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Viewing Telugu Inscriptions at Ahobila

Sucharita Adluri

One of the important pilgrimage centers (*tīrtha*) in South India, dedicated to the incarnation (*avatāra*) of Viṣṇu as Narasiṃha, the man-lion, is located at Ahobila, in the state of Andhra Pradesh. This site was important for the Vijayanagara kings as attested by numerous Telugu inscriptions dated to the 16th century. While their textual content provides valuable information on the social, political and economic cultures of sixteenth century South India, this paper investigates their meaning as visual signs within the contexts that comprise a pilgrimage site rather than as texts read by pilgrims. Additionally, given the paucity of scholarship on Telugu inscriptions, it also contributes to this understudied field.

Keywords: inscriptions; South India; visual text; visual sign; *tīrtha*; darśana; Ahobila; Ahobala; Narasiṃha

Situating Ahobila and its Inscriptions

About 200 miles to the south of Hyderabad, in the state of Andhra Pradesh, Ahobila or Ahobala the sacred temple complex to the deity Narasiṃha, is located at three thousand feet in the Nallamalai hills of the Eastern Ghats.¹ The Narasiṃha incarnation (*avatāra*) is the most wrathful among Viṣṇu's descents. To protect his devotee, Prahlāda, the deity incarnates as a man-lion to slay the young boy's father, the demon Hiraṇyakaśipu and this mythology is developed in various Sanskrit Purāṇas along with regional traditions.² The cult of Narasiṃha is particularly influential in this region of South India with over 200 temples and its history indicates complex processes of integration of folk deities of the Deccan into the larger pan-Hindu pantheon.³ Through marriage to a local Ceñcū tribal woman, this incarnation of Viṣṇu is thought to permanently reside at Ahobila.⁴

While Narasiṃha has long enjoyed popularity in this region, the cult gained importance in the 15th to 17th centuries as it received extensive patronage from the Vijayanagara kings of South India.⁵ The wrathful aspect of Narasiṃha was an apt symbol for this South Indian dynasty, that was perpetually engaged in military expeditions.⁶ Under the auspices of the Śrīvaiṣṇava sectarian tradition, this particular incarnation was acknowledged as the family god of the ruling elites.⁷ The twenty-four, 16th century inscriptions, recorded in Volume XVI of *South Indian Inscriptions* published by the Archaeological Survey of India, substantiate Ahobila's prominence during

this period.⁸ After the fall of Vijayanagara in 1609, this site lost its importance as evidenced by the lack of inscriptions thereafter.

Ahobila and the worship of Narasiṃha is traditionally thought to have ancient roots. Though most epigraphic evidence is available only from the 14th century onward, there is some indication of patronage by earlier dynasties of this region such as the Kakatiya monarchs and the Reddi kings.⁹ One of the important developments during the 15th century that facilitated the meteoric rise in Ahobila's popularity is the establishment of a monastic organization (*maṭha*) connected to the temple.¹⁰ The pontiffs of this *maṭha* were instrumental in incorporating the worship of Narasiṃha into the larger religious development of Śrīvaiṣṇavism, a tradition with its roots in the Tamil South, but that made significant headway in the Telugu regions to the north.¹¹

The pilgrimage center at present, consists of two temple complexes known as Upper (*eguva*) and Lower (*diguva*) Ahobila. The former is eight miles from the latter and is located at a higher elevation. Surrounding these temples are shrines dedicated to various forms of Narasiṃha, for which Ahobila is famous. The Upper Ahobila temple complex, the oldest as far as the edifice is concerned, houses the main deity. It sits in a valley between two peaks, called the Vedadri and the Garudari and a small river, the Bhavanasini, flowing nearby.¹² The main image in the temple sanctum is of Narasiṃha gutting the demon Hiraṇyakaśipu, having placed him on his knees. A human face and eyes are embedded/painted on to the image that is said to be self-manifest

(*svayambhū*). Ahobila is the only place where such a wrathful form (*ugra mūrti*) is installed in the sanctum at a place of pilgrimage.¹³

The image at Lower Ahobila, is of Lakṣmī-Narasimha – the four-armed Narasimha seated with one leg crossed and other pendent (*lalitāsana*), with the goddess Lakṣmī seated on his left thigh. Adjacent to the main sanctum is a separate shrine to the goddess (Figure 1). In addition to the Lower Ahobila complex, known as the Prahalāḍavarada or the Lakṣmī-Narasimhasvāmī temple, and the Upper Ahobila temple, there are eight smaller shrines to various manifestations of the deity.¹⁴ Thus, the entire pilgrimage site is comprised of a total of ten temples. Past the Upper Ahobila complex, at an even higher elevation is the *ugra stambha*, the pillar of wrath, a natural rock formation, recognized as the site where the deity is said to have emerged to slay the demon.

Of the twenty-four sixteenth/seventeenth century inscriptions¹⁵ preserved by the Archeological Survey of India, nineteen are situated at Lower Ahobila and five are situated in the courtyard of Upper Ahobila or on the way to this temple complex.¹⁶ The nineteen inscriptions confined to the Lower Ahobila complex are inscribed on the base of the main shrine,¹⁷ walls¹⁸ or pillars¹⁹ and free-standing stone slabs²⁰ placed at various locations around the temple (Figures 2–4). Of the five inscriptions designated as located in Upper Ahobila, all of which are free-standing, two²¹ are found in the temple courtyard and three are on the way there.²² All twenty-four inscriptions are in the Telugu language. Unlike Tirupati, the other important Śrīvaiṣṇava pilgrimage center at this time, which encompassed Telugu, Tamil, and Kannada regional



1. The main sanctum (right) and shrine to the goddess (left) at Lower Ahobila with the temple gateway in the background. Photo Sucharita Adluri.



