2 The Space: Kanchipuram

Kanchipuram, in short Kanchi, is a South Indian city[28] situated some 70 kilometres southwest of Tamil Nadu's state capital Chennai. Its popular epithets City of a Thousand Temples and Silk City highlight two main hallmarks of the place. While the latter epithet refers to the city's trademark, the local silk weaving industry that produces the famous Kanchipuram saris, the first plays on the city's significance as a pilgrimage centre with more than four hundred larger and smaller temples, shrines, and dozens of temple tanks dotting the city. The many temples densely spread over the entire city are a unique characteristic of Kanchi (Stein 2021, 106).

In contrast to many other temple towns and cities in the south of the Indian subcontinent, Kanchipuram's urban layout is not arranged around one predominant temple acting as a single religious, ritual, and social centre. While examples of Tamil Nadu's temple cities and towns characterised by a monocentric spatial arrangement around one temple include, among others, cities such as Srirangam with the Vaiṣṇava Araṅkanāta Cuvāmi temple; Chidambaram with the Śaiva Naṭarācar temple; Madurai with the Mīṉāṭci Cuntarēcuvarar temple dedicated to the Goddess and Śiva,[29] Kanchi does not fall in their category. Instead, there are three large temples in Kanchipuram: the Śaiva Ēkāmparanātar, the Śākta Kāmākṣi Ammaṉ, and the Vaiṣṇava Varatarāja Perumāḷ temples (see figures 2.5, 2.6, and 2.4). These three most renowned religious sites bear witness to Kanchi's particularly pluralistic religious landscape and determine the interpretation of urban spatiality. The cityscape of Kanchi further reflects a cluster-like development of the city in which villages and urban settlements, each with residential areas around one or more centrally placed temples, gradually grew together over the centuries (Raman 1987, 67; Srivatsan 1992, 103; Stein 2022, 297). Flourishing side by side, the Hindu traditions of Śaivism, Śāktism, and Vaiṣṇavism shaped the city over the past two millennia, only to be joined by Buddhism and Jainism in the early centuries CE (Srinivasan 1979, 231–279).

28 According to the most recently available Indian Census (2011), Kanchipuram has around 164 000 inhabitants with an estimated population of around 237 000 in 2025 (Census Organization of India, 2025).

29 On these cities, see contributions in Michell 1993.

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Among the population today, there is a Hindu majority of over ninety percent.[30]

The glorifying Sanskrit Sthalamāhātmyas dealing with Kanchi allude to the historical changes in spatial and religious conditions. In their interpretations of Kāñcī's sacred landscape, they blend an imagined, mythical concept of Kāñcī with the historical and physical place. It is, therefore, essential to first take a look at the geographical, historical, and spatial setting of the city to understand references made to these aspects in the texts.

2.1 Geography

Kanchi is situated in an open, largely flat terrain with fertile soils (Seshadri 2003, 7; Raman 1975, 2–3), with two rivers, the Palar and the Vegavathi, marking the area (see figure 2.1). The larger Palar, one of the major eastwards flowing rivers that spring from the Eastern Ghats (Resmi et al. 2021, 360), originates in the Nandi Hills (Karnataka) and makes its way through the lowlands of Tamil Nadu towards the Bay of Bengal. On its east- / south-eastwards course, the Palar runs past Kanchi a few kilometres south of the city.[31] As a northern sidearm of the Palar, the Vegavathi traverses Kanchi in its southern part, around 2 to 3 kilometres north of the Palar. The Vegavathi is a seasonal river which tends to be largely dry even in the rainy season; only a small stream forms in parts of the riverbed, as observed in the first decade of the twenty-first century by Ute Hüsken (pers. comm., November 2021).[32]

30 The latest data is available from the Indian Census 2011 (Census Organization of India, 2025).

31 The Palar is essentially a seasonal river. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the river was completely dry most of the year. During heavy monsoon rains it could, however, turn into a torrential river (Ute Hüsken, pers. comm., October 2021). A colonial source from the last quarter of nineteenth century indicates a similarly contrasting nature of the Palar. In some years, the river is described as having no water at all, while in other years it flows continuously for several months, with a strong current at that (Crole 1879, 1–2).

32 According to Ute Hüsken, however, people in Kanchi recount memories passed on from earlier generations regarding floods of the Vegavathi (pers. comm., November 2021). In fact, the Vegavathi is a larger paleo-channel of the Palar river, meaning that the Palar once flowed in the riverbed of the present Vegavathi and then changed its course to the present—in comparison more southern—in the Holocene (Resmi et al. 2017). In more recent times, water

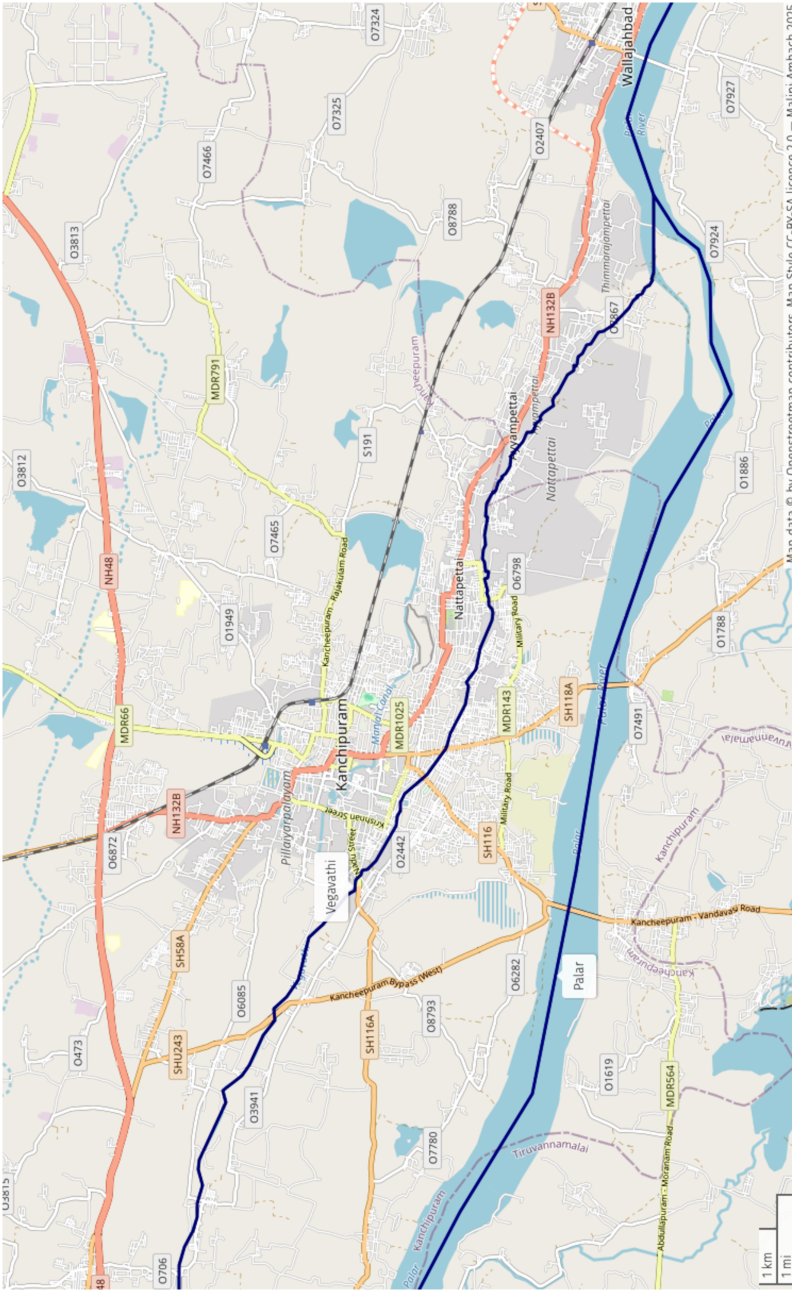

Fig. 2.1 Kanchi with the rivers Palar and Vegavathi.

