

## Praise for *Lords of the Deccan*

‘Rarely has the history of peninsular India, of this period, been told as anything more than a dry and ceaseless monotony of battles between obscure and unimaginable rulers. Anirudh Kanisetti’s *Lords of the Deccan* has lifted the history of south India out of the dusty archives of Indian archaeology and epigraphy. Meticulously researched and narrated with a style that is at once lively and judicious, *Lords of the Deccan* synthesizes a wide array of innovations in recent scholarship with the older tradition of political history. Kanisetti harnesses his impressive skills as a storyteller to breathe new life into his subject, deftly interweaving the careers of individual kings, the structures and networks of noble families, and the great transformations in religious, cultural and literary life into a single coherent and riveting account of south India in this crucial period, which saw the region enter historical centre-stage and take on many contours still palpable today.’

– Daud Ali, associate professor, University of Pennsylvania  
and author of *Courtly Culture and Political Life in Early Medieval India*

‘[A] remarkable debut book. Quite unlike drab history tomes.’

– Bibek Debroy, chairman, Economic Advisory Council to  
the Prime Minister (EAC-PM)

‘A sprawling and riveting saga of a region that has often been overlooked in popular Indian history ... Kanisetti has ... [written] a highly readable book without, to his credit, sacrificing robust historical research.’

– *Frontline*

‘The book does much to highlight the historical significance of a region that does not figure prominently in the popular imagination of India’s medieval past ... an erudite, popular history ...’

– *India Today*

‘Do yourself a favour – particularly you lot banging on about how you only learned about Mughals in school – and read Kanisetti’s *Lords of the Deccan*.’

– Prem Panicker, journalist and editor

‘Ambitious in its scope and rich in depth and detail, *Lords of the Deccan* is an outstanding debut. With his evocative retelling, Anirudh Kanisetti restores medieval south India to the prominence and centrality it deserves in general imagination – marrying old learning to new perspectives on everything, from kingship to the evolution of religions.’

– **Manu S. Pillai**, author of *Rebel Sultans*

‘A blood and guts retelling of the Chalukyas ... vividly recreates an era from medieval south India ... erudite and knowledgeable but has the pace and suspense of a novel.’

– **Scroll**

‘Designed to capture the imagination of the reader and keep them turning the pages right till the end ... a testament to Anirudh Kanisetti’s extraordinary knack for storytelling and announces the arrival of an ambitious new voice in the genre of Indian history writing.’

– *Telegraph India*

# Lords of Earth and Sea

A History of the Chola Empire

Anirudh Kanisetti

 juggernaut

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பெரியோரை வியத்தலும் இலமே;  
சிறியோரை இகழ்தல் அதனினும் இலமே.

... We are not amazed by the great,  
And, more importantly, we do not scorn the little.

– KANIYAN PUNKUNRAN, c. Third century CE, when  
asked why he did not eulogise kings.  
*Purananuru* 192, translated by A.K. Ramanujan



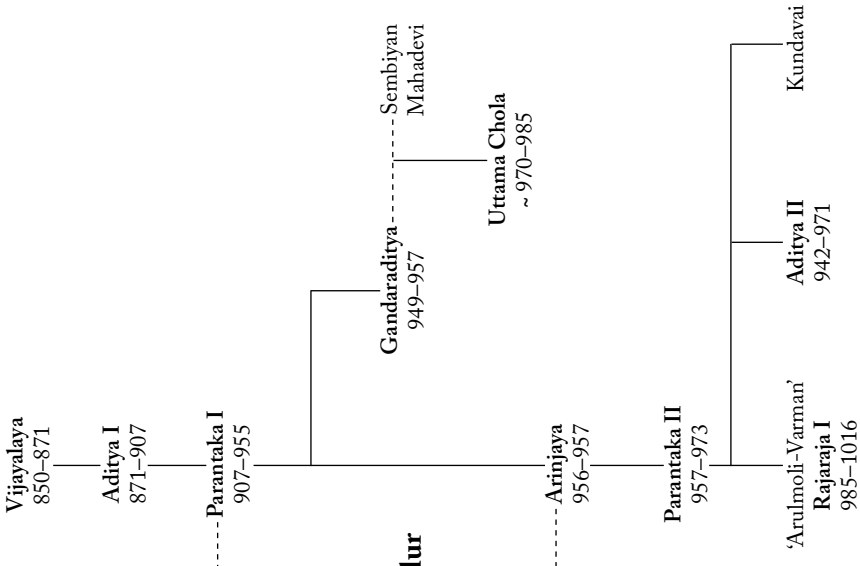
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# Introduction

