
A Review of Thirunanthikarai Rock-cut Shiva Temple with Special Reference to its Paintings

Ajit Kumar¹

¹. Department of Archaeology, University of Kerala, Kariavattom Campus, Thiruvananthapuram – 695581, Kerala, India (Email: ajitkumarku@gmail.com)

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Abstract: *Thirunanthikarai rock-cut Shiva temple holds the distinction of harbouring the oldest mural paintings from the erstwhile Ay-Venad-Travancore region. Although today located in the Kanyakumari district, of Tamil Nadu, no studies on the mural paintings of Kerala can be complete without a reference to it. The paintings of this cave have not found holistic evaluation though, passing reference to it have been made by some early scholars like Stella Kramrisch, Sivaramamurti etc. This paper attempts a holistic review of Thirunanthikarai cave temple with special reference to its paintings.*

Keywords: Thirunanthikarai, Rock-Cut Temple, Paintings, Inscriptions, Porch, Pillar, Side Walls

Introduction

Thirunanthikarai or Tirunandikkara cave temple (8° 23' 55" N; 77° 17' 50" E) is situated in Thirunanthikarai village located 3km from Kulasekaram on the way to Pechipparai, and falls within the limits of Kalkulam taluk of Kanyakumari district. This area was often referred to as Nanjilnadu. The cave temple is cut into the southern surface of a granitic hillock 83m in high running east. Adjoining it to the south is a structural temple dedicated to Siva called Nanthishwaran and is possibly contemporaneous to the cave temple. There is a stream called Nandhiaaru flowing to the south of the temple. The old temples and the stream find mention in the inscriptions of Chola period engraved on the rock surface of the cave.

The Cave

The Tirunandikkara cave temple is dedicated to Siva like many other cave temples in the ancient Ay-Venad-Travancore territory (hereafter Travancore). In plan, it comprise of a pillared veranda, hall and sanctum (Fig.1). The mortises on the façade of the cave and on the floor in front of the temple indicate that a portico in wood possibly existed. Bernier and Poduval mentions of a brick wall running between the pillars with doorway to the centre and window to the west end (Poduval 1948 36, Bernier plate 21).

This wall has however been demolished and is now replaced by an iron mesh with two flap door at its centre.

