

## RESEARCH PAPER

# (Pre) Iron Age Burials of Thandikudi, Tamil Nadu

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Thandikudi, one of the major villages in the Lower Palani Hills occupies a unique position as this village was well connected by major trade routes. The archaeological vestiges unearthed here have clearly attested that it was continuously occupied since pre-Iron Age times. The occurrence of Dolmens, Cists, Cairn-circles and Urns points out to the convergence of different cultural traits.

The available data accumulated through the explorations and excavations gives an idea in drawing of cultural process of Palani hills, particularly of Thandikudi, which played an active role in trade during the medieval period as attested by trade guild inscriptions. The present study was also conducted to have an idea about the architectural achievement in stone working, constructional methods, engineering skills and technological perfection of the Iron Age builders.

## Introduction

Thandikudi (10°18'25"N; 77°38'40"E), one of the major villages on lower Palani hills is situated about 44 km north-east of Vatalakundu in Kodaikanal taluka of Dindugal district, Tamil Nadu. It lies at the height of 1300 m above MSL and surrounded on four sides by two hills namely Kathavumalai and Arunganalmalai. All the down streams originating from the surrounding hills flows as a small rivulet namely Periyar *Odai* ('*Odai*' means rivulet) to the south of this village. This *Odai* joins with the major river Marudanati near Chinnakudalankadu.

This village is well connected by the major traditional trade routes. One of the trade routes connects Musiri on the West Coast and Madurai in the hinterland passes through Pollachi, Palani, Dindugal and Madurai. The villages Palamalai, Perumalmalai, Machchur, Pannaikadu, Thandikudi and Kadavumalai are situated along this ancient trade route.

The previous explorations by Father Anglade (1928: 22–78) and the present explorations (**Fig. 1**) by the authors (Kumaran and Saranya 2009: 96–101, Kumaran *et.al.*, 2012: 96–101) and excavations by Rajan (2005: 49–65, 2008: 149–176) have revealed the sepulchral monuments of the Thandikudi into 4 types.

- (i) Dolmens
- (ii) Cists
- (iii) Urns
- (iv) Cairn-circles.

