

HISTORICAL OUTLOOK OF CHOLA ENDOWMENTS IN VAZHUVUR VEERATTESWARAR TEMPLE INSCRIPTIONS

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Abstract

Veerateswarar Temple, also referred to as the Vazhuvur Veerateswarar Temple, is a Saiva religious establishment located at Vazhuvur in the contemporary Mayiladuthurai district of Tamil Nadu. The temple is dedicated to Shiva, venerated in the form of Veerateswarar, with the accompanying goddess worshipped as Bala Gujambigai. The site forms part of the early Saiva sacred landscape and reflects the continuity of devotional practice across centuries. The village of Vazhuvur is cited in the seventh-century Tevaram, the foundational Tamil Saiva canonical corpus attributed to the Nayanar poet-saints. While the temple itself is not the subject of an exclusive hymn, its recognition as a Vaippu Sthalam places it among the 276 shrines acknowledged within the Tevaram tradition. This literary reference attests to the antiquity of the site and its embeddedness within early devotional networks. The temple's historical identity is thus shaped by its textual presence, ritual significance, and enduring association with Tamil Saiva religious culture.

Keywords: Veerateswarar Temple, Vazhuvur, Saivism, Tevaram, Vaippu Sthalam, Nayanars, Tamil devotional tradition, Mayiladuthurai district

INTRODUCTION

Temple institutions in early medieval South India operated as enduring centres of religious authority, agrarian organisation, and social coordination. Under the Cholas, Saiva temples were embedded within administrative systems that connected land control, revenue management, ritual obligation, and royal legitimacy. Literary sources and inscriptions together disclose the structural position of temples within local economies and political arrangements. These materials allow a reconstruction of historical processes extending beyond dynastic chronicles, foregrounding institutions rather than individual rulers.

¹ The Veerateswarar Temple at Vazhuvur must be situated within this wider historical setting. Its recognition within early Tamil Saiva literature places the site within the formative devotional landscape, while later inscriptional evidence indicates its absorption into regulated endowment systems. The temple thus reflects continuity between early religious memory and subsequent administrative formalisation under Chola governance. The historical outlook of Chola endowments emerges from identifiable institutional needs and material conditions that shaped temple patronage. One primary historical reason lay in the consolidation of agrarian surplus following territorial expansion in the Kaveri delta. As wet-rice cultivation intensified, surplus land and produce became suitable instruments for permanent endowment.² Epigraphic records from the tenth to twelfth centuries CE show that land grants constituted the dominant form of donation, accounting for a substantial share of all recorded temple benefactions, while cash grants appear less frequently.

A second reason was administrative stabilisation. The Chola state relied on temples as reliable nodes for revenue management and redistribution. Inscriptions reveal repeated use of standard land measures, boundary markers, and regnal dating, indicating a high degree of procedural uniformity. The growing volume of endowment inscriptions during the reigns of Rajaraja I and Rajendra I reflects this administrative maturity, with multiple records from single villages documenting successive grants rather than isolated acts. Social and political considerations also informed endowment practices. Royal and elite patronage of temples served to formalise authority within local societies. The recurrence of donors from village assemblies and officials, alongside royal names, suggests shared participation rather than exclusive court sponsorship. Over time, the increasing density of such records points to institutional continuity, where endowments functioned as long-term arrangements sustaining ritual, labour, and local governance structures.³

Chronological Overview

- **7th century CE:** Vazhuvur is referenced in the Tevaram, composed by the Nayanar saints, establishing its place within early Saiva devotional geography as a Vaippu Sthalam.
- **9th–10th centuries CE:** Expansion of Chola authority in the Kaveri delta region facilitates institutional consolidation of temples and standardised record-keeping.
- **10th–12th centuries CE:** Inscriptional activity at the Veerateswarar Temple records land grants, service endowments, and ritual provisions, reflecting mature Chola administrative practices.⁴
- **Post-12th century CE:** Continued ritual use and local patronage sustain the temple's religious and social functions beyond the Chola period.

