

**Rūpa, Arūpa and Rūpa-Arūpa:  
The Three Forms of Śiva worship at the Naṭarāja's Temple of Chidambaram, South  
India and their impact on the Temple Architecture**

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The miniature reconstruction of the cosmos is the Hindu temple where the main deity is housed at the center called Garbhagṛaha<sup>1</sup> (Fig. 1). The finial of the superstructure erected above the Garbhagṛaha forms a vertical line extending from the ground towards the sky. This basic structure and the objects surrounding it constitute the architectural morphology – a language of form through which a system of belief could be expressed (Meister 1986: 33). The Garbhagṛaha and the Superstructure have a symbolic meaning of release<sup>2</sup> of souls' bondage with birth. "Both the pyramidal and the curvilinear superstructure on the walls of the Garbhagṛaha are the means by which the purpose of the temple is shown to those who come to see it (darśana) and to attain release" (Kramrisch 1944: 175). The Liṅga in the Garbhagṛaha is the place of release and the external form of the Prāsāda, extended in space, is reduced to a central point on the sky.<sup>3</sup>

Plans were originally used to construct cities and buildings at the time of Varāhamihira's *Bṛahat-Saṃhitā*, written in the sixth century A.D., but later they were rejuvenated with interpretations of myth and astrology<sup>4</sup> so as to be adopted for the temple

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<sup>1</sup> See Michell (1988: 61-73) for an account of the symbolic links between god, man and temple in the Hindu religion.

<sup>2</sup> The idea of "release" denotes a point of departure from the sinful life on earth to the heavenly state where the human soul attains a stable form without having to be born again; a process referred to as *mukti* 'salvation' (see Smith 1993: 60).

<sup>3</sup> Kramrisch (1944: 176).

<sup>4</sup> See Meister (1993 and 2003) and Kramrisch (1944) for an elaborate account of the plan of *Vāstupuruṣamaṇḍala* designated by square grids.

architecture. Vāstupuruṣamaṇḍala<sup>5</sup> with specific number of square grids became the defacto metaphysical plan of architecture reflecting the placement of gods and demons at symbolically relevant spaces within a temple complex (Fig. 13). The central four squares of the maṇḍala configuration make the Garbhagṛaha (Fig. 1) meant for the all-pervading, formless, divine entity called *Brahman*. This place of the *Brahman* - the brahmasthān - in the Garbhagṛaha is the point of creation (Meister 1993: 95).

The general plan of Vāstupuruṣamaṇḍala (Fig. 1) discussed in detail in Meister (2003) is used in this paper to compare with the objects and the rituals of the Chidambaram Naṭarāja's temple<sup>6</sup> that belongs to the Draviḍa type of temple architecture<sup>7</sup>. The two intended goals of this paper are: a) to study the symbolic meaning of the dancing form of Śiva, a form that developed into an emblem of victory among the Cōḷa kings, and consequently became an object of worship in this temple with the status of a main deity, and b) to argue how the symbolism of the dancing image of Śiva influenced the architecture of the temple in a notable fashion, both at the level of the ground plan (figs. 7, 8 and 8A), as well as at the level of proportioning of the deities in the temple (Fig. 8A).

The main thesis of this paper is to demonstrate how the co-existing Garbhagṛaha, the Liṅga of space and the dancing image of Śiva (Fig. 9) together developed an architectural

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<sup>5</sup> The Sanskrit terms Vāstu means building, Puruṣa means man and maṇḍala means diagram. A plan for the dwelling place of man is used to mean symbolically as a trace of sacrifice (Meister 1993: 254). The plan originally meant to build house and cities later attained "a new use as a specific and practical proportioning tool and was re-appropriated and overlaid by layers of mythic and astrological uses." (Meister 1985: 248-258).

<sup>6</sup> This temple, located one hundred and fifty miles south of Chennai, is known as Sabhānāyaka temple (leader of the Sabhās) and is administered by Dikṣitars, who are both priests and trustees of the temple (Satyamurty 1978: xi).

<sup>7</sup> The main characteristics of the Draviḍiyan temples – Draviḍa type, according to Dhaky, are the square temples surmounted by a Śikhara which are divided into compartment-like storeys, on the top of which are two kinds of crowning pieces, one like that on the 'Shore' temple at Mamallapuram and the other like the one on the Gaṇeśa Ratha of that place. (Dhaky 1977:32). The North Indian stone temples, called Nāgarā type, on the other hand are characterized by a square plan with cardinal offsets and a curvilinear superstructure with projecting vertical bands (latās, "creepers") over the wall's offsets. (See Meister 1986: 33).

morphology that is different from the other Śaiva temples built in the region by the Cōḷa patrons – an example for the emergence of complex architectural vocabularies in accordance with the changing perceptions<sup>8</sup>. Evidences to support the arguments in this paper are drawn from the hymns of the Tamil Śaiva saints, inscriptions attested on the walls of the temples, historical information of the patrons and the analytical judgments of the scholarships in the field.

The scope of this paper is limited to a) the evolution of the dancing image of Śiva in the South and its impact on the architecture of the temple in Chidambaram b) the significance of the Sabhās (halls) and prakāras (circumambulatory paths) and c) the ritual of the worship of Śiva in His Formless state<sup>9</sup>.

### **Cōḷa's Temple Architecture**

Turning from the few rock-cut examples of the Pallava dynasty (A.D. 600 to A.D. 800)<sup>10</sup> to the structural temples of the Cōḷa kings (from A.D. 866 to A.D. 1280)<sup>11</sup>, one finds their extant very vast and extraordinarily complex in nature. One of the notable features of the Draviḍa type of temples lies in the way the outlying elements are developed. Such elements include forms other than the superstructure including the artificial tanks - used for sacred baths within the temple complex (Fig. 12), multiple Prakārās intended for various forms of pradikṣṇa (Figs. 7 and 8), successive enclosure walls, additional pavilions - usually with barrel-vaulted roofs to house the sub deities, pillared halls with flat roofs intended for

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<sup>8</sup> “The task facing architects in the formative period for Hindu temple architecture (from ca. A.D. 400 to 700) was to find means to develop an architectural morphology capable of expressing the complexities of a long religious tradition.” (Meister 1986: 36).

<sup>9</sup> This work differs from the most recent work of Kaimal (1999) on Śiva in that the thesis of her work concentrates on the sculpture of Śiva and the symbolic meanings of the other images in the sculpture. This paper, on the other hand, focuses upon the inner symbolic meanings objects and their impacts on architecture of the temple.

<sup>10</sup> Barrett (1974: 16).

<sup>11</sup> Barrett (1974: 17) and Balasubramaniam (1979).

organizing special events and rituals, and finally the streets surrounding the four sides of the circumambulatory paths – called “Car streets” – usually meant for conducting processions of the deities around the town as a way of taking the religious rites and rituals to the people in the town. The symbolic meaning of the divine space extending from the Gaṛbagraha to the urban space through the gateways is what is called by George Michell a “temple town”.<sup>12</sup>

Forms of worship and the perception of god underwent a radical change with the changing dynasties, kings and patrons in the Draviḍa region ever since the Pallavas initiated their enterprise with stone cut temples. Patrons of different periods kept making changes and additions to the already existing temples, as a result, like what Meister(1986) observed, the complex symbolic vocabularies of these temples kept emerging<sup>13</sup>. It is observed in this paper that the role of the hymnists and the kings played a major role in determining the temple architecture during the Cōḷa kingdom, which lasted between ca. 10<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century<sup>14</sup>. The hymnists developed the perceptions and symbolisms, and the kings gave a form to them.

Despite some minor differences in the way the Hindu mythology, gods and sculptures are depicted, the Hindu temples of Cōḷa period, in general, demonstrate a common paradigm for the decorative veneers of Gopurās (Superstructure), maṇḍapas (Halls), prakarās (circumambulatory paths) and tanks. An exception to this, however, is the Naṭarāja's temple of Chidambaram which differs from the other Śaiva temples of Cōḷa period both in conceptual terms as well as in architectural terms.

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<sup>12</sup> Michell (1993: 13).

<sup>13</sup> “None of the present structures in the Naṭarāja's temple complex can be dated before the Later Cōḷa period (1070 – 1279). The accession of Kulōttuṅga I to the Cōḷa throne in 1070 AD seems to have given a new impetus that led to the reconstruction of previous and erection of new structures in the ancient temple site” (Mevissen 2002: 61).

<sup>14</sup> See Balasubramanian (1971, 1975 and 1979) for the chronology of Chōla kings and their service to building and renovating temples.

The Bṛhadīśvar temple constructed roughly between AD 995 and 1010 by Rajaraja I in Tanjavur may be considered to discuss the distinctive features of the Cōḷa architecture in general. Here, the Liṅga is the main deity, and the shrines are housed in individual maṇḍapas including the dancing image of Śiva, which is housed in the northeast corner of the courtyard.<sup>15</sup> The Sanskrit term Naṭarāja meaning 'King of Dance' is frequently referred to in the inscriptions carved on the walls of this temple by the Tamil term Āḍavallān meaning 'one who is capable of dancing'.<sup>16</sup> Development of maṇḍapas (pavilions) with flat roofs is especially the significant outgrowth of the Cōḷa architecture. Muha maṇḍapas, Arḍha maṇḍapas and thousand pillar maṇḍapas are some of the components that one can find in most of the Cōḷa temples (figs. 4 and 6). The Bṛhadīśvar temple is known for its strict conformity to the maṇḍala plan in the way the Garbhagrāha and the deities are housed. (compare figures 1 and 13).

