

Connected Places, Networks of Shrines: Ahobilam in the Nets of Spatial Relationships¹

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Diverse networks of groups of shrines constitute an integral element of Hindu religious landscapes, in which, to quote Eck, “nothing stands isolated” (Eck 2012, 35). The tools to explore such spatial relationships are for example provided by methods of literary cartography, in view of which what maps the space is a narrative (Tally 2014, 1–3). Recently, a growing interest in issues related to spatiality and place, and their cultural constructions throughout history and regions, can also be noticed in the field of South Asian studies (e.g., Feldhaus 2003, Selby and Peterson 2008, Eck 2012, Young 2014, Nowicka 2019a, Nowicka 2019b, Galewicz 2019). In this particular context, the equal carriers of the temples’ bonds are narratives, rituals and festivals (Preston 1980). The idea of movement between particular sites is in fact executed by pilgrims who take an imagined or real journey from one sacred place to another, thus actively participating in the establishment of the sacred map of India (Eck 2012, 5). Moreover, the footsteps of imagined or real travelers, be they either mythical, divine or historical figures, or common devotees, but also the paths sketched by objects or ideas (Galewicz 2020, 27–30), frame territories of various range and meaning, which are always important for their inhabitants. Taking a beloved god as the destination of peregrinations, the narratives involving the notion of moving along a reiterated route are usually emotionally charged. However, the sets of places perceived as demarcating a conceptually coherent region might also be produced without the help of a story encompassing various locations, but, simply, through counting or listing the sites, sometimes under a joint name (Feldhaus 2003, 127). The places might be also grouped by means of replication, stating that they are replicas of, physically connected to, transplanted from or containing elements from other sites situated in other parts of India (Feldhaus 2003, 158; see also Branfoot’s contribution to this volume). Last but not least, the sites might be thought together due to the lay of the land and/or the prospect of a safe journey between them. This might be the case if they are situated along the same river or a hardly accessible

1 This research was funded by the National Science Centre, Poland (NCN) on the basis of decision no. 2018/29/B/HS2/01182. I wish to thank Olga Nowicka (Jagiellonian University in Cracow) for sharing the concept of literary cartography she broadly uses in her PhD dissertation, “In the Footsteps of Śankara: Local Advaita Vedanta Monastic Tradition in the Topographies of Kerala Hagiographies,” which is still under preparation.

range, by the seashore or amongst a dense forest. Then it pays to visit them in a row in the company of others, even though not all the temples on the trail are equally important for individuals taking part in the journey. Localized myths inscribed into natural surroundings of certain sites are usually the topic of *māhātmya* texts. These texts outline sacred areas with the major aim of drawing devotees. As literary maps, *māhātmyas* are also often the products of the particular political and economic conditions of a given temple. It is assumed that the clustering of sacred spaces in *māhātmya* narratives gives an individual site, even if it is in fact less frequented than others, significant recognition (Eck 2012, 34).

In this essay, I shall outline the patterns of such spatial relationships by tracing historically and contextually variable modes of constructing a meaningful space of Ahobilam (Kurnool district of Andhra Pradesh). As a center of the Narasiṃha cult with a Pāñcarātra form of worship, currently the site attracts a limited number of pilgrims all the year round, particularly on the occasion of the “great festival” (*mahotsava*), which takes place in March/April. Due to its location on the slopes of the Nallamalla Hills, this Vaiṣṇava center has been until now associated with undisturbed forests inhabited by tigers and the indigenous population of the Chenchu hunter-gatherers. The remoteness of this area has significantly affected the inflow of pilgrims but has also empowered the development of a distinct form of Narasiṃha cult, deeply ingrained in local beliefs. The number of visitors, hailing predominantly from the region, cannot be compared to the masses reaching many other big and more easily accessible Vaiṣṇava temples of Andhra Pradesh, for instance Tirupati, yet it has been substantially increasing since the 1970s, when the village was connected to the town of Allagadda by a concrete road. As I will argue, the significance of this particular case study lies in the fact that it concerns a place which, on the one hand, due to its peripheral location, may somehow evoke the Turnerian “place out of there”, the sacredness of which arises from its remoteness (Turner 1973), or, as Preston put it, a place of particular magnetism emerging from the risk inherent in the journey to it (Preston 1992, 35–38). However, on the other hand, as the place is difficult to reach, it has become involved in a number of territorial interrelations discernible on various scales and in various contexts. I shall focus on the system of space given in the Sanskrit text that glorifies Ahobilam, the *Ahobila-māhātmya* (henceforth AM), which takes the natural environment as a frame of reference, mainly understood as being shaped by the Nallamalla range. The concept of a cluster of sites situated along the range (Srisailam, Ahobilam, Tirupati, Kalahasti) that I am going to discuss is by no means confined exclusively to the Ahobilam tradition. Between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries, these religious centers received particularly rich endowments from the Vijayanagara rulers (Parabrahma Sastri 2014, 381). Throughout the region of Andhra, the set of these particular sites has been imagined collectively as a set situated along the body of the reclining snake Śeṣa, who assumed the form of the mountain range —Srisailam lying on its tail, Ahobilam on its back, Tirupati on its hood, and Kalahasti at its mouth. These sites

together constitute a pilgrimage circuit stretching from north to south (Eck 2012, 251–252, 317). Remarkably, however, the AM seems to highlight especially Ahobilam’s connection to Srisailam. In addition, it substitutes the southern Kalahasti with Mahanandi (Nandyāśrama) situated to the north of Ahobilam. This preference of the north over the south, or, more precisely, of the Śaiva realm over the Vaiṣṇava² when defining a territory meaningful for Ahobilam tradition, raises a number of questions, which I am going to discuss below. Can the literary cartography of the AM be translated into the contemporary religious landscape of Nallamalla Hills? What were the factors which affected imagining Ahobilam as involved in this particular network? Were the religious affiliations of any importance in regard to pilgrimage circulation of this area in medieval times?

Central Points and Meaningful Peripheries: Ahobilam in the Nets of Spatial Connections

Before discussing the AM’s concept of organizing the “greater” territory of Ahobilam in reference to other sites set along the same mountain range, I shall briefly sketch other patterns which locate Ahobilam either in the center of territorial relationships, mention it as an element of cross-regional socio-spatial schemes or as belonging to other temples’ networks. The pattern, which involves Ahobilam in terms of the nodal point of a certain territory, concerns two local groupings: (a) the unique cluster of nine Narasimha temples, which also has given the site an alternative joint name, *navanarasimhakṣetra* (the area of the nine Narasimhas), and (b) the space marked by the hunting procession/festival called Paruveta. The patterns which present Ahobilam either as participating in cross-regional groupings or in the networks of other temples, at least from a current point of view, involve crossing linguistic barriers. These are (c) the widely recognized set of Vaiṣṇava holy places extolled by the Tamil Ālṅvārs (seventh to ninth centuries) and later on codified into 108 holy places (*divyadeśas*; ca thirteenth century; Young 2014), and (d) the network of three sites – Kanchipuram, Sholingur (Ghaṭikādri), Ahobilam— outlined in the third chapter of the Sanskrit Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya*. Although produced in different spatio-temporal contexts, these two latter concepts agree not only in the use of the notions associated with movement to produce the space to which Ahobilam belongs, but also in mapping Ahobilam on its fringes. As their purpose was not to praise Ahobilam as a single spot worthy of attention and visiting, it is not surprising that the narratives promoting these particular sets of dispersed sites do not treat Ahobilam as central in the net of interrelations forming the sacred landscape they envisage. However, this is a very peripheral location, which in light of literary

2 Ahobilam and Tirupati are Vaiṣṇava centers of worship; Srisailam, Kalahasti and Mahanandi are Śaiva ones.

cartography, proves the site's special meaning for a mapping plot (Piatti and Hurni 2011, 218).

