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DOI: 10.1177/001946460304000301

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What is This?
Old Tamil Cāṅkam literature and the so-called Cāṅkam period

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The reconstruction of the early history of Tamilnadu has been based mainly on the so-called Cāṅkam poetry. This poetry is generally taken to provide descriptions of Tamilnadu by contemporary poets during the period before the rise of the Pallavas and the introduction of Sanskrit culture in the South. However, the argument is basically circular, that is to say, Cāṅkam poetry is dated before the Pallavas because it does not mention the Pallavas and describes a purely indigenous culture which is hardly touched by Sanskrit culture. In the present article it will be argued that Cāṅkam poetry does not describe a contemporary society or the poets’ own culture, but a society from the past, or life in small, primitive villages which are far removed from the poets’ own cosmopolitan milieu. This means that Cāṅkam poetry is to be dated after the period it describes. On closer consideration, we appear to be dealing with certain literary genres borrowed from the North Indian Kāvya tradition, more in particular with compositions which are typically not written in Sanskrit but in Prākrit or Apabhramśa. In Cāṅkam literature, the regional Tamil language has been assigned the role of a Prākrit. This use of Tamil we otherwise meet in the inscriptions of the Pāṇṭiyas of the eighth or ninth century and only in the inscriptions of that dynasty. This suggests that Cāṅkam poetry was composed by the same poets who were responsible for the Velvikudi and Dalavaypuram inscriptions of the Pāṇṭiyas. As such, it is no longer possible to use this poetry for the reconstruction of the early history of Tamilnadu. On the other hand, Cāṅkam poetry does supply interesting material for the study of the cultural politics of a newly arisen regional dynasty in eighth-century South India.

Introduction

In the history of Tamilnadu, the period from approximately 200 BC to 500 AD is generally labelled the ‘Caṅkam Period’. The term caṅkam refers to an academy

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank my colleague Jos Gommans for his comments and suggestions.

The Indian Economic and Social History Review, 40, 3 (2003)
SAGE New Delhi/Thousand Oaks/London
(Sanskrit saṅgha) of poets, established in the Pāṇṭiya capital Maturai, whose poems constitute our main source for the reconstruction of the history of Tamilnadu before the fifth century. The poems depict a South Indian society that was only sparsely influenced by North Indian Sanskrit culture. They deal mainly with the Pāṇṭiya, Cōla and Cēra dynasties, while the Pallavas, who introduced Sanskrit into Tamilnadu, are not mentioned. In addition to that, loanwords from Sanskrit are extremely rare in the poems. It is, therefore, generally assumed that Cankam poetry is pre-Pallava and as such gives a faithful impression of life and culture in that period, which was based on the poets’ direct and personal observations.

Studies of the early history of Tamilnadu freely draw information from Cankam literature. Until quite recently this use of Caṅkam poetry by historians has not been questioned. However, my recent research has been aimed at demonstrating that Caṅkam poetry does not belong to the society or the period which it describes. Instead, it is argued that it was probably an invention by the Pāṇṭiyas of the eighth or ninth century, who were also responsible for the Velvikudi and Dalavayapuram inscriptions. In these inscriptions, the same world is depicted as in poems, and they betray the same attitude towards Tamil as a literary language as is found in Caṅkam poetry. The consequences of this conclusion for historical studies should be obvious. However, since my work, which in many respects is a purely literary study, is not likely to attract the attention of historians, I think it might be useful to bring some of the main conclusions to their attention, and also summarise the major points in debate.

The first point which will be discussed here concerns the nature of Caṅkam poetry. It is generally believed that the persons featuring in the poems are also the poets of the poems. However, as I will try to show, the villagers, bards and kings are all ‘fictional’ characters in imaginary scenes. In fact, the main problem of earlier studies was their failure to properly grasp the fictional nature of Caṅkam poetry. One of the conclusions will be that Caṅkam poetry was almost certainly not composed in the period it describes but after it; the poems thus evoke a society from the past. I will also argue that Caṅkam is not a poetry composed on the spot by wandering bards, which before having come to be written down had for a
number of centuries been transmitted orally. Instead, an attempt is made to show that Caṅkam poetry presents a complex written literary tradition and that the poems were probably composed only at the moment of their compilation into anthologies. It may be interesting to note already here that there is some evidence to suggest that the Kalittokai, one of the eight Caṅkam anthologies, cannot have been compiled before the eleventh century.

The next task is to try to date Caṅkam poetry somewhat more exactly than ‘after the period it describes’. In this connection, attention will be drawn to the political constellation referred to in the poems, namely a period in which political dominance over Tamilnadu was shared by the Pāṇṭiyas, Cōḷa and Cēras, the mūvēntar, or ‘the three kings’. This same political situation plays an important role in the inscriptions of the South Indian dynasties from the Pāṇṭiyas of the eighth and ninth centuries onwards. Thus, the Pāṇṭiyas and, after them, the Cōḷas and Cēras claim to have revived this particular political set-up. The poets of Caṅkam appear to evoke the very same past as did the composers of the praśastis of, in particular, the Pāṇṭiya inscriptions.

These same Pāṇṭiya inscriptions are interesting in yet another respect. With their dual praśastis, one in Sanskrit providing an epic or mythological genealogy, and the other in Tamil, providing local history, they show a similar use of Tamil as seen in Caṅkam poetry. In order to make this clear, I will briefly deal with the derivative nature of some of the texts concerned. On closer consideration the majority of them appear to be Tamil adaptations of original Kāvya genres. In all these cases we are, however, not concerned with texts in Sanskrit, the language of the learned textual tradition and epic mythology, but texts in Prākrit or Apabhramśa. In the Kāvya tradition, the latter dialects represent the spoken or regional languages of unlettered people. Apparently, in Caṅkam, Tamil as a literary language was assigned the role of a Prākrit or Apabhramśa. This use of Tamil is similar to that seen in the Pāṇṭiya inscriptions, and of those of the Pāṇṭiyas only.

On the basis of these findings, it is more than tempting to conclude that Caṅkam poetry is an ‘invention’ of the Pāṇṭiyas of the eighth or ninth century. As a result, we should be careful in using Caṅkam poetry as a source of information on the early history of Tamilnadu. At the same time, however, we have acquired an interesting source on the Pāṇṭiyas of the eighth and ninth centuries, the ambitions they entertained and the politics they pursued in, for instance, the matter of culture.

The present article will be mainly restricted to Caṅkam poetry itself. While the proposed new dating of this poetry has far-reaching consequences for the periodisation of early Tamil literature in general, this aspect will be dealt with only very briefly here for the Cilappatikāram and Bhakti poetry. Furthermore, it has not been possible to deal with each and every detail here or to anticipate all the questions that are provoked by the new and late dating of Caṅkam poetry. In order to pursue questions, for instance concerning the relationship between the poems and the ancillary poetical text of Tolkāppiyam or the supposed internal chronology of the Caṅkam corpus, the interested reader may consult other work by the present author.
Caṅkam poetry consists of eight anthologies of short poems and a work on grammar and poetics. The various texts are enumerated in Nakkiraṇâr’s commentary on Iraiyaṇâr’s Akapporul,3 where the legendary account of the three successive caṅkams is also found. Modern scholars usually add a ninth anthology, namely Pattuppâtu, but as we will see, this addition is unjustified and in fact seems to rest on a flawed understanding of the nature of the Caṅkam collection. The 2,354 poems have the form of short monologues in which a certain person is presented as speaking either to someone else, or to him or herself. In the Akam, or love, poems, the speaker is a person from a small village commenting on his or her love affair or marriage. In the Puram, or heroic, poems, the speaker is a bard, a king or any other character typical of a heroic age and society.

Where the Puram poems describe kings, according to such well-known scholars of Tamil literature as K.V. Zvelebil and K. Kailasapathy, Akam would deal with an aristocratic leisure class as well.4 On whatever source this interpretation may have been based, it cannot have been on the poems themselves. For the Akam poems describe poor and unhappy people, people who have to work to make a living, who if they do not work will starve (for example, Nârinai 284),5 and be unable to fulfil their obligations as householders (Akanâru 173). Work interferes with their love lives (Akanâru 43), or else with their duty as parents to keep a watch over their unmarried daughters (Kuruntokai 269). Clear examples of the protagonists’ unhappiness are the many poems which deal with the hardships the husband has to undergo during his travels (Kuruntokai 56 and 283) and the suffering of the wife during her husband’s long absences from home (Kuruntokai 11 and 124).

As indicated, the scenes of Akam are set in small villages and deal with farmers, hunters, cowherders, traders, and the like. Even so, the people in this rural society are not all equal. The texts allow us to distinguish between people living in small houses (ciṟukutu) or huts (kurampai), and those living in large ‘palaces’ (nakar). This is the one big manor house in a village which otherwise consists of small huts only (Nârinai 169). The inhabitants of such a nakar are indeed comparatively well off. They seem to form a ‘landed gentry’. Thus, they can afford a wet-nurse (cevili) for their daughter, and they also spoil their daughter with delicious food while the daughter in her turn spoils her parrot with such products as milk. However, when it comes to marrying their daughters, the people from the nakar are no better off than the poor people among whom they are living. A clear example of

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3 The text has been recently translated into English by D.C. Buck and K. Paramasivam, The Study of Stolen Love: A Translation of Kalaviyal eeng Irâiyângâr Akapporul with Commentary by Nakkiraṇâr, Atlanta, 1997.


5 References to the Caṅkam texts are to the editions of the South Indian Saiva Siddhanta Works Publishing Society in Tirunelveli.
their frustration may be seen in Akāñṉāṟu 369. According to the colophon, this poem is spoken by the wet-nurse after her ‘daughter’ had eloped. First the woman describes the desolate state of the house after the girl’s elopement: her parrot refuses to drink the sweet milk it is offered, her friends no longer dance, the pots are no longer decorated with flowers, and the goddess painted on the wall is no longer presented with offerings. The wet-nurse regrets not having realised what was going on in the girl’s mind when she refused to have her hair done on her wedding day. But after her family had decorated their rich house so that it looked new and resembled Urantai, the capital of the Čolās, it became clear that the girl did not wish to consent to the marriage. Instead, she ran away with her lover along rough paths through unknown country. The wet-nurse suffers at the thought that her little girl has united with the stranger with whom she had eloped, and that the girl, after having loosened her anklet (that is, married) in this poor stranger’s house, which has only one pole in the front yard with only one cow tied to it, is for the rest of her life doomed to live like a poor woman in a hut thatched with grass in a small village.