2.2 A Centre of Religious Diversity and Learning

Situated in the historical region known as Tondaimandalam,[33] Kanchipuram has one of the longest uninterrupted histories of any city in South India, with a continuous settlement since ca. 300 BCE (Raman 1987, 67–68; Heitzman and Rajagopal 2004, 239).[34] As early as the first century CE, Kanchi is documented as an urban economic centre with mercantile activities; over the following centuries, it developed into an important supra-regional commercial centre with (maritime) trade links to Southeast Asia (Shanmugan 1992, 77; Champakalakshmi 1996, 390). By the first half of the seventh century, it had become a vibrant religious centre and a place of learning, as described by the Chinese Buddhist monk Hsuan Tsang in the account of his travels in India (Hsuan Tsang 1884, 228–230). Hsuan Tsang writes of the learnedness of Kanchi's inhabitants, of a few hundred Buddhist communities and several thousand monks, a large Buddhist monastery in the southern part where the most learned scholars met, and a *stūpa* (a Buddhist monument commemorating Buddha) erected by the Mauryan emperor Ashoka (third/second cent. BCE). He also mentions a great number of Jain monks living in the city, and around eighty *deva* temples.[35]

Thus, besides harbouring Buddhist activities described by Hsuan Tsang, Kanchi had developed into an educational hub of Jainism as well and was considered one of four *vidyasthānas* (centres of learning) by the Digambara Jains (Ekambaranathan 1992, 36). Several renowned Jain scholars visited the city in the first six centuries CE and the early Pallava rulers of Kanchipuram were followers of Jainism (Srinivasan 1979, 239–242). The subsequent period, however, saw a decline in the importance of both Buddhism and Jainism in the city due to dwindling or complete withdrawal of royal patronage (Minakshi 1954, 5–6; Srinivasan 1979, 240). In contemporary Kanchi there are only a few Buddhist remains in the form of statues and

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works and sand mining further impacted the riverbed of the Vegavathi (Pisipaty 2011, 45).

33 Tondaimandalam is the Tamil name for the country ruled by the Pallava kings and comprised the northeastern districts of the modern state of Tamil Nadu and the southern-eastern edge of Andhra Pradesh (Mahalingam 1969, 2–3; Schier 2018, 25, n. 20). For a visualisation, see figure 7.1.

34 For comprehensive historical studies, see Srinivasan 1979 and Mahalingam 1969. On excavations carried out in the area of Kanchi, see Pisipaty 2011 and Raman 1987.

35 According to Kerstin Schier (2018, 15), the term *deva* temples refers to the Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, and presumably also the Jain temples.

relief carvings. Jainism, however, is still a living tradition: its base has been and still is the suburb of Tirupparuttikkunram located south of the Vegavathi river, now popularly called Jina-Kanchi (see figure 2.2).[36] In addition, Kanchi was the location of a Brahminical educational institution (*ghaṭika*), as evidenced by inscriptions from the fourth century CE (Champakalakshmi 1996, 391).[37]

The kings of the Pallava dynasty, who ruled the area between the third and the ninth century CE, shaped Kanchi's political fate.[38] They made the city their capital, expanded it and changed its urban outline (see details in section 2.3). From the seventh and eighth centuries onwards, the royal patrons were increasingly influenced by Tamil poets, the Śaiva Nāyaṉmār and the Vaiṣṇava Āḻvārs, exponents of the Bhakti movement of the Hindu traditions. The poets composed devotional poems about Śiva and Viṣṇu said to reside at a particular place, propagating worship of these two gods through devotion and thereby opposing the asceticism-based teachings of the Buddhists and the Jains.[39] In the wake of the new movement, the building of temples dedicated to Śiva or Viṣṇu through the agency of the ruling kings increased, also in Kanchi. One of the most monumental physical testimonies of the Pallava temple architecture in Kanchi is the Kailācanātar temple, dedicated to Śiva and commissioned by the Pallava King Narasimhavarman II (reigned 690–728), which event "marks a turning-point away from what was earlier a religious centre dominated by Buddhists" (Thapar 2003, 331).[40]

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36 On Buddhism in Kanchi, see Srinivasan 1979, 231–238 and Seshadri 2003, 163–164; on the Jain tradition, see Srinivasan 1979, 239–242 and Ekambaranathan 1992; on the Buddhist and the Jain relics and temples in the city, see Minakshi 1954, 26–30 and Stein 2021, 182–193. Noteworthy is the discovery of Buddhist architectural relics and Buddha statues at the site and in the vicinity of the Kāmākṣi Ammaṉ temple, suggesting that there was once a Buddhist (and Jain) site at this location, which was gradually transformed (Rao 1915; Venkataraman 1973, 19–20).

37 Its members were also politically involved, for example in the selection of the Pallava ruler Nandivarman II in the eighth century (Srinivasan 1979, 25, 55).

38 On the Pallavas, see Mahalingam 1969, Srinivasan 1979, 15–68, Seshadri 2003, 13–21, and Gopalan 1928.

39 For an overview on the Bhakti movement, see Narayanan 2018; for the Tamil Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava traditions, see Prentiss 1999, Champakalakshmi 2004, McGlashan 2006, Peterson 1982, and Jagannathan 2015.

40 Another example is the Vaiṣṇava Vaikuṇṭa Perumāḷ temple built in the eighth century. See Hudson 2008a for a detailed study of the Vaikuṇṭa Perumāḷ, and Kaimal 2005 and 2020 on the Kailācanātar temple. On the Pallava temples in Kanchi, see Minakshi 1954, 11–18 and Stein 2021, 43–102.

As the ruling dynasty of Kanchipuram, the Pallavas were eventually superseded by the Chola kings (tenth–thirteenth century). Kanchi became the regional seat of the northern part of their empire and the cityscape again underwent a structural reorientation: considering economic, political, and socio-religious aspects, the Cholas established a new south-north thoroughfare which connected Kanchi to important places in the region and key sites within the city itself. The new road served also as the focal line for the orientation of shrines and temples within the city (Stein 2021, 103–152). During the time of the Cholas, the existing temples were renovated and expanded, and the new ones built, increasingly sponsored and maintained by local communities rather than the royal patrons (Stein 2021, 143–144).[41] With the rise of the Vijayanagara empire which covered most of South India (fourteenth–seventeenth century), Kanchi came under the rule of its sovereigns (Srinivasan 1979, 197–213). The most famous Vijayanagara king, Krishnadevaraya, gifted villages and other financial resources to the Ēkāmparanātar temple in Kanchi and gilded the tower superstructure (*vimāna*) above the sanctum sanctorum of the Varatarāja Perumāḷ temple (Srinivasan 1979, 200–201).

