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Mathurā and Maturai, Back and Forth

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When Tradition Meets Archaeological Reality: The Site of Tiruccentūr

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INTRODUCTION: THE ABODES OF GOD MURUKAṈ

The Tamil tradition holds that a sacred geography of Lord Murukaṉ was established in the *Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai*, one of the first poems of Tamil Bhakti literature dated to the 6th or 7th century of the common era: six sacred locations—the *āṟupaṭaivīṭu*s, literally "the six abodes of the army"—are hailed as the dwellings of the god. The "names" of the six places appear in this literary work as follows: *kuṉṟu* (l. 77), *alaivāy* (l. 125), *āviṉaṉkuṭi* (l. 176), *ērakam* (l. 189), *kuṉṟutōṟāṭal* (l. 217) and *paḻamutircōlai* (l. 317). However, scholars struggle to make these places match with the actual sacred geography of Murukaṉ.

We do not know when the construction of sanctuaries dedicated to this somewhat wild deity of Tamil literature, who presides over affairs of the heart in spite of his fearful aura, and is mostly adored by tribal inhabitants of the mountains, the Kuṟavars, began. One poem of the *Puṟanāṉūṟu*, an early anthology of war poems, mentions a sanctuary, which reveals that the practice of building a temple or at least a shelter (*kōṭṭam*) for Murukaṉ was in existence even during the early period:

neymmiti yaruntiya koycuva leruttiṟ
ṟaṇṇaṭai maṉṉar tāruṭaip puravi
aṉaṅkuṭai murukaṉ kōṭṭattuk
kalantoṭā makaḷiri ṉikantuniṉ ṟavvē (*Puṟanāṉūṟu* 299.4–7)

The horses of the rulers of riverine cities,
though they eat paddy mashed with ghee and are close curried
and garlanded,
stand frozen in fear, like women in their time of the month,
when they must not even touch dishes, who have entered the temple
[*kōṭṭam*] of avenging Murukaṉ! (Hart & Heifetz transl., p. 174)

Another reference to the word *kōṭṭam* used in connection with Murukaṉ is found in the *Cilappatikāram* 14.10: *kōḻic cēval koṭiyōṉ kōṭṭamum*, "the temple of he who has a cock-banner." Other words with similar meaning and related to other gods are found in the lines above (*kōyil*, l. 7; *niyamam*, l. 8; *nakaram*, l. 9; *paḷḷi*, l. 11). An early epigraphical appearance of the word *kōṭṭam*, probably referring to a temple or a shelter, is found in a 6th-century inscription in Pūlāṅkuṟicci (E. Cupparāyalu & M.R. Rākavavāriyar 1991; Y. Subbarayalu 2001). This record mentions three temples, now disappeared, and one of them is a *kōṭṭam* dedicated to a god called Vāci, in a hermitage of ascetics believed to be Jains (*tāpatappaḷḷiyuḷ*, l. 5 of the 2nd inscription). F. Clothey (1978: 116–117) assumes that the word *kōṭṭam* referred first to an open space, which became, over time, a covered enclosure, "and may have been a forerunner of the Tamil temple," although I have difficulty in tracing such an evolution for this word with any confidence since it is not described. K.V. Zvelebil (1991: 85) also adds another reference from *Cilappatikāram* 5.170 which mentions a temple (*kōyil*) for Cevvēḷ with six heads (*aṟumukac cevvēḷ aṉitikaḷ kōyilum*) again included in a series of temples dedicated to other gods. However, we do not, as far as I am aware, recognize a pattern of a sacred geography in these early texts.

I shall summarise now the significant position of just a few scholars concerning the six abodes mentioned in the *Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai*.

R. Champakalakshmi (2011) supposes that the cultic geography of Murukaṉ in the Tamil-speaking South appears in the *Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai*,[1]

and she does not question the association of these ancient names with the present locations, although she briefly mentions the presence of the earliest archaeological remains in each site. Therefore, she gives the following correspondences for the six places in the order of their presentation in the text:

1	*kuṉṟu*	Tirupparaṅkuṉṟam
2	*alaivāy*	Tiruccentūr
3	*āviṉaṉkuṭi*	Paḻani
4	*ērakam*	Cuvāmimalai (Swamimalai)
5	*kuṉṟutōṟāṭal*	Tiruttaṇi
6	*paḻamutircōlai*	Aḷakarmalai

Françoise L'Hernault (1978: 185–189), who follows the same correspondence, proposes a totally different view: underlining the problem of the identification of a few of these sites (*ērakam*, *kuṉṟutōṟāṭal* and *paḻamutircōlai*), and the absence of archaeological evidence of an ancient Murukaṉ cult in the identified sites, she prefers to consider that these six names in the *Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai* are given simply to match the number six: Murukaṉ has six heads, there are six parts in this work, and therefore there should be six sites. She adds that the idea of six places had probably been maintained, and the temples of growing fame chosen as *āṟupaṭaivīṭu*s at a later point of time.

On the other hand, Fred Clothey (1972: 81–82 and 1978: 118–131) mentions five sites whose authenticity he considers certain: Paḻani, Tiruccentūr, Tiruttaṇi, Tirupparaṅkuṉṟam, Cuvāmimalai. He does not give the corresponding names in the *Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai*, but I think that he assumes *kuṉṟutōṟāṭal* to designate "every place, and particularly every hill." Clothey nevertheless adds (1972: 85 and note 30) that these modern sites may not be the same as the ones presented in the *Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai*, but that medieval remains in Tiruccentūr, Tirupparaṅkuṉṟam and Paḻani suggest that the cult of Murukaṉ was practised during the Pāṇḍya period.

Scholars, such as M. Shanmugam Pillai (2009: 29 and 31), think that *kuṉṟutōṟāṭal* and *paḻamutircōlai* do not refer to any site in particular, but simply to the mountains and the fruit-groves in general as their names suggest.

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[1] Champakalakshmi (2011: 198–199) writes: "The work, therefore, may be taken as the first clear marker of the synthesis between the local Tamil tradition and the Sanskritic tradition, which changed a deity of the *Kuriñci* eco-zone into a universalised Tamil

deity within the larger Purāṇic tradition, which also took him out of a strictly local context to a regional context and provided a cultic geography."

The various possibilities of interpretation thus show that these six sacred places were not so well defined in the *Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai*, and may very well not have been established at that time. I would personally tend to agree with F. L'Hernault who did not believe in the establishment of six sacred centres by this long poem, a tradition which seems to have crystallized much later; she rather considers the division of the text based on the number six as a "numerical identity." However, in order to examine this theory, I began the exploration of each of these six actual pilgrim centres which the tradition relates to the six sites of the *Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai*, and I am attempting to confront the literary and archaeological data. After the site of Tirupparaṅkuṉram (V. Gillet, in press), I shall now consider Tiruccentūr, the second sacred centre that appears in the *Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai*.

Tiruccentūr, Centil and Alaivāy: A Doubtful Association?

The present town of Tiruccentūr lies on the east coast, 55 kilometres from Tirunelvēli, in the Tūttukkuṭi district. Its very impressive temple, presiding over the seashore, is dedicated to Subrahmaṇya/Murukaṉ, in accordance with the belief that Tiruccentūr is the second of the six sacred abodes of Lord Murukaṉ. Before coming to the temple itself, I shall first analyse the appearances of names traditionally considered to refer, in literature, to the present Tiruccentūr.

The association between Tiruccentūr and two other names found in ancient Tamil literature, Centil and Alaivāy, is widely accepted. The first name, Centil, is difficult to understand—but one should keep in mind that it is often impossible to make sense of toponyms. The *Tamil Lexicon* seems to trace its origin to the Sanskrit word *jayantī*, "victorious" or "flag [of victory]." This interpretation leads Somasundaram Pillai (1948: 5), for example, to understand the toponym Tiruccentūr as "The sacred and prosperous town of Victory." Nevertheless, the correspondence between Centil and *jayantī* is not very clear and appears, in my view, a little far-fetched.

