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Ewa Dębicka-Borek
debicka.debicka@uj.edu.pl
(Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland)

Lidia Sudyka
lidia.sudyka@uj.edu.pl
(Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland)

From the Narratives on Mythical Beasts to the Voicing of Power
The Case of the Vīrabhadra Temple in Keladi

ABSTRACT: Taking as the case study the Ikkeri Nayakas' Vīrabhadra temple in Keladi (the current Karnataka state), the paper discusses the potential correlation between the narrative and the image in terms of the temple's artistic programme and the myths it draws on. With the assumption that the artistic production can serve as a political tool aimed at expressing a ruler's agenda, our focus is on the depictions of certain hybrid creatures found within the premises of the temple and their multidimensional symbolism attested to in Hindu narratives. Our analysis of the visual and the narrative material against the backdrop of the early history of the temple's royal patrons suggests that in the centre of their interest, while designing the temple, was the desire to set out their claims to power and present the milieu they lived in.

KEYWORDS: Ikkeri Nayakas, Vīrabhadra Temple in Keladi, Narasiṃha, Gaṇḍabheruṇḍa, Śarabha, *puruṣamṛga*, hybrid creatures

Introduction

With the Vīrabhadra temple in Keladi as the case study, the paper proposes to discuss the interrelation between the text and the image from

the perspective of an artistic programme, which—with the help of narratives it depicts—may act as a political instrument aimed at communicating ruler's milieu, his political agenda and his display of power. In what follows, we briefly address the history of the patrons of the temple, i.e., the Ikkeri Nayakas (c. 1499–1763 CE), and the route that led them to establishing their own kingdom. Then, having presented several instances of sculptures depicting violent hybrid characters found in the Vīrabhadra temple, along with their myths, we pose a question as to whether the artistic production of this particular temple does indeed mirror the nature of the Ikkeri Nayakas' rule and how such visual programme might have articulated these rulers' ascendancy.

Vīrabhadra is essentially a wrathful form of Śiva, an embodiment of Śiva's rage that emerges from his forehead. According to the widely popular myth known as the destruction of Dakṣa's sacrifice, Śiva along with Satī were intentionally insulted by Satī's father, Dakṣa, who did not invite them to the sacrifice he organized; Dakṣa's arrogance led Satī to her death and brought on Śiva's anger.[1] However, at times, Vīrabhadra is presented as Śiva's attendant (*gaṇa*). In the earliest versions of the Dakṣa myth, Vīrabhadra appears as a lion (Granoff 2004: 123–124). In the Shaiva adaptations of the myth of Narasiṃha (the Man-Lion incarnation of Viṣṇu), Vīrabhadra's appearance precedes the appearance of Śarabha, a composite figure created to destroy Narasiṃha whose fury refuses to abate even after killing the demon Hiraṇyakaśipu.

Among the many composite, attention-grabbing sculptural images found in the premises of the Vīrabhadra temple, one may certainly count those of Narasiṃha, the Man-Lion, and Gaṇḍabheruṇḍa, the two-headed hybrid creature often believed to have been called to life to kill Śarabha. As will be discussed in the next section, it is also likely that temple's artistic programme features an image of Śarabha, who, if this is indeed the case, was perhaps equated here with Vīrabhadra (Rajarajan 2006: 119). Although much less popular than Narasiṃha, the other two mythical

[1] On the interpretation of this myth and its traces in the current cults of Vīrabhadra in Andhra Pradesh, see Knipe 1989.

beings significantly contributed to Narasiṃha's complex portrayal and narrative, and the myths of the three intertwine. The rise of Śarabha and Gaṇḍabheruṇḍa was in a way triggered by Narasiṃha's affinity with Rudra-Śiva in terms of their shared ferocious nature: the former was thought of as a Shaiva answer to the myth of the fierce Narasiṃha, the latter as a Vaishnava answer to Śarabha. Although the hierarchy among the three usually depends on the religious context, basically either Vaishnava or Shaiva, each of the three protagonists may be used—both in terms of narratives and temple art—as a tool for conveying messages crucial to the patrons of the artistic production in which the image is featured, usually in relation to power negotiations.

The Vīrabhadra temple in Keladi was most likely founded by Doḍḍa Saṅkaṇṇa (r. c. 1565–1570?).[2] Built at a singular moment in time, that is, in the era of the political ascent of local chiefs invested with authority by the Vijayanagara rulers and often operating on the geographical fringes of their empire, the temple inscribes into the schema wherein, as George Michell (1995: 8–9) observes, "widespread distribution of power is of particular consequence for the development of the arts," mainly through expressing political claims and ambitions of individuals by means of artistic patronage. In this sense, art may be treated in terms of yet another medium used for projecting certain ideas and political aspirations of the newly created kings, besides, as pointed out by Nicholas Dirks (1987), resorting to legends showcasing their long histories and enumerating their ancestors as fully entitled to rule the land, usually their rights confirmed by some sort of a miracle.[3]

In the context of the Nayaka rulers, the visual way of reinforcing the authority applied particularly, as Michell argues, to patronizing the

[2] On doubts concerning his identification and problems with dynastic successions of the Ikkeri Nayakas, see Bes 2022: 122–141.

[3] In case of the Ikkeri Nayakas we do have several versions of the origin myth, which slightly differ from each other; see Bes 2022: 61–65. It is also worth noting that these genealogies did not require to be "embedded in a dynastic structure conforming to the standard *purāṇic* type—all such efforts have become quite superfluous by this time […]." (Rao et al. 1998: 56).

construction of temples, where the wealth and might be openly demonstrated, but also to selection of themes rendered in sculptures and paintings. Whereas sculpted or painted motifs predominantly aimed to establish the presence of the patron in the temple and thus usually depicted him with his family in the god's vicinity, in the context of the Nayakas' rule in Tamilnadu, Tiziana Lorenzetti (2019) proposes to widen this imagery to include visual 'instruments of statecraft' such as the motif of a leogryph (*vyāḷi*) and the motif of *sudarśanayantra*, both variously associated with a regal power. She asserts:

