

Chola (Cola) Empire

RAKESH MAHALAKSHMI

Jawaharlal Nehru University, India

Throughout almost 400 years of its rule, Chola power extended over a large area of south India comprising the whole of the modern state of Tamil Nadu and contiguous areas of southern Karnataka and southern Andhra. Emerging from their heartland in the vicinity of Uraiyur along the banks of the river Kaveri in the mid-9th century, they soon controlled the entire Tamil-speaking area. There are five major regions that comprised the Tamil country according to early medieval sources: the Cholamandalam, the Tondaimandalam (the sphere of authority of the Pallavas centering around Kancipuram), the Pandimandalam (the Pandya realm with Madurai as its core), the Naduvilnadu (literally “the land in the center” between Cholamandalam and Tondaimandalam), and Kongumandalam (areas around the Dharmapuri and Coimbatore districts) (Heitzman 1997). At the apex of its power between the late 10th and late 11th centuries, the Chola Empire extended over the entire Andhra region, Mysore, and northern-central part of the island of Sri Lanka. Other islands in the Indian Ocean such as the Lakshadweep and the Maldives were also brought under its control. During the time of Rajendra Chola (1012–1044), its power extended to the Malay Peninsula and the eastern archipelago. The conquests of this ruler in particular suggest that he was victorious over the entire region, from Andhra to Orissa, parts of Madhya Pradesh, and Bengal, which earned him the title of Gangaikondan or the “conqueror of the river Ganga.” However, this appears to have been more of a

Digvijaya (conquest of the directions) campaign related to assertion of power rather than leaving any lasting impact in terms of the territorial control by the Cholas.

The origins of the Cholas in the Early Medieval period can be traced to Vijayalaya who ruled in the locality of Uraiyur in the Tiruchirapalli region of Tamil Nadu in the mid-9th century. The history of the Cholas has been reconstructed on the basis of inscriptions on stone and copperplates used to record royal orders and donations. The kings were identified through their epithets and by using the strategy of alternate titles of Rajakesari (“lion among kings”) and Parakesari (“lion among enemies”) for successive rulers, and from the end of the 9th century, a further distinguishing feature was the use of specific introductory verses to describe a king. We also know from records of the practice of co-regency, where the anointed successor ruled alongside his father. Chola rule can be broadly divided into four periods – early (850–985), middle (986–1070), later-1 (1071–1178) and later-2 (1179–1279) – marking their rise and consolidation, imperial expansion, struggle to maintain their power and decline respectively. The major rulers of this dynasty were Parantaka I (907–955), Rajaraja I (985–1014), Rajendra I (1012–1044), and Kulottunga I (1070–1120). While succession to the throne was based on patrilineal primogeniture, the later-1 period was heralded by the accession of Kulottunga I, the grandson of Rajendra Chola, and the son of Rajendra’s daughter Ammanga Devi and the eastern Chalukyan ruler Rajaraja Narendra.

A matter of some curiosity is the link between the Cholas of the Vijayalaya line and the Cholas of the Sangam literature. We know of the dynasty called Cholas, whose

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rulers, along with those of the Pandyas and Cheras, were referred to as the *Muvendar* or “three kings.” They seem to have vanished into obscurity by the end of the 3rd century CE, and it is believed that a line of these rulers surfaced in the Renadu area of Andhra by the 7th century. There is no evidence to directly connect the Sangam Cholas with the early medieval dynasty; however, frequent mention of the Tanjavur and Tiruchirapalli districts as the Chola core, in records of other dynasties from the 6th century, such as the Pallavas and Chalukyas of Badami, and the *prasastis* of the Cholas themselves from the 10th century, indicate the living memory of the earlier lineage.

