Forensic Archaeological Excavation in Chemmani, Jaffna (2025/2026)

A summary report on findings







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Prologue

This is an interim report of the excavation conducted at the Sittupatti cemetery in Chemmani. It presents a concise description and analysis of skeletal remains and associated materials recovered during approximately 80 days of excavation. The findings are synthesized in a systematic and coherent manner to elucidate the nature, characteristics, and material composition of the burials. Attention is given to the archaeological evidence relevant to reconstructing burial practices and depositional processes, while also examining the medico-legal implications of the human remains and their associated contexts.

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1. Preamble

This report presents the findings of the exhumation conducted at the Sittupattu Cemetery premises in Chemmani (N 9°66'26" / E 80°59'66"), located within the J/94 Grama Niladhari Division under the administrative jurisdiction of the Nallur Divisional Secretariat, Jaffna.

The Chemmani area has been locally identified as a potentially significant location, allegedly linked to illicit activities and suspected human rights violations in the recent past. The primary objective of the excavation was to locate and investigate an area containing human remains which had been surfaced accidentally during a digging for construction at the Sittupatti cemetery premises. It was methodically excavated for a medico-legal investigation after the order issued by the Magistrate court in Jaffna, under observations by the Honorable Magistrate and the Chief Judiciary Medical Officer of the Jaffna Hospital.

2. Scope and Analytical Framework of the Report

This report presents a synthesis of the findings obtained through several phases of archaeological excavation conducted over a period of approximately three months. The report is structured around four principal analytical components: (a) site formation processes, (b) stratigraphy, (c) excavated human skeletal remains, and (d) associated artefacts. Each of these components contributes independently and collectively to the reconstruction of the history, development, use, and eventual transformation of the site. The analysis of site formation processes seeks to establish how the excavated location and its surrounding environment acquired their present physical characteristics.
Site formation encompasses both natural and anthropogenic processes that have operated at the location over time. An understanding of these processes is essential for reconstructing the environmental and cultural history of the site and for evaluating the extent to which subsequent disturbances, depositional processes, erosion, sediment accumulation, or human interventions may have altered the original archaeological context.

Stratigraphic analysis constitutes a fundamental component of archaeological excavation because it provides an empirical basis for reconstructing the sequential development of a site from a pedological and archaeological perspective. The identification, description, and interpretation of individual soil layers make it possible to establish the relative chronological sequence of depositional events and associated human activities. Where stratigraphic units contain anthropogenic inclusions, such as artefacts, construction materials, or other cultural remains, these materials may provide important evidence for identifying the nature and intensity of human activity during phases of the site's development. Such cultural inclusions may also serve as indicators of relative chronology, particularly when their archaeological or typological characteristics are sufficiently diagnostic to associate them with specific periods or phases.

The human skeletal remains recovered during excavation constitute an important category of evidence for interpreting the circumstances and context of burial. Their spatial distribution, anatomical condition, articulation, orientation, associated materials, and relationship to the surrounding stratigraphic units can provide information concerning burial practices and the processes that affected the remains after deposition. At the same time, the skeletal assemblage has considerable potential for investigating cultural, sociological, and biological dimensions of the population represented at the site. Osteological and forensic anthropological analyses may further contribute information relating to demographic characteristics, biological profiles, pathological conditions, trauma, taphonomic processes, and other aspects relevant to the interpretation of the individuals and the circumstances surrounding their deposition.

Artefacts constitute another significant category of archaeological evidence. As material products or modified objects associated with human activity, artefacts provide evidence for the functional use of the site, technological practices, behavioral patterns, and, where their chronological characteristics are sufficiently established, the temporal dimensions of occupation or activity. Their spatial distribution and stratigraphic associations are particularly important, as they may assist in identifying activity areas, distinguishing different phases of site use, and establishing relationships between material culture and the human remains recovered from the excavation.

Taken together, the analysis of site formation, stratigraphy, human skeletal remains, and artefacts provides a multidimensional framework for interpreting the archaeological context. Rather than treating these categories of evidence independently, their interrelationships are essential for reconstructing the sequence of events that contributed to the formation, use, modification, and eventual transformation of the site. This integrated approach is particularly important for establishing a reliable interpretation of the archaeological evidence and for distinguishing primary depositional contexts from subsequent natural and anthropogenic disturbances.

3. Site Formation

The term site formation refers to the natural and cultural processes that have contributed to shaping a site into its present condition. It encompasses the events that affect the creation, alteration, and preservation of archaeological contexts. This concept gained prominence in archaeology following the seminal work of Schiffer (1987). The site formation process plays a critical role in modifying both the physical features of the ground surface and the composition of subsurface deposits.

At the Chemmani site, multiple agents have significantly altered the landscape and subsurface strata, adversely impacting the preservation of human skeletons. Notable among these are the dumping of garbage, the excavation of pits for waste disposal, and the burial of animal carcasses (*Figure. 1*). These intrusive activities, particularly pit digging, have caused substantial vertical and horizontal dislocation of human skeletal remains within the stratigraphy.

The above conditions suggest that the present site does not exclusively utilize as a human burial ground but, used as a dumping ground for various disposable items including human remains as well.

