The Form and Formlessness of Śiva: The *Linga* in Indian Art, Mythology, and Pilgrimage

Benjamin J. Fleming*
*University of Pennsylvania*

Abstract

The *linga* is well-known as the dominant emblem of the Hindu god Śiva. This article seeks to provide an accessible survey of the mythology and iconography of the *linga*, and the scholarly discussion about them. It considers some of the ancient objects that scholars have identified as *lingas*, reflecting on the methodological challenges involved in their interpretation. It also considers major narrative, theological, and pilgrimage traditions surrounding *lingas*, as preserved in the Purāṇas, and some of the prescriptions for their construction and installation, as outlined in Āgamas and reflected in current practice. The author suggests, moreover, that *linga* worship may have played an important role in the trans-regional spread and consolidation of Śaivism as we know it.

Today, the Hindu god Śiva is worshipped throughout India, and devotees perform rituals to a *linga*, a cylindrical object typically made of stone, clay, wood, or metal. The *linga* is now the dominant emblem of the deity, and *linga* worship is important for Śaivite piety and ritual practice across the diverse regional cultures of India; thousands upon thousands of Śaivite temples across the subcontinent hold a *linga* in their central-most sanctum. Ancient and medieval evidence for *lingas*, however, suggests a long and varied history, in art and literature alike. It took centuries for the present form of the *linga* to evolve, and it also took centuries before *linga* worship took hold as the single most dominant form of devotion to Śiva. Nevertheless, the *linga* has been a constant source of inspiration in myths and liturgies celebrating the god. Arguably, in fact, the history of Śaivism – its mythology, ritual, and theology – is inseparable from the history of the *linga*.

This article will survey some of the major literary, theological, and iconographic traditions surrounding *lingas*, with a focus on its place in the history and practice of Śaivism. What is our earliest evidence for *lingas*, and when did this form come to be associated with Śiva? What is the place of *linga* worship in Śaivite myth and ritual, past and present? What role did it play in the development and spread of Śaivism? In the process of exploring such questions, I hope also to provide an introductory guide
to scholarly and popular ideas about lingas as well as an entry-point into the study of Śaivism more broadly.

The Form and Formlessness of Śiva

The linga is virtually unique among the myriad images of gods in South Asian religious art. Hinduism, after all, is famous for its rich artistic and ritual traditions surrounding the representation of divine figures in anthropomorphic forms (Banerjea 1956; Waghorne & Culter 1984; Davis 1999). Typical of the iconography of South Asian deities, moreover, are images with multiple arms, heads, eyes, and other attributes (Śrinavasan 1997, 1978). Although such features are found in some representations of Śiva, his dominant emblem, the linga, is distinguished by its extreme simplicity.

We find this tendency attested already in the Śaivite Āgamas, a set of technical manuals on art, architecture, and ritual that encompass ancient and medieval traditions (especially during and after the ninth century ce). Although the Āgamas describe different shapes, sizes, kinds, and styles of lingas (see further below), they favor the geometrically simple, cylindrical form as the basic, normative design of this ritual object. Likewise, most lingas in Hindu temples today resemble posts or cylinders (Figs 1–2). Although they vary in size and material (see below) and are often decorated with garlands during rituals (Fig. 3), they share a simplicity that stands in striking contrast to the dominant emblems of other Hindu gods.

The iconographic distinctiveness of the linga may parallel the theological differences between the devotees of Śiva and those of other Hindu deities.
The very simplicity of the *liṅga’s* form resonates with widespread concepts in Śaivite mythology and theology about the nature of this god’s action and appearance in the world. Whereas Vaishnava traditions depict the *āvatāras* of Viṣṇu as acting directly in the world, for instance, Śaivite traditions portray Śiva as a distant god, who only participates in the world through his divine horde of followers (*gaṇas*). Phyllis Granoff (2004) has shown how the ‘narrative distancing’ of Śiva is reflected in a range of medieval
Sanskrit sources, especially Śaivite Purāṇas and Āgamas. These sources celebrate Śiva as a deity who is ‘formless’ (nirguṇa) and ‘without attributes’ (niṣkala). Such descriptions reflect their theological positioning of Śiva as the ultimate concept in the universe. They evoke the formless Śiva at the top of a cosmic hierarchy.

