Title
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The Rajarajeswaram as an Instrument of Economic and Political Unification in the Chola Empire

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**Introduction**

Sacred spaces throughout architectural history are rarely limited to reflecting religious ideology. Many layers of socio-cultural, political, or economic motives can be peeled away from famous religious buildings over time. The Hindu temple of South India is no exception. At first a purely religious institution, it evolved into an imperial political and economic instrument with an influence far beyond the religious sphere. This paper will examine the temple which is canonically considered the apex of Hindu temple architecture, which marked the shift to royal temple patronage: the Rajarajeswaram temple (Sri Brihadeshwara) at Tanjore, in modern day Tamil Nadu, India. Completed in 1010 C.E. during the reign of Rajaraja Chola I, the Rajarajeswaram is a monumental institution that relies on double-coding in its architectural forms to both religiously appeal to the masses as well as to politically control and economically benefit a vast empire. The paper will first lay out the background of the bhakti (devotional) temples to show their contrast with the royal temple. It will then address the temple’s architectural elements of structure, art, sculpture, and inscription in each main part of its layout, with respect to the novel political and economic meanings that the temple pioneered. Finally, the paper will discuss temple management and the monetary system of devadana, or land grants, the sustaining backbone of this new economic system. Through this examination, the temple will be analyzed as an extension of the royal court itself – an instrument by which Rajaraja capitalized on the religious devotion of his subjects for political and economic aggrandizement of a newly expanded empire. While it turned a private and personal devotion into a public spectacle, the grandiose expression was not necessarily a method of self-deification or proclamation of power over the divine. Rather the double-coding of the temple served as both appeasement and assertion to abet the unification of a vast empire, ultimately placing the empire’s subjects in the same service relationship to Rajaraja as he placed himself to the Lord.
**The Bhakti Movement**

Central to understanding the impact and analysis of the Rajarajeswaram is the concept of the bhakti movement, and bhakti temples. Examining these aspects of pre-Chola Saivism\(^1\) will contextualize and help inform the building of Rajaraja’s grand temple and its effects. Bhakti is generally defined as an intense devotion to a particular god, a personal deity\(^2\). In many ways it approaches a monotheistic form of Hinduism, where only one god is particularly worshipped, and the favored gods were often Vishu (Vaisnavism) or Shiva (Saivism)\(^3\). While the concept of bhakti has existed in India since the Vedic period, the bhakti movement was a specific revivalist movement that gained strength around the 7\(^{th}\) century in modern-day Tamil Nadu, coinciding with the building of rock-cut Hindu temples\(^4\). This movement can be attributed largely to the emerging Buddhist and Jain influences at the time, against which bhakti’s rousing Tamil hymns and chanting, wandering devotees stood as a challenging force. In fact, many of the hymns relate the struggle between Hinduism and Buddhism and Jainism, specifically in the royal courts which were often dominated by these religions. This unique movement was thus both an “imitation and competition” with the rival faiths\(^5\). As it grew, bhakti temples dotted the landscape of present-day Tamil Nadu and became a distinct architectural form. These temples were additive and evolving – starting out as a small impermanent shrine that was maintained by local administration, and growing over time. The most important bhakti temples eventually became the great rock-cut temples from the Pallava era\(^6\) and birthed the temple as an established religious institution\(^7\).

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1. Saivism is one of the major sects of Hinduism, originating as far back as 100 A.D. and gaining strength in the 6\(^{th}\)-8\(^{th}\) centuries, in which Shiva is worshipped as the primary deity.
5. Spencer 47.
6. The Pallava Dynasty immediately preceded the Chola Dynasty, and lasted from around 570 A.D to the end of the 9\(^{th}\) century.
As Geeta Vasudevan notes, there are significant differences between the bhakti and royal temples, such as that at Tanjore. Unlike a bhakti temple, a royal temple was strategically planned and constructed by a sovereign at a particular point in time. Whereas royal temples faded in utility after a specific individual lost power, the significance and sanctity of bhakti temples increased with time and patronage. Most importantly, although the royal government patronized and glorified certain bhakti temples of their choice, its power was exercised with “great discretion” over these temples, limited to settling disputes and giving gifts. The institution was never extended outside the religious realm, was never used by the state for its aggrandizement, and instead attracted royalty to the sites as devotees. As the Rajarajeswaram was built the previously delicate relationship between the king and temple was overturned, leading to a reorganization of politics and economics as this paper will show.

