A Granite God in an Ocean of Milk

Restoring the form and context of the rock-cut Viṣṇu at Māmallapuram (600-630 CE)

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Abstract
The article concerns the context of the early seventh-century rock-cut Viṣṇu at Māmallapuram carved by the coast. Although no serpent was carved beneath the reclining Viṣṇu, the total image would have been understood this way: the bedrock and skies symbolizes the serpent and the ocean represents the primeval waters on which it lays. The form, location and orientation of the image would dramatize the popular myth of Viṣṇu waking from his sleep to create the material world. This would function in relation with the nearby ocean, seasonal monsoons, positions of the sun in the sky over the year. The mechanism would likely have reflected in ritual practices over the image as well. The original form of the rock-cut Viṣṇu – the details of which have been lost owing to continuous water-erosion – may have represented the very end of his sleep or the fringe between his cyclical sleeping and waking.
1. Introduction

What does “context” comprise? For Hindu sacred images, context is a confluence of mythological tales, iconographic traditions, ritual and devotional practices, and surrounding environments. These systems variously combine to dramatize a specific mechanism of the deity in worship. Such is the case with the rock-cut monolith of the reclining deity Viṣṇu (Fig. 1), which was carved into the granite bedrock by the coast at Māmallapuram sometime during the reign of Pallava ruler, Mahendravarman I (r. 600-630 CE). Originally open-air, this image would once have been washed by the incoming tide from the Bay of Bengal and exposed to sunlight year-round.

Viṣṇu is among the most widely worshipped deities in Hinduism today. The broad religion where Viṣṇu is considered to be the highest or Supreme divinity is called Vaiṣṇavism; its followers are called Vaiṣṇavas. For Vaiṣṇavas, Viṣṇu is the absolute cosmos, i.e. the essential source from which and into which the entire material realm proceeds over cosmic time-cycles of creation and destruction. He is also the ultimate recipient of all worship, and the one who grants spiritual liberation. ‘Viṣṇu’, however, is a broad term. This god is imagined in many different forms with various names like Nārāyaṇa (the Supreme person), Vāsudeva (the all-pervasive one), Kṛṣṇa (the all-attractive one) among others, depending on the specific function in question.

Our image, carved into the ground itself, is a larger than life-size representation of Viṣṇu’s śayana or reclining form, which is a category in itself. Four-armed – two by the side, one stretched back and the fourth, flexed – Viṣṇu lays with legs outstretched and appears to have his mouth wide open. One can make out a conical headpiece and waist-belt, but details of his hand-held objects, clothing and expression have been lost owing to erosion caused by exposure to the incoming tide and the performance of on-site rituals involving the application of corrosive substances like milk, oils and curd. The specific form of Viṣṇu represented is uncertain, and in order to hypothesize what
this was, the original context of the image must be known. Walter Smith has argued that proximity to the sea was central to its location for the artistic and symbolic roles the waters would play. ¹ This essay develops and broadens Smith’s insight by hypothesizing the idol’s ritualized context, especially in relation with its surrounding environment. In particular, I consider the sea and sun as ritual agents and symbols in context of the Viṣṇu image.

Soon after carving, the image was enclosed in a small shrine with a narrow east-facing opening, constructed on orders of the next Pallava, Narasiṁhavarma I (r. 630-668 CE). This would not prevent waves from washing the image, but it would control the way it was illuminated by the rising sun at different points in the year. This would correspond with specific moments in cosmic time as understood in the Viṣṇu tradition in relation with the Tamil astronomical calendar that would have been used in Māmallapuram. Around a century after the shrine enclosing the Viṣṇu image was built, two larger shrines to another popular deity, Śiva, were erected – one between the ocean and the Viṣṇu shrine and one on its other side (Fig. 2). These structures, constructed on orders of the powerful Pallava ruler Rājasiṁha (r. 700-728 CE), would have restricted almost any physical interaction between the image and the tide or rising sun.

Scholars such as Vidya Dehejia and Richard Davis have shown that the building of the large Śiva shrines was likely meant to suggest the inferiority of Viṣṇu to Śiva by dwarfing the pre-existing Viṣṇu shrine.² This move marked a series of religious competitions between Vaiṣṇavas and Śaivas (followers of Śiva) at Māmallapuram. However, it is not only size that matters in this case. By physically restricting the interactions between the Viṣṇu image and the incoming tide and rising sun, the Śiva shrines destroy its ability to perform in context of its surroundings as was originally

intended. Here, I reconstruct the original context of the Viṣṇu image to show how its interactions with the surroundings would have dramatized the mythological imagination and mechanism of Viṣṇu as Supreme divinity. This essay lends new evidence for Dehejia and Davis’ arguments for the competitive motivations behind the construction of the Śiva shrines.

It is ironic that today, we know these three shrines by a collective name, the Shore Temple, as though they were constructed all at once, and by same ruler. This implies a single, congruous agenda in throughout its history that reflects pure religious harmony among Vaiṣṇavas and Śaivas. The situation is more complex than that, raising questions on why Rājasiṁha would have ordered the Śiva shrines constructed so as to disrupt the mechanism of our Viṣṇu image. All three Pallava rulers mentioned earlier (and who contributed to the building of the Shore Temple) were Śaivas. In contrast to those of the earlier two – Mahendravarman I and Narasiṁhavarma I – under whom our image and sleeping house were created respectively, Rājasiṁha’s move seems geared to position one deity, Śiva, over another, Viṣṇu. In this essay, I consider mythological narratives, devotional poetry and ritual systems to reconstruct the original mechanism of our rock-cut Viṣṇu with respect to its environmental setting. In this way, I suggest the reasons for its creation and the role it would play it society, and thus speculate how this would shift upon the construction of the Śiva shrines under Rājasiṁha. In hypothesizing the motivations for Rājasiṁha’s move, I suggest new ways to explain some peculiarities of other structures around Māmallapuram that yet remain mysteries. I hope that my article will lend to our present understanding of the early history of Vaiṣṇavism in Māmallapuram and also the seventh and eighth centuries in the Tamil country more broadly, which comprise an crucial but highly understudied period in the pan-Indian history of Vaiṣṇavism.
2. The Image in Context
   
a. Environment

Located along the Coromandel coast and exposed to the blazing sun, Māmallapuram is characterized by expansive landscapes of naturally-occurring orthopyroxene granite known as Krishnashila: red-brown in colour, coarse-grained, quartz-rich, and among the hardest of the four main kinds of granite found in south India. As with the Viṣṇu image, this locally available stone is the material from which almost all structures and sculptures are carved on-site, both structural and rock-cut monolithic. Granite, and especially Krishnashila, is very sturdy, demanding nearly three times the effort required to carve sandstone or limestone. For the same reason, it is highly resistant to erosion or decay, which it would endure from the sea, wind and with respect to the Viṣṇu idol, rituals performed on-site. Whether or not the rock-cut Viṣṇu would have been physically interacted with the sea is questionable as it is difficult to determine the ways in which the coastline of Māmallapuram has changed over the 1400 years since the image was carved. However, as Smith notes, the lower walls of the Shore Temple seem eroded from their long and direct exposure to seawater, which appears different from the wind-eroded superstructures. In addition, geological studies that indicate the coast has prograded not, receded over time.

