



Emma Natalya Stein

Constructing Kanchi

City of Infinite Temples

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For Bob and all the Babus



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Acknowledgments

My affair with the city of Kanchi began with a whirlwind day in the summer of 2011. It was late into my first tour of South India. I had stayed in Māmallapuram far longer than planned, enchanted by its coastal landscape, and was left with only one day to visit Kanchi before flying back home. I was out of time. Knowing little about the city, I did what most visitors would do and followed my guidebook to Kanchi's five most famous temples.

I was instantly struck by the vitality of the city. People and traffic flowed in all directions simultaneously, even more so than in other Indian cities. Temples dotted every corner and the end of every street, and the city squeezed itself between them. The diversity of Kanchi's temples in chronology and condition – let alone their sheer abundance – was staggering. Some were archaeologically preserved monuments, while others were gleaming with sacred substances, resounding with music, and teeming with devotees. Past and present coincided in rare harmony. I saw that Kanchi's popular epithet, 'City of One Thousand Temples', was no mere hyperbole. I am a New York City girl, but Kanchi's vibrant urban landscape stole my heart.

Fieldwork during 2013-2016 would have been impossible without the generous assistance of Kanchi's priests, residents, tea sellers, monument attendants, and other keepers of local knowledge. A lucky return visit in January 2020, just before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, enabled me to reconnect with this amazing community. The Annadurai family requires special mention. I thank A. Prabu, A. Valavan, and their father, Annadurai, for introducing me to many of the sites discussed in this book. My warm thanks also to Narayanasami, head monument attendant of the Archaeological Survey of India's Kanchipuram division, and to Mallai Dilip, for a decade of friendship that included many excursions to temple-sites near Māmallapuram. Thanks also to drivers Balakuru of Kumbakonam and Kumar of Pondicherry, who patiently entertained my many requests to go temple-hunting in remote villages across the Tamil landscape. Special thanks go to Aditya and Buvana Vaidyanathan for their invaluable friendship and for giving me a home in Chennai. My deep gratitude also goes to the Reddy family of Hyderabad, for their sponsorship of large-scale rituals in Kanchi and Tiruvannamalai, and for allowing me to observe and photograph these rituals up close. I owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. S. Barathi and the teachers at the American Institute of Indian Studies language center in Madurai for giving me the ultimate tool for navigating Kanchi: the language of Tamil.



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Note on Transliteration, Translation, and Illustrations

Translations of Tamil and Sanskrit terms are given in parentheses the first time they appear in each chapter. Tamil words are transliterated according to the system of the *Tamil Lexicon* (University of Madras). For Sanskrit words I use the standard (Monier-Williams) system of transliteration. Where the Sanskrit equivalent of a Tamil word is more commonly known, I use the Sanskrit form (such as *gopura* rather than *gopuram*). I use conventional spellings for the names of relatively well-known places (Kanchipuram, Madurai, Chidambaram, etc.) and Tamil transliteration for smaller places (such as Tirukkaḷuṅṅam, Cevilimēṭu, Māmaṅṭūr). Where it cannot be avoided, I use hybrid Sanskrit/Tamil forms. I use conventional spellings for certain additional words (such as Chola rather than Cōḷa, and Shiva and Vishnu rather than Śiva and Viṣṇu.) For architectural descriptions, I follow the terminology employed in the *Encyclopaedia of Indian Temple Architecture* (Meister and Dhaky, 1983). Images and translations are my own unless otherwise noted. Since many of the temples discussed in this book were not previously documented, I have prioritized photographs and illustrations that are unique.



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Introduction

All Streets Lead to Temples

On the northern border of the city of Kanchi stands the sprawling temple complex of Ekāmbaranātha. Shaded lakes and dense, jungly groves fringe the walled compound to its north and west, and a soaring *gopura* ('gateway') marks the main passage into the sacred space from a street on the southern side. Leading directly to the temple, this busy commercial street is lined with sweet-sellers, tea stalls, and merchants selling the city's famed gold-and-purple silk saris (Ill. 1). Some vendors have semi-permanent stalls set up along the street or built into *maṇḍapas* ('pillared halls'), while others are itinerant peddlers who hawk their wares from movable carts. Between the shops are the houses of priests whose families have maintained the Ekāmbaranātha temple for generations. Closer towards the *gopura*, ladies sell garlands of jasmine and trays heaped with fresh lotus blossoms, coconuts, and bananas to be given as offerings to the gods inside the temple. From the early hours of the morning, the bustling street swells with auto-rickshaws, cars, buses, and all manner of vehicles carrying the thousands of visitors who arrive at Ekāmbaranātha each day. By nightfall, the temple traffic slows, the merchants cover their goods and close their shops, and the street returns to its local residents.

