

The Architectural Heritage as a Projection of Competition and Negotiation Shared Muslim-Vīraśaiva Sacred Sites in Northern Karnataka. A Preliminary Approach

Sara Mondini
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia

Abstract Recent studies have reported that the mausoleum of Aḥmad Shāh I Bahmanī (r. 1422-1436), in Ashtur (Karnataka), is frequented by both Muslims and Vīraśaivas. Now, setting out from the pilgrimage performed on the occasion of the sovereign's 'urs, the aim of the present contribution is to analyze some of the architectural sites that are touched by the pilgrimage, and to examine how their spaces are understood and perceived by the devotees. The paper aims to shed light on the coexistence of these two religious groups and on the way in which certain forms of competition and negotiation have come to be transposed onto the cultural and historical landscape.

Keywords Indo-Islamic architecture. Bahmanī dynasty. Vīraśaiva. Pilgrimage. Sacred geography. Shared sacred sites.

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1 Introduction

The dynamics behind the sharing – and sometimes disputing – of sacred spaces in central-southern India by Muslims and Vīraśaivas (or Liṅgāyats), have been the subject of field studies and research conducted over the past few years. The importance of the Viraśaiva presence in the Deccani region, on the one hand, and its proximity to the Muslim community, on the other, had already attracted the attention of various scholars.¹ Nevertheless, further research on the issue was inspired by the surveys carried out on the Indo-Islamic architecture in northern Karnataka. Here, some sites frequented by the two religious communities reveal the complexity and depth of their intertwining in the area and the crucial importance of the architectural heritage in witnessing and transposing – but also strengthening – the dynamics of coexistence between the two groups over the centuries. While the forms of this encounter had already partially emerged in previous studies, the observation of visits to local sites and of the rituals performed there has now suggested the existence of what could be defined as a ‘shared sacred geography’ and, at the same time, an evolution in the perception of these sites. In this sense, the present attempt to understand the sites’ transformation and redefinition over the time can bring out the growing role of architectural heritage in the processes of identity-building and political propaganda, also highlighting possible contemporary tensions.

The preliminary research conducted has set out from the mausoleum dedicated to Aḥmad Shāh I Bahmanī (r. 1422-36), the ninth sovereign of the Bahmanī dynasty, who reigned in the Deccan from 1347 to 1527. The first results have already highlighted the importance of the structure located in Ashtur – in the Bidar district, in northern Karnataka – and have shown that it is frequented by Muslims, Vīraśaivas and Hindus. The mausoleum appears to lie at the heart of a peaceful coexistence that has endured for centuries, and is the setting for a Muslim-Vīraśaiva celebration whose ‘syncretic’ rituals have always been extensively covered by the local and national press as an occasion for ‘communal harmony’ among the different religious communities.²

1 In this regard, one can think, for example, of the work of Roy Burman (2002), who focussed on the concept of syncretism applied to shrines frequented by both Hindus and Muslims, to the studies conducted by Jackie Assayag (1983, 1993 and 2004) in Karnataka and in South India, to the work of Yoginder Sinkand (2003), which also touched, albeit marginally, on one of the sites that are the object of the present analysis, and – most recently – to the study by Manu V. Devadevan (2016).

2 Consider, for example, how each year *The Hindu* covers the event: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/karnataka/hindumuslim-festival-to-conclude-today/article8435041.ece>.

While this preliminary research sought to trace the main characteristics of the mausoleum in relation to Aḥmad Shāh's ambitions, the observation of its fruition and frequentation on part of the devotees led to an initial reflection on the change in the monument's perception over the centuries in view of the persistence, or indeed consolidation, of its shared use.³ Furthermore, a study of the celebrations conducted every year on the occasion of the sovereign's 'urs'⁴ revealed a pivotal role of the structure as a major site at the centre of a sacred geography that appears to be reinstated each year through the performance of a pilgrimage that culminates at the sovereign's mausoleum and which involves a large number of both Muslim and Vīraśaiva devotees in the region. By focussing on the modern sharing of the structure, on its frequentation and veneration, and on participation in the 'urs pilgrimage, the present contribution intends to outline the mausoleum's relation to other 'shared sites', possibly connected to it from an artistic and architectural point of view, and to investigate the variety of meanings and powers these sites have come to embody in relation to the historical intersection between the Muslim and Vīraśaiva communities.

Traces of a 'peculiar relation' between the two communities, albeit fragmentary, have emerged in the studies concerning both the religious and the historico-political context. A strong Vīraśaiva presence, close to the Muslim authorities, emerged in the last decades of the Bahmanī Sultanate, after the transfer of the capital to Bidar (ca. 1424),⁵ and is reported to have also characterized the 'Ādil Shāhī Sultanate.⁶ So far, however, it has not been investigated in depth. De-

³ In this regard, see the two works published by the Author on the mausoleum of Aḥmad Shāh I Bahmanī (Mondini 2014, 2016), which provided a starting point for the present investigation.

⁴ From Arabic 'urs, lit. 'marriage'; it stands for the union with one's beloved - the divine.

⁵ After a brief period in Daulatabad, the dynasty of the Bahmanīs (1347-1527) - the first independent Islamic dynasty of the Deccani region - established its capital in Gulbarga (today known as Kalaburagi), but then transferred it to Bidar around 1424. Sherwani remembers how different dates have been assigned to this event, ranging from 1424 to 1426-7 (1985, 17-36, 122-6). He also mentions the Vīraśaiva literary production in Kannada, which must probably be dated to the Bahmanī period (Sherwani 1985, 292-3).

⁶ Eaton describes the Liṅgāyat (Vīraśaiva) presence on the Bijapuri plateau at the time of the Islamic conquest (1978, 9-13). He mentions the influence that the "dominant Hindu sect in the Bijapur region" had on the 'Ādil Shāhī Sultan Ibrāhīm II (r. 1580-1627), as demonstrated in his view by the sovereign's interest in a series of deities mentioned in the *Kitāb-i Nauras*, all of whom related to Śiva. Furthermore, he mentions a miniature that portrays the sultan wearing dark beads, which have been suggested to represent *rudrākṣa* berries, the ornament of Śaivaite devotees, and his epithet "Jagat Guru" (Eaton 1978, 101, see in particular note 68). He also describes the proximity and intertwining between the Sufi component - especially the "Sufi Dervish" Shāh Amīn al-Dīn A'lā (1597-1675) - and Liṅgāyat (Eaton 1978, 243-56, see in particular note 19). Beside noting the proximity between the two institutions of the Sufi *khānqāh* and

vadevan's recent study (2016)⁷ appears to take stock of the encounters and connections between the Vīraśaiva and the Islamic presence in the region. Thus, in the light of the scenario he has depicted and of the importance assigned to Aḥmad Shāh's mausoleum in the region, the present investigation intends to set out from the role the structure plays in rituals and the way it contributes to establishing a precise sacred geography in the devotees' imagination.

