DAVID DEAN SHULMAN

Tamil Temple Myths

Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the
South Indian Saiva Tradition

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Temple

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Śaiva Tradition

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FOR
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AND
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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

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love of stories; may these pages reflect at least something of the sense of wonder they imparted.

Finally, for a measure of *śāntakalyāṇaguṇa*, for making me say what I mean, and above all for the real gift of her own enthusiasm and love for India, I wish to thank my wife Eileen.

ABBREVIATIONS

AB	*Aitareyabrāhmaṇa*
ABORI	*Annals of the Baroda Oriental Research Institute*
Ait. Ār.	*Aitareyāraṇyaka*
Akam	*Akanāṉūṟu*
ALB	*Adyar Library Bulletin*
ASS	Ānandāśrama Sanskrit Series
Aṭiyār.	Aṭiyārkkunallār
AV	*Atharvaveda*
BĀU	*Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad*
BEFEO	*Bulletin de l'École française de l'Extrême Orient*
Bib. Ind.	Bibliotheca Indica (published by the Asiatic Society of Bengal)
BMGM	*Bulletin of the Madras Government Museum*
BSOAS	*Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*
Cil.	*Cilappatikāram*
CIS	*Contributions to Indian Sociology*
CM	*Cidambaramāhātmya*
CÑP	*Civañāṉapotam*
CU	*Chāndogyopaniṣad*
DED	T. Burrow and M. B. Emeneau, *A Dravidian Etymological Dictionary*
FEQ	*Far Eastern Quarterly*
HOS	Harvard Oriental Series
HR	*History of Religions*
IA	*Iṟaiyaṉār akappoṟuḷ* (see *Kaḷaviyal*)
IIJ	*Indo-Iranian Journal*
Ind. An.	*Indian Antiquary*
IO	India Office Library
JA	*Journal asiatique*
JAOS	*Journal of the American Oriental Society*
JAS	*Journal of Asian Studies*
JAU	*Journal of Annamalai University*
JB	*Jaiminīyabrāhmaṇa*
JBBRAS	*Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*
JIH	*Journal of Indian History*
JORM	*Journal of Oriental Research, Madras*
JRAS	*Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*
JRASB	*Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal*

JTS   *Journal of Tamil Studies*
KB   *Kauṣītakibrāhmaṇa*
KP   *Kantapurāṇam* of Kacciyappacivācāriyar
KSS   *Kathāsaritsāgara* of Somadeva
Kur.   *Kuṟuntŏkai*
Mai. Saṃ. *Maitrāyaṇī saṃhitā*
MBh   *Mahābhārata*
MBh (S)   *Mahābhārata*, Southern Recension
Nacc.   Naccinārkkiṇiyar
Naṟ.   *Naṟṟiṇai*
Pĕrumpāṇ. *Pĕrumpāṇāṟṟuppaṭai*
PICSTS   *Proceedings of the International Conference Seminar of Tamil*
           Studies
PP   *Pĕriyapurāṇam* of Cekkiḷār
Puṟam   *Puṟanāṉūṟu*
QJMS   *Quarterly Journal of the Mythic Society*
Rām.   *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki
RV   *R̥gveda*
ŚB   *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*
SII   *South Indian Inscriptions*
SISS   South Indian Śaiva Siddhānta Works Publishing
           Company
Skt.   Sanskrit
ŚRKh   *Śivarahasyakhaṇḍa*
Tai. Ār.   *Taittirīyāraṇyaka*
Tam.   Tamil
Tāṇḍya   *Tāṇḍyamahābrāhmaṇa*
TB   *Taittirīyabrāhmaṇa*
TC   *Tamil Culture*
Tev.   *Tevāram*
Tirumuru. *Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai*
Tiruvāl.   *Tiruvālavāyuṭaiyār tiruviḷaiyāṭaṟpurāṇam* of
           Pĕrumpaṟṟappuliyūrnampi
Tiruviḷai. *Tiruviḷaiyāṭaṟpurāṇam* of Parañcotimuṉivar
TL   *Tamil Lexicon*
Tŏl.   *Tŏlkāppiyam*
TS   *Taittirīyasaṃhitā*
Vāj. Saṃ. *Vājasaneyimādhyandinasaṃhitā*
WZKSO   *Wiener Zeitschrift zur Kunde des Süd- und Ostasiens*
ZDMG   *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*

GLOSSARY

I. Tamil Terms

akam: the inner part; in poetics, the poetry of love
patikam: a poem of ten or eleven stanzas, usually in praise of a deity
pāyiram: introduction, preface
puṛam: the outer part (opposed to *akam*); in poetics, the poetry of
    heroism and war
talapurāṇam: the traditions of a sacred site; *see* sthalapurāṇa
veḷāḷa: a non-Brahmin agricultural caste in Tamiḻnāṭu

II. Sanskrit Terms

adharma: disorder; unrighteousness
amṛta: the nectar of the gods; the drink of immortality
apsaras: a celestial maiden
ardhanārī: the androgyne
āśrama: a retreat, the dwelling place of a sage in the wilderness; also,
    one of the four conventional stages in the life of a Brahmin
    (student, householder, forest-dweller, renouncer)
asura: a demon; an enemy of the gods
aśvamedha: the horse-sacrifice
avatāra: an incarnation (literally "descent") of God on earth
bhakti: devotion; love
bhūta: a ghost or spirit
brahmacārin: a celibate; a student (in the first of the four *āśramas*)
brahmarākṣasa: a high class of demons; a Brahmin *rākṣasa*
Brahmin: a priest; a member of the first of the four social classes
deva: a god
dharma: order (the proper order of the universe); also, the proper
    conduct demanded of the individual as a member of a social
    category; righteousness
dīkṣita: one who has been consecrated in preparation for ritual per-
    formance (e.g., a sacrifice)
gandharva: a celestial musician
gopura: the gateway into a shrine; often a tall tower set over the en-
    trance
kāpālika: Śiva as the bearer of a skull (*kapāla*); a worshiper of Śiva
    who carries a skull

karma: action; by extension, the law by which one's actions determine one's fate

liṅga: the phallus; the symbol of Siva

maṇḍapa: a porch or pavilion

mantra: a sacred utterance

māyā: the divine power to create; magic; deception, fraud; illusion, especially the illusory appearance of the phenomenal world

mūlasthāna: the original or primary shrine in a temple

muni: a sage; an ascetic

pañcākṣara: the "five syllables"; the *mantra* sacred to worshipers of Siva, i.e., *namaḥ śivāya*, "homage to Śiva"

pāśupata: a worshiper of Śiva in his form as Paśupati, "lord of beasts"

prākāra: the wall surrounding a shrine or temple complex

pralaya: the dissolution of the universe; the cosmic flood

pratiṣṭhā: stability; the firm basis of creation

purāṇa: literally "old, ancient story"; a text in which myths and other traditions are preserved

purohita: a domestic priest

rākṣasa: an evil demon; a goblin

Śaiva: pertaining to Śiva or the worship of Śiva; a devotee of Śiva

śakti: power; the goddess as a source of power

samādhi: a state attained through deep meditation

Soma: the elixir of immortality

śrāddha: a ceremony in honor of the dead

svadharma: conduct prescribed for the individual as a member of society

svayaṃvara: a bridegroom test; a ceremony at which a young woman chooses her husband

sthalapurāṇa: the traditions of a sacred site; the *purāṇa* of a shrine

tapas: literally "heat"; austerities; penance

tīrtha: a sacred site or shrine; originally, a ford or bathing place

tulasī: holy basil, sacred to Viṣṇu

vāhana: a divine vehicle

Vaiṣṇava: pertaining to Viṣṇu or to the worship of Viṣṇu; a devotee of Viṣṇu

vimāna: an aerial chariot; a temple structure

yakṣa (fem. *yakṣī, yakṣiṇī*): a class of semidivine beings; a nature spirit

yogī (fem. *yoginī*): a practitioner of yoga

yoni: the vulva or the womb

Tamil
Temple
Myths

Kāḻatti

Tirupati

Tiruvālaṅkāṭu

Velūr

Kāñcipuram

Tiruvaṇṇāmalai

Tiruvŏrriyūr

MADRAS

Tiruvāṉmiyūr

Mahābalipuram

BAY
of
BENGAL

Kāviri R

Viruttācalam

Citamparam

Kŏḷḷiṭam R

Cikāḻi

Kumpakoṇam

Tirupperūr

Nākapattiṇam

Tiruccirāppaḷḷi

Tañcāvūr

Tiruvārūr

Paḻaṉi

Vetāraṇiyam

ARABIAN

SEA

Maturai

Vaikai R

Jaffna

Irameccuram

Tirunĕlvĕli

Tiruccĕntūr

Cucintiram

Sri Lanka

Kaṉṉiyākumari

0   100   200 km

1:4,000,000

Tamiḻnāṭu, Major Shrines

CHAPTER I

Introduction

On this earth circled by the sea,
is there another land ruled by
the three great gods?
The heaven of the gods is here.[1]

1. TAMIL MYTHOLOGY AND THE INDIAN TRADITION

From earliest times, India has given form to many of its most vital
ideas through the medium of myth. The labyrinthine world of
Hindu mythology has always been known to us principally from
classical texts in Sanskrit—the Vedas, the Brāhmaṇas, the two
epics, and the major purāṇas. It is in the works of this last category,
the purāṇas (the name means "old," "ancient story"), that Hindu
myths have crystallized in their classical forms. Yet within this vast
world there exist, and no doubt have for long existed, individual
traditions of mythology proper to the various historic centers of
Indian civilization. One of the most extensive of such traditions is
that of the Tamil region (Tamiḻnāṭu) in southern India. This area is
the home of an ancient culture revealed to us by a large corpus of
Tamil literary texts dating back to the first centuries of this era;
these poetic texts—known as "Caṅkam" literature, since they are
said by legend to have been submitted to an "academy," Caṅkam,
of poets in the city of Maturai—were clearly produced by a
flourishing south Indian civilization with its own distinctive charac-
ter and world view.[2] Tamiḻnāṭu is also the birthplace of two power-
ful devotional movements, connected with the worship of the gods
Śiva and Viṣṇu, which, from approximately the seventh century
onwards, left an enduring imprint on Hindu culture generally. The
Tamils have thus made a major contribution to Indian civilization;
yet many aspects of this contribution are still largely unknown.
This study is intended to fill an important gap in our knowledge of
south India—for Tamiḻnāṭu has recorded a local tradition of
mythology extraordinary in its variety and imaginative range, and
differing in many respects from the classical northern tradition.
These Tamil myths provide us with a regional variant of Hindu
mythology of peculiar interest and importance, not least because of
the long tradition of continuous cultural activity in this region. De-

spite the enormous extent and the intrinsic importance of this
Tamil literature of myth, it has so far been virtually ignored by
Western scholars.

