

The Metropolis of Medieval Cholas

Author

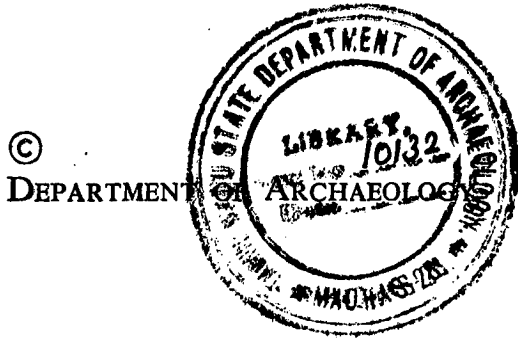
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THE METROPOLIS OF MEDIEVAL CHOLAS

Gangaikondacholapuram, the small village, situated on the trunk road leading to Jayankondacholapuram from the Cross Road near Minsurutti was a metropolis during medieval Chola period. It was the second largest and important city in 11th-12th centuries A.D. and was the centre of political, commercial and cultural activities as that of Madurai in Pandinadu and Karur in Cheranadu.

The illustrious Cholas were the great rulers in Tamilnadu during medieval period. Vijayalaya, the first ruler of this dynasty had established a strong kingdom by conquering over Mutharayar who were the rulers of a considerable part of the Chola country. Then he created a capital city at Tanjavur and built a temple for Durga.¹ In his line the great Chola king Rajaraja I ruled from this place and extended his territory upto Thungapatra on the North and Ceylon on the South, the Arabian Sea on the West and the Bay of Bengal on the East. He held cordial relations with far eastern countries.² Rajendra Chola, son of his, had created a famous metropolis and named it after his epithet Gangaikondan as Gangaikondacholapuram. He had built a temple also at this place as a counterpart of the Big Temple built by his respectable father Rajaraja I at Thanjavur. In addition to these he had dug a very big lake west of his capital and called it as Cholagangam.³ It is said that he caused the defeated kings of Gangetic region to bring Ganga water on their heads and poured it in the lake. This lake was considered as *Jalasthambam* (pillar of water) to signify his victorious march upto the Ganges.⁴ More details about the palace and other parts of the city are found mentioned in the epigraphs of his successors.

Epigraphs

In the inscription of Virarajendra, Rajendra's third son, the palace at Gangaikondacholapuram is referred to as *Chola-Keralan Thirumaligai* (Chola - Keralan Palace) evidently after one of the titles of Rajendra I. The same inscription mentions a few parts of the palace as *adibhumi* (probably the remains of the earlier building), *Kilaisopana* (the eastern portico), and a seat named *Mavali Vanadhirajan*. Evidently the palace was multi-storied. In an inscription dated in the 49th year of Kulottunga (1119 A.D.)

reference is made to *Gangaikondachola maligai* at this place. It is likely that there were more than one royal building each having its own name.

Entry ways, Roads and Streets

Besides the names of the palace and fort walls, the names of a few roads and streets are preserved in the epigraphs. Two entry ways named *Thiruvasal*, the eastern gate and the *Vembugudi vasal*, evidently the south gate leading to the village Vembugudi situated in that direction are mentioned. Reference is also found to *highways* named after Rajaraja and Rajendra as *Rajarajan Peruvalli* and *Rajendra Peruvalli*. Streets that are mentioned in epigraphs are the *ten streets (Pattu-teru)*, the gateway lane (*Thiruvasal Narasam*) and the *Suddhamali Narasam* (Suddhamalli lane).

Fort Wall Rebuilt

Probably in the reign of Kulottunga, the fortifications were rebuilt and the city underwent some alterations and additions. An epigraph refers to the fort wall of Kulottunga Chola (*Kulottunga Cholan Thirumadil*) and the highways, *Kulottungacholan Thirumadil Peruvalli*, *Vilangudaiyan Peruvalli*, *Kulaiyanai Pona Peruvalli* (the highway through which an elephant which had short tail passed by). The strengthening of the fortification and additions to the city in the reign of Kulottunga I were probably necessitated by the uprising which led to the murder of the Chola king Adirajendra, Kulottunga's predecessor.

