

Anthropomorphic Figurine at Vembakottai Excavation

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Abstract:

Indigenous peoples have occupied South India for over 10,000 years; yet the earliest anthropomorphic figurines were only manufactured in the past several thousand years. This emergence of human figurine traditions in South India is correlated with increased settlement permanence, and community size related to key demographic thresholds. In this study, I present an overview of unreported figurine assemblages from the Vembakottai excavation Iron Age/early historical period in Illinois and use these assemblages as a jumping-off point to examine the emergence of early human figurines in South India. To illustrate the importance of the correlation between anthropomorphic figurines and settling down, I focus on what figurines do that encouraged the emergence of widespread traditions of figurine manufacture and use as the size of affiliative communities increased. This study involves examining early figurines and their broader context through the lens of a model of the socioeconomic dynamics of settling down in conjunction with an examination of the materiality of miniature 3-D anthropomorphic figurines. Key to this latter perspective is understanding not what figurines represent but what they do.

KEYWORDS:

figurines, South India, Tamil Nadu, socioeconomic dynamics, materiality, ritualistic,

Introduction

This study focuses on early anthropomorphic clay figurines in Tamil Nadu and the timing of their appearance in relation to periods of important changes in settlement, community, and ceremonialism. I interrogate the nature of these correlations by asking what figurines do that encouraged the emergence of widespread traditions of figurine manufacture and use as people were settling down? Answering this question involves examining early figurines and their broader context through a model of the socioeconomic dynamics of settling down in conjunction with the materiality of miniature 3-D anthropomorphic figurines. To build this argument, I present an overview of unreported figurine assemblages from the Early historical period in Illinois and use these as a jumping-off point to discuss the emergence of early human figurines in

Tamil Nadu. Overall, this example illustrates general patterns and important variations associated with alternative pathways to settling down and making anthropomorphic figurines.

Early anthropomorphic Figurine in Tamil Nadu

The first widespread anthropomorphic figurine tradition in the region occurs during the Iron Age period (circa 1200 BCE–500 BCE). These clay figurines have been recovered from burial and habitation of settlements and mounds. My focus here is on clay figurines as these are the most ubiquitous anthropomorphic objects while acknowledging that these are part of a larger pattern of human representation that emerges in the Tamil Nadu.



Figure.1. Anthropomorphic Figurine

This anthropomorphic figurine, likely crafted from terracotta, represents a stylized human form rendered in a highly simplified and symbolic manner. The figure is characterized by a disproportionately large head and a compact, cylindrical body, a common feature in early folk or ritualistic representations. The facial features are minimal yet expressive. The eyes are depicted as large, circular perforations that pass completely through the head, possibly intended for suspension, insertion of decorative elements, or symbolic

emphasis. The nose is rendered as a small, protruding ridge, while the mouth is either faintly indicated or absent, contributing to the abstract nature of the face. A raised band encircles the upper portion of the head, which may represent a headdress, coiffure, or ornamental headgear.

The torso is crudely modeled, with slight projections suggesting arms or bodily adornments. One prominent rounded protrusion on the chest area may indicate a pendant, breast, or ritual marking. The lower portion of the figurine appears to merge into a rounded base, allowing it to stand upright, although the base is irregular and roughly finished. The surface of the figurine is coarse, with visible firing marks and weathering, indicating exposure to burial conditions over time. The uneven texture and lack of fine detailing suggest it was handmade rather than mold-produced. Such figurines are often associated with domestic, ritual, or symbolic functions in early historic or protohistoric contexts. The perforated eyes and schematic form may point toward a non-naturalistic, possibly spiritual or protective role rather than a purely decorative one.

The anthropomorphic figurine can be contextualized within the broader archaeological framework of Vembakottai, located in the Virudhunagar district of Tamil Nadu, an important multi-period habitation site situated along the banks of the Vaippar River. Excavations conducted by the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology have revealed continuous human occupation in this region dating back at least 2,000 years, with evidence extending from the Neolithic through the Early Historic and into the medieval periods.

Systematic excavations across multiple phases have yielded a rich assemblage of over 12,900 artefacts, including terracotta objects, shell bangles, glass and crystal beads, copper coins, iron implements, and industrial debris. These findings suggest that Vembakottai functioned not only as a habitation site but also as a craft-production center, particularly for shell bangle and glass bead of particular relevance to the present figurine is the discovery of terracotta human representations (clay dolls) from controlled excavation contexts. One such example—a small male figurine with defined facial features and headdress—was recovered from a stratified layer and attributed to an Iron Age or early historic phase. These finds indicate that anthropomorphic terracotta objects formed a recurring element of material culture at the site. Within this archaeological setting, such figurines are typically interpreted as objects of ritual, symbolic, or domestic significance.

Their stylized features, perforations, and handmade nature align with a broader South Indian tradition of non-naturalistic human representations, often associated with fertility beliefs, protective functions, or household cult practices. The presence of trade-related artefacts, including semi-precious beads and coins,

further suggests that Vembakottai was integrated into wider exchange networks during the Sangam period. This socio-economic complexity provides an important backdrop for understanding the figurine not merely as an isolated artefact, but as part of a vibrant cultural landscape involving craft production, ritual practices, and regional trade.

