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Architecture and Living Traditions Reflected in Wooden Rafters of Śrīvilliputtūr Temple

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Abstract

The present article cursorily examines the wooden images set in exterior hall of the Vaṭapatraśāyī complex. The temple priests told me these images were part of an old temple car, *tēr* that existed in the nineteenth century. A collection of 135 wooden sculptures is packed in this hall of which select specimens are reported. Each image is supposed to be housed in a *vimāna*. The unique features of the images vis-à-vis their architectural setting is investigated. It is understood the different Mūrtis appearing in the sculptural illustrations are likely to represent the presiding gods of Vaiṣṇava *divyadeśas* at Śrīvilliputtūr, Māliaruñcōlai, Araṅkam/Śrīraṅgam, Vēṅkaṭam/Tirumala-Tirupati, Dvārakā, Śālagrāma and so on. The *vimāna* typologies seem to represent the models popular in South Asian art. Architectural drawing of the examined specimens is designed to facilitate better understanding of the religious traditions of the Indian subcontinent. Parthiban's doctoral thesis on the architectural setting of the Śrīvilliputtūr includes a survey of the sculptural wealth of the Great Temple (Tamil *peruṅkōyil*) dedicated to Āṇṭāl and Vaṭapatraśāyī. A number of architectural drawings are presented to pinpoint the programme of

images within the macro twin-temple and the micro *maṇḍapas* or other parts where icons are accommodated.

Keywords: Śrīvilliputtūr, Āṇṭāl, Vaṭapatraśāyī, *tēr*, *vāhana*, *aṣṭāṅgavimāna*, Ekaṇādamūrti, Periyālvār, Nammālvār, Maturaiṁviraṇ.

Śrīvilliputtūr is one among the 108 Vaiṣṇava *divyadeśas* in the extreme south of India about 100 kms from Maturai on the way to Kuṛṇālam and Teṅkāci, listed under the Pāṇṇinātu subdivision¹. It was the nativity of two among the twelve Vaiṣṇava mystics; Periyālvār, and Āṇṭāl-Kōtai, known as *Cūṭikkoṭutta-nācciyār* in Tamil Vaiṣṇava lore. The temple on the site seems to have existed at the time of the Ālvārs² because Periyālvār was the *bhaṭṭa/paṭṭar*³ of the temple. To begin with, a temple for Viṣṇu-Vaṭapatraśāyī, the shrine for Āṇṭāl was added during the later Pāṇḍya period by about the twelfth century CE⁴. Today, the Āṇṭāl temple is prominent, occupying a spacious complex when compared with Vaṭapatraśāyī, and in all temple rituals the ‘Nācciyār’-Mistress receives the first-hand treatment⁵, exactly the corollary of the Mīnākṣī-Sundareśvara at Maturai (Fergusson 1876/1972: 391, fig. 229; Rajarajan & Jeyapriya 2013: 135-37).

The history of the temple is mostly based on literary evidences of the hymns of Periyālvār and Āṇṭāl down to the ninth century CE.

¹ Totally eighteen *divyadeśas* are listed from Meyyam (Rajarajan 2015: 114) in the north to Kuṇṅkuṭi (Rajarajan 2012a: 91-93) in the Deep South. For recent studies on *divyadeśas* in the South Asian context see Rajarajan 2007, 2012a & 2013. Literary gleanings on Villiputtūr are summed up in Rajarajan (2012: 84-85). For case studies on Kumbhakoṇam, Śrīraṅgam, Allikkēṇi and Pārkaṭal (Ocean of Milk) see Meeneshwari (1993-95: 95-106), Kalidos (1993-95: 136-52) and Rajarajan (2013: 68-71).

² For an interpretation of the term, *bhaṭṭa* see Kalidos (2015: 139); *bhaṭ* seems to be a caste name in Karnāṭaka.

³ Āṇṭāl in her *Tiruppāvai* (v. 30: *Paṭṭarpirāṇ Kōtai conṇa* “these hymns, the revelations of Kōtai of the Lord-Bhaṭṭa”) and *Nācciyār Tirumoli* (10th or 11th hymn in all the fourteen *tirumolis*) acknowledges her relation with Periyālvār in the daughter-foster-father *bhāvva*. For Roman transcription, *patavurai*, English summary and dictionary of the *Nālāyirativviyappirapantam* see Kalidos et al. 2016 & 2016a. The two works in five volumes is in nearly 4500 pages (MS).

⁴ Nearly 150 inscriptions of the temple, both published and unpublished have been collected by the author from the Epigraphical Survey of India, Mysore (Parthiban 2016).

⁵ The temple plan (Rajarajan 2015: fig. 1) is on model of the Mīnākṣī-Sundareśvara at Maturai (Rajarajan & Jeyapriya 2013: 135-38, Plans 1-2).

These are quasi-historical. An astronomical clue to the rise of *Velli*/Venus and fall of *Viyālam*/Jupiter, *velliyeḷuntu Viyāla muṇṇakirru* (*Tiruppavai* 13) may give different dates; c. 731 (cf. Kalidos 1976: 104) or 850 CE (cf. Cutler 1979: 16 citing Jean Filliozat “many other dates fit the same data”). In any case, the two Ālvārs seem to be contemporaries of the Pāṇḍya kings (Empire I) Varaguṇa I to Śrīmāra Śrīvallabha (c. 765-862).

Inscriptional sources come to light during the later Pāṇḍya, i.e. Empire II c. 1190-1238 CE (ARE 1906: 525, 1926: 523, 526, 527, 535, 538, 541, 542, 550; cf. Sastri 1972: chap. X) and Vijayanagara-Nāyaka time since 1371 CE (ARE 1926: 571, 573, 579, 582, 585, 586, 591; Krishnaswami 1964: chaps. 3-4). Most of these evidences pertain to endowments of perpetual lamps [*nontāviḷakku*], food offerings to the gods [*amutupaṭi*], gift of jewels and tax-free lands [*devadāna*], festivals [*utsava*], and provision for feeding Vaiṣṇava mendicants and so on. No inscription pertaining to the foundation of either Vaṭapatraśāyī or Āṇṭāl shrines is traceable. *Vata-peruṇ-kōyil* “the northern big temple” (ARE 1926: 532, 550) was the name of the Vaṭapatraśāyī shrine during the later medieval period. It was presumably gold-cast, *porkōyil* (ARE 1926: 679). The *tiruk-kōpuram* “sacred Gateway” (ARE 1926: 530) and the *tirut-tēr* “sacred temple car” (ARE 1926: 559) were added during the later Pāṇḍya and Vijayanagara-Nāyaka periods. The presiding God was known as *Vaṭaperuṇkōyil-paḷḷikoṇṭaruḷṇa-paramasvāmi* (ARE 1926: 556) “the Eternal Lord who is pleased to repose in the Great northern Temple”. The Goddess was known as *Cūṭikkoṭutta-nācciyār* “Mother that knit (the Garland) and offered to the Lord” (ARE 1926: 535, 573, 576).

