

Kumbakonam: the ritual topography of a sacred and royal city of South India

Vivek Nanda

South India is renowned worldwide for the architectural splendour of its temples and the elaborate sculpture that adorns them, but their symbolism, still ritually enacted today, is less well understood outside India. Complex interrelationships of art, architecture and ritual are expressed in the evolution, through the past thousand years, of the topography of one of the most important of the temple cities.

For over a millennium Kumbakonam has been a sacred centre of Hindu pilgrimage. It differs from other temple cities of southern India in the diversity of the religious traditions manifested in its architecture and celebrated in elaborate cycles of ritual enactment that have been performed and re-interpreted down to the present day.

Contemporary Kumbakonam, in the state of Tamil Nadu, is a thriving city on the legendary Kaveri River (Fig. 1), the central artery that has nurtured and sustained the cultural traditions of the Tamil people. The siting of Kumbakonam near the head of the Kaveri delta has given it an exalted position as a religious and economic centre. Its craft traditions – in textiles, sculpture, bronze casting, brassware and gold jewellery – have been renowned since the ninth century AD and contribute to the

city's present commercial prosperity. Throughout its historical evolution, it has also been a seat of scholarship – the brilliance and fame of its scholars being widely recognized through to the early twentieth century, when it was known as the “Cambridge of South India”.

Kumbakonam's urban and ritual topography is unique in comparison with other temple cities of the Tamil country.¹ It is far more complex than most of them, which are organized around a single large temple complex that is the theatre for the enactment of a single corpus of creation myths. Kumbakonam, in contrast, contains several important temple complexes, sacred water tanks, and hundreds of secondary shrines, principally organized in two chronological clusters. This article describes the historical evolution and main constituents of Kumbakonam's ritual topography, in particular the sites sacred to the city, and, in

the case of the Mahamakam tank, to the whole of India.

Legendary origins of Kumbakonam

Our knowledge of the earliest history of Kumbakonam comes from texts and very little archaeological work has been conducted so far. The city was referred to as Kudandai in the corpus of Tamil literature known as the Sangam, which dates to the first three centuries AD. However, in early religious works dedicated to the god Shiva (the Shaiva corpus) it was called Kudamukku (literally, the mouth or spout of the pot), probably the antecedent of its present name Kumbakonam which first appears in a fourteenth-century inscription. The pot motif, evidently significant in the historical evolution of the place name, may simply refer to the town's wedge shape and location at the point where the Kaveri bifurcates in its delta from the Arasalar (Fig. 1). However, the pot motif recurs in a later Sanskrit text, the Kumbakonam Puranam, where the city is the site of the cosmic myth of Shiva as Adi-Kumbeshvara or the “Lord of the Pot”.

According to this legend, Brahma, the creator god, places the Hindu scriptures and the seed of creation in a golden pot to save them from destruction; in due course the pot floats to the south, to be later released by the arrow of Shiva. The appearance of Shiva at a shrine after the cosmic flood, the shattering of the pot (or womb of all creation), and the subsequent release of amrta (an embryonic nectar that congeals and crystallizes to form Kumbakonam's luminescent topography of temples and tanks) mark the start of a renewed creation. Even today, Kumbakonam's religious topography and rituals embody and reenact this creation myth. Although all the city's sacred sites participate in the cosmic origins, particular sites directly embody this myth. The Banapureshvara temple, for example, is the place where Shiva launched his arrow westwards onto the site where the pot actually ruptured, celebrated today in the form of the Adi-Kumbeshvara temple (Fig. 2).

