

KAMPAN

Kampan (*Ramayana*)

Born and Died 12th-13th c. CE (?), India, present-day Tamil Nadu

Life As with so many authors before the pre-modern era in Indian literature, the life of the Tamil poet Kampan is largely speculation. From epigraphical and linguistic evidence, it is thought that he was a court poet for a Chola king, probably in the late 12th or early 13th century CE. He is recognised as the poet who composed the great Tamil epic of the Ramayana, which differs from earlier tellings of the story in one crucial respect: he reinvented it as a full-blown devotional epic in which Rama is indisputably the avatar of Vishnu. This is why Kampan's epic of 24,000 lines is called *The Avatar of Rama (Rama-avataram)*. He also composed other works, but his Rama story is his masterpiece.

Legends about this most famous of all Tamil literary figures are numerous. In one, he is the son of a temple drummer and learned the art of poetry by listening to temple music, and in another, he is a cook. In most legends, he is a common man, not a Brahmin or other high caste person. In one story, Kampan demonstrates his poetic skill, and at the same ridicules the pretensions of the court poets, by demonstrating that the rough verse uttered by a woodcutter has perfect metre. In another, he helps a woman who complains that demons are knocking down her house, every time she rebuilds it. Kampan says to her, 'Give me a shovel' and then recites a poem to ward off the demons. The consummate proof of his rapport with common people, however, is a story in which he recites the Rama story before an assembly of court poets who question his use of a word. Then Kampan silences his critics by telling them to keep quiet—outside the palace a woman is heard to use the same word, thus proving that it is valid.

Works (other texts are attributed to Kampan but without solid evidence)

Ramayana (Ramavataram)

Sarasvati Antati (In Praise of [goddess] Sarasvati)

Catokopar Antati (a poem in praise of Nammalvar, an earlier poet)