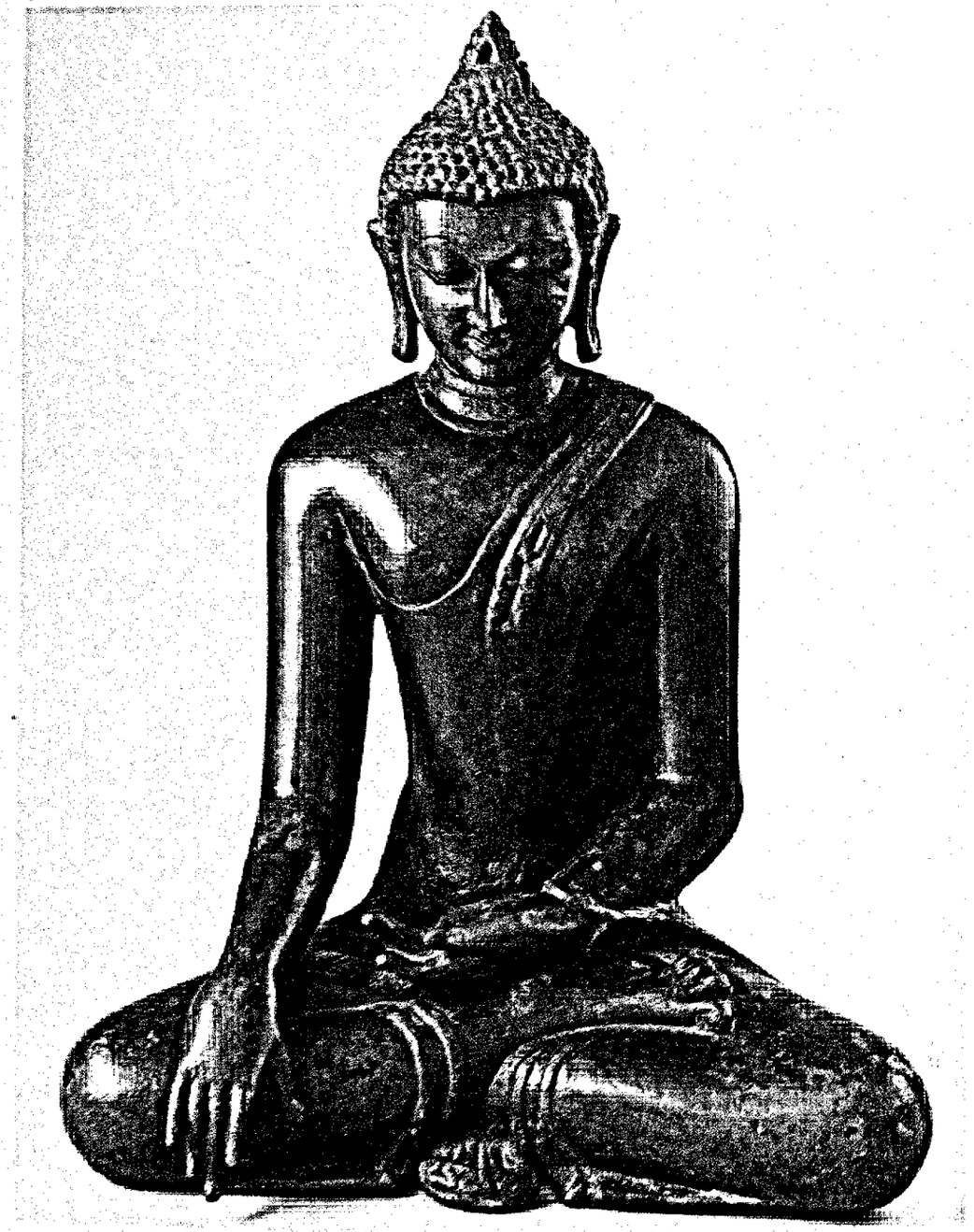

INDIAN ART
& CONNOISSEURSHIP

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Preface and acknowledgements

This collection of papers grew out of a desire among a number of Douglas Barrett's colleagues and friends to honour his contribution to the study and appreciation of Asian arts, particularly those of the Indian sub-continent. It was to the understanding of Indian sculpture and painting that Douglas devoted a large part of his professional energies. As the late Basil Gray describes so eloquently in his chapter, a lasting legacy of Douglas's curatorship at the British Museum is to be seen in the galleries which display objects acquired under his discriminating eye. The combination of scholarship and connoisseurship evident in Douglas's acquisitions for the Museum, and in his pioneering writings, represents a permanent legacy to Indian art appreciation.

