 1912 (*Sṛmatahōpila Māhātmyam*). The latter was recently digitalized under the framework of Endangered Archives Programme of the British Library (see: <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP918-10-273>).

Tirumaṅgai, a place that is hostile and scorching with heat, parallels the ferocious, blazing aspect of God.

Even if currently, due to the development of infrastructure and roads, it is much easier to reach the village and the water sources it depends on are more abundant than in the past, the circumambulation of all Narasimha shrines which belong to Ahobilam complex remains an onerous task: the routes which run along the slopes have to be negotiated on foot, they are often steep, hang high over rocky cliffs, and are exposed to the blazing sun. Of course, the shrines which are situated in the Lower Ahobilam, and are today close to the asphalt road, can be visited in a car. This also applies to the temple of Pāvananarasimha: although located far from the village, in the heart of the jungle, it can be approached in a vehicle. Nonetheless, to cover all the temples, one day is not enough; this requires rather two or three days, especially if one chooses to walk the routes. The effort of climbing uphill in the open sun and traversing secluded areas once in Ahobilam, seems to accrue merit. Even more so, if one were to add that encounters with wild animals are not uncommon as the forests around the village are a part of protected forest (Ahobilam Reserve forest) and close to the tiger reserve (Nagarjun-sagar-Srisaïlam Tiger Reserve). What has however changed over the centuries, is the threat of robbers and hunters, by whom Tirumaṅgai most likely meant the Chenchu hunter-gatherers. Currently, they have largely merged with the local Vaiṣṇava community enriching the temple traditions with certain non-Brahmanic elements.

The dissonance between the image of Ahobilam as given by Tirumaṅgai Ālvār and the modern authors—likely the same place then and now, with the same hills and similar natural conditions regardless of passage of time⁶—may arise from the literary conventions they adopted. In the case of modern authors there is surely a concern for rationalizing a visit to the place, the more so that a fea-

⁶ However, as shown, e.g., by Charlotte Schmid (2014) in reference to the Tamil Śaiva corpus of *Tēvāram* and *Periyapurāṇam*, and the archeological data, the links between a given god and a hymn attached to his shrine may change with time passing.

ture of inaccessibility and wildness persists in Ahobilar's environment even today. On the other hand, a fair amount of realism in Tirumaṅgai Ālvār's account of the place, even if drawing on the trope of landscape (*tiṇai*) perceived as drylands (*pālai*),⁷ may suggest that in his case it is not only a purely literary elaboration, but that his hymn contains the already widely spread knowledge about the features inherent in Ahobilar's surroundings.⁸

My current investigation aims at showing that whereas the AM follows the old popular tradition of accentuating the circumstances of slaying Hiraṇyakaśipu in the hills surrounding Ahobilar, contrary to the depictions of Tirumaṅgai its narratives which mediate the local variant of the Narasiṃha myth do not seem to evoke a feeling of fear in the air. Rather, most likely in order to encourage prospective pilgrims, the AM narratives actively contribute to enhancing the sanctity of Ahobilar by carefully extenuating the notion of the site's disconcerting ambience. As I argue, it is achieved through crediting Ahobilar's environment with special powers as the result of particular association with the mountains and, further, through diversification of the Narasiṃha entity into the locally envisaged nine discrete aspects that show his nature as rising above his fierce (*ugra*) aspect linked to killing the demon. However, Tirumaṅgai's legacy might have survived (hypothetically) in the pattern of nine forms of Narasiṃha himself: in his poem on Siṅgaveli Kuṇṇam, Tirumaṅgai praises Narasiṃha in nine stanzas, which perhaps might have influenced the popular perception of the hill/s as the abode of the Narasiṃhas.⁹

⁷ On the Tamil concept of *tiṇai* see Buchholz in the present volume.

⁸ Realistic features of the Tirumaṅgai's hymn go hand in hand with the view that the intention of the Ālvārs was not to establish any foundation myths of the given temples (which is a motif common for a later genre of *sthalapurāṇa/māhātmya*), but they sang about the places /temples/temple towns which were already in existence, see Young 2014: 336.

⁹ I thank one of the reviewers for this thought. It certainly deserves further investigation. See English translation of *Periṇa Tirumoli* (1.7.1–10) by Kausalya Hart at: https://www.projectmadurai.org/pm_etexts/utf8/pmuni0622_eng.html.

The AM I analyze in the following sections remains undated, although it certainly has been composed several centuries after Tirumaṅgai's work. It consists of ten chapters, their length spanning from 67 to 144 *śloka*s. The usage of Sanskrit in a Dravidian land may hint at a relatively early phase of its composition: it seems the Sanskrit *māhātmya*s predate the counterpart genre in local languages of South India. For instance, in the case of Tamil eulogies, the golden age of their production is said to be the 16th cent.¹⁰ Therefore, the Sanskrit Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya*, which mentions traditional etymology of the toponym Ahobilam, might have been composed slightly earlier, and, in turn, the AM from which this notion is likely to have been borrowed, even before that. Perhaps a lack of references in the AM to the tenth, later temple, the Prahlādavarada, can be treated as another point of reference suggesting that the AM was composed prior to its construction (15/16th cent.).¹¹ Furthermore, as has often happened in the case of the *māhātmya*s in general, the text might have undergone some reworking. So far, it is impossible to say anything conclusive in terms of the date of its composition.

While discussing the issue of creating the sacredness of the Ahobilam landscape in the AM, I also refer to relations between nature and culture as understood by Chiara Letizia, according to whom “sacredness” is “a mediating concept between nature and culture, i.e. a way—a western culture's way—of emphasizing the intersection between natural and cultural space” (Letizia 2018: 348). Although I focus here on the narratives, to some extent I draw also on the idea according to which what makes a given site sacred is also the various ritual activities, for example, pilgrimages to the place or certain elements of worship undertaken there (Letizia 2018: 348, cf. Michaels 1990: 136, Sax 2003: 193; both referred to in

¹⁰ See Buchholz 2022: 22 for overview of opinions on this subject.

¹¹ In this connection it may be worth noticing that the AM does not refer to a motif of the second, local wife of Narasiṃha, which became particularly important for the 3rd dynasty Vijayanagara kings (16th cent.) who patronized the site, and on which the plot of the play *Vāsantikāpariṇayam* was built (see below).

Letizia 2018). Like at other sites where the sacred area is organized according to the distribution pattern of a multiplied god, it is the unique grouping of the nine shrines that has given Ahobilam its regional recognition. Nowadays, the term *navanarasimhakṣetra* has become a sort of Ahobilam's label, widely used, among others, by travel agencies advertising pilgrimage tours to the site, even though, as we may presume, not all pilgrims are in fact aware of the myths related to individual aspects of the god they seek to visit. They rather learn about the relevant details while walking from one sacred spot to another and being exposed to certain narratively charged elements of the landscape, thus actively engaging in making Ahobilam sacred.

A brief overview of the historical and textual past of Ahobilam

The forested hills against the backdrop of which Ahobilam is situated belong to a range called the Nallamala Hills that stretch from Tirupati in the south to Śrīśailam in the north. The range marks an old pilgrimage route established when Vijayanagara rulers extended their patronage to the temples in the region. It is often said that for the pilgrims making the trip, the hills along which the tract runs personify serpent Śeṣa, his body stretching out from north to south: his tail rests in Śrīśailam, the belly in Ahobilam and the head in Tirupati.

We do not know much about the early history of Ahobilam; although there are some hints which allow us to assume that it was patronized by the Kākatīya¹² and Redḍi kings—for instance, a copper plate grant of Anavema Redḍi, dated to 1378 records that for the benefit of pilgrims he constructed steps there (Vasantha 2001: 69–70)—most inscriptions preserved at the place, chiefly on the prem-

¹² In a couple of kaifiyats, Andhra village histories collected by Colin Mackenzie, the Kākatīya ruler, Pratāparudra (1289–1323) is said to have visited Ahobilam. However, no other historical evidence of this event exists (Talbot 2001: 203).

ises of the latest, Prahādavarada temple of the Lower Ahobilam, come from the 16th cent.¹³ This proves that the site flourished under the rule of the Vijayanagara kings of the Tuluva dynasty.

Mentions of Ahobilam in literary sources, e.g., the Sanskrit *Rāmābhyudaya* by Aruṇagirinātha Ḍiṇḍima and the *Sāḷuvābhyudaya* by Rājanātha Ḍiṇḍima (15th cent.), suggest however that it was the Vijayanagara dynasty of the Sāluvas that was first interested in extending supremacy over this place. Strategical importance of Ahobilam resulted from its location on the northern border of the empire; it was close to Tirupati and, particularly, to the headquarters of the Sāluva generals in Candragiri (Stoker 2016: 79; Dębic-ka-Borek 2022c). Crucial for increasing the popularity of Ahobilam was surely the establishment of a *maṭha* (15/16th cent.?), a monastic institution which, besides being instrumental in the dynamic contacts with the local community of Chenchu hunter-gatherers and in spreading the Śrīvaiṣṇava faith in the Telugu region, was also important for the Vijayanagara polity (Appadurai 1977).

Likewise, the textual history of Ahobilam has not been researched thoroughly so far. As far as I am aware, apart from the already mentioned Tamil hymn of Tirumaṅgai (9th cent), the earliest works that refer to the site are two Sanskrit texts. One is the unpublished *Śrīśailakhaṇḍa*, a text connected to a Śaiva centre in Śrīśailam (12/13th cent.; Prabhavaty Reddy 2014: 16), which is linked with Ahobilam through the common ecosystem of the Nallamalla Hills and the narratives about a Chenchu girl who became the second wife of the presiding god. The other is a printed *Vihagendrasaṃhitā* (4.11cd) of Pāñcarātra, dated by Gonda to the 14th cent. (Gonda 1977: 106). The latter may suggest that already in that period the sect of Pāñcarātras, who nowadays control the temple order in Ahobilam, were present at the site.