Of the movement’s social effects, the most important was that bhakti connected Hindus of Tamil Nadu – promoting pilgrimage, networks, and a kind of “regional consciousness” that had never before existed. More than simply a religion, the bhakti movement was a way of life that, by the time of Rajaraja’s ascent, had become deeply rooted in Tamil Nadu. As George Spencer says of Rajaraja: it is natural that a “ruler should seek to tap such useful channels for royal purposes, and temple patronage became a significant means of achieving that end”.

Introduction to the Architectural Forms at the Rajarajeswaram

The Rajarajeswaram, a royal temple to Lord Shiva, was built from 1003 – 1010 A.D. in the capital city of Tanjore, at the highest point of the Chola empire under Rajaraja I. Inheriting a weak kingdom, Rajaraja embarked on great conquests ranging from the eighth to twentieth year of his reign to expand the Chola empire to its vastest reaches, as far as Sri Lanka. Starting in his twentieth

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8 Vasudevan 19.
9 Spencer 49.
year, he shifted from military activities to investing his war booty in cultural building projects, the greatest of which was the Rajarajeswaram\textsuperscript{10}. In brief description, as seen in Figures 1 and 2, the temple is in a doubly enclosed complex whose courtyards consist of galleries housing small shrines to various deities. It is entered through a set of large gateways, or \textit{gopuras}, along the eastern axis. A long covered hall and a Nandi (bull) follow on the same axis, at the end of which rises a main shrine that is capped by a monumental sanctuary tower. The interior of the shrine contains a \textit{garba griha}, a kind of sanctuary “womb”, which houses a monolithic \textit{linga} representing Lord Shiva.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{rajara.png}
\caption{Rajarajeswaram complex plan and section (labels added).}
\end{figure}

While many aspects of the temple were retained from the previous rock-cut and freestanding temples, this temple contains several innovations, often consisting of appropriating previous forms for aesthetic purposes. Specifically, these innovations fostered variations on existing rituals, tying into an elaborate sociopolitical and economic system and making the temple double-coded politically and religiously. The subsequent sections will analyze the roles of iconography, sculpture, and structural elements of the temple in its double-coding – making it both a monument to Rajaraja’s personal devotion and religious ritual as well as an extension of the royal court. It will journey through the temple from the enclosure and gateways to the pillared hall, into the garba-griha, and finally the elevation of the sanctuary tower.

**Temple Enclosure and Gateways**

The enclosure and gateways of the temple are monumental and militaristic, the clearest symbol of the temple as an extension of the royal court. The main shrine was walled by a rectangular stone enclosure with four gates, one toward each cardinal direction, which in turn was
surrounded by another wall and a kind of moat\textsuperscript{11}. Aligned eastward are the two main \textit{gopuras} or gateways, which are notable as structures “without antecedents”\textsuperscript{12} in temple architecture up to that point. They are excellent examples of religious architectural forms that arose for a new, royal purpose – as a majestic passageway into the complex. As seen in Figure 3, they frame the temple and create an entry sequence which can be likened to a palatial gate. There is a calculated increase in the \textit{gopuras’} heights, as shown in Figure 4, from three to five tiers as they progress away from the main shrine, which is supposed to suggest a continued ascension to an infinite height. Since the \textit{gopuras} represent royal power, there is a metaphorical implication of Rajaraja’s infinite political control. Further, there is a mathematical correlation of the \textit{gopuras’} widths to the height of the sanctuary tower – a proportional relationship that connects the ground level directly to the highest point (the sanctuary tower) evoking a symbolic cosmic connection.

