

***THE TIRUKKURAL AS A TOOL TO UNDERSTAND THE STATECRAFT OF THE
CHOLA EMPIRE***

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Abstract

This paper employs the Tirukkural as an analytical framework to study the statecraft of the Chola Empire, one of the longest-ruling thalassocratic dynasties in global history. The work provides a systematic approach to understanding governance, with particular emphasis on statecraft, interstate relations, and the monarchy of the Cholas, whose political influence spanned both Southern India and Southeast Asia. By examining the key precepts of the Tirukkural, this study seeks to examine pivotal moments in Chola history, notably the Chola expedition to Srivijaya. These military ventures, set against the backdrop of generally peaceful relations between India—particularly Southern India—and Southeast Asia, present a persistent historical conundrum. Through a critical analysis of the Tirukkural's guiding principles, the paper assesses the text's explanatory utility in understanding Chola political strategy. In doing so, it underscores the continued relevance of the Tirukkural as a potent tool for analysing the political dynamics of one of the most influential empires in the history of the Indian subcontinent.

Keywords: *Tirukkural; Tiruvalluvar; Chola empire; Rajaraja Chola; Rajendra Chola; Srivijaya*

Introduction

The Tirukkural, an ancient Tamil text composed by the poet-saint Tiruvalluvar has held enduring significance beyond India, notably in Southeast Asia. Its universal themes of ethics, governance, and social harmony have found resonance across cultures, with the work often cited as a guide for personal conduct and statecraft. The Tirukkural has been translated into various Southeast Asian languages, facilitating its accessibility and influence. In more recent times, the Tirukkural has continued to be an important text in Southeast Asia, particularly in countries with significant Tamil diasporas, such as Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. Its teachings are integrated into community life, educational curricula, and even political discourse.

This study delves into the political dynamics of the Chola Empire, one of the longest-ruling thalassocratic¹ dynasties in world history, through the lens of the Tirukkural.² The Tirukkural's relevance to Chola statecraft is explored by examining its indirect yet telling references to governance and the management of a maritime empire³. The Cholas, whose power spanned much of Southern India and Southeast Asia, are known for their sophisticated administrative systems, strategic warfare, and maritime prowess. By interpreting key aspects of Chola statecraft through the Tirukkural, this study aims to offer a deeper understanding of the political and military strategies that allowed the Cholas to become a dominant force in the Indian Ocean world.

What is the Tirukkural?

The Tirukkural or Kural, a classic Tamil language text consisting of 133 adhigarams and a total of 1,330 kurals is one of the most celebrated works in the history of Tamil literature.⁴ This didactic text is divided into three books, hence also called “*muppal*” (meaning three divisions) with aphoristic teachings on virtue (*aram*), wealth/polity (*porul*) and love (*inbam/kamam*), respectively. The three books are also called *Arattupaal*, *Porutpaal* and *Kaamattupaal*.⁵ The Kural's authorship is traditionally attributed to Tiruvalluvar, although not much is known about him. Valluvar's personal background is still subject to debate and many aspects of his life, largely conjecture.

Scholars and historians have not reached a consensus on the period of the Tirukkural's origin, partly due to limited documentation about its author, Tiruvalluvar. Gautam⁶ notes that estimates range from the first century BC to the sixth century CE. Gopalan cites historians like V.R. Ramachandra Dikshitar, K.R. Srinivasa Aiyangar, and K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, who place Sangam literature between the fifth century BC and fifth century CE, with the Kural likely originating between the first century BC and first century CE. Sundaram⁷ dates it broadly between the second century BC and eighth century CE, while Rajagopal⁸ proposes 200–250 CE.

Tiruvalluvar's background remains a subject of debate, blending historical, factual, and legendary accounts. Gandhi⁹ argues that the structure and content of the Kural suggest Valluvar was closely connected to power, possibly a minister. Sastri¹⁰ highlights that the *Divakaram* describes Valluvar as a chief of drummer boys, likely from the Pariah caste, and asserts his Jain leanings based on the deity praised in the Kural's opening.

Analysing the Kural

For this analysis, in addition to using the simplified Tamil text versions of the Kural from reputed online sources such as Dinamalar, Dheivegam, Tamizh Karrpom, and S. Sinnathamby's print version of *Malainaadu Kanda Tirukkural: Eliya Urai, Naankaam*

*Pathippu*¹¹ (The Tirukkural as seen by Malaysia: Simplified, 4th edition), a number of English translations of the Kural has also been referred to. For this study, Gopalkrishna Gandhi's Tiruvalluvar The Tirukkural,¹² P.S. Sundaram's Tiruvalluvar The Kural (1989,1990, 2012 (digital edition) and Project Madurai's¹³ - or *Madurai Tamizh Illakiya Minthokuppu Thittam's* (Madurai Tamil Literature Online Project) Tirukkural English Translation and Commentary by Rev Dr G U Pope, Rev W H Drew, Rev John Lazarus and Mr F W Ellis (First published by W.H. Allen, & Co, 1886, Reprinted by The South India Saiva Siddhantha Works Publishing Society, Tinnevely, Madras, India, 1962, 1982) are used substantively.

Book I or *Arattupaal* (Virtue or “Being good”) contains 38 adhigarams (380 kurals), whereas 70 adhigarams (700 kurals) in Book II or *Porutpaal* (Wealth/polity or “Being politic”) speak at length about the dynamics of politics, qualities of a king as well as the subjects related to individuals. The ideal aspects of human love are aesthetically described in the last 25 adhigarams (250 kurals) in Book III or *Kaamattupaal* (Love or “Being in love”).

Based on the scope of this study, this section will focus on the *Porutpaal* on polity and identify key Adhigarams and Kurals. While elements of *Arattupaal* will also be identified and selected based on relevance, *Kaamattupaal* will not, considering how it is not relevant to this study. The focus will only be on Adhigarams and Kurals that relate to interstate relations and statecraft.

Thereafter, key adhigarams and kurals relevant to this study will be identified and presented in a table form. This exercise is an important pre-cursor and will serve as significant material for further analysis.

Table 1 presents a curated selection of Adhigarams and Kurals that encapsulate key concepts of strategy and statecraft identified through a comprehensive analysis of the Kural. These selections have been rigorously justified by integrating implicit knowledge of statecraft and strategy and situating the Kural within its historical and cultural context.