The following pages are an attempt to explore some major
themes of this literature. One outstanding feature must be men-
tioned at once: the Tamil myths were written down in texts at-
tached to individual shrines in the Tamil land. Tamilnāṭu is graced
by hundreds of such shrines, some of them very old, most of them
popular sites of pilgrimage. Nearly all such shrines have produced
one or more works in which their traditions have been given poetic
form. These works are known in Sanskrit as *māhātmyas* ("majesty,"
"greatness") or *sthalapurāṇas* ("ancient stories of a sacred site"); in
Tamil they are generally referred to as *talapurāṇam*.[3] Every work of
this class records the traditions that have grown up around a shrine
and its locale, and that are used to explain and to sustain the shrine's
claim to sanctity. Taken together, these texts, whether composed
in Sanskrit, Tamil, or in rare cases Telugu, embody a rich tradition
of mythology unique to the Tamil area.

The Tamil myths are, nevertheless, a part of the wider world of
Hindu mythology; however different their orientation, however
local their concerns, they are by no means independent of the clas-
sical Sanskritic tradition. On the contrary, they have taken many of
the most famous northern myths (and at least as many of the
lesser-known stories as well) and adapted them to their own pur-
poses, often transforming them considerably in the process. The
Tamil myths share a common pantheon with the classical Sanskrit
purāṇas and with other regional literatures—although purely local,
Tamil figures, such as Valli, the beloved second wife of Murukaṇ,
do exist. Clearly, the Tamil tradition is complex and multilayered.
Northern and indigenous elements have merged in the tradition of
every major Tamil shrine. The deity of each shrine will have both a
local name and mythological history, and an entire complex of
names, attributes, and myths derived from the northern, classical
deity with whom he is identified. For example, Śiva at Maturai is
known as Sundareśvara, "the beautiful lord" (Tamil Cŏkkaliṅkam
or Cŏkkecar); his bride there is Mīnākṣī, "the fish-eyed" (Tamil
Mīṇāṭciyammaṇ). The myths told about Sundareśvara and Mīnākṣī
are replete with local elements, some of which no doubt have pre-
historic roots; the stories all take place in Maturai and the surround-
ing region. Yet Sundareśvara is clearly identified with Śiva, and
Mīnākṣī with Pārvatī, Śiva's consort in the classical purāṇas; both

deities are often described in terms directly borrowed from the northern tradition. This situation is typical of the shrines we will study; the tradition of each sacred spot has developed through the fusion of local and imported elements. This is, in fact, an ancient process in this area. Already in the "Caṅkam" anthologies of bardic poetry, *Ĕṭṭuttŏkai* and *Pattuppāṭṭu*, the assimilation of northern, Sanskritic elements by the Tamil tradition is readily apparent; it is yet more pronounced in the early Tamil epic, the *Cilappatikāram* (fifth-sixth centuries A.D.?), and by the time of the devotional movements, it has come to provide the very structure within which the mainstream of local myth and legend is subsumed. The Tamil local purāṇas are thus a subcategory of the purāṇic literature generally, as incorporated in the Sanskrit "great" purāṇas (the so-called *mahāpurāṇas*),[4] and a seemingly endless series of related works; our task is to delineate the characteristic features of this distinct, fairly homogeneous south Indian variant of Hindu myth.

The boundaries of the regional tradition with which we are concerned may be defined as the area of Tamil speech. Tamiḻnāṭu is the home of the oldest articulate culture in south India, and the degree of cultural continuity in this region is one of south India's most outstanding features. No other Dravidian language can claim so long and uninterrupted a tradition. Nevertheless, medieval Tamil culture shares much with neighboring cultures expressed in other Dravidian languages. We must, therefore, distinguish between the specifically Tamil and the generally south Indian. For example, the goddess Mīnākṣī is firmly rooted in the Tamil tradition of Maturai, while the Vaiṣṇava saint Āṇṭāḷ (Godā) is common to both Tamil and Telugu sources.[5] Often a pattern will be general throughout south India, while its individual expressions will be specifically located: thus the idea that a deity must have a second, local bride is very widespread in the south; but the Tamil myths of Vaḷḷi, the second wife of Murukaṉ mentioned above, are fully intelligible only against the background of early Tamil literary conventions. On the level of village religion, there is an impressive similarity of practice and concepts over a wide area of south India;[6] as we shall see, village cults often seem to preserve features known from the oldest layer of Tamil civilization.

The basic texts for this study have thus been recorded within the present boundaries of Tamil speech, although other south Indian myths have sometimes been cited in support of an argument or for purposes of comparison, and classical northern mythology is al-

ways present as a factor in our discussion. The Tamil myths them-
selves often emphasize the importance of the Tamil language, and
in this connection they mention the Vedic sage Agastya, who is be-
lieved to have come from the north to reside on the Pŏtiyil Moun-
tain near the southern tip of the subcontinent.[7] The Agastya legend
is in essence an origin myth explaining the beginnings of Tamil cul-
ture: according to a widespread tradition first found in the com-
mentary ascribed to Nakkīrar on an early work of rhetoric, the
Iṟaiyaṉār akappŏruḷ, Agastya was the author of the first Tamil
grammar.[8] This assertion is made in the context of the Caṅkam
legend mentioned earlier, which describes the composition of the
earliest Tamil poetry; this legend is firmly attached to Maturai, one
of the historic centers of Tamil culture, and has a prominent place
in the Maturai purāṇas. We will return to the Caṅkam story in con-
nection with the Tamil flood myths, for the "academy" of poets
situated in ancient times in present-day Maturai is said to have been
the last of a series of three; the first two "academies" were located
in cities swallowed up by the sea. Agastya is connected by the
legend with the first two Caṅkam. The gods Śiva, Murukaṉ, and
Kubera are said to have been members of the first Caṅkam, and
Śiva and Murukaṉ appear again in popular myths about the third
Caṅkam, in Maturai.[9] The entire cycle, with its depiction of the
gods as Tamil poets, may be seen as an expression of love for Tamil
and belief in its divine nature.[10] But it is difficult to estimate the age
of the legend, or even of that part of it connected with Agastya's
southward migration; the Sanskrit epics are already familiar with
the sage's journey to the south, including his exploits of stunting
the growth of the Vindhya Mountains and destroying the demon
Vātāpi (eponymous with the town of Vātāpi/Bādāmi in the western
Deccan).[11] For our purposes, it is essential to realize that in its myth
of cultural origins the Tamil tradition has fastened on a Vedic seer
explicitly said to have come from the north. In other words, the
tradition clearly sees itself as derived in the first instance from a
northern source. This orientation toward the north as a source of
inspiration and prestige is quite characteristic of Tamil culture in its
development after the "Caṅkam" period, that is, after the process
of fusing local and imported elements had reached an advanced
stage and a rich, composite tradition had emerged. The myths of
Agastya offer us a vantage point from which to consider this proc-
ess; they also demonstrate the understanding the Tamils had of
their own cultural history. Let us look, for example, at one later

Tamil myth that explores Agastya's association with both Tamil and Sanskrit:

> Nārada asked the sages who were gathered to the southwest of Śivagiri: "Who among you is best? Who has performed austerities in the Vedic Śaiva path? Who has attained the truth and gained the grace of Śiva? Such a one is equal to the godhead (*civam*), and him I praise. Now let me have freedom from rebirth." So saying, he disappeared and reached heaven. The sages agreed that Agastya fitted the description and merited the blessing of Nārada, but at this Vyāsa became angry: "What have you said? You must be speaking only out of politeness (*mukamaṉ urai*). Your praises should go to Sarasvatī (*kalaivāṇiyaṉṉai*); she will grant release (*vīṭu*)." Said Agastya: "Did not Śiva (and not Sarasvatī) collect the Vedas and other arts (*kalai*)?" Vyāsa retorted, "You too once acquired a good knowledge of those Sanskrit works (*vaṭa nūl*) sung by me. Is there anything else (of which you can be proud)?" At this Agastya fell silent and left the sages, who were now greatly perplexed as to which of the two was greater—Agastya, who was a form of Śiva, or Vyāsa, a form of Viṣṇu.
>
> Agastya worshiped Śiva until the god appeared and taught him a sacred *mantra*, saying, "This is sweet Tamil. Murukaṉ will teach it all to you without leaving anything out. First worship for one year in the *āśramas* of Ādikeśava and Parāśara, and then return to Śivagiri." Agastya followed this command; Murukaṉ instructed him in the Tamil syllabary and the other parts of grammar, then disappeared into his shrine.
>
> When Agastya returned to the sages, he was welcomed by Vyāsa and the rest: "You have brought mountains here so that the south will flourish,[12] and you have enabled all to taste the divine drink of Tamil." Agastya put Tamil grammar in the form of aphorisms for the benefit of the land between Vaṭaveṅkaṭam and Teṉkumari, and he expounded his book to his twelve disciples.[13]

The boundaries mentioned are the traditional northern and southern borders of the Tamil land: Vaṭaveṅkaṭam is Tirupati, the site of a major shrine to Viṣṇu-Veṅkaṭeśvara, whose myths are studied below; Teṉkumari is invariably glossed by the commentators as referring to a river, apparently far to the south of the present Kaṉṉiyākumari (Cape Comorin) at the limit of a territory that was later

swallowed up by the sea.[14] Agastya, the champion of Tamil, is
honored by the sages, and even his rival, Vyāsa, acknowledges his
superiority in the end; but it should be noted that the sage learns
Tamil only after being sent to the *āśrama* of Parāśara, Vyāsa's
father. Vyāsa, the master of Sanskrit learning, insists on the
preeminence of the goddess of learning, Sarasvatī; but Vyāsa is
himself seen as an incarnation of Viṣṇu,[15] and the Śaiva author of
our text must therefore see him defeated by Agastya, here regarded
as a form of Śiva. Other Tamil myths also make Agastya a hero of
militant Śaivism as well as the author of Tamil grammar.[16] Yet the
image of Agastya in the above myth is a complex one. Agastya's
greatness appears to lie in his command of *both* traditions: he is well
trained in the Sanskrit works of Vyāsa, and he learns the science of
Tamil from the god who is master and examiner of Tamil, Muru-
kaṇ.[17] Agastya is thus a symbol of Tamil learning, not as independ-
ent from or opposed to Sanskrit, but rather in harmony and con-
junction with it. This cultural merger represented by the Vedic sage
who teaches Tamil is perfectly apparent in the Tamil purāṇic litera-
ture, in which Sanskrit myths, motifs, and deities are the carriers of
a *local*, south Indian tradition with its own characteristic ideas and
concerns.

