

Revisiting Mandagapattu: A Historical Study of An Early Pallava Cave Temple

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Abstract

The Mandagapattu cave temple occupies an important position in the history of early Pallava architecture. Situated in present-day Villupuram district of Tamil Nadu, the monument is associated with Mahendravarman I of the early seventh century CE. Its historical significance is enhanced by the survival of a Sanskrit inscription in Grantha characters, which records the creation of a shrine associated with Brahma, Isvara and Vishnu without the use of brick, timber, metal or mortar. The inscription provides important evidence concerning royal patronage, religious dedication and constructional practice during the Pallava period. This study examines the historical background, inscriptional evidence, architectural arrangement and religious significance of Mandagapattu. It also places the monument within the wider development of the rock-cut caves associated with Mahendravarman I. Published epigraphical and archaeological studies form the principal sources, while recent student architectural documentation is used only as supplementary evidence for the surviving plan and measurements of the cave. Particular attention is given to distinguishing the information directly established by the inscription from interpretations proposed by later scholars. The study argues that Mandagapattu represents an important phase in the development of Pallava rock-cut architecture. Its historical importance rests upon the close relationship between royal patronage, religious dedication, constructional practice and surviving architecture rather than upon an unquestionable claim that it was the earliest rock-cut temple in South India.

Keywords: Mandagapattu; Mahendravarman I; Pallavas; Rock-Cut Architecture; Vichitrachitta; Epigraphy.

1. Introduction

The history of South Indian temple architecture reveals important developments in religious institutions, artistic traditions and constructional practices. Temples were not merely places of worship but were also expressions of political authority, religious patronage and cultural activity. Their architectural forms developed through the use of different techniques and materials, including brick,

timber, stone and excavation into living rock. Among the ruling dynasties of early medieval South India, the Pallavas made an important contribution to temple architecture. Their surviving monuments include rock-cut caves, monolithic monuments and structural temples. These forms provide evidence for different stages of experimentation in religious architecture under Pallava patronage. The Mandagapattu cave temple is particularly valuable because its architecture survives together with an inscription associated with its royal patronage. The record identifies a ruler styled Vichitrachitta and describes the creation of a shrine associated with Brahma, Isvara and Vishnu without brick, timber, metal or mortar.¹ The monument therefore combines documentary and material evidence in an unusual manner.

The historical importance of Mandagapattu, however, should be approached carefully. Earlier scholarship sometimes discussed it in terms of architectural priority and the beginning of rock-cut temple construction in the Tamil region. Such interpretations should be distinguished from what the inscription itself establishes. The inscription records the patron, religious dedication and constructional character of the shrine; it does not explicitly describe the monument as the first rock-cut temple of South India. The present study examines Mandagapattu through its historical setting, inscription, architecture and religious significance. It also considers the cave in relation to other monuments associated with Mahendravarman I. The purpose is to understand Mandagapattu as an important early Pallava monument without extending the surviving evidence beyond what it can reasonably support.

Historical Background of the Pallavas

The Pallavas emerged as an important political power in southern India and established Kanchipuram as a major centre of their authority. Their rule had an important influence upon the political and cultural history of the northern Tamil region. Pallava patronage contributed to developments in religion, literature, sculpture, epigraphy and architecture. The period beginning with Simhavishnu and continuing under his successor Mahendravarman I marked an important stage in the history of the dynasty. Mahendravarman I belonged to the early seventh century CE and is particularly significant for the study of Pallava architectural history. R. Gopalan discusses the political rise of the dynasty under Simhavishnu and the subsequent reign of Mahendravarman I as an important phase of Pallava ascendancy.²

The architectural achievements of the Pallavas were not confined to a single form. Rock-cut caves were followed by further experimentation in monolithic and structural architecture. A. H. Longhurst's classification of Pallava architecture distinguished an early phase associated with Mahendravarman and rock-cut excavation from subsequent architectural developments.³ Such classifications provide a useful framework, although Pallava architectural development should not be interpreted as a rigid sequence in which one technique immediately replaced another. Different forms of building could coexist, and the surviving monuments represent only part of the architectural activity of the period. Within this wider history, the rock-cut monuments associated with Mahendravarman I are especially important. Mandagapattu occupies a distinctive position among them because its inscription directly connects royal patronage, religious dedication and the method of construction.

