

Sangam Age, Art, Architecture, Sangam Literature, UPSC Notes

July 12, 2026 • vajiramandravi.com



The **Sangam Age** is a significant phase in the history of ancient South India, spanning roughly from the 3rd century BCE to the 3rd century CE. It is also referred to as the period of Tamil Literature. The term "Sangam" refers to assemblies or gatherings of poets and scholars that took place in ancient South India. These gatherings were instrumental in nurturing a literary tradition that focused on various aspects of life, including love, war, ethics, politics, and nature.

The works composed by different poets during the Sangam age provide insights into the social, cultural, and political dynamics of the time. The Sangam age left a significant cultural legacy, influencing the region's history and heritage.

Sangam Literature

According to Tamil scholars, **three sangams** (academies of Tamil poets) existed in ancient Tamil Nadu, also known as **Muchchangam**. Under the Pandyan dynasty's royal patronage, these Sangam flourished. These Tamil literary works continue to be valuable resources for rewriting Sangam age history.

- **First Sangam: Legendary gods and sages** attended the first Sangam held in **Madurai**, although there are no recorded accounts of it.
- **Second Sangam:** It was held in **Kapadapuram** in Tamilnadu. Except for **Tolkappiyam**, none of the literary works written during this Sangam survived.
- **Third Sangam:** The third Sangam was established in **Madurai by Mudathirumaran**. Although many poets participated and created substantial work, only some persisted.
- **Tolkappiyam, Ettutogai, Pattuppattu, Pathinenkilkanakku**, and the two epics Silappathigaram and Manimegalai are among the works in the Sangam literature corpus.
- **Pathinen Melkanakku** includes **Ettutogai and Pattuppattu**.

Early Sangam Literature

The earliest Sangam literature provides invaluable insights into the social, cultural, and literary aspects of ancient South India. It includes Agattiyam, Tolkappiyam, Ettutogai and Pattuppattu.

Aham and Puram Concept

The use of the **poetic form** is an important aspect of Sangam literature. **Tolkappiyam**, an ancient Tamil treatise, divides poetry into two categories: **Aham and Puram**. These two are related in the sense that they are the polar opposites of each other while also complementing each other.

Aham (Agam)	Puram
- It represents the individual, the interior, the feminine, and the various stages of love.	- It represents the world, the exterior, the masculine, violence, and heroism.
- Women dominated	- Male-dominated
- Concerns on subjects such as love and sexual relations.	- Concerns many issues, such as wars, kings, poets and personal virtues

Agattiyam (Akattiyam)

Agattiyam was the earliest book on **Tamil grammar** according to Tamil tradition.

- This book was a **non-extant text (not existing)**, written and compiled by sage **Agattiar** (Agastya) during the First Sangam.

Tolkappiyam

It was written by **Tolkappiyar** and is considered the first Tamil literary work.

- First mentioned by name in **Iraiyana's Akapporul** as an authoritative text on Tamil grammar.
- This was the most ancient Tamil grammar text and the **oldest extant long work of Tamil literature**.
- Arranged into three books – Eluttatikaram, Sollatikaram and Porulatikaram
- **Source:** It also gives an insight into the **political and socio-economic** conditions of the time.

Ettuttogai

Ettuttogai is a classical Tamil poetic work consisting of eight works long and short, both or eight anthologies. It is included in the **Pathinen Melkanakku** (Eighteen Greater Texts).

Eight anthologies	Significance
Natrinai	- Mentions the Tamil legend about Kannagi (Kannaki) to protest against her husband's unjust execution.
Kurunthogai	- Kuruntokai's influence can be seen in modern Tamil films.
Aingurunuru	- It was compiled by Kudalur Kilar and has a colophon identifying it as a Chera text as opposed to the more typical Pandyan kingdom-based text.
Patitruppathu	- About ten decades of Chera kings, known as Cheramals .
Paripadal	- Expresses love in the form of religious devotion and includes dialogue-based poems . These poems are longer than the poems in other major Sangam anthologies.
Kalithogai	- Compiled by Nallantuvanar , notable for the relatively higher number of Sanskrit loan words, categorised into the five tinai's conforming to the Sangam landscape.
Akananuru	- Notable for its mathematical arrangement, it has a reference to the Ramayana.
Purananuru	- Information on the political and social history of ancient Tamil Nadu

Pattuppattu

It is an anthology of ten longer poems in the Sangam literature – the earliest known Tamil literature.

