

# News from Asia

## Tamil merchants in India and abroad (9th-14th centuries)

Risha Lee

BETWEEN THE NINTH AND FOURTEENTH centuries, merchants with ties to India's southeastern Tamil region played a crucial role in facilitating trade throughout the Indian Ocean. They transported India's highly sought after goods – luxury items such as spices, horses, woven cloth, pearls and gems, as well as everyday items, like rice and oil – to all corners of the Asian world, via the southern maritime route. These exchanges linked multiethnic actors into interlocking geographic and cultural networks, and produced a premodern world system. South Indian-style art and architecture and at least nine Tamil language inscriptions have been discovered in Southeast Asia and China, located along the Indian Ocean trade routes that these individuals would have travelled.

Knowledge of intra-Asian contact and exchange from this period has been derived mostly from Arabic and Chinese sources. The preference for these sources can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, they are more abundant in comparison to the sub-continent's dearth of written history. Secondly, written history in premodern India in large part has been limited to inscriptions, carved into the walls of stone temples. These inscriptions are site-bound and only partially published. Inscriptions also generally do not record standard 'histories', such as a recitation of dated chronological events.

### Not just royalty

A wealth of non-written history for merchants exists, however, in the form of objects and monuments patronized by them. In south India alone, hundreds of stone temples and some devotional bronze statues of deities bear inscriptions attesting to either the full or partial sponsorship by merchants. This empirical fact has gone largely unnoticed for some time by art historians of India, who have tended to presume that only royal patrons were responsible for creating the majority of objects and monuments. As research increasingly demonstrates, however, many works of art often received patronage entirely independent of any royal source, or from royal/non-royal collaborations. Several recent studies indicate that merchant patrons played particularly active roles in commissioning art and architecture all over India.

Merchants comprised a distinct class of non-royal individuals, whose profession required intense mobility and continual negotiation between local and cosmopolitan identities. There was a huge range of professional differentiation, with merchants specializing in the sale of specific goods at various locales, including local and regional markets, and periodic fairs. Supralocal merchant organizations were relatively common in medieval India, but their structure was highly complex. Indeed, it is unlikely that a central authority existed for them; rather, they had opaque borders that claimed to have power over massive geographical regions. Merchant organizations appear as patrons in inscriptions, from which it is clear that they constantly competed with, incorporated, and subsumed one another. Mercantile associations were structurally complex, characterized by constant change according to time and locality. Although our understanding of these groups is still murky, it seems apparent that extraordinary mobility and transregional identity were defining group characteristics.

One of the largest merchant organizations was 'the Five Hundred of the Thousand Directions of the Four Quadrants of the World' (*Nānādēsi ticai āyirataiṅṅurruvar*), often shortened to *Ainnurruvar* or 'The Five Hundred Members'. Although other merchant organizations proliferated during this period, none were as successful in terms of geographic

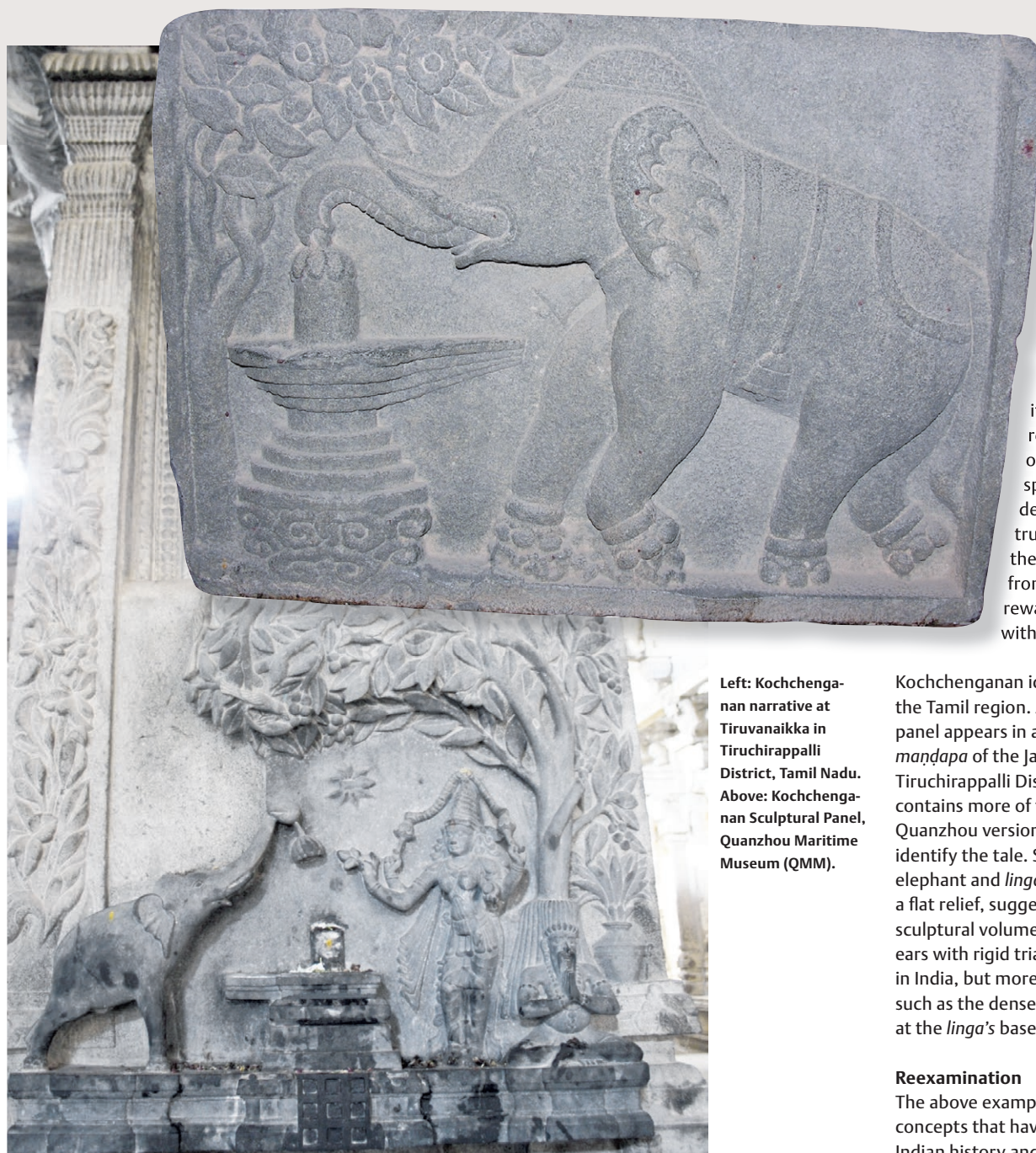
penetration and historical longevity. *Ainnurruvar* inscriptions (9th-17th centuries), have been discovered throughout south India and as distant as Sumatra. The organization's literal and imagined geographical and ideological expansiveness strongly suggests that it would have impacted the policies and behavior of contemporaneous merchant groups.

