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The Voice of the Sculptures: How the ‘Language of Dance’ Can Be Used to Interpret Temple Sculptures. An Example from the Hoysalesvara Temple at Halebīd

SUMMARY: The sculptures of the Hoysalesvara temple at Halebīd abound in dance scenes and dance postures, thus representing a great source of material for the study of the relationship between dance and sculpture in traditional Indian art. In this work, a posture of the arms frequently found in the dance sculptures of the Hoysalesvara temple is analyzed according to the *nāṭya-śāstras* and to its location in the temple building. So doing, I aim to investigate how the technical language of dance could have been used by the sculptors to inform temple sculptures with a variety of meanings, in a way analogous to the use of dance sequences to express specific feelings on stage. While doing so, the work highlights how traditional dance, with its full-fledged body language, possibly plays a specific role in the act of going to the temple: dance is the language through which the sculptures are enlivened and speak, so to say, to the devotees while they perform the ritual of circumambulating the temple (*pradakṣiṇa*) and entering into it.

KEYWORDS: Hoysala sculptures, Hoysalesvara temple, dance sculptures, *nāṭya-śāstras*, *vismaya hasta*.

Introduction

The measure and the way in which the dance movements codified in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* [hereafter NŚ] and other texts inform temple sculptures have been the subject of scholarly research since the 1930s. Naidu’s *Tāṇḍava Lakṣaṇam* (Naidu 1936) and the Gaekward Oriental Series

editions of the NŚ represent the first attempts to link the basic units of dance, the *karaṇas* described in the fourth chapter of the NŚ, with their sculptural representations carved in the *gopuras* of the Naṭarāja temple at Cidambaram. A common feature of these early works is that here *karaṇas* are considered almost as static postures.¹ It was only in the late 1960s that Vatsyayan first attempted a history of Indian art through the lens of dance (Vatsyayan 1968), in such a way extending the discourse on the sculptural representations of dance beyond the analysis of the sets of *karaṇas* found in Cidambaram and other temples of Tamil Nadu.² In her work, Vatsyayan identifies the movements and postures of dance in the sculptures of different regions and belonging to different periods of Indian history, highlighting in the meanwhile how the language of dance informs all sculptures and not only those engaged in an actual dance. Apart from establishing a thorough methodology for the technical analysis of the sculptures from the point of view of dance,³ Vatsyayan's main contribution

¹ The fact that the first scholars dealing with the *karaṇas* considered them as quasi-static poses may be related to the history of dance. The practice of performing the *karaṇas* was, at some point in time and for some still unclear reasons, interrupted. Although there are references to the performance of *karaṇas* at least up to the 15th century Vijayanagara period (as an example, see the 15th century Kaṇṇada work *Pampāsthānavarṇane* by Candrasekhara describing the *karaṇas* of dance performed in the temple of Lord Virūpākṣa, see Filliozat 1985: 314), the names and descriptions of these *karaṇas* are different from the *karaṇas* of the NŚ. It is in this context, marked by the absence of a living tradition of performing the *karaṇas*, that scholars referred to the only visual information available on the *karaṇas* of the NŚ, that is the temple sculptures, static by definition.

² For a list of the temples where sculptural renderings of the *karaṇas* of the NŚ can be found, see below.

³ Vatsyayan proposes two different but somehow complementary ways of grouping the 108 *karaṇas* of the NŚ. In the first method, *karaṇas* are divided into ten groups according to the main characteristic of the movements involved in them, which is broadly reflected in their names. In the second method, which Vatsyayan firstly devises for interpreting the sculptures

can be seen in the fact that she is the first to consider the *karaṇas* as “cadences of movements culminating in a pose” (*ibid.*: 99) and not as quasi-static poses like they had been considered for a long time before her. When related to the analysis of the sculptures, Vatsyayan’s approach marks a revolution: if a *karaṇa* is a sequence, each sculpture may represent the initial, intermediate or final moment of that sequence, making any attempt to identify the *karaṇas* very challenging. Around the same time, a certain interest arose about the reconstruction of the *karaṇas* from the point of view of the dance performance. Dancer Padma Subrahmanyam attempted such reconstruction for her doctoral thesis in 1978.⁴ She also created drawings as the preparation for a new set of *karaṇa* sculptures⁵ in which the initial, intermediate and final stages of each *karaṇa* action are offered to the view simultaneously.⁶ The *karaṇa* actions thus recreated by Subrahmanyam have also been used as a reference by Lopez Y Royo ([Lopez Y Royo] Iyer 1998) in her work on the identification of the dance reliefs of the Prambanan

of the Śāraṅgapāṇi temple at Kumbakonam (Vatsyayan 1982), the division is made according to the movements of the lower limbs shifting in different ways from the *sama* stance, where the weight is equally distributed. For a detailed description of the groups of *karaṇas* formed according to the two methods, see Vatsyayan 2007 [1968]: 98–136 and Vatsyayan 1982: 11–25.

⁴ Subrahmanyam’s work has been published in three volumes (Subrahmanyam 2003) and is available on the DVD: *Karaṇa Vinīyoga Mālikā. A Garland of Karaṇas* (2008). Her reconstruction work is based on textual and iconographic sources, although I believe that a certain amount of personal interpretation is definitely required in order to stitch together information from different sources and use them to create a dance choreography.

⁵ The sculptural representations of the *karaṇas* created by Subrahmanyam were installed in the Śiva temple of Satara, Maharashtra, in 1993.

⁶ This is done using two figures: Devī and Śiva, the latter with two sets of arms. The figures are meant to be seen while moving around in *pradakṣiṇa*, starting with the Devī performing the initial movement of the *karaṇa*. The main set of arms of Śiva performs the intermediate stage and the secondary set of arms performs the final movement of the *karaṇa*.

temple (9th/10th century) in Java. The Prambanan reliefs show groups of three figures of dancers and/or musicians enclosed in a niche and showing different postures that Lopez Y Royo interprets, in many cases, as moments of *karaṇas*,⁷ in this way proposing the Prambanan reliefs as the oldest representation of *karaṇas* known so far.

To know what is a *karaṇa* of dance, how it is rendered in the sculptures and what is its use in the theatrical performance, is fundamental in order to understand the relationship between dance and sculpture. In particular, the role of *karaṇas* in relation to the arousing of *bhāvas*, emotions, and ultimately *rasa*, the aesthetic experience that is the aim of the performance, is controversial;⁸ more so when dance, a performing art, is rendered through the medium of another art, that is sculpture. The available information on the *karaṇas* comes from two sources:

1. The textual sources, *in primis* the *Nāṭyaśāstra* of Bharatamuni (NŚ) and its commentary *Abhinavabhāratī* by Abhinavagupta (ABh). Later texts, such as *Saṅgītaratnākara* of Śārngadeva (SR) and *Nṛttaratnāvalī* of Jāya Senāpati (NR), also provide a detailed description of the *karaṇas*. Although they mostly follow literally the NŚ and ABh, they add a group of regional *karaṇas* that could be of particular interest when trying to interpret dance sculptures.
2. The sculptural representations of the *karaṇas* found in the temples of Bṛhadīśvara at Thanjavur (11th century), Śāraṅgapāṇi at Kumbakonam

⁷ [Lopez Y Royo] Iyer 1998: 105–164. In this work, Lopez Y Royo claims that in some of the dancing groups, the three figures could represent three moments in the performance of a single *karaṇa*, thus offering a simultaneous rendering of a whole *karaṇa* action. This is not seen in any of the Indian temples where a systematic attempt to represent the *karaṇas* of the NŚ has been made. Nevertheless, the possibility that dance sequences could be represented through adjacent figures showing different stages in the unfolding of the same dance action opens up a whole range of possibilities for further research. A few cases of similarly arranged dancing figures can be detected in the Hoysalesvara temple itself.