In the politically turbulent times that followed the collapse of the Vijayanagara empire, Kanchi became, in turn, a part of various Muslim empires and lost its political importance (seventeenth–eighteenth century; Raman 1975, 36–38).[42] In the eighteenth century, following the Carnatic wars, the British East India Company assumed control in the region (Raman 1975, 38–39); a century later the British Crown took over from The Company whose former territories became part of the British Raj and remained so until India's independence in 1947 (Kulke and Rothermund 1998, 315–319, 391).

During the rule of various dynasties over the centuries, Kanchi was not only a supra-regional political centre, but also attracted well-known philosophical and religious scholars of pan-Indian significance. Most notable were Shankara, Ramanuja, and Venkatanatha. Shankara, an eighth-century Advaitavedānta scholar, is traditionally considered by the monastic institution Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham to be its founder (Wilke 1996, 135). According to the available sources, the Peetham has been associated with the

41 On the political-economic structure in Kanchi during the Cholas, see Heitzman 2001 and Srinivasan 1979, 94–121; see Shanmughan 1992 for a perspective on the economy with a broader historical timeframe.

42 On the impact of the aftereffects of the Mughal invasion on the religious practices of the Kāmākṣi Ammaṉ, Ēkāmparanātar, and Varatarāja Perumāḷ temples, see Raman 1975, 37–38, Hüsken 2017, and Schier 2018, 138–149.

Kāmākṣi Ammaṉ temple since the fourteenth century and direct management of the temple since 1842 (Venkataraman 1992, 70; Schier 2018, 125, n. 27).[43] The head of the Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham is one of the most influential religious leaders not only in Tamil Nadu but also the whole of India, with close ties to the political and business elites (Hüsken 2021a, 518–520).

For Ramanuja (eleventh/twelfth century), founder of the Viśiṣṭādvaita philosophy and one of the most prominent Śrīvaiṣṇava teachers, Kanchi and particularly the Varatarāja Perumāḷ temple was a central place of his activities. Ramanuja's association with the temple significantly increased its standing (Raman 1975, 62–66).[44] Venkatanatha (thirteenth/fourteenth century) was a native of the Kanchi region and principal preceptor in the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition. Better known as Vedanta Desika, he was one of the eminent spiritual teachers (*ācāryas*) at the Varatarāja Perumāḷ temple. His most significant works emphasise the orthodox Sanskrit perspective on the Śrīvaiṣṇava and Viśiṣṭādvaita teachings, reflecting the Sanskrit-oriented, traditional settings in the scholastic and religious communities of the cosmopolitan and religiously pluralistic city of Kanchi during his lifetime (Hopkins 2002, 35–37).[45]

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43 However, there is no clear epigraphic evidence to support the claim that Shankara himself founded the Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham (Wilke 1996, 135). The (perceived) link to the Kāmākṣi Ammaṉ temple, though, is close. In the first enclosure there is a shrine dedicated to Shankara, and several other images of him can be found inside the temple as well. Moreover, Shankara is said to have defeated Buddhists in Kanchi and might have transformed a former Buddhist shrine into the temple for the goddess Kāmākṣī located at the same site (Minakshi 1954, 25). A local legend further narrates how he tamed the previously ferocious goddess Kāmākṣī into a gentle goddess firmly rooted in the Śākta Śrīvidyā tradition (Wilke 1996).

44 Kanchi's development into a major site of South Indian Vaiṣṇavism already began before Ramanuja's time (Srinivasan 1979, 257), but it was particularly the Varatarāja Perumāḷ temple that gained importance through his influence. In the fourth enclosure of the temple there is a shrine dedicated to him.

45 As a polymath and a cosmopolitan, Venkatanatha linked transregional and local identities and values, Sanskrit and Tamil literary traditions. He was also an author of devotional poetry and among others composed the *Meyviratamāṉmiyam*, a Talapurāṇam-style Tamil work that narrates the origin of Viṣṇu as Varadarāja and is part of Venkatanatha's prose *Attikirimāhātmyam* in Manipravalam about Varadarāja, and the *Varadarājapañcāśat*, a devotional praise of Varadarāja in Sanskrit that is read to the god on selected occasions at the Varatarāja Perumāḷ temple (Hopkins 2002, 79–114, 169–198; Raman 1975, 70–72, 99–100; Buchholz 2022, 31–32). There is a shrine dedicated to Vedanta Desika in the gardens (fourth enclosure) of the Varatarāja Perumāḷ temple.

The religious landscape of the city still bears witness to the influence of these three scholars. The Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham is one of Kanchi's most influential religious institutions with close links to the Kāmākṣi Ammaṉ temple and actively contributes to religious, social, and educational activities of the city, while the Varatarāja Perumāḷ temple is an important centre of the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition from approximately the eleventh century onwards (Venkataraman 1992, 73–75; Raman 1975, 88).

The cityscape thus testifies to Kanchi's eventful history, most visibly in the form of temples which reflect different architectural styles developed under the rule of various dynasties.[46] Less obvious at first glance is how the spatial layout of the city also maps the eras of its political history, reflecting the manifestation of policymaking over the centuries, including the development of religious landscapes.

2.3 Spatial Cityscape

Contemporary Kanchi displays a conceptual division into three spatial zones, of which two are clearly predominant: Vishnu-Kanchi and Shiva-Kanchi (see figure 2.2). These are not just names of certain local neighbourhoods but rather prevalent bynames denoting two divisions of the city. One covers the southeastern part around the Vaiṣṇava Varatarāja Perumāḷ as the centre point and the other covers the northwestern part with the Śaiva Ēkāmparanātar and the Śākta Kāmākṣi Ammaṉ temples as the most monumental sites.

Slightly less prominent—probably due to its more remote location on the outskirts of the city—is Jina-Kanchi. The name seems to indicate a religious affiliation, in this case to Jainism and its sacred places and followers. Jina-Kanchi comprises the suburb of Tirupparuttikkunram in the southwestern part of Kanchi, south of the river Vegavathi. The two major Jain temples of the city are located here and this area is historically associated with Jain activities (see section 2.2).

According to K. V. Raman (1975, 3), "[t]he name *Vishnu-Kāñchi* is today applied to the immediate vicinity of this [(the Varatarāja Perumāḷ)] temple and upto the Thēraḍi, where the temple car [of said temple] is stationed." This huge temple chariot (*ratha*; Tamil *tēr*) of the Varatarāja Perumāḷ temple is

