Unfolding Politics, Merging Into the Sacred: Liminality and Transfiguring *Digvijaya*s in the *Pāṇḍyakulodayamahākāvya*[*]

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Abstract
The paper discusses the possible applications of the concept of liminality in the realm of the classical Sanskrit literary production of South India, exemplified by the *mahākāvya Pāṇḍyakulodaya* (15th–16th centuries CE). Transcending from the ritual connotation ascribed to the anthropological category since van Gennep's theories, the modern application of liminality to broader historical and cultural changes will be taken into account. The close study of selected stanzas from this epic poem will show how the description of a military campaign seems to be permeated by liminal elements, which also appear in the portrayal of royal power. The new conceptualisation of kingship in the *Pāṇḍyakulodaya*, interpreted as the new institutional paradigm after the transitional period investing the Pāṇḍya dynasty and its weakened political influence, will be analysed in the frame of the general categorisation of cultural reaction.

Keywords: liminality, *mahākāvya*, Pāṇḍya dynasty, kingship.

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1. *Introduction*

No introductory words are needed for the anthropological concept of liminality as theorised during the early decades of the 20th century. In 1909, the ethnographer and folklorist Arnold van Gennep (1873–1957) elaborated the category of liminality applied to rites in small-class societies, in the general frame of his theorised three-fold structure of the "rites of passage"[1]. In recent years, after the implementation of the concept by Victor Turner[2], liminality has assumed a broader perspective and been applied to every kind of category describing historical, political or cultural changes[3]. In this view, the standard and confirmed assets of a given tradition, placed then in transitional liminal periods, may become uncertain or reversed, which may lead to the dissolution and reformulation of the precedent order. The moment created during liminality can provoke fluid situational events that may cause the rise and establishment of new institutional customs[4].

Malleable and inclusive dynamics characterise the Hindū tradition under several aspects. Everything is born and changes according to cultural and historical transformations and is dissolved and recreated in a new shape through the phagocytising trends of Indian culture. Men change according to in-progress cultural conceptualisations; their identities are constantly evolving through the centuries, sensible to the historical mutations which have created them. Nothing is established and fixed about human identities, especially those of kings. The paper will be devoted to a specific liminal period in South Indian history as mirrored by the classical courtly production in Sanskrit (*kāvya*), focusing on the re-creation of new idioms of royal ideology and cultural reaction in a Southern royal dynasty.

1. For further details about the original concept of liminality the interested reader may of course refer to van Gennep 1975 [1960]. Starting from the 1960s, the category was further re-studied by Victor Turner, and then generalised and applied beyond the limits of rituality by Thomassen, for instance, in the frame of political anthropology.

2. Turner 1969.

3. Thomassen 2009, 51.

4. Szakolczai 2009, 141.

2. *A Liminal* Digvijaya

By the end of the 15th century CE, the Pāṇḍya dynasty[5] had been relegated to a small territorial area located in the Tirunelveli district. Driven away from their historical capital of Madurai during the Muslim invasion of the 14th century and weakened by the disastrous coeval internecine war[6], the Pāṇḍyas were rulers of a kingdom "in exile" under the direct control of the Vijayanagara empire (1336–1565), which extended its undisputed dominion over all the Southern parts of the Indian sub-continent. Despite the political decline and its subordinate position, the culture and patronage of the arts increasingly flourished at the Teṅkāśī court, especially at the closing of the 15th and the beginning of the 16th centuries, marked by the composition of the *Pāṇḍyakulodayamahākāvya* by Maṇḍalakavi.

The *Pāṇḍyakulodaya* ('The Rise of the Pāṇḍya dynasty') is an incomplete *mahākāvya* in 12 *sarga*s narrating the origin and establishment of the Pāṇḍya kingdom. The poem, in its actual form, retells the history of the dynasty from the mythological accounts to the times of King Campaka Parākrama, also known as Jaṭilavarman Tribhuvanacakravarti Kōnērinmaikoṇḍāṉ Parākrama Kulaśekhara (c. 1480–1508 CE). This later monarch of the royal line, whose reign from the capital city of Teṅkāśī constitutes the object of the fundamental *sarga*s X-XII, was in all probability the poet's patron[7].

5. For the chronological division of Pāṇḍya history I refer to the canonical periodisation in "early", "medieval", "imperial" and "later" phases proposed by Nilakanta Sastri and Sethuraman (Nilakanta Sastri 1929; Sethuraman 1978; 1980).

6. Jalāl ad-dīn Aḥsan Ḵẖān, an officer with Sultan Muḥammad bin Tuġluq (1290–1351), was sent to subdue rebellious kings in the frame of the Muslim invasion of the Southern branches of the Indian sub-continent, which had started in 1311 with Malik Kāfūr, general of the Sultan of Delhi 'Alā' ud-dīn Ḵẖaljī (1267–1316). In 1335, having managed to subdue the Pāṇḍya region, Aḥsan Ḵẖān proclaimed independence and founded the Sultanate of Madurai (1335–1370), only to be driven away by Kumāra Kampaṇa, the son and general of the Vijayanagara emperor Bukka I (1357–1377) in 1365–1370 (Derrett, 1957, 170). Furthermore, in this difficult transition, King Māṟavarman Kulaśekhara Pāṇḍya I (1268–1308) was murdered by his own son, the co-regent Jaṭāvarman Sundara III (1304–1320), who started a civil war against his brother, Jaṭāvarman Vīra Pāṇḍya II (1297–1343) (Nilakanta Sastri, 1958, 208-209).