The present article is not concerned with the history of the temple. It considers the wooden sculptures that are housed in the *agramaṇḍapa* (also called Kōpāla Vilācam) of the Vaṭapatraśāyī shrine (Pls. I, II, and III). These sculptures are supposed to be the remnants of an old dismantled car that existed during the later medieval time (ARE 1926: 559; cf. Kalidos 1989: front cover plate, Rajarajan 2006: pl. 50; Dallapiccola 2010: fig. 1.5, 14.14, 35; Vekatesan & Branfoot 2015: figs. 2.20, 2.22). The present *tēr* was added in the early 20th century (Rajarajan 2010: 101-105). Old masters sometime in 1980 said the old chariot, i.e. the wooden plinth was much more massive than the present one (interview with Raju Kalidos). Wooden rafters with images accommodated in a *śilāgrha* are rare; done mainly to conserve the

relics. I have prepared a plan (not a measured drawing) of the *maṇḍapa* to show how the wooden images are accommodated, the images numbered in serial order (Pl. I). The sculptures include several rare elements and at the top of each wooden piece a model-shrine (cf. Rajarajan 2012, Hardy 2012: 115-25) is carved, which is a replica of the different types of *drāviḍa-ṣaṭaṅga-vimāna*, and few of South Asian tradition (Pls. VII, and VIII). The aim of the present study is two-pronged:

- 1) To detect the model-temple typologies, and new elements in iconography
- 2) To examine the functional value of processional *vāhanas* and their application in sculptural illustrations

Therefore, the descriptive part of the essay consists of two parts dealing with the iconographic motif and the architectural setting in which the image is located.

K.R. Srinivasan (1971: chap. V) employed the phrase “Architectural Sculpture” to denote the monolithic temples of the early medieval South India, e.g. the Kailāsa in Ellora, Dharmarāja et alii *rathas* of Māmallapuram and the Vēṭṭuvāṅkōyil at Kaḷukumalai. The phrase sculptural architecture may be employed to denote the temple types that appear on the *Kōpāla Vilācam* wood-carved images. Architecture and sculpture find a harmonious blend in these wooden rafters. On first instance, each image appears within a chamber of the *vimāna* to suggest it is set within a model-temple (Rajarajan 2012: figs. 29-31, 71), *devakoṣṭha* or aedicule. The symbolism is the *ter/ratha* is the totality of the temple that is the Meru, *Axis mundi*. Besides, two models of *aṣṭāṅga-vimāna* and rare *saptāṅga-vimāna*⁶ are traceable among the sculptural remains. It is reasonable to conjecture several types of the *vimānas* existed at the far end of the Vijayanagara-Nāyaka period.

⁶ *Saptāṅga* is not an approved traditional terminology/typology of temple *vimāna*. However, the applicability śāstric terminology and rules to actual art is not necessarily consistent (Gail 1989 and Parker 2003). Therefore, I have coined a terminology on the model of *ṣaṭaṅga* (six parts of a temple) and *aṣṭāṅga* (eight parts) – *saptāṅga vimāna* (seven parts). Notably the Vaṭapatraśāyī temple is in this model with separate sanctum in ground and first floor.

Aṣṭāṅga-vimāna

Aṣṭāṅga-vimāna (18 in plan) is a unique type of *drāviḍa-vimāna* that consists of eight members in the vertical order in addition to the usual six-parts⁷, known as *ṣaṭaṅga*. The six parts from the base to finial are *upapīṭha*, *adhiṣṭhāna*, *pādavarga* (accommodating *kumbha*- or *koṣṭha*-*pañjaras* fitted with *makaratoraṇas* or *kīrtimukha* arches, and *kuḍya*-*stambhas*), *prastara* (*karṇakūḍus* at corners and *śālapañjara* in middle), *śikhara* (*mahānāśikas* in cardinal directions), *grīva* (accommodating *grīvakoṣṭhas* with or without images, see Rajarajan 2012a: figs. 7, cf. 1) and *stūpi*⁸. The six members are brought under three basic units as shown below (cf. Kalidos 1984: fig. 1):

| | |
|------------------|--|
| Plinth/basement: | <i>upapīṭha</i> and <i>adhiṣṭhāna</i> |
| Wall: | <i>pādavarga</i> / <i>bhīṭi</i> |
| Super-structure: | up above <i>prastara</i> , particularly the <i>śikhara</i> and <i>kalaśa</i> |

In this mode, the *pādavarga* constitutes the box-like chamber⁹, the *garbhagrha* that houses the *mūlabera* (cult image). In *aṣṭāṅga-vimānas* two more chambers are provided in the vertical order above the *prastara* that makes up a type of *tri-pādavarga*; three boxes placed one above the other in the pyramidal pattern. It is a specialty of Viṣṇu temples meant for housing the *āsana* “seated”, *śayana* “reclining” and

⁷*Vastu* denotes the architecture (“wealth, stuff” Monier-Williams 2005: 932-33, Apte 2012: 497-98) and *vāstu* space (“the site of a house” Monier-Williams 2005: 948-49, Apte 2012: 505). The departed Vaidhyānātha Gaṇapati *sthapati* of Māmallapuram used to say *vastu* includes both architecture and sculpture; *vastuśāstra* is science of architecture and sculpture, cf. the *Mayamata* includes a chapter on *pratimālakṣaṇa* (Dagens 1985: chap. 36).

⁸This is a simplified description. For more details see Srinivasan (1971: chap. V, 86-87, 112-14). For a description of the *tri-tala* Dharmarāja-*ratha* see Srinivasan (1971: 102-103, cf. Kalidos 2006: II, pl. I). Even if incomplete, it is the best example of a *drāviḍa-ṣaṭaṅga-vimāna*. For the *nāgara*- (square, north Indian), *veśara*- (circular, from the Vindhyas to the River Kṛṣṇā) and *drāviḍa-vimāna* (octagonal, south of the Kṛṣṇā) types see the *Mānasāra* (Acharya [1924: chap. 43]). The geometrical shape of the *vimāna* is determined with due reference to the form of the *śikhara* (cf. Gravely and Ramachandran 1977, Kalidos 1989: chap. III).

⁹The geometrical form of this section may be square or rectangle, circular or rarely octagonal.

sthānaka “standing” cult images in the same temple¹⁰. The earliest example is the Vaikuṇṭha Perumāḷ (Tamil Paramēccura-*viṇṇakaram* cf. *Periya Tirumoli* 2.9.1-10) of Kāñci¹¹. The *śikhara*s of Vaṭapatraśāyī and Āṇṭāl *vimānas* are *kūṭaśālā* (barrel-shaped) and *veśara* (circular) in form (Venkatesan and Branfoot 2015: figs. 2.2, 2.9, 2.12).

The sculptural fragment under study illustrates the *aṣṭāṅga-vimāna* (Pl. IV a-b). The top section is in *kūṭaśāla* pattern (e.g. the Bhīma-*ratha* in Māmallapuram, cf. Kalidos 2006: pls. XX-XXI) imitating the present *śikhara* of the Vaṭapatraśāyī *vimāna*. Three chambers are clearly earmarked in the vertical order accommodating the Lord with his consorts, Śrī and Bhū in *irunta/āsana* “seated”, *kiṭanta/śayana* “reclining” and *niṇṇa/sthānaka* “standing” modes (*Tiruvantāti* III, v. 54; cf. Kalidos 1999: 226). In the seated and standing forms, Śrī is to the right and Bhū to the left. The Lord is seated in *sukhāsana*; the Devīs in *lalitāsana*. In the reclining mode Śrī is seated close to the Lord’s head and Bhū massaging the feet¹².

Interestingly, above the *kūṭaśālā-vimāna* another *sthānaka*-Mūrti with Devīs is housed within a *prabhāvali* (Pl. IV a). It is an unusual addition because the *śikhara-stūpi* is not overshadowed by any other structure as it represents the *ākāśa*-finial. It has to be presumed the *prabhāvali* or *kīrtimukha* is a dummy *mahānāśika* that is usually located on the *śikhara*.

