

Original Research Article

Neolithic Excavations in Tamil Nadu

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

The Neolithic Age marks a crucial shift in human history, with advancements in agriculture, animal domestication, and tool-making. Tamil Nadu's rich archaeological sites, such as Athirampakkam, Payyampalli, and Kodumanal, offer valuable insights into this transformative period. This study examines recent excavations of Neolithic stone tools and settlements, focusing on tool typology, material composition, and technological evolution. A multidisciplinary approach, incorporating archaeology, geology, and paleoenvironmental studies, helps understand the socio-economic and cultural practices of Neolithic communities in Tamil Nadu. The paper also explores regional variations in tool design and usage, reflecting adaptation strategies to Tamil Nadu's diverse ecological zones. The findings suggest that these communities developed complex agricultural and pastoral systems, which were integral to their survival and growth. The research also sheds light on the role of these tools in daily life, including food production, construction, and ritual practices. By reconstructing the prehistory of South India, this research contributes to the broader understanding of human evolution in the Indian subcontinent. The study calls for enhanced collaboration in preserving and interpreting these significant archaeological findings for future generations.

Keywords: Neolithic Age, Tamil Nadu, Stone Tools, Archaeological Excavations, Human Evolution.

Introduction

The Neolithic Age in Tamil Nadu marks a pivotal chapter in the region's history, reflecting the gradual transition of early human societies from a nomadic lifestyle to settled agricultural communities. Spanning roughly from 2500 BCE to 1500 BCE, this period is characterized by advancements in stone tool technology, the domestication of animals, and the cultivation of crops.¹ Archaeological excavations at sites such as Payyampalli, Mayiladum Paarai, Modoor, and others have revealed insights into the lifestyle, tools, and cultural practices of the Neolithic inhabitants of Tamil Nadu.² These communities developed unique pottery styles, engaged in megalithic burials, and laid the foundation for the socio-economic structures that shaped the early Tamil civilization. This article delves into the archaeological findings, cultural significance, and technological advancements of the Neolithic period in Tamil Nadu, highlighting its role in the region's prehistoric development.³

Neolithic age is a culture

The Neolithic Age, often referred to as the New Stone Age, is not merely a chronological period but a distinct cultural phase that marked a revolutionary transformation in human history. It spanned roughly from 10,000 BCE to around 2000 BCE, varying by region, and is characterized by groundbreaking changes in lifestyle, technology, and societal organization. The Neolithic Age is synonymous with the advent of agriculture. Humans transitioned from nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyles to settled farming communities. This shift involved cultivating crops such as wheat and barley and domesticating animals like sheep, goats, and cattle.⁴

Permanent Settlements

The establishment of agriculture led to the development of permanent settlements. Notable sites like Catalhoyuk in modern-day Turkey and Jericho in the Levant showcase the early architecture, including mud-brick houses and communal storage facilities.⁵

Technological Innovations

Tools and weapons became more advanced during this period. Polished stone tools replaced earlier crude implements, and pottery-making emerged as a vital craft for storing and preparing food. The invention of the wheel and the use of plows significantly enhanced agricultural productivity.

Social Structures and Specialization

With stable food supplies, societies became more complex. Roles became specialized, with individuals engaging in activities such as pottery, weaving, and tool-making. Social hierarchies began to form, leading to organized governance systems and the first indications of leadership.

¹ Peter Bellwood, *First Farmers: The of Agricultural Societies* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p.2.

² Paiyampalli, Wikipedia — outlines Neolithic remains at Paiyampalli in Tirupattur taluk, discovered by the Archaeological Survey of India in the 1960s, representing one of the classic Neolithic sites in Tamil Nadu.

³ "Archaeology Dept Excavates Over 50 Neolithic Artefacts in Tamil Nadu's Pennagaram," *The New Indian Express*, July 3, 2023.

⁴ Ramachandran, K.S. *Archaeology of South India - Tamil Nadu*, Sundeep prakashan Delhi -1980 p-31.

⁵ K.V Soundararajan *Glimpses of Indian Culture History and Archaeology*, Sundeep Prakashan Delhi -1980, p.26.