### **Rūpa and Arūpa form of Worship in the Naṭarāja's temple of Chidambaram**

The dancing image of Śiva is a perceivable "Form", which is called "rūpa" in Sanskrit. This image housed in Cit-Sabhā is, what is observed by Smith<sup>17</sup>, the heart of the world and the heart of individual self – Cit means 'consciousness' and Sabhā means 'hall' (Hall of consciousness). To the right of Naṭarāja is an empty space called Rahaśya. This space designates the Formless form of Śiva, and is called by the term "arūpa", an opposite of rūpa. Arūpa form of Śiva is also called Ākāśa Liṅga, assuming that "Space" is the other manifestation of Śiva in Chidambaram (see Smith 1993:62 and Smith 1996: 83). The ritual of

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<sup>15</sup> Pichard (1995, p. 101).

<sup>16</sup> One of the instances of this reference to Naṭarāja as Āḍavallān in the inscriptions may be noted as follows: "taṭṭam onṟu Āḍavallānennuṅgallaal niṟe nārpatin kaḷañceykāl..." On the fourteenth day of the twenty-sixth year (of his reign), the lord Śri rāja rāja dēvā gave one sacred diadem (tiruppaṭṭam) of gold, weighing four hundred and ninety-nine kaḷañcu by the stone called (after) Āḍavallān (Hultzsch 1891: 3).

<sup>17</sup> Smith (1996: 82).

worshipping “Space” developed a new architectural vocabulary of *Chidambara Rahaśya* (Secret of Chidambaram), which is discussed in detail later in this paper.

The third form of worship is Liṅga. This form neither conforms to any conceivable object<sup>18</sup>, nor does it represent the void as Brahma does. The Liṅga, then, is both a form and without a conceivable form, and it can be understood thus as *rūpa-arūpa* “form and formless”. Evidences for this three-fold worship of Śiva in Chidambaram can be drawn from the ca. 7th century A.D. Śaiva work of Tirumantiram, composed by the poet saint Tirumūlar. In many of his verses Tirumūlar reinstates the idea that the Lord emerges in Chidambaram as Form (*Uru*), Formless (*Aru*), and in all-pervading divine form (*Para Rūpam*)<sup>19</sup>. As we will see below, the textual evidences to substantiate the manifestation of the Lord Śiva in these three forms in Chidambaram are also available in the works of the much earlier Śaiva hymnists *Appar, Māṇikkavācakar and cuntarar*, whose dates are generally assumed between 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century<sup>20</sup>.

### **The Dancing image of Śiva and the Origin of the Emblem for Victory**

The image of Dancing Śiva (fig. 8) is seemed to have gained prominence in the South even earlier by the time of Sangam, a period between ca. B.C. 3rd century and ca. A.D. 5<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Although there are many interpretations to the form of Liṅga, we confine ourselves to its concrete form, which is incomparable to any perceivable object.

<sup>19</sup> Tirumantiram, (2790:69 Ninth tantra):

“For Rishis Patanjali and Vyagrapada

In the splendid Temple of Chidambaram

He danced as a Form, a Formless and a Cosmic Form,

With the Divine Grace of Sakti He danced,

He, the Citta, the Ananda; Gracefully stood and danced.” (Unless otherwise noted the translations of the Tamil hymns in this paper are rendered by the author with suitable consultations with Smith 1996, Peterson 1989 and Shulman 1980.)

<sup>20</sup> See Zvelebil (1998) for an account of the dates and the works of the Śaiva hymnists.

century.<sup>21</sup> One of the Sangam epics called Silappathikaram composed during ca. A.D. 5<sup>th</sup> century makes references to the dancing form of Śiva in the context of his celebration of the destruction of demons<sup>22</sup>. Although no mention of the city of Chidambaram, in particular, is made in this work, this reference can be taken to assume that the object of the dancing image of Śiva prevailed from fifth century onwards. However, the earliest attested statues of the dancing Śiva in Śiva temples, mostly in the niches of the walls, are during the Chalukya period - ca. 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. (Fig. 14), the Pallava temples<sup>23</sup> - ca. 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and the Cōḷa (ca. 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D.)<sup>24</sup>. The Kanchipuram Kailasanāta temple that was built during the Pallava dynasty also exhibits icons of the dancing Śiva, but in a pose of Urudva-Tāṇḍava<sup>25</sup> “fierce dance” (ca. 700-728). The type of dance that is prominent in Chidambaram is understood as Ānanda Dāṇḍava “dance of bliss”, which is of primary concern of this paper. The progression from the Pallava dynasty to the Cōḷa dynasty<sup>26</sup> developed many new forms in and around temple complexes, and resulted in evolving

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<sup>21</sup> Even by the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. three of the four great dynasties (mūvēntars) were already known. The Pallava dynasty, however, did not get mention in Sangam literature. But, the Cōḷa dynasty emerged powerfully only from 866 A.D. to 1014 A.D. (Barrett 1974: 16-17).

<sup>22</sup> The Tamil epic Cilappatikaram composed about 450 C.E. refers to Śiva's dance to celebrate his destruction of the three cities of the demons. (Cilappatikaram, Bk. 6.4, lines 44-45).

<sup>23</sup> Fergusson (1899: 326), who calls the stone-cut temples of Māmallapuram as “raths”, states that they are the oldest examples of their class known.

<sup>24</sup> See Kaimal (1999) for a discussion and illustrations on the image of dancing Śiva from Chalukya, Pallava and early Cōḷa temples.

<sup>25</sup> Kaimal's illustrations from the Badami temples show of Śiva having multiple hands in fierce mood (Kaimal 1999: 395). Similar, gesture of the Lord is attested in the pre-Āryan sources as Rudra-Śiva, whose occurrences can be traced back to the Indus Valley Harappa Culture. “Rudra appears primarily as fear-inspiring deity whose shafts of lightning slay men and cattle (Ṛgveda 1:114: 10), (Yocum 1982: 16). But no reference to dancing form is attributed to Śiva at this time.

<sup>26</sup> See fig. 2B for how the Ratha type of architecture from Pallava has influenced the Cōḷa architecture, in constructing the Hall of dance (Nritta) with wheels and horses at the front.

complex symbolic vocabularies commensurate with radically changing rites of patronage and personal devotion.<sup>27</sup>

Based on textual and inscriptional evidences, Kaimal (1999) and Zvelebil(1998) observe that for the later Cōlas this statue of the dancing Śiva with a tiger, a skull, a drum, snakes, fire and Apasmara - the demon of ignorance, became an emblem to mark their victories from their rivals. The image of dancing Śiva as a symbol for victory among the patron Cōḷa kings should have been the reason for the evolving practice of placing this image to the status of the main deity in the Naṭarāja's temple of Chidambaram during the ca. A.D. 9<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. Coomaraswamy's summary of the essential significance of the image of dancing Śiva and Kaimal's account of this image as an object of victory offer evidences to the development of this new practice. Based on a number of textual evidences including from the Śaiva works of Tamil namely Uṇmaivīḷakkam and Tirumūlar's Tirumantiram<sup>28</sup>, Coomaraswamy considers a tripartite view of Śiva's dance: "First, it is the image of his Rhythmic Play as the Source of all Movement within the Cosmos, which is represented by the Arch; Secondly, the Purpose of his Dance is to Release the Countless souls of men from the Snare of Illusion; Thirdly the place of the Dance, Chidambaram, the Center of the Universe, is within the Heart" (Coomaraswamy 1970: 75). More explicit account of the view that Chidambaram is the center of the universe and of every human heart can be noticed in

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<sup>27</sup> Meister's assumption of evolving complex symbolic vocabularies in temple architecture in relation to the changing dynasties (Meister 1986: 33-50) is substantiated in this article with evidences from Cōḷa architecture. The practice of Rūpa - Arūpa worship is the principal observation that is used for this attempt.

<sup>28</sup> Kaimal (1999: 394), however, contends that these texts belonging to twelfth and thirteenth centuries cannot be taken to be as the right source to demonstrate the symbolic interpretations that Coomaraswamy attempts to illustrate with regard to the objects surrounding the image. As discussed elsewhere in this paper, this doesn't in any manner undermine basic fact of the image of "dancing Śiva" being used as a symbol for victory from ca. 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D.



*Chidambaramahatmya*, - written during ca. 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. - a priestly redaction of old and new stories designed to present Chidambaram (Kaimal 1999: 406 and Zvelebil 1998).

Conceptualizing Śiva in a concrete “Dancing form” from His abstract form of Liṅga should have been a major transition that occurred in the South<sup>29</sup> during the fifth century A.D. There have been arguments on the linear progression of the development of this image and the objects surrounding it. One of such arguments is about the demon in a dwarf form that is found under the foot of Śiva. It has been debated whether or not it signifies the destruction of “ignorance” by Śiva, but a discussion on such issues is beyond the scope of this paper. See Kaimal (1999) for a note on the symbolism of the dwarf<sup>30</sup>.

