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Vijayanagara and Post-Vijayanagara Representations of the Story of Madivelaiah

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In this paper I will re-examine a peculiar sculptural theme, of a hero grappling with an elephant, which I had discovered while doing my field work at Hampi, the site of the erstwhile city of Vijayanagara, which served as the capital of the Vijayanagara Empire from the mid-14th century to 1565 CE. My field work at the site was spread over a decade commencing from 1985. The theme I am discussing is a rare type of carving commemorating a hero or a godling. In all, seven such reliefs were found scattered over the site and also in the site museum located at Kamalapuram. These sculptures were found carved exclusively on boulders or stone-slabs, and were located either in the open or in some sort of a shelter. For a very long time I was not aware of either who the hero was or what story was being represented in these sculptures.[1] While between 1985 and 2001 my research was on Hampi, in order to study the religious and art traditions that developed at the site, since 2002 the focus has shifted to the wider area of the Vijayanagara Empire and of its successor states, the Nayaka kingdoms of southern India, in order to examine the art and visual culture of South India throughout the Vijayanagara Empire and its successor states. My knowledge of the capital city has helped me to understand better the regional developments in southern India both during and after the Vijayanagara period. Vice-versa, the study of art and culture in the wider area of the empire and under Vijayanagara's successor states has resulted in a deeper understanding of developments within the capital city. This has indeed been the case with these sculptural representations at Hampi which had baffled me as long as my research work was focussed on the site of Hampi.

The remains of the imperial city of Vijayanagara, popularly known as 'the Hampi ruins', are spread over an extensive area of about 25 square kilometres. The outer lines of its fortifications and the suburban areas, however,

include a much vaster area, from Anegondi in the north to the modern town of Hospet in the south.

To facilitate documentation at the site, the entire area has been divided into four functional zones, namely, the 'sacred centre', the 'irrigated valley', the 'urban core' and the 'suburban centres'. The 'sacred centre' is to the south of the Tungabhadra. Here are located not only the largest temple complexes of the city, but also numerous smaller temples and shrines, sculptures and inscriptions. To the south of this is the 'irrigated valley', an agricultural zone. The 'urban core' occupies a series of hills, ridges (such as a ridge that runs along its northern limits) and valleys to the south of this agricultural belt. The greatest concentration of population was located here, as is revealed by the traces of residences, tanks, wells, roads, stairways, potteries and also of the remains of many small shrines and larger temples. A complete circuit of fortification wall surrounds the 'urban core'. In the south-west end of the 'urban core' is the 'royal centre' within its own enclosure wall, only parts of which have survived. Beyond the 'urban core', further south and west, as far as modern Hospet, were laid out the great residential suburbs. A few isolated temples in these are all that remain of these once populous 'suburban centres'.

