

## 3 Textual Fundamentals: Kanchipuram's Glorifying Texts

Elements of geography, history, religion, and sometimes architecture merge in descriptions of sacred places found in Sanskrit Sthalamāhātmya texts. The local and generally glorifying character with a view to praise the local object(s) of interest unites works of this genre, while the design and emphasis of individual Sthalamāhātmyas vary greatly. This chapter first discusses specifics of Sthalamāhātmyas as a genre and then presents the three Sanskrit Sthalamāhātmyas that deal with Kanchi. The analysis at this point focuses on their structure of the content, the myths and writing style of the texts while the following chapters 4, 5, and 6 examine their designs of Kāñcī's sacred landscape.

### 3.1 Māhātmyas as Genre

Sthalamāhātmyas form a subcategory of the genre of Māhātmyas, which in turn is considered part of the Purāṇic literary corpus. The works counted as Purāṇas are not a homogenous group: displaying an encyclopaedic character, they cover a wide range of topics, from secular subjects such as architecture, geography, or astronomy to philosophy, rules of conduct, religious concepts such as pilgrimage, festivals, rites of passage, and related matters such as cosmogony.<sup>68</sup> Purāṇas may generally be described as theistic literature, in that one or another deity is understood as the personified representation of the supreme. Moreover, they are sectarian in that they favour one deity of the Hindu pantheon over others and their mythological narratives may focus on one deity. However, as Ludo Rocher (1986, 23) states, “even though the purāṇas contain sectarian materials [...] their sectarianism should not be interpreted as exclusivism in favor of one god to the detriment of all others.” Rather, the texts tend to show a comprehensive approach and one and

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68 On the nature, content, transmission history, and dates of the Purāṇas, see the studies by Ludo Rocher (1986) and Rajendra Hazra (1940 and 1958–1963).

the same text may contain glorifications of Viṣṇu, Śiva, and Brahmā or the Goddess (Devī) in different passages.

Many of the extant Purāṇic compilation contain one or more Māhātmyas. In addition, there are Māhātmyas that exist as separate texts and claim affiliation with a particular Purāṇa, in particular with one of the Mahāpurāṇas, the major Purāṇic works.<sup>69</sup> However, the printed editions of these texts usually do not contain the Māhātmyas that associate themselves with the work. This discrepancy arises from the various recensions and composite character of the Purāṇas as well as their transmission; the texts that are available to us today represent only parts of what constituted a work with the same title in the course of its compilation (Rocher 1986, 59–67). Moreover, as Jonas Buchholz points out,

it can therefore not be ruled out that a *māhātmya* that claims to form part of a particular *purāṇa* was indeed included in a recension of that *purāṇa* that is different from the printed version. However, given the large number of *sthalamāhātmyas* and their largely local relevance, it seems likely that most of them were transmitted as independent texts. (2022, 13)

In some cases, though, a similarity in content can be found between the Māhātmya and the Purāṇa of which the Māhātmya claims to be a part. The *Kāmākṣivilāsa*, for example, presents Kāñcī's sacred geography from an initially Śākta perspective and states to belong to the *Mārkaṇḍeyapurāṇa*. The latter work contains the *Devīmāhātmya*, one of the central texts for the worship of the Goddess. There is thus a noteworthy consistency in terms of the sectarian orientation of both texts, which is reflected in the self-acclamation to the Mahāpurāṇa by the Māhātmya (Ilkama 2023, 45). At the same time, the statements claiming that a Māhātmya is part of a Purāṇa could be understood as an attempt to reinforce the affiliation with the larger pan-Indian textual tradition (Dutta 2010, 32). Moreover, the self-affirmation of a Māhātmya derived from its connection to the larger textual tradition becomes particularly important when there are several texts from the same or different sectarian traditions about the same sacred place. In such a comparative and

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69 More than half of the 712 Māhātmya texts discussed by Linda Wiig in her analysis of the Māhātmya genre based on Theodor Aufrecht's *Catalogus Catalogorum* affiliate themselves with a Purāṇa or other text (1981, 8). As Linda Wiig acknowledges in this context, the percentage of Māhātmyas claiming affiliation to a Purāṇa could be even higher, as Aufrecht's catalogue may simply have omitted the relevant information.

possibly competitive local setting, the association with a particular Purāṇa can strengthen the interpretative authority of a particular text.

As with works of Purāṇic literature in general, Māhātmyas claim to be a product of a divine revelation. Within the text itself, a Māhātmya is most often attributed to divine characters who are said to have narrated the content of a text in a distant, mythical past. From them, the Māhātmya is said to have been passed on through a succession of mythological characters such as sages. The aspect of transfer is even extended to the textual structure, in which often several sets of conversation are nested and the listener of the first frame-narrative is the narrator of the embedded story. In their reference to an origin in mythical times, Māhātmyas make a timeless claim of truth and their distance regarding human authors contributes to their authority (Bisschop 2011, 3). The historical authors or compilers of Māhātmyas are therefore usually not identifiable; the texts typically contain no information that allows us to determine the place or time of compilation or writing with certainty.

In the case of the glorifying texts written in Sanskrit, the compilers can presumably be found among members of the brahmin class and temple priests and functionaries in particular; their own geographic and contemporary context is reflected in elements such as the promotion of the worship of a particular deity at a specific place (Dutta 2010, 32; Bisschop 2011, 3-4; Gonda 1977, 278). The intentions of the compilers seem to be clear: they hoped to attract attention and patronage and thus also make economic profits from the visiting pilgrims (Dutta 2010, 26, 31-32; Ambach et al. 2022b, 3). Even more so, the subjective agenda of the compilers, focusing on the local micro-level, could also be integrated to use the Māhātmya as an argumentative medium in a rival environment competing for temple resources, as Jan Gonda reflects:<sup>70</sup>

There are sound reasons for assuming that *māhātmyas* often served to formulate the aims or to establish the claims of the temple priests and to refute their opponents, among them not only exponents of other religions but also rival priestly groups

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70 Hermann Kulke (1970, 224-225), in his study of the *Cidambaramāhātmya*, reaches a similar conclusion when he writes: “[t]he Māhātmya may be said to be the ‘official’ medium by means of which the tensions between the priests of the various temples were fought out. The Māhātmya is of extreme importance because the text which finally was incorporated into it sooner or later became part of the official dogma of the temple tradition, so long as no internal contraction arose.”

of their own temple city—the presence of various cults did not fail to evoke tensions—and the political powers of their region. In course of time their views and claims, once they were included in the “official” *māhātmya* of their temple, could easily acquire the reputation of authority. (1977, 278)

Testimonies of such negotiating processes are found in the *Māhātmya* texts themselves. Using the example of the Śaiva *Cidambaramāhātmya*, a text on the South Indian city of Chidambaram, Hermann Kulke (1970) analyses how—to offer an example—the older concept of worshipping Śiva through worship of the *śivaliṅga* is gradually superimposed in layered myths by that of worship of the anthropomorphic Naṭarāja, the dancing Śiva, and how the Śaiva relation to the role of the Goddess and Śākta worship changes.<sup>71</sup> Reworkings of the texts, textual layering, interpolations, and additions thus attest to socio-cultural and religious developments and their evolving interpretations. As Ranjeeta Dutta (2010, 32) further notes, after the decline of the Vijayanagara Empire (first half of the seventeenth century), groups other than the (royal) rulers became part of the power structure, also including those in the temples; hence, the content composition of the *Sthalamāhātmyas* became oriented towards more local material—for example, about the Āḷvārs and Śrīvaiṣṇava preceptors in the case of the Vaiṣṇava texts—in order to better address the local communities.

*Māhātmyas*, as *Purāṇas* in general, represent in the Hindu traditions a religion of place (Jacobsen 2013, 57). While in the earlier Vedic tradition the deities were without permanent places, in the *Purāṇic* Hindu traditions sacred places took centre stage where manifestations of deities are permanently present (Jacobsen 2013, 70). With this transition, pilgrimage (*tīrthayātrā*) achieved status on par with (Vedic) sacrifice (*yajña*) as a means of attaining merit and even salvation (*mokṣa*; Ensink 1979, 106).<sup>72</sup> The merit (*phala*) of visiting a particular sacred place—the religious journey often

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71 Elaine Fisher (2017, 100) points out that in an approach she calls “public philology”, the *Purāṇas* as sectarian texts sacred to Śaivas or Vaiṣṇavas were sources of textual criticism for the purpose of public theology. It stands for one tool in the process of sectarianisation from the seventeenth century onwards in South India, when Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava sectarian groups and their theologians resorted to various means to expand and consolidate their influence in the temples and among the devotees.

72 As for chronology, it is assumed that the *Purāṇas* date from the Gupta period (early fourth to early sixth century), although changes were made up to the medieval time (Flood 1997, 110).

combined with performing a certain ritual there—came to be equated to the merit of performing a sacrifice and possibly estimated even higher than that (Ensink 1976, 59).<sup>73</sup> Pilgrimage was accessible to a broad audience of people; it was not only the brahmins anymore who were allowed to take part in religious activity. The religious concepts presented in Purāṇic texts were (more) inclusive and accompanied a broadening of the recognised religious praxis to include a variety of local vernacular, non-Brahminical customs and lore, reflected by the scope and diversity of Purāṇic mythologies; the change in ideas was coupled with an agricultural expansion, as formerly peripheral civilisational zones were increasingly developed (Nath 2009, 41–68, 168–201). Sthalamāhātmyas in particular address these new developments as they deal with the geographical goals of pilgrimages and provide descriptions of sacred sites and their merits, glorifying individual locations with the intention of attracting pilgrims and patronage (Dutta 2010, 31–32).

Despite a broad positioning, detailed historical contextualisations of Purāṇic texts remain difficult. According to Hans Bakker, the attribution of a Purāṇic text to divine revelation led the transmitters of a text to feel entitled to “change, delete, or add to given text-material without conceiving of this as a personal contribution, distortion, or fraud” and they made a great effort in “minimalizing the effect of empirical, historical and personal circumstances on the texts” (2019, 177) when copying them. This strategy of recomposition has been followed in a process that Hans Bakker terms “composition-in-transmission” in which changes to a Purāṇic text were made through written transmission (2019, 176–177).<sup>74</sup> Comparing different versions of a text, with additions, omissions or paraphrases clearly present, reveals this practice. In the case of the Sthalamāhātmyas on Kanchi, textual history can best be examined by looking at the Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya*. There are several manuscripts of this text available today, each with different lines of transmission: in two of the manuscripts, entire passages on individual sites seem to be missing; those passages are, in turn, found in another manuscript and in the printed editions (Buchholz 2022, 23–24). Even if one were to consider only the version(s) of the printed editions, there are several inconsistencies

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73 Vijay Nath (2009, 170–171) further notes that this idea “appears to mark the culmination of the process by which the Vedic tradition with its narrow caste base and appeal was subsumed by the Purāṇic tradition that was geared to appeal to the masses with its thrust on a strong folk-orientation.”

74 Hans Bakker (2019, 176–178) contrasts the process he calls “composition-in-transmission” with “composition-in-performance” where changes occurred during live performance of the texts in oral form.

in the central narrative that indicate a multilayered composition of the text (Schier 2018, 82).

Due to their changing form, dating Purāṇic texts and thus also the Māhātmyas is an issue that often can be answered only unsatisfactorily. Passages that seem to allude to historical persons, events or datable physical structures are mostly scarce and of limited value. Descriptions of temples, for example, often convey an idealised view that reflects how it was envisioned at the time the text was composed, and not necessarily what the historical temple would have looked like then. Nevertheless, it is possible that such passages actually point to structures of the historical temple to which they refer; the mention of certain architectural features may then allow the date of composition to be narrowed down to a time after these elements had become part of the local temple architecture.<sup>75</sup>

Even if the texts might allude to historical places or events, the temporal setting of the stories remains a mystical past. Conceptually, Māhātmyas and other works of Purāṇic literature deal with stories about the past. Not in the sense of chronicling history but as a form of selective, subjective interpretation of past events with a contemporary reference. Jay Ramesh (2020, 12–13) argues that Purāṇas—and by extension, the Māhātmyas—can most aptly be conceptualised as collective memory instead of history in their relation to the past, since the (mythical) past is used with the intention to impact the lives of devotees in the present. To this end, mythological narratives serve merely as a means of presentation. They are usually set in a mythical past and feature divine and mythological characters. The matters of the world and of life are explained and filled with meaning through mythologies. They thus also refer to rituals and customs. Thus, the myths in the Sthalamāhātmyas are adapted to a local setting to imbue specific features of their spatial and temporal frame of reference with history, meaning and significance.

### 3.2 Sthalamāhātmyas

The objects of glorification in the Māhātmyas vary greatly. In her study of Māhātmya works, Linda Wiig (1981, 16–18) distinguishes between texts dealing with geographical or fictional places, worship of a particular deity (that is, sectarian affiliation), human and mythological characters, vows,

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75 For examples from the Sthalamāhātmyas on Kanchi, see pp. 85–89 and Buchholz 2022, 22–23.

time periods, or glorification of names (of epic or Purāṇic texts). Across all those categories, there is a clear emphasis on locality. According to Linda Wiig (1981, 15–16), circa ninety-five percent of the Māhātmyas she has analysed are local in that they are concerned with a place as such, a deity at a particular place, or a ritual practice to be performed at a certain time at a specific location.

