PERSPECTIVES ON SOUTH INDIAN PAST I: THE CHOLAS

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READING NOTES

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UNIT I

THE IMPERIAL CHOLAS

INTRODUCTION

The history of the Chola dynasty represents one of the most enduring imperial lineages in South India, spanning approximately four centuries from the mid-ninth to the late thirteenth century CE (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 229). This dynasty, which originated in the fertile Kaveri delta, evolved from a regional chiefdom into a vast empire, demonstrating complex political, economic, social, and cultural structures (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 229).

This unit, titled *The Imperial Cholas*, is designed to equip students to critically analyze the fundamental processes of kingship and state formation during this significant period. By drawing upon major theoretical and historical scholarship, students will explore the mechanisms through which Chola royal authority was established, consolidated, and maintained. The primary focus areas include (a) the evolving nature of Chola kingship and state structure, (b) the crucial role played by royal temple construction, genealogies, and ritual symbolism in legitimizing authority, and (c) the consequences and character of the Chola state's large-scale military and diplomatic expansion into territories like Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. Ultimately, this unit aims to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of how political power, religious institutions, and military ambition intersected to shape the Chola Empire's rise and eventual decline.

CHOLA GENEALOGY AND POLITICAL HISTORY

The political trajectory of the Chola dynasty, from its obscure origins to its imperial zenith and ultimate fragmentation, can be broadly divided into four analytical periods, each reflecting distinct political and social trends (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 208).

Period 1: The Formative Phase (c. 850 CE to 985 CE)

The Chola dynasty was founded around the middle of the ninth century CE by Vijayālaya (c. 850–871 CE), who captured the city of Thanjavur from the neighboring Muttaraiyar chiefs (Ogura, 1999, p. 120; Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 208). Vijayālaya is noted for having dedicated an image of the goddess Niśumbhasūdanī in Thanjavur to commemorate his victory, although he left no major temples of his own (Ogura, 1999, p. 120).

The dynasty subsequently expanded under his successors. Āditya I (871–907 CE) is traditionally credited in later inscriptions, such as the Anbil plates of Sundara Chola, with building a series of large Siva temples made of stone along the banks of the Kaveri River (Ogura, 1999, p. 120). However, contemporary foundation inscriptions of Āditya I related to temple building are scarce (Ogura, 1999, p. 121).

The Cholas became a powerful ruling dynasty with the displacement of the Pallavas, who had previously controlled the northern districts of Tamil Nadu, during the early tenth century (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 208). Parāntaka I (907–954 CE) significantly extended Chola territory and achieved success over the Pāndyas (Ogura, 1999, p. 126). He was responsible for certain temple constructions, notably the entire structure of the Kodaṇḍarāmeśvara temple at Tondaimanadu in 941 CE, built where his father, Āditya I, died in battle (Ogura, 1999, p. 124). This period saw the core territory expand to annex the Tondai-nadu (the core Pallava territory) (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 208).

However, this expansion was temporarily crippled around the middle of the tenth century when the Chola kingdom succumbed to the onslaughts of the Rāshtrakūṭa king from the northwest (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 208). Kings like Gandarāditya (949–957 CE) did not construct any royal temples (Ogura, 1999, p. 123). The territory was recovered under Sundara Chola (957–973/975 CE) (Ogura, 1999, p. 126). During the subsequent reign of Uttama Chola (971–988 CE), his mother, Sembiyan Mahādevī, played a pivotal role in strengthening the royal involvement in temple construction and patronage (Ogura, 1999, p. 125).

During this early phase, the Chola king did not rule alone; numerous chiefs from small, ancient lineages maintained a subordinate relationship, possessing their own territories, courts, officers, and armies. These chiefs demonstrated fealty by issuing inscriptions in the Chola king's name and assisting in wars ((Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 209).

Period 2: The Imperial Phase of Expansion and Consolidation (986 CE to 1070 CE)

This phase represents the high-water mark of Chola power, covering the reigns of the great Rājarāja I and his son and grandsons (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 208).

Rājarāja I (985–1014 CE): Rājarāja I succeeded Uttama Chola in 985 CE and rapidly expanded the Chola realm, which had previously shrunk due to external threats (Ogura, 1999, p. 126). He defeated or asserted Chola suzerainty over many neighbouring kingdoms of peninsular South India and extended Chola control over important coastal and insular regions. Rājarāja I conquered the offshore islands of Sri Lanka (Ila-maṇḍalam), and asserted suzerainty over the Maldives (Kulke, 2010, p. 3; Spencer, 1976, p. 410). Rājarāja initiated significant administrative and cultural changes,

including incorporating chiefly territories into his new *valanāḍu* scheme and undertaking the first countrywide land survey (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 209). Crucially, he constructed the monumental Rājarājeśvara temple (Bṛhadīśvara) at his new capital, Thanjavur, cementing a new imperial ideology (Ogura, 1999, p. 126).

Rājendra I (1012–1044 CE): Rājendra I continued his father's imperial policies (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 209). His reign is noted for ambitious military campaigns, including a victorious march through Kalinga up to the Ganges (*Gangai*), which eliminated rivals on the eastern coast, earning him the title *Gangaikonda* (Kulke, 2010, p. 9). Rājendra I also advanced his father's imperial designs across the Bay of Bengal, leading a unique naval expedition against the Srī Vijaya kingdom in Southeast Asia in 1025 CE (Kulke, 2010, p. 1; Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 209). He established a new capital, Gangaikondacholapuram, where he built the magnificent Rājendreśvara temple, which was almost identical in scale and style to his father's temple (Ogura, 1999, p. 127). Rājendra I also established viceroyalties in conquered territories under the charge of his sons, such as Chola-Pāṇḍya in the Pāṇḍya country and Chola-Laṅkeśvara in northern Sri Lanka (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 209).

The immediate successors of Rājendra I, including his three sons, continued the line until 1070 CE (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 209). During the reigns of these great imperial rulers, the Chola state attempted deliberate efforts at centralization of political power and reorganization of the administrative structure (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 209).

Adhirājendra (1068–1070 CE): The brief rule of Adhirājendra marked the end of the direct Vijayālaya line; he was assassinated in 1070 CE (Ogura, 1999, p. 131).

Period 3: The Chola-Chalukya Line and Territorial Contraction (1070 CE to 1178 CE)

Following the 1070 crisis Kulōttunga (an Eastern Chalukya prince) became Chola sovereign, taking the title Kulōttunga I (1070–1122 CE) and inaugurating the Chola-Chalukya line (Ogura, 1999, p. 131). This union represented a fusion of two major royal lineages (Heitzman, 1995, p. 166).

Although Kulōttunga I was a powerful ruler, during the later part of his long reign, the Chola overlordship began to shrink outside the central Kaveri area (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 210). The Chola-Pāṇḍya viceroyalty ended after 1070 CE, and henceforth, the Chola state generally covered only the *Chola-maṇḍalam* and *Tondai-maṇḍalam* (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 210).

Successors in this line included Vikrama Chola (1118–1135 CE), who built the Vikramacholīśvara temple (Ogura, 1999, p. 132), and Rājarāja II (1146–1172 CE), who

built the Rājarājeśvara temple (Airāvateśvara temple) at Dārāsuram (Ogura, 1999, p. 132). Throughout this period, there was a gradual revival of local chiefs (*nāḍu* leaders), and the royal personality in temple architecture became less pronounced compared to the imperial phase (Ogura, 1999, p. 132; Heitzman, 1995, p. 166).

Period 4: Fragmentation and Demise (1179 CE to 1279 CE)

This final period saw the full emergence of powerful chiefly families and the ultimate disintegration of the Chola state (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 208).

Kulōttunga III (1178–1218 CE): Kulōttunga III built the Tribhuvanavīreśvara temple (Kampahareśvara temple) at Tribhuvanam, marking the culmination of the great Chola temples (Ogura, 1999, p. 132). However, by the latter half of the twelfth century, the Chola king depended increasingly on the armies of the chiefs (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 211).

The decline accelerated in the thirteenth century. As the Pāṇḍya king grew powerful enough to challenge Chola supremacy, the Chola rule was undermined by the rise of powerful and independent chiefs such as the Kadava, the Bāṇa, and the Telugu Chola (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 211). The Hoysalas of Karnataka also began to exert influence, establishing a parallel rule in the Tiruchirappalli area after intervening when Rājarāja III was captured by a Kadava chief in 1230 CE (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 211).

The last Chola king, Rājendra III (1246–1279 CE), retained only the Kaveri delta under his nominal rule until the end of his reign, marking the final demise of the dynasty (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 211).

A) Kingship and State Formation

The nature of kingship and the structure of the Chola state have been central issues in historical debates regarding medieval South India. The Chola state evolved significantly over its four-century existence, moving from a highly decentralized structure to a notably more centralized political system, especially during the Imperial Phase (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 240).

MODELS OF CHOLA POLITY

Historically, scholars have attempted to characterize the Chola state using three major, often conflicting, models: the bureaucratic, the feudal, and the segmentary (Heitzman, 1995, p. 162).

1. **The Bureaucratic/Centralized Model:** Older historical views, championed by scholars like K.A. Nilakantha Sastri, insisted on seeing Chola politics as centralized and bureaucratic, implying a modern, unitary state form (Stein,

1995, p. 136; Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 248). This view held that the Chola state was a highly centralized imperial state with a well-organized and efficient bureaucracy, although it supposedly interfered minimally in local institutions (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 248). The proponents of this model focused on central bureaucratic power and posited little structural change over time (Heitzman, 1995, p. 164).

2. **The Feudal Model:** This model, associated with scholars like R.S. Sharma, emphasizes independent, intermediate political offices and the fragmentation of state rights (Heitzman, 1995, p. 163). Some tentative suggestions of a feudal state or society have been made, particularly regarding the last phase of the Chola period or the land relations observed in *Brahmana* villages (*brahmadeyas*), characterized by the rise of big landholders and serf-like cultivators (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 209, 241). The use of the feudal concept is encouraged by some scholars because of its potential to clarify socio-economic organization, even if it does not strictly align with European feudalism (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 250).

3. **The Segmentary State Model:** This conception, formulated by Burton Stein based on Aidan Southall's work in Africa, asserted that the Chola polity was pyramidally segmented (Stein, 1995, p. 135, 137). The Segmentary State is defined by:

    - The existence of numerous political centers or domains (segments) (Stein, 1995, p. 137).
    - A differentiation between ritual sovereignty (held only by the anointed king) and political power (*kṣatra*), which can be wielded by many (Stein, 1995, p. 137).
    - All centers possessing autonomous administrative and coercive means (Stein, 1995, p. 138).
    - Ritual recognition of a single ritual center (the king) by lesser political centers (Stein, 1995, p. 138).

In the South Indian context, Stein identified the numerous localized social units called the *nāḍus* as the fundamental, pyramidally-organized segments (Stein, 1995, p. 136, 138). The Segmentary State model suggests that effective territorial sovereignty was confined only to the central zone (the rich Kaveri delta), while sovereignty became an increasingly ritual hegemony in the peripheral zones (Stein, 1995, p. 150). Critics of this model, however, point to clear indications of a centralized state during the middle

phase of Chola rule, arguing that Stein failed to account for changing administrative structures and obvious evidence of centralization (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 249, 254).

THE CENTRALIZING TENDENCY OF THE IMPERIAL CHOLAS

Empirical evidence, particularly from the extensive Chola inscriptions, suggests a dynamic process wherein Chola rulers actively sought to centralize authority, especially after the rise of Rājarāja I (c. 985 CE) (Heitzman, 1995, p. 178).

The King as the Central Figure: In the Chola state, the king was the unquestionable central figure (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 211). As the status of the king rose from a regional chief (ninth century) to an emperor (eleventh century), the use of grandiose titles increased (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 211). Earlier, the king was referred to as *perumāṉ* ('great man'), but later titles evolved to reflect greater social distance and divine attributes, such as *uḍaiyār* ('our lord') and later *ulaguḍaiya-perumāḷ* ('lord of the world') (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 211). Ultimately, titles like *śrībhuvana-chakravartti* ('emperor of the three worlds') were adopted (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 212). The king was consistently seen as the fountain of honour (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 212).

The Bureaucratic Apparatus: During the Imperial Phase (986–1070 CE), there were deliberate royal attempts to reorganize the entire administrative setup (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 230).

The officials of the Chola kings can be broadly divided into two groups: the extended court and the bureaucratic agents (Heitzman, 1995, p. 175, 176).

1. **The Extended Court:** This group included individuals bearing functional titles (like *nāḍu-vagai* performers or *senāpati*) who often acted as arbitrators of local disputes, investigating relevant documents and delivering judgments (Heitzman, 1995, p. 174, 175). These agents appeared to act on their own initiative or with a generalized fiat from the king, resembling a loyal "extended court" rather than a ramified administrative organization (Heitzman, 1995, p. 175). The highest officials of the government, who issued executive orders on behalf of the king, were often called Adikaris (*adhikāri*, meaning one who wields authority) (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 224). The heyday of the *adikaris* was the eleventh century (Period 2) (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 225). The royal scribe, or personal secretary who committed the king’s oral orders to writing, was the *Tirumandira-Ōlai*, or simply Ōlai (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 225).
2. **The Bureaucracy (Land Revenue Department):** From the time of Rājarāja I, the Chola administration developed a highly rationalized and specialized system for controlling agrarian resources. The Puravuvari-tinaikkalam (Land Revenue

Department) was the agency primarily concerned with land tenure records, revenue accounts, and tax assessment (Heitzman, 1995, p. 176; Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 226). This department operated with a defined, hierarchical structure (Heitzman, 1995, p. 176; Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 226). This institutional development—marked by rational procedures and hierarchically organized offices—was a clear move toward a more centralized bureaucratic state organ (Heitzman, 1995, p. 176). The frequent issuing of Royal Orders (*tirumugam*, 'sacred face') related to tax deferment and resource allocation, often revolving around the king personally, demonstrated the marked interest and ultimate control of the ruler over resources associated with temples at the local level (Heitzman, 1995, p. 171).

