

The Dawn of History in the Deep South

The Megalithic Background

After the prehistoric period, several elements mark the beginning of the historical period. These are: settlements of large-scale rural communities which carry on plough agriculture with the aid of the iron ploughshare, formation of the state system, rise of social classes, introduction of writing, introduction of metal coinage, and the beginnings of written literature. All these phenomena did not come into being at the tip of the peninsula with the Kaveri delta as the nuclear zone until about the second century BC. Up to the second century BC, the upland portions of the peninsula were inhabited by people who are called megalith builders. They are known not from their actual settlements which are rare, but from their funerary structures. The graves are called megaliths because they were encircled by large pieces of stone. They contain not only the skeletons of the people who were buried but also pottery and iron objects. We have a list of 104 excavated megalithic and black-and-red ware sites of the early Iron Age or early historic period. Though some of them are found in Maharashtra, MP, and UP, most of them are located in south India. The megalithic people used various types of pottery, including red ware, but black-and-red ware seems to have been popular with them. It was so widespread and important that initially black-and-red ware was called megalithic ware by archaeologists. Obviously the practice of burying goods in the graves with the dead bodies was based on the belief that the dead would need all these in the next world. These goods give us an idea of their sources of livelihood. We find arrowheads, spearheads, and also hoes and sickles, all made of iron. Tridents, which later came to be associated with Shiva,

have also been found in the megaliths. However, in comparison to the number of agricultural tools that were buried, those meant for fighting and hunting are larger in number. This would indicate that the megalithic people did not practise an advanced type of agriculture.

The megaliths are found in all the upland areas of the peninsula, but their concentration seems to be in eastern Andhra and in Tamil Nadu. The beginnings of the megalithic culture can be traced to c. 1000 BC, though in many instances, the megalithic phase lasted from about the fifth to the first century BC, and in a few places, this phase persisted even as late as the early centuries of the Christian era.

The Cholas, Pandyas, and Keralaputras (Cheras) mentioned in Ashokan inscriptions were probably in the late megalithic phase of material culture. The megalithic people in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu had certain noteworthy characteristics. They buried the skeletons of the dead in urns made of red pottery in pits. In many instances, these urns were not surrounded by stone circles, and there were not many grave goods. The practice of urn burial was different from that of cist burial or pit burial surrounded by stone circles, that prevailed in the Krishna–Godavari valley. However, despite the use of iron, the megalithic people preferred the slopes of hills for settlement and funerary structures. Although the megalithic people produced paddy and *ragi*, apparently the area of cultivable land used by them was very limited, and they generally did not settle on the plains or lowlands due to their thick forest cover.

State Formation and the Development of Civilization

By the second century BC, the megalithic people had moved from the uplands into fertile river basins and reclaimed marshy deltaic areas. Under the stimulus of contact with the elements of material culture brought from the north to the extreme end of the peninsula by traders, conquerors, and Jaina, Buddhist, and some brahmana missionaries, they began practising wet paddy cultivation, founded numerous villages and towns, and developed social classes. Cultural and economic contacts between the north and the deep south, known as Tamizhakam, became extremely important from the fourth century BC onwards. The route to the south, called Dakshinapatha, was valued by the northerners because the south supplied gold, pearls, and various precious stones. The Pandya state was known to Megasthenes who lived in Pataliputra. The earlier Sangam

texts are familiar with the rivers Ganges and Son, and also with Pataliputra, the capital of the Magadhan empire. The Ashokan inscriptions mention the Cholas, Pandyas, Keralaputras, and Satyaputras living on the borders of the empire; of these only the Satyaputras are not clearly identified. Tamraparnis, or the people of Sri Lanka, are also mentioned. Ashoka's title 'dear to the gods' was adopted by a Tamil chief. All this was the result of the missionary and acculturating activities of the Jainas, Buddhists, Ajivikas, and brahmanas, as well as the traders who accompanied their train. It is significant that Ashokan inscriptions were set up on important highways. In the earliest stage much of the influence of Gangetic culture over the south was felt through the activities of the heterodox sects that are mentioned in the earliest Tamil Brahmi inscriptions. The brahmanical influence also percolated in a large measure to Tamizhakam, but this really happened after the fourth century AD. Eventually many elements of Tamil culture spread to the north, and in the brahmanical texts, the Kaveri came to be regarded as one of the holy rivers of India.