Within their immense depths, the \textit{gopuras} become programmatic rather than simply ornamental thresholds. As seen in Figure 5, they contain mysterious semi-circumambulatory corridors, and moving through these spaces, a devotee would mimic the circumambulation around the \textit{garba-griha}\textsuperscript{13}. This repeated motif of circumambulation is similar to the repetitive use of \textit{gopuras}, both of which carry the idea of worship and ritual far from simply the shrine itself. Symbolically, the shrine extends infinitely, and if the temple is read politically as an extension of the royal court, then the court also extends ad infinitum. Visitors to the temple, while eternally worshipping God, are at the same time eternally serving Rajaraja.

\textsuperscript{13} Harle 19-21.
Even within their monumental gesture, the gopuras skillfully appeal to the existing bhakti cult, bearing numerous panels of lavish bas-reliefs telling stories of the Puranas, a major Hindu religious text. Importantly, all of these engravings contain a theme of worship and veneration. The first image, for example, – the lowermost panel of the inner gopura – shows a devotee with his hands folded. Later images show even Yama, the god of death, offering thanks to the linga, and an
entire panel is devoted to engravings of gods and male figures in salutation. In this way Rajaraja skillfully utilized a pre-existing ideology to invoke submission within the comforts of a familiar representation.

Architectural hierarchy is another way that the temple entrance recalls the palace. All four gates lead into an enclosed a courtyard of two levels, the higher of which is a set of galleries containing subshrines in the form of aediculae that are shown in Figure 6. The subshrines too are organized hierarchically – those at the corners and centers of walls are two-story while all the rest are a single story. Of the three secondary approaches, only the southern gate leads directly into the main courtyard, on an axial approach to the temple. The other two gates lead directly to the elevated galleries, with staircases to the bottom floor. This innovative differentiation of entrances speaks to the multi-faceted use of the temple – perhaps the south entrance was for dancers or musicians, whereas the others led to the subshrines for more religious or everyday purposes. The act of adding secondary entrances in the Rajarajeswaram goes beyond simple accessibility purposes. In creating the temple to be an extension of the court, Rajaraja used these differential entrances to incorporate social, political, and economic underpinnings to the religious uses of the temple. These will be discussed in detail in the following sections of the paper.

Pillared Hall and Main Sanctum

The second main set of innovative and symbolic features of the temple is in the main shrine, which includes the pillared hall and the garbagriha. In its simplest form, a shrine is a structure housing the idol of a deity, accessible to the priest by a door. Prior to the Rajarajeswaram, shrines had developed modest vestibules, where priests and devotees would gather during and after the prayer ceremony and to give and receive offerings. The main shrine at Rajarajeswaram obviously

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15 Prichard 107.
16 Prichard 35
has gone through a great deal of evolution, and its final form bears great symbolism and gives significant insight into how the temple was viewed as an extension of the royal court.

Most noticeably, the modest vestibules found in previous temples become an elaborate pillared hall at Rajarajeswaram, the interior of which is seen in Figure 7. The experimental quality of this novel addition is evidenced through its visible various stages of construction, rather than being composed as a coherent whole. Upon entering the courtyard, the hall functions to mask the base of the sanctuary tower entirely, and only upon passing along the ritual pathway and walking through the hall are the volumes slowly unveiled\textsuperscript{17}. Resembling the axial approach to a royal palace, this perfectly framed hall was an obvious instrument of religious theatricality, allowing one to progress from the well-lit exterior into increasing darkness toward the sanctum. An interesting aspect to this symbolic interpretation of light is a modern, quantitative 3D lightscape analysis that was conducted on the temple in its current state. The study suggests that, along with the progressive “holy darkness”, the first floor and wall surfaces in the pillared hall have higher illumination values (in units of Lux) than other surfaces, that capture a “strong focused light” at exactly the moment of sunrise\textsuperscript{18}. Though the study is based on the current condition of the temple (which may be considerably different than Rajaraja’s day) it is certainly suggestive that even a novel and experimental structure was specifically motivated and strategically constructed for religious symbolism.