The administration of the Cholas as demonstrated through inscriptional sources suggests that a very elaborate revenue and bureaucratic structure was put into place by the late 10th century. There are broadly two kinds of officials – those important functionaries who already wielded power within the locality whom we call proto-bureaucratic, and those who were deliberately appointed by the state – the bureaucratic officials (Heitzman 1997). A class of officials referred to simply as *nam karumam arayum* – “those following our (the king’s) orders” – is found as conducting the affairs of the state. The generic term *atikari* (Sanskrit *adhi-kari*) was also used for various classes of officers. Those at the top of the ladder appear to have been drawn from the elite *vellala* and *brahmana* landowning sections of society. Both types held the titles of the reigning king along with their personal names; additionally, the former carried the title of *Muvendavelan*, while the latter carried the title of *Brahmarayan*. These titled officials’ names appeared in the context of maintenance of records (*olai*), revenue administration (*vari*), or as military functionaries (*senapati* – military commander). Other important offices include those of the Pallavarayan and Vilupparayan, where the suffix

arayan indicates that they were notables from the locality (Karashima 1984).

We have specific mention of the *karrali* or inscriber of the grants and *olainayakam* or scribe, suggesting the institution of writing and maintenance of records. There is a separate mention of the office of *puravuvari tinai-kalam*, which appears to be a reference to the revenue department. Within this office, we have references to the *varipottakam* or revenue register, the *varipottaka kanakku* or the one who makes entries into the tax register, *variylidu* or tax officer, *pattolai* or the copier, and *kilmukavetti* or the junior inscriber. Interestingly, we have references to the office of the *madhyasta*, invariably in the context of village assemblies, suggesting the function of arbitration or mediation. The office of the *nadalvan*, one who governs the *nadu* or region, appears to be conspicuous in the last stage of Chola rule, leading us to the conclusion that community-centric decision making had given way to individuals exercising power.

There was a second tier of government machinery that functioned at the trans-local level. In the early medieval period, the *nadu* or peasant locality emerged, comprising a cluster of villages called *ur*, dominated by non-*brahmana* landholding elite. These *nadu* had their own mechanisms of political and economic control, marked by the assembly, also called *nadu*, which was managed by the village elites who together formed the *nattar* – “those who hold the *nadu*” (Stein 1994). However, there were external elements that played a role in the *nadu* such as the *sabha* or assembly of *brahmanas*, who lived in separate settlements called *brahmadeya* that appear to have been royal creations. The state appears to have had its own bevy of officials at the *nadu* level: the *nadu vagai ceyvar*, also referred to as the *nadu kuru ceyvar*, indicating one who was in charge of settling *nadu* accounts, and what may have been a superior

office of *nadu kankani nayakam* or one who oversaw the accounts of land sales and arranged for services and suchlike (Subbarayulu 1973). At the very local level, the *brahmana* villages had a system of representation in the corporate body called *sabha*, with different committees or *variyams* having specialized functions such as supervision of tanks and the weighing of gold. The method of election to five such committees is mentioned in an inscription of the early 10th century. There were 30 *kudumbus* or wards arranged into 12 *ceris* or streets. Nominations were first invited from the *kudumbus* and then a selection by lot or *kudavolai* was done (Sastri 1937). Temples and other religious institutions that also played an important role in economic and social transactions in the society had organizations to look after their working.

Regarding sub-rulers and provincial governors, there is no specific indication of institutionalized tiers of rule under the Cholas. There is indication of heirs to the throne being co-regents; and allied rulers and military commanders or *senapati* also figure during military campaigns. It appears that the king of Sri Vijaya represented the Cholas (Karashima 2009) at an embassy in Song China. The Cholas had very close ties with a number of chiefs in the area, like the Sambuvarayar, as well as neighboring kingdoms such as the Rashtrakutas and Eastern Chalukyas, often forged through marriage. Often these matrimonial alliances soured relationships between the kingdoms at a later date, as in the case of the Rashtrakutas, on the question of succession. The early years of Chola rule saw them first conquering the Pallavas to the north and renaming their territories as Jayamkondacolamandalam. They were also constantly attempting to conquer and maintain their control over the Pandyas and Cheras in the extreme south, the Chalukyas of Kalyani in the northwest, and the

various small principalities ruled by the Nolambas, Gangas, and others (Sastri 1955).

