

2 KINGS AND KINGDOMS

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Many new dynasties emerged after the seventh century. Map 1 shows the major ruling dynasties in different parts of the subcontinent between the seventh and twelfth centuries.



Map 1
Major kingdoms, seventh-twelfth centuries

Locate the Gurjara-Pratiharas, Rashtrakutas, Palas, Cholas and Chahamanas (Chauhans). Can you identify the present-day states over which they exercised control?

The Emergence of New Dynasties

By the seventh century, there were big landlords or warrior chiefs in different regions of the subcontinent. Existing kings often acknowledged them as their subordinates or *samantas*. They were expected to bring gifts for their kings or overlords, be present at their courts and provide them with military support. As *samantas* gained power and wealth, they declared themselves to be *maha-samanta*, *maha-mandaleshvara* (the great lord of a "circle" or region) and so on. Sometimes they asserted their independence from their overlords.



Fig. 1
Wall relief from Cave 15, Ellora, showing Vishnu as Narasimha, the man-lion. It is a work of the Rashtrakuta period.

One such instance was that of the Rashtrakutas in the Deccan. Initially they were subordinate to the Chalukyas of Karnataka. In the mid-eighth century, Dantidurga, a Rashtrakuta chief, overthrew his Chalukya overlord and performed a ritual called *hiranya-garbha* (literally, the golden womb). When this ritual was performed with the help of Brahmanas, it was thought to lead to the "rebirth" of the sacrificer as a Kshatriya, even if he was not one by birth.

In other cases, men from enterprising families used their military skills to carve out kingdoms. For instance, the Kadamba Mayurasharman and the Gurjara-Pratihara Harichandra were Brahmanas who gave up their traditional professions and took to arms, successfully establishing kingdoms in Karnataka and Rajasthan respectively.

Do you think being born as a Kshatriya was important in order to become a ruler during this period?

Administration in the Kingdoms

Many of these new kings adopted high-sounding titles such as *maharaja-adhiraja* (great king, overlord of kings), *tribhuvana-chakravartin* (lord of the three worlds) and so on. However, in spite of such claims,

they often shared power with their *samantas* as well as with associations of peasants, traders and Brahmanas.

In each of these states, resources were obtained from the producers – that is, peasants, cattle-keepers, artisans – who were often persuaded or compelled to surrender part of what they produced. Sometimes these were claimed as "rent" due to a lord who asserted that he owned the land. Revenue was also collected from traders.

Four hundred taxes!

The inscriptions of the Cholas who ruled in Tamil Nadu refer to more than 400 terms for different kinds of taxes. The most frequently mentioned tax is *vetti*, taken not in cash but in the form of forced labour, and *kadamai,* or land revenue. There were also taxes on thatching the house, the use of a ladder to climb palm trees, a cess on succession to family property, etc.

Are any such taxes collected today?

In what ways was this form of administration different from the present-day system?

These resources were used to finance the king's establishment, as well as for the construction of temples and forts. They were also used to fight wars, which were in turn expected to lead to the acquisition of wealth in the form of plunder, and access to land as well as trade routes.

The functionaries for collecting revenue were generally recruited from influential families, and positions were often hereditary. This was true about the army as well. In many cases, close relatives of the king held these positions.

Prashastis and Land Grants

Prashastis contain details that may not be literally true. But they tell us how rulers wanted to depict themselves – as valiant, victorious warriors, for example. These were composed by learned Brahmanas, who occasionally helped in the administration.

The "achievements" of Nagabhata

Many rulers described their achievements in *prashastis* (you read about the *prashasti* of the Gupta ruler Samudragupta last year).

One *prashasti*, written in Sanskrit and found in Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh, describes the exploits of Nagabhata, a Pratihara king, as follows:

The kings of Andhra, Saindhava (Sind), Vidarbha (part of Maharashtra) and Kalinga (part of Orissa) fell before him even as he was a prince …
He won a victory over Chakrayudha (the ruler of Kanauj) …
He defeated the king of Vanga (part of Bengal), Anarta (part of Gujarat), Malava (part of Madhya Pradesh), Kirata (forest peoples), Turushka (Turks), Vatsa, Matsya (both kingdoms in north India) …

Kings often rewarded Brahmanas by grants of land. These were recorded on copper plates, which were given to those who received the land.



Fig. 2
This is a set of copper plates recording a grant of land made by a ruler in the ninth century, written partly in Sanskrit and partly in Tamil. The ring holding the plates together is secured with the royal seal, to indicate that this is an authentic document.

Also, see if you can find some of the areas mentioned in the inscription on Map 1.
Other rulers made similar claims as well. Why do you think they made these claims?

