Introduction

Once, we are told, the awesome goddess Kāḷi addressed her assembled courtiers. She was speaking, among other things, in praise of a king, who was in fact Viṣṇu come to earth to rule over the greatest kingdom of the south. The goddess detailed the story of his birth among men, his rise to eminence, and the great justice of his rule. Then she turned to describe the magnificent sight of him as he embarked upon a royal progress across his kingdom:

> *maṟṟa vĕṅkaṭakaḷiṟṟiṉ utayakkiriyiṉ mel*
> *mati kavitt'iṭav utitt'iṭum arukkaṉ ĕṉave*
> *kŏṟṟa vĕṇkuṭai kavippa micai kŏṇṭu kavarik*
> *kulamatippuṭai kavitta nilav' ŏttu varave.*
>
> And so,
> atop a fierce bull-elephant he comes,
> like the Sun arising over Sunrise Mountain.
> And just as the Moon hangs over it,
> he is covered over by a warrior's white parasol,
> its long yak-tail fans like bright moonlight
> hovering round its orb.[1]

Elephant, king, royal emblem: mountain, sun, moon. Kāḷi's verse marries celestial harmony to the realization of a similar perfection in the physical person of the king. Royal display becomes hierophany, a momentary alignment of heaven and earth.

This syzygy and its mirroring among men contain subtle allusions to a set of further earthly conjunctions. Kāḷi never says as much – the goddess is not a genealogist – but this king, whom she calls Apayaṉ, began his life in the east, in the land where the sun's rays first touch the earth every morning. The royal family into which he was born traced its descent back to the moon, who in ages past had sired a far-reaching line of kings, among them Kṛṣṇa, another of Viṣṇu's earthly apparitions. Apayaṉ, however, rules as the rightful heir of the Coḷas, the greatest of the dynasties of the southern Tamil country, whose distant ancestors include

not only Manu the lawgiver and Rāma the perfect king (yet another of Viṣṇu's *avatāra*s), but the Sun-god himself. Kāḷi's words thus enact a tableau both natural and dynastic: the all-powerful sun atop its mountain seat at once adopting as ornament and outshining the cool-rayed moon, as the ascendant imperial Co̲la subordinates to himself the satellite dynasty of his birth. In the goddess's version of events, Apayaṉ's accession was an act of salvation, his enthronement removing the anarchic chaos of the Kali *yuga*. Yet the fact that it is she who narrates this is unsettling: Kāḷi, the blood-drinking war-goddess at home in the cremation ground and on the battlefield, is an unlikely figure from whom to expect such an irenic vision.

It is a fiction that we can overhear the goddess's words: her speech to her ghoulish retinue was the invention of a poet, Cayaṅkŏṇṭār, in a work meant to entertain the court of this very king, whose own royal pronouncements style him as Kulottuṅga, "Lofty in his Family." The tableau is just a single moment in Cayaṅkŏṇṭār's poem, and one that cannot be understood without a great deal of tacit knowledge that the poet presumes. First of all, there is the king's ancestry: though Cayaṅkŏṇṭār's poem – it is called the *Kaliṅkattupparaṇi* – contains a detailed king-list of the Co̲las, its version of recent dynastic history is notably and deliberately opaque. There is also the elaborate set of mythic commonplaces that assign the ruling houses in India to one of the two lines descending from the sky's most prominent luminaries. These lines had ramified down through the centuries, taking in the families at the center of each of the great epics, along with the greater and lesser kings of recent times. And there is Sunrise Mountain: this was a mobile feature of the imagined landscape of classical India, always off somewhere to the east. For the Tamil-speaking subjects of the Co̲la, this meant the northeast, at the seaward edge of the Telugu country. This in turn summoned up the long and fraught relations between the Co̲las and the lunar Cālukya kings who held sway in the Telugu country. But for the earliest Tamil listeners to this poem, the silence surrounding the recent past was especially deafening, as Kulottuṅga's accession was a crucial moment in the life of the kingdom, a transformation whose effects had extended far beyond the affairs of one royal family.

All fictions rely on the presumption of such tacit knowledge: it is the unsaid spaces that listeners and readers attempt to fill that make meaning possible. The martial goddess, as she relates this implied dynastic conjunction, stands in for the many makers and shapers of language, those connoisseurs of gaps and silences, for whom Kulottuṅga's public life provided an occasion for description, for poetic creation, and for individual and collective self-imagining. Cayaṅkŏṇṭār's staged

ventriloquy through Kāḷi was distinct in genre, in form, and in intention from what we might call a historical narrative, but it was nevertheless a meaningful rendition of the events of the past, something that remains unobscured by the poem's many evasions and transformations. Historiography of the sort practiced elsewhere in Eurasia was vanishingly rare in medieval South India, but it produced in great abundance works of language that married poetic fiction with reference to and reflection upon the past. Cayaṅkŏṇṭār's text was one among many that so engaged with the events surrounding Kulottuṅga's accession.