While the scenes of the Akam poems are set in small villages, occasionally we get glimpses of other worlds, namely that of the king and of the city. It should be noted, however, that the king does not belong to the central protagonists of the poems. He is an outsider, and the organiser of the military campaigns which keep the unhappy husband away from his wife: ‘The wrathful king rose to face work … the rain started with heavy showers, and we, who could only think of our wives whose hair was tied together, were tossing and turning in our beds without sleep’ (Ainkuṟunāṟu 448).

The city is found mainly in comparisons, in which it stands for dazzling richness: ‘Even if he were to acquire Urantai, he would not forsake the fluid oozing from between your white teeth’ (Akāñṉāṟu 237). Cities are also mentioned for their festivals (Narrinai 234), which offered to the villagers a temporary escape from their dull lives.

The references in Akam to life in the city and to the king, that is, to a world outside, or rather, above the village, suggest that we are not dealing with poems of the village but with poems about the village. The village seems to function as a setting for all kinds of awkward situations. The villagers are poor, foolish and unhappy. Their love-affairs are a constant source of worries and frustrations to them. As such the poems catered to a leisure class, which did not have to work to earn a living and could afford to make fun of the poor, foolish villagers. The references in the poems to cities and to the king suggest that the poets as well as the audience are to be found in the cosmopolitan culture of the city or the royal court in the capital.

The current assumption that the villagers featuring in the poems are also the poets of the poems seems to be untenable. They are simply too dull to compose poetry. Note in this connection the villager portrayed in Kuruntokai 70, who is trying to describe his lover. He sighs: ‘I am at a loss for comparisons for her! Her words are few and gentle, and when I embrace her she feels as soft as a mattress (sic)!"
In providing such an overall negative picture of life in the village, Akam poetry is not unique in Indian literature. Such a portrayal is also found in, for instance, Ḥāla’s Sattasai, a compilation of 700 gāthās about life in the village. The villagers are constantly unhappy, among other things, because, like their counterparts in Akam, they are unable to combine love and work: ‘The farmer’s wife, who failed to reach her climax as her husband had fallen asleep exhausted from dragging the ploughshare through the thick mud, cursed the rainy-season’ (324).

The Sattasai presents itself as a satellite text of the Kāmasūtra, or as the final piece in a protracted education in the science of erotics: ‘Those who boast of their knowledge of the scientific works on erotics but fail to appreciate this Prākrit poetry, . . . why should they not sing another tune?’ (2). Where the Kāmasūtra teaches primarily the art of categorising by endlessly making lists and establishing procedures, the Sattasai shows that what is more important is discrimination or a clear perception of the actual situation in which one finds oneself. The differences between a knowledge of lists and perceptiveness may be illustrated by some gāthās that deal with the young bride. The husband’s basic problem according to the Kāmasūtra is to make the young, and presumably inexperienced, bride overcome her shyness. In Kāmasūtra III 2, this process has been dissected into a series of successive steps by which the husband gradually reveals his intentions without frightening his young wife. One of the final steps is that of loosening the girdle of the bride’s skirt. However, going by the Sattasai, the real problem for the husband is to decide on the right moment to take this step. The point in gāthā 648 is that he is too rash: ‘While the husband, feigning to be asleep, turns over and drops his trembling hand on the knot in the young bride’s skirt, she doubled the pressure of her thighs to keep the skirt in place’. In gāthā 351, by contrast, he had waited much too long, and thus made a complete fool of himself: ‘He was so embarrassed by my laughter at his attempt to find the knot in my skirt, not realising that it had slipped off already, that I embraced him tightly’.

According to the Kāmasūtra the ideal lover is the nāgaraka. Judging by the nāgaraka’s way of life depicted in Kāmasūtra I, 4, the most important conditions for a happy sex life are wealth, leisure and, as the term nāgaraka suggests, living in a city. Through the figure of the nāgaraka we can understand why the scenes of the Sattasai, which deal exclusively with poor and unhappy lovers, have been set in the village.

This agreement between Tamil Akam poetry and Indo-Aryan poetry cannot be coincidental. It points either to a common source or to direct borrowing of the
one text from the other. In this connection, it is important to refer to the work of George Hart,\(^9\) according to whom the second possibility could almost certainly be ruled out. He argues that Akam and the Sattasaı are virtually contemporaneous, which left too little time for their authors to have borrowed from one another. Hart concluded that both Akam and the Sattasaı go back to a particular poetic tradition belonging to the neolithic cultures of the Deccan. When all is said and done, it appears to be all a matter of the dates assigned to the respective texts. The date of the Sattasaı in the first centuries AD has been based on the traditional attribution of the Sattasaı to the Sātvāhana king Ĥāla. However, this attribution might well be a later literary fiction. All we know for certain is that the Sattasaı is older than Bāna’s Harsacarita (possibly seventh century), which latter text contains a reference to it. At the same time, however, it is not very likely that the Sattasaı is an adaptation of Akam. In that case we would have to conclude that the Kāmasūtra was inspired by the Sattasaı rather than the other way around. This is unlikely, for the relationship between the Kāmasūtra and Sattasaı, as sketched above, does not stand on its own. We are not dealing here with a one-time literary experiment but with a veritable literary tradition, in which the didactics of learned śūtra or śāstra texts were parodied. Another example of this tradition is furnished by the Pañcatantra and Hitopadesa, which, as shown by R. Geib, react on the Arthasāstra in the very same way as the Sattasaı reacts on the Kāmasūtra.\(^{10}\) In fact, the only hurdle in the scenario according to which Akam poetry should be read as an adaptation of the Sattasaı lies in the early dates assigned to Akam. However, as already indicated, this early dating is questionable and Čaṅkam poetry may have to be dated much later than has been done so far.

### The Fictionality of the Scenes in the ‘Pūram’ Poems

Tradition maintains that the poets who composed Akam were also responsible for Pūram. Where in Akam they impersonate certain village types, in Pūram they are speaking themselves. In the poems we hear, for instance, what bard so-and-so had once said to king such-and-such. The bards’ words are supposed to have been transmitted orally during many centuries before having been written down. However, if the poets of Akam did indeed belong to the leisure class, we have a problem with the traditional attribution of the Pūram poems to the bards. For, the bard is a wandering beggar desperately looking for a royal patron who would support him and his starving family. For instance, in Pūranāṅguru 160, he exhausts himself in describing his distress: his belly has sunk in from hunger, and his little son is sucking in vain on his wife’s flat and empty breasts.

The conclusion seems obvious that the bards in the poems are not the poets of the poems but, like the poor villagers in Akam, are mere characters in fictional

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\(^9\) Hart, The Poems of Ancient Tamil.

scenes. Such an explanation would at least also account for the scenes of, for instance, Puranâñâru 74 and 246. In Puranâñâru 246, a woman, who in the colophon has been identified as the wife of King Pûtappântiyan, is abusing those who try to prevent her from mounting her husband’s funeral pyre. The queen did not at that moment compose a poem, nor was she able to do so afterwards or repeat what she had said earlier, assuming that she did carry out her desire to enter ‘the bed of the corpse, built up of black firewood’. The same kind of situation is found in Puranâñâru 74, which is supposed to contain the words that King Cêramâñ Kanâikkâlirumporai had spoken to his jailers before he died. As a final example I may refer to Puranâñâru 255, in which we hear a woman speaking while she is dragging her dead husband’s heavy body into the shade.

Is Cañkam Bardic Poetry?

The conclusion that the bards in the poems are merely fictional characters clashes with the current view according to which the Cañkam poems are oral compositions of illiterate bards. Between the composition of the poems and their compilation into anthologies, there is believed to have been a period of oral transmission, which has been calculated to have lasted at least six centuries. However, in this connection it should be noted that the interpretation of the Cañkam poems as oral and spontaneous on-the-spot compositions of wandering bards does not agree with the syntactic complexity of the poems. In this respect the poems are far removed from the simple ‘adding’ style of oral, epic, poetry. Thus, characteristic of Cañkam poetry are long sentences. For instance, Akanâñâru 9, a poem of altogether 26 lines, consists of one single sentence, and the first 70 lines of the Tirumurukârûppatai together form one long sentence. Another complex feature is the so-called embedding style, in which a passage is embedded in a second passage which is itself embedded into yet another passage, etc. The poems appear simply too complex to have been composed just on the spot.

The interpretation of Cañkam poetry as oral poetry was given a scientific basis by K. Kailasapathy, Tamil Heroic Poetry. Kailasapathy drew attention to the picture which the poets in Purâm poetry gave of themselves as bards wandering from court to court in search of a patron, on the one hand, and the occurrence of features typical of oral poetry, such as stereotyped formulas and themes, on the other.


In her review of my book, Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi (Asian Folklore Studies LX/2, p. 374) inadvertently confirmed this conclusion by objecting to it on the ground that ‘the bards walking for days to see a generous patron had ample time to think about what they would recite before him [the king] in the most pleasing way’. Apart from anything else, this scenario presented by Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi does not account for such on-the-spot compositions as referred to above, in which a queen abuses the persons standing around her and the one in which a woman is presented speaking while she is dragging her dead husband’s body into the shade.
In his study of the style of Caṅkam poetry, George Hart made much of the contrast between the Tamil and Sanskrit styles. He has contrasted the embedding style of Tamil poetry, in which each embedded sentence qualified its own head noun, to the paratactic style of Sanskrit Kāvya, in which a string of different adjectival phrases, including bahuvrīhi compounds, could qualify one and the same head noun. At the same time, however, Hart has preferred to ignore the common aim behind the long sentences in both the Tamil and Sanskrit poems, which evidently was to paint a scene in one stroke. When all is said and done, in both traditions we seem to be dealing with the result of an experiment typical of a written literature. Another question is how we might explain the fact that these experiments in the Tamil and Sanskrit traditions both take the same direction. In this connection it is to be noted that the evidence on the Indo-Aryan side is relatively early. Long sentences of the type discussed above are found in the inscriptions of the Sāvatvāhanas and Mahākāštrāpas. In this way we arrive at a period in which the Tamil literary tradition was still considered to be in a completely oral stage. Before the Pallavas the Tamil landscape was, at least according to its own literary evidence, peopled by wandering bards only. Unless we accept a scenario which denies any form of mutual influence of Sanskrit upon Tamil literature, or vice versa, we have here again an indication that the current early dating of Caṅkam poetry is problematic.

