

## CHAPTER-2

### **Mahendra Style (Cave Temple 610-680 AD)**

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“The means matter but less than the significance and the thing done and the power and beauty with which’ it expresses the dreams and truths ‘of the human spirit.”

The political scene at the time of Mahendravarman was dominated by three powers who were shaping the historical events of the period—the Pandyas of Madurai, the Pallavas of Kanchi and the Chalukyas of Badami. Their mutual relationship, their claim to power, their ambition in the field of temple architecture determined the spirit of that period. Of less importance were the Gangas of Mysore and the Muttaraiyars who were local chieftains south of the Kaveri, where they held a position as sort of buffer states between Pallavas and Pandyas. The Cholas, once a powerful South Indian dynasty ruling from their capital Uraiyur (near the present Trichy), had temporarily been pushed to the background, probably by long-lasting wars with the Pallavas.

Mahendra’s father, Simhavishnu (556 -589 AD), was a warrior and conqueror without equal, and was called ‘**Avanishma**’, a lion of the earth. With a firm hand he steered the dynastic ship of the Pallavas into the open waters of imperial power. On his conquests, the historical Pallava empire was built up with Kanchi as its capital. He defeated not only the Cholas and pushed his boundaries south of the Kaveri, but also ended the rule of

the Kalabhras over the Tamil country. Simhavishnu was the first among the Pallava rulers who invaded Sri Lanka and defeated the Sinhala king—a campaign for which he must have had a well-organised fleet at his disposal. The enmity between Pallavas and Chalukyas which would last for more than two centuries began in his time. Like many other Pallava kings, he was a great patron of Sanskrit learning and culture. At his court, the young poet Bharavi wrote his famous epic '*Kiratarjuniya*'. We may suppose that he had met the *Yuvaraja* Mahendra and influenced and inspired his literary talents.

Mahendravarman (580-630 AD) inherited the Pallava throne from his father Simhavishnu and with it a large and settled empire extending from the Krishna river in the north to the Kaveri in the south. He was an exceptional and unorthodox king, whom Prof. Dubreuil referred to as one of the greatest figures in the history of Tamilian civilization. A many-sided and gifted personality, musician, poet, builder and statesman, it was he who called forth the immense flowering of culture and art which would spread all over South India and overflow to other countries of Asia, and finally even survive the decline of his own dynasty and empire.

Pallava conquest and expansion of power came to a stand-still in his time. His fame in history was not achieved on the battlefield but by the fact that he was the first under whom cave temples were carved into the granite rocks of the South—cave temples of a specific and unmistakable style named after him. Into those temples he recorded his expressive inscriptions in fine Sanskrit and in the beautiful letters of his time, which afford some insight, no matter how little, into his uncommon character.

The inscription of his first cave temple at Mandagapattu where he calls himself ‘the inventive or curious minded’ (*vichitra-chitta*) is but one example:

“this brickless, timberless, metalless and mortarless mansion of Lakshita was caused to be made by King Vichitra-chitta for Brahma, Isvara and Vishnu.”

“Brickless, timberless, metalless... “..one can almost read it as an exultant exclamation, ringing through the centuries and announcing the triumph of a man who had attempted something new—and had attained it, most probably against much resistance, secret or open, of the local craftsmen who were attached to their traditional ways.

The fascination of carving whole temples into the living rock which spread over India during the first millennium AD had not yet seized the South by the end of the 6th century. Even as a building material, stone was not or rarely used here, possibly because of its strong association with funerary customs (viz. the erection of stones to venerate the dead). The materials in use were brick, mortar and thatch-perishable substances of which nothing has remained. No architectural structure of a period earlier than Mahendra’s reign has survived in the Dravidian country. Our knowledge of its early architecture and style, secular and sacred, is based on a few general references in the Sangam literature and sculptural representations at Buddhist *stupas* (Amaravati etc.).

Mahendra's cave temples, their particular style and the *birudas* (honorific names) and inscriptions engraved into them, will be dealt with in a separate chapter. Yet it seems worthwhile to dwell for a moment on his *birudas* as they convey, as nothing else, the attitude of this uncopypentional, almost revolutionary king who loved new ways, challenge and adventure in the realm of the spirit. The fashion of assuming *birudas* instead of using the proper name was initiated by him and abundantly taken up by his successors. His *birudas*, however, are the most expressive ones and often convey in a few words a wide and deep meaning. They never seem to be the arbitrary or vain flatteries frequently found in later times, but always have an obvious reason behind them and express a thought or a mood of the king. Very often, they emphasize the firmness of his character which would not yield to hostile circumstances and was unfaltering in termination and action. His absolute unconcern about gossip behind his back is expressed in an inscription found on a detached pillar in a ruined *mandapa* of the Ekambaranatha temple at Kanchipuram where he calls himself '*brhantah akari*' or 'the mad man who has caused it to be made'. Probably, he was thus secretly called by others and when he came to know about it, he carved his nickname with a fine sense of humour into the *stone*— '*brhantah akari*'.<sup>1</sup> Other significant *birudas* are:

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1. The *biruda* '*brantah akari*' appears among his *birudas* in other cave temples too viz. in Pallavaram.

<i>aluptakamah</i>	one who will not abandon his quest or desires;
<i>lokasalyah</i>	the arrow to the world (of opponents to his new ways); the thunderbolt that cannot
<i>kalahapriyah pugapiduka</i>	lover of fight or dispute; the thunderbolt that cannot be split;
<i>pravrtta matrah drdhagathi</i>	always progressive alone; of unswerving, persevering gait;
<i>citrakara pulli</i>	the tiger among artists;

The last of these may be the most eloquent of his *bimdas*, disclosing the king's hidden and probably strongest ambition to be accepted as the great genius of his country.

And genius he was. His poetical bent expressed itself in the numerous rock-inscriptions, written in an elevated language full of puns and allusions, some times not easy to grasp. Here are two verses of the famous inscription carved into his cave temple on top of the Trichy rock:

2. "King Satrumalla (Mahendra) built on this mountain a temple of Girisa (Siva), the husband of the daughter of the king of the mountains in order to make the name 'Girisa' (i.e. mountain dweller) true to its meaning."

3. “After Hara (Siva) had graciously asked him: “How could I, standing in a temple on earth, view the great power of the Cholas or the river Kaveri?”-King Gunabhara (Mahendra), who resembled Manu in his manner of ruling, assigned to him this mountain temple which touches the clouds.”

Mahendra is also known as the author of a short play, ‘**Matalivasa-prahasana**’. In it, the king criticizes in a humorous yet scornful way, the followers of different religious sects in his capital without sparing any of them. Buddhists, Kapalikas and Pasupatas are ridiculed for their hypocritical devotion and for trying to find scriptural justifications for all their personal weaknesses. It is an interesting little farce, rather free in its spirit. Another play ‘Bhagavadajjukam’ shows similarity in style and verse and is obviously the work of Mahendra too; both plays are mentioned in the Mamandur inscription as being written by him.

Little would be known about his inclination for the art of painting if it were not for the mutilated inscription in one of his cave temples, the northern Mamandur cave. When studying its fragments it becomes clear what a rare document it would have been had it been intact-full of important and genuine information about Mahendra and his time.

“Classifying (the subject) from (an old) *kalpa* (i.e. work on the subject), he caused to be compiled a commentary (*vrttz*), called *daksina cittra* (i.e. South Indian art of painting) following strictly the methods and rules laid down for such a work.”

The least we may conclude from the above is that the king was so interested in the art of painting that he ordered a new handbook of painting to be written as the existing one had probably to be revised. From the importance given to this fact we may even assume that he contributed with his own ideas to the work. The art of fresco painting was widely known in ancient times. Very fine examples are the frescoes in the cave temples of Sittanavasal (pudukottai District) which is built in the Mahendra style. This cave temple is no longer ascribed to Mahendra but seems to be a Pandya excavation; here it may serve as example for the art of painting in his time or slightly later. Sittanavasal means the abode of *siddhas*, and is a Jain cave. The main decorative motif is the lotus in all its forms of unfolding. A large lotus tank is seen on the ceiling of the *mandapa* with fish, geese and elephants; three beautiful young men wade through the water and pluck lotus flowers. The supple movements of dancing figures on pillars are treated with ease and authority. Particularly noteworthy is the head of a king on one of the pillars with that of a lady behind him. For a long time it was believed that it was King Mahendra leading his wife to the shrine of the temple. Though the paintings as a whole are badly damaged, the delicate forms of what had remained, the beautiful expression of the figures and the intensity of the ancient colours convey an idea of the high perfection this art had reached in Mahendra's days.<sup>1</sup>

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1. T.N. Ramachandra: Mahendrarvarman, the royal artist, Journal of Research, vol VII, 1933.

The Mamandur inscription, as far as it is legible, records further that the king was an adept in music too, a fact which is already implied by his *biruda* ‘*sankirna jati*’, meaning expert in the exposition of *sankirna* or mixed *ragas* or *jatis*. (*jati* was the term for *raga* in ancient music). The *sankirna raga* is a mixed *raga* in which traces of two or more *ragas* are discernible. As for the fragments on music in the Mamandur inscription, I refer to Dr. Minakshi who says, “The reference to ‘**Orvasi sarva sobhana**’-Orvasi of all round splendour and of ‘Gandharva Sastram’-the science of Gandharvas, i.e. music, in the Mamandur inscription of Gunabhara alias Mahendravarman, strengthens our conclusion that the king was an adept in music. The inscription also records his literary achievements, but it is disappointing to note that the portion that speaks of music in detail is much damaged. However, from what I am able to make out of the broken sentences, I have no hesitation in stating that herein the king has recorded his composition of the Kudumiyamalai music and his experiments with it on an instrument.”<sup>1</sup>

Mahendra had a relatively long and peaceful reign during which he had ample time to follow his artistic inclinations. His preferences was certainly not the battle field a fact of which his belligerent neighbour, Chalukya Pulakesin II was aware, for it must have encouraged him to undertake a campaign to the eastern Deccan, where he overthrew the Vishnukundins of Vengi (the present Elluru). Then, he annexed the

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1. Administration and Social Life under the Pallavas, University of Madras, 1977, p. 270/71.



adjoining northern Pallava provinces in the Krishna valley and, turning his army southward, invaded the central territory of the Pallava empire without finding much resistance. It seems that his troops did not come to a halt until they had reached the Kaveri. The Kasakudiplates<sup>1</sup>, however, record a victory by Mahendra in the battle of Pullalur, at a ten mile distance from Kanchi. Though it is not said against whom the battle was won, it is generally believed that it was Pulakesin II, who was thus prevented from entering the Pallava capital. Nothing further is known about his march to the Kaveri. He must have returned soon to his own capital Vatapi, realizing the dangerous potential power of his enemy into whose territory he had ventured so far. The northern provinces, however, the homeland of the Pallavas in the Krishna valley from where they had come to the South, remained in the hands of the Chalukyas. Henceforth, they would form, together with the territory of the Vishnukundins, the empire of the eastern Chalukyas, a branch dynasty of the Badami Chalukyas, who ruled there for more than five hundred years.

Pulakesin's march to the Kaveri is described in his Aihole inscription carved into the walls of the Meguti temple there. As it is a fine piece of Sanskrit, poetry, it seems worthwhile to quote a few verses. It was written by a certain Ravikirti and contains the history of the Chalukyas, mainly that of Pulakesin II. The following verses refer to his invasion of the Pallava territory and his march to the Kavere.