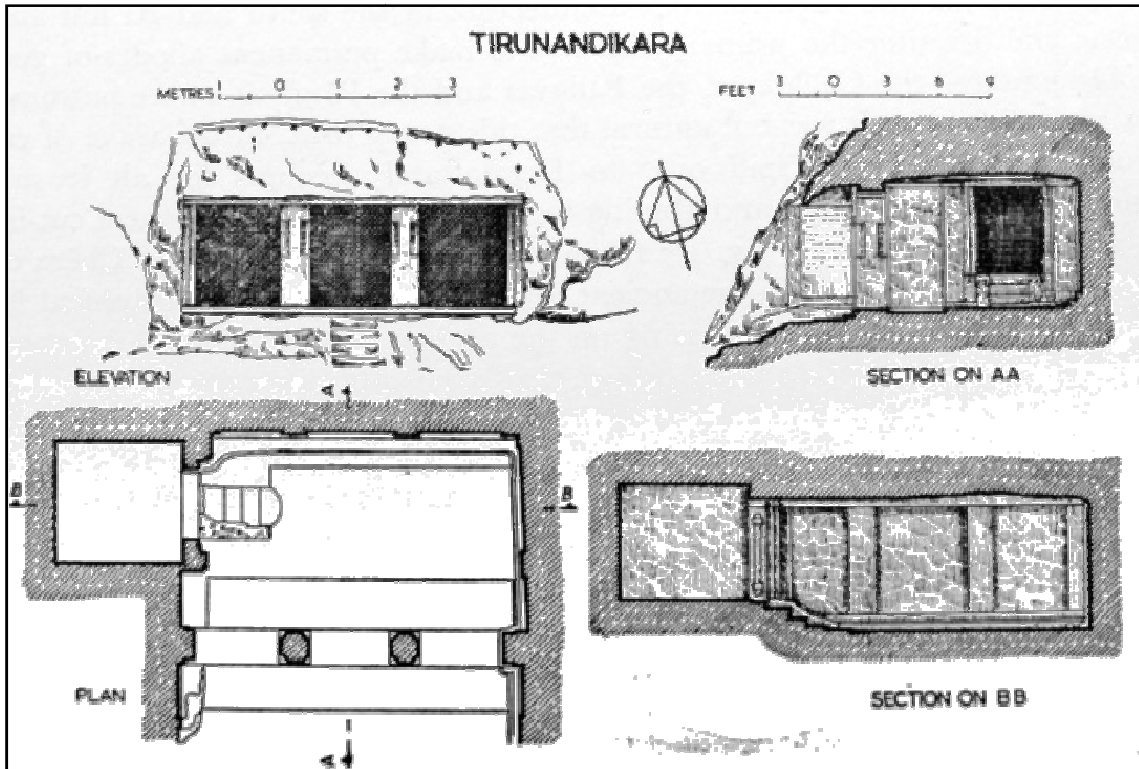


Figure 1: Plan of Tirunandikkara Cave Temple (after H. Sarkar)

A flight of nine rock-cut steps used to lead to the forecourt of the cave. Today, the stone steps are laid over with a flight of steps in iron (Fig. 2). The hall is fronted by a small veranda roughly 5.85m in length and 1m in width, supported on two pillars to the centre and to two pilasters to either ends. The pillars have a square base and octagonal shaft and a square upper portion supporting the plain brackets which spread to either side Fig. 3a). The pilasters to either side are plain and square.

The pillars do not have floral medallions or wavy pattern on the corbels and are plainly cut with straight bevel resulting in an angular profile (Fig. 4) These pillars draw stylistically similarity to the Narasimha rock cut cave Anamalai, Madurai district, which according to an inscriptions in the cave belongs to the time of Maransadaiyan (Varaguna-I) 770CE. The cave has an unusual plan, in the sense that the sanctum is placed to the north-west corner of the hall and faces east. In Travancore region, it is the only cave with this plan. Sarkar draws similarity with the plan of Malaiyadiatti Varkiswarar cave 1 in Kulattur taluk, District Pudukkottai dated to the 16th regnal year of Dantivarman (812CE) (Sarkar 1978 46-47; Balaji 2011 34).

The pillars of the porch and the projecting eastern and western side walls bear inscriptions (Figs. 3a, 3b and 3c). The inscription engraved on the pillars is the earliest Fig. 3a). This inscription cites of land being gifted to the temple to upkeep various

activities. This inscription is in Vatteluttu alphabet and Tamil language. The inscription does not bear date but on palaeographic characters it is ascribed to the latter half of the 8th or first part of the 9th century CE (Rao TAS Vol. II. No. 54& 55:200-205). The projecting walls of the porch have inscriptions of Raja Raja Chola's period (TAS Vol.I:413-414).



Figure 2: General view of the cave with the flight of steps in iron



Figure 3a



Figure 3b



Figure 3c

Figures 3a, 3b and 3c: Inscriptions on pillar and side walls

Entering the interior, a lower floor level, two pilasters and sunken niches on the sidewalls at either end divides the large hall that measures nearly 5.4m in length and 2.5 m in breadth. To the south corner of the hall is the sanctum facing east enshrining a Shivling. The sanctum is higher than the hall in front and entered by 3 stone cut steps fronted by a *chandrasilā*. There is a shallow rock-cut drain running along the floor of the back wall to drain out libations. The pilasters on the back wall in relief are plain and flat (Fig. 4).



Figure 4: Cave's Interior



Figure 5: Votive rock-cut Shivlinga

Towards the bottom right of the main cave, there is a small niche cut into the rock housing a monolithic Shivalinga within it and it seem to be votive in nature. Such votive Shivilngas are also observed also in a few other rock-cut temple sites like Erniel, Kotukkal etc (Fig. 5).

Paintings in the Cave

The interior of the whole cave and its pillars were plastered and painted (Fig. 4). One of the notable and the earliest recorded painting from the cave discussed by Stella Kramrisch and now obliterated is a male face which she calls a 'Devata'(Fig. 6). This figure which she says was part of a large panel of '...which only the upper most portion is in existence, showing amongst flowers, clouds and rocks traces of hands in fleeting movements and of heads bent with tenderness'(Kramrisch 1948 143,Pl.LXII). This figure appears to be that of a king and apparently accompanied by his consort depicted behind him. Though obliterated, the crown of this figure is partly visible. The face of this male figure is in three-fourth profile and rendered in bold outline. His head is slightly inclined to the viewer's left with gaze directed downwards. The face is chubby, clean shaven, with sharp nose, elongated eyes and a double chin very naturalistically demarcated. This male figure in treatment and style is extremely similar to the king and consort depicted in Sittannavasal cave and almost vents a feel that they were done by the same artisans or their guild (Fig. 7). Kramrisch also refers to a lion and elephant faced figure, though not traceable in totality today, a painted copy of the lion faced figure and the so called 'Devata' image mentioned by Kramrisch finds display in Shri Chitra Art Gallery at Trivandrum Museum.



