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Vīrūpākṣa-vasantotsava-campū of Ahobala or What Can Happen During the Hunting Festival*

SUMMARY: *Vīrūpākṣa-vasantotsava-campū* describes the nine-night-long Spring Festival, *vasantotsava*, in the capital of the Vijayanagara kingdom. The text is quite ambiguous in many respects. It is probable that one of its protagonists, a certain Brahmin, a poet by profession, speaks here on behalf of the real author, Ahobala, who most probably lived in the 15th century CE. The present paper will be devoted to the episode connected with the *mṛgayotsava* or the Hunt Festival, which was a part of *vasantotsava* celebrations. What will be particularly stressed is the fact that Ahobala's description of the *mṛgayotsava*, which takes place in the public sphere connected strongly to kingship, unexpectedly evolves into the experience belonging to a private sphere, namely concerning a personal meeting of a devotee with God. At the same time the poet evoked rich tradition of showing the forest as the place of encounters between representatives of different worlds.

KEYWORDS: Vijayanagara, Ahobala, *Vīrūpākṣa-vasantotsava-campū*, *vasantotsava*, *mṛgayotsava*

Vasantotsava in Vijayangara

Vīrūpākṣa-vasantotsava-campū, a work written by Ahobala, describes the nine-night-long Spring Festival in the capital of the Vijayanagara kingdom. As far as *vasantotsava* itself is taken into consideration,

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a lot has been written about this pan-Indian spring festival: from comprehensive studies such as the monograph "Vasantotsava. The Spring Festivals of India. Texts and Traditions" by Leona Anderson to articles devoted to singular literary compositions containing the description of spring festivities, e.g. David Pierdominici's "Mistreated Vasanta: Comical Degradation of Ritual in the *Hāsyārṇavaprahasana*". In fact, the term *vasantotsava* denotes various festivals marking the commencement of the spring season held either in the *phālguṇa* month (February–March) or *caitra* (March–April). Similarly, as the time of celebrating *vasantotsava* was different in various regions of India, besides the common elements such as glorification of fertility, love and rebirth, there were also specific traits characteristic of each locality. In the case of Vijayanagara, the *mahotsava* or "Great Festival" was held in the Virūpākṣa temple in March or April, overlapping with *vasantotsava*.[1] Anila Verghese states that:

> […] this festival, known as the *Vasantotsava* (spring festival), is said to have lasted for nine days commencing with the *dhvajārohaṇa* (ceremonial hoisting of the flag) on *caitraśuddhanavamī* (the ninth day of the bright fortnight of *caitra*) and ending with the *avabhṛthā*, or the ablution of the idols in Tuṅgabhadrā. Between these two ceremonies were the important celebrations of the *Rathotsava*, which took place on the full moon day, the *Mṛgayotsava*, when the god Virūpākṣa was taken out hunting, the festival of estrangement between Virūpākṣa and Paṃpadevī and the reconciliation and marriage festival (*Kalyaṇotsava*). (Verghese 1995: 101–102)

Just as the Virūpākṣa temple (Fig. 1) has been built on the foundation of earlier structures, the area where it is situated, now called the Sacred Centre, although it owes its present shape to the kings of the Vijayanagara empire, has been regarded as holy since the pre-Vijayanagara

[1] As Anderson points out: "It was a festival which, according to certain other sources, overlapped chronologically with other festivals and occasionally was an admixture of these diverse celebrations. […] *Vasantotsava*, as a blanket term, may include a large number of festivals celebrated in spring, and it may or may not itself be treated as a festival separate from these other festivals" (Anderson 1993: 25).

period. Virūpākṣa was a god worshipped in Karnataka[2] and mentioned already in Hoysaḷa-period inscriptions as toponyms referring to the area—Virūpākṣapattana or Vijaya Virūpākṣapura (Stein 1997: 31). Even though a local folk goddess Pampā/Hampādevī, identified with the Tuṅgabhadrā river, was more ancient, judging by the above-mentioned toponyms, at a certain time, the cult of Virūpākṣa became even more popular there than that of Pampā/Hampādevī. She was included into the Hindu pantheon by her marriage to Śiva as Virūpākṣa and then identified with Śiva's consort Pārvatī as her incarnation.[3] Similarly, Virūpākṣa's presentation as a form of Śiva on the one hand, and Pampā's husband on the other, could serve the purpose of introducing local traditions and deities in pan-Indian tradition, but also at the same time could enable the incorporation of indigenous communities into a bigger political organism. The role of the festivals could be exactly the same—integration of different groups of the society around the figure of a king. And *vasantotsava* was one of such state-building events.

