Tamil Scripts and Inscriptions – Tamili (Tamil-Brahmi), Vatteluttu, Grantha, Major Inscriptions, Copper Plates, Pulimankombai Hero Stones and Epigraphy in Tamil Nadu | TNPSC Notes

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The oldest script of Tamil is **Tamili** (Tamil-Brahmi), found in cave shelters such as Mangulam near Madurai, on pottery from excavations such as Keeladi and Kodumanal, and on the **Pulimankombai** hero stones. From Tamili grew **Vatteluttu** in the Pandya and Chera regions; **Grantha** was used from the Pallava period to write Sanskrit; and through Pallava–Chola forms the present **Tamil script** took shape. Citing a 2005 Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) report, it is stated that of about one lakh inscriptions found in India, about 60,000 are in Tamil Nadu – they are the primary sources of the State's history.

தமிழில் படிக்க

These notes are written for TNPSC Group 1, 2/2A and 4 aspirants. They serve the topics "Archaeological discoveries in Tamil Nadu" and "History of Tamil society" in the unit on **History, Culture, Heritage and Socio-Political Movements of Tamil Nadu**, and the sources-of-history portion (inscriptions and copper plates). Related notes: Keeladi, Kodumanal, Chola administration.

Evolution of the Tamil Script at a Glance

Script	Period	Where found	Features
Tamili (Tamil-Brahmi)	Sangam age	Cave beds, pottery graffiti, hero stones, coins	Brahmi adapted to Tamil sounds; letters peculiar to Tamil such as zha, lla, rra, nna
Vatteluttu	From about the 5th/6th century CE	Inscriptions, copper plates and hero stones of the Pandya and Chera regions	A rounded script that grew out of Tamili; later fell out of use in Tamil Nadu but lasted longer in Keralam
Grantha	From the Pallava period	Inscriptions and copper plates with Sanskrit portions	Used to write Sanskrit in the Tamil country; the Malayalam script grew out of it
Tamil script (forerunner of today's form)	From the Pallava–Chola period	Chola inscriptions and copper plates	Grew from Tamili through Pallava–Chola forms; spread with Chola expansion

- **The name "Tamili":** because "Tamili" appears among the old scripts listed in Jain texts, Tamil-Brahmi is also called Tamili.

- **Pulli (dot):** the Tolkappiyam states that a consonant takes the dot ("meyyin iyarkai pulliyodu nilaiyal"); the dot appears in the later phase of Tamili inscriptions.
- **Grantha letters in Tamil:** ja, sha, sa, ha, ksha and sri – added to Tamil to write Sanskrit words.
- **Script reform:** the Tamil Nadu Government implemented in 1978 the script reforms proposed by Periyar (changing the shapes of letters such as nnaa, rraa, naa, lai, llai, nai and nnai).

Tamili – Key Discoveries

- **Cave inscriptions:** Mangulam, Arittapatti, Thiruparankundram, Anaimalai, Alagarmalai (Madurai region), Sittannavasal (Ezhadipattam, Pudukkottai), Jambai and Pugalur – mostly recording stone beds for Jain monks.
- **Pulimankombai hero stones:** found in **2006** at Pulimankombai village in the Vaigai valley, Theni district. One inscription records the stone of Tiyan Antavan, a warrior killed in a cattle raid – direct inscriptional evidence for the cattle-raid warfare (vetchi–karanthai) and the hero-stone tradition described in Sangam literature.
- **Keeladi:** the Tamil Nadu Archaeology Department's excavations yielded pottery graffiti with names such as "Aathan", "Kuviran Aathan" and "Thisan"; the department's 2019 report, based on scientific dating, takes Tamili back to about the 6th century BCE – scholars continue to debate this dating. See the Keeladi note.
- **Kodumanal, Porunthal, Alagankulam:** many Tamili graffiti on pottery – evidence that literacy had spread among ordinary people.
- **Abroad:** Tamili graffiti have been found at Quseir al-Qadim and Berenike in Egypt, Khor Rori in Oman and Khuan Luk Pat in Thailand – evidence of early Tamil sea trade.
- **Research:** Iravatham Mahadevan's "**Early Tamil Epigraphy**" (2003) is the comprehensive corpus and study of Tamili inscriptions.

