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Sacred Itineraries and 'Intersacrality' in Premodern *Sthalapurāṇas*

A common narrative trope found in many premodern texts belonging to the genre of *sthalapurāṇa* (lit. "ancient myths of a place") or *māhātmya* (since they usually profess the "greatness" of a place)[1] is that of a mythical devotee travelling through multiple sacred sites before reaching the sacred place extolled by the text in question, where the journey often, but not always, ends. For instance, in the early modern vernacular *sthalapurāṇa*s of Srikalahasti,[2] such as the sixteenth-century Telugu *Śrīkāḷahastimāhātmyamu* by Dhūrjaṭi and the seventeenth-century Tamil *Cīkāḷattippurāṇam* by Civappirakāca Cuvāmikaḷ and his brothers, the Tamil poet Natkīra (Telugu) or Nakkīraṉār (Tamil) travels from Madurai to ultimately reach Srikalahasti where the curse placed on him by the god Śiva is nullified and where he is liberated by Śiva's grace (*Śrīkāḷahastimāhātmyamu* 3.178–222; *Cīkāḷattippurāṇam, nakkīrac-carukkam*, 78–135).[3] Similarly, two *veśya* (courtesan) girls who

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1 While the Sanskrit terms *sthalapurāṇa* and *māhātmya* refer to Sanskrit texts, in this essay they will also point to the corresponding genre in the vernaculars, such as the *sthalapurāṇamu* or *māhātmyamu* in Telugu and *talapurāṇam* or *māṇmiyam* in Tamil. For various scholarly perspectives on the differences in *sthalapurāṇa/māhātmya* texts composed in the Sanskrit and vernacular traditions, see Lanaghan 2006 30 ff. and Buchholz 2022: 26, who note that aesthetics, *rasa* theory, and poetic flourish are typically not emphasized in Sanskrit texts; as well as Ramesh 2020, for more thoroughgoing observations on how Sanskrit and Tamil texts usually engage in prescriptive/didactic and emotional aspects respectively. At the same time, Sanskrit *māhātmya*s across time periods should not be thought of as following some standard template. The above scholars are careful to point out exceptions to the general patterns they highlight, but more importantly, we should also acknowledge striking differences in premodern and contemporary *māhātmya* writing in the Sanskrit sphere itself, as Andrea Pinkney suggests in her study of modern Uttarakhand *māhātmya*s (Pinkney 2013).

2 An important Śaiva temple site in the Telugu–Tamil borderlands of south India, specifically in the modern state of Andhra Pradesh. It is especially important in the Śaiva religious landscape as it hosts the *vāyuliṅga* (*liṅga* of air), one of the *pañcabhūtaliṅga*s (*liṅga*s of the five elements).

3 For an accessible, though abridged, translation of Natkīra's story in the *Śrīkāḷahastimāhāt-myamu*, see Narayana Rao and Shulman 2002, chap. 14.

are ardent devotees of Śiva, specifically of Śrīkāḷahastīśvara (name of the local form of Śiva at Srikalahasti), leave their home in Madurai to reach Srikalahasti where, by Śiva's grace, they attain liberation (*Śrīkāḷahastimāhātmyamu* 4.56–128; *Cīkāḷattippurāṇam*, *kaṉṉiyarc-carukkam*, 83–147). During their peregrinations, these characters pass through various sacred sites where they worship and perform appropriate rituals to the local resident deities.

While these examples refer to different devotees undertaking sacred journeys in the Srikalahasti corpus, the case of the mythical sage Agastya is interesting since we find the grand narrative of his (and his wife Lopāmudrā's) journey from the north to the south of the subcontinent captured and variously narrated in different *sthalapurāṇa*s.[4] This grand narrative is based on one famous story connected with Śiva and Pārvatī's wedding: when all the gods and other celestial beings gather in the Himalayan abode of Śiva and Pārvatī to participate in their wedding festivities, the earth dangerously tilts to the north. Śiva tells Agastya that since only they both are capable of redressing the situation, Agastya should proceed to the south and balance the earth. Agastya, though distraught about missing the divine wedding, obliges, and, accompanied by Lopāmudrā, he proceeds to the south, while also subduing on his way the arrogant Vindhya mountains, which had risen so high into the sky that the movement of the stars became difficult. In some versions of the story, Agastya's journey down south is impelled by Brahmā and other celestial gods, who task the sage with just subduing the Vindhya.

As mentioned, this central narrative appears in different versions across different texts. According to one vernacular Srikalahasti text, Agastya and Lopāmudrā depart Śiva's Himalayan abode and traverse the sacred rivers of Gautami and Krishnaveni, as well as the sacred sites of Srisailam and Siddhavata (both in modern Andhra Pradesh),[5] before reaching (and later departing) Srikalahasti (*Śrīkāḷahastimāhātmyamu* 1.108–10).[6] In the vernacular texts associated with other sacred

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4   For some observations about Agastya's "journey narratives" (to use the author's phrase) found specifically in Tamil *talapurāṇam*s, such as the *Tirukkuṟṟālappurāṇam* (eighteenth-century composition on Courtallam by Tirikūṭarācappak Kavirāyar) and the *Tirunĕlvelippurāṇam* (nineteenth century, about Tirunelveli, by Nĕllaiyappa Kavirāyar), as well as in the *Kantapurāṇam* (fifteenth century, by Kacciyappa Civācāriyar), see Davis 2000: 109 ff.

5   While Sidddhavata just holds regional (not transregional) importance, it is quite significant in the landscape of Srisailam for being the southern "gateway" of Srisailam. As Prabhavati Reddy points out, "after fulfilling ritual obligations at [Srisailam, pilgrims] would continue the journey to the southern gateway Siddhavaṭa" (Reddy 2014: 67). At this point then, the Srikalahasti texts invoke an established pilgrimage route surrounding Srisailam.

6   Agastya's itinerary varies even within the Srikalahasti corpus. For further details, see Kanamarlapudi forthcoming, chap. 4.

sites, too, we find, for instance, Agastya going from Kashi to Kanchipuram in the *Kāñcippurāṇam* (an eighteenth-century Tamil *talapurāṇam* of Kanchi composed by Civañāṉa Muṉivar); and in the fourteenth-century Telugu *Bhīmakhaṇḍamu* or *Bhīmeśvarapurāṇamu* (a text by Śrīnātha that glorifies Draksharama), we see the sage expressing his nostalgia for Kashi in poignant poetry even while exuberantly praising Draksharama.[7] Within Sanskrit narrative traditions, as well, in the famous medieval *māhātmya* on Kashi, the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa*, Agastya's journey—here deployed as a frame story within which the bulk of the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* text is nestled and through which Kashi is established as center of the cosmic universe[8]—is framed between his (former) residence in Kashi and his final arrival at Srisailam where the god Skanda relates to Agastya the glories of Kashi and thereby assuages the sage's grief at leaving Kashi.[9] A modified version of this story is also narrated in the medieval Sanskrit *Karavīramāhātmya* (a text glorifying Kolhapur and its resident goddess Mahālakṣmī in present-day Maharashtra), where Agastya and Lopāmudrā's journey is again leveraged as a frame story to recount the greatness of Kolhapur and other sacred sites.[10]

All these journey narratives from the Srikalahasti corpus (of various itinerant devotees) and from the different *sthalapurāṇa* traditions (of a single sage's peregrinations) could certainly leave a dizzying effect on the reader. This, however, is not the intended purpose of lining up these examples. Rather, I wish to underscore the ubiquity of the narrative trope that lies at the heart of this essay: namely, devotees in the *sthalapurāṇa*s traversing multiple sacred sites and thereby giving

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As per the *Cīkāḷattippurāṇam*, the pious couple travel via places including Kedarnath and Kashi in the north, and Draksharama in the Telugu south before arriving at Srikalahasti (*Cīkāḷattippurāṇam*, *pŏṉmukaric-carukkam*, 7–10).

