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Nine Narasiṃhas of Ahobilam
On Marking Sacred Territory, God's Manifoldness, and Polyphony of Narratives

In this chapter I discuss a sub-category of temple networks, in which several temples are believed to form one sacred cluster. My case study is a group of nine shrines dedicated to Narasiṃha, the man-lion incarnation of Viṣṇu, in its unique local aspects associated with the village of Ahobilam/Ahobalam, in the Kurnool district of the present-day Andhra Pradesh. The nine shrines are located around the village ("Lower Ahobilam") and on the slopes of the surrounding mountains, which form part of the Nallamala Hills ("Upper Ahobilam").

The site's association with the number nine—conveyed in its alternative Sanskrit name *navanarasiṃhakṣetra* (i.e., "the field of nine Narasiṃhas")—is so strong that it persists despite the fact that the actual number of Narasiṃha shrines there has increased. The prevalent concept of ninefoldness seems to have contributed most, at least in recent times, to the popularity of Ahobilam in the Andhra region and beyond. Contemporary tourism advertisements—aimed at pilgrims across India and reaffirming both the uniqueness of Ahobilam in hosting the ninefold Narasiṃha as well as the efficacy of the cluster concept in attracting devotees—often use the term *navanarasiṃhakṣetra* instead of, or alongside, the more familiar toponym.

In addition, the Ahobilam concept of the ninefold Narasiṃha has been creatively multiplied, reused or transplanted to other sites.[1] For example, the Ahobilam tradition is acknowledged as the source of inspiration by the priest and founder of a modern private temple on the outskirts of Chennai, at a place called Navalur, where the images of nine peculiar Narasiṃhas are installed. The Tamil village of Avaniyapuram (Tiruvannamalai district, Tamil Nadu), where yet another set of nine aspects of Narasiṃha are hosted in two temples situated on a hill, is

1 The phenomenon of duplicating sacred *tīrtha*s, which often reflects the emotional and devotional connections of inhabitants of the sites to which they were relocated, as expressed through toponyms, is common in Hindu religious traditions and extends beyond the geographical boundaries of the Indian subcontinent (see Salomon 1990).

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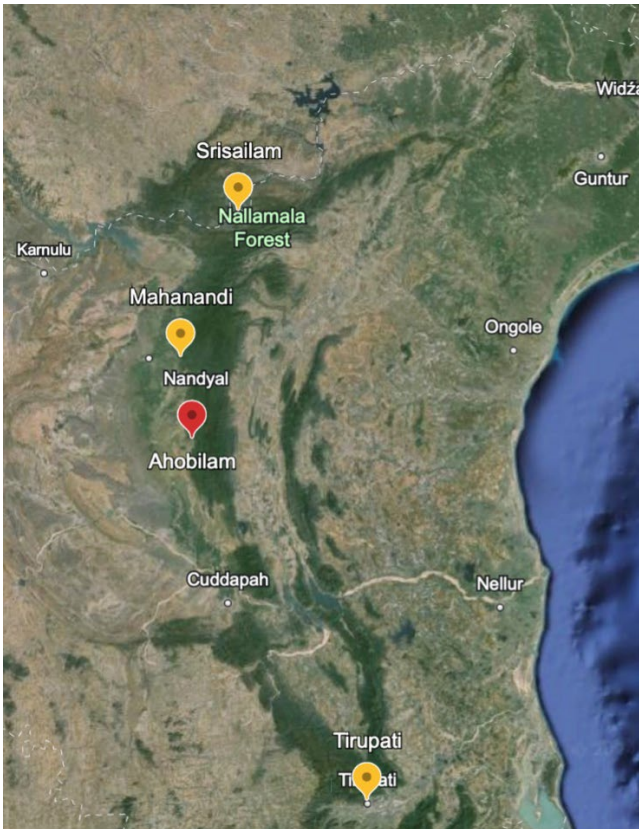


Map. 1. Ahobilam and other important religious sites along the Nallamala Hills in the current Andhra Pradesh, 2024, based on Google Maps

believed to be a southern replica of Ahobilam, hence its other name "Southern (*dakshina*) Ahobilam." A "Northern (*uttara*) Ahobilam," in turn, is under construction at Naimisharanya (Uttar Pradesh), one of the 108 Śrīvaiṣṇava holy places (which include Ahobilam itself), where funds are being raised to build a temple complex, advertised as a Navanarasiṃha temple, on a land that belongs to the Naimisharanya branch of the Ahobila-*maṭha* (monastery).[2] Last but not least, the nine Narasiṃhas of Ahobilam have been 'brought' to the Varadarāja temple in Kanchipuram, in the form of mural paintings, probably during the late Vijayanagara or Nāyaka period (i.e., seventeenth century).

In Ahobilam itself, there are at least two coexisting, somewhat intersecting, and often mutually enriching narrative traditions about Narasiṃha's nine local aspects. One version is typically presented by the priests who serve in the temples and by the officials of the local *maṭha*, both representing Śrīvaiṣṇava

2 For details, see: https://www.ahobilamutt.org/us/data/pdf/Naimisharanyam_Appeal.pdf (accessed April 16, 2025).

circles. According to them, the source for the concept of nine is to be found in the Sanskrit literary production, particularly in the eulogy of the place, the undated *Ahobilamāhātmya*. The second set of narratives comes from a popular oral tradition that is more attuned to the local environment and beliefs predating the arrival of Vaiṣṇavas at the site. Often incongruent, these narratives are shared and circulated by the 'common' residents of Ahobilam, including the Chenchu community, former hunter-gatherers who have lived in the Nallamala Hills since the Palaeolithic era (Fürer-Haimendorf 1982: 2),[3] and today make up a significant part of the local worshippers of Narasiṃha. Having largely adopted the Hindu way of life, they actively participate in the Ahobilam temple rituals and festivities, enriching them with elements of their original forest-related beliefs and practices. Local temple guides, including some Chenchus, play a particularly influential role in shaping the contemporary oral traditions, as pilgrims rely on their knowledge while visiting the site.[4]

In many respects, the cluster of Narasimha sanctuaries at Ahobilam aligns conceptually with observations by, for instance, Feldhaus (2003) and Eck (2012), with regard to groupings of sacred sites in India.[5] Ranging from networks encompassing the entire subcontinent to clusters organising the sacred space of a specific locality, these groupings are an essential element of Indian sacred geography. Basically, the number of elements in the Ahobilam set of Narasiṃha temples symbolically evokes the multiplicity of a god, as is usually the case in such contexts (Eck 2012: 31). Furthermore, pilgrims often travel through imaginatively connected locations, even if not all sites in the pattern hold significance for them (p. 34). Similarly, in the case of Ahobilam, not all visitors reach the site or a specific shrine within the cluster because it is their ultimate goal, but rather because it is on their way to another destination. Additionally, the pilgrims' urge to visit all nine shrines of the Ahobilam cluster supports the idea that, while these are

3 More on mutual influences between indigenous beliefs and a Vaiṣṇava version of Narasiṃha cult in Andhra, including the case of Ahobilam, see Sontheimer 1985, Murty 1997.

4 Guiding Hindu pilgrims through the Nallamala Hills has been the mainstay of the Chenchu's livelihood since they began visiting temples situated along the range, chiefly Srisailam and Ahobilam. In the case of Srisailam this custom is, for instance, mentioned in the Telugu *Srisailam Temple Kaifiyat* which was recorded in 1810 CE as a part of Col. Mackenzie collection aimed at gathering digests of village registers from the Deccan (see the English summary of its content in Sitapati 1981: 15). It came to end in the 1950s, after the construction of the State Highway which made it possible to transport pilgrims to the site by bus (Turin 1999: 255). In Ahobilam the tradition has survived, but only within the territory spread between the nine shrines of Narasiṃha; moreover, because of commercialisation it has also been partly taken over by other local communities.

5 However, neither Feldhaus nor Eck discusses a group of sites comprising nine elements.

narratives that frequently link sites into a set, the simple act of counting these sites can be equally meaningful (Feldhaus 2003: 127).

In the context of Ahobilam, however, the dynamics of perception and reinterpretation of the pattern, both at the site and beyond, raise not only the question of what connects the nine shrines, but also how a change of perspective affects the concept that connects them. As I hope to show, on many levels the case of Ahobilam perfectly illustrates phenomena that have typically been studied in relation to large, multi-religious pilgrimage centers, where their sacredness is no longer viewed as eternal and unchanging, but rather as a product of dynamic, ongoing changes initiated by specific agents and historical circumstances.[6]

Basically, I explore the issue of Ahobilam-related cluster from two angles: one is its representation in rich, and variously articulated, narrative heritage of Ahobilam itself; the other is a tradition from another Vaiṣṇava sacred site, where the narrative of the nine Narasimhas has been adopted. For the former, I propose a comparative analysis of relevant passages of the Sanskrit *Ahobilamāhātmya* (hereafter: AM), the eulogy of the site, and popular myths, shared among devotees and visitors in reference to certain shrines, which I have collected during my fieldtrips to Ahobilam. For the latter, I discuss the potential agenda and a narrative behind the visual representation of the nine Narasiṃhas in the Varadarāja temple at Kanchipuram.

With the aim to highlight the complexity of Ahobilam's narrative tradition and the diverse strategies employed by different communities to assert their presence there, I begin with observations on the contemporary pilgrimage practice at the site. Following this, I briefly outline the epigraphic and textual sources that trace the site's transformation from a peripheral and hard to reach place of the Narasiṃha worship to a renowned Śrīvaiṣṇava pilgrimage destination strongly defined by the distinctiveness of its ninefold Narasiṃha. My investigation into the potential links between the nine aspects of the god and the concept of the cluster focuses on the AM, which is the primary textual source that offers an extensive treatment of Narasiṃha's nine forms, their abodes, and powers, and sets them in a fixed order. I argue that this order does not evoke any linear narrative that would join them, but rather emphasises the number nine as crucial for delineating a perfect territory. Another number-nine-oriented idea that may have influenced the pattern I briefly consider regards a theological perspective: the Pāñcarātrika concept of the all-pervading god who encompasses nine forms (*navamūrti*). What also seems to speak in favor of 'arithmetic' symbolism of the nine-fold pattern is that it was maintained despite changes in the actual number of temples or their spatial rearrangement at the site. In this sense, the concept

6 See, for instance, Lazzaretti (2017) for a summary of the recent scholarly approaches to the sacredness of Varanasi.

which connects the nine forms of the god as given in the premodern texts[7] differs significantly from the popular oral traditions, which tend to encapsulate the nine aspects of the god within a 'totalising' narrative, aiming at subordinating single episodes related to certain aspects of Narasiṃha so that all the nine are explained in a cohesive and unified manner. The last case I discuss is the cultural articulation of the nine Narasiṃhas beyond Ahobilam exemplified by their visual representation on the walls of the Kanchipuram Varadarāja temple. As I show, the aspects painted in a mural seem to follow a linear narrative, yet adjusted in a way that focuses more on recalling Narasiṃha' s multiplicity and fury, than details of individual episodes of his localized myth.

Nine Narasiṃhas and the current pilgrimage tradition in Ahobilam

The nine temples of Narasiṃha in Ahobilam are named after locally rooted forms of the god, which are associated with specific episodes from his mythology and are often believed to be represented by elements of the natural surroundings. Although basically produced with the Puranic Vaiṣṇava version of the Narasiṃha myth as a point of reference, these episodes enhance the widely acknowledged narrative through endowing the god with a sort of afterlife, which he experienced in Ahobilam after killing the demon Hiraṇyakaśipu there.

The order of aspects one is usually informed about while at Ahobilam is as follows: Jvālānarasiṃha, Ahobilanarasiṃha, Lakṣmīnarasiṃha (or: Mālola-), Vārāhanarasiṃha (or: Kroḍa-), Karañjanarasiṃha, Bhārgavanarasiṃha, Yogānandanarasiṃha, Chatravaṭanarasiṃha, and Pāvananarasiṃha (or: Pamuletti). This particular sequence, which also appears in most of the modern religious literature accessible at the stalls in Ahobilam, is not a new concept; it features, for example, in the Telugu *Ahobila Kaifiyat*, recorded in 1810 by Kasuba Karnam Ramanna (Sitapati 1982: 3).[8]

The Jvālānarasiṃha, Ahobilanarasiṃha, Lakṣmīnarasiṃha, and Vārāhanarasiṃha are located on the hills, in what is known as the "Upper Ahobilam."

7 Besides the AM I briefly refer to the poems of Tirumaṅkai Āḻvār, Taḷḷapāka Annamācārya/Annamayya, and one of the *jīyar*s of Ahobilam, in which they venerate the nine Narasiṃhas.

8 Although the *Kaifiyat* has not been published, excerpts from it happen to be cited in contemporary scholarly books on Ahobilam. Sitapati mentions that the manuscript in Telugu is available in State Archives, Hyderabad.

Three temples, i.e., Karañjanarasiṃha, Yogānandanarasiṃha, and Chatravaṭanarasiṃha, are scattered at the foot of the hills, around the village, in the area known as the "Lower Ahobilam." Karañjanarasiṃha lies on the paved road that connects the village to the Upper Ahobilam. The remaining two, i.e., the Bhārgavanarasiṃha and Pāvananarasiṃha temples, are located deep in the jungle, far from the village but on the lower slopes of the hills.