PLATE 1 Neolithic Bone Tools, Burzahom. *Courtesy Archaeological Survey of India (ASI)*

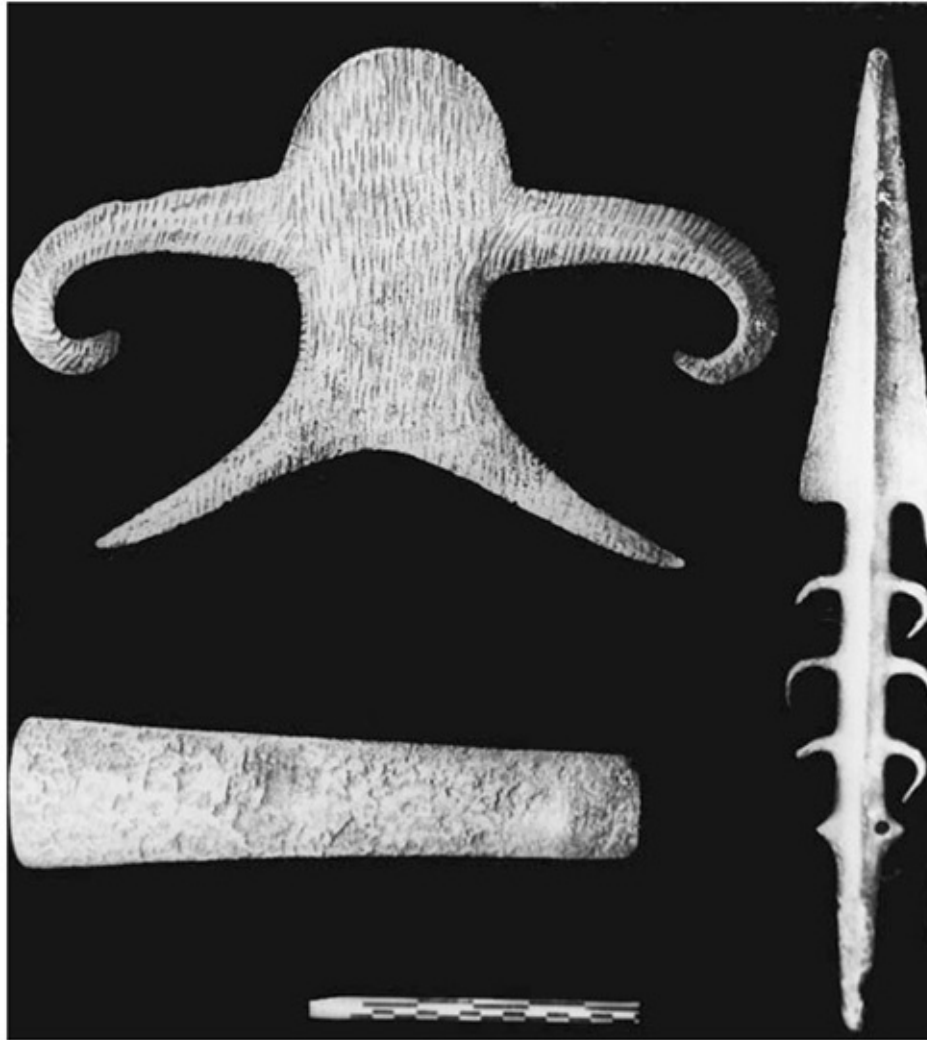


PLATE 2 Copper Hoards, Anthropomorph Figure, Bharat Kala Bhawan, Banaras. *Courtesy ASI*