⁸ See Ganser 2013.

(12th century), Naṭarāja at Cidambaram (13th century), Aruṇācaleśvara at Thiruvannamalai (16th century) and Vṛddhagirīśvara at Vṛddhacalam (16th century), where a solo dancer is represented performing the *karaṇas*. In some cases, the names and verses from the fourth chapter of the NŚ are engraved below the figure.

The systematic representations of the *karaṇas* found in the temples mentioned above accounts for the absence, in most cases, of a distinctive feature that could allow an unambiguous identification of each *karaṇa* in a non-systematic context. This absence of a conventional way to represent most of the 108 *karaṇas* mentioned in the NŚ together with the unlimited number of possible intermediate movements occurring in each *karaṇa* make it impossible to ascertain beyond doubt if the dancing sculptures carved in non-systematic contexts do represent specific *karaṇas*.⁹ In this paper, some of the dancing sculptures from the Hoysaleśvara temple at Halebīd are analysed from the point of view of the dance technique and with specific reference to their iconography and their location in the architectural framework. The Hoysaleśvara temple, although it does not represent the *karaṇas* of NŚ in a systematic way, nevertheless offers a great number of dance sculptures, thus providing an important source of information for the study of how the movements and postures of *nṛtta* (dance)¹⁰ are used in the temple's sculptures. In fact, a number of inscriptions inform about the existence in the Hoysala kingdom of a flourishing tradition of dance performed in the temples as well as at the court.¹¹

⁹ I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for sharing some insightful remarks on this point.

¹⁰ In this work I translate *nṛtta* as 'dance', different from *nāṭya*, 'theatre'.

¹¹ On the existence of a living tradition of dancers dedicated to the temple, see for example the inscription from Belūr, dated 1117, in *Epigraphia Carnatica* (EC) 5.1.58, that records a donation made by king Viṣṇuvarhana "to provide for daily ceremonies, decorations [...] for the livelihood of the Śrīvaiṣṇava brahmins, of the dancing girls [...]". Also see the inscription from Arsikere district (EC 5.1.134), dated 1369, that mentions dancing girls dedicated to the service of god Madhusūdana. See also

As mentioned before, I am not attempting here an identification of the dance actions found in the sculptures with the *karaṇas* of the NŚ; nonetheless, I will try to isolate smaller dance units represented in the sculptures and to study them also using the available sources on the *karaṇas*, especially the *Abhinavabhāratī*.¹² *Karaṇas* are made of different combinations of *cārīs* (dance actions of the lower limbs), *sthānas* (stances) and *nṛttahastas* (dance actions of the upper limbs) that in certain cases can be used on stage to express specific emotions (*bhāva/rasa*). Based on this, I propose an analysis of the most common dance movement of the arms (*nṛttahasta*) in the dancing sculptures of the Hoysalesvara temple at Halebīd according to the *nāṭya-śāstras* and the *śilpa-śāstras* with the aim to explore how the language of dance is used in temple sculptures and could possibly empower the sculptures to communicate specific *bhāvas* and *rasas*. In this manner, I will try to provide an example of how the body language specific to the art of dance possibly transcends the boundaries of the performance and communicates with the devotees, through the sculptures, in this way accomplishing a specific ritual function.

Few scholarly works addressed the topic of the dance sculptures in the Hoysala temples. Nandagopal (Nandagopal 1990) examined the ways in which dance is represented in the arts of Karnataka offering a useful compilation of dancing sculptures' related apparatus of music instruments and ornaments. Govindarajan in her work

EC 7.170. The temple dancers are generally referred to in the inscriptions with the term *pātra-bhoga* or *pātra-sule* ambiguously indicating both the dancers and the ritual service (*bhoga*) they provide in the temple. In the Kannada inscription from Arsikere mentioned above (EC 5.1.134), the dancing girls dedicated to the service of god Madhusūdana are referred to with the names *devarige pātra-bhogake* and *devara pātra-bhogakke*. In another inscription (EC 5.1.125), the dancing girls consecrated to the temple are referred to with the name *degulada sule*, their supervisor is called *sulevala* and their quarters *sulegeri*.

¹² All references are from the first volume of the *Abhinavabhāratī* in the fourth revised edition of the Gaekward Oriental Series, Vadodara, 1992.

on the representation of dance in the sculptural art of Karnataka (Govindarajan 1983) includes a generic analysis of some Hoysala dance sculptures, while a general study of the dance movements represented in the major Hoysala temples is found in Nadig (Nadig 1990). This last work is written from a dancer perspective and its main focus is to show the contribution of ancient sculptors to the contemporary practice of Indian dance. With specific reference to the dance sculptures in the Hoysalesvara temple, Ramaswami (Ramaswami 2000) offers a comprehensive survey that includes the analysis of the *nṛttamūrtis* as well as the other dancing figures located in the narrative friezes. Previous literature on the dance sculptures represented in the Hoysalesvara temple will be considered when exploring the different aspects of the complex relationship involving the following categories: 1. the textual sources on dance and sculpture (*nāṭya-* and *śilpa-śāstras*); 2. the sculptors; 3. the dancers (temple dancers and court dancers); 4. the devotees for whom the images are meant.

Due to the absolute relevance of the concept of *karaṇa* in the dance technique,¹³ an introductory definition of the *karaṇas* based on the *nāṭya-śāstras* and on the ABh is fundamental before examining the way in which dance is represented in sculptures and the relationship between the textual sources, the dancers, the sculptors and the devotees.

The *karaṇas* of dance

Karaṇas are basic units of movement defined, classified and described in the fourth chapter of the NŚ. The word *karaṇa* is a noun in the neuter gender denoting an instrument that is used to perform an action (*kriyate 'nena*).¹⁴ In the context of dance, the word *karaṇa* is defined as a “combined movement of the upper and lower limbs”

¹³ See below, especially footnote n. 20.

¹⁴ The name is formed from the root *kṛñ-* and the suffix *lyuṭ* in the sense of ‘instrument’ (*karaṇe*). The suffix *lyuṭ (ana)* is applied to a verbal root when the relation of the word to be formed with the verb is that of an instrument. In the process, *ñ* gets the *it-samjñā* and disappears. See *Aṣṭādhyāyī*, 3.3.119.

(NŚ 4.30b: *hastapādasamāyogo nṛttasya karaṇam bhavet*).¹⁵ Abhinavagupta explains the word in terms of action: “a *karaṇa* is an action. Which kind of action? An action of dance which is the graceful movement of the limbs of the body”.¹⁶ According to the NŚ, different numbers of *karaṇas* join together to form longer sequences of dance movements called *aṅgahāras*.¹⁷ The NŚ (NŚ 4.60–167) enumerates 108 *karaṇas* and 32 *aṅgahāras*.¹⁸ They constitute the vital essence

¹⁵ The names *hasta* and *pada* have to be intended here as *upalakṣaṇa* (synecdoche) for ‘upper limbs’ and ‘lower limbs’ respectively. See ABh ad NŚ 4.30, p. 90: “[the word] *hasta* includes every major and minor limb of the upper part of the body, [the word] *pada* includes the lower part of the body: waist, sides, thigh, legs, feet, etc.” (*hastopalakṣitatasya pūrvakāyavartitaśākhāṅgopāṅgādeḥ pādopalakṣitatasya cāparakāyagatapārśvakaṭyūrujaṅghācaraṇādeḥ*). Unless specified otherwise, all translations are mine.

