

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

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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 Ammaiṃār*. This and similar sculptures, were originally designed for temple worship and festivals in South India and Sri Lanka. Even to date, *Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār* is celebrated annually in several temple festivals in Tamil Nadu and other locations where there is a significant population of Hindu worshipers of Lord Shiva. In the text, the figurine and the legend surrounding *Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār* are examined and reflected on as important aspects of Sri Lanka's history. This paper considers the story of the poet-saint *Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār* 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 Ammaiṃār* and her historical legacy as part of a once powerful spiritual movement in South India and Sri Lanka.

Keywords: *Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār*, Shaivism, Shiva-bhakti Saints, Tamil devotional poetic anthology, Hindu bronzes

VISUAL READING

The bronze figurine is a visualization of an emaciated female playing the cymbals, *thālam*, while seemingly chanting devotional songs (Figures 1 and 2). She is in a seated position. The upper part of her torso has been left bare and a cloth covers the lower part of the body. Her right knee is bent straight and the foot is placed on the ground. Her left leg is also bent with her foot closer to the body and the leg positioned in parallel to the ground. She is wearing a close-fitting necklet and a necklace or rosary that appears to be made out of beads. Moreover, the figure displays a beaded armlet on her right arm with a circular loop for tightening. Unadorned, simple bracelets can be seen on her wrists. She is wearing heavy earrings and there are upward-facing flowers in her hair. Her headdress is made up of twelve angular shapes, giving the impression of the hair being on end. The facial expression suggests excitement and awe with her eyes and mouth open as if to indicate her fascination with Lord Shiva's godly dance. She is holding a pair of small cymbals connected with a short rope. Her posture indicates that she is playing the role of an accompanist through vocal contribution as well as in the act of playing the cymbals. Her emaciated and pointed breasts are hanging down and taken as a whole, the female figure appears to be purposefully deformed and presented in abstract format.



Figures 1 and 2: Shiva Saint Kāraikkāl Ammaiār, Polonnaruwa Period, 11th Century (Photographs of the author).

