



Unraveled Insights Behind The Kazhugumalai Jain Beds

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Abstract

This research explores the rock-cut heritage of Kazhugumalai, situated in the Thoothukudi district of Tamil Nadu, as a definitive archaeological and epigraphical record of early medieval Jainism. Renowned as the "Ellora of the South" for its monolithic Hindu Vettuvan Koil, Kazhugumalai simultaneously serves as the largest repository of Jain inscriptions and sculptures in far south India. This study examines the iconographic program of over 150 bas-relief Tirthankara figures, analyzing their stylistic evolution under the patronage of the early Pandyas. Centrally, the paper focuses on the collection of nearly 102 Vatteluthu inscriptions that document a sophisticated monastic network. Unlike royal land-grant charters, these "votive labels" serve as primary evidence for an "open-air university," detailing pedagogical lineages between monk-teachers (*kuravadigal*) and students (*manakki*). These records reveal a significant socio-religious phenomenon: the high status of female ascetics (*kurattigal*), who are recorded as both esteemed scholars and independent donors. By synthesizing archaeological evidence from primary works by C. Sivaramamurti and P.B. Desai, this research argues that Kazhugumalai was not merely a site of isolated penance but a thriving center of Jain theology and religious syncretism that interconnected major southern Jain hubs like Kottar and Chitharal. The findings underscore the enduring legacy of the Jain community within the broader cultural and architectural landscape of the Tamil country during the 8th and 9th centuries C.E.

Key Words: Kazhugumalai – Jaina Abode – Thirthankaras – Vettuvan Kovil – Sculptures

Kazhugumalai Jain Beds – A Jaina spiritual abode

Kazhugumalai or Kazhugumalai is a tiny panchayat town situated in Thoothukudi district of Tamil Nadu state.¹ Thoothukudi is once a famous city in Pandya Kingdom, one of the three major kingdoms of ancient Tamilagam, was historically a part of its pearl-fishery coast.² In Kazhugumalai region of Thoothukudi district, there is a rock-cut Jaina-abode,³ that was constructed during the period of Parantaka Nedunjadaiyan, also known as Varaguna Pandya I, one of the prominent Pandya Kings who belongs to 8th century CE.⁴

The term Kazhugumalai means 'Vulture Peak' in Tamil language. The highlighted structure of Kazhugumalai Jaina Abode is its rock cut structure, carved out of a single rock, showcasing the eminence of Pandya architectural proficiency. This rock cut temple is named as Vettuvan Kovil, also known as Sculpture's Paradise, is an uncompleted monolithic cave temple, belongs to the period of 8th century Pandyas, is standing still to exhibit the iconographic richness of the ancient Tamil art and architecture.⁵

Kazhugumalai is one of the oldest Jain relics of India, dated back to 8th century CE.⁶ The unfinished construction of Kazhugumalai is said to be completed by the late 1st millennium and the Jains thrived their until 14th century CE.⁷ Including Kazhugumalai, a lot of south Indian Jain relics and beds were all of Dhigambaras, that indicated the flourished Dhigambara past in the ancient Tamil Country. Paul Dundas, A Jain scholar remarks in his work 'The Jains', that Kazhugumalai was once a Buddhist site, later reused by the Jains and Hindus, However, there was no archaeological evidence to strengthen his statement.

The structure of Kazugumalai Vettuvan Kovil is carved out of a massive 7.5 meter of solid rock, that was marked down into rectangular shape and chipped downwards from the top. The temple was carved from the top, so that, the temple could be placed in its middle in a single piece of rock. In a close inspection, it is visible that only the top portion of temple is completely carved, indicates and clarifies that the temple might be carved from the top to bottom which is a antithetical to the traditional construction method indigenous architecture of bottom first.⁸

The Ellora of South – Kazhugumalai, can be seen along with the Kailasantha Temple at Ellora for its architectural wonder.⁹ In this shrine, there is a boulder filled with hand carved statues of Jain Thirthankaras, almost 150 rock cut bas-relief sculptures of Jains, that dated back to 8th and 9th century C.E.¹⁰ These sculptures all included the inscriptions that carrying the names of its donors and sculpturers, including monk-teachers, monk-students, and other artists including dancers and musicians who travelled from other prominent Jain canters of that age such as Kottar and Thiruchaaranathumalai (Chitharaal) to carve these sculptures.¹¹ These inscriptions portrays the societal norms of such period that provided equal

opportunities for women, by mentioning the Female Jain monks also called as Kurathikal or Pattaraikal, who possessed significant spiritual status, and educational roles among that period's society.¹²

These inscriptions prove that kazhugumalai Jain beds was not just a shrine but a major academic centre of Jain Theological study that thrived for over three centuries in that locality.¹³ It is noticeable that significant number of Kazhugumalai inscriptions mentions about Female mendicants, that is monk-students, also called as Kurathigal. The most noticed teacher among them was Tirtha-Pattara.¹⁴

While closely studying these spiritual inscriptions, it is noticeable that the placement of these sculptures along with the sculpturer's details is not quite simple, rather than a complex spiritual legacy that created a Sacred geography. The inscriptions below each Thirthankara weren't just names, but, was a path to claim a spiritual connection with their teachers by students, henceforth created a permanent record of their proficiency in Jain doctrine.¹⁵

The Jain sculptures at Kazhugumalai are categorized as bas-reliefs, carved directly into the granite boulders. The gallery consists of approximately 150 figures arranged in three distinct rows, representing the *Trikala Caturvimsati*—the twenty-four Tirthankaras of the past, present, and future ages.¹⁶