2 The Mausoleum of Aḥmad Shāh I Bahmanī in Ashtur⁸

As has emerged from the first published results, the central focus of the research conducted is certainly the mausoleum attributed to Aḥmad Shāh I Bahmanī (r. 1422-36) [fig. 1], within the last Bahmanī royal necropolis located in Ashtur, a village 2.5 km away from the city of Bidar, which encloses the tombs of the sovereigns based in the city.⁹ This renowned funerary complex was erected northeast of the capital, on the road leading to the village, and consists of a small funerary mosque, thirteen mausoleums, and a series of minor tombs and secondary structures (Yazdani [1947] 1995, 114-40).

Already described by Yazdani in the forties, the mausoleum ([1947] 1995, 114-28) - which inaugurated the complex that was later expanded until 1527 - has been the subject of several studies in recent years on account of its extraordinary decorative scheme, but also as a sacred space shared by Vīraśaivas and Muslims. On the one hand, both symbolically and artistically, the structure seems to perfectly meet the requirement of preserving the memory of the sovereign while epitomizing Bahmanī power; on the other hand, it is difficult to pigeonhole because of its mixed frequentation and the rituals performed there, as well as the complex range of meanings it has come to embody.

the Liṅgāyat *maṭha*, he recalls that, like Sufi devotees, Liṅgāyats began frequenting *dargāhs* (Eaton 1978, 9-13).

7 The study by Devadevan turned out to be essential in sketching the religious scenario in which the sharing of sacred sites here discussed seems to have originated.

8 The present chapter draws upon the results previously published by the author concerning the mausoleum of Aḥmad Shāh I Bahmanī (Mondini 2014, 2016), integrated with those of other scholars. Since the investigation here presented sets out from the celebrations held at the mausoleum, it is essential to reaffirm the dense articulation of meanings assigned to its space.

9 The mausoleums of the very first Bahmanī rulers were erected in Gulbarga, northwest of the Fort. Then a royal necropolis was erected northeast of the Fort, in proximity of the *dargāh* dedicated to Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusaynī Gīsūdīrāz (d. 1422). After the transfer of the capital to Bidar, all sovereigns were buried in the Ashtur complex. See Philon 2005, 155-9, 167-72; Mondini 2018, 293-7.



Figure 1 Interior of the mausoleum attributed to Aḥmad Shāh I Bahmanī (Ashtur, Bidar). Photo by Sara Mondini

Although, technically speaking, the funerary structure devoted to Aḥmad Shāh cannot be regarded as a *dargāh* درگاہ,¹⁰ and rather represents the mausoleum of a sovereign, it continues to attract thousands of Muslim and Hindu pilgrims. By virtue of the powers attributed to the ruler and his identification as a saint, the structure has become a major object of *ziyāra* (visit) and pilgrimage, and it is perceived by devotees more like a *dargāh*,¹¹ if not a temple – considering the shared attendance by Vīraśaivas and Hindus. This perception is primarily attributable to – and at the same time fuelled by – the complexity of the messages inherent to the structure itself and proclaimed by the epigraphic programme, as well as by the established rituals.

As emerged during the previous phases of the investigation, the mausoleum of Aḥmad Shāh I Bahmanī seems to perfectly reflect the

10 In South Asia the term *dargāh* refers to a shrine built over the grave of a revered religious figure, generally a Sufi saint or the representative of a Sufi brotherhood; *kḥānqāh* instead refers to a residential Sufi monastery.

11 Certainly, the appeal exercised by the mausoleum cannot be compared to that of the main *dargāhs* in the region, such as the Khuldabad ones dedicated to Sheikh Burhān al-dīn Gharīb (d. 1337) and his disciple Zayn al-Dīn Shirāzi (d. 1369), or the one dedicated to Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusaynī Gīsūdirāz (d. 1422) at Gulbarga, but its fame is equally remarkable; see Ernst 2004a, 227-38; 2004b; Hussaini 2004.

sovereign and patron's desire for self-representation and self-affirmation. In terms of its shape – a quadrangular layout with a domed roof – and decorative scheme, the mausoleum conforms to tendencies and models commonly adopted for funerary structures in the region, as illustrated by the mausoleum dedicated to the first legitimizer of Aḥmad Shāh, Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusaynī Gīsūdirāz (d. 1422), a representative of the Chishtiyya order, in Gulbarga.¹² However, it is the charm and the extraordinary complexity of the epigraphic and painting programme for the interior of Aḥmad Shāh's structure that have attracted the attention of many scholars, who have proposed detailed analyses, on several interpretative levels.

The interior presents some of the most remarkable and sophisticated decorations to be found in the sultanate's production. Despite the serious deterioration, it is possible to appreciate how both the walls and the dome originally featured a magnificent painted decorative programme consisting of floral arabesques of Persian inspiration, interspersed with geometrical motifs and epigraphic bands developed according to the *kufi*, *naskh* and *thuluth* calligraphic styles.

Philon, approaching the monument, focussed on the choice of decorative motifs and formal elements, which would recall Central Asia and the Iranian tradition. She noted how the painted decorations of the mausoleum not only find no parallel in 14th and 15th-century South Asian productions, but may be regarded as crucial evidence for Islamic painting in this period.¹³ Firouzeh (2015) and Gupta (2017) have instead concentrated their attention on the content of the epigraphic programme that runs on the interior walls of the mausoleum. More specifically, Firouzeh emphasizes the evocation of Shāh Ni'matullāh (d. 1430),¹⁴ the new spiritual guide to whom Aḥmad Shāh turned after Gīsūdirāz's death, and remarks that the choice to feature a text of Ni'matullāh inside a mausoleum was a clear attempt to record the Sufi-Sultan relationship and to legitimize Aḥmad Shāh and his descendants' right to the throne by establishing a sacred bond (2015, 209-13). While also referring to the Deccani adaptations of the Timurid international style or its Ottoman refractions,

12 The structure dedicated to the famous sheikh and erected in the first Bahmanī capital, Gulbarga, was apparently selected as a model for the ruler's mausoleum and for the mausoleum of his predecessor, Firūz Shāh Bahmanī (r. 1397-1422); see, among others, Merklinger 1981, 36-43; Michell, Zebrowsky 1999, 66-76; Hussaini 2004.

13 According to Philon, this is otherwise only evidenced by limited Yemenite, early Ottoman, and Timurid examples (Philon 2000, 5).

14 Shāh Ni'matullāh (d. 1430) was the founder of the Ni'matullāhiyya, the Persian Sufi order. Aḥmad Shāh would appear to have repeatedly invited its leading representative to move to Bidar. Ni'matullāh (d. 1430) initially turned down the sovereign's offer, but a few years later he agreed to send his grandson Nūrullāh to the Bahmanī court and, after the death of Ni'matullāh, his son Khalilullāh (d. 1455) – Nūrullāh's father – also moved to Bidar. See Rizvi 1986, 251-2; Aubin 1991; Speziale 2013; Mondini 2016, 159-62.

Gupta reflects on the several ways in which the poems are integral to the shrine's visual context, and on the new and multiple meanings the visual milieu assigned to the poetry selected for the epigraphical programme (2017, 205). He specifically focuses on the recurrence of the wordplay on *'ain* – a term that both in Persian and in Arabic carries several meanings, including 'eye, vision, wellspring, fountain, or source' – whose use creates multiple meanings evoking the eye of the beloved, water sources (poetic and physical – those surrounding the mausoleum), and Aḥmad Shāh himself (Gupta 2017, 189, 205).