7. The reign of Jaṭilavarman Kulaśekhara is attested by a dozen of unpublished records (ARE 1918, nos. 502-505; 508-510; 516; 524; 527; 534; 618); this epigraphical documentation attests the King's ascent to the throne in 1480. Record no. 618 attests the great patronage the monarch dedicated to temple building, just like his maternal uncle Arikesari Parākramadeva (1422–1463), the founder of the Kāśīviśvanātha temple in Teṅkāśī. This inscription, dated to 1508, involves the donations to and the maintenance of the Aḻagiya Cokkanār and Varaṃturam Perumāḷ temples in Kaḍayanallūr (Tirunelveli district).

Nothing is known about the author of the *mahākāvya*, Maṇḍalakavi, except for what he himself laconically stated in each colophon of the poem; for instance, the ending of *sarga* I[8]:

> // *iti kuṇḍinakulamaṇḍanasya maṇḍalakavīśvarasya kṛtau pāṇḍyakulodaye prathamaḥ sargaḥ* //
>
> Here [ends] the first canto in 'The Rise of the Pāṇḍya race', composed by the Lord of Poets Maṇḍala, the jewel of the Kauṇḍinya clan.

The poet opens his narrative on the origin of the dynasty with the depiction of the mythical past, with the foundation of the city of Madurai and a long series of connected episodes. It appears quite clear, even at a preliminary reading, that the models for the first parts of the *mahākāvya* (*sarga*s I-V) were drawn from a Tamil heritage orbiting around the celebrated 'Sacred Games of Śiva', as, for instance, the *Tiruviḷaiyāṭaṟpurāṇam* by Perumpaṟṟapuliyūr Nampi (probably late 13th century) and a Sanskrit version of this material, the *Hālāsyamāhātmya* (14th–15th century).

Canto XII, unfortunately incomplete, narrates the military campaigns against Kerala and King Jayasiṃha conducted by the Pāṇḍya sovereign, Campaka Parākrama[9]. After a colourful description of the setting of the King's army in the Keralan territory (stanzas 1-5), Maṇḍalakavi describes the beginning of the hostilities between the two sovereigns. The relative passages are quoted below[10]:

> *āvṛtya hanta puṭabhedanam asmadīyaṃ*
> *balo 'pi khelati parākramapāṇḍyadevaḥ /*
> *praṇaiḥ kimebhir iti pallavitaprakopo*
> *dhīraś ca*[*cāla nagarā*]*j jayasimḥarājaḥ* // 6 //

8. Here and later on, I quote the text of *Pāṇḍyakulodaya* according to the critical edition (Sarma 1981). If not otherwise stated, all the translations in the paper are mine.

9. This King subdued by the Pāṇḍya army may be identified with Jayasiṃha Vīrakeralavarman, whose Kollam inscription (published in the *Travancore Archaeological Series* II; Gopinatha Rao 1914, 26-27), dated to 1496 CE, allows him to be placed as a contemporary of Jaṭāvarman Parākrama Kulaśekhara.

10. Given the thematic element of this description, Maṇḍalakavi employed the *vasantatilakā* metre in the metrical asset of the canto. According to Kṣemendra's *Suvṛttatilaka* III, 19a, this 14-syllabled *vṛtti* is more suitable for evoking the *raudra* and *vīra rasa*s, the aesthetic sentiments of fury and heroism (*vasantatilakām bhāti saṅkare vīraraudrayoḥ*).

The resolute King Jayasimḥa marched from his capital with rising fury, [asking]: "Ah! Why does the boyish Parākrama Pāṇḍya play with his own life turning towards my city?"

jhañjhāprabhañjanasamākulasāgarāmbhas
sambhārasambharaviḍambanali[*mpakena*] /
sainyena tasya jayasimḥavibho raṇāya
niryāṇakarma nidhilābham asāv amaṃsta // 7 //
He [the Pāṇḍya King] considered King Jayasimḥa's act of going out to battle, with an army that resembled the spreading of the ocean's waters greatly agitated by the storm over a region, as a great favour.

The poet indulged in imaginative passages in his description of the terrible clash between the two opponents, portraying the vehemence of the battle and the valour of the Pāṇḍya King:

āsīt samīkam anayor amarādhirāja-
rāṣṭrābhivṛddhighaṭanālaṭahāstrapātam /
asrair niṣiktam a[*pa*]*rāmṛśatā svam a*[*ṅgaṃ*]
yatra vyahāri yaminā mahatīkareṇa // 8 //

There was a battle between the two [kings], in which the discharge of missile weapons provoked the raising [of a number of warriors] to the kingdom of the Lord of Immortals; here (on the battlefield) the *Mahatī* lute bearer Sage – Nārada did not even wipe his blood-stained limbs.

