

Processions in the medieval South Indian temple: Sociology, sovereignty and soteriology*

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Processions in Madurai — the sixth to ninth century

To introduce this study of medieval temple processions, I will provide two contrasting sets of images from Madurai, in the far south of India. The first set of images is drawn from the Tamil devotional literature of the sixth to ninth centuries — from the text called *Paripāṭal* and from the poems composed by the poet-saint Nammālvār. In these texts, we see worshippers going from the royal city of Madurai, the capital of the Pandya kings, toward the shrine of Lord Murukan on the hill of Parankunram to the southwest of the city, and toward Tirumaliruncolai, sacred to Viṣṇu, to the north. First, we see Murukan's worshippers, as they are described in *Paripāṭal*:¹

Carrying honey-bearing blossoms, tender leaves, rich cloth, clear-sounding bells, and the
spear,
they crowded around the tree, where the *vēlan* had tied the buffalo smeared with sandal
paste,
and sang words of praise,
coming forward (*elu*) together, with torches, music, perfumes, incense, and flags,
to the mountain whose trees are moist with the nectar of flowers.
Those who join together every night to abide at the foot of this wondrous hill —
what desire would they have to dwell among the gods?
...
Filled with songs of his fame, overflowing with words of praise,
the road between Madurai and Paraṅkuṅram
was so crowded with people adorned with fragrant sandal
that the short distance was made long.
And so many petals came loose and fell from the garlands
borne in the hair of men and women, in great rejoicing,

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Tamil words are transliterated according to the system of the *Tamil Lexicon* of the University of Madras, except that, in keeping with medieval inscriptional usage, I do not distinguish between long and short vowels *e* and *o* when discussing terms and names that appear in Chola period inscriptions. It should be noted that Tamil inscriptions make frequent use of Grantha characters to represent Sanskrit letters. In these cases, and in the case of Sanskrit words, I have used the conventional system of transliterating Sanskrit. In general, I use spellings without diacritics for place names, and for the names of kings and dynasties.

¹ François Gros' French translation and notes for *Paripāṭal* have been of immense value to me in preparing my English translation. I am very grateful to Tanisha Ramachandran for working with me on this project.

that one could not move forward.

Paripāṭal 17.1-8 and 22-27

On the great road filled with flowers,
your devotees came forth (*eḷuntu*) to celebrate the festival,
with sandalwood paste, white incense smoke,
lamps that remained alight in the breezes that passed,
with blossoms that spread fragrance, and the loud music of drums.
Bearing bells, cords, your banners with peacock, axe, and elephant,
and everything needed for their purpose,
your worshippers approached the sacred mountain, so difficult to reach.

Paripāṭal 8.95-102

[The people of Madurai] dressed in brilliant clothes, adorned with shining jewels,
mounted on splendid horses or in fast-moving chariots,
with garlands of bright flowers, made light the darkness of the road
between Madurai and Tirupparaṅkuṅṅram, where they all gathered.
The crowded road along which the procession (*yāttirai*) flowed,
as if on cool sands beside the roaring shore,
was laid out like a garland placed on the Earth,
around the head of Him who dwells on this hill.
As the stars together with the moon encircle Mount Meru,
the learned king Vaḷuti was surrounded
by his wives graceful as peacocks together with his dutiful and wise ministers
as he mounted the broad slopes of the hill, the place of demons.
Circumambulating the mountain, he was joined
by throngs of people from the country and the city,
wearing cloth on their heads in the old-fashioned way,
that fell to their shoulders, chanting praise, filled with joy.
O You, the tall one, whose elephant has sounding bells!
This is the way we travel the road around your beautiful mountain.

Paripāṭal 19.12-29

Another poet in the *Paripāṭal* collection extols the shrine of Viṣṇu at Tirumaliruncolai — also known as Iruṅkuṅṅram — somewhat further distant and to the north of the city of Madurai:

Understand, you humans! Hear of the glory that arises here!
Blue lotuses blossom in the mountain pools, and around each pool
golden flowers cover the branches of the Aśoka trees.
Green fruit and ripe fruit hang side by side and bright clusters of vēṅkai flowers bloom.
This beauty is like that of Māyōṅ, who dwells here.
You who do not approach to worship, see and offer reverence to the mountain from afar.
The name of Iruṅkuṅṅram has spread
across the great flourishing earth; its fame is ancient.
The sight of the beloved Lord who is here destroys delusion.

...

Together with your wives and with your parents,
with your children in your arms and with those whom you love,
come! Offer worship to this god!
The one whose eyes resemble lotuses,
the one whose body gleams like a gem, dark as a raincloud,
the one who is here, and appears in all the worlds
to remove the suffering that torments humankind —
that gracious one is the Lord of Iruṅkuṅṅram!

Paripāṭal 15.29-37 and 46-53

Several centuries later, Nammālvār, one of the Tamil poet-saints known as the *Ālvārs*, continued to exhort devotees to make their way to this holy place:

Before the growing glow of youth begins to fade,
and your limbs become feeble,
if you reach the temple,
 where the dark Lord,
 whose splendor ever grows,
 dwells with love
Māliṛuñcōlai,
hill surrounded by luxuriant young groves
Rare fortune is yours.

My heart! there is nothing to gain
by performing wasteful deeds.
Reach yonder hill:
near Māliṛuñcōlai
surrounded by thick enchanted forests.
This is the temple
where he who has the hue of stormy cloud,
 delights to dwell.
This is the right thing to do.

Do not add to your sins with your gathered strength:
Reach the slopes of the outer hill.
Māliṛuñcōlai,
surrounded by sparkling clear mountain springs.
This is the temple of the Lord
 who uses his discus
 in righteous wars.
That is the way.

Be strong, don't waste your strength day by day.
This is the temple of the marvelous cowherd,
 who makes you strong.
Māliṛuñcōlai
where the celestials come
to circle him in adoration.
Circle, come near him everyday;
 it is the right way.

Tiruvāymoli 2.10.1, 3, 5, and 8, trans. Narayanan *et al.* (Narayanan 1994, 152-54)

This depiction in the poetry of fifteen hundred or a thousand years ago — the parade of human and celestial worshippers winding their way up the slopes of Tirumaliruncolai, sacred to Viṣṇu, and of Tirupparankunram, Lord Murukan's abode, with praise-songs and drums, flags and lamps, and offerings for the Lord, and their circumambulation of these holy hills — reflects a conception of divinity in which God is understood as being present in particular locales and landscapes. The poems of the *Ālvārs* and *Nāyaṇmārs*, composed in the seventh to ninth centuries, are filled with such images of devotees, sages, celestial maidens and deities all thronging to the temples of Viṣṇu and Śiva, with

scarcely any mention of the gods themselves coming forth from their shrines to pass through the streets.²

Processions in modern Madurai

When the subject of processions comes up today, however, we are less apt to envision streams of worshippers moving towards a temple, and instead are more likely to think of the movement of the god outward from the inner sanctum of his temple. In the modern context, we especially think of festivals in which bronze images of deities are placed on palanquins or chariots ("cars"), and taken by an entourage of temple servants in procession through the streets, where residents and pilgrims are crowded, awaiting the privilege of the "sight" (*darśana*) of the god. In this scenario, the deity becomes accessible to the humblest among the inhabitants of his city, bestows honours upon eminent citizens or special devotees, marks out the territory over which he rules, and displays his dominance over, or relationship with, other deities of the locality.

In Madurai, processions of this character are part of the two festivals that take place in the month of Cittirai, one celebrating the marriage of the goddess Mīnākṣī to her consort, Lord Śiva, in the temple at the centre of the city of Madurai, and the other taking place at Viṣṇu's temple of Alagarkoyil (as Tirumaliruncolai is known today) to the north of the city. The complex processional choreography associated with these festivals has been wonderfully described by Dennis Hudson (1982). During the twelve-day festival at the Mīnākṣī temple, the divine couple is taken out in procession twice daily, in golden palanquins in the morning and on their *vāhanas* or "animal vehicles" in the evenings. On the ninth day, the goddess Mīnākṣī's *digvijaya*, "conquest of the universe," is enacted. Mīnākṣī was a Pandya princess who was reared as if she were a warrior prince. Her festival image is supplied with weapons and is

² The description of the procession at Tiruvarur on the festival day of Tiruvātirai, by the Śaiva poet-saint Appar (*Tēvāram* 4.21), is one of the very few portraits we have of the god's movement in the *bhakti* literature. Here Lord Śiva is envisioned as the wandering mendicant: "He goes on his begging rounds/ amid the glitter of a pearl canopy/ and gem-encrusted golden fans./ Devoted men and women follow him,/ along with Virati ascetics in bizarre garb... The ascetic god goes in procession,/ led by the immortal gods/ whose heads are bowed to him,/ while lovely celestial women/ with shoulders graceful as the bamboo/ follow behind, and ash-smearing devotees/ surround him, singing his praise." (trans. Peterson, pp. 184-85). Śiva as the beggar, Bhikṣāṭana, is the image that is today taken in procession on the eighth day of the Tiruvātirai festival at Chidambaram, although Naṭarāja is the processional image that is used on other days of the Tiruvātirai festival in Mārkaḷi month at Chidambaram and other temples (Younger 1995, 59-60; see also *Kamikāgama* cited in Davis trans. *Mahotsavavidhi*; and L'Hernault and Reiniche 1999, 70). It is possible, however, that the form of Śiva taken in the streets of Tiruvarur in Appar's time was not that of Bhikṣāṭana, but this temple's famous Somāskanda image — Tyāgarāja or Vītiṅkaṅkaṅ — which continues to be the main processional icon, and is taken out to "dance" during the yearly Tiruvātirai festival (Devesh Soneji, personal communication). Richard Davis (2002, 60) considers the deities accompanying Śiva in this poem also to be processional images, but I think it more likely that Appar is suggesting the presence of gods and celestial maidens amid the human worshippers — a motif frequently met with elsewhere in the *bhakti* hymns. For other references in the Śaiva devotional literature to processions of the Lord, chariots/ cars (*tēṛ*), and festivals, see Kandiah (1973, 182-87), Balasubramanian (1980, 259), Peterson (1989, 183-89), and Dehejia (2002, 14-16). Such depictions of Viṣṇu, in the hymns of the *Ālṅvārs*, appear to be extremely rare.

placed in a large cart, which sets out from the east gate of the temple towards the outskirts of the city, where the goddess wages battle with the god Indra, and defeats him, after which she makes the circuit of the city, conquering the Lords of the Eight Directions at each of the eight points of the city. Finally, she encounters Lord Śiva, in his festival cart, with whom she engages in combat and loses — and is thus transformed into a suitable marriage partner for the spouse whom she has long been destined to marry. The following day, the tenth day of the festival, is the day when Mīnākṣī and Śiva are wed. On this day, the bride and groom are taken in procession in royal splendour around the town, both before and after the marriage ceremony. One of the deities of Madurai whom we have already met, Lord Murukan, has made his journey in image form from his home in Tiruparankunram in order to arrive early in the morning on this day, in time to witness the marriage, and is invited to stay in the Madurai temple as an honoured guest during the festivities which will take place during the next several days. On the eleventh day is the great car festival, where the god and goddess are placed on thrones in two immense chariots which are moved through the streets, by hundreds of men pulling on ropes.

Meanwhile, the "Journey Festival" of the god Viṣṇu of Alagarkoyil is underway, and, on the very day of the car festival at the Mīnākṣī temple, Lord Viṣṇu has himself set out from his temple in the direction of Madurai, riding in a golden palanquin. In the course of the next five days, this deity, garbed in an array of garments and mounted on different vehicles, travelling about in the area north of the city, encounters people of various villages and communities. Deities of the region, including Kūṭalalakkar, Viṣṇu who resides in Madurai, come to honour him. But he himself never arrives in the city of Madurai, where, according to popular belief, he was expected to attend the wedding as Mīnākṣī's brother. The traditions of the Alagarkoyil temple maintain, however, that Lord Viṣṇu's journey has nothing to do with Mīnākṣī's wedding; there are three other rather different purposes of his peregrinations — to bestow salvation on an ascetic who had undertaken severe penance on the hill of Tirumaliruncolai, to give *darśana* to the residents of a particular village next to the river Vaikai at the northern edge of Madurai, and to receive a garland as a gift from the female saint Āṅṅāl, who comes in image form from her home temple every year to meet the Lord.