PLATE 3 Mother Goddess, Terracotta, Mohenjo-daro. *Courtesy ASI*



PLATE 4 Bull Seal, Mohenjo-daro. *Courtesy ASI*

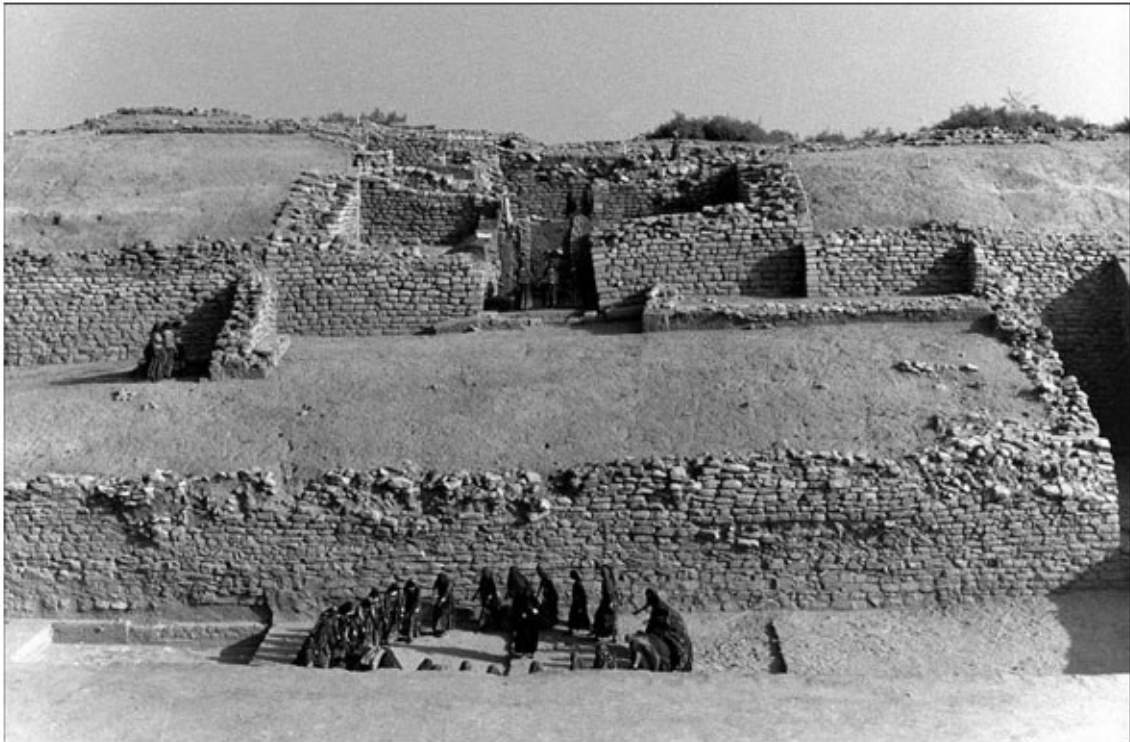


PLATE 5 North Gate, Dholavira. *Courtesy ASI*



PLATE 6 Apsara, Ajanta. *Courtesy ASI*



PLATE 7 Sanchi, 200 BC–AD 200. *Courtesy ASI*

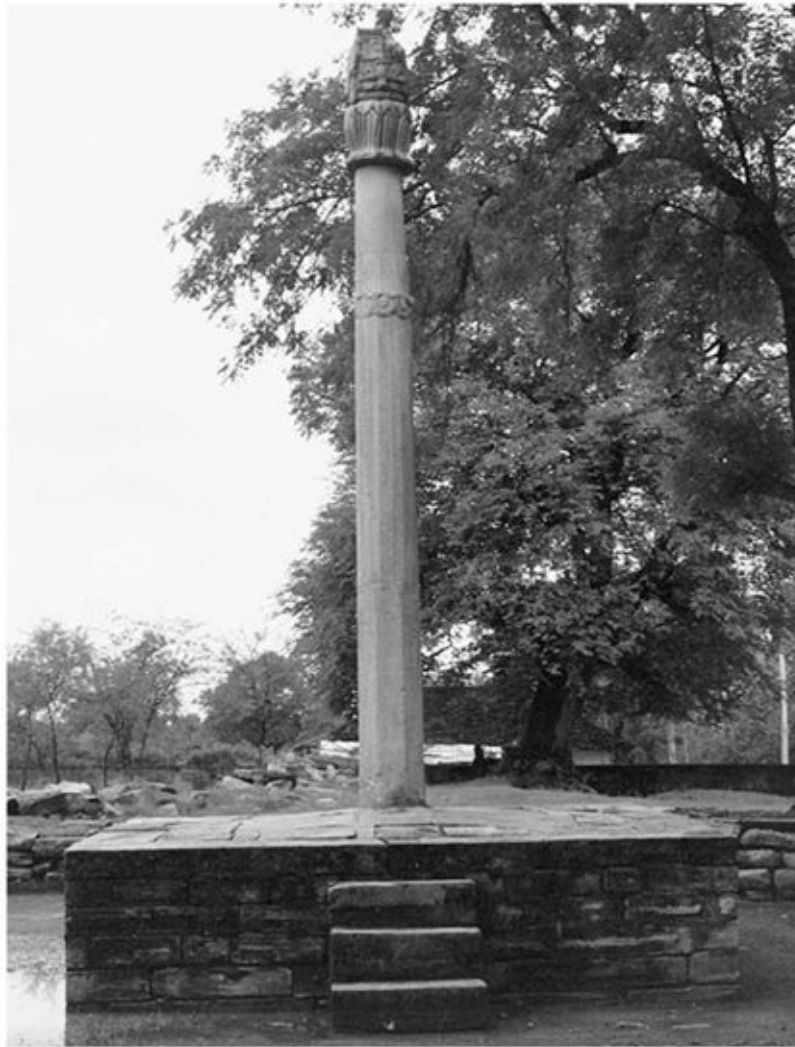


PLATE 8 Vidisha, 200 BC–AD 200. *Courtesy ASI*



PLATE 9 Buddha, Mathura, 200 BC–AD 200. *Courtesy ASI*

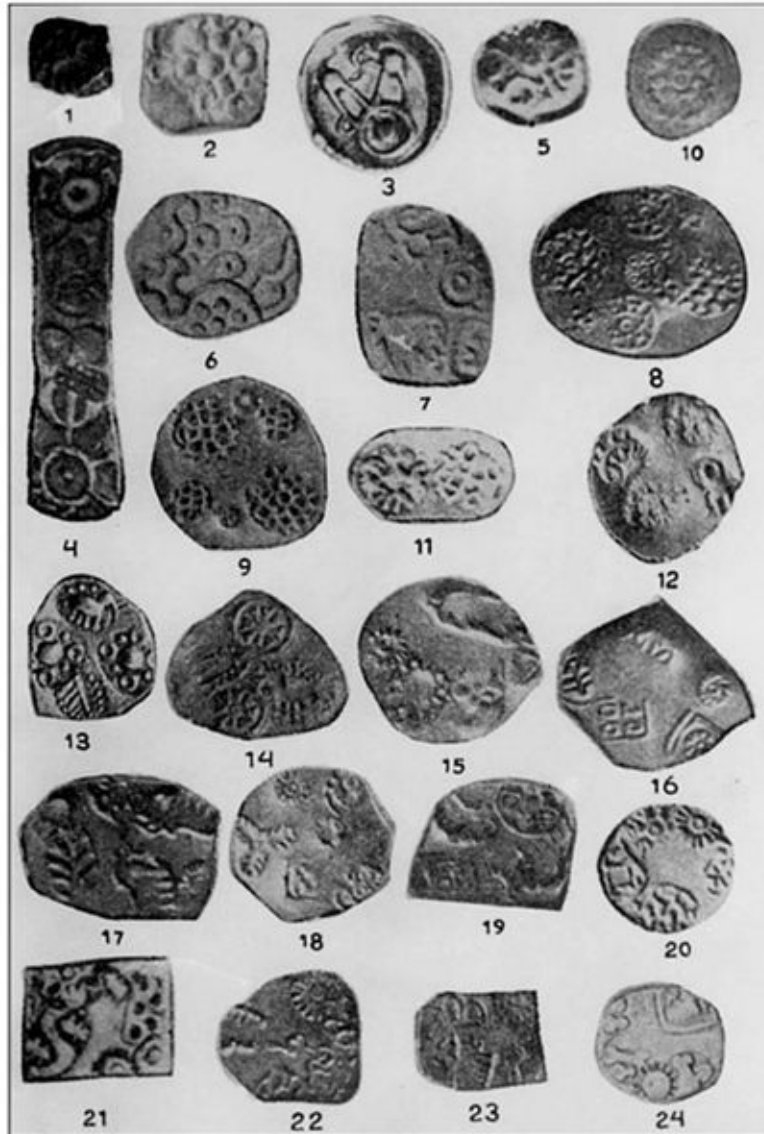


PLATE 10 Punch-marked Coins, Age of Buddha. *Courtesy ASI*

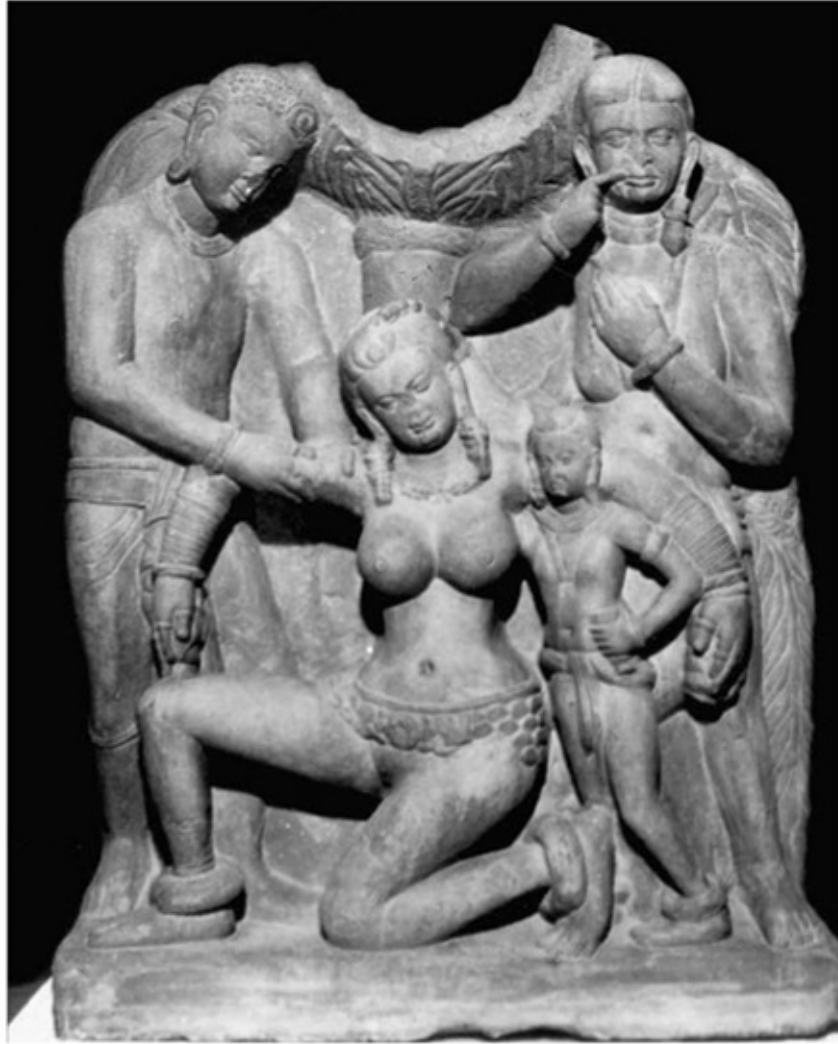


PLATE 11 Scene from *Mrichchakatika*, Mathura, Kushan, Second Century AD. *Courtesy ASI*



PLATE 12 Stupa Site III, Nalanda, Gupta Period. *Courtesy ASI*



PLATE 13 Gupta Coins. *Courtesy ASI*



PLATE 14 Rathas, Mahabalipuram, Gupta Period. *Courtesy ASI*



PLATE 15 Nara-Narayana, Deogarh, Gupta Period. *Courtesy ASI*

