

THE PANCHA ISHWARAMS

Early Siva Temples
of
Ancient Sri Lanka

Siva Thiagarajah





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World Tamil Heritage Series No.1

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Siva Thiagarajah

B.Sc., M.B.B.S., Ph.D.



Ayothy Library Services, UK
&
Aalayam Publishers, Sri Lanka

World Tamil Heritage Series No.1
Series Editor: N. Selvarajah

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by Siva Thiagarajah

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First Published in Great Britain by Ayothy Library Services
48 Hallwicks Road, Luton LU2 9BH, United Kingdom

Jointly Published by:
Ayothy Library Services UK
&

Aalayam Publishers
39, 36th Lane, Colombo 06, Tel.: 112 364550, 113 097608, E-mail: kumbhbk@gmail.com
3, Meigai Vinayagar Street, Kumaran Colony, Vadapalani, Chennai 600 026 Tel.: 2362 2680

Printed by:
Kumaran Press Private Limited
39, 36th Lane, Colombo 06, Tel.: 112 364550, 113 097608, E-mail: kumbhbk@gmail.com

Publication No.: 002

ISBN 978-955-0881-01-7

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Series Editor's Note

At the dawn of the twenty-first century the Tamil Diaspora has become a global phenomenon. The major sections of this Diaspora are the Tamils of Sri Lankan origin who had migrated from their motherland over the last three decades. They are now widespread and most of them are permanently settled in many countries all over the world.

Many of the second as well as third generation children of the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora living in these countries all over the world, although competent in the native languages of their host countries can hardly read or write Tamil. Also, many of them do not know or have a proper understanding of their history and heritage and run the risk of losing their identity in future.

The purpose of initiating this *World Tamil Heritage Series* is to provide these children small booklets or monographs written in simple English, subjects dealing with the customs, traditions, history and heritage long cherished by their forefathers. Not only these children but their parents too can benefit from this undertaking.

The Ayothy Library Services, UK, in association with Aalayam Publishers has planned to produce a series of small books dealing with the culture, heritage and history of the Tamils of Sri Lanka and South India for the Tamil children of the world. As its first issue we are proud to present this book *Early Siva Temples of Ancient Sri Lanka* by Dr. Siva Thiagarajah, a well researched work about the Pancha-Ishwarams of ancient Lanka. We will gladly encourage our Tamil academics to contribute short monographs relating to the many facets of Tamil culture and heritage for our future presentations.

We hope the Tamil Diaspora community will appreciate the necessity for this much needed venture; promote us and encourage to develop this undertaking in the forthcoming years.

N. Selvarajah

Preface

Siva worship is one of the early forms of worship known among the Dravidians of South Asia long before the creation of the religions Saivism and Hinduism. Worship of nature was a common feature among early societies. To them the Sun, Moon, Sky and the Earth represented divinity. Earth to them was the Mother Goddess *Parvati* and Sky, the blue God *Vinnu*. The concept of Siva evolved from the worship of the Sun known to the Dravidians as *Sivanthan* or the Red-god. All these deities were later adopted into the Indo-Aryan fold. *Parvati* was made the daughter of the mountain and consort of Siva, while *Vinnu* the blue Sky-God was converted to *Vishnu*. The famous 5000 year-old Indus Valley seal of Siva discovered by John Marshall and colleagues depicts this God in a yogic posture seated among animals. Linga worship was practised by the aboriginal Australoids, described as Dasas in the Rigveda. After the intermarriage between the Dravidians and the Australoids, Linga worship became associated with Siva Worship.

Along the coastal regions of ancient Sri Lanka, situated on all four sides of the island were five ancient Siva temples. Legend has it that these temples were first built more than 2500 years ago, and from time to time were subjected to destruction by elemental assaults – by the rains, winds, storms, cyclones, hurricanes and tsunamis and were restored and rebuilt time and again by the rulers and well-wishers of those periods.

These temples were *Thiruthambaleswaram* situated in the Nagulagiri hills in the north of the island, later known as *Naguleswaram*; *Thirukkoneswaram* situated in the Thirukonamalai hills of the east coast; *Chandra Mauleeswaram* situated at Thevendra Munai or Dondra Head, later re-named Devinuwara in the south coast; *Munneswaram* situated near Chilaw and *Thirukkethiswaram* at Matota both in the west coast.

The treatise *Yalpana Vaipava Malai* mentions the temples of *Thiruthambaleswarar* and *Thiruthambaleswari* in the north,



5000 year-old seal from Mohenjo-daro showing Lord Siva wearing a trident head dress seated in a yogic posture among animals.

Thirukkoneswaram in the east, *Thirukkethiswaram* in the west and the temple of *Chandrasekarar* in the south being present during the time of Vijaya in the 6th century BCE (*YVM*: Kula Sabanathan 1949, p.6). Archaeologist and historian Sir Paul Pieris added *Munneswaram* near Chilaw in the west coast to the above list of the most ancient Siva temples of Sri Lanka (Pieris, Paul E. 1919: pp.11-30).

I am grateful to N. Selvarajah, director of the Ayothy Library services for publishing this as a monograph in his planned heritage series. This would be a useful handbook for our youngsters as well as our adults to know about our rich culture and heritage.

