

Red-brick Town Walls in Caṅkam Poetry

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Introduction

Earlier I have discussed the meaning of the word *puricai* found in lines 16-17 of *Puṛanāṅṅūru* 343:¹

puricai
paṭai mayañkāriṭai neṭunalūrē,

[Our] large town, the streets (*iṭai*) of which are difficult to pass through (*ār*) as they are blocked (*mayañku*) by layers (*paṭai*) [of bricks] broken off from the walls (*puricai*) [surrounding it].

According to the *Arthaśāstra* (2,3) a *durga*, or fortified town, is surrounded by a wall (*prākāra*) on top of a rampart (*vapra*, *vaprasyopari*), which was raised with earth that had become available by digging moats (*parikhā*). As can be seen, in the above translation the word “bricks; has been added between square brackets, indicating that it is absent from the Tamil text. I have supplied the word on the authority of the *Arthaśāstra*, which in 2,3,7 mentions that the *prākāra* is made of bricks (*aiṣṭaka*), and on the assumption that *puricai* does indeed refer to the wall, and not, for instance, the rampart (the third part of the fortification, the moat, is in the poems called *akali*). To the question if *puricai* does indeed mean “wall” I will come back below, after another question has been solved, namely that of the material it was made of. All that is clear from the above poem is that it consists of (many) layers. In those contexts in which the *puricai* is a Vedic sacrificial platform it consists of layers of bricks (Tamil *iṭṭikai*, Sanskrit *iṣṭikā*). It is not self-evident, though, if what applies to the Vedic altar applies to the *puricai* as part of a fortification as well.

puricai and the Vedic altar

Maturaikkāñci 352 reads *viṅṅura vōṅkiya palpaṭaiippuricai*, “a high, many-layered *puricai* touching the sky”. Here, as in *Puṛanāṅṅūru* 343, the *puricai* is a part of the fortification, and, as in the latter poem, the material of the layers is not specified. In *Puṛanāṅṅūru* 224 the same phrase *palpaṭaiippuricai* is found and while, again, the material of the layers is not specified, as it describes the platform or altar for vedic sacrifices, we know they are bricks. *Puṛanāṅṅūru* 224,7–9 reads:

paruti yuruvir palpaṭaiippuricai
eruvai nukarcci yūpa neṭuntūṅ
vēta vēlvit toḷiṅ muṭittatūm,

... performed the Vedic sacrifice (*vēta vēlvit toḷil*) which offered a feast for the vultures (*eruvai*) at the high sacrificial post (*yūpa*) on the altar made of many layers (*paṭai*) [of bricks] [and] has the shape of a *paruti*.

¹ See Tieken (2020). The present paper is an attempt to answer a question raised on p. 292, footnote 39, of that article. The article is available through Open Access; for the link see the references at the end of this paper.

As to *paruti*, “circle”, it must be a corruption of *paruntu* “falcon” (Skt *śyena*): the Vedic altar has the form of a falcon. In *Akanānūru* 287, 6-8, then, the bricks are explicitly mentioned:

nātpali maṛanta naraikkaṇ iṭṭikaip
puricai mūlkiya poriyarai yālattu
oru taṇi neṭu vīl utaitta kōtai,

The west wind blows against a single aerial root of a banyan tree, of which the trunk is completely dried out [by the sun] and which has undermined the raised platform (*puricai*) made of bricks (*iṭṭikai*) with greyish spots because the daily offerings are no longer made.

Bricks and copper

In none of the passages in which *puricai* refers to a part of a fortification bricks are mentioned. Instead, we find copper, namely in *Puranānūru* 37 and 201 and *Akanānūru* 375. *Puranānūru* 37, 11 reads:

cempurai puricai cemman mītūr,

the ancient capital, with its walls shielded in bronze;²

Puranānūru 201,9 reads:

cempupuṇaintiyarriya cēṇetum puricai

with its long walls that seemed to be formed of bronze;

and *Akanānūru* 375,13:

cempural puricaip pāli,

Pāli with its copper-like walls.³

While in the two *Puranānūru* passages Hart and Heifetz (1999) translated *cempu* with bronze, in that of *Akanānūru* 375 Hart (2015) opted, correctly as we will see, for “copper”. Furthermore, They did not decide if the metal, whether copper or bronze, was a part of the construction (“shielded in bronze”) or part of a simile (“seemed to be formed of bronze”, “copper-like”). In this connection I want to refer to *Maturakkāñci* 485, which describes a red(dish) wall (*ceñcuvar*), that looks as if it is made of copper (*cempiyaṇraṇṇa*).⁴ This passage seems to show that in the three passages quoted above as well we are dealing with a simile: walls are red as copper.