Fig. 3 shows the distribution of naturally-occurring granite (shaded grey) in south India, as well as the location of Māmallapuram, which I have marked with a star. Barring the very southern tip of the sub-continent, the area around Māmallapuram is the only coastal region wherein granite is the major local stone. That the Pallavas chose this location to carve the Viṣṇu image indicates that

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5 Mohs’ Scale Values (Generic): Limestone (2.5-4); Sandstone (5-6); Granite (6.5-7)
the nearby environment was likely important to its mechanism. Unless they underestimated the elements or thought that the granite would withstand them, it is likely that they would have selected a more inland location to reduce erosion of the sculptures and monuments from incoming tides, harsh salty winds, and rainfall, which would be greatest along the coast. However, this is unlikely given that Māmallapuram had been used as a port since at least the third century by the earlier Pallavas. They would have thus known of the way the naturally-occuring granite held up against the erosive sea and wind. It is unclear whether the Pallavas intended to build the numerous monuments that would follow our rock-cut Viṣṇu, probably the earliest image at Māmallapuram. However, given that the interaction of light and water was so crucial to several monuments on-site such as the water-tank located north of the Shore Temple (Fig. 4) and Descent of the Ganges in whose cleft water would be poured (Fig. 5), it is likely that sun and sea came together to bring our Viṣṇu image to life as well.

Smith writes that the landscape of Māmallapuram likely indicated the presence of divinities in the region even before the Viṣṇu image was carved. He writes that like some other monuments around Māmallapuram such as Descent of the Ganges and Śāḷuvankuppan, the rock into which the Viṣṇu image is carved might have been ‘suggestive of the image to be carved from it’. A similar idea was present in the Pāñcarātra system, which, along with the Vaikhānasa system is one of the two main systems of ritual worship to Viṣṇu. As I will make reference to these systems later on as well, I must note that it is very difficult to say which system and precisely which of their texts would have been prominent around Māmallapuram for their dates of composition are uncertain. Nevertheless, an idea similar to Smith’s is exhibited in an important Pāñcarātra text, where Viṣṇu says that he can be ‘search(ed) and (found) asleep on the milk Ocean’, and approached through such

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‘immanent bodily forms’ on earth. While I agree with Smith that the rock into which the image is carved might have exhibited a form that suggested a presence of Viṣṇu, it is difficult to confirm the extent to which this is true. Unlike the other structures around Māmallapuram that Smith cites as comparables, the Viṣṇu image is carved by the coast and not inland. Transformed over centuries of erosion from battering waves, the original form of rock is impossible to know. Moreover, there are also many structures around Māmallapuram that do not seem to be carved from rocks that exhibit any figural suggestiveness, which Smith does not consider. To present the sculpture as a naturally-occurring miracle is to prevent its precise form, location and orientation from being studied as intentional artistic choices. I develop this in the following section.

b. Architecture

The rock-cut Viṣṇu, carved around 600-630 CE, was among the first, and possibly the very first artwork at Māmallapuram, most likely on orders of Mahendravarma I (r. 600-630 CE) who is remembered for his artistic inclination and as the pioneer of rock-cut architecture among the kings of the Pallava dynasty. Originally, the sculpture would have been open-air, but soon after (the exact date is unclear), during the reign of Narasiṁhavarma I (r. 630-668 CE), it was enclosed within a shrine-like structure that a later Pallava inscription calls a ‘stone sleeping house for Viṣṇu on the ocean’s brink.’ In addition, a large apsidal-shaped tank was also built just north of the image and dedicated to the boar-deity Varāha, who is an avatāra (divine incarnation) of Viṣṇu, i.e. one of the ten forms Viṣṇu takes in order to descend to the earth in times of chaos. A monolith of Varāha, snout pointing down, survives in the tank and bears three inscriptions of Narasiṁhavarma I’s name. Scholars like Smith have suggested that when the tank was full, it would recall the popular myth of

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the boar-deity diving to rescue the goddess Earth, Bhūmī, from the waters into which she had once sunk. This image is also carved in relief in the Ādi-varāha cave temple nearby carved later in the same century (Fig. 6). Given that Viṣṇu’s sleeping house and the Varāha tank are contemporary, a relation may exist between them.

Why was the shrine around the rock-cut Viṣṇu referred to as a ‘sleeping house’? Perhaps this had to do with its interaction with the sun. On June 21st, the summer solstice, and December 22nd, the winter solstice, the sun’s rays hit the Viṣṇu shrine (~12.6165° N, ~80.1993° E) from an approximately 24° angle north and south of absolute East respectively (Fig. 7). However, Viṣṇu image and sleeping house do not lay on a perfect North-South axis. Rather, they are both angled approximately 14° south of absolute East. Owing to this, sun-rays would have entered the shrine through its narrow opening and touched the Viṣṇu image most powerfully when the sun was also at this angle. Rather than on the equinoxes, this would be around 28th October and 28th April (give or take a few days), i.e. approximately four months after the summer and winter solstices begin and end respectively. For reasons I develop in section 4, this four-month period may have corresponded with the length of Viṣṇu’s cosmic sleep, where his “waking” and “sleeping” symbolize the emanation and reabsorption of the material realm. Furthermore, Viṣṇu’s “waking” would also correspond with Varāha’s episode recalled in the nearby tank. If the precise orientation of the image is important, at least some artistic intentionality in its carving is implied.

The question then arises as to why the image and shrine are oriented south-east rather than north-east – the four-month period would hold in both cases. This can be reconciled in three ways. Firstly, the sun would rise much higher in the sky two months before and after the summer solstice than the winter solstice. As the shrine is at sea-level, the lower angle of the sun around 28th October and 28th April would mean that more light would enter the shrine and fewer shadows would be cast.
over the image. Secondly, Viṣṇu’s sleep is usually associated with the rainy season, which spans from June until September. Thus, an orientation toward the north-east would mean that the sun-rays hit the image during this period and “waking” Viṣṇu, which would be inappropriate. Thirdly, it is possible, likely even, that the rock indicated a presence of Viṣṇu within it as Smith writes. This would complement, not, deny the intentionality of choices made.

It is unclear for how long the Viṣṇu image lay open-air before the sleeping house was built. For this undetermined period of time, its interaction with the rising sun would not be controlled; however, this does not mean that its orientation 14° south of East was accidental. Besides the possibility that the bedrock truly did, miraculously, ‘suggest’ Viṣṇu’s form oriented in exactly this way, his four-month period of sleep may still have been accounted for without the sleeping house. While the structure physically controls the rays of the sun over the image, Viṣṇu’s waking could be celebrated annually even without the dramatization of this incident by the sleeping house. In fact, while the image was open-air, rains would pour directly over it and even submerge it during these four months. This would recall pralaya, the cosmic period associated with Viṣṇu’s sleep, when all manifested entities with form dissolve into a state of formlessness, from which manifestation reoccurs at the end of cycle of creation and destruction. This dramatization would be sacrificed on building the sleeping house, and perhaps this is another reason why the tank to Varāha was built, for during the monsoons, it would fill up with water and submerge the monolithic boar. In this way, some form of Viṣṇu would still dramatize the cosmic period of dissolution, pralaya.

Owing to its sea-facing opening, Viṣṇu’s sleeping house would allow the incoming tide from washing the image while also controlling how its interaction with the sun. This mechanism was put to rest by Rājasiṃha (r. 700-728 CE), under whose rule the impressive shrines of the Shore Temple were built, two in number and both dedicated to Śiva. The larger of these Śiva shrines stands between
the sea and the Viṣṇu image, physically demarcating it from both the water and rising sun. In fact, at sunrise, the shadow of the Śaiva shrine falls over Viṣṇu’s sleeping house. This move, meant to assert the inferiority of Viṣṇu to Śiva, sparked a series of religious competitions at Māmallapuram that persisted until the fourteenth century. This involved the writing of curses and various iconoclasms. Rājasimha’s disruption of the mechanism of our Viṣṇu is compatible in that he is was a Śaiva but not typical. In fact, Mahendravarma I, under whom the rock-cut Viṣṇu was carved, and Narasiṃhavarma I, under whom the sleeping house was built, were both devotees of Śiva. For a Śaiva or Vaiṣṇava, devotion to one deity does not imply termination of devotion to the other as well. The debate is only over which deity is Supreme, to whom the others are subservient. Rājasimha’s move was likely coloured by other agenda, which I consider in section 5.