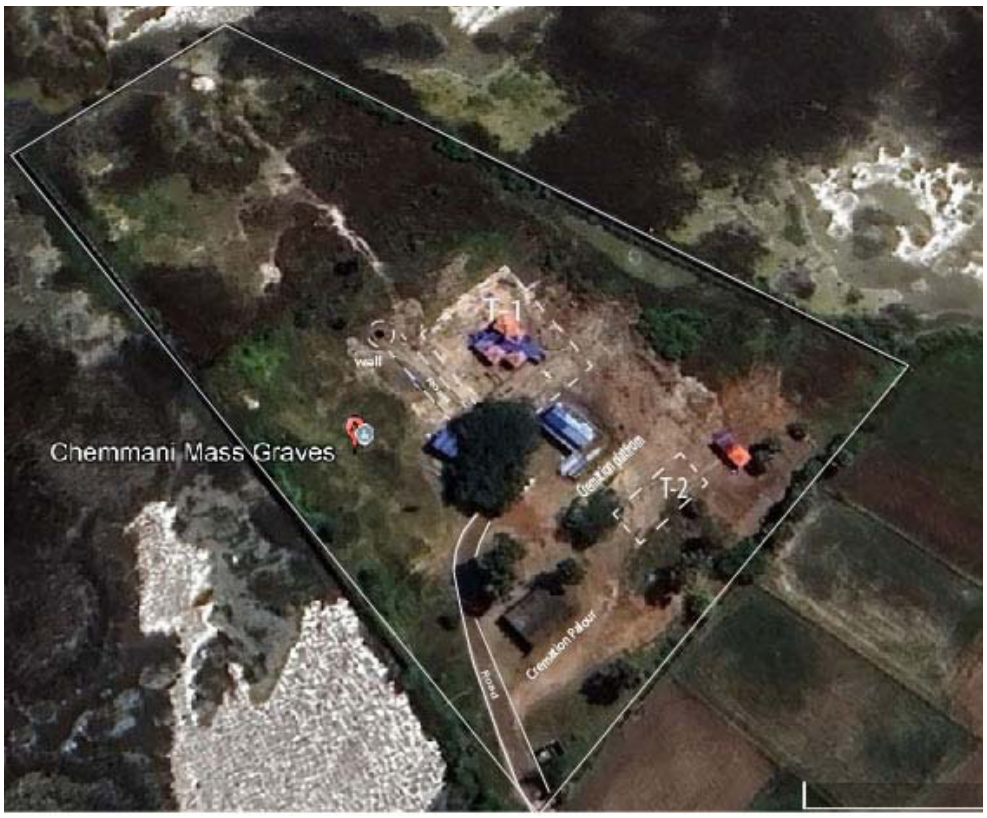


Figure. 1. Two photographs showing the recent disturbances occurred at the site (a). burying a dead cow and (b). distribution of hospital wastes over the surface at site 1 (pic. by author)

4. Identification of the Location

Two probable locations—designated as Trench 1 and Trench 2—were identified as potential burial loci based on the analysis of satellite imagery (see map.1). These locations were selected using soil color differentiation patterns, likely resulting from heat emission anomalies detectable in the satellite data (cf. Sowmya R. et al., 2017; Asokan A. et al., 2020). In the imagery, both sites are marked by distinct, white-colored rectangular shapes, suggesting possible disturbances to the subsurface strata.

Trench 1 is located approximately [insert number] meters northwest of the cremation platform at the Sittupattu Cemetery. Trench 2 lies 14 meters from the same reference point and is situated to the east of Trench 1. The linear distance between the two trenches is approximately 40 meters.



Map 1. General setting of the two excavation trenches in Chemmani

5. Excavation

Site 1 (trench 1) – A 28.5 m × 18 m area (513 square meters, see, annexture 2) was demarcated for initial excavation. The depth of excavation varied depending on the stratigraphic levels at which the human skeletons were deposited. The maximum depth reached at certain points where human remains were encountered was 1.60 meters below the highest point of the surrounding ground surface, with the depth generally ranging between 1.60 meters and 1.30 meters.

Site 2 (trench 2) – This trench was established approximately 40 meters east of Trench 1, at a location where the satellite imagery revealed a rectangular-shaped soil discoloration. A trial trenching method was employed in this area to assess the potential presence of buried human remains. The initial test excavation consisted of three interconnected linear trenches, each measuring 0.50 meters in width, arranged as follows:

- 13.80 meters (east–west),
- 6.40 meters (northwest–southeast),
- 1.40 meters (southwest northeast) .

Excavation in this area was carried out to a depth of 0.80 meters.

6. Stratigraphy

All the complete human skeletons and the accumulations of disarticulated human bones were reported from a shallow depth from the existing ground surface of the site (for a detailed analysis of the levels, *see, Figure. 7*).

The excavation revealed three distinct soil layers, described as follows: (*see, Figure 2*)

Layer 1 – (Munsell Code: 5YR 4/1 – Brownish gray; coarse-grained; indurated; maximum thickness: 24 cm)

This is the most recent soil horizon at the site, characterized by a high organic content. The organic composition is primarily the result of the decomposition of leaf litter from surrounding vegetation. Additionally, anthropogenic activity—particularly the disposal of domestic waste—has contributed to the accumulation of organic material in this layer.

Layer 2 – (Munsell Code: 7.5YR 5/2 – Grayish brown; fine-grained; stiff; maximum thickness: 36 cm)

From a geological perspective, the stratigraphy of the Jaffna Peninsula is formed across two major geological epochs: the Miocene and the Quaternary. The underlying limestone bedrock was formed during the Miocene epoch, while the overlying sedimentary formations were deposited during the

Quaternary epoch. These Quaternary sediments include:
(a) ridge and runnel sand,
(b) dune sand,
(c) beach sand, and
(d) lagoonal sediments (Senaratne & Dissanayake 1982).

Layer 2 appears to represent a composite of dune sand (upper portion) and beach sand (lower portion). Evidence of disturbances such as pit digging—is observable in various areas of this layer. Fragmented human and animal (cow/goat) bones were identified, likely due to the downward penetration of more recent disturbances. These were caused by the burial of dead livestock or, in some instances, shallow human burials inserted into the mid-level of this stratum.

Layer 3 – (Munsell Code: 7.5Y 6/2 – Grayish olive; fine-grained; plastic; maximum thickness not uniformly measurable). This layer corresponds to lagoon-sand and clay, forming part of the broader Quaternary stratigraphy of the Jaffna Peninsula. Most human skeletal remains were encountered in the upper and middle sections of this horizon. The high alkalinity of this layer (pH > 8) is likely attributed to the presence of the underlying Miocene limestone, which may have influenced both preservation conditions of the bones and the chemical characteristics of the burial environment.

