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Translating Tamil Caṅkam Poetry: Taking Stock

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1. The available translations of Classical Tamil Caṅkam (from Sanskrit saṅgha-, “community”) poetry1 can be divided into roughly two types, one comprising poetic translations which but for a general introduction to the poetic tradition should speak for themselves, and the other annotated, literal translations. For the first category the tone has been set by A.K. Ramanujan. Ramanujan was a poet in his own right and his translations from Caṅkam poetry were meant to be savoured and enjoyed just like that, without introduction; the poetic tradition is explained in an “Afterword” in each book.2 His translations are a true pleasure to read and have no doubt attracted many students to the study of Classical Tamil. A sense of the same ambition may be gained from the translations by George L. Hart III,3 Hart and Hank Heifetz4 (henceforth HH), M. Shanmugam Pillai and David E. Ludden,5 and Martha Ann Selby,6 as well as, to a lesser extent, from those by J. V. Chelliah,7 V. Murugan8 or A. Dakshinamurthy9. This does not mean, however, that these translations are accurate. Their authors tend to follow the commentaries, old ones if available, and, if not, modern ones produced by the nineteenth- or twentieth-century editors of the texts. What is striking is the seemingly complete absence on the translators’ part of an urge to question the interpretations offered in this secondary material, even in the face of an impossible meaning or ungrammatical construction. As a discipline, Classical Tamil studies appears to lack a philosophical tradition such as has developed in its neighbour Sanskrit studies.

In this respect the translations of the second, literal type, show no improvement. An early example of this type is N. Kandasamy Pillai’s translation of the Narriṇai, completed in the 1960s but published only in

1 According to the indigenous literary tradition the poems are the work of the members of an ‘academy’ established at Madurai.

2 The Interior Landscape. Love Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology. (UNESCO Collection of Representative Works, Indian Series.) Bloomington/London: Indiana University Press 1967. — Poems of Love and War. From the Eight Anthologies and the Ten Long Poems of Classical Tamil. (UNESCO Collection of Representative Works, Indian Series.) New York: Columbia University Press 1985.

3 Poets of the Tamil Anthologies. Ancient Poems of Love and War. (Princeton Library of Asian Translations.) Princeton: Princeton University Press 1979. — The Four Hundred Songs of Love. An Anthology of Poems from Classical Tamil. The Akanāṉūṟu. (Regards sur l’Asie du Sud 7.) Pondichéry: Institut français de Pondichéry 2015.

4 The Four Hundred Songs of War and Wisdom. An Anthology of Poems from Classical Tamil. The Puranāṉūṟu. (Translations from the Asian Classics.) New York: Columbia University Press 1999.

5 Kuṟuntokai. An Anthology of Classical Tamil Love Poetry. Madurai: Koodal Publishers 1976.

6 Tamil Love Poetry. The Five Hundred Short Poems of the Aiñkurunūṟu, an Early Third-Century Anthology. (Translations from the Asian Classics.) New York: Columbia University Press 2011.

7 Pattuppattu. Ten Tamil Idylls. Second edition. Madras: South India Saiva Siddhanta Works Publishing Society 1962. (First edition Colombo: General Publishers 1946.)

8 Kalitokai in English. Translation with Critical Introduction and Glossary. Chennai: Institute of Asian Studies 1999.

9 The Narriṇai Four Hundred. Chennai: International Institute of Tamil Studies 2001.
of the complete Caṅkam corpus – the first of their kind, based on manuscripts and earlier editions – so we may expect to see more of them. However, if we should look forward to them is another matter. In translating the poems Wilden has decided to ignore the commentaries as well as the traditional poetical tradition accompanying the poems, which, she claims, would only blur our vision of the original text. Instead, she provides literal translations (“as literal as possible”) together with notes and “a host of question marks (a punctuation mark that has, in my opinion, been used all too sparingly in Caṅkam philology as a whole)”, and “avoids” to go into the “possible implications” of the words of the poems; if the outcome is unintelligible, she writes, which it often is, the “exercise … might teach [us] the limits both of a mere philological approach and of the traditional approach guided by poetics” (Wilden 2010: 30 f.). It seems that Wilden calls her approach a philological one (in the Continental meaning of the term). This is not the place to quibble about definitions of philology. However, if for traces of philology we have to turn to Wilden’s notes and question marks, expressly lacking any investigative intention, then these can hardly be called philology by any standard. Furthermore, if her approach is indeed meant to be didactic, she fails to offer guidelines on how to tackle problems; the many question marks, for instance, if at all relevant, time and again prove to be mere dead-end streets. But Wilden’s lack of interest in the meaning of the poems also affects her work as an editor, for how else can one select from among available variant readings than on the basis of the meaning of the text?

These are grave allegations, which of course need to be substantiated. The aim of the following is this very substantiation, as well as to offer suggestions on how the poems should be approached.

2. For determining the meaning of a Caṅkam poem it is important to realise that the poem does not exist in isolation, but is one of a group of poems dealing with similar themes, situations and expressions. The Caṅkam corpus falls apart into two categories, that of Akam, or “the inner world”, and of Puṟam, or the “exterior world”. While Akam is often equated with love poetry, it is better to speak of poetry about village life, depicting the unhappy love lives of people living in small villages in the countryside. Akam poems have been fruitfully compared to the Prakrit poems of Hāla’s Sattasai. Puṟam, on the other hand, is characterised as heroic poetry, but as in the case of Akam that description covers the poem’s content only partly. In the Puṟam poems we hear wandering bards praising kings and begging these to support them and their families.

Caṅkam poems present someone speaking to someone else (or to one’s self), in the Puṟam poems a poor bard, in the Akam village poems an unhappy lover. The auditor’s or reader’s task is to identify the problem the speaker is experiencing or commenting upon and what her (in most village poems it is a woman) or his intentions are. This is also the main task the traditional poetical tradition had set itself. It is simplified by the fact that the more than 3000 poems revolve around a restricted number of situations in the villagers’ love lives or the kings’ roles as warriors or patrons of bards. Therefore, in the case of an unclear poem it might help to look at other poems dealing with a similar theme.

Furthermore, we now have several grammars of the language of the poems, which tell us in full detail what is grammatically possible and, by implication, what is not. There is, moreover, a good dictionary, and there are two word indexes covering the entire corpus.

10 Narriṇai. Text and Translation. (Publications hors série 7.) Pondichéry: Institut français de Pondichéry 2008. Cf. on this work Herman Tieken’s review in Asiatische Studien/Études Asiatiques 63 (2009): 771–774.
11 See also Wilden 2018: lxxii.
12 In my translations, round brackets mark explanations to and square brackets insertions within the translation. But in extracts from someone else’s translation, round brackets mark insertions from other portions of the same translation, and square brackets my own insertions; if these latter are explanations, then they are inside round brackets within square brackets.
13 See George L. Hart III: The Poems of Ancient Tamil. Their Milieu and their Sanskrit Counterparts. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press 1975, and, with different conclusions, Herman Tieken: Kāvya in South India. Old Tamil Caṅkam Poetry. (Gonda Indological Series 10.) Groningen: Egbert Forsten 2001 (reprint with new preface New Delhi: Manohar 2017).
14 E.g. V. S. Rajam: A Reference Grammar of Classical Tamil Poetry (150 B.C.–Pre-fifth/sixth Century A.D.). (Memoirs of the American Philosophical Society 199.) Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society 1992, and, Thomas Lehmann: Grammatik des Alt tamil unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Caṅkam-Texte des Dichters Kapilar. (Beiträge zur Südasienforschung 159.) Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag 1994.
15 Tamil Lexicon. Published under the authority of the University of Madras. Six volumes and Supplement. Madras: University of Madras 1924–1939 (reprinted 1982).
16 Index des mots de la littérature tamoule ancienne. (Publications de l’Institut français d’Indologie 37). Three volumes. Pondichéry: Institut français d’Indologie 1967–1970, and, Thomas Lehmann, Thomas Malten: A Word Index of Old Tamil Caṅkam Literature. (Beiträge zur Südasienforschung 147.) Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag 1992.
Elegant though this translation may be – HH’s more recent translation (1999: 61) differs only in details –, it is wrong. Ramanujan apparently saw no reason to doubt the information found in the commentary, according to which cāṟu in the first line of the poem (cāṟu talaikkōṭina) would mean “festival”. However, he might have asked what festival we are dealing with, which starts at sunset in the wet rainy season, when the nights are, moreover, extremely dark. More importantly, a study of the other instances of the word cāṟu in the Caṅkam poems would have shown that here it means not “festival” but “mud”; cāṟu is just one way of spelling /cēṟu/, the other being ōcēṟu “mud” (also “pulp, juice”). The man depicted in the poem is hurrying to finish the raised bed before sunset so that his pregnant wife can lie upon it, as otherwise she would have to lie on the ground muddy due to the rain. In this connection it should be noted that we are dealing with a poor couple; the man is iḷicćinaṅ “low-caste, uncivilised”. Such people do indeed usually sleep on the ground, and the earthen floors of huts do tend to become muddy or even water-logged through seepage from outside when rains are heavy.

Equally problematic is Selby’s translation (p. 29) of Aiṅkuṟunūṟu 20. The 500 poems of the Aiṅkuṟunūṟu are arranged in groups of ten, the poems of each decade sharing the same word or phrase. For instance, those of the second all contain the word “bamboo”. In her translation Selby follows this division and to each decade has added an introduction briefly indicating the situations dealt with in the individual poems. About Aiṅkuṟunūṟu 20 she writes (p. 27) that “the heroine describes the dashing of her domestic hopes, blaming her ruin on the hollow reeds. Her bangles slip from her wrists because her anxiety has caused her to grow thin – this is a common convention throughout the anthology, and throughout South Asian literature as a whole.” The translation runs:

Thinking of that man
from the place near the riverbank
where tubular reeds as hollow as bamboo
rip out eggs laid in a hundred-petaled lotus
by a tiny-legged dragonfly with iridescent wings,
the beautiful, gleaming bangles
slip from my wrists.

