

Vṛṣabhavāhanamūrti in Early Medieval Cult and Art

As is well-known, the gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon are provided with *vāhanas* of their own. Śiva is usually associated with the *vṛṣabha-vāhana* ('bull vehicle'), popularly called Nandi¹. Among the vehicles of the various gods, Nandi and Garuḍa are important². The Lord who appears in the company of Nandi or mounted on him is called Vṛṣabhārūḍa and Vṛṣabhavāhanamūrti respectively (Sastri 1916: 113–14; Rao 1971: 352–4; cf. Dhaky 1972: 183–210). From a survey of early medieval temples (c. A.D. 550–850), sixteen images of this kind have been reported (Kalidos 1988a: 389). They are evenly distributed over the Upper and Lower Deccan and in the Far South (5, 8 and 3 respectively). Most of these images are *koṣṭha-devatas* (Soundararajan, 1981, pls. XXVIa, LIb, LVIIa), as found in the cave and structural temples of Ellora (5), Bādāmī (1), Paṭṭaḍakkal (4), Aihole (2), Alampūr (1) and Māmallapuram (3) (Kalidos, 1988a: 108, 188, 309). A few years ago, the Archaeological Survey of India spotted a shrine, close to the Shore Temple (fig. 1; cf. Tadgell 1990: fig. 91), at Māmallapuram. It is unique among the early medieval temples because an image of Vṛṣabhavāhanamūrti is housed in its *garbhagrha*, being the only one of its type³. The present article examines the significance of the piece with reference to the contemporary Tamil *bhakti* literature, i.e. the *Tēvāram* of the Nāyanmārs, who spearheaded the Śaiva *bhakti* movement in the Far South. By and large their ideas spread far and wide and are

¹ The *Śivasahasranāma*, or 'The Thousand Epithets of Śiva' (*infra*) refers to two other aspects of His in this regard. Epithet no. 495 calls the Lord *Vāyuvāhana* '(One) of the vehicle of Vāyu (the God of Wind)'. Another epithet (no. 532) calls the Lord *Bhūtavāhana*, i.e. 'He who mounts a *bhūta* (dwarf demon)'.

² Nandi's status is on a par with Śiva himself and so he is called Nandikeśvara (*infra* n. 5). In a temple of Śiva, Nandi is the watch and ward, and is called Adhikāra-Nandi. Images of zoomorphic Nandi appear on the top of walls, *tirumatiḷ* or *tirucurṟālai*, as custodian of the establishment (Dhaky, 1972). Garuḍa commands a similar status in the Vaiṣṇava tradition. Both Nandikeśvara and Garuḍālvār are credited with separate chapels, falling exactly in front of the *garbhagrha* in temples of Śiva and Viṣṇu respectively.

³ The earliest association of Śiva with *vṛṣabha* is traced in the coinage of the Kuṣāṇas (Joshi 1984: 54).

likely to have provided the incentive for the vigorous propagation of iconic art in the Deccan (Pathy 1980; Kalidos 1988b).

To begin with, a brief description of the monument is given. The shrine (fig. 2), which is about 5–6 feet in height, appears to be a monolithic replica⁴ of the *drāviḍa-ṣaṭaṅga-vimāna* that we find at Māmallapuram, and it is likely that a miniature copy of the Arjuna- or Valayaṅkuṭṭai- or Piḍāri *ratha* (Kalidos 1984: figs. 2–4, 6–9, 12; Tadjell 1990: figs. 89–90) was created under Rājasimha Pallava (*alias* Vṛṣimhavarman II, A.D. 690–729) as per testimony provided by the inscription therein. The three basic members of a *drāviḍa-vimāna*, viz., plinth, *pāda* and *vimāna* ('superstructure') are present in addition to other features of the plinth (*upapīṭha* and *adhiṣṭhāna*) and *vimāna* (*prastara*, *śikhara*, *gṛīva* and *kalaśa*). The *pāda* is open, facing east, and its back wall, i.e. the *garbhagṛha*, accommodates the *mūlavar*, the cult image, who is Vṛṣabhavāhanamūrti (fig. 3). An important feature of the shrine is that it is circular in plan. Such temple types (see the *garbhagṛha* of the Soundararāja Perumāl temple at Tirumāliruñcōlai, near Madurai: Rajarajan 1995), are rare. Miniature shrines were common in late ancient India, as may be observed at Udayagiri near Vidiśā. On the rocky slopes to the right of the famous Śeṣaśāyī relief there are small cellae where images of *sthānaka*-Viṣṇu, Sūrya-Nārāyaṇa, *sthānaka*-Kevala Nārasiṃha and others are carved in similar way (Williams 1983: fig. 35; Simha 1982: fig. 45). Similarly in Bādāmī, the metropolis of the Western Cālukyas, some of the boulders close to the Bhūtanātha tank at its eastern extremity provide for miniature cellae, including one of Śeṣaśāyī (Soundarajan 1981, pl. CXIVb) and Trimūrti. Such rock-cuts are also found at Uṇḍavalli (ibid.: pl. CXXI) and at Moghulrājapuram in the Kṛṣṇā basin. In Tamil Nadu a similar rock-cut cave is found in the village of Kīlmāvilaṅkai (Srinivasan 1961: pl. XXXVIIA), housing an image of *sthānaka*-Viṣṇu in its cella.