When Xuanzang, the famous Chinese monk and traveler, visited Kanchi in the middle of the seventh century, he praised the city as a prosperous urban center surrounded by fertile paddy fields and filled with learned priests tending hundreds of sacred buildings.¹ The city's many temples greatly impressed this well-traveled Buddhist pilgrim. It is perhaps ironic, then, that Xuanzang visited Kanchi a century before its construction as a temple-city had even truly begun. During the eighth through thirteenth century, Kanchi served as the royal capital for two major South Indian

1 Xuanzang, *Si-Yu-Ki. Buddhist Records of the Western World. Translated from the Chinese of Hiuen Tsiang (A.D. 629) by Samuel Beal, 2 vols., vol. 2* (London: Trubner & Co., (1884) 1969), 228-229. For Xuanzang, I follow spelling given in Robert E. Buswell and Donald S. Lopez, *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

Illustration 1 Ekāmbaranātha Temple and Sannathi Street, Kanchi, seventh century – the present



dynasties – the Pallavas and then the Cholas – and was home to thousands of priests, literati, and landholding elites. The rulers and residents who dwelled in and around the city during these formative centuries sponsored the construction of more than 50 stone temples that still stand in varying states of preservation today (Ill. 2). Built from supple blocks of sandstone and smooth granite slabs, these temples were crowned with pyramidal towers, adorned with relief carvings of divine figures in forested and palatial landscapes, and elegantly inscribed with courtly Sanskrit and Tamil verse (Ill. 3). The dark inner sanctums sheltered stone *lingas* ('signs of Shiva') or icons of goddesses and gods. Other sanctums contained sensuous bronze deity figures with swaying hips, tapering limbs, and regal ornaments that flickered in the light of butter lamps. The construction of these temples was part of a series of larger acts of urban planning, which included the establishment of special avenues designed for processions of the festival bronze images. Kanchi's temples attracted a wide network of merchants and devotional communities that flocked to the city.

In the 500-year period of Pallava and Chola reign, temples throughout Tamil Nadu took on new roles within a widening range of cultural, economic,

Illustration 2 Map of Kanchi Temples (map by Emma Natalya Stein and Daniel Cole, Smithsonian Institution)

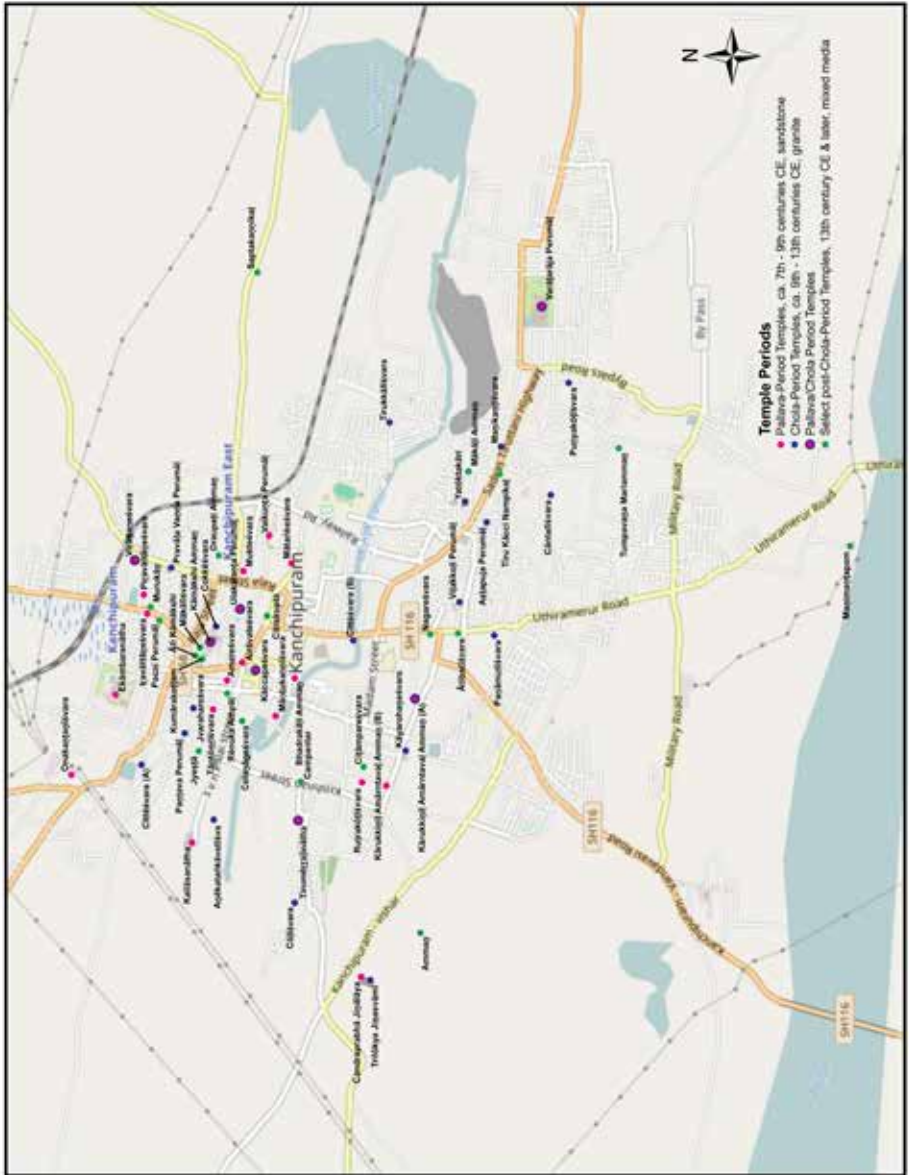


Illustration 3 Kailāsanātha Temple, Kanchi, ca. 700-725 CE



legal, and political processes.² Temples remained religious institutions, but they served more than religious functions. They acted as the legal sovereigns of lands and properties, and they were responsible for the management of community resources, such as water and rice. Temples were also responsible for various municipal services – they maintained schools, hospitals, and feeding houses.³ The rise of temples in Tamil Nadu was representative of a distinct change in South India's socioeconomic makeup that included the consolidation of urban centers and the creation of robust agrarian estates.⁴ In previous centuries, temple worship focused on deities that were connected with landscape and sustenance. The seventh and eighth century saw instead the institutionalization of temples dedicated predominantly to Shiva and Vishnu.⁵ Animated by the communities of people who used and moved between them, temples became spaces where diverse groups fashioned, enacted, and negotiated their claims to prosperity, political authority, and cultural capital. Such negotiations can be seen through structural renovations and read in records of pious gifts that are documented in inscriptions on the temple walls.