At the zenith of their power, the Cholas maintained cordial relations with kingdoms in Southeast Asia and the Chinese Empire. During Rajaraja I's time, the Sailendra dynasty ruler of Sri Vijaya was permitted to build a Buddhist temple – the Chudamani Vihara at Nagapattinam – in c.1008 CE. Rajendra I received a golden chariot as a gift from the king of Kamboja (Khmer or Angkor, modern Cambodia) (Kulke 2010). Rajendra and his son Virarajendra led an expedition to Kadaram against the Sri Vijayan kingdom in 1025 apparently to curb its imperialist expansion vis-à-vis the Khmer. Chinese Song period chronicles *Songshi* identify this kingdom as Sanfoqi while the Cholas are called Zhunian. The *Songshi* also mentions an embassy from the Zhunian king in 1077 (Sen 2010). Closer to home, there were frequent skirmishes with the kings of Rajarata in Sri Lanka culminating in the conquest of the northern and central parts of the island in the early 11th century.

The saints of the *bhakti* or devotional tradition, which flourished in the Tamil region between the 6th and 9th centuries CE, firmly established the worship of the brahmanical deities Siva and Visnu, extolled in the sacred texts called *Purana* composed in the Sanskrit language. These saints localized the traditions by using Tamil language as their mode of expression, and identifying local cult sites as sacred to these Puranic deities (Mahalakshmi 2011). Although we know of the presence of the northern religious traditions – Brahmanism, Buddhism, and Jainism – in the region since the 2nd century BCE, it is the last two that held sway in addition to the local belief systems until this point. The Chola period saw the construction, renovation, and expansion of a number of shrines to these Puranic deities, thereby seeking legitimacy from the *bhakti* tradition. The middle

Chola period saw the “cathedral” style of building marked by towering spires and magnificent proportions, exemplified in the Siva temples in Tanjavur, Gangaikondaolapuram, and Darasuram (Srinivasan 1972). In the later Chola period, there was the horizontal expansion of the temple complex and a number of subsidiary shrines to minor deities and different forms of the main deity were added. What is striking is that the temples were named after kings, the best example being the massive Rajarajesvaram in Tanjavur built by Rajaraja I. This may be seen as an ideological mechanism through which the association between the king and the deity was invoked, thereby granting divine sanction to the king. This was linked to the absorption of local gods and goddesses who were gradually associated with the brahmanical deities, and the adoption of brahmanical rituals for their worship. The patronage to the ritual specialists – *brahmanas* – and the creation of a liturgy in an evolving Sanskritized Tamil language helped to strengthen this assimilation (Stein 1994).

The Chola state was dependent on the surpluses generated from the expansion of wet rice cultivation and the intensification of agrarian processes in already cultivated areas. In addition, due to the presence of a large number of craft specialists, burgeoning trade and the concomitant urbanization led to new economic bases for the state coming into being. The evolution of *nadu* or peasant localities was a gradual process that began in the early centuries of the Common Era, and which was accelerated in the early medieval period. There are numerous sources that talk of the “killing” of forests and the creation of the agrarian areas as well as the clearing of wastelands (Subbarayulu 1973). This process was facilitated through the operation of institutional mechanisms in the form of the *brahmadeya* or *brahmana* settlements and the *devadana* or temple settlements that were

either part of or whole settlements. As these were controlled by those from outside the locality they also provided leverage for the state to make its presence felt in disparate regions (Champakalakshmi 1996). While private ownership of land was not known in the non-brahmana villages with the *vellan-vagai* or peasant cultivators until the 10th century, thereafter we see rapid development of individual tenures as compared to the communal ownership of earlier times. We have a number of instances of irrigational facilities instituted and maintained by the local governmental machinery in the form of raising embankments, tanks, and canals. We also hear of committees levying taxes and fines for this purpose. Inscriptions tell us of livestock gifted to temples and their redistribution among the pastoral communities (Heitzman 1997).

