

Introduction¹

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For many centuries, Hindu temples and shrines have been of great importance to South Indian religious, social and political life. Aside from being places of worship, they are also pilgrimage destinations, centres of learning, political hotspots, and foci of economic activities. In these temples, not only the human and the divine interact, but they are also meeting places of different members of the communities, be they local or coming from afar. It therefore does not come as a surprise that Hindu temples do not exist in isolation, but stand in multiple relationships to other temples. They relate to each other in terms of architecture, ritual, or mythology, or on a conceptual level when particular sites are grouped together. Especially in urban centres, multiple temples representing different religious traditions may coexist within a shared sacred space.

Extant scholarship has tended to view temples as stand-alone monuments. The current volume sets out to pay more attention to the connections that exist *between* individual Hindu temples and the affiliated communities, be it within a particular place or on a trans-local level. We describe these connections as “temple networks,” a concept which instead of stable hierarchies and structures looks at nodal, multi-centred, and fluid systems, in which the connections in numerous fields of interaction are understood as dynamic processes.

Temple Networks

Temple networks can be of different types. A temple network may be constituted by shrines in different places that are grouped together as a concrete, often numbered, set—“connected places” in Feldhaus’s (2003) terminology. Such temple networks are imagined or symbolic in so far as they are connected on a purely conceptual level.

1 This volume is an outcome of the project “Temple Networks in Early Modern South India: Narratives, Rituals, and Material Culture” (Principal Investigators Ute Hüsken and Jonas Buchholz), which was generously funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation)—project number 428328143. The editors wish to thank Prof. Dr. Peter Bisschop (Leiden University), who kindly agreed to review the manuscript of this volume in an open review process, and whose input and criticism helped to improve the diverse contributions to this volume. We also would like to express our gratitude to Dr. Quoc-Bao Do, who competently did the copy-editing and formatting of the manuscript. We thank the team from Heidelberg Asian Studies Publishing (HASP) for professionally guiding us through the publication process.

At the same time, however, their connection is real in the sense that it is meaningful for the people who visit the temples, or even peregrinate all sites of a group as a pilgrimage circuit. Well-known examples on a pan-Indian level are the seven “cities of liberation” (*saptamokṣapurī*), which are thought to grant liberation from the cycle of rebirth,² or the twelve *jyotirlingas*, where Śiva is thought to have manifested himself as a column of light.³ South India also has its share of regional temple networks. Examples include the five “elemental *lingas*” (*pañcabhūtaṅga*), a group of five Śiva temples in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh,⁴ or the six abodes of the god Murugaṅ (*aruṣaivīṭu*) that are spread across Tamil Nadu.⁵ Temple networks of this type may also exist on a local level, as the example of the nine Narasimhas at Ahobilam shows (see Dębicka-Borek, this volume).

At the same time, the concept of temple networks can also be employed to describe the relations between temples that coexist within a given space, as within a particular city or town. Especially in urban areas, temples rarely stand alone; rather, they form part of a sacred topography that is defined by the presence of numerous temples and shrines, some devoted to the same deity, others belonging to different religious traditions, as well as sacred water bodies. A prime example is the South Indian temple town of Kanchipuram, with which several contributions to this volume (Buchholz, Hüsken, Ambach, Stein) are concerned. Unsurprisingly, competing notions of hierarchy and different definitions of centre and periphery exist in such a situation. Particularly the relations between temples belonging to different religious traditions are often highly dynamic and contested. These relations can be characterized by rivalry, as each tradition tries to assert its primacy and contests competing claims (Hüsken 2017, Schier 2021). Often, however, there is also an element of cohesion, as different religious traditions share a common repertoire of local myths (see Hüsken and Ambach, this volume) and as deities pay visits to each other during temple festivals. Moreover, different traditions that coexist in a religious centre may also cooperate to assert the position of their place in competition with other religious centres.⁶ Rivalry constitutes as much a connection as cooperation.

