

Report of Field Stay at Pondicherry Centre of the EFEO 2026

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Abstract

Departing the stark winter of Germany this January, I arrived at the vibrant, sunny, and active EFEO research centre in Pondicherry. There, amidst the exchange of ideas between senior experts and emerging researchers, I improved my research skills. My base in Pondicherry became the anchor for frequent field operations in Kanchipuram. Over the course of four months, I sought out north to the city of Kanchipuram five times and collected necessary data for my research.

Kanchipuram graciously revealed itself to me in various aspects: through the warmth of local encounters and the rhythm of temple festivals. Furthermore, by measuring its urban and suburban landscape by feet for countless hours, I moved beyond the abstract concept of a South Indian temple-town and experienced the embodied Kanchipuram as a breathing entity in front of me. The fieldwork yielded more than mere research data, as I documented a wealth of inscriptions and corrected discrepancies in earlier readings through *in situ* verification. Also, it offered unexpected discovery and enhanced my personal attachment to the field of research.

Meanwhile, my journey in South India extended beyond the “stone-archives” on the temple walls of Kanchipuram. Utilising the brand-new Vande Bharat rail route, I visited Mysore, Bengaluru, and Chennai. The Archaeological Survey and the local research centres had their doors open and provided me with access to the necessary materials and the warm collegiality of other scholars. I have established contact with scholars from India.

As the end of my stay and the monsoon approached, I was inspired by recent publications of the EFEO members and travelled further south toward the ancient Pandya monuments at the foot of the lofty Western Ghats. Having immersed myself in the cool currents of the Tamraparni River and the vivid hospitality of the local cultures, I encountered several shrines with exquisite architectural designs, craftsmanship, and unique pre-modern inscriptions.

I do appreciate having enjoyed the privilege of having this field grant. Standing amidst the paddy field as witnesses to and interactors with centuries of agricultural and religious development, all these monuments that I have seen in the north and south of Tamil Nadu offered a profound insight into the history of South India. The field stay has been an exceptionally productive experience that will remain inscribed in my memory and continue to provide precious materials, illuminate research pathways, and enrich personal feelings, which will underpin my research for the duration of my doctoral studies.

Field Stay at Pondicherry Centre 2026 Report

It has always been my honour to receive the fieldwork grant from the EFEO. Before my departure, the prospect of an extended, four-month research stay in India felt almost like a dream to me. While leaving Germany on a snowy winter day, I was filled with uncertainty regarding the challenges of independent fieldwork. However, thanks to the invaluable support of the EFEO and my colleagues at Heidelberg, the experience exceeded all expectations.

With the financial support from the EFEO, I could travel and stay in South India. The field stay at the Pondicherry Centre was not only personally refreshing but also academically transformative and illuminating. The funding from the EFEO allowed me to achieve the primary objectives in my proposal goals, namely, a. improvement of language skills in Tamil, b. data collection through visits to Kanchipuram and surrounding areas, and c. trips to other important sites in South India. I have improved my language skills, completed a thorough documentation of inscriptions, plunged myself into the temple culture, enjoyed daily life experience and gotten into contact with Indian scholars. Hence, my research questions have been elucidated with the adequacy of materials as I built up my own inscriptional corpus.

In this report, I will first detail my work in chronological order, followed by the highlights of my experiences, the academic progress, a reflection on the future trajectory of my project, and, in the end, some challenges encountered during this field stay.

1. Chronology of Works in South India

January was mainly dedicated to the foundational preparation. Having completed the complicated procedure of registration with the assistance of Kavitha and Shariff, I began my stay in Pondicherry with daily intensive reading sessions with Prof. Vijayavenugopal. He guided me through the Madras Museum Copperplates and explained to me the nuances of the temple administration and daily expenses, as well as the procedure of making inscriptions. His ocean-like knowledge and bibliographical recommendations introduced me to the field of Tamil inscriptions. Apart from epigraphic language, I was exposed to the colloquial Tamil intensively for the first time. Frustrated by the speaking speed, I tried hard to follow more and reply in Tamil. Simultaneously, I started the preparatory work for my excursions to Kanchipuram by curating a list of relevant inscriptions and confirming the accessibility of temples online. Besides, I utilised the library and online digital resources to broaden my exposure to the literary corpus in Tamil, Sanskrit, and Maṇipravāḷam in preparation for the upcoming discussions with scholars from India.