7   In this Telugu text, Agastya expresses his nostalgia for Kashi and praise for Draksharama to the great sage Vyāsa, who is himself banished from Kashi by Śiva and is therefore travelling—while stopping at various sacred spots on the way (Kuntimadhava, Puri, Srikurmam, and Simhachalam, etc.)—to Draksharama, which, the text claims, is "southern Kashi." For an insightful discussion of this story and the source text, see Shulman 1998.

8   For a discussion of this frame story and for the dating of this voluminous *māhātmya* to the late eleventh century, see Smith 2007.

9   For an extension of this story, see the sixteenth-century Telugu *Pāṇḍuraṅgamāhāt-myamu* by Tĕnāli Rāmakṛṣṇa. Here, after their conversation about the greatness of Kashi, Agastya and Skanda go from Srisailam to the Mount Kailash, where they, along with Pārvatī and other sages, hear from Śiva the greatness of the Vaiṣṇava site Pandharpur (in modern Maharashtra). Agastya and Skanda's journey to Śiva's abode is instigated by the sage's curiosity to know if there was any place that hosted the best of gods, the best of sacred lands, and the best of rivers (*velupu*, *kṣetramu*, and *tīrthamu*) all at the same spot (1.152).

10   For a detailed discussion of this frame story, see Lanaghan 2006, chap. 3.

the texts an opportunity to discuss the (relative) greatness—or specifically the sacrality—of the different sites that are included in the devotee's journey.

The pervasiveness of this sthalapurāṇic narrative trope, then, serves as a reason enough to elicit scholarly gaze; and to this end, my essay attempts to analyze the logics of this trope. More specifically, the main thrust of this essay is to understand what precisely the sthalapurāṇic journeys accomplish for the *sthala*s that are the subject of *sthalapurāṇa*s, for their mythical travelers, for their source texts, for their composers, and/or for their audience. After some important theoretical reflections on interpreting these journeys as 'sacred itineraries' and contrasting them with the analytical category of 'pilgrimage,' this chapter will consider the following questions: Why the fascination with the trope of sacred itineraries? What is achieved in variously inflecting this trope across different *sthalapurāṇa* texts? What sites are included in and excluded from the sacred itinerary, and why? And most importantly, how does this trope serve (or reveal) the intended ideological agenda of the *sthalapurāṇa* compositions—that is, how does it aid in glorifying the *sthala* connected with the *sthalapurāṇa* in question?

In attempting to answer these queries, much of my data will come from two early modern vernacular *sthalapurāṇa*s of Srikalahasti that I have already alluded to:[11] the Telugu *Śrīkāḷahastimāhātmyamu* by Dhūrjaṭi, and the Tamil *Cīkāḷattippurāṇam* by the three brothers Civappirakāca Cuvāmikaḷ, Karuṇaippirakāca Cuvāmikaḷ, and Velaiya Cuvāmikaḷ.[12] By analyzing the journey narratives primarily drawn from these texts, this essay will suggest that the trope of sacred itineraries throws important light on the theology of place embedded in *sthalapurāṇa* narratives. More specifically, I argue that the *sthalapurāṇa* materials envision and articulate the sacrality of the *sthala* in question predominantly in relation to the sacrality of other sacred sites—that is, in relational terms rather than in absolute, non-referential terms. As we will see, while *sthalapurāṇa*s do claim, without reference to other sacred sites, that the particular *sthala* grants liberation, they express the sacredness of the site more forcefully in relative terms—thereby elevating the sacredness of the concerned site over that of the others. The *sthala*, then, is rendered and claimed as not simply *a* means of liberation but *the most* expedient means of liberation. The *sthalapurāṇa*s, in other words, understand

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11   The Srikalahasti *sthalapurāṇa*s are the focus of my currently ongoing dissertation project on the Srikalahasti temple site and its narrative traditions—hence the priority for the Srikalahasti materials in this essay. It is the many itinerant characters in the Srikalahasti narratives that first sparked my curiosity about sacred itineraries in the larger genre of the *sthalapurāṇa*s. However, I also invoke the journey narratives from other, non-Srikalahasti texts.

12   The composition of this Tamil *sthalapurāṇa* was based on the Telugu text, yet there are noteworthy variations in both these narrative works. For further details, see Kanamarlapudi forthcoming, chap. 1.

the sacrality of a *sthala* in relation to other sites, revealing what I refer to as the sthalapurāṇic conception of "intersacrality." Defining intersacrality as the conceptualization of the sacrality of one site in relation to that of other sites, I posit that the trope of sacred itineraries is an important narrative strategy that exemplifies the sthalapurāṇic phenomenon of intersacrality.

Sacred itinerary vis-à-vis pilgrimage

Considering the nature of the journeys in the *sthalapurāṇa*s would be a fitting starting point in our analysis since this enterprise would allow us to conceptualize these journeys in relation to already familiar analytical categories of human mobility. Indeed, the most relevant form of mobility that comes to mind in the context of the sthalapurāṇic journeys, given their focus on visiting sacred places, is the category of pilgrimage. Derived from the Latin word *peregrinus*, which semantically ranges from a foreigner to someone on a journey, pilgrimage usually connotes religious journey or the journey of a pilgrim, especially to a place considered sacred. As the medieval historian Richard Barber defines it, pilgrimage is "a journey resulting from religious causes, externally to a holy site, and internally for spiritual purposes and internal understanding" (Barber 1993: 1).

But pilgrimage need not, of course, entail or restrict itself to just one sacred spot and/or a solo traveler. As Indira Peterson points out, pilgrimage can instead be understood as the "journey undertaken by a devotee or group of devotees to one or more shrines/sacred places which they have a desire or obligation to visit" (Peterson 1982: 71). In her study of the *Tevāram* corpus[13] of the three principal Tamil Śaiva saint-poets (Campantar, Appar, and Cuntarar; sixth to eighth century C.E.), Peterson accordingly understands the journeys of the three saints recorded in the *Tevāram* songs as pilgrimages, for these songs were composed/sung by the saints as they journeyed through various Śaiva sacred sites in the Tamil country.[14] The *Tevāram* songs therefore are, in Peterson's reading, "literature of pilgrimage par excellence" (p. 69).

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13   The *Tevāram* compendium of about eight hundred songs comprises the first seven volumes of the twelve-volume Tamil Śaiva canon called *Tirumuṟai*.

14   According to Peterson, "there is no reason to doubt that the songs record actual pilgrimages made by Appar, Campantar and Cuntarar; the topographical accuracy of description in the Tevāram is, in itself, enough to convince us of the concrete reality of the places described" (Peterson 1982: 71). On the other hand, in her study of the medieval Tamil Śrīvaiṣṇava Āḻvār and their *bhakti* poems, Katherine Young suggests that this may not necessarily be the case. Observing that the Āḻvār "refer to movement only in very general or mental terms" and that the "descriptions of the sacred places

With *sthalapurāṇa* texts narrating the sacred journeys of numerous reverent devotees, it is tempting to also interpret the sthalapurāṇic journeys as pilgrimages and the *sthalapurāṇa*s as containers of (mythical) pilgrimage narratives. There are, however, often important differences in the journeys of the Tamil saints versus that of the sthalapurāṇic devotees—such as desire or intentionality on the part of the traveler to undertake the journey and the traveler's conviction about the destination's uniqueness or sacrality. In the case of the *Tevāram*, Peterson comments on the motivation behind the saints' journeys as follows: "Love of Śiva was the sole criterion for pilgrimage. The motivation of the saint's journeys is best described as their intense desire to experience Śiva in all his variety, inasmuch as he manifests it in specific places and forms" (Peterson 1982: 73). As can be inferred from their emotionally charged songs, then, the Tamil Śaiva saints were not only very deeply invested in their pilgrimage but were also convinced about the sacrality of the approximately 260 places they sang about.[15] More generally, pilgrimage studies scholars have often underscored, among others, these "essential elements of pilgrimage": (1) "The experience of pilgrimage is seen in advance as capable of creating an enduring memory one returns to in later life"—an aspect that engenders the desire for a pilgrimage—and (2) "Celebrating a physical location as a site of symbolic or real access to powers beyond the human realm"—an aspect that emphasizes the significance of the destination (Greenia 2018: 10).