For the purpose of documentation, the 'Preliminary Map Series' prepared by the scholars of the Vijayanagara Research Project, was used. The greater metropolitan region of Vijayanagara has been put on a grid by these scholars with the core part of the city falling in the centre of the grid. This metropolitan area is divided into 25 equal squares (Fig.1). Each square is designated by a capital letter, from A to Z (omitting I). Square 'N', of
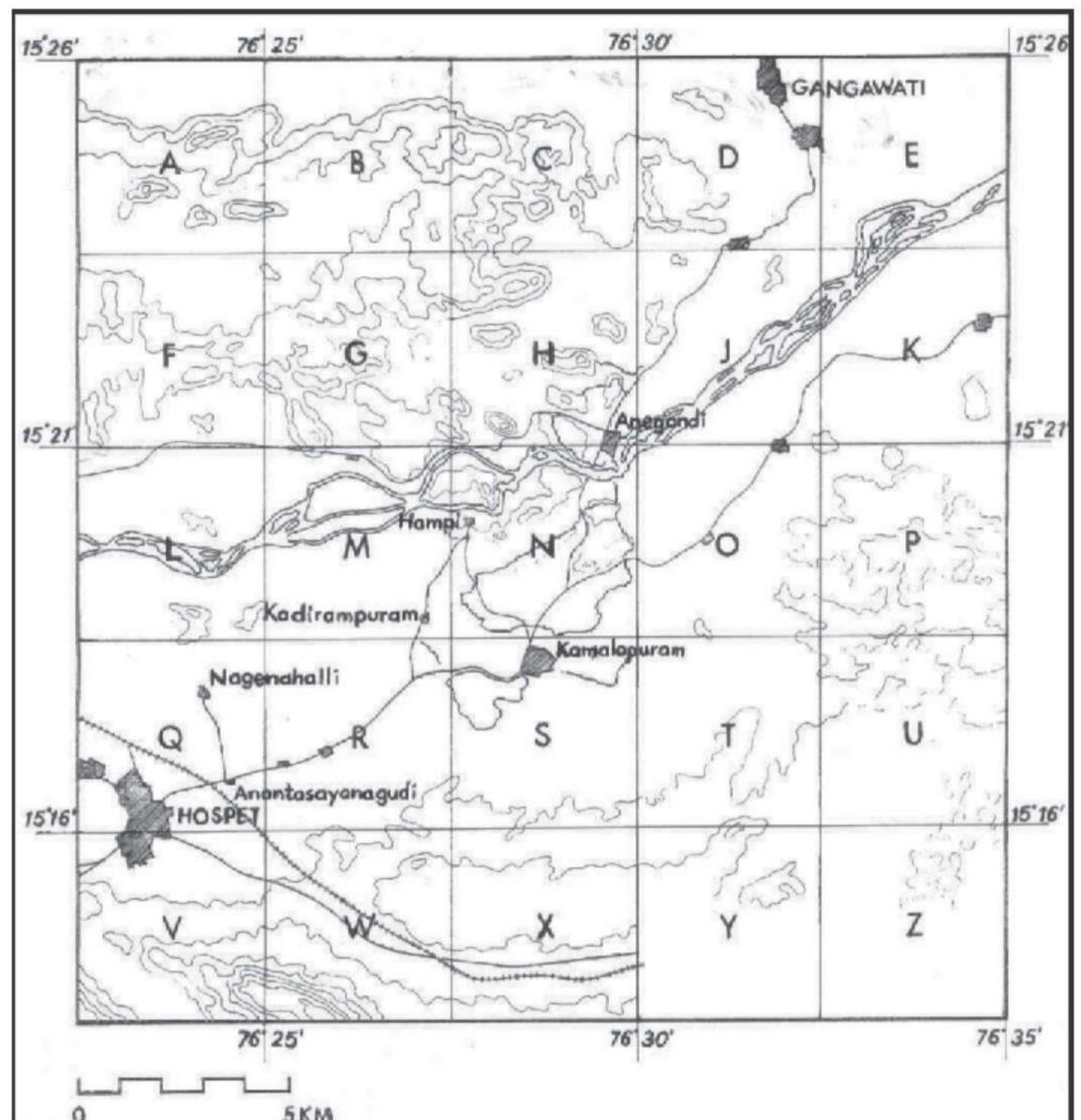

