



WOMEN AND WATER MANAGEMENT IN THE CHOLA PERIOD: A HISTORICAL STUDY OF SEMBIYAN MAHADEVI AND KUNDAVAI PIRATTIYAR

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Abstract

Research into Chola irrigation has so far concentrated on kings, the brahmadeya assemblies, and the peasant institutions, whereas the part played by royal women in the hydraulic economy has been little examined. The present paper looks at the ways in which two elite women from the tenth and early eleventh centuries CE - Sembian Mahadevi (the widow of Gandaraditya and mother of Uttama Chola) and Kundavai Pirattiyar (the elder sister of Rajaraja I) -took part in and influenced the water-management situation in the Kaveri delta and its surrounding areas. By employing a qualitative method that brings together published temple inscriptions, art-historical surveys and secondary scholarship, the paper contends that their impact was mainly institutional rather than technical. Both women increased the resources of river-side temples by making endowments of land, gold and perpetual lamps, thus strengthening the temple corporations which, in Chola Tamilakam, were involved in the maintenance of tanks, channels and sluices. The paper also points out that there are few direct references in the inscriptions attributing the building of any tank or canal to either of these women, and warns against equating literary accounts with actual historical evidence. It suggests a four-part analytical framework (endowment capital, temple-based hydraulic governance, ritual legitimation and kin-based patronage networks) which can be applied to new epigraphic and field data. The study makes a contribution to the fields of Indian environmental history, gender history and the historiography of pre-modern water systems.

Keywords: *Chola dynasty, Sembian Mahadevi, Kundavai Pirattiyar, water management, temple endowments, Kaveri delta, gender and patronage, medieval Tamilnadu, epigraphy.*

1. Introduction

The Chola state (c. 850–1279 CE) ruled one of the most productive agricultural areas in medieval South Asia. The alluvial Kaveri delta, which was supplied by a network of distributaries, diversion weirs, tanks and channels, allowed for dense settlement, the construction of temples on a massive scale and a resource base that could support maritime and military expansion. For a long time historians have acknowledged that water management was at the heart of this situation, whatever interpretation is adopted—whether it be Burton Stein's segmentary-state model, the more institution-focused views of Y. Subbarayalu and Noboru Karashima, or the long-term studies of South Indian irrigation such as David Mosse's *The Rule of Water* (Stein, 1980; Karashima, 1984; Subbarayalu, 2012; Mosse, 2003).

However, very little is said about gender in this literature. In the history of the Chola kingdom, royal women are mainly described as consorts, mothers, or temple donors, and their connection with the material foundation of the kingdom, especially land and water, has rarely been the subject of research. Two individuals stand out in the epigraphic record of the period. Sembian Mahadevi, a queen who outlived her husband by several decades and who continued to act as a patron during the reign of Rajaraja I, is known for having encouraged the reconstruction of brick shrines in stone. Kundavai Pirattiyar, the elder sister of Rajaraja I and consort of the Vallava chieftain Vandiyadevan, is noted for being a generous donor to the Rajarajeswaram at Thanjavur and for having founded a Jain shrine, and she has gained an exaggerated popular reputation as a result of twentieth-century historical fiction.



The paper asks how and to what extent Sembiyan Mahadevi and Kundavai Pirattiyar can be connected with water management in the Chola kingdom; it advances three related propositions. First, their clear contribution to water management took place through temples as institutions. The second is that evidence of direct involvement in hydraulic engineering by either woman is limited and must be presented as such. Third, by redefining 'water management' to encompass the financial and institutional arrangements needed for maintenance rather than merely the building of embankments, it becomes possible to evaluate women's roles on a more historically sound basis.

2. Literature Review and Research Gap

2.1 Chola irrigation and rural institutions

K. A. Nilakanta Sastri's *The Colas* (1955) remains the foundational narrative of Chola political history and describes major hydraulic works associated with the dynasty, including the Viranarayana tank near present-day Veeranam and the Cholagangam tank associated with Rajendra I's new capital. Stein (1980) placed irrigation within a wider argument about peasant localities (nadas) and temple-centred ritual sovereignty, while Karashima (1984) and Subbarayalu (2012) used inscriptions to reconstruct land tenure, revenue and local administration. The Uttaramerur records from the time of Parantaka I, which describe the composition of village committees, including bodies concerned with tanks and gardens, are widely cited as evidence that maintaining water sources was an institutional responsibility of local assemblies (Nilakanta Sastri, 1955; Veluthat, 1993).

