



## **Proto-Dravidian Linguistics and Archaeology: Examining the Gaps and Potential Reconciliations**

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### **Abstract**

This study undertakes an interdisciplinary investigation into the socio-cultural and ecological contexts of Proto-Dravidian communities, employing a comparative methodology that juxtaposes reconstructed Proto-Dravidian lexicon with archaeological evidence primarily from the Indus Valley Civilization (IVC) and the Southern Neolithic cultures. Addressing the enduring scholarly debate surrounding the Proto-Dravidian homeland, the paper critically examines lexical reconstructions pertaining to foundational socio-political structures – fortifications, rulership, taxation, and warfare – alongside ritualistic practices. This analysis reveals nuanced points of convergence and divergence when cross-referenced with material records. While the IVC exhibits suggestive parallels with Proto-Dravidian faunal nomenclature and elements of socio-political vocabulary, particularly in zoo-archaeological attestations, the Southern Neolithic context presents a more fragmented, albeit evolving, archaeological narrative. Notably, recent archaeological discoveries establishing an earlier chronology for iron metallurgy in South India, temporally congruent with estimated Proto-Dravidian philological dating, introduce a compelling dimension to the discourse. The study posits a plausible Proto-Dravidian presence within the IVC sphere, subsequently influencing southward cultural and linguistic diffusion. Ultimately, this interdisciplinary synthesis underscores the inherent complexities and persistent ambiguities in reconstructing Proto-Dravidian origins, advocating for

sustained, integrated research paradigms to reconcile existing discrepancies and refine our comprehension of their historical trajectory and socio-cultural milieu.

**Keywords:** Proto-Dravidian, linguistics, archaeology, Indus Valley Civilization (IVC), neolithic culture.

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## 1. Introduction

Since Caldwell's seminal contributions in comparative Dravidian grammar, the discussion surrounding the native or original homeland of the Dravidian race has continued. Caldwell himself ventured a link between the Uralic and Dravidian language families (Caldwell 495), hinting at a common ancestor. John Marshall, who directed the Indus Valley Civilization excavations, later postulated that the inhabitants of this civilization could be proto-Dravidian (Marshall 109). Southworth, after a close study of linguistic and archaeological facts, arrived at the conclusion that the Neolithic people of South India were the proto-Dravidians (Southworth 243). While these two approaches are the prevailing among scholars, comparative study of reconstructed Proto-Dravidian roots identifies some inconsistencies and lacunae in the archaeological record. In this article, I shall explore the contentious etyma behind these differences.

## 2. Etymological Insights into Social Structures

### 2.1 *Fortifications and Palaces*

Linguistic reconstruction of Proto-Dravidian words for "fort" (\*kōṭṭai DED 1831) and "palace" (\*kōyil DED 1810). Both words occur only in South Dravidian (SD) and Central Dravidian (CD) languages and have no cognates in North Dravidian languages. Their absence ignites controversy about their exact Proto-Dravidian meaning.

Though etymology is uncertain, archaeological findings of the Indus Valley Civilization (IVC) complicate matters further. Even though the IVC has sophisticated urban design, with clear citadels and lower towns, no absolute buildings have been termed "palaces" as such (Possehl 148). The fact that there are fortified settlements is usually prevalent in Indus culture particularly on the western coast, e.g., Surkotada, Sutkagen-dor, and Kuntasi, indicates an emphasis on protection in some areas, perhaps used as storehouses for valuable commodities (McIntosh 169). Within the context of the Southern Neolithic culture, no conclusive evidence of forts has been found. Interestingly, even among the fortifications of the Sangam Age, none have been archaeologically found so far. This could be due to the fact that Southern people might have built these with perishable materials such as wood.