In light of such conceptualization of the category of pilgrimage, it is interesting to consider the sthalapurāṇic journeys. Some of the sthalapurāṇic travelers do set out on their journey fervently, a motivation born of their intense desire to visit a certain holy place. The journey from Madurai to Srikalahasti by the two *veśya* girls I alluded to in the introduction, for instance, was instigated by the girls' intense love for the Śrīkāḷahastīśvara form of Śiva. Yet, such a motivation is more often *not* the norm. To illustrate, consider the following (abridged) story of the poet Natkīra.[16] When the Tamil poet arrogantly faults Śiva's poem, the god curses him with leprosy. Natkīra immediately repents for his sin to Śiva and the latter, pacified, suggests Natkīra that the curse will be lifted when he sees Mount Kailash.

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themselves are very formulaic," she remarks that the journeys in the Āḻvār poetry could be partly true (in case of the local temples) and partly imagined (in case of temples in northern India); see Young 2014: 345 ff.

15 Indeed, the fact that these places elicited the saints' poetical outpourings is already indicative of the perceived sacrality of the sites. Significantly, the songs, in turn, consolidate the sites' holiness: as Peterson observes (1982: 71), "the visit of the saint has a positive and lasting effect on the *talam* (the pilgrimage site), for after such a visit it is known as a "*pāṭal peṟṟa stalam*," "a sacred spot sung (by the nāyaṉmār [i.e., the Tamil Śaiva saints])" and is specially loved by Tamil Śaivites."

16 For a more detailed version of the story, see Narayana Rao and Shulman 2002, chap. 14.

Natkīra at once sets out north from Madurai, visiting holy sites and rivers along the way, including Tiruvanaikaval, the Kaveri, Tiruvannamalai, Kanchipuram, Nellore, Simhachalam, Srikurmam, Puri, Gaya, and Kashi (*Śrīkāḷahastimāhāt-myamu* 3.180–92). When proceeding further north while already increasingly suffering from leprosy, the poet is caught by a demon, and he thereby prays to the god Subrahmaṇya (Śiva's son) for rescue. Subrahmaṇya manifests himself and rescues the poet, and when the latter informs the god of the purpose of his journey, the god suggests that the poet can simply be cured at Southern Kailash (i.e., Srikalahasti, as the Srikalahasti *sthalapurāṇa*s like to proclaim):

> The secret god (Guha, i.e., Subrahmaṇya) replied: "Śiva may have said Kailāsa,
> but he didn't specify the Kailāsa of the North.
> The Southern Kailāsa will do just as well.
> That will heal you." And, after pondering the best way
> to bring Natkīra there,
> he hid his own power within the lake and addressed
> the prince of poets: "Bathe in this lake, and Kailāsa will come
> searching for you, as the proverb says."
> It was music to Natkīra's ears. With full awareness, he bathed
> in the pond. By the time he lifted his head out of the water,
> that mountain of Śiva from the south came walking toward him,
> along with its river, the Song of Gold (i.e., the Svarnamukhi river in
> Srikalahasti).[17]

As the god Subrahmaṇya rightly suggested, the poet is finally cured by the mere glimpse of Srikalahasti. But it is important to note that the poet himself does not halt at Srikalahasti during his travel north from Madurai although Srikalahasti conveniently lies between Kanchipuram and Nellore which the poet visits. Natkīra, then, seems to be initially unaware of the greatness (or even the existence?) of Srikalahasti; or perhaps the narrative avoids including this temple town in the journey early on to finally make the grand revelation of its extraordinariness at the very end. Furthermore, we must note an additional aspect regarding the poet's travel: while the journey from the poet's base in Madurai to the north is punctu-ated by visits to sacred sites and rivers, thereby resembling the pilgrimages of the *Tevāram* saints, the journey is hardly underpinned by a desire to visit the various sacred spots; rather, it is to nullify the unfortunate curse of leprosy that the poet painstakingly embarks on the journey. Natkīra, then, is neither enthusiastic for the journey nor is aware of the significance of Srikalahasti. Many sthalapurāṇic

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17 *Śrīkāḷahastimāhātmyamu* 3.213–15. Translation by Narayana Rao and Shulman (2002: 199–200).

travelers likewise undertake their journeys without a desire for the journey and without a prior conviction about the destination's significance. As I further discuss below, Agastya's journey down south, which is narrated differently in various *sthalapurāṇa*s, and Vyāsa's journey from Kashi to Draksharama in the *Bhīmeśvarapurāṇamu* are just a handful of examples that additionally illustrate this phenomenon.

To be sure, the sacrality of the different sites visited prior to the destination is acknowledged and sometimes even underscored by the Srikalahasti *sthalapurāṇa*s,[18] and such recognition of the uniqueness of the pilgrimage sites is, as pilgrimage studies scholars point out, often observed in the pilgrims' earnest for their journeys. Yet, as I discuss later, discourses about different sites' sacrality are ultimate leveraged to elevate and proclaim the even greater sacrality of the *sthala* extolled by the *sthalapurāṇa* in question, and not to demonstrate the eagerness of the sthalapurāṇic traveler to embark on his/her journey. In Natkīra's story, too, what we constantly find is not an enthusiasm for the journey, but practical anxieties about the feasibility of the journey given the poet's physical disabilities on account of his worsening leprosy. Natkīra therefore panics:

> How many rivers, forests, mountains,
> wild villages will I have to pass,
> how many animals will I have to face,
> how many lonely paths will I have to walk
> before I can see Śiva's mountain?
> No one has seen it, no one knows
> where it is.
> There are lions, tigers, wild elephants,
> rhinoceroses, and all those fabled beasts,
> to say nothing of the demons,
> on those routes; snowstorms, too,
> and cutting rocks. Can anyone travel
> that way? Śiva, flowing with mercy,
> what shall I do?
> Soon my body will lose sensation.
> Then black spots will appear all over.
> The skin will thicken, and blisters will break out.

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18 To illustrate, in the case of Natkīra's story, see *Śrīkāḷahastimāhātmyamu* 3.182, 3.184–85, and 3.189, where the Kaveri, Tiruvannamalai, and the Ganges are admired with descriptions about their virtues and about the blessings they confer on their worshippers.

I will feel weakened, and turn ugly.
Flies will hover around my oozing pus and blood.
People will turn away in disgust when I beg for food.
So let me go now, while I can still walk,
to look for Kailāsa. There is no escaping
God's words.[19]

To reiterate then, Natkīra's journey is instigated *not* by a desire for the journey and *not* by a recognition of the pious nature of the sites included in the journey—all these aspects undermining the interpretation of his journey as a pilgrimage.

In a similar light, consider also Agastya's peregrinations, narratives about which permeate the *sthalapurāṇa* corpus in Sanskrit as well as in vernacular traditions.[20] As William Davis notes, and as may be gleaned from the examples provided in the introduction, most *sthalapurāṇa*s use the famous myths associated with Agastya including the humbling of the Vindhya mountains and/or the balancing of the earth as framework for presenting their version of Agastya's travel adventures (Davis 2000: 109 ff.). That is, when Agastya is urged by Śiva or Brahmā to head south from Mount Kailash (the seer's starting point according to the earth-balancing myth) or Kashi (often noted as Agastya's starting point in the Vindhya-humbling myth), the sage is distraught about missing the divine wedding of Śiva and Pārvatī or about leaving the holy, liberation-granting Kashi. Agastya is however convinced by Śiva or Brahmā who explain to him that he would witness a repeat performance of Śiva and Pārvatī's wedding at the destination and/or that the destination is as excellent a place as Kashi.[21] Significantly, in this conversation, Agastya too, like Natkīra in the Srikalahasti myths, originally seems to be ignorant of the site's excellence, or its very existence in the south (Davis 2000: 212). The seer is however made to oblige the command, even as he still laments his exile from the north.[22] The journey is then often explained as a process whereby the distraught sage gradually overcomes his grief by halting at various sacred sites

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19 *Śrīkāḷahastimāhātmyamu* 3.175–77. Translation by Narayana Rao and Shulman (2002: 196–97).

