

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ART AND ARCHITECTURE UNDER THE MUTTARAIYARS

Dr. A. BHARATHI RAJA

Assistant Professor, P.G and Research Department of History,
V.O.Chidambaram College, Thoothukudi,
Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekkapatti, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu.
Email ID: bharathirajaa12@gmail.com

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Abstract

The Muttaraiyars played a significant role in the political, cultural, and artistic history of Tamil Nadu during the early medieval period, particularly between the seventh and ninth centuries CE. Their rule in the fertile Kaveri region contributed substantially to the development of South Indian art and architecture. Although the Muttaraiyars were subordinate to larger powers such as the Pallavas and the Pandyas at different periods, they emerged as important patrons of temples, sculpture, and religious institutions. Their architectural activities are especially visible in the region around present-day Pudukkottai and the central Tamil country.

This paper examines the development of art and architecture under the Muttaraiyars, with particular attention to their rock-cut and structural temples, sculptural traditions, iconography, and temple patronage. The monuments at Narthamalai, including the Vijayalaya Choleeswaram, provide important evidence for understanding the architectural experimentation of this period. The Sittannavasal and other monuments associated with the broader artistic milieu of the Muttaraiyar region also reveal the interaction of Pallava, Pandya, and emerging Chola artistic traditions. The study analyses the architectural features, religious themes, artistic techniques, and stylistic characteristics reflected in these monuments. It also highlights the contribution of Muttaraiyar patronage to the transition from early medieval rock-cut architecture to the structural temple tradition that later reached greater maturity under the Cholas. Thus, the artistic and architectural achievements of the Muttaraiyars represent an important stage in the evolution of Tamil temple architecture and provide a significant link between Pallava and early Chola architectural traditions.

Keywords

Muttaraiyars; Muttaraiyar Art; Muttaraiyar Architecture; Narthamalai; Vijayalaya Choleeswaram; Rock-cut Temples; Structural Temples; Temple Architecture; Sculpture; Iconography; Pallava Architecture; Early Chola Architecture; Tamil Nadu; Kaveri Region; Medieval South India.

Historical Background of the Muttaraiyars

The Muttaraiyars were an influential line of chieftains who, during the early medieval period, ruled the region situated between the Pandya and Pallava kingdoms. They exercised authority over parts of present-day Thanjavur, Tiruchirappalli, Pudukkottai, Tiruvarur,

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Nagapattinam, Dindigul, Karur and Madurai districts of Tamil Nadu. For a considerable period, the Muttaraiyars functioned as feudatories of the Pallavas. Their political authority came to an end with the rise of Vijayalaya Chola. The Muttaraiyars occupied an important position in the political history of the Kaveri region. Their geographical location between the major powers of the Pallavas and Pandyas enabled them to play a significant role in the political and cultural development of the region. The ancient city of Uraiyr, one of the early Chola centres, is also associated with the historical tradition of the Muttaraiyars. References to the Muttaraiyars are found in literary and epigraphical sources.

Sources for the Study of the Muttaraiyars

Literary and inscriptional evidence provides important information about the Muttaraiyars. Naladiyar, a Tamil work traditionally associated with the early medieval period, refers to a Peru-Muttaraiyan. More substantial information is obtained from inscriptions.

Important epigraphical sources include the Sendalai pillar inscriptions, inscriptions from the former Pudukkottai State, and inscriptions found in the Thanjavur and Tirunelveli regions. These inscriptions provide information regarding the rulers, administration, religious activities and temple-building activities of the Muttaraiyars. Thus, inscriptions constitute an important source for understanding the political and cultural contributions of the Muttaraiyars.

Contribution of the Muttaraiyars to Art and Architecture

The Muttaraiyars made significant contributions to the development of art and architecture in Tamil Nadu. Several rulers associated with the Muttaraiyar line are connected with the construction and patronage of temples.

Among the important Muttaraiyar rulers mentioned in the inscriptions are:

- Perumbidugu Muttaraiyan alias Kuvavan Maran
- Ilangovadiyariyan alias Maran Paramesvaran
- Perumbidugu Muttaraiyan I alias Suvaran Maran
- Videlvidugu Vilupperadi Araisan alias Sattan Maran
- Marppidugu alias Peradiaraiyan
- Videlvidugu Muttaraiyan alias Kuvan Sattan
- Sattan Paliyili

The Muttaraiyars were associated with several important temple centres, including Thirumayam, Niyamam, Malayadipatti, Narthamalai, Keeranur, Kilattaniyam and Puvalaikkudi.