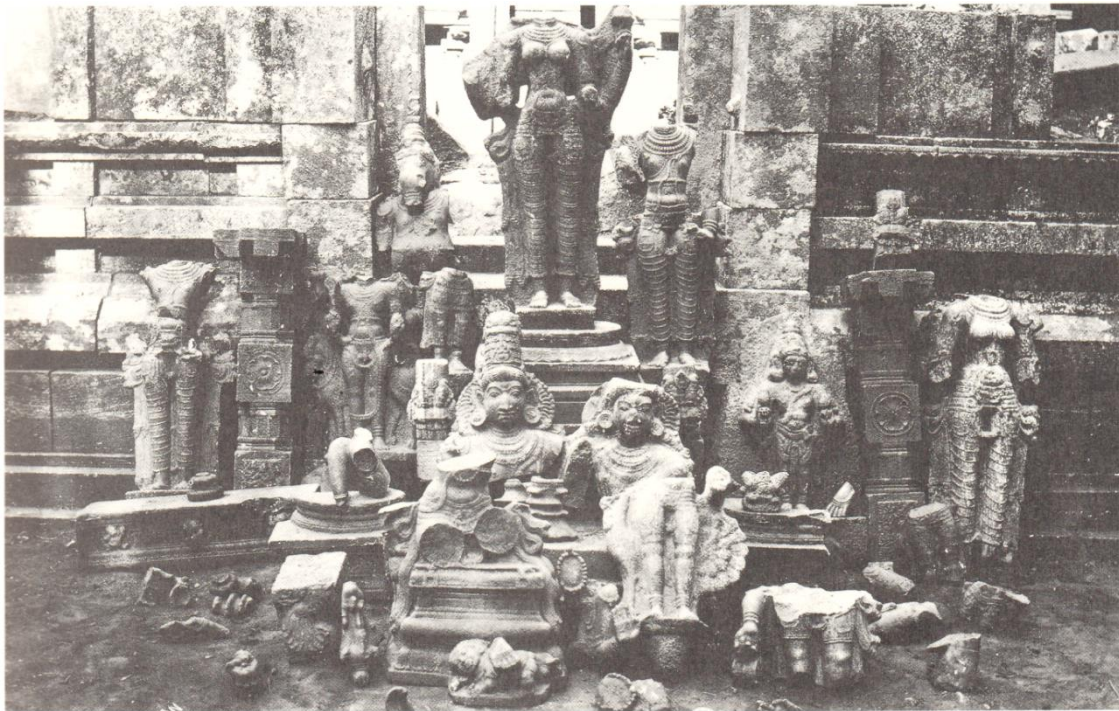


Figure 3: Granite sculpture of Hindu deities at the Siva Temple No.01, Polonnaruwa. Photo: J. Lawton, 1870 (public domain).

According to Hindu mythology, a sculptor gives free expression to his imagination and this may have contributed to the portrayal of a gaunt woman with an eerie and esoteric appearance. This particular work has been compared by historians and archaeologists with somewhat similar images found in

several museums and in South Indian temple imagery.¹ The figurine has been identified as a female devotee of Lord Shiva known as *Kāraikkāl Ammaiṅār*. The meaning of *Kāraikkāl Ammaiṅār* is ‘The revered mother of Kāraikkāl’ - “Kāraikkāl” being her birthplace and “Ammaiṅār”, meaning “mother”, which is said to be the term that Lord Shiva used when referring to her.² *Kāraikkāl Ammaiṅār* was one of several Tamil poet-saints and she is recognised as the author of four poetic works dedicated to Shiva in the Tamil language.

DISCOVERY OF THE BRONZE FIGURINE

The figurine was originally enshrined in the Shiva Temple number 05, an archaeological site in Polonnaruwa, together with several other bronze statues depicting various aspects of the Hindu God Shiva. The bronze sculpture, which was excavated in 1960, is a solid cast, 28 cm in height and covered in dark green patina. At present, it is listed as exhibit number 7.1 in the Hindu Bronze Gallery at the archaeological museum of Polonnaruwa.³

The artifact is dated to the 11th century in the early Polonnaruwa period. Polonnaruwa was then the location of Sri Lanka’s capital kingdom of Sri Lanka during the mediaeval period. In ancient times, it was known as *Pulatti Nagara*⁴ (city of Pulasti), named after the famous Hindu sage *Pulasti*. The early Polonnaruwa period is identified as the Hindu period (993-1055 AD) as King *Rājarāja* (983-1014 AD) and the South Indian *Chola* Dynasty invaded the Kingdom of Anuradhapura and established Polonnaruwa as the provincial centre of their royal administration. The *Cholas* built temples in Polonnaruwa for the worship of Hindu gods such as Lord Shiva, Vishnu, and Ganesh. Following a period of 62 years, the Sinhala king *Vijayabāhu* I (1055-1110 AD) and his army marched to Polonnaruwa and defeated the *Cholas* thereby liberating the city of Polonnaruwa. This was the beginning of what is known as the late Polonnaruwa period (1055 - 1235 AD)⁵. After the first discovery of Hindu bronzes at excavation sites in the Polonnaruwa Hindu temples in 1908, H. C. P. Bell, the first Commissioner of the Archaeological Department under the British Government of Ceylon, described the Hindu Bronzes as follows:

“It is clear that the majority of the Hindu shrines and the sculptures connected with them belong to the period of the *Chola* occupation of ancient Lanka. There is every likelihood that when the *Cholas* who brought the *Sinhala* people under subjection, began building shrines to worship their Gods and started making images of their deities and saints, they employed Sinhala artisans. The building of Buddhist shrines, the making of Buddha images and the executing of mural paintings at Buddhist temples had made the Sinhala people experts in architecture, sculpture and painting. These native craftsmen were employed by the *Chola* conquerors for their works.”⁶

¹ Similar figures are held in the collections of the Nelson Atkins Museum of Arts in Kansas City, and the Metropolitan Museum of Arts in New York. Historical images of Saint *Kāraikkāl Ammaiṅār* can be found in Hindu temples dedicated to Lord Shiva in Tamil Nadu, South India. For example, in the Vadaranyeswarar temple in Tiruvalankatu, the Kapaleeshvara temple in Mylapore, and during the mango festival to celebrate her life story at the temple town of Karaikkāl.

