

# ARCHITECTURAL MARVELS: THE ENIGMATIC ROCK-CUT CAVE TEMPLES OF TIRUMAYAM

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## Abstract

*Thirumayam stands as a testament to the rich architectural heritage of South India, adorned with its remarkable rock-cut temples that have endured the test of time. The rock cut temples of Tirumayam are extraordinary examples of ancient architectural ingenuity and spiritual devotion. Carved into rocky hillside, these enigmatic structures feature intricate sculptures and designs reflecting the artistic prowess and cultural richness of their creators. This study embarks on a comprehensive investigation into the architectural legacy of Tirumayam's rock-cut temples, delving into their historical significance and intricate design elements. Through this analysis, we gain insight into the religious practices and societal values of the times, highlighting the enduring legacy of Tirumayam's rock cut temples in India's architectural and cultural heritage.*

**Keywords:** *Tirumayam, Rock cut temples, ancient architecture, sculpture, cultural heritage, religious significance.*

## Introduction

Tirumayam, historically referred to as "Tirumeyyam" in early records, holds significant and cultural and architectural importance. It is the headquarters of the Taluk of that name in Pudukkottai district. It is 12 kilometers to the south of Pudukkottai. Archaeologically and culturally, Tirumayam is one of the richest taluks of the Pudukkottai region. It yielded 123 sites, of which 84 are archaeological sites and 39 are historical sites. All the archeological sites have cultural vestiges from the Iron Age times to the historical period. Rock art in red pigment is also found on the surface of the rock shelter at Tirumayam. The early rock-cut temples are noticed at Devarmalai, Malayakoil and Tirumayam. The famous and earliest musical inscriptions of Tamilnadu referring to *parivatini* are found at Malaiyakoil and Tirumayam. It is one of the 108 Divyakestras, sung in the vaisnavite hymns, Divyaprabhandam. The inscriptions and literature of the Alvars, especially Tirumankai who has contributed a number of hymns in praises of Tirumeyyam. Totally there are twenty inscriptions in the two temples at Tirumayam, dedicated to Sesasayi and Satyagirisvara. There is an early inscription dated in the later half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D., in the Satyamurti (Sesasayi Temple). It states that the mother of the Muttaraiya chief called Videlavidugu Sattan Maran, named Perumbidugu Perundevi renovated the rock-cut shrine and also gave some gifts of land to it (IPS 13). The term used to mean renovation is *putukku*. Sattan Maran's

regin may be assigned to the eighth century as shown below and the paleographical evidence also indicates that the inscription belongs to the same period. The Vishnu temple at Tirumayam must, therefore have been built early in that century. The first to settled at Tirumayam were the Vaisnavas. Then, the Saivas came to the leading to confrontations in later times. The records of Sundara Pandya register an interesting case. The Saivas are called Srimahesvaras and the Vaisnavas, Srivaishnavas. There was a dispute between the rival parties regarding the boundaries of their respective temples and landed properties. These issues affected the *pujas* and *utsavas* of the temple.

### Devarmalai

Devarmalai lies about 15 km southwest of Pudukkottai near Peraiyur which lies on the Pudukkottai to Ponnamaravati road. It is a hamlet of the village of Mallangudi. On the eastern slope of a low rock, standing amidst cultivated fields there is a cave- temple which consists of cubical cell has a *linga* with square *yonipitham* and without a rock cut ardhmantapam. The niches on either side of the entrance are flanked by pilasters carrying fluted corbels. The Southern niche contains a sculpture representing a chief in regal robes with one hand placed on the hip and another rose in adoration. He wears yajnopavita and ear lobes and the head has a crown of matted locks and the extreme southern niche has Ganesha with trunk curled to the right a typical Pallava style. According to **K.R. Venkatarama Ayyar**, "the first northern niche has sculpture of a saint with a bearded face. To the north of this figure is another, believed to be that of Perumilalai Kurumba Nayanar, one of the 63 Siva saints". The Nayanar seated in his knees which are bent upwards and in his right hand he holds a peculiar staff commonly carried by yogis. The mantapam in front of the cell is a late Chola structure. The Amman shrine, a small building to the south, is now empty. On the top of the rock there is a mutilated idol of Dandayudhapani. There are tarns both on the top of the rock, and at the base. There is a late Tamil inscriptions engraved on the surface of the rock to the south of the cave-temple. This record mentions that the villagers of Malaiyankuti, a *pataipparru* of Kana-natu alias *Virutaraja-payankara-valanatu* granted land as utirappatti to one Natiyar, daughter of Periyar Peraiyur Paraiyan in the month of *Avani* in *Tunmuki* year.

