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Pallavas

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The Pallavas were one of the major dynasties of South India in the first millennium CE. The earliest sources (ca. 350–550 CE) relating to them are COPPER PLATE GRANTS, mostly from Āndhra (the present-day state of Andhra Pradesh), south of the Kṛṣṇā River, where it appears that they succeeded to the realm of the IKṢVĀKUS. At this early period, KĀNCĪPURAM, in the extreme northern part of present-day Tamil Nadu, approximately 50 kilometers southwest of Chennai, was already their capital city. From ca. 550 CE, the Pallavas' connection with Āndhra loosened and the kingdom recentered itself in the northern part of Tamil Nadu. Over the six centuries of the existence of the dynasty, at least three lineages within the family are known to have succeeded one another, but it is not entirely clear how they were connected. The domination of the Pallavas in the Tamil South came to an end with the rise of the Cōlas of Tanjore in the tenth century (see CŌLAS).

Our knowledge about the first two lineages, ruling in the south of Andhra Pradesh and the extreme north of Tamil Nadu, is based mainly on copper-plate charters extending patronage to Brahmins through the foundation of *brahmadeyas* (see BRAHMADEYA/AGRAHĀRA) and *devadānas* (see DEVADĀNA) in favor of local gods. From approximately 600 CE onward, the Pallavas, besides continuing to commission inscriptions, also became patrons of architecture, beginning first with the excavation of rock-cut cave temples and soon after with the construction of freestanding structural temples. The walls and pillars of these royal temples featured another type of inscription, dedicatory and eulogistic.

ARTS

The beginnings of durable temple architecture – made of stone rather than wood and brick – in Tamil Nadu are associated with the Pallava king Mahendravarman I (ca. 580–630) (see MAHENDRAVARMAN; Srinivasan 1964). His dedicatory inscriptions reveal him to be the first known patron of rock-cut cave temples in this region. Along with rock-cut architecture, sculpture also emerged, mostly of doorkeepers to the temples. A large sculpture dating to Mahendravarman's reign at Tiruccirāppalli (Trichy) depicts Gaṅgādhara, a representation of the god Śiva receiving the celestial Ganges River in his matted hair following the request of the penitent king Bhagiratha, so that its descent would leave the earth intact. This panel is considered the earliest sculptural masterpiece in Tamil South India.

A second phase of rock-cut architecture began with the successors of Mahendravarman I, starting with Narasiṃhavarman I Māmalla (ca. 630–670), mainly at Māmallapuram (Mahābalipuram; see MĀMALLAPURAM/MAHĀBALIPURAM), a ceremonial center at that time and today a UNESCO World Heritage site, approximately 50 kilometers south of Chennai. These second-phase rock-cut caves are more elaborated: besides doorkeepers, they are adorned with more sculptures (including cult images, mythological scenes, and royal portraits) and display a more sophisticated type of pillar, incorporating the figure of a lion. In addition to caves, monolithic temples – locally designated as *rathas*, “chariots” – and large rock-cut sculptures, such as the “Great Penance,” were also carved at Māmallapuram. The latter relief, of large proportions (approximately 12 × 25 meters), displays at the center an ascetic obtaining a boon from the god Śiva, while a nearby cleft represents the River Ganges. Two main

interpretations have been proposed. The ascetic was first identified as Arjuna, one of the five heroes of the *Mahābhārata*, who performed austerities in the Himalayas, the source of the Ganges, in order to obtain a magical weapon from Śiva. Yet he may also be recognized as the ascetic king Bhagiratha, who obtained from Śiva the boon of the descent of the celestial Ganges, so that the river purified the nether-world ashes of his ancestors, who had been cursed by a sage. A recent interpretation, based notably on a parallel with contemporary ornate poetry which abounds in *double entendre*, suggests that the panel is in fact a visual pun and represents both narratives (Rabe 2001).

A further development in architecture involved the construction of structural temples through the use of stone blocks as the technology of stone extraction reached maturity (Longhurst 1924–30; Dumarçay and L'Hernault 1975) and was, if not initiated, then at least encouraged by Narasiṃhavarman II Rājasimha (ca. 700–730). Structural temples were commissioned by Pallava kings until approximately 850 CE and are found mainly in their capital city Kāñcīpuram, as, for instance, the Rājasimheśvara temple (“the temple of the Lord of Rājasimha”), today known as the Kailāsanātha temple (“the temple of the Lord of Kailāsa,” that is, Śiva, who resides on the mount Kailāsa), built in the first quarter of the eighth century CE. The use of a soft stone, instead of the hard stone of the rock-cut period, made possible the proliferation of sculptures and ornamental motifs. The walls of the Kailāsanātha are thus adorned with an unprecedented and possibly unrivalled series of representations of Śiva. In Māmallapuram, the “Shore Temple” complex was transformed by the addition of two structural temples dedicated to Śiva, in a sectarian appropriation of the site.

Between 600 and 750 CE, temples in the Tamil South were thus in their vast majority commissioned by royal patrons. This royal practice of building durable temples and having them inscribed was then imitated in the

Pallava realm and beyond, in villages, where magnates and local communities started to rebuild temples in stone. The royal idiom was however not exactly replicated, as these local temples were usually built in a hard stone and display only one sculpture per temple wall. The building of temples was also accompanied by the development of freestanding sculpture, in stone and bronze.

