

4.2 THE CHOLA STATE: CENTRALIZED OR SEGMENTARY?

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The Chola state, according to Nilakanta Sastri, was characterized as 'the almost Byzantine royalty of Rajaraja and his successors with its numerous palaces, officials, and ceremonials, and its majestic display of the concentrated resources of an extensive empire' (Sastri 1955a: 447) differing from 'the simple, personal rule of the earlier time' (Sastri 1955b: 200). This statement was criticized later by Burton Stein who regarded the Chola state as 'segmentary' (Stein 1980: 256-7). According to Stein, the segmentary state was composed of many similar segments surrounding a core and was ruled by the king. Though each of the other segments also had its own ruler, sovereignty was restricted to the king ruling the core segment. And the king exercised his sovereignty only ritually in a major part of the state as he had no political authority over the surrounding segments. Stein tried to apply this theory to south Indian states from the Pallava to the Vijayanagar periods.

Borrowing the idea from Southall who studied an African society, Stein first published this theory towards the end of the 1970s (Stein 1977), and when he elaborated it in his *magnum opus* (Stein 1980), it drew support as well as criticism from many scholars.³ One of the most important points criticized was Stein's categorical denial of the king's political authority over segments other than his own. Accordingly, Stein gradually changed his interpretation

³ Critics include M. G. S. Narayanan, R. Champakalakshmi, Kesavan Veluthat, Noboru Karashima, Y. Subbarayalu, and R. S. Sharma. Sharma's (1989/90) critique is considered definitive.

towards the end of his life in 1996, finally admitting that a king's political authority was combined with his ritual authority in the case of Hindu kingdoms, although he did not discard his theory of the 'segmentary state' still interpreting the Chola and Vijayanagar states as segmentary (Stein 1991). Here, we shall focus our discussion on this point, the king's political authority, by examining various state policies and the bureaucracy which implemented those policies.

Royal stone temples of the early Chola period before Rajaraja I can be classified into two types. The first includes temples of a sepulchral nature (*pallippadais*) that were built over the remains of kings who died in war, and the second, those newly built or renovated using stone at the sacred sites of the Tamil religious tradition (Ogura 1999). Reminiscent of the ancient practice of commemorating a hero by marking in stone the spot where he fell, Parantaka I built the Kodandaramesvaram temple, the first sepulchral temple, at the spot where his father, Aditya I, died in battle. Though temples of this type continued to be built in the later period, the Siva temple constructed by Rajaraja I in Thanjavur was a new type.

As stated earlier, Rajaraja enshrined in this temple a *linga* named Rajarajesvara after himself. Rajaraja was alive when it was constructed, and, therefore, it was not sepulchral. Its scale far surpasses that of the earlier Chola temples and is magnificent. Hence it is obvious that Rajaraja wanted to project his own greatness, and the unchallenged prestige of the state, by building this temple. In that sense, it may be taken as a

display of the ritual sovereignty of the king over the whole country, somewhat in accordance with Stein's theory. However, we also have clear evidence in this temple of the exercise of the king's political sovereignty.

As already mentioned, there are in it many inscriptions recording magnificent gifts to the deity by the royal household and other people (see Figure 4.2). From some (*SII*, ii, 4, 5, and 92) of them we learn that Rajaraja granted to the temple state revenue accruing from as many as 40 villages in Chola-mandalam, the core area of the state, and 16 villages in the conquered areas, including southern Karnataka and Sri Lanka. Detailed information about each of the 40 villages is given. For the conquered villages

too, the amounts of grain or money to be paid, as well as the measurements of taxable land are given, though in less detail than for the villages in Chola-mandalam. A king without political sovereignty, or without command over a state bureaucracy, could not have made such grants of villages over as wide an area as this or provided detailed information on each village, including those in the newly conquered areas.

