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The service retinues of the Chola court: a study of the term *velam* in Tamil inscriptions

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Abstract

Drawing on the large corpus of Chola period Tamil inscriptions, this paper attempts to clarify the meaning of the apparently obscure and neglected term in Tamil epigraphy, known as *velam*. The paper argues that the term in Chola period sources should best be understood as a “palace establishment” composed mostly of women (and sometimes men) of servile status. A relatively comprehensive review of the term in inscriptions and literature sheds significant light on the organization of the lower echelons of labour in the Chola royal household and the conditions under which men and women of this status were incorporated into such service. The paper argues for a reconsideration of the importance of the *velam* as an institution in Chola times, as well as the lives of its members, concluding with reflections on how the institution changed over time.

Introduction

As important as aristocratic and royal lineages have been in the shaping of society and culture in early medieval India, very little is understood about the organization of labour in the palaces and extended households of royal families.¹ While we have a rudimentary understanding of the officers and functionaries who surrounded the king, the organization of the lower echelons of royal service have been far from clear. Yet the worlds of these men and women are manifestly important for a number of reasons. Understanding the social origins of palace servants, the avenues through which they entered service, the privileges and/or constraints falling upon them as a result of their condition, the means of their remuneration and opportunities for advancement, their kin relations, organization and domestic arrangements – besides having intrinsic interest – throws light on the dynamics of elite societies in early medieval India. The lack of

1 I would like to thank Y. Subbarayalu, Sascha Ebeling and especially Leslie Orr and P. Sundaram for assistance on the interpretation of various inscriptions. Leslie Orr was particularly generous in sharing various aspects of her extensive knowledge of women in Tamil inscriptions and carefully commenting on a final draft of this paper. Special thanks also to S. Swaminathan and the Chief Epigraphist at Mysore for their help in obtaining and in some cases interpreting transcripts and estampages during my research trip there, and James Heitzman for generous assistance in producing the site map.

scholarly treatment of this world of service is, no doubt, attributable to a scarcity of evidence in many regions and periods. At the same time, there has been an apparent disinclination to push the sources to their limit, to reveal what Noboru Karashima has called the “whisperings” of social history from inscriptions.² In the case of the Chola empire of south India (c. 950–1250), the opportunities for such interpretation may be possible due to the copious epigraphic legacy generally lacking in contemporary north India.³

This paper explores the lives of lower ranking servants in the Chola imperial household and the organizations to which they belonged, both of which are poorly understood and rarely treated in the historiography of the period. The evidence for such a task remains problematic, as lithic inscriptions mostly record only those economic transactions which pertained to temple affairs – presenting a fragmentary picture of other aspects of Chola society. Nevertheless, a range of differently ranked personnel associated with the palace appear regularly in inscriptions as donors – their titles and affiliations providing insight into the service arrangements of the royal household. Inscriptional evidence will be supplemented by contemporary literary sources – court poetry, sumptuary manuals, and travellers’ accounts. Though precise corroboration is elusive, literary sources remain an important backdrop for the inscriptional data. The Chinese traveller Chau Ju-Kua, for example, who claims to have visited south India sometime in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, reports that the Chola king retained some 10,000 “dancing girls”, three thousand of whom attended him in rotation.⁴ Sumptuary manuals in Sanskrit often rank the majesty of kings by the size of their retinues. The imperial king, according to the architectural treatise *Mānasāra*, was to have an entourage of millions of women.⁵ In court poetry such women appear as nameless *nāyikās*, thronging the streets of the royal city seeking the attention of the king as he moves in procession. While these genres contain formulaic dimensions, together they underscore what must have been an extensive presence in the royal household.

From their inscriptions, the Cholas are known to have had a number of palace complexes – at Tanjavur, Gangaikondacholapuram, Kanchi and Palaiyaru, to name those cited most frequently.⁶ Though no medieval palace has survived intact, incidental inscriptional references suggest that

2 Noboru Karashima, “Whispering of inscriptions”, in Kenneth R. Hall (ed.), *Structure and Society in Early South India: Essays in Honour of Noboru Karashima* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 56–7.

3 Chola period inscriptions are published chiefly in *South Indian Inscriptions* (henceforth *SI*), *Epigraphia Indica* (henceforth *EI*) and the *Travancore Archaeological Series* (henceforth *TAS*). Unpublished inscriptions have been noted in the *Annual Reports on Indian Epigraphy* (henceforth *ARE*).

4 Reported originally in the account called *Ling-wai-tai-ta*. See *Chau Ju-Kua: His Work on the Chinese and Arab Trade in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries Entitled Chu-fan-chi*, trans. F. Hirth and W.W. Rockhill (Taipei: Cheng Wen Publishing Co., 1970), 95, 100.

5 See *Mānasāra*, ed. P.K. Acharya (Delhi: Oriental Reprints, 1980), vol. 3, 41.10–43.

6 Tamil and Sanskrit diacritics will not be used for modern place names or major dynasties current in English-language scholarship. Epigraphic spelling conventions

palace-complexes were composed of numerous, and often large, multi-storeyed residences as well as functionally defined buildings, like bathing-, eating-, and assembly halls. In some cases, palaces were also connected to surrounding urban space. Inscriptions mention “inner” and “outer” regions of the city, and literary texts indicate that the streets surrounding palace complexes often housed a sort of extended retinue of the king. These spatial arrangements seem to be broadly corroborated by contemporary sources on architecture and town planning.

The inhabitants of royal palaces of course included first and foremost the royal family itself, which was of a considerable size. In order to secure political alliances, Chola kings frequently took numerous wives. Two kings in the tenth century, for example, Parāntaka I (907–955) and Uttamacōla (979–985), are known to have had at least ten wives each.⁷ Many of these women appear in the epigraphic records as donors – acting individually or collectively, but often independently of their husbands. The royal household would have also included children as well as various other kin of different ages – though beyond the heir-apparent and the viceroys of the eleventh century, these people do not regularly appear in the epigraphic record.

Beyond family, the royal household may have retained various high state functionaries, and certainly included personal body guards and some hereditary military retainers. Then there were special “intimates” (*aṇukkanl aṇukki*), “concubines” (*pokiyār*), and “friends” (*saciva*) who enjoyed elevated status and sometimes lordly titles. These people often appear as members of the heterogeneously staffed retinues or entourages (*parivārams*) which accompanied high ranking family members as they moved between royal centres and toured the kingdom making religious donations. Finally, there was a much wider group of personal or “domestic” servants who occupied a lower rank in the royal household, but who are nevertheless relatively conspicuous in the inscriptional record. These men and women are referred to in inscriptions by generic terms like *peṇṭāṭṭi* (“servile woman”) and *paṇimakan* (“work-boy”).⁸ It is these latter groups who form the subject of this paper.

The *veḷam* as an institution

A key term which appears regularly in inscriptions associated with palace servants, particularly women, is the Tamil word “*veḷam*”. Over thirty different *veḷams* are mentioned in twice as many inscriptions, all dated

(particularly the use of short vowels) will be maintained for Tamil cited from inscriptions despite their discrepancy with standard literary usage.

7 Notable are the marriages secured with the Malaiyamāns of Milāḍu, the Maḷavars of Maḷāḍu, Irukkuveḷs of Kodambalūr as well as the Vallavaraiyar and Paḷuveṭṭaraiyar lineages. See George Spencer, “Ties that bind: royal marriage alliance in the Chola period”, *Proceedings of the Fourth International Symposium on Asian Studies* (Hong Kong: Asian Research Service, 1982), 717–36.

8 On *paṇimakan*, see Subbarayalu, *Studies in Chola History* (Chennai: Surabhi Pathipakam, 2001), 107.

between the reigns of Parāntaka I (907–955) and Kulōttuṅka I (1070–1120).⁹ The inscriptions are primarily concentrated in the Chola core region with smaller numbers located in outlying regions (see Figure 1). Translated variously as “harem”, “prison”, palace, or “military encampment”, the term has received little by way of systematic attention, and its origin and precise meaning remain uncertain.¹⁰ Its obscurity is partly attributable to a limited appearance in the sources. The term is confined entirely to the Chola period, and even then its incidence is substantial, but hardly copious – it occurs in just under sixty inscriptions (many of which are unpublished) and in a single literary text.¹¹ Moreover, its meaning is often ambiguous, leaving it open to a wide array of interpretations by historians and epigraphists.

In the great majority of inscriptional references, *veḷams* are mentioned as the identifiers of particular male and (mostly) female donors at temples. Typically, incidences have a similar syntactic structure: *x veḷattup peṇṭāṭṭi y*, where *x* refers to the title of the *veḷam* and *y* the name of the woman. The titles of *veḷams* give us significant clues as to their function and organization. The designation of many *veḷams* clearly derive from the names of kings and queens and other members of the royal family and the many titles which they bore. Chola kings, as is well known, had a predilection for naming institutions, territorial units and even denominations of measure after themselves and their relations. Palace institutions were no different. So in the tenth century, during the reign of Parāntaka and his immediate successors, we learn of *veḷams* named after the Chola queens Karralipirāṭṭiyār and Kilāṇaṭikaḷ as well as the prince Gaṇḍarāditya.¹² During the reign of Rājārāja I (985–1014), inscriptions at Tanjavur and elsewhere record the names of no fewer than nine *veḷams* with royal titles (most of which were associated with Rājārāja himself), and at least one *veḷam* named after his queen Pañcavanmādeviyār. This practice of titularly naming continued well into the twelfth century.

