

# the architect



## An Interrupted Inheritance

*Stories from the north*



Journal of the  
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THE ARCHITECT

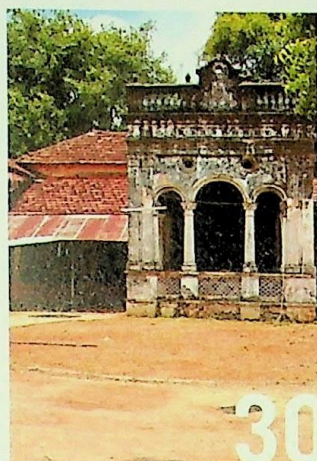
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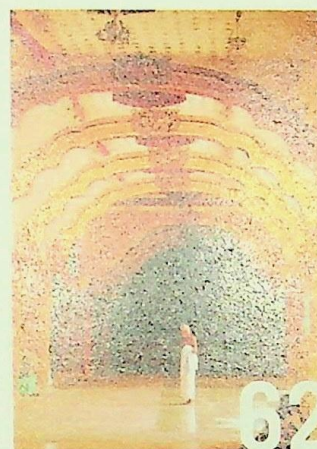
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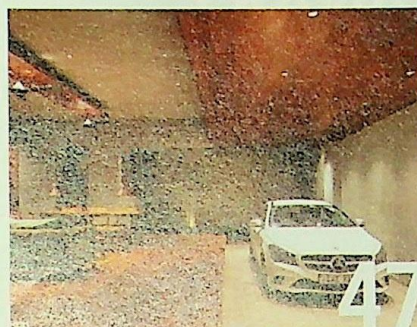
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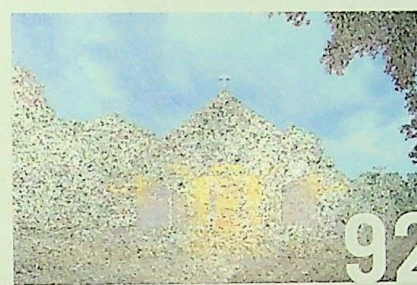
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COVER VISUAL  
Nallur Kandaswamy Kovil, circa 1909  
Letterpress Print (1940-50)  
Kannan Press (est. 1940)

PHOTO CREDITS  
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# REMNANTS OF RESIDENCY

## UNCOVERING TWO CARVED WELLS IN JAFFNA

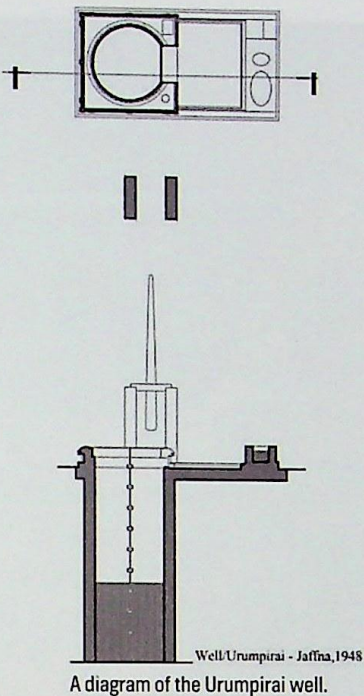
BY Dr. Packiyanathan Ahilan

Archaeologists in western Cyprus discovered a group of wells that are believed to be the oldest in the world and proved it was 10,000 years old using radiocarbon dating. The oldest wells found at South Indian and Sri Lankan archaeological sites are estimated to be more than 2,000 years old.

Archaeologically, wells are earthen constructions created by driving, drilling or excavating to access waterways found amidst permeable rock layers underground. Terracotta, stone or brick were used to line the building; wood was occasionally used to line wells dating back to the early Neolithic period.

Wells differ historically in their design. They range from a straightforward scoop in a dry stream's silt to Iran's *qanats*, India's step wells and *sakiehs* and Jaffna's *sutra kinaru*, to square and round wells in many parts of the world.

Tamil culture has a rich history of wells that vary widely in terms of location and architectural patterns.