> […] artistic production, had for the most part, an undeniably political function. Indeed, its highly distinctive characteristics, as evinced in the vast iconographic scheme, in the choice of peculiar themes and in the interrelationships of symbolic meanings of the temple sculptures, reveal an organic plan, aimed at the legitimisation of their claim to rule. Therefore, art becomes the principal means to enable a new interaction between the political and the religious forces, necessary to establish the Nāyakas as a dynastic power. (Lorenzetti 2020: 238)

In turn, R. K. K. Rajarajan points out that the Nayakas were inclined to include in the artistic programme of their temples various types of ferocious (*ugra*) images, of both Vaishnava and Shaiva provenance, which might have reflected the socio-political situation of the period (Rajarajan 2006: 118–119). To this rich repertoire of strategies that reveal the Nayakas' awareness "of the political dimension of temple patronage, an association expressed not only in written word of inscriptions," Crispin Branfoot adds the tendency to reach out for the old, consciously archaized architectural and iconographical motifs (Branfoot 2013: 335).

What we find significant in the context of choices concerning sculptural themes in the Vīrabhadra temple is the conspicuous presence of mythical figures whose bodies are made up of other powerful creatures. We group them into two basic categories: those related to the myth of Narasiṃha and others, falling outside the Narasiṃha myth. Not only do both types of images dominate the artistic programme of the temple visually, but some of them have become iconic images of

the Ikkeri Nayakas art. Inhabiting human imagination and shaping the creative output, composite beings usually symbolize the aspirations, dreams, and fears of their originators, and play various roles.[4] Being an amalgamation of different entities, they figuratively render notions such as the excessive power, but also the state of the in-betweenness, the transgression, or the idea of reconciliation. In this connection their compositeness is very useful when it comes to expressing the nuances of rulership, particularly in the unstable moments of social and political changes. By bringing together art, mythology and political history of the earliest Ikkeri Nayakas in the following sections, we hope to contribute to the knowledge of strategies that might have helped this much neglected and under-researched dynasty to rise.

The Ikkeri Nayakas and the Vīrabhadra Temple in Keladi

In the vast Vijayanagara empire, the system of *nāyaka*ship played an important role in establishing king's relationship with local people. Usually, a local military leader or chief (*nāyaka*) was publicly acknowledged by the king and entrusted with the territory he was responsible for. Such *nāyaka*s ruled their respective lands on king's behalf. They "had to remit to the king a certain proportion of the revenues of their territory as well as to maintain the prescribed military forces for the king's command [Sewell 1970: 370]. In their own territories, however, they behaved as the lords having under them their own agents" (Karashima 2004: 156–157). After the decline of the Vijayanagara power, some *nāyaka*s established their own regional kingdoms, some bigger, some smaller. That was also the case with the Ikkeri Nayakas, who functioned at first as the intermediaries between the Vijayanagara king and the people of their locality and later became the independent rulers of the western strip of Karnataka.

[4] In India, such hybrid beings appear as early as Vedic literature: these are especially the winged creatures as for instance Dadhikrā (*Ṛgveda* 4, 38–40; 7, 44), a divine steed with wings like an eagle, also compared to the goose (*haṃsa*).

Keladi was the first capital of the Nayakas of this region. The Vīrabhadra temple belongs to the Shaiva Rāmeśvara temple complex (Fig. 1).

The Rāmeśvara temple complex consists of three temples of almost equal size: the Rāmeśvara, the Pārvatī and the Vīrabhadra temples. The Rāmeśvara temple was built most probably around 1500–1520 CE, at the beginning of the *nāyaka*ship in the region, by Cauḍappa, the first member of the family to be given the title and position of *nāyaka*. The *maṇḍapa*s of the Rāmeśvara temple and the Pārvatī temple were erected by his son, Sadāśiva, (r. c. 1530–1565?). The Vīrabhadra temple itself was added to the complex later, perhaps by Sadāśiva's son, Doḍḍa Saṅkaṇṇa (r. c. 1565–1570?). It is also said that the first completely independent ruler of the line, Veṅkaṭappa Nayaka (c. 1585–1629),[5] renovated the Rāmeśvara complex (Kanekar 2010: 145–146). Michell explicates: "The Rameshvara shrine is generally assigned to Chaudappa, first of the Nayakas, while the adjacent Virabhadra shrine, with which it is connected, was added by his successor, Sadashiva" (Michell 1995: 66). In view of the *Śivatattvaratnākara* (ŚtR), an encyclopedic work in Sanskrit authored by the Keladi-Ikkeri king Basavarāja (r. 1697–1714), Sadāśiva's son Saṅkaṇṇa was instructed by the god Vīrabhadra, who appeared to him in a dream, to fetch the *liṅga* from a certain lake and worship it in a specially constructed shrine. The last passage of chapter (*taraṅga*) 9 in the fifth book (*kallola*) of ŚtR describes Vīrabhadra's revelation to Saṅkaṇṇa (ŚtR V.9.72–77). In the next *taraṅga* various aspects of constructing the temple, all in accordance with the encyclopedic nature of the work at hand, are revealed. The temples as witnessed today clearly display influences of different architectural traditions: the local Kannada, the imperial Vijayanagara, and, to some extent, the Islamic. We are not in a position to provide a decisive answer to the question as to the precise dates of their construction, not to mention the ideology encapsulated in the architectural choices of the patrons of the shrines, however, it seems reasonable to take into account the aspirations of the men behind the project: Cauḍappa, who managed to attain the position

[5] Regnal dates of the Ikkeri Nayakas as given in Bes 2022: 123–124, 138.

of a general in the Vijayanagara army, and Sadāśiva, whose ambitions set in motion the Ikkeri Nayakas' dream about the kingdom of their own. As already shown in Rao et al. in reference to the version of the foundation of Madurai Nayaka kingdom given by the anonymous author of *Tañjavūri āndhra rājula caritra*, although the exemplary ideal of *nāyaka* promoted loyalty to the Vijayanagara ruler, it was not possible to exclude aspirations to self-rule (Rao et al. 1998: 44–56).