Examples can be found in traditions about Śiva’s presence in Vārāṇasī, a city celebrated as sacred to the god. In the Jñāna-saṃhitā (49) of the Śiva Purāṇa tradition, for instance, it is said that all extant matter, divine beings, earthly creatures, etc., emanated in progressive stages of manifestation and materialization from Śiva’s state of formlessness. Near the bottom of this hierarchy, Vārāṇasī itself emerged out of the tip of Śiva’s trident. It is said, moreover, that his special liṅga in the city (called ‘Avimukta’; lit. ‘the one who never leaves’) was set in its place by the god Brahmā. In the continuum linking the highest god with specific sites on earth, the liṅga is thus lauded as emblematic of Śiva’s formlessness. This physical, ritual object stands in direct relationship to the god’s abstract, elevated presence at the top of the universal hierarchy.

Scholars such as Wendy Doniger (1973) have pointed to this paradox and have suggested that it is central for Śaivite theology more broadly. If so, then it is all the more significant that the liṅga serves as an embodiment of the paradox. According to the Jñāna-saṃhitā (49), the highest reality of Śiva is eternal and without worldly qualities. Yet the liṅga can be approached and can serve the world in which it now exists. A cylinder is still a form, after all, even if it might seem ‘formless’ in comparison with anthropomorphlc images. The liṅga is thus an ideal symbol and/or earthly surrogate of the higher reality, from which it is said to derive and with which it is said to retain a connection. The liṅga’s status as a representative of the otherworldly Śiva resonates with the literal meaning of the Sanskrit term ‘liṅga’, namely, ‘mark’ or ‘sign’.

Some texts explicitly describe Śiva’s liṅgas as his ‘avatāras’ – a designation typically reserved for the corporeal manifestations of Viṣṇu, as richly represented in Hindu art and literature. The term avatāra, for instance, is applied to Śiva’s manifestation in the form of jyotirliṅgas (lit. ‘liṅgas of light’) in the Śatarudrā-saṃhitā (42.1–60) of the Śiva Purāṇa tradition. In Śaivite mythology, this form of Śiva is sometimes envisioned as a formless orb of light, floating in mid-air (Granoff 1993, p. 69, verse 40), or through which the god interacts with his devotees (e.g., giving them special weapons). Śiva’s jyotirliṅga form is also, however, associated with 12 specific sites where the god once appeared and to which devotees can make pilgrimage (Feldhaus 2003, pp. 128–30; Yamaguchi 2008; Fleming 2009). In this case too, the liṅga both represents and mediates the paradox of a formless god who can be specially manifested in specific places on earth. That this particular articulation continues to be compelling is suggested by the popularity of literary, liturgical, and pilgrimage traditions about Śiva’s 12 jyotirliṅgas, beginning almost 1000 years ago and continuing today.
The Early History of the Liṅga

Thus far, we have considered the form and meaning of the liṅga from a synchronic and synthetic perspective, examining modern Śaivite traditions alongside the medieval sources from which they draw (e.g., Purāṇas and Āgamas). This approach reflects one major strand of scholarship on Śaivism, as exemplified by the work of Doniger (for other synchronic approaches to Śaivism, see Kramrisch 1981). In her book Śiva: The Erotic Ascetic (1973), for example, she explores the internal contradictions within Śaivite tradition, drawing on a range of diverse materials to evoke an image of the god as a synthetic whole. She proposes that devotees of Śiva encounter the god as a unity of opposites, orchestrated between the extremes of ascetic distancing and sexual indulgence. Even as Doniger (1973, p. 35) acknowledges that ‘the apparently contradictory strains of Śiva’s nature may well have originated at different times and places’, she thus stresses that ‘they have resulted in a composite deity who is unquestionably whole to his devotees’.

Other scholars, such as Hans Bakker and Phyllis Granoff, take a different approach to investigating the diverse traditions now encompassed within Śaivism. They seek to reconstruct the origins and development of specific traditions, by taking seriously the differences between our ancient evidence, on the one hand, and our medieval and modern evidence, on the other (e.g., Bakker 1996, pp. 321–34; Granoff 2003, pp. 2–3). Consequently, such scholars tend to focus on the most ancient attestations of iconographical and literary motifs that later became prominent in medieval and modern Śaivism. Such an approach proves particularly valuable for the study of the liṅga, due to the striking differences between ancient liṅga-like objects and the form of the liṅga familiar today.

