

Historical and Architectural Significance of Tirumayam Fort, Tamil Nadu: A Multi-Period Analysis

R. Poorana Chandra¹, G. Kasthuri Thilagam²

¹ Ph.D. Research Scholar, PG and Research Department of History, Thanthai Periyar Government Arts & Science College (Autonomous), Tiruchirappalli, affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tamil Nadu, India

² Associate Professor, PG and Research Department of History, Thanthai Periyar Government Arts & Science College (Autonomous), Tiruchirappalli, affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tamil Nadu, India

Corresponding Author:

R. Poorana Chandra

Email: pooranachandra27@gmail.com.

ABSTRACT

Tirumayam, situated on a Precambrian granite hillock in the Pudukkottai district of Tamil Nadu, is one of the most historically layered heritage complexes in southern India, combining prehistoric rock art, seventh- and eighth-century Saiva and Vaiṣṇava rock-cut cave temples, and a seventeenth-century hill fort within a single granite landscape. This article presents an integrative multi-period analysis of the site's geographical setting, prehistoric antecedents, epigraphic record, architectural composition, religious landscape, and conservation status, drawing on epigraphic evidence, architectural documentation, regional gazetteers, and recent archaeological survey reports. Existing scholarship on Tirumayam has remained disciplinarily fragmented — epigraphers documenting inscriptions, architectural historians analysing the cave temples, and regional historians reconstructing the Sethupathi–Tondaiman political sequence — without a sustained analysis treating the site as a coherent cultural landscape. Addressing this gap, the article argues that Tirumayam's significance derives from the cumulative character of its successive occupations, in which each phase inherited and reinterpreted the symbolic authority established by the phase before it, and from the systematic exploitation of granite terrain as both a defensive and a symbolic resource. The study concludes by identifying urgent conservation priorities, particularly for the deteriorating prehistoric rock art, and by situating Tirumayam within the wider challenge of writing integrative histories of multi-period South Indian heritage sites...

Keywords: Tirumayam; rock-cut cave temples; Sethupathi dynasty; Tondaiman rulers; Pudukkottai; hill fort architecture; prehistoric rock art; South Indian epigraphy..

INTRODUCTION

Tirumayam — historically Tirumeyyam, “the land of truth” in Tamil — lies in the Pudukkottai district of Tamil Nadu, approximately twelve kilometres south of the district headquarters. Its significance rests not in any single monument but in the cumulative density of its cultural remains: 123 documented sites, of which 84 are archaeological and 39 historical, spanning the Iron Age through the early modern period. At the centre of this zone stands a granite hillock whose slopes bear prehistoric rock paintings in red ochre, early medieval rock-cut temples dedicated to Śiva and Viṣṇu, and the fortification walls of a seventeenth-century hill fort that is among the best-preserved examples of the *padmakottai* (lotus-fort) typology in Tamil Nadu.

The research problem addressed here originates in a disciplinary fragmentation that has long characterised the study of Tirumayam: epigraphers have documented its inscriptions, architectural historians have analysed its cave temples, and regional historians have reconstructed its dynastic sequence, without a sustained study treating the site as a single, coherent, multi-period cultural

landscape. This article asks how successive phases of occupation at Tirumayam — prehistoric, early medieval, early modern, and colonial — relate to and build upon one another, and what that layered relationship reveals about the construction of sacred and political authority. Its central argument is that Tirumayam's significance derives precisely from this layered character: each phase reinterpreted and built upon the accumulated symbolic authority of the phases preceding it. The article's contribution is accordingly twofold: empirically, it draws together epigraphic, architectural, historical, and ethnographic evidence previously treated separately; analytically, it proposes cumulative sacralisation and the strategic exploitation of granite terrain as linked interpretive frameworks for this and comparable multi-period South Indian sites.

2. Literature Review

Scholarship bearing on Tirumayam falls into four broad, largely non-intersecting strands. The first comprises epigraphic corpora and documentation — the *Chronological List of Inscriptions of the Pudukkottai State*, the *Inscriptions (Texts) of the Pudukkottai State Arranged According to Dynasties*, Rangacharya's and

Mahalingam's topographical lists, the *South Indian Inscriptions* and *Epigraphia Indica* series, Krishnan's *Studies in South Indian History and Epigraphy*, and Srinivasan's translated edition of the Pudukkottai inscriptions — which together constitute the primary textual foundation for any epigraphic argument about the site but record and translate inscriptions without situating them within an integrated site history. The second strand is architectural and art-historical: Dayalan's survey of cave temples across the Pandya, Muttaraiyar, Atiyaman, and Ay territories, Srinivasan's studies of Pallava cave temples and South Indian temples generally, Latha's regional study of Pandya-country cave temples with specific reference to Pudukkottai, and Sivaramamurthy's work on early Pandyan rock-cut shrines, all of which supply the stylistic and typological vocabulary used elsewhere in this article to date and contextualise the Satyagirisvarar and Satyamurthi shrines.