¹⁶ ABh ad NŚ 4.30, p. 90: *kriyā karaṇam kasya kriyā? nṛttasya gātrāṇām hastopalakṣitasya vilāsakṣepasya*.

¹⁷ According to NŚ 4.33, *aṅgahāras* are sequences of four, six, seven or eight *karaṇas* (*ṣadbhir vā saptabhir vāpi aṣṭabhir navabhis tathā | karaṇair iha samyuktā aṅgahārāḥ prakīrtitāḥ ||*). The word *aṅgahāra* indicates a movement (*hāra*, from the root *hr-*) of the body’s limbs (*aṅgas*); Abhinavagupta defines it as “moving the limbs without ruptures and placing them in the right places” (*tatra ye ‘ṅgahārā aṅgānām haraṇānīti atruṭitarūpatayā samucitasthānaprāptiḥ*, ABh ad NŚ 1.44, p. 21).

¹⁸ ABh ad NŚ 4.59, p. 95: “A *karaṇa* is produced by the combination of static postures and movements” (*ihāvasthānaṃ gatiś ceti dvayanirvartyaṃ karaṇam*). When intended in this way, as generic movements of the body, both the *karaṇas* and the *aṅgahāras* are infinite (*ānantya*, ABh ad NŚ 4.27, p. 95). Nevertheless, to explain the symbolic numbers 108 and 32, Abhinavagupta comments that the text mentions only those *karaṇas* which are useful in making up the *aṅgahāras* (*ānantyaṃ yady api karaṇānām tathāpi aṅgahāropayogitvād etāvad uktam iti*, ABh ad NŚ 4.59, p. 95), and only those 32 *aṅgahāras* which are the most useful for achieving the visible aim of the performance due to their extremely charming nature (*prādhānyād dṛṣṭaphalam pray adhikoparaktatayā dvātriṃśan nāmato nirdiṣṭāḥ*, ABh ad NŚ 4.19–26, p. 89). On the concept of *dṛṣṭa/adṛṣṭa* in the ABh, see Ganser 2016.

(*prāṇa*)¹⁹ of dance (*nṛtta*): in fact, according to Abhinavagupta, *nṛtta* and *karaṇas* are the same, for nothing else exists in *nṛtta* apart from the *karaṇas*.²⁰ Further, Abhinavagupta makes another crucial remark about the meaning of *karaṇa* in dance: “an action which is different from the actions of refusing or taking an object, such action is called *karaṇa*”.²¹ The reference here is to the nature of dance (*nṛtta*), which is “not in view of any task (*na tu kenacit kartavyāṃśena*)”. The concept is visually epitomized in the dance of Lord Śiva performing the *kaiśikī vṛtti* in the vision of Bharatamuni (NŚ 1.45): “on account of the absence of any task, the only reason for the Lord’s dance is joy”.²² The *kaiśikī vṛtti*, the ‘gorgeous manner’, is introduced in the first chapter of the NŚ when presenting the four manners (*vṛttis*)²³ of the theatrical performance. The NŚ defines the *kaiśikī vṛtti* as “*nṛtta-aṅgahāra-sampannā*” (NŚ 1.44), telling thus that it is “characterized by

¹⁹ See ABh ad NŚ 1.44, p. 22.

²⁰ Abhinavagupta explains the use of the genitive (*nṛttasya*) in the definition of *karaṇa* in NŚ 4.30: *hastapādasamāyogo nṛttasya karaṇam bhavet as: nṛttasya iti vyapadeśivatvena śaṣṭhī* (ABh ad NŚ 4.30, p. 90). The *vyapadeśivat-bhāva* is a grammatical device used to indicate that something is considered as if composed of different parts, even though there is only one entity. The example typically given is *rahoḥ śiras*, the ‘head of Rahu’, an expression where the genitive case is used, as if Rahu possessed a head, like other beings, even though Rahu is just a head. Therefore, in the same way, the genitive in the expression “*nṛttasya karaṇa*” indicates that *nṛtta* is nothing but *karaṇas*.

²¹ ABh ad NŚ 4.30, p. 90: *heyopādeyaviśayakriyādibhyo vyatiriktā yā tatkriyā karaṇam ity arthaḥ*.

²² *itikartavyāntaravaikalyāt ānandanṛttamātrasthitāḥ*, ABh ad NŚ 1.45, p. 21. *Karaṇas* and *aṅgahāras* originate from internal bliss: “while dancing, Lord Śiva is full of bliss jumping out from his body, which is beautiful on account of internal happiness” (*paripūrṇānandanirbharībhūtadehoccalad-āntaranirvārasundarākārasya—ata eva nṛtyataḥ*, ABh ad NŚ 1.45, p. 21). This is expressed outwardly in the form of *vilāsa*, a playfulness full of grace (see below, n. 24).

²³ The four *vṛttis* are: *bhāratī*, ‘the vocal’; *sāttvatī*, ‘the psychophysical’; *ārabhaṭī*, ‘the physical’ and *kaiśikī*, ‘the gorgeous’. On the *vṛttis*, see NŚ 20.

When different types of dance movements act together with *abhinaya*,²⁸ music and songs, they concur to the arousing of *bhāvas* and *rasas* in the spectators. This is also the sense, I believe, of Abhinavagupta indicating *viniyogas*, theatrical uses, for the *nṛtta-karaṇas* listed in NŚ.²⁹

3. The Hoysalesvara temple at Halebīd

The Hoysalesvara temple is located in the village of Halebīd, in the Hassan District of the State of Karnataka. During the Hoysala time, in this site was the city of Dorasamudra that served as the capital of the Hoysala empire for three centuries. The Hoysalesvara temple was built in the 12th century, between 1120 and 1150. It is raised on a platform (*jagati*) and consists of two connected shrines, containing the Hoysalesvara and Śāntalesvara *liṅgas* respectively. Both shrines have star-shaped outer walls and include a *śukanāsi* (vestibule)³⁰ and

kaṭākṣādinā vinā śṛṅgārarasāsvādasya nāmāpi na bhavati.

²⁸ For the definition of representation (*abhinaya*) and for the description of the four modes of *abhinaya* based on body movements (*āṅgikābhinaya*), words (*vācikābhinaya*), psychophysical states (*sāttvikābhinaya*) and ornaments (*āhāryābhinaya*), see NŚ 8.7–9.

²⁹ Abhinavagupta (ABh ad NŚ 4) indicates a *viniyoga* for 79 out of 108 *karaṇas* listed in NŚ 4. In some cases, the *viniyogas* have a mimetic value that can be guessed by the name of the *karaṇa* itself as in *karaṇa* 1: *talapuśpapuṭa*, ‘a handful of flowers’, used at the beginning of the performance to greet the gods with flowers or in *karaṇa* 83: *hariṇapluta*, ‘the flight of the deer’. In other cases, the *viniyogas* have a mimetic value even though their usage is not hinted at in the *karaṇa*’s name. See for example *karaṇa* 47: *vṛścika*, ‘scorpion’, where the leg lifted backwards, in the manner of a scorpion’s tale, is conventionally used to represent the action of flying. Finally, some *viniyogas* are directly linked to the expression of *bhāvas*, as in *karaṇa* 11: *kaṭicchinna*, literally ‘split waist’, used to express the feeling of wonder, with which I deal in this work. In the same way, there are examples of *karaṇas* used to express jealousy, anger, wrath, arrogance, etc.