What was given with the land

This is a part of the Tamil section of a land grant given by the Cholas:

We have demarcated the boundaries of the land by making earthen embankments, as well as by planting thorny bushes. This is what the land contains: fruit-bearing trees, water, land, gardens and orchards, trees, wells, open spaces, pasture-land, a village, anthills, platforms, canals, ditches, rivers, silt-laden land, tanks, granaries, fish ponds, bee hives, and deep lakes.

He who receives the land can collect taxes from it. He can collect the taxes imposed by judicial officers as fines, the tax on betel-leaves, that on woven cloth, as well as on vehicles. He can build large rooms, with upper stories made of baked bricks, he can get large and small wells dug, he can plant trees and thorny bushes, if necessary, he can get canals constructed for irrigation. He should ensure that water is not wasted, and that embankments are built.

List all the possible sources of irrigation mentioned in the inscription, and discuss how these might have been used.

Unusual for the twelfth century was a long Sanskrit poem containing the history of kings who ruled over Kashmir. It was composed by an author named Kalhana. He used a variety of sources, including inscriptions, documents, eyewitness accounts and earlier histories, to write his account. Unlike the writers of *prashastis*, he was often critical about rulers and their policies.

Warfare for Wealth

You may have noticed that each of these ruling dynasties was based in a specific region. At the same time, they tried to control other areas. One particularly

prized area was the city of Kanauj in the Ganga valley. For centuries, rulers belonging to the Gurjara-Pratihara, Rashtrakuta and Pala dynasties fought for control over Kanauj. Because there were three "parties" in this long-drawn conflict, historians often describe it as the "tripartite struggle".

Rulers also tried to demonstrate their power and resources by building large temples. So, when they attacked one another's kingdoms, they often chose to target temples, which were sometimes extremely rich.

One such ruler is Mahmud of Ghazni, Afghanistan. He raided the subcontinent 17 times (1000–1025) with a religious motive. His targets were wealthy temples, including that of Somnath, Gujarat. Much of the wealth Mahmud carried away was used to create a splendid capital city at Ghazni.

Other kings who engaged in warfare included the Chahamanas, later known as the Chauhans, who ruled over the region around Delhi and Ajmer. They attempted to expand their control to the west and the east, where they were opposed by the Chalukyas of Gujarat and the Gahadavalas of western Uttar Pradesh. The Chahamana ruler was Prithviraja III (1168–1192), who defeated an Afghan ruler named Sultan Muhammad Ghori in 1191, but lost to him the very next year, in 1192.



Look at Map 1 and suggest reasons why these rulers wanted to control Kanauj and the Ganga valley.



Look at Map 1 again and discuss why the Chahamanas may have wanted to expand their territories.

A Closer Look: The Cholas

From Uraiyur to Thanjavur

How did the Cholas rise to power? A minor chiefly family known as the Muttaraiyar held power in the Kaveri delta. They were subordinate to the Pallava kings of Kanchipuram. Vijayalaya, who belonged to the ancient chiefly family of the Cholas from Uraiyur, captured the delta from the Muttaraiyar in the middle of the ninth century. He built the town of Thanjavur and a temple for goddess Nishumbhasudini there.



Map 2
The Chola kingdom and its neighbours.

The successors of Vijayalaya conquered neighbouring regions and the kingdom grew in size and power. The Pandyan and the Pallava territories to the south and north were made part of this kingdom. Rajaraja I, considered the most powerful Chola ruler, became king in 985 and expanded control over most of these areas. He also reorganised the administration of the empire. Rajaraja's son Rajendra I continued his policies and even invaded the Ganga valley, Sri Lanka and countries of Southeast Asia, developing a navy for these expeditions.

Splendid Temples and Bronze Sculpture

The big temples of Thanjavur and Gangaikonda-cholapuram, built by Rajaraja and Rajendra, are architectural and sculptural marvels.



Fig. 3
The temple at Gangaikondacholapuram. Notice the way in which the roof tapers. Also look at the elaborate stone sculptures used to decorate the outer walls.

Chola temples often became the nuclei of settlements which grew around them. These were centres of craft production. Temples were also endowed with land by rulers as well as by others. The produce of this land went into maintaining all the specialists who worked at the temple and very often lived near it – priests, garland makers, cooks, sweepers, musicians, dancers, etc. In other words, temples were not only places of worship; they were the centres of economic, social and cultural life.

Amongst the crafts associated with temples, the making of bronze images was the most distinctive. Chola bronze images are considered amongst the finest in the world. While most images were of deities, sometimes images were made of devotees as well.