Table 1 : Selection of Adhigarams and Kurals related to strategy and statecraft post-analysis of the Kural

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adhigaram 11 – Gratitude - Kural 101-110 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adhigaram 68 – On Mode of Action - Kural 671, 673-676, 679, 680
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adhigaram 23 – Giving - Kural 221 and 222 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adhigaram 69 – On Embassy - Kural 684, 686, 690
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adhigaram 39 – On Kingly excellence - Kural 381 and 385 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adhigaram 74 – The Good nation - Kural 731, 732, 735, 736, 738, 739
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adhigaram 45 – Securing the Friendship of Great Men - Kural 441-446 and 450 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adhigaram 76 – The Exchequer/Wealth - Kural 751-753, 756-759

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adhigaram 46– Against Associating with Evil Persons - Kural 451-460 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adhigaram 77 – The Characteristic of a Good Army - Kural 761
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adhigaram 47 – On Acting with Fore-thought - Kural 461-470 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adhigaram 79 – Friendship - Kural 781, 787, 788
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adhigaram 48 – On the Knowledge of Resources - Kural 471-474 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adhigaram 80 – Forming friendships - Kural 791, 792
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adhigaram 49 – On the Discernment of (a suitable) Time - Kural 481-490 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adhigaram 81 – Familiarity - Kural 801-803
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adhigaram 50 – On the Choice of (a suitable) Place - Kural 491-494, 496-499 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adhigarams 82 & 83 – Evil friendship & Unreal friendship - Kural 811, 812, 826, 827, 829
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adhigaram 55 – On just government - Kural 541, 543, 547, 549 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adhigaram 87 – On the Characteristic of Enemies - Kural 861
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adhigaram 56 – Misrule/The Cruel Sceptre - Kural 551-560 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adhigaram 88 – On Enmity - Kural 875, 876
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adhigaram 57 – Penalties/Punishment - Kural 561, 562, 567 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adhigaram 90 – On disrespect to the great - Kural 891-897
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adhigaram 66 –The moral law - Kural 651, 652, 660 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adhigaram 103 – Citizenship - Kural 1021, 1023, 1026

The Cholas

The Cholas were a thalassocratic empire of India and one of the longest-ruling dynasties in world history. According to Sastri¹⁴ the history of the Cholas falls into four divisions: the age of Sangam literature, the interval between the close of the Sangam age and the rise of the Vijayalaya line, the Vijayalaya line which came to prominence in the 9th century CE and lastly

the Chalukya-Chola line of Kulottunga I and his successors from the third quarter of the 11th century to about the middle of the 13th. On the interregnum between the close of the Sangam age and the rise of the Vijayalaya line, Sastri¹⁵ recounts,

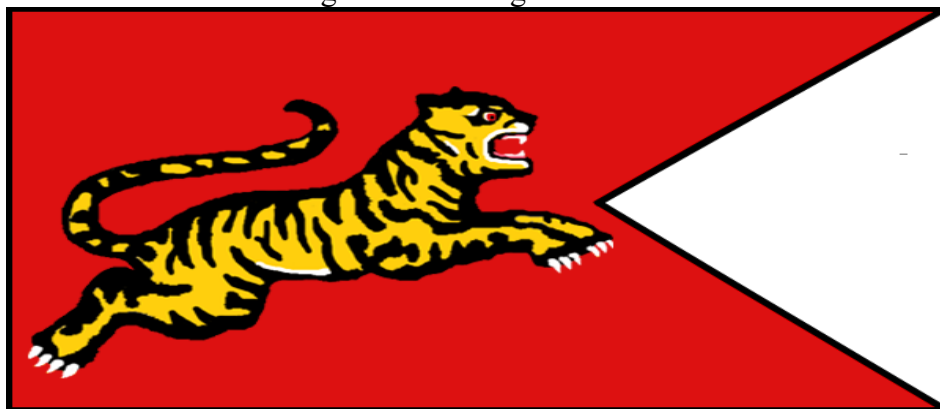
“We see then that in the long historical night that envelops the Colas from the third or fourth to the ninth century AD, their condition is best described as one of suspended animation. They managed in some manner hidden from view to find a second home for themselves in the Renandu country”.

Sastri describes the Chola country as located between the Vellaru rivers in the north and south, bordered by the sea to the east and KottaiKarai to the west, encompassing modern-day Tiruchirapalli, Tanjavur, and parts of Pudukottai. The River Kaveri symbolized the Cholas, with cities like Tiruchirapalli and Tanjavur, representing ancient Uraiyur and Kumbakonam, being notable centers. Sastri suggests the name “Chola” likely referred to an ancient ruling family, with the tiger crest as their emblem (see Figure 1).

During the Sangam period (200 BC–200 CE), Southern India was dominated by three dynasties: the Cheras, Cholas, and Pandyas, collectively known as the Muvendar or "three kings"¹⁶ Smaller regions were ruled by local chieftains or Vallals, who owed allegiance to these dynasties but exercised local authority. Chola statecraft and warfare were influenced by several texts, particularly the Kural, which Sastri notes as integral to Chola governance.

The flag of the Cholas (Figure 1) was “jumping tiger” or *Paayum Puli* according to the Periya Puranam.¹⁷ There is no official image of the Chola flag, and this figure helps with a reconstruction. There is no flag artifact or any archaeological proof of a flag used by Cholas.

Figure 2: The flag of the Cholas

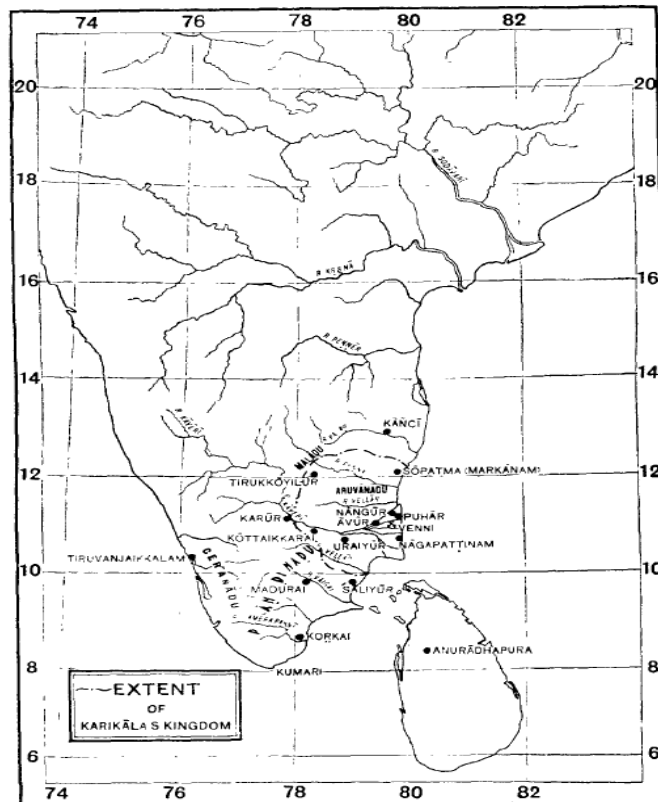


Source: *Flag of Chola*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flag_of_Chola#cite_note-PeriyaPuranam-1 (date accessed 18 January 2025)