In these modern processions, according to Hudson's descriptions of the Cittirai festivals of Madurai — or Reiniche's (1985) interpretations of the processions of Tiruvannamalai or Younger's (2002) analysis of the *Paṅkuni* festival of Srirangam — the nature of movement suggests that the significance of the temple procession lies in its definition of the deity's relations with the territory and society of the region where he dwells, including interactions with other gods and goddesses resident in the area. The procession, in this interpretation, is expressive of — and constitutive of — sovereignty over the god's realm, the recognition and incorporation of people of various castes and neighbourhoods as subjects of the Lord, and the articulation of relationships with other divine beings in the locality. The conduct and route of the procession is also a means through which human rivalries and hierarchies are articulated

and negotiated, as patrons claim the right to have the procession pass by their homes, or to participate in the procession and to display their status in other neighbourhoods (Mines 1996, 67-83; Good n.d., chapter 13). The pattern of the journey of Viṣṇu of Alagarkoyil temple, for example, has changed over time, as different castes and communities have asserted their right to receive the Lord (Kaali 1999, 154-57). The highly political character of South Indian processions in colonial and modern times has meant that they have provided the context for overt conflict and violence on numerous occasions (Good 1999; Peterson 2001). In contrast to the modern temple procession's outward trajectory — and mapping out of spatialities that are "saturated with relations of power" (Kaali 1999, 161-62) — the procession described in the early devotional poetry presents an image of in-gathering and inclusivism. God is strongly identified with a particular place, and has a magnetic attraction that draws pilgrims towards him. These poems are focussed on the devotee's experience — the experience of longing to go and see the Lord, the sense of anticipation and excitement in joining the company of devotees journeying to the Lord's dwelling place, the wonder of arriving at the magnificent temple town and partaking of God's beauty and grace.

What has actually changed between the sixth century and the twenty-first century, and why? In the processions described by the *bhakti* poets, it seems that the devotees move inward to the temple, while later the god moves outward. Earlier, the god was encountered within his shrine — amidst the throngs of his worshippers, human and divine — while in our times he gives *darśana* in the streets, singling out the preeminent for special favour. The devotional literature shows the deity as a pervading presence in his particular place, while the modern Lord goes in procession in order to demarcate space and establish sovereignty.

Processions in-between: the Chola period temple and its everyday rituals

My focus in the present essay is on an historical period that lies in between the time of the *bhakti* poets, on the one hand, and our own times, on the other. My effort will be to envision the temple procession of medieval Tamilnadu, in the period of the ninth to fourteenth centuries, in what is loosely referred to as the Chola period. For such an investigation, we are fortunate in having at hand sources that allow us a glimpse through the eyes of several different kinds of participants. The multitude of beautiful bronze processional images — Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, Jain, and Buddhist — that were produced during this period and that have survived until today allow us to see the gods as they were seen by those who witnessed their processions, while the Sanskrit ritual handbooks, the *Āgamas*, which were utilized in South Indian temples provide another perspective, and the Tamil inscriptions engraved on the stone walls of the temples yet another. I propose to rely primarily on the evidence of the

inscriptions.³ The inscriptions that I have examined for this undertaking appear on the walls of Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, and Jain temples, throughout Tamilnadu, and it should be noted that there is a remarkable consistency in the ways that processions are referred to regardless of regional or sectarian context. The stone inscriptions are almost entirely records of donations, and serve both as legal documents sanctioning the terms of the transfer of property and as public declarations of the generosity of the donor, whose munificence was designed to support various kinds of activities in the temple. The inscriptions document some of the actual arrangements relating to processions that were made in medieval temples. In the case of these sources, we would expect to find a reflection of the point of view of the donor, as sponsor of or participant in the ceremony, or perhaps the perspective of the temple personnel whose managerial, ritual, or performance skills would be required for the conduct of the procession. But this is not the case, as we shall see. Surprisingly, the inscriptions represent God as the central actor.

The first thing that must be acknowledged is that although references to processions in the Tamil inscriptions are relatively numerous, they are rather fleeting, almost incidental. It cannot be said that processions are actually *described* in the inscriptions. Invariably, processions are mentioned as part of an account of arrangements being made with reference to other matters — for example, the provision of food offerings, the donation of an image, the celebration of a festival, or the decree of the temple deity. While gifts to the temple may have made processions more elaborate or more frequent, it is extremely rare to find donors playing a role in instituting a procession or contributing substantially to the re-shaping of an already-existing procession — by altering its route, for example, or introducing new purposes for the deity's movement.

Most of the processions referred to by the inscriptions are a part of the temple's daily ritual, rather than periodic festival celebrations — just as most of the inscriptions more generally are concerned with day-to-day temple affairs. The daily *śrībali* ceremony stands out particularly as an occasion for procession. This ritual receives elaborate treatment in both the Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava Agamic literature, and although the picture we get from the inscriptions is somewhat

³ This essay is based on epigraphical evidence gathered in two ways. On the one hand, I have undertaken an intensive examination of all inscriptions (published and unpublished) of the ninth to early fourteenth centuries at three temples in the Madurai city area (the Mīnākṣī temple, Tiruparankunram, and Alagarkoyil), at Tiruvidaimarudur and Tiruvisalur (both in Tanjavur district), at Srirangam and Tiruvanaikkaval (Tiruchirappalli district — surveying also inscriptions in the vicinity of these two temples), at Kudumiyamalai (also in Tiruchirappalli district), at Chidambaram and at Udaiyargudi/ Kattumannargudi (both in South Arcot district), at Tirukkoyilur/ Kilur (also in South Arcot district — surveying also inscriptions at several other important temple towns in Tirukkoyilur taluk), and at Tiruvannamalai (North Arcot district). A second strategy has been a more extensive search for inscriptions throughout the Tamil country that relate to processions. In this case, I have utilized my own databases on temple ritual, temple servants and performers (prepared for Orr 1999a, 1999b and 2000a), have surveyed the entire *Topographical List of Inscriptions* (T.V. Mahalingam, ed.) for Tanjavur district, and have followed up on numerous references in the secondary literature.

different, it is not inconsistent with what the texts prescribe.⁴ In this ritual, which took place three times a day at some temples, a form of the deity, different from the fixed image found in the central shrine, was brought out and, together with his consort, processed around the temple compound, halting at several points along the way so that food offerings could be made to the guardian deities of the directions. In a thirteenth-century inscription from Chidambaram, for example, we read about the occasion "when [the Lord] graciously comes forth and receives worship (*pūjai*), as the *Śrīrudram* is recited before the God of the central shrine (*śrīmūlastānam*) at the start of the *śrībali* procession" (SII 4.631). Details about the exact nature of the images used in the *śrībali* ritual are rarely provided by the inscriptions, and references to goddess images are encountered as often as those to forms of the male deity to whom the temple was dedicated. At Tirukarugavur, in Tanjavur district, an eleventh-century record (ARE 400 of 1961-62) identifies the image taken out in the *śrībali* procession as Pāśupatadevar — a standing form of Śiva holding the trident and rosary. Another eleventh-century inscription (ARE 624 of 1920), from Udaiyargudi in South Arcot district, describes the arrangements made for worship and food offerings to two images of the goddess as the consort of Candraśekhara, one for *śrībali* and the other for festival processions; in this case, the goddess' male counterpart would have been a processional image of Śiva, standing and bearing the attributes of the axe and the deer.⁵ Both Pāśupatadevar and Candraśekhara are images that were emblazoned on the trident, or Astrarāja, another form of Śiva that had an important role to play in processions, and could have been used in the *śrībali* ritual.⁶ But the paucity of inscriptional references to *śrībali* images of the central male deity may indicate that the deity was most

⁴ Most of the inscriptional references to *śrībali* come from Śaiva temples, although they are also found in the Vaiṣṇava and even the Jain context (SII 7.1017). Agamic references to daily *śrībali*, which is also called *nityotsava*, "daily festival," are found in the Śaiva texts, and in the two bodies of Vaiṣṇava literature, the *Pāñcarātra*, and *Vaikhānasa* — see, e.g., Brunner 1967, 36 (*Suprabhedāgama* kriyāpāda 13); *Rauravāgama* kriyāpāda 16; *Parārthanityapūjāvidhi*, 307-311; references to *Pāñcarātra* texts in Smith 1980, including *Pādma Saṃhitā* caryāpāda 5 and *Śrīpraśna Saṃhitā* 30; and Goudriaan 1970. Descriptions of the daily *śrībali* in modern South Indian temples are provided by Fuller (1987, 26-27) and Good (n.d., chapter 2).

⁵ Other inscriptional references to images used in *śrībali* include a record of the provision made for ornaments, food offerings, and a perpetual lamp for the *śrībali* image of Nācciyār (Śiva's consort) at Tiruvannamalai (TAM 86, AD 1180), and the donation by the Chola king Rajaraja I of a golden image called Koḷkaidevar ("the god who takes [offerings]"), to go in procession for *śrībali*, at the great temple of Tanjavur (SII 2.1). Dehejia (2002, 84) has identified this image as "a linga set with five gems," but I am doubtful that a *śrībali* image would have had such a form.

⁶ On Chola period images of Candraśekhara and Pāśupatadevar, and their association with the Astra (trident), see Adicéam 1970 and 1971, especially 1971, 42. Astradeva is mentioned in an inscription from Tirupandurai, near Kumbakonam, in the context of a monthly procession on the new moon day (KTK 68). On the trident form and its role in festivals, see Janaki 1988, 164-65 and Dehejia 2002, 146-49. In its description of the daily *śrībali*, the Śaiva text *Rauravāgama* (kriyāpāda 16.1b-5a) says that Astrarāja is to be invoked in the *liṅga* made of food, flowers or grain, and that this *liṅga* is to go on procession with the image (*pratimā*) either of Candraśekhara or Pāśupatadevar.

often represented in the ritual by a form composed of cooked food or flowers, a possibility that is suggested by the Agamic texts.⁷

What did the daily *śrībali* procession look like? It is interesting that it is in this context that we find what is apparently the one and only inscriptional reference to the use of elephants in temple processions in the early medieval period: a tenth-century record from Tiruvamattur in South Arcot district refers to the employment of an elephant to carry the *śrībali* offerings (SII 8.739).⁸ Elsewhere, we find no mention of special conveyances used in the procession to transport either deities or offerings. In some cases, we find that men were employed to carry lamps and incense, and there is one reference to women singing.⁹ But the most important participants in the *śrībali* procession were

⁷ Not only does the Śaiva text *Rauravāgama* speak of the representation of the central deity of the temple in a form made of food, flowers or grain (see note 6 above), but this is an option mentioned by the Pāñcarātra *Pādma Saṃhitā* (caryāpāda 5.4-6), where Viṣṇu may be invoked in rice or flowers, if an image is not going to be used in the daily *śrībali* ritual. From Goudriaan (1970, 211-12) we learn that the earlier Vaikhānasa literature — for example, *Kāśyapaśaṃhitā* — does not refer to an image (*balibera*) for use in the daily *śrībali*, as do the later texts, but regards the *bali* offering itself as a manifestation of Viṣṇu.