This book offers a first-ever understanding of Kanchi's physical transformation from a relatively small settlement into a cosmopolitan urban center. The first half of the book geographically reconstructs the emergence and reconfiguration of the city around a major pilgrimage route that was also a great artery of commerce. It then broadens the scope of enquiry both geographically and temporally to consider networks of trade and devotion

2 A large body of literature on precolonial South India considers the role of temples. Burton Stein, *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980); Kenneth R. Hall, *Trade and Statecraft in the Age of the Cholas* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1980); James Heitzman, *Gifts of Power: Lordship in an Early Indian State* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997); R. Champakalakshmi, *Trade, Ideology, and Urbanization: South India 300 BC to AD 1300* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999); Kesavan Veluthat, *The Early Medieval in South India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009).

3 An inscription on Tirumukkūṭal's Ādikeśava Perumāḷ temple records multiple functions. T.V. Mahalingam, ed. *A Topographical List of the Inscriptions in the Tamil Nadu and Kerala States: Chingleput District*, 8 vols., vol. 3 (New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research, 1989), p. 336, Cg.-1313.

4 Veluthat makes a case for an early medieval period in South India (seventh through twelfth century) represented by the temple as an institution. Absent in previous centuries were the 'sprawling Brāhmaṇa settlements with vast areas of agricultural land under their command and the temple as the pivot around which they functioned.' Veluthat, *The Early Medieval in South India*, 5 and 62-63.

5 Ibid. Although goddesses ('devī') were also important in this period, it was not until the tenth and eleventh century that goddess worship became fully incorporated into mainstream practice, and separate temples for forms of Devī were constructed.



that connected Kanchi with the rest of South India and a wider world. The final chapter considers the continued construction of Kanchi's identity as a temple-city in the colonial era and onwards into the present. The research coordinates extensive first-hand field surveys with archival materials, including epigraphic and archaeological reports, early photography, colonial-era travelers' accounts, and contemporary practice.

The aim of the book is twofold. First, it documents the city and maps its monuments spatially and chronologically in relation to each other, to the city, and to features of the natural environment. Second, it situates temples as functional establishments that continuously contributed to a growing urban landscape. At its core, the book demonstrates that Kanchi is structured with a unique urban logic that coordinates the placement of temples and roads. Overlaying this tightly woven urban plan, the building and renovation of temples in and around the city has enabled Kanchi to continuously thrive as a prosperous center from at least the eighth century up until the present.

An Ancient City

Kanchipuram, or 'Kanchi', as it is more simply known, is an ancient city. When the Pallava dynasty moved its seat from Andhra Pradesh in the third century to establish a presence in Tamil Nadu, the royal family selected Kanchi for their new capital because it was already an important place.⁶ Kanchi was widely known throughout India during this era – nearly 2000 kilometers away in North India, the Allahabad pillar of Aśoka contains a ca. fourth-century inscription from the Gupta king, Samudragupta, in which he claims to have conquered one of Kanchi's early Pallava kings.⁷

6 For discussion of the early Pallavas, see T.V. Mahalingam, *Kāñcīpuram in Early South Indian History* (Madras: Asia Publishing House, 1969), 25-53; Valérie Gillet, *La Création d'une Iconographie Śivaïte Narrative: Incarnations du Dieu dans les Temples Pallava Construits* (Paris: Institut Français de Pondichéry, Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient Pondichéry, 2010), 23-28; 'The Dark Period: Myth or Reality?', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 51, no. 3 (2014).

7 Lines 19-20 read: 'Whose magnanimity blended with valour was caused by (his) first capturing, and thereafter showing the favor of releasing, all the kings of Dakṣiṇāpatha, such as... Viṣṇugōpa of Kāñcī...' The Pallava king referenced is Viṣṇugopavarman. Ramesh Chandra Majumdar and Anant Sadashiv Altekar, *The Vākātaka-Gupta Age: Circa 200-550 A.D.* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, [1967] 1986), 245. I thank Derek Mitchell for drawing my attention to this inscription.