Today, the most common and effective tool for informing the devotees about the circumstances related to the occurrence of each of the nine Narasiṃhas is a bulk of the locally produced myths that, in addition to being spread orally, are circulated through small, cheap pamphlets in Telugu, Tamil, or English, and sold at stalls in Ahobilam, else by way of more substantial authored publications, chiefly released under the auspices of the Ahobila-*maṭha*. Both pamphlets and books creatively emulate the style of Sanskrit *māhātmya*s, supplementing sections on the mythical background of Ahobilam with historical overviews and practical information, including maps of the spatial distribution of the temples and the routes by which they may be accessed. In some, the meaning of the number nine is explained as corresponding to the nine elements of the *anuṣṭubhmantra* of Narasiṃha (the so-called *mantrarāja*), which goes as follows: *ugraṃ* (1) *vīraṃ* (2) *mahāviṣṇuṃ* (3) *jvalantaṃ* (4) *sarvatomukhaṃ* (5) *nṛsimhaṃ* (6) *bhīṣanaṃ* (7) *bhadraṃ* (8) *mṛtyormṛtyuṃ* (9) *namāmy aham.*[9]

Additionally, the nine-partition of the god is visually emphasized through a modern pictorial religious map (Fig. 1), which is displayed in several locations, including spots along routes connecting the shrines and in the village. Although the map's legend includes other religiously important sites situated

9 Which literally means "I bow to wrathful (*ugraṃ*), heroic (*vīraṃ*), great Viṣṇu (*mahāviṣṇuṃ*), fiery (*jvalantaṃ*), facing in all directions (*sarvatomukhaṃ*), Nṛsiṃha (*nṛsiṃhaṃ*), terrifying (*bhīṣaṇaṃ*), auspicious (*bhadraṃ*), the Destroyer of Death (*mṛtyormṛtyuṃ*)". The identification of this *mantra* with the nine aspects of Ahobilanarasiṃha, apparently based on a simple association with a number nine, is given, for instance, in the 14-page-long *Sri Ahobila Nava Narasimha Kshetram; A Travel Guide* by Krishna Kumar (2008) and the anonymous, undated, 24-page-long modern booklet, *Sri Ahobilam Navanarasimha.* However, this idea is also considered in scholarly books, see Narasimhacharya 1989: 32. The *mantra* comes from the *Nṛsiṃhatāpanīyopaniṣad* of the *Atharvaveda* tradition, namely from its first part called *Nṛsiṃhapūrvatāpanīya*, see Deussen 2004: 810; according to Farquhar the *Nṛsiṃhatāpanīyopaniṣad* cannot be later than the seventh century (Farquhar 1920: 188). The same *mantra* is also promulgated by the *Ahirbudhnyasaṃhitā* of the Pāñcarātra tradition (ca. thirteenth century, see Rastelli 2006: 50f.), which in its three consecutive chapters (54–56) explains the subtle (*sūkṣma*) and gross (*sthūla*) aspects of its respective words. According to the text, the *mantra* is suitable for adherents of any five major schools of thought, i.e., Sāṃkhya, Yoga, the doctrine of Sāttvatas/Pāñcarātras, Vedānta, and the doctrine of Pāśupatas (*Ahirbudhnyasaṃhitā* 54.2–5), see Dębicka-Borek 2011: 108–13.

Fig. 1 A modern pictorial information board displaying the network of the Ahobilam shrines and routes, 2019. Photo by Ewa Dębicka-Borek.

around Ahobilam, such as the largest and most popular temple of Prahlāda-varadarasiṃha/Lakṣmīnarasiṃha located at the village center (which is shown on the map, yet situated on the far edge of the sacred area) or the Bhavanashini river (whose size is considerably exaggerated), the map primarily focuses on the nine shrines that form a cluster, numbered from 1 to 9. Other places of veneration are marked with letters, clearly distinguishing them from the nine. Despite the efforts to be topographically accurate—for instance, the space's organization is relatively correct, and routes' distances are indicated by numbers indicating kilometers, this map—as Gengnagel (2011) has shown in relation to the cartography of Varanasi—is more of a medium for representing the sacredness of the area and transforming its space into an imagined, in this case 'nine-folded', landscape, rather than a practical tool for pilgrims.

In turn, the popular myths primarily strive to create a sequential storyline that connects the nine aspects, assigning each a distinct and logical position in the order.

1. Jvālānarasiṃha

The aspect with which the prevalent narrative starts is Narasiṃha in a fiery (*jvālā*) form. It comes as the first, for in this very aspect the god is believed to have defeated the demon Hiraṇyakaśipu at the site, and his anger has not yet subsided. Visually, his fierceness is conveyed by the main *mūrti*, installed in a small cave

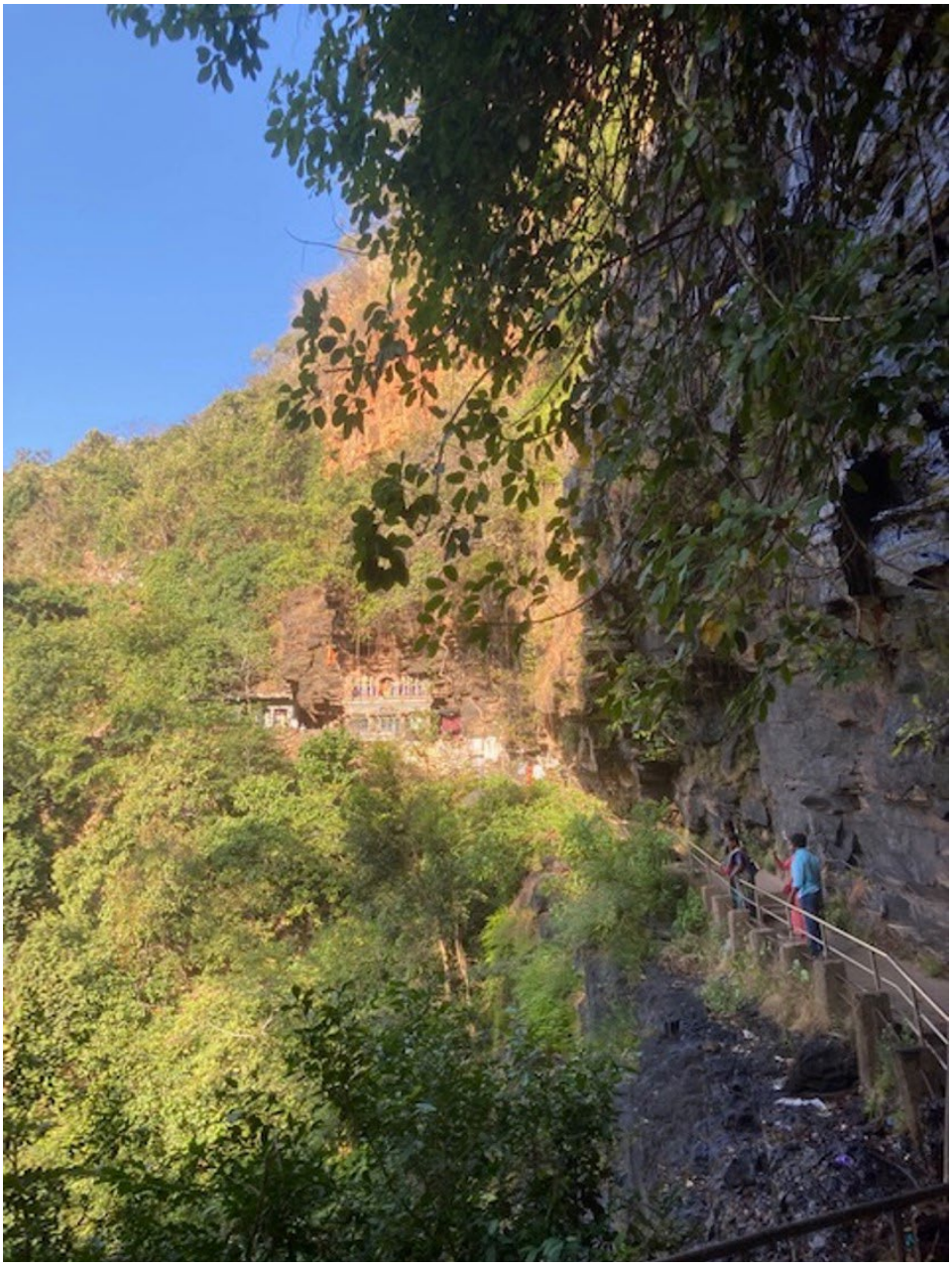


Fig. 2 The Jvālānarasiṃha shrine, 2024. Photo by Ewa Dębicka-Borek.

Fig. 3 The Jvālānarasiṃha shrine, 2024. Photo by Ewa Dębicka-Borek.

shrine: the eight-armed *ugra* Narasiṃha is shown while mutilating Hiraṇyakaśipu who lays on his laps, with the demon's intestines around the neck. One among the several other figures kept in the shrine depicts the combat between Narasiṃha and Hiraṇyakaśipu (*dvandva-yuddha*). In the popular imagination, the column of Hiraṇyakaśipu's palace, from which Narasiṃha emerged to slay the demon, is a rock called Ugra Stambha ("wrathful pillar"), which rises vertically in the Upper Ahobilam. Devotees can admire it from a distance on their way to the shrine. Before they approach it, they can also visit a small pond of reddish water, in which Narasiṃha is believed to have washed off Hiraṇyakaśipu's blood from his hands. For many, this is the most important temple at the site.

2. Ahobilanarasiṃha

The next aspect in the popular sequence, the Ahobilanarasiṃha, resides in the largest temple in the hills of the Upper Ahobilam. This temple is also considered to be the earliest among the grouping, perhaps constructed on a spot previously sacred to the Chenchu people (Sontheimer 1987: 149). According to Biardeau

Fig. 4 The Ahobilanarasiṃha temple, 2019. Photo by Ewa Dębicka-Borek.

(1975: 52), the structure is of the early Vijayanagara period (ca. fourteenth century). Sitapati (1982: 13) estimates similar time of its construction (although labeled as under the Kākatīya period), and remarks that the *Ahobila Kaifiyat* mentions an inscription—so far not discovered by the epigraphists—which refers to the construction of the *mūkhamaṇḍapa* of the Ahobilanarasiṃha temple in 1385/1386 CE.[10]

The main deity of this temple, the Lord of Ahobilam who is believed to self-manifest (*svayaṃbhū*), also displays a wrathful aspect (*ugra*). As in the case of the Jvālānarasiṃha's *mūrti*, he is shown as tearing apart the demon who rests on his lap, yet he is two-handed and there are no entrails decorating him. In addition, the demon's position is different: whereas the Jvālānarasiṃha keeps the demon's head on the left thigh, the Ahobilanarasiṃha keeps it on the right thigh.

10 Vasantha (2001: 17) estimates the dates of all the temples, however, with not much evidence; these proposals, particularly in regard to the shrines considered the oldest, are extremely early, even if pointing not to a structure itself but to some iconographical elements it contains: Ahobilanarasiṃha shrine to the second-third century; Pāvana- to sixth-seventh century; Vārāha-, Yogānanda- and Jvālā- to seventh-eighth century; Karañja- and Bhārgava- to tenth-eleventh century; Mālola- to twelfth-thirteen century; and Chatravaṭa- to early Vijayanagara period.

The most popular version of the myth, particularly favoured by the priests and the *maṭha* circles, is that Narasiṃha appeared here in response to a penance of Garuḍa.[11] However, a version circulated in contemporary pamphlets says that the God stayed here at Prahlāda's request, when his anger after killing his demonic father Hiraṇyakaśipu did not abate. This version is closer to a narrative, which begins with the Jvālānarasiṃha's act of killing the demon (Krishna Kumar 2008).

3. Lakṣmīnarasiṃha

The Lakṣmīnarasiṃha shrine is where, according to the local guide I talked to in 2024, Narasiṃha appeared, after being impressed by the penance of Lakṣmī that she took on in hope of appeasing him, after he killed the demon. That is why

Fig. 5
The Lakṣmīnarasiṃha (or: Mālolanarasiṃha) shrine, 2024. Photo by Ewa Dębicka-Borek.

11 The motif of Garuḍa's penance occurs in AM 2 narrative on the etymology of the designation of 'Garuḍācala' (Mountain of Garuḍa) and reuses the epic and Puranic myths on how Garuḍa became a vehicle (*vāhana*) of Viṣṇu. According to the AM, instructed by his father, Garuḍa undertook mortifications in Ahobilam, on a hill called Nārāyaṇa, with a wish to fulfil all his desires. In response to his penance Viṣṇu in the form of Narasiṃha manifested in front of him and granted him two boons: becoming Viṣṇu's vehicle and calling the hill where he performed austerities by his name. See Dębicka-Borek 2023: 131–37.

his alternative name, Mālolanarasiṃha, is interpreted as 'dear [Lola] to Lakṣmī [Mā]'. According to another variant of this narrative, Lakṣmī approached Narasiṃha on the request of gods, who were threatened by Narasiṃha's anger after the slaughter. She then 'tamed' the god and stayed with him there, to bless the devotees (Rangachar 1993: 10–11). Some narratives attribute more agency to the goddess, saying that she moved to the hilly area of Markonda (local name of the hill where the shrine is situated) because she was offended by Narasiṃha, when he invited a Chenchu huntress to their abode, associated with a cave shrine of the Ahobilanarasiṃha (Ayyengar 1914: 82). Unlike the Lakṣmīnarasiṃha shrine, the main *mūrti* of the Ahobilanarasiṃha temple is shown in an *ugra* aspect, and thus without a consort. However, a figure of Lakṣmī in her aspect of a Chenchu huntress (Ceñcūlakṣmī) is kept not far from him, in a separate cave shrine.

4. Vārāhanarasiṃha

The next episode continues the theme of the goddess as Narasiṃha's companion, by locating in Ahobilam the Puranic myth of rescuing the Earth (Bhū). It is believed that Narasiṃha, having taken the form of the boar, dug her out of Pātāla—to which she had been taken by Hiraṇyākṣa, the brother of Hiraṇyakaśipu—at the very site where the temple of the Vārāhanarasiṃha now stands.

Fig. 6 The Vārāhanarasiṃha shrine, 2024. Photo by Ewa Dębicka-Borek.

5. Karañjanarasiṃha

The following episodes are rather loosely connected, if at all, with the rest of the story. According to one version, Narasimha, in the aspect called Karañja, designated after a Karañja tree (*Pongamia Glabra*) under which he sat, blessed Hanumān when the latter approached Ahobilam. Out of respect for Hanumān's worship of an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu other than Rāma in this particular place, Narasiṃha took a bow, an emblem of Rāma, in one of his four hands. Accordingly, the god's *mūrti* in this shrine is depicted as having four arms, with a bow in one hand. In addition, there is a small shrine of Hanumān on the temple grounds.

Fig. 7 The Karañjanarasiṃha temple, 2019. Photo by Ewa Dębicka-Borek.