Hybrid creatures: Playing with the myth of Narasiṃha

The Ikkeri Nayakas were loyal feudatories of Vijayanagara; it was the Vijayanagara Sārvabhauma,[6] as stated in the *Śivatattvaratnākara* (ŚtR V.4.40–42), who conferred the *nāyaka*ship on Cauḍappa, the headman of the Keladi village. In the course of time the rulers of Keladi gradually extended their area of influence to ultimately assert their independence from Vijayanagara. In that context, it is worth noting the presence of a decorative Gaṇḍabheruṇḍa, the two headed creature usually combining elements of different beings, sculpted with great attentiveness on the ceiling of the Vīrabhadra temple (Fig. 2).[7]

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[6] *sārvabhauma*, literally: an emperor, universal monarch. One of the titles used by the Vijayanagara rulers. As far as the regnal years are concerned, this *sārvabhauma* could be Vīranarasiṃharāya (r. 1505–1509) or Kṛṣṇadevarāya (r. 1509–1529), belonging to the third dynasty of the Vijayanagara empire, known as the Tuluvas.

[7] As Valentina Stache-Rosen (1976: 1–4) notes, the oldest depictions of the double-headed bird in the Indian subcontinent come from Taxila and are often interpreted as being of Scythian and Near Eastern origin, that is, as depicting an eagle. Another early double-headed bird, possibly a *haṃsa*, is found on a stupa in Bodh Gaya. These two early instances could have been derived from literary or oral sources, for example, Buddhist legends which mention a bird with two heads, one called Garuḍa, the other Upagaruḍa, or, respectively, Dharma and Adharma. Also, the *Pañcatantra* contains a story about the bird with two heads called Bhāraṇḍa, in some manuscripts referred to as Bheraṇḍa or Bhāruṇḍa (see *kathā* 13: *bhāruṇḍa-pakṣi-kathā*). According to the *Mahābhārata* passages, Bhāruṇḍa birds have strong beaks, human faces and sing with a beautiful voice (Stache-Rosen 1976: 3). In the *Śivapurāṇa*, Bheruṇḍas belong to the retinue of Śiva, whereas in the *Brahmāṇḍapurāṇa*, they are said to be vehicles of the goddess Mahāvajreśvarī and the lord of demons when he goes into battle (Stache-Rosen 1976: 4). According to Stache-Rosen, the explanation for imagining

In the Hindu religious context, when encountered in its full form and furnished with a proper mythology and visual representation, the creature known as Gaṇḍabheruṇḍa could be interpreted as the Vaishnava response to the emergence of Śarabha.[8] Combining elements of several entities, Gaṇḍabheruṇḍa was perceived as stronger than Narasiṃha himself and thus able to defeat Śarabha. Gaṇḍabheruṇḍa's destructive power is depicted in the Hoysala sculpture panels from the 12th-century Karnataka (e.g., Keśava temple in Belur, Sūrya temple in Koramangala), basically in terms of the so called 'chain of destruction', where Gaṇḍabheruṇḍa devours Śarabha, Śarabha devours a lion, a lion devours an elephant, an elephant devours a serpent, and a serpent gobbles up an antelope (Naidu 1997: 883).

The oldest visual representation of Bheruṇḍa in South India comes from the village Belgami in the Shimoga district in Karnataka, where it is found on a pillar in front of the Jagadkamalleśvara temple. An inscription dated to 1047 CE states that the person responsible for erecting the pillar made an additional gift of land to Bheruṇḍeśvara and the donated land was measured with a *bheruṇḍa* pole. The donor was a vassal of Someśvara I Chalukya. With the aim of publicizing his own virtues, courage, truthfulness, and liberality he used the title *gaṇḍabheruṇḍa* (Stache-Rosen 1976: 4–5). This custom continued with later dynasties, who not only adopted the title but also the double-headed bird or a man with two bird heads as their emblem. In fact, from the 11th century onwards the motif of Gaṇḍabheruṇḍa became quite popular in literature and art as well, for even the poets started to use it when speaking about the supremacy of some over the others, by comparing these persons to Gaṇḍabheruṇḍas and Śarabhas respectively (Stache-Rosen 1976: 7). Whereas during the Hoysala period Gaṇḍabheruṇḍa was usually visualized as a man with bird heads accompanied by tigers, in the Vijayanagara

Gaṇḍabheruṇḍa as a man with two bird heads or a double-headed bird might be the existence of both Bheruṇḍa deities and birds in the Indian literary traditions (Stache-Rosen 1976: 4).

[8] On other Vaishnava figures and their iconography interpreted in this way, see Kalidos 1987.

era both the Bheruṇḍa man and the Bheruṇḍa bird were depicted as carrying elephants in their beaks (Stache-Rosen 1976: 10–11). The tradition of identifying oneself with Gaṇḍabheruṇḍa was continued by the former vassals of Vijayanagara Empire, the so called Nayakas of Madurai, Ikkeri, Tarikere, etc. (Stache-Rosen 1976: 16).[9]

The title *gaṇḍabheruṇḍa* takes on a special significance in the case of rulers who fought and claimed victory in clashes with the Orissa rulers referred to as Gajapatis, i.e., 'the lords of the elephant corps,' due to the strength of their elephant contingents. In the Nagaragere copper plates inscription of Vīranarasiṃha, dated 1505, Vīranarasiṃha states that Narasa, his father, who founded the dynasty of the Tuluvas, has, because of his courage, defeated the Gajapati King and assumed the title of *gajapaty-ākhya-rāyebha-gaṇḍabheruṇḍa*, that is 'the *gaṇḍabheruṇḍa* to the elephant known as the Gajapati King' (EC X: 279).[10] The subsequent rulers of the dynasty, namely Kṛṣṇadevarāya and Acyutadevarāya, minted coins with the image of the Bheruṇḍa bird.