In his aspect of Vṛṣabhavāhanamūrti the god is seated on a bull in *mahārājajālāsana*. He is *caturbhuja*: the right-back hand seems to hold a long *triśūla* ('trident'), which is upside down and planted on earth; the right-front hand possibly holds a bow; the left-front hand seems to hold an arrow while the other is just lifted up. The Lord's other features are not clear, excepting the *jaṭāmukuta*. The couchant Nandi is zoomorphic.

Other features are effaced due to the reason that this small monument, along with its auxiliary units (i.e., a zoomorphic Boar, a well and an amphitheatre have been buried under a sand dune for centuries. The ravage of time and the saline wind and water have played havoc.

The Tamil *Tēvāram* hymns provide excellent clues to visualise a form of Śiva in which the Lord is *vṛṣabhārūḍa* or *vṛṣabhavāhana*. They⁵ handle a number

⁴ In fact, it is neither structural nor monolithic. It consists of three or four pieces, cut from a rock and assembled one above the other in structural pattern.

⁵ The *Tēvāram* trio are Tiruñāṇacampantar, Tirunāvukkaracar (*alias* Appar) and Cuntarar, authors of *Tirumuṟais* 1–3, 4–6 and 7 respectively. The total number of hymns, mostly quatrains, cross a margin of 8,000 (Kalidos 1994). On the Nāyaṁmārs, see Dehejia (1988).

of epithets in the form of crisp and criptic *nāmāvali* ('epithet'), as may be found in liturgical texts like the *Śivasahasranāma* of the *Līṅga Purāṇa*⁶. A few Tamil epithets are: Viṭaiyan (1:2:4)⁷, Viṭaiyān (7:38:1) or Viṭaiyār (1:66:1), 'Lord of Bulls'; Viṭaiyūrvar (1:28:3), 'one who moves (seated) on the Bull'; Ēramarperumān (2:239:11), 'Lord seated on Bull'; Viṭaiyuṭaivētiyan (2:235:9), 'the expert (learned in the *Vedas*) who possesses the Bull'; Viṭaiyūrtiyān (2/253/3), 'Lord of the Bull-mount'; Viṭaiyēruvētamutalvan (7:33:5), 'The foremost of the *Veda* who is mounted on a Bull', and Nantimākālar (Skt. Nandimahākāla) (4:56:8).