46 On the architectural history and Kanchi's temples, see Ayyar 1993, Minakshi 1954, Stein 2021, and Seshadri 2003.

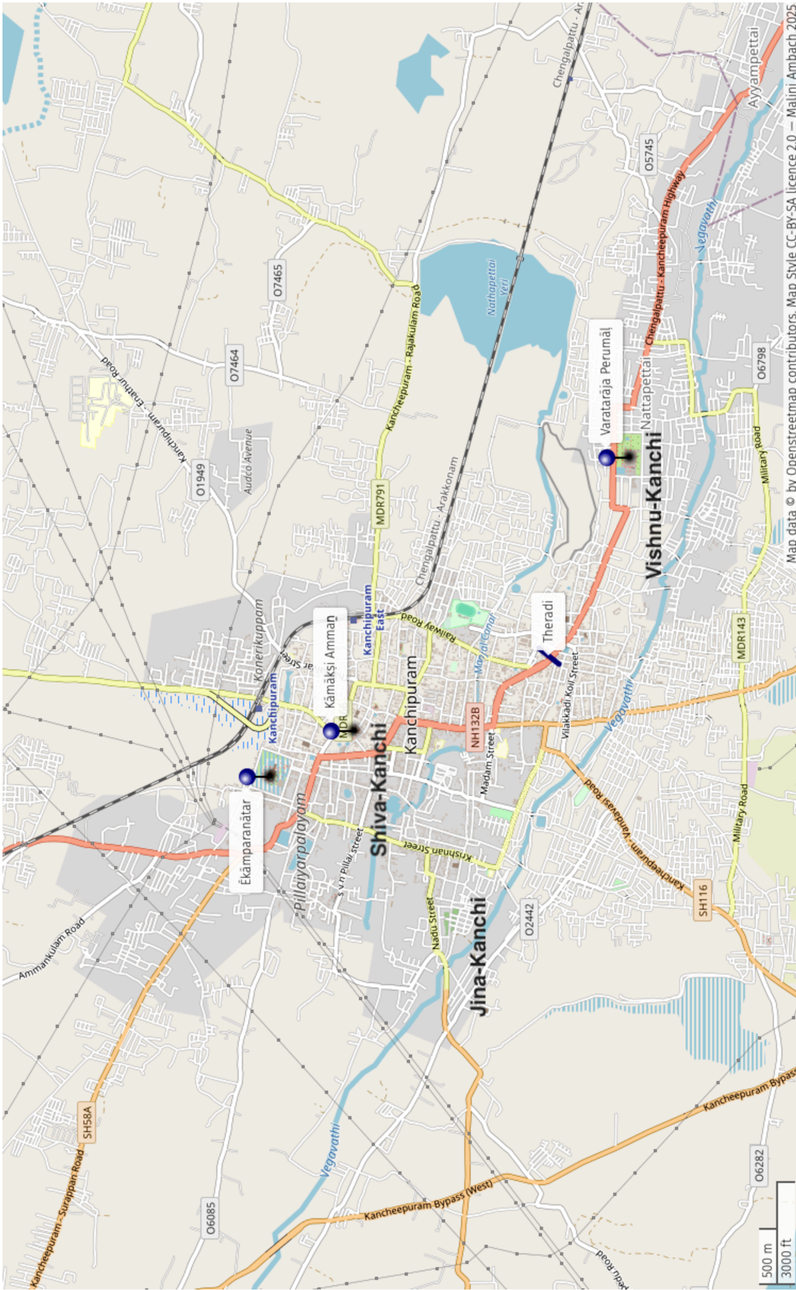

Fig. 2.2 Contemporary spatial divisions in Kanchi, approximate visualisation (based on Schier 2018, 16, fig. 1.1).

Fig. 2.3 *Map of Conjeeveram* by John Gould. 23 April 1816 (© British Library Board, WD 2701).

kept on Gandhi Road, the main street leading to the southeast of Kanchi (see marker in figure 2.2).[47] It stands next to two fragmentary pillars from the sixteenth century that “likely once supported an arched gateway that marked the passage between the two city zones” (Stein 2021, 133), that is, Vishnu-Kanchi and Shiva-Kanchi. The location of this crossing is probably a testimony to urban development: until the thirteenth century, the area around the Varatarāja Perumāḷ temple was an independent village called Attiyur, which gradually expanded to also include other Viṣṇu temples further west (Raman 1975, 3; Stein 2021, 67; 2022, 297), while the urban core of Kanchi found around the Vaiṣṇava Ulakaḷanta Perumāḷ further northwest gradually expanded towards the east, towards Attiyur (Raman 1987, 66–67; Stein 2021, 63–68).

On the *Map of Conjeeveram* by John Gould (see figure 2.3), an early map of Kanchi from 1816, a gap in the urban development is visible in the area of Theradi, where the Yatōktakāri and Aṣṭapuja Perumāḷ temples are located in the immediate vicinity, visually separating the southeastern part from the rest of the city. Based on this representation, it appears that at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the spatial boundaries of the former Attiyur and Kanchi were still evident. As we shall see, one of the Sthalamāhātmyas on Kanchi, the *Kāmākṣīvilāsa*, seems to take this “boundary” into account and situates a territory assigned to Viṣṇu east of it (see subsection 5.3.1).

The origin of the designations Vishnu- and Shiva-Kanchi (and Jina-Kanchi) is unclear. K. V. Raman (1975, 3) suggests that the notion of Vishnu-Kanchi might have come about in the sixteenth century when the Vijayanagara King Krishnadevaraya is documented to have established processional routes to be taken by the temple chariots of the Ēkāmparanātar and the Varatarāja Perumāḷ temples, whose routings had led to a dispute between the officials of both temples before. Emma Stein (2021, 36–37), however, proposes that the names became current only in the second half of the nineteenth century. As the major Viṣṇu temples are more or less evenly distributed throughout the city, it is not far-fetched to conclude that the designation Vishnu-Kanchi takes into account the position of the Varatarāja Perumāḷ temple as a centre of the religious landscape. Based on this, such a designation would not have arisen before the eleventh century, as the temple’s importance only increased from the eleventh century onwards, following its

47 What is not clear from this spatial marker mentioned by K. V. Raman, however, is where the boundaries of Vishnu-Kanchi are drawn in the wider geography of the city. A practical and precise spatial delimitation probably does not exist, even though the inhabitants of Kanchi seem to have a distinct idea of whereto Vishnu-Kanchi extents.

expansion under the rule of the Chola King Kulottunga I, its association with Ramanuja (eleventh/twelfth century), and a shift of attention to the temple in the local Vaiṣṇava community in the fourteenth century (Raman 1975, 60, 88; Nagaswamy 2011, 5–6, 34).

While these designations, Vishnu- and Shiva-Kanchi, seem to indicate a sectarian affiliation of each area, their Tamil monikers Ciṉṉa-(Little) and Periya-(Big) Kanchi point merely to their unequal size. The smaller Ciṉṉa-Kanchi in the southeast, though, is as important in the religious landscape as Periya-Kanchi. Besides, the name Ciṉṉa-Kanchi may also contain a reference to the history of urban development: the area around the Varatarāja Perumāḷ temple—the former Attiyur—, now in Ciṉṉa-Kanchi, may have been classified as an important but proportionally smaller addition to the older and then bigger urban core further northwest—hence Little Kanchi.[48]

The Varatarāja Perumāḷ, an important centre for the Śrīvaiṣṇavas in South India (Raman 1975, 60), is the best known, monumental site in Vishnu-Kanchi and the largest Vaiṣṇava temple in Kanchi (see figure 2.4). While Vishnu-Kanchi includes some other major Vaiṣṇava sites, the Yatōktakāri, Aṣṭapuja, Viḷakkoḷi, and Aḻakiya Ciṅka Perumāḷ temples, just as many of the city's Viṣṇu temples are found in Shiva-Kanchi, such as the Pāṇṭavatūta, Ulakaḷanta, and Vaikuṇṭa Perumāḷ temples (see figure 2.7).[49] One of better known Śiva temples in Vishnu-Kanchi is the Puṇṇiyakōṭṭīsvarar, situated near the Varatarāja Perumāḷ temple.