There is a great number of literary works "in Sanskrit, Kannada and Telugu, related to the Vasantotsava celebrations during the sixteenth century" (Dallapiccola 2013: 286). However, is seems that the *Virūpākṣa-vasantotsava-campū* of Ahobala was written earlier, in the 15th century, as the author most probably refers to the King Devarāya II introduced as *devanṛpati*. What the author says about his capital also leads us to the conclusion that at that point of time it was

[2] Perhaps the oldest Virūpākṣa temple is in Pattadakal, the capital of the Cāḷukya dynasty. It was built in the 8th century. More in Michell 2002: 36–60.

[3] It seems that very often the incorporation of the local goddess' cult into the mainstream Hinduism led through assimilating the particular goddess into the pan-Indian Śaiva tradition and including her into the Śaiva mythology as a wife or daughter of Śiva. Cf. the Mīṉākṣi mythology and her marriage with Śiva Sundareśvara; it is believed that the Bhadrakālī cult offered possibilities of introducing local deities, together with specific ritual practices, into the pantheon of Hinduism and according to the myth popular in Kerala, Bhadrakālī originated from her father Śiva's third eye.

already a huge metropolis. For instance, the prose passage after stanza I.34 reads:

> *tena mukharitadiṅmukhena mahādevamahābherikā(ninādena) vidyānagara-kamalāpurādilokānām atmeśarathotsavaḥ samārabdha itiyabodhayat paṃpā-mbikānagarī* |
>
> Thus the huge drum's sound spreading in all directions began the Car Festival of the God of the inhabitants of Vidyānagara, Kamalāpura and other (suburbs) and awakened the City of the goddess Pampā.[4]

At the times of Devarāya II the capital city developed immensely (Sinopoli 2004: 276) and new tanks and canals were needed to fulfil the requirements of the growing number of its inhabitants. One of the biggest reservoirs providing water was that in Kamalāpura. This suburb of the Vijayanagara City was named after Kamalādevī, the first queen of Devarāya,[5] who expanded its water tank. Thus the stanza is clearly in opposition to the statement of Vidyaratna R. S. Panchamukhi, the editor of the *Virūpākṣa-vasantotsava-campū* and the author of the *Introduction*, that Ahobala lived in the second half of the 14th century (Panchamukhi 1953: IX, X, XVI). His supposition is based on the mention present in the *campū* that Vidyāraṇya and his disciples took part in the celebrations of *rathotsava* or Car Festival. This legendary personage was active during the reign of Bukka I and Harihara II. However, the above-quoted stanza refers us to the stage in the life of the city marked with the emergence and growth of many *pura*s (*kamalāpurādi*…), i.e. settlements of common people. It is not the first phase when Bukka I constructed a **royal** political centre, drawing upon prestige and importance of the old sacred place—its much older *śākhānagarī*, Pampā, today's Hampi. Ahobala's Paṃpāmbikānagarī in comparison with other *pura*s is a peaceful and languorous locality, which would be fully awaken and alive only because of festival

[4] Unless stated otherwise, all the translations are mine.

[5] The practice was popular among Vijayanagara rulers. For instance, another suburb of the expanding city was named Nagalāpura by Kṛṣṇadevarāya to commemorate his mother Nagalādevī.

occasions. Another point is that the name *vijayanagara* for the capital city is older than *vidyānagara* as it is attested in the epigraphical and literary evidence (Sudyka 2013: 61–76) and in Ahobala's *campū* the name *vidyānagara/ī* is preferred. All these point out to the reign of Sangama Devarāya II who ruled c. 1425–1446 CE. A. K. Warder comments that "Vidyāraṇya (Mādhava?) is just a title" and considers the dating proposed by Panchamukhi uncertain (Warder 2011: 286). The text is quite ambiguous in many respects. It is probable that one of its protagonists, a certain Brahmin, a poet by profession, speaks here for the real author, Ahobala. And in this way it would be "autobiographical, a journalist's report", as A. K. Warder (Warder 2011: 298) calls it. If so, the poet himself would be taking part in the episode connected with the *mṛgayotsava*, the Hunt Festival, which was, after *rathotsava*, the next event of *vasanta* celebrations.

