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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

## PADMANABHAPURAM PALACE: A TIMELESS MARVEL OF TRAVANCORE HERITAGE AND ARCHITECTURE

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### Abstract

Padmanabhapuram Palace, also recognized as Kalkulam Palace, stands as a relic from the Travancore era, nestled in Padmanabhapuram within the Kanyakumari district of Tamil Nadu, India. Remarkably, this architectural marvel is currently under the jurisdiction and care of the Kerala state government. Historically, Padmanabhapuram served as the capital of the former Hindu kingdom of Travancore, and it is geographically situated approximately 20 kilometers away from Nagercoil, 39 kilometers from Kanyakumari town, and 52 kilometers from Thiruvananthapuram in Kerala. The palace itself is a sprawling complex enclosed by an ancient granite fortress extending over four kilometers. Positioned at the base of the Veli Hills, which are part of the Western Ghats, it enjoys the proximity of the flowing river Valli. Additionally, there exists another palace known as Kuttalam Palace, located in Kuttalam within the Tenkasi district of Tamil Nadu. Intriguingly, this palace is also governed by the Kerala government despite its location in Tamil Nadu. Historically, these regions, including Kanyakumari District, Chenkottah Taluk, Tenkasi Taluk, and areas of Kuttalam, were once under the control of the Travancore Kingdom in Kerala.

**Key words:** Padmanabhapuram, Travancore, Upparikka malika, Kottaram, Mural painting

### Introduction

The quaint village of Padmanabhapuram, originally known as Kalkulam and located in the Kanyakumari district, held historical significance as the thriving capital of the formidable Venad Kingdom. This kingdom later evolved into the renowned princely

state of Travancore. Notably, Padmanabhapuram did not serve as the first stronghold for the Venad rulers in the southern region. Nearby places such as Valliyur, Veerakeralaeswaram, Thiruvithamcode, Charode, Puliyoorkurichi, and Eraniel still bear remnants of ancient settlements, palaces, historic fortifications, and prominent temples that precede the establishment of

Padmanabhapuram. Presently, there are no traces of the former palace in Keralapuram and Charode, while the ruins of a palace can still be observed in Eraniel. It's likely that Kalkulam was chosen as an ideal location for constructing a palace due to its strategic positioning and proximity to the rugged mountain ranges of the Western Ghats, which offered natural protection to both the palace and the surrounding settlements. The abundance of fertile farmland and a bountiful water supply were compelling factors that attracted royalty and other settlers to this region. Nestled within the ancient fortification of Kalkulam is the expansive Padmanabhapuram Palace complex, which once served as an early administrative hub for the Venad rulers. When delving into the origins of the fort and palace in Kalkulam, one must consider the Mudaliyar records, which suggest that these forts in Kalkulam and nearby Udayagiri were established just before 1600 A.D., during the reign of Iravi Varma Kulasekharan (1592-1609). John Nieuhoff, a seventeenth-century Dutch traveler, documented the grandeur of Kalkulam: "Kalkulong (Kalkulam) is a very large city, on one side strengthened by inaccessible mountains, on the other by a wall, the lower part of it is made of stone, while the uppermost part is constructed of brickwork, measuring 24 feet in height. The royal palace stands at the western end, enclosed by a stone wall.

### **Origin and Evolution**

The palace's origins trace back to around 1601 CE when it was constructed by Iravi Varma Kulasekhara Perumal, who ruled Venad from 1592 to 1609. Later, during the reign of King Anizham Thirunal Marthanda Varma (1706–1758), often considered the founder of modern Travancore, the palace underwent significant reconstruction during 1750. King Marthanda Varma, who ruled Travancore from 1729 to 1758, rebuilt the palace and dedicated the entire kingdom to his family deity, Sree Padmanabha, a manifestation of Lord Vishnu. He ruled the kingdom as Padmanabha dasa, signifying his role as the servant of Lord Padmanabha. This dedication led to the adoption of the name "Padmanabhapuram" or the "City of Lord Padmanabha." However, in 1795, during the late 18th century, the capital of Travancore was relocated from Padmanabhapuram to

Thiruvananthapuram, marking the decline of Padmanabhapuram's former glory. The palace complex remains a remarkable example of traditional Kerala architecture, with certain sections serving as an essential representation of the traditional Kerala architectural style. Despite its geographical location entirely within the state of Tamil Nadu, the Padmanabhapuram Palace remains under the ownership and jurisdiction of the Government of Kerala. The maintenance and preservation of this historic palace are entrusted to the Kerala Archaeology Department.

