Politics, Kingship, and Poetry in Medieval South India

In this compelling new study, Whitney Cox presents a fundamental reimagining of the politics of premodern India through the reinterpretation of the contested accession of Kulottuṅga I (r. 1070–1120) as the ruler of the imperial Chola dynasty. By focusing on this complex event and its ramifications over time, Cox traces far-reaching transformations throughout the kingdom and beyond. Through a methodologically innovative combination of history, theory, and the close reading of a rich series of Sanskrit and Tamil textual sources, Cox reconstructs the nature of political society in medieval India. A major intervention in the fields of South Asian social, political, and cultural history; religion; and comparative political thought, this book poses fresh comparative and conceptual questions about politics, history, agency and representation in the premodern world.

Whitney Cox is an associate professor in the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago. His principal interest lies in Sanskrit language and literature, premodern Tamil, and in the cultural, political, and social history of far southern India. He has been a member of the Collegium of the Berlin-based Zukunftsphilologie project since 2011 and has received awards from Fulbright-Hays, the British Academy, and the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council.

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Moonset on Sunrise Mountain

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For Ken and Peter,

father and son

Contents

Figures

Tables

Acknowledgments

I imagine that most books have more than one moment of inception. This one had at least three. The first, and formative, moment occurred in Tanjavur in the waning months of 1996, when I visited the Rājarājeśvaram temple for the first time. I spent the afternoon in the complex's central courtyard, marvel-struck, as most visitors are to the place. There were eagles circling its central *vimāna*. I knew then that some day I would write a book about the Coḻas. The second moment came years later, during graduate school in Chicago, when I had asked Blake Wentworth, dear friend and fellow student, to read what would end up as the first chapter of my doctoral dissertation. Its subject was the Śaiva Tantric virtuoso Maheśvarānanda, who wrote in the early fourteenth century, but in the early rumblings of my thesis I tried to incorporate Kulottuṅga and his times. "I can't see what this has to do with anything," Blake wrote (or something like it) to me. He was right: this book was trying to fight its way onto the page, no matter how awkwardly.

A few years passed; I took a job teaching Sanskrit in London. I was sitting in a South Indian restaurant with Francesca Orsini, another dear friend and my then-colleague in SOAS. Francesca had kindly offered to discuss my research plans, including a behemoth of a book I was then considering. Describing the argument that was (yet again) incongruously tucked into the imagined study's early chapter, I warmed to the topic: I found myself talking at greater length about the preliminaries of the book-to-be, without ever coming to the main argument. Francesca suggested that maybe there was enough there for a book of its own.

Much has happened in the intervening years: I moved back to America and took another job teaching Sanskrit, but I have never stopped thinking of this as my "London book." The initial research trip to Chennai, Mysore, and Kolar in early 2010 was funded by a British Academy Small Research Grant, while the bulk of the writing was generously supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council's award of an Early Career Fellowship in 2012–2013. Equally essential was the

intellectual sustenance I received from my colleagues and conversation partners in London, especially Orsini, Rachel Dwyer, and Michael Willis. I am particularly grateful to my fellow Cola obsessive Daud Ali, for his constant encouragement and good advice. The SOAS library holds the personal collection of the brilliant South Indian epigraphist J. F. Fleet (d. 1917): his beautifully written marginalia supplied a treasure trove of corrections and cross-references. It was also there, and thanks again to Ali, that I was introduced to Hermann Kulke, who kindly shared with me his manuscripts of the *Cidambaramāhātmya*. The major archival research was carried out in the offices of the Archaeological Survey of India in Mysore: I am grateful to the Director, T.S. Ravishankar, to S. Swaminathan, and to the exceptionally helpful staff. I happened to be there during a visit by Y. Subbarayalu, who encouraged my work and gifted me an electronic version of his invaluable *Concordance*. K. Vijayavenugopal of the École française d'Extrême-Orient, Centre de Pondicherry, first initiated me into epigraphical studies, and has warmly supported me ever since.

I am deeply indebted to a number of my remarkable cohort of fellow scholars and friends. Special thanks are due to Leslie Orr, who has read through or discussed many versions of this argument, and has always offered wise words of encouragement and criticism. Profound thanks to Manan Ahmed, E. Annamalai, Don Davis, Wendy Doniger, Sascha Ebeling, Rich Freeman, Arlo Griffiths, Rajeev Kinra, V. Narayana Rao, Christian Novetzke, Luther Obrock, Indira Peterson, Sheldon Pollock, David Shulman, Cindy Talbot, Gary Tubb, A. R. Venkatachalapathy, and Blake Wentworth. All have helped to thrash out ideas, read drafts, and provided citations and sympathetic ears. Conversations with Yigal Bronner and Larry McCrea shaped major parts of Chapter 3; I would never have written Chapter 2 without the example of Emmanuel Francis and Charlotte Schmid's work on the *měykkīrtti*. Since my return to Chicago, I have been surrounded by great colleagues and wonderful students. I am indebted to Muzaffar Alam, Dan Arnold, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Thibaut d'Hubert, Rochona Majumdar, James Nye, Seth Richardson, Dan Slater, Ulrike Stark, and Christian Wedemeyer. I owe a particular debt to Margherita Trento for her superb work as my research assistant and bibliographer. The maps included in Chapter 2 were created by Olaf Nelson of Chinook Design, Inc.; Katherine Ulrich prepared the index; and I am once again profoundly grateful to Blake Wentworth for the photograph on the cover. I wrote the vast majority of the manuscript working in the Regenstein Library, and I finished it in the Franke Institute for the Humanities housed there. My thanks to the members of my class