3. Form of the rock-cut Viṣṇu

As mentioned in the introduction, ‘Viṣṇu’ is an umbrella term for the multitude of forms by which this deity can be referred or represented. Our image is of śayana or reclining Viṣṇu, which is a category in itself. When Viṣṇu is represented in the reclining form, he is usually depicted on his many-headed serpent-bed, Ananta, who in turn lays on the primeval waters of the cosmos or the cosmic ‘Ocean of Milk’ (kṣīrasāgara). As these descriptions occur most frequently in narrative works of literature like the Purāṇas rather than those of philosophy, it is difficult to map precisely what Ananta or the primeval waters are meant to represent. However, the name Ananta (an-without; anta-end) suggests the temporal eternality and spatial boundlessness of these cosmic ideas. Ananta is also known as Śeṣa, which derives from the root śiṣ, meaning ‘to remain’. Viṣṇu’s serpent-bed, therefore, represents that which remains at the end of each cycle of emanation and reabsorption.

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(creation and destruction) from and back into Viṣṇu. When Viṣṇu is represented reclining on Ananta, he is referred to by the better-known name, Anantaśayana, i.e. ‘reclining on Ananta’. However, no image of Ananta survives beneath our Viṣṇu at Māmallapuram and no accompanying deities seem to have been carved either. This is quite rare.

With respect to the Anantaśayana theme and citing a Vaikhānasā text, K.V. Soundara Rajan writes that our image fulfills the ‘Vaikhānasāgama description of the minimal, adhama stage of the abhicārika version.’\(^{11}\) Abhicārika or incantation images, rare and characterized by specific features, are meant to harness the vicious energies of deities. Our image displays some of typical abhicārika features such as a four-arms and the absence of attendant deities. However, it does not exhibit other standard features like scanty clothing, thin limbs or a north-facing head that Rajan details earlier in his own article.\(^{12}\) Unlike the nude and weak-looking abhicārika image in V. S. Pathak’s study, our Viṣṇu wears a crown and belt, has strong limbs, and a south-facing head.\(^{13}\) Even more details of ornamentation may have been present earlier, now lost due to erosion. There is no other evidence suggesting that the our Viṣṇu was an abhicārika image.

Since Ananta is missing, scholars have usually referred to the form of the Viṣṇu depicted as Sthalaśayana (sthala-ground; śayana-reclining). Indeed, the image is carved into the ground itself and there is a later temple, Thirukadalmallai, dedicated to Sthalaśayana at Māmallapuram, which may indicate a prior history of the worship of Sthalaśayana. I consider this is greater detail in section 5. Many hymns by the Āḻvārs also describe Viṣṇu reclining on Ananta or the primeval waters. Smith cites two eleventh-century inscriptions on the walls of the Shore Temple that refer to the temple as dedicated to Jalaśayana (jala–water; śayana–reclining), providing evidence that the ocean would be

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\(^{12}\) Rajan, “Typology,” 75.
part of the total context of the image. The Jalaśayana form does not rule out an accompanying presence of Ananta. In fact, while Anantaśayana images often represent only Viṣṇu on the serpent and not the primeval water, Jalaśayana images usually show all three. This is seen in the main icon of a Nepali mandala dedicated to Jalaśayana Viṣṇu (Fig. 8). A detail near the bottom shows a priest conducting rituals over Viṣṇu laying on his serpent, who floats on water (Fig. 9). This likely represents the seventh-century icon at Budhanikantha Temple in the Kathmandu Valley (Fig. 10). If the nearby sea was meant to be part of the rock-cut Viṣṇu at Māmallapuram, then the question arises as to why Ananta is not carved beneath. This may be because the vast rock itself represented Viṣṇu’s serpent-bed, which floats on the primeval waters, symbolized by the ocean.

The idea of Ananta as landscape is seen in the following verse from the *Haṃsasandeśa* of Vedānta Deśika, an important Vaiṣṇava thinker from south India, on the town Tirupati.

> Just ahead Lamp Black Hill will rise up before you giving pleasure to the eyes: it’s no wonder that people say it’s the coiled body of the serpent Śeṣa himself, for this is Viṣṇu’s place the earth’s broad bed, its hooded peaks hung with bright jewels and scudding clouds like freshly shed skin.

While this verse was written later in the thirteenth century, Vedānta Deśika was a Śrīvaiṣṇava, i.e. a member of the influential community into which many older streams of Vaiṣṇavism were absorbed like the devotional poetry of the Āḻvārs and the Pāñcarātra system of ritual. Therefore, his analogy of landscape as serpent may have existed in seventh-century Māmallapuram, and as his verse says, perhaps the skies may also have been understood as part of Śeṣa, borne by the ocean. Vedānta Deśika

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14 Eugen Hultzsch, *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. I (Madras: Archaeological Survey of India, 1890), 64, inscription no. 40 line 17; and 67, inscription no. 41 line 18.

repeats this in the Navaṇimālai too, where he refers to another town, Tiruvahīndrapuram (120 kilometres south of Māmallapuram), as ‘Serpent Town’.\textsuperscript{16} The temples at Tiruvahīndrapuram and Tirupati are both divyadeśas, i.e. the 106 locations on earth where the Āḻvārs would have believed that Viṣṇu has descended. Thirukadalmallai temple at Māmallapuram is also one of these, so the idea of its landscape as his serpent may hold in our case as well. A similar idea is also present in the Mahābhārata – an Indian epic composed between 300 BCE to 300 CE and known in Māmallapuram – where it is written that Śeṣa ‘bears the earth with all its mountains.’\textsuperscript{17}

Vedānta Deśika’s Hamsasandeśa is modelled after the lyric poem Meghadūta composed by the fourth-century poet Kālidāsa from central India.\textsuperscript{18} In this verse, he mentions both the image of Viṣṇu reclining on the serpent and his fourth-month period of sleep mentioned earlier.

Śārṅga-armed Viṣṇu sleeps on Śeṣa,
and when he wake my exile ends.
Thus, my dear, please close your eyes
and muddle through the next four months.
Under the cool, full moon of autumn,
we’ll slake our starved desires.\textsuperscript{19}

I have not found evidence from seventh-century Māmallapuram that demonstrates the prevalence of the notion of the aforementioned four-month period. On its own, the influence of Kālidāsa on Vedānta Deśika alone does not confirm this either, let alone its relationship with the idea of Śeṣa as landscape and the Anantaśayana form. However, given that Vedānta Deśika is a product of earlier south Indian Vaiṣṇavism where ideas of Viṣṇu’s sleep and the Anantaśayana form were important, this may have been the case. I develop this in section 4, but I raise the point now to suggest that


\textsuperscript{17} Nicholas Sutton, Religious Doctrines in the Mahābhārata (Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass Publishers: 2000), 157. Mahābhārata 6.63.10-11

\textsuperscript{18} For more information on this relation, please see Yigal Bronner and David Shulman, “A Cloud Turned Goose: Sanskrit in the Vernacular Millennium” Indian Economic and Social History Review, 43 (1): 1-30.