In the planning of this volume I was greatly assisted by Robert Skelton, retired Keeper of Indian art at the Victoria and Albert Museum, and Ralph Pinder-Wilson, a former colleague of Douglas Barrett in the Department of Oriental Antiquities at the British Museum. Mary Barrett aided and abetted in many ways. We are very grateful that so many of Douglas's colleagues responded so enthusiastically to this project and contributed to its realisation.

Sadly, Douglas Barrett passed away on the 26th September 1992, whilst this book was in press.

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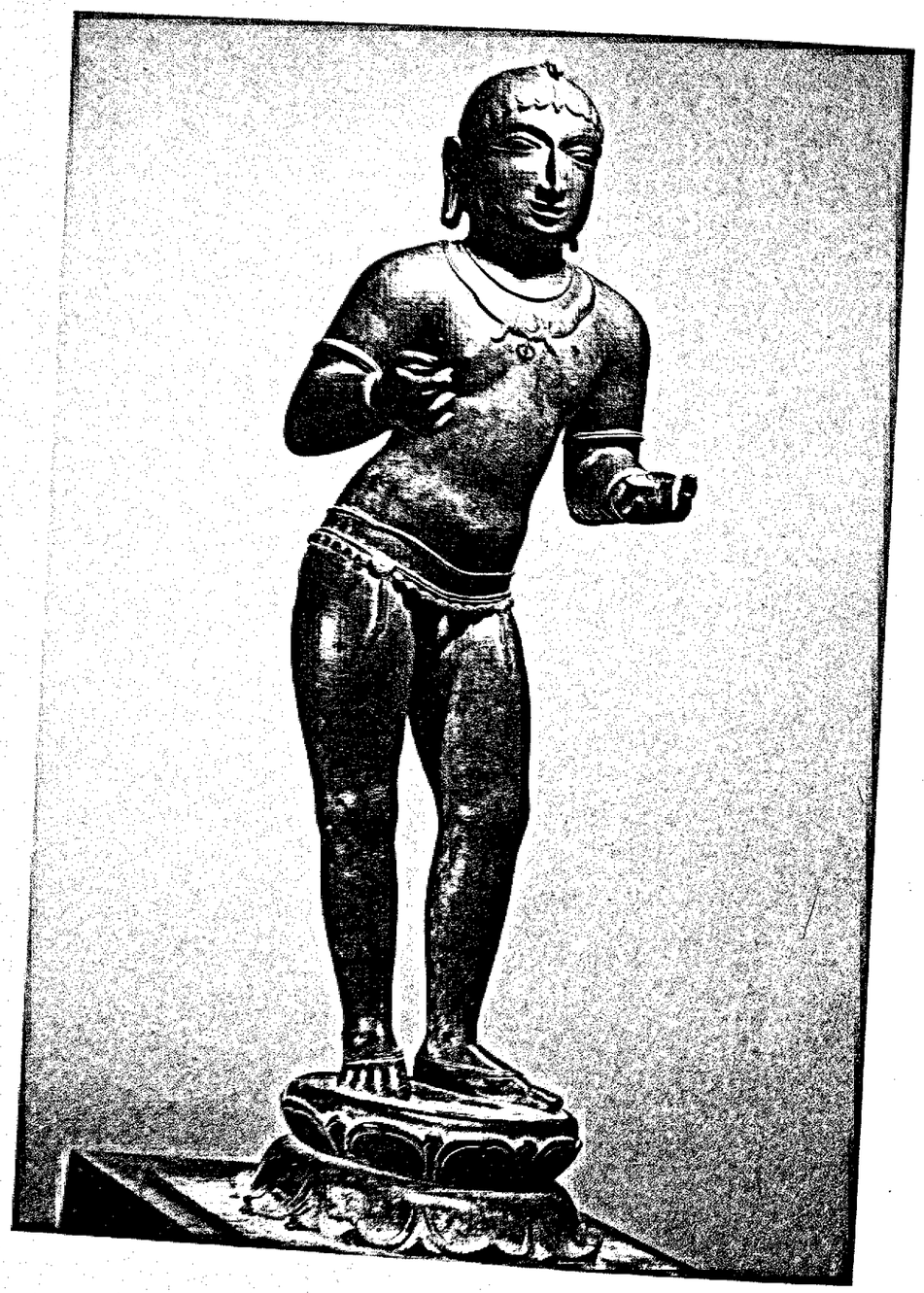

