



## The Cholas: Maritime Power and Temple Architecture

Manoj T R

H.O.D & Associate Professor, Department of History, Milad-E-Sherief Memorial College, Kayamkulam, Kerala, India.

---

### Article information

Received: 13<sup>th</sup> March 2026

Volume:2

Received in revised form: 10<sup>th</sup> April 2026

Issue: 2

Accepted: 7<sup>th</sup> May 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63090/JIHIC/3139.1710.0015>

Available online: 4<sup>th</sup> June 2026

---

### Abstract

This paper examines the Chola dynasty's emergence as the dominant maritime power in the Indian Ocean during the medieval period (9th-13th centuries CE) and their revolutionary contributions to South Indian temple architecture. Through analysis of inscriptional evidence, archaeological remains, and art historical sources, this study explores how the Cholas' naval supremacy facilitated extensive trade networks that generated the wealth necessary for their unprecedented temple-building program. The research demonstrates that Chola maritime expansion and architectural innovation were interconnected phenomena that reflected and reinforced the dynasty's political power, religious devotion, and cultural identity. The paper argues that the Cholas' integration of maritime commerce with monumental architecture created a distinctive model of medieval Indian statecraft that combined economic pragmatism with religious legitimacy, establishing cultural and political patterns that influenced South and Southeast Asian civilization for centuries.

---

**Keywords:** - Chola Dynasty, Maritime Power, Indian Ocean Trade, Temple Architecture, Brihadisvara Temple, Naval Expansion, Cultural Exchange, Imperial Statecraft, South India, Temple Economy

---

### Introduction

The Chola dynasty of South India represents one of the most remarkable examples of maritime empire-building in medieval world history. From their capitals at Thanjavur and later Gangaikonda Cholapuram, the Cholas established naval dominance over the Indian Ocean, created extensive trade networks reaching from Arabia to China, and simultaneously developed architectural traditions that produced some of India's most magnificent temples (Nilakanta Sastri 1955; Hall 1980). This dual achievement in maritime power and monumental architecture was not coincidental but represented a sophisticated integration of economic, political, and religious strategies (Champakalakshmi 1996).

The period of Chola greatness, spanning roughly from the 9th to the 13th centuries CE, witnessed the dynasty's expansion from a regional Tamil kingdom to a pan-Indian Ocean empire that exercised political control over territories from the Maldives to the Malay Peninsula. Simultaneously, the Cholas revolutionized South Indian temple architecture, creating monumental complexes that served as religious centers, economic hubs, and political symbols that proclaimed their imperial ambitions (Kulke and Rothermund 1998).

This paper examines the interconnected development of Chola maritime power and temple architecture, analyzing how naval supremacy generated the resources necessary for monumental construction while temple

complexes served as organizational centers for trade, administration, and religious activity. The study draws on extensive epigraphic evidence from Chola inscriptions, archaeological investigations of temple sites and port cities, and comparative analysis of Southeast Asian cultural influences.

## Theoretical Framework

This analysis employs theoretical frameworks from maritime history, art history, and political anthropology to understand the Cholas' distinctive integration of naval power and religious architecture. The concept of "thalassocracy" (sea-based empire) provides a framework for understanding how the Cholas organized political authority around control of maritime trade routes rather than territorial conquest alone.

The study utilizes Pierre Bourdieu's theories of symbolic capital to examine how monumental architecture functioned as both religious devotion and political propaganda, creating cultural legitimacy that supported economic and military expansion. Additionally, the analysis draws on world-systems theory to understand how Chola maritime networks integrated diverse regional economies into broader patterns of exchange and cultural transmission.

The theoretical framework also incorporates recent scholarship on "connected histories" that emphasizes how cultural developments in one region influenced and were influenced by broader networks of exchange and interaction. This approach helps explain how Chola architectural innovations both drew from and contributed to broader South and Southeast Asian cultural traditions (Thapar 2002).

## Historical Context and Early Development

The emergence of Chola maritime power built upon earlier Tamil traditions of seafaring and trade that extended back to the Sangam period (c. 300 BCE - 300 CE). Archaeological evidence from sites like Arikamedu and literary references in Sangam poetry confirm the antiquity of Tamil involvement in Indian Ocean commerce, providing the foundation for later Chola expansion (Ramaswamy 2007).