Importantly, the temple networks that are laid out in the texts also authorize pilgrimage practice: the narratives are *walked* or otherwise traveled when pilgrims follow the routes that sages or gods have used before them. In this way, the pilgrims’ movements between particular sites actively participate in the establishment of the

2 The list of these seven cities of liberation most commonly includes Ayodhya, Mathura, Haridwar, Varanasi, Kanchi, Ujjain, and Dwaraka (see e.g., *Garuḍapurāṇa* 2.35.5c–6b).

3 See Fleming 2009 and Eck 2012, 189–256.

4 These five temples are in Kanchipuram, Kalahasti, Tiruvanaikkaval, Tiruvannamalai, and Chidambaram (see Eck 2012, 253–256).

5 See Clothey 1978, 116–131.

6 For example, in a narrative given in the thirty-first chapter of the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya*, the Brahmin Upamanyu travelled to many well-known pilgrimage places, but found *mokṣa* only in Kanchipuram (Hüsken, this volume).

sacred map (Eck 2012, 5), as they follow the footsteps of mythical travelers imagined in the texts. Clearly, one chief aim of the texts at the centre of this volume, the *sthalamāhātmyas*, was to advertise a site in order to attract devotees: they express the claims of temple priests and local authorities, who depend on the boost of the economy through a steady influx of pilgrims.

Finally, temple networks may also be formed by shrines that are related to each other in terms of ritual or mythology. Temples in different places may share the same myth of origin or particular ritual traditions. Ritual and mythology are often connected since the origins of specific ritual practices are often explained through mythological narratives.⁷ Moreover, as Branfoot's contribution in this volume shows, temple networks may also be (re)created as architecture, for example through replicas of particular shrines in other places. Such connections are often also expressed through murals that depict related sites.⁸ At the same time, temples that share particular architectural features may create new networks of their own. By including contributions that look at the connections between temples as expressed in different media, this volume opens up new perspectives on temples as "agents" in close connection to and interaction with other sacred sites and actors.

Temple Legends

Most contributions to this volume approach temples and temple networks through textual sources. In this respect, a central resource are the texts that we call "temple legends," corresponding to the class of texts known as *sthalamāhātmya* in Sanskrit and *talapurāṇam* (from Skt. *sthalapurāṇa*) in Tamil. This textual genre is as vast as it is understudied (see Buchholz, this volume).⁹ In short, *māhātmyas* can be characterized as texts that glorify a particular subject, in the case of *sthalamāhātmyas* a particular sacred site (an area, a temple, a city, or a river). Such texts were composed both in Sanskrit and in South Indian languages like Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam throughout the second millennium of the common era. A particularly large number of such texts exists in Tamil, with the production of Tamil *talapurāṇams* seeing a major upsurge between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Temple legends describe specific shrines, salvific spaces, and deities and narrate etiological myths accounting for their origins, specifying at the same time local ritual practices. They reflect specific temple networks, and at the same time link local and transregional traditions, often by connecting localized narratives to pan-Indian Purāṇic myths. Sanskrit *sthalamāhātmyas* also typically associate themselves with the transregional

7 Several of the Viṣṇu temples in Kanchipuram are connected through the story of Brahmā's horse-sacrifice (*aśvamedha*). This connection is expressed in the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya* (see Porcher 1985), in the common perceptions of these Viṣṇus as "brothers," and it is also expressed through the processional routes of the respective deities.

8 See Seastrand 2019; for the Varadarāja temple, see Krishna 2014.

9 See however Shulman's groundbreaking work *Tamil Temple Myths* from 1980.

Purāṇic tradition by claiming to be part of specific Purāṇas.¹⁰ As such, temple legends form part of a complex textual network.

A further dimension is added by the fact that such texts do not only exist in Sanskrit, but also in local South Indian languages. While the Sanskrit texts and those in local languages are closely intertwined, their relationship is far more complex than what conventional categories such as “translation” or “adaptation” can express, as many of the contributions to this volume show (Buchholz, Ganesan, Sarma, Nachimuthu, Hüsken). Temple legends therefore provide an opportunity to investigate the interaction of Sanskrit and regional literary cultures in early modern South India.