The first recorded king in the ancient or early Chola dynasty is Ilanjetcenni, who is descended from an earlier unknown Chola king who is reported to have had the “wind do his bidding”. This may be a reference to the early Chola maritime excursions. Karikala Peruvalathan who succeeded Ilanjetcenni was said to rule around 270 BC. Karikala maintained his capital at Kaveri Pattinam (see Figure 2), where he instigated policies that prevented migration from his lands, the resettlement of forested lands, the development of flood banks along the River Kaveri¹⁸, and the development of irrigation canals, water tanks,

and dams to sustain agriculture. One of these dams was the Kallanai Dam¹⁹ across the Kaveri River, which is still in use today. Karikala won many notable battles, including the Battle of Venni²⁰, in which he defeated 11 minor kings or chieftains, and the Battle of Vahaiparandalai, in which he defeated nine minor kings (see Figure 2). In another battle, Karikala defeated the combined armies of the Pandya and the Chera kings.²¹ Despite the ancient origins of the Chola dynasty, the period when it is most relevant to speak of a “Chola Empire” only begins with the Imperial Cholas in the mid-9th century CE (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Extent of Karikala's Kingdom



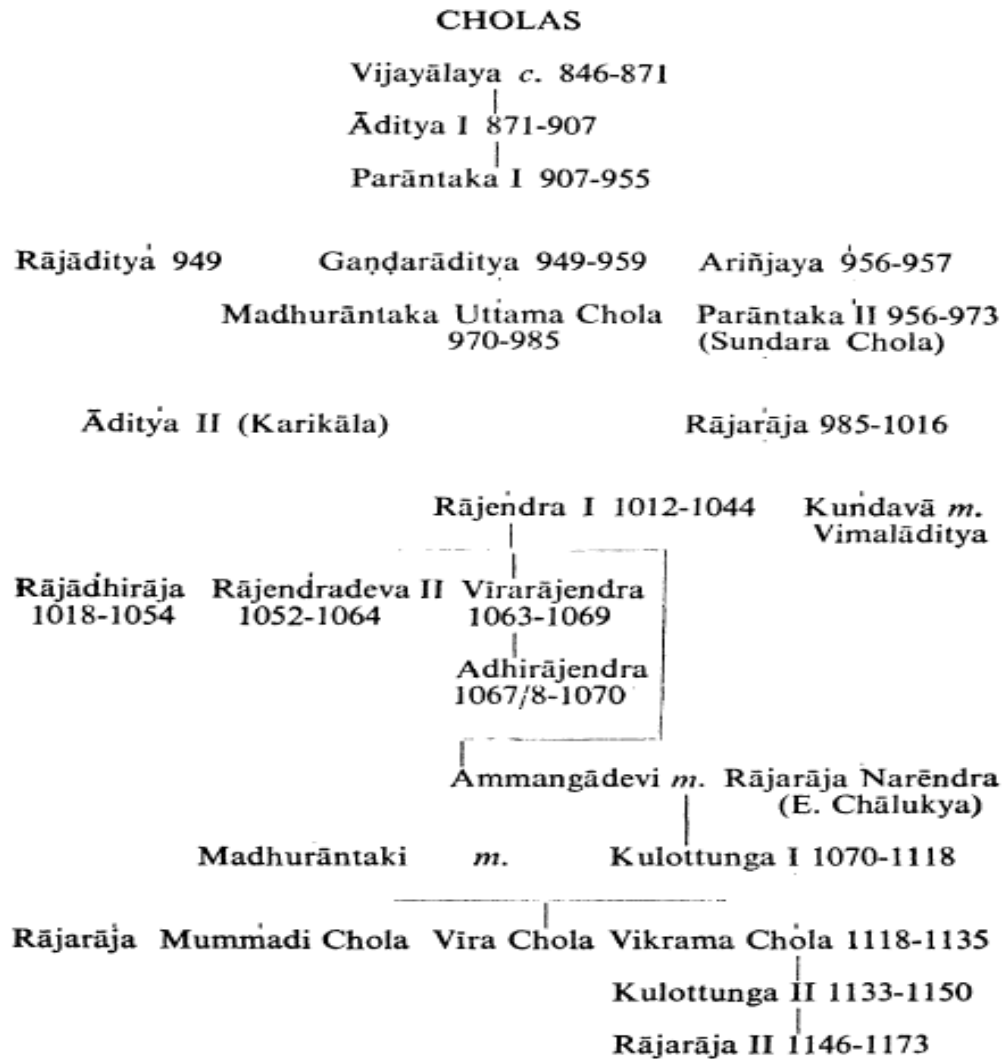
Source: Sastri, K.A.N., *The Cholas*, 1955.

The Imperial Chola Empire

The Chola rule post-interregnum is divided into four periods: early (850–985), middle (986–1070), later-1 (1071–1178), and later-2 (1179–1279), marking their rise, imperial expansion, struggle for power, and decline respectively. For nearly 400 years, the Cholas controlled Southern India, including Tamil Nadu, southern Karnataka, and Andhra. Mahalakshmi notes that by the late 10th and early 11th centuries, the Chola Empire extended to Andhra, Mysore, and Sri Lanka, as well as islands like the Lakshadweep and Maldives. The early Chola period began with Vijayalaya's capture of Tanjavur, marking a turning point. His son, Aditya I, further established Chola power by defeating the Pallavas and annexing Tondaimandalam. Aditya I's conquests, including Kongu, expanded Chola territory rapidly, with Parantaka I extending it up to Kanyakumari and Nellore.²² Under Parantaka I, the Pallava and Pandya powers were weakened, although the Cholas suffered defeats by the Rashtrakutas. The period from 955-985

CE saw a decline in Chola power, with the kingdom reduced to a small principality. The Chola Empire began its resurgence with Rajaraja Chola I in 985 CE. Under his rule, the Cholas transformed from a small state into a powerful empire, rich in resources, with a strong army and navy, and a centralized administration.²³

Figure 4: The Chola line (Vijayalaya to Rajaraja II)



Source: Sastri, K.A.N. *A History of South India: From Prehistorical Times to the Fall of Vijayanagar*. London: Oxford University Press, 1958.