In my contributions to the study of Aḥmad Shāh mausoleum (Mondini 2014, 2016), I instead focussed my attention on the ruler's religious identity and on the instrumental use he appears to have made of the title of *walī* bestowed upon him by Shāh Ni'matullāh,¹⁵ in an effective political propaganda effort which would appear to have ensured the sovereign's fame immediately after his death. Artistic and architectural patronage met the constant need to represent political power and fulfil propaganda requirements by visually conveying the distinguishing features of ruling dynasties. This often meant the use of select registers, and especially inspiring models and symbolic elements, even in the architectural field: as might be expected, the peculiarities of the patronized monuments and their specific location at times make up for existing gaps in terms of identity or religious orientation. From this point of view, the mausoleum of Aḥmad Shāh constitutes a striking example. In the Deccani religious and political context, *dargahs* became seats of religious power and symbols of the union and reciprocal investiture between religious and political authority, extending beyond the rulers' death.¹⁶ My analysis of the inscription adorning the dome of Aḥmad Shāh's mausoleum aimed to suggest that the figure of the ruler-saint and his legitimation were no longer exclusively based – as had been the case in the other Islamic capitals in South Asia – on a constant interplay between the sovereign's mausoleum and the *dargāh*.¹⁷ What we have, then, is an overlap of religious and political meanings: as stated also by Gupta: "the water flowing through Bidar springs from the source of the mystical beloved and is blessed" and the sovereign, the *walī*, would be responsible for "bestowing Bidar with such fortune that the land became fertile, the crops had water, and the community thrived" (2017,

¹⁵ While Shāh Ni'matullāh declined the sovereign's invitation to take up residence at the Bahmani court, he sent him a letter of 'initiation', addressing him by the title of *walī*, along with "a cap of discipleship and a robe authorizing the sultan to act as Ni'matullāh's disciple" (see Rizvi 1986, 251-2; Aubin 1991; Speziale 2013; Mondini 2016, 159-62).

¹⁶ See for example Ernst 2004a, 201-26 and Mondini 2018.

¹⁷ The topic has been widely investigated, especially from a political and religious point of view. See in particular, among others, Digby 1986, 1990; Kumar 2017; Aquil 2008; Banerjee 2014. More specifically focussed on the Deccani scenario are Sherwani 1990; Ernst 2004a; Green 2004b, 2012; Mondini 2017.

205). The decorative programme designed for these purposes would appear to revolve around the use of a consciously striking language, although its various parts play on an underlying ambiguity. Aḥmad Shāh, the *walī* and friend of God, is at the same time a disciple; and although he apparently embraces the teachings of the Ni'matullāhiyya – as mentioned above, the lower walls of the mausoleum display the writings of Ni'matullāh himself –¹⁸ and maintains the Sunni beliefs of his predecessors, he now inhabits a mausoleum that, precisely by virtue of an epigraphic programme whose content finds no parallel in the Deccan, comes across as Shi'i in the eyes of many art historians.¹⁹ The decorations thus stand as an enduring testimony to the sovereign's role and to his unique qualities as an elect.

In the light of the double, political and spiritual, role acquired by Aḥmad Shāh, his final resting place – from which he continued to operate for the good of his subjects and devotees – was intended to powerfully convey the ruler's authority, as well as the distinguishing traits of his identity. Indeed, the recognition of his status as a saint and the ambiguity in defining his religious orientation contributed to transforming his burial into one of the most important pilgrimage destinations in northern Karnataka, also frequented by non-Muslims. It is therefore probably by virtue of the identity of Aḥmad Shāh – that of a sovereign-saint – that the practice of celebrating his 'urs, the anniversary of his death,²⁰ was consolidated. Today, the striking endurance of the celebrations (*jātrā*) constitute a tangible manifestation of the great influence the monument exerts, at least on a regional level.²¹

3 Muslims and Vīraśaivas in the 15th-Century Deccan

Given our current knowledge of the history of the perception of Aḥmad Shāh's burial, it is difficult to reconstruct and fully explain the sharing of the site by Muslims, Vīraśaivas, and Hindus, and the origins of their joint pilgrimage, especially owing to the fragmentary information existing and the discordance of local testimonies.

¹⁸ As remarked by Firouzeh 2015, 191-204 and Gupta 2017, 192-204.

¹⁹ The idea of an adherence to Shi'a Islam by the sovereign whose religious orientation remains debated, see in particular Haig 1924 and Mondini 2016.

²⁰ In Muslim India, annual celebrations of this kind are generally reserved for Sufi saints and they are meant to commemorate the saints' union with God on the anniversary of their death. As remarked by Green, over the course of its history South Asia has also witnessed celebrations held for the 'urs of sovereigns – one could think of Aurangzēb (d. 1707) and Mumtāz Mahal (d. 1631) or of famous poets such as Bidel (d. 1720); see Green 2004a, 135, 142.

²¹ The importance of the structure and its modern frequentation and perception by devotees has been analyzed in depth for the first time in Mondini 2014.

According to what is reported by Yazdani and to local testimonies, the Vīraśaivas' participation in the 'urs of Aḥmad Shāh, as well as their 'appropriation' of the figure of the saint-sovereign and of his burial, gradually emerged after the sovereign's death (1995, 115-16). However, while in the case of religious figures with a key role in the region, such as the above-mentioned Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusaynī Gīsūdirāz, the sources help us reconstruct interfaith encounters and exchanges between the representatives of these religious traditions,²² in the case of the sovereign the sources examined so far do not seem to provide any information regarding his perception by non-Muslims. Moreover, the secondary sources surveyed and the devotees' accounts are anything but uniform and consistent, which does not help to explain the link between Vīraśaivas and Aḥmad Shāh, making the modern perception of the ruler far from univocal.

The Vīraśaivas, in particular, would generally appear to identify the sovereign as an incarnation of Allama Prabhu - a saint and a leading Vīraśaiva spiritual authority - but local accounts further suggest that some devotees believe the ruler-saint to be an incarnation of Basava (d. 1196), the person responsible for spreading the movement across south-central India in the twelfth century. All Vīraśaiva devotees - and an increasing number of Muslims too - attribute the mausoleum to 'Sultan Basha', which appears to be a contraction of 'Sultan Bahman Shāh',²³ and whose name is sung and invoked during the *jātrā*'s celebrations. Regardless of the difficulties in defining the perception of the sovereign-saint by the faithful belonging to the various religious communities, the devotees all seem to acknowledge the moral and spiritual stature of Aḥmad Shāh, along with his thaumaturgical powers and ability to perform miracles, including - as also reported by Sikand - rain miracle described by Firishta.²⁴

In his pioneering work, Devadevan (2016) explores religious processes in the Deccan region between the 11th and the 19th century, and throws new light on the making of religious communities. In a way, he seems to corroborate the present Vīraśaiva perception by

²² See for example Rizvi 2003, vol. 1, 251-6.

²³ The term *bāshā*, a variant of *pāshā*, is a Turkic title recurring in some sources; see, for example, the term "Isupāśca" attested in a later period and mentioned by Devadevan 2016, 91.

