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YOGI SCULPTURES: COMPLEX ĀSANAS ACROSS THE DECCAN

Seth Powell

Abstract

This chapter aims to broaden our understanding of the visual record of yogis carved upon the temple pillars and walls of several Vijayanagara-era temple sites in the Deccan—including major temple complexes at Hampi, Śrīśailam, Śrīrīgerī, Lepākṣī, and Śravaṇabelāgola. The yogi sculptures are a key feature of a broader visual program of artistic temple production that spanned across these Vijayanagara temple sites during the 15th and 16th centuries. I argue that the pervasive sculptural presence of yogis performing complex āsanās in the Deccan during this period is a testament to the physical presence of lived yogis in and around these south-Indian temple sites. In several cases, the sculptures of particular āsanās predate and anticipate textual evidence thereof, providing unique insight into “on the ground” yoga traditions. Renditions of certain contortionist postures and those involving physical “props” may also be indicative of a shared performative community of physical culturalists (including yogis, dancers, and gymnasts) who were active at such temples, especially during annual festivals. The assessment of this material record of yoga practice is crucial for our understanding of the historical development and geographical location of physical yoga traditions in precolonial South India.

KEYWORDS

Haṭhayoga, Āsana, Nāth Yogis, Yogis, Vijayanagara Temples, South India.

Introduction

Building upon a previous study (Powell 2018) which analysed a set of yogi sculptures restricted to the mediaeval capital of Hampi, this chapter aims to broaden our gaze of the visual record of yogis performing *āsanas* to a wider set of Vijayanagara-era temple sites in the Deccan. In addition to the temple complexes of Hampi, this chapter will also assess sculptural evidence of complex postural yoga documented at Śrīśailam, Śṛṅgerī, Lepākṣī, and Śravaṇabeḷagola. This rich body of material evidence reveals that the yogis sculpted on *maṇḍapa* pillars at Hampi are not an isolated case, but part of a broader visual program of artistic temple production that spanned across Vijayanagara temple sites during the 15th through 16th centuries, from Karnataka to Andhra Pradesh. I argue that the pervasive sculptural presence of yogis performing advanced *āsanas* in the Deccan during this period is a testament to the physical presence of lived yogis in and around these south Indian temple sites. In several cases, the sculptures of particular complex *āsanas* predate and anticipate textual evidence thereof, providing unique insight into “on the ground” yoga traditions. Renditions of certain contortionist postures and those involving physical “props” may also be indicative of a shared performative community of physical culturalists (including yogis, dancers, and gymnasts) who were active at such temples, especially during annual festivals. The assessment of this material record of yoga practice is crucial for our understanding of the historical development and geographical location of physical yoga traditions in precolonial South India.

In a 2011 article, Richard Shaw drew attention to a shared set of Śaiva ascetic figures sculpted across three Vijayanagara-era temple sites: Hampi, Śrīśailam, and Śṛṅgerī. Shaw observed parallel visual motifs and sculptural styles of yogis and ascetics carved onto the temple pillars and walls of these three sites, which he describes as displaying a “Siddha iconography”—ascetics adorned with large hooped earrings (*kuṇḍala*), waistbands, necklaces, armlets, long matted (*jaṭā*) and sometimes flaming hairstyles, hands in meditative *mudrās*, and other yogic accoutrements including the yoga staff (*yogadaṇḍa*) as well as the yoga strap (*yogaṭṭa*). Anila Verghese and Anna Dallapiccola (1998) have also documented some of the sculptural yogic imagery, especially on the temple pillars at Hampi, the ruined capital city of the Vijayanagara empire, in their extensive survey of Vijayanagara sculptures. Building upon the foundational work of these art historians, and based on periods of field work in the region over the past four years, I have documented extensive further yogic sculptures at these and related temple sites.¹

¹ All photographs are the author’s unless otherwise noted.

Previously I have argued (Powell 2018) that the carvings of yogis in complex *āsanas* can be broadly identified as Śaiva and Siddha yogis, and that some figures in particular are material depictions of Nāth (S. *nātha*) yogis—especially those ascetics who appear to be adorned with the *śiṅgī* animal-horn necklace, are seated on animal vehicles (*vāhana*), or are wearing a pointed cap.² What is striking about this identification is that despite the well-known claim that the Nāth yogis were the progenitors of *haṭhayoga*, until recently we have had surprisingly little historical evidence to account for their practice of complex *āsanas*. As James Mallinson writes (2011: 15):

Although the Nāths’ adoption and adaptation of Haṭha Yoga was very successful—their Haṭha Yoga became synonymous with *yoga*—the Nāths appear not to have practised their invention very assiduously. There have been few celebrated Nāth practitioners of Haṭha Yoga since the time of the composition of the *Haṭhapradīpikā*.

Rather than being the sole inventors of *haṭhayoga*, in the picture that is emerging from recent text-critical yoga scholarship it is becoming increasingly clear that the Nāths, though influential, were one among several groups who codified Sanskrit texts and practical methods of what came to be known under the rubric of *haṭhayoga* during the 11th through 18th centuries of the common era. The early texts that are attributed to Gorakṣanāth, the putative founder of the Nāth order, teach surprisingly few yogic postures, and seated ones at that. Although texts like the *Vivekamārtaṇḍa* (circa 13th century) and *Gorakṣaśataka* (circa 14th century) gesture at a limitless variety of yoga postures known, “one for every living being,” they only teach the classic seated postures such as *padmāsana* and *siddhāsana*. Even the influential *Haṭhapradīpikā* (circa 15th century), which is not entirely a Nāth text, teaches only fifteen *āsanas*—and hardly anything like the complex postures we see depicted visually at the Vijayanagara temples. As Jason Birch has shown (2018), it is really not until the 17th and 18th centuries that we begin to see in Sanskrit and vernacular texts detailed teachings of large numbers of *āsanas*, and more elaborate *āsanas*.

