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City of One Thousand Temples

A Network of Hearsay in South India

Although the South Indian city of Kanchipuram is popularly known as the City of One Thousand Temples, there is no existing prescribed circuit, and no comprehensive temple listing or map to guide visitors.* Rather, the thousands of pilgrims who flood the city daily usually only know about the five most famous temples. Scattered street signs throughout the busy city point the way to these sprawling monuments, which are always crowded and especially thronged at festival times (Figure 1). However, other pilgrims arrive seeking particular temples, such as those extolled in hymns found in premodern texts, or temples that enshrine a deity to which a pilgrim's family has a particular allegiance. For these and hundreds of other temples—some of which are vast, multi-building complexes and others single shrines—there is no sign to guide the way. Upon arrival, as they pass from Kanchi's rural surrounds into the densely compacted urban core, visitors must ask directions from street vendors, auto-rickshaw drivers, local guides, and priests, in order to determine a logical order for their visit. Pilgrims choose which temples to visit based on the particular fame of each, a fame that reached them through a long history of hearsay. For this

Opposite: Kamakshi Amman Temple, Kanchipuram during Sahasra Candi Yajna, July 2014.

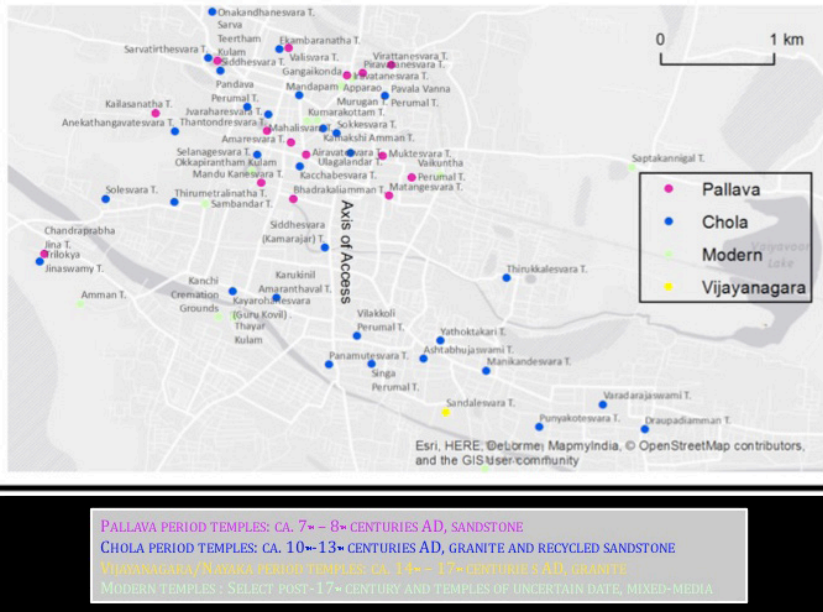


Figure 2: Temple locations, Kanchipuram.

reason, many of Kanchi’s temples today remain unknown even to locals. While a particular temple might be the site of one person’s daily morning prayer, another resident may never have even heard of it.

The city of Kanchi flourished during the premodern period, particularly during the Pallava and Chola eras (ca. 7th – 12th centuries CE), when stone temple architecture became the hallmark of the elite (Figure 2). Kanchi’s temples participated in a wide range of cultural and economic expansions and exchanges. They demarcated boundaries, junctions, centers, and peripheries, and they were oriented towards water sources and royal establishments. The movement of people between temples, and the stories people told about each place, breathed life into the urban landscape. Temples functioned as spaces where diverse groups—including ruling elites, transient devotional and merchant