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1. Aihole inscription of Pulakesin II, Kielhorn, Ep. Ind, vol IV, page 4, with slight modifications.

“With his sixfold forces, the hereditary troops and the rest, who raised spotless *chowries*, hundred of flags, umbrellas and darkness (the darkness raised by the troops is dust), and who churned the enemy elated with the sentiments of heroism and energy (power), he (pulakesin) caused the splendour of the lord of the Pallavas, who had opposed the rise of his power, to be obscured by the dust of his army and to vanish behind the walls of Kanchipuram.”

“When straightaway he strove to conquer the Cholas, the Kaveri who has the darting carps for her tremulous eyes, had her current obstructed by the cause-way (which was) formed by his elephants whose rutting juice was dripping down, and she avoided the contact with the ocean.” (This is a fine example of a double entendre, frequently found in ancient inscriptions, here, however, easy to grasp. The river goddess Kaveri was avoiding the contact with her husband, the ocean, as she was smelling of the rutting juice of many elephants; but at the same time, she was compelled to avoid him as her waters were obstructed by the bridge which those elephants formed for the troops of Pulakesin.)

“There he caused great prosperity to the Cholas, Keralas and Pandyas, he being the hot-rayed sun to the hoarfrost—the army of the Pallavas.”

“While he, Satyasraya, (pulakesin) endowed with the powers of energy, mastery and good counsel,—having conquered all the quarters, having dismissed the kings full of honours, having done homage to the

gods and *brahmins*, having entered the city of Vatapi—is ruling this earth like one city which has the darkblue waters of the surging sea for its moat.”

The chapter on King Mahendra I should not be closed without mentioning his relationship with the Saint **Appar**. In his early days, Mahendra had been a follower of the Jain religion and then converted to Brahmanism, probably under the influence of the Saiva saint, Appar, who, formerly the abbot of a Jain monastery was a prominent convert himself. Both followed with their conversion a general trend of their time, the resurgence of Brahmanism with the gods Siva and Vishnu in the fore. In more literary times the encounter of these two men, the king and the saint, would have inspired many a poet. Mahendra certainly felt much attracted by the entirely devoted personality of the saint and even more by his ardent songs, poetical and meaningful, reflections of the high spiritual inspiration he received. It was Appar who called god the ‘jewelled lamp that shines in the heart of the devout’ and his *devarams* (hymnal wreaths) are re-garded as Tamil mantras which have not lost their power to the present day. *Sambandar*, *Sundara* and *Appar* were the first of a galaxy of Saiva singers (Nayanars) who sang in the temples their fervent praise of the Lord.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Nayanar means a faithful servant of god; the Nayanars were followers of Lord Siva. Alvar means ‘the diver in the qualities of god’; the Alvars were followers of Lord Vishnu.

The figure of King Mahendravarman I, though but vaguely reflected across the centuries by his rock inscriptions, stands out as an immensely interesting personality, almost modern in his passion for freedom to act according to his will and not to convention, free-dom to create, to progress, to throw the gates of confinement and orthodoxy wide open for future centuries of learning, art and culture, and, last if not least, to prepare the way for the young religion and the god whom he adored-Siva.

### *Mahendravarman and his Time*

#### INSCRIPTIONS

A most fascinating chapter is that of inscriptions. They are an invaluable, and generally the only source of information, allowing however sparse an insight into the history, culture and mentality of a time.

Two kinds of inscriptions are generally distinguished—those engraved on copperplates (viz.the Kasakudi plates) and those which are carved into stone. Stone inscriptions appear as early as the centuries before the Christian era; the earliest among them are the southern versions of the Ashokan edicts which indicate by their local finding the extension of the Maurya empire in the South. From the 6th century AD, stone inscriptions in crease steadily in number and finally amount to tens of thousands while of copperplate inscriptions, only a few hundred exist. To draw a line of absolute distinction between the contents of stone and copperplate inscriptions is not easily possible and yet it would seem that they differ from each other.

Copperplate charters are basically documents which record the transfer of property from one person or institution to another; very often they contain the grant of a ruling king to a deserving member of his' court or else confirm gifts and endowments to temples and *brahmins*. Almost all copperplate charters follow a definite sequence: the opening is an invocation in prose or verse in which one or several deities are invoked. Then follows the preamble (*prasasft*) in which the names and achievements of a ruler and his forefathers are narrated, very often in a poetical and glorifying language as in the following passage from the Kasakudi plates:

“From him was born the victorious Narasimhavarman who surpassed the glory of the valour of Rama by (his) conquest of Lanka, who was a comet (that foreboded) destruction to the crowd of proud enemies and who imitated the pitcher-born (Agastya) by his conquest of Vatapi.”

The charter usually continues with a detailed description of the grantor and his achievements as well as those of his ancestors with a similar description of the grantee and his ancestry. Usually the three immediate forefathers who stand for the endless line of forebears are mentioned. Next follows the description of the object, be it money or a piece of land or a village, specifying carefully all the details of the grant—the amount of money, the boundaries of the land or the various duties or exemption of duties which were connected with it. Then it is stated, usually in a fixed form, that the object or gift was given with water poured out from the hand of the donor into that of the donee for his perpetual and undisturbed enjoyment. The charter concludes with an

imprecation on anyone who may terminate the charity or otherwise disturb the arrangement:

“If there is anybody who injures the *dharmasasana* which was thus given, he shall incur the sin of one who has killed a tawny cow on the bank of the Ganga. May Mahesvara be the protector.”

For the historian, the value of copperplate grants lies in the preamble in which name and achievements of the ruling king and those of his ancestors are narrated as in a historical record. Such charters on copper (as well as those on stone) are the most authentic source of history, (particularly the history of the South) without which hardly anything would be known. Thus, the history of the Pandyas between the 7th and 10th century is known by two long copperplate records; likewise the history of the eastern Chalukyas and much of that of the Chalukyas of Badami is known from copperplate grants. Some of the Chola copperplates attain an enormous length, being engraved on a large number of plates strung together on a huge ring with a seal soldered on them. Copper was the metal prescribed in ancient texts for the writing of documents and with a few exceptions, no other metal was employed.

Stone inscriptions show a wider range and greater variety of contents than copperplates. They were usually orders and may contain in their preambles long royal genealogies. But stone inscriptions may also record small gifts, for example, the maintenance of a lamp in a temple to gain religious merit; lamps which were to burn day and night were called *nanda vilakku*. When the lamps were provided for by gifts of livestock,

the expression '*sava-muvapperadu*' occurs which means literally— '*the big sheep that neither die nor age*'. This was a way of expressing the permanence of the endowment. Other stone inscriptions give interesting details about constitution, craft and the artistic life of the time—for example, the masterfully carved inscription of the Brhadesvara temple of Tanjore which records in detail the entire economy of this great temple. Rajaraja I Chola initiated a practice (much appreciated by modern scholars) which was kept up by his successors—he ordered that an official and authorized account of the principal events of his reign should be carved into stone in set form and the language of the people. Other stone inscriptions were intended to preserve decisions and agreements on public matters, for example, royal orders on taxation and land revenue, resolutions of village assemblies etc. They may also contain statements about the erection of the temple into which they were carved, as in the inscription of Mandagapattu, heralding King Mahendra's first excavation of a rock temple in the South. The stone inscription of his rock temple on top of the Trichy rock, contains a remarkable piece of Sanskrit poetry. Another stone inscription of his time, engraved into the wide rock-face of Kudumiyamalai (pudukottai District) contains combinations of musical notes used in the seven *ragas* of the period; it is regarded as being of great value for the history of Indian music. A unique inscription preserves an otherwise unknown hymn of the Saint **Nanasambandar**.

It has however to be mentioned that inscriptions, whether on stone or on copper, have to be interpreted with care. Kings and people of old

were apt to be boastful and exaggerations and distortions are often found. Sometimes both parties claim victory in the same war. Words had a different weight in those days and what was meant as an inspired representation rings vainglorious in our ears. Thus, when the race of the Pallavas is likened to the descent of the Ganga... purifying the whole earth... we may not share the enthusiasm of the poet. A most confusing fact to be dealt with is that rulers, particularly Pallava rulers, assumed a large number of *birudas* or cognomens many of which were also assumed by their successors and are, therefore, no safe indication as to which king was meant. Another problem is that all early inscriptions are dated in the regnal years of kings and are once again, not a reliable guide to an absolute chronology.

When we grope our way through these labyrinths of reliable and unreliable data we have to remember that the purpose of the inscriptions was not to serve as historical sources even though we are using them as such. People of old were not much concerned about history. They wanted to describe in an elevated language the importance of their time or the victories and virtues of their king and they used such eulogies as embellishment to the actual content of the document. Thus, we have patiently to learn to read between the lines and coordinate what at first view seems to be incompatible.

A few words about the language and the script—early inscriptions of the centuries before or shortly after the birth of Christ are stone inscriptions, written in the Brahmi script. The language employed is a



local version of Prakrit which is a general name for all tongues with Sanskrit affiliation. In Pallava inscriptions, Prakrit is found to be employed only in a few early copperplates of the 3rd and the 4th century AD, after which it was superceded by Sanskrit. Very often two languages are found in the same grant-the beginning and end in Sanskrit and the actual body of the document covering the grant in the respective language of the people which in Pallava inscriptions appears in Tamil. In course of time the script underwent many modifications. In Pallava countries, the Grantha script appears and is used in both a florid and a simple variety between the 4th and the 8th century. Then the Grantha script itself undergoes modifications and under the influence of the Tamil script becomes the 'round hand' or Vatteluttu script.

### *CONTEMPORARY PLACES OF WORSHIP*

To trace and describe the different trends and forms of worship in ancient India would be a comprehensive task. Nowhere else was religion so vast and all-embracing, comprising such a large complexity of spiritual thought and disparate beliefs, cults and rituals a diversity which spans a range reaching from the untiring quest for the ultimate Truth to the blood sacrifice of the forest dweller. The number of deities, symbols and other worshipped objects, animate or inanimate, which were all amalgamated into Hindu tradition seems to be infinite. There is the worship of ancestors, of Mother goddesses, of snakes and stones, of countless minor gods, fertility spirits and other beings, as well as the worship of Surya, the Vedic Sun God and of Vishnu and Siva, the popular deities of the time.

Within the frame of this book and chapter, a very general outlook on the subject seems to be helpful to visualize the religious spirit of the time in which Mahendra's rock-temples came into existence.

Worship of sacred images and symbols had its beginning in a very remote past of mankind. When we trace back its natural evolution we find that worship in the temple was preceded by worship in the open, in surroundings of beauty and peace, for example, under trees or on top of hills and mountains or by the side of rivers and lakes. As already mentioned, worshipped objects were manifold. Stones are particularly found in the South where they were erected to venerate the dead, *nadukal*. This form of worship consisted of circumambulation, lighting of lamps, burning of incense and presentation of all kinds of offerings. Also, the guardians of the villages, crossroads, tanks etc., were honoured and even in our days their colourful clay figures can be seen scattered all over the Tamil country. Trees were believed to be the abode of spirits, usually *yakshas*, who may either be beneficent or malignant and therefore have to be propitiated with offerings. Worship of trees or rather their inhabiting spirits is a very ancient form of worship which, according to early texts, goes back to pre-Buddhist times. It is vividly illustrated in sculptural reliefs at Sanchi, where garlands are hanging down from the branches of sacred trees and offerings are placed beneath them. Usually a stone table or altar is found beneath the tree which gives shelter to the *yaksha*.