### **Chidambaram, the Center of the Universe, and the *Cit-Sabhā*, the Center of the Temple**

It should be obvious from the evidences drawn from a) the texts including *Cilappatikaram* (ca. 450 C.E.), b) inscriptions referring to Śiva as Āḍavallān “one who is capable of dancing” in Tanjore Br̥hadīśvar temple (ca. 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) and c) Tirumūlar’s references to the formlessness of Śiva in Tirumantiram (ca. 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D.)<sup>31</sup> that the Lord in his dancing form became an object of importance from the time of Caulikya, ca. sixth century A.D.

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<sup>29</sup> The Badami architecture, which belongs to the Vēsara type, exhibits images of dancing Śiva in the niches of temple walls, but no mention of using it as a central deity is found anywhere in the literature, nor is there any mention of this image in Nāgara architecture of the north. There have been occurrences of the image of Śiva in Nāgara temples, but not in a dancing form. See Zvelebil (1998: 12) and Kulke (1970) for a discussion on this topic.

<sup>30</sup> Kaimal (1999) takes the stand of giving a new dimension to the understanding of the demon on the foot of the dancing Śiva. Her contention is that the dwarf image is believed to be supporting Śiva during his dance, as opposed to Coomaraswamy’s description that it was symbolizing the destruction of the ignorance of Ṛsis, who attempted to conquer the Lord by using fire, snakes, tiger and finally the demon in the dwarf form.

<sup>31</sup> Zvelebil (1998: 41) provides further two other references: One for the dancing Śiva as Pāṇṭuraṅka and the other for the town as Tillai-c-ciṅṅambalam by the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century Śiva hymnists *Appar* (ca. 580-650) and Tiruñānacampantar (ca. 630-660 A.D.).

References to Chidambaram as the center of the universe is found in Purāṇas. One of the celebrated Purāṇas called Tiruvīlaiyāṭarpurāṇam “games of the sacred Lord” composed by Parañcōti munivar during the 11<sup>th</sup> century A.D. characterizes the town of Chidambaram being the heart and Madurai being the head of the Man, who is lying on the entire region of the Tamil Nadu. These verses contain the direct revealed teachings of the Lord himself – similar to what is referred to in Meister (1990: 4) about the Vaiṣṇava saṁhitās and Śaiva āgamas.

“We perform that dance,  
in this Velliambalam (Madurai)”, Said the Lord.  
“The World is nothing but a Human Form!  
Heart is the ponnambalam (Chidambaram) and  
Top of head is this Velliambalam”,  
proclaimed the Lord gracefully.  
Oh! The Lord! “What the other parts are then?”  
asked the Saints<sup>32</sup>.

The Lord Says!  
World is the human body, so to say!  
There exists limitless Sanctorum on this earth!  
To describe them all, impossible it would be!  
We explain some, listen you all<sup>33</sup>.

The celebrated dance of Śiva is said to have taken place at the Hall of *Cit-Sabhā*<sup>34</sup> “Hall of consciousness” in the Naṭarāja’s temple of Chidambaram, an earlier name of which is

<sup>32</sup> Tiruvīlaiyāṭarpurāṇam, 456:2

<sup>33</sup> Tiruvīlaiyāṭarpurāṇam, 456:3

<sup>34</sup> See Coomaraswamy (1970), Kaimal (1999), Zvelebil (1998) and Harle (1995) for references to linking Cit-Sabhā and the dance. A separate chapter named *Poṟṟillaik kūttu* “Dance at the golden Hall of Tillai” of Tirumūlar (verses 2749 to 2761) describes the event of Na-arja’s dance in detail. The Sanskrit term *Cit* means to remember, be conscious of, recover consciousness and *Sabhā* means Hall (Monier-Williams 1970). The name Chidambaram is a later derivation of its earlier name Ciṟṟambalam, Ciṟṟu in Tamil means consciousness and Ambalam means a stage or hall – the town’s name *Citambaram* and the earlier name of ‘*ciṟṟambaram*’ are named after the Hall of Consciousness, which is Chid-Sabha – *Ambalam* and *Sabhā* are used synonymously. Kaimal (1999: 406), however, notes that the Sanskrit term “Chidambaram” meaning “the heavenly abode of the Spirit”; and the word Ciṟṟambalam meaning “little hall”, which must be a misunderstanding of the word “Ciṟṟu” meaning “small”, as opposed to the word Ciṟṟu meaning “Consciousness” and “mind”.

“Cīṛṛambalam”<sup>35</sup>. In one of his verses in Tirumantiram (2770: 4),<sup>36</sup> Tirumūlar explicates the symbolism of the Tamil word “cīṛṛu”, which is etymologically related to the words *Cit*, *Cittu* “Consciousness” and *Cittam* ‘Conscience’. Tirumūlar’s reference to the center of the pervading energy of Śīva is the point that lies between the two eyebrows on the forehead (*Bhindu*). At this very spot, Śīva is said to have his third eye called *neṛṛikkaṇ* “the forehead eye”. Thus, what is symbolized by the term *Cit-Sabhā* is nothing more than the meaning of the term *Cit* or the *Bhindu* on the forehead – a point of union of Śīva and *Sakti*.. The names “Chidambaram” and “Cīṛṛambalam” are, thus, derived from the same root, which is *Cit*, “the consciousness”, which is equivalent to the Sanskrit word *cittah* meaning ‘heart’ or ‘mind’<sup>37</sup>. “Consciousness” or “the point of pervading energy” from a point on the forehead is comparable to what Meister calls the human body as the temple - “the ultimate temple in ancient India was the human body” (Meister 1990).

### The Architecture of the Sabhās

In contrast to the general conformity with the other South Indian temple components namely a cella, Ardhamāṇḍapa, Mahāmāṇḍapa and Muhamāṇḍapa, the Sabhās take the prominent role of sanctums in Chidambaram, and the *Cit-Sabhā* is understood to be the

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<sup>35</sup> According to legends, Chidambaram is one of the pañcapūta Stalams signifying the five elements of wind (Kalahasti), water (Tiruvanaikka), fire (Tiruvannamalai), earth (Kanchipuram) and space (Chidambaram) (Satyamurti 1978 and Smith 1993: 62). Legends, myths and textual references have contributed to the fame of the Chidambaram Na-ar'ja's temple to be considered as one of the tirtha stalas “pilgrimage place” in Tamil Nadu. “Tirthas are sacred places. Pilgrimage links them; temples mark them. Conserving temples as artifacts conserves artifacts.” (Meister 1989).

<sup>36</sup> Stare straight at the forehead  
Between the eyebrows  
The delightful rays shine  
The dwelling space of the graceful Lord  
The Cīṛṛampalam, where I reached (Tirumantiram 2770: 4).

<sup>37</sup> The word *Citta-nāṭa* in Sanskrit means ‘heart-lord’ (Monier-Williams 1970).

sanctum sanctorum of this temple complex<sup>38</sup>. The *Cit-Sabhā*, the holiest shrine in the temple, is a wooden structure supported with wooden pillars, with a barrel-vaulted roof (Fig. 2), and the tiles are made of copper, platted in gold. Unusually this hall is oriented toward the south. Chidambaram, today, and probably for several centuries back, this south facing *Cit-Sabhā* constitutes the holy of holies, and it is in this hall that the dancing image of Naṭarāja and Sivakami are housed in front of a set of two curtains, the inner (invisible) one being red in color, the outer one being black in color (Harle 1995: 38). What is important about this hall is that it is seen through the east gate of the temple past the two entrances in the middle (Fig. 3); whereas in the other Cola temples of Śiva, the Garbhagṛaha is seen through the consecutive entrances on a straight line from the East gate. (Figs. 4 and 6). “The two small connecting buildings called the *Cit Sabhā* and the *Kanaka Sabhā*, where both Śiva in the form of Naṭarāja and the invisible “ether” *Liṅga*” are enshrined, are without question the sanctum sanctorum of the temple” (Harle 1995: 37). The other uncommon feature about this is that the location of the Mūlastān or the Garbhagṛaha falls on to the northeast side of these buildings, but not at the center, as one would expect (Figs. 7 and 8). It is not known whether this architecture is a later development, especially after the emerging perception of the dancing form of Śiva, or was it the original conception.