Rajaraja Chola I (985-1016 CE)

The Chola dynasty entered a period of grandeur with the accession of Rajaraja I, also known as Rajakesari Arulmozhivarman. Rajaraja's leadership laid the foundation for the empire's expansion under his son, Rajendra I. Rajaraja was recognized for his exceptional intellectual

ability and statecraft, focusing on both minute details and grand ambitions according to Sastri. His military conquests were notable, particularly his campaigns against the allied southern kingdoms of the Pandyas, Cheras, and the Sinhalese, which led to significant territorial gains.

Rajaraja's southern campaign resulted in the conquest of Ceylon, with the destruction of Anuradhapura, which had been Sri Lanka's capital for over a millennium. The Cholas made Polonnaruwa their base and ruled Sri Lanka for over seventy years, overseeing its integration into the Chola Empire. This conquest marked the end of the Sinhalese kingdom's dominance in the region.²⁴ Additionally, Rajaraja extended Chola control to the Maldives, marking a significant naval achievement.

Chola governance was marked by a highly structured administration, with territories organized into units called nadu. These served both as agricultural and administrative systems, with guilds like Periyannadu supporting economic and trade activities. The Chola kings, supported by Brahmins, governed through a combination of military strength, economic power, and spiritual legitimacy, symbolized by the Rajarajesvara Temple, which reinforced the king's authority and centralized power.

The Cholas achieved their expansion not only through military conquest but also by maintaining a strategic system of exchange with local chieftains. This network helped consolidate power over Tamil lands while incorporating local rulers into the Chola sphere through marriage alliances and religious patronage. Additionally, Chola maritime trade with regions like the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and China contributed to the empire's wealth, supporting its military and economic strategies.²⁵

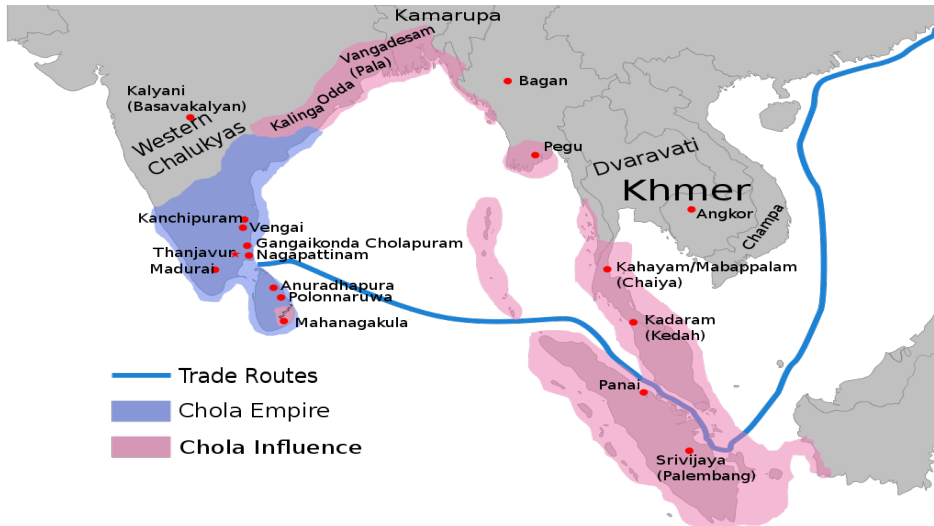
Rajendra Chola I (1012-1044)

Towards the end of Rajaraja's reign, he appointed his son, Rajendra Chola I, as Yuvaraja in 1012. Rajendra inherited an empire extending across modern Chennai, Andhra, parts of Mysore, and Ceylon, supported by a strong naval force that protected trade routes with Southeast Asia and China (See Figure 4). Rajendra's conquests, including the full annexation of Ceylon, solidified Chola control over the region. His military success earned him the title "Gangaikondan" after defeating kingdoms from Andhra to Orissa, though this was more a symbolic conquest rather than a lasting territorial control.

Rajendra's naval expedition against Srivijaya, while unprecedented in India's history, remains debated in terms of its motivations. It is suggested that it could have been driven by trade rivalry or an ambition to assert Chola supremacy over the Straits of Malacca.²⁶ Srivijaya's interference in trade routes may have prompted Rajendra's raid, with some scholars proposing that the Chola empire sought to safeguard its trade interests.²⁷

Southeast Asian powers like Angkor and Srivijaya interacted diplomatically with the Cholas, but competition in the Bay of Bengal grew, culminating in Rajendra's naval raid in 1025, which disrupted the region's balance. The Cholas' expansion beyond South India reflected the rise of regional powers like the Fatimids, Song China, and Srivijaya, influencing the maritime trade network and political dynamics in the Indian Ocean.²⁸

Figure 5: Map showing the extent of the Chola empire during Rajendra Chola I (c. 1030 CE)



Source: Sastri, K.A.N. *The Cholas*. 1955. (*Rajendra map new* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Rajendra_map_new.png (date accessed 18 January 2025))

Tansen Sen explains that after the first Chola-Srivijayan military confrontation in 1017, a more extensive raid occurred in 1025, followed by a third offensive in the 1070s. Contrary to Sastri, Sen argues that Chinese records suggest Chola-Srivijaya relations before 1025 were not as friendly. Srivijayan representatives may have misinformed the Song court, claiming the Cholas were subjugated by Srivijaya before the Chola's first diplomatic mission to China in 1015. This led the Song to view the Cholas as a militarily weak vassal state, limiting their traders' access to Chinese markets.

Sen suggests that Tamil traders and Chola officials, seeking direct access to Chinese markets, likely recognized Srivijaya's role in obstructing these ambitions. The Srivijayans, perceiving a Chola entry into the South China Sea as a threat, disrupted conditions for favorable trading terms for South Indian merchants, making Chola raids on Srivijayan ports in 1017 and 1025 inevitable.²⁹

Kulke notes that, after their naval expeditions, the Cholas made only one more mission to China in 1033. Despite their success, the Cholas did not seek permanent political control. However, Rajendra's naval victories led to the Cholas being recognized as South Indian foreigners in Javanese inscriptions, replacing previous mentions of Kalingas with the Colikas by 1053.³⁰

What makes the Kural a relevant tool to analyse Chola statecraft? Two main reasons, i.e., 1) Existing insights and research from Sastri (1955) and 2) The Kural's indirect mentions of a maritime empire/thalassocracy make the Kural a relevant tool to analyse Chola statecraft.