### 2.2 *Rulership*

Linguistic evidence indicates the presence of rulers [\*kō- (DED 1810), \*et-ay- (DED 448.), \*wēnt- (DED 4549)] in Proto-Dravidian society. From the Proto-Dravidian to the Tolkappiyam times, the king was the central figure in society. Nevertheless, in spite of these linguistic postulations, no

concrete evidence from the Indus Valley Civilization (IVC) has been produced to prove the existence of a king or a royal class (McIntosh 394). Though lack of tangible proof for rulers in the IVC is still contentious, the occurrence of a citadel indicates an elite class. Additionally, standardized weights and measures across the IVC, together with proof of widespread trade networks, indicate a level of central authority, maybe in the guise of a ruler, council, or powerful merchant class.

Direct proof of leaders or chiefs within the Southern Neolithic era still evades identification. Yet it is possible these pastoralist peoples had some form of leadership (Powers and Lehmann), as many other Neolithic societies were marked by hierarchical power relations. That expectation is validated by the beginning of multiple lines of dynasts in the region in the post-Christian period, implying an improvement over time of sociopolitical structure.

### **2.3 Taxation**

Following kingship and royal palaces, the concept of taxation emerges as an essential element in the understanding of ancient socio-political structures. Linguists have reconstructed Proto-Dravidian etymologies for "tax" as \*Ari- (DED(S) 179) and \*kappam- (DED 1021), suggesting the antiquity of this practice.

Archaeological evidence at Mohenjo-daro, one of the Indus Valley Civilization's main cities, suggests a granary in the citadel complex. This discovery lends credence to the hypothesis that the Indus people reaped grains as a form of taxation (Habib 45). This is in line with the Mesopotamian trend, where the powers held control over the reception and release of goods, including those acquired through taxation or official payment. The etymology of \*Ari- also lends credence to this interpretation. It is likely that the Proto-Dravidian etymology \*Ari-ci (paddy) evolved to denote "tax," originally payments in terms of farm products. This evolution highlights the significance of agrarian resources in early economies and their utilization to support the ruling class and the machinery of the state. Although concrete evidence of taxation systems in the Southern Neolithic period is currently lacking, it is reasonable to posit that these communities, even without a formalized structure, likely participated in some mode of resource distribution. Their dependence on rice cultivation makes it conceivable that a fraction of the yield was designated for collective needs. Nevertheless, the absence of direct corroboration requires a measured interpretation, underscoring the constraints of our present comprehension of socio-economic organization during this epoch.

### **2.4 Warfare**

The institution of warfare constitutes a cardinal aspect of societies throughout the ages, its origins predating even the evolutionary emergence of Homo sapiens. The proto-Dravidian folks were not exempt to this tradition. Linguistic reconstruction indicates that the vocabulary was very dense concerning warfare, such as \*pōr (battle, war, or fight, DED (S, N) 3708), \*aṇi (troops drawn up, DED(S) 99), \*muṇ-ay (DED 4120) and \*kalam (fields of battle, DED(S) 1160), \*gel-/kel- (victory or

winning, DED (S, N) 1641), and \*oṭṭ-am (fleeing or defeat, DED(S, N) 877).

The famous archaeologist Sir Mortimer Wheeler postulated that the collapse of the Indus Valley Civilization was the result of an Aryan invasion, culminating in a full-blown massacre. He supported this with the skeletal remains scattered in the city levels of Mohenjo-daro as evidence, calling it the 'last massacre ' (Kulke and Rothermund 19). Subsequent post-World War II researchers, however, rejected Wheeler's hypothesis to a great degree (Possehl 157). Although the Aryan violence conquest theory has been disproven, it cannot be wholly eliminated that internecine war or regional warfare caused the Indus Valley civilization to decline.

Sharp weapons and tools were used in the South Indian Neolithic culture (K. K Pillai 14). It is possible that minor skirmishes and wars took place with these. In Krishnagiri district, a Megalithic era painting in Mallapadi depicts a horse fight (Raju Poundurai 32); although this painting is from a later period, similar conflicts must have taken place in the Neolithic period as well. Its traditional extension can be called the Sangam period cattle raids and retrieval culture.