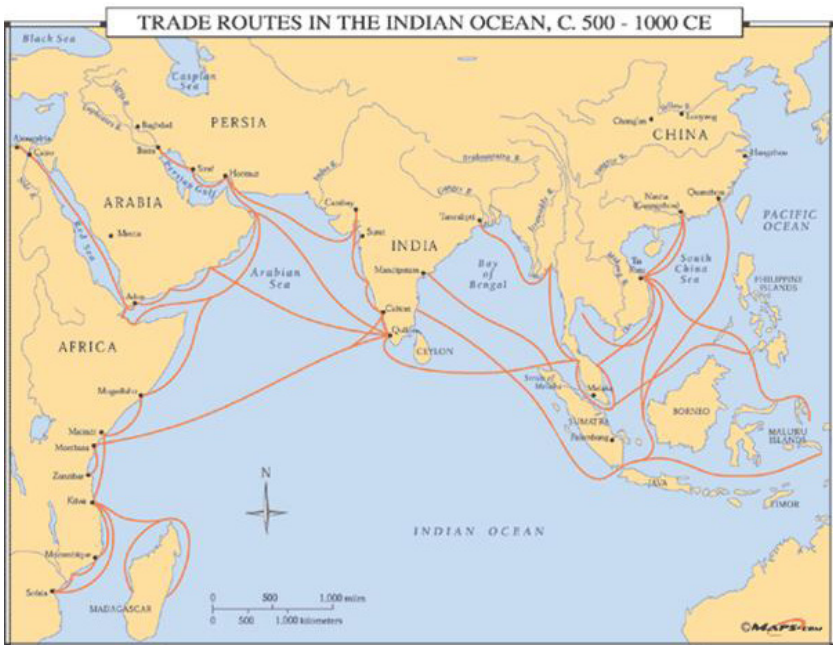


Figure 3: Map of maritime trade routes, ca. 500 – 1000 CE.

communities, and rising classes of urban landholders—could fashion, enact, and negotiate their claims to economic prosperity and political authority on local, regional, and transregional levels. The Pallava kings were keenly aware that the intersection of these two aspects, the religious and the commercial, made their capital a highly desirable destination, and they used stone temple architecture to cultivate Kanchi’s multifaceted reputation. The fame of Kanchi’s temples spread through long-distance networks connecting India with Southeast Asia and China (Figure 3).

Still situated on Kanchi’s northern border, surrounded on three sides by lakes, and approached from the south by a bustling commercial street lined with sweet-sellers, tea stalls, and merchants selling Kanchi’s famed silk saris, is the Ekambaranatha temple (Figure 4). Begun in the 7th century, Ekambaranatha is among Kanchipuram’s oldest temples, but



Figure 4: Ekambaranatha Temple, Kanchipuram, Begun ca. 7th century CE
Rajagopuram, 1509 CE, from south.

the city itself has a much longer history. When the Pallavas arrived from Andhra Pradesh to establish Kanchi as their capital (ca. 3rd century CE), they did so because this city was already a famous place. Archaeological remains tell us the region was inhabited since the megalithic period and was active in Roman trade.¹ Ancient inscriptions and Jain *padukkas* (stone beds), at the majestic cave-temple site of Mamandur only ten kilometers south, reveal that Kanchi, with its hinterland, was an important center of knowledge (Figure 5).² Kanchi's king sponsored the bard who sings the *Perumppānārruppatai*, a Sangam era (ca. 1st-6th century CE) poem that extols the city resounding with the festivals of diverse populations.³ The *Manimēkalai*, one of the five great Tamil epics, describes a journey along the path of Buddhism that leads the heroine directly to Kanchi, where famous spiritual teachers reside;⁴ premodern statues of Buddhas attest to the presence of a strong Buddhist community in and around the area



Figure 5: Cave 3, Mamandur, ca. 7th century CE, from southeast.

(Figure 6). The hymns of the wandering Tamil Saints, compiled in the *Tēvāram* and *Divya Prabandham* anthologies, sanctify many of Kanchi's temples and tell of *bhakti* devotional communities passing through the city. As described in the 12th-century hagiography, the *Periya Puranam*, while the saints and their acolytes travelled throughout the countryside, news of their imminent visit would arrive in each town before they did.⁵ These itinerant groups carried and transmitted the stories of the temples, establishing and reinforcing the fame of each place.

From ground level, Kanchi is a convoluted tangle of streets of varying size, all of which eventually terminate in temples, but, from the air, the city reveals its unique urban logic. Unlike the standard model of Tamil temple-towns, in which a single sacred complex centers the urban space, Kanchi is strewn throughout with temples, and the city squeezes between them. As early as the 10th century, the cityscape was oriented



Figure 6: Buddha statue, Kanchipuram ca. 11th century CE, Subbaraya Mudalair boys' school yard, from south.

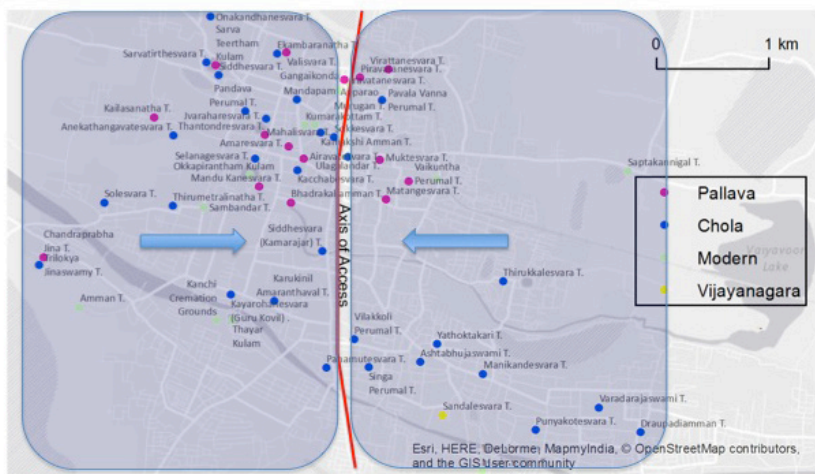


Figure 7: Temple orientations, Kanchipuram.