February was marked by many academic meetings and preliminary fieldwork in Kanchi and therebeyond. My supervisor and colleagues arrived at the Pondicherry Centre from Germany. We had weeks of meetings and conferences focusing on temple legends, fieldwork methods, textual editing, manuscriptology, image documentation, research ethics, Tamil poetry, lexicography, etc. I joined the language course where we focused on the *Paripāṭal* with the team of Prof. Eva Wilden, Dr. T. Rajeshwari, and Dr. Indra Manuel. Meanwhile, I began to read more Śrīvaiṣṇava literature with Dr. Anandakichenin and Mr. Laksmīnarayana Sundararaman. Their devotion opened a brand new thesaurus of materials to me, which I started collecting by ordering books from booksellers recommended by our colleagues, Dr. Rajarethinam Thillai Chidambaram, Dr. Vishnupriya Srinivasa, and Dr. Vigneshwaran Muralidaran at the Centre.

It was also during February that I conducted my first and second field trips to Kanchipuram. My first visit was kindly assisted by Prof. Vijayavenugopal, Dr. Anandakichenin from the Centre, and Dr. Vinoth Murali from the IFP. During my three-day first visit in early February, I visited the Ulakaṇṭa Perumāḷ Temple twice to photograph its reported inscriptions. I also went to the major Pallava monuments in the town along with Prof. Charlotte Schmid, who expounded on the iconographic programmes in these temples. My second visit took place on the 28th of February. I went to the Ulakaṇṭa Perumāḷ Temple and found some unreported inscriptions on the floors and walls. On that particular day, many temples in Kanchipuram were holding their festivals. Thus, I joined the procession of the Kāmākṣī Temple and the Kumāra Koṭṭam. It was not my first experience of the South Indian temple festival, as I had joined the *rāthotsava* in Pondicherry before. These experiences in a crowded and dense urban setting served as important preparation for documenting larger-scale festival events later. The mechanism and structure of a festival became clearer to me after seeing both procession routes in the Kāmākṣī Temple and the Kumāra Koṭṭam of several *pradakṣiṇas* around the outer *prākāra*, with significant moments of coming out marked with music and prayers.

Apart from Kanchipuram, I visited Nallur between the Manimukta River and Gomukhi River with Dr. Renato Davalos and Dr. Margherita Trento. We documented and read the inscriptions on the walls regarding female donors. Besides, I made some day trips to Tiruvanamalai and Srirangam, the significant sites for Śiva and Viṣṇu, respectively. I explored the region on foot to see the landscape of an isolated mountain and the land in the middle of a river, which appears to me as an archetype for many sacred places in South India.

Having had an eventful February and following my return to Pondicherry in early **March**, I attended the conference on “Voices” and had further sessions with Prof. Vijayavenugopal to read stone inscriptions from the photos that I had taken. After receiving his

advice on documentation and working methods, I embarked on the research trip along the Vande Bharat rail route.

In Bengaluru, my supervisor Prof. Ute Hüsken and I visited the Mythic Society, which has been working on the digitisation of inscriptions by 3D scanning for years. Our long conversation with their project leader, Uday Kumar, established the foundation of a potential collaborative project in Kanchipuram. I also attended a gathering of scholars and heritage enthusiasts at the Goethe Institut. When I travelled to Mysore, my time included a visit to the Mysore University and their museology department in the Jayalakshmi Vilas Mansion, under their renovation. I stayed with the epigraphists in the Archaeological Survey of India for three days, reading inscriptions and getting the essential transcripts. In the end, I acquired manuscript copies related to Kanchi after a friendly discussion with the manuscript conservation team at the Oriental Research Institute. Rushing from Mysore to Chennai, I visited local bookstores, where I purchased literary works, and the Government Museum, where I got photos of the Uttama Chola Copperplates.

I then returned to Kanchipuram for Late March and Early **April**, in order to observe the festivals, document more inscriptions, and check the readings from the transcripts *in situ* against the walls of many temples in Kanchipuram. I spent days and nights in the temples for the Brahmotsava of the Ekāmrānātha Temple, where Śiva marries the goddess after her penance and the Pallavotsava of the Varadarāja Perumāḷ Temple, where the *Hastigirimāhātmya* is recited along with the Manipravalam commentary to tell the story of Varadarāja appearing from sacrificial fire on the land of *Satyavrata*. The weeks were also the festival season for many Śaiva shrines and Goddesses. Hence, I could see many processions, street plays, and local devotees, with whom I conducted some interviews with my colleague Ramesh Mohandass from Pondicherry. The festival experiences and the interactions with the local people offered me a vivid picture of the social, religious, and economic dimensions of temple management that have long been the topics of the inscriptions since the time of the Pallavas.