Actually, the Chola state had a well-developed bureaucracy for revenue collection. The revenue department called *puravuvvari* comprised various offices, functions and features such as *puravuvvari-tiṇaikkala-kaṅkāṇi* or *puravuvvari-tiṇaikkala-nāyagam* (accountant supervisor of the revenue department), *varippottagam*



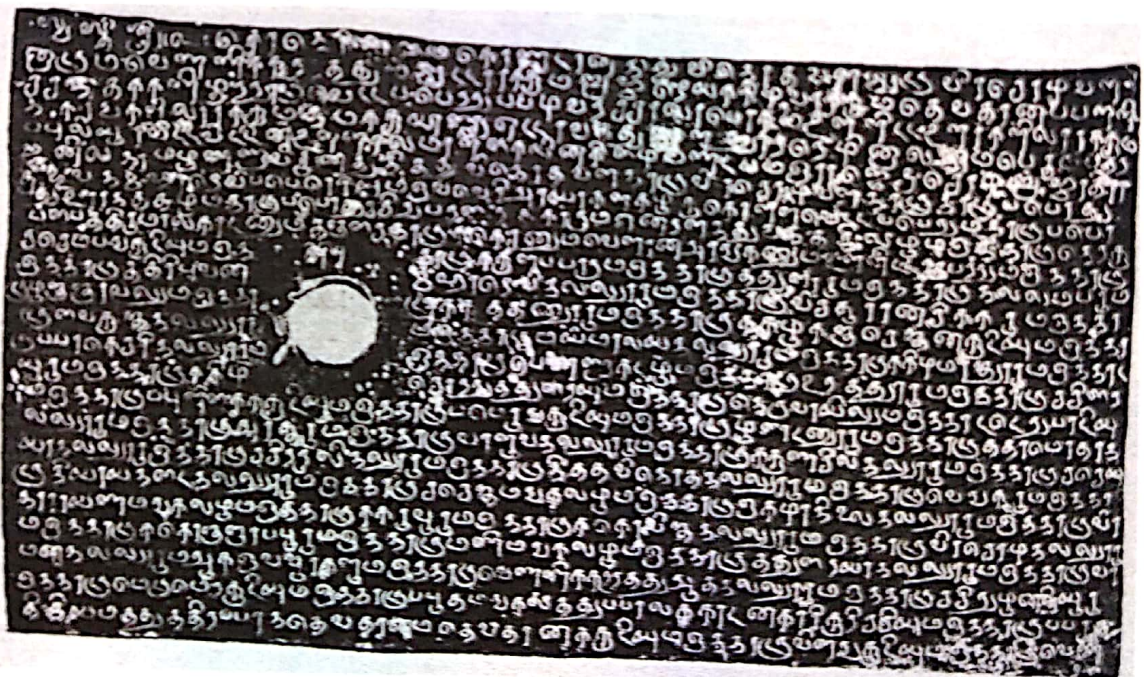
Figure 4.2 Pedestal Inscription of Brihadisvara Temple in Thanjavur
Source: Courtesy of Noboru Karashima.

(the tax register), *mugavetti* (the royal stamp), *varipottaga-kanakku* (the accounts of the tax register), *variylidu* (entry in the tax register), and *pattolai* (the palm-leaf record writer (Shanmugam 1997; Subbarayalu 2012: 226 and 234). In the Karandai copper-plate inscription

of Rajendra I (Krishnan 1984), recording his grant of more than 50 villages to 1,080 Brahmanas, the names of the revenue officers, with their titles and villages to which they belonged, are mentioned as the executors (see Figure 4.3). Names of the other executors coming from the



a



b

Figure 4.3 (a) Seal with Legend and (b) the Beginning of the Tamil Portion of the Karandai Plates
 Source: Courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India.

secretariat and the local administration office such as *naḍḍu-vagai* (tax settlement of the *naḍḍu*) are likewise mentioned. The total number of all the officers thus described in this copper-plate inscription exceeds 40. This alone proves the existence of a fairly well-developed officialdom in the Chola state.

The important officers who worked for the king as secretaries and others apart from those in the revenue department included the *tirumandira-ōlai* or simply *ōlai* who was the royal scribe or personal secretary to the king, *naḍḍuvirukkai*, learned Brahmanas probably working on judicial matters, *uḍankūṭṭam*, the court officials, and *viḍaiyil* who carried out the royal order in tour. These high-ranked officers, often called *adikāri*, had some imposing titles prefixed by the king's name, for example, *Rājarāja-mūvēndavēḷān* (given to Vellalas), *Rajēndrachōḷa-brahmarāyan* (given to Brahmanas), *Kulōttungachōḷa-pallavarāyan* (given to Vellalas or other non-Brahmanas), and so on, which were conferred by the respective king whose name was prefixed. Military chiefs called *sēnāpati* and *daṇḍanāyakam* also bore such titles. Another notable officer was the *śrikāriyam* who supervised temple affairs for the state. These officers appear to have been hierarchically graded.

