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Intertwined heritage: The Tirumayam fort and the twin temples of Siva & Vishnu rock-cut shrines

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Abstract

Tirumayam, a historic town in Tamil Nadu, is home to an architectural ensemble that seamlessly blends spirituality and military strategy. The Tirumayam Fort, a 17th-century structure built under the rule of the Sethupathi Kings, stands as a testament to the region's strategic significance. Within its vicinity lie the twin rock-cut temples of Shiva and Vishnu, showcasing Dravidian craftsmanship and religious syncretism. These temples, adorned with intricate sculptures and inscriptions, reflect the artistic and cultural evolution of the region. This study explores the historical and architectural significance of Tirumayam's fortifications and sacred shrines, analyzing their role in Tamil heritage. Through an in-depth examination of the site's structural elements, iconography, and historical narratives, this manuscript sheds light on Tirumayam's unique position as both a center of defense and devotion.

Keywords: Tirumayam fort, rock-cut temples, Shiva temple, Vishnu temple, Dravidian architecture, Tamil heritage, Sethupathi kings, South Indian temples, historical significance, architectural marvels

Introduction

Tirumayam 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. It is a historically and architecturally significant town which stands as a remarkable testament to the confluence of defense and devotion. Dominating its landscape is the Thirumayam Fort, a 17th-century military stronghold built by the Sethupathi Kings of Ramnad, designed to safeguard their territory against external threats. The fort's strategic positioning atop a rocky hill, coupled with its robust fortifications, watchtowers, and concealed escape routes, exemplifies the advanced military engineering of its time.

The twin rock-cut temples dedicated to Shiva and Vishnu are nestled among the protected environment and showcase the artistic genius of Dravidian architecture. These temples are not simply places of worship, but also timeless icons of regional artistic and religious traditions. This essay seeks to investigate Thirumayam's dual significance as a defensive stronghold and a spiritual hub. This study illuminates the town's historical significance by examining the fort's military methods, including its tiered walls, moat system, and natural topographical advantages, as well as the architectural and artistic elements of the twin temples. This work uses an interdisciplinary approach to emphasize Thirumayam's unique blend of religious and strategic architecture, providing significant insights into South India's sociopolitical and cultural landscape.

Historical Background of Thirumayam

Thirumayam is derived from the term 'Thirumeyam', which signifies the seat of truth. It is located in Pudukkottai town, near Karaikudi. In frightened hymns, the hill on which the temple and fort are located is referred to as Meyyarmalai, and the lord as Meyyamalaiyan. The Siva cave temple is one of the area's ancient structures. It is attributed to the Pallava Mahendra-varman I period based on the architectural and other criteria listed below. An

inscription in the Visnu temple names Muttaraiya chief Sattan Maran, who was a contemporary of Pallava Nandivarman II. Tirumayam eventually became part of the Vijayalaya lands of imperial Cholas.

In the 12th and 13th centuries, the Hoysalas became active in South Indian events, initially as Chola friends and then as Pandya allies. Appanna, a Dandanayaka or General of the Hoysala army, presided over an important tribunal at Tirumayam to settle a long-standing dispute between the trustees of the Visnu and Siva temples, according to two inscriptions. Tirumayam was under Pandyan power in the 13th century, as evidenced by inscriptions from Maravarman Sundara Pandya II, Jaṭa-varman Vira Paṇḍya III, Jaṭavarman Parakrama Pandya, and an unidentified Vira Pandya. The Vijayanagar inscriptions originate from the periods of Virupaksa I and Kirṣṇadeva Raya. Surraikkudi's leaders administered it in the 15th century. Inscriptions describe Suraikkudi chiefs Parakrama Pandya Vijayalaya Tevar, also known as Sempaga Ponnayanar, and Avaiyandan Sundara Pandya Vijayaḷaya Tevar.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, the town was a northern edge of Ramnad's Setupati territory, but the Pallavarayars controlled it directly. Around 1686, Vijaya Raghunatha, also known as Kilavan Setupati, of Ramnad, a brother-in-law of Raghunatha Raya Tondaiman, the founder of the current Ruling house, gave the latter the palayam of Tirumayam. Setupati Tanda Tevan confirmed this cession in 1723 in exchange for military assistance from Tondaiman against Bhavani Sankar, a rival claimant to Ramnad's chiefship. Tirumayam was the Tondaiman's lone shelter in 1733, when Tanjore general Ananda Row overran the entire Pudukkottai region. Vijaya Raghunatha Raya Tondaiman was besieged for nearly a year before Ananda Row raised the siege and departed.