9 My research revealed approximately 100 inscriptions directly relevant for this study, nearly sixty of which explicitly mention *veḷams*. Fewer than half of this overall number have been published. I was able to consult transcripts or estampages of a large number of these unpublished inscriptions at the Chief Epigraphist’s Office (Archaeological Survey of India) in Mysore, but a few of these records have remained elusive and untraceable.

10 See T. N. Subramaniam, “Glossary”, in *South Indian Temple Inscriptions* (Madras: Government Oriental Manuscript Library, 1957), vol. 3, pt. 2, s. v.; Nilakanta Sastri, *The Colas* (Madras: University of Madras, 1955), 449–51; B. Venkataraman, *Rajarajesvaram: The Pinnacle of Chola Art* (Madras: Mudgala Trust, 1985), 251; James Heitzman, *Gifts of Power* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 149; and Y. Subbarayalu (ed.), *Tamil Kalveṭṭuc Collakarāṭi* (Chennai: Cānti Cātana, 2002), s. v.; Ci. Kōvintarācan, *Kalveṭṭuk Kalaiccol Akaramutali* (Madurai: Madurai Kamaraj University, 1987), s. v.; L. Thyagarajan, “Gangai and its region: an epigraphical perspective”, in Pierre Pichard et al., *Vingt ans après Tanjavur, Gangaikondacholapuram* (Paris: École Française d’Extrême Orient, 1994), vol. 1, 184.

11 It is not found in later lexicons like the *Apitāna Cintāmaṇi* of Mutaliyār Ciṅkaravēlu. The *Madras Tamil Lexicon* (Madras: Madras University, 1927–35), s. v., cites its single literary occurrence in the Chola period poem *Kalīnkattupparāṇi*.

12 For Karralipirāṭṭiyār, see *SII* 19.131, for Kilāṇaṭikaḷ see *SII* 19.150; *SII* 17.530; and *SII* 3.201; for prince Gaṇḍarāditya, see *ARE* 241 of 1926.

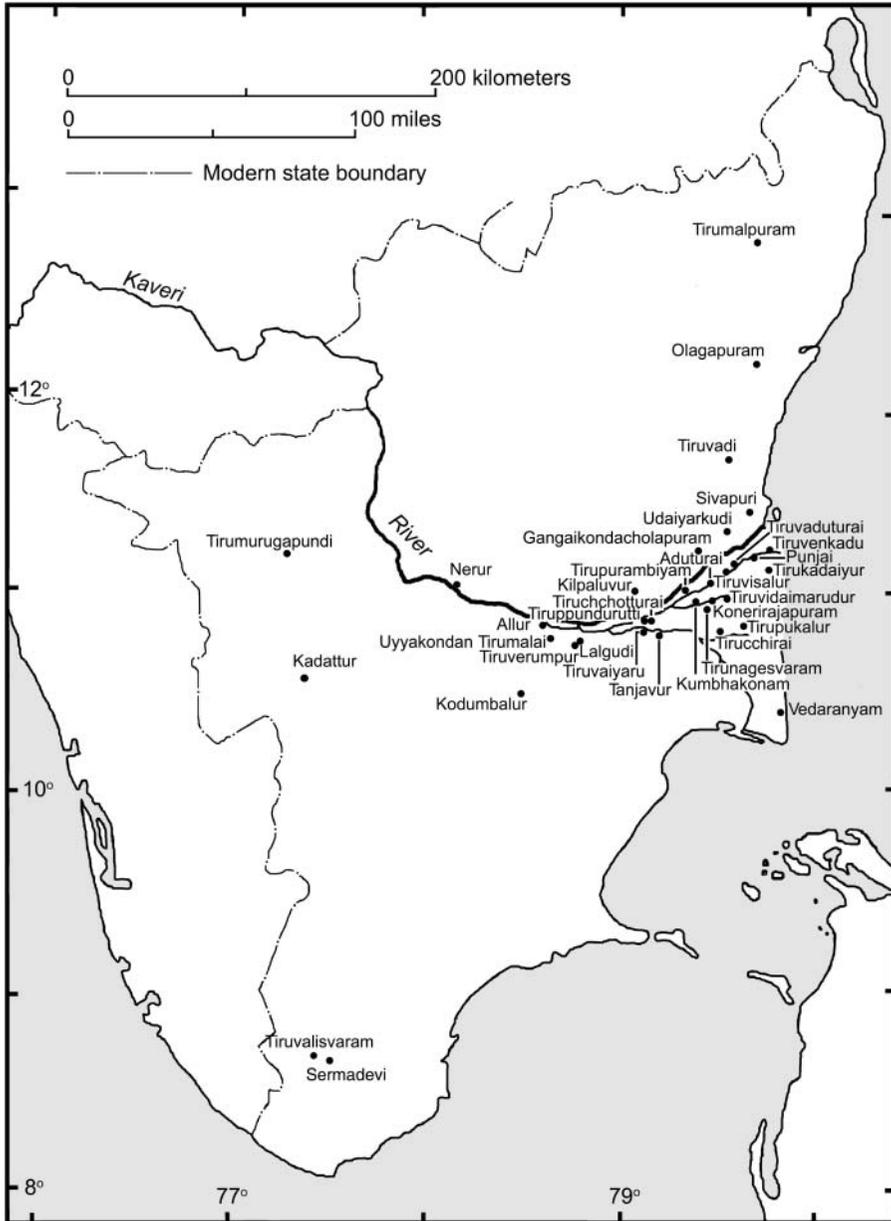


Figure 1. Spatial distribution of *veḷam* inscriptions

In some cases, the title of a *veḷam* may have indicated attachment to the family member denoted in its title. But this is far from certain. For one, we find *veḷams* named after the titles of kings known to be deceased.¹³ So in the reign of Rājarāja we find a number of references to one Kotaṅṭarāma-*veḷam*, a

13 The evidence here is uncertain due to the large number of names that kings often took and the fact that they often appropriated the titles of their ancestors.

well-known title of the famous Chola prince Rājāditya, slain at the battle of Takkolam in 949.¹⁴ Similarly, during the reign of Rājendra I (1012–1044) and his son Rājendra II (1052–1064), we find references to *veḷams* apparently named after the titles of the deceased Rājarāja I (Śivapādaśekhara, Abhimānabhūṣaṇa, Uyyakoṇṭān).¹⁵ Moreover, some inscriptions clearly suggest that the names of *veḷams* had little to do with the service-affiliations of their members. In one inscription a member of the Kotaṅṭarāma-*veḷam* is named as a servant of queen Pañcavanmādeviyār.¹⁶ The Śatrubhayanakara-*veḷam*, apparently named after a title of Rājarāja or some earlier king, appears to have served the same queen.¹⁷ The royal names in the titles of these *veḷams*, then, do not seem to indicate clearly to whom their services were directed. It is possible that *veḷams*, much like *brahmadeyas*, were named after their founders rather than the individuals they served. Their names may have also been commemorative of past lineage members. Finally, *veḷams* titled after deceased kings could also represent the survival of palace institutions founded in earlier times. It is also clear that multiple *veḷams* named after different members of the royal family could co-exist at the same time regardless of their service arrangements.

Some have interpreted *veḷam* as a military retinue or encampment.¹⁸ While there is some evidence, as we shall see, that soldiers, particularly those known as *kaikkōḷars*, were sometimes associated with *veḷams*, nothing suggests that *veḷams* themselves were military encampments or institutions attached to them. It is significant that military units known from other inscriptions whose titles are identical to *veḷam* titles (Gaṅḍarāditya-*veḷam*, Kotaṅṭarāma-*veḷam* and Madhurāntaka-*veḷam*) are all in fact associated with units of *kaikkōḷar* troops (Gaṅḍarāditta-terinta-*kaikkōḷar*, Kotaṅṭarāma-terinta-*kaikkōḷar*, and Madhurāntakat-terinta-*kaikkōḷar*).¹⁹ The *veḷams* which can be linked in title with such military units are, however, very limited, and in one case where we have a *kaikkōḷar* explicitly named as a member of a military unit called the Madhurāntaka-terinta-*kaikkōḷa-ṭai*, his *veḷam* affiliation is with the Perumāṇṭikaḷ-Cōḷamāteviyār-*veḷam* in Tanjavur, presumably a *veḷam* named after the queen. It would seem, then, that while military units and *veḷams* could overlap, they were formally distinct. In the majority of cases, however, there is no connection at all with a military unit.

14 *SII* 23.278; *SII* 23.356; and most probably *SII* 23.342. The inscriptions during Rājarāja's time at Rājarājeśvara in Tanjavūr also mention one Uttamacīliyār-*veḷam*, perhaps a reference to his uncle Uttamacōla, *SII* 2.94, 95.

15 *ARE* 63 of 1928; *ARE* 64 of 1928; *ARE* 212 of 1911; *ARE* 121 of 1914. Deciding the actual designees of royal titles can sometimes be tricky, due to the plethora of names taken by each king and the tendency of preserving and appropriating the titles of forebears.

16 *SII* 23.278.

17 *ARE* 62 of 1928.

18 See Kōvintarācan, *Kalveṭṭuk Kalaiccol Akaramutali*, s.v. “vēḷattup penṭāṭṭi” and Thyagarajan “Gangai and its region: an epigraphical perspective”, 184.