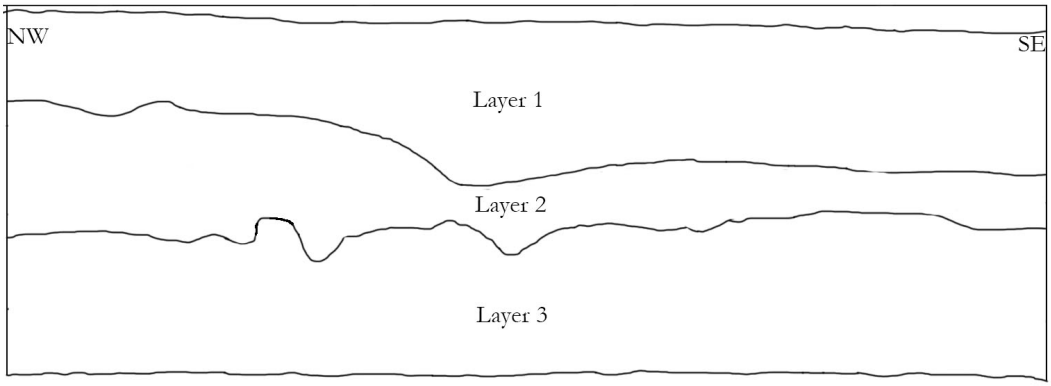


Figure 2: General setting of the two excavation trenches in Chemmani

7. Human Skeletal Remains *(Figure 3)*

The principal findings of the excavation comprised human skeletal remains recovered in two distinct forms: (i) relatively complete human skeletons preserved in anatomical association and (ii) disarticulated assemblages of human bones. These two categories provide different forms of archaeological evidence for examining burial practices, depositional processes, and the circumstances under which human remains were interred at the Chemmani site.

8. Identifiable Individual Human Skeletons

A total of 574 minimum number of individual (MNI) human skeletons were excavated during the investigation. These remains were recovered from burial contexts situated at varying depths below the present ground surface. The observed variation in burial depth is a significant characteristic of the assemblage and warrants consideration in reconstructing the funerary practices represented at the site.

The differences in the depths at which the skeletons were encountered may indicate that burial depth was not governed by a consistently applied convention. Instead, the depth of individual burial pits may have been determined by immediate circumstances, including the physical characteristics of the burial location and the practical requirements

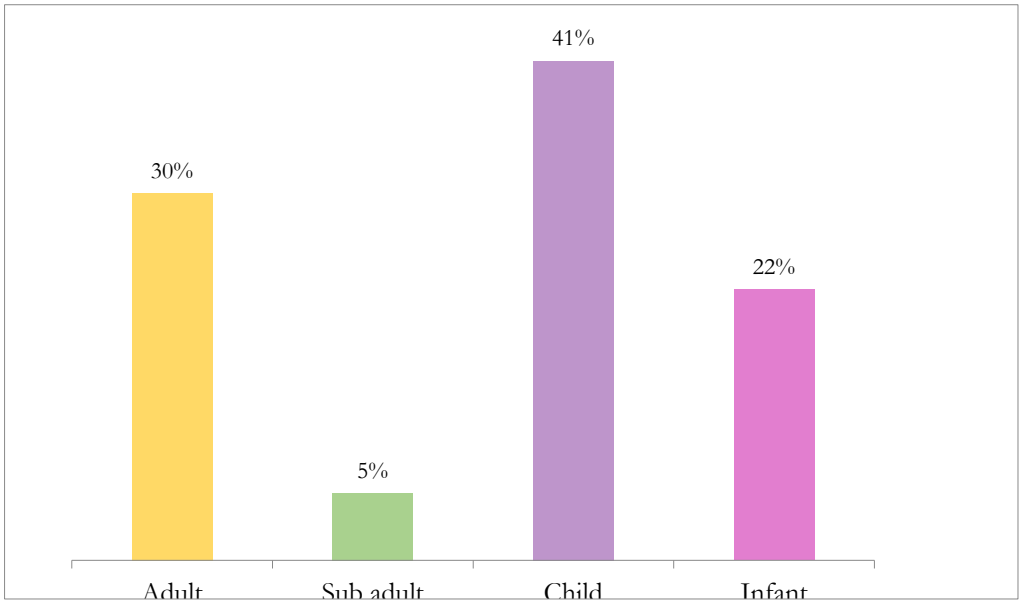


Figure 3: Distribution of estimated age categories across the excavated skeletal assemblage (N = 574). Age assignments represent preliminary field evaluations conducted by forensic professionals during the in situ recovery and systematic removal of skeletal remains from the excavation units.

associated with interment. Nevertheless, this interpretation remains provisional, as variations in burial depth may also reflect differences in the original ground surface, subsequent site formation processes, or other contextual factors.

9. Accumulations of Disarticulated Human Bones

Several assemblages of disarticulated human bones were documented during the excavation. These assemblages consisted of both complete and fragmented skeletal elements accumulated within discrete areas of the excavated deposit. A total of 51 such accumulations were recorded.

The association of certain artefacts with these assemblages provides potential evidence for interpreting the processes responsible for their formation. In particular, the presence of iron nails and other metal fragments within some of these accumulations (ex. AC 51) may indicate a relationship with earlier burial structures with coffins. These findings suggest that at least some of the disarticulated bone assemblages may have resulted from post-depositional disturbances associated with subsequent grave-digging activities. Such activities may have disrupted pre-existing burials, resulting in the displacement and secondary accumulation of skeletal remains.

10. Orientation of the Crania

The orientation of the cranium within a burial context constitutes an important variable in the anthropological and archaeological investigation of funerary practices. In many societies, the positioning of the deceased's body, including the direction in which the head is placed, is influenced by culturally prescribed conventions, religious beliefs, and socially transmitted traditions. Consequently, the systematic examination of cranial orientation may contribute to identifying patterns of funerary behavior and assessing the extent to which shared cultural norms govern the treatment of the dead.

The human skeletons excavated at Chemmani do not exhibit a uniform pattern of cranial orientation. This variability indicates that the deceased were not consistently interred according to a single directional convention, at least within the excavated assemblage. Such variation may suggest that a standardized orientation protocol was not systematically observed during burial. It may also reflect differences in the circumstances of interment, the organization of burial activities, or the cultural backgrounds and practices of those responsible for burying the deceased.