For practical reasons, when quoting Tamil words in isolation I shall dissolve the sandhi, thus, e.g., iṟiyit and not yiyiṟiṟi, ḍiyit and not yāyittai, or iriyiti and ēni and not virutta and vēṇi (in vēṇṇpaṭa vēṟutta vēṇi), as well as mēḷ nilā instead of mēṇilā.

Unfortunately, the editors of these Tamil texts do not distinguish, e.g. by using different fonts, between the old commentaries and their own explanations.

Strangely, she studied Sanskrit and Tamil at Hamburg under two eminent philologists, Albrecht Wezler and Srinivasa Ayya Srinivasan respectively.

For a review of Selby’s translations see Herman Tieken: “On a Recent Translation of Classical Tamil Love Poetry”, Asiatische Studien/Études Asiatiques 66 (2012): 811–832.
It is basically a paraphrase of the commentary of Po. Vē. Cōmacuntaraṉār, the editor of the text. 22 It is also a good example of what can go wrong by relying too much on such secondary sources. However, I would like to begin with what seems to be Selby’s own contribution, namely the translation of tumpi “bee” with “dragonfly”. 23 Probably she opted for this more exotic insect because bees do not lay eggs in flowers. But neither do dragonflies, who lay their eggs in the water. For the rest Selby’s translation is based on a failure to understand the grammatical structure of the passage tumpi nūṟṟitaḻ tāmarai pūcciṉai cīkkum, 24 which she obviously analyses as “where reeds rip out (cīkkum) egg(s) (ciṉai) of the dragonfly (tumpi) in the flower (pū(c)) of the hundred-petalled (nūṟrītal) lotus (tāmarai)”, but which should have been translated as “where a bee brushes against (cīkkum) the swollen pistil (ciṉai) of the flower (pū) of the hundred-petalled lotus”; the bee is the subject of the participle cīkkum, not the reed (vēḻattu). It is an open question, though, if the participle cīkkum is dependent on “reed” or on the “village”, i.e. īr in īrānai “the man from the village” (“in which bees [fly around] brushing against ...”). In either case, the reed cannot be blamed for the woman’s marital problems, as Selby would have it; it has a purely decorative function in the poem. The woman is not complaining about her husband, but about her lover (the bee) who is unwilling to leave his pregnant wife (the lotus with swollen pistil) for her.

3. Puṟanāṉūṟu 343 offers a variation on the common theme of a king who refuses to give his daughter in marriage to a warrior with royal ambitions. The latter takes the refusal as a challenge, which results in an all-out war between the two. As in the poem concerned, this war usually ends in the destruction of the king’s town. HH’s translation (pp. 195 f.) reads:

“In Muciṟi25 with its drums, where the ocean roars, where the paddy traded for fish and stacked high on the boats make boats and houses look the same

and the sacks of pepper raised up beside them make the houses look the same as the tumultuous shore and the golden wares brought by the ships are carried to land in the servicing boats, Kūṟuvaṉ its king to whom toddy is no more valuable than water, who wears a shining garland, gives out gifts of goods from the mountains along with goods from the sea to those who have come to him. Even if you humbly bring and bestow as much fine and copious wealth as that city possesses, she will not marry someone who is unworthy of her.” So says her father and will not grant her hand. Think! Will the tall city suffer where sighing kites sleep on the middle wall of the fort, the roads hard to conquer are filled with weapons, but ladders have been thrown up by men who have come to force their way in!

The notes to this poem (pp. 324 f.) concern mainly realia, such as the type of drums (line 1) and the nature of the sea trade and the storage of goods in the harbour (lines 2–7). On lines 14–17 they say: “the kite is meant as a bad omen, and the men with weapons on the roads belong to the enemy king”. But are there really men with weapons on the roads? Moreover, we are most probably dealing not with kites, but with vultures, 26 taking a rest after having eaten their fill on the dead bodies of the soldiers who had in vain tried to prevent the enemy from entering the town.

The translation of the last six lines of the poem need closer consideration for other reasons as well. They read:

puraiyar allōr varaiyalar[al ival enat- tantaiyai koṭāan āyiṉ vantōr väḷḷitaṟ vaṟuṭta vēṇi āyiṭai varuntiṉṟu kollō tāṉē paruntuyir- tiṭaimatiṟ cēkkum puricaiṉ- paṭai mayatkaaritai netunālēr.

In HH’s translation, the (bolded) expression āyiṭai at the end of the third line is ignored. However, as the approximately 25 instances in the Caṅkam poems show, āyiṭai invariably heads a new sentence, referring back to the preceding sentence or sentences, and meaning something like “in the middle of that”. 27 This can be substantiated by examples of the use of āyiṭai in some other Caṅkam poems.

22 Tinnevelly: South India Saiva Siddhanta Works Publishing Society 1966.
23 According to the Tamil Lexicon (see note 15), p. 1971 the meaning “dragonfly” is found only in “other” dictionaries, i.e. is not substantiated by the evidence of the texts used for the lexicon.
24 The complete Tamil text of Aṅkuṟunūṟu 20 reads: arucil kāla vaićiṟai aiṟum
nūṟrītaḻt tāmarai pūccinai cīkkum
kāmpukantaṇa tūmпутai vēḻattu
paruntu yāṟaiṟai yulliyeṇ
niṟaiyē elvaḷai nekiḻpoṭumē.
25 A seaport town in present-day Kerala on India’s west coast.
26 For paruntu the Tamil Lexicon, p. 2522 does give the meaning “common kite”, but, according to T. Burrow and M. B. Emeneau (A Dravidian Etymological Dictionary [= DED]. Second edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press 1984, no. 3977), regional Tamil varieties of the term refer to vultures, and its counterparts in other Dravidian languages refer to eagles, vultures and falcons as well.
27 In Rajam’s (see note 16) treatment of āyiṭai among the case markers and postpositions (p. 311), this particular use of the word is lost.
A good example is found in the preceding Puṟanāṉūṟu 341. This poem begins with two sentences, each ending on a finite verb, puk-kananē “he entered” and attoṇaanē “he touched, laid his hand on” respectively. Its theme is the same as that of 343: The girl’s father, to prepare himself for battle has bathed in a reservoir (kayam puk-kananē), and the chieftain, while laying his hand on his weapon (patai attoṇaanē karicit), vows (VH: 1941): “Either tomorrow I will marry that girl … or else … I will go to the world from which no one returns”. The following passage paints the consequences of the coming battle (HH: 195): “This cool city by the river with its fertile tracts of land, will surely lose its great beauty …”. However, it is introduced by āyiṭai, not represented in the translation. With āyiṭai we obtain: “In the middle of that (= Caught between these two warriors), this cool city by the river …”. 

Another clear example of āyiṭai is found in Naṟṟiṇai 284, in which two sentences are followed by one introduced by āyiṭai. The following translation by E. Annamalai and Harold F. Schiffman28 speaks for itself:

My heart says, “Go to her, unbind the thongs of suffering from her soul”. She of the cool-looded eyes, whose outlines are dark kuvaiṉ blossoms, and long black tresses hanging low. My mind: “A job undone will bring disgrace; rush not!”. My body bears the tension of these two [(āyiṭai)] – a worn-out rope pulled from both ends by elephants with bright upswinging shiny tusks.29

Puṟanāṉūṟu 343 differs from these two poems in that āyiṭai is preceded not by two sentences but only by one, concluded by the finite verb koṭāan. Moreover, it is turned into a conditional sentence by the addition of āyin “if [he] is/had been” after koṭāan “he does/did not give”. Constructions of the type koṭāan āyin ... āyiṭai are found elsewhere too, for instance in Kuṟuntokai 111.

In this poem a young girl speaks to a friend. The girl has fallen in love with a man from the mountains who after their first meeting seems to have lost interest, or the courage, to come down to her village. As a result she has become ill and grown thin. Her worried parents have consulted a village priest dedicated to Murukaṉ. In most poems where this priest occurs he has no inkling of the real cause of the girl’s illness, but has both a standard diagnosis – the girl is possessed by ‘his’ god Murukaṉ – and a standard cure, sacrificing a goat. The girl’s mother is quick to accept the priest’s diagnosis in order to allay the other family members’ suspicion that her daughter has fallen in love with a stranger. Through her friend the girl lets her lover know that if he wants to meet her he should come now, as her family, fooled by the foolish priest, is off guard, which, however, will not be for long, for they both know all too well that the remedy will not work.

The poem starts with two sentences each ending with a finite verb, ennum “he (the priest) will say” and uṉarum, “she (the mother), will think”: menṉēṉēḻita cellal vēḷari veṇṟi netiyeṉ ennum “The vēḷar priest will say that the illness, which makes my shoulders droop, is caused by the victorious long spear [of Murukaṉ]”, and appaiyam atutem etuṇarum “and mother will believe that that is indeed what is the matter with me”. After uṉarum stands āyin “if”, literally “if that happens”, the conditional of the verb ā- “be, occur”. After that, as the last word of the line, we find āyiṭai, heading the following sentence:

... āyiṭai kūḻai yirumpitik ka karantaṅagā kēḻiruṇtaṅaṟ kaḷumalai nāṭaṉ vallē varuka tōḻi namm illōr perunkai kāniya ciṟitē.