³⁰ The term *śukanāsi* primarily refers to the front projection of the *śikhara* (superstructure), but it also indicates the hall below this projection, as in this case.

a square *raṅgamaṇḍapa* or *navaraṅga* (pillared hall). Each shrine has stone benches running all along the Eastern part of the wall and large niches added to the center of each side. The superstructures are missing. The temple has four entrances to the *navaraṅgas*: two from the East, one from the North and one from the South. Each doorway has niches flanking the sides of the stairs. The outer walls of the temple feature an ornated *adhiṣṭhāna* (basement) consisting of eight rows called *paṭṭikās* (cornices) running along the temple and each carved with a particular motif. From the bottom to the top, these are: 1. A row of elephants; 2. A row of lions; 3. A row of creepers; 4. A row of horsemen; 5. Another row of creepers; 6. Scenes from the epics, the *purāṇas*, dance and music;³¹ 7. A row of *makaras* (crocodiles); 8. A row of *haṃsas* (wild geese/swans). Above the *paṭṭikās* and up to the eaves in the outer walls of the *garbhagrha* is the central portion of the wall that is decorated with reliefs of gods and goddesses. Elsewhere, in the front part of the temple, the central portion of the wall is decorated with *jālakas* (perforated screens) and railings. While the screens are not decorated except for geometrical patterns, the railings showcase three rows of images, starting right above the *paṭṭikās*. From the bottom to the top, these are: 1. Alternatively recessed and protruding niches with miniatures of *yakṣas* and *śālabhañjikās/apsarases*; 2. A row of miniature *śikharas* flanked by lions located over a projecting portion of the railing; 3. A row of miniature figures enclosed in rectangular niches portraying warriors, erotic scenes and dancers. Finally, in the outer walls of the niches added to each shrine, the basement consists of only five *paṭṭikās*, surmounted by a row of miniature *śikhara*, flanked by figurines on each side. This variation in the basement structure is important in the context of this work: the row with miniature *śikharas* occupies the visual space elsewhere assigned to the sixth *paṭṭikā* and most of the figurines found here actually represent dancers and musicians.

³¹ For a list of all the themes found in the sculptures of the sixth *paṭṭikā*, see the Annual Report for the year 1930 of the Mysore Archeological Department 1934: 33–60.

Compared to the abundance of the outside sculptured walls, the inside of the temple looks rather plain, although it still contains sculptured door lintels leading to the *garbhagr̥ha*, sculptured ceilings (often displaying dance scenes) and some sculptured pillar *upapīṭha* (plinths), also displaying dance scenes. On the top portion of the pillars bearing the *navaraṅgas*' ceilings, few of the original bracket sculptures (130 cm ca.) of the so called '*madanikās*' remain, most of which perform dance movements.

Amongst the variety of its sculptures, the Hoysalesvara temple displays a great number of figures performing dance movements. Here, the sculptures representing dance can be classified into three broad categories:

1. Dance-like movements: the figures do not perform an actual dance, but every limb of their body is carved using the language of dance.
2. Proper dance movements: the figures perform an actual dance movement in the context of a dance scene. Typically, these sculptures show a solo dancer surrounded by musicians.
3. *Nṛttamūrtis*: showing the dance movements of gods and goddesses.

In this work, I will focus on the second group that includes the figures engaged in proper dance movements. The dancing sculptures constitute a fundamental document of the state of the art of dance in the Hoysala time and territory. More interestingly, they provide the source to investigate the criteria leading to the choice of certain dance movements to be represented on the temple building: why are some movements considered more fit than others to be represented in this context? What do they communicate and mean? Is their meaning somehow 'in tune' with the temple or with the deity worshipped in it?

Sculptures representing proper dance movements are found all over the temple, although the majority of them converge in the sixth *paṭṭikā* of the basement: this cornice is 23 cm ca. wide and is located at an average height of 150 cm from the floor. This part of the wall, that includes the narrative friezes, is where the eyes naturally focus as one

walks around the temple.³² The second place for a number of dance figures are the protruding miniature niches³³ in the lowest section of the railings: these measure around 23 cm and are located at an approximate height of 240 cm from the floor. These two parts of the temple wall alone contain more than half of the dance sculptures' total number (56 out of 100). The central portion of the wall corresponding to the *garbhagr̥has* shows around fifteen examples of *nṛttamūrtis*, or dancing gods and goddesses. Dance movements are also frequently represented in the small figurines (5 cm ca.) encircled by the creepers' volutes of the third and fifth cornices of the basement.³⁴ Finally, amongst the figures flanking the miniature *śikharas* of the topmost cornice of the niches' walls that occupies the same space of the sixth cornice of the basement, many are dancers. In the Hoysalesvara temple there are at least 100 figures engaged in proper dance.³⁵ Still, from a technical point of view, the range of dance movements represented is limited: out of 100 dancing figures, 59 show dance movements that share the same posture of the arms, with one hand kept near the ear and the other stretched at the side in *dola hasta*.³⁶ I will describe this pose in detail below.

The frequency of its occurrence suggests that this movement of the arms, combined as it is with a range of four leg-postures, was

³² The measure of 150 cm is the average height from the floor of a line passing through the middle of the cornice. The sixth cornice occupies the space on the wall between around 137 and 160 cm of height from the floor.

³³ The niches are organized so that dancers occupy the protruding niches, while the musicians occupy the recessed ones.

³⁴ The third and fifth cornices are around 13.5 cm wide and are located at around 76 cm and 120 cm from the floor respectively.

³⁵ Throughout this work, I define a 'proper dance' sculpture by the presence of musicians.

³⁶ See NŚ 9.148: "It is called *dola* [*hasta*] when the shoulders are relaxed and both hands in *patāka* [*hasta*] are hanging down while performing a *karāṇa*" (*aṃsau praśithilau muktau patākau tu pralambitau yadā bhavetāṃ karāṇe sa dola iti saṃjñitah*).

for some reasons considered particularly fit for the representation on the temple walls. The sculptures hold the hand kept near the ear in slightly different ways: in some cases, the fingers are facing upwards and the hand is showing a pose similar to *patāka*³⁷ or *alapallava/alapadma hasta*.³⁸ In other cases, the hand in *alapallava hasta* is stretched outwards with the fingers pointing away from the head. In most of the figures, the fingers are separated and rotated maybe to suggest a continuous movement of the hand. From the dance point of view, this movement could be a circular and outward movement of the *udveṣṭita*³⁹ or *parivartita*⁴⁰ type. The general impression is that of a movement in which the arms move away from the center of the body, as the *apavidḍha* described in SR.⁴¹ From the iconographic point of view, this results in a gesture that closely resembles the one generally known in the *śilpa-śāstras* as *vismaya hasta*, literally a gesture expressing wonder (*vismaya*).⁴²

The sculptures combine the arm-movement described above with four different movements of the legs. The first has one foot

³⁷ See NŚ 9.18: “It is known as *patāka* [*hasta*] when all the fingers are stretched out together while the thumb is bent” (*prasāritāḥ samāḥ sarvāḥ yasyāṅgulyo bhavanti hi | kuñcitaś ca tathāṅguṣṭhaḥ sa patāka iti smṛtaḥ ||*).

³⁸ See NŚ 9.91: “It is [called] *alapallava* [*hasta*] when all the fingers are turned round towards the palm of the hand, standing sideways and separated” (*āvartitāḥ karatale yasyāṅgulyo bhavanti hi | pārsvāgatavikīrṇāś ca sa bhaved alapallavaḥ ||*).