The Kaveri's water gushed through mud canals, lapped at the walls of tanks. For century after century, it murmured the same humdrum story. On its banks, Tamil-speaking villagers lived out their lives. Their lands were owned by peasant clans in whose mud-and-thatch homes livestock bleated. Occasionally, a king showed up from another region and made gifts at a village's little temple but they were mostly left alone. Sometimes they squabbled over water or herds. But otherwise, for centuries, little disturbed the ancient, uniquely self-governing rhythm of the Kaveri floodplain.

But then something changed. More than a thousand years ago, around 850 CE, a peasant clan arose in the Kaveri floodplain, seemingly out of nowhere. First, they conquered villages. Then they raised armies, tens of thousands strong, and marched them up the Kaveri to conquer the warlike Deccan highlands. Merchant corporations kowtowed to them, following their conquests to bring these kings tribute of camphor and pearl, and to transport their armies across oceans. Their loyalists harnessed the great, lazy sway of the Kaveri, taming its delta, studding it with settlers. Their administrators funnelled hundreds of tonnes of granite, thousands of tonnes of golden rice into enormous new imperial temples. Glorious in plaster, paint, tile and gilding, two of these temples in particular stood out. These colossi were the tallest freestanding structures on Earth, excepting the Pyramids.

Both these temples – blazing with light from dozens of bronze idols, fragrant with offerings of sheep's ghee and heaps of flowers – bore the name of this clan that arose from nowhere to conquer the world. Today we call them the Brihadishvara temples, the temples of the Great Lord Shiva. In their own time, they were called the temples of the Great

Kings-of-Kings, men whose edicts, we are told, adorned the diadems of crowds of princes. These were the men of the imperial Chola dynasty – an unexpected superpower that changed the history of the planet.

The Cholas were unexpected for two reasons. For most of Indian history, the subcontinent has been dominated by either one of two great geopolitical regions: the Gangetic Plains, with its sprawling Maurya, Gupta, Tughlaq and Mughal empires, or the Deccan Plateau, with its warlike Satavahana, Rashtrakuta and Maratha empires.

When the Cholas emerged onto the scene in the ninth century CE, the Rashtrakuta lords of the Deccan were acknowledged, even by foreign rulers like the Arabs, to be the subcontinent's dominant rulers. The Cholas changed all that. They, for the first time, united the vast area of the Tamil and Telugu coasts, creating a Tamil-speaking empire that lasted nearly three hundred years – as long as the Mughal empire that came much later North India. Through a series of spectacular campaigns, the Cholas not only humbled the Deccan Plateau but also raided as far north as Bengal and the river Ganga, symbolically subordinating all of South Asia to their imperial sceptre: the tiger-surmounted *sengol* you see on this book's cover. It was the first and only time that a Tamil-speaking coastal polity lorded it over other proud, distinct regions of India.

Chola power was not contained to the boundaries of present-day India, either. They had a long-lasting outpost in Sri Lanka, and successfully raided the shores of the Malay peninsula, an expedition with no precedent in the Indian Ocean. They sent shockwaves all the way to East Asia. 'The crown of the [Chola] ruler,' wrote an eleventh century Chinese bureaucrat, 'is decorated with luminous pearls and rare precious stones ... He is often at war with various kingdoms of Western Heaven [India]. The kingdom has sixty thousand war elephants ... There are almost 10,000 female servants, 3,000 of whom alternate everyday to serve at the court.\*' Not bad for a family of humble origins.

