

Unique sculptures in a 1000-year-old Tirupperunthurai temple, Tamil Nadu, Southern India

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Abstract: This paper is aimed at bringing out the unique stone sculptures of an ancient temple in the state of Tamil Nadu, India. Although many ancient temples with exquisite stone carvings in the state are well known, the one thousand years Aathmanathaswamy temple which is alluded to, has not received due attention. Hence, the paper draws attention to the stone carvings present in this temple. As a preamble, the study presents briefly the history of carving stone images for temples and the methodology followed in southern India for this religious task.

Keywords: Avudaiyar Temple, Shilpa Shastras, Rock carving; Granite statues, Temple architecture, Manickavasagar, Pudukkottai

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Introduction

The Pallava dynasty (c. 3rd-9th Century CE) ruling from Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu initiated building rock-cut divine edifices using granite in Tamil Nadu. The Pallava King Mahendravarman I (600-630AD) ^{1,2} also called *Vichitrachitta* (curious minded) and *Chitrakārapuli* (Tiger of artists)³, initiated rock cut temple edifices deviating from the traditional practice of using brick and mortar. He inscribed in one of the temples he designed as - மண்டகப்பட்ட, கடவைரகைக் கோயில் அல்லது மண்டகப்பட்ட, திரமுர்த்தி கோவில் என்பது தமிழ் நாடு, விழிப்புரம் - 'this brick-less, timber-less, metal-less and mortar-less' construction was done by Vichitrachitta confirming his pioneering efforts in rock sculpted structures⁴. However, owing to the unyielding nature of rocks, requirement of new tools and skills in carving, such rock cut temples were simple and smaller in size.⁴ Later on, both the Pāndiya (of the 8th Century BCE) and the Chola (c. 850 CE – 1250 CE) rulers used granite extensively for constructing temples and carving sculptures.

General Methodology of Stone Sculpting

Granite was preferred by sculptors of Tamil Nadu because of its extreme hardness (in Mohs scale it is 6-7) and resistance to abrasion and erosion thus ensuring the long life of the sculptures. The chief architect (*Sthapati*, கல்-தச்சன்) and the sculptor (*Shilpi*) who were engaged in temple building and statue carving strictly followed the *Shilpa Shastras* (traditional Indian treatises on architecture and sculpture) for choosing the proper place^{5,6}, and right type of stone for their work^{7,8} and to know the proportion and type of decoration of the deity to be sculpted. *Shilpa Shastras* predict that misfortunes would descend on the ruler, builders and people if the constructions did not pertain to specifications mentioned in them⁵. Suitable stones were selected by following *Sila pariksha* (sila-statue pariksha – testing).

Stones with vertical lines and producing a specific sound when tapped were chosen for carving male figures *Purush sila* (purush -male), those with horizontal lines were used for carving female figures *Stree sila* (stree- female) and stones with cracks, dots or sand integrated in them were considered unfit for carving.⁹ Massive stones were split by drilling holes in them and inserting dry wooden wedges in these holes; the wooden pegs were then soaked with water making them to expand which cracked the rocks. According to the ancient Sanskrit text *Manu Samhita* (200 BCE - 200 CE), the *Sthapati* had to be well-versed in tradition, physically fit, righteous, devoid of malice and jealousy, and should know mathematics and the *Puranas*^{10,11}. He starts the work by praying to Mother Earth to forgive him for carving the rock and promises that he would not waste or misuse the stone.¹² Once the image is completed, an eye is carved in the figure and a ritual is performed to transfer life and breath into it thus making it fit to be housed in a temple and worshiped.^{5,12} Several temples in the state of Tamil Nadu today exemplify the extraordinary skill and workmanship of the sculptors; one such is the Aathmanathaswamy Koyil (*swamy* – God, *koyil*- residence of God) located in Aranthangi, Pudukkottai district of Tamil Nadu state (10.0758° N, 79.0430° E) which houses exquisitely carved statues.

