

## THE SEMIOTIC RESEMBLANCE BETWEEN THE RECENT SCULPTURE REMAINS AND THE PALLAVA-ERA SCULPTURES



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### Abstract

Stones were used first to build architecture in the Pallava period only and so the transition from rock-cut sculptures to stone architecture occurred. Initially, the Pallava king Mahendra Varman installed rock-cut sculptures in the Thondai region of South India in 600 CE. Thirty-four such rock-cut sculptures of the Pallavas had been found already. Next to the rock-cut sculptures, the monolithic chariots of Narasimha Pallava and other Monolithic temples built by Rasa Simha Pallava exemplify the glory of the Pallava sculptures. The sculpture figures are carved as bas-reliefs. A sculpture carved and embossed on the wall itself without being attached and with only one side visible is called a relief. The tall and slender physiognomical form is the style of Pallava sculptures. The thin and elongated limbs emphasize the tallness of the sculpture figures. Pallava sculptures are naturalistic in pose and modelling. The female sculpture figures have lighter appearances, with narrow chests and shoulders, thin waists, and sparse clothing with ornaments and show submissive attitudes. The peculiar goddess sculptures of the Pallava period are known as the Kotravai and Thavvai. Recently some ancient sculptures have been found in a few places in Tamil Nadu. Four sculptures were found in Bennatakaram village of Thellaru in February 2022 and those were analyzed by the Historian Raj Panneer Selvam and history buffs Udayaraja and Vedal Vijayan. The Historian Raj Panneer Selvam also found two Kotravi sculptures, one in the village of Keezhnamandi near Thellar area of Vandavasi in March 2022 and one more in Kizhavampoondi village, Melmalayanur, Villupuram district in April 2022. The sculpture of Thavvai had been discovered and analysed by the team of Senguttuvan (coordinator of the History and Culture Council) in Nannadu, a village in the Villupuram district in April 2022. An antique sculpture has been found in Aarani, Tiruvannamalai District in September 2022, and the secretary of the Sambuvarayar Research Center, Professor A. Amulraj and historian R. Vijayan analysed that sculpture. All these recent sculpture remains are confirmed to belong to the 8th century CE Pallava sculpture as demonstrated by their tall and slender anatomical style and bas-relief features. The recent analysis of the Kali statues at Koovagam lakeside in April 2022 by Senguttuvan, coordinator of the Villupuram Museum Association, confirmed as the Pallava goddess sculptures Kotravai and Thavvai which the people of Koovagam village are protecting these sculptures and worshipping them till today.

**Keywords:** Semiotic, Pallava Era, Pallava Sculptures, Sculpture Remains

### Introduction

Pallavas ruled south India for about five hundred and fifty years from 275 CE to 897 CE. English historian Vincent Smith defined the Pallavas as South Indians at the end of his research. They conquered the Thondai region and went up to the Pudukottai area and ruled the northern part of Tamil Nadu. During the reign of Mahendravarman (600–630 CE) and Narasimhavarman (630–668 CE), Pallavas became a major South Indian power and dominated the northern parts of the Tamil region. The capital of the





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Pallava kingdom was Kancheepuram. Pallava inscriptions have been found in Sanskrit and Tamil. Pallavas were followers of Hinduism. The Chinese traveller Xuanzang visited Kanchipuram and praised enthusiastically the Pallava dynasty. The Pallavas excelled in both rock-cut architecture and stone architecture.

## **Sculptures of the Pallava Era**

The Pallavas were important in the transition from rock-cut architecture to stone temples. The rock-cut cave temples bear the inscription of the Pallava kings. Stones were used first to build architecture in the Pallava period only and so the transition from rock-cut architecture (Kudaivaras) to stone architecture occurred. Since the Pallava king Mahendra Varman had political connections with the Chalukyas, he followed the tradition of Vatabi Kudaivaras and installed Kudaivaras in the Thondai region of South India in 600 CE. Thirty-four such Kudaivaras of the Pallavas had been found already. Next to the Kudaivaras, the monolithic chariots of Narasimha Pallava and the monolithic temples known as architectural sculptures built by Rasa Simha Pallava exemplify the glory of the Pallava sculptures. The Pallavas are well known for Hindu temple architecture and the best example is the Shore Temple in Mamallapuram. The temple structure types of the Pallavas are Rock-cut cave temples, Mono-lithic temples and Architectural Stone temples. Rock-cut cave temples are in Mahabalipuram and Mahendravadi. A lot of relief sculptures created on the front hall of the Rock-cut cave temples are still world-renowned and the notable relief sculptures are Magitasura Martini, Anantha Sai, Govardhana Dhari and Poovaraga Murthy. Apart from this, the sculpture of Bhagirath's penance in Mahabalipuram is one of the largest Monolithic sculptures in India. A monolithic temple complex, Pancha Pandava Rathas were built during the reign of Narasimha Varma Pallava (630-668 CE). Rajasimha Pallava (700-728 CE) was the first to build Architectural stone temples in the Pallava dynasty and famous among his works are Mahabalipuram Beach Temple and Kanchi Kailasa Nath Temple. Moreover, the pillars, walls, bodhikas and vimanas of the temples built by the Pallavas are studded with spectacular sculptures. Pallava sculpture shows greater details of workmanship, lighter anatomy and more developed artistic finishing.