How was a unified tradition created out of these different ele-
ments? The process was undoubtedly lengthy and complex. On the
one hand, the classical culture of the "Caṅkam" period certainly
did not disappear without trace; many ancient cultural traits have
survived, notably in village rituals, folk poetry, popular tales, and
so on. I will return to this point below. On the other hand, a major
contribution to the formation of Tamil culture was undoubtedly
made by the Brahmins, who became the custodians, and in some
cases the creators, of the traditions of Tamil shrines. Many Tamil
purāṇas describe the migration of a group of Brahmin priests from
some site in the north to the Tamil shrine, and it is certain that such
migrations were an important historical force extending over many
centuries. Brahmins were often settled on lands by royal grants, for
the king could gain a much-needed form of legitimization by such a
gift to the Brahmins.[18] Those Brahmins who became attached to
local holy places brought with them their own traditions, which
were part of the wider Brahminical culture; but they were also in-
fluenced by local factors, the most powerful of which could be-
come central to the cult in its final, Brahminized form. In those
literary sources that were either written by Brahmins or composed

under significant Brahmin influence—and all Tamil *sthalapurāṇas*
fall into this category—a standard, all-Indian framework could be
made to absorb local themes. Here, as in other areas, we glimpse
the unifying, synthesizing, fertilizing force that Brahminism has
represented in the history of Tamilnāṭu. It is largely this force that
allows us to speak of a single, distinctive system of Tamil mythol-
ogy incorporated in literary texts composed over a period of some
one thousand years.[19]

Let us take a closer look at this phenomenon. It is by no means
enough to divide the composite tradition with which we are deal-
ing into northern and southern branches that have merged in the
course of the crystallization of the cult. We must also notice the ex-
istence of internal processes of change accompanying the process of
assimilation. Change has occurred both within individual elements
of the tradition and within the mature tradition as a whole. One of
the major themes of this study illustrates the complexity of the
problems that confront us in this area: it appears that an early ideol-
ogy of sacrifice, which strongly recalls and was perhaps assimilated
to the Vedic sacrificial cult, lies at the basis of the tradition of many
shrines. In Chapter III we will explore the symbols that convey this
idea, especially in relation to the main god, whose blood first re-
veals the shrine. Perhaps from very ancient times the idea of sac-
rifice was associated with the worship of the goddess, who is
closely identified with the sacrifice as the source both of death and
of new life, and who embodies basic south Indian concepts of
woman and sacred power. The marriage myths we find in nearly
every shrine clearly demonstrate this connection between sacrifice
and love; they are discussed at length in Chapter IV. But the mar-
riage myths also show us a second stage in the elaboration of the
cult, a stage in which the myth of sacrifice has been radically re-
worked so as to exclude the participation of the main god, the con-
sort of the goddess. In the concluding chapter we will study the
implications of this development for the orientation of Tamil
Śaivism in its most recent form. The evolution I will seek to estab-
lish is in the direction of a deity ever more removed from the realm
of death and rebirth, specifically from the violent death and restora-
tion of the sacrifice: the god becomes *nirmala*, without taint. In
order to do so, however, he must first transcend his own mythol-
ogy; for, as we shall see, the symbols that recur in the myths leave
little doubt that the god himself enacts the sacrifice.

We will be concerned in the following chapters with the me-

chanics and the meaning of this evolution. For the moment let us
note two relevant explanations of the trend away from violence.
The process of Brahmin accommodation to ancient Tamil religion
has been described by George Hart in the following terms:

> "It must be remembered that, to the ancient Tamils, sacred
> forces were dangerous accretions of power that could be
> controlled only by those of low status. When the Brahmins ar-
> rived in Tamilnad, it was natural for them to dissociate them-
> selves from these indigenous forces and to characterize them-
> selves as 'pure,' that is, isolated to the greatest possible extent
> from polluting sacred forces; indeed, if they were to gain the
> people's respect, they had very little choice. It was also natural
> for the Brahmins to characterize the gods they introduced as
> pure and unsullied by pollution. . . . It follows that the
> Brahmins had to adopt from the high-caste non-Brahmins
> many of the customs whose purpose was to isolate a person
> from dangerous sacred power."[20]

The idea that the sacred is dangerous and potentially polluting is
undoubtedly ancient in the Tamil area, and there is every reason to
believe that the Brahmins who settled there came to terms with this
idea in a manner that guaranteed their own claim to purity. But it is
noteworthy that within the Vedic sacrificial cult itself we find an
evolution away from contact with the dangerous forces of violence
and death that are at work in the sacrifice. This development has
been described by Heesterman[21] in terms of the emergence of the
prāṇāgnihotra, the "sacrifice of the breaths," as a substitute for the
original blood-sacrifice: by a studied system of symbolic equiva-
lences, the arena of the sacrifice is transferred from the sacrificial pit
to the mind of the Brahmin "who knows thus," and who offers up
his own breaths (*prāṇa*) in place of the original victim. The entire
ritual is internalized, with the result that the actual slaughter of a
victim is eliminated. Death and destruction are relegated to the
chaotic world outside the individual performer of the ritual (just as
they are made to rest beyond the confines of the sacred shrine in the
Tamil myths). In other words, within the Brahmin tradition itself
there was a powerful impetus toward freedom from the burden of
death, which was an unavoidable part of the sacrificial ritual in its
early form. It is this transformed tradition that was imported into
south India, and that both crystallized and ultimately reinterpreted
a local myth of violent sacrifice. Yet we shall see in the following

pages how vital and enduring the underlying myth has always been, and how quickly the religious ideology superimposed upon it crumbles before the inherent force of the ancient symbols.

Note on Method

In view of the complex nature of the tradition being studied, I have adopted a somewhat complex approach to my sources. I have, to begin with, attempted to understand the myths as they are today, or as they might be understood by the millions who regard them as living truths about their god. This is, in itself, a difficult task. But a comparison of the myths of many shrines revealed a number of recurrent patterns and symbols, which seemed to express ideas at variance with the declared themes of the authors. I have brought these patterns together and interpreted them with the help of all the sources available to me. Myth is by nature a conservative medium; symbolic images survive in late versions, where they may be given a completely new role or left incongruously opposed to the new context.[22] How, then, is one to know which elements are more archaic than others? In our case there is, first of all, the aid offered by classical sources in Tamil (such as the bardic anthologies and the two epics, the *Cilappatikāram* and *Maṇimekalai*), which tell us a good deal about the ancient religion of the Tamils. As I have stated, some features of the classical culture seem to have survived in village cults in the Tamil area; the villages often seem to have preserved a direct link to the ancient past, and village myths often shed light on the underlying themes of Tamil purāṇic myths. We will see a number of examples of this phenomenon. To name but a few in advance of their discussion: there is the village cult of blood-sacrifice, which explains many persistent features of the purāṇic myths of Mahiṣāsura (the idea of the transfer of power, the role of the buffalo, and so on); the transvestite worship of the goddess, which helps us to understand the purāṇic myths of sex reversal; the village cults of demon-worship, which are akin in some ways to the purāṇic myths of the demon-devotee; the identification in folk myths of Mīnākṣī, the goddess of Maturai, with Kaṇṇaki, the heroine of the *Cilappatikāram*, and of the god of Maturai with the serpent. These and other examples of the link between folk tradition and Brahminized myths will be studied at length below. There exist a number of useful descriptions of south Indian village religion;[23] in addition, much of the folk mythology of the Tamil re-

gion was written down in the form of folk epics or ballads during
the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Almost all of these compo-
sitions are clearly oral in origin, like the oral epic recorded by
Brenda Beck in the Coimbatore region;[24] other such oral narratives
are still in circulation. The rich mythology of the Tamil folk epic
deserves a separate study; I have cited the sources that exist today in
print when they are relevant to our discussion. I have also included
a number of oral myths collected during a period of research in
Tamilnāṭu; like the folk epics, these oral traditions often appear to
have preserved archaic features with more fidelity than the
Brahminized literary texts.

In order to avoid the dangers of tautology and circular reasoning,
the village myths must, of course, be used with some care. Not all
elements of the folk tradition are necessarily "archaic." Although
the oral transmission of south Indian mythology was basically a
conservative process, the folk tradition was by no means independ-
ent of purāṇic sources or of the processes of change within the
Tamil Śaiva tradition generally. One prominent example of
purāṇic influence on folk mythology—in the Maturai myths of
Mīnākṣī and the Pāṇṭiya king—is discussed below. Clearly, the vil-
lage traditions are most helpful when they support a conclusion al-
ready postulated on the basis of the internal evidence of the
purāṇas—in other words, when an underlying theme related to a
folk theme emerges from the literary texts *despite* obvious attempts
to obscure it. The folk sources cited in the following pages do, in
fact, support the existence of an underlying layer of Tamil myth
that has been hidden under later attempts to isolate the deity from
impurity.