Taxation and Resource Penetration: The analysis of tax terms reveals a consistent pattern of increasing penetration of the village environment by outside agencies subordinate to the Chola kings after about 1000 CE (Heitzman, 1995, p. 183). Two major groups of taxes were collected:

1. ***Kadamai***: The major land tax, which yielded the bulk of the revenue and was collected directly from the landowner in grain or occasionally money (Subbarayalu, 2012, pp. 233). The term *kaḍamai* continually increased in frequency over time (Heitzman, 1995, p. 182).
2. ***Kuḍimai***: Labour levies, mostly in the form of corvée (unpaid labor), taken from the direct producers (cultivators). This labor was used for irrigation maintenance, temple service, and official upkeep (Subbarayalu, 2012, pp. 233). The burden of *kuḍimai* increased and became unbearable by the late twelfth century (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 235).

The shift from localized cesses to centralized terms like *kaḍamai* and *antarayam* (a cess determined by the royal revenue department) points toward a greater concentration of tax-collecting power in the hands of superior agencies (Heitzman, 1995, p. 182).

Geographical Variation of Control: The success of Chola integrative policies depended heavily on local variables and geography (Heitzman, 1995, p. 191). Central royal control, demonstrated by the highest frequency of royal activity and officials, was heavily tied to the Kaveri river basin (Heitzman, 1995, pp. 171, 172). In these central, wet zones (like Kumbakonam and Tiruchirappalli), the king's agents (especially the Land Revenue Department) dominated (Heitzman, 1995, p. 177). In outlying, drier zones (like Pudukkottai), the *nāṭṭār* (assemblies of *nāḍu* leaders) retained significant autonomy, sometimes performing administrative and arbitral functions. Their visibility increased whenever royal authority weakened (Heitzman, 1995, p. 184). This spatial

variability confirms that while the Cholas strove for centralization, they were often forced to strike deals with local powerful families or chiefs in peripheral zones, a process resembling 'feudal' subordination, especially in riverine tracts (Heitzman, 1995, p. 192).

B) Forms of Legitimation: Royal Temple Policy and Role of Genealogies

Chola kings relied extensively on religion, ritual symbolism, and mythological lineages to establish and legitimize their authority, thereby minimizing the cost of government and complementing their potentially vulnerable administrative systems (Ogura, 1999, p. 119).

THE ROLE OF GENEALOGIES

The Cholas secured legitimacy by claiming deep historical and divine roots. Soon after consolidating power, they acquired a mythical genealogy connecting them with the Purāṇic traditions of northern India (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 208). The genealogical portions of their *prasastis* (eulogies) trace the dynasty's origins back to gods, such as claiming descent from the sun (*Sūrya*) (Ogura, 1999, p. 130; Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 213). In times of political activity, such mythological ancestors were sometimes credited with actions supporting current royal policies; for instance, the mythical ancestor King Kaccahapan was ascribed active temple construction during the reign of Uttama Chola (Ogura, 1999, p. 137).

ROYAL TEMPLE POLICY: CHRONOLOGICAL PHASES

The involvement of the Chola royal family in temple construction evolved over time, reflecting changing concepts of kingship and resource command (Ogura, 1999, p. 120).

1. Early Phase (c. 850–1000 CE): Heroic Kingship and Local Shrines

In the earliest phase, royal construction focused on two main areas: sepulchral temples and the patronage of local Siva shrines (Ogura, 1999, p. 124, 135).

- **Sepulchral Temples (*Paḷḷippaḍai*):** These funerary temples were built over the remains of kings or relatives who died in battle (Ogura, 1999, p. 124). The earliest clear royal example is the Kodaṇḍarāmeśvara temple built by Parāntaka I in 941 CE for his father, Āditya I (Ogura, 1999, p. 124). These temples, presided over by Pāśupata sect pontiffs, memorialized heroic kings, providing the living ruler with legitimacy by connecting him to a deified heroic lineage (Ogura, 1999, p. 124, 125). This practice reflects traditional Tamil warrior culture fused with early Saivism (Ogura, 1999, p. 124, 125).

- **Local Siva Shrines:** Royal patronage shifted from the clan deity, the goddess Niśumbhasūdanī (worshipped by Vijayālaya), toward the universal god Siva (Ogura, 1999, p. 125). The conversion of existing, often wooden or brick, structures in traditional sacred places into stone temples broadened the universal legitimacy of the Chola kings as protectors of Saivism (Ogura, 1999, p. 125). These temples were moderate in size, suggesting initial scarcity of resources for large-scale construction (Ogura, 1999, p. 125).
- **Sembiyan Mahādevī's Influence:** In the later part of this phase, Uttama Chola's mother, Sembiyan Mahādevī, intensified royal involvement, constructing many temples inscribed with her foundation records (Ogura, 1999, p. 125, 135). She projected her identity by naming temples (e.g., Cholaīśvara) and even commissioning a portrait image of herself to be regularly worshipped (Ogura, 1999, p. 126). She also strengthened the royal connection with the Natarāja temple at Chidambaram (Ogura, 1999, p. 126).

2. Middle Phase (c. 1000–1078 CE): Imperial Temples and the Royal Linga Cult

This phase marked a dramatic shift following Rājarāja I's vast accumulation of wealth and power (Ogura, 1999, p. 127).

- **Imperial Temple Architecture:** Rājarāja I built the massive Rājarājeśvara Temple (Bṛhadīśvara) in Thanjavur (Ogura, 1999, p. 126). This temple, along with Rājendra I's Rājendreśvara Temple at Gangaikondacholapuram, represented a completely new category of imperial temple, fundamentally different in scale, style, and location from previous constructions (Ogura, 1999, p. 127). These temples served as monumental works designed primarily to showcase the immense wealth and power of the nascent empire, much of which came from war booty (Ogura, 1999, p. 127, 128).
- **The Cult of the Royal *Liṅga*:** A key feature was the naming of the main *liṅga* after the king who dedicated it (Ogura, 1999, p. 127). Names like *Rājarājeśvara* ('Lord of the King Rājarāja') carried the potential interpretation of 'Rājarāja as Lord' (Ogura, 1999, p. 127). This denoted the emergence of the cult of the royal *liṅga*, suggesting the apotheosis of a living king (Ogura, 1999, p. 127).
- **Focus on the King:** Worship in these temples was highly centered on the king himself (Ogura, 1999, p. 127). Rājarāja I's portrait sculpture, closely resembling Siva, was displayed, and the temple iconography emphasized themes reflecting the king's military strength (e.g., Siva in Tripurāntaka form) (Ogura, 1999, p. 128). The largest festival celebrated the king's natal star (Ogura, 1999, p. 128).

- **Incorporating Legitimacy:** The imperial temples served a double function of legitimacy, resulting from a compromise between the king's divine self-image and the orthodox Brahmins (Ogura, 1999, p. 130, 131). The king was exalted as a "god-like devotee" who represented Siva, fulfilling a *dāna* (donation) strategy by redistributing wealth (booty) to his subjects through the temple's economic network (Ogura, 1999, p. 128, 131). Rājarāja, through the Bṛhadīśvara temple, created a centralized ritual superstructure to keep his feudatories in ritual dependence and channel resources toward the economic development of his core area (Kulke, 2001, p. 15).

3. Late Phase (c. 1070–1279 CE): Fading Personality and Pan-Indian Cults

During the Chola-Chalukya period, the focus shifted further toward Pan-Indian deities (Ogura, 1999, p. 131, 133).

- **Decline of Personal Cults:** Although imperial temples continued to be built (e.g., Airāvateśvara by Rājarāja II), the king's personal identity or god-like nature gradually faded (Ogura, 1999, p. 132, 135). In later temples, the king was essentially degraded to the status of a pious lay protector of Saivism (Ogura, 1999, p. 133). The custom of building *paḷḷippaḍais* also received increasing disapproval (Ogura, 1999, p. 133).
- **Patronage of Chidambaram Natarāja:** Kings like Kulōttunga I and Vikrama Chola invested heavily in enlarging and embellishing the Natarāja temple at Chidambaram, which had become a Sanskritized, universal god (Ogura, 1999, p. 133). Natarāja became the dynasty's virtual tutelary deity (Ogura, 1999, p. 134). By focusing patronage on universal Sanskritized gods (including Ranganaatha at Srirangam), the kings secured a broader, pan-Indian legitimacy against rival dynasties, sacrificing their divine self-image for a more consistent political foundation (Ogura, 1999, p. 134, 135).

TEMPLE AND STATE: A MUTUAL RELATIONSHIP

The temple and the state shared a deeply symbiotic relationship (Veluthat, 2017, p. 1). The state patronage guaranteed temples land and support, while the temples conferred legitimacy on the monarchy (Veluthat, 2017, p. 3). The temples acted as powerful agents for the extraction of surplus, the disintegration of tribal society, and its reorganization into a caste society (Veluthat, 2017, p. 2). By accepting the caste ideology (*varṇāśrama-dharma*) and basing the new social order on it, the ruling class achieved ideological domination (Veluthat, 2017, p. 3). The divinity attributed to the king further strengthened this image, often utilizing deities and heroes of Purāṇic

Hinduism (Veluthat, 2017, p. 5). Through practices like naming temples after themselves and constructing *paḷḷippaḍais*, the Cholas merged the sacred and secular realms, equating the deity with the king and the temple cosmos with the state territory (Veluthat, 2017, p. 5, 7).

C) Hegemonic Expansion: Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia

The consolidation of the Chola empire was characterized by aggressive military expansionism, extending far beyond the Indian peninsula (Kulke, 2010, p. 3). These campaigns were crucial for obtaining resources and projecting Chola dominance.

The Invasion and Occupation of Sri Lanka (Ceylon)

The Chola presence in Sri Lanka (referred to as Ceylon or Ila-maṇḍalam) during the eleventh century was a pivotal part of their imperial strategy, characterized primarily by what is termed the "Politics of Plunder" (Spencer, 1976, p. 405, 406).

Historical Precedent: Conflicts between South Indian kingdoms and Ceylon were common long before the Cholas. Ceylonese kings often intervened in Pandyan politics, sometimes securing plunder from the mainland, but also often being subject to invasion themselves (Spencer, 1976, p. 408, 409). The instability caused by Ceylonese kings relying heavily on unruly Indian mercenary troops (like the *Keratas* or *Damitas*) provided opportunities for outside intervention (Spencer, 1976, pp. 410-411).

Rājarāja I and the Onslaught: Rājarāja I's invasion began around 993 CE (Spencer, 1976, p. 409). Learning of internal strife, particularly a revolt by unpaid Indian mercenaries under King Mahinda V, Rājarāja saw an opportunity for intervention (Spencer, 1976, p. 411). The Chola forces rapidly destroyed the capital, Anuradhapura, which subsequently lost its political preeminence (Spencer, 1976, p. 412). The Cholas commanded the city of Polonnaruva as their principal settlement in northern Ceylon, renaming it Jananathamangalam, after one of Rājarāja's titles (Spencer, 1976, p. 412).

The Motive of Plunder: The primary objective of the Chola campaigns in Ceylon was to sustain and enlarge the supply of "free-flowing" resources to the royal court (Spencer, 1976, p. 406). The island was renowned as a source of precious stones and occupied a key position in maritime trade, making it an attractive target (Spencer, 1976, p. 408, 414).

- **Targeting Wealth Concentration:** The Chola forces did not focus solely on the royal palace; they targeted wealthy institutional centers, especially the great Buddhist monastic complexes (*vihāras*) of Anuradhapura (Spencer, 1976, p. 411, 412). These monastic centers had accumulated immense resources (Spencer, 1976, p. 412).

- **Desecration and Theft:** Contemporary accounts and Spencer's analysis stress the severe devastation of Anuradhapura's monastic wealth, yet the pattern was not a simple permanent territorial annexation; southern Ceylon remained contested and ultimately produced resistance leading to Chola withdrawal (Spencer, 1976, p. 411, 416).
- **The Continuum of Exaction:** The Chola approach to resource gathering followed a taxation-plunder continuum: regular taxation/tribute was imposed in the secure heartland, while plunder was the preferred method of irregular exaction taken from the most distant places subject to rival centers (Spencer, 1976, p. 406). The destruction in Ceylon demonstrates that organized plundering activity was a fundamental instrument of the traditional Indian state (Spencer, 1976, p. 407).

Occupation and Retreat: Under Rājendra I, raids continued southward into the unruly province of Rohana, where defeated Ceylonese royalty (like Prince Kassapa, future Vijayabāhu I) often took refuge (Spencer, 1976, p. 416, 417). However, Rājendra's claim of "complete conquest" was overstated, as the Cholas never truly consolidated control over southern Ceylon, which lacked the large, prosperous settlements that typically tempted long-term Chola occupation (Spencer, 1976, p. 416). The Chola occupation became a prolonged war of attrition that eventually ceased yielding profit (Spencer, 1976, p. 417, 418). By 1070 CE, internal political crises at home and the sustained counter-attacks led by Vijayabāhu I forced Kulōttunga I to terminate the Ceylon adventure, opting for withdrawal rather than recouping losses (Spencer, 1976, p. 418).

Merchant and Military Involvement: The Chola dominance created favorable conditions for South Indian merchant alliances, such as the *Ainūṟṟuvar* and *Valanjīyar*, to expand their commercial activities across northern Ceylon, often displacing Sinhalese merchant groups (Spencer, 1976, p. 415). These merchant groups sometimes brought their own troops (*Velaikkārar* regiments) to protect commerce and potentially to serve alongside imperial forces (Spencer, 1976, p. 415, 416). However, the invasion was likely driven by political plunder rather than a direct strategy to secure a trade monopoly for Indian merchants, as Chola kings welcomed foreign merchants and did not directly engage in commerce themselves (Spencer, 1976, p. 413, 414).