If Caṅkam poetry is not oral poetry but belongs to a written tradition, what are we to make of the current interpretation, according to which the Caṅkam anthologies contain merely a selection from a boundless reservoir of floating, orally transmitted poems? For one thing, it should be clear that the poems, due to their complex syntax, are not easily memorised. Apart from that, the fate of the poor bards figuring in the poem will hardly have served as an incentive to try to memorise the poems. In addition to that, however, some interesting relevant evidence may be found in the arrangement of the poems in the anthologies. Take the Karuntokai. This anthology consists of 400 poems of four to eight lines each, which as far as the content is concerned seem to have been put together more or less at random. However, what we find instead by way of arrangement is that each poem echoes certain words from the preceding ones. The repetition does not appear to be restricted to one or two ‘significant’ words from the immediately preceding poem, but involves all kinds of words, including grammatical elements, sometimes from as far back as 10 poems. Each poem appears to be tied to those preceding it

by a set of verbal associations of its own. As an example I would like to present the cases of Kuruntokai 51 and 52:

| 48 | kâtalâr pâni |
| 49 | mâ cêrppa muṇṭakkattu |
| 50 | turâi ûr |
| 51 | turâi ûr mâ cêrppaṇ muṇṭaka kâtalâr pâni |
| 47 | allai |
| 48 | nacai |
| 49 | yâŋ pal |
| 50 | ilaṅku iṛai |
| 51 | yâŋ |
| 52 | yâŋ ilaṅku iṛai pal nacaintâŋai allaṅô |

The same phenomenon is seen in the two other texts investigated in this connection, Narrinai and Puranâñjâru. The question that arises is what this type of concatenation, which is also known for instance from the Sattasai, tells us about the process of compilation of these anthologies. As I see it, the type of concatenation seen in the Kuṟuntokai introduces a serious complication into the current scenario of the origin of the anthologies. While in the case of 51 referred to above, a poem containing the word turâi (50) may still have been relatively easy to find in one’s memory, the task must have become increasingly more difficult if the poem were in addition to contain the words ûr (50), mâ, cêrppaṇ (49), and muṇṭaka(m) (49), and kâtalâr and pâni (48). Apart from the difficulty in finding a poem meeting these requirements all at the same time, we should consider the size of the corpus the compiler was supposed to have stocked in his memory. Note in this connection that the word muṇṭakam occurs only 15 times in the entire Caṅkam corpus.

It hence seems to me that the idea that the compiler selected the poems from a vast reservoir of existing poems will have to be abandoned. Instead, I would like to suggest that the poems were composed for the first time at the moment of their inclusion in the anthologies, if only because it might have been easier, starting from words found in the preceding poems, to compose a new poem than to search one’s memory for an existing one.

I have concluded above that the poets in the ‘historical’ Puṟam poems do not describe themselves. Instead, they seem to evoke scenes from the lives of poor wandering bards, who, as may be gathered from Akam, are artists of a social setting completely different from their own. Hart, who on the basis of the style of the poems had already concluded that they could not be products of a truly oral tradition, argued that the poets of the poems took their conventions and subject matter...

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16 The 500 poems of the Ainkurunāṟu are divided into five groups of 100 poems. Within each cento the poems are divided into groups of 10 poems which share the same line or half-line. This latter feature may well be a reflex of the game, played in literary circles, to create verses on the basis of a given line (samaśyāpāraṇa). Incidentally, it may be asked if the echoes found in, for example, Kuruntokai do not hark back to this game as well. The poems of the remaining anthologies are too long to allow for an analysis as has been carried out, for instance, for the Kuruntokai.
from oral bards' and 'copied the bards' life-style, at least to the extent of going from one court to another until they found a king who would support them in return for their poems'. 17 To me, however, it seems highly unlikely that learned poets would adopt a bardic life-style, if only because going by the Puram poems the latter did not prove to be a very successful way of life. Such considerations apart, the real question is whether the bards and the poets were contemporaries. In this connection it should be noted that even now in India, one may find wandering bards side by side with learned authors writing pseudo-bardic compositions. However, in such cases each poet has his own audience. In Cankam the bards address the three great kings, who between them rule the entire Tamil-speaking world. So, if the poets and bards were indeed contemporaries, we would face a situation in which two different types of poets were competing for the same kings' favours in exchange for virtually the same kind of poetry. It is, of course, possible that the poets of the poems were just writing a more sophisticated version of the bards' poems, ridiculing the bards' unsuccessful attempts to make a living. If so, however, the poems would imply contempt for the kings, who, as described in the poems, did receive the bards at their courts and spent lavishly on them. When all is said and done, the most obvious conclusion seems to be that the scenes and the persons described in the poems at the time already belonged to the past. This means that Puram is not a poetry of a contemporary heroic society, but one about a heroic society of the past. The poems are dramatic monologues in which the poets present the main protagonists of that period, that is, kings, their wives, the heroes' mothers and, last but not least, bards, in order to illustrate the heroic code of a past time.

The Historical Scene in Cankam

If the above interpretation of the scenes of Puram is correct, this means that Cankam poetry is to be dated not in but after the period it describes. The Cankam period is generally taken to end with the Pallavas. However, it is clear that Cankam poetry did not originate with that dynasty, which was not interested in local history or in Tamil as a literary language. In fact, the earliest evidence of an interest in local history and the promotion of Tamil as a literary language is provided by the Pantiyas of the end of the eighth or the beginning of the ninth century.

In this connection, it is useful to go briefly into the historical scene depicted in Cankam poetry. The scene of the action in Puram is the area dominated by the 'three kingdoms' (mūvar, mûru, mûvēntar), that is, the Pântiyas of Kûtal (or Kōli), the Cōlas of Urantai and the Cēras of Karuvūr (alias Vañci). Each of these kingdoms was continuously at war with the other two, or else with the minor kingdoms that occupied the surrounding hills and mountains. The ambition was to unite the three kingdoms under one rule. This appears, for instance, in Puranândūru 51.5 which describes the Pântiya King Mâran Vaḻuti as one who 'cannot bear to share the rule of the cool Tamil land (with the Cōla and Cēra kings)', and

Puranâṇûru 357.2-4: 'The years go by also for kings who rule without sharing the world which (before them) had been ruled jointly by the three'.

As the first example shows, the land of the three kingdoms is also defined in linguistic terms, namely as the land where Tamil is spoken. Both definitions, political and linguistic, come together in, for instance, Puranâṇûru 35.1-5: 'Among the three kings, whose armies advance with roaring muracu-drums, and who own the entire Tamil speaking world . . . which is bound by the dark waters of the three oceans, you alone deserve to be called “king”'; or Puranâṇûru 58.12-13: 'O king of rich Kûtal (Madurai) lying in the Tamil speaking world which is shared by the three'. In this way the land overlaps with the sphere of action of the wandering bards, the fictive authors of the Puram poems. The northern boundary is defined by Vênkaṭam Mountain, and bards returning from that area are famished: 'My large group has returned intent to stay here because in the northern Vênkaṭam area it was famished' (Puranâṇûru 391.7-8). Apparently they had failed to make a living with their Tamil poems there.

While the area as a whole includes the territory of the Pallavas, in the poems the latter dynasty has been rarely mentioned and plays only a marginal role when compared to the three great kings. In this respect the Perumpâñârûppaat of the Pattuppâṭṭu forms an exception. The hero of this long poem is King Tiraiyaṅ of Kâncî (Kacci), the capital of the Pallavas. But it should be remembered that the Pattuppâṭṭu has not been included in the traditional list of Cankam works, a point to which I will return below.

As indicated above, the Pallavas' absence from the scene has played a crucial role in the early dating of Cankam poetry: starting from the assumption that the poetry depicted contemporary events and persons, it is taken to be pre-Pallava. However, if Caṅkam is indeed a historical poetry, the absence of the Pallavas from the scene can also mean that the authors simply aimed to depict a period in which the Pallavas did not yet play a role. Whatever the case may be here, as already indicated, Caṅkam poetry was not a Pallava affair. For one thing, the 'Caṅkam period' was not their past. The Pallavas themselves have long remained focused on the north. They modelled their reign on that of the Sâtavâhanas from the north-western parts of the Deccan, not on that of any of the local dynasties from Tamilnadu featuring in Caṅkam poetry. Furthermore, the official language of the Pallava court was Sanskrit (or Prâkrit), not Tamil.

The picture changes completely when we turn to the Pânṭiyas of the end of the eighth century. This dynasty, like the Côlas and Céras after them, did show a keen interest in the past. As becomes clear from their dynastic names, all three of them presented themselves as the successors of the very same three dynasties described in Caṅkam poetry. It should be added, however, that the implied dynastic continuity is purely a matter of assumption, as becomes clear for, for instance, the Pânṭiyas from the Velvikudi Grant. This inscription is concerned with the renewal

by King Netuççaïyan of a land grant made by one of his ancestors. The ancestor in question, Palyëka Mutukùtumi Peruvàlti, had granted the village Velvikudi (Vēl'viküti) to a certain Naêrkarâm. Subsequently, the realm was occupied by the so-called Kalappâlar (Kalabhuras). It was recaptured, however, by Kaţûnîkôn, who thus became the founder of the second Pántiya dynasty, Netuççaïyan tracing back his ancestry through five predecessors to this Naêrkarâm. Whoever the Kalabhuras were, the point is that the second Pántiya line was not a direct continuation of the earlier Pántiyas, and for all we know, Kaţûnîkôn represents an entirely new line of Pántiyas. By assuming this dynastic name, the Pántiyas were, so to speak, forging history. However, it does express their ambition to restore and revive the old order, which had been disrupted by the Kalabhuras.

For the Pántiyas of the Velvikudi inscription, Tamilnadu was a distinct area with a history of its own. In this and their other inscriptions they refer in various ways to the old political constellation, which they claim to have revived. Thus, the Pántiya King Tërmárân, alias Râjasîmîha (circa 740–70), is said to have renovated Kûtal, Vaîci and Kōli, that is, the capitals of the earlier Pántiya, Cērâ and Cōla dynasties (Velvikudi, lines 86–88). Before him, his father Caṭaiyan had carved the emblems of these three dynasties—a pair of fish, a tiger and a bow—on Mount Meru (lines 67–70). The same Caṭaiyan is said to have ‘deleted the words “common rule” from the country (bordering) on the roaring sea’ (line 67), and Avaṇicûlâmaṇi Mâravarman would have ‘abolished common ownership of the earth (have become sole ruler)’ (lines 46–47). These passages show a striking similarity of expression to the ones from the Puranâ1Jû quoted above.