Such a *yaksha* stone table beneath the sacred pipal-tree served the Buddha as a seat at night when he attained Nirvana. According to one

version of the well-known story, it was when he was sitting on such a table beneath a sacred tree that he received the bowl with milk-rice from the girl, Sujata. A Burmese variant of it relates that Sujata had the habit of going daily to a sacred tree by the riverside to place offerings beneath it. When she came that morning and saw the meditating Buddha sitting under the tree, she thought that it was the *yaksha* of the tree and offered him the rice. Later the Bodhi-tree with the altar beneath became one of the five major symbols in the Buddhist teaching, that of the ‘Great Enlightenment’, though it was actually borrowed from a cult much older than Buddhism. So-called treetemples with a brick enclosure and sometimes galleries to walk around (*vrksa-chatiya*) are known from representations at Sanchi and Bharut and equally referred to in ancient literature, both Tamil and Buddhist.

From these origins gradually evolved the necessity to protect a worshipped image or symbol from rain, sun and other vicissitudes. Plain roofing of wood or thatch were placed over it, fences erected with a gate to enter—the first simple hut arose to house the god. Where greater durability was needed, wood or thatch were replaced by brick and mortar. In remote areas such simple temple forms, sacred trees or other places of worship in Nature, can be found even in our days, having outlasted centuries and millenniums. In quite a natural process, elaboration set in, the wish to enlarge, to ornament, to shape the roofs in special forms, to have a vestibule in front—and it is here that the actual chapter on the Indian temple begins.

In the North, the Vedic religion was in the foreground and is more distinctly perceptible for us than other existing religious trends of the time, as it was backed by the most sacred books of Hindu tradition—the Veda. The importance of the Veda cannot be stressed enough as for more than 3,000 years it was and is the fount of the spiritual, religious and social life of India. From about 1000 BC, other scriptures were appended to the Veda (Vedanta) among which the Brahmanas (ritual texts) allow an interesting insight into the more external form of the religion, the sacrificial worship. The principal and daily ritual consisted of the worship of the fire (*agnihotra*). For great sacrifices, the fire altar was erected, a high brick structure with rich inner segmentation, raised in the open for a single purpose. On a bench (*vedi*) upon this altar, the gods in their ethereal form took their place, called by the incantations of the priests. Behind their outer name and appearance a vast inner significance was hidden, known, however, only to a few: Their position in the eyes of men deteriorated in course of time, while simultaneously, the importance of the sacrifice as such grew immensely—it became an all-dominating power in the world process to which even the gods had to submit. Its ever growing complexity and extravagance, its exclusiveness being centered alone around the sacrificer, the *yajamana*, as well as the arrogation of the priests who claimed to be the gods on earth (*bhudeva*) led finally to its decline.

In Vedic fire worship, libations are given into the fire and in the form of *agni*, are carried up to the sphere of the gods. In subsequent centuries, this *homa* form of worship was replaced by the *piya* form

(which was perhaps older than the fire worship) where the material image of the god is sprinkled with water, decorated with flowers, dressed and bejewelled and finally presented with fruits and other offerings. It was this form of worship which in a long process substituted the fire worship, and in the wake of a vast revival and popularisation of Brahmanical tradition, led to the age of the Indian temple. But fire worship never completely ceased to exist and is found to the present day on the occasion of great festivals in South Indian temples.

From ancient literature it is clear that Brahmanical temples and images existed as early as 200 BC but nothing of them has remained or been discovered, not even their foundations. The earliest remnants of brick foundations were found in Nagarjunakonda, the ancient Vijayapuri, where the Ikshvakus ruled in the 3rd century AD. Even in the centuries following the decline of the Ikshvaku dynasty, material remnants or written evidence of Brahmanical temples is rare, whereas reports on extravagant fire sacrifices performed by the kings are still numerous. The temple as a living centre of worship and culture and, at the same time, an elaborate and durable structure of stone, erected and maintained by kings and nobility, and given to the people, seems to have made its appearance not earlier than in the 4th or 5th century AD. And yet, when its forms and principal models are revealed and become distinct in the various types of stone temples of the Guptas, Chalukyas or the monolithic architecture of the Pallavas, it is clear that they do not represent the beginning, but rather the full flowering of a development (viz. the Dharmaraja Ratha) the evolution of which cannot be traced in our present state of knowledge.

## *ROCK ARCHITECTURE*

Naturally formed caves under piled up boulders or in the steep rock-faces of the mountains as refuge for *rishis* and monks were known in India since very ancient times. In the 2nd century BC, Buddhists began to carve planned temples and monasteries into the rocks and gave them the shape of their structural architecture—their *chaityas*, *viharas* and *stupas*. Soon the Hindus followed, and carved temples with pillared halls and rectangular sanctuaries into the mountains. They too copied architectural designs and ornaments from contemporary structures so that those cave sanctuaries resembled in all details their brick and timber originals.

Elaborate temples and tombs carved from the rocks are found in other world cultures too, dating back to much earlier times than in India. But nowhere had this fascination of worshipping God in the heart of the mountains seized men with such an intensity as here, inspiring them to the most extraordinary and bold architectural achievements. Between 200 BC and 800 AD, approximately, one thousand cave temples of great diversity of plan and style came into existence in India. Among them are two and three-storeyed rock temples with vaulted or flat roofs, with verandahs and large halls, labyrinthine with their numberless pillars and dark shrine caves at their far ends. The wealth of ornaments is bewildering and so is the number of sculptured relief figures which emerge from the walls and seem to be filled with the very breath of life; sometimes the rough stone

walls were plastered to a silken smoothness and covered with marvellous fresco paintings, allowing a rare insight into the ways of life, the ornaments, dresses and the expression of men in ancient times. Nothing seemed impossible for the Indian architect and craftsman who brilliantly met the challenge of his first encounter with the material stone.

Sandstone and trapformations were among the kinds of stones which were chosen most frequently, the latter particularly by the architects of early rock architecture (Ajanta, Karle, Bhaja etc.). The soft sandstone, easy to work with, was used by the Chalukyas for their rich and intricate architecture.

Its frequent occurrence made it the most employed material for rock architecture and sculpture. In the Krishna valley, it was the marble-like limestone which was used for the *stupas* and sculptured slabs at Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda. Another kind of stone is the darkbluish soap-stone which served the Hoysalas for their elaborate creations. In the Tamil land it was the granite, the hardest of all rocks, which prevailed all over the country and had to be chosen. The quarrying of monolithic cave temples from granite had not been attempted since the time of Ashoka, certainly because of its extreme hardness and brittleness. Thus, it was after almost a millennium that granite was quarried in India and cave temples excavated from it—this time by the Pallavas.

*MAHENDRA'S ROCK ARCHITECTURE*

The fact that Pallava craftsmen had to deal with an entirely new material of unknown potentialities may account for the bare, almost archaic interior of the Mahendra cave temples. There is nothing labyrinthine about them and their pillars are few; No wealth of ornament and sculpture bewilders here, but rather, the re-semblance with early Buddhist architecture with which they share the spirit of austerity. Rectangular of plan with a pillared hall in front of one, three or five shrines, their most specific feature is the shape of their massive pillars. With contemporary places of worship, all Mahendra cave temples have in common their beautiful sites in Nature, in remote areas, far from the crowded roads of men. To visit them nowadays is a journey into the past, to places with an intensely pure atmosphere, serene and peaceful when associated with an ancient tank or a weathered tree, of the grandeur when situated on top of a mountain, of awe when cut into wild lonesome hills. All of them are marked by the centuries that have passed.

Those whose sanctity has been maintained are now obscured by halls and other structures added to them at a much later time and style, thus disrupting their original harmonious contact with the landscape. Others have been debased to humbler purposes and serve as shelter for bats and casual wayfarers or as storage room for farmers. But, in spite of all these vicissitudes, none of them have lost their dignified aloofness, the spirit in which they were built by their royal patron, Mahendra.



Mahendra cave temples resemble in all details a number of rock temples of the Vishnukundins, whose territory in the Krishna valley bordered of that of the Pallavas with whom they were connected by matrimonial ties. Mahendra, when he was *yuvaraja* (crown prince), had lived in the northern Pallava territory for some time as it was the custom for royal princes to be sent to distant provinces to rule there as governors or viceroys. Moreover, it is testified by an inscription carved into the wall of the ancient Kapotesvara temple at Chezarla near Vijayapuri, in the heartland of the northern Pallava provinces. Here, Mahendra is referred to as Mahendravikrama Maharaja and also by some of his *birudas*. Says Prof. J. Dubreuil, "...it was on the banks of the Krishna, when admiring the caves of Undavalli, Bezwada and Mogalrajapuram that Mahendra entertained the idea of spreading in the Tamil country the mode of cutting temples into the rock." Be this as it may, the style of the Vishnukundin cave temples and those of Mahendra is exactly the same. Once the first cave temple was cut into the rock of Mandagapattu in Tamil Nadu, the fashion spread quickly and also the appreciation for this new mode of architecture. In relatively quick succession, numerous cave temples came into existence.

*General Features:* Rock temples have but one external facade; in those of Mahendra it consists of a row of pillars which are comparatively short and massive and without the clear demarcation of the various parts of a pillar which the *shastras* prescribe. Their plain archaic shape with straight outlines has a certain similarity to Buddhist pillars or railing posts

which may have served as a model. It is in strange contrast to other contemporary pillars, for example, those of the Chalukyas at Badami or the Vakatakas of Ellora which are not only elaborately shaped, but also, have a rich ornamental and figural decor. Mahendra's pillars have two large, almost cubical parts at the base and the top, with an intervening part which is levelled off at the corners and has thus, an octagonal shape. The cubical parts on top and bottom are called *sadurams*, while the octagonal section in between is the *kattu*. In later excavations, lotus medallions are found on top and bottom *sadurams* which resemble the typical Buddhist lotus motif. The corbel sits on the upper *saduram* and has curved, rarely angular arms, proportionate in size to the massiveness of the pillar. In later cave temples they are decorated with roll mouldings called *taranga*.

The *mandapa* in front of the shrine is generally divided by two rows of pillars, one of them forming the temple facade and the other being in the interior; further, by a difference in the floor level which stresses the classical separation of a *mandapa*<sup>1</sup> into an *ardha* and *mukha mandapa*. There are a few simpler excavations too, merely shrine cells excavated from the rock without a hall in front, but the *mandapa* type is the most common among all Pallava (and other) cave temples.

The shrine cells are either cut behind the *mandapa*, facing the facade of the temple or else into one of its side walls. They are excavated

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1. Sequence according to K.R. Srinivasan : 'Cave temples of the Pallavas'.

on a higher level than that of the hall and entered by one or several rock-cut steps. In Mandagapattu, Mahendra's first excavation, the level difference is just a small step of about three inches; in later cave temples it would grow higher until it would provide the space for a moulded *adisthana* (base) running along the front wall of the shrines, interrupted only by the rocksteps at their entrance.

The shrine chambers are plain and bare of any ornamentation; they contain neither a relief sculpture of the deity nor a rock-cut *linga*. Non-monolithic *lingas* of black polished stone and uncertain age are often found inserted into a socket hole which was cut into the floor at a later time. Another noteworthy feature is the absence of any water outlet (*pranala*) from the sanctuary. The *abhisheka* (ceremonial bath) consisting of liquids like coconut water, milk, honey, ghee etc., was obviously received in a vessel inside the sanctum itself.<sup>1</sup> A rock-cut pedestal or platform is often found at the rear wall of the shrine, suggesting that an image of the deity was placed upon it. Such images were formed of painted stucco or wood or brick with stucco. The tradition of shaping the deity of the shrine in these materials has been preserved to the present day where wooden or stucco *mulasthanas* are found in South Indian temples. Remnants of paint on the rear wall of some shrines may indicate that the figure of the god was painted there over a thin coat of plaster. This is confirmed by references in the Sangam literature where temples are described as having their deity painted on the hind wall of the shrine.