However, the absence of a uniform orientation pattern should not be interpreted as evidence that cultural or religious considerations were entirely absent from the burial process. Establishing such an interpretation would require the examination of additional variables, including body positioning, grave morphology, stratigraphic relationships, the spatial distribution of burials, and associated material evidence. Accordingly, cranial orientation at Chemmani should be analyzed as one component of a broader investigation into the funerary practices and social circumstances represented by the excavated skeletal assemblage.

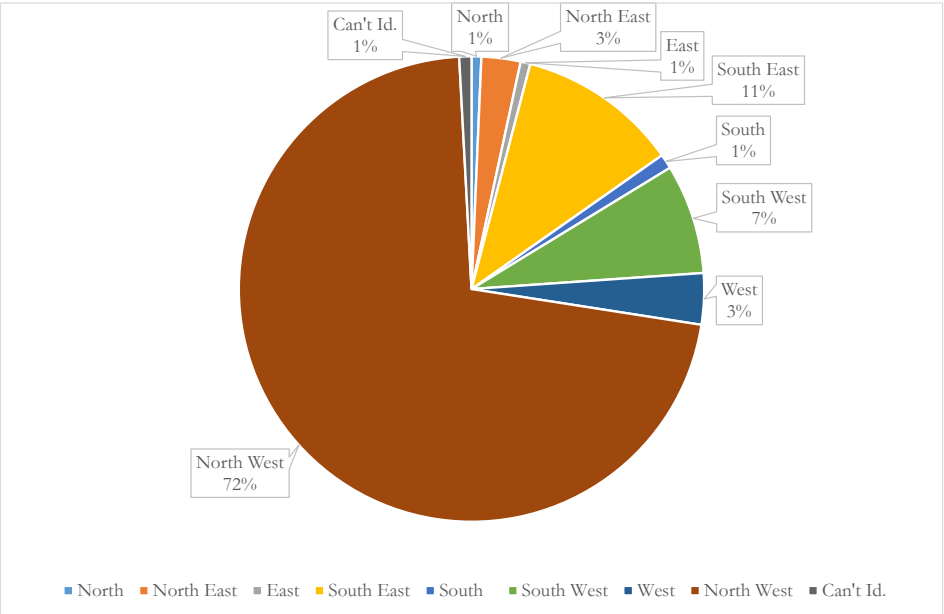


Figure 4: Spatial Orientation of the Crania. Distribution frequency illustrating the directional orientation of crania recorded across the excavated skeletal assemblage.

11. Hand Positions

The positioning of the hands in a buried individual constitutes an important element of mortuary practice and may provide insights into the way the deceased was treated by those responsible for the burial. Hand placement, considered in conjunction with other aspects of body disposition, may reflect culturally prescribed burial conventions, attitudes towards the deceased, and the symbolic or ritual significance attributed to the act of interment. Nevertheless, the interpretation of hand positions requires careful consideration of possible post-depositional disturbances and the effects of decomposition, as well as the original arrangement of the body.

In many cases of clandestine or irregular burial documented in forensic contexts, skeletal remains exhibit considerable variation in body disposition, including irregular

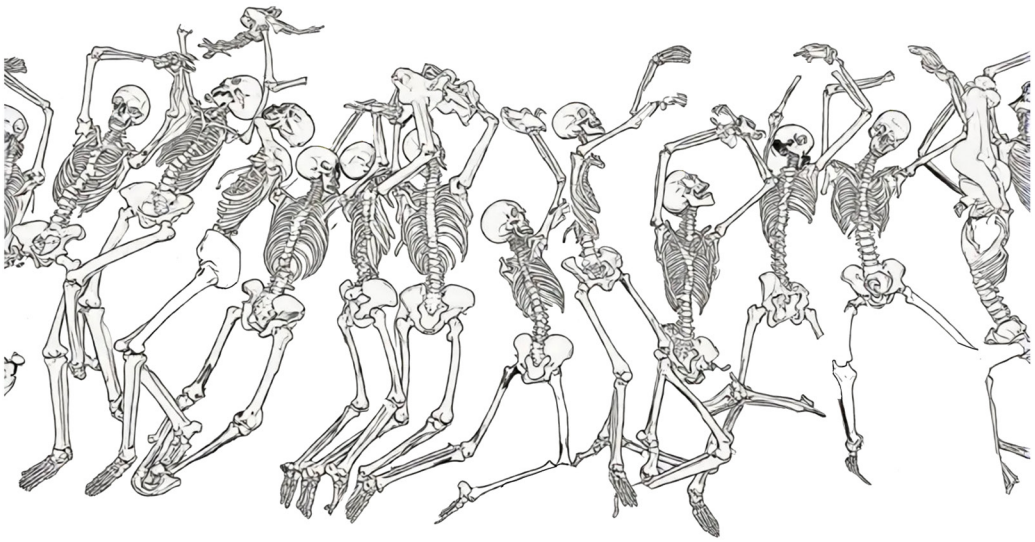


Figure 5: The image shows the Phaleron Captives (Desmotes), an Archaic-period mass grave discovered in March 2016 at the Phaleron Necropolis near Athens, Greece (source: https://www.ekathimerini.com/culture/1157385/the-improper-burials-of-ancient-times/).

arrangements of the upper limbs. In contrast, the human skeletal remains excavated at Chemmani demonstrate a notable degree of consistency in hand positioning. Except for skeletons affected by post-mortem disturbance, many of the excavated individuals exhibit one of two principal patterns: the hands are positioned over the abdominal region, or they are placed alongside the body. This relative uniformity constitutes a significant observation in the analysis of burial practices at the site. However, its cultural or behavioral significance cannot be established solely based on hand position; it must be evaluated in relation to the overall anatomical disposition of the remains, stratigraphic evidence, associated artefacts, and other contextual characteristics of the burials.
Two exceptional cases, identified as Skeletons 227 and 429, were found in a seated position. This mode of body disposition warrants particular attention because seated burial is documented in certain Hindu religious traditions. The concepts of Samādhi and Jīva Samādhi are associated with religious and ascetic practices in which the body of a spiritually accomplished individual may be interred in a seated posture. Such practices are described in the literature on Hinduism and related religious traditions (Long et al., 2022). The occurrence of seated burial in these two cases raises the question of whether this body disposition reflects a deliberate mortuary practice or another process associated