More specifically, Sthalamāhātmyas deal with a single local sacred site or a larger sacred landscape encompassing many places. These sites are characterised by a deity said to reside there or a water body (*tīrtha*). Mythological narratives are the means to explain the origin of the sacred place and justify its sacredness. To this end, the texts blend local and pan-Indian elements to construct their own stories. As Ina Ilkama aptly summarises (2023, 44), the “*māhātmyas* share the common Hindu pantheon with the major *purāṇas* and often copy their themes and stories, but elaborate on them and provide them with a local character, so that local myths and motifs are blended in.” This blending forms a link to the pan-Indian Purāṇic mythology, making the local myths recognisable and familiar to people who come to know the place through its mythological story. At the same time, the local sacred landscape extolled through the myths in the Sthalamāhātmyas is associated with the pan-Indian sacred geography.

In addition, the sectarian affiliation of a Sthalamāhātmya influences the shaping of the myths. The partiality is usually reflected in the preference given to one deity over the others. For example, a Śaiva Sthalamāhātmya assigns Śiva a decisive role and would probably present Viṣṇu as worshipping Śiva. When more than one Sthalamāhātmya exists about the same place, such as in the case of Kanchi, the sectarian predisposition of each text can lead to parallel versions of a story about the origin of the same sacred site(s), while often drawing on a common pool of myths.

The stories in the Sthalamāhātmyas are foundation myths of sacred places. This way of describing sites represents a new feature compared to the approach taken in earlier works of the Vaiṣṇava Ālvārs—and the Śaiva Nāyaṇmār—(seventh–ninth century) which also deal with sacred places in their songs (Young 2014, 339). The Sthalamāhātmyas provide a story of origin and attribute significance and salvific power to the places. The sacred and salvific nature is conceptually inherent in a place. It is therefore a site itself that is crucial and attributed a salvific power, and not any physical manifestation of, for example, a temple (Eck 2012, 76–77).<sup>76</sup> The salvific power is

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76 For details on the notion of sacred places, see section 1.4, in particular pp. 18–20, as well as Eck 1981, Jacobsen 2013, and Nath 2009.

thought to result from the deity or mythological figure that once sanctified the site (Jacobsen 2013, 4–8). The physical appearance of sacred sites is often not mentioned and if it is, it seems to conform to an idealised idea of—in most cases—a temple.<sup>77</sup> With the focus on the permanently ascribed sacred nature of the sacred places, the texts' de-temporalised approach is emphasised, which is also reflected in the self-attribution to non-human authors (see section 3.1). By acknowledging the physicality of a place the imagined sacred landscape is linked with the geographical, physical one.

It is evident that Sthalamāhātmyas refer to historical and mostly still existing sites of a religious and geographical landscape. The mention of a sacred place in a Sthalamāhātmya is fundamentally grounded in its existence in the real-world in, for example, Kanchi. At the same time, the texts link an event in a mythical past to the origin of the sacred place, whose character and significance are then derived from mythology. In their blending of an imagined mythical world with a physically tangible, the texts use the former to give meaning to the latter. By drawing on the characteristics of the real-world geography to describe a sacred landscape, natural sites such as rivers and other water bodies can also appear as part of an imagined landscape in a Sthalamāhātmya. These sites are provided with a significance, sense, and a story of origin as well. In the case of Kanchi's Sthalamāhātmyas, the strategies used by the texts to deal with the parallel concepts of mythology and physical geography differ as does the extent to which they apply mythological concepts to interpret the physical landscape (see chapters 4, 5, and 6). The Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya*, for example, takes the location of the sacred places in the space of Kāñcī as a starting point for the order in which the places are described, whereas references to the physical landscape are much rarer in the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya*.

In their core, Sthalamāhātmyas seek to explain why the place they deal with are the most significant one and why it is important to specifically go there and not somewhere else. They thus refer to the practice of pilgrimage and aim to promote the local place—in the interests of the people who represent these sites, and who often are linked to the milieu of local temples (Dutta 2010, 31–32; Hüsken 2017, 68). To this end, a central element is the exposition of the sacredness attributed to the site in question, which is achieved by indicating its meritorious powers that one can benefit

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77 The Sthalamāhātmyas on Kanchi contain only a few passages with specific details that may indicate a temple structure (see pp. 101–106, subsections 5.3.1 and 5.3.3, and pp. 189–190). On the issue of architectural descriptions from the text with regard to their dating, see pp. 85–89 and Buchholz 2022, 22–23.

from when carrying out rituals there or simply visiting the place (Gengnagel 2011, 23). These glorifying statements are denoted as *phalaśruti*, which can be translated as that which has been heard about the rewards of a place. They possibly serve two purposes; they inform visiting pilgrims about the exculpatory profits to be attained at a site which in turn is expressed by those intending to promote the place.

Such sections are a characteristic feature of the Māhātmya genre. In this setting, each sacred place described in a Sthalamāhātmya is conceptually considered to be the most beneficial. If several places are extolled as the most significant in the same text, such claims may initially appear contradictory. However, general ascriptions in the superlative are to be understood as a stylistic element to illustrate the efficacy ascribed to the individual site rather than as indicators of a universal hierarchy of sites (Jacobsen 2013, 26, 123–126).<sup>78</sup> Claims of superiority that explicitly name another sacred site in comparison, though, serve to establish a hierarchy: thus contextualising a site in a local or trans-regional sacred geography, the promotion and ascribed exceptional importance of the locality in focus is reinforced (Jacobsen 2013, 26). Sravani Kanamarlapudi terms this relational sacredness of a site, which results from the comparison with the attributed powers of other sacred sites, as *intersacrality* (2025, 12–13).

Although they may refer to other places in a regional or pan-Indian sacred landscape, Sthalamāhātmyas are usually less concerned with extolling pilgrimage as a journey from afar; rather, they focus on a place as the destination of a pilgrimage. Throughout the Purāṇic literature we find this approach to sacred places as the most dominant (Jacobsen 2013, 22, 89).<sup>79</sup> In keeping with their primarily local character, Sthalamāhātmya texts appeal to worshippers and also indicate ritual practices at the local place. So,

[w]hat does the pilgrim need to know? Above all, he is concerned with the specific powers and individual features that have given the site its sacred character. The [glorifying] purāṇa composed at

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78 In this context, Knut Jacobsen points to “an element of henotheism in the presentation of the Hindu sacred places in the *Purāṇas* and the *Māhātmyas*,” whereby “each site which is in focus is treated as the foremost site, while also accepting the existence of salvific power at the other sites” (2013, 126).

79 Yet, as Sravani Kanamarlapudi in her study of two vernacular Sthalapurāṇas on Srikalahasti (Andhra Pradesh) shows, journey motifs, which describe how a mythological character visits several sacred places before arriving at the place that the text extols, are found in glorification texts and serve various purposes: they transport a character to the sacred place in question, emphasise its sacredness and enable pilgrims to retrace this mythological journey (2025, 21–22).

this spot will therefore provide him with the traditional history of the shrine, including its (usually miraculous) discovery and the adventures of those important exemplars (such as gods, demons, serpents, and men) who were freed from sorrow of one kind or another by worshipping there. Basic elements of the sacred topography will be identified, and subsidiary shrines may be brought into relation with the main deity of the site. Any local idiosyncrasies in ritual or in the structure of the cult (for example, [...] the exact plan of festivals in many shrines) will be explained by a myth. The purāṇa will also offer lists of the ritual benefits to be gained from worship at the shrine. (Shulman 1980, 17)

These features and functions identified by David Shulman for Tamil Talapurāṇams, the counterparts of Sthalamāhātmyas, also apply to the Sanskrit texts.<sup>80</sup> The latter unite descriptive and prescriptive elements, a story of origin, and the rituals that are to be performed in order to benefit from the salvific powers of a site. Their authority in both matters rests on their claim to be a product of a divine revelation that is passed on through a series of divine and/or mythic interlocutors (Ramesh 2020, 111–156). Sthalamāhātmyas are essentially manuals for pilgrims, as Travis LaMar Smith notes; they “contain details of specific places—shrines, bathing tanks, and so on—and frequently even provide geographical data so that one might navigate the sacred complex more easily” (2017, 2). While the aforementioned features are characteristics common to Sthalamāhātmya texts and largely determined by the genre, the individual perspective of a text on a specific sacred place is still unique; it depends on the local sacred geography, the geo-temporal context referred to by the composers, and the local religious landscape that is commonly shaped by several religious traditions.

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80 There are undeniable differences between Sanskrit Sthalamāhātmyas and Tamil Talapurāṇams, first of all in the literary style. Apart from that, Jay Ramesh (2020) shows that Talapurāṇams follow Tamil devotional (*bhakti*) poetry in their approach to religious experience and space, and are thus affective and more emotional in their dealing with the mythical past as collective memory compared to the more prescriptive Sthalamāhātmyas. For details on differences between Sanskrit Sthalamāhātmyas and Tamil Talapurāṇam, see Ramesh 2020, Shulman 1980, and Buchholz 2023a.

### 3.3 Sthalamāhātmyas on Kanchi

There are several Sanskrit Sthalamāhātmyas that deal with Kanchi and exhibit different approaches to the sacred geography of the city. This study focuses on those three texts that deal with Kāñcī's sacred geography in a broader perspective, and are available in printed editions. These are a Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya*, a Śākta text titled *Kāmākṣivilāsa*, and a Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya*. The *Hastigirimāhātmya*, a Vaiṣṇava text with a more limited focus on Varadarāja, as well as to texts titled *Kāñcīsthānamāhātmya*, which are only available in manuscript form, are therefore not included (see subsection 1.3.1). Based on myths, the two *Kāñcīmāhātmyas* and the *Kāmākṣivilāsa* texts present their interpretations of Kāñcī's sacred space and accounts about the origin of the many different sacred sites in the city and their rewarding qualities. The unique perspective of each text is expressed through the text's sectarian framework, structural layout, and spatial conception. Across the Māhātmyas<sup>81</sup> on Kanchi, the stories associated with the same individual sacred place are often similar. This indicates a shared local corpus of mythological stories related to the sacred places of the city. Sometimes, two of the texts closely correspond in the content of a narrative and in some rare cases, text passages from two texts even agree with each other in wording (see subsection 3.3.4). Both correspondences and differences between the texts and the individual framing of the mythological narratives about a sacred place reflect a dynamic process of negotiation between the religious traditions in Kanchi that relate to the interpretation of the local religious landscape and sacred space.

Among the many sacred sites they name and myth they tell, the texts devote the most attention to Śiva as Ekāmranātha, Viṣṇu as Varadarāja, and Devī as Kāmākṣī. The three largest temples in Kanchi are dedicated to these three deities. It can thus be assumed that the texts originated in the spheres of the Ēkāmparanātar, Varatarāja Perumāḷ, and Kāmākṣi Amman temples. Each of the three Māhātmyas places its emphasis around their main deities: the Śaiva text highlights Ekāmranātha, the Vaiṣṇava Māhātmya Varadarāja, and the Śākta text deals with Ekāmranātha, Varadarāja, and Kāmākṣī in equal parts, but adds a structural setting that accentuates the goddess. In

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81 The texts on Kanchi discussed in the following call themselves only *Māhātmya* and not *Sthalamāhātmya*. In recognition of the texts' own terminology and for better readability, I use the designations *Māhātmya* / *Māhātmyas* for these texts from here on and until the end of chapter 6 (see also remark on p. xiv).

these arrangements, the texts reflect the heightened significance that came to be attached to the sites of these three deities in the cityscape and in the religious landscape of Kanchi, which crystallised into a polycentric layout (see section 2.2).

While Varadarāja's myth of origin does not involve the other two deities in any of the three texts, the myths of Ekāmrānātha and Kāmākṣī are partly interwoven with each other. Only the Śākta Māhātmya presents an additional, distinctly disentangled myth about Kāmākṣī's origin. Given their centrality among all the narratives in the Māhātmyas, the renditions of Ekāmrānātha's, Varadarāja's, and Kāmākṣī's myths will briefly be summarised in this chapter. The sites associated with these deities are also central to the texts' spatial design of Kāñcī, as will be discussed from a geo-spatial perspective in the following chapters.

### 3.3.1 The Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya*

The text titled *Kāñcīmāhātmya*, available in editions from 1899 and 1967 in Telugu script, is the most comprehensive text (4700 verses) of the three Māhātmyas on Kanchi. It claims to belong to the *Skandapurāṇa* but is not found in the printed version of the latter text. This Māhātmya has a Śaiva perspective on Kāñcī and is therefore labelled as the Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya* (KM(Ś)) to distinguish it from the other text also called *Kāñcīmāhātmya*.

Structurally, the Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya* can be divided into three parts: an introduction containing the frame story and a general glorification of Kāñcī (KM(Ś) 1.1–4.34); a main part locating around one hundred *śivaliṅgas* and further sacred places in Kāñcī and narrating their origins in mythological stories (KM(Ś) 4.35–45.end); and a section mainly dedicated to rewards that may be obtained by performing various religious deeds in Kāñcī (KM(Ś) chs. 46–50). The narrator of the Māhātmya is the sage Sūta, the narrator of the Purāṇas, and his audience are the sages assembled in the Naimiśāraṇya, the forest that is often mentioned in Purāṇic stories as a place where sages gather. The sages discuss which of the means is best suited to attain the vision of Śiva and on their request Sūta first retells a narrative referring to a dialogue between Śiva and Pārvatī that praises Kāñcī as Śiva's city on the one hand (introductory part) and then a Māhātmya of Kāñcī that the sage Kauśika once told the brahmins of Kāñcī on the other hand (main part).

