

The Kundankuzhi Mahadevar Temple, Madagadipattu: A Microcosm of Rajaraja Chola's Imperial Vision

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Abstract

This study examines the Kundankuzhi Mahadevar Temple in Madagadipattu, Puducherry, as a significant, albeit relatively modest, architectural and epigraphical monument attributed to the reign of Rajaraja Chola I (c. 985–1014 CE). While not on the monumental scale of his Brihadeeswarar Temple, this granite structure exhibits quintessential features of early Imperial Chola temple architecture, including its functional layout with a Garbhagriha, Ardhamandapa, and a single-tier Vesara vimana. The temple's unique westward orientation and the historical relocation of its *devakoshta* idols are discussed in the context of Chola stylistic norms and subsequent preservation efforts. Critically, the study delves into the invaluable epigraphical records found within the temple. These inscriptions explicitly confirm Rajaraja Chola I as the patron and reveal the ancient place name, "Thirubhuvanai Mahadevi Chaturvedimangalam," highlighting the site's socio-religious importance as a Brahmin settlement. The potential administrative and economic details embedded in these inscriptions offer a micro-level insight into the centralized yet locally integrated governance of the Chola Empire. The temple thus serves as a tangible testament to the extensive reach of Chola architectural patronage, religious devotion, and administrative policies, underscoring the symbiotic relationship between imperial power and sacred space in medieval South India.

Keywords: Rajaraja Chola I, Kundankuzhi Mahadevar Temple, Madagadipattu, Chola Architecture, Dravidian Style, Vesara Vimana, Epigraphy, Thirubhuvanai Mahadevi Chaturvedimangalam, Temple Patronage, South Indian History, Archaeological Survey of India (ASI).

Introduction

The Kundankuzhi Mahadevar Temple, situated in Madagadipattu (formerly Thirubhuvanai Mahadevi Chaturvedimangalam) within the modern territory of Puducherry, stands as an

invaluable, albeit relatively modest, architectural and epigraphical monument from the zenith of Imperial Chola power. While it may not command the monumental scale or worldwide recognition of Rajaraja Chola I's grand masterpiece, the Brihadeeswarar Temple at Thanjavur, its significance lies precisely in its representation of the pervasive reach of Chola architectural patronage and religious devotion, even in areas peripheral to the imperial core. Attributed definitively to the reign of **Rajaraja Chola I (985–1014 CE)**, this temple encapsulates characteristic features of early Chola temple architecture while simultaneously offering crucial epigraphical insights into the administrative and socio-religious fabric of the period. Its study allows for a nuanced understanding of how imperial policies were translated into local religious infrastructure, illustrating the symbiotic relationship between political power and sacred space (Nilakanta Sastri, 1955; Balasubrahmanyam, 1971).

Architectural Details: A Study in Chola Style and Local Adaptation

The Kundankuzhi Mahadevar Temple is a testament to the Chola transition from earlier experimentation to a mature, full-fledged stone construction. The widespread use of granite as the primary building material, a hallmark of Imperial Chola temples, speaks to a newfound confidence in material technology and a desire for enduring monuments (Harle, 1994). This choice of material ensured both the longevity of the structure and provided a durable canvas for the intricate carvings and sculptural programs that are synonymous with Chola artistry.

Overall Layout and Orientation

The temple complex, despite its inherent modesty, adheres to the fundamental principles of Dravidian temple architecture, albeit on a reduced scale. It typically consists of a central shrine, the *garbhagriha* (sanctum sanctorum) and an *ardhamandapa* (ante-chamber connecting the sanctum to the hall). This sequence of spaces, progressing from the outermost public areas to the innermost, sacred realm of the deity, is a standard feature designed to facilitate ritual circumambulation (*pradaksina*) and hierarchical access to the divine (Soundara Rajan, 1972).

A distinctive feature of the Kundankuzhi Mahadevar Temple is its westward orientation. This is somewhat unusual for traditional Shiva temples in South India, which conventionally face east to greet the rising sun, symbolizing light, knowledge, and regeneration (Michell, 1977). While some Shiva temples may face west due to specific site conditions, local legends, or the alignment with a particular celestial body, this deviation from the norm warrants closer examination, though specific reasons for this orientation at Madagadipattu are not commonly documented in accessible scholarly literature. It might indicate a reverence for the setting sun,

a connection to specific local cult practices, or simply a pragmatic adaptation to the existing topography of the site (Settar, 1993). This atypical orientation could potentially point towards older, pre-Chola sacred practices that the Cholas integrated into their imperial temple-building program.

