
CAVE TEMPLES OF PALLAVAS IN KANCHIPURAM

Dr. M. Lakshmanamoorthy

Assistant Professor,

Department of History, Saraswathi Narayanan College, Perungudi, Madurai-22

Dr. S. Kasthuri

Assistant Professor,

PG & Research Centre of History,

Jayaraj Annapackiyam College for Women, Periyakulam, Theni

Introduction

The art and architecture of the Pallavas constitute a very illustrious chapter in the history of art in South India. Their work laid the foundations of the Dravidian style. Kanchipuram was known as Kachi or Kachipedu in early Tamil literature but was later Sanskritized as Kanchi or Kanchipuram. (250–355) Pallava inscriptions and Chalukya dynasty inscriptions refer to the city as Kanchipura. Jaina Kanchi refers to the area around Tiruparutti Kundram. During British rule, the city was known as Conjeevaram and later as Kanchipuram. The municipality was previously known as Kanchipuram, while the district retained the name Kanchipuram. Kanchipuram is a famous temple town in Tamil Nadu, India.

Panchapandava Cave Temple, Pallavaram

Pallavaram (Town of Pallavapuram Pallava) is located at Saidapet Taluk, Kanchipuram district, about 10 miles south of Madras and 30 miles east of Kanchi, the capital of Pallava. The local rock is the finest charnockite known as Pallavaram Blue Metal or Blue Granite. The cave temple, known as the Panchapandava Cave Temple, was carved into the southern slope of a hill called Panchapandava malai by Hindus and Maula-ka-pahad by Muslims, in a quarry hill east of the present village, overlooking with a large irrigation pond. The sloping rock is nicely cut to a depth of about 15 feet in order to get the vertical cut. At the bottom of the original surface, thus forming an open platform (31 ft x 13 ft) in front.

This platform is preceded by a flight of steps cut into the rock with sloping parapets, a large part of which is concealed by a modern masonry platform paved with cement, accessible from the ground by about fifty steps in chipped stone. The excavation itself consists of an elongated mukha mandapa, behind which is an almost similarly sized ardha mandapa and five carved shrines on the rear wall of the ardha mandapa. The facade of the mukha mandapa is divided into five compartments, one on each side, by four massive columns and two pilasters. While the two end pilasters are cubic throughout their cross-section (unlike the Mandagappattu pilasters), the four central columns are divided into three sections, square sadurams at the top and bottom and octagonal at the central kattu. The height of the lower sadurams of the two central pillars is slightly higher than that of

the lower sadurams of the two side pillars of the pair, while the upper sadurams of the whole series are of the same height.¹

At the top of the columns and pilasters cut the beams with a pronounced curved profile and without taraiga decor. Beams (uttira) are cut into the canopy to nearly match the height and width of the cornice below. A thin, wide plank of wood was cut above the beam, its sides shaped like a vajana, as if to support the ceiling on the inside and the projecting curved cornice or kapota on the outside. The underside of the kapota is not hollowed out, but is evenly decorated, and although the curvature is well done, there is also no characteristic decoration on the outside. Above the cornice line are shown the projecting ends of eleven rectangular beams, without the typical vidana or hamsa decoration; at the end of the beams runs a linga.²

Behind the mukha mandapa and in front forming the slender ardha mandapa is a second row of columns and pilasters, in direct alignment with the first row on a slightly higher story. A notable difference is that the extreme pilasters have no joists and their axes are fixed directly to the ceiling; the two extreme columns have no kattu and have three armed crown lines projecting laterally inward, as if to support the upper beams, which run lengthwise for the back wall, rest on the two upper arms of the crown protruding frontally to align the columns of the back wall of the ardha mandapa with the two front outer columns. However, the two central columns are divided into three parts, the sadurams at the top and bottom and the kattu in the middle, with two side-arm cornices to support the beams. No beams are visible at either end, and the pilasters of the ardha mandapa rows have no crowns themselves. Thus, the ceiling of the ardha mandapa is divided into three compartments by two beams, the central compartment forms the ceiling in front of the three central entrances to the shrine, and the two beams link between the middle and outer entrances to the shrine.