London
January, 2012

Siva Thiagarajah

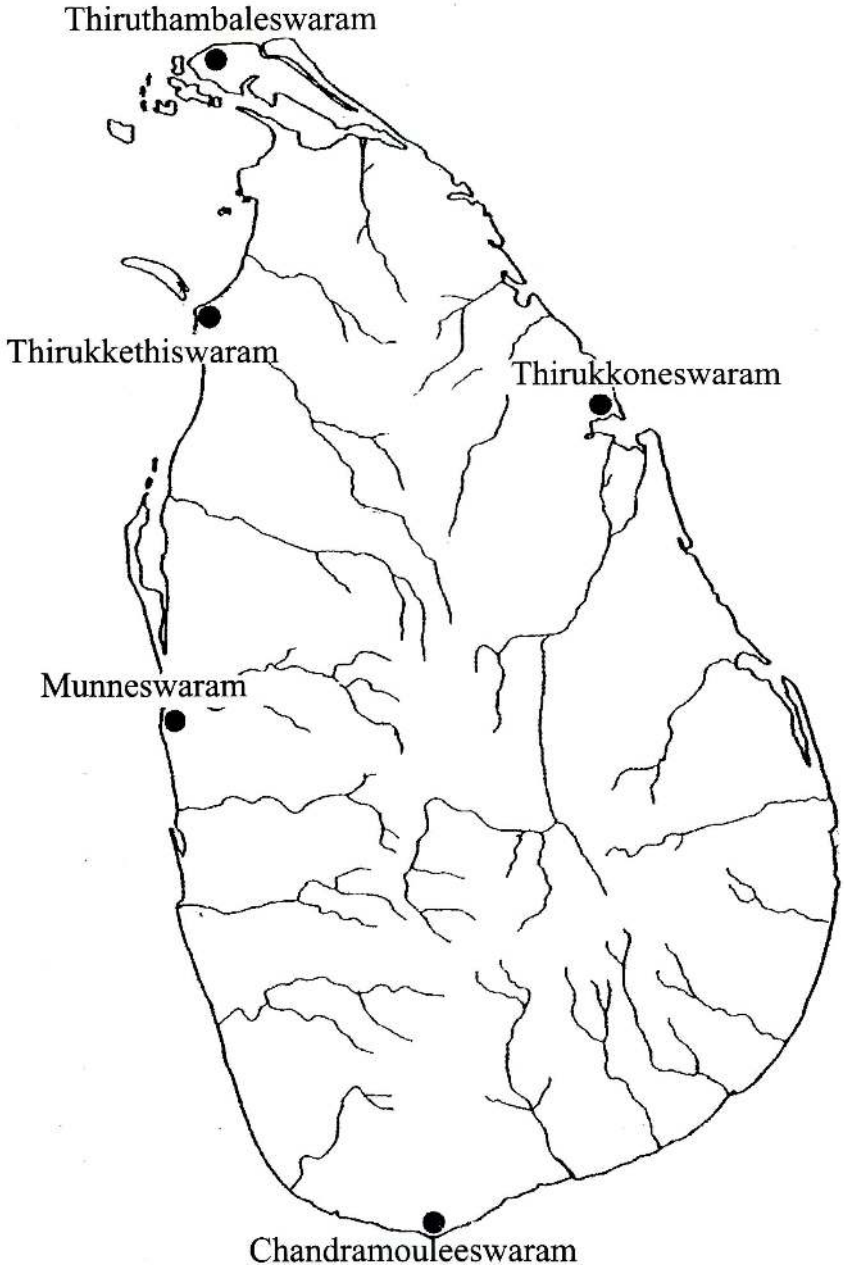


Nagulagiri rock face at Keerimalai. It is believed that this rock had protruded into the sea for several metres in the past, housing the original Siva temple. Further along the top of the rock, an ancient Vishnu temple is still intact.

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Early Siva Temples of Ancient Lanka



Thiruthambaleswaram (Naguleswaram)



A frontal view of the Naguleswaram temple at Keerimalai

Keerimalai is the present name for the sacred water spring as well as the name of the coastal village located north of Jaffna in Sri Lanka. In the past this name referred to the limestone rock projecting into the sea which is situated about half-a-mile to the east of the springs. This rock was called Keerimalai meaning the mongoose-hill, which in Sanskrit came to be known as Nagulagiri. The name of this hill later became the name of the land.

Legend has it that the Nagulagiri rock projected into the sea for a considerable distance and the original Siva

temple *Thiruthambaleswaram* with its ascending tower was built on top of this rock. There was a separate temple for his consort *Thiruthambaleswari*. These temples were destroyed by inundation of the sea.

During the eighth century king Ugra Singan who ruled from Kathiramalai (Kantarodai) re-built this temple in its present site. From that time it came to be known as Naguleswaram or the Keerimalai Sivan Kovil. During later times it was supported and administered by the kings of Jaffna (*YVM*). It is believed by some that this temple had its origin as a centre of the Saiva sect called Nagulesa Pasupatham initiated by Saint Ligulisa in the second century CE. Several legends relating to Naguleswaram temple are found in *Yalpna Vaipavamalai* and *Thaksina Kailasapuram*.

For hundreds of years pilgrims from all parts of Jaffna have been visiting Keerimalai during the festival season and on certain occasions of special religious significance. Its location at the sacred site on the northern coast of Jaffna where the post-funerary rites of *sapindikaranam* and *asticancayanam* are conducted have invested it with a degree of sanctity comparable to that of Kathirkamam, Koneswaram and Thirukketiswaram (Cellaiya, Y. 2006). Every year Hindu males from all over the Jaffna peninsula flock in large numbers on *Adi Amaavaasai* day to carry out rituals for their forefathers and take a dip in the divine springs.

The Portuguese captured Jaffna in 1621 and began a systematic destruction of the Hindu temples in the peninsula. Parasupani Iyer, the chief priest of the Naguleswaram temple at that time, when he heard that the Portuguese officers with



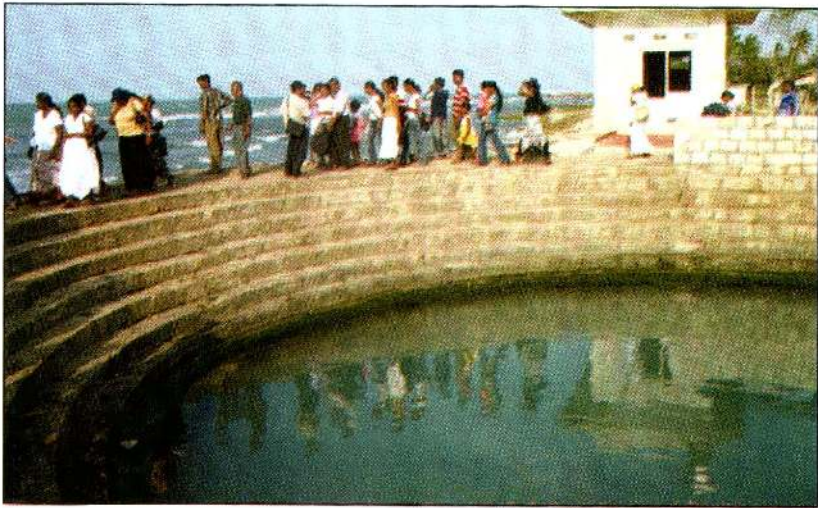
A Picture showing the Vimanam of Naguleswaram temple.

their soldiers were coming to Keerimalai, wrapped up the Siva and Parvathi images along with the ornaments and temple jewels and dumped them into the temple well and threw several layers of sea-sand to cover them. Although the Portuguese officials searched for many years they could neither find the temple treasures nor Parasupani Iyer. He had migrated to Batticaloa where he had lived anonymously. (Muthuthambipillai, A. 1915: p.76)

The British who succeeded the Dutch in Jaffna allowed the local people to rebuild their Hindu temples and pursue their native religious practices. The Siva temple at Keerimalai was restored after a period of 260 years after its destruction by the Portuguese. Arumuga Navalar of Vannarpannai, the architect of Hindu and Tamil renaissance was a key figure who tirelessly worked for the reconstruction of this historic temple. He completed his task with the support of several beneficiaries and philanthropists and the consecration ceremony was held in the month of *Aani*, June-July 1882.