The epigraphs also refer to the *Madhuranta'ka Vadavaru*, now called the Vadavaru, running about three miles east of the ruined capital. Madhurantaka Vadavaru evidently named after one of the titles of Rajendra I, was a source of irrigation channel called *Anai vettuvan Kal* (channel of destroyer of elephants) is also mentioned.⁵

Esalam Copper - Plates

The recently discovered copper plates of Esalam describe all the historic events of Rajendra Chola in its sanskrit portion. It narrates some significant exploits of his as follows:

1. He conquered the Chalukya ruler Jayasimha.
2. He brought the pure water of Ganges to his country and surpassed Bhagiratha in the effort.

3. This Rajendra established the Gangaikondacholapuri after his name and built a great temple also named after him to Lord Mahesvara out of great devotion. He was deeply attached to the lotus feet of that Lord like a bee ever humming over Parijata flower.⁶

Though the royal order engraved in Esalam plates was issued in the 24th regnal year of Rajendra I, it was to take with retrospective effect from his 15th regnal year itself. Since the above narrations are found in this charter, it could be presumed that Gangaikondacholapuram must have been in existence before his 15th regnal year, corresponding to 1029 A.D.

Thiruvallangadu Plates

In the Thiruvallangadu plates also there is a mention about Chola-ganga which was the liquid pillar of victory that Rajendra created in memory of his conquest over Gangetic region. The relevant portion found in this copper plate is given below:

“The light of the solar race (Rajendra) mocking Bhagiratha who by the force of his austerities caused the descent of the Ganga, set out to sanctify his own land with the waters of that stream brought by the strength of his arm.”

As this grant was issued in Rajendra's sixth regnal year, there is every possibility that the city Gangaikondacholapuram could have been built before his sixth regnal year *i.e.* 1020 A.D.

The Karanthai Plates

The Karanthai plates of Rajendra Chola gives full detail of his exploits in enchanting Sanskrit verses. They are as follows:

“After Rajaraja had gone to enjoy the heaven after having enjoyed the earth, this brave Madhurantaka, an ocean with precious stones of (good) qualities bore the burden of the earth.

Wearing on his head the golden crown, shining on account of the radiance of the Padmaraga (stone), he shone like the mountain of sunrise in the morning bearing aloft on its top the disc of the sun.

While the king Madhrantaka who acted like Vishnu, bore the earth by his great arm, the world shone like the orb of the moon emerging out of the cave of the mouth of Rahu, the Kali.

When (the king) ruled this earth, the people were devoted to Dharma and their own duties free from portentous happenings, ever wealthy and with pomp subdued, had eternal wealth and (subdued pomp) were exceedingly gay and happy, and took delight in truth; (there were) timely rains; the rivers had pure water, and the earth was everywhere adorned with varied yields (of grains).

This king who, like the sun, the progenitor of his race reached the eminence of Dharma resembling the Udaya mountain day after day, who was bowed by the whole world, who set his feet (or rays) on the heads (or summits) of several kings (or mountains) decked with thousands of spotless jewels, who possessed fierce prowess (or great brilliance), who with his arms (or rays) favoured the whole world, and who following the good path (the heavens), illumined the universe.

The Kamboja king, aspiring for his (Rajendra's) friendship (and) in order to save his own fortunes sent him a triumphant chariot, with which he had conquered the armies of the enemy kings in the battles.

Having pleased (the king) of unequalled prowess with countless good (or Bhadra kind of) elephants looking like fresh clouds that (elephants and clouds) sport on the mountains, and were worthy of being used for the coronation; (or were about to shower rains) the wise lord of Chakra-goshtha obtained immense wealth.

It is no wonder that all kings carried out his command out of fear, because even Mahendra bears it on his head even today.

He became eager to capture Manyakheta to fulfil the vow of his father that he would never sport on the hills (for hunting) as long as he did not capture Manyakheta.

Which (Manyakheta) surrounded by the Sala trees kissing (*i.e.* touching) the clouds, shines like the expanse of earth surrounded by the Lokaloka mountain.

While that great city was burning amidst thousands of series of flames of the fire thrown by his army, the women, moving in the open spaces of high palatial residences inlaid with varied jewels, appeared on account of the nets of smoke rising (from the fire) like the lightning moving frequently in the midst of groups of clouds.

The divine herds, abandoning even the celestial abode caught by the ever consuming flames of the terrible fire burning aloft from that city probably suddenly fled (away) out of fear. Suspecting it to be the fire of the time of the deluge.