After this extended period in Kanchipuram, I returned to Pondicherry to sort all my photos, organise the recordings, and synthesise the notes from the field. I finalised my editions of the inscriptions while preparing abstracts for conferences that I planned to attend this year. In the meantime, I continued with many reading sessions in Pondicherry and utilised the library in the EFEO and the IFP for more information on the inscriptions. Fortunately, the festival season in Pondicherry started then, which happened in a different setting from Kanchipuram and allowed me to witness the bathing of deities carried by automobiles in the early mornings. I held more discussions with scholars in India, including one with an anthropologist, Haresh

Vedamurthy from Pondicherry University, regarding festivals in Trichy and Kanchi. As the holidays in Pondicherry approached, I decided to spend some time with the members of EFEO by sharing food and so forth. Social talks with them gave me a more concrete understanding of politics and lifestyles in India, which will be invaluable in my later career.

It was a holiday for the Pondicherry Centre in **May**. I was fortunate to enjoy the relatively tolerable heat and undertake a research tour through Southern Tamil Nadu. With the help of the financial support from the EFEO, I explored the diversity of the Tamil cultural and natural landscape. I travelled through more *divyadesams* and archaeological sites, including Sittanavasal, Narthamalai, Yanaimalai, Srivilliputtur, Kalugumalai, Malayadikurichy, Kuttalam, Brahmadesam, Ambasamudra, Papanasam, Srivaikuntam, Nanguneri, Tirukkurungudi, Chitharal Malaikovil, etc. I have thus gained a lot of materials for later exploration and widened my horizon. Before I left Chennai on 11th May, I concluded my field stay with Kanchipuram. I expressed my gratitude to the temple priests in the Ulakaṇṭa Perumāḷ temple. I could not tear myself away from this productive field stay but had to leave in spite of the lingering feeling of wanting more.

2. Highlights of my Experiences

My immersive experiences in South India are also invaluable, breathing life into the textual materials consisting of the epigraphic records. The two most significant aspects lie in the temple ritual and everyday chores.

Firstly, Temple festivals were the topic of some inscriptions related to the Ulakaṇṭa Perumāḷ Temple. During the festival of the Kumāra Koṭṭam Temple, the procession of four Goddesses in Kanchipuram, the marriage between Ekāmrānātha and his consort, the Pallavotsava in the Varadarāja Perumāḷ Temple, and some minor festival services, the complex inter-temple relations are enacted and to be witnessed, while the citizens are largely involved in the various tasks in the town during the festivities. The deities come to see the devotees, while the devotees come to serve the deities. These festivities demonstrated how temple management and local society converge in practice, which features heavily in the inscriptions of the Ulakaṇṭa Perumāḷ Temple.

In addition to the exceptional festival events, I visited and stayed in temples like the other devotees, gaining an immediate understanding of the feelings and processes in temple worship. For instance, consuming *prasadam* with others made the descriptions of *amutu* tasteful to me, while waiting for *darśana* taught me the devotional longing which I have read

in the texts like *Tirup Paḷḷiyelucci*. The materials in the Tamil language will no longer be fossilised texts but vital images with feelings.

Beyond the temple complex, the daily life offered me a necessary culture shock that is connected to the contents of the inscriptions as well. Having spent my childhood in the countryside of Southeast China, I had unconsciously projected the image of the agrarian landscape of my native place near Shanghai to that of the pre-modern Tamil region. However, lifestyles in South India were revealed to be distinct, since the crop rotation, the livestock-raising, the cooking methods, modes of transportation, and the water management of the paddy fields are indeed drastically different from my childhood experiences at home. I was deeply impressed by the mode of production. To be brief, the complexity of irrigation was different from the polder systems in Southeast China, where draining the paddy fields in the middle of a network of rivers was more of an issue, provided with ever-running streams everywhere. Therefore, lands for goats or cows to graze are often side by side with densely-grown, lush paddy fields that are irrigated by channels that bring water from afar. As the rivers might rise and fall drastically on the east coast of South India, boats are rare in Tamil Nadu, while they used to be an essential for our daily transportation in China. Besides, the use of water and cooking fire differs from Southeast Chinese villages, where rainwater collectors, several fixed stoves and the Chinese wok enable much quicker cooking. Traditional South Indian households get water from wells and cook tenderly. Even the same method of steaming appears to be different in terms of the intensity of the steam. Therefore, the temples in South India require much more time, labour, and space to prepare the divine food, which has been an important topic in the inscriptions. These vivid cultural shocks fundamentally questioned my approach to historical interpretation, as I used to think with a Chinese agrarian image *a priori*. I now realise how much we researchers might have unintentionally projected our own cultural background onto imagery ideas when interpreting inscriptions. The daily chore that I witnessed changed my understanding of inscriptions and increased my discretion when it comes to postulations.