³⁹ See NŚ 9.216: “It is called *udveṣṭita* [*nṛtta hasta*], [the movement in which] the fingers starting with the forefinger move outwards in succession” (*udveṣṭyante yadāṅgulyas tarjanyādyā bahir mukham | kramaśaḥ karaṇam viprās tad udveṣṭitam ucyate ||*).

⁴⁰ See NŚ 9.218: “It is called *parivartita* [*nṛtta hasta*], [the movement in which] the fingers starting from the little one stretch outwards in succession” (*udvartyante kaniṣṭhādyā bāhyataḥ kramaśo yadā | aṅgulyaḥ karaṇam viprās tad uktaṃ parivartitam ||*).

⁴¹ SR 7.339 defines *apavidḍha*: “proceeding out from the region of the chest with circular movements”. NŚ 9.220 mentions *apavidḍha* as one of the arm-movements, but does not describe it.

⁴² On the *vismaya* hand pose in Hindu iconography, see Gopinatha Rao 1997 [1914]: Vol. I, part 1, plate V, figs. 13–14.

resting on the ground in *tryāsra*⁴³ at a distance of about two or more *tālas* (span) from the other foot, giving the general impression of a stance (*sthāna*), like the *vaiṣṇava sthāna*⁴⁴ or the *maṇḍala sthāna*⁴⁵ (26 examples, fig. 1–3). The second leg-position shows one foot in *kuñcita*⁴⁶ or *sūcī*:⁴⁷ this gives the impression of being ready to be lifted or also could suggest an alternate upward and downward movement of the type of *udghaṭṭita*⁴⁸ (7 examples, fig. 4). The third position shows a bent knee with fully raised foot (*ūrdhvajānu*),⁴⁹ sometimes

⁴³ The foot in *tryāsra* (literally: ‘triangle’) has the heel touching the middle of the other foot and the fingers pointing outwards.

⁴⁴ See NŚ 10.52–53: “In the *vaiṣṇava sthāna* the feet are kept two and a half *tālas* apart, one in the natural position, the other in *tryāsra* with the toes pointing sideways. The shank is slightly bent and the limbs are *sauṣṭhava* [i.e. properly held in a natural position with the chest raised, see NŚ 10.92–93a]” (*dvau tālāv ardhatālaś ca padāyor antaram bhavet | tayos samutthitas tv ekas tryāśraḥ pakṣasthito ’paraḥ || kiṃcid añcita jaṅghaṃ ca sauṣṭhavāṅgapuraskṛtaṃ | vaiṣṇavasthānam etad dhi*).

⁴⁵ See NŚ 10.65b–66a: “In the *maṇḍala [sthāna]*, which is sacred to Indra, the feet are kept four *tālas* apart in *tryāsra* with the toes pointing sideways. The waist and the knee are in a natural position” (*aindre tu maṇḍale pādau catus-tālāntaristhitau || tryāśrau pakṣasthitau caiva kaṭijānū samau tathā |*).

⁴⁶ See NŚ 9.277b–279a: “It is known as *kuñcita* when the heel is thrown upwards, the toes are bent and so is the middle of the foot. It is used in the aristocratic gait, in turning around and in performing the *atīkrāntā cārī*” (*utksiptā yasya pārṣṇiḥ syād aṅgulyaḥ kuñcitās tathā || tathākuñcitamadhyaś ca sa pādaḥ kuñcitaḥ smṛtaḥ | udāttagamane caiva vartitodvartite tathā || atīkrāntakrame caiva pādān etam prayojayet |*).

⁴⁷ See NŚ 9.279b–280a: “It is known as *sūcī* when the [right] foot has the heel raised and rests on the big toe, while the left [foot] is held in a natural position” (*utksiptā tu bhavet pārṣṇiḥ aṅguṣṭhāgreṇa samsthitāḥ || vāmaś caiva svabhāvasthaḥ sūcīpādaḥ prakīrtitāḥ |*).

⁴⁸ See NŚ 9.266b: “[In the *udghaṭṭita*] the foot first stands on its forepart and then the heel touches the ground” (*sthitvā pādatalāgreṇa pārṣṇir bhūmau nipātyate |*).

⁴⁹ See NŚ 10.33: “It is known as *ūrdhvajānu [cārī]* when one *kuñcita* foot is thrown upwards with its knee at the level of the breast while the other

kuñcita, sometimes with the sole completely turned upwards (20 examples, fig. 5–6). Lastly, in a few examples, the legs are crossed at the shins (*janghāsvastika*) in the *kṣipta* posture (6 examples, fig. 7). In all the sculptures, the head is bent at different degrees and directions as in the *parivāhita* movement described in the NŚ.⁵⁰

From the above analysis, it emerges that the group of sculptures considered in this study display proper dance movements that involve the whole body and feature a common posture of the arms in which one hand in *alapallava hasta* is possibly used to represent the *vismaya hasta* of iconography. The texts on dance do not mention the expression of wonder (*vismaya*) as one of the main usages for *alapadma hasta*.⁵¹ However, Abhinavagupta, while commenting on chapter four of the NŚ, mentions three dance sequences or *karāṇas* where the *alapallava hasta* is linked to the expression of the feeling of wonder. Below, I will describe these three cases in relation to the sculptures considered in this work, although, this is not with the intention of proposing a final identification of the sculptures with a particular *karāṇa*, something that at present would not be possible.⁵² The main

knee is kept firm” (*kuñcitam pādāṃ utksipyā jānu stānasamāṃ nyaset | dvitīyaṃ ca kramastabdham urdhvajānuḥ prakīrtitā ||*).

⁵⁰ See NŚ 8.26a: “[It is called] *parivāhita* when the head is alternately turned to the sides” (*paryāyaśaḥ pārśvagatam śiraḥ syāt parivāhitam*).

⁵¹ In her work, Ramaswami (Ramaswami 2000) remarks the outstanding frequency of this *nṛttahasta* in the sculptures of the Hoysalesvara temple. While doing so, she maintains the identification of the *alapadma hasta* with the *vismaya hasta* of iconography although the absence in the dance texts of any reference to the use of the *alapadma hasta* to express wonder makes her conclude that “in this case dance and sculptural texts seem to differ in usage” (Ramaswami 2000: 137). The textual evidence from the ABh proposed in this work offers an authoritative source to substantiate the usage of *alapadma hasta* to signify wonder (*vismaya*).

⁵² The possibility of the sculptures representing different moments of the same dance action where the arms are carved in the same position as to become a distinctive sign to recognize a specific *karāṇa* is fascinating

aim of confronting the textual descriptions and the available systematic representations of these three *karāṇas* with the dancing sculptures of the Hoysalesvara temple is to consider the latter a possible source of information on the relationship existing between the sculptors, the performing art of dance and the texts on dance available in the Hoysala kingdom. This is done especially with regard to the possibility that the dance movements were chosen for the temple walls also based on their theatrical usage or on a shared repository of bodily gestures recorded in some theatrical sources.

The first case mentioned in the ABh is the *karāṇa kaṭicchinna* (*karāṇa* 11),⁵³ where the hands are defined as *pallava*,⁵⁴ a term that Abhinavagupta explains as one hand in *patāka* and the other in *alapallava* raised to the shoulders in an alternate movement,⁵⁵ perhaps following

but yet to be proved. As an anonymous reviewer remarked, the recurring position of the arms theoretically rules out the possibility of the sculptures representing different moments of the same dance action since, at least in principle, a *karāṇa* would require the arms to move as well.

⁵³ See NŚ 4.72; SR 7.608–9; NR 4.45–6. The *karāṇas*' numbers given in brackets refer to the order given in the list of *karāṇas* in the NŚ (NŚ 4.34–143).

