Villupuram: 2,300-year-old burial urns found in Thenpennai river bed

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News

Media reported on 14 November 2026 that burial urns had been found in the Thenpennai river bed at S. Mettupalayam near Poovarasankuppam, close to Villupuram. Acting on information from local resident K. Prakash, Villupuram history researcher Ko. Senguttuvan carried out a field survey. The urns held bones; a small, finely made pot with a lid and a very thin rim, black inside and black-and-red outside, was also found. He said they are evidence of the funerary practice of burying the dead in urns and estimated them to be about 2,300 years old (no scientific dating has been done yet). Potsherds bearing symbols were found in the same area in 2019. He has asked the Villupuram District Collector and the State Archaeology Department to carry out excavation and a surface survey and to declare the site protected.

Key facts for the exam

Point	Details
Place	S. Mettupalayam, near Poovarasankuppam, Villupuram district
River	Thenpennai (South Pennar / Ponnaiyar)
Field survey	Researcher Ko. Senguttuvan; tip-off – K. Prakash
Finds	Urns with bones, black-and-red ware, small lidded pot

Point	Details
Age	About 2,300 years (researcher's estimate)
Earlier find	2019 – potsherds with symbols
Demand	Excavation; declaration as protected site
Dept letter	July 2020 – survey ordered; no action yet (reported)

Background

- Archaeology: placing the dead, or their bones, in large earthen urns and burying them is 'urn burial'. In south India it is linked to the Megalithic culture, which largely coincides with the Iron Age. Dolmens, cists, cairn circles and menhirs are types of megalithic monuments. Black-and-red ware is a hallmark of this culture – firing the pot upside down turns the inside black and the outside red.
- Tamil Nadu evidence: Adichanallur on the Thamirabarani is the State's best-known urn-burial site; Andrew Jagor dug there in 1876 and Alexander Rea in 1899–1905. Sivakalai (Thoothukudi), Kodumanal (Erode) and Konthagai (Keeladi cluster, Sivaganga) are other key sites. The Manimekalai lists several modes of disposal – cremation, exposure, pit burial, burial in a vault and covering in an urn; in Purananuru 228 the poet Aiyur Mudavanar addresses the potter making a king's burial urn as 'kalam sei kove'.
- Geography: the Thenpennai (Ponnaiyar) rises on Nandi Hills (Nandidurg) in Karnataka's Chikkaballapur district. It flows through Krishnagiri, Dharmapuri, Tiruvannamalai, Kallakurichi, Villupuram and Cuddalore districts and enters the Bay of Bengal at Cuddalore. The Krishnagiri (KRP) and Sathanur dams stand across it; Tirukoilur is a historic town on its bank. It runs about 80 km in Karnataka and 320 km in Tamil Nadu (Britannica).
- Law: Article 49 of the Constitution (a Directive Principle) makes it the State's duty to protect monuments of national importance. At the Union level the Archaeological Survey of India protects sites under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains (AMASR) Act, 1958; at the State level the Tamil Nadu Archaeology Department declares protected sites under the Tamil Nadu Ancient and Historical Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1966.

Tamil Nadu link: This is entirely a Tamil Nadu story. Urn-burial evidence has now been reported from the basin of the Thenpennai, a major north Tamil Nadu river, comparable to sites such as Adichanallur (Thamirabarani), Konthagai (burial site of the Keeladi cluster, Vaigai) and Kodumanal (Noyyal). Villupuram district earlier yielded ancient evidence such as tool-grinding grooves near Gingee. Excavation and scientific dating would throw more light on the Iron Age history of northern Tamil Nadu.

Frequently asked questions

What is this news about?

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What are the key facts to remember for the exam?

Place: S. Mettupalayam, near Poovarasankuppam, Villupuram district; River: Thenpennai (South Pennar / Ponnaiyar); Field survey: Researcher Ko. Senguttuvan; tip-off – K. Prakash; Finds: Urns with bones, black-and-red ware, small lidded pot.

What is the background to this news?

Archaeology: placing the dead, or their bones, in large earthen urns and burying them is 'urn burial'. In south India it is linked to the Megalithic culture, which largely coincides with the Iron Age. Dolmens, cists, cairn circles and menhirs are types of megalithic monuments.

Practice questions (with answers)

1. Where does the Thenpennai river, which flows past Villupuram and Cuddalore, originate?

A) Nandi Hills

B) Kolli Hills

C) Javadhu Hills

D) Shevaroy Hills

Answer: A – Explanation: It rises on Nandi Hills (Chikkaballapur), passes the Krishnagiri and Sathanur dams and enters the Bay of Bengal at Cuddalore.

2. Aiyur Mudavanar's poem addressing an urn-making potter as 'kalam sei kove' is found in which Sangam work?

A) Akananuru

B) Purananuru

C) Kuruntokai

D) Patirruppattu

Answer: B – Explanation: Purananuru 228 – no urn could be big enough for the dead Chola king's fame. Purananuru is one of the Ettuthokai anthologies.

3. Which technique gave megalithic Black-and-Red Ware its black interior and red exterior?

A) Coating with soot

B) Inverted firing

C) Lead glazing

D) Sun-drying only

Answer: B – Explanation: Fired upside down, the inside is cut off from air (reduction) and turns black; the exposed outside oxidises and turns red.

4. Among megalithic monuments, what is a single tall stone set upright on its own called?

A) Dolmen

B) Cist

C) Menhir

D) Cairn circle

Answer: C – Explanation: Menhir. A dolmen is a capstone on upright slabs; a cist is an underground stone box; a cairn circle rings a burial with stones.

5. Which Directive Principle Article obliges the State to protect monuments and places of national importance?

A) Article 48A

B) Article 51A(f)

C) Article 50

D) Article 49

Answer: D – Explanation: Article 49. 48A – environment and forests; 50 – separating judiciary from executive; 51A(f) – citizens' duty to value our heritage.

Sources: ETV Bharat Tamil Nadu (14 Nov 2026); Dinamalar (14 Nov 2026); Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology (tnarch.gov.in); DT Next (Gingee grooves, 2021). © Shanmugam IAS Academy.