āruhya kañcid ibham adrinibhaṃ prakopād
āpāṭalākṣam arirājasarojabandhum /
pratyarthināṃ pramathanāya paribhramantaṃ
bhartā kathañcid avahat phaṇināṃ śirobhiḥ // 9 //

Somehow the Lord of the Snakes managed to support on his heads the Sun to Enemy Kings, who, with eyes reddened by fury, having mounted a mountain-like elephant, was moving about crushing the enemy [soldiers].

After a narrative sequence portraying the battle between the two armies (stanzas 10-17), Jayasiṃha is finally subdued and graced by the benevolence of Campaka Parākrama:

saṃvartavāta iva sānuma[*to 'ṅgaṇasthaṃ*]

dhātrīruhaṃ vyaghaṭayaj jayasimḥarājam /
vetaṇḍakarṇaviva[*raiḥ prahitai*]*r vipāṭhaiḥ*
sphāyatparākramadhanaḥ pararājasūryaḥ // 18 //

The Sun to Enemy Kings, a treasure of increasing valour, destroyed King Jayasimḥa with *vipāṭha* arrows shot at the earholes of elephants, like the whirling wind [would destroy] a tree standing in a mountain valley.

[*khinnaṃ bhrama*]*ntam adibhūmi muhur luṭhantam*
āśvāsya keralam ayāt pararāja[*sūryaḥ*] /
[*turigaṃ*] *matangajakulaṃ turagān* [*prabhūtān*]
vittaṃ praśastam api tasya jahāra vīraḥ // 19 //[11]

The Sun to Enemy Kings, after having comforted the Kerala [monarch] who was rambling in distress on the battlefield and who was constantly rolling [on the ground], led him away. The Hero carried away even the herd of strong elephants, the numerous horses and the renowned wealth of Jayasimḥa.

Having described the war with the Kerala King, Maṇḍalakavi proceeded to describe Campaka Parākrama's further march against other Indian kingdoms, offering the reader a true account of a *digvijaya* ('worldly conquest'). The several stages of this military campaign as described by the poet represent a political map of the Southern regions of India, whose depiction contributes to outlining a vivid fresco of the geopolitics of the 15th–16th centuries CE.

The first step in the Pāṇḍya *digvijaya* is the Tuḷu country[12], historically under the control of Vijayanagara:

paścād amuṣya calataḥ pathiketanāni
mākandavṛndamakarandarasārdritāni /
dūrīkṛtāhavamadais tuluvai[*r viti*]*rṇa-*
vetaṇḍakarṇapavanair agaman viśoṣam // 21 //

11. As we shall also see later, several stanzas present somehow considerable and significant textual *lacunae* which have been arbitrarily filled by the editor of *Pāṇḍyakulodaya*, an attitude, unfortunately, adopted more than once in editing this particular *sarga* and the tenth one. They are symptomatic examples of the critical trends employed by Sarma in the presentation of the critical edition.

12. The Tuḷu country comprehends two Western coastal areas of the contemporary federal state of Karnataka; the third dynasty of Vijayanagara – the Tuḷuva (1491–1570), coeval to the composition of *Pāṇḍyakulodaya* and Jaṭilavarman Parākrama Kulaśekhara's reign – was native to this geographical area.

> Moving then westwards, the flags [of the Pāṇḍya army] were moistened by the honey of the mango trees; they became dry due to the fanning of the ears of elephants offered by the Tuḷu people whose ardour for battle had been removed.

This introductory step of the military conquest, rather neutral in its detail, serves as a *trait d'union* with the following stage of Campaka Parākrama's march; in the next stanza the poet does indeed describe the Tamil monarch worshipping a Śiva idol on the banks of the Tuṅgabhadrā river and the subsequent battle with the *karṇāṭadeśapati*, "the Lord of Karnataka":

> *pāṇḍyo vilaṅghya tuluvaṃ pratipadya pampāṃ*
> *saṃsevya tat taṭagataṃ taruṇendumaulim /*
> *karṇāṭadeśapatinā kalitāhavena*
> *prapte kare paricacāla bhajan pramodam* // 22 //

> The Pāṇḍya [King], crossing the Tuḷu country and reaching the river Pampā, worshipped the Young Moon-Crested God – Śiva – installed there on the bank. As he happily received tribute with war with the Lord of Karnataka, he proceeded.