Another way to understand Centil would be to divide the word into two components: *centu* + *il*. In the *Tamil Lexicon*, *centu* is said to come from the Sanskrit *jantu*, "living being, creature." We could therefore interpret it as "The house (*il*) of the creature/living being" or "The death

(*il*: non-existence) of the creature." Furthermore, as Eva Wilden pointed out to me, although this is not attested in Caṅkam literature, *centu* could morphologically mean "that which is red," and *centil* may therefore mean "The house which is red."

The place-name Centil appears, probably for the first time, in *Puṟanāṉūṟu* 55.[2] It is already connected with Murukaṉ, called here Neṭuvēḷ ("He with a long spear"):

> *nīnīṭu vāḻiya neṭuntakai tāḻnīr*
> *veṇṭalaip puṇari yalaikkuñ centil*
> *neṭuvē ṉilaiiya kāmar viyaṉṟuṟaik*
> *kaṭuvaḻi tokuppa vīṇṭiya*
> *vaṭuvā ḻekkar maṇaliṉum palavē* (*Puṟanāṉūṟu* 55.17–21)

O Great man of quality! May you live as many years as the grains of the dunes of black sand which have gathered, assembled by the wild winds, on the large beautiful seashore where Neṭuvēḷ stays, Centil where the white crest of the deep water of the ocean dashes.

According to the conventional but very uncertain chronology of ancient Tamil literature, the next occurrence of this place called Centil is encountered in chapter 24 of the *Cilappatikāram*. The text does not give any indication of its location. It is simply included in a list of four places related to Murukaṉ:

> *cīrkeḻu centiluñ ceṅkōṭum veṇkuṉṟum*
> *ērakamu nīṅkā viṟaivaṉkai vēlaṉṟē*
> *pārirum pauvatti ṉuḻpukkup paṇṭoruṇāḷ*
> *cūrmā taṭinta cuṭarilaiya veḷvēlē* (*Cilappatikāram* 24.8)

Is it not the spear in the hand of the deity who does not depart from Centil full of fame, Ceṅkōṭu, Veṇkuṉṟu and Ērakam? The bright spear resembling a burning leaf which has cut off the fearful beast/mango tree, one ancient day, having entered inside the dark expanse of the ocean?

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[2]   We have to bear in mind that this poem may be a later addition. In that respect, E. Wilden (forthcoming) is of the opinion that the next poem in the anthology (56) dates back to the 7th century, although this anthology is usually considered to belong to the first centuries CE. We understand from this passage that Centil is located on the seashore, with the waves of the ocean dashing against it.

This passage once again associates this "famous" (*cīr keḻu*) Centil with Murukaṉ. However, Centil is not the only place where he dwells, and Ceṅkōṭu, Veṇkuṉṟu and Ērakam are mentioned as well. This is particularly interesting for our purpose, since it shows that, although the concept of six abodes was not explicitly in use in that text dated between the 3rd and the 7th century, some centres were related to Murukaṉ, probably through the establishment of religious monuments. May we assume that the mention of these places is the reflection of a kind of cultic map of the period during which this text was written; that there were famous temples dedicated to the god holding a spear in Centil, Ērakam, Ceṅkōṭu and Veṇkuṉṟu, wherever these used to be located?

Ērakam, which is nowadays associated with Cuvāmimalai although evidence of an ancient centre is entirely absent, is also found among the sites of the *Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai*. However, the anonymous medieval commentary on difficult words (*arumpatavurai*) of the *Cilappatikāram* mentions that Cuvāmimalai is Veṇkuṉṟu (see below). Unfortunately, the passage where Ērakam is discussed is lost (see p. 512 of the edition of U. Vē. Cāminātaiyar). F. L'Hernault (1978: 187) mentions a village close to Cuvāmimalai called Ērakam, and supposes that it may be the "original one." She also remarks that since Nacciṉārkkiṉiyar, in his commentary to the *Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai*, placed Ērakam in the mountain-country (see p. 94 of the commentary: *ērakam – malaināṭṭakat toru tiruppati*), it has been often considered to be located in Kerala.

Ceṅkōṭu, the Red Mountain, is traditionally identified with Tirucceṅkōṭu, situated between Erode (Īrōṭu) and Nāmakkal, a town whose principal temple today is dedicated to Ardhanārīśvara. There is, however, no absolute certainty that the Ceṅkōṭu of the *Cilappatikāram* is the same place as the modern Tirucceṅkōṭu. If it is the same place, it means that the cult of Murukaṉ which was popular at the time of the redaction of this chapter of the Tamil Epic was supplanted by the Śaiva cult over the centuries. F. L'Hernault (1978: 122–123) suspects that the present Ardhanārīśvara temple was in fact formerly dedicated to Subrahmaṇya, since this deity is not in his usual position as attendant of Śiva facing the same direction, but faces the opposite direction. This argument is nevertheless very fragile, based on an abnormality of position between the two gods, and only

a thorough archaeological and epigraphical investigation of the site would perhaps reveal a former tangible Murukaṉ cult.

Veṇkuṉṟu, the White Mountain, has not been identified with certainty so far. The few identifications proposed are as follows: the anonymous commentary on difficult words (*arumpatavurai*) of the *Cilappatikāram* says that Veṇkuṉṟu is equivalent to Cuvāmimalai (*cuvāmimalai*, p. 512 of the edition of V. Cāminātaiyar), but it does not comment upon this association (we do not even know if the Cuvāmimalai he refers to is the same as the modern one); K.V. Zvelebil (1991: 88) notes that Veṇkuṉṟu is unidentified, although he mentions the possibility of it being Cuvāmimalai; V.M. Subrahmanya Ayyar (quoted in F. L'Hernault 1978: 188) thinks Veṇkuṉṟu corresponds to Veḷḷiyaṅkiri, in Coimbatore (Kōyamputtūr) taluk and district, since *veḷḷi* means silver and that a silver mountain would be white; B. Dagens, again quoted by F. L'Hernault (1978: 188), considers Veṇkuṉṟu as a Tamil equivalent of Śvetagiri, the White Mountain, on which Skanda was born (*Mahābhārata* 3.214), referring thus to a mythical, rather than tangible, place in the Tamil-speaking country. The white mountain may therefore recall the Sanskrit imagery of the Himalaya, re-located on South Indian soil: Veṇkuṉṟu is a generic name which could be applied to any hill, and does not necessarily refer to a mountain which is white in reality.[3] It could, moreover, refer to the purity of the mountain, purified by having received the embryo of the young god.

However, after enquiring of N. Ramaswamy Babu (assistant of the Pondicherry Centre of the EFEO), I was told that Veṇkuṉṟam is also the name of a hill near the town of Vantavāci (Tiruvaṇṇāmalai district), where a temple dedicated to a deity named Dhavalagirīśvara, the Lord of the White Mountain, is found (fig. 8.1). This deity is now Śiva, and a *liṅga* occupies the main shrine, facing east, built on top of a rock (fig. 8.2). Four other sanctuaries, built in granite and brick, have been added, and are dedicated to the goddess, to Caṇḍeśa, to Gaṇeśa, and to Subrahmaṇya. All these shrines, even the main one, are of small dimensions, and the temple, access

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3   The process of a northern mythical symbol "transferred" to the Tamil-speaking South is also observed in the correspondence between the river Gaṅgā and the river Kāvēri, considered as the southern Gaṅgā. See, for example, S. Brocquet (1997: 129–131) and E. Francis (2009: 416, note 508), who gives a list of works on this subject.

Fig. 8.1. The hill of Veṇkuṉṟam, Vantavāci taluk, Tiruvaṇṇāmalai district
(photo by the author, 2012).

