

MAHABALIPURAM OR THE
SEVEN PAGODAS

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*Fig A. Shore temple, Mahabalipuram
(about 7th Century A.D.)*

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The Mahabalipuram known as "Seven Pagodas" has many appellations. They are Mallapuram, Mamallapuram, Mavalipuram, Mahamalaipuram etc. The place lies in Chingleput District in the Madras State at a distance of about 53 miles from the Madras City (via Pakshitheertham.) There is a new route between Madras and Mahabalipuram via Tirupporur. The distance is about 35 miles to the South of Madras.

The carvings on the rocks in Mahabalipuram represent the Dravidian style of architecture.

It appears from the inscriptions that this place was once a big city ruled by Pallava Kings. It was also a

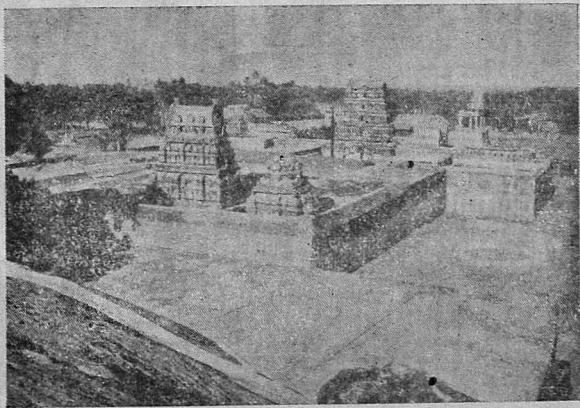


Fig B. Sthalasayana Perumal temple-about 15th century A. D.

business centre. The ancient Tamil writings indicate that about 11th century A.D. there were many palatial buildings

and they were all supposed to have gone under the sea. The original Sthalasayana temple known as "Shore Temple" (Fig A) is very close to the sea. The temple in the Village Fig. (B) is a counter part built about 15th century, A. D.

Except this one shore-temple all others are monolithic buildings cut out of the rocks on the sandy plain. It is believed that there were seven pagodas in ancient times and they were all submerged into the sea. There is a lighthouse in Mahabalipuram to warn the ships of the rocks near the coast line.

The Mahabalipuram is a Vaishnavite Centre. The Vaishnava Saints have sung in praise of the presiding deity of this place, Sri Sthalasayana Perumal.

Many stories of historical and mythological interest surround this place. The stories of Mahabaratha—a great Indian epic and others of Vaishnava religion are depicted on the rocks.

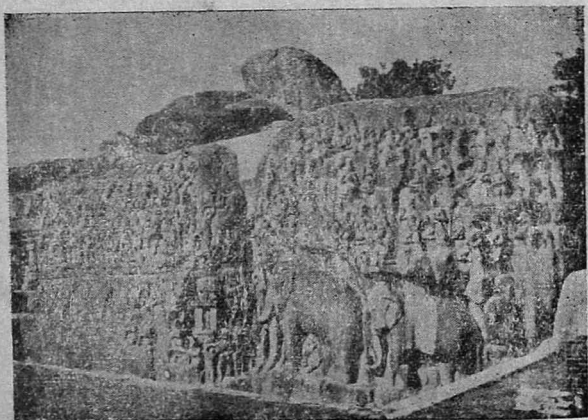


Fig C. Arjuna's penance-about 7th century A. D.

The sculpture on the rocks is so beautiful and life-like that it attracts the attention of many foreign visitors.

Situated on the sea-shore within an easy distance from Madras, many people on excursion seek rest and recreation in Mahabalipuram during holidays.

The scene of Arjuna's penance (Fig. C) on the rock is most attractive. The Hero is shown as standing on one leg with arms lifted in a penitent mood. Siva with his 'Pasupathastra' stands next to him.

Of all the sculptured anecdotes Arjuna's penance is most interesting. The story of the penance is as follows: The five Pandava brothers lost their all in dice with their Cousin Duryodana who had set up a trap for them. They were exiled for 12 years and they had to wander in the forest. The brothers decided that in order to recover their lost possessions they should gain "Pasupatastra" from Lord Siva. The "Pasupatastra" was said to be a matchless weapon which could defeat the enemy and scatter death and destruction to the world.

Arjuna was chosen to do the penance and win the weapon from Lord Siva. He travelled to Himalayas and began his penance at a beautiful spot. He gradually reduced his food and did not eat anything at all when he completed the penance, which he did standing with his arms raised above his head.