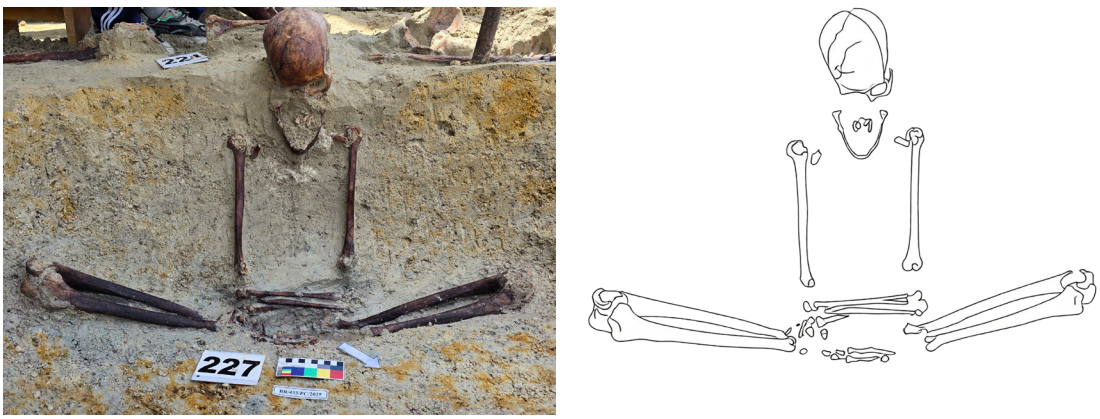


Figure 6: A skeleton buried in meditation posture (Sk. 227) unearthed during the excavation.

with the circumstances of deposition. Nevertheless, the seated posture alone does not establish a connection with Samādhi or Jīva Samādhi. Any such interpretation would require independent corroboration through contextual archaeological evidence, including the configuration of the burial deposits, the anatomical integrity of the skeletons, associated material remains, and relevant cultural or historical evidence. Accordingly, Skeletons 227 and 429 should be treated as exceptional cases within the Chemmani assemblage whose significance requires further investigation.

12. Vertical Distribution of Human Skeletons

The vertical distribution of the human skeletal remains excavated at Chemmani exhibits considerable variation in burial depth. The deepest recorded skeleton was encountered at approximately 1.52 m below the present ground surface, whereas the shallowest was identified at a depth of approximately 0.24 m. This variation represents a significant characteristic of the burial assemblage and warrants consideration in the interpretation of burial practices and the formation processes of the site.

A notable pattern observed during the excavation is the relatively shallow positioning of many of the child burials. However, this pattern is not exclusively associated with children. In the western sector of the excavated trench, several adult and sub-adult individuals were also encountered at depths of less than 1.00 m. These observations indicate that burial depth was not determined solely by the age category of the deceased. Other factors, potentially including the circumstances of interment, the sequence of burial events, the availability of space, and subsequent disturbances to the burial deposits, may have contributed to the observed variation.

The differences in burial depth provide a limited but potentially informative basis for examining the circumstances under which the bodies were deposited. One possible interpretation is that the variation reflects differences in the manner and degree of care exercised during interment. Some burials may have involved relatively deliberate and orderly procedures, whereas others may have resulted from more rapid or expedient acts of deposition. Nevertheless, burial depth alone cannot establish the intentions of those responsible for the interments or demonstrate that the observed differences correspond directly to distinct burial practices.

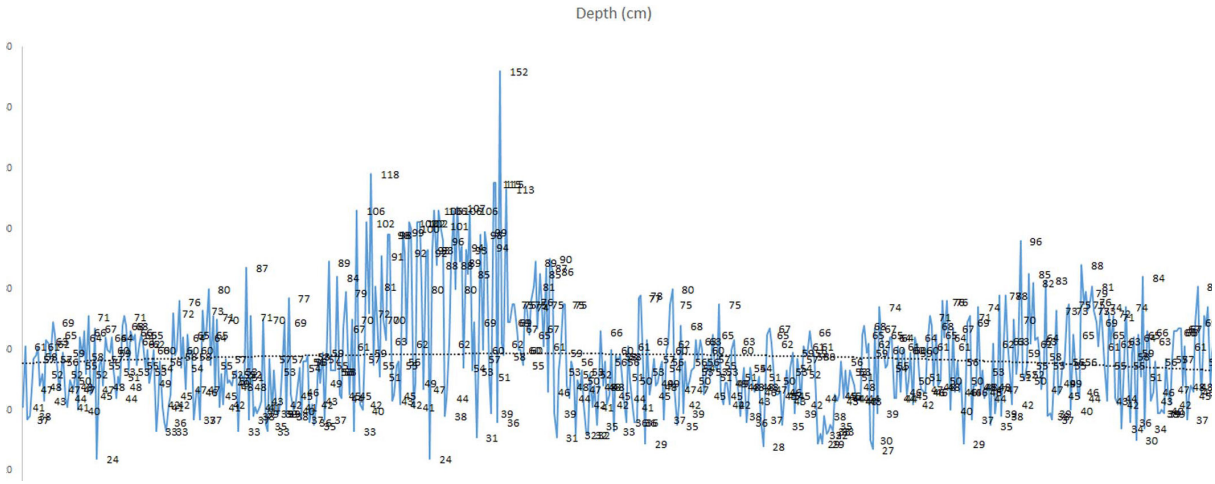


Figure 7: A graph showing the distribution of the irregularity of the depth of the skeleton buried in the investigated trench.

Accordingly, the vertical distribution of the Chemmani skeletal assemblage should be interpreted in conjunction with other archaeological variables, including the stratigraphic sequence, the spatial arrangement of the skeletons, anatomical articulation, evidence of post-depositional disturbance, and the distribution of associated artefacts. Such an integrated assessment may help to clarify whether the observed differences in burial depth reflect successive episodes of interment, variations in burial procedures, or other processes that contributed to the formation of the excavated deposit.

