History of the Chola Dynasty

The three Tamil dynasties Chola, Chera and Pandyans have had a long history dating back to a time before the Common Era. Inscriptions of Asoka (ca. 273—232 BCE) mention them as the rulers of Tamil-speaking region. The authors of the Sangam poems (ca. 100 BCE—250 CE) lived on the generosity of about 48 chieftains and ‘three crowned heads’ of the region. With that many kings and chieftains vying for control over a relatively small region, never-ending disputes over territories was a feature of their lives. Armed conflicts, raids on border villages and cattle lifting were frequent occurrences.1

Around 250 CE these rulers and chieftains succumbed to the onslaught of an invading horde, the Kalabharas.2 The origin of the Kalabharas is unclear, but the absence of any reference to them in the Sangam literature suggests that they must have been newcomers to the region.3 During the next three centuries that the Kalabharas held sway over Tamil Nadu, we hear very little about the rulers and chieftains of Tamil region. The Pandyan and Pallava dynasties barely managed to survive. There is no mention of the Cheras and the Cholas.4 The period of their ascendency has been referred to by some scholars as the “Kalabharaka interregnum”5 or as the “Dark Age” by others.6 Some scholars disagree with these characterizations and point out that during the Kalabharaka rule Tamil poets produced some important didactic literature which focused on ethical consciousness.7
By 600 CE, Kalabhara control of the Tamil region weakened. The Pallavas and Pandyans re-emerged and resumed their age-old quarrels. During this struggle, the Cholas of Uraiyur, a feudatory of the Pallavas, survived by making alliances of convenience with both the Pallavas and the Pandyans. By early 9th century the numerous wars had taken their toll on the Pallavas and the Pandyans. In ca. 850 CE Vijayalaya Chola captured Thanjavur and the agricultural tracts along the Kaveri River from the Muttaraiyars, another feudatory clan. The Chola dynasty Vijayalaya founded ruled Tamil Nadu for the next four centuries. Between the Vijayalaya conquest in ca. 850 and the last inscription by a Chola ruler in 1279, no less than 20 rulers bore the dynastic name, Chola.

**Inscriptions. A word of caution.** Among the three dynasties, the most has been written about the Cholas. Of the more than 18,000 Tamil inscriptions deciphered so far, about 10,000 of them are attributed to the Cholas. These inscriptions, despite their overwhelming numbers, are not of much value as historical documents. They invariably begin with a *prasasti*, a lengthy, embellished narrative of the semi-mythical history of the dynasty, then record the details of the endowments the kings and the members of his family established for such charitable causes as establishing *brahmadesa* villages, maintaining the images donated to the temples or feeding the priests. Apart from this they contain little else. For example, the inscription of Rajaraja I at the Rajarajesvaram gives the names, ancestry, street addresses and compensation of the 400 dancers of the temple, but nothing about the temple’s construction-related details. Similarly, another inscription of his that mentions the victorious expedition to Southeast Asia gives no details about navigational matters, the route of the expedition or the types of vessels. It is odd that while some of the inscriptions are so precise
as to dividing a veli of land to the accuracy of $1/52,428,800,000$, they are silent about the route of the long expedition to the Ganges or to Southeast Asia.

The information these inscriptions provide are useful to study the religious policies of the kings, not for a comprehensive history of the times. Commenting on these inscriptions Douglas Barret observed, “Any historical information they may give is usually incidental.” Nilakanta Sastri conceded, “No general statement on the standard of life of the people is possible: much less can we trace the changes in the standards and tastes of the population. The sources of our information are not sufficiently copious or precise to allow such attempts.”

Lost in this over-abundance of these temple-related inscriptions are certain significant events during the Chola period. Details of Rajaraja I’s attempts to establish relations with the Song ruler of China are to be found in Song dynastic documents. Information derived from Southeast Asian sources leads one to believe that the Chola patronage of the Chudamani vihara at Nagapattinam that was established by the Sailendra dynasty of Siam (present-day Thailand), and the Chola attempts to conquer Sri Lanka seem to have been related to trade. The inscriptions also provide very little information on the important role of the trade guilds which had a vast membership and carried on trade across the seas and land.