### **Structural Wonders of the Palace**

The Padmanabhapuram Palace complex comprises several distinct structures, each with its unique purpose and historical significance. These include the Mantrasala, which served as the King's Council Chamber, the Thai Kottaram, built before 1550, the Nataksala, designated as the Performance Hall, a centrally located four-storeyed mansion, the Thai Kottaram, known as the Southern Palace, and the Indira Vilasom, a guest house designed to accommodate guests and foreign dignitaries. Each of these structures contributes to the rich architectural and cultural heritage of the palace complex.

The Central Mansion within the Padmanabhapuram Palace complex is a four-story structure situated at its heart. On the ground floor, you'll find the royal treasury, while the first floor comprises the King's bedrooms. An ornate bed, crafted from 64 varieties of herbal and medicinal woods, was a gift from Dutch merchants. Throughout this mansion and other areas of the palace, recesses in the walls were ingeniously designed to store weapons like swords and daggers. Ascending to the second floor, you encounter the King's resting and study rooms, often used during fasting days. The topmost floor, known as 'upparikka malika,' functioned as the royal household's place of worship. Its walls are adorned with exquisite 18<sup>th</sup> century murals depicting tales from the puranas and scenes from the social life of Travancore during that era. This top floor was believed to be the room of Sree Padmanabha Swamy, reinforcing the deep connection to the deity. King Marthandavarma oversaw the construction of this building and ruled over Travancore

as Padmanabha Dasa, a devoted servant of Sree Padmanabha Swamy.

The Southern Palace, with an age of approximately 400 years, holds historical significance similar to that of the Thai Kottaram (meaning 'mother's palace'). Today, it functions as a heritage museum, featuring a remarkable collection of antique household items and curiosities. These well-preserved artefacts provide valuable insights into the social and cultural aspects of that period.

Uppirikka Malika: A Regal Jewel of the Palace Complex, located to the northwest of the Thai Kottaram, Uppirikka Malika is one of the most notable elements of the royal complex. This impressive structure was built in 1745 by King Anizham Thirunal Marthanda Varma and played a significant role in the palace's history. The ground floor housed the coveted Travancore royal treasury, while the floor above served as the king's bedchamber, featuring the renowned Sapramancha Kattil, a grand poster bed crafted from 64 timbers with medicinal properties. An adjoining staircase from the King's room led to his fasting chambers, where he would retreat during periods of devotion and fasting.

### **Majestic Mural Paintings**

The Padmanabhapuram Palace is renowned for its captivating mural paintings that adorn its walls, providing a visual journey through history and mythology. These artistic treasures showcase intricate details and vibrant colors, offering glimpses into the rich cultural and religious tapestry of the region. The murals depict a wide range of subjects, drawing inspiration from both Vaishnavite and Saivaite mythologies. Central to these artworks is the portrayal of Lord Ananthapadmanabha, who occupies a prominent place on the western and eastern walls, revered with deep devotion. Among the notable murals, one can find depictions of Siva Thandava, Ganesa Pooja, Vettakkorumakan, Krishna as the Charioteer of Arjuna, Veda Vyasa, Sankaranarayana, Mahishamardini Durga, Dakshinamurthi, Siva as Bhairava, Sastha as a hunter, and more. These vivid paintings also narrate various facets of Krishna's life, portray Vishnu with his divine consorts, showcase

Krishna being adorned with jewels, and offer a glimpse into the life of Siva and Parvathi. The mural on the southern wall is particularly striking, featuring a picturesque scene of Krishna playing the flute amidst a backdrop of Gopikas, cows, birds, and beasts in the woods of Vrindavan. The careful harmony of colours, including green, ochre, white, golden yellow and dark blue, adds to the allure of this artwork. Another noteworthy mural depicts the coronation of Rama, capturing a pivotal moment in the epic Ramayana. The diverse mural paintings continue with subjects such as Subramanya, Siva as Ardhanareeswara, Sudarsana Bhadra Kali, Vishnu and Lakshmi, Narasimha, Sivalinga, Siva with his family, and Siva Parvathi. These murals offer a glimpse into the intricate religious and mythological narratives cherished by the people of the region. The unique aspect of these murals is the distinct styles they exhibit, showcasing three individual approaches in the Padmanabhapuram Palace. The upper halves of the walls and the western wall were predominantly the work of one artist, while a different artist contributed to a significant portion of the lower halves. The entire repainting of the eastern wall, displaying a style influenced by post-Vijayanagara art, was carried out by yet another artist. These murals feature elongated faces and bodies, sharp noses, and distinctive pouting lips, reminiscent of the figures found in the Padmanabha Swami Temple of Thiruvananthapuram. Ultimately, the mural paintings at the Padmanabhapuram Palace stand as captivating storytellers, conveying the essence of religious devotion, mythology, and cultural heritage, all woven into the fabric of this historical treasure.

