The Place of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār in South Indian History

Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār’s poetry bridges the classical Tamil world and the devotional milieu in which Sanskritic myths are localized in a Tamil landscape and infused with Tamil modes of relating to the divine. Although Ammaiyār does not directly praise the Tamil land or Tamil language as the later Śaiva poets do, her poetry is animated by literary and cultural elements that are defining features of the classical Tamil world. Ammaiyār makes reference to many of Śiva’s heroic deeds as related in Sanskrit myths and epics, but she is especially devoted to Śiva dancing in the cremation ground, a scenario that resonates profoundly with Tamil ideas of death and dessicated wastelands. In order to understand how Ammaiyār’s poetry situates Śiva in the Tamil landscape, in this chapter I present a brief historical overview of the milieu in which Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār composed her poetry, including the literary traditions that inform her work.

A vivid portrait of life in Tamilnadu in the early centuries of the Common Era emerges from the earliest surviving Tamil literature, which was likely composed or compiled between the first century BCE and the fifth century CE. Literature can convey certain social and cultural facts, but since it “refracts as much as it reflects,” it is necessary to “enter the realm of the symbolic values that writers express through the ‘facts’ and ‘objective entities’” (Ramanujan 1999a, 52). In classical Tamil literature human behavior and natural landscape are key components of a poetic system that reflects and structures the values and aesthetics of the Tamil world during the centuries leading up to the beginnings of devotional Hinduism. By outlining a chronological development of cultural and literary ideas and practices in Tamilnadu, I aim to convey the complex environment that Richard Davis describes as the “shared religious culture where divine figures, literary tropes, and ritual forms could all be reincorporated, reformulated, and resituated for polemical purposes” (Davis 1999, 218).
This early literature consists of the first Tamil work on grammar and poetics, the Tolkāppiyam; ten long poems by ten different poets called the Pattuppāṭṭu; and eight anthologies (Eṭṭutokai) of poetry that is divided into two types: akam, “inner” or love poems; and puram, “outer” or public poems about kings, war, heroism, death, codes of conduct, and so on. These poems were composed by Pulavāns, “wise men.” Although the poems are clearly rooted in an oral culture, they are syntactically too complex to have been simply extemporized, and may have been composed in writing; A. K. Ramanujan calls the poems “witnesses to a transition” (1985, 273). The Brāhmī script, which was probably the first script used for Tamil, was introduced into Tamilnadu in approximately the second or third century BCE. From ancient times two forms of Tamil seem to have been in use: a spoken form with many dialects, and a written, standardized language. Several centuries after the texts’ composition, this classical literature was labeled “Caṅkam” literature, referring to three caṅkams or academies of poets that, according to legend, each met for thousands of years in ancient kingdoms in or near the city of Maturai that were subsequently washed away by floods. In addition is the Tirukkuṟaḻ, traditionally attributed to Tiruvaḷḷuvar and probably composed 450–550 CE, a compendium of aphoristic verses about ethics, virtue, love, politics, and economic issues that continues to be esteemed in Tamil culture. The Tirukkuṟaḻ delineates the social and moral milieu in which Ammaiyaṟ composes her poetry, but it is the akam and puram poetry that Ammaiyaṟ draws on to give voice to her uncompromising love of Śiva and her conviction that he is the divine hero who conquers evil and through whom the devotee can conquer death. The varied scenes of love and heroism in the classical poetry become the stages of devotion to Śiva and the arenas of his heroic activities.

In the Tolkāppiyam the akam and puram poems are characterized by tiṇai, which is most often translated as “landscape” or “poetic situation.” But Martha Ann Selby suggests these words are inadequate to convey the scope and boundary of this concept. She says, “Tiṇai is, in a very real sense, the artistic space circumscribed by the poets, along with everything contained therein. I tentatively choose the word ‘context’ to translated tiṇai, but what must be understood is that this context includes geographical space, time, and everything that grows, develops, and lives within that space and time, including emotion” (2000, 33). There are seven tiṇai or contexts for akam and for puram poems; each of the five major or “middle” contexts is assigned to a geographical landscape that contains characteristic flowers, birds, animals, people, drums, and gods; each landscape is connected to
a particular season, time of day, and subcategory or theme (tur-ai); and finally, each context has a fixed behavior, mood, or emotion that on one level defines the context. The behavior or mood of each akam poem is a phase in the love relationship between a man and a woman. The five main akam contexts, named after a flower or plant found in each landscape, are: mountain (kur-iñci), first union; pasture (mullai), waiting for a lover to return; countryside (marutam), infidelity and resentment; seashore (neytal), lamenting the lover’s absence; and wasteland (pålai), separation. Many of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyyār’s poems take place in a pålai landscape. The last two situations in akam poetry are not related to a particular landscape and are not the subject of true love poetry, which is well-matched or proper love. These situations are mismatched love (perunti£ai), and unrequited love (kaikki¬ai). The characters in akam poetry are not named, but are restricted to a few anonymous, conventional types: the hero and heroine, the heroine’s foster-mother, friends and messengers, the concubine. The poet does not speak directly to the reader or use the poet’s own voice, but rather allows the reader to overhear the characters’ dialogue or monologue: The heading for a poem might be “What Her Girl Friend Said.”