So to call Cayaṅkŏṇṭār's poem a fiction is not to dismiss it. Many and varied were the fictions of Kulottuṅga's time, ranging from works that were meant to entertain, like the poet's, to the legal fictions that sustained public documents and to the elaborate confections of courtly and temple ritual. One could go so far as to claim that the greatest fiction was the Coḻa state itself, and to see it as an elaborate performance, buttressed by court ceremonies and punctuated by the spectacular acts of largesse, meant to convert the leading members of its audience into its performers and supernumeraries. Consider the following:

> In the fourth year of his majesty the king Rājakesarivarman Kulottuṅgacoḻa, the emperor of the three worlds. As he was sitting in state in the Cetirāja hall in his palace in Pĕrumparrapuliyūr, the king was entreated by Pavaḻakkuṉṟanāṭ-uṭaiyāṉ, the lord of Pūṇṭi, and he graciously declared that the village of Putuppākkam should be set down in the rolls as a tax-exempt temple holding, and should be given over to the lord Śiva, master of Tirukkaccālai and master of the city of Kāñcipuram. This order was taken down by the royal secretary Muṭikŏṇṭacoḻaṉ, village elder of Pālaiyūr, and it was verified by the senior royal secretary Rājarājabrahmarājaṉ, the leading citizen of the *brahmadeya* village Keralāntakacaturvedimaṅgalam in Veṇāṭu. These were the overseers of the revenue office: Ampalavaṉ Uttamacoḻapallavarayaṉ, the master of Aracūr; Vikramacoḻa Coḻiyarayaṉ, master of Cāttumaṅgalam; Muṭikŏṇṭacoḻaviḻupparayaṉ; the revenue officer . . . Rājarājaṉ, village elder of Oṭṭaiyūr; and the revenue officer Kāñcanakŏṇṭāṉ, master of Kantamaṅgalam. From the three hundred and twenty-ninth day of his fourth year onward, the king was pleased to ordain Putuppākkam to be a temple holding.[2]

The king is presented to us in this royal communication as he held court in a certain place on a certain day, in the temple city of Cidambaram, on or around May 8, 1074, the day from which this order went into effect. He is surrounded by officials and courtiers, each meticulously located in the social space of the kingdom, most of them titled landholders from its central provinces in the Kāveri river delta. We know that this session of court took place because a copy of the order rescripted by Muṭikŏṇṭacoḻaṉ was transmitted to the temple

and was inscribed on its walls, to serve as a permanent record of a part of its landed property.

This testimony would appear to be poles apart from the stylized hierophany in Cayaṅkŏṇṭār's poem. In contrast to the cosmic stillness of the image uniting sun and moon within himself, the king as captured in this record is hard at work performing the banal business of tax remission to a Śiva temple in the kingdom's northern metropolis of Kāñcī. The royal order is set firmly in time and space, lacks any sort of mythological embroidery, and is expressed in a workmanlike Tamil prose. Rather than celebrating the king's glory, the inscription captures a transaction in which he was an authorizing agent: we see here a single instance, out of many thousands, of the transfer of revenue to a religious institution, usually a temple or a conclave of learned Brahmans. One might say that where Cayaṅkŏṇṭār gives us a representation, this is a trace of a real past act. The one is perfectly good poetry; the other, the stuff of history.

It is not at all a new idea to find this distinction unsatisfactory. For one, texts like the *Kaliṅkattupparaṇi* possess a relationship to the past that itself deserves to be made an object of analysis, and declaring them out of evidentiary bounds simply ignores the problem. But more significantly, a supposedly pristine documentary source like this royal order turns out under even a cursory inspection to be just as founded upon silential gaps and tacit presumption as an imaginative work like Cayaṅkŏṇṭār's. The order is structured as a transfer of rights over land not between the impersonal institution of the state and the corporate body of the temple, but between two different lords: Kulottuṅga, the wheel-turning emperor of earth, heaven, and the underworld, and the god Śiva as he is housed in a particular site in Kāñcī. In this arresting asymmetry, the king lays claim to the entire universe as his property, to be disposed of as he wishes, while the cosmic deity is bound up within the four *prākāra* walls of a single temple, one of many such earthly addresses. All seven men mentioned along with the king appear clothed in the elaborate costume of Co̱la titulature, elevated from their place as local big men in their individual villages into the ranks of the kingdom's ruling elite. Almost all bear lordly titles issuing from the Co̱la court, rather than personal names and patronymics, and in the Tamil original, each is meticulously located in terms of his place of residence's location in the bureaucratic and customary spaces of the imperial system of land control. Each man, from local grandee to scribe, to accountant, can only be glimpsed here through the guise of an adopted and scrupulously maintained public self.