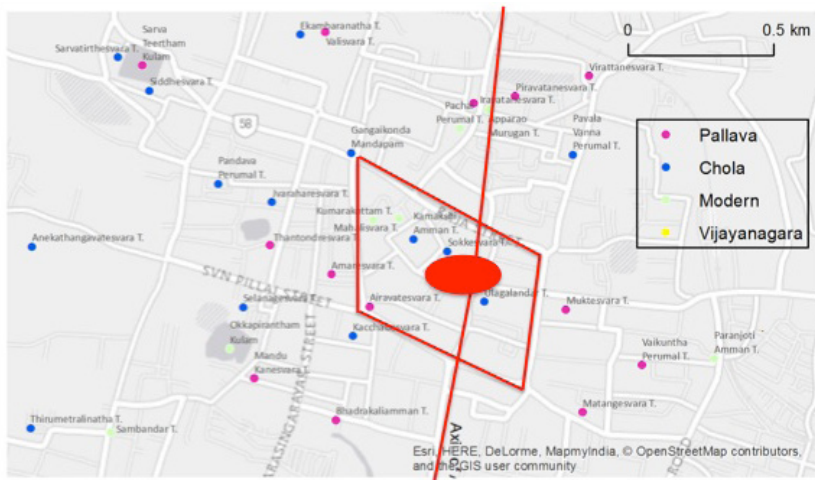


Figure 8: Raja Veedhis surrounding the central square, proposed site of Chola palace marked as a red oval.

towards a central north-south road—an axis of access⁶—that connected Kanchi's compacted urban core with important places of worship and administration north and south of the city. All temples to the west of the axis have sanctums that open towards the east; all temples to the east of the axis have sanctums that open towards the west (Figure 7). This convention has been rigorously followed for more than a millennium. The approach along the axis leads to the city's center, at which four streets called the Raja Veedhis (King's Streets) are laid in a square that encloses a noticeably elevated area (Figure 8). Today occupied by a labyrinth of shops and residences, this elevated area was likely the site of the royal palace since the 10th century, when the Chola dynasty selected Kanchi as its secondary capital.⁷ Architectural remains of two sandstone *mandapas* (pavilions) at the place where the axis crosses the southern Raja Veedhi may once have been part of the gateway to the palace precincts (Figure 9-10).

Kanchi's north-south axis was the main artery along which merchants, pilgrims, residents, and rulers moved. It connected the temples inside the city with those in neighboring areas (Figure 11). At the southern end of the avenue is the important Brahmin settlement of Uttiramerur (forty kilometers south), which holds the triple-story Sundaravarada Perumal temple and a granite platform that served as the Brahmin council's administrative headquarters (Figure 12). At the northern end of the axis is Tirupati, famed for its golden temple, situated one hundred kilometers away. Kanchi's north-south artery remains a wide avenue and one of the busiest streets in the city, yet no one talks about it as an axis or notices that all temples open towards it. Local and foreign scholarship is similarly silent on this point. While informants can only guide visitors according to knowledge gained through hearsay, Kanchipuram's underlying layout suggests a much more entrenched pattern of growth and development that has been reiterated over time.

Together with the broad Raja Veedhis, the axis of access would have served as an ideal processional space through which to proclaim the fame of certain deities and their temples. Bronze sculptures of the gods were, and still are, carried on palanquins in festival processions to enable the greater public to see and be seen by the deity.⁸ Competition among devotional sects and various communities of priests has led to ever increasing levels of spectacle. *Brahmotsava* festivals take place periodically throughout the year, during which a group of priests and helpers transports a deity from one temple to another temple, where it, and they, will reside temporarily. Priests also travel in order to conduct particular rituals. For a 10-day *pūjā* at the Kamakshi Amman temple in July 2014, a group of priests from Tirupati was brought to Kanchi to officiate, because they are the most expert in this particular ritual today. Festival bronzes were also brought for the occasion and installed in the central pavilion overlooking the fire pit for the duration of the *pūjā* (Figure 13). The ritual was a grand affair consisting of continuous recitation of the thousand names of the Goddess and giving offerings of ghee, fruits, spices, medicines, and even silk saris into a Vedic fire altar (Figure 14).