Kanchi appears frequently in South Indian epics and poetry from the Caṅkam era (ca. first century BCE-sixth century CE).⁸ Although the texts give us mere glimpses of its character rather than the kind of rich descriptions of the city of Madurai and port of Pūmpukār found in the epic *Cilappatikāram* [*Tale of the Anklet*], Kanchi's repeated inclusion in Caṅkam literature indicates its importance as a South Indian city. The *Pattuppāṭṭu* anthology of ten Tamil poems often mentions Kanchi.⁹ It does so through the literary technique of *ārruppaṭai* in which a wandering bard, having received favor from a king in a distant land, returns to his homeland and advises another bard or artist to seek similar sponsorship. This gives occasion for the returned traveler to extol his royal patron and the lands in that king's domain. In the *Perumpāṇārruppaṭai*, the bard praises Kanchi as a place populated by foreign merchants and alive with diverse festivals.¹⁰

Kanchi is the ultimate destination in the *Maṇimēkalai*, one of the five great Tamil epics.¹¹ Also a Caṅkam-era work, this text describes a spiritual journey along the path of Buddhism that leads the heroine directly to Kanchi. The reader may long for a description of the city upon the heroine's arrival, but instead the text concentrates on the many teachers of the Buddhist *dharma* she meets there. The great philosopher Śaṅkarācārya, who was probably active in the eighth century, is believed to have founded Kanchi's main monastery and to have spent time there near the end of his life.¹² Kanchi maintains a position of importance within literature of the late first and early second millennium. A great many of Kanchi's temples are sanctified in the hymns of the *Tēvāram* and *Divya Prabandham*, poetic anthologies composed by the Tamil saints (Shaiva *nāyaṇmārs* and Vaishnava *āḷvārs* respectively), who probably lived between the sixth and ninth century. The life stories of the Shaiva saints were later compiled into a hagiographic anthology called the *Periya Purāṇam*, which was composed in the twelfth century at the Chola court.¹³ Kanchi's prominent role in this corpus of

8 This is the range of dates for Caṅkam texts that is generally accepted by scholars of Tamil literature.

9 *Pattuppāṭṭu*, [*The Ten Tamil Idylls*], trans. A. Dakshinamurthy (Kattankulattur: Tamil Perayam, SRM University, 2012). I have also consulted the original Tamil, with assistance from Jean-Luc Chevillard (CNRS, Paris). U.Vē. Cāminātaiyar, ed., *Pattuppāṭṭu*, V., ed. (Madras: Kabeer Printing Works, 1956).

10 *Pattuppāṭṭu*, 184.

11 Shattan, *Maṇimēkalai* [*The Dancer with the Magic Bowl*], trans. Alain Danielou and T.V. Gopala Iyer (India: Penguin Books, 1993).

12 James Heitzman, *The City in South Asia* (Abingdom: Routledge, 2008), 57-58.

13 Versions consulted: Cēkkilār, *Periya Purāṇam* (Madras: C.K. Subiramaniya Mudaliyar, 1950); *St. Sekkizhar's Periya Purāṇam*, trans. T.N. Ramachandran, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Thanjavur:

Illustration 4 Buddha, Kanchi Police Station, twelfth century

bhakti ('devotional') literature attests to enduring cults of devotion that centered on the city.

Archaeological evidence of Kanchi's longevity supports the literary testimony. Megalithic burial sites and excavations in and around the city have revealed the area's continuous inhabitation and its activity in Roman circuits of trade.¹⁴ In the majestic cave-temple site of Māmaṅṭūr, ten kilometers to the south, a first-century BCE inscription in Brahmi script reveals that by the early historic period, Kanchi and its hinterland served as an important center of religious and literary knowledge.¹⁵ Below the inscription is an ancient stone bed associated with early Jain ascetics, who would have used the caves for retreat. At that same site, a Grantha inscription credits the Pallava king Mahendravarman I (ca. 580-630 CE) with authorship of

Tamil University, 1990); *St. Sekkizhar's Periya Purāṇam*, trans. T.N. Ramachandran, 2 vols., vol. 2 (Thanjavur: Tamil University, 1995); *The History of the Holy Servants of the Lord Śiva: A Translation of the Periya Purāṇam of Cēkkiḷār*, trans. Alastair McGlashan (Victoria, Canada: Trafford Publishing, 2006).

14 Robert Bruce Foote, *On the Occurrence of Stone Implements in Lateritic Formations in Various Parts of the Madras and North Arcot Districts* (Madras: Graves, Cookson and Co., 1865); *Prehistoric and Protohistoric Antiquities of India* (Delhi: Leeladevi Publications, 1916).

15 *ARE* 1939-40, no. 171.

Illustration 5 Siteśvara Temple, Kanchi, tenth century



the *Mattavilāsa Prahāsana*, a Sanskrit drama that takes place in courtly Kanchi.¹⁶ Throughout the play, specific temples are associated with different sectors of society to give a picture of a multireligious place. Today, the various literary representations are borne out through Kanchi's surviving temples and statues of Buddhas, Jinas, and plethora of Hindu gods (Ill. 4).