The relief of Gaṇḍabheruṇḍa in the Vīrabhadra temple possibly points to the links of the Ikkeri Nayakas with Vijayanagara. Through mediation of Vijayanagara kings, who appealed to the glory of the past

[9] Rarely, the post-Vijayanagara iconography shows Gaṇḍabheruṇḍa as Aṣṭamukhagaṇḍabheruṇḍa-narasiṃha, that is Narasiṃha with eight faces, combining the features of Narasiṃha and Gaṇḍabheruṇḍa (this iconography is treated in a 19th-century text *Śrītatvanidhi*, see: Kalidos 1987: 2). Such images are found, for instance, on the *gopura* of the Srirangam temple and the wall paintings in its Narasiṃha shrine. They also happen to be carved on the wooden temple cars (Tam. *tēr* / Sanskr. *ratha*) from the post-Vijayanagara era, e.g., on the Gaṇapati *tēr* of the Tirukkāmeśvara temple at Villiyanur and the circa one hundred-year-old *tēr* of Āṇṭāl and Vaṭapatraśāyi temple in Sriviliputtur. The eight faces are arranged in a horizontal row and include Mahāgaṇḍabheruṇḍa, lion, tiger, horse, boar, monkey, eagle, and bear. The combination of so many animal species into a single form is suggestive of a supreme power. In the depiction preserved on the wooden temple car from Srivilliputtur, Aṣṭamukhagaṇḍabheruṇḍa is seated in *sukhāsana* and his suspended leg crushes Śarabha found below the pedestal (Rajukalidoss and Rajarajan 2016: 159).

[10] *jitvā gajapatiṃ rāyam birudam prāpa sāhasāt | gajapaty-ākhya-rāyebha-gaṇḍabheruṇḍa ity amum* || EC 77

dynasties in adopting the title of *gaṇḍabheruṇḍa* and minting gold coins with a double-headed bird carrying elephants in its talons and beaks, they might have also linked themselves with the Chalukyas and the Hoysalas.

The Nayakas of Madurai minted coins with the image of Bheruṇḍa, but the rulers of Ikkeri had Bheruṇḍa also on their flag (Stache-Rosen 1976: 13–15). Interestingly enough, unlike Vijayanagara and its other successor states, the coinage of Keladi had only two emblems: Umā-Maheśvara and Gaṇḍabheruṇḍa (Chitnis 1967: 308). This clearly shows their religious affiliation and the importance of Gaṇḍabheruṇḍa as their symbol.

Besides the impressive and innovating Gaṇḍabheruṇḍa executed on the ceiling panel of the Vīrabhadra temple—it carries a lion in each of its two beaks, each lion in turn grasping an elephant, with two other elephants held in its two sets of claws— there are smaller external decorative reliefs on the walls (Figs 3, 4) and a simple, tiny image of the two-headed bird without elephants or lions on a basement decorative medallion (Fig. 5). Other hybrid creatures that dwell in the Vīrabhadra temple

Fig. 3

Fig. 5

are Dakṣa (with a ram head) and Narasiṃha: both are of human size, sculpted on the sides of the entrance to the *garbhagṛha* and surrounded by a small ambulatory. The hands of both figures are folded in supplication as if paying respect to the god (Figs 6, 7).

Fig. 7

In the Hindu temples, Vīrabhadra images are often accompanied by those of Dakṣa with the head of a male goat. According to popular myths, Vīrabhadra as an emanation of Śiva's wrath beheaded Dakṣa and then resurrected him by replacing his head with that of an animal. Dakṣa with the head of a ram, who along with Satī/Mahākalī stand on the sides of Vīrabhadra, is also a common motif of votive plaques in Karnataka (Sontheimer 1987: 133). In the Vīrabhadra temple, the hand gestures displayed by Dakṣa imply he is honouring Vīrabhadra. The same applies to Narasiṃha, evidently depicted as Vīrabhadra's subject.[11] Such a way of depicting Narasiṃha seems very telling for a couple of reasons. As Vīrabhadra was the warrior deity worshipped by the Keladi rulers, then in this particular case the concept of Gaṇḍabheruṇḍa communicating victory over Shaivas loses its meaning. Besides, the iconography and placing of the images of Dakṣa and Narasiṃha evidently stress the Shaiva character of the temple, while deliberate showcasing of Narasiṃha's subordination to Vīrabhadra intensifies in a way the power of the latter.

According to myths preserved in the early Puranic corpus, Viṣṇu takes on Narasiṃha's form so he may kill the demon Hiraṇyakaśipu who is threatening the world. To annihilate the demon, Narasiṃha needs to act in transitional circumstances rendered through the usage of categories of neither-nor: the demon may be killed neither during the day nor the night, neither by weapon nor by hand, etc. (Soifer 1992: 8–11). Other meaningful dimensions of Narasiṃha's nature emerge with the development of Bhakti cults, when the narrative transforms itself into the myth centered on Prahlāda, Viṣṇu's devotee and Hiraṇyakaśipu's

[11] R. K. K. Rajarajan notes that the mode of presenting the Narasiṃha image installed in the Vīrabhadra temple in Keladi is strikingly different than in other Nayaka temples. Rajarajan finds this mode actually mocking: "The mouth is agape, showing three teeth (are the others broken?), the eyes full of anger but subdued. Decorated with pītāṃbara and all types of ornaments, this Kevala Nṛsiṃha has the gadā planted vertically and poses to be non-belligerent. May be (sic) the Vīraśaivas who worshipped Vīrabhadra made fun of Nṛsiṃha, making him a D[vāra]P[āla]? The sectarian idea is that Nṛsiṃha is nothing before Vīrabhadra and that he stands [with] his teeth broken by the Śaiva Lord Superior" (Rajarajan 2006: 118–119).

son, whom the demon attempts to kill. Having killed Hiraṇyakaśipu to save Prahlāda, which entails liberating the demon at the moment of his death, Narasiṃha becomes also the model protector of all his devotees (Soifer 1992: 92–93).