The hermits nearby were moved by the intense devotion of Arjuna and they apprised Lord Siva of it. Highly pleased Lord Siva wanted to test it for Himself. He took the form of a hunter with one of his attendants as a boar. Arjuna prepared to shoot the boar. An unseen voice forbade him to do so. He disregarded it and shot the boar and the hunter. A personal fight between the hunter and Arjuna ensued in which the latter had exhausted all his resources against the former. Then Arjuna began to tore up mountains and rocks and hurl them at the hunter who remained unhurt. Then a hand-to-hand fight ensued. Celestial beings, beasts in the forest, all came to witness the contest. The contest ended when Lord Siva revealed Himself and bestowed His 'Pasupatastra' on Arjuna. This story of Arjuna's penance is vividly depicted on the rocks.

Besides this representation, there are sculptures of men and animals on this rock. Two lifesize elephants are most prominent. On the same rock is a figure of 'Naga-Kannika' i.e., half woman & half-snake. Among the men & animals sculptured on the rock are ascetics, lions, tigers, antilopes, birds etc.

On the same rock King Bali of Mahabaratha holds his Durbar. In a mandapam nearby Sri Krishna of Bhagavath-geetha fame is represented as supporting a hill with his left hand against the anger and fury of the Varuna-the Rain-God.

This story is told in a Vaishnava Text : Once Krishna found in Vraja all cowherds and the people preparing to offer Puja to Indra. The people were all in a festive mood. They said that the Indra as Lord of the clouds and rain which sustain life on earth was entitled to the gratitude and offerings of the people.

But Krishna told the cowherds and the people of Vraja that they had nothing to do with Indra. The cows, forest and the mountains were their support and their sustenance. They deserved to be worshipped and venerated. Disregard of them would spell ruin and disaster to their community. Let all our prayers and worship be offered to the Mountain Govardhana and the Cows, he said.

The Gopis and others accepted the advice of Krishna and offered their prayers and worship to the Cows and the Govardhana mountain. Krishna appearing himself on the top of the hill accepted the prayers. He showered his blessings and vanished.

Thus being disappointed of his usual offerings, Indra became angry with the people of Vraja. Indra ordered his attendants and the Rain God to be active and to bring about destruction of the cattle. Thunder, storm, & lightning followed by heavy rain threatened the people. Thick clouds darkened the earth. Caught in the floods, cattle and the people trembled for life. They all implored Krishna for help.

Krishna scented the mischief of Indra. He felt he should go to their rescue. He lifted up the Govardhana mountain and held it as an umbrella over the cattle and the herdsmen and thus saved them from the wrath of Indra.



Fig D. 5 Rathas of the Pandavas-about 7th century A.D.

There are 5 Rathas or chariots for Pandavas. Fig. (d) There is one Ratha for Droupathi also. The visitors are very much attracted to the monolithic elephant, lion, and Nandi near the Rathas. There is a pillared gallery around Bhima ratha.

It is said that this place Mullai or Mahabalipuram was once the seat of Chola kings. King Suraguru is said to have ruled Mullai as his capital. It was from this place that King Suraguru built or renovated the temple at Thirukalukundram and this atoned him for the killing of a cow accidentally while hunting in the forests of Tirukalukundram.

Lord Vishnu made 10 incarnations on earth. His Boar incarnation is of special interest to Mahabalipuram. (Fig. E.) The Scene is that the deity is shown with his right foot on Adishesha—God of snakes and the Goddess of earth resting on his right thigh. It represents that

Lord Vishnu rescued the goddess of earth from Demons who made away with her and hid her under the sea.



Fig E. Lord Vishnu in his Boar incarnation rescuing Earth from demons-about 7th century A. D.

Several scenes of Vishnu's incarnations are sculptured on the rocks. In one panel two huge elephants are shown as pouring water on the goddess Samanya Lakshmi.

It is believed that the carvings and other sceneries at Mahabalipuram were done for about 100 years and certain portions were left unfinished on account of a war between the Pallavas and the Chalukyas.

The Mahabalipuram is one of the most sacred places like Rameswaram, Sethu etc. in South India. The orthodox Hindus consider it a sacred duty to have a bath in the sea on Newmoon & fullmoon days and do 'Shraddas' and other religious ceremonies.

The scenes at Mahabalipuram represent the ancient culture and art of India. These are well preserved under the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act by the Govt. of India.