² Battacharya, N.N. ed. 1989. *Medieval Bhakti Movements in India*. New Delhi: Munishvaram Manoharlal.

³ Godakumbura, C.E. 1961. Archeological Surver of Ceylon: *Annual reports*, 1908: 73-75; Godakumbura, C.E. 1961. ‘Bronze from Polonnaruwa’ *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society (Ceylon Branch) New Series*, 7 (2): 239-253; Godakumbura, C.E. 1964. *Polonnaruwa Bronzes, Art Series*, 5. Colombo: Archeological Department: 13, 20; van Lohuizen-de Leeuw, Johanna Engelberta. 1981. *Sri Lanka: Ancient Arts*. London: Commonwealth Institute: 34; von Schroeder, Ulrich. 1992. *The Golden Age of Sculpture in Sri Lanka*. Hong Kong: Visual Dharma Publication.

⁴ Geiger, Wilhelm, translator (assisted by Christian Mabel Duff Rickmers) and ed. 1953. *Cūlavamsa*. Colombo: Ceylon Government Press: 73.156

⁵ Geiger, Wilhelm, translator (assisted by Christian Mabel Duff Rickmers) and ed. 1953. *Cūlavamsa*. Colombo: Ceylon Government Press: 58.1.

⁶ Bell, H.C.P. 1913. Archeological survey of Ceylon: *Annual Reports*, 1908: 74.

Bell thus suggests that the figurine of *Kāraikkāl Ammaiṅār* represents a unity of the Chola's religious beliefs and the craftsmanship of the native Singhalese population. The origin of the female subject, however, is undeniably South Indian.

