

Nagappattinam – A medieval port of South India

S. Rajavelu

Department of Maritime History and Marine Archaeology

Tamil University

Thanjavur, 613010

India

Email: rajavelasi@gmail.com

Abstract

Nagappattinam, a famous sea port of the imperial Cholas, is presently the headquarters of a District in Tamil Nadu, India. During the medieval Period, under the imperial Cholas, this port city played a vital role politically, commercially and culturally. From the time of the Pallavas of Kanchipuram around 8th century CE, the port city was referred to as Nagai. Though we do not get any direct reference from the records of the Pallavas, there is an inscription on a stone slab in the Naganathar temple at Nagappattinam that refers to donation of gold to the temple of Naganathar by a big smith probably a goldsmith of the town Nagai. The sacred saivite literature Teevaram refers to the port city as being fortified by big walls and the ships like vangam anchored in the harbor of Ten Nagai. In the succeeding period this city flourished as a main port of the imperial Cholas where the Chola Navy was stationed. During the time of Rajendra Chola I (1012-1018 CE) the son and successor of Rajaraja Chola I (985-1014 CE) crossed the Bay of Bengal with his Navy from seaport of Nagappattinam and conquered Kedah in the year 1017 CE. During the times of Vijayanagar, Nayaks and Dutch East India Company, the port was busy with foreign trade. This paper traces the emergence of the port city and Maritime contacts to Southeast Asian Countries in the medieval period in the light of available inscriptional and literary evidences in detail.

Key words: Dutch East India Company, Nagappattinam, Teevaram, Rajaraja, Rajendra, Naganathar temple

Introduction

Nagappattinam (10° 79'06" N, 79° 84'28" E) was a major port city of the imperial Cholas of the medieval period. At present the city Nagappattinam is the headquarters of the District of the same name in the State of Tamil Nadu, India. The origin of the port city is quite obscure in the beginning of the early Common Era, since Tamil literature of the Sangam period never mentions this city although it provides more information on the other port cities on the Coromandel Coast. The early name of the city Nagappattinam is referred to in the sacred literature *Teevaaram* of 7th century CE., and an inscription of 8th century CE, was found engraved on a stone slab which is now preserved in the complex of *Naaganaathar* temple at Nagappattinam. Colonel Henry Yule (1873) identified the city with Ptolemy's metropolis *Nigama*. *Nigama* is a common term referring to a mercantile group or community. The term *nigama* is found in the inscriptions of 1st century CE on stone and pottery engravings (Subbarayalu, 2008). In the later period, the settlement of merchants was known as Niyamam which is the corrupt form of *nigama*. The identification of Ptolemy's *nigama* with the place name Nagai needs further collaborative evidence.

Teevaram is the sacred literature of the Tamils sung by the Saiva saints (*Naayanmaars*) of 7th century CE in praise of the lord Siva of various temples in Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Sri Lanka. They personally visited these temples and made vivid descriptions of the places and their significance. Nagappattinam is mentioned in this literature as Naagai or kaTal Naagai (Naagai along the Sea). The city Naagai was situated in a coastal area and it had many huge multi storied buildings (*neTu maaTam, MaaTa neTu viiti*) and long streets (*neTu viiti*) with huge fortification walls (*maamatail*) surrounding it alluded by saiva saints Tirunavukkarasar and Sundaramurthi of 8th century CE, (Devaram, 1961). All these descriptions clearly suggest that the city was a harbor in which the merchant community lived. The traders who lived in this city engaged in maritime trade. Further, it is gleaned from the above literature that the city was busy with anchoring of

many kinds of ships and vessels (*kalam* and *vangam* vangamali kadal nagai). Thus the port of Nagai became one of the major sea ports of Tamil Nadu around 6th-7th centuries CE. The port was located between the two outlets of Kaveri, namely, the Kudavaiyar and the Uppanar to anchor ships safely (*kazi suuz kaTal naagai*).