### **Inscriptional Treasures**

The Epigraphic Gallery within the Padmanabhapuram Palace stands as one of South India's most extensive repositories of historical inscriptions. It serves as an enlightening and educational resource for those interested in delving into our rich past, exploring the depths of history and culture. This gallery houses a remarkable collection of copper plates and stone inscriptions, inscribed in various scripts, including Vattezhuthu, Tamil, Grantha, and Malayalam characters. Spanning from the 8th century A.D. to the 18th century A.D., these

inscriptions offer intriguing insights into different facets of history. Among the noteworthy inscriptions, the earliest Vattezhuthu stone inscription belongs to the Pandya king Marcandayan. The inscription of the Chola king Raja Raja sheds light on his generous contributions to the temple at Kanyakumari. Another significant inscription is the Manalikkara inscription of Ravi Kerala Varma, the earliest stone inscription of the Venad king in the gallery, dating back to AD 1236. Of particular interest are the inscriptions known as "anjinanpukalidam," signifying the asylum for the oppressed. These inscriptions bear a unique mark, guaranteeing security to oppressed individuals residing in colonies. Through these records, one can gain a comprehensive understanding of the political, social, and religious history of Venad from the 8th to the 18th century AD. These stone inscriptions were collected from various regions of the erstwhile Travancore state. Additionally, the gallery features the "anchinan pulculthiham" inscription of 1478 AD, which was installed in Quilon by the Travancore king Chembaka Ramavarma—a significant historical artefact. It highlights the abolition of social evils like 'Mannappedi' and 'Pulappedi' in the southern part of the state, a decree enacted by the Venad king Veerakerala Varma in 1696 A.D. This inscribed slab document provides valuable insights into the progressive measures taken by the Venad kings to address societal issues, and it is prominently displayed in the gallery for visitors to explore and appreciate.

### **Artistic Wooden Sculptures**

The Archaeological Museum houses a collection of significant wooden sculptures discovered from various locations in the Kanyakumari district, enriching the museum's exhibits with their artistic brilliance. Notable among these wooden sculptures are the Dwarapalaka, Rathi Devi, Saraswathi Devi, and Ladies with Veena. The Dwarapalaka, crafted from teak wood, stands out as a decorative masterpiece and was unearthed in the 18th century AD in Padmanabhapuram. Rathi Devi, another wooden sculpture, also discovered in Padmanabhapuram in the 18th century AD, adds to the museum's allure. Saraswathi Devi, an exquisite wooden sculpture, showcases remarkable artistry and a polished finish. It

dates back to the 17th century AD and was discovered in Padmanabhapuram. Another noteworthy sculpture is "Ladies with Veena," which was found at Padmanabhapuram in the 17th century AD. These sculptures reflect the rich artistic traditions of the region, highlighting influences from neighbouring areas such as the Chola and Pandya regions. Early sculptures, while simple and delicately modelled, do not exhibit distinct traits. The artistry of Venadu up to the 14th century AD embodies the influences of Chola plastic art and the classical modeling of the Pandyan region. From the 16th century AD onwards, the influence of the Vijayanagara School of Art becomes evident in sculptural mediums. Nevertheless, wooden sculptures remain a dominant and cherished aspect of Venadu's artistic traditions.

### **Conclusion**

Padmanabhapuram Palace is a magnificent embodiment of the region's rich history and cultural heritage. Nestled in the heart of the Kanyakumari district, it bears witness to centuries of rule by various dynasties, from the Pandya kings to the Venad rulers and later the Travancore dynasty. This architectural marvel, characterized by traditional Kerala design, encompasses a treasure trove of art, history, and craftsmanship. The palace's mural paintings vividly depict religious and mythological tales, providing a captivating window into the beliefs and artistic traditions of its era. The Epigraphic Gallery, on the other hand, houses a wealth of historical inscriptions, shedding light on the political, social, and religious history spanning from the 8th to the 18th century AD. Within the Archaeological Museum, one can admire wooden sculptures like the Dwarapalaka and Saraswathi Devi, adding another layer of artistic brilliance. These sculptures, along with the palace's intricate architecture, reflect the diverse influences that have shaped the cultural identity of Venad over the centuries. Padmanabhapuram Palace not only stands as a historical gem but also serves as a living testament to the enduring legacies of art, culture, and heritage in Southern India. It beckons all those eager to explore the captivating history and artistic treasures of the region.

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