# The Legitimation of the Hoysala Dynasty in Belur

Cristina Bignami

#### Sacred Place and Royal Legitimation

• The sacred place (tīrtha) represented the repository of political and religious power and, at the same time, the place where royal legitimation could be celebrated.

# What is a *tīrtha* in the Medieval Period?

• The Sanskrit word *tīrtha* is connected with the concept of salvation and liberation; *tīrtha* is naturally associated with **the practice of pilgrimage** and even more with **countless rituals**.

• In the Medieval period *tīrtha* also bears the meaning of the royal sacred space where the king and his role are supported by royal deities.

## The Temple Complex in Belūr

#### → Temples:

- Cennakeśava temple, the main temple
- Kappecennigarāya temple
- Andal (Ranganayaki) or Ammanavara temple
- Vīranārāyan
   ②a or Laks
   ②mīārāyan
   ②a temple
- Saumyanayaki or Bhudevī temple
- Rama temple
- Smaller shrines

#### → Other buildings:

- Kalyani tank or Vasudeva tīrtha
- Balance
- Sthamba or sacred pillar
- Big mandapa for the ceremonies
- Gopuram

# Tīrtha, Belur



## The Cennakeśava Temple



#### Mandapa and Vīranārāyan 2a



#### The Vasudeva Pond



# Gopuram



# Balance and Gopuram



#### Balance



### The Cennakeśava Temple

• The Cennakeśava temple is the main temple in Belur whose construction was commissioned by king Vis@n@uvardhana, the most important king of the Hoysaļa dynasty. The temple was built to celebrate his victory against the Col@a in Tal@akad@ and was consecrated in 1117 (EC V: 14.59).

#### The Year 1117

The year of the **consecration** of the royal temples (1117) **marks the first outburst** of the dynastic authority of Viṣṇuvardhana that was **implemented through**:

- → the construction of temples;
- → the creation of the legend of the dynasty foundation;
- → the celebration of royal rites (aśvamedha, tulāpuruṣa, hraṇyagarbha);
- → the conversion of the king that took place by changing his name from Bittideva to Viṣṇuvardhana.

#### The Dynastic Legend

- $\rightarrow$  "the Hoysalas were purely of an indigenous origin" (Derrett 1957 and Coelho 1950).
- The importance of this element (indigenous origin) emerges in the need to create a dynastic legend:
- 1) this exalts the roots of the Hoysala family on the one hand
- 2) and, on the other, it enhances the **provenience** of Hoysala **by the mythical Hindū family**, the lunar Yadava.

# The Legend of Sala: The Foundation of the Dynasty Legend

Quotation of Epigraphia Cranatica Vol V about the *Legend of Sala*:

"Sala was prostrating himself to the holy yogindra, who was an adept of incantations, and pleased with Sala he resolved to give him an empire. For this purpose he was performing the necessary rites to bring the Goddess Vāsantikā of śāśakapura into his power, when, in order by any means to break the spell, she sprang forth in the form of a tiger" (EC V:Ak 71)

#### Local Element

• All these data are very important to understand (and study) the sacred area in Belur because trough the local/indigenous origin of the Hoysala we could understand the iconographical choice of the king and the royal ritual celebrated in the *tīrtha*.

# Pivotal Elements in the Dynastic Legend

- By the numerous inscriptions of Epigraphia Carnatica we know that this legend, that was created by the king Vis@n@uvardhana, appears for the first time in 1117 in Belur and was repeated many times in the following centuries with slight variations, but
- the pivotal elements are always identical:

the forest,  $\rightarrow$  the tiger,  $\rightarrow$  the r2s2i,  $\rightarrow$  Sal2a (the hunter)  $\rightarrow$  the goddess.