Origin of the name Naagai

The above sacred literature *teevaram* and the inscription of the 8th century refer to the city as Naagai not as Nagappattinam. Thus Nagai is the early name of the place. When the city became a major sea port of the Cholas around 9th century CE, it became Nagappattinam. (Nagai+Pattinam) The place name Nagai in all probability derived its origin from *Naagu*, a Tamil word meaning Conch, (i.e., *Chank- Xancas pyrum* (*Linnaeus*). It shows that the city Naagai in all probability was once famous for its *chank* fishing centre.

Chank fishing

Chank is considered as an auspicious object in the Hindu pantheon. The manufacture of *chank* bangles is one of the major industries in India from time immemorial. Manimegalai, a Tamil epic of 6th century CE, refers to the Naga nadu which was ruled over by *Valai vanan*. The queen of the Naga nadu was *vaasamayil*. They had a daughter known as *pili valai* (Nattar and Duraisamy, 2007). *Pili valai* married a Chola prince and had a son named Tondaiman Ilantiraiyan. Later Tondaiman Ilantiraiyan became the king of Tondaimandalam, a northern part of Tamil Nadu, with a capital city, Kanchipuram, around 2nd century CE. The name *Piili valai* has two components. The first part *piili* means *chank* and *Valai* refers to a bangle (bangle made of *Chank*). The area in and around Nagai in the early common era was known as Naga nadu. All these suggest that the naga nadu or nagai was famous for *chank* fishing as well as manufacturing of *chank* bangles and it was ruled over by the Naga clan in the early period of the Common Era.

Kaveripumpattinam and Nagappattinam

Before the emergence as a port city on the eastern coast, the city Nagai as narrated above, served as a small port for *chank* fishing. Kaveripumpattinam or Pumpuhar, the

celebrated port city of the early Cholas on the East coast, was famous as a maritime trade centre in the early Common Era. The Sangam literatures, especially the post Sangam work *Pattinappalai* of second century CE, describes the city Kaveripumpattinam in detail. Accordingly, Kaveripumpattinam was famous for sea trade from where, the articles like horses, gems, gold, sandal, pearls, food stuffs from Sri Lanka and other articles from Kalagam (Burma) were imported and exported. According to this work many traders from this city spoke different kind of languages (Tamilannal and Annamalai, 2003). The twin Epics *Silappadigaram* and *Manimekhalai* of 4th-5th centuries CE, give vivid pictures of the port city Kaveripumpattinam and according to the *Manimekhalai* the city was destroyed by the sea (*aninagarantannai alaikadal kolga*) (Nattar and Duraisamy, 2007). The port city Kaveripumpattinam was also famous for Buddhism. Further, the epic *Manimekhalai* and the excavations carried out by the Archaeological Survey of India attested to the fact that this city was a flourishing centre for Buddhism prior to 5th century CE (Soundararajan, 1994). The destruction of the port city Kaveripumpattinam by the sea paved the way for the emergence of Nagappattinam, which is located on the south of Kaveripumpattinam, as an important port city during the time of the Pallavas around the 6th-7th centuries CE.

Naagai as a busy port and an international centre for Buddhist religion

The port city Naagai became a prominent port city around 7th century CE during the rule of the Pallavas. When the Saiva saints Appar and Sambandar visited a temple Naagai Kaaronam they witnessed many big ships anchored in the harbor of Naagai. The ships were big in size: the *vangam*, a type of big ship, is vividly compared with mountains by these two saints. The fortified city port was spacious enough to accommodate many big *vangam* and *kalam* vessels. Gold (*kanakam*), camphor (*kaRpuram*), and elephants were important goods for trade in this port. The ships or *vangam* carried elephants along with shores and the taxes (*sungam*) were levied for the goods which were stored in the port (Teevaram No.7.101.5, 8).