Throughout the Chola period, the following emerge as important aspects in the governance of the dynasty.

1. “Constant and endemic” wars with their neighbours. Causes for these wars were never made clear in the inscriptions but
must have been motivated by expansion of territories. In those days when there were no recognized boundaries, wars were fought to expand territories, which would result in an increase in the revenue base. Successful military campaigns also meant a huge booty. Stiff taxes levied in the conquered territories were a source of revenue. Booty from wars financed the construction of temples and gifts to the images enshrined within them. Some historians characterize these wars as predatory raids to infuse cash into the treasury. These wars must have been expensive and brutal. The conquerors list the destruction they caused in their adversaries’ territories in gruesome detail. Temples were spared, but those identified with the royalty were not. Despite the rulers’ claim to victories, their silence regarding the number of soldiers fielded, survived and dead border on indifference. In all the wars there were short-lived alliances: an ally in one war joined the adversary in another.

2 Chola kings and members of the royal family built temples as an act of piety and as a statement of royal authority. During the time span 850 to 1200, anywhere from 200 to 300 temples were erected in the Chola heartland. They were large and the sculptures in them numerous and graceful. The shrines of the parivara devatas, subsidiary deities, which were scattered and unrelated to the main shrine earlier, were integrated within the temple premises. In these temples there was a marked increase in the agamic rites: pujas several times of the day to the accompaniment of Vedic chanting, which required numerous priests. Another significant development was the practice of donating bronze images of important deities as Utsavamurthis, festival-images, by the members of the royal family and officials of the court, to be taken out in procession during festivals.
3. Chola rulers established *brahmadeya* villages, granted to brahmins who enjoyed special privileges and were exempted from taxes. These grants were carved on the walls of the local temple or in copper plates. To populate these villages brahmin priests were relocated from within the Chola kingdom and brought from as far away as Varanasi. Of some 1,300 villages in the Chola kingdom, 250 were *brahmadeya* villages. These villages were concentrated in the fertile Kaveri basin. *Brahmadeya* villages, however, were not exclusively of brahmins. As the brahmins did not cultivate, there were two classes of people in these settlements: those who owned the land and those who worked on them. The landlords formed a *sabha*, or assembly, to manage their affairs. Uttaramerur, well-known for an inscription about village governance was one such village. *Brahmadeya* villages served as the instruments of spreading the elements of *agamic* culture such as knowledge of Sanskrit, temple worship of *puranic* gods, following prescribed codes of conduct relating to purity and pollution and supporting the concept of kingship based on *dharma*. With the sanction and support of the kings these villages promoted the worship of *agamic* Saivite deities.

**History of the Cholas:** Nilakanta Sastri’s (1892-1975) *The Colas*, published in 1935, was a watershed in our knowledge of the dynasty. His narrative of the history of the Chola monarchs cannot be improved, as he studied over 3,000 inscriptions and then presented a coherent and linear account of the dynasty. S. R. Balasubrahmanyam, (1893-1982) in his books on the architecture of the Cholas inventoried nearly 500 temples thereby adding to our understanding of the times.
though his chronology of several monuments is contested, his
description of the monuments will remain useful as the character of
several monuments is being altered under the guise of renovation.