The Raja of Tanjore, in 1755, submitted a claim for Tirumayam to the East India Company. However, he failed to adequately maintain the claim. There is an unverified tale that, during the 'Poligar War' of 1799, Kattabomma Nayak of Panjalankurichchi and his dumb brother were imprisoned in the Tirumayam fort before the Tondaiman 'betrayed' them to the English. The Poligars, who had taken refuge in the forests near Tirukkalambur, were seized by Tondaiman's soldiers and transferred to Madura upon request of Mr. Lushington, the Collector of the Poligar Peshoush. Tirumayam served as a depot for Lieutenant Colonel Agnew's troops during the second 'Poligar War'.

Tirumayam Fort: A Strategic Stronghold

The Thirumayam Fort, covering an area of 40 acres, is circular in shape and classified as a "Padmakottai" (Lotus Fort). Traces of deep moats that once surrounded the fort are still visible, though they have been filled in at several places. According to the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), the fort originally had seven encircling walls, but only four remain today. Researchers believe that this fort could be the "EzhaiyilKottai" (Seven-walled Fort) mentioned in Sangam literature. While the outer defensive walls are in a dilapidated condition, the inner walls remain intact.

The inner fort is situated atop a high hill, offering natural defenses along with an artistic architectural design. High walls enclose the fort, and a handrail wall made of brick, built on the upper part of the surrounding structure, features gaps designed for holding weapons and providing cover for

soldiers. Midway to the inner fort, on the right side, a rock-cut chamber can be seen, which may have been used as a weapons storage room. The walls above the rock, which enclose the main citadel, are comparatively well preserved. The top is easily accessible on the west, on which side narrow steps have been hewn in the perpendicular boulders. From the remains one may judge that the walls were surmounted by parapets of strong brickwork, serrated by machicolations and pierced by musketry. Nearly half-way up to the top, to the right, is a chamber which was used as a magazine. Opposite to it, on the western slope of boulder, a little below the top of the fort, is a rock-cut cave temple is suspended at a height of 20 feet containing a lingam placed on a square yonipitham, the spout of which is supported by the figure of a dwarf. On the top of the citadel, is a platform is a tarn.

Atop the bastion of the Kamalai Fort, an English-made cannon has been installed facing east on a platform that measures 20 feet in length. Two cannons are placed at each entrance of the fort, enhancing its defenses. The fort is also home to two deep springs, one on the north side and the other on the south side, which served as the primary water sources. Historical records suggest that the fort was originally twice its present size.

The Thirumayam Fort has three grand entrances located in the south, southeast, and north directions. The main entrance, positioned in the south, is nearly a kilometer away from the present-day fort. The northern entrance is a shrine to Bhairavar, the southeastern entrance is a shrine to Karuppasamy, and the southern gate by Sakthi Ganapathi and Hanuman all protecting deities of the fort. The inner fort has additional entrances on the western side of the town, which is now protected by the Archaeological Department. Streets have formed by filling in the ditch when the fortifications were demolished.

In 1687, Vijaya Raghunatha Sethupathi Devar, the ruler of Ramnad, constructed the Thirumayam Fort. Following the death of Kizhavan Sethupathi, his son Bhavani Sankarar engaged in a battle for succession with Thandathevan Sethupathi. With the assistance of the Pudukkottai king, Thandathevan emerged victorious and gifted the Thirumayam region to the ruler of Pudukkottai. Consequently, from 1723 onwards, the fort came under the rule of the Thondaiman dynasty.