THE NAVAL EXPEDITION TO SOUTHEAST ASIA (SRĪ VIJAYA)

The most ambitious projection of Chola power was Rājendra I's massive naval expedition in 1025 CE against the powerful maritime state of Srī Vijaya, which controlled the critical Straits of Malacca (Kulke, 2010, p. 1).

The Context of Asian History: This expedition must be viewed within the context of contemporary political and economic developments across the Indian Ocean (Kulke, 2010, p. 2). The late tenth century saw the simultaneous rise of new powers: the Fatimids in Egypt, the Song dynasty in China, and the Cholas in South India (Kulke, 2010, p. 2). The shift of Muslim trading activities from the Persian Gulf to the Red Sea increased the importance of the Malabar coast, aligning closely with the emerging Chola power (Kulke, 2010, p. 2).

Chola Strategic Goals: The Cholas appear to have followed a systematic expansion plan: conquering South Indian ports, occupying Sri Lanka and the Maldives, eliminating Indian opponents up to Bengal, and finally attacking Srī Vijaya, which dominated the Southeast Asian trade routes (Kulke, 2010, p. 3).

The reasons for the expedition are complex, encompassing commercial, political, and material motivations (Kulke, 2010, p. 1).

1. **Trade Hindrance:** Srī Vijaya was known for forcing foreign ships to stop at its ports and attacking those that failed to do so, aiming to maintain a monopoly, especially in products like sandalwood (Kulke, 2010, p. 2, 7). The Chola raid was therefore likely an ambitious maneuver aimed at removing hindrances from the trade route between India and the Song markets (Kulke, 2010, p. 2).
2. **Plunder and Wealth:** Rājendra's inscription explicitly claimed the capture of "the large heap of treasures" accumulated by the king of Kadaram (Srī Vijaya's second capital) (Kulke, 2010, p. 1, 2). The expedition was seen as the culmination of the Chola's "politics of plunder" employed in previous wars (Kulke, 2010, p. 2).
3. **Assertion of Dominance:** The expedition was intended to extend Rājendra's *digvijaya* (conquest) across the sea, adding luster to his imperial crown (Kulke, 2010, p. 1). The rise of the Cholas as a major maritime power led to a struggle for market share in the Indian Ocean (Kulke, 2010, p. 3).

Ritual Diplomacy and Rivalry: Before the attack, Srī Vijaya had attempted to maintain friendly relations with both China and the Cholas, engaging in "rituo-political" donations (Kulke, 2010, p. 6). For instance, the Srī Vijaya king, Srī Māravijayottuṅgavarman, constructed the Buddhist shrine Cūḍāmaṇi Vihāra at Nagapattinam, the major Chola port, around 1005 CE. Rājarāja I donated the revenue of a village for its maintenance (Kulke, 2010, p. 6). This diplomacy was meant to strengthen Srī Vijaya's privileged trading position (Kulke, 2010, p. 6).

The Cholas themselves engaged in diplomacy, sending embassies to the Chinese court

in 1015 CE, where they gathered intelligence regarding a potential conflict with Srī Vijaya (Kulke, 2010, p. 8). Rājendra I launched the naval expedition in 1025 CE, raiding major ports on the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, and the Nicobar Islands (Kulke, 2010, p. 1). The inscriptions record the capture of King Sangrāma-vijayottuṅgavarman of Kadaram (Kulke, 2010, p. 1).

Post-Expedition Effects: Although militarily successful, the Cholas were reluctant to convert this success into permanent political dominion (Kulke, 2010, p. 10). Srī Vijaya rebounded quickly, sending missions to China and regaining its dominant position, although weakened by internal struggles (Kulke, 2010, p. 10). The trade of South Indian merchants, however, continued to flourish in the region, evidenced by the famous inscription of the *Ayyāvole* merchant guild found in Barus, West Sumatra, dated 1088 CE (Kulke, 2010, p. 10). Later, Kulōttunga I interfered again around 1067–1068 CE with a naval expedition to support a pretender to the throne of Kadaram, indicating continued Chola involvement in the region's power struggles (Kulke, 2010, p. 11).

The Chola expeditions and ensuing trade relations fostered a new wave of cultural influence from South India that spread across Southeast Asia, often replacing earlier Pallava influence (Kulke, 2010, p. 10).

CONCLUSION

The Chola period, spanning over four centuries, was marked by a fundamental transformation in political organization, moving from a system of decentralized chiefdoms to a sophisticated imperial state (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 208; Veluthat, 2017, p. 2). This political evolution involved continuous tension between the core area's drive toward centralization—evidenced by the rise of a structured bureaucracy (the Land Revenue Department) and an increasing capacity for taxation (Heitzman, 1995, p. 183)—and the enduring power of local elites in peripheral regions, validating, to some extent, the concepts proposed by the segmentary state model (Heitzman, 1995, p. 192; Stein, 1995, p. 138).

Legitimacy was paramount for the Chola rulers. They achieved this by weaving together military heroism, mythological genealogies tracing their divine origins (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 208; Ogura, 1999, p. 130), and, most visibly, an evolving royal temple policy (Ogura, 1999, p. 120). This policy shifted dramatically from supporting local shrines and funerary temples to funding massive imperial centers like the Bṛhadīśvara at Thanjavur, where the king was projected as a "god-like devotee" who controlled both the sacred and secular realms (Ogura, 1999, p. 130, 131).

The consolidation of Chola power was intrinsically linked to military success. The

Chola state engaged in sustained hegemonic expansion, driven equally by the political need to assert dominance (*digvijaya*) and the economic imperative of plunder (Spencer, 1976, p. 406; Kulke, 2010, p. 2). This dual strategy manifested in the destructive raids and resource extraction campaigns in Sri Lanka (Spencer, 1976, p. 411) and the strategic naval expeditions against Srī Vijaya, aimed at securing trade routes and maximizing wealth in the context of rising Asian maritime competition (Kulke, 2010, p. 3). Although the Chola state eventually declined due to agrarian crisis and the resurgence of local chiefs (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 241), its accomplishments—in military reach, institutional development, and architectural patronage—left an indelible mark on the political and cultural history of South India (Heitzman, 1995, p. 194).

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UNIT II

ECONOMIC STRUCTURES AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATIONS

INTRODUCTION

This unit explores the fundamental economic structures and profound social transformations that took place during the Chola period, spanning from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries. The Chola era represents a major period of urbanization in Tamil Nadu, following an earlier phase coinciding with the early centuries of the Christian era (Champakalakshmi, 1991, p. 48). The intervening period, from the fourth to the eighth century, established a crucial institutional foundation, characterized by extensive agrarian expansion, which ultimately formed the necessary basis for the urban and economic growth that followed (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p.02).

The core objectives of this unit revolve around understanding the shaping of the Chola agrarian bases. This shaping involved active agrarian expansion, marked by bringing new land under cultivation and the successful creation and improved utilization of irrigation facilities. This expansion led directly to an increase in the number of stable rural settlements and consequently generated internal stratification within the rural world, resulting in greater social differentiation among inhabitants (Subbarayalu, 2012).

Concurrent with these agrarian changes, there were pronounced trends toward urbanization, the establishment of a monetized economy, and the large-scale intensification of trade activities. The mechanisms driving this commercial growth included the development of specialized market centers, known as *nagarams*, and the pivotal role played by powerful merchant guilds. A central theme is the institutional significance of religious centers: temples were fundamental to this transformation, representing the nucleus of urbanization and receiving substantial royal patronage.

A) AGRARIAN ECONOMY AND SOCIETY

The foundation of the Chola state's power and economy rested heavily on a robust and expanding agricultural system. The historical study of Chola-period agrarian organization, although built upon earlier foundational studies, requires a reinterpretation of how land was held, cultivated, and controlled, particularly given the growing stratification of society between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 146).

I. The Basic Agrarian Units: Ur and Nadu

The fundamental unit of socio-political and economic organization in the Tamil country was the village, commonly called the *ur* (Veluthat, 2000, p. 180). However, agricultural integration and governance often relied on the larger territorial unit known as the *nadu* (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 129).

The Ordinary Village (*Vellanvagai* and *Ur*)

The vast majority of villages in the Chola area were designated as *ur*. These were ordinary villages that had existed since ancient times and were subject to the normal governmental revenue assessment. This general category of villages was therefore called *vellanvagai*, meaning literally 'the agricultural kind' (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 125). In the geographical core of the Chola territory (Chola-mandalam and Naduvil-nadu), ordinary villages accounted for approximately 75% of all settlements (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 124).

A typical *ur* village included several key physical components within its borders: habitation quarters, cremation grounds, drinking water ponds, irrigation channels, and cultivated lands, alongside reserved pastures and forest cover (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 125). Detailed data from two inscriptions of Rajaraja I (dated 1014 CE) provides insights into the physical layout of villages in fertile regions (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 124). Villages varied widely in size; roughly a third averaged about 1.5 square kilometers, another third measured around 0.75 square kilometers, and the remainder were smaller, about 0.25 square kilometers or less (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 124). Crucially, in these villages, about 95% of the total village area was dedicated to cultivation (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 125).

Within the habitation quarters, social differentiation was manifested spatially through separate living areas for different occupational groups (Karashima, 2001, p. 46-47). Four specific residential quarters were mentioned in the records: (i) the quarters of the landholders/cultivators (*ur-irukkai*), often referred to as *urar* (Subbarayalu, 2012); (ii) the quarters of the artisans (*kammana-cheri*) (Subbarayalu, 2012); (iii) the quarters of the Paraiya (*parai-chéri*) (Subbarayalu, 2012); and (iv) the quarters of the Ilava (*ila-chéri*) (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 125; Karashima, 2001, p. 47).

The communal assembly of the ordinary peasant villages was called the urar ('those of the *ur*') (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 124). The fact that the generic name for the village was *ur*, and the landholders' quarter was *ur-irukkai*, suggests this body, primarily composed of landholding cultivators, held fundamental importance (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 126). Their corporate activities revolved almost exclusively around land matters, such as managing the sale or gift of property and handling exemptions from land taxes

(Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 126). The *Vellala* caste often formed the core of the *urar* and used hereditary land titles like *kilan* or *udaiyan* (possessor) associated with the village name (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 126).

The Regional Unit (*Nadu* and *Nattar*)

Above the village level, the more significant territorial unit was the nadu (Veluthat, 2000, p. 180). A *nadu* was essentially a micro-region, defined as a cluster of *ur* villages organized around a common irrigation source, such as a tank or a channel (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 129; Veluthat, 2000, p. 180). These were natural, spontaneous groupings of agrarian communities, rather than artificial governmental constructs (Veluthat, 2000, p. 181). The size of the *nadu* varied significantly, typically covering an area between 20 and 100 square kilometers and containing between one and forty villages (Veluthat, 2000, p. 180; Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 129). The sheer increase in the number of *nadu* units mentioned in inscriptions after the ninth century is often interpreted as evidence of gradual agrarian expansion, especially toward marginal regions (Veluthat, 2000, p. 181).

The corporate body representing this territory was called the nattar (or *nattavar*), meaning 'those of the *nadu*' (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 129). The *nattar* consisted primarily of the most important people of the area—the landholders, particularly *Vellala* landholders from the general villages, who held substantial influence in local affairs (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 129; Veluthat, 2000, p. 187). The *nadu* was recognized as the basic revenue unit by the Chola state (Veluthat, 2000, p. 188). The royal government depended on the *nattar* as its agents for administrative duties (Veluthat, 2000, p. 187). Their primary governmental function involved the assessment and collection of land taxes, as they were responsible for paying the government tax from their specific *nadu* (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 130). The *nattar* sometimes negotiated with royal authorities to secure tax reductions for the cultivating and artisan populations under their control (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 130).

The Chola administration also created larger, artificial administrative divisions known as *valanadus*, which were superimposed over the existing, organic *nadus* (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 130). This superimposition, alongside the elaboration of privileged *brahmadeya* and *devadana* settlements, suggests that the Chola government was actively structuring the political geography of its core area (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 130).

Supra-Local Integration: The Periyanattar

In the drier areas situated outside the intensive agricultural core of the Chola heartland, a form of supra-local integration emerged among landholders (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 132). This body was called the *chittirameli-periyanattar* (or simply *periyanattar*),

meaning 'the *periyanattar* of the beautiful plough' (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 132). The designation emphasized their collective identity as agriculturalists (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 132).

Unlike the local *nattar*, the *periyanattar* covered an area larger than a single *nadu*, functioning somewhat like expansive caste organizations of later periods (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 132). This group was multi-ethnic, united by their shared profession of agriculture (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 132). In a significant development, even the Brahmana landholders, who traditionally maintained a more isolated existence, were eventually included within the *periyanattar* (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 133). Furthermore, these large landholder bodies sometimes convened and worked together with merchant organizations (*nagarattar*) for shared purposes (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 133; Karashima, 2001, p. 36). This development of the *periyanattar* is traceable to the mid-eleventh century and was influenced by factors like the central government's creation of *valanadu* administrative units and the rise of new landholding groups from former pastoral or military communities (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 134-135).

II. Special Settlements: Brahmadeya and Devadana

The agrarian society included special, privileged settlements that were not subject to normal state revenue assessment and played a crucial role in socio-political integration and agrarian expansion (Champakalakshmi, 1991, p. 38).

The Brahmana Village (*Brahmadeya*)

Approximately 20% of the villages were designated as *brahmadeya*, settled and owned by Brahmanas known as *brahmadeya-kilavar* (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 124). These settlements were distinct because their landholdings, unlike the earlier communal nature often found in general villages, were typically owned by individual Brahmanas from the start (Karashima, 2001, p. 41). *Brahmadeya* villages were specially created by royal decree and enjoyed state protection (Karashima, 2001, p. 37). The Brahmana residents held rights both as land possessors (*miyatchi*) and as recipients of cultivation rights (*karanmai*) (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 147).