### Kulamangalam

Kulamangalm is situated 13 km from Tirumayam and 18 km from Pudukkottai. Kulamangalm is a part of panaiyur village called Panaiyur-Kulamangalm, located 2km east of Malayakkoil. Megalithic stone circles with cists are noticed on the western side of the village. Kulamangalam is inhabited by Maravars. It contains a rock cut cave Siva temple at the foothill and Subramanya temple on the top of the rock. The earliest inscription, issued in 1334 refers to this village in the territorial division of vadaparru of Ponnamaravatinadu. A copper plate grant mentions that ponnambalanatha Tondaiman, who ruled Arantangi in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century made grants to siva temple at Panaiyur we learn that the two modern villages of Panaiyur and kulamangalam were formerly once called Panaiyur-

Kulamangalam, situated in the vadaparru or northern division of Ponnamaravatinadu and that they were administered by a common ur or village assembly. There seem too been frequent disputes between them.

### Kulalakottaiyur

Kulalakottaiyur lies about 10km from Tirumayam between Kadiyapatti and Rayavaram on the Tirumayam-Arimalam road. There is a small 2m square rock-cut cave with *linga* and circular *avudaiyar* attached to the back wall carved out of pattern rock. This is the only example where the *avudaiyar* is attached to the back wall.

### Malaiyakovil

Malayakkovil about a mile from Nachchandupatti is included in the revenue village of kulamangalam. It abounds in tors and contains some houses belonging to chettiyars a group of temples and a tank with well-built granite steps and parapet. On the eastern side of the Largest rock is a rock-cut cubical cell with well built granite steps and parapet. On the eastern side of the largest rock is a rock-cut cubical cell with a rectangular entrance. The *Lingam* in it stands on an octagonal *yonipithamning*, the *gomukhi* or spotted of which is supported on a rearing lion. On either side of the entrance is a shallow niche flaked by pilasters bearing corbels, the brackets of which are curved and bear the usual Pallava roll-ornaments. The *arthamantapa* and *mahamantapam*, which are later additions to the shrine, are completely dilapidated. There are a *nandi* and a fractured **Valamburi Ganesa**. There are two other miniature niches on this side of the rock, one of which contains a *lingam*. According to PSI (Pudukkottai State Inscriptions) there is an inscription here which is in three parts; the script of one part is Pallava grantha, and that of the other two Tamil. The Pallava grantha part is a label reading Parivaddinida; - Parivadini is a seven- stringed lute. The lines in Tamil are not wholly intelligible; but part of it may be interpreted as "behold the method of learning the science of *parivadini* as established by Gunasena". Gunasena is believed to be title of the Pallava Mahendravarman-I and this cave-temple may, therefore be attributed to him. In all these places the musical code word "parivadiniye" is inscribed inside a rectangular frame and in almost similar characters. This indicates a close link between them. The main center in this group seems to be Kudumiyannmalai where the large and valuable "musical" notations are engraved on an almost vertical scarp of rock. Just below the grantha inscription is a three line Tamil inscriptions which reads:

*Karkap Patuvatu Kan*

*n colliya pukirparukkum urittu*

*Nukkan niruvattukkum urittu*

Similar inscriptions are also found in the Satyagiresvara cave- temple at Tirumayam. On the south of this inscription is another short two line inscription in Tamil character. It records:

*Gunasena piramanan*

*Ceyta vitya parivadini kar(kar)*

According to D. Dayalan this inscriptions is translated by the scholars as “behold how the vogue, in favour of the Parivadini knowledge or art systematized by Gunasena has set.” This Gunasena, again had been taken wrongly by some scholars as standing for Mahendravarma Pallava, on the basis of one his titles “Gunabhara”. The Tamil inscriptions engraved on north wall are belonging to the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of Tribhuvana Chakravartikal Sri Varamutaiya nayanar of Kana-natu in Virutarajapayankara -valanatu.

The other rock-cut cave temple is on the southern vertical slope of the same rock, and in plan resembles the Siva cave-temples at Thirumayam and Malayadpatti. The cubical sanctum facing west is at the eastern end of the cave, in front of which is a rectangular ardhmantapam, the façade of which is supported by two pillars and two pilasters of the usual Pallava style, massive and cubical at the base and top, and octagonal in the middle and surmounted by a corbel with roll-ornamentation.

### Satyamoorthy Temple

The Satyamurthi (Vishnu or Lord of Truth) temple is considered by the local Vaishnavites to be the second holiest after the Srirangam temple. In fact, it is called Adi Rangam or Original Rangam and is believed to be older than the temple at the latter location. A festival takes place in Margali and lasts twenty days. The first ten days are called *Pakalpattu*, when the processions take place during the day, and the last ten days are called *Rappattu*, when the processions take place at night. It is believed that those who worship the deity on *Ekadasi* day or the eleventh day of this festival will definitely get salvation. Other important festivals are Chitrapournami and Nawaratri, as well as those celebrated in the months of *Vaikasi* (May-June) and *Adi* (July-August). The sanctity of this temple was enhanced by Tirumangai Alvar, the famous Vaishnava Saint Sand, singing hymns in praise of the Lord, Satyamurti. The stone temple of Yogasayanamurti or the god is located to the west of the Satyamurti temple. The two pillars and two pillars of this stone cathedral are generally high. The cork has scroll ornaments from the Pallava period. To the east of the Sri Satyamurti temple are those of Senamudali and Rama (group) and further east is the sacred gate, through which the main idol is brought out on the *Ekadasi* day of the month of *Margali*. Satyapushkarni is a beautiful, symmetrical octagonal tank.