The bull is *viṭai* (1:11:1, 3:266:1) in Tamil, a term which implies the idea of being 'erect', a pointer to sexual potency⁸, or *iṭapam* (Skt. *vṛṣabha*) (3:337:2, 5:221:19) or else *ēru* (1:24:4, 10), literally 'climb' or 'rear', again a pointer to sexual potency, or *erutu* (1:67:1, 7:11:). He is called Nanti (Skt. Nandi) and the name, Nandimahākāla means that he is equal to Mahākāla, the God of Death (e.g. Kalāsamhāramūrti) and to Kāla, 'God of Time'⁹. In other words, Śiva is supposed to ride upon time and death, the eternally cyclic process in the cosmic void (Kramrisch 1981: 277). The bull is belligerent and serves the same purpose as the *simha* ('lion') of Devī and Airāvata of Indra. Therefore he is called *pōrviṭai* 'war Bull' (1:40:1, 5:126:3) or *aṭalēru*, 'heroic Bull' (2:156:2). In addition to this, it should be kept in mind that Viṣṇu is supposed to be bull-incarnate. So the bull is called Mālviṭai, where Māl stays for Viṣṇu (1:56:7), other synonyms being Ceṅkaṇmālviṭai, 'the red-eyed bull' (5:150:8, 7:86:5), Ceṅkaṇviṭai, 'the red-eyed (Viṣṇu) Bull' (4:4:6), or Veṅkaṇmālviṭai (2:235:9) and Vētamālviṭai (7:57:3). With reference to his zoological species, he is called *pacu*, 'cow' (2:221:9, 7:15:8). He is virulent, a terrific being comparable to an elephant (*kollēro vēlamō*, 6:239:4). Nāṇacampantar refers to a number of bulls in a *patikam* on Tiruvālavāy (m. Madurai; 3:297:6). They are Kaṇakananti (Skt. *kanaka*, 'gold'), Puṭṭananti (Skt. *puṣpa*, 'flower'), Pavaṇananti (*pavaṇa*, 'air'), Kumaṇamācūṇakananti, Kuṇakunanti, Tivaṇananti and Moḷikoḷa-aṇakananti. The hymn has a bearing on the rendition of Jains who were dominant in Madurai during the pre-*bhakti*

⁶ The *Śivasahasranāma* records not less than eight epithets (nos. 41, 374–9, 516). They are *Vṛṣarūpa* 'in the form of a Bull' (no. 41), *Nandine*, 'the Lord, Nandi' (nos. 374, 377), *Nandikarāya* 'The Lord holding Nandi in a hand (i.e. the flag)' (nos. 375, 516), *Nandiśvara* (no. 376) and *Nandivartana* ('one abiding in the Bull' (no. 379). The *Śivāṣṭottara* includes two epithets (nos. 39–40): *Vṛṣāṅkāya*, 'one whose part is the *vṛṣabha*', and *Vṛṣabhārūdā*. The *Śivapañcākṣrī*, another book meant for regular recital, calls the Lord *Vṛṣadvāja*, '(one holding) the Bull banner' (v. 5), *Vṛṣabheśvara-vāhana* (v. 7), and *Nandipriya* (v. 8), '(one) fold of Nandi'.

⁷ These and the following numbers refer to the *Tēvāram*. For example, in 1:1:4, 1 is the number of *Tirumurai*, 2 of *patikam* and 4 the verse. The text followed is that of the *Śaiva Siddhānta Nūṇpatippu Kalakam*.

⁸ Nandi is an incarnation of *dharma* appearing on Śiva's banner (*infra*; Kramrisch 1981: 408; Kalidos 1991: pl. II) and a symbol of sexual virility (Kalidos 1991: 274; cf. Rajarajan, 1991).

⁹ The image of Kāla, seated on a pile of *śava*'s in the *Yajñasālā* (Sapta Mātṛka's enclave) of Ellora is significant in this context (Kalidos 1992: fig. 6).

epoch, whom the saint, Nānacampantar, is said to have dislodged (Kalidos 1991: 263–4). So these names may refer to the Jain monks who were fighting with the Śaivas¹⁰. Cuntarar adds another name, Namaṇananti (7:33:9). The bull's colour is white (*veḷḷai* 1:51:3, 1:67:1, 7:3:3).

The bull is Śiva's emblem. He appears on the Lord's flag, called *viṭai-cētarukoṭi*, *viṭaicērkoṭi* or *viṭaiyārkoṭi*, 'flag of bull' (1:13:10, 1:15:6, 1:24:6), or *iṭapakkoṭi* (Skt. *vr̥ṣabhadvaja*; 1:12:10, 6:291:6) or *ērukoṇṭakoṭi*, 'flag bearing bull' (1:24:4, 10). The colour of the banner is also white, *viṭainaviluṇkoṭiyāṇai veṇkoṭi* (2:204:11).

The main function of the bull is to serve the Lord as a mount, *ūrti* (5:126:3). The Lord mounts the bull, *ēru* (1:1:1, 1:29:6, 1:51:3), or moves seated on it, *ūru* (1:1:5, 1:28:3). He may be seated on the bull all alone or along with his consort, Umā. To quote:

taṅkāṭaliyun tāmumuṭanāyt taṇiyōr viṭaiyēri
'He along with his beloved, mounted on a bull' (1:71:2)

Umaiyoṭum veḷḷai viṭaimēl
'along with Umā (seated) upon a white bull' (2:221:3).