Mahendravarman I and Rock-Cut Architecture

Mahendravarman I was one of the important rulers of the Pallava dynasty. In addition to his political role, his reign is associated with literary and architectural activities. Several rock-cut shrines have been attributed to his period on the basis of inscriptions, royal titles and architectural characteristics. The group commonly associated with the Mahendra phase includes Mandagapattu, Pallavaram, Mamandur, Mahendravadi, Dalavanur, Siyamangalam and Tiruchirappalli. These monuments do not reproduce a single plan. Nevertheless, similarities in pillars, excavated halls, shrine arrangements and sculptural treatment have enabled historians of architecture to examine them as a related group.

K. R. Srinivasan made an important contribution to the classification and study of these Pallava cave temples. His examination of the monuments brought together inscriptional and architectural evidence and placed Mandagapattu within the early phase of Pallava rock-cut architecture.⁴ One characteristic feature associated with the Mahendra style is the treatment of pillars, with square portions at the upper and lower ends and an octagonal middle section. Relatively restrained decoration, pillared halls, shrine cells cut into the rear rock and guardian figures also occur at several sites.

Tamil scholarship likewise recognizes the architectural activity of Mahendravarman I. Mayilai Seeni Venkatasami discusses Mandagapattu in his study of Mahendravarman and places it among the cave temples associated with the ruler.⁵ The differences between these monuments are as significant as their similarities. The number of cells, arrangement of halls, treatment of façades and religious dedications vary from site to site. The surviving caves therefore indicate architectural experimentation rather than the mechanical repetition of a fixed plan.

Location and Historical Setting of Mandagapattu

Mandagapattu is situated in present-day Villupuram district of Tamil Nadu. Earlier epigraphical publications identified the village within Villupuram Taluk of the former South Arcot District. The difference reflects changes in administrative geography rather than a difference in the location of the monument. T. A. Gopinatha Rao described the shrine as an excavation in a hill near Mandagapattu and drew attention to the inscription associated with the monument.⁶ The location is significant because the available rock itself determined the form of the cave.

Unlike a structural temple constructed by assembling separate building materials, Mandagapattu was produced through excavation. Rock was removed to create the interior spaces while selected portions were retained to form pillars, pilasters, walls and other architectural components. The monument therefore represents a subtractive method of construction. The architectural form was obtained not by placing one building element upon another but by transforming the natural rock into an artificial sacred space. The inscription was copied in 1905 by the staff of the Madras Epigraphist's office. Its later publication and interpretation by T. A. Gopinatha Rao provided an important basis for identifying the patron and understanding the historical significance of the monument.⁷

The Mandagapattu Inscription

The inscription is the most important documentary source for the historical study of Mandagapattu. T. A. Gopinatha Rao published the record as the “Mandagappattu Inscription of Vichitra-Chitta” in Volume XVII of *Epigraphia Indica*. He described it as a Sanskrit verse engraved in four lines in Grantha characters and assigned the palaeography to the first half of the seventh century CE. He also drew attention to damaged portions of the record.⁸

The inscription may be represented in transliteration as:

*Etad anisṭakam adrumam aloham asudham vichitrachittena nirmāpitam nrpeṇa
Brahmeśvaraviṣṇulakṣhitāyatanam.*

In its essential sense, the record states that King Vichitrachitta caused a shrine associated with Brahma, Isvara and Vishnu to be made without brick, timber, metal or mortar.

Several historically important points emerge from the record.

