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## The religious landscape of Gingee (Senji)

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# THE RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE OF GINGEE

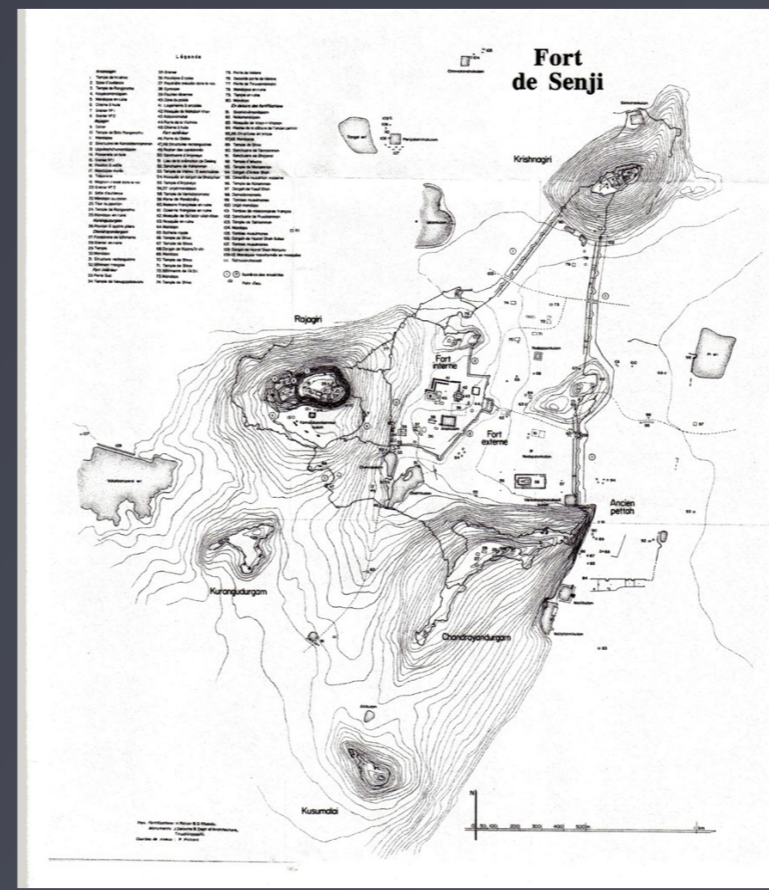
## STUDY OF THE ARCHITECTURE AND ICONOGRAPHY

### OF THE RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS OF GINGEE FORT, CITY, AND ITS SURROUNDINGS

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The city of Gingee is located in the north of Tamil Nadu state in South India, in the Villupuram district between the pilgrim centre of Thiruvannāmalai and Tindivanam town.

The site attracts by its impressive physiography and the granitic hills and rocky landscape fuel easily imagination.

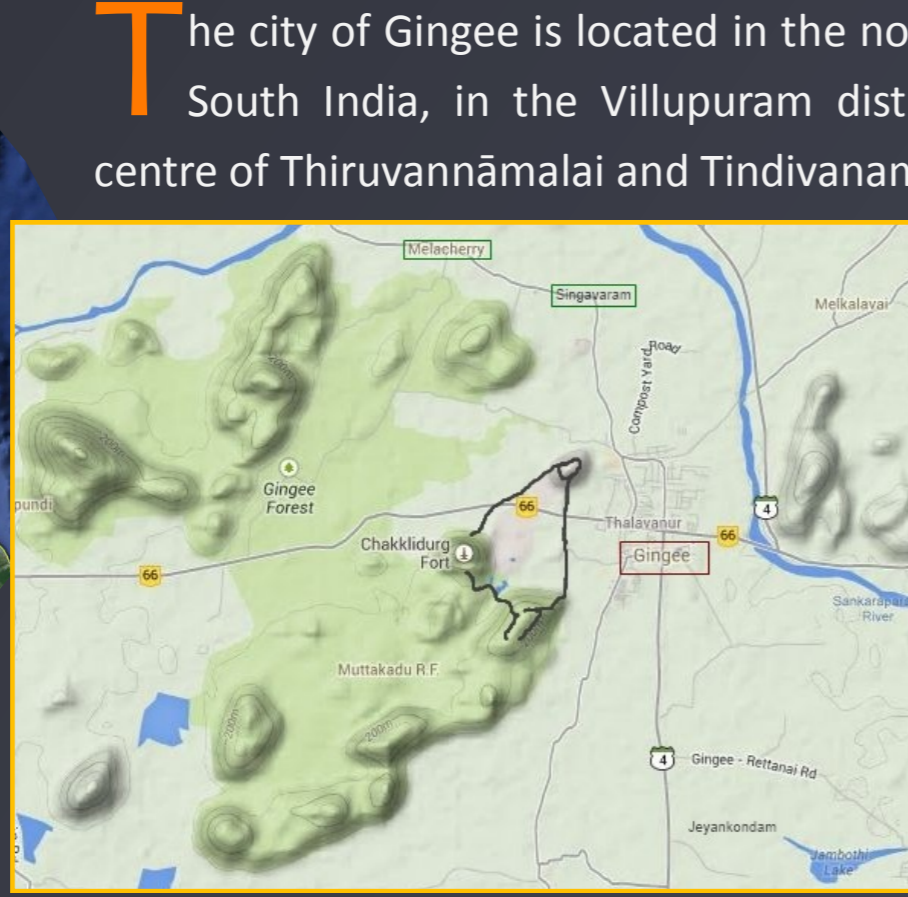


Plan of Senji (Gingee) Fort by Jean Deloche, 2006.