On October 16, 1990 the Keerimalai Siva temple and its devotees were subjected to a ferocious brutal aerial attack. While the festivities were in progress and thousands of people congregated in the temple compound, at about 4.00 pm three bombs dropped from the air blasted the *kopuram*, *vimanam* and *pirakaram* to smithereens. On that day hundreds of people lost their lives (Neminathan, M. 2004). At present the temple is only partially restored.

Works relating to the origins and glorification of the temples and the deities enshrined in them are called *Thalapuranas*. Several such works relating to *Naguleswaram* were produced over the years. Notable among them were *Nakulasala Puranam* by Erampa Aiyar (1847-1914) of Mathakal; *Nakuleswara Manmiyam* by S.Sivappirakasam of Nirveli; *Nakulesar Oonchal* by Kumarasami Pulavar of Chunnakam; *Nakulesuvarar Vinotha Vicittira Kavipponkottu* by Mayilvakana Pulavar (1875-1919) of Kadduvan and *Nagulesar Thiruvanthathi* by Panditha Namasivaya Thesigar, also from Kadduvan.



The Keerimalai fresh water tank fed by underground springs is believed to be sacred having curative properties.

Naguleswaram at Keerimalai is one of the oldest Siva temples of Sri Lanka. Over several hundreds of years this temple along with Maviddapuram Murugan temple situated nearby had propagated a unique brand of Saivism blending traditional religious concepts with local customs distinctive to the people of Jaffna.

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Thirukkoneswaram

One of the earliest Siva temples of ancient Lanka is the *Tirikoodam* or triangular-hill-abode of the hallowed Thirukkoneswarar and his consort Mathumai Ambal situated in the East coast of the island. As these hills are situated to the south of Mount Kailash (in Himalayas) the abode of Lord Siva, it is also called *Dhakshina Kailash* or Kailasam of the South. It is believed that the name Koneswaram is derived from the Sanskrit expression Gokarneswara, which was applied as the name of the form of Siva for whose worship the temple at Tirikoodam, later called Thirukonamalai, had been dedicated.

The myths, legends, traditions and historical accounts associated with Thirukkoneswaram are many. The earliest legends relates to Thirukkoneswarar's association with the mythical king Ravana of Lanka, the Lord Siva being his favourite deity. The rock cut in the temple premises is known as the *Ravana's Cut* to this day. Other poetic works like *Thaksina Kailasa Puranam*, *Konesar Kalvettu* and *Thirukonasala Puranam* elaborate on these myths and legends.

A Sri Lankan Brahmi inscription of the third century B.C. mentions a place called *Siva Nagara* (Paranavitana, S. 1970: Inscription 796), the City of Siva, which is identified with Thirukkoneswaram. This perhaps is the earliest extant reference to this temple.



Thirukkoneswaram Sivan temple on top of Tirikoodam rock

The Buddhist chronicles *Mahavamsa* (Ch XXXVII: V. 41) and the *Mahavamsa Tikka* (Ch XXXVII: V.15-25) record that Mahasena, the Buddhist king of Anuradhapura being dissatisfied that his people were praying a *Sivalinga* at Gokanna ordered the destruction of this temple during the fourth century A.D.

In spite of the measures adopted against this temple, it must have been re-built soon afterwards as its fame flourished as far away as North India, for the *Vayupurana* of the fifth century compiled during the age of the Imperial Guptas speaks about this renowned temple at Gokarna, the most popular Siva temple in the southern region (*Vayupurana* Ch.48, V.20-30).

From the fifth century onwards the name and fame of Koneswaram spread far and wide and gained high renown. During the seventh and eighth centuries Saiva saints

Thirugnana Sambandar and Sundaramurthy Nayanar sang hymns in praise of the God of Konamamalai: “*Praise to the abode of our Lord where raging waters of the sea scatter on the shore, splashing with sandalwood, ahil, precious stones and pearls*”.

The Virasaivite king Kalinga Magan who ruled Lanka from Polonnaruwa (1215-1255 A.D.) was a great devotee of the lord Siva at Tirikoodam. It is said that he donated the entire income from Tirukonamalai town to the temple. After he lost power this temple was neglected.

In 1263 A.D. the Pandyan king from Madura, Jadhavarman renovated the temple buildings. A temple inscription refers to him as *Kulakkoddan*, meaning the builder of the tank and the temple. Some authors claim that the renovation was carried out by Chodagangan, a sub-king to Kalinga Magan. But, two fish emblems sculptured below the inscription associate this benevolence with the Pandyan.

For about 400 years from 1270 till 1624 A.D. the Arya Chakravarthy kings of Jaffna became the custodians of the Koneswarar temple. Among them Jeyaveera Singai Aryan and Pararajasekaran V were munificent benefactors and custodians of Saivite Culture. The chieftains of Vanni too made several large endowments to this temple.

Sekarasasekaran, the King of Jaffna (1380-1410 A.D.) is credited with the authorship of *Thaksina Kailasa Puranam*, the *thalapuranam* or temple-history of this shrine. The royal author claims that he rendered into Tamil verse the *Daksina Kailasa Manmiyam*, a Sanskrit work describing the sacred



Front view of present Thirukkoneswaram temple

site on the promontory of Konaparvatam on the eastern coast of the island. The book consists of 632 verses in six sections. The activities of two kings Kulakkottan and Kayavaku are described in considerable detail. It is significant to note that the *Taksina Kailasa Puranam* was written at a time when the temple was in a most flourishing state. (Pathmanathan, S. 2006: 54)

During the medieval period Thirukkoneswaram was one of the richest temples in South Asia. The temple hall had one thousand pillars and it had in its possession large amounts of gold, pearls, precious stones and silk, which had been endowed over a thousand years. (Navaratnam, C.S. 1968)

During the fifteenth century Saint Arunagirinathar who visited this temple wrote *Thiruppugazh* hymns about “the delight of Goddess Mathumai observing her son Lord

Skanda who in the company of his spouses two, walked in majesty in the Konesar Hills". According to Arunagirinathar the town housing this temple is one of the most beautiful places he has ever been, and this temple was magnificently managed by the Brahmin priests.