a) Nine Shrines of Narasiṃha

The belief that Ahobilam is the unique site of nine Narasiṃhas has been fostering its popularity for centuries. However, the sacred space nowadays traversed by pilgrims actually covers a territory marked by ten shrines, each devoted to a different, locally conceived aspect of the deity: i.e., Ahobilarasimha, Bhārgavarasimha, Jvālānarasimha, Yogānandarasimha, Chatravātanarasimha, Karañjanarasimha, Pāvanarasimha, Mālolarasimha, Vārāhanarasimha, Prahlādarasimha. The temples are dispersed between the so-called Lower Ahobilam and Upper Ahobilam. The former more or less complies with the territory of the village and hosts the Prahlādarada temple, which is dedicated to the mild (*saumya*) aspect of the god and is excluded from the pattern of nine. The latter chiefly refers to a forested area dotted with the rest of the shrines, which spreads up to the hill, where the earliest temple at the site, dedicated to Narasiṃha in his ferocious (*ugra*) aspect (Ahobilarasimhasvāmi), is located, probably at the spot which had been sacred for the indigenous hunter-gathering tribe of the Chenchus (Sontheimer 1985, 145–146). Although most of the shrines in Ahobilam predate the Vijayanagara period, the center reached its peak under the rule of the Vijayanagara kings, from the times of the Sāluva dynasty onwards. The founder of the latter, Sāluva Narasiṃha (reigned 1485–1491), was portrayed by poets as born out of grace of Narasiṃha of Ahobilam, his family deity (Dębicka-Borek 2014). Extending their patronage over the site was particularly important for the next Vijayanagara dynasty of the Tuḷuvas, whose rulers successively expanded their territory into the Rayalaseema region of Andhra, where Ahobilam lies. A Telugu inscription at the site refers to a visit paid by Kṛṣṇadeva Rāya (reigned 1509–1529), who not only donated riches to the deity, but also, as some scholars believe (e.g., Rajagopalan 2005, Raman 1975, 80–81), might have played a key role in organizing the activities of the Ahobila *maṭha*.³ Till the end of

3 The past of this monastic religious institution, which to date governs local temples and has a number of branches throughout South India, is unclear. According to traditional accounts promulgated by the *maṭha* itself, it was established in the fourteenth century. Its first pontiff (*jīyar*), Vaṅ Śāṭhakopa Jīyar, is believed to have come to Ahobilam from Kanchipuram due to Narasiṃha's call. However, as Appadurai claims (below), the establishment of the *maṭha* should be rather linked with a form of rivalry between the Śrīvaiṣṇava Sanskrit and Tamil schools in Tirupati in the early sixteenth century, which made some groups of leaders associated with the Vaṅ Śāṭhakopa *maṭha* in Tirupati to shift to the Kurnool district of Andhra to look for new opportunities and areas of religious activities. Thanks to its association with the Vijayanagara rulers, in the span of several decades the *maṭha* became a leading center of Śrīvaiṣṇavism in Andhra (Appadurai 1977, 69–70). According to Sastry, the *maṭha* might have been established earlier, during the reign of Sāluva Narasiṃha, or Malikārjuna (reigned 1446–1465) at the earliest, that is in the second half of the fifteenth century (Sastry 1998, 214–215).

the sixteenth century, and with the support of the Vijayanagara kings, for whom association with religious institutions was essential for the policy of extending power into bordering zones, the monastery became crucial for increasing the influences of Vāṭakalai Śrīvaiṣṇavism in the region of Andhra (Appadurai 1977, 69–71). On a local level, the proselytizing activities of the first heads of the monastic institution (*jīyars*) are nonetheless associated to a significant degree with attempts at drawing indigenous groups of the Chenchu into the temple order (Vasantha 2001, 48). This combination of a Brahmanic tradition with local beliefs in fact led to the mutual permeation of certain ideas fed off of Narasiṃha's predatory features, which are till today particularly maintained on a folk level, but also discernible in the Ahobilam temple culture (Sontheimer 1985, 146–149).

Noteworthy in this context is the pattern of the nine shrines, which organizes the topography of the site, especially in terms of perceiving it as being worth visiting due to its salvific power (Jacobsen 2016, 354). This pattern also appears to be the most powerful in the process of transforming the area of Ahobilam into a meaningful space, as it reflects the long-lasting tensions at the site. By the use of the idea of Viṣṇu's capability to manifest himself in multiple forms in many places, the pattern allows to accommodate, under locally rooted forms of Narasiṃha (e.g., AM 4.8–54), the already remodelled traditions which predated the Brahmanic culture at the spot. Additionally, it gives Ahobilam a sense of coherence, clearly expressed in its collective name *navanarasimhakṣetra*. Considering our rather poor knowledge concerning the development of Ahobilam prior to the sixteenth century,⁴ it is difficult to estimate how old the custom of denoting Ahobilam through reference to the set of nine is. What we may presume is that it precedes the erection of the last and the tenth temple at the site, i.e., the Prahlādarada temple of Lower Ahobilam, the construction of which possibly started during the reign of Sāluva Narasiṃha (fifteenth/sixteenth century; Vasantha 2001, 86). The pattern inscribes the complex of Ahobilam into the trend observed in the region of Andhra in many other places, e.g., the “greater” territory of Srisailam (*śrīśailakṣetra*) with its eight gateways, the nine Nandi shrines in Nandyal, the nine Brahmā (dedicated to Śiva) temples in Alampur, the nine Janārdana temples in East Godavari district, the nine Śiva shrines in Bhairavakona/-konda (Prakasam district), etc. As evident in the case of Srisailam, the scheme may connote a variously conceptualized perfect space marked by eight directions and the center within them (Reddy 2014, 62–65). What is interesting in regard to Ahobilam is that the extension of the already fixed grouping of nine into ten appears not to spoil its imagined boundaries claimed by its Brahmanic spiritual masters. Contrarily, it might be interpreted as enhancing its consistence and anchoring the distinctive form of worship in the mainstream Vaiṣṇava traditions through aligning the native forms of Narasiṃha with the ten incarnations of Viṣṇu.

4 From the sixteenth century onwards the production of inscriptions at the site significantly increased as a result of the patronage of Vijayanagara rulers.



Fig. 1: A map of Navanarasimhakṣetra currently on display in Ahobilam (photo by the author).

b) Sites Joined by the Paruveta Procession

Given that the concept of connecting the sites can be also rendered by a festival/ritual storyline, we may assume such a function in regard to the Ahobilam-bounded narrative on Narasiṃha's marriage to a Chenchu girl, or, as a matter of fact, one of its local variants, which, commonly in popular imagination, serves as a scenario behind the hunting festival/procession known as Paruveta. Devised most likely after establishing the patronage of Vijayanagara kings over the site, the festival is celebrated annually for forty days, starting from the day after *makarasamkrānti* (mid-January). The procession, which carries Narasiṃha, visits over thirty sites located around Ahobilam.⁵ The most important among them is the Lower Ahobilam with its Prahādavarada temple, from which the procession departs and to which it returns when the festival ends. In line with the oral tradition, which perceives Narasiṃha as a god but also a human, the trek re-enacts his trip to the woods, during which he

5 These are (in order of visiting): Lower Ahobilam, Bacheppali, Kondampalli, Krishnapur, Kotakandukur, Marripalli, Yadawada, Alamur, Thimmannapalli, Narasapuram, Muttaluru, Nallavagupalli, Bachapuram, Nagireddyapalli, Padakandla, Allagada, S. Lingamdinne, Saravaypalli, M.V. Nagar (Allagada), Chinthakunta, Devarayapuram, Gubagundam, Jambuladinne, Mandalur, Nakkaladinne, Chandalur, Chilakalur, Thippareddyapalli, T. Lingamdinne, Nagulavaram, Tuvvapalle, Rudravaram, Lower Ahobilam (I received the list in 2018; see also Vasantha 2001. For an account of Paruveta celebration at the beginning of the twentieth century see Ramaswamy Ayyangar 1916, 112–114).