The motif of hunting in Sanskrit literature

A lot can be said about *mṛgayā* or hunting in ancient India. At a certain point of time it even led to the emergence of hunting science. The divisions of hunting and benefits of hunting were explained in a treatise titled the *Śyainikaśāstra* by Rājā Rudradeva of Kumaon (16th century CE?). In Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra* hunting is mentioned among addictions or vices (Sanskr. *vyasana*) of the human race. It is stated that if we were to choose between hunting and gambling, hunting is the worse vice since falling into the hands of robbers and enemies, getting into wild fire, fear, inability to distinguish between the cardinal points, hunger, thirst and loss of life are evils consequent upon hunting. But there are also positive things which should be said about hunting, remarks Kauṭilya: it is an exercise which brings the disappearance of phlegm, bile, fat and sweat and results in the acquisition of skills such as aiming at stationary and moving bodies and the ability to predict from the appearance of a provoked beast how it would behave, etc. (AŚ VIII, 3).[6]

Hunting was considered not only a favourite pastime and sport of Indian kings but almost their duty. As Rājā Rudradeva explains,

[6] For more on these two aspects of hunting, see Wojtilla 2009: 199–214.

it leads to the acquisition of merits by killing ferocious animals such as wolves and tigers. By the slaughter of stags and other animals standing crop is protected. It is also a good occasion for an inspection of the forest, which again can serve many useful purposes, such as frightening thieves and conciliating forest tribes (ŚŚ III. 22, 230). Defined as such, hunting belongs to the *rājadharma*, one can say.

Now we are going to discuss briefly the scenarios and different types of encounters possible in the forest presented in sources of varied origins and focusing on different aims to be achieved. It should also be noticed that every hunting expedition to the *araṇya* can be discussed in terms of the meeting of the two worlds.

1. It is obvious that animal and human kingdoms meet at that occasion. The beauty of fauna and flora as well as their terrifying aspects are often described by the artists composing literature as well as the sculptors and painters (Figs 2 and 3). Such descriptions create a chance for a writer to introduce different stylistic figures as well as to characterize a hero of a story. For instance Rajendran C. in his article devoted to Kālidāsa's perception of hunting notices that the poet shows his hero's different sensitiveness in the case of "soft and beautiful creatures like deer, peacocks and yaks, and fearsome animals like the lion, rhinoceros, bison and tiger" (Rajendran 2006: 135).

2. However, in the case of a kingly hunter it can happen that a chase becomes a confrontation of the world of *dharma* represented by the king and the world of *adharma* represented by the thieves hiding there as the king can force them to fly away. Potentially, there is also a chance of encountering forest tribes. In that case it would be a meeting of the worlds belonging to different cultures and traditions negotiating the terms of their coexistence.[7]

[7] The subject of forest tribes was discussed at great length in the *Āmuktamālyada* ascribed to Kṛṣṇadevarāya in the section devoted to the duties of a king (Sistla 2010: 313, 317–318, 327). This king, as many other Vijayanagara rulers, was well aware of the advantages of encompassing them into the social and religious systems of his kingdom. As shown by P. S. Kanaka

3. There is also one more possibility: the king can meet an ascetic or *ṛṣi* during his blood sport. Also this time it would be a dramatic encounter between two realities: the one marked by violence and another avoiding it. And these meetings for the heroes of the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, as we know very well, had far-reaching consequences. It turned out that the world of ascetics situated in the *araṇya* had the power of transforming kings and their subjects' lives in the *grāma* sphere. Was it a kind of punishment for both the kings: Pāṇḍu and Daśaratha for being blinded by passion and really possessed by one of the *vyasana*s? On the one hand it was a retribution for behaviour improper for a king. To quote Kālidāsa's *Raghuvaṃśa* IX, 74:

> What Daśaratha did, transgressing the bounds of law, was surely forbidden for a king. Indeed, even men conversant with the rules of conduct, when blinded by passion, set foot on a wrong road. (Kale 1922: 78)

Both kings were supposed to be ideal rulers of the earth but, unfortunately, they were not, even if at a certain point of time it looked as if they were paragons of all kingly virtues.[8] Pāṇḍu, although having several wives, continued to be childless. The events during his hunting trip and his addiction to this sport resulted in homicide and the ensuing curse which prevented him from sexual contact with his wives. This finally proved to be a benediction as Pāṇḍu's queens asked the gods for progeny and gave birth to sons, each of them being a real embodiment

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Durga and Y. A. Sudhakar Reddy, the process of acculturation of pastoral and tribal communities could be crucial for the survival of the state and the caste society (Kanaka Durga and Reddy 1992: 145, 147). In his *campū* Ahobala also mentions that among the guests for the festival a chief of Citraśilānagara of tribal origin (*vanecaravaṃśasaṃbhūtaḥ*—ViVC: 18) was present.