We may also seek help from literary sources produced after the
"Caṅkam" period—both the medieval "epi-purāṇic" literature of
poems sung in praise of local deities and their shrines, a literature
more or less contemporaneous with the Tamil purāṇas them-
selves;[25] and, more important, the earlier classics of the Śaiva tradi-
tion, especially the *Tevāram* hymns. The *Tevāram* constitutes the
first seven books of the Tamil Śaiva canon; it consists of poems
sung, according to the tradition, by the three early saints of Śiva,
Tiruñāṇacampantar, Appar (both probably of the seventh century),
and Cuntaramūrtti (ninth century?). Like the Tamil myths, the
Tevāram poems are associated with individual shrines.[26] As the
Śaiva tradition itself recognized,[27] the textual tradition of the
hymns is not always reliable; nevertheless, the *Tevāram* poems of

any given shrine usually reveal the local cult in a mature form, with the names and in many cases the major myths of the local deities already established. The poets often allude to prominent features of the local cult, and in this way they sometimes offer clues to the original basis of the local myths.

Many elements of Tamil mythology have close analogues in the Tamil hagiographic tradition. The lives of the sixty-three Śaiva saints (*nāyaṉmār*) were codified in the twelfth century by Cekkiḷār in the *Tiruttŏṇṭarpurāṇam*, usually known as the *Pĕriyapurāṇam* (the twelfth book of the Śaiva canon). At many points these hagiographies are important aids to our understanding of Tamil myths: an outstanding example is the story of Kāraikkālammaiyār, which is in effect a hagiographic variant of the myth of Nīli, the ancient goddess of Tiruvālaṅkāṭu.[28]

I must also mention here one of the best-loved of all Tamil literary works, Kampaṉ's Tamil adaptation of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Irāmāvatāram*.[29] The Tamil cultural achievement, and the decisive themes and problems of Tamil devotional religion, receive perhaps their finest expression in Kampaṉ's verses. I have referred often to Kampaṉ in the course of this study, and in Chapter V an attempt is made to interpret in some detail Kampaṉ's version of an important myth of a demon-devotee.

In the end, however, all the above are no more than auxiliary sources, and one must rely above all upon the internal evidence of the purāṇic texts. The principles that have guided my analysis may be simply stated. When the evident force of a symbol appears to conflict with the interpretation offered by our source, we may suspect that a historical change has taken place. For example, the constantly recurring theme of the wounding of the deity[30] is never, to my knowledge, explicitly related by the Tamil purāṇas to the god's death in sacrifice; it is, in fact, never really explained at all, except as a common sign of the divine presence in a site. Nevertheless, when seen together with its related motifs, this theme can hardly be separated from the ancient concept of sacrifice. The myth most closely linked with the theme of wounding the deity is that of Śiva's marriage to the local goddess; as I will attempt to demonstrate, this union is characterized by the god's violent death and rebirth. Yet such is not the standard understanding of the divine marriage in the purāṇic texts, which usually describe Śiva's marriage in very different terms, as a harmonious union with a meek, submissive bride. The violent aspects of the marriage have been projected on to the

battle between the goddess and her demon enemies. This conclu-
sion is not simply a case of imaginative interpretation: it must be
stressed that the *texts themselves* preserve traces of the identification
of Śiva with the demon-victim. I have operated on the working
assumption that even late texts retain evidence of earlier stages in
the development of the tradition, and that such earlier stages, even
when obscured by a later ideology, proclaim their existence
through apparent anomalies in the narration. It is, on the whole,
better to assume that all elements in the myths are meaningful and
can sustain interpretation than to believe that chance alone has pro-
duced such anomalies—let us at least assume that our texts have
meaning! In studying these myths, I have thus tried to isolate those
symbols that stubbornly persist despite their apparent incongruity
or inconsistency with the general tenor of the myths; I have then
attempted to discover whether these symbols are related to one
another in a coherent manner, and whether they point to the exist-
ence of an earlier level of meaning than that suggested by the
explicit statements of the texts. As will become clear, the Tamil au-
thors are, in fact, particularly fond of rationalizing older, inherited
patterns whose original force is still quite evident from the mythic
images used by the narrative.

Another element in the analysis is important here. I have already
noted that many Tamil myths are reworkings of classical Sanskrit
myths. For example, the marriage myths that are so prominent in
the Tamil tradition are directly related, in their present format, to
the Sanskrit myths of Śiva's marriages (to Pārvatī and Satī / Umā).
But the import of the Tamil myths is, in general, very different
from that of the Sanskrit models. Here local south Indian ideas have
been absorbed within the framework of Sanskritic myths of the di-
vine marriage. Clearly, it is necessary to define the changes made
by the Tamil versions in their inheritance, especially since such
changes often coincide with the anomalies and inconsistencies men-
tioned above. Thus when the Tamil myths declare Mahiṣāsura to ,
be a devotee of Śiva who offers a *liṅga* to the goddess,[31] we must
note (a) the discrepancy between this description and the standard
Sanskrit accounts of Mahiṣāsura, and (b) the unusual relation-
ship—a symbolic marriage—between the demon and the goddess,
who subsequently marries Śiva at a local shrine. Both of these ele-
ments are part of a basic, hidden pattern of myth.

Such a pattern becomes readily apparent from a comparison of
the myths of many shrines. No single shrine offers a complete pic-

ture of the major elements and concerns of Tamil mythology; it is only by comparing the many variants of a myth that we can arrive at an understanding of the true importance of the motifs and the underlying conceptions that they convey. When we find the same elements recurring consistently, albeit in varying forms, in the traditions of many shrines, we approach a definition of the basic components of Tamil mythology. I have therefore surveyed a fairly wide sample of the literature and have avoided concentrating too heavily on the traditions of any one spot.

Although I have always tried to find a "primary" literary source for each myth—that is, a narration of the myth in verse, in either Sanskrit or Tamil—I have not hesitated to rely on other sources as well, such as prose retellings, commentaries, popular devotional hymns, and folk sources. In fact, the distinction between "primary" and "secondary" is in this case largely irrelevant, since even the verse originals of the Tamil purāṇas are nearly always derivative: the myths antedate the written versions, often by many centuries. As I have already hinted, the literary sources of Tamil mythology have always existed alongside, and indeed been nourished by, an unbroken oral tradition. Local traditions handed down by word of mouth have been recorded in different periods in various forms. Today, for example, the poetic texts of the purāṇas are no longer available in most shrines; their place has been taken by a popular literature (in prose) of pilgrims' handbooks, in which the main myths and rituals attached to the shrine are summarized. These works, which are usually produced by the temple authorities (the *devasthānam*) in limited editions run off local printing presses, embody an essentially oral tradition, although in some cases they have merely summarized or abridged the *sthalapurāṇa*. I have used these pamphlets to supplement the information of the purāṇas; in a few cases, when I was unable to obtain a copy of the original purāṇa, I have cited these prose versions instead. I have also recorded a number of oral myths from Tamil shrines. The fact that many of the myths cited below were written down only in the fairly recent past says little about the date of their origins. Moreover, many would argue today that any version of a myth, however late, deserves consideration as evidence of the living power of the myth and its meaning for the narrator.

In the interests of economy, I have for the most part summarized myths instead of translating them. Extensive translations would have meant a work several times the length of the present study.[32]

For the same reason, versions extracted from modern, secondary
sources have been summarized, and have been printed as extracts.
Direct quotations from secondary sources will be in quotation
marks. In reducing the prolix narratives of the purāṇas to more
manageable size, I have at times had to omit whole episodes as well
as material extraneous to the plot (such as hymns of praise, allegor-
ical interpretations, lists of ritual rewards to be gained from wor-
ship at a shrine, and so on); but I have always striven to record the
essential elements of each myth as accurately as possible. I have,
however, introduced one major change for the benefit of the non-
Tamilist: I have replaced the Tamil names for the gods with their
standardized Sanskrit equivalents (for example, Śiva for Civaṇ,
Viṣṇu for Tirumāl, and so on) in the case of figures drawn from the
common stock of Hindu myth. Names that are unique to Tamil
mythology, and place names generally, have been retained in their
Tamil form.[33]

In referring to the Sanskrit epics and the *mahāpurāṇas*, I have used
the recent "critical" editions, relying not only on the text in its "re-
constituted" form, but on the possibilities made available by the
apparatus. Thus in citing these texts, I often refer to lines or verses
deleted by the editors. For the *Mahābhārata*, however, I have usu-
ally studied the text of the Southern Recension before referring to
the Poona edition, and in some cases Southern Recension is cited in
addition to the Poona text. The major exception to the practice out-
lined above is my use of a more traditional text of the *Harivaṃśa*;
here, one feels, the "critical" edition has gone too far in excising
essential material from the text. No truly critical editions exist of
any of the Tamil purāṇas or of the related folk sources mentioned
earlier.[34]

Throughout this study I have concentrated on explaining the
myths in their Indian context. Many parallels to these myths exist
in the mythologies of other peoples, but I have felt that it is impor-
tant first to understand the tradition within its own terms. Those
who might wish to explore structural or thematic comparisons
with the myths of other cultures, or who bring to the study of
myth the particular biases of their own disciplines, will, it is hoped,
be able to make use of the summaries of the Tamil sources. But I
must confess to having followed my own interests and instincts in
exploring the uncharted world of the Tamil purāṇas. I have not
hesitated to pursue those themes that appeared to me to be of cru-
cial importance for understanding Tamil culture. For the following

chapters are an attempt not only to describe but also to interpret the Tamil myths in the light of what appears to be their major concerns; and no doubt in the study of myth, as in the writing of history, the very act of selection implies the existence of a personal interpretation.