As *vr̥ṣabhārūḍa*, the Lord moves as the *Vedas* are chanted, music played and dance performed (*maṛaiyār pāṭalāṭalōṭu Mālviṭaimēl varuvār*; 1:73:3). That is to say that the Lord moves, seated on Viṣṇu–Bull, when the *Vedas* are chanted to the accompaniment of music and dance. The Lord is attended by Maṛaiyār (Skt. *Vedis*), 'the learned' (1:73:3), dwarf demons (*pūtañcūḷa*, 1:67:1) and *bhūtagaṇas* (*pūtakanam*, 1:40:1).

The attributes of *vr̥ṣabhārūḍa* are *maḷu*, (Skt. *taṅka*, 'battle-axe'; 1:29:6) or *erikonmaḷu*, 'burning axe' (1:88:7), *elumpu*, 'bone(s)' (2:253:3), *veṇṇūl*, 'white (sacred) thread' (1:67:1), and the holy ashes (*veṇṇīru*, 2:253:3). The apparel consists of the flayed skin of a tiger (*puliṇṇuritōl*; cf. 1:67:1).

The importance of *vr̥ṣabhārūḍa*'s cult is pointed out by Nānacampantar in a hymn which is unique among the tens of thousands by the Nāyaṇmārs because it is the first in the series. The saint, Nānacampantar, who is supposed to have drunk the divine milk of the Cosmic Mother in the temple at Cīrkālī (Tañcāvūr district) visualizes Śiva in his *vr̥ṣabhavāhana* aspect. The saint says that Śiva wears an ear-stud, is mounted on the bull, has a crescent fitted on the tiara and the holy ashes smeared all over the body, is extolled by one seated on a flower (i.e. Brahmā) and is the presiding God of the temple at Pīramāpuram (m. Cīrkālī):

¹⁰ Short Tamil–Brāhmī inscriptions in the caves of Tamilnadu wherein rock-cut beds for Jain monks were donated give a number of names; Raman (1977: 264–6) recalls a few of them, collected from original works by scholars like Professor R. Champakalakshmi. They are Ajanandi who came under *nandigaṇa*. There were *senagaṇas*, the names being Indusena, Dharmasena (cf. *Tēvāram* 7:33:9, which notes), Tarumacēṇaṇ and Sandhusena. Others are Cāttantēvaṇ, Pātamūlattāṇ, Guṇasena, Gautama, Ajitasena, Neminātha and Govardhanadeva. The *Tēvāram* (3:297:4) also enlists a few –*senā* names.

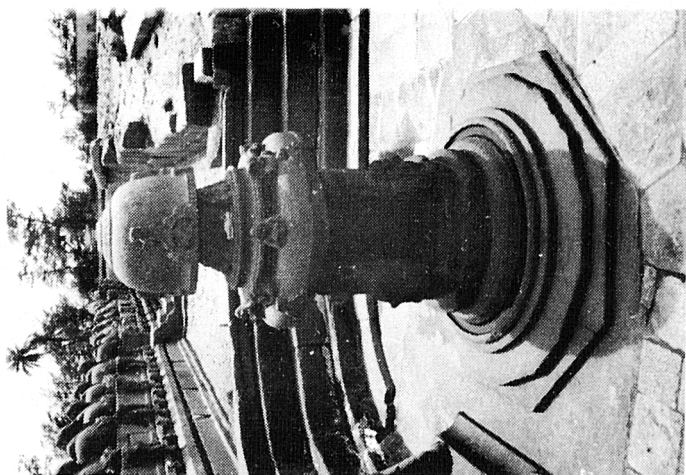


Fig. 2 – Māmallapuram, Vṛṣabhavāhānamūrti temple
(photo by the author).



Fig. 1 – Māmallapuram, Vṛṣabhavāhānamūrti temple in the Shore Temple
compound (photo by the author).



Fig. 3 – Vṛṣabhavāhānamūrti (photo by the author).