2. Inscriptions on the walls of the main sanctum, Lower Ahobila. Photo Sucharita Adluri.

zones, Ahobila was exclusively a Telugu site as attested by these inscriptions.²³ One caveat in regard to the free-standing inscriptions is that they may have been moved from their original site of placement. How are we to know where they were placed in the 16th century? We cannot answer this with certainty. The placement of inscriptions that this paper follows is that recorded by the Archaeological Survey of India at the time of the transcription of the epigraphs.²⁴

Having leafed through the inscriptions of Ahobila, collected and published in Volume XVI of *South Indian Inscriptions* (S.I.I), I found the lack of legibility of the epigraphs *in situ* surprising, when I visited the temple complex in 2017. They were difficult to read with clarity, as textual documents. To be sure they had been somewhat weathered by exposure to the elements. However, their readability and legibility is questioned due to at least two other reasons. First, some of the stone slabs are over seven feet in height and dominate the temple spaces in which they were placed (Figure 3). Some free-standing inscriptions are distributed over more than a single slab creating rupture in the sequence of the text. Some of the inscriptions on the temple walls begin at such heights that one cannot read the beginning of the inscription that adorns them. The inscriptions on the base of the temple walls or at the base of the pillar at the entrance would have been more accessible. However, this meant that the erstwhile reader would have to spend considerable time in a crouched position, while continuing to follow the sequence of the text. Furthermore, while it is possible to make out the Telugu alphabet of these inscriptions, there is an absence of punctuation and space between words, creating an unending flow of script. Telugu script during this period becomes 'fully roundish' transcending some of its earlier 'angular' and 'linear' shape.²⁵ This tendency to circular form and the continuous flow of words without spacing is known as *Golusu Kattu* or chain style writing, which went out of vogue in the 19th century.²⁶ Readability is also affected by light as some of the inscriptions especially those on temple



3. Free-standing stone slab inscriptions. Photo Sucharita Adluri.



4. Free-standing stone slab inscriptions. Photo Sucharita Adluri.

walls are difficult to decipher during certain hours of the day.

Second, what was the level of literacy in this region in the sixteenth century? Though an easy answer is not possible, studies suggest that to be highly literate required learning in Sanskrit and Telugu literature that was restricted to the upper classes.²⁷ The language usage in the inscriptions was of the 'spoken variety of the contemporary educated class' which included 'the liberalized classical style with a greater admixture of the contemporary spoken forms of the high and middle classes.'²⁸ It is possible that certain sections of inscriptions may have been recited to groups of pilgrims by guides that even today are used by some to navigate pilgrimage sites.²⁹ This would result in some awareness of the *raison d'être* of these epigraphs. Though, the contents were accessible to a few, and were meaningful to different degrees to the various types of readers and may have served different purposes for different groups of people, nevertheless, it is unlikely that the inscriptions were accessible to a large number of devotees, as texts that could be read. For those who could not access the texts what was the significance of inscriptions for them?

The content of inscriptional materials in the reconstruction of medieval Indian history and their significance as textual documents is indisputable³⁰ In the case of South India, numerous studies reconstruct dynastic lineages, details on polity, religious and ritual hierarchies, and social and economic policies.³¹ Most of the inscriptions utilized are from religious sites as the temple in medieval India was understood as the nexus of educational, social, political and economic activity.³² Ahobila inscriptions too, reveal such specifics. Similar to legal documents, a typical inscription reads as follows:

May there be prosperity! This is the edict of the god among gods, Narasimha [victory], who is the goad for the anti-gods assembled as elephants and the crest jewel among the multitude of gods. Hail! It being the year 1469 (1548) of the victorious Śālivāhana era, the year named Kilaka,³³ during the bright fortnight of the month(s) June/July, on the 11th while the glorious king of kings, the foremost lord, the courageous and splendid mahārāja, Sadāśivarāya reigned the kingdom with complete sovereignty from Vidyānagara. Hail! To the auspicious feet of the Lord of the four directions etc., the god of Ahobala, the powerful Narasimha. The illustrious chieftain and king,³⁴ tracing descent from the sage Kaśyapa³⁵ of the Yajur Vedic lineage,³⁶ Goburi Vobayadeva's wife, Narasamma, who

constructed on the north side of Diguva Tirupati (lower complex), the open-air hall called Vasanta,³⁷ to offer to the Lord of Ahobala, when he rests there upon his descent and return back (to the upper complex), during the time of festivals that are daily, fortnightly, monthly, yearly, for the purpose of offering of 15 plates of dosas,³⁸ black gram lentils, cumin, ghee, castor oil, areca nuts and betel leaves,³⁹ the interest on the 120 varāhas⁴⁰ that she donated to the temple treasury is to be utilized for offerings to the Lord of Ahobala until such a time as there is no moon. These services are to be always supervised by sons of Goburi Narasamma ... Narasingaraju, Narasaraju, Timmaraju, and the descendants of these four [one name missing] shall always be the overseers.⁴¹

One way in which the social and economic importance of temples was facilitated was through their function as distributive centers for divine food that signified authority and honor. The gifting of food as a donative act is evident in inscriptions from 9th to the 13th centuries, but increases progressively from the 14th century onwards.⁴² Concurrent with divine cuisine was also the celebration of festivals with processions that resulted in an elaborate ritual calendar that regulated the feeding of the gods at numerous times.⁴³ Both these features are evident in the inscriptions at Ahobila, which are rife with ritual menus, recipes and protocols for processioning the deity within the temple sanctum and without, during festivals. An undated inscription at Ahobila, mentions a staggering 220 days of festivals, at which time the deity was processioned and rested at various open-air halls (*maṇḍapa*), providing *darśana* to pilgrims.⁴⁴ So, though pilgrims may know some of the content, perhaps through guides, it was not necessarily mediated through reading.