13. Horizontal Distribution of Human Skeletons

The horizontal distribution of the 574 human skeletons recorded within the excavated trench does not exhibit an immediately discernible spatial pattern (Map 2, see annexture 3). The arrangement of the skeletal remains appears irregular, with no clearly identifiable evidence of a consistently maintained spatial organization among the burials. This pattern may indicate that the placement of individual bodies was not governed by a uniform system of spatial arrangement. However, the absence of a discernible pattern should be interpreted cautiously, as the observed distribution may also have been influenced by the sequence of interments, the availability of space, and subsequent disturbances to the burial deposits.

The overlapping of skeletal remains constitutes another significant characteristic of the excavated assemblage. In several instances, the spatial relationships between skeletons, together with the presence of materials potentially associated with coffins, suggest that the burials may represent successive episodes of interment rather than a single, simultaneous depositional event. Where one burial overlies or intersects another, the stratigraphic and anatomical relationships may provide evidence for establishing the relative sequence of deposition. Nevertheless, overlapping alone does not establish the precise chronological interval between burials or demonstrate that all such instances resulted from deliberate disturbance of earlier interments.

In addition to the relatively complete and articulated skeletons, the excavation revealed several accumulations of disarticulated human bones. These assemblages represent a distinct component of the skeletal material and require separate consideration in the interpretation of the site's formation processes. Their presence may reflect a range of possible processes, including the disturbance of earlier burials, the displacement of skeletal elements during subsequent interments, or other depositional and post-depositional activities. Determining the origins of these accumulations requires detailed analysis of their spatial distribution, anatomical composition, stratigraphic position, and relationship to the surrounding skeletons.

Several artefacts were recovered in association with some of the accumulations of disarticulated bones, including iron nails and iron plates. These objects may be indicative of the former presence of wooden coffins or other structures used in the containment of the deceased. Their interpretation, however, requires consideration of their precise archaeological contexts, patterns of corrosion, spatial arrangement, and possible functional relationships with the skeletal remains. Where such associations can be established, these materials may provide additional evidence for reconstructing burial practices and understanding the processes through which the excavated deposit was formed.

Taken together, the irregular horizontal distribution of the skeletons, the overlapping of individual burials, the presence of disarticulated bone accumulations, and the recovery of possible coffin-related materials indicate that the Chemmani assemblage is unlikely to represent a simple, spatially uniform depositional event. Rather, these characteristics warrant investigation into the possibility of multiple episodes of interment and subsequent disturbance. A comprehensive interpretation should integrate horizontal distribution with vertical positioning, stratigraphic relationships, skeletal articulation, and artefact associations to establish a more reliable account of the formation and development of the burial deposit.

14. Clothing

None of the human skeletons excavated at Chemmani yielded direct, preserved evidence of clothing attached to the skeletal remains. However, the absence of surviving textile materials should not be interpreted as evidence that the deceased were buried without clothes. Organic materials, including textiles, are susceptible to deterioration under unfavorable burial conditions, and their preservation is strongly influenced by the physicochemical properties of the surrounding soil, moisture levels, microbial activity, and the duration of burial.

In several instances, buttons, eyelets, and studs were recovered in association with the human skeletons. These objects constitute indirect material evidence that may support the inference that at least some of the deceased were clothed at the time of burial. Nevertheless, the precise nature, composition, and arrangement of the garments cannot be established solely based on these objects. Their original functional associations should therefore be assessed in relation to their spatial distribution, archaeological context, and the anatomical positions of the skeletons with which they were recovered.

The apparent absence of preserved textiles across the excavated assemblage may be attributable, at least in part, to the prolonged exposure of organic materials to the burial environment. The chemical characteristics of the soil, including its pH, mineral composition, and associated moisture conditions, may have contributed to the decomposition of textile fibers. However, the extent to which these factors account for the absence of clothing remain cannot be determined without further investigation of the site's burial environment and the preservation conditions of organic materials. Consequently, the absence of surviving textile remains at Chemmani should be regarded as a taphonomic observation rather than definitive evidence of the absence of clothing at the time of interment. The recovery of buttons, eyelets, and studs provides a basis for further investigation into the clothing and burial practices represented in the assemblage, although their evidential significance must be evaluated in conjunction with their precise archaeological contexts.

15. Artefacts

A total of 170 artefact entries were registered during the excavation. The assemblage comprises objects recovered in association with the human skeletal remains, suggesting various relationships with mortuary practices, personal adornment, ritual activities, clothing, and burial procedures. The artefacts can be provisionally classified into six functional categories: (i) ornaments and jewelry; (ii) objects associated with ritual practices; (iii) clothing-related items; (iv) personal belongings of the deceased; (v) objects

associated with the expression of final respect for the deceased; and (vi) remnants of coffins used for interment. This classification is based on the observed characteristics of the artefacts and their archaeological contexts, although the precise function of some objects requires further investigation.

(15.1) Ornaments and Jewelry

This category comprises finger rings (e.g., SK 278), bangles (e.g., SK 165), and beads (e.g., SK 47, SK 96, SK 405, and SK 417). The contextual distribution of these objects reveals a discernible association between certain forms of personal adornment and the age categories represented in the burial assemblage. Finger rings and bangles were primarily associated with adult skeletons, whereas most of the recovered beads were found in association with the remains of children. This distribution may reflect differences in the conventions of personal adornment according to age, although further analysis of the assemblage is necessary to establish whether these associations represent consistent patterns of mortuary practice.

(15.2) Objects Associated with Ritual Practices

This category includes several amulets (e.g., SK 132, SK 154, SK 254, and SK 164) and a substantial number of Sri Lankan coins (e.g., SK 72, SK 77, SK 96, SK 95, SK 203, SK 223, SK 536, and SK 239). Their association with the human remains raises the possibility that these objects formed part of ritual practices undertaken in connection with the deceased, although their precise functions cannot be established solely based on their archaeological contexts.