⁸ Elephants are referred to by the inscriptions of our period in a royal context — particularly in copper-plate inscriptions, we read of elephants conveying the king's orders and marking out a parcel of land which was being presented as a royal gift. War elephants are often mentioned in *praśastis* (Tamil *meykkīrttis*), the poetic, if rather formulaic, descriptions of the exploits and attainments of the ruling king that often serve as a preface to the "business" part of the inscription. But, apart from the Tiruvamattur inscription, I know of no inscriptional references to the gift of elephants to a temple, or the presence of elephants in temple ceremonies, earlier than the fifteenth century, when we find a record at Srirangam mentioning the participation of elephants in a car festival (AD 1434; SII 24.329). In the subsequent period, and up until the present, elephants seem to have become essential elements in religious processions of all kinds. By the early eighteenth century, for example, the authorities at the Srirangam temple and those in charge of the nearby tomb of the Muslim saint Hazarat Nathar Wali had made arrangements to coordinate the timing of festival celebrations, so that they could share the same elephants and festival paraphernalia (Bayly 1989, 117, 162-63). In the Agamic texts, some of which would have been contemporary with the inscriptions of the earlier period, we see elephants mentioned in the context of festivals, but their use seems to have been optional. So, for example, both the *Rauravāgama* (kriyāpāda 18.114) and the *Pādma Saṃhitā* (caryāpāda 11.198) describe the conveyance of the deity during the "hunting festival" on either an elephant or a horse — although the Chola period inscriptions do not indicate that horses were used any more than elephants. The Śaiva *Mahotsavavidhi*, in describing the carrying of earth in procession as a preliminary to the annual festival, says it may be borne by temple attendants (*paricārakas*), by *māheśvaras*, by temple women (*rudraṅṅikās*), by elephants, or by other animals; elsewhere, this text shows the use of a whole range of "mounts" for the deity — swings, cars, palanquins, and other vehicles, as well as horses and elephants — in the context of the *parivēṣa* or "perambulation ceremony" (Davis, trans.; see also *Parārthanityapūjavidhi*, 281-82; Barazer-Billoret 1999, 139-43).

⁹ References to men bearing lamps and incense are found in two tenth century inscriptions, one from Udaiyargudi in South Arcot district (SII 19.62) and the other from Kuttalam, Tanjavur district (SII 13.170 — transl. in Orr 2000a, 91). The reference to women singing is quite a bit later, dating from the fourteenth century (SITI 525, Tiruvorriyur, Chingleput district). Women's dance as an element of the *śrībali* procession evidently developed in even more recent times, and is more characteristic of the festival context than daily *śrībali*; particularly noteworthy in this connection is the performance by temple women, in the last several centuries, of the *navasandhi kautavam*, a dance performed at each of the places where *bali* offerings are made within the temple courtyard, in the eight directions and the centre (Janaki 1988, 167-75; Kersenboom 1987, 44, 61, 117, 170 n126; Orr 2000a, 103-106, 234 n11-12). The Agamic literature dealing with daily *śrībali* usually refers in a

drummers. These performers, called *uvaccar*, are very frequently encountered in the inscriptions, often in bands of five or seven men charged with "beating *śrībali*." So essential were drummers to the conduct of this ritual, as well as to other temple processions, that when the *uvaccar* of the temple at Tiruvilangudi (in Pudukkottai) emigrated, in the early eleventh century, the *śrībali* ceremony — and all other processions — had to be suspended completely; the inscription records the provision for support of a new group of five drummers and a conch player, so that these services could be resumed, after the lapse of a year (IPS 89). The central role of drummers in the *śrībali* procession leads me to believe that other daily rituals in which drummers were employed also may have had a processional component. In a tenth-century inscription from Kuttalam, for example, we see that a group of twelve *uvaccar* were given the responsibility of performing not only at *śrībali*, but "at the time of the sacred bath, and at the times of the food offerings, *bhūtabali*, ... late night service, and early morning service" (SII 13.170 — see trans. in Orr 2000a, 90). Certainly the last two of these occasions would have involved processions — at night, when images of the god and goddess would be taken to the temple's "bedchamber," and, in the morning, when they were "awakened" and returned to their daytime abodes. It seems that the round of daily ritual provided numerous occasions for processions within the temple.

The inscriptions also indicate that some temples had weekly processions; these, like the daily processions, seem to have been "inside processions," around the temple compound, and — interestingly — most often featured the goddess. For example, a twelfth-century inscription from Elvanasur (in South Arcot district; SII 22.165) records an endowment of land to provide for what would be necessary when Tiruppalliyarai āḷuṭaiyāḷ (the "bedchamber goddess") "graciously comes forth (*puṟampe eḷuntaruḷi*) every Sunday, to listen to [the hymn] Tiruccāḷal and receive food offerings, and to circumambulate the temple (*koyillai cūḷal eḷuntaruḷi*)." ¹⁰ An eleventh-century inscription (ARE 234 of 1961-62) from the temple at Sivapuram, in Chingleput district, gives us a glimpse of the various personnel who might have been involved in a Sunday procession — "[a priest] who performs worship, six assistants to the priest (*māṇikal*), twenty-four temple women (*patiyār*), the *ācārya*, a musician to play the *vīṇā*, and one to play the small drum (*uṭukkai*), a man to sing hymns (*tiruppatiyam*), twenty drummers (*uvaccar*), and four men to carry garlands."

general way to music, song, and dance as part of the proceedings, but rarely specifies the identities of the performers. The *Rauravāgama* seems to indicate that the performer of the "dance of the directions" (*dīśanṛtta*) is a woman — a courtesan (*gaṇikā*) — (kriyāpāda 16.17b cf. 19.7b-8), but the *Pādma Saṅhītā*'s extended account of the rhythms and dance-gestures to be used in daily *śrībali* suggests that the performer is a *paricāraka*, a male temple servant (caryāpāda 5.16-45).

¹⁰ Sunday processions of Tiruppalliyarai āḷuṭaiyāḷ also took place at nearby Kilur, according to another inscription of the twelfth century (SII 7.913), and — far to the south, in Madurai district — at Kiranur, as recorded in an inscription of the early thirteenth century (SII 5.276).

Festivals: the god at home and abroad

Processions were a part of annual and monthly festivals, as well, although — in contrast to modern festival processions — the movement of the deity usually took place within a very circumscribed area. As in the daily and weekly processions, the gods emerged from their shrines and made their way to mandapas and altars within the temple compound. The inscriptions' accounts of festival processions focus on the food, bathing, and adornment provided for the deities as they stopped in their progress around the temple. For example, at Elvanasur, we have the fourteenth-century record of a merchant whose gift of land was intended to provide for the expenses involved when, "on the festival day, the Lord (*mutaliyār*) having been awakened (*tiruvānantal eluntaruḷi*) comes forth in procession (*eluntaruḷi iruntu*) to the *āsthāna maṇḍapam*, where he graciously allows himself to be bathed (*tīrttam prasādittu aruḷi*), and for the expenses when he comes forth in the evening on that same day and goes out for the procession (*tiruppavaṇikkū aṭṭiyaruḷa*) and receives food offerings, adornments and unguents, including rose-water, musk, camphor, kumkum, sandal paste, blue lotus garlands, and white lotus garlands, and for the expense of lamps when [the Lord] makes his procession (*tiruvulā ceytaruḷa*) inside the temple walls (*tirumāḷikai*)" (SII 22.160).

The occasions for monthly festivals were the first of the month (*caṅkranti*) or the day of the new moon (*amāvāsya*), or particular asterisms (*nakṣatras*) associated with the birthday of a donor — these birthday festivals were established in the thirteenth century by the kings of the Pandya dynasty at many temples throughout the Tamil country.¹¹ Annual festivals were celebrated at various times of year in different temples. In some cases, the medieval inscriptions describe festivals that are still celebrated today — for example, Chidambaram's festival in the month of *Māci*, with its procession to the sea, or Srirangam's festival in the month of *Paṅkuṇi* which then, as now, drew many pilgrims to the temple — but at other temples, like those in and around Madurai, the yearly festival calendar, and festive activities, appear to have undergone major transformations in the course of the last thousand years.¹²

¹¹ Sethuraman (1987, 22-24) maintains that Chola kings, too, instituted monthly temple festivals to mark their birthdays, but it in fact appears that on the few occasions when the Chola king's *nakṣatra* was celebrated, this was done by arranging for an additional service in the context of an already-established observance on that day. For example, a record issued by the temple authorities of Tiruvenkadu (SII 5.976) informs the inhabitants of local villages that they are to provide for the expenses of a special food offering when the deity goes in procession at the monthly bathing festival on *Āyileyam*, which is the birth-star of Virarajendra.

¹² The medieval inscriptions from the *Mīnākṣi* temple in Madurai mention festivals taking place in the months of *Mārkaḷi*, *Aippaci*, and *Āvaṇi*; only the last of these appears to have continued up to the present. The *Cittirai* festival seems to have been instituted by the Nayaka kings in the seventeenth century — perhaps drawing on an earlier celebration of *Mīnākṣi*'s marriage that took place in the month of *Māci*, but developing the processional routes and rituals in an entirely new way, as the rulers of Madurai laid down new streets, renovated and expanded the temples of their city, and built their palaces (*Census 1961* vi, 134; Hudson 1982; Howes 2003, 68). The Alagarkoyil inscriptions mention festivals in *Āṭi* and *Aippaci*, which remain important, but also mention festivals that have faded into obscurity, while others have emerged relatively recently — including Viṣṇu's "Journey

In most of the inscriptions referring to festivals, there is no mention of processions. Most often these records concern themselves with food offerings for the deity — and providing food for pilgrims and devotees — with bathing the god's image (*tirumañcanam*, *tīrttam*), and adorning it (*cāttu*). Other festival arrangements frequently mentioned include the provision of lamps, garlands, and banners, and the singing of hymns. It is clear that some of these special observances would require the deity to emerge from his central shrine, and therefore would likely involve the movement of a festival icon, but no preparation or procedure for this coming forth is specified. When the inscriptions do refer explicitly to processions, as we have seen, these seem most often to have as their setting the interior spaces of the temple compound. But sometimes the inscriptions tell us about the god's movement outside the temple precincts, into the streets around the temple or his conveyance in a temple car (*ter*). For example, a thirteenth-century inscription from Alagarkoyil records the order of the deity, which was issued as he listened to the hymns of "our" Caṭakopaṇ (Nammālvār), while seated in the car named Amaittanārāyaṇaṇ, in Tiyaṅkañcīriyāṇ street, on the ninth day of the Āṭi wedding festival (ARE 14 of 1931-3).¹³ The number of inscriptional references to the temple car is small, and

Festival" in Cittirai (*Census 1961* vi, 108; Hudson 1982). At the great Śaiva temple of Tiruvannamalai, the major festival in the month of Kārttikai has long been celebrated, judging from the evidence of the inscriptions, but other festivals that are important today, like those in Māci, Tai, and Āṭi appear to be more modern — the last of these having been established as recently as the nineteenth century (L'Hernault and Reiniche 1999, 156). At Srirangam, the Paṅkuṇi festival has endured, but the celebrations that formerly took place in the month of Aippaci are no longer observed; meanwhile the Adhyayanotsava in Mārkaḷi, which attracts the largest number of visitors to the temple, has taken shape from the fifteenth century onwards (*Census 1961* ii, 196; Younger 2002, 51-57, 80-94). Chidambaram's modern festivals include the early medieval celebrations in Māci and Tai, but today the great festivals in Mārkaḷi and Āṇi are more important. Younger (1995, 66-67) maintains that these two latter festivals — with their royal and cosmic symbolism — were established, or took on their present form, under the influence of the Chola court, but there is little epigraphical evidence for this. I believe that the only inscription at Chidambaram that mentions either of these festivals is SII 4.223 (AD 1039 — trans. Orr 2000a, 121-22), which records an endowment by the *aṅukkiyar* ("intimate," mistress) of Rajendra Chola, covering a number of expenditures including several festivals. For the festival in Mārkaḷi, food offerings for the deity were arranged for, as well as food for the *māheśvaras* (devotees) and gold and sacred cloths (*parivaṭṭam*) to be distributed, and in Āṇi, the provision was for food offerings to the deity and the distribution of cloths. I do not see the hand of the king here, nor anything particularly "imperial" — or novel — about these festival arrangements. It is interesting that the inscription makes no mention of a procession, although this is a prominent feature in the celebration of these two festivals today (cf. Younger 1995, 55, 59).