In this case āyiṭai “in the middle of that” is best reproduced simply with “then”:

Then the man from the (that) high mountain, which is covered with shining black stones resembling ever so many small elephant cows which have hidden their trunks, should come immediately to have a quick (ciṟitē) look at the great joy enjoyed by the people in our house (about the priest’s diagnosis).31

From this account of the meaning of āyiṭai it will be clear that the words vantōr vāyppatā viṟutta vēṇī32 in Puṟanāṉūṟu 343 have somehow to be fitted into the sentence tantaivūn koṭāan (āyin) “(if) her father (tantaiv) ... will not grant/had not granted (koṭāan)”, i.e. the sentence about the ladders has somehow to be included in the one governed by the finite verb koṭāan. This verb koṭu- is indeed most commonly used in the meaning “give”, which led HH to supply the king’s daughter’s hand as its object (“her

30 Wilden (2010: 301) translates (the square brackets being hers): “Quickly he may come … in order to see the great laughter among those in our house on the occasion of the priest’s saying ... [it is] Murukaṉ ... and mother realises: That’s it!”. However, I fail to understand the note appended to “on the occasion” (āyiṭai): “My proposition is to read vēḷan ennum + appaiyam uṉarum as dependent on āyin āyiṭai (parallel construction: subject plus habitual future positioned at the end of the preceding line), and connected by -um”. Does she mean that -um in ennum and uṉarum is the ending of the habitual future (it is!) or the particle -um”and” (it is not)!

31 Not directly related to the poem’s structure is the question of the message contained in the description of the mountain, that makes up Ramanuṉa’s “interior landscape” (cf. note 2 above). As I see it, where the man comes from people know how to hide their true nature, a quality he should use when he comes down to the girl’s village. He need not fear that her family will notice that he is her lover.

32 In HH’s translation: “but ladders [(ēṇi)] have been thrown up [(irutta)] by men who have come [(vantōr)] to force their way in [(vāyppatā)]”.

28 As quoted by Kamil Zvelebil: The Smile of Murugan. On Tamil Literature of South India. Leiden: E. J. Brill 1973, p. 76.

29 Wilden (2008: 627) seems to take āyiṭai as a kind of postposition, if “At the time” indeed represents āyiṭai: “At the time [my] heart ... says ... but [my] knowledge ... says ... - will my body perish ...?” (the square brackets are hers). It is unclear whether here “at the time” pertains also to “but [my] knowledge”, as it should.
father ... will not grant her hand”). In the text, however, there is no word for “daughter”. However, the action of giving also includes that of permitting or allowing, in this case the ladders: “if he (the girl’s father) had not permitted the ladders, raised by those who had come (for his daughter) to climb over the walls”. However, before being able to properly translate the whole passage, the words puricai, paṭai and itaimatil need to be discussed.

puricai denotes a wall around the town protecting it against enemy attacks: it is high, touches the sky, and lamps lighted by the watchmen stationed on it resemble the stars high in the sky. What then does paṭai mean? As we saw above, Hart connects paṭai with maṇayiku (mayanku) and translates it with “

arable land surrounded by a fence” or “farm boundary”.

However, as the phrase paḷaṭa paṭai puricai in Puṟanāṉūṟu 224,7 (see below) and Maturakāṅkī 352 (viṇṭu vuṇṭiya paḷaṭa paṭai puricai) shows, we have to do with a part of the puricai construction: in the town the streets (itai) are difficult to pass through (ār) as they are “crowded” (maṇayu), that is, blocked by the paṭai of the puricai.

In this connection let us look at two instances of puricai in which the word refers to a Vedic altar, a raised platform made of several layers of bricks (iṭṭikai, Sanskrit ṭīṭikā). The first instance is Akanāṉūṟu 287,6–8 in a description of a deserted town:

paṭai(y)amai cēkkai paṭai
nāṭpāli maṇṭa luṟṟi ṭiṟai
puricai mūḷku yōṟai yēluṭtu
oru taṇu viḷ vil uṭṭai kōttai.

The second example is Puṟanāṉūṟu 224,7–9, where we also find paṭai:

parutu yuruvir paḷaṭaippuricai
eruva mukarcci yōṟa netuntiṋ
vēṭa velvēṭ toṅṭi mēttuṭaiṁuṟu.

... performed the Vedic sacrifice (vēṭa vēḷvit toţi) which consisted of a feast for the vultures (eruvai) at the high sacrificial post (yōṟa) on the altar made of many layers (paṭai) [of bricks] [and] has the shape of a parutu.

33 Note vaḷai, “encircling”, in viṭu muṭ puricai yēmuṟa vaḷai (Mulaiṭpattu 27).

34 vāṇijy puricai (Akanāṉūṟu 181,20).

35 vāṇō tōy puricai / yōṟai kolppaḷa nāṭṭiţai / vāṇakamitteri viḷaṅkitōṉṟum (Akanāṉūṟu 114,9–11).

36 In his translation (see note 3) Hart (2015: 292f.) disregards the order of the text, making it difficult to correlate his translation with the Tamil text: “(a village) ..., its empty [(naraikkant)] altar [(iṭṭikai, which does not mean “altar”, but “brick”)] no longer receives its morning sacrifice ... (In this broad, rainless place,) an empty tree with a parched trunk spreads [?] like a wall [(puricai)], and as the west wind blows against a single aerial root ...”.

37 These devour the sacrificed animal.

38 HH’s translation is: “he performed the Vedic sacrifices ... within the circling [paruti uruvir] many-layered [paḷaṭaipp] wall where the towering post of sacrifice rises next to the kites to be fed”. “Circle” is indeed one of the meanings of paruti (= pariti, Sanskrit paridhi) given in the Tamil Lexicon, pp. 2513f.; paridhi- also denotes the sticks laid round the sacrificial fire to delimit it. I fail to see, though, how this meaning fits the combination with uruvai “shape”.

39 This answers the question of the construction of the puricai, or walls, only partly, as in two instances the puricai is decorated, or strengthened, by things made of copper (cempu): Puṟanāṉūṟu 201,9 (cempuviṇṭuviṇṭiyaiṟai cēṇum puricai) and 37,11 (cempuvi puricai cemman mūṭār). Note also viṭu muṭ puricai yēmuṟa vaḷai in Mullaiṭpattu 27 (note 33 above) describing a fort in the jungle protected by a “wall” (puricai) of thorny bushes (mul).

40 The choice is not explained, but HH may have had the compound puṟamati “outer wall” in Puṟanāṉūṟu 387,33 in mind. However, the translation of that poem (pp. 227f.) leaves puṟamati unaccounted for (“the resounding Porunai River that washes the city [(puṟamati?)] of Vaichai”).

41 Wilden (2008: 475): “Sobbing ... so that [your] breasts become wet in between”.

42 Wilden (2010: 435 and 729): “between my breasts”.

43 The Akanāṉūṟu 73 passage Hart (2015: 84) translated with “Between your breasts a single strand of pearls shoots out its light”. In the Akanāṉūṟu 362 passage he leaves īṭai in īṭaimaiḷi untranslated: “like the pearl necklace that covers the lovely blush on my ample breasts” (p. 364).
Would our large town have suffered less if (āyini) the girl’s father, saying that she will not marry someone unworthy of her, had not permitted (koṭaṉ) the ladders, raised by those who had come (for his daughter) to climb over the walls – our town within the walls of which vultures are taking a rest after a day’s hard work (uyiriru) and the streets are blocked by layers of mud or stones] broken off from these same walls?

4. These exercises exemplify the perils of neglecting philological methods, as do all the translations mentioned, whether poetic or literal. With this understanding of the setting that informs Wilden’s publications, we may now turn specifically to these latter, beginning with an exemplary discussion illustrating how she works, namely that of the participle iṟutta; this occurs also in iṟutta vēṇi of Puṟanāṉūṟu 343 above, translated as “ladders thrown up” by HH, by me as “ladders raised”.44

DED (see note 26), partly basing itself on the Tamil Lexicon, distinguishes altogether seven different verbs iṟu-: “draw, drag, absorb” (no. 504), “die, end” (no. 514), “break” (no. 520), “pay” (no. 521), “strain, percolate” (no. 522), “tarry, stay” (no. 523) and “filing (as a spear)” (no. 859). In Puṟanāṉūṟu 343 we clearly have iṟu- “stay”, giving iṟutta “stayed” (as used in technical English), i.e. “set in place”.

A similar use of the verb to refer to something set in place is found in Puṟanāṉūṟu 19.8.f.:  

kuṟṟatāṟutta kuriṟṇaṁ pōḷa
ampu ceṟṟatāṟutta varumpuṇyāṇai

a wounded elephant hit (ceṟṟu) by arrows (ampu) lodged [in his body] (iṟutta), which look like a flock of birds settled (iṟutta) on a hill.

Puṟanāṉūṟu 294.1f. has:

venkutai matiya meṇiḷai tiktalarak-
kaṇkāṟutta kaṭaṉmaruḷ pāċari

The military camp, vast like the ocean, in which so many (kaṇkāṟu) white parasols (venkutai) were raised (iṟutta) that together they produced more moonlight than (mēl) the moon.45

And in Puṟanāṉūṟu 398.7f. we find:

paricīr - pantar
varicaiyīn iṟutta vāymoḻi vañcaṉ

Vañcaṉ whose words are true (vāymoḻi), before whom in the pavilion (pantar) those in need (paricīr) stood,46 arranged (iṟutta) according to rank (varicaiyīn).

Finally, we find in Puṟanāṉūṟu 391.7-10:

... pacittena
iṟku vantiṟutta veṇṉirumpēr okkai

Finally, we find in Puṟanāṉūṟu 391.7-10:

Turning now to Wilden, we find that for the meaning of iṟu- she seems to have relied on the Tamil Lexicon, which mentions inter alia the meaning “tarry, stay”. Of these two she has opted for the first, “tarry”, and introduced this in practically all instances. Thus, in Nāṟṟiṇai 99 the rainy season is a period “when ... the clouds that have drawn [water] from the sea ..., tarry, [full to] the breaking point”, in 215 “sorrowful evening ... has come [and] tarries with loneliness”, in 257 there is a mountain-side, “on which clouds rise [and] tarry”, and in 287 “a king with green-eyed elephants tarried outside the fortifications”.49 I do not intend to discuss the merits of these four translations other than by noting that because of the possibility of misunderstandings51 I would not use the English verb “tarry” to describe clouds clinging to mountains, and even less for a king laying siege to a fort.