²⁴ Aḥmad Shāh was believed to possess healing powers, the ability to solve fertility problems, and more generally the power to act as an intermediary with God - by virtue of his proximity to the divine as a *walī* - and hence the capacity to dispense *baraka*. According to Firishta, the sovereign performed the 'rain miracle' by bringing rain during a drought through the power of his prayers. This, however, can easily be identified as one of the most recurrent *topoi* in Islamic hagiography, which frequently ascribes the effective use of *ṣalāt al-istisqā'* (lit. 'prayer for the rain') to religious figures throughout history. For this view, see Sikand 2003, 83; Firishta 2006, 250.

quoting Tarikere,²⁵ who mentions the presence of an inscription “on the tomb” of Aḥmad Shāh, “where the word ‘Allamaprabhu’ [appears] in Devanagari letters” (Devadevan 2016, 103, and note 376; Tarikere 1998, 56). However, this inscription, which would evidently confirm the link between the sovereign and the Vīraśaiva saint, is not mentioned in any of the studies conducted so far on the mausoleum and its epigraphical programme, as it has not been found during the field research conducted. Even Yazdani, in his translation of the whole epigraphic programme of Aḥmad Shāh’s mausoleum, apparently did not come across any mention of Allama Prabhu. During his analysis of the various monuments of the royal necropolis and of their epigraphic evidence, he only mentions a Marathi inscription – coupled with a Persian one – on the well located south of the Bahmanī ruler’s mausoleum and dated to the Baridi era (1487-1619) (Yazdani [1947] 1995, 114-29, 140-1). However, the two inscriptions appear to be quite distinct and do not mention Allama Prabhu in any way.

Despite the absence of the evidence he mentions, Devadevan’s analysis sheds considerable light on the proximity between Vīraśaivas and Muslims in the region. His study, which investigates the complex intertwining between the two religious communities, integrates the results of the field research conducted by the anthropologist and historian of religions Jackie Assayag.²⁶

In the Deccan, during the period under examination, earnest attempts were made to integrate many of the saintly genealogies and practices that had appeared in the preceding centuries into a single system called Vīraśaivism through new narratives which were polyphonic and variously interlinked, but at the same time all centred on the figures of Allama Prabhu or Basava. Furthermore, from the picture outlined by Devadevan, it emerges that by the 16th century onward the authority previously assigned to scriptures, visions, and practices had come to be embodied by individuals through the figure of the guru: “His word, both written and oral, and his ideals, represented through legends, were worthy of adoration by the followers”. This emphasis on the individual as the source of authority had two important consequences according to him:

having lost their authority, texts, visions, and practices were now only secondary in importance, with bars removed from subjecting them to revision, discarding them at convenience, and draw-

²⁵ Tarikere’s *Karnatakada Sufigalu* (The Sufis of Karnataka), has informative comments on a number of these sites, although it does not engage in an architectural analysis of the sites (Tarikere 1998, 56). I thank Dr. Manu V. Devadevan for his kind indications and comments on Tarikere’s work.

²⁶ Assayag has long worked on the Hindu-Muslim encounter in South India, especially looking at Vīraśaivas; see, among other works, Assayag 1983 and 2004.

ing authority from sources of any other tradition [and] archetypal guru figures could be brought into the imagined genealogies of these traditions, irrespective of which tradition they actually belonged to. (Devadevan 2016, 100)

In his reconstruction Devadevan presents saint Koḍēkallu Basava (presumably born around 1450) as the one who consolidated and gave systematic expression to these developments (2016, 103), while his hagiography is significant in expressing the kind of intertwining of traditions that can contribute to explain the sharing of sacred sites. He reports that it was saint Ārūḍha Saṅgamaṅātha, who arrived in Vijayanagara sometime in the last quarter of the 15th century, who made Koḍēkallu Basava realize who he had been in his fourteen previous births. In four of his previous lives he had been Tirujñānasambandhar, one of the sixty-three Śaiva Nāyanārs of Tamilnadu, Allama Prabhu and Basava (contemporaries in the mid-12th century), and Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam. Devadevan continues by stating that when Koḍēkallu Basava was at Kalyana, a “lord of the world” (*lōkapati*) – referred to as “Isupāśca” and identified as Yūsuf Bādśāh or Yūsuf Khān, the founder of the ‘Ādil Shāhī dynasty (1490-1510) of Vijayapura (Bijapur) – contacted him in order to meet him. Although Koḍēkallu Basava was reluctant to meet the ruler, he was forcibly taken to the sultan’s palace. Here “Isupāśca” struck him with a dagger, but the dagger passed through his body as though it was moving through water, without harming the saint. The sovereign became his devotee, and asked for a gift of five bundles of *vacanas*, and some hair. Since Koḍēkallu Basava was deemed to be an incarnation of the Prophet Muhammad, the hair he gave the sultan came to be preserved in Bijapur as a relic of the Prophet. In the light of the fact that the hair now preserved in the Hazratbal shrine – in Srinagar, Kashmir – as Muhammad’s relic was brought from Bijapur, it may be assumed that what is believed to be Hazratbal’s hair is actually the hair of Koḍēkallu Basava (Devadevan 2016, 91).

The numerous exchanges or ‘cross-fertilization’ between different religious traditions, as those reported in the example here outlined, are often interpreted as instances of ‘religious syncretism’. Nevertheless, Devadevan highlights Tarikere’s critiques of this position, even though they are rather poorly articulated. Hutton too, while discussing the artistic environment of the Deccan at the time of ‘Ādil Shāhī, is skeptical about the pertinence of this kind of interpretation. She notes that the idea of syncretism is based on a conception of different (religious or artistic) traditions autonomous and watertight entities, which in practice was hardly the case in the region (Hutton 2006, 13-19). Artistic vocabularies, like religious traditions, were porous and, especially at a popular level,

they tended to enmesh into one another in complex ways that involved conflict, negotiations, exchanges, conciliation, acceptance, and assimilation to an extent that made a distinction between one tradition and the other impossible. (Devadevan 2016, 86, in particular fn. 290)

The above-mentioned case of Koḍēkallu Basava and his role in the religious developments of the time can be compared to some extent to the slightly earlier figure of Aḥmad Shāh I Bahmanī and the construction of his identity, crucial to my own argument. The Bahmanī sovereign would appear to have legitimized his own role – as a political and spiritual leader – by resorting to ‘fanciful genealogies’, and by locally promoting a further development in Sufi-sultan relations, through the intertwining of different religious traditions. In the region, from the 14th century onward, after the establishment of Sufi brotherhoods, *dargāhs* and *khānqāhs* underwent a fundamental transformation, which led them to play a key role from a political, social and religious point of view. During Bahmanī rule, the already mentioned Sayyed Moḥammad Ḥosaynī Gisūderāz, the first legitimator of Aḥmad Shāh, initiated the practice of hereditary succession in his *khānqāh* in Gulbarga. The bestowing of a perpetual land grant by Aḥmad Shāh was historically decisive in this context. Indeed, the fact that control over the land was linked to succession within the brotherhood reinforced the principle of hereditariness, by consolidating the position of the *khānqāh* also as a political force. This, as remarked by Devadevan,

led to the creation of strong images of tradition and continuity that came to be explored through representational strategies deployed in the legends and hagiographies (2016, 80)

and fostered the evolution of the above-mentioned real and imaginary lineages of succession.