The presence of Narasiṃha in Shaiva myths as we witness in the Vīrabhadra temple resulted from the shared nature of violent forms of Viṣṇu and Śiva whose affinity is additionally brought out by their mythical coming into being by emergence from within a column.[12] Disputes between the adherents of both traditions over such concepts precipitated the production of new variations of Narasiṃha's myth. Depending on the context, the new narratives were either aimed to show Viṣṇu's superiority over Śiva (projecting Hiraṇyakaśipu as Śiva's follower) or Śiva's over Viṣṇu (projecting Śiva as vanquishing Narasiṃha to save the world) (Eschmann 2005: 104–105). Last but not least, and as Günther-Dietz Sontheimer has argued, due to the half-human half-animal body Narasiṃha may be also seen as a 'divine integrator' of the wilderness (*vana*) and the inhabited space (*kṣetra*). This feature of Narasiṃha is mainly linked to his tribal roots revealed by his half-lion form and predatory traits (Sontheimer 1987). Probably these were the very same, aggressive aspects that made Narasiṃha attractive to the rulers, especially the kings of the Vijayanagara Empire, for such aspects reflected their expansion-oriented and warlike times (Verghese 1995: 145). On the one hand, the figure of god became a useful instrument in the process of extending royal influence to the forest areas: due to his associations with a lion, Narasiṃha might have been used for the sake of assimilating borderlands' forest tribes and herders, to whom he appeared as the evident manifestation of the nature of their

[12] In the case of Viṣṇu-Narasiṃha the act is visually represented by a column which splits into two above Narasiṃha who sits with Hiraṇyakaśipu on his lap and entrails him; in the case of Śiva, there is the *liṅgodbhava*, i.e. the appearance of an iconic image of Śiva from the aniconic *liṅga*. As Branfoot remarks, in religious sculpture the theme of a column symbolizes power which is inherent in it. In the case of Śiva's and Narasiṃha's iconography, this power is clearly seen as divine and dynamic, i.e., expanding out and emerging from it (Branfoot 2007: 178–180).

own fearsome deities dwelling far away from human habitations.[13] On the other, Narasiṃha's violent nature made him the perfect model of a god that could be identified with a brave king (Sinopoli 2000: 376).

Playing with the myth of Narasiṃha within the premises of the Vīrabhadra temple might be also traced to the concept of another hybrid creature, so far unidentified, which is depicted on the western exterior wall of the hall enclosing *garbhagṛha* in which *liṅga* is installed. The depiction shows a figure of a powerful human-like body in a standing position with two elephant trumpets as his arms, and elephant legs (Fig. 8). The head is that of a lion.[14] The creature belongs to the *raudra* or ferocious type, as indicated by its bulging eyes, frowning expression and protruding tusks. The people at its feet, dancing, singing, and playing instruments, are approximately one third of its height, which additionally highlights the might and greatness of the principal figure. On the right side of the relief one can see the measuring rod (length: 78.5 centimeters) with divisions and subdivisions (Michell 1995: 66). Perhaps because of this the hybrid creature was identified by the local historian, Gunda Joyis, as the *vāstupuruṣa* or the personification of an ideal pattern or an archetype of a building (Gunda Joyis 2011: 77).

Rajarajan launches however another hypothesis: discerning wing-like patterns on the image's shoulders he proposes to identify it as "a form of Śarabhamūrti who is just emerging." The creature's elephantine traits, as he continues, would point to its capability of conquering Narasiṃha, whose image, too, is installed in the temple. The context of its occurrence, i.e., the premises of the Vīrabhadra temple, may further suggest that the image should be identified with Vīrabhadra (Rajarajan 2006: 133).

Based on the number of occurrences of sculptures of Śarabha—a mythical beast whose narrative enters the scene as a variously

[13] For instance, this issue is symbolically rendered in the 16th-century drama *Vāsantikāpariṇayam*, the theme of which is the second marriage of Narasiṃha / king of Ahobilam with a girl from the Chenchu tribe, see Dębicka-Borek 2016.

[14] It reminds an intriguing 'mask' above Dakṣa's head (see Fig. 6 in coloured insert).

conceptualized sequel to the myth of Narasiṃha—it seems that his popularity is confined to South India.[15] Although the stone image from Vikramacoleśvara temple in Tukacchi in Tamilnadu, dated 11th/12th cent. (Nayar 2010–2011: 78), is considered to be the earliest of the Śarabha images, Archana Verma observes that Śarabha's visual representation became widely known only in the 12th cent., as indicated by images from Chola temples in Darasuram and Tribhuvanam. In both cases, the images emphasize Śiva's supremacy over Viṣṇu. They are not standardized but seem mostly to follow the instructions of a late Śaivasiddhānta manual, the *Uttarakāmikāgama*, which states that *śarabhamūrti* "should be made in human form from shoulder onwards, though he should have the fangs of a lion. Besides, he should have four lion-like feet" (Verma 2016: 105).[16] As Verma sums-up, "the fact that [this image was] provided a space in the Chola royal temples shows that royal patronage extended a platform to the evolving cultic practices and beliefs which resulted out of the religious tensions and flux in society" (Verma 2016: 105). Literary texts, however, provide even earlier references to the beast and point to a very complex tradition. Whereas the understanding of the beast as an eight-legged monster is for the first time attested to in the *Mahābhārata*, other texts from the *Atharvaveda* onwards, chiefly those uninfluenced by the *smārta* tradition, identify it with a real animal namely *mārkhor* (*Capra falconeri*) (Slaje 2017, cf. Parpola 1992: 290). As Sanne Dokter-Mersch submits,

[15] Nayar (2010–2011: 78) gives a list of Śarabha sculptures found in the South, yet no details concerning Karnataka. The popularity of Śarabha in the South is also attested to by the Tamil *Śarabhapurāṇam* (17th/18th century?), which is devoted to Śarabha (Kalidos 1987: 284).

[16] Nayar enumerates three main types of Śarabha's images: "(1) a composite image of man, lion and bird. They possessed leonine features on face or head and on portions below hips or on face and body. Human features are shown in depiction of torso and hands. Wings represented the birds. (2) a composite image of man and lion. This type has leonie features on head and below hip. Torso is as that of a man. (3) a composite image of lion and bird. This genre has multi legged ferocious lion with wings behind the shoulders. All the images invariably possess the face of a lion" (Nayar 2020–2011: 79).