⁵⁴ The NŚ (NŚ 9.196a) mentions a *nṛtta hasta* named *pallava*: “It is called *pallava* [*nṛtta hasta*] when two *patāka* hands are loose at the wrists” (*maṇibandhanamuktau tu patākau pallavau smṛtau* |). The description found in SR (SR 7.239b–242a) is more detailed and is closer to Abhinavagupta's description of the hand movement involved in the *kaṭicchinna karāṇa*: “when two *patāka* hands are stretched upwards in *vyāvartita* and turned back in *parivartita* and brought to form a *svastika*, [the pose] is considered to be *pallava*. Some say that here two *tripatāka* hands are used. Yet others say that *pallava* is that in which two *padmaśa* hands, loose at the wrists, are lowered and raised up, either at the sides or in front. Still other mentions *patāka* in the place of *padmaśa*”. Translation by Kunjunni Raja and Burnier (Kunjunni Raja and Burnier 1976).

⁵⁵ See ABh ad NŚ 4.72, p. 102: “The *pallava* [*nṛtta hasta*?] should be performed with one hand in *patāka* and the other in *alapallava* alternately brought

the movement of the waist to the sides.⁵⁶ The Cidambaram relief shows this *karāṇa* with both arms stretched sideways above the level of the shoulders. The Śāraṅgapāṇi sculpture inscribed as *kaṭicchinna* presents nothing of the textual descriptions, apart from a hand possibly *patāka* or *alapallava* and a slightly shifted waist.⁵⁷ However, the movement of the arms described in ABh could suit the movement seen in the sculptures, especially as it assigns great importance to the *alapallava hasta*. Abhinavagupta specifies that the *kaṭicchinna karāṇa* is used in expressing wonder: *vismayaprādhana vākyārthābhinaye cāsya prayogaḥ*.⁵⁸ More specifically, in this case Abhinavagupta adds that the *pallava* hand gesture in this *karāṇa* is to be used “at the beginning [of the *karāṇa*?], to proclaim the predominance of [the feeling of] wonder”.⁵⁹ In the *kaṭicchinna karāṇa*⁶⁰ the legs perform

to the shoulders” (*bāhuśirasi ca pallavaṃ patākālapallavacchāyādvitīyam paryāyeṇa bibhrad vidheyah*).

⁵⁶ The main feature of this *karāṇa* is the oscillation of the waist from side to side (*kaṭimadhyasya valana*, NŚ 9.245), hence probably the name *kaṭicchinna*, ‘split waist’. In the *kaṭicchinna karāṇa*, the legs perform the *bhramarī cārī* (see NŚ 10.45: “It is known as *bhramarī* [*cārī*] when the foot in *atīkrānta* is lifted, then the body turns around and the second foot turns on the sole”) and the *atīkrānta cārī*. See NŚ 10.30: “It is known as *atīkrāntā* [*cārī*] when the *kuñcita* foot is thrown upwards, then stretched in front and made to fall on the ground” (*kuñcitam pādama utkṣipyā purataḥ saṃprasārayet utkṣipyā pātayec cainam atīkrāntā tu sā smṛtā*) with a turning movement of the body in the first *cārī* and one *kuñcita* foot raised in the second *cārī*. The dancer should then take the *maṇḍala sthāna* (see definition above, n. 45).

⁵⁷ See Vatsyayan 1982: 24.

⁵⁸ See ABh ad NŚ 4.72, p. 102: “To be used in representing the meaning of a sentence where [the sentiment of] wonder is prevalent” (*vismayaprādhana vākyārthābhinaye cāsya prayogaḥ*).

⁵⁹ *vismayaprādhānyakhyāpanāyaivātra pallavasyādau* (ABh ad NŚ 4.72, p. 102).

⁶⁰ See NŚ 4.72; SR 7.608–9; NR 4.45–6.

the *bhramarī cārī*⁶¹ and *atīkrānta cārī* with a turning movement of the body in the first *cārī* and one *kuñcita* foot raised in the second *cārī*. The Hoysaḷa sculptures do not show the complete turn of the body. According to the texts, another feature of this *karāṇa* is the ‘oscillation’ of the middle of the waist moving side to side.⁶² The dancer should then take the *maṇḍala sthāna*. No defined movement of the waist can be seen in the sculptures, although there is a shifting of the weight and the *sthāna* with the feet apart.

The second case of an *alapallava hasta* used in connection with the representation of the feeling of wonder is found in the ABh on the *karāṇa catura* (*karāṇa* 39),⁶³ where Abhinavagupta explains the *añcita* hand described in the NŚ (NŚ 4.99a) as *alapallava*.⁶⁴ The hand in *alapallava* is clearly visible in the Śāraṅgapāṇi sculpture inscribed as *caturam*,⁶⁵ where the other arm is remarkably stretched at the side, so to create a final posture in fact similar to the one displayed by the Hoysaḷa sculptures. This is peculiar as it differs from the representation of the arm stretched across the torso in *karihasta*⁶⁶ that typically characterizes the sculptural representations of this *karāṇa*, for instance at Cidambaram. The feet are described in the texts as one foot performing the alternate upwards/downwards

⁶¹ See NŚ 10.45: “It is known as *bhramarī* [*cārī*] when the foot in *atīkrānta* is lifted, then the body turns around and the second foot turns on the sole” (*atīkrāntakramaṃ kṛtvā trikaṃ tu parivartayet | dvitīyapāda bhramaṇāt talena bhramarī smṛtā ||*).

⁶² *kaṭimadhyasya valana* (NŚ 9.245).

⁶³ See NŚ 4.99b–100a; SR 7.648–9; NR 4. 192.

⁶⁴ See ABh ad NŚ 4.99b–100a, page 114: “[with the term] *añcita*, *alapallava* [is meant]” (*añcita ity alapallavaḥ*). SR (SR 7.648–9) and NR (NR 4.192) give only *alapallava*, following ABh.

⁶⁵ See Vatsyayan 1982: 9.

⁶⁶ See NŚ 9.199: “It is known as *karihasta* [*nṛttahasta*] when the *latā* hand is lifted and swings from side to side, while the other hand in *tripatāka* is held at the ear” (*samunnato latāhastah pārsvāt pārsvaṃ vilolitaḥ | tripatāko ’paraḥ karṇe karihastah prakīrtitaḥ ||*).

movement (*udghaṭṭita*).⁶⁷ According to Abhinavagupta, the *karāṇa catura* is used on stage to indicate the feeling of astonishment, this time expressed by the *vidūṣaka*, the jester of the theatrical play.⁶⁸

In the third case, the *karāṇa vṛścikakuṭṭita* (*karāṇa* 42)⁶⁹ combines a backwards lifting of one leg with a hand movement called *nikuṭṭita*, explained by Abhinavagupta as “both hands touching the tip of one’s shoulders with *alapallava hasta*”.⁷⁰ The *alapallava hasta*, clearly visible in the Śāraṅgapāṇi sculpture inscribed as *vṛścikakuṭṭitam*⁷¹ is not distinguishable in the case of the Cidambaram relief. The ABh indicates as the *vinīyoga* for this *karāṇa*: “to be used to express the meaning of a sentence where the dominant [purport] is wonder (*vismaya*), the desire of moving through the sky, etc.”⁷² This is the less interesting movement in the context of this work as none of the movements included in this *karāṇa* are to be found in the sculptures considered here. Besides the ABh, in the section dealing with the movements of the primary limbs (*aṅgas*), the NŚ indicates the *parivāhita* head, which instead may well be present in the sculptures, as a movement to be used on stage in order to represent the feeling of wonder (*vismaya*), among others.⁷³

⁶⁷ See definition above, n. 48.

