

Sangam Poetic traditions under the Imperial Cōla-s

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Two inscriptions

Two inscriptions of the Cōla period coming from the northern part of Tamilnadu throw interesting light on the influence of Sangam poems in the mediaeval period. The first one dated 1012 CE (27th regnal year) in the reign of Rājarājacōla I is found in the Vīraṭṭānēśvara temple of Tirukkōyilūr and the other assignable to the 12th cent. is found in the Rishabhēśvara temple of Chengam in north Arcot District. Both are important from different angles. This paper draws the attention of scholars to the content of these inscriptions and to their relevance to Sangam poetry. The first one was copied by the Government epigraphist, and published in *South Indian Inscriptions*.¹ And the other copied by TN State Department of Archaeology, when an Epigraphical survey was undertaken under my direction in the Chengam area².

The operative part of the first record refers in detail to a gift of villages to the Vīraṭṭāna temple at Tirukkōyilūr and provisions made for various services in the temple to be met from the revenue of the endowment. The emperor Rājarāja himself ordered the gift at the request of one Kampan Vītiviṭāṅkan, who also had the title Mahimālaya Muvēndavēlān. It is thus a royal gift. Kampan Vītiviṭāṅkan served under Rājarāja as a commander and administrator of justice. As the gift was made at his request he gets importance in the record.

Ārruppaṭai format

The inscription of Rājarāja, recorded in Tamil script and language, on the base of the main Vīraṭṭāna temple of Tirukkōyilūr is a long poem in ācīriyappā meter, running to over two hundred and thirty lines (with some damages in the middle) in the ārruppaṭai format of Sangam literature. There are thousands of inscriptions of Rājarāja found all over Tamilnadu which are in prose form, in the usual inscriptional format, as matter of fact records. But this one is unique and is the only one known, prescribing even the boundaries of gifted lands, taxes, services in the temple, etc. in this poetic format.

The record starts with an invocation to Sūrya, as annihilator of clouds of darkness (*andhaka*) and the progenitor of the Cōla royal family, in which Rājarāja was born. In addition to the praise, this passage also suggests that the Sun is identical with Śiva who destroyed Andhakāsura,³ an exploit connected

¹ South Indian Inscriptions, Vol. N° VII, n° 863.

² *Ceikam Natukarkal* (Tam) Ed Nagaswamy R., Pub. by Tamilnadu State Department of Archaeology, Madras.1972

³ "Jaya jaya vennum.... moli
paṇṇiyal vāyamaiyir paṇṇiya
ponniyal vicumparil katalum pacumpari
vellulai neṭuñcuvarru eṭutta kuruntunaip patuṅka

with the Tirukkōyilūr Viraṭṭāna temple. It also alludes to Rājarāja, born in the solar dynasty, as a destroyer of his enemies who appeared as dark clouds. The inscription continues with the greatness of Rājarāja and his prowess, and conquests⁴. Following this, the inscription proceeds, in well laid out parts, to describe Rājarāja's mother, Vāñavañ mahādēvī⁵, the glory of the family of Malaiyamāñ in which she was born, the greatness of Tirukkōyilūr, the river Peññai that passes through this town, and the hilly boulder on which Kapilar, the Sangam poet left his mortal coils, the sanctity of the temple of Viraṭṭānēśvara Śiva to which gift of lands were made and the services and payment. Finally it praises the Commander Kampan̄ Vitiviṭañkañ who was responsible for the donation. Praising Kampan̄ the inscription ends as "He the Chief of Ponni nāṭu".

Without going into the details of the gift, etc., this study will confine itself to the parts that are relevant to the present essay.

Tirukkōyilūr Pāṭṭu

The poem ends in the Ārruppaṭai tradition, praising the liberal patron Kampan̄ as the chief of Ponni Nāṭu, (Kāvēri region) full of water resources, that bestows prosperity: *Taṭa nīr nalam taru ponni nāṭu kiļavōñē*. It is well known that some of the ten idylls of the Sangam anthology (*Pattup-pāṭṭu*)⁶ end in this manner:

- 1) *Malai-paṭu-kaṭām*, which ends as *kuṇru-cūl-irukkai-nāṭu kiļavōñē*
- 2) *Perum-pāṇ-ārruppaṭai*, that ends as *oḷiṛu ilaṅku aruviya malai kiļavōñē*
- 3) *Porunar-ārruppaṭai* that ends as *kāviri purakku nāṭu kiļavōñē* and finally
- 4) *Tiru-muruk-ārruppaṭai*, that ends as *Paṭamutir-cōlai-malai kiļavōñē*.