The Pallavas contributed significantly to the introduction of Brahmanical and Sanskrit culture in South India. This was achieved in part through creation of *brahmadeyas* for communities of brahmins learned in the Sanskrit scriptures. The copper-plate grants instituting these *brahmadeyas* were first composed in Prakrit (ca. 300–350 CE), then in Sanskrit (ca. 350–550 CE), and finally, from 550 CE onward, became bilingual, with Sanskrit for the opening eulogistic portion and Tamil for the following documentary or business portion. It is notable that the Sanskrit portions of the bilingual plates were ornate poetry (*kāvya*), as were the royal dedicatory inscriptions engraved on the rock-cut and structural temples. These royal inscriptions were furthermore sometimes engraved in very ornate and calligraphic scripts. Famous Sanskrit poets, such as Daṇḍin, were reputedly patronized by Pallava kings. Toward the end of the dynasty, the Tamil language also acceded to the status of a royal idiom. A praise poem named *Nantikkalampakam*, probably inaugurating this new literary genre, was composed at the court of Nandivarman III (ca. 850–860 CE).

RELIGION

As for the religious orientation of the Pallava kings, the available sources (copper-plate grants first, and then temples and their inscriptions) indicate a transition from an ecumenical patronage of Brahmanical institutions toward a sectarian “Hinduism.” The creation of *brahmadeyas* and *devadānas* is attested throughout the Pallava period, while Māmallapuram offers

a clear example of growing sectarian tensions and a shift toward Śaivism. There, earlier temples originally dedicated to Viṣṇu were transformed into temples of Śiva (Lockwood 2001). Viṣṇuism resurfaced however during the reign of Nandivarman II (ca. 730–800), who had the Vaikuṇṭhaperumāl temple (“the temple of the Lord of Vaikuṇṭha,” that is Viṣṇu) built in Kāñcīpuram.

The Pallava period witnessed the spread of what is called the “*bhakti*” movement, a religious movement based on personal devotion, in the Tamil area. As both royal and local temple construction became widespread, hymns in Tamil, later collected in anthologies – the *Nalāyirattiviyyappirapantam* for Viṣṇu, the *Tēvāram* for Śiva – were apparently composed and recited in these temples. The connection and interaction between these two streams of *bhakti* (royal and local) is however not entirely clear. If both share commonalities, their modes and purposes were not entirely identical: royal *bhakti*, mostly expressed in Sanskrit, aimed at eulogizing kings as much as the gods, while local *bhakti*, mostly expressed in Tamil, put the god in the forefront. Buddhism and Jainism were also present and developing in the Pallava kingdom, notably at Kāñcīpuram itself, but they do not appear to have enjoyed direct royal support.

POLITICS AND ROYAL DISCOURSE

During the seventh and eighth centuries CE, the Pallavas were among the main competitors in South India for the status of universal sovereigns. They opposed first the CĀḷUKYAS OF BĀDĀMI from Karnataka, then the branch of this family established in Veṅgī (see CĀḷUKYAS OF VEṅGĪ) in Āndhra, and finally the RĀṢTRAKŪṬAS of the Deccan, who were instrumental in the Pallava decline, and paving the way for their replacement in the Tamil South, at the end of the ninth century CE, by the CŌḶAS.

This dynastic rivalry is reflected in the panegyrics of the royal inscriptions (on stone and copper), which were vehicles for demonstrating the greatness and fame of the ruling king and his lineage. Royally sponsored architecture served the same purpose by its unprecedented scale. The Kailāsanātha and the Vaikuṇṭhaperumāl temples in Kāñcīpuram were among the largest temple complexes built in the whole of the Indian subcontinent during their time: as state temples they were meant to display the imperial status of the dynasty. Inscriptions were also spatial markers of this rivalry. Mahendravarman I had an inscription engraved on a rock in Bādāmī, the capital city of the Cāḷukyas, when he conquered it. A century later, a Cāḷukya king retaliated by having a donative inscription engraved on a pillar of the Kailāsanātha at Kāñcīpuram.

The Pallavas had no enduring conquests or firm political authority outside the confines of South India and the Deccan. Their kingdom did, however, enjoy commercial and cultural relations with polities of Southeast Asia and beyond. A Tamil inscription mentioning Nandivarman III has been found in southern Thailand, while Pallava embassies were sent to the Chinese emperor.

Through their inscriptions and their monuments, the Pallavas articulated a distinctive discourse about kingship. Merely hinted at in sources before 600 CE, it became fully enunciated afterward. In contrast to Brahmanical ideology, expressed in the *varṇa-jāti* system (see VARṆA-JĀTI SYSTEM (CASTE)), which subordinates royal power (the Kṣatriya *varṇa*) to the spiritual authority of brahmins (the Brahmin *varṇa*), as sole interpreters of *dharma* thanks to their expertise in the Veda, the Pallavas expressed another vision of kingship.

Epigraphical genealogies – regularly found in copper-plate grants, but also in dedicatory inscriptions – as well as, exceptionally, a visual genealogy found in the Vaikuṇṭhaperumāl temple at Kāñcīpuram, at the beginning of an extensive series of narrative reliefs representing the history of the dynasty, evince this

royal discourse. The Pallavas are presented as descendants of the god Brahmā, through a lineage of pure Brahmins, which, from one ancestor to another, shows a growing attraction toward worldly rule. The pivotal figure is that of the eponym Pallava, hailed as the first king of the lineage. A Brahmin by his paternal line, he also incorporates royal blood through his mother, who is variously conceived as either the daughter or emissary of Lord Indra, king of the gods. Iconographical programs of royal temples, especially that of the Kailāsanātha in Kāñcīpuram, can be read to the same effect, with direction-oriented divine representations pointing to the double nature of the Pallavas: ascetic figures, facing south, and warrior figures, facing north, respectively represent Brahmanical and royal values, while the figures facing west – dancing Śiva and Śiva as Gaṅgādhara – represent the fusion of the Brahmanical and royal aspects. As such the Pallavas represented themselves as both Brahmins and kings, embodying temporal *and* spiritual power, positing themselves above the *varṇa-jāti* system (Francis 2013–17).

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