1 Introduction

When walking through the streets of Kanchipuram, every few metres one almost inevitably comes across a shrine, a temple, or a temple tank. With the exterior walls of these sites often painted in red-and-white vertical stripes, as is typical in South India, they constitute physical representations of places that are accorded particular significance in Hindu India. In Kanchipuram, or Kanchi, a temple city in the northern part of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, one may thus find many Hindu religious sites: over four hundred smaller and larger temples and shrines as well as several dozen temple tanks, all of which, when taken together, form a particularly pluralistic religious landscape. Such a dense and extensive arrangement of the temples is not merely a characteristic of Kanchi but is indeed considered unique among other South Indian temple cities (Stein 2021, 106). The local temples and shrines are places of worship and several of them constitute pilgrimage sites of pan-regional renown.

Notions about Kanchipuram and its sacred sites are presented in the glorifying Sanskrit texts called Sthalamāhātmyas, meaning glorification (*māhātmya*) of a place (*sthala*). These texts are important sources for the understanding of historical developments and the formation of the Hindu traditions (Bakker 1990b, 2–3), and there are several such glorifying texts on Kanchi. They recount etiological myths about the origin of specific places in the city, places that are considered sacred, they justify their sacredness, and praise the powers attributed to them. Myths have served and continue to serve as a means of relating to and understanding the world, in particular as the interpretations, explanations and the creation of meaning of relationships that cannot be grasped entirely by conceptual abstraction or predictability (Jamme and Matuschek 2014, 13). In the Sthalamāhātmyas, myths provide the local places and their particularities with a history, meaning, and significance (Hüsken 2017, 68).

When pertaining to sites of religious significance, a world where mythology and geography meet may be termed "sacred geography" (Eck 1998). As Diana Eck states in her work on the Hindu landscape constituted of pilgrimage places, "[b]oth mythology and topography provide for people and cultures the 'maps' of the world" (1998, 186). In these maps, the physically

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tangible world is given a sacred meaning. The Sthalamāhātmyas on Kanchi provide such an orientation to the city by describing its sacred geography. The texts clearly refer to the historical city and its religious sites, temples and sacred water bodies, and interpret the religious landscape. Their built structures, such as temples, are, though, of subordinate relevance in the Sthalamāhātmyas; the places are acknowledged because of a significance that is considered to be inherent to the places themselves. By mapping selected places to which the text attaches particular significance, the perspective of a certain religious tradition unfolds.

From the larger corpus of Sanskrit Sthalamāhātmyas on Kanchi, three are discussed in this book (see subsection 1.3.1). The three texts are exemplars of the three major Hindu traditions—Śaiva, Śākta, and Vaiṣṇava. These are represented by the three temples in the city that have emerged through the centuries as the largest and the most prominent in the city (Hudson 1993, 20). The largest Śaiva temple is the Ēkāmparanātar temple and the Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya* highlights the significance of Ekāmranātha, the principal deity of this temple. The Kāmākṣi Ammaṉ temple is the largest Śākta temple and the Śākta-framed *Kāmākṣīvilāsa* pays most attention to the goddess Kāmākṣī, the main deity residing in that temple. In the Vaiṣṇava Varatarāja Perumāḷ temple, Varadarāja is the main deity and the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya* focuses on him. The coexistening traditions of Śaivas, Śāktas, and Vaiṣṇavas have shaped and negotiated Kanchi's religious landscape over centuries (Hüsken 2017; Srinivasan 1979, 231–279; Seshadri 2003, 29–39). Each of them is characterised by a rich yet distinct tradition of textual transmission. The Sthalamāhātmyas are thus a textual reflection of the city's religiously pluralistic environment, constituting moreover "important sources for the diverse sectarian interpretations of Kāñcipuram as sacred space" (Hüsken 2017, 68).

Each Sthalamāhātmya presents a unique perspective on Kanchi, which results in the presence of three parallel interpretations drawn from the three texts. Discussing them side by side allows to explore the shared and the divergent notions of the same sacred space. This approach can be seen in the light of glorifying texts being "highlighted as means to implement and adapt previous material and knowledge about sacred places in new social, political and historical contexts" (Lazzaretti 2016, 122, in reference to Smith 2007, 2 and Pinkney and Acri 2014). Studying Sthalamāhātmyas thus enables an in-depth analysis of the dynamic dimensions and the composite character of the local sacred space Kanchi.

Sthalamāhātmyas as a genre may be categorised as an integral part of the Purāṇic literature. They are local texts that reflect a local perspective on a

particular sacred place or places, and local ritual practices. At the same time, they maintain a trans-local reference by presenting localised renditions of the well-known Purāṇic mythological motifs and referring to a larger sacred geography, with preference for the local over the supra-regional (Hüsken 2017, 67–68). Like the Purāṇas in general, the Sthalamāhātmyas reflect a religiosity that differs from the earlier one—Vedic, orthodox, Brahminical. The Vedic tradition "involved worship of gods without places and was a religion of placelessness," while the Purāṇic Hindu traditions constitute a "religion of sacred places, places associated with particular manifestations of divine power" (Jacobsen 2013, 70). In the Purāṇic Hindu traditions, the deities were thought to permanently reside at particular sites and be accessible there for worship in visible form (Jacobsen 2013, 57). Building on this idea, pilgrimage (*tīrthayātrā*) had become equal to a sacrifice as a meritorious religious practice and a means to salvation (Ensink 1979, 106).[2] Some Sthalamāhātmyas seem to be commenting on this development, as can be seen in the texts on Kanchi. The frame-stories in the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya* and the Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya* tell how the sages discuss which means are best suited to attain liberation by seeing Viṣṇu respectively Śiva, and the conclusion is to visit sacred places dear to Viṣṇu or Śiva. With pilgrimage, salvation was no longer considered the privilege of the brahmins but was in principle attainable to everyone, regardless of gender and class, by visiting sacred places (Jacobsen 2013, 23). At these sites, the link to the divine was (and still is) thought to be stronger (Eck 2012, 7). Sthalamāhātmyas emerged as an expression of these transformed circumstances and

> their importance lies in the fact that they represent the more accessible level of textual material for devotees and sacred specialists, who can easily use them as they select, filter and retell mythological narrations to convey new meanings. (Lazzaretti 2016, 122)

The myths were important means to transfer the notion about the efficacious powers of the sacred places, which are said to be affected by religious practices such as taking a ritual bath—or hearing about the greatness (*māhātmya*) of the site (Nath 2009, 171, 174). By emphasising the religious significance of a particular site and extolling it through various

2 Attested by passages on pilgrimage found in the *Mahābhārata*, the practice of pilgrimage was adopted in Brahminical, orthodox traditions from the first centuries CE (Ensink 1976, 72 and 1979, 110–111). The Purāṇas date a little later, from the early fourth to the early sixth century, with modifications being made until the early medieval times (Flood 1997, 110).

myths, Sthalamāhātmyas generally aim to attract pilgrims and patronage that would also result in economic profits for the (temple) priests and functionaries at the site in question (Dutta 2010, 31–32, 36; Ambach et al. 2022b, 3). Each text is thus a representative of a particular site, be it a single place such as a temple, or a larger area, such as a city housing several sites. In their local anchoring, Sthalamāhātmyas are prime representatives of the religion of place of the Purāṇic Hindu traditions.