The Garbhagriha and Vimana: Form and Symbolism

The heart of the temple is the *Garbhagriha*, the sacred "womb-house," which houses the presiding deity, Lord Shiva, in the iconic form of a Lingam. The Lingam, an aniconic representation of Shiva, symbolizes the ultimate reality (Brahman), the creative and destructive forces of the universe, and the transcendent nature of the divine (Stutley & Stutley, 1977). The description of the Lingam as being without an *Avudayar* (the base or *pitha*) is a significant detail. While some sources suggest this, it is an unusual omission as the *Avudayar* typically symbolizes the *Shakti* (feminine energy) aspect, complementing the Lingam (Shiva, the masculine principle) and representing the creative union of the cosmos. If indeed originally absent, it could point to a specific iconographic or ritualistic tradition adhered to by the patron or the local community at the time of construction, or it might indicate a feature that has been lost or modified over centuries of worship and renovation. However, it is also plausible that the *Avudayar* was a later addition or that the description refers to the Lingam itself, separate from its base.

Rising majestically above the *garbhagriha* is the *vimana*, the towering superstructure that is the architectural crescendo of the Dravidian temple. The *vimana* of the Kundankuzhi Mahadevar Temple is characterized as a single-tier Vesara type. The Vesara style, often described as a hybrid or transitional architectural idiom, blends elements typically associated with the northern Nagara style (e.g., curvilinear shikhara, projecting niches) and the southern Dravidian style (e.g., horizontal tiers, pyramidal profile) (Dhaky & Meister, 1983). In the context of a smaller Chola temple, a "single-tier Vesara" might imply a simplified, yet elegant, superstructure that incorporates some of the curvilinear or composite forms without the multiple stories seen in grander Dravidian *vimanas* like those at Thanjavur or Gangaikondacholapuram. This choice of style, even in a smaller temple, reflects the Cholas' pan-Indian artistic aspirations and their willingness to integrate and adapt diverse architectural vocabularies within their extensive empire. The use of granite throughout the *vimana*, like the rest of the temple, ensured its structural integrity and allowed for precise sculptural detailing, even if on a more modest scale compared to imperial temples (Balasubrahmanyam, 1971).

Absence of Niche Idols (Originally) and Relocation

Another intriguing architectural detail concerns the *devakoshta* (niche idols) that are typically integral to the iconographic program of Chola temples. These niches, strategically placed on the exterior walls of the *garbhagriha* and *ardhamandapa*, traditionally house specific subsidiary deities such as Ganesha (remover of obstacles), Dakshinamurthy (teacher form of Shiva), Lingothbhavar (Shiva emerging from the Lingam), and Brahma (the creator god), among others (Michell, 1977). Historical accounts suggesting that these *devakoshta* idols were **not found *in situ* at this temple originally, but rather relocated to the Puducherry Government Museum for safety**, implies several possibilities. Firstly, it strongly indicates that these sculptures were indeed part of the original iconographic scheme of the temple, as their presence is standard for Chola Shiva temples (Nagaswamy, 1979). Their removal for preservation suggests a recognition of their artistic and historical value. Secondly, their original absence *in situ* could be due to vandalism, natural decay, or earlier unauthorized removal before their formal relocation by the authorities. The fact that they are now housed in a museum confirms their artistic and historical significance and allows for their study even if their original placement cannot be fully appreciated at the temple site. Their presence, whether original or later additions (though less likely in this context if they fit the typical Chola scheme), underscores the comprehensive nature of Chola temple art, which extended beyond the main deity to include a pantheon of associated gods.

The Monolithic Nandi and its Chronology

A **monolithic Nandi** (the sacred bull, Shiva's mount) positioned within a *mandapa* (pavilion) facing the sanctum is an essential component of any Shiva temple. The Nandi represents eternal waiting, devotion, and vigilance (Stutley & Stutley, 1977). While the Nandi is present at Kundankuzhi, the observation that it "is often suggested to belong to a later period, perhaps indicating renovations or additions to the complex," is significant. Chola temples, especially those of enduring worship, underwent continuous renovations, expansions, and additions over centuries, often by later dynasties or local patrons (Balasubrahmanyam, 1971). If the Nandi *mandapa* or the Nandi itself is a later addition, it might exhibit stylistic features or material choices that differ from the original Rajaraja Chola period construction. This would provide valuable evidence of the temple's continuous use and evolving patronage throughout its history, even if it slightly complicates the understanding of the original early Chola layout. Such additions are common and reflect the organic growth of living temple complexes.