Aathmanathaswamy Koyil

Aathmanathaswamy Koyil, also called Avudaiyar Koyil, is a 9-10th century Siva temple.¹³ It is one of the ancient Siva temples which was praised by the Nayanmar saints (6th – 8th or 9th centuries CE) in their worship on Lord Siva.¹⁴ My literature survey confirms that there is hardly any research study on this temple. Legend says that the temple was constructed by Manickavasagar, a 9th century¹⁵ Tamil saint and poet though, according to Narayana Ayyar¹⁶ Manickavasagar lived in the 7th century. Additional constructions were made later by many who ruled this region including the Cholas, Vijaya-Nagara Nayaks, Tanjavur Maratha Kings, and the Thondaimans who ruled Pudukkottai during various periods.¹⁷

The Vijayanagara constructions in Tamil Nadu followed in general the styles of the Pallava-Chola-Pandya architecture. An example of the finest rock carving here is the sun shade (*Kodungai*) which, in temples of Tamil Nadu are designed to extend over the roofs of halls (*Mandapams*). The Kodungai of Aathmanathaswamy temple has been created out of rock, but looks like that it has been constructed using wood; the panels, ropes, bolts, large screws and hinges there create an illusion that wooden and iron structures were put together to make the roof. A Britisher during their rule fired a gun shot at the roof to confirm that the roof was not the result of a wood work¹⁸, (Figure 1). It is said that architects of

Tamil Nadu, before beginning a temple construction made an oral promise to the king that they could execute any work excepting the likes of the kodungai of Avudaiyar Koyil.

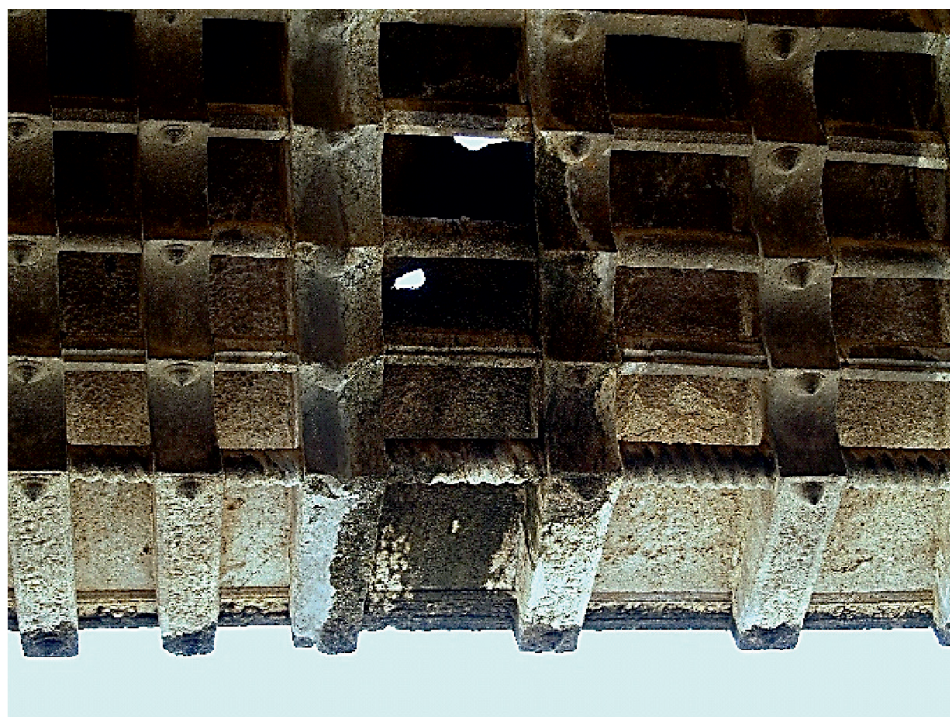


Figure 1: Sun shade (Kodungai) carved out of granite with the hole made by the gun shot fired by a Britisher to confirm that it was not made of wood