*Cit-Sabhā* being the center of attention, it is located at the nucleus of the first Prākāra. Surrounded by this Prākāra are the two other Prākāras consisting of one *Sabhā* each. There are five *Sabhās* in Naṭarāja's temple (Fig. 5). They are: a) *Deva Sabhā* - hall of the gods, b) *Raja Sabhā* - thousand pillared hall, c) *Nritta Sabhā* - a chariot like hall (Figs. 2B and 11),

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<sup>38</sup> See Kaimal (1999: 398), who bases her opinion from the Śaiva hymnists, suggests that the seventh-century Appar's poem enshrines the dancing figure of Śiva instead of the abstract, cylindrical stone symbols of Śiva. This is also true in the case of the later period hymnists Tirumular, Tirunavukkarasar and Tirugnanasampandar, whose poems invariably sung of the dancing image of Śiva.

believed to be the place where the dancing contest between the Lord and the Goddess took place. The Lord's anger is revealed in this contest by His leg raised straight in the air – a pose usually called *urdhva-janu*<sup>39</sup>, d) *Cit-Sabhā* - the Mūlastān with a magnificent roof thatched with gold coated tiles (Fig. 2 and 2A)- where the sanctum of the Cosmic Dance took place, and e) *Kanaka Sabhā* - located in front of *Cit-Sabhā*, is where Śiva is worshipped in the form of Crystal Liṅga, the Candramaulīśvara<sup>40</sup>. The *Cit-Sabhā* and the *Kanaka Sabhā* are believed to be the earliest phase of the temple complex, evidence for which is suggested by Kaimal from a mural in King Rajaraja Cōḷa's temple in Thanjavur. This mural demonstrates that by 1010, when that temple was consecrated, the *Cit-Sabhā* at Chidambaram already had its unusual shape (Kaimal 1999: 399).

Sabhās are surrounded by Prakārās, which are intended for various forms of pradikṣṇa<sup>41</sup>. The Garbhagrāha here, on the other hand, is not surrounded by its own Prakārā, but shares the one with the Nritta and Cit Sabhā (Fig. 7). This is yet another feature of the Chidambaram temple that distinguishes it from the other Śiva temples in the South; and it also suggests that the central deity in this temple is in fact the image of dancing Śiva. (See fig. 4 in contrast with the Thanjavur Bṛhdīśvar temple in Thanjavur – Fig. 13). The other anomalies of this temple that Smith notes include a) the southern alignment of the *Cit Sabhā*, the hundred-pillared hall, the thousand-pillared hall, and the *Deva Sabhā* and b)

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<sup>39</sup> Kaimal (1999: 398).

<sup>40</sup> Smith (1996: 68) narrates the significance of the Crystal Liṅga with a translation of the verse from Tirumantiram. According to the verse (1726) the human form is like the Liṅga, Chidambaram, Sadāśiva and the Holy Dance.

<sup>41</sup> Michell (1993: 16) sites examples of rituals involving the clockwise circumambulation in a number of different complex ways. Making auspicious pradikṣṇa of the central shrine; complicated clockwise itineraries through labyrinthine halls and corridors; making auspicious round of the mango tree etc., are some of such methods.

the large *Nandi* (Śiva's bull) and two *bali piṭhas* (sacrificial pits) opening up to the closed wall (Smith 1993: 65).

### Chidambara Rahaśyam

Another distinctive characteristics of the Chidambaram temple is the ritual by the name of “*Chidambara Rahaśya*” (secret of Chidambaram). To the right of the *Naṭarāja* is a space revered as *Chidambara Rahasyam* – a conception of the nothingness (space) garlanded with golden bilva leaves (bael – *Aegle marmelos*). The curtain in front of the *Chidambara Rahaśyam*, symbolizing Śiva in His Formless form (Arūpa), is unveiled ceremoniously during rituals. This form of Śiva is also called *Ākāśa* liṅga, which is referred to as the Liṅga of space by Smith.<sup>42</sup> It is in the work of Māṅikkavacakar (9<sup>th</sup> century) we find an explicit reference to the “*Chidambara Rahaśyam*” of Chidambaram Naṭarāja: ariyānē yāvarkkum ambaravā ambalattē periyōnē “My majesty! No one knows your Formless Form in Ambalam – Chidambaram”(Verse 22, Tiruvācakam, Māṅikkavacakar)<sup>43</sup>. Other references to this vocabulary of formlessness (Arūpa) are available in the verses of Tirumular's Tirumantiram (ca. 10<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> century)<sup>44</sup>. One of them is cited as below.

uruviṅṇi yēniṅṇu uruvam puṅarkkum  
karuvanṇi yēniṅṇu tānkaru vākum  
aruviṅṇi yēniṅṇa māyap pirānaik  
karuviṅṇi yāvarkkum kūṭaonṇātē.  
(2840:6)

Form, He has none; He becomes all the  
Forms.  
Cosmic Egg, He has none; He is the  
Cosmic Egg.  
Him, the elusive Lord without a Form,  
Impossible for anyone to reach,  
Without His essence - the *karu*.

<sup>42</sup> Smith (1993: 68)

<sup>43</sup> Narayana Velupillai (1993: 99).

<sup>44</sup> See Zvelebil (1998: 40-43) for an account of the dates between 7<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> century A.D. during which the poet saints including Maṅikkavācakar, tirumūlar, Nambi Āṅṅār nimbi, Cēkkiṭṭār, appar and campantar, who have made important mentions about both the dancing image as well as the Cītambaram site. For the text, see *Tirumantiram* by Tirumūlar, trans and notes B. Naṭarājan, gen. Ed. N. Mahalingam (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1991).

As this verse is composed as part of the chapter on *Corūpa utayam* “Genesis of the magnificent form” (verses 2835 to 2846), in the work of *Tirumantiram*, there is a reason to believe that the understanding of the three forms of Śiva, inclusive of the idea of “Chidambara Rahaśya”, was in practice from the time of the inception of this temple some time between 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D. – a time period attributed to the saints Appar, Sundarar and Sambandar, who composed the works of *Dēvāram*, which is dated earlier than all the available texts on Śiva. Although the dates are debatable, one cannot deny the fact that these belief patterns had their impacts on the architecture of the temple in a definitive manner, mainly by the way the image of dancing Śiva, *Sabhās* and the “Space” are manifested in this temple.

### **Genesis and the layers of developments of the Śiva temple**

Balasubramanian’s account of the process of renovation of the Chidambaram temple in three stages by three different patrons reveals “replacement” of older objects with fresh ones, but no specific mention is found about any major alternations to the basic plan in the way the *Cit-Sabhā*, the *Kanaga-Sabhā* and the *Karbhagragha* are laid out at the present time, nor does it make any references to the process of construction in relation to the symbolic interpretations of the dancing image of Śiva. Harle notes that Balasubramanian’s account is based on the literary and inscriptional evidences available. According to Balasubramanian:

“The oldest surviving parts of the temple were built during the reigns of the late Cōla kings Kulottunga (A.D. 1070-1118) and Vikrama Cōla (A.D. 1118 – 1135). The name of at least one earlier edifice has been preserved, and the rare inscriptions from earlier reigns are found on stones, which now incorporated into later structures, must originally have belonged to shrines or *Prākāra* walls which have disappeared without a trace. Nothing, unfortunately seems to have survived the rebuilding and enlarging of the temple commenced under Kulottunga I. With such zeal was the work carried on by his successors up to Kulottunga III (A.D. 1178-1217) that within little more than a hundred years they had not only replaced all the older portions but had completed the temple practically as it stands today.” (quoted from Harle 1995: 40).

The earliest available inscriptions refer to this temple as belonging to the period of Aditya-I (871-907 A.D.), and the textual evidences from the devotional hymns of *Appar*, *Sundarar* and *Sambandar* date this temple to a much earlier phase between seventh and eighth century A.D. A discussion on the recovery of the Dēvāram hymns composed by these three saints by Aditya I from one of the Prakāras suggests that an earlier phase of this temple should have existed between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century<sup>45</sup>. Historical evidences of the patron Cōla kings suggest that the renovation process of this temple starts from the period of Parantaka I, which is said to be from 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D. “It was probably during the time of Parantaka I (909 AD to 985 A.D) that the *very first sample in stone of the ananda tāṇḍava* form of Naṭarāja was created” (Balasubramaniam 1971: 287)<sup>46</sup>.

## Conclusion

Textual sources from the 7<sup>th</sup> century along with a handful of inscriptional sources offer evidences to the fact that there existed a temple with the principal objects of a) dancing Śīva – referred to as Āṭavallān (the one who is capable of dancing), b) Cit-Sabhā - the hall of consciousness, referred to as *Ambalam* in verses and c) a space signifying the formless (Arūpa) state of Śīva, which altogether constitute the temple's core symbolism. The symbolism being the worship of Śīva in three forms: first Rūpa (dancing form of Śīva), second the Ārūpa (the space or the Rahaśya form) and third the Liṅga form.

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<sup>45</sup> See Balasubramaniam (1975) and Smith (1996) for a discussion on the topic of recovery of Dēvāram hymns and how it is relevant for the historicity of this temple.

<sup>46</sup> See discussions on this topic in Kulke (1970), Balasubramaniam (1975: 77) and Zvelebil (1998: 18).



These symbolisms have had their impact on the planning of this temple's architecture. This is evident from a) the south oriented and centrally located Cit-Sabhā with the image of dancing Śiva (Rūpa), referred to as Āḍavallān, as the principal deity, b) the ritual of the Space with decorated bilva leaves (bael) signifying the Formless form (Arūpa) of Śiva – ritually understood as *Chidambara Rahaśya* (Secret of Chidambaram) and c) use of the Sabhās to house the dancing Śiva (called Sabhānāyakan – the leader of the Sabhās).

The issue, however, is that only the texts act as the primary source<sup>47</sup> to reconstruct the architectural vocabulary of this temple between 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D., but the other relevant records, either in the form of archeological remains or in the form of historical information of the patrons, are lacking to understand the origin for the architectural morphology of the ground plans and perhaps also the rites of this temple the way it is understood at present time.