Epigraphic Scope

The epigraphic material from the Veerateswarar Temple at Vazhuvur constitutes a coherent body of administrative evidence reflecting the operational logic of a Saiva institution under Chola rule. Most of the inscriptions may be situated within the tenth to twelfth centuries CE, corresponding to the phase of intensified bureaucratic articulation in the Chola polity. These records document a range of endowments, including land assignments, remission of fiscal liabilities, allocation of agricultural produce, and provisions for ritual services such as lamps, festivals, and daily worship. The inscriptions identify donors across multiple institutional levels, encompassing royal authority, local officers, village assemblies, and private individuals. Their formulaic structure demonstrates a high degree of legal precision, marked by regnal dating, standardized measurements, and detailed boundary specifications. References to sabhas, ur, and temple personnel indicate shared modes of administration and accountability. The epigraphic scope of Vazhuvur thus extends beyond devotional patronage, revealing the temple's embeddedness within systems of revenue management, labour regulation, and local governance that characterised Chola administrative practice.⁵

Physical Context of the Inscriptions

The inscriptional records of the Veerateswarar Temple at Vazhuvur are engraved on enduring stone surfaces within the temple complex, including the adhisthana of the central shrine, inner enclosure walls, and subsidiary structures. Their spatial placement within areas of ritual circulation indicates an intention to combine religious sanctity with administrative authority.⁶ From a historical standpoint, stone inscriptions constitute the largest surviving category of Chola documentary evidence, with several thousand records preserved across the Kaveri delta region, underscoring the scale of inscriptional governance during this period. All inscriptions are composed in Tamil and reflect palaeographic forms typical of early and middle Chola phases. The evolution of letter shapes, spacing, and orthographic conventions aligns with patterns observed across tenth- to twelfth-century Chola records. Within the broader corpus of South Indian epigraphy, Tamil inscriptions form a substantial proportion of Chola-period records, indicating deliberate use of the regional language for administrative communication and legal validation. Each record is dated through regnal years of reigning Chola rulers, following a uniform chronological formula.⁷ This practice allows precise temporal placement and reveals the increasing density of dated inscriptions during the mature Chola period. Historically, the number of regnally dated inscriptions rises sharply from the late ninth century onward, reflecting administrative consolidation and heightened record production under rulers such as Rajaraja I and Rajendra I. The inscriptions primarily document land grants, which represent the dominant form of temple endowment in Chola epigraphy. A majority of surviving Chola temple inscriptions across Tamil Nadu concern agricultural land or its produce, indicating the centrality of agrarian surplus to institutional support. Secondary grants include tax remissions and allocations for lamps, festivals, and ritual services, revealing the close linkage between economic resources and religious practice.

Boundary Descriptions and Legal Precision

Boundary clauses occupy a significant portion of inscriptional text, often extending across multiple lines.⁸ The systematic use of natural markers, irrigation features, and neighbouring holdings reflects a developed legal culture concerned with enforceability and permanence. Across Chola records, such detailed boundary descriptions appear with remarkable consistency, pointing to standardized land documentation practices. Several inscriptions name sabhas, ur, local officials, and temple functionaries entrusted with executing grants. Historically, village assemblies appear frequently in Chola inscriptions, suggesting decentralised administration operating within an imperial framework. The recurrence of collective bodies rather than individual agents highlights institutional rather than personal modes of governance.⁹

In aggregate, the Vazhuvur inscriptions form part of a wider pattern in which temples functioned as regulated economic institutions. The increasing volume and complexity of endowment records between the tenth and twelfth centuries signal a transition from episodic patronage to structured, long-term arrangements. These historical patterns demonstrate that Chola endowments were integral to systems of land control, revenue circulation, and administrative continuity within medieval South India. The ninth century CE represents the formative phase of Chola epigraphy, during which inscriptional documentation begins to reappear following the Pallava decline. Although limited in volume, inscriptions from this period are crucial for understanding early Chola state formation and temple-oriented patronage.¹⁰

Vijayalaya Chola (c. 848–871 CE)

Inscriptions attributed to Vijayalaya Chola are sparse and primarily associated with early temple foundations and land donations. These records are documented in the Annual Reports on Epigraphy (ARE) of the Madras Presidency, where they are classified under early Chola entries from the Thanjavur region. In the South Indian Inscriptions (SI) series, references to Vijayalaya appear in volumes dealing with early Chola rulers, often in

introductory sections rather than extensive edited texts. Historically, these inscriptions signal the revival of stone temple construction and the re-establishment of Saiva institutions.

