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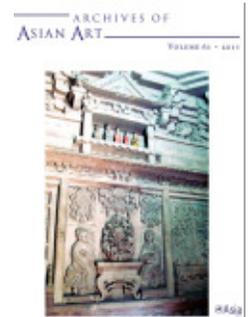
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## **Addition, Erasure, and Adaptation: Interventions in the Rock-Cut Monuments of MÄ•mallapuram**

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# Addition, Erasure, and Adaptation: Interventions in the Rock-Cut Monuments of Māmallapuram

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The magnificent set of excavated caves, rock-cut monoliths, sculpted stone tableaux, and structural temples at the Pallava-period (ca. 575–728) port town of Māmallapuram (in present-day Tamil Nadu) has attracted the attention of a wide range of scholars. The fascination exerted by this unique site is demonstrated by the existence of two annotated bibliographies, one published in 1966 and a second barely fifteen years later in order to bring the scholarship into the year 1980.<sup>1</sup> Although scholars agree that the monuments at Māmallapuram date between the late sixth and early eighth centuries, during the reign of the Pallava rulers of the Simhaviṣṇu line, unresolved questions proliferate regarding their precise authorship, exact date, and intent; the incompleteness of many of the monuments adds complexity to the conundrum they pose.

Most studies of Māmallapuram have focused on the dominant monuments of the Pallava period, and for good reason. But the structures commissioned by the Pallava patrons continued in existence, and through the following centuries they attracted later visitors who sometimes imposed themselves upon the site through their own material practices. These might include anything from the addition of small graffiti-like markings onto existing monuments to the creation of larger new structures that overshadowed the previous ones. Things might be added, or sometimes subtracted, as in the deliberate erasure of the identifying features of sculpted images. Surprisingly little attention has been paid to the matter of physical change at Māmallapuram. Numerous clear signs of adaptation and elimination of imagery appear upon and within the rock-cut structures at the site, but with the sole exception of Michael Lockwood's studies, art historians have shown a sort of benign neglect toward these changes.<sup>2</sup> In this essay we propose to attend more closely to the structures that show signs of alteration, erasure, and adaptation, as a preliminary inquiry into change at this important site.

## Material Changes and Religious Competition

The purpose of this study is to identify some of the marks of later intervention on the fabric of the stone art and architecture at Māmallapuram, and to account for these as intentional activities. Through this effort we hope to learn from these acts something about the long-term history of Māmallapuram as a continuing site of religious art.

It is not always easy to locate the times when these interventions took place. After all, iconoclasts do not usually sign their works of erasure.<sup>3</sup> South Indian discussions of later changes to early medieval sites often refer to “the Muslims” and their alleged rampages of the fourteenth century as an all-purpose explanation for all destructive alterations to Hindu religious structures. But this reflexive narrative is clearly inadequate, as well as politically nefarious.<sup>4</sup> In this study we shall see that the most relevant religious conflict was not between Hinduism and Islam, but between votaries of Śiva and those of Viṣṇu. That long-running competition between followers of two primary Hindu deities, with the balance of support and power shifting over time, accounts for subtle and not-so-subtle acts of material intervention at Māmallapuram. In this study we have not sought to explore another striking aspect of religious competition in medieval South India, namely, that between the Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava devotees and those Jains and Buddhists they defined as Others. This is a striking theme in the songs of the south Indian poet-saints, the Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava saints, known respectively as the *nāyanmārs* and *ālvārs*, but we do not see material evidence of this conflict in the monuments of Māmallapuram.<sup>5</sup>

The fourteenth century saw a resurgence of Vaiṣṇavism across south India, and the building at Māmallapuram of the Sthala-śayana Temple to enshrine a stucco image of Viṣṇu reclining (*śayana*) on the ground (*sthala*).

This temple was erected directly in front of the Great Penance relief of the earlier Pallava monarchs, partly obstructing the view of the cliff face with this great sculpted tableau, which until then had been a focal point of the site.<sup>6</sup> The new Viṣṇu temple's gateway (*gopuram*) led through a stone pillared hall to the ocean, where Pallava monarch Rājasimha (r. 700–728) had built his Shore Temple; by erecting double shrines to Śiva, he had enclosed the original rock-cut image of Viṣṇu reclining on the seashore, thus relegating it to secondary importance. This demeaning of Viṣṇu was now reversed. During this Vijayanagara phase (ca. 1336–1565) of Vaiṣṇava revival, certain rock-cut structures at Māmallapuram dedicated to Śiva were subjected to a drastic erasure of their relief sculptures and in one instance even to the eradication of shrine walls, apparently with the intention of deflecting and rerouting sectarian affiliation in favor of Viṣṇu.

As noted above, however, evidence exists of the reverse scenario during the Pallava period, when new epigraphs threatening the descent of divine wrath on those who did not worship Śiva were inscribed in an attempt to divert the original Vaiṣṇava affiliation of certain structures. It seems possible too that the richly sculpted Pallava Mahiṣa-mardinī Cave was originally intended as a Vaiṣṇava dedication and was altered soon after its creation, during the Pallava period itself, to glorify Śiva instead. Although the Pallava period in South Indian history has often been cited as a prime example of “Indian tolerance,” we need to qualify this somewhat in light of the physical remains at Māmallapuram.