¹³ The term used for wedding or marriage is *kaṅṅālam*. References to the marriage of the deity are very rare. One which is quite similar to the Alagarkoyil inscription is from Tirukannapuram in Tanjavur district (thirteenth century; ARE 503 of 1922): in this case, the Lord, together with his consorts, listens to the hymns of Nammālvār seated in a mandapa within the temple rather than in the temple car, and the occasion is the fifth day of the marriage festival in the month of Cittirai. The only other references to marriage within the context of a festival that I have come across are from the temple dedicated to Viṣṇu at Tirumokur, in Madurai district (ARE 334 of 1918), where the wedding procession took place in the month of Mārkaḷi, and from the Śaiva temple at Brahmadesam (South Arcot district) which refers to an image of the goddess used in marriage festivals (twelfth century; ARE 192 of 1918). It is perhaps significant that three of these four references to marriage festivals come from Vaiṣṇava temples. In the Agamic literature, as well, there seems more interest in this ritual on the Vaiṣṇava side, where it is treated at some length in various Pāñcarātra texts (including *Śrīpraśna Saṃhitā* 26.1-35, *Pādma Saṃhitā* kriyapāda 30.1-37, and

those that we have most often resemble this one, in which the car appears to be "parked" in the street just outside the temple — resembling a semi-mobile mandapa more than a mode of transport.

But at times the god's festival procession took him further afield; there are two occasions for leaving the vicinity of the temple that are particularly mentioned in the medieval inscriptions. The first is a trip to a river or other body of water, for a special festival bath — as in the case, for example, of the Lord of Chidambaram's procession to the sea. References to processions to the sea (*kaṭal, tuṛai*) come not only from Chidambaram, but from Tiruvendipuram to the north of Chidambaram (South Arcot district; ARE 93 of 1943-44) and Tiruvīdaikali to the south (Tanjavur district; ARE 269 of 1925). Inscriptions from these temple towns, all of which are within ten miles of the ocean (the Bay of Bengal), describe the laying out of roads and the establishment of gardens and mandapas where the deity stops for food-offerings or to receive his ritual bath. More surprising is the mention at Tiruvannamalai of a procession to the sea (TAM 40); the fact that this place is over sixty miles from the ocean suggests that the "sea" was perhaps in this case a tank, of which there are many in Tiruvannamalai (Reiniche 1985, 107). Elsewhere, the inscriptions' references to processions to rivers for festival bathing most often occur in the context of describing a gift of land which was to be used for making a road leading from the temple to the river, and give us few details of the festival or procession itself.

The second occasion mentioned by the inscriptions when the god went forth from the temple in procession was during the "hunting festival" (*tiruveṭṭai*). The hunting festival, like the bathing ritual, was one of the events that could be incorporated into a number of different annual festivals.¹⁴ For

Viṣṇutilaka Saṃhitā 7.584-603 — summarized in Smith 1975), while it is mentioned fleetingly in only two Śaiva texts, *Ajītagama* and *Mahotsavavidhi* (Barazer-Billoret 1999, 205-6).

¹⁴ The Śaivāgamas, as well as the Vaiṣṇava Āgamas, both Pāñcarātra and Vaikhānasa, indicate that a procession to a *tīrtha* for bathing is to take place on the last day of a nine- or ten-day festival, while the hunting festival (*mṛgayātra, mṛgayotsava*) should be scheduled for the preceding day. The *Śrīpraśna Saṃhitā*, however, describes the hunting festival not as part of an annual festival, but as an independent celebration which was instituted by Lord Viṣṇu so that the *vānaprasthas* (forest "hermits") would have the opportunity to encounter him. The bathing ritual involves the procession of the trident or *cakra*, as embodiments of Śiva and Viṣṇu respectively, to the *tīrtha*, where worshippers participate in the bathing. It seems an essential component of festival celebrations. But the hunting festival is not treated at all, or only in passing, in many Agamic texts, leading some scholars to suggest that it was a later addition to, or regional adaptation of, the basic festival structure (Colas 1996, 326-27; Barazer-Billoret 1999, 156-63). Among the texts that do provide some detail about this procession, there are some common themes: the deity is mounted on a horse (*Pādma Saṃhitā* and *Rauravāgama* mention an elephant as an alternative) and, surrounded by armed attendants, enters the forest (*Pādma Saṃhitā* caryāpāda 11.180-201a; *Mārkaṇḍeya Saṃhitā* 22.60-64a; *Śrīpraśna Saṃhitā* 43.1-23; *Rauravāgama* kriyāpāda 18.108-136; *Kāraṇāgama* I.141.193-97 cited by Bhatt in *Rauravāgama*; *Mahotsavavidhi* "pariveṣa" section). The *Rauravāgama* and *Kāraṇāgama* mention that Śiva in this procession may have the form of Tripurāntaka, and refer to the slaying or capture of wild animals in the course of this ritual. The Vaiṣṇava texts depict the proceedings as unrolling in a more measured and sedate fashion; the emphasis is more on the Lord's sojourn in the forest, seated within a mandapa or beneath a tree. In the fifteenth-century *Virūpākṣa-vasantotsava-campu*, describing the spring festival of Lord Virūpākṣa of Vijayanagara, we have a poetic depiction of the hunting festival, which features the god as both hunter and king, but stresses even more the romantic aspect of the Lord's stay in the forest, where he dallies with celestial maidens, much to the

example, several thirteenth-century inscriptions from Kudumiyamalai, in the former Pudukkottai state, tell us that the deity went down the street in procession to the *tiruveṭṭaittoppu* (grove of the sacred hunt) on festival days in the months of *Mārkaḷi*, *Māci*, and *Paṅkuṇi*; on each of these occasions, lamps were provided for the street and food was offered to the deity when he took his place in the mandapa in the grove (IPS 291 and 301). While in principle the deity was supposed to go to the forest on this expedition, in practice it appears that special gardens, perhaps not so far distant from the temple, were created for this purpose. In at least one case, the hunting procession went to the river: an eleventh-century record from Marangiyur (South Arcot district; ARE 80 of 1935-36) describes the arrangements for a special service of expiation that had to be performed by the Brahman assembly as a result of the unfortunate damage suffered by the image of the god at the river bank during the course of the hunting festival.¹⁵ Although in many respects the inscriptional representation of the hunting festival differs from what we find in the Agamas — the inscriptions do not show us gods mounted on horses, bearing royal or military insignia — the injury to the Lord described in this record from Marangiyur may indicate something of a shared spirit with what is found in a text like *Rauravāgama*, where the appropriate procession is one in which throngs of worshippers "of all classes" set off, with loud shouts and at break-neck speed, to accompany the image of the deity into the forest.

Who's on parade?: comings and goings

It is difficult to determine, on the basis of the medieval inscriptions, precisely who participated in festival processions. As was the case for daily or weekly processions, drummers seem to have been important figures, but beyond that, the character of the deity's entourage remains obscure. There are a few references to men charged with the duty of bearing flags or lamps, or carrying the god (at Chidambaram, ARE 325 of 1958-59; at Udaiyargudi, ARE 608 of 1920; Madras Museum Plates [SII 3.128]; at Tiruvadavur, ARE 483 of 1962-63). On rare occasions, we encounter an indication that musicians, singers, or dancers accompanied the deity in procession. One such reference, from the early eleventh century, suggests that there was an exchange of personnel between Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava temples: at Dadapuram in South Arcot district, the sister of the Chola king Rajaraja I, Kuntavai, ordered that the thirty-two temple women (*taḷicceripeṇṭuka!*), the *ācārya*, the drummer, and the musicians of the

annoyance of the goddess left at home in his temple (Anderson 1993, 183-89). This erotic mood also characterizes the hunting festival as it is celebrated today at Srirangam (Vasudha Narayanan, personal communication).

¹⁵ In addition to the references to processions as part of hunting festivals from Kudumiyamalai and Marangiyur, there are mentions at Tiruvannamalai (TAM 31); Srirangam (SII 24.69); Chidambaram (SII 12.245); Allur (SII 8.681) and Tirunedungulam (SII 13.42), both in Tiruchirappalli district; Peravur in Tanjavur district (ARE 11 of 1925); and Tirumokur (ARE 334 of 1918) and Tiruvadavur (ARE 470 of 1962-63), both in Madurai district. Many of these inscriptions record arrangements for food offerings, and mention the deities' sojourn in a garden or grove. References to bathing processions are frequently encountered in the inscriptions of Tanjavur district, where the deity is taken to the Kaveri or Kollidam rivers.

Śiva temple she had built were to be responsible for singing, dancing, and attendance both at Śiva's hunting festival, and in the festival procession of the deity enshrined in the Viṣṇu temple in the same village (ARE 14 of 1919).¹⁶

The only participants who are really highlighted in epigraphical descriptions of the festival procession are those who have paid for the honour of attending on the deity. A thirteenth-century inscription from Vedaranyam in Tanjavur district (SII 17.543) shows us how a donor was rewarded for his gifts to the temple by being granted the privilege of rendering "special service" (*pariciṅṅam paṇimāravum*) when the deity went in procession (*tiru ulā*). Elsewhere, we learn that the right to carry the deities in procession was conferred upon a man who had made a number of generous gifts to the temple (Tukkacci, Tanjavur district; AD 1239; ARE 1 of 1918). But the major players in this game were temple women, who made deals with various temples that allowed them to participate in festival processions. For example, at the Sundaravarada Perumāḷ temple of Uttaramerur, in the early thirteenth century, we find a temple woman (*emperumāṇaṭiyāḷ*) rewarded for her sponsorship of numerous repairs to the temple with the following privilege: "that on every occasion when the god goes forth in the temple car on festival days in this temple, she will stand at the front of the car and wave the flywhisk, holding onto the top of the car, the little girls [of her family] to be seated on the upper platform of the car, while other relatives stand behind and perform flywhisk service" (ARE 180 of 1923; cf. also ARE 183 of 1923). At Tirupampuram (Tanjavur district), also in the early thirteenth century, a temple woman (*tevaraṭiyāḷ*) who had donated several images to the temple was granted the right to participate in the "waking" ceremony of the Lord, to have an important place in the hunting procession, and to sing part of the hymn "Tiruvempāvai" at the festival in the month of *Mārkaḷi* (NK 139). At Nallur in South Arcot district, again in the same period of the late twelfth and early thirteenth century, we see the temple authorities making an outright sale of such privileges to a number of temple women (*tevaraṭiyār*) — the rights to sing "Tiruvempāvai," to dance the *cākkai* dance, to be first in the hunting procession, and to ride in the temple car (ARE 143, 144, 149, 160, 161, 176 of 1940-41).¹⁷

¹⁶ The inscriptions' general failure to mention the activities of the *ācārya* in festival observances contrasts with the focus on the importance of this figure in the Agamic texts (see Davis' introduction to his translation of *Mahotsavavidhi*). Furthermore, the Dadapuram inscription — one of the few records which does in fact show us an *ācārya* or priestly participant in a procession — represents an arrangement that would be quite unseemly from the Agamic perspective, with its assumption that an *ācārya* initiated and trained in the Śaiva tradition would be qualified (or willing) to serve Viṣṇu as well.