## **Semiotic features of Pallava Sculptures**

The Pallava sculptures are naturalistic in pose and modelling. The sculpture figures are carved as bas-reliefs. A sculpture carved and embossed on the wall itself without being attached and with only one side visible is called a relief. The tall and slender physiognomical form is the style of Pallava sculptures. The thin and elongated limbs emphasize the tallness of the sculpture figures. The female sculpture figures have lighter appearances, with narrow chests and shoulders, thin waists, and sparse clothing with ornaments and show submissive attitudes. The peculiar goddess sculptures of the Pallava period are known as the Kotravai and Thavvai. Kotravai is the goddess of victory, name is derived from the Tamil word kotram, which means "victory, success" found in Tolkappiyam Tamil grammar. Korravai in a rock-relief panel at the Varaha mandapam of Mahabalipuram depicted as a deity with several arms holding different weapons and with the lion and blackbuck as vehicles. She was later syncretised with the Hindu goddesses Durga, Kali and Amman.





Kotravai Relief Sculpture in Varaha  
Mandapam at Mahabalipuram

The one more goddess, worshipped as a female deity was mentioned as Thavvai, also called Jyeshtha Devi or Moothadevi. She holds the Crow flag and broom and is shown with large pendulous breasts, a flabby belly, and thick thighs. In some sculptures, the crow flag and broom are displayed on her back. She wears ornaments on the ears and neck. Her son Mandhan and daughter Mandhi are shown on both Sides. Thavvai is resting both hands on her two attendants and is in a sitting position, whereas Mandhan and Mandhi are in a standing position.



Thavvai sculpture in Kanchi  
Kailasanathar Temple built by  
Second Narasimha Varman

During the Pallava period, there was a custom of worshipping Thavvai and she was considered a good sign of wealth and fertility. She was in the separate temples and donations were made for worship. She

was the family deity of Nandivarma Pallava.

Pallava sculptures are easy to distinguish from the later (Chola, Pandya, Nayak) sculptures of Tamil Nadu. Pallava sculptures often have a lean, long body structure with a broad chest and a narrow waist. The crowns of these sculptures are conical and elongated. Sculptures are sparsely ornamented. Crowns and head decorations are simple. The female figures have a slight bulge at the bottom of the abdomen. The dress will flare out on both sides of the waist. The earrings known as the kundalams in the sculptures are thick and the shoulder decorations have simple carvings. Generally, Pallava sculptures are simple and elegant.

### Recent Sculpture Remains found in Tamil Nadu

1. Some antique sculptures have been found at Pennatagaram near Thellaru in the Tiruvannamalai district in February 2022. Raj Panneer Selvam, the head of Thiruvannamalai Heritage Society and historian, along with Udayaraja, Saravanan, Vijayan and Krupakaran found two idols on the roadside near the Shiva temple in Bennatagaram village during their survey. One is the Vishnu idol and this beautifully carved sculpture is half buried in the soil, wearing beautiful Makara kundalams on both ears, with an upright gaze, big eyes and thick lips. The upper right hand is with Prayoga Chakra, in the upper left hand there is a conch, the lower right hand with the Abhaya Mudra, and the lower right hand with the Kati Mudra. To decorate the sarapalli around the neck, the nividha mupuri thread that descends from the left shoulder and spreads over the chest and then climbs over the right arm is woven on all four arms with shoulder pads and cuffs. Considering the features of this sculpture, it can be a sculpture belonging to the end of the eighth century.