Apart from this interest in the early history of Tamilnadu, the Pántiyas evinced a great interest in the development of Tamil as a literary language. Thus, in the Larger Sinnamanur Copper Plate Grant, one of the king’s ancestors is said to ‘have corrected and investigated the brilliant Tamil language along with Sanskrit, thus becoming the foremost among the learned’ (lines 94–95). He also ‘commissioned the translation of the Mahàbhârata into Tamil’ and ‘established the Mâthurâpuric Çankam’ (lines 102–3). Here we are dealing with the same çankam of literary legend, from which Çankam literature has derived its name. In the Dalavaypuram inscription, it is stated that the king’s ancestors ‘studied Tamil with the help of Akattiyâna (Agastyâa)’ (lines 88–89), and ‘having founded Madurai in the south, set up there a good çankam [for the study] of difficult Tamil and in this way caused Tamil to flourish’ (lines 97–98).

These activities were part of a standard list, which also included feats of a mythological nature. Nevertheless, we may safely assume that the concern for the standardisation of Tamil would not have been mentioned if at the time it had no longer been important. In fact, one may well argue the other way round: setting

the standardisation of Tamil in the past mainly serves to sanction present-day ambitions and add distinction to the current practices and institutions connected with it.

The notion of Tamilnadu as a distinct area ruled by the three kings lives on in the Cōḷa title mummuticcōḷaq, ‘Cōḷa, wearer of the three crowns’. It was likewise cherished by the Āy dynasty of Kerala. Thus, the Āy king Karunāṭakkan (Karunandakkan), who ruled on the west coast in the middle of the ninth century, endowed a college for Vedic students, who were to be admitted after an entrance test in subjects like the trairājyavyavahāra, ‘Law and customs of trairāja’,

which term seems to refer to the history, manners and customs of Tamilnadu as the land of the ‘three kingdoms’, if not to Caṅkam poetry itself as the repository of this history.

From their inscriptions it becomes evident that the Pāṇṭiyas wished to present themselves as the inheritors of a great Tamil culture which had flourished some time in the past. It is precisely such historical claims as evinced by the Pāṇṭiyas which provide the raison d'être of Caṅkam poetry. The historical Purām poems evoke the very period which the Pāṇṭiyas zealously tried to revive. It was a period in which Tamilnadu was ruled by Tamil dynasties which patronised Tamil poetry. This ‘literary’ history may thus be seen as an invention which serves to sanction the Pāṇṭiyas’ preoccupation with the development of a literary Tamil. The revival of Pāṇṭiya rule in the end of the eighth and the beginning of the ninth centuries would thus constitute the absolute lower limit of Caṅkam poetry, that is to say, earlier evidence of the conditions implied in Caṅkam poetry is lacking, and it seems unlikely that the poetry existed before their rule.

Though these Pāṇṭiyas of the late eighth or early ninth century provide a possible limit for the dating of Caṅkam poetry, they were not the only indigenous dynasty to exploit the early history of Tamilnadu. As we have seen, the same is done by the Cōḷas and Cēras. For all we know, Caṅkam poetry was not started by the Pāṇṭiyas but only by the later Cōḷas or Cēras. The next task, therefore, is to try to further narrow down the date of Caṅkam poetry. In this connection I would like to draw attention to the function of Tamil in Caṅkam poetry, which will appear to agree with that in the Pāṇṭiya inscriptions. This finding will lead me to suggest that Caṅkam poetry was indeed a creation of the Pāṇṭiyas.

The Tamil Factor

As we have seen, among the achievements of the Pāṇṭiyas mentioned in their inscriptions is the institution of an academy for the study and development of Tamil. In fact, the outcome of this linguistic policy of the Pāṇṭiyas is visible in the inscriptions themselves. Thus, the Velvikudi inscription has two prāsastis, one in Sanskrit and one in Tamil. The Sanskrit prāsasti traces the Pāṇṭiya dynasty back

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Sastri, *History of South India*, p. 323.

22 Earlier evidence is found in Caṅkam poetry itself, but I am looking for external evidence.
to its mythic ancestor Pândya, who at the beginning of the present Kalpa was reborn as Budha, son of the Moon. Budha's son, Purúravas, who introduced the dynasty's emblem of a pair of fish, is said to have shared his throne, and taxes, with Indra. Next, the praśasti mentions Jâtiia, alias Parântaka, and three of his immediate predecessors. This is followed by a praśasti in Tamil. In contrast to the Sanskrit praśasti, which provides the Pânṭiyas with a purely mythological ancestry, the Tamil praśasti is a piece of concrete and detailed local history. It enumerates altogether seven ancestors of the present king Netuṇcaṭāiyaiyañ and adds many details concerning battles and conquests.23

By its two praśastis the Velvikudi inscription—and other examples are the Larger Sinnamanur and the Dalavaypuram inscriptions—deviates from the contemporary royal Pallava inscriptions, which have only one praśasti, in Sanskrit. With the Pallavas, the use of Tamil is typically restricted to the 'profane' transactional parts of the inscriptions. Now the novelty of the Tamil praśasti cannot be sufficiently emphasised. It also appears to have been a once-only experiment, as the Côḷas reverted to the Pallava model again with its single praśasti in Sanskrit. The Pânṭiya experiment with the two praśastis may be interpreted as an attempt to raise Tamil as a regional language to a status comparable to that of Sanskrit. At the same time, it should be noticed that each language was assigned a sphere of its own, Sanskrit was given North Indian mythology and Tamil local history. As I will try to show, in Cankam poetry Tamil is used in precisely the same function as in the Pânṭiya inscriptions. This will become clear from an investigation into the counterparts of the various Cankam texts on the side of North-Indian Kdvya literature, on the one hand, and a discussion of the Pattuppâṭṭu, on the other, which compilation modern scholarship often includes in the Cankam corpus but which tradition excludes.

Counterparts to ‘Akam’ Texts from North India

Hart was the first to draw attention to the close agreement between Tamil Akam poetry and the erotic poems of the Sattasai from North India. He tried to explain this agreement in genetic terms. In the end, however, he came up with a rather convoluted scenario, according to which both traditions were derived from the poetry of the neolithic cattle keepers of the Deccan. As indicated, Hart was forced into this scenario as both traditions were almost contemporary according to his dating, which precluded the possibility that the one was derived directly from the other. With the new and late date of Cankam poetry suggested in the above sections, all this changes. If there is a genetic relationship between Akam and the Sattasai, it is not unlikely that the poets of Akam borrowed from the earlier Sattasai.

Both the four generations of the Sanskrit praśasti and the seven of the Tamil praśasti occur in connection with the śrâddha ritual; see J. Jolly, ed., Mânavadharmaśâstra, London, 1887, 3.146 and 5.60. Incidentally, 'seven generations' seems to be a way of saying 'as far back as one can remember'.
The poems of the Kalittokai and Paripātal clearly belong to another genre than that of the Kuruntokai, for example. As to the genres of the Kalittokai and Paripātal, I must of necessity be brief here. Elsewhere, I have argued in detail that the Kalittokai, with its songs embedded in narrative stanzas, provides examples of the so-called lāṣyas as described in the Nāṭyaśāstra. The setting of the Paripātal poems is invariably a festival. The poems present the people at such festivals dramatically, that is, repeating what they said to one another at such occasions. In fact, in the text itself, namely in 11.123–40, paripātal is used as a term for the songs which people sing in festivals. The Paripātal poems appear to be examples of the dramatic festival scenes, which in the North Indian Kavya tradition are included among the uparāpākas, or minor dramatic scenes. The earliest example of a dramatic festival scene, or rather, of the songs sung at a festival, is found in Harṣa’s Ratnāvali of the seventh century. It thus appears that in both the Kalittokai and Paripātal we are dealing with examples of genres which at the time (eighth or ninth century) already had a tradition in North Indian literature. While it cannot be ruled out that in the village poems of the Kuruntokai the Tamil poets re-invented a village poetry independently of the Sattasai, it is difficult to maintain that they did so thrice. It is much more likely that in all the cases discussed so far we have to do with adaptations in Tamil of original North Indian Kavya genres.

If this is indeed so, a pattern emerges. As I have argued elsewhere, the earliest example of a festival song in Harṣa’s Ratnāvali is in what at first sight looks like Māhāraṣṭrī Prākrit. On closer consideration, however, it is in a systematic way further disfigured by a feature which later became typical of Apabhraṃśa. All later festival songs (for example, carcarī) are indeed in Apabhraṃśa. As songs which were sung in the open on the streets by the common folk, they could not be in Sanskrit or, for that matter, in Māhāraṣṭrī Prākrit, which latter dialect in the Sanskrit drama as well as in the lāṣyas and the Sattasai was already reserved for women’s private love songs. It thus appears that Cankam included mainly adaptations in Tamil of typical Prākrit and Apabhraṃśa genres.

So far, two Cankam texts have been left out of consideration, namely Purāṇāṇāru and Pattippattu. How do these two texts fit in? In order to make this clear I will have to discuss the absence of Pattippattu from that same corpus. The Pattippattu is a collection of relatively long poems. It is also the only Old Tamil text for which we have external evidence, namely a quotation in the Dalavaypuram Copper Plate Grant. The very first sentence of the Tamil part of the inscription is identical with the very first line of the Maturaikkāṇci. This shows that we have to do with a fairly early text known to the Pāṇṭiyas. As such the Pattippattu must have been contemporary with at least some of the texts of the Cankam corpus. The fact that it has not been included in this corpus suggests that the corpus itself is not a random compilation of texts which happened to be available at the time, but that it was compiled in accordance with specific criteria. Apparently the Pattippattu did not answer to them. In this connection, the two following criteria can be

24 Tieken, Kāvya in South India, pp. 176–82.
isolated. In the first place, we have seen that a majority of the texts were adaptations of Prakrit or Apabhramśa texts. Another feature to be considered is that all the texts discussed so far belong to the genre of Muktaka poetry. The basic building material is the stanza. Thus, the poems of the Kalittokai and Paripāṭal have been pieced together with individual stanzas. The poems of the other Akam anthologies are stanzas by themselves. Even the long poems of the Akanāṇūru are basically ‘stanzas’.

The fact that the Pattuppāṭṭu has not been included in the Caṅkam list is sometimes believed to be accidental. The 10 poems of the Pattuppāṭṭu are considered to have been composed by the same poets who composed Caṅkam poetry. An exception is made for the Tirumurukāṭṭuppāṭṭai, which describes the worship of the god Murukaṇ and is taken to be an early Bhakti poem. However, the Tirumurukāṭṭuppāṭṭai is not the only poem which deviates from Caṅkam poetry. Other instances are the Neṭunavāṭai and Mullaippāṭṭu. These poems depict the queen pining away in her large, seven-storied palace during the king’s absence. Similar scenes in Akam do not feature the king and queen but a poor man’s wife, left behind in her ramshackled hut. As we have seen, if the king is mentioned in Akam it is as an outsider, more in particular as the organiser of the military campaign which caused the husband’s absence from home. In the Neṭunavāṭai and Mullaippāṭṭu Akam scenes have been transplanted from the village to the capital, and from the village to the king and queen.

