



# Maritime Power, Commerce, and Temple Networks in the Chola Naval Expansion, 900-1200 CE

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## Abstract

This article examines the relationship between naval power, long-distance commerce, and temple institutional networks in the overseas expansion of the imperial Chola dynasty between the reign of Rajaraja I (r. 985-1014) and the decline of Chola maritime dominance in the late twelfth century. Drawing on Tamil copper-plate inscriptions, the Tanjore temple records, Chinese Song dynasty annals, and the archaeological evidence from port sites across the Bay of Bengal littoral, as well as the analytical frameworks developed by K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, Kenneth Hall, and Hermann Kulke, the study argues that Chola naval expansion was not a form of territorial imperialism oriented toward conquest and administrative incorporation but a commercially motivated projection of political authority designed to secure, regulate, and tax the maritime trade circuits of the Bay of Bengal and the Straits of Malacca. The article traces three interlocking dimensions of this expansion: the organization of the Chola naval apparatus and its relationship to the merchant guild networks of the Tamil coast, the political economy of the 1025 CE raid on Srivijaya and its consequences for the restructuring of Bay of Bengal commerce, and the role of South Indian temple institutions as nodes of commercial credit, cultural diplomacy, and diaspora community organization across the Southeast Asian trading world. The Chola case demonstrates that pre-modern Indian Ocean imperialism operated through mechanisms of commercial dominance and ritual prestige rather than through territorial occupation, and that the temple institution functioned as the principal organizational vehicle through which Tamil commercial and cultural influence was projected and sustained across maritime Southeast Asia. The gradual contraction of Chola maritime power after 1150, driven by the rise of competing commercial polities in Southeast Asia and the internal agrarian pressures generated by the costs of continuous military campaigning, serves as the article's terminus and provides a framework for understanding the structural limits of commercially motivated maritime imperialism in the pre-modern Indian Ocean world.

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**Keywords:** - Chola Dynasty, Maritime Expansion, Srivijaya, Bay of Bengal, Temple Networks, Indian Ocean Trade, Tamil Merchant Guilds

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## Introduction

The imperial Chola dynasty, which dominated peninsular India from its heartland in the Kaveri delta between the late ninth and early thirteenth centuries, presents the most instructive case in South Asian history for understanding the relationship between agrarian state power and maritime commercial expansion. Unlike the landlocked empires of north India whose political economies were organized around the extraction of agricultural surplus from the Gangetic plain, the Chola state combined a productive irrigated agrarian base in the Tamil country with systematic engagement in the maritime commercial world of the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. The result was a political formation that was simultaneously a territorial state, a naval power, and a commercial empire,

whose overseas activities cannot be adequately understood through the analytical frameworks developed for either the agrarian empires of the interior or the purely commercial city-states of the Southeast Asian coast.

The historiography of Chola maritime expansion has been shaped by a persistent debate between two interpretive positions. The older nationalist tradition, associated primarily with the work of K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, emphasized the military and political dimensions of Chola overseas activity, reading the 1025 CE raid on Srivijaya and the subsequent campaigns in Southeast Asia as expressions of imperial ambition comparable to the territorial conquests of the great land empires. The revisionist scholarship of the 1980s and 1990s, represented by Kenneth Hall's work on Southeast Asian commercial networks and Hermann Kulke's analysis of the ritual dimensions of Chola diplomacy, shifted the interpretive emphasis toward commerce and cultural exchange, arguing that the Chola overseas presence was primarily oriented toward securing trade routes rather than acquiring territory (Kulke 1993, 23-28). Neither position is fully adequate. The Chola maritime enterprise combined military coercion, commercial regulation, and cultural diplomacy in proportions that varied by context and period, and its institutional mechanisms cannot be reduced to any single analytical category.

This article develops three arguments in sequence. First, that the Chola naval apparatus was organizationally inseparable from the Tamil merchant guild networks whose commercial interests it served and protected, and that the distinction between state naval power and private commercial enterprise was less clear in practice than in theory. Second, that the 1025 raid on Srivijaya was primarily a commercially motivated intervention designed to restructure Bay of Bengal trade circuits in favor of Tamil commercial interests rather than a conventional military campaign aimed at territorial acquisition. Third, that the South Indian temple institution, transplanted across the Bay of Bengal through the patronage of Tamil diaspora merchants and the diplomatic initiatives of the Chola court, functioned as the principal organizational vehicle through which Tamil cultural and commercial influence was sustained in Southeast Asia long after the contraction of Chola military power.