What remains to be answered are the questions of when the present maṇḍala plan of the Naṭarāja's temple (figures 7 and 8) was instituted first, and were there any alternations occurred to the previous plan in accordance with the changing perceptions of the image of dancing Śiva and the ritual of the "*Chidambara Rahaśyam*". What seems to be obvious, however, is the fact that the hymns of the poet saints, such as Tirumular, *Appar* and others from the seventh century A.D., onwards were instrumental in developing the *perceptions* of the image of Śiva, and the patron Cōḷa kings became responsible for the development of the *architectural morphology* according to the changing perceptions over the course of many historical processes.

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<sup>47</sup> Except for the work of Balasubramaniam (1979), the works of Coomaraswamy (1970), Zvelebil (1998) and Kaimal (1999) largely rely on the textual sources. Kaimal's attempt, however, traces this back to the available images of Naṭarāja from Calukya to the Cōḷa period.

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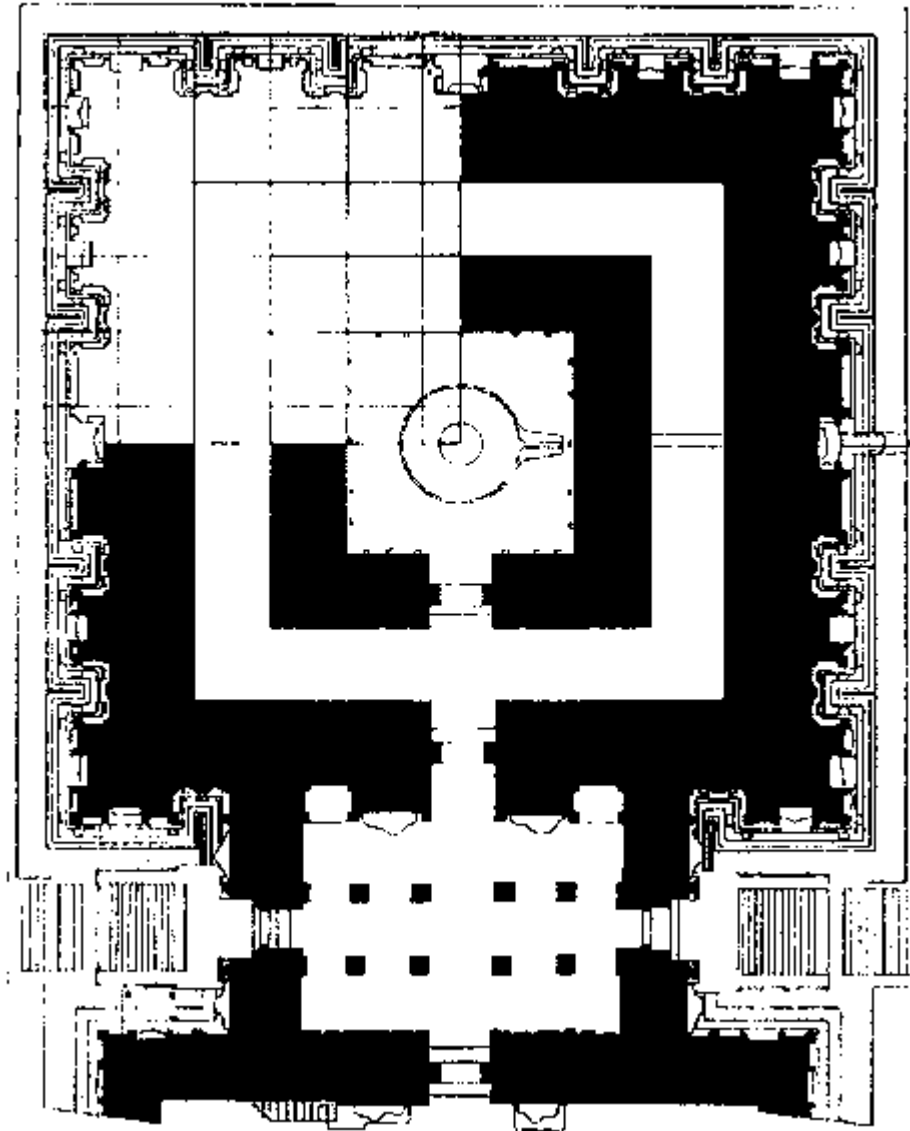


Figure 1. Vāstupuruṣamaṇḍala diagram: The central four square constitutes the Garbhagrāha. Courtesy: Meister (2003).



Figure 2. Barrel-vaulted Cit-Sabhā thatched with copper plates, coated in Gold.

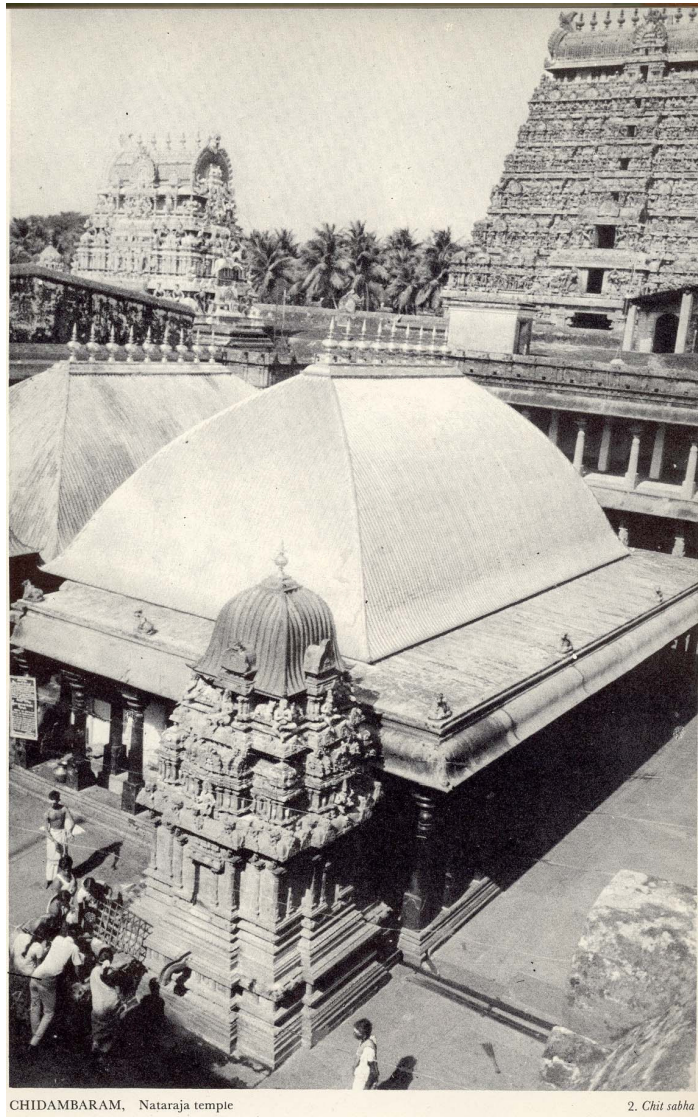
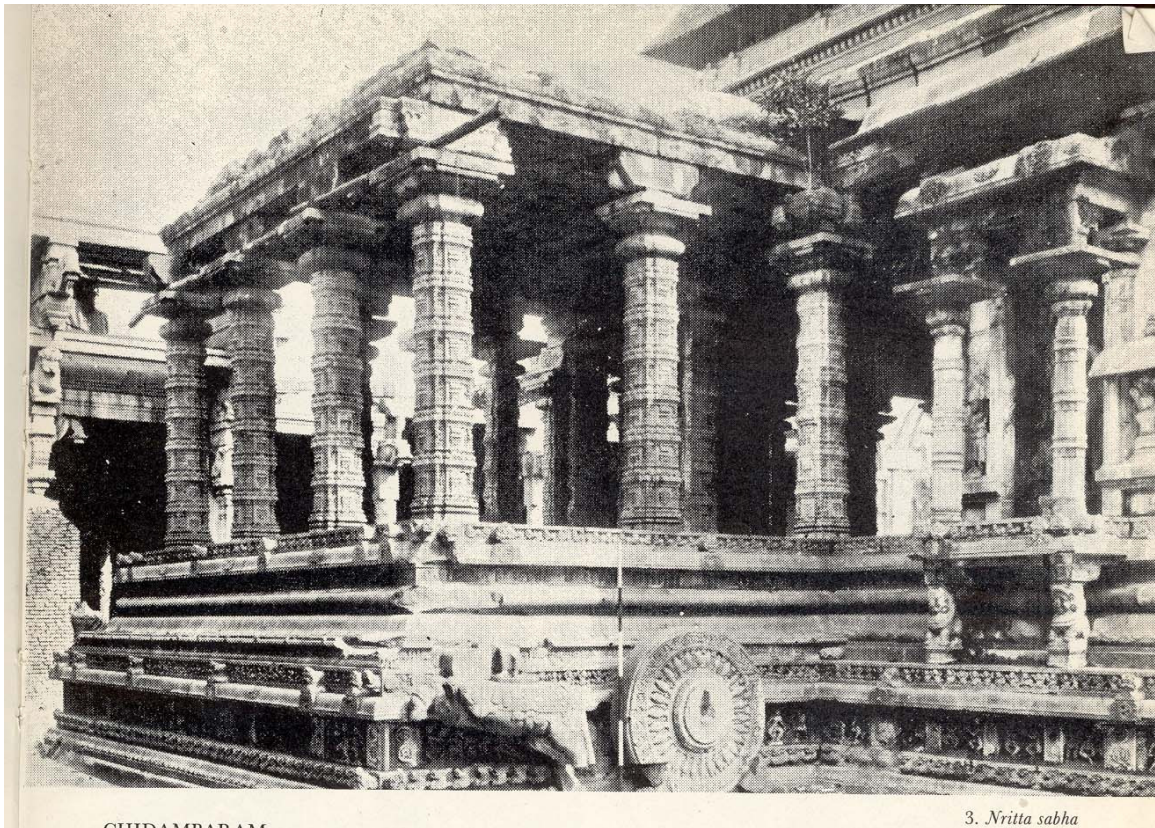