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1. Epigraphia Indica XVII.

An outstanding feature of Mahendra cave temples, which are otherwise bare of any sculptures, are the doorkeepers or *dvarapalas*. They represent the guardian figures of the threshold, a very ancient symbol frequently met with in legend and occult literature. There, they have a frightful, sometimes nonhuman appearance, to test the intrepidity of the seeker before they let him pass and continue his quest. Indian temples too, whether monolithic or structural, early or late, have a guardian of the threshold, and very often, they are the most expressive figures in a temple. They are regarded as semidivine beings, sometimes emanations of the god inside the shrine. Pallava *dvarapalas* are two-armed, wear elaborate ornaments and crowns and those who guard Siva shrines usually have a muscular, even hefty body, clad in beautifully draped clothes. Sometimes one of them has a pair of curved horns which protrude from either side of his headgear; their meaning has been interpreted differently by different scholars. The smile on *dvarapala* faces are bright and encouraging and often one of their hands is raised in a gesture of wonder or else of *abhaya*. Their whole attitude when leaning casually on huge clubs, expresses friendliness and a great, yet restrained physical strength—kindly giants who do not want to be terrifying. Vishnu shrines are guarded by gentle youths who often look like royal princes. Instead of a weapon, they have a flower in one of their hands with which they point to the shrine.

In the centuries following the time of King Mahendra, his successors continued to excavate cave temples in his specific style. By continuing his

particular style they were honouring him as the first who had carved his temples into the granite of the South. In fact, not only his own successors, but also the Pandyas, Muttaraiyars and other South Indian dynasties followed in their rock architecture the style which had been initiated by him. At the same time, they created their own refined and developed style of rock and structural architecture which differed much from that of Mahendra.

## 2.1 THE LAKSHITAYATANA CAVE TEMPLE

The Lakshitayatana of Mandagapattu is the first cave temple excavated by King Mahendravarman from the granite rocks of his country. It is here his famous inscription is found, saying that he made a temple without using the materials common for contemporary shrines—brick, timber, metal or mortar. The Sanskrit inscription on the western pilaster reads:

1. *Etad-an-ishtakam-a-druma (m-a-lo)*
2. *ham-a-sudham (Vichitrachi) ttena*
3. *nirmmapitan-nipe (na) Brahm-E-*
4. *svara- Vishnu-Lakshit qyatanam*

“This brickless, timberless, metalless and mortarless mansion of Lakshita was caused to be made by King Vichitrachitta for Brahma, Isvara and Vishnu.”<sup>1</sup>

‘Lakshita’ or the ‘distinguished one’ is one of king Mahendra’s *birudas*; Lakshit-ayatana means the ‘temple of Lakshita’.

The cave temple on the outskirts of the village Mandagapattu, situated 15 km from Villupuram in South Arcot, is carved into one of those piledup agglomerations of boulders which are scattered all over the

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1. Viz. verse 18 of the Kasakudi plates: “Though born from a race of *brahmanas*, he possessed in the highest degree the valour of the *kshatriyas* which was inherent in him. Does not the thunder-bolt possess by nature the quality of burning, though in springs from the cloud?”

flat landscape—picturesque spurs of the nearby Gingee range. A small irrigation tank in front of it with a *banyan* tree by its side enhances the charm of the secluded place and at the same time fulfills the traditional demand that a place of worship should be associated with water (*tirtha*) and a particular tree (*vrksa*). The first impression on entering the temple is that of the all-pervading presence of the rock, the breathing stone, its severity, its unyieldingness. There is no ornamentation anywhere on which the eye can dwell. One feels the concentrated effort of the craftsman to become familiar with this new material, stone, with which he was suddenly confronted and to rise to the task to carve a temple out of it.

The facade of the temple consists of two heavy pillars and two pilasters at either end.<sup>1</sup> Pillars, as well as pilasters, are shaped in the typical Mahendra style—two cubical parts on top and bottom (*saduram*) with the octagonal part, the *kattu*, in between. In the interior, a second row of pillars separates the hall into the *mukha* and *ardha mandapa* which is further stressed by a small level difference of the floor. In imitation of wooden structures the curved corbels on top of the pillars and pilasters carry a beam. Four plain pilasters were carved from the back wall of the temple and in between them three shrine-cells excavated. According to the inscription they were dedicated to Brahma, Isvara and Vishnu. All three shrines are empty now; each one has a socket hole into which the image of the deity was placed at a certain period. Traces of plaster and paint on the shrine walls indicate that at another period, perhaps when the

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1. While pillars are freestanding, pilasters are pillars that are adjoined to the wall.

temple was inaugurated, the images of the deities were painted on the back walls of the shrines. The floor level of these three shrines is only slightly raised above that of the hall as opposed to later excavations where the shrine-cell is entered by rock-steps.

The *dvarapalas* in niches beyond the pilasters, at either end of the facade, are not fully completed and it seems that they were added at a later time. Both are similar to each other in dress and ornament and both face the temple facade. The eastern one wearing a high and elaborate crown and large ear ornaments leans relaxed on his club, his rich garment folded in a sophisticated way around his thighs. Elaborate dresses and ornaments of Pallava *dvarapalas* were to become a characteristic of the Mamalla period. The second *dvarapala* is less relaxed and looks more like a determined guard. Out of his slightly different crown, emerge masses of thick hair; a cobra is coiled around his club and another one is seen near his shoulder, both with their hoods raised. The figures of the *dvarapalas* show high sculptural maturity which would again suggest that they are a later addition.

It feels good to sometimes come back to Mandagapattu; to sit under the *banyan* tree, to drink in the serenity of the place and contemplate the rock temple in its plain nobility the first attempt of a restless royal mind in its quest for new and unconventional ways and the beginning of an era of outstanding achievements in South Indian rock architecture and sculpture.



## 2.2 THE PANCHAPANDAVA CAVE TEMPLE

Near the village Vilapakkam (about 6 km from Arcot town) rises a chain of imposing granite hills of which the western part is called Chinna Tiruppamalai and the eastern Perya Tiruppamalai. A natural cave on top of the Chinna Tiruppamalai houses the tomb of a Muslim saint and the whole area with a small mosque nearby is a frequented place of pilgrimage for Mohammedans. From the Periya Tiruppamalai on the eastern side of the hills, a large cave temple with seven shrine niches was excavated, which, according to the inscriptions in it (one by Nandivarman and the other by the Chola king Rajaraja I), had the name of the hill-Periya Tiruppamalai. At present, the temple is popularly known as Panchapandavamalai cave temple. According to K. R. Srinivasan the excavation can be ascribed to King Mahendravarman I; it was probably commenced towards the end of his reign and dedicated to Siva and other gods. The picturesque hills formed by huge boulders strongly remind one of the stony wilderness of Dalavanur. The cave temple which was excavated from an enormous single rock could not stand the weight of the hill above. Its heavy, almost unshaped pillars, (six forming the facade and six in the interior) cracked during the excavation work which was consequently abandoned. Its un-even floor slopes from the hind wall to the front. Seven shallow shrine niches were carved from the back-wall of the *ardha mandapa* and are, as the rest of the excavation, only roughly formed. A ledge overhanging the facade serves as a cornice; above it a drip line for the rain water was cut into the rock. A shallow niche above this drip line contains an image of a Jain *tirthankar* which would confirm the assumption that in subsequent centuries the cave temple was occupied by the Jainas.

### 2.3 KURANGANIL CAVE TEMPLE

In the vast plain of paddy fields south of Kanchi lies the village of Kuranganilmuttam, an ancient settlement where Sambandar, the saintly singer sang his hymns in the days of the Pallavas. It was, however, not the deity of the rock temple there whom he addressed in his songs but that of a contemporary village shrine, *madakkovil*, still existent though many times rebuilt. The rock temple by the side of the road is hidden in a depression of the ground which probably had to be dug out to expose the boulder into which it was carved. The granite, here in a fine condition, conveys the same feeling of a living and breathing substance as in Mandagapattu. Thus the cave temple, neat and unobscured by later structures, conveys an excellent impression of a rock temple during the time of Mahendra.

There is no Pallava inscription in the interior, but in one of the inscriptions of a later time, the cave temple is referred to as Kal Mandakam. It has an interesting layout. Three shrines are excavated from the back wall and four side shrines from its side-walls, two on the side-walls of the *ardha* and two of the *mukha*. Thus, it is a rare specimen of a seven-celled rock temple, heralding the elaboration of Dravidian temple plans with numerous subsidiary shrines of future centuries. The Kailasa-natha temple with its highly complex architecture in the nearby Pallava capital, Kanchipuram, erected barely one hundred years later, would be one example. The cave temple's facade consists of two central pillars in the usual Mahendra style and two plain pilasters on either side.

Their corbels are plain. Another row of corresponding pillars and pilasters separates the *mandapa* into the *ardha* and *mukha mandapa* which is further emphasized by the usual level difference of the floor. Along the front wall of the three shrines runs a moulded base and on top a rounded cornice which extends over the corners to the side walls of the *ardha mandapa* with a shrine cell on either side. It does not, however, extend to the side-walls of the *mukha mandapa* where the cornice above the shrine is separately carved. This suggests 'that the two side shrines of the *mukha mandapa* are an addition to the original plan. Three rock steps, the lower most shaped like a half moon, break through the moulded base in front of each shrine. Three pairs of *dvarapalas* are found at the entrances of the three main sanctuaries. The figures of each pair are similar to each other in gesture, dress and ornament. They are arranged in a slightly different way to those of Mamandur-II<sup>1,2</sup> instead of *rishis*, the southern shrine is guarded by two young men in *tribhanga* pose, who are pointing with a flower to the shrine. They resemble the *dvarapalas* of the northern shrine dedicated to Vishnu who have one of their hands raised in the *abhaya* gesture. The central Siva shrine is guarded by *dvarapalas* with heavy clubs entwined by serpents; one of them has a pair of horns protruding from his crown. All the figures are badly mutilated.

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1. While pillars are freestanding, pilasters are pillars that are adjoined to the wall.
  2. None of the photographs published by K.R. Srinivasan in 1964 in his book 'Cave temple of the Pallavas' are relevant any more because of this.

## 2.4 VASANTESVARAR CAVE TEMPLE

The Vasantesvaran cave temple carved from a granite hill near the village Vallam (about 3 km from Chengleput) is the uppermost of three plain caves there and the only one which was excavated in the time of Mahendra. One of its inscriptions in ancient Tamil says that the temple was made by a local chieftain, a certain Skandasena, son of Vasantapriyaraja who was a vassal of Mahendrapotaraja. A number of *bimdas* of King Mahendra were engraved into the face of the northern facade pillar.

At present the original front of the cave temple is bricked up and plastered and looks like a modern structure. One would certainly not expect an ancient rock temple behind it. The excavation itself is small and simple. Two pillars in the Mahendra style and two pilasters at either end, all with plain corbels form the facade in front of a cubical shrine chamber carved from the rock.

