

Tracing Siddha Toxicology: Archaeological and Epigraphical Evidence of *Nanju Maruthuvam* in Tamil Nadu

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ABSTRACT

The Siddha System of Medicine encompasses a specialized branch known as *Nanju Maruthuvam*, which deals with toxicology, including the identification, management, and therapeutic use of poisons. This study aims to document and analyze the archaeological evidence supporting the historical existence and practice of Nanju Maruthuvam in Tamil Nadu. A descriptive research design was adopted, utilizing data collected from inscriptions, temple records, archaeological reports, and museum archives.

Primary data were gathered through field visits to selected site museums and epigraphical sources, while secondary data were obtained from institutional libraries, including the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology and Connemara Public Library. A total of 20 inscriptions across various districts were examined, out of which 10 inscriptions from 7 districts showed direct relevance to toxicological practices. These inscriptions document land grants such as *Visha Virutti*, *Vaidya Virutti*, and *Vishaharabhoga*, indicating institutional recognition and patronage of poison specialists and physicians.

Key findings highlight the prevalence of toxicological practices related to snakebite management, insect envenomation, and the use of medicinal oils and ritualistic healing methods. Sites such as Tiruppur, Coimbatore, Tirunelveli, Theni, Salem, Kanchipuram, and Madurai revealed substantial evidence of Nanju Maruthuvam practices through temple inscriptions and cultural beliefs, including Garuda worship as an antidotal tradition.

The study demonstrates that Nanju Maruthuvam was a well-established and socially supported medical practice in ancient Tamil society, closely integrated with religious institutions and royal administration. The convergence of archaeological and literary evidence underscores the scientific and cultural significance of Siddha toxicology and its role in traditional healthcare systems.

Keywords: Nanju Maruthuvam, Siddha toxicology, Archaeology, Inscriptions, Tamil Nadu, Visha Virutti, Traditional medicine

INTRODUCTION

The Siddha System of Medicine is one of the oldest traditional systems of healing in India, predominantly practiced in Tamil Nadu. It is a holistic medical system that integrates

physical, mental, and spiritual well-being, with a specialized branch known as *Nanju Maruthuvam*, which deals with toxicology, including the identification, management, and therapeutic application of toxic substances.

Archaeology is the scientific discipline that investigates human history and prehistory through the excavation and analysis of artifacts, structures, inscriptions, and other physical evidence. By employing systematic methodologies, archaeology provides valuable insights into the cultural, technological, and medical practices of ancient societies.

In Tamil Nadu, archaeological research and heritage conservation are primarily overseen by the Archaeological Survey of India and the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology. Since its establishment in 1961, the State Department has played a crucial role in preserving monuments and conducting systematic excavations across the region. India, as a whole, possesses more than 3,600 protected archaeological sites and monuments under the supervision of national authorities.

An archaeological site refers to a location where evidence of past human activity is preserved, ranging from prehistoric settlements to historically significant monuments and living heritage structures. These sites serve as repositories of cultural and scientific knowledge, offering insights into ancient lifestyles, technologies, and healthcare systems.

Nanju Maruthuvam, as a branch of Siddha medicine, represents an advanced traditional system of toxicology. From an interdisciplinary perspective, the concept of archaeology in toxicology involves examining historical records, inscriptions, artifacts, and sites to understand how ancient societies perceived, utilized, and managed toxic substances. This intersection of archaeology and toxicology provides valuable information on the health practices, environmental interactions, and medical knowledge of early civilizations.

Tamil Nadu is home to several historically significant archaeological sites, including Mahabalipuram, Kanchipuram, Thanjavur, Madurai, Coimbatore, Tiruppur, Cuddalore, and Tirunelveli. These sites have yielded significant archaeological and epigraphical evidence relevant to traditional medicine and toxicological practices.

AIM

To document the archaeological evidence of *Nanju Maruthuvam* (Siddha toxicology) in Tamil Nadu.