Fig. 8.2. Dhavalagirīśvara temple, at the top of the hill of Veṇkuṉṟam
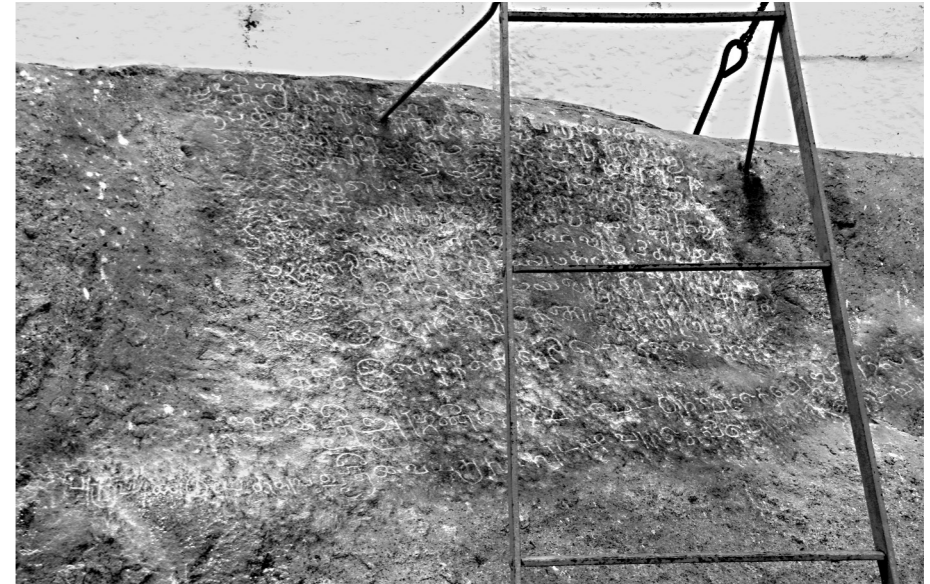(photo by the author, 2012).

Fig. 8.3. Tamil inscription dated from the sixth year of the reign of the Pallava king
Nandivarman III, rock under the Dhavalagirīśvara temple in Veṇkuṉṟam, 9th century
(photo by the author, 2012).

Fig. 8.4. Tank on the northern side at the foot of the Veṇkuṉṟam hill
(photo by the author, 2012).

to which is nowadays difficult, does not attract pilgrims and remains largely unknown. Interestingly, on the north side of the rock where the main shrine is built, there is a Tamil inscription dated from the 6th year of the reign of the Pallava king Nandivarman III, in the 9th century (fig. 8.3). The epigraph gives the name of Veṅkunṟu, which is located in a geographical division called Veṅkunṟukkōṭṭam, and mentions the presence of Paṭārar (Sanskrit *bhaṭṭāra*).[4] Paṭārar simply refers to a noble person or deity, but this title is sometimes found associated with the name Subrahmaṇya.[5] May we then surmise that this temple on top of the hill was originally dedicated to Subrahmaṇya, the Lord of the White Mountain himself, and that this hill of Veṅkunṟam precisely is the one referred to in the *Cilappatikāram*, which would still have been famous in the 9th century? The presence of a very large tank on the northern side at the foot of the hill, now covered with vegetation (fig. 8.4), testifies that this temple was once a highly frequented place. Nevertheless, the scarcity of inscriptions on this site is a major obstacle to determining its history with any accuracy.

Returning to Centil, we find another occurrence of this name, once again related to Murukaṉ, in *Tēvāram* 6.23.4cd:

nam centil mēya |
vaḷḷimaṇāḷarkut tātaikaṇṭāy – maṟaikkāṭṭu uṟaiyum maṇāḷaṉtāṉē

Behold the father of the bridegroom of Vaḷḷi who dwells in our Centil!
The bridegroom resides in Maṟaikkāṭu.

The god is mentioned here simply as the son of Śiva. This particular poem is attributed to Appar, supposed to be the oldest of the three authors of the *Tēvāram* (a corpus usually dated to the 7th–9th centuries), and is

attached to a site called Maṟaikkāṭu (modern name: Vētāraṇyam), a coastal town in Nākapaṭṭiṉam district. No information about the place is given. However, the reference to Centil may have been chosen here because it was on the seashore, as Maṟaikkāṭu is.

The place-name Centil has traditionally been associated to Alaivāy, which, in its turn, is considered as a specific place-name for the second abode of god Murukaṉ mentioned in *Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai* 124–125:

yulakam pukaḻnta vōṅkuyar viluccī
ralaivāy cēṟalu nilaiiya paṇpē …

The prosperous beautiful Alaivāy of increasing renown,
[with] a permanent nature even when passing, is praised by the world.

The word *alaivāy* appears once prior to the *Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai*, in *Akanāṉūṟu* 266.17–21, and is already connected with Murukaṉ, called Cēy ("the Red One"):

kaḻaṉi yuḻavar kaliciṟan teṭutta
kaṟaṅkicai verīip paṟanta tōkai
yaṇaṅkuṭai varaippakam poliyavan tirukkun
tirumaṇi viḷakki ṉalaivāyc
cerumiku cēyo ṭuṟṟa cūḻē

This is the oath [you have] taken in front of Cēy who excels in battle in Alaivāy [which possesses the] lustre of brilliant gems where the peacocks who flew, scared by the sounding noise raised by the eminent strength of the farmers in the fields, tarried; they have come inside this boundary which possesses spirits, so that it prospers.

Alaivāy is found once more, but probably later, in an anonymous poem included in Nakkīraṉ's commentary (11th century?) on the poetological treatise *Iṟaiyaṉār Kaḷaviyal* (p. 86):

kōṉēr elvaḻai teḻirppa niṉpōl
yāṉum āṭik kāṇkō tōḻi !
varaivayiṟu kiḷitta niḻaltikaḻ neṭuvēl
tikaḻpūṇ murukaṉ tīmpuṉal alaivāyk
kamaḻpūm puṟavil kārpeṟṟuk kalitta
oṉpoṟi maññai pōlvatōr
kaṇkavar kārikai peṟutaluṉ teṉiṉē

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4   ARE 1900, No. 73, p. 53; SII 7, No. 80, p. 34; T.V. Mahalingam (1988: 370–371). The first syllable of the word *paṭārar* is not very clear: Dr. G. Vilayavenugopal proposes an alternative reading of *piṭārar*, which would have a similar meaning. There is a two-line inscription under this one, engraved much later, which records a renovation by a Brahmin woman. The name of the god is not given, and the name of the sovereign (that T.V. Mahalingam reads as Rājendra) is not clear at all. I could not locate the inscription published in SII 7, No. 81, p. 35, which may have disappeared under the cement. The name of the god in this one seems to be Nakkamarācuramuṭaiyar, but I am unable to identify him.
5   See the Tiruccentūr inscription of the 9th century, *infra* p. 304, and the inscriptions found on the site of Cāḷuvaṉ Kuppam in S. Rajavelu 2008.

Friend, I shall bathe too,
like you, and let
my conch bracelets jingle,
to see if I can gain
your eye-snatching beauty,
like a brightly spotted peacock
that thrills to see black
thunderheads come
to the woodlands
fragrant with flowers
near Alaivāy with its sweet
waters, that place
of Lord Murukan
whose jewels glisten,
and whose gleaming lance
ripped the inside out
of a mountain! (Buck & Paramasivan transl., pp. 92–93)

The term Alaivāy is composed of two words, *alai*, "waves," and *vāy*, "mouth," which can also be simply a locative; in both cases, *alai-vāy* would refer to the seashore. It may be taken as a specific place-name, but could also be interpreted as a generic name, and accordingly refer to any location on the seashore. We notice, moreover, that in these early texts, Centil and Alaivāy are never found juxtaposed. As we will see below, the association between the two, first attested in the poems of Aruṇakirinātar (14th-15th century), has seemingly been made on the basis that both these places have been connected to Murukan for a long time, and that both seem to be located on the seashore.