Of particular interest here are the sculptures—the *dvarapalas* in niches on either side of the shrine entrance and the figures of Ganesha and Jyeshtha on the outer facade. Both the *dvarapalas*, slim and elegant figures decked with heavy ornaments, lean on their clubs in a graceful *tribhanga*. Thick hair wells forth from under their crowns and large earrings touch their shoulders. A pair of horns protrudes from the crown of one of them, whereas the other has an axe blade in the centre of his headgear, both indicating the Saivaite affiliation of the shrine they guard.

The sculpture of Ganesha is an immensely charming representation of the God who looks with scrutinizing eyes at the spectator, his upper pair of arms widely opened out and his slim trunk turned to the right. An-other rare representation at a Pallava shrine is the eroded figure of Jyeshtha, a popular goddess in the South. Though basically inauspicious and in ancient texts even portrayed as an ogre, she is kind to those who worship her and destroys their enemies. Ganesha and Jyeshtha as godheads in separate niches are neither found during the time of Mahendra nor that of Narasimha Mamalla. It is therefore supposed that they were added to this excavation at a later time.

## 2.5 ARDHANARISHWAR MANDAPA

Duality is something that we encounter all around us. It is almost as if all creation comprises of duality. Ardhnariahwara takes one of the most tangible aspect of duality. The masculine, feminine and an attempt of demonstrate that these are illusions and that the divine is beyond this and every other quality. Shiva assumes and the form of Ardhanariswara, which in Shiva half and parvathy half. In the same body for the sake of great devotee by name Bringi. According to the legend, Sage Bringi worshipped only lord shiva and neglecting the worship of his consort parvathy. He believes only lord Shiva is the great. Shiva only having the power of everything. To teach the Sage a lesson, parvathy asked to share the lord's body and hence became one with him. The form of Ardhanarishwara indicates that Shiva-consciousness and Shakti (parvathy) – energy are both equally important and are inseparable.”

“The material in which we work makes its own peculiar - demand on the creative spirit, lays down its,own natural conditions, ... and the art of making in stone or bronze - calls for a cast of mind which the ancients had and the moderns have not or have had only in rare individuals, an artistic mind not too rapidly mobile and self-indulgent, not too much mastered by its own personality and emotion and the touches that excite and pass, but founded rather on some great basis of assured thought -and vision, stable in temperament, fixed in its imagination on things that are firm and enduring. One cannot trifle with ease in these sterner materials, one cannot even for long or with safety indulge in them in mere grace and

external beauty or the more superficial, mobile and lightly attractive motives. The aesthetic self-indulgence which the soul of colour permits and even invites, the attraction of the mobile play of life to which line of brush, pen or pencil gives latitude, are here forbidden or, if to some extent achieved, only within a line of restraint to cross which is perilous and soon fatal. Here grand or profound motives are called for, a more or less penetrating spiritual vision or some sense of things eternal to base the creation. The sculptural art is static, self-contained, necessarily firm, noble or severe and demands an aesthetic spirit capable of these qualities.”

The Dharmaraja Ratha has been designed and shaped by master-architects and sculptors. It is the largest and most elaborate of the rathas and widely regarded as the best architectural achievement of the Pallava period. (It is therefore treated here at some length.) K. R. Srinivasan says, “The rhythm of its receding talas has never been excelled nor has the marvellous sikhara, which so gracefully tops it. Its strong “timber-look”, combined with the high fineness of its stone carving, its perfect proportions generate a sense of architectural transcendence, that goes well beyond its formal origins.” But the Dharmaraja Ratha has not only reached a singular perfection of form—it is also replete with rare iconography and fine figure sculptures, some of them belonging to the best of the Pallava period. Moreover, it is an excellent example of the perfect coalescence of building and sculpture, so unique in Indian Art, the latter not being an added ornament, but emerging from the material of the structure itself.

Another panel on this laid shows Siva in his aspect of annihilation, overwhelming the asura Andhaka. At a certain time, Andhaka was the terrible chief of the asuras. One day, he came to Mount Kailash with the intention to carry away Parvati, whereupon a violent encounter with Lord Siva ensued. When Siva shot an arrow at the asura and blood started to flow out of his body, each drop of it assumed as it touched the earth, the shape of another Andhaka asura. Thus, thousands of Andhakas arose to fight against Siva. Immediately Siva thrust his trisula through the original Andhaka and Vishnu, who assisted Siva in this terrible battle, destroyed with his chakra the asuras, who had sprung from the blood drops. Then, from a flame issuing out of his mouth, Siva created a sakthi, called Yogesvari, who caught with a bowl the blood falling on the earth. Thus, the further multiplication of asuras was stopped. In the panel we see Andhaka who lies wailing at the feet of Siva, his face terrors truck and marked by the dreadful fight. Siva however, in spite of his powerful stance is completely detached, even unaware of Andhaka, whom he seems to have forgotten, as is shown by the fact that his deadly weapon, the trisula lies loosely and reversed in his hand.



## 2.6 MAHENDRAVISHNU TEMPLE

Mahendravadi, now a small town in North Arcot about 35 km from Arkonam with a vast irrigation tank on its western side, was a settlement even in Pallava days and was probably founded by King Mahendra. To the east of the present town, a cave temple was excavated from a single boulder which, according to the inscription in it, was called Mahendra Vishnu Griham.<sup>1</sup> It is one of Mahendra's very few cave temples dedicated to Lord Vishnu. The inscription in Sanskrit that is engraved into its southern pilaster beneath a lotus medallion and its translation reads:

“Splitting the rock Gunabhara caused to be made on (the bank of) the Mahendra *takaka* in the great (city of) Mahendrapura this solid spacious temple of Murari, named Mahendravishnugriha which. is highly praised by good people (and which is) an abode of beauty pleasing the eyes of men.”

From the inscription it is learnt that the tank was also excavated by king Mahendra.

To visualize the exact location of the ancient settlement and tank is now not possible. At present there is no tank near the cave temple. Perhaps the large irrigation tank on the western side of the town had a different shape then and extended up to the temple. In a manual of North Arcot it is stated that originally the tank was very big and had a high bund the length of which amounted to four miles in one direction it supplied

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1. The literal translation of *griham* is 'house'; in this case it refers to the temple.

water to villages at a distance of seven to eight miles. It is further said that it was even larger than that of Kaveripakkam which was regarded as one of the largest in the South. From the foregoing it would be clear that the tank has changed its shape and size in the course of centuries.

As in Kuranganilmuttam, the cave temple occupies almost all the freestanding boulders from which it was excavated. It is a neat and well preserved excavation, the granite of which has been cleaned recently by the Archaeological Survey of India. It has two facade pillars with plain pilasters on either side, the latter being clearly set off from the rough rock wall. The pillars are shaped in the usual Mahendra style.

As in the plan of Mamandur I, the top *sadurams* have been reduced in height but in a more proportionate way. Into the upper inner face of. Each pilaster, a lotus medallion has been carved, likewise on the *sadurams* of the facade pillars. The upper lotus medallions are deeply engraved and complete whereas those of the bottom *sadurams* are in various states of completion. The interior has a second row of pillars. The projecting shrine shows a moulded base (*adhithana*) and a rounded cornice. Rock steps lead to the shrine entrance, the lowermost of them. having the semi circular shape (*chandra sila*). On either side of the shrine entrances are shallow niches with *dvarapalas*. Though indistinct in their outlines one can recognize the typical attitude of Pallava *dvarapalas* at Vishnu shrines, pointing with their one hand to the shrine while the other rests on the hip. The walls of the oblong shrine chamber show traces of plaster and paint as in a number of other Mahendra cave temples.

## 2.7 SATRUMALLAN MANDAPA

The Satrumallesvara cave temple is situated in an archaic landscape of large granite boulders jumbled above each other as if by the hands of playful giants. On top of it, overhanging rocks have formed natural caves which were used by Jain monks as shelter and refuge long before Mahendra selected this picturesque place for his excavation beneath. The cave temple seems to be gradually taken back by the wilderness of rocks from which it was shaped. A rusty fence with pieces missing surrounds it and the groaning of its gate swinging in the wind is the only sound in the pervading silence. Its walls are disfigured by enigmatic numbers and sundry other scribblings and its interior is populated by bats. Through pillars and pilasters runs a crack along a natural fault line in the rock which is visible at the back wall of the cave. Pillars and pilasters are held together now by iron bands. And yet, in spite of the defects and neglect, the temple's charm and originality are immediately obvious.

The temple has three inscriptions. The earliest one in Sanskrit is carved into the outer face of the western pilaster. It states that the temple has been built by King Satrumalla ("the queller of his foes"):

"Narendra Satrumalla who has humbled (inimical) kings by his army caused to be made on this hill the (temple) *Satrumallesvar alqya*."

*Satrumallesvar alaya* means the Isvara temple of Satrumalla. The name Narendra (the Indra of men) can certainly be read as a variant of Mahendra (the great Indra).

***The second inscription in Tamil reads:***

“Prosperity! The king who wore a beautiful garland of *tondai*, Narendra Pottarayan (i.e. the Pallava king) whose cruel bow brided with arrows, made with great joy in the south of Venbettu (this temple) called Satrumallesvaralaya to be the residence of Hara (Siva). Brahmagananan Sellan Sivadasan of this village composed this.”<sup>1</sup>

*Tondai* is the name of the creeper out of which the garland of the Pallava kings was made; *tondaimandalam* is the name of the land over which they ruled.

The third inscription is a Pallava inscription in Tamil of the time of Nandivarman (9th century) dated in his 15th regnal year, which registers an agreement between a temple servant residing at Venbettu and a certain Modan who made an endowment of one *kalanju* of gold.

The temple is excavated well above ground level and entered by four rock steps. This elevation emphasizes not only the outer effect of the temple but allows a beautiful view from inside over the vast and fertile landscape in front of it. The facade has a curved cornice with *kudu* arches framing *gandharva* faces. The two *dvarapalas* at either end of the facade, though of a friendly appearance, are executed in a crude, almost primitive way. The two facade pillars in the typical Mahendra style are decorated with lotus medallions on all four faces of top and bottom *sadurams*. The pilasters are plain and the corbels of pillars and pilasters have no roll

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1. South Indian Inscriptions, vol XII.

ornamenta-tion. The two central pillars are spanned by a fine *makara torana* which appears here for the first time in Pallava rock architecture representing a *stambha torana* entrance. From the mouths of two big *makaras*, with elaborately shaped tails, issue two volutes which end in the mouths of two opposite smaller *makaras* in the centre between the pillars, thus forming a double arch. Gay little *ganas* ride on the two outer *makaras* while another one sits atop the bracket stone, shaped in the form of a lotus.

This entrance leads to an oblong *mandapa* containing the shrine chamber with a porch in front. The shrine is excavated from the western wall of the temple and faces east and not the facade. The porch has two heavy pillars in front with cross corbels on top and two pilasters on either side of the shrine. On top of the pillars and pilasters runs a beam which, in wooden structures would carry the weight of the roof. The shrine entrance is flanked by two *dvarapalas* similar to each other, each having his inner hand raised in a gesture of adoration while the outer rests on the hip. They wear tall and beautifully carved crowns, rich ornaments and heavy ear rings. With their heads slightly tilted towards the entrance as if inviting the devotee to come closer, they are of a graceful and gentle appearance. The shrine chamber contains a cylindrical *linga* with a *yonip pedestal* in black stone, both separate pieces and added at a later time. The interior of the cave temple has four floor levels: a level-difference along the porch separates it into an *ardha* and *mukha mandapa*; the floor level of the porch is raised above that of the *mandapa* and entered by two

steps, the *chandra sila* stone being the lowermost; and another two rock steps lead from the porch into the shrine chamber.