Pudukkottai, a district of Tamil Nadu mentioned in old Sangam Tamil literature (100 CE and 250 CE), was a maritime trade point with flourishing trade with the Romans which is endorsed by the finding of Indo-Roman gold and silver coins of the times of Augustus (BC 29 – AD 14) up to Vaspasianus (69-79 AD)¹⁷ in this region. About 300 km away from Pudukkottai in the south is Kayalpattinam which was a major seaport during the regime of Kulasekara Pandyan I (c. 1268–1308 CE). Marco Polo, the Venetian merchant and traveller, who travelled through the Pandya Kingdom during Kulasekara Pandyan's time, states that horses from Arabia were imported periodically in to southern India at Kayalpattinam port.¹⁹ He adds that the horses from Arabia were sought after as they proved to be more powerful and robust; more than 2000 horses were imported every year since breeding them locally failed to yield desirable quality.¹⁹

Religious legend says that Arimarthana Pāndiyan sent his minister Manickavasagar to Tirupperunthurai of Pudukkottai district to buy such Arabian horses for his cavalry; however, Manickavasagar spent the money meant to buy the horses to expand the Athmanathar temple. As a recap of this legend, this temple houses life-size sculpturing of horses with riders on them. These statues, reflect the legend and exemplify the fierce nature of horses with large and protruding eyes, flaring nostrils and strong legs (Figure 2a). One carving made shows clearly the ornaments, design in the dress and the details like the ankle bone in the leg of a horseman (Figure 2b). The striking poses, balanced proportions, and creation of depth to project the 3D effect of the statues vouch for the creativity of the sculptors.



Figure 2a: Life size monolithic sculpture of a rearing horse depicting broad eye, flaring nostrils, and intricate details of reins and ornaments.

Figure 2b: Sculpture showing the details of the dress and ornaments worn by the horse rider. Toe nails and ankle bone have been etched clearly.

During the Vijayanagara Nayaks period (16-17th Century), intricately sculpted stone pillars (stambham) were created in the corners of the hall. The figures on the pillars are designed to project from the flat stone surface thus producing a 3D effect (relief sculptures). Two such big pillars each with 500 small pillars carved on them are seen in *Aayiramkall Mandapam* (Aayiram – thousand, kall – legs or pillars, Mandapam - hall) (Figure 3). Carvings with intricate details such as in the braiding of a women's greased hair (Figure 4a) and the jewels worn of her time (Figure 4b) point to the meticulous attention to detail and craftsmanship of sculptors. It is likely that the sculpture in Fig. 4b belongs to a later period – probably of the Nayakas (or later) since they initiated the use of polished granite in carving.⁴

The ceilings in the temple have carvings with immense precision; in some places, carvings of lotus flowers with repetitive geometric designs depicting precise tessellations are present (Figure 5a). There are chains hanging from the ceiling with circular, movable links which have been sculpted out of solid rocks (Figure 5b).²⁰ Such rock chains speaking of extremely precise workmanship are seen in many ancient temples in the South of India. Smaller carvings of various religious figures are also present in the roofs of the temple; interestingly, although very small when compared to the life size