19 See J. Sundaram, “Appendix 1: Military units mentioned in Chola records”, in S. N. Prasad (ed.), *Historical Perspectives on Warfare in India: Some Morale and Materiel Determinants* (Delhi: Centre for Studies in Civilizations, 2002), 243 ff.

Other *veḷam* titles suggest more diverse functions. Inscriptions of widely differing dates mention “old” (Palaiya-*veḷam*) and “big” (Periya-*veḷam*) *veḷams*, and a single record mentions an Ālvār-*veḷam*, a generic term referring to junior member(s) of the royal household.²⁰ There are a handful of inscriptions associated with Chola subordinates in Kongu which refer generically to “the king’s” or “royal” *veḷam* (Perumāḷ *veḷam*).²¹ Together, these types of titles imply distinctions based on size, pre-eminence and seniority which existed alongside the organization of *veḷams* along titular lines. Various other titles suggest functions in the daily routine of the king. A substantial number of records across the tenth and eleventh centuries mention members of the (tiru)mañcaṇattār-*veḷam* or the “*veḷam* of the (sacred) bath”.²² Many of these inscriptions combine the function of bathing with a royal title – we hear of the Uyyakoṇṭān-terinta-tirumañcaṇattār-*veḷam*, Rājarāja-terinta-Pāṇṭi-tirumañcaṇattār-*veḷam*, Ilāṅkeśvarakulakāla-terinta-tirumañcaṇattār-*veḷam*, Rājendracoladeva-Mummuṭicola-terinta-tirumañcaṇattār-*veḷam*, Śivapādaśekhara-terinta-tirumañcaṇattār-*veḷam*, and Teliṅgakulakāla-terinta-tirumañcaṇattār-*veḷam*.²³ These long titles, variations on a syntax found in the names of some military units, may be rendered as “the *veḷam* known as *x* (royal title) of those selected for the ceremonial bath”.²⁴ We find similar *veḷams* relating to the handling of ceremonial vessels (Arumolideva-terinta-tiruparikalattār-*veḷam*) and “evening rituals” (Abhimānabhūṣaṇa-terinta-tiruvantikkāppu-*veḷam*).²⁵ While these titles give us our only epigraphic glimpse into the functional activities of *veḷams* within the royal household, their evidence should be considered partial. This is because some records mention *veḷam* members performing tasks not indicated by their *veḷam* affiliations, as when a tenth-century donor, one Nakkaṇ Pattālaki, is identified as a singer in the Periya-*veḷam*.²⁶

20 For mention of the Palaiya-*veḷam* in the tenth century, see *SII* 3.204 and twelfth century, see *SII* 5.697. There are ten references to the Periya-*veḷam*, making it the most prevalent *veḷam* in the sources – a fact which may indicate a relatively low and generic status. In three cases it is specified as the Periya-*veḷam* of Rājendra Chola. For tenth-century references, see *ARE* 99 of 1931, *SII* 17.480, *SII* 19.10, and *ARE* 106 of 1925; for eleventh-century records, see *ARE* 104 of 1925, *SII* 22.291, *ARE* 401 of 1921, *ARE* 424 of 1962, *ARE* 103 of 1925 and *ARE* 185 of 1925. For the Ālvār-*veḷam*, see *SII* 23.45. On the significance of the term *ālvār*, see Nilakanta Sastri, *The Colas*, 142.

21 *ARE* 334 of 1928; *ARE* 126 of 1915; *ARE* 809 of 1983; *ARE* 825 of 1983.

22 *SII* 13.15; *SII* 19.193; *SII* 22.27; *SII* 8.678; *ARE* 510 of 1926; *ARE* 579 of 1971; *ARE* 323 of 1965; *ARE* 325 of 1965; and *ARE* 149 of 1932.

23 *SII* 2.94 and 95; *ARE* 323 of 1927; *ARE* 142 of 1919; *ARE* 121 of 1914; *ARE* 63 of 1928; and *ARE* 64 of 1928; *ARE* 149 of 1932.

24 I follow the rendering of Subbarayalu, in *Studies in Cola History*, 108. A possible alternative reading of this syntax would be “the *veḷam* of those selected for the ceremonial bath of *x* (holder of royal title)”. This reading seems unlikely, however, as the royal titles of *veḷams* do not seem to imply any necessary affiliative connection.

25 *SII* 2.94; *ARE* 212 of 1911. The latter phrase is unclear, but may refer to the application of protective unguents or substances, known as *kāppu*, in temple ritual, see Leslie Orr, *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters of God: Temple Women in Medieval Tamilnadu* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 114.

26 *SII* 19.10.

Two inscriptions on the Rājarājeśvara temple at Tanjavur mention “Pāṇṭi”, short for Pāṇṭimaṇṭalam, the Chola administrative designation of the conquered Pandya kingdom. We hear of the Pāṇṭi-veḷam and the Rājarāja-terinta-Pāṇṭi-tirumañcanattār-veḷam.²⁷ Though it may be argued that Pāṇṭi was a Chola epithet, in the latter title Pāṇṭi is syntactically separated from the royal name, suggesting that it probably denoted something else. We may instead render the phrase as “the veḷam known as Rājarāja (comprised) of those from Pāṇṭi (maṇḍalam) selected for the ceremonial bath”. This reading suggests that at least some *veḷam* titles may have indicated the personnel which staffed them, particularly when such naming increased the grandeur of the king as a warrior. We shall see that other evidence supports this as well.

Various scholars have interpreted the *veḷam* as a physical space – a “palace”, “harem”, “prison” or “urban unit”. Two elaborate and important inscriptions on the Rājarājeśvara temple at Tanjavur are particularly germane in this regard, as they give more information than usual about the *veḷams* they name.²⁸ The inscriptions, which record arrangements for temple illumination, mention some seven different *veḷams* and at least sixty-four individuals associated with them. They seem to speak of men and women “residing in” various *veḷams* (...*veḷattu irukkum*). What is more, they also specify the general locations of the *veḷams*, with all but one of the seven being “outside” (*purampaṭi*) and the other (Pāṇṭi-veḷam) “inside” (*ullālai*), the central urban area. It is unlikely that *veḷam* here refers to a palace. Chola royal inscriptions often mention palaces (*kōyil*) or places within them (*cālai*, *maṇṭapam*, *mālikai*), usually in connection with specifying the king’s location when issuing an order. A number of royal orders, for example, were issued while the king was “pleased to be seated in the ceremonial bathing hall (*tirumañcanacālai*) within the palace”.²⁹ It is clear that such places, where the king’s actual bath must have taken place, must be distinguished from the bathing *veḷams*.

This fact has no doubt led scholars to interpret the bathing *veḷams* at Tanjavur as “quarters” occupied by those who had to supply water or services for the royal bath, and more generally as semi-urban settlements.³⁰ This interpretation would seem to be supported by the locative descriptions of the *veḷams* at Tanjavur. Yet we find that one of the most prominent of the Tanjavur bathing *veḷams*, the Uyyakoṇṭān-terinta-tirumañcanattār-veḷam, is also encountered in a record dated in the fifth year of Rājendra II’s reign (1057), where it is clearly said to be located in Gangaikondacholapuram.³¹ The later appearance of this *veḷam* in a

27 *SII* 2.94 and 95.

28 *SII* 2.94 and 95.

29 For the palace at Tanjavur, *SII* 2.1; at Gangaikondacholapuram *SII* 3.20; at Kanchi, R. Nagaswamy, “Archaeological finds in south India: essalam bronzes and copper plates”, *Bulletin de l’École Française D’Extrême-Orient* 76, 1987, 34; and Muṭikoṇḍacholapuram *EI* 22.35.

30 The suggestion of the editors, *SII* 2.95, introduction. See also Venkataraman, *Rajarajesvara*, 251.

31 *ARE* 121 of 1914.

different locale makes it clear that it could not have been an urban settlement or residential quarter. The locative references in *veḷam* inscriptions suggest instead that *veḷam* personnel were merely quartered in these places. Less than half of the remaining *veḷams* cited in Chola inscriptions include any information at all on their locations, and when such information does occur, it remains conspicuously generic (being either in Tanjavur or Gangaikondacholapuram). I would suggest that the term is better conceived, following Subburayalu, as a collection of servants in the first instance and by extension also came to designate the place where these servants would have resided. The quartering of *veḷams* both in and outside the central city of Tanjavur was no doubt significant, but we currently possess neither enough information on the urban layout of Chola period Tanjavur – its palaces, residential quarters, fortifications or city limits – nor the total number and location of its other *veḷams* to make any solid conclusions on this point.

The Tanjavur inscriptions are anomalous from another point of view, which raises further questions about the nature of *veḷams*. The “residents” of the *veḷams* in the Tanjavur inscriptions are for the most part said to be shepherds (*iṭaiyan*), not palace menials or military personnel, as is typical in all other epigraphic instances so far found. The inscriptions record the deposit of large numbers of livestock to well over a hundred shepherd households for the daily provision of oil necessary to burn temple-lamps at Rājarājeśvara.³² The animals were donated by the king, high-ranking courtiers, military groups, and, notable for our purposes, a woman attached to one of the *veḷams* in question by the name of Varakuṇaṅ Eruvattūr. The majority of shepherd families in receipt of these animals lived beyond the inner urban area of Tanjavur, “in” *veḷams* and other places noted in the inscriptions, but a significant number lived in various villages at a greater distance from the capital. It is difficult to understand what connection this subset of shepherds, numbering some 63 families, had with the *veḷams* they are described as “residing in”. It is possible that *veḷams* may have had more differentiated functions and diverse personnel within their ranks than other inscriptions have led us to believe. Shepherds may have been “attached” to palace establishments to supply them or the palace with oil. In view of the complex and manifold nature of the royal retinues, this is certainly possible. Yet if this were the case, one might expect such shepherds to be distinguished in title from their counterparts who were not associated with *veḷams* – and we find no such titles. Nor do we find any other instances of shepherd/herding castes throughout the Chola period with *veḷam* affiliations as identifiers.³³ For this reason it seems more likely

32 See George Spencer, “Temple money-lending and livestock redistribution in early Tanjore”, *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 5/3, 1968, 277–93, and also Heitzman, *Gifts of Power*, 121–42.