3. Academic Progress

My progress can be summarised in three aspects: the acquaintance with epigraphic research methods, systematic data collection from the Ulakaḷanta Perumāḷ Temple as well as the town of Kanchipuram, and the clarification of the key research questions.

3.1 Epigraphic Methods

My basic research skills were significantly improved through intensive reading sessions and field visits with learned experts at the Pondicherry Centre of the EFEO. Their expertise was beneficial before and during my later work in Kanchipuram, concerning palaeography, reading inscriptions, interpreting the content, considering the socio-political context, and doing fieldwork. I am now more familiar with how epigraphists had worked before and how we are proceeding with their work, while improving my language skills through constant reading of the inscriptions documented by senior scholars.

Additionally, my meetings with scholars yielded fruitful results. The four workshops at the Pondicherry Centre provided me with the opportunity to meet other scholars who have been working in relevant fields for years. They have been a great help to me ever since. The epigraphists in Mysore warmly received me and extended their welcome to the future, while the Mythic Society in Bengaluru kindly look forward to collaboration on 3D scanning of Kanchi inscriptions. Dr. Davalos at the Pondicherry Centre of the EFEO introduced me to the DHARMA project and taught me to encode and translate the inscriptions in the TEI format, which will be taken as my working method in the upcoming years.

From the discussion with them, I could see the development of epigraphic research methods. Epigraphy in South India received enduring scholarly attention. Ever since British Colonel Mackenzie attempted to collect inscriptions with the help of local scholars, the inscriptions in Kanchipuram intrigued many epigraphists. Government epigraphists have constantly visited Kanchipuram for its inscriptions in 1888, 1890, 1893, 1895, 1906, 1910, 1919, 1921, 1931, 1939, 1956, etc., resulting in a more thorough documentation of the Pallava inscriptions with a series of reports, transcripts, and edited volumes. The editions can be found in volumes *Epigraphia Indica* and *South Indian Inscriptions*. In our century, the Tamil Nadu government published inscriptions according to districts, Kanchipuram having 5 volumes. Two of them are solely dedicated to the Varadarāja Perumāḷ Temple, while the first volume contains 21 pieces from the Ulakaḷanta Perumāḷ Temple. The readings were conducted by Krishnamurti, who recently published an individual book including a reproduction of the Uttama Chola Copperplates in *South Indian Inscriptions*. Some of the published editions of *South Indian Inscriptions* are now encoded digitally within the DHARMA project, making it more accessible and research-inspiring.

Despite the greater accessibility of editions now, fieldwork is indispensable for epigraphy. Through my own fieldwork, I could see how epigraphists worked in the past. They took down visible inscriptions as estampages in the order they visited and transcribed them

later into manuscripts. Usually, later pieces and fragments were given much less priority. Given the chronological distance of a century, their working methods are not always clear to us, as we do not know for sure the situation of the inscriptions and the temples 100 years ago. Inscriptions might have been replaced due to renovation, while the terms used to describe inscriptions might have been misunderstood during transmission. Working in a recluse might not be optimal for epigraphic research that is closely tied to the fields.

Fieldwork not only brings the earlier report to life and elucidates the confusion resulting from secondary literature, but also helps us to read the inscriptions alongside the architecture. The inscriptions are an integral part of the temple and occupy specific spaces on the walls. When it comes to fragments, their loci in the larger complex are essential information to stitch them together and understand the process of renovation in the course of history. It is our task to cast our glances beyond the texts onto the bearing artefact of the inscriptions, given more mobility and development in data formats now.

Moreover, by reading *in situ*, we can see how local people appear mostly reverently indifferent to the letters on the wall, with some exceptions from the more educated ones, including retired doctors or teachers.