According to the Tolkæppiyam the seven ti£ai for pur-am poems are parallel to the landscapes for akam poems; six of the seven are given a plant name. The seven pur-am contexts are: cattle raid (ve†ci), invasion (vañci), siege (uÒiñai), battle (tumpai), victory (våkai), struggle, endurance (kåñci), and praise of heroes (på†å£). Although the correspondences between the akam and pur-am contexts may not be immediately clear, the Tolkæppiyam commentators explain that the first union of lovers, for instance, corresponds to a cattle raid because both are first encounters, and take place in the middle of the night, in the mountains, and in secret. In contrast to the overheard dialogues of conventional character types in akam poetry, the pur-am poets speak in their own voices, or as a bard or drummer, specify individuals by name, and portray particular circumstances and “real” people in history. The contexts of the poetry provide a provocative outline of some of the important social, cultural, and religious themes in Tamilnadu during this period, as well as the imagery that will inform the work of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyyār. Ammaiyyār speaks in her own voice as Šiva’s pēy and ardent devotee. She builds a vivid and adoring image of Šiva as the Lord of the Universe by evoking his many heroic deeds and describing his attributes in detail.2

Although akam and pur-am poems are categorized separately, in practice they overlap and intersect: The two genres of poems differ in theme and emotion, but share a repertoire of imagery, “a
live vocabulary of symbols; the actual objective landscapes of Tamil country become the interior landscape of Tamil poetry” (Ramanujan 1994, 108). In this poetry nature and culture are not opposed, but work together to embody meaning concretely, not through metaphysical abstraction but through physical detail (Ramanujan 1985, 286–287). The geographical landscape becomes a kind of map of the human self. Selby cites a vivid example of one akam poem in which a woman talking to her mother laments her absent lover; in the last few lines of the poem elements of the seashore (neytal) context are literally mapped onto her body:

The place between my breasts
has filled up with tears,
has become a deep pond
where a black-legged
white heron feeds.

Here the woman’s salty tears correspond to the pond on the seashore; the heron is her lover, feeding on her. In this poem the environmental imagery remakes the woman’s body. Although every poem in the anthologies does not unify the geographical landscape with the speaker’s body this literally, the geographical imagery of the poetic system stimulates and articulates the transformation of human emotions, thoughts, and desires (Selby 2000, 52–54).

Whereas akam poetry is concerned with the many phases of human erotic love, puram poems focus largely on kings and heroes. Many (if not most) of the akam poems are in the voices of women, as opposed to the overwhelmingly masculine voices of the puram poems. During the Caṅkam age there were many small kingdoms, or nāṭus; the most powerful kings of the time were the Cōlas, Čeras, and Pāṇṭiyas. The king was expected to rule justly, ensure a rich harvest, be a generous patron, and achieve victory on the battlefield. War seems to have been virtually constant, and many of the puram poems describe in vivid detail the extraordinary heroism and strength of the king and his warriors and the bloody carnage on the battlefield. Victory and a hero’s death on the battlefield both bring honor; having a good name in public is a central concern. Women in the akam poems fear that their lovers will betray or desert them, thereby robbing them of their chastity (karpū), and their good public name. Wives and mothers in the puram poems dread hearing gossip that their husbands or sons were killed running from the enemy, and rush onto the battlefield to see their men’s wounds.3
When she heard the many voices saying . . . “her son was afraid of the enemy army and he showed them his back and ran!” then rage overcame her . . . And when she found her son who was scattered in pieces, she felt happier than she had been the day she bore him.⁴

Widows were expected to maintain their chastity after their husband’s death by living restrained, ascetic lives, giving up their ornaments and shaving their heads. Some widows chose instead to accompany their husbands in death, sometimes by immolating themselves on their husbands’ funeral pyres, or taking their own lives and being buried in the same urn with their husband. A memorial stone (natukal) was erected to house the powerful spirits of heroic warriors and chaste wives, which would be worshiped with offerings. Heroic warriors earned war anklets (kalal), made of gold, which symbolized their victory over their enemies and which were distinct from the anklets worn by women (cilampu). The war anklet is one of the elements signifying heroism that Kārikkāl Ammaiyār uses to convey the victorious stature of the god Šiva.⁵

Although Caṅkam poetry is concerned mostly with the elite members of Tamil society, the cār-ør or “noble ones,” and reflects their aristocratic values, the poems are also populated by many groups or castes (kuti) of people that are identified by their occupation and which form a Tamil social hierarchy or caste system that existed before the North Indian varṇa system spread into South India and the two systems fused together. Several important castes are considered to be of lower birth, or Pulaiyans, people whose occupations brought them into contact with polluting or threatening forces, such as death, and who were restricted in their interactions with higher castes. Many of these low castes were bards and musicians that performed a variety of functions in society; they were clearly distinct from the Pulavans or poets who composed the poems. Bards sang the praises of kings, and played drums in battle. Drumming is particularly important in the Caṅkam world; many groups of drummers are frequently mentioned.⁶ Dancing is also an important activity; the poetry describes many festivals at which crowds of people, especially girls, come together in joyful dances, such as the tundaṅkai. Music and dancing are integral to the ritual worship of Murukan, whose name means “one who is youthful, beautiful.” He is one of the few named deities in the Caṅkam poems, and appears to be an indigenous Tamil god.⁷
Drums were integral to the king’s activities, especially warfare; they contained a kind of power that infused the king and his army. Each ruler possessed symbols of authority such as a tutelary or protected tree and a royal drum, or *muracu*; a victorious king would cut down his enemy’s tree and take his drum. The *muracu* or royal drum was bathed and offered sacrifices of blood and liquor. Before the battle began, a drummer beat a huge drum to call the soldiers to the battlefield; drums were said to cause enemies to be defeated. When a warrior did not achieve victory and was wounded, drummers and bards played for him, providing a kind of protection from the forces unleashed around him. In many poems the carnage of the battlefield is described in gruesome detail: rivers of blood flow, dead bodies pile up, and severed body parts are scattered everywhere:

How can the war flare up now and soldiers brace against advancing troops?  
Demonesses, garishly glowing, plunge their hands into the wounds of warriors who have died there in battle and smearing their hair red with the blood, they dance then to the sad throb of the pa‰ai drums beaten in slowed pain.  
Vultures are feasting on the army . . .

