

Chronological dimensions and Cultural Layers of Tamils

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Abstract

This research scrutinises the chronological stratification and cultural layers of Tamil society, situating its evolution within a long-term historical framework. Drawing upon interdisciplinary sources—including archaeological findings, literary corpora, and epigraphical records—the research delineates the temporal trajectory of Tamil civilization, mapping transformations in socio-political structures, religious practices, linguistic developments, and material culture. The analysis foregrounds the dynamic interplay between continuity and change, elucidating the successive historical phases have cumulatively shaped the complex, multi-layered identity of the Tamil people. By integrating temporal and cultural dimensions, the study provides a nuanced understanding of Tamil heritage as a historically resilient and adaptive civilizational formation.

Keywords: *Chronological stratification, Cultural layers, Tamil society, Historical evolution, Material culture, Socio-religious transformation, Tamil identity*

Introduction

The Tamil civilization, with origins extending several millennia into the past, exemplifies a remarkable continuity of language, culture, and social organization. As historian K. A. Nilakanta Sastri notes, “The Tamils have preserved their linguistic and cultural identity across successive political and social upheavals, offering a rare glimpse of sustained civilizational ethos in South India.” This persistence is reflected not only in literary traditions but also in archaeological, epigraphic, and numismatic evidence, which collectively map the chronological and cultural layers of Tamil history. The foremost source of ancient Tamil history is the **Sangam literature**, generally dated between the 5th century BCE and the 3rd century CE. The poems contained within this corpus offer vivid depictions of the social, economic, and religious life of Tamilakam, and scholars largely agree on their reliability as historical evidence. Complementary evidence emerges from **Greek and Roman accounts** of the early centuries CE, which document maritime trade with Tamilakam, detailing ports along both coasts and underscoring the region’s integration into broader transcontinental networks.

Archaeological excavations across Tamil Nadu and Kerala have uncovered remnants from the Sangam era, including inscribed pottery, imported ceramics, industrial implements, brick structures, and spinning whorls. Application of **stratigraphy** and **paleography** has enabled precise chronological placement of these artifacts, which corroborate the economic and occupational activities—agriculture, weaving, smithing, gem cutting, construction, pearl fishing, and painting—attested in Sangam texts. Epigraphic evidence, particularly inscriptions in the **Tamil-Brahmi script**, is found not only in South India but also in distant locales such as Sri Lanka, Egypt, and Thailand, predominantly recording grants by kings and chieftains. These inscriptions also provide incidental insights into the social organization of Sangam society. **Numismatic evidence**, including coins recovered from riverbeds and urban centers, complements these sources. The coins often bear dynastic emblems, such as the bow and arrow of the Cheras, along with legends and portraits, allowing numismatists to assign them to specific periods and political entities. As R. Champakalakshmi observes, “The cultural landscape of the Tamils is not a mere aggregation of practices, but a dynamic interplay of religion, economy, and social structures over time.” Similarly, Burton Stein highlights that “the Tamil region exemplifies the interaction between polity and culture, where historical events are deeply enmeshed with the evolution of social and ritual life.” By synthesizing literary, archaeological, epigraphic, and numismatic

sources, this study seeks to illuminate the layered chronology of Tamil society, revealing the intricate processes by which cultural identity, economic activity, and political authority were historically negotiated.