Of particular significance is the presence of traces interpreted as remnants of cloth adhering to the surfaces of some coins. These traces suggest that the coins may have been wrapped in pieces of fabric and tightly secured before being placed in association with the deceased. Such an interpretation is consistent with practices documented among Hindu and Buddhist communities in Sri Lanka, in which coins or other small objects are wrapped in cloth and bound to parts of the body, especially the hands or hip region. Within these ritual contexts, such objects may be intended to provide protection against malevolent forces or other perceived sources of harm.

The reported practice is particularly noteworthy in relation to individuals who experienced prolonged illnesses, among whom the use of protective objects may have formed part of ritual responses to suffering and the perceived influence of supernatural forces. Nevertheless, the interpretation of the excavated coins as components of such practices remains provisional. Their precise significance must be assessed through a comparative analysis of their archaeological contexts, the physical evidence for textile preservation, and relevant ethnographic and historical evidence.

(15.3). Artefacts Associated with Clothing

Artefacts associated with clothing constitute a relatively scarce category within the assemblage recovered from the burial trench. The excavated materials comprise a limited number of plastic buttons, eyelets, and plastic studs. Despite the small size of this assemblage, these artefacts provide material evidence suggesting that at least some of the deceased were buried wearing garments or that clothing-related materials were present at the time of burial.

The limited representation of clothing-related artefacts should not, however, be interpreted as definitive evidence of the absence of garments among the deceased. Their scarcity may be attributable to several factors, including differential preservation conditions within the burial environment and post-depositional disturbances affecting the skeletal remains and associated materials. Consequently, although the available evidence supports the probable presence of clothing among the buried individuals, the precise nature, composition, and extent of such garments cannot be established from the surviving artefactual evidence alone.

(15.4). Artefacts Identified as Personal Belongings of the Deceased

A distinct group of artefacts recovered during the excavation can be interpreted as personal belongings associated with the deceased. These include (a) a plastic bag, (b) pieces of cloth cut and prepared for sewing, (c) socks and shoes, and (d) a metal anklet chain known in Tamil as kāl changili and referred to in Sinhala as pāda salamba or by the Sanskrit-derived term nūpura. All these items were recorded in association with Skeleton 25 (SK 25).

The occurrence of this assemblage in association with a single individual is noteworthy. The plastic bag, cut pieces of cloth, footwear, and metal anklet chain constitute a diverse collection of objects that may provide insights into the personal possessions and material circumstances of the deceased. Nevertheless, the precise functions and significance of these objects must be interpreted cautiously, considering their archaeological context and the limitations of the surviving evidence.

Further significant observation concerns the presence of a concentration of small nails in the vicinity of SK 25. These nails may represent remnants of a coffin associated with the burial. When considered alongside the associated artefacts, their presence provides supporting evidence for the possibility that the deceased was interred in a coffin and received a relatively formal burial. However, the interpretation of the nails as coffin remnants requires consideration of their spatial distribution, archaeological context, and any additional evidence of coffin construction. Consequently, the association of SK 25 with personal belongings and possible coffin remains distinguishes this burial from the broader assemblage and warrants further investigation into the variability of burial practices represented at the site.



Figure 8. The plastic bag and shoe reported from skeleton number 25 (pic. by author)

(15.5) Artefacts Associated with the Final Rites for the Deceased

Artefacts that may be associated with the expression of final respects to the deceased are extremely rare within the excavated burial assemblage (ex. Sk. 56 and Sk. 48, see below). The only recorded example of this category consists of two pollythen garlands recovered in association with a single skeleton. The presence of these objects may indicate the placement of garlands as part of the mortuary practices associated with the deceased.

Although the evidence is limited to this single occurrence, the garlands are noteworthy because they may represent material expressions of mourning, commemoration, or the performance of final rites. However, in the absence of additional contextual evidence, their precise function and the circumstances under which they were placed in the burial cannot be established conclusively. Nevertheless, their recovery provides a potentially significant indication of the practices through which respect for the deceased may have been expressed at the time of burial.

(15.6). Remnants of Coffins Associated with the Skeletons

Iron nails and irregularly shaped iron fragments were frequently observed in association with some of the excavated skeletons. A proportion of these metal fragments could be identified as probable remnants of coffin fittings or attachments. The iron nails exhibit considerable variation in size, suggesting variability in their dimensions and potentially in their original functions. However, the precise relationship between these metallic remains and the burial structures requires further contextual and material analysis.

Skeleton no	Iron fragments	Iron nails	Coins	Amulets	Beads	Bangles	Clothes related items	Glass	Pottery	Finger rings	Hair ornament	Rubber pieces
45	X	X										
47					X							
72	X	X	X				X				X	
67	X	X										
75								X				
77			X									
96			X		X							
95			X									
98		X										
124	X	X										
132				X			X					X
144	X	X			X							
165						X						
156	X	X										
152	X	X										
176		X										
187	X	X										
203			X				X					
223			X									

Skeleton no	Iron fragments	Iron nails	Coins	Amulets	Beads	Bangles	Clothes related items	Glass	Pottery	Finger rings	Hair ornament	Rubber pieces
215							X					
225		X										
527	X	X										
536	X	X	X									
239	X	X	X									
248		X										
246			X									
253			X									
254				X								
255	X	X						X				
164				X								
405					X							
278										X		
409	X											
412		X			X							
417					X							
448	X	X										
459		X										
458	X											
463	X											

Table 1. Association of different types of artefacts with some of the skeletons suggests the intentional motive of the burials.

16. Minted year of the coins

The only datable material evidence recovered during the excavation consists of coins, most of which were found in close association with human skeletal remains. Most of the specimens are heavily corroded, making their surface features and inscriptions difficult to identify. Following preliminary conservation treatment, a coin recovered in association with Skeleton 367 (SK 367) was identified as bearing a legible date of 1870 CE. However, the minting date of a coin does not establish the date of the burial with which it is associated. The coin may have remained in circulation or been retained for a considerable period before its deposition. In the present context, the association of coins with skeletal remains may be interpreted in relation to the ritual practices and transcendental beliefs of those responsible for the burial of the deceased. The deliberate deposition of coins may have constituted a material expression of such beliefs, rather than serving a chronological function. Consequently, although the coin from SK 367 provides a chronological reference point for the object itself, it cannot independently establish the date of the associated burial. The relative dating of the burials must therefore be approached with caution, considering the archaeological context and the possibility of a temporal interval between the minting of the coins and their eventual deposition.