\textsuperscript{19} These words are from a translation by Jaffor Ullah and Joanna Kirkpatrick published online. Meghadūta 107.
while we do not have evidence that the mythological idea of Viṣṇu’s four-month sleep was known in seventh-century Māmallapuram, it would not contradict, rather complement others that were more popular. The Sthalaśayana label limits the ways in which we understand the mechanism of our rock-cut Viṣṇu. It does not account for its coastal location or the symbolism of the landscape as Ananta and ocean as primeval waters. In this way, it also leaves out the four-month period of Viṣṇu’s sleep evoked by the orientation of the image with respect to the sun and the monsoons.

An important source of information on the form and context of the Māmallapuram Viṣṇu icon are the accounts of Pallava poet, Daṇḍin, who visited the site in the late seventh century. In his accounts, Daṇḍin mentions that his purpose of visiting was to see how well a broken arm of a stone image of Viṣṇu, reclining by the sea, had been restored. As our image also shows signs of a restored arm, it is almost certain that he refers to the same image (Fig. 11). Surprisingly, Daṇḍin mentions that he did, in fact, see Ananta along with other figures present by Viṣṇu.

…with eyes blossoming wide in wonder, beheld the Blessed One. Toward His body came skipping in rows the waves of the saltsea darkened by a garland of blossoming blue lotuses like a wreath of glances from goddess Lakṣmī. The God was being borne by the serpent Śeṣa, who with a wreath of coppery-red glances blazing forth from this thousand wide-opened hoods, seemed to show that frightened look he once had when the demons Madhu and Kaiṭabha attacked. And He was favoring the god of the lotus seat [Brahma] with a wondrous thousand-leaved lotus springing from His navel - the lotus that is the stream of the power of His eyes when closed in the weariness of His yogic sleep.

In this section, Daṇḍin is making reference to a specific moment in the Mahābhārata where Viṣṇu, asleep on Ananta, is attacked by the demons Madhu and Kaiṭabha. Smith suggests that the figure of Ananta that Daṇḍin refers to might have been rendered in paint or stucco and worn off, or that the

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20 Rabe, “Praśasti,” 197.
21 Daṇḍin, Avantisundarī, Trivandrum Sanskrit Series, no. 172 (Trivandrum: University of Travencore, 1954), 14. These words have been borrowed from the aforementioned article by Michael D. Rabe, who in turn credits Sheldon Pollock for translating much of the surviving prologue to Daṇḍin’s Avantisundarī.
A poet may simply have been recalling the standard iconography associated with a reclining Viṣṇu. It has also been suggested that these are simply poetic turns written in by Daṇḍin. While all this might be true, the poet might also have read the bedrock as the serpent itself. To assess this, we must consider the literary moment he refers to in context of the *Mahābhārata*.

4. **Viṣṇu’s Sleep and Cosmic Time**

In Vaiṣṇavism, Viṣṇu’s waking and sleeping moments are considered analogous to the cyclical emanation and reabsorption of the material realm, which occurs endlessly over time. As mentioned earlier, period of Viṣṇu’s sleep corresponds with *pralaya*, i.e. when all manifested forms dissolve into formlessness, before he wakes to manifest the material world again.

a. **The *Mahābhārata***

The Madhu-Kaiṭabha incident that Daṇḍin refers to with respect to our Viṣṇu is among the most popular tales from the *Mahābhārata* (Śānti Parva, Book 12, Section 348). That it was known in Māmallapuram around the time our Viṣṇu image was carved is confirmed in the presence of these figures by a stylistically similar relief image in the Mahīṣāsuramardini Cave from the mid-seventh century (Fig. 12). In a nutshell, the story proceeds as follows. When cosmic destruction occurs, the entire material realm merges into a state of formlessness and darkness spreads over the universe. At this time, Viṣṇu lays on the primeval waters and dreams of the creation of the universe in all its diversity. Then, in the primeval lotus that springs from his navel, Brahmā takes birth, who is understood as Viṣṇu’s agent or mode of creation. In the lotus, Viṣṇu casts two drops of water that, on his command, spring into Madhu and Kaiṭabha, two powerful demons. They steal the Vedas (holy scriptures) from Brahmā and dive into the primeval waters. Then Brahmā begs Viṣṇu for help. One

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aspect of Viṣṇu wakes and recites the Vedas. This is not the final moment of waking that is analogous to cosmic creation. Hearing the recitation, the demons drop the Vedas to find its source. Meanwhile, Viṣṇu retrieves them, returns them to Brahmā and resumes his sleep. When the demons realize that the scriptures are gone, they resurface to find Viṣṇu, asleep on his fire-breathing serpent-bed Ananta. Finally, Viṣṇu wakes and slays Madhu and Kaiṭabha, and from this sacrifice, creation takes place once more.

Viṣṇu’s sleep is core to this story. Even when the original narrative from the Mahābhārata has been appropriated by other traditions to venerate other deities, Viṣṇu’s sleep and its association with creation and destruction remained central. For example, the Devī-Māhātmya – the main text of Goddess (Devī) traditions in Hinduism – begins with a similar story. The only difference is that here, Brahmā is said to have prayed to Devī to wake Viṣṇu from his sleep. This way, the Goddess is ascribed ultimate control over cosmic creation and destruction. It is this version of the story that makes its way into Nepal, featuring in the Svasthānī Kathā, a Nepali text, towards the end of the eighteenth century. Yet, Jessica Vantine Birkenholtz argues that this narrative, in context of the Svasthānī Kathā unlike that of the Devī-Māhātmya, has no agenda to assert the superiority of Devī over Viṣṇu like, rather to facilitate a ‘Hinduization’ in Nepal by promoting both deities.

Given that this myth was present in Nepal from the end of the eighteenth century onward, it may be possible that Madhu and Kaiṭabha are, in fact, the two mysterious figures (of whom I have not encountered similar representations) in the bottom-left corner of the large red square of the Nepali Jalaśayana Viṣṇu mandala (Fig. 13). This corner is distinct from the other three of the red square, over which the ten avatāras of Viṣṇu are depicted. These are, in clockwise order, tortoise Kūrma, boar Varāha, man-lion Narasiṁha and dwarf Vāmana (top-left); Rāma with the axe, Rāma

with the bow and Balarāma (top-right); and Buddha, horse-riding Kalki and Matsya (bottom-right). These gruesome-looking figures in the bottom-left corner – likely a duo owing to the similarities in their form and iconography – both face the large yellow deity (some form of Viṣṇu) and appear as though about to engage in battle with him. However, there is no bloodshed and the twin figures are depicted holding the four attributes (conch, lotus, discus and mace) of Viṣṇu in their hands, which may indicate that they also represent forms of Viṣṇu. Yet, this may be an appropriate representation of Madhu and Kaitabha. In the Devī-Māhātmya, it is made clear that demons are ultimately forms of Devī and that she is mahāsurī, the great Demoness. As it is this version of the tale that reached Nepal, as a fragment and not bound to a context wherein Devī is considered Supreme, is it possible that Madhu and Kaitabha were understood as forms of Viṣṇu in the context of Nepali Vaiṣṇavism.

In the original Mahābhārata version of the tale, Madhu and Kaitabha are created by Viṣṇu upon his will, and in the Svasthānī Kathā version, they rise from the wax in Viṣṇu's ears. Both these also suggest that the demons are not entirely external from Viṣṇu. Moreover, given that it is through their sacrifice that creation is takes place, their role is distinct from other demonic figures that only embody malefic forces. Madhu and Kaitabha, like Viṣṇu, are essential participants in creation.