The Śrīvilliputtūr *vimāna* for Vaṭapatraśāyī is not *aṣṭāṅga-vimāna*. It is on a high plinth, called *māṭakkōyil* or *terri-ampalam* (e.g. Kūṭal Aḷakar at Maturai and Saumya-Nārāyaṇa at Kōṭṭiyūr PTM 9.10.1-10, *māṭakkōyil*-Nāṅkūr PTM 3.8.1-10, *terriyampalam*-Nāṅkūr PTM 4.4.1-9, Kalidos 1989: 19); Nāṅkūr including a cluster of twelve *divyadeśas* on the southern bank of the Kolḷiṭam (distributory of Kāviri) basin. These *sthalas* are noted for aesthetic natural setting as notified in

¹⁰ This type of temple seems an imitation of the Buddhist prototype housing the seated, reclining and standing images of the Buddha; e.g. Temple no. 45 on the Sāñchī hill (Mitra 1978: pl. VIII). Buddhist impact on Hindu architecture and iconography is a historically viable factor (Kalidos 2006: chap. I).

¹¹ Other examples are the Kūṭal Aḷakar temple at Maturai and the Saumya-Nārāyaṇa Perumāḷ temple at Kōṭṭiyūr.

¹² In most iconographical typologies, especially the early rock-cut images the goddesses are found near the extended feet (Parimoo 1983: figs. 1-79, Kalidos 2006: I, pls. I-IV, V.2). In the *ābhicārika* mode no attendant Mūrti is present (Sastri 1916: 50-52, Rao 1999: I, 96), e.g. Śayanamūrti in the Shore temple at Māmallapuram (Kalidos 2006: I, pl. LXII.1).

the hymns of the Ālvārs, particularly in the *Periya Tirumoli* (Kalidos & Rajarajan 2016: Vol. IV). Naturally, the question is why the image under study portrays the *aṣṭāṅga-vimāna*? In all probability, it represents a processional vehicle¹³. Several *vāhana* types have been reported (Kalidos 1989: 46-47) of which *Indra-vimāna* is one¹⁴. It seems the *Indra-vimāna* (cf. *puṣpaka-vimāna* in itihāsic and purāṇic lore) is modeled in the form of *aṣṭāṅga-vimāna*.

Saptāṅga-vimāna

Saptāṅga-vimāna is not known to exist (38 in plan). This is likely to be a remodeling of the *aṣṭāṅga-vimāna*. The lower two tiers house images of *sthānaka*-Viṣṇu and *śayana*-Mūrti coupled with Devīs (Pl. V a) as noted in the previous model.

The *vimāna* is of the *kūṭaśālā* type (Pl. V b) fitted with *karṇakūḍus* and frontal *mahānāśika*. This spatial arrangement is relatable to the Vaṭapatraśayī shrine. The difference is that at the lower level, the wooden sculpture hosts a *sthānaka*-Viṣṇu along with Devīs but in Vaṭapatraśayī shrine, there is a chamber accommodating seated Lakṣmī Nṛsiṃha. The Vaṭapatraśayī *mūlabera* has an elaborate set of attendant figures. Viṣṇu is reclining on Śeṣa with Śrī and Bhū near his feet. *Garuḍa*, his brother *Aruṇa*, *Bhṛgu* and *Mārkaṇḍaya* are the other retinue. *Brahmā* is seated on a lotus that rises from the Lord's navel. A host of Viṣṇu's personified weapons are featured. But in the case of wooden image the weapons are not personified but the abstractions of *śaṅkha*, *cakra*, *dhanus* and *bāṇa* appear.

Trivikrama

Trivikrama is a popular theme in the hymns of the Ālvārs. The *Tiruppāvai* (v. 3) affirms the Lord assures rains thrice a month, fields fertile in paddy, cows yielding pots full of milk and never vanishing

¹³ For a detailed literary and field-data account on *vāhanas* see Kalidos (1988: figs. 1-5, 1989: 44-47, 5-6; Rajarajan 2006: 13-114; Raghunath 2014: pls. 15, 141, 209-211).

¹⁴ Note the following examples: *haṃsa*, *kāmadhenu*, *vṛṣabha* (Kalidos 1988: figs. 1-3); *Garuḍa* (Rajarajan 2006: pls. 113-114), *Airāvata*, *mayūra*, *siṃha*, *Āñjaneya*, *gaja*, *turaga*, and so on. Kalidos (1989: 47) has reported deer, tiger and fox *vāhanas*. For *vāhanas* employed on stipulated days of *utsavas* see Kalidos (1989: 401-403).

wealth. This is to suggest the lifted foot is symbolic of peace and prosperity for the worlds¹⁵. The image (82 in plan) finds the Lord lifting the leg up to the crown level in a gracious posture (Pl. VI a) that recalls minding the rock-cut sculpture in Cave III, Badāmī (Soundararajan 1981: pl. XVI.B). Vāmana and Mahābali are dwarfed. On the other side, Śukrācārya is seated dolefully and extending the right hand in *tarjanimudrā* warning Mahābali not to grant the gift. Noted for aesthetic traits, few specimens from Nāyaka art are reported earlier (Jeyapriya 2008: 262-69, figs. 22-28). The specimen under note is interesting because Raju Kalidos (1983: fig. 3), a pioneer to work on *tēr* (Kalidos 1989: pls. 7-22), has published a similar image from the existing Villiputtūr *tēr* thirty years ago¹⁶.

The *vimāna* is *dvitaḷa-nāgara* (Pl. VI b). The top member is square. The two tiers that we call *taḷa* are embellished with *karṇakūḍus* and *śālapañjaras* at the far end and middle. This *vimāna* has a seated *yāli* and two mythical birds; such motifs are also present in *Aṣṭāṅga-vimāna* (see Pl. IV).

Ekapādamūrti

Ekapādamūrti (?) is a syncretistic typology that integrates the Hindu Triad in an entity. Normally Śiva is viewed the core-Mūrti from whom Brahmā and Viṣṇu trifurcate at the hip level (Sastri 1916: fig. 59, Grassato 1987: figs. 12-13, Rajarajan 2006: 93, 265, Jeyapriya 2009a: pl. IIIb). An early image is reported from the Shore temple complex in Māmallapuram (Kalidos 2006: II, pl. LXXIV.1). A rare specimen of Viṣṇu-Ekapāda has been reported from the Kūṭal Aḷakar *tēr*, Maturai (Kalidos 1989: 301). The present image (15 in plan) is unique because Harihara is viewed as Ekapādamūrti (Pl. VII a). The unique features are:

The legs are two, not “one-footed” but at the same time *caturmukha*-*Brahmā* and Viṣṇu separate from the right and left thigh level

¹⁵ For a summary of iconographical details from the hymns of the Ālvārs and Nāyaṇmār see Kalidos (2006: I, chap. I; II, chap. I).

¹⁶ This author has published a number of articles bearing on temple cars in the *East and West*, Rome (see back volumes since 1984).

The right hand holds a *padma* or *nilotpala* (emblem of Viṣṇu) and left *mṛga* (emblem of Śiva)¹⁷

The *pūrvahastas* are in *abhaya* and *varada -mudrās*

The garment is *pītāmbara*, the tiara *kirīṭamakuṭa*, and the necklace *vaijayantimālā* meant for Viṣṇu

Brahmā (*akṣamālā* and *kamaṇḍalū*) and Viṣṇu (*cakra* and *śaṅkha*) carry their characteristic emblems

At the base on either side two seated lions, *vāhana* of Devī are present

Ekapādamūrti endowed with *dvipādas* is a rare idiom. To our knowledge, no image of the type is reported. May we name the form *dvipāda*-Trimūrti; cf. Krishna Sastri (1916: 97, figs. 59-60) calls the one-footed type (cf. Grossato 1987), Ekapāda-Trimūrti.