Major Inscriptions and Copper Plates

Inscription / copper plate	Period	Significance
Ashoka's Rock Edicts II and XIII	3rd century BCE	Mention the Cholas, Pandyas, Satiyaputras and Keralaputras as kingdoms beyond the Mauryan frontier
Hathigumpha inscription (Kharavela, Odisha)	1st century BCE (general view)	Claims to have broken a confederacy of Tamil states (Tramira sanghatam)
Mangulam Tamili inscriptions (Madurai)	c. 2nd century BCE (some: 3rd century BCE)	Record stone beds made for Jain monks; name the Pandya Nedunchezhiyan
Jambai inscription	Around the turn of the Common Era	"Satiyaputo Atiyan Neduman Anji" – helped identify Ashoka's Satiyaputras with the Athiyaman line
Pugalur (Arunattarmalai, Karur) inscription	c. 2nd century CE	Ko Athan Cheral Irumporai, Perungadungo, Ilangadungo – three generations of Chera kings

Mandagapattu inscription	7th century CE	Mahendravarman I ("Vichitrachitta") built a temple without brick, timber, metal or mortar
Kudumiyanmalai music inscription	Pallava period	Musical notation – key evidence for the history of Indian music
Velvikudi copper plates	8th century CE	Pandya Nedunjadaiyan Parantaka; reference to the Kalabhra interregnum; Vatteluttu and Grantha
Uthiramerur inscriptions	919 and 921 CE	Parantaka Chola I; selection of sabha members by kudavolai (pot-ticket)
Larger Leiden plates	Rajaraja I – Rajendra I	Grant of Anaimangalam village to the Chudamani Vihara at Nagapattinam; kept at Leiden University, Netherlands
Thiruvalangadu copper plates	Rajendra I	Chola genealogy and the Ganga expedition

- **Copper plates:** records of land grants (brahmadeya, devadana, pallichandam); usually bilingual – a Sanskrit part (in Grantha) giving the genealogy and a Tamil part giving the boundaries and terms of the grant.
- **Meykeerthi:** from Rajaraja I onwards, Chola inscriptions open with a historical preamble listing the king's victories (e.g. Rajaraja's "Thirumagal pola perunilach selviyum").
- **Hero stones:** raised for warriors who died in battle or cattle raids – found in Tamili, Vatteluttu and Tamil; the Chengam hero stones are well known.

Epigraphy in Tamil Nadu – Institutions

Institution / event	Details
ASI Epigraphy Branch	Founded in 1886 at Bengaluru; moved to Ootacamund (Ooty) in 1903 and to Mysuru in 1966; publishes the "South Indian Inscriptions" volumes
Tamil estampages to Chennai	After a 2021 order of the Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court, over 20,000 estampages of Tamil inscriptions were moved from Mysuru to the ASI office in Fort St George, Chennai; the court said the Chennai branch should be named "Epigraphy Branch – Tamil"
Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology	Formed in 1961; excavations at Keeladi, Sivakalai, Korkai and others; copying and publishing of inscriptions
Classical-language status (2004)	Tamili inscriptions are key evidence of the antiquity of Tamil

Tamil Nadu Angle

- **Arittapatti:** Arittapatti in Madurai district, with Tamili inscriptions and Jain stone beds, was declared Tamil Nadu's first **Biodiversity Heritage Site** in 2022 – conservation joining culture and

ecology.

- **Challenges:** loss of inscriptions during temple renovation (sandblasting, painting), quarrying and low awareness.
- **Way forward:** digital copying and online publication of all inscriptions, courses in epigraphy, and conservation with local participation.

Writing Mains Answers (Group 1 / Group 2)

Contribution of inscriptions to the history of Tamil Nadu (about 200–250 words)

- **Introduction:** a large share of India's inscriptions is in Tamil Nadu; from Tamili to Tamil.
- **Political history:** Ashokan edicts, Pugalur (Cheras), Mangulam (Pandyas), meykeerthis.
- **Administration:** Uthiramerur – kudavolai; land survey and taxes.
- **Economy and society:** land grants, temple administration, merchant guilds, the hero-stone tradition.
- **Religion and culture:** Jain stone beds, Leiden plates (Buddhism), Kudumiyanmalai (music).
- **Conclusion:** firm evidence that checks literary sources; conservation and digital records are essential.

Evolution of the Tamil script (about 150 words)

- Tamili – cave shelters, pottery, Pulimankombai.
- Vatteluttu – Pandya and Chera regions; Grantha – for Sanskrit.
- Present Tamil script through Pallava–Chola forms; the 1978 script reform.
- Conclusion: a continuous script tradition – a basis of classical status.