This sportive warrior king captured, even remaining in his own capital all their wealth and vehicles along with their spotless fame, after having burnt Manyakheta by his army (Manyakheta) which was the residence of the Chalukyas as well as the Yadus who have adorned the quarters by their spotless fame and which like the celestial city, was unassailable even in mind by the enemies.

The illustrious (Rajendra) having mounted upon a horse of good breed, charming, (riding) fast as the wind well trained in the five fold ways of galloping accompanied by young princes, with dignity befitting his own, mounted on horses similar (to the one he rode), attached (to him), accomplished in the two arts of painting etc., loved by him understanding his mind intuitively, grateful, wise, versed in (all) arts, of spotless great families and skilful in the art of spying and also by feudatories, possessors of innumerable good qualities with limbs afflicted by strokes of weapons on the foreshore (*i.e.* who had never shown their back) on the battle fields, experts (in fighting) and having arms befitting their rank, the hero in midst of the cavalry (the illustrious Rajendra) pleasing to the eyes and minds of the people and resplendent, displaying Vidakrida made his father Rajaraja accomplished in his vow.

The strong (Rajendra) having conquered the mighty Simhala king by a fierce army, captured in battle his territory. his crown, his queen and her crown, his daughter, his mass of properties, his vehicles and also the garland of Indra and the spotless crown of the Pandya preserved by him (the Simhala king).

How can his greatness be described by me here and now, at whose two feet the king of Ceylon, of known strength and valour, his army having been defeated in battle and himself caught along with his wives, sons, and others, made a howl out of fear.

He of the unshattered (*i.e.* unassailable) prowess and self-possessed made the Purana-dvipa his own having occupied it with army and brought the spoils.

He whose circle of enemies are frightened and whose canopy of fame was spread over all the skies, became a sarabha unto the lion of Jāyasimha when he conquered the very powerful lion of Jayasimha by his strength.

It is no wonder that the fire of his prowess burnt (*i.e.* consumed) the great race of Taila (*i.e.* 1. The Chalukya king of that name; 2. or oil) but it is a wonder that having crossed the ocean it burnt Kedaha (1. The island of Kedah 2. The vessel of burning called Kadhai, Kedhai etc.) which is sealed (sa-mudram).

He of the unshattered prowess, became the beloved of all the kings, having conquered the territory protected by the penance of Bhargava avowed to kill the rulers of the world.

Bringing down Ganges

He, the torch of all the kings and possessing innumerable good qualities, having heard of Bhagiratha as having emancipated his body in the penance (practised) for the sake of bringing down the Ganga, himself caused her (the Ganga) to be brought here to his territory (carried) on the heads of kings living on her banks.⁸

Description of City in Literature

The elaborate description of this citadel comes from *Muvar ula*. Another literature namely *Rajaraja Cholan ula* gives an account of almost all the important places of this city namely palace building, entrance towers, streets, pavilions, temples, chuligas, toranas, windows, pials [terri], madas, dance halls etc.

கோயிலுரிமைக் குழாம் நெருங்கி - வாயிலும்
மாளிகையும் சாலையும் ஆலயமும் மண்டபமுஞ்

சூளிகையும் எம்மருங்கும் தோரணமும் - சாளரமுந்
தெற்றியும் மாடமும் ஆடரங்கும் செய்குன்றும் . . .

This city is mentioned as *Gangapuri* in *Kalingattupparani* which was composed by Jayankondar.¹⁰

Removal of Stones from Temple and bricks from Palace

According to an interesting account published in a local publication of 1855 and reproduced in the *Indian Antiquary* IV, page 274, it is known that the present lower Anaicut situated about 6 km. from Gangaikondacholapuram is said to have been built of stones removed from the walls of the Siva temple of Gangaikondacholapuram. It is also heard from the villagers that carts load of bricks have been unearthed from Maligaimedu and sold out to the nearby villagers. Maligaimedu is a raised mound which is an indication for the existence of a palace covered by the earth.

Archaeological Exploration

Therefore, the Tamilnadu State Department of Archaeology had started its archaeological exploration in the year 1980 by deputing its archaeologists.¹¹ Since they were able to collect a number of medieval period pot sherds, tiles, terracotta figurines, knobs and some coins, it was decided to conduct the horizontal excavation at this site.