The introductory section sets the Śaiva framework that permeates the entire text by glorifying Śiva as the highest deity, his splendour, and Kāñcī as the dearest place of Śiva. It is mainly Śiva's presence as Ekāmrānātha

(Ēkāmparanātar) under the single mango tree that is said to bestow its magnificence on the city. The main part of the Māhātmya about Kāñcī's sacred landscape comprises separate myths of varying lengths that tell of the origin of the sacred sites and usually include statements on the efficacy of the place. The narratives focus on the origins of the sacred sites of Śiva, which are considered the most important. The origin of other sacred places—of Viṣṇu, the Goddess, or sacred water bodies—is a sub-element of the stories detailing the origin of the *śivaliṅgas*.

All the narratives have the same basic structure and the descriptions are partly formulaic: a mythological character, such as a sage or deity, installs a *liṅga* in Kāñcī to worship Śiva. The god manifests himself there, grants rewards to the worshipper or relieves him of afflictions. Afterwards, Śiva remains in the *liṅga* as the lord (*iśvara*) of that place, endowed with the powers he has shown his worshipper there. The *liṅga* is either called after the worshipping character, a prominent element of the narrative, or the specific power ascribed to the *liṅga*. For example, the *śivaliṅga* Iṣṭasiddhīśvara (Iṣṭasittisvarar, within the compound of the Kaccapēsvarar temple; KM(Ś) 13.103c–148b) is said to grant fulfilment of what is desired (*iṣṭasiddhi*) and Matsyeśvara (Maccēca; KM(Ś) 32.62c–71) is worshipped by Viṣṇu in his incarnation as fish (*matsya*). In this basic pattern, the Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya* reflects both the approach to the power of sacred places common to Māhātmyas and the structures of displaying the sectarian bias of Śaiva texts; a place is sanctified because a deity was worshipped there and showed its grace there in favour of its worshipper(s) (Wiig 1981, 29).

The narratives in the KM(Ś) are usually versions of pan-Indian myths and/or include motifs and characters from the epics and the Purāṇas. In order to establish a local reference in the stories, the spatial frame is set in Kāñcī where the plot evolves. As it includes a large number of separate stories about a large number of individual places, the KM(Ś) refers to many characters and narrative motifs from the Purāṇas. In the inclusion of general Purāṇic material, it is thus more extensive than the other two Māhātmyas. Moreover, the text corresponds to the general display of sectarian affiliation characteristic for Śaiva Māhātmyas (not only Sthalamāhātmyas in particular) as Linda Wiig expounds:

In the case of Śaiva motifs, the focus is on Śiva's ability to remove sins and confer benefits when he is supplicated by a devotee. The event of his doing so is often marked by the installation of a *liṅga* (called 'īśvara') on the site. (1981, 27)

Exactly these very elements shape the narratives in the Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya* as well.

As indicated above, the KM(Ś) constructs Śiva as the decisive agency and the divine hierarchy is clearly oriented towards him. Other deities are also part of the Śaiva narratives. Several manifestations of Viṣṇu and different goddesses appear among the characters installing a *liṅga* in Kāñcī. By styling them as Śiva's worshipers, the supreme position of Śiva is firmly established, but without creating an opposition between the deities (cf. the approach in the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya*, see subsection 3.3.3). The bias towards Śaiva myths and sites is also the apparent interpretative element for the comprehensive description of Kāñcī's sacred geography in the KM(Ś).

The emphasis of the narratives and the *Māhātmya*'s spatial concept is Ekāmranātha (Ēkāmpanātar). His myth—interspersed with shorter stories on *śivaliṅgas* and other sacred places located in the surroundings—is elaborately told in a larger portion of the text, covering chapters 39–45 of the KM(Ś). As Jay Ramesh states, *Māhātmyas* often place the site they consider most important at the end of a pilgrimage route that is constructed by their arrangement of the sacred sites they deal with (2020, 7, 118). This pattern is also adopted in the Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya*, which narrates the myth of Ekāmranātha's at the end of the main section, while the introductory section of the *Māhātmya* has already established the significance of Ekāmranātha. However, contrary to Jay Ramesh's general interpretation, I do not understand the arrangement of the sacred sites in the KM(Ś) as an actual route map meant to be followed (for details, see section 4.3). If the same were to be constructed as a template for a pilgrimage route, one would expect a cohesive narrative that creates a pilgrimage circuit based on the sites, as well as some more specific details regarding the distance of one site from another or the travel timeframe. Nor am I aware of a predetermined or recommended pilgrimage itinerary to visit Kanchi's sacred sites according to the order suggested in the KM(Ś). The conceptual structuring towards Ekāmranātha, though, is apparent and reflects the observation made by Jay Ramesh.

### Ekāmranātha's Myth

The central myth of the Śaiva *Māhātmya*, the narrative of Ekāmranātha's origin, can be summarised as follows (KM(Ś) ch. 39–45): it happens that the goddess Pārvatī, Śiva's wife, once playfully covers Śiva's eyes and this plunges the universe into darkness. To atone for her fault, Śiva first sends her to Kāśī (Varanasi) and afterwards to Kāñcī. Pārvatī circumambulates

the city, installs various goddesses, and worships all of Śiva's places. Eventually she reaches the dwelling place of Śiva who is residing at the foot of the single mango tree on the banks of the river Kampā, where she sees Śiva in the form of a Jyotirlinga, a *liṅga* of light. The goddess wishes to worship it but is unsure about how to do it and therefore decides to build a *liṅga* out of sand on top of the light rays. Pārvatī performs austerities next to the single mango tree until Śiva manifests himself to give her permission to construct the *liṅga*. The goddess follows his instructions, builds the *liṅga* and worships it. In an attempt to test Pārvatī's devotion, Śiva causes the primordial flood of destruction (*praḷaya*) to arise in the river Kampā. The approaching flood lets Pārvatī embrace the sand-*liṅga* to protect it, which from then on bears the imprints of her breasts and bangles. The waters of the flood are contained in a skull-bowl by one of Pārvatī's female companions and later on released to form the sacred water body Sarvatīrtha. The Jyotirlinga is transformed into a *liṅga* of sand and Śiva manifests himself out of it. He grants Pārvatī her wish, which is that he should with her in Kāñcī and their wedding is celebrated.<sup>82</sup> The single mango tree, the specific tree of the site (*sthalavṛkṣa*), the divine symbol and object of worship at the Ēkāmparanātar temple, and the Kampā river as site of Pārvatī's worship are provided with separate stories (KM(Ś) 36.9–88, in particular 36.77c–88 and 37.1–21b).

The understanding of the goddess as Śiva's consort in the KM(Ś) is worth a note. For the most part of Ekāmranātha's myth, she referred to by one of the widely attested names Pārvatī, Devī, or Gaurī. The story mentions that the goddess stays together with Ekāmranātha in Kāñcī, but no specific location is assigned to her in this context. Accordingly, she is not given a specific local name, as would be customary for the local deities of the sacred places mentioned in the text (for example Ekāmranātha, for this local form of Śiva). This non-placement may be due to the fact that, as in other Śaiva temples in Kanchi, there is no separate shrine with a *mūlamūrti*, a central, stationary image, of the god's consort in the Ēkāmparanātar temple. Consequently, there is no historical site of the goddess in the temple with which Śiva's consort from the text could be associated. At the same time, however, Pārvatī is said to stay in Kāñcī alongside Ekāmranātha, suggesting a site where the resident goddess is identified as Ekāmranātha's consort. Yet the text remains

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82 For a comparative analysis of different versions of Ekāmranātha's myth in both Sanskrit and Tamil sources, see Schier 2018, 73-96, 199.

rather vague in that respect, as it only indirectly identifies Pārvatī with the local goddess Kāmākṣī.<sup>83</sup>

The connection of Kāmākṣī with Pārvatī as local form of Ekāmranātha's consort reflects the primary notion of the goddess Kāmākṣī in the KM(Ś). However, Kāmākṣī is specifically and separately dealt with in the text and located at the cave called Kāmakoṭi (or Kāmakoṣṭha; KM(Ś) 31.69–104b; see also pp. 137–140).<sup>84</sup> This location points to the Kāmākṣī Amman temple, which is situated around 1 kilometre away from the Ēkāmparanātar temple (see figure 2.2).<sup>85</sup> The text passage does not provide a separate myth about the origin of the goddess there and instead characterises the cave where Kāmākṣī is said to reside. It is composed in a praising style similar to the passages about other significant features related to Ekāmranātha's myth, such as the single mango tree or the Kampā river, thus structurally linking Kāmākṣī as the goddess of Kāmakoṭi to Ekāmranātha. Kāmakoṭi is said to consist of the highest ether; it is the designation of the power of the seat of the Goddess (*pīṭhasakti*) existing there, which refers to the Śākta concept of the *pīṭhas*, the seats of the Goddess. The goddess abides at the cave, she is identified with the supreme power present in the cave and is known in her form as Kāmākṣī.<sup>86</sup> This characterisation suggests that Kāmākṣī is conceived as stand-alone and separate from Ekāmranātha; she is closely connected to her own site Kāmakoṭi, thus emphasising a distance to Ekāmranātha on the spatial level. The close link of Kāmākṣī to the locale Kāmakoṭi is a central

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83 In Ekāmranātha's myth, Pārvatī is sporadically also called Kāmākṣī (KM(Ś) 42.15cd and a few times in the description of the wedding ceremony of Ekāmranātha and Pārvatī / Kāmākṣī starting from verse 45.169).

84 Kāmakoṣṭha, or Kāmakoṭṭam in Tamil, is the designation for the separate shrine for the Goddess as Śiva's consort within Śaiva temples; such a shrine gradually became a fixed element in the South Indian temple architecture from the early Chola period (eleventh century) and was prominent from the thirteenth century onwards (Srinivasan 1951). K. R. Srinivasan suggests that the designation Kāmakoṣṭha is derived from Kāmākṣī as the famous goddess at Kanchipuram (1951; 1960, 32–35). For a hypothesis of the religious-historical developments that led to the inclusion of separate Goddess's shrines in Śiva temples in South India, see Stein 1973. On the topic of Kāmakoṭṭam as designation for the goddess Kāmākṣī, see Schier 2018, 122–123 and Wilke 1996, 160.

85 On site, the cave is considered to be below the Gāyatrīmaṇḍapa housing the sanctum sanctorum of the Kāmākṣī Amman temple (see n. 206); thanks go to Ute Hüsken for pointing out this understanding. For details on Kāmākṣī's (spatial) position in the Śaiva Māhātmya, see pp. 137–140. On the concept of the cave as part of Kāmākṣī's character and site, see Annette Wilke's study (1996).

86 In full, the Sanskrit(-ised) name of the Kāmākṣī Amman temple is Kāmakoṭi Kāmākṣī Amman, combining the name of the goddess with the site.

aspect in this context and found as well in the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya* and the *Kāmākṣīvilāsa*. Yet while Kāmākṣī is introduced separately in the text passage on Kāmakoṭi, she is repeatedly called Ekāmranātha's consort (*ekāmranāyikā*; for example, KM(Ś) 31.97) in this context and throughout the text, just as Ekāmranātha is labelled as Kāmākṣī's lord.

The association of Kāmākṣī with Ekāmranātha is also prevalent in the contemporary ritual re-enactment of Ekāmranātha's wedding during the annual Paṅkuṇi Uttiram festival at the Ēkāmparanātar temple. While the announcements refer to Ekāmranātha and Kāmākṣī as divine couple, the goddess Ēlavārkuḷali actually nowadays represent the bride—but is identified with Kāmākṣī,—with Kāmākṣī's festival statue (*utsavamūrti*) taking part in the festivities as the bride's female friend (Schier 2018, 119–152, 175–190, 192–193).<sup>87</sup> The goddess Ēlavārkuḷali takes the role of Ekāmranātha's consort in this context, but she does not seem to be permanently placed in this role at the Ēkāmparanātar temple. The shrine of the goddess Ēlavārkuḷali in the second enclosure (*prākāra*) of the temple houses only her festival image; a stationary image (*mūlamūrti*), which one might expect to find, is missing.<sup>88</sup> This setup is in line with the overall popular understanding that there is no separate shrine—with a *mūlamūrti*—of the Goddess as the god's consort found in the Śaiva temples in Kanchi.<sup>89</sup>

The reason for the lack of a separate myth of Kāmākṣī in the KM(Ś) is, in my view, grounded in her connection with Ekāmranātha. Even if only subliminally conveyed, her role and origin is sufficiently disclosed through Ekāmranātha's myth. The multilayered characterisation of Kāmākṣī can be seen as an expression of a balancing act in which the ideas of Kāmākṣī as independent, stand-alone goddess in her own place or as married to Śiva are acknowledged in parallel. The separate description of Kāmākṣī's site may well be grounded in the geo-spatial arrangement of the sacred sites and their stories in the text that is based on the location—or rather the proximity—of the places introduced one after another (see subsection 4.3.3). The myth

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87 Until the end of the seventeenth century, it seems, the festival image of Kāmākṣī of the Kāmākṣī Amman temple, Baṅgāru Kāmākṣī, served as Ekāmranātha's bride during Paṅkuṇi Uttiram (Schier 2018, 138–152). As Kerstin Schier (2018) shows, the question whether Kāmākṣī is to be considered Ekāmranātha's consort or is an independent goddess is a debated topic in the different religious traditions in Kanchi as well as in the myths found in Māhātmyas, oral traditions, and ritual practice.