¹⁷ By the time we get to the later part of the fourteenth century, such rights start to become the source of disputes among temple servants more generally, and in the wider community as well. The conflicts involved in the organization of different groups of temple women with respect to their privileges, including those relating to participation in "outside processions," are documented in a series of inscriptions from Tiruvorriyur, dated from 1342 to 1371 (ARE 195, 196, 208, 212 of 1912). The "temple honours" system as such (described, for example, in Appadurai and Breckenridge 1976), which is especially elaborated within the framework of temple festivals and processions, is more characteristic of the late pre-colonial and colonial periods than of the period surveyed in this essay. The activities of temple women in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, in making "deals"

Apart from these patrons who paraded their privileged status, it is hard to catch a glimpse in the inscriptions of other members of the god's entourage as he moved outside the temple gates in procession. On the other hand, we have a very striking impression of the movement *into* the temple of visitors who came to celebrate the festival. The context in which the presence of such visitors becomes evident is in the arrangements made for feeding them during the festival. We have numerous inscriptions which describe the feeding of Brahmans, devotees, *māheśvaras*, *śrīvaiṣṇavas*, ascetics, and pilgrims (*apūrvais* — those "not seen" before). Frequently these people are explicitly described as being from other lands (*paradeśi*, *deśāntri*), or having come to worship at the time of the festival. The numbers of visitors provided for is in some cases impressively large. In the Minākṣī temple at Madurai, one hundred ascetics were fed on each of the ten days of the festival in the month of Āvaṇi (AD 1275; ARE 278 of 1941-42). At the other end of Tamilnadu, in the north, a tenth century inscription from Tondaimanad in Chittoor district (SII 8.529) describes the arrangements made for each of the seven days of the festival (*tiruvilā*): 200 ascetics of the six schools (*samaya*), including the *śrīmahāvatikaḷ*, were to be fed, as well as 300 Brahmans, and 500 devotees of various *samayas*. The inscriptions even mention celestial visitors. A record of the many gifts to the temple of Tiruvannamalai made by Kopperuncinkadeva, a thirteenth-century chief who claimed to have succeeded to the Pallava throne, tells us that he provided for the "paving of the floor with stones quarried from the hill ... which shone with brilliance in the moonlight ... [allowing] the gods (*vāṇor*) whose garlands never faded, whose eyes did not wink, and whose feet did not touch the earth to descend and circumambulate (*valamvara*) the temple." This king also gave "a fine and wide garden ... intended for the stay of the deity during his summer processions (*vēṇiṟ tenral viyaṇ*), where the celestial beings (*imaiyavar*) could worship him" (TAM 208).¹⁸

Getting from here to there

The inscriptions show affinities with the earlier *bhakti* literature — and dissimilarity with the patterns of more modern times — with respect to the movement of gods and people in temple processions, and the way that movement is perceived. Although the inscriptions show us a deity who does take occasional excursions outside the temple for bathing, enjoying the hunt, or

with the temple in exchange for various privileges, seem to anticipate this later system (see Orr 2000a). It should be noted, however, that honours were attached in the Chola period to individuals, while in later times, they were understood as being possessed by castes and communities as hereditary rights.

¹⁸ This translation is based on that of P.R. Srinivasan. The presence of celestial beings at earthly shrines and in temple towns is a motif commonly found in the hymns of the *Ālvārs* and *Nāyaṇmārs*. We encounter it also in *Periya Purāṇam*, the twelfth-century hagiography of the *Nāyaṇmārs* where, for example, Kanchipuram is described as being filled with huge and lofty mansions connected by staircases: "Men, women and kin ascend and descend through/ These steps; *Devās* and *Apsaras* too use these steps/ For coming down; so it is hard to tell who/ The celestials are, and who the human beings are" (v. 1173, trans. T.N. Ramachandran). The *Āgamas*, too, in outlining the procedures for preparing for a festival, insist that the gods must be invited.

resting in his garden, accompanied by an entourage, most of the god's processions take place within or before the temple gates. Meanwhile, pilgrims and patrons, devotees and divinities, come from afar, move around the temple, and enter its interior spaces, in order to draw near to the Lord who is present in this place. Conspicuous by their absence are epigraphical references to the god's circular movement outside the temple compound — the type of trajectory that may be interpreted as a demarcation of the Lord's domain, and which seems integral to the character of modern temple processions. I have found only a single such reference — in a twelfth-century inscription from Seyyur, in Chingleput district, which records the arrangements for the Lord to make *pradakṣiṇa* around the village (*grāma*), "as prescribed in the *śāstras*," at the time of the festivals in the months of Māci and Paṅkuni (SII 8.39).¹⁹ Indeed, the Agamic texts do hold that such a circumambulation — around the temple or the village — should be a regular part of festival observances.²⁰

But the festival processions we read about in the inscriptions do not fulfill this ritual requirement — this encompassing — which not only maps the deity's realm, but symbolizes his sovereignty over the entirety of the universe (Barazer-Billoret 1999, 148; see also Reiniche 1985, 111 and Reiniche 1989, 66-67). While the circumambulation of the "inside" processions described in the inscriptions — and especially the *śrībali* procession — certainly carries something of this significance, the "outside" procession depicted in the inscriptions seems to be more goal-oriented in a linear sense, with specific aims and purposes. It is actually a means to an end, a transportational exercise. At Chidambaram, for instance, provisions were made for the offering of cakes to the Lord at the halting places (*tirukkaṭci*) in the course of his procession through the sacred street (*tiruvīti*) called Rācākkāṭampirāṇ on his way to the shrine of Vināyakapiḷḷaiyār (Gaṇeśa), east of the temple (AD 1279; SII 12.245). Food offerings were also the concern for a temple woman of Uyyakondan Tirumalai, near Tiruchirappalli, who wished to make arrangements for the god Śiva on the festival day of Vaikāci, when the Lord departed from his place within the Rajendracolaṇ pavilion and went to the west of the village, to the Irāma river, where he was seated in the bathing maṇḍapa called Jaḍaimeliruntāl, and subsequently made his way back to the *tiruvōlakkam* (assembly hall) (AD 1142; ARE 435 of 1961-62). Another inscription that tells us something about processional routes is from Tiruvidaimarudur, where the Chola king Kulottunga III ordered, in 1193, that henceforth the deity's procession was to leave from the east gate of the temple, rather than the south, on a new street which would be laid out on

¹⁹ This rare inscriptional reference to the authority of sacred texts in the conduct of festival rituals finds an interesting counterpart in a tenth-century record (SII 5.588) from Tillasthanam, near Tanjavur, giving the decree of a royal officer that the temple authorities were to be guided in their performance of the festival in the month of Vaikāci by what had earlier been engraved on the temple walls.

²⁰ See, e.g., *Rauravāgama* and *Mahotsavavidhi*, *passim*; *Mārkaṇḍeya Saṃhitā* 25.52; *Paramasaṃhitā* 22.28; Colas 1996, 333-34. But, as Barazer-Billoret (1999, 56-57) points out, the texts are extremely imprecise about the circumambulatory route the procession is to take, and if they refer to streets at all — e.g., the *vāstuvīthi* (encircling the village) or the *maṅgalavīthi* (the four streets surrounding the temple) — they do so in a confused and inconsistent fashion.

land formerly part of the palace grounds; the main palace gate was to be constructed on the north side of the new street, and the residences formerly on the south side of the temple were to be taken over and replaced by a flower garden and grove (SII 23.288). This new processional street does not go *around* the temple or the town, but runs between the temple and the palace.²¹ The kind of procession that is suggested here is one in which the deity is conveyed straight out from the temple gates into the town — possibly with a further destination in mind, or perhaps simply to occupy the street in front of the palace in a display of divine majesty before returning to the temple.

This kind of go-and-come-back procession is precisely what we see in the car festival (*rathotsava*) of Lord Virūpākṣa of Vijayanagara, as it is described in the fifteenth-century *Virūpākṣa-vasantotsava-campu* (Anderson 1993, 175-80). Here, the street is lined with multitudes of devotees as the deities emerge from the temple and mount the car, which is pulled to its destination at the end of the street; for the return journey, the ropes are simply attached to the back of the car, and the deities turned around to face the temple.²² In Tamil literature of the Chola period we also see signs that this processional pattern was prevalent, both in the case of the royal processions depicted in the poems known as *ulās*, and in the descriptions of temple towns found in *Periya Purāṇam*, the twelfth-century hagiography of the Nāyaṇmārs, where temple streets (*tiruvīti*) are rarely mentioned, but when they are — for example at Chidambaram — they seem to radiate from rather than to encircle the temple.²³ The notion that a processional street was at times a kind of stage upon which the deity presented himself is suggested by an inscription of the early thirteenth century from

²¹ Processional streets linking palace and temple were constructed in the sixteenth century at Udaiyarpalayam (Reiniche 1985, 84-91), at Madurai in the seventeenth century (Howes 2003, 68), and at Kalugumalai in the mid-nineteenth century (Good n.d., chapter 1).

²² The archaeological evidence at Vijayanagara suggests that this poetic account is quite accurate: not only the Virūpākṣa temple, but all the major temple complexes have monumental processional streets leading straight outward from the temple enclosure, and not concentric streets around the four sides of the temple (Phillip Wagoner, personal communication).

²³ *Periya Purāṇam* describes in some detail the visits of Cuntarar (vv. 243-256), Appar (vv. 1426-1436), and Campantar (vv. 3035-3043) to the Chidambaram temple. In all three cases, the saints first come through a gate (*vāyil*) — for Cuntarar and Campantar it is the north gate, and for Appar the west — and then proceed down a *tiruvīti*, where Brahmans dwell, to the entrance (*kōpuram*) in the temple wall (*mālikai*). In the account of Cuntarar's entry, we do see a reference to streets surrounding the *ampalam*, evidently around the outside of the temple walls, but Cuntarar doesn't use these streets for his own circumambulation of the shrine, which takes place within the temple walls. *Periya Purāṇam*, although it is largely an account of pilgrimages to the places sacred to Śiva in the Tamil country, mentions only one other place which has temple streets, and that is Tiruvarur — doubtless because of the fame of its processional image, Tyāgarāja or Vītiṭṭāṅkaṅ. This is also the only place where we see any reference to temple processions, notably (in vv. 1494-1500) the procession on the Tiruvātirai festival day described in Appar's hymn (see note 2 above). *Periya Purāṇam* highlights not the deity's movement, but the processions of the pilgrim-saints, who travel with an entourage of fellow-devotees, and are greeted with great fanfare wherever they go (see, e.g., Appar's return to Tiruvatikai in vv. 1402-1407; Campantar's departure for Madurai, in a bejeweled palanquin, in vv. 2517ff; Cuntarar's approach to the palace of Cēramāṅ Perumāḷ, mounted on an elephant, in vv. 4247-4254; and the final episode of Cuntarar and Cēramāṅ's ascension to Kailāsa, in vv. 4259-4267).

Achyutamangalam in Tanjavur district (NK 269), recording the arrangements made with residents to renovate their houses in the new temple street (*tiruviti*) that had been constructed in place of the old one, which had been too narrow and insufficiently populated. Here it is not simply a question of having adequate space for the movement of the deity — perhaps mounted in his wheeled car — into the street, but also having a suitable number of onlookers.²⁴ The image of the god in procession as a motionless god giving a public audience is reinforced by the way the inscriptions describe the services and diversions that are presented to the Lord in the course of the festival procession — he condescends to be adorned, he graciously takes food, he listens to hymns, he sees a dance performance — as offerings received while the deity is at rest.