Today this complexity and its historical, political and religious consequences are often overlooked and seem foreign to popular beliefs and to the faithful’s feelings. The devotees’ perception of Aḥmad Shāh continues to be marked by a certain degree of confusion. On the Muslim side, the issue does not seem to be considered relevant, and there is a tendency to emphasize the ‘open-mindedness’ of what is seen as an ‘enlightened ruler’. Already Yazdani ([1947] 1995) had actually speculated that the links between the Vīraśaiva and Muslim communities could be rooted in the sovereign’s liberal views. Having been disciple of Gisūderāz and having embraced Ni‘matullāhiyya principles, he would have followed no fixed doctrine, fluctuating between Sunna and Shi‘ia Islam while probably also respecting Vīraśaiva doctrine. And precisely because of Aḥmad Shāh’s rather ‘syncretistic’

and inclusive views, Yazdani compares him to Akbar (r. 1556-1605) and Dara Sikoh (d. 1659) ([1947] 1995, 116). While this hypothesis is certainly tenable, the picture of the regional religious context accurately drawn by Devadevan and the rituals centred on the ruler's mausoleum point to a complexity that goes beyond the Ashtur site and must be understood in the wider regional trends and religious transformations.

4 From the Ziyāra to the Yātrā

The grand celebration held for Aḥmad Shāh's 'urs reveals how the religious authority of this figure has long outweighed his role as a sovereign, and is recognized by the various religious communities. While in everyday routine his grave is an object of *ziyāra* for devotees belonging to different faiths, it is on the occasion of the anniversary of his death that the sharing of the mausoleum's sacred space and rituals has apparently been confirmed and consolidated over the centuries. In the light of the crucial importance assigned to these celebrations as a means to understand Aḥmad Shāh's identity and propaganda, as well as the present relations between the Muslim and the Vīraśaiva community, I decided to focus my field investigation on the annual *yātrā* (pilgrimage) and *jātrā* (festival)²⁷ held to celebrate the event. The two terms seem to be used inconsistently by the devotees. Most of them often use the term *jātrā* to refer both to the pilgrimage that starts from Madiyal and ends at Aḥmad Shāh's mausoleum in Ashtur, and to the five-day festival at the burial site, which opens with the arrival of the pilgrims [fig. 2]. While still having religious connotations, *jātrā* generally indicates primarily or largely secular fairs and festivals but in this case it seems to be used despite the strong religious connotation of the event. On the other hand, the two meanings of *jātrā* and *yātrā* can often converge at the time of religious events, for example when people travel to witness the procession of deities along prescribed routes or congregate at some sacred site (Gurung 1981, 31; Messerschmidt, Sharma 1982, 148; Gold 1990, 136-45).

Alongside the daily visit to the sovereign's mausoleum made by devotees, the 'urs celebrations, that generally take place each year between late March and early April, have become a strikingly important event in the region. Approximately one week before the celebration, when Aḥmad Shāh's tomb is washed and smeared with sandal paste, the Vīraśaiva *janḡam* of Madiyal – a village in the district of Gulbarga – sets off in the direction of Ashtur, with a trail of hun-

²⁷ Both terms derive from the same Sanskrit root; for a discussion of *jātrā* and *yātrā* see also Gold 1990, 136-45.



Figure 2 The arrival of pilgrims in Ashtur, at the Bahmani necropolis, at the end of the annual *yātrā*. Photo by Sara Mondini

dreds of pilgrims and devotees, both Muslims and Vīraśaivas. This *yātrā* of over 150 km, which also touches other sites,²⁸ has apparently been performed every year since the sovereign's death in 1436. It culminates with a five-day *jātrā* by the mausoleum itself in Ashtur. It is not my aim here to provide a detailed description of the shared rituals held by pilgrims and devotees from the different religious communities during the nearly five days of the foot-march and the other five days of the *jātrā* in Ashtur.²⁹ Nevertheless, the striking endurance of the celebrations dedicated to Aḥmad Shāh and the great influence they exert on a regional level call for a reflection on the significance of the spaces and buildings involved.

The long *yātrā* touches an established series of sites along an itinerary, which winds its way through the districts of Gulbarga and Bidar, in northern Karnataka, nearly touching the Maharashtra border. According to popular belief, these stopovers retrace a journey made by Allama Prabhu, but it is difficult today to verify this tradition and identify its origin. The various stops are made both to per-

28 The Author performed the pilgrimage from Madiyal to Ashtur for the first time in March 2016, while further research has been carried out over the following years with the aim of observing rituals and studying the sites involved, their architecture and their modern perception by devotees.

29 The Ashtur *jātrā* held at the mausoleum of Aḥmad Shāh begins with the *janḡam* and pilgrims' arrival at the site and lasts for five days; it is marked by the daily performance of rituals and by a rich programme of events, such as concerts featuring *qawwālī* (devotional music traditionally performed at Sufi shrines), and a *kuṣṭī* tournament (a kind of South Asian wrestling), rituals and events that are now being studied in detail.



Figure 3 *Mazār* in Khamthana, one of the stops of the annual *yātrā*. Photo by Sara Mondini

form rituals and to take some rest. During the last editions, due to the high temperatures - 45-47 Celsius degrees - pilgrims were marching during the night and resting during the day.³⁰ The stopovers are generally in open areas or near recently built (or rebuilt) temples.

One interesting exception is the last stop in Khamthana, an important suburb of Bidar, where pilgrims spend the night in what appears to be an Islamic *mazār* [fig. 3] before their triumphal entrance in Bidar. In this case the *pūjā* takes place right at the *mazār*, where the pilgrims rest before entering the city late in the afternoon on the last day of march. Despite the limited architectural interest of many of the sites touched by the journey, it is interesting to note that in the case of stops in the proximity of sacred structures, including temples - with the exception of the above-mentioned case of Khamthana, where the *pūjā* is held at the *mazār* - the ceremonies and the rituals are kept outside of the established sacred spaces, in open areas. Here the religious symbols brought along on the pilgrimage are laid out and rituals are performed, imbuing the spaces with peculiar new symbolic values and meanings. Through the performance of the pilgrimage we thus witness the creation of an 'itinerant ritual space' characterized by new ritual regulations, and within which all the prescriptions and typical hierarchies of village life - and the

30 This also happened on the occasion of the *yātrā* in which the Author took part in 2016. For a discussion on the religious significance of walking in India, as a bodily expression of liminality and for an understanding of the dimension of pilgrimage see, among others, Karve 1962 and Olivelle 2007.



Figure 4 The inaugural evening of the annual *jātrā*, the *mutawallī* and the *jaṅgam* officiating together at the Aḥmad Shāh I Bahmanī tomb. Photo by Sara Mondini

kind of “decoupage spatiaux” studied by Assayag – appear to be overthrown (1983, 85).