Insights from Sastri (1955)

Sastri asserted that Tiruvalluvar's Tirukkural provides valuable insights into Tamil monarchy, particularly Chola statecraft. He dated the Kural to the early or middle Sangam period (1st century BCE to 1st century CE), predating the Imperial Cholas of the 9th century CE but possibly postdating early Chola rulers like Karikalan. Sastri emphasized Kural 955 on "Lineage or Kudimai" and Parimelazhagar's 13th-century commentary as references to the Cholas and

the Muvendar. Valluvar's detailed knowledge of governance suggests he was closely linked to power circles, possibly a minister. Sastri also connected kural 552 to Chola governance, highlighting their strongly guarded treasury at Kumbakonam.

The Kural's mentions of a maritime empire/thalassocracy

The Tirukkural hints at the existence of naval arrangements under a monarch, potentially alluding to the Chola empire. Book III's references to a loved one at sea suggest organized maritime forces. Scholars like Sakhuja and Sakhuja³¹ have debated whether the Chola state engaged directly in mercantile activities alongside its military expeditions. Sastri emphasized the Cholas' extensive empire under Rajaraja, supported by a powerful army and navy, making the Kural a pertinent text to analyze their statecraft.

Results and discussion

The previous sections identified the key adhigarams and kurals and this serves as important material for this section which aims to assess the major and aforementioned events in Chola statecraft using the Kural as a tool for analysis.

The Srivijaya expedition

Kulke notes that Rajendra's overseas expedition against Srivijaya was an unprecedented event in India's history and its otherwise peaceful relations with the states of Southeast Asia. The reasons for this naval expedition are still questionable as the sources are silent about its exact causes. The previous sections also describe how the Cholas during Rajendra's reign saw its relations with Srivijaya quickly sour. This is particularly noted with how throughout the eleventh and twelfth centuries, it remained Srivijaya's major diplomatic aim to lower the Cholas in China's³² esteem.

During the period of Rajendra's reign, Angkor, Mainland Southeast Asia's major power, also entered into a kind of ritual diplomacy with the Cholas where it was also likely that Angkor had entered troubled waters with its penetration into Srivijaya's sphere of influence on the Malay Peninsula.³³ As mentioned, in eleventh-century Angkor there still existed an awareness of a possible threat from Srivijaya. The Cholas, too, meanwhile had become rivals of Srivijaya and thus potential allies of Angkor.³⁴

In fact, Hall suggests that the reasons for the Chola's invasion of Srivijaya were probably motivated by geopolitics and diplomatic relations. King Suryavarman I of the Khmer Empire (Angkor) requested aid from Rajendra Chola I of the Chola dynasty against Tambralinga kingdom which was said to be within the sphere of influence of Srivijaya.³⁵ After learning of Suryavarman's alliance with Rajendra Chola, the Tambralinga kingdom requested aid from the Srivijaya king, Sangrama Vijayatungavarman. This alliance also had religious nuance, since both Chola and Khmer empires were Hindu Shaivite, while Tambralinga and Srivijaya were Mahayana Buddhist.³⁶ This eventually led to the Chola Empire coming into conflict with the Srivijaya Empire. The conflict ended with a victory for the Chola and heavy losses for Srivijaya and the capture of Sangramavijayottungavarman in the Chola expedition in 1025.

Sastri notes that the King of Kambhoja (Angkor) had friendly relations with the Chola kingdom, well attested during the reign of Kulottunga I (1070-1118) but began much before Kulottunga's reign – coinciding with Rajendra's time.³⁷

The Kural would explain Chola's Srivijaya expedition in 1017 through its Adhigaram 68 – On Mode of Action, kural 679,

**Friends are a wealth, as the saying goes
But a greater wealth are foes of foes**

Meaning: One should rather hasten to secure the alliance of the foes (of one's foes) than perform good offices to one's friends.

A modern-day, simple explanation of this Kural is “the enemy of your enemy is your friend”. In that sense, Rajendra's expedition can be interpreted as a direct answer to Angkor's call for help to deal with Srivijaya's assertion.

Sen explains that the Srivijayans were the main informants about the southern Asia region for Song scribes. This might explain why Chinese works fail to mention the Chola raids on the Srivijayan ports, and the Song officials, until at least the early twelfth century, insisted that the Chola kingdom was a vassal state of the Srivijayans. Sen notes that a direct commercial relationship between the Cholas and the Chinese would have affected the commercial interests of the Srivijayans. Srivijaya hence seems to have taken prudent steps to prevent the establishment of direct Chola-Chinese trading relations.³⁸ Sen's insights substantiate as to why the Cholas so readily went to the aid of Angkor, seeing how Chola-Srivijaya relations were already turbulent³⁹. Adhigaram 46, 82 and 83 and kurals 460, 811 and 829, in particular, can also partially explain the Srivijaya expedition in that sense,

**Good companions, we know, are a great help in life
But bad company, take it from me, is impossible to survive!**

Meaning: There is no greater help than the company of the good; there is no greater source of sorrow than the company of the wicked.

**Evil men with honeyed words to win friendship's hand attempt
Does one give that evil favour? No! One treats it with contempt**

Meaning: The decrease of friendship with those who look as if they would eat you up (through excess of love) while they are really destitute of goodness is far better than its increase.

**Those who smile and smile and then beguile
Should receive at your hands rejection's fatal projectile**

Meaning: It is the duty of kings to affect great love but make it die (inwardly); as regard those foes who shew them great friendship but despise them (in their heart)

The Kural would also explain Rajendra's timely 'assistance' to Angkor and King Suryavarman I who already presented a meaningful, royal gift to Rajendra through its entire adhigaram 11 – Gratitude, which is incidentally part of Book I or *Arattupaal* on virtue. Kural 102 talks about how a favour or help conferred in a time of need despite being small, value-wise is much larger than the world. Kural 107 states that the wise will remember to have

gratitude when one has extended help in a time of need. Kural 110 underlines how remembering gratitude is paramount. The Kural's concept of gratitude in Chola-Angkor relations reveals a power differential in the act of showing gratitude. This contextualisation of adhigaram 11 also reveals the Kural's underlying concepts of bandwagoning and patronage. Chola-Angkor relations in the context of Srivijaya, through the Kural's explanatory power can be seen as the Cholas choosing to bring Angkor into its sphere of influence knowing Angkor will then be bound by indebtedness hereafter. This is further expounded by Adhigaram 23 – Giving, kural 221 which states,

What's given to the needy is given from one's giving purse

What's 'given' otherwise is commerce

Meaning: To give to the destitute is true charity. All other gifts have the nature of (what is done for) a measured return.

