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The Sangam Age: Chera, Chola and Pandya Kingdoms

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Why would a Tamil king march to the Himalayas, by legend, just to fetch a single stone? The answer lies in the Sangam Age. Three kingdoms shared the deep south of India: the Cheras, Cholas and Pandyas.

This lesson explains the key dates, the three kingdoms, two famous kings, the Roman trade and the exam angle.

The idea in brief

- **Period:** the Sangam Age runs from the 3rd century BCE to the 3rd century CE.
- **Three crowned kings:** Cheras (bow), Cholas (tiger) and Pandyas (fish).
- **Two kings:** Karikala is Chola. Senguttuvan is Chera.
- **Three ports:** Muziris (Chera), Puhar (Chola) and Korkai (Pandya).
- **Two Cholas:** the Sangam Cholas and the Imperial Cholas are different dynasties.



The Kallanai, an old dam on the Kaveri river. Photo by Beckamrajeev, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

Key Dates

What is the Sangam Age?

The Sangam Age is the early historic period of the Tamil country. It is usually placed between the 3rd century BCE and the 3rd century CE, or about 300 BCE to 300 CE.

Its sources are poems, epics, foreign sea guides and digs.

Sources: web.archive.org; archive.org

Which four dates act as a memory spine?

Four anchor points help you remember the order of events.

Battle of Venni: Karikala Chola wins, and a Chera king is wounded.

Senguttuvan: a Chera king linked by tradition to the 2nd century CE.

The Periplus: a 1st-century sea guide that names Muziris.

Pandya embassy: an envoy meets the Roman emperor Julian about 361 CE.

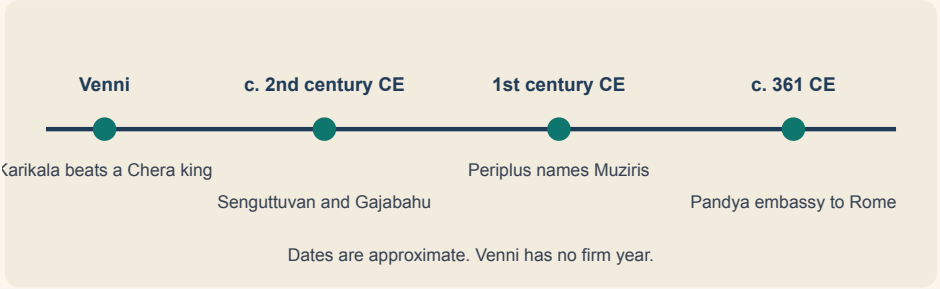
Sources: web.archive.org; archive.org

Are all these dates firm?

No. The Gajabahu link for Senguttuvan is a synchronism, a match between two kings. Some scholars reject it.

So learn the dates as a rough order of events, not as exact years.

Sources: web.archive.org



Four anchor points. The dates are approximate, and the Venni battle has no firm year.

> **Quick check 1.** The Venni battle has a firm, known year. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

The Three Kingdoms

Who were the three crowned kings?

The three royal houses are called the Muvendar, or three crowned kings. Tamil poems speak of three banners: the bow, the fish and the tiger.

Learn which banner goes with which house.

Sources: archive.org

Which house ruled where?

Cheras (bow): they ruled the west coast, in what is now Kerala. Their capital was Vanji, also called Karuvur.

Cholas (tiger): they rose in the Kaveri valley. Uraiyur, near Tiruchirappalli, was their oldest capital.

Pandyas (fish): they ruled the far south from Madurai.

Sources: archive.org; web.archive.org

What does a Greek guide say about the Pandyas?

The Periplus says the Pandya king lived inland, far from the port. It calls his city Modiera.

Historians read Modiera as Madurai.

Sources: archive.org

What was Tamilakam?

The land they shared is called Tamilakam. It ran from the Tirupati hills in the north down to Cape Comorin in the south.

The Pandyas also grew by war. The epic says the Pandya king Nedunjeliyan took land from both the Cholas and the Cheras. He ruled around 200 CE.

Sources: web.archive.org

Chera	Chola	Pandya
Emblem: bow	Emblem: tiger	Emblem: fish
Land: west coast (Kerala)	Land: Kaveri valley	Land: far south
Capital: Vanji	Capital: Uraiyur	Capital: Madurai
Port: Muziris	Port: Puhar	Port: Korkai

The three kingdoms side by side. Each had its own banner, land, capital and signature port.

Quick check 2. The Cheras, Cholas and Pandyas are called the three crowned kings. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 3. The tiger was the emblem of the Pandyas. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Two Famous Kings

Who was Karikala?