While *urai* and *ural* in *Puranānūru* 37 and *Akanānūru* 375 do indeed mean “resembling”, the phrase *cempupuṇaintiyarriya* in *Puranānūru* 201 is exceptional. Literally it says that the wall is constructed (*iyarriya*) by covering (*puṇaintu*) it with copper. Most

² This the following translation are from Hart and Heifetz (1999). Note that here and in the following poem *cempu* is erroneously translated as bronze.

³ Translation Hart (2015).

⁴ See also *Netunalvātai* 112: *cempiyaṇraṇṇa ceyvuru neṭuñ cuvar*.

probably, though, *cempu* does not refer to copper here, but to material which has the colour of copper. And this brings us back to bricks. The colour of bricks may vary considerably, depending on the minerals of the clay. One of the most important minerals in clay is iron oxide, which produces red-coloured bricks. Apart from the fact that red may well have been the default colour, in *Āpastamba Śrautasūtra* 16,13,7 the bricks of the Vedic sacrificial altar are explicitly said to be copper-coloured (*lohinīḥ*):

nirmanthyena lohinīḥ pacanti,

In a fire produced by rubbing sticks they (the *iṣṭikāḥ* mentioned in the preceding sentence 5) are baked until they have become copper-coloured.

The outside of the *puricai* in *Puranāñūru* 37 and 201 and *Akanāñūru* 375 consists thus of red bricks.

puricai “city wall”

According to *Arthaśāstra* 2,3,7 the city wall is built on top of the rampart. Above, I have left open the possibility that *puricai* as a pile of things could also refer to the rampart. In this connection I want to draw attention to *Mullaippāṭṭu* 26-27, in which the *puricai* is described as planted with thorny bushes:

..... *kāṭṭa*
iṭumuṭ puricai ēmuṛa vaḷaii
 *pāṭi*

a town (or hamlet, *pāṭi*) in the forest (*kāṭṭa*), surrounded by a *puricai* made of thorny bushes.

This *puricai* looks like the rampart described in *Arthaśāstra* 2,3,6, which is planted with thorny shrubs (*kaṇṭakigulma*) and poisonous vines (*viṣavallī*). As I see it, however, the *Mullaippāṭṭu* passage does not necessarily describe a rampart. It describes a fortified town or hamlet in the forest where bricks are not available and therefore it is protected (*ēmuṛa*) by a wall or rampart of sorts formed by thorny bushes. Indirect evidence of *puricai*, “wall”, may be found in Kauśāmbī in combination with *Puranāñūru* 343. In Kauśāmbī no traces of a wall are found, only those of a rampart and a moat. The rampart is clad with bricks, no fewer of 154 layers of them, but only on the exterior.⁵ Apparently, it was not deemed necessary to provide the side facing the town with a revetment, the purpose of which was to construct an extremely steep slope. In *Puranāñūru* 343, however, the bricks fall down from the *puricai*’s side facing the town, which rather than a rampart suggests a wall.

Fortifications and the date of Caṅkam poetry

The Caṅkam corpus is generally dated in the period before the arrival of the Pallavas in Tamilnadu in the 6th-7th c. A.D. However, there do not seem to be archaeological remains of fortifications in Tamilnadu from that early period.⁶ The descriptions are most likely anachronisms that had accidentally slipped into the poems, in which later, eighth to tenth-century poets tried to evoke a period from the past.⁷ However, even in this later period

⁵ Schlingloff (2014: 67). See below, Figure 1.

⁶ Deloche (2007: 49-74).

⁷ For this late date of Caṅkam poetry, see Tieken (2001, 2003).

TamiInadu did not yet have fortifications of the type described in the poems. We should therefore reckon with the possibility that the descriptions were inspired by those found in the Sanskrit epics and the *Arthasāstra*. Note in this connection the town in *Patirrupattu* 53, which beside a wall (*puricai*) and gate (*vāyil*), has a moat (*akali*) “with deep pits and full of crocodiles eager to catch (whoever enters the water) (*kōḷvaṇ mutalai*). The crocodiles are a standard element in the descriptions of moats in the epics,⁸ and as such made it into the *Arthasāstra* in the section (2,3,4) on the moats: *parikhās... grāhavatīs*; note that *kōḷ(val)* “translates” Sanskrit *grāha*).

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Figure 1: The brick rampart at Kauśāmbī

⁸ See Schlingloff (2014: 60).

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