Religious and Cultural Practices

The Neolithic period saw the development of spiritual practices and the construction of megalithic structures like Stonehenge, which had religious or ceremonial purposes. Art flourished, as seen in carvings, figurines, and cave paintings, reflecting symbolic and cultural expressions.⁶

Trade Networks

Early Neolithic communities engaged in trade, exchanging goods like obsidian, flint, and other valuable materials. These interactions facilitated the spread of ideas, technologies, and cultural practices across regions.⁷

Cultural Significance

The Neolithic Age laid the foundations for modern civilization. It was during this period that humans began to alter their environment systematically, leading to the rise of cities, complex societies, and, eventually, states and empires. The cultural advancements of the Neolithic Age continue to influence aspects of human life today, from agriculture and architecture to social organization and spirituality.⁸

Early Research on the Ancient Stone Age in Tamil Nadu

Tamil Nadu, located in the southern part of India, holds a significant place in understanding the prehistoric Stone Age cultures of the Indian subcontinent. The state's rich archaeological heritage has revealed evidence of human settlement and activity dating back to the Paleolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic periods. Early research into the ancient Stone Age in Tamil Nadu has provided invaluable insights into the lives and culture of prehistoric humans in the region.⁹

Discovery and Early Research

The systematic study of the Stone Age in Tamil Nadu began in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, spearheaded by archaeologists such as Robert Bruce Foote. Known as the "Father of Indian Prehistory," Foote conducted pioneering excavations in Tamil Nadu during the late 1800s. His most notable discovery was the hand axe at Pallavaram in 1863, which became the first scientifically documented Paleolithic tool in India. This discovery demonstrated the antiquity of human habitation in Tamil Nadu.¹⁰

Stone Age Sites in Tamil Nadu

Paleolithic Period (Lower Stone Age)

Sites such as Athirampakkam, Pallavaram, and Gudiyam caves have yielded evidence of early human activity. Athirampakkam, in particular, is one of the most significant sites, as excavations revealed stone tools dating back to approximately 1.5 million years ago, making it one of the oldest known sites in South Asia.¹¹

⁶ Ramachandran.K.S. *Archaeology of South India- Tamilnadu* Sundeep Prakashan publishers, Delhi, 1980,p.35.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ramachandran.K.S.op.cit.p.54.

⁹ Narasimhaiah. B .Neolithic and megalithic cultures in Tamilnadu, Sundeep Prakashan, DelhiV. Gordon Childe, *Man Makes Himself* (London: Watts & Co., 1936), 1980.pp 37-40.

¹⁰ Ramachandran. K.S .opcit.pp.54-57

¹¹ Sridhar, T.S, *Excavations of Archaeological Series in Tamil Nadu-Modur* department of Archaeology, Chennai -2005. pp. 6-9.

Mesolithic Period (Middle Stone Age)

Evidence of microlithic tools has been discovered at sites such as Kovalanpottal and Kundrathur. These tools indicate a transition from hunting-gathering to a more settled lifestyle, with early humans developing sharper and smaller tools for specific tasks.¹²

Neolithic Period (New Stone Age)

Neolithic sites such as Paiyampalli and Kodumanal showcase the advancement of human culture, including the domestication of animals, agriculture, and the use of polished stone tools. Paiyampalli, in particular, has yielded evidence of early farming and pottery, reflecting a significant cultural shift.¹³

New Neolithic Age Settlements and Artifacts

The Neolithic Age, or the New Stone Age, marked a revolutionary phase in human history, characterized by the transition from nomadic hunting-gathering to settled agricultural lifestyles. This period saw the development of permanent settlements, advancements in tools and technology, and significant cultural evolution. The discoveries of new Neolithic Age settlements and artifacts provide deeper insights into the lives of early humans and their societal structures.¹⁴

Formation of Villages

During the Neolithic Age, humans began establishing permanent settlements. These villages were often located near rivers or fertile lands that supported agriculture and livestock rearing. The settlements were small but organized, with structures built from mud bricks, stone, or wood. **Examples of Sites:** In South Asia, important Neolithic sites include **Paiyampalli (Tamil Nadu)**, **Mehrgarh (Pakistan)**, and **Burzahom (Kashmir)**. Globally, sites like **Çatalhöyük (Turkey)** and **Jericho (Palestine)** are well-known.¹⁵

Architecture and Layout

Houses in these settlements often had rectangular or circular plans, with thatched roofs and storage areas for grains. Some sites also reveal evidence of communal spaces, indicating the early stages of organized communities.¹⁶

Economic and Social Life

Farming and Domestication: The cultivation of crops like wheat, barley, and millet became widespread, alongside the domestication of animals such as cattle, sheep, and goats. Social Structure settlements suggest the beginnings of social hierarchies, with some individuals likely taking leadership roles in community organization.¹⁷

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Tamil Nadu: Child Burial Site Dating Back to Neolithic Age Unearthed in Chengalpattu," The New Indian Express, February 28, 2024.p 4

¹⁵ Peter Bellwood, *opcit.* p.17

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Narasimhaiah. B . *opcit.* p.46.