The battlefield draws spirits and other creatures that feast on dead bodies and inhabit places of death. The Tamil word for demon or ghoul is *pēy*, the word Kāraikkāl Ammaiṉār uses to describe herself in her poetry. Male and female demons are common beings in particular Ca∫kam landscapes, along with spirits that are generally malevolent and cause suffering. The battlefield is another arena where particular kinds of dances take place. Here the *tuṉkai* is performed by female demons and corpses that rise up in response to the dance’s rhythm; Koṉavai, the goddess of war and victory who lives in the forest, is also said to dance the *tuṉkai*. Demons dancing the *tuṉkai* appear in Kāraikkāl Ammaiṉār’s poetry.

The battlefield is a place of brutal death, but it is also a realm of transition; the death or defeat of one king brings increased honor and power to the conqueror. The heroic king brings in “an unfailing harvest of victorious wars” (Ramanujan 1985, 115), and the battlefield is often homologized to the process of the harvest:

. . . I have come here, to the field where the gurgling blood rises
and spreads across the earth, since a cloud of glowing weapons has rained down the ripe, wished-for fruit and when the rich curving grain is cut, the stems heap up and elephants circle like buffaloes to thresh and reduce the many piles of fallen corpses. . . .

In addition to the battlefield, fearsome beings inhabit the cremation ground, another place of death and transition that is described in many puram poems. The burning ground is salty, dessicated, a wasteland where only plants that can survive extreme heat and aridity can live. Owls shriek; scavenging animals, ghouls, and demonesses feast on the rotting flesh of corpses left among the ash and bones. Low-caste men perform the funeral rituals. On the battlefield the victorious warrior fights his way to honor and fame; but the cremation ground is everyone’s ultimate destination:

. . . This ground, it is the end of everyone in the world, looks upon the backs of all men, and hasn’t seen anyone yet who will look upon its back.

The word most often used in the poetry for cremation ground or burial ground is kāṭu, which also means “forest,” “jungle,” “desert,” “dry land,” “place,” and “border, limit.” In Tamil Caṅkam culture the kāṭu is conceived of as a dangerous, uninhabitable wilderness area outside of human control, and has traditionally been contrasted with the nāṭu, the agricultural and inhabited land, and the īr or village, a distinction that continues to be a vital part of Tamil culture today.

The kāṭu is connected to the pālai landscape of akam poetry, the wilderness or desert wasteland that signifies separation. The pālai is a kind of drought-resistant tree; this landscape has no specific geographical location, but is any area that the midday summer heat has burned into a wasteland. Pālai poems may describe the lovers’ elopement and the hardships they endure, including the pain of separation from their families. But the most common pālai poems describe the hero’s solo journey through a harsh and dangerous wasteland in search of wealth or education so that he can marry his lover. The wasteland is a chaotic territory of transition between settled, inhabited landscapes.
The extreme heat, dessicated plants, and wild animals and birds mark the landscape as an alien world that the hero endures by thinking of his beloved. Many of the poems move from outside to inside, from the desolate landscape outside to the hero’s heart and the image of the lover he had to leave. The *puram* situation of *vēkai* or victory in war also takes place in a wasteland; the poems praise the achievement of the hero, who has survived the dangers of the battlefield and endured the long separation from his wife.\(^{13}\)

In the post-Caṅkam period this poetic system will be used to portray outer and inner devotional landscapes. The longing for a lover and the pain of separation in *akam* poems will be redirected toward god in devotional poetry. Likewise, the praise of a king or hero that is central to *puram* poetry will provide a language and set of images through which devotees envision and connect to the divine. Fear of public shame will become the sense of separateness from others as an emerging devotional community. The cremation ground with its fearsome creatures will carry over into Kāraikkāl Ammāiyār’s poetry, but will convey a devotional vision of the world.

Caṅkam literature reveals a social, cultural, and religious milieu characterized by North Indian as well as indigenous Tamil elements. Scholars have long debated how much of the culture depicted in the poems comes from North India, and how much is “pure” Tamil. The elements of the poetry and the Caṅkam world discussed so far seem to predate the introduction of North Indian culture, but cultural elements from regions north of the Tamil country were clearly impacting the South Indian world from early on; the way that Sanskrit language and North Indian ideas and practices were selectively woven into Tamil culture is hugely important in the later development of devotional Hinduism, as well as in Kāraikkāl Ammāiyār’s poetry.\(^{14}\)

Some features in Caṅkam literature obviously spread into the Tamil land from the north. Vedic sacrifice, Brahman priests, and Vedic literature had spread throughout the subcontinent by the turning of the Common Era. There are many descriptions of Brahmans reciting the Vedas and performing sacrifices in Caṅkam literature. Brahmans apparently lived apart from other groups and kept away from polluting animals like dogs. At least some Brahmans were vegetarian; some of the poets were Brahmans. Some poems make references to the epics *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*. The *Tirukkuṟṟaḷ* is organized according to the Sanskrit three aims of life, which also appear in the poems: *dharma* (*arpam*) or morality; *artha* (*porul*) or wealth, public life; and *kāma* (*iṟṟam*) or sexual pleasure. There are several descriptions of ascetics who have renounced the world and practice *tapas*, or austerities in
order to achieve liberation, *mukti*, the fourth aim of human life. Many poems include the doctrine of karma and reincarnation.\(^{15}\)