There was another way in which Chola power was unexpected. They ruled the Kaveri floodplain, a region that had been settled by cultivators

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\* Karashima, Noboru, and Tansen Sen. 'Chinese Texts Describing the Chola Kingdom as Zhu-Nian'. In *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa: Reflections on the Chola Naval Expeditions to Southeast Asia*, edited by Hermann Kulke, K. Kesavapany and Vijay Sakhuja, Reprint., 292–315. Nalanda-Sriwijaya Series. New Delhi: Manohar, 2019. 304.

from the early centuries CE. For much of its existence, agrarian life there had little to do with kings or kingdoms. Divided up into a patchwork of 500 *nadus*, literally ‘countries’, villages in the Kaveri floodplain managed their affairs – irrigation, harvests, markets and tax revenues – autonomously, mostly through assemblies of kin. In the vast landscape of medieval India, this was pretty much the last place one would expect to see a powerful kingdom.

In global history, it is often the most fragmented regions that give rise to the grandest of polities. Greece, under Alexander the Great. Mongolia, under Genghis Khan. And the Tamil land, under the Cholas.

The Chola state was greatly feared and admired by its contemporaries. In the last century of the empire, and for two hundred years after, in Kongu, the hilly region between Kerala and Tamil Nadu; in Nellore and the Krishna-Godavari Delta in Andhra Pradesh, local dynasties claimed Chola names and titles and attempted to fashion themselves as new Cholas. As late as the sixteenth century, Malay kings were inventing family histories claiming descent from a near-mythical ‘Raja Chulan’ – a warped memory, perhaps, of the conqueror Rajendra Chola.

Yet, by the time the British established the Madras Presidency in the seventeenth century, historical memories of the Cholas had faded into South Asia’s endless tapestry of legend and myth. The names Rajaraja and Rajendra had been forgotten.\* The great imperial temples stood empty: communities only maintained their own local shrines. According to the distinguished Tamil historian, A.R. Venkatachalapathy, when the first Tamil steamship companies were established in the early twentieth century, no memory remained of the Cholas’ swashbuckling oceangoing expeditions.†

This changed rapidly due to two movements: the Indian freedom struggle and, soon after, Dravidian nationalism. From the 1930s onwards, the great historian, K.A. Nilakantha Sastri, founder of South Indian historical studies, pored through thousands of Chola inscriptions and

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\* According to late sources composed in Thanjavur itself, like the Brihadishvara Mahatmya, the temple was built by Karikala Chola, the cultural hero of the Sangam era, rather than the historical figure of Rajaraja I.

† Personal conversation with Dr Chalapathy at the Ooty Literature Festival, 2023.

compiled a magisterial account of the dynasty. Sastri found in the Cholas, proud, warlike and confident rulers that seemed to express the highest political ideals of his time: constitutional monarchy coupled with local self-government. Soon after, freedom fighter and author, Kalki R. Krishnamurthy, wrote the explosively successful *Ponniyin Selvan*, a fictionalized account of the rise of Rajaraja Chola, published in a monthly periodical. Krishnamurthy, according to his granddaughter and translator, Gowri Ramnarayan, intended for his fictional Chola clan to embody the personalities of various nationalist figures, in order to promote a sense of pride in both Tamil and Indian identity. ‘The Mahatma’s nobility, Nehru’s charisma, Patel’s steel, Rajaji’s integrity, and the compassion of Buddha and Ashoka.’\*

But in the decades after, as India’s federal structure came to favour Gangetic histories and the Hindi language, the new state of Tamil Nadu found a need for an alternative narrative: a narrative of Tamil glory, of a distinct, Tamil-led Dravidian identity. And the Cholas, with a sprawling empire, were the perfect emblems of this concept, inspiring blockbuster films such as *Raja Raja Cholan* (1973). In more recent decades, they have been claimed as Hindu nationalist icons, with a *sengol*, a Tamil royal sceptre, enshrined in India’s new Parliament building in 2023.

There’s a consistent pattern here: the way we imagine the Cholas has never been about who they actually were. It’s who we wish they were, what contemporary anxieties we want to soothe. A sprawling Wikipedia page on the ‘Chola Navy’ served as the basis for a major video game recently,<sup>†</sup> with one minor problem: there are no actual Chola-era sources claiming that they had a navy.<sup>‡</sup> It seems that their troops instead crossed shores with the help of powerful Tamil merchant corporations. Reams of paper,

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\* Bhatia, Nandini. “The Appeal of ‘Ponniyin Selvan’ Defies Time and Logic” | Interview with Translator Gowri Ramnarayan, Granddaughter of Author Kalki.’ *The Hindu*, 1 October, 2024. <https://www.thehindu.com/books/interview-ponniyin-selvan-125-years-novel-translation-kalki-granddaughter-gowri-ramnarayan/article68663822.ece>.