\textbf{Figure 7} Pillared hall leading to the sanctuary tower

\textsuperscript{17} Prichard 37

Along with this religious theatricality, the hall also fosters a literal theatricality that followed a radical change in ritual. It was a space for dancers to perform in front of various shrines, as suggested by the iconography of cymbals and drums on the wall, and was yet another mark of a courtly practice fusing with religion\(^{19}\).

The inscriptions on the walls in this part of the temple speak to yet another layer of this novel spatialization of ritual: the organization of devotees and workers that Rajaraja created as an unprecedented, religiously motivated employment system. The pillared hall accounted for the circulation of the 800 workers and priests at the temple on its busiest days,\(^{20}\) and the work done by these numerous groups of people, as well as their salaries and their living accommodations, are related in painstaking detail on the walls. At the outset, even setting aside their content, the sheer fact that the inscriptions recorded these duties so painstakingly, as they would the activities of a royal court, illustrates a complete shift in religious ideology. No longer did religion function independently of the royal court – it was now controlled by it, and realized architecturally.

The inscriptions evidence that, just as Rajaraja appealed to the existing religion, he was adept at utilizing pre-existing socioeconomic conditions to create a large-scale unified system. He manipulated preexisting social structures such as village assemblies and craft guilds for the temple’s needs, and hundreds of employees were responsible for all aspects of the temple’s functioning – including shepherds to provide cattle and ghee, watchmen, dancers, musicians, lamplighters, carpenters, actors, tailors, and teachers of the Ramayana and Mahabharatata\(^{21}\). Inscriptions even provide exact numbers of each kind of worker – for example, 77 laborers for the performance stage and 11 potters – and descriptions of jobs such as gathering water from the streams\(^{22}\). The pillared

\(^{19}\) L’Hernault 20.
\(^{20}\) Prichard 58
\(^{21}\) Spencer 53.
\(^{22}\) N. Vanamamilai, “State and Religion in the Chola Empire: Taxation for Thanjavur Temple’s Music and Dance” Social Scientist, 3 (October 1974) 26-42: 29
hall was thus born out of necessary circulation and congregation areas for these workers, and formed an interesting dialectic between creation of employment and new ritual practices like dance and music. As it is speculated to have housed festivals and gatherings, the hall may have become a space for the public display of the Rajaraja’s devotion and patronage. Inscriptions relate the annual enactment of the “Rajarajeswara-nataka”, a play that “celebrated the king’s patronage to the temple” and was performed by troupes supported by the royal treasury. It is feasible that such plays would have been performed in the large pillared hall, and this space was integral to promoting the image of “king-as-devotee”.

As it approaches the main tower, the hall is transformed into a kind of a “transept” contiguous with the courtyard by the novel use of vestibules, which are, for the first time in a Chola temple, directly attached to the sanctuary tower, as seen in Figure 8. Whereas in earlier temples the vestibules served a ritual purpose, they were borrowed at the Rajarajeswaram simply for their aesthetic function in accentuating the exterior volumes of the tower.

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Figure 8 Stairs leading to one of the vestibules that lead into the garba-griha, directly attached to the sanctuary tower

23 Spencer 50.
24 Prichard 38
Also, for the first time, the stairs leading to these vestibules provided alternative and original approaches to the sanctum, and as in the case of the gopuras, it can be speculated that these approaches became specialized for different groups of devotees. The main approach through the pillared hall was the axis into the sanctum, supposedly used by dancers and musicians, whereas one of the lateral approaches was for priests. An inscription above the third vestibule that reads “Sacred door of Vikrama Chola” suggests a royal entrance\(^{25}\). These distinctions can be further be seen in iconography that in each stairwell – the bas reliefs in the Northern stairway depict warlike stories of Shiva whereas the Southern stairway reliefs depict Shiva with Parvati at Kailasa in a more marital, peaceful state\(^{26}\). The iconography from the inner gopura is repeated in both stairways, and this relation of exterior to interior reinforces the idea of a continual reentrance into both sacred space and the royal realm of Rajaraja. Thus at Rajarajeswaram, we can see the first Hindu architecture that is double-coded religiously and politically, consisting of numerous features whose functions have been changed from ritualistic uses to those of monumental theatricality.