Kanchi itself provides a rich and complex archive. At least eight full temples were established in the eighth century alone, under the auspices of the Pallavas. Dozens of small shrines and scattered fragments furnish evidence of additional Pallava-era temples. No less than 25 extant shrines date to the Chola period (ca. 850-1279 CE), and disengaged sculptures attest to the former presence of an even greater number (Ill. 5). Countless inscriptions and architectural fragments have gone unnoticed in official epigraphic and archaeological reports, and still more lie hidden beneath recent layers of paint and plaster.¹⁷

Layers of Time

The archaeology in Tamil Nadu is largely horizontal – rather than being buried underground, the sculptures and architectural elements that belong to earlier iterations of sacred sites are typically hidden in plain sight. With some detective work, they can be found incorporated into later structures, scattered throughout open courtyards in temple complexes, or re-enshrined, sometimes as a different deity than first intended. Structural degradation and renovation often exhibit distinctive patterns. Over time, interiors become exteriors, as walls and superstructures disintegrate due to weather and wear. With renovation and rehabilitation, exteriors in turn become interiors. Pillared halls are sealed into fully walled structures, and additional *mandapas* are appended to earlier sequences of entry halls. What previously had been an open-air ambulatory may later be covered with a roof, or a concentric cloister around a temple may subsume the main shrine, such that what originally was a freestanding building becomes a dark room. Since the founding of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) in the latter half of the nineteenth century, these transformations have sometimes been halted or

16 *SII Vol. 4*, p. 13, no. 138. The inscription is situated in the northernmost cave (Cave 1), on the south interior wall of the verandah.

17 Specialist readers can find more extensive listings and architectural descriptions of Kanchi's sites in Emma Natalya Stein, 'All Streets Lead to Temples: Mapping Monumental Histories in Kanchipuram, ca. 8th-12th centuries CE' (PhD diss., Yale University, 2017).

reversed in officially protected monuments.¹⁸ This book interrogates these processes in order to peel away the layers of time from temples built up over the course of what has often been more than a millennium of construction and renovation.

Like temple walls, rituals too are diachronic and multilayered. Many of the sacred festivals that take place in the city today represent consolidations of what previously were expansive rituals or even daily practices. For example, during the Pongal festival that opens the Tamil month of *Tai* (January/February), a festival bronze of Shiva is carried in procession from the Ekāmbaranātha temple to the town of Dimasamudram, eight kilometers to Kanchi's north. In Dimasamudram, local performers present song and dance, and the priests from Ekāmbaranātha conduct *pūjā* ('worship') for the gathered devotees. That same night, the festival bronze is returned to Kanchi for an elaborate *abhiṣeka* ('ritual bathing') inside the Ekāmbaranātha temple. The purpose of Shiva's daylong journey is to extend *darśan* ("blessing through an exchange of gazes with the divine") of Ekāmbaranātha as both temple and god to people in surrounding villages who are unable to travel to Kanchi. Although the practice of bronze icon processions dates back at least a millennium, this particular festival was instantiated only several decades ago, as a consolidated form of an earlier ritual.¹⁹ Formerly, the icon was taken to multiple villages in the surrounding area. Now it is brought only to one. Dimasamudram was selected as the singular destination for the sake of efficiency. It is comprised of a combination of previously independent settlements, and it is centrally located among a cluster of proximate villages. Devotees can go to Dimasamudram more easily than they can reach Kanchi, and the god can spread *darśan* in a more limited amount of time.

The colonial period brought about extensive changes to official forms of ritual praxis. The differences can be seen through comparison between contemporary rituals and precolonial literature and artistic representations. Sectarian rivalry, both among competing Hindu groups and between Hindus and Jains, marks one such critical arena of change.²⁰ While colonial officers often sought to emphasize tensions between devotional

18 After several attempts, the ASI was established in earnest in 1871 under Alexander Cunningham.

19 My thanks to Ekāmbaranātha *pūjāri* ('priest') Nagaswamy Aiyer and his son for discussing this ritual with me (January 2014).

20 Sectarian rivalry continues to be a primary concern in scholarship. See for example Emmanuel Francis, Valérie Gillet, and Charlotte Schmid, 'L'Eau et le Feu: Chronique des Études Pallava', *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient* 92 (2005); Emmanuel Francis, "'Woe to Them!': The Śaiva Curse Inscription at Mahābalipuram (7th Century CE)', in *The Archaeology*

communities, scholars have recently argued against the notion of rivalry, instead emphasizing productive encounters between members of different religious communities, or drawing attention to the pluralistic textures of precolonial Hinduism.²¹ Leslie Orr has shown that temples with different dedications sometimes exchanged personnel, and that the corpus of Tamil inscriptions constitutes a literary genre of its own that transcends sectarian divides.²²

Various forms of Tamil texts often situate Shiva and Vishnu as relatively equal recipients of devotion. *Sandēśakāvya*s ('messenger poems'), for example, give greater importance to regional unity than to the author or sponsor's sectarian affiliation.²³ The *Haṃsasandēśa*, by the fourteenth-century Vaishnava theologian Vedānta Deśika who was born and resided in Kanchi, extols temples dedicated to Shiva in the midst of what is supposedly an exclusively Vaishnava poem.²⁴ Even in the *Kāmākṣīvilāsa*, a *Sthalapurāṇa* ('legendary history') of Kanchi that centers on the Goddess, Vishnu and Shiva are given a remarkable level of prominence.²⁵ In practical terms, Kanchi once maintained a daily ritual in which Shiva and Vishnu visited with each other and were worshipped in tandem.²⁶ A daily occurrence until the middle of the nineteenth century, this practice survives only in the form of a cursory ritual that takes place once a year during the ten-day festival of Garuda Sevai. Similarly, the present-day designations of Shiva-Kanchi (Big/

of Bhakti: Mathurā and Maturai, Back and Forth, ed. Charlotte Schmid and Emmanuel Francis (Pondicherry: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 2013).