The Destruction of the Temple by the Portuguese

The Portuguese arrived in Ceylon in 1505 and soon embarked on their "Temporal and Spiritual Conquest" of the island. The local tradition narrates in minute detail how they set about the spiritual conquest of the temple of Thirukkoneswaram and brought about its downfall.

It was the Hindu New Years Day of 1624 at Thirukkoneswaram. After the morning pooja, the festival procession proceeded out to town with a crowd of worshippers. At this time the Portuguese emissaries and soldiers gained entrance to the temple disguised as Hindu priests. They overpowered the few who remained in the temple and looted the temple. In the confusion, the devotees who escaped carried away the temple belongings they were able to take. The deities taken in procession were beyond the reach of the vandals and were hidden safely. Later, Thirukkoneswaram temple was blasted to destruction on the orders of the Portuguese commander Constantine de Sa. (Sivakumar, K. 2010)

The Pagoda with a Thousand Pillars

Sir Paul E.Pieris, a pioneer modern historian of Sri Lanka, having examined contemporary Portuguese records has this to say: "It was the summer of 1624 when de Sa started on



Side view of Thirukkoneswaram Sivan temple

this enterprise. The site selected was the lofty headland of Konesar Malai, which was connected with the mainland by an isthmus where the town lay. Three temples occupied the promontory, one at the base, and one half way up, while the summit rising 400 feet above the sea, was crowned by the most renowned of all. As of the five Isvarams or residences of Siva, this was the centre of great veneration even beyond what its magnificence and wealth entitled it to; and this was destroyed to make way for a triangular fort of stone and mortar which commanded the entrance to the Bay” (Paul E.Pieris, 1983). The ancient temple at the summit of the Konesar Malai which was destroyed by the Portuguese, is described by the Portuguese chronicler Fernao de Queyroz as the Pagoda with a thousand pillars. (Fernao de Queyroz, 1939: 238-240)

The Restoration of Swami Malai

Although there was neither a temple nor any form of worship at Thirukkonamalai for almost two centuries our forefathers never forgot the memory of the famed Siva shrine and passed this memory to their children and grandchildren. In 1796 the British Government, under their freedom of worship policy allowed the practice of non-Christian religions prohibited by the Portuguese and the Dutch. Since 1803, at the site of the Koneswaram temple prayers were conducted on open ground with reverence and solemnity by the Brahmin priests. And people began to flock towards Swami Malai to pray to Lord Siva and Lady Mathumai.

It was Arumuga Navalar's clarion call in October 1872 that was instrumental in creating an urge for the rebuilding of the ancient Hindu temples of Sri Lanka. A society of devotees gathered by Arumuga Navalar completed the mission he started. Ancient statues made of gold and brass were discovered in 1944 and 1950. Among the 'Trincomalee bronzes', "*the statues of Siva and Parvathi and that of Ganesh are among the finest examples of Hindu bronze sculptures known to exist*"

On April 3rd 1963 the *Maha Kumbabishekam* or initiation ceremony of the newly built Thirukkonswaram temple took place. The re-building of this temple is a prime example of the determination and resolve of the Tamil people to re-build their lost heritage. Perhaps this inherent resolve and resilience will help them to build a better future.



Rock cleft in the Tirikoodam rock. Legend has it as the Ravana's Cut.

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The Devanturai Thondar Ishwaram Chandramouleeswaram

Devanturai also known as Devar Munai (Dondra Head), was a historic port town in the south coast of Sri Lanka near Matara. Claudius Ptolemy, the famous Greco-Roman astrologer and traveller in his map of Taprobane of 98 CE, marked a point near Devanturai as Daganna. The name Taprobane referred to the island of Lanka; and Daganna meant a *'temple sacred to the moon'*. (Jean Baptiste, 1759)

This city had one of the most celebrated Hindu temple complexes of the island, and in its later stages said to have housed temples of Siva, Vishnu, Ganesha, Murugan and Kannagi. This temple has been variously named as Devanturai Kovil, Devar Munai Koyil, Thenavaram Kovil, Thentiraitottam, Chandrasekarar Aalayam, Chandramouleeswaram, Nila Koyil and Thondeswaram. The town was named after the temple as Thevanagar meaning the City of the Gods and the port as Tentiraitthottam or Devanturai. In Pali the town was called *Devapura* and *Devanagara*. In Sinhala it has been referred to as *Devinuwara*. The name of the port Devanthurai was corrupted by the Portuguese to Tanaure/Danaure, and later the British called it Dondra Head.

From the earliest records we gather that there were two major temples at this site – one dedicated to Lord Siva with the Crescent Moon and the other one dedicated to Lord Vishnu. According to tradition, the Dondra Temple was built by Aggabodhi IV during the middle of the seventh century. (Cordrington, H.W. 1929: 37)

The Kegalle District Ola Manuscript discovered by archaeologist H.C.P.Bell records the arrival of a red sandalwood Vishnu image at Dondra by sea in 790 CE, brought by a Brahmin named Rama Chandra. King Dappula Sen after envisioning its arrival in a dream, housed the image at the Dondra Temple. (Bell, H.C.P. 1970: 47)

The Royal Grant of King Parakramabahu II of Dambadeniya (1236-1270 CE) contains references to the Tendiratota temple (தென்திரைத்தோட்டம்), reaffirming its land ownership and regulations to prevent evasion of customs duties at the port by traders at the estate. According to this epigraph, *Tendiraitota and its lands that were religious endowments of old were duly maintained by the king.* (Arnold Wright 1999: 416)

Endowments to the Siva shrine and extensive donations of villages were made to it by King Alagakkonara of Raigama who ruled between 1397 and 1409 (Navaratnam, C.S. 1964: 52). There are references to a Siva temple and a Vishnu temple at this site during the reign of Vijaya Bahu VI in the 14th Century CE. The lands owned by the temple were detailed in a Royal Edict dated 1510 by King Vijayabahu VI.