Sculptures found at Pennatagaram near Thellaru in the Tiruvannamalai district in February 2022.

In the field of the lakeside of Tiruvannamalai, another sculpture was found lying in a leaning position and after cleaning it, it was found as Kotravai. The beautiful Jada crown adorns her head, wears a kandigai and chavadi around her neck, and is shown with shoulder and armlets on all her arms. Among the eight hands, his upper right hand is carrying Prayoga Chakra, the other two right hands are holding a war sword and a Choolam respectively, the fourth right hand with Abhayamutra, and the upper left-hand holds Conch, while the other hands are holding Kuruval and deer horn respectively. Warriors are usually shown on either side between the antlers, and reindeer are shown on the left. Based on the weapons, clothing and

accessories seen in the sculpture, it can be dated to the 8th century CE.

2. Two antique sculptures have been found near Vandavasi in March 2022. Historian Raj Panneer Selvam and history buffs Udayaraja and Vijayan of Tiruvannamalai Heritage Society got information about an idol in slab stone in Keezhamandi near Vandavasi. After that, they acquired the idol and did research. They said that near the field of Keezhamandi town, a 5 feet high and 2 feet wide stone slab with 8 arms embossed sculpture was found to be the idol of Kotravai. Its head is adorned with a black crown, its oblong face is adorned with palm fronds in both ears, a ring-like ornament around its neck, a sannaveera across its chest, and its arms and shoulders are covered with bangles, and its mid-dress extends up to its legs. On either side of the shoulder is an ampura thuli, a basket that holds an arrow. The sculpture is holding Prayoga Chakra in the upper right hand and a sword and antler in the lower right hand. The upper left hand holds a conch and the lower left hands carry a bow and a shield. At the rear of the shrine is a vehicle with long antlers and majestically standing on the head of a buffalo. Judging by the ornaments and sculptural composition, this sculpture is belonging to the 8th-century Pallava period.



Pallava sculptures Kotravai and Thavvai found in Keezhamandi near Vandavasi in March 2022

Also in this town Vandavasi, near the upstream reservoir tank, a Thavvai sculpture was found as a relief sculpture on slab stone in a position of standing with a three-layered black crown and a thick middle. The right hand is in Abhaya mudra, the left hand is simply hanging, and the waist garment is spread up to the feet and is beautifully carved. Near the head of Thavvai is a crow flag on the right and a broom on the left, with his son Manthan and daughter Manthi at her feet. This sculpture can also be considered to belong to the 8th century.

3. A Kotavai sculpture belonging to the Pallava period has been found in Kizhavamboondi village, Melmalayanur circle, Villupuram district in April 2022. Historian Raj Panneer Selvam while conducting field research in villages in the Melmalayanur area, found an idol at the Malliyamman temple in Kizhavamboondi village. The local people said that this temple, which is located under a big rock on the northern border, has recently been repaired and reconstructed and is offering good worship. There is an eight-armed sculpture of Moolavar named "Malliyamman" on a stone slab about 5 feet high and 2 feet



Kotravi sculpture found in  
Kizhavampoondi village, Melmalayanur,  
Villupuram district in April 2022  
(along with Mr Raja Panneer Selvam)

The sculpture shows a black crown adorning the head, a round face, makara kundalam in both ears, a tiger tooth thali around the neck, and bangles on the shoulders and arms. Prayoga Chakra is seen in the upper right hand and the other two right hands are carrying a sword, deer horn and bell. The upper left hand is holding a conch, the other hand is holding a bow and a shield, and the lower left hand is showing the town seal in the middle. It is said that this sculpture can be considered a Pallava sculpture dating back to the 8th century.

4. An around 1,200 years old sculpture of Thavvai has been discovered by a team led by Senguttuvan, coordinator of the History and Culture Council, while conducting a field study in Nannadu, a village in the Villupuram district and in April 2022. More than half of the sculpture was buried in the ground. When the soil was removed in front of it, a sculpture of the goddess known as Thavvai in the vernacular was found. In the sculpture, she is seen sitting with her son Manthan and daughter Manthi. In it, Selvakkudam is shown below the left side of the Thavvai sculpture. Thavvai has placed her left hand on it. This sculpture belongs to the Pallava period and is around 1,200 years old.