The ending of this inscriptional poem as *Ponni-nāṭu kiļavōñē* leaves no doubt that the whole composition is based on the model of Sangam poems. This must be viewed in the light of reference to the famous poet Kapilar of the Sangam anthologies in the body of the text of this inscription. In analogy with Sangam poems like *Kuriñcippāṭtu* and *Mullaippāṭtu*, in the *Pattup pāṭṭu* collection, it would be appropriate to call the Tirukkōyilūr inscription of Rājarāja "*Tirukkōyilūr pāṭṭu*".⁷

nallurap pon niññ vallura vacca
tañikkāl aracu mañakkāl kañkul
kulampu paṭu pērirul pilampu paṭa uruṭtiya
ceñcuṭar mauli veñcuṭar vāñavan̄
vali mutal vanta mahipati" (Tirukkōyilūr Inscription, lines 1-8)

[Ceñcuṭar mauli veñcuṭar vāñavan̄ denotes: 1) one who has reddish flames as halo on his head, and 2.) Śiva of white complexion with reddish *jatā makuta*]

⁴ Rājarāja's conquest of Pāndya, Chera, Gaṅgapādi, Udagamandalam, Koṅgam and Ilamandalam are mentioned. Rājarāja is given the following titles: *Mahipati, Adhipati, Narapati, Aśvapati, Gajapati, Indra samāṇan, Rāja-sarvajña, Cañḍa-parākrama, Tamil-nāṭan, Kanṭan*.

⁵ "Rājarājan rājasarvajñan eñnum // puliyaip payanta peñ-māñ"

⁶ *Pattup pāṭṭu*, Ed U.V. Swaminatha Iyer, Madras, 7th edition, 1974.

⁷ R. Nagaswamy, Colmalai (Tam), pub. by Tamil Arts Academy, Madras, 2000, pp 75-90.

Kapilar and Pāri

The mention of the poet Kapilar in the inscription of Rājarāja deserves greater attention. This place is associated with Kapilar, a great friend of Pāri, one of the seven celebrated patrons of the Sangam age. Pāri died in a battle with the three crowned kings of Tamilnad leaving his two daughters orphans. Kapilar took under his protection the two girls, visited the courts of the three kings and entreated them to marry them, but all of them refused. Finally he reached Tirukkōyilūr and persuaded Malaiyamāṇ to marry. This is alluded to in the Sangam poems and also later tradition. Thus Kapilar was closely connected with Tirukkōyilūr. The poems sung by the daughters of Pāri are included in the *Puranāṇūru* collections⁸. They are seen lamenting the death of their father and their pitiable state. Kapilar was moved by the death of his friend Pāri and taking pity on the girls sings the situation in moving poems. There are several poems in the *Puram* collection mentioning this poignant situation that would not fail to move any reader. This inscription of Tirukkōyilūr mentions the poet Kapilar, and the marriage of Pāri's daughter to Malaiyamāṇ and adds more information not known from any other source about the poet Kapilar. It says that having ensured the safety of Pāri's daughter he decided to ascend heaven and attain liberation and immolated himself on a rocky boulder on the river Peṇṇai near the Vīraṭṭāna temple.

"Kapilar rock" (*Kapilak kal*)

The relevant portion of the record reads as follows.