The Telugu *Narasimha Purāṇamu* by Errapragada which is said to glorify Ahobilam and mentions the Lord of Ahobilam and the hills he resides on may, too, be dated to the 14th cent. Between

¹³ See Adluri 2019 for translations and interpretations of some of them.

the 15th and 16th cent. there appear other literary works of various genres that mention the site, usually by means of venerating a localized, fierce aspect of Narasiṃha, i.e., Ahobilanarasiṃha, as the presiding deity. In its nine forms the deity is, in turn, praised in the literary output of Taḷḷapāka Annamācārya/Annamayya (1408–1503), an eminent Telugu poet associated with the Tirupati temple (Narasimhachary and Ramesh 2008: 252–253). The nine Narasiṃhas are also venerated in some Sanskrit *stotras* which are believed to have been composed at the turn of the 16th cent., such as the *Navanāra-siṃhamanḡalāśāsana* ascribed to the fourth pontiff (*jīyar*) of the Ahobila *maṭha*.¹⁴

An important, and perhaps so far, the best known text as regards Ahobilam is the Sanskrit drama titled *Vāsantikāparināyama*. It is usually ascribed to the 7th *jīyar* of the Ahobila *maṭha* (16th cent.) and reproduces the old narrative about Narasiṃha marrying a Chenchu girl. The motif is further retold in several Telugu *yakṣa-gāṇas*. Ahobilanarasiṃha is also referred to in the two 16th-cent. ‘pilgrimage accounts’ composed in Sanskrit, *Yātrāprabandha* of Samarapuṅgava Dīkṣita and *Tīrthaprabandha* of Vādirāja-tīrtha, both recording their authors’ travels to sacred locations spread all over India. The already mentioned undated Sanskrit Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcī-māhātmya*, i.e., the glorification of the Varadarāja temple in Kanchi, briefly mentions Ahobilam, too (Dębicka-Borek 2019).

What happened there? Ahobalam/Ahobilam, Garuḍādri, Vedādri

India is not an exception when it comes to perceiving mountains, hills or hillocks as holy. Since they rise above the ground and thus visually interrupt the scenery, Haberman summarizes (2020: 75–79) that all around the world mountains are perceived as intersecting the landscape¹⁵ to join earth, heaven, and different geographical direc-

¹⁴ <http://www.prapatti.com/slokas/english/navanaarasimhamangalaashaasanam.pdf>.

¹⁵ On confluences as intersecting landscape see Letizia 2018.

tions. From this perspective a mountain is the center of the world. The physical feature of standing out from the surrounding landscape most likely lies behind concepts that associate mountains with theophany and with the abode of gods. Mountains can be also treated in terms of divinity, meaning they are perceived as a god itself and not just as his sacred dwelling place.

As shown below, the Sanskrit glorification of Ahobilam abounds in narratives that predominantly link the hills around Ahobilam with Narasimha's residence. Yet, already in its first chapter, the AM employs a metaphor of a bridge (*setu*) to credit local peaks with a power of salvation (AM 1.41–42):

The shining moon disturbed by multitude of high peaks is seen from afar along with the peaks [which resemble] bridges over the ocean of misery (41). A certain peak looks like the Meru Mountain; however, having a manifested appearance, it casts an immovable shadow, like a path for liberated souls (42) (trans. Dębicka-Borek 2022a).

Given that a convention of using the image of a bridge (like-wise of *sopāna*, a ladder) while speaking about liberation at a pilgrimage site is much less developed than it is in the case of an image of reaching another shore in a 'watery' *tīrtha*, the above passage points to the impact of rocky scenery on the Ahobilam tradition, including the choice of the "language of the crossing" (Eck 1981: 325). Already from the outset, an image of a bridge figuratively implies that traversing local peaks enables a devotee to cross over the ocean of *samsāra* and reach heaven. In other words, the metaphor frames the concept of Ahobilam as a holy site deriving its power from the hills. From the practical point of view, ascribing soteriological power to the hills must have been an important factor when it came to persuading potential pilgrims to make an effort of going uphill in a demanding terrain to a place difficult to reach.

Nonetheless, the structure and plot of the AM do not diverge from the glorification of other sites which usually also focus on defining their sanctity in terms of their physical features, i.e., natural phenomena. Some of the *māhātmyas*, as Granoff states, seem to

even use such a strategy to marginalize the importance of temple buildings and rituals carried therein, the reason for which she sees in the initial opposition of some orthodox priests towards the temple cult (Granoff 1998: 1–2). From a narrative perspective, what makes the space sacred is, however, first of all what happened there and who resided there. Therefore, an indispensable motif of the *māhātmya* literature is essentially the God’s embodied appearance at a given site.

As mentioned earlier, according to a widespread belief Ahobilam is the exact spot where Narasiṃha manifested himself to kill the demon Hiraṇyakaśipu. The AM 1 briefly sketches this localized plot, treated in detail in following chapters, highlighting within the geographical territory in focus topographical features that are crucial for its development.¹⁶ As we learn, certain peak, which resembles the Meru Mountain, was once a pillar in the palace of Hiraṇyakaśipu (AM 1.43); Narasiṃha in his blazing form killed the demon on that very peak (AM 1.44–45).¹⁷ In the water of the nearby pond, known as Raktakuṇḍa (‘vessel of blood’), Narasiṃha washed off demon’s blood from his hands (AM 1.46–47ab). The river Bhavanāśinī, a local manifestation of Gaṅgā, which flows across the *kṣetra*, was sent down by gods to placate Narasiṃha’s anger after Hiraṇyakaśipu’s slaughter (AM 1.49–50). After several lines, which situate Ahobilam in a particular part of the mythical Jambudvīpa (AM 1.60–63), the introductory passage returns to the topic of the sanctity of the hills which shape the sacred landscape of Ahobilam: one of them is called Garuḍādri / Garuḍācala (Mountain of Garuḍa) (AM 1.64). Another, not mentioned in the 1st chapter but eulogized in the AM 4, is Vedādri (= Vedācala; Mountain of Vedas). Apart from being extolled through narratives that elucidate circumstances of charging them with certain toponyms, these two hills serve as a point of spatial reference for another set of narratives, which eulogize the sites and powers of the nine Narasiṃhas.

¹⁶ More on this passage see Dębicka-Borek 2022a.

¹⁷ This is where the Jvālānarasiṃha temple stands today.

With an attempt to explore how the AM narratives mediate the concept of sacredness while engaging with the spheres of nature and culture, and the local and the Brahmanic, in what follows I first discuss passages that explain the origin of the toponyms Ahobalam/Ahobalam, Gāruḍācala and Vedācala. Thereafter, I move to the description of the nine Narasiṃhas and their abodes.

• Ahobilam/Ahobalam

The circumstances of the battle between Narasiṃha and the demon, which lead to the act of slaughtering the latter are narrated in the AM 7. On this account the text provides a popular etymology of toponyms Ahobalam/Ahobilam. Both variants of the place name are derived from the exclamations with which the gods praise Narasiṃha after his victory over Hiranyakaśipu. This is what Narasiṃha says to Prahlāda just after killing his evil father (AM 7.78–83):

This site (*kṣetra*) is of a great merit due to my appearance. From today, the world should proclaim it as ‘Ahobalam’. Having known my incomparable strength (*balam*), gods proclaimed thus: “Oh, what a valour, oh, what a heroism, oh, what a power in Narasiṃha’s arms, the highest deity, oh, what a cave! (*aho bilam*), oh, what a strength! (*aho balam*).” Therefore, this site (*kṣetra*) indeed will be Ahobalam. I will dwell on this very spot, nearby the Gajakuṇḍa, and you, right in front of me on the bank of Bhavanāśinī. Living here, you shall govern a whole kingdom successfully. Here indeed sages, ancestors, gods [shall] praise me.” Having said so, the Highest Soul kept the Narasiṃha’s body. With sharp claws he tore asunder the king of Daityas, an enemy of all living beings. The Foe of Mura appointed his offspring to [rule] the great extensive kingdom. Dwelling at the side of the mountain called Garuḍa, on the bank of Bhavanāśinī, praised by all chief earth-gods (Brahmans), the victorious [god] remains in the form of Narasiṃha.¹⁸

¹⁸ AM 7.78–83: *idam kṣetram mahāpuṇyam mamāvīrbhāvākāraṇāḥ | adya prabhṛti loko ’yam ahobalam iṭrayet ||78|| mamātulaṃ balam jñātvā daivatair evam īritam | aho vīryam aho śauryam aho bāhuparākramaḥ || nārasīṃhaḥ paraṃ*

According to the above passage, stating right at the beginning that the site is sacred for Narasiṃha dwells there, one variant of the toponym—*aho balam* ('oh, what strength!')—refers to Narasiṃha's physical prowess demonstrated by killing Hiraṇyakaśipu at the spot, an event narrated in the very same chapter. Alternative form of the place name, today seemingly more popular—*aho bilam* ('oh, what a cave!')—derives from the exclamation which extolls a cave. Although the etymological passage does not clarify the cave's role in the narrative, for a devotee it must have been clear that this was the exact place within the sacred space of Ahobilam where Narasiṃha manifested himself. The toponym's origin clearly hints at the Ahobilarasiṃha temple of the Upper Ahobilam, which hosts the ferocious (*ugra*) Lord of Ahobilam. The Ahobilarasiṃha temple is inserted between the northern slopes of Garuḍācala and the southern slopes of another mountain, Vedācala (Vasanth 2001: 18). The *ugramūrti* kept in its *sanctum sanctorum* (*garbhagrha*) is believed to be self-existent, *svayambhū*. It shows Narasiṃha in a sitting posture, with the right leg folded under and the left dangling. With his two hands Narasiṃha disembowels Hiraṇyakaśipu, who is laying down on his lap. The god has a *śrīvatsa*-mark on his chest. In the niche opposite the statue there is a stone image of Prahlāda (Vasanth 2001: 100), whose presence exemplifies a strategy aimed at pacifying Narasiṃha's fury (Sumant 2010: 61), and of Ceṇḍulakṣmī, who is considered the god's wife. The *garbhagrha* is a natural cave whose western wall is originally formed by a part of the Garuḍācala mountain.