## Dolmens

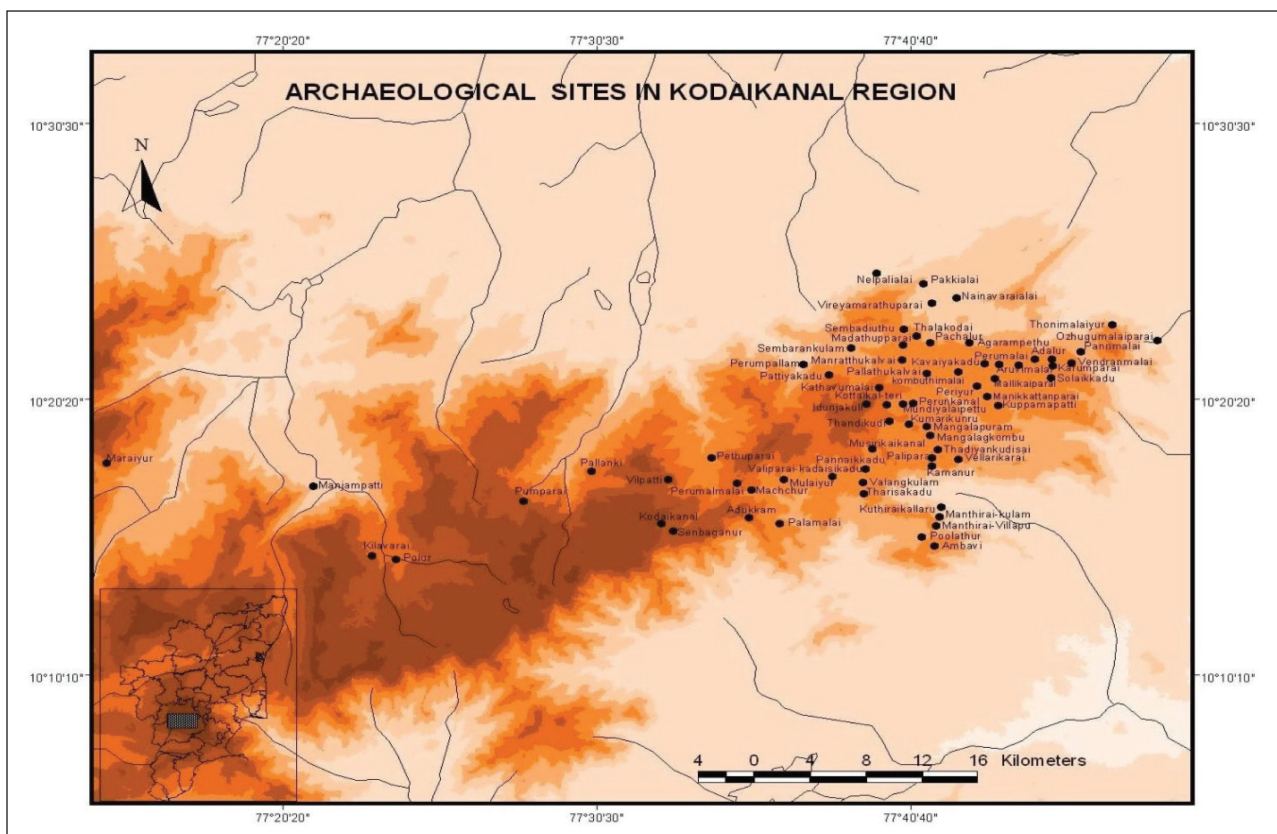
Generally, a dolmen is a box like chamber (**Fig. 2**), normally formed of six slabs, one lying horizontally, but directly on the bed rock serving as a floor slab. Around this base, the slabs stand directly on the bare rock and were placed in clockwise or anti clockwise direction with uneven surfaces on the top, which in turns supports the capstone placed above. Normally a capstone covers single dolmen, but at Thandikudi, a capstone covers two adjacent dolmens.

The groups of dolmens in eight complexes locally known as *Pettu* (which refers 'to die') were found on the way to Murugan temple, when approached through Regional Coffee Research Station (RCRS). All the complexes were more or less disturbed. The dolmens are raised on the slopes of the rocky surface and were in groups, which normally consists of two rows. The gaps between the chambers and the enclosure walls were tightly packed with cairn stones upto the level of the capstone to prevent any outward tilting of the orthostats. The inward tilt is prevented by the interlocking system of the chamber slabs.

The orientations of the dolmens are multifarious. Each complex was enclosed by an enclosure wall of either rectangular or circular one. These walls are raised of dressed stones of regular courses of no fixed sizes, but adjusted without any trace of binding medium. In the rectangular walls, the flat rectangular or square stones were used and in the case of circular, triangular stones were used with the outer or broader edges of the blocks were trimmed in a semi-circular form to build perfect walls. This is one of the special features of the dolmens of Palani hills. In one of the complex the dolmens were bifurcated into two generally at the narrow end usually by a flat rectangular stone.

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**Figure 1:** Map showing Important Archaeological Sites in Kodaikanal Region.



**Figure 2:** General view of Dolmen, Thandikudi, Tamil Nadu.

**Cists**

Generally, a pit was dug into the natural soil to a depth of nearly 2 m. At first, one or two floor slabs were placed one above the other on the floor. The orthostats were placed around the ground slab, which follows clockwise, anti clockwise or swastika pattern. The eastern orthostat had invariably a round porthole at the centre. The whole complex is then covered with a massive capstone. The present excavations have revealed 3 types of cists.

- i. Simple cist with passage.
- ii. Cist with multiple transept
- iii. Cist with double chambers.