The Moroccan traveller Ibn Batuta visiting the temple complex during the 14th century has this to say:

The main deity is known as Dinawar and He shared the same name as the flourishing trade town in which He resided. He was made up of gold, the size of a man with two large rubies for eyes that lit up like lamps during the night..... One thousand Hindus and Yogis were attached to this vast temple for services, with five hundred girls that danced and sang in front of the deity. (Ibn Batuta 1983: p.260)

The Galle Trilingual Inscription datable to 1411 CE, mentions donations of gold, silver, silks and sandalwood made by the Chinese Admiral Zheng He to the Hindu God, Thevanag Nayanar (some read this as *Tenvarai Nayanar* meaning God of the South Sea), referring to the God at *Thevanagar* on behalf of the Yongle Emperor of China. The admiral invoked the blessings of the Hindu deity for a peaceful world built on trade.

The Devanturai temple owned the entire property and the land of the town as well as the surrounding villages. The ownership of which was affirmed through several royal grants during the early medieval period. Due to patronage by various royal dynasties and pilgrims across Asia, it became one of the wealthiest institutions of the 16th century.

The many deities housed in this temple complex are historically attested in grants, inscriptions and in contemporary literary records. Apart from the main deities Siva and Vishnu, information relates to the temples of Murukan, his consorts, God Gancsha and Kannaki. The Devanturai temple was built

on vaulted arches on the promontory overlooking the Indian Ocean. It is said that the temple had a high central tower, and a light lit at the top of this tower at nights acted as a lighthouse helping the ships at sea to arrive and dock safely at the harbour. Also the temple top (*vimanam*) was overlaid with golden plates and gilded brass which reflected the sun, helping the navigators during the day.

During the early medieval period Devanturai was a prosperous pilgrimage centre. A ferry transported traders, travellers, pilgrims and chroniclers from Devanturai to the Chera and Chola kingdoms of Tamilakam via Puttalam on the west coast of the island.

The Destruction of the Temple Complex

All evidence indicates that at the time of its destruction the Devanturai temple was one of the wealthiest, well established and fully functional Hindu temples of the island. Sir Emerson Tennent describes this as the most sumptuous temple complex of the island before its destruction. (Tennent, J.E. 1859: 20)

In February 1587, about 120 well armed Portuguese soldiers led by naval Captain Thome De Souza d'Arronches entered the temple complex. Finding it empty the soldiers plundered and looted its riches of ivory, gems and sandalwood. They smashed and threw away thousands of statues and idols of the temple before levelling the complex and defiling the inner sanctum by slaughtering cows. The whole area including a magnificent wooden temple car was then set on fire and was razed to the ground. De Souza and

his men then ran amok devastating the town and the entire southern coast. The Portuguese chronicler Diogo do Couto describes the many shrines within the enclosed walls of the 'Pagode of Tanaure' as handsome chapels, and describes the destruction of this temple in great detail. (Diogo de Couto 1600, Fernao de Queyroz 1680)

After the destruction of these temples, the Hindus who were mostly Tamils were deprived of pursuing their own religious faiths and openly worshipping their gods. Gradually during the Portuguese and Dutch periods the Tamil population began to move away from this region, and the few who were left behind became Buddhists. Even the name of the land 'Devanthurai' disappeared from their race memories. The place was called 'Devinuwara' by the Sinhalese who occupied this region during the British rule.

British chroniclers of the 18th century like Robert Percival and Colin Mckenzie have described the ruins of these temples as fine examples of ancient Tamil architecture and sculpture. The ruins had huge granite carvings of elephant heads, semi-naked men and women, sculptured stone pillars and broken idols. James Cordiner described the bases of a colonnade of 200 granite pillars forming an avenue leading up to the sea. (James Cordiner 1807: 197)

Building the Othpilima Vihara and Vishnu Devale

During the 18th century when the British government allowed the local population to re-build their religious institutions



Chandrasekarar with his consort Uma.

and pursue their own faiths, a Buddhist Vihara was built over the ruins of the old Devanturai temple complex.

A French traveller De Jonville who visited this site during the 18th century has this to say about the ruins of the Dondra temples and the new building that was built:

“This pagoda is dedicated to Vishnu....what remains shows its plan, a long rectangle which corresponds to a gallery of three or four hundred pillars. The new temple is insignificant.

Among other debris on the ground is a Lingam, which the priest described as “Isvara roupe”, and a temple to Boudhou (Buddha) was being built near the pagoda”.

During the late British period a ‘Vishnu Devale’ was built near the Vihara according to Sinhala Buddhist traditions. The temple is built in blue colour, an attribute of Vishnu (originally named Vinnu, the Sky God of the ancients). The deity of this temple described as *Upulvanna* is venerated mainly by the Sinhalese Buddhists.

Icons and Idols

From time to time sculptures and idols belonging to the original Hindu temples are being dug out of the compound at Othpilima Vihara. In 1998 a large *Siva Lingam* 4feet high and 2½ feet wide as well as a stone image of a *Nandi* were discovered by a gardener while digging the court yard. A few years earlier another stone *Nandi* and a stone image of Ganesha were excavated from this site. On another occasion a statue of a Goddess identified as Patthini was recovered. These discoveries clearly indicate that the Buddhist Vihara has come to be erected where earlier the Lord Shiva shrine was located (Ramachandran, N. 2004: 19).

Chandramouleeswaram of Devanturai was a Siva temple which is now lost to us. There are Sinhalese Buddhists today who deny such a temple complex even existed at this Vihara site. It is important for us to preserve all the available records and documents relating to this temple reminding us and our future generations of this great temple from a glorious past.

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Thenthiraitthottam is an ancient name for the Dondra Head harbour. Note the similarity to Mathottam, the ancient name for the harbour at Mantai.

Munneswaram

Munneswaram, also known as Munniswaram or *Periya Koyil* is the abode of Lord Munniswarar and his consort Vadivambigai: It is situated about two kilometres to the East of Chilaw in the Puttalam District of western Sri Lanka. It is considered by some to be the oldest Siva temple in the island, hence the prefix *mummai* meaning before or first.

The historical origins of the Munneswaram temple are uncertain. A legend mentioned in the *Daksinakailasa Mahatmiyam*, a Sanskrit work glorifying Lanka and the temples found in it has it that Prince Rama while returning to India having defeated Ravana, was afflicted by *Brahmahasti dosham*, a curse resulting from killing an ardent devotee of lord Siva. In repentance he established a Sivalingam for worship and built a temple with subsidiary shrines which later became Munneswaram. However, as the *Daksinakailasa Mahatmiyam* is considered to be a work of recent origin, this legend cannot be credited to antiquity.