Poem	Meaning	Author	Source/ Information about
Thirumurugatrupatai	Guide to Lord Murugan	Nakkīrar	Murugan
Porunaratrupatai	Guide for the war bards	Mutattamakanniya	Karikal
Sirupanatruppatai	Guide to bards with small lutes	Narrattanar	Nalliyakkotan
Perumpanatruppatai	Guide to bards with large lutes	Uruttiran Kannanar	Tontaiman Ilantiraiyan
Mullaipattu	Song about the forest	Nappitanar	-
Maduraikanchi	Reflection on Maturai	Mankuti Marutanar	Netunceliyan
Nedunalvadai	Good long northern wind	Nakkirar	Netunceliyan
Kurinjipattu	Song about the hills	Kapilar	-

Pattinappalai	Poem about the separation and the city	Uruttiran Kannanar	Karikal
Malaipadukadam	Poem of the sound about the mountains	Perunkunrur, Perunkaucikanar	Nannan

Later Sangam Literature

The Sangam age was a time of great literary achievement, where poets and scholars thrived, creating a vibrant literary tradition.

- The works produced during this era continue to be revered for their poetic excellence, imaginative storytelling, and cultural significance.
- This includes mainly poetic work **Patinen Kilkanakku**, also known as the “The Eighteen Lesser Texts”, and **five great epics**, extensive narrative Tamil epics according to later Tamil literary tradition.

Patinen Kilkanakku (The Eighteen Lesser Texts)

It is a collection of eighteen poetic works created during the post-Sangam period. It mainly deals with morals and ethics.

Book	Author	Significance
Naladiyar	Various poets (mainly Jain monks)	The most important ancient didactic text in Tamil is next after Tirukkural .
Nankakatigai	Vilambi Naganaar	Contains one hundred songs, and each poem has four ideas.
Inna Narpathu	Kapilar	Describes the most undesirable things one should avoid.
Iniyavai Narpathu	Putham Sernthanar	Explains the most desirable things in life.
Kaar Narpathu	Kannankoothanaar	Deals with the intangibles of life, such as human emotions, love, separation etc.
Kalavazhi Narpathu	Poigayaar	Deals with the puram (external) subjects.
Ainthinai Aimpattu	Kannankoothanaar	Deals with the aham (internal) subjects
Tiṇaimozhi Aimpattu	Kannan Chenthanaar	Deals with the aham (internal) subjects
Aintinai Eḷupatu	Muvathiyaar	Deals with the subjective (aham) concepts.
Tiṇaimālai Nūṟṟaimpattu	Kanimeytaviyar	Deals with the subjective (aham) concepts.
Thirukkural	Thiruvalluvar	Discusses epics, love, polity and governance.
Tirikaṭukam	Nallathanaar	Uses the analogy of traditional herbal medicine.

Acharakkovai	Peruvaayin Mulliyaar	Concerned with personal rituals and the correct method to follow.
Pazhamozhi Nanuru	Munrurai Araiyanar	Employs old Tamil proverbs to illustrate its messages.
Siruppanchamulam	Kariyaasaan	Uses the analogy of traditional herbal medicine.
Muthumozhikkanchi	Mathuraikkoodalaar Kilaar	Employs a simple poetic style to enable the layperson to understand the messages.
Elathi	Kani Methaviyar	The analogy of traditional herbal medicine known as elathi is used.
Kainnilai	Pullangkaathanaar	Deals with the subjective (agam) concepts.