46 For the position of the paricīr in relation to the king compare that of the Sanskrit anujīvin-.

47 Here paricīr is the subject of iṟutta, but to HH (pp. 237f.) this is King Vañcaṉ, sitting under the pavilion. To then grammatically fit in paricīr a word for giving is appended, and paricīr linked with varicaiyīn: “(where) under a pavilion ... sat [(iṟutta)] Vañcaṉ whose words are always true, who pays his debts according to the merit [(varicaiyīn)] of those who come to him in need [(paricīr)].”

48 See also vantīrutta in Akanāṉūṟu 243.8, Nāṟṟiṇai 215.3, or punatīrutta “besieged in” in Nāṟṟiṇai 287.2.

49 For the “helping hand”, see also kai pōl utavi in Nāṟṟiṇai 216.3, literally, “helping like a hand”. —HH translate tirkai viţukkuṃ panpiṅ mutukūṇi

50 Wilden 2008: 257, 489, 573 and 633 respectively (the square brackets are Wilden’s). In the phrase preceding the translation of Nāṟṟiṇai 99, Wilden (p. 257) renders iṟutta with “broken”; the word is translated twice, once in “when ... clouds tarry” and once in “[full to] the breaking point”.

51 Cf. the following paragraph.
What is more serious, however, is that Wilden seems to think that both meanings of English “tarry”, namely the old, literary “stay in a place”, and the more recent “delay or be slow in starting, going, coming etc.”, are also applicable to Tamil īru. Thus, in Nār̥r̥inai 387:6–8 she translates īrutta with “tarry” in the sense of “hesitate or be afraid to proceed” (Wilden 2008: 833):

... ceruviṟantu
ālaṅkāṇattāṇcuvaravīrutta
vēlēku tāṇcē ceḻiyaṉ pācraṉi,
in the encampment of Ceḻiyaṉ with an army full of spears that tarried for fear to come to the banyan forest, crossing a conflict.

Why would a king, or his army, just emerged victorious from a battle (ceruviṟantu, Wilden’s “crossing a conflict”), be afraid to enter the banyan forest or, else, the place called Ālaṅkāṉam? Here Wilden appears to have fallen into her own trap of consistently translating īru- with “tarry”. In this case this strange decision has even led to yet another one, namely to take aṇcuvara to mean “being afraid”, even though in all instances in Caṅkam poetry this expression means “causing fear, terrifying”.

For instance, in Nār̥r̥inai 83 a woman bribes an owl with promises of food (a mouse) to be quiet as its shrieks terrify her (9: aṇcuvarak kﷲuṟṟukal payiṟṟāṟṟē), in 319 in the spooky night the shrieks of an owl are scaring travellers (4–6: kūkaiccēvāl... aṇcuvarak kluṟṟukum āṉku kāl), and in Akanāṉūṟu 77 vultures are sitting at the road junction, causing fear in the travellers (11f.: eruvai aṇcuvara iṟukku... kavalai). These examples have all been drawn from texts edited and translated by Wilden herself. In addition, the passage from Nār̥r̥inai 387 has an exact parallel in Maturaikkāṇi 127, which describes a Pandya king, who, after destroying the country of his enemy with fire, encamped (īruttu) at Ālaṅkāṉam, terrifying the people there (ālaṅkāṇattāṇcuvaravīruttu). Cf. also aṇcuvaru netuve “terrifying long spear” in Ciṟupāṇāṟṟuppaṭai 94, and aṇcuvara pēymakal “terrifying demonesses” in Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai 51.

Nār̥r̥inai 387:6–8 may, therefore, be translated as follows:

The camp of Ceḻiyaṉ, whose army was well equipped with spears, who, after he had emerged victorious from the battle, encamped in Ālaṅkāṉam, terrifying the people there.

5. But perhaps a self-imposed limitation of no more than two pages per poem in Wilden’s editions-cum-translations did not invite detailed textual investigation. The works on both the Nār̥r̥inai and the Kuṟuntokai have the same layout: the page on the left has the reconstructed text of the poem, headed by the poet’s name and a brief indication of the situation in which the poem is spoken, information generally transmitted together with a poem’s text. After the reconstructed text, with an overview of the variant readings (both in the Tamil script), follows its romanised transliteration, with sandhis dissolved. The opposite page has first an English translation of the introductory matter and then a word-by-word ‘translation’ in a kind of coded language.

This is concluded by a ‘regular’ English translation.

However, in the edition of the longer poems of the Akanāṉūṟu this limitation was abandoned and the information is spread out over as many pages as required. The possibility this offers for more thorough discussions is, however, left unused, so that it seems not merely a matter of external constraints. This may be exemplified by a discussion of the first five lines of Akanāṉūṟu 24:

vēḷāṟṟēppāṉ vēḷārān tumittu
vaḻāi kaḻaiṁoḻṟinta koḻunāt āṟṟa
ṭaḷaṟṟēppāṉ vēḷāṟṟēppāṉ tumittu
tai niṟṟa tarpeyar kaḻaiṁ

Wilden translates (2018: 160):

On the last day of the cool raining that had persisted in the month of Tai,

When the jalap with curly buds that had not [yet] opened [their] tight fetters

Blooms because of the diffuse, miserable, spattering spray, like splinters(?!) left behind, having been removed from the conch bangles that are cut by the saw of a non-sacrificing Brahmin.

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52 See Paul Procter, Robert F. Ilson, John Ayto (eds.): Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English. Harlow: Longman 1978, p. 1135.
53 Wilden (2008: 225) (with her square brackets): “don’t use again [your] fierce voice for fears to come up”.
54 Wilden (2008: 697): “at diffuse midnight, when the time of plagues comes up [ਆṉku kāḷ?], where [sic] the owl ... shrieks ... for fear to come up”.
55 Wilden (2018: 485): “crossroads ... where kites perch frighteningly”.
56 See also Paṟṟuṇāṉūṟu 41,7: aṇcuvarat takuna puḻukkural iyam-parum, “bird calls that are terrifying shrieks” (HH 1999: 33).
57 Īrutta is a so-called verbal participle, functionally equivalent to the Sanskrit absolutive.
58 For instance “one-it [aṇṇu] word [mōl] Kōcar [kōcar] be-similar [pola]” and “strength [vaṉṟa] deliberation” “[cūcčiy + particle um] is-necessary [vēṇtum + particle d] little-it’ [ciṟitu + particle e]” (Wilden 2010: 1081f.: Kuṟuntokai 73,4f.). The bracketed parts have been added by me.
59 The empty lower spaces of both pages are for annotations, but could have been better filled.
If I understand the translation correctly, the rain drops on the bud of the jalap flower are compared to the tiny splinters left after sawing through conch shells for making bangles. However, koḻuntu does not mean “splinter”. This meaning is entirely Wilden’s own invention, an attempt, as she explains in a footnote, to make sense of the comparison. Now one of the meanings of koḻuntu, beside “tender twig, tendril”, is “the plume of the yak tail” (Tamil Lexicon, p. 1161). In the same footnote Wilden refers to an old gloss, caṅkiṉ talai, saying that koḻuntu refers to the tip of the conch here, which indeed looks like a plume. The bud of the jalap ends in a plume as well. Thus, the bud of the jalap flower is in our passage compared to the tip of a conch shell, which is cast away after having sawn through the shell, as for bracelets only its round, wider part is used. Everything was, thus, already there: the dictionary, an old gloss. The only thing for Wilden left to do was to look for an image of the jalap flower! Instead she produces a ghost gloss. The only thing for Wilden left to do was to look for an image of the jalap flower! Instead she produces a ghost gloss. The only thing for Wilden left to do was to look for an image of the jalap flower! Instead she produces a ghost gloss. The only thing for Wilden left to do was to look for an image of the jalap flower! Instead she produces a ghost gloss.

6. Wilden’s edition and translation of Nāṟṟiṇai 324 read (2008: 706 f.):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{antō tāṅyē yaliyaṭāyē} \\
nontalī yavalamōṭenēkkavaḷ kōl \\
pompōṅ mēṅti tayakamaṅayantōḷ \\
kōṭu muriyāṇai kāṭuṭaṅṭairāra \\
neypaṭṭamā nōṅkālē ᵇhkīṅ⁴⁺ \\
celvat tantai yiṭṇuṭai varaippīṇ \\
dūpantuṇṭuṇāl pōla vēṭi \\
yatikōḷī yiyavaḥ ᵇumūṅmē \\
paṭci mellai natai paviṟṟummē. \\
\end{align*}
\]

Alas for it. Pitiable mother.

Aching, with destructive affliction – what will become of her? The one she longed for as for her own daughter, with gold-like body, is practicing steps with the cotton-soft feet that she of pretty thin hair has, running as if she were rolling a ball in play on the border of the land of [her] wealthy father with enduring hard blades, as if smeared with ghee, while elephants whose tusks are mature fill up together the wilderness.

Something needs first to be said about the situation the poem refers to, one among the standard themes of the village poems.⁶³ The father mentioned is a wealthy man (here: celvat tantai); his daughter is brought up in great luxury by a so-called cevillittāy, a term usually translated as “foster mother”. This woman started her career in the family as a wet nurse and stayed on as a nanny. Her own daughters were friends and companions of her charge; cf. Hart 1975 (see note 13): 214 note. Most poems dealing with such a daughter refer to the worries she causes this foster mother, the main worry being that she will refuse to marry the man her parents have chosen for her, elope with someone below her station and as a result cannot continue to enjoy the same luxury. In the poems we meet the girl running away together with her lover along rough paths through unknown country, or, as in this poem, preparing to do so; or we hear about her foster-mother worrying about the spoiled girl’s subsequent fate in the stranger’s house in a small village with “only one cow in the front yard” (Akanāṇuṟu 369). As in Nāṟṟiṇai 324, much is made of the soles of the girl’s feet, too soft and tender for jungle paths.