Fig.1: Map of Metropolitan Vijayanagara

approximately 25 square kilometres, is the area of the city proper (Fig.2). Square 'N' has again been divided into 25 squares, of around one square kilometre each and a second capital letter is used to designate each of these, e.g. NA, NB, NC, etc. Each of these have in turn been divided into 25 squares, each assigned a small letter, e.g. NAa, NAb and so on. Within each of these smallest squares, the individual structures are numbered (1, 2, 3, 4, etc.). This reference code provides a unique designation to each structure in the entire site and an easy and quick system of identification. During my field work at the site, I had made a detailed survey of all the extant monuments within square 'N', that is, the city proper. Important monuments in the suburban centres of the city were also studied.
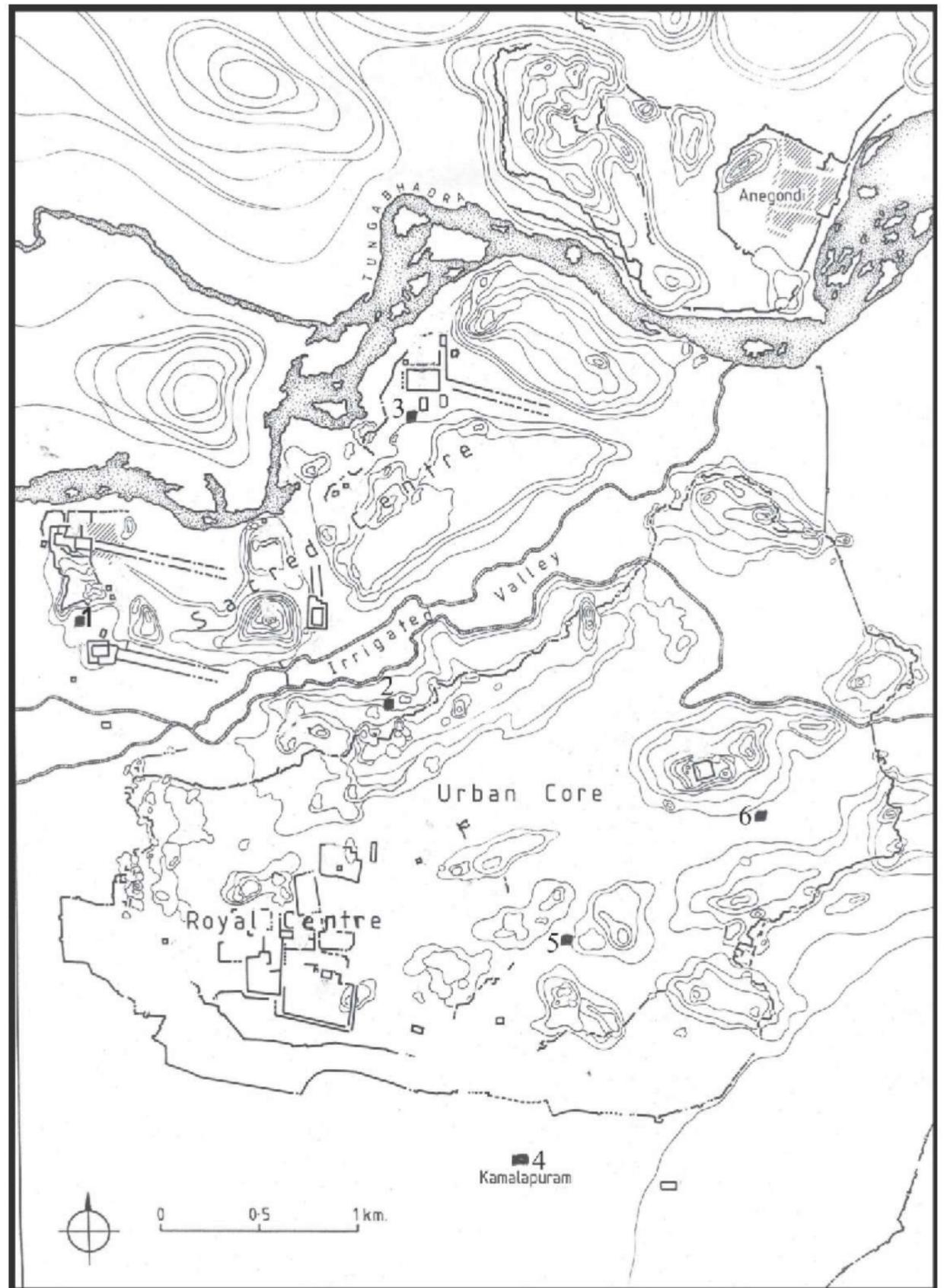

Fig.2. Map of Vijayanagara City

1. Temple of Hemakuta hill
2. Relief on the 'north ridge'
3. Small shrine at Viṭṭhalapura
4. Site Museum at Kamalapuram
5. Relief in rock-shelter (NXo/3)
6. Relief at NPv/1

The central theme in each of the seven panels that I will now discuss, more or less in the order in which I had first seen them is that of a man grappling with or subduing an enraged elephant. The first of these reliefs was noticed by me in the year 1985. It is the most elaborate one because it is located in a small temple. Besides this, it reveals the basic iconographic scheme of the heroic story. It is carved on the east face of a natural boulder on the southern

slope of Hemakuta hill, just outside the wall that encircles the top of this hillock (Fig.3). The carving is enclosed within a small, east-facing temple, consisting of only a sanctum and a *maṇḍapa*. The construction of this temple is simple; the pillars are crudely cut monolithic blocks. The relief in the sanctum reveals the following figures from south to north: a large

Fig.3: Relief in the shrine on the southern slope of Hemakuta hill

elephant rearing up on its hind legs, with the front ones raised, and the hero grappling with the beast by holding its trunk and tusk and kicking it with his left foot. The man wears a tall cap and pyjamas or a *dhotī* and he appears to have a moustache; he has a bundle tied to his back. Behind the hero is a standing woman who holds a pot on her head; she is looking on at the struggle between man and beast. To her rear is a second, smaller elephant.

Fig.4: Relief on the north ridge, Hampi

Another relief, very similar to the one mentioned above, is carved on a rock, but with no shrine around it, on the 'north ridge' beyond the circuit of walls of the 'urban core' of the city (Fig.4). Here, too, one finds the enraged elephant which is being kicked by the hero who also seizes it by its trunk and tusk. Behind the hero is a woman with a pot on her head and the second elephant.