Yet another point to be noted concerns the role of the Pallavas in the Pattuppāṭṭu. Caṅkam poetry evokes a period in which Tamilnadu was dominated by the Pāṇṭiyas, Cōḷas and Cēras, who feature as the main sponsors of the bards’ poetic art. The Pallavas, occupying the north-eastern parts of Tamilnadu, play only a marginal role in Caṅkam poetry. Most of the poems of the Pattuppāṭṭu are about kings or dynasties already known from Caṅkam poetry proper. Thus, in the Porunarāṟṟuppāṭṭai the bard is directed to the Cōḷa king Karikāl of, for example, Akanāṇūru 55, and in the Malaiappāṭṭaṭṭam he is directed to Nāṇaṇa, a well-known so-called minor chieftain. The Pattippāṭṭai is about a bard who prefers staying home with his wife to going to the Cōḷa king and begging for alms. The Ciṟupāṇāṟṟuppāṭṭai refers to a king Kuṟiṅcik Kōmāṇ, whose name Kuṟiṅcī places him firmly in the landscape described in Caṅkam. In this respect the Perumpāṇāṟṟuppāṭṭai is not in harmony with the others as it deals with the king of Kacci, that is, Kāṇći, the capital of the Pallavas, who did not belong to the ‘old’ world described in the short poems. The Pallava king in the Perumpāṇāṟṟuppāṭṭai is presented as a liberal patron of Tamil poetry.

Beside these three points of deviation, namely religion/mythology, king/palace and the role of the Pallavas, there is a fourth, which concerns all 10 poems equally. I am referring to the exceptional length of the poems, which range between 102 to 782 lines. As such, the poems far exceed anything found in Caṅkam proper. Stylistically, however, the Pattuppāṭṭu poems are highly similar to the Caṅkam poems. Just like the latter they abound in long and complicated sentences. For instance, the 782 lines of the Maturaikkāṇci consist of only a single sentence. As
far as the Pattuppāṭṭu is concerned, this has been interpreted as the logical outcome of the same development seen in the Akanāṇûru with poems of one sentence of 20 lines or more, side by side with the Aiṅkuṟṟunûru with one sentence of four lines. In all cases, the starting point would be the Muktaka stanza, which was stretched out, or blown up.

However, this conclusion may have been drawn in too facile a fashion. While the shorter Tamil poems can indeed be connected with Muktaka poetry, for the source of the Pattuppāṭṭu we may have to look elsewhere. It should be noted that the aim to describe a scene in one sentence is not restricted to Muktaka poetry. It is also found in Kāvya prose (Kādac Mari, inscriptions) and epic Mahākāvya poetry (Raghuvaṃśa), where it may cover entire sections. An example is Kumārasambhava 1.2–17, with all relative clauses describing the Himalaya Mountain mentioned in verse 1. In fact, as far as I can see, the Pattuppāṭṭu does not belong to the genre of Muktaka poetry but instead to that of epic Mahākāvya. In this connection I would like to draw attention to the instances in the Pattuppāṭṭu (for example, Kurinichippāṭṭu 107–27) of so-called nakhāsikā descriptions, a device for organising descriptive passages which is otherwise typical of epic Mahākāvya. A variation is constituted by the well-ordered iconographic descriptions of Murukāṇ's six faces in Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai 87–102 and this god's 12 arms in 107–18. In addition, mention may be made here of Māturakāṇci 238–326, which provides descriptions of the five tinai, or landscapes, marutam (238–70), mullai (272–85), kuniicci (286–301), pālai (302–14), and neytal (315–25), which passage is concluded by the phrase aṁpāl tinai, 'the fivefold tinai', in 326.

Once we have accepted that the Pattuppāṭṭu is an adaptation of epic Mahākāvya poetry, all its other peculiarities fall somehow into place. For instance, the sources of Mahākāvya are the epic stories and epic and Purānic mythology. The interpretation of the Pattuppāṭṭu as a specimen of Mahākāvya may then explain the inclusion of the Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai, a poem about the god Murukāṇ, his worship, mythology and iconography. Further, in Mahākāvya the epic and mythological stories serve as allegories; the local and particular have been dressed in the clothes of universal and transcendental myth. In this respect, however, the Pattuppāṭṭu seems to have remained stuck half-way, in the sense that its scene is still strikingly regional. The Pattuppāṭṭu deals with gods, but only with a typically regional, indigenous South Indian god, namely Murukāṇ. Also, the world described in the Pattuppāṭṭu may be wider than the one described in Cankam, but it did not go further than adding another local dynasty, namely the Pallavas.

Mahākāvya is an original Sanskrit genre. The first specimens of Mahākāvya are in Sanskrit, the Prākrit examples such as the Setubandha and Gaudavaho representing a later, secondary development. The curious regionalisation of the Mahākāvya genre seen in the Pattuppāṭṭu appears to coincide with the use of Tamil and, in fact, may well be the direct consequence of this. That is to say, in accordance with the use of the regional, vernacular language instead of Sanskrit,
the scene of Mahākāvya had been narrowed down to purely local persons and matters.

While in the Pattuppātu the genre seems thus to have been adapted to the language, in the case of Caṅkam poetry the genres were selected in accordance with the language. For most of the Akam texts it has been possible to point to specific Prakrit and Apabhraṃśa genres of Indo-Aryan literature which have served as models for the respective Tamil texts. For the Puranānūra and Patirruppattu, however, this has not been possible. In this way we come back to the question as to how these two texts fit into the Caṅkam corpus. In this connection it should be noted that, as the Pattuppātu shows, the type of local history as told in these two anthologies was a genre relegated to the local language. Or, to put it differently, if the Puranānūra and Patirruppattu had been written in North India by Kāvya poets, they would have been written in Prākrit or Apabhraṃśa.

Tamil in the Pāṇṭiyas Inscriptions

The particular attitude towards Tamil visible in Caṅkam poetry is peculiar to the Pāṇṭiyas. As we have seen, in the inscriptions of the Pāṇṭiyas of the eighth/ninth century, Tamil was used side by side with Sanskrit, the inscriptions having two praśastis. After the praśasti in Sanskrit, a second one is given in Tamil. At the same time, however, each praśasti has a domain of its own. In the case of the Sanskrit praśasti this is Sanskrit mythology; in the Tamil praśasti this is local history. In the Sanskrit praśasti, the genealogy of the dynasty is traced back to ancestors belonging to Sanskrit mythology. By contrast, the Tamil praśasti is full of details of local interest. For instance, it enumerates the battles which the king’s ancestors had fought with their neighbours. The praśasti provides a piece of regional history such as is found in Puṟam.

Leaving aside Caṅkam poetry, these inscriptions provide the first evidence of Tamil as a literary language, that is, as a language for fiction or for expressing things that were unfamiliar or not directly visible. Before that, in the inscriptions Tamil was not used for literature (history), but merely for concrete, technical details concerning the donations made in the grant. Furthermore, in the Pāṇṭiya inscriptions we seem to be dealing with a once-only experiment, and as noted above, the Cōjas, who came to power somewhat later than the Pāṇṭiyas, opted again for the earlier Pallava pattern of one praśasti in Sanskrit.

Taking all these factors together, we may surmise that Caṅkam poetry may have been invented by the very same poets who composed the inscriptions for the early Pāṇṭiyas of the end of the eighth and the beginning of the ninth centuries. In any case, with these Pāṇṭiyas, and only with them, do we find evidence of the conditions for Caṅkam literature. It should be added that this conclusion applies in the first place to the origin of the poetic tradition. It cannot automatically be extended to apply to the texts which we now have. As I will try to show next,
there is indeed some evidence to suggest that the corpus in its present form is the outcome of a later literary activity patronised by other and later dynasties than the Pāṇṭiya. Before that, however, I would like to discuss the evidence which suggests that the Kalittokai was not compiled before the first half of the eleventh century.

The Compilation of the Kalittokai

As indicated above, the Kalittokai contains examples of lāsya, that is, small dramatic scenes consisting of songs embedded in narrative stanzas. In fact, as I have elaborated elsewhere, it represents the same genre as the Sanskrit Gitagovinda. The lāsya is adopted in Bhakti poetry as well, which used the songs without the narrative stanzas. At the same time I have drawn attention to the peculiar position of the poems 101–8 in the Kalittokai. These poems depict a bull-baiting contest in which a cowherd boy had to prove himself worthy of the cowherd’s daughter by subduing a fierce bull. The contest is followed by the so-called kuravai dance in which the boy and girl are praised and which at the same time is a form of praise of Māyō (Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa). The poems are called kuravai poems after this dance. In depicting a festival scene, the poems belong to the same type as the poems of the Paripāṭal. The question which then arises is why these festival poems have not been included in the Paripāṭal but instead in the Kalittokai. As I have shown elsewhere, the answer to this question may be found in Abhinavagupta’s commentary on the Nyāyaśāstra and Bhoja’s Śṛṅgāraprakāśa.

I would like to begin by noting that the Kalittokai scene is found in Harivamśa 63. During autumn nights Kṛṣṇa and the young cowherds fight with bulls (63.15–17). After the contest, the cowherd girls look for Kṛṣṇa and, ‘forming a line’, delight him. Joined two by two they sing songs about Kṛṣṇa’s adventures, imitating his lilā and gait, all the while with their eyes fixed on him (24–26). Incidentally, this early passage, which is common to both the northern and southern recensions of the text, shows that the kuravai scenes do not, as is often implied, describe an exclusively Tamil custom.

In Indo-Aryan literature Kṛṣṇa’s dance with the gopīs has developed into an independent dramatic scene, the hallīsaka. As such it is mentioned in Bhoja’s Śṛṅgāraprakāśa and Abhinavagupta’s commentary (both eleventh century) on Nyāyaśāstra IV 268. The bull-fight, preceding the dance, agrees with yet another

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26 See Tieken, Kāvya in South India, pp. 185–90.

27 P.L. Vaidya, The Harivamśa being the Khila or Supplement to the Mahābhārata, Vols I (Critical Text) and II (Appendices), Poona, 1969–71.
dramatic scene, the *gosthī*, the definition of which is in the *Srṅgāraprakāśa* (p. 468) given immediately before that of the *hallīsaka*:

That something in which they depict the actions of the Enemy of Kātabha (Krṣṇa) while he was staying in the cowherd village, among other things, how he conquered the demon-bull Riṣṭa, is called *gosthī*.