Ethnographic field research among contemporary Nāth yogi ascetics has had difficulty in finding Nāths today who are adepts in yogic postures, despite their historical claims

² On the identification and significance of these markers as pertaining to Nāth yogis, see Powell 2018: 85–92. For a more detailed study of the dress and accoutrements of the Nāths as depicted in literary and visual sources, see Mallinson 2022.

to be progenitors.³ Contemporary Nāth *sādhana* tends to be focused more on daily *pūjā*, *bhakti*, and more contemplative and Tantric ritual practices, rather than on complex systems of *āsana*, *prāṇāyāma*, *mudrās*, or *ṣaṭkarma*—the hallmarks of mediaeval *haṭhayoga* praxis. The Vijayanagara temple sculptures of Nāth and other Siddha yogis performing highly complex yogic postures thus provide a unique historical account, documented in stone.⁴



Figure 1: Map of temple sites with yogi sculptures in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.

³ Some Nāths report that they do not “show off” their *āsanas* in public, but that they are still done as part of one’s private *sādhana* (p.c. Daniela Bevilacqua, Sep 30, 2020). On the other hand, there are a few Nāth yogis in India today who do practice complex styles of postural yoga, and even publicly perform them at festivals such as the Kumbh Melā. Yet it is clear from the contemporary nature and application of some of the *āsanas* that these Nāths have been influenced by the global dissemination of modern transnational yoga, rather than participating in some unbroken chain of mediaeval postural yoga (p.c. James Mallinson, May 1, 2020). Bevilacqua 2022 refers to this as part of a modern process of the Nāth’s “re-appropriation” of *haṭhayoga*.

⁴ There are at least a few important sites worth mentioning that are outside of the geographical purview of this study, and which date to an earlier period—relevant to a visual-material history of *āsana* and *haṭhayoga*. Perhaps the earliest documented Nāth yogis performing non-seated *āsanas*, including inversions, can be found upon the Mahudi gate at Dabhoi in Gujarat, which can be dated to *circa* 1230 (Mallinson 2022). Another important site is the Brahmanātha temple (*circa* 13th–14th centuries) in the Pune district of Maharashtra (Sarde 2019; Sarde and Dandekar 2015—though I remain cautious about their naming and dating of particular yogic *āsanas*).

In my ongoing investigations into the yoga traditions of the mediaeval Deccan, I have found numerous carvings of yogic-ascetic figures sculpted on the temple *maṇḍapas* and *prākāras* not only at Hampi,⁵ Śrīrgerī,⁶ and Śrīśailam,⁷ but also at Lepākṣī⁸ and at Śravaṇabelāgola (Fig. 1).⁹ When read together, the images across these wide-ranging temple sites reveal substantive and geographically-specific evidence of a documented yogi presence in the Deccan region during the 15th through mid-16th centuries—throughout the contemporary states of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.

The yogi sculptures can be understood as part of a broader Vijayanagara temple visual program sponsored by the Vijayanagara kings (*rāya*) throughout the reign of the empire, with increased temple-building activity during the Tuḷuva rule of the great Kṛṣṇadevarāya (r. 1509–1529) and his half-brother and successor, Acyutadevarāya (r. 1529–1542). The architects and sculptors of the Vijayanagara temple style drew upon earlier South Indian imperial styles—especially the Hoysaḷas, Kākaṭīyas, and Cōḷas—and fully matured into its own by the mid-15th and early-16th centuries (Stein 1989: 111). Increasingly large Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava temple complexes were erected, perimetered by outer and inner *prākāra* walls, and a layout of intricate temple halls (*maṇḍapa*). These

⁵ The *maṇḍapas* at Hampi under consideration, in particular within the Virūpākṣa, Viṭṭhala, and Tiruveṅgalanātha temple complexes can be dated based on inscriptional and architectural evidence to the first half of the 16th century, during the reigns of Kṛṣṇadevarāya (r. 1509–1529) and Acyutadevarāya (r. 1529–1542). See Powell 2018.

⁶ The Śrīrgerī *maṭha* has important historical (albeit contested) ties to the founding of the Vijayanagara dynasty, as the head pontiff Vidyāraṇya was likely the *rājaguru* to the emperor brothers Harihara I and Bukka I (Clark 2006: 205–208). Though traditions tie it to the founding of the *maṭha*, the Vidyāśaṅkara temple under consideration has been dated by George Michell to the mid-16th century, based on careful architectural and epigraphical study (Michell 1995; Clark 2006).

⁷ The Mallikārjuna temple at Śrīśailam, an important pilgrimage destination visited by king Kṛṣṇadevarāya, was, according to inscription, renovated in 1510–1511 CE by a master architect named Kondoju (see Shaw 1997: 162; Linrothe 2006: 127). However, according to Shaw, while the renovation was completed at this date, its *prākāra* with its thousands of panels was likely carried out “over several creative periods during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries” (2011: 239).

⁸ The Virabhadra temple at Lepākṣī, near the contemporary Andhra and Karnataka border, is a mid-16th century Śaiva temple erected by two brothers, Vīranna and Virūpanna, who were governors of Penukoṇḍa during the reign of Acyutadevarāya in approximately 1540 CE (Michell 2013: 371).