- First, the ruler is identified by the title Vichitrachitta. Rao connected this royal biruda with Mahendravarman I through comparison with other Pallava inscriptional evidence. The identification provides an epigraphical basis for associating Mandagapattu with Mahendravarman I rather than relying solely upon architectural style.⁹
- Second, Brahma, Isvara and Vishnu are explicitly named. The religious association of the monument is therefore supported directly by inscriptional evidence.
- Third, the inscription specifically refers to the absence of brick, timber, metal and mortar. The statement is unusual because it draws attention not merely to the religious foundation but also to the technique by which the monument was created.

Rao interpreted the reference to these materials as evidence that such materials had been familiar in earlier temple construction.¹⁰ The interpretation is reasonable insofar as the inscription assumes that the named materials were recognizable components of construction. Nevertheless, detailed reconstruction of earlier temples from this single statement would go beyond the evidence supplied by the inscription. A similar distinction is necessary concerning claims of architectural priority. The inscription does not state that Mandagapattu was the first rock-cut temple in southern India. Such a conclusion belongs to later scholarly interpretation. The strongest historical significance of the inscription is therefore more precise. It documents a royal religious foundation whose patron deliberately commemorated the fact that its construction did not depend upon brick, timber, metal or mortar.

Architectural Features of the Cave Temple

Mandagapattu represents a comparatively restrained form of early Pallava cave architecture. The façade is principally formed by two pillars and two pilasters. Recessed spaces at the ends accommodate dvarapalas. Behind the façade, the excavated interior consists of hall spaces leading towards three shrine cells cut into the rear portion of the rock. Srinivasan's study of the Pallava caves identifies these features as part of the architectural character of Mandagapattu and places the monument within the early Mahendra phase.¹¹ The pillars are particularly useful for stylistic study. Their lower and upper portions

are square, while the intermediate portion is octagonal. The pilasters and comparatively simple corbels contribute to the restrained appearance of the façade. Longhurst similarly identified relatively simple pillar and corbel forms as characteristic elements in the early phase of Pallava architecture.¹²

The three cells at the rear of the cave constitute another important feature. Their number naturally invites comparison with the three deities named in the inscription. Rao discussed the rear niches in relation to Brahma, Isvara and Vishnu.¹³ However, caution is necessary when attempting to assign each surviving cell to an individual deity, since the original cult images do not survive securely enough to establish such an arrangement independently. The dvarapalas form part of the architectural and sculptural composition of the monument. Their position emphasizes the sacred character of the excavated space and demonstrates that sculpture was integrated into the architecture rather than added merely as independent decoration.

Recent architectural documentation prepared by students of the School of Architecture and Interior Design, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, provides supplementary measured drawings, elevations, sections and photographic documentation of the surviving monument.¹⁴ Since this is unpublished student documentation rather than an official archaeological survey, its measurements are used here only as approximate supplementary data.

Table 1

Selected Architectural Measurements of the Mandagapattu Cave Temple

S. No.	Architectural Feature	Approximate Measurement
1	Width of cave front	10.92 m
2	Depth of excavation	7.81 m
3	Depth of <i>mukha-mandapa</i>	1.72 m
4	Depth of <i>ardha-mandapa</i>	1.96 m
5	Clear width of halls	7.00 m
6	Free-standing pillars	Two per hall
7	Pillar section	Approx. 0.66 m square
8	Pillar height	Approx. 3.00 m
9	Number of shrine cells	Three
10	Width of each shrine cell	Approx. 1.41 m

Source: Hitesh Patel, Abirami Chandrasekar, Roshni Rajarajan R. A., and Hemya Varman, “Mandagapattu Cave Temple: Heritage Documentation” (unpublished student architectural

documentation, School of Architecture and Interior Design, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, n.d.), measured drawings, pp. 7–9.

The measurements help to demonstrate the compact character of the cave. The successive interior spaces lead towards the three rear cells, while the pillars organize the excavated space. The plan is therefore relatively simple but carefully arranged. The architectural simplicity of Mandagapattu should not be interpreted as technical simplicity. Rock-cut construction required craftsmen to remove material while preserving the portions intended to function as pillars, walls and other architectural elements. Unlike a separately prepared structural member, an incorrectly cut portion of the living rock could not simply be replaced. Mandagapattu is therefore important not because of architectural size or elaborate ornamentation but because of the relationship between technique, plan, sculpture and inscription.