The earliest history of the liṅga cannot be told through textual sources. Rather, it must be reconstructed entirely through the analysis of artifacts. Whereas our literary evidence for liṅgas is largely medieval, the relevant material evidence dates back to as early as the third century BCE. In medieval and modern materials, as noted above, iconographical and literary depictions of the liṅga tend to emphasize a simple, amorphous or cylindrical form. When we look to the older archaeological and sculptural data, however, we find a somewhat different picture. Some of the most ancient sculptural artifacts that both Indian and Western scholars identify as liṅgas are phallic in form, and some of these phalli even have human faces on them. Comprehensive surveys of the relevant materials can be found in art-historical studies such as Gerd Kreisel’s Die Śiva-Bildwerke der Mathūrā-Kunst (1986) and Doris Śrinavasan’s Many Heads, Arms and Eyes (1997). Here, it will suffice to consider a few prominent examples, which are representative of the different types of ancient artifacts that scholars identify as liṅgas.

In the relevant materials dating from the second century BCE to the sixth century CE, there is no one dominant or consistent form. Nevertheless, one may see a general trend in the extant evidence: phallic imagery is
The Form and Formlessness of Śiva

gradually downplayed and abstracted over time. Early examples of lingas – from the Kṣatrapa period (ca. second to first centuries BCE) to the Kuśāna period (ca. first to third centuries CE) – are also less homogenous than those that come after them. During the course of this period, lingas evolved into forms that were highly abstracted as well as increasingly systematized, perhaps in interaction with the theological discourse on form and formlessness noted above.

As the earliest evidence for līṅga worship, scholars most often point to the Guḍimallam-linga (Fig. 4), which has been dated variously between the third and first centuries BCE. Scholarly attention was first drawn to this sculpture by T.A. Gopinatha Rao, who published it in his seminal *Elements of Hindu Iconography* (1914, vol. 2.1, pp. 65–71). When Rao ‘discovered’ it, in the early twentieth century, it was still being actively venerated.

The phallic image stands five feet high, is highly graphic, and is erect. In front of the phallus is a human figure. He stands on a squat dwarf and holds a water pot and a deer; an axe rests against his left shoulder. A ninth-century CE inscription at the temple identifies the sculpture as ‘Parāśurāmeśvara’ (‘Lord of Rāma with the axe’; Sarma 1994, pp. 4–5). An association with Śiva is suggested by the ‘-īśvara’ suffix, a common feature in epithets of the god. The inscription attests one interpretation of the image: at least by the ninth century the sculpture was thought to represent Śiva’s mastery over the Vaiṣṇavite *avatāra* Parāśurāma. Since the inscription is a medieval addition to the more ancient object, however, it does not explain the original intent of the sculpture, which remains unknown. Indeed, despite the usual assumption that phallic imagery alone suffices to identify any early object as Śaivite, more caution may be warranted; there is much about the Guḍimallam-linga that continues to puzzle scholars and much that remains debated about early Śaivism.

One intriguing aspect of the Guḍimallam-linga is its provenance. Its iconography is unique to the region in which it is found; no similar sculptures have been identified in Andhra Pradesh. However one wishes to date this sculpture, it is clearly the earliest of its kind in South India. Its southern provenance is intriguing inasmuch as iconographic features of the human figure recall contemporaneous traditions in the North, particularly the images of yakṣas (demons or sprites) found on Buddhist stūpa railings at Bharhut (ca. second century BCE) and other sites (Coomaraswamy 1928–31, pp. 8, 41; von Mitterwallner 1984, pp. 12–18). It is possible that further comparative study might help us to make sense of this ancient image and its original meaning.