#### Local Elements and Sculptures

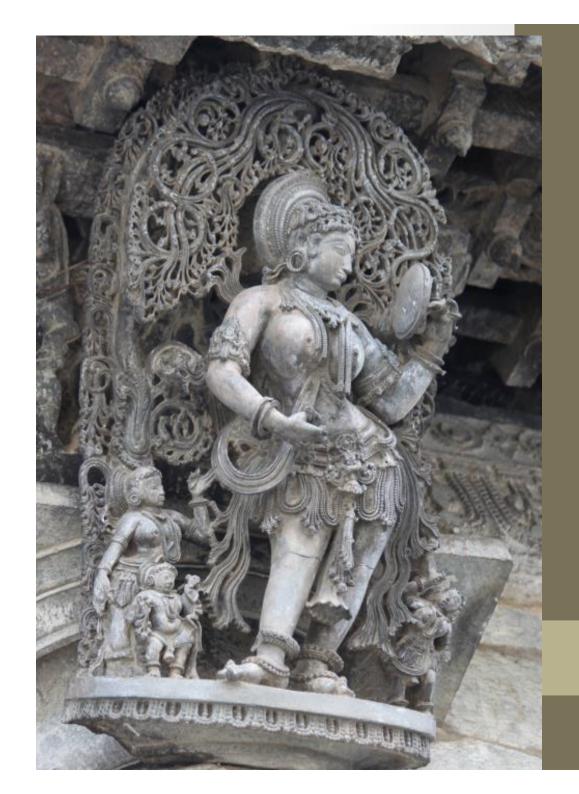
These **local elements** are also present, in reworked form, in the **sculptures** of the Hoysala **temples**:

- → the **emblem of the dynasty** representing the fight between the first king, **Sal**②a, and the **tiger** (transformed into the lion)
- → the female sculptures of the 261 big and small Madanikās (Yakṣī) correlated with the goddess Vasantikā, the kuladevata of the Hoysala dynasty.

### Hoysala Emblem



#### Madanikā



#### Madanikās



### Alliance and Legitimation

• During these centuries, Karnataka was divided into two great parts: the northern part belonged to the Cālūukya empire while the southern part was dominated by the Hoysalūa; within these two potentates, the territory was run by local chiefs and other small dynasties allied with each other.

• In this context, the importance of the concept of "alliance" and consequently "legitimation" clearly emerges.

#### King and Legitimation

- The development of the Hoysala dynasty, attested by epigraphic sources from the 10<sup>th</sup> century, is characterized by territorial segmentation and political development "from below".
- The importance of legitimation is correlated with sovereignty:
- 1) for **political balance** (the alliance between the king and the local chiefs).
- 2) for the **strengthening of the new dynasty** (coming from below) → **encapsulation of the local deities** into the royal ritual.

#### Legitimation

• The royal *tīrtha* was the sacred area where the **legitimation of the kings** could be celebrated through **royal rituals** and **sculptures of divinities** on the walls of temples.

• The celebration of rituals and veneration of deities aimed at gathering different people with different backgrounds under the royal umbrella.

# The Importance of the Cennakeśava Temple

- The main temple, Cennakeśava, represents the focus of the legitimation of sovereignty:
- the iconographic design carved on the outer walls of the temple recount the exploits of the ruler, his roots and his desire to encapsulate the various cults of the kingdom.

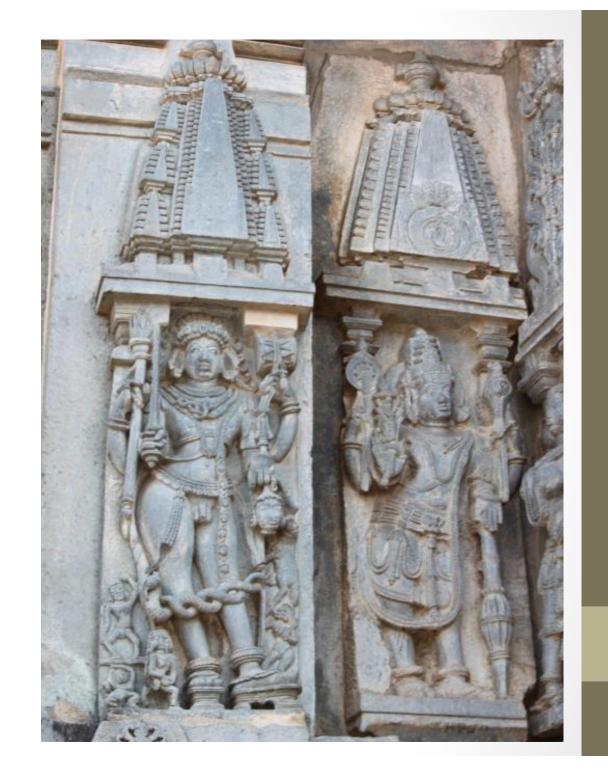
# Mahābhārata (the Death of Biṣma)



# Wrestling Fighting (Local Ritual)



### Mailār



### Local Element and Sculptures

• The sculptural project of the Cennakesava temple encapsulates the local/indigenous elements of the Hoysala dynasty; these are:

- The Madanikā or Yakṣī
- The **local divinities**
- Sala, the hero, and the tiger

#### The Madanikās

• The 42 Cennakeśava's **Madanikās are about one-metre-an-a-half high steles**, placed as brackets alongside the perimeter of the basement, inside the *navaranga*, the pavilion of the temple.