⁹ Śravaṇabelāgola is a famous Jain pilgrimage site celebrated for its colossal monolithic statue of Gommateśvara. Though the site is far older, the main temples were built during 12th-century Hoysaḷa rule, with further additions during later Vijayanagara and Woḍeyar dynasties. The unfinished, outer *prākāra*, which surrounds the main Gommateśvara monolith atop the steep Vindhyaḡiri hill, is of likely 16th-century Vijayanagara construction based on its sculptural style.

temples functioned not only as vital centres of trade, calendrical festivals, and religious worship within the city, but also served to boast the cultural power of the empire over other neighbouring chiefdoms within South India (Stein 1989: 112). Today, the remains of detailed architecture, inscriptions, sculptures, and iconography make these mediaeval temple sites a rich historical archive for investigating courtly, religious, and sociopolitical life during the Vijayanagara period. While many sculptures are depictions of idealised divine and semi-divine beings, or narrative reliefs from the great epics and Purāṇas, a large number of the sculptures and friezes have a more documentary-like quality, depicting human figures and scenes of life within the empire. Writing about the mediaeval capital of Hampi, Dallapiccola and Verghese observe, “the capital was, so to speak, an experimental ground for the artists,” where “different artistic traditions were eventually mingled and transformed according to a newly created aesthetic” (1998: 6).

Throughout these magnificent Vijayanagara temple complexes, thousands of granite pillars (*stambha*) create a maze-like structure inside the great temple halls (*maṇḍapa*). The standing pillars are adorned on all four sides with an astonishing array of sculptural imagery, which creates a dazzling and hypnotic effect on the visiting pilgrim, or scholar. Extensive relief images are also found carved along the *prākāra* walls surrounding some of the temples—most notably at the Rāmacandra temple at Hampi and the Mallikārjuna temple at Śrīśailam. The yogis exist among a sea of sculptures including narrative reliefs, deities, animals, religious icons, and a multitude of human figures—courtiers, soldiers, musicians, dancers, wrestlers, and more. Finding the “yogis” among the crowd can feel a bit like searching for Waldo at a mediaeval Hindu festival. However, with the right visual cues, one begins to find them throughout nearly all of the temple sites.¹⁰

That these sculpted figures are ascetics is typically indicated by their renunciant clothing and hairstyles: a simple loin cloth, long unkempt or dreadlocked hair (*jaṭā*) sometimes matted in an ornate hair bun or top-knot, beard, earrings (*kuṇḍala*), mantra beads (*akṣamālā*), water pot (*kamaṇḍalu*), and other accoutrements of the itinerant lifestyle. That they are yogis is suggested by either their meditative seated posture and

¹⁰ It is worth noting that the location and order of the yogic figures upon the temple pillars do not appear to be part of any intentionally ordered schema. The standard pillars are cut into columnal sections of three panels which run vertically and around all four sides of the panel. The yogis occur in all locations, facing all directions. In general within Vijayanagara *maṇḍapas*, there is no deliberate order to the types of sculptural imagery that adorn a single column, or meaningful proximity from one sculpture to the next. Yogis may appear above, below, or next to gods, conch shells, *yakṣas*, *vyālas*, female dancers, an image of Narasiṃha, a monkey, and so on. In this regard the visual images on the pillars appear to be randomly ordered, and if one is not looking for them, are thus harder to detect.

hand *mudrās*, their yoga straps (*yogapaṭṭa*), or as is the case of many of the images herein, the highly complex yogic postures (*āsana*) they are performing—including standing postures, arm balances, inversions, and highly advanced “pretzel-shaped” balancing postures. However, certain sculptures, and particular postures, can be difficult to classify as “yogic” or not, blurring the lines between yoga and other physical disciplines such as dance and acrobatics. These images raise an important methodological challenge for scholars to consider how we categorise and “read” the visual figures, especially in the absence of corroborating texts or inscriptions.

Seated Postures

A large number of the yogic figures sculpted on Vijayanagara temples are depicted seated in a meditative cross-legged position, squatting (Figs. 7–8), or with hands in various gestures (*mudrā*) of teaching or contemplation. The yogi is often accompanied by accoutrements such as a staff, *yogapaṭṭa*, *akṣamālā*, water pot, forest or other natural imagery, as well as yogic motifs, such as the sun and moon (Figs. 2–6).



Figure 2: Siddha with long *jaṭā*, seated in *siddhāsana*, flanked by the sun and moon. Śrīśailam.



Figure 3: Two yogis seated with *jaṭā* and *yogapaṭṭas*. Vidyāśaṅkara temple, Śrīgerī.



Figure 4: Yogi with long *jaṭā* seated with *yogapaṭṭa*. Tiruveṅgalanātha temple, Hampi.

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Figure 5: Seated ascetic with *akṣamālā*, matted hair, and arm and leg bands. Virūpākṣa temple, Hampi.



Figure 6: Stylised Siddha seated with elaborate jewellery. Viṭṭhala temple, Hampi.



Figure 7: Squatting (Nāth?) Siddha, with *śiṅgi* around neck. Tiruveṅgalanātha temple, Hampi.



Figure 8: Squatting Siddha, seated upon a mountain(?). Vidyāśaṅkara temple, Śṛṅgerī.