According to the *Munneswara manmiyam* (Somaskanda Kurukkal, 1927), King Kulakkottan who is credited with the restoration and renovation of Thirukkoneswaram is also associated with the restoration of Munneswaram. This temple has played a vital role in the religious and cultural traditions of the Hindus of Lanka over a long period of time.

Munneswaram is located in the midst of paddy fields irrigated by canals issuing from large tanks found in the



vicinity of the temple towards the east. The fields are skirted by patches of thick and shady woods, punctuated by isolated and sparsely populated villages covered with groves and shady coconut palms. The intense heat of the tropical sun is countered by the cool breeze emanating from the surrounding wet green fields and the woods and palm groves beyond them. (Somaskandhan, N. 2006: 242)

The peak of its development was during the period of the Kings of Kotte some of whom are known to have patronised the temple and the Brahmins attached to it and made extensive land grants for its maintenance. The Tamil inscription found on the basement of the *garbhagraha* on the northern side describes the land endowments made to this temple by Parakramabahu (1412-1467) of Kotte (Fowler, G.M. 1887: 118-119). Similar grants were made by Parakramabahu IX in 1547.

During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the sixty-four villages of *Munneswaram-Pattu* formed the exclusive domain of the temple. The inhabitants of this domain were bound by service obligations to the temple and the lands they had occupied and cultivated were held on service tenure. All the requirements of the temple in respect of conducting worship and rituals, seasonal and annual festivals, and repairs and maintenance were met with the products and services supplied by them and this was by no means inconsiderable. The temple had a large community of dependants including the residents of the *agraharam*, temple managers, supervisors, functionaries, collectors of dues and services, and temple servants. (Somaskandhan, N. 2006: 242)

There was a local tradition suggesting that the chief priest at Munneswaram exercised authority over parts of Chilaw and Puttalam in the name of the Goddess enshrined at Munneswaram. It is also mentioned that locally minted coins were used as legal tender at Munneswaram. The following account by H.W.Codrington reinforces this.

“I came across a coin somewhat allied to this class but known in the country as pincers coin (Tamil– *Kuraddu Kasu*; Sinhalese– *Andu Massa*). It was minted according to tradition at Munneswaram during a period when the Brahman of Munneswaram temple is said to have ruled Chilaw and Puttalam Districts in the name of the goddess. The shape of the coin is that of a pair of pincers, hence the name. On the outer aspect of one of the forks or handles was an inscription which with some difficulty was found to be Chola Grantham; the reading of it was, I believe Parakrama..... The coin certainly preceded the Chola invasion of Ceylon in the eleventh century.” (Codrington, H.W. 1916: 186)

Destruction and Restoration

The immense wealth of the Munneswaram temple attracted the greed of the Portuguese invaders who looted it and finally destroyed it in 1578. The observations made by historian Sir Paul E. Pieris relating to the site of this temple are of note: "The terras of Munneswaram constitute the domain of the Devalaya, which the Portuguese destroyed in 1578, and consisted of sixty-four villages of which Munneswaram where the Devalaya once stood was the chief and the rest were aduttha (azuttas in Portuguese) thereto. The recognised boundaries were: in the East, the village of Xenanam in Devamedi Korale; West, the tree Almaroa, presumably some well known banyantree; North, the village Cirsala in Devamedi Korale; South, the tank Syratav. (Pieris, P.E. 1949)

At the fall of the Portuguese power in Lanka during the mid-seventeenth century the territories of Puttalam and Chilaw came under the Kandyan Kingdom. Soon the Christians were dislodged from the temple premises which were reoccupied by the Hindus. According to the temple records the task of the reconstruction of the temple was undertaken and completed during the early years of the reign of King Kirthi Sri Rajasinha (1747-1782) of Kandy. The consecration was carried out by him and he arranged for lands to be given to the temple for its upkeep. Although the copper plate recording of the grant of lands made by Kirthi Sri Rajasinha to the priests of Munneswaram is not tracable, references to it in the British official records are still available. (Sivaramakrishna Sarma, 1968)

In Chilaw, during 1779, a fisherman's net got entangled in a heavy object. To his amazement he found that it was

the Devi image from Munneswaram lost 200 years earlier. After some legal wrangling this image was re-instated at the temple. In 1875 the temple was renovated through the unstinting efforts made by Sri Coomaraswamy Kurukkal.

The main deity at Munneswaram is the Sivalingam presiding in all majesty at the inner sanctum. In the Mahamandapam or main hall we have the gracious Vadivambikai Ambal and adjacent to it is the shrine of Sundara Nadaraja Murthi.

Munniswaram is perhaps the only Hindu temple in the world which houses the handsome figure of *Pitchanda Murthy*, the majestic hunter. A puranic legend has it that once a Rakshasha called Mahishasura was causing havoc killing the men and devas and destroying their towns and villages. Because of his immense tapas powers neither the gods nor devas were able to kill him. At the request of the sages and rishis, Maha Vishnu assumed the form of Mohini, while Siva took the form of the handsome hunter Pitchandi. The son from their association was Hari Hara Puthran Ayyappan, who killed Mahishasuran. The form of Siva as Pitchandi was venerated at this temple (Thiagarajah, S. 2004: 59-60). The Pitchandi image made of bronze is five feet six inches tall, almost human in size and is of striking interest with high quality workmanship. It depicts a handsomely built figure going out on a hunting expedition accompanied by his dog.

Buildings and Architecture

The Munneswaram temple stands within a walled enclosure about 120 by 110 feet. The central shrine comprising the



The Vimanam of Munneswaram – Modern reconstruction

garbhagraham, *arthamandapam* and the *mahamandapam* are exclusively of stone construction. The architectural style and design harks back to the 14th and 15th centuries. The ornamentation on the mouldings and plasters is restrained and the architectural design is reminiscent of the Vijayanagara style. The original character of the three component parts has virtually remained unchanged despite renovations made

periodically ever since the restoration in the 18th century. (Somaskandhan, N. 2006: 259)

A closer study of the integrated components of the central shrine reveals that they are the remnants of the original *pagoda* destroyed by the Portuguese in 1578. The original *vimanam* destroyed in 1578 was rebuilt in the 18th century. The three-storeyed *vimanam* which rises to a height of 46 feet, constructed by the Kandyan kings has undergone modification during periodic renovations. In the central niches of each of the three storeys are images of *Brahma*, *Mahavishnu* and *Dakshinamurthi*. The *moolasthanam* or inner sanctum houses the sacred lingam, beside which has been installed the image of *Vadivambikai*, the Mother Goddess. The subsidiary shrines flanking the sanctum are those of *Ganapathy* on the right, and *Murukan* on the left. The entire building is roofed and sealed with plain slabs of stone.