Kumbakonam under the Chola kings: seventh to thirteenth centuries AD

The earliest historical stratum, as gleaned from extant buildings and rudimentary surface archaeology, corresponds with the advent of the Chola kings, who, from the seventh to thirteenth centuries, developed a characteristically Tamil form of urbanism that grew by aggregation from its core in the Kaveri Valley to an empire that at its peak, in the tenth-thirteenth centuries, extended from the Ganges Valley in the north to Sri Lanka. Kudamukku, present-day Kumbakonam, was the sacred religious centre, organized around its several temples, whereas Paliyarai, 2 km to the southwest, was the royal centre and residential capital, with its palaces, royal

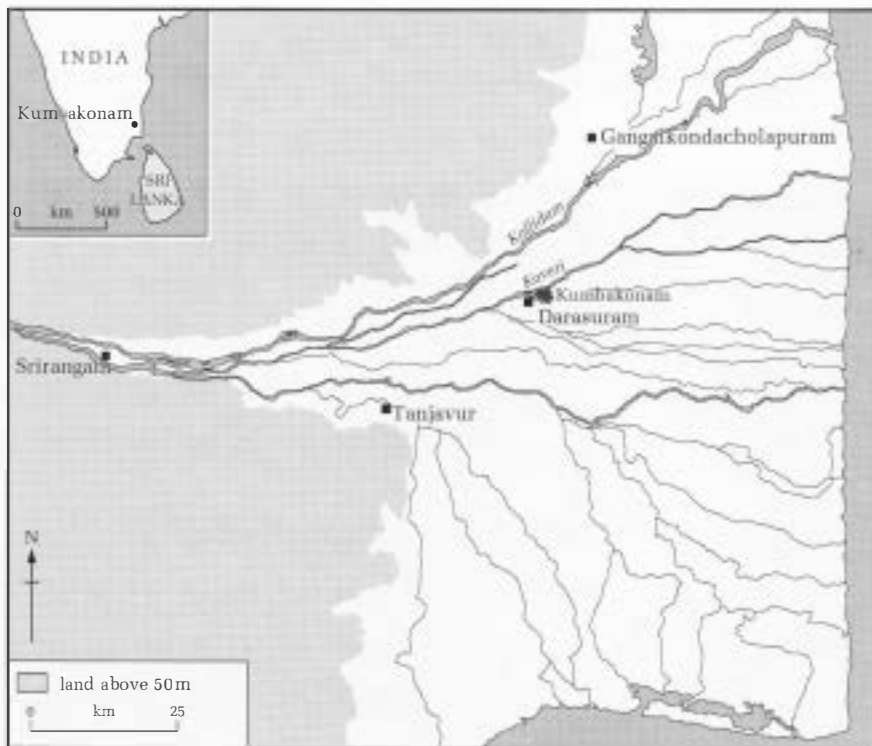


Figure 1 The location of the city of Kumbakonam near the apex of the delta of the Kaveri River, southeastern India.