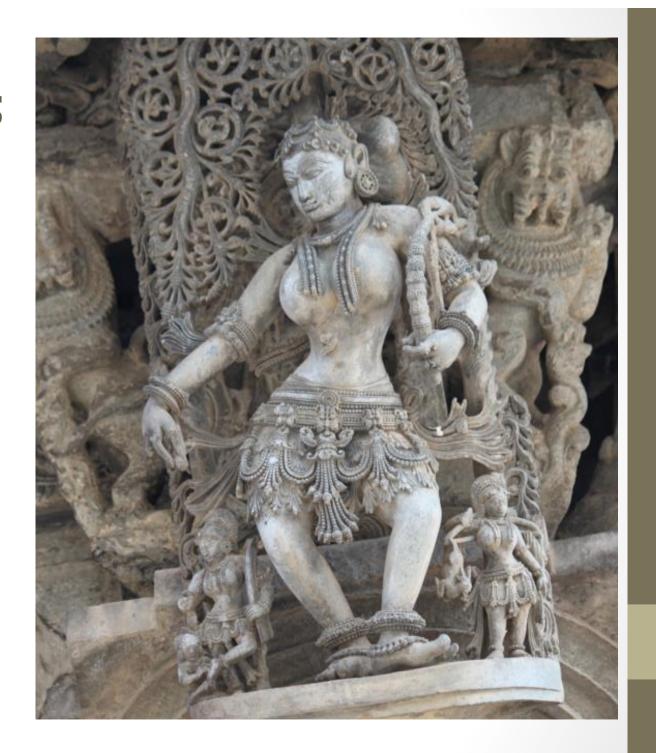
• The Madanikās represent a *unicum* → the **inscriptions on their** bases tell us the name of the artists, the guild to which they belonged, the place from which they came from and some information on the royal propaganda carried out by Vis②n②uvardhana himself.

# Huntresses and the Local Origin of the Dynasty

• A peculiar iconography, the huntress, leads us to connect the Madanikās at the local origin of the Hoysala dynasty.

• The theme of huntresses is sculpted in Belur in 4 steles of large proportions and 2 small steles.

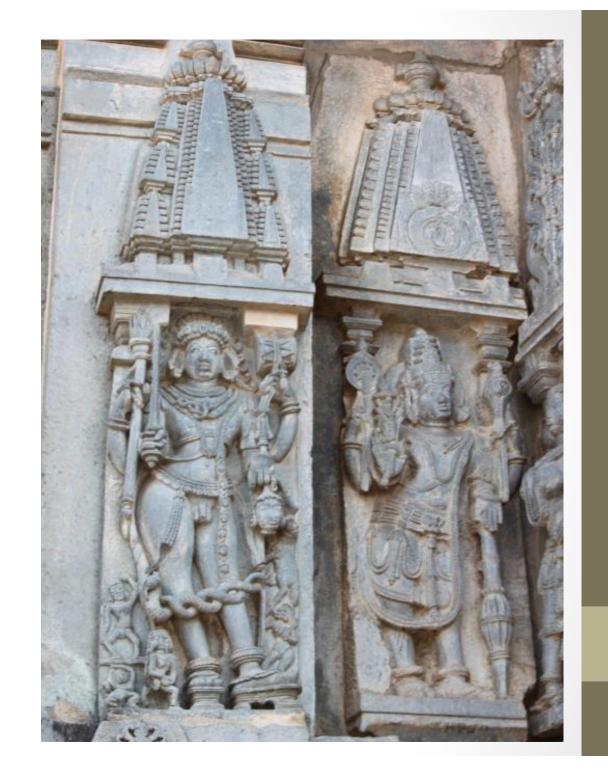
#### Huntress



#### Local Divinities

• Mailār, a local god: The local god is carved naked, with sword, damaru and triśula, with snakes enwrapping his legs, accompanied by dogs. This is the god of the hill and his devotees belong to the pastoral and hunters community.