Five Great Epics

Epic	Author	Feature
Silappadikaram	Ilango Adigal	- Describes the story of Kovalan and Kannagi. - Gives insight into contemporary Tamil society, polity and social life of the people. - Called the Iliad of Tamil Literature.
Manimekhlai	Seetalaisattanar	- Sequel to Silappadikaram, where Manimekhlai is the daughter of Kovalan, born to Madhavi (she becomes a Buddhist monk). - It contains useful details about the Sangam government and society. - Related to philosophical topics and Buddhism in South India. - Called the Odissi of Tamil literature.
Jivaka Chintamani	Tiruttakrdeva	- Related to the life of Jivaka, who marries eight queens and later becomes a Jain monk. (associated with Jainism) - Also called the Book of Deity and Manannul (Book of Marriages).
Valayapathi	Tamil Jain monk	- Story of a son and father, where the father left before the birth of the son, and the son seeks his father - Supported the ideologies found in early Jainism

Kundalakesi	Nathakuthanaar	- A story about love, marriage, getting tired of the married partner, murder and then discovering religion. - Related to Buddhism.
-------------	----------------	--

Other Literary Sources of the Sangam Age

- The commercial ties between the West and South India are mentioned by Greek authors like **Megasthenes, Pliny, Strabo, and Ptolemy**.
- **The Chera, Chola, and Pandya kings** in the southern region of the Mauryan empire are mentioned in **Asokan inscriptions**.
- The **Hathigumpha** inscription of Kharavela of Kalinga also mentions Tamil kingdoms.

Art and Architecture During Sangam Age

Art and architecture during the Sangam Age in ancient South India were not as extensively documented as the literature. While physical remnants are rare, references in literature and archaeological findings provide insights into the art and architecture during the Sangam age.

Art of Sangam Age

- The Sangam age was characterised by the widespread **popularity of poetry, music, and dancing**. Kings, chieftains, and nobles lavishly bestowed gifts upon poets.
- **Panar and Viraliyar, two singing bards**, were common performers in the royal courts. They were experts at folk music and dance.
- Dance and music were both highly developed arts. The Sangam literature makes reference to a wide range of **yazhs and drums**.
- Kanigaiyar performed dances. **Koothu** was the most popular form of entertainment among the people.
- Sangam **painters** employed the painting guidebook **Oviya Nul** to direct their creative endeavours.

Architecture of Sangam Age

Information and documentation regarding the architecture of the Sangam ages are limited. It can, however, be deduced from literary references.

- **The Hero Stone worship (Nadu Kal worship):** During the Sangam age, Nadu Kal worship was important. The Hero Stone was erected to commemorate the warrior's valour in battle. Many hero stones with legends carved on them have been discovered in various parts of Tamil Nadu.
- **Port cities:** Pattinappalai refers to the seaport of **Puhar**. Other seaports during the Sangam period are Tondi, Musiri and Korkai.
- **Building irrigation tanks:** **Karaikala** built Kallanai across the Kaveri River and built a large number of irrigation tanks.

Keeladi Excavation

- It is a small village in **Tamil Nadu's** Sivaganga district.
- These findings demonstrate the existence of an urban civilisation in Tamil Nadu during the Sangam age along the Vaigai River's banks.
- Excavations at Keeladi have pushed the Sangam age back about **300 years earlier than the previously believed** third century BCE.
- The discovery of pottery heaps points to the existence of a pottery manufacturing industry.
- Findings of inscribed potsherds suggest the **long survival of the script**.
- **Presence of the weaving industry:** Spindle whorls, copper needles, terracotta seals, hanging stones of the yarn, terracotta spheres and earthen vessels to hold liquid.
- **Dyeing industry and glass bead industry:** There is evidence of the existence of a **dyeing industry and a glass bead industry** in the Keeladi finding.

Other Related Articles	
Indus Script	Jain Literature
Upanishads	Sangam Age
Vedangas	

Source: <https://vajiramandravi.com/upsc-exam/sangam-literature/>

© Vajiram & Ravi. For personal use only.