20 As Davis points out (2000: 109 ff.), the "southern sage" Agastya's journey myths are especially aplenty in Tamil *talapurāṇam*s, possibly since the sage's legends are often connected with the beginnings of Tamil grammar and culture (Shulman 1980: 6 ff.).

21 In the *Kāñcippurāṇam*, for instance, Brahmā and the other gods hail Kanchipuram as the southern equivalent of Kashi. See *Kāñcippurāṇam* 63.185–249 translated in Davis 2000: 117.

22 To illustrate, see *Bhīmeśvarapurāṇamu* 2.91 translated in Shulman 1998. Here, even as Agastya is at Draksharama, he "indulges his nostalgia for Kāśī in several emotional verses" (Shulman 1998: 199).

and rivers to worship the lord before ultimately reaching the site connected with the *sthalapurāṇa* in question.[23]

As David Shulman notes in the case of the *Bhīmeśvarapurāṇamu*, the sage Vyāsa's journey from Kashi to Draksharama[24] is also similarly purposed: Vyāsa "heads south toward Dakṣārama (i.e., Draksharama), stopping at various shrines on the way—Kuntīmādhava, Puri, Śrīkūrmam, Siṃhācalam—all described, rather poignantly, as providing partial forms of much-needed "cooling" for the fiery suffering of separation from Kāśī, as a loving wife would fan her over-heated husband" (Shulman 1998: 198). Again considering the fact that the journeys—or rather the exiles from the holy Kashi—were not desired by the two travelling sages and that the destinations were not intended by them in advance, it is hard to categorize wholesale the sthalapurāṇic journeys as pilgrimages,[25] as has been done in earlier scholarship (for instance, Shulman 1998). Rather, as Davis's nu-anced study of Agastya's journeys southward also suggests, despite tempting resonances between Agastya's travels and the pilgrimages of the *Tevāram* saints which Peterson discussed, we find fundamental differences in the sthalapurāṇic journeys and the Tamil Śaiva pilgrimages (Davis 2000: 197 ff.). These differences include the aspects I have already discussed (lack of desire for embarking on the sthalapurāṇic journeys, lack of a prior recognition of the *sthala*'s sacrality, etc.), as well as Davis's additional important observation in light of an integral part of the typical Indian pilgrimage experience, namely the pilgrim's return trip,[26] which is a component that is usually not found in Agastya's sthalapurāṇic journeys.[27]

It should also be noted, considering modern definitions of pilgrimage, that this concept usually also emphasizes the *journey* of a devotee to a sacred religious site. That is, the idea of pilgrimage usually indicates two kinds of experience: "that of the journey, and that of being at the destination, the desired place" (Peterson

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23 At this point, the *sthalapurāṇa* often narrates how Agastya is not only finally pleased with the destination but is also so moved by the sight of the place that he utters an extended praise of the beauty and the merits of the *sthala*. For instance, Davis notes in the case of the *Tirukkuṟṟālappurāṇam* (a *sthalapurāṇa* of Courtallam) that "Agastya's approach to Courtallam occupies over forty verses of poetry that describe the beauty of the town and the surrounding area" (Davis 2000: 111). We will return to this point later in the essay.

24 See fn.7 for the context of Vyāsa's journey.

25 That is, if we understand the idea of pilgrimage in way modern pilgrimage scholars have theorized it.

26 Here, Davis draws upon Ann Grodzins Gold's work on Rajasthani pilgrims; see Gold 1988.

27 Once he reaches the south, the seer never returns to the north. He must remain so ac-cording to the Vindhya mountains myth, for if the sage returns and crosses northward, the mountain range would again rise high into the sky and thereby disturb various cosmic phenomena.

1982: 71).[28] While the *sthalapurāṇa* narratives do contain extended descriptions of both these aspects, it seems to me that the journeys are detailed not to mark the events as instances of pilgrimage but since a journey is inevitable to transpose a character to the *sthala* being glorified.[29] As noticed in Natkīra's story wherein the poet is magically transported from Kashi to Srikalahasti by Subrahmaṇya's grace, or rather Srikalahasti itself manifests in front of Natkīra, it appears that other sthalapurāṇic characters too would happily forego the travails of journeying if the narrative allowed them to do so. But as I discuss in the next section, giving this leeway and removing the journey narrative would deplete the *sthalapurāṇa*s of an excellent opportunity to proclaim the extraordinary sacrality of the *sthala* being celebrated. In what I argue as an ingenious narrative strategy, the *sthalapurāṇa*s carefully craft the journey to a particular *sthala* via stops at several significant holy sites so as to invoke the sacrality of the intermittent sites in service of elevating the sacrality of the concerned *sthala*. The *sthalapurāṇa*s, in other words, craft careful itineraries—by a strategic inclusion of significant sites—as part of their journey narratives, and the included sites are significant in the sense that they are locally or transregionally venerated sacred sites and rivers. I therefore read the carefully programmed sthalapurāṇic journeys not as pilgrimages but as "sacred itineraries"—the word "sacred" to capture the fact that the included intermittent spots are primarily chosen for their sacrality,[30] and the word "itineraries" to capture the idea that rather than being haphazard or arbitrary, the sthalapurāṇic journey routes incorporate a carefully curated line up of sacred sites and rivers before leading the itinerant to the *sthala* that is the subject of the *sthalapurāṇa*.

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28 However, many contemporary studies of pilgrimage continue to debate whether the journey or the destination is emphasized in different instances of historical and contemporary pilgrimage traditions. See, for instance, Bailey 2023.

29 At least in the case of the South Indian *sthalapurāṇa*s, which are usually more poetic than the typically descriptive Sanskrit *sthalapurāṇa*s, these journeys also provide a wonderful opportunity for the composer(s) of the *sthalapurāṇa* texts to display their poetic finesse in describing different landscapes and other topographical features.

30 Sometimes, regional, economic, and/or political motivations are additional factors to consider when analyzing the logic behind the inclusion—or exclusion—of different intermediate sacred sites. In the case of the Tamil *talapurāṇam* journeys, for instance, places of politico-economic significance such as from the Kaveri delta region frequently feature in the journeys since this region was the heartland of the Chola empire when the so-called temple Hinduism flourished in southern India. See also Smith's study of the *sthalapurāṇa*s of Kashi, where he identifies the political and ideological valences embedded in the inclusion of Kolhapur and Srisailam in Agastya's journey down south. Smith hence points out that the itineraries typically trace "paths of Śaiva patronage and pilgrimage. The framework thus delineated is at once geographical and ideological" (Smith 2007: 174).

Intersacrality in the sacred itineraries of premodern *sthalapurāṇa*s

Why exactly do *sthalapurāṇa*s task their characters with embarking on their sacred itineraries? We have already noted Peterson's observation about the *Tevāram* pilgrimages that the impetus for those journeys is an "intense desire [on part of the Tamil Śaiva saints] to experience Śiva in all his variety" (Peterson 1982: 73)—an observation convincing in the case of the *Tevāram* since in these poems "Śiva *is* the place, and, therefore, to sing of the place is to sing of Śiva" (p. 81).[31] That is, with the *Tevāram* corpus homologizing a sacred place and its resident deity, pilgrimages to different places allows Tamil Śaivites to experience the various local Śivas, whom the *Tevāram* rhetoric envisions as unique deities with distinct local mythologies even though ultimately rendering them as identical with "Śiva Mahādeva of Great Traditional Hinduism" (p. 79). However, rather than equating place and god, *sthalapurāṇa*s, as the name suggests, typically prioritize the *sthala* over the resident god[32]—that is, it is the sacred place that the text is primarily concerned with, and the local deity is made significant because he resides at the place.[33] This idea has already been advanced in scholarly works on different holy places of the subcontinent, such as when Diana Eck states that "Kashi is not such a great *tīrtha* [i.e., pilgrimage place] because all the gods are there; all the gods are there because it is such a great *tīrtha*" (Eck 1982: 157), and when Tamara Lanaghan notes in the context of the Sanskrit *Karavīramāhātmya* an "ingathering [of] all

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31 Peterson demonstrates this equivalence with several cogent examples based on which she remarks: "there are numerous songs where there is a set of phrases describing Śiva and ending with the name of the place, couched in an ambiguous Tamil construction or grammatical ending which leaves it unclear as to whether it is the Deity or the place which the devotee must see, remember, praise, love, sing" (Peterson 1982: 81).