While the Guḍimallam-linga stands in some isolation in South India, there appears to have been a large output of līṅga-like, phallic sculpture in the North, especially during the Kuśāna period (ca. first to third centuries CE). Many such works were produced in Mathurā (Kreisel 1986; Śrinivasan 1997, pp. 260–81, 305–24). This ancient city was a center for sculptural production, including but not limited to lingas. It
seems to have been a highly creative environment; much of the sculpture from Mathurā is unique, displaying a variance of forms that contrasts with the systematized iconographical consistency of later periods. Among the known pieces identified as liṅgas, for example, we find a variety of shapes, sizes, and decorative motifs (von Mitterwallner 1984).
A significant iconographical form that may have developed in Mathurā is the mukha-liṅga, a phallic-like form featuring one or more human faces. Examples of mukha-liṅgas have been discovered with one, two, and four faces (e.g., Fig. 5). The single-faced (ekamukha) liṅgas, in particular, make up perhaps the largest single corpus of early liṅga evidence.

Scholars have long sought to explain the meaning of mukha-liṅgas with reference to literary evidence, but corroborating textual material is later and more limited than one would like. The motif of Śiva with multiple faces is presented in one of our earliest manuals of Hindu iconography, the Viṣṇudharmottara-Purāṇa (ca. fifth to eighth centuries ce). The possibility of older allusions to this iconographical motif has been discussed by N.P. Joshi (1984, p. 52) and Bakker (1997, pp. 72–74; 1999, p. 339), with reference to passages in the Mahābhārata that describe Śiva with four faces (1.203.26; 13.17.74; 13.128.4; 14.8.30). Such a connection, however, remains tentative, especially as this epic also describes the god Brahmā as having four heads (3.194.12; 3.275.17; 12.335.18). In addition, none of these early literary sources makes any direct connection between this multiface Śiva and liṅgas. Although the mukha-liṅga later became associated with Śiva, its original meaning remains unclear.
Granoff (2003, p. 2) rightly cautions that there are ‘problems with the iconography and identity of some of the earliest lingas, the [scholarly] interpretation of which has been based on late sources that clearly show the hands of the theologian-systematizer’. It may be tempting to project later traditions backwards onto earlier evidence or to interpret ancient iconographical data through the lens of later literary sources. Yet, it is also important to take seriously how little we know, from the surviving evidence, about the early development of Śaivism. The precise historical locus for the association between the ādi-nilakantha and the god Śiva, for instance, remains uncertain. None of our earliest examples of lingas and ādi-nilakantha-like objects are explicitly, unambiguously, or unequivocally Śaivite. Accordingly, we may miss something significant about the early history of Śaivism when we automatically connect such images to Śiva or conflate them with later traditions.

It is possible, for example, that the association of the ādi-nilakantha with Śiva alchemized over a period of several centuries, perhaps continuing to evolve even into the medieval period. That the ādi-nilakantha only gradually rose to the status of Śiva’s main emblem is suggested by our ample evidence for anthropomorphic images of Śiva. The earliest examples date from the same period as most of the earliest lingas and ādi-nilakantha-like figures, as discussed above (i.e., Kuśāna period), and they continue into the Gupta period and beyond. Such evidence points to regional, ritual, and iconographical diversity within early Śaivism (see further Goldberg 2008; Falk 1994; Younger 1995, pp. 87–89, 106–8; Bakker 1997, pp. 66–79; 2001). There seems to have been a time, in other words, when ādi-nilakantha worship was not yet dominant at a ‘pan-Indian’ level.

The evidence from Mathurā, in particular, also points to sustained developments in ādi-nilakantha-related sculpture, as the popularity and acceptance of such images grew. In the centuries following our earliest evidence for lingas, we see the influence of Śaivite literature and theology on its form and iconography. Whereas the iconography of early lingas lacks consistency, our later evidence speaks to efforts at systematization. Innovations and standardization in the iconography of the ādi-nilakantha seem to have occurred particularly during the Gupta period (ca. 3rd–6th CE). This development appears to have been marked, moreover, by concerted attempts to eliminate any overt resemblance of the ādi-nilakantha to the human phallus. Jitendra Nath Banerjea (1935, pp. 36–44; 1956, pp. 445–56), Gritli von Mitterwallner (1984, p. 18, n. 33), and Hans Bakker (1997, pp. 75–76) have pointed to the discomfort of the Brahmanical tradition with realistic, phallic imagery. They propose that the older form may have been modified due to this discomfort; this abstraction, in turn, allowed for the incorporation of the ādi-nilakantha into the broader tradition. One might further suggest that elite theologians may have wanted nothing at all to do with ādi-nilakantha worship until it was sufficiently abstracted from phallic realism in the Gupta period and could be absorbed into the increasingly pro-Vedic strand of Śaivism that was beginning to take form at the time (Fleming 2007, pp. 140–83).
The Form and Formlessness of Śiva