The fame of Kanchi's temples today, and their participation in pilgrimage networks, survives largely by virtue of word of mouth. At times, an individual temple falls out of use—the priest who maintained it dies and no one takes up the task; ownership of the property is under dispute and locked in court; the family who usually gifts money for repairs has hardships or decides to donate to a different temple instead—and it becomes locked behind a gate or filled with trash, effectively disappearing both from sight and common knowledge (Figure 15). At other times, a large endowment resuscitates a previously disused temple and brings it back into local discourse. In Kanchi, street signs direct pilgrims to the five most famous temples,



Figure 9: East Mandapa (architectural remains that may have been the base of a gateway to the royal palace precincts), juncture of Southern Raja Veedhi and Axis of Access, from west.



Figure 10: West Mandapa (architectural remains that may have been the base of a gateway to the royal palace precincts), juncture of Southern Raja Veedhi and Axis of Access, from east.



Figure 11: Axis of Access, from Uttiramerur to Tirupati.

Ekambaranatha, Kamakshi Amman, Kailasanatha, Varadarajaswami, and Vaikuntha Perumal; dozens of other unlisted temples only remain the focus of local residents who live in their immediate vicinity (Figure 16). The same street signs point the way to Tirupati, ignoring the much more proximate temple sites. Between Kanchi and Uttiramerur are villages containing large-scale granite temples from the tenth through thirteenth centuries, surrounded by paddies and quarries that supplied the villagers' livelihoods and stone for the temples' construction (Figure 17-18). The extant sacred architecture reveals that these now peripheral villages were once well-known nodes in Kanchi's greater pilgrimage network. Both within and around Kanchi, patterns of movement that were established during the premodern period continue to be followed today, yet, in the end, fame is what determines where one chooses to stop.



Figure 12: Sundaravarada Perumal Temple, Uttiramerur, ca. 9th century CE, from southeast.



Figure 13: Kamakshi Amman Temple, Kanchipuram, The Goddess Kamakshi carried in procession outside the temple, July 2014.



Figure 14: Kamakshi Amman Temple, Kanchipuram, Tirupati priest throwing offerings into the fire pit during Sahasra Candi Yajña, July 2014.



Figure 15: Airavataniśvara Temple, Kanchipuram, ca. 8th century CE, sandstone, from southwest, January 2014 (repaired thereafter).



Figure 16: Selanagīśvara Temple, Kanchipuram, neighborhood temple used by residents, from east.



Figure 17: Paddy fields surrounding Tiruvaliśvara Temple, Arpakkam, ca. 11th century CE, granite, from north.



Figure 18: Quarry field, Arpakkam, from south.

[Endnotes]

*Field research for this article, which is drawn from my dissertation (“All Streets Lead to Temples: Mapping Monumental Histories in Kanchipuram, ca. 690 - 1199 CE,” History of Art, Yale, expected 2017), was generously supported by the Yale South Asian Studies Council and History of Art Department, 2013-14. I would also like to warmly thank the Vaidyanathans for their hospitality, the Reddys for welcoming me to photograph their pūjā in Kanchipuram, and the many priests and local informants without whom my work would simply not be possible.

1. R. Champakalakshmi, “The Urban Configurations of Tondaimandalam: The Kāñcīpuram Region, C.A.D. 600-1300,” in *Urban Form and Meaning in South Asia: The Shaping of Cities from Prehistoric to Precolonial Times*, ed. Doris Meth Srinivasan and Hugh Urban (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1993), especially 197-98; S. Suresh, “Roman Vestiges in Kanchi,” in *Kāñchi: A Heritage of Art and Religion*, ed. Nanditha Krishna (Madras: C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar Institute of Indological Research, 1992).
2. Iravatham Mahadevan, “A Tamil-Brahmi Cave Inscription near Kanchi,” *ibid.*
3. *Pattuppāttu in English*, [The Ten Tamil Idylls], trans. A. Dakshinamurthy (Kattankulattur: Tamil Perayam, SRM University, 2012), 184.
4. Shattan, *Manimekhalai* [The Dancer with the Magic Bowl], trans. Alain Danielou and T.V. Gopala Iyer (India: Penguin Books, 1993).
5. Cēkkilār, *The History of the Holy Servants of the Lord Siva: A Translation of the Periya Purānam of Cēkkilār*, trans. Alastair McGlashan (Victoria, Canada: Trafford Publishing, 2006).
6. I borrow the expression “axis of access” from Michael W. Meister, “The Hindu Temple: Axis of Access,” *Concepts of Space, Ancient and Modern* (1991). Meister describes the experience of the Hindu temple as a physical movement inwards along a horizontal axis and a conceptual movement upwards along a vertical axis that begins at the center of the inner sanctum and ascends to the pinnacle of the superstructure.
7. As domestic architecture, palaces in premodern India were built of perishable materials, such as brick and timber, and remains generally do not survive.
8. For an excellent study of South Indian processions, see Crispin Branfoot, *Gods on the Move: Architecture and Ritual in the South Indian Temple* (London: Society for South Asian Studies, British Academy 2007).