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RESEARCH ARTICLE

"THE VAYALUR TEMPLE COMPLEX: A PALLAVA-ERA GENEALOGICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL LANDMARK"

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Abstract

This article examines the architectural and epigraphical significance of the Thirupulishwarar (Vyaghapurishwarar) and Vaikundeswarar temples at Vāyalūr, highlighting their Pallava origins and subsequent contributions from Chola, Pandya, and Vijayanagara dynasties. The Thirupulishwarar temple showcases key Pallava architectural elements such as the gajaprishta (apsidal) sanctum, Brahma-kantha pilasters, and ornamental prastara, while the Vaikundeswarar shrine reflects a blend of Pallava, Chola, and Vijayanagara influences. Of particular historical value is the Vāyalūr genealogical pillar inscription attributed to the Pallava ruler Rajasimha, which offers an extensive dynastic lineage of fifty-four generations, linking the Pallava dynasty to both divine and historical figures. This inscription is an unparalleled source for reconstructing Pallava genealogy and ideology. The temple's architectural components and diverse inscriptions attest to its longstanding religious, cultural, and political significance across centuries. This study reinforces the importance of regional temples as repositories of royal memory and instruments of dynastic legitimacy.

Keywords: Pallava dynasty, Vāyalūr temple, Thirupulishwarar temple, Vaikundeswarar temple, Rajasimha inscription, Pallava Grantha script, South Indian temple architecture, gajaprishta shrine, apsidal sanctum, devakoshta, adhisthana, prastara, Shaivism, Vaishnavism, dynastic genealogy, royal eulogy, Chola inscriptions, Vijayanagara period, sculptural iconography, temple patronage, epigraphy, Tamil Nadu temples, sacred architecture, political legitimacy, mytho-historical lineage.

Introduction

Vayalur, a village in the Thirukalukundram block of Chengalpattu district, Tamil Nadu, is renowned for its ancient temple complex situated on

the banks of the River Palar. Located 55 kilometers east of Kanchipuram and 64 kilometers from Chennai, Vayalur is home to an ancient twin temple complex dedicated to Shiva and Vishnu. Situated on the banks

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of River Palar, this temple complex, maintained by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), showcases the architectural brilliance of the Chola and Pallava dynasties. The temple features a unique Gajabrishta type Sanctum in the Shiva shrine, where the deity is worshipped as Sri Thirupulishwarar/Vyaghapurishwarar, while the Vishnu shrine enshrines Sri Vaikunda Perumal with his consorts. The temple lacks a Rajagopuram (entrance tower) and Vimanam (sanctum tower), which distinguishes it from many other South Indian temples. The complex also includes shrines for Vinayagar, Shanmugam, and Sri Ankeyarkanni, offering a holistic representation of Tamil devotional practices. Currently maintained by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), the temple is a protected monument, preserving its historical and cultural legacy for future generations. Its serene location on the Palar's banks and its architectural uniqueness make it a significant landmark of the region. Vayalur village, with its stunning temple complex, offers a glimpse into Tamil Nadu's glorious past, attracting history enthusiasts, architecture buffs, and pilgrims alike.

Thirupulishwarar / Vyaghapurishwarar Temple The temple layout comprises the **garbhagriha** (sanctum sanctorum), **antarala**, **ardha mandapa**, and **maha mandapa**. The sanctum is constructed in the **gajaprishta** (apsidal) style, raised on a **pada bandha adhisthana**, which includes components such as **jagathi**, **three-patta kumuda**, and **pattika**. The **bhitti** (wall) begins with a **vedika**. The **pilasters** are of the **Brahma-kantha** type and are composed of **kalasha**, **kudam**, **mandi**, **palakai**, and **vettu pothyal**. The **prastara** includes a simple **valabhi**, **kapota** with **nasikas**, and a row of **vyala** motifs. No **superstructure** survives on the **bhumi desha**.

The temple, facing east, features a **balipeeda** and **Rishabha** (Nandi). A raised platform precedes the entrance. In the **koshta** niches are found images of **Vinayaka**, **Guru Bhagavan** (Dakshinamurti), **Vishnu** (in the position typically reserved for **Lingodbhava**), **Brahma**, and **Durga**.

Vaikunteswarar / Vaikuntanatha Swamy Temple this temple is rectangular in plan, elevated about two feet above the surrounding ground level. **Garuda** is positioned facing the sanctum sanctorum. The **koshta** niches are empty. The main deity (**moolavar**) is accompanied by **Sridevi** and **Bhudevi**.

