

# Mahendravarman

EMMANUEL FRANCIS

CEIAS UMR 8564, EHESS and CNRS, France

Mahendravarman I, a king of the Pallava Dynasty (see PALLAVAS), is an important royal figure of South India as the first known patron of rock-cut cave architecture in the Tamil region (present-day Tamil Nadu). He reigned approximately from the last quarter of the sixth century to the first quarter of the seventh century CE. He is mainly known to us from inscriptions of his time, either commissioned by himself or by others, who dated their records to a year of his reign.

Mahendravarman, “The Great Indra” (a conventional designation for kings), is known under different names in the sources and was particularly fond of glorifying sobriquets (Sanskrit: *biruda*), such as Guṇabhara, “bearer of virtues.” Besides being a patron of architecture, he is also known as the author of the *Mat-tavilāsaprahasana*, a farce set in KĀÑCĪPURAM, the capital city of the Pallavas. His reputation of poet-king has triggered some historians to attribute to him, possibly exaggeratedly, the composition of another farce, as well as dedicatory verse-inscriptions.

Mahendravarman is with certainty the patron of at least seven rock-cut caves in the northern parts of present-day Tamil Nadu, dedicated mostly to Śiva, but also to Viṣṇu. These are simple in style compared to those of his successors. For instance, sculpture is limited to that of doorkeepers, with the exception of the cave at Tiruccirāppaḷi (Trichy), which displays, among other peculiarities, a panel of Śiva as Gaṅgādhara (“bearer of Ganges”). On the pillars, pilasters, and walls of these caves are found dedicatory inscriptions in Sanskrit verse, but also lists, sometimes very long, of the *birudas* of Mahendravarman. In one of his inscriptions, he declares his pride in having a temple made “without brick, wood, metal nor mortar.” He was possibly also involved at Māmallapuram (see MĀMALLAPURAM/

MAHĀBALIPURAM), even though none of his inscriptions is found there. A pillar from Kāñcīpuram, with a list of his *birudas*, is today exhibited at the entrance of the sculpture gallery of the Chennai Government Museum.

The spatial distribution of Mahendravarman’s caves appears to delimit the core of the Pallava territory, with the capital city Kāñcīpuram, inland, and the ceremonial center of Māmallapuram, on the coast. The cave in Trichy is an exception: it is set further south, on a hill overlooking the Kāvēri River, not far from an ancient capital of the rival dynasty of the Cōlas (see CŌLAS), and is a symbolic statement of Mahendravarman’s victory over them.

It is also remarkable that many of the sites selected for Mahendravarman’s caves were already occupied, notably by Jaina ascetics. This could mean that Mahendravarman aimed at supplanting Jainism by caves dedicated to Brahmanical gods. This does not, however, necessarily mean that he was, as later hagiographic literature depicts him, a Jaina devotee converted to Śaivism, abjuring his older faith through his foundations.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The present contribution is a result of the project DHARMA “The Domestication of ‘Hindu’ Asceticism and the Religious Making of South and Southeast Asia.” This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement no 809994).

## REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

- Filliozat, P.-S. (1984) “Les inscriptions sanskrites du roi Pallava Mahendravarman Ier.” *Bulletin des Études Indiennes* 2: 99–116.
- Hirsh, M. (1983) “Mahendravarman I Pallava: artist and patron of Māmallapuram.” *Artibus Asiae* 48: 109–30.