33 Based on information gathered in N. Karashima, Y. Subbarayalu and T. Matsui, *A Concordance to the Names in Cōla Inscriptions* (Madurai: Sarvodya Ilakkiya Pannai, 1978), 3 vols. One of the several fragmentary inscriptions found in the courtyard of the Tanjavur temple records a joint gift made by a woman named Maraikkāṭṭaṭikal, of the Mañcaṅattār-*veḷam*, and Koḷūraṅ Kaṅgālaṅ, a shepherd (*maṅṅāṭi*), see *ARE* 576 of 1971.

that the shepherds lived in proximity to the quarters of the *veḷams* but had no formal affiliation with them.³⁴

To conclude the discussion so far, it would seem that the term *veḷam* denoted a collection of servants connected with the royal household and by extension may have loosely referred to the residential quarters where such personnel were domiciled. The evidence suggests that many such establishments co-existed within the rule of a single monarch, often being named after members of the royal family. But despite the titular links to the royal family, *veḷams* seem to have had no single principle of nomenclature. Like other institutions associated with the royal court, *veḷams* often bore the titles and names of the royal family in a commemorative rather than a functional sense. Moreover, the titles of various *veḷams* clearly suggest a hierarchy perhaps based on size and seniority. Finally, a number of *veḷams* were clearly named after specific tasks in court ceremonial and possibly after the original provenance of their members.

The personnel of *veḷams*

The categories of people most often associated with *veḷams* in inscriptions are *peṇṭāṭṭi*, and to a lesser extent *kaikkōḷar*. *Kaikkōḷars*, literally “those of strong arms”, were a class of apparently hereditary military retainers who often resided in proximity to the palace and who formed an integral part of the Chola armies. *Kaikkōḷars* appear as members of *veḷams* in just five instances, one in the tenth century and the other four in the twelfth.³⁵ *Kaikkōḷars*, however, sometimes appear connected through kinship to others (mostly women) who are *veḷam*-identified, a point of some significance.³⁶ While *kaikkōḷars* appear in a small number of *veḷam*-related records, their overall presence in Chola inscriptions is far more extensive, as they formed part of the elite military coterie of the Chola kings, being selected for staffing personal entourages (*parivārams*) and perhaps acting as body guards, but at the very least constituting part of an inner core of permanent troops around the royal household.³⁷ Even in early Chola inscriptions, these men possessed a strong corporate identity which, like other military groups, seems to have been transformed into a caste status by the end of the Chola era.³⁸

34 It is interesting that the *peṇṭāṭṭi* Varakuṇaṇ Eruvattūr who is a donor of sheep to the same *veḷam* with which she is associated is not described as “residing” (*irukkum*) there, but with the standard formula of *x veḷattup peṇṭāṭṭi y*. In fact, use of the term “reside” is not found in any other *veḷam*-related record, being unique to the shepherds at Tanjavur.

35 For the tenth century see *SII* 4.536; for the twelfth century, see *SII* 23.279, *SII* 23.281, *SII* 5.697, *SII* 5.698.

36 See *SII* 26.669; *SII* 23.356; *SII* 5.539; *SII* 22.27.

37 See the discussion of P. Sundaram, “Chola and other armies – organization”, in Prasad (ed.), *Historical Perspectives on Warfare in India*, 190–1.

38 In post-Chola times the term *kaikkōḷar* denoted a caste of weavers who traced their origin to military groups of the Cholas. When this occupational caste identity developed is less clear, with some scholars (Heitzman, *Gifts of Power*, 150, and

Female members of *veḷams* are usually described as *peṇṭāṭṭis*, a difficult word because of a long historical sedimentation and multiple usages. Though used informally in contemporary Tamil to mean “wife”, in medieval times the term denoted a woman of generally servile status³⁹ and most usually one connected with the royal palace in some capacity – what Leslie Orr has called a “palace woman”.⁴⁰ It literally meant a woman “ruled” or a “slave/servile woman”, but the generic nature of the vocabulary of servility prevents any conclusions about the status of such women on the basis of terminology alone.⁴¹ In at least one reference a *peṇṭāṭṭi* seems also to be identified with a term which less ambiguously denoted a slave (*aṭiyaḷ* for *aṭiyāḷ*), but for the same reasons this may mean very little.⁴² Not all inscriptional references to *peṇṭāṭṭis* mention *veḷams* – women are sometimes simply identified as *peṇṭāṭṭis* or as the *peṇṭāṭṭis* of the entourage of a particular member of the royal family.⁴³ In a few cases women associated with *veḷams* and other palace establishments are simply referred to by generic words referring to women (*peṇṭulpeṇṭir*) – terms we also encounter for women attached to the royal kitchens – but it is likely that in the cases of *veḷams* the terms *peṇṭāṭṭi* and *peṇṭir* were interchangeable.⁴⁴ It is difficult to gauge the significance of the absence of *veḷam* affiliations for *peṇṭāṭṭis* and *peṇṭāṭṭi* status for royal servants not apparently attached to *veḷams*.⁴⁵ It may be that *peṇṭāṭṭi* referred to a more generic category of

Subbarayalu, *Studies in Chola History*, 108) arguing that it was primarily later, and others holding that it was already in place during Chola times (Vijaya Ramaswamy, *Textiles and Weavers in South India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, second ed., 2006), 13 ff.).

39 The term for wife which occurs in inscriptions is typically *maṇavāṭṭi*, see *SII* 13.196. The term *peṇṭāṭṭi* may in some cases have designated simply an unmarried woman, as in *Tiruppāvai* 11. I’d like to thank Archana Venkatesan for drawing my attention to this citation.

40 See Orr, *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters*, 40–1.

41 The word is formed by adding the suffix *-āḷ* (a verbal root meaning “to rule, receive, control or maintain”, or noun meaning “man, servant, slave, labourer”) to the noun *peṇ*, meaning “woman”. See Orr, *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters*, 212 n. 5.

42 *SII* 23.278.

43 See, for example, *ARE* 88 of 1928; *ARE* 69 of 1926; and *SII* 5.700. Orr has identified forty-one instances of *peṇṭāṭṭi* in Chola inscriptions, with twenty-six (over 60 per cent) mentioning some association with a *veḷam* (Orr, *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters*, 212 n. 5). My own data suggest a somewhat higher numbers of both *peṇṭāṭṭi* instances and *veḷam* associations.

44 For the use of *peṇṭulpeṇṭir* to refer to palace personnel and members of royal entourages, see *ARE* 13–14 of 1936 and *ARE* 156 of 1939. For references to kitchen staff using the terms *peṇṭāṭṭi* and *peṇṭu*, see *SII* 19.98; *TAS* 1.8.1; *SII* 7.981; *ARE* 8 of 1936; *SII* 6.34; and *ARE* 361 of 1918. I would like to thank Uthaya Velupillai for the last two references. Inscriptions mentioning the royal *veḷams* (Perumāl-*veḷam*) of the Kongu rulers describe their donors either as *perumāl veḷam peṇṭāṭṭis* or as “among the women of the *veḷam*” (*perumāl velattil peṇṭukalil*), see *ARE* 334 of 1928; *ARE* 126 of 1915; *ARE* 809 of 1983; and *ARE* 825 of 1983.

45 Two adjacent inscriptions at Uṭaiyārkuṭi (South Arcot) commemorating gifts probably made on the same occasion by two women, one identified as “singing” in the Periya-*veḷam* at Tanjavur and the other simply as a *peṇṭāṭṭi*, *SII* 19.10, 12. The apparently accidental omission of the term *peṇṭāṭṭi* in the first inscription may parallel an omission of a *veḷam* affiliation in the latter.

female servant who took on a variety of roles at the Chola court, but the majority of records place them within *veḷams*, and I will assume that this was their typical affiliation.