Neolithic Age Artifacts

Tools and Implements

The Neolithic period saw the refinement of tools. Polished stone tools, including axes, sickles, and grinding stones, were used for farming and domestic purposes. The improved quality of tools marked a significant technological leap.¹⁸

Pottery

Pottery is one of the defining features of the Neolithic Age. Early humans began crafting pots for storage, cooking, and water transportation. These were often decorated with intricate patterns or painted designs, showcasing an artistic dimension. Artifacts such as beads, necklaces, and bracelets made from bone, shells, and stones reveal the aesthetic sensibilities and cultural practices of Neolithic communities.¹⁹

Notable Neolithic Discoveries

Paiyampalli Archaeological Site in Tamil Nadu

Paiyampalli is a significant Neolithic archaeological site located in the Tirupattur district of Tamil Nadu, India. It is one of the earliest sites in South India that provides crucial evidence of Neolithic settlements and the gradual transition of humans from a nomadic lifestyle to a more settled and agrarian-based society. Excavations at Paiyampalli have uncovered artifacts and structures that offer valuable insights into the cultural and technological advancements of the Neolithic period. The site dates back to around 2000 BCE and showcases the early stages of farming, pottery-making, and tool usage in South India. The site was first excavated by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) in 1964-65.²⁰

Tools

Polished stone tools such as axes and chisels were unearthed, indicating the development of agricultural practices and woodworking. Tools suggest that the inhabitants engaged in clearing forests, farming, and other domestic activities.²¹

Pottery

Various types of and made pottery, including black and red ware, were discovered. The pottery was often decorated with simple patterns and used for cooking, storage, and water transportation.²²

Agricultural Evidence

The remains of millets and pulses, along with grinding stones, were found, providing evidence of early farming practices. These findings indicate the domestication of crops and a shift towards sedentary agricultural lifestyle.²³

¹⁸ Gordon Childe. *V. Man Makes Himself* London: Watts & Co., 1936, pp.73–74.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Archaeology Dept Excavates Over 50 Neolithic Artefacts in Tamil Nadu's Pennagaram," The New Indian Express, July 3, 2023.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

Burial Practices

Megalithic burials discovered at the site reveal the funerary practices of the Neolithic people. The presence of grave goods, such as pottery and tools, indicates a belief in an afterlife.²⁴

Cultural and Technological Significance

The discoveries at Paiyampalli highlight the early use of polished stone tools and the introduction of agriculture and the domestication of animals, which laid the foundation for settled communities. The production of pottery as an essential craft for daily life and its role in trade and storage. The evolving social structure, with evidence of collective living and organized activities.²⁵

Preservation and Importance

Paiyampalli is an important site for understanding the Neolithic culture in South India. Efforts are being made to preserve the site and promote further research to uncover more about the early human activities in Tamil Nadu. The Paiyampalli archaeological site provides a window into the lives of South India's early Neolithic inhabitants. Its findings have enriched our understanding of early agricultural practices, tool-making technology, and social organization. As one of the key Neolithic sites in India, Paiyampalli continues to be a focal point for archaeological research and cultural heritage.²⁶



Mayiladum Paarai Archaeological Site

The Mayiladum Paarai Archaeological Site is an important prehistoric location situated in the Nagapattinam district of Tamil Nadu, India. The site provides significant evidence of ancient human settlement, particularly from the Neolithic and Iron Age periods. It is known for its unique contributions to understanding the early agricultural practices, burial customs, and tool-making technologies of ancient South Indian societies.²⁷

²⁴ Peter Bellwood, *opcit.p.23.*

²⁵ Ramachandran. K.S .*opcit.pp.59-60.*

²⁶ Bhairabi Prasad Sahu, *From Hunters to Breeders: Faunal Background of Early India.* Anamika Prakashan. 1 January 1988, p. 199.