The revival of Chola power under Vijayalaya (c. 848-871 CE) occurred during a period of political fragmentation in South India following the decline of the Pallavas and the weakening of Pandya authority. The early Cholas skillfully exploited these conditions to expand their territorial base while developing the naval capabilities that would become their distinctive strength (Chattopadhyaya 1994).

The geographical advantages of the Chola heartland in the Kaveri delta region proved crucial to their maritime development. The Kaveri River system provided access to both the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal through multiple distributaries, while the fertile delta agriculture generated the surplus wealth necessary to support naval construction and maintenance. Archaeological surveys of Chola-period irrigation systems reveal sophisticated hydraulic engineering that maximized agricultural productivity and created the economic foundation for imperial expansion (Subbarayalu 1973).

## The Rise of Maritime Power

The transformation of the Cholas from a regional kingdom to a maritime empire began under Rajaraja I (985-1014 CE) and reached its zenith under his son Rajendra I (1014-1044 CE). Inscriptional evidence reveals a systematic program of naval development that included construction of war fleets, establishment of naval bases, and creation of administrative systems for managing maritime territories (Gopal 1951).

The Chola navy, described in inscriptions as having different classes of vessels for warfare, transport, and ceremonial purposes, represented a technological and organizational achievement that enabled them to project power across vast oceanic distances. Archaeological investigations at sites like Kaveripattinam and Nagapattinam have revealed evidence of sophisticated port facilities including docks, warehouses, and defensive installations that supported naval operations.

Chola maritime expansion followed strategic patterns that prioritized control of key trade routes and commercial centers. The conquest of Sri Lanka under Rajaraja I provided a crucial naval base for further expansion, while subsequent campaigns in the Maldives, Lakshadweep, and eventually Southeast Asia established a network of tributary relationships that secured vital trade routes.

The famous expedition of Rajendra I against Srivijaya (1025 CE), documented in the Thanjavur inscriptions, demonstrated the extent of Chola maritime reach and their willingness to use naval power to protect commercial interests. This campaign, which resulted in the capture of the Srivijayan capital and the establishment of Chola influence throughout the Malay Peninsula, marked the high point of medieval Indian naval power (Spencer 1983).

## Economic Foundations of Maritime Empire

The Chola maritime empire was fundamentally an economic enterprise designed to control and profit from Indian Ocean trade networks. Inscriptional evidence reveals sophisticated systems for taxing maritime commerce, regulating port activities, and managing the revenues generated by international trade.

The Cholas' strategic position between the spice-producing regions of Southeast Asia and the markets of the Middle East and China enabled them to serve as intermediaries in lucrative luxury trades. Archaeological evidence from Chola ports reveals the presence of Chinese ceramics, Southeast Asian spices, Middle Eastern textiles, and other exotic goods that generated substantial customs revenues (Sen 2009).

The inscription known as the "Larger Leiden Plates" provides detailed information about Chola commercial policies, including regulations for foreign merchants, provisions for maritime insurance, and systems for resolving commercial disputes. These documents reveal the sophisticated legal and administrative frameworks that supported Chola maritime commerce.

The development of a standardized currency system, evidenced by the wide distribution of Chola coins throughout the Indian Ocean region, facilitated commercial transactions and demonstrated the empire's economic influence. Archaeological discoveries of Chola coins from sites ranging from the Maldives to the Malay Peninsula confirm the extent of their commercial networks.

## Temple Architecture: Innovation and Symbolism

The Chola period witnessed revolutionary developments in South Indian temple architecture that established new standards for monumental construction and artistic expression. The architectural innovations of this period reflected both technological advances and evolving religious and political concepts that required increasingly elaborate built environments.

The Brihadisvara Temple at Thanjavur (c. 1010 CE), commissioned by Rajaraja I, represents the culmination of early Chola architectural achievement. This massive complex, with its 216-foot tower (vimana) topped by a monolithic granite capstone weighing approximately 80 tons, demonstrated engineering capabilities that had never before been achieved in South Indian architecture (Barrett 1974).