Architecture

The Shiva temple reflects both **Pallava** and **Chola** architectural influences. The rear apsidal end of the shrine, known as **gaja-prishta** in Sanskrit (meaning "elephant's back"), is characteristic of Pallava craftsmanship. Niches on the outer wall house images of **Ganesha**, **Dakshinamurti**, **Vishnu**, **Brahma**, and **Durga**. The **Vaikuntha Perumal** shrine features the deity flanked by **Sridevi** and **Bhudevi**.

A **Chola-period mandapa** stands in front of the sanctum, while a **multi-pillared Vijayanagara mandapa** is located near the entrance. The temple layout comprises a **garbhagriha**, **ardha mandapa**, and **maha mandapa**, suggesting a blend of **Pallava** and **Vijayanagara** architectural phases. These elements are primarily constructed of stone. The **pillared mandapa** and **kalyana mandapa** are later additions from the late **Vijayanagara period**.

The temple is notable for its extensive use of **sandstone**, which is uncommon in this provincial region. This material choice echoes practices from Pallava temples like those built by **Rajasimha** and **Nandivarman** at **Kanchipuram**, where **granite courses** were incorporated at the plinth to provide structural stability.

While the **kalasha** is present on the Shiva temple, the **tala** elements (tiers of the superstructure) are absent. A **seated Nandi** and **balipeeda** face the sanctum, but there is no **dwajasthambha**. Additional shrines within the complex include those dedicated to **Sri Siddhi Vinayagar**, **Sri Angayarkanni Tayar**, and **Sri Arumuga Peruman**.

Plinth and Adhisthana

The **Tirupulishwara temple** is built on a well-moulded **plinth**, with the base beginning with a **chitra-vana**. Above this is the **adhithana**, subdivided into elements such as **upana, padma, kambu, jagathi, kumudam, keel padma, kambu, kanda, kambu, mel padmam, kapothaka, alinga, anthari, prathi, and vajana**. Just above the adhithana is the basal section of the wall known as **vedika**, which is considered part of the basement.

Bhitti or Pada

The **bhitti** or **pada** section rises above the **vedika** and forms the external walls, including the **devakoshtas** (niches for deity images). The exterior walls include 24 **kudya-stambhas** (pilasters), with eight on each of the three sides (excluding the eastern entrance), arranged in sets that create visually recessed sections. The outer pilasters are narrower, while those between the **devakoshtas** are broader. These pilasters stand on the **vedika**, with shafts (**danda** or **kāl**) and capitals.

The capital consists of:

- **Malasthana** (base with decoration)
- **Padma-bandha**, subdivided into:
 - **Kalasha** (lotus or bell-shaped)
 - **Tadi** (plank-shaped)
 - **Padma/Idal** (blossomed lotus)
- **Phalaka/Palagai** (flat stone)
- **Potika** (bracket), resting on the **phalaka**

The **Pallava-style potikas** have curvilinear forms, while the **Chola-period potikas** on the mandapa walls are more angular and lack the **taranga** (wavy curves).

Devakoshtas

Five **devakoshtas** are found: three on the **garbhagriha** (facing east, north, and south) and two on the **ardhamandapa** (north and south). Each likely contained images from the Hindu pantheon. **Makara-toranas** span the top of these niches, adding decorative grandeur.

Kapota and Prastara

The **prastara** includes a well-formed **kapota** and **vyala-mala**. The **kapota** features **kudu** (horseshoe- or chaitya-arch-shaped) motifs called **alpa-nasikas**, without embedded figures. Traces of **paintings**—mainly red and green—are visible within the **kudus**, likely depicting human figures. These reflect the **Pallava-period** tradition of painting within architectural motifs.

Above the **kapota** is a row of **vyala** (mythical lions), followed by a **hara** of miniature shrines, including **karna-kutas** at the corners and **salas** in between, connected by **hara-antara**. Between these, **ksudra-nasikas** (small niche shrines with chaitya arches) and **kudus** are found.