The Linga in Śaivite Myth and Pilgrimage

As we have seen, our ancient iconographical evidence raises many questions about the origins of linga worship and the association of the linga with Śiva. This problem is not found in medieval literary traditions, which explicitly identify it with Śiva. Interestingly, some of these traditions take up the very question of the origins of linga worship. Perhaps the most famous and influential examples are the myths of the Dāruvana (‘Pine Forest’) and the Liṅgodbhavamūrti (‘form of the arising linga’).

One version of the Dāruvana myth occurs in the Kūrma Purāṇa (2.36.49–2.37.164; Davis 2002, pp. 150–61), a work compiled around the eighth century CE. It tells of how Śiva was once wandering as an ascetic through a pine forest, when he sexually aroused and tempted the wives of a group of formidable sages. In retaliation, the sages cursed Śiva, causing his penis to fall to the ground. When it fell, it erupted into flames and threatened to destroy the entire universe. In order to appease Śiva and halt the impending doom, the sages began to worship the phallus; it is said that they were ordered to this fate as a punishment for their transgression against Śiva. According to this popular medieval tale, this was how linga worship first originated.

Above, we noted how the phallic imagery of early lingas was transformed into more abstract forms that resonates with theological ideas about Śiva as distant, formless, and transcendent. By contrast, the Dāruvana myth explicitly presents the linga as the phallus of the god. As such, it may point to the reception and resonance of the older phallic iconography, even into the medieval period. That this myth was widespread, for instance, is suggested by the integration of versions into a number of different Purāṇas.8

By contrast, the Liṅgodbhavamūrti myth explains the mysterious origins of the linga with an emphasis on its cosmic significance. This story also occurs in various versions. Typically, it begins with a fight or argument between the gods Brahmā and Viṣṇu, each of whom claims to be the highest lord in the universe (jagatprabhū; Skanda Purāṇa 1.3.2.9.30). Then, between the two deities, a splendid column of fire or light suddenly appears; it is so enormous that its limits lie beyond their vision or perception. Viṣṇu, in the form of a boar, thus digs underground to search for the base of the column; Brahmā, in the form of a swan, attempts to fly to its apex. Both are unsuccessful, as the column is infinite – without beginning or end (e.g., Fig. 6).

Viṣṇu thus comes to realize that the column is a form of Śiva; he praises the god, recognizing him as the one who is truly the highest lord in the universe. Brahmā, by contrast, contrives a lie; he claims that he had, in fact, reached and seen the top of the column. Śiva himself immediately appears, and Brahmā is exposed as a fraud. As a result, the god is subordinated to Śiva.
Whereas the Dāruvana myth recounts the origins of liṅga worship in relation to Śiva’s body, the Liṅgodbhavamūrti myth instead emphasizes its timeless and cosmic significance. The column of light is here described as Śiva’s ‘jyotirlinga’ (‘liṅga of light’; Skanda Purāṇa 1.3.2.10.5), and it is said to have no beginning or end. The image of Śiva, in this myth, is that of a distant and abstract god. Different versions of the story describe the cosmic column in various ways; it is notable, however, that many emphasize that the liṅga is beyond the senses, thus evoking the view of Śiva as formless and without attributes.

The Dāruvana and Liṅgodbhavamūrti myths are famous to this day, and they seem to have been popular among medieval storytellers and writers across the Indian subcontinent as well. Whereas these traditions are ‘pan-Indian’ and speak to the origins of the liṅga in a general sense, there are also many medieval story-traditions that focus on local landscapes, often celebrating the liṅgas attached to specific temples and religious centers by recounting their origins. In Sanskrit and vernacular sources from across the subcontinent, we find almost countless examples of tales about the fame, power, and benefits of individual liṅgas.

Although likely oral in their ultimate origins, such stories are frequently collected into texts called māhātmyas, a term suggesting the special efficacy
or virtue of god or sacred place. Over time, māhāmyyas become woven together and integrated into larger compilations of mythic and pilgrimage traditions, such as the Purāṇas. As a result, purānic literature often preserves a diverse cross-section of local traditions about sacred sites.