Their architectural activities are particularly significant because they illustrate the development of both rock-cut and structural temple traditions in the region.

Thirumayam Satyamurti Perumal Cave Temple

The Satyamurti Perumal Cave Temple at Thirumayam is regarded in the source as the earliest extant monument associated with the Muttaraiyars. An inscription connected with the

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temple is engraved on a balustrade now situated in the *prakara* on the western side of the Satyagirinatha Perumal Temple at Thirumayam. The inscription belongs to the first half of the eighth century.

It records the renovation of the shrine by a woman and the grant of the village of Andakudi, including cultivation and possession rights, for the maintenance of the central shrine. The monument has been identified with the rock-cut shrine containing the Yogasanamurti of Vishnu. The temple is therefore important not only from the architectural point of view but also for understanding religious patronage and the role of individuals in the maintenance of temples during this period.

Niyamam Pidari Temple

The Niyamam Pidari Temple is associated with Perumbidugu Muttaraiyar. Its history is known through epigraphical evidence found on the pillars of the mandapa in the Sundaresvara Temple at Sendalai in Thanjavur. The inscriptions refer to the deity at Sendalai as Tirupperunduraidaiya Mahadevar at Candralekai-Caturvedimangalam. The evidence suggests that the pillars presently found at Sendalai were originally associated with Niyamam and were subsequently shifted there.

At present, no Pidari temple can be clearly traced at Niyamam. The name *Pidari* is understood to have developed from the Sanskrit term *Bhattarika*, through forms such as *Bhatari* and *Padari*. This monument is significant for understanding the movement and reuse of architectural elements during the medieval period.

Malayadipatti Vagisvara Temple

The Vagisvara Temple at Malayadipatti is situated in Kulathur Taluk of the former Pudukkottai State. The site is also known as Thiruvellathur Malai. The temple is notable for its double rock-cut shrine, dedicated to Siva and Vishnu. Both shrines were excavated from the same rock. The Siva shrine is earlier in style and displays features associated with the Mahendra architectural tradition.

An inscription from Pudukkottai refers to Videlveidugu Muttarayan II, also known as Kuvavan Sattan, as the ruler responsible for excavating the temple at Thiruvallathur Malai. He was the son of Narpidugu Peradiaraiyer. The temple is now known as the Vagisvara Temple. The combination of Siva and Vishnu shrines within the same rock-cut complex makes Malayadipatti an important monument for the study of early medieval Tamil architecture.

Narthamalai Paliyilisvaram Temple

The Paliyilisvaram Temple at Narthamalai is associated with Cattan-Paliyili, the son of Videlveidugu Muttaraiyar. He is identified in the source with Kuvavan Catten. Cattan-Paliyili excavated a rock-cut cave temple at Narthamalai in Kulattur Taluk. The temple was named Paliyilisvaram after its patron.

An inscription is engraved on the base of the platform in front of the cave shrine. The structural extensions associated with the cave temple were made during the reign of Nirpatunga. The evidence indicates that the cave temple itself had already existed before these later additions. The surviving architectural features are limited. The plinth of the

mandapa contains elements such as the *upana*, *jagati*, *vritta-kumuda* and *kapota*. Sculptures associated with the monument display features such as crowns, earrings, *hara*, sacred thread, bracelets and garments.

Narthamalai Vijayalayacholisvaram Temple

The Vijayalayacholisvaram Temple at Narthamalai was built by Cattan-Pudi, also known as Ilango Adiaraiyar. The temple is a stone-built structural monument. It suffered damage over time and was subsequently renovated by Mallan Viduman, also known as Tennavan Tamiladiaraiyan. Mallan Viduman appears to have been a contemporary of Chola Vijayalaya. The temple was later known as Vijayalayacholisvaram, and this name is recorded in a later Pandyan inscription of the thirteenth century.

Architectural Features

The temple consists of a central shrine facing west and surrounded by seven subsidiary shrines. The principal shrine is square in plan and consists of three storeys, surmounted by the *griva* and *sikhara*. The architectural components include the *kantha*, *pattigai*, *kal*, *palagai*, *podigai* and *kapota*. The upper storeys rise in diminishing proportions. The *griva* and *sikhara* contain sculptural elements, including bulls placed at the corners.