Therefore, adhigarams 11 and 23 from Book I can sufficiently explain the Cholas decision to respond to Angkor's request for aid. Kural 221 in particular makes it clear that any aid given to the "non-destitute" is commerce which warrants a measured return – indicating the 'politics of gratitude'⁴⁰ and Angkor's move into the Cholas sphere of influence because of this aid. In fact, it is noteworthy that Angkor was a major ally and trading partner and helped the Cholas stretch their networks as far as Song China.⁴¹

Rajendra's reign saw the rise of "emporia," a system of trade focused on exporting goods based on demand. By dominating the Strait of Malacca and other key coastal areas, the Cholas established lucrative trade networks, which strengthened their military and expanded their reach. With Angkor as a key ally, these networks extended to Song China, incorporating Chinese vessels into the Chola navy, and westward to regions like Arabia, North Africa, Anatolia, and Turkic lands.⁴²

The Chola-Angkor relationship was therefore a mutually beneficial one. As we recall, Kural 381 underlined that a State also required "friends" or alliances – in a more strategic sense. Adhigaram 79 also explains in detail why allies are important to the State. It must be noted that the Cholas, unlike the Pandyas and Cheras did not have enduring alliances during the Imperial period, they were all either dubious (like Srivijaya during Rajendra's reign) or feudatory and vassal relationships. The Angkor relationship was the closest to an alliance which was borne from "giving" and "gratitude" and later developed into a more economic and "political" relationship.

Chola Relations with the Song Dynasty

Kulke highlights China's centrality in Southeast Asian politics and trade, with states regularly sending tributary missions to the Chinese imperial court. The Song dynasty's reunification and the rise of the Fatimids and Cholas marked a new maritime era. The Cholas initiated diplomatic missions to China, with the first in 1015, a significant success despite Srivijaya's earlier misinformation to the Song court portraying the Cholas as its vassals.⁴³ By 1020, the Cholas had sent another mission, and their final recorded embassy was in 1033 after their naval victory over Srivijaya.

The Cholas refrained from asserting permanent political control in Southeast Asia, possibly to avoid disrupting the Sino-centric tributary system, which legitimized regional

leaders, enabled trade, and mediated disputes.⁴⁴ Rajendra likely prioritized friendly ties with the Song dynasty over territorial ambitions, as Southeast Asian states relied on Chinese recognition for survival and dominance.

Anderson notes that the Cholas practiced "commercial diplomacy," seeking to replace Srivijaya as China's key maritime partner. Rajendra's military campaigns, including against Srivijaya, aimed to control the strategic Malacca Straits and establish Chola influence within China's tributary network. Despite diplomatic rivalry, Chola envoys sought to emphasize their veneration of the Song court to secure economic ties, aligning their ambitions with China's dominant regional order.⁴⁵

Hence, the Kural could explain the Cholas relations with the Song dynasty through adhigaram 45 – Securing the Friendship of Great Men and adhigaram 90 – On not offending the great.

Chola Expansionism and Conquests

Rajaraja swiftly expanded Chola dominance (985–1025), conquering the Pandyas, Western and Eastern Chalukyas, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. From their Kaveri delta base, the Cholas subdued South India, extended into central India, and secured key maritime centers. Rajendra, his successor, culminated this expansion with campaigns to Bengal and Southeast Asia. The Cholas strategically conquered South India's coastal regions, secured vital Indian Ocean trade hubs like Sri Lanka and the Maldives, defeated eastern coast rivals, and finally targeted Srivijaya, controlling Southeast Asia's crucial trade routes.⁴⁶

Chola expansionism in southern India and South and Southeast Asia here can be interpreted as the desire to graduate to being a major state. A relatively small state at his accession, the Chola kingdom grew under Rajaraja into an extensive and well-knit empire. adhigaram 68 – On Mode of Action, kural 680 can explain this strategic choice,

‘Our king defeated? No way,’ they say

‘We’d rather he sues for peace’

Knowing this, at close of day

The king bites his lip, bends his head and says to his foe, ‘Please!’

Meaning: Ministers of small states, afraid of their people being frightened, will yield to and acknowledge their superior foes, if the latter offer them a chance of reconciliation.

This can be interpreted as the Cholas reluctance of being put in a situation where it is small and powerless, having to yield to bigger powers. Major powers in this time period in particular are easily distinguished from small states through geographical extent and control of maritime routes and centres. The Kural explains this as well through adhigaram 50 – On the Choice of (a suitable) Place / Knowing the place, kural 497

Might matters as do guts but what matters most

Is the right plan to use on mountain, forest, coast

Meaning: You will need no other aid than fearlessness, if you thoroughly reflect (on what you are to do) and select (a suitable) place for your operations.

The Chola State and Governance

During the Chola period, peasant localities were organized into units called *nadu*, while *nagarams*, due to their commercial significance and trade tax revenues, were closely monitored by the state. The Rajarajesvara Temple symbolized both worship and royal institutional power. Despite the king's authority, he was bound by laws interpreted by brahmans, and the people could overthrow him if he violated these laws. The Cholas maintained a secure treasury at Kumbakonam, a council of ministers, and a professional army, alongside formidable naval power for distant conquests.⁴⁷ Ancient Chola society expected little more than general security from the government.⁴⁸

Valluvar's Adhigaram 39, 55, 66, 74 and 77 can explain the characteristics of the Chola state – specifically on the insights that the King though supremely important for a state is not above the law and can be questioned by his subjects if he does not uphold moral principles and govern with justice and fairness. We see here the significance of morality and governance in the Chola state.

The Cholas' Ceylon Conquest

The southern kingdoms of Pandya, Kerala (Chera), and Simhala were allied against the Cholas, a coalition still active during Rajaraja I's reign. Rajaraja's invasion of Ceylon resulted in the destruction of Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka's capital for over 1,000 years, and the Cholas easily captured both Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa. With the Cholas defeating other South Indian kingdoms, the Sinhalese lost their old allies, the Pandyas and Cheras. The Cholas ransacked Anuradhapura, making Polonnaruwa their administrative center. This ended the 1,500-year-old kingdom of Anuradhapura, with King Mahinda captured around 1012 and deported to Tanjore, integrating Sri Lanka into the Chola Empire.⁴⁹

The Chola conquest and occupation of Anuradhapura Kingdom is considered an ensuing conflict between Chola and Sinhalese kings after the initial conflict between Chola and the Pandya-Sinhalese alliance during conquest of the Pandya Kingdom by Chola king Parantaka I.⁵⁰ A Kuralist view of this conquest can be derived from kural 861,

When your foe stands taller, retreat

When of lesser size, don't dissemble—defeat!

Meaning: Avoid offering resistance to the strong; (but) never fail to cherish enmity towards the weak.