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Thirukketheeswaram

“At Mantotte the antiquarian will find a field for research in the still extant remains of remote antiquity, amongst which are the vestiges of a Giant Tank amid the ruins of a former Hindu City, built of birch. The antiquity of the Hindus, by whom, I humbly presume, the island was originally peopled, and their civilization at the remotest period of history, are recognised by all the ancient Eastern Philosophers.” (J.W. Bennett 1843)

Historically Thirukketheeswaram is one of the oldest temples in Sri Lanka. It was a Siva temple during several centuries before the Christian Era, when Korkai of Tamil Nadu and Matota in North Lanka were popular twin ports of South Asia. The temple was established on the northern bank of a stream called Palavi, a tributary of Aruvi Aru or Malvatu Oya within the confines of the port city of Matottam or Mantai.

The situation of the island in the middle of the Indian Ocean, and to the extreme southern tip of the Indian peninsula, resulted in Sri Lanka being in a strategic position of the sea-routes linking countries on either side of the Indian Ocean. Of necessity, the fleets of Chinese vessels transporting silks and ceramic ware for sale to the countries on the East African coast; and Arabian vessels carrying the

spices of the East to Middle-Eastern markets had to touch at Mantai, half-way along their sea-routes to obtain fresh water and provisions. The temple owed its origins to the mariners, traders and seamen in the localities surrounding it and the flourishing commerce at Mantai was the mainstay of its economy

The Thirukketheeswaram temple is held in a position of pre-eminence because of its great antiquity, the degree of sanctity invested by tradition and its reputation as a centre of pilgrimages. Two of the leaders of the movement of Saiva revival in South India, Sampanthar and Suntharar, had each produced a hymn in honour of Siva enshrined at Thirukketheeswaram. In his hymn on *Thiruvilimilalai*, another Nayanmar Appar describes Siva as one who resides at *Ketiswaram and Ketharam*. In the *Kuyirpattu* Saint Manikkavasagar praises Siva as the Lord of Perunthurai and as the one who through grace conferred bliss on *Vandothari of Thennilankai* surrounded by the roaring waves of the ocean (Pathmanathan, S. 2006: 30). Perunturai, the great port mentioned in the hymn is identified as Matottam.

Mahavamsa, the popular Buddhist chronicle mentions a *Sivikasala*, meaning a shrine housing a Sivalinga during the reign of Pandukabhaya during the fourth century B.C., which is believed to be a reference to this temple (Mahavamsa). *Dathavamsa*, a chronicle on the Tooth Relic of the Buddha mentions the Hindu temple at Mahatittha, which flourished during the reign of Megavanna Abhaya (A.D. 303-331). (*Dathavamsa*: V, VI)



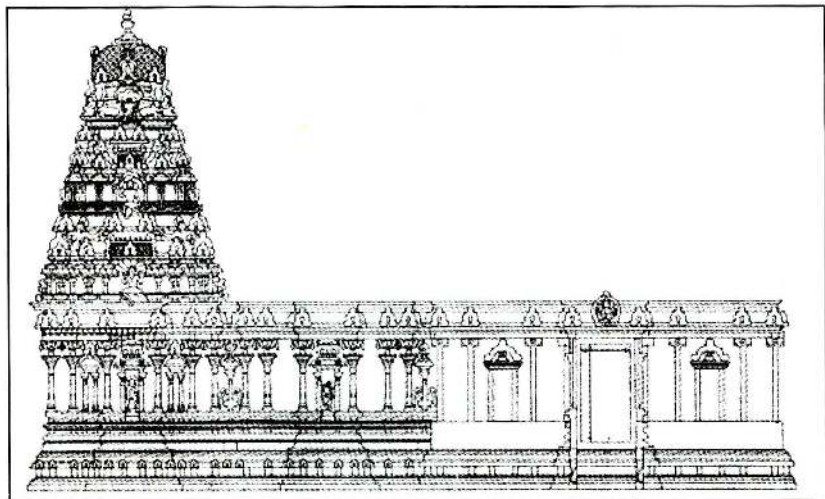
The re-built entrance tower of Thirukketheeswaram temple

During the seventh and eighth centuries, Thirukketheeswaram was reputed in South India as a great centre of pilgrimage and for a saiva religious tradition. According to the Nayanmar hymns, the temple was surrounded by parks, gardens and groves of mango trees, areca palms and banana plantations where the humming of bees and the pleasant cries of birds attracted the attention of visitors.

During the tenth and eleventh centuries the northern part of Sri Lanka came under the reign of the Chola kings Rajaraja I (985-1016 A.D.) and Rajendra (1012-1044 A.D.). The port city of Mantai occupied a position of considerable importance as an outlet for commercial and cultural interaction among the kingdoms of South India and Sri Lanka. The administration of this temple came under Chola power. The Cholas also built two other Siva temples at Matottam called Siva Rajarajeswaram and Thiruviramiswaram. Some suggest that it was the ancient shrine of Thirukketheeswaram which was restored and renamed Rajarajeswaram. This temple enjoyed the support and patronage of the Chola government which is evident from the transfer of government revenues to this temple as indicated by the Chola inscriptions. (Pathmanathan, S. 2006: 34-36)

Destruction by the Portuguese

During the sixteenth century the temples of Matottam had been systematically destroyed by the Portuguese. The trade of the port was shattered and when the Portuguese finally destroyed the Tamil rule in 1590, the old port was abandoned in favour



Plan for the restoration of Thirukketheeswaram temple

of Mannar. When they took final possession they sacked and burned the city of Mantotte, and razed its ancient temple to the ground (Hugh Neville 1887: 165). The epigraphic records relating to the history of the temple were all destroyed. To the British who arrived after the Dutch the site where the temple had existed previously was a desolate mound.