*Moy vaitiyalum muttamil nāṇmai
 Teyvak kavitai ceñcor kapilan
 Mūri vaṇ taṭakkai pāri tan aṭaikkalap
 Peṇṇai malaiyarkku utavip peṇṇai
 Alai puṇal aluvattu antarikṣam cella
 Minal pukum vicumpu pēr eṇṇi
 Kanal pukum kapilak kal atu"*

i.e. "Kapilar, the composer of classical divine poems, abounding in three Tamils (*iyal*, *icai*, and *nāṭakam* — poetry, music and dance), presented the great Pāri's daughter, now under his protection, to Malaiyamāṇ. Having accomplished it he decided to ascend heaven through the sky, sparkled by lightning and attain salvation. Kapilar leaped into a glowing fire and immolated himself, on the boulder called *Kapilak-kal* (Kapilar rock) on the banks of the Peṇṇai waters"

The inscription calls Kapilar's poems, "*teyvak kavitai*", divine poems, abounding in poetry, music, and dance. Obviously the verses of Kapilar in the Sangam collections were extolled as divine poems in the mediaeval period. Kapilar's poetic talent and also his mastery of music and dance, are referred to in his own poems of the Sangam age, like the *Kuriñcip pāṭṭu*, while mentioning an accomplished musician playing tunes like *naivalam* (lines 146-152) and to a dexterous dancing girl who dances to sweet music "*inṇicai karaṇka āṭum maka!*" (line 193).

⁸ *Puranāṇūru*, U.V. Swaminatha Iyer (Ed.), Madras, 6th edition, 1963.

The inscription corroborates what is found in the Sangam poems.

*Arrait tiñkal av vel nilavin
Entaiyum uñaiyem em kuñrum pirar kollär
Irrait tinkal iv vel nilavin
Venru eri muracin vëntar em
Kuñrum koñtär yäm entaiyum ilame⁹*

These *Puram* lines of Pāri's daughters "that our father was alive on the other full moon day and there was none dared to take over our hill, but this full moon day our hill has been captured and we have lost our father" show the pitiable condition of the girls. Similarly the following lines of a *Puram* poem by Kapilar tell that he was a great friend of Pāri¹⁰ and that his daughters were under his protection.

*ivar yär eñkuvai ãyin ivare
ür uñañ iravalarkku arulî têr uñañ
mullaikku itta cellâ nal icai
pañu mañi yñañai parampiñ kômân
neñu mäp pâri makañir yñañe
tantai tõlañ ivar eñ makañir
antañan pulavañ konñu vantanañe¹¹ (Puram. 201, 1-7)*

i.e "If you ask me who these girls are I shall tell you they are the daughters of the great and far famed Pāri, the chieftain of Parambu country, who gifted his villages to minstrels and his chariot to the jasmine (*mullai*) creeper. I am the friend of the father of these girls. They are indeed my daughters. I am a Brahmin poet who has brought them here"

says Kapilar in his own words in the *Puram* verse. This is corroborated in the lines of the inscription when it says "Pāri tañ añaikkalap peññai Malaiyärkku utavi".

Marriage of Pāri's daughter

That one of Pāri's daughters was given in marriage to Malaiyamān is mentioned also in a few stray Tamil verses, found in¹² *Tamil Nâvalar Caritai*. One verse is an invitation to the Céra ruler to come with presents to Tirukkøyilür to attend the marriage of Pāri's daughter, as the king has consented to marry her. The name of Pāri's daughter is given as Añkavai. (A Variant reading of the verse also mentions the name of the other daughter Cañkavai). Another poem attributed to the Poetess Avvaiyār is an invitation to the Pâñtiya king to attend the marriage scheduled on the 18th day with presents¹³. It is known that all the

⁹ *Puram*, 112, lines 1-5

¹⁰ "yñañe tantai tañ tõlañ ivar eñ makañir"

¹¹ *Puram*, 201 lines 1-7

¹² "cêralarkõn cêral celumpat tirukkôval // ür alavum tân varuka uñkâté Pârimakañ // añkavaiyai kolla aracan mañam iyaintañ // cañkiyâté varuka tâñ" (*Tamil nâvalar caritai*)

¹³ ".....taiyarkku

vëñtuvanañ konñu viñiyal patinetñam näl
ñetu varuka iyaintu" (*ibid*)

three kings of the Tamil Country Cēra, Cōla and Pāṇṭiya attended the marriage of Pāri's daughter¹⁴. Another poem of significance addresses god Varuṇa that he should benevolently pour rains of gold, at the great marrige at Kōvalūr, excluding only the waters poured over the burial urn of Pāri¹⁵. All these poems clearly confirm that Kapilar got the marriage of Pāri's daughter to Malaiyamāṇ performed at Kōvalūr (alias Tirukkōyilūr) that attained celebrity. All these get pointed reference in the inscription. Evidently these seem also to confer historicity to the events connected with Kapilar. The other historic episode connected with Kapilar, but not known so far from any other source, is that, having completed his life's mission, he gave up his life by falling into a burning fire on top of the boulder, near the Vīraṭṭāṇa temple .