The road-building that was required at Tiruvidaimarudur and Achyutamangalam, as a result of the new arrangements deemed appropriate by the king or the temple authorities, points toward a significant issue. One of the reasons that processional routes in medieval Tamilnadu did not conform to *sāstric* norms is that settlements did not in the least resemble the idealized town-plans of the Āgamas or the Śilpaśāstras, in which a mandala or grid pattern governed the placement of buildings and the lay-out of streets.²⁵ In the medieval temple town of Tamilnadu, especially in the "wet" regions where rice was cultivated, residences, commercial areas, gardens, and fields were interspersed and immediately adjacent to one another (Heitzman 2001, 126-28). Streets were a problem. Land had to be acquired in order to lay out a street or to widen it, and many of the inscriptions relating to processions deal with precisely this issue. The "classic" South Indian temple town — centred on a shrine surrounded by a series of regular, concentric temple walls and four processional streets — seems not to have been a feature of Tamilnadu's landscape in the Chola period, but only emerged in the subsequent era, particularly from the seventeenth century onward, as a result of the patronage of the Nayakas and the "little kings" of the Tamil country. These rulers not only enlarged the scale of many temples — with new walls, gopuras, mandapas, shrines, tanks, and temple streets — but radically reorganized the cityscape and altered ritual arrangements in order to strengthen their claim to having a privileged relationship with the temple deity, bringing into being "a new state-level culture of kingship and pious patronage" (Bayly 1989, 68). The nature of the city, and its character as a zone distinctly marked off from the countryside,

²⁴ In the post-Chola period — in the context of the courts of Vijayanagara, the Nayakas, and the "little kingdoms" — we see a number of examples of the overlapping of the procession and the royal audience (*darbar*). The king's entourage in procession was in a sense "a palace in motion" (Waghorne 1994, 164; see also 7-9, 161-63). In other cases, the king came forth to be seated in state in the large open area in front of his palace to view a military parade or to be entertained by a performance of dance or music (Sewell 1962; Narayana Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam 1992, 58-66; Wagoner 1993, 126-28).

²⁵ In fact, the Śilpaśāstras provide for a great variety of different site plans, with various arrangements of streets and placement of temples (see, e.g., *Mayamatam* and *Viśvakarma Vāstuśāstram*). There are a number of interesting and important questions about the significance of the *sāstric* diagrams and mandalas for actual site planning and building practices that have been recently debated by, among others, Michell (1992), Bafna (2000), and Howes (2003, 185-91).

was also changed during this period by the increasing fortification of towns and the settlement of in-migrating populations — including the rulers themselves, arriving from the north and west (Bayly 1989, 22-27; Narayana Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam 1992, 86-87; Howes 2003, 190). The new patterns of patronage, new conceptions of divinity, new mobility and militarization, and new demarcations of social and sacred space all had an impact on processions and their meanings.

The politics of processions

The interest on the part of Kulottunga III in the processions of Tiruvidaimarudur is most unusual, since kings of the Chola dynasty — unlike later South Indian rulers — generally did not institute changes in temple ritual. And although the Śaiva text *Mahotsavavidhi* features the king as a participant in the festival procession, there is no inscriptional evidence indicating that temple processions included devotees of royal status or of local standing. In contrast to the practices of more recent times, political hierarchies were evidently not at stake in the ordering of the medieval festival procession. When the inscriptions broach the subject of rank and precedence within processions, as we have seen, privilege belongs to the patron, and not to the one invested with royal power nor to the local worthy. Nor was the processional route expressive of the right to recognition claimed by various castes and communities, as it is today. Major changes in social as well as political structures in the course of the last six hundred years seem to have altered the ways in which people related to the temple and its rituals. As corporate and sectarian identities became more fixed and caste hierarchies more rigid — and as royal patronage of temples became a means of seizing power by kings and a source of the ritual honours meted out on the occasion of festivals — temple processions became arenas where political claims were demonstrated and contested, and the processional route was being continually renegotiated (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1976, 203-4; Bayly 1989, 46-47, 58-61; Orr 2000a, 176-77). The trajectory of the medieval procession, on the other hand, was evidently not so wide-ranging nor subject to such modification. When a procession did depart from the immediate vicinity of the temple, it was so that the deity could visit a "natural" feature (a river or a grove) rather than a social entity (a neighbourhood or a village). The fact that the deity stopped in a mandapa or in a garden which was named after a donor suggests not so much the deity's movement toward the donor, but rather the donor's approaching the place of the deity.

The god in procession did not seem to go out of his way to find his special human devotees, nor did he interact very much with other deities. This presents a sharp contrast with the ways in which relationships of alliance, dominance and competition among various divinities within a locale are expressed through the design of processional routes in modern times (Hudson 1982; Reiniche 1985, 80; Mines 1996, 75-77; Kaali 1999). We have seen that the Chola period inscriptions include a reference to the visit of the Lord of Chidambaram to Gaṇeśa's shrine to the east of the temple (AD 1279; SII 12.245), and there is another record, from Tiruchengattangudi in Tanjavur district, describing the

construction of a new road so that the image of Gaṇeśa could go in procession from the mandapa of saint Cīruttonṭar in the Śiva temple to a nearby brahmadeya village (AD 1197; NK 57). An inscription from Tirumangalam, also in Tanjavur district, describes the visit of one Śiva to the temple of another during the festival in Vaikāci month (AD 1184; ARE 113 of 1927). The encounters among deities occasioned by medieval processions seem few and friendly. The single piece of epigraphical evidence that such relationships may not have been entirely cordial is found in a thirteenth-century inscription from the temple dedicated to Viṣṇu at Akkur, in Tanjavur district, recording a gift of land for a road to the Kaveri river to be used for the procession of the Lord; this new road had to be made because the temple authorities at the Śiva temple in the village had refused the use of the tank at their temple for Viṣṇu's sacred bath, as had been customary in the past (AD 1230; ARE 231 of 1925). But the very fact that such processional resources had, up until then, been shared — like the personnel for the Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava festivals at Dadapuram, as arranged by the princess Kuntavai — shows that serious sectarian rivalry had yet to emerge.

Going in procession: the Lord appears

The absence of a strong sectarian spirit seems also to be indicated by the ways in which the temple deities, who were the central figures in festival celebrations, were identified by the inscriptions. The inscriptions usually identify the gods participating in festival processions simply as the "Lord" and "Lady" (*nāyakar* and *nācciyār*), or use a local name for the god — in either case, there is a lack of distinction among Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava and Jain images. It is very difficult to know what were the precise forms of these festival icons, or to link the descriptions in the inscriptions of gods in procession with the bronze images of the gods that we see today in museums, or still under worship in South Indian temples. I have found only ten inscriptions in which the form of the image used in festival processions is clear — in three cases, it is Śiva as Naṭarāja (Āṭavallār).²⁶ It is interesting that the inscriptions generally do not use

²⁶ I am excluding here the few references to *śribali* images — for which see the discussion above and note 5. Processional images of Śiva used in annual festivals, apart from Naṭarāja, include Candrasekara, Pāsupatadevar, Ṛṣabhavāhana, and Attiratevar (Astradeva) — each of these forms is mentioned once, in the context of a festival procession. It is quite remarkable that in the inscriptions dealing with processions, we find no mention of Somāskanda, although this is the image that is today used most often in processions in Śiva temples, the image specified for festival use in the Agamic text *Mahotsavavidhi*, and the image that appears most abundantly among the extant Chola period bronzes, second only to Naṭarāja (L'Hernault 1978, 78). There are two references to Gaṇeśa (Piḷḷaiyār), and an inscription from Tukkacci (AD 1239; ARE 1 of 1918) describes the establishment of images of Śani (Saturn) and Bṛhaspati (Jupiter) for processional use. From Shermadevi, in Tirunelveli district, comes the single reference that I have found to processions in the Vaiṣṇava context where one can identify the images mobilized: here is recorded the setting up of Rāma, Sītā, and Lakṣmaṇa, to be taken in procession (AD 1277; ARE 648 of 1916). Note that there are a large number of inscriptions, which I am not considering here, that refer to the donation of images — including many goddess images, a large number of Naṭarājas, very few Vaiṣṇava images, and, surprisingly, no Somāskandas (unless "Umāsahitar" refers to such images) — where the ritual use of these images is unspecified. Although some of these must have been processional images, I am

language that distinguishes the processional image from the deity of the central shrine. Such a distinction would appear to be of particular significance in the Śaiva context, where the central, fixed image (*mūla mūrti*) is a Śivaliṅga, while the movable, processional image is Śiva in anthropomorphic form. The differentiation among various types of images is also an issue in Vaiṣṇava temples, where we often see the fixed stone *dhruva* image in the central shrine accompanied by a metal *kautuka* image, which is the actual object of daily worship, while other metal images may be used for *śrībali*, bathing rituals, and festivals; the Vaiṣṇava Agamic literature devotes some attention to these image typologies.²⁷ Yet, in the inscriptions, it is as if these distinctions were irrelevant. In a related fashion, the inscriptions blur the boundary between stone and metal images. Precisely the same language is used in describing the establishment of a stone niche figure or a bronze processional image — except that the inscriptions almost never tell us what the material of the image actually is, and we can only figure this out if, for example, the image is said to have been set up "on the south side of the temple" (where presumably it will stay put), or if, as in the cases we have been considering, the image will be taken in procession. The distinction between stone deities installed in shrines and niches and movable metal images is also made less significant when we consider that festival and *śrībali* images of gods and goddesses frequently received daily worship (SII 5.707; TAM 86; ARE 624 of 1920).

In the inscriptions, in fact, it would seem that the very idea of "image" is de-emphasized. The lack of distinction among the different forms the Lord might take, and the scant use of a vocabulary relating to "images," point to a perspective in which it is God's pervasive presence at a particular sacred site that is of primary significance.²⁸ In this regard, the inscriptions accord very closely with the spirit of the earlier devotional literature. This understanding of the nature of divine presence is also consistent, generally speaking, with the

excluding them from the present discussion because in most cases it is not clear whether they are images of metal or stone. The major exceptions to this general rule are the inscriptions at the Great Temple of Tanjavur (published in SII 2) which provide lengthy descriptions of the precise form and materials (the weight of gold, etc.) used in the making of metal images presented by Rajaraja I and members of his court, and the two inscriptions from Tiruvaduturai (ARE 104 and 117 of 1925) that refer to the gifts of metal images and ornaments by members of the Chola court several years later (see Dehejia 2002, 82-85 for summaries). Rajeshwari Ghose considers that the names Dakṣiṇameruṅṅaṅkar, Tañjaivaṅṅaṅkar, and Mahāmeruṅṅaṅkar in the Tanjavur inscriptions refer to Somāskanda, and that the failure of the inscriptions at Tanjavur and elsewhere to make explicit mention of the Somāskanda image is explained by "cultic taboos against its being exposed to ordinary mortal eyes" (1996, 302-3). See Barrett 1965 and Thomas 1986 on inscriptions from other sites which refer to metal images, including ones still extant.

²⁷ Up to eight kinds of images, including the *dhruva* image, are mentioned in the Pāñcarātra texts (e.g. *Aniruddha Saṃhitā* 15.39-42 and *Īśvara Saṃhitā* 17.238-248 — summarized in Smith 1975; *Pādma Saṃhitā* kriyāpāda 19.1-3; *Śrīpraśna Saṃhitā* 14.1-23) and four or five kinds in the Vaikhānasa literature (Goudriaan 1970, 166-67; *Marīci Saṃhitā*, 71-74).

²⁸ The only term for "image" that is found with any regularity in the inscriptions is *tirumeṅṅi*, "sacred form." It occurs most often, and particularly in Jain contexts, in simple "label" inscriptions — "this image was set up by donor X." Occasionally the term is also found in expressions indicating the transfer of merit to a human recipient — "this is given for the *tirumeṅṅi* of Y," i.e. for his well-being. The word *tiru* in this case seems to serve as an honorific, and does not indicate royalty or divinity.

