

Sailing to Supremacy: The Naval Expedition of Rajendra Chola on South East Asia

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Abstract

The study delves into the history of the Chola Dynasty, focusing on their military prowess and naval expeditions. The Cholas, known for their ambitious rulers like Rajaraja I and Rajendra I, embarked on successful campaigns both within their land and overseas territories. Through inscriptions, we explore the military strength of the Cholas, highlighting their strategic advancements and conquests in regions such as Maldives, Sri Lanka, Countries in Malay Peninsula. The role of the Navy in these conquests is examined, shedding light on how the Cholas utilized merchant ships for transporting soldiers to foreign lands. By analysing historical accounts and inscriptions, we uncover the Cholas dynasty's military strategies, naval capabilities and the key figures involved in their expansionist endeavours.

Keyword: *navy, invasion, navigation, south east asia, mercantile ships.*

Introduction

Throughout history, every sovereign, be it king or queen, pursued their unique desires and ambitions. Many among them harboured dreams akin to Alexander the Great, yearning for global domination. Dynasties frequently embarked on campaigns of conquest against neighbouring realms, seeking to expand their territories and fortify their domains. This drive for expansion necessitated a focus on strengthening both the army and navy forces, with military prowess emerging as a defining attribute of a dynasty's power and influence. Even those rulers inclined towards peace found themselves compelled to maintain a formidable military apparatus for the sole purpose of safeguarding their realms from external threats.

Within the triumvirate of formidable dynasties in Tamil Nadu's history, the Cholas stood out with profound significance. Renowned for their military prowess, illustrious monarchs such as Karikala Chola, Kilivalavan, Rajaraja I, Rajendra I, and Kulothunga I became synonymous with daring foreign expeditions. Fuelled by ambition, these rulers orchestrated highly successful campaigns, both on land and across distant shores. The Imperial Cholas, in particular, boasted a formidable naval force, which proved instrumental in their triumphant invasions of territories spanning from the Maldives and Sri

Lanka to Indonesia, Myanmar, Thailand, Java, and Sumatra.

Objective

1. To analyse the naval power and to understand the strategic utilization of merchant ships by the chola dynasty in their overseas conquests.
2. To focus on their expedition to South East Asia.
3. To examine the historical accounts and inscriptions about the invasion.
4. To study the navigational knowledge of cholas.
5. To understand the role of navy in expansionist endeavours.

Methodology

This study is being an interdisciplinary, the data were derived mainly from literature and archaeological sources. Hence, methodology used in this study is descriptive and analytical.

Review of Literature

Numerous journal, books and reports exploring archaeological sources were collected to conduct this study, focusing on the naval expedition of Rajendra Chola over the South East Asian nations.

Navy of the Cholas

In delving into the annals of medieval Tamil Nadu, the primary reservoirs of historical knowledge are predominantly found in inscriptions. These inscriptions serve as invaluable chronicles, meticulously recording a plethora of facets encompassing the reigns of monarchs. They not only illuminate the grandeur of royal patronage, recounting tales of victories and magnanimous gestures in the form of gifts and donations, but also provide intricate details of temple activities under their purview.

Beyond these ceremonial aspects, inscriptions serve as windows into the broader socio-political fabric of the time. They offer nuanced glimpses into the intricacies of governance, shedding light on matters of political intrigue, tax regimes, and the cultural milieu prevalent during the era. Moreover, they provide invaluable insights into the bustling trade networks, artistic achievements, and the ebb and flow of military engagements that defined the period.

However, it's essential to approach these historical artifacts with a critical eye. While they offer a wealth of information, it's acknowledged that certain details, especially pertaining to military affairs such as the size of armies, the arsenal employed, and the actual strength of military forces, often veer into realms of exaggeration or myth. Hence, to distil accurate historical truths from these inscriptions, rigorous cross-referencing and meticulous scrutiny are imperative, ensuring a more nuanced understanding of the military dynamics that shaped medieval Tamil Nadu.