The third strand is regional political history: Nilakanta Sastri's foundational studies of the Pandya kingdom and of South India, Radhakrishna Iyer's and Venkatarama Iyer's administrative histories of the Pudukkottai state, and Siranjivi and Lakshminarayanan's dynastic history, which establish the Sethupathi–Tondaiman political sequence but treat the fort primarily as an administrative and military asset rather than a site of sustained sacred significance. The fourth strand consists of gazetteers, monument guides, and heritage inventories — Raghupathy's guide to Pudukkottai monuments, Raja Mohamad's studies of Pudukkottai art and architecture, Rajan's recent survey of the district's cultural heritage, and the Tamil-language works of Mani, Murugesan, and Vittal Rao — which document the site's physical fabric without offering sustained interpretive analysis. Recent press reportage on the 2023 discovery of prehistoric caverns and the 2024 ASI refurbishment project (Rajaram; Nainar; Beulah Rose) provides valuable contemporaneous documentation of ongoing archaeological and conservation activity. The gap this literature leaves unaddressed is integrative rather than empirical: each strand is individually well developed, but no existing study reads the epigraphic, architectural, political, and archaeological evidence together as a single explanatory account of Tirumayam's successive phases of use — the gap this article addresses.

3. Methodology

This is a historical and interpretive study rather than a quantitative one, drawing on four categories of source material: epigraphic evidence, primarily the inscriptions recorded at the Satyagirisvarar and Satyamurthi cave temples, read through the published corpora of Pudukkottai inscriptions; architectural and art-historical documentation of the cave temples and fort structures, following the descriptive and stylistic frameworks established by Dayalan and Srinivasan; regional gazetteers, dynastic histories, and colonial-period administrative records; and recent archaeological survey reports together with contemporaneous press documentation of discovery and conservation activity between 2023 and 2024. The analysis proceeds through comparative architectural and epigraphic analysis, situating Tirumayam's cave temples and inscriptions

against published parallels at Kunnandarkovil, Devarmalai, Sittannavasal, and Kizhavalavu, combined with textual and historiographical analysis of gazetteer and administrative sources for the fort's political history. No fieldwork involving human participants, interviews, or statistical methods was undertaken for this study.

4. Results

4.1 Geographical Setting and Strategic Landscape

The Precambrian granite hillock of Tirumayam rises sharply from the surrounding alluvial plain, offering panoramic visibility across a territory of several kilometres in multiple directions. Its hard, impermeable, irregular granite made it simultaneously an ideal defensive site and a tractable medium for rock-cut architectural intervention. Near-vertical faces on the northern and western flanks required no supplementary fortification, while the gentler southern and eastern approaches defined the primary zones of vulnerability that later received constructed defensive walls. Water management was a critical strategic consideration: the granite's impermeability directed rainfall toward natural depressions enlarged into cisterns, with rock-cut tanks at multiple elevations connected by carved overflow channels forming an integrated rainwater-harvesting system. The fort's capacity to remain self-sufficient in water during the Tanjavur siege of 1733 derived directly from this environmental planning.

The site's location at the intersection of inland routes connecting Pudukkottai with Madurai, Thanjavur, and Ramanathapuram gave its occupants surveillance over commercial and military movement across a strategically significant zone, translating into toll revenue and early warning of approaching forces. This explains why successive ruling powers, from the Muttaraiyar chiefs of the early medieval period through the Sethupathis and Tondaimans of the early modern era, consistently prioritised control of Tirumayam within their territorial strategies.

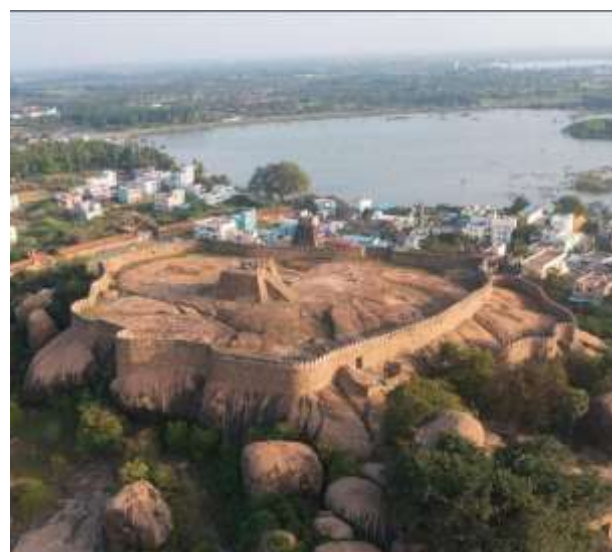


Fig. 1. Aerial view of Tirumayam Fort's circular hilltop enclosure and its lakeside setting, illustrating the granite hillock's commanding position over the surrounding plain.