Pampā, the ancient fluvial goddess in the Kannada-speaking region, was identified with the Tuṅgā, the river which has its source in the Western Ghats and merges with the Kṛṣṇā in Andhra Pradesh. As the topographical reference and the periphrasis 'Lord of Karnataka' employed by Maṇḍalakavi suggest, it is quite clear that in the present narrative segment, Campaka Parākrama subdued the Vijayanagara emperor[13]. It is interesting to note that in the eulogistic plan of the *mahākāvya* the

13. An alternative form of the name of this river is Tuṅgabhadrā, due to the union with the Bhadrā river in Koodli, Shimoga district. In ancient times, this river was identified with the goddess Pampā, from whom the current name of the site derives (Pampā, old Kannada > Hampe/Hampi, modern Kannada). The popular use of the deity's eponymous name for the river, apart from being attested in Vijayanagara inscriptions, is also confirmed by the *Pampāmahātmya* (I. 7), the local *sthalapurāṇa*. This evidence probably denotes the genesis of Pampā as a very ancient fluvial goddess who, in the course of centuries, came to be identified as the folk deity of the area. Her antiquity is in fact a difficult matter to ascertain. According to scholars (Verghese 1995, 16) Pampā's cult is anterior to the 7th century CE, when an inscription by the Cālukya king Yuddhamalla Vinayāditya (680-696) refers to a royal settlement on the banks of the river. According to the south Indian process of 'Sanskritisation', where the usual dynamics of assimilation were based upon a symbolical marriage with a brahmanical deity, Pampā became the consort of Śiva-Virūpākṣa and identified with Pārvatī. In the course of time, the goddess became less important and, as a result of this process of assimilation she was gradually reduced from the position of preeminent deity to a secondary object of worship. In

Pāṇḍya monarch managed to overcome his nominal sovereign – who is completely anonymous in the stanza. Given the political situation of the dynasty at the dawn of the 16th century CE, the above passage is even more surprising. Furthermore, the depiction of the war is not coincidentally interspersed with a scene of religious worship, which we will examine in a more elaborated form later on.

Proceeding with the worldly conquest, the next stage of the campaign is even more undefined, but no less significative. In stanza 23 of *sarga* XII, the poet depicted his patron defeating a Muslim ruler:

paścāt tuluṣkam atiśuṣkamayaṃ prakurvan
bāhābalena pararājapayojabandhuḥ /
gandharvagandhajaṣaṇḍam atipracaṇḍam
asyāpahṛtya dhanam apy acalat parastāt // 23 //

The Sun to Enemy Kings, with a strong army, defeating a Muslim ruler and plundering his large herd of mighty scent-elephants, proceeded further.

From the account given in the stanza, it is not really possible to ascertain the identity of the Muslim ruler defeated by the Pāṇḍya sovereign. Taking into account the historical criterion and the ruling date of Campaka Parākrama, it can be stated that the *tuluṣka* mentioned in stanza 23 was probably one of the rulers belonging to the five Persianate Sultanates – the so-called "Deccani Sultanates" – which arose at the closing of the 15th century after the weakening of the Bahmani kingdom (1347–1527), namely Ahmadnagar, Berar, Bidar, Bijapur and Golconda[14].

After the clash with the Sultan, Jaṭilavarman Parākrama Kulaśekhara moved against the kingdoms of Vidarbha, Lāṭa, Aṅga and, finally, Vārāṇasī. The first three geographical areas are quoted through a string of *bahuvrīhi* compounds, compacting their description centred on a series of word plays:

vaidarbham ānanasarojavitīrṇadarbhaṃ
lāṭaṃ lasaccharavihāradalallalāṭam /
aṅgaṃ kṣatāṅgamayamāracayannayāsīd
vārāṇasīṃ madanaśāsanarājadhānim // 24 //

fact, on the whole site, there is only one shrine dedicated to Pampā, the small one in the temple complex of Virūpākṣa. For further details, see Verghese 1995, 16-17 and Wagoner 1996.

14. For the historical frame which saw the rise of these political entities after the collapse of the Bahmani kingdom, the interested reader may refer to Nilakanta Sastri 1958, 212-232.

> [The Pāṇḍya proceeded against] the King of Vidarbha[15], [who held] *darbha* grass in his lotus-mouth; the King of Lāṭa, whose forehead was struck by the distribution of flashing arrows; the Sovereign of Aṅga, who was crippled at the hand [of Campaka]. [The King] reached Vārāṇasī, the abode of the Destroyer of the God of Love.

The description of subsequent conquests is compacted through the use of a specific rhetorical device, the *lāṭānuprasa*, namely the repetition within the same verse of word/s with the same meaning that, depending on the context, assume different valence (as *vaidarbha*, 'King of Vidarbha' / *darbha*, '*darbha* grass' in the first *pāda*)[16].

Momentarily setting aside the description of the *digvijaya*, Maṇḍalakavi inserted some stanzas devoted to the city of Benares in this narrative portion. The verses from the *mahākāvya* focus on the holy character of the religious centre and its centrality for the funerary rituals and attainment of *mokṣa*[17]. In the frame of these descriptive passages, which arrest the fast flow of the 'world-conquest', the Pāṇḍya monarch is portrayed in pious attitudes, worshipping his ancestors on the banks of the Gaṅgā and bestowing ritual *dāna*s on Śiva:

> *aṃhoharāṇi sa japann aghamarṣaṇāni*
> *bhajann jale 'tivimale marudāpagāyāḥ /*
> *santarpayann api pitṛn amarān pratīraṃ*

15. The stanza is connected to the previous one by a morphological *yugmaka*; the series of terms inflected in the accusative case depend upon the main verb in the previous verse, *acalat*. For the sake of translation, I have supplied the sense in square brackets.