**Garba-Griha**

Another area in which previously functional features are borrowed for aesthetic purposes is the sanctum within the sanctuary tower shown in Figure 9.

\(^{25}\) Prichard 58.  
\(^{26}\) L’Hernault 14.
The sanctum is a square plan, laid out in a primarily gridded system. It is two-storeyed, a feature found only in five temples prior to this one – all of which notably were built on previous Buddhist sites. Each of these five sites supposedly contains one piece of a giant linga which Shiva split into five pieces after the destruction of the Indian state of Tripura. While the exact symbolism is murky, a double reading is again present: the multiple storeys proclaim the singularity of Saivism over Buddhism, a devotional statement, while also creating an association with violent destruction. This mythic reading of the multi-storeyed sanctum has even been interpreted as a “dismantling of a Buddhist monument” 27.

Its symbolic nature is further strengthened by the fact that, although the second floor was complete (with a sanctum, circumambulatory corridor, and vestibules) there was no way that the structure could support a linga of several tons, and, more importantly, there is no means of access to this floor (see Fig. 10). Unlike in the multi-storeyed sanctums in temples built before and after the Rajarajeswaram, where the second story was a “service floor” from where the ritual bathing (abhisheka) of the linga might have been performed, the purpose of the floor here was solely aesthetic and symbolic 28. Formally, it served to accentuate the verticality of the sanctum, and its meaning was also undoubtedly intertwined with the representation of power in the form of the overtaking of Buddhism.

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27 Prichard 41  
28 Prichard 51

Figure 10 Upper story of sanctuary tower. It is non accessible and non-functional but is complete with all its parts.
The circumambulatory corridor, which forms a square path around the circular linga at its center, is a clear mandala archetype that is the crux of Hindu temple architecture\(^{29}\). At Rajarajeswaram, however, this cosmological metaphor is further intensified by the novel use of “token doors” in the center of each storey – large orifices that are essentially windows because they have no access or other functionality. They let in an otherworldly light, which, when coupled with the high corbelled ceilings, unusually narrow corridors, and ritual circular movement, represent the fusion of the devotee with the universe\(^{30}\). The walls, however are painted with murals of the Chola empire, such as that seen in Figure 11, and images of Rajaraja and his wife, thus juxtaposing the ritualistic physical actions with political and royal visuals\(^{31}\). Metaphorically, since the temple recalls the royal court, the ritual can be interpreted as the absorption of the subject into the kingdom, as the religious womb is infused in the political womb of the empire.


\(^{30}\) Prichard 53.

\(^{31}\) L’Hernault 11.
Along with religion and politics, the main shrine was an important economic space in two ways. Firstly, it was where many of the employees’ tasks were centered. A particularly interesting example are those tasks designated to the military – the setting up of icons, making endowments in the form of ornaments and vessels, and maintaining lamps. Erring armymen, in fact, were punished with “compulsory endowments for lamps”. This is not only an interesting juxtaposition of the stronghold of the royal court (the army) with the heart of the temple (the garba-griha), but is a notable choice of task. Though the tasks were easily performable by numerous other groups, involving the army in temple matters functioned primarily to ensure its “commitment to the upkeep and protection of its undertakings”. Secondly, the sanctum was a showcase for one of the principal methods of the temple’s monetary sustenance – royal gifts of ornaments and gold for the deities. Gifts of ornament allowed Rajaraja to adorn Shiva in a kingly fashion, publicly exhibiting his devotion, and again devotees would encounter the king juxtaposed with God. However, this show of royal wealth was not unidirectional. As George Spencer mentions, “In order to understand the importance to Rajaraja of patronage to the Tanjore temple, we must recognize that such patronage, far from representing the self-glorification of a despotic ruler, was in fact a method adopted by an ambitious ruler to enhance his very uncertain power”. Indeed, while Rajaraja’s moves may have been strategically calculated, his patronage as seen in the garba-griha was genuine and does not equate to deification or self-aggrandizement. All the gifts, for example, were entered in the name of Candesekara, the first servant to the Lord, as a symbolic reminder that all the empire’s work was dedicated to the service of Shiva. Instead the garba-griha, just as the other parts of the temple, must be read as an architectural manifestation of a complex web of politics.