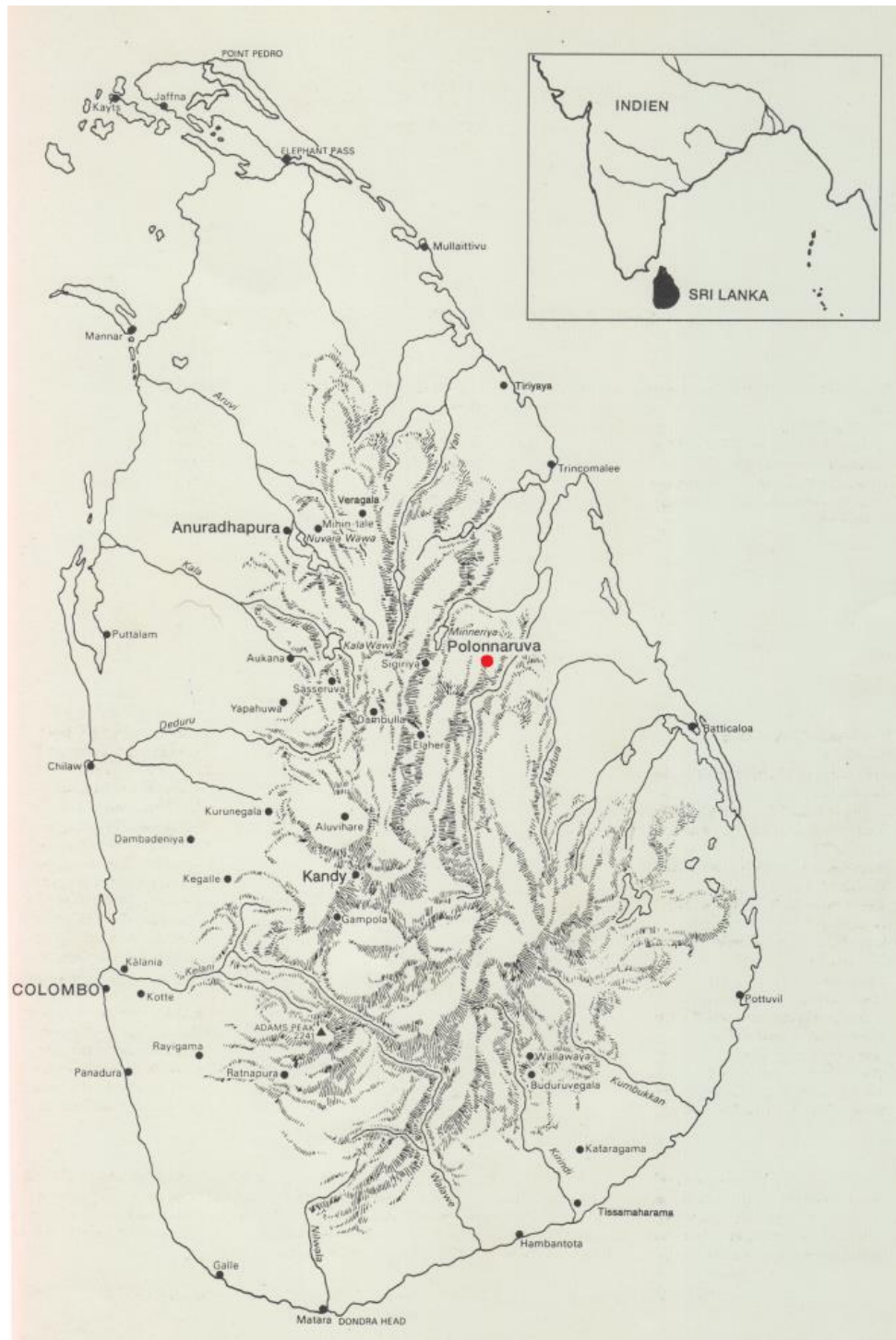


Figure 4: Map of Sri Lanka (Open source). A red dot marks Polonnaruwa.

RELATED HISTORY AND LEGENDS

Kāraikkāl is a maritime trading city in Tamil Nadu, South India, where, according to a legend, *Kāraikkāl Ammaiṅār* lived around 550 AD. *Kāraikkāl Ammaiṅār's* original name was *Punithāvathiyar*.

Punithāvathiyar was married to *Paramādattan*, a wealthy merchant from a coastal city of *Nāgapattinam*. One day her husband sent home two mangoes. On the same day, a Shiva Yogi appeared in front of her house begging for alms; hence, she offered one mango to him.

At midday, her husband came home for his noon meal. After the meal, she served him the remaining mango. He finished it and asked for the other mango as he had sent her two. She went inside and prayed to Lord Shiva for divine intervention as she was frightened of telling her husband that she had given it as alms to a Shiva Yogi. Mysteriously, a mango appeared on her palm, so she served it to her husband. He tasted it and understood it to be of divine taste so he became quite sure it was not one of the mangoes he had sent his wife. When questioned, *Punithāvathiyar* told him the truth. However, *Paramādattan* refused to believe her explanation and challenged her to produce another mango the same way she had done the first one. Therefore, the distressed woman appealed to the Lord Shiva once again. Consequently, another mango appeared on her palm and this too she gave to her husband. As soon as he took the fruit into his own hands, it disappeared. It was at this point that he truly realized the potential and significance of *Punithāvathiyar*'s devotion to Lord Shiva. Therefore, he felt that it was a great sin to continue living with this woman as husband and wife and he decided to flee from his hometown. He loaded a ship with goods and sailed to the city of *Pāndyan* where he settled down and married a merchant girl. His second wife had a daughter and they named her *Punithāvathi* after *Paramādattan*'s first wife.