The overshadowing *vimāna* is *ekatala*; *karṇakūḍus* and *śālapañjara* fitted at the *taḷa* level (Pl. VII b). The *śikhara* is *kūṭaśālā*. It is fitted with *mahānāśikas* frontally and at the further end of the barrel-shaped roof; cf. Bhīma-ratha and Gaṇeśa-ratha in Māmallapuram (Kalidos 1984: fig. 7).

Harihara

Harihara uniting Hari-Viṣṇu and Hara-Śiva is a syncretistic form. Normally, the images appear standing and rarely accompanied by Devīs; e.g. Caves I and III Badāmī (Kalidos 2004: pl. 1; 2006: I, pl. XXXIX.2). Seated images are exceptional; e.g. a rare Western Calukyan specimen from the Virūpākṣa temple at Paṭṭadakkal (Kalidos 1994: fig. 2). The wooden image under note (109 in plan) finds seated Harihara (?) with three accompanying Devīs (Pl. VIII a) seated near the feet. The clue for identification is the *ḍamaru* appearing in the right *parahasta* and *śaṅkha* in left¹⁸. Posed in *mahārājālīlāsana*, the front left

¹⁷ Vaiṣṇava emblems are not attributed to the core-Mūrti.

¹⁸ The Gandhāran composite image reported in Taddei (1996: fig. 1) appears a blend of the Hindu Triad that carries *triśūla*-Śiva (right *parahasta*), *cakra*-Viṣṇu (left *parahasta*), *akṣamālā* and *kamaṇḍalu*-Brahmā (*pūrvahastas*); cf. Santhana-Lakshmi-Parthiban 2015: 17-31. We may be wrong; we are not familiar with Gandhāran art and iconography. However, in early and later medieval South Indian iconography Bhikṣātana is usually nude or semi-nude (Suthanthiran 1996: figs. 1-2, Kalidos 2006: II, pl. LVIII.1, Sitanarasimhan 2006: pl. 39).

hand is rested on erect knee, and the right posing *abhayamudrā*. The *siṃhāsana* is crested by the five-hooded Ādiśeṣa¹⁹. Therefore, it is a Vaiṣṇava modeling of Harihara (Kalidos 1994: 277)²⁰ that *śilpaśāstras* bring under the *pañcaviṃśati-līlāmūrtis* of Śiva (cf. *Śrītattvanidhi* 3.56 citing *Kāraṇāgama*). The Devī seated on the Śiva side is Umā and the two to the left are Śrīdevī and Bhūdevī. However, it is left to speculation whether the *cakra* appears as *ḍamaru* in which case, it is a rare image of Ādimūrti accompanied by Śrī, Bhū and Nappiṇṇai (cf. Kalidos 2012: figs. 2-3, Kumaran 2015: figs. 1-2).

Ideologically speaking, this Nāyaka period wood carved image seems to incorporate some Western Calukyan norms; e.g. the seated mode and accompanying Devīs; cf. the images from Badāmī Cave I and Paṭṭadakkal. This might suggest certain cultural idioms were transmitted by *peruntaccans/sthapatis* orally through the ages. In the absence of any canonical mandate from *āgama* and *śāstra*, it is difficult to explain the concordance.

The *vimāna* up above is globular and so *veśara* (Pl. VIII b). It is *tritaḷa* with the central *nāśikas* in two tiers carved with a circular *maṇḍala* accommodating *caturbhuja* and *dvibhuja* images of Devīs seated in *ardhapadmāsana*. The *karṇakūḍus* in the second and third tier are represented by zoomorphic *mayūras*. The *grīvakoṣṭhas* at the either end are supported by zoomorphic *haṃsas* that seem to be inspired by Nepalese temple types (Gail 1984: pl. XV.2). The *kalaśa* is one. The presence of *mayūras* and *haṃsas* replacing *karṇakūḍus* is new to Tamil tradition.

Nammālvār

Nammālvār was a versatile scholar in the *Vedas* and his four works that form part of the *Nālāyirativviyappirapantam* (*Divyaprabandham*) are

¹⁹ Cf. the hymn of Poykai Ālvār (in Kalidos et al. 2016: I, *Tiruvantāti* I, v. 53): Ceṇṇal kuṭaiyām iruntāl ciṅkācaṇamām/ Niṇṇāl maravaṭiyām ... aṇaiyām Tirumāṅkaravu “The serpent for the sacred Māl-Black is an umbrella if walking, lion-throne if seated, the sandals if standing ... bedstead if reclining.”

²⁰ The Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva hymns (the *Divyaprabandham* and the *Tēvāram*) bearing on the subject are briefed in Kalidos (2006: II, 27-28).

considered the *catur-Vedas* ²¹. His ancestors belonged to Kurukūr/Ālvār-Tirunakari ²², one among the Navatiruppatis in the Tāmiraparaṇi basin (Rajarajan 2011: 131-44). According to the *Āṛāyirappaṭi*-G (pp. 88-92) hagiography, the Ālvār was silently seated below *puḷi* (tamarind tree, *Tamarindus indicus*; *puḷima* Averrhoa bilimbi) known as Tiruppuḷi Ālvār until reaching maturity²³. The Ālvār started composing hymns when he had an occasion to debate with Kōḷūr-Maturakavi, another Ālvār from the same region. Nam was a *veḷḷāḷa* (serf or feudal baron) by birth and Maturakavi a *brāhmaṇa* who was the former's disciple. Images seated under a tamarind tree are Nammālvār, not Rāmāujācārya (Dallapiccola 2010: pl. 5.40, cf. pl. 9.61).

The wood-carved image (80 in plan) finds Nam (means “our”) seated below a tree in *ardhapadmāsana*. Tiny leaves would point out it is a tamarind tree. Eyes closed in meditation (Pl. IX a), the right hand is broken (likely to have posed *abhayamudrā*) and left placed on lap in *dhyānamudrā*. Two attendants are standing nearby. They are likely to be *araiyars* (temple singers and dramatists, cf. *Tirumoli* of Periyālvār 4.3.8, *Periya Tirumoli* 3.5.9; Kalidos & Rajarajan 2016a: under “a”). The caps appearing on the heads of *araiyars* are significant, which is a living tradition today. Below the *bhadrāpīṭha* a diminutive personality is seated holding the hands in *añjalibandha*. He is Maturakavi, author of *Kaṇṇinuṇṇiruttāmpu* written in praise of Nammālvār. The Ālvārs in the visual arts of South India are rare. Raju Kalidos (1989) has presented a long list of wooden images (totally 2795) from the temple cars, including the Ācāryas but none represents the Ālvārs. Therefore, the few images reported in the present essay are of a unique genre.

The *alpavimāna* devoid of *taḷas* is *kūṭasāla* fitted with *śālapaṇjara* and *karṇakūḍus* (Pl. IX b), which suggests Nam was

²¹ His four hymnal compositions are *Tiruviruttam*, *Tiruvāciriyam*, *Periya Tiruvantāti* and *Tiruvāymoḷi*. *Sampradāyam*-bound scholars consider these the equal of Ṛg, Yajur, Atharva and Sāma Vedas (see Kalidos et al. 2016: III, 1-512).

²² The mother of the Ālvār hailed from Vaṇparicāram/Tirupparicāram, close to Nāḱarkōyil listed under the Malaināṭu/Kēraḷa *divyadeśas*.

²³ A century old tamarind tree and a small modern pavilion is found within the inner *prākāra* of the Ādināṭha temple at Ālvār-Tirunakari temple that devotees visit and pay honours to the Ālvār. Raju Kalidos (1989: 272) has recorded three temple cars meant for *utsavas* in the Tamil months of *Cittirai* (April-May), *Māci* (February-March) and *Paṅkuṇi* (March-April).

housed in a separate shrine since the later medieval period particularly in the Ālvār-Tirunakari temple.