daivam aho bilam aho balam ||79|| *tasmād ahobalaṃ kṣetram idaṃ tāvad bhaviṣyati*
 | *nivasamy aham atraiva gajakuṇḍasamīpataḥ* ||80|| *tīre tu bhavanāśinyās tvam ca*
tiṣṭhāgrato mama | *atraiva tvam vasan sarvaṃ bhuṅkṣva rājyaṃ samṛddhimat* ||81||
ṛṣayaḥ pitaro devā mām atraiva stuvanti hi ||82|| *iti kila paramātmā dhārayan*
nārasimhaṃ vapur akhilajanānāṃ kaṇṭakam daityarājaṃ | *nīśitanakharajālair*
dārayaṃs tasya sūnuṃ mahati vipularājye hy abhyaśiṅcan murāriḥ ||83||
garuḍābhīdhahūdharasya bhāge nivasan vai bhavanāśinī taṭe | *vinutas sakalair*
mahīsurendrair vijayī tiṣṭhati nārasimharūpī || 84||

Real features of the temple appear to comply with a passage embedded in the treatment of the twelve sacred water bodies (*tīrtha*) of Ahobilam, which mentions a cave situated near the Gajakuṇḍa *tīrtha*, where Narasiṃha dwells (AM 3.133–134):

The tenth is Gajakuṇḍa, difficult to bath in, where kings of elephants are overpowered and go astray on the surface of the earth. To the north of Garuḍācala, amidst the slopes of the mountain, Nṛkesari resides in a cave like an umbrella (*chatrīkṛtaguhā*). In front of him there is a deep *tīrtha* which purifies the world.¹⁹

Despite the succinct form, the etymologies of respective names by which the site is known are significant in making and perceiving it sacred. They can be read not only as narratively overlapping, i.e., connecting Narasiṃha in his fierce aspect (*aho bala*) with the circumstances of his self-manifestation in a cave (*aho bila*), which, again, strengthens the local character of the narrative, but also as disclosing processes of mutual penetration of various traditions which over centuries developed in the area of Ahobilam and taken together contributed to its appreciation as sacred.

As remarked by Diana L. Eck, the term *svayambhū* connotes a deity which has self-manifested, without any human intervention, in a natural environment, or, more precisely, it is often a natural embodiment of a god, such as a stone, a rock, or even a mountain or a river. Believed to spontaneously appear in a certain place, such a deity has its own agency. Contrary to other images, it also does not need a ceremony of imparting the breath (*prāṇapraṭiṣṭhā*), as it is said to be vested with breath already. All these features make the *svayambhū* deities particularly appealing to pilgrims (Eck 1998: 183–184).

¹⁹ AM 3.133–135: *daśamaṃ gajakuṇḍaṃ syād avagāhitum akṣamaṃ | yasmin gajendrāḥ kṛṣyante vicaranti mahītale ||133|| gāruḍasyottare bhāge bhūdharaśya taṭāntare | chatrīkṛtaguhāyāṃ tu samadhyāste nṛkesarī || tasyedaṃ puratas tīrthaṃ gaṃbhīraṃ lokapāvanaṃ ||134||*

On the other hand, the beginning of the process that resulted in regarding the natural location of the *svayambhū* in case of Ahobilarasimha and its sacredness, reaches most likely to the times when the hill on which it is hosted now was a site important to the indigenous Chenchu hunter-gatherers, that is long before the Vaiṣṇavas had consolidated their claims over the place and the temple was built there. The Chenchus' ancient connection to the place may be, for instance, inferred from the fact that, as Sitapati mentions, even not so long ago once a week they used to offer animal sacrifices to Ahobilarasimha (Sitapati 1982: 12).²⁰

Although the old concept of the site's power has been with the passing of time redefined along the Vaiṣṇava lines, some traits of a deity which was originally worshipped by hunter-gatherers seem to have been maintained, even if modified. In Sontheimer's opinion, Narasimha, the Man-Lion, owes a lot to a tribal theriomorphic deity, which originated in a forest, on a hill, in a cave or a ravine. This dangerous deity was first imagined not as an anthropomorphic image, but as an animal of the feline order which preys around (Sontheimer 1985: 145). Traces of these beliefs have certainly survived in the hunting aspects of the ferocious Ahobilarasimha which are still emphasized both in the local and the Sanskrit narratives, most specifically in their ritual reenactments during temple festivals at the Upper and Lower Ahobilam (Dębicka-Borek 2022b). As it happened in many other Hindu holy sites where the notion of their inherent sacredness is much older than the temples built there later, more so as being derived from other, often indigenous beliefs that particularly emphasize connection to nature, it could be that the AM concept of a cave as the site of Narasimha's self-manifestation is a product of a cultural and religious appropriation. Once a natural, secluded spot associated by the Chenchus with a feline-like forest deity, the place might have evolved into a site perceived as related to the Man-Lion's self-appearance, with the site's primordial power

²⁰ Nowadays one can see this tradition, for example, during the last days of the Brahmotsava (Great Festival) on the premises of the Pāvananarasimha temple, which, perhaps not by coincidence, is also the furthest from the village.

transformed, or rather retained, in the environmentally informed idea of *svayambhū*.

• Garuḍācala

The next narrative to be examined concerns the Mountain of Garuḍa (Garuḍācala), one of the hills, in the vicinity of Ahobilam, that make up the Nallamalla range. On the textual level, this particular hill serves as a point of reference for a number of other AM narratives that map the place and contribute to the process of rendering it sacred.²¹

According to the Hindu mythology, Garuḍa is a bird-like creature which serves as Viṣṇu's mount (*vāhana*). The circumstances of how this came about are given, for instance, in the *Mahābhārata* narrative (*Ādiparvan*, 1.14–30), according to which Kaśyapa had two wives: Kadrū and Vinatā. Whereas, as result of a boon, Kadrū became the mother of one thousand snakes (*nāgas*), Vinatā had two sons, Aruṇa and Garuḍa, who were to surpass the *nāgas*. Born prematurely and, therefore, deformed Aruṇa curses his mother so that she becomes a slave of Kadrū. To release her from the curse, Garuḍa agrees to steal *amṛta* from heaven. On his way back, he meets Viṣṇu, who, impressed by Garuḍa's selflessness—he did not taste *amṛta* while carrying it from heaven—offers him immortality, a place on his banner and requests him to serve as his mount.²²

The AM narrative of Garuḍa reuses the motif of him being the son of Kaśyapa but particularizes the episode of Viṣṇu's (implicitly Narasiṃha's) agreement to make Garuḍa's his *vāhana* by localizing it in Ahobilam. Crucial in achieving this is the act of naming certain hill after Garuḍa. Yet, what seems particularly significant in the

²¹ In addition, some verses of the AM use the term Garuḍācala/Garuḍādri to denote Ahobilanarasiṃha's sacred territory, which makes the literary map of the site sometimes confusing. For instance, in the *phalaśruti* of the AM 4 the Ahobilanarasiṃhakṣetra is called Pakṣīndrakṣetra (Pakṣīndra=Garuḍa).

²² On the literary motif of the theft of *soma* by an eagle / *amṛta* by Garuḍa see Feller 2004: 159–206.

context of engendering the sanctity of Ahobilam is that despite the narrative's overriding goal of explaining the origin of the Garuḍācala's name, its focal figure appears as much Garuḍa as Viṣṇu-Narasimha.

Introduced by the sage Nārada, the narrative related to Garuḍācala is embedded in a dialogue between Garuḍa and his father Kaśyapa. Following the popular motif of obtaining boons from gods as the result of practicing austerities, it begins with an episode of Garuḍa who, mindful of mortifications, wants to learn how to attain what he desires (AM 2.2–7):

Honourable Nārada: All sages! Listen with attention to this speech! Formerly, in the auspicious *ṛtayuga*, Garuḍa, the son of Vinatā, with intention of performing austerities, said to his father: “O Venerable one! What is the method of achieving all what is desired? Or, who in the world fulfils hundreds of wishes? You are my father, and, actually, preceptor and teacher. Tell me the truth which is established. I do not know another path. Please, save me, who is helpless, miserable, confused, sunk in the ocean of worldly existence (*saṃsāra*), by giving an instruction”. Kaśyapa: “Those who are immersed in the ocean of worldly existence, whose minds are agitated by uncertainty, they all on the earth should worship Viṣṇu. Only he, no one else, is their redeemer, o son of Vinatā, therefore you should worship the Lord of world, Viṣṇu, o you, who observes religious vows!”²³

Having instructed his son that the only way to realize his wishes is to worship Viṣṇu, Kaśyapa further recommends him to proceed

²³ AM 2.2–7: *śrīnāradaḥ: śrīṇudhvaṃ munayaḥ sarve sāvadhānam idaṃ vacaḥ | purā ṛtayuge puṇye garuḍo vinatāsutaḥ ||2|| tapaś cartuṃ manaḥ kurvan pītaṃ vākyam abravīt | kenopāyena bhagavan sarveṣāṃ iṣṭasaṃbhavaḥ ||3|| ko vā pūrayitā loke manorathaśatasya tu | tvaṃ hi no janakaḥ sāksād gurur ācārya eva ca ||4|| yaddhitam brūhi me tattvaṃ nānyaṃ paśyāmy ahaṃ gatim | anāthaṃ kṛpānaṃ mūḍhaṃ magnaṃ saṃsārasāgare | upadeśapradānena samuddhartum ihārhasi ||5|| kaśyapaḥ: ye bhavārṇavasamagnāḥ viṣayākṛāntasetasāḥ | ārādhaniyas taiḥ sarvair viṣṇur eva mahītale ||6|| sa eva teṣāṃ uddhartā nānyo 'sti vinatāsuta | tas-māj jagatpatiṃ viṣṇuṃ tam ārādhaya suvrata ||7||*

to Ahobilam and undertake austerities there, on a great hill called Nārāyaṇa (AM 2.32–47):