Shiva-Kanchi, in turn, is marked by the Ēkāmparanātar temple, the largest and predominant Kanchi temple dedicated to Śiva (see figure 2.5). Besides the Śākta Kāmākṣi Ammaṉ, which is located nearby, it is the most important temple in the northwestern part of the city. In Kanchi, Kāmākṣī signifies Devī and her temple is by far the largest Devī temple in the city and

48 It is, however, not documented when and how the names Ciṉṉa- and Periya-Kanchi originated. By the mid-nineteenth century, both names where in use and the Ēkāmparanātar and Kāmākṣi Ammaṉ temples spatially associated with Big Kanchi and the Varatarāja Perumāḷ temple with Little Kanchi (Graul 1856, 183–190). Even earlier colonial sources from around the year 1800 specifically mention Little Kanchi as a separate division and the Varatarāja Perumāḷ temple to be located there but they do not associate the area with a particular sectarian terminology (Clive 2009, 109–110). In his *Map of Conjeeveram* from 1816 (see figure 2.3), John Gould uses the label "Great Conjeveram" for the northwestern part of the city and "Little Conjeveram" for the southeastern part.

49 In addition, there are several more shrines dedicated to Viṣṇu that are located within larger temples, such as Nilāttiṅkaḷtuṇṭa Perumāḷ, situated at the Śaiva Ēkāmparanātar temple, and Kaḷva Perumāḷ and Pūtanikraha Perumāḷ at the Śākta Kāmākṣi Ammaṉ temple.

Fig. 2.4 Varatarāja Perumāḷ temple, the western gateway tower, viewed from within the fourth enclosure, 2023 (© Malini Ambach).

of pan-regional significance as the centre for the worship of the Goddess in Tamil Nadu (see figure 2.6). Apart from these, there are several other larger temples of a distinct renown in Shiva-Kanchi, such as the Kumarakōṭṭam temple dedicated to the god Skanda;[50] the Śaiva Kaccapēsvarar, located at the spatially exposed southwestern corner of the streets enclosing the elevated area around the Kāmākṣi Ammaṉ temple; and the Vaiṣṇava Ulakaḷanta Perumāḷ and Pāṇṭavatūta Perumāḷ temples. Slightly closer to the eastern and western peripheries of Periya-Kanchi are the Pallava-era Kailācanātar and Vaikuṇṭa Perumāḷ temples (see figure 2.7).

Besides the major temples, there are many smaller temples, shrines, and sacred sites, with several being less well accessible and visible as such. Some are hidden by residential buildings or located in open-field areas. All in all, there are at least four hundred shrines and temples spread over the city. Among them, the Citrakupta Cuvāmi temple is of some rarity, as there are

50 As Dennis Hudson (1993, 30) points out, the Ēkāmparanātar, Kāmākṣi Ammaṉ, and Kumarakōṭṭam temples (see figure 2.7), though independent, “are popularly thought of as forming a ‘Somaskanda’ cluster,” that represents the pan-Indian Śaiva divine family consisting of Śiva, Pārvatī—where Kāmākṣī is understood to stand-in for Śiva’s consort—and Skanda, their son.

Fig. 2.5 Ēkāmparanātar temple, the Rājagopura, the main and the largest gateway tower, viewed from the Ekambaranathar Sannathi Street leading to the temple, 2020 (© Malini Ambach).

only a few temples in the whole of India, and only this one in the South, dedicated to Citragupta, an assistant of the God of Death, Yama (Seshadri 2003, 159).[51]

The urban character of Kanchi has been acknowledged since the first centuries CE, as indicated by the Tamil poem *Perumpāṇāṟṟuppaṭai*, which praises the then ruler of Kanchi (ca. second to fourth century; Zvelebil 1974, 23; Wilden 2014, 8). In the Tamil epic *Maṇimēkalai* (ca. 500 CE; Zvelebil 1995, 409), Kanchi is likewise described as a city (*nagara*), indicating its status as an urban settlement with a corresponding administration and commercial activities (Shanmugan 1992, 77). As city, it underwent several stages of

51 In addition, there are in Kanchi a few Jain temples (in Jina-Kanchi), churches and mosques, as well as monastic institutions, *maṭhas*. The most influential among the latter is the Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham, which has close ties to the Kāmākṣi Ammaṉ temple (see section 2.2).

Fig. 2.6 Kāmākṣi Ammaṉ temple, tank and central building with the sanctum sanctorum inside, viewed from within the outer enclosure, 2020 (© Malini Ambach).

urban development that was also linked to the development of the agrarian hinterland (Champakalakshmi 1996, 389–395). The earliest core probably consisted of the area around the Ulakaḷanta Perumāḷ temple, which is a little elevated and now lies in the northwestern part of the city (Raman 1987, 66). The area, called Kacci or Kaccipeṭu in inscriptions (Nagaswamy 2011, 2–3), forms roughly a square, framed by the four Rājavīthis, the king's streets. Along these lead the processional routes of all three major temples—including the Varatarāja Perumāḷ, which lies on the other side of the city (Hüsken 2017, 69; see figure 2.8).[52] This urban core was then connected to the surrounding independent settlements (Heitzman 2001, 128).

In the further urban development of Kanchi, temples became important spatial markers, reflecting the new centres of religious activities brought about by the Bhakti movement (Srivatsan 1992, 103; Veluthat 1979). The kings of the Pallava dynasty (third–ninth century) expanded the city to the west (Kailācanātar temple) and later to the east (Vaikuṇṭa Perumāḷ temple), as evidenced by the construction and expansion of temples in the

52 Additionally, Emma Stein (2021, 112–113; 2022, 302–306) suggests that this was the place where the royal palace of the Cholas stood.

area (Raman 1987, 66; Stein 2021, 63–68).[53] The pattern of streets in the newly developed urban space follows the orthogonal system with an east-west orientation—as also found in the area around the Varatarāja Perumāḷ temple (Srivatsan 1992, 102–103; Raman 1987, 67). For the northwestern part of today's city and the former urban core, the Pallava period was formative regarding the spatial layout as seen even today (Raman 1987, 68).

The next radical change in the urban configuration occurred during the Chola period (tenth–thirteenth century): a new major road—today called Kamarajar Salai—was constructed as the central pilgrimage and processional route aligned in the north-south direction so as to connect Kanchipuram with significant sites in the region (Stein 2021, 103–109, 122, fig. 39, 120–126).[54] As Emma Stein elaborates, Kamarajar Salai serves as the central line of orientation to which the sanctum sanctorums, with the main image of every temple, open: "[t]his centralized orientation is consistent in all temples built within the boundaries of the city during the last twelve hundred years, regardless of religious dedication, builder, date, or material" (2021, 103). Throughout the city, the temples west of the road face east, those east of the road open to the west.[55]

At the same time, Kanchipuram grew (mainly to the east), gradually incorporating within the city individual surrounding settlements that centred around individual temples or other religious institutions (Raman 1987, 67;

53 Emma Stein (2021, 101) elaborates: "in the beginning of the eighth century, the construction or expansion of the Kailāsanātha, Ekāmbaranātha, Airāvateśvara, and Kacchapeśvara temples established the borders of the city. Less than a century later, the east-west extent of the city had nearly doubled. By the end of the eighth century, Kanchi stretched from the hilltop Candraprabhā Jiṉālāya to the Vaikuṇṭha Perumāḷ temple, which towered on the city's new eastern frontier. The fragments in the two Karukkiṉil Amarntavaḷ Ammaṉ temples and the Rudrakoṭīśvara temple, as well as at Cevilimēṭu farther south, show that Kanchi also extended significantly in the direction of the Palar River. As more temples were established in the urban landscape, the city continued to grow." For a visualisation of that area developed by the Pallavas, see Stein 2021, 121, fig. 38.

