

Tanjavur
Brhadīśvara temple The Monument and
the Living Tradition

Iconography

The temple of Brhadīśvara includes a great number of iconographic representations. The most original feature, never emulated elsewhere in the same way, is the sculptural rendering of two intertwined concepts: the pañca brahmā and the paramānanda tāṇḍava.

The most important icon in the temple is the huge Liṅga, the main symbolic object of worship which represents the supreme light of knowledge. It is to worship the Supreme God in this Liṅga that this entire temple was built. The measurement of the Liṅga is based on a scale derived from the middle finger of its builder. Because of the large size of the Liṅga, a system of scaffolding allows the priests access to the summit of the Liṅga to perform ablutions.

The builder of this temple Rājarāja was influenced by the concept of the golden Mērū Mountain. The images of deities enshrined in the niches on the walls and the sanctuary-towers of the structure are the manifestation of the circles of smaller peaks that went around the main Mērū in which other Gods and Goddess took their abodes. Some sculptures on the sanctuary-tower, on the gateway or on the stairways were never finished, showing that the work was probably entrusted to different teams of sculptors.

An interesting innovation is the architectural-iconographical vase pilaster called Kumbha Pañjara. The use of Kumbha Pañjaras in structures was unknown in Tamil Nadu before Tanjavur. Kumbha Pañjara is an architectural embellishment on the main wall, in between the koṣṭhas, in the sunken face of the wall. It represents a vase at the bottom, a pilaster, and an ornamental pañjara, with overflowing creepers on either side. This is a bold recreation from an old motif which became the norm for the following centuries.

All the figures of brick and lime mortar which cover the aedicule of the tower are subsequent of the Cōḷa period. The four cardinal niches at the summit of the tower all contain an identical seated Śiva, now covered in lime mortar.