By 1800 AD, the friendly relations between the Pudukkottai king and the British led to the fort being used as an armory by the British. In 1875, the Thirumayam Fort was converted into a prison for criminals convicted of serious offenses. Historical records indicate that Oomai Durai, the brother of Veerapandiya Kattabomman, was imprisoned here and later handed over to the British by the Pudukkottai Thondaiman. This association led to the fort being referred to as "Oomayan Kottai" (Oomai's Fort). To the north-west of the hill is another tarn, and to the south-east, a tank. Some of the guns and armours have been removed and undertaken by the State Museums, while the others are preserved locally.

Discovery of at Tirumayam fort Ancient Rock Murals

Ancient and rare rock murals, reflecting the prehistoric character of the Tirumayam region, have been discovered within the premises of Tirumayam Fort. These rock paintings, dating back to approximately 5000 BCE, depict scenes of dance and social life from that era. Historian and

District Chief Educational Officer N. Arulmurugan stated that while the existence of these murals was known earlier, a recent study of the fort has revealed more details. The paintings, created using red-colored pigments, are considered older than the well-known murals of Sithannavasal, which were painted between the 7th and 9th centuries CE.

One of the murals, located on the side of a cap-shaped rock near the fort's entrance, has faded over time. However, on the other side, a series of well-preserved paintings depict a reclining man and woman, possibly symbolizing rest or leisure. Another prominent mural portrays a dance performance where a couple is seen playing musical instruments while another couple dances, holding hands. This dance form is mentioned in ancient Tamil literature, Tolkappiyam, as *Undattu*, a traditional form of dance. A large figure in the mural, possibly a queen or a regional chief, is depicted separately as an observer of the performance.

On the northern side of the rock, additional murals depict various human figures, including a procession of men following a woman. Within the cave between the Shiva and Vishnu temples in the fort, more paintings have been discovered, including depictions of animals used for transportation and weapons made from stone for hunting. Arulmurugan has urged the Archaeological Department to take necessary measures to protect these invaluable murals. The Tirumayam region, particularly the Pudukkottai district, has long been recognized as a significant site for prehistoric human habitation, with numerous burial sites and lithic records providing evidence of early human settlements in southern India.

Prehistoric Caverns at Tirumayam fort foothill

At the foothill of the 17th-century Thirumayam Fort, four caverns of varying sizes, believed to have served as the abode of prehistoric humans between 2500 and 3000 BCE, were recently discovered. Historian J. Raja Mohamad, who led the research team, emphasized that the ancient rock art found in one of the caverns would provide valuable insights into the history of the Pudukkottai district. The first cavern, stretching from west to east, is filled with debris up to a depth of 10 feet, while the second cavern, smaller in size, is elevated from the ground to a height that could accommodate a few individuals. The entrances to the third and fourth caverns have been sealed with masonry. These caverns had remained hidden from the public eye due to the accumulation of soil over time. The research team, headed by Raja Mohamad, President of the Pudukkottai Historical and Cultural Research Centre, included V. Muthu Kumar, Assistant Archaeologist at ASI, and G. Karunakaran, a research scholar from Tamil University. The second cavern contained ancient rock art, with red ochre paintings that have largely faded. Despite the deterioration, human figures could still be discerned from the remaining artwork. Notably, paintings of human hands were also found, similar to those discovered in caverns in France, Spain, and Indonesia, dating back nearly 40,000 years.

In addition to this discovery, similar hand paintings were also found in rock art panels at Sethavarai in Villupuram district and in Thirumayam. In 2001, a team led by Raja Mohamad had previously discovered another panel of rock paintings in a boulder on the same hillock. Efforts are underway to explore the third and fourth caverns further,

with the third cavern believed to be the largest of the four discoveries

Cave Temples within the Fort Complex:

In the western part of Thirumayam, within the fort complex, there is a single-chamber cave temple carved into the rock. At the center of the cave temple's floor, a Shivalingam is carved, which appears to have a square base. At the entrance of the cave, two half-pillars stand on each side, and above them is the *Avudaiyar*, the circular pedestal of the Lingam. To facilitate access, an iron staircase has been installed. On the steep southern slope of Thirumayam Hill, the cave temples of Sathyagireeswarar and Thirumeyyar are located next to each other, separated by a distance of sixty feet. Of these two rock-cut temples, one is dedicated to Vishnu (Thirumeyyar) and the other to Shiva (Sathyagireeswarar). Until the thirteenth century, the temple pathways and shrines in Thirumayam were designed in a way that allowed devotees to view both Sathyagireeswarar (Shiva) and Thirumeyyar (Vishnu) together. However, during the thirteenth century, rising conflicts between Shaivites and Vaishnavites led to the construction of a dividing wall between the two temple complexes, physically separating the two deities.