54 To the north, the road leads to Tirupati (Andhra Pradesh). The Veṅkaṭeśvara Swāmi temple located there is one of the most popular Vaiṣṇava pilgrimage site in South India. The road supports processional ties between Kanchi and Tirupati even today (Stein 2021, 126–133). To the south, the road leads to Uthiramerur, a former Brahmin settlement of particular relevance in the power transition from the Pallavas to the Cholas (Stein 2021, 92–126).

55 There are only few exceptions to this pattern, for example the Kāmākṣi Ammaṉ temple, which is located in the diagonally arranged street network and whose sanctum sanctorum opens to the southeast. For details on this and other exceptions to the east-west arrangement, see Stein 2021, 107–108.

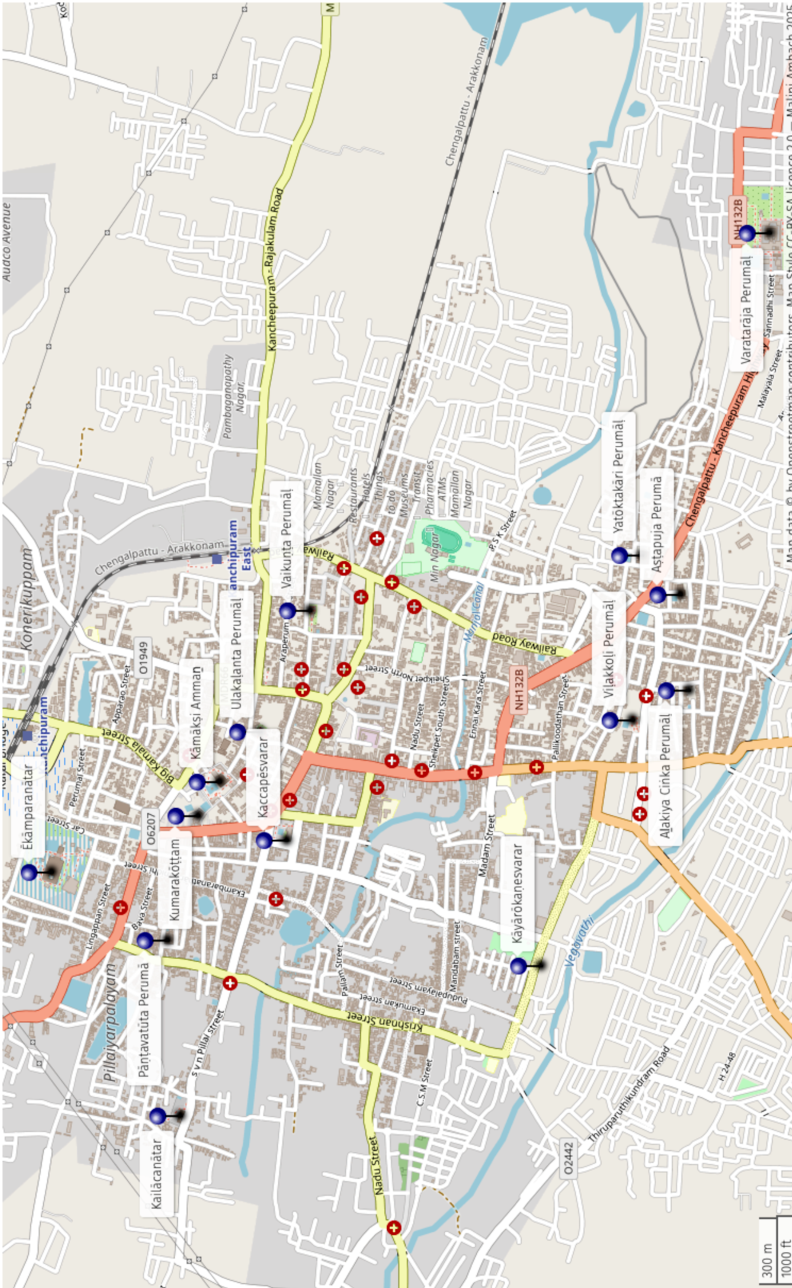

Fig. 2.7 Selection of major temples in Kanchi.

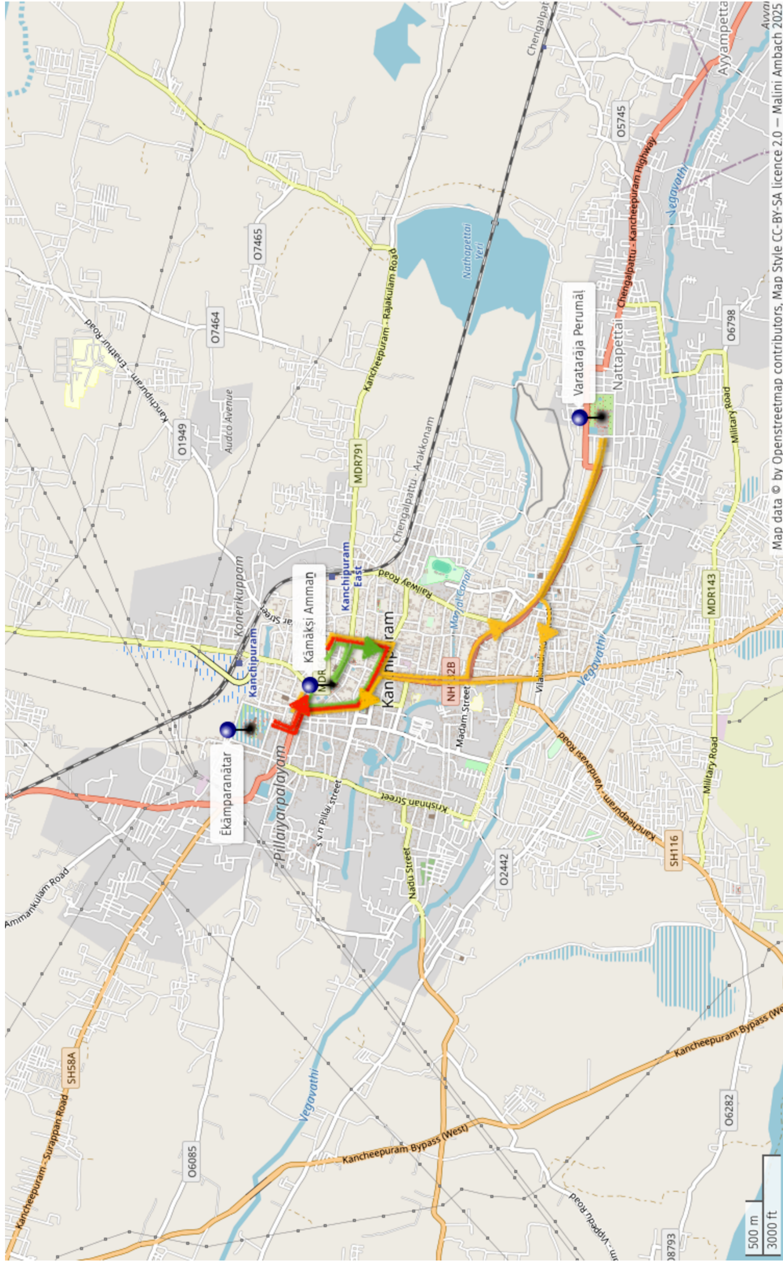

Fig. 2.8 Processional routes of the Ēkāmparanātar (red), the Kāmākṣi Amman (green), and the Varatarāja Perumāḷ (yellow) temples along the Rājavīthis (based on Schier 2018, 63, fig. 2.20 and unpublished maps by Ute Hüsken).