Brahmanical deities from the North were well known in the Tamil country by the Caṅkam period. Indra, Kubera, Varuna, Paraśurāma, Balarāma, and the devoted wife Arundhati are mentioned in the poetry. There are several references to Māyōṇ, the Tamil name for Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa.\(^ {16}\) Although the name “Śiva” does not appear, there are a few references to the god Śiva in Caṅkam poetry: He is described variously as blue-throated, having an eye in his forehead, wearing a crescent moon, bearing Gaṅgā in his matted hair, and possessing a banner marked with a bull. He gave the gods victory when he conquered the three-walled city with an arrow; he prevented the demon from raising the mountain he is sitting on. He is associated with Death. He is called the Primal Being, and is associated with the four Vedas. He is also described as the god worshipped by sages or Brahmans in a temple.\(^ {17}\)

The *Cilappatikāram*

According to Zvelebil (1973, 172), “the first literary expression and the first ripe fruit of the Aryan-Dravidian synthesis in Tamilnad” is the epic *Cilappatikāram*, “The Story of the Anklet,” written in approximately the fifth century and traditionally ascribed to the Jain prince-ascetic, Ilāṅkō Atikal.\(^ {18}\) The epic tells the story of the hero and heroine, Kōva-lan and his chaste wife Kaṇṇaki. The action takes place in all three of the Tamil kingdoms: the Cōla, in the northeast part of the Tamil country; Pāṇṭiya, in the south and southeast; and the Cēral, on the west coast (what is now the state of Kerala). The epic is divided into three books, each of them named after the three capitals. Each book embodies a different dimension: the Caṅkam poetic categories of *ākam* and *pur-ām*, to which is added the mythic (*purāṇam*) realm. “The Book of Pukār” explores and celebrates the many facets of love through *ākam* conventions; “The Book of Maturai” describes the heroine Kaṇṇaki’s destruction of the city of Maturai and her transformation into the goddess Pattini; “The Book of Vañci” uses *pur-ām* conventions to praise the king and celebrate his victory in war. *Cilappatikāram* encapsulates many facets of the complex cultural and religious milieu of the Tamil country in which Kāraikkāl Ammaiyyār composed her poetry. Part of the “Aryan-Dravidian synthesis,” the epic expresses a broader portrait of Śiva than is seen in Caṅkam literature, including his connections to both Sanskritic and Tamil goddesses. In the epic Śiva performs...
his dance of destruction in the cremation ground, an image that is central to Ammaiyaṅ’s devotional world. The doctrine of karma and rebirth is integral to the Jain epic, as well as to Ammaiyaṅ’s poetry, although the paths to liberation from rebirth are different for each poet. In addition to the epic’s rich evocation of the Tamil world that informs Ammaiyaṅ’s poetry, the figure of Nīlī, who plays a part in Kōvalaṅ’s fate, bears important associations with the story of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyaṅ and the temple town of Tiruvāṅkāṭṭu.19

The story of the epic Cilappatikāram begins in the Cōla capital of Pūkār (Pūmpukār) on the east coast, where the hero and heroine, Kōvala and Kāṇṇaki, belong to prominent merchant families. They marry and enjoy many years of wedded bliss. Then Kōvala abandons his wife for the courtesan Mātavi; Kāṇṇaki is heartbroken but faithfully waits for his return. Kōvala squanders all of his wealth on Mātavi, but sours on their affair and returns, remorseful, to Kāṇṇaki, who as a devoted wife not only accepts him back but also gives him one of her jeweled anklets to sell in order to begin a new life. They travel through the forbidding, desolate forests to the city of Maturai, the capital of the Pāṇṭīya kingdom, along the way meeting the Jain ascetic Kavunti, who becomes their guide and companion. In the forest a Brahman on pilgrimage from the Cōla country tells Kōvala that Mātavi has given birth to their daughter Maṭimālai, who is the heroine of the great Tamil Buddhist epic Maṭimēkalai. But Kōvala had a dream about his own death and fears returning to Pūkār, so he and Kāṇṇaki continue on toward the capital.

Kōvala leaves Kāṇṇaki in the care of a herdsman woman outside the city and reaches Maturai alone. He fateful sells the anklet to the king’s goldsmith, who has stolen the queen’s anklet but falsely accuses Kōvala of the theft. The Pāṇṭīya king responds hastily to his goldsmith’s accusation and without a trial orders Kōvala to be executed. When Kāṇṇaki hears about her husband’s tragic death, she rushes into the city and finds him in a pool of blood. She has a vision that he ascends to heaven. Kāṇṇaki then goes to the palace to confront the king; she breaks open her anklet to prove Kōvala’s innocence: her anklets contain rubies; the queen’s contain pearls. The king realizes his guilt and his failure to rule righteously and dies; the grief-stricken queen dies after him. Kāṇṇaki then tears off her left breast, curses the unrighteous city, and throws it at Maturai, her chaste power burning the city down, sparing only “Brahmans, good men, cows, chaste women/The old, and children.”20 The goddess of Maturai comes to Kāṇṇaki and tells her that events in Kōvalaṅ’s past life resulted in his death in this life. He was a man named Bharata and worked for
a king; he mistakenly thought a merchant called Caṅkamaṇḍ was a spy and beheaded him. Before Caṅkamaṇḍ’s wife Nīli took her own life, she cursed Bharata. The goddess then tells Kaṇṇaki that she will soon join her husband in heaven.