“With mind occupied by Garuḍācala, you are resolved to perform austerities. There is a great Ahobilakṣetra, which destroys all sins, governed with affection by Hari himself, who maintains the world. There is a great mountain with hundreds of caves. This elevated mountain peak is called Nārāyaṇa but due to the greatness of your austerities, it will become the mountain of Garuḍa.” Then, having said so, Kaśyapa embraced the son Garuḍa, he blessed the satisfied child with the intention of austerities. Garuḍa, the Lord of Birds, having gone to the great mountain became silent, meditating (lit. thinking about nothing). “This is the mountain at the full width. Where am I to perform austerities? How shall I recognize the place of powers? What is the means to decide?” When he was thinking so, a voice came forth in front of him. “Oh boy adored as Lord Garuḍa! What are you thinking about? This site is known as Narasiṃha’s Ahobilam. But here, it is the Lord of Mountains, inhabited by gods and *gandharvas*. [...] Therefore you, too, with purified soul, fasting, with senses withdrawn, shall meditate on the God of worlds; he will grant you wellbeing.” Having said so, the next moment the great voice became silent. Garuḍa, with a purified soul, was astonished. [...] “Is it the power of my fortune or is it the power of Hari himself? Is it the place’s [power] or the mountain’s, the God of God’s or the guru’s?” Contended, he thought “Let it be satisfied!” He felt inclined to perform austerities on the slope of the mountain. On the bank of Bhavanāśinī, nearby Gajakuṇḍa, he propitiated the Lord of World (Jagannātha), the Endless (Ananta), the Best of Men (Puruṣottama). He recited the supreme mantra, the highest twelve-syllabled one, having taken recourse to complete silence, living on air, with senses withdrawn.²⁴

²⁴ AM 2.32–47: (*kaśyapa*) *garuḍācalacetās tvam tapase kṛtaniścayaḥ | ahobilamāhākṣetram sarvapāpavināśanam* ||32|| *sākṣād adhiṣṭhitam prītyā hariṇā lokadhariṇā | tatra śailo mahān āste guhāśata samanvitaḥ* ||33|| *sa tu nārāyaṇākhyas tu śailaśṛṅgaḥ samucchritaḥ | tapasas tava mātmyāt garuḍādrir bhaviṣyati* ||34|| (*śrīnāradaḥ*) *ity uktvā putram āliṅgya kaśyapo garuḍam tathā | preṣayāmāsa tapase hy āśirbhiḥ pūrayan sutam* ||35|| *so ‘pi gatvā mahāśailam garuḍaḥ patageśvaraḥ | tuṣṇīm babbhūva manasā na kiñcid api cintayan* ||36|| *parvato ‘yam suvi-stīrṇam tapaḥ kutra carāmi vai | siddhikṣetram katham jñāsyase kim vā nirṇaya-*

As the worlds are threatened by the power of Garuḍa's asceticism, the gods send Urvaśī, a beautiful nymph, to distract him. Her efforts prove futile. Urvaśī justifies her failure by the fact that Garuḍa's austerities are driven purely by devotion to Viṣṇu. At that moment, in response to Garuḍa's devotion, the God manifests himself on the hill. The AM provides long description of the God's appearance, the benevolence of which is stressed by the fact he is accompanied by the goddess Śrī (AM 2.91–97):

Thus, gracious Venerable one, holding a conch (*śaṅkha*), a disc (*cakra*) and a club (*gadā*), with four arms and four faces, served by Indra, similar to autumnal lotus, with lotus-like eyes, splendid due to a crown of lustre of thousand suns, with a beautiful nose, curly dark hair, a delicate shining low lip resembling beautiful blossom, a shell-neck, various parts of the body decorated with a pair of bracelets, with a breast adorned by a Kaustubha jewel and Śrīvatsa mark, wearing garland of pearls and necklace, with Śrī, with arms glittering due to armlets, with bents decorated with various girdles, with fingers adorned with rings, resembling a dark-blue cloud shining with a yellow cloth, attended by all stars as if the Moon, the Best of Men (Puruṣottama), stood in the middle of a Golden Mountain (Kanakācala), superior as if the King of the Mountain, served by shining groups of deities starting with serpents.²⁵

kāraṇam ||37|| *ity evaṃ cintayān asya purato vākyam utthitam | kiṃ cintayasi vai bāla garuḍāmarapūjita* ||38|| *idaṃ kṣetraṃ nṛsiṃhasya ahobilaṃ iti śrutam | atrāyaṃ bhūdharendras tu suragandharvasevitaḥ* ||39|| [...] *tasmāt tvam api śuddhātmā jīṭhāro jīṭendriyaḥ | dhyāyasva jagatām īśaṃ sa te śreyo vidhāsyati* ||41|| *ity uktvā tu mahāvāṇī virarāma kṣaṇāntare | garuḍo 'pi viśuddhātmā paraṃ vismayam āgataḥ* ||42|| *tam arthaṃ cintayāmāsa idaṃ vākyam punaḥ punaḥ | katham etad idaṃ vaakyam akāraṇasamudbhavam* ||43|| *mama bhāgyaprabhāvo vā prabhāvo vā hareḥ svayam | kṣetrasya vātha śailasya devadevasya vā guroḥ* ||44|| *evaṃ vai cintayān astu santuṣṭaḥ pūrṇamānasaḥ | tapaś cartuṃ manaś cakre bhūdharasya taṭāntare* ||45|| *tire tu bhavanāśinyāḥ gajakuṇḍasamīpataḥ | ārādhayan jagannātham anantaṃ puruṣottamaṃ* ||46|| *jajāpa ca paraṃ brahma dvadaśākṣaram uttamaṃ | kevalaṃ maunam āsthāya vāyubhakṣo jīṭendriyaḥ* ||47||

²⁵ AM 2.91–97: *tataḥ prasanno bhagavān śaṅkhacakraḡadādharaḥ | caturbhujāś caturvaktraḥ purandaraniṣevita* ||91|| *śāradāmbhojasadṛśaḥ puṇḍarikānibhekṣaṇaḥ | sahasrasūryadyutinā kirīṭena virājitaḥ* ||92|| *sunāsayā samāyuktaḥ*

Viṣṇu-Narasimha, gratified with Garuḍa's penance, asks him about what he wishes for. Garuḍa first praises the God with devotional hymns, and then requests two boons: the first is to become Viṣṇu's vehicle and the second, to name the hill where he performed austerities after his own name (AM 2.133–138):

“If you are pleased, O Venerable one, listen to my words. If you are pleased, O Lord of Gods, victory over earth and victory over three worlds is certain for those [who ask], O Madhava! Since today, O Lord of Gods, make me your vehicle. Sitting on my shoulder you will give me pleasure, O Lord (Prabhu)! Being a vehicle of the Receptacle of All is a great benefit. Who is able to gain [this state] besides the son of Vinatā? The servants of Hari do not seek immortality, or being Indra, or being Brahmā or Śiva. But [they seek] fruition in gladdening [you].” Then, the wise one asked for another excellent gift:

“O Lord of Gods! This mountain for a long time has been occupied [by me]. O, God of Gods! You shall declare it designated with my name!”²⁶

*nīlakuñcitamūrdhajaḥ | cārupallavasamkāśaḥ mṛṇālajvalitādharaḥ ||93|| kambu-
grīvo vicitrāṅgaḥ kuṇḍaladvayamaṇḍitaḥ | kaustubhālankṛtoraskaḥ śrīvatsena
samāśritaḥ ||94|| hārī hārayutaḥ śrīmān keyūravilasadbhujah | vicitravalayānamra
aṅgulīvarabhūṣitaḥ ||95|| nīlameghapratīkāśo bhātaḥ pītena vāsasā | tārāmaṇḍala-
saṃyuktaḥ śaśiva puruṣottamaḥ ||96|| kanakācalamadhyasthaḥ adrirāja ivāparaḥ |
anantādyaiḥ suragaṇair amalair upasevitaḥ ||97||*

I read *vicitravalayānamra aṅgulīvarabhūṣitaḥ* as *vicitravalayānamro 'ṅgulī-
varabhūṣitaḥ*.

²⁶ AM 2.133–138: *yadi tuṣṭo 'si bhagavann avadhārāya madvacāḥ | prthi-
vyāṃ vijayo vāpi trailokyavijayo 'pi vā ||133|| dhruvo vā yadi deveśa yeṣāṃ tuṣṭo 'si
mādhava | adya prabhṛti deveśa tava mām kuru vāhanam ||134|| skandhe mama
vasannn eva matprītir dīyatām prabho | sarvādhārasya deveśa vāhanatvaṃ mahat
phalam || kena vā śakyate prāptum ṛte ca vinatāsutam ||135|| nāmaratvaṃ suren-
dratvaṃ na brahmatvaṃ umeśatām | nandanānubhavaṃ vāpi vāñchanti harikiṅka-
rāḥ ||136|| bhūyaḥ papraccha matimān varamanyamanuttamam ||137|| deveśa ba-
hukālo 'yaṃ parvataḥ samupāśritaḥ | mannāmayavahāraṃ tu devadevāsya kal-
paya ||138||*

After expressing astonishment regarding Garuḍa's maturity, Viṣṇu agrees to grant him both boons and disappears (AM 2.142–146):

“Let it be, the two boons mentioned by you, both being my vehicle and mountain's fame under your name. People on earth will call you Garuḍa, Foe of Serpents, Soul of Veda, Lord of Birds, Chariot of Nārāyaṇa. As long the sun acts, as long as the moon shines that long this mountain will be [known] in the world as of Garuḍa.” Having said so the god disappeared from there. In this way, to the south of Bhavanāśinī's bank the Mountain of Garuḍa shines as another abode of gods. May the Mountain of Garuḍa (Garuḍādri) always gleam on the earth, glittering entirely due to violent austerities of Garuḍa, abounding in fruits, grass, drinking water, frequented by streams of ascetics, the southern protector of the entire world, the all-giver.²⁷

Here the narrative ends. With the recurring remarks on the need of worshipping Viṣṇu-Narasimha, its culminating episode becomes in a way the description of circumstances of the God's appearance on the mountain, which, if so, not by a coincidence had been previously known as of Nārāyaṇa(=Viṣṇu). Essentially, what makes the hill sacred is not the fact that Garuḍa performed his penance there, but that Viṣṇu-Narasimha appeared there to reward him.

