



## THE CHOLA DYNASTY ADMINISTRATION: A REVIEW STUDY

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The **Chola** **dynasty** (Tamil: [tʃoːɻɐ]) was a Tamil dynasty originating from Southern India. At its height, it ruled over the Chola Empire, an expansive maritime empire. The earliest datable references to the Chola are from inscriptions dated to the 3rd century BCE during the reign of Ashoka of the Maurya Empire. The Chola empire was at its peak and achieved imperialism under the Medieval Cholas in the mid-9th century CE. As one of the Three Crowned Kings of Tamilakam, along with the Chera and Pandya, the dynasty continued to govern over varying territories until the 13th century CE.

The heartland of the Cholas was the fertile valley of the Kaveri River. They ruled a significantly larger area at the height of their power from the latter half of the 9th century till the beginning of the 13th century. They unified peninsular India south of the Tungabhadra River and held the territory as one state for three centuries between 907 and 1215 CE. Under Rajaraja I and his successors Rajendra I, Rajadhiraja I, Rajendra II, Virarajendra, and Kulothunga Chola I, the empire became a military, economic and cultural powerhouse in South Asia and Southeast Asia.

### Origins

There is very little written evidence for the Cholas before the 7th century CE. The main sources of information about the early Cholas are ancient Tamil literature of the Sangam period (c. 600 BCE), oral traditions, religious texts, temple and copperplate inscriptions. Later medieval Cholas also claimed a long and ancient lineage. The Cholas are mentioned in Ashokan Edicts (inscribed 273 BCE–232 BCE) as one of the Mauryan empire's neighbours to the South (Ashoka Major Rock Edict No.13), who, though not subject to Ashoka, were on friendly terms with him.<sup>[6]</sup> There are also brief references to the Chola country and its towns, ports and commerce in the Periplus of the Erythraean



Sea (*Periplus Maris Erythraei*), and in the slightly later work of the geographer Ptolemy. Mahāvamsa, a Buddhist text written down during the 5th century CE, recounts several conflicts between the inhabitants of Sri Lanka and Cholas in the 1st century BCE.

A commonly held view is that *Chola* is, like Chera and Pandya, the name of the ruling family or clan of immemorial antiquity. The annotator Parimelazhagar said: "The charity of people with ancient lineage (such as the Cholas, the Pandyas and the Cheras) are forever generous despite their reduced means". Other names in common use for the Cholas are *Choda*,<sup>[9]</sup> *Killi* (கிள்ளி), *Valavan* (வளவன்), *Sembiyan* (செம்பியன்) and *Cenni*.<sup>[10]</sup> *Killi* perhaps comes from the Tamil *kil* (கிள்) meaning dig or cleave and conveys the idea of a digger or a worker of the land. This word often forms an integral part of early Chola names like Nedunkilli, Nalankilli and so on, but almost drops out of use in later times. *Valavan* is most probably connected with "*valam*" (வளம்) – fertility and means owner or ruler of a fertile country. *Sembiyan* is generally taken to mean a descendant of Shibi – a legendary hero whose self-sacrifice in saving a dove from the pursuit of a falcon figures among the early Chola legends and forms the subject matter of the Sibi Jataka among the Jataka stories of Buddhism. In Tamil lexicon *Chola* means *Soazhi* or *Saei* denoting a newly formed kingdom, in the lines of *Pandya* or the old country. *Cenni* in Tamil means *Head*.

## History

The history of the Cholas falls into four periods: the Early Cholas of the Sangam literature, the interregnum between the fall of the Sangam Cholas and the rise of the Imperial medieval Cholas under Vijayalaya (c. 848), the dynasty of Vijayalaya, and finally the Later Chola dynasty of Kulothunga Chola I from the third quarter of the 11th century.

### Early Cholas

*Main article:* Early Cholas

*Further information:* Legendary early Chola kings

The earliest Chola kings for whom there is tangible evidence are mentioned in the Sangam literature. Scholars generally agree that this literature belongs to the late centuries before the common era and the early centuries of the common era.<sup>[14]</sup> The internal chronology of this literature is still far from settled, and at present a connected account of the history of the period cannot be



derived. It records the names of the kings and the princes, and of the poets who extolled them.