16. Gerow 1971, 105-106. The *mahākāvya* is characterised by the massive employment of the rhetorical device called *anuprāsa*, which appears in almost every stanza of the poem. According to Gerow 1971, 102-103, "alliteration" is a particular figure consisting in the repetition of given phonemes or phonetic features in the verse in order to produce precise aural effects. It should not be confused with a different figure, the *yamaka*, namely the consistent repetition of verses or verse parts. Given their common characteristics, *lāṭānuprasa* and *yamaka* often overlap.

17. See for instance stanza 26:

> *pañcānane vitarati praṇavaṃ janānāṃ*
> *prāṇaprayāṇasamayaklamathapramātham /*
> *yatrottarīyajanuṣam pavanaṃ kareṇa*
> *prāleyaśailatanayā kurute bhavānī* // 26 //

> As the Five-Faced God – Śiva – bestows on men the *praṇavamantra* that eradicates pain at the moment of death, Goddess Bhavānī – the Daughter of the Snowy Mountain – fans with her hand the [dying] man with her upper garment.

samprāpa campakaparākramapāṇḍyadevaḥ // 28 //

Uttering the sin-effacing prayers and bathing in the pure waters of the heavenly river, Campakaparākrama Pāṇḍya reached the bank [of the Ganges], honouring even his immortal ancestors.

jāmbūnadāmbujaparamparayā sa śambhuṃ
sampūjya campakaparākramapāṇḍyadevaḥ /
dānāni ṣoḍśa mahānti mahāphalāni
tatrāpy adhatta dharaṇīramaṇāvataṃsaḥ // 29 //

Campakaparākrama Pāṇḍya, the Ornament of Joy on Earth, worshipping Śambhu with a succession of golden lotuses, offered on that occasion even the sixteen great gifts[18] that bear high merits.

As is known, the standard relation between the institution of kingship and the temple donation can be summarised as a mutual and interdependent one. Bestowing gifts or concessions on a given shrine or deity was and always has been the tool in order to gain political legitimisation and temporal authority sanctioned by the divinity and, by extension, the Brahmanical class. Such a dynamic was perfectly described by James Heitzman with the notion of "gifts of power". Quoting his words, «the driving force behind donations was the concept of legitimization of authority, whereby gifts to the gods or their representatives on earth resulted in a transfer of divine sanctity and merits to the givers. The primary purpose of eleemosynary grants was, then, to tap into the power of the divine, to enhance sanctity and then to demonstrate it to society.»[19].

In the eulogistic plan of the poem as shown in *sarga* XII, Jaṭilavarman Parākrama Kulaśekhara is portrayed by Maṇḍalakavi as the perfect king and perfect devotee, worshipping and bestowing ritual gifts on the religious institutions,

18. According to Puranic literature, and especially *Agnipurāṇa*, 210, the sixteen *mahādāna*s are as follows: 1) *tulāpuruṣa* ('weighing of a person and donation of equivalent weight in gold'); 2) *hiraṇyagarbha* ('gift of the golden embryo'); 3) *brahmāṇḍa* ('Brahma's egg'); 4) *kalpapādapa* ('the wishing-tree'); 5) *gosahasra* ('one thousand cows'); 6) *hiraṇyakamadhenu* ('wish-granting cow'); 7) *hiraṇyāśva* ('golden horse'); 8) *hemahastiratha* ('golden elephant chariot'); 9) *pañcalāṅgalaka* ('the five ploughs'); 10) *dhārā* ('the Earth'); 11) *hiraṇyāśvaratha* ('golden horse chariot'); 12) *viśvacakra* ('the universal wheel'); 13) *kalpalatā* ('wish-granting creeper'); 14) *saptasāgara* ('the seven oceans'); 15) *ratnadhenu* ('jewel-cow'); and lastly, 16) *mahābhūtaghaṭa* ('the pot of the great elements').

19. Heitzman 1997, 1.

which is a widespread and well-known *topos* in Indian literary and epigraphical documentation[20].

Moreover, the insertion of descriptive literary segments centred on religious devotion seems to add a secondary and significant connotation to the *digvijaya* in the *Pāṇḍyakulodaya*. Starting with stanza 21, the world-conquest was described as directed against the major political entities of the sub-continent, covering areas encompassing both the Southern and Northern regions. The descriptive section dedicated to Benares is introduced alongside the political or royal aspect of the *digvijaya* the religious one, smoothly shifting from one domain to the other. We may then observe the description of the march of Parākrama Kulaśekhara in the *mahākāvya* as a march 'in between', in which the dynamics of politics and religious patronage are merged into another, creating a liminal tension in the whole canto and its ideological plan[21].