The Sthalamāhātmyas on Kanchi as a whole may be dated to the premodern times. A historical categorisation of Sthalamāhātmyas remains in most cases an unresolved issue as the Purāṇic texts are usually de-temporalised. They make a timeless claim to truth (Bisschop 2011, 3), with the authorship being attributed to divine characters and the stories about the origin of sacred places set in a mythic past. In the case of the Sthalamāhātmyas on Kanchi, Ute Hüsken's assessment "that most were composed after the fourteenth century" (2017, 67) offers an initial orientation, with recent research by Jonas Buchholz (2022, 2025) as well as this book discussing details that substantiate this.

While dealing with the past, the Sthalamāhātmyas are still of relevance today. There is continuity in several aspects, in particular in reference to geography and mythology. The temples in contemporary Kanchi are often still known under the names given to the places in the texts and are found at the same location as indicated by the Sthalamāhātmyas. Additionally, the stories about the origin of a temple told by the priests when visiting the sanctum sanctorum and/or the place myth found on stone slabs in the temple today often seem to draw on the myth(s) of origin of the particular site found in one or even several Sthalamāhātmya texts. Similarly, conceptions about the relationships between the local deities are expressed and mediated in the texts and events from the mythological stories are re-enacted and interpreted in the contemporary ritual practice (Hüsken 2017, 69; Schier 2018). Sthalamāhātmyas thus enable a very specific approach to different nuances of preserving and transmitting collective memory over long periods of time. They represent and also shape the local religious landscape of Kanchi.

The core of the glorifying texts constitutes the interpretative exposition of the local sacred geography. For a study of sacred geography, Kanchipuram is particularly useful for a variety of reasons: with a continuous settlement since ca. 300 BCE, the city has one of the longest uninterrupted histories of any city in South India (Raman 1987, 67–68; Heitzman and Rajagopal 2004, 239) during which a multifocal religious space emerged simultaneously with the growth of the city; the city's temples are set in a unique urban layout, with the three largest dominating the scene (Stein 2021, 106–108). Moreover,

Kanchi houses a decidedly pluralistic religious landscape, a vibrant ritual and festival scene with over four hundred temples and other places of worship shaped by the Hindu traditions of Śaivas, Vaiṣṇavas, and Śāktas, as well as Jains and, in early times, Buddhists (Hüsken 2017; Srinivasan 1979, 231–279; Seshadri 2003, 29–39; Schier 2018, 10). Together, these elements make Kanchipuram "probably the most complex of Tamil temple towns" (Schier 2018, 10). As reflection of the rich religious landscape, there is not only one but several Sthalamāhātmya texts that describe, interpret, and shape the sacred space of the city. Approaching the three of them in a comparative manner allows for comprehensive, multi-perspective insights into this multifarious universe.

1.1 State of Research

For a long time, the study of the Purāṇas—and with it, of the Sthalamāhātmyas—has received limited attention in scholarship, although the corpus of the relevant texts is extensive. Main reasons for this state of affairs could be the almost exclusively local distribution and the prevailing view among Sanskrit philologists that the texts of the entire genre of the Māhātmyas are of a supposedly little literary merit (Wiig 1981, 1–2; Rocher 1986, 5–13). The most detailed study of the Māhātmyas has been undertaken by Linda Wiig (1981); a few sections on the Māhātmyas, providing a general overview, can be further found in publications on Indian literature (Gonda 1977, 277–283; Rocher 1986, 70–72); in addition, selected Sthalamāhātmya texts have been studied individually, mostly dealing with places in North and East India (Bakker 1990a, 1996; Bisschop 2016, 2021; Jacques 1962; Lochtefeld 2010; Malik 1993; Smith 2007; Littunen 2022). Sthalamāhātmyas about South Indian sites, however, have received even less attention so far (Kulke 1969, 1970; Czerniak-Drożdżowicz and Sathyanarayanan 2022; Dębicka–Borek 2019, 2022, 2023), which leaves much potential for future research.

Moreover, texts in the style of Sanskrit Sthalamāhātmyas also exist in other (South) Indian languages. The largest number constitute a body of texts composed in Tamil and called Talapurāṇams (stories of places).[3] The

3 Talapurāṇams are often intimately connected to Sanskrit Sthalamāhātmyas, claiming to have a Sanskrit Sthalamāhātmya as their source (Buchholz 2022, 13). However, as Jonas Buchholz notes (2023a, 388), this close connection between Sanskrit Sthalamāhātmyas and their Tamil counterparts, is—with few exceptions—often not taken into account in scholarly studies. This means that

glorifying texts on Kanchipuram exist both in Sanskrit and Tamil. With seven texts available in printed editions and even more in the manuscript form, their number is comparatively large, considering that they all deal with a single place (Buchholz 2022, 11). This textual situation is exceptional and therefore offers a particularly promising starting point for comparative research. It is precisely this approach that is taken in this book when comparing the concepts of Kāñcī's sacred geography in the three Sanskrit Sthalamāhātmyas.

In recent years, the Sanskrit and Tamil glorifying texts have increasingly become the focus of scholarship on Kanchipuram. For a long time, research on the city addressed itself to its history as the capital of the Pallava kings and an important centre during the following dynasties ruling in the region (Foulkes 1889; Gopalan 1928; Mahalingam 1969; Srinivasan 1979), and the city's temples in the light of their art history and architecture (Minakshi 1954; contributions in Krishna 1992; Seshadri 2003; Nagaswamy 2011). Individual temples, in particular those with an exceptional architecture and iconography and/or of major religious significance (Venkataraman 1973; Raman 1975; Varadatatacharya 1978; Wilke 1996; Hudson 2008a, 2008b; Kaimal 2005, 2020; Krishna 2014; Rajarajan 2015–2016), as well as archeological studies and inscriptions (Rao 1915; Jouveau-Debreuil 1919; Raman 1987; Pisipaty 2011) were the topic of several publications. Of particular relevance for the analysis of Kāñcī's sacred geography from the Sthalamāhātmyas are the available publications on the development of the cityscape and urban geography (Hudson 1993; Heitzman 2001; Heitzman and Rajagopal 2004; Stein 2015, 2021, 2022), since the texts refer to the spatiality of the city.