Iconographic transference between Kṛṣṇa and three Śaiva saints

Vidya Dehejia

In the Tamil-speaking region of south India, during the last millennium, a powerful cult of saints helps to define the distinct art, religion and literature of the region. Complete groups of bronze and stone images of these Hindu saints, many of outstanding artistic quality, may be seen in the temples of the south, placed beside the shrine of their deity, either Śiva or Viṣṇu. The Jain and Buddhist faiths were predominant in the southern country until the emergence of the Tamil saints who lived between the sixth and tenth centuries, and the triumph of Hinduism was due in large measure to the influence of these saints. The most sacred literature of south India consists almost exclusively of the hymns they composed, and to this day the saints remain a living tradition. Their images are worshipped in temples and carried in processions; their poems are chanted in homes and at a variety of ceremonial gatherings; and their death anniversaries are days of special observances. The Tamil saints are referred to as *aḍiyārs* or *toṇḍars* , both words meaning slaves (of the Lord), and there are sixty-three Śaiva saints known as Nāyanmārs and twelve Vaiṣṇava saints known as Ālvārs. While north India produced saints who wrote poetry like Mirabai, Surdas and Kabir, these northern saints were not immortalised in art or worshipped in temples. Saints of the Western world are frequently portrayed in art, but their presence in churches and cathedrals is not universal. By contrast, icons of the complete groups of south Indian saints were commissioned by every Tamil temple and placed in a prominent position where they were accorded ritual worship, justifying the use of the word 'cult' in this context.

The saints of Viṣṇu, the twelve Ālvārs, were raised to an extraordinarily high status in which they were partially deified, being considered as *aṃśas* or secondary incarnations of the attributes and companions of the god.[1] The Nāyanmārs of Śiva were not elevated in this manner; yet a study of their imagery throws light on the process of deification and serves as a focal point for a discussion of the relation

Fig. 2
Child-saint Sambandar. Bronze, twelfth century. Courtesy: Australian National Gallery, Canberra.

Fig. 1
Child-saint Sambandar. Bronze, ca. twelfth century. Victoria and Albert Museum, IM 75–1935 (Colour pl. 8, p. 170).

between the art and religion of south India.

Images of three Śaiva saints are frequently mistaken for images of the god Kṛṣṇa. Child saint Sambandar in a dancing pose is invariably identified as dancing child god Kṛṣṇa; the iconography of the child saint is closely akin to, and presumably modelled on, that of the child god. In similar manner, images of two other Śaiva saints seem to have been modelled on Kṛṣṇa, one on his form as Veṇugopāla, the flute-player, and the other on Kṛṣṇa as Rājamannar who stands with one arm resting on the shoulder of his wife. Images of the two major women saints, although not our prime concern here, further highlight this feature of iconographic transference. Vaiṣṇava saint Āndāl who is depicted as a beautiful young woman holding a parrot, may be confused with Madurai's goddess Mīnākshi, while Śaiva saint Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār is an emaciated skeletal hag who has been mistaken for the fearsome goddess Kālī. This ambiguity in the iconography of the saints was undoubtedly intentional and it emphasizes the great importance of the Tamil saints in the religious and cultural life of south India.

Child saint Sambandar, a historical figure, appears to have lived in the second half of the seventh century, at which time he converted the Pāṇḍya ruler Neḍumāran from Jainism to a belief in the supremacy of Śiva. Sambandar is most frequently depicted in art as a standing child, usually uncrowned, with an empty cup held in his left hand and the index finger of his right hand pointing upwards (Figs. 1 and 2). This gesture of the right hand is sometimes specific, but at other times less sharply defined, with fingers cupped together and the index finger extended. The iconography for such images is taken directly from the story of the child saint. Born of brahmin parents in the town of Śīrkāli near Chidambaram, Sambandar frequently accompanied his father to the local Śiva temple. On one such occasion, when just a child of three, he was left on the steps of the sacred tank while his father descended for a ritual bath. Being hungry, the child started crying. When the father returned after his bath, he found Sambandar playing contentedly with an empty golden cup while trickles of milk ran down his chin. On being questioned as to who had given him the cup of milk, the child pointed upwards to the temple tower where there was an image of Pārvatī seated beside Śiva. Having drunk the cup of divine milk given to him by the goddess, Sambandar burst into song praising Śiva and Pārvatī, and the entire Śaiva canon commences with these verses of Sambandar. In placing a cup in one hand of the child and in delineating his other hand in the significant pointing gesture, the artist has translated this memorable story into visual imagery. This is the standard mode for images of Sambandar when he takes his place in the complete row of the sixty-three Nāyanmārs.