3.2 Collected Materials

I have focused on both literary materials and epigraphic data during my field stay in India. I searched for editions of relevant Maṇipravāḷam commentaries as well as old pilgrim books about Kanchipuram online, which are not easily accessible in Europe. I purchased as many Tamil pre-modern poetic works related to Kanchipuram as possible, both in prints and in manuscript copies. They will be an extended part of my study of the temple town. In the coming years, I will examine these sources further to evaluate their relevance.

When it comes to epigraphic data, I collected them in the Archaeological Department, museums, and most importantly in Kanchipuram. I have scanned and bought relevant epigraphic publications in relation to Kanchipuram, including editions of inscriptions and reports of inscriptions. In Kanchipuram, I have approached all the urban shrines with inscriptions attested in literature. Several temples have lost all the inscriptions (e.g., the Phaṇāmaṇīśvara and Kaṇṇeśvara Temples). Hence, I relied on the 25 transcripts acquired from the Archaeological Survey of India in Mysore, where I copied 32 further pieces copied in 1921 from the city of Kanchipuram.

In all, I have been to Kanchipuram five times, spending more than two weeks in the town. I visited 48 temples in the town in total, reaching them on foot. Walking in the town

allowed me to feel the city's expanse in the bright daylight and dry heat of North Tamil Nadu. The engagement with the ground is indispensable in reconsidering the idea of the *nagaram* (commercial settlement) "Kanchipuram" in the larger region. I have taken photos of almost 100 inscriptions from 20 temples in the Kanchipuram region. More than 30 are from the Ulakaṇṭa Perumāḷ temple, which I have visited ten times.

3.3 Writing the Temple History

Here, I take the Ulakaṇṭa Perumāḷ Temple as the primary case study for writing a temple history, given its richness in materials. The temple in the city centre (*ūrakam*) had once a very close relation with both the local merchant community and minor lords from afar during the Chola and post-Chola period. It might have continued to function in the town in the later period, while the culture of writing inscriptions had changed, leading to the lack of as much evidence as in the bigger temples favoured by the Vijayanagara royals.

The pattern of donation in the Ulakaṇṭa Perumāḷ Temple seems to be shared with some other temples in the city centre, including the Kacchapeśvara Temple. They survived or even prospered at the decline of the Cholas with a considerable number of private donors, but ceased to receive inscriptions after the 14th century, when under the Vijayanagara regnal years, most inscriptional records shifted to the three main iconic temples, being Śaiva, Śakta, and Vaiṣṇava respectively. Scholars have noticed these temples in the old city centre and published some of their inscriptions. Nevertheless, a closer and comprehensive look appears to be necessary, given the complexity of the earlier inscriptions in the temple.

The Ulakaṇṭa Perumāḷ Temple houses 30 historical inscriptions within its two-*prākāra* temple complex. There are 18 completed pieces: 6 on the outer *gopura* that faces west, 4 on the exterior walls of the *maṇḍapa* leading to the main *garbhagrha*, 6 around the *vimāna* of the central shrine, and one paved into the inner *prākāra* floor. More Chola-period fragments are found on the exterior walls of the inner *prākāra*. Later graffiti are found on both sides of the *gopura*. There are also several modern inscriptions on the floors in front of the deities or in the form of individual slabs in front of the entrances. From the inscriptions, we can sketch the temple's history as follows.

The temple might have received administrative attention under the reign of Nandivarman III of the Pallava Dynasty (864 CE). He issued an order on the exemption of tax to the merchants selling camphor and sandals. However, this Pallava-period Tamil inscription is paved into the recently renovated inner *prākāra* floor. It was indeed reported on the floor in the same location in the late 19th century (ARIE 12 of 1895). Nevertheless, we cannot be certain

whether it belonged to the temple since the 9th century, given the fact that the temple was not mentioned in the decree.

Regarding the Chola period, materials are scattered but vast. The aforementioned copperplates (985 CE) are by far the first attestation of the occurrence of the later prevailing Tamil idiom *ūrakattu niṇṇaruḷiya* as well as the Sanskrit *ūrakastha*, which could be the evidence for its status of being a *divyadesam*. The idiom echoes Tirumaḷicai's *Tiruccantaviruttam* verse 64, where three Viṣṇus in Kanchipuram are mentioned in different postures. During the regnal time of Rajaraja and Rajendra, donors of high social status left more traces in the temple, but they are scattered on the northern and western sides of the exterior walls of the inner *prākāra* due to later reconstruction. Two more pieces are found within the inner *prākāra* built into the floor and wall, respectively. Their inscriptions sometimes had references to a second shrine in the temple, probably dedicated to Kṛṣṇa. They referred back or even briefed on the edicts of their reigning predecessors. Fragmentary as the inscriptions are, they are rich in information concerning the temple and demand close examination of the content.