<sup>†</sup> The game in question is *Age of Empires II, the Dynasties of India* expansion.

<sup>‡</sup> Rajendra I’s meykkirti mentions that he dispatched ships into the rolling sea, but this in no way indicates a standing navy. Compare this to the Chola army, of which we know the names of over a dozen regiments through their temple gifts. It seems strange that a polity so careful about documentation would entirely neglect to mention navy units had they actually existed.



pools of ink have been used to prove, on the basis of various Chola claims, that the dynasty colonized and ruled Southeast Asia and the Maldives – though there is no archaeological or material evidence of this whatsoever. Artifacts from Indonesia overwhelmingly suggest that Tamil merchants made up most of the ‘Chola’ footprint across the seas, and these merchants ruled themselves autonomously. Talk show hosts claim that under the Cholas, India contributed over 40 per cent of the world’s GDP – another statistic based on no contemporary evidence, ignoring the Cholas’ very real integration of markets within Southern India, which lay the foundations for an economic boom in the fifteenth century. Authors have even written historical fiction where the Cholas face off against enemies they had no interest in, such as the Turkic invader Mahmud of Ghazni. This, while ignoring the Chola–Chalukya Wars, a near century-long conflict between the Deccan and the Tamil coast that provoked major military, political and cultural innovations across India’s southern peninsula. The actual achievements of the Cholas have been shoved to the side and undermined in favour of one or the other feel-good myth.

This is how our world was actually shaped by the Chola shockwave, which lasted from 850 to 1279 CE.

With their efficient administration and brilliant military campaigns, the Cholas were able to lavish fortunes on religious sites, contributing to their reputation as divinely favoured rulers. The glorious icon of Nataraja Shiva, King of Dance, was evangelized by a Chola queen who you will meet in this book – Sembiyan Mahadevi – who, in very real sense, was the founder of the Chola empire. Over 3,000 bronze images of Nataraja were produced throughout the Chola period. Before Sembiyan Mahadevi, Nataraja was a god worshipped in the mangrove swamp of Tillai, better known as Chidambaram. Today, thanks to Chola patronage, he is one of the most recognizable symbols of India and of Hinduism. The poetry of Tamil saints, sung to the gods in the morning; even the canonization and veneration of saints: these, too, were Chola innovations.\*

The Cholas also transformed the built landscapes of Southern India.

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\* While the saints predated the Cholas, it is only under Chola rule that there is definitive evidence of the integration of their Tevaram songs into temple ritual across the Tamil-speaking region and beyond.

Before the Cholas, across much of India south of the Narmada, temples were conceived as single, standalone shrines to bolster a king or patron's reputation. But the Chola emperor, Rajaraja I, who established the empire's military pre-eminence in South India, planned his great imperial temple at Thanjavur to also distribute his war-loot and tax income. Nearly *forty times* larger than any earlier Tamil temple, this Home of Rajaraja's Lord, as it was called, was a mega-ministry of public works and welfare, an instrument of the Chola state. As such, Chola-style temples were *complexes* – within an enclosure, they included many smaller shrines, hallways, treasuries, storerooms and kitchens, allowing their temples to act as financial and administrative centres. They gave loans to weavers in cities; rented livestock to herders in the drylands; invested in new irrigation networks in the Kaveri floodplain. This idea soon caught on. By the sixteenth century, well after the Chola dynasty had collapsed, Chola-style temples could be found all the way from northern Karnataka to northern Sri Lanka. Today the Tamil temple, with its iconic *gopuram* gateway, can even be found in the United States and the United Kingdom.

Chola power also had lasting international effects. As we'll see, under the tremendously imaginative Rajendra I Chola, the Tamil diaspora – one of the longest-lasting and most influential Indian expatriate groups – began a sustained expansion out of their coastal homeland. Tamil temples, for the first time, popped up on the shores of China and island Southeast Asia.\* Stunning archaeological and linguistic finds attest to Tamil merchant settlements on the coast of Sumatra, such as a wedding-necklace worn by the Arab or Indonesian wife of a Tamil merchant, and the language of the Sumatran Karo people, which still contains dozens of Tamil loanwords. The expansion of Tamil-speakers was not just an overseas phenomenon. In southern Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, Tamil became a language of prestige and power, contributing to the bubbling multilingualism of South India.

