

Early Cholas

The **Cholas** of the pre and post Sangam period (400 BCE – 200 CE) were one of the three main kingdoms of the ancient Tamil country. Their early capitals were Urayur and Kaveripattinam. Along with Pandyas and Cheras, Chola history goes back to the period where the history is covered with the mists of time.

Although we the exploits of a number of Cholas of this period through Sangam literature and later folklore, it is hard to elucidate exact histories with any amount of certainty

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Ancient Tamil Nadu contained three monarchical states, headed by kings called *Vendhar* and several tribal chieftaincies, headed by the chiefs called by the general denomination *Vel* or *Velir*.^[1] Still lower at the local level there were clan chiefs called *kizhar* or *mannar*.^[2] The Tamil area had an independent existence outside the control of these northern empires. The Tamil kings and chiefs were always in conflict with each other mostly over property. The royal courts were mostly places of social gathering rather than places of dispensation of authority; they were centres for distribution of resources^[3]

The names of the three dynasties, Cholas, Pandyas, and Cheras, are mentioned in the Pillars of Ashoka (inscribed 273–232 BCE) inscriptions, among the kingdoms, which though not subject to Ashoka, were on friendly terms with him.^[4]^[5] The king of Kalinga, Kharavela, who ruled around 150 BCE, mentioned in the famous Hathigumpha inscription of the confederacy of the Tamil kingdoms that had existed for over 100 years.^[6] Karikala Chola was the most famous early Chola. He is mentioned in a number of poems in the Tamil Sangam literature.^[7]

Another source for the available information of the early Cholas is the early Tamil literature of the Sangam Period. There are also brief notices on the Chola country and its towns, ports and commerce furnished by the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (*Periplus Maris Erythraei*). *Periplus* is a work by an anonymous Alexandrian merchant, written in the time of Domitian (81 – 96 CE) and contains precious information of the Chola country. Writing half a century later, the geographer Ptolemy has more to tell us about the Chola country, its port and its inland cities.

Mahavamsa, a Buddhist text, also recounts a number of conflicts between the inhabitants of Ceylon and the Tamil immigrants from Chola Country.

Chronicles such as the Yalpana Vaipava Malai and stone inscriptions like Konesar Kalvettu recount that Kulakkottan, an early Chola king and descendant of Manu Needhi Cholan, was the restorer of the ruined Koneswaram temple and tank at Trincomalee in 438 CE, the Munneswaram temple of the west coast, and as the royal who settled ancient Vanniar (not to confuse with present-day Vanniar or Palli caste).^{[8][9]}

Early Cholas

The inscriptions of the Medieval Cholas are replete with history about the Early Chola kings. The Cholas were looked upon as descended from the sun. These historic incidents speak of the Chola king Kantaman, supposed contemporary of the sage Agastya, whose devotion brought the river Kavery into existence. There is also the story of the king Manu who sentenced his son to death for having accidentally killed a calf. Mahavamsa portrays King Elara who was defeated by Duttha Gamini (c. 3rd century BCE) as the just king who '..had a bell with a rope attached at the head of his bed, so that all who sought redress might ring it.'. King Sibi who rescued a dove from a hawk by giving his own flesh to the hungry hawk was also part of the early Chola history

These historic incidents received enormous emphasis in the later Chola period in the long mythical genealogies incorporated into the copper-plate charters of the 10th and 11th centuries. The earliest version of this is found in the Anbil Plates which gives fifteen names before Vijayalaya Cholan including the historical ones of Karikala, Perunarkilli and Kocengannan. The Thiruvallangadu Plate swells this list to forty-four, and the Kanyakumari Plate runs up to fifty-two. There are other lists gathered from literary works such as Kalingathuparani. No two of these lists agree, although some names and details are common to all.

Cholas in Sangam literature

The earliest Chola kings of whom we have tangible evidence are those mentioned in the Sangam literature, written in the period 200 BCE–300 CE.^{[10][11]} Unfortunately, it has not been possible to piece together an internal chronology of the Sangam works. Due to this, we know of several rulers, but not their chronology. All three kings have been portrayed as fighting the war or involved in feeding both the armies at that legendary war

Karikala Chola

Karikala Chola (c. 90 BCE) stands pre-eminent amongst all those mentioned in Pattinappaalai. Karikala's father was Ilamcetcenni, a brave king and a hard fighter. 'Karikala' means 'elephant feller' or 'charred leg', which is assumed to be a reference to an accident by fire which befell the prince early in his life. Pattinappaalai describes this accident and the enterprising way in which the prince escaped and established himself in the Chola throne. Pattinappalai is a long poem on the then Chola capital Kaveripattinam. This work also describes the numerous battles Karikala fought against the other two Tamil kings in one of which the Chera king was disgraced (received a wound on his back) and committed suicide. Karikala thus broke the confederacy that was formed against him and established hegemony over Pandyas and Cheras.

In later times Karikala was the subject of many legends found in the Cilappatikaram and in inscriptions and literary works of the 11th and 12th centuries. They attribute to him the conquest of the whole of India up to the Himalayas and the construction of the flood banks, Grand Anicut, of the Kaveri River with the aid of his feudatories. These legends however are conspicuous by their absence in the works of Sangam.