Religious and Cultural Landscapes in the Sangam Era

The Sangam era exhibits a sophisticated intertwining of geography, religion, and social organization, as reflected in the concept of **thinai**—five distinct ecological and cultural landscapes. Each thinai was associated with a presiding deity **Murugan** in kurinji (hills), **Thirumal** in mullai (forests), **Indiran** in marutham (plains), **Varunan** in neithal (coasts), and **Kotravai** in palai (deserts). Thirumal, regarded as Paramporul (“the supreme one”), appears in various Sangam texts under names such as Māyavan, Māmiyon, Netiyōn, and Māl. While Shaivite worship existed alongside this pantheon, Murugan emerged as the **Tamil kadavul** (“God of the Tamils”), a status reflected in the prominent **Arupadaiveedu hill temples** dedicated to him. The epic **Ramayana** (7th–5th century BCE) situates Tamilakam within a broader cultural imagination, recounting Rama’s crossing from Rameswaram to Sri Lanka via the Rama Setu to rescue Sita from Ravana, illustrating early narrative links between the Tamil region and pan-Indian religious epics. Religiously, Tamilakam was pluralistic. **Jainism** flourished from the Sangam era onward, as evidenced by inscriptions, drip-ledges (1st century BCE–6th century CE), and temple monuments such as the **Chitharal Jain Temple**. The **Kalabhra dynasty**, patrons of Jainism, ruled much of Tamilakam between the 3rd and 7th centuries CE. Other surviving Jain sites include the **Kanchi Trilokyanatha Temple** and the **Tirumalai temple complex**, which houses a 16-foot-high sculpture of Neminatha dating to the 12th century CE. **Buddhism** also influenced the region, with references to a Vihāra in **Nākappattinam** during Ashoka’s reign (3rd century BCE) and 4th-century CE relics found in **Kaveripattinam**. The **Chudamani Vihara** in Nagapattinam was later rebuilt in the early 11th century CE by the Srivijaya king Maravijayottunggavarman under the patronage of Raja Raja Chola I. By the 7th century CE, the Pandyas and Pallavas, who had earlier patronized Jainism and Buddhism, shifted support toward **Hinduism**, reflecting the revival of **Saivism** and **Vaishnavism** during the Bhakti movement led by the **Alvars** and **Nayanmars**. This period witnessed the establishment of the **108 Divya Desams** dedicated to Vishnu and Lakshmi, celebrated in the hymns of the Alvars, and the **276 Paadal Petra Sthalams** dedicated to Shiva, extolled in the Nayanmar verses. Additionally, the **Pancha Bhuta Sthalams**, each representing one of the five prime elements, exemplify the integration of natural philosophy with religious devotion in Tamil culture.

The Sangam period is primarily reconstructed through **Sangam literature**, which provides insight into the political, social, and cultural life of ancient Tamilakam. The region was ruled by a **triumvirate of monarchies**—the Cheras (western Tamilakam), Pandyas (southern Tamilakam), and Cholas (Kaveri delta)—collectively called **Vāṇpukaḷ Mūvar** (“Three glorified by heaven”). Minor chieftains, including **Velirs** and **Kizhar**, managed hill tribes and clan-based settlements, while smaller rulers were termed **Kurunilamannar**. Epigraphical evidence from the **Mauryan Empire** (3rd century BCE) and **Kalinga inscriptions** (2nd century BCE) corroborate the existence of these kingdoms. Sangam rulers patronized **Vedic, Buddhist, and Jain traditions** and sponsored early Tamil literature, with **Tolkāppiyam** being the oldest surviving work. Texts like **Purananuru** describe public life, Vedic sacrifices, funerary rites, occupational organization, and agricultural practices, including irrigation networks. Trade flourished via ports such as **Muziris** and **Korkai**, with exports including spices, pearls, silk, ivory, and gemstones. Diplomatic contacts included Pandya emissaries sent to **Emperor Augustus**, and the **Periplus of the Erythraean Sea** details Tamil maritime commerce.

In the early phase (3rd–2nd century BCE), society was organized around tribal and clan-based settlements, with **Velir chiefs** overseeing hill tribes and **Kizhar** managing clan territories, while minor rulers known as **Kurunilamannar** administered smaller regions. Agriculture emerged as the primary occupation, supported by rudimentary irrigation networks, and early trade links developed with northern kingdoms and Mediterranean regions, as evidenced by **potsherds and imported beads at Arikamedu**. In the middle phase (2nd–1st century BCE), literary activity flourished with the composition of the **Sangam anthologies** (**Ettuthokai**, **Pattuppāṭṭu**) and the codification of **Tolkāppiyam**, reflecting heroism, love, ethics, and governance. Material culture advanced, with megalithic burials, metal tools, beads, and ornaments attesting to artisanal sophistication. Maritime commerce expanded through ports such as **Muziris** and **Korkai**, exporting spices, pearls, silk, and ivory, while Roman coins and inscriptions indicate increasing foreign interaction.