Kaṇṇaki journeys west to Neṭuvēl (Muruka) Hill in the Cēral country. There the local hill dwellers witness the gods taking her up to heaven. The hill people take their story to the Cēral king, Ceṅkuṭṭuvaṇ; a poet tells the king about the tragic events in Maturai. The queen wants Kaṇṇaki to be worshiped as a goddess. Ceṅkuṭṭuvaṇ declares that he will install a memorial stone (naṭukal) for Kaṇṇaki brought down from the Himalayas. During his march north he conquers several North Indian rulers, who then carry the stone south to the capital city Vañci, where the king installs the stone image of Kaṇṇaki, now the goddess Pattini (“chaste woman”), in a temple. In response to the Brahman Māṭalaṇ’s counsel, the king performs the royal sacrifice (råjasūya) to establish himself as the ruler of the entire Tamil country, and along with the invited kings, worships Pattini. ²¹

Cilappatikāram contains many elements that are familiar from Caṅkam poetry. The epic is filled with detailed descriptions of music and dance, including the frenzied dancing of a possessed temple oracle (Canto 12). The god Murukaṇ is prominent, and in a few songs the mother of a love-sick girl thinks she is possessed by him (Canto 24). After burning the city of Maturai, Kaṇṇaki, now a widow, goes to the temple of the goddess Ko‰‰avai and breaks off her bangles (23.181). Kings are praised for their righteous rule, their generosity, and their prowess in battle. Demons and demonesses (pēymakal) dance on the battlefield and feast on corpses; the battlefield is compared to a cremation ground (Canto 26). When Kaṇṇaki and Kōvalaṇ leave their families in Pukār and go to Maturai, they travel through a threatening, desolate pālai landscape (Canto 11). When the Cēral king hears the story of Kaṇṇaki’s ascension to heaven, he installs a memorial stone (naṭukal) to the woman who was deified through her power of chastity (The Book of Vañci). This is the first Indian record of the deification of a woman of the Vaiśya caste. ²²

In addition to familiar Caṅkam characteristics, the epic encompasses many elements of northern provenance that have clearly pervaded the Tamil country by the fifth century and become integral to the culture. The doctrine of karma and reincarnation is central to the epic; Kōvalaṇ’s untimely death is precipitated by his actions in a previous life (23.145–176), and Kaṇṇaki’s tragic situation results from her failure to observe a vow for her husband in an earlier life (9.54–56). One of the main characters, Kavunti, is a Jain ascetic; she
serves as a guide and protector for the hero and heroine, and when she hears about the terrible events in Maturai, she starves herself to death (uṣṭāṇāyana/sallekhana) in penance (27.82–83). In addition to Jains, there are references to Buddhists, yogis, ascetics, Ajivikas. Girls perform the dance of Kṛṣṇa (Māyava) and his consort Piṇḍai; several other avatars of Viṣṇu are praised (Canto 17). The Caṅkam goddesses Aṉāṅku and Koṟṟavai are identified in the epic with several Sanskritic goddesses, including Durgā, who rides a lion and killed the buffalo demon, and Umā/Pārvatī, the consort of Śiva (Canto 12; 20.34–36). Kāli is said to live in the forest, like Koṟṟavai (20.39). When Kaṃkaki arrives at the palace gates to confront the king about her husband’s death, the gatekeeper describes the enraged and vengeful woman to the king as “not Koṟṟavai . . . not Aṉāṅku . . . not Kāli . . . not Durgā” (20.35–44), foreshadowing the divine power she utilizes in destroying the wicked city.

In contrast to his marginal presence in Caṅkam poetry, Śiva plays a larger, though not major, role in Cilappatikāram. There are references to Śiva throughout the epic, and some of his attributes are familiar from Caṅkam poetry. Drums sound from his temples (13.137–138; 14.7–14). In the epic Śiva is described as residing in the Himalaya mountains (28.225–229); as manifesting in himself the entire universe (26.55–59); and as causing events through his grace (30.140–141). Śiva is also explicitly connected to the goddesses Umā and Kāli; one passage refers to the marriage rituals for Umā and Śiva (25.132–134). There are also two descriptions of Śiva dancing his dance of destruction, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Early Devotional Poetry

In general, Caṅkam poems did not convey overtly religious themes; although some poems allude to various deities and practices related to them, these are secondary to the focus on the natural and social worlds. There are, however, two exceptions from the later Caṅkam period (ca. fifth–sixth century CE) that mark the beginning of devotional poetry in the Tamil land. One of the ten long poems, the Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai, praises the Tamil god Murukan, who by this period had become fused with the Sanskrit god Skanda, the son of Śiva and Pārvatī who was born to battle the demons. In the Caṅkam literature he is associated with the hills, and is said to live in trees, especially the katampu tree; he rides a peacock; and he is called Ceyōn, the Red One. He is also called katavul, a term for the divine that in a later period designates a
transcendent divinity, but which in the Caṅkam context appears to mean a deity one should sacrifice to or worship. Murukan is also associated with another important word for divine power in Caṅkam literature, aṇāṅku, which means “affliction,” “suffering,” “fear,” and “killing,” as well as “deity,” “celestial woman,” “demoness,” and “demon.” Aṇāṅku can possess a person or dwell in a particular object; Murukan is said to cause and dispel aṇāṅku, especially in young women. In several akam poems, the mother brings a love-sick girl to the vēḷaṇ, Murukan’s priest, not knowing the girl is in love and thinking she is possessed. The vēḷaṇ, “he who has a spear,” dances his frenzied possession dance, the veriyāṭu, to diagnose the girl’s affliction. Sometimes a priestess or woman diviner (kaṭṭuvici) was called on. In other worship contexts, crowds of girls perform the veriyāṭu; lutes, pipes, and drums are played. This kind of ecstatic connection to an immanent divine will carry over into devotional worship.

The Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai is a “guide poem” (āṟṟuppaṭai), a puram form in which two bards meet on a road and converse; one bard praises his patron’s generosity and prosperous realm, and urges the other bard to visit this ruler’s court to seek his patronage. In the Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai a Murukan devotee tells a neophyte about the beautiful god and the six hills that are his sacred dwelling places in Tamilnadu. The six sacred places are identified with Murukan’s six faces, so that the Tamil land is made into the body of the god. Instead of the wealth given by a king, Murukan bestows personal salvation on his worshipers. Here the Sanskrit gods Viśu, Śiva, Indra, and Brahmā are subordinated to Murukan. He has a Sanskrit wife from the heavens, Teyvāyāṇai, the daughter of Indra; and an earthly Tamil wife, Vaḷḷi, daughter of a hunting tribe.

In this poem, the poet describes one of the places where Murukan dwells, accessible to his devotees:

Where goats are slaughtered,
where grains of fine rice are offered
in several pots with flowers,
and His cock-banner is raised . . .

wherever devotees praise
and move His heart;

where His spear-bearing shamans
set up yards
for their frenzy dance . . .
and in the awesome vast temple
where the daughter of the hill tribe
worships . . .
    singing kuriñci songs . . .
where the daughter of the hill tribe
sounds Murukañ's favorite instruments
and offers worship to Murukañ
till He arrives
and comes into her
to terrify enemies and deniers . . .

He dwells in all such places
and I speak what I truly know. (Ramanujan 1985, 215–217)

In this poem the description of the worship of the god evokes
the Caṅkam descriptions of the frenzied dancing and music that were
integral to the worship of Murukañ, the participation of women in
his worship, and the shaman-priest's and the woman's possession by
the god. Murukañ dwells in the hills; the "daughter of the hill tribe"
sings kuriñci songs. In the akam landscape the heroine meets her lover
in the hills; here, the woman is possessed by the god. In the Caṅkam
poetry the worship of Murukañ was a subsidiary element, serving to
highlight the love-sickness of the heroine; here the akam landscape
localizes the god, who is praised in the puṟam mode as a powerful
god whose heart is tender, but who terrifies his enemies, and lives in
a vast temple in a beautiful realm. In the eleventh century the Tirum-
urukāṟṟuppaṭai was included in the Tamil Śaivite canon; it is the only
Caṅkam poem that is also part of a devotional corpus.28

The Caṅkam anthology Paripāṭal originally contained seventy
poems to the gods Cēvvel (Cēyōn/Murukañ), Tirumāḷ (Viṣṇu), the
river Vaiyai (Vaikai), and the Pāṇṭiya capital Maturai located on
this river. Only twenty-four poems have survived, seven of them to
Tirumāḷ, and they are the only Caṅkam poems dedicated to Viṣṇu.
These are likely the earliest devotional poems in Tamilnadu, as well
as in India.29 One Paripāṭal poem celebrates one of Tirumāḷ's sacred
places, Mālirurunkuṟam, "Tirumāḷ's Dark Hill," near the city of Maturai
and still the location of a popular Viṣṇu temple, called Alakar Köyil.
The praise of the god's sacred place parallels the puṟam praise of the
king's prosperous, well-protected realm, as well as the close attention
to the natural landscape in akam poetry.

. . .

fragrant blue lilies
blossom in all its ponds,
the branches of *aśoka* trees
growing at their edge
are covered with blossoms...
the beauty of this place
is like the Black God himself...
the name *Iruṅkuṟṟam*

has spread far and wide,
on this great, bustling earth
it boasts fame in ages past
for it is the home of the dear lord
who eradicates delusions
for people who fill their eyes
with his image. (Ramanujan 1999d, 241)

The *Paripāṭal* poems incorporate elements of the *puṟam* mode of praise
for a heroic king, but instead celebrate the heroic feats and generosity
of the god. In Ramanujan’s translation of *Paripāṭal* 2 we read:

... 
O lord fierce in war,
the discus in your hand
cuts off the sweet lives
of enemies:
heads fall and roll
wreaths and all...
and lie dead at last
in a mire of blood.

That discus
consumes enemies at one stroke:
Death is its body,
it’s color the leaping flame
of bright fire
when gold burns in it.

The battle scene, with the heads rolling in blood, echoes the macabre
battlefield scenes depicted in *puṟam* poetry; but here we know the hero
is not a human king, but the god Tirumāl/Viṣṇu because of the discus
in his hand, a reference from Sanskritic myth and iconography.

In another verse of the poem Tirumāl’s grace is said to be “a sky
of rain-cloud/fulfilling everyone.” Rain signifies generosity in the Tamil
land where rains are often scarce; in puñam poetry a ruler’s generous patronage is often likened to the rain. In addition, here the darkness of a storm cloud evokes Tirumāl’s blue-black color. In contrast to the shaman-priest (Vēlan) who performs rituals to Murukaṇ, in later verses of this poem Tirumāl is identified with a carefully delineated Vedic sacrifice performed by Brahmanas. Paripāṭal 3 celebrates Tirumāl by saying “In the Vedas, you are the secret. /Of the elements, you are the first.” In other verses of the Paripāṭal poems Tirumāl is the One, beyond understanding, transcending time, the essence of the universe. The Tamil sense of the sacred as immanent in special places, people, and things localizes Tirumāl in the Tamil land, but he is at the same time conceived of as the transcendent Absolute. These early poems represent the first time in India that philosophical and religious concepts are conveyed in a vernacular language instead of Sanskrit. They extend the classical landscapes and motifs into the devotional realm, but it is with the hymns of the poet-saints that devotional poetry truly flowers.30

