



Written in Stone: Negotiating Space and Religious Identity in South India

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The 7th to 8th centuries CE represent a watershed within Tamil history. This period is marked by the spread of Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava devotionalism, and, as dominant historical narratives would suggest, the defeat and decline of Jainism and Buddhism throughout Tamil Nadu. However, epigraphic, archaeological, and literary sources problematize this latter aspect by presenting a substantial body of evidence attesting to the creative presence and agency of Jain monastic communities. Rather than decline and defeat, the data suggest both productive and antagonistic engagement between the Jains and Brahmanas. This paper will demonstrate the ways in which the physical and sacred landscapes of Tamil Nadu became important sites for heightened inter-religious interaction in the latter half of the first millennium CE. In particular, it will explore how Jain and Brahmanical religious communities sought to claim sacred hill sites by physically marking them with inscriptions, relief images, and temples. It will be argued that landscape was a critical medium through which both Jains and Śaivites in South India conceptualized and negotiated their religious identity.