This literature also provides important evidence for the role of liṅga worship in connecting different locales, by means of pilgrimage and storytelling alike. As early as the sixth century ce, for example, the early Skanda Purāṇa lists a grouping of Śaivite pilgrimage sites, which apparently extended across the Himālaya mountains (Bischop 2006, pp. 12–14). Other regional pilgrimage routes featuring liṅgas are richly attested in later Purāṇas (see, passim, Feldhaus 2003, pp. 127–56; Dyczkowski 2004, pp. 93–174).

Concurrent with the rise of regional pilgrimage routes, it seems that stories about liṅgas traveled throughout the subcontinent, contributing to the emergence of a relatively homogenized liturgy surrounding liṅga worship. The variety in early forms of Śaivite ritual practice gave way to increased systematization and standardization, sometime after the seventh or eighth century ce. Gradually but progressively thereafter, liṅga worship would come to supersede other types of Śaivite ritual practice, and it became established as the dominant, trans-regional mode for worshipping Śiva (Younger 1995, pp. 87–89, 106–8; Fleming 2009).

As liṅga worship became widespread in medieval times, hymns were composed and stories collected in praise of liṅgas – not just locally and regionally but even at a ‘pan-Indian’ level. One of the most dominant groupings of ‘pan-Indian’ liṅgas are the 12 jyotirliṅgas. This is perhaps the most wide-ranging set of liṅgas: one is located in the Himālaya mountains, another on the southern tip of the subcontinent, while the others are spread in western, central, and eastern locales (Feldhaus 2003, pp. 128–30; Fleming 2009). Here is a stotra (‘hymn of praise’) about the 12 jyotirliṅgas and their locations:

(The liṅga) Somanātha is in Sāurāstra, and Mallikārjuna is in Śrīśaila. Mahākāla is in Ujjain; Amalēsvara is in Oṅkāra. In Parā is (the liṅga) Vaidyanātha and in the Dākini (Forest) is (the liṅgas) Bhūmaśāṅkara. At the Bridge (to Lāṅkā) is Rāmeśa, and in the Dārukā Forest is Nāgeśa. In Varāṇasī is (the liṅga) Viśvēśa, while on the shores of the Gautamī (River), Tryāṃbaka is (found). In the Himālaya (mountains) there is Kedāra, and at the Śivālaya (Pond), Ghuśmeśa is (found). The person who recites from memory these liṅgas of light (jyotirliṅgas), every morning at dawn, annihilates the sin accumulated during seven rebirths.9

This stotra has its origins in medieval times, but it is sung, to this day, by school-children, devotees, and priests alike (Fleming 2007, pp. 28–35, 2009) – a poignant example of how local and regional traditions about liṅgas and liṅga worship eventually came to shape views of Śiva throughout India.
Unity and Diversity within Śaivism

For understanding liṅgas and liṅga worship in modern Hinduism, medieval developments are arguably pivotal. It was then that widespread, ‘pan-Indian’ Śaivite traditions emerged, linking a diverse complex of local sites and regional pilgrimage traditions together. By that time, the iconography of the earliest artifacts of the Kṛṣṇapura and Kuśāṇa periods had been displaced by the geometrically simple liṅgas found in thousands upon thousands of temples in India today. These cylindrical forms, as we have seen, have much in common with the theological conceptualization of Śiva developed by Brahmanical elites, which portray him as a distant and formless deity with little direct contact with the world.

Even in medieval and modern times, however, diversity persists. Liṅgas today, for instance, are of various sizes, and they can be made of stone, clay, wood, metal, or other materials. Some are built for permanent installation, while others are moveable, employed in seasonal festivals or other specific rituals. Some moveable liṅgas are made from perishable materials like wood and unfired clay, and discarded at the end of a ritual in which they are used. One example is a practice at the Āmarēśvara temple in the city of Īnḍra in Madhyā Pradesh. There, priests make hundreds of small clay liṅgas every single day and place them across seven large wooden palettes. After performing a series of rituals, the priests throw the clay liṅgas into the nearby Narmadā river. From purānic stories, it is clear that rituals of this sort have been practiced since at least medieval times.¹⁰

Some medieval Sanskrit texts describe the use of different materials to create liṅgas, even alluding to liṅgas made of gems or precious stones.¹¹ In addition, in a passage from the Vidyeśvara-sanhitā (19.7–8) of the Śiva Purāṇa tradition, different materials are correlated with the cosmic cycle of yugas (‘ages’):

A liṅga consisting of gems is best in the Kṛta age, gold is best in Treta age, silver is best in the Dvāpara age, and clay is best in the Kali age.