Here, it is clear that Ceylon no longer could rely on their traditional allies, hence demobilising them to a "weak state". The Chola's conquest can be seen as a natural, opportunist one, seeing how the conflict with Ceylon has been ensuing for decades in the past.

The selection of Polonnaruwa as the capital of Sri Lanka made it easy for the Cholas to control the eastern coast of the island. This must have been an advantage for them in their expedition towards Srivijaya, from both the military and economic perspectives. Sri Lanka was under Chola power for over seventy years. The Kural can explain this geostrategic choice through again, kural 497.

The Chola Envoy

The Cholas sent their first embassy to the Chinese court in 1015 after a stopover in Srivijaya for several months. As this happened only ten years before the swift attack of the Chola navy on the ports of Srivijaya, the assumption is that South Indian envoys had done excellent intelligence work in view of a possible future conflict with Srivijaya⁵¹. It is also noteworthy that merchant guilds in the Chola period controlled long-distance trade.⁵² In fact, the Chola imperial expansion was planned according to the advice of such merchants. It was a merchant who told Rajaraja about the weakness of Sri Lanka's (Ceylon) king and suggested a military intervention. The long and efficient rule of the Cholas, hence, is also owed to auxiliary, supporting members of the State. The Kural would explain this through kural 690,

**Who conveys his king's message with verve and with vim
Should know—and not mind—that death will therefore stalk him**

Meaning: He is the ambassador who fearlessly seeks his sovereign's good though it should cost him his life (to deliver his message).

The Chola Army

The Chola army, known for its professionalism, included regiments of cavalry, elephant-mounted archers, infantry, and swordsmen, with around 60,000 elephants and up to 900,000 soldiers.⁵³ One elite regiment, Rajaraja-terinda-vil, was named for its high training and fitness, focusing on archery. The army was led by officers called nayakans, with training centers (senamukham) and bazaars for supplies.⁵⁴ Stationed in kadagams (garrisons) across Chola territory, the army reached its peak in the 11th century.⁵⁵ The Chola kings' professional army featured cavalry, elephant corps, infantry, bowmen, and swordsmen.⁵⁶ A Chinese author in 1178 described their 60,000 war elephants, which carried soldiers shooting arrows and wielding spears in close combat. The Cholas also innovated with naval power, using merchant vessels as warships when needed.

The Kural can explain this aspect of Chola statecraft with kural 761,

**In all its arms complete
In strength of heart replete
Of proud and stately bearing
Of the wounds of war unfearing
In conquest daring, quick and bold
Such an army, for the king, outweighs its weight in gold**

Meaning: The army which is complete in (its) parts and conquers without fear of wounds is the chief wealth of the king.

We must recall that Valluvar's State gave primary importance to the army (kural 385) also indicating that an army was necessary as both a protective feature of the State and the indication of being a "major power".

Chola Planning and Strategy

The earliest point at which one can speak about intense Chola "planning" per se (at least during the Imperial Chola period) is their rise from obscurity after several centuries in "darkness" and

“suspended animation”, “bending low before every storm that passed over them and bided their time”. Vijayalaya’s capture of Tanjavur from the Muttaraiyar chieftains is perhaps the most important turning point of a subsequently magnificent, and long rule by the Cholas. Vijayalaya’s actions were indicative of shrewd and opportunist planning, intelligent reasoning, and fore vision. Vijayalaya’s son and successor, Aditya I overthrew even his ally, the Pallavas in the Sri Purambiyam battle which further reinstated the Cholas as a re-emergent force.

During Rajendra’s reign centuries later, in 1022/23 the Cholas accomplished their grand design by their victorious march through Kalinga up to the Ganges, eliminating all possible rivals on the eastern coast of the subcontinent and finally undertaking their great naval expedition against Srivijaya in 1025. This demonstrated careful and strategic planning before undertaking such an unprecedented act against a former ally.

In that context, the previous sections which captures the major conquests and expeditions of Rajaraja I and Rajendra can collectively constitute a mostly consistent pattern of strategic planning. This can be rationalised through Adhigarams 47, 48, 49 and 50.

Conclusion and scope for further studies

This study highlights the profound relevance of the Tirukkural as an enduring framework for understanding Chola statecraft and diplomacy, particularly during the Imperial Chola Empire. By analyzing Chola actions through the lens of the Kural, we gain valuable insights into the moral and strategic imperatives that guided their foreign policy, military expansion, and governance. The Tirukkural’s timeless wisdom, encapsulating principles of justice, gratitude, diplomacy, and governance, serves as a powerful analytical tool to decode the Cholas’ complex interactions with Southeast Asia, especially in the context of their relationships with Srivijaya, Angkor, and the Song dynasty. By bringing together historical events with the Tirukkural’s ethical precepts, this work contributes a fresh perspective on Chola statecraft, offering a nuanced understanding of the empire’s diplomatic and military strategies while reaffirming the timeless applicability of ancient wisdom in statecraft.

Follow-up research could be undertaken by employing a Kuralist perspective to understand contemporary international relations and, to refine current discernments of the Kural. Working on the Kural has reintroduced 35 other ancient Tamil texts mentioned in passing in previous chapters (*Patinēṇmēlkaṇakku* and *Patinēṇkīlkaṇakku*), a number of which can be explored in a manner similar to what has been done in this research. Some examples are the *Purananuru* and *Patirruppattu*. The former is a collection of 400 heroic poems about kings, wars and public life, of these, 138 praise 43 kings; the latter is a classical Tamil poetic work and one of the Eight Anthologies (*Ettuthokai*) in Sangam literature. A panegyric collection, it contains puram (war and public life) poems. Alternatively, a more extensive relative comparison of the Kural and other texts can also be carried out as future research.

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Biodata

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Notes

¹ Sakhuja, V., and S. Sakhuja, "Rajendra Chola I's Expedition to Southeast Asia: A Nautical Perspective," In Hermann Kulke et al. (ed.), *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa: Reflections on the Chola Naval Expeditions to Southeast Asia*, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2009. It is important to note that the navy of the Cholas has attracted a lot of scholarly attention, and while the military expeditions are not disputed, the possibility that the state was itself engaged in mercantile activities has also been raised. Sastri, K.A.N, *The Colas*, 1958. The Chola kingdom under Rajaraja, as mentioned earlier, grew into an extensive and well-knit empire with a powerful standing army and navy.

² Sastri, K.A.N, *The Colas*, 1955. The Cholas were a thalassocratic empire of India and one of the longest-ruling dynasties in world history. According to Sastri, the history of the Cholas falls into four divisions: the age of Sangam literature, the interval between the close of the Sangam age and the rise of the Vijayalaya line, the Vijayalaya line which came to prominence in the 9th century CE and lastly the Chalukya-Chola line of Kulottunga I and his successors from the third quarter of the 11th century to about the middle of the 13th.

