

Early Medieval Southern India [UPSC Notes]

The Cholas were a powerful kingdom in the South of India, whose influence extended beyond their territorial domains. They played an active part in the Hindu cultural influence seen today in southeast Asia. Tamil culture and the arts also reached its zenith during the Chola reign. In this article, you can read all about the early medieval history of Southern India, with particular reference to the Cholas, for the [IAS exam](#) history segment.

Imperial Cholas (Period from c. 850 - 1200 CE)

The Cholas are believed to have overthrown the Pallavas in south India. They became prominent in the 9th century and established an empire comprising the major portion of South India. They also extended their control in Sri Lanka and the Malay peninsula and are thus called 'Imperial Cholas'. Thousands of inscriptions found in the temples provide detailed information regarding the administration, society, economy and culture of the Chola period. The founder of the Imperial Chola line was Vijayala.

Chola Rulers

Vijayala (c. 850 CE)

- Earlier, a feudatory of the Pallavas.
- Captured Tanjore and built a temple for Durga.

Aditya (c. 871 - 907 CE)

- He put an end to the Pallava kingdom by defeating Aparajita and annexed Tondaimandalam (southern Tamil country).

Parantaka I (c. 957 - 973 CE)

- He defeated the Pandyas and the ruler of Ceylon at the famous Battle of Vellur.
- He suffered a defeat at the hands of the Rashtrakuta king Krishna III in the famous battle of Takkolam. The Rashtrakuta army overran Tondaimandalam.
- Parantaka I was a great builder of temples. He also provided the vimana of the famous Nataraja temple at Chidambaram with a golden roof.
- The two famous Uthiramerur inscriptions that give a detailed account of the village administration under the Cholas belong to his reign.

Parantaka II/ Sundara Chola (c. 957 - 973 CE)

- Invaded Sri Lanka and regained some parts of Tondaimandalam.

Uttama Chola (c. 973 - 985 CE)

- Most of Tondaimandalam was recovered when he occupied the throne.

Rajaraja I/Arumolivarman (c. 985 - 1014 CE)

- It was under Rajaraja I and his son Rajendra I that the Chola power reached its highest point of glory. The following were his military conquests:
 - The defeat of the Chera ruler Bhaskara Ravivarman in the naval battle of Kandalur Salai and the destruction of the Chera navy.
 - The defeat of the Pandya ruler, Amarabhujanga and the establishment of Chola authority in the Pandya country.
 - The invasion of Sri Lanka which was entrusted to his son Rajendra I. As the Sri Lankan king Mahinda V fled from his country, the Cholas annexed northern Sri Lanka.
 - Another military achievement was a naval expedition against the Maldives which were conquered.
 - The Chola victory over the growing power of the western Chalukyas of Kalyani. Satyasraya was defeated and Rajaraja I captured Raichur Doab, Banavasi and other places. Hence, the Chola empire extended up to the river Tungabhadra.
- By his conquests, the extent of the Chola empire under Rajaraja I included the Pandya, Chera and the Tondaimandalam regions of Tamil Nadu and the Gangavadi, Notambapadi and the Telugu Choda territories in the Deccan and the northern part of Ceylon and the Maldives beyond India.
- He constructed the famous Rajarajeshwara temple or Brihadeshwara temple at Tanjore in 1010 CE.
- He developed an advanced revenue system wherein the land was surveyed and then revenue was assessed. He was referred to as “Ulagalanda Perumal” (the king who measured the earth).

Rajendra I (c. 1014 - 1044 CE)

Rajendra I demonstrated his military capabilities by participating in his father's campaigns. He continued his father's policy of aggressive conquests and expansion.

- During his reign, the whole of Sri Lanka was made part of the Chola empire.
- He reasserted the Chola authority over the Chera and Pandya countries.
- He defeated Jayasimha II - the western Chalukya king and the river Tungabhadra was recognised as the boundary between the Cholas and the [Chalukyas](#).
- His most famous military enterprise was his expedition to North India. The Chola empire crossed the Ganges by defeating a number of rulers on its way. Rajendra I defeated Mahipala I (Pala empire) of Bengal. To commemorate this successful north India campaign, Rajendra I founded

the city of Gangaikondacholapuram and constructed the famous Rajesvaram temple in that city. He also excavated a large irrigation tank called Cholagangam on the western side of the city.

- Another famous venture of Rajendra I was his naval expedition to Kadaram or Sri Vijaya (Malay peninsula, Sumatra, Java and the neighbouring islands and controlled the overseas trade route to China). The naval expedition was a success and a number of places were occupied by Chola forces. He assumed the title Kadaramkondan.
- He was also a great patron of learning and was called Pandita Cholan.

At the death of Rajendra I, the extent of the Chola empire was at its peak. The river Tungabhadra was the northern boundary, the Pandya, Kerala, Mysore regions and also Sri Lanka formed part of the empire.

Rajadhiraja (c. 1044 - 1052 CE)

- He was called Jayamkonda Chola (the victorious Chola king), as he fought with his men on the front.
- He destroyed the Chalukyan cities such as Kalyani and planted a Jayastambha at Yadgir. Cholas were known for plunder and they massacred the people of the region they conquered.
- He was killed on the battlefield while fighting in the battle of Koppam against Someshwar - western Chalukyan king. He earned the title of Yanai-mel-thunjina Devar (the king who died on the back of an elephant).

Rajendra II (c. 1054 - 1063 CE)

- Rajendra II defeated Someshwar, planted a Jayastambha at Kolhapur.