Śarabha joins the universe of the Narasiṃha mythology by means of the Shaiva *Skandapurāṇa* (6th–7th cent.), the composers of which have re-modelled the Narasiṃha myth by introducing the episode of his 'afterlife.' Since the Man-Lion becomes a threat to the world after killing Hiraṇyakaśipu, Śiva assumes the form of Śarabha, a ferocious beast so far chiefly known as a destroyer of lions. Versions of this episode appear in the later *Śivapurāṇa* (*Śatarudrīyasaṃhitā* 10–12), *Liṅgapurāṇa* 1.95–96 and *Kālikāpurāṇa* 29–30, all most likely influenced by the *Skandapurāṇa* (Dokter-Mersch 2021: 141–142, 149ff).[17]

In the *Liṅgapurāṇa* 1.96.1–70,[18] Śiva first summons Vīrabhadra, and then, after Vīrabhadra's unsuccessful attempts to appease Narasiṃha with kind words, he assumes the body of Śarabha. Narasiṃha concedes the fight and praises Śiva. In a similar way the figure of Vīrabhadra is introduced in the *Śivapurāṇa* (*Śatarudrīyasaṃhitā* 10–12).

Taking into account the versions of the Śarabha myth which equate Śarabha with Vīrabhadra, Rajarajan's hypothesis that the obscure image in the Vīrabhadra temple should be identified with Śarabha/Vīrabhadra seems very plausible, even more so if we consider the image's location behind the western wall of the temple. As we know in the case of the *liṅgodbhava*, it was "placed in the niche of the rear wall of a Śiva temple's *vimāna*, the west wall of an east-facing temple" (Branfoot 2002a: 200).[19] The form that is worshipped in this particular temple in Keladi is the emanation of Śiva's wrath, and it can be

[17] See a summary of the three *purāṇa*s in Dokter-Mersch 2021: 141–142, fn 320, comp. Soifer 1992: 90–91, according to whom the *Liṅgapurāṇa*'s version contributed significantly to incorporating Narasiṃha into Shaivism, for it ends with absorbing the defeated Narasiṃha by Śiva. Śarabha occurs in Vaishnava literature, too. For instance, in the *Pādmapurāṇa*, *Uttarakhaṇḍa* 18, as if to avoid showing that Narasiṃha can be conquered by Śiva, the plot is transformed so that Śiva fights with the demon Jālandhara. Jālandhara emits a figure described as half human and half lion. This figure is defeated by Śiva who makes a loud roar out of which Śarabha emerges (Granoff 2004: 123).

[18] See translation by Shastri 1998.

[19] See also Chandrakumar: "Under the Colas, Liṅgodbhava acquired iconographical standardization with regard to attributes and placement within the temple

assumed that we have Vīrabhadra-Śarabha here; hence Narasiṃha is in submissive posture and so is Dakṣa, who, too, once found himself face to face with Śiva's fury. One lost to Śarabha, the other to Vīrabhadra. The elephantine features in the image of the beast that transforms into Śarabha are also not surprising given the mutual hostility of elephants and lions so often emphasized in classical Sanskrit literature and visible also in the representation of Gaṇḍabheruṇḍa

Noteworthy, the already mentioned statue of Gaṇḍabheruṇḍa erected on the pillar in Belgami in 1047 probably fixed the length of the *bheruṇḍa* pole used in measuring land as inscription on the base of the pillar indicates (EC 1902: 47). It is possible that the measuring stick visible next to the image of the hybrid creature in Keladi, equal to the height of its torso and legs, served a similar purpose, being, for instance, 'a *śarabha* pole' with which the boundaries of temple lands were defined. In fact, as Simon Digby notices while reviewing *Keḷadi Polity* (1974) (the book is inaccessible to us), its author, K. N. Chitnis, mentions that the rule put besides the image which represents the *vāstupuruṣa* serves to measure land as well as in the geometry of the temple (Digby 1976: 253). This does not mean, however, that we have to think of the image of a hybrid creature as a *vāstupuruṣa* exclusively. Such a depiction as we are dealing with here does not indicate this directly. The intriguing figure appears to be connected primarily to Vīrabhadra, although the scale still suggests links to measuring process and the personage visible on this relief may have served as a diagram for Vīrabhadra's shrine.[20] If this is the case, the being composed from different creatures and representing Śarabha, Vīrabhadra and *vāstupuruṣa* in one would be even more compelling.

structure, appearing in the back *devakoṣṭha* of the *garbhagṛha*" (Chandrakumar 1991: 163).

[20] If we imagined it as a reclining figure then its shape and the proportions of the temple would match.

Other instances of hybrid creatures

Selection of hybrid forms presented as devotees of Vīrabhadra may be connected with the larger programme of the Vīrabhadra temple as a whole, programme not confined exclusively to the elements of Narasiṃha myth but, additionally, rendering various aspects of transgression. In the shrine, which is not very big, there are many different representations of composite creatures carved in the interior of the *maṇḍapa*s and on the external walls. On one of the pillars of the *sabhāmaṇḍapa* one can see a *puruṣamṛga*.[21] As Corinna Wessels-Mevissen points out, it is not known,

> […] how old the concept of Puruṣamṛga, a ferocious jungle inhabitant, actually is. Doubtlessly, the benign, auspicious quality of the South and Southeast Asian sphinx ultimately prevails, which is demonstrated by its close association with sacred objects, particularly pūjā lamps and festival. (Wessels-Mevissen 2006: 251)

The creature shown on the medallion decorating the basement of the Vīrabhadra temple (Fig. 9) could be taken for yet another mythical being, namely *vyāghrapada*, previously a sage entrusted with the task of picking up fresh flowers for Śiva in his aspect of Nāṭarāja, on whom Śiva conferred the feet and tail of a tiger in order to give him more strength, i.e. efficiency in reaching out for the flowers which were difficult to obtain for offerings. The tail of the hybrid beast from Keladi, however, is a lion's tail and another relief on the pillar (Fig. 10) confirms the reference made here is to the story—of the *puruṣamṛga* invited by Bhīma for Yuddhiṣṭhira's consecration ceremony—which Dallapiccola found in a Kannada version of the *Mahābhārata*.