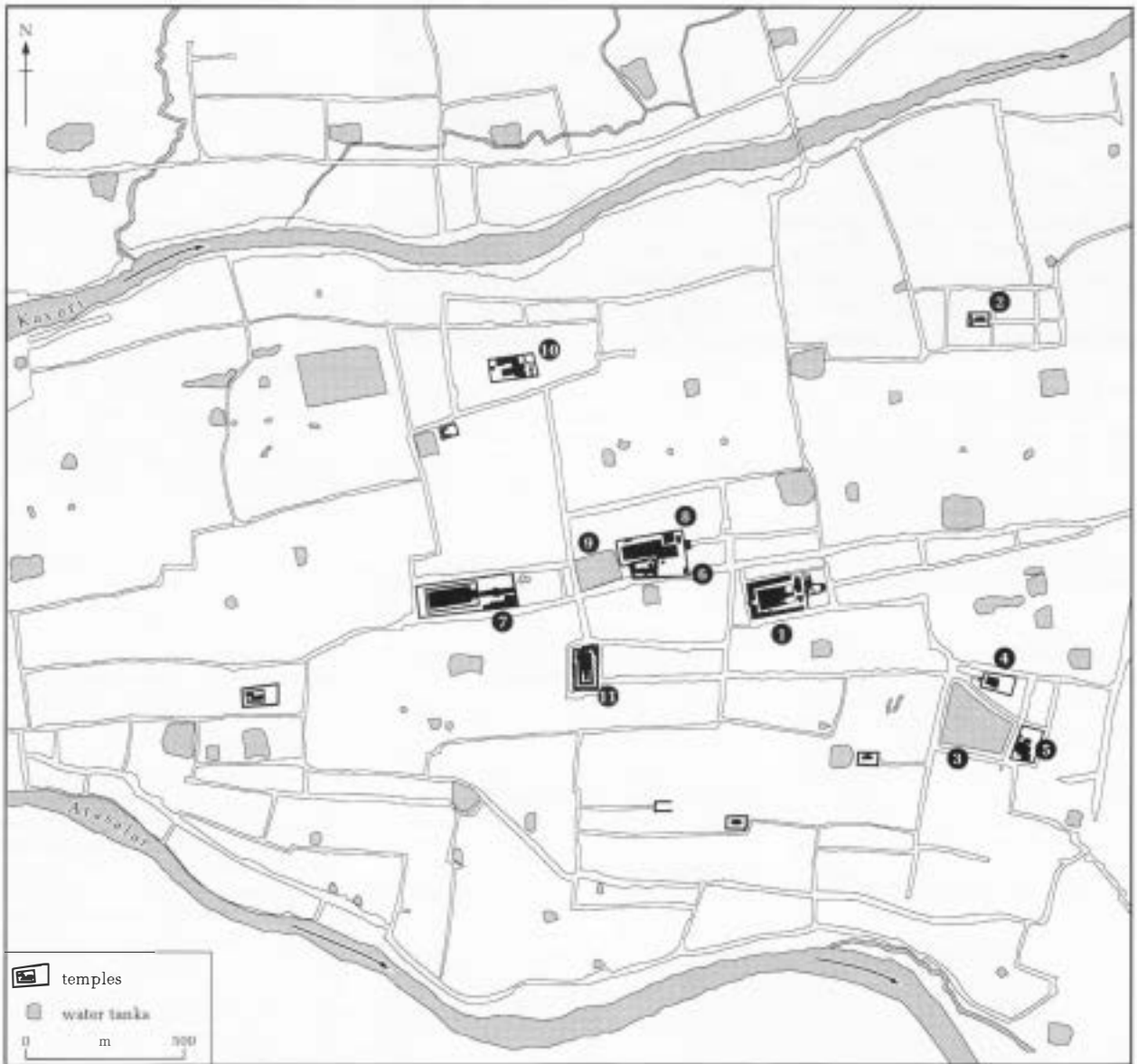


Figure 2 Kumbakonam showing the location of the principal temples and sacred water tanks: (1) Nageshvara temple, (2) Banapureshvara temple, (3) Mahamakam tank, (4) Kasi-Vishvanatha temple, (5) Abhimukteshvara temple, (6) Somesvara temple, (7) Adi-Kumbeshvara temple, (8) Sarangapani temple, (9) Pottramarai tank, (10) Chakrapani temple, (11) Ramasvamy temple.

temples and administrative and military establishments. The sacred-royal configuration of Kudamukku-Paliyarai, together with a wider network of subsidiary temple-centred agglomerations, constituted one of the earliest settlements of the Chola kings in the Kaveri Valley.² It epitomized the Chola idiom of symbolic landscapes consecrated by the sacred Kaveri, the continuity of which was embodied in a sacred topography of temple centres and ritual kingship.

As the Cholas were devout Shaivites



Figure 3 The Nageshvara temple: the northern wall of the main sanctum.