Horizontal Excavation

In the years 1980, 1984 and 1991, totally 20 trenches had been laid bare, covering an area of 320 sq. m.¹² In all the trenches the brick structures occurred invariably at a depth of 1.65 m. The breadth of this wall is 1.10 m. These walls are built of backed bricks in *header-stretcher* method. It seems that they used clay mixed with jaggery juice as binding material.

Construction of Walls

On the surface of these walls, thick lime mortar appears denoting that it should be the ground floor of the building. The thickness of the mortar is about 4 cm. There are 3 or 4 layers in this mortar. This wall is built with 14 courses of bricks upto one level and below it, it goes upto 23 courses of bricks. At the 15th course the thickness of the walls extends adding 9 cm. on each side. The measurement of the brick is 24.5x13.5x6 cm. On the floor of this wall a few granite stones having a socket at

the centre are found placed at an equal distance of 2 m. In the entire area we get 32 such granite base stones. These stones seem to have been used for bearing the wooden or stone pillars that supported the superstructure of this palace. The measurement of each base stone is 65x60x30 cm.

Two Parallel Walls

There are two walls running side by side leaving a gap of 55 cm. in between them. This gap is filled with river sand. This shows that the centre space was left intentionally to keep the building cool and to give strength to the walls. These double walls go east-west and north-south directions.

Three Layers only

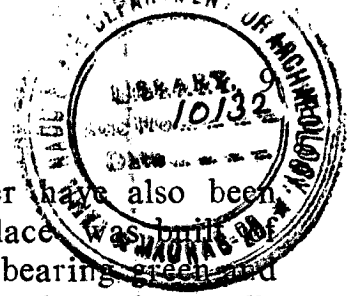
In all the trenches it is found that there are only two or three layers. The first layer consists of thick sand mixed with clay in red colour. There are also some brick bats in this layer and is found difficult to dig this. The characteristic of the second layer is of loose sand mixed with brick bats. In this layer number of potsherds are found. The third layer is significant because it consists of thick clay having an yellow band. This yellow band occurs in all the trenches at a particular depth *i.e.* 1.65 cm. very close to the lime mortar. So it is obvious that this layer was contemporary of this palace building. This layer is about 20 cm. in thickness.

Three Buildings of Different Periods

In the trenches dug in the year 1991 a wall just below the level of the walls found in other trenches was noticed. It gives an impression that there must have been an earlier structure, over the remnants of which, the palace of Rajendra Chola must have been built. In the trenches laid bare on the eastern side of the earlier trenches it is noticed that a wall built of small brick bats over the remnants of the structure of Rajendra I's period. Altogether three buildings belonging to different periods are noticed in Gangaikondacholapuram excavation.

Tiles, Iron Nails, Clamps & Painted Plaster

During the excavation a considerable number of tiles, intended to use on the ceiling, iron nails and clamps intended for fixing the wooden



beams one over the other and joining them together have also been found. These suggest that the superstructure of this palace was built of wood having tiles on the ceiling. Some pieces of plaster bearing green and blue colour painting have also been collected suggesting that the walls of this palace had been painted with different colours. Some of the tiles are in hexagonal shape. The maximum length of the nail is about 50 cm. while the smallest nail is in 2 cm. A knob made of copper was also found suggesting that it might have been used on the wooden door.

Terracotta Objects, Bone and Ivory Carvings

Some terracotta objects of artistic value have also been collected. The most significant finding of this site are the exquisite ivory or bone carvings such as the figures of Yali, Lion, Elephant and some unidentifiable animals. The mane of the Lion, the legs of the Lion, the face of the Yali, the eyes of animals and some other parts of the body that are executed with great care and patience have been gathered. They appear to have been used for decorating the throne, cot, chair etc.

Decorated Stone Objects

A considerable number of decorated stone objects have also been unearthed. These stones are red in colour probably brought from Kalinga region. The objects are of blossomed lotus, birds, ducks, human head etc. These objects seem to have been used for decorating the walls.

Porcelain & Celadon Ware

The porcelain wares which were seemingly brought from South East Asian countries are in different shapes. Professor Carewell of Japan had identified these wares and dated them to 11th century A.D. These wares appear in two colours. One group is of light green and the other of white. On all these wares, salt glaze shining is given for fine appearance. There are also some celadon wares in grey, light green and red colour. These wares are somewhat thicker than the porcelain sherds. Vessels of this ware are bigger in size. Some of the vessels of this ware have handles too.