²⁷ AM 2.142–146: *varadvayaṃ tvayā proktaṃ vāhanatvaṃ madīyakam | tvannāma girivikhyātir ubhayaṃ syāt tathaiva tu ||142|| garuḍaḥ pannagārātir vedātmā vihageśvaraḥ | nārāyaṇarathaś ceti tvam vakṣyati janā bhuvi ||143|| yāvac carati vai bhānur yāvac carati candramāḥ | tāvad bhavati loke 'yaṃ gāruḍaḥ pṛthivīdharah || ity evaṃ uktvā devo 'yaṃ tatraivāntaradhīyata ||144|| ity evaṃ bhavanāśinyās tīraṃ dakṣiṇam āśritaḥ | gāruḍo rājate śailaḥ surālaya ivāparaḥ ||145|| khagapatitapasoccaiḥ sarvato bhāsamānaḥ phalaṭṭṇajalapānaḥ sevitā tāpasaubhaiḥ | sakalabhuvanarakṣādakṣiṇaḥ sarvadāyī vilasatu bhuvi nityaṃ parvato gāruḍādriḥ ||146||*

I read *tāpasaubhaiḥ* as *tāpasaughaiḥ*.

• Vedācala

The next narrative to be discussed centres on the meaning behind the name Mountain of Vedas (Vedācala/Vedādri). The narrative is found within the framework of the chapter on the nine Narasiṃhas, their locations and the powers of their *kṣetras*, understood as the individual sites they preside over. The sages ask about the origin of the Vedācala name on the account of extolling the aspect called Vārāhanarasiṃha (Boar-Narasiṃha). Such a context allows to smoothly integrate the narrative into the chapter for it draws on the Purāṇic myth regarding the Vedas stolen from Brahmā. This myth is usually related to the Vaiṣṇava tradition, and some of its classical versions involve Viṣṇu's Vāraha (Boar) incarnation (or Matsya, Fish) who recovers the texts hidden by thieves in the ocean. The savior can be also Hayagrīva. The robbers are usually demons Madhu and Kaiṭabha or demon Hayagrīva/Hayaśiras. Besides, there are several localized versions of this myth, and in some of them, for instance, from Tamilnadu, the thief is demon Somaka (Doniger O'Flaherty 1988: 99–102, Shulman 1984: 21–25). This is also the case of the AM narrative, where, moreover, the Vedas are retrieved by Viṣṇu-Narasiṃha, after which, dissatisfied with Brahmā's attitude, they approach the Lord of Ahobilam. The narrative proceeds as follows (AM 4.28–44):

[The mountain] by name Garuḍa is the best among mountains. The mountain known as Veda is its part. Before, in *kṛtayuga*, a cruel demon called Somaka stole Vedas from Brahmā born from a lotus. Therefore, the perplexed creator, three worlds, everything moving and not moving, the recitation of Vedas and the syllable *ṣaṭ*, rituals of oblations, conduct according to *varṇa* and *āśrama* could not proceed. Having seen this all, Lord Puruṣottama killed demon Somaka and took back the three Vedas. Thus, when the god was giving [them] back to afflicted Brahmā, all Vedas thought together: "This Brahmā is incapable of granting any boon in any way. Therefore, we will perform austerities, we will become victorious over everyone. We will exert ourselves, no doubt, so that we are not insulted by demons,

gods, or people of unsubdued spirit, sacred texts, other *purāṇas*, *smṛti* along with historical texts.” They walked from forest to forest. Having climbed the mountain, all performed arduous austerities which cause the hair to bristle in front of the Lord of Kamalā, Nṛsimha. Thus, the gracious Venerable one said to these ascetics: “For what reason austerities are performed [by you] violently as if [you were] deprived of knowledge of the self?” Having been addressed so the Vedas spoke to Nārāyaṇa: “All people perform austerities which cause hair bristle for your sake. O Lord of the World, being omniscient, you do not discern advantage and disadvantage. Prabhu! For what reasons do you perplex [us], O God, as if [we were] common people?”. “I know your entire story, thus let it be in this way, there is no doubt. I gave you the boon and now there will never be any insult by any demons or gods accompanied by Indra, O Vedas! Those who despise the three-fold path, are all heretics. Those various texts which are hostile towards you, *purāṇas*, histories, *smṛtis* in thousands, they, no doubt, are corrupted, like Gaṅgā’s water [is corrupted] by liquor. From today this world will call this mountain by your name, verily.” Having said so, Hari disappeared. From this day on the name of the mountain has been known as Veda.²⁸

²⁸ AM 4.28–44: *garuḍācalanāmā tu bhūdharāṇām tu puṅgavaḥ | ta-syāvayavabhūto 'yaṁ bhūdharo vedasaṁjñitaḥ ||28|| purā kṛtayuge krūraḥ somakaḥ nāma durmatih | vedāpaharaṇaṁ cakre abjayoneḥ pitāmahāt ||29|| tataḥ saṁkṣobhito dhātā trailokyam sacarācaram | na svādhyāyaṣaṭkārāu nāgnihotrakriyās tadā || na varṇāśramadharmāṇām ācāras tu pravartate ||30|| etat sarvaṁ samālokyā bhagavān puruṣottamaḥ | jaghāna somakaṁ rakṣaṁ ājahāra ca vai trayīm ||31|| tatas tu dattavān devaḥ śocate vedhase punaḥ | vedās tu sarve saṁbhūya parasparam acintayan ||32|| brahmāyaṁ varadāne na samarthaḥ kathaṁcana | tapasyāmo vayaṁ nūnaṁ yāsyāmaḥ sarvaḥ śṛṇuṣvāt ||33|| asurair vā surair vāpi narair vā hy ajitātmabhiḥ | sāstrair anyair purāṇair smṛtibhiḥ setihāsakaiḥ ||34|| sathāsmākaṁ paribhavo na jāyate tathā vayaṁ | yatiṣyāmo na sandeha iti yātā vanād vanam ||35|| aruhya parvataṁ sarve hy agrataḥ kamalāpateḥ | nṛsimhasya tapaś cakrur dāruṇaṁ romaharṣaṇam ||36|| tataḥ prasanno bhagavāms tān uvāca jaṭādharaṇ | kim arthaṁ tapyate ghoram ātmavijñānahīnavat ||37|| yuṣmadarthaṁ janāḥ sarveḥ tapyante romaharṣaṇam | ity evam uktās te vedā nārāyaṇam athābruvan ||38|| sarvajñaḥ tvaṁ jagannātha na jānāsi hitāhitam | kim arthaṁ mohayasyeṣa prthag-janam iva prabho ||39|| (śrībhagavān): jāne yuṣmatkathāṁ sarvāṁ tattatāivaṣṭv asaṁśayaḥ | datto varo mayā cādyā sendrair api surāsuraiḥ ||40|| sarvaiḥ paribhavo vedāḥ na kadācid bhaviṣyati | ye nindanti trayīmargaṁ sarve pāṇḍinaḥ*

The AM version of the myth intermingles classical motifs about the stolen Vedas with locally invented concepts. Besides common threads concerning the decline of the world caused by the impossibility of performing sacrifices due to the loss of the Vedas, not only does the AM personify the Vedas, but additionally endows them with agency. Impure and insulted because of having come into contact with the demon, they express their critique of Brahmā's ability to grant them their power back. Hence, they decide to perform austerities—note the same motif of undertaking mortifications as in the case of Garuḍācala narrative—and, most importantly, in terms of creating the site's sanctity, choose Ahobilam as their destination. Like in the Garuḍācala narrative, the motif of austerities on a hill entails the motif of the God's appearance. Having climbed a mountain amongst the forests, the Vedas approach Narasiṃha who is accompanied by the Goddess and who in reward for their austerities restores their authority. Before he names after them the hill where the Vedas had practiced austerities, he declares all the texts that contradict them heretic. Once again, the site's sacredness stems from the presence of Narasiṃha, the god manifested on a hill, rather than the eponymous protagonists of the narrative.

• The Nine Narasiṃhas

As the last instance of narratives that contribute to making the space of Ahobilam sacred, I discuss the narrative sequence which maps the spatial distribution of the abodes (*sthāna*) of nine aspects of Narasiṃha, briefly refers to myths behind their names (*nāma*), and the powers of their sites (*kṣetra*), which all together constitute the *navanarasimhakṣetra*. The nine-fold sequence starts and ends with the *ugra* aspects as if to underscore their special position: these are Ahobilanarasiṃha (1), Bhārgavanarasiṃha (8) and Jvālānarasiṃha

tathā ||41|| *yāni yuṣmad viruddhāni śāstrāṇi vividhāni ca | purāṇānūtiḥāsāś ca smṛtayāś ca sahasraśaḥ || dūṣitāni na sandeho gaṅgāmbhaḥ surayā yathā* ||42||
adya prabhṛti loko 'yaṃ yuṣmannāmnā tu parvatam | vadiṣyati na sandeha ity uktvāntardadhe hariḥ ||43|| *tataḥ prabhṛti śailasya nāmāsīt vedasamjñitam* ||44||

(9). In some cases, the narrative segments allude to yet other narratives connected to various other topics, e.g., Vedācala, thus creating a dense net of textual and mythical connections.

