

The late mediaeval wooden carvings of the front pavilions in the Trichur Vaṭakkunnātha temple

The Trichur Vaṭakkunnātha temple is one of the most important temples of Kerala. The name Trichur (Mal. *ṭṛśśūr* from *tīru-śīva-peru-ūr*) refers to this Śīva temple, meaning "the great village of Śīva". The temple is particularly famous for its annual *pūram* festival. The early history of the temple, with its shrines built in the 11th century (Sarkar 1978: 204), is connected with the late phase of the Cēra empire and the Cōḷa-Cēra wars. The temple trustees Brahmins of the Vadakkunnātha temple, called the Yōgyattirippāṭu Nampūtiris governed originally the temple, and later the royal administrative organ called the Cochin Devasvam. The temple consists of two circular shrines named Vaṭakkunnātha and Śaṅkaranārāyaṇa and one square shrine named Śrī Rāma. All three have detached front pavilions (*namaskāra-maṇḍapa*) of square plan. Their wooden architecture is undated but probably from the late 18th or early 19th century due to the Mysorean invasion by Tipu Sultan. The pavilions are all similar albeit of different size, consisting of two sets of wall-plates (*uttara*) of which the inner is supported by four columns and the outer by twelve. The inner set of columns and wall-plate encloses a faceted ceiling of nine squares. This ceiling is supported by secondary beams between it and the wall-plate. Rich sets of reliefs of Purāṇic and Epic content are carved on these secondary beams. The columns also contain iconography with idols of deities carved on their surfaces, following the conventional directional rules of facing.

The object of this paper is to arrange and analyze the wooden carvings of the three pavilions referring to Kerala Śilpa texts. The carvings were photographed in march 2007 by Dr. Henri Schildt, and a monography on the Vaṭakkunnāthan temple where their iconography is interpreted (Sreedharan Nayar 1998: 106-131) is used as one of the primary reference works as well as the Kerala Śilpa texts, particularly the *Śilparatna* (Gaṇapati Śāstrī 1922) and the *Tantrasamuccaya* (Gaṇapati Śāstrī 1921). As to the analysis itself, particular attention is paid to the location and direction of a motif, and to the three *boundaries* the wall-plates and the socle (*adhiṣṭhāna*), form.

The conclusion will include three tables on the motifs, one of each pavilion and a conclusion on the characteristic 'system' which the iconographic whole forms. This system may have similarities with the cosmic diagrams called *vāstupuruṣa-maṇḍala* in Vāstu Śāstras, or the system may as well be purely conventional or even be connected with general rules in rituals.

References:

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