The Sangam literature also records legends about mythical Chola kings.<sup>[16]</sup> These myths speak of the Chola king Kantaman, a supposed contemporary of the sage Agastya, whose devotion brought the river Kaveri into existence.<sup>[citation needed]</sup> Two names are prominent among those Chola kings who feature in Sangam literature: Karikala and Kocengannan.<sup>[17][18][19][20]</sup> There are no sure means of settling the order of succession, of fixing their relations with one another and with many other princelings of around the same period Urayur (now a part of Thiruchirapalli) was their oldest capital Kaveripattinam also served as an early Chola capital. The Mahavamsa mentions that a Chola prince known as Ellalan, invaded the Rajarata kingdom of Sri Lanka and conquered it in 235 BCE with the help of a Mysore army

### Interregnum



South India in BC 300, showing the Chera, Pandya and Chola countries

There is not much information about the transition period of around three centuries from the end of the Sangam age (c. 300) to that in which the Pandyas and Pallavas dominated the Tamil country. An obscure dynasty, the Kalabhras invaded Tamil country, displaced the existing kingdoms and ruled during that time.<sup>[24][25][26]</sup> They were displaced by the Pallava dynasty and the Pandyan dynasty in the 6th century Little is known of the fate of the Cholas in Tamil land during the succeeding three centuries. The Cholas disappeared from the Tamil land almost completely in this debacle, though a branch of them can be traced towards the close of the fifth century CE in Rayalaseema—the Telugu-Cholas, whose kingdom is mentioned by Yuan Chwang in the seventh-century CE.<sup>1</sup> Due to Kalabhra invasion and the growing power of Pallavas, Cholas migrated from their native land Urayur to Telugu country and ruled from there as chieftains of Pallavas at least since



540 CE. Several Telugu Chola families like Renati Cholas, Pottapi Cholas, Nellore Cholas, Velanati Cholas, Nannuru Cholas, Kondidela Cholas existed and claimed descent from ancient Tamil king Karikala Chola. The Cholas had to wait for another three centuries until the accession of Vijayalaya Chola belonging to Pottapi Chola family in the second quarter of the ninth century to re-establish their dynasty as independent rulers by overthrowing Pallavas and Pandyas.

Epigraphy and literature provide a few glimpses of the transformations that came over this line of kings during this long interval. It is certain that when the power of the Cholas fell to its lowest ebb and that of the Pandyas and Pallavas rose to the north and south of them, this dynasty was compelled to seek refuge and patronage under their more successful rivals. Despite their reduced powers, the Pandyas and Pallavas accepted Chola princesses in marriage, possibly out of regard for their reputation. Numerous Pallava inscriptions of this period mention their having fought rulers of the Chola country.



An early silver coin of Uttama Chola found in Sri Lanka showing the tiger emblem of the Chola and in Nagari script

### **Imperial Cholas: Medieval Cholas**

#### **CHOLA TEMPLES**

The Chola Empire was founded in 848 CE by Vijayalaya, a descendant of Early Cholas.



Detail of the statue of Rajaraja I at Brihadisvara Temple at Thanjavur.

The early Chola kings expanded their territory and influence. During the early 10th century, the second Chola King, Aditya I, defeated the Pallava dynasty and Pandyan dynasty capturing Tondaimandalam and Kongu Nadu. Later Aditya's son Parantaka I defeated the Rashtrakuta dynasty in the battle of Vallala and also defeated the Pandyas.

Rajaraja I and Rajendra I would expand the dynasty to its imperial state in the 11th century, creating an influential empire in the Bay of Bengal. The Brihadeeswarar Temple was also built in this era. The Chola dynasty was at the peak of its influence and power during the 11th century.

Rajendra I conquered Odisha and Pala dynasty of Bengal and reached the Ganges river in north India.<sup>[40]</sup> Rajendra Chola I built a new capital called Gangaikonda Cholapuram to celebrate his victories in northern India, Rajendra Chola I successfully invaded the Srivijaya kingdom in Southeast Asia which led to the decline of the empire there. He also completed the conquest of a kingdom in Rajarata within Sri Lanka and sent three diplomatic missions to China in 1016, 1033, and 1077.





Gopuram Corner View of Thanjavur Brihadisvara Temple.



The sikhara of Brihadisvara Temple, a cupolic dome (25 tons), is octagonal and rests on a single



block of granite, weighing 80 tons. <sup>[citation needed]</sup>

Airavateswara temple, Darasuram in Thanjavur District.