These southern kingdoms would not have developed without the spread of iron technology which promoted forest clearance and plough cultivation. The distribution of the punch-marked coins of the *janapada* and of the imperial Magadhan type are indicative of the development of north– south trade.

Flourishing trade with the Roman empire contributed to the formation of three states, respectively under the Cholas, Cheras, and Pandyas. From the first century AD onwards, the rulers of these peoples derived benefit from the export and import activity that was carried on between the coastal parts of south India, on the one hand, and the eastern dominions of the Roman empire, especially Egypt, on the other.

Three Early Kingdoms

The southern end of the Indian peninsula situated south of the Krishna river was divided into three kingdoms: Chola, Pandya, and Chera or Kerala. The Pandyas are first mentioned by Megasthenes, who says that their kingdom was celebrated for pearls. He also speaks of it being ruled by a woman, which suggests some matriarchal influence in Pandya society.

The Pandya territory occupied the southernmost and the south-eastern portion of the Indian peninsula, and it roughly included the modern districts of Tirunelveli, Ramnad, and Madurai in Tamil Nadu with its capital at Madurai. The literature compiled in the Tamil academies in the early centuries of the Christian era and called the Sangam literature refers to the Pandya rulers, but it does not provide any coherent account. One or two Pandya conquerors are mentioned. However, this literature shows clearly that the state was wealthy and prosperous. The Pandya kings profited from trade with the Roman empire and sent ambassadors to the Roman emperor Augustus. The brahmanas enjoyed considerable influence, and the Pandya king performed Vedic sacrifices in the early centuries of the Christian era.