### Mailār



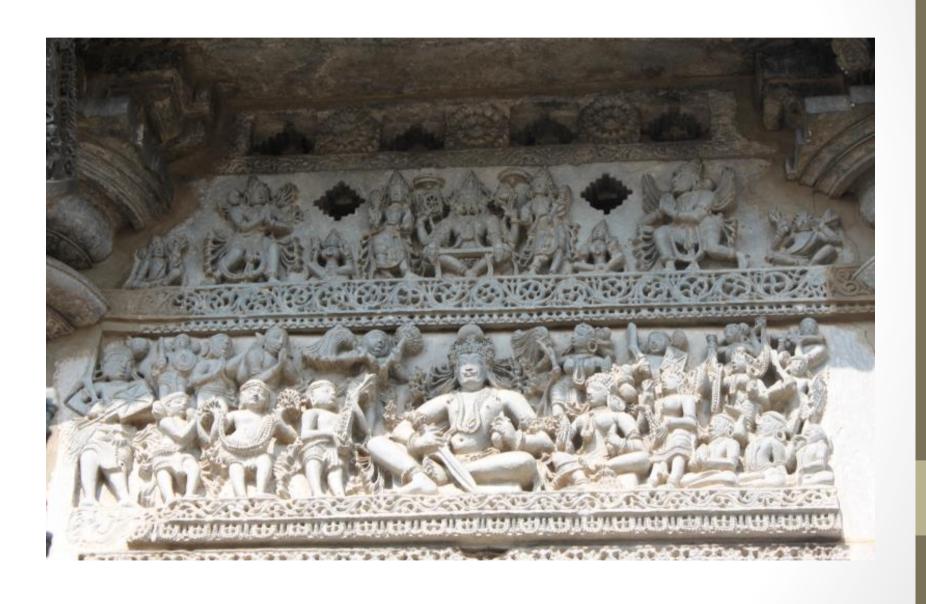
### Sala, the Hero, and the Tiger

- The fight between a man and the tiger is present in the entire oral tradition in Southern India;
- In Karnataka the man (that fights with a tiger) becomes an hero for the community because the fight represents the protection that the man/hero gives to the village from a hungry feline.
- Usually the death of the here is celebrated in the "Hero stone", a stele that becomes a worship object for the local community.

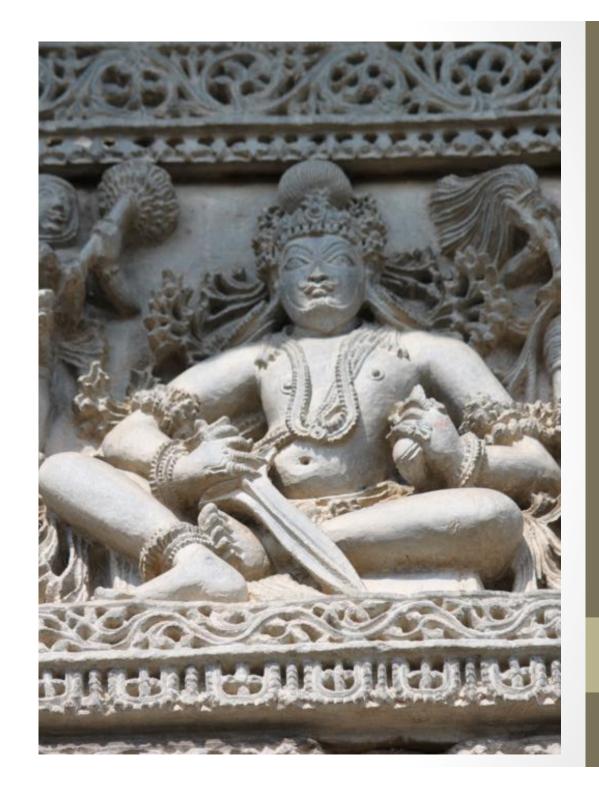
#### The Darbar

• The representation of the royal court and the legitimation of the same king.

#### The Darbar



# The King



#### Ratha Yatra

• The most important festival in Belur is the ratha yatra (car festival) where a big chariot hosts the divinities and carries them around the city. According to Kulke, the royal participation in the car festival helped to proclaim the new idea of Hindu kingship to the rural and tribal population.

#### Tīrtha and Ratha Yātra

• The practice of religious procession (ratha yātra) in which the image of the presiding deity of the tīrtha complex was kept in decorated chariots followed by hundreds of devotees become an important annual feature at many tīrthas to which pilgrims from all over the country were drown in large numbers.

#### Modern Car Festival in Belur



#### Modern Car Festival in Belur



# The Sacred Chariot as the Sacred Temple