TAMIL WORDS	ENGLISH EQUIVALENT	EXPLANATION
<i>Thodu kinaru</i>	Dig well	A place where water is dug out from time to time in and near a river
<i>Azh kinaru</i>	Deep well	A well near the seaside
<i>Urai kinaru</i>	Ring well	A well lined with terracotta or stone
<i>Kattu kinaru</i>	Built well	A well cut in gravel, and lined with stone and brick
<i>Kumuli</i>	Rock cut well	A well bored through rock, causing a spring to rise up
<i>Koovam</i>	Abnormal well	An irregularly shaped well
<i>Kooval</i>	Shallow well	A pit like a shallow well
<i>Keni or nadai kinaru</i>		A well with a walkway to reach the water
<i>Pillai kinaru</i>	Middle well	A well in the middle of a tank
<i>Pongu kinaru</i>	Pouring well	A well with bubbling spring water
<i>Teertha kinaru</i>	Holy water well	A well in a temple used for bathing deities



The top view of the uncovered Urumpirai well.

In Jaffna, the well is the main unit of a traditional house cluster named 'veedu.' The *veedu* is surrounded by a *veli* or *mathil* (fence or compound wall) with a *sankadapadalai* (gate-house). Within the premises of a *veedu*, the residential house, *kottil* (cattle shed), *kinaradi* (well) and *mutram* (courtyard) are the main units.

Traditionally, digging the well is the first auspicious activity in building a house. According to the *Vastu Shastra*, a well should be located in the *neer moolai* (water corner), based on the birth chart of the house owner, by employing traditional methods for scanning the earth for a good spring.

Similar to a shrine room in a house in Jaffna, a well is regarded as an auspicious unit of the house. In this regard, the inhabitants of these houses never flush the water from wells when there is pollution and water plays a major role in purifying the home. In certain prestigious traditional homes, a small room for the god Bhairava (which is known as '*kinatradi vairavar*' or 'Bhairava of Well') is built along with the compound wall of the well.

Kal Kotthiyar and Kal Ottar were the prime castes of ancient Jaffna that dug and carved stones for constructing wells. The subgroups of these communities are known for their special skills in sculpting. They mainly work on *vellai kal* (white stone), which are predominantly used in old temples, some parts of houses and wells in particular. This hard stone symbolises social hierarchies in terms of the castes and classes of certain communities. We have to understand two carved wells discussed in this essay as seen in their socio-historical context.

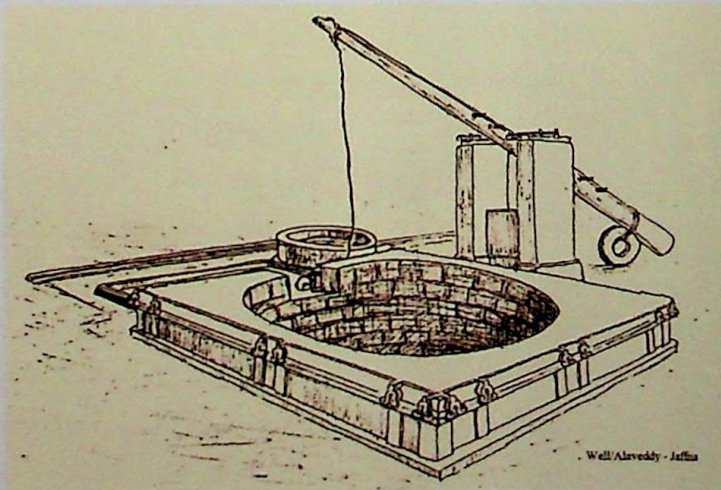
**Urumpirai well**

The inscription on the inner wall of this well mentions that it was constructed in 1949 with a small prayer for their Kula Deivam (family deity) Karunakara Pillayar. Varanni Velupillai, the owner of this well, was a businessman trading tobacco and belonged to the Vellalar caste. The well stands as a sign of his wealth – the surplus money spent on architecture.