The third relief is similar to the previous two, yet with some differences. It, too, is carved on a boulder, but it is accompanied by other rock carvings.

Over these carvings a small shrine or shelter (Fig.5) has been constructed by erecting two columns and laying roofing slabs from the rock shelf to these columns. In the shelter there are two boulders with carvings. In the centre of one is a fine carving of Vīrabhadra. On the other, first appear a *liṅga* worshipped by the squatting Nandī and then the heroic theme (Figs.6 & 7). The woman with a pot appears first in the depiction of the story here, then the man and finally the elephant. Both the hero and the

Fig.5: Small shrine near Viṭṭhalapura

elephant are portrayed in the same manner as in the two earlier mentioned reliefs. This small shelter with its carvings is to the south-east of the double-storeyed gateway that gives access to Viṭṭhalapura, namely, the area around the great Viṭṭhala temple.[2]

Fig.6: Reliefs in the small shrine near Viṭṭhalapura

Fig.7: Relief of the hero grappling with an elephant in the small shrine near Viṭṭhalapura

The next two depictions, both on stone-slabs, are located in the site Archaeological Museum at Kamalapuram. On one of these (Fig.8) the man fighting the elephant is in the centre of the

Fig.8: Stone-slab with reliefs of the hero with Śiva-Pārvatī, site museum at Kamalapuram

composition. The hero grabs the elephant by its trunk and tusk and one foot of the hero rests against the front feet of the beast, which are raised. To one side of the hero are two women, of whom the taller one in front carries a pot on her head. On the other side of the hero and facing him is a male deity, with one hand raised in blessing, and his consort, both seated on a bull. Obviously these represent Śiva and Pārvatī on Nandī. Behind the bull is a small standing figure.

The carving on the other stone-slab in the museum (Fig.9) reveals the furious pachyderm in one corner. The hero is in vigorous action: with one hand he grabs the tusk of the beast and stabs it with a sword held in his other hand. One leg of the hero is raised high and it rests against the animal. The dramatic struggle between man and beast is vividly portrayed in this carving. At

Fig.9: Stone-slab with reliefs of the hero with Mailara and consort, site museum at Kamalapuram

the other end of the slab is the relief of Mailara (a folk form of Śiva) and his consort, both seated on one horse. In the centre is a rather mutilated male

figure, standing with hands joined in adoration; above him is carved a small *liṅga*. The sun and moon found carved in one corner of the slab indicate that the fame of the hero will last as long as the sun and moon exist.

The last two reliefs are found within the 'urban core' of the city.[3] The sixth panel is carved fairly high on a rock-face of a cave-like natural rock-shelter (map reference: NXo/3). It is dark within this shelter and due to the poor lighting, the rough nature of the carving, and the height of its location it was difficult to study the carving in detail or to photograph it. The carving was also lavishly daubed with vermilion and white powder, indicating that it is still venerated. Though crudely executed, the carving is both dramatic and powerful. At one end of the panel is the beautifully caparisoned enraged elephant. Seated on it is a diminutive male rider, probably its *mahout* (Hindi *Mahāvata*), who has an elephant goad or spike in one hand. In the middle of the panel is our hero who is attacking the elephant. He holds its tusk and trunk and kicks it with one foot. His back-pack or bundle can be discerned. Between the hero and the beast, lying on the ground is a ring-like object, possibly meant to represent the empty pot, lying on its side with its wide mouth turned to the viewer. To the rear of the hero appears a male figure on horseback. He wears a *kirīṭa-mukuṭa* and holds a staff or sword; possibly he is god Mailara, whose *vāhana* is a horse. A second elephant is seen behind the horse-rider; its trunk is raised over the horse-rider. In front of this rock-shelter, carved on a flat rock is a pair of sculpted feet, encircled by a serpent. Probably, this is meant to represent the feet of the hero and it was set up for veneration. The custom of carving feet to denote not only gods but even saintly or semi-divinized humans is known to have been a practice at the site.