2.2 Temples, endowments and women

Temple-centred scholarship has shown that Chola temples were major landholders, employers and credit institutions (Champakalakshmi, 1996; Orr, 2000). S. R. Balasubrahmanyam's three-volume survey of Early, Middle and Later Chola temples (1971; 1975; 1979) and Vidya Dehejia's *Art of the Imperial Cholas* (1990) document Sembiyan Mahadevi's role in transforming Kaveri-basin shrines and the extraordinary bronze production associated with her patronage. Leslie Orr's study of temple women in medieval Tamil Nadu (2000) treats women primarily as donors and temple dependants, and shows how women's gifts were recorded, remembered, and institutionalised.

2.3 The gap

Three gaps follow. Gender is largely absent from Chola hydraulic histories. Studies of royal women's patronage rarely ask how gifts intersected with the agrarian and hydraulic economy. Popular accounts, particularly of Kundavai, also blur the line between documented action and literary invention. The present paper does not claim to close these gaps through new inscriptional discovery. It offers a critical synthesis and a framework, and identifies the specific evidence needed to test its claims.

3. Sources and Methodology

The study is qualitative and source-critical. The primary corpus consists of published Chola inscriptions, principally those collected in the South Indian Inscriptions (SII) series, the Annual Reports on South Indian Epigraphy (ARE), and *Epigraphia Indica*, as cited and analysed in the secondary works listed in the references. These are read alongside art-historical and architectural surveys of the temples associated with the two women. The analysis proceeds in four steps: (i) identifying the documented acts of each woman; (ii) locating those acts in the geography of the Kaveri basin and adjoining regions; (iii) assessing how the recipient institutions were involved in water management, using comparative epigraphic scholarship; and (iv) grading the strength of each inferred link (strong, moderate, weak) according to whether it rests on direct attribution, institutional inference or tradition.



Two limits of method should be stated at the outset. The paper draws on published editions and secondary analyses rather than fresh readings of original estampages, so individual inscription numbers should be verified against the SII volumes before formal submission. Second, the evidence is elite and temple-centred. It reveals what was worth recording on stone, not the full range of women's engagements with water in ordinary agrarian life.

4. The Hydraulic Landscape of Chola Tamilakam

Water management in the Chola country was not a single system but a nested set of practices. On the Kaveri and its distributaries, diversion weirs and head sluices fed channels that supplied village tanks; in the drier tracts north and south of the delta, rain-fed tanks with bunds, sluices, and surplus weirs were the primary means of irrigation. Inscriptional terminology reflects this diversity, with distinct terms for tanks (eri), channels (vaykkal), sluices and irrigation-related dues and labour obligations. What unites the epigraphic references is a concern with maintenance: the recurrent silting of tanks, the repair of breached bunds and the allocation of water and cost among beneficiaries.

Responsibility for maintenance was distributed. Village assemblies, as the Uttaramerur records suggest, appointed committees for tanks and gardens. Local corporate bodies (ur, sabha, nadu) enforced obligations. Temples, which held large tracts of tax-favoured land, had a direct economic interest in reliable irrigation and are recorded as receiving gifts and remissions linked to tank and channel upkeep. Kings and members of the royal household intervened at moments of major construction or benefaction, as in the case of the great tanks associated with Chola rulers noted above. This distributed pattern matters for the present argument because it means a patron's leverage over water management could operate through the institutions that bore maintenance costs, not only through direct construction.

5. Sembiyan Mahadevi: Patronage and the Temple–Water Nexus

5.1 Documented career

Sembiyan Mahadevi, the widow of Gandaraditya and mother of Madhurantaka Uttama Chola, is among the best-attested women of the Chola court. Her long widowhood, spanning several reigns, gave her unusual continuity as a patron. Standard surveys credit her with initiating the stone reconstruction of several older brick temples in the Kaveri region, and her name recurs in inscriptions at sites such as Konerirajapuram, Aduthurai, Tirukkodikaval, Kuttalam and Vriddhachalam (Balasubrahmanyam, 1971; Nilakanta Sastri, 1955; Dehejia, 1990). [Specific SII volume and inscription numbers to be inserted after verification against the primary editions.] Her patronage also extended to the commissioning of metal images, and the bronze sculpture of the period is a central subject in the art-historical literature.