At the same time, the narratives contained in the temple legends are transmitted not only through textual representations, but also through the architecture of the temples, iconographic details, and through murals painted on temple walls – in short, through material expressions of the narratives. Moreover, oral versions of the narratives circulate among the temples’ priests, custodians, or local residents, and are retold when pilgrims visit the sites. They may correspond to particular textual versions, but often they contain elements that are not found in any of the textual sources (see Hüsken, this volume). In the case of some temples, mythological narratives are also ritually enacted (see Sarma, this volume). As Dębicka-Borek’s contribution to this volume shows (see also Schier 2018; Hüsken 2021), especially temple festivals and other rituals continue to be important means of re-enacting the narratives of the temple legends, both storing them in collective memory and retrieving them from collective memory. These performances provide insight into how the rituals relate to the texts, what meanings are attributed to these practices by different agents, and allow to analyse the adaptation and transformation of narrative and performative motifs by diverse sectarian traditions. Similar to the sometimes radically different interpretations of the basic narratives in the different texts, the ritual performances, and sculptures also tell stories differently, and are moreover often at odds with the textual narratives.

Non-textual expressions of the mythologies thus constitute specific versions of the narrative material, which are also often actively engaged by the contemporary temple custodians along with the oral narratives in the temple (see Hüsken, this volume). Thus, while today the Sanskrit and Tamil texts of the temple legends are rarely consulted by the relevant religious communities, their narratives continue to be transmitted orally among the custodians of the temples, local residents, in an ever-increasing amount of “grey” temple literature (summarizing stories pertaining to the temple), and more recently also on temple websites. These narratives are meaningful

10 Examples for such self-attributions are the Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya* claiming to be part of the *Skandapurāṇa*, the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya*, the *Anantaśayanakṣetramāhātmya*, and the *Aho-bilamāhātmya*, which all attribute themselves to the *Brahmāṇḍapurāṇa*, and the *Kāmākṣivilāsa* linking itself to the *Mārkaṇḍeyapurāṇa* (see the contributions by Buchholz, Hüsken, Ambach, Sarma, and Dębicka-Borek in this volume).

to both the narrators and pilgrims, as they establish, negotiate, or solidify a network of meaning pertaining to each of the many holy sites.

By applying the concept of networks to describe the fluid relationships between various Hindu temples in a given locality or across different places, and by looking at these networks' representations in different media, this volume takes a first step in opening up new perspectives both on South Indian sacred sites and their religious and ritual traditions.

On the Genesis of the Volume

This volume is an outcome of the workshop “Networks of Temples and Networks of Texts in South India”, which was funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) and conducted from January 20 to January 26, 2020 at the École Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) in Pondicherry (figure 1). The workshop concluded with a two-day-long excursion to Kanchipuram, which enabled the participants to visit and explore a number of temples that had been discussed during the workshop (figure 2).

Since the underlying research project “Temple Networks in Early Modern South India: Narratives, Rituals, and Material Culture” focuses on Kanchipuram, special emphasis during the workshop was placed on this particular temple town, yet contributions on other South Indian sites were also invited. The presentations were held in an open format, allowing the presenters to go into detail regarding their material. Many participants chose to read specific textual passages together with the audience. While the majority of the presentations dealt with textual materials, others approached the topic from the perspective of art history. In this way, the participants of this workshop explored diverse temple networks in South India not only through their representation in Sanskrit, Tamil, and Malayalam texts, but also through oral, performative, and material expressions of the textual narratives and through architecture and iconography. This approach is reflected in the diverse contributions to this volume, while the importance placed on primary material is mirrored by the rich appendices to many of the contributions.



Fig. 1: Session of the workshop “Networks of Temples and Networks of Texts in South India” at the École Française d’Extrême-Orient (EFEO) in Pondicherry.