In the last two decades, there has been increased research on the ritual and festival traditions of Kanchipuram and their performative aspects (Hüsken 2007, 2013, 2017, 2018, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2022, 2023, 2025; Ilkama 2018, 2021, 2022, 2023; Schier 2013, 2018, 2021, 2022).[4] Besides, some motifs and narratives from the texts have been dealt with in individual studies

there is a considerable scope for further research in the combined consideration of texts in Sanskrit and local languages.

4 Research carried out within the framework of the subproject "Initiation, Priesterweihe, Tempelfest—Ritualtraditionen in der südindischen Tempelstadt Kancipuram" (Initiation, Ordination to Priesthood, Temple Festivals—Ritual Traditions in the South Indian Temple City of Kancipuram) of the Collaborative Research Project (Sonderforschungsbereich) "Ritual Dynamics" at Heidelberg University, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) from 2002 to 2013 and headed by Ute Hüsken, marked the beginning.

(Porcher 1985; Moßner 2008; Schier 2018; Dębicka-Borek 2019; lkama 2012, 2023).[5]

Research on Kanchipuram's glorifying texts under multifaceted perspectives was further intensified with the launch of the project Temple Networks in Early Modern South India: Narratives, Rituals, and Material Culture at Heidelberg University[6] and is continued in the ongoing long-term research unit Hindu Temple Legends in South India at the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities (since 2022; headed by Ute Hüsken). Among recent publications resulting from research conducted within these frameworks is an edited volume on South Indian sacred sites in their capacity as connected places (Ambach et al. 2022a), an examination of the particular links of the Tamil *Kāñcippurāṇam* to its source, the Sanskrit Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya*, in context of the general relationship of Tamil Talapurāṇams to Sanskrit Sthalamāhātmyas (Buchholz 2023a), and a study of the Āti Atti Varatar Vaipavam festival, which is celebrated once every forty years at the Varatarāja Perumāḷ temple in Kanchipuram (Hüsken 2023). As preliminary work on my doctoral dissertation, I looked into the mythological stories about the sacred water body Sarvatīrtha / Carvatīrttam in Kanchi from three Sthalamāhātmyas to explore their spatial layout of Kāñcī (Ambach 2022).

1.2 Research Questions

Although there are individual publications on selected aspects—mainly myths—that are dealt with in the Sthalamāhātmyas on Kanchipuram, there has not yet been any significant research into the sacred geographies laid out in the texts, be it for a single text or for several texts in a comparative perspective. The present study addresses this gap and undertakes an in-depth analysis of the sacred geography of Kāñcī on the basis of three glorifying Sanskrit texts about the city. As a comparative perspective, such as the one adopted in this book, highlights, they all refer to the same spatially

5 Moreover, some publications have looked at selected motifs from the local narratives based on the Tamil texts (Dessigane et al. 1964; Shulman 1980; Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1987).

6 This project was funded by the German Research Foundation, 2019–2022. The principal investigators were Ute Hüsken and Jonas Buchholz.

delimited area and the same conceptual construct, Kanchi, but show considerable differences depending on sectarian orientation, context and focus.[7]

Fundamentally, this book explores the relationship between the Sthalamāhātmyas on Kanchi and the religious landscape of the South Indian temple city. Looking at each of the three texts individually, I examine: i) how the sacred landscape of Kāñcī is imagined and constructed, which places are named and given significance, and what structural and characteristic elements define its spatial concept; ii) how and to what extent the physical geography, spatial particularities of the religious landscape and the urban space, and related spatial conceptions of the historical city are integrated into the perspectives on Kāñcī; and, iii) expanding on the previous aspect, how the depiction of Kāñcī from the Sthalamāhātmya reflects its sectarian orientation and a possible spatial agenda, and how it engages with the pluralistic religious landscape of the city, particularly sites associated with other religious traditions. Furthermore, a comparative perspective on the designs of Kāñcī's sacred landscape in all three Sthalamāhātmyas is introduced to contextualise them within the local religious landscape, history, and geography.

Discussing the above-mentioned aspects gives first of all insights into the rich Kanchipuram Sthalamāhātmyas tradition. By approaching the texts from the angle of spatiality—a perspective that is often still neglected in studies of literature (Piatti 2008, 21)—the book sheds light on the concept of Kanchi as sacred space through the lens of three Sthalamāhātmya texts. While set in mythical, ahistorical times, Sthalamāhātmyas are assumed to be shaped by the geo-temporal context to which their composers referred (Dutta 2010, 32; Gonda 1977, 278). The texts on Kanchi thus allude not only to the historical city Kanchi in general but also to specific historical settings and developments. With their compositions presumably dating to different centuries, they relate to different phases in the life of the historical place and thus attest to historical developments within the city's diverse religious landscape. As I show in chapters 4, 5, and 6, the Sthalamāhātmyas thus present parallel but not necessarily temporally concurrent conceptions and interpretations of the city and its unique religious landscape, referring to and representing the diachronic aspect of the historical place and space. Furthermore, each text stands for one of the different religious traditions

7 Throughout this book, I use *sectarian* (*traditions*) to refer to the various Hindu religious traditions, in the most general sense to the major strands of Śaivism, Vaiṣṇavism, and Śāktisim, as part of "a synthesis of originally discrete religions that gradually came to be situated under the umbrella of a unified Hindu religion in the early second millennium" (Fisher 2017, 31).

that share Kanchipuram's space, as well for its own distinct tradition of textual transmission. Looking at their Śaiva, Śākta, or Vaiṣṇava perspectives as testimonies of Kanchi's pluralistic religious landscape and viewing them in parallel allows for a comprehensive exploration of the conception, construction, and consolidation of Kanchi as the multifarious sacred place it became and still is.

1.3 Methodology and Textual Sources

This book is primarily a textual study of the Sanskrit Sthalamāhātmya texts on Kanchipuram. It discusses the sacred geography of Kāñcī expressed in these texts through both inner-textual and comparative approaches. A cross-textual perspective is enabled by the existence of more than one Sthalamāhātmya on Kanchipuram, three of which are analysed here. Their portrayals construct literary geographies of the city with its numerous sacred places. Accordingly, the analysis of the places and spatial concepts mentioned in the texts is the core element. To this end, extracting the geography-related data from the Sthalamāhātmyas, mapping and visualising it, and lastly interpreting the cartographic representations are the required steps, as Barbara Piatti has pointed out in reference to the discussion of literary geographies (2008, 52, in reference to Moretti 1999, 25). The resulting literary-geographical maps allow not only to illustrate what is described in the texts and discern patterns of the geographies emerging from them, but also to explore what is left out (Moretti 1999, 31). Their aim is to add value to the textual analysis (Piatti 2008, 50), and cartographic representations are included in this book for this purpose (for details on the maps, see subsection 1.3.3). For comprehensive reference, the appendix gives details about the places mentioned in the three Sthalamāhātmyas and the historical sites with which they can be identified (for details, see subsection 1.3.2).