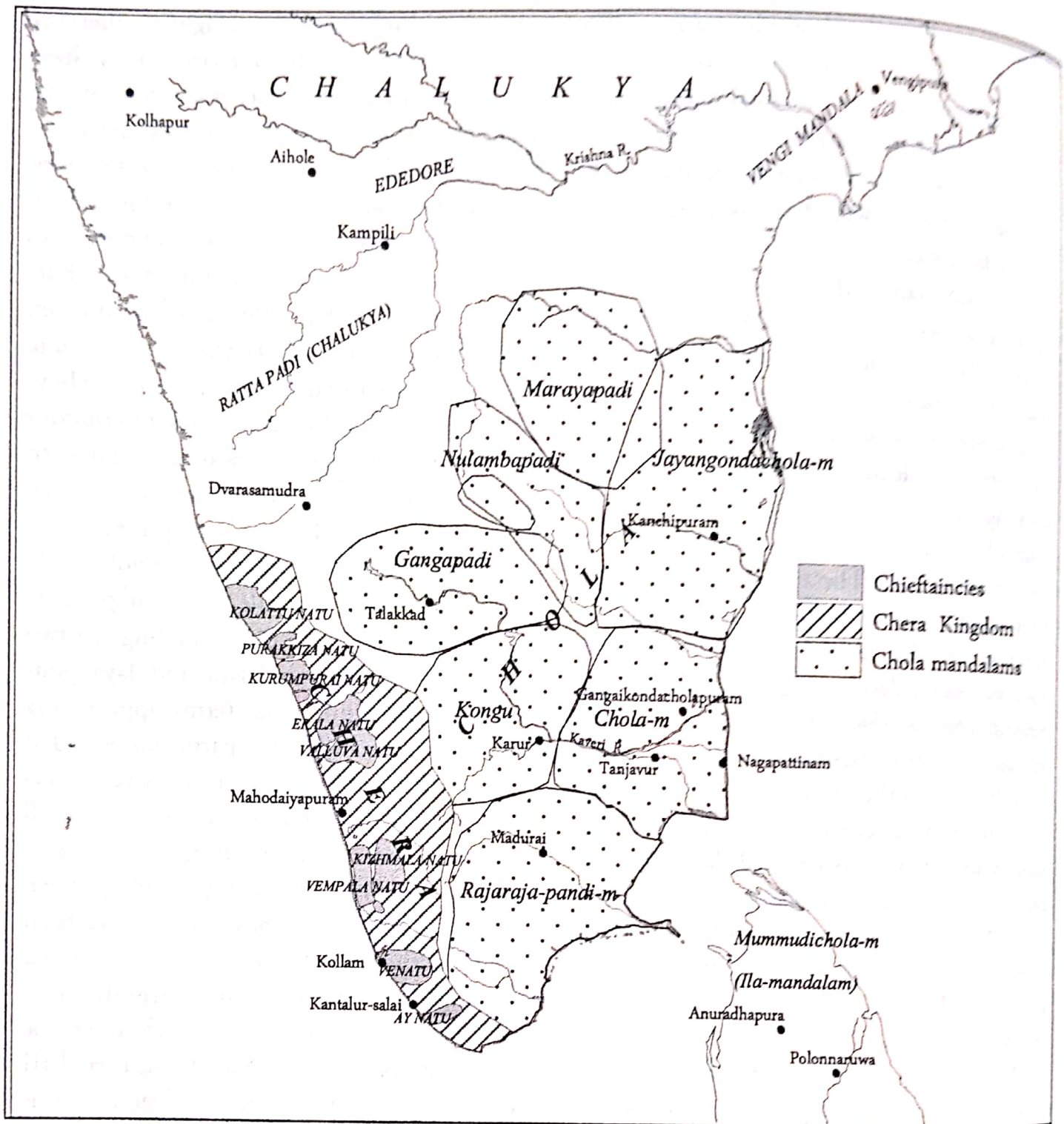
Though the bureaucratic framework was not very elaborate, most of the offices described above had been created by the time of Rajaraja I and most of them continued to function up to the end of the Chola state. Rajaraja I is known to have conducted land surveys by introducing a standard land measurement unit (Karashima 2009: 91–6). In the inscriptions of Rajendra I, we find references to a new measuring rod called *māligai-kōl* (palace rod), which must have been used in the land survey conducted by his father.