Equally popular, however, and of fundamental importance for our analysis of iconographic transference, are images of Sambandar as a

Fig. 3
Dancing child-saint Sambandar. Bronze, thirteenth century. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

crowned dancing child (Fig. 3). With one leg (either left or right) raised in dance, Sambandar points upwards with the index finger of his right hand, while his left hand is extended gracefully in a gesture of dance. Child saint Sambandar stressed the importance of song and dance in the worship of Śiva. A simple, happy, fluent style came naturally to him, as naturally as the concept of joy and its expression in music and dance. He did not concern himself with religious texts, or give learned discourses or expound a philosophy. Instead he sang ecstatically in praise of Śiva and Pārvatī. He sang too of the beauties of nature, of shady groves of coconut palms and green paddy fields, of lotus ponds and surf-crested creeks. The revival of Tamil musical poetry known as *isai* was in large measure due to the efforts of Sambandar who sang over four thousand verses, all of which were set to music. He wandered the Tamil countryside, singing joyfully in praise of god and goddess, accompanied by a musician who played on an instrument known as the *yāḻ*. Sambandar's emphasis on joyful worship must have led to his visualization as a dancing child.

Images of dancing Sambandar have been confused with dancing Kṛṣṇa in museums the world over.[2] In books on South Indian bronzes,[3] as in those devoted to the legend of Kṛṣṇa,[4] and indeed in auction catalogues,[5] the same misconception has been perpetuated. The treatment of the child figure as well as the dancing pose is closely similar in images of Sambandar and Kṛṣṇa, but there is one unmistakable distinction which makes it impossible to confuse the two images. Dancing Sambandar invariably has one finger of his right hand in a pointing gesture,[6] while dancing Kṛṣṇa's right hand is always in the gesture of protection (*abhaya mudrā*), a divine gesture. The upward-pointing finger, so integral to the story of Sambandar, is the telltale clue to his identity.

The sculptors who modelled dancing Sambandar appear to have borrowed almost in its entirety the already established form of dancing Kṛṣṇa. As the divine infant and child, Kṛṣṇa had gained great popularity in south India, not least through the poems of the ninth century Vaiṣṇava saint Periyāḻvār, who wrote separate poems dedicated to each little incident in Kṛṣṇa's life as a baby. The joys of infancy and childhood, as portrayed in baby Kṛṣṇa, became a favorite theme with devotees and artists. It was perhaps natural that the artists who sculpted dancing Sambandar felt no need to look further. They borrowed the form of dancing Kṛṣṇa and adapted it to the story of Sambandar, merely by replacing Kṛṣṇa's *abhaya* gesture of the right hand with the upward-pointing finger. Even Kṛṣṇa's crown is given to dancing Sambandar, while in other Sambandar images, the crown is the exception rather than the rule.

Dancing Sambandar has also been misidentified as dancing Skanda, there being two such examples in the Madras Museum. Again

the upward-pointing finger, explicit in one "Skanda" image and less defined in the other, is the clue to the correct identification. Since these particular images were found within a Śiva temple, it was clear that they could not represent dancing Kṛṣṇa. What divine child could there be in a Śiva temple but Skanda, the beloved son of Śiva and Pārvati? Dancing Sambandar, of course!

The few known texts which lay down formulae for the depiction of the saints belong to a date three to four hundred years after the first images were produced. The earliest document which deals with the Nāyanmārs is the Tamil *Kandapurāṇam*, a text entirely different from the earlier Sanskrit *Skandapurāṇa*, and probably composed at the end of the fourteenth century.[7] Two later Sanskrit texts that also provide a brief descriptive verse (*dhyāna*) for each Śaiva saint are the *Śiva Rahasya* and the *Śiva Bhakta Mahātmya*.[8] The *dhyāna* verses are terse and precise and are primarily of academic interest rather than an aid to identification, or indeed an aid to the production of an image, since a number of existing ancient bronzes do not adhere to these textual formulae. For instance, neither of the two major types of images of child saint Sambandar correspond to the prescription of the *Kandapurāṇam*, which states that the saint should be crowned and shown clapping his hands in time to music. The general lack of correspondence between text and image is intriguing. One may point out that the most striking and unusual variations from the texts belong to a period predating the compilation of such formulae. However, images of dancing Sambandar, which began to be made in the eleventh century and continued to be produced into the seventeenth century, are not mentioned in any texts. It seems strange that documents incorporating formulae of the Nāyanmārs, composed some centuries after the earliest images, should have so completely ignored the already existing icons of dancing child Sambandar. Possibly *dhyānas* describing such images may still emerge from unexplored manuscripts, both Tamil and Sanskrit, which exist in such large numbers in south Indian collections such as those of the Thanjavur Saraswati Mahal Library.