Karikala is the best-known early Chola king. The tradition says he won the battle of Venni as a boy. A Chera king was wounded there, and Karikala took the victory.

The Kallanai dam on the Kaveri, still in use today, is said to have been first built under Karikala around 150 CE.

He is also remembered for river works. Later records credit him with building embankments on the Kaveri. These kept floods away and helped farming in the delta. Farming in turn fed the Chola treasury.

Sources: archive.org; web.archive.org

Where was his capital?

In the epic Silappadikaram, the city of Puhar is his capital. Puhar is also called Kaveripattinam. It sits where the Kaveri meets the sea.

Why does this matter? A river-mouth capital shows how much Chola power leaned on the Kaveri and on sea trade.

Who was Senguttuvan?

Senguttuvan is the great Chera king of the same epic. Poets praise him in the Sangam poems. He decided to bring a block of stone from the Himalayas and carve an image of the goddess Pattini from it.

Pattini is the deified Kannagi, the wronged wife at the heart of the epic. Senguttuvan raised a temple for her at his capital. The king of Sri Lanka, Gajabahu, is said to have attended the opening.

Sources: archive.org; web.archive.org

How do I avoid mixing the two kings?

Remember the pair: Karikala is Chola, Senguttuvan is Chera. Exams love to swap them.

Tie each name to its house with the banner: Karikala with the tiger, Senguttuvan with the bow.

> **Quick check 4.** Karikala won the battle of Venni. *(True or False?)*
>
> See answer ↓

> **Quick check 5.** Senguttuvan was a Chola king. *(True or False?)*
>
> See answer ↓

Chera Trade with Rome

Which house did Udiyanjeral belong to?

Udiyanjeral is an early Chera king. The epic names him as a Cera king, not a Chola.

Do not pair him with the wrong house in an exam.

Sources: web.archive.org

Why did Greeks and Romans come to the Chera coast?

The Chera coast was famous for spices. Greeks and Romans knew the region for pepper long before the Sangam poems were written down.

The main Chera port was Muziris, also written Muchiri or Musiri. The Periplus lists it with two other pepper towns.

It says large ships went there for pepper and malabathrum, a leaf used as a spice. Tondi was the other chief Chera port.

Sources: archive.org; web.archive.org

What was the signature port of each kingdom?

The Pandya and Chola coasts had their own harbours. Each of the three kingdoms had one signature port.

Muziris (Muchiri): the Chera pepper port on the west coast.

Puhar (Kaveripattinam): the Chola port at the Kaveri mouth.

Korkai: the Pandya port, linked to the pearl fisheries.

Sources: archive.org

What else do we know about Korkai and Uraiyur?

Korkai was once the Pandya capital. The Periplus places the pearl fisheries at the nearby coast.

Uraiyur, the Chola capital, was a pearl and cloth market.

Were Roman soldiers at Muziris?

Old claims about Roman soldiers guarding Muziris or a temple of Augustus there are not firm in the sources.

Do not treat them as settled facts.

> **Quick check 6.** Korkai was a Pandya town known for pearl fisheries. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 7. Udiyanjeral was a Chola king. *(True or False?)*

See answer ↓

The Sangam Story

What do traditions say about three Sangams?

Tradition tells of three assemblies of poets, or Sangams, held at Madurai and other cities. The Pandya kings are said to have backed them.

The epic also says an old Pandya capital was swallowed by the sea and the court moved to Korkai.

Sources: archive.org

Is the legend proven history?

No. Treat it as tradition, not as proven history. The poems themselves are the real evidence.

For the poems, poets and the debate about their dates, read The Sangam Age: Literature and Society.

Two Cholas

Is there more than one Chola dynasty?

Yes. The word Chola names two different dynasties, centuries apart. Do not mix them up.

Sangam Cholas: the tiger-banner kings of the Kaveri valley, from Uraiyur.

Imperial Cholas: the medieval empire. It began with Vijayalaya, who ruled around 850 CE, and the empire rose in the 9th century.

What happened to the Pandyas later?

The Pandyas stayed in the picture for centuries. About 361 CE a Pandya embassy reached the Roman emperor Julian.

Madurai stayed a Pandya capital into the medieval age.

For the later Chola story, read Rashtrakutas, Chalukyas, Pallavas and Cholas. For the epics, read The Twin Tamil Epics.

What is the big picture?

These kingdoms were shaped as much by trade and poetry as by wars.

> **Quick check 8.** The Imperial Cholas began with Vijayalaya around 850 CE. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Exam Angle and Past Papers

What pattern do exams follow?