personally extends the invitation to the wedding with a Chenchu girl to his local kith and kin. However, from the temple's point of view, the celebrations retain a royal aspect characteristic of a ritual hunt described in Sanskrit narratives and hinted by prescriptions of the late Pāñcarātra *saṃhitās* (Dębicka-Borek 2021). This is expressed, for instance, by providing the deity's icon with a ruler's knife and turban, and by the presence of Chenchu archers in his retinue. In addition, the deity is taken to "social units" far from the temple, so that he may symbolically demarcate his territory and establish relations with its inhabitants (Orr 2004, 441–442, 456). From this angle, the space framed by the Paruveta procession differs from the space marked by the cluster of Narasiṃha temples, not only in regard to its range, but also in regard to its meaning: whilst the group of shrines makes the site appropriate for Brahmanic norms and gives it recognition, the territory enclosed by the procession denotes the orb of Narasiṃha's influence, mirroring at the same time the political agenda of the Vijayanagara kings, who dealt with the newly annexed areas with the help of religious institutions.

c) 108 *Divyadeśas*

Ahobilam owes its appearance on the list of the *divyadeśas* to Tirumaṅkai Ālvār (ninth century), who extolled it, under its Tamil name Cīnkavēḷkunṛam, in the *Periyatirumoli* (1.7.1–10). Noteworthy in this case, despite its physical bearings on the border of Tamil and Telugu speaking regions physically demarcated by the mountains dividing the ancient Tamil kingdoms from the central plateau, the list of the *divyadeśas* projects Ahobilam as belonging to an imagined land essentially appealing to Tamils (Young 2014, 345). The geographical borders of this land, stretching from modern Tirupati to Kanyakumari, where Tamil language is in use, were already outlined in the initial verses of the *Tolkāppiyam* (Selby and Peterson 2008, 4). However, in Young's view, the poems of the Ālvārs refer neither to an actual map of holy sites nor to pilgrimage networks already established, but their aim is to highlight particular places where Viṣṇu dwells to consolidate his devotees, who are dispersed across the area, and to attract more devotees to the community in the making (Young 2014, 345–360). If so, an outlying location of Ahobilam seems to play a crucial role in extending the northern borders of the Vaiṣṇava realm. This strategy is crystallized in another spatial system, which as time went on, got interlocked with that promoted by the Ālvārs. After the number of *divyadeśas* as 108 had been established as a normative framework of pilgrimage for Śrīvaiṣṇavas, the sites sung by the Ālvārs were also grouped into smaller geographical regions (Tam. *nāṭu*). In accordance with this pattern, Ahobilam together with ten further sites, namely Tirupati (Veṅkaṭa), Ayodhya, Badrinath, Mathura, Dvaraka, etc., was ascribed to the region to the north of the land of the Tamils denoted by the name Vaṭanāṭu ("northern country"). Scholars agree that this concept uses the sites perceived as "northern", yet important for Tamils, as a device to symbolically shift

the influence of Śrīvaiṣṇavism to a pan-Indian scale, providing the community with a wider area of movement (Dutta 2010, 19; Young 2014, 344).

d) The Route: Kanchipuram – Ahobilam – Sholingur (Ghaṭikācala) – Kanchipuram

The network of temples advertised by the third chapter of the *Kāñcīmāhātmya*, refers to the three shrines of Narasiṃha counted among the 108 *divyadeśas*: the Narasiṃha shrine within the premises of the Varadarāja temple of Kanchipuram, the Narasiṃha shrine in Ghaṭikācala/Ghaṭikādri (modern Sholingur, Ranipet district of Tamil Nadu) and the collective of Narasiṃha shrines of Ahobilam. In contrast to the above-mentioned patterns, it shows Ahobilam as participating in the territory significant for a particular, more recognizable temple, that is the Varadarāja temple in Kanchipuram. The narrative delineates an imagined route traversed by Narasiṃha, who in pursuit of demons leaves his shrine in the Varadarāja structure and proceeds to Ahobilam, with a stop in Ghaṭikācala on his way back again to Kanchi. The glorification of Kanchipuram might be seen as referring to a circuit partially implied by the legends maintained till today by the Ahobila *maṭha*. According to this narrative the *maṭha*'s first *jīyar*, after completing his education in Kanchi, set off to Ahobilam (Raman 1975, 80). On the other hand, if we refer to the assumptions of literary cartography, a frontier location of Ahobilam on the map sketched by the *Kāñcīmāhātmya* author/s triggers questions about its specific meaning for this particular narrative. Considering that as if to avoid bloodshed in Kanchi, the text sends Narasiṃha off to Ahobilam to slaughter the demon, Ahobilam's outlying location appears to overlap with its long-lasting perception as imbued with a unique ambience. This ambience has been associated with the fact of hosting an *ugra* aspect of Narasiṃha and an event of killing Hiranyakaśipu there, with which Ahobilam is attributed by local traditions. This particular episode uses yet another technique of connecting places. To destroy the demon, Narasiṃha creates a multitude of replicas of himself, thus giving the impression of being present in various places within the borders of Ahobilam (Dębicka-Borek 2019b). Noteworthy, the network of shrines promoted by the *Kāñcīmāhātmya*—most likely to draw routes to be followed by pilgrims and to legitimize the Varadarāja temple's connections with the Ahobila *maṭha*, again under the favorable politics of Vijayanagara kings—is not only imaginary, but is reflected in the physical features of the sacred landscape. The strip of land stretching between Kanchipuram and Ahobilam is exceptionally rich in Narasiṃha temples. This fact corroborates Hardy's idea of outlining a religiously cohesive area by means of a plot implying the deity's accessibility to all on the account of his journey (Hardy 1993, 166). Moreover, inscriptions commemorating *jīyars* of Ahobilam, a mural depicting the nine Narasiṃhas found on the walls of the Varadarāja temple, as well as the existence to date of the branch of Ahobila *maṭha* at the site, confirm the circulation of people and ideas between these two places since the sixteenth century. In addition, this indicates a growing role of the *jīyars* of

Ahobilam in the process of formation of the Śrīvaiṣṇava community. As this exchange goes beyond the land of the Tamils (see above), Hardy refers to the area produced by Narasiṃha's itinerary as a "supraregion" (Hardy 1993, 166).

To sum up, the instances of various modes of relations concerning Ahobilam I have outlined so far involved various scales and contexts of producing meaningful groupings and networks. The most localized pattern of the nine Narasiṃha temples at the site has organized the sacred space of Ahobilam and, most likely, opened the ways to accommodate the already transformed local cults into the Brahmanic mainstream. The widely known trans-regional scheme of the holy sites extolled by the Ālvārs, later on codified in the group of 108 and divided into smaller geographical units of the imagined Tamil land, reflects the importance of Ahobilam in strategies aimed at extension of influences of South Indian Vaiṣṇavism. In turn the route sketched by the *Kāñcīmāhātmya*, where Narasiṃha goes from Kanchipuram to Ahobilam and back, with a short stop in Sholingur, points to Ahobilam's participation in other temples' networks, including those belonging to other regions.

Now, let us turn to the scheme found in the first chapter of the AM, which emphasizes the sites that are dispersed, yet located along the same mountain range and in the same Telugu-speaking region.

