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RESEARCH ARTICLE

**A REREADING ON KUNNANDARKOIL CAVE TEMPLE IN PUDUKOTTAI DISTRICT GLEANED
FROM INSCRIPTIONS**

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Abstract

A Cave Temple in Kunnandarkoil, village in Pudukottai district in Tamil Nadu, is dedicated to the Lord Siva. The temple has various inscriptions from the Cholas, the Chalukyas, the Pandyas and the Vijayanagar Empire. This paper throws on light regarding its significance, which is considered one of the oldest stone temples in South India. The temple is maintained and administered by Department of Archaeological Survey of India as a protected monument.

Keywords: artha mandapa, dwarapalakas, nrita mandapa

Introduction

Kunnandarkoil Cave Temple in Kunnandarkoil, a village in Pudukottai district in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, is dedicated to the Hindu God Siva. Constructed in Rock cut architecture, the temple is believed to have been built during the 8th century by Muttaraiyar Kings, the cardinals of Pallavas, with later expansion from the Vijayanagar Empire. The rock cut architecture in the temple is a specimen of the later Pallava Art and an early example of the Chola Art. The temple has various inscriptions from the Cholas, the Chalukyas, the Pandyas and the Vijayanagar Empire. The temple is considered one of the oldest stone temples in South India. The temple is maintained and administered by

Department of Archaeological Survey of India as a protected monument.

The rock cut cave temple is facing east with Balipeedam, Nandi and Dwajasthambam. Entrance looks like a Rajagopuram base. From the outer prakaram to the inner prakara entrance is like a Rajagopuram with stucco image of Rishabanthikar, Pickshadanar with rishipanthika and Gajasamkara murthy. Again a Nandi is in the mandapam.

The front mandapam is joined with the main rock to form the sanctum sanctorum. In front of the sanctum on the left valampuri Vinayagar. Vinayagar's yagnopaveetha and mothagam are little unusual to be watched. On the right Shiva with Umami Ammai in the

form of bas-reliefs. Shiva and Umami are sitting in lalitasana. On the left mandapam Saptamatrikas with Vinayagar and Veerabhadra. Sri Murugan and Sri Valli are in a small rock cut cave. Sri Chandikeswarar bas-relief is on the right side of the small cave. Ambal is in a separate temple. Ambal is in standing posture with abhaya varada hastham. On the hill there is a Arumuga with 12 hands sitting on peacock temple.

On the west side of the temple is a Vijayanagara period 100 pillar mandapam with a raised platform. The front portion is built like a chariot pulled by the horses. In front are the images like sanganidhi, Padmanidhi and boothaganas. The mandapa extension was started but couldn't be completed, which can be seen with unfinished extension. There is a Navakanda statue kept in the mandapa, how it came here is not known. But to my guess, this legend may be similar to the Navakanda statue with inscription at Jambai Shiva temple. To complete the construction of this mandapa, the hero might have sacrificed himself in the form of Navakandam.

The sanctum sanctorum is with padabandha adhisthana comprises of jagathi, Vrudha Kumuda, kampu, Kandam (Kandapadam) and kampu. The mukha mandapam is like a small shrine with square pillars and tharanga pothyal. The sanctum Sanctorum is a Rock cut cave and moolavar is an integral part of the main rock / Thai parai. The 61 cm Lingabnam is on the 57 cm high, 8 faced avudayar. The komukha is small. Dwarapalakas are at the entrance, but not similar. On the left called soola Devar and the right called as mazhuvadiyar. A stucco Vimana was constructed above the sanctum on the rock.

Bas relief of Valampuri Vinayagar is in the mukha mandapa, on the opposite is Lord Shiva with Parvati as Gangavijarsanar and a servant maid in the form of bas-relief. In prakaram Saptamatrikas and Karuppu Swamy. The mandapams Potharaiyar Mandapam and Natya mandapa are constructed by the Mutharaiyars. Murugan Statue is in another rockcut cave and Chandikeswarar is in the form of bas-relief.

The rock cut cave temple was excavated during 8th century by Nandivarman. The front mandapam

was extended by Pandyas. The 100 Pillar mandapas and some of the structures are built during Vijayanagara period. As per the inscriptions, Lord Shiva was called as Thirukundrakudi Mahadevar, Kundrakudi Nayanar and Kundraperumal . The original name of Kundrakudi was turned to the present name of Kunnandarkoil. The temple has more than 60 inscriptions, which speaks about the land measurement, sale, Taxes, donations and the punishment for the wrongdoers. The Pallava king Nandivarman-II's 3rd reign year inscription records the gift of 200 Nazhi rice to 100 people on Thiruvathirai day by Visaiyaraiyan of Vaduvur in Meepuzhai Nadu.

One of the inscription records the donation of 220 nazhi rice to 110 andhanars, by Kothaimayinthan, in the name of his son Mayinthan Veerakadayan on Thiruvathira day. Pandya King Konerimelkondan Sundara Pandyan's period inscription records the endowment of Naivedyam and Sathupadi (alangaram) for the sandhi pooja created in the name of the King himself. For the same 100 gold (coins..?) was given as deposit by the king itself, after exempting from Taxes. The temple is under the control of Archaeological Survey Of India (ASI).

Kunnandarkoil derives its name from *Kundru Andan Koil* meaning the Lord of the hill in the temple. Kunnandarkoil and the region around it was ruled by the Mutharaiyars during the 7th to 9th centuries, where were lieutenants under the Pallavas. The region was later captured by Medieval Cholas. The cave temple was originally built by the Muttaraiyar King who was the lieutenant of the Pallava King Nandivarman II (710-775 CE), who was also called Nandivarman Pallava Malla. The earliest inscription is from the period of Nandivarman and his son Dantivarman indicating generous contribution to Vedic people (learned) during the Thiruvadira festival.¹ Soundara Rajan identifies the temple to an addition during the early half of the 8th century.² There are later inscriptions from the Cholas, the Chalukyas, the Pandyas and the Vijayanagar Empire. During the 14th century, the village had two divisions for the Kallar community.³ Some of the epigraphic studies reveal that there were strict punishments levied to

people robbing in remote villages like Kunnandarkoil.⁴ In modern times, the temple is maintained and administered by Department of Archaeological Survey of India as a protected monument.⁵

The temple is located in Kunnandarkoil, a rockyhill in Pudukottai district in southern Tamil Nadu. The cave houses three life size sculptures of various forms of Shiva.⁶ The main shrine faces east and the *sanctum* houses the image of Lingam, an iconic representation of Shiva. Shiva is worshipped as Parvathagiriswarar. The walls of the sanctum are plain, unlike the later Chola temples that have niches to house different images. The sanctum is approached through an *artha mandapa*, a hall supported by pillars. The sanctum is guarded by *dwarapalakas* on either side. The inscriptions are made on the base of the *dwarapalakas*. There are two portrait images, one of which is identified as the Mutharaiyar chief who built the temple and other being his assistant.⁷

The concluding part states that the Kunnandarkoil, cave temple in rock cut architecture is an early example of the Cholan Art, continuing the tradition of the Pallavas. The individual images retrieved from the place are maintained in the Pudukottia Government Museum. The hundred pillared *nrita mandapa* has sculpted pillars, a typical of the Vijayanaagar art. The bronze images in temple are earliest specimen of exquisite sculpted images in South Indian art. The Somaskanda bronze with Siva

and Parvathi, with their child Skanda is the most prominent among the bronzes in the temple.⁸

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