

Original Research Article

Archaeological Excavation Sites in Theni District: A Study on Iron Age and Early Historic Antiquities in Theni District

Dr. S. Kasthuri

*Assistant Professor, PG & Research Centre of History, Jayaraj Annapackiam College for Women (Autonomous)
Periyakulam, Theni dist. 625601 Tamil Nadu, India*

Corresponding author E-mail: asthurihis@annejac.ac.in

Received: 07 December, 2025 | Accepted: 02 January, 2026 | Published: 12 January, 2026

Abstract

The Theni district of Tamil Nadu occupies a significant position in understanding the cultural developments of South India during the Iron Age and Early Historic periods. Archaeological evidence from this region, particularly burial monuments and habitation remains, indicates sustained human occupation from prehistoric times onward. Although earlier discoveries were reported during the colonial period and later surveys by scholars of the Archaeological Survey of India and Tamil University, focused and systematic investigation of Theni district remained limited. The present study addresses this gap through intensive field exploration and documentation of Iron Age and Early Historic sites identified at Vaidhyanthapuram, Jangalpatti, Mallayagoundanpatti, Chatrapatti, Dharmapuri, and Lakshmipuram. Using descriptive and comparative archaeological methods, the paper analyses burial typology, associated material culture, pottery assemblages, cup-marks, and settlement indicators. The study situates these findings within the broader archaeological framework of Tamil Nadu and demonstrates the importance of Theni district in reconstructing early cultural trajectories of ancient Tamil society.

Keywords: Iron Age, Megalithic Burials, Early Historic Period, Theni District, Tamil Nadu Archaeology, Cup-marks, Pottery Traditions

Introduction

The Iron Age and Early Historic periods represent a transformative phase in the cultural history of Tamil Nadu, marked by the emergence of megalithic burial practices, the use of iron technology, the growth of settled life, and the beginnings of literacy and trade. Theni district, located at the foothills of the Western Ghats and intersected by the Vaigai River system, offers a favourable ecological setting that attracted early human communities. Despite its geographical importance, archaeological research in this region has largely remained fragmented.

Earlier scholars documented isolated burial monuments and artefacts while conducting surveys in connection with broader studies on South Indian megalithic traditions. However, these observations were not followed by an intensive exploration focused exclusively on Theni district. The present research aims to document newly identified Iron Age and Early Historic sites in Theni district and to analyse their cultural significance. Attention is given to burial forms, distribution patterns, raw material selection, pottery assemblages, and the relationship of these sites with similar cultural remains elsewhere in Tamil Nadu.

Archaeological Background of Theni District

The earliest archaeological evidence from Theni district came to notice during the late nineteenth century when infrastructural activities revealed burial remains and associated artefacts. Subsequent surveys by professional archaeologists during the mid-twentieth century identified several megalithic sites, including stone circles, cists, cairn circles, and urn burials. These discoveries confirmed that the region formed an integral part of the South Indian Iron Age cultural zone.

Later explorations by academic institutions expanded the inventory of sites and produced catalogues documenting their location and typology. Nevertheless, the absence of a comprehensive study focusing on spatial distribution and cultural interpretation limited a holistic understanding of the region. The present investigation builds upon earlier findings and introduces new data collected through systematic field exploration.

Methodology

The present study is based on systematic archaeological field survey conducted in various parts of Theni taluk. The research follows a descriptive and analytical approach aimed at documenting surface archaeological remains and interpreting their cultural significance. Primary data were collected through village-to-village exploration, visual inspection of archaeological features, and recording of structural remains, burial monuments, and surface artefacts.

Measurements of burial slabs, port-holes, and associated features were recorded using standard archaeological tools. Pottery sherds and artefacts were classified based on fabric, colour, surface treatment, and typology. Comparative analysis was carried out by correlating the newly documented remains with previously reported Iron Age and Early Historic sites from Tamil Nadu. Secondary data from published excavation reports, survey records, and scholarly works were used to contextualise the findings. The methodology adopted ensures reliable documentation while adhering to non-invasive archaeological practices.

Description of Archaeological Sites

Vaidhyanathapuram

Vaidhyanathapuram is situated approximately two kilometres north of Periyakulam town, at the base of a small hill locally known as Thaiyalnayakiamman Karadu. Field exploration in this village revealed the presence of a cist burial constructed using large, carefully dressed stone slabs. The burial chamber is square in plan, measuring about 1.60 × 1.60 metres, with slabs placed on all four sides. Only the upper portion of the structure is visible above the ground surface.