Practice: Match the Following

Item	Match
Pugalur inscription	Three generations of Chera kings
Jambai inscription	Atiyan Neduman Anji – Satiyaputra
Uthiramerur	Kudavolai – Parantaka I
Larger Leiden plates	Chudamani Vihara, Nagapattinam
Mandagapattu	Mahendravarman – Vichitrachitta
Pulimankombai	Tamili hero stones – Theni

Common Mistakes to Avoid

- Ashoka's edicts are not found in Tamil Nadu; they only mention the Tamil kingdoms.
- Grantha is a script used for Sanskrit, not a language.
- Vatteluttu was widespread in the Pandya and Chera regions; it was not the main script of Pallava inscriptions.
- The "6th century BCE" date for Keeladi Tamili is the view of the State Archaeology Department's report; mention that the debate continues.

- The ASI Epigraphy Branch is headquartered at Mysuru; the Chennai office is the Tamil epigraphy branch.

Key Terms – Tamil / English (for the bilingual paper)

தமிழ்	English
கல்வெட்டியல்	Epigraphy
கல்வெட்டுப் படி	Estampage
செப்பேடு	Copper-plate grant
நடுகல்	Hero stone
கற்படுக்கை	Stone bed (for Jain monks)
மெய்க்கீர்த்தி	Royal prasasti (historical preamble)
வட்டெழுத்து	Vatteluttu (rounded script)
மட்பாண்டக் கீறல்	Pottery graffiti

Quick Revision Table

Year / period	Event
3rd century BCE	Ashoka's Rock Edicts II and XIII – mention of the Tamil kingdoms
c. 2nd century BCE	Mangulam Tamili inscriptions – Pandya Nedunchezhiyan
c. 2nd century CE	Pugalur – three generations of Cheras
7th century CE	Mandagapattu – Mahendravarman
919 and 921 CE	Uthiramerur inscriptions
1886 / 1903 / 1966	ASI Epigraphy Branch founded (Bengaluru) / moved to Ooty / moved to Mysuru
1961	Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology
1978	Tamil script reform implemented
2006	Pulimankombai Tamili hero stones discovered
2021	Madurai Bench orders Tamil estampages moved to Chennai
2022	Arittapatti – Tamil Nadu's first Biodiversity Heritage Site

TNPSC Key Points (PYQ-style facts)

- Oldest Tamil script – Tamili (Tamil-Brahmi).
- Vatteluttu – Pandya and Chera regions; Grantha – for writing Sanskrit.
- Mangulam – Pandya Nedunchezhiyan; Pugalur – three generations of Cheras; Jambai – Athiyaman (Satiyaputra).

- Pulimankombai – Theni – 2006 – Tamili hero stones – cattle raid.
- Ashoka's Rock Edicts II and XIII – Cholas, Pandyas, Satiyaputras, Keralaputras.
- Uthiramerur – 919, 921 – Parantaka I – kudavolai.
- Larger Leiden plates – Chudamani Vihara, Nagapattinam – Leiden (Netherlands).
- Velvikudi plates – reference to the Kalabhras – Pandyas.
- Inscriptions in India c. 1 lakh; in Tamil Nadu c. 60,000 (ASI 2005, as cited).
- Early Tamil Epigraphy – Iravatham Mahadevan (2003).

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Tamili (Tamil-Brahmi)?

Tamili is the Brahmi script adapted to Tamil sounds. It has letters peculiar to Tamil such as zha, lla, rra and nna. It is found in cave shelters such as Mangulam, on excavated pottery from Keeladi and Kodumanal, and on the Pulimankombai hero stones.

How do Vatteluttu and Grantha differ?

Vatteluttu is a rounded Tamil script that grew out of Tamili and was widespread in the Pandya and Chera regions. Grantha was used in the Tamil country to write Sanskrit, and the Malayalam script grew out of it. Grantha letters such as ja, sha, sa and ha have entered Tamil.

Why are the Pulimankombai hero stones important?

Found in 2006 at Pulimankombai in Theni district, these hero stones carry inscriptions in Tamili. One records a stone for a warrior killed in a cattle raid – direct inscriptional evidence for the hero-stone tradition and the cattle-raid warfare described in Sangam literature.

How many inscriptions are there in Tamil Nadu?

Citing a 2005 ASI report, it is stated that of about one lakh inscriptions found in India, about 60,000 are in Tamil Nadu. After a 2021 court order, over 20,000 estampages of Tamil inscriptions were moved from Mysuru to Chennai.

Why are the Uthiramerur inscriptions important?

These inscriptions of 919 and 921 CE, from the reign of Parantaka Chola I, describe in detail the qualifications, disqualifications and procedure for choosing village sabha members by the kudavolai method – a primary source on early Tamil local self-government.