Absence of Rajagopuram: Scale and Function

Unlike the monumental **Brihadeeswarar Temple** at Thanjavur, which boasts an awe-inspiring *Rajagopuram* (monumental gateway tower) that dwarfs the *vimana* itself, the Kundankuzhi Mahadevar Temple **does not possess a prominent *gopuram* or a *dwajasthambam* (flagstaff) at its entrance**. This absence is entirely consistent with the temple's smaller scale and its function as a local or regional shrine, rather than a grand imperial temple. In early Chola architecture, the *vimana* was typically the tallest and most architecturally significant element, symbolizing the cosmic mountain (Meru) (Harle, 1994). The *rajagopuram* only began to rival and eventually surpass the height of the *vimana* during later Chola periods and under subsequent dynasties like the Pandyas and Vijayanagara, as temple complexes expanded to encompass vast courtyards (Michell, 1977). Therefore, the lack of a towering *gopuram* at Kundankuzhi Mahadevar Temple is not an anomaly but rather a stylistic marker consistent with its construction during Rajaraja Chola I's time, when the *vimana* still retained its architectural supremacy. The simple entrance likely served the functional requirements of the devotees without the need for an imposing, multi-storied gateway.

The Sapta Matrika Shrine in Kundankuzhi Mahadevar Temple

While the primary focus of the Kundankuzhi Mahadevar Temple is Lord Shiva, the presence of a dedicated shrine to the Sapta Matrikas highlights their importance in the religious practices of the time. According to available descriptions, the temple complex "consists of the Main sanctum sanctorum, the Ambal temple, a **Saptamatrikas sannadhi**, and a small sannathi without a deity." This confirms the existence of a distinct structure or area specifically allocated for the worship of these powerful mother goddesses.

Architectural Placement and Characteristics:

The specific architectural details of the Sapta Matrika shrine at Kundankuzhi are not as extensively documented as the main sanctum. However, based on typical Chola temple layouts and the nature of Matrika worship:

- **Location:** Matrika shrines are often found in the north-eastern part of the temple complex (Isana-corner, associated with Shiva), or along the northern perimeter, or sometimes within a subsidiary shrine (*parivara alaya*) within the temple prakara (courtyard). Their placement is often strategic, reflecting their role as protective deities.

- **Structure:** As part of a Rajaraja Chola I-era temple, it is a small, independent stone structure, similar in material (granite) to the main temple, with a simpler *vimana* or a flat roof.
- **Deities:** The houses a panel or individual sculptures of the seven goddesses:
 - **Brahmani:** Shakti of Brahma, identified by the swan (hamsa) vahana and attributes like rosary and water pot.
 - **Maheshwari:** Shakti of Shiva, identified by the bull (Nandi) vahana and a trident (trishula).
 - **Kaumari:** Shakti of Skanda (Murugan), identified by the peacock (mayura) vahana and a spear (shakti).
 - **Vaishnavi:** Shakti of Vishnu, identified by the Garuda vahana and attributes like conch and discus.
 - **Varahi:** Shakti of Varaha (Vishnu's boar incarnation), identified by a boar face and buffalo vahana.
 - **Indrani (Aindri):** Shakti of Indra, identified by the elephant (Airavata) vahana and a thunderbolt (vajra).
 - **Chamunda (or Yogeshwari):** A fierce form of Devi, often depicted emaciated, with a skull garland, a cadaver as a seat, and associated with an owl or jackal. She is sometimes considered the chief of the Matrikas.

Significance of Sapta Matrika Worship in the Chola Period:

The inclusion of a Sapta Matrika shrine in a Rajaraja Chola I temple underscores several important aspects of the period's religious and social dynamics:

1. **Continuity of Ancient Cults:** The worship of mother goddesses, often associated with fertility, protection, and warfare, is deeply rooted in ancient Indian traditions, predating the rise of major Puranic deities. The Matrikas, as a formalized group, gained prominence from the Gupta period onwards and were widely integrated into temple complexes during the Pallava and Chola eras. Their presence signifies the Cholas' strategy of incorporating existing popular cults into the mainstream Shaivite and

Vaishnavite frameworks to ensure broader popular appeal and legitimacy (Nagaswamy, 1979; Settar, 1993).