In light of the Sthalamāhātmyas evidently referring to the regional geography and the urban and religious landscape of Kanchi, I attempt to examine allusions to historical developments. This contextualisation builds on extant scholarly work in the form of secondary literature, with the first-hand consideration of historical (primary) sources such as inscriptions being beyond the scope of this work. Two excursions with subsequent shorter field-visits to Kanchipuram in January 2020 and March 2023 round off my

text-based approach.[8] These on-site stays allowed me to familiarise myself with Kanchipuram and develop a sense for its spatiality, to visit temples and shrines, and search for sites that I could not locate with the help of maps, secondary sources, and online research.

1.3.1 Primary Sources and Translations

There exist several glorifying Sanskrit texts on Kanchipuram in Sanskrit.[9] Three larger Sthalamāhātmya texts form the basis for my work (see below and chapter 3). They all deal with Kanchi's sacred geography in a broader perspective and are available in printed editions. A fourth and rather popular Sanskrit Sthalamāhātmya, available in many manuscripts and editions (Buchholz 2022, 18–19) and called *Hastigirimāhātmya*, has a more limited focus on the myth of Viṣṇu as Varadarāja (Varatarāja Perumāḷ) in Kanchi and is therefore not considered.[10] Likewise, two texts entitled *Kāñcīsthānamāhātmya*, which are available only in manuscript form, are not taken into account.[11]

The three Sthalamāhātmyas dealt with in this study are: i) a Śaiva text titled *Kāñcīmāhātmya* (KM(Ś)), in fifty chapters containing a total of 4700 verses, that attributes itself to the *Skandapurāṇa*; ii) a text with the title *Kāmākṣīvilāsa* (KV) with 1400 verses in fourteen chapters, which reflects a Śākta point of view and states to be a part of the *Mārkaṇḍeyapurāṇa*; iii) and a Vaiṣṇava text also titled *Kāñcīmāhātmya* (KM(V)) that claims to belong

8 The excursions were part of the workshop "Networks of Temples and Networks of Texts in South India," organised by the project Temple Networks in Early Modern South India: Narratives, Rituals, and Material Culture (German Research Foundation) in January 2020, in Pondicherry and Kanchipuram, India, and the workshop "Narratives on the Yathoktakārī Perumāḷ Temple" in February/March 2023, conducted by the Hindu Temple Legends in South India research unit (Heidelberg Academy of Sciences) in Pondicherry and Kanchipuram.

9 For an overview of the available editions and manuscripts of the Sthalamāhātmyas on Kanchi as well as the Tamil Talapurāṇams, see Buchholz 2022.

10 In his brief analysis of the *Hastigirimāhātmya*, Jonas Buchholz notes that this Māhātmya is of a Vaiṣṇava nature and largely corresponds to the other Vaiṣṇava Sthalamāhātmya on Kanchi, the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya*, in its telling of Varadarāja's myth of origin; it is a very popular text with many available printed editions and manuscripts in different scripts and commentaries in different languages (2022, 18–19).

11 On the *Kāñcīsthānamāhātmyas*, see Buchholz 2022, 20–21 and Buchholz and Raghavan (forthcoming).

to the *Brahmāṇḍapurāṇa* and contains 2300 verses arranged in thirty-two chapters.

For the Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya*, the printed edition from 1889 in Telugu script has been the main source, with additional consultation of the edition from 1867 in Telugu script when needed; for the *Kāmākṣīvilāsa*, the Devanagari edition from 1968 was the basis, with consideration of the edition from 1889 in Telugu script for variants; and for the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya*, the printed edition from 1907 in Devanagari script has been used, considering a handwritten paper manuscript for variant readings.[12] During my research, the texts became gradually available also in preliminary digital versions and thus in searchable Roman transcriptions.[13] The possibility to search the texts digitally proved to be an important tool, allowing me to look for specific place names, terms and place references in order to analyse and, importantly, compare the occurrence and structural use of these elements in the texts.[14]

The basis for my analysis of Kāñcī's sacred geography are translations of several chapters of the primary sources and the reading of several more passages whenever I came across an aspect that I wanted to explore in more detail. Generally, I have focused on the chapters and passages that present the designs of Kāñcī's sacred space. Overall, I have translated ten out of fourteen chapters of the *Kāmākṣīvilāsa*, fifteen out of thirty-two of the Vaiṣṇava

12 The manuscript is titled *Kāñcīkṣetramāhātmya* and is held by the French Institute of Pondicherry (transcript T. no. 1083). It is a copy of the manuscript D. 15705 of the Government Oriental Manuscripts Library in Chennai.

13 The passages in Roman transcription from these three texts reproduced in this publication are based on a transcript of the 1889 edition of the Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya*, produced by Meera Shridhar, Jonas Buchholz, and myself; a transcript of the 1907 edition of the Vaiṣṇava text, prepared by Marija Grujovska and myself; and a transcript of the 1968 Devanagari edition of the *Kāmākṣīvilāsa*, done by myself. No editorial intervention (such as normalisations of and notes on spelling, reading suggestions, corrections of errors) was carried out in the transcriptions of the Sanskrit prints, apart from the insertion of *avagrahas* wherever these were missing. When citing text passages in the present book, I have added text abbreviations for clarity (for example, KV for the *Kāmākṣīvilāsa*; see list of abbreviations on p. xi).

14 As of 2025, digital facsimiles of the three Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya*, the *Kāmākṣīvilāsa*, and the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya* have been produced by the Hindu Temple Legends in South India research unit (Heidelberg Academy of Sciences). They can be found at https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.72555 (Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya*, 1889 edition), https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.72557 (*Kāmākṣīvilāsa*, 1889 edition), and https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.72556 (Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya*, 1907 edition).

Kāñcīmāhātmya, individual passages of the Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya*. Besides, I could rely on summaries of several chapters of the latter text prepared by Jonas Buchholz. Regardless of whether there was another translation available which I could consult in the initial stages of my work, all translations from these texts given in this book are my own.

1.3.2 Identification of Sacred Places

As I demonstrate in this book, the sacred geographies from the Sthalamāhātmyas on Kanchi are grounded in the real-world city, its layout and religious landscape at a certain point of time in history. Terminologically, I differentiate between the notion of the sacred places from the Sthalamāhātmyas and the existing sites. Following Melanie Conroy's distinction of literary places in her study of literary geographies in the works of Honoré de Balzac and Marcel Proust, the existing sites are termed "historical" as their existence is attested in historical documents (2021, 6). Most of the sacred places mentioned in the three Sthalamāhātmyas can be identified with historical sites, temples, shrines, and temple tanks. The majority of these sites still exist in contemporary Kanchi. Establishing correlations is fundamental to find out how the descriptions from the texts refer to the spatiality of the real-world geography and which places of the more than four hundred sites found in the city are taken into account in the texts.