32 By prioritizing the *sthala*, *sthalapurāṇa* texts primarily emphasize the extraordinary sacrality of the site. At the same time, and possibly owing to this priority for the site, these texts—particularly the vernacular ones—frequently also provide extensive, exquisite descriptions of the natural features of the site. Tamil *talapurāṇam*s, for instance, typically have dedicated customary chapters called *tirunāṭṭuppaṭalam* (description of the holy country) and *tirunakarappaṭalam* (description of the holy city) immediately following a prefatory section called *pāyiram*. For an interesting study of these chapters in the *Kāñcippurāṇam*, see Buchholz 2023.

33 Indeed, even if we consider the case of the twelve famous *jyotirliṅga*s (*liṅga*s of light) of Śiva, the earliest extant lists and stories of them are actually about the corresponding sites, with many of the stories not mentioning the *jyotirliṅga*s at all; see Fleming 2009: 53 ff. Consider as well medieval inscriptions of the Tamil region and their "strong sense of the divine power of place": the inscriptions "often refer to a deity as the "Lord of such-and-such a place" rather than indicate whether it is Śiva or Viṣṇu" (Branfoot 2022: 269). These cases too illustrate how in many cases the sacred place has primacy over the residing deity.

things sacred, holy or laudatory in order to intensify Kolhapur's *own* sacredness" (Lanaghan 2006: 104, emphasis added). The same conception can also be observed in vernacular *sthalapurāṇa*s such as in the Srikalahasti materials which narrate about the influx of Śiva, Pārvatī, the gods, the *gaṇa*s, the mountains Kailash and Meru, and other celestial beings at the already holy land of Srikalahasti, thereby making it further holier as "southern Kailash" (called *dakṣiṇakailāsamu* in Telugu or *teṉkayilāyam* in Tamil; *Śrīkāḷahastimāhātmyamu* 1.90–97; *Cīkāḷattippurāṇam*, *teṉkailāyac-carukkam*, 57–68).[34]

With this premise that a *sthalapurāṇa* is predominantly concerned with a *sthala*, and with the fundamental understanding that the major aspect of a *sthalapurāṇa*'s agenda is to assert the exceptionality of the concerned *sthala* and thereby its resident deity, I posit that unlike the *Tevāram* pilgrimages, the sthalapurāṇic sacred itineraries are *not* motivated by a desire to experience Śiva in his manifold local forms, for this would run counter to the *sthalapurāṇa*'s contention about the consummate nature of both the concerned *sthala* and its god (that is, if the *sthalapurāṇa*'s *sthala* and its deity can grant everything that a devotee desires, then why visit other places or pray to other divine forms?).

If this hypothesis is granted, we are back to our unresolved question about the impetus for the *sthalapurāṇas*' preoccupation with sacred itineraries. Why then does the *sthalapurāṇa* genre insist on narrating various sacred itineraries? Some of the purposes the itineraries serve are clear: first, the itineraries sketch out journeys that audience or devoted pilgrims could potentially follow with the assurance that they are tracing mythically or historically attested routes.[35] As well, the process of reactivating a mythic knowledge of sacred journeys helps keep the *sthalapurāṇa* relevant for changing times.[36] Furthermore, mapping itineraries to a *sthala* and thereby gesturing at journeys directed to that place aids in further consolidating the sanctity of the sacred site. That is, visits to a site—and

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34 In this context, I should also point out the imprecision in referring to the *Śrīkāḷa-hastimāhātmyamu* as (*Śrī)kāḷahastīśvaramāhātmyamu* (i.e., a *māhātmya* of the lord of Srikalahasti), as several scholars have erroneously done (Narayana Rao 2003: 426, Sanderson 2012: 84, and others)—imprecise for the latter title elides the fundamental fact that the text is a *sthalapurāṇa* (i.e., a glorification of the *sthala* and not that of the *sthala*'s deity).

35 This point mainly holds when the journeys are not simply literarily crafted, geographically illogical itineraries (quite often the case), but are pilgrimage routes that are practical and/or historically attested (see, for example, fn.5). Here again, the distinction I try to make between practical pilgrimage routes and literarily curated sacred itineraries comes to the fore.

36 I draw upon my ethnographic fieldwork at Srikalahasti here. Alluding to the Srikala-hasti *sthalapurāṇa*s, the temple priests and local signboards remind devotees that the sacred site was visited by Agastya and several other characters significant in Hindu traditions.

performance of rituals there (which, as we will see, sacred itineraries also suggest)—can help reinforce the site's holiness.[37]

A basic need for sacred itineraries in *sthalapurāṇa*s is also worth noting: given that *sthalapurāṇa*s primarily deal with places, and that too in a relational manner as I will further demonstrate, the journey narratives help the corpus juxtapose different places in a way that other narrative themes or strategies may not support. At the basic level, what sacred itineraries do is connect one holy site with other religiously marked spaces, thereby presenting the site as part of a larger religious landscape (Peterson 1982: 77). But significantly, such connections do not mean that the concerned site and the other various places with which it is connected are conceptualized equally, for this would undermine the *sthalapurāṇa*'s unabashed proclamation about the exceptionality of its *sthala*. In fact, I argue that rather than placing the different sites on a level playing field, a *sthalapurāṇa*'s sacred itineraries hierarchize the sites—not by distinguishing amongst the various sites, but by elevating the merits of the concerned *sthala* over that of all the other sites included in the itinerary. The sacred itineraries are thus carefully crafted by incorporating important religious sites which, in helping the sthalapurāṇa to extol its *sthala*, are ultimately rendered inferior to the *sthala*. The particular *sthala*, in other words, draws from the sacrality of other sites, but ultimately outshines them—and this, I posit, is what sacred itineraries achieve for the *sthalapurāṇa*s.

Given my reading of sthalapurāṇic journeys as sacred itineraries strategically crafted to assert the intended *sthala*'s exceptionality, I develop this hypothesis in the rest of this essay by demonstrating some of the ways in which sacred itineraries distinguish between the concerned *sthala* and the other holy spots they incorporate.

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37 The idea that worshipful visits to a site can consolidate the site's sanctity can actually also be observed with places like tourist attractions and/or spiritual sites, as the geographer Noga Collins-Kreiner points out: places are not intrinsically sacred, rather they are social constructions that get sacralized and are thereby marked as meaningful (Collins-Kreiner 2010: 444). I hasten to add that in the context of the sthalapurāṇic theology, however, the concerned places are considered inherently sacred, as we already discussed. Theologically speaking then, what pilgrimages to the religious sites supposedly do is not sacralize the sites but cement and consolidate the sites' intrinsic sacrality. From an anthropological perspective, however, as Collins-Kreiner suggested, it is primarily the reverent visitations to the site that make it sacred. For other human practices that can mark a space as sacred, like performing a prescribed ritual at a given time, see Chiara Letizia's ethnographic work on South Asian river confluences (2018). Letizia thereby argues that "a quality of *a priori* sacredness does not exist": sacredness is not "something intrinsic to a place, but rather … a product of ritual actions performed there" (Letizia 2018: 360).