88 Thanks go to N. Subramaniam for clarifying the question of Ēlavārkuḷali's images at the Ēkāmparanātar temple.

89 A myth in the *Kāmākṣīvilāsa* (ch. 14) explains why there are no separate shrines for the Goddess as Śiva's consort in the city's Śaiva places.

of Ekāmrānātha integrates Kāmākṣī to indicate the text's primary understanding of her as Ekāmrānātha's consort and local form of Pārvatī while the text passage separately dealing with Kāmakoṭi reflects the spatial distance between the Kāmākṣī Ammaṇ and Ēkāmparanātar temples.

The idea of Varadarāja (Varatarāja Perumāḷ), in turn, is straightforward in the Śaiva text. As with all of Viṣṇu's sites, the myth of origin of this manifestation of Viṣṇu is interwoven into the story about the one of the *śivaliṅgas* located close by. Varadarāja's narrative is linked to Puṇyakoṭīśvara (Puṇṇiyakoṭṭīśvarar; KM(Ś) 5.1–70). Varadarāja's myth in the Śaiva text differs from the versions found in the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya* and the *Kāmākṣivilāsa*, with the latter apparently corresponding to the plot from the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya* (cf. subsection 3.3.3).<sup>90</sup> The focus in the story from the KM(Ś) is the origin of the *liṅga* Puṇyakoṭīśvara—in accordance with the structural outline of the text. As mentioned above, the interpretation of Viṣṇu and Vaiṣṇava sites in the KM(Ś) is undisputed: Viṣṇu is presented as worshiping Śiva and the narratives on Viṣṇu's manifestations in Kāñcī are add-ons to the stories about the *liṅgas*. This setting attributes to Śiva a superordinated position over Viṣṇu and, consequently, clearly settles the relation between the associated traditions in the interpretation of the KM(Ś).

As is typical for Māhātmyas, the element of glorification in the KM(Ś) is expressed mainly in the form of statements about the special power of a place. These *phalaśruti* phrases are found at the end of almost all stories in the Māhātmya and detail the efficacy of the *śivaliṅgas*. In the case of sacred water bodies, their power is thought to be linked to a worship of a *liṅga* with Śiva eventually effecting the desired rewards. In addition to the praising remarks found at the end of the stories about the sacred sites, the KM(Ś) includes longer praise sections on the single mango tree, the Kampā river, and the cave Kāmakoṭi where Kāmākṣī resides. It further repeatedly and extensively glorifies Śiva's particular representation of Ekāmrānātha, both in the chapters covering his myth and throughout the text.

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90 The story in the KM(Ś) tells about Viṣṇu who wants to create the world alongside Brahmā and is advised by Śiva to worship him in Kāñcī, which he does with the help of the king of elephants, Gajendra. Linking to the latter character, the story features the known Purāṇic Vaiṣṇava motif of Gajendra being attacked by a sea monster and seeking refuge with Viṣṇu for help (cf. *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, *Skandha* VIII, 2–4; see also footnote 221). Śiva eventually manifests himself and grants Viṣṇu the boon to create the world. Because Viṣṇu calls Śiva *varada* (granter of wishes), he himself receives the name Varadarāja. Viṣṇu further requests that the mountain on which he resides as Varadarāja be called Hastigiri (Elephant-Hill) after the elephant that helped him worship Śiva.

Building on a general Śaiva orientation, the link of Kāñcī with Śiva as Ekāmranātha is one of the prominent features of the Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya*. Ekāmranātha is clearly the focus of the text, which leads to the assumption that the text originated in the context of the Ēkāmparanātar temple. The emphasis on Ekāmranātha is also reflected in the spatial design of Kāñcī's sacred landscape in the text, which constructs this local manifestation of Śiva at the centre of the city (see chapter 4).

### 3.3.2 The *Kāmākṣivilāsa*

The *Kāmākṣivilāsa* (KV) is the shortest text among the three Māhātmyas on Kanchi (1400 verses). It is available in two printed editions, one from 1889 in Telugu script and the other from 1968 in Devanagari. The text attributes itself to the *Mārkaṇḍeyapurāṇa* but is not found in the latter's standard printed editions. However, as Ina Ilkama (2023, 45; also Schier 2018, 85) points out, this self-acclamation to a Mahāpurāṇa is noteworthy and consistent in terms of sectarian orientation. The *Mārkaṇḍeyapurāṇa* contains one of the central texts for the worship of the Goddess, the *Devīmāhātmya*. In its myth about the goddess Kāmākṣī, the KV presents a localised rendition of the central Goddess myth from the *Devīmāhātmya*.

Judging by its title, it would be assumed that the *Kāmākṣivilāsa* deals with Kāmākṣī and her myth. The Śākta orientation holds true for the overall framing: in the introduction (KV ch. 1), Kāñcī is presented as a Śaktipīṭha, a seat of the Goddess, and Kāmākṣī as a local form of the great Goddess (Mahādevī). This identification indicates the text's affiliation with the pan-Indian tantric Śākta Śrīvidyā tradition, which centres around the Goddess as Lalitā Mahātripurasundarī and further reflects the tradition followed in the Kāmākṣi Ammaṇ temple in Kanchi.<sup>91</sup> The local anchoring is unmistakable and the KV itself variously mentions the identification of Kāmākṣī with Mahātripurasundarī (KV 1.78, 11.26, ch. 12).

The Śākta framing is most evident in the introductory (and the concluding) chapter. The divine power of the Goddess (*śakti*) of illusion (*mahāmāyā*), the primordial nature, is presented as the original cause that brings about the goddess Kāmākṣī (Kāmākṣi Ammaṇ) in Kāñcī and also, through

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91 On the Śrīvidyā tradition, see Gavin Flood's introduction (1997, 187–189) and the study by Douglas Brooks (1992) for details of the South Indian Śrīvidyā form. On the local Śrīvidyā form of worship followed in the Kāmākṣi Ammaṇ temple, see Ina Ilkama's study (2023, 25–34).

her, Ekāmranātha (Ēkāmpanātar) and Varadarāja (Varatarāja Perumāḷ). As she fights off an angry Brahmā, the goddess creates Śiva and Viṣṇu in an imperceptible form as her emanations, from which Ekāmranātha and Varadarāja later manifest themselves (KV 1.94–125b).<sup>92</sup> The divine Śākta principle is accordingly manifest threefold in Kāñcī as Devī (Kāmākṣī), Viṣṇu (Varadarāja), and Śiva (Ekāmranātha). Kāñcī is therefore said to be Viṣṇu's realm, to grant closeness to Śiva, and to be endowed with the power of Devī because of her predominance. Twice the divine power of the Goddess (*śakti*) is visible in the *saguṇa* (with qualities) form, namely as Kāmākṣī and Varadarāja, and once, as Ekāmranātha, it exists in the *nirguṇa* (without qualities) form (KV 1.50c–68b).<sup>93</sup> The classification refers to the deities' physical representation in the sanctum sanctorum of their temples: Varadarāja and Kāmākṣī are depicted in anthropomorphic form, Ekāmranātha as aniconic *śivaliṅga*.

Within this fundamental Śākta framing, the local deities Kāmākṣī, Varadarāja, and Ekāmranātha are placed seemingly on an equal level. Accordingly, the *Kāmākṣīvilāsa* presents itself as a Māhātmya on Kanchi with a broader perspective.<sup>94</sup> Framed as a conversation between the sage Mārkaṇḍeya as narrator and a king named Suratha<sup>95</sup> listening to him, it demonstrates an inclusive approach with an distinctly schematic and

92 This narrative processes one of the central Śākta myths, in which the Goddess kills the demons Madhu and Kaiṭabha (cf. for example *Devībhāgavatapurāṇa*, *Skandha* I, 6–9).

93 In reference to the myth told in the first chapter of the KV, the understanding of Kāmākṣī, Ekāmranātha, and Varadarāja as emanations of the Goddess's nature is taken up again in the last chapter of the text. Here, Kāmākṣī is said to be sixfold present in Kāñcī, thrice as goddess, twice as Śiva and once as Viṣṇu, all through divine play. The six forms are the golden Kāmākṣī (the festival image of the Kāmākṣī Ammaṇ temple; see n. 101), the cave (considered to be the space below the sanctum sanctorum of the Kāmākṣī Ammaṇ temple but physically imperceptible), Kāmākṣī in the sanctum sanctorum, the single mango tree (at the Ēkāmpanātar temple), Ekāmranātha, and Varadarāja (KV 14.123–132b). This list expands the arrangement found in the first chapter of the Māhātmya. On the concept of *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* in divine manifestations, see Agrawal 2018.

94 At the end of chapter 1, the KV itself states to be a *Kāñcīmāhātmya*: *kāmākṣyās tu vilāso* [’*lyam kāñcīmāhātmyam uttamam* || KV 1.127; for *māhātmyam* (1968 edition) read *māhātmyam* (1889 edition).

95 Several kings with this name appear in the epics and the Purāṇas (Mani 1975, 768–769) and that is why the identification of this character is ambiguous. In his English compilation of the KV, V. D. N. Rao (n.d.), however, apparently identifies king Suratha with a particular character from the *Devībhāgavatapurāṇa*, where Suratha loses his kingdom after being defeated by his enemies, goes to the hermitage of the sage Sumedha where he is taught a Śākta *mantra* (sacred formula),

uniform structure. The result is a rough tripartite division in a Vaiṣṇava (KV chs. 2–5), a Śaiva (chs. 6–9), and a Śākta part (chs. 10–13), centring around Varadarāja, Ekāmranātha, and Kāmākṣī. Each part is structured identically: i) the first chapter outlines the territory (*kṣetra*) assigned to the main deity in Kāñcī and introduces a selection of sacred sites located in that area (see section 5.3). Viṣṇu, *śivaliṅgas*, goddesses, and *tīrthas* in almost equal number each are located and their myths of origin are hinted at. The thus defined area forms the spatial frame for the subsequent mythological narratives; ii) the next chapter of each part tells the story of one divine symbol that is strongly associated with both the myth of the main deity and its worship or abode. For Varadarāja this is the hill Hastiśaila, on which he manifests himself and stays, for Ekāmranātha it is the single mango tree, under which the goddess Pārvatī builds a *liṅga* of sand to worship Śiva, and for Kāmākṣī it is a manifestation of ether as a cave, where the goddess resides. Following the narrative about the symbol, the central myth of the main deity is introduced; and, iii) the respective third chapter of each part continues the core narrative aiming at the manifestation of the deity in Kāñcī; iv) the conclusion of each part is formed by an episode about a sacred water body that plays an important role in the main myth and is located in the deity's *kṣetra*.

Through the consistent structure of the Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva and Śākta parts, the *Kāmākṣivilāsa* presents local Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva and Śākta mythologies each in their own right and as existing in parallel. It is noteworthy that the Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva parts do not show any Śākta influence anywhere. Instead, the rendition of Varadarāja's narrative seems to correspond to the version from the Vaiṣṇava Māhātmya on Kanchi. Likewise, the rendition of Ekāmranātha's myth largely agrees with the version from the Śaiva text. The myths in the KV are, however, much condensed and deviations in detail do occur.<sup>96</sup> Compared to the other two Māhātmyas, the narrative renditions from the KV appear to be told as if in a fast-forward. Although this

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and eventually regains his kingdom. Since the KV itself does not provide any details on the character of Suratha, I cannot verify this particular identification.

96 For example, the version of Ekāmranātha's myth in the KV includes the motif of Viṣṇu (understood as Pārvatī's brother) helping Pārvatī in protecting her and the sand-*liṅga* when Śiva attempts to test the goddess's devotion. This element is also found in the version of the narrative from the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya*, which generally assigns Viṣṇu the superordinate position and powers. However, Viṣṇu's involvement is not included in Ekāmranātha's myth in the Śaiva text, while the story lines in the Śaiva part of the KV are otherwise congruent with the versions found in the KM(Ś).

stylistic approach leads to a comprehensible and logical presentation of the plot with an explanation of the central motifs, it seems simplistic in comparison. In addition, structurally recurring sections, for example, the introductory verses of the chapters, the introductions to the longer narratives, the passages describing the manifestation of Varadarāja, Ekāmrānātha, and Kāmākṣī, as well as verse sections praising the realms of the three gods, are similar in their structure and even almost identical in the wording in each of the three parts of the KV.<sup>97</sup> Thus, the KV is decidedly uniform, but also monotonous from a linguistic-stylistic perspective.

Instead of elaborate myths, core elements are glorifying and often extensive *phalaśruti* passages. These are frequently added at the end of the stories about the sacred places and in itself may be specific illustrative stories that exemplify the power of the sites. The *phalaśruti* passages directly appeal to the listeners—or readers—of the Māhātmya and underline the impression of the entire text as a pilgrim-friendly synoptic introduction to Kanchi.

In the *Kāmākṣivilāsa*, we find the only case in Kanchi's Māhātmyas in which the myth of Kāmākṣī is untangled from Ekāmrānātha's. In the Śākta part of the text, the goddess is provided with a separate myth on her origin and considered an independent goddess, a form of Lalitā Mahātripurasundarī, with her own Śākta tradition.<sup>98</sup> In this regard, the KV does live up to its title as account of the Goddess manifested as Kāmākṣī. At the same time, the rendering of Ekāmrānātha's myth in the KV understands the goddess with the name Kāmākṣī to be a form of Śiva's wife Pārvatī. Kāmākṣī is thought to be married to Ekāmrānātha, as is also found in the narrative of the Śaiva text and the version of Ekāmrānātha's and Kāmākṣī's myth in the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya*. There are thus two different, but parallel interpretations of Kāmākṣī expressed in the KV: the goddess appears as Ekāmrānātha's consort in the Śaiva part, while Kāmākṣī is presented as a stand-alone goddess in the Śākta part. This incongruence results from the structural division within the text, in which each part stands on its own in terms of content.