Due to the reasons mentioned earlier that render reading the text difficult, how would the epigraphs have been viewed? The scholarship of Liz James, and Anthony Eastmond is instructive on the significance of inscriptions as visual signs. James asks '[w]hat happens when words are considered purely as visual signs and considered in terms of their visuality, rather than what they say?'⁴⁵ In her study of Byzantine churches, she finds that words as signs functioned in two ways. First as magical signs, the 'letter forms' of the inscriptions had an 'iconic power' to harness the 'power of the written word.' Second, words in epigraphs functioned as 'ornament which completes the object to which it belongs' and 'bring[s] to life the blank spaces of the buildings.'⁴⁶ She concludes, 'unread inscriptions perform a function [even] in their silence and potential illegibility.'⁴⁷

Likewise, Eastmond on the topic of viewing inscriptions makes a salient point on the distinction between viewer and reader—

... literacy is not an absolute: it is a sliding scale that runs between full literacy – the ability to read, write

and compose – and various forms of functional literacy. Functional literacy can vary between signature literacy (the ability to just read and sign your name); differing degrees of ability to recognize particular letter, words, or phrases; or the ability to read and write in one particular language. Each person therefore brings a different degree of knowledge and experience to bear on inscriptions, and, as a result will take different things from them. And the further we move down the scale of literacy the greater the importance of viewing over reading. The less you can read, the greater the shift from reading to viewing and the more the writing becomes a visual symbol rather than a means of verbal communication.⁴⁸

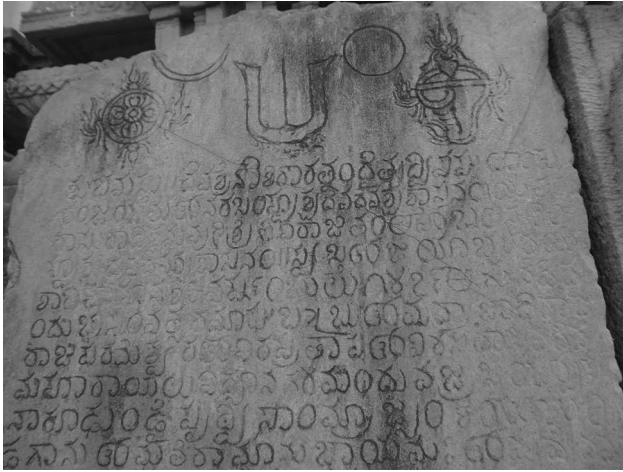
Following such studies, this paper explores the significance of inscriptions for a viewer rather than the reader, by evaluating their placement and other symbolic contexts in which they are embedded. Even though the contents of the inscriptions may have been inaccessible as text to be read, they could still function as visual signs. Their significance for the devotee can be deciphered in relation to other constituents that inform the experience of a pilgrim such as the symbolism of the temple (*mandira*), the concept of a pilgrimage site (*tīrtha kṣetra*) and the enhancement of devotional attitude during the process of the exchange of vision with the deity (*darśana*).

The first section discusses the symbolism of the Hindu temple as the body of the deity and the abode of god and the meaning of inscriptions within this context. In the second section, I explore the significance of inscriptions in cementing the identity between place (Ahobila) and deity (Narasimha). Here, the prior experience of the devotee in regard to the pilgrimage site made possible by various sources such as narratives, performances, recitations etc. in understanding the significance of inscriptions is evaluated. Lastly, the paper considers the function of inscriptions as visual signs in enhancing the overall experience of devotion for the pilgrim. The prominent display of the divine insignia on the epigraphs and their iconic role as forms of the deity serve as prompts in heightening devotional attitude (*bhakti anubhava*) as they serve to maintain the experiential continuity with the *darśana* of the deity that takes place within the sanctum (Figure 5).

Viewing Inscriptions

Experiencing the Body of God

Of the nineteen recorded inscriptions at Lower Ahobila, nine are found on temple structures. Eight of these nine are inscribed on the walls and the base of the main sanctum that houses the image.⁴⁹ One is found on



5. Divine insignias on the stone slab inscriptions. Photo Sucharita Adluri.

the platform which supports the huge pillar in the courtyard.⁵⁰ Of the ten freestanding epigraphs, seven are found at the main gateway (*gopura*)⁵¹ and three at various points within the temple courtyard.⁵² As visual signs their significance could be deciphered in the context of the symbolism of the temple and the movement of the devotee through its precincts. As the devotee proceeds through the main gateway, they would encounter the seven free-standing epigraphs (Figures 3 and 4) Then as they make their way toward the main shrine and pause to bow down at the pillar, the inscriptions on the base of the structure would be visible. Moving inward toward the main shrine, the circumambulation (*pradakṣiṇa*) of its outer precincts brings the engravings on the walls of the temple shrine and those placed within into view (Figure 2). What would a pilgrim make of these, if they were unable to read them? What would be their significance?

A potent sacred place, the Hindu temple is envisioned as a link between the world of men and the world of gods, a nexus between earth and heaven.⁵³ Additionally, it is understood to be the abode of the deity, a replica of the Hindu universe, the center of the universe, the cosmic axis around which the universe traverses.⁵⁴ Two understandings of the Hindu temple are significant in evaluating the experience of viewing inscriptions as the pilgrim makes their way toward the inner shrine, namely, the identification of the temple as the body of god and the temple as the abode of god.

The symbolic correspondence between the temple and the divine body is an understanding fundamental to most Hindu traditions. Esoteric Sanskrit Vaiṣṇava texts such as the *Padma Saṃhitā*, describe meditations where one visualizes the temple in the 'form of an anthropomorphic divine

living being'.⁵⁵ But even in the case of more popular texts such as the *Agni Purāṇa*, accessible to larger numbers of people through recitation and/or performance, the temple is envisioned as a representation of Vāsudeva.⁵⁶ Colas speaking on the Vaiṣṇava tradition notes that 'Viṣṇu's temple is made of Viṣṇu'.⁵⁷ Similarly, it has been suggested that,

the assimilation of the temple to the god or his body leads to a reconsideration of the relationship that may exist between the temple and the images that often come to cover its facades, in other words between the architecture and the iconography it supports ... it is obvious that the setting up (of deities) on the facades of the temple aims first of all to rebuild around the titular god the pantheon over which he is the master, locally ... [and] these images that 'inhabit' the facades of the temple thus inhabit the body of the god.⁵⁸

In the case of Ahobila, the sanctum walls are austere, lacking any such iconographic representations but for inscribed text. As such, regardless of the contents of the text, the inscriptions take on significance as adorning the body of Narasiṃha himself (Figure 2).