Archaeological analysis of Chola temples reveals sophisticated planning principles that integrated religious, administrative, and economic functions within unified architectural complexes. The temples served not only as places of worship but as centers of learning, economic activity, and political administration that supported the broader imperial system.

The artistic program of Chola temples, with their elaborate sculptural decoration depicting Hindu deities, royal portraits, and scenes of court life, functioned as visual propaganda that proclaimed the dynasty's divine sanction and imperial achievements. The bronze sculptures produced by Chola artisans, particularly the famous Nataraja images, represent high points of Indian artistic achievement that influenced aesthetic traditions throughout South and Southeast Asia (Huntington 1985).

## The Brihadisvara Temple: Imperial Monument

The Brihadisvara Temple at Thanjavur stands as the most spectacular achievement of Chola architecture and a masterpiece of medieval Indian monumental construction. Inscriptions within the temple complex provide detailed information about its construction, funding, and administration that illuminate the relationship between imperial power and religious architecture.

The temple's massive scale—with a base measuring 240 by 120 feet and a tower rising over 200 feet—required unprecedented mobilization of resources, skilled craftsmen, and organizational capabilities. The inscriptions record donations from the royal family, nobles, and merchants that totaled thousands of pounds of gold and silver, demonstrating the immense wealth at the Cholas' disposal.

The architectural innovations of the Brihadisvara Temple influenced temple construction throughout South India and Southeast Asia. The distinctive Chola vimana design, with its pyramidal profile and elaborate sculptural decoration, became a standard form that was copied and adapted in later periods (Soundara Rajan 1972).

The temple complex functioned as a microcosm of Chola imperial administration, with inscriptions documenting elaborate systems for managing temple lands, organizing religious festivals, and coordinating the activities of hundreds of priests, musicians, dancers, and other personnel. This administrative complexity reflected and supported the broader imperial system (Orr 2000).

## Architectural Evolution and Regional Influence

The development of Chola architecture showed continuous innovation and adaptation throughout the imperial period. The Gangaikonda Cholapuram Temple, built by Rajendra I, demonstrated evolution from the Thanjavur model while maintaining the distinctive Chola aesthetic principles.

The architectural influence of Chola temples extended far beyond South India through the dynasty's maritime connections. Archaeological investigations in Southeast Asia have revealed numerous temples that show clear Chola influence in their design, decoration, and construction techniques. The temples of Angkor in Cambodia, while maintaining their distinctive Khmer characteristics, show significant Indian influences that may have been transmitted through Chola cultural networks.

The standardization of architectural elements across Chola territories—including specific proportional systems, decorative motifs, and construction techniques—created a unified imperial aesthetic that proclaimed Chola authority and cultural identity. This architectural standardization paralleled similar developments in coinage, inscriptional formulas, and administrative practices that created imperial unity across diverse regions.

The development of bronze-casting techniques reached new heights during the Chola period, producing sculptural works of unprecedented technical sophistication and artistic achievement. The famous Chola bronzes, particularly the images of Shiva as Nataraja (Lord of the Dance), represent masterpieces of world art that demonstrate the period's synthesis of religious devotion, artistic skill, and technical innovation (Dehejia 1990).

## Temple Economy and Administration

Chola temples functioned as complex economic institutions that played crucial roles in imperial administration and commercial activity. Inscriptional evidence reveals that major temples controlled vast agricultural estates, engaged in money-lending activities, and served as centers for craft production and trade (Karashima 2009).

The economic role of temples extended beyond simple religious functions to encompass systematic land management, tax collection, and commercial regulation. The Thanjavur inscriptions document elaborate systems for managing temple lands, including provisions for irrigation maintenance, crop rotation, and tenant relationships that maximized agricultural productivity.

Temple craftsmen, including sculptors, bronze-casters, textile workers, and jewelers, produced luxury goods that were both used in religious ceremonies and traded in commercial markets. The high quality of Chola temple arts created demand throughout the Indian Ocean region, generating additional revenues that supported temple activities and imperial expansion (Parasher-Sen 2004).

The integration of temple administration with imperial bureaucracy created efficient systems for resource mobilization and political control. Temple officials often served simultaneously as imperial administrators, while royal inscriptions in temples proclaimed imperial achievements and divine sanction for political authority.