The Assistant Government Agent of Mannar W.J.S. Boake wrote in 1887 as follows: “Nothing remains above ground of this ancient city except a few fragments of sculpture, broken tiles, bricks and pieces of pottery. The site is entirely overgrown by low dense jungle – The foundations of a brick building, somewhere about the centre of a hill, on which I believe the greater part of the city stood – The entrance of the temple is said to have been near the old well – Its temple rivalled that of Rameswaram.”(Boake W.J.S. 1887)

The Restoration

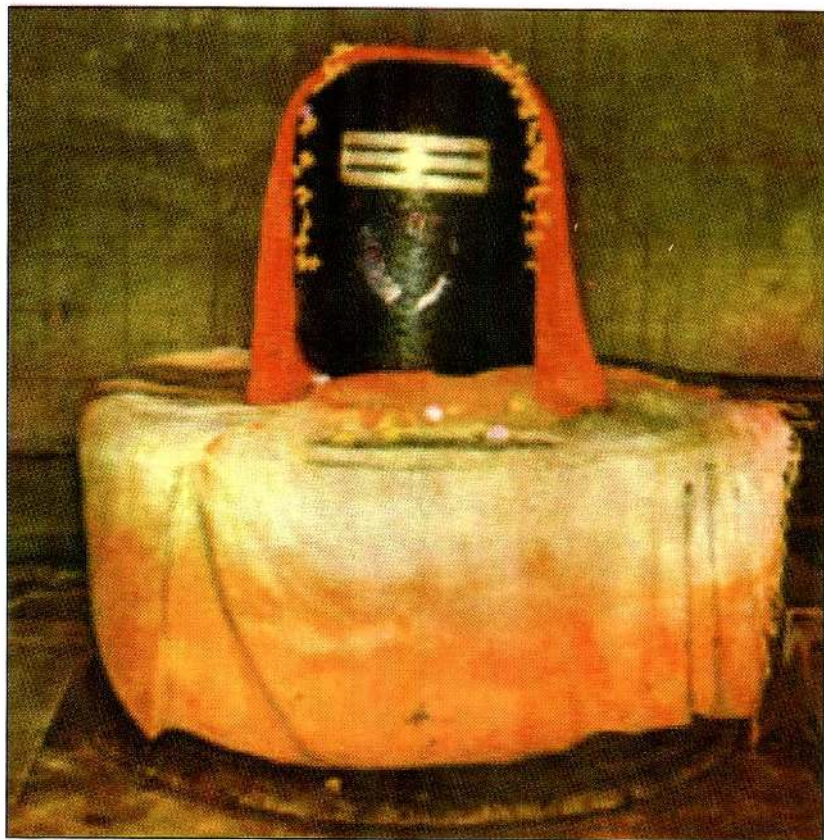
It was Arumuga Navalar of Jaffna who conceived the idea of restoring the Thirukketheeswaram temple to its ancient glory. He appealed to the Hindu public of Jaffna in his booklet *Yalpana Samaya Nilai*: "Ilankai is fortunate in having two temples dedicated to the worship of Siva on which laudatory hymns have been sung by our saints - - Why are the Hindus of Ceylon not mindful of the greatest of their temples? - - If you would only heed my advice and rebuild this Thirukkethiswaram temple Siva will shower his favours on you , out of the bounty of His infinite grace." (Kandiah, A. 1968)

On the 13th December 1893, the Government Agent of Jaffna put up for sale the Crown land of 44 acres of jungle land of no economic value, but a sacred spot for the Hindus. The land was bought by R.R.Palaniyappa Chettiyar on behalf of the *Saiva Paripalana Sabai* . S.T.M. Pasupathy Chettiyar, treasurer of the *Saiva Paripalana Sabai* proceeded to the area, began clearing and undertook excavations. In 1894 the celebrated Maha Lingam, a Nandhi and a statue of Lord Ganesha were unearthed (Arumukam, S. 1990: 56-64). These were installed in a small temple built at that site in 1903.

A large scale rebuilding of the temple was envisaged in 1948 by the Thrukketiswaram Restoration Sociey under its president Mr. S.Sivapathasundaram. The first phase of the building programme was conducted under the direction of Sir Kandiah Vaithianathan, who gave up politics and took up servitude to Lord Siva.

Buildings and Architecture

The sanctum, the *artamandapam* and the imposing *vimanam* of the temple, dedicated for the worship of Kethiswaranathar and Gowri Ambal were built in granite. The *rajagopuram* at the southern entrance of the Amman shrine and the subsidiary shrines for the attendant divinities and Saiva saints were constructed. The Pillaiyar temple in the southwest, the Kandaswamy temple, the shrine of Nateraja and the



The Sivalingam of Thirukketheeswaram

palli aria were all rebuilt in the temple complex. Images of *thubarapalakar* and *thuvava sakthikal* were established in front of the main sanctums. In the second *pirakaram* in front of the main *rajagopuram* the ancient Nandhi discovered in the course of excavations was installed. All stone images were carved at the Government College of Architecture and Sculpture at Mamallapuram. (Pathmanathan, S. 2006: 47)

The bell tower was completed early in 1961 and a bell outfit was mounted on it. The bell cast in a copper-tin alloy had an overall size 50"x50"x50" and the gross assembly weighed about two tons. The overall dimension of the perimeter wall measured 218 feet by 132 feet.

The second phase of the construction was conducted under the able guidance of Mr.R. Namasivayam. The progress of construction was abruptly terminated at the site due to the riots of 1983. Soon the area was placed under a military administration. The temple was abandoned; worship was not conducted and devotees could not approach the site during the period of civil war. During the more recent civil war that plagued the country, the temple at various times was occupied by the Sri Lankan Armed Forces and survived many insults. However in January 2010 the President of Sri Lanka declared Thirukketheeswaram as a sacred city for Hindus. (Sivakumar, K. 2010)



The Vimanam of Thirukketheeswaram as seen in 1958 (above) and the re-built present Vimanam as seen below.



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THE PANCHA ISHWARAMS

Early Siva Temples of Ancient Sri Lanka



This monograph is about the five early Siva Temples of ancient Sri Lanka.

Along the coastal regions of ancient Sri Lanka, situated on all four sides of the island were five ancient Siva temples.

Legend has it that these temples were first built more than 2500 years ago, and from time to time were subjected to destruction by elemental assaults – by the rains, winds, storms, cyclones, hurricanes and tsunamis and were restored and rebuilt time and again by the rulers and well-wishers of those periods.

These temples were *Thiruthambaleswaram* situated in the Nagulagiri hills in the North of the Island, later known as *Naguleswaram*; *Thirukkoneswaram* situated in the Thirukonamalai hills of the east coast; *Chandramauleeswaram* situated at Thevendra Munai or Dondra Head, later re-named Devinuwara in the south coast; *Munneswaram* situated near Chilaw and *Thirukkethiswaram* at Matota both in the west coast.

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ISBN 978-955-0881-01-7



Price Rs. 400.00

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