

Notes and News

Obeisance to Viṣṇu-Tirumāl: Vaiṣṇava Transmission for a Caṅkam Manuscript

Among the roughly 150 surviving manuscripts on palm-leaf and paper of the earliest Classical Tamil literature, the Caṅkam corpus (consisting of two hyper-anthologies of erotic and heroic poetry which dates back perhaps to the beginning of the Common Era), the larger part appears to have been transmitted in a Śaiva surrounding. Well-known is the role institutions such as Tiruvāṭuṭurai Mutt, a Śaivaite monastery in the Tañcāvūr area, played for Tamil literary history. But even though the exact provenance of many manuscripts is not known today, their Śaiva affiliation is visible in the numerous small invocations of Śaiva deities predominantly at the end, but also in the margins of manuscripts. The function of these invocations is not immediately obvious, but it stands to reason that, apart from being simply auspicious signs, they might have been seen as a minimal justification of copying a secular text in a religious institution. Sources from the 18th century onwards testify to a rather militant consciousness of religion which had little to say in favour of older non-Śaivite poetry. Quite frequently, the invocations are also marked by a change of script; while the poetic text and its colophon are written in Tamil, what follows is written in Grantha script.

However, in a number of cases the short invocations and blessings are not of Śaiva, but of Vaiṣṇava denomination. Next to nothing is known about the share that Vaiṣṇava institutions might have had in the transmission of the corpus. The following case is noteworthy, firstly for the fact that the manuscript begins (not ends!) with four fully-fledged devotional verses in various metres, followed by the usual series of minimal invocations. Secondly, the manuscript in question constitutes the major witness of a second strand of transmission available for one of the old anthologies, the Akanānūru, the 400 long Akam (love) poems. Since the manuscript is incomplete, it is not clear whether it also contained the otherwise well-attested traditional end colophon. The manuscript is on palm-leaf, well-preserved and beautifully written, and is stored at the U.V. Swaminathaiyar Library in Chennai [no. UVSL 107] (abbreviated as C3 in the critical edition prepared by the Caṅkam project). The four verses, on a first, separate leaf, are dedicated to Nammālvār (the most important of the early Vaiṣṇava poet-saints), to the spiritual teacher, to Viṣṇu-Tirumāl and to a goddess (Śrī or Sarasvatī), in a row with several short prose invocations of various Vaiṣṇavite entities (among them again Nammālvār). This part ends with some minimal information on the copying of the manuscript and a short characterisation of its content, naming as the title of the anthology ‘*netuntokai*’ and referring to the miniature commentary, traditionally named *kiḷavi-s*, by the term *turai*. This shows that

apart from the well-attested vulgata, mostly transmitted in Śaiva institutions (such as Tiruvāṭuṭurai mutt), there is a second line which appears to have been transmitted in a Vaiṣṇava context. As is usual, the manuscript is not dated, but both the script and the state of preservation make a date before the early 19th century look improbable.

In what follows metrical transcript and translation of the four stanzas are presented. The first among them is found in the laudatory preface (*ciṟappuppāyiram*) of a late poetological treatise, the Māraṅalaṅkāram (16th c). The others are not yet identified and, to my knowledge, have not been printed before. The slightly irregular metres are presumably Ācīriya Viruttam(?), then two four-line Venṇpās, finally an Ācīriyam.¹

*tēṇ arā makil to- ṭaiyalum mauviyum tiru kiḷar kuḷai kātum
kāṇ arā malar, tiru muka cōṭi- yum kayi- rava, tu- var, vāyūm
mōṅgam ākiya vaṭivamum mārpamum muttirai tiru, kaiyum
ñāṇa tēcikaṅ caraṅam, tā- maraiyum, eṇ nayaṅam, viṭṭ’ akalāvē.*

“The nectar garland of unending sweetness
and the hair tuft and the ears with lustre-emitting ear rings
and the light of the sacred face, an ever-fragrant flower,
and the water-lily coral mouth
and the form that became silent
and the chest and the sacred hands posed in worship
and the feet lotuses of the teacher of spiritual knowledge –
[they all] do not leave my eye.”

*pārāta kalvi pirapanta poruḷ, aṅaittu
nēr.āka muṇ vantu niṟkumē tērātu
tēvīru koṅṭa tiru, mālai mu, tamil
tērnar, vīr’ a[[[aitt’ utitta nāl.*

“All the meaning of the Prabandha’s of unseen erudition
came straight before [me and] stayed, unsought,
on the day that arose, summoning with distinction those who examine
the three[-fold] Tamil of the sacred garland that distinguishes god.”

*eṇrum tirumārke ālarvēṇ em perumāṇ
eṇrum eṇṇakkē pirāṇ avāṇ eṇrum
piravāta pēr, āḷaṅ pēr, ā- yiramum
maravātu vāḷttuka, eṇ vāy.*

“Always I am the servant of Tirumāl, my great one.
Always he is my lord. Always,
without forgetting, let my mouth laud
the thousand names of the unborn great man.”

*tavaḷat tāmarait tāt’ ār kōyil
avaḷai porrutum arum, tamil kuṟittē.*

“We shall worship her
in the pollen-filled temple of white lotus,
pondering rare Tamil.”

Eva Wilden | Hamburg

¹ For the metrical split, I am indebted to my EFEO colleagues T. Rajeswari and G. Vijayavenugopal; the one printed verse is scanned in a different way by the editor of the Māraṅalaṅkāram, T.V. Gopal Iyer. For its identification, I thank Jean-Luc Chevillard.