OBJECTIVES

Primary Objective

To systematically document epigraphical and archaeological evidence related to *Nanju Maruthuvam* from selected sites in Tamil Nadu.

Secondary Objective

To correlate the identified archaeological evidence with descriptions of toxicological practices in the Siddha System of Medicine literature.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design

A descriptive, qualitative study was conducted to analyze archaeological and epigraphical evidence related to Siddha toxicology.

Study Period

The study was carried out over a period of **four months**.

Study Setting

Data collection was performed through both institutional and field-based sources:

- **Library Sources:** Archival and textual data were collected from the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology, Chennai, and the Connemara Public Library, Chennai.
- **Field Sources:** Relevant data were obtained through visits to selected site museums and archaeological locations across Tamil Nadu.

Data Collection

Epigraphical records, inscriptions, and archaeological reports were reviewed to identify references to toxicological practices, including terms such as *Visha Virutti*, *Vaidya Virutti*, and *Vishaharabhoga*.

Data Analysis

The collected data were categorized and analyzed descriptively to identify patterns, geographical distribution, and historical significance of Nanju Maruthuvam practices.

KEY ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

1.Chokkanathar Temple Inscription, Kolinjivadi (Tiruppur District)

The inscription of the Chokkanathar Temple at Tiruppur, dated to 1303 AD, originates from Kolinjivadi in Tiruppur district of Tamil Nadu, India. Written in the Tamil language using the Tamil script, it records details of land grants made by a king for Visavirutti, which refers to the profession of a poison doctor. The inscription mentions the allocation of two *kā araikkani* lands located in Viracola Mannarai, Kulottunga Chola Mannarai, and Kumanarayan, granted to the Sokkanathar Temple. This historical record is documented in Tiruppur Mavatta Kalvettugal (pages 185–186), published by the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology, Chennai, in 2012.

2.Meenakshi Amman Temple Inscription, Kolinjivadi (Tiruppur District)

The Meenakshi Amman Temple inscription from Kolinjivadi in Tiruppur district, Tamil Nadu, India, dated to 1268 AD, is an important historical record written in the Tamil language using the Tamil script. This inscription documents a land grant made for Visavirutti, the profession of a poison doctor, indicating the recognized role of toxicology in the Siddha medical tradition. It records the allocation of one *ma* of land along with an additional half *ma araikkani* in the region of Kumanarayan, granted to the Meenakshi Amman Temple to support this specialized medical practice. The inscription highlights how institutional and economic support was provided for healthcare professions through

temple endowments. This information is documented in Tiruppur Mavatta Kalvettugal (pages 195–196), published by the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology, Chennai, in 2012.

3. Tiruppur Kovil Vadakku Suvar Inscription, Kolinjivadi (Tiruppur District)

The Tiruppur Kovil Vadakku Suvar inscription, located at Kolinjivadi in Tiruppur District, Tamil Nadu, dates back to the 12th century and is written in Tamil script. It records a historic land grant made for Visavirutti, referring to the profession of a poison doctor in ancient Tamil society. During this period, practitioners played a vital role in treating venomous bites and poison-related conditions. The inscription demonstrates that such medical practices were formally recognized and supported through royal patronage, particularly through grants of land. This information is supported by Subramanian (2015) in Land Grants and Medical Practices in Ancient Tamil Nadu: Epigraphic Evidence of Siddha Toxicology, published by the Tamil Nadu Historical Research Society.

4.Maneesar Kovil Karuvarai Therukusuvar Inscription, Annur (Coimbatore District)

The Maneesar Kovil Karuvarai Therukusuvar inscription, located at Annur in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, is written in Tamil script and is dated to around 103 AD. It records a notable event involving an individual named Pullan from Kawaiyanputnar, who commissioned the creation of images of himself and his wife after recovering from a beetle bite. This inscription highlights an early cultural practice in the Kongu region, where creating images served both as an act of devotion and a way to commemorate recovery from illness. It provides valuable insight into the intersection of health, faith, and social customs in ancient Tamil society. This information is documented in Coimbatore Mavatta Kalvettugal Thogudi 2 (2012), published by the Tamil Nadu Department of Archaeology, Chennai.