Inscription

The Vāyalūr Inscription and Its Significance in Pallava Genealogy the **Vāyalūr inscription** presents a much greater degree of reliability than other extant records, as it constitutes the **earliest known genealogy** of its kind. Unlike the **Kasakadi** and **Velurpalaiyam** copper-plate grants, which date from the period of the later Pallava princes of the **Nandivarman lineage**, the **Vāyalūr** inscription is attributed to the reign of a ruler from the **Simhavishnu dynasty**, placing it at a much earlier stage in Pallava history. More significantly, this inscription enumerates a remarkably **comprehensive sequence of rulers**, listing as many as **fifty-four generations**, seemingly in chronological order. These features—its **antiquity and completeness**—make the **Vāyalūr** inscription a critical source for reconstructing the **dynastic chronology and political evolution** of the Pallavas.

The genealogy begins with **mythological and semi-historical figures** such as **Brahma, Angiras, Brihaspati, Drona, and Asvatthaman**, linking the Pallava dynasty to an exalted celestial lineage, a feature often seen in royal eulogies (prasastis) to legitimize rule. This is followed by more historically grounded names, including **Pallava, Asoka, Harigupta, Vishnugopa, Skandavarman**, and

culminating with **Rajasimha**, providing an unbroken dynastic succession.

Inscriptions and Monuments at Vāyalūr

Vāyalūr has yielded a **rich corpus of inscriptions** spanning several centuries and dynasties, including the **Pallava, Chola, Pandya, Rashtrakuta, and Vijayanagara** periods. These records, inscribed on structural elements and loose stones, offer valuable insights into **political authority, temple patronage, land grants, and local administration**.

- A **13th-century Pandya epigraph** found on the walls of the **Tirupuliswara shrine** references three Shiva temples and refers to the image of Vishnu as *Sri Vaikundathu Emperuman*.
- A **Pallava-style cubical pillar** with a helical inscription in florid Pallava-Grantha script supports the gopura of the Tirupuliswara temple. This pillar, likely relocated from an earlier temple, contains the aforementioned genealogy up to **Rajasimha**, identifying him as a warrior-king (*Yuddhārjuna*) and lion among kings (*Narendrasimha*).
- A **Chola inscription attributed to Kulottunga I** (11th century CE), inscribed on a damaged pillar, records a **land grant for maintaining a temple lamp** and situates Vāyalūr within **Paducarnadu of Chempurkottam, part of Jayangonda-Cholamandalam**.

Other inscriptions from the **Vijayanagara period** (14th–17th centuries CE) are found on **loose stones**, often fragmentary:

- References to endowments, land donations (e.g., 100 *kuli* of land), and village names (many lost).

Names of officials and donors, such as **Marisuramudaiyan, Tiruvunnaigai Veana, Govinda, and Gunavelan**, are occasionally preserved.

- Some records are purely **prasasti (eulogistic)** in nature, while others record **administrative transactions**.

The Vāyalūr Pillar Inscription of Rajasimha

The **Rajasimha pillar inscription** is especially notable for its poetic eulogy and royal imagery:

"Be he victorious, the royal lion (Rajasimha) on the chief mountain of the glorious Pallava race, whose spotless fame as the lion of warriors (*Kṣatrasimha*) is widely known... whose crown is resplendent with the crest-jewel, Mahesvara (Śiva), the lion among lords of kings (*Narendrasimha*)... the great wrestler (*Mahāmalla*) in hand-to-hand combat, the blessed cloud (*Śrī-megha*) who nourishes the Brahmanical field of prosperity, the Moon to the ocean of his lineage..."

This passage, rich in **royal metaphors and divine association**, reinforces the Pallava monarch's **kshatriya ideals, Shaivite devotion, and cosmic kingship**. The inscription is both a **genealogical and ideological statement**, positioning Rajasimha within an illustrious lineage and as a rightful, almost divine, sovereign.

Conclusion

The Vāyalūr temple is an important site for understanding the history of the Pallavas. The most significant contribution of this temple is the **genealogical pillar inscription of Rajasimha**, which gives a long list of Pallava kings from mythological times to the reign of Rajasimha. This makes it one of the **earliest and most complete records** of Pallava genealogy.

Although the temple itself may not be as large or famous as those at Mahabalipuram or Kanchipuram, the presence of Pallava-style architecture—like the cubical pillar—and the use of Pallava Grantha script show that the Pallavas had an active role in developing this sacred site.

Later additions by the Cholas, Pandyas, and Vijayanagara rulers show the continued importance of Vāyalūr, but its roots clearly lie in the Pallava period. This makes the temple valuable for tracing how **Pallava kings used temples not just for worship but also to record their royal heritage and promote their power**.

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