This particular list may be an attempt to account for the varieties of types of liṅgas known when it was composed (ca. ten to twelfth centuries CE), and it may emphasize the importance of clay liṅgas, which are especially renowned in the Śiva Purāṇa tradition. Other sources associate the liṅga with bone. In a number of passages in the Skanda Purāṇa tradition, for instance, skulls are either equated with liṅgas or are depicted as transformed into them. Some association of liṅgas with relics is also suggested by inscriptive evidence related to the medieval practice of entombing and celebrating the memory of one’s teacher by erecting a liṅga (Bhandarkar 1931, pp. 1–8).

Medieval prescriptions about the construction and installation of liṅgas have also influenced practices to this day. The instructional literature for making liṅgas for installation in temples is extensive, contained primarily
in Āgamas but also in some Purāṇas (Kramrisch 1946, pp. 239–43, 414–15). Liṅgas, as presented in these sources, are typically divided along the cylindrical column into three parts of equal size: a square base, a circular mid-section, and a rounded top. Each of these parts is further subdivided according to certain conditions, which can include the liṅga’s placement in the temple as well as the shape and size of the temple in which the liṅga is to be installed. The base portion is typically set into the floor, while the mid-portion is either surrounded by stone slabs or set into a stone base (piṭhikā). The remaining, top section is left exposed for propitiation by worshippers. Only a third of the actual liṅga is above the ground.

The differences in details between types of liṅgas are overwhelming in their variation and complexity. Indeed, to all except ritual specialists, those who compose and study the technical manuals, and perhaps the artisans who create these religious objects, the details are likely unknown. Nor is knowledge of such details necessary for participation in popular rituals involving liṅgas or for understanding the rich body of mythological, hymnic, and theological traditions about them.

Each stylistic variation, however, operates according to an internal logic of equivalences between the ritual specialist, the liṅga, and the space in which the liṅga is housed. In this sense, the liṅga is meant to be understood as a microcosm of the universe itself. One of the most dominant types of liṅgas, for example, is called a mānuṣa-liṅga (lit. ‘the liṅga derived from [or made by] man’); this type is typically proportioned in direct correspondence to the physical proportions of sacrificer or priest who oversees the construction of the liṅga.

Often, a liṅga may be proportioned in relation to the shrine in which it is to be housed, taking into account the length of the shrine, the height of the doorway, and so on. In turn, the shrines themselves are constructed according to specific rules laid out in the Āgamas. Their size and shape are chosen in relationship to cardinal directions and to geographical formations, such as mountains and rivers. Accordingly, the liṅgas therein are in alignment with the macrocosmic universe.

Conclusion

It is impossible to do justice to the richness of the literary, theological, and iconographic traditions surrounding liṅgas in one brief article. Above, I examined some of the most prominent traditions as well as some of the major issues of scholarly discussion and debate. I also attempted to point to some persistent dynamics and dichotomies, found in both material and literary evidence, and to highlight some of the continuities and discontinuities between ancient, medieval, and modern traditions about liṅgas.

It is important to stress, however, that these represent only a small selection of the many and varied traditions about liṅgas in India and beyond. Our survey of textual materials, for instance, was limited to
Sanskrit literature, and our survey of historical developments focused on ‘pan-Indian’ developments. Much more could be said about the practices, ideas, and developments distinct to individual cities and regions, and expressed in vernacular languages. Likewise, space did not permit a consideration of the views of lingas specific to certain groups, such as the Lingayats or Vīraśāivas; in contrast to the pro-Vedic tendencies noted above, this South Indian Śaivite sect wear small lingas around their necks and are traditionally anti-Brahmanical and anti-Vedic (Rao 1990, pp. 3–7).