### Viṣṇu, Śiva, and the Goddess at Māmallapuram

By and large early Pallava monuments reveal a remarkably open and ecumenical approach to the worship of a range of Hindu deities. A consideration of the inscribed shrines that Mahendravarman Pallava (r. ca. 610–630) excavated across the Tamil country reveals three caves each enshrining a liṅga; one cave dedicated to Viṣṇu; one cave with an unspecified, perhaps painted, image; one triple-shrined cave dedicated to Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva; a second triple-shrined cave of undetermined affiliation; as well as a cave with five shrines. The variety of enshrined deities suggests that Mahendra adhered to the śāstric ideal of a monarch who, regardless of his own personal affiliation, was expected to build and maintain temples to the entire range of Hindu gods worshipped by his citizens, and to join with them in their celebration of the varied festivals.<sup>7</sup> The *Arthaśāstra* and the *Śukranītisāra* are among the texts

that enjoin this as a royal duty. This is parallel to the devotional attitudes of the poet-saints of the period, the Vaiṣṇava *ālvārs* and Śaiva *nāyanmārs*, who reserved their antipathy for the Buddhists and Jains while largely accepting the full pantheon of Hindu deities. As we shall see, however, not all Pallava rulers were equally even-handed in their patronage of the various Hindu gods.

A similarly diverse group of dedications exists at the Pallava port town of Māmallapuram, where the greater number of its monuments were created out of the massive granite outcrop at the center of the site. Two caves are dedicated to Viṣṇu, as is one sculpted cliff-face that portrays the Kṛṣṇa legend; three structural temples and three rock-cut monuments are Śaiva and house both a Somāskanda (Śiva accompanied by wife Pārvatī and son Skanda) panel carved into the shrine's rear wall and a liṅga at its center; one cave and one monolith are dedicated to Durgā; and an unidentified shrine must once have housed the magnificent Cāmuṇḍā (epithet of Kālī) image that is today cemented into a platform in the grounds of the local library. Several other monuments are of mixed dedication: these include the five-shrined Koneri Cave and the so-called Trimūrti Cave containing images of Skanda, Śiva, and Viṣṇu, with an additional niche for Durgā sculpted along the façade. Indeed, even the magnificent sculpted relief of the Great Penance, measuring roughly forty-five feet high by ninety feet wide, appears to fall into this category; despite the story/stories revolving around the appearance of Śiva, a place of prominence is given to a Viṣṇu shrine carved on the rock face directly below Śiva. Several of the monoliths, including the so-called Arjuna *ratha*, Bhīma *ratha*, and Nakula-Sahadeva *ratha* remain of uncertain affiliation because their deity images are missing. (The names identifying these monoliths were applied in a much more recent period.) A number of Māmallapuram caves and monoliths were abandoned at an early stage of their creation, and afford but meager clues to their original intended dedications.

Even from this admittedly incomplete listing, we can see the remarkable diversity of affiliation with various deities at Māmallapuram. We should note here that several caves, whether containing one, three, or five shrines, are missing their original enshrined images. The identification of the original image can be deduced in many instances from the character of the door guardians flanking the shrines, as we will see below. For example, matted locks curving in to frame the neck, and in some instances a horned headdress, distinguish Śaiva door guardians; female door guardians

indicate a Durgā shrine; bearded guardians often suggest a Brahmā image; and those wearing a cylindrical crown are suggestive of Viṣṇu.

An additional intriguing feature at Māmallapuram is the pairing of the goddesses Lakṣmī and Durgā, consorts respectively of two very different deities, Viṣṇu and Śiva. One would not expect to find these two goddesses together, but they flank the single, central shrine in two major Vaiṣṇava caves, the Varāha and the Ādi-Varāha. Durgā is identified across India with Umā-Pārvatī, consort of Śiva, but only in south India is she also considered to be the sister of Viṣṇu.<sup>8</sup> It is the latter relationship that allows her an accepted position within Vaiṣṇava caves. Roughly parallel is the iconography in the Mahiṣa-mardinī Cave. On its left wall Viṣṇu reclines upon his serpent couch prior to the creation of the world, while on the opposite wall the lithe young Durgā, mounted upon her lion, battles the buffalo-demon Mahiṣa, whose form, carved as a retreating diagonal, signifies the ultimate victory of the goddess. It seems likely that Durgā's accepted position as sister of Viṣṇu may have been responsible for this unusual pairing.

### *Dvārapāla* (“door guardian”) Types

Since the systematic erasure of imagery in certain rock-cut structures at Māmallapuram includes, and is occasionally restricted to, door guardians, it will be useful here to note that distinctive types of *dvārapālas* are found flanking the shrines of early Pallava monuments. Further, the distinctive door-guardian types enable us to identify the affiliation of structures where the central image or icon is no longer present.

To demonstrate the sharp distinctions apparent among *dvārapāla* types, we shall briefly consider four caves, three housing triple shrines and one housing a single shrine. The evidence is circumstantial, and seemingly circular in its argumentation and, in part at least, based on Mahendra's inscription at Maṇḍagappaṭṭu, which speaks specifically of its single cave having been dedicated to Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva. In the above-mentioned four caves guardians of a Śiva shrine have heavy curved *jaṭas* (“matted locks”) hanging downward to frame their faces, and each rests his hands on a massive club that is usually encircled by a serpent. In some groupings one of the two Śaiva guardians displays horn-like protrusions behind his head, and sometimes the other guardian has a small curved semicircle protruding from his headgear. Guardians of a Brahmā shrine resemble sages; they tend to be bearded, often

with hair piled up on their heads, and to wear a lower garment that reaches to their ankles. Guardians of a Viṣṇu shrine tend to be slender figures wearing a crown, and frequently stand in exaggerated contrapposto. When we turn to the rock-cut caves at Māmallapuram, we shall see that the erasure or alteration of door guardians often accompanied attempts to change the affiliation of structures dedicated to either Śiva or Viṣṇu, the primary deities.