[8] To quote Kālidāsa's depiction of Daśaratha again:
"Neither love for hunting, nor gambling, nor goblet of wine with reflection of the moon for its ornament, nor a beloved (mistress) of fresh youth (i.e. in the prime of youth), diverted (the mind of) him who was striving for rise (prosperity)" (RghV, IX, 7) (Kale 1922: 71).

of their godly father's qualities. The problem of the *grāma* world was solved by that of the *araṇya.*[9] The race of Pāṇḍu received worthy heirs.

In the case of Daśaratha, who inadvertently killed the son of a pair of blind hermits while hunting in the forest, and subsequently was cursed by the victim's parents, only calamities befell him. Thus Daśaratha first lost his beloved son and then his own life.

4 & 5. There are also two other scenarios very often met with in Indian mythological stories and literature, firstly—the meeting with the demons, where the king acts as a protector of the civilization, and secondly, encountering a beautiful woman during hunting. We are not going to explore different and numerous variants of these plots, but, for example, King Duṣyanta met beautiful Śakuntalā in the forest whereas Rāma encountered demoniac Śūrpaṇakhā.

6. What will be of a particular interest for us now is the very special representation of a meeting in the midst of a forest when the figure of a king is transformed into that of a hunting god. A very interesting and less known variant of such a plot is the story about a god who, while chasing animals, encounters tribals and not his devotees. Let us see how the story ends by referring to the Srisailam example.

Srisailam is situated on a flat top of Nallamalai hills in the Kurnool District in Andhra Pradesh. The area is covered with forests in which a scheduled tribe of Ceñcūs lives. The Ceñcūs, once a hunting-fishing-gathering society forced to turn slowly to agriculture, are spread all over Andhra Pradesh but mostly they are found in Kurnool, Prakasham, Guntur and Mahaboobnagar (Nagaraju and Ivanov 2011: 88). Some of them still depend on hunting. It is not surprising then that hunting is referred to in their beliefs and the few mythological narratives that they have. Most probably Mallikārjunasvāmī, called by tribals Ceñcū

[9] According to Rudradeva hunting literally provides medicine which can be a remedy for childless men:

"By the eating of the wholesome meat of wild boar and buffaloes bagged in hunting, sexual desire and capacity are increased, which leads to the enjoyment of women by the increase of strength" (ŚŚ, III.25).

Mallayya, was originally a tribal deity admitted into the Brahmanical order of Śiva worship with the Sanskritized name of Mallikārjuna. There are some stories explaining the etymology of the god's name. There is also a myth concerning the origin of all Ceñcūs connected with Srisailam. A man and his wife lived in the vicinity of the Srisailam temple. They were childless. One day during hunting they met the god Mallikārjuna and prayed for his blessing to have children. Mallikārjuna granted their wish on one condition: they will offer the child to him. In due course a girl was born. At the age of three she left her parents and lived under a cettu tree, that is why she was called Ceñcitā or Ceñcatā. After some years she met Mallikārjuna in the forest. Both hunters, Ceñcatā and Mallikārjuna, fell in love and married. The Ceñcūs are the offspring of this pair (ibid.: 90). There are also some other stories explaining how it happened that a god is present on this particular hill. Some of these legends do not mention the Ceñcūs at all but it is a fact that in this famous pilgrimage centre the Ceñcūs are appointed helpers to the temple priests. In the nearby important temple of Saileswaram a Ceñcū functions as a priest (ibid.: 91).

The story of the marriage of Narasiṃha and Ceñcatā, so important in Ahobilam and its vicinity, is definitely a *vaiṣṇava* version of the same story.[10] The marriage of a tribal girl very often depicted as a daughter of a chieftain encountered on a hunting trip builds special bonds between the Ceñcūs and cults of Mallikārjuna equated with Śiva as well as Narasiṃha, a *vaiṣṇava* theriomorphic deity. This time, hunting, or better to say, stories about hunting transmitted orally or adopted to the rules of a certain genre[11] help in the process of acculturation of a forest tribe. The process of acculturation was important for the survival of the state and Sanskritic culture.[12]

[10] More about Narasiṃha and Ceñcatā in Dębicka-Borek 2016: 301–338.