The second instance of iconographic transference between Kṛṣṇa and a Śaiva saint arises in the case of Sundaramūrti Nāyanār, who appears to have lived at the start of the eighth century, and was possibly a contemporary of the Pallava monarch Rājasiṁha. Bronzes of Sundarar, the Beautiful One, most frequently depict him as the handsome young bridegroom that he was at the moment when Śiva, in the guise of an aged man, interrupted his marriage and claimed Sundarar as his bonded slave. Standing in relaxed elegance, the young garlanded saint holds a lotus flower in one hand and rests the other hand on a staff. This is the standard mode for Sundarar when he takes his place as one of the sixty-three Nāyanmārs. It is with images of Sundarar depicted together with his wife Paravai that the iconographic transference from god Kṛṣṇa

Fig. 4
Saint Sundarar Bronze, eleventh century. Tiruvenkāḍu hoard, Thanjavur Art Gallery.

Fig. 5
Sundarar from Kilaiyur. Bronze, tenth century. Thanjavur Art Gallery.

becomes apparent. The saint stands gracefully poised, holding a lotus in his right hand and resting his left elbow upon Paravai's shoulder. In the elegant bronze unearthed at Tiruvenkāḍu, belonging to the early eleventh century, he is depicted standing thus with the lovely Paravai by his side (Fig. 4). A masterpiece from Kiḷaiyūr of this type, belonging around 975, depicts Sundarar as the epitome of beauty (Fig. 5); unfortunately, the companion piece of Paravai is missing. The resemblance of these images of Sundarar accompanied by his wife to portrayals of Kṛṣṇa as Rājamannar (Fig. 6) is indeed remarkable.[9] Both Sundarar and Kṛṣṇa are regal, stately and handsome figures; both have their left arms raised to rest gently against one shoulder of a consort-Paravai in the case of Sundarar, and Satyabhāmā in the case of Kṛṣṇa. The differences between the two images are relatively minor. Sundarar

does not wear the crown of Kṛṣṇa but instead has his hair gathered into a topknot. And while Sundarar's right hand is upraised to hold the lotus, Kṛṣṇa's downward hand holds the staff. It certainly appears that the bronze-casters borrowed heavily from the already established form of Kṛṣṇa Rājamannar to produce their images of Sundarar.

Sculptors looking for models found a convenient parallel in Sundarar's second wife Śangilī and Kṛṣṇa's second consort Rukminī. They began to cast threesome groups, of both god and saint, with the second wife standing slightly apart. In the sixteenth century, the similarity of the Sundarar groups to the Rājamannar groups became even more marked. The Sundarar images from Tiruviḍaimaradūr, Tirunāvalūr, and several other temples of this phase reveal that even the gesture of Sundarar's right hand is now identical to that of Kṛṣṇa, being clearly intended to hold a staff and not a lotus. It may be pointed out that for a long time prior to the appearance of these images of Sundarar and Kṛṣṇa Rājamannar, Lord Śiva was depicted with one arm poised to rest against the shoulder of his bull Nandi. Images of Śiva in this style date back at least five centuries prior to our bronzes of Sundarar and Kṛṣṇa, and it is possible that the pose for the later visualisation of Kṛṣṇa came from that of Śiva. However that may be, the modelling of Sundarar himself is clearly based on that of Kṛṣṇa, and its increasing similarity to the image of Kṛṣṇa is significant.