5.2 Geography and hydraulic embeddedness

Many of the temples linked with Sembiyan Mahadevi lie on or close to the Kaveri and its channels. This is not incidental. Riverine temples depended on reliable irrigation for the lands that funded worship, and their landed endowments were exposed to floods, silting and channel shifts. Stone reconstruction, which required stable revenue over decades, implies confidence in the productivity of the surrounding land. It is therefore reasonable to infer that royal patronage of this kind would have reinforced the economic durability of temple estates and, with it, the temple's capacity to participate in maintenance of local water sources. This is an institutional inference, not a documented construction of tanks by the queen, and it is graded here as moderate.



5.3 Interpretation

Sembiyan Mahadevi's role is best understood as that of a long-term investor in the stability of a temple-centred agrarian order. Her widowhood, a period when women in some contexts might be expected to withdraw from public life, was instead the setting for sustained institutional activity. Her case also shows how the queen-mother figure could bridge reigns, sustaining continuity of patronage across successive kings while the dynasty consolidated its hold over the delta. The evidence supports characterising her as a shaper of the institutional conditions of water management rather than as a hydraulic engineer or administrator of irrigation.

6. Kundavai Pirattiyar: Royal Patronage and Endowment Networks

6.1 Documented career

Kundavai Pirattiyar, daughter of Parantaka II (Sundara Chola) and elder sister of Rajaraja I, was married to Vandiyadevan of the Vallava line and remained a significant figure through Rajaraja's reign and into that of Rajendra I. Inscriptions at the Rajarajeswaram, Thanjavur, record her gifts of gold and jewellery to the temple, dated to the early eleventh century (Nilakanta Sastri, 1955; Balasubrahmanyam, 1975). She is also associated with founding a Jain temple at Dadapuram in the Villupuram region, a foundation that testifies to a patronage pattern not confined to the Saiva mainstream of the dynasty. Later traditions and some secondary works attribute further foundations and charitable institutions to her; these should be checked independently against primary records before acceptance.

6.2 Endowments, kinship and the Thanjavur temple economy

The Rajarajeswaram was the largest temple endowment of its age, sustained by lands and villages allocated across the Chola realm, together with a large and carefully recorded body of personnel. Gifts by members of the royal family, including Kundavai, form part of the documentary record of that economy. Their significance for water management lies at the systemic level: the temple's revenue depended on the productivity of its estates, and the Thanjavur temple administration therefore had a stake in maintaining the tanks and channels that watered those estates. Here, Kundavai serves as a node in the kin network through which the dynasty channelled resources to the temple and, through it, to the countryside.

6.3 Cross-sectarian patronage

Kundavai's Jain foundation is analytically important. It shows that royal women's patronage could cross sectarian lines, and that the institutional benefits of endowment were not limited to a single religious community. If, as comparative evidence suggests, religious institutions of various affiliations held land and were responsible for maintaining associated water sources, women's donations to different communities would have broadened the base of institutions with an interest in maintaining local hydraulic infrastructure. The sources consulted establish no direct link between the Dadapuram shrine and specific water works, so this remains a hypothesis.

6.4 Fiction and history

Kalki R. Krishnamurthy's novel *Ponniyin Selvan* (1950–54) presented Kundavai as a shrewd political strategist and made the dynasty's hydraulic works part of the age's narrative texture. The novel has profoundly shaped public memory. Historians should treat it as evidence of twentieth-century imagination, not of tenth-century fact, and studies that use it as a source for Kundavai's role in water management risk circularity. The gap between popular image and documentary record is itself a subject worthy of study in the history of public memory.



7. Analysis: How Royal Women Shaped Water Management

Bringing the two cases together, four mechanisms emerge. Each is stated with its evidentiary basis so that it can be tested.

(a) Endowment capital. Gifts of gold, jewellery, lamps and land increased the financial resources of temples. Because temples were long-lived corporate landholders, they could convert such capital into revenue-producing assets, including tank-irrigated land. Direct evidence comes from recorded gifts; the inference concerns how the resulting income was used.