6. Bhārgavanarasiṃha

The oral tradition associated with the aspect of the Bhārgavanarasiṃha is also related to the theme of Viṣṇu's other incarnations, claiming that Bhārgava (i.e., Paraśurāma) worshipped Narasiṃha here. This belief seems to be hinted at by the fact that the halo (*prabhāvali*) that frames the *mūrti* depicts Viṣṇu's ten incarnations. Unlike the Karañjanarasiṃha, the Bhārgavanarasiṃha is shown in the *ugra* ("wrathful") aspect, ripping the demon lying on his thigh.

Fig. 8 and 9
The Bhārgavanarasiṃha temple, 2015 (above), 2024 (below). Photos by Ewa Dębicka-Borek.

7. Yogānandanarasiṃha

The aspect known as the Yogānandanarasiṃha is associated with Narasiṃha who taught yoga and other wisdom to Prahlāda after the death of his demoniac father.

Fig. 10 The Yogānandanarasiṃha temple, 2024. Photo by Ewa Dębicka-Borek.

8. Chatravaṭanarasiṃha

The Chatravaṭanarasiṃha, called after a Banyan tree the deity sits under, is the aspect which, as my interlocutor explained, was entertained by the singing Gandharvas (this narrative occurs in the AM, see below). Due to that, he interpreted the main *mūrti*'s face as smiling with contentment.

Fig. 11 Chatravaṭanarasiṃha temple, 2024. Photo by Ewa Dębicka-Borek.

9. Pāvananarasiṃha

The last in the sequence, the Pāvananarasiṃha, is situated in a temple located in a protected forest with restricted access, close to the hamlets of the Chenchu community, about 8 km from the Ahobilam village. Currently, the Chenchu's contribution to the local form of worship is emphasized and discernible in the Ahobilanarasiṃha temple's festival programme: it is the Chenchu who decorate temple premises with products brought from the forest and escort the god to the Lower Ahobilam before the yearly hunting festival (Paruveta, Tel. *pāruvēṭa*) starts; the marriage of the Ahobilanarasiṃha with the Ceñcūlakṣmī is celebrated here on the occasion of Brahmotsava; and on the night of Garuḍasevā, the Chenchus perform an enactment of stealing jewelry from Narasiṃha.[12] However, it

12 This is not to say that the Chenchus are invisible in the Prahlādavarada temple of the Lower Ahobilam. For example, they play an important ritual role when the Paruveta

is only in the Pāvananarasiṃha shrine that animal sacrifices for Narasiṃha happen to be offered, particularly during religious festivals.[13] According to a tradition especially alive among the Chenchus, Narasiṃha met and married a Chenchu huntress in this area.[14] This belief resonates with the wilderness of the site but also with the strongly emphasized presence of the goddess. Whilst the main *mūrti* of the Pāvana temple is shown accompanied by Lakṣmī, there is also a shrine of Ceñcūlakṣṃī, Narasiṃha's local wife, within walking distance from the temple, in a tiny cave slightly higher on the hilltop, where she is believed to have been born. The priestly and *māṭha* circles do not explicitly neglect this version of the myth associated with the Pāvana. Nonetheless, when requested to explain the myth behind the temple, they point to certain verses of the AM (4.80–82; see below), which associate the designation with the site's purifying (*pāvana*) power.

Fig. 12 The Pāvananarasiṃha temple, 2015. Photo by Ewa Dębicka-Borek.

procession sets out from the temple for a 40-day march through the local villages. On Paruveta in Ahobilam, see Dębicka-Borek 2021.

13 Noteworthy, Sitapati (1982: 17) mentions the Chenchu practice of sacrificing fowls at the Ahobilanarasiṃha temple but is silent about it in relation to Pāvana. This can mean that with the growing interest of pilgrims over the last four decades, the practice has been redirected (or restricted) to the most distant and difficult to access shrine.

14 According to Sethuraman Kidambi, communication officer of the Ahobila-*maṭha*, more and more people believe this version of the story nowadays because of the bloody sacrifices that can be seen there.

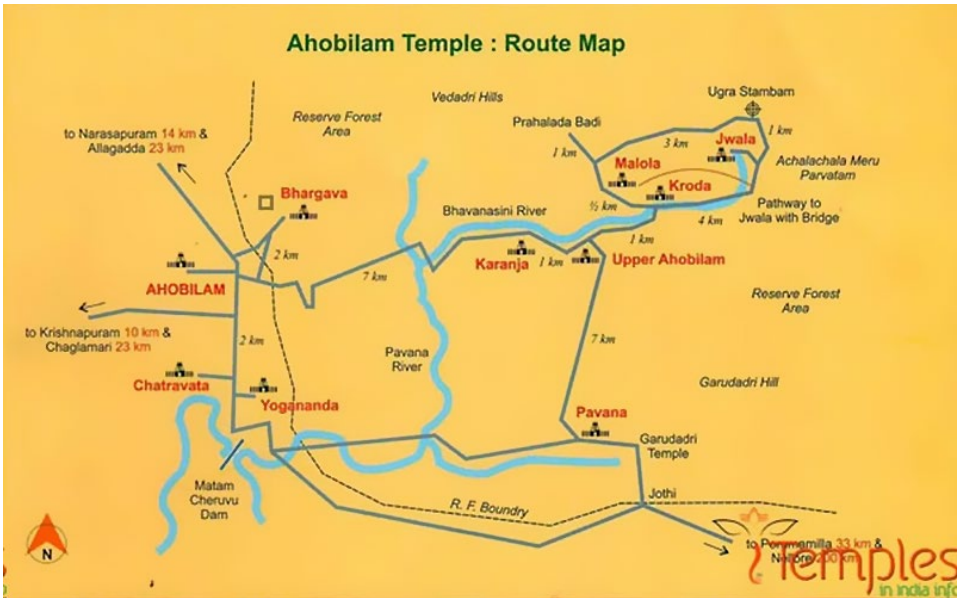
In terms of temple ritual, contrary to other shrines in Ahobilam where priests follow the Pāñcarātra order, those appointed in the Pāvana (in 2025 there were two of them) belong to the Vaikhānasa tradition.

As we could see, the linear narrative that encompasses all nine Narasiṃhas, begins with an episode of Narasiṃha's slaying of the demon, which, in the Puranic tradition, essentially ends the Narasiṃha myth. The linear narrative closes with an episode that is particularly important for the inclusive character of the Ahobilam religious tradition, namely the romance between him and the Chenchu huntress. Importantly, it does not exclude Lakṣmī, the god's first wife. This narrative, involving a series of episodes based on a particular timeline of the nine aspects of Narasiṃha, is an influential tool for capturing the imagination of the pilgrims, even if it is only roughly coherent. While its linearity facilitates the comprehension of the god's 'nine-ness', another important factor is the visual dimension of the narrative's episodes.[15] First, by anchoring certain episodes in the local landscape, they can be experienced and seen by devotees on their journey (Ugra Stambha, certain peaks, jungle). Second, the iconographic features of *mūrti*s more loosely connected to the rest of the narrative, are translated into myths (or vice versa) to which pilgrims are exposed. This is especially evident in the case of the myths concerning aspects of Karañja and Chatravaṭa, which, although associated with specific trees by designation, focus on elements of the deity's iconography (the bow, the facial expression). The narrative fulfils the purpose of showing the god at successive moments in his 'life' at Ahobilam, and, as a result, unites the nine temples into a group that reflects these events in a chronological order.

However, the narrative order of the nine aspects is not in congruence with the order of visiting the shrines, particularly in the case of those located in the Upper Ahobilam. For instance, to reach the Jvālānarasiṃha shrine, which comes first in the narrative, one has to walk a challenging footpath which starts on the premises of the Ahobilanarasiṃha temple of the Upper Ahobilam, and then pass by the Vārāhanarasiṃha and the Lakṣmīnarasiṃha shrines, as the Jvālā is located at the end of this route.

Nowadays, apart from the temple of the Prahlādavaradanarasiṃha in the Lower Ahobilam ('the tenth' temple), which is usually the first on the devotees' agendas due to its convenient location in the heart of the village, the order in which the nine shrines are visited depends on the time and resources of the pilgrims. Currently, all shrines, served by over thirty priests, open daily: the Prahlādavarada temple in the Lower Ahobilam from 6.30 AM to 1 PM and 3 PM to 8 PM; the Ahobilanarasiṃha temple in the Upper Ahobilam from 7 AM to

15 On the role of visuality in experiencing Ahobilam, see Adluri 2019.



Map 2 A route map of temples in Ahobilam circulated in inexpensive booklets and on the Internet.

1 PM and 2 PM to 7 PM, and the rest of shrines from 9 AM to 4:30 PM. Given the challenging terrain, distances, opening hours of the temples, and the timing regulating when the protected area in which some of them are located is accessible to visitors, saving time is paramount.

Having reached the hills of the Upper Ahobilam in a vehicle, along a paved road, just after the sunrise, pilgrims often spend half a day there, walking back and forth on a steep footpath leading to the Jvālānarasiṃha shrine, and worshipping in the Vārāha- and the Lakṣmīnarasimha shrines in between. Whereas some of them visit the Ahobilanarasiṃha temple as the last amongst those in the hills, others do it at the very beginning, before setting off to the Jvālā. The other half of the day is usually spent using various means of transport to visit the shrines of the Lower Ahobilam, including the furthest one, the Pāvananarasiṃha, and, on the same occasion, the Bhārgavanarasiṃha shrine, which is also situated in a deep forest. The Karañjanarasiṃha, located along the road from the Lower to the Upper Ahobilam, is customarily visited during a short journey between the two. Some visitors choose to divide their stay into two days, especially those who come from far away. Another option taken by many is to do the pilgrimage in the reverse order, starting in the afternoon at the Lower Ahobilam, crossing the hills early the next day, and after lunch moving on to the Pāvananarasiṃha and the Bhārgavanarasiṃha.

Beyond the nine

The Prahlādavaradanarasiṃha temple, commonly viewed as Ahobilam's tenth Narasiṃha shrine and thus beyond the traditional cluster of nine, is a large temple dedicated to the peaceful Narasiṃha, accompanied by Lakṣmī, and considered a benevolent aspect of the fierce Ahobilanarasiṃha of the Upper Ahobilam. Nowadays, because of its naturally easier accessibility in the heart of the village, the Prahlādavarada temple attracts most pilgrims and serves as the centre of temple festival life. It was most likely built after the cluster of nine had already been established.

Vasantha (2001: 17) suggests that the Prahlādavaradanarasiṃha temple of the Lower Ahobilam was a project of Sāḷuva Narasiṃha, and thus its construction began between the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Michell (1995: 176), however, believes that certain features of the sculptural representations of the god in the temple' main hall prove that the temple is contemporary with the Viṭṭhala temple at Vijayanagara, meaning that it was built in the mid-sixteenth century.

Another shrine not currently included in the group of nine is a cave shrine of Narasiṃha in a yogic posture, located in the Upper Ahobilam behind the Lakṣmīnarasiṃha (Mālolanarasiṃha) structure, at the back of a flat rocky area known as "Prahlada Badi" (Prahlāda's school). According to oral tradition, this is where young Prahlāda studied yoga under Narasiṃha's guidance before his father was killed. Therefore, the shrine is called Yoga/Yogānandanarasimha, that is, in the same manner as the shrine hosting Narasiṃha in a yogic posture in the Lower Ahobilam, which does belong to the cluster of nine, or the Prahlādanarasimha, that is by the name which emphasizes the fact of teaching yoga to Prahlāda.[16] Not all pilgrims visit this shrine, as it requires extra effort to reach, and not always there is a chance of finding it open. When I approached it in 2024, a group of devotees was roaming around waiting for a priest. In February 2025 the priest was there. In this case, the exclusion from the cluster was most likely caused by natural reasons. The temple's *mūrti* was 'duplicated' and transferred to a larger shrine, built later on in the Lower Ahobilam, for, according to Rangachar, the natural setting of the 'original' Yoganarasiṃha temple made its circumambulation impossible (Rangachar 1992: 21).[17]

16 For instance, Ayyangar (1914) distinguishes between the two using Prahlādanarasiṃha when referring to the old shrine in the Upper Ahobilam and Yogānandanarasiṃha when referring to the later one, in the Lower Ahobilam.

17 On the various mechanisms of displacing deities in reference to religious heritage of Varanasi, see Lazzaretti 2017.

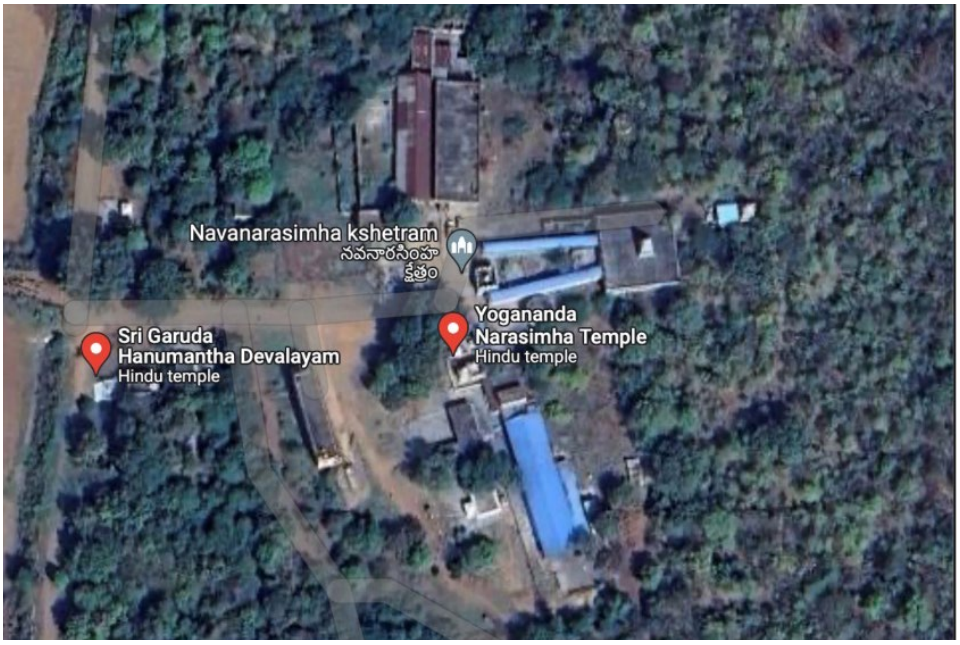
Fig. 13 and 14
The ‘old’ Yogānandanarasiṃha (or: Prahlāda-) temple in the Upper Ahobilam, 2024. Photos by Ewa Dębicka-Borek.