Thavvai Sculpture discovered at Nannadu,  
Villupuram District in April 2022

5. Some antique sculptures were found in Kaliyamman Temple in Uldsidheri village on the Arani-Sethupattu road in Tiruvannamalai district in September 2022. The secretary of the Sambuvarayar Research Center, Prof. A. Amulraj and historian Arani R. Vijayan confirmed that the sculptures are Pallava sculptures dating back to the 8th century CE.



Pallava sculptures Vishnu and Kotravai found in Aarani, Tiruvannamalai District in September 2022

Regarding these sculptures, According to Professor A. Amulraj, the sculpture of Kaliyamman on the roadside in Udchitheri village is an idol worshipped by the people of the Pallava period. A crown is seen on the head, Prayoga Chakra in the upper right hand and Conch in the left hand. Makara kundalams on the ears, chest girdle, bifurcated shoulder blades and armbands are also shown. The lower right-hand shows Abhaya Mudra. The statue is seen with feet on the head of a buffalo with a long dress up to the knees. Archaeologists confirm that the sculptures may be of Vishnu

Similarly, there is a sculpture of Kali called Kortavai in the arable land about 100 feet away from the road in the south direction east of Tundarikampattu village. On examination of the idol, it was found to be a Kotravai sculpture of the Pallava period, dating back to the 8th century CE. The eight-armed figure has a black crown on its head and Prabhai on its back. In the upper right hand, he is shown stabbing Mahishasura with a soolam. The other arms are shown with a wheel, knife, conch and shield. The ears have long, circular lobes. This sculpture is seen standing on a buffalo head.

6. Koovagam village is situated in Uzhundurpet taluk of Villupuram district. The coordinator of Villupuram Museum Association Senguttuvan, Mr Saravanakumar and Vishnuprasad in the Koovagam lakeside area found the goddess sculpture in April 2022 when engaged in field research. They confirmed that the sculpture was Pallava's Kotravai. They also found one more goddess near the Kotravai sculpture and confirmed it as Thavvai which was seen with her son Manthan and daughter Manthi. These sculptures belong to the Pallava period 1200 years ago.



Kali statues at Koovagam confirmed as the Pallava's  
Kotravai and Thavvai

The people of the region call these goddess sculptures Kali. A warrior who sacrificed himself to Kali a thousand years ago was worshipped in Koovagam village. The worship events Kalapali, Sacrifice rice preparation, and revival events are all centred around Kali. But over time, this worship has changed into the worship of Koothandavar. Till today the people of Koovagam village are protecting these sculptures and worshipping them.

### Discussion

Pallava sculptures are easy to distinguish from the later (Chola, Pandiya, Nayakka) sculptures of Tamil Nadu. Pallava sculptures often have a lean, long body structure with a broad chest and a narrow waist. The crowns of these sculptures are conical and elongated. Sculptures are sparsely ornamented. Crowns and head decorations are simple. The female figures have a slight bulge at the bottom of the abdomen. The dress will flare out on both sides of the waist. The earrings known as the kundalams in the sculptures are thick and the shoulder decorations have simple carvings. Embossing-type relief sculptures are predominantly created in the Pallava period. Pallava's Kotravai and Thavvai sculptures are peculiar and elegant. They are goddess sculptures which are still in use in Tamil Nadu here and there with different names like Amman, Durga, Kali and Parvati and people worshipping those idols. In that way, people are protecting them indirectly without knowing their actual value. They are priceless treasures. Since Pallava kings followed the Hindu religion the Hindu God Sculptures created by them are seen in Pallava temples. These temples and sculptures of the Pallava period, which had been destroyed over time, were buried here and there in South India as treasures. Whenever those places are excavated for some reason, those buried sculptures are found. The God sculptures of the Pallava which have perished over time have also been found in excavations. They are examined and analysed by Historians and Excavators and their origin is confirmed by their semiotic resemblance with Pallava sculptures.

### Conclusion

The Pallava sculptures are special and they excelled in both rock-cut architecture and stone architecture, the best example is the Shore Temple which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Mamallapuram. The types of Pallava temples are Rock-cut cave temples, Mono-lithic temples and Architectural Stone temples. Bas-relief sculptures of the Pallavas and their Goddess Kotravai and Thavvai sculptures have unique semiotic features. The Historians and experts confirm the recent sculpture remains as Pallava





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sculptures with their semiotic resemblance. The Pallava temples and sculptures found so far are preserved. Pallava sculptures found as treasures are also preserved in museums after exploration. Some Pallava sculptures are being protected and worshipped by people.

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