

Rajaraja, I Biography

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Biography

Rajaraja I (reigned 985-1014) was possibly the greatest of the Cola kings of southern India. He made the Colas the paramount power in southern India, Sri Lanka, and the southern seas. A political and organizational genius, he was also a grand patron of religion and the arts.

Traditional Cola territories center on the fertile lands around Tanjore in southern India (about 220 miles south of Madras city). Representatives of the family seem to have been agents of the Pallavas during the period of that dynasty's great achievements and subsequently to have broken away. When Rajaraja (meaning "king of kings") took the throne, the Colas were still suffering the consequences of invasions from the Deccan earlier in the century.

Rajaraja first reduced traditional Cera rivals in the southwest (present-day Kerala) and then subdued the Pandya contenders in the extreme south. Thereafter he invaded and took control of the island kingdom of Ceylon, now Sri Lanka. Next, Rajaraja's armies conquered the territories in what is present-day Mysore State. In less than a decade Rajaraja had become master of southern India.

Accompanying Rajaraja's undoubted military genius was a talent for political and economic administration. He elaborated a network of subordinate administrators and perfected a set of procedures which assured a reliable and efficient cohesion in his "empire" while allowing great autonomy to the local units. Most famous of the deeds of Rajaraja is the building of the "Great Temple," the Rajarajesvara, at Tanjore. The mighty tower (*vimana*) that surmounts the central shrine rises 216 feet to dominate the city and the adjacent land. The stone sculpture on the tower and its base is Cola art at its most vigorous. The many inscriptions at the temple provide vital information concerning the dynasty.

Rajaraja's son Rajendra I (reigned 1012-1044, initially with his father) extended the Cola sway. One military expedition reached the Ganges. The Cola navy was strengthened, and profitable campaigns were waged in Southeast Asia. Rajendra built a new capital city, Gangaikondacolapuram ("city of the Cola who brought the Ganges"), and, emulating his father, he crowned it with an exquisite "sister" temple to the Tanjore shrine.

Under Rajendra, the Cola dynasty flourished, as did art and literature. Though he surpassed his father's achievement, Rajendra owed to Rajaraja the conditions and the examples without which his own achievement would have been inconceivable.