Virarajendra (c. 1063 - 1067 CE)

- He defeated Someshwar II and laid the foundation of a Vedic college of learning.

Athirajendra (c. 1067 - 1070 CE)

- He died while suppressing one of his rebels.

Kulottunga I (c. 1070 - 1122 CE)

- Kulottunga I sent a large embassy of 72 merchants to China and maintained cordial relations with the kingdom of Sri Vijaya.
- He united the Vengi kingdom of Chalukyas with the Chola empire.
- The classic writer Kamban (who wrote Ramayana in Tamil) was at his court.

The later rulers like Kulottunga II, Rajaraja II, and Kulottunga III tried to maintain the Chola rule but it gradually suffered a downfall and came to an end in the 13th century. The Cholas were replaced by the Pandyas and the Hoysalas in the south, and of the later Chalukyas by the Yadavas and the Kakatiyas. These states were continuously in a state of war with each other and hence, weakened themselves. Finally, at the beginning of the 14th century, they were destroyed by the Sultans of Delhi.

Read [UPSC Notes on Early Medieval Northern India](#) in the link.

Chola Administration

The king was at the top of the administration and Chola inscriptions refer to him as Ko, Perumal Adigal (the great one) and Ko-Konmai Kondan (king of kings). The Chola inscriptions describe the king as a great warrior, conqueror, a great patron of art, destroyer of the evils, generous and a protector with a pleasing personality. The king undertook royal tours to increase the efficiency of the administration.

- The administration set up was larger as compared to that of the Cheras, the Pandyas and the [Pallavas](#). However, it witnessed a decline after the death of Kulottunga I and thereafter, the power of local chieftains increased.
- The Rashtriyam/Rajyam (empire) consisted of eight Mandalams (provinces) and each Mandalam had a governor/viceroy (generally a prince). The provinces were further divided into Valanadus or Kottams and each Valanadus were divided into Nadus (districts) under Nattar. The Nadus consisted of a number of autonomous villages. The guilds/Shrenis were also part of the administration.
- The assembly of the mercantile groups/merchants was known as Nagaram and was specific to different trades and specialised groups. For example, the Shankarappadi Nagaram were ghee and oil suppliers, the Saliya Nagaram and Satsuma Parishatta Nagaram were associated with the textile trade. The Ayyavole (the five hundred) in the Aihole, Karnataka and Manigramam were powerful and important guilds. These guilds became more powerful and subsequently, independent.

Chola Village Administration

- The Chola village administration had two types of assemblies:
 - Ur - The general assembly of the local residents of non Brahmadeya villages (or Vellanvagai villages). It is believed that members of the assembly were less than ten.
 - Sabha or Mahasabha - Two inscriptions belonging to the period of Parantaka I found at Uttaramerur provide details about the formation and functioning of Sabhas. The Sabha was an assembly of Brahmans/adult male members in the agraharas i.e, rent-free Brahmadeya villages which enjoyed a large measure of autonomy.

The Brahmana sabha and the Chola court were closely associated e.g, the resolution of the sabha was made in presence of an official deputed by the king. The members of the committee were elected by drawing lots or by rotation. The membership was governed by certain criteria such as the ownership of land, knowledge of Vedas, good conduct, etc. The committee members were called Variya Perumakkal and usually met in a temple or under a tree. The Chola village assembly was the absolute proprietor of the village lands and also of the newly acquired lands.

- Land revenue was the main source of income for the Chola empire and it was usually one-sixth of the produce. The revenue was collected by the village assembly and was paid in cash, kind or both. The land survey was conducted by the Chola government. The inscriptions also refer to land transfers via sale or gift.
- There are also certain references to villages that were headed by women. In a 902 CE inscription, there is mention of a woman Bittaya who headed the village Bharangiyur.

Chola Society and Economy

The caste system was prevalent in the society and the condition of the Paraiyar (untouchables) was miserable. The higher orders like the Brahmanas and Kshatriyas enjoyed special privileges. The Chola inscriptions mention the major divisions among the castes:

1. Valangai - mainly artisans and trading class.
 2. Idangai - mainly agricultural groups.
- Brahmanism (Shaivism and Vaishnavism) continued to flourish during the Chola reign. Apart from granting gifts to Brahmanas, gifts were generously given to temples by the royal families. Rich merchants also contributed to the temples. Under the patronage of Chola kings and queens, a large number of temples were built. Brahmana Sabha was involved in the management of finances and maintenance of the temples.
 - The economy was mainly agrarian - reclamation of forest land, construction of irrigation tanks, expansion in the variety of crops led to agricultural prosperity.
 - The industrial sector also witnessed a leap in the Chola period e.g, Kanchipuram emerged as an important weaving industry centre, Kudamukku was an important centre of betel nut and areca nut cultivation and it was also known for metal works, textiles and coin minting. The Chola kings also maintained close commercial ties with south-east Asia and China. Arabian horses were imported in large numbers to strengthen the cavalry.

Chola Art and Literature

There was also the growth of literature during the reign of the Cholas. Alvars (devotees of Vishnu) and Nayannars (devotees of Shiva) composed a lot of literature in Tamil and other regional languages

between the 6th and 9th centuries. This literature has been collected into eleven volumes and given the name Tirumurais in the early 12th century. They were considered to be the fifth Veda.

- The classic writer Kamban wrote Ramayana in Tamil.
 - The famous trinity of Pampa, Ponna and Ranna were the three priced jewels of Kannada poetry.
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