Māmaṇḍūr Cave II, known from later inscriptions as the Śaiva Rudravalīśvaram Cave, is located near Kāñcipuram, the inland Pallava capital. It is a typical Mahendra-style excavation with two rows of columns, each row with two columns in full round and two attached to their respective side walls, each cut square above and below and octagonal in the middle. Cut into the rear wall of the cave are three shrines, with each doorway flanked by door guardians. Those guarding the southernmost shrine are bearded and appear sage-like, with hair massed on top of their heads. They wear long lower garments and sacred threads, and each holds a lotus in the hand nearest the doorway. Such door guardians would have most likely flanked the entrance to a Brahmā shrine. The central shrine, dedicated to Śiva, has door guardians leaning on heavy clubs, their hair in curved, matted locks, or *jaṭas*, on either side of the neck, and large rounded earrings (*patra kuṇḍalas*). The *dvārapālas* of the northern shrine, presumably intended to house a Viṣṇu image, stand in graceful contrapposto (*tribhaṅga*), with one hand resting on the thigh and the other gesturing toward the shrine. Though no Mahendra inscription exists to confirm that the Māmaṇḍūr Cave II was intended to house shrines to Śiva, Brahmā, and Viṣṇu, the *dvārapāla* types are suggestive of such an intention. We may recall that the inscription in Mahendra's cave at Maṇḍagappaṭṭu specifies exactly such a dedication; unfortunately for our study, the Maṇḍagappaṭṭu Cave, probably Mahendra's very first excavation, displays guardians only along its façade and not flanking its three shrines, as was soon to become standard.

A second Mahendra-style excavation, also with three shrines in its original formulation, is the Kalmandakam at Kuranganilmuṭṭam, only two miles away from Māmaṇḍūr. The two guardians flanking the southern shrine each wear a sacred thread, differently arranged, and stand facing forward in slight *tribhaṅga* with outer hand on the hip and the inner holding an indistinct object that is probably a lotus. They have neither beards nor massed chignons, and yet it would seem that the shrine must be dedicated to Brahmā. The door guardians

of the central cave are typically Śaiva, each resting his inner hand on a heavy club wound around with a serpent. The southern image of the pair is in profile, while his companion is frontal. Both wear a sacred thread in the form of knotted snakes, and both wear a crown above the curved *jaṭas* that frame the neck. Additionally, the southern one of the pair sports a large curved horn on the side of his face turned toward the doorway. The guardians of the northern shrine, presumably Vaiṣṇava, stand in exaggerated contrapposto, with one hand on hip and the other gesturing toward the shrine; both wear a slightly tapering cylindrical headdress and a sacred thread.

The third triple-shrined excavation to be considered in this context, the Trimūrti Cave at Māmallapuram, appears to provide a windfall, since it preserves all three shrine images as well as its three sets of door guardians. Yet identifying their icons is not as simple as it might have been. The guardians of the first shrine are bearded figures, each wearing garments extending to his ankles, a sacred thread, and long hair piled on his head, and holding a flower in the hand nearest the doorway while resting the other hand on his hip; one of them additionally holds a water vessel. The imagery is strongly suggestive of Brahmā guardians. The single-faced rock-cut image within, however, belies a strictly Brahmā identification in favor of Subrahmaṇya (Skanda) as Brahmā-Śasta, a form he assumed to put down the pride of Brahmā.<sup>9</sup> Here Subrahmaṇya appears to have taken over Brahmā's door guardians at the same time that he has appropriated Brahmā's physical appearance. In the central shrine the rear wall is carved with an image of standing Śiva, and a liṅga is inserted into the socket in its floor. One flanking guardian rests a hand on a club, the other holds a tall spear, and both rest their other hands on their hips. Both wear heavy round earrings and a crown that holds their *jaṭas* in place. The guardians of the third shrine, carved with an image of standing Viṣṇu, resemble those flanking the Śiva shrine; one hand seemingly gestures toward the image within the shrine, the other appears to be gesticulating in wonder (*vismaya*).

The final cave to be considered in this brief discussion on *dvārapāla* types is Mahendra's single-shrined, inscribed Śaiva cave at Śiyamangalam, known in its inscriptions as the Avaniḥajana-Pallaveśvaram.<sup>10</sup> Both *dvārapālas* are heavyset, bearing weight on one leg with the other resting lightly on the ground, and both place one arm on a serpent-wound heavy club carved alongside the door jambs. Both sport the curved heavy *jaṭas* that frame the face, with a crown holding the locks in place, and both wear large rounded earrings. The

guardian to the left, facing frontally, has large horns that curve upward toward the top of his crown; his companion figure lacks these. This seems to be a standard variation in paired Śaiva door guardians. Lockwood's suggestion that both *dvārapālas* may be viewed as personifications of Śiva's weapons seems plausible;<sup>11</sup> the "hornlike protrusions" stand for curved prongs that represent the trident, and the frontal view of the curved edge of the axe that adorns a few of the headdresses represents Śiva's battle-axe.

In Pallava rock-cut architecture, then, the *dvārapālas* flanking a shrine enable one to make largely justified identifications of the deity enshrined within.

### Pallava Interventions, 1: The Śaivite Curse

The small but richly carved Pallava-period Ādi-Varāha Cave, dedicated to the glory of Viṣṇu, and enshrining an image of Varāha holding up the goddess Earth, survives today in its Vijayanagara-period (ca. 1336 c.–1565) enlargement through the addition of a pillared and roofed *maṇḍapa* hall erected in front. It retains intact its original seventh-century carvings, including elegantly sculpted images of Durgā and Lakṣmī, Viṣṇu, Harihara, Śiva Gaṅgādhara, and Brahmā, as well as royal portraits of the Pallava monarchs Simhaviṣṇu (r. 560–580) and Mahendra (r. 580–630), accompanied by their queens. The sculpted walls of this Vaiṣṇava cave were never subjected to any type of adaptation or intrusion, but cut into its floor is the so-called Śaivite curse. In large, well-executed letters of the Pallava *grantha* script current in the seventh or eighth century, is an inscription in two lines running from viewer's right of the shrine to the cave's proper right side wall.