**Figure 6: Royal figure from
Tirunanidakara**



**Figure 7: Royal figure with his consort
from Sittannavasal**

Though defaced by time and human vandalism, visible among the damaged murals painting on the back wall is a standing Lion faced figure of Lord Narasimha (Fig. 8) and adjoining it to the right is pillar motif (Fig. 9) and a female seated on couch (Fig. 10). To the southwest corner of the hall within a shallow niche is an image of Ganesha (Fig. 11). To the top of the standing figure are some cloud and floral motifs quite akin to Sittannavasal (Figs. 12 and 13). On the ceiling there are a few green patches and appear to be lotus leaves as seen at Sittannavasal (Figs. 14 and 15).



Figure 8: Standing Narasimha



Figure 9: Cushioned capital

The standing Lord Narasimha figure is shown in lateral profile in a movement to the right (Fig. 7). Possibly the nose and mouth portions is still visible and above are the manes demarcated as red lines flowing backwards. His torso is quite clear; he has broad shoulders and a narrow waist. At the waist is tied a dhoti and its pleats are seen towards the back. His left hand holds a large mace which he also supports with his leg. Sculptures of Narasimha are also noticed in contemporaneous Pandya caves at Anamalai cave 2 and Malaiyadippatti cave (Balaji 36, 74).

To the right of the figure is a pillar design which might have been a part of some painted structure now obliterated (Fig. 8). This pillar is slender and has a bulbous cushioned capital unlike the massive square pillars that support the veranda of this cave. Such cushion capitals become popular in Tamilakam from Pallava period and the closest cave where such capital is noticed in the Azhagiapandipuram cave (incomplete in execution), Ananthasayanamurthi cave at Malaiyadippatti, and Trichy lower rock-cut cave datable to 9th CE (Balaji 37, 50).



Figure 10: Lady seated on a couch

The lady seated on a couch is an elegant example of early medieval painting from the Travancore region (Fig.10). The bold body contours are shown in red. The beauty of the figure has not been enhanced by other colours or costumes but merely by strong outlines. The coiffure, the ornaments and body contours are rendered as outlines. The chubby face is inclined slightly to the left. The hair is tied into a tuft to her left. Though

the left eye is obliterated the magnetic gaze of her right eye is fixed at the viewer, the aquiline nose and full lips add to her beauty. Her body contours are rendered in a smooth, graceful, supple and rounded form. Her full bust and thin waist adds to her feminine grace. She wears a necklace and larger chain the pendent of which she holds between her fore and index fingers, close to her bust. Her right leg is folded and rests on the couch.



Figure 11: Painted Ganesha image

The Ganesha image in the cave is located to the southwest corner (Fig. 11). This figure too is painted in red outlines on a white lime background. Ganesha is seated with his face slightly inclined to the left. His head bears a crown, and other adornments include a necklace, armlets and sacred thread. His trunk is turned to the left. Though the left eye is damaged, the right eye is very beautifully depicted. The keen piercing gaze it throws at the viewer is arresting and reflects the mastery of the artisans. He has four arms. Objects held in his two lower arms are not clear however, in the upper right he possibly holds a broken tusk and in the upper left a sugarcane stalk.

To the upper part of the wall there are some undiagnostic clustered representations in red outlines and are cited as 'clouds' by Kramrisch (Fig. 12). To the left are stalks and a partly defaced lotus flower. Similar decorative floral scheme done in varied colour are

also noticed in Sittannavasal cave (Fig. 13). The ceiling of the cave has patches of green painting (Fig. 14) and appears to be lotus leaves and an elaborate version of this scheme that includes lotus, aquatic birds, fishes and humans can be seen in Sittannavasal cave even today (Fig. 15).