5. Maneesar Kovil Karuvarai Theruku Kilakku Suvar Inscription, Annur (Coimbatore District)

The Maneesar Kovil Karuvarai Theruku Vadakku Suvar inscription, located at Maneesar Kovil in Annur, Avinashi, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, dates to the 12th century and is written in Tamil script. This inscription records that an official named Athikari Veeracholadevan, after being bitten by a beetle, installed a Shanti Lamp at the Easwaran Temple in Maniyur. The act reflects a devotional practice associated with seeking relief, recovery, or spiritual protection following illness or harm. It highlights the cultural and religious responses to health-related incidents in medieval Tamil society, where ritual offerings were made as acts of gratitude or healing. This record is documented in Coimbatore Mavatta Kalvettugal Thogudi 2 (2012), published by the Tamil Nadu Department of Archaeology, Chennai.

6. Oil Well Inscription at Vanamamalai Perumal Temple, Nanguneri (Tirunelveli District)

The oil well inscription at the Vanamamalai Thothatrinathan Perumal Temple dates to the 13th century and is written in Tamil script. It records the traditional belief that the sacred oil found in the temple well possesses healing properties, particularly for curing various skin diseases. This highlights the integration of religious practices with therapeutic traditions in ancient Tamil society, where temple-based remedies were widely trusted for health and well-being.

7. Erasakkanayakkanur Inscription on the Garuda Pillar, Theni (Theni District)

The Garuda pillar inscription at Erasakkanayakkanur, dating to the 18th–19th century and composed in Tamil script, reflects a prevalent cultural belief in the curative power of divine worship. It states that devotees believed serpent venom could be effectively neutralized through the worship of Garuda. This inscription illustrates the deep interconnection between religion and healing practices in Tamil society, where faith-based rituals were often

sought as remedies for venomous bites. Such traditions demonstrate how mythology and medicine coexisted, especially in local communities. This interpretation is supported by Parthasarathy (2013) in *Divine Interventions: Mythology and Medicine in Tamil Nadu*, published by Tamil Heritage Publications.

8. Mariamman Temple Backyard Inscription, Salem (Salem District)

The inscription discovered in the backyard of the Mariamman Temple, likely dating to the 18th–19th century and written in Tamil script, records the presence of a stone believed to have healing properties for snake bites. It notes that this stone, found within the temple was traditionally regarded as an effective remedy for venom-related ailments. The inscription illustrates the close link between indigenous medical knowledge and religious faith in Tamil society.

9. Uttaramallur Inscription, Kanchipuram (Kanchipuram District)

The Uttaramallur inscription, written in Tamil script, records the granting of land under the category of Vishaharabhoga. These lands were endowed free of all taxes and were intended to last perpetually, “as long as the moon and the sun endure.” The term Vishaharabhoga suggests an association with remedies or services related to poison treatment, indicating institutional support for such practices. This inscription highlights the organized patronage of medical or therapeutic functions in traditional Tamil society through permanent land grants.

10. Iyyanar Kovil Garuda Inscription, Madurai (Madurai District)

The Iyyanar Kovil–Garuda Inscription from Madurai, Tamil Nadu, provides insight into the traditional beliefs and practices of the local people. Written in the Tamil language and script, though its exact time period is not specified, the inscription highlights a significant cultural and religious belief associated with Garuda. It reveals that people had strong faith in the power of Garuda to neutralize snake venom. According to the inscription, worshipping Garuda was considered an effective remedy for snake

bites, reflecting the integration of spirituality and healing practices in the region's history. The inscription is documented in Ramesh, V.'s work *Inscriptions of Tamil Nadu: A Historical Perspective* (2010), published by the Tamil Nadu Historical Society.