The Chola period also saw craft specialization and trading activities accelerating due to the highly productive agrarian system that was put into place by the state. A number of specialists such as weavers, oil pressers, goldsmiths, and so on, are known from inscriptions. As a result, we also have a concomitant development of trade within the region and outside, including maritime trading activities. A third institutional mechanism, closely linked to the temple, that contributed to the economic transformations in the Chola period was the *nagaram* or urban settlement. The corporate assembly of the same name comprising merchants from the settlement, the *nagarattar*, directed trade and other affairs (Hall 1980). Cities became important production centers over the Chola period, and we hear of specialized centers such as the Saliya Nagarattar of the weavers and Sankarappadi nagarattar of the oil-mongers. Merchant bodies such as the Manigramam and Ayyavole, also called Nanadesa Disai Ayiratti Ainurruvar, which had a trans-regional presence, were dominant from the latter half of the Chola rule, while

supra-local trading bodies dealing in a particular commodity are also known. The Ainurruvar, particularly, played an important role in linking different trading bodies and regions as indicated by their name – “the 500 from one thousand directions in different regions” – and had a significant presence outside the region as well as across the ocean in Sri Lanka. A guild of foreign merchants called Hanjumannam is also known, that may initially have included Jewish and Arab merchants but was later exclusively associated with the Arabs (Subbarayulu 2012). There appears to be little doubt that the Cholas were aggressively following a policy of promotion of trade and it has been argued that the numerous naval expeditions undertaken by them into Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, and China may be attributed to the commercial potential of the area (Sen 2010). This has also led to the assertion that while the early Cholas were focused on the internal revenue base the imperial Cholas were influenced by the pull of the coast (Chakravarti 2011).

The many gifts recorded to religious institutions suggest that goods and land were in circulation, and, in the case of the latter, in the 12th century the state was forced to pass injunctions restricting land sales. The Cholas oversaw a vibrant money economy with kings issuing coins in gold called in ascending order of value as *manjadi*, *kacu*, and *kalanju* although with varying values (Chattopadhyaya 1977). We also hear of a gold coin in circulation presumably from Sri Lanka called *ilakacu* (Ilam is the name for Sri Lanka found in Tamil sources). Many gifts in gold were channeled into the agrarian economy, and we also hear of usury as an established practice.

Land revenue was the main source of income for the state and the entire taxation system was organized to harness this in various ways. We hear of assessment of land in terms of the cropping pattern – *orupuvilaiyum nilam* or one-crop lands, and

irupuvilaiyum nilam or two-crop lands; *nir nilam* or wet lands; *punjey* or dry/wastelands; and *nanjey* or improved lands (Karashima 1984). Essentially there were two tiers of revenue extraction – local and supra-local. The most pervasive tax was that levied on the cultivator – *kutimai*. Among the local taxes there were various kinds of labor dues, the most common being irrigational labor – *vetti/vettinai* – at the village and *nadu* levels. There was a general tax called *natacci/uracci* referring to the taxes on residential spaces and commons. There were a number of trading and artisanal dues as well, such as *cunkam* or toll, *tattar pattam* or tax on goldsmiths, *ennai irai/urai nali* on oil, *kurai kacu* on cloth, *verrilai* on betel leaf, *vannar parai* on washermen, *paci pattam* on fishing, and so on. What is interesting to note is that most were specified to be paid in kind. At the state level, the most abiding tax term we find is the *katamai*, which is also called *kanikatan*, which was paid in kind. Both terms are revealing: *katamai* means duty while *kanikatan* refers to a debt on land. There are taxes mentioned under the generic head *irai* in the early Chola period that referred perhaps to this land tax. We have another land tax to be paid in cash called *antarayam*, literally meaning “income coming in” identified as an interior tax. A particularly interesting tax was the *eccoru* referring to provisions made to feed the officials engaged in revenue administration. There were general taxes clubbed as *perumvari* and *ciru/kil vari* meaning big and small taxes respectively. A special right of protection called *padikaval* was given to locality chiefs such as the Malaiyaman, Vana-kovarayar, Kadava, and Sambubaraya, recognizing their privileged status.