Moreover, this piece of revenue business conceals a momentous act of political transformation. This is the earliest surviving instance of the king's claiming for himself the name Kulottuṅga and the title

tiripuvaṉaccakkiravarttikaḷ, Wheel-turning Emperor of the Three Worlds. Prior to this time, the king – then called Rājendracoḷa – had issued orders, marshaled soldiers, and made donations: he had, in short, acted like a king. But he did so in the midst of serious political uncertainty, when the Coḻa dynasty had ceased to effectively exert hegemony in its domains. Before this, the king was styled in a way that sought to connect him with his Cālukya ancestors to the northeast, while arguing for his Coḻa inheritance. But by May 1074, something had shifted: the king had assumed unimpeded control of the kingdom's central lands, and had emblematized his success by the adoption of this new regnal name. The public enunciation of this order marks the earliest extant trace of this new royal identity: that it was issued from the Śaiva temple-town of Cidambaram and that it is connected with the ancient city of Kāñcīpuram doubly mark this out as an important piece of political theater. Years of work were needed to bring this little piece of royal generosity to pass, and Kulottuṅga's graceful words are just as much the product of a ventriloquistic voicing as Cayaṅkŏṇṭār's speaking through Kāḷi, decades later, in his *paraṇi*.

* * *

This book is an essay in Coḻa history, taking the emergence of the emperor Kulottuṅga I (r. 1070–1120) as its central point of focus. It seeks to answer two questions: What actually happened? And why should anyone care? The first of these questions is much the easier of the two. Many of the following pages are devoted to what happened between June 1070, when Rājendracoḷa, the Coḻa–Cālukya prince, was consecrated into kingship and his assumption four years later of his new, imperial identity. This did not take place in a vacuum, nor can it simply be confined to the domain of familial machination or court intrigue. Rājendracoḷa began to rule in the midst of polity-wide transformations catalyzed by the forging of the Coḻa imperial state-system, a process begun two generations earlier. The second half of the eleventh century saw the emergence of newly empowered elite groups, modes of property relations, and the reforging of existing caste-communities into amalgams of regional solidarity and collective action. Yet the transformation of Rājendracoḷa into the emperor Kulottuṅga was not simply the surface expression of these underlying causes, so much foam churned up from the depths of the social. Instead, in the process of this royal self-renovation, we can capture how the king's court actively sought to position itself through the calibration of public rhetoric and the assiduous fostering of a political network. The king's claim to authority was taken up in the maneuverings

of often quite ordinary men and women as well as powerful grandees; royal ambition joined with local ritual observance to enact imperial kingship in novel ways. Kulottuṅga would go on to rule for nearly a half-century, and this period saw the emergence of a new settlement among the kingdom's ruling elite, the rudiments of which were put in place in the period 1070–1074. The conjuncture that brought about Kulottuṅga's accession contained within it, as the seed contains the sprout, the earliest intimations of the social forces that would trigger the slow collapse of Coḻa authority, generations later. Less an episode of the one-damn-thing-after-another of dynastic history, these events occasioned real and durable change in the medieval Tamil country.

This book is also concerned with what happens in the wake of this new imperial settlement, when this king's ascendency became an occasion for narration by others. The narratives that this provoked, crafted in Tamil and Sanskrit and in a range of genres and formats, present the events, their significance, and their practical and moral consequences in ways that are often mutually discordant. Though ranging widely in their investment in narrative facticity (the stuff of names, dates, and putative causes), none are readily assimilable to a historical – much less a historiographical – mode of explanation. But this is not to say that they did not seek to produce a coherent account of the past. These texts were written for their particular present, the time and place of their initial dissemination; and this was a present that in every case was part of the world transformed by Kulottuṅga's accession. These narrative renditions, whether court poem, inscriptional eulogy, or local myth-cycle, were not isolable, more-or-less successful accounts of what happened: they were themselves very much a part of what happened.