RESULTS

The present study identified substantial archaeological evidence supporting the existence and practice of Nanju Maruthuvam (Siddha toxicology) across multiple regions of Tamil Nadu. Epigraphic analysis revealed organized toxicological practices, institutional recognition, and socio-religious integration of poison management therapies. In the Tiruppur region, inscriptions from temple sites document land grants for *Visavirutti*, indicating the recognized role of poison physicians in society. Evidence from Coimbatore, particularly the Maneesar Kovil inscription, reflects traditional therapeutic responses to toxic exposures such as beetle bites. In Tirunelveli, inscriptions associated

with temple sites highlight the use of sacred oil preparations for the treatment of skin diseases, suggesting the medicinal application of substances with potential toxicological relevance.

Inscriptions from Theni, Salem, and Kanchipuram reveal practices related to snakebite management, including references to *Vishaharabhoga* and beliefs in Garuda worship as a means of neutralizing venom. Similar evidence from Madurai further reinforces the cultural and therapeutic significance of Garuda in antidotal practices. Overall, a total of 10 inscriptions from 7 districts were identified as directly relevant to Nanju Maruthuvam, encompassing references to *Visha Virutti*, *Visha Vaidya*, *Vishaharabhoga*, and treatments for envenomation and toxic exposures. These findings collectively demonstrate the structured and culturally integrated nature of toxicological knowledge in ancient Tamil society.

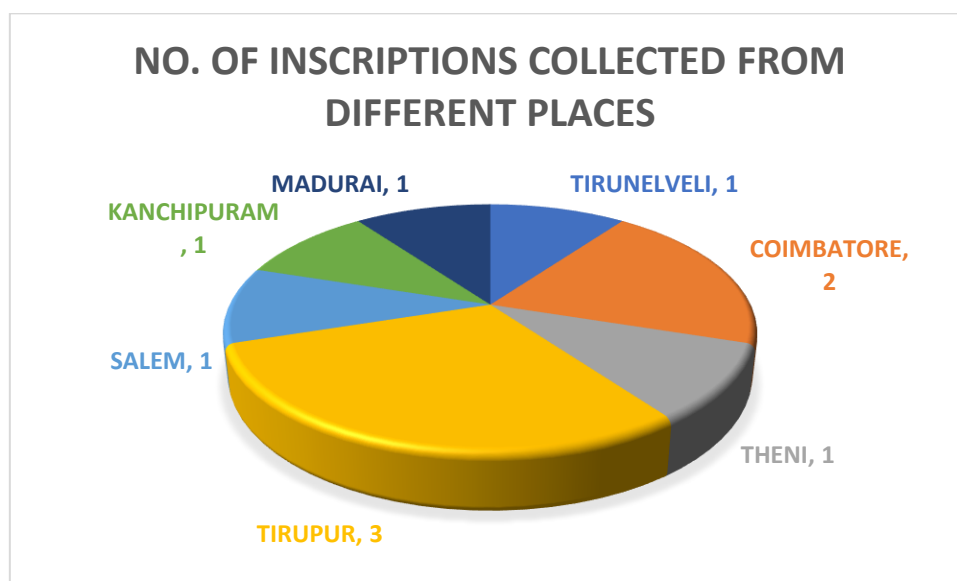


Fig no. 1 No. of Inscription collected from different places.