4.2 Prehistoric Foundations and Early Human Occupation

Archaeological surveys conducted in 2023 by researchers affiliated with Tamil University and the Archaeological Survey of India identified four natural caverns along the southern and southeastern slopes of the Tirumayam hillock, providing evidence that the site supported human habitation extending back approximately five thousand years (Rajaram). These weathering-formed caverns display the characteristics of deliberately selected prehistoric shelters: elevated above the valley floor, oriented to deflect monsoon winds, and positioned for surveillance while remaining accessible from lower slopes. One cavern preserves rock paintings in red iron-oxide pigment — human figures, fauna, and stencilled hand outlines — stylistically situated within the late Mesolithic to early Neolithic tradition documented at comparable Tamil Nadu sites such as Sittannavasal and Kizhavalavu.

The spatial relationship between prehistoric painted surfaces and the later medieval temple excavations is analytically significant: at several points on the southern slope, prehistoric markings and temple architectural features occur in close proximity, suggesting that sacred authority already accumulated by prehistoric communities shaped the selection of locations for formal religious construction in the early medieval period. This pattern of cumulative sacralisation — whereby each generation inherits and reinterprets the symbolic investments of its predecessors — is characteristic of several major sacred complexes in Tamil Nadu and underpins this article's analytical framework.

4.3 Rock-Cut Temples: Architecture and Inscription

4.3.1 The Satyagirisvarar Śiva Cave Temple

The principal Śaiva installation at Tirumayam — dedicated to Satyagirisvarar, whose name conjoins the hill's designation (Satyagiri, hill of truth) with the Śaiva divine title — is excavated from the southern scarp at the base of the hillock. Its architectural programme comprises a rectangular *ardhamandapa* whose façade is articulated by two pillars and two pilasters of characteristic early medieval South Indian form: cubical at base and capital, octagonal in the shaft, surmounted by corbels bearing roll ornamentation. *Dvarapalas* flank the entrance; one is conventionally interpreted as a portrait figure of a chieftain or patron, a feature paralleled at Kunnandarkovil and Devarmalai within the same district, indicating a shared regional patronage tradition associated with the Pandya or Muttaraiyar sphere of production.

The inscriptional record is exceptionally significant. The oldest inscription, headed by the Sanskrit term *parivāḍinī* in Pallava-Grantha script, mentions Gunasena in a context some scholars have linked to Pallava Mahendravarman I (r. ca. 600–630 CE) through his title Gunabhara, though the identification remains contested. A musical inscription comparable to the Kudumiyanmalai notation was also present but was substantially erased in the thirteenth century, when the Hoysala *daṇḍanāyaka* Appanna Dandanayaka used the surface to record a judicial settlement between the Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava temple administrations — an episode documenting both the

continuing institutional vitality of both shrines and the reach of Hoysala judicial authority into Pudukkottai.

4.3.2 The Satyamurthi Viṣṇu Cave Temple

Adjacent to the Śaiva shrine, the Vaiṣṇava rock-cut temple dedicated to Satyamurthi houses a monumental *śayana* (recumbent) image of Viṣṇu carved from the living granite, its sanctum proportioned to receive natural light at specific angles across the principal image. The temple holds exceptional importance within the Vaiṣṇava Bhakti tradition: it is identified as one of the 108 Divyadesas celebrated in the *Divyaprabandham*, and Tirumangai Alvar composed devotional hymns in praise of the deity here, establishing Tirumayam's prominence within the institutional Śrīvaiṣṇava network. Local tradition identifies the site as an *āḍi Rāgam*, a primordial form of the Rāṅganātha manifestation predating Srirangam, a theological claim that continues to shape its pilgrimage significance.

4.3.3 The Upper Śiva Cell

A smaller rock-cut Śiva cell on the western face of the hillock, integrated within the later fortified zone, houses a monolithic *liṅga* over a square *avudaiyār* whose moulding sequence — *jagati*, *vṛtta-kumuda*, *kampa*, *kaṇṭha*, *paṭṭikā*, and *prati* — reflects early structural temple vocabulary translated into rock-cut form, with the *prāṇāla* emerging on the north supported by a carved *bhūta-gaṇa*. Dayalan's stylistic analysis places this cell in the sixth to seventh century CE (Dayalan), making it among the earliest datable religious installations at the site and strengthening the case for the hill's sacred antiquity preceding even the main cave temples.