Nalankilli and Nedunkilli

The poet Kovur Kilar mentions a protracted civil war between two Chola chieftains Nalankilli and Nedunkilli. Nedunkilli shut himself in a fort in Aur, which was being besieged by Mavalattan, Nalankilli's younger brother. The poet chided Nedunkilli to come out and fight like a man instead of causing untold misery to the people of the city.



Kallanai / Grand Anicut built by Karikala Cholan, on the River Kaveri, near Tiruchirappalli

In another poem, the poet begs both the princes to give up the civil war as whoever wins, the loser will be a Chola.

Kocengannan

Kalavali by Poygayar mentions the Chola king Kocengannan and his battle with the Chera king Kanaikkal Irumporai. The Chera was taken prisoner and Poygayar, who was a friend of the Chera, sang Kocenganna's prince in 40 stanzas. The Chola king, pleased with the work, released the Chera. *Kalavali* describes the battle fought at Kalumalam, near the Chera capital. Kocengannan is one of the 63 nayanars.

Kocengannan became the subject of many instances in later times and is portrayed as a pious Siva devotee who built many fine temples for Siva along the banks of the river Kaveri.

Social conditions

Sangam literature gives an unusually complete and true picture of the social and economic conditions during the early chola period. The culture is best described as an amalgam of the Dravidian and Aryan. The stories of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* were well known to the Tamil people, shown by the claims of some kings to have fed both the opposing army in the Mahabharata War. The claim that Shibi, who gave his own flesh to save a dove, as a Chola is obviously influenced by northern legends.

The land of the Cholas was fertile and there was ample food. Sangam poems say that in the Chola country watered by the river Kaveri, in a space in which an elephant could lie, one can produce enough grain to feed seven.

Hereditary monarchy was the prevailing form of government. Disputed succession and civil war was not uncommon. The sphere of the state activity was limited. In a society steeped in respect for custom, even the most perverse dictator could not have done much harm.

The Chola monarchs were approachable by subjects and justice was meted out directly by the king in most occasions. This is in marked contrast to the magnificent empires of the later Cholas where the Emperor was kept much away from contact with the lay people. The kings often took the field in person in battles and if the kings was killed or wounded in battle, his army immediately gave up the fight and surrendered.

The trade that flourished between the Chola country and the ancient Roman Empire is given in much detail by *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (c. 75 CE).

See also

- Chola
- Historic early Chola kings
- Sangam literature
- Kingdom of Chu
 - Chu (state)

Notes

1. K.A.N. Sashtri, *A History of South India*, pp 109–112
2. 'There were three levels of redistribution corresponding to the three categories of chieftains, namely: the ~~Velir~~ ^{Ventar}, Velir and Kilar in descending order Ventar were the chieftains of the three major lineages, viz ~~Ch~~ ^{Ch}era, Cola and Pandya. Velir were mostly hill chieftains, while Kilar ~~were~~ ^{were} the headmen of settlements...' —"Perspectives on Kerala History"(<https://web.archive.org/web/20060826094724/http://www.keralahistory.ac.in/historicalantecedents.htm>) *P.J.Cherian (Ed)*,. Kerala Council for Historical Research. Archived from the original (<http://www.keralahistory.ac.in/historicalantecedents.htm>) on 26 August 2006 Retrieved 15 November 2006.
3. K.A.N. Sastri, *A History of South India* p 129

4. 'Everywhere within Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi's domain, and among the people beyond the borders, the Cholas, the Pandyas, the Satyaputras, the Keralaputras, as far as Tāmaparni...' —"Ashoka's second minor rock edict" (<http://www.cs.colostate.edu/~malaiya/ashoka.html>). Colorado State University Retrieved 15 November 2006.
5. K.A.N. Sastri, *The Cōḷas*, 1935 p 20
6. "Hathigumpha Inscription"(<https://web.archive.org/web/20061117151339/http://www.mssu.edu/projectsouthasia/HISTORY/PRIMARYDOCS/EPIGRAPHY/HathigumphaInscription.htm>) *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. XX (1929–1930). Delhi, 1933, pp 86–89. Missouri Southern State University Archived from the original (<http://www.mssu.edu/projectsouthasia/HISTORY/PRIMARYDOCS/EPIGRAPHY/HathigumphaInscription.htm>) on 17 November 2006 Retrieved 15 November 2006.
7. *Pattinappaalai*, *Porunaraatruppada*i and a number of individual poems in *Akananuru* and *Purananuru* have been the main source for the information we attribute now to Karikala. See also K.A.N. Sastri, *The Cholas*, 1935
8. *Tamils and the meaning of history Contemporary South Asia* 3. Routledge. 1994. pp. 3–23.
doi:[10.1080/09584939408719724](https://doi.org/10.1080/09584939408719724)(<https://doi.org/10.1080/09584939408719724>) | first1= missing | last1= in Authors list ([help](#))
9. Schalk, Peter (2002). "Buddhism Among Tāmils in Pre-colonial Tāmilakam and Ilam: Prologue. The Pre-Pallava and the Pallava period". *Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis Uppsala University*. 19-20: 159, 503. "The Tamil stone inscription *Konesar Kalvettu* details King Kulakottan's involvement in the restoration of Koneswaram temple in 438 A.D. (Pillay K., Pillay, K. (1963). *South India and Ceylon*);"
10. Kamil Veith Zvelebil, *Companion Studies to the History of Tamil Literature*, p12
11. Nilakanta Sastri, *A History of South India* p 105

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Preceded by -	Chola empire: Early Cholas	Succeeded by Medieval Cholas
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