32 Venkataramam 232.  
33 Vasudevan 96.  
34 Vasudevan 96.  
35 Spencer 45.  
economics, and religion in which Rajaraja both exerted power and displayed wealth while appealing to a familiar religion to connect with the diverse people of his empire.

**Elevation of Sanctuary Tower and Sculptural Program**

Finally, the temple's façade is a novelty that exhibits a political and religious duality. The shrine and tower, shown in Figure 12, are of unprecedented height and also unmatched in later Chola temples – rising to a total height of 59.98 meters\(^{37}\). The main shrine, excluding the tower, is 25 meters wide by 13 meters high, fifteen times the size of a normal temple of the period\(^{38}\).

\[\text{Figure 12 Elevation of the Sanctuary Tower}\]

The architecture of the façade is an interesting combination of traditional practice and innovation for theatrical effect. The tower retains the traditional five projections (tiers) of the façade, perhaps to create a familiar sight for its devotees, but it harshly distorts the proportions to make each projection


\(^{38}\) Venkataramam 77.
appear wider and taller\(^{39}\). Nine of eleven bays in each level are of equal width, but the corner bays are wider for an optical effect. Furthermore, the projected bays and aediculae are supported by thick pilasters, whereas the recessed ones contain simple intercolumniation, creating a play of light and shadow that enhances the volumes of the tower\(^{40}\). The aediculae of each subsequent level decrease in height, are of different heights in the garbagriha vestibules than in the tower, and the tower itself has a deep diagonal profile. All of these features, which give the illusion of great height, notably vanished in subsequent Chola temples, suggesting that they were not utilitarian but reflected a desire to enhance and display power through monumentality\(^{41}\).

Non-native stone was imported for construction, another novelty that displays Rajaraja’s command over his various conquered lands\(^{42}\). While the traditional mandala symbolism of transitioning from the square base to the crowning round stupi is present, the entire form was built amidst a royal city rather than being subtractively created from an isolated rock. The shift in construction alters the symbolism – the monumental Rajarajeswaram becomes a Kailasa or Mt. Meru that has been erected in the city, rather than resting in a natural form of the cave or mountain. It is clearly a visual reminder of Rajaraja’s power, abilities and skill. But the many unresolved and imperfect features of the temple can lend support to a less self-aggrandizing reading that the temple is a gesture to prove an emergent prowess to the empire, and to sanctify the royal city. It appeals to the masses in the same breath that it speaks of hierarchy and political control.

The iconographic elements, which have been briefly discussed in various sections already, take one main form that warrants consideration – the Tripurantaka image of Shiva. This four armed form of Shiva is known for destroying three asuras (demons) with a single arrow and is significant as the warrior image of Shiva, par excellence. It is found in the mandapas and the corridor wall of