Structurally, the description of the nine Narasiṃhas is divided into two sections, with the first one (AM 4.9–53) focused on the names of the consecutive aspects of the god and the physical location of their abodes (*navānām nārasimhānām nāmāni ca prthak prthak | sthānāni brūhi...*, AM 4.8). The second section (AM 4.54–109), deals with the power (*prabhāva*) of each of them,²⁹ that is, as follows from subsequent verses, with the advantages of visiting their sites understood as sacred (*kṣetra*).

Ahobilanarasimha

The series of Narasiṃha's manifestations begins with the description of an *ugra* aspect of Narasiṃha who slaughters the demon. The passage counterbalances fierce traits of the god with his concern for the worshippers; this is exemplified by the presence of Prahlāda on his side:

The shore of the Gajātūrtha is the most fortunate of all locations. Narasiṃha who tears asunder enemies appears there. He sits on the disc-seat (*cakrāsana*) [and is] endowed with a disc (*cakra*) and other weapons. With his jaw he brings destruction to those who wander about. With a mane, dispelling the groups of demons, with jaws full of terrible fangs, he is fearsome even to the Fear. With his nails sharp as white thunderbolts he makes demons shaken, with the cruel fire produced out of the eye on a forehead, he, of immeasurable form, appears to burn the three worlds. With his compassion to devotees, constantly, he is looking at [those] focused on gods. Extremely delighted, he dwells welcoming with affection Prahlāda full of love, sitting in

²⁹ AM 4.53cd–54: *ete navavidhāḥ proktā nṛsiṃhā navadhā smṛtāḥ ||53|| ekaikasya prabhāvas tu vaktum śakyam na vedhasā | tathāpyuddeśato vakṣye kiñcid eva prthakprthak ||54||*

front with folded hands, a true devotee. This is the first location (*sthāna*) honoured by Brahmā and others.³⁰

Although the passage does not explicitly name the god, the description refers to Ahobilarasimha, the Lord of Ahobilam. This is clear not only due to emphasis on his role in killing the demon (note that the other two *ugra* aspects hosted in Ahobilam are visually credited with this act too), but, furthermore, due to a topographical hint at the shore of Gajātīrtha which is mentioned at the very beginning of the passage. The same spatial reference is given in the already discussed passages AM 3.133–134, which points to Ahobilarasimha who dwells in a cave on the slopes to the north of Garuḍācala (cf. fn 19), and AM. 7.78–83, which deals with the etymology of toponyms Ahobalam/Ahobilam (cf. fn 18). In terms of iconography, there seems to be an inconsistency concerning the weapons, for the main deity of the Upper Ahobilam, the *svayambhū*, does not have any. However, in the cave adjacent to the main one, there is one more image of the *ugra* Narasimha which has four hands: while with the lower ones the deity mutilates the demon's belly, in the upper ones he holds *śaṅkha* and *cakra*. The mention of *cakrāsana* in which the deity seats poses some problems too. If we ignore yogic associations of the term (a wheel pose/ backbend) and take it as denoting "the seat/dwelling of *sudarśana*", the latter being a deified disc (*cakra*) of Viṣṇu, then the textual reference may point to a custom of representing Narasimha as seated on the reverse site of the Sudarśana icon, an embodiment of the disk, or with a disc in

³⁰ AM 4.9–15ab: *sthānānām eva sarveṣāṃ gajātīrthataṭaṃ śubham | vidā-
rayan ripūṃs tatra narasiṃhaḥ prakāśate* ||9|| *cakrāsane samāsīnaś cakrādyā-
yudhasevitaḥ | caṃkramakramitānām tu vaktrāśayavināśanaḥ* ||10|| *saṭcchaṭāsa-
māyukto vidhūtāsura maṇḍalaḥ | daṃṣṭrākaraḥ lavadano bhayasyāpi bhayaṅkaraḥ*
||11|| *śitadambholiparuṣair nakhair vilulitāsuraḥ | phālekṣaṇasamudbhūtavahninā
dāruṇātmanā | aprameyakṛtākāras trilokaṃ nirdahann iva* ||12|| *bhaktānukampayā
nityaṃ bhāvitāmṛtavikṣṇaḥ* ||13|| *agre prāṇjalim āsīnaṃ prahlādaṃ priyapūritam |
preṃṇānugṛhṇan sadbhaktaṃ samadhyāste 'tihaṛṣitaḥ* ||14|| *idaṃ tu prathamam
sthānam brahmādibhir upāsitam |*

his hand.³¹ Although there is no such a representation in the Ahobilanarasimha temple, Vasantha remarks that the *sudarśa-nayantra* is installed in a small side-shrine situated to the west of Ahobilanarasimha's cave (Vasantha 2001: 79).

Vārāhanarasimha

The next aspect, the peaceful Boar Narasimha, i.e., Vārāha, along with Vasundharā, the Earth, resides on the back of Vedādri (AM 4.22):

Assuming the form of Vārāha,
the eternal god supports his wife Vasundharā,
having remained at the hinder part of Vedādri.³²

An allusion to the Puranic myth of Viṣṇu, who in his manifestation of Vārāha rescues the Earth from the ocean by lifting her up from waters with his tusk is also recalled in the section on the merits accruing from visiting this *kṣetra*. Besides promising to grant an accomplishment to people who keep vows and chant the best Vaiṣṇava *mantra* in front of the god, the text associates the *vārāhakṣetra* with the power to fulfil a desire of having land (*bhūkāma*) and kingdom (*rājyākāma*) (AM 4.57cd). This is granted if a person recites for a certain period a *stotra*, which is quoted in the following verses, and with which the Earth (Bhū) praises her savior, the Boar Narasimha (AM 4.59–71).

In terms of iconography, the brief description of Vārāhanarasimha (locally often called Kroḍanarasimha) conforms with one of the statues installed in the shrine. According to Vasantha's account (Vasantha 2001: 8–9), the cave temple dedicated to Vārāhanarasimha hosts nowadays two images, of Lakṣmīnarasimha and of

³¹ An icon of Narasimha with Sudarśana on his back is found, for instance, in the Varadarāja temple in Kanchipuram.

³² AM 4.22: *vārāhaṃ rūpamāsthāya dhatte jāyāṃ vasundharāṃ | vedādrehḥ prṣṭhabhāge tu sthitvā devaḥ sanātanaḥ ||22||*

Sthanakanarasimha with Bhūdevī. The latter shows the Earth-goddess embracing the god's snout³³ as if being lifted from waters. The god has two hands, the head of a boar and the tail of a lion attached to a human torso.

The cave is situated near the Bhavanāśinī river, circa one km to the north-east from the Ahobilarasimha temple, between Vedādri and Garuḍādri, yet attached to the former.

Narasimha with Lakṣmī (Lakṣmīnarasimha)/Mālolanarasimha

The next manifestation, again peaceful, is of Narasimha with Lakṣmī (AM 4.23–25):

On the highest, lofty peak of this eminent mountain [Vedācala], venerable Narasimha manifests [himself] facing towards the south. On his side an eminent great river called Kanakā (Golden) always flows carrying water with its streams. There, Hari once bestowed Devī with supremacy. From this time people have proclaimed the place as of Lakṣmī.³⁴

[...]

This eminent mountain always glows due to glances thrown by Lakṣmī, [and is] covered on all sides with fruits, flowers and creepers.³⁵

Accordingly, the AM 4.74–76 explicitly states that the *kṣetra* of this particular aspect is situated on the top of Vedādri, and the god resides there with Lakṣmī. A visit to this *kṣetra* is recommended for those who desire distinction or glory (*śrīkāma*), success (*sampad*) or

³³ According to Rangachar, the goddess clings to Vārāhanarasimha's left shoulder (Rangachar 1993: 30).

³⁴ AM 4.23–25: *tasya bhūdharavaryasya unnate mastakottame | dakṣiṇā-bhimukhaḥ śrīmān narasiṃhaḥ prakāśate ||23|| tasya bhāge mahābhāgā kanakākhyā mahānadī | sadā dravati dhārābhir udvahanī sadā udam ||24|| prādhānyaṃ tattra devyās tu hariḥ kalpitavān purā | tataḥ prabhṛti lokās tu lakṣmyās padam avādayan ||25|| [...]*

³⁵ AM 4.45: *lakṣmīkaṭākṣavikṣepāt sadāyaṃ parvatottamaḥ | phalapuṣpala-tākīrṇaḥ sarvataḥ samprakāśate ||45||*

seek to become like a lord of gods (*sureśatā*). For this sake they should chant Lakṣmīnṛṣiṃhamantra along with Aṣṭākṣaramantra.

The chapter's *phalaśruti* links this *kṣetra* only with Lakṣmī: it calls it *jalanidhitanayāsamjñita*, the *kṣetra* "called the Daughter of the Ocean" (=Lakṣmī).

The *saumya* icon of Narasiṃha accompanied by Lakṣmī is installed in the shrine locally known as Mālolanarasiṃha. The god is seated in *sukhāsana*, with left leg folded and right one dangling. The goddess sits on his left thigh and embraces him with her right arm. The feet of the goddess rest on *padma* which sprouts from the earth. Lord's two upper hands hold *cakra* and *śaṅkha*. With the lower right hand Narasiṃha displays *abhaya* gesture and with the lower left hand he embraces his consort.

The shrine is situated circa 2 kms up of the upper Ahobilam temple, on a level of the Vedādri's peak. A small rivulet called Kanaka flows nearby (Vasanth 2001: 9).

There are also several local myths not attested in the AM which explain Narasiṃha's and Lakṣmī's appearance in this particular place. This event happens to be connected with the act of Lakṣmī appeasing Narasiṃha's anger after he killed Hiranyakaśipu at another local *kṣetra*, a site associated with Jvālānarasiṃha. Having approached Narasiṃha on the request of threatened gods, Lakṣmī moved along with him there to bless the devotees (Rangachar 1993: 10–11). Other narratives attribute more agency to the goddess: for instance, she is believed to have moved there after being offended by Narasiṃha who invited a Chenchu huntress to their abode. This belief partly finds its visual counterpart in the cave shrine of Ahobilanarasiṃha, where the statue of Ceñcūlakṣmī considered to be a wife of Ahobilanarasiṃha is kept besides the main *mūrti* (Ayyengar 1916: 82).