In each case, the rendition of the Coḻa king's coming to power enjoyed a central place in texts produced in or after his reign, and each of these texts embodied a particular complex project directed toward a specifiable social constituency. Unpacking this requires a certain practical flexibility: for all that the evidence contained within these works can suggest interpretations that are the preserve of the social historian, it is only through the tools and modes of attention peculiar to textual scholarship that these can be accessed and assessed. Understanding the individual projects constituted by these works and the ends to which they were directed can only be accomplished through attention to their linguistic fabric, with reference to the conventions within which they were structured and against which they were meant to strain. As it happens, two of these texts – Cayaṅkŏṇṭār's *Kaliṅkattupparaṇi* and Bilhaṇa's *Vikramāṅkadevacarita* – are among the major literary monuments of the

period. Here philology shades over into hermeneutics, and into the work of the literary historian and critic, as attention to the place occupied by the narrative of Kulottuṅga enables a new, and better, understanding of these masterpieces.

Reading these texts in this way might be in itself interesting for some. But as much as this is necessary for the first of my questions (what happened?), it is insufficient for the second (who cares?). One might readily agree that, by carefully reading its surviving documentary and expressive traces, the murky accession of this king and its consequences can be made clear, and yet still ask why, ten centuries later, this is of any interest whatsoever. There are two answers to this question. The first of these relates to the peculiar achievements of Cōḻa studies: the body of historical research on this time and place is the empirically richest and conceptually most sophisticated work of its kind for what may be called (with an audible sigh) "early medieval" South Asia. As such, it deserves to be much better known. My own training is as a philologist of Sanskrit and Tamil, not as a historian, but my esteem for these historians' work has led me to return to it repeatedly, and prompted my own attempt to add to it. I have often felt like this book was at once an extended piece of fan mail to these scholars and a love letter to the period itself, with all the potential for self-exposure and embarrassment peculiar to those two epistolary genres. To admire the work of others, however, is not to be willfully blind to its limitations, and the present state of Cōḻa historical studies, for all its accomplishments, is not immune to criticism.

The second of my two answers to the question "who cares?" emerges directly from this critique of the current state of Cōḻa historiography. It is my contention that the complex of events surrounding the accession of Kulottuṅga I and its subsequent interpretation should be understood as primarily *political* in character. This might appear to be a self-evident claim; it is not. I do not mean that this royal succession should be classed as what is conventionally called "political history," usually understood as the study of just this sort of thing, along with diplomatic transactions and military campaigns. Nor do I mean this in the sense that any and all human activity is shot through with and finally reducible to the self-interesting jockeying for mastery, that "it's all just politics": this may in fact be true, but it is unhelpful. I mean instead that the society over which the Cōḻa kings held sway possessed an array of customary and constitutional institutions and practices that meaningfully maintained and reproduced the asymmetrical distribution of power and access to resources. This array was not exhausted by the extended household that constituted the royal court; nor, contrariwise, was the court simply a theatrical appurtenance to the actual workings of politics at the local

level of patriarchy and rural domination. The polity over which the Co̱la kings claimed control was a complexly distributed, kinetic one: its far-flung, disconnected elements could and did effectively interact with its supposed courtly center. This can be explicitly seen in the skein of events leading up to Kulottuṅga's emergence, and again in the texts that sought to repurpose this to particular collective and individual ends. In this overwhelmingly agrarian world, power ultimately depended on land and on the social relations bound up in the extension and maintenance of agriculture. But the politics of the Co̱la state played out in poetry and legal pronouncement as well as in revenue survey and the distribution of the village grain-heap; it could be found at work in the rights claimed by caste assemblies, in the rituals of military conquest, and in acts of pious donation to gods and Brahmans.

For all that we can recognize and categorize the maintenance of the structured inequalities of this society as political, there is a distinctiveness to the institutions, imaginal modes, and practices overseen by the Co̱las. The composition of the society and the very possibility of its dominance by the organized political enterprise of a state have been questioned and debated for decades; this has provided much of the conceptual raw material that has driven its historiography. But it would elide something of importance if the politics of the Co̱la kingdom were to be reduced to the dry typologization of state formation. One of my chief tasks is to capture the strangeness of the politics of the period, when seen from our received notion of "the political," whether in its restricted, formal sense or in its power-is-everywhere variant, and to thus suggest that this notion can be widened and enriched by these medieval Indian materials. As a single example: among the political agents at work in the Co̱la domains in the 1070s and after, I would not hesitate to include the goddess Kālī herself, as she appears in Cayaṅkŏṇṭār's poem and as the mistress of a temple in the kingdom's northwestern marches. To take the politics of the Co̱las seriously, then, is to defamiliarize our ready-to-hand concept of it, and thus to critically reframe our sense of this part of collective experience.