*Dhik teṣām dhik teṣām punarāpi dhig dhig  
dhigastu dhik teṣām Yesān na vasati hṛdaye  
kupathagaṭi-vimokṣako rudrah*

In translation: "Cursed be those, cursed be those, once again cursed, cursed, cursed, cursed be those in whose heart does not dwell Rudra [Śiva], deliverer from walking the evil path." Who might have added this vitriolic verse, so out of keeping with the tenor of the original Vaiṣṇava dedication?

We postulate that its author and instigator might have been the Pallava monarch Narasiṃhavarman II, called Rājasimha (r. 700–728). Rājasimha is known to have built three structural temples to Śiva, all containing his dedicatory inscriptions: the Rājasimheśvara along the shore at Māmallapuram (popularly called the Shore Temple), the Kailāsanātha in the inland capital of

Kāñcipuram, and a second Rājasimheśvara Temple upon a hill at Panamalai. All his inscriptions attest his ardent Śaivism. In his foundation inscriptions at both Panamalai and Kāñcipuram, Rājasimha compares his own birth to that of Guha (Subrahmaṇya or Skanda), begot by the supreme Śiva;<sup>12</sup> the Udayendiram copperplate inscription of the later Pallava ruler Nandivarman refer to Rājasimha as a devout worshiper of Maheśvara;<sup>13</sup> and the Vēlūrpālaiyam copperplate inscription of Nandivarman III (829–853) proclaims the greatness of Rājasimha in having built a temple to Śiva comparable to Mount Kailāsa.<sup>14</sup> It should be noted, however, that Rājasimha's own Reyuru copperplate inscription, considerably more eclectic, speaks of him as a staunch follower of Bhagavan (Viṣṇu), Maheśvara, and Subrahmaṇya.<sup>15</sup>

The immediate question is why the Vaiṣṇava custodian of the Ādi-Varāha Cave did not obliterate this record, either during the Pallava period itself or during the later Vijayanagara period, when Vaiṣṇavism thrived. An answer to the Pallava part of this query presumably lies in the power wielded during his reign by Rājasimha, which made it perilous to erase any inscription that he had commissioned. We know that his death was followed by the collapse of the dynastic line and the establishment of a new, collateral line of Pallava rulers, who had little interest in Māmallapuram and its monuments. The seaside town may have continued to serve as a port, but their center of interest and activity appears to have shifted entirely to the inland capital of Kāñcipuram, leaving Māmallapuram to languish in its incomplete state. Even a Śaiva curse inscribed into the floor of a splendid Vaiṣṇava cave was ignored, and is still extant as evidence of a powerful monarch's strong espousal of Śaivism.<sup>16</sup> The original Vaiṣṇava dedication consisted of three inscriptions on the walls of the cave above the sculptures. Two are labels identifying the Pallava royal portraits; the third is a verse listing the ten avatars of Viṣṇu: Matsya, Kūrma, Varāha, Narasimha, Vāmana, Rāma (Paraśurāma), Rāma, Rāma (Balarāma), Buddha, and Kalki. The Śaiva curse, by contrast, is engraved into the floor of the cave, where it may not have been viewed, either by the monarch who ordered its addition or, indeed, by the cave's Vaiṣṇava custodians, as an unacceptably blatant intervention. If indeed it was Rājasimha who had the curse carved, his admiration and respect for the sculptures, coupled with the fear of divine or temporal retribution, may have been to him sufficient reason to leave them intact; perhaps the addition of an image of Śiva Gaṅgādhara and one of Harihara (conjoint Viṣṇu-Śiva) facilitated his restraint.

We can find help in resolving the authorship of this Śaiva curse from its repetition within the text of a

lengthy inscription in two other monuments. The first is the Gaṇeśa *ratha*, a completed monolith that does not contain a rock-cut image within its shrine, but carries an inscription which describes it as the Śiva shrine of a ruler titled Atyantakāma Pallava (*Atyantakāma Pallaveśvara grham*), an honorific of Rājasimha. The Gaṇeśa *ratha* was not altered or tampered with in any way during the later Vaiṣṇava phase. Its inscription, engraved on the wall of its veranda to the right of the shrine doorway, concludes with verses numbered eight to eleven, reading thus:

*Just as in a large lake filled with water which is fit for bathing, and covered with various lotus flowers, handsome Śaṃkara (Śiva) abides on the large head, sprinkled with the water of coronation and covered with bright jewels of the illustrious Atyantakāma who deprives his enemies of their pride, who is a receptacle of wealth, who possesses the charm of cupid, and who assiduously worships Hara (Śiva).*

*He, desiring to attain the glory of Śaṃkara (Śiva), caused to be made this lofty dwelling of Dhurjati (Śiva) in order to procure the fulfillment of his subjects' desires.*

*Six times cursed be those in whose hearts does not dwell Rudra (Śiva), the deliverer from walking on the evil path.<sup>17</sup>*

This last eleventh verse is the exact Śaiva curse (in a varying English translation) encountered in the Ādi-Varāha Cave; here the curse is followed by the name of the shrine. An earlier verse (number five) in the Gaṇeśa *ratha* speaks of King Atyantakāma, famed by the name Raṇajaya, who commissioned this lofty house of Śambhu (Śiva). Raṇajaya, a confirmed title of Rājasimha, occurs in his foundation inscriptions in both the Shore Temple at Māmallapuram and the Kailāsanātha Temple at the inland capital of Kāñcipuram. These two temples contain an identical verse that reads:

*May Rājasimha, Raṇajaya, Śrībhara, Citrakārmuka, Ekavīra, Śivacūḍāmaṇi, for a long time protect this earth.<sup>18</sup>*

Both foundation inscriptions also contain his title of Atyantakāma. The evidence thus strongly associates the Śaivite curse with Rājasimha.