As a result of her husband's disappearance, *Punithāvathiyar* became dejected and went in search of her husband. Finally, she reached the *Pāndyan* kingdom. *Paramādattan* heard of her arrival and went with his second wife and child to meet her. He fell at *Punithāvathiyar*'s feet and revealed that he regarded her not as a wife but as a goddess instead. At this point, *Punithāvathiyar* prayed to Lord Shiva beseeching him to deprive her of her physical beauty and to grant her a demonical form. Her prayer was answered and her body was transformed into that of an emaciated female. According to the legend, she then went on a pilgrim to mount *Kailāsh*, the abode of Lord Shiva. During the last lap of the pilgrimage, she gave up walking by foot and finished her journey on her head.⁷ Her devotion to her god remained throughout her life and Vidya Dehejia states that, '[s]he spent the rest of her life singing praise of Shiva, whom she visualized as dancing in a dense forest where emaciated female ogres fed up on half burn carcasses between cremation fires'.⁸ Thus, *Punithāvathiyar*, now known as *Kāraikkāl Ammaiṅār*, has become celebrated as one of Lord Shiva's most devoted servants.

POETESS AND CYMBAL-PLAYER

In the 12th century, a minister at the Chola court named *Cekkilār* wrote 63 biographical stories of the devotees of Shaivism, including that of *Kāraikkāl Ammaiṅār*. This volume is named *Periya Puranam* or 'The great tradition'.⁹ *Kāraikkāl Ammaiṅār* is one of the key figures among the sixty-three saints listed in the Tamil Shiva-bhakti tradition and one of only three females. She was a poetess, vocalist and a cymbal-player for Lord Shiva, and the only female saint known to have composed literary works, of which there are 143 verses in four separate works remaining, all expressing her religious devotion.¹⁰ She is commemorated as a great poet-saint in South Indian Tamil devotional literature.

CONCLUSION

From historical sources, legends and the works ascribed to her, it could be assumed that *Kāraikkāl Ammaiṅār* was a historical personality and a committed devotee of Lord Shiva. Having arguably been a

⁷ Craddock, Elaine. 2010. *Siva's Demon Devotee: Kāraikkāl Ammaiṅār*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

⁸ Dehejia, Vidya. 1988. *Slaves of the Lord- The Path of the Tamil Saints*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal: 129-138.

⁹ McGlashan, Alastair, translator. 2006. *The History of the Holy Servants of the Lord Shiva: A Translation of the Periya Puranam of Cekkilar*. Oxford: Trafford Publishing.

¹⁰ Pechilis, Karen. 2012. *Interpreting Devotion: The Poetry and Legacy of a Female Bhakti Saints of India*. London: Routledge.

follower of the deity for most of her life the legend tells us how she embraced a life as a religious servant and took the form of an ascetic female yogi.

Thus, the small bronze figurine from Polonnaruwa opens up a window to history and a story that explores the conflict between domestic family life and spiritual life of ancient Hindu society in South India. It could be that *Kāraikkāl Ammaiṅār* herself transformed into a skeletal form due to the emotional suffering she experiences as a result of the loss of her spouse and to compensate for the loss, she decided to devote her life to a deity whose perceived omnipresence, would have reassured her. Thus, her transformation from a wife to a Shiva devotee, and her resort to writing and chanting religious verses, may well have generated the legends and rituals developed around her character.

The worship of *Kāraikkāl Ammaiṅār* has faded now and it is no longer practiced among Sinhalese in Sri Lanka. The Polonnaruwa bronze figurine, however, remains as a museum piece and is considered as a treasure of Sri Lankan art. Ultimately, this icon is testimony to the veneration of Lord Shiva in the Shiva-bhakti tradition that emerged in Sri Lanka under *Chola* rule in the 11th - 12th centuries and, as such, it represents the religious vision of Chola royalty at the time.

Finally, it can be stated that the creation of this sculpture undoubtedly exemplifies the impact of mythology, music, dance, and religious devotion on an ancient community. Even today, the solid bronze figure of *Kāraikkāl Ammaiṅār* remains an enduring symbol of piousness while her emaciated body continues to remind us of the impermanent and decaying nature of all material entities..

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