## Maritime Trade and Cultural Exchange

The Chola maritime empire facilitated extensive cultural exchange that influenced artistic, architectural, and religious developments throughout South and Southeast Asia. Archaeological evidence reveals the movement of craftsmen, artistic motifs, and construction techniques across the Indian Ocean through Chola commercial networks.

The presence of Tamil inscriptions at sites like Barus in Sumatra and various locations in the Malay Peninsula confirms the extent of Chola cultural influence and the role of Tamil merchants in Indian Ocean trade. These inscriptions often combine commercial information with religious dedications, demonstrating the integration of economic and religious activities in Chola expansion (Zvelebil 1975).

The architectural influence of Chola temples can be traced in Southeast Asian monuments that adapt South Indian design principles to local conditions and materials. The temple complexes of Java, Thailand, and Cambodia show varying degrees of Indian influence that were transmitted through commercial and cultural contacts facilitated by Chola maritime power.

The development of artistic styles that combined South Indian and Southeast Asian elements created distinctive regional traditions that continued to evolve long after the decline of Chola political authority. These synthetic cultural forms demonstrate the lasting impact of Chola maritime expansion on regional artistic development.

## Administrative Integration

The Chola empire developed sophisticated administrative systems that integrated maritime and terrestrial territories into unified imperial structures. Inscriptional evidence reveals hierarchical administrative systems that maintained central control while allowing for regional adaptation to local conditions (Stein 1980).

The administration of maritime territories required specialized knowledge of naval operations, commercial law, and international relations that distinguished it from traditional land-based administration. Chola inscriptions refer to specific officials responsible for naval affairs, port management, and oversight of foreign merchants.

The integration of temple administration with imperial bureaucracy created efficient systems for tax collection, resource mobilization, and political control that supported both religious activities and imperial expansion. Temple inscriptions often record the careers of officials who served in both religious and secular capacities.

The development of standardized administrative practices across Chola territories created imperial unity while maintaining flexibility to accommodate regional variations. This administrative sophistication enabled the Cholas to manage an empire that extended across diverse geographical and cultural regions.

## Decline and Transformation

The decline of Chola maritime power began in the 12th century due to a combination of internal political conflicts, external military pressures, and changing patterns of Indian Ocean trade. The rise of competing maritime powers, including the emergence of Muslim naval forces in the Arabian Sea and the expansion of Chinese naval activity, challenged Chola dominance (Aiyangar 1921).

The Later Chola period (12th-13th centuries) witnessed a gradual retreat from maritime expansion and a return to more traditional territorial concerns in South India. However, the architectural and cultural achievements of the imperial period continued to influence regional development long after the decline of political authority.

The transformation of Chola temple complexes from imperial monuments to regional religious centers demonstrates the enduring cultural impact of the dynasty's architectural achievements. Many temples continued to function as important pilgrimage sites and cultural centers that preserved Chola artistic and architectural traditions.

The influence of Chola maritime and architectural achievements extended far beyond the dynasty's political lifespan, establishing cultural patterns that influenced South and Southeast Asian civilization for centuries. The integration of maritime commerce with monumental architecture created models of statecraft that were emulated by later dynasties throughout the region.

## Comparative Analysis

The Chola achievement in combining maritime empire with monumental architecture represents a distinctive model in medieval world history that can be compared with other thalassocratic civilizations such as Venice, the Majapahit kingdom, and various Southeast Asian maritime states.

Unlike purely commercial maritime empires, the Cholas integrated naval power with sophisticated agricultural systems and monumental architecture that created more stable and enduring imperial structures. The combination of agricultural surplus, commercial revenues, and religious legitimacy provided multiple sources of imperial strength.

The scale and sophistication of Chola temple architecture exceeded contemporary achievements in most other maritime civilizations, reflecting the dynasty's successful integration of diverse resource bases and cultural traditions. The durability of Chola architectural monuments contrasts with the more ephemeral achievements of purely commercial maritime empires.

The Chola model of imperial organization influenced subsequent South and Southeast Asian political development, creating cultural and institutional patterns that persisted long after the dynasty's political decline.