The connotation of inscriptions as ornaments is heightened when they are understood to be the very decrees of Narasiṃha 'inhabit[ing]' the temple walls. Even though these eulogies may not have been read, in the larger context of the temple as the body of god, they may have been understood as divine utterances. All of them begin with the declaration that they are the decrees (*śāsana*) of Narasiṃha and launch into devotional praise right away. These are formulaic and utilize one of two formats or sometimes both together.

Format A:

May there be prosperity! This is the edict of the God among gods, Śrī Narasiṃha [victory], who is the crest jewel among the best/multitude of gods and is the goad for the demons assembled as elephants

Format B:

May there be prosperity! This is the edict of the god among gods, Narasiṃha of Ahobala, whose head is adorned by a wreath of the lords among men, gods and so on.

This is unusual as contemporaneous inscriptions from other prominent pilgrimage sites during this time simply begin as decrees of kings or temple administrators.⁵⁹ They lack any kind of elaborate epithets promoting the sovereignty of the deity that are the hallmark of the inscriptions at Ahobila. In the case of Ahobila however, all are articulated as the edicts of Narasiṃha. In addition, missing in these epigraphs is a semi-divine royal genealogy, utilizing purāṇic ancestry that is common in Indian inscriptions.⁶⁰ The divine sovereign here is clearly

Narasimha and the kings and administrators who are the donors, are simply his vassals.

Ali, in his discussion of decoration and adornment in the context of beauty in medieval courtly culture, notes that verbal praises or eulogies such as those that comprise the beginning of the Ahobila inscriptions, 'were the verbal counterparts to the physical ornaments (unguents, clothes, flowers, jewelry) which "dressed" or "decorated" their addressees. Eulogies (*praṣaṣṭi*, *stuti*), both secular and religious, imagine themselves as decorations presented towards their objects'.⁶¹ All inscriptions at Ahobila, including those on temple structures, begin with an eulogy, 'an ornament – a courtesy (*upacāra*) to its recipient'.⁶² The term *upacāra* is also used to refer to the various offerings or services that comprise the ritual of *pūjā* within the inner sanctum, underscoring the significance of these inscriptions together with their eulogies as devotional offerings similar to flowers, unguents, and so on that adorn the main image of the deity. As Coomaraswamy notes, an ornament is not an extraneous addition, but 'essential to utility and beauty' and is added to 'fulfill a given function'.⁶³ Hence, just as the attributes of the icon in the inner sanctum such as the conch, discus, crown and so on are essential and convey certain aspects of the deity, so too are the inscriptions that adorn the body of the deity, i.e., temple walls. Though unaware of the exact text, devotees would comprehend these inscriptions as verbal ornaments etched into the stark stone façade in curved and rounded Telugu script.

The temple as the body of god is also understood symbolically in two ways. The temple structure is homologized as the deity standing with the temple sanctum as his body and the temple tower (*śikhara*) as the divine crown. Alternately, the temple also corresponds to the deity in a reclined posture. In the latter case, 'placed longitudinally, the sacred edifice is taken as an image of the body of the supine god', meaning that the head of the deity corresponds to the sanctum, the open-air hall (*maṇḍapa*) is his middle, and the gateway (*gopura*), which is the entrance into the temple complex, corresponds to the feet of the prone deity.⁶⁴ Fifteen of the nineteen inscriptions at Lower Ahobila are located on the sanctum walls of the main shrine understood as the head of the reclining deity. Together with the gateway which symbolize the divine feet, they comprise the two most important places within the temple complex and this is signaled by the placement of inscriptions.⁶⁵ As the pilgrim enters through the gateway, they encounter the inscriptions and when they proceed further and circumambulate the temple sanctum, the large number of inscriptions on its walls,

become visible. Three of the nineteen epigraphs are found in the courtyard and at the entrance of the Narasimha shrine, visible as the devotee enters and proceeds towards the inner sanctum.⁶⁶ The entire space within which the nine epigraphs on the walls of the sanctum and the pillar, seven at the gateway and three in the courtyard are to be found, comprise the body of the deity envisioned as reclining longitudinally.

The significance of temple as the abode of deity also comes into play in the viewing of inscriptions as visual signs. In the womb chamber or the inner sanctum, the most sacred place of the entire temple, is housed the image of the deity and sacred power is understood to emanate outward and upward from the sanctum. What this means is that the inscriptions on the western and southern walls of the temple not only signal the source of divine energy, but are saturated with the divine energy radiating from the image in the inner sanctum. Lacking any other iconographic details, these bare walls with the inscriptions stand out as tokens of potent power radiating from the inner sanctum. So, as far as the inscriptions on the temple walls are concerned, as ornaments or attributes (from earlier discussion on temple as the body of god) saturated with divine power that can be touched, the rough, cool granite stone evokes the terrible yet benevolent aspects of Narasimha. While these epigraphs may not have the visually charged effect of the exchange of vision (*darśana*) in the inner sanctum, the fact that they are understood as offerings of adoration that adorn the deity and their physical proximity to the god in the inner sanctum underscore their importance for the pilgrim.

Moving forward toward the temple sanctum, i.e., traversing the divine body, the approach of the devotee from the feet (main gateway) to the head (the main sanctum) of the deity is a trajectory of increasing divine power while at the same time a movement through the body of god from feet to the crown. In fact, together with the inscriptions on the sanctum walls of the temple, these free-standing inscriptions at the gateway comprise a majority of the inscriptions found at Lower Ahobila. Seastrand's paper explores some aspects of this kinesthetic experience of movement within temple precincts. The placement of the epigrams at the gateway serve as a framing device for the pilgrim not only marking the entry into sacred space, but also underscoring the sanctum as the source of power radiating out, where a number of inscriptions are found on the temple walls. The three inscriptions placed within the temple courtyard could serve as reminders of this symbolism as the devotee approaches the main sanctum.