Figure 2A. Cit-Sabhā: Courtesy: Balasubramaniam (1979)





**Figure 2B. Nritta Sabhā with the shape of a Ratha, a Pallava paradigm**

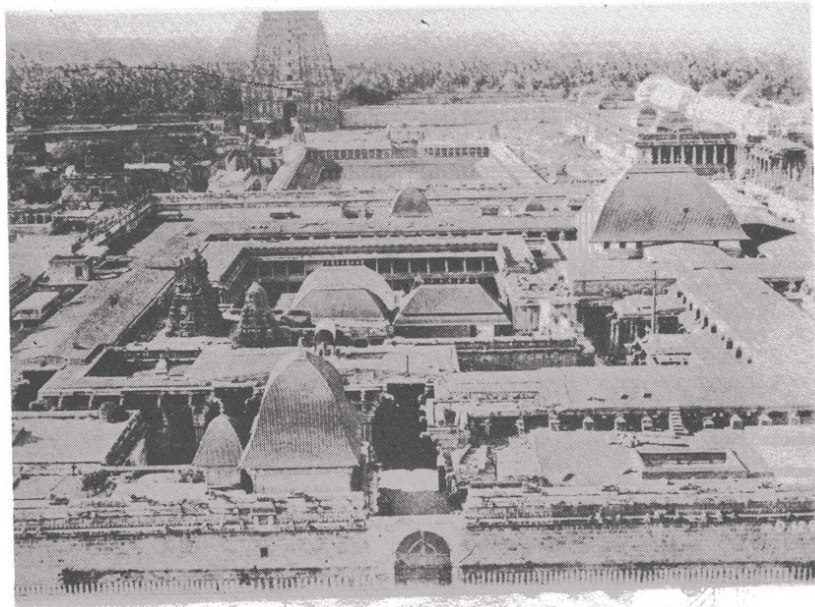


**Figure 3. Cit-Sabhā visible through the East Gate**





**Figure 4. Thanjavur Brhadisvar Temple – East gate view**

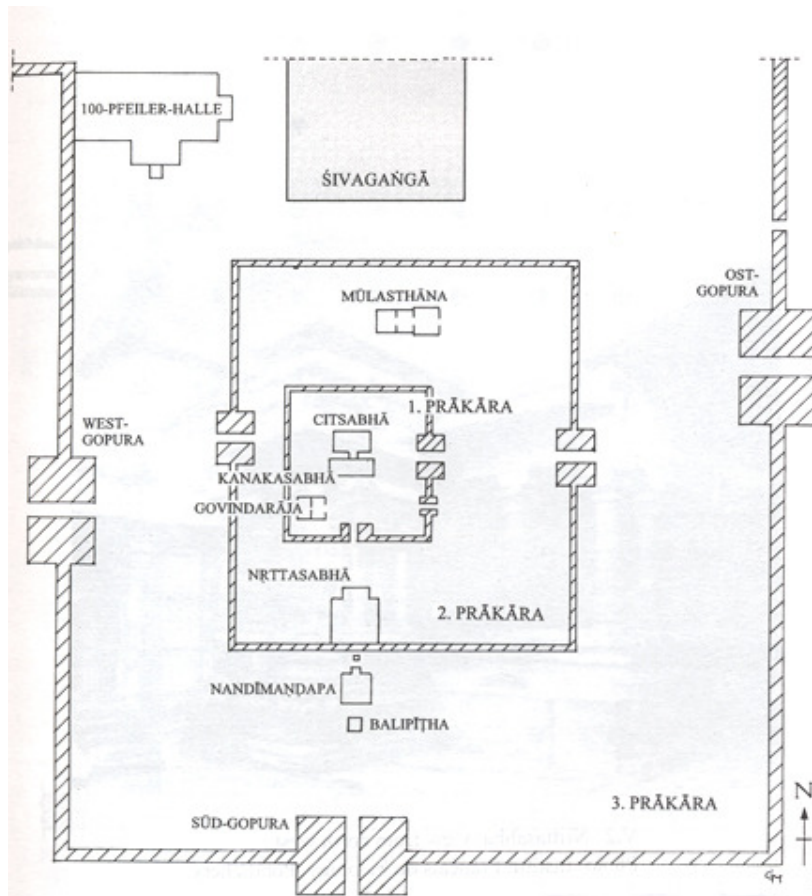


V. 4 Nataraja temple complex, overview taken from south gopura, ca. 1920.  
Photo: Archaeological Survey of India.

**Figure 5. Aerial View of the Chidambaram Naṭarāja Temple**

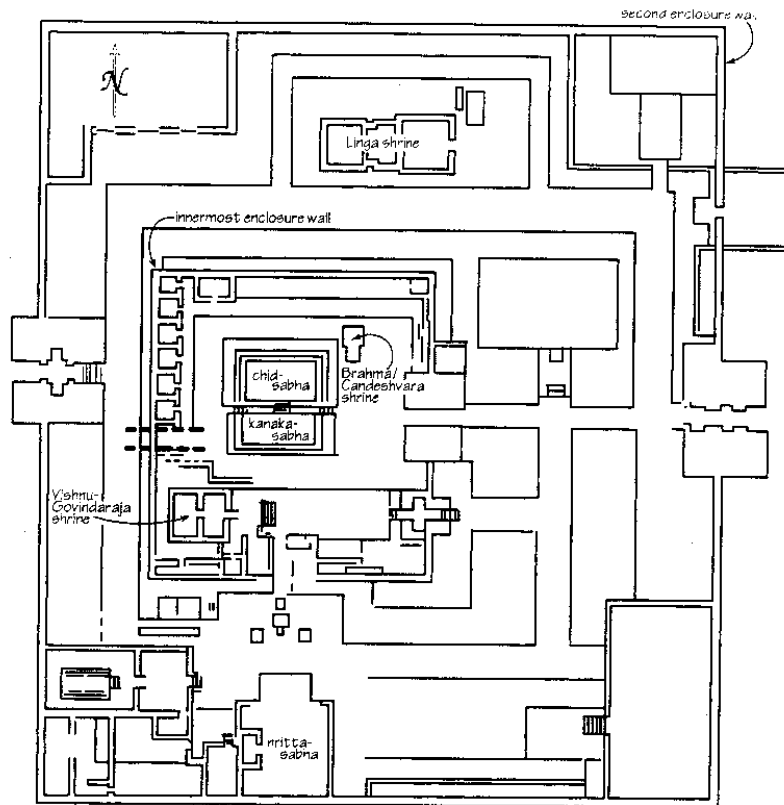


**Figure 6. The Thanjavur Brhadisvar Temple with a Mandapa in the front**



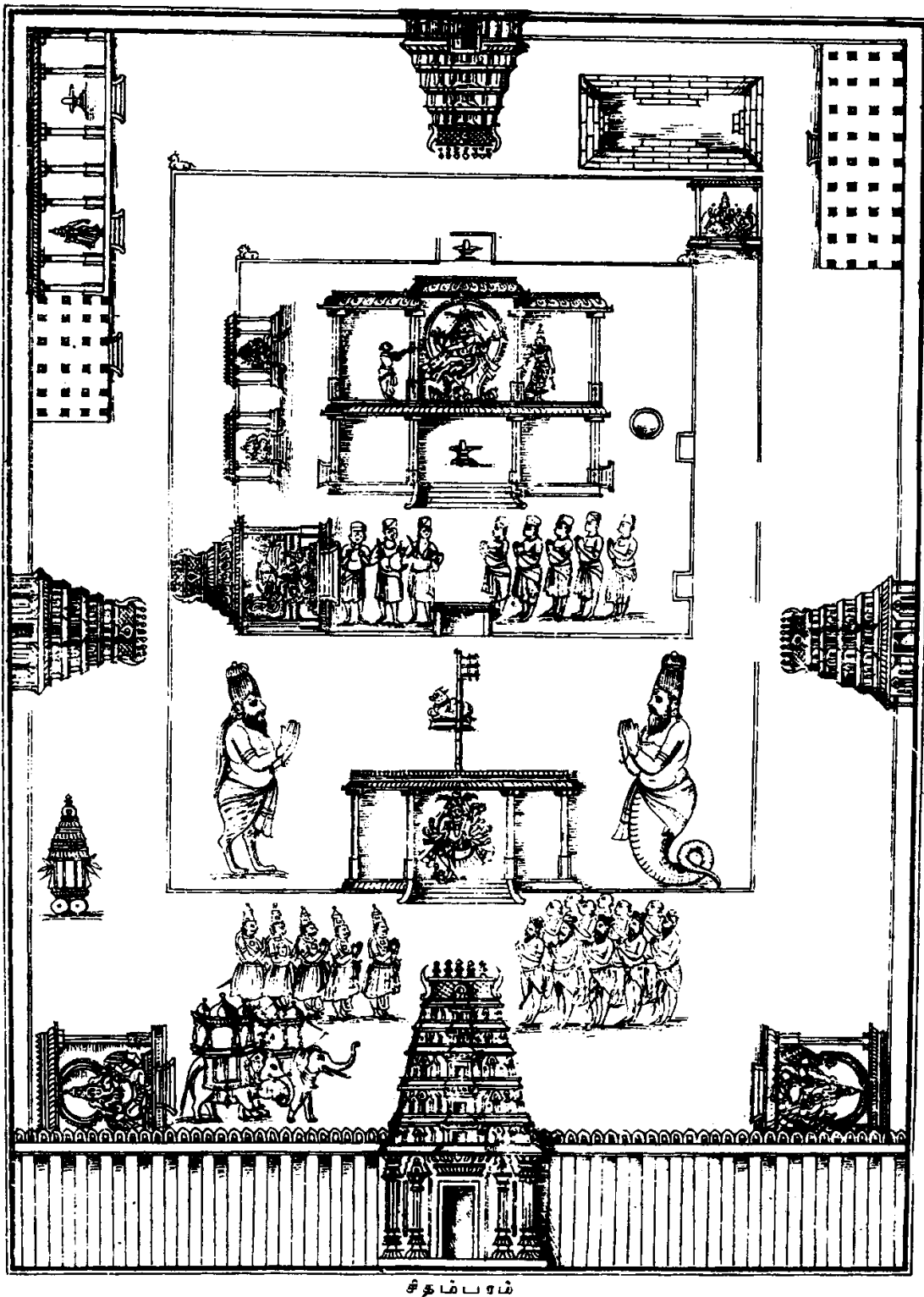
V.1 Chidambaram, Nataraja temple, sketch-plan of southern part of temple complex.