Emotional response

As I have been suggesting, sacred itineraries can help us unpack the ways in which *sthalapurāṇa*s hierarchize their respective *sthala*s vis-à-vis the other sacred spots included in their itineraries. To start this unpacking, we can first consider the responses of a *sthalapurāṇa*'s mythic travelers as they make their way to the *sthala* and as they halt at the other religious spots that they usually visit prior to (i.e., on their way to) the *sthala*. The ailing poet Natkīra (we may recall Śiva's curse of leprosy here) in the Srikalahasti *sthalapurāṇa*s, for instance, halts at Kashi, where he takes a dip in the Ganges and honors the city's deities, before proceeding further on in his journey. The *Śrīkāḷahastimāhātmyamu* tells us:

> He bathed in the Ganges,
> took darshan of the lord of liberation, Viśvanātha (Śiva at Kashi),
> worshipped Viśālākṣi, Śiva's wife, who is the rain [that douses] the fires of sins,
> devoutly praised the destroyer Lord Kālabhairava,
> prayed to the abode of auspicious virtues, Ḍuṇṭhi Vināyaka,
> and as his enthusiasm for the journey increased...[38]

In contrast to this single verse for Kashi, once the poet sees the southern Kailash or Srikalahasti and his curse of leprosy is lifted, we learn about the poet's response to the site in the form of a hundred-verse poem:

> The leprosy was gone. He came near that Kailāsa
> on the banks of the Song of Gold [i.e., the Swarnamukhi river].
> Bathing in its waves,
> he composed a Tamil song, a hundred verses,
> to Śiva, first of all the gods.[39]

Here, the Tamil song mentioned is a reference to the *kayilaipāti kāḷattipāti antāti* "ascribed to Nakkīrateva Nāyaṉār, in the eleventh volume of the Tamil Śaiva canon (fifty verses on Kailāsa intermingled with fifty verses on Kāḷahasti)" (Narayana Rao and Shulman 2002: 200). Natkīra's composition of the *kayilaipāti kāḷattipāti antāti* reveals several important points: first, it gestures not only at the greatness

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38 *Śrīkāḷahastimāhātmyamu* 3.191 (my translation):
    gaṅgāsnānamucesi viśvapati mokṣasvāmi darśiñci pā
    pāṅgāravrajavṛṣṭi nīśvari viśālākṣi' śivaṃ gŏlci bha
    ktiṃ gālāntaku' <u>k</u>ālabhairavapatiṃ gīrtiñci ḍuṇṭhi dvipā
    syuṃ galyāṇaguṇālayuṃ dala'ci yātrotsāha mŏppāra'gan
39 *Śrīkāḷahastimāhātmyamu* 3.216. Translation by Narayana Rao and Shulman (2002: 200).

of Srikalahasti, which countered a curse that was to be invalidated by the (supposedly northern) Kailash, but also at the poet's final realization, thanks to the god Subrahmaṇya who makes him realize, of the equivalence of the Mount Kailash and Srikalahasti. The *sthalapurāṇa* thus presents us with a classic example of the rhetoric of the duplication of a sacred place, a rhetoric that is often found in what Diana Eck notes as the "grammar of sanctification" in the language of the *sthalapurāṇa*s (Eck 2012).[40]

More importantly, I wish to highlight another noteworthy aspect of the Srikalahasti *sthalapurāṇa*s' grammar of sanctification as captured in the sacred itineraries that they narrate: whereas Srikalahasti elicits a hundred-verse poem in its praise, other sites, including the greatly celebrated Kashi, are presented in a strikingly simple, non-extravagant manner. Note for instance *Śrīkāḷahastimāhātmyamu* 3.188 where in a single *gadya* or prose passage we learn about the numerous sacred spots that Natkīra crosses: Nellore, the Gundlakamma, Krishnaveni, and Gautami rivers, Pithapuram, Simhachalam, Srikurmam, Gokarna, Puri, Krittivasa, Gaya, and several additional holy towns. Looking at the *sthalapurāṇa* genre's sacred itineraries as a whole, then, we observe that while the *sthala* that is the subject of a *sthalapurāṇa* often elicits an emotionally charged, deeply affective response from its visitor (Natkīra's poetic outpouring being a case in point), the other sites for the most part simply receive seemingly mechanical rituals (like Natkīra's ritual activities at the other sites).

To be sure, Natkīra's very brief stops at other sites and his extended poetic outpouring at Srikalahasti can simply be interpreted as being prompted by his deteriorating and regained health respectively, rather than by the relative merits of the different sites. However, when we cumulatively consider multiple sacred itineraries from different *sthalapurāṇa*s, it becomes evident that the *sthala*s extolled by the *sthalapurāṇa*s versus the other places included in the texts are consistently attributed with different responses from the devotee-traveler: namely, with deep emotional/poetic versus simple descriptive/prescriptive/informative responses, respectively. This variation becomes evident from the very fact that sometimes the other places are grouped together in descriptive *gadya* prose while the *sthala* is granted numerous exquisite *padya* verses, as we saw in Natkīra's story.[41] In Agastya's itinerary in the *Śrīkāḷahastimāhātmyamu*, too, we find a similar

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40 See also Feldhaus 2003, chap. 5, for a thorough discussion of the different modes of linking sacred sites in a relativistic manner.

41 The *padya/gadya* distinction holds for premodern Telugu *sthalapurāṇa*s as they are mostly composed in the *campū* style, that is in mixed verse and prose. While beyond the scope of this essay, it would be interesting to juxtapose this phenomenon found in Telugu *sthalapurāṇa campū*s to what Phyllis Granoff refers to as "pilgrimage *campū*s" in medieval Sanskrit literary cultures. For instance, looking at the *Yātrāprabandha*,

situation, though with both the descriptive and the affective narrated in verses rather than in prose and verse. This is how Agastya journeys across different sites prior to reaching Srikalahasti:

> He shattered the arrogance of the Vindhya mountains,
> bathed in the Gautami and the Krishnaveni,
> took *darśan* of the lord of Srisailam,
> worshipped Jyoti Siddavateswara,
> and as they (i.e., Agastya and Lopāmudrā) were approaching [Srikalahasti]...[42]

And this is how the pious couple react to the sight of Srikalahasti:

> Approaching [Srikalahasti], tearing asunder
> the binding fetters of sins, with tears of joy
> rolling from his eyes, with trembling voice,
> he and his wife [saw Srikalahasti].[43]
> Seeing [Srikalahasti] along with his wife,
> bowing while his body hairs stood on end,
> he meditated with his eyes slightly closed like buds;
> with the bliss of the *darśan*, the sage
> worshipped Śiva with a thousand names,
> praised him with various exquisite words,
> made many circumambulations,
> chanted the five-syllable mantra joined with Om,
> with mind intent on meditation, he remained silent,
> he was overjoyed, unable to depart he stood there seeing,
> wobbling his head, he was amazed inside,

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a late sixteenth-century Sanskrit pilgrimage *campū* about Rāma's bridge (Skt. *setu*; the bridge that Rāma supposedly constructed across the ocean to Laṅkā) composed by a south Indian brahmin Samarapuṅgava, Granoff notes that the bulk of the text is "a record of the places visited, ... more importantly of the pilgrim's emotional responses to those places" (Granoff 1998: 106).

42 *Śrīkāḷahastimāhātmyamu* 1.108 abridged (my translation):
vindhyaparvatagarvambu viṟuga' tṟŏkki
gautamī kṛṣṇaveṇyavagāhanamulu
sesi śrīśailanāthu darśiñci jyoti
siddhavaṭanāthu' ḵŏlci vicceyunapuḍu

43 *Śrīkāḷahastimāhātmyamu* 1.111 (my translation):
ḍaggaṟi pĕna'ḵŏnu duritapu'
pṟaggambula' tṟĕñcivaici pramadāśrutatul
dṟggoḷambula' tŏra'ga'ga
ḍagguttikatoḍa' tanapaḍatiyu' tānun

> overcoming his grief at separation with the lord of Kashi,
> bowing, with his wife, to Śiva who was there as a fruit of Vasiṣṭha's penance,
> the best of sages worshipped Dakṣiṇamūrti. [44]

These passages relate how Agastya performs appropriate rituals at the sites visited prior to Srikalahasti, with no reference to his emotional state while performing rituals at these sites, and how upon approaching Srikalahasti, the sage has a devotional outpouring for this *sthala*: we are informed that his voice trembled (*dagguttika-toḍan*), his eyes shed tears of joy (*pramadāśrutatul*), and his body hairs stood on end (*pulakāñcitadehamu*) as soon as he merely spotted the Srikalahasti mountain peak from afar (i.e., before he even reached the sacred place). [45] Such sudden change in devotees' demeanor as soon as a sacred site just comes into sight is in fact a frequently observed theme in not just the sthalapurāṇic sacred itineraries but also in pilgrimage traditions across the globe, for the theme helps convey the idea that the devotees are crossing into sacred space as soon as the space is first glimpsed (Bailey 2023). We thus notice this phenomenon in the Srikalahasti *sthalapurāṇa* narratives of not just Agastya and his wife, but also in the myth of Natkīra, whose leprosy was cured, as we noticed, as soon as Srikalahasti was merely glimpsed. This rhetoric thus helps mark the threshold of Srikalahasti as a juncture that sets apart the highly sacred space of this *sthala*.