\(^{39}\) Prichard 91.
\(^{40}\) Prichard 74.
\(^{41}\) Prichard 89-90.
\(^{42}\) Venkataramam 77.
the Rajarajeswaram a total of thirty times, associated with various stories. However, the
Tripurantaka is omitted from the elaborate inscriptions on the temple, leaving the motif to
interpretation. Based upon its warlike qualities, several scholars suggest that the form was used for
self-aggrandizement and deification – the story of the Tripurantaka is thought to refer to Rajaraja’s
military conquests of three kingdoms before he built the temple, and thus might be a boastful
display of power. George Spencer further points out that the form, like many aspects of the Hindu
tradition, “reflects an attempt to assimilate the divine and royal roles…That is, gods were made to
appear king-like, while the king was made to appear god-like.” However, a more sensitive
analysis of the sculptures is that Rajaraja was a devout Saivite who may have worshipped this form
of Shiva as a personal god. For example, even the temple built by his son some years later does not
bear this image, suggesting how personal the image might have been. While association with the
form may have been because the Tripurantaka story symbolized Rajaraja’s conquests, it does not
necessarily imply self-aggrandizement. Instead, usage of the form can be read as an attempt to
justify and enhance a very uncertain power. This interpretation is furthered by Rajaraja’s name for
himself Shiva Pada Shekara (he whose crown bears the feet of Shiva), suggesting that he did not
necessarily equate himself with god, but rather hoped for sanctity and a divine touch through the
association.

Managerial and Financial Systems of the Rajarajeswaram

As discussed before, Rajaraja was skilled in using preexisting social conditions to create an
employment system that unified the empire and enhanced his control. By supplementing this vast
systematization of labor and assets through a hierarchy of religious and secular overseers, and
instilling devadanas, or land grants, Rajaraja greatly expanded the sphere of influence of the temple

43 Gary J. Schwindler, “Speculations on the Theme of Śiva as Tripurāntaka as It Appears during the Reign of Rājarāja I
44 Spencer 50.
45 Schwindler 167-8.
and used it to control, unify, and improve the kingdom, making the Rajarajeswaram the “political and economic pivot of the empire”46.

As discussed in previously, the Rajarajeswaram had a variety of specialized worker groups to attend to every task that was essential to the temple’s function. To oversee the workings of the various departments, there was a priestly as well as a secular administration of the temple. The secular administration consisted of government employees, the most important member being the sikarayam – the general manager who oversaw the day-to-day management of the temple. Directly under him was the Head Overseer, followed by more peripheral managers who included the Master of Rent Roll, Engraver of Inscriptions, the treasurers, and accountants47. The priestly administration consisted of priests of varying scholarship and power, who conducted the religious rites. Significantly, however, some priestly roles overlapped with secular roles, such as the Saivacarya, who was both the spiritual head of the temple as well as one who controlled a large number of temple endowments and executed numerous royal orders. This interwoven managerial network again blurs the line between religion and other royal spheres, reflecting the theme illustrated within the architectural forms48.

The motivations behind this elaborate division of labor and its management were twofold. Religiously, the jobs were familiar, traditional, and were considered holy and righteous, making the temple a noble employer that appeased the masses. Politically, as employees were brought from all over the empire – it has been noted that workers came from over 144 different villages as far as Ceylon – the employment and its detailed records kept subjects under check49. Thus the condition of the temple is a reflection of the empire itself, and through this systematized compartmentalization of

46 Vasudevan 96.
47 Vasudevan 48-51.
48 Vasudevan 55.
49 Spencer 52.
labor, the temple became a virtual “watchtower” for Rajaraja by which he could track deficiencies even in distant parts of the empire by simply tracking deficiencies in temple upkeep.

Renumeration of the hundreds of workers was done through paddies of rice in units called *kalams*, totaling 54,125 *kalams* per unit of pay. To maintain salaries the main source of income was a system of land grants, or *devadana*, whereby the taxes or produce from the land would be used for payment of workers and temple maintenance. *Devadana* literally means “a gift to god”, and traditionally, produce from a share of land should be shared by the temple, the cultivator, and the state. To fund these massive expenses, however, Rajaraja again manipulated the existing system for a greater economic benefit and “introduced changes in the shares of the produce…in favor of the king and temple”.