Figure 4 *The Nageshvara temple: sculpture of a royal figure on the southern wall of the main sanctum.*

(followers of Shiva), the primary focus of the settlement was the Kudandai Kilkottam or the Nageshvara temple (Figs 2 and 3). This temple, apart from being one of the finest examples of early Chola art and architecture, embodies several strata of ritual symbolism. The earliest and probably most consistent ritualistic and iconic theme in the Nageshvara temple draws its inspiration from worship of Surya the sun god. To the present day, the most auspicious and important annual festival celebrated at the Nageshvara temple occurs on the day when the sun penetrates through to the inner sanctum and illuminates the linga (the phallic depiction of Shiva). The exquisite sculptures that adorn the sanctum walls show Shiva in the company of royal persons (Fig. 4) and sages,³ and probably allude to a much closer identification of early Chola kingship with divinity in the form of Shiva.

The Shaiva topography of early Kumbakonam also comprised the Kayavarohana or Karonā temple (believed to be the present Kasi-Vishvanatha temple), the Someshvara temple and the Banapureshvara temple (Fig. 2). The epitome of Chola Shaiva religious architecture, is, however, the Airavateshvara temple complex, located in the northern quarters of Paliyairai (present-day Darasuram)⁴ about 5 km southwest of Kumbakonam (Fig. 1) and assigned to the reign of Rajaraja II (AD 1146–72). Although somewhat smaller than the grand temples of the period, such as those at Tanjavur and Gangaikondacholapuram (Fig. 1), the Airavateshvara complex is one of the finest to survive, replete with inscriptional records and a complete ensemble of relief carvings (Figs 5 and 6).



Figure 5 *The Airavateshvara temple, Darasuram: view from the southeast showing the sanctum and pyramidal tower (vimana), and in the right foreground the southern porch leading up to the colonnaded hallway.*

Kumbakonam under the Vijayanagara-Nayaka kings: fifteenth-seventeenth centuries AD

Under the Vijayanagara-Nayaka kings the religious topography of Kumbakonam underwent a series of changes as a result primarily of a shift in royal patronage from Shaivism to Vaishnavism (from the god Shiva to the god Vishnu). Consequently the Shiva temples of the Chola period declined; the Adi-Kumbeshvara temple gained precedence over the Nageshvara temple; and the two new temples dedicated to Vishnu, the Ramasvamy and Chakrapani, together with the much older Sarangapani temple (Fig. 2), gained popularity. The popularity of the seven river

goddesses (dedicated to the seven sacred rivers of the Hindu cosmos) probably also dates from this period. The Vijayanagara-Nayaka contribution to the ritual topography of Kumbakonam, as in the rest of the Tamil country, is manifest in large building programmes for the renovation and expansion of several of Kumbakonam's early temples; the expansion of the Adi-Kumbeshvara and Sarangapani temples by the addition of several colonnaded hallways and concentric outer enclosures is testimony of this.

The most significant impact of the Vijayanagara-Nayaka intervention was, however, on the urban and ritual topography of the city as a whole. Under the Cho-



Figure 6 *The Airavateshvara temple, Darasuram: the southern portico sculpted to depict a celestial chariot drawn by horses and elephants.*



Figure 7 Bazaar street with the Ramasvamy temple at its southern end.

las, the urban topography had a primarily east–west Shaiva orientation consisting of small clusters of temples surrounded by concentric ceremonial streets lined with priestly brahmin dwellings, but during the fifteenth–seventeenth centuries this pattern was incorporated into a grand and symbolic urban scheme. This transformation principally involved the creation of a complementary north–south Vaishnava topography to the west of the Chola city, which subordinated the older Shaiva religious establishments to the new Vaishnava ones. A north–south link, today a crowded bazaar street, constituted the nexus of the new sacred core of the city. It ritually connected all Kumbakonam’s new and renovated religious establishments, and further linked them to the fluvial horizons of the sacred terrain – the rivers Kaveri to the north and Arasalar to the south (Fig. 2). The sacred character of the Kaveri, in contrast to the Arasalar, is evident in the profusion of ritual structures (shrines, plinths or ghats, and pavilions) that dot its banks. The purificatory role of the Kaveri is an inextricable part of this ritual topography that was (and continues to be) enacted through a host of fluvial consecration and ablation rites conducted in all the temples.