2. THE RITUAL OF PILGRIMAGE

Since the major sources of Tamil mythology are so closely tied to local shrines, the Tamil myths are naturally associated with temple worship and, in particular, with the ritual of pilgrimage (*tīrtha-yātrā*). It may, therefore, be helpful to take a preliminary look at this phenomenon in its classic south Indian form before turning to the myths themselves. The Tamil land is crowded with sacred sites, which are regularly visited by thousands of devotees; each Tamil *talapurāṇam* seeks to justify pilgrimage to the particular shrine to which it is attached. This is a pilgrim's literature, produced for the benefit of worshipers in living centers of pilgrimage, often by pilgrim-poets.[1] The first extensive examples of this kind of literature are found in the *tīrthayātrāparvan* of the *Mahābhārata*, where localized myths are cited to glorify individual shrines.[2] By the time of the Tamil *talapurāṇam*, we find a standard literary form in which the pilgrim is offered essential information about the shrine to which he has come.

What does the pilgrim need to know? Above all, he is concerned with the specific powers and individual features that have given the site its sacred character. The purāṇa composed at this spot will therefore provide him with the traditional history of the shrine, including its (usually miraculous) discovery and the adventures of those important exemplars (such as gods, demons, serpents, and men) who were freed from sorrow of one kind or another by worshiping there. Basic elements of the sacred topography will be identified, and subsidiary shrines may be brought into relation with the main deity of the site. Any local idiosyncrasies in ritual or in the structure of the cult (for example, the Monday fast at Maturai, the forty-day women's vow at Cucīntiram, the exact plan of festivals in many shrines) will be explained by a myth. The purāṇa will also offer lists of the ritual benefits to be gained from worship at the shrine. In most cases these are fairly standard: the site frees one from evil of various sorts, from ignorance, disease, the consequences of one's misdeeds, and so on. Occasionally a shrine will

establish a reputation as "specializing" in the treatment of a particu-
lar sort of evil: thus Vaittīcuvaraṇkoyil, for example, is renowned
as the site where Vaidyanātha-Śiva, "the lord who is a physician,"
cures his devotees of all diseases.

Nearly always the "home" shrine, the subject of the purāṇa, is
glorified at the expense of all others; each shrine claims to be the site
of creation, the center of the universe, and the one spot where sal-
vation is most readily obtainable. Many stories illustrate these
claims of superiority: for example, we are often told that the
Ganges itself is forced to worship in a south Indian shrine in order
to become free of the sins deposited by evildoers who bathe in the
river at Kāśī (Benares).[3] A man who was bringing the bones of his
father to Benares for cremation stopped at Tiruvaiyāṟu for the
night; in the morning he discovered that the bones had grown to-
gether into the shape of a *liṅga*. When he set off again for Benares,
they were separated again—and thus he realized the greater sanc-
tity of Tiruvaiyāṟu.[4] The shrines of the Tamil land define them-
selves in contrast to (or in imitation of) famous shrines of the north:
thus we have a Teṅkāci, a Dakṣiṇaprayāga (Tirukkūṭalaiyāṟṟūr), a
Dakṣiṇadvārakā (Maṇṇarkuṭi), a Dakṣiṇamānasā (at Vetāraṇiyam),
several Dakṣiṇakailāsas, etc. These claims are typical of a pilgrim's
literature.[5] They might also be seen as the pilgrim's equivalent of
what has been termed "henotheism," that is, the worship, in the
context of a plurality of acknowledged gods, of each god *in turn* as
supreme.[6] The denigration of other gods/shrines is the simple
corollary of praising the momentary favorite; the same principle
operates in relation to the praise (*praśasti*) offered to kings, patrons,
and gurus.

What is the pilgrim's experience in this land of temples? There
is often, to begin with, the long, uncomfortable journey to the
shrine, which may be defined as a form of asceticism, *tapas*.[7] The
journey is, however, only the prelude to a deeper sense of self-
sacrifice. Once the pilgrim arrives at the shrine, he sees before him
the towering *gopuras* or gates set in the walls that enclose the sacred
area. He leaves his shoes outside the gate; he will also usually
undergo an initial purification by bathing, which prepares him for
contact with the powerful forces inside.[8] Once the pilgrim is
through the *gopura*, the real journey begins. This is a journey into
the self, and backwards in time. The tall *gopuras* of the south Indian
temple create a sense of dynamism, of movement away from the
gate and toward the center, which is locked inside the stone heart of

the main shrine. There lies the sacred force contained within the walls, rendered accessible only through the strong ties that bound it, and through the ritual ordering of the universe within. The worshiper first circles around the temple compound, offering obeisance at minor shrines, always keeping the main sanctuary on his right; he circumscribes the center in an individual act of demarcation, just as the stone walls forever mark its limits. At length he will pene-·trate into the recesses of the main shrine and come to rest before the *garbhagṛha*, where the image of the deity is located. Here he has arrived at the farthest reach of his wandering; hidden away in stone and darkness, as in a cave in the bowels of the earth, lies the symbol of the god, which is imbued with the divine power whose deeds are narrated in our myths. Knowledge, or truth, is, in the eyes of the Hindus, by nature esoteric; it is buried, lost, to be recovered from the depths of the sea or from the darkness of the earth.[9] The temple expresses in its very structure this search for hidden wisdom: the *gopuras* point us inward, to the cave. But the *garbhagṛha* is, literally, a "house of the womb"; at this spot the pilgrim is conceived afresh, to be reborn without taint, with all the powers latent in the newborn child.[10] He is not, indeed, alone in this experience; as we shall see, the very deity whom he worships also suffers in this site a new birth preceded by violent conception. Life enters the womb in darkness, out of the disintegration into chaos and death of an earlier existence.

This interpretation is applicable to the structure of the south Indian temple in its most mature form, which it attained only in the late stages of Cola temple architecture. Earlier, the *gopuras* are not as high as the central *vimāna*, which houses the inner sanctum; in the Bṛhadīśvara temple at Tañcāvūr, for example, the central *vimāna* rises to a height of over two hundred feet—several times the height of the gates. In cases such as this, the pilgrim's passage through the *gopuras* toward the central shrine is a form of ascent— as, of course, it is in the many shrines built upon hills or mountains. Yet even here the *garbhagṛha* remains remote, in the chamber of stone, and the worshiper seems to enter and reemerge from a womb.

What are the pilgrim's goals? Usually there is a practical aim to be furthered by the pilgrimage; the worshiper comes in contact with a power that aids him in his mundane existence. How is this accomplished? On one level, we seem to find an archaic concept of exchange: the pilgrim gives something of himself to the god or

goddess, and the deity returns this offering in a renewed form. We will explore this concept further in the context of the myths of marriage. More generally, the pilgrim seeks the help of the god in response to his devotion, *bhakti*. The act of pilgrimage is itself an expression of *bhakti* for the god in his specific, located home. If I have stressed the pragmatic orientation of the worshiper, it is, of course, through no wish to doubt the intensity of his encounter with his lord; rather, my intention is to clarify an important issue. Again and again we are told that a shrine provides the devotee with both material reward (*bhukti*) and release (*mukti*). The former is a clear enough goal, while the latter would, on the surface, appear to coincide with the ideal of renunciation as proclaimed in the Upaniṣads and later texts. This is not, however, the case; it is important to realize that no one in Tamiḻnāṭu goes on pilgrimage to attain release. What has happened in the Tamil tradition is that the world-renouncing goal of the ascetic has been redefined as equivalent to *bhakti*. Pilgrimage comes to substitute for *sannyāsa*.[11] To illustrate this development, we may turn to a Tamil variant of a well-known theme—the problem of overcrowding in the *muktipada*, the zone of release:

> The gods complained to Śiva that evil people without merit were going to Viruttācalam and reaching Śiva's feet. "What is the use of the preeminence you have given us?" they asked. "No one worships us, we receive no sacrificial portions, no one offers anything to the sun or to Yama, hell is deserted and the positions reached by *tapas* are ruined. Help us!" Śiva answered: "You yourselves reached your present status by performing *tapas* at Mutukuṉṟam. Would it be right (*nīti*) to stop others from worshiping there? You too should worship at Mutukuṉṟam and reach the *muktipada*." The gods went to the shrine, bathed in the Maṇimuttā River, which is the river of the liberated (*muttanati*), and meditated on Śiva, who granted them a vision of his dance of knowledge.[12]

Śiva shows himself to be quite indifferent to the gods' distress. In fact, his suggestion to them implies that everyone should attain *mukti*—a direct reversal of the basic assumption of the Sanskrit myths about the *muktipada*.[13] This reversal causes a theoretical problem: if everyone goes to the zone of release, a dangerous imbalance results, with heaven overflowing and hell empty.[14] Yet

these considerations, so basic to Sanskrit myths, are largely disregarded by the Tamil text: the power of the shrine has become an absolute. The shrine must offer salvation to all, whatever the consequences. But let us take a closer look at the meaning of this story. The gods descend from heaven to earth, to the shrine, where they are granted a vision of Śiva's dance of knowledge. It is this vision that, by implication, is equated with salvation; and there is no reason why all cannot possess it, without threatening the gods in their celestial bastions. In other words, the myth directs us not to heaven but to earth, which has become the locus of *mukti*: even before witnessing the dance, the gods bathe in the River of the Liberated, which flows through the sacred site. *Mukti* is present for the devotee within the conditions of his life on earth. This is a development of particular importance. Tamil devotional religion can dispense with heaven altogether, for the shrine is superior to any world of the gods. When King Varakuṇapāṇṭiyaṉ asks to see the world of Śiva, the god brings *his* world to earth (*avv ulakai ivv ulak' iṭai varuvittu*);[15] afterwards the king is said to have ruled the city of Maturai, which was wealthier than Pŏṉṉakar, the golden city of the gods, and which was famed as "the world of Śiva on earth" (*pūvulakiṛ civalokam ĕṉṉav icaippaṭa*).[16] The same title (*pūloka-civalokam*) is attributed to Tiruvŏṛṛiyūr, Tiruviṭaimarutūr, and other shrines.[17]