This tension seems to be exemplified by the following stage of the campaign. After the battle with the King of Vārāṇasī (*kāśīśvara*, stanza 30), Campaka Parākrama moved against Ayodhyā:

unmucya tām uragabhūṣaṇarājadhānīṃ
sāketam āpa [*nicitaṃ*] *savidheṣu yupaiḥ* /
ākāśalaṅghibhi[*r abhidyubhi*]*r adhvarārthair*
arkānvāyajanuṣām avanīpatīnām // 31 //

20. The precedents in the Pāṇḍya epigraphical production are significant in this regard. For instance, Valerie Gillet has devoted an extensive paper to the study and edition of an unpublished inscriptional corpus of Varaguṇa Pāṇḍya II (862–880 CE). In her careful analysis of the geopolitical background of the inscriptions, the scholar has noted how this epigraphical group, recording several cases of temple donation, was placed in a political area that was not immediately under the dominion of the Pāṇḍyas, specifically in the Kāvēri valley – the traditional stage of the Cōḻa dynasty. Quoting her words, «[...] Mārañcaṭaiyaṉ Varaguṇa Mahārāja has left, during the second half of the 9th century, a series of inscriptions in this region recording donations to temple, mostly lamps for the god, testifying to his sway over the Kāvēri region [...] through his donations, which eventually materialised as "gifts of power" embedded in a network involving other contemporaneous dynasties [...], Varaguṇa Mahārāja participated in the bustling religious life of the region. The choice of the locations for these gifts seems to have followed a sacred network woven into the hymns of the Tamil Bhakti, making the Pāṇḍyan appear as king-devotee» (Gillet 2017, 244-245). This conclusion seems to find confirmation in Varaguṇa's Tiruchendur inscription (EI XXI, no. 17), in which the King is portrayed as a great devotee of Śiva.

21. Such descriptions of military campaigns are often mixed with scenes of religious patronage and donation; the interested reader may refer for example to the extensive study conducted by Lidia Sudyka on the description of a war expedition as described in the *Acyutarāyābhyudaya* by Rājanātha Ḍiṇḍima (16th century), 'in between' politics and pilgrimage (Sudyka 2013).

> Leaving the capital of the Snake-Ornamented God – Śiva –, [the Pāṇḍya King] reached the city of Ayodhyā, full of sacrificial stakes on every side, which reached up to the sky and were brilliant, [installed for] the purpose of sacrifices of the kings of the solar dynasty.
>
> *tatrārkavaṃśajanuṣā dharaṇīdhavena*
> *tasya praśasyayaśasaḥ samaraṃ babhūva /*
> *yad vīkṣayā tu raghupuṅgavasaṅgarasya*
> *sasmāra bhūtapṛtanā saha nāradena* // 32 //
>
> Then there was a battle between [Campaka Parākrama] of Celebrated Fame and the King scion of the solar race; on seeing this [fight], with the hordes of demons and sage Nārada, it called to mind the battle of the Bull of the Raghus – Rāma – [in Laṅkā].

Traditionally Ayodhyā was the capital city of the solar dynasty and the city of Rāma, the hero of the epic *Rāmāyaṇa*, considered not only as the perfect king, but also as one of the *avatāra*s of Viṣṇu. As happens partially in the case of the stanzas devoted to Benares, the military conquest of Ayodhyā contains in itself both the dynamics of politics and religion, marking the liminal character of this *digvijaya*. even more neatly. The Pāṇḍya sovereign subdued the city which was the abode of the temporal power of Rāma in a battle which, as stated by Maṇḍalakavi, was reminiscent of the Laṅkā war against the demon Rāvaṇa.

The seizure of Ayodhyā is the starting point for a change of route not only for the military campaign as described in the *Pāṇḍyakulodaya*, but also for the ideological trajectory introduced by the poet. After the conquest of most of South and Northern India, the world campaign of the Pāṇḍya army seems to 'lose' its nature and transforms into a sort of religious or divine apotheosis for its leader. Indeed, at this point, Jaṭilavarman Parākrama Kulaśekhara reached the slopes of the Himālaya and prepared his attack against the mountain:

> *paścād a*[*muṣya*] *tanayaṃ pararājasūryo*
> *rājye nidhāya ramaṇīyabhujāpadānaḥ /*
> *tena pradarśitapatho diviṣatkadamba-*
> *saṃbādham āpa* [*tuṣāragire*]*r nitambam* // 34 //
>
> Then, the Sun to Enemy Kings, whose heroic deeds [were celebrated gracefully], having placed on the throne the Son [of the dead King of Ayodhyā], following

the path shown by this, reached the slopes of the Himālaya, which were full of assemblages of the Gods.

cakranda campakaparākramapāṇḍyasainyair
āviṣkṛtām asahamāna ivābhibhūtim /
pāṣāṇabāṇaparijṛmbhaṇasambhramena
[*pāṇḍyeṣu jālam akhilaṃ parikhaṇḍya cādri*] // 36 //

The Mountain roared as [if] not tolerating the disrespect shown by the armies of Campakaparākrama Pāṇḍya, breaking all the pride of the Pāṇḍyas with a bustling of spreading stones as arrows.