Inscriptions are for the most part silent as to the social origins of *peṇṭā-ttis*, but exceptional evidence comes from the late twelfth century, when an inscriptional eulogy (*meḷkkīrtti*) of king Kulōttuṅka III (1178–1218) describing his protracted struggles with Vīra Pāṇḍya of Madurai, boasts that having beaten the Pāṇḍya king on the battlefield, he “caused the best of his women to enter his *veḷam*”.⁴⁶ A later version of the same eulogy adds that the Chola king caused Vīra-Pāṇḍya’s “young queen” to enter his *veḷam* (*maṭakkoṭiyai veḷ[am] erri*).⁴⁷ The *Kaliṅkattupparaṇi*, the famous court poem composed during the reign of Kulōttuṅka I, which contains the only attested literary use of the term *veḷam*, would seem to corroborate the *meḷkkīrtti* of Kulōttuṅka III. The first substantive canto of the poem takes the form of an entreaty to the women of the royal city to “open their doors” for the returning Chola army. A string of verses is specifically addressed to women of the *veḷam*:

You gentle women of the Pāṇḍya country, the flag of which bears the fish, who have entered the *vēḷam* after running through the wilderness in tears, open your doors! Women of Tuḷunāṭu, women of Malaināṭu, give tribute to Kulōttuṅka, from the land of the splashing waters, open the doors to your houses ... You Karṇāta women, approaching uttering a confused mix of beautiful words in Tamil and Vaṭuku in your gentle speech, open your doors!⁴⁸

The *Kaliṅkattupparaṇi* and Kulōttuṅka III’s *meḷkkīrtti* make clear that at least some of the women of the *veḷam* were war-captives.⁴⁹ The practice of capturing or forcibly abducting women as part of annual military campaigns in rival kingdoms is well-attested in south India, as “seizing women” was a regular boast in the royal eulogies which cover the walls of scores of Chola period temples. Medieval south Indian armies travelled with large trains of supporting personnel – including members of the royal family and various ranks of male and female servants. In the case of defeat, these retinues often fell into the hands of the enemy. In their *meḷkkīrttis*, the Cholas are often quite particular about the fate of women captured from their rivals.⁵⁰ The forcible abduction of women of lesser rank from the

46 *SII* 22.42; also *ARE* 254 of 1925.

47 *SII* 3.88.

48 *Kaliṅkattupparaṇi*, ed. Pe. Paḷanivēla Piḷḷai (Chennai: South India Saiva Siddhanta Publishing Works, 1961), vv. 40–3.

49 See the discussion of C. Iḷavaracu in his *Paraṇi Ilakkiyaṅkaḷ* (Chidambaram: Māṇivācakar Nūlakam, 1978), 53–4, where he contends that among the women of the royal capital depicted in the second canto were contingents of women received as tribute from subordinate rulers or captured during wars.

50 See especially the *meḷkkīrttis* of Rājendra I’s successors, particularly Rājendra II (1052–64), *SII* 22.80 and Vīrarājendra (1063–70), *EI* 21.38. In some instances they were “defaced” – their noses shorn off – as when Vīrarājendra boasts of severing the

cities and countryside is also known. A famous Chalukya inscription dated in 1007, at the village of Hottur in contemporary Dharwar district, describes the campaign of a large Chola army from the other side, as it “ravaged the whole country, murdering women, children and brahmins, seizing women (*peṇḍiram piḍidu*) and overthrowing the order of castes ...”.⁵¹ Though some of these claims are surely rhetorical, the repeated and often very specific emphasis on tribute and capture cannot be ignored. Such references, both literary and epigraphical, strengthen the contention that at least some *veḷams* (i.e. Pāṇṭi-veḷam) may have been named after the regional origins of their inhabitants.

One of the medieval *ulā* poems composed at the Chola court describes the crowds of women who lined the streets during royal processions as being descendants of women brought to the Chola capital from victorious campaigns and settled by the king in areas assigned to them.⁵² Though the word *veḷam* is not mentioned in the poem, the passage clearly invokes these establishments and is broadly corroborated by a contemporary Sanskrit text on architecture, *Mayamata*, which recommends that the royal street (*rājavithi*) be lined with mansions (*mālikā*), where the king’s retinue was to reside.⁵³ Such a set-up calls to mind the dispersal of *veḷams* across the urban landscape mentioned in the Tanjavur inscriptions, though without any reliable urban geography of the medieval city, this cannot be confirmed.

Closely related to capture through war was the receipt of women as tribute from subordinate kings, a practice which was not unknown elsewhere in early medieval India. The *Kaliṅkattupparaṇi*, which portrays the splendour of the assembled Chola court, lists among the annual tribute-gifts required of subordinate kings, “the forehead bands (*paṭṭam*) of women who are rightfully yours”.⁵⁴ At least one *peṇṭāṭṭi* known from inscriptions, a woman who served Rājarāja’s queen Paṅcavanmāteviyār in the Kotaṅṭarāma-veḷam at Tanjavur, has a name, Vānakovaraiyaṅ Poṅkāḷi, which identifies

nose of the Chalukya *mahādaṇḍanāyaka* Cāmuṅḍarāja’s only daughter, the beautiful Nagalai, *EI* 21.38, *SII* 3.20. In other cases these women were simply added to the king’s retinue, as in Vīrarājendra’s claim to have taken large numbers of elephants, camels, horses, banners, queens, and women of lesser rank left on the battlefield by the retreating Chalukya monarch, *SII* 3.29.

51 *EI* 16.11a.

52 In describing the crowds (*kuḷāṅkaḷ*) of women who appear on the street awaiting the king, Oṭṭakkūttar lists the women (*maṭantaiyarum, maṅkaiyarum, mātarum*, etc.) captured (*kaik koṅṭu*, etc.) by the Chola king or acquired as servants of women given (in marriage) to him – all by way of explaining that “the tender girls descended from the women of these various respected lineages, who have a right to the palace crowd together (*mutalāya cāyal aramakaḷir tattan tirumarapil kōyilurimaik kuḷāneruṅki*) in the gateways, residences and mansions ready to see the king. “Irācarācacōlanulā”, in *Mūvarulā*, ed. U. V. Cāminātaiyar (Chennai: U. V. Cāminātaiyar Nūl Nīlaiyam, 1992), vv. 70–82, esp. 79. See also the remarks of G. Thirumavalavan, *Political, Social and Cultural History of the Cholas as Gleaned from the Ulā Literature* (Thiruvathipuram: Ezhilagam Publishers, 1991), 134–5.

53 *Mayamata: Traité Sanskrit d’Architecture*, ed. and trans. Bruno Dagens (Pondicherry: Institut Français d’Indologie, 1970), 10.74–5.

54 *Kaliṅkattupparaṇi*, v. 336.

her with a lineage known to be subordinates of the Cholas. It is possible that this woman, who was clearly not a wife but a servant, was presented as a gift to the Chola family as a token of friendship and submission.

It is likely, then, that many women entered *veḷams* through military conquests and as political tribute. Indeed, the period of the greatest number of *veḷams* mentioned in inscriptions coincides neatly with the military successes of the Chola armies in the eleventh century under Rājarāja I and his son Rājendra I. It remains an open question, however, to what extent *veḷams* were filled exclusively with such women and whether there were other methods of recruitment into *veḷams*. Though *peṇṭāṭṭis* shared a number of characteristics with temple women, there is no existing epigraphic evidence of the presentation, sale or purchase of a *peṇṭāṭṭi* to or by the royal court as we sometimes possess in the case of temple women. Assuming that at least some *peṇṭāṭṭis* entered palace service as war booty, this may have obviated the need to acquire them through purchase. It is also true that such transactions would not have appeared in the inscriptional record, as they had little relevance for temple affairs. Important in this regard is an inscription dated to the reign of Kulōttuṅka I, which records the transfer of a temple slave found in the king's retinue back to the temple authorities, which involved removing the king's mark (*nam ilaccanai aḷittu*) from the woman's body and branding her with the god's stamp as a sign of her proper ownership.⁵⁵ This inscription suggests that the lower ranking women among palace servants may have overlapped with their temple counterparts.

The inscriptions, however, present another sort of evidence which bears on the identities of *peṇṭāṭṭis* – their personal names and kin-affiliations. In all cases the inscriptions record the names of *peṇṭāṭṭis*, but these are often difficult to interpret. Some *peṇṭāṭṭis*, for example, appear to have had male names⁵⁶ – a fact which may indicate either that “male” names could be taken by women or that *peṇṭāṭṭi* indicated a gender role rather than a biological identity.⁵⁷ *Peṇṭāṭṭis* often had compound names, like Kāṭaṅ Āccatevi, Kalḷici Uttamata, or Kāri Cātti, which raises the question of the significance of each name segment. It is possible that in some cases,

55 *ARE* 141 of 1922, discussed in Nilakanta Sastri, *Cholas*, 356. The term used in the inscription for this woman, not surprisingly given her discovered identity, is *tevaraṭṭiyār* rather than *peṇṭāṭṭi*.

56 As in the case of a *peṇṭāṭṭi* of the Melai-veḷam with the single name Rāmaṅ, *ARE* 340 of 1927.

57 For the latter interpretation, see Kōvintarācan, *Kalveṭṭuk Kalaiṅkol Akaramutali*, “*veḷattup peṇṭāṭṭi*” and “*peṇṭāṭṭi*”. Kōvintarācan's conclusions seem to be based on the weakly substantiated assertion that *peṇṭāṭṭis* were cooks at army encampments. The evidence he cites is both meagre and inconclusive, and demonstrates neither the claim that the primary activity of *peṇṭāṭṭis* was cooking (he ignores the other dimensions of *veḷams* discussed above), nor that *peṇṭāṭṭis* were actually men. While it is possible that terms like *peṇṭāṭṭi* may not have conformed to the gender identities of their bearers, it is more likely that proper names did not. The large body of evidence analysed by Leslie Orr suggests that the use of “male names as given names for women” was widespread in Chola times. See Orr, *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters*, 147.

paternal names were prefixed to proper names, as has been common practice in south India, though the evidence is not conclusive.⁵⁸ In some compound names the first element is clearly feminine, and others would seem to incorporate the name of a deity or place as the first element of a compound name. There is, therefore, no consistent naming pattern among *peṇṭāṭṭis*. What is at stake in understanding the significance of *peṇṭāṭṭi* name segments is their possible identification of natal or conjugal kin. Leslie Orr has suggested that the names of many *tevaraṭṭiyār* in the inscriptions may not indicate kinship links of any sort.⁵⁹ Name segments aside, in no instances are *peṇṭāṭṭis* explicitly identified as either the daughters or wives of men, even when their own children are mentioned. This apparent absence of male kin remains in stark contrast to the identification of women from the higher castes.⁶⁰ On the other hand, many temple slaves were designated as “daughters of god” and male palace servants as “work sons” (*paṇi maṅgaṇ*). Whatever the connotations of this quasi-kin terminology, the men and women of the *veḷam* did not define themselves through normative natal and conjugal kin affiliations.