One might go still further and maintain that *bhakti* movements in general, and certainly the mainstream devotional movements of southern India, are oriented toward life in this world, with its conventional social categories; far from being revolutionary in a social sense, *bhakti* religion—except in its most extreme manifestations—tends toward the preservation of the social order through the sanctification of the present.[18] Having inherited the goal of world-renunciation from an earlier stage of Indian religion, *bhakti* stands it on its head and directs man back to life on earth. The *bhakta* is commanded to live not in some future heaven but *here*, in the present moment, through a recognition of the divine within him and within the world in which he lives. Already in the *Bhagavadgītā*, *bhakti* provides in effect a practical answer to the fascination of renunciation; Kṛṣṇa reveals himself to Arjuna, and thus convinces him to return to the battle, to his socially prescribed role. In Tamil mythology, the world—and in particular the Tamil land—is clearly consecrated as the realm of the divine. The myths never tire of de-

scribing the god's participation in our lives; Śiva's "amusements" (*tiruviḷaiyāṭal*) at Maturai often take the form of a sudden revelation, in which men are made to confront the divine presence that pervades their universe. The *bhakta* poets cannot help celebrating the world. See, for example, how Kampaṉ describes a sunrise:

> The sun whose death the day before
> recalled the death of all who suffer endless rebirths,
> that sun which is without birth
> was born again
> and thus made one forget heaven and all other pure worlds. [19]

Why did the sunrise make those who beheld it forget heaven? According to the commentators on this verse, the point is that the sun, which is not born and never dies, provides a contrast to the lives of creatures who suffer endless rebirths and recurring death; the use of the verbs *iṟa*, "to die," and *piṟa*, "to be born," to describe the previous day's sunset and the present sunrise, respectively, is therefore pointed and ironic, intended to drive home the contrast. The clue to this notion lies in the epithet *piṟavā*, "the unborn," to describe the sun; the sun thus makes us think of *mokṣa*, of a state beyond birth and death, and forget heaven and other worlds which, however superior to life on earth, would still implicate us in the process of creation. "Everyone must seek *mukti*, in which there is no birth." [20] But is this really the point? The verse is a celebration of sunrise as seen on earth; and this spectacle that the poet praises involves, in his words, a kind of birth for the sun. We forget heaven not because we are reminded of the transience of pleasures and wish to renounce them, but because life on earth is beautiful. And the essence of this joy in mundane existence is explained by the following verse, in which Rāma—the god Viṣṇu incarnate, to whom the poet turns in worship—is (as often in Kampaṉ) compared to the sun (he is the black sun brighter than the sun itself). The presence of Rāma in the world makes life in this world full of wonder and happiness.

At this point a problem arises. If the god is present everywhere, within the recognized conditions of our life, what purpose is served by the shrine? Why need the devotee take the trouble to go on pilgrimage? The boundaries between the shrine and its surroundings disappear in the light of the consciousness of god. Iconoclastic poets stress this point:

To the utterly at-one with Śiva

there's no dawn,
no new moon,
no noonday,
nor equinoxes,
nor sunsets,
nor full moons;

his front yard
is the true Benares,
O Rāmanātha.[21]

Nevertheless, the Tamil purāṇic myths insist that there *is* a difference between the shrine and the outside world. The shrine is consistently idealized as a place outside of and opposed to the sway of time and the corruption that time brings about. Yama, the god of death, has no power over men who reside in the sacred area.[22] Nor does the Kali Age, the degenerate period of time in which we live:

> The sage Sarva was worshiping Śiva on the bank of the Sarasvatī River when the Kali Age began. "*Adharma* now appears to me as *dharma*," he said; "where can I escape the power of Kali?" A voice from heaven directed him to Tiruvāñciyam. Kali, seeing him heading in that direction, pursued him, calling, "Stop! You are in my power!" The sage began to run, and Śiva sent the Kṣetrapāla (the guardian of the sacred site of Tiruvāñciyam) to arrest Kali. Kali begged to be allowed to dwell *near* the shrine and to come one night a year to expiate his faults. He dwells there still, and the Kṣetrapāla is now known as Kalinigraha ("he who restrains Kali").[23]

The shrine is beyond the power of Kali, the personification of the age with all its faults. Kali's task, his *svadharma*, involves him in evil, and the shrine, which is opposed to his nature, offers him a means of absolution. Note that Kali remains on the edges of the shrine near the Kṣetrapāla, and thus becomes, together with the latter, a kind of guardian figure on the border of the sacred zone. Kali at Tiruvāñciyam is thus one of a remarkable series of gatekeepers, whose presence at the border of the shrine seems to serve several purposes: the gatekeeper marks the transition from this world, a realm of sorrow, to the other-worldly shrine. Sometimes his pres-

ence is said to be intended to deter undesired visitors from entering:
thus Yama is stationed by Śiva at the entrance to this same shrine,
Tiruvāñciyam, to keep evil men away.[24] Sinners who die at the
shrine attain an undeserved salvation; hence Yama is made to
punish them not with death—as he usually does—but with life,
outside the shrine. Still, the implication of this myth is that if a
man, be he righteous or evil, can succeed in getting past the
gatekeeper, he is assured of salvation. The gatekeeper thus comes
to represent a trial of inner strength; the devotee must overcome his
fears, his doubts, his human weakness, in order to accomplish his
pilgrimage. The following myth from Tiruvārūr makes this idea
clear:

> Indra saw that all evil men were going to heaven and reaching
> *mokṣa* by worshiping at Acaleśvara (at Tiruvārūr). He there-
> fore called Anger, Lust, Covetousness, Hatred, Fear, Sexual
> Pleasure, Delusion, Addiction, Jealousy, and Desire and said:
> "You must prevent any man or woman who is going to the
> shrine from reaching it." They went and destroyed its reputa-
> tion on earth.[25]

The vices employed by Indra are exactly analogous to the gate-
keepers ordered to keep men away from a shrine. The gods have a
clear enough interest in such a goal; as we have seen, the shrine
supersedes the rituals upon which the gods depend, and offers a
short cut to heaven. Although Indra's initial concern is with the
dangerous and unjustified salvation of the wicked, he acts against
man in general: no man or woman must be allowed to reach the
shrine. The security of the gods depends upon the corruption of
men.[26] Nevertheless, we must not forget that this is a myth that
extolls the power of a shrine; the lesson that the readers or listeners
were no doubt intended to draw was that if they could only master
the vices sent by Indra, and concentrate on the importance and
power of the shrine, they could achieve final happiness by going
there. The myth thus offers both an explanation of the fact that
people are no longer flocking to Acaleśvara—because they have
been corrupted by Indra's messengers—and an implicit recommen-
dation to the listener not to succumb to evil, or at any rate not to
the evils commissioned by Indra to keep men away from the
shrine.

In some cases the test represented by the gatekeeper has a violent

conclusion: the devotee slays the guardian in order to unite with the god. Thus Śiva as Bhairava impales Viṣvaksena, the gatekeeper of Viṣṇu, on his trident.[27] Or, the terrifying guardian may be appeased by the prior worship of the devotee: Śani, malevolent planet of suicides, is worshiped in a shrine at Tirunaḷḷāṛu before one enters the inner sanctum of Śiva;[28] and the fierce image of Brahminicide that stands on the east *gopura* at Tiruviṭaimarutūr receives offerings of salt and spices.[29] Let us look for a moment at the myth told in connection with the latter figure, for it serves to illustrate the idealized nature of the universe within the gates:

> Varakuṇapāṇṭiyaṉ was returning from the hunt when his horse inadvertently stepped on and killed a sleeping Brahmin. The king was afflicted by Brahminicide, and nothing he did by way of expiation was effective. Śiva answered his prayers with a voice from heaven: "King, do not fear. The Cōḻa king is planning to go to war against you. You will defeat him and pursue him, and in this way you will reach the shrine of Tiruviṭaimarutūr, where your sin will be healed." It came to pass as Śiva had said. When the king reached Tiruviṭaimarutūr, he entered the temple through the eastern gate, and his sin stayed outside. Śiva said to him, "That shade (*piramacāyai*) is still outside the eastern gate; return to Maturai through the western gate." The king came out through the western *gopura*, which he called by his name.[30]

The king's *brahmahatyā* still stands, waiting for him, at the eastern gate. Evil cannot penetrate the sanctuary, which represents, through opposition to the evil and suffering lurking outside, a zone of safety and freedom. Many myths describe the shedding of evil beyond the limits of a shrine; to cite only one more example: Rāma is freed of the ghost of Kumbhakarṇa when he approaches Tiruvāṇaikkā; from the sages there Rāma learns that no demon, Brahmarākṣasa, or disease can enter the sacred bounds; but in order to be rid of the shadow upon leaving the shrine, Rāma must atone for his acts of slaughter by setting up a *liṅga* there.[31] The devotional rite cuts the bonds between Rāma and the ghost forever, but we are never told that the ghost ceases to exist. Indeed, in the closed Hindu cosmos evil cannot cease to exist; it can only be distributed among other vehicles (as Indra distributes *his* crime of Brahminicide[32]) or transmuted into something else.[33] The shrine exists as an island

surrounded by the chaos of the unredeemed; outside it, evil, death, and the Kali Age persist unchanged. The cost of maintaining a refuge from the world is isolation.

How does the pilgrim bridge this gap? What does he derive from his brief sojourn in the shrine? And how, indeed, are we to understand the shrine's peculiar freedom from taint? Let us recall the ritual nature of pilgrimage; like ritual generally, the shrine possesses a conventional, formal structure. It is, above all, ordered. Fences have been erected around the sacred, which in this way becomes manageable and accessible. The ritual ordering of the universe within the confines of the shrine creates an ideal opposed to the disorderly world of nature. At the heart of the shrine lies a concentration of sacred power; but this power is restricted, channeled, forced into an inherited pattern of symbolic relations. Chaos is represented through symbols that reflect its subjugation: the primeval water of the flood, the water that threatens to destroy the created universe and out of which the universe has emerged, exists within the shrine or in its vicinity in the form of a temple tank, a river, or the sea; similarly, the ancient forest, the dwelling of chaos that opposes the ordered life of society, is represented in the shrine by the sacred tree.[34] The shrine is a microcosm of the whole of creation, but it differs from the surrounding world by the strict ordering of its component elements. The pilgrim who enters this world is transformed in the direction of harmony. For a moment, he has left his world and entered an idealized cosmos, in which violent forces act within the limits imposed upon them; he touches these forces and is strengthened by them and is then redirected to the chaotic world outside. Through his contact with the bounded power of the shrine, the pilgrim brings to the sphere of his usual activity a new sense of borders and control. From the substratum of violent energy that gives life to the universe and that inheres in limited form in the shrine, the worshiper derives a new vitality—and with it an ideal of order that he retains in the disorderly but still divinely appointed realm beyond the temple bounds.