The communal assembly of the *brahmadeya* was the sabha (Karashima, 2001, p. 37). The members of the *sabha* managed village administration, including matters related to cultivation, irrigation, and the investment of money received from sources such as the Tanjavur temple endowments (Karashima, 2001, p. 37; Heitzman, 1991, p. 30). Because the Brahmanas were not engaged in tilling the land themselves, a critical social distinction arose between the Brahmana 'landholders' and the separate 'cultivators' who worked the fields (Karashima, 2001, p. 37; Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 147). The *brahmadeya* villages served as important local centers that helped the Chola power

structure integrate and control the surrounding *vellanvagai* villages (Karashima, 2001, p. 40).

The Temple Village (*Devadana*)

The Chola rulers actively promoted the creation of *devadana* villages, which were lands granted to temples (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 148). The increase in temple building (converting older brick temples into stone, and constructing new, massive structures) by the royal family and other elites led to a significant increase in both money and land endowments to these institutions (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 148).

Initially, some grants, called *kudi-ninga-devadana*, only transferred the government tax owed on the land to the temple, allowing the original cultivators (*kudi*) to retain ownership (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 148). However, from the eleventh century onward, grants more frequently involved removing the original owner, resulting in *kudi-nikki-devadana*, which made the land the full property of the temple, referred to as *tirunamattu-kani* (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 148). This allowed deities to become genuine landowners, accumulating vast agricultural resources. A massive example of this process is the Rajarajesvara temple at Tanjavur, where Rajaraja I allocated the entire land tax (*kanikkadan*) from forty villages across the Kaveri delta and distant *mandalams* (including settlements in Sri Lanka) to support the temple's maintenance (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 149).

III. Agrarian Stratification and Social Differentiation

The breakdown of communal landholdings in the general villages during the eleventh century, giving way to individual ownership, resulted in the emergence of powerful, differentiated landholders (*kaniyalar*) who sometimes owned entire villages (Karashima, 2001, p. 58; Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 146). This process created complex and layered relationships within the rural world, leading to marked differentiation in the latter half of the Chola rule (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 146).

Social Hierarchy and Occupational Groups

The village society was clearly divided into broad social strata based on occupation and relationship to land (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 125).

1. **The Landholders and Possessors:** At the top were the possessors and controllers of the land, known generally as *kaniyalar* (Subbarayalu, 2012). These included the *urar* and the Brahmana landholders (*perungudi* or 'greater' *kudi*) (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 153).

2. **The Cultivating Tenants (*Ulukudi*):** The actual tillers of the land, especially on the large estates of temples and *brahmadeya* settlements, emerged prominently in the last quarter of the twelfth century as organized solidarity groups (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 153). They were often referred to as *ulukudi-vellala* (cultivating Vellalas) or *périlamaiyar* (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 153).

3. **The Servicing People (*Panicheymakkal*):** Occupying a middle position were the service workers and artisans. These included accountants, potters, musicians, weavers, carpenters, and blacksmiths (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 153). They were dependent on the landed elite (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 153). These groups were actively denied certain privileges by the cultivating Vellalas, such as the right to wear a tuft of hair, use drums during ceremonies, or own livestock, confirming their subordinate social status (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 153).

4. **Agricultural Laborers:** The *paraiya* community, whose specific residential quarters (*parai-chéri*) are mentioned in inscriptions, provided essential agricultural labor (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 125). Evidence suggests that the *paraiya* in the villages were employed directly for the cultivation of land (Karashima, 2001, p. 48). This labor force was often in a condition of serfdom, attached to the land (*adscripti glebae*), without freedom of movement (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 158). Furthermore, residential areas for lower communities like the *pulai-chéri* (quarters of the *pulaiya* community) were not even owned by the residents but were considered the property of the *kani* holders of the village (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 158).

Agrarian Tensions and the Burden of Labor

The latter half of the Chola rule was marked by deepening agrarian crises, evidenced by conflicts between landholders and cultivators (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 153).

Rent and Taxation: Tenant cultivators (*ulukudi*) paid rent (*kadamai*) to the landholders through two methods: (i) annual fixed rates (*varichai*) or (ii) sharecropping, where the landlord received the *melvaram* (landlord's share) (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 152). Cultivators also suffered burdens due to illegal levies, sundry payments for revenue officials and soldiers, and demands that they pay portions of the landlord’s government tax (Subbarayalu, 2012). Coercive measures were used for rent collection, sometimes involving armed persons (*chevagar*) (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 153).

Corvee Labor (*Tevai*): A significant point of contention was the demand for corvee or forced labor (*tevai*), claimed either by the king or the landlord (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 155). This compulsory labor included:

1. ***Kolarai:*** Apportioned work required for maintaining essential irrigation facilities, such as desilting water channels and strengthening canal banks (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 155).
2. ***Nettal:*** Continuous, non-apportioned labor demanded for renovation projects, sometimes related to royal works like the palace at Rajarajapuram (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 155). Inscriptions sometimes documented *nettal* demands, such as requiring one person for every specific unit of cultivated land (*kani*) for each cropping season (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 155).

By engaging in collective resistance, cultivators were able to secure agreements, such as those dating to 1177 CE, that aimed to settle their grievances (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 151). These agreements included restrictions on arbitrary harassment by armed collectors and set limits on *kolarai* labor based strictly on the area of cultivated land (Subbarayalu, 2012, p. 151).

B) TRADE, URBANIZATION AND MONETIZATION

The stability provided by the expanded agrarian base fueled powerful trends towards urbanization and the development of a complex commercial economy during the Chola period (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 2). This process, termed "secondary urbanization," arose internally from agricultural growth and institutional organization, distinguishing it from the earlier, maritime-driven urbanization (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 38).

I. The Temple as the Nucleus of Urbanization

Temples were structurally crucial to the growth of urban forms and were continuously the focus of royal patronage throughout the Chola era. The period from the ninth to twelfth centuries saw urban growth largely centered around the expansion of existing agrarian settlements, especially *brahmadeya* and *devadana* villages (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 51).

Institutional Framework for Growth

From the seventh century onward, temples assumed immense significance, evolving into institutional bases that fostered socio-economic and political integration (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 52). This growth was supported by the Bhakti ideology, which the Cholas leveraged to achieve integration (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 54). By receiving continuous endowments of land, gold, money, and livestock, temples became economic powerhouses with complex administrative structures, supported by temple personnel and tenants (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 54). The accumulation of these resources provided the necessary capital to finance and encourage urban development (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 54).

This concentration of wealth necessitated the expansion and elaboration of temple architecture (Champakalakshmi, 1991, p. 132). Small shrines grew into massive horizontal complexes, complete with enclosures (*tirumadaivilagam*) where specialized quarters were established for diverse non-agricultural groups, including merchants, artisans, and weavers (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 59).

The Imperial Temple: Rajarajesvara at Tanjavur

The construction of monumental royal temples, such as the Rajarajesvara temple at Tanjavur by Rajaraja I (985–1014 CE), served multiple purposes: projecting the supreme power of the Chola ruler, symbolizing the centralization of power, and stimulating economic activity (Heitzman, 1991, p. 27; Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 61).

The king, along with his family and high-ranking courtiers, made spectacular founding donations (Heitzman, 1991). Rajaraja I alone donated 38,604 *kalancus* of gold and 48,000 *kalancus* of silver, often sourced from war booty (Heitzman, 1991, p. 29). This massive transfer of wealth set up the infrastructure for the temple's permanent operation, the transactional network, which was cumulatively of far greater economic value than the one-time gifts (Heitzman, 1991). This network permanently linked the imperial center to 369 different places, mostly within the Chola core (*Cholamandalam*) (Heitzman, 1991, p. 35).

The transactional network relied on seven components for continuous resource mobilization and staff support (Heitzman, 1991, pp. 30–32):

1. **Oil Supplies:** Guaranteed by depositing livestock (cows, ewes, buffalos) with individuals or groups in villages, who then had to supply specific amounts of oil for lamps and offerings (Heitzman, 1991). Rajaraja I personally supplied about 40% of the animals, totaling 1,623 cows, 2,563 ewes, and 40 buffalos (Heitzman, 1991). This transaction represented a small but significant influx of essential milk products from the pastoral economy on the peripheries (Heitzman, 1991).

2. **Money Deposits:** High-ranking officials, military groups, and the temple treasury deposited gold money (*kacu*) with Brahmana assemblies (*sabhai*) (Heitzman, 1991). These *sabhai* were responsible for investing the money and returning an annual yield (typically 12.5%) in cash or agrarian produce to the temple (Heitzman, 1991). At least 9,097 *kacu* were deposited in this manner (Heitzman, 1991).

3. **Temple Personnel (Dancers):** 398 female temple dancers (*talicceri pentukal*) were brought from smaller temples throughout the Chola domain and supported

by an allocation of land that yielded 100 *kalams* of paddy per share (Heitzman, 1991).

4. **Service Workers:** This large support staff, including musicians, tailors, potters, and accountants, were supported by varying shares of paddy, with total recorded expenses exceeding 20,000 *kalams* annually (Heitzman, 1991).
5. **Ritual and Administrative Specialists:** These personnel, including Brahmanas and treasurers, also received annual stipends, often drawn from *brahmadeyam* settlements (Heitzman, 1991, p. 32).
6. **Watchmen:** Village assemblies (*sabhai* and *urar*) were required to send watchmen (*tirumeykdppdrka.l*) to the temple. These individuals received 100 *kalams* of paddy annually per share (Heitzman, 1991, p. 32).
7. **Tax Revenue Allocation:** The king allocated substantial land taxes (*katamai*) to the temple. Agricultural villages (*ur*) paid this tax in kind (paddy), while commercial communities (*nagaram*) paid in gold (Heitzman, 1991, p. 32). The annual tax income allocated exceeded 153,000 *kalams* of paddy and over 2,500 gold *kalancus* (Heitzman, 1991, p. 33). These allocated tax revenues alone were sufficient to cover all known expenses for temple personnel (Heitzman, 1991, p. 33).

Geographical and Political Implications: The transactional network was heavily concentrated around Palaiyaru, near the apex of the Kaveri delta, reflecting the intense irrigated rice cultivation there, which was the most important source of resources (Heitzman, 1991, p. 48). This suggests Palaiyaru, not Tanjavur, was the true ritual and economic center of the kingdom (Heitzman, 1991, p. 48). Tanjavur itself was isolated from the network's core, serving instead as a symbol of centrality (Heitzman, 1991, p. 48). The construction of the massive temple there may have been a strategic decision to stimulate economic development on the southern periphery of the delta and to act as a border marker, proclaiming Chola lordship over former Pandya territory to the south (Heitzman, 1991, p. 49).

The network also helped integrate peripheral areas: the southeast (Tirutturaippundi area), which had irregular water supply, participated intensively, suggesting the temple was a mechanism for encouraging investment and agricultural development in this backwater area (Heitzman, 1991, p. 45). In the drier southwest, where pastoral economy dominated, the temple established ritual authority through animal transfers Heitzman, 1991, p. 45).

II. Trade, Monetization, and Commercial Institutions

The efficient mobilization of agricultural resources and the capital accumulated in temple complexes provided the necessary conditions for the intensification of commercial activities and the eventual rise of a monetized economy (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 50).

Monetization and Standardization

While early exchange was heavily reliant on barter and localized exchange of subsistence goods (*noṭuttal*) (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 102), money as an exchange medium was used generally in larger transactions and long-distance trade, particularly by itinerant merchants (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 54). The intensification of the transactional network of the imperial temples brought commercial and monetary arenas under the direct regulation of royal authority (Heitzman, 1991, p. 35). This resulted in the standardization of commodities and the establishment of fixed money equivalents (Heitzman, 1991, p. 35).

Inscriptional references reveal that all major commodities transferred to the temple were given standard money equivalents (*kacu*), accelerating the ready monetization of resources within the core kingdom (Heitzman, 1991, p. 35). During the Chola period, especially after the tenth century, coined money became a regular exchange medium (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 54). For instance, gold *kalancu* was equivalent to 2 *kacu*, and 2 *kalams* of paddy were equal to 1 *kacu* (Heitzman, 1991). The Chola mint was located in Kudamukku (Champakalakshmi, 1991, p. 54). However, the impact of monetization on commercial organization remains complex and difficult to assess, as monetization throughout the entire subcontinent was low, and paddy often served as the overall basis of the exchange system (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 57).

Specialized Market Centers (*Nagarams*)

A crucial development was the rise of specialized market centers known as *nagarams*. The *nagaram* was defined as a commercial community that was distinctive because it paid taxes to the royal government in gold (Heitzman, 1991, p. 32; Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 44). These market centers proliferated alongside the expansion of Chola power (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 45).

The primary function of the *nagaram* organization was to maintain local markets and supervise the flow of goods, providing a regular link between the local *nadu* (agrarian unit) and itinerant traders (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 45). Each *nadu* often functioned as the local marketing territory for its corresponding *nagaram* (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 60).

The *nagarams* and the Brahmana settlements (*brahmadeya*) functioned as interdependent agents of political synthesis for the Chola state (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 45). The growth and proliferation of *nagarams*, especially from the tenth century, coincided with the rise of the Cholas (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 45). Areas that had recently been conquered by the Cholas, such as parts of Karnataka, the Kongu region (Coimbatore/Salem), and the Andhra region, showed a marked increase in the number of *nagaram* centers (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 46). This suggests the Cholas strategically used the *nagaram* as an agent of state synthesis in newly integrated territories (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 46).

Some urban centers achieved the status of *managaram* (a great or prestigious market) (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 58). Kanchipuram, although a secondary political center under the Cholas, retained commercial prominence, indicated by its designation as *Kanchimanagara* (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 58). The exchange nexus in these cities and their surrounding few *nagarams* were oriented toward the commercial requirements of the royal centers (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 58).