In conquered territories such as the Pallava areas of Tondaimandalam, earlier structures were maintained. The same policy was also followed in the Pandya regions, although

there were some new taxes as well as those known in Chola areas (Karashima 1984).

We know of a large standing army of the Cholas and its various regiments, such as the *kudirai cevagar* or cavalry, *anaiatkal* or elephant corps, *villigal* or archers, and *valperra kaikkolar* or swordsmen. The king was the head of the armed forces in principle and there were various expeditions led by individual rulers or their sons or feudatories. There was an official functionary called the *senapati* who was the commander of the forces. The specialized group of *valangai velaikkarar* or left-handed groups who performed a *velai*, or task, is known as the backbone of the army not merely in the Chola lands but also in Sri Lanka. These have been understood as mercenary armies that offered their services to any party in the later Chola context (Hall 1980). Grants of land for military services known as *padaiparru* were given by kings. Specialized communities such as the Kaikkolas (“by the strength of their arms”) and Curuttiman (bowmen) are also known from the latter half of Chola rule.

The navy of the Cholas has attracted a lot of scholarly attention, and while the military expeditions are not disputed the possibility that the state was itself engaged in mercantile activities has also been raised. It has further been suggested that rather than maintain their own fleet of ships they used mercantile vessels or outriggers such as *Sangara* (large oceangoing single log vessels) and *Colandia* (massive oceangoing vessels). The *kattumararan* (catamarans) were the small bounded log-boats used in shallow waters and were possibly used to ferry soldiers’ arms and ammunition and provisions to the larger carriers (Sakhuja and Sakhuja 2010).

Early historiography of the Cholas focused on its grandeur, comparing it to the Byzantine Empire, while emphasizing the democratic structures in the form of elected representation in village assemblies. The first systematic

effort to study the political economy of the Cholas was through a statistical analysis of the pattern of landholding in *brahmana* and non-*brahmana* villages in the early Chola period which had implications for the changes heralded by the royal creation of the *brahmadeya* in rural society. Another groundbreaking work focusing on the political geography of the Cholas established that the state created new agrarian pockets, renamed old ones, and was constantly redefining its political boundaries. Some scholars have argued that the period marked by Chola rule represented a feudal social formation. A very important study on the Cholas focused on the issue of ritual sovereignty, where ideological mechanisms primarily drawing from religions were seen as the main props of the state. Countering this claim that the state had no real power as well as the feudalism proponents, scholars have stressed the many institutional apparatuses created by the Chola state to establish and maintain itself as a centralized entity. Recent studies have questioned the assumption of Chola colonization of Southeast Asia by focusing on the maritime trading networks from China to the Arab world as the key to understanding this interaction. Works that have focused on religious traditions and transformations of the cultural landscape of the Tamil region draw attention to the ideological institutions used by the state to further its reach and maintain its power.

Conventional histories have tended to focus on the decline of the Cholas because of weak rulers in the late 12th century. Recent studies indicate that the onus must be shifted to the political economy on the one hand, and on the other to the rise of additional regional powers such as the Hoysalas and Kakatiyas to the northwest and northeast, and the Pandyas in the south. The last known ruler of this dynasty was Rajendra III who was defeated in 1279 by the Pandyan king Maravarman Kulasekara.

SEE ALSO: Administration and bureaucracy; Agriculture and empire; Chalukya dynasty; Chera Kingdom; Eastern Ganga and Gajapati empires; Hoysala Empire; Kakatiya Kingdom; Pandyan Empire; Rashtrakuta Empire; Śailendra Empire of Java; Srivijaya, Kingdom of; Trade and commerce

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