Aditya I (c. 871–907 CE)

The inscriptional record expands significantly under Aditya I. Numerous ARE entries from the Kaveri delta and northern Tamil regions document his endowments to Saiva temples, gifts for lamps, and land grants. These inscriptions are published across early SI volumes dedicated to Chola epigraphy, where they are presented with transliterations and summaries. Historically, they reflect political consolidation following victories over the Pallavas and indicate increasing administrative regularity.¹¹ Ninth-century Chola inscriptions in ARE reports are typically brief, noting regnal year, location, donor identity, and nature of the gift. Their cataloguing confirms physical verification and chronological placement, even when inscriptions are fragmentary.¹²

Endowments of Chola Kings in the Mayiladuthurai Region

The inscriptions from the Mayiladuthurai region convey a coherent pattern of Chola endowment practices, reflecting the integration of temples into systems of revenue, administration, and ritual regulation. These records, largely datable from the ninth to the twelfth centuries CE, document royal initiatives that transformed local shrines into institutional centres sustained by permanent resources. Inscriptions attributed to **Vijayalaya Chola** and **Aditya I** record early land grants to Saiva temples, primarily intended for daily worship and the maintenance of sacred lamps. The messages emphasise religious restoration and the reassertion of Chola authority in a region emerging from Pallava influence. Endowments during this phase are modest in scale but significant in intent, establishing precedents for later institutional arrangements. Under **Parantaka I**, the inscriptional messages expand in scope. Records from the Mayiladuthurai area detail larger land assignments, remission of specified taxes, and the allocation of produce for festival observances.¹³ These inscriptions frequently reference village assemblies responsible for administering the grants, indicating shared governance and procedural regularity. Later Chola inscriptions from the region convey sustained royal engagement with temple institutions. They emphasise continuity of endowments across reigns, legal precision in land documentation, and accountability mechanisms for ritual performance. Collectively, the Mayiladuthurai inscriptions reveal Chola endowments as structured interventions that linked royal authority with local agrarian resources and temple-centred religious life. The Veerateswarar Temple is situated approximately three kilometres south of Mayiladuthurai, within a zone that formed part of the core Chola territorial and agrarian landscape. Its location ensured proximity to established irrigation networks, village assemblies, and ritual routes, facilitating sustained patronage across multiple political phases.¹⁴

Chola-Period Architectural Additions

An inscription dated to the fifth regnal year of Kulottunga Chola III records the construction of a dedicated shrine for the goddess in the north-west corner varandaha of the temple. This work was executed by Vanakovaraiyar, the chief of Tundanadu in Mudikondasola-valanadu, indicating the role of regional chiefs in temple expansion under Chola authority. The record reflects decentralised participation within an imperial framework, where local elites undertook architectural initiatives tied to royal legitimacy. An undated inscription attributes the construction of the main gopuram and the prakara wall to Alagapperumal Pillai, son of Gangeyar Ganapatnayinar-Pillai. The same record notes the installation of an image of Bhikshatanamurti within the temple complex. These details indicate a phase of architectural formalisation and iconographic enrichment, marking the temple's transition toward a fully articulated sacred enclosure.¹⁵

Vijayanagar Interventions and Hydraulic Works

A record from the reign of the Vijayanagar king Pratapadevaraya refers to the construction of a tank and an irrigation channel for the temple. This intervention underscores continued royal engagement with the site and highlights the integration of temple institutions with water management systems essential for sustaining agrarian production and ritual economy. Two inscriptions from the Brahmapurisvara Temple, attributable to the Vijayanagar period, record that the settlement was known as Valugur, also called Kalikadinda-solanallur. The preservation of this dual nomenclature points to continuity of Chola-era territorial identity within later administrative contexts.