### Asserting their identities

Literary and artistic style both seem to have been crucial devices for shaping mercantile identity both in and outside of India. A common *praśasti* (eulogy) prefaces many of the *Ainnurruvar* inscriptions, appearing in linguistically diverse regions (Telugu, Kannada, and Tamil). The *praśasti* draws on tropes that appear in contemporary *praśasti* authored by kings, such as describing its members as being famous, virtuous, and of divine birth, but also draws on rhetoric from non-elite groups. Farming tools, such as scythes, ploughs, and hammers are often mentioned with reverence, and additionally, the gory feats of soldiers employed as bodyguards by the *Ainnurruvar* are often described in grisly detail. Also, there seems to have been a preference for commissioning temples to be constructed in the Tamil-Dravida style.

By sketching out the broad strokes of mercantile activity and identity in India, we can better interpret mercantile commissions when they appear outside of India. In particular, the ruins of a thirteenth century Hindu temple in Quanzhou (China) show that Tamil merchants transported both iconography and architectural style to the eastern terminus of their trading route. By replicating a Tamil-Dravida style temple, it is possible that they were continuing to assert their identity as they did in south India. Over 300 carvings, when analyzed, reveal that both Tamil and Chinese artisans collaborated to construct a monument that would have expressed a collective mercantile identity to both Quanzhou populations and merchant patrons.

We can demonstrate that the Quanzhou example closely approximated south Indian prototypes by looking at a single carving from the Hindu temple (which was originally dedicated to Shiva). A granite slab depicts a caparisoned



Left: Kochchenganan narrative at Tiruvanaikka in Tiruchirappalli District, Tamil Nadu. Above: Kochchenganan Sculptural Panel, Quanzhou Maritime Museum (QMM).

elephant approaching a *linga* (an iconic symbol of Shiva) underneath the branches of a flowering tree. The relief illustrates a well-known tale of the early Chola king, Kochchenganan. In one of his past lives, Kochchenganan was a spider that wove a daily web to protect a Shiva *linga* located in a forest. An equally devout elephant also paid daily homage to the *linga* by lustrating it with water from its trunk, inadvertently removing the spider's web. The fortunes of both animals changed one day, when the spider, infuriated by the elephant's continued destruction of its work, attacked it and bit its trunk. The elephant smashed its trunk against the ground, killing the spider, but then died from the venomous bite. Ultimately, Shiva rewarded both creatures for their devotion with honorable reincarnations.

Kochchenganan iconography rarely appears outside of the Tamil region. An iconographic parallel to the Quanzhou panel appears in a Nayaka period (16th-17th century) *maṅḍapa* of the Jambukesvarar Shiva temple in Tiruvanaikka, Tiruchirappalli District.<sup>2</sup> While the Tiruvanaikka relief contains more of the story's narrative elements, the Quanzhou version contains enough iconic elements to identify the tale. Strongly linear in design, the Quanzhou elephant and *linga*, while well proportioned, are executed in a flat relief, suggesting a hand less accustomed to portraying sculptural volume. The artist has depicted the elephant ears with rigid triangular folds, a stylistic treatment unseen in India, but more akin to Chinese ornamental patterns such as the dense and angular cloud motif that appears at the *linga*'s base in the Quanzhou relief.

### Reexamination

The above example encourages us to rethink several concepts that have been central to scholarship on south Indian history and society. First, its unexpected location in China demonstrates the artistic patronage of Tamil merchants, who voyaged through the Indian Ocean to arrive there, revising the traditional view of Indian art as an exclusively royal enterprise. Second, it expands Indic visual culture's geographical reach, since the narrative depiction's existence outside India attests to a larger circulatory network within the Indian Ocean. Finally, it points at the cross-cultural transmission of artistic style by expressing a melding of Sino-Indic concepts and techniques, encouraging a reading that emphasizes the artist's and patron's active engagement with aesthetic form, and the transformation of preexisting representational modes.

Risha Lee is Postdoctoral Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore.

### Notes

- 1 TN Ramachandran, translation. 1990. *St. Sekkizhar's Periyapuram*, pp.4197-4202. Tanjavur: Tamil University.
- 2 Local legend states that Kochchenganan constructed the original temple in Tiruvanaikka. Balasubrahmanyam. 1997. *Middle Chola Temples*, p.392. Amsterdam: Oriental Press.

The articles on these 'News from Asia' pages were compiled by our regional editor Lee Hock Guan, at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore.

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