The latest addition to Ahobilam's complex religious landscape is a modern and brightly painted temple donated by the followers of the recently deceased guru and Kadapa-born saint, Kasireddy Nayana Swamy, who was not associated with the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition. Operated by a Śaiva priest and collectively called Navanarasiṃha, this temple combines the concept of the nine Narasiṃhas with that of the nine planets (*graha*s), which are usually represented collectively in Śaiva temples. In such a case, their figures are assembled on a small platform, all are represented in anthropomorphic forms which do not face each other and are often differentiated by the colour of their garments, with Sūrya in the centre, and others around, in eight cardinal directions, i.e. Moon/Candra (south-east), Mars/Maṅgala (south), Mercury/Budha (north-east), Jupiter/Bṛhaspati (north), Venus/Śukra (east), Saturn/Śani (west), the ascending node/Rāhu (south-west) and the descending node/Ketu (north-west). These celestial bodies are worshipped as deities and believed to influence human destiny (Bühnemann 1989: 1–2). In Ahobilam, the distinctive adaptation of the *navagraha* cult to the local Vaiṣṇava tradition is clearly manifested in the pairing of each *graha*'s *mūrti* with the *mūrti* of each local form of Narasiṃha (see Fig. 16). The *graha*s' idols are displayed and worshipped in the temple hall in a pattern consisting of the

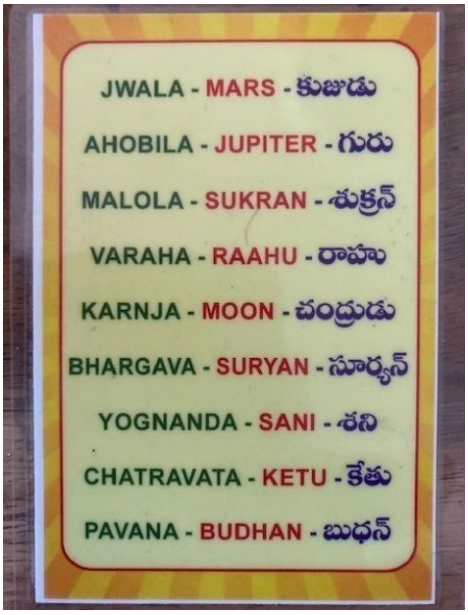
Fig. 15 and 16
The Navanarasiṃha temple in the Lower Ahobilam (left) and its interior, with the nine Narasiṃhas paired with the nine *graha*s (right), 2024. Photos by Ewa Dębicka-Borek.

three rows of three *graha*s each, and each *graha* is in conjunction with an aspect of Narasiṃha that evokes the typical distribution of *graha*s. This temple stands in the Lower Ahobilam, right next to the Yogānandanarasiṃha temple (note the association of Śiva with a yogin), which is now considered one of the nine. While this external and relatively recent initiative of appropriating the nine Narasiṃhas by the Śaiva-oriented tradition of the nine planets, additionally filtered through the teachings of a modern guru, reinforces the character of the Ahobilam centre of Narasiṃha worship as a contested site already shared with the Chenchu, it also naturally increases the appeal of the nine Narasiṃhas by widening the range of potential visitors who do not necessarily identify as Vaiṣṇavas. This is reflected, for instance, in the active sale and distribution of devotional artefacts containing the motif of the nine Narasiṃhas in combination with the nine *graha*s, often simply listing their names in pairs, that were unavailable on the local market a few years ago. On the other hand, consolidating the nine Narasiṃhas into a single, easily accessible temple might discourage devotees from making the effort to visit each one in its original, natural location.

Although the sequence in which the shrines of the Upper Ahobilam are visited is somewhat forced by the terrain and, to some extent, remains unaltered



Map 3 Orientation of the Navanarasiṃha temple (here: kshetram) towards location of the Yogānandanarasiṃha temple, 2024 (based on Google Maps).



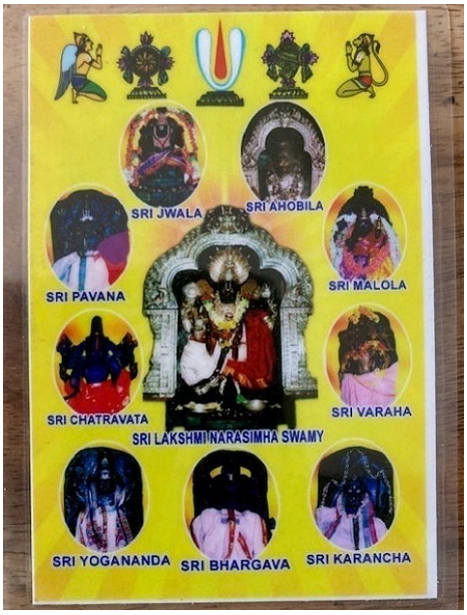


Fig. 17 and 18 Both sides of a small card explaining the concept of the nine Narasiṃhas associated with the nine *graha*s, 2024. Photos by Ewa Dębicka-Borek.

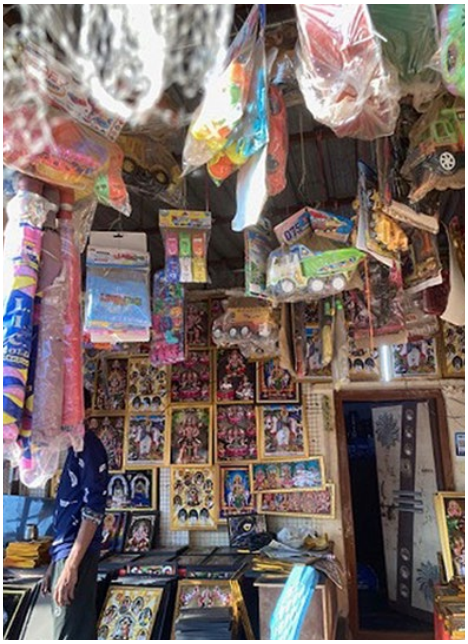


Fig. 19 A stall with religious articles, mostly prints, in the Lower Ahobilam, 2024. Photo by Ewa Dębicka-Borek.

(Ahobilanarasiṃha, Vārāhanarasiṃha, Mālolanarasiṃha, Jvālānarasiṃha and back to Ahobilanarasiṃha, optionally with Vārāhanarasiṃha and/or Mālolanarasiṃha visited on the way back to Ahobilanarasiṃha), in general, the order of worshipping the remaining aspects is not as important as ensuring that the visit covers all of them. This includes the Prahlādavarada temple of the Lower Ahobilam, making it a total of ten aspects. Just like aligning the nine Narasiṃhas with the nine *graha*s, the process of widening the customary pattern of nine temples is discernible at the stalls in front of the Prahlādavarada temple, where most of the illustrations on the covers of religious booklets, calendars or posters display the nine aspects of the god gathered around the tenth, which is in the center.

This process, however, still does not affect the content of the religious brochures and tourist guides, which constantly emphasize Narasimha's ninefoldness. Their authors recommend other sacred sites, i.e., the Prahlādavarada temple, the ancient Yogānandanarasiṃha temple and its flat rocky surroundings associated with the Prahlāda school, and the Ugra Stambha, as important but additional places to visit. On the other hand, neither modern pilgrims nor ritual specialists in Ahobilam will find the question of why Narasiṃha manifested in exactly nine forms relevant. What matters is his omnipresence.

Ahobilanarasiṃha and *navanarasiṃha*: textual sources and inscriptions

The paucity of inscriptions makes it difficult to reconstruct and verify Ahobilam's past before the turn of the sixteenth century when, probably for geopolitical reasons, the site fell into the sphere of interest of the Vijayanagara kings, and the

Ahobila-*maṭha* was established there.[18] It is also very likely that the site's remote location in the Nallamala Hills limited its appeal to pilgrims for many centuries.

Textual sources of various genres and traditions, though relatively scarce, shed some light on the crucial points in the earlier history of the place. Most of them refer to Ahobilam by invoking the Ahobilanarasiṃha or the Ahobileśvara, the Lord of Ahobilam, usually identified with his *ugra* form associated with the Upper Ahobilam, and, sometimes, benevolent (*saumya*) in a company of Lakṣmī, but not to his other aspects. To my knowledge, the concept of the nine Narasiṃhas appears in only a handful of pre-modern texts and in one inscription, most of which were not produced earlier than the fifteenth century. The most extensive treatment of the nine Narasiṃhas and their abodes is found in the independent Sanskrit glorification of Ahobilam, i.e., the AM, which ascribes itself to the *Brahmāṇḍapurāṇa*, and can only be relatively dated to a period earlier than the fifteenth century. As I argue below, this suggests that (1) the popularity of the nine Narasiṃhas viewed collectively as a cluster of shrines that encompasses the god's various aspects is a rather modern phenomenon; and (2) the concept of the nine aspects known to us was established by the author/s of AM.

The earliest textual mention of a place associated with Ahobilam is found in Tirumaṅkai Āḻvār's *Pĕriya Tirumŏḻi* (1.7.1–10), in which he praises it under its Tamil name Siṅkaveḷkuṉṟam ('The Hill of the Youthful Lion'), focusing on the correspondence of the harshness of the area with the nature of Narasiṃha, who killed the demon Hiraṇyakaśipu there. Considering that the poet may not have visited the site personally,[19] yet the setting he describes does not differ much from the natural features of the Ahobilam landscape, we can assume that it must have been known to the South Indian Vaiṣṇavas as a place of a particular terrifying ambience from as early as the nineth century CE.

A version of the "Glorification of Ahobilam" is embedded in chapters 48–49 of the *Śrīśailakhaṇḍa*,[20] a text linked with the ancient and famous Śaiva centre at Srisailam. This text, dated by Reddy to the twelfth-thirteenth centuries, includes

18 Most of inscriptions in Ahobilam are in the Telugu language. Vasantha (2001: 2) mentions that the earliest inscription belongs to the times of Cālukya Kīrtivarman (eighth century) and the latest to Veṅkatapatirāya II (sixteenth/seventeenth century). The name Ahobala as a designation of Narasiṃha occurs already in 1124 CE in an inscription engraved on a slab set up to the west of the Śiva temple in Peddamudiyam, currently Kadapa district (SII, vol. IX, p. 208, no. 207; cf. Vasantha 2001: 16). On inscriptions in Ahobilam from Vijayanagara period, see Adluri 2019.

19 Discussion on whether Āḻvārs visited all the sites they praised, see, e.g., Dutta 2010, Young 2014.

20 These two consecutive colophons state that they contain glorification of Ahobalam, which is a part of the second part in *Śrīśailakhaṇḍa* of *Sanatkumārasaṃhitā* of the *Śrīskāṃda Mahāpurāṇa*.

narratives associated with Ahobilam, along with the narratives of Śaiva Nandi *tīrthamaṇḍala* (i.e., the area of present-day Nandyal, Sanskr. Nandyālaya, and its surroundings), which lies between the two (with Śriśailam to the north and Ahobilam to the south) in its sacred mythology.[21] Remarkably, the sacred territories of both Nandi *tīrthamaṇḍala* and Srisailam are structured on the ninefold pattern. The area which stretches between the present-day Nandyal and Mahanandi, is marked by nine temples of Śiva, the so-called *navanandi*, dated to the Cālukya period (seventh-eighth centuries), and displaying features of the *nagara* style (Subba Reddy 2009: 69–70).[22] The religious tradition of Srisailam presents the centre with the famous Mallikārjuna temple as surrounded by eight gateways, all together comprising nine sites. According to Reddy, the concept of the four major gateways to Srisailam was developed by the tenth century, and the full, eight-element concept by the thirteenth century. Each of the eight gateways became a religious center with temples of Śiva and the Goddess, and the routes between them and Srisailam are important pilgrimage tracts (Reddy 204: 62–65).[23] In Alampur, which is considered one of the Srisailam's eight gateways, we find another group of nine temples dedicated to Śiva, the so-called *navabrahmā*, as in the case of *navanandi* built in the times of Cālukyas of Badami (Subba Reddy 2009: 65–69). The ninefolded architectural and conceptual solutions linked to Nandi *tīrtha* and Srisailam, including Alampur, appear much earlier than in the case of Ahobilam. Because of the close proximity of these three sites, one wonders if the two Śaiva centers could have been a source of inspiration for the pattern of the nine Narasiṃhas.[24]

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21 Both Nandi-*tīrtha* and Srisailam, and additionally Tirupati, are mentioned in the AM passage which deals with sacred geography of Ahobilam and its surroundings, see Dębicka-Borek 2022: 249–56.

22 Currently the group of *navanandi* temples is located within a radius of eighteen km, in the area stretching between the town of Nandyal and a famous Śaiva pilgrimage centre in Mahananadi (Kurnool district of Andhra Pradesh). The nine temples are: Prathamānandi (in Nandyal town), Naganandi (in Nandyal town, inside Añjaneya temple), Somanandi (the eastern outskirts of Nandyal), Sūryanandi (on the road to Mahanandi), Śivanandi (on the road to Mahanandi), Viṣṇu-/Kṛṣṇanandi (on the road to Mahanandi), Garuḍanandi (at the outskirts of Mahanandi temple's premises), Mahānandi (in Mahanandi village), Vināyakanandi (northwest of Mahānandi temple) (Subba Reddy 2009, 69–70). Although the pilgrimage infrastructure at the place is still not fully developed, already in the 1940s it was recommended to make the circuit in one day (Nandyal Theosophical Lodge 1942: 44–48).

23 The eight gateways of Srisailam are eight towns situated towards the four cardinal (Tripurantaka, Brahmeshvara/modern Alampur, Umamaheshvara, Siddhavata) and the four intermediate directions (Eleshvara, Somashila, Pushpagiri, Sanghameshvara), all together marking the boundary of the "Greater" Śrīśailakṣetra (Reddy 2014, 62–65).