Fig. 2. Entrance to a rock-cut cave temple on the southern scarp of the Tirumayam hillock, accessed by a modern staircase.

4.4 Tirumayam Fort: Historical Development and Architecture

4.4.1 Construction and the Sethupathi Phase

The formal fortification of Tirumayam dates to 1687 CE, when Vijaya Raghunatha Sethupathi (Kilavan Sethupathi) of Ramanathapuram constructed the fort at the northern periphery of Sethupathi territory, combining natural defensive terrain, visual command over routes toward

Karaikudi and Sivaganga, and the symbolic benefit of constructing military authority atop an already sacred landscape — a strategy of appropriating pre-established sacred sites to legitimise political power that is well documented across the subcontinent. The fort was organised around seven concentric fortification walls following the natural contours of the hill — the *padmakottai* or lotus-fort configuration — of which only four survive structurally, the outer rings having been demolished during colonial reorganisation. Circular in plan and covering approximately forty acres, the fort's original moat is still traceable in the current road network. Vijaya Raghunatha Sethupathi delegated administrative control to Raghunatha Raya Tondaiman, establishing the dynastic association that would define Tirumayam's political identity for the following century (Siranjivi and Lakshminarayanan).

4.4.2 The Tondaiman Period

The formal cession of Tirumayam to the Tondaiman lineage was confirmed by Thandathevan Sethupathi in 1723 CE in exchange for military assistance against a rival succession claimant, illustrating the fort's role as a negotiable political asset in eighteenth-century southern Tamil Nadu. Under Tondaiman governance the fort functioned as a multi-purpose administrative centre for revenue collection, judicial proceedings, grain storage, and military coordination across the southern marches of the Pudukkottai state. Its military value was demonstrated during Tanjavur general Ananda Row's campaign of 1733, when Vijaya Raghunatha Raya Tondaiman sustained a siege of nearly a year before the attacking force withdrew.

4.4.3 Architectural Composition

The defensive architecture integrates natural terrain with constructed elements so closely that the boundary between geology and military architecture becomes analytically unstable: wall alignments follow the natural gradient, with masonry concentrated only where the rock face offers insufficient resistance. Three principal gateways — south, southeast, and north — are each associated with a guardian-deity shrine (Kottai Bhairavar, Karuppasamy, and Shakti Ganapathi with Hanuman respectively) and deliberately misaligned from their approach routes to disrupt formation movement and expose attackers to flanking fire. Internal features include pillared halls in dressed granite, magazine chambers, courtyards, and elevated artillery platforms, including a rock-cut ammunition chamber hewn directly from the bedrock that provided thermally stable, incendiary-resistant storage. Rock-cut steps along the primary ascent enforce single-file movement, converting the approach into a controlled defensive corridor adapted to gunpowder-age warfare.



Fig. 3. Fortification walls of Tirumayam Fort rising directly from the natural granite scarp, illustrating the integration of constructed masonry with bedrock terrain.

4.4.4 Colonial Period and Heritage Designation

The expansion of British East India Company influence into Pudukkottai through subsidiary alliance arrangements progressively reduced Tirumayam's military and administrative role: by 1800 CE the fort served as a British armoury, and by 1875 it had been converted for use as a prison. The colonial period also produced the earliest systematic documentary record of the fort's condition, now a historical baseline for conservation assessment. A notable episode is the imprisonment of Oomai Durai — deaf-mute brother of the *poligar* leader Veerapandiya Kattabomman — within the fort during the Poligar Wars of 1799–1801, giving rise to its popular designation as *Oomaiyan Kottai* (Beulah Rose). The fort subsequently received protected-monument status under the Archaeological Survey of India.

4.5 Religious Landscape and Living Heritage

The religious landscape of Tirumayam extends beyond the two principal cave temples to the Kottai Bhairavar shrine at the northern gateway, subsidiary shrines to Karuppasamy and Shakti Ganapathi, and a cycle of festivals sustaining the site as an active devotional environment. Kottai Bhairavar — the Fort Bhairava, divine guardian of the fortified settlement — reflects the wider South Indian practice of situating fierce protective deities at threshold spaces, integrating the fort's military identity into its sacred symbolism. The Satyamurthi temple's major festival in the month of *Mārgaḷi* — ten days of *Pakalpaṭṭu* followed by ten days of *Irāppaṭṭu* — draws significant pilgrimage and remains one of the principal Vaiṣṇava observances of the region, transmitting historical consciousness through embodied devotional practice in ways formal documentation cannot replicate.