Identifying Place and Deity

Viewing inscriptions also functions to underscore the identity between place and deity, reinforcing Ahobila as the residence of Narasiṃha. They become signs of a mythology that is repeatedly articulated at the pilgrimage site. This is especially the case with the epigraphs on free-standing stones placed at various locations around the temple complex (Figures 3 and 4). An important consideration in evaluating the significance of inscriptions as visual signs is that the pilgrim is not a *tabula rasa*.⁶⁷ Their previous experience with devotional texts, performances, hymns, and even prior *darśana* at local Narasiṃha shrines, all mediate their experience of Ahobila. Primed in this way the devotee experiences inscriptions as integral components of the pilgrimage site (*tīrtha kṣetra*) as a whole. Eastmond notes that inscriptions can generate meaning by serving as ‘prompts to memory’, in our case, evoking and drawing connections to prior encounters with the deity’s mythology and ritual.⁶⁸

As a devotee enters through the gateway to the temple, two unique features of the inscriptions render them meaningful for a pilgrim viewing them.⁶⁹ First the materiality of the inscriptions inscribed on large rough-cut granite stone, resonates with the descriptions of Narasiṃha and Ahobila found in narratives available as oral renditions. A second unique feature is the prominent display of the Vaiṣṇava insignias. The beginning of each free-standing inscription is framed by the footprints of Viṣṇu, flanked by his weapons the conch (*śaṅkha*) and discus (*cakra*). Surrounding the footprints are the sun and the moon (Figure 5).⁷⁰ The conch and the discus are among the most important of Viṣṇu’s weapons that are unique to him. The sun and the moon may symbolize the created universe over which the deity is the sovereign. Even if pilgrims could not read the eulogies, or in some way were unaware of the information the textual contents supplied, they would necessarily recognize the emblems of Viṣṇu that signify his presence reinforcing a particular vision of Narasiṃha as the sovereign ruler over his realm as articulated in textual traditions. Their physicality and the divine insignia on them serve as ‘prompts’ to remind the devotee of the identity between place and deity. Each of these is explored further in this section.

One of the earliest sources is the Tamil *Nalāyīra Divya Prabandham*. Here, as one of the 108 holy sites (*divyadeśa*) for the Śrīvaiṣṇavas, Ahobila is extolled as Siṅgave! Kuṇṇam, the mountain of the youthful lion in ten verses, by Tirumaṅgai Ālvār in his *Perīya Tirumoli*.⁷¹ Identified as the residence of Narasiṃha who incarnates to slay the demon Hiranyakaśipu, the poet notes that it is difficult to reach due to inclement

weather and a rough terrain inhabited by wild animals and hunters. Four of the ten verses characterize this pilgrimage site utilizing terms such as mountain/hill (*kuṇṇu*) or as strewn with rocks (*kal*). For instance, Ahobila is described as a place of *broken mountains*, the place where the roots of the gooseberry trees penetrate and break the *rocks*.⁷² Its thick bamboo vegetation is said to grow amidst *rocks*, and it is described as the place where the heat and *rocks* render the journey difficult.⁷³ Such accentuation of the rocky terrain of the poem resonates with the massive rough-cut, unpolished stone epigraphs at the gateway to the temple that the devotee encounters. They are symbolic of the raw and powerful nature of the place and deity.

In like manner, the *sthalapurāṇa* section of the *Brahmaṇḍa Purāṇa*, the *Ahobila Mahātmya*,⁷⁴ states that the pillars (of stone) that comprised the demon’s palace, upon his demise, became the mountains on which the pilgrimage site is located.⁷⁵ With the prior understanding that Ahobila was set up among the ruins of the demon’s palace, a place of broken mountains and shattered stone pillars, the rough-cut stone inscriptions serve to signify that mythological context for some viewers. They may evoke in the viewer an understanding of the stone slabs with inscriptions as pieces of the very pillar from which Narasiṃha charges out, thereby connecting the present to the ancient past. Available to touch, these epigraphs take on new meaning and serve as a link, perhaps, to the actual pillar homologized as a huge cleft in the side of the mountain and revered as the *ugra stambha*, the pillar of wrath, that lies even further up from the Upper Ahobila temple complex. However, this is an arduous journey undertaken only by a few. Such prior conceptualizations of the temple in narratives that devotees most likely had knowledge of, lend a kind of lens through which the inscriptions are viewed – as visual signs enlivening a particular mythology.⁷⁶

Not only does the experience of the materiality and physicality of the epigraphs parallel narrative accounts, but the divine insignia on them also underscores the identity between deity and place. In the Telugu purāṇa on Ahobila, titled *Narasiṃha Purāṇamu* by Errapragada (14th century), after emerging from the pillar and slaying the demon, so great was the deity’s rage that it was consuming the known worlds. The sages and the gods assemble on this very site to praise the incarnation in order to soothe his anger. Upon being hymned, the God exclaims –

Since my heart has been softened and filled with love,
I will reside on this mighty mountain, because earlier,
you all extolled my strength, exclaiming *aho-bala* (o’
what strength!), this *tīrtha* known by the name of

Ahobala, will remain, sanctifying the three worlds, by me.⁷⁷

‘The mighty mountain’ which was originally the palace of the demon has a new inhabitant. Not only does Narasiṃha reside here permanently, he does so as its sovereign ruler. The devotee is primed for such an experience of inscriptions as edicts of the deity by previous recitations or performances that solidify the appearance of Narasiṃha and his myth at this specific place. For instance, the contents of the *Narasimha Purāṇamu* which deals exclusively with Ahobila would have been accessible through performers even though the devotees may have been non-literate or literate to various degrees. Rao notes that ‘[t]he purāṇas were read/performed in temples and other religious locations. A class of paurāṇika performers made it their profession to perform these texts.’⁷⁸ The experience of viewing these inscriptions can be influenced by such knowledge of various sources that are not necessarily read, but whose contents may have had wider transmission.