Death of Rājarāja's mother

Almost one thousand years later Rājarāja's mother Vāṇavan̄ mahādēvī immolated herself on the funeral pyre of her husband Cuntara Cōlāṇ, leaving an infant child.¹⁶ This episode is mentioned in this record alone. Rājarāja's mother was born in the family of Malayamāṇ-s of Tirukkōyilūr who had an unbroken lineage from the Sangam age¹⁷. There is also a clear suggestion that she hailed from the lineage of Pāri on her mother's side¹⁸. Rājarāja obviously had in his vein the lineage of two of the greatest chiefs of the Sangam age, Malaiyamāṇ and Pāri, both liberal patrons of Sangam poets. There is no doubt this unique parentage inspired Rājarāja to compose his inscription in the

¹⁴ "cēraṇum cōlaṇum pāṇṭiyaṇum
maṇkaikku arukiṭa vantu niṛrār maṇap pantalile" (ibid.)

¹⁵ "karuṇaiyāl inta kaṭal ulakam kākkum
varuṇanē māvalaiyāṇ kōval perumanattu
naṇ pāri tāli koṇṭa naṇ nīr atu tavirttu
pon māriyāka poli" -(ibid)

¹⁶ "Indra samāṇaṇ rājasarvajñāṇ ennum
puliyaip payanta penmāṇ
kaliyaik karantu karavāk kārikai curanta
mulaimakal pirintu muļāñkeri naṭuvanum
talaimakaṭ piriyāt taiyal
.....

cuntara cōlaṇ mantara tāraṇ
tiruppuyan myaṇkum teṇi viruppuṭan
vantutitaruļi ya malaiyar tirukkulattōr" (Tirukkōyilūr inscription lines)

There are two parts in the first two lines of this inscription: 1)the first part speaks of Vāṇavan̄ Mādēvī as a delicate and tender deer, who gave birth to a tiger. It points out that she as a mother gave birth to a valourous son Rājarāja. 2) It alludes to the Cōla lineage that had the tiger as their royal insignia.

The later half of the inscriptions mentions that Vāṇavan̄ Mādēvī left behind a suckling baby, and entered the funeral fire of her husband, in a beautiful poetic way

¹⁷ Malaiyamāṇ-s, celebrated in Sangam literature, continued to have Tirukkōyilūr as a capital almost till modern times.

¹⁸ As Pāri's daughter was married to Malaiyamāṇ, Vāṇa mādēvī was born in the line of Pāri through her mother's side.

Sangam tradition. Incidentally this also shows that the Sangam tradition continued in the 11th century under the Cōla-s.

Malai kaṭām Pāṭṭu

I have mentioned that there exists a poem inscribed in the Rishabhēśvara temple of Chengam and the record refers to *Malai kaṭām pāṭṭu*. The record is in Cōla characters of 12th cent Tamil script in Tamil language. It does not refer to the ruler but there are inscriptions of the later Cōla-s in the same temple and that the inscription is in 12-th century characters brings it under the mediaeval period. It is in praise of a chief Gaṅgēya and his prowess in *Venpā* meter. The record reads:-

Mūvēntar tār mannarai malaip paṭait ten mannarai
 Venkanṭa tiral kaṇkar kōmāṇ̄ kaṇ̄ civappa paṇṭē
 malai kaṭām pāṭṭunṭā mālnavarai ceñcōri
 alai kaṭām pāṭṭunṭatē¹⁹

"When the eyes of the Ganga chief,
 The conqueror of the crowned kings three
 And more so the victorious ruler
 Pandya of mountain ranges like army,
 Turned red with merciless anger
 The great Navirai hill, that received
 Praises in days of yore, in
 The song *Malai kaṭām pāṭṭu*,
 Was reddened with waves of blood
 (Of the vanquished).