The *sikhara* above the *griva* is semi-spherical in form.

Sanctum and Mandapa

The *garbhagriha* is circular and enclosed by a substantial wall. Around it is a square enclosure that creates a narrow circumambulatory passage. The front *mandapa* forms an integral part of the temple. It contains six pillars with cubical upper and lower portions and octagonal middle sections. Two *dvarapalakas* stand on either side of the entrance. The sculptural decoration of the temple includes figures with crowns, ornaments, sacred threads and other traditional attributes. The combination of the *dvarapalakas*, dancing figures and architectural sculptures contributes significantly to the artistic character of the monument.

Keeranur and Kilattaniyam Uttamadanisvara Temples

There are two Siva temples associated with this architectural tradition, one at Keeranur and another at Kilattaniyam. The Keeranur temple is now known as Uttamanathesvara, while the temple at Kilattaniyam continues to be known as Uttamadanisvara. The title Uttamadani was assumed by Ilango-Muttaraiyar, and the names of the temples suggest a connection with his patronage.

The architectural features of these temples are significant. At Keeranur, the *vritta-kumuda* appears as an important architectural feature. Another notable feature is the *hamsa-vari* below the *kapota*. The plain walls without niches for subsidiary deities, together with the circular *griva* and *sikhara*, show similarities with the architecture of Narthamalai. The *vimana* deities include Brahma in the north, Vishnu in the west and Dakshinamurti in the south.

The Kilattaniyam temple contains architectural elements such as the *upana*, *jagati*, *tripatta* and *kantha*. Its *sikhara* is curvilinear. Several loose sculptures found at the site have

been attributed to the Muttaraiyar period. These temples share several features with the Narthamalai monuments and represent local architectural traditions of the region.

Puvalaikkudi Puspavanesvara Temple

The temple at Puvalaikkudi is now known as the Puspavanesvara Temple. An early inscription from the reign of a Parakesarivarman refers to the deity as Paramesvara of Puvalaikkudi. An inscription near the entrance of the cave appears to refer to the excavation of the rock-cut temple by Pudi-Kalari, also known as Amaranri Muttaraiyan. This chief appears to have been the son of Cattan-Pudi, who is associated with the Vijayalayacholisvaram Temple. The temple consists of a cubical rock-cut cell excavated by the Muttaraiyar chief and a mandapa constructed later by a priest during the reign of Parakesarivarman.

Architectural Significance of the Muttaraiyar Period

The monuments associated with the Muttaraiyars demonstrate the development of different architectural forms, particularly rock-cut shrines and early structural temples. The temples at Thirumayam, Malayadipatti, Narthamalai, Keeranur, Kilattaniyam and Puvalaikkudi reveal a gradual development in architectural planning, sculptural treatment and temple construction.

The Narthamalai monuments are especially important because they display several distinctive architectural elements, including circular *grivas*, different forms of *sikharas*, subsidiary shrines and elaborate sculptural features. The temples at Keeranur and Kilattaniyam also resemble the Narthamalai tradition in several respects. These monuments demonstrate the importance of regional architectural traditions and the role of local rulers and chiefs in supporting religious and artistic activities.

Conclusion

The Muttaraiyars occupy an important position in the history of early medieval Tamil Nadu. Although they were regional chieftains and feudatories, their contribution to the development of temple architecture, rock-cut monuments and sculpture was significant. The temples associated with them at Thirumayam, Niyamam, Malayadipatti, Narthamalai, Keeranur, Kilattaniyam and Puvalaikkudi provide valuable evidence for the development of South Indian architecture. Their monuments demonstrate the interaction between rock-cut and structural traditions and reveal distinctive regional architectural features.

At the same time, the architectural evidence alone does not always provide sufficient information for determining the exact dates or builders of every monument. The source itself notes that, although some of these temples may have owed their existence to the Muttaraiyars, the available evidence does not conclusively establish this for all the monuments. Therefore, inscriptions, architectural features and literary evidence must be studied together to understand the contribution of the Muttaraiyars to the cultural history of Tamil Nadu. Their monuments form an important link in the development of Tamil temple architecture before the emergence of the imperial Cholas.

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