Since 1960 scholars from universities abroad have contributed
to an analytical study of Chola history.31 Burton Stein (1926—
1996) studied the nature of the Chola state and its administrative
structure;32 Noburu Karashima (1933—2015) focused on the
economic and social history of the times;33 Herman Kulke (b.1938)
explored Cholas’ relation with Southeast Asia.34 Among the group
of younger scholars, George Spencer focused on the military
exploits of the Cholas and the maritime exploration of Rajendra;35
Kenneth Hall studied the Nagarathar community and their trade-
relations with Southeast Asia.36

Among Indians, Suresh Pillai (1934-1998) scrutinized the inscrip-
tions from a social perspective. Based on pieces of information
scattered in those inscriptions, he challenged the existing narrative
which glorified the social and political culture of the Cholas.
Y. Subbarayalu analyzed the political geography of the Chola
kingdom and various aspects of the inscriptions.37 Subbarayalu,
along with Karashima and Sitaraman identified their location and
content under nineteen select categories. This is a monumental
work, as it has listed the inscriptions and provided bibliographic
information about them in a single publication.38

There has been a fresh approach towards Chola art also. Gerda
Hoekveld-Meijer in her Koyils in the Colamandalam provided a model
for an analytical study of the architecture of the Chola temples.39
Padma Kaimal subjected accepted notions about the Cholas and
their art to a fresh analysis of the inscriptions and presented her
findings in clear and precise language.\textsuperscript{40} Geetha Vasudevan, after a meticulous study of the inscriptions has, in her analytical study of the Rajarajesvaram, boldly argued that the imperial Cholas used religion and its associated institutions, such as temples, as much as an act of piety as tools to consolidate their political grip on the people.\textsuperscript{41} These scholars did not accept the inscriptions at their face value but subjected them to a critical analysis with a broader perspective of the society of the times. Their observations have been subjected to criticism, largely on details, but the significance of their contributions remains.

**Early Chola rulers. 850—985.**

The history of the dynasty has been divided into three segments: Early Chola, ca. 850—985, from the foundation of the dynasty to the accession of Rajaraja I; Imperial Cholas, ca. 985—1070, the reigns of Rajaraja I and his son Rajendra; and Later Cholas, ca. 1070—1279, Kulottunga I till the last ruler, Rajendra III.

**Vijayalaya (ca. 850—866 or 871)** Contemporary records are silent about Vijayalaya or his conquest of Thanjavur, yet “Vijayalaya took possession of Tanchapuri … just as he would seize his own wife” boasted Rajendra Chola I about his remote ancestor more than 150 years after the actual event.\textsuperscript{42} Vijayalaya was succeeded by his son Aditya I (871—907). He fought with the Chalukyas, Pandyas and the Rashtrakutas on several fronts, allying with the winning side and was well-rewarded with territories. He is credited to have built temples on either side of the entire course of the Kaveri River, even though there are no foundation records associating him with the temples. It is likely that he renovated the temples that were in disrepair.\textsuperscript{43} Aditya’s son Parantaka I (907—955) succeeded him.\textsuperscript{44} As suggested by his title *Maduraiyum Eeellamum konda,* he
expanded the Chola kingdom after victories over the Pandyan rulers and the Sri Lankans. Yet, the Pandyan and Rashtrakutas continued to challenge his authority. In 911, Parantaka, in alliance with regional chieftains, defeated the Rashtrakuta ruler, Krishna II. He then turned his attention south and invaded the Pandyan territory. The Pandyan ruler Maravarman Rajasimha (905—920) formed an alliance with the Sri Lankan ruler Kasappa. Parantaka defeated their combined forces at Vellur. The Pandyan ruler fled to Sri Lanka carrying with him the imperial regalia. In 923 Parantaka launched an expedition to Sri Lanka to recover the Pandyan regalia thereby legitimizing his claim for the Pandyan throne. The invasion did not result in outright victory as the Sri Lankan king retreated to Rohana, the hill country in the southern part of the island with the Pandyan regalia. Yet, Parantaka returned home with an immense booty which provided sufficient resources to cover the roof of the Nataraja Temple at Chidambaram with gold plated tiles. Meanwhile, in Rashtrakuta, Krishna III ascended the throne in 939. Aggressive and bolstered by his victories over the Ganga rulers, he chose to avenge his father’s defeat at the hands of the Cholas. In 949 at Takkolam he inflicted a crushing defeat on the Cholas. He annexed much of the northern territories of the Cholas and proclaimed himself the conqueror of Kanchi and Thanjai. The northern portion of the Chola territories remained under Rashtrakuta control until 968. After Takkolam, Parantaka remained inactive until his death in 955 and was succeeded by his younger son, Gandaraditya (956—957). His reign was too short for us to assess him, but the little we know of him suggests that he was a pious man with a literary bent of mind.