My first comment concerns Wilden’s translation of taṅ makal nayantōḷ as “the one she longed for as for her own daughter”. In Classical Tamil other instances of the use of active participial nouns like nayantōḷ (“she who loves someone”) as passives (“the one loved by someone”) are rare, if available at all.⁶³ As seen, Wilden takes nayantōḷ as the subject of the verb paviṟṟumme at the end of the poem. To come into consideration for this function nayantōḷ must indeed be taken to have a passive meaning, for it is the wealthy father’s daughter and foster mother’s charge who is practicing steps here. This, however, brings me to my second comment: there is nothing in the Tamil text corresponding to “as” in “as for her own daughter”. In fact, most probably we do not have to do with the foster mother’s charge here, but with the woman’s own (taṅ) daughter, who as a friend has a great affection (nayantōḷ) for the

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⁴⁺ According to Wilden (2018: 160 note 97) the non-sacrificing brahmin (vēḷāppārppāṉ) is an early example of a brahmin making a living by cutting bangles when he is unable to do so by officiating at sacrifices. Though I have no definite solution for vēḷāppārppāṉ, he seems to be a pārppāṉ distinguished from the pārppāṉ who officiates at sacrifices.

⁶² See Tieken 2001 (note 13 above): 24–28.

⁶³ In modern Tamil participial nouns may indeed occasionally have a passive meaning. Hermann Beythan (Praktische Grammatik der Tamilsprache in Umschrift. (Praktische Grammatik und Übungsbuch der Tamilsprache 1.) Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz 1943, p. 110) mentions vaṅkiyavai as meaning both “das, was gekauft hat” and “das, was gekauft worden ist”. Rajam (see note 14) quotes an interesting instance (p. 656): varuntiṉaḷ aḷiyaḷ nī pirinticiṉōḷē. “She, whom you (m) had left (pirinticiṉōḷē), felt sad and is to be pitied” (my translation, with a relative clause for the passival participle). But comparable instances seem to be rare – neither Rajam nor Lehmann (see note 14): 137–144 (§ 6.2) mention the phenomenon –, and something like “she who is loved by her own daughter” would be unexpected in the passage from Nāṟṟiṇai 324 anyway.
girl, and worries as much as her mother. The foster mother's daughter is the subject of the verb ākuvāl: “What will happen (engā ākuvāl kol) to her own daughter who has a great affection (for the girl)?”

As indicated, Wilden takes ‘passive’ nayantōl as the subject of the verb payirummnē (“is practicing steps”). Apparently, in the text as reconstructed by her she was unable to find a word that could come into consideration for that function. However, what about the pronoun īval “she” in (y)āncīl ōti īval uṛum / pañci mellati natai? But, if I understand Wilden’s word-by-word paraphrase correctly, she takes īval as the subject in the phrase īval uṛum … mellati, i.e. “soft feet (mellati), which she (īval) has (uṛum)”. This solution may, however, be questioned.

For one thing, the construction is rare; the only other example comparable to our phrase could find is ni uṛum poyci in Kalittokai 88,20.64 Another problem is the meaning of uṛum in these two instances. For uṛu- the Tamil Lexicon (p. 483) mentions quite a number of meanings, which, however, are all of a highly contextual nature and as such cannot simply be applied to the two contexts above.65 By starting from the meanings “approach, gain access, reach” we might translate the passage above.

At this point I would like to draw attention to īvalum, one of the variant readings for īvalum.66 (y)ānciōti (y) īvalum may be translated as “she with beautiful, thin hair, for her part (-um)”, īum being functionally equivalent to Sanskrit api. The girl, for her part, is blissfully unaware of the anxieties she causes by her play in the minds of those most close to her. Metrically, there are no objections to read īvalum instead of īvalum. On the other hand, it is not easy to see how īvalum may have changed into īvalum, unless one speculates that the eye of the copyist strayed to the following payirummnē. Nevertheless, this reading would speak for īval being the subject of payirummnē.

Wilden’s “on the border of the land” translates ītāṇ uti vairaippin.67 This is not only inexact and incomplete, but also says nothing about the nature of the space referred to. We are clearly dealing with a rich man’s (celvat tantai) place, as also in other poems containing ītāṇ uti vairaippu; thus, in Akanāṇārī 145,17 the girl’s father possesses great wealth (kūḷ in kūḷ uti tantai ītāṇai vairaippin). Those living in such places wear beautiful ornaments (kalam).68

As to what the place looked like, vairaippu “boundary” is also used for an enclosed space such as a courtyard, and such areas do indeed seem to have been surrounded by a wall with gates, as in Porunarāṟṟūṟṟṟṟpatai 64–67: “To end my poverty I silently enter his ītāṇ uti vairaippu, where loud drumming can be heard,” through its wide gate (peru vāyil) which is always open for those who come begging.”69 It seems also to have been a palace-like building complex, as in its totality it is said to be as beautiful as a painting (ōvattanga in Puṟanāṉūṟu 251,1 and Naṟṟiṇai 181,2.) As to ītāṇ “place”, the Tamil Lexicon (p. 280), referring to Nacciārkinjiyar’s commentary on the Porunāṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟṟறf

The girl is living in a large manor house, a veritable golden cage, with no idea about the dangers that might befall her in the outside world. The house is surrounded by jungle where elephants with large tusks roam about: kōṭu murriyāi kāṭuṇṭai. Wilden’s translation of the phrase ītāṇ niraitara, “elephants … fill up together the wilderness”, is, however, needlessly convoluted, as

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64 Cf. too uṛum ītattu “a situation in which (something) is useful”, as in ċerńtākkā / uṛum ītattukku uṭavi “(extend) the right type of assistance (uṭavi) to those who have approached you” (Akanāṇārī 231,11) and uṛum ītattukku varumilam ūti, “rain not helping (uṭavātu) where it would be useful”, falling on saline earth instead (Puṟanāṉūṟu 142,2). Instances such as el uṛa maual, “a jasmine flower (in brightness) resembling the sun” (Kuruntokai 19,4) are doubtful, as it is uncertain whether we have here the participle uṛum or the verb stem uṛ-, for in sandhi the final m of uṛum is dropped before another nasal (similarly uṛumūrā in Puṟanāṉūṟu 98,16 and 292,2 and uṛumūrān in Puṟanāṉūṟu 135,21).

65 Objects: soft feet (mellati) or way of walking (natai), and false oaths (poyci) respectively.

66 According to Wilden 2008: 24, the variant occurs in the two-volume Naṟṟiṇai edition by Turaicāmi Piḷḷai (Cenṇaṭi 1966, 1968).

67 Her word-by-word paraphrase reads “place [ītāṇ] possess [uṭai]” -border [vairaippin] (the additions in square brackets are mine).

68 Puṟanāṉūṟu 161,29: ītāṇai vairaippin tāṇai vāyil vāṭai naṇkalai (m) mukuppa.

69 In Puṟanāṉūṟu 161,29, referred to in the previous note, “the noise of drums is heard in the courtyard” (muracirāṅku ītāṇai vairaippin).

70 yārum anva iṣume cunmā yitāṇai vairaippin caiyānunt tataiyā naṇ peri vāyil iṣum iṣuṇṭumai īṇa.

71 In support of this traditional interpretation ītāṇ “place” too should be mentioned. Two of its many contextual meanings show that ītāṇ denoted the size of things, namely “cubit, in measuring the width of cloth” and “breadth, width, expanse” (Tamil Lexicon, p. 279).
the use of utaṅ here had already been dealt with before by Rajam (see note 14): 328; beside the passage under consideration, “as the elephants filled/occupied all over the forest”, Rajam quotes Patiruppattu 24,10 nāṭu utaṅ vilankum ... nallicai, “good fame which shines all over the country”.

The same characterisation applies to Wilden’s translation of neyyaṭṭānṟya nōṅkāḻ eẖkiṉ ... tantai as “her father with enduring hard blades, as if smeared with ghee”. eẖku can refer to any sharp, pointed weapon, such as a spear. As to nōṅ in the compound nōṅkāḻ, rather than from the verb nōṅ- “endure, practice austerities” we should start from the abstract noun nōṅmai “vigour, strength, force, might”. It is also puzzling why of all the meanings of kāḷ Wilden opted for the one which the Tamil Lexicon (p. 904), gives first, namely, “hardness, solidity”, instead of considering the following “pillar, rod, handle, stem”, especially in the light of Puṟanāṉūṟu 95,2 where nōṅkāḻ describes a separate part of a spear (vēḻ): nōṅkāḻ tirutti ney yañuntu “having polished the strong shaft and anointed it with ghee”.72 The girl’s father thus owns an arsenal full of spears, probably as a guarantee against invasions of wild elephants, but also of strangers who are after his daughter.

The poem may, thus, be translated as follows:

Ah, pity on mother. What will become of the golden body of her own daughter, who will suffer and worry on account of the girl for whom she has great affection? While grown-up elephants with large tusks roam around through the jungle outside, inside, in the wide compound of the mansion, where her wealthy father keeps his sharp spears with strong shafts, gleaming as if they have been polished with ghee, the little girl with beautiful thin hair, under the pretext of rolling a ball, is teaching herself how to run with her feet soft as cotton.

7. Wilden (2008: 590 f.) reconstructs Naṟṟiṇai 266 as:

kollaikkōvalar kuṟumpuṇaṁ cērnta
kuṟunjār kuvaṁiṅ kuviṅaṁ vāṉpu
vāṭuṭai yiṭaimanai ciṭap pākkum
akaluḷiṅkaṭ ciṭurēmē
yatuvē cāluva kāmaṁ anṛiyum
em viṭṭakanyir ayir koṅnoṅu
kūṟval vāḻiyar aiyā vēṟupat-
tiriyā kāḷai yiriyir
periya vallavō periyaṅar nilaiyē.