The Ramasvamy temple complex,⁵ located at the southern end of the bazaar street (Figs 7, 8), was founded in the early seventeenth century by Govinda Diksitar, a powerful minister of the local Nayaka king, Raghunatha Nayaka (Fig. 9). The Ramasvamy sanctuary is built in a revivalist manner, its architectural details emulating the eleventh–twelfth century Chola style. The sanctum houses human-sized images, distinctive of the later period, of the god Rama and his consort Sita, together with their retinue. The columnar entrance or mandapa is designed as a royal hall for state occasions such as coronations, declarations and marriages, and the royal

agenda is manifest in the supports, transformed here into sculptural compositions showing king and retinue in the company of the gods (Fig. 9).

In addition to the adoption of Rama iconography as propaganda for (sacred) Nayaka kingship, the Ramasvamy temple as a whole seems to have served a more crucial royal agenda in terms of the overall topography of the post-Chola city. It made the most explicit contribution to the renewed sacred core of Kumbakonam. Its striking north–south orientation (in contrast to the east–west orientation followed for most temples), is ample testimony of this for it established a proximity to the Adi-Kumbeshvara temple (and thus the creation myth of the pot), the Pottamarai tank and the Sarangapani temple. Furthermore it evoked a royalist Vaishnava topography that linked the Chakrapani temple (of

earlier date) and the Kaveri, by way of the north–south bazaar for which it served as a termination (Fig. 2). In this wider context, the Ramasvamy temple can be seen to have orchestrated an overlay of ritual kingship on a wider realm of the sacred city.

The Chakrapani temple, at the northern end of the bazaar street and close to the Kaveri, is the only one at Kumbakonam to be raised on a series of terraces. It probably draws from a wider tradition of raised temples in the Paliyarai region and the Kaveri Valley at large (the temples at Swamimalai, Mulayur, Nallur and Avoor are some nearby examples). The temple is dedicated to Vishnu, as the bearer of the disc or chakra (an attribute with which he redresses all evil) after which the temple is named. Worshippers enter the central shrine from different directions according to the time of the year, reflecting the influence of astronomic calculations on temple rituals. The temple has proved difficult to date due to a lack of inscriptional evidence, but on architectural and iconographic grounds it is now believed to have been built in the fifteenth century in emulation of the preceding Chola style.

The Adi-Kumbeshvara is the largest and most important temple at Kumbakonam (Fig. 2) because Shiva, the god venerated here, is directly involved with the creation myth of the city. Here he takes the form of an irregularly shaped linga made of sand, in accordance with the story of the flood that ensued after he pierced the cosmic pot with his arrow. Although the Kumbeshvara cult dates back at least to the eighth–ninth centuries, the innermost shrine is a much renovated later building. It reflects the radical remodelling of the city under the Nayakas and their successors, the Marathas, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The most enigmatic monument at Kumbakonam is the Sarangapani temple (Fig. 2). The main sanctuary, deep within the



Figure 8 The Ramasvamy temple: view of the sanctum from the southeast.



Figure 9 *The Ramasvamy temple: sculpture on the central pillar of the entrance doorway depicting the royal patron Raghunatha Nayaka with wives.*

complex, emulates a celestial chariot – exquisitely executed in stone on a plinth decorated with prancing horses, elephants and wheels – that clearly links its foundations to the late Chola period of the tenth to twelfth centuries. The superstructure however is a later addition. The niches of the sanctum are adorned by a fine set of marvellously executed sculptures of the later period that again emulate earlier Chola aesthetic sensibility (Fig. 10). The temple is dedicated to Vishnu, as the bearer of the bow or saranga. He is shown here reclining on Ananta, the serpent who floats on the cosmic ocean prior to the creation of the universe, in the company of the seven river goddesses carved on the rear wall of the sanctum. Large stone guardians at the entrance to the sanctum epitomize the sculptural traditions of the late-fifteenth-century Vijayanagara period, and the harmonious juxtaposition of late Chola and Vijayanagaramatureartistic traditions make this a unique monument. However, its greatest significance is that it incorporates Kumbakonam in a wider ritual landscape of Tamil Vaishnava pilgrimage of the fifteenth century that included sites such as Srirangam and Tirupathi west and north of Kumbakonam.