It is hard to identify these figures. However, their inclusion in the mandala alongside the avatāras of Viṣṇu indicates that they are important and that there exists some relation between their mythological episode and the idea of Viṣṇu’s periodical descent into the material realm in the form of an avatāra. If they indeed do represent Madhu and Kaitabha, then, in line with Daṇḍin’s account, a strong triadic relationship emerges between Jalaśayana/Anantaśayana Viṣṇu, the idea of avatāra and Viṣṇu’s cosmic sleep.

R. Champakalakshmi notes that the earliest epigraphic reference to Viṣṇu’s ten avatāras occurs in an inscription in the Ādi-varāha cave temple at Māmallapuram, and includes, like this
mandala, Balarāma and Buddha but not Kṛṣṇa. Omitting Kṛṣṇa is rare. Matsya, Kūrma, Varāha, Narasimha, Vāmana, Rāma with the axe, Rāma with the bow, and Kalki (in total eight) appear in all standard representations of Viṣṇu’s ten *avatāras*. Usually either one of Balarāma or Buddha is included. In our mandala, Kṛṣṇa’s form is either clubbed with that of Balarāma (who holds his staff by his mouth like Kṛṣṇa would hold his flute) or omitted entirely. Some other Nepali mandalas do not represent Kṛṣṇa distinctly either, and in many of these, Balarāma does not hold his staff by his mouth (Fig. 14). That the Jalaśayana Viṣṇu mandala from nineteenth-century Nepal shares the rare combination of *avatāras* inscribed in seventh-century Mahāmallapuram may indicate a direct lineage from the early Vaiṣṇava cult at Māmallapuram unto that in Budhanilkantha Temple in Nepal. This strengthens my case that the demon-like duo depicted on the mandala are Madhu and Kaitabha and supports my argument for the previously mentioned triadic relationship: Jalaśayana/Anantaśayana, *avatāra* and Viṣṇu’s sleep. Let us now consider it with respect to another site, Udayagiri.

b. Udayagiri and Astronomy

The most thorough study of Vaiṣṇavism in Udayagiri has been conducted by Michael D. Willis. Located near Vidisha, Madhya Pradesh (central India), and ruled under the fifth-century Gupta empire, Udayagiri is a site of many caves temples dedicated to Viṣṇu, Śiva and Devī. Willis demonstrates that on the summer solstice at Udayagiri, which marks the onset of the monsoon, the sun-rays directly illuminate a relief of Viṣṇu reclining on Ananta and surrounded by figures like Brahmā, Madhu and Kaitabha. This relief is in shade at other times in the year. The summer solstice, then, would be the day that Viṣṇu goes to sleep. As time passes, the image is decreasingly well lit.

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24 R. Champakalakshmi, *Vaiṣṇava Iconography in the Tamil Country* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1981), 81. The topic of Kṛṣṇa’s omission does not concern the arguments in this essay. However, it is worth mentioning that it may be due to a sense of his full synonymy with Viṣṇu himself.

Viṣṇu then wakes four months later, when, Willis suggests special festivals would be held. A similar but inverted phenomenon would occur at Māmallapuram. The sun would only illuminate our rock-cut image four months after the summer solstice when it is time for him to wake. In fact, owing to the sleeping house, minimal light would fall on the image on the summer solstice and only increase over the next four months. In order to better examine the astronomical phenomena related to our rock-cut Viṣṇu, let us consider the Sanskrit and Tamil calendars used at Udayagiri and Māmallapuram respectively in greater detail. These differ from each other in some ways and do not align exactly with the Gregorian calendar.

According to the Sanskrit calendar used in Udayagiri, the four-month period would begin on the eleventh day of the Āṣāḍa month, which spans mid-June through mid-July, and end on the eleventh day of the Kārttika month, which spans mid-October through mid-November. The eleventh day of Āṣāḍa would correspond roughly with the summer solstice when the image would be lit. These periods are based on solar-luni observations so there are no fixed annual dates. However, in general, the eleventh of Āṣāḍa through that of Kārttika corresponds with the rainy season around Udayagiri. At Budhanilkantha Temple, where the Sanskrit calendar is also used, the same dates are followed. Although there is no apparent relation between environment and the Jalaśayana icon, the rainy seasons in Nepal follow a similar timeline as that in Udayagiri. On the days of waking and sleeping, appropriate rituals are performed over the image.

The Tamil calendar would have been used in Māmallapuram, according to which each month is pushed forward by thirty days. Āṣāḍa spans mid-July through mid-August; Kārttika, mid-November through mid-December. The calendar also lists six two-month seasons, of which kaar, the monsoon, spans mid-August to mid-October. However, rains are very heavy throughout August, September and October; lighter showers persist through July and November. Unlike at Udayagiri,
where Smith is unable to find archeological evidence for a special interaction between the Viṣṇu image and the sun on his waking day, at Māmallapuram, both his sleeping and waking moments were dramatized with respect to the sun. If Viṣṇu would wake around the end of October, his sleep would begin at the start of July. This is only nine days after the Gregorian summer solstice, when our image would be in maximum darkness.

Another important relation between Udayagiri and Māmallapuram is in the presentation of Viṣṇu’s third avatāra, Varāha, and its relation with water and the idea of Viṣṇu’s sleep. Willis argues that the large relief of Varāha in Cave 5 would represent Viṣṇu having woken up (Fig. 15). This image shows Viṣṇu in his third, boar-incarnation rescuing goddess Earth, Bhūmī, from the primeval ocean in which she was submerged. He also cites a similar case in Cave 3 of the Bādāmi temples in Karnataka, south India. Like the Varāha monolith in the tank just north of our Viṣṇu at Māmallapuram, interactions with water would be significant for the relief at Udayagiri as well. Feeding into the large tank before the image and lapping at its feet, the presence of water would dramatize how Varāha rose from the ocean, carrying Bhūmī on his tusks.26 As John R. Marr notes, a similar phenomenon may also have been at play in Māmallapuram, where the tank would fill with rainwater while Viṣṇu was asleep during the monsoons.27 In addition to dramatizing the story of Viṣṇu’s avatāra, water is an inherent aspect of the Anantaśayana image. Willis writes that water was an ‘obvious physical link between the images’ at Udayagiri.28 With respect to our Viṣṇu and Varāha at Māmallapuram, this may have been even more prominent than at land-locked Udayagiri given their coastal location and interaction with not only rainfall but also the incoming tide.

26 Willis, Archaeology, 43-44.
28 Willis, Archaeology, 42.
It is hard to say whether the carvers in Māmallapuram knew about Udayagiri or not, but the similarities in their conceptions of Viṣṇu’s sleep, its relation with the Varāha *avatāra* and their modes of dramatization with respect to sun, rain and water imagery are remarkable. Moreover, these similarities occur across both Sanskrit and Tamil systems in the northern and southern parts of the subcontinent. For these reasons, it is possible that the aforementioned triadic relationship among Anantaśayana, Viṣṇu’s sleep and his descent as *avatāra* was an aspect of Vaiṣṇava thought before these ideas acquired new meanings in contexts exclusive of one another. Perhaps some of these similarities arise from influences of the earlier reign of the Gupta empire in Māmallapuram, under whom the sites in Udayagiri were also built. From images like the Deogarh relief (Fig. 16) in Uttar Pradesh, north India, it is clear that the Madhu-Kaiṭabha tale was popular among the Gupta rulers. In fact, given the twitch suggested in Viṣṇu’s eyebrows and lower-right hand, the Deogarh relief is often interpreted as representing the moment just before Viṣṇu wakes up, i.e. the very end of his sleep. Furthermore, a reason for the rare combination of *avatāras* listed in the inscription at Māmallapuram, Champakalakshmi suggests, is the influence of Gupta rule. That this list is mirrored in the previously mentioned Jalaśayana mandala may suggest a Gupta influence on ideas of Viṣṇu in Nepal. These would have spread mainly during the reign of the Licchavi kingdom (400 to 750 CE), when the Vajjika script, closely related to the Gupta script, was used. This supports my argument that the mysterious figures in the Jalaśayana mandala are Madhu and Kaiṭabha and that the idea of Viṣṇu’s sleep was closely related to that of *avatāra* and the Anantaśayana form.