### **3. Religious and Ritualistic etyma**

#### ***3.1 Domestic Worship***

In the Indus Valley Civilization, many terracotta figurines of male and female figures have been excavated. Significantly, in the homes of Mohenjo-daro, these figurines have been found in specially allocated chambers in more than five hundred excavated homes. These discoveries strongly indicate the likelihood of these chambers being used as specific areas for domestic worship (Parpola 173). This practice is paralleled in later Sangam literature, In *Maturaikanci*, its mention of aṇaṅkuṭai nallil ("house possessing the goddess") is attested (Māṅkuṭi Marutaṇār verse 578). These are either family or personal tutelary deities, represented within the home by icons and honored accordingly. This textual support for this tradition, showing the continuity of religious household practices from the Indus Valley to the Sangam age.

#### ***3.2 The Tradition of Sacred Thread***

Linguistic reconstruction, utilized by comparative philologists, has assumed the existence of the \*tāli (DED 2594) as Proto-Dravidian. Yet, the sole occurrence of cognates for this term in South Dravidian languages only, this creates doubts about the antiquity of this reconstructed root. Traditional accounts, especially those based on socio-cultural development, tend to propose a more recent origin of the tāli as a symbol of marriage, perhaps dating after the 11th century CE (M. Rajamanickam 85). This chronological placement is mainly inferred from textual evidence and the seeming concurrence with changing marriage practices. However, the presence of potentially conflicting literary evidence makes this simple chronology difficult, creating an element of academic controversy.

In spite of these chronological uncertainties, it is possible to assume that in Proto-South Dravidian, the word *tāli* could have possibly already referred to a bridal or auspicious ornament. Before this shift in meaning, in Proto-Dravidian proper, the word *tāli* could have referred more broadly to a necklace or any other kind of neck ornament. This hypothesis receives possible confirmation in the Indus Valley Civilization archaeological record.

Both the famous bronze "Dancing Girl" statuette and the many terracotta female statuettes found at Indus Valley sites are often shown wearing necklaces (Wheeler 69). These ornaments, possibly coeval with initial Dravidian linguistic evolution, provide material analogues that can be associated with the changing semantics of the *tāli* within the Dravidian language family.

#### 4. A Zoo-archaeological Approach to Proto-Dravidian Studies

A Zoo-archaeological study of Proto-Dravidian provides a new interdisciplinary perspective with which linguistic reconstruction and archeological evidence find common ground and shed light upon the cultural and ecological context of ancient Dravidian-speaking groups. Correlation of Proto-Dravidian faunal origins with archeozoological record of the Southern Neolithic and the Indus Valley Civilization (IVC) gives this research methodology crucial leverage into the subsistence strategies, faunal domestication, and ecological relationships of these ancient civilizations.

Table 1

Archaeological Attestation of Proto-Dravidian Roots for Faunal Terms<sup>1</sup>

S.No	Proto-Dravidian Roots	Meaning	Archaeological Attestation
1.	*eru-tu	Bull	IVC, Southern Neolithic
2.	*mā-y-	Deer	IVC, Southern Neolithic
3.	*kot-i-	Sheep	IVC, Southern Neolithic
4.	*yāt-u	Goat	IVC, Southern Neolithic
5.	*pill-	Cat	IVC
6.	*iv-uḷ-i / *kuti-ray	Horse	Southern Neolithic
7.	*pur-	Peacocks	IVC, Southern Neolithic
8.	*yām-ay	Tortoise/Turtle	IVC
9.	*pul-i	Tiger	IVC
10.	*muc-	Hares	IVC
11.	*pām-pu	Serpents	IVC, Southern Neolithic

12.	*nari-	Foxes/ Jackel	IVC
13.	*erum-	Buffalo	IVC, Southern Neolithic
14.	*mūn- ūc	Mongoose	IVC, Southern Neolithic
15.	(?) *pākk-	Leopard	IVC
16.	*kōṭ-i	Chicken	IVC
17.	*moc-V	Crocodile	IVC
18.	*panti-	Wild Pigs	IVC, Southern Neolithic

<sup>1</sup> The Table 1 comprises of the lexical and Faunal data obtained from JANE McIntosh, “The Ancient Indus Valley – New Perspectives,2008” ABC-CLIO, Inc. Santa Barbara, California 93116-1911 & FRANKLIN C. SOUTHWORTH, “Linguistic Archaeology of South Asia,2005” Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005.