In the late Sangam phase (1st–3rd century CE), the **Chera, Chola, and Pandya monarchies**, collectively called **Vāṇpukaḷ Mūvar**, consolidated power, with kings performing **Vedic sacrifices** and upholding dharma, while chieftains administered local regions. Religious pluralism flourished, as **Buddhism and Jainism** coexisted alongside Vedic traditions, and texts like **Purananuru** documented public life, festivals, and moral codes. Agricultural productivity and organized settlements supported growing urban centers, facilitating domestic and international trade, including contacts with the **Roman Empire and Han China**. Poetry, music, and dance were integral to courtly and

festival culture, while the literary depiction of landscapes (tinai) reflected the integration of environment and cultural identity. Over these three centuries, Tamilakam experienced progressive political consolidation, religious and cultural pluralism, literary flourishing, and expanding economic networks, forming the foundational framework of ancient Tamil civilization.

Early Medieval Period (4th – 8th century CE)

Following the **Sangam period (3rd century BCE – 3rd century CE)**, the **Kalabhras** dominated Tamilakam roughly from the **4th to 6th century CE**, a phase often described as a “dark age” due to the scarcity of contemporaneous sources. Despite limited documentation, the period is associated with cultural and religious transitions, including continued patronage of **Buddhism and Jainism** alongside residual Vedic practices. By the **6th century CE**, the **Pallavas** rose to prominence under **Mahendravarman I (c. 600–630 CE)**, establishing **Kanchipuram** as their capital and promoting monumental rock-cut architecture at **Mahabalipuram**, reflecting both political authority and artistic sophistication. The **Pandys** were revived under **Kadungon (c. late 6th century CE)**, gradually reclaiming influence in southern Tamilakam. During this period, **linguistic and cultural differentiation** became increasingly pronounced in the western regions, contributing to the emergence of **Malayalam**, influenced further by the migration of **Sanskrit-speaking communities**. Socially, the era retained hierarchical and clan-based structures from earlier periods, while literary and artistic expressions continued in temple architecture, inscriptions, and devotional traditions, laying the groundwork for the subsequent flourishing of Tamil culture under the later

Cholas and Pandyas.

Chola Empire (9th – 13th century CE)

The **Chola Empire (9th–13th century CE)** marked a period of extraordinary political consolidation, cultural efflorescence, and religious patronage in Tamilakam. The revival began with **Vijayalaya Chola (c. 850–870 CE)**, who defeated the Pallavas and established **Thanjavur** as the Chola capital, laying the foundation for imperial administration and temple patronage. Under **Rajaraja I (c. 985–1014 CE)**, the empire expanded across **southern India, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives**, introducing administrative reforms that divided the Tamil country into well-defined units (valanadus and kurrams). Rajaraja I was a vigorous patron of **Shaiva and Vaishnava traditions**, commissioning monumental temples like the **Brihadisvara Temple at Thanjavur**, which served as hubs of **religion, education, art, and performance**. Temples under his reign hosted **Vedic sacrifices, consecration rituals, temple festivals, processions, and daily ceremonial worship**, which reinforced both spiritual authority and royal legitimacy. Music, dance, and literary performances thrived in temple precincts, fostering a rich cultural ecosystem that included **Tamil literature, poetry, inscriptions, and iconography**. His son, **Rajendra Chola I (c. 1014–1044 CE)**, extended influence to **Bengal and Southeast Asia**, establishing Chola naval supremacy, while maintaining trade with the **Song Dynasty of China**. He continued temple patronage, supported **community rituals, royal ceremonies, and temple endowments**, and encouraged scholarly activity in Vedic and Tamil traditions. Later, **Kulottunga I (c. 1070–1122 CE)** consolidated the Chola and Vengi kingdoms, maintaining political stability and cultural continuity. He further promoted **temple-based education, ritual performance, classical dance (Bharatanatyam), music, bronze sculpture, and literature**, while avoiding unnecessary wars. Across this period, the Cholas integrated **administration, economy, religion, and culture**, with temples functioning as centers of social organization, artistic production, and ritual life, creating a cohesive imperial identity that influenced Tamil society for centuries.

