

# Cola/Chola Dynasty

The Chola Dynasty was a Tamil dynasty that flourished from the 9<sup>th</sup> century through the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The *bhakti* period, starting in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, saw the rise of temples built for principal gods and a decline in Jainism and Buddhism. Not only does the Hindu temple bring communities together with religion, but it also has social, economic and political affects. The Pallava kings were the first to build stone temples in the Tamil country and were defeated by the Chola dynasty in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. (Vasudevan 10-20).

The Chola empire extended its power over the whole of South India from each coast. In the north, the empire stretched to the Tungabhadra river, and far south, even to include Sri Lanka for a short time. During expansions, the Chola kings established a Tamil culture over the controlled regions and introduced Brahmanical rituals in the temples.

Many kings of the Chola dynasty would build several temples and even rebuilt existing temples in stone. Atitya I (r. 871-907 CE) was one of the earliest conquering kings in the Chola Empire and brought gold back from his conquests of the Kaveri river valley. This gold was used to rebuild a gold shingled roof on the Cit Sabha in Cidambaram, which was then adopted as the family temple for the Chola kings (Younger 16-17). Credit is given to Atitya's son, Parantaka I (r. 907-55 CE), who was next in line and completed this monumental task of putting the gold on the temple's roof (Younger 94). This temple complex is known as the Siva Nataraja and is the only Hindu temple that contains Siva in his dancing form (Younger 1).

Temples began to receive more financial resources and started to become a redistribution centre of wealth and services. The greatest period for the dynasty began in 985 CE with the rise of Rajaraja I (r. 985-1017 CE) to the throne. Rajaraja I wanted to change the focus of worship from Cidambaram to his own royal temple. Rajaraja's reign was followed by his son Rajendra I (r. 1012-44 CE), who would help complete the conquests of his father. During the reign of Rajaraja I, the great temple, Rajarajesvara, was constructed near the king's palace in Tanjavur, the new capital of the Chola kingdom. Rajaraja used this temple to help control the empire and as a political tool to demonstrate the power and authority of the Chola kingdom. The temple was built in 1010 CE and is almost 200 feet high. (see Lippe 29-36). These Hindu temples became an institution to unite different regions and cultures.

When the reign of Rajaraja ended, the empire had no successor and a period of chaos occurred. A Calukyan ruler from Central India seized the throne and took the name Kulottunka I. Under Kulottunka's reign a general in his army by the name Naralokaviran began a rebuilding program at Cidambaram. This included constructing two gateway towers, an inner wall around the central shrine, expanding the temple of the goddess Sivakamacuntari, adding stairs and porches to the water tank, building of the main outer wall and the addition of other doorways and golden vessels for ritual use (Younger 100). Vikrama (r. 1118-33 CE), Kulottunka's son wanted to take credit for the construction at Citamparam and in 1118 CE attended the rededication of the temple. Kulottunka II (r. 1133-50 CE) became a strong supporter of Citamparam and did not allow any inscription carvings in the temple (Younger 100-110).

Temples in Southern India host two different types of worship. The everyday worship is carried out by priests who have a defined ritual pattern. The other type of worship is seen during festivals when huge crowds gather in the courtyards and the deities are carried around the streets. The deities leave the temple to be entertained, bathed and honored by their worshipers (Younger 48). In Tirukkovalur, a Vaisnavite temple is at its center and the rest of the town is built around it. The temple was rebuilt and an additional wall was added in the eleventh century (Heitzman 802). A large number of workers were employed including drummers, dancers, and musicians. These workers had an income to support their family but were not granted a high status because their work seemed demeaning (Younger 50).

The Cidambaram temple complex contains four major shrines as well as ten minor shrines. The shrine of Lord Natarajan is at the heart of the temple followed by the shrine to the goddess Sivakamacuntari. The temple of Murukan, the Mulastana temple and the Deva Sabha are the other three major temples in the complex. Priests and assistants are present each day to complete the daily feeding, bathing and pray to for the deities that are found in the major and minor temples (Younger 24-30).

Markali Tiruvaturai is the great festival that occurs in Cidambaram, which corresponds with the winter solstice. This time is considered a dangerous time and Indian astrology considers it inauspicious. The major event occurs during the morning of the tenth day when the deities are taken out of their shrines to be bathed in a ritual procedure involving priests and worshipers. Another event is the daily reading of the *Tiruvempavai* [hymn of Manikkavacakar] which celebrates the daily bathing that the women and girls do in the morning during the festival month. Before the festival begins, the Dicitar priests

prepare clothes for the deities to wear and perform special prayers to Vinayakan who is responsible for auspicious events. The name of a priest is drawn out of a pot (by a child) and will become the head priest for the festival. During the first day of the festival a flag is raised to signify the beginning of the celebrations. The flag is a forty yard long white cloth that has a picture of an ox and a trident. A procession with the head priest riding an elephant and the temple musicians playing behind him occurs through the corridors to the priest home. Worshipers in the streets bow to him and place garlands around his head. The temple musicians then participate in a preparation ceremony as the head priest brings out a special brass drum from the sanctum that was donated by the bull, Nandi, who is Siva's vehicle and gate keeper. A drummer is selected to perform a special concert with an unusual beat that is connected with this sacred drum. To finish the day, a concert is put on for the five deities who are brought out from the temple. After the concert the priests chant to the nine gods for protection during the festival. The middle days of the festival have similar structure with processions in the morning and evening with a different theme each day. A third procession is placed in on the eighth day in which the beggar form of Siva is worshipped (Younger 54-74).

When the deities are brought out of their temples, there are three major events that occur. The chariot pull, the bathing ritual and the Royal Audience on the tenth day. During the chariot pull, worshipers pull the statues of the deities down the streets. Because of poorly constructed chariots and muddy roads, these chariots can sometime get stuck in the streets. The holiest moment occurs on the tenth day at 4 A.M. when the Dancing God and goddess images are bathed with water, milk, curd, honey, sugarcane juice, lemon water and coconut water by the head priest. Mantras are spoken as each of

the liquids is poured on the images, with Lord Natarajan being bathed first. The images are then covered with garlands and perfumes after which they are bathed using apple juice, grape juice and rose water. The most auspicious moment occurs when water brought from the Ganges River and is poured over the statues. The final bath occurs in sandal paste water, composed of ground up sandalwood, and afterwards worshipers try to receive a drop of the precious liquids the priests begin to hand out (Younger 54-74).

The Royal Audience is the event which brings the festival to a close. Worshipers line up for a blessing but many are turned away. People are selected to help push the images of the deities back into their shrines (Younger 60-70).

The Citamparam temple became a showcase of the Chola kings and their imperial status. Though Rajaraja I and Rajendra I tried to develop their own temples away from Citamparam, the later Chola kings spent much of their time at the Citamparam temple complex (Younger 233-35).

## **REFERENCE AND FURTHER RECOMMENDED READING**

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Lippe, Aschwin (1971) "Divine Images in Stone and Bronze: South India, Chola Dynasty (c. 850-1280)", *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, Vol. 4, pp. 29-79.

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## **RELATED TOPICS FOR FUTURE INVESTIGATION**

Atitya I

Citamparam

Ditcitar

Kulottunka I

Kulottunka II

Markali Tiruvaturai

Pallava

Parantaka I

Rajendra I

Rajaraja I

Sivakamacuntari

Sivan Natarajan

Tamil

Tanjavur

Tirukkovalur

Vikrama

Vishnu

## **NOTEWORTHY WEBSITES RELATED TO THE TOPIC**

<http://www.indiantemplesportal.com/>

<http://www.templenet.com/>

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