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29 Champakalakshmi, *Vaiṣṇava Iconography*, 81.
30 For more information on this, please see Raniero Gnoli, *Nepalese Inscription in Gupta Characters* (Roma: Instituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1956) and Gautamavajra Vajrācārya, “Recently Discovered Inscriptions of Licchavi Nepal,” *Kailash - Journal of Himalayan Studies* volume 1, number 2 (1973), 117-134.
c. Bhakti Poetry and Ritual

The theme of Viṣṇu’s sleep is common in both the bhakti (devotional) poetry and ritual systems of Vaiṣṇavism. Here, I consider the hymns of the Āḻvārs, a group of Vaiṣṇava bhakti poets-saints variously dated from the sixth through ninth centuries. As their hymns may have been composed after the rock-cut image was carved, my discussion does not provide evidence for the prevalence of ideas on Viṣṇu’s sleep in seventh-century Māmallapuram, rather, it illustrates the importance of this theme in later times. This subsequent popularity may indicate an unrecorded or undiscovered cult surrounding the theme contemporary with our Viṣṇu as well. With respect to ritual, we know little about which system was employed in this region and time period. It would be either Vaikhānasa and Pāñcarātra, the two influential Vaiṣṇava systems of ritual in seventh-century south India, but which specific texts were used is uncertain. My discussion is thus speculative, suggesting roles that water, sea and sun may have played in the mechanism of our image. I thus suggest new reasons for why the location, orientation and form of the image were significant.

In this section, I will hypothesize how symbols such as that of the sea in devotional poetry interact with systems of ritual to create one coherent mechanism. Before I proceed, let me establish the porous natures of these very different approaches to the worship of Viṣṇu. Gérard Colas writes that devotional and ritualistic processes ‘appear complementary rather than exclusive of each other’ in the Vaikhānasa texts he considers, and also in Nārāyaṇīyaparvan, a Pāñcarātra text. The ideas

31 For more information on the history of Vaiṣṇava bhakti in south India, please see Friedhelm Hardy, Viraha-bhakti: The Early History of Kṛṣṇa Devotion in South India (Delhi: Oxford, 1983).
32 For more information on the history of the Āḻvārs, please see Norman Cutler, Songs of Experience: The Poetics of Tamil Devotion (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).
in devotion and ritual even shared similar symbols. Here is a verse-segment by one of the three earliest Āḻvārs, Pūtam, who is said to have been born in Māmallapuram.

With love as bowl,
ardor as oil,
and joyful mind as wick,
I swooned
and lit a blazing lamp of knowledge

Here, the image of oil or ghee, which is used ritual procedures as fuel to feed sacred fires is likened to devotional effort whose basis is love. The hymns of the Āḻvārs are replete with examples like this. Now, let us consider the idea of Viṣṇu’s sleep their poetry.

*Tiruppāvai*, a hymn by the Āḻvār Āṇṭāḷ, is characterized by a devotee’s longing for Viṣṇu to wake up from his sleep, which he enters just before the start of the poem. For instance, she writes:

Impartial, invincible lord!
O immaculate one
terrifying to your enemies

Images of Viṣṇu reclining on his serpent on the primeval ocean are plentiful, and in the following verse-segment even the image of the lotus from his navel (where Brahmā sits) is recalled in the word, *Padmanābha* (lit. one whose navel is a lotus). This verse is written to the rain.

Flash like the flaming discus
Resound like the valampuri (conch)
held aloft in the hands of Padmanābha,
whose shoulders are broad and beautiful.\footnote{Venkatesan, *Secret Garland*, 54. *Āḷi Maḷai Kaṇṇā, Tiruppāvai 4*.}

In her other major work, *Nācciyyār Tirumoli*, Āṇṭāḷ alludes to the tale of Madhu and Kaitabha by addressing Viṣṇu as ‘Madhusūdhana’, i.e ‘slayer of Madhu’. However, many other episodes of
Viṣṇu’s activity are often recalled in names like Madhusūdana for him as well. In a manner typical of bhakti Vaiṣṇava poetry, the narrator years for him to wake not for cosmological purposes like creation, but simply to achieve union with him. As the poem proceeds, the devotee’s desperation for Viṣṇu to wake increases, and in the next verse-segment, it is expressed as envy for Nappiṉṉai, his consort with whom he sleeps. Following highly sexualized imagery of Viṣṇu’s ‘broad chest draped in garlands of flowers’ laying on her breasts, the devotee begs Nappiṉṉai herself:

O lovely woman with large eyes
darkened with kohl
How much longer
will you prevent him
from rising?
We know,
you cannot bear to be apart
from your beloved
for a single instant
But this does not befit you:
It is unfair.38

In Āṇṭāḷ’s Tiruppāvai, the ideas of Viṣṇu’s sleeping and waking, borrowed from epic texts and older mythological imaginations, become analogous with the period of devotees’ longing for god and the moment in which he bestows grace respectively. The narrator variously asks to be ‘bathed’ or ‘cooled’ by him and yearns for sexual union. It is unclear whether similar ideas existed in premature stages when our rock-cut Viṣṇu was carved. Anyhow, a direct lineage of the idea of Viṣṇu’s sleep from cosmological concept to devotional motif in south India is demonstrated here. While the Āḻvārs may have come after our rock-cut Viṣṇu was carved, it is likely that they, like many other bhakti poet-saints, visited the site and knew of the original context of the image and its dramatization of Viṣṇu’s sleep. Let us now consider the rituals performed over the image.

The tradition of venerating icons of Viṣṇu dates back to the first or second centuries CE but it gained its greatest momentum around the sixth or seventh when the first major temples in south India were built, which would create appropriate spaces for the ritualized worship of the divine. This is also around the time when bhakti poetry to Viṣṇu started to become popular in the region. Whether this is a coincidence is difficult to say for it is unclear at what point devotional poetry found its place within temples. While we cannot be certain about the devotion practice, or lack thereof, around our Viṣṇu image in its original context, it is highly probable that rituals would be conducted regularly over it. This is even illustrated in the Jalaśayana mandala from Nepal, whose relation with our Viṣṇu I have demonstrated earlier (Fig. 12). In seventh-century south India, Vaiṣṇava icon worship was governed by the Pāñcarātra and Vaikhānasa systems, whose doctrines describe how the presence of god can be achieved in idols and venerated through the practice of rituals. Yet, it is hard to say which system and precisely which texts would be originally used due to uncertainties in their dating and distribution. Further, as Marzenna Czerniak-Drożdżowicz writes, there were often discrepancies between the instructions for ritual written in canonical literature and what was actually performed.39

As discussed earlier, perhaps the most important element in the mechanism of our Viṣṇu image and its relation to that of Varāha is water, which holds value as both a symbol (as the ocean representing the primeval waters) and ritual element (preparation of substances like those listed earlier, among other purposes). Before I proceed to develop the latter, any doubts over the intended physical interaction between the image and sea should be put to rest. Let us understand why the gradual erosion of the granite image would not be considered problematic.