The cave temple, with a rounded cornice at its facade decorated with *kudu* arches, a *makara torana* forming its entrance, with lotus medallions being carved into its pillars, and with a well-proportioned porch in the interior and various floor levels, shows a considerable architectural elaboration. Together with the cave temples of Tiruchirapalli and Siyamangalam, it forms the connecting link to the evolved rock architecture of Mamallapuram and further, to the period of the structural Pallava temple.

While leaving this secluded place and looking back at the rock temple it becomes clear that here Siva was still worshipped as Rudra, the god who roams through the wilderness, loudly shouting, whose arrows were feared and who is thus propitiated by men:

“Salutation to the tawny one, to the architect, to the sustainer of trees, obeisance to the wise councilor, homage to the promoter of verdant growth, to the cause of wealth, supplication to the lord of herbs, salutation to him who loudly shouts, causing the enemy to wail...”

## 2.8 LALITANKURA MANDAPA

This cave temple, almost on top of the steep rock-hill in the midst of Tiruchirapalli, is carved into its southern face with a view of the town and the vast landscape beyond it. On its northern side, the river Kaveri takes its winding course through the plain. This hill was worshiped since very ancient times and numerous inscriptions refer to it under different names-Siramalai, Sirapalli, etc. The saints, Appar and Sambandhar, have sung their hymns there in a contemporary structural shrine.

According to an inscription in its interior, the cave temple was called Lalitankura Pallavesvara Griham and made by King Lalitankurena (of tender sprout), a *biruda* of King Mahendra.

It is certainly one of Mahendra's most interesting excavations, not only because of the numerous inscriptions which cover its darkened walls and reflect so openly the spirit of his time, but specifically because of the Ganga-dhara panel, the first large sculptural composition in a Pallava cave temple.

The inscriptions contain many *birudas* of King Mahendra, most of them known from his other cave temple *Avanibhqjana* (earthvessel), *Gunabhara* (abundance of virtues), *Lakshita* (the distinguished one), *Satrumalla* (the queller of his foes) etc.

The inscription which deserves special interest is engraved on either side of the Gangadhara relief and it contains a charming text, poetical and full of puns. In the English translation, I am following (with

minor modifications) the first translation by Dr. Hultzsch (1890). On the northern side of the panel it begins by stating that King Gunabhara had a stone image of Siva Gangadhara carved (or placed) in the temple and it continues with a pun on '*sthanu*' (stationary) which is one of Siva's aspects.

1. "When King Gunabhara carved a stone figure in the wonderful stone temple on top of the best of mountains, he made in this way *sthanu* (Siva) stationary and became himself stationary (i.e. immortal) together with him in the worlds."

M. Lockwood in his book 'Mahabalipuram Studies' objects to the word 'placed' in the translation and substitutes it for the word 'carved'. He says, "Hultzsch, in his translation says, that King Mahendra 'placed' an image of Siva in the cave temple. The English word 'placed' is utterly misleading here and Hultzsch and others have concluded that a separate piece of sculpture was brought from somewhere and 'placed' in the cave temple. But in fact, the image referred to in the inscription is obvious: the figure of Gangadhara in the relief-panel itself, which was carved in situ. The Sanskrit word '*nidhya*' may be translated quite fairly as 'made in situ', and therefore we have freely used the word 'carved' in this sense.

Secondly, when King Mahendra had the figure of Siva Gangadhara carved in anthropomorphic form, it was given the human form of the king himself. That is, when we look at the Gangadhara panel, we are actually seeing a figure of Siva which is at the same time a portrait of King



Mahendra. This is the significance of the passage in the inscription which claims that in the making of the image of Siva, the king “became himself immortal together with Siva before the eyes of the world.”

2. “King Satrumalla (Mahendra) built on this mountain a temple of Girisa (Siva), the husband of the daughter of the king of mountains in order to make the name Girisa (i.e. mountain-dweller) true to its meaning.”

The next verse describes, how Siva, after he had come to know about the king’s intention to build a temple for him, gave him a hint, as to where it should be situated.

3. “After Hara (Siva) had graciously asked him: “How could I, standing in a temple on earth, view the great power of the Cholas or the river Kaveri?”-King Gunabhara, who resembled Manu in his manner of ruling, assigned to him this mountain temple, which touches the clouds.”

In the following verse is described, how the Tamil name of the hill Siramalai (Tamil: sira=crown, malai=mountain) became meaningful by bearing the figure of Siva on its top.

4. “Thus having joyfully carved on top (of the mountain) a matchless stone-figure of Hara (Siva), which he caused to be executed, that Purushottama (Mahendra), who bore Siva fixed in his mind, made the loftiness of the mountain fruitful.”

The text continues on the southern pilaster. From the following verse it has been concluded that a figure of Parvati was installed in the

temple. The meaning of the verse is that Parvati joined her husband Siva on this mountain in order to warn him not to fall in love with the river goddess Kaveri as she was already the beloved of King Mahendra.

1. “Being afraid that the god who is fond of rivers (Siva), having perceived Kaveri, whose waters please the eye, who wears a garland of gardens, and who possesses lovely qualities, might fall in love (with her), the daughter of the mountains (parvati) has, I think, left her father’s family and resides permanently on this mountain, calling this river (Kaveri) the beloved of the Pallava (king).”

2. “While the king, called Gunabhara (Mahendra) is a worshipper of the *linga*, let the knowledge which has turned its back on hostile (*vipaksha*) conduct, be spread for a long time in the world by this *linga*.”

This last verse has, as also admitted by Hultzsch, a double meaning throughout. This is Lockwood’s translation: “As the king has (assumed in this manner) the form (of Siva), let this form (the figure of Gangadhara, together with its great fame) forever spread throughout the world the faith, which has turned its back on hostile conduct (towards the truth of Saivism).”

*The Gangadhara Panel:* The large and extremely fine panel of Siva as Gangadhara is carved into the west wall of the temple. The Gangavatarama is a favourite theme in sculptural representations of the Pallavas. In the Kasakudi- plates the dynasty itself was compared with the descent of the Ganga on earth... “the spotless race of the Pallavas... which

resembled the descent of the Ganga, as it purifies the whole earth “

The sculptural representation is based on the Puranic story of the descent of the heavenly river Ganga upon the earth. The sons of King Sagara who in their wantonness had angered the Rishi Kapila were cursed by him and turned to ashes. After many generations a descendant of the king Bhagiratha, wished to sanctify the ashes of his ancestors. This could be done only by the waters of the sacred river Ganga which at that time was flowing in the heavenly realm. In order to bring her down on earth, Bhagiratha wished to practise a long and severe *tapasya*, which finally pleased Brahma so much that he granted him his wish. But he warned him that the earth would not be able to bear Ganga’s downpour and would be crushed; Bhagiratha continued his *tapasya* and prayed to Lord Siva who agreed to receive Ganga on his head in order to break her crushing force. When the river goddess, proud of her might, came down with all her force she found herself caught and lost in the tangled maze of Siva’s tresses where her destructive power had been broken. Then Ganga became humble and Siva permitted her to flow forth from his hair down to earth as a soft stream, to purify the ashes of Bhagiratha’s ancestors and, henceforth, all mankind from its sins. Since then the goddess is believed to abide in Siva’s hair—very much to the annoyance of Parvati.

The moment when Siva is about to receive Ganga in a lock of his hair is represented in the panel. Siva in his calm strength and concentration, personification of unlimited power, reminds one of similar expressive representations of the Gupta time. His figure is marked by austere

grandeur and epic power while the typical Pallava feature of lyrical rapture and devotion takes a first shape in the two youths kneeling at his feet and having one of their hands raised in adoration; or perhaps best in the little *gana* who enthusiastically tries to support Siva's raised foot. The tresses of Siva's hair form a high and elaborate crown which is held together by a diadem.

As in the Gangadhara panel of the Adi Varaha cave temple Siva holds a cobra with a raised hood in one of his hands. Impressive is the unusually rich drapery of his garment with its folds reaching to the ankles, a fan-like pleat hanging between the legs. This royal garment and the elaborate ornaments, not typical for the sculpture of Mamallapuram, seem to support more than anything else the presumption that it is King Mahendra who is portrayed here in the figure of Siva. Above Siva, two flying *vidhyadharas* indicate the heavenly sphere. Ganga, small and indistinct, with both her hands folded in *anjali* (adoration) is seen above Siva's right hand which holds out a lock of his hair. The base of the panel is shaped like a Buddhist *vedika* or railing, with lotus medallions.

The temple faces south. Its facade has four pillars and four are in the interior, close to the back wall of the temple. Here, this second row of pillars does not demarcate the separation of the hall into the two *mandapas*, as the shrine chamber lies in between the facade and interior pillars on the eastern side wall of the temple. The pillars are slightly taller and reduced in width, and thus have a more graceful appearance than those of the first caves. They are decorated with various types of lotus

medallions and other floral designs surrounded by concentric circles of beads, many of them being eroded or damaged, particularly those of the interior pillars. The corbels have roll ornamentations (*taranga*). The shrine chamber above the level of the hall faces the Gangadhara panel. Its front wall has a moulded base below and a rounded cornice with *kudu* arches above. Its entrance is reached by three rock steps and framed by *dvarapalas*, slim and much eroded figures which lean in elegant *tribhanga* on their clubs. Their heavy hair is formed to a high *crown,jata-makuta*. Four tetragonal pilasters, similar in shape to the Mamalla pillar, are found on either side of the *dvarapalas* niches.

This beautiful temple, the southernmost outpost of Pallava empire, with a vast view on the land of Cholas, is an expression of the deeply devoted, but the same time, bold and challenging spirit of Mahendra era. From its lofty height it has seen many eventful centuries pass. At one time it was used as a powder magazine and its facade closed up with brick walls. But nothing whatsoever has been able to affect its atmosphere of austerity and devotion which it has been served ever since the days when it was built—when kings obeyed the biddings of the gods and built temples as it would please them.