A recognisable figure is what Shaw (2011: 245) calls the “swaying Siddha” (Figs. 9–10). This yogi is often depicted seated, clasping the hands, extending the arms upwards and towards the side—providing a nice side stretch along the torso. Along the *prākāra* of the

Mallikārjuna temple at Śrīśailam, a Siddha is depicted swaying and balancing atop a T-shaped rod, while a monkey appears to eat out of his pot below (Fig. 11).



Figure 9: Swaying Siddha. Virabhadra temple, Lepākṣī.

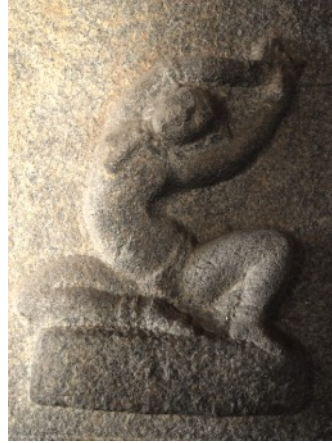


Figure 10: Swaying (Nāth?) Siddha with *śiṅgī*(?). Virūpākṣa temple, Hampi.



Figure 11: Swaying Siddha atop a T-shaped rod. A monkey below eats out of his pot. Mallikārjuna temple, Śrīśailam.

Another figure commonly found across these sites is what I call the “sleeping Siddha,” who typically sits cross-legged in an easeful *sukhāsana*, or with the legs slightly bent, strapped-in to his posture with a *yogapaṭṭa*. Head tilted to the side, resting on hand, the figure appears to lean over as if falling asleep. He remains fixed in his meditative posture—bound by the strap (Figs. 12–13).



Figure 12: Sleeping Siddha with *yogapaṭṭa*. Viṭṭhala temple, Hampi.



Figure 13: Sleeping Siddha with *yogapaṭṭa*, wild flaming hair, hooped earrings, and arm satchel. Viṭṭhala temple, Hampi.

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Although less common and harder to detect, there are a few sculptures which appear to depict seated yogis engaging in the practice of breath-control (*prāṇāyāma*) (Fig. 14), and even the application of haṭhayogic locks (*bandha*) and the retention of breath (*kumbhaka*) (Fig. 15).



Figure 14: (Nāth?) yogi practising nostril-breathing *prāṇāyāma*(?), seated on a tortoise. Vidyāśaṅkara temple, Śṛṅgerī.



Figure 15: Yogi practising *uddīyāna bandha*(?), drawing the abdomen inwards. Kṛṣṇa temple, Hampi.

Some figures are seated with a twist—crossing a leg over and rotating the hips, or depicted with a leg extended. They are often fixed with the *yogapaṭṭa* for support (Figs. 16–17).



Figure 16: Seated yogi with leg extended, *akṣamālā*, water pot, and *yogapaṭṭa*. Mallikājuna temple, Śrīśailam.



Figure 17: Seated yogi in a twist, with *yogapaṭṭa*. Mallikājuna temple, Śrīśailam.

One of the most ubiquitous and easily recognisable yogic images across the Vijayanagara temple sites is Matsyendra (i.e., Matsyendranātha, Macchanda, etc.), the “Lord of the Fish,” who is indicated in visual form as seated on his fish vehicle (*vāhana*). Matsyendra is a highly important Siddha figure both for the earlier Kaula Śaiva tradition which flourished in Kashmir,¹¹ as well as the later Nāth yoga tradition associated with Gorakṣa (i.e., Gorakṣanātha, Gorakhnāth, etc.). An abundance of Matsyendra sculptures can be found across nearly all Vijayanagara temple sites, giving ample testimony to the popularity of Matsyendra as a great yogic Siddha within the public imaginaire of the Deccan (Figs. 18–20).¹²



Figure 18: Matsyendra with large slit earrings. Hemakuta hill, Hampi.



Figure 19: Matsyendra. Mallikārjuna temple, Śrīśailam.



Figure 20: Stylised Matsyendra with *yogapaṭṭa* and staff. Virūpākṣa temple, Hampi.

¹¹ On Matsyendra’s important role as an agent of revelation within the Kulamārga and the writings of Abhinavagupta and his commentators, see Williams 2017: 134–143. Williams makes a distinction between this Kaula Matsyendranātha/Macchandra and his afterlife as the Matsyendra associated with the Gorakṣa tradition. It is likely that the Deccan was a fertile ground for the transition between these Śaiva yogic traditions.

¹² There is extensive material and textual evidence of Matsyendra and his connections with the emergent Nāth tradition throughout Karnataka, Andhra, and especially in Maharashtra—the latter, dating back several centuries prior to Vijayanagara (see Sarde 2019). Matsyendra appears also in vernacular texts such as Jñāndev’s 13th-century Marathi *Jñāneśvarī*, and especially the 15th-century *Navanāthacaritramu* of Gaurāṇa, the court poet at Śrīśailam (Jones 2018). Vijayanagara-era temples feature narrative reliefs of Matsyendra’s hagiographical tales, as well as other prominent Siddhas in, for example, the Mallikārjuna *prākāra* at Śrīśailam, devotes several panels to Matsyendra’s birth story. At Lepākṣī we also find an image of an ascending yogic Matsyendra being birthed out of the fish’s mouth.