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97 Compare, for example, *yaḥ paṭhec chṛṇuyān nityam imam adhyāyam ādarāt | hariḥṣetranivāsena yatphalaṃ tatphalaṃ labhet || KV 2.73 to yaḥ paṭhec chṛṇuyān nityam imam adhyāyam ādarāt | rudraśālānivāsena yatphalaṃ tatphalaṃ labhet || KV 6.72 and to etad adhyāyamātram vā yaḥ paṭhec chruṇuyān naraḥ | kāmakoṣṭhanivāsena yatphalaṃ tatphalaṃ labhet || KV 10.79.*

98 According to Douglas Brooks (1992, 71), Kāmākṣī's iconography stresses her stand-alone status.

### Kāmākṣī's Myth

Kāmākṣī's Śākta myth of origin from the *Kāmākṣīvilāsa* reflects the core storyline of Purāṇic Goddess mythology. It can be summarised as follows (KV 11.19–25, 12.16–114):<sup>99</sup> A demon called Bandhaka torments the world and its beings, including deities and sages. Frightened, the gods enter Kāñcī through the cave (*bila*) Kāmakoṣṭha and see Mahātripurasundarī who resides there. In the form of parrots, they stay outside the cave and contemplate on the Goddess. She manifests herself and in the form of fire burns the world which is thus destroyed. Out of the void space, the Goddess creates Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva (the Trimūrti) who then carry out their tasks of creation, preservation and destruction. The new world, however, still includes Bandhaka. The Goddess again fights and eventually kills him and all other demons. In the form of a five-year-old girl, she drags the dead Bandhaka to Kāmakoṣṭha in Kāñcī. The gods—still present as parrots—recognise the girl as the Goddess, assume their own forms and praise her. As instructed by the girl, the gods bury Bandhaka, build a temple (called Gāyatrīmaṇḍapa) for her at the cave, and worship her all night. The next morning, Mahātripurasundarī shows them her own divine form and declares that she will reside at Kāmakoṣṭha as Kāmākṣī from now on.<sup>100</sup>

Like an appendix to the Śākta part, the last chapter of the KV (ch. 14)—with 247 verses, it is the longest of all chapters—presents miscellaneous topics and narratives related to Kāmākṣī. One myth, for example, explains why there are no separate shrines for the Goddess in Śiva's places in Kāñcī as well as the origin of the golden Kāmākṣī.<sup>101</sup> Furthermore, philo-

99 For a more detailed summary and comparison of the local Goddess myth with the archetypal Śākta mythology about the goddess fighting and killing a demon, see Ilkama 2023, 41–61. In her study of the Navarātri festival in Kanchi, Ina Ilkama analyses the myths from different sources—among them the KV.

100 The description of how Kāmākṣī is celebrated by the gods recounts how Śiva appears in the form of the sage Dūrvasas, who presents the *Cintāmaṇītantra* containing the rules for the worship of Kāmākṣī. According to Anne Moßner, this passage probably refers to the *Saubhāgyacintāmaṇī*, the normative ritual handbook used as the manual for worship in the Kāmākṣī Ammaṇ temple (2008, 77, n. 371).

101 The golden Kāmākṣī is known as Baṅgāru Kāmākṣī (*baṅgāru* means gold in Telugu) and is the former festival image of the Kāmākṣī Ammaṇ temple. In the seventeenth century, the statue left Kanchi to be hidden in politically unstable times and has been eventually installed in a temple in Thanjavur where it still is found (Hüsken 2017). For the role of Kāmākṣī in the contemporary celebration of the annual Paṅkuṇi Uttiram temple festival at the Ekāmparanātar temple and the legendary accounts about Baṅgāru Kāmākṣī from Kanchi and

sophical expositions are given on the nature of the various forms of the Goddess present at the Kāmākṣi Ammaṇ temple, as well as instructions on the worship of the Śricakra, the representation of the Goddess in form of a *yantra* (a mythical diagram) in the Śrīvidyā tradition, and a brief account of a Chola king who once worshipped Kāmākṣi.<sup>102</sup> The various episodes in the last chapter of the KV express the local anchoring and the Māhātmya's embedding in the religious tradition of the Kāmākṣi Ammaṇ temple.

On the one hand, the decidedly uniform and schematic structure of the KV links the Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva, and Śākta parts into a coherent concept. On the other hand, the framing of the Māhātmya is less consistently discernible due to the equal inclusion of Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva, and Śākta material. The general outlook in form of the introductory and concluding chapters is clearly Śākta. The idea of Kāñcī as a place of the Goddess is emphasised, Devī is placed on top of the divine hierarchy, Viṣṇu and Śiva presented as manifestations of the power of the Goddess principle, and elements of the ritual traditions of the Kāmākṣi Ammaṇ temple are featured. At the same time, the forms of divine (Śākta) power locally present in Kāñcī as Kāmākṣī, Varadarāja and Ekāmrānātha, seem to be regarded as on a par with each other. Nearly half of the chapters, the Vaiṣṇava and the Śaiva part, present either Viṣṇu or Śiva as supreme deity and focus on one of the two gods. In these sections of the text, there is no suggestion of a deeply ingrained Śākta angle. The crucial element that brings together the Śākta framing with the Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva material into a unified whole is the myth in the introductory chapter (KV 1.94–125b), which presents Viṣṇu and Śiva alongside the Goddess as emanations from the Goddess principle. Still, if the text were to present a Śākta perspective on Kanchi and/or a praise of Kāmākṣi alone, the myths of the Vaiṣṇava and the Śaiva part could have been omitted or re-interpreted to include the Goddess in a prominent position.

In view of the tripartite division of the KV and an equally tripartite spatial layout of Kanchi (see section 5.3 and figure 5.11), I therefore consider the KV more likely an attempt to claim territory for Kāmākṣī in Kanchi's religious landscape and to promote the city as an important place of the Goddess worship, with the local Śākta tradition as equal to the Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva traditions. In contrast to both the Vaiṣṇava and the Śaiva *Kāñcī-māhātmya* with their one-sided orientation, however, an inclusive approach

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Thanjavur; see Schier 2018, 138–152. On the iconography of the golden Kāmākṣī compared to Buddhist goddesses, see Venkataraman 1973, 45–47.

102 On the ritual tradition of the Kāmākṣi Ammaṇ temple, Kāmākṣī's worship, and the role of the Śricakra, see Ilkama 2023, 25–34. For an assumption on the historical identity of the king, see Moßner 2008, 97, n. 407.

has been chosen. This acknowledges the other religious traditions and their narratives rather than juxtaposing them with Śākta interpretations of the same sacred places. Importantly, though, it establishes an autonomous narrative of Kāmākṣī as an independent goddess, framed in the South Indian Śrīvidyā religious tradition that is followed in the Kāmākṣī Ammaṇ temple. Particularly noteworthy are the various references to details in the ritual practices observed in the temple that unmistakably link the *Kāmākṣīvilāsa* to the local Śākta tradition of Kāmākṣī in Kanchi. In this respect, the KV is an explicitly locally grounded text whose probable origin or commissioning is therefore to be surmised in the communities associated with the temple, be they hereditary priests or members of the monastic institution of the Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham, whose former head Chandrasekharendra Saraswati (1894–1994) very actively propagated the renown of Kāmākṣī and her temple (Wilke 1996, 149).

### 3.3.3 The Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya*

The second text titled *Kāñcīmāhātmya* has a distinctly Vaiṣṇava orientation and is therefore referred to as the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya* (KM(V)). It is available in an edition from 1907 in Devanagari script and claims to belong to the *Brahmaṇḍapurāṇa*. In terms of length (2300 verses), the KM(V) is about half the size of the KM(Ś) and twice the size of the KV.

Like the Śaiva Māhātmya, the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya* is framed as a narration presented by the Purāṇic narrator Sūta to the sages gathered in the Naimiṣāraṇya. The sages first discuss what act one needs to perform for Viṣṇu to grant them liberation (*mokṣa*). They eventually single out Kāñcī as the place on earth where Viṣṇu bestows liberation. Upon his arrival at the assembly of the sages, Sūta agrees to tell the Māhātmya on Kanchi which he has once heard the sage Nārada narrate to the king Ambarīṣa. This introduction (KM(V) 1.1–2.14) sets the Vaiṣṇava framework for the entire text, which further contains various self-contained narrative cycles (chs. 2–3, 9–30), a chapter more generally glorifying Kāñcī (ch. 4), and a part introducing several sacred water bodies in Kāñcī and the surrounding area (chs. 5–8). The last two chapters give the origin of a pair of lizards, a popular object of worship at the Varatarāja Perumāl temple (Taṅkapalli; ch. 31), and introduce three *śivaliṅgas* (ch. 32). Both seem to be additions to the text, since the Māhātmya is structurally concluded in the third last chapter (ch. 30) of the Māhātmya text (Hüsken 2022, 167–168).

The main structural elements of the KM(V) are narrative cycles, which each aim at the manifestation of a particular form of Viṣṇu in Kāñcī. Further manifestations of Viṣṇu may additionally appear in the course of these myths and one in an additional narrative. In her in-depth analysis of the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya*, Marie-Claude Porcher (1985) points out the arrangement of four narrative cycles along a spatial and temporal axis. The spatial shift is reflected by a change of venue from the southeast to the northwest in Kanchi in the transition from one narrative cycle to the next. The temporal axis is based on successive manifestations of Viṣṇu (*avatāras*), which preside over the larger narratives with one exception. Varāha, Viṣṇu's manifestation as boar, is leading in the first narrative cycle, (KM(V) ch. 2); the man-lion, Narasiṃha, in the second (KM(V) chs. 3, 9–17), Viṣṇu as dwarf Vāmana presides over the third cycle (KM(V) chs. 18–28); and Kṛṣṇa over the fourth (KM(V) ch. 29). The assignment of the *avatāras* with their temporal allocation reflects a progressive structure of the KM(V). In accordance with the manifestations of the *avatāras* linked to successive world ages (*yugas*), the narrative cycles are set in consecutive *yugas*.<sup>103</sup> The first three evolve in the Kṛta- or Satyayuga and the fourth in the later Dvāparayuga. Outside the framework of a narrative cycle, the last narrative detailing the origin of a local form of Viṣṇu (KM(V) ch. 30) is set in the Kaliyuga, the present world age, without the assignment of an *avatāra*.

Overall, the narratives in the KM(V) are distinctly confined to the sphere of mythical conceptions. The *Māhātmya* is first and foremost concerned with telling mythological stories about Viṣṇu that illustrate his supreme power and glory. These often process known Purāṇic motifs or present localised renditions of Purāṇic Vaiṣṇava narratives. The narratives follow a structural outline typical for Vaiṣṇava *Māhātmyas*, which Linda Wiig identifies as follows: “[i]n the Vaiṣṇava context, Viṣṇu manifests and displays

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103 The sequence of the *avatāras* in the KM(V) reflects the arrangement found in *daśavatāra*-lists of the ten principal incarnations of Viṣṇu. Such lists of Viṣṇu's manifestations, which are believed to appear for the welfare of the world in a certain order in successive world ages, are found in various Purāṇas. Varāha is usually listed as the third incarnation, Narasiṃha as the fourth, Vāmana as the fifth, and Kṛṣṇa is either on position eight or nine. The sequence and inclusion of particular incarnations vary in the epic, Purāṇic and other textual sources. Varāha and Narasiṃha are said to manifest in the Kṛtayuga (also called Satyayuga), the first and best world age in a cycle of four. Vāmana is considered to have appeared in the Tretāyuga (second era) and Kṛṣṇa at the end of the third yuga, the Dvāparayuga (Couture 2018). In the KM(V) we find a slight deviation from this allocation of the *avatāra* to an era, with the myths led by Vāmana set in the Kṛtayuga and not in the Tretāyuga.

his power on behalf of a devotee and then agrees to reside permanently (in iconic form) at a place” (1981, 27). It is precisely these elements that structure the myths in the Vaiṣṇava Māhātmya as well: Viṣṇu is asked for help by a devotee, the god appears in a local form, and ultimately stays in a particular place in Kāñcī.

The selection of sacred sites presented in the text is largely limited to manifestations of Viṣṇu and *tīrthas* in Kanchi (see section 6.4). The number of individual stories is less extensive compared to the other two Māhātmyas, as it mentions fewer sacred places. In turn, the structure in the narrative cycles allows for extensive narrations, partly interspersed with further episodes that introduce a new motif or character. The first narrative cycle is a local version about Varāha, Viṣṇu’s manifestation as boar that rescues the earth (the goddess Bhū) by lifting her up with his tusks (KM(V) ch. 2; cf. *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, *Skandha* III and *Matsyapurāṇa*, 247–248).<sup>104</sup> The second cycle, divided into two self-contained myths, presents a local interpretation of the Hiraṇyakaśipu myth, in which Viṣṇu incarnates as a man-lion to fight the demon Hiraṇyakaśipu (KM(V) ch. 3; cf. *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, *Skandha* VII) while larger portion forms Varadarāja’s myth (chs. 9–17).