Upon his arrival in Ashtur, the *jaṅgam* meets the *mutawallī* of the necropolis at the mausoleum of Aḥmad Shāh to officially open the celebrations. During the five days of *jātrā*, each ritual and procession performed at the site will involve devotees from different religious communities. The *mutawallī* and the *jaṅgam* will celebrate the ‘*urs*’ simultaneously, each according to the prescriptions of their own religious tradition (Mondini 2015, 133-41). On the inaugural evening of the *jātrā*, both will officiate at the sovereign’s tomb, the former by reciting the *sūrat al-fātiḥa*, the opening *sūra* of the Qur’an, the latter by performing a *pūjā*, while the faithful’s songs and invocations to ‘Sultan Basha’ will mark the rhythm of the procession [fig. 4]. The ritual, established and repeated every year, while centred on the mausoleum of the ninth Bahmanī sovereign, also involves some of the adjacent mausoleums, which are part of the complex too. In particular the mausoleum presumably attributed to Aḥmad Shāh’s son, the mausoleum of Aḥmad Shāh’s wife, the mausoleum of Sultan ‘Alā al-Dīn Shāh II Bahmanī (r. 1436-58), the mausoleum of Sultan Humāyūn Bahmanī (r. 1458-61) and the mausoleum of Sultan Nizām Shāh – Humāyūn’s son – (r. 1461-63) [fig. 5].

It is interesting to note that the rituals also involving other structures within the complex seem to encourage their frequentation by devotees. The field research carried out over the years has appar-



Figure 5 The performing of rituals at the Bahmanī necropolis during the annual *jātrā*.
Photo by Sara Mondini

ently revealed an increase in devotees' visits not only to the mausoleum of Aḥmad Shāh, but also to the other ones within the complex that are touched by the rituals performed on the occasion of the 'urs. These are mausoleums that until a few years ago were considered part of a historical more than sacred site. Thus, it is evident that in order to understand the modern value assigned to Aḥmad Shāh's burial - and to the entire Bahmanī necropolis - it is necessary to study and appreciate it in relation to the wider network of sacred places and Vīraśaiva shrines, starting perhaps from the Madiyal structures from which the *jaṅgam* sets out on the occasion of the 'urs, and from the series of sacred places involved in the celebrations for this important anniversary. In these sacred places, in the collective imagination, the history of Vīraśaivas intertwines with legendary episodes from the life of the Bahmanī sovereign, whose study could also contribute to perpetuate this peaceful sharing of spaces.

5 The Village of Madiyal and Its 'Allama Prabhu Temple'

As already mentioned, the annual pilgrimage to the mausoleum attributed to Aḥmad Shāh I Bahmanī on the occasion of his 'urs starts



Figure 6 Pilgrims leaving Madiyal to Ashtur on the occasion of the annual *yātrā*. Photo by Sara Mondini

from Madiyal, a small village of nearly 7,000 inhabitants³¹ in the Gulbarga district. Every year the *yātrā*, which sees the participation of Vīraśaivas and Muslims alike, sets out from the so-called 'Allama Prabhu temple',³² after a *pūjā* is performed inside the 'temple' and a procession through the village [fig. 6].

The information we have about Madiyal is nothing short of scarce. The village is dominated by what appear to be the remains of a small citadel, of which however only a tower remains, along with a few collapsed walls and at least a couple of ancient temples with inscriptions in Kannada [fig. 7]. As often happens, the reuse of building material for the construction of the village houses has further compromised the conservation of the entire site. Although the analysis of the evidence found is currently underway and few conclusions can thus be drawn on the history of the place, some sculptures of elephants emerging from the ground [fig. 8] - found in one of the main streets of the village and in front of one of the damaged temple structures - would suggest at least a Chalukyan (ca. 975-1189) phase of patronage, before the whole area fell under the control of the Islamic dynasties. While these sculptures are very ruined today and used inappropriately by the population, in terms of their style and decora-

31 According to the 2011 census.

32 The geographic coordinates of the so-called 'Allama Prahbu temple' in Madiyal are 17°23'21.1"N 76°29'36.1"E.



Figure 7 Ruins in the village of Madiyal. Photo by Sara Mondini

Figure 8 Elephant sculpture emerging from the ground in the village of Madiyal. Photo by Sara Mondini

tive elements they seem to recall the rock-cut elephants so typical of the dynasty's production – for example, those of the Thousand Pillar Temple of Warangal (present-day Telangana), dating back to 1163 CE.

According to Sikand, the choice of Madiyal as a starting point for the annual pilgrimage is due to the existence there of a “small structure” devoted to Aḥmad Shāh and associated with legendary events in his life (2003, 84-6).³³ Nevertheless, the complex from which the Vīraśaiva *jaṅgam* sets out to reach Ashtur is regarded today as a ‘temple’ dedicated to Allama Prabhu, and its connection with Aḥmad Shāh remains unclear. The local accounts I have personally collected during the pilgrimage and during my research in the region differ considerably from, and often clashes with, the data recorded by Sikand as regards the exact relationship of the Madiyal complex with Aḥmad Shāh and Allama Prabhu. Devadevan, in his above-quoted work, refers to the site in Madiyal as a “tomb-replica” of the Ashtur one, and reports that in Madiyal Koḍēkallu Basava is worshiped as Allama (2016, 103).

The sharing of sacred sites by the various religious communities and the role and perception of architecture in northern Karnataka are yet to be systematically researched, and this also applies to the sites that interest us. The majority of structures have not been published and for many of them we have only fragmentary information, frequently imbued with local or popular beliefs.³⁴

The Madiyal ‘temple’ complex appears heavily restored today, and this makes it difficult to precisely identify its original shape and appearance [fig. 9]. Still, it is extremely interesting from an architectural point of view. Located in an elevated position at the centre of the village, this complex consists of several structures enclosed by an outer wall and is accessible through a monumental gateway. The three main structures that compose the complex are erected on a basement and are aligned along the same axis; all three have a quadrangular shape and are covered by a dome, and each is open on the northeast side. Next to them is a further basement on which is positioned what was probably originally intended to be a gravestone. Two additional structures – one leaning against the monumental gateway and the outer wall (on the northern corner), the other on the northern side of the outer wall – are almost unrecognizable today owing to the poor state of conservation. While the wall and the collateral structures are extremely damaged, the recent heavy restoration

³³ In a more recent publication Sikand has defined the ‘temple’ in Madiyal a “subsidiary shrine of Sultan Ahmad” (2017, 178).

³⁴ As already mentioned, studies devoted to the sharing of sacred spaces by Muslims and Vīraśaivas in the region have generally focussed on frequentations and practices, and often, while mentioning relevant sites and buildings, they do not provide accurate descriptions of their architecture, stylistic analyses, or an interpretation of their spaces.