There are, of course, the simple ways, too. The contemporary English word 'cash', for example, comes from the Tamil *kasu*, was popularized in the booming international economy of the Chola period. The Coromandel Coast derives its name from Chola-Mandalam, the Chola Circle.

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\* Earlier shrines are known to have existed on the southeast Asian mainland, in northern Thailand.

Chola-encouraged expansion enabled Tamil merchants to deal in some of the most valuable products of the medieval world: rare camphor and spices, high-end metals and textiles. Organized in sprawling assemblies – a feature unique to medieval Tamil society – merchant corporations like the *Ainurruvar*, the Five Hundred, lasted for the better part of a thousand years, longer than the East India Company. Lured by commerce, travellers came from far and wide to Indian shores, including Tunisian Jews and Yemeni Arabs. North Indian priests and West Indian merchants also migrated to Chola territories. For those dazzling centuries, South India was a land of opportunity.

Many of these goods, much of this talent, was directed toward the sprawling temple complexes patronized by the Cholas. Enriched by global contact, these grew into temple towns and eventually into cities. This ‘Third Urbanization of India’, as scholars have called it, rivalled in scale the Harappan civilization of the Indus Valley, and the early kingdoms of the Gangetic Plains. By the time the Cholas declined in the thirteenth century, the Kaveri’s temple-towns were home to tens of thousands of people, easily outclassing the European metropolitan zones of Paris and London. To this day, most of the region’s settlements are still clustered around Chola-period temples.

What the Cholas actually managed to achieve was so utterly bold and audacious, so full of the constant push-and-pull between rulers and ruled, rich and poor, that it doesn’t require any embellishment at all. There’s no need to imagine a Chola navy when we know that Tamil merchant corporations could easily move armies. Why imagine overseas Chola colonies, when we have objects proving that Tamil merchants were capable of ruling settlements in Sumatra? Why imagine magical temples, when we can read the work of genius engineers and logisticians in Chola structures? Perhaps the Chola story is not exactly what we imagine, but it is no less irresistible for it. The Cholas are much more dazzling when we don’t force them to be who we wish they were.

For theirs a story of how the relatively democratic, egalitarian world of the medieval Kaveri floodplain came to be ruled by a warlike autocracy, which in turn created a wealthy ruling class, whose tax evasion beggared the Chola throne and finally led to the collapse of the dynasty and the trampling of once-proud cultivators. At the same time, the middle-class

collectives of the Chola region found themselves vastly wealthier and more cosmopolitan. Leaving the fading Cholas to their own affairs, these collectives formed alliances among themselves and with new rulers. Later conquered and assimilated by the vigorous upland empire of Vijayanagara, Tamil weavers and merchants dominated Indian Ocean trade by the fifteenth century.

Many Indian histories are imagined as a procession of kings, with the question of how they actually *ruled* handwaved away. Where did their wealth come from? How did they mobilize resources and manpower? How did they convince people to let themselves be ruled? A major theme of this book is that Indian kings were not kings in vacuums, they had to constantly prove their power, their right to be obeyed. This was true for all civilizations, and India was no exception. The ancient Romans, whose emperors splurged on colossal buildings and military parades; the British, who had to constantly assure urbane Indians that British rule was good for them. And it was equally true for the Cholas. Chola kings, having risen to rule over a land of vigorous regional collectives, had to campaign not just militarily but politically and, just like contemporary politicians, they found that temples were excellent sites for political advertisement – usually accompanied with a generous gift and a dedicatory inscription.

These Chola inscriptions will allow us, through the course of this book, to look directly into the minds of these fascinating men and women. But it also allows us to see who they were speaking to. Thanks to a colossal archive of nearly 13,000 Tamil temple inscriptions, this book will explore, for the first time, how medieval wars and conquest changed the nature of Indian society. You will not just meet Sembiyan Mahadevi, dowager-turned-Nataraja evangelist, you will meet Rajaraja Chola, secondary prince turned world-conqueror and genius administrator; but then you will also meet the women captured in Chola wars, the ladies of the palace Service Retinues, forced to bathe and adorn their conquerors. You will meet hard-nosed merchants who ordered mercenaries to hunt down their enemies and drink their blood; a peasant who murdered his brother in a fit of rage; a Chola queen who burned herself to death in a *sati* ritual, hand held aloft, grasping a lemon. You will see and taste the strange and wondrous things of their world: a stone in Singapore bearing an apparently Chola title; a

Tamil Shiva with a Chinese face in the Mongol port of Quanzhou; the meals of sailors on ships crisscrossing the Indian Ocean.