A Sanskrit play attributed to the pontiff of the Śrīvaiṣṇava monastic organization (*maṭha*) in Ahobila in the 16th century characterizes Ahobila as not only the abode of Narasiṃha, but as the place where he holds court. In the *Vāsantikāpariṇaya*, the author, Śatagopa Yatindra Mahādeśikan, narrates the marriage of Narasiṃha to a local tribal woman. Here, the kingdom of Ahobila is described with the mountain Vedadri and the river Bhavanasini in its environs. In the assembly hall (*asthānamandapa*), Narasiṃha receives all the gods who arrive for the purpose of serving (*sevanārtha*) him and to obtain *darśana*.⁷⁹ While Narasiṃha rules over the universe as the Supreme Being, Ahobila is also his kingdom, in the sense of a ‘bounded territory’.⁸⁰ Within such contexts, viewing the divine insignia on the epigrams may signal to the viewer this circumscribed territory. As visual signs, the inscriptions are expressions of Narasiṃha’s nature and sovereignty over this *tīrtha kṣetra*.

Adorned with the prominent Vaiṣṇava insignia these rough-cut granite slabs are infused with Narasiṃha’s power and signal his presence within the sanctum (Figure 5). These blocks of stone conceptualize an experience of the deity as the ruler over this area and these decrees with the divine insignia are royal decrees embodying the very power of the sovereign in residence. As ‘current’ decrees of Narasiṃha, the inscriptions together with the narrative sources mentioned earlier, which refer to the deity’s past action of slaying the demon and restoring order, would project a continuous history of his presence at Ahobila. While evoking his mythic reality they also underscore his sovereign rule over the three worlds. Just as the gods come to pay homage to the Lord of the universe, so too the pilgrims.

Inscriptions evoke the importance of the deity and place for the devotee. Ritual texts such as the *Śrīprasna Saṃhitā* also extol the sacredness of the entire temple complex not just the main image. It prescribes that once the various structures of the temple are completed and the icon is placed in the sanctum, the whole temple compound and all its parts are to be consecrated to establish the divine presence. The entire temple complex and all existent structures are invested with the sacred power of the deity.⁸¹ The idea of the temple complex and everything within it as pulsating with divine energy is not an uncommon notion among devotees. Placed within such surroundings, the inscriptions signal not only the divine power of Narasiṃha, but also his sovereignty as ruler over this region.

Enhancing Devotion

In the previous section we saw that the prominent display of the divine insignias on inscriptions could function to identify and solidify the connection between place (Ahobila) and deity (Narasiṃha), particularly as the sovereign ruler over this pilgrimage site. With the signs prominently displayed on them, the inscriptions embody the narrative of Narasiṃha in a visible form. Additionally, viewing these inscriptions may also serve an iconic function in the overall heightening of devotional feeling or experience (*anubhava*) among the pilgrims. In his study on the reliefs of *Jātaka Tales* at some Buddhist sites in South and South East Asia, Brown notes that the function of these paintings or reliefs was

to indicate, to make “actual”, the Buddha through his life and history. They do this simply by being there, and perhaps are best seen as allowing the Buddha through his ‘history’ to participate with the monks and lay worshippers. The purpose is to make the Buddha’s presence felt, his forms and teachings manifest.⁸²

Observing the heights at which some of these reliefs were found and also the lack of a narrative sequence to the reliefs, he concludes that their function was not didactic, but rather to ‘make the Buddha’s presence felt.’ They were to be understood within the context of the Buddhist temple as a whole and serve an iconic function as ‘a form of the deity that is the focus of reverence and worship’ thereby, amplifying the devotional attitude of the pilgrim.⁸³

The divine insignias of the stylized footprint, the discus and the conch on the inscriptions make Narasiṃha’s presence felt even outside the sanctum (Figure 5). The stylized footprints known as the *ūrdhvaṇḍra*, is an important Vaiṣṇava symbol

inscribed not just on physical objects such as temple walls and inscriptions. Some Vaiṣṇava groups apply the mark to their foreheads and or various parts of their bodies. It is used as a mark on the forehead and also in certain groups, it is applied to various parts of the body.⁸⁴ The footprints of Viṣṇu comprises a category of divine emblems that are ‘honored as the very embodiment of the God.’⁸⁵ The insignia of Viṣṇu’s feet on the inscriptions can evoke in the pilgrim the ritual in the inner sanctum of being blessed by the feet of Viṣṇu, which fashioned as a crown (*śatagopa*), is placed on one’s head as a blessing. Such perceived continuity within the sanctum and outside it, serves to reinforce and sustain the overall devotional feeling of the pilgrim. Even if the inscriptions cannot be read by the pilgrim, they are understood as tokens of Narasimha’s divine presence, power (*śakti*), and grace (*prasāda*) continuous with the overall experience of seeking merit at a religious site.

The conch and discus as the weapons of the deity, in Hindu iconography are a stand-in for Viṣṇu. These weapons have a long history of being represented as personified beings called the *āyudha puruṣas* and are objects of ritual. However, even the non-personified discus, placed as the main image in the inner sanctum of some shrines is worshipped in the Tamil South.⁸⁶ Shrines to this non-personified form of the discus attached to some Vaiṣṇava temple complexes are not uncommon.⁸⁷ These understandings of the discus variously as the creative power (*kriyā śakti*) of Viṣṇu and/or a form of Viṣṇu, and/or as Viṣṇu himself (*cakrarūpin*) render the inscriptions as more than stones documenting evidence of donative activity. The divine ‘signage’ of footprints, the discus and the conch, a unique feature of Ahobila inscriptions render them as a ‘form’ of the deity and as ‘units of meaning and reverence’.⁸⁸ And even though, Ahobila inscriptions are not narrative depictions of the life of Narasimha, as in the case of the *Jātaka* reliefs in Buddhist temples. Nonetheless, the prominent display of Viṣṇu’s insignia which have a rich contextual significance just mentioned, serve an ‘iconic’ function to make Narasimha’s presence felt, enhancing the overall devotional experience of the devotees.