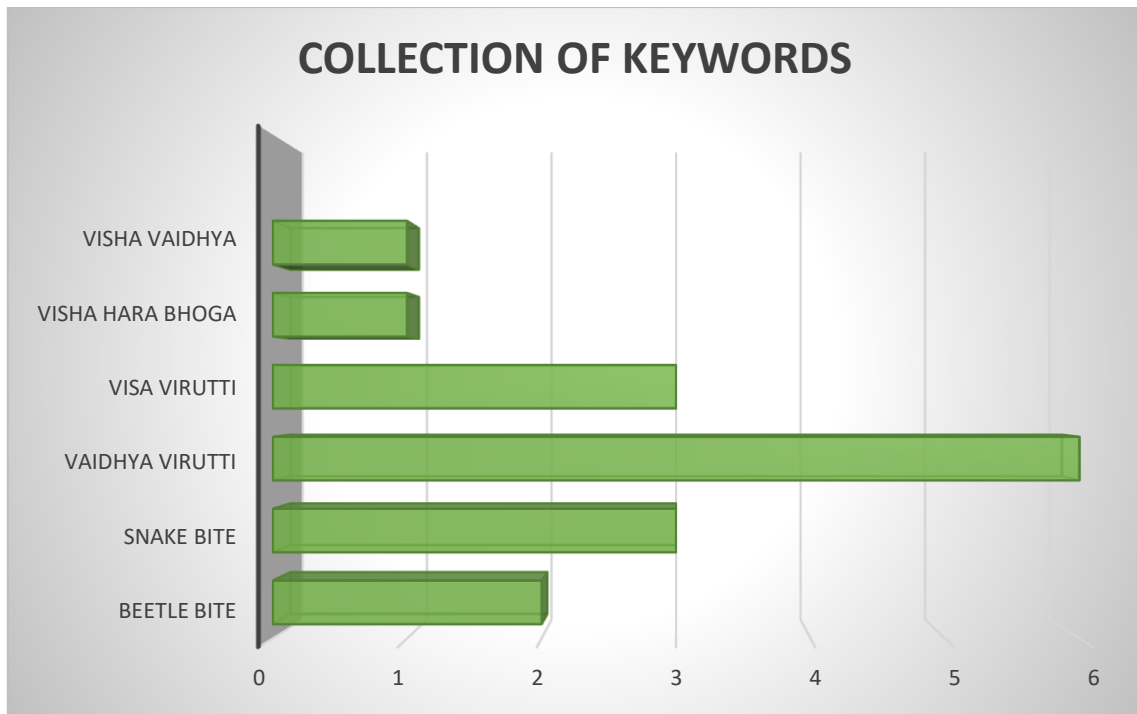


Fig no 2. Most frequently used keywords.