[11] E.g. *Vāsantikāpariṇayam*, a drama of the *nāṭaka* type, ascribed to the 7th Jīyar Ahobila maṭha (Dębicka-Borek 2016: 316–333).

[12] However, it seems that the integration of the Ceñcūs ended in the precincts of the temple, unlike for example that of the Boyas, whose status was

7. In the wilderness also a real *bhakta* engaged in ascetic practice can meet a god in person as once happened to Arjuna Pāṇḍava. Again, this plot, well-known from the third book of the Mahābhārata, served as a canvas for different litterati as well as sculptors and painters.[13]

Mṛgayotsava in Ahobala's *campū*

The *śaivāgama*s, as well as the *vaiṣṇavāgama*s, mention two occasions on which the idol leaves the premises of the temple in procession; they were particularly referred to in medieval inscriptions. These are *mṛgayotsava* and *avabhṛthā* or ablution in the nearby river or pond. A trip to a *tīrtha* for a special festival bath is to take place on the last day of a nine- or ten-day festival, while the *mṛgayotsava* should take place a day before (Orr 2004: 449). Obviously, *vasantotsava* in Vijayanagara was not devoid of both elements characteristic of the important annual festival.

The Hunt Festival is described by Ahobala in the *Uttara-turya-kāṇḍa*, as his *campū* consists of two parts called *kāṇḍa*s. The first section comprises three chapters, the other one contains only one, namely the fourth chapter. In its second stanza one reads:

> *śrī-paṁpā-nagare tataḥ pratipadi śrī-hemakūṭācalasvāmī*
> *vāha-suvāhanaḥ pramudito gaurīṁ vihāya svayaṁ|*
> *sāyāhne mṛgayā-mahotsava-bhavānando 'dya gaṁgā-dharo*
> *draṣṭavyo bhavatīti saṁbhramayutāḥ ke cid babhūvur janāḥ||2||*
>
> "There, in the City of Pampā, today at the eventide
> it will be possible to see delighted Lord of Hemakūṭa Mountain,
> the Supporter of Gaṅgā, alone, leaving behind Gaurī,
> riding his beautiful mount (a horse), enjoying the great festival of hunt!",
> some people were excited.

It turns out that the stanza prefigures what will happen on that day but also gives the context for the *mṛgayā-mahotsava*. It becomes clear that

raised from outsiders to the *varṇa* system, which consequently enabled them being promoted to high positions (Kanaka Durga 2001: 141–174; Kanaka Durga and Reddy 1992: 45–166).

[13] See for example Sudyka 2011: 145–162.

it will not be a case of a hunting god who meets a beautiful tribal girl and marries her as for instance in the stories known from Ahobilam and Srisailam.

In the stanza Śiva-Virupākṣa is called *hemakūṭācalasvāmī*, namely The Lord of Hemakūṭa Mountain. The introduction of the local goddess Pampā into the pan-Indian pantheon of gods occurs through her equation with Pārvatī. Pampā is not another wife of Śiva, but she herself is Pārvatī. However, the process of equation goes even deeper: according to the local myth it was here, nearby Hampi, where Pārvatī won her husband. In order to achieve that, she had to perform severe austerities at Pampāsaras, the lake near Hampi. And Śiva was meditating on nearby Hemakūṭa hill. Thus Hemakūṭa is the place where Kāma was burnt to ashes. It turns out that this region has been sanctified by the presence of gods.

One also has to remember that Śiva's hunt takes place during *vasantotsava* and the celebrations of Kāma, the god of love, were part and parcel of it. Śiva is said to leave Pārvatī behind, and he alone, without any companions, rides his horse to the forest. Why is the god so delighted? Is it because there is no wife with him, or he likes hunting expeditions, or both? Let us see whom the god meets in the forest:

> *devas tatra vane vasantasamaye vāsantikāṃ puṣpitām*
> *draṣṭuṃ kevalam āgatās sapadi taddeśam suparvāṅganāḥ* |
> *ārād vīkṣya* […] (ViVC II. 38: 70)
>
> In the forest, at once, the god saw from afar the divine ladies,
> who in the spring time came here only to see
> the blossoming vasantika creepers.