It is not easy to get accurate information on the revenue system of the Cholas, as there are

no extant sources that throw light on their tax system in its entirety. To understand it, we have to collate all the tax terms from inscriptions. The number of terms, which seem to refer to a tax or due and which have been collected from published Chola inscriptions recording a land grant and/or tax imposition or exemption in the two core *maṇḍalam*s, amounts to 422 (Karashima 1984: 74–84). This is a big number, which suggests that Chola taxation was quite arbitrary and without a clear rationale. However, if we statistically examine the inscriptions in which these tax terms appear, we can discern a certain logic. There are 27 terms, featuring in more than ten different inscriptions. If we check these terms (inscriptions) chronologically by dividing the Chola rule into four periods⁴ and topographically by differentiating the two *maṇḍalam*s (Chola-mandalam and Jayangondachola-mandalam), some terms appear only in one *maṇḍalam* and/or in particular period(s) (see Map 4.2). However, there are seven terms that appear in both the *maṇḍalam*s and in all the four periods. They are *antariyam*, *echchōru*, *kaḍamai*, *kuḍimai*, *mutṭai-ai*, *naṇṇai-pāṇṇam*, and *veṇṇi*.⁵ These are considered to have been the main taxes, and thus we find an established principle in the Chola revenue system throughout its long rule, though we can infer the reforms in taxation in Period II and Period III from the increase in occurrence of certain terms and the appearance or disappearance of others during these periods reflecting the change in politico-economic conditions of the time.

⁴ Period I corresponds with the reign from Vijayalaya to Uttama (846–985 CE), Period II from Rajaraja I to Adirajendra (985–1070 CE), Period III from Kulottunga I to Rajadhiraja (1070–1179 CE), and Period IV from Kulottunga III to Rajendra III (1179–1279 CE).

⁵ For these tax terms, see Karashima 1984: 69–94 and Subbarayalu 2012: 92–9.



Map 4.2 Maṇḍalams in the Chola State and Chieftaincies in Chera Kingdom

Source: Courtesy of Y. Subbarayalu.

Among the seven terms mentioned above, *kaḍamai* and *kudimai* are taken as land tax, with the former being levied on landowners and the latter on cultivators. As the Chola state and economy depended heavily on agrarian production, cultivation of rice and other crops was encouraged. In Jayangondachola-mandalam

tank water was used for irrigation and in Chola-mandalam river water. In the Kaveri delta and after Period II, double-crop cultivation of rice seems to have been common (Karashima 1984: 94–105). Corvee or forced labour, denoted by the terms *muṭṭai-āḷ* and *veṭṭi*, was used for the maintenance of irrigation facilities

by desilting tanks and riverbeds. *Antarāyam* and *tattār-pāṭṭam* levied on merchants and artisans greatly increased in frequency in Period IV, indicating development other than agriculture towards the end of the Chola rule.

Rajaraja I and his successor Rajendra I obviously intended to centralize the state administration. This intention is also clear from the fact that Rajaraja I introduced the *vaḷanāḍu* (intermediate territorial division) in between the *nāḍu* (smaller territorial division) and the *maṇḍalam* (the largest territorial division) and entrusted the revenue collection of the area to the officers in this new division. The purpose must have been to weaken the local magnates' powers based on the kinship and regional ties in the *nāḍu*, the traditional agrarian unit for production. In the heyday of the Cholas, the state was divided into nine *maṇḍalams* (sometimes called *pāḍi*), including those in Sri Lanka and other conquered areas. In the reign of Rajaraja I, there were ten *vaḷanāḍus* in Chola-mandalam, which increased by the early twelfth century to fifteen as a result of bifurcation and rearrangement (Subbarayalu 1973: 66–7).⁶

As stated earlier, Rajaraja I occupied the northern part of Sri Lanka, and Rajendra I attacked Srivijaya in the Malacca Straits area by dispatching a naval expedition. Both sent envoys to the Chinese court, and all these efforts were to control the East–West maritime trade in the Indian Ocean. It is apparently clear that the middle period Chola kings were determined to build up a centralized and powerful state for themselves and in this they were successful to a certain extent. This view, therefore, refutes the segmentary state interpretation of the Chola

rule projected by Stein and supports to a certain extent the position articulated by Sastri