Instead of a procession of kings, this book is animated by the great force of ordinary lives, constantly amidst extraordinary events. It will show you why our ancestors made the decisions they did, how they came to be ruled and, when their rulers began to fade, how they rescued themselves. Only in the chorus of their beating hearts can we hear the roar of oceans the Cholas once sailed.



For this book I have been honoured with a grant from the MAP Academy, which enabled me to undertake fieldwork and research at a new scale. I conducted fieldwork in around 30 temples across Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, the two great seats of the transregional Chola empire. I also explored the sites of their contemporaries and successors. I read hundreds of peer-reviewed translations of inscriptions, spread across the *Epigraphia Indica*, *Epigraphia Carnatica*, *South Indian Inscriptions* and *Annual Reports on South Indian Epigraphy*. I complemented this with over 300 secondary sources, all of which can be found in the extensive Bibliography, with detailed Notes on my interpretations, critiques and suggestions. As a work of narrative history based on somewhat limited visual and biographical material, I have had to make informed guesses about characters' inner worlds and outer appearance. All such speculations are marked as such, and the reasoning explained, in the Notes.

Readers might recognize the names of many of the communities mentioned in this book, such as 'Vellala', a term for peasant cultivators, as well as 'Palli', 'Paraiyar' and 'Brahmin'. 'Palli' today is considered a derogatory reference to the Vanniyar caste, but in the Chola period, it was the name of an impressive and much-feared class of hill warriors. The book prefers the medieval terms only to stay true to the sources, and to show that the meanings of caste names and group names change over time. The greatest possible care has been taken to show that medieval people lived in a different world from our own, and their behaviour and statuses do not always reflect on their descendants. It's also worth mentioning that

contemporary groups are not always directly descended from medieval groups of the same name, a result of the social flux of the early modern period.

Tamil readers will also note that the names of sites such as Tiruvarur and Tirunallam are presented without the customary '*Tiru-*' prefix. This modification is intended for accessibility to non-Tamil speakers, only to make the names more immediately distinct.

In writing this history of the Cholas, I am particularly obliged to the work of five great scholars of Chola inscriptions: Noboru Karashima, Y. Subbarayalu, Daud Ali, Leslie Orr and Whitney Cox. This book would not exist without their decades of tireless work, which has consistently challenged what we think we know of the Chola world. I am equally obliged to the art historical work of Vidya Dehejia and Padma Kaimal, who have helped unravel the many meanings of Chola sculpture and architecture, once again challenging the easy assumptions we have of the period. The book's emphasis on interrogating autocrats and their audiences is inspired by Mary Beard, distinguished classicist and historian of imperial Rome. And my approach to characterizing medieval people owes much to Amin Maalouf, scholar of the Crusades, as well as historian Amy Livingstone's study of medieval French lordly families. I have found, in studying these scholars, that the Cholas shine deeper and more complex in conversation with their peers and forebears from across the world.

A recurring weakness in all studies of the Cholas is the lack of archaeological evidence, which has led many earlier scholars to take Chola claims at face value. However, nowhere in the world has archaeological evidence ever confirmed all the claims made by primary sources. The makers of primary sources were trying to tell a story to their peers, usually a grander story than the actual reality. Increasingly, new excavations suggest this was the case for the Cholas as well, at least going by recent discoveries in Sri Lanka and Malaysia. This is explained in more detail in the text, but all that can be said for now is that the world of the Cholas might be even more fascinating and counterintuitive than what is presented in this introduction.

But contemporary historiography and bibliographies need concern us no longer, for a medieval woman is weeping, quietly, worried for her future.

Let's visit her in her palace, amidst lush banana plantations, a whiff of frankincense in the air. It is time for us leave our world behind and travel to that of the Cholas.