Introduction

One of the earliest accounts on record of the sculptures and ruins at Māmallapuram is that of the Englishman, William Chambers. According to him, the monuments appeared to be

the remains of some great city, that has been ruined many centuries ago; they are situated close to the sea, between Covelong and Sadras, somewhat remote from the high road, that leads to the different European settlements. And when we visited them in 1776, there was still a native village adjoining to them, which retained the ancient name, and in which a number of Brahmans resided, that seemed perfectly well acquainted with the subjects of most of the sculptures to be seen there.

From the vantage point of some two hundred years of further study, we are now in a position to know that the monuments at Māmallapuram are among the oldest remaining ones in the deep south. They are rock temples and sculptures created under the patronage of kings of the Pallava dynasty in the sixth to eighth centuries, A.D.

From the record of the early royal copper-plate grants, it appears that in the earliest part of this millennium, the Pallavas were a clan belonging to the highest administrative level in the Andhra region, to the north. Sometime around 275 A.D., they attained royal rank when one of their line married a local princess. By the fourth century, the capital of the Pallavas had been established further
Pallava Genealogy from King Siṃhavishṇu

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<th>King</th>
<th>Reign Dates</th>
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<tr>
<td>Siṃhavishṇuvarman</td>
<td>(c. 550 - c. 580 A.D., regnal years)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mahēndravarman-I</td>
<td>(c. 580 - c. 630)</td>
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<td>Narasimhavarman-I (Mahāmalla)</td>
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<td>Mahēndravarman-II</td>
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<td>Paramēśvaravarman-I</td>
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south at Kanchipuram in the Tamil country. This city is inland, some 65 kilometers to the west of what is now the modern city of Madras (Chennai). Thus, from the fourth to the ninth centuries, the Pallavas were ruling the territory around Madras, the land stretching from the North Pennar river in the north to the river Kaveri in the south.

The record of inscriptions in copper-plate and in stone indicates that the court language of the Pallavas, which in Andhra was at first Prakrit, changed to Sanskrit. Later, in the Kanchi area, from around the sixth century, Tamil began to be used more often.

The Pallavas traced their lineage back to a King Ashokavarman. It has been suggested that this Ashoka was the great Mauryan ruler. King Mahêndravarman, who was the Pallava ruler from about A.D. 580 to 630 and who distinguished himself in the arts, seems to have referred to this lineage. He was the author of at least two plays in Sanskrit, *Bhagavadajjuka* and *Mattavilâsa*, the earliest extant farcical comedies in Indian literature. In the play, *Bhagavadajjuka*, Mahêndra makes many punning allusions to ‘sprouts’ or ‘shoots’ of the ashoka tree. For these terms he often uses, significantly, the word ‘pallava’. The implication is that the Pallavas were an ‘offshoot’ of Ashokan stock.
Mahēndra’s legacy of cave-temples provides us with the earliest documented rock-cut architecture in the Tamil country. His inscriptions engraved on the stone walls of several of his cave-temples (though none at Māmalla-puram) have survived and proclaim his authorship through the use of his royal name and titles.

Mahēndra’s cave-temples are characterized by plain, massive, square-sectioned pillars with an octagonally chamfered middle portion. Generally speaking, the only sculptured figures in these cave-temples are door guardians, though the walls of these shrines must have been originally plastered and painted with figures illustrating religious themes. These paintings have eroded away over the centuries.
Fortunately, in one of Mahëndra’s last cave-temples, the one which is excavated near the top of the Rock-Fort Hill, Tiruchirapalli, there is a splendid carving in relief of Śiva-Gaṅgādhara on the western wall of its porch. This masterpiece demonstrates the excellence of Pallava sculpture in Mahëndra’s day.
Mahendra’s son, King Narasimha-I, conquered the Chalukyan kingdom in 642 A.D. It is recorded that he removed a pillar of victory standing in the center of the enemy’s capital city of Vatapi (modern Badami). After this triumph, he assumed the title, ‘Mahamalla’ (Great Wrestler), and brought back with him artisans from Vatapi. In a burst of artistic activity, Narasimha created many different types of monuments at his premier port town, which, from that time, took his victorious title as its new name, Mahamallapuram (Mahamalla-town). In the Tamil language, this name was shortened to Mammallapuram.

The many new monuments at Mammallapuram were influenced by Chalukyan as well as by Andhra art. The pillars of Mahamalla’s cave-temples are slender and elegantly embellished. Often, their bases are fashioned in the form of a seated lion. The walls of the porches of his temples are carved into elaborate panels representing scenes from Hindu mythology.
Introduction

The façade of Mahāmalla’s Varāha-II cave-temple, Māmallapuram
King Mahāmalla created something unprecedented in the Tamil country when his artisans carved whole temples out of solid rock masses. The Five Rathas of Māmallapuram are the best examples of these monolithic shrines.
The Great Penance Panel

The Great Penance Panel at Māmallapuram is another unique creation of Mahāmalla’s. This expansive open-air relief carving remains unparalleled in world art.
The Chiṟṟūr copper-plate grant of the later Pallava king, Nṛipatunγa, specifically records the fact that Mahāmalla built out of blocks of stone, on the sea, an abode for the reclining image of the ‘One who possesses the mighty discus’ (Vishṇu). The image of the Reclining Vishṇu referred to is found in the Shore Temple at Māmallapuram. Mahāmalla’s structure, however, has been replaced by a structure built in the eighth century by the Pallava king, Rājasimha.

Mahāmalla ruled until A.D. 668. His son, Mahēndra (the Second), then had a short reign of two or three years. The next king, Paramēśvara-I, built a structural stone and brick temple at Kuram, dedicated to Śiva. He re-dedicated several monuments to Śiva at Māmallapuram – as his own inscriptions on them indicate. King Paramēśvara was also responsible for the creation of the so-called Gaṇēśa Ratha, according to its foundation inscription.
Paramēśvara’s monolithic shrine, the Gaṇēśa Ratha
Paramēśvara’s son, Narasimha-II, better known by his title, Rājasimha, ruled during the first quarter of the eighth century. He devoted himself mainly to the building of structural temples, using stone blocks. The twin towers of the Shore Temple are his creation.
The Olakkaṇṭēśvara Temple, on top of the Māmallapuram hill is also Rājasimha’s. Other important structural stone temples built by him are at Panamalai and Kanchi. His Kailāsanātha Temple, Kanchi, is a vast treasure-house of Pallava art.

These Pallava kings, then, from Simhavishṇuvarman to Rājasimha, were the creators of the various monuments of Māmallapuram. What follows next is a more detailed account of these monuments.