Pallava Period

During the rule of Rajasimha II, the Pallava King of Kanchipuram (CE 691-729) sent an embassy to China. Due to this cordial relationship with China the traders and Buddhist

monks visited South India and influenced the king to construct a china pagoda at Nagappattinam. In the year 720 CE, the 9th month, the king of South India Che-li-na-lo-seng-kia-pas-to-pa (Sri Narashimha Varman i.e, Rajasimha II) constructed a temple to honour the China Empire: he addressed to the emperor a request asking from him an inscription giving a name to this temple; by decree it was decided that the name should be “which caused return to virtue” and the emperor sent Narashimha a placard or tablet with the inscription “Koci hoa se,” so that it might be placed on the front of the temple erected in India by Narashimha for the benefit of China (Minakshi, 1977). From the above remarks, it is known that the King Narashimha Varman *alias* Rajasimha II constructed a Buddhist vihara at Nagappattinam for the benefit of merchants and pilgrims arriving from China and elsewhere in his kingdom. The existence of a Buddhist vihara of the Pallava period, which was popularly known as China-pagoda, at Nagappattinam is referred to by Yule in his ‘Marco Polo’ (Yule and Cordier, 1993). The Chinese pagoda or Jaina pagoda was noticed by Walter Elliot (1878) until its demolition in 1867 by the local Jesuit mission. This edifice was known as the Chinese or Jaina Pagoda at Nagappattinam. A large number of bronze images were discovered before and after the demolition of the above said vihara in 1867 by Jesuit mission of Nagappattinam. These were catalogued by the Madras Museum (Ramachandran, 1965). When Marco Polo visited the place he witnessed the ruined Buddhist vihara at Nagappattinam. The Kalyani inscription from Burma records that the Theeras and Chitraduta travelled on foot to Nagappattana and visited the place Padarikaaraama monastery and worshipped the statue of Buddha (Yule, 1873).

Chola Period

After the decline of the Pallavas around 9th century CE, the imperial Cholas came to power under the founder ruler Vijayalaya. Nagappattinam came under the direct control of the Cholas and they made the port the headquarters of the Chola Navy. It was referred to in the inscriptions of Cholas as Nagappattinam *alias* Cholakulavallippattinam (in the name of a queen of Chola race) (*Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy*, 1956-57: 157). Rajaraja Chola I inscriptions clearly suggest that the city became both commercial and religious capital of that period. At the request of the Srivijaya king Vijayotunga Varman, Rajaraja I allowed him to build a Buddhist vihara in Nagappattinam in the

name of the latter's father Chulaamani Varman (Aiyar, 1934). Rajaraja allowed this and also granted a village, Anaimanagalam, as tax free village (*pallichandam*). The construction of the vihara was started during the time of Rajaraja I and completed during the reign of Rajaraja-I's son Rajendra I. This vihara also had another name, *Rajarajapperumpalli*, at Nagappattinam named after the King Rajaraja I. The larger Leiden plate as well as inscription of late 13th century CE from Naganatha temple at Nagappattinam refers to this vihara. Anaimangalam grant was renewed during the time of Kulottunga I for the Buddhist vihara. Besides, we come across in the inscriptions of later period that there were several such viharas of Buddhist pantheon at Nagappattinam, such as Rajendra Perumpalli (in the name of either Rajendra Chola I or Kulottunga Chola I) and Akkasalai Perumpalli. The smaller Leiden grant of Kulottunga I refer to Rajaraja Perumpalli and Rajendra Perumpalli.

From this we can presume that Rajendraperumpalli constructed during the time of Rajendra I or Kulottunga I. The *Akkasalaip perumpalli* in all probability was yet another Buddhist vihara, contemporaneous to Rajendra Perumpalli. In the collection of Rockefeller's bronzes, there are some images of Buddha which originally belonged to Nagappattinam Buddhist vihara. Among Rockefeller's collection, interestingly, a standing image of Buddha yields an inscription engraved on the pedestal referring to the bronze image which belonged to the viharas of Rajendra Perumpalli – Akkasalai Perumpalli of Nagappattinam (Karashima and Subbarayalu, 2002). The image of Buddha was taken for procession from these two Buddhist *viharas*. Further the name *Akkasalai* denotes "mint". Nagappattinam had a mint for coins from the time of the Cholas. This Buddhist vihara might have been an exclusive worship centre for the goldsmiths working in the mint; hence it earned the name Akkasalaipperumpalli. The second line of the above inscription which records the mercantile community known as *padinen vishayattar* in the pedestal inscription supports our view. During the Chola period there were a number of mercantile communities who engaged in foreign trade. They were called *naanadeesi*, *tisaiyirattu ainnurruvar*, *senamugam*, *nagarattaar* and *padinen(bhumi) vishiyattaar*. Many of the above names appear in the inscriptions of Sri Lanka, Malay Peninsula and Sumatra (Karashima and Subbarayalu, 2002). Besides, the port was used by the merchants who came from the western coast of Peninsular