The second instance of the occurrence of the Śaivite curse within a lengthy inscription occurs in the Dharmarāja maṇḍapa. This modest-sized excavated cave has two rows of simple columns, square above



FIG. 1. Mahiṣa-mardinī Cave. Māmalla-puram. *Dvārapāla*. To left of left shrine. Ca. 7th c. Note curved prongs of trident.

and below and octagonal between, that are reminiscent of Mahendra's caves. Apparently the central shrine was dedicated to Śiva, since it was once flanked by Śaiva-style door guardians, as attested by the inscription. This shrine extends into the cave and is flanked by two recessed side shrines, all three of them sharing a single base molding. Each shrine has a semicircular step at the base, with further steps leading up to the floor level of the shrines, which are all empty. An eleven-verse inscription, identical to that engraved in the Gaṇeśa *ratha*, is encountered immediately upon entering the cave, along its left end wall. The only minor variation is that the name of the cave, *Atyantakāma Pallaveśvara grham*, here precedes the Śaivite curse rather than fol-

lowing it as in the Gaṇeśa *ratha*. The inscription reinforces the connection of Rājasimha with the Śaivite curse. Significantly, however, whereas no recutting is apparent in the Gaṇeśa *ratha*, with its Rājasimha inscription incorporating the Śaivite curse, the identical inscription in the Dharmarāja Maṇḍapa seems to have aroused the ire of later Vaiṣṇavas, as we shall see.

### Pallava Interventions, 2: Alteration of the Mahiṣa-mardinī Cave

A more dramatic Pallava adaptation may be found in the altered affiliation of the unscribed Mahiṣa-mardinī Cave. Here a reclining Viṣṇu occupies one side



FIG. 2. Mahiṣa-mardinī Cave. Māmalla-puram. *Dvārapāla*. To right of left shrine. Note curved edge of battle-axe in head-gear. Ca. 7th c.

wall of the cave, and Durgā's battle with the buffalo-demon Mahiṣa is carved on the opposite wall. Pride of place is given to its central shrine, which is fronted by a raised porch with pillars carrying seated lions. The recarving of its *dvārapālas* is unobtrusive and escapes casual detection. The two flanking shrines are merely cut into the cave's rear wall.

As it stands today this central shrine has on its rear wall an exceptionally large bas-relief of Somāskanda, extending all the way to the floor, with a socket cut into the center of the floor to hold a liṅga. The *dvārapālas* flanking this central shrine, however, are not typical

Śaivite guardians. They appear to have originally been Vaiṣṇava guardians, subsequently altered to Śaivite ones through the addition of clubs.<sup>19</sup> In fact, the doorjambs have been carved away to accommodate such recutting, so that the normal jamb, measuring some six inches, is reduced in places to a mere inch. The *dvārapālas* of the flanking shrine to the left are a pair of typical Śaiva *dvārapālas*; the left-hand *dvārapāla* has trident prongs alongside his head as well as a serpent-wrapped club (Fig. 1), the one to the right sports the curved edge of the battle-axe in his headgear (Fig. 2). Flanking the shrine to the right are typical Brahmā-type guardians.



FIG. 3. Rāmānuja Cave. Māmallapuram. Ca. 7th c.

This occurrence of a pair of typical Śaiva guardians flanking the shrine to the left, together with the altered Vaiṣṇava guardians of the main shrine, makes it necessary to reconsider the original intention of the shrine. It seems likely that the cave, with its reclining Viṣṇu on one wall and Durgā fighting the buffalo-demon on the other, was originally intended to venerate Viṣṇu in its central shrine, with a Śiva shrine to the left and a Brahmā shrine to the right. The cave's dedication seems to have been altered to the worship of Śiva, probably soon after it was created, by cutting a Somāskanda panel into the wall of the central shrine, adding a socket for a liṅga, and converting the central Vaiṣṇava *dvārapālas* into Śaiva guardians. Once again, we suggest the possibility of Rājasimha being the author of this alteration, particularly in view of Rājasimha's well-

known predilection for placing both a Somāskanda panel and a liṅga within a single shrine, as evidenced, for instance, at the double shrines of the Shore Temple, which were indubitably his commission.

As we can see, relations among worshipers of the various Hindu gods were not always harmonious, even during Pallava times. With the exception of the probable alterations to the shrine of the Mahiṣa-mardinī Cave, the religious tension that existed during the Pallava period is evident at Māmallapuram primarily in inscriptions and is thus relatively unobtrusive. It would be apparent only to those who could read the script, whether in ancient times or today. These interventions have left behind intriguing puzzles of intent and purpose, however, and we hope that scholars and interested viewers will explore them more fully.



FIG. 4. Rāmānuja Cave. Māmallapuram. Erased Somāskanda within rectangular panel on rear wall of what was once the central shrine. Ca. 7th c., with 14th/15th-c. alterations.

### Vijayanagara-Period Erasures and Adaptations, 1: The Rāmānuja Cave

Earlier we emphasized the varied affiliations of rock-cut structures across Pallava territory and at Māmallapuram itself during the heyday of the early Pallava rulers, and spoke of the inclusion of imagery relating to Durgā in Viṣṇu caves. We now turn to structures that suggest a period of greater tension between followers of Śiva and those of Viṣṇu, or at any rate between the sponsors of some structures dedicated to these deities. The most striking instance of such discord is provided by the Rāmānuja Cave, a modest structure cut into the main granite hillside at Māmallapuram, not far from the Mahiṣa-mardinī Cave. The structural columns and lintels seen before the cave belong to the Vijayanagara period (Fig. 3), when similar additions were placed in front of other structures, including the Ādi-Varāha

Cave and the Kṛṣṇa sculpted tableau that once stood in the open air like the adjoining Great Penance cliff.