Along the Nallamalla Range: Srisailam, Mahanandi, Ahobilam, Tirupati

There is an inner logic to the way the AM author/s mapped Ahobilam, with the description of its territory roughly shifting from the macro- to micro-scale. Whilst the first chapter of the AM appears to focus on presenting Ahobilam against the backdrop of its natural surroundings,⁶ the fourth chapter deals with the features of the nine Narasiṃhas whose abodes constitute the sacred space (*narasiṃhakṣetra*) and who are confined to what today roughly conforms the Upper Ahobilam complex. The two patterns do not interfere: neither does the former passage allude to the nine Narasiṃhas as a collective, nor does the latter emphasize the role of the range in the organization of their territory, focusing rather on the immediate locality. As already mentioned, the initial chapter of the AM links Ahobilam with the other three sites located along the same range, which are Mahanandi (Nadyāśrama) and Srisailam to the north, and Tirupati (Veṅkaṭa) to the south. Enumerating Nandyāśrama instead of Kalahasti makes this concept different from its popular version known throughout Andhra Pradesh till date.

In brief, the first chapter of the *Ahobilamāhātmya* (AM 1.40–77; see the appendix below), defines the sacred area (*kṣetra*) of Ahobilam as measuring three by three

6 This happens mainly in reference to the so called Garuḍācala/Garuḍādri/Garuḍaśaila, which, depending on the context, refers either to the *kṣetra* itself or to the mountain situated within its boundaries (Garuḍācala/Garuḍādri), or to the slopes of Nallamalla Hills (Garuḍaśaila).

yojanas (40). It is dotted with high peaks that are compared to “bridges over the ocean of misery” (41). One of the peaks resembles the Meru mountain (42). It used to be the pillar of Hiranyakaśipu’s palace (43). This is also where Narasiṃha destroyed the demon and and till date resides in his blazing form (*javālā*) (44–45). After the murder, as the text continues, Narasiṃha washed his blood-stained hands in a pool called Raktakuṇḍa (“red pool”/“vessel of blood”), which is situated nearby (46–48ab). To pacify the angry god, the gods sent down the river Bhavanāśinī (“remover of births”) (48cd–50). Next, the plot moves to the north of Ahobilam to briefly mention Nandyāśrama, another site which lies along the Garuḍācala range. This is where Nandikeśvara once performed austerities to please Śiva. As a result, Śiva manifested himself at the spot and shared this land among his attendants, ascribing proper names to certain local ponds (52–54). Still further to the north along the range, there is the famous Śrīśaila (Srisailam), the abode of the self-manifested (*svayambhū*) Śiva, who left the Kailāsa mountain to live there (55–56). The territory in question stretches up to the river Kṛṣṇā, beyond which another range of mountains raises (57). All the natural elements and beings who belong to the range are worth of worship due to Narasiṃha’s greatness (58–59ab). The next section of the account opens with a question posed by the sages to Nārada about the precise location of Narasiṃha’s holy place and the source of its power (59cdef). Nārada begins his answer with sketching the mythical map of the earth, on which Jambudvīpa is located. Then he zooms in on its southern hemisphere and continues with a short description of Ahobilam and the Garuḍa mountain (Garuḍācala) situated within the boundaries of its sacred area. As he explains, the term Garuḍācala serves as an appellation of both the *kṣetra* and the mountain (60–65). He depicts the *kṣetra* as full of various species of fauna and flora (66–73). Although “barbarians” (*mleccha*) equipped with bows and arrows live there, it is splendid due to the presence of sages, Brahmins and celestial beings (74–76ab). The account ends with a short reference to Veṅkaṭācala, which is situated ten *yojanas* to the South (77cd–79).

The above passage outlines the framework of a local version of the pan-Indian Narasiṃha myth—expanded upon further in consecutive chapters. Its episodes are localized, as they are imposed on elements of the landscape dominated by hills. This approach seems to transpire already from the fact that in contrast to other passages, Ahobilam here is often denoted with the term Garuḍādri/Garuḍācala, “The Mountain of Garuḍa,” alluding to one of the local narratives, in which Garuḍa performed austerities there (AM 1.64–65). The account of the sacred geography of Ahobilam begins, however, quite conventionally for a text of the *māhātmya* genre, with emphasizing the site’s powers, attractive for potential visitors. The site grants salvation as is implied by the mention of peaks resembling a bridge (*setu*), which is a common metaphor pointing to a holy site (*tīrtha*) as joining the earth with heaven, the so-called “crossing” (Eck 1981, 325). A mention of a particular peak, whose immovable shadow navigates the released devotees, seems to serve the same aim (AM 1.41–42). Comparing it to the Meru mountain, which is the archetypical cosmic mountain

deemed in Hindu traditions as the axis mundi connecting the earth with heavens and netherworlds, and encircled by other mountains (Eck 2012, 122–124), equates Ahobilam with the center of the world. A further remark on Narasiṃha who in his blazing form (*javālākara*) resides in the area which used to be the ruins of Hiranyakaśipu's palace, evokes Jvālānarsiṃha, one of the nine Narasiṃhas, who is associated with a sensation of fiery anger, which he experienced after killing the demon. In terms of physical realities, the verses refer to the mountain called Acalacchāyāmeru, at the base of which the shrine of Jvālānarsiṃha is located. A nearby pond known as Raktakuṇḍa, to date visited by devotees, is shown as possessing miraculous powers preventing reincarnation, as Narasiṃha washed off his demon-blood-stained claws after the slaughter there.⁷ The power of removing sins is attributed as well to the Bhavanāśinī river, which runs through Ahobilam. Equalled with the Gaṅgā in terms of salvific power, she is said to have flown down there in order to tame Narasiṃha who, after destroying the demon, threatened the world (Deḃicka-Borek 2019a).

The spatial perspective of the AM is enlarged as the narrative switches to the myths pertaining to other sites, namely Nandyāśrama and Śrīśaila. Although in each of the three sites, Ahobilam, Nandyāśrama and Śrīśaila, the appropriate god manifested himself, they fall into a shared space of the length of one hundred *yojanas* (AM 1.51), spreading along the “great Garuḍaśaila,” sanctified by the presence of sages on its right side. The northern boundaries of this shared territory are articulated by the set of topoi characteristic for the Purāṇic cosmology which define the realm of Bhāratavaṛṣa, dealt also in brief in AM 1.60–63. These are a mountain range (the Himalayas) and a river (Ganges) (Ali 2008, 123–126). This scheme is transferred onto the regional scale via the motif of the mighty Kṛṣṇā river, which meanders near Śrīśaila, where the mountains that form the natural border of the area end (AM 1.57).

The AM clearly states that the connection between the sites along the mountain range is attributed to Narasiṃha, whose greatness impacts both the elements of its landscape and living beings who inhabit the range (AM 1.57). Therefore, Ahobilam, which is perceived as the epicenter of the deity's power, is a central spot of the area (AM 1.59). This does not mean, however, that Ahobilam is shown as an unquestionably serene site. Its disturbing ambience—which after all contributed to the site's recognition throughout the region—is hinted at by a remark on hunting tribals (*mlecchas*) who live in the surrounding forests (AM 1.74). In line with the conventions of the literary genre, this remark is balanced by the assurance that also sages, Brahmins and mythical celestial ladies reside there (AM 1.75–76ab).

How shall we interpret the AM's treatment of Ahobilam's spatial connections? What does it say about the socio-religious history of the region in the medieval

7 The *Payoṣṇīmāhātmya* locates the motif of Narasiṃha washing his claws stained with blood on the banks of the Purna River (Feldhaus 1995, 176–177).

period? Why does the cluster of sites promoted by the AM include Nandyāśrama, a site which does not seem to play any role in other narratives related to Ahobilam?