According to the Pāñcarātra and Vaikhānasa systems, damage to idols could result in a loss of god’s presence in them. Hence, their manuscripts detail instructions on how to proceed in such

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cases. While certain kinds of damage to idols would be considered problematic by Pāñcarātra and Vaikhānasa traditions, their physical dissolution would not. Czerniak-Drożdżowicz lists many examples that demonstrate how it is primarily the breakage of limbs or other elements that affords jīrṇoddhāra (renovation) according to the Pāñcarātrika sources she considers. Diwakar Acharya also, in his study of three different, Pāñcarātrika texts, writes that it is broken, scratched, cracked or bent icons that are considered unacceptable. Given that there is no mention at all of dissolution – as acceptable or not – it seems that it would not compromise Viṣṇu’s presence within it. Of course, most sculptures are not subject to incoming tides, but the pouring of rituals substances over time can erode stone in any context, even indoors. My argument is not that the dissolution of the icon was intentional, and not even that no efforts were made to counter it. In fact, Māmallapuram would be the best place for a rock-cut sculpture to interact with the sea given the resistance of Krishnashila granite to erosion. Now let us consider how water would be significant to the site.

Czerniak-Drożdżowicz lists many instances in Pāñcarātra texts where water is used for the ritual repair or purification of images. In her essay on the Paramasaṃhitā, she notes that practitioners are to regularly consume water to purify themselves – both externally, through bathing, and internally, through consumption, in preparation of performing rituals. This is also commonly seen in Vaikhānasa texts, and even those of other religions like Śaivism. The Varāha tank has a spring at its base that occasionally seeps water. It is possible that this was used as part of ritual procedures or one’s preparation for them. Furthermore, the regular washing of the sea over the image might have

served to purify the site in preparation for ritual practice and also bathe the deity as an act of veneration. This purpose is distinct from those of rituals meant to wake the deity.

As yet, we have limited the symbolism of the sea to the primeval waters on which Ananta lays. However, the sea would also represent the material realm of suffering (samsāra) that we hope to cross for spiritual liberation. Here is a section of a verse by one of the first three Āḻvārs, Poykai:

I have woven a garland of words for the feet of the Lord, who bears the red flaming wheel, so I can cross the ocean of grief.43

This verse may not have been written specifically for this image, but it parallels an image-specific account by Daṇḍin. He writes that he saw ‘a big red lotus floating over the sea’ turn suddenly into a Vidyādhara (celestial deity), ‘recovering its original form’, then vanish, on touching Viṣṇu’s feet and being liberated. The symbol of the sea as the material realm functions at an ontological level closer to ground, which, unlike the cosmic primeval waters, we physically inhabit. In my estimate, this symbol would interact with the rituals performed over the image – a practice that would occur very regularly, at least during the eight months that Viṣṇu is awake. Tantric practices like those of Pāñcarātra involve the transformation of material substances used in ritual into empowered ones that contain supernatural potencies. Matter, which binds one, is used as a means to liberation itself, often by consuming these ritual residues. In addition to this, the passage of ritual residue into the ocean may also have represented the entrance of Viṣṇu’s blessings into the material realm. Usually, sacred objects are housed within temple architectures, and so the excess ritual residue does not interact with the surroundings in the same way. This phenomenon, unique to the Māmallapuram image, is grounded in its specific location by the sea.

The location of the image by the sea is tied strongly to its interaction with the rising sun. At Māmallapuram, it is likely that a special ceremony was performed to wake Viṣṇu toward the end of the monsoons, when the sun directly illuminated our image. Owing to the severely understudied condition of seventh-century south India, we do not have any concrete evidence to suggest which specific texts would be used for image worship in Māmallapuram. But it is possible to speculate what some crucial ceremonies were. ‘Opening the eyes’ of a deity is an important ceremony in many Vaikhānasa and Pāñcarātra systems. Acharya’s study of Aṣṭadaśavidhāna, a Pāñcarātra text reveals that rituals in opening the deity’s eyes would include pouring or application of oils, mud-packs, unhusked rice, cow-dung, milk, curd, ghee and sandal-paste over the icon. In addition, it would be bathed in herbal, flower, fruit, and milk and perfume baths. In some Vaikhānasa thought, the sun is understood to ‘contain Viṣṇu’s creative power (śakti) and fiery energy (tejas). With respect to the Madhu-Kaṭabha tale, tejas would be required to kill the demons and śakti would be required to create the world. A similar idea may have existed in Pāñcarātra thought too.

5. Hypothesizing History: Architecture, Religion and Politics in Māmallapuram

Having reconstructed the original context of the early rock-cut Viṣṇu at Māmallapuram, let us now consider the advent of the Śiva shrines more closely. This way, we can more rigorously speculate the goings-on at Māmallapuram in this important moment. If our image was originally meant to be read and worshipped as Anantaśayana/Jalaśayana, then Rājasīṁha’s move would have done more than dwarf the Viṣṇu image to suggest its inferiority. Without any physically modifying it, Rājasīṁha prevented the image from being read as Anantaśayana by demarcating it from the

44 Colas, “Competing Hermeneutics”, 166.
45 Acharya, Early Tantric Vaiṣṇavism, lxvii-lxviii.
surroundings. This would call for new ways to worship the image. It is possible, then, that the Sthalaśayana tradition in Māmallapuram arose after and perhaps in response to Rājasiṁha’s move.

The extent to which the history of the original form of our was known is Māmallapuram is unclear. We do not know to whom the sculpture was accessible – only priests for rituals with special access for some members of the Pallava royal family, or to the larger public as well. Often, across India, the elaborateness of the temple complexes a ruler had built was a measure of their dedication to both the gods and civilians who would visit them. However, given the modesty of the original form of the image, Māmallapuram may not have been a public destination for pilgrimage in the early history of Pallava rule there. For this reason, it is possible that the earlier form as Anantaśayana was not widely known. However, given that eleventh-century inscriptions refer to the image as Jalaśayana, it is likely that knowledge of its original form remained even once the Śiva shrines were built. Furthermore, Māmallapuram had been a thriving port-city for centuries before our image was carved, so the original form must have been well-known. How can we reconcile this with the Thirukadalmallai temple to Sthalaśayana nearby? Both Thirukadalmallai and the Sthalaśayana form of Viṣṇu are mentioned in the hymns of Tirumaṅkai Āḻvār. Let us consider his poem, Periya Tirumoḻi.

In his Periya Tirumoḻi, Tirumaṅkai writes that Viṣṇu resides in Kaḍalmallai as Thala Śayanam (II.6.1) along with the Lord Śiva (II.6.9). This hymn proceeds the construction of the Śiva shrines but as Archana Venkatesan notes, it is difficult to say whether Tirumaṅkai refers to our specific image or if he means, more generically, to describe the relationship between these deities. Tirumaṅkai writes that the temple he refers to is located by the forest (II.6.3) and lined by streets

47 Kaḍalmallai and Thala Śayanam are Tamil words for Mahābalipuram and Sthalaśayana respectively. For a complete english translation of all the hymns by the Āḻvārs, please see Srirama Bharati, The Sacred Book of Four Thousand (Chennai: Srī Sadagopan Tirunarayanaswami Divya Prabandha Pathasala, 2000).
48 Archana Venkatesan, Email, June 1, 2019.
(II.6.10). Both these descriptions point to Thirukadalmallai, which is located more inland by hills with dense foliage, and surrounded on three sides by three streets that are now called N Mada, S Mada and Mada Koli. Anyhow, even if Tirumaṅkai meant to refer to our Viṣṇu as Sthalaśayana, it would be after the Śiva shrines were built, which demarcate the image from its surroundings. This does not imply that our image was originally meant to represent Sthalaśayana.