The last and seventh panel (Fig.10) is found on an east-facing rock (map reference: NPv/1), which is flanked by a north-facing and south-facing rock, the three forming an

Fig.10: Relief at NP/v1

open shelter. Though carved more elegantly than the sixth representation the two are quite similar. In this relief, too, in one corner is the furious elephant with rider; the hero, whose back-pack, cap and moustache are clearly delineated, appears in the centre. He seizes the animal by its trunk and tusk and kicks it with one leg. The overturned pot with its mouth framed by a ring lies on the ground between the hero and the pachyderm. Behind the hero is a male figure, wearing a crown or cap and holding a staff, seated on horseback. A second elephant, with its trunk raised over the horse-rider, is in one corner. A pair of carved feet also lies in front on this carving, but they are not encircled by a serpent.

Besides the very similar manner in which the fight between the hero and the elephant is portrayed, what is common is that in all the seven cases the hero has a bundle on his back. He wears either pyjamas or a *dhotī* draped tightly. In all, except the sixth relief, he wears a cap. In all, except in the fifth relief in which with one hand the hero stabs the elephant with a sword, the hero uses both hands to grab the elephant by its tusk and trunk. In all, except in the fourth, the hero is shown kicking the beast. Thus it is obvious, especially from the bundle that is invariably tied behind his shoulder, that the same hero is depicted in all these carvings. The enraged elephant is also, of course, found in all seven for the struggle between the hero and the elephant is the key theme of these reliefs.

Other details, such as either a woman or women carrying pots or an overturned pot, are also present in all the panels, except one. In some, the elephant is adorned with rich trappings, indicating that it was prized or royal elephant. In some panels there is a rider on the elephant. Occasionally, a second smaller, apparently tame, elephant also appears. In a few of these panels, deities (e.g. Śiva-Pārvatī on Nandī, or Mailara, or Vīrabhadra and / or a *liṅga*) are also evident. The Śaivite nature of the deities depicted alongside the hero reveals the Śaiva nature of the story depicted. Two of the panels are within either a shrine or a shrine-like structure.

It is important to note that at Hampi these representations of the hero fighting an enraged elephant are carved on boulders or on stone-slabs and generally they appear by themselves. This theme is not found anywhere in Vijayanagara temples, neither on wall surfaces, pillar-reliefs or basements, nor

are they found on any of the secular monuments at the site. Although I have travelled extensively to Vijayanagara and post-Vijayanagara sites all over southern India, nowhere else besides Hampi have I come across similar sculptural depictions of a man with a back-pack fighting against an elephant. However, at the time when I was studying these carvings at Hampi, it was reported to me that in the Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad, there is a painted cloth scroll, probably of the eighteenth-nineteenth century, on which this hero appears (Fig.11). On it the hero is shown kicking the elephant; the bundle on his back is clearly visible and the woman with a pot is present near the hero.[4]

Due to lack of more information, for a long time I was under the impression that these seven panels which I had noted at Hampi were memorial stones, commemorating some heroic action that had taken place. It is only the research by my colleague, Anna Dallapiccola, into painted textiles of southern India of the 17th to 20th centuries that has shed light on these unusual reliefs. Dallapiccola, especially while preparing a catalogue of south Indian paintings in the collection of the British Museum, London, came across some Andhra scrolls that were used and are still used for story telling in which are found, along with the rest of the long narrative, the same scene as found in the Hampi panels (Fig.11). With the help of Kirtana Thangavelu who, at that time was working on her Ph.D. thesis,[5] Dallapiccola was able to identify the scene as

being a part of a local *purāṇic* story called *Madelpuranamu* and the hero as Madivelaiah (Madivelayya), the son of Vīrabhadra. The *Madelpuranamu* narrates the origin of the washermen's caste. After the usual introductions, as found in various Śaiva *purāṇic* stories, a key episode in the story of

Fig.11: Painted Andhra scroll, circa 1950 (Courtesy Anna L. Dallapiccola)

the *Madelpuranamu* is of Vīrabhadra and his destruction of Dakṣa's sacrifice. The story then proceeds on to the birth of Vīrabhadra's sons, Madivelaiah and Masaiah (Machayya), and their marriage to water nymphs. The narrative ends with the story of Madivelaiah and the origin of the washermen's caste. According to this story, Madivelaiah and his brother were told by the gods that, in order to atone for the sin of Brahminicide committed by their father, Vīrabhadra, they would have to wash the clothes of thirty-five crores of gods for twelve years. The youths and their wives agreed and commenced washing the clothes of not only the gods but also of Śaiva Brāhmaṇas. The core of the *Purāṇa* is the conflict between Madivelaiah and the Muslim king, who demanded that Madivelaiah should wash his clothes. When Madivelaiah refused to comply, the king sent first his army against Madivelaiah and when the army was vanquished he set loose the royal elephant, a particularly fierce beast, on to our hero. Madivelaiah fought the royal elephant by grasping it and kicking it. In the course of the battle, Madivelaiah took the bundle of clothes for washing that he was carrying off his back and deposited it in the sky.[6] His wife was present while this battle takes place. Finally, the huge, fierce royal elephant was transformed, by Madivelaiah's magical powers, into a tame, baby elephant.