Exams test which king, port or banner belongs to which of the three kingdoms. They also test the Periplus and the limits of Tamilakam.

Distractors often give a real king or port to the wrong house. Read each pairing slowly.

Udiyanjeral and Senguttuvan: both Chera.

Karikala: Chola.

Korkai, Puhar, Muchiri: Pandya, Chola, Chera ports.

UPSC 2026: Udiyanjeral's Dynasty

UPSC asked which king-and-dynasty pairing from early Tamilakam is not correctly matched. The answer is statement 2 only.

The trap is Udiyanjeral and Senguttuvan. Both were Chera kings.

Sources: mcqquestion.com

UPSC 2023: Three Famous Ports

UPSC asked what Korkai, Poompuhar and Muchiri were known as. The answer is ports.

They are the signature ports of the Pandyas, Cholas and Cheras.

Sources: mcqquestion.com

NDA 2025: Who Was Senguttuvan?

NDA 2025 asked who Senguttuvan was. The answer is a Chera king. He is the Himalayan-stone king of the Pattini temple.

CAPF 2020: Tamilakam's Boundaries

CAPF 2020 asked what ancient Tamilakam included. The answer is the land between the Tirupati hills and the southernmost tip of the peninsula.

Sources: mcqquestion.com

NDA 2016: The Periplus

NDA 2016 asked if Periplus means "sailing around" and if Erythraean was the Greek name for the Mediterranean. The answer is statement 1 only.

The Erythraean Sea meant the Arabian Sea and the western Indian Ocean.

Sources: mcqquestion.com

Practice MCQs

1. The Cheras, Cholas, and Pandyas of the Sangam Age are together known by which term?

A. The Trimurti

B. The Satavahana confederacy

C. The Muvendar, or three crowned kings

D. The Mahajanapadas

See answer ↓

2. Which pair correctly matches a Sangam-era port with its kingdom?

A. Korkai with the Pandyas and Puhar with the Cholas

B. Puhar with the Cheras and Muziris with the Cholas

C. Korkai with the Cholas and Puhar with the Pandyas

D. Muziris with the Pandyas and Korkai with the Cheras

See answer ↓

3. Senguttuvan, who brought a Himalayan stone for the Pattini image, belonged to which dynasty?

A. Pallava

B. Chera

C. Chola

D. Pandya

See answer ↓

4. In the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, where did the Pandya king live?

A. At Vanji on the west coast

B. At Puhar on the Kaveri

C. At the port of Muziris

D. At Madurai, inland, called Modiera

See answer ↓

5. Which city was the oldest capital of the Cholas?

A. Vanji

B. Madurai

C. Uraiyur

D. Korkai

See answer ↓

6. For which product was the Chera region known to the Greeks and Romans in the early centuries BCE?

A. Wheat

B. Iron weapons

C. Silk

D. Spices such as pepper

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **C.** The Cheras, Cholas, and Pandyas together are called the Muvendar, the "three crowned kings" of the Sangam-era Tamil region, each with its own kingdom and emblem. ↑ Q1
2. **A.** Korkai was the Pandya port, linked to the pearl fisheries. Puhar, at the Kaveri mouth, was the Chola port. Muziris was the Chera port. ↑ Q2
3. **B.** Senguttuvan was a Chera king, praised in the Sangam poems. He raised the temple of the goddess Pattini, the deified Kannagi. ↑ Q3
4. **D.** The Periplus says the Pandya king lived inland, far from the mart, in a city called Modiera. This is read as Madurai. ↑ Q4
5. **C.** Uraiyur, now Tiruchirappalli, was the oldest Chola capital. The Periplus calls its region Argaru and notes its pearl and cloth market. ↑ Q5
6. **D.** The Chera coast was famous for spices, mainly pepper. The Periplus says large ships came to Muziris for pepper and malabathrum. ↑ Q6

Quick-check answers

1. **False.** The year of Venni is not firm. ↑ 1
2. **True.** They are called the Muvendar, the three crowned kings. ↑ 2
3. **False.** The tiger was the Chola emblem, and the Pandya emblem was the fish. ↑ 3
4. **True.** Tradition says Karikala Chola won at Venni. ↑ 4
5. **False.** Senguttuvan was a Chera king. ↑ 5
6. **True.** Korkai was the Pandya port linked to pearls. ↑ 6
7. **False.** Udiyanjeral was an early Chera king. ↑ 7
8. **True.** Vijayalaya founded the medieval Chola line around 850 CE. ↑ 8

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