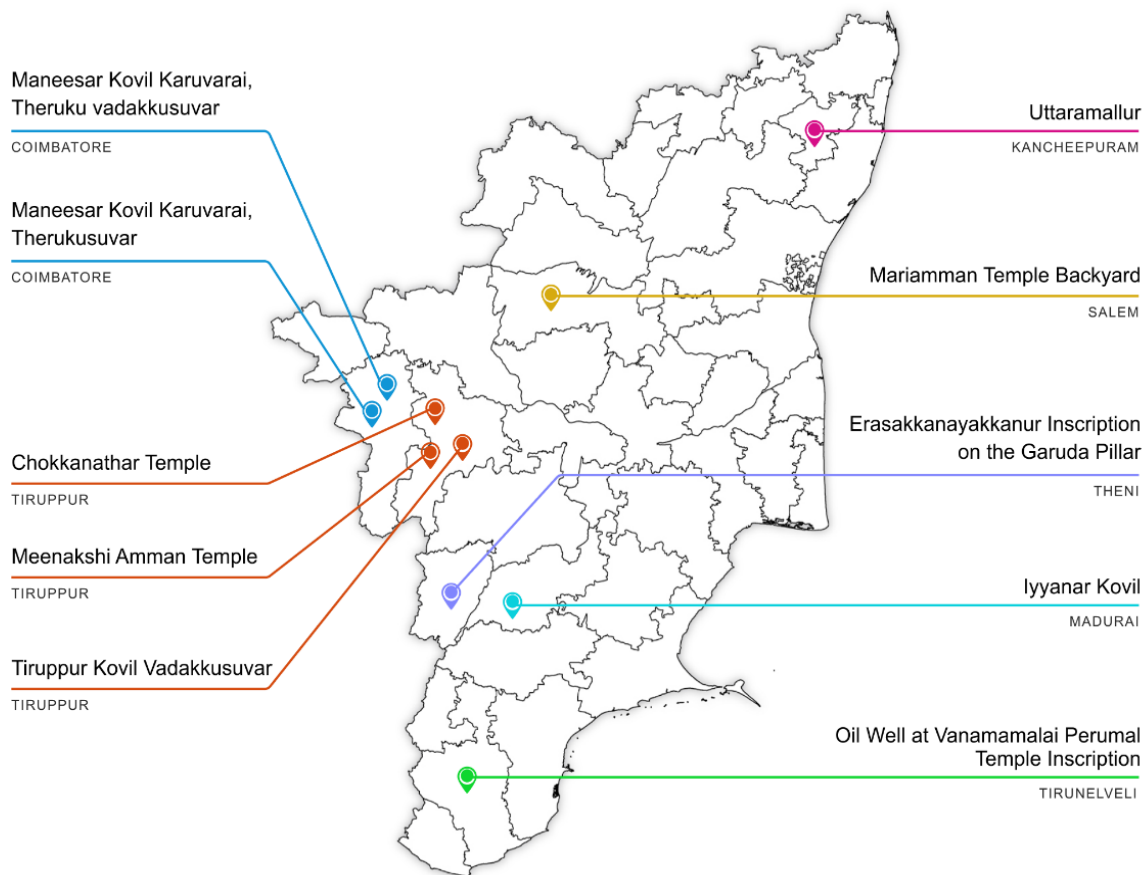


Fig 3. Archaeological Findings across Tamil Nadu found in this survey.