²⁷ *Ibid*

Stone Tools and Implements

Excavations at Mayiladum Paarai have revealed various stone tools, including **polished axes, scrapers, and spearheads**. These tools reflect the advanced technology used by early humans in the region for activities like hunting, gathering, and farming. The site yielded pottery fragments, including **black-and-redware** and **greyware**, which are characteristic of the Neolithic and Iron Age cultures of Tamil Nadu. The pottery is indicative of the region's transition to agricultural settlements, with pottery being used for cooking, storage, and rituals.²⁸

Agricultural Evidence

The presence of **grinding stones** and **charred plant remains** suggests that the inhabitants of Mayiladum Paarai were engaged in early agricultural practices. The cultivation of **millets** and other crops likely formed the basis of their diet and supported their settled lifestyle.²⁹

Burial Practices

Similar to other archaeological sites in Tamil Nadu, Mayiladum Paarai has provided evidence of **megalithic burial practices**, with large stone structures and urn burials found at the site. These burials are believed to be associated with ritualistic practices, offering insights into the social and religious beliefs of the community.³⁰

Iron Age Artifacts

The site also contains several artifacts from the **Iron Age**, such as iron tools and weapons, indicating the development of metalworking skills. This marks a significant technological advancement, complementing the agricultural and societal changes taking place at the time.³¹



²⁸ “Neolithic Ash-Mound Found in Tamil Nadu for First Time,” The Times of India, February 23, 2020.

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ “Iron Age in Tamil Nadu dates back 4,200 years, ‘oldest in India’,” The Print, May 9, 2022. This article reports that excavations at Mayiladumparai in Krishnagiri district have produced radiocarbon dates of 2172 BCE and 1615 BCE, pushing back the known start of the Iron Age in Tamil Nadu and indicating a preceding late Neolithic phase.

³¹ Ibid

Modoor Archaeological Site

The Modoor Archaeological Site is an important prehistoric site located in the Nagapattinam district of Tamil Nadu, India. It is significant for its evidence of ancient human settlements, particularly from the Neolithic period. The site provides important insights into the early stages of agricultural and cultural development in South India. Excavations at Modoor have uncovered a variety of stone tools, including polished axes, chisels, and grinding stones. These tools suggest the inhabitants of the site were involved in farming and domestic activities, marking a transition from a nomadic lifestyle to more settled agricultural practices.³²

Pottery fragments found at the site include examples of **black-and-redware**, a hallmark of the Neolithic culture in South India. The pottery was likely used for cooking, storage, and other daily activities, reflecting the development of craftsmanship during this period. Remains of **millets** and other plant materials, along with **grinding stones**, suggest that the inhabitants engaged in early farming. This aligns with the broader Neolithic shift from hunting and gathering to a more settled agricultural lifestyle. Similar to other Neolithic sites in Tamil Nadu, Modoor has yielded evidence of early **burial practices**, though on a smaller scale. These burials may have been part of ritualistic or social customs, offering clues into the spiritual life of the people.³³

The Modoor archaeological site is an essential location for understanding the Neolithic period in Tamil Nadu. Through its tools, pottery, agricultural evidence, and burial practices, Modoor contributes to our knowledge of early human societies in South India and their gradual shift toward a more settled and organized way of life.³⁴ Ongoing research at this site may uncover further details about the region's prehistoric past and its role in the broader context of South Asian archaeology.³⁵



³² Ibid

³³ M. Niyas Ahmed, "Modhur village throws up evidence to Dharmapuri's Neolithic connection," *The New Indian Express*, May 13, 2013.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Sridhar T.S., *opcit*.p.59.



Conclusion

The emergence of Neolithic period is closely linked to the transition from a nomadic lifestyle to settled agricultural communities. As people began to engage in farming and domesticating animals, the need for durable containers to store grains, water, and other goods became evident. The invention of pottery allowed for the storage and preservation of food, which was a crucial development for these early farming communities. In South India, Neolithic pottery is an essential part of archaeological sites such as **Paiyampalli**, **Kodumanal**, and **Mayiladum Paarai**. The pottery from these sites typically included **black-and-red ware** and **grey ware**. The pottery found in South Indian Neolithic sites is often associated with agricultural communities that used these vessels for storing grains, cooking food, and conducting rituals.

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