That dance with women in a circle they call the *hallīsaka*. In that dance there is one ‘leader’, in the same way as Murāri was the leader of the cowherds’ wives (in the mythic counterpart). Bhoja distinguishes altogether 12 such minor dramatic dance scenes. These he divides into two groups on the basis of, among other things, the number of dancers or actors involved. The last three (10–12), which include the *rāśaka* and *carcarī*, feature many different dancers and are situated on the streets. By contrast, the first nine scenes, which include the *gosthī* and *hallīsaka* side by side with the *lāsya*, are performed by one actress or dancer only and are not situated in a public but in a private place.

This distinction between the two groups is peculiar to Bhoja. However, the inclusion of the *gosthī* and *hallīsaka* in the same group with the *lāsya* is curious, for, where the *lāsya* involves only one dancer, the *gosthī* and *hallīsaka* involve a whole group of dancers, who act as the cowherd girls of the Krṣṇa myth. In itself the fact that the underlying festival involved a group does not rule out the possibility that when it was turned into a dramatic scene, the *hallīsaka* had been reduced to a scene involving only a single dancer. This single dancer may have performed the role of the woman facing the ‘one leader’ (Krṣṇa). It should be noted, though, that the choice to perform the *hallīsaka* like a *lāsya*, that is, with one actress rather than with many, is ultimately arbitrary.

As far as I can see, in including the *gosthī* and *hallīsaka* in the same category with the *lāsya*, Bhoja may have been led astray by the definitions of the dramatic scenes as they are found in Abhinavagupta’s commentary on Nātyaśāstra IV 268. In that passage the *hallīsaka* is said to involve ‘one leader’ (ekas . . . netā) and the very next type, the *rāśaka*, is said to be performed by ‘many dancers’ (anekanartakī). It is as if a dividing line is drawn here between the *hallīsaka* and the preceding plays, on the one hand, and the *rāśaka* and those that follow, on the other. At the same time, however, it is clear that the reference to the ‘one leader’ has nothing to do with the total number of dancers involved in the dramatic scene. In fact, the full text mentions ‘one leader of (many) cowherds’ wives’ (ekas . . . netas . . . gopastrīṇāṁ).

As indicated, the inclusion of the *gosthī/hallīsaka* among the *lāsya* type of dramatic scenes is completely arbitrary. Therefore, the agreement on this point between the Sanskrit poetical tradition on the one hand, and the Tamil tradition

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on the other, cannot be a matter of coincidence. Instead, it points to the direct influence of the one tradition on the other. Above it has been suggested that Bhoja's inclusion of the hallisaka into the same category as the lāsya might be due to a misunderstanding of the text as transmitted by Abhinavagupta. If this interpretation is correct, the origin of the inclusion of the kuravai poems among the lāsya of the Kalittokai rather than the festival scenes of the Paripāṭal has to be sought in the Sanskrit poetical tradition. This also means that the Kalittokai cannot have been compiled before Bhoja, who was the first scholar to explicitly link the hallisaka (and gosṭhi) to the lāsya. This brings the compilation of the Kalittokai, and probably of the Paripāṭal as well, to the first half of the eleventh century at the earliest. Strictly speaking, this conclusion applies in the first place to the compilation of the texts. However, as pointed out above, there is some evidence to suggest that the poems were composed only at the moment of compilation of the text. If this conclusion, which has been elaborated in the first place for example, the Kuruntokai, may indeed be extended to the Kalittokai and Paripāṭal, this would mean that the poems of these text were not much older than the eleventh century as well.

The Patirruppattu and Cilappatikāram

There is evidence to suggest that the Caṅkam anthologies reflect Pāṇṭiya interests. Thus, the Paripāṭal describes festivals in and around the Pāṇṭiya capital Maturai. The kuravai festival in the Kalittokai is in the final songs dedicated to the Pāṇṭiya king. The Puranāṇāru is historical poetry dealing with the old political constellation in which Tamilnadu was ruled by the three dynasties, which the Pāṇṭiyas aimed to revive. Among these texts, the Patirruppattu seems to form an exception, as this text deals exclusively with the history of the 'Cēras', or rather, with the kings ruling contemporary Kerala and the western parts of the interior of Tamilnadu. It is not clear for what purpose the Pāṇṭiyas would have sponsored the composition of such a text. Most likely the Patirruppattu is a Cēra work, that is, a text composed by and for the Cēras. If so, its inclusion in the list of Caṅkam texts would suggest that the Caṅkam corpus as we now have it has not come down directly from the Pāṇṭiyas but through the Cēras.

In fact, this scenario has a parallel in the history of the transmission of Nakkiranaṉar's commentary on Iraiyanaṉar's Akapporul, which is our very source for the Caṅkam legend and the list of Caṅkam works. Composed by Nakkiranaṉar in Maturai, the commentary was handed down from teacher to pupil, finally arriving in Muciri

30 In my book I dated Abhinavagupta erroneously in the ninth century. As pointed out by Whitney Cox in his review of my book, Abhinavagupta and Bhoja are contemporaries. He also noted that it is unlikely that Bhoja was directly influenced by Abhinavagupta. It should be noted, however, that in the passage in question Abhinavagupta refers explicitly to the works of predecessors. Cox's review has appeared in the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Third Series, Vol. 12(3), 2002, pp. 407–10.
in the Cēra country. Furthermore, the scenario finds corroboration in the Cilappatikāram, which provides documentation of the Cēras adopting Pāṇṭiya culture. Before discussing this aspect of the Cilappatikāram I would like to note that, in order to avoid too many excursions, I do not go into the problem of the various dates assigned to the Cilappatikāram here, which are generally much too early anyhow. What is important to note here is that the Cilappatikāram simply cannot be earlier than Cāṇkam poetry as it assumes a superior and prestigious Pāṇṭiya culture and literature, for which there is no evidence before Cāṇkam poetry or, for that matter, in the Pāṇṭiya inscriptions.

The story of the Cilappatikāram opens in the Cōḷa capital Pūkār, with Kaṇṇaki, the archetypal faithful wife and her husband Kōvalaṅ, who has an affair with the dancing girl Mātavi. After the husband had squandered all his money on Mātavi he repented, and the couple decided to make a new start in Māturai of the Pāṇṭiyas. Kōvalaṅ leaves Kaṇṇaki behind outside Māturai and enters the town alone in order to investigate the possibilities of starting a new business there. Kaṇṇaki had offered her anklet to him to serve as starting capital. However, when Kōvalaṅ tries to sell the anklet he is accused by a goldsmith of having stolen it from the queen. Actually, the goldsmith had stolen the queen’s anklet himself. Kōvalaṅ is summarily executed by the king. Upon hearing this, Kaṇṇaki appears before the king and proves her husband’s innocence. The king and queen die of shame. But for Kaṇṇaki this is not enough. She turns into an avenging goddess. She tears off her left breast which she throws at Māturai, setting the town on fire. Next Kaṇṇaki takes refuge at the foot of a kino tree and after several days ascends to heaven, where she is reunited with her husband. In the final part of the Cilappatikāram we are told how the Cēra king Čeṅkutṭuvan, after he had heard of the great power of the woman under the kino tree, decided to set up a stone dedicated to her in Vanci. The stone is brought by him from the Himalayas. During this expedition, King Čeṅkutṭuvan is, however, informed that the Pāṇṭiya king had already been re-instated to the throne after he had sacrificed 1,000 goldsmiths to Pattini, as Kaṇṇaki is now called.

The Cilappatikāram gives the story as it was told by Ilāṅkōvaṭikal, a younger brother of Čeṅkutṭuvan. In this way the Cilappatikāram is presented as a Cēra text. It is a highly complex text, which interweaves several different themes. The main theme, however, seems to be the institution of the cult of Pattini by the Cēra

32 On the basis of the final last part of Ilāṅkōvaṭikal’s name, atikal, it is assumed that the author of the Cilappatikāram was a Jaina. Note, however, that atikal is a common element in the names of the ‘Cēra’ kings of Venad; see K.K.R. Nair, ‘Venad: Its Early History’, Journal of Kerala Studies, Vol. 14, 1987, pp. 1-34, esp. p. 12. This is not to deny any Jaina influence on Cāṇkam poetry or the Cilappatikāram. It is definitely there, however, side by side with the influence of Buddhists and brahmins.
kings. Pattini clearly belongs to the category of the so-called terrific (ugra) goddesses, who are to be pacified with human sacrifices. As the many stories concerning the goddesses in the Kathasaritsagara show, people who sacrifice themselves to her are endowed with supernatural powers. Kings are made into universal monarchs, or cakravartins. The goddess cult was known all over India. However, in the Cilappatikaram we are dealing with the spread of the cult in Tamilnadu. Before it was established by the Ceras, the cult had proven its efficacy among the Pantiyas, as is shown by the Pantiya king who had regained the throne by pacifying the goddess with a sacrifice of 1,000 goldsmiths. The total destruction of Maturai by the fire of Pattini's wrath is to be taken as the mythical paradigm of such sacrifices. Thus, also on the mythical level, the origin of the cult is traced back specifically to the Pantiyas.

The Cilappatikaram thus appears to describe the Pantiya-isation of the Ceras. At the same time, as a literary text in Tamil, it is also a product of this process. Given this situation it is not unreasonable to assume, as has been done above, that the Ceras appropriated and transmitted the Cankam corpus and added their own contribution to it in the form of the Patiruppattu. One of the questions which arises is whether the Ceras added their Patiruppattu to an already fixed set of texts which they had borrowed from the Pantiyas, or whether the texts of the Cankam corpus had been actually composed and brought together only by the Ceras, who in doing so worked, so to say, in the spirit of the Pantiyas. However, instead of elaborating on these possibilities I would like to turn to Bhakti poetry, which seems to add yet another dimension to the question of the origin of the Cankam corpus beside the one discussed just now, namely the Pantiya-isation of the Ceras.