Economic Endowments and Lamp Donations

A twenty-seventh regnal year inscription of Kulottunga Chola records a monetary gift for six lamps, reflecting organised provisioning for daily ritual requirements. An inscription of Rajaraja Chola documents the donation of thirty-two cows and one bull for a perpetual lamp by Sengeni Virapperumal, also known as Kulottungachola Sambuvaraya. Another record from the same reign mentions a monetary gift for two lamps and two lamp stands, made by a donor from Sirkarkadu in Arkattu-kurram of Pandyakulasani-valanadu.¹⁶ These records illustrate varied forms of endowment livestock and cash structured to ensure continuity of worship. Taken together, these inscriptions reveal phased architectural development, sustained ritual investment, and infrastructural support extending from the Chola to the Vijayanagar periods. The Veerateswarar Temple emerges as a regulated institutional centre, embedded in regional agrarian systems, shaped by layered patronage, and sustained through legally articulated endowments over several centuries.

CONCLUSION

The inscriptional evidence from the Vazhuvur Veerateswarar Temple allows a layered historical reading of Chola endowments as deliberate instruments of institutional organisation rather than episodic religious generosity. The

records demonstrate that endowments were embedded within clearly defined administrative procedures, supported by legal precision in land measurement, boundary demarcation, and regnal dating. Such features indicate that temples operated within a regulated framework that linked ritual continuity with fiscal discipline and local governance. Across successive reigns, the inscriptions reveal continuity as well as adaptation. Early Chola endowments established the temple's economic base through land, livestock, and monetary gifts, while later records reflect architectural expansion, iconographic additions, and infrastructural investments such as tanks and irrigation channels. The involvement of regional chiefs, village assemblies, and private donors underscores a shared mode of patronage that distributed responsibility across multiple social levels. This pattern situates the temple within a wider agrarian economy, where surplus production was channelled into ritual maintenance and institutional permanence.

The survival of these records through Chola and Vijayanagar phases further highlights the temple's capacity to accommodate political transitions without institutional disruption. In historical terms, the Vazhuvur inscriptions illustrate Chola endowments functioned as mechanisms for sustaining religious practice, stabilising local economies, and reinforcing political authority. The inscriptional corpus of the Vazhuvur Veerateeswarar Temple provides a detailed historical perspective on Chola endowments as instruments of long-term institutional management. The records confirm that endowments were framed within legally articulated procedures, relying on precise regnal dating, standardized measurements, and clearly defined obligations. This legal formalism ensured enforceability and protected endowed resources from arbitrary diversion.

The inscriptions also reveal the temple's role as a stabilising centre within the agrarian landscape. Land grants, livestock donations, and monetary gifts were closely tied to agricultural cycles, irrigation facilities, and village-level revenue systems. By directing surplus toward ritual services such as lamps, festivals, and daily worship, endowments transformed agricultural production into sustained religious practice, reinforcing the temple's centrality in local society. Another significant dimension lies in the decentralised nature of patronage. Regional chiefs, village assemblies, temple functionaries, and private individuals appear alongside royal donors, indicating that endowment practices operated through collective participation rather than exclusive royal control. This shared involvement contributed to institutional resilience and continuity across generations. Architectural references within the inscriptions point to phased construction and spatial expansion, reflecting changing ritual needs and economic capacity.

The continuation of endowment records into the Vijayanagar period further demonstrates the adaptability of the temple's institutional framework to shifting political regimes. Taken together, the Vazhuvur Veerateeswarar Temple inscriptions illustrate that Chola endowments functioned simultaneously as economic arrangements, administrative mechanisms, and instruments of political legitimacy. They offer a grounded historical understanding of temple institutions as enduring structures that organised land, labour, and belief within medieval South Indian society.

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