The Chola Navy is rarely mentioned in historical inscriptions, but one notable exception is an inscription found in Sirkazhi, Tamil Nadu, dated to 1187 CE. This inscription references a naval officer named Araiyan Kadalkolamitanan alias AmarkonPallavaryan. It details that AmarakonPallavarayan held the title of Tandalnayagam karaippadayilar, a variation of Dandanayagam, which translates to commander of the army. He was also one of the guarantors ensuring that landowners paid their taxes to the government. The term Karaippadayilar can be interpreted as an army stationed at the seashore, suggesting a naval force. Furthermore, the name Kadalkolamitanan translates to "one who floated while the sea engulfed," indicating a strong association with the sea, either personally or within his family.

Additional evidence of the Chola Navy's existence comes from other historical references. Rajendra I's eulogy, for instance, mentions the term *kalam*, which is indicative of ships or maritime vessels. Moreover, Tamil inscriptions found in Barus and Sumatra refer to the term *Marakkalam*, further implying a connection to naval activity. These references collectively highlight the maritime prowess and naval activities of the Chola dynasty, even though explicit mentions in inscriptions are rare.

Given the scant information about the Chola navy, it is possible that the Cholas did not engage in naval battles, focusing instead on land warfare. Many scholars suggest that the Chola naval force primarily comprised merchant ships used to transport their land army to foreign territories where battles were fought. The ships employed were predominantly mercantile vessels known as *sangara*, *colandia*, and *kattumaram*.

The *sangara* were coastal vessels constructed by binding single logs of wood together, capable of carrying large cargoes. The *colandia* were ocean-going ships designed for long-distance travel. The *kattumaram* were small wooden boats used to transport goods, soldiers, or merchants from the shore to the larger ships. Based on this, it can be inferred that the *sangara* and *colandia* were used to transport large numbers of soldiers to various foreign regions, with the *kattumaram* facilitating their transfer from the larger ships to the shore.

Invasion of Rajendra Chola I to South East Asia

By the 9th century CE, the Cholas had risen to prominence as a formidable kingdom in Tamilagam. Their influence expanded significantly, reaching several central Indian states such as Orissa and parts of West Bengal. Among the illustrious rulers of the Chola dynasty, Rajaraja I stands out as a particularly significant figure. During his reign, he achieved notable military successes, capturing the Chalukya kingdoms, the Chera kingdom, and the northern parts of Ceylon from the Pandyas. Rajaraja I also undertook expeditions to the Lakshadweep and Maldives islands, where he not only captured these territories but also established trading ports, thereby maintaining robust trade contacts with Western merchants.

Rajendra I, son of Rajaraja I, extended the Chola empire's influence even further. Known as Parakesari

Varman Rajendra I, he was declared heir by his father during the latter's final days, with inscriptions indicating a period of joint rule between father and son in Tanjore. Upon the death of king Rajaraja I in 1014, Rajendra I began his independent rule. At the time of his ascension, the Chola territory encompassed modern Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra, parts of Orissa, West Bengal, Sri Lanka, and several islands in the Lakshadweep and Maldives.

One of the most remarkable achievements of Rajendra I's reign was his ambitious naval invasion of the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra Island. This expansion demonstrated not only the Chola dynasty's military prowess but also their maritime capabilities. Rajendra I's naval campaigns were significant in establishing the Cholas as a dominant maritime power in the Indian Ocean region, thereby extending their influence and fostering trade relations far beyond the Indian subcontinent. This period marked the height of Chola power, characterized by extensive territorial expansion, economic prosperity, and cultural development.

The South Eastern kingdoms invaded by the forces of Rajendra I, as mentioned in his eulogy, include Srivijaya on Sumatra Island, Pannai of Eastern Sumatra, Malaiyur, Mairudingam, Mapappalam on the Malay Peninsula, Madamalingam (possibly located on the Kra Isthmus), Ilamuridesam (North Sumatra), Manakkavaram (modern-day Nicobar Islands), and Kadaram on the Malay Peninsula. These were small dominions ruled by various rulers in and around the Malay Peninsula and other islands in Southeast Asia. Following his victory over Kadaram, Rajendra I was first named Kadaram Kondan, highlighting this significant conquest.

