

A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF AN OFTEN-OVERLOOKED PORTION OF IMPERIAL CHOLA HISTORY: THE ROLE OF CRAFTS AND CRAFTSMEN

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Abstract

This article seeks to shed light on a previously unexplored aspect of Chola history: the empire's skilled artisans and artisans' work from the ninth to thirteenth century A.D. Despite the importance of craftsmanship to the rise of the Chola Empire, it has received very little academic attention. This research tries to fill that information gap by analysing the role that artisans played in the Chola imperial administration. The ruler of the Cholas had ultimate power over his dominion. The king made regular trips to government centres to check on progress and make sure everything was running well. The king had a council of advisors known as ministers who served at his discretion. The everyday operations of the central administration were overseen by a competent secretariat. Pursuing an understanding of the crafts and artisans' contributions to the cultural, artistic, and economic growth of the Chola Empire is the primary goal of this research. The book examines how the Roman Empire benefited from the efforts of artists and craftspeople such as sculptors, metalworkers, weavers, painters, and architects. Chola craftsmanship's past is

reconstructed with the help of inscriptions, written works, and archaeological finds. The extent to which Chola kings patronised the arts, the organisation of craft guilds, the transmission of skills from one generation to the next, and their impact on trade and cultural exchange are all explored here. The results of this study shed light on the cultural contributions, economic weight, and social standing of the Chola Empire's artisans and craftspeople. This research helps us better comprehend the Chola administration and the significance of craftsmanship at this period in South Indian history.

Paper Identification



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Introduction

When compared to other sub-disciplines of history, craft history is a relatively recent field of study in the academic world. Craftspeople were often treated as an

afterthought in mainstream research. Scholars have recently begun investigating the craft industry and its practitioners more thoroughly. Certain academics in India and elsewhere are influenced by Marxist, subaltern, and annals schools of thought. S. Settar, Raju Kalidos, Kalyan Kumar Dasgupta, R.N. Misra, Thomas E. Levy, Carla Sinopoli, and Jan Brouwer are only a few of the well-known art historians who have written on the history of craft.

These authors focused on specific aspects of artisan production across the Indian subcontinent. It's important to note that studying artisans in depth reveals important information about the social and economic structure of the community in question.

The Chola Empire

The economic impact of the artisanal sector can be seen in the local, regional, and maritime trade and markets all at the same time. The Chola Empire reached its greatest extent during the reigns of Raja Raja Chola I (reigning from A.D. 985 to 1012) and Rajendra Chola I (reigning from 1012 to 1044), when it encompassed a significant portion of what is now known as South India (with the exception of northern Kerala and northern Karnataka), Sri Lanka, and a portion of the states and kingdoms along the South-East Asian littoral. The Cholas' capacity to engage in maritime commerce and exploration was greatly enhanced by the strategic location of their empire, which was situated between the prosperous trade routes of the Gulf of Aden and the South China Sea. The works of historians such as George W. Spencer, Kenneth R. Hall, and Vasudha Narayanan, who have written extensively on the consequences of Chola activity along these vital trade routes on the economy, politics, and culture, are relevant in this context.

Objectives of the study

This study has four objectives as follows:

- Examine the evolution of urbanisation in the Chola Empire (ninth to thirteenth centuries

AD) through the lens of the creation of a wide range of handicrafts.

- To learn about the social, economic, and ritual standing of Chola society's artisans and craftspeople.
- To look into the chances of advancement for these tradespeople.
- Create a context for the history of craftspeople within the subaltern historiography.

Historical Sources

This page draws on a plethora of unique sources in order to present its information. Literary writings, architectural documents, and folklore are all included, as are the renowned Chola bronzes, paintings, coins, monuments, and inscriptions. Secondary works, such as books, journal articles, and essays, are also used here when they are pertinent to the topic at hand. During the data gathering phase, researchers will go on field trips to establishments including museums, chosen temples, and workshop spaces.

Research Methodology

The approach taken here is one in which the aforementioned historical sources are systematically analysed and synthesised, and the resulting data is then structured into two fundamental frameworks: "Crafts and Craftsmen" on the one hand, and "the view from below" (Subaltern approach) on the other. With the goals in mind, the data is collected and verified so that it may be properly categorised and used. Timeline and overarching theme or themes work together to tell the story of the subject at hand.