Some of these inscriptions as backdrops to certain specific rituals also may have served to enhance devotional attitudes. At Lower Ahobila, seven slabs are placed at the main entrance to the temple premises. Also, at least two of the twenty-four inscriptions were placed near open-air halls where the deity was to rest according to the stipulations of the donations. The gateway to the temple precincts is an important juncture where rituals would be conducted and where the processioned deity halts for devotional ministrations

before moving on to the streets of nearby villages. Though we cannot be sure if this actually took place, some inscriptions seem to have been stained with color possibly from ritual activity. On such occasions, the processional party conducts special rituals and makes offerings. Experiencing the inscriptions during festival times, with the deity in close proximity, perhaps imbues the epigraphs with divine power, spiritually recharging them, further enforcing the notion of them as signifying the presence of the Narasimha. Given that Vaiṣṇava ritual texts such as *Paramapurūṣa Saṃhitā* consider even bowing down to the towering structure over the main gateway, the *gopura*, from afar as highly meritorious, the viewing and proximity to the inscriptions within the temple complex itself would certainly be significant for a devotee.⁸⁹

Those inscriptions that are placed close to open-air halls (*maṇḍapa*) where the processional deity rests on his journey between the two temple complexes, also bear witness to ritual activity. Here special ceremonies are conducted and the devotees have a chance to partake of not only *darśana*, but also *prasāda* (sanctified food).⁹⁰ Most of the inscriptions in courtyards and near these open-air halls detail specifics of ritual performance and distribution of offerings that would take place when the deity was resting in these *maṇḍapa*-s (see the translated inscription). It is unclear whether the contents of the inscriptions were read out loud or if mention was made of them during ritual performances that took place in close proximity to them. It is also possible, as mentioned earlier, that the contents may have been accessible to the pilgrims through guides who mediated the textual contents.⁹¹ During such times, devotees would be compelled to interact with these epigraphs because as backdrops to such activity they encourage pausing and interacting with the surrounding settings. Along with ingesting the consecrated food (*prasāda*) and the *tīrtha* water, clutching flowers and cosmetics offered to the deity, the closeness to these inscriptions can have an effect on the devotee. These inscriptions serve to extend the presence of Narasimha outside of the temple sanctum while compressing within them his entire mythology and as visual reminders enhance the *darśana* experience that is had in the sanctum as one moves through the temple space.

Conclusion

As texts to be read, South Indian inscriptions yield valuable information in regard to various aspects of medieval and late-medieval societies. But what significance could they have had for pilgrims who could not access them as such? The foregoing discussion of inscriptions at Ahobila

explores the significance of epigraphs beyond meaning derived from their contents alone. The aim was to evaluate possible, alternate frames of reference that could inform a devotee's understanding and experience of the inscriptions, if their import cannot be accessed through the reading of their contents. When viewing rather than reading becomes the more prominent way of experiencing them, the web of social, cultural, and religious frames of reference in which they are embedded can aid in deciphering their significance. While the responses of viewers may be varied depending on the milieux that inform their comprehension of inscriptions, three contexts that are integral to the experience of a pilgrimage site become important: 1) symbolism of the temple (*mandira*); 2) identity between place and deity that is so important to the conception of a pilgrimage site (*tīrtha kṣetra*); and 3) the enhancement of devotional attitudes in line with Hindu ritual and worship. First, considering inscriptions as encapsulated within the wider symbolic space of the temple complex renders the experience of viewing them, meaningful. The sanctum as the body of god renders inscriptions on sanctum walls as imbued with the power emanating from the image within, but also serve an ornamental function as adornments to the body of Narasiṃha that is homologized as the temple edifice. As another permutation of the symbolic understanding of the temple complex *itself* as the body of the deity, the placement of inscriptions at the temple gateway and on the sanctum walls frame the movement of the pilgrim through the body of the supine Narasiṃha, from the entrance which symbolizes his feet to the sanctum, which signifies his head.

Second, inscriptions may function to integrate Narasiṃha's wrathful nature, his mythology and his identity with Ahobila. This is made possible due to prior memories of the nature of deity, the pilgrimage center, and the myth that is mediated through devotional texts, performances and hymns. Primed in this way, viewing inscriptions solidify the deity's identity as the sovereign of the mountainous, rocky landscape of Ahobila and also manifest his wrathful nature. Third, the viewing of inscriptions needs to be understood within the overall devotional program that is so salient at a pilgrimage site. Due to the placement and prominent display of insignia on the epigraphs, viewing them can heighten the devotional experience (*bhakti anubhava*) that is integral to the experience of *darśana*.

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NOTES

1. For other designations utilized, see Vasantha 2001: 5-6.
2. Soifer 1991, Vemsani 2009.
3. Narasimhacharya 1989: 5, Sontheimer 1987, 2004.
4. Murty 1997. Also see, Deḃicka-Borek 2016 on the legend of the marriage of Narasiṃha to a local woman, Ceñcū-Lakṣmī, as retold in the Sanskrit drama of the 16th century, the *Vāsantikāpariṇaya*.
5. For history of southern India during Vijayanagara rule see Asher and Talbot 2006: 53-83 and Stein 1993. Narasimhacharya 1989 examines the prominence of this cult in the Andhra region. Vemsani 2009 explores through the analysis of *sthalapurāṇa*-s, folk mythology, ritual practices, and the unique features of Narasiṃha worship in Andhra.
6. Verghese 1995: 41, 35; Sontheimer 2004: 332.
7. Verghese 2000.
8. Narasimhaswamy 1972.
9. Sitapati 1982: 13-14.
10. Vasantha 2001: 47.
11. Narasimhacharya 1989.
12. Biardeau 1975: 52.
13. Ibid. 53.
14. Shrines dedicated to Narasiṃha's other manifestations namely Jvāla, Bhārgava, Mālola, Krodha, Pāvana, Karañja, Chatravaṭa, and Yogānanda.
15. From 1515 CE to 1609 CE.
16. S.I.I Vol. XVI—nos. 53, 96, 109, 155, 159, 169, 174, 181, 199, 200, 205, 257, 260, 263, 271, 296, 299, 301, 310 and S.I.I. Vol XVI—nos. 165, 188, 235, 248, 261 respectively.
17. S.I.I Vol XVI—nos. 96, 109.
18. S.I.I Vol. XVI- nos. 155, 159, 169, 181, 205, 271.
19. S.I.I Vol XVI—no. 174.
20. S.I.I Vol XVI—nos. 53, 199, 200, 257, 260, 263, 296, 299, 301, 310.
21. S.I.I Vol XVI- nos. 165, 261.
22. S.I.I Vol XVI—nos. 188, 235, 248.
23. This is not to say that Telugu at this time served as a symbol of national identity, since according to Narayana Rao and others such an understanding of linguistic identity did not emerge until the seventeenth century (1995).
24. When I visited Ahobila in 2017, the free-standing inscriptions seemed to have been moved from their