The ancient military Fort of Gingee, which has built the area's reputation, stands bordered by the Sankarāparanī River and surrounded by three high hills: Rājagiri, Kṛṣṇagiri, and Chandrayandurgam. Each one is fortified at the top and connected to the others by a long wall.

The study of iconography, architectural style and context integration of the religious buildings conducted from 2010 to 2013 focuses on temples in and around Gingee Fort but also inside the modern town, spread in the "old Gingee village" and in two northern places: Singāvaram and Melaccheri. Most of them dates from 14<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> c, especially from the Nāyaka domination.

If the military complex has been exhaustively analysed by Jean Deloche (EFGO), the religious landscape has never received such attention.



Detailed map of Gingee region. © MapHill (www.maphill.com)

This research raises the issue of the identification of distinct types of cults, belonging to each building category, and the repartition of the deities and their worship on the territory.

#### SOURCES AND CHRONOLOGY

A small part of the epigraphic data has been studied and published and gives very little information. Unknown inscriptions found last year are currently being translated, even if they seem to belong to a later period. The most reliable document is a history of the Fort from Narayanan Pillai, supposed descendant of Gingee rulers, written in 1802 for Colonel Colin Mackenzie, during his survey of historical sites in India. Since then, we depend on that text.



Tamil inscription in the Mahalingeśvara temple and telugu inscription in the Kodandarāma temple.



Nāyaka rampart between Kṛṣṇagiri (north) and Rājagiri (south).

Gingee has always been used for its defensive qualities, since the first occupation of the shepherd clan of the Kon, lead by Ananda Kon at the 12<sup>th</sup> c. who set up the fortifications, to the Vijayanagara empire at the 14<sup>th</sup> c. This growing kingdom involves warrior vassals who become viceroys of the provinces, and protect borders, increasing their power and wealth. The Gingee Nāyakas take their independence from a dying empire in the 16<sup>th</sup> c. Like the Vijayanagara emperors, they fight against the progression of Islam hoping to restore the Hindu *dharma*, protecting Hindu cult. They are known for being as great and tolerant temples builders and restorers, as fine tacticians.

Gingee nowadays shows us built and ruined Hindu temples, mosques and dargah side to side, as well as places of local worship and hero stones.



Conventional portrait of a Nāyaka king, Venkatarāma temple.

#### BRAHMANIC CULT

The Nāyaka period (15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> c.) was a time of intense construction, they developed a typical architectural style and an iconography focused on the main Hindu gods while keeping local traditions alive. Main structures adopt vast ground plans keeping the ancient *cella* at the centre and add shrines, tanks, high gateways (*gopura*) and enclosure walls (*prakāra*). The most important of them are found at ground level and the smaller are often on hill top.



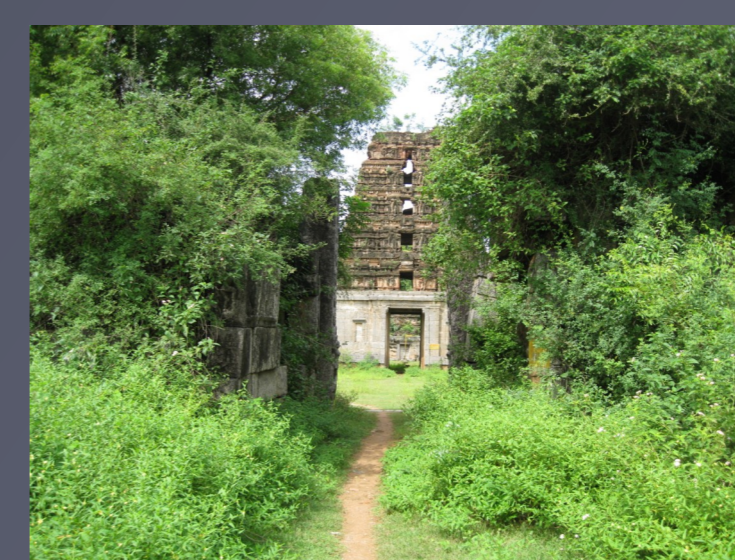
Large view of the Venkatarāma temple.



Decorative stairs, dais of the Pattabhirāma temple.



Ruined gopura of the Kodandarāma temple.



Ruined entrance of the Sitarāma temple, Jeyankondam.