Glass and Shell bangles

This excavation had yielded some interesting bangle pieces also. They are collected from 80 cm. to 2.5 metre depth. These glass bangles

are of black, yellow and blue in colour. A few conch bangles have also been collected bearing some fascinating ornamentations. A majority of the glass bangles are in black colour.

Beads

Some beads in different shapes were also procured, such as barrel type, circular type, star type and hemispherical type. These beads are made of different materials, namely paste, shell, clay and crystal. Of them the bead made of crystal is more attractive and fascinating.

Coarse Red Ware

Coarse red ware is the predominant ware occurred in these trenches. They have some decoration on the shoulder and rim portions.

Manmalai, Fort wall Excavations

In order to ascertain to what extent this city was expanded, one trench was laid bare at a place known as Manmalai (Sand Hill) which is on the western side of the trunk road leading from Gangaikondacholapuram cross road to lower Anaicut. This trench did not yield any antiquities of archaeological value except a brick wall which is similar to the walls occurring in Maligaimedu. Hence it indicates that the city must have been extended upto this part. Then another trench was put just on the bank of a depression which is believed to be the ancient moat, south of Guruvalappur Koyil. The excavation revealed a wall built of laterite blocks. This wall appears to be the surrounding fort wall.

Sluice Excavations

At the closing period of 1991 season, a trench was laid bare just in front of the sluice of the *Cholagangam* in order to find out the ancient structure built during Chola period. As expected this trench revealed the sluice of the Chola period in well preserved state. It had one wall on each side built in semi-circular shape. Just in front of the passage for outletting water, there is a depression like a tub built in granite stone. It shows the engineering skill of ancient Tamils in checking the high speed of the water and filtering the sediments in order to save the crops from the high pressure of water and spoiling sediments.

This sluice is built on the eastern bank of the Cholagangam. The Mahratta Kings and the Britishers seem to have renovated this sluice by using laterite stones and bricks during their respective periods.

Kalkulam Excavation

Another trench was dug on the eastern side of a small pond locally known as Kalkulam (stone tank) which is believed to have been used by the royal harem. This trench revealed a small channel built of granite stones either for bringing water to this pond or for taking water from this pond to other parts of this city. The sides of this channel is strengthened by putting laterite boulders.

On the whole, the excavation has brought to light the hidden structures of a metropolis having its usual other parts such as fort wall, moat, a lake for irrigation and drinking purpose, roads, streets etc. This city might have played very important role even after Rajendra I *i.e.* till the invasion of later Pandyas.

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1. K. A. Nilakanta Sastry; Cholas Vol. I, Page 135
 2. Larger Leyden plates, E.I, Vol. 34, pp. 223-24
 3. Esalam copper-plates, edited by Dr. R. Nagaswamy, Bulletin De L'Ecole Francaise, D'extreme orient, Tome LXXVI, 1987
 4. Tiruvalangadu copper-plates, Archaeological Survey Report for 1903-04
 5. Dr. R. Nagaswamy, Gangaikondacholapuram, pp. 14-15
 6. Esalam copper plates, Op. cit
 7. Tiruvalangadu copper-plates, S.I.I. vol. III
 8. Karandai Tamil Sangam plates of Rajendra Chola, edited, by K. G. Krishnan Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India, No. 79, pp. 198-200
 9. Rajaraja Cholan Ula, 79-80
 10. Kalingattupparani, S. Rajam Publication, p. 71
 11. The exploration team consisted of Messrs. A. Abdul Majeed and K. Sridharan Registering officer and Archaeologist respectively under the guidance of the former Director Dr. R. Nagaswamy
 12. During these three seasons the following Archaeologists, Curators, Archaeological officers namely Messrs A. Abdul Majeed, K. Sridharan, C. Tulasiraman, S. Selvaraj, K. Nedunchezian, A. Rajendran and K. Gautamaputran had carried out the excavation under the guidance of Dr. R. Nagaswamy (1980 and 1984), and Thiru. Natana. Kasinathan (1991). I am thankful to the former Director Dr. R. Nagaswamy and the above officers for their memorable services.