Figure 9 The 'Allama Prabhu temple' in the village of Madiyal. Photo by Sara Mondini

makes it difficult to recognize the original functions of the complex and has altered those artistic features that could have helped date and reconstruct the history of the complex. However, despite these difficulties, the presence of burials within the three main structures suggests that the complex may have originally been conceived as a *dargāh*. This appears to be confirmed by the presence of some of the distinctive formal characteristics of such buildings in South Asia: the complex is located in an elevated position within the village, it has a monumental gateway [fig. 10], and it includes at least three structures whose essential shape – a quadrangular building covered by a dome – is consistent with the typical model adopted for mausoleums in India. This also seems to be confirmed by the presence of a cenotaph inside each of the monuments, today covered by the typical shrouds used in Muslim *khānqāhs* and *dargāhs*.³⁵

³⁵ The idea would be further supported by Sikand who states that “till 1948, this area formed part of the vast dominions of the Muslim Nizams of Hyderabad, and Hindus and Muslims would regularly visit these Muslim-style shrines. Since 1948, when the Indian armed forces overran Hyderabad and incorporated it into the Indian Union, in the course of which scores of Muslims were killed, these shrines have been undergoing a rapid process of Hinduization. In 1948, a Shiva *lingam* is said to have been forcibly installed on the Muslim grave-like structure at the subsidiary shrine of Sultan Ah-



Figure 10 Monumental gateway of the 'Allama Prabhu temple' in the village of Madiyal. Photo by Sara Mondini

The main presumably funerary structure, which is larger in size and today actually has the function of a temple, appears to have been recently renovated and adapted to meet the needs of 'Viraśaiva rituals'. Furthermore, iconographic representations of Hindu demigods have been added on the minor basements - that could hypothetically host further burials - and dislocated within the space of the complex. The formal elements, although attributable to the Islamic-Indian architectural vocabulary, can only partially help formulate hypotheses as regards the dating and attribution of the complex.

It seems plausible to hypothesize that the complex was expanded over the decades - a development quite typical for *dargāhs* in the region - and then, in more recent times, progressively underwent a more pronounced transformation into a Viraśaiva site. However, while it remains difficult to speculate on the major mausoleum-temple on account of its the recent restyling, the more bulbous profiles adopted for the domes of the minor structures seem to emulate those Central Asian models which spread across this area mainly from the mid-15th century onward. On the one hand, although the walls are tapered, the simplicity of their decorative schemes and of the mer-

mad at Mudiyal" (2017, 178), nevertheless Sikand does not mention any sources to support his statements.



Figure 11 Minor structures in the 'Allama Prabhu temple' in the village of Madiyal. Photo by Sara Mondini

lons might lead us to date the foundation of the complex to the early Bahmanī period or even to the years of Tughluq (1321-98) rule over the area. On the other hand, the mature shape of some of the salient formal elements certainly push the construction date forward, to the 15th century, if not later. The domes' profiles and their finials, and the shape of the arches' extradoses seem to be too elaborate to date to an early Bahmanī period [fig. 11]. Moreover, the kind of ring of petals occurring around the base of one of the minor domes appears to have been introduced in Gulbarga only during the reign of Fīrūz Shāh Bahmanī (r. 1397-1422); in a more elaborate shape, it became a defining feature of the 'Ādil Shāhī architectural vocabulary (between the late 16th and the early 17th century).

The *guldastās* crowning the monumental gateway could be dated perhaps to an early Baridi phase (ca. 1487-1619) on account of their shape – they are high and culminate with small domes surrounded by crowns of petals at the base. If the original functions of *dargāh* – or in any case of funeral complex – are confirmed, it would be logical to assume that the complex was enlarged over the time and that its various patrons – as often happens with structures of this kind – introduced stylistic elements specific to the artistic vocabulary adopted.

What makes it even harder to date the complex is the continuous and invasive renovation work that has taken place in recent years – and up to the present day – altering its original appearance.



Figure 12 The *janigam* inside the 'Allama Prabhu temple' in the village of Madiyal. Photo by Sara Mondini

From a visual (and ritual) point of view, the main structure certainly has the greatest impact. Although, as already mentioned, it has been presumably transformed from a mausoleum into a 'temple', and adapted to the needs of a Viraśaiva cult, its interior remains that of an 'Islamic' mausoleum. A series of objects - probably original - preserved in the interior might help date the structure, but access and the possibility to study the small collection of objects has not been granted. Moreover, local witnesses speak of an alleged inscription, in Arabic or Persian, on the cenotaph or in any case inside the mausoleum,³⁶ but again I was not allowed to verify this. Throughout its history the complex has been enriched by 'Hindu' elements, such as sculptural representations of gods and demigods, today also an object of cult practices. It is hard to establish how recent this 'transformation' might be, with the reshaping of the main structure, its appropriation by the Viraśaivas, and the addition of 'new' iconographic elements. However, despite the coexistence of rituals, in terms of perception, as in the case of Ashtur, the site remains strongly 'Islamic'. Indeed, from an architectural and decorative point of view, owing to the distribution and conception of the spaces, it still remains indisputably attributable to the regional Indo-Islamic tradition. Even some ritual practices, such as listening to music and poetry (*samā'*) on Thursdays, or the visiting of the complex on Thursday evening, evoke the Sufi practices associated with *dargāhs*.

Although, much as in the case of Ashtur, the Madiyal complex is frequented by both Viraśaivas and Muslims - and not just for the 'urs celebrations - what we have is a religious complex 'controlled' by the Viraśaivas. The maintenance and performance of rituals are in the hands not of a *mutawallī*, as generally happens in *dargāhs*, but of the Viraśaiva *jaṅgam* and his family, who lives in a small building adjacent to the complex, along the northern outer wall. Access to what I have called the mausoleums remains forbidden to devotees - only the *jaṅgam* can access them for ritual purposes [fig. 12].

It is clear that at the present state of the investigations, any precise attribution or reconstruction of the edification phases of the complex is hard. However, as mentioned, local devotees today refer to the complex as the 'Allama Prahbu temple', and both Viraśaivas and Muslims acknowledge its connection with 'Sultan Basha', as in the case of the Ashtur mausoleum. If the local attribution were confirmed, we could date the complex approximately to the 1420s-1440s, which is to say to Aḥmad Shāh's reign, or the years immediately af-

36 Similarly to what has been noted with regard to the Aḥmad Shāh mausoleum, where Tarikere (1998) mentions the presence of a devanagari inscription reporting the name of Allama Prahbu, here some devotees affirm that the inscription inside the temple-structure of Madiyal bears the name of Allama Prahbu (see footnote 25).

ter his death. Certainly, a reconstruction of the site's context, and an in-depth study of the village, with its numerous ruins and traces of pre-Islamic and Islamic patronage, would help understand the historical function of the site and its significance.

6 From the Yātrā to a Shared Sacred Geography

The fact that both Muslims and Vīraśaivas share the same sites is far from surprising, particularly in the context of the Deccan. As already noted, the region has always been marked by religious encounters and intersections. The presence of various religious sites charged with complex symbolic juxtapositions and providing a setting for shared rituals bears witness to this complexity.

As mentioned, a range of different powers are attributed to Aḥmad Shāh and are recognized by the Vīraśaivas by virtue of the sovereign's alleged connection with Allama Prahbu. As is customary, after the ruler-saint's death the powers attributed to him were transferred to his tomb, which became a symbol of his presence and charisma (Werbner, Basu 1998, 3-20), as well as a physical means to transmit the powers he exercised during his life. These powers have come to be extended to the site as a whole – as clearly confirmed by the fact that pilgrims feel it is important for them to spend the days of the *jātrā* at the site itself, near the other structures touched by the pilgrimage, and in those surrounding areas believed to be connected to them.