Periyālvār

The hagiography of Periyālvār (literally “the Great Diver”) is very interesting (*Āṛāyirappaṭi*-G pp. 37-45). Called Viṭṭucittan/ Viṣṇusiddha (NT: *Nācciyār Triumoli* 1.10, 10.10), the Ālvār belonged to a family of traditional *bhaṭṭas* (Tamil *paṭṭar* cf. NT 3.10, 5.11, 7.10) or *vēyar* (a class of *brāhmaṇas* NT 6.11) dedicated to the service of the *Vaṭaperunkōyil* in Śrīvilliputtūr. The reigning Pāṇḍya king, Śrīvallabhadeva (*Āṛāyirappaṭi*-G p. 39) identified with Śrīmāra Śrīvallabha (c. 815-62 CE) had framed an inquisitive question, viz., “who the Cosmic Reality is?” He instituted a golden purse, *poṛkili* that any scholar could claim if the problem is solved. Viṭṭucittan proved Śrī Nārāyaṇa is the Parama-Puruṣa (Puruṣa of the *Puruṣasūkta* in the *Rgveda*, cf. VSN epithets Puruṣaḥ-14/406, Pradhānapuruṣeśvaraḥ-20, Puruṣottamaḥ-24/507) citing evidences from the *Vedas* and *Vedāṅgas* thereby staking his claim to the *poṛkili*. He is said to have composed the *Tiruppallāṇṭu* (Sacred Invocation for Several Years), part of the *Tirumoli* of Periyālvār (see Kalidos & Rajarajan 2016: Vol. III) maybe in the Kūṭal Āḷakar temple at Maturai. The wooden image under study is vertically divided into three parts (Pl. X a): i) Periyālvār, ii) Golden Purse hanging on a curved *stambha*, and iii) the *kalaśa* atop.

The image (103 in plan) of Periyālvār/Periyavar is *samapāda-sthānaka* holding the hands in *añjalibandha*. Located in between two *kuḍya*- or *ardha-stambhas*, it is presumed to be housed in a *devakoṣṭha*. Periyavar “the Elder” is decorated with a turban-like headgear, closely fitted loincloth, *yajñopavīta* and other ornaments. It may be of some interest to note Viṣṇusiddha is designated the chief of *bhaṭṭas*²⁴ of Villiputtūr and a king, *kōṇ* (NT 1.10, 8.10, 12.10) or *nampi* “dignified lord” (NT 13.10). The fitting of the image seems to bring to reality the literary description of Āṇṭāl regarding her foster-father. The image tentatively belongs to the sixteen-seventeenth century and the literary

²⁴ Cf. *Vētavāytoḷilārkaḷ* “those that are dedicated to the profession of fostering the *Vedas*” (NT 2.10); *paṇṇu Nāṇmaraiyōr Putuvai maṇṇaṇ* “king of Putuvai/Villiputtūr, expert in the four Scriptures” (NT 5.110) that is retold in pristine *cen*-Tamiḷ (NT 9.10).

mandate the early ninth century. It is understood the sculptors were proficient in the hymns of the Ālvārs.

The middle section finds two individuals standing near a *vimāna* (Pl. X b). An image of zoomorphic *garuḍa* with outstretched wings is located on the frontal projection of the *vimāna*, an indicator of the temple for Viṣṇu²⁵. The two human figures are likely to represent royal servants guarding the *porḱiḷi*. Nearby, a tall pier is set up, the top of which is tied with the *porḱiḷi*-purse covered by a lion-faced *kīrtimukha*.

Āṇṭāl's Procession

The *utsava* of the Āṇṭāl temple, particularly in the Tamil month of *Mārkaḷi* is auspicious for reciting the *Tiruppāvai*²⁶ that includes an important event in which the Goddess is ceremoniously taken in procession on a golden “chair” (Pl. XI a) during the *Enṇaiāppu-urcavam* (holy oil anointment ceremony). The chair is a gold-plated vehicle (see note 12, Pl. XII). Āṇṭāl is seated majestically on the chair with a *cāmara*-bearer standing nearby (17 in plan). Palanquin-bearers are lifting the chair.

The *vimāna* portrayed at the top is *kūṭasālā* (Pl. XI b). An *alpavimāna*, it is fitted with *karṇakūḍus* and *śālapaṇjara*. The varying modes of *vimānas* are symbolic of different temple types in *divyadeśas* such as *Dvārakā* and *Śālagrāma*. That may be the reason why they include various types such as *nāgara*, *veśara* and *kūṭasālā*, and rarely Nepalese.

It may also be specified here that few of the processional *vāhanas* appearing in sculptures represent a living tradition. What I mean to say is such processions of the Goddess Āṇṭāl or Periyālvār form part of the festival agenda of the temple today (cf. Pls. XII, XIV, and XV). For example, *tōḷukkiniyāṇ* (literally “pleasing to the shoulder”) is a gold-chair in which Āṇṭāl is taken in procession. The same chair is used for Periyālvār in another festival. This is because the original chair-*vāhana* (called *parāṅki-nārkaḷi* “chair of the white-man”, perhaps gifted by a

²⁵ May we suggest it is symbolic of the Kūṭal Alakar temple where the debate was most likely organized?

²⁶ The *Veṅkateśvarasuprabhātam* is recited in Veṅkateśvara temple at Tirumala-[Tirupati] during the early morning service all through the year. In the month of *Mārkaḷi* (December-January) the *Tiruppāvai* is played.

European) meant for Periyālvār made of ivory is wrecked, and so Āṇṭāl's chair is substituted nowadays. By usage when the "chair" is used for Āṇṭāl, it is called *tōḷukkīṇiyāṇ* and the same chair is called *paraṇki-nārkaḷi* for Periyālvār. This is continuation of a tradition that the people do not want to forget. Even if the "white-man's chair" is lost, the "white-man" (called *paraṇki* literally "pumpkin" during colonial time) is still remembered one way or the other by just employing the name.

Maturai-vīraṇ

Maturai-vīraṇ "Hero of Maturai" is a folk god, popular among the depressed communities in Tamilnāḍu. *Maturai-vīraṇ-katai* (Story of the Hero of Maturai) is supposed to be a folk ballad, popular with the mass and his story enacted in country theatres, known as *terukkūttu*²⁷. He is a popular village god, worshipped by certain sections of the people in the Maturai region. The story was cast in cinema (1950s), starred by Rāmacandraṇ (MGR)²⁸ (*Maturai-vīraṇ*), Bhānumati (Bommi) and Padmini (Vellaiyammāl), popular matinee idols of the then time. The story in brief is that Vīraṇ "Hero" born a cobbler fell in love with the daughter (Bommi) of a *pāḷaiyakkāran* (baron or tenet-in-chief, see Rajayyan 1974, Rajarajan 2015a: 184-87) of Totṭiyampāḷaiyam (midway between Tiruccirāppaḷḷi and Nāmakkal), and kidnapped her. He was in service of Tirumalai Nāyaka (c. 1623-69 CE) of Maturai as the commander of a brigade to nab the *kaḷḷaṇ* (midnight-robber) gang that was concentrated in the region round Maturai, called

²⁷ Popular some fifty years ago, the culture is vanishing slowly. However, such enactments may be detected in the remote countryside that takes place from late night to early morning during the festival season in village temples. Several popular pan-Indian (e.g. *Satyavān-Sāvitṛī*, Dowson 1998: 291) and regional (*Nantaṇār*, i.e. 'Tirunāḷaiappōvār Purāṇam' of *Periya Purāṇam*) or sub-regional (*Maturai vīraṇ* in the Maturai area) are enacted in these street plays. Recently (March 2016), the Institute of Asian Studies, Cemmāñcēri/Ceṇṇai organized a National Congress on "Folk Ballads" in which several pan-Indian (e.g. *Kiratārjunīyam* by Rajarajan 2016) and regional themes (*Aṇṇaṇmārkatai* "Elder Brothers Story" popular in the Kōyampuṭṭūr region - live presentation by artistes) were discussed.