Merchant Guilds and Organized Trade

Merchant guilds played an indispensable role in promoting trade, extending the reach of the monetized economy, and influencing urbanization (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 47). Organized commerce was a major factor in the economic life of medieval South India (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 47).

The most prominent corporate trading communities were the Ayyavole (or Ainnurruvar, meaning 'The Five Hundred') and the Manigramam (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 48).

1. **Ayyavole/Ainnurruvar:** Originating in Aihole in Karnataka, this was the largest organization of itinerant merchants (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 48). After Chola military incursions into Karnataka in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the Ayyavole expanded its operations into South Karnataka and parts of Tamil Nadu, spreading its activities across South India (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 51). They were composed of representatives of all four major castes (*chaturvarnya-kulodbhavam*) and focused on large-scale, long-distance trade, often acting as creditors and patrons of religious institutions (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 54). Their common eulogy often expressed their ascendancy in a predominantly agrarian context (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 54).

2. **Manigramam:** This was an organized group of traders, operating regionally, but subsequently establishing long-distance trade links, often interacting with the Ayyavole (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 49).

The Chola state actively promoted trade, as seen in the royal policy encouraging overseas trade missions, abolishing tolls (*Sungam tavirtta Chola*, epithet of Kulottunga I), and opening new avenues for trade (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 52). Guilds controlled the movement of trade in regions conquered by the Cholas, including Kongu, Ganga regions, Andhra, and Sri Lanka (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 52).

Specialized Trading Hubs (*Erivirapattanas*)

A highly specialized urban form emerged during this period, known as erivirapattanas (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 52). These were merchant towns established by royal charters, typically located on important trade routes or in areas of settled agriculture (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 52). *Erivirapattanas* often served as protected towns for stocking merchandise and distributing products collectively by the merchant body (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 52).

The militant nature of the merchant organizations is revealed by the existence of these centers (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 63). For instance, Rajaraja Erivirapattana was protected by the Chola army known as *munrukai mahasenai* (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 63). The use of armed troops (*Erivira*) by the guilds indicates that security and protection were integral to commercial operations, particularly for the movement of high-value goods (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 63).

Overseas Trade and Commodities

The impetus for organized commerce came not only from the internal agrarian surplus but also, significantly, from the revival of peninsular trade and the expansion of South Asian trade from the tenth century onward, involving maritime commerce with Southeast Asia, and China (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 47).

The major goods traded included:

- **Luxury and Exotic Goods:** Aromatics, spices (especially pepper), horses, gems, gold, pearls, precious stones, and textiles (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 58). Pepper, in terms of quantity, ranked highest among exports to the Roman empire (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 58).
- **Craft and Manufactured Goods:** Metalware, silk, textiles (cotton, fine fabrics like *kalingam*), and bronze idols, produced largely in centers benefiting from temple demand (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 58). Textile production was

particularly renowned, with centers in places like Kanchipuram (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 58).

- **Agricultural Goods:** Trade also extended to basic agricultural commodities like grains and pulses in urban areas, supporting the distribution needs of the growing commercial and non-agricultural population (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 58).

The Chola rulers consciously controlled and promoted ports (like Nagappattinam) and royal centers to form a tight economic and political web that encouraged trade (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 58).

III. Social Transformations in Urban Centers

The rise of urban centers and the specialization of labor created a socially complex and stratified environment (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 56).

Craft Production and Artisan Groups

The growth of temples fostered sophisticated craft industries. Bronze image casting flourished, particularly in the Kumbakonam region, driven by ritual needs. Weaving was another major industry, with Kanchipuram being a major center (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 54). As craft production intensified and commercial groups gained prominence, artisans and craftsmen were accommodated in separate quarters, often within the temple enclosures (*tirumadaivilagam*), indicating the acknowledgement of their economic importance (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 57).

In some craft-intensive regions like the Kongunadu (Coimbatore/Salem), merchants often took control of temple management and acted as protectors of the craftsmen, illustrating the strong economic interdependence between these commercial sectors (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 57).

THE RIGHT AND LEFT HAND CASTE DIVISIONS

The highly complex social stratification of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, resulting from occupational specialization and urban density, was marked by the prominent emergence of the dual division of castes into the **Right Hand (*Valangai*) and Left Hand (*Idangai*) factions** (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 56).

This dual division was a characteristic social development in the urban and craft centers (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 56). It represented a structural innovation in social organization, accompanying the process of economic progress (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 56). The stratification was horizontal, placing all non-Brahmana, non-Vellala occupational groups (such as weavers, agricultural laborers, artisans, and menial service

workers) into these two broad divisions (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 56). Improved economic status for some groups led to rivalry for social mobility and enhanced ritual standing, often expressed through conflicts and attempts to secure privileges (Champakalakshmi, 1996, p. 56). These divisions signalized the greater differentiation experienced by society as agricultural and commercial sectors matured.

CONCLUSION

The Chola economic and social structure was built upon the dynamism of the agrarian system, characterized by managed expansion, extensive irrigation networks, and the proliferation of rural settlements (*ur* and *nadu*). This expansion fundamentally altered social relations, moving away from older communal structures toward systems of private holding, resulting in marked differentiation and the rise of a powerful landholding elite (Subbarayalu, 2012). The resultant stratification led to tense relations between landholders and tenant cultivators (*ulukudi*), who were burdened by taxes and corvee labor demands (*kolarai* and *nettal*) (Subbarayalu, 2012).

This agrarian vitality provided the necessary surplus to support widespread urbanization. The state strategically positioned temples (like the Rajarajesvara temple), which received massive royal patronage, as the nucleus for urban growth and the centers for complex economic transactions (Heitzman, 1991, p. 29). The temple's vast transactional network regulated resource transfer, formalized accounting, and standardized commodity values, driving the transition towards a monetized economy (Heitzman, 1991, p. 35).

Commercial intensification was managed through specialized market centers (*nagarams*) and powerful merchant guilds (Ayyavole, Manigramam), which linked local agrarian surpluses to extensive regional and overseas trade routes (Champakalakshmi, 1996). These commercial networks, sometimes defended by militant trade armies (*Erivira*) and operating with tacit or explicit royal support, traded high-value goods and expanded the Chola economic and political influence far beyond the Kaveri delta core (Champakalakshmi, 1996). The social corollary was the development of specialized craft production and the crystallization of hierarchical differences, marked notably by the emergence of the dual Left and Right Hand caste divisions in urban centers (Champakalakshmi, 1996). The Chola state thus achieved a highly integrated system where agrarian resources, ritual institutions, and organized commerce were tightly interconnected, forging a complex socio-economic structure that defined the medieval South Indian past.

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UNIT III

VISUAL CULTURE AND GENDER ROLE

INTRODUCTION

The Chola dynasty holds a significant place in history as one of the longest-lived imperial lineages in South India, governing for approximately four hundred years. The rise and expansion of the Chola state involved complex processes of consolidation, requiring strong legitimization structures to maintain control. The study of this powerful empire must look beyond the central monarchs and elites to examine the diverse sources of power within the state, including temples, agrarian peasants, merchants, and women.

This unit specifically analyzes how the Chola state utilized visual culture—defined here as monumental temples, iconic programs, sacred bronzes, and their accompanying inscriptions—to express power and define roles within society. The goal is to establish how royal temples and their iconographic programme created a powerful royal imagery and functioned as a powerful visual text for the state. Concurrently, we investigate the often-understated but critically important role of women in this visual and political system, demonstrating their agency through religious activities like temple patronage.

The temples themselves were far more than just religious spaces; they acted as central mechanisms for organizing sacred, economic, social, and political space in early medieval South India (Champakalakshmi, 2011b, p. 553). By examining the material evidence embedded in these structures, we can understand how the Chola monarchy intertwined ritual sovereignty with political sovereignty, making the two realms indistinguishable in their monumental projects (Champakalakshmi, 2011b, p. 554; 2011a, p. 509). This integrated approach allows students to critically engage with the sophisticated intersection of art, power, and gender within the Chola imperial structure.

a) Women and Their Role in the Chola Empire

The historical evidence regarding the roles and agency of women within the Chola Empire is highly dependent on the type of source material examined. While official royal records often provided only limited or indirect recognition, local temple inscriptions reveal that women, particularly those connected to the ruling families, utilized religious patronage as a powerful tool to assert their political and social status (Orr, 2016, p. 409).

THE CHALLENGE OF OFFICIAL HISTORY: THE SILENCE OF GENEALOGIES

In the formal records of the Chola dynasty, especially the Sanskrit genealogies that precede copper-plate grants, royal women are seldom mentioned (Orr, 2016, p. 409). When they do appear, their mention is primarily contextual, preceding the genealogies of the Pallava and Chola kings to validate royal endowments (Orr, 2016, p. 409). This practice suggests that in the official narratives focused on dynastic achievement, women's visibility was often secondary to the needs of establishing the legitimacy of the grant or the male lineage (Orr, 2016, p. 409).

However, the local inscriptions uncovered in temple contexts demonstrate that many women, especially chiefly queens and local royal women, were significant patrons and donors (Orr, 2016, p. 409). These women deliberately used the permanence and public nature of the temple setting to record details about their identity, their familial relationships, their religious devotion, and their political ties (Orr, 2016, p. 389, 413). Their actions indicate that, particularly in the local sphere, they enjoyed substantial agency (Orr, 2016, p. 417).

THE EPIGRAPHICAL PERSONA OF THE IMPERIAL QUEEN: CEMPIYAṈ MAHĀDEVĪ

One figure whose history is almost entirely reconstructed through the visual and epigraphical record is Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī (Cane, 2019, p. 29). She was a prominent queen of the tenth century, known as the wife and mother of Chola kings (Cane, 2019, p. 29). Today, historians universally acknowledge her as one of the greatest historical figures of medieval South India, achieving this status primarily through her impressive patronage of the holy places of Tamil Śaivism (Cane, 2019, p. 29). Without the collection of numerous wall inscriptions since the turn of the twentieth century, the existence and destiny of the "Queen Mother of the Chola house" would likely have remained unknown (Cane, 2019, p. 29).

Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī's period of activity was remarkable, spanning over sixty years (Cane, 2019, p. 38). Her religious program focused on three key areas: building, gifting, and regulating donations to Śaiva temples (Cane, 2019, p. 37). Her patronage involved the ambitious project of converting original brick shrines into durable stone temples (Cane, 2019, p. 40-41). For instance, she is associated with commissioning the building in stone of the Civalōkam (*Śivaloka*) temple (the present-day Candramaulīśvara) at Tiruvakkarai (Cane, 2019, p. 41). Her endowments also ensured the performance of specific rituals, such as the sacred singing of *bhakti* hymns (Cane, 2019, p. 29).

The historical record concerning Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī highlights the complexities of using epigraphy as a source. For nearly a century, historians believed her demise occurred around 1001 AD, based on a Tiruvakkarai inscription dated to Rājarāja Chola I's 16th year, which recorded the transfer of a tax to the stone temple she had built (Cane, 2019, p. 41). However, later research confirmed that a different inscription, dating to Rājarāja Chola I's 17th regnal year (circa March 1002 AD), explicitly records her ongoing activity, detailing her gift of a silver plate (Cane, 2019, p. 43). This discovery refuted the earlier assumed date of death and confirms her status as the "venerable Queen Consort of the glorious King Kaṇṭarādittaṉ" (Cane, 2019, p. 110).

Furthermore, Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī played a significant role in Shiva Nataraja iconography (Kaimal, 1999, p. 410). Scholars suggest she was instrumental in the spread of the Nataraja cult, actively pressing for its acceptance as the state cult of the Cholas (Kaimal, 1999, p. 410). The temples she sponsored featured full-scale Nataraja figures prominently, demonstrating her contribution to the visual identity of the dynasty (Kaimal, 1999, p. 410). Her widespread patronage across the Kaveri delta thus served the dual purpose of religious piety and dynastic promotion (Kaimal, 1999, p. 410; Cane, 2019, p. 29).

Chiefly Queens and the Negotiation of Local Power

Moving beyond the central Chola queens, the epigraphical evidence reveals the sustained power and agency of women attached to local ruling families, often referred to as "chiefly queens" or *reines du terroir* (Orr, 2016, p. 386). These women utilized religious patronage not just for merit (*puṇya*), but as a primary means of demonstrating power and substance within the local sociopolitical landscape (Orr, 2016, p. 386). Their identities were often expressed through honorific language emphasizing their position as daughters, queens, or mothers (Orr, 2016, p. 413). This reliance on kinship structures, particularly maternal lineage, was a significant vector of power, especially in the context of succession (Orr, 2016, p. 408, 411).

Punṇiyavāṭṭiyār: Asserting Tax Authority

Punṇiyavāṭṭiyār, a Mālayamaṉ woman who married a Vāṇakōvaraiyar chief, stands out for the detailed public record of her actions in Aragalur (Orr, 2016, p. 389). Her inscription explicitly highlights her high status, claiming her identity through her mother's family (Mālayamaṉ) and her marital clan (Vāṇakōvaraiyar) (Orr, 2016, p. 389-391). Her acts of patronage were bold, including building a small stone temple at Aragalur (Orr, 2016, p. 391).

Orr (2016, p. 390) explicitly discusses Punniyavāṭṭiyār claiming the power to remit taxes (*vitten*), which was unusual for women. The authority to declare tax exemptions

was typically vested in the Chola overlord or the local assembly, which remitted taxes to the temple (Orr, 2016, p. 390). By claiming this power in her own record, and by deliberately omitting mention of the current male ruler, Punṉiyavāṭṭiyār demonstrated her personal independence and influence (Orr, 2016, p. 390). Her religious activity thus served as a conspicuous display of her personal wealth and power (Orr, 2016, p. 390).