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¹³ Project Madurai is an open and voluntary initiative to collect and publish free electronic editions of ancient Tamil literary classics. This means either typing-in or scanning old books and archiving the text in one of the most readily accessible formats ("E-TEXTS") for use on all popular computer platforms. All e-texts will be distributed in both web/html and PDF formats. Distributed through the World Wide Web servers, anyone located anywhere

may download a copy for personal use or read what we publish on the internet, free of charge.
<http://www.projectmadurai.org>

¹⁴ Sastri, K.A.N., *The Colas*, 1955

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Mahalakshmi, R., "Chola (Cola) Empire," *The Encyclopedia of Empire*, 2016.

¹⁷ The Periya purāṇam, that is, the great purana or epic, sometimes called Tiruttontarupuranam ("Tiru-Thondar-Puranam", the Purana of the Holy Devotees), is a Tamil poetic account depicting the lives of the sixty-three Nayanars, the canonical poets of Tamil Shaivism. It was compiled during the 12th century by Sekkilhar.

¹⁸ The Kaveri (also known as Cauvery) is one of the major Indian rivers flowing through the states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. The Kaveri River rises at Talakaveri in the Brahmagiri range in the Western Ghats, Kodagu district of the state of Karnataka, at an elevation of 1,341 m above mean sea level and flows for about 800 km before its outfall into the Bay of Bengal. It reaches the sea in Poompuhar in Mayiladuthurai district. It is the third largest river – after Godavari and Krishna – in southern India, and the largest in the State of Tamil Nadu, which, on its course, bisects the state into north and south. In ancient Tamil literature, the river was also called Ponni (the golden maid, in reference to the fine silt it deposits).

¹⁹ Kallanai (also known as the Grand Anicut) is an ancient dam built by Karikala of Chola dynasty. It is built (in running water) across the Kaveri river flowing from Tiruchirapalli District to Thanjavur district, Tamil Nadu, India. The dam located in Thanjavur district. It is the fourth oldest water diversion or water-regulator structures in the world and the oldest in India that is still in use.

²⁰ Kallanai (also known as the Grand Anicut) is an ancient dam built by Karikala of Chola dynasty. It is built (in running water) across the Kaveri river flowing from Tiruchirapalli District to Thanjavur district, Tamil Nadu, India. The dam located in Thanjavur district. It is the fourth oldest water diversion or water-regulator structures in the world and the oldest in India that is still in use.

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²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Mahalakshmi, R., "Chola (Cola) Empire," *The Encyclopedia of Empire*, 2016.

³² China was considered the major power in prevailing regional order at the time (Sen, 2003, as cited in Kulke, 2009)

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³⁶ Coedès, G., *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, Honolulu: 1968.

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³⁸ The Chola dynasty maintained vibrant trade relations with China, particularly during the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE). Chola merchants exported high-demand commodities such as fine cotton textiles, precious stones, ivory, spices—especially pepper—and aromatic products. In return, they imported luxury goods from China, including silk fabrics, porcelain ware, lacquerware, and exotic metals. Diplomatic missions from the Chola kingdom, recorded in the Song Shi, reached the Chinese court in 1015 and 1077 CE, bringing with them these valuable goods. As Tansen Sen notes, the luxury products presented by Chola envoys "matched the Song dynasty's growing appetite for exotic commodities from the southern seas." Furthermore, Paul Wheatley

highlights that "cotton textiles, pepper, ivory, and aromatic resins formed the core of the merchandise that passed from Coromandel to the Song dynasty ports." The Cholas' control over the Bay of Bengal trade routes and their strategic campaigns, notably the Kadaram expedition, further secured direct access to Southeast Asia and China, consolidating their position as a major maritime power in the Indian Ocean world. See Tansen Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations, 600–1400* (University of Hawaii Press, 2003), 143 and Paul Wheatley, *The Golden Khersonese: Studies in the Historical Geography of the Malay Peninsula before A.D. 1500*, Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1961, p. 39.

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⁴⁰ Phrase adapted from Ricardo, 2020.

⁴¹ Meenakshisundararajan, A., "Rajendra Chola's Naval Expedition and the Chola Trade with Southeast and East Asia," In *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa: Reflections on the Chola Naval Expeditions to Southeast Asia*, edited by H. Kulke, K. Kesavapany, and V. Sakhuja, 1–19, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2009

⁴² Ibid. One of the most enduring legacies of Rajendra's reign was the emergence of new forms of trade. Thanks partly to his domination of the Strait of Malacca and several other coastal areas, a commercial system called "emporium" emerged, which refers to exporting goods according to their demand. This new system made trade within the Empire considerably more profitable, creating a cyclic effect where the highly lucrative trade networks engendered a larger and more powerful military, facilitating the further widening of those networks. In this, the Khmer Empire (Angkor) was a major ally and trading partner and helped the Cholas stretch their networks as far as Song China. This link allowed Rajendra to incorporate Chinese vessels into the Chola military. These massive networks also extended west, where the Cholas engaged in the spice trade with Arabia, north Africa, Anatolia, and Turkic.

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⁵⁰ Wijetunga, M.K., *The Rise and Decline of Chola Power in Ceylon*, 1962.

⁵¹ Kulke, 2009.

⁵² During the Chola period, merchant guilds like Manigramam and Ayyavole played a critical role in controlling long-distance trade across the Indian Ocean. These guilds, as detailed by K.V. Ramesh in his study of Tamil inscriptions, were deeply involved in managing maritime trade routes, particularly in the Chola ports of Nagapattinam and Kedah, and facilitated trade between India, Southeast Asia, and China (Ramesh, 1992). Tansen Sen further highlights the Manigramam guild's influence, noting that it controlled trade networks stretching from the Coromandel Coast to China and Southeast Asia, facilitating the flow of textiles, spices, and precious stones (Sen, 2003, p. 144). Additionally, K.A. Nilakanta Sastri emphasizes the Ayyavole guild's prominent role in maintaining these connections and ensuring the Chola Empire's dominance over trade in the region (Sastri, 1955, p. 260). Paul Wheatley also discusses how these guilds ensured the stability of maritime trade across the Bay of Bengal, with guilds like Ayyavole securing Chola influence in both Southeast Asia and China (Wheatley, 1961, p. 39). This network was vital to the Chola economy and helped establish their maritime power across the Indian Ocean, ensuring the regular flow of goods such as cotton, pepper, and ivory. Iyengar, 1939, p. 192.

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