The well also has subunits for various needs in relation to using water – *thotti* (tab), *salavai kal* (a stone for washing) and *man-jal kal* (a stone for grinding turmeric or for females to use on their bodies after baths in those days). In the old days, the *thula* (a long palmyra trunk and bucket connected by rope) was used to fetch water from the well. Later, it was replaced by various water fetching mechanisms.



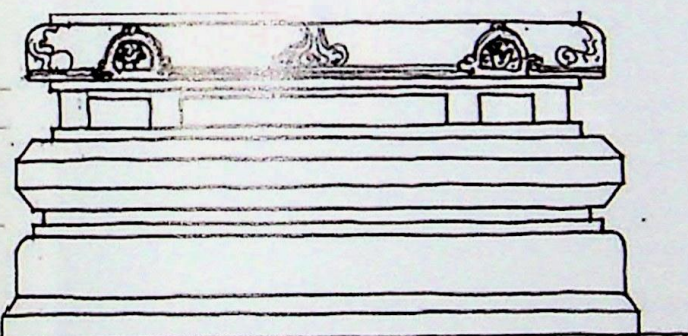
The carved sides of the Urumpirai well.



A sketch of the Alaveddy well.



Samples of Dravidian architecture – the *athistanam* with *kudu*.



Samples of Dravidian architecture – the *uppa pittem*.



The carved details of the Alaveddy well.

### Alaveddy well

This well also shares the same features with the only difference being the scale of the well. The owner of this well, S. Thomatharampillai, belongs to the Udayar community (the village headsman during the British period of Sri Lanka's history) of the Vellalar caste. It was built around the 1940s.

### Architectural features of the wells

The carved surrounding square walls are the predominant characters of these wells. With white stones, deep carvings are possible. The texture of the stone, and its actual and visual weight makes it monumental.

The structure of these wells followed certain elements of Dravidian architecture. In particular, a few selected bands from the *uppa pittem* and *athistanam* of the bottom part of a building are important components of temple architecture. The ornamental part of the *kudu* is taken from the *sikaram* (upper part of Saivite temples) and other parts of the architecture. The *teertha kinaru* (wells for bathing deities) of the temples – especially the squareness rather than roundness of the outer shape – was influenced by the aim of domesticating these temple structures.

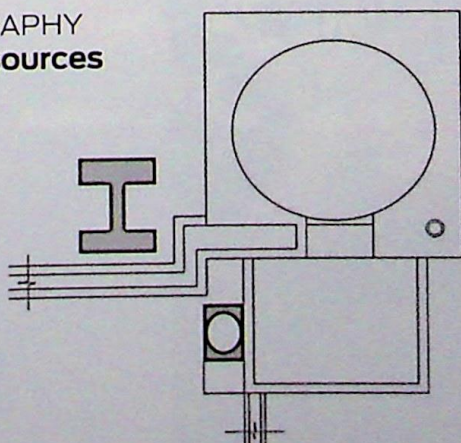
Through the selection and reformulation of Dravidian architecture, Sri Lankan architectural history has shown innovative adaptations in the construction of wells. This also underlines the conspicuous impact of Dravidian architectural traditions on Sri Lankan architecture.

These little stories of architecture that question the meta-narrative of Sri Lankan architectural history open up new avenues to read, think and understand the 'Lanka Dravidian School' of architecture, and its evolution in early, modern and contemporary Sri Lanka.

Dr. Packiyathan Ahilan is a Senior Lecturer in Art History at the University of Jaffna's Department of Fine Arts. His research interests lie in visual art history and theory, theatre history, heritage practices, cultural politics and poetry studies, as well as archaeology – some of which he seeks to encompass in an archival sense through architectural recordings. His publications include two poetry collections – *Pathunkukuzhi Naatkal* (2001) and *Saramakavigal* (2011) – and the essay collection *Kalathin Vilimpu: Yalapanathin Marapurimaiyum avatrai pathukaathalum* (2015). He remains one of the important voices among contemporary Tamil poets in Sri Lanka.

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### PHOTOGRAPHY Author's sources



Well Alaveddy - Jaffna

A plan view of the Alaveddy well.