Furthermore, once Agastya enters Srikalahasti and is enraptured by the space and the local Śiva, he is finally able to overcome his grief at his painful separation from Kashi, a feat that could not be achieved at the sites he visited prior to

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44 *Śrīkāḷahastimāhātmyamu* 1.113–14 (my translation):
   kāñci vadhūyutu'ḍai pula
   kāñcitadehamuna' praṇatu'ḍai dhyāniñcĕn
   ḵiñcinmukuḷitanayanayu
   gāñcalu'ḍai mauni darśanānandamutoḍan (1.113)
   arciñcĕ śivuni sahasranāmambula
   vividhavākprauḍhi' ḵāvincĕ nutulu
   sesĕ' ḵekkulu pradakṣiṇamulu japiyiñcĕ'
   pañcākṣarambu sapraṇavamuganu
   dhyānaniṣṭhābuddhi maunamudra vahiñcĕ
   nānandaparavaśuṇ ḍayyĕ' ḵidapa'
   ṭala'gipo' cālaka nilici cūcucu nuṇḍĕ'
   ṭalayū'ci vera'gande' ṭanaku'tānĕ
   kāśikānātha viprayogavyathāvi
   dūru' ḍagucu vasiṣṭhataporamānu
   bhava mātmavadhūṭito' praṇuti' cesĕ
   muniśikhāmaṇi dakṣiṇāmūrti' ḵolicĕ (1.114)
45 For the Tamil retake on this moment, see *Cīkāḷattippurāṇam, pŏṉmukaric-carukkam*, 11–12.

Srikalahasti. In effect then, the single verse allotted for the other sites and the multiple verses narrating the sage's affective response to Srikalahasti corroborate what Davis has observed in his study of Agastya: "The greatest of the laudatory descriptions… are found when Agastya nears the end of the journey and approaches the temple town which is the subject of the *talapuranam*. What he sees with his own eyes, and his reactions to the sight, … are described in detail and provide final proof of the excellence of the place" (Davis 2000: 110).

To wrap up this analysis, by narrating an emotional experience for their respective *sthala*s, the *sthalapurāṇa*s seem to facilitate for their audience, as Jay Ramesh has already pointed out, a deeply felt connection to the concerned holy sites, thereby offering an emotional experience to the audience as well (Ramesh 2020: 162). Furthermore, if what *sthalapurāṇa*s aim at is developing for the reader or listener an intense emotional entanglement with the *sthala* and its resident deity, it makes sense that the texts refrain from lending an emotional rhetoric for other sites (in order to create a single pointed emotional response for the *sthala* alone). A *sthalapurāṇa*'s sacred itinerary does acknowledge the sacrality of other sites, however, and we hardly find any trace of disdain for any place, but each *sthalapurāṇa* simultaneously maintains the claim that the other sites are just not as glorious as the *sthala* it is invested in.

Outcome at the concerned sthala vs. at other sites

Another way that a *sthalapurāṇa* marks its *sthala* as superior to other sites can be found in the declaration that the *sthala* serves as an expedient means of liberation, a declaration that is ubiquitously found in the *sthalapurāṇa* genre (Ramesh 2020: 117). There are multiple ways this claim is usually advanced by a *sthalapurāṇa*: (a) the text can sometimes simply state the fact in poetic terms,[46] such as when the *Śrīkāḷahastimāhātmyamu* notes that Srikalahasti is a play area for the goddess of liberation (*mokṣalakṣmiki vihārasthānamu*; *Śrīkāḷahastimāhātmyamu* 1.62); (b) the text can point out how the *sthala* can grant liberation to even unconventional beings, such as when the *Śrīkāḷahastimāhātmyamu* makes a case that Srikalahasti can grant liberation to even animals;[47] and/or (c) the text can

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46   Using a poetic mode to express abstract ideas such as liberation is commonplace in much of religious literature.

47   Direct liberation to animals—that is, without the animal having to reincarnate in human form for liberation—is an idea that contradicts classical, mainstream Hindu thought that claims that only human birth can lead to liberation. Hence, animals attaining liberation is a remarkable idea found in only a limited number of *sthalapurāṇa*s, including the Srikalahasti texts. For a detailed analysis of this theme, see Kanamarlapudi forthcoming, chap. 2.

narrate the stories of various people who attained liberation at the *sthala*, such as when the sacred itineraries in a *sthalapurāṇa* narrate how the devotee-traveler finally attains liberation, at the end of his journey, upon reaching the concerned *sthala*. In the Srikalahasti texts, for instance, Natkīra and the two *veśya* girls from Madurai attain liberation at Srikalahasti after travelling through all the various holy sites included in their itinerary (*Śrīkāḷahastimāhātmyamu* 3.222 and 4.128 respectively).[48] To continue with the narration of Natkīra's story, here is the Telugu text's narration of how the poet is blessed with liberation:

> Pleased with these hundred verses,[49]
> the lord of Kāḷahasti, father of Kumāra
> and husband of the goddess Fragrant with Wisdom,
> the god who cares for those in trouble,
> revealed himself and said, "Your life
> has been fruitful, master of poetic speech.
> I'll give you whatever you choose. Ask,
> I'll make you free from fear." Natkīra bowed
> again and again to the god, his mind pulsing with joy.
> He brought his hands together over his forehead
> and tried to speak, but the words were choked
> and fumbling in his ecstasy. Emotion and eloquence
> struggled with one another as he prayed:
> "Joy, in life, is never unmixed
> with pain. That special happiness
> one gets by letting go of the world—
> make that mine."[50]
> As he prayed thus, the wish-fulfilling tree for devotees,
> the sickle that severs the bonds of ignorance,
> the scissors that cut the cloth of existential pain,
> the wish-granting gem for the goal of liberation,
> one in a virtuous householder state of conjugal relationship with
>   the Himalayan daughter,
> the god of the town of Kāḷahasti granted liberation.[51]

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48 Given the grand narrative of Agastya's final settlement further down south in the Pŏtiyil Mountain, the Srikalahasti texts do not have the liberty to claim that Agastya too attained liberation at Srikalahasti!

49 Reference to the *kayilaipāti kāḷattipāti antāti.*

50 *Śrīkāḷahastimāhātmyamu* 3.217–21. Translation by Narayana Rao and Shulman (2002: 200).

51 *Śrīkāḷahastimāhātmyamu* 3.222 (my translation):
    ani prārthimpa'ga bhaktakalpaka mavidyāsūtradātrambu jī

The Srikalahasti text's narration of Natkīra's sacred itinerary already informed us that the numerous sacred sites the poet visited prior to Srikalahasti were incapable in curing his leprosy or in eliciting an affective response from him. But significantly, what the Srikalahasti texts further suggest is the other sites' inadequacy in granting liberation, an important inadequacy that is of course needed for the poet to remain embodied and continue his travel until Srikalahasti, but also for reinforcing the claim about Srikalahasti's superiority and status as southern Kailash. This distinction of the ability of Srikalahasti and the apparent inability of the other sites in granting liberation does arguably correlate with the fact that while Natkīra has a deep emotional outpouring at Srikalahasti, he only performs seemingly mechanical rituals devoid of an affective reaction at the other sites. Yet, what is perhaps only covertly conveyed via the emotional/affective distinction becomes readily apparent in the different outcomes for Natkīra at Srikalahasti versus the other sites. The *sthalapurāṇa* texts' grammar of sanctification therefore usually also includes the narrative theme of devotees attaining liberation at the concerned sites.