²⁸ He was later the Chief Minister of Tamilnāḍu during the later 1970s.

Aḷakarmalai-*kaḷḷaṇs*²⁹. In the meantime, he was in love with a dancing girl, *devadāsī*-Vellaiyammāl, beloved of Tirumalai Nāyaka. He was successful in suppressing the *kaḷḷaṇ*-menace but lost his life in the encounter. The trio was deified by the cobbler community, called *cakkiḷiyaṇ* (Telugu *mādigavāḍu*³⁰) untouchables of those days³¹ and down to this day worshipped. Small temples for the trio-divinities may be found in the Maturai region.

The wooden panel (72 in plan) accommodating Maturai-*vīraṇ* consists of two vertical portrayals: i) a *drāviḍa-vimāna* (Pl. XIII b) of the *nāgara* mode in square form (upper), ii) Viṣṇu and Śrī seated (middle), and iii) Maturai-*vīraṇ* (bottom). Viṣṇu and Śrī are housed in the āgamic temple. Maturai-*vīraṇ* at the lower level is supposed to be the *kāval-teyvam* (watchman-God)³² of Viṣṇu. The top-member, the āgamic *vimāna* is designed for the higher divinities not for folk gods (cf. Loshita 2012: 114-24).

Maturai-*vīraṇ* is a robust personality holding a *khadga* “sword” in *prayoga* mode and lifting the maiden (Pl. XIII a). Bommi is seated on his left shoulder. He is fitted with mustache and wears chappals. The loincloth is tight *kaupīna*-like that was meant for the downtrodden class. He wears few ornaments and headgear with a bun leaning to the left in Nāyaka style hairdo; cf. image of Āṇṭāl in Chair Procession (*supra*). He looks more like a *kṣatriya* rather than a *cakkiḷiyaṇ*.

²⁹ Aḷakarmalai is the *divyadeśa*-Māliṛuñcōlai “Residency-grove of the Black” (Rajarajan 2012a: 71-75); also the *paṭaivīṭu* of Murukaṇ, known as Paḷamutircōlai “Grove of ripe fruits”.

³⁰ The Tamil *pāḷaiyakkaras* were mostly Telugus of the caste *gavara* and *toṭṭiya* - *nāyakas* (cf. Parthiban 2013: 96-102), considered *kṣatriyas*; *kammas* were plebeians as were the *mādigavāḍus* (cobblers).

³¹ Myth would consider him a *kṣatriya-nāyaka* that came out from the mother’s womb with a creeper-like garland bound to his body (i.e. intestine). It was inauspicious for the *kṣatriya-kula*. The baby was thrown in forest was adopted by a cobbler.

³² *Patineṭṭāmpaṭik*-Kaṛuppu (God-Black of the eighteen steps) is supposed to be the steward of the Saundararāja Perumāḷ (popularly Aḷakar, cf. Aḷakarkōyil *supra*) of Māliṛuñcōlai. During the Nāyaka period folk divinities were amalgamated with the worship of higher gods as their protector or steward; cf. *Noṇṭik*-Kaṛuppu (God-Black, the Lame) in case of the Vīrabhadra clan temple in Bōdināyakkappaṇṭṭi village (Jeyapriya 2009: 97-99).

Concluding remarks

At the outset it is imperative to categorically state wood was a viable medium of temple architecture and sculpture down to the eighteenth century. We have surviving relics of a *tēr* in the Śrīvilliputtūr temple of which photographic evidence is produced from the British Museum (e.g. Venkatesan et al.: ii). Surviving monuments are sure to feed the architectural historian with a new insight and first-hand information when compared with the fragile photographic documentation. I have collected images of not less than 135 wooden specimens, which could be published in a catalogue (cf. Dallapiccola 2010). Senior scholars tell me it is practically impossible to publish 140 photographs in journals. That is the main reason why I have reported select specimens in the present article. However, the idea of publishing a catalogue is still lingering.

The theme covered in the wood carved monuments ranges from canonic iconography to folk. The folk element in Indian art and the oral traditions that mould the visual arts are a matter to reckon with (Rajarajan 2016b). The temple cars and *gopuras* provide ample space for the inclusion of a wide variety of themes (cf. Kalidos 1989: 397-400, Soundararajan 2015: pls. 1-145) that still remains a virgin field for exploration in spite research extending over the past thirty-five years (see back volumes of *East and West*, *Annali...Napoli* and *Acta Orientalia*-Oslo). An important monument forgotten by scholars specializing in wooden monuments is the massive wood-carved temple doors of which Rajarajan (2006: pl. 136) has done some spadework. Nāyaka art history is an ocean. What art historians and architectural specialists have contributed is a drop. We have a long way to go as pointed out fifteen years ago (Kalidos 1998: 463-64).

The present report may be of some interest to scholars in architecture and sculpture to demonstrate how *vāstu* (space) and *vastu* (building) are inseparable and why *vastu* includes both the edifice and the schematized images. Even if we consider the model temple the part of a sculptural relief as *vāhana*, the *vimāna* and *vigraha* make up Indian religious art. I have brought to light new elements; e.g. the myths of Nammālvār and Periyālvār, *utsava* of Āṇṭāl, and the folk-oral Maturai-*vīraṇ*. The *drāviḍa-vimāna* is not a monochrome; it includes several typologies (e.g. square-*nāgara*, circular-*veśara* and octagonal-*drāviḍa*, *kūṭaśālā*, *gajaprṣṭha* and so on) that was demonstrated at the early stage

of formation in the seventh century CE at Māmallapuram, e.g. the *Pañca-Pāṇḍava*-, Gaṇēśa-, Valayaṅkuṭṭai- and Piḍāri-rathas, including the Kailāsa, *Choṭā*-Kailāṣa, Jain-*caumukha* (Indra-*sabhā*), and the Veṭṭuāṅkōyil at Kaḷukumalai (Kalidos 1984). In spite of several researches on Indian Architecture from James Fergusson (1876) to G.H.R. Tillotson (1998) and Adam Hardy (2012) the field is thrown open. The author has spotted several model shrines in the paintings of the Virūpākṣa Temple at Vijayanagara/Hampi³³ that is reserved for future investigation.

The Mūrtis represented in the cited images and the *vimāna* typologies may have something to say in the larger context of South Asian religious art. The Mūrtis may pertain to the presiding gods of the hallowed temples for Viṣṇu at Kūṭal/Maturai (*aṣṭāṅga-vimāna*), Vēṅkaṭam, Araṅkam, Māliṛuñcōlai, Dvārakā, Śālagrāma and so on, all these venues extolled in the Āḷvārs' hymns. The *vimāna* typologies, e.g. those with zoomorphic motifs (Pls. VI b, and VIIIb) at the *śikhara* level are likely to have derived inspiration from Nepal (e.g. Śālagrāma as a *divyadeśa* in the hymns of Periyāḷvār and Tirumaṅkai) and Southeast Asian traditions. That means architects of the South and Southeast Asian temples shared a common technology relating to the format of a Hindu, Buddhist or Jain temple down to the later medieval time.

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³³ Deepak John Mathew has documented these paintings using ultra-modern techniques of photography. Deepak is also the principle investigator of Design Innovation Center, IIT H and is documenting several monuments with three-dimensional scanners in Telangana state.