Kulottunga I stayed in Kanchipuram for quite a long time due to his emphasis on the north. He and his retinue made various donations to renovate or reconstruct the temples in the town, as his *meykkīrtti* can be found in many temples in the town. The current main trapezium-shaped *vimāna* of Ulakaḷanta Perumāḷ might have been commissioned under his reign, bearing his extensive inscriptions on both sides of the *mukhamaṇḍapa*, dated 1110 CE. He might have largely shaped or even rebuilt the temple as well as the town, as an essential part of his ambitious enterprise.

Soon after the expiration of Kulottunga's reign, Kanchi witnessed a rise in private donors, as the Chola weakened. Directly under the edict of Kulottunga I and his queen, a weaver from this *nagaram* retained the land, which probably was the one confiscated by the earlier Chola kings from the hand of the merchants, and donated it to the temple under the reigning year of Rājādhiraḷa II (1172 CE). Later land donations seem to be mainly done by the non-royal individuals in the temple.

In the 13th century, from which the previous scholarly attention largely reduced, the town and the temple witnessed different waves of rulers coming and going, while the daily temple rituals seem to have enjoyed some stability. The Pandya King sent an edict via a chieftain to the temple to exempt the tax collection for lighting a lamp in 1228 CE. Since then, several different individuals from the town and nearby regions donated gold for the lamps in the temple, which have been managed by the same priest for over 30 years under the reign of

two different dynasties. Private donors became more influential and involved in urban management, as we see one figure on both sides of the *gopura* donating land to the temple for various costs in the first half of the 14th century, though a Sambuvarayar royal permission on putting on street plays can also be found in the temple.

The temple did not have much record under the Vijayanagara. The two measuring rods might have been commissioned when the Vijayanagara prince Kampana established himself in Kanchipuram. There was another land sales inscription related to the Temple Diwan with a series of Ayyaṅkar signatories in 1678 CE. The inscription is now covered by boxes and spider nets, making the shoal letters even harder to read. Unlike the Varadarāja Perumāḷ Temple with the same set of measuring rods by the Vijayanagara, the temple seems not to have received more royal attention from the Vijayanagara rulers.

In the recent past, between the 19th and the 20th centuries, many donations were made by the wealthy merchants and brahmins, which shaped the landscape of its adjacent streets. The inscription culture was thus revived. Unfortunately, some of these modern inscriptions were lost after the temple renovation in the past decade. We can only see their names inscribed on the floors of the entrances to the shrines.

Based on the materials collected, I will present the epigraphic corpus and then elucidate the temple history through the comparison with other temples in the town, such as the Varadarāja Perumāḷ Temple, the Pāṇḍavadūta Perumāḷ Temple, and the Kacchapeśvara Temple. Moreover, inspired by the details in the inscriptions, I have reformulated the further research. The general investigation of the inscriptions will help to elucidate the idea of Kanchipuram city, while reading these materials alongside literary sources will provide us with new insights into the development of the *Divyadesams* and their tales.

3.4 Questioning Nagarai Kāñcipuram

Previous studies sometimes project the modern topographical administrative division onto the historical town. Hence, tracing the development of the city is an urgent task to clarify what we mean by saying Kanchipuram and how much generalisation we can make out of our unique materials as well as perspectives. The concept of the commercial settlement (*nagaram*) is reflected in the inscriptions that situated themselves in the territory and sometimes mark the boundaries of certain land divisions. By tracing boundary markers and territorial designations from the 10th to the 16th centuries, I aim to redefine the politico-religious scale of the city.

From my present understanding, Kanchipuram already reached the South Yathoktakārī Perumāḷ Temple and the East Satyanāthasvāmi Temple in the mid-10th century. Moreover,

under the age of Uttama Chola, there was already an idea of Cīrukacci (“Little Kanchi”, see ARIE 419 of 1902), established together with a Brahmin settlement, which a few modern scholars consider a 19th-century invention. The inclusion of Attiyūr, i.e. the Varadarāja Perumāḷ Temple region, might have taken place around the mid-12th century, much earlier than the usual conception of the 14th century. The city boundaries were ascertained in one of the 13th-century inscriptions in the Ulakaḷanta Perumāḷ Temple, which largely match the present-day extent of the municipality.