Trying to tackle these questions, I shall start with some observations concerning the centers highlighted in the spatial construct advertised by the AM in reference to their objective connections. The toponym Nandyāśrama denotes the present Mahanandi, the site of “Great Nandi,” situated forty kilometers north of Ahobilam on the fringes of the Nallamalla Hills. This temple was among the famous pilgrimage centers of the Vijayanagara empire, as it is mentioned in a copper-plate inscription of Kṛṣṇadeva Rāya dated to 1508, which records his visit there (Chattopadhyaya 1998, 105). A “Mahānandi-tīrtha” appears also in the earlier inscription of Śivānanda, dating to the eleventh century. Ramesan remarks that the name of the temple possibly derives from a huge sculpture of Śiva’s bull, Nandi, which rests in front of the temple (Ramesan 2000, 51–53). AM 1.52 seems to suggest another possibility, connecting it with Nandikeśvara, a figure not necessarily representing the bull, but a human, sometimes imagined with a bull’s head, who attends Śiva (Orelyskaya 1997).

The temple lies within an eighteen-kilometer radius of eight further temples dedicated to Nandi, all together creating the complex known as Navanandi. Currently, the fame of the Mahanandi shrine also arises from its natural scenery: it is located in a natural gorge against the background of the mountains. The site is rich in springs and water bodies. This feature is perhaps hinted at in AM 1.54, which mentions Śiva assigning names to various pools. It seems that Mahanandi’s political connections with Ahobilam go back to the patronage of the Nandyala chiefs, the feudatories of Vijayanagara kings since the times of Sadāśiva Rāya of the Tuḷuva dynasty, whose preceptor was probably the fifth *jīyar* of Ahobila *maṭha*. They were Vaiṣṇavas, yet supported Śaivism as well. Their family name was taken from the area called “the abode of Nandi” (Skt. Nandyāla = Nandi+ālaya, contemporary Nandyal), which they patronized (Soma Sekha Rao and Bose Babu 2014, 135). However, both Ahobilam and Mahanandi are eulogized in the consecutive chapters of the *Śrīśailakhaṇḍa*, the Sanskrit text praising Srisailam, which is dated by Reddy to the thirteenth century. The inclusion of Ahobilam’s and Mahanandi’s glorification into the body of the Srisailam-related textual tradition most likely suggests that pilgrims’ routes connecting these three sites were already established (Reddy 2014, 109), and both sites played a significant role in the orb of Srisailam’s influence. Nowadays, it is quite common that the pilgrims approach Mahanandi after a visit in Srisailam (Ramesan 2000, 53).

Undoubtedly, however, Srisailam with its Mallikārjuna shrine constitutes the most recognizable site in the set that the AM describes (Srisailam, Mahanandi, Ahobilam, Tirupati). Located towards the north of the Nallamalla Hills, alternatively known as the Sacred Mountain (Śrī Parvata), and already alluded to in the *Mahābhārata*, it features several clusters ranging from regional to pan-Indian level. Srisailam is one of the twelve sites where Śiva manifested himself in the form of *jyotirlinga*

(*liṅga* of light),⁸ one of the fifty-one *śaktipīṭhas* of Satī, and one of five Vīraśaiva *maṭhas/pīṭhas*. By the mid of the seventh century, the site had become known as a center of Tantric worship, fostering development of various Śaiva traditions associated with extreme practices dedicated to Śiva in his Bhairava form along with his consort. After the Kāpālikas, circa in the eleventh century, the power over the place was seized by the Kālamukhas, and then, by the fourteenth century, by the Vīraśaivas/Liṅgāyatas (Lorenzen 1991, 50–55). By this time, the temple, along with associated sites perceived as its gateways situated towards eight directions, which all together constitute a pilgrimage circuit, was the most important in inland Andhra Pradesh (Talbot 2001, 107). According to Reddy, this concept developed over centuries, with the four outermost gateways, i.e., Tripurantaka (east), Brahmeshvara (west), Umamaheshvara (north) and Siddhavata (south) introduced by the tenth century, and the four minor ones, i.e., Eleshvara (northeast), Sangameshvara (south-east), Pushpagiri (southwest) and Somashila (northeast) added by the thirteenth century.

As far as relations between Ahobilam and Srisailam are concerned, both sites, along with Tripurantaka, constituted the famous centers of worship belonging to the Redḍi kingdom (circa 1325–1448 CE). Hence the routes connecting them must have been established earlier (Somasekhara Sarma 1948, 390). The subsequent copper plate grants of the Redḍis commemorate the construction of steps to facilitate the pilgrims' ascent to the temples of Srisailam and Upper Ahobilam by the founder of the Redḍi kingdom, Prolaya Vema.⁹ The king is remembered as supporting temples of various sectarian affiliations despite his personal allegiance to Śaivism (Somasekhara Sarma 1948, 84; Vasantha 2001, 69–70). Tripurantaka, the eastern gateway of Srisailam, was frequented by pilgrims already during the rule of the Kākatīyas (1163–1323) (Talbot 2001, 107). This may point to the existence of the circuits already then. Yet, in the case of Srisailam and Ahobilam, the inscriptional evidence corroborates only Srisailam's presence on the Kākatīyas' pilgrimage agenda, as it records visits of the last Kākatīya king, Pratāparudra (reigned 1289–1323). In regard to Ahobilam, we find a mention of Pratāparudra stopping nearby, remarkably on his way from Srisailam, exclusively in oral legends and *kaifiyats*, i.e., village accounts collected between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries under the supervision of a British official and antiquarian Colin Mackenzie (Wagoner 2003). Although there is no historical data that could prove that Pratāparudra visited Ahobilam, Talbot claims that some details contained in the *kaifiyat* of the village of Mutyalapadu make

8 On the *jyotirlinga* sites, see Eck 2012, 189–256.

9 The custom of visiting Srisailam and Ahobilam one after the other, is more often attested by inscriptions starting from Vijayanagara onwards. For instance, one record on two slabs opposite the Bhairaveśvarasvāmi temple at Porumamilla in the Cuddappah district refers to both Srisailam and Ahobilam (1367 AD), and an inscription dating to 1394 AD states that the Vijayanagara king Hari Hara II constructed some *maṇḍapas* at Ahobilam after returning from Srisailam (Ramaswamy Ayyangar 1916, 31–32).

this plausible (Talbot 2001, 203–204). The *kaiḥiyats* employ the motif of important Śaiva individuals travelling between Srisailam and Ahobilam quite often: besides Prātāparudra these are Śāṅkara (ca. eighth–ninth century)¹⁰ and the Maratha king Śivāji (1627–1680)¹¹ (Ramaswamy Ayyangar 1916, 26–28, 46–47). The stories pertaining to Prātāparudra, however, seem the most prolific, as they connect the Kākatiya king either with establishing local temples or the *maṭha*, which, at least in the latter case, appears to antedate the real events. Remarks on the king concern his habit to cast an image of Śiva, which turns into Narasiṃha when he stops in nearby Ahobilam. In addition, the *kaiḥiyats* which refer to Ahobilam appear to make a certain effort to establish its particular link with Srisailam through the motif, most likely reproduced from local *māhātmyas*, of both sites being mapped on the extreme points within the shared religious landscape. The *Ahobilam Kaiḥiyat* says:

(...) to the south of the area of mount Meru and near the southern Varanasi – Srisailam, a part of Karnataka Country – is to be found the Nallamala hill range. On one of these mountains, eight amadas from Srisaila Kshetra, Garuda commenced silent penance to obtain a vision of Lord Narasiṃha, who destroyed Hiranyakasipa (Sitapati 1982, 4).

The *Srisailam Kaiḥiyat* states:

Ahobilam with its famous diamond peak (*vajra sringa*) is at distance of 10 amadas from Srisailam. Lord Vishnu manifested himself as the Narasiṃha incarnation emerging out of the Steel Pillar here (*Ukkusthamba*) and killed the demon Hiranyakasipa, protecting the Parama bhagavatha Uttama Prahlada. This place is known as Ahobila Narasiṃha Swamy sthala (Sitapati 1981, 5).