The Chola kingdom, which came to be called Chola-mandalam (Coromandel), in early medieval times, was situated to the north-east of the territory of the Pandyas, between the Pennar and the Velar rivers. We have some idea of the political history of the Cholas from the Sangam texts. Their chief centre of

political power lay at Uraiyur, a place famous for cotton trade. It seems that in the mid-second century BC, a Chola king named Elara conquered Sri Lanka and ruled over it for nearly fifty years. A clearer history of the Cholas begins in the second century AD with their famous king Karikala. He founded Puhar and constructed 160 km of embankment along the Kaveri river. This was built with the labour of 12,000 slaves who were brought as captives from Sri Lanka. Puhar is coterminous with Kaveripattanam, the Chola capital. It was a great centre of trade and commerce, and excavations show that it had a large dock. One of the principal sources of the wealth of the Cholas was trade in cotton cloth. They maintained an efficient navy.

Under Karikala's successors Chola power rapidly declined. Their capital, Kaveripattanam, was overwhelmed and destroyed. Their two neighbouring powers, the Cheras and the Pandyas, expanded at the cost of Cholas. What remained of the Chola power was almost wiped out by the attacks of the Pallavas from the north. From the fourth to the ninth century, the Cholas played only a marginal part in south Indian history.

The Chera or the Kerala country was situated to the west and north of the land of the Pandyas. It included the narrow strip of land between the sea and the mountains, and covered portions of both Kerala and Tamil Nadu. In the early centuries of the Christian era, the Chera state was as important as the states of the Cholas and Pandyas, and owed its position to trade with the Romans. The Romans set up two regiments at Muziris, coterminous with Cranganore in the Chera state, to protect their interests. It is said that they also built there a temple of Augustus.

The history of the Cheras is a continuing battle with the Cholas and Pandyas. Although the Cheras killed the father of the Chola king Karikala, the Chera king also lost his life. Later, the two kingdoms temporarily became friends and concluded a matrimonial alliance. The Chera king next allied himself with the Pandya rulers against the Cholas, but the Cholas defeated the allies, and it is said that as the Chera king was wounded in the back, he felt shamed and committed suicide.

According to the Chera poets, their greatest king was Senguttuvan, the Red or Good Chera. He routed his rivals and established his cousin securely on the throne. It is said that he invaded the north and crossed the Ganges. All this however seems an exaggeration. After the second century, Chera power declined, and we know nothing of its history until the eighth century.

The principal interest of the political history of these three kingdoms lies in the continuing wars they fought with one another and also with Sri Lanka.

Although these states were weakened by the wars, they greatly profited from their natural resources and foreign trade. They grew spices, especially pepper, which was in great demand in the Western world. Their elephants supplied ivory, which was highly valued in the West. The sea yielded pearls and their mines produced precious stones, and both these were exported to the West in substantial quantities. In addition, they produced muslin and silk. We hear of cotton cloth as thin as the slough of a snake. The early Tamil poems also mention the weaving of complex patterns on silk. Uraiyur was noted for its cotton trade. In ancient times, the Tamils traded with the Greek or Hellenistic kingdom of Egypt and Arabia, on the one hand, and with the Malay archipelago and China, on the other. As a result of trade, the words in Greek for rice, ginger, cinnamon, and several other articles were derived from Tamil. When Egypt became a Roman province and the monsoon was discovered at about the beginning of first century AD, this trade received great impetus. Thus, for the first two and a half centuries, the southern kingdoms conducted a lucrative trade with the Romans. With the decline of this trade, these kingdoms began to decay.

The Purse and the Sword

Trade, local and long-distance, constituted a very important source of royal revenue. We know how the customs officers functioned in Puhar. Transit duties were also collected from merchants who moved from place to place with their goods. For the safety of merchants and prevention of smuggling, soldiers maintained constant vigil along the road.

The spoils of war further added to the royal income. However, the real foundation of war and polity lay in the regular income from agriculture. The share of the agricultural produce claimed and collected by the king is not specified. The tip of the peninsula and the adjacent regions were extremely fertile. The land produced paddy, *ragi*, and sugarcane. It was said of the Kaveri delta that the space in which an elephant could lie down produced enough to feed seven persons. In addition, the Tamil region produced grains, fruit, pepper, and turmeric. It seems that the king had a share in all this produce.