Five shrines are cut between the back wall and the pilasters of the ardha mandapa, the central projecting slightly in front of the bus with adhishtana or molded plinth. It also originally had a short set of three steps which was cut away leaving only the lower Chandra slide intact on the floor of the ardha mandapa. Low oval benches with a central square base are cut into the bottom of the rear walls of the various shrines. It is evident that, like all other primitive caves in Pallava, there are neither carved lingas nor contemporary lingas installed in the sanctuary. The location of this cut platform behind the center of the sanctuary and close to the rear wall and socket (possibly later) would indicate the installation of more sculptural panels against the rear wall or stucco reliefs rather than linga, which should normally occupy the center of the floor. Two beams are provided in front of the three main central cells of the temple to enclose the central ankana of the ceiling of the ardha mandapa, and there are two cells on each side, suggesting that the three cells will be dedicated to the three main deities, possibly being Shiva in the middle, and Brahma and Vishnu in the other two, and the extreme cell is the auxiliary god. In its current state, however, there is absolutely no clue as to the original dedication of this cave temple.³

In the inscription, copied and published, appears a line of the Pallava grantha script; it appears on the beams of the ardha and mukha mandapas. It gives a long list of birudas, some of which are obscure when typed, of Mahendravarman I, which begins with my name (Sri Mahendravikramah). Written in Sanskrit, Tamil and Telugu script, these titles indicate the character, emotions and personal tastes of the king. The most important of these were Chettakdri, Vichitra chitta, Sahkirna jati, Gunabhara, Chitrakdrapuli, Mattavilda, Satyasandha Lakshita, Avanibhdjana, Lalitdnkura and Saturnalia, which were used as names for his other cave temples and in their excavations as his own name. In Hindu temples, even cave temples of the Pallava era, it is unusual for all shrines to face south. Even for cave temples with south-facing porch facades, due to the limitation and selection of excavation sites, shrines were carved into either the east or west side walls so that the worshiped gods faced south, east or west. Otherwise, select the entire cave temple, including the shrine, facing east, west, or north.

On the top of the hill near the cave temple, an attempt was made to dig a square or tar cistern about 15 feet high. The almost horizontal part of the rock was cut into many squares by many deep side passages, the final idea was to cut the overhanging blocks with side areas. On the eastern slope of the cave, next to it, there was another attempt to dig the rock, possibly another cave temple. The excavations were abandoned due to natural faults in the rock and the unsuitability of the site.⁴

Narasimha Cave Temple, Singaperumal koil

In the village of the same name in Chengalpattu Taluk and Kanchipuram districts, 30 miles south of Chennai, the rock-cut Sirigoperumal koil, known in its later inscriptions as the name of Narasinga Vinnagaram, is enshrined. Rock-cut sections were added to the front and concealed by a series of later structural mandapas, with the main opening of the outer mandapa on the south face. The cave temple itself is small, almost a vertical notch cut into the eastern face of a low rock, carved about a foot from the rock face at the bottom. It consists of a rectangular ardha mandapa with an equally rectangular shrine behind it. The facade of the ardha mandapa consists of two massive central columns with pilasters on each side. Although the two pilasters still retain their cubic section, the columns are usually divided into three sections, the sadurams at the bottom and top and the octagonal kattu in the middle. The lower sadurams are just under 2 square feet and thinner than a typical Mahendra column; even taking into account the shorter base height, the lower sadurams are tall and the kattu is as tall as the lower saduram. The upper saduram is shorter than its sides. The upper beam is the same thickness as the beam and is about half the height of the upper Saduram.

The rocky ledge that juts out at the top is broken where the structural mandapa joins it, and from the outside its irregular surface is not molded in kapota or decorated with kudus. The crown is chamfered with a defined angular profile.

A wider but thinner plank is cut under the rough kapota and above the main beam, which protrudes inside the ceiling of the ardha mandapa like a vidana course. This vidana is also thrown outside under the big kapota.⁵

The shrine is rectangular and contains a huge stucco with a seated four-armed Narasirhha holding the chakra in the upper right hand (not in prayer oga), the upper left sankha has flames and the lower right abhaya , the lower left corner is Katie. The right knee is bent and resting on the seat, and the left knee is slightly stretched forward in front of the seat, resting on the rosette. This stucco does not seem to have covered the bas-relief sculptures on the back wall. The architectural value of this cave temple should be attributed to the period between Mamara and Bairameswaravarman.