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Practice questions

1. What is the oldest script of Tamil?

A. Tamili (Tamil-Brahmi)
B. Grantha
C. Vatteluttu
D. Kolezhuthu

2. Which script was used in the Tamil country to write Sanskrit?

A. Vatteluttu
B. Grantha
C. Tamili
D. Kharosthi

3. In which district are the Pulimankombai hero stones?

A. Madurai
B. Sivaganga
C. Theni
D. Karur

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4. In which year were the Pulimankombai Tamili hero stones found?

A. 1996
B. 2006
C. 2014
D. 2019

5. Which Tamili inscription names three generations of Chera kings?

A. Pugalur
B. Jambai
C. Mangulam
D. Arittapatti

6. Which Tamili inscription mentions the Pandya Nedunchezhiyan?

A. Pugalur
B. Mangulam
C. Jambai
D. Mandagapattu

7. Which inscription helped identify Ashoka's "Satiyaputras" with the Athiyaman line?

A. Pugalur
B. Uthiramerur
C. Jambai
D. Kudumiyanmalai

8. Which of Ashoka's Rock Edicts mention the Tamil kingdoms?

A. I and IV
B. VII and XII
C. V and IX
D. II and XIII

9. To whose reign do the Uthiramerur inscriptions belong?

A. Parantaka I
B. Rajaraja I
C. Rajendra I
D. Mahendravarman

10. Which copper plates record the grant to the Chudamani Vihara at Nagapattinam?

A. Velvikudi
B. Larger Leiden
C. Thiruvalangadu
D. Kasakudi

11. Which Pandya copper-plate grant refers to the Kalabhra interregnum?

A. Leiden plates
B. Anbil plates
C. Velvikudi plates
D. Thiruvalangadu plates

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12. Where is the inscription of the king titled "Vichitrachitta"?

A. Mangulam
B. Uthiramerur
C. Pugalur
D. Mandagapattu

13. The Kudumiyanmalai inscription is key evidence for which field?

A. Music
B. Astronomy
C. Medicine
D. Sea trade

14. To which city was the ASI Epigraphy Branch moved in 1966?

A. Chennai
B. Mysuru
C. Ooty
D. New Delhi

15. Who wrote "Early Tamil Epigraphy"?

A. R. Nagaswamy
B. K.A. Nilakanta Sastri
C. Iravatham Mahadevan
D. C.W. Damodaram Pillai

16. In which year did the Tamil Nadu Government implement Periyar's Tamil script reform?

A. 1956
B. 1967
C. 1978
D. 1989

17. Which place with Tamili inscriptions was declared Tamil Nadu's first Biodiversity Heritage Site?

A. Arittapatti
B. Sittannavasal
C. Keeladi
D. Mangulam

18. Quseir al-Qadim, where Tamili graffiti were found, is in which country?

A. Oman
B. Egypt
C. Thailand
D. Sri Lanka

19. Which court ordered the Tamil estampages to be moved from Mysuru to Chennai?

A. Supreme Court
B. Karnataka High Court
C. Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court
D. National Green Tribunal

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20. What is the preamble listing the king's victories at the start of Chola inscriptions called?

A. Payiram
B. Sasanam
C. Pathigam
D. Meykeerthi

Answers with explanations

1. A) Tamili (Tamil-Brahmi) – Tamili – Sangam age; Vatteluttu and Grantha came later.

2. B) Grantha – Grantha; the Malayalam script grew out of it.

3. C) Theni – Theni district, Vaigai valley.

4. B) 2006 – 2006.

5. A) Pugalur – Pugalur (Arunattarmalai, Karur).

6. B) Mangulam – Mangulam (Madurai).

7. C) Jambai – Jambai – "Satiyaputo Atiyan Neduman Anji".

8. D) II and XIII – Rock Edicts II and XIII.

9. A) Parantaka I – Parantaka Chola I – 919 and 921 CE.

10. B) Larger Leiden – The Larger Leiden plates – kept in the Netherlands.

11. C) Velvikudi plates – Velvikudi – Nedunjadaiyan Parantaka (8th century).

12. D) Mandagapattu – Mandagapattu – Mahendravarman I.

13. A) Music – An inscription with musical notation (Pudukkottai).

14. B) Mysuru – Bengaluru 1886; Ooty 1903; Mysuru 1966.

15. C) Iravatham Mahadevan – Iravatham Mahadevan, 2003.

16. C) 1978 – 1978.

17. A) Arittapatti – Arittapatti, Madurai district – 2022.

18. B) Egypt – Egypt; Khor Rori – Oman; Khuan Luk Pat – Thailand.

19. C) Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court – Madurai Bench, 2021.

20. D) Meykeerthi – Meykeerthi – from Rajaraja I onwards.

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