The Western Chalukya empire under Satyashraya and Someshvara I tried regularly to loose itself from Chola domination, primarily due to the Chola influence in the Vengi kingdom. The Western Chalukyas mounted several unsuccessful attempts to engage the Chola emperors in war, and except for a brief occupation of the Vengi territories between 1118 and 1126, allied with Prince Vikramaditya VI. Cholas usually managed to dominate over the Chalukyas in the western Deccan by defeating them in war and levying tribute on them.<sup>[50]</sup> With the occupation of Dharwar in North Central Karnataka by the Hoysalas under Vishnuvardhana, where he based himself with his son Narasimha I in charge of the Hoysala capital Dwarasamudra around 1149, and with the Kalachuris occupying the Chalukyan capital for over 35 years from around 1150–1151, the Chalukya kingdom had already started to dissolve.

The Cholas under Kulothunga Chola III collaborated to herald the dissolution of the Chalukyas by aiding the Hoysalas under Veera Ballala II, the son-in-law of the Chola monarch, and defeated the Western Chalukyas in a series of wars with Someshvara IV between 1185 and 1190. The last Chalukya king's territories did not even include the erstwhile Chalukyan capitals Badami, Manyakheta or Kalyani. That was the final dissolution of Chalukyan power though the Chalukyas existed only in name for the period 1135–1140. But the Cholas remained stable until 1215, and were then absorbed by the Pandyan empire and ceased to exist by 1279.

On the other hand, from 1150 CE to 1280 CE, the Pandya dynasty became the staunchest opponents of the Cholas and tried to win independence for their traditional territories. Thus, this period saw constant warfare between the Cholas and the Pandyas. Besides, the Cholas regularly fought with the Eastern Gangas of Kalinga. Moreover, under Chola's protection, Vengi remained largely independent. Cholas also dominated the entire eastern coast with their feudatories, the Telugu Cholas of Velanati and Nellore among others. These feudatories always aided the Cholas in their successful campaigns against the Chalukyas and levied tribute on the Kannada kingdoms. Furthermore, the Cholas fought constantly with the Sinhala kings from the Rohana kingdom of Sri Lanka, who repeatedly attempted to overthrow the Chola occupation of Rajarata and unify the island. But until the later Chola king Kulottunga I, the Cholas had firm control over the area. In one such instance, the Chola king, Rajadhiraja Chola II, was able to defeat the Sinhalese, aided by their traditional ally, a confederation of five Pandya princes, and kept the control of Rajarata under Chola rule. His successor, the last great Chola monarch Kulottunga Chola III reinforced the hold of the Chola territories by



quelling further rebellions and disturbances in the Rajarata area of Sri Lanka and Madurai. He also defeated Hoysala generals who fought under Veera Ballala II at Karuvur. Furthermore, he also continued holding on to traditional territories in Tamil country, Eastern Gangavadi, Draksharama, Vengi, and Kalinga. However, after defeating Veera Ballala II, Kulottunga Chola III entered into a marital alliance with him through Ballala's marriage to a Chola princess, which improved Kulottunga Chola III's relationship with the Hoysalas.

### Later Cholas (1070–1279)

#### Later Cholas



Later Chola Kingdom under Kulothunga Chola I (1070–1120 C.E)

Marital and political alliances between the Eastern Chalukyas began during the reign of Rajaraja following his invasion of Vengi. Rajaraja Chola's daughter married Chalukya prince Vimaladitya<sup>1</sup> and Rajendra Chola's daughter Ammanga Devi was married to the Eastern Chalukya prince Rajaraja Narendra.<sup>1</sup> Virarajendra Chola's son, Athirajendra Chola, was assassinated in a civil disturbance in 1070, and Kulothunga Chola I, the son of Ammanga Devi and Rajaraja Narendra, ascended the Chola throne. Thus began the Later Chola dynasty.