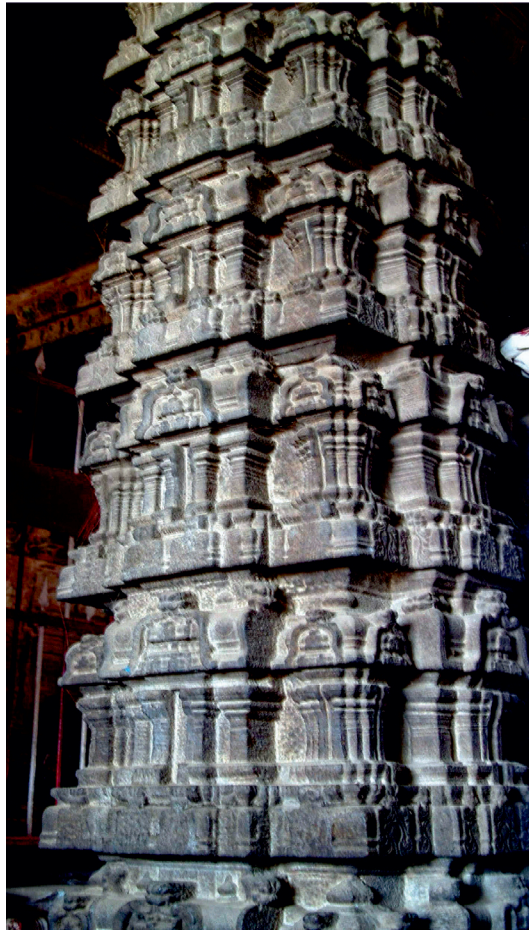


Figure 3: One of the two granite rock pillars with 500 pillars chiselled on it



Figure 4a: Detailed carving of plaiting of hair Figure 4b. Representation of jewels

statues in the temple, the different features of the figures are manifested amazingly reiterating the craftsmanship of the sculptors (Figure 5c).



Figure 5a: Carvings in the roof depicting lotus flowers

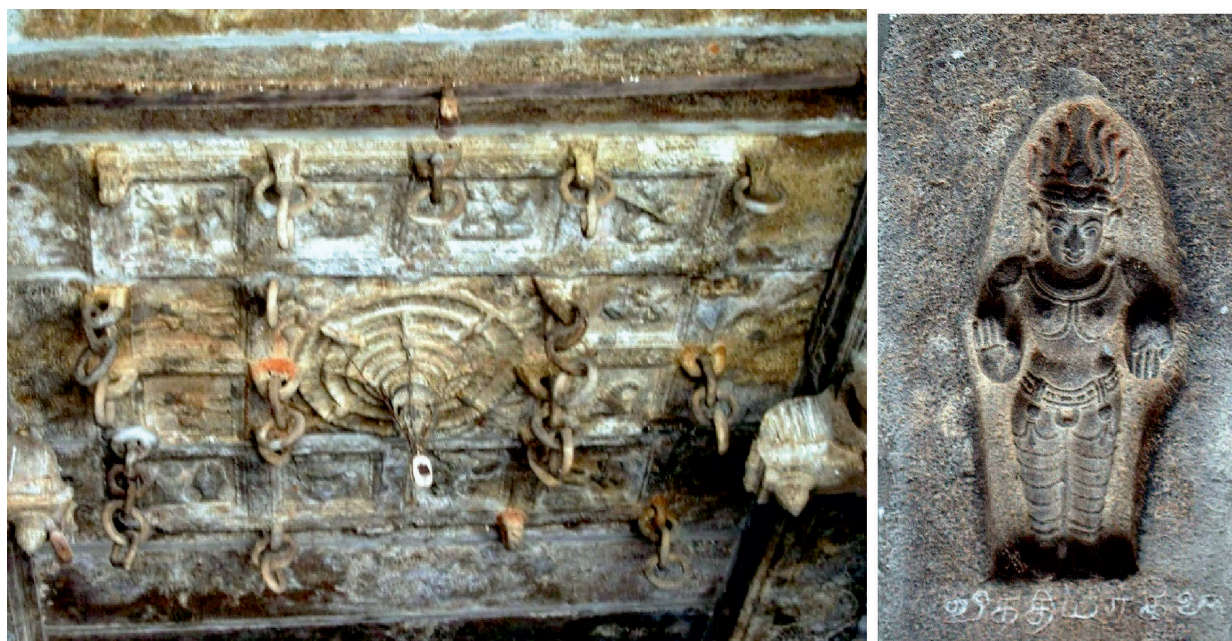


Figure 5b: Chains with movable circular links carved in stone.

Figure 5c. One of the many small carvings on the roof

Conclusion

The stone carvings in the thousand year old Aathmanathaswamy temple represent the contributions of different dynasties of different periods. Such monolithic stone carvings in Tamil Nadu declined in the later periods due to the lack of skilled- sculptors as well as the shortage of suitable stones.²¹ Since plan of temple construction, sculptural style, (the pillars, decorative structures on top of the pillars, and windows²², material used and theme emphasis distinctly differ with different dynasties, a focused study on this temple would help in identifying the role played by each regimen in the structural evolution of it.

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