The 15th-century *Haṭhapradīpikā* of Svātmārāma, the most influential Sanskrit text on *haṭhayoga*, and which was likely composed in the Deccan,¹³ mentions that some of the yogic postures taught were previously known by “Matsyendra among other yogis.”¹⁴ It is very possible that the posture commonly known as *matsyendrāsana*¹⁵ derives its name and form in texts like the *Haṭhapradīpikā* from Matsyendra’s Deccan sculptural iconography—which commonly depicts the great Siddha in a seated twist (Fig. 20). Though it could also be the case that it is the iconography that is following the practice. As the *Haṭhapradīpikā* describes the pose:

Having grasped the right foot, which is placed at the base of the left thigh, and the left foot which has covered the outside of the [right] knee, [the yogi] whose body is twisted thus, should remain. This is the *āsana* taught by the Illustrious Lord of the Fish.¹⁶

Complex Balancing Postures

Perhaps the most spectacular yogic sculptures are those depicting more complex balancing *āsanas*, including standing on one leg, arm-balances, and intricate “pretzel-shaped” postures. These too are found not only at the capital of Hampi, but across many of the Vijayanagara temple complexes in the Deccan. Sculptures which depict an ascetic yogi standing on one leg are evocative of ancient *tapas* traditions, dating back at least to the composition of the *Mahābhārata* (Fig. 21). Here the ascetic aims to stand uncomfortably for an exceedingly long period of time to overcome the limitations of the body, in order to generate spiritual heat and power. Indeed, the historical boundaries between *tapas* and physical yoga are notoriously porous, and it can be problematic to make such hard categorical distinctions when reading the visual imagery.¹⁷ However, an important practical distinction can be made owing to the length

¹³ See Mallinson 2019: 7.

¹⁴ *Haṭhapradīpikā* 1.20 (*vasiṣṭhādyaś ca munibhir matsyendrādyaś ca yogibhiḥ | aṅgīkṛtāny āsanāni kathyante kāni cin mayā ||*).

¹⁵ In more contemporary schools of postural yoga, variations of this posture are often referred to as *ardhamatsyendrāsana* (“half lord of the fish posture”), for example, Iyengar’s *Light on Yoga* describes three (1994 [1966]: 259–62 and 270–73).

¹⁶ *Haṭhapradīpikā* 1.26 (*vāmorūmūlārpitadakṣapādāṃ jānor bahirveṣṭitavāmapādāṃ | pragrhya tiṣṭhet parivartitāṅgaḥ śrīmatśyanāthoditam āsanāṃ syāt ||*).

¹⁷ Ethnographic research also reveals that today many ascetic practitioners often conflate *tapas* and *haṭhayoga* (Bevilacqua 2018).



Figure 21: Ascetic performing *tapas* with tree-like *jaṭā*, standing on one leg, on the tips of the toes. Tiruveṅgalanātha temple, Hampi.

of time one would have held such a posture, with bodily positions of *tapas* typically being held for numerous years at a time. The more complex balancing postures we find sculptures of—with legs behind the head, or balancing on the arms—certainly could not be held for such long periods (Figs. 22–24). Here I contend that a more dynamic *haṭhayoga* appears to be evoked, with *āsanas* aimed at the cultivation of the eradication of disease or illness, and manipulation of vital fluids and energies within the body (*prāṇa*, *bindu*, *kuṇḍalinī*, etc.).¹⁸

While prior textual evidence can be traced,¹⁹ the earliest *visual* evidence we have for the arm-balancing posture *kukkuṭāsana*, the “rooster pose,” appears to be found at the

¹⁸ On the function of *āsana* within mediaeval *haṭhayoga*, see Powell 2018: 59–61, and Mallinson and Singleton 2017: 92–95.

¹⁹ The *Vasiṣṭhasaṃhitā* (circa 13th century) is perhaps the first text to teach the non-seated *kukkuṭāsana* in a *haṭhayoga* context, and is the source from which Svātmārāma draws his verse in *Haṭhāradīpikā* 1.23 (= *Vasiṣṭhasaṃhitā* 1.78)—though Mallinson (2014: 240) has traced its source to a prior Vaiṣṇava Pāñcarātra work, the *Ahīrbudhnyasaṃhitā* 31.38.



Figure 22-24: Balancing yogis. Vidyāśaṅkara temple, Śṛṅgerī.

Virūpākṣa temple at Hampi (Fig. 26), the Vidyāśaṅkara temple at Śṛṅgerī (Fig. 25), and the Mallikārjuna *prākāra* at Śrīśailam (Fig. 27)—likely all carved in the early to mid-16th century. It is quite interesting to note that the placement of the feet is different in each sculpture—suggestive of variant forms of practice. At Hampi the soles of the yogi’s feet are drawn together and the toes are pointed upwards; while at Śrīśailam the feet are pointed down. Only the sculpture at Śṛṅgerī depicts *kukkuṭāsana* with the legs folded in *padmāsana*, the way the posture is typically taught in the Sanskrit *haṭhayoga* literature.²⁰



Figure 25: Yogi in *kukkuṭāsana*. Vidyāśaṅkara temple, Śṛṅgerī.



Figure 26: Yogi in *kukkuṭāsana*. Virūpākṣa temple, Hampi.



Figure 27: Yogi in *kukkuṭāsana*. Mallikārjuna temple, Śrīśailam.