The Later Chola dynasty was led by capable rulers such as Kulothunga Chola I, his son Vikrama Chola, other successors like Rajaraja Chola II, Rajadhiraja Chola II, and Kulothunga Chola III, who conquered Kalinga, Ilam, and Kataha. However, the rule of the later Cholas between 1218, starting with Rajaraja Chola II, to the last emperor Rajendra Chola III was not as strong as





those of the emperors between 850 and 1215. Around 1118, they lost control of Vengi to the Western Chalukya and Gangavadi (southern Mysore districts) to the Hoysala Empire. However, these were only temporary setbacks, because immediately following the accession of King Vikrama Chola, the son and successor of Kulothunga Chola I, the Cholas lost no time in recovering the province of Vengi by defeating Chalukya Someshvara III and also recovering Gangavadi from the Hoysalas. The Chola empire, though not as strong as between 850 and 1150, was still largely territorially intact under Rajaraja Chola II (1146–1175) a fact attested by the construction and completion of the third grand Chola architectural marvel, the chariot-shaped Airavatesvara Temple at Dharasuram on the outskirts of modern Kumbakonam. Chola administration and territorial integrity until the rule of Kulothunga Chola III was stable and very prosperous up to 1215, but during his rule itself, the decline of the Chola power started following his defeat by Maravarman Sundara Pandiyan II in 1215–16. Subsequently, the Cholas also lost control of the island of Lanka and were driven out by the revival of Sinhala power.

In continuation of the decline, also marked by the resurgence of the Pandyan dynasty as the most powerful rulers in South India, a lack of a controlling central administration in its erstwhile Pandyan territories prompted several claimants to the Pandya throne to cause a civil war in which the Sinhalas and the Cholas were involved by proxy. Details of the Pandyan civil war and the role played by the Cholas and Sinhalas, are present in the Mahavamsa as well as the Pallavarayanpettai Inscriptions.

### **Decline**

The setbacks suffered during the final years of Kulothunga I left a somewhat diminished empire. Kulothunga's successors Vikrama Chola (1118–1135 CE) and Kulothunga Chola II (1133–1150 CE) were capable and compassionate leaders who took care not to involve their subjects in unnecessary and unwinnable wars.<sup>1</sup> Rajaraja II (1146–1173 CE), Rajadhiraja II (1166–1178 CE) and Kulothunga Chola III (1178–1218 CE) took active roles in the politics of the emerging revival of the Pandyas.<sup>[67]</sup> Meanwhile, the Chola succession was getting murkier and murkier with disputes and intrigues during the periods of Rajadhiraja II and Kulothunga III.

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## **Cultural contributions**



Detail of the main vimanam (tower) of the Thanjavur Temple.

Under the Cholas, the Tamil country reached new heights of excellence in art, religion, music and literature. In all of these spheres, the Chola period marked the culmination of movements that had begun at an earlier age under the Pallavas. Monumental architecture in the form of majestic temples and sculpture in stone and bronze reached a finesse never before achieved in India.



The Chola conquest of Kadaram (Kedah) and Srivijaya, and their continued commercial contacts with the Chinese Empire, enabled them to influence the local cultures. Examples of the Hindu cultural influence found today throughout Southeast Asia owe much to the legacy of the Cholas. For example, the great temple complex at Prambanan in Indonesia exhibits several similarities with South Indian architecture.

According to the Malay chronicle *Sejarah Melayu*, the rulers of the Malacca sultanate claimed to be descendants of the kings of the Chola empire.<sup>[80][full citation needed]</sup> Chola rule is remembered in Malaysia today as many princes there have names ending with Cholan or Chulan, one such being Raja Chulan, the Raja of Perak.

## Literature

### [Chola literature](#)



Chola bronze from the Ulster Museum

The Imperial Chola era was the golden age of Tamil culture, marked by the importance of literature. Chola records cite many works, including the *Rajarajesvara Natakam*, *Viranukkaviyam* and *Kannivana Puranam*.



The revival of Hinduism from its nadir during the Kalabhras spurred the construction of numerous temples and these in turn generated Shaiva and Vaishnava devotional literature. Jain and Buddhist authors flourished as well, although in fewer numbers than in previous centuries. Jivaka-chintamani by Tirutakkatevar and Sulamani by Tolamoli are among notable works by non-Hindu authors. The grammarian Buddhamitra wrote a text on Tamil grammar called *Virasoliyam*. Commentaries were written on the great text *Tolkāppiyam* which deals with grammar but which also mentions ethics of warfare.<sup>[90][91][92]</sup> *Periapuranam* was another remarkable literary piece of this period. This work is in a sense a national epic of the Tamil people because it treats the lives of the saints who lived in all parts of Tamil Nadu and belonged to all classes of society, men and women, high and low, educated and uneducated.