Vallam I: Vasantesvaram Cave Temple

Vallam is located in the Taluk and Kanchipuram districts of Chengalpattu, about 20 miles southeast of Kanchi and 40 miles south of Chennai, on a small hill bordering the town, 2 miles from Chengalpattu. The three cave temples on the eastern face of the hillock overlook the small village of Vallam. The caves are excavated at three slightly different heights. Of the three, two are cut on the eastern faces of two boulders perched one above the other, the upper and the most important one standing well behind the lower cave. The top of the lower excavated boulder thus forms a sort of a platform in front of the upper cave.⁶

The uppermost cave temple, Vallam I, the largest in the group, is the most perfect and typical of the Mahendra style. Three inscriptions are inscribed on the front pillars. The southern one gives the two birudas of Mahendra varman viz. Pakappiduku, Lalitankuran in Tamil. Of the two inscriptions on the face of the north pillar, the upper one, also in early Tamil, continues Mahendra's other birudas and states that the temple was excavated by Skandasena son of Vasantapriyaraaja Yes, he was a vassal of Mahendrapotaraja. . The excavated face has sunk about 2 feet. On the slightly sloping face of the rock, so that there is a platform in front, slightly wider than the overhanging edge at the top. The list does not end with kapota with decorations. The cave temple consists of a cuboid shrine with a reclining ardha mandapa in front. The facade of the ardha mandapa has two massive columns and two pilasters which, as usual, are square in section at the base and top, and are chamfered in the middle to form an octagon. The facades of the square parts (sadurams) contain inscriptions. The pilasters correspond in shape and size to the columns. The cornices at the top of the columns and pilasters are large. Examination of the four interior cornices, of which they are only partially exposed, would indicate a tendency towards arched rather than angular profiles. The entire facade is closed by three contemporary doors; the central opening is further masked by a bright decorative brick and stucco entrance.⁷

The entrance to the central shrine is carved into the back wall of the ardha mandapa and in its center the entrance to the shrine is cut out. With the exception of two shallow niches carved on either side of the entrance to this ancestral hall, the rest of the walls and all of the side walls are unremarkable. In shallow niches there are two standing semi-profiled dvara-palas, facing the entrance to the sanctum? They are almost identical in decoration and clothing, but have some differences in detail. Both rest on thick sticks, with

their left hand on the south side and right hand on the north side for symmetry. The other hand of the pair is placed on the hip in the typical kati pose. In both cases, the legs are crossed. Both wear kirta makutas with massive jata locks on the sides of the face and thick kundala patra on the ears. There are two curved horns at the base of the makuta on either side of the southern figure, indicating that he is Nandi as a representative of Ghana; the northern figure has no horns. Similarly, southerners wear the common upavita fashion vastra yajndpavita, while northerners wear the nivita fashion sarpa yajapavita. The north center has the jata makuta, which appears to be the leading edge of a small chakra, while the south has none.

A linga stands on the floor of the central shrine. The avudaiyar comes in two parts and slides on top, so it is advisable to add the two parts later.⁵⁹ Outside, on the rock face, next to the excavation, on two different levels, there are two niches, both rectangular. The one to the south is quite deeply carved and contains a fine relief of Ganesha seated on a simhasana with his body tilted slightly towards the sanctum. This figure is four-armed; in the two upper arms, the right hand holds something broken and difficult to discern, and the left hand holds a lotus bud. Rest your lower right arm on your elevated right thigh while resting your lower left arm on a pillow behind you.

The trunk curls to the right. The floor of the chapel is about 1 foot higher than that of the ardhā mandapa, and two short steps are open in front of its door, the lower step has a curved Chandra-sila without any decoration. The walls and ceilings inside the temple are simple. There are traces of ancient whitewashing on the back wall of the sanctuary, suggesting that it was originally whitewashed. At the top of the facade above the edge, a series of gable holes are cut to accommodate the beams of the front structural deck of the mandapa, and a slot is cut in the line of these holes, perhaps to provide a connection waterproof to secure the platform to the vertical rock surface.⁸

In contrast, the northern niche is shallow, with the bas-relief sculpture of Jyeshthadevi facing forward. She is seated, her legs dangling in the air. The image is heavily worn, so it is difficult to judge the fineness of its original finish or the detail of its features. The slender goddess wears a heavy jatabheda with a conical makuta. These two carvings are at odds with the caves they adjoin and are in common with two other simpler cave temples, one below Vasanteswaram and the other north of it, although in the Pallava period it -even.⁹