Numerous sculptures are found depicting yogis in highly complex balancing postures with their legs wrapped in what could be described as a “pretzel-shape” pose (Figs. 28–33). Often one leg is held behind the head, while the other wraps under and through the

²⁰ See, for example *Haṭhapradīpikā* 1.23. The 17th-century *Haṭharatnāvalī* mentions that there are five variations of *kukkuṭāsana* (3.17), though it only teaches the standard version wherein the yogi adopts *padmāsana* (3.73).

opposite arm. At Hampi, especially, yogis are found carved in these unusual postures, balancing on one hand (Fig. 30), with an *akṣamālā* in the other—indicating a simultaneous practice of *āsana* with *mantra* recitation (*japa*) (Fig. 28). Such highly complex and difficult postural forms have no textual forerunners as far as I am aware, and anticipate certain postures of modern yoga.²¹



Figure 28-30: Yogis in one-armed balancing postures. Tiruveṅḡalanātha temple, Hampi.



²¹ See for example, *virañcyāsana* as taught in the Tirumalai Krishnamacarya tradition of Mysore (Powell 2018: 77–79).

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Figure 31: Yogi in complex balancing posture.
Virūpākṣa temple, Hampi.



Figure 32: Yogi in two-armed balancing posture.
Vidyāśaṅkara temple, Śrīgerī.



Figure 33: Yogis in complex balancing postures. Posture on left reminiscent of *vīrañcyāsana*.
Tiruveṅgalanātha temple, Hampi.

Inverted Postures

We find several sculptures of upside-down yogis in inverted postures across the temple sites. Of particular notice with these figures is the use of a material “prop” to assist the balancing act. The yogi is typically balanced upon a staff or T-shaped rod which rests under the chin, or upon which the yogi presses off with one arm. While we do find some important early visual evidence of yogic inversions at Dabhoi in Gujarat in the 13th century,²² the inverted Vijayanagara yogi sculptures with their innovative use of T-shaped rods appear to be a unique representation—and again is something unaccounted for in the textual record. One figure at the so-called “underground” Virūpākṣa temple at Hampi, represents a Siddha-like yogi with flowing unkempt hair inverted with legs-crossed behind the back in a reverse *padmāsana*, balancing atop a T-shaped rod. The staff itself appears to be resting on a pile of stones or skeletal remains, or more likely a smouldering fire—reminiscent of the common ascetic *pañcāgni* practice (Fig. 34).



Figure 34: Yogi in inverted posture with T-shaped rod. “Underground” Virūpākṣa temple, Hampi.



Figure 35: Yogi in inverted posture with T-shaped rod. Viṭṭhala temple, Hampi.

²² See Mallinson 2019.



Figure 36: Yogi in inverted posture with T-shaped rod. Virabhadra temple, Lepākṣī.



Figure 37: Yogi in inverted posture with T-shaped rod. Vidyāśaṅkara temple, Śṛṅgerī.

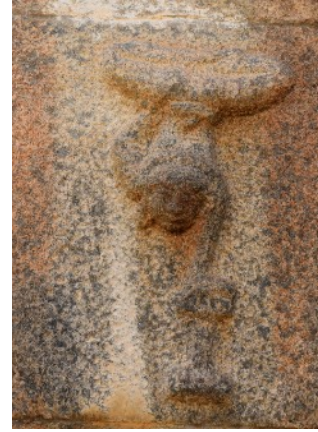


Figure 38: Yogi in inverted posture with T-shaped rod. Outer *prākāra*, Śravaṇabelāgola.

There are some depictions of yogic-like figures in acrobatic postures, however, that blur the lines between yoga and acrobatic performance. Atop the hundreds of steps of Vindhyagiri hill at Śravaṇabelāgola, along an unfinished outer *prākāra* we find a depiction of what clearly looks like an ascetic yogi, with a loin cloth, doing a one-armed inversion pressing off a T-shaped rod (Fig. 38), similar in style to what we find at the Viṭṭhala temple at Hampi (Fig. 35) and elsewhere (Figs. 36–37). Just next to this is another figure that is more difficult to identify, who also appears to be similarly inverted and pressing off of a T-shaped rod. This figure, though, has two lower bodies and two sets of legs, with the inner legs and feet pressing upwards towards the sky (Fig. 39). How are we to read such an image? Is this a semi-divine figure with four legs? Or perhaps (more likely) the sculptor was visually depicting a sense of movement—suggesting that the figure moves across the staff, kicking the leg up, from one side to another. Moreover then, are these figures yogis, or some kind of acrobats? As isolated images on an unfinished *prākāra*, it is quite difficult to say. They do feature similar garb to many of the other Vijayanagara yogi figures, including the loin cloth, leg and arm-bands, a crown of flaming hair, and jewelled necklace.

Another similar image can be found along the *prākāra* at Śrīśailam (Fig. 40)—only here, the figure has four sets of legs, each of which surrounds the staff. At Śrīśailam in particular, artisans were experimenting with representing movement and action in stone—as many of the panels depict narrative scenes from narratives and other “visual Purāṇas” (Reddy 2008). This four-bodied figure is part of a larger narrative frieze, visually depicting the well-known story of Arjuna and the hunter from the *Mahābhārata*, dramatised in Bharavi’s *Kirātārjunīya* (Fig. 41). On the far-left of the panel we see Arjuna standing on one leg performing *tapas* in the forest, followed by his being distracted by a



Figure 39: Yogi/acrobat(?) with two lower bodies in inverted posture with T-shaped rod. Outer *prākāra*, Śravaṇabelāgola.



Figure 40: Yogi/acrobat(?) with four lower bodies in inverted posture with T-shaped rod. Mallikārjuna *prākāra*, Śrīśailam. Close-up of Fig. 41.