Religious and Cultural Significance

The religious character of Mandagapattu is established principally through its inscription. The record explicitly names Brahma, Isvara and Vishnu. The threefold dedication is therefore not merely an inference based upon the architectural plan. It is supported by contemporary epigraphical evidence. The presence of three rear shrine cells provides an architectural context for this dedication. Srinivasan drew attention to the religious character of Mandagapattu while examining the monument within the broader group of Pallava cave temples.¹⁵

Nevertheless, the surviving evidence should not be extended beyond what it establishes. The existence of three cells does not by itself securely establish which individual deity occupied each cell. Similarly, the naming of three deities should not automatically be transformed into a broad claim that the inscription proves a formal Pallava policy of “religious tolerance.” What the evidence demonstrates more securely is that a royal foundation associated with Mahendravarman I explicitly named Brahma, Isvara and Vishnu together.

The monument also illustrates the close relationship between political authority and religious architecture. The king is remembered through his *biruda*, while the religious purpose of the foundation is expressed through the named deities. Architecture, religion and royal patronage are therefore brought together within a single monument. This combination contributes significantly to the historical value of Mandagapattu. The monument is not merely an architectural specimen; it is also evidence for the manner in which royal authority could be expressed through the creation of sacred space.

Mandagapattu in the Development of Pallava Temple Architecture

The significance of Mandagapattu becomes clearer when the monument is examined in relation to other caves associated with Mahendravarman I. Pallavaram, Mamandur, Mahendravadi, Dalavanur, Siyamangalam and Tiruchirappalli belong to the wider architectural context within which the Mahendra phase has been studied. These caves share a vocabulary of excavated halls, pillars, pilasters, shrine chambers and, in several cases, guardian sculptures. At the same time, differences in plan and religious association demonstrate that they were not simply copies of one another. Mahendravadi provides an important example of Vaishnava association within the Mahendra group. Mamandur illustrates further experimentation with excavated spaces, while Dalavanur demonstrates variations in architectural

treatment. The rock-cut monument at Tiruchirappalli combines architecture, sculpture and inscriptional evidence within another important Pallava context. Srinivasan's study of Pallava architecture demonstrates the value of comparing these monuments as related but individually distinct experiments.¹⁶ Mandagapattu should therefore not be regarded as a rigid prototype mechanically repeated at every subsequent site.

The reference to brick, timber, metal and mortar gives Mandagapattu a particular place within this wider architectural development. The inscription demonstrates that the constructional character of the shrine itself was considered significant enough to be recorded. This has often encouraged historians to discuss Mandagapattu in terms of a transition to stone. The expression is useful only when carefully defined. Mandagapattu is not a structural stone temple built by assembling dressed blocks. It is a rock-cut monument created through excavation of a natural rock formation. Later Pallava structural temples employed a different constructional method. The significance of Mandagapattu therefore lies in the development of durable monumental religious architecture through excavation rather than in the introduction of structural stone construction itself. The monument represents an important stage in Pallava architectural experimentation, while later developments would explore monolithic and structural forms on a much larger scale.

Conclusion

Mandagapattu occupies an important position in the history of Pallava temple architecture. Associated with Mahendravarman I, the monument provides valuable evidence for the development of rock-cut religious architecture during the early seventh century CE. Its significance lies particularly in the close relationship between its surviving architecture and inscription, which identifies the ruler as Vichitrachitta, records a dedication to Brahma, Isvara and Vishnu, and emphasizes construction without brick, timber, metal or mortar. Architecturally, its pillared façade, excavated halls, *dvarapalas* and three rear shrine cells reflect the characteristics of the early Mahendra phase. Comparison with other caves associated with Mahendravarman I further shows that Pallava rock-cut architecture developed through related but varied experiments. Thus, the importance of Mandagapattu rests not on an absolute claim of chronological priority, but on its combined inscriptional and architectural evidence for understanding Pallava royal patronage, religious practice and architectural development.

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