PŪMĀḶVI: BRIDGING POLITICAL DIVIDES

Pūmāḷvi, the daughter of a Vāṇakōvaraiyar chief, married Iraiyūr Periyurāyāṉ, a leader of the Killiyūr Mālayamāṉ family (Orr, 2016, p. 397). Her marriage was likely a **strategic political** alliance designed to resolve hostilities between the Vāṇakōvaraiyar and Mālayamāṉ clans (Orr, 2016, p. 399). Her religious contributions, recorded at the Śiva temple at Araganḍallūr, included arranging for the construction of a tank, reclaiming land, and providing perennial endowments (Orr, 2016, p. 397).

Pūmāḷvi's inscription meticulously defined her status, identifying her as the daughter (*makal*) of the Vāṇakōvaraiyāṉ chief and the mother (*tāy*) of the Killiyūr Cētiyarāyaṉ chief (Orr, 2016, p. 397). This emphasis on her status as a mother was important because the political conflicts were ultimately resolved by her son (Orr, 2016, p. 399-401). Pūmāḷvi's activities demonstrate how temple patronage provided a platform for women to navigate complex local political dynamics, leading to outcomes that had significant personal and political consequences for her descendants (Orr, 2016, p. 399).

The Kāṭavarāyar Women: Commemoration and Resource Control

Women associated with the Kāṭavarāyar dynasty also left powerful epigraphical testaments to their roles, especially focusing on commemoration and wealth display:

1. **Kōpperuñciṅkaṉ's Mother:** This queen, often referred to as the king's "glorious mother" (*nāyār*), was responsible for constructing a temple for the goddess Periyapirāṭṭiyār at Tiruveṇṇainallūr (Orr, 2016, p. 402). She ensured her lasting legacy, and the image was set up in her name (*tan pērāl*) (Orr, 2016, p. 402). Her temple-building activities were inextricably linked to commemorating her son's lordship and enhancing the family's prestige (Orr, 2016, p. 403).
2. **Mitṭāṇṭār Nāccyār:** The daughter of Kōpperuñciṅkaṉ, Mitṭāṇṭār Nāccyār was a prominent donor to the massive Śiva temple at Tiruvaṇṇāmalai (Orr, 2016, p. 405). Her four inscriptions, spanning from 1241 to 1257 AD, record gifts of substantial silver vessels and ornaments (Orr, 2016, p. 405). She consistently used elevated language to record her high status, demonstrating conspicuous control over valuable resources (Orr, 2016, p. 405-406). Like Punṉiyavāṭṭiyār,

the high status and prestige recorded in her inscriptions were ultimately derived from her mother, Kōpperuñciṅkaṉ's queen (Orr, 2016, p. 406-407).

In conclusion, for women, particularly those in local or regional royal positions, temple patronage was far more than an auxiliary activity (Orr, 2016, p. 413). Their gifts, construction efforts, and endowments were public demonstrations of power, wealth, and strategic kinship connections, proving them to be active agents within the political and religious structures of the Chola Empire (Orr, 2016, p. 413, 417).

b) Religious and Political symbolism

The Chola Empire consciously manipulated religious belief and material culture to establish and reinforce its political sovereignty. This involved transforming the temple institution into a central ceremonial and administrative entity and employing specific iconography as potent political imagery (Champakalakshmi, 2011b, p. 553).

THE TEMPLE AS THE CEREMONIAL CITY AND STATE APPARATUS

Under the powerful Chola monarchs, especially Rājarāja I (reigned 985–1014 AD) and his son Rājendra I (Champakalakshmi, 2011b, p. 553), royal centers like Tanjavur and Gangaikondacojapuram were established (Champakalakshmi, 2011b, p. 553). The founding of these cities was not accidental; it was a result of a deliberate royal policy that sought to imitate sacred *bhakti* centers (Champakalakshmi, 2011b, p. 553). The monumental Rājarājeśvara (Bṛhadīśvara) temple at Tanjavur, for example, became the nucleus around which the huge temple-town blossomed (Champakalakshmi, 2011b, p. 554).

The temple became the chief instrument for integrating society and legitimizing the Chola monarchy (Champakalakshmi, 2011b, p. 553). It served as the central point for organizing the sacred, economic, social, and political space from the ninth century onwards (Champakalakshmi, 2011b, p. 553). The Chola rulers systematically adopted the bhakti ideology by building temples, instituting grants for the ritual singing of *bhakti* hymns, and fostering the development of temple arts, including architecture and sculpture (Champakalakshmi, 2011b, p. 553).

The construction of these royal temples was inherently political:

1. **Economic Centralization:** The temple functioned as a crucial element in Chola administration, supporting efforts at centralization (Champakalakshmi, 2011b, p. 555). Rājarāja I's reign saw significant efforts at centralization, including comprehensive revenue surveys and redefining local administrative units (*nadus*) (Champakalakshmi, 2011b, p. 555). The Tanjavur temple was the recipient of vast revenues from villages across the entire kingdom, including

those in Cōḷamaṇḍalam and Pāṇḍinādu, demonstrating an impressive economic outreach that covered the whole kingdom (Champakalakshmi, 2011a, p. 509).

2. **Ritual Sovereignty and Kingship:** The political element of the Chola polity coincided with the ritual element, meaning political and ritual sovereignty were inseparable (Champakalakshmi, 2011a, p. 509). The iconography displayed in these monumental structures was therefore the political iconography of the ruling king (Champakalakshmi, 2011, p. 509, 376). This fusion of the divine and temporal realms was further reinforced by rituals and festivals, such as special endowments made for offerings on the natal star (*sadaiyam*) of Rājarāja I, and the performance of plays like *Rājarājeśvaranāṭaka* (Champakalakshmi, 2011a, p. 509-510).

ICONOGRAPHIC SYMBOLISM OF POLITICAL DOMINION

The placement and repetition of certain iconic forms of Shiva provided metaphorical representations of Chola military and cosmic dominance.

Shiva Nataraja: Emblem of Dynasty and Expansion

The image of Shiva Nataraja, the Cosmic Dancer, became deeply tied to the identity and prestige of the Chola dynasty (Kaimal, 1999, p. 410). Chola royal patrons commissioned numerous magnificent processional bronze images (*utsava murtis*) of gods and goddesses, characterized by their precision of posture and slender figures (Dehejia, 2006, p. 24).

The established meaning of Nataraja's dance is universally symbolic: his dance represents his mastery over the cosmic cycle, and the dwarf he crushes (*Apasmara*) symbolizes the destruction of ignorance (Kaimal, 1999, p. 388). He simultaneously destroys the universe and frees souls from their bonds (Kaimal, 1999, p. 388).

However, by the fourth quarter of the tenth century, visual and inscriptional evidence suggests that the *Nataraja* icon began to function explicitly as an emblem of the Chola dynasty (Kaimal, 1999, p. 385, 410). This coincided with the Chola period when their fame and authority were rapidly increasing across South India and neighboring regions (Kaimal, 1999, p. 385).

The deployment of this specific iconography served the imperial agenda in several ways:

1. **Cultic Integration:** The use of Nataraja, a form of Shiva known across India through Sanskrit texts (*Puranas*), helped distance the Cholas from local,

wrathful deities, thereby aiding in the political project of integrating disparate regional territories (Kaimal, 1999, p. 406).

2. **Expansionist Metaphor:** Scholars suggest that the radial composition inherent in the Nataraja form could have been intended to embody the expansionist ambitions shared by the Cholas and the priestly community at Chidambaram (Kaimal, 1999, p. 413). This visual representation symbolized how the king's presence permeated the Tamil landscape, much like the god's presence expanded throughout the cosmos (Kaimal, 1999, p. 413).
3. **Patronage and Diffusion:** Queen Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī actively contributed to this process by featuring Nataraja prominently in her sponsored temples, making her instrumental in the spread of the cult and its acceptance as the state cult of the Cholas (Kaimal, 1999, p. 410).

TRIPURANTAKA: THE WARRIOR KING AND ŚAIVA DOMINANCE

The representation of Tripurantaka (Shiva as the destroyer of the three cities of the *Asuras*) was another potent political icon in Chola temples (Champakalakshmi, 2011a, p. 506).

1. **Dominance in Royal Space:** At the Rājarājeśvara temple in Tanjavur, the Tripurantaka icon was given a dominant position, repeated in all the niches of the upper tier of the *vimana* walls (Champakalakshmi, 2011a, p. 506). This importance was further underscored by a famous bronze image, known as the Tanjai Alagar, and large fresco panels within the inner ambulatory (Champakalakshmi, 2011a, p. 506).
2. **State Ideology:** The prominence of Tripurantaka was directly related to the state ideology of Rājarāja I, whose reign was marked by military successes and efforts at centralization (Champakalakshmi, 2011a, p. 507). The image served as a powerful metaphor symbolizing the ruler as a warrior and demonstrating the qualities of courage and determination necessary for sovereignty (Champakalakshmi, 2011a, p. 507; Sankrityayan, 2020, p. 97).
3. **Religious Assertion:** The Tripurantaka myth was frequently referred to in the *Tevāram* hymns, which Rājarāja I systematically collected and propagated (Champakalakshmi, 2011a, p. 507). By emphasizing this icon, the Cholas visually asserted the dominance of Śaivism and integrated royal authority with the popular *bhakti* tradition (Champakalakshmi, 2011a, p. 507). This form was also significant in establishing the superiority of Śaivism over rival traditions,

such as *Śramaṇic* (Jaina and Buddhist) traditions (Champakalakshmi, 2011a, p. 507).

Iconography Shaping Gendered Identities

Chola visual culture did not merely express political power; it also served to reinforce normative social and gender hierarchies, particularly through the depiction of divine couples and female deities.

THE KALYĀṆASUNDARAMŪRTI AND MARRIAGE HIERARCHY

The depiction of Kalyāṇasundaramūrti, representing the marriage ceremony of Śiva and Pārvatī, was commonly found in early medieval Indian temple art, including the Bṛhadīśvara Temple at Tanjavur (Singh, 2020, p. 288). This iconography served as a "public announcement" of the socio-religious features of the Brahmanical tradition to both Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical masses (Singh, 2020, p. 288).

In these depictions, the visual differences are intentional: Śiva is consistently portrayed as four-armed and physically larger than all other divine beings present (Singh, 2020, p. 286). In contrast, Pārvatī is shown as fragile and coy, reinforcing the patriarchal idea that the husband functions as the "taker and controller" of the wife (Singh, 2020, p. 286, 279). This iconography visually embedded the hierarchical nature of Brahmanical marriage within the sacred architectural space (Singh, 2020, p. 286).

Kālī at Shiva's Feet: Patriarchal Control and Territorial Integration

The imagery of the goddess Kālī dancing at the feet of Śiva in early medieval Tamil temples, especially during the period of imperial expansion, carried profound political and patriarchal symbolism (Mahalakshmi, 2020, p. 34).

1. **Patriarchal Order:** On a superficial level, this relates to the Puranic myth of the dance contest; however, the towering figure of Śiva dominating the relatively diminutive Kālī visually represents the patriarchal control and order of the male over the female (Mahalakshmi, 2020, p. 34).
2. **Territorial Legitimation:** More strategically, Kālī/Durgā often acted as a generic figure for the absorption of various local female deities (Mahalakshmi, 2020, p. 34). Therefore, the symbolic arrangement of Śiva towering over Kālī represented the cultic and territorial integration of these decentralized local deities and localities under a single, central authority (Śiva), perfectly mirroring the centralized and expanding Chola state's need for political legitimacy (Mahalakshmi, 2020, p. 34). The choice of this specific representation was

deliberate and intentional, reflecting the political moment of imperial expansion (Mahalakshmi, 2020, p. 34).

ANCESTOR WORSHIP AND DEIFICATION OF THE LINEAGE

The boundaries between the divine and the royal were further blurred through the practice of integrating ancestor figures into the temple ritual space (Champakalakshmi, 2011a, p. 509). Kundavai, the sister of Rājarāja I, commissioned images of her father (Sundara Cōḷa) and his queen to be set up in the temple (Champakalakshmi, 2011, p. 555, 372). These images were referred to in inscriptions by the term *tirumeni* ("sacred body"), the same honorific used for deities (Champakalakshmi, 2011a, p. 509). This ritual practice of setting up ancestor images as part of temple worship underscored the idea that the Chola king acquired a near-total identity with divinity (Champakalakshmi, 2011a, p. 509). This practice is comparable to the *devakula* (ancestor shrines) established by the Kuṣāṇas in earlier centuries (Champakalakshmi, 2011a, p. 509).

CONCLUSION

This unit confirms that the Chola Empire's political success was fundamentally supported by the systematic use of visual culture as an ideological tool. Monumental structures like the Rājarājeśvara temple in Tanjavur served as highly centralized ceremonial and administrative centers, deliberately merging ritual and political sovereignty (Champakalakshmi, 2011b, p. 553; 2011a, p. 509).

The intersection with gender roles demonstrates that while the overarching political symbolism—embodied by Nataraja (as the dynastic emblem and cosmic expander) and Tripurantaka (as the warrior king)—reinforced male, centralized authority (Kaimal, 1999, p. 410; Champakalakshmi, 2011a, p. 506), women utilized this same system to assert their personal and familial agency (Orr, 2016, p. 417). Imperial figures like Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī shaped the state cult through massive patronage (Cane, 2019, p. 29), while powerful chiefly queens demonstrated local authority, tax control, and strategic influence through their temple donations, leveraging their status primarily through their roles as mothers and daughters (Orr, 2016, p. 390, 408, 413). Ultimately, the inscriptions, patronage records, and iconic programs of the Chola period reveal a dynamic society where visual representations were constantly shaping and reflecting both the imperial political authority and the nuanced roles of powerful women within it.