The localising of sacred places from the texts and their identification with historical sites is a core aspect in the discussion of Kāñcī's sacred geographies (see above). It has been done using a range of sources: I consulted maps available online (primarily GoogleMaps and GoogleEarth) and secondary sources about the sites in Kanchipuram, searched the internet for comments and even maps created by people writing online about their visits to these sites, and expanded my knowledge through discussions with scholars working on the same subject, especially Ute Hüsken and Jonas Buchholz. While I had to start from scratch regarding the identification of most places for the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya* and *Kāmākṣīvilāsa*, I was able to draw on a list compiled by Jonas Buchholz (2025) for the Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya* where the sacred places from the text have been located and identified with contemporary sites.

In many cases, the names from the texts are similar to the Sanskrit, Tamil, or Tamilised contemporary names, thus allowing a comparatively straightforward identification. For example, the goddess Kāmākṣī is still known under this Sanskrit name, alternatively under the similar Tamil name Kāmāṭcī,

or Kamakshi in anglicised spelling. The identification of the site of Kāmākṣī mentioned in the Sthalamāhātmyas with the Kāmākṣi Ammaṇ temple can therefore easily be made by the name alone. In other cases, a translation of the Sanskrit name from the Sthalamāhātmya into Tamil provides the hint. For example, the name of Śyāmaviṣṇu indicates that this Viṣṇu is (called) green-coloured (*śyāma*), which is reflected in his Tamil name Paccaivaṇṇa Perumāḷ, the green-coloured one (*paccai* means green in Tamil, *vaṇṇam* colour; TL s.v. *paccai*, *vaṇṇam*). However, when the Tamil and contemporary anglicised name of the shrine, temple, or water body bear little likeness to the name mentioned in the text, the identification depends to a great extent on the location given in the Sthalamāhātmyas and the mythological story of origin linked to the site.[15]

1.3.3 Spatial Dimensions and Visualisations on Maps

Understanding the pre-modern units of measurement given in the Sthalamāhātmyas is essential for the analysis of the location details. The texts on Kanchi use the units *yojana*, *gavyūti*, and *krośa*, which are all ancient Indian temporal length units. This means that they initially denote a distance covered in a certain time span; the individual distance actually covered can thus vary depending on the course of the route and the specific topographical conditions (curvy/straight, hilly/flat). A *yojana*, for example, is understood as a distance travelled without unharnessing the draught animal (PW, s.v. *yojana*). A distance in such a temporal length unit can therefore not be converted into a constant distance in contemporary standard length units like kilometres or miles, and a wide range of conversion values have been proposed over time (Danino 2015, 134). This ambiguity therefore requires estimates when searching for places according to the distances mentioned in the Sthalamāhātmya texts and further contextualising details like the name and the mythological story linked to the place in the text.[16]

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15 In some instances places from the texts could not (yet) be identified with historical places. This may be because the information from the texts is not conclusive enough or the historical place no longer exists in the area indicated by the text. Further research is needed in these cases, possibly on site, to explore the city on the ground and learn about the oral narratives and compare those to the mythological stories linked to the places in the texts.

16 For a purely text-internal spatial understanding, it is sufficient to consider the temporal distance units in relation to each other. The unit *yojana* is the longest; 1 *krośa* is 1/4 of a *yojana* or half of a *gavyūti* (PW, s.v. *krośa*); 1 *gavyūti* is 2 *krośas* (PW, s.v. *gavyūti*). Besides these, the *Kāmākṣīvilāsa* uses the unit *aṃśa* (lit. share

Yet, for the purpose of spatial visualisations on a geographical map employing contemporary units of length—as included in this book—a conversion value is required. To facilitate this, such a value for the *yojana*, the longest measurement unit used in the texts, will be derived below using two calculations. The first follows Michel Danino's (2015) survey of several of ancient Indian length units based on different Sanskrit texts, according to which a *yojana* would corresponds to around 14.6 kilometres.[17] The second calculation is based on Otto Böhtlingk's *Sanskrit-Wörterbuch*, which states that a *yojana* corresponds 4 *krośas*, where each *krośa* corresponds to 2 geographical miles (PW s.v. *yojana*; s.v. *krośa*). The distance of a geographical mile is derived from the circumference of the earth at the equator and is commonly defined as around 6080 feet, or around 1.8 kilometres (National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency 2024, 357). Accordingly, a *yojana* would correspond to 14.4 kilometres.[18] While both conversions provide concrete figures, they nonetheless leave a degree of imprecision in translating the distance of a *yojana* into contemporary units of measurement. Consequently, any value can only be regarded as approximate. For the sake of consistency in visualising spatial dimensions derived from the Sthalamāhātmyas in geographical maps, this study adopts the conversion value of 1 *yojana* as equal to 14.5 kilometres, averaged from the two calculations discussed above for the sake of simplicity.

The numerous maps included in this book serve to illustrate and better understand the spatial concepts and their internal structures that are found in the Sthalamāhātmyas on Kanchipuram (see section 1.3). In all maps that represent places from the Sthalamāhātmyas, sites that could not yet be clearly identified with historical places are evidently missing. The maps included in this book are created with the free online map creator uMap in accordance with its terms of use (FOSSGIS e.V. n.d.). uMap allows

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or part; PW, s.v. *aṃśa*). As it is not a common unit, the *Kāmākṣīvilāsa* defines its own usage: 1 *yojana* is 160 *aṃśas*, hence 1 *aṃśa* is a 1/160 of a *yojana* (*yojanaṃ paṇḍitaiḥ proktaṃ ṣaṣṭyuttaraśatāṃśakam* || KV 1.51cd).