**i) Simple Cist with Passage**

A pit was dug and the slabs were placed one above the other on the floor. First, the western orthostat was lowered and placed against the western wall of the pit. Subsequently, the southern, northern and eastern orthostats were placed. All these slabs were perfectly, placed around the floor slab. The eastern orthostat has a trapezium shaped porthole at the centre. This slab is broken at the porthole level, likewise, the eastern and of the northern orthostat is also broken. This would have happened at the time of placing or dragging the capstone. As the broken pieces have fallen inside the chamber, it is presumed that they would have been dragged from the east.

The cist does not follow any clockwise, anti-clock wise or swastika pattern. For instance, the western slab rests on the southern and northern slabs. The northern slab stands independently without any support. However, all the orthostats stand erect due to the thrust of the other slabs. The uneven edges of the orthostats were cleverly wedged with small slabs. In order to prevent the outward tilt, buttress walls were constructed between the orthostat and the pit wall from the base to the top. The upper edges synchronize with the level of the ground. This helped to place the massive capstone over the cist by dragging it from a distance. This capstone is irregular in shape and did not bear any traces of chisel marks except for crude hammer dressing. After placing the huge capstone perfectly over the cist, undressed boulders of irregular sizes were placed at the ground level around the cist to form a circle (Fig. 3).



**Figure 3:** Simple cist with Passage, Thandikudi, Tamil Nadu.

#### Orientation

The orientation of the cist is east-west and is almost square in plan. A trapezium shaped porthole on the eastern slab is closed on its outer side with a rectangular slab placed inside the passage. However, the southern part of the porthole is left uncovered and to close this, another small slab is placed adjacent to the earlier covering stone. In front of the chamber, a rectangular passage is constructed.

#### Passage

The passage is built of 3 slabs in front of the eastern side of chamber. They are placed against each other and forms like a square box. Interestingly, for the first time in Tamil Nadu, a semicircular floor slab is noticed inside the passage placed in front of the porthole. The purposeful dressing of this semicircular slab clearly indicates its ritual value. The construction clearly suggests that the passage was constructed after the chamber.

#### Grave Goods

All the grave goods seem to have been placed directly on the floor slab of the cist, as no evidence of any ritual either outside of the cist or in the passage was noted. In total, 41 pots of different wares and shapes were placed in association with four Urns. These Urns rests on the four corners of the chamber are the main grave goods. All the other pots are either placed below or around these Urns. The placement of the various grave goods like bowls, basins, plates, four legged jars, small pots, rings stand, big

sized pots, lids, storage jars, swords, daggers, L shaped objects and fish hook clearly suggest that they started placing the grave goods from the west.

#### ii) Cist with Multiple Transepts

(a) Excavation in one of the cist situated 200 m east from the above mentioned cist (**Fig. 3**) on the left side of Thandikudi-Pannaikadu main road has revealed multiple transepts. After removal of capstone, a perfect cist rectangular in shape with a passage on the east was noticed. It is broad at the base owing to the slanting position of the orthostats. This chamber is bifurcated into two by erecting a transept slab almost in the centre with a circular porthole connecting both the chambers. The northern chamber is further bifurcated into one more chamber on its north-west corner by a small rectangular slab.

A passage was constructed against the porthole by placing 3 slabs. The floor level was filled with stone blocks mixed with soil. Crushed black-and-red ware sherds along with two black slipped stands were noticed. This disturbed cist has yielded 8 carnelian beads, diminutive iron pieces, black-and-red ware plates and few black slipped pot sherds.

(b) This cist was located in a cultivated field locally called Bommai-kadu about two km south of Thandikudi and 33.70m east of the main road leading to Pannaikadu. The river Marudanadi flows 250m away from the site. This disturbed cist is one of the biggest and architecturally one of the best burial complexes so far excavated in this region (**Fig. 4**).

After removal of the earth around the capstone, a perfect cist and a passage on the east were exposed. The cist is divided lengthwise by transept slab resulting in a northern and southern chamber. The northern chamber is further sub-divided into one more chamber by a slab on the west. The southern chamber would have been divided into one or two chambers, but as the slab was subsequently disturbed this could not be verified. Totally, 3 chambers and 3 circular portholes were noted and based



**Figure 4:** Cist with Multiple transepts, Thandikudi, Tamil Nadu.

on the construction of the cist; it appears that a transept slab was placed in an east-west orientation.