Unfortunately, we may never know the fate of the *digvijaya* of Campaka Parākrama; in fact, in its actual form, the *Pāṇḍyakulodaya* comes to an abrupt end in the middle of stanza 38, which describes the royal army's clashes with some mountaineers. We do not know if the Pāṇḍya monarch managed to conquer that mountain which is traditionally regarded as Śiva's abode[22].

In absence of further data and in order to fully understand the final step of the world conquest as described in the *Pāṇḍyakulodaya*, we have to draw determinant details from elsewhere, namely from the 'true identity' of King Jaṭilavarman Parākrama Kulaśekhara in the ideological plan of the *mahākāvya*.

The final part of *sarga* IX (stanzas 32-38) and the first ten verses of the next are devoted to the description of Dharma's journey to Kailāsa. As we gather from the reading of this passage, the personification of the Universal Law, distressed by the spread of evil, reaches out to Śiva for help. In Maṇḍalakavi's narrative, Śiva himself decides to put a stop to the affliction of the world, commanding Dharma to take birth in the Pāṇḍya dynasty:

tava dharma marmamathanaṃ vitanvatā
kaluṣeṇa viśvam abhavat kadarthitam /
tad upehi janma bhuvi tārakadviṣā
samam adya pāṇḍyakula eva pāvane // X. 7 //

22. The provisional conclusion of the *mahākāvya* may inform us about Maṇḍalakavi's probable intent to complete his poem through the "ring composition" modality. This final episode of Parākrama Kulaśekhara's attack on Himālaya is indeed perfectly specular to an episode narrated in *sarga* III of the *Pāṇḍyakulodaya* and drawn from the *Tiruviḷaiyāṭaṟpurāṇam* the *digvijaya* of Princess Taṭātakā and march against the Himālaya, her fight with and marriage to Śiva, with the subsequent consecration of the God as the King of Madurai.

> Oh Dharma, the violation of your inner being by rampant sin has made everything meaningless! So, take now birth in the world along with the Enemy of Tāraka — Skanda — in the pure Pāṇḍya dynasty.

Dharma and Kārttikeya are to be incarnated as the future rulers of the Pāṇḍya kingdom in Teṅkāśī, Jaṭilavarman Parākrama Kulaśekhara, the poet's patron, and his historical younger brother, Vīra. In the celebratory plan of the *Pāṇḍyakulodaya*, the sovereign is then conceived as a god, the incarnation of universal order on earth. But Maṇḍalakavi's conceptualisation of kingship is not simply confined to a merely celebratory statement as in stanza X. 7, but implemented through an intentional literary strategy.

As the reader might recall, according to the canonical *kāvya* standard, the common trend to describe the physical appearance of human beings is the procedure defined as *nakhaśikhavarṇana* or *pādādikeśānta*, literally a 'description [starting] from the (toe)nails to the head'[23]. In stanzas 67-74, the poet gives an extensive description of his patron, isolating specific physical features of the King, namely his head/crown (67), forehead (68), face (69), arms (70), chest (71), hands (72), waist (73) and, lastly, his feet (74). The significant order of the description of each physical unit shows how the poet violated the standard order of representation from the 'toe-nails' to the 'head' of *kāvya* literature. But Maṇḍalakavi's depiction is actually of a different order: the poet portrayed the Pāṇḍya sovereign according to the classical dynamics used to describe gods, hence beginning with the head and reaching the feet only in the last stanza, thus following a procedure we could define as *śikhānakhavarṇana*[24]. This trend introduces a new conceptualisation of royal

23. Lienhard 1984, 144.

24. In the *Madhurāvijaya* by Gaṅgādevī (14th century), the Vijayanagara authoress described the hero of the *mahākāvya*, prince Kumāra Kampaṇa, the son of emperor Bukka I (1356–1377) and the general who uprooted the Muslim Sultanate of Madurai in the campaign of 1365–1370, but he is still described according to the standard *kāvya* convention of the *nakhaśikhavarṇana* (III, 7-16). Similarly, Tirumalāmbā (16th century), the Vijayanagara princess who authored *Varadāmbikāpariṇayacampū*, gave her description of the appearance of Acyutadevarāya (1529–1542) employing the same order (prose passage after stanza 69-stanza 76). The same convention of portraying the sovereign as a god can be traced once again in the 17th century Thanjavur: Rāmabhādrāmbā, consort of the Nāyaka King Raghunātha (1600–1634), described the hero of her poem according to the *śikhānakhavarṇana* dynamic (VII. 1-33). A more detailed survey of the topic of the divinisation of kings is unfortunately beyond the scope of the paper; the interested reader may refer for now to Gonda 1966, Pollock 1984 and Narayana Rao *et alii* 1998, 169-188. For the divinisation of the King in the *Pāṇḍyakulodayamahākāvya* cf. Pierdominici Leão 2020.