⁶⁸ See ABh ad NŚ 4.99a–100b, page 114: “this [*karāṇa* has to be used] in representing the buffoon in a state of wonder (*savismaya*) and similar”. (*etat vidūṣakasya savismayasūcyābhīnāyādau*).

⁶⁹ See NŚ 4.102b–103a; SR 7.660–1; NR 4.212–3.

⁷⁰ See ABh ad NŚ 4.102b–103a, page 115: *dvāv api hastau svabāhuśīrasy alapallavau nikuṭṭitau*.

⁷¹ See Vatsyayan 1982: 75.

⁷² See ABh ad NŚ 4.102b–103a, page 115: *etac ca vismayākaśagamane cchādīpradhāne vākyārthaviṣaye prayujyate*. The *vṛścika* position of the leg is conventionally used in iconography to represent the act of flying.

⁷³ See NŚ 8.27: “The *parivāhita* head [is used in expressing] accomplishment, wonder, joy, remembering, intolerance, agitation, reluctance, amorous sporting” (*sādhane vismaye harṣe smṛte cāmārṣite tathā | vicāre vihr̥te caiva līlāyām parivāhitam ||*). Also the *vaiṣṇava sthāna*, possibly seen in some of the sculptures, is mentioned in the NŚ (NŚ 10.58a) to represent on stage the same feeling: “the *vaiṣṇava sthāna* should be used when the *śṛṅgāra*,

The choice of a hand pose, and possibly of a whole dance movement, intended to express wonder is appropriate to its location in the temple. According to the NŚ (NŚ 6.75), the visit to a temple is a determinant (*vibhāva*) of the *adbhuta rasa*. Abhinavagupta explains:

Walking into a temple is a determinant for *adbhuta* for those who have never seen the beautiful entrance and the other parts of such a place.⁷⁴

A Hoysaḷa inscription from the 13th century from Devāṅgere effectively describes the sense of awe generated in the devotees by the sight of the temple:

[...] Is it a hill or a tower? is it the sun or a *kalaśa*? Is it the horizon or a wall? Is it the famous women at the points of the compass or groups of beautiful statues? One cannot look long at it, causing the people to exclaim: did Polāḷva-Daṅḍādhipa wonderfully make the temple of Harihara!⁷⁵

With regard to the location of most of the sculptures I identify as representing the feeling of wonder, namely the sixth cornice of the basement that occupies the space most proximate to the viewers' eyes, it must be considered that this part of the temple is dedicated to the representation of narrative friezes and hence the devotees should be able to comfortably look at the stories unfolding in front of them, as they move in *pradakṣiṇa*. In fact, in some cases, the dance sequences found here are an integral part of the narration, like in the case of the *apsaras* trying to divert Arjuna from his penance in the *kirātārjunīya* panel located in the South-East wall or with the *gopis* dancing with Kṛṣṇa in the North-East portion of the temple wall.⁷⁶ Irrespective of the context, these figures still display the *vismaya/alapallava hasta* posture

adbhuta, bībhatsa and vīra rasas are prominent" (*śṛṅgārādbhutabībhatsa-vīraprādhānyayojitam* |).

⁷⁴ *devakule ca gamanam. tasyādbhutavibhāvatvaṃ yena tatradyaṃ saraḥ saṃniveśadi na kvacit dṛṣṭam* (ABh ad NŚ 6.75, p. 323). Translation by Cuneo (Cuneo 2008–2009).

⁷⁵ EC 11.Dg.25.

⁷⁶ For a description of these two narrative sequences, see Ramaswami 2000: 290–293.

of the arms. In a certain way, since the narrative cornice is the focus of the devotees' attention, the presence of dancing movements aimed at conveying some meaning to the devotees makes more sense here than in other parts of the building. A study of the different dance movements found in the narrative friezes and the way their *viniyogas* may be linked with the themes of the narration would be of great interest, but would exceed the scope of this article.

Another case that requires special attention is that of the *nṛttamūrtis*, where this specific posture of the arms can be found in the images representing the fierce forms of gods and goddesses, with the majority of examples regarding Śiva, thus attesting the existence of an *ugra* variant of *vismaya hasta*, so to say. The study of this specific use of *vismaya hasta* and its possible relations with the dance movements represented in the sculptures has not been included in the present study as it would require a thorough investigation and detailed study.⁷⁷

4. The dancers, the sculptors, the devotees: preliminary conclusions

Inscriptions inform that dance played an important role in the life of the Hoysaḷa kingdom. Both the temples and the court maintained a number of dancing girls who were employed in the main occasions when dance was performed, such as:

1. The ritual dances for the god in the temple, possibly performed in the *raṅgamaṇḍapa* in front of the sanctum.
2. The dance dramas of the *yakṣagāna* type, possibly performed on stages built for this purpose in the temples' precincts.

⁷⁷ In the case of Śiva and Devī in their *ugra rūpa*, the *vismaya hasta* is not expected to communicate the feeling of 'wonder' as the expression of astonishment and surprise. Instead, this may represent a variation of *vismaya hasta* that could be linked to a feeling of awe, reverential fear or terror due to the witnessing of a superhuman state of enragement. As an anonymous reviewer suggested, this variation of *vismaya hasta* may be similar to the one displayed in the sculptures of *dvārapālas* in Coḷa art. I would like to thank the reviewer for drawing my attention to this point and for sharing some discerning views on this subject.

3. The festive dances performed while following the processions during religious celebrations (*utsava*).

4. The secular dances performed at the king's court.

Hoysaḷa kings and queens were particularly fond of dance and many queens were renowned dancers themselves.⁷⁸ Certainly, dance is a favorite theme in Hoysaḷa sculpture. An evaluation of the dances performed at court and in the temple, especially in their relation with the sculptural representations of dance, would be of utmost interest, but would demand a study on its own, and so would an investigation of how sculptors were trained and instructed in representing the movements of dance. Instead, the focus of the present study is on how dance is possibly used as a medium to communicate a range of meanings to the devotees through the sculptures and thus may transcend the boundaries of the performing art to become part of the practice of going to the temple. To sum up what has been stated so far: the Hoysaḷeśvara temple at Halebīd showcases a great number of dancing sculptures, more than half of which share a similar movement of the arms featuring one hand. This can be described as *alapallava/alapadma hasta*, according to dance terminology, or *vismaya hasta*, according to sculpture terminology. From a reading of the ABh, it appears that a precise link existed between the presence of *alapallava/alapadma hasta* and the expression of the feeling of wonder (*vismaya, adbhuta*) in dance sequences, as the *alapallava hasta* is included in all the *karaṇas* that are considered suitable to represent the feeling of wonder. Whether the Hoysaḷa sculptures represent one of these *karaṇas*, or any specific *karaṇa*, is not possible to ascertain without confronting the visual material with the evidence coming from different sources, for example, epigraphy. Nevertheless, the evidence

⁷⁸ Inscriptions praise queen Śāntalādevī, wife of Viṣṇuvarḍhana (1104–1141), as a “head-jewel in all manners of dancing” and an “expert in vocal and instrumental music, and dancing” (See EC 5.B1.58 and EC 2.SB.132). Until today, local guides at the Hoysaḷeśvara temple like to tell tourists the legend of queen Śāntalādevī instructing the sculptors, or even posing for them, on how to properly carve the dance postures.