The woman speaking in the poem lives in a small village (ciṭurēm) peopled by goatherds; she feels trapped, missing the luxury and exciting life she was accustomed to in her parents’ house.73 Here we see what happens to a girl like the one depicted in the preceding poem: she pays the price for having rejected the husband selected for her by her parents and eloped with a stranger. Most probably the āṭutai īṭaimanai in line 3 is her husband. As a herdsman (īṭaimanai) owning (ūṭai) a flock of goats (āṭu), he is relatively wealthy, but that does not make him less of a village type. So far the woman has resigned herself to the situation, though it is not what she really wants (5: atuvē cāluva kāmaṁ anṛiyum), but that has changed as her husband has announced that he is going away, leaving her behind in this dump of a village (6: em viṭṭakanyir ayin). She replies (koṅnoṅu kūṟval), telling him what she will do if he leaves her.

The village is situated in an area in which slash-and-burn land cultivation is practiced, and dotted by fields called kolla. On these fields so-called kollaikkōvalar are employed. Who are these kollaikkōvalar? Wilden translates the word with “cowherds” having “small fields”, asking noncommittally in a footnote: “What kind of relation is intended between the kōvalar and the īṭaimanai? Is this a movement from centre to periphery?”. In translating kōvalar with “cowherds”, Wilden was no doubt led by its derivation from Sanskrit gopāla-. However, a comparison with the one and only other instance of kolaikkōvalar in the Caṅkam corpus, in Naṟṟiṇai 289, seems to show that these persons are no herders at all, neither of cows, nor of goats. To ascertain what they actually are, we need first to ascertain what exactly kolla signifies, and to do so we will also have to consider two other sorts of field, called puṟam and itai respectively.

The term kolla has been investigated by Takanobu Takahashi, according to whom it refers to a clearing in a forest.74 He derived kolla from the verb kol- “kill”, which would have been used both for the felling of trees in the forest and ploughing the field after that. The main thesis

72 It is not clear to me for what purpose the shaft of the spear, which most probably was made of wood, was smeared with ghee. Does nōṅkāḻ refer to the iron tip here?

73 Her situation may be compared to that of the one speaking in Gāthā 164 from that other anthology of village poetry, Hāla’s Sattasaṭai. Peter Khoroch and Herman Tieken (Poems on Life and Love in Ancient India. Hāla’s Sattasaṭai. (SUNY Series in Hindu Studies.) Albany: Excelsior Editions 2009, no. 540 on p. 163) translated this as: To whom can I give a sly glance, With whom can I share my joys and sorrows, With whom can I joke, In this dump of a village Full of yokels?

74 “Is Clearing or Plowing Equal to Killing? Tamil Culture and the Spread of Jainism in Tamilnadu”, in: Whitney Cox, Vincenzo Vergiani (eds.): Bilingual Discourse and Cross-Cultural Fertilisation: Sanskrit and Tamil in Medieval India. (Collection Indologie 121.) Pondichéry: Institut français de Pondichéry 2013, pp. 53–67.
Herman Tieken

aspects come together in rainfall, and the main crop of which is millet. All these mountain slopes, the cultivation of which depends on kuruntu tree on the mountain slope spotted with cāraṟ kuruntocitta māyavaṉ "Māyavaṉ (Kṛṣṇa), who pulled out the 75

For kollai in the mountains, see Cilappatikāram 17,21,1 (kollaiyai cāraṟ kuruntocittai māyavaṉ "Māyavaṉ (Kṛṣṇa), who pulled out the kuruntu tree on the mountain slope spotted with kollai"), Kalittokai 39,13f. (kollai kural vāṉiṉ īṉai malai vāṉar alla purintu oḷukalāin “because the people from the mountains misbehave the crops on the kollais have failed" and Akanāṉūṟu 133,7 (kollai itaiya kuṟumpoṟai marunkiṟ “on the slope of the small hill with its itai [fields] of the kollai type”). For millet, see Akanāṉūṟu 288,5 (kollai yiraṅciya ēṉal “millet, bent down (from the weight of its ears), on the kollais eaten (i.e. cleared) by fire”). After the fire, black becomes the prevailing colour on kollais. Thus the following passage from Puṟanāṉūṟu 159,15–20 describes unsophisticated forest people — commonly depicted as prone to such mistakes77 — mistaking a kollai (black after the fire) for a muddy field, black being the colour of mud as well78:

Unfortunately, the text with its two dangling verbal particle clauses is grammatically a mongrel. Thus, while the subject of vetti, “having sowed”, in line 17 are the kāṉavar or forest people (line 15) — for who else could come into consideration for that function here? — these do not, contrary to what one might expect, return in that or a related function with any of the following verbs: the verbal particle kaviṉi “having become beautiful”, or the negative particle cellā “(the summer) in which (sprouting) is not possible”. Another problem concerns the phrase maivyuṟak kaviṉi. In Tamil poetry the combination of “black” (maivyuṟa) and “beautiful” (kaviṉi) fits in particular the rainclouds (iḻumena karuvi vāṉan talaii), from which, however, the phrase is separated by inal cellā vēṉarku.79 The following is, therefore, not a proper translation, but merely a paraphrase of what I think the poet had in mind. He compares the generous king to a raincloud, a standard topos in ‘heroic’ Tamil poetry.80 The part which describes the kollai is grammatically clear:

Having assembled, singing the praise of your generosity which is like a massive (beautifully black), thundering cloud appearing (unexpectedly) in the summer, when the wild rice seed does not sprout [which] the forest people had sowed on the wide kollais (black after the fire) which they had mistaken for fields black (from mud).

This poem has in its entirety been translated by HH (see note 4): 101; the relevant passage reads:

... I praise you for the fame of your generosity, which is like a cloud coming with lightning and roaring thunder as it sheds its rain down on millet [(ēṉal)] not yet sprouting its ears of a lovely dark color [(maivyuṟa kaviṉi)], after it has been planted among

75 For kollais in the mountains, see Cilappatikāram 17,21,1 (kollaiyai cāraṟ kuruntocittai māyavaṉ “Māyavaṉ (Kṛṣṇa), who pulled out the kuruntu tree on the mountain slope spotted with kollais”), Kalittokai 39,13f. (kollai kural vāṉiṉ īṉai malai vāṉar alla purintu oḷukalāin “because the people from the mountains misbehave the crops on the kollais have failed”) and Akanāṉūṟu 133,7 (kollai itaiya kuṟumpoṟai marunkiṟ “on the slope of the small hill with its itai [fields] of the kollai type”). For millet, see Akanāṉūṟu 288,5 (kollai yiraṅciya ēṉal “millet, bent down (from the weight of its ears), on the kollais”).

76 The real work begins only after the trees and bushes have been burnt down, namely the removal of the roots and half-burnt tree trunks. See, for instance, Puṟanāṉūṟu 231,1f., which describes an upland field called puṉam after fire had been set to the trees on it: eri puṉak kuravai kurayal anjaṉa / kari puṇa viṟakī ina voḷaḷaṟ “the fire of the cremation pyre piled up with pieces of wood which are black (kari) on the outside like those the man from the hills collects from the puṉam he is hacking at”. Cf. also Purannarūṟuppuṭai 117f.: kollai yuḷukolu vēyyappapp paḷḷe / yellaiyum iravum iringuru maṟunkiṟ “from eating meat day and night my teeth have become as blunt as the ploughshare ploughing a kollai”.

77 This is similar in Hāla’s Sattasai, the poems’ counterpart from North Indian kāvya literature; see Tieken 2001 (see note 13), and Khoroche and Tieken (see note 73). Cf. too the Murukaṇ priest in Kuṟuntokai 111 (§ 3 above).

78 As in Akanāṉūṟu 140,10–15, which describes oxen (pokaiṭṭai) pulling out a cart stuck in the mud (aḷḷal) which is as black as the smoke (pukai) produced by the farmer working on the puṉam (puṉavan), attempting to make an itai (for itai fields, see below).

79 Thus, in Kuṟuntokai 371 the word mai “blackness” all by itself stands for “clouds”: mai puṭṭu cilampiṟai aivaṉam vetti/ yaruviṟiyi vilaiķku nāṭaṟ “the man, having sowed the wild rice on the mountain surrounded by blackness (mai, i.e. rain clouds), made it grow with the help of water from a waterfall”.

80 Hart 1975 (see note 13): 249 f.
wild rice on a wide space of land new to cultivation ([kollai]) but burned over by men of the forest and transformed ([mayakkiya]) into a field ([puṉam]).

This is problematic. To begin with, vēṉal “summer” is erroneously read as ēṉal “millet”, with the initial v- in vēṉakku taken as a glide. But the seeds of wild rice (aviyam) do not normally bring forth millet. Therefore, the millet is here “planted among wild rice”, which, however, has no basis in the text. Moreover, here it is the millet which has acquired a “lovely dark color” (maitiyak kaviṇi), but as far as I know dark-coloured millet does not offer a “lovely” sight. Note also the translation of mayakkiya “which (the forest people) had mistaken for” with “transformed”. However, “transformed” as used here clearly implies a form of improvement, which the Tamil verb mayakku- “confuse (and the like)” does not.

In the texts discussed above altogether three types of fields are mentioned that have been cleared by first burning down the trees on it. For instance, beside kollai in eri tiṉ kollai in Akanāṉūṟu 288, there are puṉam and itai: itai in itai muyal puṉavan puckai niḷar katukkum mā mūttalat in Akanāṉūṟu 160, and puṉam in eri puṉak kūṟavan kūraiyya ṣaṇa / kari puṟa viṟakīn ima vōllar in Puṟanāṉūṟu 231 (see note 76, with translation).

It seems that puṉam is a general term for a field in the hills or mountains in any stage of the cultivation process. Thus, in Akanāṉūṟu 288 the farmer is still hacking at the burned roots and tree trunks (eri puṉak kūṟavan), while in Puṟanāṉūṟu 159 the “black puṉam” (karipuṉam) is already ready for sowing. The term itai is rare; apart from the four instances in Akanāṉūṟu (133,7, 140,11, 393,4, 394,3), in which it is a kind of field, in its three other attestations (Maturaikkānci 79, 376 and 536) it refers to the sail of a ship. But the two meanings “field” and “sail” may well be related, in the same way as in Dutch lapje (“small piece of cloth”) is used for a small piece of land. In fact, the meaning “small field” would fit perfectly in Akanāṉūṟu 133,7: kollaiyitaiai kûṟumpporai marûnikir, “on the slope of the small hill with small fields (itaia) of the kollai type” (cf. note 75). As for kollai, as Puṟanāṉūṟu 159 shows, the blackness of these fields is provisoral and does not need to be specified. Of the three words for “field”, kollai is also the only one which seems to have the action of burning in its name, for rather than with kol- “kill” we may be dealing with the root also found in kollan “blacksmith”, as the blacksmith with the help of fire fashioned iron into useful instruments, so the farmer with fire turns a forest into fields (ultimately) fit for agriculture.