TIMELINE GRAPH

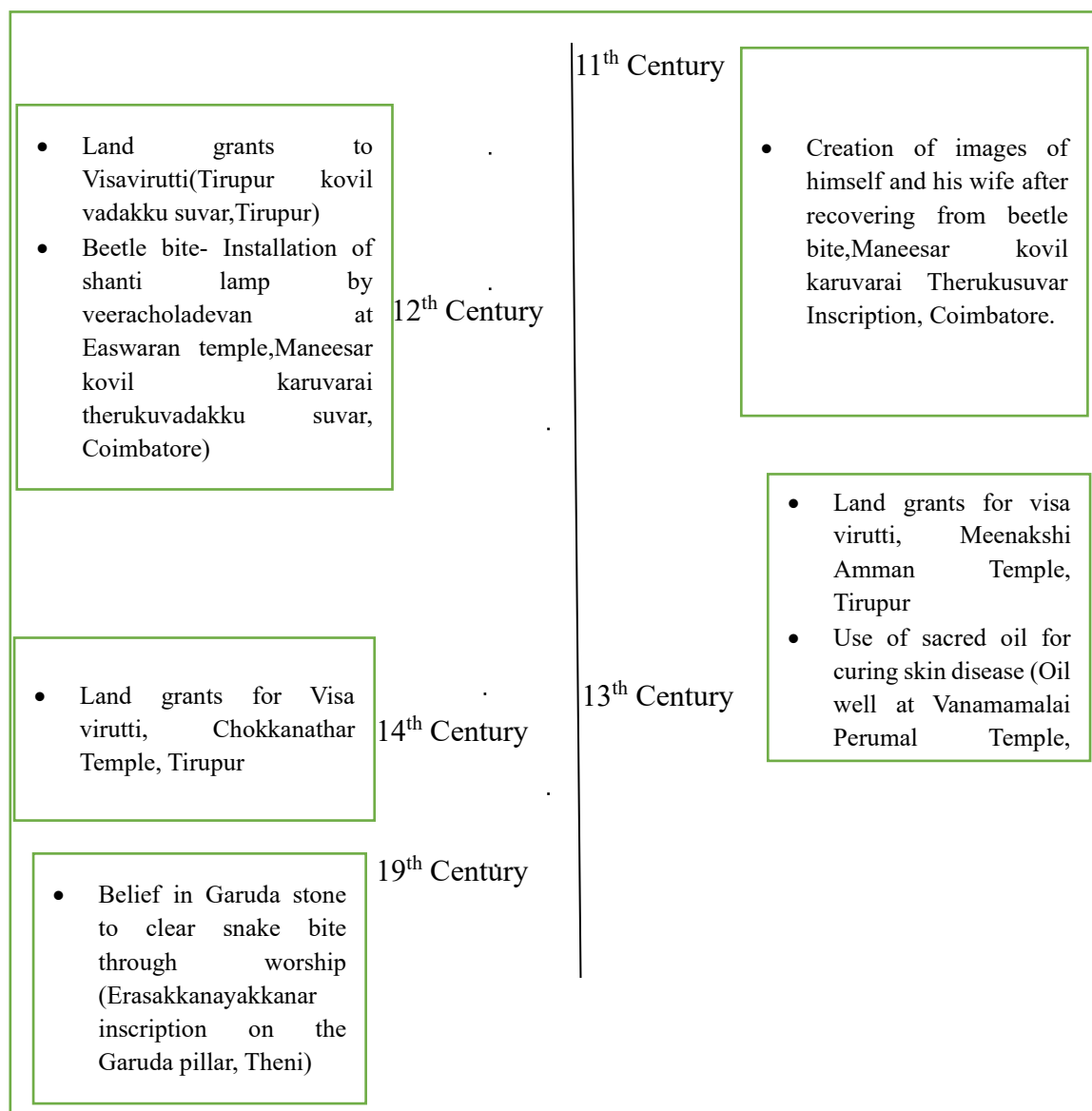


Fig No 4. Timeline Graph

DISCUSSION

The present study provides compelling archaeological and epigraphic evidence supporting the historical existence and societal importance of Nanju Maruthuvam (Siddha toxicology) in ancient Tamil Nadu. Through systematic analysis of inscriptions, temple records, and land grant documentation, the study highlights the integration of toxicological knowledge within the broader Siddha medical system and its recognition by both ruling authorities and local communities.

The distribution of relevant inscriptions across multiple centuries and geographically diverse regions indicates that Nanju Maruthuvam was not a localized practice but a widely established and institutionally supported medical tradition. The repeated references to *Visavirutti*, *Visha Vaidya*, and *Vishaharabhoga* suggest the existence of specialized practitioners dedicated to the diagnosis and management of poisoning and envenomation. The provision of land grants further reflects the socio-economic importance attributed to these professionals, ensuring the sustainability of their services.

An important observation is the close association between medical practices and religious institutions. Temples functioned as centers not only for spiritual activities but also for healthcare delivery, where therapeutic interventions were often complemented by ritual practices. The belief in Garuda worship as an antidotal measure for snake venom exemplifies this integration of empirical knowledge with spiritual healing traditions.

These findings reveal a sophisticated and holistic approach to toxicology in ancient Tamil society, combining practical treatment methods, institutional support, and cultural beliefs. The interdisciplinary nature of the evidence underscores the rich medical heritage of Tamil Nadu and provides valuable insights into the evolution of traditional toxicological practices within the Siddha system.

CONCLUSION

The present study highlights the continuity and significance of traditional knowledge systems, particularly Nanju Maruthuvam, in addressing toxicological and public health challenges in ancient Tamil Nadu. Archaeological and epigraphic evidence demonstrates that Siddha toxicology was not only well-developed but also institutionally supported through structured mechanisms such as land grants and temple-based healthcare practices.

The active involvement of rulers and local administrative bodies in promoting medical services reflects a progressive approach to public health, where toxicology was recognized as an essential component of healthcare. The integration of medical practices with socio-religious institutions further underscores the holistic framework of Siddha medicine, wherein physical healing was closely linked with cultural and spiritual dimensions.

Overall, these findings reaffirm the advanced state of medical knowledge in historical Tamil society and emphasize the relevance of

Nanju Maruthuvam as an integral part of India's traditional healthcare heritage.

Declaration by Authors

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