of a textual source, as the *Abhinavabhāratī*, suggests that in theatrical practice codified dance movements that include the *alapallava hasta* were used to convey the feeling of wonder in the same way as wonder is conveyed in sculptures with the hand gesture known as *vismaya hasta*. The recurrent presence of the dance posture featuring an *alapallava hasta* in the dance sculptures of the Halebīd temple could have been similarly used by the sculptors to indicate *vismaya*, or wonder. In order to represent the *vismaya hasta* of *śilpaśāstras* in the context of a proper dance movement involving the whole body, the sculptors might have looked for the appropriate, codified dance movement (*karana*) that would provide a suitable framework in which to represent the *vismaya hasta*, by means of the corresponding *alapallava hasta*, as the same is known in dance. More so, given the fact that different textual and epigraphic sources record wonder as a feeling naturally experienced in connection with the sight of the temple. From my analysis, it certainly emerges that the sculptors working in the Hoysalesvara temple at Halebīd were acquainted with the technical aspects of dance. The examples brought forth in this research point to the fact that at least some movements of dance were used by the sculptors as a conventional language to communicate precise meanings, in a way similar to the *vṛścika* movement mentioned above as indicative of flying figures. This consideration does not rule out the possibility that dance movements were also chosen based on their morphological features, that is to say to better fill up the available spaces or to make the sculptural scenes aesthetically more appealing. Of course, these concerns must have existed too, but in my opinion they were not the only and most decisive factors guiding the artists in the choice of the movement to be represented. In the sculptures considered in this study, the *alapallava hasta* of dance is possibly used in a way not different from the use of the *vṛścika* leg to indicate the act of flying in the non-dancing figures located in the temple's ceiling: here, the backward bending of the leg is a conventional device that all onlookers could understand as the sign of a flying figure. Needless to say that the *vṛścika* posture is not the only way to fill the square lintels of the ceiling, though it certainly fits well in them.

Even more problematic is the question to which extent and how the sculptors had a knowledge of the NŚ. The possibility that the sculptors could represent the dance movements in a correct way necessarily implies that they had a knowledge, whether direct or mediated, of the NŚ. Hoysaḷa inscriptions account for the existence of artisans' guilds to which all sculptors belonged and that were characterized by a strict hierarchical structure.⁷⁹ An analysis of the places, dates and recurrence of the inscriptions from the Hoysaḷa temples mentioning the name of the sculptors, as done by Collyer (Collyer 1990), also attests the existence of different workshops where artists of lower skills were instructed by a master sculptor, highly literate and proficient in different *śāstras*.⁸⁰ The existence of a prominent figure who could instruct the sculptors working under him on what to carve based on his knowledge of the *nāṭya-śāstras*, is one possibility to explain the accuracy of the dancing postures found in the temple sculptures. More so, in the case of the Hoysaḷeśvara temple's inscriptions, many of the latter present poor grammar and faulty spelling, thus suggesting the work of

⁷⁹ For a description based on epigraphical sources of the main artisans' guilds active during the Hoysaḷa time, see Collyer 1990: 105–112. See also Settar 1992: 86–88.

⁸⁰ As a consequence of this practice, the signature names of these master sculptors engraved in many Hoysaḷa temples were used to identify not only the sculptures made by them, but the works of all the members of their workshop, like in the case of Malitamma, the most proficient of the Hoysaḷa sculptors, or Kedāroja, the chief sculptor at the Hoysaḷeśvara temple. The existence of such refined and skilled figures is attested from the Cāḷukya times: see for example EC 6.Md.36, where Viśvakarmācārya is said to be “skilled in all arts, including painting”. EC 6.Kr.66 tells how Hoysaḷācārya is “skilled in handicrafts like gold work, metal work, stone work, woodwork, painting, calligraphy, iconography and all other skilled handwork”. See Collyer 1990: 118. Another inscription dated 1206 describe the architect Stoṭakācāri as “versed in all the *śāstras*” (EC 5.Cn.265, see Settar 1992: 84). Although none of these inscriptions explicitly mentions dance as one of the *śāstras* mastered by the temple artists, the typical list of the traditional arts would likely include that as well.

almost illiterate artists who were following the instructions of a master and were replicating his models with little variations from them.⁸¹ This could also explain the limited variety of the dance movements represented on the temple sculptures:⁸² if one movement was considered particularly fit for the location in the temple then the sculptors could have been especially instructed to replicate it, whether they knew its meaning or not.

As per the selection of pertinent dance movements aimed at communicating certain feelings in a way similar to the theatrical representations, the question arises whether a specific knowledge of the theatrical usages (*viniyoga*) of the dance movements was borrowed from the ABh, including in form of references contained in later works composed in the South Indian courts or circulating in the Deccan area.⁸³ Another possible scenario would be one in which the theatrical usages of the dance movements were taken from the direct witnessing of a living tradition of performing the *karaṇas* of dance, possibly not very different from the one that represented the direct source of information for the instructions of the ABh concerning the *karaṇas* and their uses. Future research aimed at investigating the history and circumstances for the performance of the *karaṇas* in ancient India will hopefully throw some light on the above questions.

⁸¹ See Collyer 1990: 143–146.

⁸² As mentioned before, out of the 100 dancing figures in the Hoysalesvara temple, 59 show the same posture of the arms accompanied with four legs variations. A similar ratio is maintained in the survey of 17 Hoysala temples completed so far: out of 193 dancing figures, 115 display the same movement described above.

⁸³ Although composed in the mid-13th century and therefore after the Hoysalesvara temple was completed, SR and NR, with their heavy borrowings from ABh, are the expression of a dance scholarship very close to the Hoysala kingdom in time and space (the two works were composed in the Hoysala's neighboring kingdoms of Yādava and Kākātīya). I imagine that the same knowledge of the dance technique was circulating, whether in the written or oral form, at the Hoysala court during the construction of the Hoysalesvara temple, mid-12th century.

Now that a specific medium of communication has been posited for the dance sculptures of the Hoysalesvara temple, the connected question could be asked: were the devotees able to understand the nuances and meaning of the dance movements carved in the temple, to hear the ‘voice’ of the sculptures, so to say, while looking at them? In the absence of further evidence about the history of dance and the living traditions of performing the *karanas* of the NŚ, I propose that the presence of conventional signs, like the *vṛścika* leg or the *alapallava/vismaya hasta* itself could have served the purpose of making the meaning of the movement clear to all onlookers sharing a particular set of conventional behaviours and gestural codes. At the same time, those educated in the field of dance could have experienced the pleasure of witnessing the accurate rendering of dance in the sculptures. Whatever the case, the collaboration between the visual medium of sculpture and the performative medium of dance allows traditional dance with its full-fledged body language to establish itself as an important element in the Hoysalesvara temple’s spiritual economy. The location of the majority of the dancing sculptures at a convenient height for human observation and running all along the temple’s wall suggests that they are meant to be seen by the devotees while they are engaged in the ritual movement of circumambulating the temple (*pradakṣiṇa*). In this context, the recurrence of the *alapallava/vismaya hasta* in the dancing sculptures could be specifically intended to invite the devotees to wonder at the sight of the temple, the body of God, skillfully built and lavishly decorated.

Until further research is undertaken, the question remains open, as to the extent in which the technical language of dance and theatre was intentionally used by the sculptors in ancient India to enliven the sculptures and empower them to communicate a range of meanings that are all possibly connected with the physical, emotional and ultimately spiritual experience represented by the temple itself. In the future, a comprehensive study of dance as represented in temple sculptures based on textual and sculptural sources and closely connected to the theatrical practice could add a whole new level of understanding of dancing

sculptures, highlighting the important role played by the representation of codified body movements in a traditional context.

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