The divine ladies come to the forest to enjoy the spring season but it meant not only looking and admiring the vernal flowers:

> *saṃpūrṇakāmaḥ suralokakāntāḥ santoṣayām āsā maheśvaro 'sau* |
>
> Śiva full of passion satisfied heavenly beauties

This romantic aspect suits not only the erotic mood proper for the festival of Kāmadeva but connects the Vijayanagara king and his god more tightly. In fact, they are equated and Virūpākṣa's dalliance

with celestial damsels symbolizes revitalization of the kingship. The important festivals at the court of Vijayanagara focused on the king as is visible also from accounts of different foreign travellers. If there are women around Virūpākṣa-Śiva, his Pampā-Pārvatī consort would be jealous, especially that one of her husband's lovers in the forest was the beautiful Gaṅgā,[14] whom he still hides in his locks as Ahobala informs us (II. 44.; Panchamukhi 1953: 71). Thus, the two goddesses of two rivers, Gaṅgā and Pampā, become rivals but in fact Pampā's position cannot be threatened: it is through her that Virūpākṣa takes and maintains his position in the *tīrtha* and the temple. The erotic adventure of Virūpākṣa only gives the goddess Pampā again a role to play. In such a way the roles of divine couple complement each other.

The second stanza of the *Virūpākṣa-vasantotsava-campū* quoted above provides also the information that during the Great Hunt Festival it will be possible to see the God himself. It means that the devotees will be able to have a look at the idol taken for the procession. But there is one more adventure heralded in the verse, as we will see.

The poet, *kavi*—one could equate him with Ahobala himself—together with his friend, a *kṣatriya*, son of a minister, crossed the river, perhaps just to pass the day while waiting for the evening ceremonies. A. K. Warder provides a translation of the long prose passage in which there is a description of the forest as both friends enter it. By no means is it a delineation of vernal spells of the vernal thicket when they enter. Immediately we realize that both men crossed the boundary of the world safe and known to them. There are marks left by wild animals and "in one place with shoots of thorns bristling as if trembling from a lion's roar, in one place with the circle of earth dug up by a great boar's tusks as if it was the time of dissolution [...]" (Warder 2011: 299). The *brāhmaṇa* poet is afraid, but the *kṣatriya* friend assures him that with him, as he bears a sword, he is completely

[14] Anderson notices: "That Gaṅgā's descent onto Śiva's head, Gaṅgā's union with Śiva occurs in the virgin wilderness is surly a sanctification and Sanskritization of this territory" (Anderson 1993: 192).

safe. The way in which the further description is structured suggests that the poet have trusted his friend's assurances. Now we see, hear and smell the spring in the forest:

> […] in one place the ground made wet by the ambrosial juice, sweet as mango, as if flowing forth from the seeds of pomegranate fruit split by the tiny beaks of parrots, in one place with ripe fruit fallen from wild clove, bow [8047] *vilva*, emblic myrobalan, mango, wood apple and other trees as if shaken by crowds of monkeys, in one place resounding with the jingling of swarms of bees, as if whitened by successions of pollens from flowers such as jasmine, in one place adorned with groves of rottlera joined with piper betel tied on with creepers of pepper brilliant with *saptaparṇas* as if high *aśokas* observed in the spaces between the many arbours and bowers very near the pretty cloth tent set up in the place occupied by the royal army of Pleasure though it has countless new shoots of *aśoka*, in one place resplendent with a lake as if a dwelling for flamingoes […]. (Warder 2011: 300)

They were roaming for some time. It was late in the day and the poet was anxious that they might be late for the Hunt Festival. But soon the time for real hunting came. Unexpectedly, it was a tiger or a lion, the word *śārdūla* can mean both, which was about to hunt both young men. The *brāhmaṇa* started to pray to god. The *kṣatriya* drew his sword but the poet, offering his life to Śiva, moved forward, not wanting his friend to risk his life in order to protect him. At that moment a hunter on a horse appeared and killed the beast. He introduced himself as the servant of Śiva and gave them a ring with the inscription: Virūpākṣa. This "ring of recognition" convinced them that they met Śiva the Hunter. They arrived in the city in the evening but then there is nothing about the procession in the text. A. K. Warder wonders what happened to the hunt festival (Warder 2011: 298) but as it was announced in the second verse of the forth chapter, the hunting divinity was seen in action that day. Could the narrator offer his audience a more exciting story? Certainly, not the one depicting the procession of the god dwelling in the effigy. It seems that Ahobala did not invent anything to balance the scene of meeting Virūpākṣa. The *mṛgayotsava* day is shown as such a time of the year when the god comes to earth in person to his real devotees and helps if they are in trouble.