Besides narratives which pertain to spatiality and movement between the sites, to the long-lasting tradition of pilgrimage circulation between some centers, including those of various religious allegations, may also point to the festival calendar. As Biardeau observes, especially the date of the annual great festival (*brahmotsava/mahotsava*), held in many Vaiṣṇava temples in the first half of the month Phalgunā (February/March), might be determined by the celebrations of the “Night of Śiva”

10 Traditional hagiographies of Śāṅkara, the so-called *vijayas* (conquests), depict him as the teacher of world (*jagadguru*) who circumambulates India to restore Vedic values. The Ahobilam tradition locates an event of dismembering a Kāpālīka, who at Srisailam approaches Śāṅkara to cut off the master’s head, in front of the Malolanarasiṃha temple, which enshrines Narasiṃha in his peaceful aspect (*saumya*) along with his consort, Lakṣmī. The Kāpālīka is killed by Śāṅkara’s pupil Padmapāda manifesting as Narasiṃha (Biardeau 1975, 54). According to Bader, Śāṅkara’s visit to Ahobilam is mentioned only in one account of Śāṅkara’s journey, i.e., in Anantānandagiri’s *Śāṅkaravijaya*, not composed prior to the fourteenth century (Bader 1991, 19). In its view, Śāṅkara reached Ahobilam from Sringeri and then set off to Tirupati. However, references to his visit in Ahobilam come after an episode which points to a disruption in the journey’s course, suddenly interrupted in Srisailam (Bader 1991, 100).

11 Śivāji visited Srisailam in 1674.

(*śivarātri*),¹² which take place more or less on the turn of February and March. The intention in such cases was most probably to take advantage of the inflow of pilgrims to important Śaiva temples situated nearby. Biardeau perceives this pattern particularly effective in regard to Ahobilam and Srisailam, chiefly due to the physical bearings of the two sites (Biardeau 1975, 49). Their relative proximity (currently a distance of circa 160 kilometers by road; sixty-four kilometers in a direct line, possible to be covered in three days on foot) and location on the same mountain range could have affected the decisions of pilgrims, who because of the fear of encountering tribes, predators or thieves, and the scarcity of walkable tracks, were most likely open to changing their itinerary for security reasons. An additional reason to visit both sites in a row could have been the specific concept of the presiding deities: both, Śiva in his Mallikārjuna form in Srisailam and Viṣṇu in Narasiṃha form in Ahobilam, respectively, are married to a local girl born in the same Chenchu tribe, which, in a way, foregrounded that the two abodes constitute elements of the same natural ecosystem. Moreover, as several scholars have stated, in both cases a male deity of a tribal origin is worshipped as a Purāṇic god inhabiting the shrine situated on the hill: Mailār/Malaṇṇa as Malikārjuna-Śiva in Srisailam and a jungle deity of the feline order as Viṣṇu-Narasiṃha in Ahobilam (e.g., Biardeau 1975, Shulman 1980, Pachner 1985, Sontheimer 1985).

Taking into account the rank and popularity of Srisailam among the devotees hailing from various parts of India, it seems feasible that the exchange of pilgrims between the two sites was of much bigger importance for Ahobilam priests. They had a hard time drawing substantive crowds, not only because of the remoteness, but also because of Ahobilam's relatively late development. According to Biardeau, such a tendency is particularly mirrored in certain narratives which, despite concerning Ahobilam and Srisailam, are known only in Ahobilam. This is for instance the case with an oral story, according to which the two sites are joined by an underground tunnel with entrances in the Ahobilanarasiṃha temple in Upper Ahobilam and in the *maṇḍapa* in front of the Mallikārjuna shrine in Srisailam (Biardeau 1975, 54). Interestingly, a similar concept occurs in AM 9.61–62ab, which speaks about a mountain cave, spreading from Ahobilam to Srisailam, where Narasiṃha resides.¹³ The same verses close an account of the deeds of the Bhavanāśinī river (AM 9.1–60), which, quite surprisingly in the context of the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition, disinclined towards impurity and blood, focuses on the event of taming her fury by Bhairava, alternatively

12 Or the *mahāśivarātri* (“The Great Night of Śiva”): the most important Śaiva festival, which involves a vigil at night. The festival has a rich symbolism, with celebration of overcoming the darkness as a dominant motif.

13 AM 9.61–62ab: *bhairavasyottare bhāge guhā vai parvatābhidhā | aṣṭayojanavistūrṇā śrīśailāntikam āgatā || 61 || tatra devaḥ samadhyāste nṛsiṃho gahvarādhipaḥ |* – “In the region to the north of Bhairava [’s deed] there is an eight *yojanas* long cave praised as a mountain, which extends up to Śrīśailam (61). The god Narasiṃha, the lord of the cavern, inhabits it”. All translations are mine.

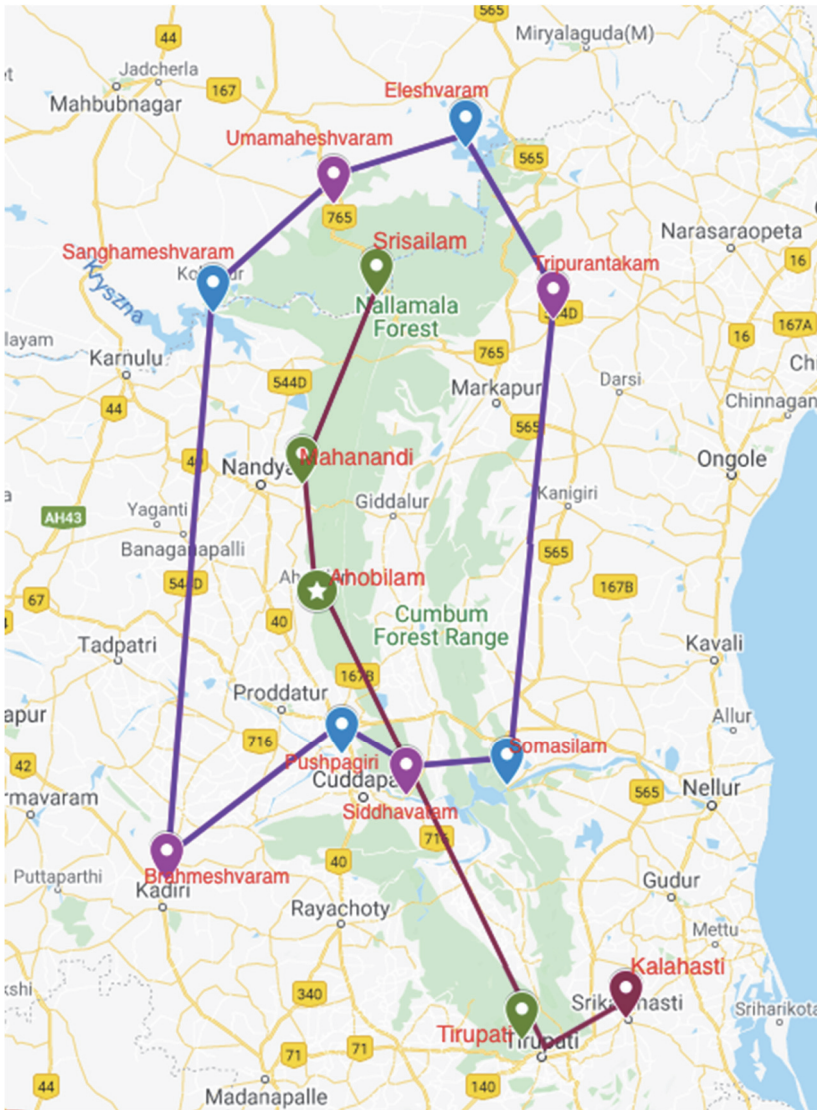


Fig. 2: Space marked by sacred centers along the Nallamalla range and the eight gateways of Srisailem (Google Maps).

called Kapālin. He self-decapitates and throws his head into her current in order to tame the river's rage. This motif, obviously alluding to extreme practices associated with Śaiva Tantric traditions linked in the region of Ahobilam with Srisailem, appears to complement the strategy of establishing connections with the site by means of a bhakti-oriented metaphor of the highest devotion to a deity, in this case articulated through the self-offering of Bhairava to Narasiṃha, whose immanent potency (*śakti*) is Bhavanāśinī (Dębicka-Borek 2019a).