Although I cannot firmly reject the identification of Centil with Alaivāy, I would like to raise some arguments which show that it may be questioned. First of all, the earliest commentator of the *Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai*, Naccinārkkiniyar (who may have lived in the 14th century), identifies Alaivāy with a place unknown today, and does not mention Centil: *nāmaṉūralaivāyeṉṉum tiruppatiyēṟa eḻuntaruḷutalum avaṟku nilai peṟṟa kuṇam* (p. 52), "The permanent quality of he who has graciously raised to climb (*ēṟa*) the sacred place (*tiruppati*) called *nāmaṉūralaivāy* (i.e. Alaivāy the village of Nāmaṉ?)." The anonymous commentator Uraiyāciriyar identifies Alaivāy with Tiruccentil (p. 57), but also mentions

nāmaṉūralaivāy. Parimēlaḻakar and Pariti called it Tiruccentūr in their respective commentaries (p. 63 and p. 67). As for Kavipperumāḷ, yet another commentator, he does not give another name to this place (p. 67). We thus see that the association between Centil and Alaivāy does not appear as undeniable as the tradition asserts. Furthermore, the temple dedicated to Subrahmaṇya in the 9th century recently found on the seashore in Cāḷuvaṉ Kuppam (five kilometres north of Mahābalipuram) shows that seashore sites were considered appropriate places for the installation of a cult to this deity.[6] Based on these remarks, may we not consider the possibility that the Alaivāy of the *Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai* was not necessarily equivalent to Centil nor to the modern Tiruccentūr? That it could refer to the seashore in general, as has often been supposed for other names in the same text, such as Kuṉrutōrāṭal ("the dance on all the mountains") and Paḻamutircōlai ("the grove with ripen fruits")? Beyond the traditional landscape of the mountain (*kuṟiñci*) associated with Murukan, we would then see this deity related to other types of landscape, the fertile plains and the seashore.

From Alaivāy and Centil to Tiruccentūr

Although some of the identifications of the sites in the *Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai* are still in dispute, the identification between Alaivāy, Centil and Tiruccentūr is usually not questioned. In fact, it is between the end of the 14th and the first half of the 15th century that the *Tiruppukaḻ*, composed by the poet Aruṇakirinātar, associates for the first time—at least in the documents which have reached us—these three names always mentioned separately in the older literature.[7] In most of the poems of the *Tiruppukaḻ* dedicated to Tiruccentūr (songs 21 to 103), this site is called

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[6] During the workshop, our group went to Cāḷuvaṉ Kuppam to visit the excavations, and Dr. T. Satyamurthy gave a presentation of the site for the conference which followed. See S. Rajavelu (2008) for a preliminary study on this temple discovered in 2006.

[7] I would like to draw attention to the fact that, except for one poem (song 47) where Centil and Alaivāy are quoted next to each other (see my note 8), only one of the three names is mentioned in each poem on Tiruccentūr. Whether the author himself is responsible for the compilation of the poems under the "banner" of Tiruccentūr or other later compilers is unknown to me.

Centil. But we also find the following names: Tiruccentil (songs 64, 79), Tiruvaḷarcentūr (songs 26, 67), Tiruccentūr (songs 29, 35, 73), Centūr (songs 80, 89, 90), Alaivāy (songs 72, 93, 98, 99, 101),[8] Cīralaivāy (song 36, 82), Cīralaivāy nakar (song 69). The place is described as standing on the seashore (*karaiyil uṟai*, song 28; *alaiyē karai poruta centil nakaril*, song 68; *alaivāy karaiyil*, song 72), united with waves (*alai poruta centil*, song 32), similar to the mount Kailāsa (*kayilai malai aṉaiya centil*, song 31). The god is said to have come to the temple/city of Centil after having fought the demons and having married on the hill (*ceṉṟa cūrar añca veṉṟu kuṉṟ' iṭai maṇam puṇarntu | centil nakar vant' amarnta perumāḷē*, song 39, lines 15–16).[9]

From the middle of the 15th century, a few inscriptions—which I will detail later—called this place Tiruccentil or Tiruccentilūr.[10] This place may then already have been associated with the Centil of the old Tamil literature, and Tiruccentilūr may appear as an intermediary form which would later lead to the modern name Tiruccentūr.

Therefore, it is perhaps in the work of Aruṇakirinātar that the link between the Alaivāy of the *Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai* and the 14th-century Tiruccentūr, famous for its temple dedicated to Murukaṉ, is made for the first time in literature. Did Aruṇakirinātar simply put into words a belief already established—we see that in the middle of the 15th century, this place was already called Tiruccentil in epigraphy, another toponym related to Murukaṉ in the ancient literature—or did he deliberately link the ancient text dedicated to his beloved deity with a modern site where a famous temple was established, thereby anchoring the roots of the cult in the ancient and glorious past?

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[8] In the last 2 lines of song 47, *alaivāy* precedes *centil*, and could be an attribute of it: *teruvilēyum nittilam eṟi alaivāyc | centil kantap perumāḷē*, "O lord Kantaṉ, in Centil where the waves (*alaivāy*) cast pearls (*nittilam*) in all the streets" or "O lord Kantaṉ, in Centil Alaivāy where pearls (*nittilam*) are cast in all the streets."

[9] The last stanza of song 66, mentions Tiruttaṇi where the god also resides: *vayal puṟattup puvikkuḷ nīḷ | tiruttaṇikkuṭ cirappil vāḻ | vayatta nittat tuvattaṉē centil mēvukukaṉē*.

[10] See ARE 1903, No. 156, published in SII 8, No. 444, pp. 234–235, in the Śivakoḷuntīśvara temple, but this epigraph has disappeared after the polishing of the walls during the latest renovation; ARE 1912, No. 28, p. 44; ARE 1975–76, Nos. 264–265, p. 89, on the wall of the eastern *gopura* of the Subrahmaṇya temple.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL REALITY:
WAS THE ORIGINAL CAVE TEMPLE OF TIRUCCENTŪR A VAIṢṆAVA MONUMENT?

As mentioned above, the modern Tiruccentūr is believed to be equivalent to the ancient abodes of Murukaṉ named Alaivāy and Centil. According to local mythology, this site is the theatre of the victory of Murukaṉ over the demon Cūr.[11] We shall now turn towards archaeological evidence, and examine the various data which may help us in understanding a part of the religious history of this nowadays famous temple.

Before coming to the temple itself, I intend to consider first a lengthy Tamil inscription of 210 lines, engraved in Vaṭṭeḻuttu on both sides of two slabs, now set up in the south-east corner of the second *prākāra* of the temple.[12] It records series of loans to various villages and *brahmade-yas* from a temple most probably dedicated to Subrahmaṇya Bhaṭṭārar,[13]

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[11] The *talapurāṇam* of Tiruccentūr, written in the 17th century by Veṉṟimalai Iyer, assigns the foundation of the temple to a mythical Pāṇḍya king called Ukkiraperuvaḷuti, after his daughter, who was born with a horse-face, bathed in Tiruccentūr worshipping Subrahmaṇya and was released from that curse. For the summary of the whole *talapurāṇam*, see K.V. Zvelebil (1991: 38–40). This part of the story is also related in a 20th-inscription on a slab facing the sea.

[12] This inscription, as well as the others which I will describe later, is found in a corner where old and broken items of the temple are stored. Therefore, it was extremely difficult to access them and even more so to stand and read them. Since I was not allowed to take pictures, I cannot publish any in this article.