Agriculture and Irrigation

Many of the achievements of the Cholas were made possible through new developments in agriculture. Look at Map 2 again. Notice that the river Kaveri branches off into several small channels before emptying into the Bay of Bengal. These channels overflow frequently, depositing fertile soil on their banks. Water from the channels also provides the necessary moisture for agriculture, particularly the cultivation of rice.

Although agriculture had developed earlier in other parts of Tamil Nadu, it was only from the fifth or sixth century that this area was opened up for large-scale cultivation. Forests had to be cleared in some regions; land had to be levelled in other areas. In the delta region, embankments had to be built to prevent flooding and canals had to be constructed to carry water to the fields. In many areas, two crops were grown in a year.

In many cases it was necessary to water crops artificially. A variety of methods were used for irrigation. In some areas wells were dug. In other places huge tanks were constructed to collect rainwater. Remember that irrigation works require planning – organising

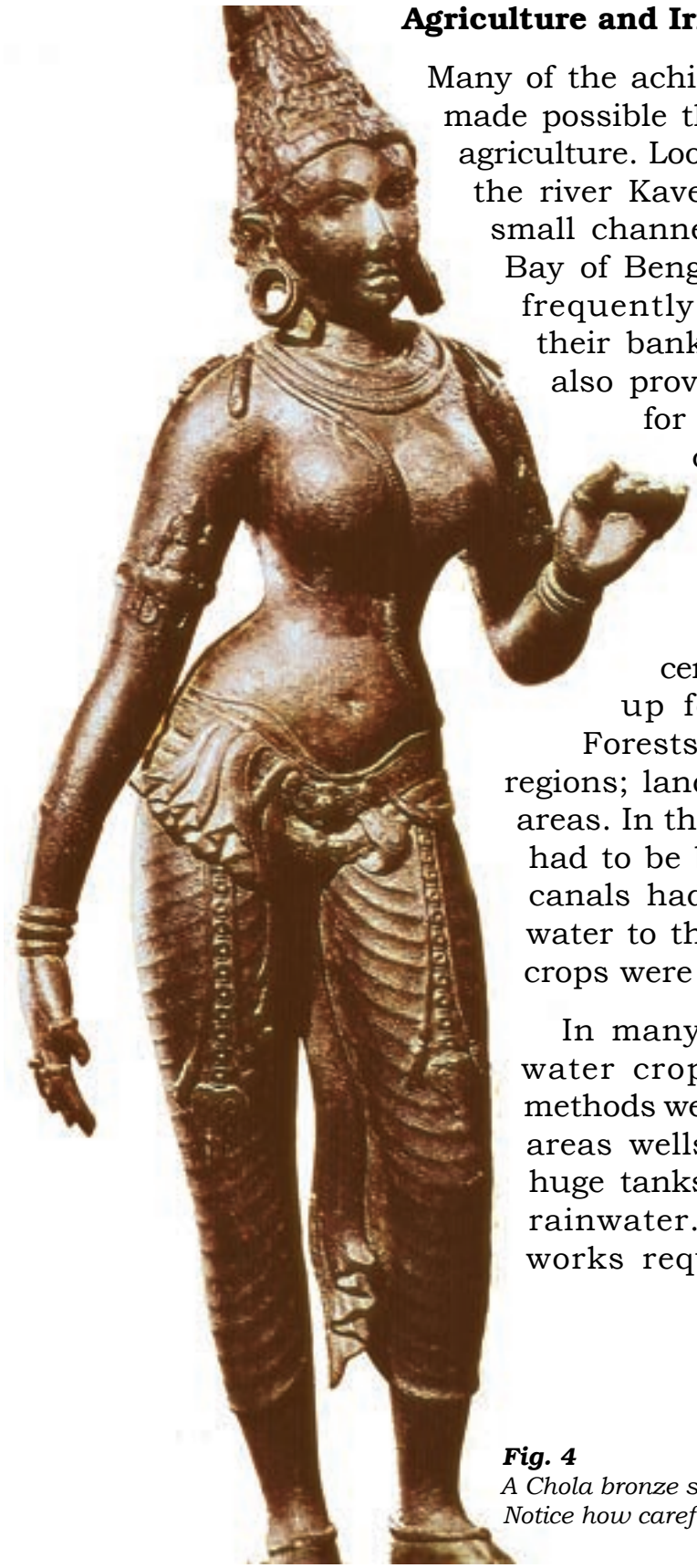


Fig. 4
A Chola bronze sculpture.
Notice how carefully it is decorated.



Fig. 5
A ninth-century sluice gate in Tamil Nadu. It regulated the outflow of water from a tank into the channels that irrigated the fields.
A sluice gate is traditionally a wood or metal barrier which is commonly used to control water levels and flow rates in rivers and canals.

labour and resources, maintaining these works and deciding on how water is to be shared. Most of the new rulers, as well as people living in villages, took an active interest in these activities.