The Nayaka intervention can be seen overall as a spatial embodiment of historical and cosmic time. The paired creation motifs of Shiva (west) and Vishnu (east), lie either side of a street that itself superimposes everyday life upon ritual time, and is marked at its south by a mingling of royal figures and gods, and at its north by a ritual obedient to celestial cycles. The pre-existing Chola context is further acknowledged

in the neo-Chola ornamentation, wherein the innovations appear as a fulfilment of the tradition. The Nayaka rulers, through the good offices of their minister Govinda Diksitar, were also responsible for reconstructing the Mahamakam tank (Fig. 2). It owes to them its present layout, which comprises steps descending into the water and 16 elaborately carved and stuccoed pavilions, each dedicated to one of the 16 great gifts or mahadanas, bestowed by a ruler on a holy place.

Contemporary pilgrimage

The Mahamakam tank is possibly the most sacred place in the city. Praised by the Nayanmar saint-poets of the seventh century, its sanctity has made it a place of pilgrimage for more than a millennium. Skirted by many temples and religious institutions, it is the setting for one of the main festivals in Kumbakonam, the Mahamakam or Great Makam, which occurs every 12 years; the last was celebrated on 18 February 1992 (Fig. 11). The festival takes place exactly at the conjunction of the sun in Aquarius and of Jupiter and the moon in Leo (known as the Mahamakam star), during the full moon in the Tamil month of Thai (February–March). Its climax lasts only a few hours, from early morning to mid-day, when dense crowds of pilgrims wade through the shallow waters of the tank and bathe in its 20 springs. According to the legend, such is the purifying power of this tank that all the sacred rivers of India, from the Ganges to the Kaveri, are believed to bathe here over this period in order to purge the sins of all humanity accumulated in their waters. The west-facing Kasi-Vishvanatha temple on the northern banks of the tank (Fig. 2) provides a sanctuary for the enshrinement of the river goddesses, whose sisterhood has now grown to nine (since their first appearance in the

Sarangapani sanctum), with Siva as custodian. All the goddesses face south as a mark of respect to the waters of the Mahamakam. However, goddess Kaveri's pride of place and omnipotence has earned her the privilege of presiding on the very banks of the tank in recent years. A vibrantly painted modern pavilion, the seventeenth, was added to the ensemble in 1974 as an ultimate fulfilment of this ritual topography; religious traditions and social customs, hand in hand with local nationalism, current politics and patronage, continue to accrete and mould the contemporary status of Kumbakonam.

The Mahamakam tank, today, has accreted pan-Hindu symbolism; it is significant not just in Tamil Nadu but to the whole of India. Its sanctity has attracted a complex multi-tiered mythology and symbolism involving the creation myth of the town, the 9 holy rivers, the 20 springs of Hindu mythology, the 16 endowments of kingship, and a celestial symbolism comprising the guardians of the quarters, the sun and the zodiac. The Mahamakam festival is a southern equivalent of the great Kumbh-mela festival held at the confluence of the Ganges at Prayag in northern India, the Kaveri, as great nurturer, replacing the sacred Ganges.