[13] The name Subrahmaṇya/Cuppiramaṇiyaṉ ("good or dear to Brahmins") is the name given to this deity in the epigraphical sources of the Tamil-speaking South whenever a temple is dedicated solely to him. The same god is designated in the inscriptions of the Pallavas under different names such as Guha, Kumāra, Skanda, Subrahmaṇya, but is always referred to as the son of Śiva—or the prince, heir of the king—and never independently. Subrahmaṇya appears in the following sites, assigned to the 9th century: Mallam in Andhra Pradesh (see T.V. Mahalingam 1960); Cāḷuvaṉ Kuppam near Mahābalipuram (see S. Rajavelu 2008); the present inscription in Tiruccentūr. Furthermore, in some of the representations in cave temples we know from the same period (Tirupparaṅkuṉram, Āṉaimalai, Tirumalai), this god is accompanied by a ram or by both a ram and an elephant, recalling his link with Agni (he is, in the first place, the son of Agni) and Indra (after his birth, he becomes the leader of the army of the god, assuming Indra's role as described in the *Mahābhārata* 3.213–216). His relationship with Agni who presides over the sacrifice and is therefore dear to Brahmins, is marked

in the 13th year (opposite a year which is lost), equal to 5001 days of the reign of King Varaguṇa Mārāyaṉ. I am giving here the first eight lines as they appear in the inscription:[14]

(1) *[…] śrī k[ō*]varaku[ṇa]mārāya[r̲]ku yāṇṭu* (2) *[…] [ta]ṉ etir patiṉmūṉru [*] ivvāṇṭu tiru* (3) *[…] cuppiramaṇṇiya paṭārar upāsaiyā[X]*(4)*[X]ṉ*[15] *[tiru]mūlattāṉattup paṭārarkku mutal keṭāmaip po[li ūṭṭā]*(5)*ka [ko]ṇṭu ce[lu]ttuvatāka [*] uṭaiyār aṭiyār ā[i]ṉa varakuṇa mārāyar p[ō*]*(6)*ttara [*] iruppaikkuṭi kiḷavaṉum cāttam perumāṉum aḷar̲r̲ū[r*][nā]*(7)*ṭṭukk[ō*]num aiy āiratt' oṉr̲u nāḷār koṇṭu vanta nir̲ai kur̲aiyāp palaṅkācu āirattu nā[ṉūr̲u] [\||*]*

In the 13th year opposite to the [...]'s year of the king Varaguṇa Mārāyaṉ. In this year, without destroying the capital for Bhaṭṭārar in the main sanctum, he who has become a devotee of Subrahmaṇya Bhaṭṭārar (*cuppiramaṇṇiya paṭārar upāsaiyā[yiṉa]ṉ*), having taken (*koṇṭu*) [a loan?], has to pay (*celuttuvatāka*), so that it feeds the interests (*poli ūṭṭāka*). When Varaguṇa Mārāyar who has become (*ā[i]ṉa*) a devotee (*aṭiyār*) of the Lord (*uṭaiyār*) was going (*pōttara*) (to/away from the temple?), Iruppaikkuṭi Kiḷavaṉ, Cāttam Perumāṉ and Aḷar̲r̲ū[r*][nā] ṭṭukkōṉ (the chief of the Aḷar̲r̲ūr country), in the five thousand and one (*aiy āiratt' oṉr̲u*) days (*nāḷār*) [of the reign of the king], came

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in the iconography of the Pāṇḍya country. Could this connection be the reason for the choice of his name, Subrahmaṇya? This brahmanical deity for whom temples were excavated and built in the Tamil-speaking South in the 9th century seems to have little in common with the Murukaṉ of the Caṅkam and early Tamil Bhakti literature (in which, nevertheless, a lot of his features are obviously already sanskritized), whose cult is tainted with frenzy and blood from animal sacrifices, and who is adored by the Kur̲avars. Regarding the word Bhaṭṭaraka which often accompanies the name of Subrahmaṇya in these 9th century inscriptions, it seems that it can be used for important persons (for example Bappabhaṭṭaraka in the Vēlūrpāḷaiyam copper plates, in T.V. Mahalingam 1988: 372–379, v. 22) as well as for a deity.

[14] Vaṭṭeḷuttu characters are italicised. Roman characters stand for Grantha characters. This inscription has been noticed in ARE 1903, No. 155, p. 19 and later in ARE 1912, No. 26, p. 43. It has been published in SII 14, No. 16-A, pp. 12–17 and in EI 21, No. 17, pp. 101–116 with a facsimile by K.V. Subrahmaṇya Aiyar in 1931–32. K.G. Krishnan (2002: 54–62) also published the inscription accompanied by a translation of the first 19 lines. The information of the remaining part is given in the form of a table.

[15] There is a possibility that the two scarcely legible syllables are *yiṉa*, giving the meaning *āyiṉa*, "having become," to this word. The unusual word *upāsai* may be derived from the Sanskrit *upāsaka*, "a servant, a worshipper."

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bringing (*koṇṭu vanta*) 1400 (*āirattu nāṉūr̲u*) *palaṅkācu* (i.e. old gold coins) which do not diminish (*nir̲ai kur̲aiyā*).

1400 *palaṅkācu* are given by three chieftains to the temple, and the king does not have a part in the donation itself: as a devotee of Subrahmaṇya he went (*pōttara*), neither his point of departure nor his destination being stated. The king may therefore appear in this inscription to mark the date (regnal year and number of days reigned), but also to increase the prestige and validity of the donation, although he does not seem to have any role in it. Out of these 1400 *palaṅkācu*, a certain amount is lent to 16 villages and *brahmadeya*s which therefore have to pay interest to the temple. The 202 following lines present the name of the villages and *brahmadeya*s, the geographical division in which they are located, the amount lent, the amount of monthly interest they have to pay, and how the temple should use this interest.[16]

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[16] I give here only the example of the first amount lent (the others are described following exactly the same structure). This inscription is very long indeed and presenting a complete translation of it would go beyond the scope of this paper.

ikkāciṟ kuṭanāṭṭuk kor̲kai ūrār kai iṉ mutal keṭāmaip poli ūṭṭuk koṇṭu celuttuvatāka vaitta nir̲ai kur̲aiyāp palaṅkācu toṇṇūr̲r̲āru ponṉeṭṭu [|* lines 8–10]

Out of these [1400] *kācu* (*ikkācil*), 96 (*toṇṇūr̲r̲āru*) *palaṅkācu* of undiminished (*kur̲aiyā*) weight (*nir̲ai*) and eight gold coins (*poṉ*) have been put (*vaitta*) in the hands of those from the village of Kor̲kai in Kuṭanāṭu; having taken (*koṇṭu*), having fed with the interests without destroying the capital (*mutal keṭāmaip poli ūṭṭu*), they have to pay (*celuttuvatāka*);

ikkācil oru kācukku āṇṭuvarai poli nir̲aimati nārāyattāl iru kala nellāka vanta nellu nūr̲r̲ut toṇṇūr̲r̲u mukkalaṉ[ē]y oṉpatiṉ kur̲uṇi* [|* lines 10–12]

With this money, for one *kācu*, at the rate of 2 (*iru*) full (*nir̲aimati nārāyattāl*) *kalam* of paddy for the interests (*poli*) up to one year (*āṇṭuvarai*), the paddy accrued (*vanta nellu*) is 193 *kalam* (*nūr̲r̲ut toṇṇūr̲r̲u mukkalaṉēy*) and 9 (*oṉpatiṉ*) *kur̲uṇi*.

innellāl niyatippaṭi iva[r]kaḷ koṇṭu vantu celuttakkaṭavaṉa* [|* lines 12–13]

with this paddy, having brought and come, they have to pay (*celuttakkaṭavaṉa*) invariably (*niyati*) according to the order (*paṭi*):

nāḷi aricikku munnāḷi nellākat tiruvamitiṉukku arici cennerr[ī]ṭṭal oru p[ō*]taikku nāṉāḷiyāka nāṉku p[ō*]taikku arici cennerr[ī*]ṭṭal patiṉarunāḷi* [|* lines 13–16]

one *nāḷi* (a measure) of rice (*arici*) equals 3 *nāḷi* of paddy; for one time (*oru pōtaikku*) [one needs] 4 *nāḷi*s of perfect rice (*cennerr̲īṭṭal*) for the holy food (*tiruvamitiṉukku*); for 4 times (*nāṉku pōtaikku*) [one needs] 16 *nāḷi*s of perfect rice (*cennerr̲īṭṭal*);

mārkaḷittiruvātirai u mācimakamum vaiyyāciviyākamum paṭi iraṭṭi celuttuvatu [|* line 16–17]

for [the festival of] Mārkaḷittiruvātirai, for [the one of] Mācimakam and for [the one of] Vaiyyāciviyākam, twice (*iraṭṭi*) the order (*paṭi*) has to be paid (*celuttuvatu*);

This unusual inscription calls for a few comments.