Acknowledging and drawing from the sacrality of the intermittent sites

Prioritizing one *sthala* over the other sites does not mean, as I repeatedly note, the denunciation of or even indifference towards the other sites. At the same time that *sthalapurāṇa*s unabashedly eulogize their respective *sthala*s, they frequently also praise—or at the very least acknowledge—the merits of other sites. We have already seen how Srikalahasti is equated to the holy Kailash (in Natkīra's story) and compared with Kashi (when Agastya finally overcomes his grief at leaving Kashi).[52] Furthermore, even when narrating Agastya's first glimpse of the Srikalahasti mountain peak, the temple town is declared as the gem of the jewel composed of the fame of Kashi, Mathura, and Kanchipuram—cities which Hindu thought includes in the category called the *saptamokṣapurī* or the seven places that grant liberation:

> Seeing Southern Kailash, the gem of the waistbelt
> that is the wealth of the towns, such as Kashi, Mathura, and Kanchi,

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vanakhedāmbarakartarīmukhamu kaivalyārthadānāmṛtā
śanaratnambu tuṣāraśailatanayājāmpatyasampannapā
vanagārhasthyamu kāḷahastipuradaivambiccĕ sāyujyamun

52   In *Śrīkāḷahastimāhātmyamu* 1.156, the seer explicitly tells the sages living in Srikalahasti that they are extremely fortunate to reside in a place that is just the same as Kashi.

which are famed in the whole of the earth girdled by the ocean,
the best of sages...[53]

So even while glorifying Srikalahasti, the *Śrīkāḷahastimāhātmyamu* reminds us of the sanctity and the fame of other sites.

In a similar manner, while the *Cīkāḷattippurāṇam*, in its narration, notes that Srikalahasti is the best place amongst all the divine abodes of Śiva (*Cīkāḷattip-purāṇam, teṉkailāyac-carukkam*, 1), it also praises other holy cities, along with Srikalahasti, for their ability to grant liberation: the text notes that one born in Tiruvarur, one who sees Chidambaram, one who dies at Kashi, one who medi-tates on Tiruvannamalai, or one who resides in Srikalahasti attains liberation (*teṉkailāyac-carukkam*, 5). Of course, this appreciation of the other sites does not undermine the *Cīkāḷattippurāṇam*'s earlier claim about Srikalahasti's superiority: elsewhere, too, the text narrates how the two *veśya* girls traveling from Madurai to Srikalahasti worship the local Śiva in the holy Chidambaram but at the same time yearn for Srikalahasti and the Śiva residing there (*kaṉṉiyarc-carukkam*, 92).

Taken together, these examples clarify how sacred itineraries assert the sanc-tity and superiority of a *sthala* over that of other sites. As we see, *sthalapurāṇa*s do not accomplish this through a simple, out-and-out biased admiration for the *sthala*; rather they narrate programmed itineraries that rely on the glory of the interim sites to finally glorify the concerned *sthala*. Srikalahasti's glory is, for instance, drawn from that of the *saptamokṣapurī* cities of Kashi, Mathura, and Kanchipuram; and its capabilities to grant salvation are juxtaposed with those of Thiruvarur, Chidambaram, Kashi, and Tiruvannamalai. Being "like" Kailash, Kashi, Chidambaram, and other places, then, Srikalahasti is characterized as a space that replicates renowned sacred Hindu sites (Feldhaus 2003: 159 ff.).

Simultaneously, strategies of narrative juxtaposition also aid in asserting Sri-kalahasti's superiority, as seen in the *veśya* girls' pining for Srikalahasti even while they reverently worship Śiva at Chidambaram, revealing what scholars have identified as the "better than" mode of discourse used by *sthalapurāṇa*s to claim that their site is better than another (Feldhaus 2003, chap. 5; Lanaghan 2006, 104). Thus, acknowledging and drawing from the sacredness of the intermittent sites need not undermine the concerned *sthala*'s status, rather this strategy can also serve to amplify the supposedly superlative sacredness of the *sthala*. In other words, we see the "better than" rhetoric ingenuously narrativized in the

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53 *Śrīkāḷahastimāhātmyamu* 1.110 (my translation):
   kāñci munīndru'ḍu jalanidhi
   kāñcīvalayaprasiddha kāśīmadhurā
   kāñcīmukhapuralakṣmī
   kāñcīmaṇi yāmyabhāgakailāsagirin

sthalapurāṇic sacred itineraries. Thus, Srikalahasti may be "like" Kailash in being its replica in the south (*dakṣiṇakailāsamu* or *teṉkayilāya*), but the narrative of Natkīra explains how it is "better than" Kailash for being more accessible to devotees[54] and in ultimately granting liberation to them.

I further posit that the *sthalapurāṇa* texts reveal in sacred itineraries their vision of what I call "intersacrality," that is, they shape and assert the sacrality of their site in relation to the sacrality of other sacred sites. This hypothesis helps illuminate one peculiar aspect of *sthalapurāṇa*s, namely their frequent succinct narration of the *māhātmya* of other sacred site(s). Consider, for instance, the fact that Agastya, during his sacred itinerary in the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa,* narrates the sacred stories of other sites to his wife Lopāmudrā (Smith 2007). In the *Karavīramāhātmya*, the sage himself learns about the sacredness of Srisailam from Skanda. And in the Srikalahasti texts, the sacred itinerary of the two *veśya* girls from Madurai invokes the sacred myths of several sacred sites including Kumbakonam, Chidambaram, and Kanchipuram. This narrative strategy of invoking the glory of other sacred sites brings to life, I posit, the claim that the *sthalapurāṇa*'s *sthala* is extraordinarily sacred. Rather than simply handwaving claims of superiority, the acknowledgement and indeed assertion of the sacrality of other sites ingenuously lends credibility to claims about the superlative status of a particular *sthala*. An absolute, non-referential glorification could be trite and superficial—such as when the *Śrīkāḷahastimāhātmyamu* points out that Srikalahasti is a play area for the goddess of liberation. But when sacred itineraries help juxtapose Srikalahasti with other sacred sites, the strategy skillfully works in establishing the idea that Srikalahasti is not just *a* site that grants liberation but is *the most* expedient site for liberation.

Concluding remarks

Demonstrating the dizzying and ubiquitous presence of a narrative trope found in numerous premodern *sthalapurāṇa*s—the trope of a mythical character travelling across multiple sacred sites prior to reaching the *sthala* that is the subject of the *sthalapurāṇa* in question—this chapter has attempted to understand both the nature and the function of this trope. Contrasting with the analytical category of pilgrimage helped reveal the distinct nature of the sthalapurāṇic journeys vis-à-vis pilgrimages: unlike the latter, the former are often not undertaken willingly and do not include a prior conviction about the significance of the destination. While pilgrimages are often voluntary undertakings, sthalapurāṇic journeys are

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54 Recall that while Natkīra's painstaking journey to Kailash is unsuccessful, Srikalahasti instantly appears before the poet (thanks to Subrahmaṇya's help) and cures his leprosy.

typically imposed on the travelers. Indeed, as we have seen, it is the reluctant traveler's eventual amazement and emotional outpouring upon finally reaching the site—or merely even at the first glimpse of the site—that makes the claim of extraordinariness for the *sthala* that much more compelling. The unwillingness on the part of the sthalapurāṇic traveler, then, carries its own rhetorical value.

Additionally, sthalapurāṇic journeys include, as I suggested, carefully curated itineraries that strategically incorporate select sacred sites to ultimately help laud the destination *sthala*. Even while revealing ideas of competition and hierarchy amongst different sacred sites, these itineraries articulate the sacrality of the site in question in relation to the sacrality of other sites. Thus, while *sthalapurāṇa*s do claim, without reference to other sites, the exceptional merits of a particular *sthala*, they express the virtues of the site more forcefully in relative terms. Indeed, it is this relativistic rhetoric that renders the *sthala* as the most expedient means of liberation. Identifying what I refer to as intersacrality also demonstrated how *sthalapurāṇa*s envision the sacrality of one *sthala* in relation to that of other sites. Thus, it is in exemplifying this phenomenon of intersacrality that the trope of sacred itineraries becomes an important narrative strategy for the *sthalapurāṇa*s to push their agenda about the exceptionality of the concerned *sthala*s.

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