Order and limitation are not, however, the only clues to the role of the shrine. Another principle, no less important than the idea of limitation, is at work here, in a way that brings the Tamil purāṇic myths into the mainstream of Hindu tradition. This is the principle of separation, the logical consequence of the concern with the contamination of power, and especially the power tied up with the sacrifice. Separation may be regarded as the Brahminical ideal *par ex-*

cellence, the very basis of the Brahmin preeminence: the Brahmin who performs the *prāṇāgnihotra*, the "sacrifice of the breaths," detaches himself from his surroundings (and, of course, from the burden of evil produced by the performance of actual blood sacrifices) and becomes an independent island of purity in the midst of a world corrupted by the exercise of power and the dependence upon power. From this point, the road to world renunciation is not far, and the religious ideal becomes one of absolute transcendence and purity, or of *mokṣa*—release from life in this world with its inherent evils, its unending cycles of death and rebirth, its inevitable pollution through contact with the violent forces that motivate these cycles.[35] I shall refer to this ideal of freedom as "Upaniṣadic," since it reaches its first mature expression in the Upaniṣads. Hart has described a parallel process in the south Indian tradition, with the same goal of separation from the inherently dangerous and polluting centers of sacred power.[36] This quest for purity finds an expression in the idealization of the shrine. Of course, the pure principle of the Upaniṣads—the *brahman* that is the hidden essence of all things—differs from the ideal of the shrine in refusing limitation of any sort; its universality would seem to contrast with the limited manifestation of the shrine. Nevertheless, as we shall see, the Tamil purāṇic myths do proclaim a universal ideal of absolute purity, and the Tamil shrines often appear as individual foci of this freedom— as tangible symbols of an other-worldly goal of total independence. This is very different from the notion of control and ordered power; the idealization of the shrine, when taken to its farthest reaches, severs the link between power and pollution, thus removing the shrine totally from the unclean world of death and rebirth, of evil, of dynamic change. The shrine comes to symbolize an unlimited, unchanging absolute. This ideal need not be described in this case as a final negation or transcendence of power, for a sense of the power that inheres in the sacred spot is never really lost, not even in the context of the search for utter purity; nevertheless, this power, if completely isolated, could in theory become independent of the general processes of creation out of violence and destruction. The shrine is depicted to the pilgrim as a self-contained entity unaffected by the violent forces of chaos at work outside its borders. Separation is the key to this ideal state, as it is in the case of Upaniṣadic idealism; the shrine shares with the Brahminical tradition the desire for purity based on the exclusion of evil and on complete independence of the contamination of power.

A basic ambivalence thus seems to be attached to the Tamil shrine, which is both a locus of power—albeit power controlled and contained—and a symbol of freedom and other-worldly detachment. The ambivalence is all the more striking in view of the "this-worldly" orientation of Tamil devotional religion and the rejection of *mokṣa* as a primary goal.[37] Despite this turning away from the Upaniṣadic ideal, the latter has left its mark on the Tamil purāṇic tradition, both in the concept of the deity and in the depiction of the shrine where he is worshiped. We will return to this problem at a later stage, but it should already be apparent that Tamil *bhakti* religion does not lack the tension between the goals of power and purity—we might even say between the real and the ideal—that seems to be characteristic of Hinduism generally.[38] In the classical Hindu tradition, there is little doubt of the theoretical superiority of the ideal of purity, which, as has been noted, underlies the Brahmin claim to prestige. The Tamil purāṇic texts often appear to follow this pattern as well; we shall see how consistently they strive to purify the image of the deity by detaching him from the symbolism of power (death and rebirth). Yet if one looks at the Tamil tradition as a whole, one cannot but notice how the ideal of purity is constantly compromised by the demand for power. The world always encroaches on the islands of independence. The Tamil tradition is, in fact, cognizant of this fact: we shall see that one of the most important motifs in the goddess myths is that of the intrusion into the sealed shrine, in which the powerful virgin has been isolated and contained; in the myths of most Tamil shrines, the separation of the goddess is fatally damaged and a divine power unleashed upon the intruder (usually her bridegroom Śiva). Moreover, this intrusion is, ultimately, necessary. Despite the persistent search for order and limitation, the myths suggest that it is in *disorder* and chaos that one meets the divine. God is reached precisely at the point where his isolation is breached and the ideal brought back to earth, or where the creative forces of chaos break through their bounds.[39] This immediate, perhaps explosive encounter takes place at the shrine, the dwelling place of a sacred power. This power can never be finally contained or transcended so long as one accepts life and yearns for the god who gives life. Vitality is tied up with death, with the chaos of the nether world (just as *ṛtá*, the cosmic order, is said in the Vedas to be hidden in the nether world[40]); this connection raises a problem that is never fully resolved, as the tradition struggles to free itself, and its

god, from death and from evil; but in a religion that ultimately asserts the divine nature of terrestrial existence, power—however dark or mysterious its workings, however terrible its effects—never loses its sacred character.

3. The Tamil Purāṇas: Types and Prototypes

If we are to believe the Tamil literary tradition, the composition of purāṇas in Tamil goes back to the very earliest period of literary activity: the commentary ascribed to Nakkīrar on *Iṟaiyaṉār akapporuḷ*—where we find the first complete account of the Caṅkam myth of cultural origins—mentions a *Māpurāṇam* and a *Pūtapurāṇam*, both allegedly composed during the period of the "middle Caṅkam."[1] Both works are lost except for stray verses quoted in medieval commentaries.[2] Although nothing more is known of these books, it is not improbable that purāṇas were composed in Tamil at an early period. Several of the *mahāpurāṇas* in Sanskrit were probably extant by the end of the fifth century A.D. (the *Brahmāṇḍa*, *Mārkaṇḍeya*, *Vāyu*, and *Viṣṇu* purāṇas).[3] Tamil adaptations of a number of these works were made in the late medieval period, but it is likely that the *idea* of composing a purāṇa, perhaps on the basis of earlier Sanskrit models, would have been carried to the Tamil area at the same time other literary forms (such as the *kāvya*) were borrowed. Here, as in other areas of Tamil literature, the Jains may have made an early contribution, for we hear of a *Cāntipurāṇam* and a *Purāṇacākaram*, both Jain works no longer extant, apparently belonging to the tenth century.[4] Other early Tamil purāṇas that have been lost include a *Kaṇṇivaṉapurāṇam* and *Aṣṭātacapurāṇam*, twelfth-century works known from inscriptions.[5] The first would appear to have been a *talapurāṇam*.

The purāṇic literature in Tamil is usually divided into three categories: 1) adaptations of the Sanskrit *mahāpurāṇas*; 2) hagiographic purāṇas; and 3) *talapurāṇam*.[6] The first extant Tamil purāṇa would then be the *Periya purāṇam* of Cekkiḷār.[7] This division is, in fact, rather unsatisfactory. The *Periya purāṇam* and similar works, such as Kaṭavuṉmāmuṉivar's *Tiruvātavūraṭikaḷpurāṇam* on the life of Māṇikkavācakar, share very little with the classical purāṇic literature; they are put in this class only by virtue of their name, which in this case is a misnomer. Hagiographic material is common enough in both the Sanskrit *mahāpurāṇas* and the *māhātmya-sthalapurāṇa* literature; the *Tiruviḷaiyāṭarpurāṇam* from Maturai, for

example, includes many stories of the lives of the devotees of Śiva,
but these stories appear in a work essentially devoted to myths of
the god and his consort. The *Periya purāṇam*, on the other hand, is
almost solely taken up with "biographies." Adaptations of the
mahāpurāṇas include such works as Cevvaiccūṭuvār's much-loved
Pākavatam (a work of the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century),[8]
the Tamil *Kācikāṇṭam*, *Kūrmapurāṇam*, and *Iliṅkapurāṇam* of
Ativīrarāmapāṇṭiyaṉ (sixteenth century),[9] his cousin Varatuṅka-
rāmaṉ's *Piramottarakkāṇṭam*, and the *Maccapurāṇam* of Iracai Vaṭa-
malaiyappapiḷḷaiyaṉ (1706-1707).[10] Although these works are based
directly on Sanskrit prototypes, they differ greatly from the
Sanskrit originals both in style and in their perspective on the
mythological materials; unlike the Sanskrit purāṇas, the Tamil
adaptations are polished and compressed, and thus belong, in ef-
fect, to the *kāvya* genre.[11] I have not included them in this study, as
they are almost entirely lacking in material which is peculiarly
southern (or have merely taken over such material from their
source, as may be the case with the *Pākavatam*—since the
Bhāgavatapurāṇa is often thought to have been composed in the
south). In two cases, however, I have used texts conventionally as-
signed to this category. Kacciyappamuṉivar's Tamil version of the
Vināyakapurāṇam was clearly based on a northern Sanskrit origi-
nal,[12] but has assimilated local material. And the *Kantapurāṇam* of
Kacciyappacivācāriyar is one of the basic texts of this study.