It is worth pointing out that Ahobala mentions different hunters and preys. The tiger, a king among animals, is hunting as well as Virūpākṣa. But soon it turns out that Virūpākṣa is hunted by the divine ladies. In that case the forest becomes a meeting place of lovers. In such a way *mṛgayotsava* mingles and overlaps with *vasantotsava* as the festival celebrating love, and at the same time matches all those stories in which god or a king meets a woman in the forest. It is important to point to the fact that:

> Vasantotsava also celebrates and reinforces the power of the king who is homologized to Virupaksha; through the person of the king and his involvement in the celebrations a link between the human and divine is firmly established. (Dallapiccola 2013: 289)

Hunting was considered not only a favourite pastime and the sport of Indian kings but almost their duty, as stated previously. Śiva the Hunter, riding his mount, subdues the land behind the river like a king and his amorous adventure with the ladies can also be seen as emphasizing the parallel between the god and the ruler and treated as representing the *krīḍā*, a play between a king and his ladies from the *antaḥpura*, the sign of the monarch's vitality prognosticating also fertility to his land. Thus, in the case of this particular *mṛgayotsava*, as described by Ahobala, the link between a king and a deity has been strengthened. As Anderson observes:

> […] lord Virūpākṣa, emerges with attributes and habits constitutive of kings; he is both a victorious ruler, a champion of the city, as well as a skillful hunter […] This deity and this king are, in several instances during the course of the celebrations, virtually indistinguishable and one is tempted to suspect that the Vijayanagara monarchs thrived on this sort of ambiguity, deriving much of their influence from their affinity of purpose with that of the major deities in the Hindu pantheon, i.e., expansion of their sphere of influence. (Anderson 1993: 172)

After Śiva's return from the hunting escapade only the goddess Pampā becomes angry and suspicious. The *campū* shows the scene in the Virūpākṣa temple: the image of the goddess was put in its place but the effigy of Śiva did not accompany her, which meant that she was offended. Only after a dispute and as a result of efforts on Śiva's side is Pampā propitiated and he is allowed to go in.

This festival, with some minor changes, is still celebrated in Hampi. As Ute Hüsken[15] mentions:

> Today the wedding of Pampā and Virūpākṣa is celebrated in spring during the spring Navarātri, whereas during the autumnal Navarātri the fierce aspects of Pampā as standalone goddess are emphasized. (Hüsken 2018: 188)

There are also sculpted panels in Hampi as well as in the Successor States which can serve as an illustration of the imagery of the Spring Festival (Dallapiccola 2013: 290–292).

Conclusions

The Hunt Festival, as a part of *vasantotsava*, was first of all a state holiday which took place in the public sphere. It is obvious that ritual performances in open spaces in pre-colonial India served "articulating political relations" and "constituting and representing the authority of groups and persons" (Price 2000: 28). However, according to the theory of Kim Knott, conceptualizing religion, space and place (the exact title of one of her essays—Knott 2010), also evoked by Caleb Simmons and Moumita Sen, the editors of the collection of essays devoted to *navarātri*, "the interconnectedness and fluidity of spatial categories such as public/private, local/global and so on" should be emphasized (Simmons and Sen 2018: 12). In the case of Ahobala's description of the *mṛgayotsava*, which takes place in the 15th-century Vijayanagara City, the public sphere connected strongly with kingship unexpectedly evolves into an experience belonging to a private sphere, namely concerning a personal meeting of a devotee with God. What can also be easily noticed here is the other opposition, namely the move from *kṣetra* to *vana.*

Concluding, one could say that in the *Virūpākṣa-vasantotsava-campū* as described by Ahobala the *rathotsava* was a culminating event for the public sphere of the festival whereas *mṛgayotsava* was representing the private sphere of it. Thus the poet showed the importance

[15] Hüsken referring to the Vijayanagara model interestingly depicts *navarātri* and *vijayadaśamī* in Kāñcipuram.

of this festival for the state and for an individual. At the same time he evoked rich tradition of showing the forest as the place of encounters between representatives of different worlds.

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Fig. 1. Virūpākṣa Temple in Hampi (photo by the author).

Fig. 2. The Kiratārjunīya episode in the Lepakshi temple
(photo by the author).

Fig. 3. Hunting scenes from Srisailam Temple outer walls (photo by the author).