Figure 41: Narrative frieze of the *Kirātārjuniya*. Mallikārjuna *prākāra*, Śrīśailam.

wild boar and then shooting an arrow into it at the same time as Śiva who is disguised as a hunter (*kirāta*). A wrestling match then ensues between Arjuna and Śiva, until Arjuna realises the hunter's divine status as Śiva, where he bows in *praṇāma* at the feet of Śiva and Pārvatī riding on Nandi the bull. Rather than depicting Arjuna receiving the infamous boon of the *pāśupata* weapon from Śiva, the final frame on the far-right depicts what V. Anuradha describes as a “four bodied single man, each in a gymnastic act and flanked by shrubs” (2002: 127). Why is such a “gymnastic” figure represented in the culminating frame of this infamous tale of ascetic power and devotion? Again we must ask, is this to be understood as an acrobat or a yogi? Unlike the two figures at Śravaṇabelāgola, this figure does not appear to wear the ascetic's loin cloth, and possesses fewer traits of a yogi than some of the other Vijayanagara sculptures.

Finally, the last and perhaps most intriguing image to discuss is another sort of inversion, a back-bending posture found at the Virūpākṣa temple at Hampi (Fig. 42). Within the Virūpākṣa's hundred-pillared *maṇḍapa* we find a yogic figure turned upside down in what appears quite similar to the more modern *ūrdhvaḍhanurāsana*, the “upward bow posture.”²³ I have previously argued (Powell 2018: 83–84) that we can safely identify this figure as a Nāth yogi, given the familiar accoutrements and garb that we see among other yogic-ascetic sculptures across Vijayanagara: the loin cloth, arm band, flaming *jaṭā* hairstyle, and most importantly, the figure's necklace which bears the *śiṅgī* horn, one of the primary insignia of the Nāths.²⁴



Figure 42: Nāth yogi in an inverted posture. Virūpākṣa temple, Hampi.



Figure 43: Female dancer in *karaṇa* 57. Naṭarāja temple, Chidambaram, 13th century. Photograph by Asian Art.

While I still believe this to be a sculptural depiction of a Nāth yogi, here I would like to investigate further the posture itself. Given the lack of *a priori* evidence for such a pose in coeval yoga texts and traditions, and especially when noting the remarkable parallels with visual programs at other south Indian temples—I would like to suggest the possibility for the cross-influence between *haṭhayoga* postures (*āsana*) and classical Indian dance movements (*karaṇa*). As is well-known, the classical treatise on Indian dance, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* teaches one hundred and eight classical *karaṇas*, which Elisa Ganser (this volume, 142) describes as the “smallest choreographic units of dance.”

²³ Sometimes referred to as *cakrāsana*, the “wheel posture.” A *cakrāsana*-like *āsana* known as the “Sofa Posture” (*paryāṅkāsana*) is described in the c. 18th-century *Haṭhābhyāsapaddhati* (see Powell 2018, 84).

²⁴ The animal horn (typically an antelope), or *śiṅgī*, is commonly depicted in contemporaneous Mughal paintings, as well as descriptions of Nāths in vernacular texts. See Mallinson 2022.

This highly elaborate and systematic bodily discipline of refined movements requires immense training and study. Of the more acrobatic *karaṇas*, Ganser writes at page ??? of this volume:

A particularity of some of these images is that they look very similar to yoga postures, so much so that it is often difficult to establish whether an isolated image displaying such a body stance should be considered a representation of a yogi performing a non-seated *āsana*, or of a dancer performing a *karaṇa*.

As Ganser importantly notes, at Cidambaram and other South Indian temple sites where visual programs of the entire one hundred and eight *karaṇas* have been depicted, the dance context of the sculptures is clear—indicated by their placement within the overarching visual program, and made explicit by the images being furnished with inscriptions of verses taken directly from the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. However, when these sculptural images are stand-alone on temple pillars, and without any inscriptions, as in the case at Hampi, it is more difficult to distinguish between a dancer’s *karaṇa* and a yogi’s *āsana*. The Nāth yogi’s posture in the Virūpākṣa temple (Fig. 42) looks extremely similar to the dancer’s *karaṇa* at Cidambaram (Fig. 43), which is a depiction of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*’s *karaṇa* 57 known as *argalam*.²⁵

How are we to explain these remarkably parallel images? Could Nāth yogis have been influenced by classically trained Indian dancers? Or are the similar postural forms merely coincidental? At this stage, I don’t think it is possible to say for certain. Given the long-standing tradition of dance according the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, if there was a direction of influence between the two, we must assume that it was flowing from dance to yoga, and not the other way around. While it is speculative, perhaps one arena in which adept yogis and professional dancers would have come into contact is within the domain of the Indian festival.

Yogis and Performers at the Festival

Around the same time that many of these temples and *maṇḍapa* sculptures were being erected, we have written accounts from foreign visitors such as the Portuguese

²⁵ The textual description for *argalam* simply reads: “Feet two and a half *tāla*-s apart, hands stretched out in front.” *Nāṭyaśāstra* 4.118 (trans. Ghosh).