Firstly, the dynasty of the king is not mentioned here. We infer, from his name, on the one hand, and from the name of Iruppaikkuṭi Kiḻavaṉ which appears in another three inscriptions of the 9th century,[17] on the other, that *kō-varakuṇa-mārāyaṉ* of this inscription is the Pāṇḍya king Varaguṇa II. As K.V. Subrahmanya Aiyar (EI 21, p. 106) indicates, this king is considered to have begun his reign in 862 CE, which would enable us to situate his 13th regnal year around 875 CE. However, the beginning of the reign of Pāṇḍya Varaguṇa II is fixed by an inscription in Ayyampāḷaiyam (Paḻani taluk, Dindigul [Tiṇṭukkal] district), found above the natural cave temple on the hill called Aivarmalai, dated to Śaka year 792.[18] A close study of the estampage published in 1957–1958 reveals however that the beginning of this inscription is slightly damaged and therefore that the mention of a Śaka year is not very clear. Furthermore, it would be the only inscription of the Early Pāṇḍya dynasty discovered so far to be dated with a Śaka year. One should thus bear in mind that, although it is considered as a well-established dating of the Pāṇḍya dynasty, this benchmark of Pāṇḍya history remains doubtful.

Secondly, the name of the place where the temple is located is not mentioned. It is unfortunate that such an otherwise detailed epigraph lacks the toponym of this place associated with Subrahmaṇya in the 9th century and does not shed the light we would have expected. However, the names

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ipparicu celuttātu kuttukkāṟpaṭil itt[ē]varkk[ē*]y irupattaiñcu kācu taṇṭamum paṭṭuc celuttātu viṭṭa mutal iraṭṭiyuṅ kuṭuppatu* [|* lines 17–19]

in this manner (*ipparicu*), if one has a pierced leg (*kuttukkāṟpaṭil*) and does not pay (*celuttātu*), the fine (*taṇṭamum*) which occurs (*paṭṭu*) is 25 (*irupattaiñcu*) *kācu* for this god (*ittēvarkkēy*), and the double of the capital (*mutal iraṭṭiyuṅ*) has to be given (*kuṭuppatu*).

[17] See: 1) an inscription from Cāttūr (Cāttūr taluk, Virutunakar district, found in the village of Ciṉṉak Kollappaṭṭi), now kept in the Tirumal Nayak Palace in Madurai with its last two lines now covered with cement (ARE 1978, No. 254; *Virudhunagar District Inscriptions, vol. I*, No. 278 of 2005); 2-3) two inscriptions from Erukkaṅkuṭi (Cāttūr taluk, Virutunakar district) noticed in ARE 1929–30, Nos. 334–335, and published in SII 14, Nos. 43–44, pp. 33–34. A paragraph which analyses the activities of Iruppaikkuṭi Kiḻavaṉ, minister of the Pāṇḍya court, is found in ARE 1929–30, part II, p. 73.

[18] See EI 32, No. 41, pp. 337–338, with facsimile, edited by S. Sankaranarayanan in 1957–58. I could not find this inscription during my visit to the site in 2009.

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of the villages and *brahmadeya*s to whom the loans are given, along with the geographical divisions they belong to, are listed, as follows:

> village (*ūr*) of Koṟkai in Kuṭanāṭu,
> village of Nallūr in Kuṭanāṭu,
> village of Cāliyam in Kuṭanāṭu,
> *brahmadeya* Varaguṇamaṅgalam in Vaḻutivaḷanāṭu,
> *devadāna* Tiyampakamaṅkalam and *brahmadeya* Iṟa[ṇa]vālimaṅkalam in Vaḻutivaḷanāṭu,
> village of Ālampaṭṭam, which falls (*paṭum*) in Keṅkaimaṅkalam in Vaḻutivaḷanāṭu,
> merchant settlement (*nakaram*) Māṉavirappaṭṭinam in Vaḻutivaḷanāṭu,
> *brahmadeya* Kaṭṭāṟaimaṅkalam in Śrīvallabhavaḷanāṭu,
> Tiṇṇi, south-west of the *brahmadeya* Paraicumaṅkalam, in Parāntakavaḷanāṭu,
> *brahmadeya* Māṟamaṅgalam, in Parāntakavaḷanāṭu,
> [...]llūr, in the *brahmadeya* of Teṉṟakku[...], in Parāntakavaḷanāṭu,
> *brahmadeya* Avaṉipacekaramaṅgalam, in Amitaguṇavaḷanāṭu,
> *brahmadeya* Puḷiiṭai, in Kuṭanāṭu,
> *brahmadeya* Kiraṇūr, in Kuṭanāṭu,
> *brahmadeya* Caṭaṅkavikuṟicci, in Kuṭanāṭu,
> *brahmadeya* Kaṭuṅkōmaṅgalam, in Kuṭanāṭu.

Almost half these places are located in the country ruled by the Pāṇḍyas: the geographical divisions bear the names or titles of Pāṇḍya kings, such as Vaḻuti, Śrīvallabha, Parāntaka; one *brahmadeya* is called after the famous, almost mythical, Pāṇḍya king Katuṅkōṉ, referred to in the Vēḷvikuṭi copper plates as the one who restored the power of the dynasty (EI 17, No. 16, pp. 291–309). The other half of the villages or *brahmadeya*s are located in Kuṭanāṭu ("the western country"), which is the geographical division where Tiruccentūr is located according to two Nāyaka inscriptions on the eastern *gopura* (ARE 1975–76, Nos. 264–265, p. 89).[19] K.V. Subrahmanya Aiyar (EI 21, pp. 107–108) identifies several

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[19] The fact that the region where Tiruccentūr is located is called "the western country" is surprising since it is on the eastern coast and to the west only of the sea! More logically, Kuṭanāṭu is generally identified with Kerala, which is situated in the western part of the peninsula. However, I have rejected the identification of this Kuṭanāṭu with Kerala because the names of villages, according to Pr. K. Veluthat (personal communication),

other villages in the same area, and locates all these geographical divisions in the Tirunelvēli district.

Thirdly, the god Subrahmaṇya resides in the main sanctum (*tiru-mūlattāṇam*) of this temple. The term *mūlattāṇam* is not very common in the pre-10th-century inscriptions of the Tamil-speaking South. It appears first in a Pallava inscription of King Narasiṃhavarman I (middle of the 7th century) in the cave temple of Tirukkaḻukkuṉṟam (Kāñcīpuram district). According to K.R. Srinivasan (1964: 106–107) who has edited this epigraph, the *mūlattāṇam* would refer to a structural temple on top of the hill, which preceded the one built in stone probably at the end of the 7th century, and not to a part of the cave temple itself. The presence of this term *mūlattāṇam* may imply that, although Subrahmaṇya is said to be the main deity in the 9th century, there were other deities or sanctuaries in this site of Tiruccentūr.

The temple of Tiruccentūr, although of vast dimensions, is curiously almost devoid of inscriptions. Only two are engraved on the walls themselves: on the southern and northern walls of the eastern *gopura*, there are two Nāyaka inscriptions (ARE 1975–76, Nos. 264–265, p. 89), dated in Kollam year 739 and 757, respectively 1564 CE and 1582 CE approximately. They record donations to the treasury of the temple of the deity called Iḷaiyaperumāl (No. 264) and Iḷaiyanāyanār (No. 265) in Tiruccentilūr alias Tribhuvaṇamahādevicaturvedimaṅgalam in Kuṭanāṭu.[20] The other inscriptions found on the walls of this temple are not earlier than the middle of the 20th century.