Structure and Design of the Twin Temples (Siva & Vishnu)

1. Satyagirisvara Temple (Shiva)

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 Kudimiyanmalai, 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 an combinations 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 maintained, 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.

2. Satyamoorthy Temple (Vishnu)

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 Pandyan 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.

Conservation and Preservation Efforts for Twin Temples

Thirumayam fort and the twin rock-cut temples of Siva and Vishnu are significant historical and architectural landmarks that require ongoing conservations efforts to protect them from natural and human induced deterioration. Various initiatives have been undertaken by government agencies, heritage organizations and local communities to ensure their preservations.

The renovation of the rock-cut temples within the Thirumayam Fort complex is progressing as planned, with the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) - Tiruchi Circle

overseeing various civic works. The temples, dedicated to Sri Sathyamurthy-Sri Uyyavanda Nachiar (Vaishnavite) and Sri Sathyagireeswarar-Sri Venuvaneeswari (Saivite), have undergone significant restoration efforts. A senior ASI official noted that efforts to stop water leakage into the shrines have been successful, and a group of 10 traditional temple sculptors, known as *sthapathis*, are working on restoring the damaged stucco images. The lime mortar used for this restoration is mixed with extracts of jaggery and kaddukkai (Indian hog plum). While the renovation of Sri Sathyamurthy Temple has been completed, work on the gopuram (main tower) of Sri Sathyagireeswarar Temple is still underway.

In the next phase of renovation, ASI plans to focus on the water bodies within the fort complex. This includes rebuilding the collapsed wall of the pushkarani (tank) located on the west side of the Shiva temple. Although the tank currently holds up to 10 feet of water, its true depth will only be revealed after the de-silting process. Additionally, the renovation of the bastions surrounding the canon, in line with the original design, has been requested.

Ahead of Republic Day 2024, ASI cleared a cloistered mandapam (hall) located at the southern gateway of the fort to facilitate the flag-hoisting ceremony and public celebrations. The Thirumayam Fort, originally constructed in 1687 by Raja of Ramnad Vijaya Raghunatha Sethupathi and later handed over to his brother-in-law Raghunatha Raya Thondaiman, was initially surrounded by seven concentric walls, of which only four have survived. The fort currently attracts around 200-300 visitors on weekdays and up to 500 on holidays. Once the renovation is complete, the date for the consecration (*kumbabishekam*) of the temples will be announced by the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department, according to ASI officials.

Conclusion

Thirumayam stands as a remarkable example of the intersection between military defense and religious devotion in Tamil Nadu's history. The fort, with its strategic location, massive fortifications, and defense mechanisms, highlights the military ingenuity of the Sethupathi rulers. Simultaneously, the twin rock-cut temples of Shiva and Vishnu exemplify the artistic and religious heritage of the region, featuring intricate carvings, sculptural grandeur, and Dravidian architectural elements.

This study has explored the historical significance, architectural features, and conservation efforts associated with Thirumayam Fort and its temples. While efforts have been made to preserve these monuments, challenges such as environmental degradation, structural wear, and human impact require continuous attention. Future conservation strategies should focus on advanced preservation techniques, sustainable tourism, and community participation to ensure the longevity of this heritage structures. By unveiling the historical, architectural, and strategic significance of Thirumayam, this research contributes to a broader understanding of South India's cultural and military history. As an enduring symbol of defense and devotion, Thirumayam continues to captivate historians, archaeologists, and heritage enthusiasts, reinforcing its importance in Tamil heritage and beyond.

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