Bhakti Poetry

The late date of Cankam poetry proposed here disturbs the dating of Bhakti poetry, for, while Bhakti poetry is generally taken to be later than Cankam poetry, its beginning has been set in the sixth or seventh century, if not earlier than that. As such Bhakti poetry would in fact be older than Cankam. However, as I have tried to show elsewhere, while Bhakti poetry claims to be later than Cankam poetry,

34 The CÔlas were involved in the Pattini cult as well. For instance, it was their capital Pûkâr which formed the background to the scenes in which Kannaki proved her status as pativrata. Otherwise Pûkâr appears to be specifically connected with the so-called heterodox sects: with Jainism through the nun Kâvunti, with Buddhism through Mâtavi and Kôvalan's father, and with the Âjîvikas through Kannaki's father. The idea behind the Cilappatikaram, the scene of which passes from heterodox Pûkâr through orthodox Maturai to Vâñci, seems to be that the worship of Kannaki/Pattini is beneficial to the whole of Tamilnadu and to people of all sects.
the basis of the absolute dating of Bhakti poetry is very weak. In an attempt to date Bhakti poetry anew, it should be noted that the saints of the Bhakti poems are not the poets of the poems, but figures in the poems. The poems, or rather songs, of the Śaiva tradition present the words which certain mad, wandering saints possessed by the desire to be united with god are supposed to have uttered. The situation may be compared with that in Pūrāṇa, in which the poems repeat presumably verbatim what a certain bard in the past had said to a certain king. The situation in the Vaiṣṇava tradition in its turn resembles that in Akam, in that the saints are supposed to impersonate a cowherd girl pining after Kṛṣṇa.

If the saints are indeed personae, or examples of an ideal type of devotee, the poetry assumes the existence of a cult around these persons. However, this cult, which is now widespread in Tamilnadu and beyond, cannot have existed long before the tenth century. In any case, the first references in inscriptions to the setting up of images of the saints, in this case Śaiva saints, date only from that century onwards. All this would suggest that Bhakti poetry may not have been much earlier than the ninth or the tenth century.

Another point to be noted here is that Bhakti poetry, as it subsumes Cāṅkām poetry, can indeed not have been much earlier than the ninth or tenth century, if we accept our revised dating of the latter. In any case, in the so-called envoy songs, or signatory stanzas concluding the decades, lip-service is paid to a flourishing literary tradition in Tamil which, at least once, in Āṇṭāl's Tiruppāvai, has been explicitly identified with Cāṅkām: caṅkattamiḻmālai muppattum, 'a garland of thirty songs in Cāṅkām Tamil'. In this way Bhakti poetry presents itself as the heir to an earlier literary tradition. It does indeed feature the same themes and situations as Cāṅkām poetry. In fact, as I have tried to show elsewhere in quite some detail, Bhakti poetry also makes use of the lāsya format treated in the Nāṭyaśāstra, other examples of which are to be found in the Kalittokai of Cāṅkām poetry. Furthermore, as indicated, the situations in the Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava traditions resemble those in Pūrāṇa and Akam respectively. In one aspect, however, Bhakti poetry represents a complete break with the preceding literary tradition, namely in its use of Tamil. Thus, while in Cāṅkām, Tamil is the language of poor villagers and illiterate bards, in Bhakti poetry it has become the language of the gods. As I see it, Tamil could be used as a language fit for the gods, a function otherwise reserved for Sanskrit, only because, like Sanskrit, it was now a standardised, literary language with a 'classical' literature. It had become so only through Cāṅkām poetry.

37 In the envoy songs, the preceding songs are praised as 'good' (cen), 'pure' (tūya) or 'radiant' (on) Tamil verses (tamil [kal]).
38 J. Filliozat, Un texte tamoul de dévotion vishnouite: Le Tiruppāvai d'Āṇṭāl, Publications de l'Institut français d'Indologie 45, Pondicherry, 1972, stanza 30, line 5.
39 Tieken, Kāvya in South India, pp. 222–34. See also Tieken, 'The Genre of Jayadeva's Gītagovinda'.
Above we have been looking for a context which could have been conducive to the composition and compilation of the Caṅkam corpus, and have arrived at the Pāṇḍiyanas of the eighth or ninth century. It may now also be argued that Caṅkam poetry was actually composed and compiled after or contemporaneously with Bhakti poetry. The Caṅkam corpus was meant to provide Bhakti poetry with a preceding literary tradition and to establish Tamil as a ‘classical’ language. By way of conclusion of this point, I wish to state clearly that I do not believe that Caṅkam literature was composed and compiled by the same persons who were responsible for Bhakti poetry. The possibility is mentioned, among other things, to show that with the Pāṇḍiya scenario, the possibilities for dating the Caṅkam corpus are not exhausted. In fact, to take an extreme hypothesis, we could even include the last century when Caṅkam poetry was rediscovered and came to play an important role in the Tamil movement. However, while in the latter case it will not be difficult to show that Dr U.V. Swaminatha Iyer did not compose the poems themselves—he left an autobiography documenting his discovery of the texts—the Bhakti scenario seems more difficult to refute. As such it would require further study.

Caṅkam and the Reconstruction of the Way of Life in Tamilnadu

Whatever is exactly the case here, the main conclusion is that Caṅkam poetry is not demonstrably older than the end of the eighth or the beginning of the ninth century. The poets of Puṟam did not describe contemporary events and persons, but wrote some kind of historical fiction. In Akam the poets described the life as lived in small and primitive villages far away from the cosmopolitan centres in which they themselves lived. All this seriously limits the usefulness of Caṅkam poetry for the reconstruction of the way of life and early history of Tamilnadu. It cannot be sufficiently emphasised: in both Akam and Puṟam we are dealing with fictional worlds fabricated by people who were outsiders.

One of the questions which then arises concerns the literary ‘distortions’ we should reckon with in studying the scenes depicted in the poems. To begin with Akam, the village in this poetry, serves mainly as a stereotyped setting for all kinds of awkward situations arising from poverty, foolishness or lack of sophistication. It is not a real village but the typical village. It is in this light that we should, for instance, judge the important role in the poems played by Murukan compared to the rareness of references to Śiva and Viśṇu. In Caṅkam poetry, the references to the great North Indian Hindu gods Śiva and Viśṇu/Kṛṣṇa are indeed rare and mainly restricted to comparisons. For instance, in Puranāṇūpa 56 and 57, a king is compared to Māyōṇ (Viśṇu) and in 58, bulls are compared to Śiva and Vāliyōn (Balarāma). These gods do not seem to play a significant role in the lives of the people depicted.

The same appears to apply to the phenomenon of temple worship. Thus, in Puranângur 6 we hear of brahmins circumambulating the temple of the three-eyed god. However, such descriptions are part of the accidental scenery, for nowhere are the kings of Puram described in the act of worshipping Śīva or Viṣṇu in a temple. Brahmins are known as well, but hardly play any role in the village scenes. A rare instance is found in Kuruntokai 106, in which the speaker refers to the brahmanic marriage ceremony of circumambulating the fire:

Word has reached us saying that his heart is faultless. We too will send a message, saying that we are so too once we have received him at the side of the (sacred) fire into which ghee is poured and we have been (officially) married.41

As seen in Akanânti ru 369 referred to above, in the village the marriage is normally sanctioned by simply loosening the girl’s anklet in the house of her new in-laws. It should be noted, however, that in Kuruntokai the girl mentions the brahmanic rite for a very specific reason. She wants her lover to know that she is not satisfied with elopement and a clandestine affair. Instead, she insists on a solemn and above all public rite sanctifying the union with her lover, who until then had shown reluctance to commit himself in this way.

In the light of the minor role of the great Hindu gods in the poems, that of Murukan becomes all the more striking. This god of the mountains plays an active role in the lives and the imagination of the villagers. He is part of their cult practices, which, as everything deriving from the village, are presented as ridiculous. Thus, Murukan’s ‘priest’, the vēlan, is a fool. When the girl who is neglected by her lover from the mountains starts showing signs of illness, her mother thinks she has become possessed by Murukâ, which diagnosis is next mindlessly confirmed by the vēlan, who was called in to cure her. In most of the poems dealing with the same topic, the priest is expressly said to have no inkling of the real cause of the girl’s illness. However, in the end he simply cannot fail to miss as his diagnosis invariably is ‘possession by the male (god) from the mountains’. Next, he duly performs the bloody exorcism rite, which is expected to cure the girl but which, of course, cannot. In fact, the cure merely adds to her worries. If the lover does not come and the girl will not get better, her mother might start thinking that the cause of the girl’s illness was not Murukâ but a lover (Kuruntokai 111 and 360). If, on the other hand, she is cured, her lover might think that she no longer loves him, so that he will no longer feel obliged to come to her (Akanânti ru 98 and Nārinai 282).42 In the end, the foolishness of the vēlan reflects on Murukâ


42 It may be noted here that scholars have been particularly reluctant to admit that the vēlan featuring in these situations is ridiculous. Note Hardy, who writes: ‘To the relief of the girl, the lover remains undisclosed as the real cause of the illness in spite of the vēlan, who is therefore once called “ignorant”. He [the vēlan] will say that it is Murukâ who has possessed the girl. But these
himself, who in *Narrinai* 34 is addressed by the unhappy girl in the following way: 'You know well that this illness is not due to your influence. Still, you come as requested by the *vēlan* to the house where the rites take place'. It would seem that in the poems Murukan was selected to serve as a specimen of a typical village god in order to fill in the picture of the village as a place full of simple people. Murukan's prominence in the Caṅkam poems is directly related to the scene of Akam poetry and, therefore, does not allow us to draw any conclusions regarding the religion of the time. References to Śiva and Viṣṇu are rare simply because they do not belong to the village scene. This rareness does not necessarily point to an early date for Caṅkam poetry before the introduction of Sanskrit culture in Tamilnadu.

As already indicated, Akam poetry describes life in the village, in which the worship of Śiva and Viṣṇu has not yet percolated down. Murukan is the local, indigenous god, already there before Śiva and Viṣṇu, who were imported from North India. In this sense Akam describes a pure Tamil society still undiluted by North Indian influences. The same applies to Puṇam, which evokes a society from well before the Sanskritisation of Tamilnadu. In this connection I would like to come back to one of the arguments put forward in the early dating of Caṅkam poetry, namely the rareness of loanwords from Sanskrit. This rareness does indeed make an archaic impression. However, this does not automatically imply that it is absolutely old as well. It may be argued that the villagers in Akam, and the bards and kings in Puṇam, in conformity with the respective scenes have been made to speak a pure Tamil with a minimum of loanwords from Sanskrit. In fact, as I have tried to show elsewhere, this way of reasoning could be applied to many of the other so-called unique and archaic linguistic features of the poems. Studies of the language of Caṅkam poetry appear to abound in circular arguments: a certain feature was considered old because it occurred in Caṅkam poetry. The need to provide independent evidence proving that the feature concerned is old in the absolute sense has generally not been felt.