The verandah of the Rāmānuja Cave has two columns rising from the heads of seated lions who face outward, along with two pilasters rising from lions who face each other across the width of the verandah. The lions are finely carved, with fangs cut entirely in the round, such that a visitor may encircle each fang with a finger. The overhanging stone eaves are adorned with Pallava-style arches that end in a spade-shaped top (*kudū*), and the recessed area above carries a row of barrel-vaulted shrines (*śālā*). Carved onto the lower side of the eave is a series of curved stone beams with a row of dwarfish *gaṇa* figures below. Flanking the cave on either side, beyond the eave, is a finely detailed relief model of the typical aedicular *kūṭa* shrine that adorns the very top of a south Indian temple or which, in miniature, adorns the corners of its various storeys. Each aedicular shrine extends to cover the space roughly from ceiling to floor level of the cave façade; its interior is deeply cut and could accommodate a small portable image. Between these shrines and the attached lion columns is the first sign of later intervention: the two *dvārapālas* along the façade have been systematically chiselled away. Their discolored stone outlines suggest that they were originally Śaiva-style guardians.<sup>20</sup>

Inside the cave one discovers shocking structural alterations and the drastic removal of relief sculptures. Once the cave had three shrines cut into the rear wall, each with a shallow rectangular niche cut into its own rear wall. Most likely the central shrine was dedicated to Śiva, with Brahmā and Viṣṇu in the two side shrines. In a niche on the rear wall of the original central shrine was once a Somāskanda panel, which has been systematically removed. Discolorations, however, clearly reveal a front-facing image of Śiva, with Pārvatī seated in profile, and a flying celestial at each upper corner of the panel; the image of Skanda is no longer recognizable (Fig. 4). Although Somāskanda panels were popular within shrines of the Pallava period, it is noteworthy that this panel differs from that in the Mahiṣa-mardinī Cave, the Atiraṇacaṇḍa Cave, or the shrines of the Shore Temple. In the Rāmānuja Cave the positioning of the figures and their more slender outlines are reminiscent of the Somāskanda panel in the upper shrine of the Dharmarāja *ratha*, which appears to predate Rājasimha. The walls enclosing all three shrines of the Rāmānuja Cave, together with the door guardians that must have flanked their entrances, have been drastically cut away in an attempt to create a single long rectangular space, apparently considered more appropriate for its altered



FIG. 5. Rāmānuja Cave. Māmallapuram. Single elongated space created against back of cave by removing walls that separated the original three shrines. Ca. 7th c., with 14th/15th-c. alterations.



FIG. 6. Rāmānuja Cave. Māmallapuram. Erased *Durgā* panel. Ca. 7th c.

use (Fig. 5). The space alignment suggests a possible intention to accommodate a reclining image of Viṣṇu, presumably of stucco or wood; if such a plan was carried out, it has left no visible traces.

This thorough and rather brutal alteration appears to have occurred in the fourteenth or fifteenth century, when Vaiṣṇavism made its mark at the site. Those responsible for the erasure and adaptation added a large, lightly inscribed discus (*cakra*) and conch shell (*śaṅkha*) along the rock face that forms the left and right extensions of the cave façade, beyond the *kūṭa* shrine models, thereby alerting visitors to the cave's altered Vaiṣṇava dedication. It is noteworthy that fifteenth-century commentaries on the hymns of the *ālvārs*, especially on the famous *Tiruvāymoḷi* of Nammālṅvār, indicate an increasing distrust and suspicion of worshippers of Śiva. In more than one context these late commentators suggest



FIG. 7. Ādi Varāha Cave. Māmallapuram. *Durgā panel*. Ca. 7th c.



FIG. 8. Rāmānuja Cave, Māmallapuram. Erased panel on right wall. Ca. 7th c., with 14th/15th-c. alterations.



FIG. 9. Rāmānuja Cave. Māmallapuram.  
*Śaivite curse engraved into floor at  
entrance. Ca. 7th c.*



FIG. 10. Dharmarāja Maṇḍapa. Māmallapuram. Ca. 7th c.



FIG. 11. Dharmarāja Maṇḍapa. Māmallapuram. Erased *dvārāpalas* flanking shrine. Ca. 7th c., with 14th/15th-c. alterations.

that opponents of Vaiṣṇavism are to be throttled. The Tamil phrase used is *nirguṇaṅ enpār miḍairraipidiṭṭār pōlē*, meaning “like throttling [to death] those who hold that the supreme is *nirguṇa* [without *guṇas*],” probably referring to Śaiva Advaitin ideals.<sup>21</sup>

Additionally, the large relief panels adorning the two side walls of the Rāmānuja Cave in its original configuration have been totally chiselled away. The obliteration of the imagery on the left wall is not complete, and sufficient discoloration remains to enable its clear identification as a standing image of Durgā, flanked by female attendants, with kneeling devotees at her feet (Fig. 6). The panel closely parallels the imagery seen in the Ādi-Varāha Cave (Fig. 7). Durgā stands in the same elegant stance, with the heel of one leg raised upon what can only be the obliterated head of the buffalo. The two flanking attendants are poised just

as they are in the Ādi-Varāha Cave; the figure on the left gracefully crosses one leg behind the other, while the attendant at the right is poised to hold a tall bow. The erasure of the imagery in the Rāmānuja Cave did not completely extend to the lowest areas so that the raised heel of the female attendant at the left still remains relatively intact. Similarly, two flying celestials hover at each upper corner, and the largely obliterated figures below suggest kneeling devotees similar to those seen in the Ādi-Varāha Cave. The panel also displays similar pilasters at each end of the wall to frame the niche, and *kuḍu* arches above featuring male heads.