If it were not for these Andhra scrolls, which graphically portray the story of Madivelaiah, and the folk tradition that continues even today of story-tellers using scrolls like these to relate such local *purāṇic* stories, it would have been difficult for us to identify the seven carved panels found at Hampi.

It is evident that Madivelaiah was not only revered in the capital city of Vijayanagara by certain groups but was even worshipped, probably by persons of the washerman caste of whom he is the patron, because one of the panels is within the *garbhagṛha* of a small shrine which even has an entrance *maṇḍapa*. The second smaller elephant seen in this panel probably represents the baby elephant into which Madivelaiah's magic powers transformed the king's ferocious beast. In another case, a shrine-like structure is built over the rock on the two faces of which we have Vīrabhadra on one side and *liṅga* and Nandī and Madivelaiah fighting the elephant, with his wife in the background, on the other side. The sculptural representations of this story, which was evidently popular at Hampi, to the best of my knowledge, is not found in other parts of the Vijayanagara Empire or in the sculptural repertoire of the Vijayanagara's successor states. Probably during the Vijayanagara period and subsequently

this story was of a fairly local significance and of importance mainly to specific groups of persons. Their provenance seems to have been mainly in the Andhra area or in places on its borders; Hampi falls in one such border zone.

It is probable that the Madivelaiah story, which is so closely linked with the Vīrabhadra cult, was a Vīraśaiva one. For the Vīraśaivas, who are opposed to brahmanical rituals, are great votaries of Vīrabhadra who destroyed the great *yajña* of Dakṣa.[7] The Vīraśaivas were an important group within Vijayanagara city and they continue to be important in Hampi to this day. From the fact that none of these reliefs are found in major temples in Hampi-Vijayanagara, but rather they seem to be scattered around the site in small shrines or rock-shelters or out in the open, it would be evident that the cult and worship of Madivelaiah belonged to the popular or folk religion and not to the 'Sāṅskṛtika' religion of the elite. This surmise is strengthened by the facts that none of them are in prominent locations and most of them are rather roughly carved.

In Vijayanagara sculptures new themes, patterns and iconographic formulas appeared; new icons were created and themes of everyday life came to the fore. This artistic movement had a vital regenerating power, creating a new aesthetic which determined the direction of subsequent artistic activity in Southern India.[8] The representation of Madivelaiah is just one among the very many new themes that appeared during this period.

Acknowledgements

References

1. In my earlier publications I have clearly mentioned that I was not aware of what these sculptures represented: see Anna Dallapiccola and Anila Verghese, *Sculpture at Vijayanagara : Iconography and Style*, Manohar Publishers and the American Institute of Indian Studies, New Delhi, 1998, p.122; and Anila Verghese, "An Unusual Type of Memorial-Stone", in *Archaeology, Art and Religion : New Perspectives on Vijayanagara*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2000, pp.292-302.

2. This was first seen by me on January 4, 1996 and has since been re-visited a number of times. I am grateful to Joshua Wright of the Vijayanagara Research Project for bringing this relief first to my notice.

3.   I am grateful to Linda Whitman who showed me these two carvings, which were discovered by her team while carrying out extensive and detailed mapping of the whole site by the Vijayanagara Research Project. Both these were seen by me during the course of my field trip of December 1992-January 1993. This part of the site is not easily accessible and is covered with thorny overgrowth and, therefore, I have never again been able to revisit these two carvings.

4.   Personal communication by Anna L. Dallapiccola (January 1993).

5.   K. Thangavelu, 'The Painted Puranas of Telangana: A Study of Scroll Painting Tradition in South India' Unpublished dissertation in History of Art, University of Berkeley, USA, 1998.

6.   Velcheru Narayana Rao, (Translator), *Siva's Warriors: The Basava Purana of Palkuriki Somanatha*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1990, pp.133-134.

7.   Anila Verghese, *Religious Traditions at Vijayanagara: As Revealed through the Monuments*, Manohar Publishers and the American Institute of Indian Studies, New Delhi, 1996, pp.23-24.

8.   Anna Dallapiccola and Anila Verghese, *op.cit.*, p.5.