Nāṟṟiṉai 289 tells us what the kollaikkōvalar do on the kollai. In the poem we hear what a woman says to a friend. Her husband has left her, making solemn promises to return before the rainy season starts. However, the rain clouds are already approaching and the husband has not yet returned. She is caught between (āyiṭai, see above) believing her husband or believing her own eyes, a Catch-22 situation. Lines 6–9 say:

...āyiṭai-
kollaikkōvalar elli māṭṭiya perumā vōṭiya pōla
varulilē amma vālīyen yāṅē.
...caught between these two choices I cannot expect any mercy

Though I have been unable to verify this, I doubt if the expression perumā is used as a general term for domesticated animals such as goats, sheep or cows. Rather, we are dealing with wild animals, which, while trying to escape from the burning forest, are driven back into the flames. The kollai field is cleared of both trees and wild animals, the ‘domestication’ including both plant and animal life. For this we have a mythic prototype in the burning of the Khāṇḍava Forest described in Mahābhārata 1,214–225, in which Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa set the forest alight and prevented the animals from escaping by circling around it, thus making them stay in the forest to serve as food for insatiable Agni, Fire.

For kol- “kill” and kollan, “blacksmith”, see DED (in note 26), nos. 2132 and 2133 respectively. If this derivation holds, then kollai can be struck from the already short list of loan translations showing Jaina influence on Caṅkam poetry, for which see, e.g., Zvelebil (note 28): 137.

81 The same is the case with Takahashi’s (see note 74) “mixed (dug) up”: “Wild rice has been planted on a wide space of field ([kollai]) which was a dry upland ([puṉam]), burned over ([kari “black”]) and then mixed (dug) up by men of the forest” (p. 60).
82 “Mud as black as the smoke produced by the farmer working on the puṉam (puṉavan), attempting to make an itai”.
83 The compound kollaitai indicates that kollai and itai are not synonyms. In fact, kollais could be relatively large, as in Puṟanāṉūṟu 159,16, which describes the kollai as an aṅkaṇai “wide place” (aṅkaṇai kollai).

84 For kol- “kill” and kollan, “blacksmith”, see DED (in note 26), nos. 2132 and 2133 respectively. If this derivation holds, then kollai can be struck from the already short list of loan translations showing Jaina influence on Caṅkam poetry, for which see, e.g., Zvelebil (note 28): 137.
85 The meaning assigned to māṭṭiya here follows the meanings 1–3 in the Tamil Lexicon, p. 3149: “fasten on, buckle, tackle, hook; fix, attach; put in, thrust (as fuel)”. Wilden has selected the eighth of the nine meanings, namely “light (as a lamp)”: “Just as the big animals running when the cowherds have kindled (māṭṭiya) light (ellī) in the clearing, I am without [his] consideration, alas, pitiable me”. However, ellī does not mean “light” (which can be kindled), but “daytime” (the additions within round brackets are mine, within square brackets Wilden’s).
86 For this myth, see pp. 21–26 of Herman Tiekens: “The Mahābhārata after the Great Battle”, Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens/Vienna Journal of South Asian Studies 48 (2004) 5–66, and Alf Hiltebeitel: “The Burning of the Forest Myth”, in: Bardwell L. Smith (ed.): Hinduism. New Essays in the History of Religions. (Studies in the His-
of daylight, despite burning down the forest taking six
days in the Mahābhārata (Tieken 2004: 24) Arjuna’s and
Kṛṣṇa’s activities were, implicitly, set during daytime, for
after they had chased away the rainclouds sent by Indra to
douse the fire, “the fowlness and darkness of the sky was
appeased, ... the orb of its sun restored to normality”.87
Only during daytime could they see the animals trying to
flee the conflagration.

The kollaikkōvalar in this poem are no ordinary herders
who have their cattle graze on very poor grounds, which
involves much extra work to keep the herd together on
the kollai field. Instead, the term kollaikkōvalar describes
farmers who are burning down a forest and driving back
the animals trying to escape the flames. They are not pro-
tecting (pāla- in gopāla-) the herd from harm, but are pro-
tectors in the sense of being jailers.

In Naṟṟiṇai 266 the woman’s village is likewise sur-
rounded by kollaikkōvalar. It is a poor village, whose
inhabitants subsist on slash-and-burn agriculture. At the
same time the kollaikkōvalar evoke the image of the village
as a prison from which it is difficult to escape. The key
word is the verb iriyiṉ “flee” (iriyin) in line 8.

But for a full translation of Naṟṟiṇai 266 several more
remarks on the text are needed, one of which concerns
akaluḷāṅkaṇ, if only because of Wilden’s laborious transla-
tion of it as “that place-wide-inside”. It is made up of two
words, namely akaluḷ and āṅkaṇ. The meaning and use of
āṅkaṇ are more or less clear.

Thus, though not very frequently, āṅkaṇ is an adverb of place,
as in āṅkaṭ āṅkaṇ āṅkaḷ parakkum “where sweet water flows
from there (āṅkaṇ) to this place here (āṅkaṇ)” (Naṟṟiṇai 70,7). It is
also used to circumscribe the locative, as in kūṭal āṅkaṇ “in Kūṭal”
(Naṟṟiṇai 298,9). Quite frequently it seems to function as a substan-
tive, meaning “(that) place”, which, like any substantive, can be
described in more detail; a case in point is nilalil āṅkaṇ “that place
without shade” (Naṟṟiṇai 105,5). Often, these āṅkaṇ phrases are part
of a larger descriptive passage, as nilalil āṅkaṇ aruṭōrakkavalai “a
crossroad in the impassable desert, that place without shade”. The
same is seen in Naṟṟiṇai 63,1-3: paratavar / miku mū nūkkāya putu-
manal āṅkaṭ / kalleṅ cērī “the noisy quarter, where (āṅkaṭ) on
the fresh sand the fishermen have laid out fish to dry”. As in vilavuṭai
yāṅkaṇ / ūrēm “we (-ēm), living in a village (ūrēm), that place” which
celebrates (owns) festivals” (Naṟṟiṇai 220,6), in akalūṅkaṇat cīṟūrēm
the āṅkaṇ phrase is found immediately before the village it
describes.88

As to akaluḷ, Wilden seems to analyse it as consisting of
the verb stem akal- “(being) wide” and the noun
ul, “inside”. I think, however, that we have to do with the
suffix -ul as found in, for instance, ceyul “action, poetic
composition” from the verb cey “do, make”. For akaluḷ
the Tamil Lexicon (p. 14) provides the meaning “width,
breadth’ (the meanings “greatness, earth, street” may be
ignored here). As such akaluḷāṅkaṇ may be compared to
viyalūṅkaṇ “in a wide open space”, though viyal is a noun
and not, like akal, a verb. Viyalūṅkaṇ is found in
Patiṟṟuppattu 56,1: vilavu virirunta viyalūṅkaṇ “on the
wide open space on which the festival takes place”, and
Malaipatukātām 350 f.: muḷavu tūyil aṟiyā viyalūṅkaṇ vilavu “a festival on a wide open space
during which the drums do not know sleep”.89 For obvious reasons
festivals require an open space, for which in Puranāṉūṟu
65,5 instead of viyalul the word akaluḷ is used. In this
example, however, akalūṅkaṇat seems to be in the first
place a descriptor of the village: vilavum akalūṅkaṇat cīṟūr
marappa “while the small village, which has a wide open
space (where festivals can be held), forgets its festivals.”
Most likely the same is the case in akalūṅkaṇat cīṟūrēm
in Naṟṟiṇai 266. In any case the village in question is not sit-
uated in a wide open space, but in a forest area gradually
being turned into agricultural land.

A passage that has to be dealt with in some detail
as well is line 5: atuṉ cālva kāmam anṟiyum. To begin
with, for the third person plural cālva I suggest to follow
manuscripts (and editions) C1, G1+2, ER and ET, and adopt the third person singular cālu, cor-
responding to atuṉ “that”, though it is the lectio facilior.
Wilden defends her choice in a note, which I am unfor-
tunately unable to follow.90 The supposed corruption of
cālu into cālva may be a mistake made by a copyist in
either reading or writing n as v; indeed, it is possible to
recognise a n in that part of n which remains if one skips
the right vertical and upper horizontal lines.

For the verb cāl- the Tamil Lexicon (p. 1389) provides
a number of meanings. In the present context I consider
appropriate the meaning “be suitable, fitting”, which has
counterparts in Kannada sāl- “be sufficient or enough,
suffice” and Telugu cālu- “be enough, sufficient”.91
For the woman, living in a small village “suffices”; it is as it
is and she won’t complain. But she adds kāmam anṟiyum

87 Translated by J. A. B. van Buitenen: The Mahābhārata. I. The Book
of the Beginning. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press
1973, p. 419.
88 See also akalūṅkaṇat cīṟūr in Puranāṉūṟu 65,5.
89 It would here go too far to deal with similar expressions like viya-
ḷaṅkaṇ (< viyal-kaṇ) and aṅkaḷaṅkaṇ (< akal-kaṇ), and viyalūṅkaṇ (there
does not seem to be a corresponding akalūṅkaṇ).
90 Wilden decides in favour of cālva as it is found in the majority
of sources. To explain the plural verb she suggests that the grammati-
cal subject atu “it” is anaphoric and the verb cataphoric, referring to
what follows. There being two subjects in the speaker’s mind.
91 DED (see note 26), no. 2470(a); see also Kota ca’km “sufficiency”
and Toda so’k “enough” in (b).
“though it is not what I really want”: if she had a choice, she would not be living there.