17 The calculation based on Michel Danino's study (2015, 125–134) is as follows: 1 *yojana* equals 8000 *daṇḍas*, where each *daṇḍa* is equivalent to 96 *aṅgulas*. Using the commonly accepted value of 19 millimetres per *aṅgula* that he identifies, 1 *daṇḍa* measures 96 × 19 millimetres, or 1.824 metres. Accordingly, 1 *yojana* equals 8000 × 1.824 metres, resulting in a total length of approximately 14.59 kilometres

18 1 *yojana* equals 4 *krośas*. Given that 1 *krośa* corresponds to 2 geographical miles—approximately 1.8 kilometres—each *krośa* measures around 3.6 kilometres. Consequently, 1 *yojana* equates to 4 × 3.6 kilometres, yielding a total of approximately 14.4 kilometres.

creating maps with the map layers by OpenStreetMap (OSM), a free, open map database, licensed under an Open Data Commons Open Database License (ODbL). This means OSM data can be copied, shared, and modified freely—as long as OSM and its contributors are credited; if one builds on OSM data or adapts it, the result can only be distributed under the same license (OpenStreetMap Foundation n.d.). Accordingly, all maps created by me are licensed under the ODbL license. This applies to i) the maps included in this book, which have been created adding markers and forms to OSM map layers, some of which are further annotated using third-party software as permitted by the license of OSM; and ii) an online map created with uMap that shows the places mapped in the three Sthalamāhātmyas. It can be viewed at https://umap.openstreetmap.de/de/map/ma-2024_68868.

1.4 Approaching Sacred Geography

As they occur in works of literature, the descriptions of Kāñcī in the Sthalamāhātmyas are first of all and generally speaking literary landscapes. A literary account of places, or a literary geography can take different forms; one of its fundamental aspects is the extent to which the place(s) described, the imagined place(s), refer to the real-world geography (Piatti 2008, 23–32).[19] In any case, the subsequent discussion of the landscape is subject to the fundamental premise in the consideration of literary geography that Barbara Piatti (2008, 25) points out in her work on the geography of literature: "Es gibt Berührungspunkte zwischen fiktionaler und realer Geographie" (there are points of contact between the fictional and the real geography).

19 The term *literary geography* is used ambiguously. As a discipline and situated at the junction of human geography and literary studies, an interdisciplinary subject area, the conceptual understanding of "literary geography" is controversially discussed and there have been different uses of this phrase over time (Alexander 2015). Sheila Hones (2018) argues for a distinction in the humanities between literary geography as an academic subdiscipline using approaches of geography and social sciences in literature, and the study of geography in literature. Robert Tally (2020, 2021), in turn, sees less clear-cut lines in the studies of space and literary geography "as the terrain examined through various types of spatially oriented critical practices" (2020, 3). In that, it is similar to literary cartography, imaginative geography, or geohumanities (Alexander 2015, 5). I use it in the sense of a literary account of geography in literary works and treat it as a topic (Piatti 2008) rather than adressing theoretical issues.

When the fictional world largely overlaps with the geographical, Melanie Conroy speaks of a "realist geography" (2021, 8). In her study of the literary geographies in the works of Honoré de Balzac and Marcel Proust, she explains such a geography as "a fictional world in which most locations correspond roughly to historical locations with the same names and other shared characteristics such as country, language, population, topography, or landmarks" (2021, 8). Following this framing, all three of the Sthalamāhātmyas on Kanchi do present such a realist geography of the city, with two of the three texts, namely the Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya* and the *Kāmākṣīvilāsa*, in particular following a geography-based approach.

To make use of Edward Soja's (1996) terminology, the places referred to in the Sthalamāhātmyas can further be characterised as "real-and-imagined" places: conceptually, such places or spaces are a blending of physically tangible sites and mental conceptions about them (Soja 1996). While their material aspect is secondary, the Sthalamāhātmyas provide notions about their origin, meaning, and significance that is attached to divine presence and/or mythical events that are said to have happened there (for details, see pp. 18–20).

When adopting a text-immanent perspective, the Sthalamāhātmyas can be considered to depict a sacred geography of Kanchi.[20] The texts describe spaces and places to which particular significance is attributed and tell about their origin and rewarding powers. These places are either associated with a resident deities or are bodies of water. The plots of the stories, through which a geography of Kāñcī is laid out in the Sthalamāhātmyas, evolve in an imagined landscape, in a fictional, mythical world.[21] As Robert

20 For reasons of simplicity, I use *sacred geography* to denote the literary landscapes / geographies presented in the Sthalamāhātmya texts. Furthermore, I use *sacred geography, sacred landscape,* and *sacred space* with only slight differences in meaning; *sacred geography* tends to be more general and spatially encompassing, for example the region of Kanchipuram or the Indian subcontinent in its entirety, while *sacred landscape* underlines the composite structure to contain individual places in an area, and *sacred space* would refer to a spatially more confined area and emphasises the dimensional aspect, such as the city of Kanchi or even parts of it.

21 I use the term *imagined landscape* in a sense narrower than Diana Eck does in her article on the patterns of a Hindu sacred geography (1998), in which she uses the term as an equivalent of "sacred landscape". In her later work on the same topic (2012), Diana Eck speaks of "sacred landscape", with "imagined" as a qualifier. When using *imagined* or *mythical* landscape, I intend to stress the notions (of Kāñcī) on the narrative level in the myths, which are, of course, part of the more encompassing concept of sacred landscape. Furthermore, I would like to emphasise that while I refer to this nuance of the literary landscape(s) as

Tally states in the introduction to an edited volume on spatiality and narratives, "narratives are in some ways devices or methods used to map the real-and-imagined spaces of human experience" (2014, 3). The Sthalamāhātmyas on Kanchi use myths as the central means for various purposes: they inform about the origin of sacred places in the (mythological) stories by providing local(-ised) versions of the well-known Purāṇic motifs and plots. They thus create a local grounding. Their arrangement into a sequence conveys a particular interpretation of Kanchi's spatiality, more so as they express the sectarian orientation of the individual text, reflected in the selection of places and the interpretative perspective of the stories. Moreover, the texts contain prescriptions about rituals to be performed at the places, thus uniting descriptive (myths) and prescriptive (specifications for rituals) elements.

The descriptions of Kāñcī are based on the geo-spatiality and religious landscape of the historically grown city Kanchi. The latter is tangible and part of the real-world geography, the physical geography or space—that we can still see and experience on site. The Sthalamāhātmyas refer to the religious landscape of the city at a certain point of time in history. Assumptions about the period to which the texts might refer can only be based on information internal to the text or clear references, such as citations, found in other, datable, texts, since we lack information about the historical compilers (for details, see chapter 3). As the urban spatial layout, the cityscape, and the existence of religious sites evolve(d) through time, the referenced religious landscape may overlap with today's, but can also differ from it. At the same time, the Sthalamāhātmyas attest to the diachronic aspect of Kanchi and its religious landscape.

Geography and mythology are woven together in a sacred geography. In the view of Diana Eck, India's sacred geography is a "living, storied, and intricately connected landscape" consisting of "a great network of pilgrimage places—referential, inter-referential, ancient and modern, complex and ever-changing" (2012, 2).[22] Typical for Purāṇic literature, in the Sthala-

mythical and *imagined,* this wording does not and should not deny the perceived reality of these conceptions for many practising Hindu devotees. The distinction is chosen in order to refer to its occurrence in mythological narratives and to differentiate this layer of sacred landscape terminologically from the physically tangible one of the historically grown city of Kanchi.