However, this did not end the story of development, because urban development is not a one-way linear story of expansion. The Vijayanagara Emperors redistributed the larger territorial *koṭṭam*-divisions to the town and further brought the Jaina shrine under the term *nagaraṅkāñcipuram*. Kanchi was shared by several *koṭṭam*-divisions. The redivision might have continued to the modern-day division of the Kanchipuram municipality into Big Kanchi and Small Kanchi, marked also by the pillars and the temple chariot in the middle of the town. A comprehensive investigation into the inscriptions of the Kanchipuram region will be necessary to redefine the politico-religious scale of Kanchipuram in different phases of its development and through different lenses. With the collected materials, I could address this confusing topic and shed new light on the lasting debate on the urbanisation process in Kanchipuram.

3.5 Identifying *Divyadesams* and their Legends

As a result of meeting in India, I am continuing with reading Ālvārs’ works with Dr. Suganya Anandakichenin since February. She intends to start Maṇipravāḷam reading from July, which will largely benefit my reading skills. With more exposure to the literature alongside my epigraphic sources, the idea of the sacred places and the source of their sanctity in the Vaiṣṇava context can be explored. It is widely acknowledged that in Toṇṭaimaṇḍala, there are 22 *Divyadesams*, as shown in the hagiography, *Divyasūricaritam*, for which there are debates about its dating. Kanchipuram houses 14 among the 22, recognised by modern scholars. The Ulakaḷanta Perumāḷ Temple houses four of them.

There are voluminous Sanskrit, Maṇipravāḷam, and Tamil texts transmitted concerning these places, while the theological idea of *Divyadesams* and their relevant narratives particularly abound in the temple complex of the Ulakaḷanta Perumāḷ Temple, making it an appropriate case for the examination of the idea of sacred places. These legends are not to be read in isolation, but placed in a context of religious history, as early studies have shown us.

There is a common idea among some natives that the other three *Divyadesams* were moved into the temple in the recent past.¹ However, Kārakam and Kārvaṇam are well attested in an undated inscription from the 13th century (ARIE 47 of 1921). Owing to the problem of unclear reading, this was not made clear in the published edition of this piece of inscription. Provided with a clear reference from the Late Chola period, the common narrative of moving the *Divyadesams* might thus be challenged by these attestations.

Further regarding the identification of the presiding deities, the contemporary pilgrim accounts have confusion between the main *mūrti* and the snake-stone in the *ardhamanḍapa*. Both are in the main compartment that is understood as Ūrakam-*Divyadesam*, while who is the Ūrakastha remains a question. Many pilgrims, following the temple advertisement and website, take the snake-stone as the Ūrakattu Perumāḷ, whereas it was not introduced as such in the pilgrim books 100 years ago, where clearly Ulakaḷanta Perumāḷ inhabits Ūrakam.

Intriguingly, some temple legends do show a clear reference to the snake in the vicinity of the main shrine as the servant or assistant, while potentially later texts identified the snake to have the same level of divinity as the main Trivikrama. Although they did not talk about the idea of *Divyadesam* in the texts explicitly, they reflect different understandings of the relationship between deities in the main section of the temple. Therefore, the *bhakti* literature takes on a new life in the temple legends, not only through hagiographies of the poet-saints but also through the identification of divinity.

When it comes to the legends associated with the other shrines of the temple, the stories found in the Sanskrit texts, the Vaiṣṇava *Kāñcīmāhātmya*, seem not to be celebrated today, in which Kārakam (Meghākṛti), Ūrakam (Trivikrama and Śeṣākṛti), and Nīrakam (Sudhākāra) are clustered together around Vāmana at the town centre. The temple and the community tell another series of stories inspired by either the Śrīvaiṣṇava theology about the all-pervasive nectarous grace of God² or the Tamil poetry produced by Piḷḷai Perumāḷ that alludes to mythical figures like Mārkaṇḍeya. Since the temple priests and contemporary temple texts do not give exact sources of the legends, the relation between the historical textual sources and contemporary oral legends is not yet clear and thus worthy of investigation. We might see how

¹ During a WhatsApp conversation on 21 April 2026 with a priest from the Varadarāja Perumāḷ temple during the Pallavotsava, he expressed a similar idea that the other shrines were found outside the contemporary temple complex before and appropriated into the temple. The overtone seems to be blaming the Teṅkalai priests for taking care of too many *Divyadesams*. On the contrary, the priests in the Ulakaḷanta Perumāḷ Temple consider the *kainkarya* to the other shrines to be their task.