In the third cycle, the frame-story tells of the sage Bhṛgu who, in search of the highest truth, disturbs Viṣṇu and is cursed by Viṣṇu’s wife Lakṣmī (KM(V) chs. 18, 21–22; cf. *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, *Skandha* X). Embedded into that narrative is a local version of the story about Bali’s sacrifice which forms the core myth of the Vāmana *avatāra* (KM(V) chs. 19–20; cf. *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, *Skandha* VIII, 15–22). The same cycle contains the Māhātmya’s rendition of Ekāmranātha’s and Kāmākṣī’s myths of origin (chs. 23–25). The fourth and last narrative cycle refers to the universe of the epic *Mahābhārata* with king Janamejaya, the great-grandson of the Pāṇḍava brother Arjuna, as the main character and Viṣṇu’s incarnation Kṛṣṇa (ch. 29).

### Varadarāja’s Myth

The core narrative of the Vaiṣṇava Māhātmya aims to explain the origin of Viṣṇu as Varadarāja (Varatarāja Perumāḷ) and is detailed at great length (KM(V) chs. 9–17). It can be summarised as follows: The god Brahmā wishes to see Viṣṇu and is told to perform thousand horse sacrifices (*aśvamedha*) to this end. As he is unable to carry out that many sacrifices, Brahmā even-

104 For a detailed summary and analysis of the myths in the Vaiṣṇava Māhātmya, see Porcher 1985.

tually arrives in Kāñcī where only one *aśvamedha* yields the results of a thousand sacrifices elsewhere.<sup>105</sup> Brahmā finds Viṣṇu as Narasiṃha dwelling at the foot of the hill Hastiśaila (lit. Elephant-Hill; Hastigiri) in Kāñcī and instructs the divine constructor Viśvakarman to build the city Kāñcī, the sacrificial arena, and altars around the hill. Divine beings, heavenly beings, and sages are invited to attend the sacrifice. Only Brahmā's first wife Sarasvatī who is angry with Brahmā due to a previous incident, refuses to come. Demons, too, learn about the *aśvamedha* and decide to hinder its successful completion. In total, they carry out three attacks: first, they intend to burn the city and second, they have Śiva create the eight-legged half-lion half-bird Śarabha to fight Narasiṃha who is watching the sacrifice. After both these attempts fail, the demons eventually entice Brahmā's wife Sarasvatī to flood the site in the form of a destructive river. In all these episodes, Brahmā pleads with Viṣṇu to protect the sacrifice whereupon Viṣṇu manifests himself in various forms at different places in Kāñcī. When the demons are eventually defeated by Viṣṇu's manifestations, the *aśvamedha* continues with Sarasvatī on Brahmā's side. It is successfully brought to an end with Viṣṇu manifesting himself out of the sacrificial fire. Brahmā is thus granted his wish and Viṣṇu agrees to permanently stay at Hastiśaila as Varadarāja.

The narrative cycle oriented towards Varadarāja is clearly the central part of the text and Varadarāja at his abode Hastiśaila is considered the overall focal reference point in the Māhātmya's design of Kāñcī's sacred space. Moreover, not only the venue where Varadarāja's myth evolves refers to Varadarāja, but also the other narratives set in different spaces in Kāñcī (see section 6.3). This emphasis reflects a strong position of Varadarāja in relation to other Vaiṣṇava sites in Kanchi, which the Varadarāja Perumāḷ temple obtained from the eleventh century onwards (Raman 1975, 88; Nagaswamy 2011, 5–6). Before, in the time of the Āḷvārs, Varadarāja was one among others, with the Ulakaḷanta Perumāḷ, Yatōktakāri, and Pāṅṅavatūta Perumāḷ temples being more prominent (Nagaswamy 2011, 8–11). This shift within the local Vaiṣṇava religious landscape seems to be addressed in the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya* by the spatial conception of Kāñcī (see sections 6.3 and 6.5).

In the Vaiṣṇava text, Viṣṇu's and Śiva's relation is generally illustrated as an active opposition. The KM(V) introduces only few manifestations of Śiva in Kāñcī and each of the related episodes has a unique setting. In most cases the relation between Viṣṇu and Śiva is portrayed as antagonistic. The

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105 The motif of a deity performing a sacrifice at a particular sacred site is commonly found in the myths of Purāṇas and Māhātmyas, with which pilgrimage is correlated with (Vedic) sacrifices (Ensink 1979, 109–110).

opposition can either be indirect by associating Viṣṇu's opponents with Śiva, or Śiva himself is manifested in some form as an obstruction. For example, in Varadarāja's myth, the demons worship Śiva to enlist his help to obstruct Brahmā's sacrifice and he both advises them to plunge Kāñcī into darkness and himself manifests as Śarabha (KM(V) chs. 12–13). Both settings ultimately lead to Viṣṇu defeating Śiva and claiming victory over the influence emanating from him. A clear representation of a Viṣṇu-oriented hierarchy is reflected in this approach as well as a concept that considers Śaiva-actions as opposition to be fought against.

In a slightly attenuated form of opposition, the Māhātmya's version of Ekāmranātha's myth clearly acknowledges Ekāmranātha as a part of Kāñcī's sacred geography. Embedded in the narrative cycle presided over by Viṣṇu's *avatāra* Vāmana, Ekāmranātha's myth is closely intertwined with the story of Kāmākṣī's origin (KM(V) chs. 23–25). The Vaiṣṇava text attributes greater importance to forms of Viṣṇu in the course of the story than the other two Māhātmyas display in their versions of the deities' myths. It is Viṣṇu who is indispensable to bring about both Kāmākṣī's and Ekāmranātha's presence in Kāñcī. Nevertheless, the version of Ekāmranātha's myth of origin in the KM(V) is told rather extensively and includes the goddess Pārvatī who is later called Kāmākṣī in her local form. The Goddess does not have a separate myth in the Vaiṣṇava text. Ekāmranātha's myth starts with Śiva's wife Pārvatī, who is cursed by an offended Śiva to have a dark-coloured body. To atone for it, she is advised by her husband to go to Kāñcī and worship Viṣṇu as Vāmana, who is understood as her brother.<sup>106</sup> Viṣṇu eventually releases her from her curse and the dark skin, and names her Kāmākṣī. The goddess then desires the presence of her husband Śiva in Kāñcī and Vāmana tells her to build a *liṅga* of sand and worship it. Repeatedly worshipped by Pārvatī to this end, Viṣṇu also rescues her from various effects of natural forces (heat, flood) emanating from Śiva, who tries to break Pārvatī's worship of the *liṅga*. Śiva's final test comes in the form of the waters of the Gaṅgā. Pārvatī curses the other goddess to become ugly before embracing the sand-*liṅga* to protect it. Delighted, Śiva appears and takes his abode as Ekāmranātha in the *liṅga* of sand under the single mango tree.

The narrative element of Gaṅgā, who is cursed by Pārvatī, is uniquely found in the Vaiṣṇava text and forms the starting point for another narrative. This story serves to illustrate Varadarāja's greatness in general and explains the god's procession mounted on his vehicle (*vāhana*) Garuḍa

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106 The idea that Viṣṇu is the brother of Śiva's wife is widespread in Tamil Nadu (Fuller 2004, 43).

during the Brahmotsava festival celebrations in particular (KM(V) chs. 26–27).<sup>107</sup> It is again a distinctly Vaiṣṇava narrative and serves as a transition from the preceding Vaiṣṇava-framed but essentially Śaiva narrative about Ekāmraṇātha—and Kāmākṣī—back to a pure focus on Viṣṇu. Continuing with the ritual aspects, the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya* further narrates (ch. 28) how Brahmā has built the dwelling place (*ālaya*) of Varadarāja and three images (*pratimās*) of the god with different characteristics for different purposes, and how the celebrations during Brahmotsava are to be carried out. These descriptions correspond to the architectural and iconographic particularities found at the Varatarāja Perumāḷ temple and the ritual practices followed still today. It would be worthwhile to further evaluate to what extent the details about the festival given in the *Māhātmya* refer to and agree with the specific ritual tradition adhered to in the Varatarāja Perumāḷ temple which is based on two particular Pāñcarātrāgama texts as normative ritual handbook.<sup>108</sup>

The Vaiṣṇava perspective in the KM(V) is very pronounced. Primarily, it is expressed in a focus on Viṣṇu-centric myths. Illustrating Viṣṇu's greatness is the clear purpose of the mythological stories, the central and structuring elements of the text. Short glorifying *phalaśruti* statements are found throughout the text and refer to the power of Viṣṇu's manifestations and sacred water bodies that are introduced in the *Māhātmya*. In particular, the text highlights Viṣṇu as Varadarāja among the manifestations of the god located in Kāñcī. His mythology takes up most space and further episodes deal with elements of Varadarāja's ritual practices. The Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya* thereby establishes an explicit reference to the most prominent local Vaiṣṇava temple in Kanchi and its ritual tradition. Although referring to Kanchi and Viṣṇu's various manifestations found across the city, the KM(V) generally moves in an imagined mythical landscape. The latter appears like a parallel layer with only few intersections with the geographical elements of Kanchi's religious landscape. As chapter 6 will show, the KM(V) is less focused on Kanchi's geographical specificities than the KM(Ś) and the KV, but instead refers to spatial and religious aspects of the city's historical urban transformation in order to establish a local anchoring.

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107 Garuḍasevā, the procession of Varadarāja on his mount Garuḍa described in this narrative, takes place in the morning of the third day of Brahmotsava, the largest annual festival at the Varadarāja temple. See Raman 1975, 102–104 and Hüsken 2013 on the Brahmotsava celebrations, and Ambach 2022 on the Gaṅgā motif in the KM(V).

108 On the normative texts of the Varatarāja Perumāḷ temple, see Hüsken 2013, 104–105 and Raman 1975, 95.

### 3.3.4 Comparative Reflections

Episodes from different texts about one and the same sacred place are a suitable starting point for a comparative perspective on the relations between the texts. While the Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya*, the *Kāmākṣivilāsa*, and the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya* all place their focus around Ekāmranātha, Kāmākṣī, and Varadarāja, there are several other sacred places whose narratives are recounted in the three Māhātmyas. The inclusion and appropriation of deities belonging to a religious tradition other than one's own and their sites is a common feature of the Māhātmya texts. The difference then lies in the interpretative framing. As indicated above through the summaries of the myths of Ekāmranātha, Kāmākṣī, and Varadarāja, the versions from the three texts resemble each other in the basic storyline and motifs. At the same time, the significance attributed to one and the same sacred place varies between the texts, as does the length and level of detail of the narratives about its origin, resulting from both the style and the sectarian orientation of each Māhātmya. The same holds true for episodes about several other sacred places whose myths are recounted in the texts. One Māhātmya may thus devote an entire chapter with more than forty or fifty verses to one place while there is only a single verse indicating the myth of origin regarding the same place in the other text. Nevertheless, there is a certain correspondence between the three Māhātmyas on Kanchi in terms of both the choice of sacred sites and the myths associated with them.

Most of these stories are local versions of the well-known Purāṇic narratives or narrative strands. An attributed character trait or the name of the resident deity at the local place in Kāñcī is often taken as a connecting element to such a narrative venture. The similarities between the Māhātmyas on Kanchi point to a common local corpus of mythological narratives linked to the sacred places in the city. On this common body of narratives, the texts seem to build their respective stories about the emergence of a sacred place. Each of the three Māhātmyas on Kanchi presents a customised form that reflects the agenda and general concept of the text. As a result, the core of a narrative is often similar in all three Māhātmyas but their contextualisation differs. Usually, the same narrative motif is associated with the same place in the KM(V), the KM(Ś), and the KV. There are, however, exceptions in which one text may attach its adaptations of a particular narrative to another site than the other two Māhātmyas. The shaping of myths in the texts is thus both a means of conveying one's own perspective on a sacred place and, building on this, the intention to gain interpretive sovereignty over the same. In this respect, the three Māhātmyas also reflect a dynamic process

of negotiation between the religious traditions that exist side by side in the city: even more than similarities in the texts, competing differences in the narratives about one and the same site as well as its precise contextualisation reveal both direct and indirect negotiations in respect to interpretive and spatial supremacy.

The different ways in which the same narrative (motif) is processed in the texts on Kanchi will be illustrated by the following example. The myth about Viṣṇu's half-lion-half-man *avatāra* Narasiṃha killing the demon Hiraṇyakaśipu<sup>109</sup> is referred to in all three Māhātmyas. In the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcimāhātmya*, a locally adapted version is linked to Narasiṃha residing in the cave below the hill Hastiśaila (Yōka Naracimma Perumāḷ; second enclosure of the Varatarāja Perumāḷ temple). It covers one entire chapter of ninety-one verses (KM(V) ch. 3), thus giving ample space to this elementary Vaiṣṇava myth in the text. The *avatāra* Narasiṃha further presides over Varadarāja's myth in that text (KM(V) chs. 9–17) and his local form (Yōka Naracimma Perumāḷ) is one of the key characters in the same myth. However, though the KV also connects the story to Yōka Naracimma Perumāḷ, it devotes only one verse to him (KV 2.19c–20b). This verse is kept rather general with only a hint to the Hiraṇyakaśipu motif and without local contextualisation apart from the name Guhā(nara)siṃha.<sup>110</sup> The KM(Ś) (12.19–22), in turn, frames the narrative in a story about a *liṅga* called Nārasimheśvara (identification uncertain), which Narasiṃha worships to atone for killing Hiraṇyakaśipu. The local form of Narasiṃha—simply called Narasiṃha—refers to another site of Narasiṃha in Kanchi, namely Aḷakiya Ciṅka Perumāḷ.