Conclusions

The instances showcased above show Śaiva places of worship, chiefly Srisailam but also Mahanandi, as symbolically joined with Ahobilam – either due to their shared location along the mountain range or through leading routes between them. This strategy obviously is part of the multi-layered process aimed at creating the site's authority. Through connection to the great and ancient temple of Srisailam, Ahobilam could have aspired to be equally important to Śrīvaiṣṇavas and Śaivas; potential pilgrims were inspired to trace the steps of recognized individuals, and the appearance of Ahobilam on the pilgrimage map of the region was antedated. Does it mean that the occurrence of the less notable Mahanandi on the map sketched by AM 1 results exclusively from practical reasons, that is its location on the way to great Srisailam? I would posit that the answer to this question might be suggested by the way the Srisailam tradition imagined its holy territory. The physical map of the region shows that the circle (*maṇḍala*) formed by the eight shrines surrounding Srisailam naturally incorporates Mahanandi, but also Ahobilam. The bearings of the latter fall between the *maṇḍala*'s center, i.e., the Mallikārjuna shrine, and the south-oriented gateways. As mentioned before, both Ahobilam and Mahanandi are glorified in the consecutive chapters of the *Śrīsailakhaṇḍa*, which indicates their role on the pilgrimage map promoted by Srisailam circles already in the thirteenth century, thus a couple of centuries before Ahobilam became an important Vaiṣṇava center. It is noteworthy in this context that a record of Vikramāditya VI of the Western Cālukya dynasty, dated 1124 AD, mentions Ahobilam as Dakṣiṇadvāram (southern gate) to Śrī Parvata (Anuradha 2002, 162). This statement not only implies the possibility of pilgrims' circulation between Ahobilam and Srisailam as early as the twelfth century, but also may indicate attempts to include Ahobilam into the pattern of Srisailam's sacred territory, possibly as an auxiliary point of departure for the pilgrims heading to Srisailam from the south or south-west. The AM's concept of the holy space extending between Ahobilam and Srisailam, and thus incorporating Mahanandi, might allude to the same, already established model of mythological cartography. According to this model, Ahobilam was already implicitly integrated into the space of the greater Srisailam and hence participated in a network which included Mahanandi, too. This hypothesis might explain the brevity of the references in the *Ahobilamāhātmya* to the Vaiṣṇava site of Tirupati: despite having been sung about by the Ālvārs and praised in hagiographies of Śrīvaiṣṇava teachers, Tirupati actually rose to prominence only in the fourteenth century and developed as an important site of the pilgrimage network quite late, mostly due to the patronage of the Sāluva dynasty, local chiefs and merchants, that is roughly at the same time and in similar circumstances as Ahobilam (Dutta 2010, 33). In addition, perhaps the most important connections between Ahobilam and Tirupati-Tirumala are the *jīyars* of the Ahobila *maṭha*, who, if Appadurai is right, moved to Ahobilam from Tirumala in the mid-sixteenth century, most likely in order to avoid tensions concerning the growing influence of Tenkalai Śrīvaiṣṇavism there (Appadurai 1977, 69–71). To conclude,

the geographical imaginary of the AM seems to mirror the model of a pilgrimage network propagated in the orb of the Srisailam temple prior to the Vijayanagara empire, when a dominant religion in the region was Śaivism, although, starting with the rule of the Redḍi dynasty, the kings extended their patronage to the Vaiṣṇava temples as well (Sambaiah 2014, 388). As Orr observes with reference to medieval Tamil Nadu, for the ordinary devotees and pilgrims who celebrated festivals or retraced pilgrimage tracts, the adherence to one religious fold in this period was hardly significant and rather fluid (Orr 2005, 10–12).

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Appendix: *Ahobilamāhātmya* 1.40–79

AM 1.40–79:

yojanatrayavistīrṇaṃ yojanatrayāyatam |
vīrakṣetram iti khyātaṃ nṛsimhasyābhimānataḥ || 1.40 ||
ucchritaiḥ śrīṅanicayaiḥ caladbhāskaracandramāḥ |
dūrād ālakṣyate śrīṅgair duḥkhasāgarasetubhiḥ ||1.41||
meruvat prakatākāraṃ kaścic chrīṅgas tu lakṣyate |
tacchāyācalanaṃ nāsti muktānāṃ padavī yathā || 1.42 ||
hiraṇyakaśipoḥ pūrvam asurāṇāṃ mahīyasaḥ |
gṛhasya stambhabhūto 'yaṃ kālād acalatāṃ gataḥ || 1.43 ||
adyāpi dr̥śyate tatra madhyadeśe hariḥ svayaṃ |
jvālā 'kāro nṛsimho 'yam ayutārkasamaprabhaḥ || 1.44||
hiraṇyakaśipos tatra vakṣaḥ pīṭhaṃ vyadārayat |
nakhair dambholisaṃkāśair nakipṛītikaraiḥ śubhaiḥ ||1.45 ||
tatra devaḥ kṣālitavān karapaṅkeruhadvayam |
raktakuṇḍam iti khyātaṃ madhyadeśe virājitam ||1.46 ||
na vāyunā nātapena katicit kṣīyate jalam |
ye tu tajjalam ālokyā nṛsimhaṃ saṃsmaranti vai ||1.47 ||
te raktamiśritāṃ yoniṃ na yānti hi kadācana |
asya cograsya devasya śāntyarthaṃ devatāgaṇaḥ || 1.48 ||
gaṅgāṃ tripathagān nīya snāpayāmāsa sādaram |
sā paścimābhimukhataḥ pravahanty atibhīṣaṇā || 1.49 ||
bhavasantāpaharaṇāt tannāmā bhavanāśinī |
ṛṣayo nīscayaṃ cakruḥ nirmalāṃ ca prabhāvataḥ || 1.50 ||
asya gāruḍasailasya śatayojanasammite |
munayo dakṣabhāge tu ye viśeṣā mahīyasaḥ || 1.51 ||
bhūdharaśyottare bhāge yojanadvayasammite |
nandyāśramaṃ mahāpuṇyaṃ yatra vai nandikeśvaraḥ || 1.52 ||
śivam uddṛśya bhagavān tapas tepe sudāruṇam |
tataḥ prasanno bhagavān śivas trailokyapūjitaḥ || 1.53 ||
pramathānāṃ adhipatyam datvā tannāma tatsaraḥ |
bhūmiṃ vibhajya harṣeṇa śivaḥ sānnidhyam ātanot || 1.54 ||