His wife Sembiyam Mahadevi outlived him and is known for her piou benevolence extended over six decades, which has
Stages in the making of a bronze image according to the lost wax or madhuṣikṣatavidhāna, lost-wax or cire-perdue process.
9. Breaking the model from Mould

10. Finished metal image

Stages in the making of a bronze image according to the lost wax or madhuchistavidhana, lost-wax or cire-perdue process

6. The mould on a bed of varatti

7. The mould buried in sand

8. Pouring
Rishabhavahanadevar

Treasure trove find at Tirunvenkadu
Now at Thanjavur Art Gallery
Date of the image: Rishabhavahanadevar: 1011 CE
Date of the image: Parvati: 1012 CE
Rishabhavahanadevar H. 108 cm
Parvati H. 96 cm

When Siva rushed to destroy the three demons, safe in their celestial fortress jointly defied the gods, in his haste he neglected to pay homage to Ganesa, the remover of all obstacles. As he stepped into the chariot its axle broke. When one neglects to perform necessary rituals, such mishaps can happen, even to divinities. As Siva lost his balance, he leaned on the rishabha standing nearby. The rishabha here was Vishnu who took that form to haul the chariot. Leaning on the bull, Siva regained his posture.

An inscription on the wall of the sanctum of Svetaranyesvara temple states that in the year 1011, Kadamban Kolakkavan installed the image of Rishabhavahanadevar. The following year, seven members of a merchant guild, the Rajaraja Jananatha Therinja Parivaram donated an image of the consort to Rishabhavahanadevar.
Siva leans on the now missing Nandi as a display of his close relationship with his mount.
Strong and supple legs intersect providing third dimensionality to the image.
Jewels on Siva’s expansive chest perform more than decorative role. Overlapping necklaces, याज्ञवल्क्य and the उदराखंड्वास add texture to the smooth torso.
Shorter jata spread over his back in a rhythmic pattern transitioning our attention from head to his torso.
As required in the *silpa shastras*, Siva is in the stance of leaning on the bull. The bull is missing but, as was commonly done, it must have been made separately and placed by his side.

With the imposing presence of the bull establishing Siva’s identity in an unmistakable manner, the rest of his iconographic features are presented unobtrusively. Siva’s hair, in long *jatas*, matted strands of hair, are gathered and wound up in several layers on his head as a turban. A jeweled band is tied a little above his forehead to restrain them from slipping onto his forehead. A full-blown *oomathai flower* is stuck into the hair. We can also see the raised hood of the cobra, its slithering body wound up in his locks. A little above his right ear one strand of hair is pulled out just enough to slip the crescent moon through. Clearly the work of a confidant *sthapathi* who has selected those of Siva’s iconographic features that would blend harmoniously with the long strands of the *jatas*. Those *jatas* not long enough to be wrapped up fall over the nape of his neck and spread over his broad shoulders and back in a rhythmic pattern deftly transitioning our attention from the head to the torso.

The wavy lines of Siva’s *jatas* intersect just above the centre of his forehead, thereby drawing our attention to his face with its strong yet gentle features. Between the arched eyebrows the third eye is delicately incised. The prominent nose, the sharp angle of the eyebrows, high cheekbones and the smoothly receding chin cast shadows that highlight his face, across which the trace of a smile plays. There is a *patrakundala*, a circular, leaf-scroll earring in his left ear; the right ear hangs loose without any ornament.