The only kin definitively mentioned in connection with *peṇṭāṭṭis* were mothers, children and siblings. In a number of records donors identify themselves as the mothers, sons, daughters, brothers or sisters of *peṇṭāṭṭis*, in some cases making gifts on behalf of, or with, their kin.⁶¹ Fathers and husbands of these women are conspicuously absent in the inscriptions. The fate of *peṇṭāṭṭi* children in relation to the complex institutions surrounding the court is uncertain. Young males may have entered the ranks of *kaikkōḷars*, as we have two instances of *kaikkōḷars* either making grants on behalf of *veḷam* women or identifying themselves as children of a *veḷam* linked *peṇṭāṭṭi*.⁶² This might fit well with the evidence we have from separate records, mentioned above, which identify *kaikkōḷars* themselves as members of *veḷams*.⁶³ But most *kaikkōḷars* seem not to have been directly linked with *veḷams*, instead constituting separate units within the Chola army – which does not of course preclude their origin from *peṇṭāṭṭis*. But *kaikkōḷars* could rise to higher ranks within the court hierarchy, and we have records suggesting they were sometimes attached to the personal

58 On the practices of naming in medieval south India, see Subbarayalu, Matsui, and Karashima’s introduction to *A Concordance to the Names*, vol. 1.

59 Orr’s findings suggest that most women did not incorporate the names of their fathers into their own, see *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters*, 147, 248 n. 16.

60 See the discussion in Orr, *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters*, 154–5.

61 See *SII* 17.530 for the gift of the children (*makkaḷ*) of a *peṇṭāṭṭi* of the Kilānatikaḷ-*veḷam*; *SII* 17.480 for the gift of a man for his elder sister who is identified as the daughter of a *peṇṭāṭṭi* of the Periya-*veḷam*; and *ARE* 63 and 64 of 1928 for the joint gift of a *peṇṭāṭṭi* and her daughter, both residents of the Śivapādaśekhara-terintatirumaṅjanattār-*veḷam*.

62 See *SII* 26.669 for a *kaikkōḷar* whose mother was a *peṇṭāṭṭi* in the Irācakesari-*veḷam*; and *SII* 23.356 for a *kaikkōḷar* making gifts for various women in the Kotaṅṭa-*veḷam*. The editors have assumed in the latter case that the women were relatives of the donor, though the inscription does not specify this.

63 We have one tenth-century record of a *kaikkōḷar* attached to a *veḷam*, *SII* 4.536; and four twelfth-century records, *SII* 5.697; *SII* 5.698; *SII* 23.279; *SII* 23.281.

retinues of various members of the royal household and in some cases enjoyed land tenures known as *vīrabhoga* by order of the king.⁶⁴ Whatever the case, there seems to be some special relationship between *kaikkōḷars* and *veḷam* women. They often appear together as donors in clusters of inscriptions at key temples. This seemingly special connection between *veḷam peṇṭāṭṭis* and *kaikkōḷar* units also seems to fit with the *Kaliṅkattupparaṇi*'s request to the women of the *veḷam* that they “open the doors” to the returning soldiery of the Chola army. It may thus be that one important function of the *veḷam*, as Nilakanta Sastri suggested long ago, was to supply the court with a regular source of loyal military retainers whose loyalties were confined entirely to the extended household and its master.⁶⁵

The few records which mention mothers and daughters are difficult to interpret.⁶⁶ Only rarely are both women identified as belonging to the same *veḷam*; more typically the evidence is ambiguous, giving no clear indication of *veḷam* affiliation or *peṇṭāṭṭi* designation.⁶⁷ It is difficult to know how much weight to give such omissions. While any firm conclusion would be hasty, the evidence hardly rules out the possibility that the daughters of *peṇṭāṭṭis* may have been born into the same condition as their mothers.⁶⁸ The comparative frequency of *peṇṭāṭṭis* in the inscriptions across many generations may itself account for the absence of explicitly identified daughters. If *peṇṭāṭṭi* mothers did not identify themselves with their natal or conjugal kin, being instead identified entirely with the extended household of the royal family (except in rare circumstances when they made gifts with or for the merit of their children) then their daughters would have presumably done the same. While male children may have had the opportunity to pursue military careers and potentially head their own households, daughters may have been simply absorbed “silently” into palace establishments without the benefit of any lineal identification. *Peṇṭāṭṭi* siblings may not have always shared the same fate. A tenth-century record from Tirupundurutti mentions a *peṇṭāṭṭi* by the name of *Perṇanakai* of the *Periya-veḷam*, who is identified as the younger sister (*taṅkayār*) of a woman called *Vikramābharaṇi*[yār], apparently not attached to this *veḷam*. *Vikramābharaṇi*, however, appears in two later inscriptions, one from

64 See *ARE* 69 and 72 of 1926, where the village of *Kulōttuṅkacōḷanallūr* is designated as *vīrabhoga* for *kaikkōḷars* from *Merkā-nāṭu* who were of lesser (*śirudanam*) rank and served in the palace at *Gangaikondacholapuram*.

65 P. Sundaram has also suggested that *veḷams* were training establishments for Chola military personnel, see Sundaram, “Chola and other armies”, 191.

66 Beyond the references cited in note 61, see *ARE* 212 of 1911 for a *peṇṭāṭṭi* of the *Abhimānabhūṣaṇa terinta tiruvaṅṅikāppu-veḷam*, who devotes the merit of a gift to her daughter, and *ARE* 149 of 1932 for joint gift by a *peṇṭāṭṭi* of the *Mañcaṇattār-veḷam* with her mother and sister.

67 See *ARE* 63 and 64 of 1928 for a mother and daughter identified as *peṇṭāṭṭis* belonging to a *veḷam*, *SII* 17.480 for a mother identified as the *peṇṭāṭṭi* of a *veḷam* but not her daughter; and *SII* 23.45 for a daughter identified as the *peṇṭāṭṭi* of a *veḷam* but not her mother.

68 This is the implication of the *Irācarācacōḷanulā*, which speaks of generations of women from different lands living by the order of the king.

Tirukkalavur and the other in a fragment found at Tanjavur, where she is referred to as a *peṇṭāṭṭi*, in one case as the personal servant of the Chola queen Villavaṇ Mahādeviyār and in the other as a resident of the market in Tanjavur known as Ponnamaraiyaṇānkāṭi.⁶⁹ If these identifications are correct, it would suggest that these sisters, Perranakai and Vikramābharaṇi, though both of *peṇṭāṭṭi* status, had different careers, resided in different places and had different institutional affiliations.

Some *peṇṭāṭṭi* names reveal clear evidence of stratification and the receipt of various forms of favour among the women of the *veḷam*. Some women seem to have entered the royal household with elevated rank – women of high standing given as tribute or captured from the chiefly and royal families of subordinate lineages – like Vānakovaraiyaṇ Poṟkāḷi, a servant of the Chola queen Pañcavaṇmādeviyār in the Kotaṇṭarāma *veḷam*, who seems to have retained the title of an earlier affiliation with a feudatory family.⁷⁰ Others seem to have acquired titles of distinction once within the *veḷam*, like the *peṇṭāṭṭi* Tevayaṇ Puḷalakkāṇ of the Kīlai (Kīlāṇaṭikal?) *veḷam*, who was also known as “Crest-Jewel of the Earth” (Avaniśikhāmaṇi), or Cāttan Rāmādevi of Rājendracōḷa-periya-*veḷam*, known from two inscriptions, who took the title “Ruby of the Sacred Jambu Fruit” (Tiruṇṇāvalmāṇikkam).⁷¹ The term *māṇikkam*, or “ruby”, seems to have been a title incorporated into the personal names of a number of *peṇṭāṭṭis* in the eleventh century, and was even more widespread among temple women.⁷² Though its particular significance is uncertain, *māṇikkam* clearly had a generally honorific connotation, as is confirmed by two eleventh-century inscriptions which mention a woman with the title Sembikulamāṇikkaiyār “Ruby of the Chola family”, who is also termed an *aṇukki*, or “intimate”.⁷³ The term *aṇukki*, (masculine, *aṇukkan*) was clearly a title of favour bestowed on those close to a member of the royal family. In the case of women, this intimacy may or may not have involved sexual relations, but appears to have indicated a status distinct from the category of *pokiyār*, or “concubine”. It is also unclear to what extent – if any – the term *peṇṭāṭṭi* itself implied sexual relations during Chola times. Women with the titles of

69 See ARE 99 of 1931 for the Tirupundurutti record, dated in the thirty-fourth year of Parāntaka (941 CE), mentioning Perranakkai and Mutta Vikramābharaṇiyār; SII 3.110 for the Tirukkalavur record, dated to the thirty-ninth year of Parāntaka’s reign (946 CE), mentioning Nakkaṇ Vikramābharaṇi as a *peṇṭāṭṭi* of Villavaṇ Mahādeviyār; and ARE 574 of 1971 for the Tanjavur fragment, dated in the eleventh year of Āditya II’s reign (967 CE), recording the donation of Piccaṇ Vikramābharaṇi, resident of Ponnamaraiyaṇānkāṭi. Though the prefixed names of Vikramābharaṇi differ, I assume that they nevertheless refer to the same person, as each is a common term for Śiva, suggesting they were loose titles indicating devotion. The term *mutta*, however, could be an epigraphic variant of *mūtta*, “elder”, which would be a loose descriptor in keeping with the purport of the first inscription.