24 However, during the period of Ahobilam's heyday, i.e., in the sixteenth-seventeenth century, nine temples dedicated to Viṣṇu in the vicinity of Alvar Tirunagari (Tirunelveli district of current Tamilnadu) were most likely perceived as forming a group as well.

As Reddy proposes, the literary strategy of including narratives concerning Nandi-tīrtha and Ahobilam in the *Śrīśailakhaṇḍa* may indeed testify to the early stage of development of a pilgrimage route linking sacred sites of different religious affiliations along the Nallamala range (Reddy 2014: 103–09).[25] The *Śrīśailakhaṇḍa* introduces the topic of Ahobilam at the end of chapter 47, where *ahobilasthalapati* (the Lord of the place [called] Ahobila) is mentioned (47.70) as the form that Viṣṇu in his Narasiṃha aspect took to kill the demon Hiraṇyakaśipu. The two consecutive chapters unfold the myth and localize it in Ahobilam by means of praises of Narasiṃha by gods and other divine beings, after he defeated the demon: "Ah, what strength! Ah, what shape! Ah! what brilliance! Ah, what cruelty! Ah, what affection to devotees! Ah, what an expert in doing favours!"[26] It is worth noting that variants of this verse, which explains the traditional etymology of the toponym Ahobalam (i.e., the site where Narasiṃha was praised with exclamation "*aho balam*!"), occur in the 'independent' AM and in the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya*, which I discuss later.

Another relatively early Sanskrit text that mentions Ahobilam is the twelfth-century *Smṛtyarthasāra* by Śrīdhara. In the section discussing a pilgrimage to specific holy sites as an alternative to penances based on distance traveled (the so-called *tīrthapratyāmnāyāḥ*), "Ahobalam" is listed among a select group of South Indian *tīrtha*s (Salomon 1979: 109).

That the Ahobilam centre of Narasiṃha embraced the Pāñcarātra temple order before the fourteenth century can be deduced from another Sanskrit source, the *Vihagendrasaṃhitā* 4.11cd,[27] where a Narasiṃha's aspect called Ahobilanarasiṃha is listed among the seventy-four forms of the Man-Lion.

During the same century an eminent Telugu poet, Errapragada, composed the *Narasiṃha Purāṇamu*, in which he situates the episode of Narasiṃha killing the demon in the hills surrounding Ahobilam (Adluri 2019: 173–74).

The *Rāyavācakamu*, a Telugu prose work composed ca 1600 CE, which reports events from early years of Kṛṣṇadevarāya's reign (1509–1529) (Wagoner 1993: 3), mentions that the king visited *navatirupati*, "Nine Tirupatis" (transl. in Wagoner 1993: 158). According to Branfoot (2022: 271), the *navatirupati* temples are not uniform in terms of construction, with the earliest evidence for the building of two of them, Alvar Tirunagari and Srivaikuntham, in the thirteenth century. Branfoot suggests that the *navatirupati* temples started to be perceived as a connected group under the patronage of Madurai Nāyakas, at whose court the *Rāyavācakamu* was composed, or under the Tenkasi Pāṇḍyas.

25 This route is nowadays reflected in a popular myth in view of which the Nallamala Hills are the embodiment of Viṣṇu's snake Śeṣa, which spans the range from north to south, with his tail in Srisailam, belly in Ahobilam, and head in Tirupati.

26 *Śrīśailakhaṇḍa* 49.38: *aho balam aho rūpam aho tejaś ca sāhasaṃ | aho bhakteṣu vātsalyam aho satkāraveditā ‖*

27 On dating *Vihagendrasaṃhitā* see Gonda 1977: 106.

Perhaps the first to mention the Ahobilam-related concept of the nine aspects of Narasiṃha was another Telugu poet, Taḷḷapāka Annamācārya/Annamayya, associated with the famous Tirupati temple. Some of the copper plates engraved with his compositions dedicated to Narasiṃha were found in Ahobilam, which is usually interpreted as a proof of his visits there (see, e.g., Vasantha 2001: 3). The period of Taḷḷapāka Annamācārya's life is usually estimated between 1408 and 1503, which allows us to assume that some form of the *navanarasiṃha* group was known (at least) to the Telugu speaking audience in the fifteenth century. One of the poet's songs begins with the phrase "Hail to the nine Narasiṃhas ..." "*nava nārasiṃhā namo namo* ...". Based on the translation of Narasimhachary and Ramesh (2008: 252–53), the aspects extolled by Annamācārya are: (1) Ahobala-, (2) Jvālā-, (3) Yogānanada-, (4) Kānugumāni-, (5) Maṭṭemaḷla-, (6) Bhārgava-, (7) Prahlāda-, (8) Lakṣmī-, (9) Varāha-. The forms I am not sure how to identify, i.e., Kānugumāni- and Maṭṭemaḷla-, can either conform under their local names to the two amongst lacking Chatravaṭa-, Karañja-, and Pāvana known to us through the medium of the AM and currently circulated oral myths, or refer to other, unique forms known to the poet, that predate those known to us today.[28]

However, two fifteenth-century Sanskrit courtly poems—the *Rāmābhyudaya* of Aruṇagirinātha Ḍiṇḍima and the *Sāḷuvābhyudaya* of Rājanāṭha Ḍiṇḍima, written under the patronage of Sāḷuva Narasiṃha, the founder of the second Vijayanagara dynasty of the Sāḷuvas—which contain a narrative based on the motif of a king as the incarnation of God, in this case translated into the narrative of Sāḷuva Narasiṃha as the incarnation of the *ugra* Ahobilanarasiṃha, are silent about the nine aspects of the god. [29] Nonetheless, since the plot begins with another

28 In the opinion of Sethuraman Kidambi, "Kānugu" refers to Karañjanarasiṃha, "Maṭṭemaḷla" to Mālolanarasiṃha, and "Prahlāda" to Prahlādavaradanarasiṃha of the Lower Ahobilam. However, given that the aspect called Maṭṭemaḷla is characterized in the poem as "terrifying," it is questionable whether it can be associated with an aspect shown with Lakṣmī. In turn, considering that the Prahlādavaradanarasiṃha temple of the Lower Ahobilam was most likely built after the fifteenth century, I would rather link Prahlādanarasiṃha aspect with the ancient shrine of Narasiṃha in a yogic posture located in the Upper Ahobilam, which is also associated with the teaching of yoga to Prahlāda, and thus speculate that the poet includes both in the pattern. Or, Annamācārya praises the aspects which had not been yet enshrined in the temples we associate them with nowadays.

29 These two Sanskrit *kāvya*s mark the beginning of the Empire's interest in controlling the Ahobilam area. We can assume that the strategic importance of Ahobilam resulted from its location on the northern border of the empire; it was close to the already famous temple at Tirupati and, above all, to the nearby headquarters of the Sāḷuva generals at Candragiri, from where the king could control both the northern and the southern territories (Stoker 2016: 79; Dębicka-Borek 2022a). Particularly useful for this polity was the establishment of a *maṭha* at Ahobilam (probably early sixteenth

recognized motif, i.e., the miraculous conception of a heir as a reward for austerities performed by his parents (the miraculous conception of Sāḷuva Narasiṃha due to austerities performed by his parents in Ahobilam), the poem mentions, besides the god's wrathful aspect, also his benevolent form, accompanied by Lakṣmī (Dębicka-Borek 2022a: 19–20).

Likewise, another Sanskrit source, which may predate the sixteenth century and mentions Ahobilam, i.e., the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya* (the glorification of the Varadarāja temple in Kanchipuram; on dating see Buchholz 2022: 22) does not explicitly refer to the ninefold nature of Narasiṃha, but, instead, limits the Ahobilam related thread to events associated with an angry aspect of Narasiṃha. *Kāñcīmāhātmya* 3.35–37 evokes the fierce Narasiṃha in a passage that provides a variant of etymology for the name Ahobilam:

> Ah! What valour! Ah! What firmness! Ah! What power in [his] arms! Ah! Look at the great strength of Narasiṃha's body! Ah! What teeth! What jaws! What features, Ah! What a very terrifying roar! What strength inspiring beings!' O Rājendra! The land of Hari, which was praised by gods in this way, is therefore called Ahobala [and] destroys all sins.[30]

The larger motif within which Ahobilam is mentioned in the *Kāñcīmāhātmya*, i.e., the motif of Narasiṃha associated with the Varadarāja who travels to Ahobilam to kill the demon there, seems to reflect contacts between these two Vaiṣṇava centres that were under the same patronage of the Vijayanagara monarchs. While important agents of these contacts were the *jīyar*s of Ahobilam,[31] both the Varadarāja temple in Kanchi and the Narasiṃha shrines in Ahobilam belong to the Vaṭakalai branch of Śrīvaiṣṇavism and follow the Pāñcarātra temple order.

Undisputably to the sixteenth century belongs another Sanskrit piece that mentions Ahobilam, albeit not the nine Narasiṃhas, i.e., 'pilgrimage account',

century), a monastic institution that managed the Narasiṃha shrines at the site and coordinated the spread of the Śrīvaiṣṇava faith in the Telugu region and beyond in cooperation with the successive Vijayanagara emperors (Appadurai 1977: 69–70).

30 *Kāñcīmāhātmya* 3.32–34ab: *kareṇa tasyorasi śailasāre samprāharad vajranakhena viṣṇuḥ | tasyorasaḥ samprahatasya viṣṇunā vinirgatāś śoṇitabindavo ye ||32|| sadyas ta evāsurarājakoṭayo babhūvur urvyāṃ śataśaś ca sāyudhāḥ | tato nṛsiṃho 'pi samīkṣya dānavān saṭā vidhūnvan sasṛje nṛsiṃhān ||33|| sṛṣṭai nṛsiṃhaiḥ paritaś supūrṇā babhūva bhūmis savanādrisāgarā |*

31 According to tradition, the first *jīyar*, Ādi Van Saṭgopa Jīyar, studied in Kanchipuram under the guidance of Ghaṭikāstanamammāḷ (a.k.a, Varadakavi) before he left for Ahobilam. Inscriptions at the Varadarāja temple, dated 1530 and 1539, mention that the third *jīyar* of Ahobila-*maṭha*, Parāṅkuśa Jīyar, gave offerings to the temple on the occasion of Caturmāsa-Ekādaśi and Kauśikadvādaśi days and made provisions for reading the *Kauśikapurāṇa* on the latter (Raman 1975: 81).

a *campū* (a mixture of verse and prose) titled *Yātrāprabandha*, authored by a South Indian Brahmin, Samarapuṅgava Dīkṣīta, born after 1574. The protagonist is the author's elder brother, who undertakes a pilgrimage to eventually experience the presence of Śiva in Varanasi and visits other religious centres along the way (Granoff 1998: 105–6). One of them is the site of Ahobilapati ('Lord of Ahobila'), as the poet calls the fierce deity portrayed briefly as destroying the demon.[32]

In the case of literary production later than the Annamācārya's poem, the differentiation into more than two aspects of Narasiṃha—benevolent and angry—seems to be a feature of pieces composed at the site, i.e., in Ahobilam. The Sanskrit drama *Vāsantikāpariṇayam*, allegedly produced locally in the sixteenth century, is usually attributed to the seventh *jīyar* of the Śrīvaiṣṇava Ahobila-*maṭha,* under the patronage of the Vijayanagara kings. Although it does not mention the nine Narasiṃhas, it nonetheless widens the scope of the god's usual aspects, by portraying him taking a local girl as his second wife, with the approval of Lakṣmī (Dębicka-Borek 2016). Unlike the works patronised by Sāḷuva Narasiṃha, which emphasise Narasiṃha's fearsome qualities to reinforce the image of the ruler through identification with the fierce deity, in this case the plot aims to symbolically convey the reconciliation of the state/Vaiṣṇava tradition with the local community and beliefs, thus evoking Narasiṃha in his benevolent aspect, already married and additionally enchanted with his future spouse from the indigenous community.

The evolvement of aspects of Ahobilam's Narasiṃha is also hinted at by a Telugu inscription at the site dated 1564, which records a grant of land by Śrī Parāṅkuśa Śrīvansatagopa Jīyar and mentions him as the benefactor who provided the road and steps to the shrine of the Bhārgavanarasiṃha (Vasantha 2001: 7–8), i.e., one of the aspects included in the group as we know it today. This suggests that by the sixteenth century, some kind of structures enshrining aspects other than the Ahobilanarasiṃha of the Upper Ahobilam and the Prahlādavaradanarasiṃha of the Lower Ahobilam had already been built.

It seems that the nine aspects of Narasiṃha are explicitly mentioned only in one inscription (No. 57 of 1915) at the site, engraved on the south wall of the goddess's shrine in the Prahlādavarada temple at the Lower Ahobilam— thus most likely after the end of the fifteenth century—which commemorates the construction of the Kṣīrābdhi-Navanarasiṃhamaṇṭapa (i.e. 'a pavilion of nine Narasiṃhas for the Kṣīrābdhi [-dvādaśī vrata] for the god Ahobaleśvara') (Rangacharya 1919: 969).