- locations indicated in S.I.I and were instead positioned together in the courtyard of the Lower Ahobila temple complex. Many devotees did not pay any attention to them and they seemed a vague reminder of the past glory of the temple complex.
25. Parabrahma Sastry 2009: 94.
 26. I am grateful to one of the reviewers for directing me to this aspect of Telugu writing. For more on Telugu script in inscriptions see Grünendahl 2009.
 27. Rao 2017: 28.
 28. Krishnamurti 1995: 90, 91.
 29. Dehejia 1998, Rotman 2008.
 30. See Sircar 1965, Solomon 1998.
 31. Nilakanta Sastri 1958, Stein 1980, Karashima 1984, Ali 2000, Talbot 2001.
 32. Nilakanta Sastri 1958, Stein 1960, Appadurai 1976.
 33. For more on eras in Telugu inscriptions see Iswara Dutt 1967: XXXVIII-XL.
 34. *mahāmaṇḍaleśvara* and *mahārāja* respectively.
 35. Sanskrit term is *gotra*.
 36. Sanskrit term is *śākha*.
 37. *Vasanta Maṇḍapa*, a specific open-aired hall at in the Lower Ahobila temple complex.
 38. Crêpes made of lentils offered to the deity, but also a staple of South Indian cuisine.
 39. Note that the exact measurements of these ingredients indicated in the inscription have not been translated. For more information on weights and measurements, see Vasantha 2001: 156-160.
 40. Ibid.
 41. S.I.I. Vol. XVI—no. 169; my own translation.
 42. Orr 2000.
 43. Breckenridge 1986: 28.
 44. Narasimhacharya 1989: 237.
 45. James 2007: 188.
 46. Ibid. 200, 201.
 47. Ibid. 203.
 48. Eastmond 2015: 4-5.
 49. S.I.I. Vol. XVI—nos. 96, 109, 155, 159, 169, 181, 205, 271.
 50. S.I.I. Vol. XVI—no. 174.
 51. S.I.I. Vol. XVI—nos. 257, 260, 263, 296, 299, 301, 310.
 52. S.I.I. Vol. XVI—nos. 53, 199, 200.
 53. Kramarisch 1976, Michell 1988, Lorenzetti 2015.
 54. Michell 1988: 62-69; Lorenzetti 2015: 17-44.
 55. Dagens 1996: 359.
 56. Ibid. 362.
 57. Colas 1986: 81.
 58. Dagens 1996. 369.
 59. For instance, see Vijayanagara inscriptions from Tirupati during the 14th to 16th centuries, Vijayaraghavacharya 1998: Vols. 4-6.
 60. Ali 2000.
 61. Ali 2004: 181.
 62. Ibid: 180.
 63. 1977: 252.
 64. Lorenzetti 2015: 40.
 65. S.I.I. Vol. XVI. nos—96, 109, 155, 159, 169, 181, 205, 271 and nos—257, 260, 263, 296, 299, 301, 310.
 66. S.I.I. Vol. XVI. nos—53, 199, 200.
 67. Cort 2012.
 68. Eastmond 2015: 7.
 69. Currently, there are no free-standing inscriptions at the main gateway as was the case when the epigrams were documented in S.I.I Volume XVI. The temple administration has grouped some of them in the courtyard of the Lower Ahobila complex. Collectively, they harken to the glorious past of this pilgrimage site.
 70. The insignia are easily identifiable on the epigraphs on free standing stone blocks. We cannot be sure if those on temple structures began with such symbols, though they would have begun with the eulogy to Narasiṃha as documented in the S.I.I volume XVI. It is difficult to decipher the beginnings of the inscriptions on the temple walls due to erosion and the height at which they begin. Some of them are lost due to renovations as certain sections of the temple walls have been replaced with new blocks of stone.
 71. *Periya Tirumoli* 1.7.
 72. *Periya Tirumoli* 1.7.3, 1.7.9.
 73. *Periya Tirumoli* 1.71.7.8, 1.7.7.
 74. Rocher 1986: 156-160 in his survey of the *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa*, does not mention the *Ahobila Mahātmya*. It is possible that this may be an independent work that is traditionally assigned to this purāṇa. The association between the two texts is prevalent at least by the 14th century CE in South India. It was part of what was known as the *Kṣetra Mahātmya* of the purāṇa. For instance, Errapragada (14th-15th CE) in his Telugu work, the *Narasimha Purāṇamu*, claims that he is basing his version on the *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa* (Veluri 1924: introduction, verse 27 p. 6).
 75. Ananthapadmanabhachariyar 2015: Chapter 1, verse 43.
 76. Hardy 1977, Young 1978.
 77. Veluri 1924: Book 5, verse 121 p. 193; my own translation.
 78. Rao 2004: 104.
 79. Desikan 2015: Act II.14.
 80. Colas 2009.
 81. Smith 1975: Vol. II. 453-454.

82. Brown 1997: 73.
83. Brown 1997: 98.
84. Srinivasa Chari 2005: 306-311.
85. Eck 1985: 36.
86. Champakalakshmi 1981: 248.
87. Rao 1914: Vol I. 290.
88. Brown 1997: 99; Comeau's paper explores the concept of signage, both ancient and modern as they function within the context of a temple.
89. Smith 1975: Vol I. 183.
90. Consecrated food is *prasāda*, that is something imbued with the grace of the deity, which is understood to have taken place during ritual.
91. Dehejia 1998, Rotman 2008.

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