As for the military system of the Chola state, no definite information is available,⁷ though some names of regiments composing the military (*niyāyam*) are known from the Thanjavur inscriptions (*SII*, ii, 9, 11–19, and 54), which record the donation of money by servicemen to the deities installed in the temple by the royal family. Categories such as *vilḷagal* (archers), *kudiraichchēvagar* (cavalry), *āntiyāḷgal* (elephantry), *parivāratūṭar* (palace guards), and *vēḷaikkāṭar* (probably royal guards⁸) comprise the regiments, the names of which are in most cases prefixed first by that of a king or prince followed by an adjective, *terinda*, meaning 'select'. Thus *Keralantaka-terinda-parivāratūṭar* means 'select palace guards called Keralantaka'. Regiments of sword-bearers (*vāḷilār*) and spearmen (*kondaṅgar*) are also known from other inscriptions. A Konerirajapuram inscription (*SII*, xxvi, 669: CE 997) mentions *Rajaraja-terinda-kaikkolar*. The *Kaikkolar*, who were a prominent weaving caste in the post-Chola centuries, seem to have been an important military group during the Chola period.

We have no evidence, however, as to how these soldiers were recruited by the government. This created a long controversy about the Chola military system—whether the state had a standing army or depended on mercenaries. Some scholars argued for the latter on the basis of a Polonnaruwa inscription (*EI*, xviii, 38, early twelfth century), which records the employment of Tamil *vēḷaikkāṭar* soldiers by a Sinhala king for the protection of the temple of the Tooth-Relic

⁷ For the military system of the Cholas, see Subbarayalu 2012: 228–31.

⁸ Nilakanta Sastri interprets *vēḷaikkāṭar* as troops in the royal service ever-ready to defend the king with their lives when occasion (*vēḷai*) so demanded (Sastri 1955a: 454).

⁶ Rajendra I introduced *vaḷanāḍus* in Pandi-mandalam as well as in other *maṇḍalams* and Kulottunga I extended this set-up to Jayangondachola (Tondai)-mandalam too (Subbarayalu 2012: 214).

of the Buddha in Polonnaruwa.⁹ Although the *vēlaikkāṟar* in the Polonnaruwa inscription may well be interpreted as mercenary troops, it does not necessarily mean that the Chola *vēlaikkāṟar* were mercenary. In this inscription, *vēlaikkāṟar* were associated with merchants (*vaḷaiṅṅiyar* and *nagarattār*), and the relationship between the regiments of the Chola military, including the *vēlaikkāṟar* and the soldiers (*vīnar*, *munaḷ*, and others) employed by the merchant guild (*ainūṟṟuvar*) as their guards (see section 4.4) will be vital in future studies of the Chola military system (see Figure 4.4).

The 'segmentary state' theory advocated by Stein triggered heated discussions in the 1980s on state formation in ancient and medieval India, particularly in the early medieval period (Singh 2011: Introduction). The prominent models of state formation discerned by them, together with the models already presented before the 1980s, can be classified into:¹⁰ (a) the unitary or imperial state model of the past nationalist scholars, including Nilakanta Sastri, emphasizing centralized administration; (b) the Indian feudalism model of R. S. Sharma and his followers (D. N. Jha, B. N. S. Yadava, R. N. Nandi, et al.), focusing on production relations in the fiefs and the decline of trade in the medieval period, following Marxist lines; (c) the segmentary state model of Burton Stein, denying the centralized structure of the state, which is viewed as integrated only ritually; and (d) the processual integrative state model, which can be treated as one, but was proposed and elaborated

⁹ Though denying the existence of a standing/permanent army, there are subtle interpretative differences among scholars on the nature of the army; interpretations such as militia, mercenary, and others. See Indrapala 1971, Hall 1980: 192, Stein 1980: 189–91.

¹⁰ Information on these models is available in Kulke 1995, Kulke 2006, Singh 2011, Chattopadhyaya 2003, and Sahu 2013.