Tōṭuṭaiya ceviyaṇ viṭaiyēṛiyōr tūveṇṇmaticūṭik
Kāṭuṭaiya cuṭalaippoti pūciyeṇ ullāṅkavar kaḷvaṇ
Ēṭuṭaiya malarāṇ muṇaiṇāt paṇintēṭta varuḷceyṭa
Pṭiṭuṭaiya Piramāpuram mēviya pemmāṇivaṇṇrē (1:1:1).

The importance of the cult of Vṛṣabhavāhanamūrti is backed by literary evidence, but no image had been observed so far in the *garbhagrha* of any contemporary temple, from Elephanta in western India to the Kṛṣṇā basin in eastern Āndhradeśa and Udayagiri in central India to Viḷiṇam in the Far South. Image of Trimūrti appear in many of the small caves of Ellora and Bhairavakoṇḍa; *sthānaka*–Śiva is found in a cella of the Trimūrti *maṇḍapa* at Māmallapuram; Somāskanda occupies the cellae of the Shore Temple, of the Mahiṣāsuraṃardinī *maṇḍapa*, the Dharmarāja *ratha* and the Atiraṇaṇḍa *maṇḍapa*, again at Māmallapuram; Umāsaḥitamūrti appears on the cellae of the Pirāṇamalai and Tirumalai cave temple (Rajarajan 1992: 489–94, fig. 4); Ardhanārīśvara appears in the *garbhagrha* of the Umaiāṇḍavar cave temple of Tirupparaṅkuṇṇam (Kalidos 1993: 96–8, fig. 4), and Dakṣiṇāmūrti occupies the cella of the Irunilamkōḍu cave temple in Kerala¹¹. For the Vṛṣabhavāhanamūrti, the only evidence is the one from the New Temple at Māmallapuram, which gets an important place in the early medieval Śaiva religious tradition of India. The corroborative evidence provided by the Nāyaṇmārs adds another dimension to the problem under study because it proves beyond question that Vṛṣabhavāhanamūrti was an actual cult image.

To end the discussion, it can be added that the medieval South Indian *śilpaśāstras* enumerate the *pratimālakṣaṇas* of Vṛṣabhavāhanamūrti or Vṛṣabhārūḍa: for the former, see the *Sakalādhikāra* of Agastya (*adhyāya* 8) and the *Kāśyapaśāstra* (*paṭalam* 67), and for the second, see the *Śilparatna* (*adhyāya* 22) and the *Śrītatvanidhi* (3:39), which quotes the *Kāraṇāgama* as the source of authority. These works have been published by the Tañcāvūr Sarasvatī Mahāl Library with the original in *grantha* and the Tamil translation. The details given in these texts tally with the iconography of the bronzes that were popular in Tamilnadu during and after the Cōla period. They are agreed on the iconographical details of the *sthānaka* ('standing') type, making Śiva's right leg *sūsthika*, planted on earth, and the left one *kuñcita*, slightly bent and raised. The bull is to stand behind the Lord. The *Kāraṇāgama*, cited in the *Śrītatvanidhi*, talks of a seated type in which Śiva is with Devī and Gaṇapati. He embraces Gaṇapati with a hand in *kaṭaka hasta*, while the other hands hold the *japamālā* (i.e. *akṣamālā*), 'rosary', *ṭaṅka* and *mṛga*, 'gazelle'. He wears the *sakalalabharanas* and offers all auspiciousness to his devotees. Such types are likely to have been popularised from the later medieval period onwards since the Cōlas gave shape to the classical Vṛṣabhārūḍa bronzes. On a pillar of the *Kampattaṭi-maṇḍapa* ('pavilion of flagstaff', meant for Śiva) in the Mīṇākṣī–Sundareśvara temple of

¹¹ The importance of the cult of such forms of Śiva has been discussed by Kalidos (1988a).

Madurai, there is an image in which Śiva and Devī appear with Gaṇapati, but it pertains to the Rāvaṇānugrahamūrti and not to Vṛṣabhavāhana. The Cōla bronzes illustrating Vṛṣabhārūḍa (Rao, 1914–16, II, 2: pl. CVIII), mostly follow the Agastya–sakalādhikāra, Kāśyapīya and Śīlparatna. Therefore, the early medieval tradition seems to have depended mainly upon the Tēvāram for giving shape to its imagery of the Lord with the Bull vehicle.

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