Next to the slabs where the 9th-century inscription is engraved, in the south-east corner of the second enclosure, three other slabs are set in cement, engraved with inscriptions recording donations and sale deeds of

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do not reflect a Malayali origin—except perhaps the town of Cāliyam, nowadays about 15 km south of Calicut. Beyond the obstacle of identifying these villages in Kerala, another practical difficulty prevents me from believing that this Kuṭanāṭu is the modern Kerala: why would villages from Kerala borrow money with interests from a temple so far from them, on the other coast? A connection with Kerala is nevertheless established, through means that I was not able to identify: the priesthood of the modern Tiruccentūr temple is composed, for a good part, by Malayali priests. See http://tiruchendur.org.

[20] I was not able to read these inscriptions *in situ* since their location on the walls of the always crowded *gopura* did not permit me to stand long enough. Furthermore, I was not allowed to take pictures.

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land. On one slab—or perhaps a pillar or piece of architecture—we find two inscriptions. The first one (ARE 1912, No. 27, p. 43), dated to two that are opposite to 11 years of the reign of a late Pāṇḍya king Māṟavarman *alias* Tribhuvanacakravartin Kōṉēriṉmaikoṇṭaṉ Vikramapāṇḍyadeva, registers a gift of land at Maṅkalakkuṟicci in Tiruvaḻutivaḷanāṭu to a Brahmin of Parakramapāṇḍyacaturvedimaṅgalam in Karukuntināṭu. The second inscription (ARE 1912, No. 28, p. 44), dated to the year Kollam 621, equivalent to 1446 CE, records, according to the report, a sale of land to Naṟkīradeva Nayiṉar in the temple of Subrahmaṇya Piḷḷaiyār at Tiruccentil. This land, which was at Maṅgalakkuṟicci *alias* Peruṅkaruṇaicaturvedimaṅgalam, was originally granted to the Brahmin Attigirinātha-Bhaṭṭār and to two others of Parakramapāṇḍyacaturvedimaṅgalam by Rāṇaraṅgarāma Perumāḷ alias Vikramapāṇḍyadeva. The last two inscriptions are of a later date. One (ARE 1975–76, No. 267, p. 90) records, according to the report, a visit to the place by Viśvanātha Nāyakkarayyaṉ Tirumalai Nāyakkar to protect Vaṭamalai[ya] ppapiḷḷai. It is dated from the Śaka year 1575, the Kollam year 829, equal to 1654. The other, dated to 1845 CE, documents the repair works in the kitchen of the temple.

These inscriptions do not provide much information useful for our understanding of the evolution of the temple. No epigraphical records have been found from between the 10th and the 14th centuries. The place was called Tiruccentilūr in the 15th century, and I notice that the first line of the year 1845 inscription gives the name Centūr. The main deity remains Subrahmaṇya, called Subrahmaṇya Piḷḷaiyār or simply the young god (Iḷaiyaperumāl or Iḷaiyanāyanār).

The actual temple is the result of many changes and additions and, as is common for a majority of temples in Tamil Nadu, its original shape can no longer be distinguished (figs. 8.5–6). At this point, we shall examine the oldest part of the temple itself, most of which is regrettably hidden under new constructions. No epigraph recording the foundation of this temple has so far been discovered, and the long inscription from the time of Pāṇḍya Varaguṇa II seems to suggest that this temple was already an important centre in the second half of the 9th century. We may then surmise that the core of the temple was constituted by earlier cave temples, some of which can still be seen today.

Fig. 8.5. Subrahmaṇya temple in Tiruccentūr, seashore side
(photo by the author, 2012).

Fig. 8.6. Subrahmaṇya temple in Tiruccentūr, south entrance
(photo by the author, 2012).

The main sanctuary where Subrahmaṇya resides was, according to H.R. Pate in the *Madras District Gazetteers, Tirunelveli of 1917*, quoted by H. Sarkar (1970: 77), and later followed by D. Dayalan (forthcoming), originally rock-cut although it is not discernible anymore. Subrahmaṇya, accompanied by his two wives, bears the feature of a post 15th/16th-century sculpture. Some sculptures with similar late features (a Subrahmaṇya on his peacock fighting Cūr and a Gaṇeśa) seem to have been sculpted out of small boulders, engulfed by constructions. Slightly behind the main sanctuary, reached by a narrow corridor, is found a small size *pañcaliṅga* (not higher than 50 cm), the *liṅga*s being placed in a row. This uncommon figure in stone, to which it is absolutely impossible to assign a date, is surrounded by the natural rock. But the priests informed me that the *liṅga*s were not rock-cut. As a matter of fact, the priests assured me that, except the Viṣṇu and the Gajalakṣmī to which we shall now turn, none of the figures found in this temple were excavated out of the natural rock.

A beautiful reclining Viṣṇu and a Gajalakṣmī are carved next to each other in the rock which is still visible (similar in texture and colour to the one in which the "Vaḷḷi cave" is excavated, a little to the north, see fig. 8.7),[21] facing south-east. The niche of Viṣṇu is approximately 2.50 m wide, and 1.80 m high, while the niche of Gajalakṣmī is approximately 2.70 m wide, and 1.70 m high.[22]

Viṣṇu, head towards the west, lies on the three-fold coils of the snake whose hoods spread above his head. His open right hand is stretched out, almost coming out of the niche. His left hand holds a flower whose stem bends gracefully. A lotus springs from his navel, with Brahmā sitting on it. He is surrounded by female and male figures: three unidentified women stand on the back wall, one small goddess is seated at his feet and two men resembling sages are standing near his feet. Gajalakṣmī sits, on the west,

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[21] The cave temple locally called the Vaḷḷi cave temple is an excavation dated between the 7th and the 9th century. See H. Sarkar (1970: fig. 2) who also publishes a plan of the monument. There is no image which can be dated back to this period, and the small bas-relief of a woman, identified as Vaḷḷi, found in the little cella at the back of the cave, is not earlier than the 15th century as far as can be seen.

[22] I unfortunately cannot provide any picture of these reliefs since I was not allowed to take photos. However, a picture will be published by D. Dayalan in his forthcoming book on the cave temples of the Pāṇḍya country.

bathed by the water poured from the jars held by the elephant on either side. She holds two lotuses in her two upper hands, while her lower hands are in *abhayamudrā* on the right and *varadamudrā* on the left. Although the reliefs are covered with a thin layer of stucco, the grace of these carvings is still perceptible, and I would tentatively assign them to the 8th or 9th century, on stylistic grounds, but also on the basis of the arguments that I am going to present now.

There are no cave temples dedicated to a brahmanical deity older than the 6th century in the Tamil-speaking South. The earliest caves are mostly located in the north of this region, scooped out during the reign of the Pallava king Mahendravarman I. The ones found in what is called the Pāṇḍya country seem to be slightly later, during the late 7th or the 8th century.[23] During this period, in both Pallava and Pāṇḍya territories, we encounter a few depictions of reclining Viṣṇu. The oldest seems to be the one in the Shore temple at Mahābalipuram, a four-armed deity who was facing the sea in an open setting as was probably the Viṣṇu in Tiruccentūr. Between the 7th and the 9th century, a few other cave temples enshrine a reclining Viṣṇu: the Mahiṣāsuramardinī cave temple, almost at the top of the hill in Mahābalipuram, and the caves in Ciṅkavaram, located on the hill of Ceñci (Senji/Gingee, in the Viḷuppuram district), in Tirumeyyam (Putukkōṭṭai district) and in Malaiyaṭippaṭṭi (Maṇappārai taluk, Trichy district). We also find two representations in the Pallava structural temples of Kāñcīpuram, in the Kailāsanātha (a small panel above a niche on the northern façade of the main sanctuary) and in the Vaikuṇṭhaperumāḷ (on the southern façade of the first floor). As C. Schmid pointed out to me, the four arms of the oldest reclining Viṣṇu in the Shore temple have been characteristically reduced to two arms in the later representations.