Architecturally, the figures follow a rigorous iconographic program. Most Tirthankaras are depicted in the *Ardhapariyankasana* (seated) pose on a lion pedestal (*simhasana*), adorned with a triple umbrella (*chhatra*) and the shade of an Ashoka tree.¹⁷ Notable among these is the relief of Parshvanatha, identified by the five-headed hooded serpent (*Dharanendra*) sheltering his head. Adjacent to the Jinas are their attendant spirits, the *Yakshas* and *Yakshis*.¹⁸ The sculpture of Yakshi Ambika is particularly celebrated for its naturalism, showing her with her children and a lion, a testament to the "high artistic quality" and "superb sculpting" of the Pandyan era artisans.¹⁹

The significance of Kazhugumalai is amplified by its label inscriptions in the **Vatteluthu** script. Unlike royal charters documenting land grants, these are "votive inscriptions" that serve as a social record of the Jain community. These records identify the site as **Ilanechuram** or **Araimalai** and specify the primary deity as **Araimalai Alwar**.²⁰

A central theme of these inscriptions is the documentation of pedagogical lineages. The labels often state that a particular image was commissioned by a student in honor of their teacher.²¹ For instance, inscriptions mention names such as **Vimazha Chandra Kuravadigal** and **Utthananthi Kuravadigal**, monk-teachers who traveled from centers like **Kottar** and **Thiruchaaranthumalai** (Chitharal).²² Furthermore, the records highlight the prominent role of women in the Jain order. Approximately twenty percent of the inscriptions mention female ascetics, known as **Kurattigal**, who were both donors of statues and respected teachers with their own circles of disciples.²³

In conclusion, the rock-cut monuments of Kazhugumalai represent a pinnacle of early Pandyan artistic achievement and a unique cultural crossroads in medieval South India. While the Vettuvan Koil stands as a brilliant architectural experiment in monolithic design—earning it the rightful comparison to the Kailasanatha at Ellora—it is the Jain complex on the same hill that offers the most intimate glimpse into the social fabric of the era. The vast gallery of Tirthankara sculptures, characterized by their high naturalism and strict adherence to Jina iconography, reflects a community that translated deep spiritual devotion into permanent artistic form.

However, the true significance of Kazhugumalai lies in its epigraphical richness. The Vatteluthu inscriptions serve as a primary social ledger, documenting a world where religious identity was forged through education and lineage rather than purely royal decree. As documented by C. Sivaramamurti (1961, 27-31) and P.B. Desai (1957, 66-68), the site was a central node in a vast network of Jain scholarship that connected distant centers across the Tamil country. The explicit naming of teachers like Gunasagara Bhattara and their disciples from as far as Kottar proves that Kazhugumalai was an active, mobile institution of higher learning.

Perhaps the most revolutionary aspect of this site is the visibility of women in its records. The presence of female *kurattigal* as independent scholars and donors challenges simplified narratives of medieval religious history, suggesting a society that recognized intellectual and spiritual proficiency regardless of gender. Ultimately, Kazhugumalai stands as a testament to religious tolerance and the resilience of the Jain faith. It is not merely a collection of relics but a living record of a community that sought to etch its wisdom, its teachers, and its identity into the very bones of the earth, ensuring that their contribution to the Tamil heritage would remain indelible for over a millennium.

End Notes

¹ Shrines. (2024, 14 3). *Holy Shrines*. Retrieved from holyshrines.in: <https://holyshrines.in/kalugumalai-jain-beds-kalugumalai/>

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⁴ Ya Class. *Revival of Pandya Kingdom (A.D 600-920)*. Retrieved from yaiclass.in: https://www.yaiclass.in/p/social-science/class-7/emergence-of-new-kingdoms-in-south-india-later-cholas-and-pandyas-6961/the-later-pandyas-8362/re-93ee6c73-7bcd-4df9-ac79-3b696bedfd8#:~:text=After%20Arikesari%2C%20the%20greatest%20ruler,wiki/File:Twin_fish



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- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Op.cit. EIACP. *Kazhugumalai Caves.*
- ⁹ **Sivaramamurti, C.** *Kalugumalai and Early Pandyan Rock-cut Shrines.* Bombay : Heritage India Series, N.M. Tripathi Private Ltd, 1961. p. 18.
- ¹⁰ Ibid. pp. 27-31.
- ¹¹ Ibid. pp. 27-28.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ **Desai, P. B.** *Jainism in South India and Some Jain Epigraphs.* Delhi : Gulabchand Hirachand Doshi, 1957. pp. 66-68.
- ¹⁴ Ibid. p. 28.
- ¹⁵ **Owen, Lisa N.** *Demarcating Sacred Space: The Jina Images at Kalugumalai.* Vol.6, no.4 : International Journal of Jaina Studies, 2010.
- ¹⁶ Op.cit. **Sivaramamurti, C.** *Kalugumalai and Early Pandyan Rock-cut Shrines.* p.27.
- ¹⁷ Ibid. p.28.
- ¹⁸ Ibid. p.29.
- ¹⁹ Ibid. pp.30-31.
- ²⁰ Op.cit. **Desai, P. B.** *Jainism in South India and Some Jain Epigraphs.* p.66.
- ²¹ Ibid. p.67.
- ²² Ibid. p. 67. & Op.cit. **Sivaramamurti, C.** p.28.
- ²³ Ibid. p. 68.