Local inhabitants reported that similar burials were previously encountered during house construction activities, and that pottery fragments and skeletal remains were found inside them. Although many of these structures were destroyed, the surviving cist burial provides valuable insight into Iron Age mortuary practices in the region.

Jangalpatti

Jangalpatti is a small village located nearly twenty kilometres south of Theni town. Archaeological exploration at the outskirts of the village brought to light a partially damaged cist burial. Only two stone slabs, representing the southern and western sides, are preserved, while the remaining slabs appear to have been removed or displaced.

The orientation of the burial is east–west, a feature commonly observed in Iron Age cist burials elsewhere in Tamil Nadu. The surviving slabs measure approximately 1.10 metres and 0.75 metres in length, indicating a modest-sized burial chamber. The site adds to the growing evidence for widespread megalithic activity in the southern part of Theni district.

Mallayagoundanpatti

Mallayagoundanpatti lies about sixteen kilometres south of Theni. On the eastern side of the village, two large cist slabs were recorded during field exploration. These slabs are well-dressed and carefully shaped, measuring around 2.70 metres in length, 0.80 metres in breadth, and 0.15 metres in thickness.

A notable feature of one slab is the presence of a U-shaped port-hole near its upper centre. Similar architectural elements have been documented in Iron Age burials from the Palani hill region, suggesting shared construction techniques and cultural practices among Iron Age communities inhabiting the hill–plain interface.

Chatrapatti (Iron Age Burial Site)

Chatrapatti is located approximately six kilometres south of Theni along the Virapandi–Theni road. Exploration revealed a stone slab associated with a cist burial, indicating early settlement in this locality. The slab measures about 1.80 metres in length, 0.90 metres in width, and 0.15 metres in thickness.

One of the most distinctive features of this slab is the presence of numerous cup-marks carved on its upper surface. More than thirty cupules of varying sizes were observed, while the sides and lower portions of the slab remained undecorated. Cup-marks are a recurrent feature in megalithic contexts across South India and are often associated with ritual or symbolic practices. Their presence at Chatrapatti strengthens the cultural association of the site with the Iron Age.

Dharmapuri

Dharmapuri is a small village situated about twenty kilometres south of Theni. A habitation site belonging to the Early Historic period was identified on the northern edge of the village. Surface exploration yielded pottery types such as Black-and-Red Ware, Russet-Coated Painted Ware, and Red Ware.

Additional finds included hopscotch stones, fragments of measuring devices, decorated sherds, and rim portions with deep grooves. These artefacts indicate a settled community engaged in domestic, economic, and possibly recreational activities during the Early Historic period.

Lakshmipuram

Lakshmipuram is located near the left bank of the Vaigai River, about twenty-one kilometres south of Theni. The site is characterised by an ancient mound containing structural remains made of bricks. Several large bricks were found scattered on the surface, and a partial brick alignment was also recorded.

One brick bearing a decorative fingerprint impression was particularly noteworthy. The site yielded a variety of pottery sherds, including red-slipped and decorated wares, along with shell bangles. These findings suggest craft activity, aesthetic sensibility, and possible trade connections with coastal regions during the Early Historic period.

Chatrapatti (Cup-mark Site)

Another significant discovery at Chatrapatti, located west of Theni, is a cist slab bearing cup-marks similar to those described above. The cupules range from three to eight centimetres in radius and one to two centimetres in depth. They are confined to the upper surface of the slab and appear to have been carefully executed.

Comparable cup-mark sites have been recorded in various parts of Tamil Nadu, including Pudukkottai, Krishnagiri, Madurai, and Dindigul districts. Based on contextual association, the cup-marks at Chatrapatti can be tentatively assigned to the Iron Age period.

Conclusion

The archaeological investigations carried out in Theni district provide compelling evidence for continuous human occupation from prehistoric times through the Early Historic period. The Iron Age communities of the region practiced diverse megalithic burial traditions, employed iron technology, and produced a wide range of ceramic assemblages. The presence of cist burials, port-holed slabs, and cup-marked stones reflects complex ritual behaviour and symbolic expression.

Early Historic habitation sites in the region reveal indicators of settled life, craft production, leisure activities, and long-distance trade contacts, particularly through ceramic traditions and shell artefacts. The integration of burial and habitation evidence highlights the cultural continuity and transformation that occurred over time.

The newly documented sites significantly enhance our understanding of the archaeological

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