power in the *Pāṇḍyakulodaya*, where the King is considered not just a purely celebrative manifestation of the divine, but, through the inversion of the *nakhaśikhavarṇana* convention, is stylistically portrayed and conceived as divinity proper. Given the impact of this ideological procedure on both the presentation of kingship and the conceptual basis of the *digvijaya* in *sarga* XII, allows us to make the following observation. We have already noted how the military campaign as presented by Maṇḍalakavi is permeated by liminal characters: the world conquest by the Pāṇḍya King advances towards two different realms, one of politics and the other of religious patronage/worship. The revolutionary idiom of royalty as shown in the physical description of Campaka Parākrama unifies the liminal tension between the two polarities and sublimates them further. The *digvijaya* in the last *sarga* of the poem is the march of a divine sovereign, a being "in between", crossing the threshold of the temporal world and the heavenly one, from worldly conquest to a spiritual apotheosis.

3. *Conclusions*

The closing of the 15th century and the dawn of the 16th represented a transitional period for the Pāṇḍya kingdom, marked by historical, political and cultural changes which affected this Dravidian dynasty. As we have already observed at the beginning of the historical introduction, during this time frame the Pāṇḍyas were relegated to a subordinated position ruling over a small territorial area which was virtually under the control of the Vijayanagara empire. The defiladed and secondary political importance of the dynasty after the splendour of the past centuries marked the beginning of what we may define as a liminal period.

This political weakness was the starting point for a fluid situational condition which led to the reformulation and establishment of new paradigms, recreated from canonical institutions and reinterpreted through the Sanskrit courtly production of the Pāṇḍya dynasty between the 15th–16th centuries CE. The most significant symptoms of the transitional period in question are attested by the composition of the *Pāṇḍyakulodayamahākāvya* by Maṇḍalakavi, a text which embodied significant traces of cultural and revolutionary transformations.

As we have seen in due course, liminal elements are even present in the textual portions devoted to the description of the *digvijaya* of King Jaṭilavarman Parākrama Kulaśekhara (1480–1508 CE). The stanzas which constituted the centre of our study portrayed the standard motif of the royal conquest. The military

campaign depicted by Maṇḍalakavi contributes to mapping the geopolitics of South India at the closing of the 15th century and displays for the reader the relations of the Pāṇḍya dynasty with the major coeval political entities of the time, which were carefully selected for their ideological valence.

In the eulogistic plan of the *mahākāvya*, the poet described a sublimated conquest by the Tamil King of all the centres of power of the sub-continent. The transitional point ignited by the instable political situation of the dynasty led the Pāṇḍya court to project its identity and past towards universal claims of sovereignty, which might seem greatly surprising if we take into consideration its reduced political status at the dawn of the 16th century. After having been driven from their historical capital of Madurai in the 14th century, the Pāṇḍyas were relegated to playing a secondary role and function as a kingdom in exile in the Tirunelveli area, while the whole Southern areas of the sub-continent remained under the undisputed dominion of their nominal sovereign, the Vijayanagara emperor, who, in the ideological plan of the *Pāṇḍyakulodaya,* is defeated and subdued by the Pāṇḍya monarch.

Parallel to the political aspect, the *digvijaya* of the *mahākāvya* presents other details underlying its liminal character, namely those of religious patronage. As we have observed, similar depictions of political and military campaigns were commonly constructed on co-existent religious dynamics as well. The detailed description of worship and ritual giving in Benares as described in the *Pāṇḍyakulodaya*, for instance, was obviously directed towards the support of the royal legitimisation which was sanctioned by the divine authority through the *dāna* institution. But the liminal and internal polarity of this worldly conquest, in between politics and patronage, has to be put in relation with the new idiom of the royal ideology introduced by Maṇḍalakavi.

The portrayal of the Pāṇḍya sovereign as a god in the *mahākāvya* represents the reformulation of the traditional paradigm of kingship, a standard asset which is now dissolved and reformulated in the ideological plan of the poem. The transitional point initiated by the weakened political situation of the Pāṇḍya dynasty reversed the confirmed standard represented by the traditional idea of Indian kingship, which was then reshaped in the *Pāṇḍyakulodaya* with divine attributes supported by specific and intentional literary strategies – the *śikhānakhavarṇana* trend. Given the subordinated political role played by the dynasty in the 15th–16th centuries, this revolutionary turning point is just as surprising if we compare similar descriptions of the kingship in coeval texts, where the figure of the king is still described according to the standard *kāvya dictamina*.

The *digvijaya* of Jaṭilavarman Parākrama Kulaśekhara is then not purely the conquest of a king marching against enemy kingdoms, but the ascension of a God transcending the terrestrial boundaries and conquering the world. The figure of the new God-like sovereign, ideologically forged at the rising of the liminal period of political irrelevance, is a powerful sublimation of given institutions and an expression of cultural reaction against the waves of history.

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