The subsequent expansion of the burial trench towards the east and southeast revealed a considerably thick accumulation of ash. Approximately 5–6 m to the southeast of this area lies the cremation platform of the Sittupattu cemetery. During the construction of the platform's retaining wall, the earlier cremation area appears to have been cleared and levelled to accommodate the new structure. The thick ash deposit identified during the excavation is interpreted as a residual accumulation resulting from this activity.
A considerable number of coins were recovered from the ash layer. In contrast to the coins recovered in association with the human skeletons within the excavation trench, these specimens were generally better preserved, allowing their inscriptions and minting dates to be identified with relative ease. The legible dates were 1920 (Sk. 172), 1944, 1963, 1975, 1978, 1982, 1991 and 1994 CE.

The chronological distribution of these coins indicates a discontinuous temporal sequence, with substantial intervals between some of the recorded minting dates. This pattern suggests that the coins represent material accumulated over an extended period rather than a single depositional event. However, the minting dates alone cannot establish the precise date of the ash deposit or the construction of the retaining wall. Such conclusions require consideration of the depositional context and the stratigraphic relationship between the ash layer, the earlier cremation area and the later construction activity.



Figure 9. Some of the coins reported the excavation.

17. Ground-Penetrating Radar (GPR) Survey

A ground-penetrating radar (GPR) survey was conducted in the area surrounding the excavation trench to investigate the subsurface distribution of potential skeletal remains and assess the possible spatial extent of the burial site. The resulting GPR images revealed numerous subsurface anomalies distributed across the surveyed area, some of which may be consistent with additional burials. These observations suggest that the distribution of potential burial features extends beyond the limits of the excavated trench, indicating that the site may be considerably more extensive than the area investigated through archaeological excavation.

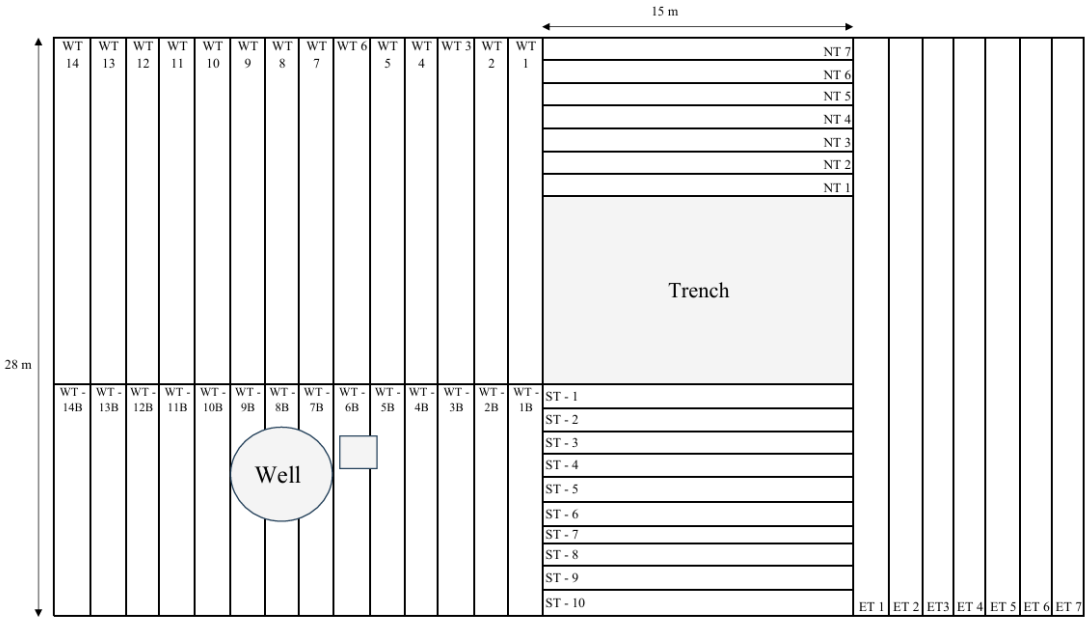


Figure 10. GPR scanned lanes around the excavated trench.

18. Observational Summary

The assemblage of material evidence documented in this report is insufficient, in isolation, to support a definitive conclusion regarding the nature and character of the burials investigated. **Nevertheless, the artefacts and associated contextual evidence suggest that the site exhibits greater similarities to contexts characterized by formal burial practices than to clandestine burial sites documented in other parts of the world.** The relatively high density of individual burials does not establish the circumstances under which the deceased were interred. If the concentration of burials resulted from an epidemic or another form of natural catastrophe, a limited assemblage of associated material culture would not necessarily be unexpected. Under such circumstances, the primary concern may have been the rapid disposal of the deceased rather than the deposition of substantial material offerings or personal belongings. Accordingly, the relative scarcity or limited diversity of artefacts should not be regarded as conclusive evidence for any burial context.

These observations remain provisional. A more comprehensive interpretation requires the integration of archaeological context, stratigraphic relationships, burial organization, skeletal evidence and the chronological information provided by the associated artefacts. The available evidence should therefore be evaluated cautiously before drawing conclusions about the circumstances, purpose or historical context of the burials.

Appendix 1 (page 18): Details of skeletons (a sample ranging from Sk. 1 to 150). Skeletons numbered 62, 63, 102, and 145 have been excluded from this description due to the low resolution of the photographs. They will be included in the final report once the resolution of the photographs has been improved.

Dr. S. Pranavan
Chief GMO
Base Hospital
Jaffna

Dear Dr. Pranavan,

Submission of the Third Interim Report on the Forensic Archaeological Excavation

I hereby submit the third interim report on the forensic archaeological excavation conducted by my team and me at Chemmani.

I would be grateful if you could kindly acknowledge receipt of the report.

Yours sincerely,

Prof. Raj Somadeva *(PhD)*
15 October 2026