A study of cults and ritual practices connected both to the Ash-tur mausoleum and to the Madiyal complex has brought to light the sharing of a sacred geography by different religious communities, but also the kind of competition and negotiation that over the past decades has been remodelling and redefining both the sites and the historical and cultural landscape. Although, as mentioned, very little research has been carried out in the region on those buildings that are the setting of this sharing, during the pilgrimage from Madiyal to Ashtur and the final *jātrā*, I was able to envisage a first network of shared sacred sites. Sikand states that

Sultan Ahmad has several subsidiary shrines dedicated to him at various places in the Bidar and Gulbarga districts [and that] these are believed to actually have been *chillahs*³⁷ marking places where the Sultan halted on his journeys. Alternately, they may have been *dargah*-like structures dedicated to the Sultan built on lands granted by him to various Lingayat families as *jagirs*. (2017, 178)

37 *Chillah*, in the Sufi context, refers to a solitary retreat, traditionally of forty days, dedicated to spiritual exercises and practices of penance.

Despite the original functions and histories of these sites remain unclear, the ongoing observation of their architecture seems to reveal a process of rewriting of their history and the use of their newly constructed identity for political purposes, namely the self-promotion of various leaders during local campaigns and the reinforcing of the identity of the various religious communities. Although today it is difficult to reconstruct the motivations, salient stages and chronology of these interactions and disputes between the Muslim and the Viraśaiva communities, and above all to trace their effects on the architecture over the centuries, there is no doubt that we are dealing with a major phenomenon in northern Karnataka.

During the most recent research conducted in the region, two further complexes emerged in the surroundings of Aland, in the district of Gulbarga, both frequented by Muslims and Viraśaivas, connected to 'Sultan Basha', and involved in the celebrations for Aḥmad Shāh's 'urs. Once the Ashtur *jātrā* is over, in fact, the pilgrims move to further *jātrās* on the two sites which are characterized by similar rituals held by the local *janīgams*. While the study of Madiyal is already challenging enough, at the moment the absence of any element on which to base investigations pertaining to these two additional sites makes it even more difficult to approach them.

The two complexes are respectively known as the Prabhuling Temple in the village of Hebli and the Shree Prabhuling Temple in the village of Jeerhalli.³⁸ Each year devotees leave these villages for Madiyal to participate in the pilgrimage to Ashtur. Both structures, which the devotees regard as 'temples', are difficult to approach because of the heavy restorations and transformations they have undergone. The Hebli 'temple' is made up of several structures similar to those encountered in Madyal [fig. 13]. Like the Madiyal complex, in terms of its layout, the typology of its structures and the distribution of its spaces, it is reminiscent of a *dargāh*. The recent restorations do not allow us to draw any conclusion on the style; however, a structure immediately outside the outer wall seems to be attributable to Islamic patronage and is presumably ascribable to the 15th or 16th century [fig. 14]. In the Jeerhalli complex, the analysis is even more difficult, as the structure identified as a temple is a new construction, probably dating back to a few years ago. Sikand too remarks how the shrine has been now completely 'Hinduized', and "its Muslim-style domes have been torn down, and replaced with a Hindu-style tower (*shikara*)" (2017, 179). According to him the transformation of the "grave-like structure" would date sometime in the mid-1990s, when militant Hindutva groups be-

38 The geographic coordinates of the two small sites are: 17°58'61.15"N 76°49'90.76"E for the Prabhuling Temple in Hebli and 17°33'36.0"N 76°30'52.0"E for the Shree Prabhuling Temple in Jeerhalli.



Figure 13 The Hebli complex. Photo by Sara Mondini

Figure 14 The Hebli complex and a further structure immediately outside the outer wall. Photo by Sara Mondini



Figure 15 The Jeerhalli complex. Photo by Sara Mondini

came increasingly popular in some districts of Karnataka and would have add a platform with a *śiva linga* - thus eventually transforming a mausoleum into a temple - and installed “pictures and idols of various Hindu deities at the entrance of the inner chamber of the shrine” (Sikand 2017, 179 and in particular fn. 9) [fig. 15].

However, the outer wall and the monumental gateway to the site seem to have remained unaltered and are stylistically ascribable to the regional Indo-Islamic architectural tradition. In both complexes it is possible to notice the presence of further iconographies, such as sculptural representations of Hindu gods or demigods that do not seem to have originally belonged to the sites.

Although further speculation on the structures is difficult in the absence of more detailed information and further analyses, the ritual practices and their sharing by the two religious communities appear quite similar to what has been observed in Ashtur and Madiyal. These structures too are perceived by devotees as linked to ‘Sultan Basha’. Further elements that all the structures considered here seem to share are a ‘tension’ between different artistic vocabularies and the continuous transformation which they have undergone.³⁹ To

³⁹ Contrary to what I have observed and the testimonies I have collected, Sikand remarks how “the denial of the cult’s Muslim links is apparent in the stories that are now

a certain extent, these peculiar features evoke other geographically distant sites in central Karnataka that are not connected to the pilgrimage we have been examining, but which also represent an object of sharing or contention between Muslims, Viraśaivas and Hindus. One emblematic example in this sense is the Sangamanatha Temple in Kaginele (Kaginele).⁴⁰ Here the renovation, partial destruction and reconstruction of the monument is an essential part of the process of 'retrieval' or 'construction' of memories and identities, and the attention to the artistic vocabularies implied in the shared or contested sites acquires a crucial role. The perception of a shared sacred site as 'too Islamic' or 'not Islamic enough' becomes an ideal justification for extremist groups to promote processes of radical reshaping and renovation which erase the appearance of the original or historical foundation and the values it embodies.

Although the investigations of sites and architectures that make up this sacred geography shared by Muslims and Viraśaivas are only in their preliminary phases, the importance of their results for understanding the religious, social and political context has already clearly emerged. On the one hand, this kind of research could help better depict that climate of fluidity and overlap between Viraśaivas and Muslims that has been repeatedly evoked here and that characterizes both artistic patronage and the political and religious scene in the Deccan between the 14th and the 16th century. The analysis of the monuments as 'witnesses' to and 'products' of this religious complexity would help reconstruct - when at all possible - the religious context of this area during the Bahmanī period and after the dynasty's decline. On the other hand, it would also shed light on how this heritage is perceived today and how it has become part of political and social discourses, at times transforming the many sites surveyed into disputed spaces, spaces of conquest, and sites of confrontation.

A progressive understanding of the historical roots of this network of shared sacred sites appears to be crucial in order to try and ease the tension and competition between the Viraśaiva and Muslim communities in certain Deccani districts, which have transposed and inscribed on the cultural historical landscape. This kind of research can also help avert the risk of irreversible appropriations, which could engulf and transfigure sacred spaces and monuments whose history and identity would then be lost.

told to explain its origins. The Lingayat custodians of these shrines deny any association with Sultan Ahmad and insist that Allama Prabhu and Sultan Ahmad are two distinct figures" (Sikand 2017, 179).

40 The case of Kaginele and the competition and transformations of its sites is also mentioned by Devadevan (2016, 115-16, note 403).

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