## **The Chola Naval Apparatus and the Tamil Merchant Guild Networks**

The organizational foundation of Chola maritime power was the intersection between the state naval apparatus and the commercial infrastructure of the Tamil merchant guilds, above all the Ayyavole Five Hundred and the Manigramam, whose operations extended from the Tamil coast across the Bay of Bengal to the ports of Southeast Asia and the Persian Gulf. These guilds were not simply commercial organizations; they were quasi-political bodies with their own charters, military retinues, judicial authority over commercial disputes, and diplomatic relationships with rulers across the Indian Ocean world. The copper-plate inscriptions recording guild activities across Tamil Nadu and Southeast Asia constitute one of the richest epigraphic sources for medieval Indian commercial history, and their analysis by Meera Abraham and Kenneth Hall has established the organizational sophistication of the guild system in considerable detail (Hall 1980, 56-61).

The relationship between the Chola state and the merchant guilds was one of mutual dependence rather than simple subordination. The guilds required the naval protection that only the Chola state could provide against piracy and the military enforcement of favorable trading conditions at Southeast Asian ports. The Chola state required the commercial revenues, market intelligence, and logistical infrastructure that the guilds possessed and that no state bureaucracy could replicate. This interdependence is visible in the institutional arrangements through which Chola naval expeditions were organized: the major overseas campaigns, including the 1025 Srivijaya raid and the subsequent expeditions under Kulottunga I, were financed partly through state resources and partly through guild contributions, and their commercial objectives were negotiated between court officials and guild representatives whose interests in the outcomes were direct and material (Nilakanta Sastri 1955, 112-117).

The port infrastructure of the Tamil coast reflects this state-guild interdependence in its physical organization. Nagapattinam, the principal Chola maritime port, combined the facilities of a state naval base with the commercial infrastructure of a major entrepot: warehouses, ship-building yards, customs facilities, and the Buddhist monastery maintained by the Sailendra kings of Srivijaya as a mark of the diplomatic and commercial relationships that linked the Tamil coast to the Malay world. Ponnusamy's archaeological survey of the Nagapattinam foreshore has documented the layered commercial and military infrastructure of the port across the Chola period, establishing the co-location of state naval facilities and guild commercial infrastructure that the textual sources describe (Ponnusamy 1987, 78-83).

## **The 1025 Raid on Srivijaya and the Restructuring of Bay of Bengal Commerce**

The naval expedition launched by Rajendra Chola I against the Srivijayan thalassocracy in 1025 CE constitutes the most dramatic single event in the history of Chola maritime power and the most debated episode in the historiography of medieval Indian Ocean commerce. The Larger Leiden Plate inscription recording the campaign lists fourteen named polities in the Malay world, Sumatra, and the Thai-Malay peninsula as targets of

the expedition, a geographical range that implies a sustained naval campaign of several months involving a substantial fleet operating at considerable distances from its home bases on the Tamil coast. The inscription's framing of the campaign as a military conquest has led earlier historians to interpret it as an attempt at territorial acquisition, but the absence of any evidence for lasting Chola administrative presence in the conquered territories and the rapid reassertion of local political authority after the expedition suggests a different interpretation (Nilakanta Sastri 1955, 167-172).

The commercial interpretation of the 1025 raid, developed most systematically by Noboru Karashima and by the contributors to the volume on Nagapattinam and Suvarnabhumi edited by Nagaswamy, argues that the expedition was directed primarily at disrupting Srivijayan control over the Straits of Malacca and the Bay of Bengal transit trade, which had allowed the Srivijayan rulers to extract toll revenues from the commerce passing between China and India. By attacking the principal nodes of the Srivijayan commercial network simultaneously, Rajendra Chola aimed not to replace Srivijayan political authority with Chola administration but to break the monopolistic control that Srivijaya had exercised over Bay of Bengal trade circuits and to open those circuits to direct Tamil commercial participation on more favorable terms (Karashima 2002, 89-94).

The consequences of the 1025 raid for Bay of Bengal commerce are visible in the Chinese Song dynasty records, which document a significant increase in direct Tamil commercial contact with Chinese ports in the decades following the Srivijayan campaign. Before 1025, Tamil merchants trading with China had typically done so through Srivijayan intermediaries who controlled the Malacca Straits passage and extracted transit tolls from vessels passing through. After 1025, the epigraphic and Chinese textual evidence suggests a period of more direct Tamil engagement with Southeast Asian and Chinese commercial circuits, as the disruption of Srivijayan toll-collection infrastructure temporarily reduced the costs of long-distance maritime commerce for Tamil traders. Wade's analysis of the Chinese sources for Southeast Asian commercial history has documented this shift in commercial geography with considerable precision, establishing the chronological correlation between the Chola campaign and the restructuring of Bay of Bengal trade patterns (Wade 2009, 44-49).

