

# An empire of epic proportions

A movie rekindles interest in the ancient south Indian Chola dynasty

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Interest in the majestic Brihadeeswara Temple and others like it has surged in the wake of a movie that some have called the "Indian 'Game of Thrones.'"

**CHENNAI** On the bank of the Cauvery River in southern India stands the majestic Brihadeeswara Temple. It was built from granite quarried 48 kilometers away and hauled to the site by a thousand captive elephants, which would deposit the heavy stones with the help of ramps.

The temple, located in Tamil Nadu state's Thanjavur, displays images of gods and goddesses, ancient inscriptions, carvings and frescoes. It was constructed in the 11th century by one of the longest-reigning Indian dynasties, the Cholas, which existed for more than 1,500 years and reached its peak between the ninth and 13th centuries, one of the three most powerful kingdoms of the region.

The Cholas were benevolent rulers who not only built Hindu temples, but were tolerant of other faiths despite being ardent devotees of Lord Shiva, one of the main deities of Hinduism. They built places of worship for Jains and Buddhists.

Interest in the Chola empire has recently been rekindled by the 2022 film "Ponniyin Selvan: Part 1," or "The Son of Ponni: Part 1," a Tamil-language historical action epic directed by Mani Ratnam. It is based on Kalki Krishnamurthy's magnum opus of the same name, depicting the history of the great Chola empire and the story of King Rajaraja I who ruled over most of southern



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India. The novel was serialized in the Tamil publication Kalki in the early 1950s and became extremely popular. The film has been called the "Indian 'Game of Thrones,'" taking the box office by storm. A sequel was released in April.

The movie epic has renewed popular interest in locations that were once part of this great kingdom. Heritage tours are being offered by travel companies and historians.

"This project was huge not only in terms of scale, but logistics and the number of characters, the number of locations and the need to re-create the Chola era. It is a dream come true for me," said Ratnam, two of whose previous films were selected as official entries from India for the Academy Awards. Although the movie has bestowed a sense of glamour to the Cholas, recent archaeological excavations in Tamil Nadu "are probably the best thing that has happened to Tamil heritage that has rekindled interest in history like that of the Cholas," said V. Sriram, a Chennai-based historian and heritage activist.

"The contribution of Cholas to Indian history is enormous. Land registry, irrigation technology and taxation ensured the Cauvery basin was -- and is still today -- the most fertile agrarian basin in India. Chola bronzes are considered [a] high-water mark of not just Indian art but of the world," said S. Vijay Kumar, co-founder of the India Pride Project, which helps recover stolen temple statues and artifacts.

The Cholas were also famous for their military prowess, especially under Emperor Rajaraja Chola and Emperor Rajendra Chola. Their navies sailed to the Maldives, the Lakshadweep archipelago and Sri Lanka, while their armies marched up the Ganges River and down to what is now Malaysia and Indonesia.

"The Cholas are a phenomenally important dynasty. Not only did they rule over a vast area, but they are known for their stellar contributions to art, literature, architecture, irrigation and local self-government," said Chithra Madhavan,

Left: A scene from Tamil-language action epic "The Son of Ponni: Part 1," which depicts some of the history of the great Chola empire.

Right: The Brihadeeswara Temple, also known as the Big Temple, was built from granite by King Rajaraja I in 1010. It is now on UNESCO's World Heritage List.

a Chennai-based historian and author.

"There were constant cultural exchanges and the crisscrossing of ideas due to their trade contacts and naval conquests as they spread Hindu culture across many parts of Southeast Asia. They were also responsible for the spread of grassroots democracy, through their village committees and subcommittees that looked after everything from storage tanks and water bodies to legal cases at the local level."

Both domestic and international tourists are exploring sites on the Chola trail, like the Brihadeeswara Temple, which is also known as the Big Temple and is on UNESCO's World Heritage List, as well as the Airavatesvara Temple at Darasuram, built in



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Guided tours in the region that was once the Chola empire offer visitors insights into local crafts such as Thanjavur paintings, known for their vibrant colors and gold foil embellishments.



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1. The Airavatesvara Temple at Darasuram is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, built by Rajaraja Chola II in the 12th century.
2. Another view of the Brihadeeswara Temple.
3. Bronze statues are still made today in the same way as the Cholas did centuries ago.
4. The temple at Gangaikonda Cholapuram, the capital city of the Cholas for 250 years.

the 12th century.

Gangaikonda Cholapuram, which was the Chola capital, is another popular destination and features a smaller replica of the Big Temple. Guided tours offer insights into local arts and crafts from gold foil encrusted Thanjavur paintings and bronze statues to the making of an ancient musical instrument, the veena.

Tourists also visit Veeranam Lake, a major source of water for the city of Chennai that was constructed with great foresight by Prince Rajaditya Chola. They can also view Point Calimere, where the Chola emperors embarked on their maritime expeditions, and Rameshwaram, the jumping-off point for military incursions into Sri Lanka. There are also less well-known Chola temples like Vijayalaya Choleeswaram in Narthamalai, one of the oldest stone temples in southern India, and Valisvara Temple in Tirunelveli.

Woven into the tapestry of the temple sculptures are several Puranic tales, each displaying distinctive creative styles of individual sculptors. "The level of craftsmanship and the skill of the innumerable sculptors who worked on the temples for decades, fashioning masterpieces from unyielding granite, is, indeed, breathtaking," said Ravi Sankaran, a software engineer who recently visited the temples. "These are still active places of worship and you do feel the presence of the

divine in the temples that have witnessed worship for over 1,000 years."

Anand Rajarathinam, founder of Heritage Inspired, was raised in the southern city of Tiruchirappalli. After a decade in the U.S., he started his company with a group of heritage enthusiasts. Heritage Inspired offers a special "Spy's Trail" tour that follows the travels of Vandhiyathevan, the protagonist of "Ponniyin Selvan," to give visitors a feeling for the Chola kingdom.

S. Jayakumar, a classical musician, was also inspired by the novel "Ponniyin Selvan." In 2017 he founded Courtyard Tours, which specializes in tours of the ancient south India kingdoms aimed at providing what he calls "a holistic experience -- from local food and art to history and culture."

The Tamil Nadu Tourism Development Corp. has also introduced a Ponniyin Selvan bus tour that takes visitors over three days to places related to Chola history.

Sumathi Suresh, a visitor from Chennai who took the tour, summed up the allure of visiting the ruins of the ancient kingdom: "Kalki's 'Ponniyin Selvan' is still my ... favorite epic novel. I've read it three times," she said. "The reason why many of us love it is because of the way Kalki weaves history into fascinating fiction; it makes one want to visit the places he describes -- and relive the story." **N**