Śaiva Siddhānta and Śrīvaiṣṇava theologies of "descent" into image form, which were being formulated by teachers of these traditions in the same period as the inscriptions were being engraved on temple walls.²⁹ On the other hand, the ritual corollaries of these theologies, elaborated in the Agamic literature, seem to indicate a notion of divine manifestation which is much less immediate than that proposed by the inscriptions, and more spatially hierarchized, in terms of the emphasis in the texts on the primacy of the temple's central icon and on the preparations and qualifications necessary for those who would approach it.³⁰ But it is only in the post-Chola period that rigid demarcations of sacred space, the insistence on specific iconic identities, and the mapping of divine power through processional movement became prominent features of temple ritual. The temple milieu represented by the inscriptions — and to a large extent by the sectarian literature of the same period — is one in which the sacred site in its entirety is seen as imbued with the transcendent divine.

The close links between the notion of God's presence — his locational fixity — and God's activity as an actor in procession — his apparent mobility — are indicated very clearly through the language used in the inscriptions to refer to processions. Medieval Tamil inscriptions almost invariably express the act of going in procession with the verb *eḷu*, to rise, ascend, appear, start out, in combination with the "benefactive" verbal auxiliary *aruḷ*, which signals that this is the act of a superior being. The term thus produced, *eḷuntaruḷ*, therefore has the meaning "to graciously come forth" or "to graciously appear." Further verbal forms may be added to indicate other aspects of the deity's activities. For instance, returning to the region of Madurai where we started our explorations, at the beginning of this essay, we have an early fourteenth-century inscription (ARE 321 of 1929-30) from Alagarkoyil (Tirumaliruncolai) that records the god's command concerning one of his temple servants, which was made while "he (Aḷakar) and his [two] consorts (*nāccimār*) were graciously listening to the hymns of Nammālvār (*tiruvāymoli keṭṭaruḷanirka*), having graciously come forth

²⁹ See Narayanan (1985) on the Śrīvaiṣṇava understanding of god's "descent" (*avatāra*) into the *arcā*, or image, and Davis (1991) on emanation or emission (*śrīṣṭi*) as descent from an absolute state into a visualized form in the Śaiva context.

³⁰ One of the complexities in the Agamic treatment of divine presence is the apparent redundancy of the daily invocation of the deity (*āvāhana*), prescribed by both Śaiva and Pāñcarātra texts, in an image which has already been imbued with divinity at the time it was set up, through the ritual of consecration (*pratiṣṭhā*) (see Brunner 1990 and 1992; Granoff 2000). There is also the question of the status of the processional image as a complete or partial, permanent or temporary, manifestation of the divinity inherent in the central temple image. While it may be the case that by undergoing *pratiṣṭhā* a processional image becomes fully divine at the time it first takes its place in the temple (Davis 1997, 33-34, 223), there is the suggestion in some texts that a "transfer" from the central icon is required to prepare the image for its festival role — which may or may not produce a temporary absence of divinity in the central icon — and that the processional image may be regarded as containing a fraction, rather than the whole, of the divine power present in the central icon (Diehl 1956, 146-48; Goudriaan 1970, 193-94, 208; Brunner in *Somaśambhupaddhati* 2, 282-85; *Śrīpraśna Saṃhitā* 33.28-34). The idea that the central image is the primary, generative source of divine presence — and that access to this source is not open to all — is found in the devotional as well as ritual texts of the Śrīvaiṣṇava and Śaiva teachers (Davis 1991, 62-72; Nayar 1992, 159-67; Hopkins 2002, 188-197, 204-213).

to be seated on the Cetirāyaṇ throne under the Śrīkulacekara pantal adorned with pearls in the Cuntarapāṇṭiyaṇ Tirumaṇṭapa." The use of the verb *eḷu* for "going in procession" gives it an active sense; the noun forms *ulā* and *pavaṇi* are rarely encountered.³¹ But more importantly, this usage underscores the agency of the deity. It is he — and not the priests or patrons, or his servants — who makes the procession happen.

But the compound verb *eḷuntaruḷ* is most often found in another context, where it also refers to the action of a deity. The god, in this case, "appears" in image form. Virtually every inscriptional reference to the donation or setting up of the image of a deity or saint uses this language, with the addition of a causative verbal form (usually *vitta*), so that the sense of the phrase is: "the donor caused the deity to appear." The same expression is used regardless of the form, type, or material of the image. And the same language is used whether the deity is newly established in a temple or whether the deity is caused to "reappear" — when the deity is returned and re-established in the temple, after having been removed.³² Again, "appearing" in image form is a verb, not a noun — we see the noun *pratiṣṭhā* ("consecration") in only a handful of inscriptions — and it refers to an action performed, with assistance from a donor, by the deity himself or herself. If "appearing in image form" and "going in procession" are referred to in exactly the same way in the inscriptions, we may be obliged to rethink the dichotomy between fixity as an aspect of god's iconic manifestation and motion as the defining characteristic of the god's appearance in procession. The congruence in the inscriptions' language for

³¹ *Ulā* is, of course, the term used for the Tamil poetic genre which describes the procession of the hero through the streets. An alternative verb form is *eḷu* (to ascend, go up) which is used especially for the Lord's "appearing" in a mandapa or a *ter*.

³² It is quite surprising that among the numerous inscriptional references to the setting up of images I have looked at, I have found only one mention of a consecration performed by a ritual specialist, despite the fact that it is precisely the role of such individuals that is at the centre of discussions of *pratiṣṭhā* in the Agamic literature. This singular reference is in a Sanskrit inscription recording the foundation of the Kampahareśvara temple in Tribhuvanam, by Kulottunga III; here the god and goddess were consecrated by the king's guru Someśvara Īśvara-śiva (SII 23.190). I have come across a few inscriptions in which other *ācāryas* figure, but, after close examination, I am convinced that these are in fact the donors of the images, rather than performers of priestly consecrations. At Tiruvidaimarudur, there are two inscriptions dated 1121 and 1122 (SII 23. 301 and 302) that refer to the setting up of an image by Svāmidevar Śrīkaṇṭhaśivar; and at the Vaiṣṇava temple of Tirukkoyilur, an image is said to have been set up by a *jīyar* (thirteenth century; ARE 329 of 1921). The lack of reference to ritual consecration is no doubt linked to the fact that there are virtually no "foundation" inscriptions in the temples of Tamilnadu. Almost all of these temples were already established shrines, with central deities (and perhaps principal processional icons) in place, at the time that stone structures were erected and inscriptions engraved on their walls.

I have come across three references to the re-establishment of displaced images: at Tirukannapuram, an inscription of AD 1143 (ARE 533 of 1922) records that a deity that had been put (*eḷuntaruḷi irutta*) in another temple was restored (*eḷuntaruḷi vikka*) to its original place (*pūrva tāṇam*); at Sembanarkoyil, another temple in Tanjavur district, a (Śiva?) image that had been removed during "troubled times" (*turita kālam*) to a Piḷḷaiyār temple, was re-established (*eḷuntaruḷi irutta*) and worship restored (ARE 171 of 1925, AD 1184); and at Tiruvelvikkudi, also in Tanjavur district, a record of AD 1223 (ARE 141 of 1926) tells us that a number of images which had been carried off by the followers of the chief Vāṇakovaraiyar were discovered in another temple and reconsecrated in their "home" temple by Toṇṭaimānār, a rival leader.

these two aspects of divinity — fixity and motion — adds another dimension to the blurring of distinctions between central and processional images, fixed and mobile images, stone and metal images that we have already noticed. Indeed, as we have seen, the inscriptions indicate that in processions themselves, halting is at least as important as moving. There are far more references to the deity's presence in the mandapa than to his travelling through the streets.

Lords of temples and of palaces

Eluntaru! language is used not only in connection with gods, but also with kings. At Tiruparankunram, for example, there is a thirteenth-century inscription (SII 4.372) recording the order of Sundara Pandya I, who "had graciously come forth to be seated on the Maḷavarāyaṇ throne in the hall of the bed-chamber (*paḷḷiyaraikkūṭam*) at the palace (*koyil*) in Madurai." Elsewhere we find such expressions used for Chola kings and princesses. At times, the inscriptions portray the Pandya or Chola king on his throne listening to music or viewing a dance performance in a manner that closely resemble the ways that the entertainment of the gods is described. The movement that is implied by such references in the inscriptions to the "gracious appearance" of the king is minimal, although his displacement from one part of the palace to another may have been similar to some of the "inside processions" that took place in the temple context; perhaps the king, like the deity, was accompanied by drummers, musicians, and bearers of garlands and lamps. The only instance in the inscriptions that I know of where *eluntaru!* relates to a king's "coming forth" from within his palace to the outside world — which is, in fact the only reference of any sort to a royal procession that I have encountered in the inscriptions — is a record of Vikrama Chola's visit to the temple of Chidambaram (ARE 314 of 1959).

The inscriptions employ the same language to describe the "appearing" of gods and kings, although *eluntaru!* is much more characteristic of the temple context than the court. Other activities "graciously" engaged in by both kinds of figures — including ceremonial bathing, the enjoyment of artistic performances, and the issuing of decrees — are described in similar terms, being marked by the verbal suffix *aru!* or the nominal prefix *tiru* ("sacred," "auspicious"), and are depicted in both cases as taking place in *koyil*-s. But did the god's procession resemble a royal procession? The problem we have in answering this question is that the inscriptions do not tell us a great deal about the arrangements of courtly life in medieval Tamilnadu, and, although we catch glimpses of the royal style of the Cholas and Pandyas, we do not see the king in procession (Orr 1999). We can learn somewhat more from the literature in Tamil and Sanskrit, contemporary with the inscriptions, that concerns itself with the affairs of kings (Shulman 1985; Ali 2002). There is little indication that the imaging of the king in this literature as fearless warrior or romantic hero found any counterpart in temple pageantry.³³ The absence from festival processions of one of the

³³ The closest relationship between the temple procession and the royal procession is perhaps to be found within the framework of the hunting festival — although this link is much more obvious in

quintessential attributes of kingship — the elephant — is particularly telling. The political ambitions of monarchs were not dramatized in temple ritual, nor did the gods find it necessary to draw on the prevailing royal ethos to make their presence felt. Chola kings may have claimed to have conquered the rulers of the four directions, performing a triumphant *digvijaya*, but the deity of the Chola period temple did not replicate this movement. It is in subsequent centuries, under the kings of Vijayanagara, that the "royalization" of the god — and the divinization of the king — began to colour the rituals that took place in both temple and court (Anderson 1993, 180-81). By the seventeenth century, the Nayaka kings of the Tamil country had effectively blurred the boundary between these two spheres, in a "fusion of symbolic domains": "temple and court, once similar but separate, have redefined themselves as explicit images of one another" (Narayana Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam 1992, 187). Another chapter in the royal imaging of the divine opened up in the late eighteenth century, under colonial rule: while human kings no longer exercised sovereignty over their territories and their subjects, the renovations and ritual rearrangements of patrons like the Dubashes of Madras established a new idiom of the divine overlordship of the temple deity, conceptualized as a revival of ancient temple tradition— in an image that still remains very much with us today (Waghorne forthcoming; Peterson 2001; cf. Appadurai and Breckenridge 1976).

Seeing god/ The seeing god

The Chola period's most explicit depiction of the royal procession is found in the poetic genre of the *ulā*. *Ullās* are Tamil poems describing the procession of the hero through the streets, as love-stricken women of various ages look on. "Tirukailāyañāna ulā," a poem composed in the ninth century by the Nāyanmār Cēramāṇ Perumāḷ in honour of Śiva, is given the title "the first *ulā*" — although the Jain epic *Cīvācāntāmaṇi*, written in the same period, also contains an *ulā* on the prince who is the hero of the story.³⁴ In "Tirukailāyañāna ulā," Śiva is prompted to emerge from his heavenly palace by a request from the gods, who

the *Āgamas* than in the inscriptions. In some of these texts it is clear that the hunting festival has royal connotations: in the same way that the king claims the right to enjoy himself in, or to bring back game from, the forest, so too does the god. As we have earlier seen, however, the hunting festival, although mentioned in some Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava sources, does not appear to be an integral part of the Agamic festival program. The inscriptions that mention the hunting festival do not provide us with any sign that royal insignia, royal motifs, or royal conveyances are involved — there are no horses nor elephants, no hunting, and, indeed, no forest. It has often been said that, in general, the honours shown to the gods enshrined in the temple were those that belonged to kings. It is extremely difficult, however, to demonstrate that this was the case in the Chola period. Even the ideal program of services described in the *Āgamas* is only occasionally characterized as "royal," and Gérard Colas suggests that the royal elements of festival celebrations were the product of the imagination of sponsors rather than being dictated by ritual necessity (1996, 304 cf. 321).