Tantric literature also offers its own broad and rich array of ritual traditions focusing on linga worship; at times, moreover, tantric ritual has had a strong and dynamic influence on the more ‘mainstream’ practices portrayed in the Purāṇas (e.g., Śakti traditions). Above, we noted how the Purāṇas preserve traditions about myth, pilgrimage, and sacred geography that may help us to understand the rise of a ‘pan-Indian’ Śaivism focused on the linga. Tantric traditions of linga worship may be similarly central to the spread of Śaivism outside of the Indian subcontinent, particularly into Nepal and Southeast Asia (Sanderson 2003–2004). Although the precise origins of the linga remain a mystery, the diverse traditions about this enigmatic representation of Śiva make clear its enduring power to inspire stories, art, pilgrimage, theological reflection, and vigorous debate throughout the centuries.

Short Biography

Benjamin J. Fleming’s research focuses on Śaivite ritual, myth, and iconography, with a particular concern for traditions about pilgrimage and sacred geography. He holds a BFA, BA, and MA, from the University of Regina and a PhD from McMaster University. His dissertation, ‘Cult of the Jyotirlingas and the History of Śaivite Worship’ (2007), investigated the relationship between ritual, storytelling, and pilgrimage in medieval Śaivism. His publications include an article, ‘Mapping Sacred Geography in Medieval India: The Case of the 12 Jyotirlingas’, in the International Journal of Hindu Studies. He has presented papers on Purāṇas and on inscriptive materials at the annual meetings of the American Academy of Religion, American Oriental Society, and Canadian Society for the Study of Religion, as well as at the Fourth International Vedic Workshop, Oriental Club of Philadelphia, and the Humanities Forum and Religious Studies Colloquium at the University of Pennsylvania. He has been awarded grants and fellowships from the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute and the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada. He is presently a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, where he teaches courses on Hinduism.

Notes

* Correspondence address: Dr Benjamin J. Fleming, University of Pennsylvania, 249 S. 36th Street, Cohen Hall #234, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA. E-mail: bfleming@sas.upenn.edu.
1 All translations in the article are those of the author. I am grateful to the following for editorial comments, suggestions, and references: Annette Yoshiko Reed, John C. Huntington, Richard Mann, Steven R. Reed, and Shayne Clarke. I would also like to thank my anonymous reader for his/her thoughtful reading of the article. Research for this article was supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute.

2 E.g., Linga Purāṇa 1.28.13–14; Śīva Purāṇa, Jñāna-saṃghitā 49.3–15. For references in various Āgamas see Davis 1991, pp. 113–14, 121–22.

3 For the rich complex of traditions about Śīva in Vārāṇaśī, see e.g., Eck 1983; Bakker 1996; Fleming 2009.

4 The impulse to understand the linga in terms of the god’s formlessness is also evident in a popular etymology of the term, which links it with fire; see Tagare 2002, pp. 20–21.

5 See also Śrinavasan 1997, p. 227, for an attempt to situate this work in a continuum of early pilgrimage routes cited in the Mahābhārata.

6 A similar discomfort is evident in modern Hinduism, particularly in elite scholarly and theological discourse (see, e.g., Tagare 2001, p. 23). This long-standing tendency within the tradition may also play a part in critiques of the fixation on sexual imagery in some Western scholarship on Śīva and the linga.

7 Mann (2007, p. 734) notes a similar process with Skanda, a figure identified in medieval sources as the son of Siva: ‘A central means the Brahmanical tradition had of drawing Skanda into the orthodox fold was to link him with Vedic ideas and figures’. See further Mann 2003.

8 On this myth cycle, see further Doniger 1980, pp. 137–54; Handelman & Shulman 2004; Stotraratna 2009.

9 Mann (2007, p. 734) notes a similar process with Skanda, a figure identified in medieval sources as the son of Siva: ‘A central means the Brahmanical tradition had of drawing Skanda into the orthodox fold was to link him with Vedic ideas and figures’. See further Mann 2003.


11 E.g., Śīva Purāṇa, Koṭijñāna-saṃghitā 17.35; Mānasāra 52.328–33 (52.152–55); see Acharya 1934a, p. 541; 1934b, pp. 349–50.


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2. ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS


3. SECONDARY LITERATURE


4. FURTHER READING