21 Richard H. Davis, 'The Story of the Disappearing Jains: Retelling the Śaiva-Jain Encounter in Medieval South India', in *Open Boundaries: Jain Communities and Culture in Indian History*, ed. John E. Cort (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998); Gary Michael Tartakov and Vidya Dehejia, 'Sharing, Intrusion, and Influence: The Mahiśasuramardīnī Imagery of the Calukyas and the Pallavas', *Artibus Asiae* 45, no. 4 (1984); Elaine M. Fisher, *Hindu Pluralism: Religion and the Public Sphere in Early Modern South India* (California: University of California Press, 2017).

22 Leslie Orr, 'Preface', in *Pondicherry Inscriptions*, ed. Bahour S. Kuppasamy and G. Vijayavenugopal (Pondicherry: Institut Français de Pondichéry and École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 2006), XXVII; 'Processions in the Medieval South Indian Temple: Sociology, Sovereignty and Soteriology', in *South-Indian Horizons: Felicitation Volume for Francois Gros on the Occasion of his 70th Birthday*, ed. Jean-Luc Chevillard and Eva Wilden (Pondicherry: Institut Français de Pondicherry and École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 2004), 450-451.

23 Steven P. Hopkins, 'Lovers, Messengers, and Beloved Landscapes: *Sandēśakāvya* in Comparative Perspective', *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 8, no. 1-3 (2004): 40.

24 *Ibid.*

25 *Śrīkāmākṣīvilāsaḥ* (Bangalore: Bhāratalakṣmī Mudraṅālayam, 1968). I thank Ute Hüsken for pointing out this aspect of the text.

26 See Chapter Four. Prince Alexis Soltykov, *Lettres Sur l'Inde* (Paris: Amyot, 1848), 70-71.



Illustration 6 Festival at Kāmākṣī Ammaṇ Temple, Kanchi (July 2014)

periya-Kanchi), Vishnu-Kanchi (Little/*cinna*-Kanchi), and Jina-Kanchi that divide the city into devotional zones were not set into place until the latter half of the nineteenth century.²⁷ While early colonial sources distinguish ‘Little Kanchi’ from the rest of the city, they make no mention of affiliation with a particular god.²⁸

Not all of Kanchi’s temples continued as active centers of devotion or economic exchange after the Chola period. By the time European travelers arrived in Kanchi, the Pallava temples in particular lay well outside of the urban focus. When the first colonial-era artists and travelers visited the city, they did not know about the great Kailāsanātha and Vaikuṅṭha Perumāḷ – Pallava temples that today are among the sole destinations for the rare foreign visitors to Kanchi. Photographs taken shortly after the Pallava temples came to light in European circles show that these temples remained, to varying extents, sites of devotion for local people who resided

27 Nilakanta Sastri also mentions an area called Buddha-Kanchi, but I have found no further reference to this. K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, *A History of South India: From Prehistoric Times to the Fall of Vijayanagar* (Madras: Oxford University Press, 1975), 437.

28 Colonial sources for the use of ‘Little Kanchi’ include the writings of Henrietta and Charlotte Clive. Nancy K. Shields, ed. *Birds of Passage: Henrietta Clive’s Travels in South India, 1798-1801* (London: Eland, 2009), 109-110.

in the temple's very immediate vicinity. Far removed from their royal Pallava origins, however, the temples had become relatively quiet places that had long-since ceased to attract the attention of affluent residents and visitors to the city. Archaeological surveyors focused on these monuments to the exclusion of others in order to perpetuate the fiction of the empire's own necessity. If the temples were in shambles, they argued, so too was India.

Other temples in the city inadvertently benefited from the colonial focus on the Pallava sites. The sprawling complexes of temples such as Ekāmbaranātha, Varadarāja Perumāḷ, and Kāmākṣī Ammaṅ, as well as dozens of other shrines throughout the city, remained active ritual centers that were uninterrupted by colonial efforts at preservation. As a result, they continue to function as Kanchi's primary living temples and are still the recipients of local devotion (Ill. 6). Contemporary practice in these temples can shed important light on ritual processes that are depicted in the more ancient sculptural reliefs and described in early literature. I have observed daily rituals, as well as several large-scale *pūjās*, that were sponsored by collective donations or individual members of the South Indian urban elite. Many of the practices involved in these rituals show a remarkable level of continuity from the past.

Kanchi Known and Unknown

Kanchi is well known to scholars through studies of Tamil literature, socio-economic history, and religion. However, despite the city's clear importance there has never been a single sustained study of Kanchi's urban space or architecture, nor have the temples been systematically mapped. Portions of the city's political history have been charted and certain monuments have been classified according to dynastic style.²⁹ Some scholars have produced monographs on single temples.³⁰ Others have conducted valuable analyses of

29 Mahalingam, *Kāñcīpuram in Early South Indian History*; C.R. Srinivasan, *Kanchipuram through the Ages* (New Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, 1979); K.R. Srinivasan, 'Pallavas of Kāñcī: Phase I', in *Encyclopaedia of Indian Temple Architecture*, ed. Michael W. Meister and M.A. Dhaky (New Delhi: American Institute of Indian Studies, 1983); 'Pallavas of Kāñcī: Phase II', in *Encyclopaedia of Indian Temple Architecture*, ed. Michael W. Meister and M.A. Dhaky (New Delhi: American Institute of Indian Studies, 1983).