70 SII 23.278.

71 SII 3.201, ARE 424 of 1962.

72 In addition to Cāttan Rāmādevi, see SII 22.291, ARE 323 of 1927. On the occurrence of the title among *tevaraṭiyār*, see Orr, *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters*, 148.

73 ARE 328 of 1965 and ARE 553 of 1994.

pokiyār or *aṇukki* often appear as donors in inscriptions with no *veḷam* associations. Two early Chola inscriptions at different temples record the gift of lamps by one Naṅkai Cāttaperumānār, a “concubine” (*pokiyār*) of the king Āditya I (871–901), and very extensive gifts made by one Nakkaṅ Paravai, identified as an “intimate” (*aṇukki*) of Rājendra I – neither of which mention *peṇṭāṭṭi* status or affiliation with a *veḷam*.⁷⁴ On the other hand, Cāttan Rāmadevi, the *peṇṭāṭṭi* mentioned above, takes the title of “intimate” (*aṇukki*), suggesting that women of the *veḷam* were eligible for this distinction.⁷⁵ Indeed, a fragmentary inscription from Gangaikondacholapuram registers the gifts of a number of *aṇukkiyār* and *peṇṭāṭṭis*, both of whom seem to have belonged to the Tirumaṅcaṇattār-veḷam.⁷⁶ There also seem to be records of children whose mothers were favourites within a *veḷam*.⁷⁷

Judging from this terminology of hierarchy and the endless sexualization of palace women in court literature, the possibility remains that the dynamics of favour for women of the *veḷam* may have been closely tied to sexual relationships with members of the royal household. Having said this, the reality of such relationships, beyond literary representations, remains unknown. None of the children of *peṇṭāṭṭis* we find in inscriptions mention their paternity, and we thus have no way of understanding who their fathers were. This, however, may be significant in itself, for these women seemed never to have had the benefit of legalized marriage, so their relationships remained necessarily ambiguous and invisible. The degree to which favour itself was imagined through the language of intimacy is very much reflected in the *ulā* literature, with its treatment of the various generations of desiring women in the king’s retinue from childhood to sexual maturity. Though there is surely a formulaic element to the genre, it nevertheless envisions the palace woman’s transition to maturity as at once a romantic fantasy and a quest for intimacy and favour. This quest was no doubt significant in shaping the horizons of well-being in the life of a *peṇṭāṭṭi*.

Like their temple counterparts, *veḷam peṇṭāṭṭis* received maintenance and seem to have been able to accumulate modest amounts of wealth. That slaves and others of servile status attached to powerful households were able to enjoy certain circumscribed privileges and material support was not at all unusual in medieval India, nor in Chola times. In one record, for example, we have a slave (*aṭiyāl*) donated to a temple with a maintenance

74 *SII* 13.219; *SII* 13.247; *SII* 4.223.

75 *ARE* 401 of 1921. See also 104 of 1925, which mentions Araiyaṅ Aṇukki of the Periya-veḷam.

76 *ARE* 325 of 1965.

77 See *SII* 17.480 for a record where a man with the unusually long (and ambiguous) name, Irumuṭicōla Aṅṅuki (li) Cāman-Accan I. Kaṅcaṅ identifies himself as the son of a *peṇṭāṭṭi* named Ilattanaṅkai of the Periya-veḷam, whose status of “aṇukki” may have been encoded in her son’s name. There is also the case of Aṭ[ṅ]jukkaṅ Mahamalli of the Utaiyār-Irācakesari-veḷam, who appears as the mother of a *kaikkōlar* donor, *SII* 26.669. As *aṇukkan* is the masculine form, it remains unclear whether she, or perhaps a male relative, held this title.

grant (*jīvanam*) for picking flowers in the temple-garden.⁷⁸ Unfortunately, inscriptions have very little to say about maintenance arrangements for palace women, a situation which contrasts markedly with that of temple women. Inscriptions relating to *penṭāṭṭis* generally indicate only that they were able to make modest gifts to temples. As with temple women, most inscriptions record gifts of money for the establishment of perpetual lamps in temples. How *penṭāṭṭis* acquired this wealth is unclear – they may have received it as maintenance (clothes, jewellery, daily or yearly allowances for food or land) from the royal household, as support from children or others, or it may have accompanied them into servitude.

Several features of the epigraphic evidence also suggest that the capacity to dispose of wealth among palace women may have been more circumscribed than has been previously assumed. First, unlike the donations of temple women, the geographical distribution of the inscriptions of palace women and *penṭāṭṭis* is considerably more restricted. Barring some notable exceptions which I shall treat below, the overwhelming majority of their activities are confined to the temples in the central region of the Chola empire (see figure 1), or Cholamaṇḍalam. Their activities, in other words, followed the practices of patronage followed by the royal household itself; they tended to make gifts at those temples heavily supported by the Chola court. When *penṭāṭṭi* inscriptions appear outside of the immediate Chola heartland, they often appear in conjunction with the specific tours of royal retinues. One of the most distant *penṭāṭṭi* inscriptions, for example, occurs at the Guhanāthasvāmin temple at Kanyakumari, in the twenty-fourth year of Rājendra I's reign (c. 1036) by one Coḷakulavalli (lit. "Creeper of the Chola family"), a *penṭāṭṭi* who cooked for the king. While in isolation the inscription may appear enigmatic, when read with surrounding epigraphs (some six other inscriptions by various members of the Chola family, including three Chola kings, and courtiers, some of whom hailed from the same locale as Coḷakulavalli) over a span of several decades, it becomes clear that the *penṭāṭṭi*'s gift was not an isolated incident.⁷⁹ Indeed, while a more detailed study of *penṭāṭṭi* inscriptions in relation to their epigraphic contexts still needs to be conducted, my preliminary analysis suggests that this state of affairs obtained within the Chola heartland as well. Gifts of palace women typically followed the patterns of, or were made in conjunction with, members of the royal household. So during the reign of Āḍitya II we find separate records of some ten donations by various members of the royal household, including the queen Sembiyaṅ-Māteviyār, two *penṭāṭṭis*, and members of five different *kaikkōlar* units, apparently donated on the same occasion, to the Ananteśvarasvāmin temple in Uṭaiyarkuṭi, South Arcot.⁸⁰ Among the fragmentary inscriptions at Gangaikondacholapuram, we find gifts made by *penṭāṭṭis* and *anukkiyār* together.⁸¹ At the Gomuktīśvara

78 *SII* 22.141, discussed along with other cases by Orr, *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters*, 127.

79 *TAS* 1.8.1 ff.

80 *SII* 19.10 ff.

81 *ARE* 325 of 1965.

temple in Tiruvāḍuturai, an inscription, dated again to the reign of Rājendra I, lists various gifts and images presented to the deity by several persons including Irāmaṇ Abhimānatoṅgaiyār, mother of Trailokya-Māteviyār (mother of Rājendra), the preceptor of Rājādhiraḅa (Rājendra's son), and of various servants of the Periya-veḷam.⁸² Palace women thus rarely acted in isolation, and it is perhaps not implausible to suggest that their individual ability to dispose of wealth as individuals was circumscribed by the hierarchy of life at court. The real ownership of resources behind conventionalized gift-giving, therefore, cannot be assumed at face value. An unusual record dating from the time of Rājarāḅa I seems to record the intervention of the palace *kaikkōḷars* on behalf of the royal household to collect payment on a loan taken by a powerful brahmin member of the *sabhā* from a *peṇṅāṭṭi* who belonged to the Mañcaṇattār-veḷam.⁸³ As he had in the interim died and no relatives were willing to settle the debt, the palace took over the debtor's property, which had passed on to his son, and sold the land to the temple. In this instance it would seem that the palace acted on behalf of the *peṇṅāṭṭi* and had some claim over wealth which she appears to have freely lent as an individual. Much work still needs to be done on the power dynamics of collective possession and giving in South Asian religious contexts.

Observations and conclusions

Inscriptions suggest that the *veḷam* as an institution underwent significant change as the Chola empire evolved. During the "early" Chola period (c. 925–985) in the tenth century, nine different *veḷams* are mentioned in approximately fifteen inscriptions, while during the "middle" period (985–1070) in the eleventh century, twenty-one different *veḷams* are mentioned in roughly thirty-five records. Putting aside a cluster of records from the kongu, the later period of Chola rule (1070–1250) saw a marked decline both in the variety and overall incidence of *veḷams* in the epigraphic record, with just three different *veḷams* mentioned in four inscriptions. The number of *veḷams* attached to the royal household, as well as the frequency that their members appear in the epigraphic record, seems to have roughly doubled during the reigns of Rājarāḅa, and Rājendra and his sons (c. 985–1070), when the empire rose to its greatest territorial extent and political power. The military successes of the Chola armies during this period would have flooded the imperial household with the spoils of war, both material and human. *Veḷams* must have grown in size and proliferated in number to accommodate the influx of men and women.