22 For Diana Eck (1998, 2012), the contemporary angle, the multiplication of sites as reflection of relations in a polycentric landscape, and the aspect of pilgrims bringing to life this geography by travelling the land to visit places of extraordinary (sacred) nature are integral parts of the concept.

māhātmyas on Kanchipuram as well, the aspect of pilgrimage as movement through the landscape is non-determining, although the texts conceptually refer to the (physical) goals of pilgrimage, the sacred places (Jacobsen 2013, 22, 89).

The individual sacred place, often considered a pilgrimage place, is in Sanskrit denoted by the term *tīrtha*. Its nature is aptly described by Knut Jacobsen (2013, 22) who states that a "[*t*]*īrtha* in the geographical sense is a place of divine or extraordinary power that is believed to have a particular ability to fulfil wishes and grant salvation, which is a goal for pilgrimage travel (*tīrthayātrā*)." In a broader sense, sacred places of various kinds can be labelled as *tīrtha*—a hill, a forest, a pond, a city, or a temple (Jacobsen 2013, 22).

In a narrow sense, *tīrtha* denotes sacred places connected with water. This understanding reflects the early meaning of the word as it is found in the pre-Purāṇic literature. Literally meaning ford or crossing, it was used for ritual bathing and in the sense of threshold for a transition between this world and another (Eck 1981, 326–329). In the Purāṇic literature, the word *tīrtha* retains its meaning of a crossing and comes to mean a place of spiritual transition, where rituals are more potent and the presence of deities can be felt more intensely than elsewhere (Eck 2012, 7). Also, in the Purāṇas, there is a significant expansion of the concept of *tīrtha* and the form that a *tīrtha* could now take: from places sanctified by sages and gods or where a venerable person lived, to water, the human body or time whereby the number of *tīrthas* increased immensely (Nath 2009, 168).

Notably, there is a different use of the word *tīrtha* in the north and the south of India. As Diana Eck writes, "[s]o closely associated is the *tirtha* with pure, running river waters that in South India the word *tirtha* has come to mean sacred waters" (1981, 335). In precisely this way the word *tīrtha* is used in the Sthalamāhātmyas on Kanchi. Accordingly, I use *tīrtha* to denote a (sacred) water body with sacred properties, which is associated with the divine and attributed salvific powers.

Characteristics of Sacred Places

The Hindu sacred landscape of India is vast and densely dotted by the individual, often connected, places.[23] These are so numerous that Diana Eck wonders whether "the whole notion of 'sacred space' as somehow set apart

23 On the interconnectivity of places, see Eck 1998 and 2012.

from the profane is cast into question," since "sacred space is so vastly multiplied that there is little left untouched by the presence of the sacred" (2012, 76). This accumulation, the "richness of pilgrimage places in Hinduism is due not least to the richness of the divine world—that is, the number of gods and goddesses and sacred narratives are mirrored in the sacred geography" (Jacobsen 2013, 7).

A conceptual opposition between the sacred and the profane is a part of many theoretical approaches to "the sacred." Knut Jacobsen (2013, 8) proposes an interpretative translation of *tīrtha* as "sacred space," thus emphasising the spatial property of a *tīrtha* that sets it apart from its (profane) surroundings, for example expressed through ritual processions or a certain behaviour required therein.[24] Such a notion of a sacred place that addresses the physicality of a built environment of, for example, a temple at that location is not expressed in the Sthalamāhātmyas on Kanchi. Accordingly, the extent of individual sacred sites is not assessed, as the physical appearance of a place is of secondary importance. Only the city Kāñcī and the region are spatially demarcated by indicating their extents in all the three texts. Similar to sacred places, these spaces are considered sacred (*puṇya*) and of particular significance. However, they seem to be treated as specific formations, which is reflected in the relevance of their spatial aspect and in their usual general designation as *kṣetra* (area; for details, see pp. 21–22).

The concept of "sacred place" in the Sthalamāhātmyas instead emphasises two other qualities: the divine presence at a sacred place and its ascribed powers; Knut Jacobsen terms these as "divine space" and "salvific space" in his book on the conceptual development of Hindu pilgrimage (2013, 7–8). In the Purāṇic context—and accordingly in the Sthalamāhātmyas on Kanchi—the salvific power of a sacred place is thought to result from the deity or mythological character who once sanctified the place (Jacobsen 2013, 4–8).[25] These aspects are addressed in the myths from the Sthalamāhātmyas; they explain how a place originated, became sacred, and

24 My use of *sacred space* as equivalent to *sacred geography* differs from Knut Jacobsen's (2013) use of "sacred space" by which he points to the quality of a place as sacred as opposed to profane (cf. n. 20). His term of "salvific space", which emphasises the capacity of places/spaces to confer beneficial powers, corresponds most closely to the conception of significant places in the Sthalamāhātmyas on Kanchi and which I call *sacred* places.

25 Nevertheless, it is the natural surroundings that are more likely to be considered sacred: water, mountains, caves, or trees (Gupta 2011, 4–5). For details on the notion of sacred sites in the Purāṇic literature, see Eck 1981, Jacobsen 2013, and Nath 2009.

justify its sacredness and salvific power. An important element to the latter are "the declaration and quantification of merit that can be attained by either visiting these places [...] or by performing specific rituals—mainly ritual baths [...][and] worship of the resident deities" (Gengnagel 2011, 23). These statements usually occur in specific sections and are denoted as *phalaśruti* (that which has been heard about the rewards) of a site.

The affiliation with the divine and the rewarding powers ascribed to a place are thought to be inherent in a place and thus independent of the built environment of the historical site, shrine, temple or water body in the physical landscape with which it can be identified. The background to this is that the sacredness is considered to be everlasting whereas the tangible appearance is subject to change. These parallel but separable features are the fundamental aspects of sacred places, as Diana Eck elaborates in her book on India's sacred geography:

> Among the most important developments over the thousand years during which the *māhātmyas* of the *tīrthas* [sacred places] came to prominence was the emergence of the constructed *tīrtha*—the temple, built with the durability of stone. In most *tīrthas*, the temple itself is not what is important; it is the place, the power, the manifestation of the divine. The great *tīrthas* were there long before elaborate temples were constructed [...]. A *tīrtha* does not need to have a temple, and when temples are destroyed or fall into ruin, the *tīrtha* remains. (2012, 76–77)

The permanence built on an attributed origin in mythical times is a core characteristic of sacred places. Their physical appearance is usually not taken into account in most Sthalamāhātmyas. The texts on Kanchi include only a few references to physical features of sacred sites. Their origin myths instead focus on the emerging divine presence at a place. In essence it is said that after a deity has manifested itself it remains at a place in its particular local form with its local name. The outward form of the residing deity may be described; for example, an anthropomorphic form in the case of Viṣṇu, the establishing of an aniconic *śivaliṅga* in the case of Śaiva sacred sites. Similarly, the water of a sacred body of water can be mentioned as an elemental characteristic of such a place. None of these features, however, indicate a built structure as we might imagine it when we think of a sacred site as temple tank or temple.