These institutions and practices of Co̱la politics were *legible* (that is, we can know significant things about them from the surviving evidence), they were *consequential* (the action of different agents within the array could produce outcomes that effected the workings of the whole) and – this is significant in light of the what-actually-happened question – they *changed*, both more broadly over time and as a particular outcome of the new order inaugurated under Kulottuṅga. The point of looking at the making of this particular king is that it allows us to capture the perduring structures of the meaning of politics along with the conjunctural instances in which

these structures were invoked, used, and, in the process, transformed. *History* and *politics* thus shape much of the argument of this book. These are among the foundational categories of humanistic and social–scientific study; to them I would seek to add a third term, *philology*. Philology – though certainly it once rivaled its fellows here in ubiquity and significance – is now often derided, though more frequently misunderstood or simply ignored. My understanding of all three, and my use of them in this book, lays no claim to universality: on the contrary, my approach is confessedly parochial, based as it is on the medieval South Indian case, and so potentially idiosyncratic. The larger problems addressed by this extended case study and an attempt to frame it in a more general theoretical conversation provide the materials for the book's conclusions. For now, the balance of this introduction is devoted to glossing each of these three rubrics, to describing the particular senses that inform their usage, and to providing an initial précis of my own interpretative stakes in them. These glosses take the form of bibliographical critiques, and readers more interested in the stuff of the Co̲la past than in prior scholarship may wish to forge ahead to the final section of this introduction.

History

The medieval Co̲las have been subject to systematic investigation for more than 130 years. This is not the place for an extended review of this scholarly literature;[3] instead, I will concentrate on the major lines of argument subtending the field as it is currently constituted. The monument to the early phase of Co̲la studies is K. A. Nilakanta Sastri's *The Cōḷas*, first published in Madras in 1934. The style and organization of Sastri's book was conventional, its subject matter predominantly politico-military, and its outlook broadly nationalist and focused on the assessment of the Great Men of the dynasty. But none of this detracts from the lasting value of the book, at once a massive synthesis of prior scholarship and a thoroughgoing engagement with the surviving archive. *The Cōḷas* adopts a celebratory, at times almost hagiographical, tone in its characterization of the period's achievements: for Nilakanta Sastri, the Co̲la kings oversaw a profound period of civic peace and cultural efflorescence, their means of government (in an incessantly reproduced phrase) an "almost Byzantine royalty."[4] With the major narrative details of the dynasty set in place by the great historian, his students concentrated on broadly synchronic surveys on polity and economy and on extending Sastri's model to other dynastic formations. Competent and thorough, if often uninspiring, this work supplemented

ongoing efforts at archaeological field survey and the collection and edition of the epigraphical corpus that still provides the mainstay of research.

The Copernican moment in the study of the Colas can be traced to the publication in 1973 of Y. Subbarayalu's *Political Geography of the Chola Country*. It is impossible to overestimate Subbarayalu's significance to the field; he remains at the time of writing its most important active scholar. From his earliest work, the two distinctive features of his scholarship were already in evidence: an overwhelmingly thorough empiricism and a commitment to reconstructing the areas of explicit concern in his inscriptional sources. In *Political Geography*, Subbarayalu's painstaking attention to the territorial designations that are a ubiquitous feature of the epigraphs yielded a richly textured history of the relationship between the classificatory power of the emergent Cola state and the customary order of the agrarian countryside. It also produced, in a precursor of much of his later work, scholarly tools possessed of utility beyond their immediate application to his argument. It includes a dozen maps (the first of any detail to be rendered of the Cola kingdom) and more than a hundred pages of appendices tabulating the historical names, locations, and contents of the major territorial types.

This commitment to a rigorously data-driven social history has continued throughout Subbarayalu's scholarly career; much of his later work has been produced either in partnership or in close dialogue with the Tokyo-based historian Noboru Karashima. Collectively and individually, these scholars' methods have evolved over the decades; this is especially evident in their prodigiously early adoption of the resources of information technology. Produced by Subbarayalu, Karashima, and Toro Matsui, the invaluable *Concordance of the Names in Cōla Inscriptions* was published in three volumes in 1978; much of the analytical work on its huge corpus of personal designations was accomplished through the analogue method of hole-sort cards. Karashima was also responsible for introducing a drive toward periodization, in order to track patterns of change over time. His division into four roughly century-long periods, tied conventionally to the reign of particular kings of the dynasty, has become a standard feature of contemporary Cola studies. Within this imposed structure – in which the reign of Kulottuṅga supplies the watershed for the onset of "period 3" – Karashima maintained a broad (if untheorized) commitment to a Marxist model of changing modes of production. The key transformation tracked over these centuries by Karashima is the rise of a mode of private landholding and the corresponding growth of landlordism among non-Brahmans. This massive secular change, the key point of which Karashima initially dated in the