In fact, a full characteristic of the nine aspects of the god is found exclusively in the undated Sanskrit AM. The passage which deals with this topic is divided into two thematic sections. The first section (AM 4.9–53) discusses the location of the Narasiṃhas' abodes (*sthāna*; note that the text does not explicitly speak about the

32 *Yātrāprabandha* by Samarapuṅgava Dīkṣīta, edited by Paṇḍita Kedāranātha, 1936, p. 121.

temples/shrines of Narasiṃha but the sites where the god is present) and briefly explains the myths behind the names (*nāma*) of each aspect. The second section (AM 4.54–109) focuses on the powers (*prabhāva*) that can be attained by visiting the nine respective sites (*kṣetra/tīrtha*). According to AM 4, the sequence of the nine Narasiṃhas is as follows (1) Ahobila [narasiṃha] (*ugra* aspect), (2) Vārāha-, (3) Lakṣmī-, (4) Yogānanda-, (5) Pāvana-, (6) Karañja-, (7) Chatravaṭa-, (8) Bhārgava- (*ugra* aspect), (9) Jvālā- (*ugra* aspect). The same nine Narasiṃhas, although in different order, are praised in the *Navanārasiṃhamaṅgāḷāśasāna*, attributed to the eleventh *jīyar* of the Ahobila-*maṭha* (and which, if the attribution is correct, can be roughly dated to the sixteenth century).[33] In consecutive stanzas of the hymn (3–12) the author hails: (1) Jvālānārasiṃhā, (2) an aspect who dwells on a bank of Gajakuṇḍa pond in a cavern of Garuḍādri (*garuḍādriguhāgehe gajakuṇḍasarastaṭe*) (i.e., Ahobilanarasiṃha), (3) Mālolanarasiṃha (i.e., Lakṣmīnarasiṃha), (4) Vārahanarasiṃha, (5) an aspect who passed knowledge on sage Gobhila indifferent to cattle, land and gold (*gobhūhiraṅyanirviṇṇagobhilajñānadāyine*) (i.e., Karañjanarasiṃha), (6) Bhārgavanarasiṃha, (7) Yogānandanarasiṃha (note that this aspect is described as dwelling in a cave of Vedādri, i.e., in its old location; *vedādrigahvarasthāya yogānandāya*), (8) Chatravaṭanarasiṃha, (9) Pāvananarasiṃha.

Tab. 1 The sequence of the nine Narasiṃhas according to Taḷḷapāka Annamācārya (TA), the AM, the *Navanārasiṃhamaṅgāḷāśasāna* (NMŚ), the *Ahobila Kaifiyat* (AK) and contemporary oral tradition (COT).

TA	AM	NMŚ	AK	COT
Ahobala	Ahobila	Jvālā	Jvālā	Jvālā
Jvālā	Varāha	Ahobala	Ahobila	Ahobala
Yogānanada	Lakṣmī	Lakṣmī	Lakṣmī	Lakṣmī
Kānugumāni	Yogānanada	Varāha	Kroḍa/Varāha	Varāha
Maṭṭemaḷḷa	Pāvana	Karañja	Karañja	Karañja
Bhārgava	Karañja	Bhārgava	Bhārgava	Bhārgava
Prahlāda	Chatravaṭa	Yogānanada	Yogānanada	Yogānanada
Lakṣmī	Bhārgava	Chatravaṭa	Chatravaṭa	Chatravaṭa
Varāha	Jvālā	Pāvana	Pāvana	Pāvana

33 In this case I rely on the text reproduced here: http://www.prapatti.com/stotras.php The lineage of Ahobilam *jīyar*s: https://www.ahobilamutt.org/us/acharya/lineage/lineage.asp?file=26-11jeer.inc (accessed July 10, 2024).

The *Ahobilamāhātmya* and the myths associated with nine Narasiṃhas

The AM passage on the Ahobilanarasiṃha (AM 4. 9–15ab) is quite generic in terms of the god's distinctive local features. It describes a fearsome Man-Lion, ready to slay demons, with clichéd phrases glorifying his mane, sharp fangs and claws, and ability to produce fire from the third eye:

> The shore of the Gajatīrtha is the most fortunate of all locations. Narasiṃha who tears asunder enemies appears there. He sits on the disc-seat (*cakrāsana*) [and is] endowed with a disc (*cakra*) and other weapons. With his jaw he brings destruction to those who wander about. With a mane dispelling the groups of demons, with jaws full of terrible fangs, he is fearsome even to Fear. With his nails sharp as white thunderbolts he makes demons shake, with the cruel fire produced out of the eye on the forehead, he, of immeasurable form, appears to burn the three worlds. With his compassion to devotees, constantly, he is looking at [those] focused on gods. Extremely delighted, he dwells, welcoming with affection Prahlāda, full of love, sitting in front with folded hands, a true devotee. This is the first location (*sthāna*) honoured by Brahmā and others.[34]

Such a treatment of the first among the nine Narasiṃhas blurs, to some extent, the boundaries between him and other *ugra* aspects among the nine that one can see today in Ahobilam, i.e., the Bhārgavanarasiṃha and the fiery Jvālānarasiṃha. However, this particular form can be identified as the Ahobilanarasiṃha by a reference to a pond called Gajatīrtha/Gajakuṇḍa, which is the same as where the present Ahobilanarasiṃha temple stands. More details on this aspect can be gleaned from AM 7.78–82, which, unlike other sources I have already mentioned, offers two variants of traditional etymology of the toponym Ahobilam and its

34 AM 4.9–15ab: *sthānānām eva sarveṣāṃ gajatīrthataṭaṃ śubham | vidārayan ripūṃs tatra narasiṃhaḥ prakāśate* ‖9‖ *cakrāsane samāsīnaś cakrādyāyudhasevitaḥ | caṃkramakramitānāṃ tu vaktrāśayavināśanaḥ* ‖10‖ *saṭācchaṭāsamāyukto vidhūtāsuramaṇḍalaḥ | daṃṣṭrākarālavadano bhayasyāpi bhayaṅkaraḥ* ‖11‖ *śitadambholiparuṣair nakhair vilulitāsuraḥ | phālekṣaṇasamudbhūtavahninā dāruṇātmanā | aprameyakṛtākāras trilokaṃ nirdahann iva* ‖12‖ *bhaktānukampayā nityaṃ bhāvitāmṛtavīkṣṇaḥ* ‖13‖ *agre prāñjalim āsīnaṃ prahlādaṃ priyapūritam | premṇānugṛhṇan sadbhaktaṃ samadhyāste 'tiharṣitaḥ* ‖14‖ *idaṃ tu prathamaṃ sthānaṃ brahmādibhir upāsitam |*
Most of translations of the AM 4 passages are given after Dębicka-Borek 2023, sometimes slightly modified.

alternative, Ahobalam. Their explanation is put into the mouth of Narasiṃha, who is addressing Prahlāda after he has killed his father, the demon Hiraṇyakaśipu:

> This field (*kṣetra*) is of a great merit due to my appearance. From today, the world should proclaim it as "Ahobalam." Having known my incomparable strength (*balam*), gods proclaimed thus: "Oh, what a valour, oh, what a heroism, oh, what a power in Narasiṃha's arms, the highest deity, oh, what a cave! (*aho bilam*), oh, what a strength! (*aho balam*)." Therefore, this field (*kṣetra*) indeed will be Ahobalam. I will dwell at this very spot, near the Gajakuṇḍa, and you [will dwell] right in front of me, on the bank of Bhavanāśinī. Living here, you shall govern a whole kingdom successfully. Here, indeed, sages, ancestors, gods [shall] praise me.

In accordance with this passage, the name of the *kṣetra* which is located nearby the Gajakuṇḍa can be interpreted either as referring to a cave (*aho! bilam*) in which Narasiṃha manifested in response to the penances of Garuḍa, or to his strength (*aho! balam*), which, along with his other qualities, was worshipped by gods and sages after he killed Hiraṇyakaśipu.

The next aspect in the sequence, the Vārāhanarasiṃha, locates in Ahobilam the Puranic myth of Viṣṇu's *avatāra* of the Boar, who saved the Earth from the ocean by lifting it with his tusk. The connection of this aspect with the Earth is also apparent in the merits attributed to this *kṣetra*: If one recites the *stotra*, in which the Earth (Bhū) praises her saviour (cited in AM 4.59–71) for a certain period of time, one's desire for the land (*bhūkāma*) and the kingdom (*rājyakāma*) will be fulfilled (AM 4.57cd).

A passage concerning the Lakṣmīnarasiṃha says that the whole mountain glitters because of the glances Lakṣmī throws.[35] Verses from the section on Narasiṃha's abodes additionally explain that in this place Narasiṃha granted Lakṣmī supremacy (AM 4. 25).[36]

The site of the Yogānandanarasiṃha is associated with the event of the teaching of yoga to Prahlāda (AM 4.47).[37] The passage which addresses the powers

35 AM 4.45: *lakṣmīkaṭākṣavikṣepāt sadāyaṃ parvatottamaḥ | phalapuṣpalatākīrṇaḥ sarvataḥ saṃprakāśate* ‖45‖ "This eminent mountain always glows due to glances thrown by Lakṣmī, [and is] covered on all sides with fruits, flowers and creepers."

36 AM 4.25: *prādhānyaṃ tatra devyās tu hariḥ kalpitavān purā | tataḥ prabhṛti lokās tu lakṣmyās padam avādayan* ‖25‖ "There, Hari once bestowed Devī with supremacy. From this time people have proclaimed the place as Lakṣmī's."

37 AM 4.47: *yogābhyāsaṃ tu kṛtavān prahlādasya mahātmanaḥ | tadā prabhṛti lokas tu yogānanda iti bruvan* ‖47‖ "He was teaching yoga to the noble Prahlāda. From this time people call him "Yogānanda."

attainable at this *kṣetra* mentions various mythical figures and gods, including Brahmā, who attained peace of mind here (AM 4.77–79).

The Pāvananarasiṃha is linked with the power to purify transgressions, such as the loss of caste (*jātibhraṃśa*) or the killing of a Brahmin. The passage appropriates the Puranic myth of the sage Bhāradvaja, who, in the AM's version, got rid of his sin here thanks to Narasiṃha's presence (AM 4.80–82).

Regarding the Karañjanarasiṃha, the text mentions a Karañja tree, under which the god sits, holding a *cakra* and a bow.[38] Another passage associates the site with the sage Gobhila, before whom Narasiṃha manifested when he recited there the king's *mantra* (*mantrarāja*) [39] (AM 4.85–89).

The myth of another aspect associated with a tree, the Chatravaṭanarasiṃha, concerns Narasiṃha dwelling in its shadow,[40] while being entertained by various mythical beings with music and songs. There he granted two Gandharvas, called Hūhū and Haha, who approached Ahobilam from the Meru Mountain, the boon of being the best musicians. The *kṣetra* is therefore recommended for ambitious artists who dream of fame (AM 4.90–96).

The name the Bhārgavanarasiṃha is explained as being taken after the sage Bhārgava, who performed severe austerities there. After bathing in a pond (*tīrtha*) called *akṣaya* ('undecaying'),[41] one should worship the god as the Adhokṣaja (an epithet of Viṣṇu, 'who is beyond perception'). The *kṣetra* grants heaven and emancipation (AM 4.97–105).

The Jvālānarasiṃha, the last aspect in the sequence given by the AM, is known for his wrath. As his name suggests, his ferocity is associated with fire (since *jvālā* means "flame"). The final verses of the chapter praise his incorporeal (*atanu*) form, which is united with the body of the eviscerated Hiraṇyakaśipu.[42] One can attain the state of communion with God (*sāyujya*) in this *kṣetra* by offering burning diyas and clarified butter or sesame oil.

As we can see, the AM passages, which illustrate the successive aspects of Narasiṃha in Ahobilam, are not coordinated by any expressions indicating that

38 AM 4.83: *karañjamūle bhagavān yatrāste śārṅgacakradhṛt | kārañjaṃ kṣetram uddiṣṭam āśritaṃ bhavanāśinīm* ‖83‖ "At the feet of Karañja, where the Venerable One holding a *cakra* and a bow resides, there is a *kṣetra* described as Karañja, adjacent to Bhavanāśinī."

39 I.e., the *anuṣṭubh-mantra* of Narasiṃha mentioned before in the context of contemporary attempts at interpreting the ninefoldness of Narasiṃha.

40 AM 4.51cd*: āste chatravaṭacchāyām āśrito narakesarī* ‖51‖ "Narasiṃha dwells in the shadow of a Banyan tree like an umbrella (Chatravaṭa)."

41 The pond of such a name is situated in the same place nowadays.

42 AM 4.109: *saṃbhinnaṃ bhinnadaityeśvaratanum atanum nārasiṃhaṃ bhajāmaḥ |* "We honour the incorporeal Nārasiṃha who is joined with a split body of the Lord of demons."

their narratives follow or precede each other. Moreover, most of the episodes do not really concern deeds of Narasiṃha which would advance the plot, but simply refer to his appearance in a particular place as a result of ritual activities of certain sages or other beings. Even though they are linked as they explain various aspects of the same god, in fact they constitute unrelated vignettes rather than subsequent episodes of a cohesive myth. This impression is enhanced by a lack of consistency with the *phalaśruti* of AM 4, which lists the nine *kṣetra*s of Narasiṃha in a different order from that in which their abodes, names, and powers are characterised in the descriptive part of the same chapter, namely: (1) Garuḍakṣetra (i.e. Ahobila), (2) Potrakṣetra (i.e. Vārāha), (3) Jalanidhitanayā (i.e. Lakṣmī), (4) Yoga (i.e. Yogānanda), (5) Kārañja, (6) Chatravaṭa, (7) Jvālā, (8) Bhārgava, (9) Pāvana,[43] versus (1), (2), (3), (4), (9), (5), (6), (8), (7).

In addition, the motifs briefly touched upon in the (allegedly) sixteenth-century *Navanārasiṃhamaṅgāḷāśasāna* to praise nine Narasiṃhas can only be fully comprehend if one is aware of their myths embedded in the AM. Therefore it seems plausible that the AM is earlier than the former. The lack of mention of the aspect of Narasiṃha embodied in the Prahlādavaradanarasiṃha temple at the Lower Ahobilam ('the tenth' temple) could be another argument to date the AM as predating the sixteenth century.

The period before the turn of the sixteenth century was a time when the Śrīvaiṣṇava masters of Ahobilam were in the process of establishing its reputation as a pilgrimage centre that is worth visiting, despite its unfavourable peripheral location in the Nallamala Hills, inhabited by the Chenchus and, in the popular imagination, robbers preying on the travellers. In such circumstances, the imposition of the pattern of a nine-fold god on the territory might have served to integrate local beliefs under the umbrella of Vaiṣṇavism (and soon the Vijayanagara state, which was interested in religious patronage). Taḷḷapāka Annamācārya's poem, in which he uses purely Telugu expressions such as 'Kānugumāni' and 'Maṭṭemaḷla' to praise two particular aspects of Narasiṃha, suggests that the pattern of nine Narasiṃhas had evolved and was transmitted in various configurations already before the sixteenth century.