Kumbakonam, through its complex evolution has earned itself the exalted reputation of the Benares of southern India; like its northern counterpart it is in the centre of a pancha krosa or fivefold pilgrimage landscape.⁶ It has come to embody multiple religious themes: it resembles Gaya in northern India in that it comprises shrines of the 18 gods worshipped there; and it is referred to as bhaskara kshetra (a landscape of light), in accordance with Hindu customs, because it has shrines dedicated to all the principal Hindu deities. Kumba-

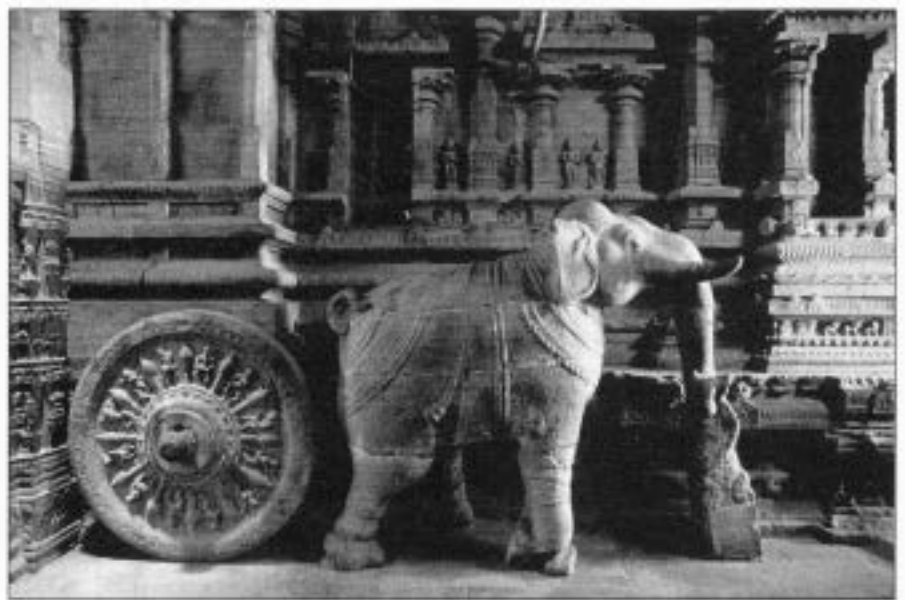


Figure 10 *The Sarangapani temple: chariot iconography on the southern facade of the sanctum.*



Figure 11 The Mahamakam festival of 18 February 1992 at the Mahamakam tank; several hundred thousand pilgrims congregate at the site every 12 years, together with important politicians (the gigantic figure in the background is a wooden cutout of the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Mrs Jayalalitha).

konam's foundations as a city refer back to its Chola origins, over a thousand years ago. The fifteenth-seventeenth century Vijayanagara-Nayaka reappropriation, as well as the eighteenth-century Maratha intervention, subtly embodied spatially both historical and cosmic time. And Kumbakonam's fluvial myths, transferred down to the present day, elevate it to the status of a pan-Hindu tirtha or celestial threshold, one that is as primordial as the beginning of creation.

Notes

1. For more detailed accounts of Kumbakonam see V. Nanda, "Cambridge Kumbakonam Project: the ritual topography of Kumbakonam", *Architectural Design* 124, 30–34, 1996, and V. Nanda & P. Carl (eds), *Kumbakonam: a sacred city and royal city of South India* (London: British Museum Press, in press for 2000).
2. R. Champakalakshmi, "Growth of urban centres in South India: Kudamukku–Palaiyarai, the twin city of the Cholas", *Studies in History* 1, 1–31, 1979.
3. D. T. Sanford, "Ramayana portraits: the Nageshvara temple at Kumbakonam", in *The legend of Rama: artistic visions*, V. Dehejia (ed.), 43–60 (Bombay: Marg Publishers, 1994).
4. F. l'Hernault, P. R. Srinivasan, J. Dumarçay, *Darsuram: epigraphical study, étude architecturale, étude iconographique* (Paris: Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1987).
5. V. Nanda, G. Michell, A. L. Dallapiccola, 1997, "The Ramasvami Temple at Kumbakonam", *South Asian Studies* 13, 1–17, 1997.
6. This term reflects five levels of the Hindu cosmos that are manifested as five concentric pilgrimage circuits around the city.