[21] Corinna Wessels-Mevissen devoted two informative articles to the subject of *puruṣamṛga*; see Wessels-Mevissen 2006 and 2007. We owe yet earlier research on this motive to Dallapiccola and Varghese (2002), and Branfoot (2002).

> The episode is drawn from the Kannada Bharata, written by Kumaravyasa, in the fifteenth century. Interestingly, this story is not only missing in the Mahabharata, but is also not present in all the extant copies of Kumaravyasa's Bharata, although the author was himself a Virashaiva. The importance given in this episode to the worship of the linga hints at the possibility of this being a Virashaiva addition to the original narrative. This indicates that this story may have been either a fairly late invention or an interpolation by a scribe or copyist of the work, keen to make a point in favour of Virashaivism in an epoch in which this faith had lost some of its influence. (Dallapiccola & Verghese 2002: 74)

Fig. 9

Fig. 10

In the Kannada myth, *puruṣamṛga* accepts the invitation of Bhīma but chases him all the way, threatening to kill him. Bhīma cleverly escapes death by dropping three hairs which miraculously produce a thousand *liṅga*s each; *puruṣamṛga*, an ardent devotee (*bhakta*) of Śiva, stops to worship each of them. The beast manages to catch Bhīma just at the moment when he reaches the threshold of the sacrificial hall, but Krṣṇa pronounces him to be safe because his head is already inside

the hall. While discussing the same theme present in the Nayaka-period sculpture of Tamilnadu tradition, Branfoot adds:

> Puruṣamirukam inhabited a forest within which he terrorised the inhabitants, killing and eating them. He was only able to do this within the confines of the forest. Meeting Bhīma in the forest, Puruṣamirukam chased the club-wielding hero to the edge of the forest where Bhīma thought he would be safe. Puruṣamirukam caught up with him when Bhīma had one foot outside forest and declared himself safe, but Puruṣamirukam rejected this, the dispute being resolved by Dharma. There is a similar pattern of motifs: the circumscribed power of a deity challenged on the threshold of a forest or building, like the demon Hiraṇya(ka–LS)śipu defeated by Narasiṃha, and the chase of Bhīma by Purusamirukam. (Branfoot 2002: 80)

In other words, the spatial dimension of liminality is addressed in the story irrespective of the version: the edge of the forest or the threshold of the sacrificial hall. A composite creature—something between a human being and a lion, an Indian sphinx—may operate in these liminal places. Moreover, its liminal presence relates to a rite of passage, namely the act of consecration of a king.

The Ikkeri Nayakas were Vīraśaivas, for whom this particular myth could have been well-known and important (see above: Dallapiccola & Verghese 2002: 74). Historically, the time of building the Vīrabhadra temple was an in-between period for them: still under the Vijayanagara suzerainty but powerful enough to dream of an independent kingdom. Including composite creatures in the artistic programme of the temple could be symbolic and referring to their situation in which extra qualities were required. Wessels-Mevissen points out that this half-human and half-lion "sphinx must have been regarded as more than that, as combining the qualities of both creatures, viz. the strength and instinct of a lion and the intellect and compassion of a human" (Wessels-Mevissen 2006: 251).

The same, in a way, concerns Gaṇḍabheruṇḍa, a symbol of supreme strength and unparalleled power. The composite beasts adorn also

Fig. 11

the pillars and half-pillars of the Vīrabhadra half-opened *maṇḍapa*. There are *gajavyāla* colonettes that take the form of a rearing lion standing on an elephant (Fig. 11), else a *yali* of a different type, namely a lion with an elephant's trunk. All were popular in the Vijayanagara art.

Among external decorations one can find depiction of a *kinnarī* (Fig. 12), symbolizing beauty and accomplishment, but also a more unusual motif of a *gajahaṃsa* (Fig. 13). The combination of an

Fig. 12

Fig. 13

elephant's head and bird's body could symbolize the union of knowledge and wealth, as Lakṣmī, the goddess of wealth, is associated with elephants and Sarāsvatī, the goddess of knowledge, uses a goose as her mount.

Conclusions

In the sculptural design of the Vīrabhadra temple, hybrid animals and half-human beings, as well as various other animals, are given a special place. As noted earlier, some of them seem to evoke the Vijayanagara and Hoysala glory (e.g., Gaṇḍabheruṇḍa), the previous dominant powers in the region; some others are very rare or one of a kind as the supposed Śarabha-Vīrabhadra/*vāstupuruṣa* depicted on the wall. They suit well a Shaiva project. On the other hand, it is very likely that the concept behind introducing composite creatures into the temple programme owed a lot to the beliefs that may be traced back to the early Puranic literature, according to which, as Phyllis Granoff remarks,

> […] hybrid animal-human forms and even simple animal forms were often associated with the demonic […] The tradition that associates animal-headed creatures or animals with the demonic and disease is also represented in the medical texts, particularly in the sections on demons that cause childhood disease (Granoff 2004: 123–124).

If we presume that besides evil 'the demonic' may also point to the excessive, unnatural powers, this observation additionally confirms the hypothesis regarding the role the hybrid creatures may play in expressing rulers' agendas.

As far as the ceiling image of Gaṇḍabheruṇḍa is concerned, one is inclined to see in it "an abridged version of the concept of the 'chain of destruction'" (Khan Majlis 1998: 269). The two-headed bird "with its wings outspread and its entire body enclosed as though with an armour" has a truly martial appearance (Naidu 1997: 884). As such, the creature may be simultaneously highlighting the military skills, defensive power and aggressive attitude of the Keladi Nayakas, be they still in the Vijayanagara service, or already the independent rulers.