The panel on the opposite right wall, framed in identical fashion, presents problems in deciphering its imagery (Fig. 8). The outline of the centrally placed, chiselled-away portion suggests an image seated upon a



FIG. 12. Koneri Cave. Māmallapuram. Ca. 7th c.

lotus-like throne; the exceedingly broad outline of the chiselled-away head and the surviving discoloration force one to confront the possibility of a triple head. Remnants of the standing figure to the extreme left of the panel indicate a standing male with tiger feet. Is it possible that this wall featured an image of seated Sadāśiva with three faces, with the standing sage Vyāgrapāda (“Tiger-footed One”) to one side? Clearly identifiable are erased images of flying celestials flanking the main image, and also intact portions of cloud-like semicircles.

The Rāmānuja Cave poses one further perplexing question. It also contains the “Śaivite curse” cut into the floor of the cave in large, well-executed Pallava characters between the two central façade columns, so that it is the first thing one sees when entering the shrine

(Fig. 9). “Cursed is he, cursed is he, once again cursed, cursed, cursed, cursed is he in whose heart does not dwell Śiva, deliverer from the evil path.” We may assume that this verse was inscribed into the floor of the cave during its original Śaiva phase, when a Somāskanda panel and liṅga graced the central shrine, with Durgā on the left wall and a second relief on its right wall that may have featured Sadāśiva. If such an assumption is valid, then the original cave was probably a Rājasimha commission. The question remains as to why those who so drastically interfered with the cave’s original Śaiva program did not erase this “six-times cursed” Śaiva inscription, engraved in beautiful Pallava *grantha* letters of the early eighth century. Perhaps the Pallava script was no longer familiar to fifteenth-century viewers or readers. Being accustomed to the Tamil



FIG. 13. Koneri Cave. Māmallapuram.  
*Dvārapāla of shrine 3. Ca. 7th c.*

script, which was well established by this date, they ignored the ancient, now illegible curse and left it untouched.

### Vijayanagara Erasures and Adaptations, 2: Dharmarāja Maṇḍapa and Koneri Cave

The small, simple rock-cut cave known as Dharmarāja Maṇḍapa, with blocky Mahendra-style columns, examined in connection with the Śaivite curse, is a triple-shrined structure (Fig. 10). We have seen that the central shrine was apparently intended to house a liṅga; it extends farther into the cave than the two flanking

shrines, all three of which share a single base molding. The doorway of the central shrine was originally flanked by Śaiva-style guardians; these have been systematically removed, leaving only the stone silhouettes to attest their one-time existence (Fig. 11). We postulate that such removal occurred during the Vijayanagara phase of the site's occupation and alteration; certainly the large conch shell and discus incised into the two central columns of the façade must have been added at this time. Why the planned alteration was never completed poses yet another conundrum.

One final example of the removal of relief carvings comes from the five-shrined Koneri Cave on the oppo-



FIG. 14. Koneri Cave. Māmallapuram.  
*Dvārapāla of shrine 2. Ca. 7th c.*

site side of the massive central rocky scarp at Māmallapuram (Fig. 12). Along its façade are a set of four simple, slender columns, square above and below and octagonal between, with the two end columns attached to the cave walls; farther inside the cave are four fully fluted slender columns, which taper slightly toward their bulbous capitals and are adorned with two bands of floral designs. Against the rear wall of the cave five shrines share the same raised base molding; the central shrine and the two end shrines project slightly into the cave and have steps leading up to them, whereas the two between are less recessed and without steps. Cut into the center of the rear wall of each shrine is a plain rectangular niche that may have been intended for a painted image of the deity. It has been suggested that the Koneri Cave may have been designed to house the five aspects of Śiva as Īśāna, Tatpuruṣa, Aghora, Vāmadeva, and Sadyojāta.<sup>22</sup> The *dvārapālas* of four of the five shrines are male, with fangs, bulging eyes, and fiercely curved, joined eyebrows, all suggestive of a Śaiva affiliation (Fig. 13). In addition, in shrines two and three, one door guardian has the curved prongs of Śiva's trident alongside his headdress (Fig. 14). Reinforcing the probability of the cave's dedication to the five-featured aspect of Śiva is the fact that the northernmost shrine, the first encountered by the visitor, has female door guardians who would have flanked either Durgā herself or Vāmadeva, the female aspect of the five-featured Śiva.

This northernmost shrine, however, has not remained intact. The female door guardian to the left has been almost entirely cut away, and her companion on the right has had substantial portions of her body removed (Fig. 15). Apparently, this removal too dates from the fourteenth-century phase when the Vaiṣṇava emblems of the *śaṅkha* and *cakra* were incised on the two flanking projections of the excavation in front of the façade. Once again, however, apparent plans for a Vaiṣṇava adaptation of the cave were never fully put into execution. This leaves a series of questions for further exploration. Is it possible to reconstruct more fully the history of these Vijayanagara-period Vaiṣṇava interventions at Māmallapuram? Who initiated them? Why were some of them carried out fully and others left incomplete?

### Concluding Remarks

This brief essay raises a variety of unresolved questions concerning the addition, erasure, adaptation, and intended reuse of certain rock-cut monuments at Māmallapuram in the context of exclusive and unwavering devotion to either Viṣṇu or Śiva. The devotional *ālvār* and *nāyanmār* poet-saints of the Pallava period, for instance, sang of Viṣṇu and Śiva as equal in greatness and glory, and reserved their ire for their Buddhist and Jain competitors, but rivalry between Vaiṣṇavites and Śaivites has also raised its head at



FIG. 15. Koneri Cave. Māmallapuram.  
Erased *dvārapālaka* of shrine 1.  
Ca. 7th c., with 14th/15th-c.  
alterations.

various times. The Śaivite curse of the Pallava era testifies to an ardent espousal of the worship of Śiva to the exclusion of all else, at least among some Pallava patrons.