Yogānandanarasiṃha

The next manifestation treated in the passage is Yogānandanarasiṃha (AM 4.46–48):

To the west of Vedādri, near the place of Lakṣmī, there is the god Yogānanda Nṛsiṃha who faces south. He was teaching yoga to the noble Prahlāda. From this time people call him “Yogānanda.” To the northwest from there Lord Narasiṃha glows in the cave in his own form of Yogānanda³⁶

A passage concerning the *kṣetra* does not provide any spatial details, focusing rather on mythical figures and gods, including Brahmā, who attained peace of mind here (AM 4.77–79).

The verses pertain to the form of Narasiṃha who is iconographically shown in a yogic posture with legs crossed and tied with a cloth used for yogic practices (*yogapaṭṭa*). Thus, although this aspect is presented without Lakṣmī, its yogic traits make him peaceful. He has four hands: the upper right holds *cakra* and the upper left holds *śaṅkha*. The other two rest on his knees (Vasantha 2001: 8). The actual cave shrine of Yogānandanarasiṃha is situated to the south-west from Lakṣmīnarasiṃha/Mālolanarasiṃha shrine, high on the slopes of Vedādri (cf. Rangachar 1993: 32–33). The passage AM 4.46–48 seems to allude to two different sites (“To the west of Vedādri...”, “To the northwest from there...”). Perhaps the first mention refers to a place where, in view of local tradition, Narasiṃha is believed to have, after killing the demon, taught yoga to Prahlāda—that would be a plain rocky surface in front of Yogānandanarasiṃha shrine. The second mention could be then to the shrine itself. Alternatively, this form of Narasiṃha is called Yogānandaprahlādanarasiṃha.

Pāvananarasiṃha

The next form of Narasiṃha is called Pāvana (purifying/pure) (AM 4.49):

³⁶ AM 4.46–48: *vedādreh paścime bhāge lakṣmīsthānāt samīpataḥ | dakṣi-
nābhīmukho devo yogānando nṛkesarī ||46|| yogābhyāsaṃ tu kṛtavān prahlādasya
mahātmanah | tadā prabhṛti lokas tu yogānanda iti bruvan ||47|| tasya vāyavya-
bhāge tu bhagavān narakesarī | yogānandasvarūpeṇa guhāyām samprakāśate ||48||*

To the south of Garuḍādri there is a *tīrtha* called Pāvana. Lord Viṣṇu in his form of Narasiṃha is there, the bestower of desired objects to living beings who resorted to him.³⁷

The passage concerning the *kṣetra* calls it a jewel among others and associates it with the power of removing various transgressions, including, for instance, losing caste (*jātibhramśa*) or killing a Brahmin, the latter illustrated by the case of sage Bharadvāja who once got rid of his wrong deed here (AM 4.80–82).

In accordance with the text, the shrine of Pāvananarasimha is situated to the south of the Garuḍādri. It is the most remote shrine at the site, built in a faraway place in a forested area on the bank of Pavani river near a Chenchu hamlet, several km to the south from the Upper Ahobilam temple. The *garuḍastambha* which is in front indicates that in the bygone times the shrine must have enjoyed popularity. In a nearby cave situated on the slope, slightly above the shrine, there is a small sanctuary of Ceñcūlakṣmī. As already mentioned, during Mahotsava/Brahmotsava the site is visited by local communities who sacrifice animals to Narasiṃha.

The enshrined image shows peaceful Narasiṃha with Lakṣmī. He has four hands: the upper two carry *śaṅkha* and *cakra*, the lower right hand displays *abhaya* gesture and the lower left hand embraces Lakṣmī seated on the god's left thigh. Narasiṃha rests in *sukhāsana* on the snake Adīśeṣa, his left leg is folded, and his right leg bent. Lakṣmī embraces the god with her right hand. Over them the seven-hooded snake spreads like an umbrella (Vasanth 2001: 11). Locally, the deity is known as Pamuletinarasiṃha (Tel. *pamu* = serpent). Besides Pāvananarasimha, the *garbhagrha* holds also the statues of Gopalakṛṣṇa, Navanītakṛṣṇa, Varadarāja, Anjaneya and another Pamuletinarasiṃha (cf. Rangachar 1993: 36).

³⁷ AM 4.49: *garuḍādrer dakṣiṇataḥ pāvanam nāma tīrthakam | tatrāste bhagavān viṣṇur nṛsiṃhasya svarūpadhṛt || saṃśritānām tu jantūnām abhīṣṭārthapradāyakah ||49||*

Karañjanarasimha

The next form of Narasimha is the Karañjanarasimha (AM 4.50, 4.83)

Behind/to the west of the Garuḍādri, nearby, there is a great tree Karañjaka, Narakesarī is at its feet.³⁸

At the feet of Karañja,
where the Venerable one holding *cakra* and a bow resides,
there is a *kṣetra* described as Karañja, adjacent to Bhavanāśinī (4.83)³⁹

The *kṣetra*'s power is explained as related to the appearance of Narasimha when the sage Gobhila, cursed by Durvasas, recited the King of the Mantras (*mantrarāja*) there (AM 4.85–89).

The shrine which hosts this form of Narasimha is till day situated under a Karañja tree (Karañja tree = *Pongamia Glabra*), on the way up to the Upper Ahobilam, currently alongside a motorable concrete road, to the west from Garuḍādri. River Bhavanāśinī flows on the left. The image is seated in meditation, with hooded cobra over the head. Narasimha holds in his hands *cakra*, *śaṅkha*, and a bow. With a lower right hand he shows an *abhaya* gesture (Vasantha 2001: 9). It is a peaceful form of the god.

Although here devotion is not directly focused on a tree, still, the importance of Karañja in the worship of this form of Narasimha may suggest that the place might have been originally significant for local communities. As Jacobsen remarks, significance of natural phenomena, i.e., trees, at the Hindu pilgrimage centers has been often inherited from older traditions which were overlayed in the process of mutual merging and redefining (Jacobsen 2013: 49–50).

The same applies to the next Narasimha aspect.

³⁸ AM 4.50: *garuḍādreh paścimataḥ hy avidūre karañjakaḥ | mahān vṛkṣas tatra cāste tanmūle narakesarī* ||50||

³⁹ AM 4.83: *karañjamūle bhagavān yatrāste śārṅgacakradhṛt | kārañjam kṣetram uddiṣṭam āśritam bhavanāśinīm* ||83||

Chatravaṭanarasimha

In this case the passage on Narasiṃha's name and location proceeds as follows (AM 4.51)

In the place to the south-west from this site,
nearby, within half of *krośa*,
Narasiṃha dwells in the shadow of a Banyan tree like an umbrella⁴⁰

The other passage links the *chatravaṭakṣetra* with a site of Narasiṃha who is entertained by various mythical entities with music and songs. Here, two *gandharvas*, called Huhu and Haha, who came from Meru to Ahobilam, were granted a boon of being the best musicians. Narasiṃha did it in recognition of their talent and familiarity with musical notes. Therefore, the *kṣetra* is dedicated to artists who study sacred texts depending on the Bharataśāstra here, for it grants fame (AM 4.90–96).

The shrine, built to the south-west of the Garuḍādri, under the shade of an umbrella-like banyan tree (*chat[t]ravaṭa*), is situated ca. four km from the Lower Ahobilam, on a motorable road to the Yogānandanarasimha shrine. The deity's image is carved in a black basaltic stone. Facing east, Narasiṃha is seated in the *padmāsana* pose on a low *padmapīṭha*. He holds *cakra* and *śaṅkha* in his upper hands. The lower right hand shows the *abhaya* gesture, the lower left hand, placed on the waist and the left thigh, the *kaṭihasta* gesture (Vasantha 2001: 8).

Bhārgavanarasimha

The geographical orientation of the physical location of this aspect is also given in reference to Garuḍādri (AM 4.52):

⁴⁰ AM 4.51: *tatsthānān nairṛte bhāge krośārdhe hy avidūrataḥ | āste chatravaṭacchāyām āśrito narakesarī ||51||*

To the north from there, in a place hidden between the mountains, Narakesarī sits in the prominent *bhārgavatīrtha*.⁴¹

In opposition to the previous aspects, Bhārgavanarasimha is fierce (*ugra*). According to a passage on its *kṣetra* (AM 4.97–105), this site promises heaven and emancipation. Nearby there is a pond (*tīrtha*) called *akṣaya* (‘undecying’), and the surroundings are forested. Having taken a bath there, one should worship the god as Adhokṣaja. The name Bhārgava comes from sage Bhārgava who performed fierce austerities there.

The shrine is situated circa 2 km from the Lower Ahobilam, on a hill near *bhārgavatīrtha*. Steps which lead to the shrine start near *akṣayatīrtha*, currently a small pond surrounded by greenery.

The image of the deity is placed on a low pedestal. It has four hands, of which the upper hands hold *cakra* and *śaṅkha*, and the two lower ones tear out intestines of Hiraṇyakaśipu. The demon has a sword in his hand. A statue of Prahlāda who displays *añjali* gesture is situated on the right. There is also a statue of Mahāviṣṇu in the peaceful aspect (Rangachar 1993: 21). The shrine is mentioned in an inscription dated 1564 AD, put up by Śrī Parāṅkuśa Śrīvansatagopa Jīyar. It registers a grant of land in a village called Lingamdinne to Ahobaleśvara for offerings during the garden festival (*vanamahotsava*) near the tank on the way to the Bhārgava shrine, the road and steps to which were constructed by the same *jīyar* (Vasanth 2001: 7–8).