Vijayanagara monarchs had shown their ability to become a Gaṇḍabheruṇḍa to their enemies, even if they were powerful and manifold (*gajaughagaṇḍabheruṇḍa*).[22] Links with the Vijayanagara kings and 'their' Gaṇḍabheruṇḍa meant that the Keladi warriors could also subjugate powerful enemies. Their well-known martial qualities made them worthy of administering territories entrusted to them and, in time, to govern this land as independent rulers, aspiring to play a leading role in the region, perhaps even more important than that once played by the Vijayanagara monarchs. The same martial symbolism applies to the elephant-lion-man figure full of extraordinary strength, who, again, provided with a body armour, expresses might. Alongside other unusual beings represented in the Vīrabhadra temple, the intriguing elephant-lion-man creature might have served as an important instrument of statecraft. Even more so if it indeed embodies the Vīrabhadra-Śarabha figure, an entity which, depending on which myth is recalled and, thus, whether more stress is put on the Vīrabhadra or Śarabha connection, can evoke, in the Shaiva tradition, either the triumph over Dakṣa or over the Man-Lion, or both. Vīrabhadra himself is a fierce, frightening and full of might form of Śiva, capable of acting with no mercy for his opponents. In fact, one could speak about the allegorical chain of power: more powerful leader dominates the weaker. This might be the message behind the images of hybrid creatures. An analysis of the sculptural programme of the Vīrabhadra temple, set against the early history of the Ikkeri Nayakas, shows that the underlying intention of the rulers sponsoring the temple's construction was definitely aimed at emphasizing their power. Given that the architectural past of the Ikkeri Nayakas was very modest,[23] the methods of execution of their temples were certainly carefully considered. Borrowings, references to

[22] The title of Devarāya II of the Sangama dynasty.

[23] "The architectural heritage of the Ikkeri Nayakas was somewhat lopsided. As already mentioned, the heartland of their kingdom was a place without much of an architectural past, or at least a sophisticated one whose remains would survive to the present day" (Kanekar 2013: 347).

various traditions and creative innovations were undeniably effective in carrying out the plan to lend splendour to the emerging dynasty.

Another hypothesis to consider would be that in the context of the Vīraśaiva rulers of Keladi the hybrid forms could symbolize the transgressing of the caste boundaries and the ensuing social advancement. As the legend has it, the founder of the dynasty, Cauḍappa's father, was a farmer from a very small hamlet close to Keladi. One day Cauḍappa went to see his fields and feeling tired, fell asleep. A priest and Cauḍappa's mother noticed that to protect the sleeping man a serpent spread his hood above him. Then the snake pointed to the place where a treasure was hidden. Some other time Cauḍappa, following his cow, found a *liṅga* hidden in an anthill (Krishnamurthy 1995: 103–104). Because of these miracles, he was appointed the head of the village and later, the *nāyaka* of Keladi. In this way a son of an agriculturist rose to power.

In addition, the legend reveals its protagonists' close bonds with nature. Even during the heyday of the Ikkeri kingdom, all three consecutive capitals of the state—Keladi, Ikkeri and Bidnur—were far from being huge urban centres, not to mention the pre-Nayaka period. Perhaps contact with nature was a matter of everyday life and close observation of wildlife and domestic animals as well as local flora inspired its inhabitants to imagine a creature with human qualities but stronger than a lion or an elephant, a creature able to create space for a safe and affluent life. As Krishnamurthy points out, the *Śivatattvaratnākara* states:

> […] the characteristic behaviour of certain animals and birds are worth following by all and particularly by the rulers. The Śivatattvaratnākara advises a king to learn one quality from the lion, one from the crane, four from the cock, five from the crow, three from the donkey and six from the dog. (Krishnamurthy 1995: 27)

From such a statement it is only one step to visualize an unusual being composed of different animals and possessing extraordinary qualities. The depiction of animals in anthropomorphic form may indicate a close contact with nature involving everyday observations of various species resulting in seeing them as creatures capable of thinking or experiencing

emotions (Fig. 14). It may speak about respect for flora and fauna on which the life of the community depended, and which certainly had its place in beliefs and folklore of the local population. In this society living in the western strip of the present-day Karnataka state, judging also by the attitude to nature visible in the *Śivatattvaratnākara* and, for instance, in the accounts of Pietro della Valle (Sudyka forthcoming), there could be no place for discomfort or reservation regarding animal or half-animal forms of god/s. Perhaps one of the factors responsible for the execution of such hybrid creatures in granite, could be to provide a solid image that would appeal to the tribal people who were being steadily assimilated into the state organism of the Keladi-Ikkeri lords. The tradition of heroism attested to by the hero and Sati stones might have also acted as an additional stimulus for the creation of such an image of a ferocious, warlike and mighty or even omnipotent hybrid creature. However, we do not know anything about the cult and rituals performed in the Keladi Vīrabhadra temple. As the mysterious creature depicted on its wall is partly a lion, partly an elephant in humanoid posture, the beasts normally hostile to each other, likewise the reasons behind certain choices could be of a yet different provenience.

Fig. 14

List of illustrations (all the pictures were taken in the Vīrabhadra temple in Keladi by Lidia Sudyka in 2019)

Fig. 1. Keladi, the Rāmeśvara temple complex with the Vīrabhadra temple in the foreground.

Fig. 2. Gaṇḍaberuṇḍa on the ceiling of the *maṇḍapa*.

Figs 3,4. Two-headed birds on the external walls.

Fig. 5. A small two-headed bird on a decorative medallion on the basement.

Fig. 6. A sculpture of Dakṣa.

Fig. 7. A sculpture of Narasiṃha.

Fig. 8. A supposed Śarabha-Vīrabhadra / *vāstupuruṣa* on the western exterior wall of the hall enclosing *garbhagṛha.*

Fig. 9. *puruṣamṛga* on a medallion decorating the basement of the Vīrabhadra temple.

Fig. 10. *puruṣamṛga* on a *maṇḍapa* pillar.

Fig. 11. *gajavyāla* colonettes in a form of a rearing lion standing on an elephant.

Fig. 12. *kinnarī* on external walls.

Fig. 13. *gajahaṃsa* on external walls.

Fig. 14. A pair of birds on external walls.

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Fig. 1. Keladi, the Rāmeśvara temple complex with the Vīrabhadra temple in the foreground

Fig. 2. Gaṇḍabheruṇḍa on the ceiling of the *maṇḍapa*

Fig. 4. A two-headed bird on the external walls

Fig. 6. A sculpture of Dakṣa

Fig. 8. A supposed Śarabha-Vīrabhadra/*vāstupuruṣa* on the western exterior wall of the hall enclosing *garbhagṛha*