Situating the Chola Craftsmen

The Chola Empire was home to a wide variety of ethnic and socioeconomic groupings. One such group were the craftsmen and artisans, who engaged in the inventive artistic activity necessary to support the growing demands of the imperial Chola rulers' geographical dominance. That is to say, these groups

were not engaged in agricultural production but rather met the requirements of both rural and urban areas. The artisans were subject to state-levied taxes and cesses, the proceeds of which were placed in the state treasury (*Karuvulam*). According to inscriptions, the *Kammalar* were a group of skilled tradespeople who worked in gold (*tattan*), brass (*kannan*), iron (*Karuman/Kolan*), wood (*tachchan*), and stone (*silpis*). Since they revered and claimed ancestry from Lord Vishwakarma, the celestial architect of the Gods and Goddesses listed in Hindu mythology and the Puranas, they were also known as the Vishwakarma craftsmen. In addition, their caste, or social status in India, was indicated by the labels "*Viswakarma Kula*" and "*Viswakarma Kulaja*," respectively, given to these artisans. The opposite end of the spectrum consists of artisans such as weavers, potters, oil-pressers, architects, water-craftsmen, and others.

Textiles and Weavers

Along with food and shelter, clothing is one of humanity's basic necessities. As a result, the textile sector expanded throughout time. Weaving on a loom or by hand has been observed. Inscriptions and literary works from the Chola period make frequent mention of textiles and weavers. Kanchipuram continues to be known as the world's preeminent centre for cotton and silk weaving. In addition to Tribhuvanam and Arni, other important textile centres in the Chola Empire included Virinchipuram, Woraiyur, Tirupati, Kalahasti, Gugai, Madurai, Salem, Sular, Venkatagiri, Dharmavaram, Kumbakonam, Thanjavur, and Vridhachalam. Raw silk had to be imported from other countries, while cotton could be grown locally.

Weavers in Kanchipuram and the surrounding area were required to pay certain taxes to the Chola Government. One such instance was the loom tax (*tari arai*). This is supported by data from the time period of Chola monarch Vijayakantagopala, namely his rule in the town of Tirupputkuli. Each weaver is expected to provide one sari from each loom, also known as the tari

pudivai, to the temple as part of the '*antarayam*' or intermediary local cess arrangement. Per kadamai was likewise exempted from these levies.

In the late tenth century A.D., the *nagaram* or market centre in Kanchipuram played a mediating role in the taxation structure of the city's early mediaeval economy, and the Madras Museum Copper Plates of Uttama Chola (tenth century) describe the importance of merchants and weavers (*saliyar*) in this regard. Interestingly, one stone inscription gives us insight into how the taxation system in the Kanchi *Managar* (city) merchants' district operated. *Katamai*, or land charges, and cesses on weaving looms, known as the *saliyar vari*, were donated to the temple by royal decree of the Chola king and the agreement of all merchants, weavers, dealers, and other people. These references to merchants and weavers are especially relevant given Kanchipuram's historical role as a centre of the textile industry. The Cholas were the primary market for textiles.

Cloth bleaching produces a foul odour, therefore traditionally weavers have had to settle outside the community. Weavers were drawn to the growing cities of the Temple Towns during the Pallava and Chola dynasties. The *saliyar pattu* and *Devanga pattu* names were given to the high-quality woven silk sarees after the communities that created them.

Jewellery and Goldsmiths

Jewels were considered good luck by the Chola people. The *perumtattan* (literally, "great goldsmith") and his crew executed the intricate gold work. Gold, diamonds, and pearls were some of the most expensive materials to use in the production of Chola royal and court jewellery, as evidenced by inscriptions. They were created for both human consumption and as offerings to the gods in the temples. One such example is the Brahadisvara that Raja Raja Chola I constructed in Thanjavur. Goldsmithing was organised into distinct subfields. Small-time *tattan*, who served a clientele that

ultimately dictated their income, were at the bottom of the economic ladder. The other group was the prosperous *peruntattan*, who were residents of major cities like Thanjavur, Kanchipuram, and Chidambaram and who benefited from the royal commissioning of the jewellery. Crowns (*makutas*), ear lopes (*makarakundalas*), necklaces (*kantabharanas*), girdles, finger rings, anklets, and other types are all examples of the jewels that can be produced.