The lesser known saint Ānaya Nāyanār, invariably depicted as playing upon his flute, provides a third and compelling instance of iconographic transference. In fact, considerable confusion has arisen between the images of this Śaiva saint and those of Kṛṣṇa as Veṇugopāla, the flute player. The story of Ānaya Nāyanār is a simple one and merely tells how this humble cowherd—cowherd like Kṛṣṇa—so enchantingly played his flute in praise of Śiva that all the creatures of the forest forgot their enmity and mingled with the cows he tended. Images of the flute-playing Ānayar often depict him with one leg crossed casually in front of the other, this relaxed stance being typical of Kṛṣṇa Veṇugopāla. Images of saint and god are so strikingly similar that it has resulted in an image of Ānaya Nāyanār from Nāgapaṭṭinam being labelled as Kṛṣṇa.[10] Seen in isolation and with no knowledge of its findspot, it would not be possible to dispute this ascription. We can, however, confirm that the identification is incorrect and that the image is that of Ānayar because it comes from the Kāyārohanēsvara temple of Śiva, where it must once have taken its place in an entire group of Śaiva saints. Other Nāyanmārs from this same temple have, in fact, been identified.[11] The image of Ānaya Nāyanār from the Kālahasti Śiva temple would also be totally acceptable as Kṛṣṇa Veṇugopāla if it were found in isolation (Fig. 6). In this instance, however, a misidentification is impossible, since the bronze stands within the temple, occupying its correct sequential place as one of a complete group of fifteenth century Nāyanmārs. A third depiction of a

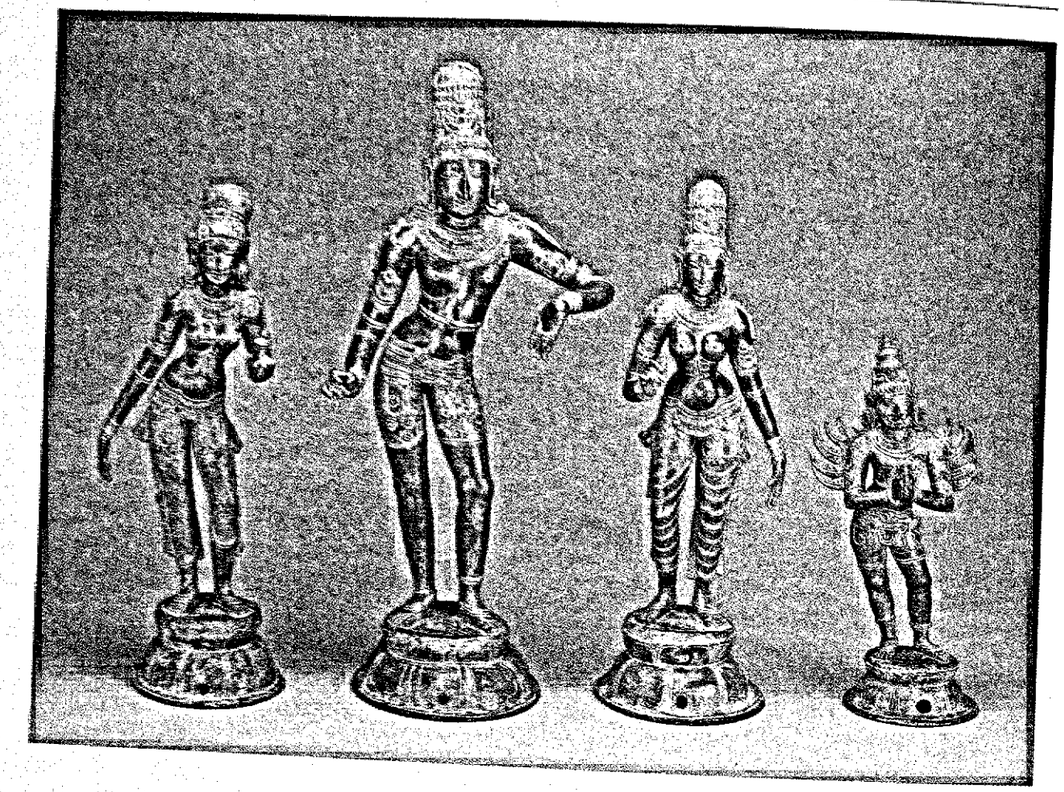

Fig. 6
Kṛṣṇa Rājamannar with Rukmiṇi, Satyabhāmā and Garuḍa. Bronze, thirteenth century. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, M.70.69.1–4. (Colour pl. 9, p.171).

flute-playing image, in a stone bas-relief from the twelfth century Chola temple at Dārāsuram, is easily identified as Ānaya Nāyanār because the panel includes a depiction of Śiva and Pārvatī who appear on their bull to bless the saint. In modelling the images of Ānaya Nāyanār, the artist has evidently borrowed from the already established iconography of Kṛṣṇa Veṇugopāla, frequently retaining even the crown, and providing us with a third forceful instance of iconographic transference.