Figure 12: Clouds?, Lotus stalk etc., from Tirunandikkara



Figure 13: Lotus and other floral scroll from Sittannavasal

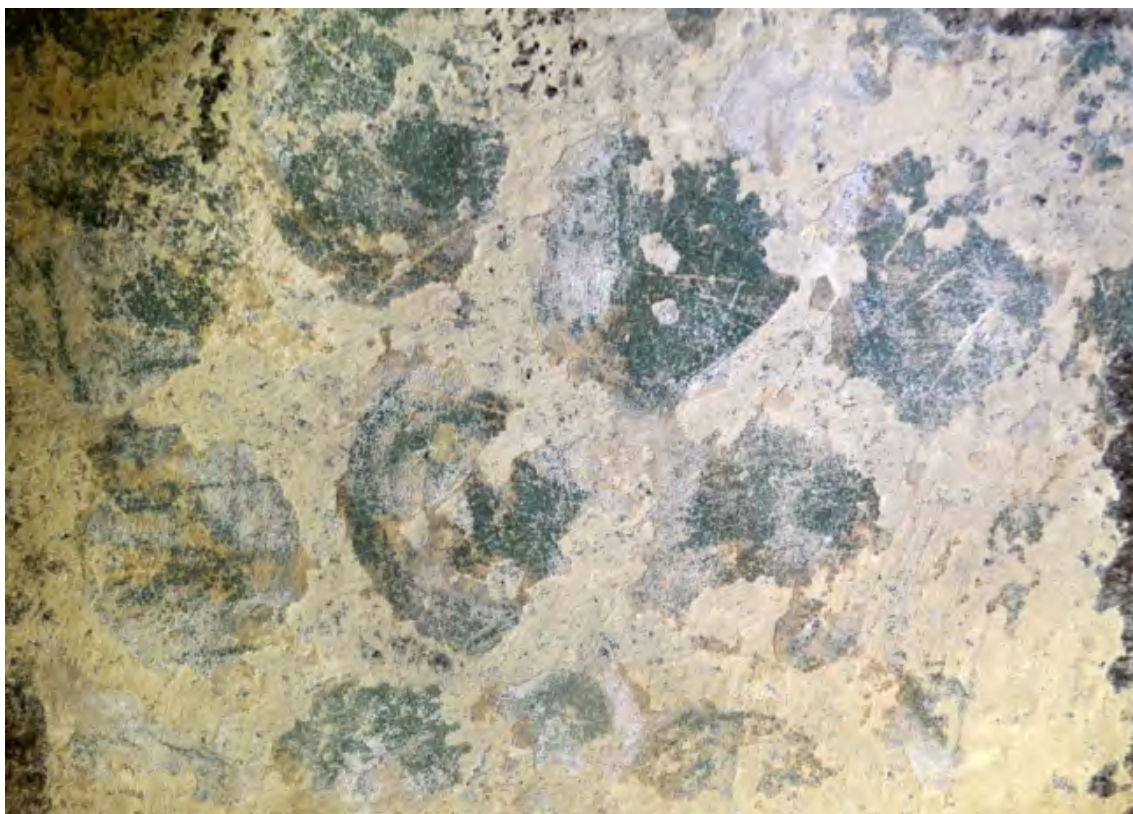


Figure 14: Lotus leaves and other floral scroll from Tirunandikkara



Figure 15: Lotus and other floral scroll from Sittannavasal

Inscriptions in the Cave

There are four inscriptions in the cave. The inscription engraved on the pillar is the earliest and it is in Vatteluttu alphabets and Tamil language (Fig.3a). It registers the gifts of lands by one Narayanan Sivakaran for worship and as wages to drummers, temple servants, *bali* offering and lamps etc. The epigraphs does not bear a date but on palaeographic grounds it is considered to date to the latter half of 8th or early half of the 9th century CE (Rao 1920 Vol.III. 203-206). On the right or east wall is carved an inscription which registers a gift of nine buffaloes by chief Sittakutti-Ambi *alias* Annurruva- Muttaraiyan for maintaining the sacred lamp in the temple of Tirunandikkari-Bhatara(Fig. .3b). The inscription states that grant was bestowed the year ships were destroyed at Karaikkandisvaram (near Kadigaipattinam in Eraniel taluq). The palaeographic characters seem to suggest a date of 12th century CE for the epigraph. The epigraph on the left or west wall dates to the 18th regnal year of Raja Raja Chola (Fig. 3c). It records that the name of the village of Muttam be changed to Mummudisolanallur and be granted to the temple of Mahadeva at Tirunandikara for celebrating a festival ending with an *Aaratt* on the *Satabhisha nakshatra* in the month of Aippikai, the birthday of the king. Besides this, a perpetual lamp was to burnt before the lord in the name of the king and this lamp was to be called *Rajarajan-tirunandavilakku* (Rao 1908 Vol. I. 413).