Chola Bronzes, a Divine Glance

What exactly is the deal with Chola bronze? Under the patronage of the Chola kings, queens, and others, the metal - craftsmen and coppersmiths cast Bronze images of the Hindu Gods and Goddesses for devotion in the temples. Art historians refer to these sculptures as Chola bronzes. Bronze statues depicting the king and his family, the 63 shaivite hymnodists (Nayanmars), and the 12 Vaishnava hymnodists (*Alvars*) were all crafted by master artisans in Swamimalai, Tiruvengadu, Kilur, and Kanchipuram. One such example is the bronze statue of Queen Sembian Mahadevi. Chola bronzes are one-of-a-kind handicrafts that just can't be duplicated. The traditional lost-wax method is used to create them. The best part about these statues is that they are worshipped as processional deities in temple celebrations. The Nataraja emblem has always served as a source of creative motivation for artists.

The Sculptor's Craft

Under the Chola kings, queens, nobles and military commanders, there was a boom of temple - building activity. Beautiful statues of gods, kings, queens, and other figures were created by the sculptors (*Silpis*). There are hundreds of temples located in the Kaveri River deltaic region and other parts of the enormous Chola Empire. Some of these temples include the Brahadisvara at Thanjavur, which was constructed by Raja Raja Chola I; the Brahadisvara at Gangaikondacholapuram, which was created by Rajendra I; and the Airavatisvara at Darasuram,

which was built by Rajaraja II. The Darasuram temple can be found in close vicinity to Kumbakonam. It has the form of a chariot that is pulled by galloping horses, and on the interior, there is an amazing panel that depicts Siva's struggles with the Nayanmars in time with the recital of Sekkilar's Periyapuram. The head architect, known as Sthapati, or the Silpacharya was in charge of overseeing the construction of the temple, which undoubtedly required a great number of skilled workers to complete the sculptural job. Sculptors would frequently receive rewards from royal patrons in the form of gifts of land, fields, food, and sometimes even cash. Texts such as the Pratima Lakshana, the Vastusashtras, and the Narada Silpasastra provided the architects with the blueprints and instructions necessary to build the structures to the exact standards described in those works. Sculpting has a long and illustrious history among members of the Tamil diaspora.

The Chariot – Makers

The skilled workers produced two distinct styles of chariots. Both the king's war vehicle (the ratham) and the temple car (the *ter ratham*) are drawn by worshippers during the annual festivals honouring the most important deities in Tamil culture. An interesting monograph on temple chariot traditions and works in Tamil country was contributed by art historian Raju Kalidas. The Chola Kings' procession came after the ula (parade) of the gods. Craftsmen known as rathakarars employed only the finest timber in their Chariot construction. Almost every deity imaginable was meticulously carved into a work of art. The bronze statues were adorned with priceless jewels before being carried in the procession through the temple's four cardinal streets. The *Tiruvarur ter* is an exemplary case in point.

The Painting Art

The fact that just a small amount of Chola paintings from the period have been preserved demonstrates the ingenuity of the artists who worked during that time.

Chola artists depicted human and divine characters in the famed Rajarajesvaram (the Brahadisvara temple), which was constructed by Rajaraja I around the year 1010 A.D. in the circumambulatory corridor (tiruchitramblam) of the imperial city of Thanjavur. The internal walls of this corridor are lined with stunning artworks, each of which contains an underlying allegorical meaning. R. Champakalakshmi, a historian, looked at an unusual panel that depicted a seated figure (perhaps Lord Siva disguised as an old man) sweeping palm - leaf in front of a group of individuals who were obeying him. The significance of documents in Chola political and social life is illustrated by this picture. In the Thanjavur Kaveri deltaic region with its lush-green rice fields, coconut groves, and banana plantations, the landowners (kaniyalar) had a great desire to secure the royal charters guaranteeing superior rights over the property. This was especially true of the Brahmanas.