Bhakti

Historical changes during the late Caṅkam era would help usher in the period in which devotional poetry flourished. In North India the Guptas (320–540 CE) identified themselves as bhāgavatas, devotees of god; they officially sponsored Viṣṇu, whose mythology became part of their politics, and they built temples. The earliest purāṇas or mythological texts were recorded during this period. In South India the Kalabhras (Tamil Kaḷappāḷar) ruled from the third to the sixth century; the historical record for this period remains thin, but it is clear that the Kalabhras supported Buddhism and Jainism, both of which prospered during this period—Jainism, in particular, flourished. From approximately 550 to 900 CE, the Pallavas ruled from their capital in Kañcipuram, and the Pāṇṭiyas reigned in Maturai. Both of these kingdoms were powerful supporters of the devotional traditions, patronizing Brahman priests and constructing temples. People and influences from the north moved southward more rapidly during this period. Devotees composed devotional poems to Śiva and Viṣṇu, becoming the poet-saints of the traditions, and initiating the vernacular bhakti movements that would spread throughout the subcontinent.31

Bhakti is usually translated as “devotion,” but the English word does not adequately convey the multivalent meanings of the Sanskrit term, which is derived from the verb bhaj, which means “to share
with,” “bestow,” “serve.” Bhakti encompasses the sense of participation and love between god and devotee that characterizes the hymns of the devotional poets. Bhakti developed from Vedic roots, revisioning both the Vedic notion of action in the world in pursuit of religious goals and the Upaniṣads’ solitary pursuit of liberation. In the dominant Upaniṣadic path, the renouncer engages in reverent meditation on the Ātman-Brahman in order to realize the identification of his true Self with the Absolute. Theistic conceptions of the impersonal Absolute emerge in two late Upaniṣads: Viṣṇu in the Kaṭha and Rudra-Śiva in the Śvetāsvatara. In these texts the Lord is the transcendent creator who is also immanent in the human self. It is also in these two texts that the concept of divine grace appears. The Śvetāsvatara emphatically proclaims that the creator of the universe and the cause of liberation are one God. Through the power of his austerities, his deep love (bhakti), and God’s grace, the devotee knows the Lord and achieves salvation.

Bhakti as the path to salvation through the love of God is fully explicated for the first time in the Bhagavad Gītā (ca. 300 CE), in the context of the Mahābhārata. This text introduces concepts that will remain central to later bhakti texts and practices, including the poetry of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyyār. In this text Kṛṣṇa explains the path of bhakti-yoga to the hero Arjuna: one should act in the world but relinquish the fruits of action and dedicate them to the Lord. Like the renouncer the bhakta should sever his passionate attachment to worldly goals, yet unlike the renouncer he should not pursue salvation physically removed from the social world. In contrast to the Vedic structure of performing rituals in prescribed spaces and at prescribed times, the bhakta should at all times be focused on the Lord, performing all action as a sacrifice to him, pursuing liberation in the world. This interaction between the perspectives of renunciation and commitment to action in the social world is inherent in the bhakti path.

The bhakti path that Kṛṣṇa lays out in the Gītā is not simply one of faith or reverence (śraddhā). In a vivid illustration of the breadth of the bhakti path, Kṛṣṇa delineates four kinds of bhaktas: the afflicted (ārta), the seeker of wealth (arthaśāsīṁ), the seeker of knowledge (jñāṇaśāsīṁ), and the sage who has the true knowledge of the Self (jñāntā). Kṛṣṇa says the jñāntā is the highest of the bhaktas:

They are all noble, but I regard
the man of knowledge to be my very self;
self-disciplined, he holds me
to be the highest way.
At the end of many births, 
the man of knowledge finds refuge in me; 
he is the rare great spirit who sees 
"Krishna is all that is."^{35}

Krṣṇa makes it clear that knowledge is necessary for liberation from the cycle of rebirth. The bhakta’s direct emotional connection to the Lord is grounded in the understanding that Krṣṇa is the Absolute, the All. This tension between knowing the Lord as the Supreme Principle of the universe (nirguṇa), and as the loving individuated God with particular attributes (saṅguṇa) is integral to the hymns of the devotional poets, including Ammaiyār.^{36}

The Tamil poems of the Paripāṭal and the Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai are considered the first devotional poems written in a vernacular language in India.^{37} Between the fifth and tenth centuries the Tamil poet-saints, the āḻvārs and the nāyānanmārs, wrote devotional poetry to Viṣṇu and Śiva, wandering from place to place singing about god, spreading temple worship, creating a sacred geography and firmly establishing the bhakti traditions in Tamilnadu. Their poems became part of the sectarian traditions and are still sung in temples today.

The twelve āḻvārs, “those who are immersed,” wrote poetry to Viṣṇu. The tenth-century devotee Nāṭamuṇi collected and arranged their poetry in the nālāyira-tiviya-pirapantam, “The Four Thousand Sacred Hymns.” The mutal miṟvar or “first three” poets were Poykai, Pūtam, and Pēy, and probably lived in the sixth or early seventh century, possibly during the same time as Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār. These three poets each composed an antāṭi of one hundred verses in vēṇpā meter, all similar in content. This is the same form as two of Ammaiyār’s poems. The lives of the āḻvārs were collected in the Sanskrit text Divya-suri-caritam, “Characters of the Sacred Ones.” According to legend, the three poets met each other at the temple in Tirukkōvalūr, where, as they huddled together in the darkness during a severe thunderstorm, they felt the presence of a fourth person and realized that Viṣṇu had joined them. The legend says that their close encounter with the Lord inspired each poet to write the first verse of his antāṭī. Pēy (“Demon”) and Pūtam (“Ghost”) probably received their names because they were “god-possessed.” The poetry of these first three Vaiṣṇava saints is more personal than the classical poetry or the early devotional poems; the personal voice of the poet characterizes bhakti poetry. Viṣṇu temples usually contain shrines with figures of the twelve āḻvārs.^{38}
The Place of Kāraikkāl Ammaiyaṟ in South Indian History