While Akam poetry is primarily concerned with the people's private matters, Puṇam deals with public life, in particular with heroic ideals and warfare. An important aspect of this theme is the relationship between bard and king. As indicated, modern studies of the early history of Tamilnadu make free use of these poems as sources. However, in doing so we should now take into account that the poems may merely present an eighth or ninth-century poet's pictures of the past. At the same time, however, the Caṅkam corpus transmits a highly detailed history. It should be noted, however, that the details are actually found only in the colophons. By contrast, the 'history' found in the poems is of a very general and abstract nature only. A case in point of this difference between the poems and colophons is furnished by the names of the kings and bards. Thus, in the poems
themselves we find only a few general titles, such as Valuti for the Pāṇṭiya king, Kīṭli for the Cōḷa king and Poṟaiyaṉ for the Čēra king. This situation contrasts sharply with the one found in the colophons, which for one such title may distinguish between several different kings. Thus, Valuti in Puranāṇūṟu 51 and 52 has been identified as the Pāṇṭiya Kūṭakārattut tuṭciya Māraṉ Valuti; the one in 59 as Cittiramāṭattut tuṭciya Naṉmāraṉ; and Valuti in Puranāṇūṟu 3 as Karuṅkāy Olvāt Perumpeyar Valuti. Note that in the former two cases, the colophons add information about certain battles in which the kings had participated, Maran Valuti in the battle of Kōṭakāram and Naṉmāraṉ at the one at Cittiramāṭam. Typically, this type of elaboration is found mainly in the case of the titles of the Pāṇṭiya, Cōḷa and Čēra dynasties, and not in that of the rulers of the minor kingdoms, among whom are Pārī, Āy, Afcī and Kuṁaṇaṉ. As a result these latter names have acquired the appearance of personal names, though they may in fact be titles like Valuti just as well.

The problem with the colophons is that they may well represent a secondary tradition. To begin with, the information of the colophons does not properly fit our interpretation of the poems. Take the fact that in the colophons, the Akam poems are attributed to the same set of bards featuring in the Purāṉ poems. Thus, Kuruntokai 123, 206 and 322 are ascribed to Aiyūr Muṭavaṉār, who according to the colophon of Puranāṇūṟu 51 is in that poem speaking to a Pāṇṭiya king: ‘What Aiyūr Muṭavaṉār said to the Pāṇṭiya King Māraṉ Valuti who had been killed at Kūṭakāram’. However, above I have tried to show that Caṅkam poetry is not bardic poetry, and that it is unlikely that the bards in Purāṉ were the poets of Akam. Furthermore, the situation as presented in the colophons would not agree with the finding that the poems were most likely composed only at the moment of their inclusion into the anthologies. Thus, it is difficult to imagine how hundreds of poets collaborated on the compilation of the Kuruntokai or Puranāṇūṟu, each patiently waiting for his or her turn to contribute a poem to the collections.

An entirely different question concerns the reliability of the historical information supplied in the colophon. This obviously requires a more careful investigation than can be carried out here. However, what I would like to point out here is that we should seriously reckon with the possibility that part of the information is just as fictional as are the scenes of the poems. In any case, quite a number of the names seem to have been invented for the occasion. This may be the case with, for instance, Karuṅkāy Olvāt Perumpeyar Valuti of Puranāṇūṟu 3, referred to above. We seem to be dealing with a name abstracted from line 13 of the poem, which reads ‘black-handed Valuti, who has a shining sword and great fame’. The same has happened with the names of the poets, a number of which have been fashioned after a striking phrase in the poem in question. Examples are Āṇil Muṉrīḷār of Kuruntokai 41, Taṉimakaṉār of Naṟṟinai 153, Irumpitartmentalaiyār of Puranāṇūṟu 3, Kuṅaikkōḷiyār of Puranāṇūṟu 364 and Toṭjittalaiṉuttantinār of

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44 For a list of such names, see N. Sanjeevi, Research Tables on Sangam Literature, Madras, 1973, pp. 29–30.
Puranāṅuru 243. With one exception (Orērulavar of Kuruntokai 131, which is also found with Purananuru 193), all these names are found only once. This suggests that we do not have to do with pen names or literary pseudonyms of well-known poets, but indeed with names invented ad hoc by the compiler of the anthologies.45

An interesting case of this type of invented names is found in Purananuru 11. In this poem the persons are enumerated who, increasingly more indirectly, profited from a certain king’s victory. The first person to profit is said to be the king himself, who, putting his enemies to flight, ‘received’ their backs. The next in line is the female singer (pāṭinī), who received rich ornaments because she sang about the victory. At the end of the line stands the pāṭinī’s husband, whose life was made pleasant by the beautiful flower garlands worn by this wife. In the colophon, however, the poem is given a curious twist, namely by putting it into the mouth of a poetess named Pēymakal Iḷaveyini, that is, a demoness (pēymakal). The author, or authors, of the colophons cannot be denied a sense of humour. For, by ascribing the poem to a demoness they turned it into a complaint: everybody benefited from the king’s victory except the demoness, who feeds on corpses. Instead of putting his enemies to flight, the king should have killed them, leaving the dead bodies on the battlefield as presents for the demoness.

My intention here is not to deny the historicity of the Pāṇṭiya King Māraṇ Valutī, who died at Kūṭakāram, or the historicity of the poet Aiyūr Muṭavaṇṇār. The main point I wish to make instead is that their identification in Purananuru 51 as the king and bard respectively is fictional and might well in fact be a later invention. Whether the colophons were added to the poems at their incorporation in the anthologies or only later, what was important was that the names sounded ancient and carried associations with Tamilnadu’s past.

One of the problems which arises concerns the question of where all the historical information—a little in the poems but much more copious and detailed in the colophons—came from. In this connection, we are actually faced with the same problem as in the case of the lists of kings from the Mauryas onwards in the Sanskrit Puranas, which as far as we have been able to verify, and making allowances for shorter and longer lacunae, are fairly accurate. It is tempting to conclude that, as in the north, in Tamilnadu there have been bards or story-tellers who did take care in passing on this type of historical information.

If we turn from the names of the kings and bards to, for instance, the heroic warrior code, one may ask, however, if the source could not have consisted of Sanskrit texts. In any case, the poets, or certainly the first generations of poets, were in the first place educated in the Sanskrit literary tradition. Besides Kavya texts, this included the Sanskrit epics, which form a storehouse of information on warriors. So long as this possibility has not been properly investigated, we cannot even be certain that the past described in the poems is typical of Tamilnadu.

45 This same type of poets’ names is also found in some of the recensions of Hāla’s Sattasāl; see Tieken, Kāvya in South India, p. 124 and Tieken, Hāla’s Sattasāl: Stemma and Edition (Gāthās 1–50), with Translation and Notes, Leiden, 1983, pp. 76–78.
Some Concluding Remarks

My study of Cankam poetry falls into two parts. In the first I have tried to show that Cankam poetry is not to be dated in but after the period it describes. In the second part, an attempt is made to date Cankam poetry somewhat more exactly than 'after the period it describes'. In doing so, I have suggested that we are dealing with an eighth or ninth-century creation of the Pântiyas of the Velvikkudi inscription. This conclusion was based on the historical scenes of the poems and the function of Tamil in Cankam poetry. That is to say, the first trace of an interest in the past as depicted in Cankam poetry is found in the Pântiya inscriptions from that time, which inscriptions furthermore evince the same attitude towards Tamil as seen in Cankam poetry.

As can be gathered from the Asokan inscriptions, there have been dynasties in the south calling themselves Pântiyas, Côjâs and Cérâs from approximately the third century bc onwards. These predecessors of their latter-day namesakes may well have sponsored bards and all kinds of performers. If, next, one tries to find out why the beginnings of Cankam poetry have been dated only in the first centuries of our era and not in the third century bc, one is bound to discover that it is all a matter of consensus among 'serious' scholars, that is to say, those who have come up with earlier dates are simply not taken seriously. It may well be that many will find that with the new, late dates of Cankam poetry, I am exaggerating in the other direction and will maintain that, whatever I may say, the tradition had its origin with one of these earlier Pântiyas, Côjâs and Cérâs. In this way, however, we are back again to square one, falling back on evidence which cannot be falsified. Thus, practically our only source on this earlier period is Cankam poetry, and the authenticity of the historical scene of this poetry is questionable. Tamil studies so far have exploited the possibilities of this vacuum in the early history of Tamilnadu to the utmost. Therefore, I think we would do well, if only by way of expiation for our past analytical sins, if for once we stick to positive evidence alone and see after some years what the result is. In conjunction with that I would like to plead for a more open mind towards the facts. Thus, up to now practically every anomaly, if it was recognised at all as such, has been explained away to make it agree with an early date of Cankam poetry. In fact, this tendency has become almost a second nature, so that we hardly notice it. Take the following observation by Nandi: 'Towards the close of the Sangam period we also hear of sluices and shutters used in tanks for controlled drainage of fields. All this would anticipate the great expansion of agriculture during the three closing centuries of the first millennium' (my italics). Similarly, while Champakalakshmi draws attention to a reference in Patţinappâlai, one of the 10 poems of the Pattuppâtu, to irrigation works, the absence of archeological evidence is treated by her as only a temporary situation:

46 R.N. Nandi, State Formation, Agrarian Growth and Social Change in Feudal South India c. AD 600–1200, Delhi, 2000, p. 89. In a note, Nandi says that sluices and shutters are first mentioned in the Patţruppâtu, which he dates to the seventh century.
'archeological corroboration is at the moment non-existent' (my italics). However, as I see it, there are now good reasons to consider the possibility that these references to water control actually represent projections of the contemporary ninth-century situation onto the historical scenes. If so, we could be dealing with accidental projections—the poets could no longer imagine a world without irrigation works—or with intentional ones, in which case the poets provided contemporary royal endeavours with a past history.

I have attempted to show here that for the reconstruction of the early history of Tamilnadu, Cankam poetry is to be used with the utmost care, if it can be used at all. But where we lose something, we also gain in other terms. Thus, Cankam poetry has appeared to provide interesting information on an otherwise poorly documented period in the history of Tamilnadu, namely the eighth and ninth centuries. This period saw the rise of regional dynasties which legitimised themselves with reference to an indigenous culture. While a similar development was taking place at approximately the same time elsewhere in South India, the literary evidence from the latter regions, apart from being probably somewhat later, is meagre when we compare it to Cankam poetry. Therefore, Tamil studies may come to occupy a central position in the study of what happened in South India in this period. The differences in pace and depth of the developments in the various regions clearly require a thorough investigation, which, it is hoped, might give the collaboration of historical and literary scholars a new impetus.