Fig. 2: Visit of the participants at the excursion to Kanchipuram’s Aṣṭabhuja temple.

The Contributions to the Volume

The texts containing temple legends are composed in local languages and in the transregional language of Sanskrit. Here, the texts in local languages, which are clearly locally rooted, display close connections to transregional traditions. At the same time the texts composed in Sanskrit are largely made of locally specific narratives. In “*Sthalamāhātmyas* and *Talapurāṇams* of Kanchipuram: A Network of Texts” **Jonas Buchholz** takes a close look at the Sanskrit *sthalamāhātmya* and Tamil *talapurāṇam* text corpora that deal with the South Indian temple town of Kanchipuram, its sacred places, and its mythologies. Introducing the range of texts, he reviews their characteristics and explores the texts’ contextualisation within their tradition, their relation to Sanskrit and Tamil literary cultures, their religious affiliation, dating, and authorship. In particular, Buchholz focuses on the interrelation between the Sanskrit and Tamil texts, which are closely connected, while promoting their own agenda, with specific priorities and peculiarities.

K. Nachimuthu’s “A Survey of the *Sthalapurāṇa* Literature in Tamil” is a comprehensive overview and study of Tamil legends pertaining to sacred places. The first part of this contribution traces the historical development of *talapurāṇam* works and examines various factors shaping the evolution of this literary genre. In the second part, Nachimuthu develops a classification for the several hundred works belonging to the genre of Tamil *talapurāṇams* and examines details of their form and style, their structural characteristics, and narrative elements.

The major agenda of **T. Ganesan**’s contribution “Innovations and Reformulations in Translation: The Case of Some of the *Sthalapurāṇas* in Tamil” is to shed light on the relation between Tamil *talapurāṇams* and Sanskrit *sthalamāhātmyas*. Ganesan closely looks at those *talapurāṇams* and *sthalamāhātmyas* that deal with the sacred sites Tiruvannamalai (Tamil Nadu), Kalahasti (Andhra Pradesh), and Chidambaram (Tamil Nadu), showing how adaptations characterize the Tamil renderings of their Sanskrit counterparts. On the basis of selected narrative motifs, he explores the influence of Tamil literary practices and ideas of the Śaivasiddhānta tradition in shaping the Tamil texts in content and style.

The chapter “Glory of the Tiruvanantapuram Padmanābhasvāmi Temple as Described in the *Māhātmyas*” by **S.A.S. Sarma** deals with the mythology and history of the Vaiṣṇava temple of Padmanābhasvāmi in Tiruvanantapuram (Kerala). Sarma reviews the relevant *māhātmya* texts to detail mythological narratives of the origin of this sacred site, its deity, and particularities of its location, such as sacred water bodies. While doing so, he also points out correspondences between the texts and the temple’s architectural features (e.g., the structure of the sanctum) and contemporary ritual practices (e.g., the appointment of priests from a certain region).

Marzenna Czerniak-Drożdżowicz & R. Sathyanarayanan explore sacred water bodies and especially the river Kaveri (Karnataka & Tamil Nadu) in their chapter “Importance of Water Bodies in the *Māhātmyas* in the Kāverī Region”. Starting from the relevant Sanskrit *māhātmya* texts, they explore the character of the Kaveri as

depicted in the texts' mythological narratives, and they point out the influence of pan-Indian motifs on the local mythology describing the riverine region and its sacred sites. Moreover, through the study of material aspects of the sites and inscriptions, they discuss the dynamics of the region's ecological characteristics and the local cultural and religious practices in relation to the notion of the Kaveri as sketched in the *māhātmyas*.

Some contributions focus on specific sectarian versions of the temple legends: Even if authored in the same language, temple legends pertaining to one and the same sacred space often are transmitted in several different yet equally valid versions. For, especially potent religious spaces are populated not by one, but by many powerful deities and their temples, which are competing for pilgrims' attention and patronage, and which therefore tend to present their narratives in specific versions that emphasize their own superiority over other deities in town.