The Administration of the Empire

How was the administration organised? Settlements of peasants, known as *ur*, became prosperous with the spread of irrigation agriculture. Groups of such villages formed larger units called *nadu*. The village council and the *nadu* performed several administrative functions including dispensing justice and collecting taxes.

Rich peasants exercised considerable control over the affairs of the *nadu* under the supervision of the central Chola government. The Chola kings gave some rich landowners titles like *muvendavelan* (a *velan* or peasant serving three kings), *araiyar* (chief), etc., as markers of respect, and entrusted them with important offices of the state at the centre.

Types of land

Chola inscriptions mention several categories of land:

vellanvagai
land of non-Brahmana peasant proprietors

brahmadeya
land gifted to Brahmanas

shalabhoga
land for the maintenance of a school

devadana, *tirunamattukkani*
land gifted to temples

pallichchhandam
land donated to Jaina institutions

We have seen that Brahmanas often received land grants or *brahmadeya*. As a result, a large number of Brahmana settlements emerged in the Kaveri valley as in other parts of south India.

Each *brahmadeya* was looked after by an assembly or *sabha* of prominent Brahmana landholders. These assemblies worked very efficiently. Their decisions were recorded in detail in inscriptions, often on the stone walls of temples. Associations of traders known as *nagarams* also occasionally performed administrative functions in towns.

Inscriptions from Uttaramerur in Chingleput district, Tamil Nadu, provide details of the way in which the *sabha* was organised. The *sabha* had separate committees to look after irrigation works, gardens, temples, etc. Names of those eligible to be members of these committees were written on small tickets of palm leaf; these tickets were put into an earthenware pot, from which a young boy was asked to take out the tickets, one by one for each committee.

Inscriptions and texts

Who could be a member of a sabha? The Uttaramerur inscription lays down:

All those who wish to become members of the sabha should be owners of land from which land revenue is collected.
They should have their own homes.
They should be between 35 and 70 years of age.
They should have knowledge of the Vedas.
They should be well-versed in administrative matters and honest.
If anyone has been a member of any committee in the last three years, he cannot become a member of another committee.
Anyone who has not submitted his accounts, and those of his relatives, cannot contest the elections.

Do you think women participated in these assemblies? In your view are lotteries useful in choosing members of committees?

While inscriptions tell us about kings and powerful men, here is an excerpt from the *Periyapuranam*, a twelfth-century Tamil work, which informs us about the lives of ordinary men and women.

On the outskirts of Adanur was a small hamlet of Pulaiyas (a name used for a social group considered "outcastes" by Brahmanas and Vellalas), studded with small huts under old thatches and inhabited by agrarian labourers engaged in menial occupations. In the thresholds of the huts covered with strips of leather, little chickens moved about in groups; dark children who wore bracelets of black iron were prancing about, carrying little puppies … In the shade of the marudu (arjuna) trees, a female labourer put her baby to sleep on a sheet of leather; there were mango trees from whose branches drums were hanging; and under the coconut palms, in little hollows on the ground, tiny-headed bitches lay after whelping. The red-crested cocks crowed before dawn calling the brawny Pulaiyar (plural) to their day's work; and by day, under the shade of the kanji tree spread the voice of the wavy-haired Pulaiya women singing as they were husking paddy …

Were there any Brahmanas in this hamlet? Describe all the activities that were taking place in the village. Why do you think temple inscriptions ignore these activities?



Imagine

You are present in an election for a *sabha.* Describe what you see and hear.

Let's recall

1. Match the following:

Gurjara-Pratiharas	Western Deccan
Rashtrakutas	Bengal
Palas	Gujarat and Rajasthan
Cholas	Tamil Nadu

2. Who were the parties involved in the "tripartite struggle"?

3. What were the qualifications necessary to become a member of a committee of the *sabha* in the Chola empire?

4. What were the two major cities under the control of the Chahamanas?

Let's understand

5. How did the Rashtrakutas become powerful?

6. What did the new dynasties do to gain acceptance?

7. What kind of irrigation works were developed in the Tamil region?

8. What were the activities associated with Chola temples?

Let's discuss

9. Look at Map 1 once more and find out whether there were any kingdoms in the state in which you live.

10. Contrast the "elections" in Uttaramerur with present-day panchayat elections.

Let's do

11. Compare the temple shown in this chapter with any present-day temple in your neighbourhood, highlighting any similarities and differences that you notice.

12. Find out more about taxes that are collected at present. Are these in cash, kind, or labour services?

KEYWORDS

samanta

temple

nadu

sabha