The Chola image of Tripurantaka, which depicts Lord Siva as the destructor of three cities or forts, was given a significant amount of importance by Rajaraja I. It includes a segment on iconography as one of its components. Because of Tripurantaka's regal bearing, the Tamil epigraphs give it the name Tanjai Alagar. This is an evocative name for the mountain. Sivan temples that lauded him in his function as the Tripurantaka were among the first to blend Chola-era innovations in architectural design with iconographic themes in a manner that was aesthetically beautiful. These temples were dedicated to the Hindu god Sivan. The figure in the artwork exudes a sense of both life and majesty at the same time. Inscriptions found on Chola temples show a representation of the cosmic dancer Nataraja. This figure is sometimes referred to as the Atavallan or the Atalarasar. The Archaeological Survey of India hired a crew to paint a mural at the enormous Sri Varadaraja Perumal Temple in Kanchipuram. While they were there, the crew

discovered ancient Chola frescoes in the walls of the temple.

Status of the Craftsmen

Distinct types of artisans were accorded distinct social statuses. The weavers, for instance, held a higher status than the craftspeople. The artisans in the countryside were not as well off as their urban counterparts. There was a wide range of wealth and property. The scale also changed during rituals. While some weaving communities were able to provide generous contributions to the temple, others are struggling to stay afloat. As a result, the donors' wealth and social standing determined who received temple honours. Master-Craftsmen in particular held high status in Chola culture and were accorded many benefits. What about Vishwakarma rituals? Colour theory can be used to the face According to the Tamil text Vishwakarma Puranam, Lord Vishwakarma has five faces—three for the smiths and two for the non-smiths. According to the story, their skin tones were also symbolic of their professions, with a golden complexion being associated with goldsmiths, a copper or brass complexion with copper smiths, a black complexion with blacksmiths, a stone tint with masons, and a wooden face with carpenters. Clearly a fabrication.

Craft Activity and Urbanization

When examining the semi-rural nature of urban centres in Chola territory, it is important to address the many facets of urbanisation. Temple towns (*tirumadaivilagam*) are the focus of this article. Throughout history, guilds of merchants and artisans like the kaikkola weavers and the kammalar have played important roles. Weavers and other craftspeople who served the temple's ritual demands set up shop in the designated streets of temple towns. Importantly, these artisans found work at both Hindu holy monasteries (*matha*) and temples. *Nagaram* was a marketplace or centre where a wide range of handicrafts could be purchased, and it could be found

in close proximity to important temple cities like Chidambaram, Thanjavur, Kumbakonam, Kanchipuram, Tirupati, Kalahasti, and Perunagar. Kanchi, Tiru, Kalahasti, and Perunagar are known for their distinctiveness. Kanchipuram is famous for being a temple hub with several religious buildings. Therefore, the artisans were crucial to the development of the temple cities.

Conclusion

We are able to draw a few broad conclusions about the artisans of the Chola period from the information presented here. The development of temple urbanism was immensely aided by the contributions of skillful artisans in a number of cities, including Kanchipuram, Uttaramerur, Perunagar, Thanjavur, Kumbakonam, Chidambaram, Madurai, and Tiruvannamalai, to name just a few of these cities. When the Chola dominated the region that is now known as Tondaimandalam, it is possible that the city of Kanchipuram's craft industry contributed to the city's economic dominance in the region. Then, the social, economic, and ritual standing of the artisans and craftsmen differed from one tribe to the next in terms of the products they made. For example, weavers were given preferential treatment over tradesmen in the society.

It is essential to keep in mind that the potters, blacksmiths, and carpenters remained in their original locations, whereas the potters, oil-pressers, and weavers were lured by royal patrons to leave the countryside and settle in temple cities. Other occupations included weaving, goldsmithing, and oil pressing. As a consequence of this, people were able to move about within societies more freely as a result of the growth of their craft companies or as a result of changes in their requirements. Viswakarma is held in the highest regard by Chola craftsmen, both then and now. In point of fact, the Chola Empire provided an atmosphere in which artists could freely express themselves and establish their own distinctive styles in the realm of temple arts and the attendant crafts. This

climate was conducive to the creation of temple arts and crafts. One good example of this is seen in the Chola bronzes. The present research makes a contribution to the subaltern history of South India and Tamil Nadu. In general, the artisans of the Chola Empire played an important part in the establishment of the Chola Empire.

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