Concluding Observations

The cave seems to have been commenced during the reign period of the Ay dynasty, after Pandya king Jatila Parantaka Nedunjadaian defeated the Ay rulers at Vizhinjam, as recorded in the Kalugumalai inscription, Huzur office plates and Madras Museum plates (Rao Vol.1 18; Venkayya 1893 73-74). The Huzur office plates are dated to the 23rd year of the king which would roughly work out to 792 CE. Incidentally, the caves at Tiruparankundram was done during the 6th regnal year of Nedunjadaian (773 CE) and Anamalai was also done during his reign period (769-811CE) (Balaji 83). Narasimha image is common to all these caves including Tirunandikkara. Nedunjadaian professed Vaishnava faith and calls himself as *parama-vaishnava* in the Madras Museum Copper plates (Rao Vol.I.231). The earliest inscription on the pillar in Tirunandikkara cave does not records the name of any regent, unlike the inscription at Chittral which has a reference to Vikaramaditya Varaguna and possibly indicates some sort of political vacuum prevailing in the region (Rao Vol 1 284).

The Architecture of Tirunandikkara cave draws similarity with that of Malaiyadiipatti Varkiswarar cave-1 dating to early 9th century CE (16th regnal year of Dantivarman, 812CE). The paintings in the cave has a stylistic similarity with that in Sittannavasal cave, which too is dated to early 9th century CE (Srimara Srivallabha Pandya, 815-82 CE) (Latha 2005 14). Assessing the art, architectural parameters and epigraphic records in the cave it appears to have been excavated between the last quarter of the 8th century and the first quarter of the 9th century CE, close to the reign period of Pandya king Jatila Parantaka Nedunjadaian(769-811CE). Hence, they possibly fall into to a time

period earlier than that of Ay king Vikramaditya Varaguna (864CE) and the excavations at Chitral (Soundara Rajan.1998.108; Rao Vol.I.41).

The paintings surviving in this cave are thus the earliest remains of its kind from the Travancore region. The essential stylistic idiom noticed in the paintings of Tirunandikkara is the predominant uses of red ochre colour in creating bold outlines and inner shades of the figures. This style appears to be earlier and pristine when compared to paintings from Sittannavasal, which uses varied colour schemes. Simplicity of lines, costumes and jewellery is the hallmark of Tirunandikkara paintings, unlike complex linear repetitiveness used for detailing coiffure, costumes etc observed in the later mural tradition of Kerala. The painting at Tirunandikkara apparently divulges a continuity of style from Ajanta paintings of Vakataka period transmuted and transmitted through the artisans of Chalukya - Pallava - Pandya times (Sivaramamurti 1970 56-57).

It is interesting to note that by 8th-9th CE, *Agamic* tradition had come to be inculcated while depicting iconic forms of Gods in temples and in assigning them specific direction/locations. Here, in this cave for example, despite the cave facing south the sanctum is oriented towards east and the Ganesha image is painted to the southwest corner of the cave also called *Kannimoola* in *Vastu* concepts. Even today, in Kerala, it is significant to note that in structural temples complexes Ganesha temples, if any, are always located to the southwest corner or *Kannimoola*.

Though, there are painted representations of Narasimha and Ganesha in the cave, no paintings with connotations to themes narrated in the *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata* occurs and this is true of all caves of Pandya period/region from where rock-cut temple tradition made way to Kerala (Sarkar 1978 49). This in another way indicates that these epics had not gained mass popularity during this period. These epics, apparently become popular in Kerala only after it being translated into Malayalam by Thunchaththu Ramanujan Ezhuthachan during the 16th century CE (Menon 1967 194). Subsequently, themes from epics came to be assimilated into performing and visual arts. It is apparently from folk-dance-drama forms and *Puranic* tradition that the later Kerala mural tradition borrows its essential costume and other characteristic traits and gains the nomenclature of 'Kerala mural style' (Kumar 2014-2015. 84).

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