The more drastic erasure and alteration of shrine walls and sculptures during the fourteenth or fifteenth century testify to later Vaiṣṇava interventions directed at Śaiva shrines. We can see the heated competition between followers of Śiva and of Viṣṇu during this later period reflected in new mythological and iconographic innovations in South India. Concerned about the increasing esteem and recognition achieved by Vaiṣṇavism, and specifically the expanding popularity of the Narasimha man-lion avatar of Viṣṇu, Śaivas created a new com-

posite Śaiva figure known as Śarabeśa, an eaglelike creature who tramples upon Narasimha.<sup>23</sup> The Vaiṣṇava response was to create an even fiercer Aṣṭa-mukha Gaṇḍa-Bheruṇḍa Narasimha, a mythical bird with the heads of eight different animals of which the prime one was leonine, with fierce long talons on its eight legs, who, in turn, tore into Śarabeśa.<sup>24</sup>

The conclusions here must remain tentative, and we hope to inspire further exploration of these issues. We have attempted here to identify later interventions into the monuments of Māmallapuram, and to place these acts into a historical context of sporadic religious conflict between Śaivas and Vaiṣṇavas in southern India.

Material evidence, such as alterations, erasures, and new iconography, can be just as powerful as any literary diatribe in revealing religious competition, challenge, and enmity.

## Notes

\* Throughout this essay, “left” and “right” refer to viewer’s left and right. All photographs in this essay by Vidya Dehejia.

1. William Willetts, *An Illustrated Annotated Annual Bibliography of Mahabalipuram on the Coromandel Coast of India, 1582–1962* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya, 1966); N. S. Ramaswamy, *Māmallapuram, an Annotated Bibliography* (Madras: New Era Press, 1980).

2. Michael Lockwood, *Pallava Art* (Tambaram: Tambaram Research Associates, 2001). This volume is a revised and enlarged edition of two earlier works: *Mahabalipuram Studies* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1974) and *Māmallapuram and the Pallavas* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1982).

3. For an inscription that does relate an act of royal theft, see Richard H. Davis, “Trophies of War: The Case of the Calukya Intruder,” in *Perceptions of India’s Visual Past*, eds. C. B. Asher and T. Metcalf (New Delhi: American Institute of Indian Studies, 1994), pp. 161–77.

4. For a valuable recent collection of essays, see David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence, *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in South Asia* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000).

5. Indira V. Peterson, “Śramaṇas against the Tamil Way: Jains as Others in Tamil Śaiva Literature,” in *Open Boundaries*, ed. John Cort (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), pp. 163–85.

6. Padma Kaimal, “Playful Ambiguity and Political Authority in the Large Relief at Māmallapuram,” *Ars Orientalis*, vol. 24 (1994), pp. 1–24.

7. We see this at many other sites too. One instance is the Chandella capital of Khajurāho (present-day Mādhyā Pradesh), where Yaśovarman built a temple to Viṣṇu, his son Dhanga dedicated one to Śiva in the form of an emerald liṅga, and Dhanga’s friend built a temple to the Jina Pārśvanātha.

8. Vidya Dehejia, *The Sensuous and the Sacred* (New York: American Federation of the Arts, 2002), p. 134.

9. K. R. Srinivasan, *Cave-Temples of the Pallavas* (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1964), p. 159.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

11. Michael Lockwood, *Pallava Art*, p. 7ff.

12. T. V. Mahalingam, *Inscriptions of the Pallavas* (New Delhi: Agam Prakashan, 1988), pp. 173–75; pp. 200–202.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 227–39.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 372–79.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 169–72.

16. Dr. Nagaswamy would see this inscription as an affirmation that Viṣṇu and Śiva are one and the same, and I am willing to agree with him that textual interpretation can be found to support such a philosophic theory. I do believe, however, that the engraving of the Śaiva curse does not affirm that Viṣṇu and Śiva are equal and identical.

17. R. Nagaswamy, “New Light on Māmallapuram,” *Transactions of the Archaeological Society of South India*, Silver Jubilee Volume (1962), p. 48. Translation marginally altered from original.

18. See also Michael Lockwood, *Pallava Art*, p. 223.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

20. Remnants of a set of frontal feet make one wonder if there was yet another change in affiliation. Is it possible that there was an original Vaiṣṇava cave, changed to Śaiva, and changed back to Vaiṣṇava?

21. I am grateful to Dr. R. Nagaswamy for alerting me to these references. See commentary “Idu” or *Bhagavad Vishayam* on the first two *Tiruvāymolīs* of Nammālvār by Adiaya valainjan jiyar, commentary 6000, 12000, 24000, and 36000, published by Krishnaswami Aiyangar (Sudarshanam) (Puttur Agraharam, Thiruchi, 1995), p. 227. The same expression is repeated on p. 215. Dr. Nagaswamy points out (personal correspondence) that it is the commentators, not the *ālvārs*, who are responsible for such statements and misinterpretations of original statements. In the very last verse of his *Tiruvāymoli*, Nammālvār states that he achieved liberation by worshipping Hari, Hara, and Ayaṅ (Viṣṇu, Śiva, and Brahmā); commentators twist this to suggest that Nammālvār meant to say Hari, to whom Hara and Ayaṅ are slaves.

22. K. R. Srinivasan, *Cave-Temples of the Pallavas*, p. 141.

23. The very first images of Śarabeśa appear on the late Chola temples such as Dārāsūram and Tribhuvanam.

24. I thank Raju Kalidoss for drawing my attention to this material.