Terminology

In the Sthalamāhātmyas on Kanchi different types of sacred places are terminologically differentiated. There are areas, bodies of water, and all other sacred places. An area is commonly denoted by the term *kṣetra*, which can be understood as (sacred) region, landed property, or pilgrimage place / area (MW, s.v. *kṣetra*). As a sacred territory, a *kṣetra* can generally house several individual sacred places and further sacred spaces. The definition of a *kṣetra* creates boundaries and a sense of property in the Sthalamāhātmyas. For example, the Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya* delineates an extended region around Kāñcī and calls it Kāñcīkṣetra, the area of Kāñcī. It thus refers to the spatial dimension of what is considered to belong to Kāñcī, which in turn is associated with a certain idea of Kāñcī. At the same time, the texts also construct spaces as arenas for events of particular plots. For example, the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya* defines sacrificial halls as venue for the myths set in Kāñcī. These illustrate the spatiality of the mythical landscape.

Bodies of water are generally denoted by the term *tīrtha*, reflecting the narrow understanding of the word in the usage of the term in South India (Eck 1981, 335; see section 1.4). Most often, the word *tīrtha* is an integral part of the specific name of a water body, for example Sarvatīrtha. As for denoting a sacred place that is not a *tīrtha*, the texts employ varying strategies. For the most part, only the specific name of the resident deity of a place is mentioned, such as Anekapeśvara (Śiva), Yathoktakārī (Viṣṇu), or Praḷayabandhinī (Devī). The place name is thus identical with that of the resident deity.

Besides, the Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya* frequently and consistently uses the general designation *sthāna* (place) for sacred places of Śiva (*śivaliṅgas*) and Viṣṇu. This wording emphasises the relevance of the location of the places and reveals a retrospective understanding of them as conceptually already existing—at a spatially stable location—when referring to them.[26] In the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya*, in turn, the emergence of sacred places in Kāñcī only comes about in the context of the myths that describe their origin, and they are conceptually not considered to exist before (see section 6.3). This prospective approach reduces the relevance of a place and its specific location in terms of spatial orientation and thus also the need for a linguistic la-

26 A typical first line of an episode about a *śivaliṅga* in the Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya* would read as follows: *athānyad api vakṣyāmi sthānaṃ śambhor mahattaram* | KM(Ś) 31.1ab. In this case, the narrator Kauśika begins the story on the *liṅga* Vīrāṭṭahāseśvara.

belling. A general term for place is not employed in the Vaiṣṇava text. Only once, in a summarising and retrospective statement at the end of the text's main part (KM(V) 30.73cd), *sthāna* is used in context of Viṣṇu's places.[27] Instead, these are—if at all—termed *āyatana* (seat, abode), with Varadarāja's abode once described with the similar term *ālaya* (dwelling [place]). Accordingly, this Sthalamāhātmya lays less emphasis than the Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya* on a place as such and rather stresses its nature as abode of the deity residing at the very place.

Similarly, the *Kāmākṣīvilāsa* does not use a general term for a sacred place. The main exception is the seat (*pīṭha*) of the goddess Kāmākṣī and by extension from it the area of Kāñcī. Kāmākṣī's site is repeatedly referred to as *nābhisthāna* (place at the navel of the earth; KV 1.56cd, 11.6ab, 1.29c–32, 13.73, 13.77). This might refer to the name Kāñcī, which is homonymous with the word for girdle. In addition, Kāmākṣī's place is also the only one that is referred to by another general term. In a passage describing certain built structures of the site, that is the temple (KV 12.52–73), *āyatana* is used. The *Kāmākṣīvilāsa* thus shows a strong sense of place in relation to the site to which the greatest significance is attached. This cursory analysis of the terminology of spatial concepts in the Sthalamāhātmyas on Kanchi indicates that the use of labels is apparently adapted to and supports the conceived designs of Kāñcī's sacred geography in the texts to produce a coherent overall concept.

1.5 Outline of the Book

The first two chapters following this Introduction (**Chapter 1**) provide the framing for the study of Kāñcī's sacred geographies by introducing the place Kanchi and its Sthalamāhātmya texts. **Chapter 2** approaches Kanchipuram by looking at the key elements characterising Kanchi's urban and religious history; it focuses on the spatial structures to give insights into the historical city which is the local setting that the Sthalamāhātmyas refer to and interpret. **Chapter 3** introduces the genre of Sthalamāhātmyas, common characteristics of these texts, and the understanding of sacred places that is

27 […] *aṣṭādaśasthānamāhātmyaṃ śārṅgadhanvanaḥ* | KM(V) 30.73cd.
Apart from that, *sthāna* is occasionally used in the context of Kāmakoṣṭha, the cave situated in Kāñcī's centre, where the myth centring around Viṣṇu's manifestation Vāmana is spatially set in the text (see section 6.3).

expressed in them. It discusses the three Sthalamāhātmyas on Kanchi, their structure and core myths, and considers their Śaiva, Śākta, or Vaiṣṇava outlook as consistently determining element.

Chapters 4, **5**, and **6** deal with the concepts of Kāñcī's sacred geography from the Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya*, the *Kāmākṣīvilāsa*, and the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya*. For each text separately, they explore the spatial designs that situate Kāñcī in a broader sacred geography and present its sacred space. They discuss the elements that structure the presentations of the city's sacred geography, such as the selection and arrangement of the sacred places. Furthermore, references to the multifocal layout, the religiously pluralistic landscape, and physical geography of the historical city as locally grounding and interpretative features that shape the spatial conceptions of Kāñcī are examined.

The concluding **Chapter 7** reverses the perspective and starts out from the historical city to link the main conclusions, drawn from the study of the Sthalamāhātmyas and presented in the previous three chapters, with the geo-spatiality, urban history, and religious landscape of the historical city. In this setting, comparative reflections are undertaken to explore common grounds and significant differences between sacred geographies presented in the three Sthalamāhātmyas.

The **Appendix** lists the sacred places mentioned in the Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya*, the *Kāmākṣīvilāsa*, and the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya*. This directory contains the modern Tamil name of the historical site with which the place from the text is identified as well as its coordinates and the name of the place as it appears in the respective text. For the Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya*, the details are based on a list prepared by Jonas Buchholz (2025), for the other two Sthalamāhātmyas I gathered the details in the course of my research.