The ambiguity in whether Tirumaṅkai refers to our image or the icon in Thirukadalmallai may be a deliberate move by the poet. By assigning to the icon housed in the Shore Temple image the same form, Sthalaśayana, as the one in Thirukadalmallai, Tirumaṅkai absorbs our Viṣṇu into the legendary history of a divyadeśa, which predates any shrine to Viṣṇu or Śiva. This would be especially poignant if the competitive motivations behind Rājasiṁha’s construction of the Śiva shrines was known at the time, or if there was still remembrance of the original mechanism of our image. This, in fact, was likely the case given the aforementioned eleventh-century inscriptions. It is unclear whether the Thirukadalmallai temple was constructed after or before the Śiva shrines. Therefore, it is difficult to say whether or not the reason that Viṣṇu is worshipped as Sthalaśayana in Thirukadalmallai is a direct response to Rājasiṁha’s move. It is possible, however, that the form of Viṣṇu without Ananta was taken up as the ‘original’ so as not to acknowledge any disruption of the mechanism of our image. Even now, scholars have only considered it as Sthalaśayana.

Two questions still remain: why was our image carved in the first place, and what made Rājasiṁha assert the superiority of Śiva in a way unlike any of his Śaiva predecessors? It is likely that the original Viṣṇu image was worshipped so as to bring prosperity to the Pallava kingdom in the form of water, trade and marshall prowess.49 As Dehejia says, “kings filled treasuries, built

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49 For more information on the history of the role of water in Māmallapuram, please see P. L. Samy, “Water Cult at Makāpalipuram,” Journal of Tamil Studies 9 (June 1976): 90-93
temples and waged wars based on taxes from trade and agriculture.” As for Rājasiṁha’s move, it is difficult to say without further research, but some hypotheses can be drawn. Rājasiṁha was known better than any other Pallava as a fearsome ruler and it is possible that the construction of the Śiva shrines was meant to establish a some identification of the Pallava rulers with Lord Śiva. One sees some evidence in the peculiar forms of other monuments around Māmallapuram, also constructed under Rājasiṁha, which remain mysteries. These include various monolithic structures that resemble shrines but that one cannot enter, outside which figures that would traditionally face these shrines, are turned in other, seemingly randomized directions. Furthermore, there are also many structures that resemble huts with thatched roofs. In privileging the large Śiva shrine in this way, it is possible that Rājasiṁha was trying to suggest that Śiva (and by extension himself) is the ruler of the region, evoked by these non-functional models. Further research is required, but it is noteworthy that the cult of a king-as-god is not uncommon in the history of south India.

Later religious competitions at Māmallapuram may have been sparked by Rājasiṁha’s move; yet, his reign is remembered as a period of peace and prosperity. It does not seem as though the change in the primary deity from Śiva to Viṣṇu caused great social disruption in the short run. This means that there was likely a shared ideology in the imaginations of these two deities that allowed a fluid adaptation of the mechanics of the Viṣṇu image in its site-specific context with that of Śiva in the same. Let us consider two hymns to Śiva by the seventh-century bhakti poet-saint Appar, who is said to have convinced the patron of our rock-cut Viṣṇu, Mahendravarman I, to convert from Jainism to Śaivism. Given that all following Pallava rulers were Śaivas, Appar’s poetry likely influenced them and their subjects in profound ways as well.

If one may see his arched eyebrows—

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the gentle smile upon his lips
of kovai red—
his matted locks of reddish hue—
the milk-white ash upon his coral form—
if one may but see
the beauty of his lifted foot
of golden glow—
then indeed one would wish
for human birth upon this earth.51

This verse to Śiva, written for the icon at Chidambaram, recalls the idea of *samsāra* evoked in the aforementioned hymn to Viṣṇu by the Āḻvār, Poykai. Consider the following longer poem as well, where Appar praises Śiva through each of the three seasons – summer, monsoon and spring.

Honey, milk, moon and sun,
youth crowned with the celestial white moon,
wisdom incarnate as the fire
that consumed the god of spring—
How should I forget him?

Sugar, sweet syrup of sugar cane,
bright one, brilliant as a lightning flash,
golden one, my Lord who glitters
like a hill of gems—
How should I forget him?

Sugar cane lump of sweet sugar candy,
bee in the fragrant flower,
light that dwells in the light of every flame,
our Lord who loves flower-buds gathered at dawn—
How should I forget him?52

This verse shows that ideas of time-cycles were important to the imagination of Śiva as well. It is likely, then, that rituals performed over the new Śiva icon were grounded, like those over our Viṣṇu image, in relation with the movement of the sun and the progress of the monsoons. Their precise mechanism, of course, would be distinct.

52 Dehejia, *Body Adorned*, 118.
The seventh century is a critical period in the history of Vaiṣṇavism in the Tamil country and yet we know quite little about it. It lies between two major moments in the development of Vaiṣṇava bhakti: the composition of the Bhagavad-gītā in the first-second centuries CE and that of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa in the eighth-tenth. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa (Bhāgavatam), is regarded by many scholars to have its origins in south Indian devotional traditions. This text popularized Viṣṇu bhakti across social classes and led to the massive Bhakti movement in the fifteenth century. It may be the most widely used text in all contemporary Hinduism. The Bhāgavatam is replete with descriptions of the various exploits of Anantaśayana and Varāha. Here, I have studied the early history of Hindu religiosity in the Tamil country as a social rather than literary phenomenon. I hope my research can help broaden our knowledge of how the Bhāgavatam achieved its final form by constructing a socio-political landscape of seventh-century south India, from which non-textual influences can also be drawn. In particular, my research will be most valuable to discussions on the passages in the Bhāgavatam on Śiva, and the Śaiva commentarial tradition on the text.
Bibliography:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9fjlIC2W648.
Images:

Fig. 1: The Viṣṇu image at Māmallapuram (c. 600 CE)

Fig. 2: Section of Shore Temple – Note larger shrines to Śiva and small enclosure housing Viṣṇu
Fig. 3: Granite Map of Southern India (from Dehejia, “Unfinished”, 258.)

Fig. 4: Large Tank to Varāha (boar sculpture) with Shore Temple Behind
Fig. 5 (detail): Descent of the Ganges; Māmallapuram

Fig. 6: Varāha carrying Bhūmi; Ādi-varāha Cave Temple; Māmallapuram; Mid-seventh century
Fig. 7: Diagram illustrating movement of the sun around Viṣṇu shrine at Māmallapuram

Fig. 8: Jalaśayana Viṣṇu Maṇḍala Distemper on Cloth, Nepal, 1857 CE
Fig. 9 (detail): Jalaśayana Viṣṇu Maṇḍala; Rituals performed before Jalaśayana Icon

Fig. 10: Jalaśayana Viṣṇu icon at Budhanilkantha Temple; 7th century; Kathmandu Valley, Nepal
Fig. 11: Detail of Restored arm on our rock-cut Viṣṇu

Fig. 12: Viṣṇu reclining on Ananta and Madhu and Kaiṭabha (right); 630-700 CE; Mahiṣāsuramardini Cave at Māmallapuram
Fig. 13 (detail, rotated): Jalaśayana Viṣṇu Maṇḍala; Viṣṇu killing two demons

Fig. 14 (detail): Balarāma (centre, with Rāma with the Bow and Buddha on either side); Vishnu Thangka; 1600-1699; Nepal; Ground Mineral Pigment on Cotton; Himalayan Art Resources
Fig. 15: Cave 5; Relief of Varāha carrying Bhūmī; Udayagiri; fifth-century CE

Fig. 16: Deogarh Relief - Viṣṇu laying on Ananta. Madhu and Kaitabha (below, left). (c. 500 C.E)