19.	*kav-uḷi	Lizard	IVC
20.	* yāṇ-ay	Elephant	IVC, Southern Neolithic
21.	*naH-	Dog	IVC, Southern Neolithic
22.	*eḷ-V-ñc-	Bear	IVC
23.	----	Rhinoceros	IVC, Southern Neolithic
24.	*kay-V	fishes	IVC, Southern Neolithic

The Proto-Dravidian lexical stems \*eru-tu (bull), \*mā-y- (deer), and \*yāṇ-ay (elephant) etc., as present in Table 1, depict an intrinsic comfort with both domesticated and wildlife, showing signs of a subsistence economy together with pastoralism, hunting, and even maybe ritualistic or symbolic activity towards animals. Most significantly, the greater number of corroborations between Proto-Dravidian etyma and IVC faunal assemblages, compared to the Southern Neolithic, quietly highlights the possibility of the IVC region as a likely Proto-Dravidian homeland. While this dataset is limited to roots supported by archaeological attestation, it is important to note that Proto-Dravidian vocabulary almost certainly included an infinitely wider range of faunal terminology.

## 5. Recent Archeological Considerations

Iron has traditionally been thought to have transformed pre-modern societies to the point where the shift to surplus production over subsistence could take place, as well as trigger deep social change. The discovery of iron metallurgy is therefore one of the most powerful indicators of the evolution of human societies. We have placed the historic onset of iron introduction to the Indian subcontinent at the 2nd millennium BCE, and that has been confirmed through comprehensive archaeological evidence. But more recent evidence, especially that in the Tamil Nadu State Archaeology Department report, "*Antiquity of Iron*," is challenging this traditional chronology. Radiocarbon analysis of iron sites at sites including Adichanallur, Sivakalai, and Mayiladumparai challenges as early as early 4th millennium BCE (Rajan and Sivanantham 40), a fact testified to by scientific evidence from archaeological digs.

This revised chronology invites a comparative analysis with reconstructed Proto-Dravidian linguistics. Specifically, the reconstructed Proto-Dravidian root \*Cir-umpu- (iron, DED(S) 411) gains heightened significance in light of these recent archaeological revelations. Given the estimated philological dating of Proto-Dravidian to approximately 4000-5000 BCE, the coincidence of timing with this newly found iron usage in South India is quite remarkable. Even if this is not specifically indicative of Proto-Dravidian speaker involvement with these pieces of iron per se, or of a conclusion that the Proto-Dravidians' homeland had to be located in Tamil Nadu, it at least keeps open the possibility of a more nuanced exploration of what the cultural and technological landscape may have been then. The intersection of the linguistic and the archaeological data, especially in relation to material culture like metallurgy, provides a rich background for reconstructing the richness of Proto-Dravidian history.

## 6. Conclusion

In summary, the interdisciplinary analysis of Proto-Dravidian linguistics and archaeology throws open deep insights as well as ongoing ambiguities into reconstructing early Dravidian-speaking communities' socio-cultural and ecological environment. Lexical reconstructions of words pertaining to fortifications, rulership, taxation, warfare, and ritual practices, when placed against archaeological data from the Indus Valley Civilization (IVC) and Southern Neolithic cultures, highlight a rich interaction between linguistic assumptions and material evidence. Though the IVC shows possible correlations with Proto-Dravidian faunal and socio-political lexemes, the Southern Neolithic has a more fractured but developing scenario, especially in the wake of recent finds like the antiquity of iron use in Tamil Nadu. These observations, while not definitive, point towards a possible Proto-Dravidian presence in the IVC area, followed by southward cultural and linguistic diffusion. The synthesis of

zoo-archaeological evidence and linguistic reconstructions enriches our tale further here, calling for sustained interdisciplinary pursuit in order to bridge the holes and reconcile differences in our appreciation of Proto-Dravidian beginnings and the historical course followed by them.

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