Vallam II: Lower Cave Temple (Shiva)

The Lower Cave Temple located directly below Mahendra Cave (called Vasantiswaram or Vedanteswara) in the districts of Vallam, Chengalpattu Taluk and Kanchipuram basically consists of a temple slightly elongated, with a narrow porch in the front, without any columns in the front. Entrance to the inner cell is through a slender opening that takes up one third of the width of the rear wall of the portico. On either side are dvara-palas in bas-relief, identical in all respects, all standing cross-legged, their heads turned towards the cave, their right arm suspended from a large stick taken under their armpits, and their hand left on the hips (kati). The dvara pala of the south is more facing north.

The southern dvara-pala wears the jata bhara which falls from the sides of the face, while the northern dvara-pala wears the hair in a large bun. Both carry huge kundalas.

The black stone linga was planted on the floor of the temple cell and consisted of three pieces. The two lower pieces forming the two halves of the section close around the lower part of the linga, while the upper piece with the central hole slides from the top. This is apparently a later addition. The entrance to the temple is not divided into door frame, lintel and window sill. The front of the stoep or mandapa is deeply cut into the outer surface of the rock, so that the edge of the overhanging rock serves as a cornice, without any of the features or decorations normally used in kapotas. The top line of this cave facade has no moldings or pinholes, suggesting the addition of an ancient structural mandapa. The facade itself is simple, consisting of only two pilasters, one on each side supported on the upper cornice, which, although broken, clearly has the original arched profile. On the south side of the side rock wall in front of the pilaster is a bas-relief depicting the valampuri Ganesa seated on a lotus. There is no hint that this is an ancient excavation from the Mahendra I era, contemporary with the cave temple above.¹⁰

Vallam III: North Cave Temple (Vishnu)

Third excavation in Vallam, Chengalpattu Taluk and Kanchipuram districts, just above and slightly lower to the north of the other two cave temples, basically similar to the lower side excavation south. The sanctum is also rectangular and contains a later group of Vishnu and his two consorts, with circular carvings. The entrance is flanked by narrow niches each containing a dvarapala. Both are dressed and posed the same, facing forward with the inner arms raised in adoration while the outer arms are rested in the kati.

The yajnopavita is worn in the nivita manner. Both wear makutas and kundalas. There are pilasters on each side of the front facade and a strip cut into the top of the base of the transom. Between them are two more complete cornices without pillars below. The buttresses, which must have been very slender, were removed and dismantled.

The cliffs are more angular than the curved silhouettes. On the north and south walls of the narrow frontal mandapa is a four-handed standing Durga, the lower two in the abhaya and kati and the upper two holding the chakras and sankha.¹¹ There is a narrow three-sided boundary cut into the rock face above the top line of the excavation, with four openings between them, probably for the insertion of wooden beams that support the roof of the front structural mandapa. The simple excavated nature of a small chamber and a small mandapa with slender columns and pilasters are later features that would mark the cave as belonging to the late Pallava period, after the Rajasimha era.

Orukal mandapam Cave Temple, Tirukkalukkunram

Tirukkalukkunram, is located in Chengalpattu Taluk and Kanchipuram district, 9 miles from Chengalpattu on the way to Mamallapuram, also known as Pakshitirtham.

The rock cave temple known locally as Orukal mandapam (meaning single stone or monolithic mandapa) was carved deep into a vertical recess on the eastern side of the

massive rock that forms the summit of Tirukkalukkaunram. It must be attributed, both paleogeographically and stylistically, to the time of Narasimha varman I Mamalla. The large excavation was approximately 3 feet from the outer vertical surface of the rock, at a height of 9 feet from the top of the rock platform in front, which is a large platform on the steps leading up to the structure. The Vedagiriswara temple is located at the top of the hill.

The bottom of the cave is thus accessed by a rock cut which actually consists of two side steps leading to a public platform at the top, preceded by a large public cut of yali railings. This and the width of the railing correspond to the depth of the rock cut between the natural exterior rock wall and the columned facade. The excavation consisted of two elongated rooms, placed one behind the other. Beyond the second hall, a cubic temple chamber has been excavated. The entrance hall corresponds to the mukha mandapa and the apse corresponds to the ardha mandapa.