**Figure 7. Ground Plan of the Chidambaram Naṭarāja's Temple**  
Courtesy: Nagaswamy (2002)



15 Ground plan of the inner two enclosures at Shiva Nataraja's temple complex in Chidambaram (graphic design: Julia Meyerson)

Figure 8. Ground Plan of the Natarāja's temple complex. Courtesy: Kaimal (1999).



11. Plan of Sabhānāyaka temple. Madras 1867 edition of *Kōyil Purāṇam*.

Fig. 8A. Courtesy: Smith (1996).





IV.10 Adavallan, (Nataraja), Victoria and Albert Museum,  
• London, 10<sup>th</sup> cent.

Figure 9. Statue of Naṭarāja

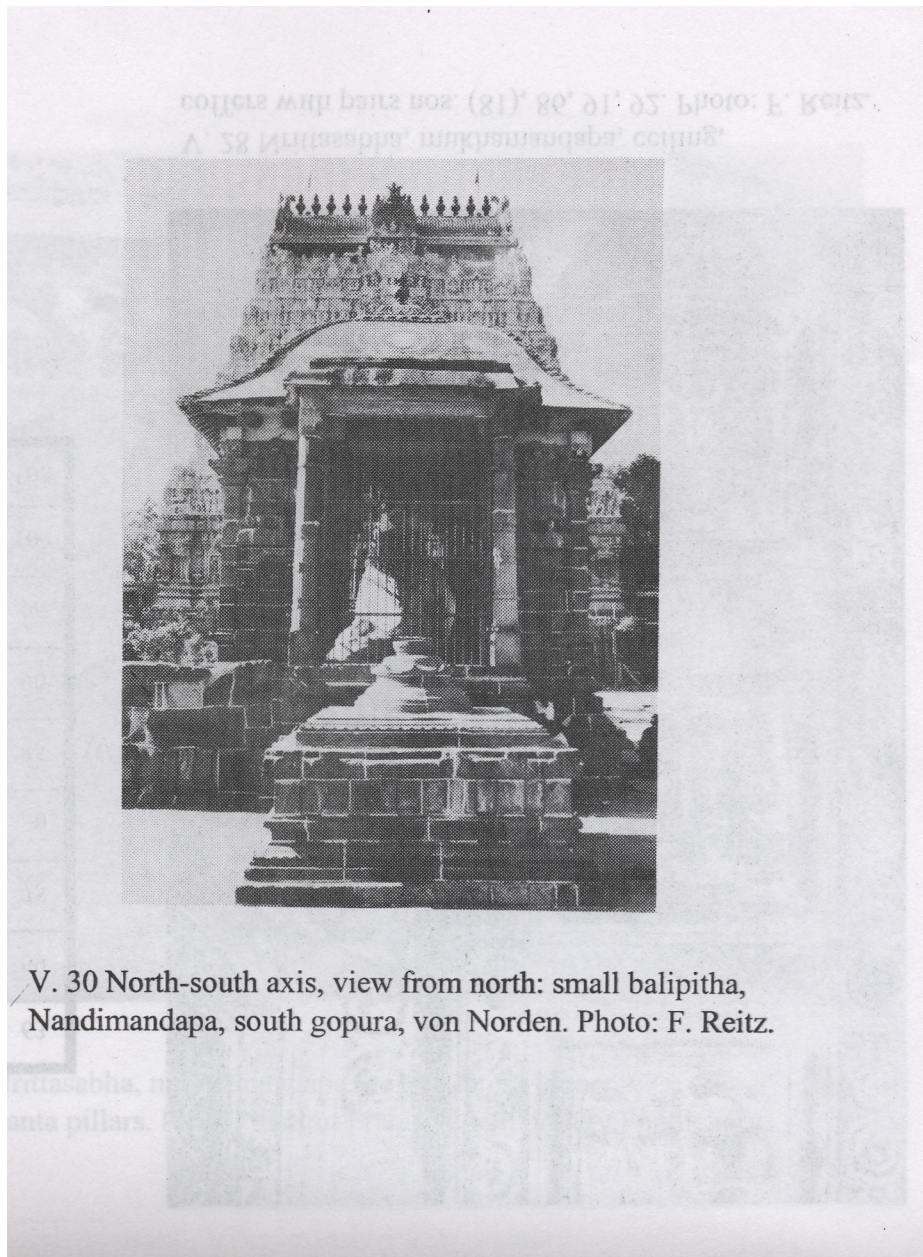


Figure 10. Front View of the Chidambaram Natarāja temple through Nadhi Pavilian  
(The Cit-Sabhā appears in the middle)