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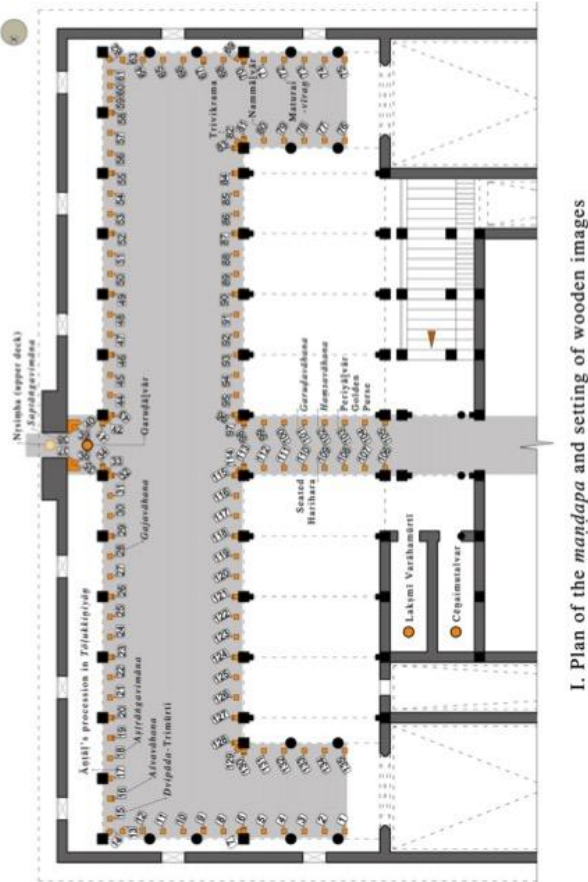
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Illustrations

- I Plan of the *maṇḍapa* and setting of wooden images
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II. (a) Exterior view of the *maṇḍapa* (showing restoration work in 2016 and mini-gopura), (b) Interior view of the *maṇḍapa* in situ



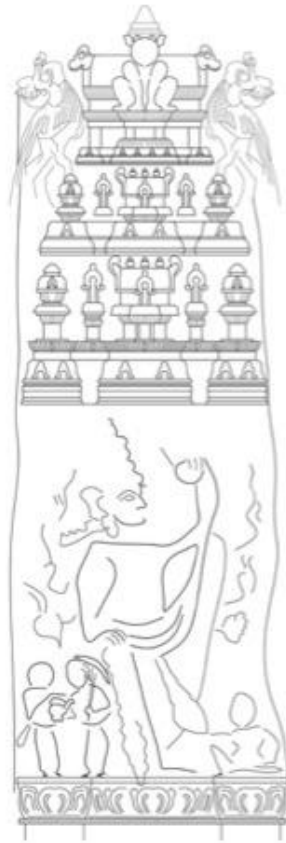
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 a) Cēṇaimutalvar (Viśvakṣena), b) Lakṣmī-Varāhamūrti, c) Nṛsiṃha
 appearing on the upper deck of mini-gopura, d) Garuḍālvār



IV. a) *Aṣṭrāṅgavimāna*: seated, reclining and standing images of Viṣṇu, b) Line drawing showing *vimāna* and *prabhāvali*



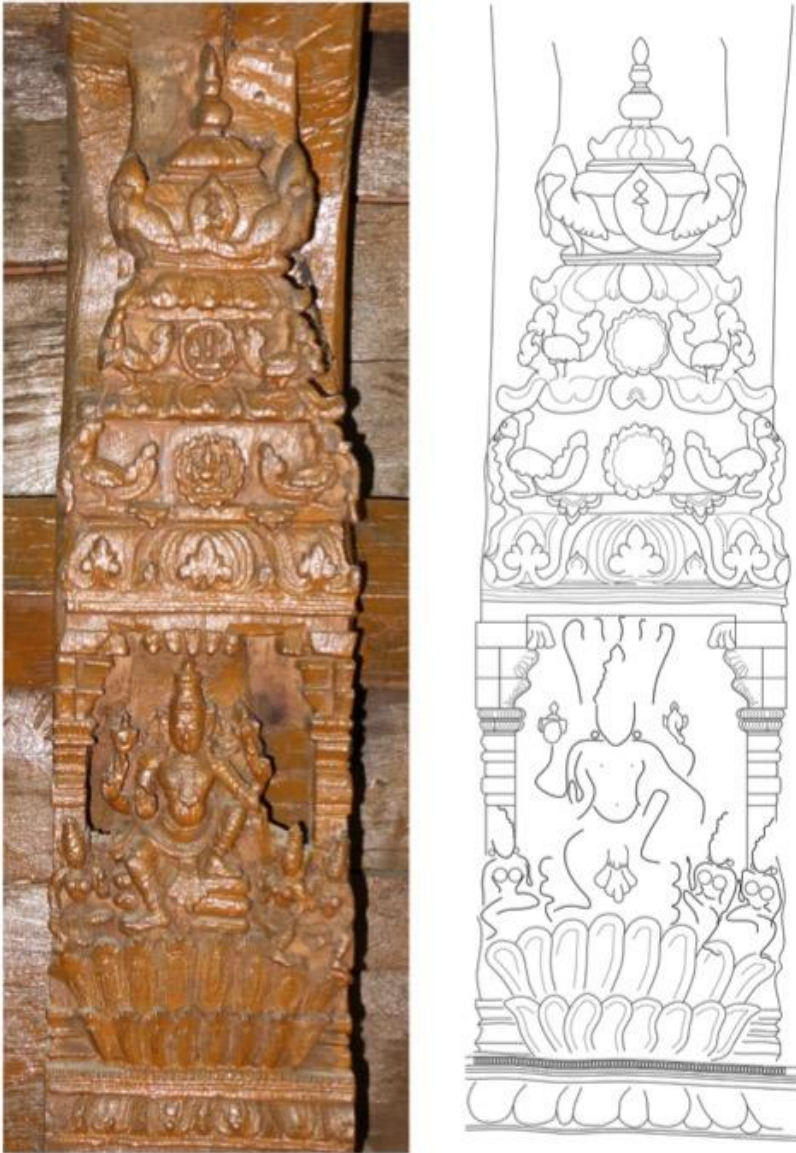
V. a) *Saptāṅgavimāna*: standing and reclining images of Viṣṇu,
b) line drawing showing *vimāna* and *prabhāvaḷi*



VI. a) Trivikrama Panel, b) Line drawing showing *vimāna*



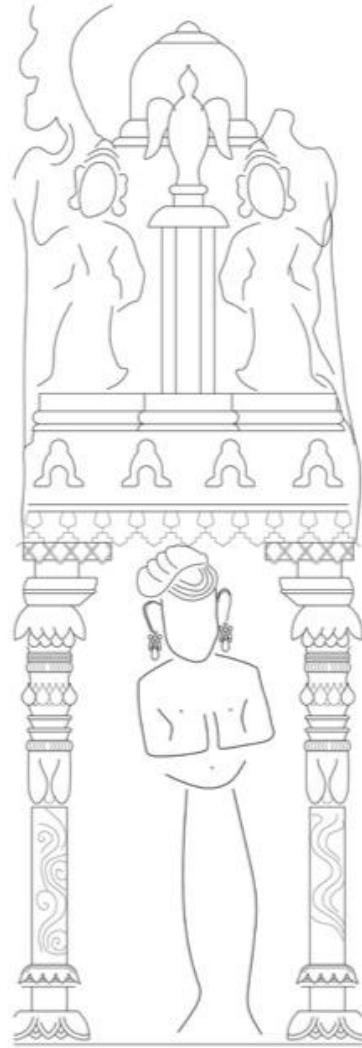
VII. a) Dvipāda-Trimūrti wooden panel, b) Line drawing showing vimāna