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UNIT IV

WARFARE AND CROSS-CULTURAL INTERFACE

INTRODUCTION

The Chola period, spanning roughly four centuries, was characterized by aggressive political and economic expansion. The course aims to highlight the expansionist policy of the Cholas in the Oceanic world. The rise of the Chola Empire coincided with a pivotal time around AD 1000, which saw a remarkable change in the structure of Asian maritime trade (Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 168). The pre-emporia trade structure, where goods were shipped directly from the source to the final buyer, transitioned into a new pattern of emporia trade (Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 168). This new trade system involved re-exporting, breaking bulk shipments, and assorting merchandise according to the diverse demands of various ports (Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 168). This structural change, coupled with the emergence of powerful regional entities like the Chola Empire, led to the intensification of long-distance trade, extending the Chola political and cultural reach far beyond the Indian peninsula (Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 169; Devare, 2009, p. 179).

The Chola expansion into the Indian Ocean, particularly under Rajaraja I (AD 984–1014) and Rajendra Chola I (AD 1014–1044), was built upon military ambition, shrewd diplomacy, and aggressive mercantile policies (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 77). This unit will explore how the Cholas combined warfare, through major naval expeditions to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, with sophisticated diplomacy, primarily via trade missions to China (Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 176; Dehejia, 2006, p. 169). Furthermore, it examines how this military and commercial fabric acted as a conduit for intense cross-cultural interactions, leading to the widespread influence of South Indian arts, religion, and social practices throughout Southeast and East Asia (Devare, 2009, p. 185).

a) Diplomatic and Warfare Strategies

The Chola kings, especially Rajaraja I and Rajendra Chola I, pioneered the construction of a military maritime capability that was unprecedented in the civilizational history of India (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 76). This pre-eminence was established through a strategy combining warfare on land, conquest of strategic islands, and massive naval expeditions (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 76).

IMPERIAL EXPANSION AND MARITIME PRE-EMINENCE

The foundation of Chola maritime dominance was laid through a series of military campaigns within India, extending into the Indo-Gangetic plains, defeating the Chera kingdoms, and capturing critical strongholds in the Deccan Plateau (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 76, 77). Crucially, the Cholas embarked on a westward expansion toward the Arabian Sea, capturing the Lakshadweep and Maldives archipelagos, islands strategically positioned astride ancient Indian Ocean trade routes (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 77).

Simultaneously, the Cholas engaged in successive southward surges into Ceylon (Sri Lanka), attacking various Sinhala kingdoms (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 77). These early military expeditions into Sri Lanka, dating from the early tenth century, required the Chola kings to transport their warriors across the Palk Strait or Gulf of Mannar, distances between 50 to 150 kilometers (Subbarayalu, 2009, p. 91). Furthermore, the conquest of the Twelve Thousand Ancient Islands by Rajaraja I, generally identified as the Maldives, involved a major sea expedition spanning about 800 to 1,000 kilometers (Subbarayalu, 2009, p. 91). This confirms that by the time Rajendra I launched his massive naval forces against Srivijaya (around 1026 AD), the Chola navy had already gained substantial experience in long-distance travel across the high seas (Subbarayalu, 2009, p. 91).

THE NAVAL EXPEDITION TO SOUTHEAST ASIA (1025 AD)

The year 1025 CE marks a singular display of the power of Rajendra Chola I (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 77). This massive naval raid targeted Southeast Asia, particularly territories belonging to the Srivijaya kingdom in Sumatra and Malaysia (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 77).

The details of this grand foray are preserved in the eulogistic inscriptions (*prasasti*) found in the big temple of Tanjavur, dating to 1030–1031 AD (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 78). This inscription states that Rajendra I, having dispatched many ships in the midst of the rolling sea, captured Sangrama-Vijayottunga Varman, the King of Kadaram (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 78; Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 170). The inscription meticulously lists the conquered places, which were subjected to historical geography investigations:

1. **Sri Vijaya:** The extensive city, captured with noise, including the arch called *Vidyadhara torana* at its ‘war gate’ and the ‘jeweled wicket gate’ (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 78; Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 170). Srivijaya was located on Sumatra Island (Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 170).

2. **Pannai:** A location noted for its bathing ghats with water, situated in the eastern part of Sumatra (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 78; Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 170).
3. **Malaiyur:** Described as ancient and having a strong mountain serving as its rampart (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 78; Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 170).
4. **Mayirudingam:** Surrounded by the deep sea, which functioned like a moat, identified as Johore on the Malay Peninsula (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 78; Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 170).
5. **Ilangasoka (Lankasoka):** A place undaunted in fierce battles (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 78; Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 170).
6. **Mappappalam:** A location defended by abundant deep water, possibly on the Malay Peninsula (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 78; Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 170).
7. **Mevilimbangam:** Described as having fine walls as defense (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 78).
8. **Valaippanduru:** Included the capture of Vilapanduru (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 78).
9. **Talaittakkolam:** Praised by great men versed in the sciences (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 78).
10. **Madamalingam:** Firm in great and fierce battles, possibly located on the Kra Isthmus (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 78; Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 170).
11. **Ilamuridesam:** Located in North Sumatra, whose fierce strength rose in war (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 78; Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 170).
12. **Manakkavaram:** Identified as the Nicobar Islands, noted for extensive flower gardens where honey was collecting (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 78; Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 170).
13. **Kadaram (Kedah/Kataha):** Of fierce strength and protected by the deep sea, situated on the Malay Peninsula near Penang (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 78; Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 170).

The inscription records that Rajendra Chola I took the large heap of treasures accumulated by the King of Kadaram, along with his elephants (Sakhuja & Sakhuja,

2009, p. 78; Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 170). This stunning success led to Rajendra being named the *Kadaram Kondan*—He who took Kadaram—a title applauded by poets (Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 170). The inscription clearly implies that all these places were captured in a single campaign (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 87).

REASONS FOR WARFARE AND DIPLOMACY

The naval raid of 1025 AD was the result of a consistent and aggressive maritime mercantile policy adopted by the Chola kings (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 77). Although Srivijaya and the Cholas initially had friendly relations, including diplomatic contacts, the relationship deteriorated (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 79; Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 172). Srivijaya kings, for instance, had supported Buddhism in India, establishing a Buddhist *Cudamani Vihara* at Nagappattinam (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 79; Devare, 2009, p. 181).

Historians propose several plausible reasons for the deterioration of relations leading to the invasion:

1. **Trade Restrictions and Levies:** One key argument suggests that the Srivijaya kingdom, which dominated the Strait of Malacca, may have attempted to strangle Indian trade with China or bypass restrictions imposed by regional rulers (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 79, 80). There is circumstantial evidence that Srivijaya rulers demanded high levies, such as 20,000 dinars as a right of passage for allowing a Jewish merchant ship to continue its voyage to China (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 79; Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 175). Such high levies likely upset the Chola rulers and the powerful merchant guilds that backed them, forcing the invasion in 1025 AD (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 79; Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 175).
2. **Military Expansion and Supremacy:** The raid can also be interpreted as a natural and logical development of the lateral military expansion policy inherited from Rajaraja I (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 80). Rajendra Chola I sought to exhibit his political determination and supremacy both within India and overseas (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 80). The naval raid was targeted against the dominant hegemonic challenger, the Srivijaya kings, who were perceived to have adopted adversarial trade policies (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 88).
3. **Plunder and Resource Acquisition:** Rajendra Chola I may also have needed additional resources through plunder, following the established Chola pattern of

expansion seen in the invasions of Ceylon (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 80). The inscription itself mentions taking a "large heap of treasures" (Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 170). The desire to conquer regions like Malaya or Sumatra was often motivated by the need to secure a constant supply of gold, leading the region to be called *Suvarnadvipa* (Island of gold) and *Suvarnabhumi* (Land of gold) (Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 171).

The sources clarify that while Chola conquests sometimes involved plunder, the intent was generally not to annex the captured territories to form an extended empire or to establish a long-term economic imperialism (Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 171; Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 79). Instead, the Cholas leveraged warfare to establish an ascendancy that was acknowledged by other littorals, resulting in the Bay of Bengal becoming something of a "Chola lake," dominating the sea lanes and facilitating direct trade with China (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 80).

DIPLOMATIC MISSIONS AND TRADE RELATIONS

In addition to warfare, the Cholas systematically used diplomatic missions to East Asia to secure their trade interests. Rajaraja I initiated this practice by sending a trade mission to China in AD 1015 (Devare, 2009, p. 182). This was followed by a series of missions throughout the Chola dynasty (Devare, 2009, p. 182). Rajendra Chola I dispatched an emissary to China in 1033 AD, strengthening trade ties (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 84; Devare, 2009, p. 183). The convoy carried Tamil officials and presents for the Emperor of China, including a pearl hat and coat, pearls, and ivory tusks (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 84; Dehejia, 2006, p. 169). Kulottunga I sent a mission in 1077 AD, whose gifts included pearls of various sizes, camphor, rhinoceros horns, textiles, and other goods, indicating the Cholas sought to act as trade carriers (Dehejia, 2006, p. 169; Devare, 2009, p. 183).

The relations with Srivijaya/Kadaram also continued after the raid. Around 1068 AD, during the reign of Virarajendra, the Chola navy crossed the Bengal Bay again for an expedition to Kadaram, this time apparently to save a suppliant Kadaram king from difficulty (Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 176). Later, in 1090 AD, a Kadaram king sent a mission to the Chola court under Kulottunga I to request confirmation of a previous grant made to the Buddhist temple at Nagapattinam (Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 176). The continued presence of agents (*kanmi*) of the Kadaram king in the Chola country, and the exchange of missions, suggests that despite the naval conflict, very close relations were maintained between the two countries (Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 176).

CHOLA NAVAL ORGANIZATION AND NAUTICAL WISDOM

The Chola military organization also included specialized naval personnel. An inscription from 1187 AD mentions a commander (Tandalnayagam) of the karaippadaiyilar, which means "the army of the seashore" (Subbarayalu, 2009, p. 92, 93). This commander had the name Kadalkolamitantan, meaning "one who floated while the sea engulfed," suggesting a long-standing association of his family with the sea (Subbarayalu, 2009, p. 93). It is plausible that the pattinavar, the local fishing community of the coastal area, played a significant part in the Chola naval organization (Subbarayalu, 2009, p. 93). The Chola mercantile marine was known to comprise at least three different types of vessels:

1. ***Sangara*:** These were medium-sized vessels, sometimes described as "outriggers" (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 83). They were built with single logs of wood bound together, primarily serving as coastal vessels capable of carrying large amounts of cargo (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 83).
2. ***Colandia*:** These were large, ocean-going, expeditionary vessels capable of distant voyages, such as those reaching Malaya, Sumatra, and the Ganges (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 83; Devare, 2009, p. 179). They had cargo holds and were capable of carrying large volumes of supplies (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 83).
3. ***Kattu-maram*:** Smaller craft, literally meaning "bound logs," from which the modern word catamaran derives (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 83). They were essential for transporting goods from anchored ships and were used as the basic floatation unit for amphibious forces, negotiating surf and shallow waters (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 83).

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NAVIGATIONAL SKILLS AND LOGISTICS

The success of the 1025 naval raid highlights the sophisticated navigational mastery of Chola seafarers (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 82). Tamil seafarers possessed an intimate understanding of the monsoon winds and currents prevalent in the Bay of

Bengal, Southeast Asian waters, and as far as China (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 80, 82). This knowledge was crucial because Chola ships were not fitted with rudders or magnetic compasses, requiring reliance on coasting or parallel/great circle sailings (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 81).

Specific navigational techniques used included:

- **Celestial Navigation:** Seafarers developed a sophisticated knowledge of heavenly bodies (stars, sun, and moon), using at least fifty-six stars visible in the northern hemisphere (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 81).
- **Optimal Route Planning:** The most suitable seasons for an easterly voyage were July–August and late December–January, when northeasterly winds and easterly currents facilitated a quick passage (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 81). The voyage often commenced after sighting specific constellations like *Migasiram* and *Ardra* (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 82).
- **Landmarks and Ports of Call:** Ships sailing east would typically sail south along the Coromandel Coast towards Simhalam (Sri Lanka), departing eastward from points like Kalmunai or Tirukoil (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 81). The Nicobar Islands (Manakkavaram) served as a critical trans-shipment or layover port for replenishment, repair, and rest (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 81, 82).
- **Stealth and Deception:** The actual port of departure for the armada was likely disguised (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 82). Although Nagapattinam was the main trading port, a large shipbuilding program there would have been noticed by foreign traders (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 82). It is plausible that the flagship, carrying the Commander, departed from Nagapattinam, while the rest of the armada achieved **rendezvous at sea**, illustrating the tactical element of deception and surprise (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 82).

The long voyage to Southeast Asia demanded a colossal logistical supply chain (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 88). Ships had to carry vast volumes of food, water, repair materials, weapons, and provisions to support thousands of soldiers and crew members (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 78, 84). Drawing on the dietary habits of ancient South Indians, the provisions likely included massive quantities of the staple food rice, along with sugar, spices, curds, coconuts, and possibly meat (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 84, 85). Fresh water was a major challenge for long distances and must have been stored in wooden casks, potentially requiring dedicated water tanker ships (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 85, 86). Coconuts were highly valuable as an alternate source of water, food, and medicine for the armada (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 86). The logistics demonstrated the Chola military-maritime expeditionary warfare capability (Sakhuja &

Sakhuja, 2009, p. 88).

b) Cross-cultural Interface

The Chola Empire's maritime dominance and extensive trade networks established powerful transregional networks that facilitated a profound cross-cultural interface across the Indian Ocean world.

THE ROLE OF TRADE AND MERCHANT GUILDS IN TRANSREGIONAL NETWORKS

The period around AD 1000 saw the emergence of powerful corporate empires, including the Chola empire, which relied heavily on customs duties and long-distance trade for their budgets, rather than solely on land revenue (Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 168). The Cholas encouraged overseas maritime trade through commerce and trade missions (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 77). This trade was diverse, moving beyond luxury goods to include processed iron, spices, sandalwood, textiles, pearls, and animals (Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 169).