Besides a strong stylistic resemblance between the reclining Viṣṇu of Tiruccentūr and the other representations from this area excavated during

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[23] Only a few cave temples of the Pāṇḍya country have foundation inscriptions which enable us to assign a date with certainty. The older excavated monument of this region seems to be the one in Malaiyaṭikkuṟicci (Caṅkaranayinārkōyil taluk, Tirunelvēli district), founded under a king called Māṟaṉ Cēntaṉ, who may have reigned during the 6th or the 7th century. For the foundation inscription engraved in this temple, see ARE 1959–60, No. 358, p. 24 and p. 82, and K.G. Krishnan (2002: 1).

Fig. 8.7. Vaḷḷi cave temple, north of Subrahmaṇya temple in Tiruccentūr (photo by the author, 2012).

Fig. 8.8. Reclining Viṣṇu in the Mahiṣāsuramardinī cave temple, Mahābalipuram, 8th century (photo by courtesy of EFEO, photographer G. Ravindran, 2007).

the 7th–9th centuries, we notice some similarities in the general composition of the panels: his two arms are positioned in exactly the same way as in all the other depictions, one extended above his head, the other folded, at the level of his chest; the hoods of the snake form a canopy around the head of the god, and its coils, the bed (see Mahābalipuram, fig. 8.8; Ciṅkavaram, figs. 8.9–10; Tirumeyyam, Malaiyaṭippaṭṭi); Brahmā sits on a lotus which rises from the navel of Viṣṇu (see Ciṅkavaram, Tirumeyyam, Malaiyaṭippaṭṭi); there are some male and female figures of large size surrounding the deity, as in the other depictions, but the two demons, Madhu and Kaiṭabha, usually at the feet of the god, seem to be replaced in Tiruccentūr by two sage-like males whom I was not able to identify. All these parallels appear to me as a forceful argument to place this image of a reclining Viṣṇu between the 7th and the 9th centuries.

Gajalakṣmī, sculpted next to him, bears the same stylistic features, and is therefore most probably contemporaneous. Large size representations of this Goddess associated with Viṣṇu during the same period are encountered in the Varāha and Ādivarāha cave temples in Mahābalipuram as well as in Tirupparaṅkuṉṟam.

Moreover, it is also possible to imagine the presence of other deities in this site, perhaps a *liṅga*—or a *pañcaliṅga*—, and even Subrahmaṇya, since some traces of cave temples have been noticed by H.R. Pate (see *supra* p. 311) and that the multi-deities-temple is a formula known in some of the excavated monuments of the Pallava and Pāṇḍya territories: the group of the five *ratha*s in Mahābalipuram, which contains in the same site a shrine dedicated to Śiva, one unfinished probably intended for a reclining Viṣṇu, one perhaps intended for Subrahmaṇya or for Indra, one for the Goddess, and one unidentified; the cave temple in Tirupparaṅkuṉṟam, near Madurai, where there are depictions of different forms of Śiva, different forms of Viṣṇu, Subrahmaṇya, Gaṇeśa, the Goddess on the buffalo's head, Gajalakṣmī, seven mothers, an unidentified goddess along with her retinue, Jyeṣṭhā ; the lower cave in Trichy, a little simpler, with Śiva, Viṣṇu, Gaṇeśa, Subrahmaṇya, Brahmā, Sūrya and the Goddess with devotees; the temples of Tirumeyyam and Malaiyaṭippaṭṭi which had two sanctuaries next to each other, one containing a reclining Viṣṇu, the other a *liṅga*, but which have now become the main shrines of two separate temples with separate entrances.

Fig. 8.9. Reclining Viṣṇu in the Pallava cave temple of Ciṅkavaram (Senji), upper part of the deity, 8th century (photo by courtesy of Institut français de Pondichéry/École française d'Extrême-Orient, photographer S. Natarajan, Negative No. 11516-1).

Fig. 8.10. Reclining Viṣṇu in the Pallava cave temple of Ciṅkavaram (Senji), 8th century (photo by courtesy of Institut français de Pondichéry/École française d'Extrême-Orient, photographer S. Natarajan, Negative No. 11516-9).

To sum up, the oldest elements of the temple in Tiruccentūr as it is observable today are these two niches of Viṣṇu and Gajalakṣmī which, before the many constructions which have transformed the original setting of the temple, were facing the sea. The position, as well as the dimensions of these two niches, seems to suggest that their cult was prominent, if not central.

Conclusion

If we accept that the long epigraph engraved on slabs under the reign of the Pāṇḍya king Varaguṇa II belonged to this temple, it seems that the main deity was already Subrahmaṇya in the middle of the 9th century. This fact does not necessarily imply that the temple was originally conceived as a Subrahmaṇya temple: the presence of a large size reclining Viṣṇu and Gajalakṣmī—as well as perhaps a *pañcaliṅga* and possibly others which may have disappeared under successive renovations—leads me to suspect that this temple was first dedicated either to Viṣṇu or to multiple deities, perhaps including Subrahmaṇya. The large dimensions of Viṣṇu and Gajalakṣmī as well as their position facing the sea tend to confirm this hypothesis: these images could have been the earliest main deities, excavated and still preserved as they were; other cults may have been added, in parallel or successively. As C. Schmid pointed out to me, a reclining Viṣṇu near the sea reminds us of a similar setting during Pallava times in the Mahiṣāsuramardinī and in the Shore temple at Mahābalipuram. These Pallava parallels provide grounds to argue that the Tiruccentūr temple may have been originally dedicated to Viṣṇu as the main deity.

The reason for the dominance of Subrahmaṇya over the other gods in Tiruccentūr is unknown to us. Did Varaguṇa II become a devotee of this god, as the inscription seemingly implies? Was he therefore responsible for bringing to the fore the cult of Subrahmaṇya, over the cult of the other deities present in this temple? May the growing tradition of worshipping Subrahmaṇya in the Tamil-speaking South have influenced the ascendency of this cult over the others in Tiruccentūr?[24] What we see is that

when Aruṇakirinātar composed his *Tiruppukaḻ* in the 14th-15th century, he anchored firmly the concept of the six abodes of Murukaṉ in the Tamil tradition. Moreover, he associated the Alaivāy of the *Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai* with the Tiruccentūr of his time which had been a famous centre for Subrahmaṇya, since the 9th century at least.

However, there is no archaeological or epigraphical evidence discovered so far to confirm such antiquity for the association between Alaivāy, Centil and Tiruccentūr. Alaivāy is not necessarily a specific place-name and could also designate any site located on the seashore. Its identification with Centil and Tiruccentūr is, as we have seen, attested only from the 14th or 15th century. There is no firm evidence that the nowadays famous centre of Tiruccentūr was a temple dedicated to Subrahmaṇya prior to the second half of the 9th century nor that it corresponds to the *alaivāy* mentioned in the *Akanāṉūru* and the *Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai*. In fact, archaeological evidence suggests that it may not have been originally dedicated to Subrahmaṇya alone but to other deities too.

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[24] The number of temples dedicated to Subrahmaṇya in the 9th century seems to grow, and we know, belonging approximately to this period or even before, the following temples: the structural temples in Mallam, Andhra Pradesh (T.V. Mahalingam 1960); Cāḻuvaṉ Kuppam, near Mahābalipuram (S. Rajavelu 2008); Kaṇṇaṉūr, near Putukkōṭṭai (S.R. Balasubrahmanyam 1966: 86–89); Tiruttaṇi, in the Tiruvaḷḷūr district (Vēḷañcēri copper plates, see R. Nagaswamy 1979); the cave temples in Tirumalai, Civakaṅka taluk and district (P.Z. Pattabiramin 1975: 43); probably Piraṉmalai, Tiruppattūr taluk and Putukkōṭṭai district (R.K.K Rajarajan 1992); Āṉaimalai, near Madurai (P.Z. Pattabiramin 1975: 51); the lower cave at Kaḻukumalai, Kōvilpaṭṭi taluk, Tirunelvēli district (P.Z. Pattabiramin 1975: 59).

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Abbreviations

ARE   *Annual Report on Epigraphy.*
EI   *Epigraphia Indica.*
SII   *South Indian Inscriptions.*

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