This leaves the last two and a half lines of the poem to be discussed:

... vēṟupat-

tiriyā kālai iṟiyā

periya vallō periyavar nilaiyē.

Wilden’s translation (2008: 591) runs as follows:

if the time that made us wait ([iriyā, participle of the causative of iri “be somewhere, stay”], changing [(vēṟupatitu], retreats [(t)iriyā, conditional of the verb iri-i], won’t [(allavō]) the state [(nilai]) of the great ones [(periyavar)] be great?

But time (kālai) is an unlikely subject of iriyā, for time “flies” but does not “flee” (iri-i). How should the passage then be interpreted? Just now we have seen that the woman has resigned herself to her situation. But this changes when her husband announces that he is going away, leaving her alone in the village (em viṭṭakaṉṟir āyiṉ).92 She gives him a piece of her mind (konnoṉṟu kūṟuval),93 threat-
ing him with the consequences:

If during the period (kālai) that I am forced to sit/stay here (iriyā) alone (vēṟupaṭu)94 I run away, the (i.e. your) high status [in the village] will no longer be that high, will it (allavō)?

We have already seen that the husband as the owner of a flock of goats is better off than the majority of his fellow villagers, who make a living by slash-and-burn agriculture in the fields next to the village. In the first few lines of the poem he is described as showing off his success in life by parading through the streets of the village with a bunch of flowers in his hair. Marrying a woman from outside the village community is the final proof of his success. Therefore, by running away from him his wife would with one stroke destroy all his ambitions and make him the laugh-
ing stock of the village.

The above considerations yield the following translation of the poem:

We live in a small village surrounded by small fields cleared by kollaiākkōvalar [who have burned down the trees and driven back the wild animals trying to escape from the conflagration], a small village with wide open spaces, where bunches of white flowers hang in the short kuravu trees, flowers which are worn by the herder, who owns a flock of goats. It (living in a small village) is what it is, though it is not what I really want. However, if you persist in going away, leaving me behind, I will tell you [this] one thing: May you live long, my lord. But if during the period that you force me to stay here all on my own I run away, not much will be left of your high status here, will it?

Compare below Wilden’s translation:

We are [in] our small village, that place wide inside, where the sky flowers of the short-trunked Kura-tree bloom in heaped clusters, close to the small fields of the cowherds, in the clearing, to be worn by the shepherd-son95 with [his] sheep.

That alone is worthy, even apart from desire: if you depart, deserting us, I tell you one thing, may you live, lord:

if the time that made us wait, changing, retreats, won’t the state of the great ones be great?

8. The translations discussed above are no result of a ten-
dentious selection. I randomly started with the poems about the kollai fields, and in my investigation of these poems had to consult other poems, necessitating consulting yet other poems, and so on. The translations I came across in the process are not what one would expect of scholarly work. One of the basic problems encountered in practically all translations, those mentioned above and others consulted, is that each poem seems to have been dealt with in isolation. A simple example of this is Selby’s translation (see note 6) of the word punpulam “waste land, dry land, arid barren place” (Tamil Lexicon, p. 2813). In Aiṅkuṟunāṟu 260, she translates punpula mayakkattu vilaintaṉa tiṉaiyē with “the millet has now ripened in the land of arid fields” (p. 107). I suspect that the word “land” renders Tamil mayakkattu which, however, describes the poor quality of the field, consisting of a “mixture” (mayakkam; oblique form mayakkattu) of earth, stones and partly burnt roots of trees, which, as seen in Porunarāṟuṇaṭṭai 117f. blunts the ploughshare (see note 76). In Aiṅkuṟunāṟu

92 In the village poems the husbands are practically always absent or on the point of leaving. In this case the husband has to leave his wife presumably to lead his goats to new pastures.

93 The interjection konnoṉṟu “one thing”, is mentioned in Tolkāpiriyam, Collatikāram 254; the grammar distinguishes altogether four attitudes on the part of the speaker expressed by it, namely accam “feeling fear”, payamili “feeling no fear”, perumai “feeling powerful, superior”, and kālam “deeming it the right time to say it”. Here the woman is clearly warning or threatening her husband, which comes close to “absence of fear” or “superiority”.

94 The verb vēṟupaṭu- has a number of contextual meanings, “be alone” being one of them. The available sources seem to hesitate between the verbal participle vēṟupaṭṭu and the infinitive vēṟupaṭha. The difference does not really affect the meaning: “remain here, being alone” or “so that I am alone”.

95 makan “son” in iṭaimakaṉ has the same function as Sanskrit putra- in vanikputra- “trader-son”, i.e. “man belonging to the trading caste”.


246, puṟpulam vitiya puṉavar, Selby translates puṟpulam with “millet field”: “farmers who have sown their millet fields” (p. 102). The translation may not be quite exact, but it is not wrong, in the sense that millet does grow on dry fields. However, in 283 from the very same collection she translates puṟpulamayakkattuḷaṇa vēṇal with “the millet [(vēṇa)] cultivated in grassy tracts” (p. 116), as if she had just realised that puṉ might stand for puḷ “grass”. But if we have indeed to do with puḷ here, it is, like Skt ṛṣa- “(dry) grass”, used to refer to something useless. Clearly, Selby did not go back to her earlier translations. In addition, in this translation mayakkattu is not accounted for, unless it is somehow, in combination with uḷuta “ploughed” (thus “ploughed and sowed”), included in the word “cultivated”. Compare the translation “transformed” by HH (see note 4): 101 of the participle mayakkiya in Puṟanāṉūṟu 159, said of a kollai field.

Yet another example of how in dealing with a word translators fail to take into account its other instances is HH’s translation of paṭai when combined with puricaī. The translation of palpaṭaippuricaī in Puṟanāṉūṟu 224 is “many-layered wall” (p. 140), even though, as already shown in § 3 above, we will not talk about a wall here, but with a platform functioning as a Vedic sacrificial altar. paṭai in puricaippaṭai in poem 343 of the same collection is translated with “weapons” and puricaī with “fort”, in the process ignoring grammar by dividing one sentence into two, with puricaī in the one and paṭai in the other. Taking the trouble, instead, to consult the available indexes covering Caṅkam poetry (see note 16) for puricaī would have led to another instance of pal(pa)ṭaippuricaī, in Maturakaiṅkāñci 352, which might have convinced HH that the paṭai is a part of the puricaī.

It is curious, nay paradoxical, to see how little use translators make of these indexes. For, in the study of Caṅkam poetry the formulaic nature of the language, or the repetitiveness of the vocabulary, has been, and for some scholars still is, an important topic. According to K. Kailasapathy,96 in the Puṟanāṉūṟu we have poetry produced on the spot by wandering bards who make use of a fixed repertory of topics, themes and formulae. This theory has been further elaborated by Hart 1975 (see note 13), according to whom the Caṅkam corpus is a type of poetry composed by learned poets who were the heirs of these earlier bardic poets from the Deccan. Whatever exactly be the case, hapax legomena are rare. When faced with a problematical passage, it is common practice among scholars to turn to other instances of the words or expressions in the corpus. However, in the study of Old Tamil poetry this philological approach does not seem to have taken root yet. I hope I have been able to show that it should.

In the past few years a number of translations of Caṅkam poetry have appeared and more are in the pipeline. Maybe the projects are too ambitious. It is not difficult to see that the interpretation of a poem given in the commentary or by an earlier translator is not possible, for instance, for grammatical reasons. But to find out what the passage in question does mean may take days, if not months or even years. As it is, many such problems tend to be circumvented by ad hoc solutions. Because such solutions are not supported by the grammar of the original texts, they are difficult to reproduce. If grammar does not count, how can we claim that the study of Tamil poetry is a legitimate academic pursuit?

Unfortunately, the situation in Tamil studies is not unique. It is also met with in Schubring’s translations of the Āyāraṃgasutta, one of the early Jaina canonical texts. In Worte Mahāvīras. Kritische Übersetzungen aus dem Kanon der Jaina one may come across several instances in which Schubring in his translation has joined together earlier and later text passages, something which in a note on p. 84 he justifies with: “Diese Wiedergabe ... beruht auf freiem Schalten mit den anzunehmenden Bruchstücken, deren heutige Folge sinnlos is.” The problem with, for instance, Hart’s (and Heifetz’s) and Selby’s translations is that similar “freies Schalten” is done, as it were, secretly.

Wilden’s translations form a category in their own right. They are literal to the extreme, and therefore very difficult to follow, at times resulting in meaningless gibberish. It is as if Tamil poetry were passed through Google Translate. An example is her translation (2008: 591) of atuvē cāluva (or cāluṉ) kāmam anvēṟṟum in Naṟṟinai 266:98 “That alone is worthy, even apart from desire”. All the words are there, but the translation does not make clear how the sentence fits in the context, nor how its two parts are related, or whose desire (kāmam) for what we are dealing with.

The poems, and I refer in particular to the Akam poems about village life, are riddles of sorts. In these poems, a villager, usually a woman, says something, either to a friend, her mother or to herself, about her love life in the widest sense of the word. As indicated, it is to the reader to find out from the words spoken what the matter is or in what context they are spoken, and what the speaker intends to achieve with them. This is not an easy task, but it is what

96 Tamil Heroic Poetry. Oxford: Clarendon Press 1968.
97 (Quellen der Religionsgeschichte 7,14.) Göttingen/Leipzig: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1927.
98 Discussed extensively in § 7, and translated by me as “It is what it is, though it is not what I really want.”
this poetry is all about. The riddle must be solved before offering a translation. By her own confession Wilden is not interested in the intentions the speaker in the poem might have. This disqualifies her as a translator. But it also disqualifies her as a text editor, for how can one know what the original reading is and what the secondary one, if one is not interested in the meaning of the text?