Thus, in all three Māhātmya texts, the well-known Vaiṣṇava narrative can be found in clearly differing forms. The differences can mostly be attributed to the sectarian orientation of the individual texts and their general structure such as the condensed style of the KV. Beyond that, however, there is a variation of the spatial localisation: the KM(Ś) connects the same narrative motif with Aḷakiya Ciṅka Perumāḷ and not with Yōka Naracimma Perumāḷ

109 Cf. *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, *Skandha* VII. On the different version of the Narasiṃha myth from the Purāṇas, see Soifer 1991.

110 The only brief notes pointing at a story line in the KV make the recognition of popular narratives rather difficult and require an extended background knowledge to understand which narrative and which of its variants are being referred to. In some cases, the reference is still clear and points to more general features of a known myth. When the link is less clear, comparing a condensed description or cryptic detail with the text passage about the same place from one of the other two Māhātmyas may contribute to understanding, provided the second source presents the same narrative version.

as found in the KM(V) and KV; moreover, it does not mention the site of Yōka Naracimma Perumāl at all. Perhaps it is precisely because of this disregard for Yōka Naracimma Perumāl that the Śaiva text links its story to another sacred site of Narasiṃha in Kanchi. The reference to Viṣṇu's *avatāra* seems intentional here and consistent with the KM(Ś) overall programme which relates all manifestations of Viṣṇu to Śaiva places in Kanchi—as if to further emphasise Śiva's supremacy by framing all of them individually as worshippers of local forms of Śiva.

The most notable exception to the presumed common corpus of local narratives across the three Māhātmya texts is the Goddess myth about Kāmākṣī in the *Kāmākṣīvilāsa*. Only in this text the goddess is not associated with Ekāmranātha and framed as his consort. Instead, the text's Śākta part describes her as an independent deity with a separate myth of origin. In fact, Kāmākṣī's myth is a localised version of the central Purāṇic Goddess myth (see subsection 3.3.2). Besides, goddesses are mentioned more often in the KV than in the two *Kāñcimāhātmyas*. The Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcimāhātmya* largely disregards female deities and even Viṣṇu's consorts Bhū and Lakṣmī residing at Varadarāja's side are only mentioned as site notes. The KM(V) seems to reflect the elite, pan-Indian, Sanskritic, Brahminical-orthodox forms of the Hindu traditions, in which in which deities associated with vernacular traditions—like most of the independent goddesses of Kanchi—are left out.<sup>111</sup> As representative of the Sanskritic, Brahminical-orthodox traditions, Kāmākṣī is accordingly mentioned in the text. The KM(V) does not refer to her own Śākta tradition,<sup>112</sup> but this contextualisation of Kāmākṣī's nature certainly facilitates the inclusion of the goddess within the theological framing of the Vaiṣṇava text. Kāmākṣī is presented as an embodiment of Śiva's wife and Ekāmranātha's consort, which agrees with the notion found in the myth of Ekāmranātha from the Śaiva text. In the KM(Ś), only a few goddesses are mentioned, each of whom has a unique character (see pp. 137–140). Among them, of course, is Kāmākṣī. The text refers ambiguously

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111 For an overview of the nature of the Brahminical and the local, vernacular traditions, their deities and their understanding of the latter, see Flood 1997, 16–19, 103–197.

112 It is evident that the ritual tradition followed in the Kāmākṣī Ammaṇ temple today is a form of the South Indian Śākta Śrīvidyā tradition which is Sanskritic, has originated in Brahminical circles and still is kept by orthodox, Vedic brahmin communities (*smārta* brahmins; Brooks 1992). Moreover, the normative ritual text for Kāmākṣī's worship is a Sanskrit text called *Saubhāgyacintāmaṇī* and the hereditary priests responsible for the rituals at the temple belong to the caste of brahmins (Ilkama 2023, 32).

to her in that the goddess is portrayed primarily as a form of Pārvatī and Ekāmrānātha's consort, but also as inextricably linked to her locality in the form of the cave Kāmakoṣṭha (see pp. 63–66). The latter setting undoubtedly evokes the notion of Kāmākṣī as a stand-alone goddess and the Śākta tradition to which she belongs. Other goddesses mentioned in the KM(Ś) are local forms of Kālī. Representing the ferocious and malevolent qualities of the Goddess, Kālī stands in opposition to the married and benevolent type of goddesses, which appear as consorts of a god. In the orthodox pan-Indian Śaiva conception, it is typically Pārvatī who takes on this role, with a local representation of her associated with a local manifestations of Śiva.

Cross-textual similarities or even literal correspondences may indicate a deeper relationship between the three Māhātmyas on Kanchi. They do not, though, lend themselves easily to establishing a relative chronology of the texts in their entirety. In their written form, the Māhātmyas have presumably undergone additions and revisions during transmission and as multi-layered works they often contain passages that were inserted over time.<sup>113</sup> This being so, there may have been a reciprocal influence of the texts on each other as well as from yet another source through contemporary debates and historical developments over time.

It is, nevertheless, worth taking a closer look at possible textual similarities between the three texts on Kanchi. Even a cursory analysis allowed me to find isolated word-for-word correspondences. These are asymmetrically distributed and exist between the Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya* and *Kāmākṣīvilāsa*, but not between the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya* and any of the other two Māhātmyas. Interestingly, the corresponding passages all seem to deal with basically one topic: Kāmākṣī's role or characterisations of her site, sometimes linked to Ekāmrānātha.<sup>114</sup> Since I have not conducted a comprehensive analysis with regard to other literal correspondences as of now, I cannot

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113 Narrative inconsistencies within one text bear witness to this process, leading Kerstin Schier (2018, 82) to assume that more than one author contributed to writing the KM(Ś). Moreover, editions and manuscripts of the same text may present different recensions with variant readings and omission or additions of entire passages, depending on which edition/manuscript of the work is taken as source for comparison. For example, the comparison of the two printed editions of the KM(Ś) (which differ only insignificantly) with the available three manuscripts of the text shows that one manuscript is rather close to the printed versions while the two other manuscripts seem to contain a variant recension (Buchholz 2022, 23).

114 KM(Ś) 45.166–213a on Ekāmrānātha's and Kāmākṣī's wedding corresponds to KV 8.92b–137b (Schier 2018, 86), KM(Ś) 31.69c–70 on the cave below where Kāmākṣī resides matches KV 11.5c–6, and KM(Ś) 31.72cd on Kāmākṣī being the

determine whether the thematic similarity of these passages is coincidental or whether these examples are a reflection of an endeavour to propagate a particular view about the goddess. The understanding of Kāmākṣī's role as Ekāmrānātha's consort or independent goddess is indeed a contested topic. The conceptual tension becomes apparent from the study of the deities' myths from the Māhātmya texts (see pp. 63–66 and subsection 3.3.2) and also in the oral traditions and contemporary ritual practices (Schier 2018). Besides, the longer literal correspondences, in particular indicate that the passages either have a common source and were added to both the KM(Ś) and KV at one point or were copied from one text into the other. However, since we have little evidence for the exact date of the texts and their textual history so far, the questions of which text may have served as the source and whether the corresponding sections are later insertions into the KM(Ś) and/or KV must remain open at this point.

The structural layout of the Māhātmya narratives in their entirety also reflects a particular consideration of the sacred space shared by different religious traditions in Kanchi. In this context, the plot of a narrative can be considered the illustrative wrapping and the sacred place whose origins it describes is the relevant core. By looking at the selection and sequence of places mentioned in the texts, the possible connections and hierarchies between them, the conception of Kāñcī as a space, and the possible focal points constructed within it, we can identify fundamentally different interpretations of Kāñcī's sacred space (see chapters 4, 5, and 6). Each text shapes and creates a particular notion of Kāñcī as a sacred place with elements overlapping and/or competing with the conceptions of the other Māhātmyas, thus presenting varied ideas of the city.

The incorporation of praising statements (*phalaśruti*) into the Māhātmyas is yet another important element. These verses or sections most generally praise the efficacy ascribed to a site as a result of performing a particular ritual there, by visually perceiving (*darśana*) the residing deity, or simply visiting the site. Typical for Purāṇic literature on sacred places, the *phalaśruti* linked to a site specifically reports that place to be the best and most rewarding of all and its redemptive powers to be the most powerful (Jacobson 2013, 126). However, the attributed qualities can also be more specific such as, for example, wiping the slate clean after a murder.<sup>115</sup> Statements

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original form of the goddess agrees with KV 13.72ab. A more comprehensive search might reveal more instances.

115 For example, a bath in the waters of the *tīrtha* Sarvatīrtha in Kāñcī and the visual perception of Śiva as Tīrtheśa on its shores is said to bring redemption for a murder (KM(Ś) 29.21–30b).

of praise thus aim to impart knowledge about specific benefits of the sacred site which is both relevant for individuals—presumably priests—intending to promote the place and those visiting the site for exculpatory profits to be gained there. In that, the Māhātmyas are connected to the practice of pilgrimage and directly appeal to those listening to a recital (of a part) of the text or reading statements about the benefits of the sacred site. Compared to the descriptive myths about a sacred site, *phalaśruti* statements constitute the prescriptive part of a Māhātmya. Still, the tendency of each and every *phalaśruti* to view the sacred site in focus as the foremost in efficaciousness needs be considered merely as a subjective and not universal statement (Jacobsen 2013, 126).

The *Kāmākṣīvilāsa* includes the most and most extensive *phalaśruti* passages, in particular about *tīrthas*. The praising statements are an important feature of the text and suggest that the KV is conceptualised as a text for worshippers and pilgrims. The text's style of presenting quintessential details of selected sacred places and its spatial layout (see chapter 5) support the perception of the KV as a pilgrims' guidebook. The Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya*, in turn, contains fewer *phalaśruti* verses. Instead, eulogies directed to Viṣṇu are woven into the myths, some of which are structurally set apart by a change of metre. The Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya* adds *phalaśruti* statements at the end of most of its narratives and generally attributes the superordinate beneficial powers to the *śivaliṅgas*. Each Māhātmya thus uses literary means by way of praising statements to underline its sectarian and spatial approach to Kāñcī's sacred space.

Moreover, the element of *phalaśruti* contributes to the local character of the Māhātmyas and the presentation of such passages reflects the individual hierarchy of deities, their sites and the spatial understanding of the text. Praising statements linked to a specific site serve to situate it among other sites of the local sacred space as constructed in the respective text. In placing the ascribed benefits of the local sacred site above those of another, distant, often famous site, these passages create a hierarchy of sacred sites in which the local site is favoured over a distant one. The praising statements are therefore an elementary feature of the Māhātmyas as local texts, providing specific information about salvific power of the sacred places they extol and thus endowing them with significance.

### Dating of the Texts and Renditions in Tamil

While correspondences between the three Māhātmyas on Kanchi on the level of content and narratives suggest a common ground, their historical dating, even a relative chronology, is more challenging. The nature of the Sanskrit Māhātmyas with the mythical past as time reference for the stories and the absence of information about historical authors or compilers leaves only few possible leads. One option are text-immanent indications such as the mention of datable temple structures at sacred sites. In the conception of the Māhātmyas, however, the sacredness and salvific power of a sacred place is inherent in the site itself wherefore any physical structures are less relevant (see pp. 18–20 and section 3.2). There are only few passages describing the architecture of a sacred place.

Furthermore, the attempt to date the Māhātmyas through descriptions of architectural elements is strongly limited, as Jonas Buchholz notes:

Firstly, even if a temple that is mentioned in a particular text can be dated to a particular century, this does not necessarily mean that the text was composed after this date, for it is always possible that the present temple was preceded by another structure, of which no traces remain. Secondly, since the texts are concerned with the mythical, rather than with the worldly realm, they rarely describe architectural details of the sites with which they are concerned, and if they do, they do it in a highly idealized way that does not allow any conclusions to dateable architectural features. (2022, 22)

A description of the physical features of a sacred place from the Māhātmyas may thus not be indicative of the architecture at a specific site—at a particular point in time—but it may nevertheless refer to a particular temple style. The most detailed description of architectural features from the three Māhātmyas on Kanchi—to which Jonas Buchholz (2022, 22–23) refers—is a passage about Ekāmranātha’s abode in the Śaiva *Kāñcī-māhātmya* (42.19–27b; see also pp. 101–106). As another example, a similar passage is found in the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya* describing the abode of Varadarāja (KM(V) 28.1–8). Leaving aside the glorifying attributes, the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya* names three walled enclosures (*prākāra*), entrances with gateway towers (*gopuras*), tower superstructures above the shrines (*vimānas*) and pavilions (*maṇḍapas*) as characteristics. These architectural components became part of South Indian temple architecture

in the twelfth/thirteenth century (Branfoot 2017, 195). Consequently, this section of the KM(V) must have been composed sometime after that, even if a more precise dating cannot be derived from this contextualisation. As Jonas Buchholz (2022, 23) states with regard to the Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya* and its passage on Ekāmranātha's abode, the mention of certain architectural features such as *gopuras* (gateway towers) does not mean that the appearance of the historical temple included them when corresponding passage of the text was composed. The same conclusion applies to the passage on Varadarāja's abode from the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya*, which equally mentions *gopuras*. Rather, such passages seem to convey the idea of how a temple was imagined at the time of the compilers and their conception of a temple was presumably based on the common architecture of their time.