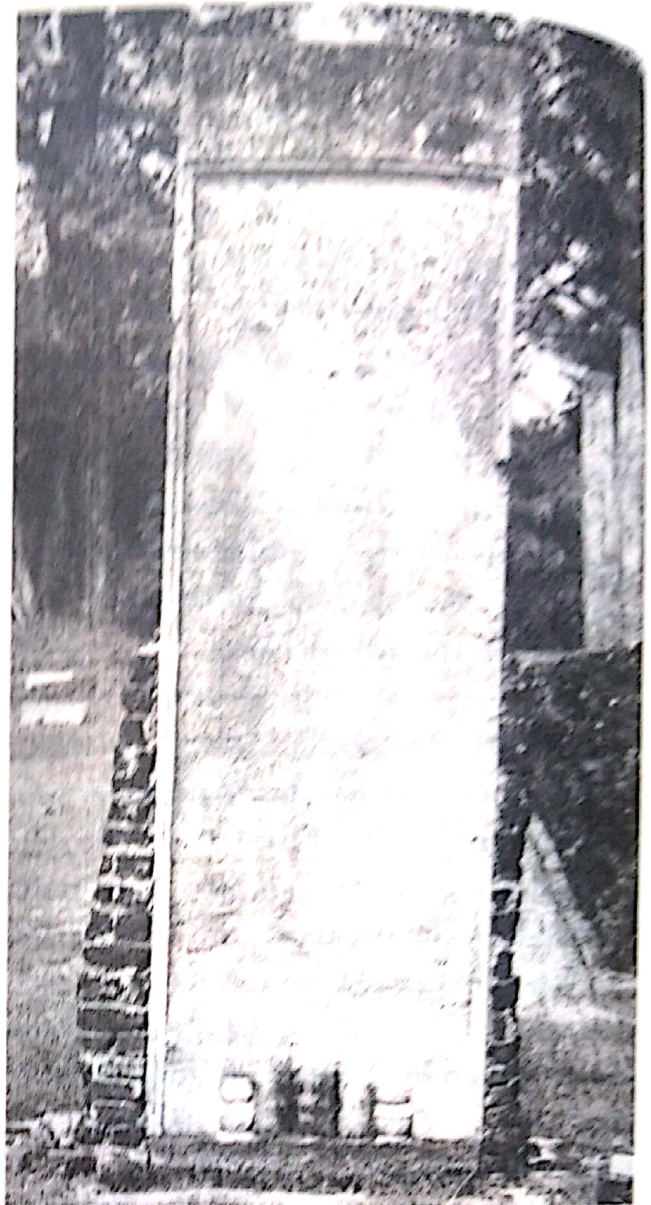


Figure 4.4 Polonnaruwa Stone Inscription of *Vēlaikkāṟar*

Source: Courtesy of Noboru Karashima.

by the following scholars with some difference in the point of their emphasis on a particular aspect: (a) H. Kulke giving importance to the three-stage process of state formation, (b) B. Chattopadhyaya paying attention to the horizontal integration of *sāmantas* and the existence of 'autonomous spaces' in the state, and (c) B. P. Sahu discussing the regional and diachronic differences seen in the interaction between the centre and periphery in state formation.

We may add to the above some more, for example, the patrimonial–bureaucratic state

model applied by S. Blake to his study of the Mughal Empire, borrowing the concept from Max Weber, and the Brahman oligarchy model of M. G. S. Narayanan, constructed through his study of the Cheraman Perumals.¹¹ Lastly the model which may be called the 'symbiotic state' model proposed by L. B. Alayev for early medieval south Indian states showing some similarity with the idea of 'autonomous spaces' given by Chattopadhyaya. According to Alayev, 'the Royal court, local magnates and collective organs of communities "penetrated" one into others, forming a symbiosis' and 'the mutual relations between the [these] actors of socio-political life were not regulated', which makes it difficult to define these states by using

¹¹ The Brahman oligarchy model will be described in section 4.5.

any readymade model, though they show some 'feudal' characteristics (Alayev 2011: 710 in summary in English).

Of course, there are many scholars who do not commit themselves to a single specific model listed here, and we should be cautious in applying these models to south India, as they were mostly articulated through the study of some state in another area. However, these new models have greatly enriched our knowledge of Indian states in general and in future, therefore, we should study south Indian states by examining the new ideas presented in them. Recent studies by some south Indian historians have already begun to respond accordingly.¹²

¹² Responses are found in Veluthat 2009, Karashima 2009, Gurukkal 2010, Champakalakshmi 2011, Alayev 2011, Mahalakshmi 2012, Subbarayalu 2012, and others.