Just as temple workers came from around the empire, the land grants, too, were spread out over the numerous areas that the Cholas had conquered, and allowed Rajaraja to “cleverly extend and establish political control over the conquered kingdoms”. Two kinds of *devadana* were put in place – the first transferred all fiscal rights to the temple but the cultivator retained possession, and the second conferred ownership of the land to the temple. In both cases, the tenant was responsible for proper cultivation of the land, and provided products including crops such as betel vine and plantains, vegetable oil, milk and ghee from cattle, and even livestock. Cash from taxed land also went towards the temple and was collected by the merchant class – another strategic use of an existing social class. Finally, wastelands were given over to the state for cultivation by various members of society, which also yielded profit. Thus, just as the temple was

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50 Valamamalai 31.
51 Karashima 177.
52 Valamamalai 32.
53 Vasudevan 89.
55 Venkatachari 91.
56 Venkatachari 95.
socially an employer, economically it became a landlord and connection between the capital and its hinterlands.

The strong undercurrent of religious propaganda which was the backbone of the temple institution is reflected best in the devdana system, and its effectiveness was also ensured by the existing Saivist devotion. In many cases of devdana, previous landowners lost their rights and were converted to being overseen by the king’s officers, or even sent from villages to become temple servants. There are records of organized riots against overseers and complaints about harsh conditions, but these were infrequent and again quelled by appealing to the strong bhakti of the villagers. Those who complained were told that they would be rewarded with a better caste in their next life, as they were doing Shiva’s work in this life. Rebels were branded as “traitors to Shiva” and were punished appropriately.57

The net effect of this elaborate system of socio-economic control over all aspects of the temple was a multi-faceted unification of the empire. Firstly, the large expanse controlled by the devadanas and providing the temple workers created a “centripetal movement”, converging the entire empire on Rajarajeswaram58. Secondly, the temple served as a cash reserve and bank, through which vital economic resources passed, and its redistribution of funds caused a “binding together of the court and countryside into a polito-economic symbiosis”. As the major economic mediator, the temple created service relationships between the villagers and the priestly and military classes through the exchange of produce and services. Cattle, for example, were brought into the countryside as booty from conquests, and in turn, the villagers would provide ghee and milk for the temple59. This leads to a third point, which Spencer mentions: that the Rajarajeswaram became the focus of a network of social communications as links in the relatively unstructured systems of

57 Vanamamalai 47.
58 Vasudevan 96.
59 Vasudevan 81.
political control and influence. As he states, “The authority which Chola kings exercised over their territories did not so much involve the routinization of bureaucratic function, as has conventionally been thought, as it did the manipulation of pre-existing, non-political institutions and the use of various methods of propaganda and persuasion in order to secure desired human and economic resources for political purposes”\(^60\).

**Conclusion**

By combining architectural forms and structure with art, iconography, sculpture, and inscription, Rajaraja I was able to create a temple to Shiva that transcended the realm of Hinduism as it was known until his rule. It was a singular monumental act of personal \textit{bhakti} that unified the empire from its northern reaches to the southern villages of Sri Lanka through systems of employment and economic exchanges, and ultimately making the subjects’ relationship to Rajaraja analogous to Rajaraja’s relationship to the Lord. Architecturally, an elaborate means of double-coding in all aspects of the temple’s form religiously addressed the \textit{bhakti} movement and its previous temple forms while at the same time capitalizing on this very devotion for economic and political aggrandizement of the empire. The temple marked the transformation of the Hindu temple institution in southern India, with innovative architectural forms that fostered novel functions – both ritualistic and economic – that allowed the temple to function as a multifaceted extension of the royal court. Through his edifice, Rajaraja created new social and religious hierarchies and a revolutionary relationship between godhead and ruler, as well as influenced the socioeconomic usage of lands far beyond the temple’s physical domain. Ultimately, each architectural aspect of the temple can be read as resting on a delicate line between self-glorification and a sincere effort for political unification. As Geeta Vasudevan puts it: “It was not just a masterpiece of South Indian temple architecture, but...a model for the future...the jewel that adorned the capital city of the

\(^{60}\) Spencer 45.
greatest Monarch of India. It was truly a novel concept to use...the Brahmanical Temple to help consolidate Cola hegemony over vast conquered territories.”61

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61 Vasudevan 45.
Bibliography