of Franke fellows, who helped me to better understand my own argument.

Three men instrumental to the book's existence passed away before its appearance. Christopher Bayly encouraged my journeyman efforts as a historian, and suggested that I submit my work to Cambridge University Press. I very much wish I could have presented him with the final product. As I was finishing the book's last round of revisions, I learned of Noboru Karashima's passing. I never met Karashima, but like all scholars of the Coḻa period, I am deeply indebted to him. Finally, just a few days after this book had gone to press, I was stunned by the early death of Barney Bate. I learned so much about politics and so very much more about Tamil from my great friend. It is still hard to believe that he is gone.

I have been fortunate to have such a loving and supportive family. My mother, Meredith Sabol; my sister, Hillary Bochniak; and Alex and Mary Morrison, *māmaṉārum māmiyārum*, have been sustaining presences throughout. And this, as with everything else, would be impossible but for Suzanne and Alice, my beautiful wife and daughter.

While writing this book, I've spent a great deal of time thinking about genealogies. My father, Kenneth Cox, taught me by example to love history. A self-taught intellectual, military officer, and practical man, he always warmly encouraged my choice of career, while being, I suspect, quietly bemused by it. I think he would have recognized what I set out to do here, and would have taken pleasure in my efforts. His grandson Peter loves history, too, among many other competing interests: he has a way of inhabiting a discovered, imagined, or invented world, of exploring it all the way to its edges. Watching him do this, I can sometimes for a moment catch a glimpse of the best version of myself.

Note on the Transliteration and Presentation of Texts

In transliterating Sanskrit, I have used the system that is universally adopted in Indological scholarship. For Tamil, I depart from the system used in the University of Madras *Tamil Lexicon* in several ways: I distinguish the short vowels *ĕ* and *ŏ* instead of their long counterparts; I give metrical Tamil texts with divisions corresponding to their word boundaries, not their prosodic units; and I mark the hyper-short *u* vowels that are dropped due to *sandhi* by a single inverted comma. This scheme of transliteration I consider to be more satisfying from a scientific as well as a historical point of view: It is consistent with that used for Sanskrit and other Indic languages, and, although the written Tamil of the medieval period did not usually distinguish the long and short *e*/*o* pairs, when necessary, its users did so through the addition of a diacritical mark (the *puḷḷi*) added to the *short* vowels. The word division here adopted is congruent with that used for Sanskrit; as there is no standard yet commonly accepted among Tamilists for the marking of significant boundaries in a line of verse – and since the habit of marking metrical boundaries appears to have only been introduced as a pedagogical aid in editions of the nineteenth century – it seems better to me to be consistent.

For the citation of personal and geographic names, I have taken a hybrid approach. In the case of Tamil proper names that contain Sanskrit elements, I have transliterated these following the latter's orthography: I thus write Rājendra, Kulottuṅga, and *brahmamārāyar* instead of Irācentira, Kulottuṅka, and *piramamārāyar*. I avoid diacritics for frequently occurring place names, but use them otherwise: thus, I write Colamandalam, Tanjavur, and Tondaimandalam, but Coḻa as a dynastic name and *tŏṇṭaiyar* as a collective noun.

Generally speaking, I have confined the citation and close discussion of primary source materials to the Notes, in order to avoid trying the patience or the endurance of the nonspecialist reader. When, however, the verbal texture of a particular passage is germane to my discussion of it,

I have opted to include the original in the main text. When citing epigraphic or manuscript sources, I retain their idiosyncrasies of spelling, except when I am reproducing the regularized text of an earlier editor; when citing the consensus of several such sources, I have regularized the orthography. Any alterations to a Sanskrit or Tamil text are preceded by an asterisk, and followed by a parenthetical reference to the source's reading; I mark such alterations – in descending order of certitude – as *corr.* (for "correction"), *em.* ("emendation"), or *conj.* ("conjecture"). Using these same signs, I have on occasion provided a more detailed apparatus of readings in the Notes; I do so when there are multiple source texts, especially multiple manuscripts, or multiple accounts of the same source.