³⁴ In *Cīvācāntāmaṇi* vv. 1095-1112, Cīvakaṇ, who is being taken to prison, passes before women of each of the seven age groups, who watch him with distress and longing. I am indebted to James Ryan for sharing with me his translation of this passage, and several others which depict Cīvakaṇ in procession. I also thank Blake Wentworth for his translation of "Tirukailāyañāna ulā," and Daud Ali for his "Vikramacōḷaṇ ulā."

wish to have a vision (*kāṭci*) of him. In the twelfth century, *ulās* were written on the Chola kings Vikrama, Kulottunga II, Rajaraja II, and Caṅkaracōḷaṅ, who is probably Rajadhiraja II (Thirumalavan 1992, 15-27). The structure of the Chola *ulās* is similar to "Tirukailāyaṅāṅa ulā," although they all contain an extended description of the royal elephant, which is absent from the *ulā* on Śiva, and of course the setting and the identities of the participants in the processions are not the same.³⁵ But the processions of the *ulās* are radically different from the temple processions described in the medieval inscriptions. In the procession of the inscriptions, as we have seen, the deity is active and present, while the hero of the *ulā* — whether god or king — is passive and impassive. Verbs relating to the hero's moving, seeing, or responding are in very short supply in the *ulās*. Indeed, the reader of these poems scarcely sees the hero at all; instead, we watch the women watching him.

Did the Lord go in procession in medieval Tamilnadu in order to be seen, as does the hero of the *ulā* or the deity of modern festivals who goes into the streets to give *darśana* to his devotees? The inscriptions, in fact, convey quite a different idea: the deity goes forth not to be seen, but to see. As is the case for going in procession, or appearing in image form, the language of the inscriptions makes God the agent, the one whose action and experience is described — he looks with favour, graciously casting his eye (*tirukaṅcāṭṭiyaruḷ*), upon those whom he encounters. The Tamil equivalent of *darśana* — *kāṭci* — does appear occasionally in the inscriptions, where it refers to a place where the deity stops during a procession, while *tirukaṅcāṭṭiyaruḷ* is synonymous with the procession itself.

The significance of *darśana* in contemporary understandings of the temple procession is closely tied to the issue of access: by leaving his sanctuary, the Lord provides an opportunity for encounter with the divine to those who would be prohibited from entering the temple precincts, or glimpsing him in the central shrine at the heart of the temple. But there are reasons to believe that, in medieval Tamilnadu, most if not all of his potential worshippers were able to experience the deity's presence within his temple. The names of donors from a wide range of backgrounds and professions are engraved on the stone walls of mandapas in the inner compound and on the central shrine itself — surely the people themselves were admitted to these same places. The emphasis in the inscriptions on the temple's reception of pilgrims of various kinds also indicates a spirit of inclusion. We must consider, as well, that the temples of the Chola period that have remained more or less intact are very simple structures, and evidently not difficult of access; there was little that was physically standing between the potential worshipper and the god. Temples were subject to renovations over the course of time which involved the radical re-shaping of

³⁵ "Tirukailāyaṅāṅa ulā" is similar in a number of respects to "Tiruppalliyēḷucci," a poem written in praise of Viṣṇu by the Āḷvār Toṅṅaraṭṭipṭōṭi, which was likely also composed in the ninth century. Both poems feature a procession of deities, whose identities are similar in the two contexts, and employ the motif of the gods' request for the Lord to come forth from his palace/ temple to be seen by them. In the case of "Tiruppalliyēḷucci," Viṣṇu is asked to awake and emerge from his shrine at Srirangam.

the interior spaces of the temple, and the alteration or replacement of the central shrine, calling into question the absolute sacrality — and centrality — of the *garbhagṛha* (Orr 2000b; Branfoot 2000). Much of what we now consider to be the standard lay-out of the South Indian temple — a small enclosed sanctum at its core, surrounded by a series of concentric enclosure walls with towering *gopuras* over the entrances — is the result of construction that only began to take place in the twelfth century, and is even more the product of the Nayaka period, continuing into our own times. Strictly hierarchized spatial arrangements, including the demarcation of boundaries with enclosure walls and imposing gates, do not appear to be characteristic of the Chola period temple. This explains, perhaps, why the inscriptions are so little concerned with the distinction between inside and outside processions, or between fixed and mobile images.

This organization of the physical space of the temple — and the social and ritual implications of this arrangement — appears to be more in keeping with patterns of the earlier *bhakti* period than those of today. For those donors and devotees whose perspective seems to be represented in the inscriptions of the Chola period the experience of seeing God was also similar to that of the poet-saints. There are countless references in the hymns of the *Ālvārs* and *Nāyaṅmārs* to having a vision of the Lord, but the modern reader who seeks to determine whether these poets are "really" seeing God — i.e., in image form — and if so, what that form is, will quickly become frustrated. Tirupāṇālvār, beholding the Lord at Srirangam, Viṣṇu reclining on the serpent, gives a detailed description of his form and attributes, but also tells us that he is seeing Viṣṇu as Narasiṃha and as the baby lying on a banyan leaf ("Amalaṅātipiraṅ," trans. Hopkins 2002, 141-44). One of Appar's poems on Tiruvaymur (*Tēvāram* 6.77) uses the word *kaṅṭēṇ*, "I saw," sixty-five times in the space of ten stanzas — and what Appar saw there was Lord Śiva in at least six different "iconic" forms. This is seeing with what Richard Davis has called the "devotional eye" (1997, 23, 38). Judging from the inscriptions' vagueness about the specific identities of the deities who went in procession, these are the same eyes that were used by those who witnessed the Lord's appearance in the Chola period temple.

The procession in history: gods on the move

The *Ālvārs* and *Nāyaṅmārs* tell us about seeing God, but even more often they complain of his elusiveness. The poems are filled with images of searching. Appar may have had a vision of his Lord at Tiruvaymur, but then Śiva slips away:

I saw him with these eyes,
and did not see him leave.
Never leaving his side,
I ran along with him.
Yet Vāymūr's Lord has vanished on the road,
leaving me caught in the web
of his wily tricks.
O wonder!

Tēvāram 5.164.4, trans. Peterson (Peterson 1989, 298)

When God takes to the road, this is not regarded as an opportunity for the worshipper to behold him — as it is in the case of Viṣṇu's "Journey Festival" in modern Madurai — but as a problem. The devotee beseeches the Lord: where are you? why do you wander off? how can I find you? why can't you stay in one place? The inscriptions show us what the solution to this problem is, celebrating the presence of God in a particular place, as well as his active role in becoming present. The combination of iconic indeterminacy with locational fixity is characteristic of the understanding of the nature of the divine from the perspective of both the *bhakti* poets, and the Chola period devotees who have left their records engraved on temple walls.

In a later age, however, the temple procession seems to represent something quite different: specificity of divine identity and far-ranging mobility are now at a premium. These features correspond to new historical circumstances. Instead of the problem of elusiveness, there is now the problem of power — brought into being in the post-Chola period by political disruption, the movement of populations, and increasingly marked social and sectarian divisions. If the modern temple procession is an expression of the Lord's dominance over other deities, a display of sovereignty over territory and human subjects, and an occasion for conferring status on particular communities, it would appear that this model has taken shape in the course of the last four hundred years. The mobility of gods becomes a major theme in religious narratives beginning in the sixteenth century, in the *sthāla purāṇas* that recount the origins of temples throughout the Tamil country, and in tales of the peregrinations of temple images seized in war or sent into hiding (Shulman 1980, 48-55; Davis 1997, 129-140). The Nayaka kings' origin stories depict them as mobile, military figures interacting with various deities, and the devotional poems composed under these kings' patronage show God as a wanderer cut loose from his "stable earthly home" (Narayana Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyan 1992, 54-55, 115-120). In a period experiencing political instability, social change, and the migration of many people, new poetic genres emerged that featured the themes of travel, pilgrimage, and procession (Peterson 2001). In the eighteenth century, rajas who ruled over "little kingdoms" went on annual "cavalcades of prestation" to distant temples, displaying arms and royal insignia and following routes carefully designed to outface rival kings (Bayly 1989, 58-61). And while the movement of people — as pastoralists or itinerant craftsmen, for trade, seeking work, in response to war and famine — was still a real fact of life in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, colonial administrators struggled to fix boundaries and sedentarize the Indian population, and collaborated with Hindu patrons in the glorification of the ancient temple as an emblem of fixedness (Irschick 1994; Waghorne forthcoming).

We have come full circle, it would seem, to the notion of God's presence in place that is expressed in the early *bhakti* literature, and in the inscriptions of the Chola period. Yet the fact that Chola period temple processions differ so greatly from their modern counterparts points toward major changes in the character and the significance of the activity of that divine presence. Today, evidently, God's identity needs to be defined, and his territory needs to be demarcated

and defended — and the modern procession performs these functions, through the shape of its route, its representation of the deities in specific roles, and through its military and royal trappings. The processional route also serves as a means of negotiating relationships with rival gods, and responding to the rival claims of various communities. But the deity in procession whom we glimpse in the Chola period inscriptions, like the god of Tamil *bhakti* poetry, is secure in his place. As a pervasive presence, there is no necessity to assert his identity, nor to use the procession to map out the zone of his authority.

So much seems to tie the Chola period temple procession to antecedents in the *bhakti* period, but clearly there is some continuity with the developments of subsequent centuries. By the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, new patterns of patronage, and the evolution of Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava sectarian movements, were already having an impact on the political, social, ritual, and physical contexts and meanings of temple processions. The success of temple women in using donations as a means of garnering ritual recognition — allowing them to become participants in processions — set the stage for the later elaboration of systems of ranking and privilege which engaged both temple servants and patrons, and politicized the procession. The Pandya kings' interest in temple renovation and in instituting festival celebrations in their own honour far surpasses the involvement of the Cholas in such matters, and anticipates the even more intense activity of the kings of the following age, when royal symbolism came to colour every aspect of the temple procession. The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were witness to the shaping of the physical space of the temple as a series of graded zones, each one more difficult of access as one moved toward the central shrine. The material effect of the gifts of kings and other donors destined to make the temple ever grander intersected with social and ritual developments, in which hierarchies were created that increasingly restricted encounter with the divinity at the heart of the sacred site, and made the emergence of God outside the walls of his temple increasingly necessary to his worshippers.

Nonetheless, the image of the temple procession conveyed by the Chola period inscriptions is still one which is dominated by the inrushing of pilgrims and devotees, rather than the outward motion of the deity. The deity appears in procession within the temple courtyard, or just outside the temple gate, amid throngs of worshippers, adorned with fragrant pastes and decked with garlands. The drums beat loudly, banners and lamps are borne aloft. Offerings of food and flowers are heaped before the Lord, and hymns are sung in his praise. His beautiful form is seen by his devotees, and he graciously casts his eye on them. And, as at Tirucengattangudi in Tanjavur district — where the deity came forth in procession in the month of Cittirai, was seated in the Tirumuttuvāṇeri mandapam and received offerings of food, unguents, garlands, and lamps — the Lord grants liberation (*mutti kuṭutta*) (AD 1240; NK 64). What is made possible by the encounter between God and devotee that takes place in the procession is, in the end, salvation.

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