Upon entering the second mandapa, visitors turn towards the Amman temple on the left. Ujjivanittayar, Amman, is considered very auspicious. This Mandapa is an architectural structure dating from the "Late Pandya" period and has decorative and artistic pillars as well as kumbha pancaras on the walls. The northern lane is called *Sundara Pándyan kuradu* and leads to the main temple of Sri Satyamurti, surrounded by closed rooms. The main temple, adjacent to a rocky outcropping, belongs to the “Late Pandya” period. The main gopuram at the entrance has many features of the 'late pandya' style, such as corbels with *pushpapodigais*, multi-faceted columns with *nagapadam* and decorative pillars. This temple is also under the control of ASI department. After the undertaken of ASI, the temple comes with stricter regulations, safeguarding the heritage sites from unauthorized alterations. This can help maintain the authenticity of the sites.

## Satyagirisvara Temple

The Satyagirisvara is perhaps the largest cave-temple in this area excavated on the southern scarp at the foot hill almost at its base and is immediately to the west of the Vishnu cave temple. The temple adjacent to the Satyamurti temple is Satyagiri Isvaram. The front gopuram is modern and imitates "later Pandya" architecture well. The first pillared Mandapa includes the east-facing Bhanu Umapatisvara temple, the south-facing Amman Raja Rajeswari temple and the Bhairava temple and the Navagraha group. This group of temples was called Kilakkovil or "lower temple". Further on is the temple of Sri Venuvanesvari or "Sovereign Lady of the Bamboo Forest", the main Amman of the temple. It is a "Late Pandya" structure, recently renovated. Above is the rock-hewn temple of Sri Satyagirisvara. The linga chamber with yonipitha is located on the west side and the end of the cave faces east, and on the east side, opposite the lingam is a large Lingodbhavamurti, carved into the rock itself. This one faces west, that is, towards the cathedral. The god of the cave-temple is known in the inscriptions as Tirumeyyattu Mahadevar, Tirumeyyadevar Srimulasthanamutaiya Mahadevar, Tirumeyyam Malaiyalan, etc.

Siva Cave Temple is the oldest monument here. For architectural and other reasons, it is believed to belong to the period of Pallava Mahendravarman I. There are five inscriptions here. The oldest was found on the north wall of the stone temple, topped by the Sanskrit word 'Parivadinida' in Pallava-Grantha script, followed by a few Tamil lines mentioning Gunasena, believed to be the title of Pallava king Mahendravarman. . Nearby is a musical inscription similar to that of Kudimiyannal, but it was erased in the 13th century when the Hoysala court judgment **Appanna Dandanayaka** was recorded. The words that are still legible refer to Indian musical terms such as *sadja*, *gandhara* and *dhaivata*. These prove that the cave temple was excavated during the time of Mahendravarman I; the cave temple appears to represent a combination of a well-known early Pallava features as well as the contemporary or immediately collateral Pandya and Muttaraiyar elements. Architectural features confirm this conclusion. The lack of regular maintenance, compounded by the practice of lightening lamp in the temples, has resulted in soot and waxy residue accumulating on the ancient stone surface diminishing their original splendor.

## Conclusion

The rock-cut temples of Tirumayam stand as a testament to the ingenuity and artistic prowess of ancient architects and artisans. Nestled in the heart of Tamil Nadu, these enigmatic structures offer a fascinating glimpse into the spiritual and cultural milieu of their time. Through meticulous craftsmanship and architectural innovation, the temples reveal a complex interplay between religious devotion and artistic expression.

Our exploration of Tirumayam's rock-cut temples has unveiled not only their remarkable structural features but also their historical and cultural significance. These temples, carved from solid rock with precision and artistic flair, represent a unique fusion of architectural sophistication and spiritual symbolism. They serve as crucial artifacts in understanding the religious practices and societal structures of the period in which they



were constructed. In examining the artistic motifs and iconography within these temples, we gain insight into the theological and philosophical underpinnings that influenced their design. The juxtaposition of grandeur and simplicity in these structures reflects a profound understanding of both sacred space and human experience. Moreover, the preservation and continued study of these temples are essential for maintaining the cultural heritage of the region. As we advance in our research, it becomes increasingly clear that these rock-cut marvels are not only architectural achievements but also vital links to the past, offering lessons on the enduring nature of human creativity and spiritual aspiration.

In conclusion, the rock-cut temples of Tirumayam are more than mere historical relics; they are living embodiments of a rich cultural and artistic tradition that continues to inspire and captivate scholars, architects, and visitors alike. As we delve deeper into their mysteries, we are reminded of the timeless nature of human ingenuity and the enduring legacy of those who have shaped our architectural heritage.

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