In a broader perspective, the existence of renditions of Sanskrit Māhātmyas in local languages may provide some indications for dating the Sanskrit texts as well as citations of the Māhātmyas in other textual sources. In the case of the texts on Kanchi, the local language is Tamil and the equivalent to Sanskrit Sthalamāhātmyas are texts called Talapurāṇams, which form a part of Tamil Purāṇic literature.<sup>116</sup> They are often based on a Sanskrit source, which they also name, while their style in dealing with the (same) myths differs decisively.<sup>117</sup> Importantly, the names of the authors of many Tamil Talapurāṇams are known and if information on the author of the Tamil text can be found, it gives a terminus ante quem for the composition of its Sanskrit source. Of course, this relative chronology can only give a rough idea and has no predictive value with regard to a more exact or earliest possible date of composition of the Sanskrit work.

The Tamil Talapurāṇam based on the KM(Ś) is the first book of the work titled *Kāñcippurāṇam*. In one of the first chapters, the author Civanana Munivar states that the KM(Ś) is the source for his work (Dessigane et al. 1964, vii in reference to *Kāñcippurāṇam* 5.26). The Tamil work closely follows its Sanskrit source content-wise, while its style conforms to the Tamil poetic conventions (Buchholz 2023a).<sup>118</sup> Civanana Munivar composed his

116 The production of Talapurāṇams started flourishing in the sixteenth century and continued until the end of the nineteenth century, when Tamil literary culture underwent fundamental changes in the wake of colonialism (Shulman 1980, 32; Ebeling 2010).

117 On Tamil Purāṇic literature and Talapurāṇams in particular, see Shulman 1980, Ramesh 2020, and Nachimuthu 2022.

118 It is a rather popular text, of which several editions have been published since the first printed edition of 1878 and which it is considered as the authoritative work by the Śaiva traditions in Kanchi (Buchholz 2022, 24–25). For details on the *Kāñcippurāṇam* and the relation of Śaiva Tamil Talapurāṇams on Kanchi to

work in the eighteenth century (d. 1785; Zvelebil 1975, 248), consequently the date of composition of the KM(Ś) has to be prior to that. If they were the only available pointers, the dates of Civanana Munivar would provide a timeframe for the latest possible origin of the KM(Ś)—as the Tamil author had it at his disposal. However, on the basis of a quotation from the text in a roughly datable work, allows to place the composition of the text “before the first half of the sixteenth century” (Goodall, cited in Buchholz 2025, 95). As this example shows, such references through quotations can provide valuable contextualisations and are worth looking out for with regard to the dating of the other Sthalamāhātmyas on Kanchi.

The Tamil rendering of the *Kāmākṣivilāsa* is titled *Kāmākṣī Līlā Pira-pāvam*. This latter text has been first published in 1907 and several times since, both on its own and as part of a book called *Śrī Kāñcī Mahimai*, first published in 1927 (Buchholz 2022, 33–34). In this case, the first printed edition of the Sanskrit *Kāmākṣivilāsa* from 1889 is older wherefore the Tamil adaptations cannot provide further information on the date of the *Kāmākṣivilāsa*. In secondary literature, there are different views on the date of this text. David Shulman (1980, 392, n. 28) and Annette Wilke (1996, 157) consider the KV to be of an uncertain date. Anne Moßner (2008, 7) cautiously places its latest possible date of origin at the end of the seventeenth century, when the former festival image of Kāmākṣī, Baṅgāru Kāmākṣī—which is dealt with in the last chapter of the text—was brought to Thanjavur to hide it from the troops of the Moghul emperor Aurangzeb.<sup>119</sup> The mention of the golden Kāmākṣī, however, also offers little definite orientation: the text may have been composed when the goddess was still in her shrine in Kanchi or referring retrospectively to her presence at a time when the goddess was already in Thanjavur. Today, Baṅgāru Kāmākṣī is still worshipped in the Kāmākṣī Ammaṅ temple in her original shrine which, though, does not house an image anymore (Schier 2018, 138).

R. Nagaswamy (1982, 207–208) suggests that the *Kāmākṣivilāsa* was possibly composed at the date of the first printed edition since it mentions more recent structures of the Kāmākṣī Ammaṅ temple in Kanchi. However, as he neither indicates the relevant text passages nor which architectural elements he is referring to, it is difficult to evaluate the strength of his argumentation. As will be discussed in chapter 5 (see particularly section 5.4),

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their Sanskrit sources, see Dessigane et al. 1964, Buchholz 2022, 24–31, 2023a, 2023b, and the literature cited in the last two contributions.

119 On the removal of the festival images of Kāmākṣī, Ekāmranātha, and Varadarāja in the seventeenth century, their return, and the reviewing of these events in narratives and ritual performances, see Hüsken 2017.

there are nevertheless elements of the sacred geography laid out in the text which could speak in favour of a composition of the *Kāmākṣīvilāsa* in the nineteenth century.<sup>120</sup>

The Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya* has not been adapted in the local language in any form, which means that an indirect chronological placement is not possible.<sup>121</sup> Text-internal elements, however, may offer some orientation. The Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya* seems to address developments in Kanchi's urban and religious history from the sixth to fourteenth century (see section 6.5) and it can be assumed that the text postdates these events. This estimation could be supported by a reference to Poṛṛāmarai Kuḷam, the eastern temple tank at the Varatarāja Perumāḷ temple (KM(V) 5.11c–12, ch. 22; called Hemāmbhojatīrtha). Its construction around the year 1500 can be deduced from inscriptions (Raman 1975, 52). According to my cursory analysis of the physical features of places from the KM(V), it would be the most recent architectural element to be described in the text, assuming that the place Hemāmbhojatīrtha from the text is actually supposed to describe Poṛṛāmarai Kuḷam and, moreover, no other structures with this name existed there before. This would at least limit the earliest date of composition of these passages of the Vaiṣṇava text to after the year 1500.

The dating proves to be one of the more challenging elements when dealing with the anonymous Māhātmyas in general. A temporal reference frame to mythical times, a focus on the non-architectural character of the sacred places as well as a layered structure and possibly different recensions make a temporal-historical placing—even a relative chronology—difficult. The three texts on Kanchi are no exception to the general nature of the Māhātmya genre. Neither text-internal nor contextualising elements provide sufficient information for establishing a precise date of origin. On the basis of

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120 Moreover, only one manuscript of the KV has been found so far (Buchholz 2022, 19). The lack of a more expanded manuscript corpus of the text may indicate that the time span between the origin of the only “original” manuscript and the first printed edition from 1889 was not too long, wherefore manuscript copies were not made. This circumstance may thus give an additional argument in support of a late origin of the text (Buchholz 2022, 20). Furthermore, it would be worthwhile to explore whether the—presumable—mention of the *Saubhāgyacintāmaṇi*, the ritual handbook used as the manual for worship in the Kāmākṣi Ammaṇ temple, in the KV (ch. 14) as well as the study of the text passages describing architectural details in reference to the temple's architectural history could provide further indications as to the dating of the Māhātmya.

121 As a rule, Vaiṣṇava Sanskrit Māhātmyas do not seem to be rendered in a local language (Matavan 1995, 88–90) and we can see this confirmed in the example of Kanchi's Māhātmyas.

the above, I would place the texts roughly between the early sixteenth century and the time of their first printed editions, that is, the late nineteenth (KM(Ś) and KV editions from 1889) and early twentieth (KM(V) edition from 1907) centuries. This assessment is broadly in line with that of Ute Hüsken (2017, 67), who estimates that most of Kanchi's Sthalamāhātmyas were produced after the fourteenth century.

In view of dating the texts, the textual history of the Māhātmyas is also of relevance. While the topic demands fuller treatment elsewhere, a brief excursus on the first printed editions of the texts should nonetheless be made here. The first editions of the Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya* and the *Kāmākṣivilāsa*, on the one hand, were both printed in Karvetinagaram (Andhra Pradesh) in 1889 in Telugu script. The Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya*, on the other, was printed in 1907 in Kanchipuram in Devanagari script. While the use of the regional Telugu seems plausible, as many people in South India would have been able to read it, one might wonder why a Māhātmya on Kanchi and printed in Kanchi was edited in Devanagari. The decisive factor for this may have been the editor himself, P. B. Ananthacharya (1874–1936); he had set himself the task of publishing Sanskrit texts previously written in Telugu or Grantha script in Devanagari (Shree Balaji Mandir, n.d.).<sup>122</sup> Accordingly, as Ute Hüsken (forthcoming) notes, sponsorship seems to have been a key factor in the transition of the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya* to a printed text. It can be assumed that this assessment holds true for the other two Māhātmya on Kanchi as well. Further research on the entirety of the Sthalamāhātmyas (and Talapurāṇams) on Kanchi is required and may provide new insights.

### Kanchi's Māhātmyas in the Contemporary Religious Landscape

In contrast to the context and date of composition of the three Māhātmyas on Kanchi, the question on their representation in the contemporary religious landscape and cityscape is easier to approach. Like other aspects regarding the Māhātmyas, the visibility of the texts need further research to gain a better understanding of their significance up to the present day. An in-depth analysis lies beyond the current scope, so I would like to give a few examples that show how differently the Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya*, the *Kāmākṣivilāsa*, and the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya* are represented in contemporary Kanchi.

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122 Besides the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya*, many of P. B. Ananthacharya's other works were also published by the Sudarshana Press in Kanchi (Freschi 2014).

As Jonas Buchholz (2025) shows, the Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya* itself does not seem to be commonly used, but one repeatedly encounters its Tamil rendering, the first book of the *Kāñcippurāṇam*. In many of the Śaiva temples in the city, there are stone slabs presenting the myth about the origin of the *śivaliṅga* found in the temple. The *Kāñcippurāṇam* is usually indicated as the source of these stories. Through this change to the local language, the Śaiva text is thus visually present in Kanchi. The use of the Tamil text suggests that the version has attained authoritative status, resulting in a significant role of the *Kāñcippurāṇam* in shaping Kanchi's Śaiva religious landscape (Buchholz 2025).

For the *Kāmākṣivilāsa*, the link to the Kāmākṣi Ammaṅ temple and with it to the Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham seems to be of essential relevance. The printed Devanagari edition of the text from 1968 prominently includes a reverent dedication to Chandrasekharendra Saraswati, the contemporary head and spiritual preceptor (*ācārya*) of the Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham, and his designated successor Jayendra Saraswati (1935–2018). Chandrasekharendra Saraswati actively promoted the goddess Kāmākṣi and the temple as Śaktipīṭha, a seat of the Goddess (Wilke 1996, 149). Apparently, the Peetham also took and still takes interest in promulgating the *Kāmākṣivilāsa*: a reprint of the *Śrī Kāñci Mahimai*, which contains the *Kāmākṣi Lilā Pirapāvam*, the Tamil rendering of the KV, refers to Vijayendra Saraswati as the head of the Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham (in office since 2018; Buchholz 2022, 34, 34, n. 44). The website maintained by the Peetham further presents a condensed English rendering of the *Kāmākṣivilāsa* (Rao n.d.) and an English adaptation of the *Śrī Kāñci Mahimai* (Kannan n.d.).

Additionally, narratives sourced from the KV are found in other literary works, on signboards at the temples, and in oral narratives. A noteworthy case is the representation of two lizards, called *Taṅkapalli* in Tamil, at the Vaiṣṇava Varatarāja Perumāḷ temple. The “golden lizards” are prominently advertised at the temple and are a popular object of worship. A myth about their origin is found both in the *Kāmākṣivilāsa* (ch. 3) and in the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya* (ch. 31). As Ute Hüsken (2022, 185–186) demonstrates, the signboard, in Tamil and Telugu, with the story about the lizards features elements from the version of the myth from the KV rather than the KM(V). She further notes that, when asked in an interview, priests of the Varatarāja Perumāḷ temple retold the narrative as known from the KV, even though it is the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya* that is considered authoritative in the temple (2022, 186, n. 46). Similarly, narrative elements from both *Māhātmyas* are presented in lizards' myth in the *Taṅkapallikaḷ Māhātmyam*. This Tamil work published in 1937 is a glorification of the lizards and claims to be based

solely on the KM(V) (Hüsken 2022, 177–179). As this example illustrates, the rendition of Sanskrit myths into Tamil seems to influence the prominence of a particular version of the narrative. Although there are pamphlets summarising the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya* in Tamil, the text has not been rendered in full in the local language. The Tamil adaptations derived from the KV, however, seem to have become popular and found their way onto the temple signboards and into the oral history.

The Vaiṣṇava Māhātmya is not an active part of the ritual practices of the Varatarāja Perumāḷ temple with its orthodox Vaiṣṇava tradition either. During the annual Pallavotsava festival, it is the *Hastigirimāhātmya* that is recited in front of the god's festival image (Hüsken, forthcoming). The Vaiṣṇava *Hastigirimāhātmya* is also written in Sanskrit and deals with the myth of Varadarāja, which largely corresponds to the narrative found in the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya*. In view of the popularity of this text in contrast to the KM(V), a decisive factor seems to be the reading of a summary in Mani-pravalam alongside the recitation of the *Hastigirimāhātmya* in Sanskrit; Mani-pravalam is apparently understood fairly well by the Vaiṣṇava audience, even without a Sanskrit background (Hüsken, forthcoming; Ute Hüsken, pers. comm., December 2024). In addition, there exist a variety of manuscripts as well as several printed editions in different South Indian scripts of the *Hastigirimāhātmya*, which may also result from the relevance of the text in the performance of the Pallavotsava festival (Buchholz 2022, 19).

Altogether, the availability of an adaptation in Tamil seems to be a crucial factor for the visibility and use of all three Sanskrit Māhātmyas on Kanchi in the city's religious landscape. Through the rendition in the local language, the Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya* and *Kāmākṣivilāsa* became more accessible and popular with a broader audience which does not understand Sanskrit, whereas the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya* on its own did not achieve the same reach.