30 C. Minakshi, 'The Historical Sculptures of the Vaikuṅṭhaperumāḷ Temple, Kāñcī', *Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India* 63 (1941); K.R. Venkataraman, *Dēvī Kāmākṣī in Kāñcī: A Short Historical Study* (Tiruchirappalli: Sri Vani Vilas Press, 1973); K.V. Raman, *Srī Varadarājaswami Temple, Kāñcī: A Study of Its History, Art and Architecture* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1975); R. Nagaswamy, 'Innovative Emperor and His Personal Chapel: Eighth Century Kanchipuram',

iconography and inscriptions using Kanchi as a case study.³¹ Among scholars of literature, Kanchi is known as a multilingual and multireligious place that fostered the development of regional cosmopolitan literatures.³² The city has also been mentioned in broader studies of premodern world systems.³³

In focusing on the relationships among temples, local landscapes, and transregional networks of religion and power, this book contributes to a broader range of ongoing scholarship within area studies and cultural history.³⁴ First, it enters into conversations on cosmopolitanism and the politics of cultural production.³⁵ Second, it engages with urban studies that have described Kanchi as a driving force in South India's socioeconomic integration.³⁶ Third, it considers modes of encounter and reception by

in *Royal Patrons and Great Temple Art*, ed. Vidya Dehejia (Bombay: Marg Publications, 1988); Padma Kaimal, 'Learning to See the Goddess Once Again: Male and Female in Balance at the Kailāsanath Temple in Kāñcīpuram', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73, no. 1 (2005); D. Dennis Hudson, *The Body of God: An Emperor's Palace for Krishna in Eighth-Century Kanchipuram* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Padma Kaimal, *Opening Kailasanatha: The Temple in Kanchipuram Revealed in Time and Space* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, forthcoming 2021).

31 Michael Lockwood, *Pallava Art* (Madras: Tambaram Research Associates, 2001); James Heitzman, 'Urbanization and Political Economy in Early South India: Kāñcīpuram During the Cōla Period', in *Structure and Society in Early South India: Essays in Honour of Noboru Karashima*, ed. Kenneth R. Hall (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001); Francis, Gillet, and Schmid, 'L'Eau et le Feu: Chronique des Études Pallava'; Gillet, *La Création d'une Iconographie Śivaïte Narrative: Incarnations du Dieu dans les Temples Pallava Construits*; James Heitzman and S. Rajagopal, 'Urban Geography and Land Measurement in the Twelfth Century: The Case of Kanchipuram', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 41, no. 3 (2004).

32 Hopkins, 'Lovers, Messengers, and Beloved Landscapes: *Sandeśakāvya* in Comparative Perspective', 37; David Shulman and Yigal Bronner, "A Cloud Turned Goose": Sanskrit in the Vernacular Millennium', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 43, no. 1 (2006).

33 K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, *Foreign Notices of South India: From Megasthenes to Ma Huan* (Madras: University of Madras, 1972); Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Kenneth R. Hall, 'Local and International Trade and Traders in the Straits of Melaka Region: 600-1500', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 47, no. 2 (2004).

34 Nachiket Chanchani, *Mountain Temples and Temple Mountains: Architecture, Religion, and Nature in the Central Himalayas*, Global South Asia (Washington: University of Washington Press, 2019).

35 Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Shonaleeka Kaul, *Imagining the Urban: Sanskrit and the City in Early India* (London: Seagull Books, 2010).

36 R. Champakalakshmi, 'The Urban Configurations of Toṇḍaimaṇḍalam: The Kāñcīpuram Region, C.A.D. 600-1300', in *Urban Form and Meaning in South Asia: The Shaping of Cities from Prehistoric to Precolonial Times*, ed. Doris Meth Srinivasan and Hugh Urban (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1993); Heitzman, 'Urbanization and Political Economy in Early South India: Kāñcīpuram During the Cōla Period.'



analyzing travel literature ranging from early first-millennium Tamil epics to nineteenth-century European accounts.³⁷ Fourth, it continues the burgeoning interest in landscape studies both within and beyond South Asia.³⁸ Finally, it makes a critical intervention in postcolonial studies by challenging narratives of deterioration and decay. Kanchi was never in a state of decline. Instead, the city continued to flourish through enduring processes of transformation and renewal.

This book takes as its organizing structure the pairing of *kṣetra* and *kṣatra*, the dual principle of royal dominion known from South Asian literature.³⁹ *Kṣetra*, which means ‘field’ in Sanskrit, is defined as a ruler’s terrestrial domain, and *kṣatra* represents his sphere of influence. The first two chapters map Kanchi’s *kṣetra* by tracing the city’s shifting contours and the emergence of a major pilgrimage route that led precisely through its urban core. The third chapter transitions outwards to Kanchi’s broader *kṣatra* by looking at patterns of movement that linked the city to its hinterland, and by considering connections with multireligious urban capitals across a wider South and Southeast Asian region. The fourth chapter focuses on afterlives and reception of the sites discussed in the first three chapters through colonial-era encounters with Kanchi and the city’s role in the production of colonial knowledge.

Chapter One focuses on the last two centuries of the Pallava period, from ca. 700-900 CE, which represent a pivotal moment in the history of South Indian art. It begins with a landscape of brick and open-air shrines, which was soon supplanted by stone as the preferred building material for elite sacred architecture. Through a rigorous mapping of temples and architectural fragments from this period, I offer a new vision of the Pallava’s royal capital. I demonstrate that Kanchi’s urban core doubled in size during a single century, and that the early city was situated to the west of present-day Kanchi. I also recover a lost geological landscape, one that was rich in sandstone, the primary construction material in Pallava-Kanchi.