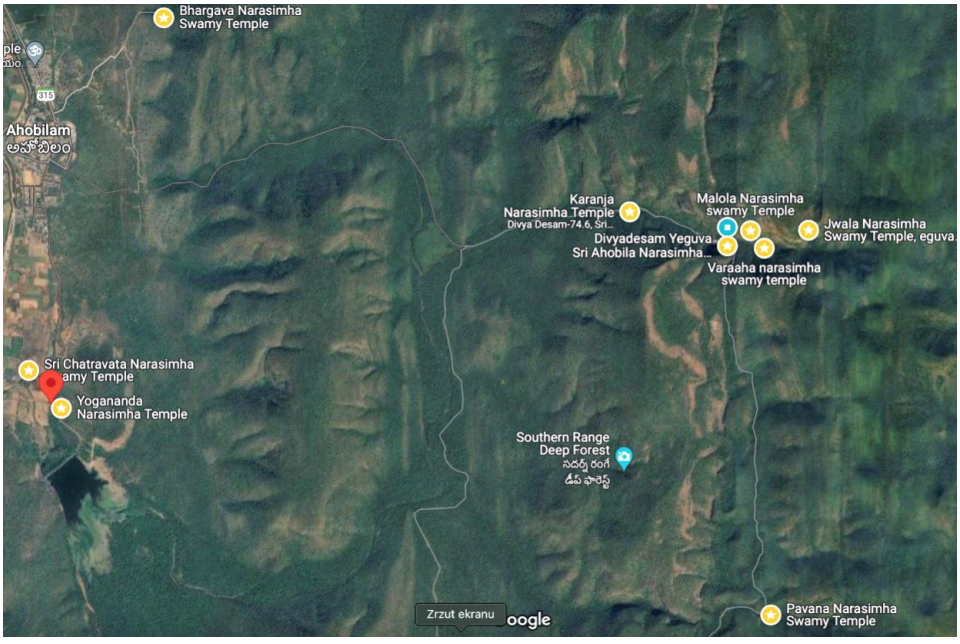
The inconsistency in the enumeration of the aspects of Narasiṃha by authors aware of the concept of the nine appears to confirm the artificiality of the linear myth behind them. In other words, the transmission of the texts does not give any basis to the contemporaneously promoted narrative which subsumes all the nine Narasiṃhas. On the contrary, the textual sources which legitimized the concept

43 AM 4.113: *pakṣīndraṃ potrasaṃjñaṃ jalanidhitanayāsaṃjñitaṃ yogasaṃjñaṃ kārañjaṃ kṣetravaryaṃ phalitaphalacayaṃ chatrapūrvaṃ vaṭaṃ ca jvālākhyaṃ bhārgavākhyaṃ bhagavadabhimataṃ bhāvitaṃ yogivaryaiḥ puṇyaṃ tat pāvanākhyaṃ hṛdi kalayatāṃ kalpate satphalāya* |113|

focus more on locating the deity in Ahobilam, by means of revealing his complex nature, than on praising these aspects as temporally linked or coordinated by a common plot (other than the identity of Narasiṃha himself). As I argue below, what the AM seems to suggest is that the nine Narasiṃhas are brought together by their natural location.

The *Ahobilamāhātmya* and the boundaries of Narasiṃha's territory

The AM passages that deal with the seats (*sthāna*) of the nine Narasiṃhas, although rather brief and operating mainly with the quarters, the mountain of Garuḍa (Garuḍācala), and the mountain of the Vedas (Vedācala) as points of spatial reference, outline the sacred territory of Ahobilam surprisingly realistically, if compared with the contemporary arrangement of the nine shrines (see Map 4).



Map 4 The nine Narasiṃhas' temples (yellow dots), the Prahlada Badi terrain where the (old) *mūrti* of Narasiṃha in a yogic posture mentioned in the AM is kept (a blue dot), the Prahlādavaradanarasiṃha temple in the Ahobilam village, i.e., 'the tenth' (marked with an Om sign), 2024 (based on Google Earth map).

As already mentioned, the first aspect in the series, i.e., the Ahobilanarasiṃha, can be identified due to a reference to a pond called Gajakuṇḍa/Gajatīrtha located in his proximity. Additionally, in AM 7.84, he is described as dwelling at the side of Garuḍācala, on the banks of the Bhavanāśinī river.[44] This description seems enough to identify his abode with the place where the temple of the Ahobilanarasiṃha was built: high on a hill, naturally nestled between the peaks of Garuḍācala and Vedācala, in the vicinity of a river known under the same name as the text reads.

The Vārāhanarasiṃha, i.e., the Boar Narasiṃha, is described as dwelling on the hinder (or upper) side of the Vedādri (*vedādreḥ pṛṣṭhabhāge*, AM 4.22),[45] which also matches the actual location of Vārāhanarasiṃha's cave shrine, slightly above the Ahobilanarasiṃha temple, on the higher slopes of the Vedādri hill.

The Lakṣmīnarasiṃha, popularly known as Mālolanarasiṃha, dwells, according to the text, on top of Vedācala, and faces south (AM 4.23–24).[46] In this case, too, the description reflects the actual bearings of the shrine.

The next passage concerns the Yogānandanarasiṃha, optionally called Yoganarasiṃha. Unlike the others, in this case the AM description does not parallel the location of the shrine that is currently a part of the ninefold pattern but refers to its today neglected predecessor. The text (AM 4.46–48)[47] locates the abode of the Yogānandanarasiṃha, which faces south (perhaps towards the Ahobilanarasiṃha), "to the west (or: obstructed part) of Garuḍādri, near the place of Lakṣmī," and continues: "To the north-west from there, Lord Narasiṃha shines in the cave in his own form of Yogānanda." Clearly, the extolled abode parallels the open rocky space in the north-west quarter of the Ahobilam sacred territory, up

44 AM 7.84 *garuḍābhidhabhūdharasya bhāge nivasan vai bhavanāśinī taṭe | vinutas sakalair mahīsurendrair vijayī tiṣṭhati nārasiṃharūpī* ‖84‖ "Dwelling at the side of the mountain called Garuḍa, on the bank of Bhavanāśinī, praised by all chief earth-gods (Brahmans), the victorious [god] remains [there] in the form of Narasiṃha."

45 AM 4.22: *vārāhaṃ rūpam āsthāya dhatte jāyāṃ vasundharām | vedādreḥ pṛṣṭhabhāge tu sthitvā devaḥ sanātanaḥ* ‖22‖ "Assuming the form of Vārāha, the eternal god supports his wife Vasundharā, having remained at the hinder part of Vedādri."

46 AM 4.23–24: *tasya bhūdharavaryasya unnate mastakottame | dakṣiṇābhimukhaḥ śrīmān narasiṃhaḥ prakāśate* ‖23‖ *tasya bhāge mahābhāgā kanakākhyā mahānadī | sadā dravati dhārābhir udvahantī sadā udam* ‖24‖ "On the highest, lofty peak of this eminent mountain [Vedācala], venerable Narasiṃha manifests [himself] facing towards the south. On his side an eminent great river called Kanakā (Golden) always flows carrying water with its streams."

47 AM 4.46, 48: *vedādreḥ paścime bhāge lakṣmīsthānāt samīpataḥ | dakṣiṇābhimukho devo yogānando nṛkesarī* ‖46‖ […] *tasya vāyavyabhāge tu bhagavān narakesarī | yogānandasvarūpeṇa guhāyāṃ saṃprakāśate* ‖48‖ "To the west of Vedādri, near the place of Lakṣmī, there is the god Yogānanda Nṛsiṃha who faces south. To the northwest from there Lord Narasiṃha glows in the cave in his own form of Yogānanda."

the Vedādri hill, now called Prahlada Badi, and the old cave shrine that contains the *mūrti* of Narasiṃha in a yogic posture situated at its edge.

The fifth abode belongs to the Pāvananarasiṃha, whom, in accordance with the present distribution of the nine shrines, the text situates to the south of Garuḍādri (AM 4.49).[48]

The sixth is the *kṣetra* called Karañja, at whose feet the god sits, west of the Garuḍādri (AM 4.50).[49] The description is also consistent with the location of the actual shrine, situated along the tarmac road that runs from the village (the Lower Ahobilam) to the Ahobilanarasiṃha temple in the Upper Ahobilam.

According to AM 4.51,[50] the abode of Narasiṃha in the aspect of Chatravaṭa lies to the south-west of the Karañjanarasiṃha, within half of a *krośa* (i.e. a distance of about 2 miles). It extends around the umbrella-like Banyan tree (*chat[t]rvaṭa*) under the shade of which Narasiṃha rests. The present location of the shrine corresponds to this description.

The features of next in the sequence, the abode called Bhārgavakṣetra, are given in reference to the Garuḍādri. Narasiṃha is said to sit in a place hidden between the mountains, to the north of it (AM 4.52).[51] Contemporarily, the shrine is situated in the same area, not far from the Lower Ahobilam.

The last *kṣetra*, belonging to the angry Jvālānarasiṃha, is briefly mentioned as located in the middle of the Acalacchāyameru hill (AM 4.53ab).[52] Accordingly, the shrine of the Jvālānarasiṃha is built high on the hill that is still known under the same designation.

Comparing the text with the actual topography of Ahobilam reveals that at the time of the composition of the AM, the spatial arrangement of individual aspects of Narasiṃha was almost the same as it is today, with the exception of the abode of the Yogānandanarasiṃha. The features of the abode referred to in

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48 AM 4.49: *garuḍādrer dakṣiṇataḥ pāvanaṃ nāma tīrthakam | tatrāste bhagavān viṣṇur nṛsiṃhasya svarūpadhṛt ‖ saṃśritānāṃ tu jantūnām abhīṣṭārthapradāyakaḥ* ‖49‖ "To the south of Garuḍādri there is a *tīrtha* called Pāvana. Lord Viṣṇu in his form of Narasiṃha is there, the bestower of desired objects to living beings who resort to him."

49 AM 4.50: *garuḍādreḥ paścimataḥ hy avidūre karañjakaḥ | mahān vṛkṣas tatra cāste tanmūle narakesarī* ‖50‖ "Behind/to the west of the Garuḍādri, nearby, there is a great tree Karañjaka, Narakesarī is at its feet" […].

50 AM 4.51: *tatsthānān nairṛte bhāge krośārdhe hy avidūrataḥ | āste chatravaṭacchāyām āśrito narakesarī* ‖51‖ "In the place to the south-west from this site, nearby, within half of *krośa*, Narasiṃha dwells in the shadow of a Banyan tree like an umbrella (Chatravaṭa)."

51 AM 4.52*: tasya cottarabhāge tu parvatāntarite sthale | bhārgave tīrthavarye tu samāste narakesarī* ‖52‖ "To the north from there, in a place hidden between the mountains, Narakesarī sits in the prominent *bhārgavatīrtha*."

52 AM 4.53ab: *acalacchāyameros tu madhye jvālānṛkesarī* | "In the middle of the Acalacchāyameru there is Jvālānṛkesarī."

the text correspond to the location of the ancient cave shrine of Narasiṃha in the aspect of a yogin who taught young Prahlāda, which still exists but is currently excluded from the pattern of nine. Vasantha (2001: 8) observes that this *mūrti* appears to be older than the one installed in the Yogānadanarasiṃha shrine in the Lower Ahobilam, which, over time, took over the role of one of the nine shrines. This suggests that the AM was composed before this abode was replaced by the shrine that is now conveniently situated at the outskirts of the Lower Ahobilam.

Another conclusion that can be drawn from various maps featured in contemporary Ahobilam guidebooks is that the literary distribution of the nine Narasiṃhas in the AM attempts at reflecting an ideal territory, at least much more ideally sketched than in geographical reality, with the Ahobilanarasiṃha (1) at the centre and the other eight places defining its boundaries. Moreover, their order in the AM, although not ideal, follows the circular order of *pradakṣiṇa*: the route starts from the centre (viz. Ahobilanarasiṃhakṣetra), makes a short approach to the north, passing *kṣetra*s of Vārāha (2), Lakṣmī (3) and Yoganarasiṃha (4), then the path turns south-east (or, as required by *pradakṣiṇa*, right), towards Pavānanarasiṃha (5), and continues south-west through Karañja (6), Chaṭravaṭa (7) and then north-west through Bhārgavakṣetra (8) to close the circle at Jvālānarasiṃhakṣetra (9) in the north-east (see Map 4).

Strikingly, the boundaries of this imaginary space are not distorted when—as it happened in some point in time—the site of Yogānandanarasiṃha is moved from the north-west (as described in the text) to the south-west, where the shrine of Narasiṃha in a yogin aspect currently included into the cluster of nine stands: in this case, too, the territory remains symbolically outlined by the eight aspects surrounding the Ahobilanarasiṃha, the ninth. Apparently, what is crucial is simply the symbolism of a digit nine, as "the grouping of tīrthas in numbered sets creates a landscape that connects place to place and thus spans the land in between" (Eck 2012: 31).

Moreover, the route sketched by the AM is challenging and time consuming: it requires traversing the jungle and negotiating varying altitudes, as well as approaching the Ahobilanarasiṃha temple twice: at the beginning, before setting off to the Vārāha-, and at the end, before setting off to the Jvālā-, but it still seems manageable. Given that the text nowhere recommends traversing it in this particular order, and that the natural conditions around Ahobilam were much more difficult than they are today, it is likely that the 'map' was essentially a mental exercise. Nonetheless, in such a configuration, the three wrathful forms of Narasiṃha, i.e., the Bhārgava, the Ahobila and the Jvālā, are visited in succession (at least today, as abovementioned, the climb to Jvālā begins at Ahobila, so by following the recommended route, the pilgrim would have to return to the latter, despite having visited the place at the very beginning). Therefore, one gets

the impression that this is a deliberate strategy to amplify the experience of the frightening nature of the god.

