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EMACIATED FEMALE PLAYING THE CYMBALS: A STUDY OF THE ANCIENT HINDU BRONZE FIGURINE IN POLONNARUWA, SRI LANKA

Abstract

The ancient bronze figurine which is the subject of this text, is exhibited at the archaeological museum in Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka. It is associated with two activities, religious chanting and playing cymbals. The figurine, illustrates how a work of art denotes its creator the freedom to visualize and recreate a religious story through the use of a three-dimensional form. Taken as a whole, its iconography represents the 'Shiva -bhakti' tradition' prevalent in Sri Lanka in the 11th century. The figurine, which shows a devotee of Lord Shiva, has been identified as a depiction of poet-saint *Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār*. This and similar sculptures, were originally designed for temple worship and festivals in South India and Sri Lanka. Even to date, *Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār* is celebrated annually in several temple festivals in Tamil Nadu and other locations where there is a significant population of Hindu worshippers of Lord Shiva. In the text, the figurine and the legend surrounding *Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār* are examined and reflected on as important aspects of Sri Lanka's history. This paper considers the story of the poet-saint *Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār* through a fascinating artistic remnant of the ancient Shiva-bhakti movement on the island of Sri Lanka, an evocative bronze temple figurine. The Hindu figurine is first examined through visual examination and consideration of its archaeological contexts and finally interpreted through the legends surrounding *Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār* and her historical legacy as part of a once powerful spiritual movement in South India and Sri Lanka.

Keywords

Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār, Shaivism, Shiva-bhakti Saints, Tamil devotional poetic anthology, Hindu bronze

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