I have published a note on this inscription in Kalvettu Quarterly no 5, p.13. The reference to *Malai kaṭām pāṭṭu* of the Sangam age *Pattup pāṭṭu* anthology is of equal interest like the Tirukkōyilūr record. In the manuscripts of the *Pattup pāṭṭu* collection, edited by U.V.Swaminatha Iyer, the title of the poem is given as "Malai paṭu kaṭām", but the inscription calls it "Malai kaṭām pāṭṭu". In all probability the original title of the poem was "Malai kaṭām pāṭṭu", as attested by the inscription. The village Chengam (Ceñkam), not far away from Tirukkōyilūr, situated near the hill Navirai Malai is well known (it is now a taluk headquarters). Chengam was then known as Ceñkaṇmā and is mentioned in the literature. Both these inscriptions point clearly to the influence of the Sangam poetic tradition very much alive in this region in the Cōla age. These two decidedly provide firm historicity to Sangam personalities.

Interest in Sangam poems

The above may be read against the background of other poems of the age. Nampi Āṇṭar Nampi, a poet of great merit who is said to have helped Rājarāja Cōla to discover *Tēvaram* Hymns at the Chidambaram temple, has composed a long poem in Sangam tradition on Nāṇacampantar, that goes by the name

¹⁹ *Malai kaṭām pāṭṭu* (in Tam.) in *Kalvettu* issue no 5, Quarterly Journal of the Tamil nadu State Department of archaeology.

Āluṭaiya-Pillai Tiruttokai. Nambi's interest in Sangam poems is also attested by another source. The Saiva saint Cuntarar, assigned to the 8th cent., lists 63 Saiva saints in his *Tiruttoṇṭat Tokai* (*Tēvāram*, 7-39), giving brief notes on their specific devotion on which Cēkkilār later elaborated in his *Periya-purāṇam*. Cundarar mentions “*poy aṭimai illāta pulavar*” in his list but it is not clear whether the reference is to a number of poets or to a single poet. The expression *poy aṭimai illāta pulavar* can be interpreted in two ways: as pseudo-devotees, or as devotees who are not slaves to false precepts. Whatever be the meaning, it clearly emphasizes true devotion. Nampi Āṇṭār Nampi enlarges the lives of saints furnished by Cuntarar in the 10th cent in his *Tiruttoṇṭar Tiruvantāti* by providing more information on each saint. Nambi takes the expression *poy aṭimai illāta pulavar* as referring to a group of poets and not to a single poet. According to Nampi the term refers to forty-nine poets of the Tamil Sangam of Madurai led by Kapilar, Paraṇar, and Nakkīrar, who were great Saiva devotees. A free rendering of Nambi's poem would read:

*Taraṇiyil poymai ilāt tamīl caṇikam atil Kapilar
Paraṇar Nakkīrar mutal nāṛpatton̄patu pal pulavōr
Aruḷ namakku īyūm Tiru Ālavāy aran cēvaṭikkē
Poruḷ amaittu inpakkavi pala pāṭum pulavarkalē*

'The poets singing many delightful poems dedicated to the sacred feet of Hara of Tiru Ālavāy (Madurai), bestowing grace on us, are forty nine in number led by Kapilar, Paraṇar, and Nakkīrar at the Tamil Sangam of the world that knows no falsehood'.

It may be noted that Nampi makes specific reference to forty-nine poets of the Tamil Sangam led by Kapilar, Paraṇar, and Nakkīrar. Incidentally he seems to be the first to give the title 'World Tamil Sangam' (*Taraṇiyil Tamīl Caṇkam*). There could be no doubt that the reference is to the well known Sangam as Nambi mentions the names of Kapilar, Paraṇar, and Nakkīrar. The fact that Nampi is considered to be a contemporary of Rājarāja Cōla in whose inscriptions at Tirukkōyilūr Kapilar finds mention, deserves attention. It illustrates that mediaeval poets held Kapilar, Paraṇar, and Nakkīrar in great veneration as Devotees of Siva.