Pandya Empire (13th – 14th century CE)

The **Pandya Empire (13th–14th century CE)** emerged as a dominant force following the decline of Chola power under **Kulottunga III (c. early 13th century CE)**. The Pandyas regained supremacy under **Maravarman Sundara I (c. 1251–1268 CE)** and **Jatavarman Sundara Pandyan I (c. 1251–1308 CE)**, defeating the **Hoysalas, Kakatiyas**, and extending influence over parts of **Sri Lanka**. **Madurai** became the political, cultural, and religious capital, with the city and its temples acting as focal points of administration, trade, and social life. The **Meenakshi Amman Temple** was expanded and patronized extensively, serving as a center for **Shaiva and Shakta worship**, elaborate **rituals, annual festivals, processions, and temple-based community ceremonies**, which reinforced both religious devotion and social cohesion. The Pandyas actively promoted **literature, music, dance, bronze sculpture, and mural painting**, continuing the artistic and literary traditions established during the Chola period. Maritime trade and inland commerce flourished, with Tamil merchants engaging in exchange with Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and other parts of India, exporting **spices, pearls, textiles, and precious stones**. Contemporary travelers such as **Marco Polo** described the Pandyas as one of the wealthiest empires of their time, noting the prosperity of Madurai

and the sophistication of its urban centers. The empire eventually declined due to **internal civil wars, succession disputes, and repeated invasions by the Delhi Sultanate**, culminating in the conquest of Madurai by **Jalaluddin Ahsan Khan in 1335 CE**, which established the short-lived **Madurai Sultanate**, marking the end of the Pandya political and cultural dominance in Tamilakam. Despite this decline, Pandya patronage left a lasting legacy in temple architecture, religious rituals, literature, and the arts that continued to influence Tamil culture for centuries.

Conclusion

The historical trajectory of the Tamil people, from the **Sangam period (3rd century BCE – 3rd century CE)** to the **Pandya era (13th–14th century CE)**, reflects a continuous interplay of political consolidation, cultural efflorescence, religious pluralism, and economic expansion. The **Sangam period** laid the foundational layers of Tamil society, with structured monarchies, clan-based administration, flourishing literature, ritual practices, and extensive trade networks that connected Tamilakam to the wider world. The subsequent **Kalabhra interregnum (4th–6th century CE)**, though sparsely documented, marks a phase of religious and cultural transition, which set the stage for the rise of the **Pallavas**, whose architectural and artistic achievements in **Kanchipuram and Mahabalipuram** reflect the integration of political authority with ritual and cultural patronage.

The **Chola Empire (9th–13th century CE)** represents the zenith of Tamil political, cultural, and maritime influence, with expansive territorial control, monumental temple architecture, elaborate Shaiva and Vaishnava rituals, promotion of music, dance, literature, and international trade. The **Pandya resurgence (13th–14th century CE)** consolidated these traditions while fostering urban growth, temple-centered social life, maritime commerce, and the proliferation of arts and literature, leaving a lasting imprint on the Tamil cultural landscape. Across these successive periods, Tamil society demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability, integrating **local traditions with external influences**, sustaining **literary and artistic production**, and creating enduring **ritual and religious frameworks**. Thus, the **chronological dimensions of Tamil history** reveal a layered cultural evolution, where each era contributed to the consolidation of a distinctive Tamil identity—politically sophisticated, economically interconnected, literarily rich, artistically expressive, and deeply rooted in ritual and religious practice. This multi-layered heritage underscores the continuity and dynamism of Tamil civilization over more than a millennium.

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