(b) Temple-based hydraulic governance. Temples had a material interest in irrigation and, in many documented cases, were participants in local arrangements for maintaining water sources. Strengthening the temple as an institution thus strengthened one of the parties responsible for upkeep. This is a regional finding of the epigraphic literature, applied here by inference to the specific temples the two women patronised.

(c) Ritual legitimation. Royal-women patrons enhanced the ritual prestige of temples and the dynasty, which, in Stein's and Champakalakshmi's readings, underwrote the relationship between the state and local agrarian society. To the extent that ritual authority made it easier to mobilise labour and resources in the countryside, it supported the collective effort on which hydraulic maintenance depended.

(d) Kin-based patronage networks. Sembian Mahadevi's continuity across reigns and Kundavai's proximity to Rajaraja I show how women operated within, and helped to reproduce, the kin networks that linked palace, temple and locality. These networks were channels through which royal resources and attention reached specific regions.

Table 1 Summary The Evidence and the Strength of Each Attribution.

Table 1. Evidence and Strength of Attribution

Dimension	Nature of evidence	Strength of attribution
Endowment of land, gold and lamps to Kaveri-basin temples (both women)	Temple inscriptions recorded in the South Indian Inscriptions series; dated by regnal years	Strong for the fact of patronage; moderate for the downstream use of income
Stone reconstruction of older brick temples (Sembian Mahadevi)	Inscriptions and architectural surveys (Balasubrahmanyam; Dehejia)	Strong
Temple as landholder and tank/channel maintainer	Land-grant and tax-remission records; village assembly records; comparative studies (Stein; Subbarayalu; Karashima)	Strong at regional level; indirect for either woman
Cross-sectarian patronage, including Jain foundation (Kundavai)	Inscription at the Jina temple associated with Kundavai at Dadapuram	Strong for patronage; no direct water-works link
Direct construction or repair of a named tank or canal by either woman	No secure epigraphic attribution identified in the sources consulted	Weak or absent; requires fresh epigraphic search



Dimension	Nature of evidence	Strength of attribution
Popular image of Kundavai as a hydraulic organiser	Twentieth-century historical fiction and its reception	Not evidentiary

The table makes plain what the paper can and cannot claim. It can claim, with strong support, that both women were major patrons of institutions embedded in the agrarian economy. It can argue, with moderate support and by institutional inference that this patronage contributed to the resources and stability of bodies responsible for water maintenance. It cannot presently claim that either woman personally built or repaired a named tank or canal.

8. Limitations and Directions for Further Research

This study is a critical synthesis and is limited by its sources. The elite and temple-centred character of the inscriptional record means that ordinary women's roles in water use, including domestic water, agricultural labour and participation in temple tank rituals, are largely invisible. Reliance on published editions and secondary interpretations means specific readings, dates, and attributions need to be checked against original records.

Four lines of work would strengthen or revise the argument. First, a systematic epigraphic search, using the SII indices and ARE volumes, for any inscription that links either woman, or her named establishments, to tank, channel or sluice maintenance. Second, GIS-based mapping of temples associated with the two women against reconstructed Chola-period channels and tanks, combined with field verification. Third, comparative study of other Chola queens and princesses, including Kundavai, the daughter of Rajaraja I and queen of the Eastern Chalukya ruler Vimaladitya, and later royal women, to test whether the pattern generalises. Fourth, a study of Kundavai's historiographical afterlife in Tamil popular culture and its effect on academic and public perceptions of Chola water management.

9. Conclusion

Sembiyan Mahadevi and Kundavai Pirattiyar are among the most visible women of the Chola age, but their connection to water management has been either assumed or ignored. This paper has argued that the defensible connection is institutional. Through sustained endowments of temples that were landholders, employers, and, in many localities, participants in the maintenance of irrigation, both women helped sustain the economic and ritual structures on which the hydraulic order rested. The sources consulted do not currently support direct attribution of hydraulic works to either woman, and popular accounts that credit Kundavai with such works should be treated with caution. The broader implication is methodological. If water management includes the financing, governance, and legitimation of maintenance, not only construction, then women's roles in Chola history become visible and can be accessed on the evidence. The framework proposed here offers a way to do so and identifies the epigraphic and field research needed to move from plausible inference to demonstrated fact.

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