The facade of the mukha mandapa has two massive cubic columns which divide the space between the two pilasters equally between the pilasters on either side, and are surmounted by huge brackets or cornices. The facade is thus divided into three symmetrical openings. The pilasters at both ends have a quadrangular section throughout their height, with elongated overhangs (as they should simulate columns half buried in the wall). The columns, on the other hand, have the typical Pallava shape and are divided into three sections with upper and lower 2-foot-square sadurams and the middle section chamfered into an octagonal kattu.

The top saduram is almost a 2 foot cube, but the bottom one is about 1 foot high and the extra half foot is the height of the base. The rims, or potikas, are wide and long, and their ends are angled at a 45° angle, giving them an angular profile. Above the cornice, a beam or uttira of the same width and height as the cornice is cut and fitted below.

At the top, two consecutive shifts designate the other elements of prastera viz. Two wider plates, vajana and valabhi.

On either side of the mukha mandapa are shallow niches, carved into the side walls, where two nearly identical life-size celestial statues face each other. Both have arms, stand in the same posture, and wear the same ornaments and clothing. Both are in the tribhanga, and in the case of the northern figure, the right side holds the worship or vismaya, while the left side is placed in the kati position on the hip. In the case of the southern figures, it is reversed; the left is in vismaya and the right is in kati. They both carry chords like vastra yajnapavitas in the manner of nevita, but for this they can be called iconographic images. The northern figure wears a large patra kundala on the left earlobe and many rings or makara kundala on the right earlobe. For symmetry, the earrings of the southern characters are reversed. Both have jata-makutas with ornaments on their heads.

Other notable adornments are the hara around the neck, the bahuvalayas above the elbows, and the valayas and udara bandha around the wrists. The bodice is loosely tied at the waist like feather wings, forming two loose loops, tied at the sides of the hips, with tassels hanging from the scalloped ends. The two Celestial Worshipers are similar in appearance, except for one with a slightly larger face and heavier jaw.¹²

The floor level of the ardha mandapa is slightly higher than the level of the mukha mandapa by about 2 inches and it also has the same set of two columns and two pilasters

on the front, each of which stands directly behind the corresponding column of the mukha mandapa facade. The most extreme pilasters are also uniformly square in cross-section from base to top, while the two columns are divided into three sections, the two sadurams and the kattu in the middle. It's the same type as the first row, just like the beam. A second thinner and wider element is placed on the beam so that it protrudes below the ceiling in all directions like an offset. This single plank or vidana replaces the row of double planks on the beams of the mukha mandapa, apparently to compensate for the upper floors of the ardha mandapa, since the ceilings of both mandapas must be at the same level.

Both mandalas have flat ceilings. The two end walls of the ardha mandapa have no carvings. The temple itself is almost cubic, with a cylindrical linga placed on the floor, and two pieces (upper and lower) of the avudaiyar slid over the linga so that only the upper third of it is visible.

Conclusion

There are also many small temples in the Kanchipuram area which are also known for their architectural grandeur. But many temples are in a state of disrepair. The Archaeological Survey of India said that the central government and the state governments have taken effective measures to preserve these precious religious institutions as they are examples of the great culture of the ancient people. Central India, especially Tamil Nadu, has splendid architecture in Kanchipuram, Kumbakonam, Madurai, Thanjavur, Tiruchirappalli and Tirunelveli and sculptures. It became part of these cultural treasures that historian A.L. Basham wrote a monumental book, *The Miracle of India*. Kanchipuram's contribution to Indian art and architecture is undoubtedly unique and significant.

End Notes:

1. K.R. Srinivasan, *Cave Temples of the Pallava*, *op.cit.*, p.149.
2. Ibid., p.156
3. K.R. Srinivasan, *The Pallava Architecture of South India*, *op.cit.*, pp.204-205. 157
4. Ibid.,
5. Alexander Rea, *Pallava Architecture Vol.I*, *op.cit.*, p.156.
6. K.R. Srinivasan, *Cave Temples of the Pallava*, *op.cit.*, p.168.
7. Ibid., 161
8. Ibid., p.198.
9. Ibid., p.199.
10. A.H. Longhurst, *Pallava Architecture*, *op.cit.*, pp.155-156.
11. K.R. Srinivasan, *Cave Temples of the Pallava*, *op.cit.*, p.203. 165
12. Ibid., 167