Although the chamber was vandalized, 296 etched button shaped carnelian beads and 48 quartz beads of different dimensions have been collected from different locations of the floor level. Besides, spacer bead of carnelian and soapstone, iron arrow-heads, a knife, black-and-red ware bowls, lids, dishes, black slipped ring stands and lids and a few bone pieces were recovered along with a few russet coated sherds and a tiny gold piece.

**iii) Cist with Double Chambers**

This cist (Fig. 5) was devoid of any cairn circles and the rectangular chambers were laid side by side with trapezium shaped porthole with a passage – but both the chambers are not interconnected. This cist yielded more than 1000 beads of quartz, agate, carnelian and steatite; out of these nearly 850 were steatite micro beads.

**Urns**

The leveling of the ground for the banana and orange plantations led to the accidental discovery of the pear-shaped Urns, which is around 1m to 1.25m in height (Fig. 6) and were invariably covered with sand and gravel. These urns are ill-fired, very coarse grained and wheel turned.



**Figure 5:** Cist with Double chambers, Thandikudi, Tamil Nadu.



**Figure 6:** Urns from Senbaganur Museum, Tamil Nadu.

No grave goods were recovered, but some sherds of red ware, black-and-red ware and black ware were collected.

**Cairn-Circles (Pit Burials)**

The excavation on the left side of the Murugan temple reveals cairn circles more or less oval or ellipsoid in shape (Fig. 7). The shape and sizes of the cairn stones are not uniform. These circles are extremely rich in ceramics and are devoid of charcoal, ashes or bone pieces and metal objects. The ceramic repertoire comprises of varieties of red ware, black ware, black slipped ware, black on red ware, black-and-red ware and Cut Ware. These potteries were kept one above the other in three rows at two different levels and of east west orientation.

**Discussion**

The explorations and excavations conducted at Thandikudi suggest that there is a wide diversity of burial customs but the other factors give the whole series a general uniformity. Grave goods were placed both inside and outside the graves. In cairn burials they were in a row but in the cist, the grave goods were placed at different levels – for example on the top, opposite to the porthole in the passage, inside the chamber against the porthole and at the base. The iron and copper objects found during the previous and present exploration and excavation testify to the diffusion of a fairly knit group of iron and copper workers.

The orthostats were placed around the floor-slab and they stand erect due to the thrust of the other slabs



**Figure 7:** Carin circle, Thandikudi, Tamil Nadu.



**Figure 8:** Beads, Thandikudi, Tamil Nadu.



**Figure 9:** Trade guild Inscription, Thandikudi, Tamil Nadu.

from inner side and packed cairn stones for the outer sides for dolmens and rarely buttress wall was raised in the case of cists. Although the capstones bear only the crude hammer dressing, the finished orthostats and stones in the enclosure wall clearly indicates their mastery over the stone technique and iron. This is further attested by the found of chisel in one of the dolmens and other iron implements in the cists. Apart from the ceramics, hundreds of beads and pendants of carnelian (both plain and etched), quartz, steatite, soapstone, agate (**Fig. 8**) were also discovered. Most of the shapes and sizes were akin to the Harappan beads (Kumaran et.al 2009: 279–289).

The cist burials of Thandikudi and the cist burials at Nattukapalayam near Pollachi and Sulur in Palladam taluk of Coimbatore district are identical both in terms of construction and contents (Rajan 1996). It is interesting to note that for the first time in Tamil Nadu; a semicircular floor slab (*chandra-sila*) measuring 1m is noticed inside the passage placed in front of the porthole. The purposeful dressing of this slab clearly suggests that it has some ritual value.

At last the archaeological materials unearthed at Thandikudi clearly indicate that this village was continuously occupied since Pre-Iron Age times till date which was attested by the Medieval trade guild inscriptions (**Fig. 9**) and late Medieval inscribed and un-scribed

memorial stones (Kumaran and Saranya 2012: 143–150) found here.

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