It is intriguing to find three Śaiva Nāyanmārs modelled thus on three different forms of god Kṛṣṇa. There is no simple answer, nor indeed a single answer, to the whys and wherefores of these remarkable instances of iconographic transference. Elsewhere I have argued that Viṣṇu was known and worshipped in the Tamil country at a much earlier date than Śiva.[12] Viṣṇu's most popular aspect was Kṛṣṇa, and many early Tamil works, such as the *Śilappadikāram* written around AD 450, include hymns that glorify the flute-player enchanter.

From the sixth century onwards, when the Pallava rulers divided their patronage equally between Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava faiths, the cult of Kṛṣṇa, with its obvious easy charm and its immediate appeal, became

even more popular. The poems composed in the ninth century by Vaiṣṇava saint Periyāḻvār, glorifying the infant Kṛṣṇa, as also youth Kṛṣṇa beloved of the cowherd girls, must have given further prominence to the cult of Kṛṣṇa. The first images of the saints began to be made in the tenth century, after the compilation of the Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava canons. Metal-casters, searching for models for the many Nāyanmārs, seem to have resorted to the popular imagery of Kṛṣṇa whose appeal was so widespread. Perhaps in their desire to divert a known and popular source of devotional attraction to the worship of Śiva, the Chola rulers encouraged the modelling of Śaiva saints on the familiar iconography of Kṛṣṇa. This conscious modelling of the Śaiva saints on forms of Kṛṣṇa (and it certainly seems that it was a planned purposeful decision) may in part be seen in terms of the determination of the Chola monarchs to popularize the faith of Śiva. In part, however, the use of the iconography of the divine Kṛṣṇa for the Śaiva saints may be attributed to an unspoken desire for the conscious elevation and deification of the Nāyanmārs who were never regarded as incarnations of the godhead, unlike their contemporaries, the Vaiṣṇava saints.

Fig. 7
Ānaya Nāyanmār, from group of fifteenth century Nāyanmārs, standing within the Kālahasti temple.

1. For details see R. Champakalakshmi, *Vaishnava Iconography in the Tamil country*, New Delhi, 1981, pp. 239–245.
2. Examples include images in the Prince of Wales Museum in Bombay and the National Museum, New Delhi. The images in the Freer Gallery in Washington, the Asia Society in New York and the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City have been relabelled.
3. C. Śivaramamurti, *South Indian Bronzes* , New Delhi, 1963, pl. 83a.
4. Plates 116, 122, 151 in David Godine, *Krishna, The Divine Lover*, Lausanne, 1982, are actually images of dancing child Sambandar. The cover picture of Walter Spink, *Krishna Mandala*, Ann Arbor, 1971, is not Kṛṣṇa but dancing saint Sambandar.
5. Lot no. 148 in *Indian, Himalayan, South-East Asian Art and Indian Miniatures*, Sotheby's Catalogue "5365 SIVA," New York, 1985 is Sambandar, not Kṛṣṇa.
6. Champakalakshmi, *op. cit.*, p. 139, states that images of Sambandar may be in *abhaya mudra* , or *suci hasta* . This is not so. The divine gesture of *abhaya* is depicted only with Kṛṣṇa and never with Sambandar.
7. Kamil V. Zvelebil, *Tamil Literature* , Wiesbaden, 1974, pp. 185–90.
8. R. Nagaswamy, *Art and Culture of Tamilnadu*, Delhi, 1980, p. 64.
9. This similarity of iconographic forms has been noticed by P. Pal, *Krishna: The Cowherd King* , Monograph Series, Number 1, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1972, pp. 24–25.
10. Śivaramamurti, *op. cit.*, pl. 73a.
11. R. Nagaswamy, *Masterpieces of Early South Indian Bronzes* , New Delhi, 1983, pp. 122–23 and accompanying plates, discusses an image of Chandikeśvara from this temple. For images of Sambandar and Karaikkal Ammaiyar from the same temple see Vidya Dehejia, *Slaves of the Lord. The Path of the Tamil Saints* , New Delhi, 1987, figs.14 and 70.
12. Dehejia, *op.cit.* , Chapter 3, "The Emergence of Tamil Bhakti," pp. 21–32.