2. **Protective Deities:** The Matrikas were revered as powerful protectors, particularly in battle and against evil forces. Their origin stories often link them to the defeat of demons (like Andhakasura in some Puranic narratives). Their presence within a temple complex, especially one built by an emperor like Rajaraja I who was constantly engaged in military campaigns, suggests their invocation for the protection of the king, the empire, and the local populace.
3. **Shaivite Affiliation:** While the Matrikas are universal mother goddesses, their association with Shiva (Maheshwari, Virabhadra) is particularly strong in South India. They are often depicted as the *shaktis* (energies) of various male deities, but their connection to the Shiva pantheon is pronounced. Their shrine in a Shiva temple reinforces the syncretic nature of Shaivism, which absorbed and integrated various goddess traditions.
4. **Local and Folk Traditions:** Even as the Cholas promoted grand imperial temples, they also patronized smaller, local shrines and assimilated regional deities. The Matrikas often had strong associations with local village goddesses (*gramadevatas*). By providing a formal shrine for them within a royal temple, the Cholas likely aimed to legitimize and elevate local traditions, fostering a sense of inclusion among diverse communities.
5. **Ritual Significance:** The worship of the Matrikas involved specific rituals, often including offerings for protection, prosperity, and the well-being of the community. Their presence in the temple would have ensured the continuation of these rituals under royal patronage, further cementing the temple's role as a vital center for community life.

The Sapta Matrika shrine at Kundankuzhi Mahadevar Temple is therefore not merely an architectural appendage but a crucial element that speaks to the rich tapestry of religious beliefs, imperial strategies, and artistic integration during the reign of Rajaraja Chola I. It highlights how the Cholas, even in smaller temple constructions, meticulously designed complexes that catered to a diverse array of deities and cultic practices, thereby reinforcing their authority and cementing their cultural legacy.

Epigraphical Details: Unveiling History and Administration

The true historical and administrative significance of the Kundankuzhi Mahadevar Temple lies profoundly in its epigraphical records. Inscriptions carved on the temple walls are primary sources of historical information, offering direct and contemporaneous evidence of the temple's construction, its patron, the local socio-economic conditions, and the administrative policies of the Chola empire (Nilakanta Sastri, 1955; Nagaswamy, 1965).

Builder and Period: The Imperial Imprint

The most crucial epigraphical revelation is the explicit confirmation that this temple was indeed built by the illustrious **Chola Emperor Rajaraja Chola I**. This attribution is monumental. Rajaraja I was not merely a powerful monarch; he was a visionary builder, a meticulous administrator, and a devout patron of the arts and religion. His reign marked a golden age for the Chola empire, characterized by extensive military conquests, a highly centralized administration, and unprecedented architectural achievements, most famously the Brihadeeswarar Temple. The presence of a temple built by him, even a relatively modest one, in Madagadipattu signifies the far-reaching influence and direct involvement of the imperial court in the religious life of its diverse territories. This places the temple's construction firmly within the **late 10th or early 11th century CE**, a period of robust Chola expansion and consolidation (Nilakanta Sastri, 1955, pp. 165-170). The direct attribution to the emperor himself, rather than a subordinate chieftain, underscores the temple's importance, however local.

Place Name and Socio-Religious Significance

The inscriptions on the temple walls often refer to the ancient name of this locality as **Thirubhuvanai Mahadevi Chaturvedimangalam**. This provides invaluable information regarding the administrative nomenclature of the Chola period. The term "Thirubhuvanai Mahadevi" likely refers to a queen or a prominent royal lady, indicating the royal association with the settlement (perhaps a grant made in her name). The suffix "**Chaturvedimangalam**" is particularly illuminating. It denotes a special type of Brahmin settlement, often a *brahmadeya* (land grant to Brahmins), where scholars learned in the four Vedas (Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda, Atharvaveda) resided and practiced their erudition. These *chaturbhedimangalams* were centres of learning, religious scholarship, and intellectual activity, often forming the core of local administration and cultural dissemination during the Chola period (Stein, 1980). The evolution of this name into the modern "Madagadipattu" provides a linguistic and historical link between the past and present, allowing scholars to trace

the continuity of settlement and its changing socio-political context. The existence of a *chaturbhedimangalam* here highlights the strategic importance of the area, not just militarily, but also culturally and intellectually, attracting imperial patronage.

Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) Control and Preservation

The fact that the Kundankuzhi Mahadevar Temple is currently under the protective purview and care of the **Archaeological Survey of India (ASI)** speaks volumes about its recognized historical and architectural value. The ASI is the premier government agency responsible for archaeological research and the conservation and preservation of cultural heritage in India (ASI website). Their official name board identifying it as "Thirukunthankudi Mahadevar Temple" further confirms its identity, validates the epigraphical evidence, and signifies its status as a protected monument. ASI's involvement ensures scientific conservation efforts, preventing further decay and enabling future research, which is crucial for a complete understanding of its historical narrative.