Kamban flourished during the reign of Kulothunga III. Jayamkondar's *Kalingattuparani*, draws a clear boundary between history and fictitious conventions. The Tamil poet Ottakuttan was a contemporary of Kulothunga I and served at the courts of three of Kulothunga's successors.

*Nannul* is a Chola era work on Tamil grammar. It discusses all five branches of grammar and, according to Berthold Spuler, is still relevant today and is one of the most distinguished normative grammars of literary Tamil.

The Telugu Choda period was in particular significant for the development of Telugu literature under the patronage of the rulers. It was the age in which the great Telugu poets Tikkana, Ketana, Marana and Somana enriched the literature with their contributions. Tikkana Somayaji wrote *Nirvachanottara Ramayanamu* and *Andhra Mahabharatamu*. Abhinava Dandi Ketana wrote *Dasakumaracharitramu*, *Vijnaneswaramu* and *Andhra Bhashabhushanamu*. Marana wrote *Markandeya Purana* in Telugu. Somana wrote *Basava Purana*. Tikkana is one of the kavitrayam who translated *Mahabharata* into Telugu language.

Of the devotional literature, the arrangement of the Shaivite canon into eleven books was the work of Nambi Andar Nambi, who lived close to the end of the 10th century. However, relatively few Vaishnavite works were composed during the Later Chola period, possibly because of the rulers' apparent animosity towards them.

## Religion



Bronze Chola Statue of Nataraja at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City

In general, Cholas were followers of Hinduism. They were not swayed by the rise of Buddhism and Jainism as were the kings of the Pallava and Pandya dynasties. Kocengannan, an Early Chola, was celebrated in both Sangam literature and in the Shaivite canon as a Hindu saint.

Among the Tamil film and entertainment industry, there is a rising trend of terming the Cholas as non-Hindus. Noted Tamil film director, producer and screenwriter Vetrimaaran asserted at a function in 2022 that the Cholas were not Hindus. At the same event, another leading Tamil actor, film director, film producer, screenwriter, choreographer, playback singer, lyricist, television presenter, social activist and politician Kamal Haasan, while supporting Vetrimaaran asserted Hindu religion did not exist during the Chola period.

## References

1. <sup>^</sup> Also spelled **Cola dynasty**
2. <sup>^</sup> The age of Sangam is established through the correlation between the evidence on foreign trade found in the poems and the writings by ancient Greek and Romans such as *Periplus*. K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, *A History of Cyril and Lulu Charles*, p 106. It is likely to extend not longer than five or six generations.
3. <sup>^</sup> The Ashokan inscriptions speak of the Cholas in the plural, implying that, in his time, there were more than one Chola.
4. <sup>^</sup> The direct line of Cholas of the Vijayalaya dynasty came to an end with the death of Virarajendra Chola and the assassination of his son Athirajendra Chola. Kulothunga Chola I, ascended the throne in 1070.
5. <sup>^</sup> The only evidence for the approximate period of these early kings is the Sangam literature and synchronisms with the history of Sri Lanka as given in





the Mahavamsa. Gajabahu I who is said to be the contemporary of the Chera Senguttuvan, belonged to the 2nd century and this means the poems mentioning Senguttuvan and his contemporaries date to that period.

6. ^ Pandya Kadungon and Pallava Simhavishnu overthrew the Kalabhras. Acchchutakalaba is likely the last Kalabhra king.
7. ^ Periyapuranam, a Shaivite religious work of the 12th century tells us of the Pandya king Nindrasirnedumaran, who had for his queen a Chola princess.
8. ^ Copperplate grants of the Pallava Buddhavarman (late 4th century) mention that the king as the "underwater fire that destroyed the ocean of the Chola army".<sup>[34]</sup> Simhavishnu (575–600) is also stated to have seized the Chola country. Mahendravarman I was called the "crown of the Chola country" in his inscriptions.
9. ^ "After the second Pandya War, Kulottunga undertook a campaign to check the growth of Hoysala power in that quarter. He re-established Chola suzerainty over the Adigaimans of Tagadur, defeated a Chera ruler in battle and performed a *vijayabhisheka* in Karuvur (1193). His relations with the Hoysala Ballala II seems to have become friendly afterwards, for Ballala married a Chola princess".
10. ^ The Buddhist work *Milinda Panha* dated to the early Christian era, mentions Kolaptna among the best-known seaports on the Chola coast.