



HAL
open science

David Pierdominici Leão: Breaking the Crown of Indra. The Pāṇḍyas and Their Dynastic Identity in the South Indian Context (Brill's Indological Library), Leiden: Brill, 2025.

Emmanuel Francis

► **To cite this version:**

Emmanuel Francis. David Pierdominici Leão: Breaking the Crown of Indra. The Pāṇḍyas and Their Dynastic Identity in the South Indian Context (Brill's Indological Library), Leiden: Brill, 2025.. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 2026, <10.1017/S0041977X26101062>. <hal-05508717>

HAL Id: hal-05508717

<https://hal.science/hal-05508717v1>

Submitted on 17 Apr 2026

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire HAL, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 - Attribution - Non-commercial use - No Derivative Works - International License

DAVID PIERDOMINICI LEÃO: *Breaking the Crown of Indra. The Pāṇḍyas and Their Dynastic Identity in the South Indian Context*

(Brill's Indological Library.) xi, 374 pp. Brill: Leiden, Boston, 2025. ISBN 978 90 04 72072 5.

This book is about “Pāṇḍyaness,” that is, what makes the Pāṇḍya kings of South India singular in their auto-perception and self-presentation over a period nearing two millennia from the first centuries of the common era up to the middle of the 18th century.

The subject is certainly interesting as the successive royal lineages that present themselves as Pāṇḍyas share peculiar feats, such as breaking the crown of Indra, the king of gods. Such a study over a long period is certainly a desideratum, given the wealth of material and the relative low attention that the Pāṇḍyas have recently received, with notable exceptions though, such as contributions by Leslie Orr and Valérie Gillet.

This question is addressed by examining, in chronological order, various primary sources that pertain to Pāṇḍya kings, from Caṅkam poems to inscriptions on copper plates and stone, to the *Pāṇḍyakulodaya* by Maṇḍalakavi, a literary text known through a single manuscript. In fact, approximately one third of the book (chapter 4, the longest of the book) deals with this long poem.

The book stops somehow abruptly with no real conclusion, no recapitulative views on the issues at stake. The final chapter is followed by appendices, notably genealogical tables and a list of “the most recurrent Pāṇḍya narratives.” It would be more accurate to speak of “mythemes” rather than “narratives” since most of time we deal very short descriptions of feats such as engraving the royal emblem on the top of mountain peak.

This book is a disappointment, since, beyond the presentation and analysis of the relevant sources, we miss global reflections and perspectives. “Pāṇḍyaness” is, for instance, loosely defined as Tamilness and Sanskritness in the introduction (p. 5). There is no discussion about the relevance of the sources. Whose conception of the Pāṇḍyas does a Caṅkam poem or an epigraphical eulogy reflect? That of the poet, of the patron or of the commissioner of the inscription? The continuity between the various lineages named Pāṇḍyas is taken for granted, even though there are breaks, known by the author. Does a Tenkasi Pāṇḍya (15th/16th century) appropriating the name and feats of the early Pāṇḍyas look at his past or at the past of a glorious dynasty of the past, that he claims as his own past in order to appear as the heir of that glorious dynasty?

The book is in fact mostly a collection of data, pointing to interesting facts, but rarely going beyond the observation. For instance, the author notes that the Pāṇḍya emblem is either a single fish or two fishes, but offers no explanation for this variation, nor explain whether this variation is significant or not.

There is a lack of comparative data in general, as attested by a surprisingly short bibliography of secondary sources. This sometimes leads the author to over-interpret as peculiar features of the Pāṇḍyas what in fact belongs to the conventional description of kings. With the three mythemes that concern Indra (breaking his crown, wearing his garland/necklace, sitting on his throne, alone or along with him) we have the Pāṇḍya version of some conventional royal trait: being or supplanting Indra, who is *devendra*, “the king of gods,” whereas the king is *narendra*, “the king of men.”

As for the garland of Indra and its connexion to the Pāṇḍyas, this is mentioned in Cōla sources as, for instance, Rājendra I Cōla (1st half of 11th century), is described, in his

meykkīrtti—his Tamil eulogy found as preamble to dozens of inscriptions—as seizing in Lanka “the crown of Sundara and the garland of Indra, that the Pāṇḍya had kept with him [the king of Lanka]” (*muṇṇavar pakkal teṇṇavar vaitta cuntara muṭiyum intiraṇ āramum*; see Pu. Cuppiramaṇiyam, *Meykkīrttikaḷ*, Cennai: Ulakat Tamilārāycci Niruvaṇam, 1983, pp. 27, 32). The same information is found in the stanza 58 of the Karantai copper plates (see K. G. Krishnan, *Karandai Tamil Sangam plates of Rajendrachola I*, New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1984, pp. 74 and 199).

As for the *Pāṇḍyakulodaya* by Maṇḍalakavi, maybe too much space is devoted to this poem, transmitted in a single manuscript only, which is possibly telling about its importance. At least the question of the relevance of this text should be addressed in more detail. Presenting this text as revolutionary for offering full-fledged divinisation of the king seems an exaggeration. Is the inverted description of the hero from head to toe, rather than from toe to head, that much against the conventions of *kāvya* and that much significant? The author also fails to convince when he, somehow artificially, makes this text an epic of resistance against Vijayanagara dominance (p. 299), or when he tries to apply to his materials the concept of liminality (p. 288) or Assman’s theory of cultural memory (p. 300).

As for the original texts, quoted and translated in the book, looking just at the inscription nicely illustrated on the front cover of the book, one notices that it is poorly reproduced (p. 314), with many mistakes. Note also that there is no mention of the Iḷaiyāṇ Puttūr grant issued by the early Pāṇḍya king Arikēcari Parāṅkucan, son of Jayantavarman, though published in 2007 (E. Cupparāyalu and Ve. Vētācalam, “pāṇṭiyaṇ neṭumāraṇiṇ iḷaiyaṇputtūrc ceppēṭu,” *Āvaṇam* 18, 2007, pp. 1–15).

This book is thus certainly useful as an interesting collection, description and discussion of relevant sources, but, unfortunately, it does not offer deep reflections beyond observing enduring features of the various lineages that claimed to be Pāṇḍyas.

Emmanuel FRANCIS

manufrancis@gmail.com

CNRS, CESA, UMR 8077, CNRS & EHESS, Aubervilliers, France