

The Legitimation of the Hoysala Dynasty in Belur

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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 Beḷūr

→ Temples:

- Cennakeśava temple, the main temple
- Kappecennigarāya temple
- Andal (Ranganayaki) or Ammanavara temple
- Vīranārāyanā or Laksṃmīārāyanā temple
- Saumyanayaki or Bhudevī temple
- Rama temple
- Smaller shrines

→ Other buildings:

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

Tirtha, Belur



The Cennakeśava Temple



Maṇḍapa and Vīranārāyaṇa



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 Viṣṇuvardhana, the most important king of the Hoysaḷa dynasty. The temple was built to celebrate his victory against the Cōḷa in Talakāḍa 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 Viṣṇuwardhana 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 Biṭṭideva to Viṣṇuwardhana.

The Dynastic Legend

- → “**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 Hoysaḷa family** on the one hand
 - 2) and, on the other, it enhances the **provenience of Hoysaḷa 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 Saḷa*:

“Saḷa was prostrating himself to the holy **yogindra, who was an adept of incantations**, and pleased with Saḷa 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 through 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 Visṅṅuvardhana**, 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**, → the **tiger**, → the **rāsāi**, → **Salā** (the hunter) → 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, **Salva**, 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 **Cālūkyā** empire while the southern part was dominated by the **Hoysalā**; 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 10th 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 Bīṣma)



Wrestling Fighting (Local Ritual)



Mailār



Local Element and Sculptures

- The sculptural project of the Cennakeśava temple encapsulates the local/indigenous elements of the Hoysaḷa 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 *navaraṅga*, 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 Viṣṇuvardhana** 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 drawn in large numbers.

Modern Car Festival in Belur



Modern Car Festival in Belur



The Sacred Chariot as the Sacred Temple