4.6 Conservation Status and Research Priorities

Tirumayam Fort is a protected monument under the Archaeological Survey of India, Tiruchi Circle, which undertakes periodic structural stabilisation, masonry repair, drainage improvement, and vegetation clearance. A refurbishment project initiated in 2024 includes restoration of stucco sculpture on both temple *gopurams*,

repairs to the Satyamurthi temple's structural fabric (now substantially complete), ongoing work on the Satyagirisvarar *gopuram*, and planned reconstruction of the collapsed western *pushkarani* wall (Nainar), with a team of traditionally trained *sthapathis* reviving damaged stucco imagery using historically authentic lime-mortar preparations. The conservation of prehistoric rock art remains the most urgent unresolved priority: the red-ochre paintings have faded significantly due to monsoon humidity, biological growth, temperature variation, and incidental contact, and require specialised conservation chemistry, microclimate management, and access-restriction protocols not yet systematically deployed. Longer-term sustainability will depend on combining institutional conservation with community-based heritage monitoring that leverages existing devotional engagement.



Fig. 4. Aerial view of the fort's hilltop interior, showing the octagonal pushkarani (temple tank) at upper left alongside the fortification walls under conservation.

5. Discussion

The evidence assembled in Section 4 supports the argument advanced in the Introduction: that Tirumayam's significance is cumulative rather than episodic, and that this cumulative character operated through the repeated reinvestment of the same physical terrain with new layers of symbolic and political meaning. The prehistoric rock art establishes the hill as a site of symbolic human activity extending back some five millennia. The proximity of these painted surfaces to the later cave-temple excavations suggests — though it does not conclusively prove — that pre-existing sacred association influenced the medieval selection of this specific hillock for formal Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava institutions rather than an adjacent, geologically comparable elevation. The seventh- and eighth-century cave temples then represent the site's incorporation into institutionalised Hindu religious frameworks, evidenced by their inscriptional record, their place within the Divyaprabandham corpus, and their continuing festival cycle. The 1687 fortification under Vijaya Raghunatha

Sethupathi represents a third and distinct form of reinvestment: the deliberate construction of military and administrative authority atop a landscape whose sacred capital had already been established over the preceding millennium. Read together, these phases substantiate the article's central claim that political and sacred authority at Tirumayam were not merely co-located but mutually constitutive — each drew legitimacy from, and in turn reinforced, the other.

This reading addresses the fragmentation identified in the Literature Review by proposing a connective mechanism — cumulative sacralisation combined with the strategic exploitation of granite terrain — that the epigraphic, architectural, and political-historical literatures have documented in isolation but not previously linked explicitly. It also qualifies the existing dynastic-historical scholarship, which treats Tirumayam primarily as an administrative and military asset: the present analysis suggests that the fort's strategic value cannot be fully explained by terrain and route control alone, since the deliberate choice of an already-sacred hill indicates that symbolic legitimation was a calculated part of the Sethupathi decision to fortify this specific location. The article's contribution to South Indian heritage studies more broadly is methodological as much as empirical: several fortified hill complexes across Tamil Nadu and adjacent states exhibit comparable patterns of multi-period layering, yet the integrative analytical approach demonstrated here — combining landscape archaeology, architectural history, epigraphy, and ethnography — has rarely been applied systematically to any one of them.

6. Conclusion

This article set out to ask how the successive prehistoric, early medieval, early modern, and colonial phases of occupation at Tirumayam relate to one another, and what that relationship reveals about the construction of sacred and political authority in this landscape. The evidence indicates that each phase built upon, rather than displaced, the symbolic investments of the phase preceding it: prehistoric rock art established the hill's earliest ritual significance; seventh- and eighth-century Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava cave temples formalised that significance within institutionalised religious frameworks; the 1687 Sethupathi fortification annexed the resulting sacred authority to military and political purposes; and the colonial period absorbed the site into bureaucratic and penal administration while inadvertently preserving the documentary record on which much of the present analysis depends. Tirumayam's distinctive character, this article has argued, derives from the systematic exploitation of granite terrain as a single resource serving simultaneously defensive and symbolic functions — a principle that unifies what disciplinary specialisation has tended to treat as separate military-architectural and religious-archaeological histories. Future research might usefully pursue a fresh critical edition of the Satyagirisvarar and Satyamurthi inscriptions, systematic photogrammetric documentation of the prehistoric rock art in advance of further deterioration, and a comparative study of Tirumayam alongside other *padmakottai*-type hill forts in Tamil Nadu to test whether the cumulative-sacralisation pattern proposed here holds more generally..

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