The titles of *veḷams* show some significant variation between the early and middle periods of Chola rule. Some *veḷams* remained important through both periods, suggesting that these were integral and perhaps large and low ranking palace establishments, namely the Periya-veḷam and Mañcaṇattār-veḷam. The early Chola court, however, seemed to

82 *ARE* 104 of 1925.

83 *SII* 22.27.

commemorate a wider number of members of the royal family, including many queens. Nearly half of all titled *veḷams* took the name of a queen while just one *veḷam* was named after a Chola monarch. This is in marked contrast to the reigns of Rājarāja I and his successors, when only two known *veḷams* commemorated queens. During this period, the vast majority of *veḷams* were named after the ever increasing titles of the Chola monarch himself (or his predecessors), commemorating victories over rival kings (and perhaps containing the spoils of specific campaigns). Even bathing *veḷams* appear with royal titles like Śivapādaśekhara, Uyyakoṇṭān, Ilaṅkeśvarakulakāla and Teliṅgakulakāla.

Because the titles of *veḷams* did not necessarily denote service arrangements, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions from this change. It cannot be argued, for example, that the proliferation of *veḷams* with royal titles reflected a concentration of palace servants around the person of the king. A more plausible suggestion would be that these naming practices were an attempt to centralize authority within the extended kin-structure of the Chola court. As the military successes of the ambitious eleventh-century monarchs mounted, new wives and palace personnel, particularly women, were acquired and the Chola household retinues no doubt expanded considerably. This human “inflow” had to be accommodated, a fact reflected in the appearance of new royal residences through the course of the century. With these enlarged retinues now spatially dispersed, there may have been a real need for cohesiveness and loyalty among kin-networks and the large body of servants attached to them. One may speculate that the king-centred nomenclature of palace establishments may have been intended to assert central authority over a dispersed and multi-local family establishment.

It is during this period that *veḷams* appear in the provincial courts of the empire, most notably those of the famous Chola-Pandya “viceroys” – members of the Chola royal family appointed to rule over the conquered Pandya kingdom during the eleventh century. Two inscriptions from Ambasamudram taluk, Tirunelveli district, in Pāṇṭimaṇṭalam, dated to the reigns of Jāṭavarmaṇ Sundara Chola-Pandya and Māṇavarmaṇ Vikrama Chola-Pandya in the mid-eleventh century, mention the *veḷams* of a Chola queen and one Ceramānār.⁸⁴

More interestingly, a cluster of mostly thirteenth-century inscriptions from sites west of the Chola heartland – at Nerur, Tirumuruganpundi and particularly Kadattur (see figure 1) – dated in the reigns of local kings based in Kongu, mention royal *veḷams* (Perumāḷ-veḷam).⁸⁵ Sometimes

84 *SII* 14.170 and *SII* 14.185. The latter inscription uses the phrase *ceramānār veḷattāl*, apparently referring to “a woman in the veḷam of the Chera king”. The term *veḷattāl* (literally “woman of the *veḷam*”) is not encountered elsewhere, though the term *vellāṭṭi* (uncertain meaning, perhaps designating either a *veḷam* servant as in *ARE* 815 of 1983 or perhaps a female *vellālar*?), as in *SII* 17.518, 528) appears in a number of Chola period inscriptions. The phrase *ceramānār* probably does not refer to a Chera king as such but to a title of a viceroy or subordinate at court.

85 Tirumuruganpundi, *ARE* 126 of 1915; Nerur, *ARE* 334 of 1928; and Kadattur, *ARE* 809, 815, and 825 of 1983. The Tamilnadu State Department of Archaeology has published a number of inscriptions at Kadattur in T. S. Sridhar (ed.),

known as the “Kongu Cholas” in the *Annual Reports* because of their adoption of Chola regnal titles, the history of this dynasty is uncertain. Arokiaswami argued that these kings were “viceroys” who arose after Chola conquests in Kongu during the late tenth and eleventh centuries, but soon became independent.⁸⁶ There is little evidence, however, for a Chola “viceroyalty” in Kongu as seems to have existed in Pāñṭiṃaṇṭalam; the Kongu kings were a lineage entirely local in origin.⁸⁷ The adoption of Chola titles, the occasional expression of tributary status, and possible marital alliances, all suggest, however, a strong link in courtly practice. Burton Stein argued that these “chieftains”, situated at the periphery of the powerful Chola empire, adopted its imperial style to gain local legitimacy.⁸⁸ As in Chola lands, *veḷam* inscriptions in Kongu often record women making gifts in conjunction with military retinues and their servants. Notably, however, the *veḷams* mentioned in Kongu inscriptions, though spanning the reigns of several kings, are not differentiated across generations by any change in name or title.

In the Chola heartland, the epigraphic record shows a dramatic decline in the number of *veḷams* after 1070. All of the extant inscriptions from the later Chola period date to the reign of Kulōttuṅka I (1070–1120) and two records refer to a *veḷam* apparently named after his son Vikrama.⁸⁹ The donors in these inscriptions, interestingly, are not *peṇṇāṭṭis* but *kaikkōḷars*, a fact which may reveal a shift in the composition of *veḷams*. On the other hand, it is during this period that we have our only definitive references to *veḷams* as the repositories of women captured in war – in the reign of Kulōttuṅka I the court poem *Kaliṅkattupparaṇi* uses the term *vēḷam* to denote a place where captive women were confined, and during the reign of Kulōttuṅka III an official *meykkīrtti* boasts of the Chola king causing the Pandya princess to “enter his *veḷam*”. The overall decline of *veḷams* in the inscriptional record is perplexing. As is well known, Kulōttuṅka I came to the Chola court from the kingdom of Veṅgī under fraught circumstances, and it might well have suited him significantly to alter or at least re-orient the existing service arrangements within the imperial establishment. There is evidence that, after assuming the throne, Kulōttuṅka I developed new patron–client relations and instituted new fiscal policies, with the end, no doubt, of re-aligning the complex network of affiliations that might have potentially challenged his authority. The fate of palace institutions like *veḷams* was no doubt caught up in this political history, as they may have

Kōyamputtūr Māvaṭṭak Kalveṭṭukaḷ (Chennai: Tamilnadu Department of Archaeology, 2006). See nos. 26, 13, and 55 of 2004, for those cited above and nos. 45 and 48 of 2004, for *veḷam* inscriptions not recorded by the *ASI*.

86 M. Arokiaswami, *The Kongu Country* (Madras: University of Madras, 1956), 206.

87 V. Ramamurthy has suggested that these kings were a collateral branch of the Cheras, see Ramamurthy, *History of Kongu (Part 1)* (Madras: International Society for the Investigation of Ancient Civilization, 1986), 248–68.

88 Burton Stein, *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980), 312.

89 *SII* 23.279 and *SII* 5.698. The remaining references are *SII* 5.697 and *SII* 23.281.

been during earlier crises in the empire, but presently our knowledge of such changes remains too uncertain to say more.

When the Chola empire collapsed in the early thirteenth century, the large palace retinues which served the royal family seem to have also disintegrated. Their members may have been absorbed into the households of the various kings (Pandya, Hoysaḷa and Kādavaraiya) who operated in the Chola heartland from the beginning of the thirteenth century as Pandya armies overran the Tamil lands. These courts, however, do not seem to have continued the institutions from which these women came. Pandya inscriptions, for example, speak repeatedly of capturing queens and high-born women of the Chola court, but do not mention the *veḷam* as an institution.⁹⁰ It is also possible that the political instability in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries may have propelled female (and male) servants of the wider royal household – either voluntarily or through commission – into temple service. Although there is no direct evidence of such migration, we do know that there was a certain parity of status between temple and palace women,⁹¹ and that at least from Rājendra’s time women may have circulated (even if by error) between the two spheres. As the temple became an increasingly autonomous and powerful institution in later, and particularly post-Chola times, it may have absorbed kinless women from failing imperial institutions. Once again, the problem is that palace women, to an even greater degree than their temple counterparts, are nearly impossible to “track” in the historical record because of their kinlessness. The *kaikkōḷars*, however, present a different picture. It is clear that by the later Chola period *kaikkōḷar* groups were in the employment of large and powerful temples – which may be significant for *peṇṭāṭṭis*, as they were sometimes related to them. In post-Chola times, the *kaikkōḷars* gradually shed their association with military retinues of the Cholas and emerged as an occupational status group. The role of *kaikkōḷar*-related *peṇṭāṭṭis* in this *longue durée* historical process is uncertain, but for the reasons stated above, certainly invisible. With the gradual collapse of the Chola empire, then, these women and their descendants seem to have silently disappeared – either into the courts of other princes, increasingly powerful temple institutions, or the kin structures of nascently forming caste groups. Whatever the case, the institution of the *veḷam*, as important as it once had been for the Chola court in the eleventh century, seems to have passed from both practice and memory.

90 See the *meykkīrtti* of Māvarmaṇ Sundara Pandya I from his twentieth year (c. 1236), *SII* 5.431.

91 For a comparison of temple and palace women, see Orr, *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters*, 228 n. 22.