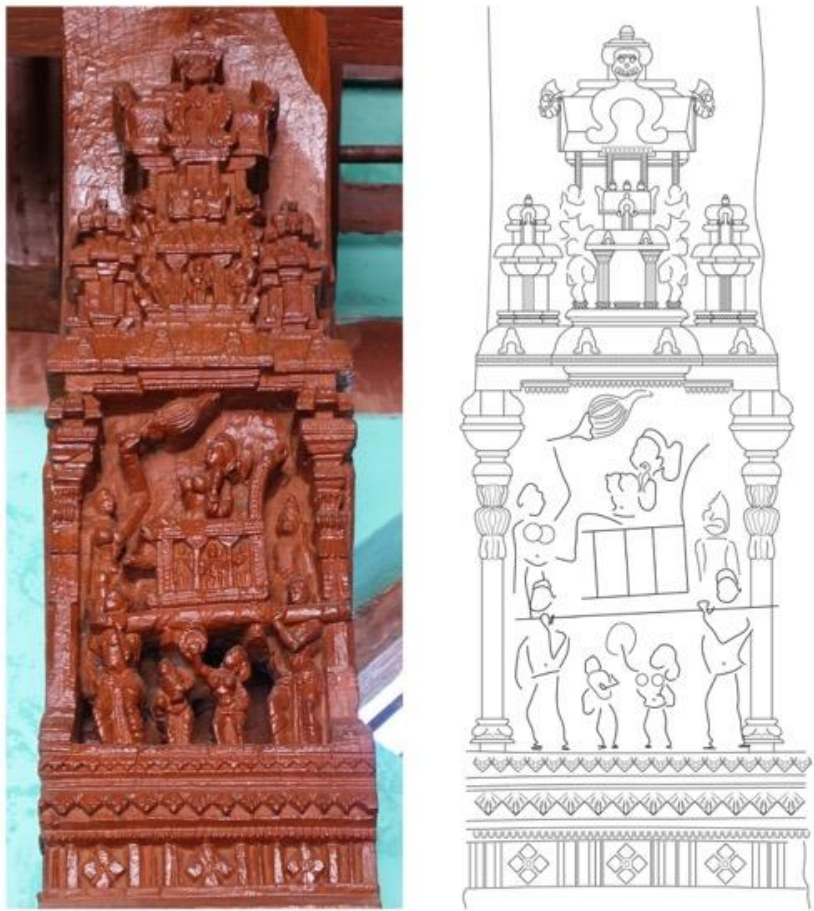
VIII. a) Seated Harihara Panel, b) Line drawing showing *vimāna*



IX. a) Nammālvār, Maturakavi and attendants, b) Line drawing showing vimāna



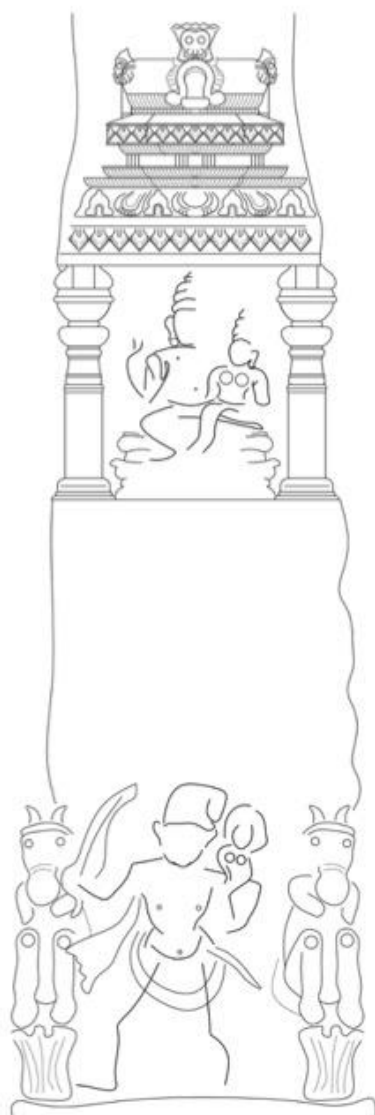
X. a) Periyālvār and the Golden Purse, b) Line drawing showing *vimāna* and the hanging *porṭiḷi*



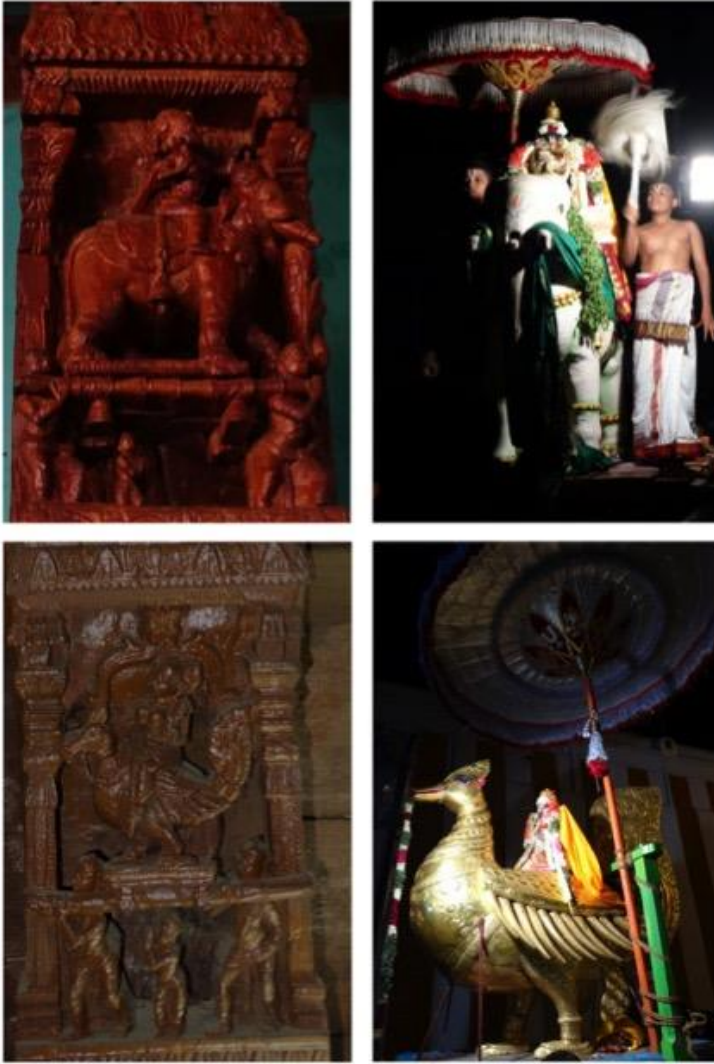
XI. a) Āṇṭāl's procession in *Tōḷukkiṇiyāṇ* (chair), b) Line drawing



XII. a) and b) Āṇṭāl's *Tōḷukkīṇiyāṇ* Procession, (January 2016);
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XIII. a) Maturai-*vīraṇ* lifting Bommi; Viṣṇu and Devī housed in temple, b) Line drawing



XIV. a) *Gajavāhana* wooden sculpture - 28 in plan, b) Periyālvār's procession in *Gajavāhana* (July 2016), c) *Hamsavāhana* wooden sculpture - 102 in plan, d) Periyālvār's procession in *Hamsavāhana* (July 2016)



XV. a) *Aśvavāhana* wooden sculpture - 16 in plan, b) Periyālṭvār's procession in *Aśvavāhana* (July 2016), c) *Garuḍavāhana* wooden sculpture - 101 in plan, d) Periya Perumāl-Viṣṇu procession in *Garuḍavāhana* (July 2016)