The Tamil Śaiva Tradition

The sixty-three nāyaṇmārs, “leaders,” are the saintly devotees of Śiva canonized in the Śaiva tradition. Only six of these saints wrote poetry, including the mūvar mutalikaṟ, the “First Three Saints,” commonly known as Appar (Tirunāvukkaracar), Campantar (Tiruṇācampanṭar), and Cuntarar (Nampi Āṟūṟar). The corpus of their hymns would later become known as the Tēvāram, part of the central Tamil Śaiva scripture. Cuntarar, who lived two centuries after Appar and Campantar and whom scholars date between the late seventh century and the first half of the ninth century, is responsible for compiling the list of saints in an eleven-stanza poem called Tiruttutottakai, “The List of the Holy Devotees,” in which he names sixty-two saints. A fourteenth-century work, the Tirumur-ai kanta purãṇam, “The Story of the Discovery of the Sacred Text,” describes how the eleventh-century Cōḷa king Apayakulaccēṟa, after hearing some of the poems sung to Lord Śiva in a temple, asked the poet Nampi Āṇṭar Nampi to find and organize the hymns of the Tamil saints. Helped by the god Gaṇeśa, Nampi found the ant-eaten manuscripts of the saints’ hymns in a sealed room behind the dancing Śiva in the great Chidambaram temple. Nampi organized the hymns into the Tamil Śiva-bhakti canon, the Tēvāram: The mūvars’ hymns, the Tēvāram, form books one through seven; the Tiruvācakam and Tirukkovaiyår of Māṇikkavācakar became the eighth book. The ninth-century Māṇikkavācakar was never added to the official list of sixty-three saints, but he and the First Three are considered the nāḷvar, the “Four Revered Saints” in the Śaiva tradition. The tenth book of the Tirumūṟai contains musical compositions probably sung in Cōḷa temples. Book ten is Tirumūḷar’s sixth- to seventh-century work Tirumantiram, considered the earliest work of Śiva Siddhānta philosophical speculation. The eleventh book is a compilation of many texts spanning several centuries, including the poems of Aiyaṭṭaṟkalavarkōṅ, a Pallava ruler and early Śiva devotee, and Kāraikkāl Ammaiyaṟ, who is considered by many scholars to be the earliest poet to write poems to Śiva in Tamil. Nampi Āṇṭar Nampi’s work, including his hagiography of the Śaiva saints, concludes the eleventh book. The twelfth and final book of the canon is the twelfth century Periya Purāṇam, “Great Story” of Cēkkilār, the definitive narrative of the sixty-three saints.

One of the major issues in scholarship on bhakti is whether, and to what degree, bhakti is a movement of social protest against caste hierarchy, status, and orthodoxy. Overall, bhakti poetry extols
the meaninglessness of caste in the eyes of the Lord, in contrast to
the overtly aristocratic poetry of the classical age. However, approxi-
mately one-third of the Tamil poets are of Brahman origin, including
the four major Śaiva poets and eight of the twelve ālvārs. Āṇṭāl is the
only female ālvār; Kāraikkāl Ammaiyaṉ is the only female nāyānmār
poet. A large segment of the sixty-three Śaiva saints comes from the
high-ranking Vēḻāḷar peasant caste and the chieftains associated with
them.41 Both the Vēḻāḷar landowners and the Brahmans supported the
worship of Śiva and Viṣṇu. At the same time that the Śaiva poets sang
about the temples emerging in the Tamil land, temple rituals were
being created and compiled in Sanskrit liturgical texts called Āgamas,
the earliest of which appeared by about 700 CE. The Āgamas are con-
sidered revealed texts, originally coming from Śiva himself; they detail
all aspects of temple worship, including the transformative rituals that
lead the priests (ācāryas) and adepts (sādhakas) toward liberation. The
Pallava kings instituted the singing of the nāyānmārs’ hymns during
worship in the temples, a practice the Cōḷas continued.42
Śaiva Siddhānta, “perfected Śaivism,” was the system of phi-
losophy and ritual practice that emerged from the Āgamas, and was
the dominant Āgamic school by the ninth and tenth centuries. The
origins of Śaiva Siddhānta are not entirely clear, but it apparently
developed in central and northern India, then spread to the south
through Brahman preceptors connected to temples or to monastic lin-
eages. Śaiva Siddhānta seems to have emerged as a distinctly named
order in approximately the ninth century, after the rise of Śaṅkara’s
non-dualist Advaita Vedānta philosophy, when observers divided the
greater Śaiva community into four orders: the Pāśupatas, Kālāmukhas,
Kāpālikas, and Śaivas. From the tenth through twelfth centuries, Śaiva
Siddhānta spread to many regions of India. Due to political changes
in North India in the thirteenth century, Śaiva Siddhānta lost its royal
patronage and rapidly died out in northern areas.

In the Tamil land, inscriptions state that the Pallava king
Siṃhavishṇu (ca. 550–610) studied the Āgamas, and the Pallava king
Narasimhavarman II (ca. 690–728) was well informed about the Śaiva
Siddhānta path. In the sixth- to seventh-century work the Tirumantiram,
the tenth book of the Śaiva canon, Tirumūḷar refers to nine Āgamas,
as well as specific Āgamic rites and temple worship. All three Tevāram
poets Appar, Campantar, and Cuntarar mention the Āgamas; these
bhakti poets delineated movements that self-consciously created Tamil
Hindu solidarity centered on temple worship. As Śaiva Siddhānta
became established in the Tamil land, several endogamous clans of
the Ādiśaiva or Gurukkal (Kurukkal) Brahman subcaste transmitted

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