## 2.9 OTHERS

### MAMANDUR-I : THE NORTHERN CAVE TEMPLE

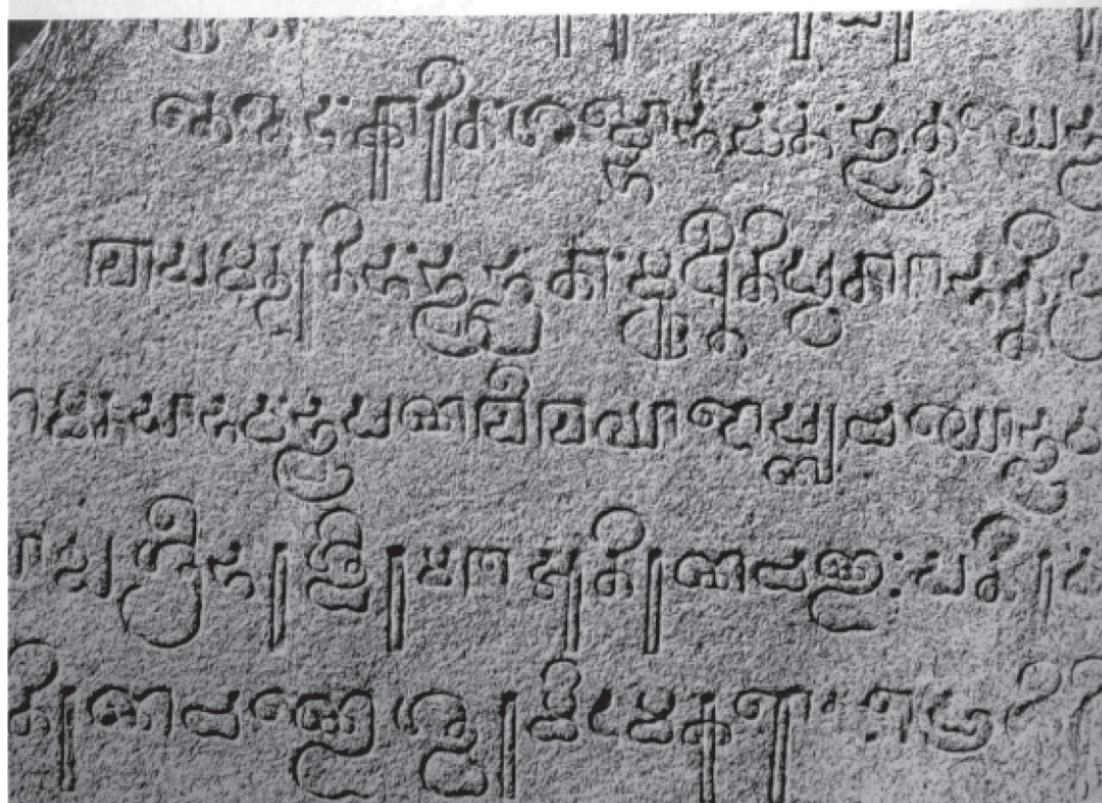
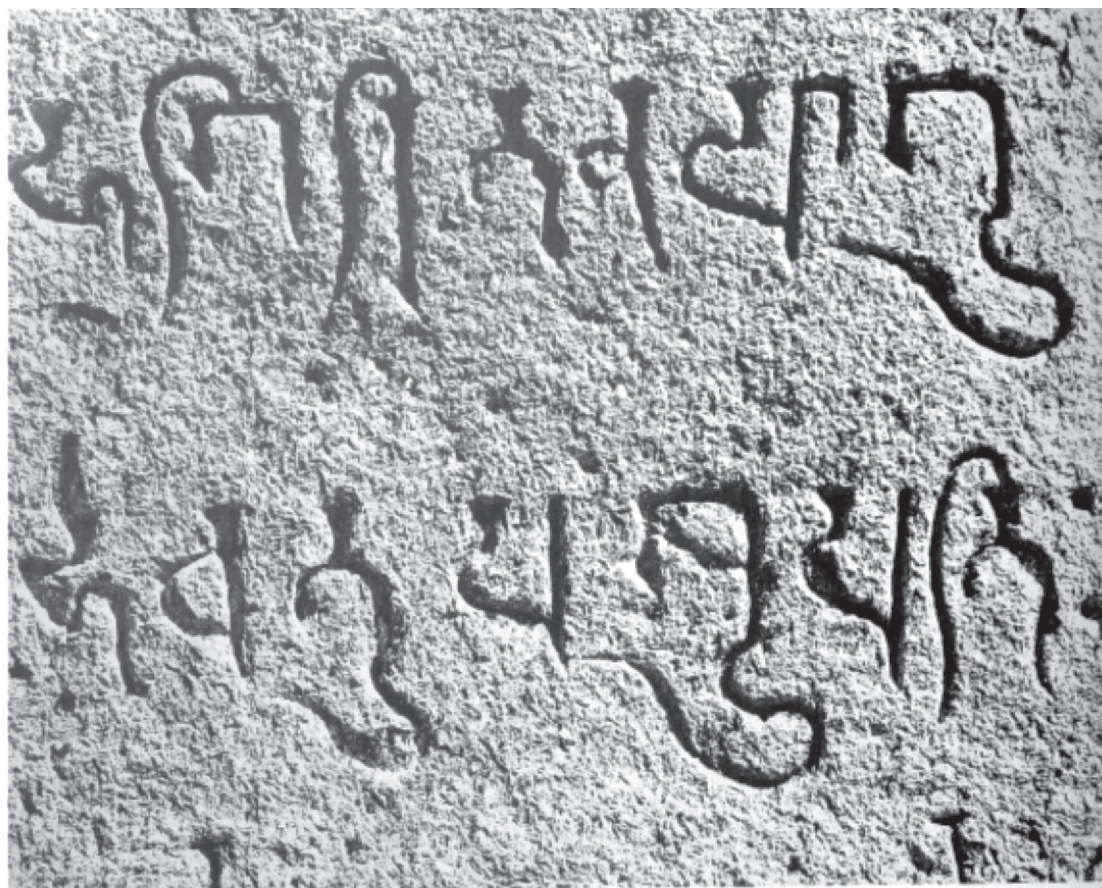
The northernmost cave temple in the chain of granite hills is called Mamandur I, for want of its original name which is not known. It is a small, very attractive chapel where a different layout was attempted indicating that by now the Pallava architects were familiar with the techniques and basic plans of Mahendra's rock architecture and ventured further to realize new ideas. The simplicity here is not the austere bareness of Mandagapattu but intentional. The basic idea obviously was to focus attention on the single shrine by projecting it from the back wall of the temple and leaving the space in front of it unobstructed by the otherwise almost obligatory second row of pillars. Thus, a small but well-proportioned empty hall was created. The projection of the shrine is further emphasized by a rounded cornice above and a moulded base below; No further ornamentation was needed for this kind of design and even the *dvarapalas* have been omitted here.

Into the southern wall of this hall the inscription by which the temple gained fame is carved. Though badly damaged with big pieces of granite missing here and there indicating that at least part of the mutilation was arbitrary, it is yet a unique document from which much valuable information can be gained.

The facade of the cave temple consists of two pillars and two plain pilasters at either end. The lower *sadurams* of the pillars are considerably

higher than the top ones, the latter looking almost odd in their reduced height. The *kattu* in between is elongated. Into the top and bottom *sadurams* circular lotus medallions in a square framing are carved. The single shrine chamber is excavated well above the level of the hall and entered by the two rock-steps with the semi circular stone (*chandra sila*) at the bottom. A platform with a square pit is carved from the back wall of the shrine. Traces of old paint and plaster are found all over the walls. The corbels of the pillars, for example, are decorated with painted circular lotuses against a red background, similar to the ceiling patterns in Sittanavasal. The granite of the temple is darkened and eroded and shows arbitrary mutilations in places.



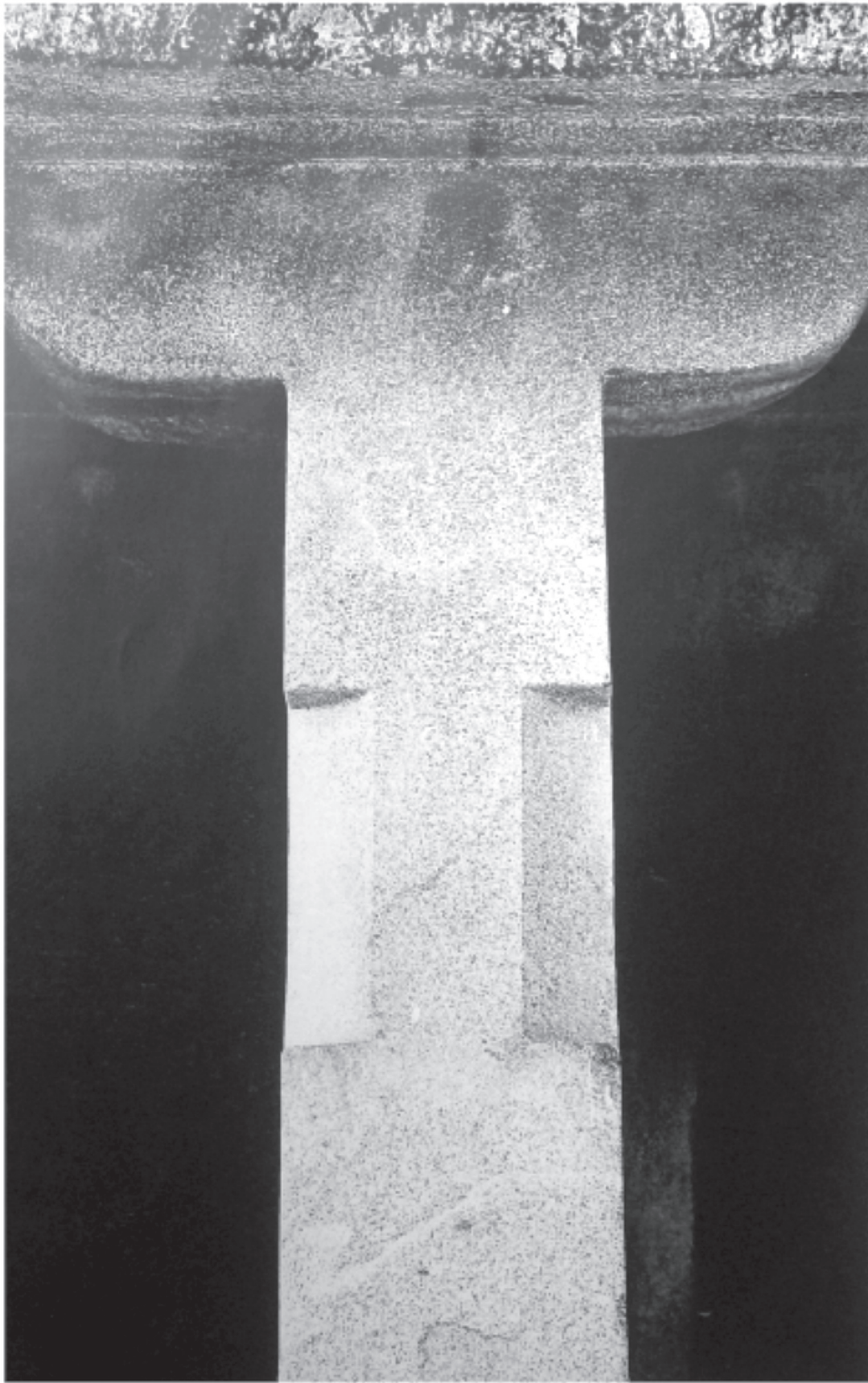


*Plate-24 : Inscription written in Pallava Grantha script & Proto Nagari script.*