² A good example would be the retelling in the series of “Velukkudi Discourses”.

different textual genres operate with the devotees and priests, while being shaped and shaping the religious landscape of the temple.

4. Future Prospective

With the scope of my research questions now clarified, the next phase will focus on the consolidation and formalisation of my findings. While the fieldwork in India was indeed successful, with most objectives achieved, several initial research goals remain uncompleted. I could not attend the temple festival of the Yathoktakārī Temple, which was deprioritised in favour of my archival research in Mysore. The volume of discovered inscriptions largely exceeded initial expectations, which leads to further time for systematic translation and analysis. Additionally, I tried to do some interviews with the temple staff in Periya Kanchi, while they were either too busy or reluctant to be recorded. I did not pay a visit to North India, as I find it more necessary to focus on the diversity in the South.

Now that the materials and questions are clear, I need to continue with processing them in a good manner. Hence, the primary goal of the next phase is the formalisation of my own corpus. I shall edit and encode the inscriptions of the Ulakaṇṭa Perumāḷ Temple in the data structure of the ERC DHARMA Project. This will enable me to later incorporate the inscriptions into the larger collection of Tamil inscriptions on GitHub. It will not only urge me to produce well-edited data but also facilitate potential reviews and discussions from fellow epigraphists.

Regarding the literary sources, I am looking through the materials to select relevant passages, thanks to the books and scans acquired in Pondicherry and Chennai.

In addition, it would be optimal to plan another field visit to South India next spring to check the remaining temples, visit the villages around Kanchipuram, acquire more transcripts from the Archaeological Survey of India, and figure out if a collaboration with the Mythic Society in Bengaluru on the 3D documentation of the ten inscriptions (five unreported) in the Puṇyakotṭīśvara Temple is feasible. I really look forward to the upcoming days and perhaps some more field visits to Kanchipuram.

5. Challenges

After some reflections, I have summarised two major challenges regarding my research: the constraints of physical accessibility and epigraphic methodology. Both have an impact on collecting and interpreting inscriptions.

Accessibility concerns the temple and larger regions. As many Kanchipuram temples are active sites of daily worship, access for photographic documentation was occasionally restricted, although my access was not denied in general. Nevertheless, there remained spaces with inscriptions that I could not access or photograph. I could not take the inscriptions from the Dīpaprakāśa Perumāḷ Temple, as the *prākāra* remains inaccessible to me during the three times I visited. Two other temples, Muktiśvara and Sarvatīrtheśvara, despite many interesting earlier Chola-period inscriptions, were always locked for the 4 times that I approached them, while the neighbourhood gave different information (but incorrect) about their opening hours. Furthermore, I could not access the murals of the 108 *divyadesams* in Srivaikuntam, which might cast light on the depiction of the *divyadesams*.

Apart from physical accessibility, there are more problems with the methodology in epigraphy. When inscriptions are lost, unfortunately, the comprehensiveness and consistency in the research data management are undermined. Hence, where physical or photographic access is permanently constrained, I have to adjust the methodology that prioritises positive evidence from available inscriptions or their reports. In order to mitigate the methodological problem, it is necessary to avoid arguments based on the absence of evidence and minimise dependency on previous reports and readings. I plan to collect cross-referencing toponymic data with the broader regional corpus to counter the limitations of the earlier epigraphic publications. Furthermore, misplaced pieces are often hard to reassemble. Although Prof. Vijayavenugopal showed me the way of rearranging them, to be confident in “stitching” the stones together requires more epigraphic training to improve my insights into the stones. More practice with epigraphy is essential for me to proceed with my materials.

In addition to the aspect of doing research, the field itself also gave rise to a minor difficulty, the Sino-phobia in Chennai were shocking, as I came across a group of motor-riders rushing towards me with discriminative language. Nevertheless, the temples opened their doors in general. It was fortunate that I could enter temples without facing obstacles.

While I successfully navigated the field as a devotee in most instances, time constraints limited my ability to conduct a more comprehensive documentation of suburban temples in the Kanchipuram Taluk. I enjoyed a great and productive time during my field stay at the Pondicherry Centre. I had put the centre in my heart even before I reached India, whereas now I am more grateful from the deepest within. I will never forget the brilliant sun, the waving ocean, the lush garden, the resourceful library, and the learned colleagues in Pondicherry. I hope I could reunite with the colleagues in Pondicherry soon.