Causes for the invasion

The term Digvijaya refers to the practice of invading other countries to establish one's supremacy or to assert power in all directions. This was a practice that the Early Cholas engaged in as well. Following this tradition, Rajendra Chola I also conducted his own Digvijaya. He successfully carried out a Digvijaya campaign in Northern India, which significantly boosted his confidence and ambition. This success served as a catalyst, leading him to extend his Digvijaya efforts towards Southeast Asia. According to

historian K.A. Neelakanda Sastri, the naval expedition of Rajendra I to Southeast Asia was indeed part of his broader Digvijaya campaign, aimed at asserting Chola dominance in that region as well. Rajendra I's ambitious and far-reaching campaigns exemplified the Chola dynasty's desire to expand their influence and demonstrate their power across vast territories, both on land and at sea.

Many scholars argue that historical invasions were primarily driven by a quest for plunder. The eulogy of Rajendra I mentions the "hefty treasure" accumulated by the king during his invasions, suggesting that material wealth was a significant motive. The regions in the east, known as Suvarnadwipa, were renowned for their gold exports, making them attractive targets for such expeditions. However, in the case of Rajendra I, his kingdom was already flourishing during his reign. The delta region under his control was rich both materially and financially.

Rajendra I did not annex the lands he captured during his invasions into his territory, nor did he establish any form of rule over these regions. Furthermore, there was no prior enmity or conflicts between the Cholas and Southeast Asia before his invasion. Historical texts, such as a song in Pattinappalai, mention the abundance of products from Kadaram being heaped in Chola ports, indicating a history of cordial trade relations between the two regions. Even in medieval times, the relationship between the Cholas and Southeast Asia remained friendly.

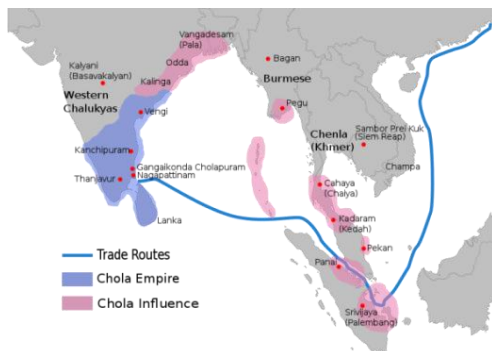
Some historians, like Spencer, suggest that the Srivijaya rulers imposed taxes on traders, which might have upset the Chola rulers and led to war. However, this theory has not been conclusively proven. Despite the uncertainty surrounding the exact reasons for the invasion, it is plausible to conclude that Rajendra I's campaign in Southeast Asia was primarily a demonstration of his supremacy and power. His actions were likely motivated by a desire to assert dominance and to be recognized for his military and naval prowess, rather than any immediate economic or territorial gains.

Course of Attack

The Tamil people were renowned for their seafaring abilities. They navigated the vast oceans by meticulously observing and considering the alignment of stars, the

patterns of monsoon winds, sea currents, and the occurrence of cyclones. During the winter season, ships setting sail from India to the Malay Peninsula navigated through the Andaman Sea via the Ten Degree Channel to reach the ports of the Malay Peninsula.

Similarly, ships from Tamil Nadu followed a navigation route through the Ten Degree Channel, traveling between Nicobar and the northern tip of Sumatra. The Nicobar Islands, specifically Manakkavaram, likely played a crucial role in these maritime voyages. Manakkavaram may have served as a trans-shipment point, where goods were transferred from one ship to another, or as a layover port, providing a place for ships to rest and resupply before continuing their journey. This strategic use of Manakkavaram highlights the sophisticated maritime practices of the Tamil seafarers, demonstrating their advanced understanding of navigation and their ability to efficiently manage long-distance sea travel.



Pic 1. Navigational route to South East Asian Ports

The Strait of Malacca, particularly during the months of September, poses significant dangers to maritime navigation. Cyclones, characteristic of the monsoon season, frequently arise in these waters, rendering sailing perilous. Historical accounts, such as the journey of Faxian, attest to the treacherous conditions, with many ships succumbing to wrecks during this time. However, by December, as the intensity of the monsoon diminishes, the perilous conditions ease, making navigation safer.

