

JEAN DELOCHE:

*A Study in Nayaka-Period Social Life: Tirupudaimarudur Paintings and Carvings.*

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The Narumbanatha Temple in the small village of Tirupudaimarudur on the banks of the Tambarapani River in southern Tamil Nadu (Ambasamudram Taluk, Tirunelveli District) was of little note to art historians until 1979. In that year, S. Hariharan published an article on the vast quantity of perfectly preserved murals inside the Narumbanatha Temple's main gopuram. Following this discovery, Jean Deloche and Françoise L'Hernault of the École Française d'Extrême Orient embarked on the herculean project of documenting these paintings. The project was beset by a number of obstacles, including the tragic and unexpected death of L'Hernault in 1999. Under Deloche's direction, the documentation project was completed in 2008, and is now archived at the École Française d'Extrême Orient at Pondicherry.

The purpose of this monograph is to introduce the reader to the paintings in the Narumbanatha Temple at Tirupudaimarudur, as well as some of the wood carvings from the temple. It must have been a considerable challenge for Deloche to decide how to select and organize the material for this monograph. He has chosen 206 of the project's 2,200 colour images to be reproduced here. According to Deloche, the monograph aims to "add a new chapter to the social history of South India" by looking at the different kinds of people, their different modes of dress, and the incredible variety of objects (buildings, weapons, musical instruments, tools, furniture, boats, palanquins and more) that surround them.

Deloche begins by describing where the paintings are located in the gopuram. The first fifteen pictures in the monograph show the interiors of the gopuram's four storeys, giving an idea of the predominating themes of the paintings at each level. For example, the first tier is mainly taken up with narratives from a Shaivite Tamil text, the "Tiruvilaiyatarpuranam", while those on the second tier show court scenes, soldiers on parade, and the famous mural of Arab horse traders. The reader gains a sense of how the rooms and levels inside the gopuram are painted with scenes depicting a variety of topics, that these topics are thematically structured, and that they are probably placed in a particular order. The significance behind this organization, however, is not investigated.

Rather than going through the paintings in the order that they occur to a viewer inside the gopuram, Deloche thematically classifies them to illustrate how they describe Nayaka society. His chapters broadly categorize the paintings according to the social standing of the people represented in the pictures. He begins by looking at the only foreigners represented in these paintings, the Arab horse traders on board a ship, and the unloading of the horses onto land. Next, he devotes a chapter exclusively to pictures of the king and his courtiers. This is followed by a chapter on the military, featuring different representations of soldiers. After this he examines various aspects of daily life, including the domestic routines and occupations of those at court and in civilian life. Finally, he devotes a chapter to the small "technical details" in the paintings such as musical instruments, weapons, and equipment connected with transportation. Deloche's decision to classify the paintings this way is useful because

it highlights the most conspicuous feature of the Tirupudaimarudur paintings; they focus on the people and activities contemporary to their creation, and not strictly on religious narratives, as they do in other Tamil temple paintings.

The bounty of visual information about Nayaka-period society revealed in the paintings is stunning. Deloche has dated the paintings to the mid to late seventeenth century based on an analysis of the objects in the paintings. In particular, Deloche looks at the “S”-shaped curved parts of the horse bridles. The earliest representations of these, found in south Indian wood carvings, are dated 1633. I think this dating works well. The seventeenth century marked the flourishing of Nayaka courtly culture through the construction of palaces and temple additions, so it makes sense that the main gopuram at Tirupudaimarudur, and the paintings therein, were made at that time.

For anyone interested in south Indian painting and the material culture of pre-colonial south India, this monograph raises more questions than it answers. Whilst this is a good introduction to the paintings at the site, one perpetually thinks of questions that could have been addressed. The colour pictures, and Deloche’s descriptions of their many subjects, are intriguing. We find everything from different styles of attire worn by the king on different occasions, to the dress of the court’s women, to the haircuts, dress and implements used by musicians, dancers, fishermen and shepherds. And of course there is detailed documentation about all manner of costumes and roles performed by soldiers and courtiers. Every corner of the king’s realm is represented. However, one wonders how these paintings reflect idealizations of court life. Maybe these paintings were intended to replicate paintings at other courts, such as those inside the palace at Nagalpur under the rule of Krishnadevaraya of Vijayanagar, which were described by Domingo Paes in the sixteenth century. Aside from a few brief references to other temples such as Lepakshi, Deloche does not compare the Tirupudaimarudur paintings with other courts or sites. Nor does he look at the idealized portrayals of courtly life in puranic and shastric texts.

It is to be hoped that all the questions that come to mind when going through this book will become the focus of research in the future. For now, this monograph does precisely what it needs to do: it gives a refreshing glimpse of Tirupudaimarudur’s understudied paintings, and it informs the reader of the EFEO’s archive of 2,200 colour images of the paintings, which are waiting to be studied. By doing so, Deloche and the EFEO have achieved something truly marvellous, by making these wonderful paintings far, far more accessible to researchers than they have ever been before.

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