The crucial engine of this international trade was the powerful network of merchant guilds (Devare, 2009, pp. 181–182). Several associations flourished during this period:

1. ***Ainnurruvar* (Ayyavole):** This guild, also known as *padinen-vishayam* (or *padinen-bhumi*), grew particularly powerful under the Cholas and became closely associated with the port of Nagapattinam (Devare, 2009, p. 182; Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 174).
2. ***Manigramam***: This guild was active in Southeast Asia, with a colony established at **Takuapa** on the west coast of the Isthmus during the ninth century (Devare, 2009, p. 183; Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 174).
3. ***Nanadesi*:** This name suggests involvement in trade across many countries (Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 174).

These guilds maintained extensive contact stretching from the Red Sea to South China (Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 174). They established their own colonies on foreign soil, operating under licenses from local rulers, and often maintained mercenary armies to protect their interests (Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 175; Devare, 2009, p. 181). The Chola imperial expansion was sometimes directly influenced by these merchants, who lobbied for military intervention (Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 174). For instance, a merchant is said to have advised Rajaraja I about the weakness of the Sri Lankan king, suggesting military intervention (Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 174).

The growth of this maritime trade led to the development of an alternative silk route by

sea, circumventing the politically unstable overland route through the Middle East (Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 174). Ports on the South Indian coast (like Nagapattinam and Kaveri-poompattinam) and the Malay Peninsula (like Takkolam and Kadaram) became convenient hubs for emporia trade (Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 174).

THE CULTURAL LEGACY OF INDIAN TEXTILES

One of the most profound aspects of the cross-cultural interface was the trade in textiles, which acted as a major carrier of culture (Devare, 2009, p. 179, 187). Cotton cloth was a main export article from the Coromandel Coast (Devare, 2009, p. 179). Textile centers like Madurai and Tanjore were prominent in cotton weaving (Devare, 2009, p. 179).

By the eleventh century, the weaving and dyeing industries had advanced technologically in the Chola region (Devare, 2009, p. 182). Block-printed textiles, resist dyed with indigo, or mordant dyed with intricate patterns, were exported in vast quantities to Southeast Asia and the Middle East (Devare, 2009, p. 182). Southeast Asians often bartered their spices only in exchange for these specific Indian textiles (Devare, 2009, p. 182).

The cultural implications of this trade were immense:

1. **Status Symbols:** The imported Indian textiles were often ceremonial and royal, bringing with them inherent notions of hierarchy, rank, and status (Devare, 2009, p. 187). They were adopted by the elite and nobility in Java, Thailand, and Sumatra (Devare, 2009, p. 187). In Angkorian reliefs, patterns on cloth and parasols proclaimed the king's sovereignty and social status (Devare, 2009, p. 182, 185).

2. **Absorption into Local Culture:** The patterned cloth was widely circulated and eventually absorbed into local cultural practices (Devare, 2009, p. 182, 187). In Indonesia, these textiles, known as *ma'a* in Sulawesi, were considered sacred treasures associated with mythology and customary practices like marriages and funerals (Devare, 2009, p. 189). They were often ascribed protective powers or magical properties, such as the Javanese *antakusuma* jacket made of auspicious Indian textiles (Devare, 2009, p. 189, 190).

3. **Artistic Influence:** Changes in textile patterns shown in the Angkor reliefs reflect the growing popularity of Indian export cloths during the eleventh and twelfth centuries (Devare, 2009, p. 182). Motifs like geometric designs, four-petal flowers, and solar discs became popular (Devare, 2009, p. 182). This influence extended to temple decor; for example, the painted motif on the

ceiling of the Thetkyamuni temple in Pagan, Myanmar, is a standard Indian design from the Coromandel coast (Devare, 2009, p. 185).

4. **Costume and Dress:** Indian influence spread to costumes, moving away from simple loincloths to more elaborate forms (Devare, 2009, p. 187). The *chawang kabun* of the Khmer equated with the Indian dhoti (Devare, 2009, p. 188). In Champa (central Vietnam), the clothing style depicted on sculptures from the middle of the tenth century, known as Chandataka (a richly decorated, skin-tight cloth), corresponds to the costumes seen on Chola bronze sculptures of dancers and female deities from South India of the same period (Devare, 2009, p. 188).

RELIGIOUS AND ARTISTIC PENETRATION

Rajendra's naval expedition and the subsequent commercial penetration brought about the widespread penetration of Indian culture, religion, languages, arts, and architecture to East and Southeast Asia, a phenomenon historians described as the development of a "Greater India" (Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 177; Devare, 2009, p. 184).

The Chola influence built upon a cultural base established earlier by the Pallavas (Devare, 2009, p. 184). The core elements transferred included:

1. ***Devaraja* and Deification:** The **concept of *devaraja***, along with the worship of Shiva and Vishnu, was widely adopted (Devare, 2009, p. 184). Rulers in Cambodia and Java began to think of themselves as Vishnu and Shiva (Devare, 2009, p. 184). Under the mid-Cholas, this deification was further promoted with the belief that the king increased his divine power by identifying with the temple and the deity itself (Devare, 2009, p. 184).

2. **Iconography and Motifs:** Hindu iconography strongly influenced local art. For example, the upper world of deities was transformed into Mount Meru, a motif powerfully expressed in temple structures and textiles (Devare, 2009, p. 186). The concept of *mandala* (circle) was transformed into the *kawung* pattern in Javanese batik (Devare, 2009, p. 186). *Naga* symbolism, prevalent in South India, found ready acceptance in Southeast Asia (Devare, 2009, p. 187).

3. **Artistic Style:** The brahmanical sculptures in peninsular Siam, dating from the ninth to the eleventh centuries, were dominated by the influence of Chola art, evident particularly in the stone sculptures on Pranarai Hill at Takuapa (Devare, 2009, p. 184). The Chola patronage of arts (architecture, sculpture, bronze casting) left an indelible imprint (Devare, 2009, p. 184).

4. **Literary and Performance Arts:** The Hindu traditions, particularly the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, became the basis for classical theatre

performances, requiring the use of rich costumes (Devare, 2009, p. 190). The art of painted scrolls used for picture recitations, known in Sanskrit sources as *yamapattikas* (conveying the message of death) or *chalatchitra* (mobile paintings), was an old tradition carried by wandering Brahmins and influenced Burmese and Siamese decorative hangings (*kalagas*) (Devare, 2009, p. 185).

Tamil inscriptions found in Southeast Asia, written in the Grantha script (a common script for Sanskrit and Tamil), further testify to this connection, with many belonging to the Chola period (eleventh to twelfth centuries) (Devare, 2009, p. 183). An inscription in Sumatra from 1088 AD, found at Barus (a camphor center), recorded a decision in Tamil by the Indian community there (members of the *ainnurruvar* guild) regarding a charitable fee on cloth trade (Devare, 2009, p. 183).

CHOLA CONQUEST AND CULTURAL INTERFACE WITH SRI LANKA

The Chola preoccupation with Sri Lanka (Ilam) was a constant feature throughout the four centuries of Chola rule, with battles and victories being recurring events (Dehejia, 2006, p. 168). The obsession with the island was driven by at least three major factors:

1. **Control of Customs Duties and Strategic Ports:** Sri Lankan ports offered safe harbors for traders making the lengthy voyage between the Middle East and China (Dehejia, 2006, pp. 166–167). Control of these ports was a prize worth fighting for, as it provided the opportunity to capture the lucrative customs duties and divert ocean trade toward the Chola port of Nagapattinam (Dehejia, 2006, p. 167).

2. **Pearl Fisheries of the Gulf of Mannar:** A second, substantial reason was the Chola passion for pearl jewelry used to adorn sacred temple bronzes (Dehejia, 2006, p. 167). The Gulf of Mannar, situated between South India and Sri Lanka, sustained major pearl oyster fisheries (Dehejia, 2006, p. 167). Chola kings, especially Rajaraja I, gifted vast numbers of pearls (tens of thousands) to their temples (Dehejia, 2006, p. 169). The desire to control access to these pearl fisheries was a major source of conflict with the Pandyas and the rulers of Lanka (Dehejia, 2006, pp. 168–169).

3. **Source of Copper Ore:** It is also proposed that Sri Lanka's Seruwila copper belt might have been a source of copper ore necessary for making the sacred bronzes in Chola temples (Dehejia, 2006, p. 171). The changeover from wooden processional images to copper at the start of Chola rule would have necessitated reliable access to a large, nearby source of copper (Dehejia, 2006, p. 171).

For approximately seventy years (998–1070 CE), the Cholas occupied and controlled the northern part of Sri Lanka, converting it into a province called Mummudicholamandalam (Dehejia, 2006, p. 172). They established a new capital at Polonnaruwa, which they renamed Jananatha-mangalam (Dehejia, 2006, p. 172).

The Chola presence resulted in the construction of as many as sixteen Hindu temples (*devales*) at Polonnaruwa, though only Shiva devales 1 and 2 were built entirely of stone (Dehejia, 2006, p. 172). Shiva temple 2, the earliest, was named after Rajaraja's chief queen, Vanavan Mahadevi, and displayed strong architectural similarities to temples in the Kaveri delta (Dehejia, 2006, p. 172). Another temple, named after Rajaraja (*Rajarajishvara*), was built in the coastal town of Mannar (ancient Matottam), a site crucial due to its proximity to the pearl fisheries and its status as a sacred site sung by the Tamil *nayanmar* saints (Dehejia, 2006, p. 173).

HINDU BRONZES AND CROSS-CULTURAL ARTISTIC ADAPTATION

The bronzes recovered from Polonnaruwa pose challenging stylistic questions, revealing a clash between local Sri Lankan artistic traditions and imported Hindu iconography (Dehejia, 2006, p. 175). For over a thousand years, Sri Lankan artists had been accustomed to modeling only two-armed, serene, unornamented Buddhist figures (Dehejia, 2006, p. 175). When faced with the task of creating Hindu bronzes for Tamil patrons, these local sculptors demonstrated varying success in coming to terms with the unfamiliar Hindu iconography (Dehejia, 2006, p. 175).

- **Dancing Shiva (Nataraja):** Several Nataraja bronzes were found at Shiva temple 5 (Dehejia, 2006, pp. 175–176). Sculptor "A," for instance, showed hesitancy and discomfort in treating a four-armed deity, resulting in excessively broad shoulders and an awkward attachment of the extra arms (Dehejia, 2006, p. 175). The faces also differed from the Kaveri delta mode (Dehejia, 2006, p. 177). A smaller, more accomplished Nataraja, perhaps imported or made by a visiting Kaveri modeler ("C"), displayed the characteristic Indian detail of adding a scarf to conceal the awkward joint of the two left arms, a detail missed by the local Sri Lankan sculptors in the larger statues (Dehejia, 2006, p. 178, 180).
- **Uma (Parvati):** The Sri Lankan artists also struggled with the typical South Indian *tri-bhanga* or "triple-bent" contrapposto posture (Dehejia, 2006, p. 182). One powerful Polonnaruwa Uma displayed an uncoordinated and ungainly effect because the head and torso were positioned at the same angle, rather than

opposing the lower body, as required by the Kaveri basin imagery (Dehejia, 2006, p. 182).

- **Hindu Saints:** The popularity of the Shaiva *nayanmar* saints among Tamil settlers is evident in the number of commissioned bronze images, reflecting differing aesthetic criteria from various local workshops (Dehejia, 2006, p. 184). One unique Polonnaruwa bronze is an exceptional portrayal of the emaciated woman saint, Mother of Karaikkal (Karaikkal Ammaiyar) (Dehejia, 2006, p. 180). This bizarre, hag-like portrayal, all skin and bones, was so close to the imagery found on Rajendra's mainland temple at Gangaikondacholapuram that it suggested the artist was directly familiar with that specific mainland imagery (Dehejia, 2006, p. 180).

This cultural interface was transactional: Tamil expatriate Hindu communities also extended support to Buddhist temples, such as commissioning gifts for the circular Buddhist temple known as the Vatadage at Polonnaruwa (Dehejia, 2006, p. 190). An intriguing inscription from the reign of the Sri Lankan king Vijayabahu placed the security of a newly constructed royal Buddhist monastery in the hands of Tamil mercenary troops who protected Tamil merchant guilds (Dehejia, 2006, p. 190). This shows that warfare, trade, and cultural patronage were deeply interconnected, with mercenary forces playing a role in protecting both commercial and religious interests (Dehejia, 2006, p. 190).

CONCLUSION

The Chola Empire's success stemmed from its systematic approach to asserting power in the Indian Ocean world, combining military might with strategic commerce and diplomacy. The unprecedented military maritime capability established by Rajaraja I and Rajendra I allowed for hegemonic expansion into Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and the successful, although brief, naval raid against the Srivijaya kingdom in 1025 AD (Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 76, 77). This military intervention was largely motivated by the need to secure access to key resources like pearls and potential copper, and to counter commercial threats, such as high levies imposed by Srivijaya rulers on trade routes essential for Chola access to the Chinese market (Dehejia, 2006, p. 167; Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 79).

The resulting cross-cultural interface was profound. The proliferation of powerful merchant guilds, coupled with diplomatic trade missions to East Asia, cemented Chola presence across transregional networks (Meenakshisundararajan, 2009, p. 174; Sakhuja & Sakhuja, 2009, p. 84). Indian textiles, especially printed cottons, became key carriers of culture, serving as symbols of status, influencing local fashion (like the dhoti), and

embedding Hindu iconography in the courts of Southeast Asia (Devare, 2009, p. 185, 187). Simultaneously, in captured territories like Sri Lanka, the Cholas physically asserted their presence by building temples and importing Hindu rituals, leading to a period of artistic adaptation where local sculptors struggled and experimented with the complexity of Chola bronze iconography (Dehejia, 2006, p. 175). This unit demonstrates that the Chola Empire used warfare and religious art as integrated tools to assert a lasting political and cultural presence far beyond the fertile Kaveri delta.

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