Apparently, out of the taxes collected from the peasantry, the state maintained a rudimentary army. It consisted of chariots drawn by oxen, elephants, cavalry, and infantry. Elephants played an important role in war. Horses were imported into the Pandyan kingdom by sea. The nobles and princes or the captains of the army rode elephants, and the commanders used chariots. The footmen and

horsemen wore leather sandals to protect their feet.

Rise of Social Classes

Income from trade, war booty, and agricultural produce enabled the king to maintain groups of professional warriors and also to pay the bards and priests who were largely brahmanas. The brahmanas first appear in the Tamil land in the Sangam age. An ideal king was one who never hurt the brahmanas. Many brahmanas functioned as poets, and in this role they were generously rewarded by the king. Karikala is said to have given one poet 1,600,000 gold pieces, but this seems to be an exaggeration. Besides gold, the poets or bards also received cash, land, chariots, horses, and even elephants. The Tamil brahmanas partook of meat and wine. The kshatriyas and vaishyas appear as regular varnas in the Sangam texts. The warrior class was an important element in the polity and society. The captains of the army were invested with the title of *enadi* at a formal ceremony. However, we have no clear idea about the vaishyas. Civil and military offices were held under both the Cholas and Pandyas by *vellalas* or rich peasants. The ruling class was called *arasar*, and its members had marriage relations with the *vellalas*, who formed the fourth caste. They held the bulk of the land and thus constituted the cultivating class, divided into the rich and the poor. The rich did not plough the land themselves but employed labourers to undertake this. Agricultural operations were generally the task of members of the lowest class (*kadaisiyar*), whose status appears to have differed little from that of slave.

Some artisans were not differentiated from agricultural labourers. The *pariyars* were agricultural labourers who also worked with animal skins and used them as mats. Several outcastes and forest tribes suffered from extreme poverty and lived from hand to mouth. We notice sharp social inequalities in the Sangam age. The rich lived in houses of brick and mortar, and the poor in huts and humbler dwellings. In the cities rich merchants lived in the upper storey of their houses. It is not however clear whether rites and religion were used to maintain social inequalities. We notice the emergence of the brahmanas and the ruling caste, but the acute caste distinctions of later times did not exist in the early Sangam age.

Beginnings of Brahmanism

The state and society that were formed in the Tamil state in the early centuries of the Christian era developed under the impact of Brahmanism. However, brahmanical influence was confined to a small part of the Tamil territory and only to the upper levels of the Tamil society in that area. The kings performed Vedic sacrifices; the brahmanas, who were the followers of the Vedas, conducted disputations. However, the chief local god worshipped by the people of the hilly region was Murugan, who came to be called Subramaniya in early medieval times. The worship of Vishnu is also mentioned, although it may have been a later practice. The megalithic practice of providing for the dead continued, paddy being offered to the dead. Cremation was introduced, but inhumation followed in the megalithic phase was not abandoned.

Tamil Language and Sangam Literature

All that has been stated above about the life of the Tamils in the beginning of the historical period is based on the Sangam literature. As shown earlier, the Sangam was a college or assembly of Tamil poets held probably under the patronage of the chiefs or kings. We, however, neither know the number of Sangams nor the period for which they were held. It is stated in a Tamil commentary of the middle of the eighth century that three Sangams lasted for 9990 years and were attended by 8598 poets, and had 197 Pandya kings as patrons. All this is wild exaggeration. All that can be said is that a Sangam was held under royal patronage in Madurai.

The available Sangam literature, which was produced by these assemblies, was compiled in c. AD 300–600. However, parts of this literature look back to at least the second century AD. The Sangam literature can roughly be divided into two groups, narrative and didactic. The narrative texts are called *Melkannakku* or Eighteen Major Works. They comprise eighteen major works consisting of eight anthologies and ten idylls. The didactic works are called *Kilkanakku* or Eighteen Minor Works.

Social Evolution from Sangam Texts

Both these types of texts suggest several stages of social evolution. The narrative texts are considered works of heroic poetry in which heroes are glorified and perpetual wars and cattle raids are frequently mentioned. They show that the early Tamil people were primarily pastoral. Traces of early megalithic life appear

in the Sangam texts. The earliest megalithic people seem to be primarily pastoralists, hunters, and fishermen, though they also produced rice. Hoes and sickles occur at many sites in peninsular India but not ploughshares. Other iron objects include wedges, flat celts, arrowheads, long swords and lances, spikes and spearheads, horse-bits, and the like. These tools were meant primarily for war and hunting. This has some parallels in the Sangam texts which speak of perpetual war and cattle raids. The texts suggest that war booty was an important source of livelihood. They also state that when a hero dies he is reduced to a piece of stone. This reminds us of the circles of stone that were raised over the graves of the megalithic people. This may have led to the later practice of raising hero stones called *virarkal* in honour of the heroes who had died fighting for kine and other things. It is likely that the earliest phase of social evolution reflected in the Sangam works relates to the early megalithic stage.