Cēkkilār, who wrote his *Periya Purāṇam* on the base of Cuntarar's *Tiruttoṇṭat Tokai* and Nampi Āṇṭār Nampi's *Tiruttoṇṭar Tiruvantāti*, does not say specifically whether the expression *poy aṭimai illāta pulavar* refers to a single poet or to a group of poets, but he seems to lean on the idea that it refers to a single poet. In other words he does not refer to the Sangam poems, but elaborates on the term in an interesting manner.

The poets having determined clearly the meanings of words in classical poems and also the multiple layers of meanings in exalted texts came to the conclusion that they point to the lotus feet of Nilakāṇṭa as the true import of all of them, became his true devotees, attained the fame "the Flawless Poets" and were not swayed by falsehood.

In the next verse Cēkkilār says that these poets attained fame by singing none but Siva with devotion in their poems. According to him, it is the path of Siva that is the true import (*mey uṇarvu*) of all great poems while the others lack the truth (*Poy uṇarvu*). That is how he interprets *poy aṭimai illāta pulavar*. There is no

mention of Kapilar, Parañar or Nakkirar in this context in Cēkkilār's poems but he says they were eminent scholars who studied classical poems and literature, and who came to the conclusion that *Civa neri* is the end result of all true exposition. This suggests that there was analytical study of ancient literature in his time.

Two other poems assignable to the same age, *Tiru Kaniappa Tēvar Tirumāram* and *Kōppappiracātam*, both ascribed to Nakkira Tēvar, follow the same tradition. Moreover, the existence of a commentary on the *Puranāñūru* by an anonymous author and the activities of the commentator *par excellence*, Naccinārkkiniyar on Sangam works also show that Sangam Poems were greatly studied in the mediaeval period. To this list may be added the commentary of Arumpatavurai Āciriyan on *Cilappatikāram*, followed by Atiyārkku nallār who *verbatim* quotes him.

19th and 20th century revival

There has clearly been a continuing interest in the Sangam classics, as evidenced by these two inscriptions and other works cited. Almost thousand years later, the 19th and 20th century witnessed a new dimension in this tradition with the Western translations by G.U. Pope of some Sangam poems, like those included in the book *Tamil Heroic Poems*, and also the translation of Dr. François Gros, *Le Paripāṭal*²⁰. This has been further enlarged by critical studies by a galaxy of eminent Western Scholars like John Marr,²¹ Kamil Zvelebil and a host of others.

Another important trend that deserves attention is the role of epigraphy. The works of such eminent scholars like R. Raghava Iiyangar²² and Sri K.V. Subramanya Iyer in the first half of the 20th cent and in recent years by Iravatham Mahadevan,²³ myself²⁴ and Mr R. Krishnamurti²⁵ (*Dinamalar*) have brought to light important epigraphical and numismatic discoveries bearing on some of the important kings of Sangam like the Sangam Cēra-s, Atiyamān Netumān Añci, inscribed coins with the names of Sangam kings like Kollipporai, Peruvaluti, Mākkōtai, Kuṭṭuvan kōtai and others have further kindled interest in the Sangam poems. These are certainly landmarks in 2000 year old literary traditions that deserve attention.

²⁰ François Gros, *Le Paripāṭal*, French Institute of Indology, Pondicherry, 1968.

²¹ John Marr, 1985, *The eight Anthologies*, [Thesis written in 1958], Institute of Asian Studies, Madras.

²² R. Raghava Iyengar, *Vañci mānakar*, Madras, 1932.

²³ Mahadevan, Iravatham. "Corpus of Tamil brahmi Inscriptions", *Seminar on Inscriptions*, Madras, 1967.

²⁴ Nagaswamy, R. 1. "Asoka and the Tamil Country: a new link", *The Indian Express*, 6-12-1981; 2. "Sangam Age Chera Coins Found", *The Hindu*, 8-11-1987. 3. *Roman Karur*, Brahad Prakashan, Madras, 1995.

²⁵ Krishnamurti, R. "A rare Sangam period Cōla coin", in *Studies in South Indian Coins*, vol.I 1991, Pandya Peruvaluthi coin, (Tam), Madras; *Late Roman Copper Coin from South India*, Madras, 1994