37 Iṅāṅkō Aṭikal, *The Cilappadikāram* [‘The Tale of the Anklet’], trans. V.R. Ramachandra Dikshitar (Madras: The South India Saiva Siddhanta Works Publishing Society, 1978); Shattan, *Maṇimēkalai*; Pattuppāṭṭu; Shields, ed. *Birds of Passage: Henrietta Clive’s Travels in South India, 1798-1801*; Lady Charlotte Florentia Clive, *Journal of Lady Charlotte Florentia Clive (1787-1866)*, Copied by Professional Calligrapher, W.H. Ramsay (British Library, Visual Arts Collection, WD2435, 1857); Soltykov, *Lettres Sur l’Inde*.

38 Daud Ali and Emma Flatt, eds., *Garden and Landscape Practices in Precolonial India: Histories from the Deccan* (Delhi: Routledge, 2012).

39 Hermann Kulke, ‘Kṣetra and Kṣatra: The Cult of Jagannātha of Puri and the “Royal Letters” (*Chāmu Cītaus*) of the Rājās of Khurda’, in *Kings and Cults: State Formation and Legitimation in India and Southeast Asia* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1993).



Throughout the book, the terms ‘Pallava-Kanchi’ and ‘Chola-Kanchi’ refer to the physical footprint of the city and the entire sociocultural milieu that lay within it during each dynasty’s reign. The chapter closes with the ninth century, when growing political instability within Kanchi prompted the Pallavas to concentrate their efforts on outlying areas, while new rulers vied for power inside the city.

Chapter Two centers on a road that emerged as a major pilgrimage route in the Chola period. Passing directly through the urban core and extending far beyond the city’s boundaries, the road positioned Kanchi as one stop along an enduring pilgrimage network that connected northern Tamil Nadu with the holy hilltop temple at Tirupati. I identify a unique architectural pattern that exists within Kanchi alone – all temples face this main road. The chapter then follows the road to the villages south of Kanchi. Changes in structures of patronage and temple architecture in the rural hinterland supply important information concerning similar transformations that were taking place on a much larger scale and with greater complexity inside the borders of the city. This chapter represents the first time that Kanchi’s Chola-period temples – often hidden behind perpetually locked doors or embedded within much later temples – have been identified, mapped, given a chronological ordering, and analyzed in the context of their contribution to the growth and intensification of the urban space.

Chapter Three widens the focus from the urban core to consider the creation of a rural-urban continuum that increasingly came to define Kanchi. Building on foundational studies by scholars such as Burton Stein, R. Champakalakshmi, and James Heitzman, it examines the more circumscribed settlements in the rural areas – being at a more manageable scale of two or three temples – to understand changes inside the city. Each of the settlements discussed shows evidence of a deep history, and each was then home to Pallava and/or Chola-era sacred architecture that received subsequent endowments and modifications over time. Together, these places became an interwoven network. The chapter traces interactions among the settlements through shared patterns in temple architecture, iconography, and inscriptions, as well as residential design. The chapter’s final section considers the possibility of a cultural landscape that expanded Kanchi’s *kṣatra* transregionally. Specifically, it looks at Kanchi’s role in extended Buddhist networks and then explores connections across urban centers in an integrated South and Southeast Asian region.⁴⁰

40 John Guy has demonstrated that South and Southeast Asia constituted an integrated region as early as the fifth century. John Guy, ed. *Lost Kingdoms: Hindu-Buddhist Sculpture of Early*

Finally, Chapter Four uses colonial-era sources to examine how foreign visitors encountered Kanchi at the crucial moment when knowledge of Indian art and geography was first being systematized and transmitted to European audiences. This chapter investigates the ways in which a popular narrative was set in place that viewed Kanchi as a city in decline – most clearly articulated by architectural surveyor James Fergusson – and how it is somewhat ironically belied by other genres of representation. While early photographs of the Pallava temples show these once-prominent sites as crumbling structures in patches of wilderness, colonial-era prints, drawings, and travelers' accounts tell a very different story – one that speaks not of decline or disrepair, but of a continuously flourishing urban center. Sources examined range from the collected manuscripts of Colonel Colin Mackenzie, to the private diaries and letters of Henrietta Clive (daughter-in-law of Robert Clive), to the drawings and letters of the Russian aristocrat Alexis Soltykoff, who described Kanchi as a city of 'infinite temples.'⁴¹

Moving from *kṣetra* outward to *kṣātra*, the four chapters construct a layered vision of Kanchi, from its establishment as a royal capital, to its present-day preservation of a cultural heritage that includes not only archaeological monuments but also the abundant processions and festivals that keep the city pulsing with life. The book demonstrates the ways in which Kanchi has been shaped, reshaped, ordered, and reconfigured through the construction of temples and the allocation of space. Through Kanchi's continual transformations, its temples have remained intrinsically connected with the vibrant urban landscape.

Southeast Asia (New Haven and London: Metropolitan Museum of Art and Yale University Press, 2014).

⁴¹ Soltykov, *Lettres Sur l'Inde*, 69.