A broad necklace and a thin chain with a tiger claw pendant rest on Siva’s expansive chest. The expected armlets and wristlets, the
Ardhanarisvarar

Treasure trove find at Tiruvenkadu
Now at Government Museum, Chennai
Date of the image: 1047 CE
Ardhanarisvarar H. 100 cm

The word Ardhanarisvara is a composite of three words, artha, half; nari, woman; and isvara, deity. There are several legends about how Siva came to assume this form. According to one legend, Sage Bhringi, whose devotion to Siva was exclusive, once found Parvati sitting very close to Siva. The sage could not ask her to move yet wanted his worship to be directed to Siva alone. Quickly he assumed the form of a bee, circumambulated Siva, and flew away. Parvati, offended by this act, wished to attain an even closer union with Siva and performed severe acts of penance to achieve that union. After a period of trial, much impressed with her devotion and penance, Siva acceded to her wish by assuming the Ardhanarisvarar form. According to another legend, when Brahma found that his creations were not multiplying, he implored Siva to aid him to complete the process of creation. In response Siva took this form. In this form he is male and female: purusha,
Each half of the image is physically the copositive of the other, but skillfully rendered details rivet our attention to a half at a time.
Though the back of an image is not intended to be seen, the sthapathi has paid equal attention to the back as to the front that we notice the softness of the female and the strength of the male features.
Karaikkal Ammaiyar wished to be repulsive as a wraith, pey. The sthapathi has in this image made her ugliness into an endearing form.
Karaikkal Ammaiayar

Place of origin: Not known
Now at The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO, USA
Date of the image: ca. 11C CE
Karaikkal Ammaiayar: H. 50 cm; pedestal, H 18 cm; image H. 32 cm

Karaikkal Ammaiayar, the ‘Mother from Karaikkal’ is believed to have lived during the 6th century. That would make her the earliest among the nayanmars.¹ Her hymns in praise of Siva are part of the 11th Tirumurai of the Saivite canon.²

She was born in Karaikkal to an affluent family. Named Punithavathi, she recalled that her devotion to Siva started from the days of her first faltering steps. She grew physically, spiritually and intellectually according to the proper stages of a virtuous girl. Because of her physical beauty and spiritual grace, she was compared to goddess Lakshmi. She was given in marriage to Paramatattan, a man of wealth and standing. Before long Paramatattan realized that his wife possessed uncommon spiritual powers. Realizing that he was unequal to her, he went on a long voyage on the pretext of trade and instead of returning to Karaikkal, established himself at Madurai. He married another woman and prospered. When a daughter was born to him, he named her Punithavathi, after his
Other representations of Karaikkal Ammaiyar.


Metropolitan Museum, New York, USA. Bronze, H. 23 cm.
first wife. News of his life under the new identity reached Karaikkal and Punithavathi’s parents journeyed with her to Madurai to reunite them. When Paramatattan received this news, he went with his new family to meet Punithavathi. They fell at her feet and admitted to the relatives that he left Punithavathi because she was indeed a goddess with whom he could not have physical relationship. On hearing this, Punithavathi prayed to Siva to transform her into the form of a ghoul, a pey, as physical beauty would only continue to be a hindrance to her.

Some may interpret this episode from the perspective of gender equality. The man’s indiscretion was handled lightly while the woman, with no fault of hers had to settle for a pey form, nonetheless by the intervention of a male divinity.

Back to the story. Her wish was granted and she set out on a journey to worship Siva in his abode at Kailasa. On reaching Kailasa, out of reverence she climbed the sacred hills on her hands rather than with her feet. On witnessing this act of extreme devotion, Siva addressed her “Mother” and asked her what was her wish. She replied, “Grant that I may not be born again, But if that is to be my lot, grant that I may not forget you and stay close to your golden feet, singing with joy as you dance.” Siva instructed her to proceed to Tiruvalankadu and await there to witness his dance. She reached Tiruvalankadu, travelling on her hands, and as she entered the temple she witnessed Siva dancing in the sanctum. Here her story comes a full circle. In one her previous births, she was indeed Nili, a goddess in pey form whom Siva had married.3

As it was her wish to be ever in the presence of the dancing Siva, singing his praises, she is usually featured as a small image on the