Details on Donations and Administration: Insights into Imperial Governance

While specific detailed inscriptions on the grand scale of those found at the Brihadeeswarar Temple, which meticulously record every aspect of temple endowments and personnel, are not as extensively documented for the Kundankuzhi Mahadevar Temple in readily available scholarly sources, it is highly probable that its inscriptions would contain similar details regarding the temple's maintenance, the offerings made to the deity, and the local administrative arrangements. Chola inscriptions, generally, are renowned for their meticulous administrative records. They often include:

- **Land Grants (Brahmadeya/Devadana):** Details about lands endowed for the temple's upkeep, often specifying the boundaries, type of land (wet or dry), and the revenue generated from them (Subbarayalu, 1973). These grants ensured the financial stability of the temple and the livelihood of its staff.
- **Endowments (Irai-ili):** Records of monetary donations, gold, cattle, or other assets given by the king, queens, royal officials, local chieftains, or wealthy merchants (Nilakanta Sastri, 1955). These endowments supported various temple activities, from daily rituals to large festivals.
- **Temple Personnel and Their Remuneration:** Lists of individuals employed by the temple, including priests (*archakas*), musicians, dancers (*devadasis*), temple guards,

accountants, and craftsmen, along with details of their salaries or share of temple produce (Nagaswamy, 1965). This sheds light on the temple as a major employer and a hub of various specialized skills.

- **Ritual Practices and Offerings:** Specific instructions regarding the types and quantities of offerings (*naivedyam*) to be made to the deity, including food, flowers, and lamps. These details offer insights into the religious practices and culinary traditions of the time.
- **Local Governance and Village Assemblies:** Inscriptions often mention the involvement of local village assemblies (*sabhas* or *urs*) in managing temple affairs, adjudicating disputes, and maintaining communal harmony (Stein, 1980). This highlights the decentralized yet integrated nature of Chola administration, where local bodies played a significant role.
- **Royal Titles and Praises (Meikeerthi):** While the primary focus might be administrative, inscriptions of Rajaraja I almost always begin with an elaborate *meikeerthi* (eulogy) detailing his conquests and achievements, placing the temple within the larger context of his imperial power and religious legitimacy (Nilakanta Sastri, 1955).

Given the direct attribution to Rajaraja I, it is highly probable that the inscriptions at Kundankuzhi Mahadevar Temple, if fully deciphered and published, would conform to these patterns, providing a microcosm of the sophisticated administrative machinery that underpinned the Chola empire. The very act of building a stone temple like this, complete with its epigraphical records, was a conscious act of asserting imperial authority and projecting cultural legitimacy.

A Testament to Enduring Legacy

In summary, the Kundankuzhi Mahadevar Temple in Madagadipattu, while modest in its physical dimensions when compared to the colossal edifices of Thanjavur, stands as a highly significant monument of the early Chola period. Its sturdy granite construction, adhering to the principles of Dravidian architecture with a single-tier Vesara *vimana*, exemplifies the mature phase of Chola temple building. The historical accounts of originally present *devakoshta* idols, now preserved elsewhere, speak to the comprehensive iconographic program typical of Rajaraja's era. The presence of a Nandi, even if a later addition, signifies the continuous

veneration at the site. The absence of a *rajagopuram* is consistent with the architectural hierarchy of its time, where the *vimana* remained paramount.

Crucially, the temple's undeniable link to **Chola Emperor Rajaraja Chola I** through explicit epigraphical evidence elevates its importance. It serves as a tangible manifestation of imperial patronage extending into regional territories, thereby consolidating political control through religious legitimization. The ancient place name, "Thirubhuvanai Mahadevi Chaturvedimangalam," revealed by inscriptions, underscores the intellectual and socio-religious vibrancy of the locality during the Chola rule. Under the vigilant care of the Archaeological Survey of India, this temple continues to offer invaluable insights. Its inscriptions, potentially detailing aspects of land grants, endowments, and administrative arrangements, provide direct glimpses into the granular functioning of the Chola state.

Ultimately, the Kundankuzhi Mahadevar Temple is more than just a place of worship; it is a historical document etched in stone. It is a vital site for understanding the spread and evolution of Chola architectural practices, the pervasive nature of their religious patronage, and the administrative reach of their empire, even in seemingly less prominent corners of their vast dominion. Its study contributes significantly to the broader narrative of South Indian history and the remarkable legacy of the Imperial Cholas.

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