To circumvent the hazards of the Strait of Malacca during the monsoon months, ships often opted for an alternative route south of Sumatra, passing through the Sunda Strait. While this route offered protection from pirates, it presented its own set of challenges, as it

traversed a vast expanse of open sea. Despite these difficulties, ships and merchants frequently patronized Kedah, also known as Kadaram or Kidaram, as referenced in the Kaliganthuparani.

Kedah held a pivotal position as a central port for maritime activities, facing the Bay of Bengal and offering safe anchorage. Here, mercantile ships often lingered, awaiting favourable changes in monsoon winds, while others utilized the port for ship repairs or the exchange of goods. The presence of warehouses facilitated trade transactions, contributing to the bustling commercial activity of the region.

Beyond its economic significance, Kedah served as a melting pot for cultural, religious, and social exchanges. It provided a platform for the interchange of ideas and practices among diverse maritime communities, enriching the cultural landscape of the region and fostering a vibrant atmosphere of cultural exchange and cooperation.

According to Prof. B. Arunachalam, the naval fleet of the Cholas under Rajendra Chola embarked on its journey from Nagapattinam. From there, they sailed south of Sumatra, conquering strategic locations such as Barus, Palembang, Jambi, Pannai, Medan, Kadaram, Ilmuridesam, and Manakkavaram, before eventually returning to their home country. However, Prof. B. Arunachalam also suggests that the inscriptions clearly indicate that these conquests were achieved in a single campaign. This raises the possibility that the naval fleet followed established trade routes during its expedition.

The eulogy of Rajendra I vividly describes a decisive confrontation between the Cholas and the king of Kedah, Sangrama Vijayottunga Varman, as recounted in historical records. It portrays a fierce battle scenario, with Rajendra dispatching numerous ships amidst the tumultuous seas, ultimately leading to the capture of Sangrama Vijayottunga Varman along with his illustrious army, including majestic elephants.

Kedah Peak, a prominent landmark in the region, played a crucial role in maritime navigation, serving as a guiding beacon for ships traversing the vast expanses of the sea. Perched atop this peak are remnants of a once grand Hindu temple, a testament to the rich cultural and religious heritage of the area. The temple, dedicated to the Nine Planets, stood as a beacon of light in the darkness,

guiding ships through treacherous waters during the darkest nights.

Additionally, scattered throughout the Bujang Valley, located at the foothills of Kedah Peak, are the remains of several Hindu temple sites. These archaeological sites serve as tangible evidence of the enduring presence of Tamil culture and civilization in Kedah. They bear witness to the ancient ties between the Tamil people and the region, reflecting a history of cultural exchange and interaction that has left a lasting imprint on the landscape of Kedah.

The Chola Kings maintained a well-trained professional army, with the king serving as the supreme commander of the military forces. Evidence of the Chola military's valor and dedication is found in a Tamil Inscription discovered at Alur in Karnataka, which records a lifetime endowment made by Rajendra Chola to Kadaram Konda Brahmarayar in recognition of his courageous military exploits. It is evident that Kadaram Konda Brahmarayar held a prominent position as a general during the Kadaram Invasion, showcasing the Chola military's reliance on skilled leaders for successful campaigns.

Despite their formidable land forces, the Cholas faced challenges in naval warfare due to the absence of a regular navy. To overcome this limitation, they often had to depend on merchant ships to transport soldiers from Tamil Nadu to the Malay Peninsula for military expeditions. An inscription from Anuradhapura highlights the significant role played by these seafarers, who were integrated into corporate bodies and the Chola administration. Military leaders were chosen based on their successful participation in battles and their ability to safeguard the interests of merchants both locally and during voyages abroad, underscoring the importance of maritime trade and naval operations in Chola military strategy and administration.

Conclusion

The Chola dynasty's remarkable naval power, demonstrated through their adept utilization of merchant ships for military purposes, played a pivotal role in their successful overseas conquests. From the strategic navigation through treacherous waters to the

establishment of trade routes and conquest of distant lands, the Cholas showcased a mastery of maritime warfare that solidified their supremacy in the region. Through a careful analysis of historical records and inscriptions, it is evident that the Cholas navy, though primarily merchant-based, was instrumental in expanding the dynasty's influence across the seas, leaving a lasting legacy of naval prowess in the annals of history.

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