Jvālānarasimha

Location of the last aspect, the fiery (*jvālā*) Narasimha, is described very briefly (AM 4.53ab)

In the middle of the Acalacchāyameru there is Jvālāṇṛkesarī⁴²

⁴¹ AM 4.52: *tasya cottarabhāge tu parvatāntarite sthale | bhārgave tīrtha-varye tu samāste narakesarī ||52||*

⁴² AM 4.53ab: *acalacchāyameros tu madhye jvālāṇṛkesarī |*

The passage on the advantages of visiting the site (*kṣetra*) of Jvālānṛkeśarī credits it with removing all wrongdoings. It recommends offering light and clarified butter or sesamum oil to Jvālānarasiṃha there, for light should bring a devotee to the state of communing with god (*sāyujya*). Last verses extol the incorporeal Narasiṃha who is joined with the dead body of Hiraṇyakaśipu (*saṃbhinnam bhinnadaityeśvaratanum atanum nārasimhaṃ bha-jāmaḥ*, AM 4.109) in a way which highlights his fiery features clearly in association with his fierceness.

Accordingly, the cave shrine of Jvālānarasiṃha is built high above the Lakṣmīnarasiṃha temple, on a hill called Accalachāyameru. According to Vasantha, in view of local tradition it is situated at the place where the anger of Narasiṃha reached its peak when he tore into Hiraṇyakaśipu. The spot where Jvālānarasiṃha is sitting with the demon spread on his lap is believed to be the threshold of the entrance to Hiraṇyakaśipu's palace. This motif, along with the already mentioned motif of a nearby small pond whose water is of reddish colour because Narasiṃha washed his hands off the demon's blood there, is woven into the *māhātmya*.

According to Vasantha, there are actually three images in the shrine. The main deity is eight-armed and seated on *garuḍapīṭha*. One hand of the first pair catches Hiraṇya's crown, the other catches Hiraṇya's hand in which he carries a sword. The second pair of Narasiṃha's hands tears open the entrails of the demon who lies on the folded right leg of the god. The third hand holds *śaṅkha* and *cakra*. The fourth pair keeps the garland of demon's intestines. In front of Narasiṃha there is a statue of Prahlāda. Another statue shows a rare form of Narasiṃha in a standing posture while coming out of the pillar (*stambhotsavamūrti*). It has four arms: the two upper hands hold *cakra* and *śaṅkha* and the two lower are positioned as if to claw the demon who is absent. To the right there is seated Lakṣmī and to the left there is an image of Prahlāda. Yet another image of Narasiṃha hosted in the shrine displays the scene of the fight: Narasiṃha approaches the demon from the right; Hiraṇyakaśipu keeps a sword in his hand willing to strike Narasiṃha

(Vasanth 2001: 9–10). Rangachar, who calls the Jvālānarasiṃha “the first of the nine holy shrines of Ahobilam” (Rangachar 1993: 10) additionally mentions the ten-armed image of Narasiṃha, which stands to the right of the main image (Rangachar 1993: 34).

Conclusions: Reading, watching, walking Ahobilam landscape

As one can see, the order of AM narratives which deal with local hills is logical and well planned. Before the text extolls the nine Narasiṃhas and their sites, the meaning behind the names of the two hills, i.e., Garuḍācala and Vedācala, which serve as spatial reference for other plots, is explained. Close reading reveals, however, that in the context of creating the sacredness of Ahobilam, the role of eponymous figures of these two narratives—Garuḍa and Vedas respectively—is limited. Given that in Hindu and other traditions mountains are perceived sacred because they are believed to be a place of gods’ theophany and residence, the AM narratives seem to convey that both hills are holy not due to the presence of Garuḍa and the Vedas there, but rather because of Viṣṇu-Narasiṃha, who descended upon them to grant boons. His benevolent aspect, emphasized by the presence of Lakṣmī at his side, proves from the outset that he has many aspects, and the ferocious one is just one of many. By establishing that Garuḍācala and Vedācala are the hills, where Narasiṃha manifests himself and dwells, the narratives set the stage for the story of the nine Narasiṃhas or his various local aspects. In the light of this, the pattern of nine does not actually seem to serve as yet another means of creating sanctity of the site because the hills where the god manifests himself are already said to be holy. The pattern’s function is rather to extend the god’s nature beyond his fierce features which Ahobilam is popularly aligned with and most likely already was in the times of Tirumaṅgai Ālvār.

Secondly, although at the beginning of this paper I stated that I find it convincing that an empirical/performative aspect of making a site sacred might be even much more decisive than non-empirical,

i.e., shaped by the narrative, it must be noted how the hills-related narratives of the AM transform the landscape of a real place, basically in comparison to that depicted by Tirumaṅgai. In the light of the AM, it is no longer a dry, difficult and haunted terrain which matches the nature of the ferocious Narasiṃha. Along with variegation of the god's nature into nine aspects, predominantly peaceful, the literary image of the site's ambience becomes more welcoming.

Thirdly, the pattern of nine (again, most likely owed to a narrative, if we consider the already mentioned option of being inspired by Tirumaṅgai's nine stanzas in which he described the ferocious god) allows to encapsulate under the umbrella of Narasiṃha's figure the indigenous beliefs that predated his Vaiṣṇava cult there. Their traces, as mentioned above, are likely to be seen in reverence towards the Lord of Ahobilam believed to be self-born in a cave, or in his aspects linked to particular trees. They are also realized during temple festivals; for instance, every year Ahobilanarasiṃha is taken for a 40-day-long ritual hunt around Ahobilam (Tel. *pāruvēṭa* / Sanskr. *mṛgayotsava*) in which the Chenchu community still plays an important role. A text which integrates various domains—nature and culture, and the local and the Brahmanic—is the festival's screenplay.

Of course, the most efficient empirical aspect of transforming the site into holy is a pilgrimage understood both as approaching it and walking amongst the nine individual *kṣetras* that lie within its sacred territory. The scenery of Ahobilam, actually unchangeably harsh, visually conveys the episodes of the Narasiṃha myth inscribed by the AM into certain local natural phenomena; besides mountains it is also Bhavanāśinī river,⁴³ and 12 *tīrthas*. While walking, pilgrims envision and confront various events encapsulated in the locally shaped Narasiṃha myth. Emotions brought out by the interplay of nature and narratives get stronger the more often they hear reports that wild felines, cheetahs or tigers, have been seen in the area. The setting of the Upper Ahobilam, chiefly a vertical rock

⁴³ For an analysis of the AM myth of Bhavanāśinī see Dębicka-Borek 2019.

with a natural cleft called Ugrastambha, which is said to be the pillar of Hiranyakaśipu's palace from which Narasiṃha appeared, is likely to enhance belief that this is the site of the demon's brutal death at the hands (or rather claws) of Narasiṃha. This seems to happen no matter how the *māhātmya*'s narrations and visual representations differentiate the nature of the god.

Drawing on her field studies in Ahobilam, Biardeau perceives the route among the Narasiṃha shrines of the Upper Ahobilam—still to be covered on foot—as a sort of circuit around the mountain, with Ugrastambha at its center. As she states, from this perspective, the mountain is the god (Biardeau 1975: 59). Even if in view of the AM the sacred territory of Ahobilam includes other temples located on the lower altitude / at the foot of the mountain, it does not impact Biardeau's conclusions. Currently the order of visiting them depends on practical issues, whether one wishes to visit them on foot or by car, the duration of the stay, etc. The lack of predetermined, obligatory sequence of touring the nine shrines seems to indicate that there is no linear plot which brings together the nine incarnations of Narasiṃha. It is not clear whether the order of nine Narasiṃhas is intended to evoke a linear myth, as, for instance, the chapter's *phalaśruti* does not point to it.⁴⁴ In this context, what joins them is indeed the mountain/s they reside on, and the routes traversed by pilgrims.

The narratives preserved in the AM can be seen as a product of interconnectedness of nature and culture. What triggered their composition were, on the one hand, the earlier stories, on the other, the local hills. As we may presume, these hills were first frequented and

⁴⁴ AM 4.13: *pakṣīndram potrasaṃjñam jalandhitanayāsaṃjñitam yoga-saṃjñam | kārañjam kṣetravaryam phalitaphalacayaṃ chatrapūrvaṃ vaṭam ca | jvālākhyam bhārgavākhyam bhagavadabhimate bhāvitam yogivaryaiḥ | puṇyam tat pāvanākhyam hr̥di kalayatām kalpate satphalāya* ||113||—“[The site called] Garuḍa, [the site] called ‘Boar’, [the site] called ‘The daughter of the Ocean’, [the site] called ‘Yoga’, the eminent site of Karañja, and the Banyan tree [called after] the parasol bearing abundance of fruit, the site known as Jvālā, the site known as Bhārgava, dear to Bhagavan promoted by eminent yogis, [and] the auspicious site known as Pavana. One should carry it in heart, [then] one partakes of good fruits.”

then spoken about by the indigenous communities: wild and secluded, the hills provided them with prey and food and hosted ferocious divinities of the forest. With the advent of the Vaiṣṇavas and the necessity to share the space, the production of narratives took another turn. Whereas at first they reflected the ferociousness of the god who resides in such a hostile site as Tirumaṅgai sang about, several centuries later, basically for the sake of the royals, they reflected a peaceful encounter of royal/Brahmanic and local spheres as embodied by the god Narasiṃha and the Ceñcū huntress who fell in love (Dębicka-Borek 2016). In turn, a place-oriented Sanskrit *māhātmya*, perhaps composed in the in-between period (?), but surely with the aim of drawing pilgrims, attempted at making a naturally harsh and demanding landscape of Ahobilam to be perceived as friendly. Because the god is there, the hills of Ahobilam grant salvation. Crucial in refashioning the perception of terrain is, however, an attempt of presenting the hilly landscape as accommodating the god, whose nature displays several aspects. Whereas for the Ālṽars, the Narasiṃha of Ahobilam was equally ferocious and blazing as the natural surroundings, the *māhātmya* seems to convey the idea that along with his other, mild aspects, the nature was harnessed too. And the pilgrims' purposeful visits and their experiencing of narratives by using all their senses and immersing themselves in the real environment perpetually recreate the site's sacredness.

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