Domingo Paes (circa 1520–1522) who reports seeing yogis in the temples,²⁶ as well as exhibitions of wrestling, dance, and other entertainment—especially during annual festivals such as the nine-day *Navarātri* or *Mahānāvami*, the most important annual festival during Vijayanagara times. As Saran Suebsantiwongse (this volume) observes, the *Sāmrājyalakṣmīpīṭhikā* (circa 16th century), a lengthy manual on Tantric rituals and statecraft believed to have been authored within the Vijayanagara kingdom, features an extensive section describing the numerous festivities of *Navarātri*. Twenty-five amusements are mentioned which are said to be performed for the king, his guests, and royal entourage. Activities include an elephant procession, courtesan dance, *mṛdangam* recital, acrobatic show, puppet show, spontaneous poetry recital, comedy, a boat show, magic show, holding of breath underwater, and even a pyrotechnic show, among other spectacles. In attendance at such a festival, the *Sāmrājyalakṣmīpīṭhikā* describes the following cast of characters:

Among those abiding in assembly halls are kings, ministers, and chief priests; feudatory princes, scholars, and entertainers; poets, singers, yogis, and officers; dancers, actors, and astrologers—O Pārvatī!²⁷

As Suebsantiwongse notes, perhaps a century later in the kingdom of Mysore, formerly a feudal territory of Vijayanagara, we have detailed descriptions again of *Navarātri* recorded in the Kannada *Kaṇṭhīravanarasarājaviṇaya*—a lengthy panegyric work composed by the court poet Govinda Vaidya during the reign of Kaṇṭhīrava Narasarāja Wodeyar I of Mysore (r. 1638–1659 CE). Chapter 20 of the *Kaṇṭhīravanarasarājaviṇaya* mentions the lodging set up for rulers and chiefs visiting from near and distant kingdoms, and separate camps with kitchens set up for Vīraśaivas, Śrī Vaiṣṇavas, and members of other religious sects. The text states:

There were fast food houses for yogis, mendicants, the handicapped and the destitute, for scholars, students, wrestlers, acrobats, courtesans, and musicians.²⁸

²⁶ Domingo Paes mentions the slaughter of sheep overseen by a “jogi” priest “who has charge of the temple.” He writes, “as soon as they cut off the head of the sheep or goat this jogi blows a horn as a sign that the idol receives that sacrifice.” Paes ends the paragraph stating, “Hereafter I shall tell of these jogis, what sort of men they are.” Unfortunately, as the editor of the English translation states in the accompanying footnote, “The writer forgot to fulfil this promise” (Sewell 1972 [1900]: 255).

²⁷ *Sāmrājyalakṣmīpīṭhikā* 112.16cd–18ab (āsthānavartinām rājñām mantriṇāṇ ca purodhasām || sāmantarāja-putrāṇām vibudhānām vinodinām | kavīnāṇ gāyakānāṇ ca yogināṇ ca niyoginām || naṭānāṇ nartakānāṇ ca gaṇakānāṇ himādrīje |). I thank Saran Suebsantiwongse for this reference.

²⁸ Sivapriyananda 1995: 110.

In reading these two lists of *Navarātri* festival participants—one likely from Hampi, and the other from Mysore—it is unclear whether yogis themselves were festival performers or audience members, or perhaps a bit of both. Their grouping together with other physical culturalists, performance artists, and entertainers may suggest that they too were part of the act. If this is indeed the case, it may in part explain the rational and even “performative” nature of some of the more complex and acrobatic *āsanas* we see on display at these Vijayanagara temple sites—especially those involving balancing on the T-shaped rod. This is certainly the case today at major Hindu festivals such as the Kumbh Melā, where it is a common site to see ascetics and yogis performing difficult *tapas* and *yogāsanas*—publicly demonstrating their spiritual prowess and attainment. Though speculative, such close proximity during festival times might also account for contact and *mimesis* between yogis and classically trained dancers. Further work here from specialists of both traditions remains to be done.

Conclusion

As our understanding of the history of yoga and yogis continues to improve through the text-critical study of Sanskrit and vernacular treatises, it is paramount that we also take just as seriously the visual and material record. The yogi sculptures found across the Deccan from the 15th through 16th centuries provide us with a rich window onto how artisans, and perhaps even the more general temple-visiting public, would have viewed yogis at the time. If we read much of these sculptural representations as descriptive, and as possessing a documentary-like quality, as I have argued, they give us an unprecedented account of what was a living yogi practice in the Deccan. Yet as we have seen, certain sculptures blur the lines between descriptive representation and prescriptive visual narratives, and in some cases between the physical methods of *haṭhayoga* and other bodily disciplines such as dance and acrobatics. Such figures challenge our categorisation and scholarly taxonomies.

When taken together, across these vast Vijayanagara temple sites, the yogi sculptures reveal a rich and established tradition of physical yoga in South India which placed great value on highly complex and advanced *āsanas*. The degree of difficulty assumed by some of these non-seated postures would surely have required years of arduous strength and flexibility training by yogis, and likely beginning from a very young age. Certainly not all yogis would have practised such *āsanas*, and like ascetic groups today, there were likely specialists who would have trained in the more physically demanding methods of *haṭhayoga* (Bevilacqua 2018).

As more of these sculptures and newly discovered manuscript evidence (Birch 2018) continue to reveal, the role and complexity of *āsana* in premodern yoga traditions in India is perhaps greater than previous scholarship has allowed for. While it is true that conceptually the term “yoga” and the practice of *āsana* have become practically synonymous within the lexicon and transnational culture of modern anglophone yoga, and that this is a rather recent phenomenon owing to the global forces of modernity (Singleton 2010)—it is perhaps also true that in 16th-century South India, a pilgrim visiting a temple would have recognised a yogi by their performance of *āsanas*, and highly complex ones at that. Such postures might be seen demonstrated at a festival by living yogis of various orders, and would also be reaffirmed in sculptural forms upon the temple pillars and walls. Alongside the other religious imagery on display in such temples, the yogi sculptures generate a feeling of spiritual power, awe, and point towards a transcendence of the limitations of the human embodiment.

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