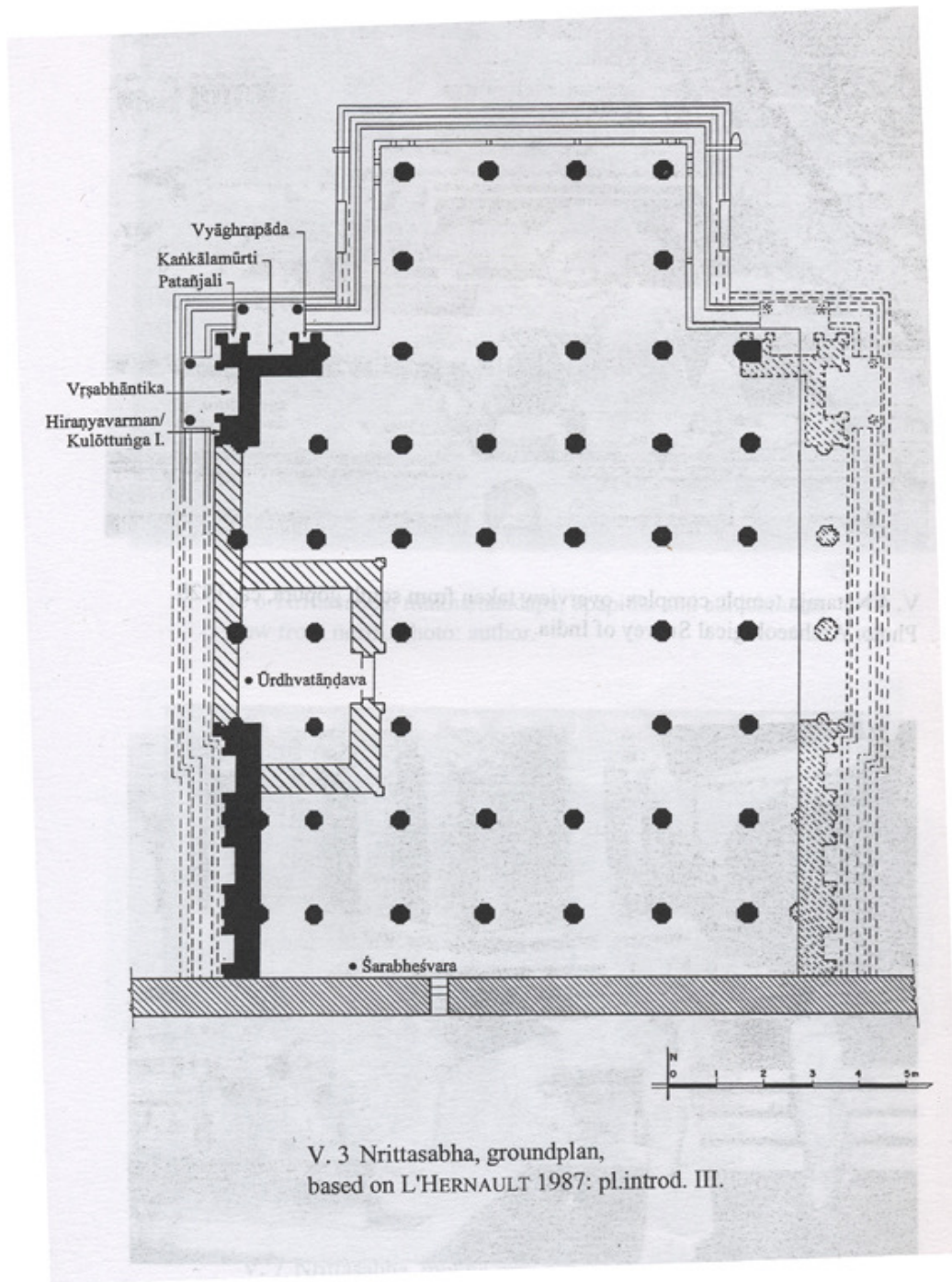
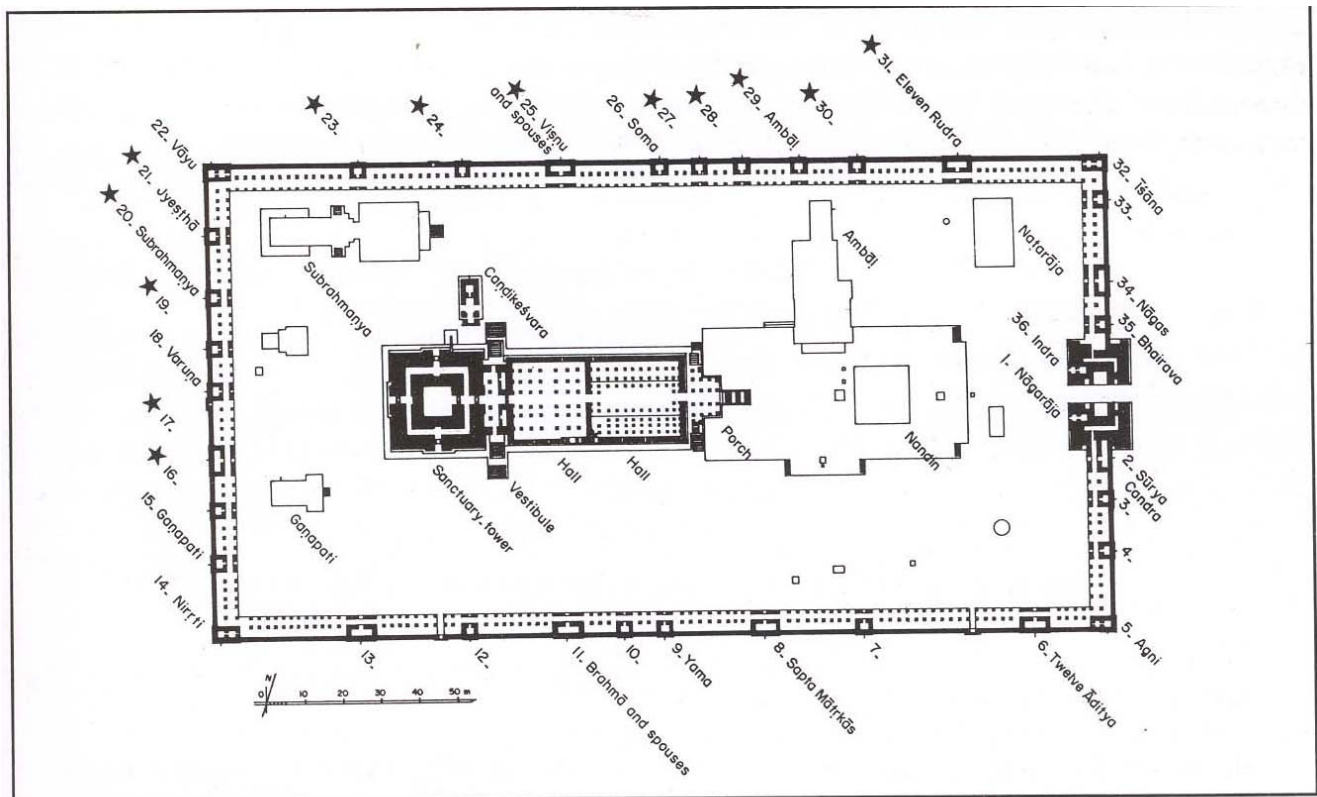


Figure 11. The Cit-Sabhā - Maṇḍapa plan. Courtesy: Nagaswamy (2002)





Fig. 12. Natarāja temple's tank



The subshrines of the gallery (\*subshrines containing a linga)  
**Figure 13. Ground plan of the Tanjavur Brhdisvara Temple (Courtesy: Gujral 2002:**

23)

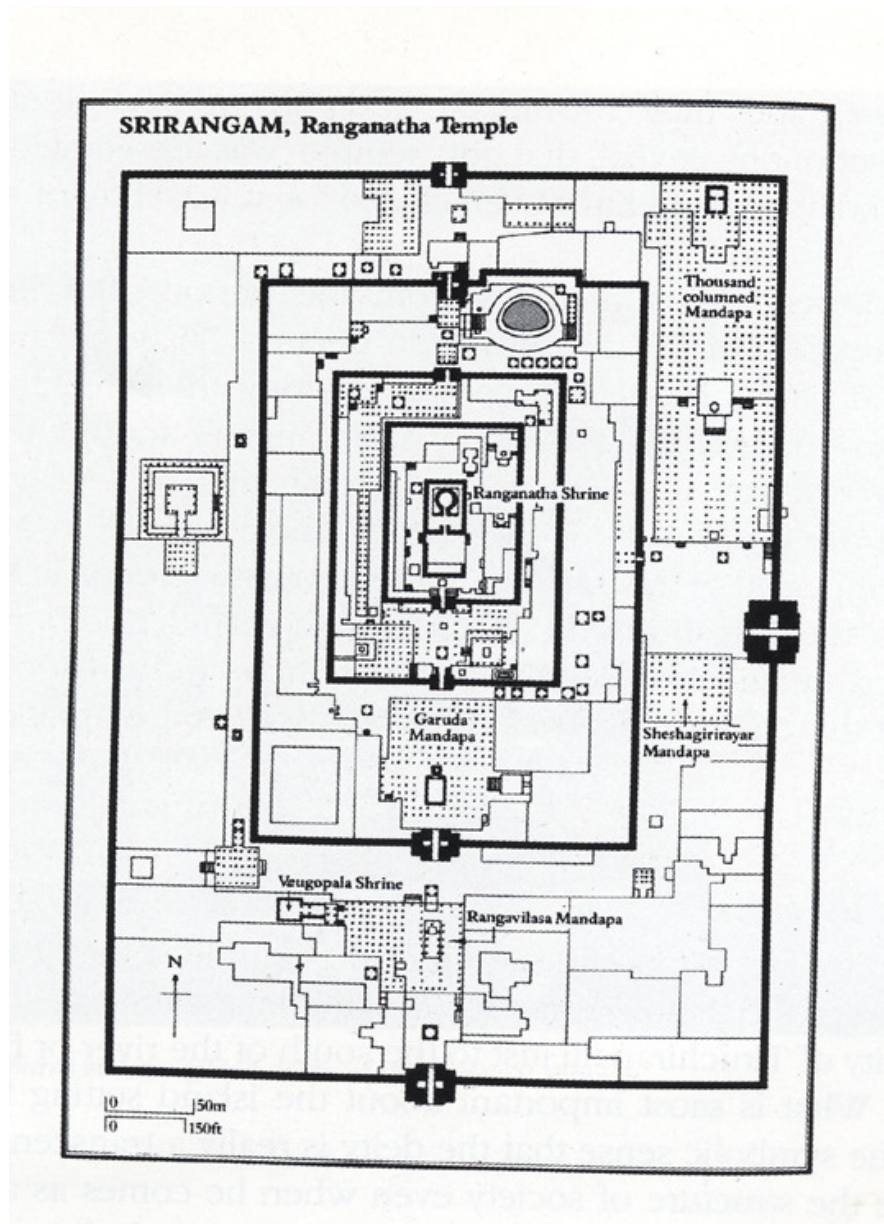


Figure 14. The Sri-Rangam Ranganata Temple – Ground Plan





**Figure 15. Dancing Śiva without the Dwarf under the feet. Courtesy: Kaimal (1999:**

**394)**