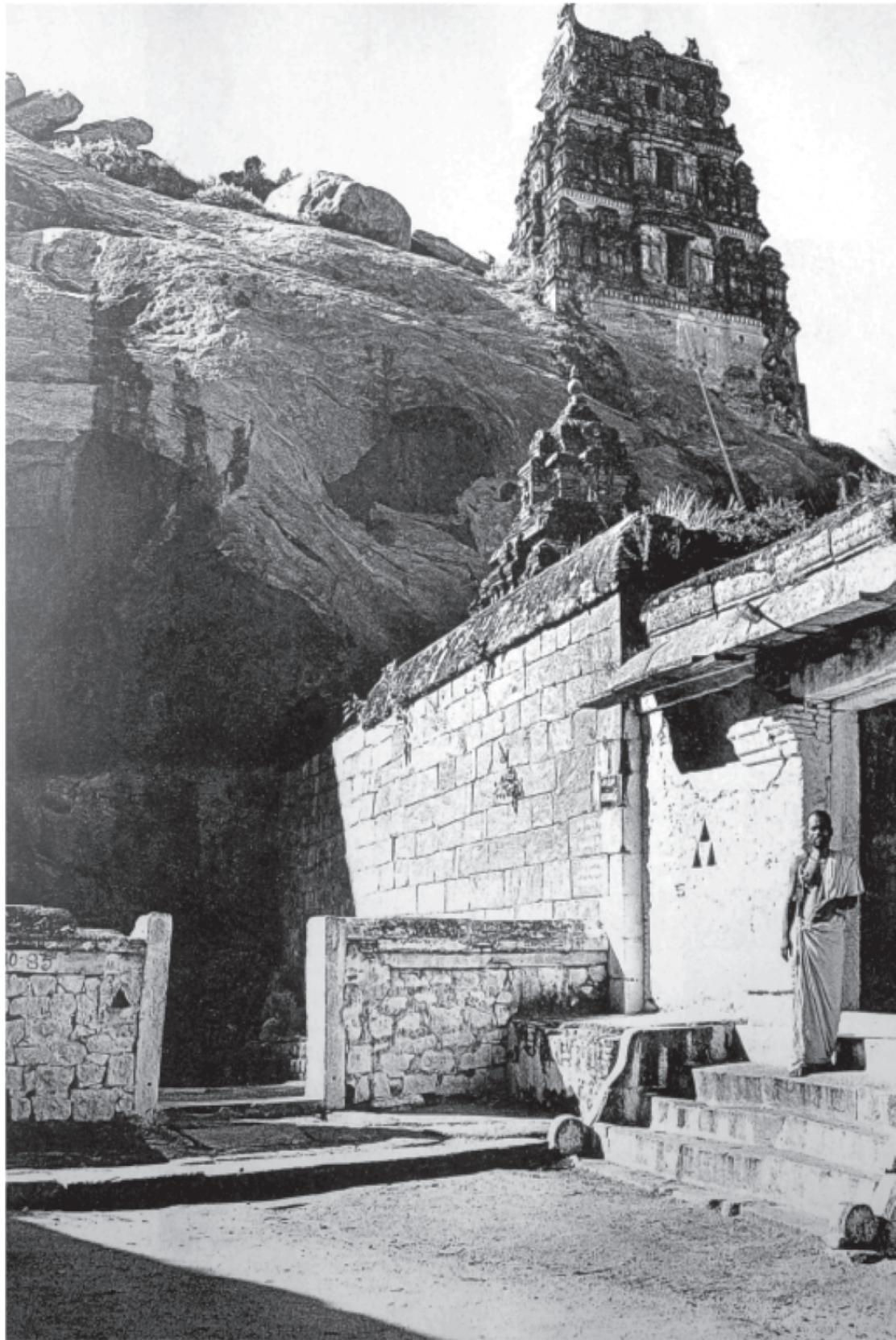




*Plate-25 : Pilasters and pillars from contemporary cave temples at Aurangabad, Ananta & Ellora*



*Plate-26 : Mahendra pillar found in cave temples built by King Mahendra.*



*Plate-27 : The Rangnatha temple of Singavaram.*



*Plate-28 : Pillars in a chaitya at Nagarjunaconda.*



*Plate-29 : Two dvarapalas, one guarding the central Siva shrine and the other, the Vishnu shrine.*



*Plate-30 : Northern dvarpala, Lakshmitayana, Mandagapattu.*



*Plate-31 : Two dvarapalas, one guarding the central Siva shrine and the other, the Vishnu shrine.*



*Plate-32 : The sculpture of Ganesha was added at a later period.*





*Plate-33 : The Kal Mandabam cave temple at Kuranganilmuittam :  
the facade, facing east.*



*Plate-34 : Facade of Mamandur I, Facing east.*



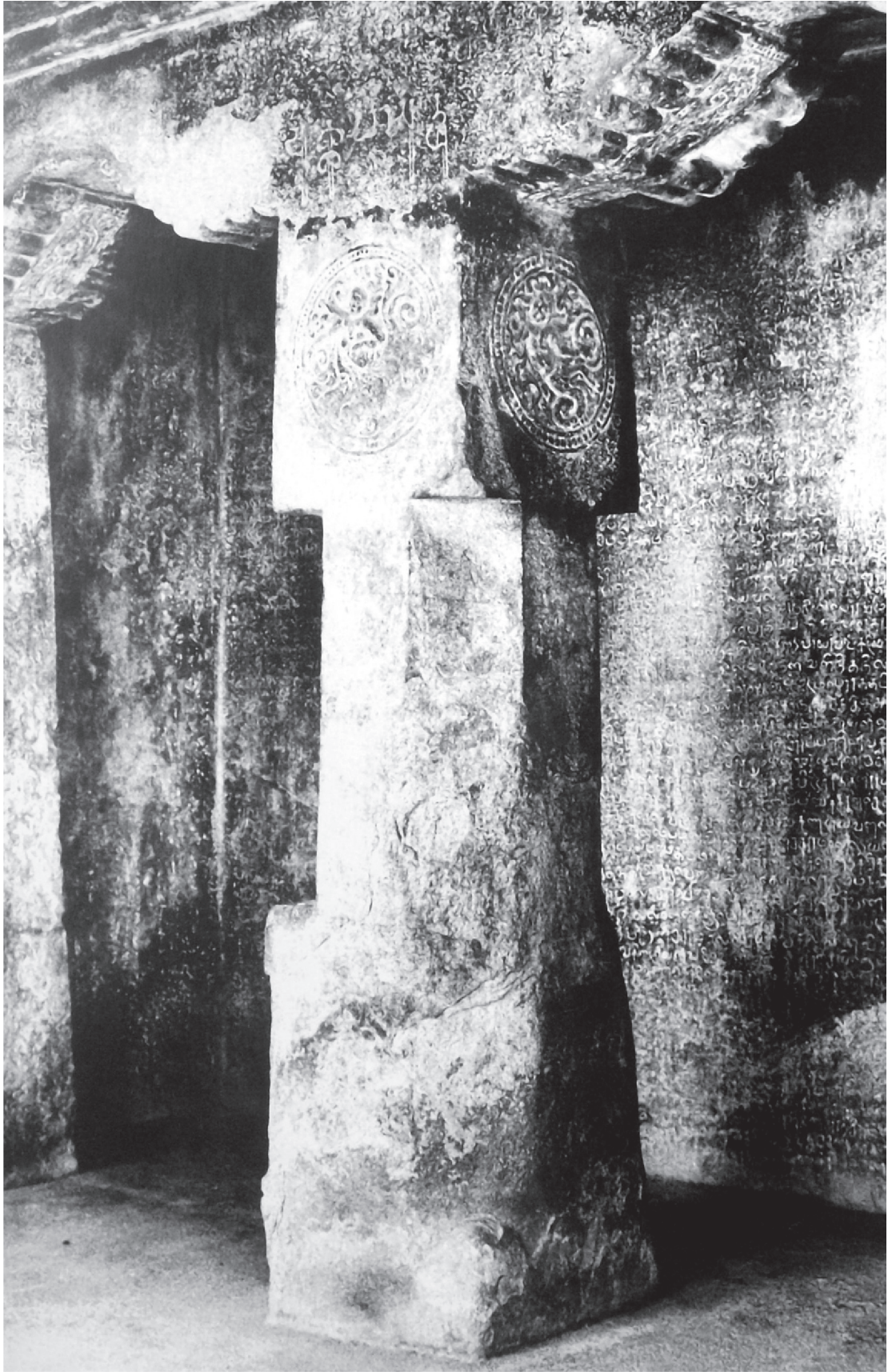
*Plate-35 : A facade pillar and pilaster with deeply engraved lotus medallions.*



*Plate-36 : Deetail of dvarapala.*



*Plate-37 : Details : Siva as Gangadhara receiving the river goddess in the tresses of his hair.*



*Plate-38 : A pillar in the interior with kinnari medallions on top.*



*Plate-39 : Detail : devotee, his hand raised in a gesture of adoration.*



*Plate-40 : Saouthern facade pillar with a lion on the top saqduram and lotus medallions on the bottom sadurams.*





*Plate-41 : Into the upper saduram of both pilasters small relief panels were carved.*



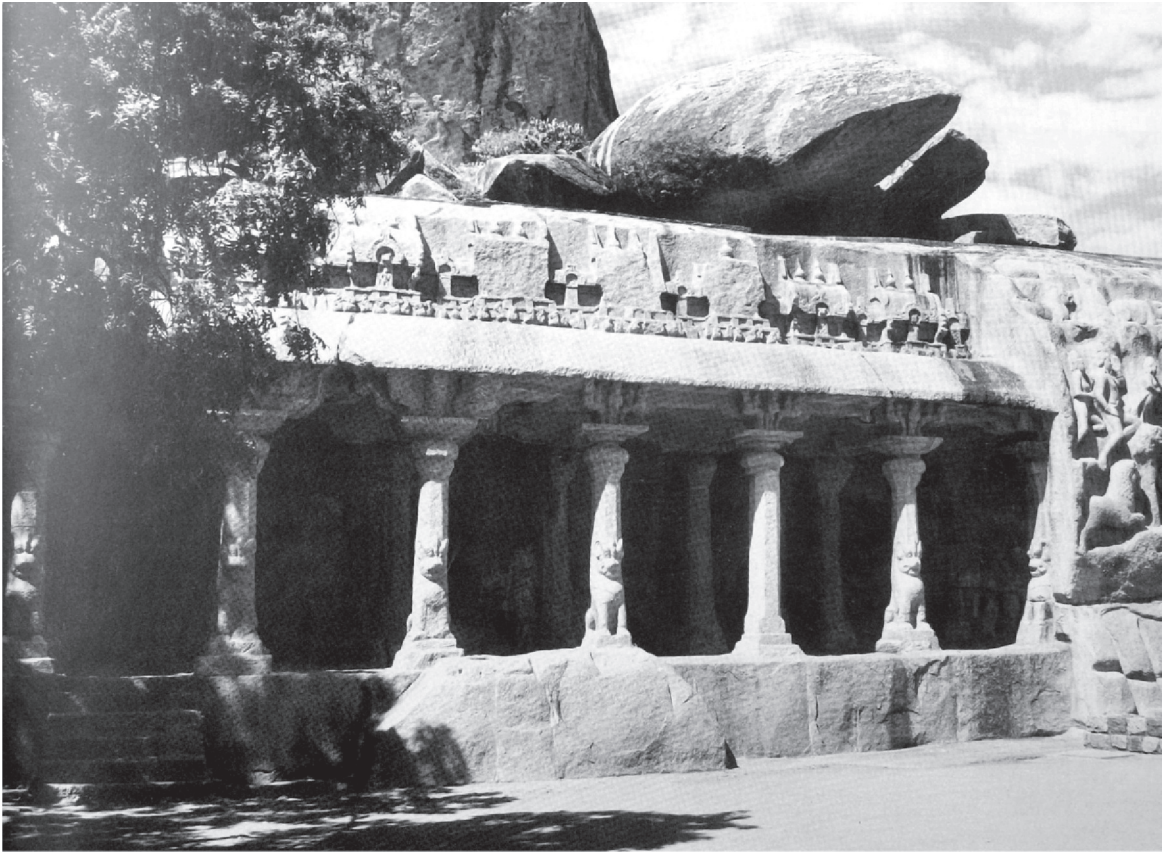
*Plate-42 : From the saduram of the southern pilaster a Siva was carved who dances the ananda tandava.*



*Plate-43 : Siyamangalam : at either extreme of the temple facade are two niches with sculptures of warriors.*



*Plate-44 : One of the dvarapalas who guard the entrance to the shrine chamber.*



*Plate-45 : The unfinished Panchapandava Mandapam cave temple by the side of the great open-air relief.*



*Plate-46 : Facade of the Yali Mandapam (often called 'tiger cave')*