The narrative Sangam texts give some idea of the state formation in which the army consisted of groups of warriors, and the taxation system and judiciary arose in a rudimentary form. The texts also tell us about trade, merchants, craftsmen, and farmers. They speak of several towns such as Kanchi, Korkai, Madurai, Puhar, and Uraiyur. Of them, Puhar or Kaveripattanam was the most important. The Sangam references to towns and economic activities are corroborated by Greek and Roman accounts, and by the excavation of the Sangam sites.

Many of the Sangam texts, including the didactic ones, were written by the brahmana scholars of Prakrit or Sanskrit. The didactic texts cover the early centuries of the Christian era and prescribe a code of conduct not only for the king and his court but also for the various social groups and occupations. These categories could have been possible only after the fourth century when brahmanas rose in number under the Pallavas. The texts also refer to grants of villages, and also to the descent of kings from the solar and lunar dynasties.

Besides the Sangam texts, we have a text called *Tolkappiyam*, which deals with grammar and poetics. Another important Tamil text deals with philosophy and wise maxims, and is called *Tirukkural*. In addition, we have the twin Tamil epics *Silappadikaram* and *Manimekalai*. The two were composed around the sixth century. The first is considered to be the brightest gem of early Tamil literature. It deals with a love story in which a dignitary called Kovalan prefers a courtesan called Madhavi of Kaveripattanam to his wedded wife Kannagi from a noble family. The author apparently seems to be a Jaina and tries to locate the scenes of the story in all the kingdoms of the Tamil state. The other epic, *Manimekalai*, was written by a grain merchant of Madurai. It deals with the

adventures of the daughter born of the union of Kovalan and Madhavi. However, this epic is of greater religious than literary interest. It is claimed in the prologues to the two epics that the authors were friends and contemporaries of the Chera king Senguttuvan, who ruled in the second century AD. Though the epics cannot be dated so early, they throw light on the social and economic life of the Tamils up to about the sixth century.

The art of writing was doubtless known to the Tamils before the beginning of the Christian era. Twelve findspots of Ashokan inscriptions in Brahmi script appear in the south, three in Andhra, and nine in Karnataka. Over seventy-five short inscriptions in the Brahmi script dating to about two centuries later have been found in natural caves, mainly in the Madurai region. They provide the specimens of the earliest form of Tamil mixed with Prakrit words. They relate to the second–first centuries BC when the Jaina and Buddhist missionaries came to this area. Inscribed potsherds have been found at several places during recent excavations. These inscriptions provide examples of the Tamil language at the beginning of the Christian era. It is because of the practice of writing that considerable Sangam literature was produced in the early centuries of the Christian era, although it was finally compiled by AD 600.

Chronology

(BC)

1000	The beginnings of the megalithic culture.
5–1 C	Wide megalithic presence.
4 C	Cultural and economic contact between the north and the deep south known as Tamizhakam.
2 C	The megalithic people moved from the uplands into the fertile river basins. A Chola king conquered Sri Lanka in the middle of this century.
2–1 C	Seventy-five short inscriptions in the Brahmi script, found in the Madurai caves, provide the earliest form of Tamil mixed with Prakrit words.

(AD)

1 C	Discovery of the monsoon. Tamil language in potsherd inscriptions.
Early centuries	The megalithic phase persisted at some places. The south Indian rulers benefited from trade between the

	coastal parts of south India and the eastern dominions of the Roman empire, especially Egypt.
2 C	The Chera power declined after this date. Composition of parts of the Sangam literature.
300–600	Final composition of the Sangam literature.
4 C	After this time, brahmana Prakrit–Sanskrit scholars composed many Sangam texts. Brahmanical influence ended in Tamizhakam after this time.
6 C	The marginal role of the Cholas from this time. Composition of the two Tamil epics, <i>Silappadikaram</i> and <i>Manimekalai</i> , at about this time.
9 C	The Cholas re-emerge as an important power.