Stein 2022, 297, 301). The extended urban space of Kanchi, though, was not completely covered by built-up areas, but had a built-up urban nucleus and open fields and gardens scattered between the clustered settlements as typical for urban settlements in the Chola area between the ninth and thirteenth century (Heitzman 2001, 126–128).[56] One of the most significant change to urban geography to date was the incorporation of the formerly independent villages such as Attiyur in Chola times (Raman 1987, 67; Stein 2022, 301).[57]

The urban history, which is defined by the merging of the formerly separate temple-centred settlements, still characterises the cityscape today, although open and green spaces have largely given way to denser development. Building on this, Kanchi displays two unique features of a temple city, "a dense and wide distribution of temples [that] defines the urban space, which is organized around the city's central avenue" (Stein 2021, 106) along with a multifocal arrangement of the religious landscape. A testimony to the first aspect are the more than four hundred temples and shrines spread over the city. The polycentric spatial arrangement is most visible in the location of the three largest temples in contemporary Kanchi, the Varatarāja Perumāḷ temple at the southeastern end of the city away from the other two major temples, Ēkāmparanātar and Kāmākṣi Ammaṉ. Their prominence is not a coincidence as these temples in particular received generous patronage throughout the tenth to seventeenth century (Hudson 1993, 20). They are the most distinct markers of the city's polycentric structure, which is also referred to in the common names of the spatial subdivisions of Vishnu- and Shiva-Kanchi (see figure 2.2).

2.4 Kanchi as Part of Religious Networks

The sacred sites of Kanchi's diverse religious landscape—physically represented in the form of temples—do not exist in isolation but are linked with each other. This is reflected by shared ritual traditions, shared mythology,

56 James Heitzman (2001, 128) further elaborates: " [a] relatively small urban core was in close contact, through commercial, administrative and ritual ties, with a series of satellite settlements grouped around temples or monasteries in a thick network of discrete nodes. It was the density of these nodes and the pattern of interactions among them and with the urban core that created a capital city."

57 On the impacts of Kanchi's urbanisation on the region and the ties of the city with its hinterlands, see Heitzman 2001 and Stein 2021, 147–172.

and connecting elements in architecture and iconography. It lies outside the scope of this book to examine the aspect of networks within the religious landscape of the city beyond the context of the glorifying texts about Kanchi which will be discussed in chapters 4, 5, and 6.[58] Just as sites in Kanchi can be linked with each other in the sacred landscape of the city, individual local sites and their deities are also part of regional or pan-Indian devotional landscapes and conceptualised networks. A cursory consideration of this aspect allows us to situate the city within the context of broader religious networks that serve to shape the perception of the city as a sacred place and pilgrimage destination.

Two prime examples of such networks are the two devotional landscapes that span the Tamil-speaking region in South India. They are formed through the poems of the Tamil Śaiva Nāyaṉmār and the Vaiṣṇava Āḻvārs who composed songs in praise of Śiva or Viṣṇu said to reside at some particular places. The Śaiva sites extolled by the first three and most influential Nāyaṉmār Sambandar and Appar (both seventh century), and Sundarar (eighth century; Ayyar 1993, 85–86) are listed in the *Tēvāram*, a part of the Tamil Śaiva literary canon. By the tenth century the sites are collectively referred to as Pāṭal Peṟṟa Stalams and together represent a devotional landscape relevant to the Tamil Śaiva tradition (Ramesh 2020, 34–47; Peterson 1982 and 1989; Spencer 1970).[59] Of the Vaiṣṇava sites praised by the Āḻvārs poets—contemporaries of the Śaiva Nāyaṉmār—108 were collected in the *Divya Prabandham*; they form the Vaiṣṇava devotional landscape and are of particular significance to parts of the Tamil Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition (Young 2014; Dutta 2010; Rajarajan 2013).

Five sites in Kanchipuram are counted among the Pāṭal Peṟṟa Stalams and are thus representations of the larger Śaiva devotional landscape laid out in the *Tēvāram*.[60] As for the Vaiṣṇava counterpart, all of the major Viṣṇu temples in the city are thought to have been praised by the Āḻvārs and

58 On relations between sites within Kanchi, expressed in the ritual context, see Schier 2018, 2021, 2022, and Hüsken 2025.

59 The Pāṭal Peṟṟa Stalams number 274 or 276 depending on the count. For details, see Chevillard and Sarma 2007.

60 These are Kacci Ekāmbam (Ēkāmparanātar; praised by Sambandar, Appar, and Sundarar), Ōṇakāntaṉ Taḷi (Ōṇakāṉtaḷīsvarar; Sundarar), Kacci Mēṟṟaḷi (Tirumēṟṟaḷīsvarar; Appar, Sundarar), Kacci Aṉēkataṅkāvatam (Anēkataṅkāvatēsvarar; Sundarar), and Kaccineṟik Kāraikkāṭu (Satyanātasvāmi; Sambandar). For details, see Buchholz (forthcoming-b); for indications of the individual poems of the three Nāyaṉmār, see Chevillard and Sarma 2007.

counted among the Divyadeśams.[61] The classification as Pāṭal Peṟṟa Stalam or Divyadeśam is still of importance for the local temples and in the lived religiosity: for example, the addition *divyadeśam* is explicitly included on the name plate of one of the subsidiary shrines of the Ulakaḷanta Perumāḷ temple to make this affiliation clear and there are privately produced maps which indicate the positions of the Pāṭal Peṟṟa Stalams.[62]

Another conceptualised network of sacred sites which includes Kanchi is that of the Five-Element Liṅgas (Pañcabhūtaliṅgas). These five Śaiva sites in South India are thought to represent five elements (earth, water, fire, air, and ether) and the Ekāmranātha *liṅga* in Kanchi is identified as the *liṅga* of the earth (*pṛthivi*).[63] The Pañcabhūtaliṅgas nowadays form a popular series of pilgrimage sites, while the concept is already mentioned in the *Kuñcitāṅghristava* by the fourteenth-century author Umapati Shivacharya (Kulke 1970, 140, 140, n. 354; Buchholz 2025, 109, n. 26).