## Legacy and Continuing Influence

The legacy of Chola maritime power and architectural achievement continued to influence South and Southeast Asian civilization long after the dynasty's political decline. The architectural innovations of the Chola period established design principles and construction techniques that influenced temple building throughout South India for centuries.

The cultural networks created by Chola maritime expansion facilitated ongoing exchange between South and Southeast Asia that contributed to the development of shared artistic, religious, and political traditions. The influence of Tamil language and literature in Southeast Asia reflects the enduring impact of Chola cultural expansion (Pollock 2006).

Modern archaeological investigations continue to reveal new evidence of Chola maritime reach and architectural achievement, confirming the extent of their imperial influence and cultural contributions. Recent discoveries of Chola-period artifacts and inscriptions from sites throughout the Indian Ocean region demonstrate the dynasty's extensive commercial and cultural networks.

The study of Chola civilization provides important insights into the relationship between economic development, political power, and cultural achievement that remain relevant for understanding processes of imperial formation and cultural transmission in the medieval world.

## Conclusion

The Chola dynasty's achievement in combining maritime empire with monumental architecture represents one of the most remarkable examples of imperial integration in medieval world history. Their success in projecting naval power across the Indian Ocean while simultaneously creating architectural monuments of unprecedented scale and sophistication demonstrates the successful synthesis of economic, political, and cultural strategies.

The interconnection between Chola maritime expansion and temple construction was not coincidental but reflected a sophisticated understanding of how commercial wealth could be transformed into cultural capital that supported political authority and religious legitimacy. The temples served not only as religious centers but as economic institutions, administrative headquarters, and cultural symbols that proclaimed imperial power and divine sanction.

The enduring influence of Chola achievements in both maritime power and architectural innovation demonstrates the lasting impact of their imperial model on South and Southeast Asian civilization. Their integration of commercial pragmatism with religious devotion and artistic excellence created cultural patterns that continued to influence regional development long after their political decline.

The study of Chola civilization offers important insights into the processes of imperial formation, cultural transmission, and artistic achievement that enhance our understanding of medieval world history and the complex relationships between economic development, political power, and cultural expression.

## References

- Aiyangar, S. Krishnaswami. *South India and Her Muhammadan Invaders*. London: Oxford University Press, 1921.
- Barrett, Douglas. *Early Chola Architecture and Sculpture*. London: Faber & Faber, 1974.
- Champakalakshmi, R. *Trade, Ideology and Urbanization: South India 300 BC to AD 1300*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Chattopadhyaya, Brajadulal. *The Making of Early Medieval India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Dehejia, Vidya. *Art of the Imperial Cholas*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990.
- Gopal, B.R. *The Chālukyas of Kalyāṇi and the Chōlas*. Mysore: Rao and Raghavan, 1951.
- Hall, Kenneth R. *Trade and Statecraft in the Age of the Colas*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1980.
- Huntington, Susan L. *The Art of Ancient India: Buddhist, Hindu, Jain*. New York: Weatherhill, 1985.
- Karashima, Noboru. *Ancient to Medieval: South Indian Society in Transition*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Kulke, Hermann, and Dietmar Rothermund. *A History of India*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge, 1998.
- Nilakanta Sastri, K.A. *The Colas*. 2nd ed. Madras: University of Madras, 1955.
- Orr, Leslie C. *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters of God: Temple Women in Medieval Tamilnadu*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Parasher-Sen, Aloka. *Subordinate and Marginal Groups in Early India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Pollock, Sheldon. *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.
- Ramaswamy, Vijaya. *Historical Dictionary of the Tamils*. Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2007.
- Sen, Tansen. *The Formation of Chinese Maritime Power from Zheng He to Shi Lang*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009.
- Soundara Rajan, K.V. *Indian Temple Styles*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1972.
- Spencer, George W. *The Politics of Expansion: The Chola Conquest of Sri Lanka and Sri Vijaya*. Madras: New Era Publications, 1983.

Stein, Burton. *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980.

Subbarayalu, Y. *Political Geography of the Chola Country*. Madras: State Department of Archaeology, Government of Tamil Nadu, 1973.

Thapar, Romila. *Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.

Zvelebil, Kamil V. *Tamil Literature*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1975.