Typological Comparison with Keeladi and Adichanallur Figurines,

The anthropomorphic figurine from Vembakottai can be better understood through comparison with similar terracotta traditions from Keeladi and Adichanallur, two key archaeological sites in Tamil Nadu known for their rich corpus of anthropomorphic representations. At Keeladi, excavations associated with the Early Historic (Sangam Age) phase have yielded terracotta figurines that are generally more refined and proportionate, often exhibiting clearer anatomical features and occasionally decorative elements such as ornaments or hairstyles. These figurines tend toward a naturalistic style, with less emphasis on perforation and more on surface detailing. In contrast, the Vembakottai specimen displays a highly schematic and abstract form, with exaggerated features such as large perforated eyes and minimal facial detailing. This suggests a different functional or symbolic emphasis, possibly prioritizing ritual abstraction over realism.

Adichanallur, dated broadly to the Iron Age–Early Historic transition, presents another useful comparison. Anthropomorphic objects from this site, though less numerous than its famous burial assemblages, often show symbolic stylization and ritual associations, particularly in funerary contexts. While Adichanallur figurines may include stylized human forms, they generally lack the distinctive perforated ocular features seen in the Vembakottai example. The perforations in the present figurine could indicate a unique local tradition—possibly for suspension, insertion of inlays, or enhancing symbolic “vision”—a feature not commonly emphasized in Adichanallur material.

In contrast, Keeladi figurines reflect urban craft specialization, while Adichanallur material is more closely tied to mortuary and ritual contexts. Thus, the Vembakottai specimen appears to represent a localized stylistic variant within the broader South Indian terracotta tradition, combining elements of ritual symbolism with vernacular craftsmanship. Its distinctive perforated eyes and compact morphology may indicate a specific cultural or functional role unique to the Vembakottai assemblage.

Comparative Typology Table

| Feature | Vembakottai Figurine | Keeladi Figurines | Adichanallur Figurines |
|-------------------------|--|---|--|
| Material | Terracotta (coarse, handmade) | Fine terracotta, often well-levigated | Terracotta, sometimes associated with burial goods |
| Manufacturing Technique | Hand-modeled, low finishing | More refined modeling; occasional mold use | Hand-modeled; moderate finishing |
| Form & Proportion | Stylized; large head, compact body | More proportionate, semi-naturalistic | Stylized but less exaggerated than Vembakottai |
| Facial Features | Minimal; perforated circular eyes, simple nose | Defined eyes, nose, sometimes mouth and ornaments | Simplified features; rarely perforated |
| Special Traits | Through-holes for eyes (possible suspension/inlay) | Decorative detailing (hair, jewelry) | Contextual association with burials/rituals |

| | | | |
|---------------------|--|---------------------------------------|---|
| Surface Treatment | Rough, uneven, visible firing marks | Smoother finish, occasionally slipped | Moderate finishing; less emphasis on polish |
| Context of Recovery | Habitation and craft-production site | Urban settlement (Sangam Age) | Primarily funerary (urn burials, grave goods) |
| Probable Function | Ritual/household cult object, protective or symbolic | Domestic, decorative, possibly ritual | Ritual/funerary symbolism |
| Craft Tradition | Folk/vernacular | Specialized/urban craft | Ritual–mortuary tradition |

Based on stylistic and technological features, the Vembakottai anthropomorphic figurine can be tentatively dated to the Iron Age–Early Historic transition (c. 300 BCE – 300 CE), with a stronger likelihood toward the Early Historic/Sangam Age horizon.

1. Manufacturing Technique

The figurine's hand-modeled, non-molded construction and coarse fabric align with early terracotta traditions seen across South India prior to widespread craft standardization. Such traits are consistent with assemblages from early habitation levels at Vembakottai.

2. Stylization and Symbolism

The exaggerated head, simplified torso, and absence of naturalistic detailing point toward symbolic representation, a feature commonly associated with Iron Age and early historic folk traditions rather than later classical phases.

3. Perforated Eyes (Diagnostic Feature)

The large, drilled eye perforations are particularly significant. While not widely paralleled at Keeladi or Adichanallur, perforations are known in early terracotta traditions for:

Suspension (amuletic use)

Ritual activation (symbolic “vision”)

Attachment of organic or decorative inlays

This feature suggests a functional dimension beyond mere representation, reinforcing an early ritual or protective role.

4. Contextual Correlation with Vembakottai Assemblage

Excavations at Vembakottai have yielded:

Terracotta figurines

Bead-making debris

Shell bangle industry evidence

Early Historic coins and ceramics

This places the figurine within a complex, craft-oriented settlement of the Sangam period, where both utilitarian and symbolic artefacts coexisted.

Interpretation

Taken together, the Vembakottai figurine represents a localized vernacular expression within the broader South Indian terracotta tradition. Unlike the more refined and urban-influenced examples from Keeladi, or the funerary-associated materials from Adichanallur, this object likely belonged to a domestic or community-level ritual sphere.

Its defining features—especially the perforated eyes—may indicate:

Use as a protective amulet or talisman

Association with household worship or ancestor veneration

A role in folk ritual practices tied to fertility, protection, or identity

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