In a broader geo-religious context, the Kāmākṣi Ammaṉ temple is counted among the Śaktipīṭhas, the seats of the Goddess. These sites are considered powerful places of the great Goddess (Mahādevī) and her worship on the Indian subcontinent is believed to have been sanctified through parts of the goddess Sātī which are said to have fallen on earth while Śiva carried his

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61 The identification of a Vaiṣṇava site in Kanchi as Divyadeśam is ambiguous, different sources list between fourteen (Rajarajan 2018, 17–21; Young 2014, 356), fifteen (Ramesh 2000, 33–114) to eighteen (Seshadri 2003, 46–48) Divyadeśams in Kanchi. The list in Rajarajan 2018 mentions alphabetically the places of Attikiri (also Attiyūr; Varatarāja Perumāḷ), Aṭṭapuyakaram (Aṣṭapuja Perumāḷ), Kaḷvaṉūr (Kaḷva Perumāḷ; first enclosure of the Kāmākṣi Ammaṉ temple), Kārakam (Kārakattu Perumāḷ; outer enclosure of the Ulakaḷanta Perumāḷ temple), Kārvāṉam (Kārvāṉa Perumāḷ; outer enclosure of the Ulakaḷanta Perumāḷ temple), Nilāttiṅkaḷtuṇṭam (Nilāttiṅkaḷtuṇṭa Perumāḷ; first enclosure of the Ēkāmparanātar temple), Nīrakam (Nīrakkatu Perumāḷ; outer enclosure of the Ulakaḷanta Perumāḷ temple), Paramēccuraviṇṇakaram (Vaikuṇṭa Perumāḷ), Pāṭakam (Pāṇṭavatūta Perumāḷ), Pavaḷavaṇṇam (Pavaḷavaṇṇa Perumāḷ), Taṅkā (Viḷakkoḷi Perumāḷ), Perakam (Ulakaḷanta Perumāḷ; in the sanctum sanctorum of the temple), Veḵkā (Yatōktakāri Perumāḷ), and Vēḷukkai (Aḻakiya Ciṅka Perumāḷ). On the historical evolution of the Divyadeśams, see Rajarajan 2013; on the process of the canonisation, see Young 2014.

62 See, for example, the map by Kamesh Kumar (2020). At the times of the Āḻvārs, however, the places mentioned in their songs did probably not (yet) form a fixed network of sites that was travelled by pilgrims (Young 2014, 345–346). It was only with the advent of modern means of transport and printing that the Divyadeśams became an interconnected structure that can be travelled, albeit mostly in sections and without a set order based on the poems of the Āḻvārs (Young 2014, 361).

63 On the concept of the Pañcabhūtaliṅgas, see Eck 2012, 253–256 and Fleming 2009.

wife's dead body around. Lists of these sites in varying numbers, of divergent names and localisations are found in Purāṇic and particularly tantric texts.[64] While Kanchi is mentioned in some older texts among the seats of the Goddess, Kerstin Schier (2018, 134–137) notes that the linking of Kanchi with the concept of the Śaktipīṭhas is a more recent development and not very strong, with the identification of Kāmākṣī as the goddess of the *pīṭha* found only in publications from the second half of the twentieth century.[65] Regardless of when and how the connection of Kāmākṣī with the network of the seats of the Goddess was established, it can be assumed that this helped to increase the significance of the local temple as a part of a larger sacred geography.[66] The Kāmākṣi Ammaṉ temple has trans-regional renown as one of the most significant places for the worship of Devī in South India, reflecting the great popularity that the Śaktipīṭhas enjoy in the contemporary Hindu religiosity in general.

In its entirety, Kanchi is further counted among the seven sacred cities that bestow liberation (Saptapurīs / Saptamokṣapurīs).[67] Kanchi is the only

64 The number of the Śaktipīṭhas varies across the source texts, it is commonly either fifty-one, sixty-four, or 108. See Eck 2012, 267–270, 289–299 and Sircar 1973 for an analysis of the concept, its understanding as a sacred geography of the earth as goddess, and the evolution of the myth. Basically, the existence of these places in mythology is generally linked to a narrative about Dakṣa's sacrifice. Dakṣa is the father of Sātī, who is understood as Śiva's wife. Dakṣa insults Śiva by not inviting him to his great sacrifice and Sātī kills herself, not able to endure the humiliation. In his grief, Śiva wanders the world with Sātī's dead body. This action disturbs the order of the world, wherefore Viṣṇu uses his discus to cut Sātī's corpse and wherever a part of Devī's body falls to earth, a *pīṭha* is created and becomes a sacred site of the Goddess (for example *Devībhāgavatapurāṇa*, *Skandha* VII, chapter 30).

65 Kerstin Schier links the attempt to establish the Kāmākṣi Ammaṉ temple within the pan-Indian concept of the Śaktipīṭhas to the increasing renown of Kāmākṣī, propagated by the late Chandrasekharendra Saraswati (d. 1994), the former head of the Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham. She further observes that neither the ritual practice at the Kāmākṣi Ammaṉ temple nor at any other Goddess temple in Kanchi emphasises the worship of body parts of the Goddess (2018, 134–137).

66 In examining how local elements relate to the overarching framework, Diana Eck (2012, 294) states: "the myth of Shakti's dismemberment becomes what I have called a 'subscription myth,' a story to which local *devī* shrines have subscribed as a way of articulating the particular sanctity of their own place and connecting it with the larger systemic reality. Our place is distinctive, they seem to say, yet our place is also related to the great, cosmic events displaying the power and presence of the Goddess."

67 The seven cities are Ayodhya (Uttar Pradesh), Mathura (Uttar Pradesh), Haridwar (Uttarakhand), Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh), Kanchipuram, Ujjain (Madhya Pradesh), and Dwarka (Gujarat). A particular verse commonly introduces them in

one of the seven cities located in the south of the Indian subcontinent. The earliest datable historical record that I know of which mentions the concept of Saptapurīs dates from the end of the sixteenth century. Completed in 1598, the *Āʾīn-i-Akbarī*, an encyclopaedic account of the affairs of the Mughal Empire authored by the court scholar Abu ʾl-Fazl for the emperor Akbar, briefly describes the seven locations and notes that they constitute the seven sacred Hindu cities (Abu-ʾl-Fazl 1894, 305–306).

Just as the other examples mentioned above, the idea of the Saptapurīs serves to situate Kanchi within the sacred geographies of the Indian subcontinent and documents a specific significance that was and still is, attributed to it. In particular the association of individual sites in the city into regional and pan-Indian networks shapes the supra-regional perception of Kanchi and thus also its significance as a place of pilgrimage. The city is considered to be an important site for the worship of Śiva, Viṣṇu, and Devī, reflecting a cluster-combination of similarly important religious traditions existing side-by-side at one place. Kanchi's pluralistic and polycentric religious landscape thus allows the city to be contextualised through a diverse spectrum of regional and pan-Indian networks.

As I discuss in more detail in chapters 4, 5, and 6, the glorifying texts on Kanchi also address the diverse religious landscape of the city. They create links to other places in the region and beyond to emphasise the importance and significance of Kanchi. The above-mentioned devotional networks partly find their way into the Sthalamāhātmya texts, while these additionally construct their own sets of contextualising places in accordance with the particular conception of Kanchi they present.

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the Purāṇas. One version of this verse reads: *ayodhyā mathurā māyā kāśī kāñcī avantikā* || *purī dvāravatī jñeyā saptaitā mokṣadāyikāḥ* | [Ayodhyā, Mathurā, Māyā, Kāśī, Kāñcī, Avantikā, and the city Dvāravatī are known as the seven [cities] bestowing liberation] *Garuḍapurāṇa, Pretakāṇḍa* 38.5c–6b (cf. also *Nāradapurāṇa, Pūrvabhāga* 27.35). The Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya* includes the same verse (KM(V) 1.59; see n. 214), as does the *Hastigirimāhātmya* (1.7c–1.8b), a Vaiṣṇava Sthalamāhātmya glorifying Varadarāja.