Ute Hüsken turns to the Vaiṣṇava Varadarāja temple in Kanchipuram and studies textual, oral, performative, and material aspects of the representation of two lizards in her contribution "Two Lizards in Kanchipuram's Varadarāja Temple." She closely explores the co-existing but competing mythological narratives on the origin of these "golden lizards" from two Sanskrit *māhātmyas* and one Tamil source and discusses the interrelation of the temple's physical space and the narratives. Furthermore, Hüsken examines the integration of elements from popular religiosity pertaining to lizards in the sanskritic religious tradition as reflected in textual accounts and in contemporary ritual practice at the Varadarāja temple.

In her "Reading' a Sacred Place Differently: Sarvatīrtha in Kanchipuram's Sanskrit *Māhātmyas*" **Malini Ambach** looks into the mythologies of one specific sacred water body, Sarvatīrtha, in Kanchipuram. Ambach focuses on the mythological narratives from three of Kanchipuram's Sanskrit *māhātmya* texts and addresses questions regarding both, the parallel and the diverging particulars of the stories, which reflect the sectarian orientation of the respective texts. She furthermore explores different perspectives on the spatial links of Sarvatīrtha within the city's sacred geographies that are expounded in these *māhātmyas*.

Reflecting a diversity of locally rooted sacred topographies (Feldhaus 2003), temple legends are also closely linked to a diversity of local practices and their underlying aesthetics—describing and prescribing lived religion. As mentioned, some narratives that have come down to us in the form of temple legend texts are also ritually enacted during temple festivals. Such spatial relationships as expressed in texts and performances constitute the focus of **Ewa Dębicka-Borek**'s study "Connected Places, Networks of Shrines: Ahobilam in the Nets of Spatial Relationships." In her contribution, Dębicka-Borek sheds light on networks that link the Vaiṣṇava centre Ahobilam (Andhra Pradesh) to other sacred places in the area and the larger region by way of, among others, a cluster of Narasimha shrines and processional enactments of local narratives. She explores the details of a description of the place from the Sanskrit text *Ahobilamāhātmya* and examines the interplay between

the space as presented by the text, the natural landscape of the area, and the patronage of rulers through the centuries in shaping the notion of Ahobilam.

The narratives found in the texts often can be read also from the iconographic program, and at times they are also expressed in the temple architecture itself. The final two contributions to this volume look at South Indian sacred spaces through architecture and through the lay-out of the town. In “Building Networks: Architecture, Ornament and Place in Early Modern South India”, **Crispin Branfoot** explores a choice of architectural and design perspectives on the historical construction of temple networks in fifteenth- to eighteenth-century in Tamil South India. Detailing examples of mural painting and relief sculpture, construction of shrine “replicas,” and material traces of festival processions, Branfoot shows how these specifics can constitute a reference from one shrine to one or several other, or associate places with each other, and thus create networks of pilgrimage sites.

The chapter “Grounding the Texts: Kanchi’s Urban Logic and Ambitious Extensions” by **Emma Natalya Stein** explores the underlying sacred geography of Kanchipuram, which was formed during the reign of the Chola dynasty and is still detectable in the architectural outline of the present-day city. In particular, Stein shows how the orientation of the temples and shrines throughout the city adheres to a specific pattern in accordance with the sites’ location relative to the central road leading through Kanchi. Stein further turns to the urban periphery to examine the influence based on the spatial structures on the build-up of settlements to which the city expanded.

Taken together, the contributions to this volume look at a variety of media in which mythological narratives pertaining to South Indian sacred sites are transmitted and transformed. In this way this volume is able to highlight that these temple legends constitute a rich cultural resource and a unique form of cultural heritage, which is material and intangible at the same time. The temple legends represent and give access to the complex relationship between textual precept and actual practice, between local (“folk”) and elite religiosity, and between oral, written and performative transmission. The 2020 workshop and this volume exemplify the benefit of exploring networks of temples through networks of scholars from different disciplines.

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