The Churning of the Milk Sea and Rāmāyana representations on the Pattabhirāma temple gopura.

The Venkatarāma temple is an example of that type. As the larger religious structure of the Inner Fort, it has two surrounding walls and three annex chapels. The temple was devoted to a form of Viṣṇu "destroyer of the sins" and might be part of a set of four great temples which are remarkable by their similarities of plan, iconography, and dimensions. The Pattabhirāma temple lies south of Chandrayandurgam Hill, the Kodandarāma temple on the shore of the river, east of the Fort, and the Sitarāma temple is farther on the south, in the actual Jeyankondam village. The two latter are in ruined conditions but can still be linked to the set by their main gate tower. They all develop a vaiṣṇava iconography sculpted on pillars or friezes inside the *gopura*, except for the Sitarāma temple which hosts equally vaiṣṇava and śaiva figures, raising questions about its original obedience.

Śiva temples exist also in number as shown by the half caved temple of Mahalingeśvara, consecrated to the iconic form of Śiva: the *liṅga*. It may have originally been a small cult in a cave and fine carved pillars have been set up later to give the temple more prestige.



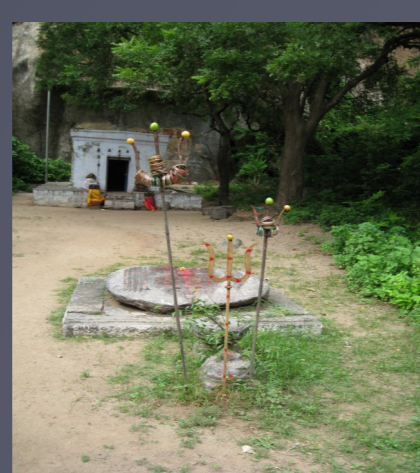
The cave temple of Mahalingeśvara and a scene of linga adoration on a pillar, Kuttarisidurgam, Inner Fort.

#### LOCAL "DRAVIDIAN" CULT

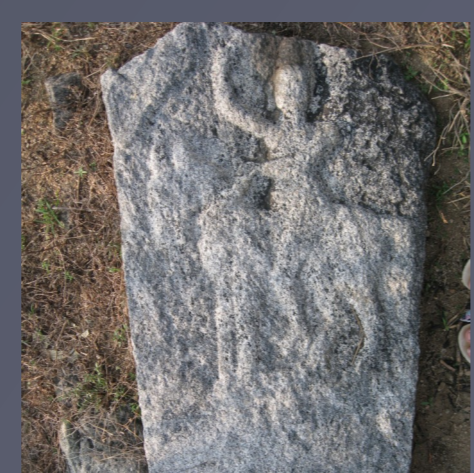
The deeply secular Tamil society from the first centuries CE attaches importance to notions such prosperity, wealth, lineage, and spirits linked to natural elements, animals and the deceased. These are the first forms of devotions known in the Tamil country. Quite different from the celestial pan-Hindu deities, the Dravidian gods (also called folk, local, minor, village, or from little tradition) are connected to earth and death, and receive offerings of food and blood. The worship doesn't need any build structure and takes place in open air, at the foot of a hill, a tree or near a pond. The representation is secondary, thus the devotion will be first offered to raw stones then will appear figurative sculptures, and hero stones. Goddesses are the most popular represented deities: related with nature and farming activities, they are supposed to be very powerful and dangerous beings in Tamil culture. Traditions tell that all female deities in Gingee must be one of the Seven Virgins, or Seven Sisters group, the most worshipped goddesses of the area.



The seven Virgin of the Kāmalakānniāmma temple, Inner Fort. Goddesses statues go with original raw stones.



The small temple of Kāliāmma on Rājagiri and its altar for the buffalo sacrifice.



A hero stone, or nadukkal, celebrating the death of a warrior, Periyakulam.

Later, circa the 5<sup>th</sup> c., the imposed Brahmanism tries to include in itself what cannot be ignored. What follows is an assimilation process which connects every element of Dravidian cult to Brahmanism we know today. They will be included in myths and protected by stone temples, which will "ennoble" their minor cult.



The Pāñchaiāmma (left) temple and the Draupadiāmma temple (right) in Melaccheri are good examples of assimilation: goddesses of borders, the deities have been respectively connected to a form of Parvatī and to the heroine of Mahābhārata (worshipped a lot at the Nāyaka periode) and a temple has been built at their place.



#### CONCLUSION

Gingee is one of the rare Nāyaka capital cities which can be studied in its entirety. Architectural style seem minor compared to great Nāyaka temples, (Vellore or Madurai), but is directly dependent on the military context and the peculiar geography. The *Archaeological Survey of India* protects such a precious heritage but some methodologies of reconstructions have often disrupted the original architectural organisation, hence a great difficulty to identify iconographic programs and for the general understanding. Thus, it would be interesting to pursue the study further, and suggesting a different approach of the restorations in order to give to this exceptional site a meaningful place in South India History and art.

Photo credit: Anne Davrinche 2011-2013