## **Temple Networks, Diaspora Communities, and the Cultural Dimensions of Maritime Expansion**

The most durable institutional legacy of Chola maritime expansion was not its naval victories but the network of South Indian temple institutions established across the ports and commercial towns of maritime Southeast Asia through the patronage of Tamil diaspora merchants and the diplomatic initiatives of the Chola court. The transplantation of the South Indian temple form to Southeast Asian commercial centres served multiple simultaneous functions: it provided diaspora merchant communities with a ritual centre that reproduced the devotional practices of their home communities, it created a physical marker of Tamil cultural presence that communicated commercial reliability and social organization to local rulers and trading partners, and it established institutional nodes for the commercial credit, dispute resolution, and community governance functions that the merchant guilds required to operate effectively across long distances (Hall 1980, 134-139).

The Chola court's investment in overseas temple construction was not simply a response to diaspora merchant demand but an active instrument of diplomatic and commercial policy. The famous Tamil inscription from Lobu Tua in Sumatra, dated to 1088 CE and recording the activities of the Ayyavole Five Hundred guild at a Southeast Asian port, demonstrates the institutional integration of guild commercial activity and temple patronage in the overseas context: the guild's commercial rights and judicial authority were expressed through its relationship to the temple institution, whose physical presence provided the organizational anchor for guild activities across the entire Southeast Asian commercial network. Kulke's analysis of the ritual dimensions of Chola diplomacy has established that the Chola court systematically used temple endowments and the donation of sacred images as instruments of political relationship-building with Southeast Asian rulers, creating networks of ritual obligation that reinforced the commercial relationships the guilds were simultaneously constructing (Kulke 1993, 89-94).

The architectural evidence of Tamil temple construction across Southeast Asia, surveyed comprehensively by Pierre-Yves Manguin and the contributors to the volume on early interactions between South and Southeast Asia, reveals a pattern of spatial distribution that closely mirrors the commercial geography of Tamil maritime activity. Tamil temples are concentrated at the major entrepot ports of the Bay of Bengal littoral and the Malacca Straits, at points where Tamil merchants congregated in sufficient numbers and for sufficient duration to justify permanent institutional investment. Their architectural forms represent adaptations of the South Indian temple tradition to local building materials and climatic conditions, and their inscriptional records document the commercial activities of the communities that sustained them alongside the ritual activities for which they were ostensibly constructed (Manguin 2011, 112-117).

## Conclusion

The Chola naval expansion between 900 and 1200 CE was a commercially motivated projection of political and military authority that operated through mechanisms of trade route control, guild network protection, and ritual prestige construction rather than through territorial conquest and administrative incorporation. Its organizational foundation was the intersection between the Chola state naval apparatus and the Tamil merchant guild networks whose commercial interests defined the objectives of overseas military action. Its most consequential single episode, the 1025 raid on Srivijaya, was a commercially motivated intervention designed to restructure Bay of Bengal trade circuits rather than a conventional territorial campaign. Its most durable institutional legacy was the network of South Indian temple institutions established across maritime Southeast Asia that continued to anchor Tamil diaspora commercial communities long after the contraction of Chola naval power.

The Chola case contributes to the comparative history of pre-modern maritime imperialism by demonstrating that commercially motivated naval expansion could generate sophisticated institutional mechanisms of overseas presence that did not require territorial administration. The temple institution, the merchant guild, and the diplomatic endowment combined to create a form of maritime cultural imperialism that was both more flexible and more durable than territorial conquest, adapting to the political conditions of Southeast Asian host polities while maintaining the organizational coherence of the Tamil commercial diaspora across enormous geographical distances.

The contraction of Chola maritime power after 1150 reflects the structural limits of this model. Commercially motivated naval expansion required continuous investment in the military infrastructure of sea power that the Chola agrarian state could sustain only as long as the commercial returns justified the costs. When the rise of new commercial polities in Southeast Asia and the internal pressures of agrarian military expenditure eroded the cost-benefit calculus of maritime imperialism, the Chola state's overseas engagement contracted. The temple networks and guild institutions that commercial expansion had created, however, proved more resilient than the naval power that had established them, sustaining Tamil cultural and commercial presence in Southeast Asia for centuries after the last Chola fleet had returned to the Tamil coast.

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