tasya cottarabhāge tu śrīśaila iti viśrutah |
 garuḍācalabhāgo 'yaṃ gahano devadānavaiḥ || 1.55 ||
 yatra prītiṃ haraś cakre hitvā rajatabhūdharam |
 svayambhūs tatra devo 'yaṃ varado 'dyāpi dṛśyate || 1.56 ||
 tatra kṛṣṇā pravahati lokakaṅṭhakaḥ (corr.; lokakaṅṭhakalopinī) |
 sāvadhīḥ parvatasyāśya tataḥ pratyantaparvatāḥ || 1.57 ||
 ye ke cātra sthitāḥ puṇyā nadyo bhūdharakandarāḥ |
 siddhāśramāḥ surāvāsā yakṣā gandharvakinnarāḥ || 1.58 ||
 vaibhavan nārasimṣya sarve pūjyatamā bhuvī |
 ṛṣayah:
 kutredaṃ pāvanam kṣetraṃ yatra vai garuḍācalaḥ |
 vistīrṇasyāśya śailasya katham ekaṭra vaibhavaḥ || 1.59 ||
 śrīnāradaḥ:
 pañcāśatkoṭivistīrṇā dharanī harivallabhā |
 dvīpaiḥ samudraiḥ sahitā saptabhiśca śiloccayaiḥ || 1.60 ||
 tasyāṃ pṛthivyāṃ dvīpeṣu jāmbūdvīpam anuttamaṃ |
 karmabhūmir yato loke sādhakatvān mahattamā || 1.61 ||
 tasmin dvīpe mahābhāge khaṇḍe bhāratasaṃjñike (corr.; bharatasamjñike) |
 meror dakṣiṇabhāge tu kṛṣṇavenyāś ca dakṣiṇe || 1.62 ||
 saptayojanamātre tu pūrvāmbhodhes tu paścime |
 ahobilam tu vikhyātam bhāge vai saptayojane || 1.63 ||
 tasmin ahobilakṣetre garuḍādrir iti śrutah |
 yathā bhagavato vyaktiḥ paripūrṇasya sarvataḥ || 1.64 ||
 ekaṭra dṛśyate tadvat garuḍācalasaṃjñitah |
 evaṃ kṣetrasya nāmedaṃ parvatasyāśya viśrutam || 1.65 ||
 nānādrumatākīrṇam nānāpakṣiṇiṣevitam |
 tarubhiś campakais tālais tamālair hemabhūruhaiḥ || 1.66 ||
 [...]

dhanurbāṇadhair mlecchaiḥ strīyuktair ugradarśanaiḥ |
 śobhitāḥ sarvajantūnāṃ rakṣaṇopāyadakṣakaḥ || 1.74 ||
 munīndraiḥ sevito nityaṃ sadānuṣṭhānatatparaiḥ |
 bhūsurair bhāsītālāpaiḥ gurupūjāparāyanaiḥ || 1.75 ||
 krīḍadbhir apsarobhiś ca sevitaḥ sarvakāmadaḥ |
 mahāśailasya māhātmyaṃ vaktuṃ varṣasatair api || 1.76 ||
 na śakyaṃ brahmaṇā vāpi kiṃ punar mādrśair janaiḥ |
 śailasya dakṣiṇe bhāge daśayojanasamṃmite || 1.77 ||
 venkaṭākhyo mahāśailo yatrāste bhagavān hariḥ |
 sevito nityamuktaiś ca ṛṣibhiś ca mahātmabhiḥ || 1.78 ||

evam āmalayāc chailo vistṛto garuḍābhidhaḥ |
 etad vaḥ sarvam ākhyātaṃ yathā sāntvaṃ subhāṣitam || 1.79 ||

“[Ahobilam is] three *yojanas* wide and three *yojanas* long. It is called *vīrakṣetra* [= the site of heroes] due to the affection of Narasiṃha[’s devotees] (40). The shining moon disturbed by multitude of high peaks is seen from afar along with the peaks [which resemble] bridges over the ocean of misery (41). A certain peak looks like the Meru mountain; however, having a manifested appearance, it casts an immovable shadow, like a path for liberated souls (42). Once a pillar of the house of Hiraṇyakaśipu, the mightiest among the demons, with time it turned into the rock (43). Even now, in the middle of this area Hari Nṛsiṃha himself is seen in his blazing form with splendor equal to a myriad of suns (44). There he ripped apart Hiraṇyakaśipu’s chest with his auspicious nails which resemble Indra’s thunderbolts [and] bring heavenly joy (45). There the god washed his lotus hands. In the middle of this area there is a splendid pool called Raktakuṇḍa, (46) the water [of which] perishes neither because of wind, nor because of heat. But those who, having looked at its water, truly recollect Narasiṃha (47), will never enter the womb of mixed blood. In order to pacify this ferocious god, the group of deities (48) respectfully performed ablutions, having brought Gaṅgā, who flows through three worlds. Very terrific, she flows from the western direction (49). Her name is Bhavanāśinī since she removes pains of births (*bhavasantāpa*)—the sages have ascertained that she is sinless due to her power (50). The sages who live on the right side of this great Garuḍaśaila, which is of one hundred *yojanas*, are of the greatest peculiarities (51). Within the distance of two *yojanas* towards north there is the extremely auspicious Nandyāśrama where Nandikeśvara [abides] (52). Having seen Śiva, the venerable one (*bhagavān*) performed a terrible penance [there]; hence the venerable Śiva, worshipped in three worlds, was pleased (53). Having granted the supremacy to his attendants, Śiva shared this land: “this name to this tank” (*tatnāma tatsaraḥ*), [and] with joy extended [his] presence there (54). But towards its north there is also famous Śrīśaila—it is a part of the Garuḍa range which is impenetrable to gods and demons (55). The self-existing (*svayambhū*) god, the benefactor, is seen even now there, for, having abandoned the silver mountain (Kailāsa), [he] the seizer (Hara) fell in love with [this place] (56). The Kṛṣṇā river, which diminishes impediments of the world, flows there, up to this mountain, beyond which adjacent mountains rise (57). Whatever auspicious rivers, mountains, caves, abodes of Siddhas, temples, *yakṣas*, *gandharvas* and *kinmaras* are here (58), they all are the most honorable on earth due to the greatness of Narasiṃha.

Sages: Where is this holy place [of Narasiṃha]? How [it happened that] only in one place within this large mountain, exactly where Garuḍācala is, [such a] power [appeared]? (59).

Honorable Nārada: The earth, beloved by Hari, spreads for five hundred million [*yojanas*], covered with islands, oceans and seven mountains (60). On this earth, the

best among islands is Jambudvīpa, where the land of religious activities (*karmabhūmi*) is—the greatest in the world due to [its] suitability for *sādhakas* (*sādhakatva*) (61). But on this highly fortunate island, which is the continent known as Bhārata, on the hemisphere to the south of the Meru mountain and to the south of the Kṛṣṇaveṇī, (62) seven *yojanas* to the west from the eastern ocean, there is famous Ahobilam, which covers the space of seven *yojanas* (63). At this Ahobilakṣetra there is the famous Garuḍādri (Garuḍa mountain), where the venerable one manifested completely everywhere in the same manner (64). In one and the same place it is also known as Garuḍācala: thus, the famous name of this mountain is [the name] of this place (65). This [*kṣetra*] is full of various trees and creepers, [it is] inhabited by various birds, [it is full] of *campaka* trees, palmyra trees, bamboo trees and golden trees (66) [...] This [great mountain] is [inhabited by] ferociously looking *mlecchas* who carry bows and arrows in the company of women, [yet] it is splendid, providing the means of safety to all living beings (74). It is inhabited by the best sages who are constantly engaged in religious practice, by Brahmins of illuminated words, whose goal is to worship gurus (75). It is also inhabited by celestial ladies (*apsaras*) and grants all desires (76ab). Brahmā would not be able to tell the greatness of this great [Garuḍa] range even for hundred years. How, then, [would] people like me? (76cd–77ab). At the distance of ten *yojanas* to the south of the mountain there is a great mountain called Veṅkaṭa, where the venerable Hari resides. It is inhabited by those who are liberated forever and by noble poets (77cd–78). In this manner, the mountain called Garuḍa stretches up to the Malaya mountain. I told you all this gently and eloquently (79)”.