The *Kantapurāṇam* is, in fact, wrongly assigned to the category of
adaptations of the *mahāpurāṇas*. It bears no relation to the *Skanda-
purāṇa* in its printed form, while its affinities are clearly with the
class of *talapurāṇam*: it celebrates Kāñcipuram, and in particular the
god of the Kumārakoṭṭam shrine there (where Kacciyappa-
civācāriyar is said to have composed the work), and it gives us in
effect the myths of Murukaṉ in the form current in the Toṇṭai re-
gion.[13] The complete localization of the mythic action in the major
shrines of the Murukaṉ cult in Tamiḻnāṭu is apparent throughout
the work. The *Kantapurāṇam* claims, however, to belong to the
Skandapurāṇa.[14] The Sanskrit text on which it was based is known
from manuscripts and one recent printed edition; it too appears to
have been composed in Kāñcipuram.[15] This text has never been
studied critically, and the possibility that the Tamil *Kantapurāṇam*
was earlier has been raised.[16] Nevertheless, the evidence of the two
texts indicates that the Sanskrit *ŚRKh* was indeed the prototype for
Kacciyappar's composition; the latter bears all the signs of a unitary

work written by a single author, while the *ŚRKh* seems to be a composite text.[17] Kacciyappar has clearly taken liberties with his model: for example, the myth of Murukaṉ's second marriage (to Vaḷḷi, Sanskrit Lavalī, his local south Indian bride) has been removed from its natural context in the fifth *kāṇḍa* of the *ŚRKh* and used to provide a powerful, climactic ending to the *Kantapurāṇam* as a whole.[18] This is but one example of a skilled artist's sense of fitness and order; in many ways Kacciyappar's work is much richer and more interesting than the Sanskrit original. The Tamil text gives us a far more complete account of the Murukaṉ myths of the south, and is particularly faithful to the ancient sources of the tradition.[19] The Murukaṉ myths themselves are, of course, older than either of these texts. The *ŚRKh* offers a standard medieval version of the myths, but it was probably the great popularity of the Tamil *Kantapurāṇam* which was responsible for the extreme regularity and lack of variation in the Murukaṉ myths recorded in the Tamil *talapurāṇam* literature as a whole. This standardization distinguishes the Murukaṉ corpus from all other areas of Tamil mythology.

The date of Kacciyappar has been the subject of much discussion, with estimates ranging from the eighth to the eighteenth centuries. Mu. Aruṇācalam has ably presented the evidence.[20] He concludes that Kacciyappar belongs to the end of the fourteenth century. Zvelebil[21] follows his argument, but then admits that it is weak and that 1625, the date put forward by Nilakanta Sastri, is "almost equally acceptable."[22] As with so many cases in Tamil literature, the dating of Kacciyappar depends upon imprecise allusions and circumstantial evidence. Two things are clear to any student of the purāṇa: Kacciyappar took Kampaṉ's *Irāmāvatāram* as his model,[23] and he was familiar with the terminology and concepts of Śaiva Siddhānta. It would appear likely that he lived after the great scholar Umāpaticivācāriyar (first half of the fourteenth century), whose works helped crystallize the language of the Siddhāntin theologians.

Any attempt to narrow down the date of Kacciyappar may hinge on the dating of his pupil Ñāṉavarotayar, who praises Kacciyappar in the thirteenth invocatory stanza of the *Upatecakāṇṭam* (the sequel to the *Kantapurāṇam*). To some, this reference (*kāñci vaḷar kacciyappa kkaṟpaka ttāru*) suggests that Kacciyappar was still alive at the time of writing.[24] The phrase should not, however, be forced to bear the full weight of such an argument. Still, there is a strong tradition that Ñāṉavarotayar was a direct pupil of Kacciyappar. Ñāṉa-

varotayar has been dated in the first quarter of the fifteenth century on the basis of rather slender evidence.[25] Another pupil of Kacciyappar, according to the tradition, was Koṇeriyappar, who wrote another Tamil version of the *Upatecakāṇṭam*. Unfortunately, we have no means of determining his date.[26] It does appear likely, however, as later sources suggest,[27] that Koṇeriyappar's version of the *Upatecakāṇṭam* is later than that of Ñāṇavarotayar. Certainly Ñāṇavarotayar adheres much more closely to the Sanskrit original, including the *adhyāya* divisions.

Kacciyappar is mentioned in the works of three poets of the seventeenth century.[28] We therefore have a safe *terminus ad quem*. If the later literary tradition is correct, we would be able to push his date back approximately two centuries from this limit. In the present state of our knowledge, further precision is impossible.

The golden age of purāṇic composition in Tamil begins in the sixteenth century. There are earlier purāṇas extant, such as the *Koyiṟpurāṇam* of Umāpaticivācāriyar (early fourteenth century), a close adaptation of the *Cidambaramāhātmya*, and the "old" *Tiruviḷaiyāṭaṟpurāṇam* (on the Maturai shrine) by Pĕrumpaṟṟappuliyūrnampi.[29] Other early purāṇas have been lost, as we have seen. But it was only in the sixteenth century that purāṇas began to be composed on a wide scale—a process that has continued right up to the present day.[30] Our main sources for the study of Tamil mythology are thus very late, although much of the related *māhātmya* literature in Sanskrit is somewhat older;[31] and in any case the myths themselves, as distinct from the form in which they were finally recorded, are often very ancient, as I hope to show. The sixteenth century also witnessed the establishment of two of the most prominent surviving Śaiva mutts (Tamil *maṭam*, Sanskrit *maṭha*) in Tamiḻnāṭu, at Tarumapuram and Tiruvāvaṭuturai; this fact is closely related to the vogue in purāṇas noticeable from this period, for a majority of these works were composed by scholars associated with these institutions of religious learning.[32]

The character of the versions of the Tamil myths now available to us is scholastic, erudite, saturated with allegory, and ornate in language and style. The format of the works is conventionalized: beginning with invocations to the deities of the shrine, the author proceeds to pay obeisance to Naṭarāja-Śiva, the sixty-three Śaiva saints (*nāyaṉmār*) as a group (perhaps with a special verse on one of them connected with the shrine, such as Kāraikkālammaiyār at Tiruvālaṅkāṭu), and the servants of Śiva generally; Caṇṭecuranāya-

ṇār, who cut off the legs of his own father when the latter committed an offense against Śiva, is often singled out for special praise.[33]
In the *avaiyaṭakkam*, a brief resumé of the contents of the purāṇa,
the number of cantos, and so on, is presented. The author
apologizes for his presumption in composing the work, usually refers in a general way to his source (more often than not, the
Skandapurāṇa),[34] and may name a patron who commissioned or
supported the work. Devout authors from the mutts will also
praise their *guru* and the founder of the line of teachers (*guruparamparā*). Inevitably, there will then be one or more cantos singing
highly conventionalized descriptions of the beauties of the town or
village in which the shrine is located (*tirunakaraccarukkam*), the river
that flows through it or the sacred tank within the walls of the
shrine (*tīrttaviceṭam*), the region as a whole (*tirunāṭṭuccarukkam*), and
perhaps a central image worshiped in the temple (*mūrttiviceṭam*).[35]
The actual myths are often introduced by the story of the creation
of the Naimiṣāraṇya, where the sages are performing *tapas*,[36] or
simply by an account of the arrival there of the narrator, Sūta, and
the request made of him by the sages to hear the stories of a holy
place (usually the most sacred place in the universe). The Sūta then
proceeds to narrate the purāṇa. Sometimes another narrator is interposed: in the *Tiruviḷai.*, for example, the Sūta recites the purāṇa
as narrated by the sage Agastya, who learned it from Murukaṇ.[37]

Although the Tamil purāṇas are repetitive in structure and
learned in style, they are not necessarily dry or devoid of poetry.
One often feels that the authors were deeply moved by the myths,
and this sense of the underlying poetic power of the stories does
break through the long, sometimes monotonous chain of *viruttam*
verses. Such is the case, for example, in Kacciyappar's account of
the myth of Vaḷḷi and Murukaṇ;[38] and Parañcoti's *Tiruviḷai* is justly
cherished for its lyrical, captivating language as well as for the
stories it relates. The fact that leading scholars and theologians were
responsible for the production of many of the Tamil purāṇas is an
indication of the seriousness with which the endeavor was regarded.[39] The stories were no doubt always beloved in their own
right, as they are today, for their wealth of imagination and invention, for their humor, and for the expression they gave to the love
of a people for its land; but they were also regarded as carrying a
message of the highest importance. In its mythology, Tamil civilization has given us a powerful expression of some of its most basic
and enduring ideas.

Many of the Tamil purāṇas, like the Saṅskrit *māhātmyas*, are of
unknown authorship; many have never been printed. Indeed, the
full extent of this literature is not yet known. Kiruṣṇacāmi, who
has prepared much the best bibliography of these works available,
lists 581 items;[40] but his list is far from complete. Zvelebil has esti-
mated that there may be nearly 2,000 Tamil purāṇas.[41] Only a few
have achieved popularity outside the shrines they celebrate. A list
of the better-known authors and their dates is given in Appendix I.
I have not, however, limited my study to these titles, but have tried
rather to sample as many Tamil purāṇas as possible. Some of the
most fascinating myths are, in fact, buried in obscure, anonymous
works from small, out-of-the-way shrines.

In order to convey something of the atmosphere surrounding the
composition of a Tamil purāṇa, I wish to cite two examples, one a
fairly typical literary "hagiography" of the premodern period, and
the second a documented historical instance. We begin with the
story of the *Tiruccēntūrttalapurāṇam* as preserved in the local tradi-
tion of this shrine. The Tamil purāṇa dealing with Tiruccēntūr, an
elegant composition of 899 verses, is ascribed to Vēṉṟimālaik-
kavirāyar, who lived in the seventeenth century. When the Tiruc-
cēntūr temple authorities published an edition of the Tamil purāṇa
in 1963, they included a brief history of the author in prose, based
on the inherited traditions about him (*vēṉṟimālaikkavirāyar varalāṟu*,
pp. 9-15). Here is a resumé of this "biography":

> One of the two thousand Brahmins of Tiruccēntūr, who are
> known as the Tiricutantirar,[42] was blessed with a son. When
> the child was five years old, his parents tried to have him edu-
> cated, but the boy was unable to master anything except the
> ways of worshiping Lord Murukaṉ: he learned to circumam-
> bulate the shrine, to fix the image of the lord in his heart, to
> say "Murukaṉ is my helper," to prostrate himself before the
> god. He retained nothing else of his instruction, and, as he
> grew older, he was found fit only to serve in the temple
> kitchen, where the offerings of food to the god were prepared.
> As he worked in the kitchen, he used to lose himself in medita-
> tion on the lord.
>
> One day while he was thus sunk in worship, he forgot that
> the moment of offering was near. The image of the god had
> already been adorned, and the Brahmin priests were angry:
> "Where is the offering? The auspicious moment must not be