It seems that, from the AM's point of view, the importance of the order of the individual Narasiṃhas, in terms of the logic of the plot that connects them, is secondary to the spatial arrangement of their abodes. As we could see in regard to the change of the temples' spatial arrangement, whereas 'relocating' of the Yogānandanarasiṃha may affect linearity of the myth if perceived as consisting of sequential episodes, it does not affect the symbolically sketched territory around the Ahobilanarasiṃha.[53]

The spatial interpretation nonetheless does not address the question of why the sought-after pattern in Ahobilam includes nine aspects of the god. It is true, however, that most texts, when talking about directions, mention eight of them, hence nine is suitable for an 'eight directions plus one" template. In addition, the idea behind a cluster can be multidimensional: its elements can demarcate a wider sacred space through symbolic reference to the directions, but also endow the deity with a complex nature.[54] And indeed, the concept of ninefoldness provides Narasiṃha with a range of aspects—a teacher, a yogin, a husband, a demon-slayer, etc.—which address a variety of emotions and thus potentially trigger a wide repertoire of modes of devotion (*bhakti*).

The nine and the Pāñcarātra concept of *navamūrti*

The double nature of Narasiṃha's, generally based on the opposition between his wrathful (*ugra*) and peaceful (*saumya*) forms, had been further differentiated in Ahobilam by enriching these forms with local features conveyed by the narratives attached to them in the AM and oral traditions. This differentiation, chiefly through the expansion of Narasiṃha's nature with a whole range of benevolent aspects, may have been a strategy aimed at making the place—hitherto seen through the prism of the Tirumaṅkai Āḻvār's poem as defined by the bloody episode of the demon's slaughter against the backdrop of a landscape conventionally portrayed by Tamil authors as arid (*pālai*)—more accessible and less frightening in the eyes of devotees.

53 In such a case, the Yogānandanarasiṃha episode would presumably have been moved between the episodes relating to the Pāvana and Chatravaṭa aspects, which is not, for example, reflected in the contemporary oral tradition.

54 Diana Eck (2012: 31) states this in relation to the tendency to present a goddess as triplicate, materially reflected in her three shrines, either within one sanctum or built separately.

It is noteworthy that Tirumaṅkai praises Narasiṃha in nine stanzas (the poet introduces himself in the tenth),[55] each of which evokes the man-lion dwelling in Ciṅkaveḷkuṉṟam (i.e., Ahobilam). Whereas in the first eight he evokes him in a wrathful form, in the nineth stanza he 'softens' the god's fierceness by introducing the image of the goddess Lakṣmī, whose beloved is Narasiṃha. There is nothing explicit in the poem about Narasiṃha's ninefold nature. Rather, the nature of the god is customarily polarised into the violent, which dominates the image, and the traces of the gentle, implied in the nineth stanza by the goddess present at his side. Nevertheless, one wonders whether this ninefold structure of praise may have influenced (or reflected?) a concept that was yet to develop fully.

The digit nine is endowed with theological symbolism in the teachings of the Pāñcarātra tradition. As already mentioned, one of the important steps in the development of Ahobilam as a Śrīvaiṣṇava centre of Narasiṃha worship was the adaptation of the Pāñcarātra mode of ritual, probably before the fourteenth century. According to the Pāñcarātrins, the all-pervading God (Viṣṇu) encompasses nine manifestations, all of which are known collectively as *navamūrti* or *navavyūha*. Depending on the Pāñcarātra *saṃhitā*, these aspects are: Vāsudeva, Saṅkarṣaṇa, Pradyumna, Aniruddha, Nārāyaṇa, Brahmā or Hayagrīva, Viṣṇu, Nṛsiṃha or Varāha. Detailed teachings on rituals for nine *mūrti*s are included in texts such as *Pauṣkarasaṃhitā*, *Viṣṇurahasya*, *Agnipurāṇa*, and *Garuḍapurāna*, whereas in later Pāñcarātra *saṃhitā*s they are rather cursorily treated. This suggests that the concept was more important in earlier periods than the later (Rastelli 2007: 201–2).

This idea of a nine-folded god is perhaps echoed in the AM, *nota bene* containing references to the Pāñcarātra doctrine and to the presence of the Pāñcarātrins at Ahobilam, in its description of the Ahobilanarasiṃha, the first of the sequence of nine, as the all-pervading (see e.g. AM 4.16. cd; *nṛsiṃhanāyako viśvaṃ vyāptavān puruṣottamaḥ*; "The chief Narasiṃha, the all-pervading, the Best of Men"). In practice, the theological symbolism of nine may have been helpful in the process of expanding Narasiṃha's territory with the latest, tenth temple: whereas from the Pāñcarātra point of view the digit nine evokes nine aspects of Viṣṇu, for Vaiṣṇavas in general the digit ten recalls Viṣṇu's ten incarnations (*avatāra*).

55 See translation of the poem by Kausalya Hart available at: https://www.projectmadurai.org/pm_etexts/utf8/pmuni0622_eng.html (accessed January 20, 2024).

The painted nine: narrative murals of Varadarāja Perumāḷ temple in Kanchipuram

Another example of the polyphony of the nine Narasimhas is their visual interpretation on the *garbhagṛha* walls of the Varadarāja Perumāḷ temple in Kanchipuram. In the narrative interwoven into the third chapter of the Sanskrit Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya*, the Narasiṃha associated with the Varadarāja temple goes to Ahobilam, to kill demons there (Dębicka-Borek 2021). In contrast, the painting on the same temple wall (see Fig. 20) in a sense brings Ahobilam to Kanchipuram. As Seastrand notices in her work on murals in southeastern India, incorporation of images of other temples into the murals visually established a network of interconnected locations, encouraging pilgrims to experience their journey aesthetically besides solely through physical travel (Seastrand 2023: 187).

The painting of Ahobilam belongs to a series of narratively unrelated images, which allegedly depict the 108 holy places (*divyadeśa*) of the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition, all intended to remind the devotees of the many forms of Viṣṇu, to identify and

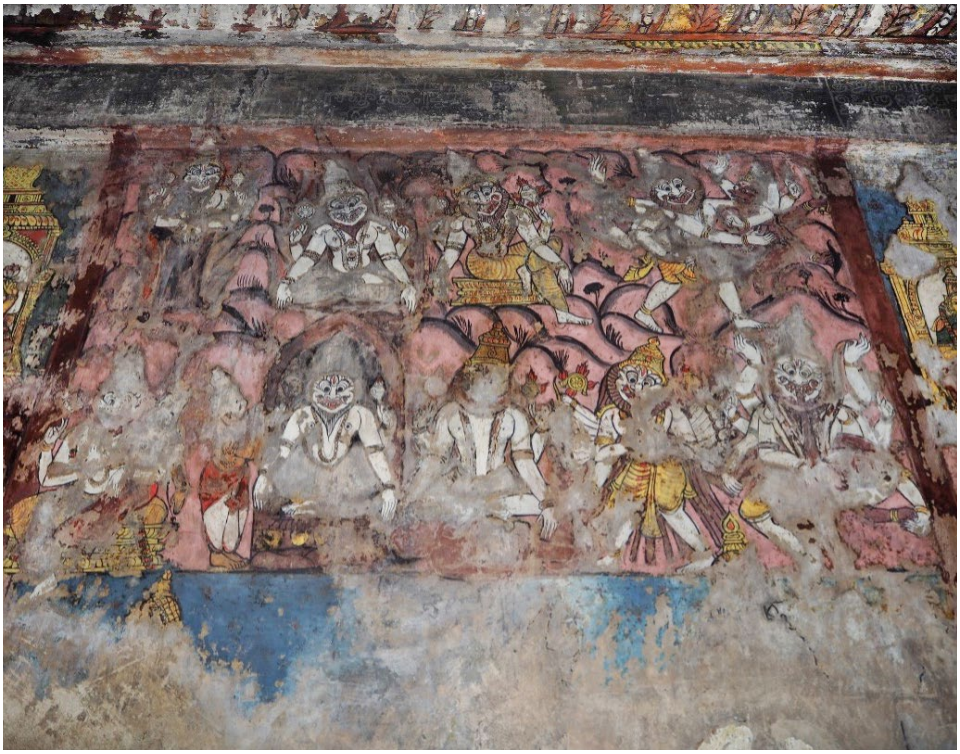

Fig. 20. A mural depicting nine Narasiṃhas of Ahobilam in the Varadarāja Perumāḷ temple, 2015. Photo by Ute Hüsken.

confirm the places where he manifests, and to encourage pilgrims to visit them (Krishna 2014: 23–24, see also Hüsken in this volume). According to Raman and Krishna, the stylistic features of the attached labels, which name the god's forms in Tamil and Telugu, indicate that the murals were created in the sixteenth century, with most of the panels presumably painted during the reign of the Vijayanagara emperor Acyutadevarāya, who sponsored the reconstruction and enlargement of the temple (Krishna 2014: 20–21, Raman 1975: 176–78). According to Dr. Madhan, who was a part of the murals' restauration team, they represent the style of the Nāyaka dynasty, i.e. the art of the seventeenth century, however one more layer of painting was found below (personal communication).[56] In South India, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed a significant increase in the practice of painting temple walls with maps of sacred places or landscapes. This trend coincided with a surge in literature focused on praising holy sites, mirroring the growing enthusiasm for pilgrimage practices, as well as the expansion and renovation of many temples during this time (Seastrand 2023: 187).

In Balaji's interpretation (2018: 116), the images, when read clockwise, create a nine-element narrative: (1) Narasiṃha comes out of a pillar (of Hiraṇyakaśipu's palace), (2) angry Narasiṃha is seated with flames around his head (i.e., in the Jvālānarasiṃha aspect), (3) Narasiṃha is seated as a warrior in *vīrāsana*, (4) Narasiṃha fights with Hiraṇyakaśipu, (5) Narasiṃha kills the demon, (6) Narasiṃha stands in anger with sixteen arms, (7) Narasiṃha is seated in a lotus posture (*padmāsana*) with a body of the demon (?) lying in front of him, (8) Narasiṃha is seated in a yoga posture (*yogāsana*) to control his anger, (9) Narasiṃha's anger is finally tamed by Lakṣmī sitting beside him.

While the panel undoubtedly illustrates Ahobilam—we see nine aspects of Narasiṃha against the background of the hills—the forms of the god do not quite match those described in the AM, and certainly deserve more research. Especially peculiar is the seventh vignette, which shows Narasiṃha with a brown figure, identified as the demon lying in front of him and said to be unattested elsewhere by Balaji (2018: 117). As Ramaswamy Babu suggested to me in personal communication (February 2025), perhaps the interpretation should be different: the dark figure is not lying in front of Narasiṃha, but beneath him, dead and trampled, similarly to the iconography of several other gods and goddesses, who are depicted as trampling a demon to emphasize their victory over him.

The narrative visually rendered in the mural does not evoke any aspects of the god uniquely bound with Ahobilam tradition. Instead, it rather follows a widely circulated Puranic version of Narasiṃha myth, which begins with his manifestation from a column, culminates with destroying Hiraṇyakaśipu and

56 I thank Prof. Ute Hüsken for connecting me with Dr. Madhan.

ends with attempts at reducing Narasiṃha's anger after the slaughter. Moreover, the mural's painters deployed iconography of Narasiṃha which, except for the aspect portrayed with a figure lying in front of it, are rather generic and attested to in other places. In this light, the only hint of Ahobilam, besides the nine-folded organization of the narrative and the hilly background, seems to be the emphasis put on the wrathful aspect of the god, and thus on the act of killing Hiraṇyakaśipu—note that, whereas according to Ahobilam's tradition, six aspects of Narasiṃha out of nine are peaceful, in the mural only the last three vignettes illustrate the tame/d god— with which the site has been popularly associated. However, these two elements—the nine-partitive depiction of Narasiṃha and the hilly backdrop—appear sufficient to evoke the essence of Ahobilam. Much like the modern religious map of the network of local shrines found on the boards in Ahobilam itself, the mural's goal is not to offer an accurate topographical representation or a detailed visual rendering of the local myths tied to the place, but rather to communicate the experience of its sacredness.

Such an approach to the local flavour of the myth associated with Ahobilam by those behind the visual rendering of the site in the Varadarāja temple responds to the needs and expectations of pilgrims visiting Kanchipuram. Notwithstanding the labels explaining what is shown in the mural, the Varadarāja paintings actually de-localise the space in which, in accordance with Ahobilam tradition, the painted events take place. This is understandable if we consider that the murals' recipients were pilgrims who mentally experienced Ahobilam during a pilgrimage actually aimed at worshipping Varadarāja of Kanchipuram. For them, probably unaware of the details of the myths locally rooted in Ahobilam, a coherent narrative consisting of nine episodes, along with emphases on the wrath of Narasiṃha and the hilly terrain in which the myth takes place, was enough to learn about, or recognise, the already established Śrīvaiṣṇava holy spot. Supposedly, rather than the detailed myths of Narasiṃha found in the locally known *Ahobilamāhātmya*, the mural evoked—and still does— the devotional poem of recognized Tirumaṅkai Āḻvār, in which he praises the god who killed the demon in the hills of Ahobilam in nine stanzas.

Conclusions

The Ahobilam-related concept of nine Narasiṃhas exemplifies the persistence and power of the pattern of nine Narasiṃhas—materially expressed in nine temples which outline a sacred territory—regardless of the shifting circumstances, audiences and perspectives. In other words, the number of elements in the cluster remains intact, even when, through the ongoing processes of appropriation,

questioning, adaptation, or even relocation, the very concept of the nine Narasimhas begins to function as a cultural product of various traditions, expressed through various media. From the point of view of anthropology of a space, Ahobilam is another instance of a site which is culturally constructed, and therefore can be variously perceived and variously represented by various agents (Gaenszle and Gengnagel 2006).

In a shared place like Ahobilam, where multiple narratives coexist, are contested and reinterpreted, it is rather the symbolism behind the cluster and the conceptual tools for linking its elements that may require certain modification to be comprehensible by and meaningful for a given community than a number of the cluster's elements. However, regardless of the initial inspiration or need to frame the Ahobilam centre in the symbolic pattern of nine—be it the architectural solutions already applied in other religious centers, the textual structure of Tirumaṅkai's poem, the theological teachings of the Pāñcarātra, or the outlining of a sacred territory—in practice, the most effective and universal method of linking the nine temples is a narrative. A linear and coherent narrative that encompasses various aspects of the god through words or images—and thus provides a whole range of experiencing *bhakti*—has the greatest impact on the minds of pilgrims, even if it is not confirmed by the authoritative textual tradition, or it is impossible to be recreated, episode by episode, while traversing the demanding sacred territory.

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