India especially from Kerala to Southeast Asian countries and China, who anchored their ships at Nagappattinam port midway through their voyage. They gave several donations to the temple of Naganatha at Nagaippattinam while they stationed at this port (*Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy, 1956-57: 155-7*). Two inscriptions from the temple of Naganatha mention the merchants Taamandaiyan and Tiruccirampalam udaiyan from Kollatturai or kurakkeeni Kollam or kollapuram which was identified with the modern Quilon port on the Arabian Sea in Kerala. All these suggest that the port city of Nagappattinam became the international centre for Buddhism for the pilgrims and traders of Buddhist faith of Southeast Asia and China. The mercantile group *padinen vishaiyattar* had close contacts with Southeast Asian countries through sea voyage from Nagappattinam and some of the inscriptions from Malay Peninsula refer to the above merchant group (Nilakanta Sastri, 1949).

During the reign of Rajendra Chola I, the son of Rajaraja I, around 1015 CE, an officer in the court of Srivijaya namely Eran Sadaiyan made a donation of precious stones to Nagai Azhavar temple at Nagapptinam. He was a native of Melthonrippattinam, a place in Ramanathapuram District of Tamil Nadu (*Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy, 1956-57, No 164*). It could be possible that he was appointed by the king Rajendra I in the court of Srivijaya after his conquest. The Navy of Cholas went to Southeast Asian countries under the able leadership of Rajendra I and conquered almost all countries in Southeast Asia. Rajendra Chola I inscriptions clearly suggest that he made a naval expedition from the port of Nagappattinam to Southeast Asian countries around 1025 CE. His eulogy of the king (*prasasti*) in the inscriptions gives the list of places in the Southeast Asian countries that were attacked by the navy of Cholas. The eulogy says “*alaikadal naduvil palakalam celutti*” meaning having dispatched many ships in the midst of the rolling sea. The inscriptions from Naganatha temple suggest that Nagai was the main seaport for the dispatch of the Chola Navy. The inscription from this place mentions the officers of Srivijaya kingdom who frequently visited Nagappattinam. The agent of the king of Srivijaya namely KaNTan Nimalan Agattiswaran (*Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy, 1956-57, No 161*) donated several gifts to the temple of Srikayarohanaswamin temple at Nagappattinam. As already pointed out, Eran Sadaiyan an officer of Srivijaya king also donated precious stones to the temple. Another

inscription of the same temple in this place records certain Sri Kuruttan Kesuvan *alias* Akralekai, a royal writer of the King of Kedaram (modern Kedah of Malaysia) installed a siva and Uma image Ardhanariswara in the temple and gave (*Chinak kanakam*) the gold coins of China (*Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy*, 1956-57, No. 166).

Nagappattinam in the late medieval period

As discussed earlier, the port of Nagappattinam was frequently visited by many travellers and merchants from Southeast Asian countries who were later followed by Westerners. The Portuguese established their settlement here with the concurrence of the Nayak King Sevappa Nayaka of Thanjavur in AD 1542. They found that the port was well suited for their trade since it was located between two outlets of Kaveri namely the Kudavaiyar and Uppanar. The Nayaks of Tanjore allowed the Portuguese Captain of Nagapattinam to collect a revenue . They built a fort in Nagapattinam in order to prevent a possible attack from the Dutch in 1594. The Vijayaragava Nayak of Tanjore did not allow the Dutch settlement in this region. However, the Dutch took Nagapattinam from the Portuguese in AD 1658 (Kovai, 1996). The Batavia Museum's Silver plate inscription refers to an agreement made by the Dutch and the Marathas of Tanjore to establish their trade at Nagapattinam in 1676 (Raju, 1988). The Tanjore Maratta king Ekoji accepted their plea after the intervention of the able agent Chinnanna Chetti. Chinnanna Chetti, a Malay merchant, had already established his trade on the Coromandel coast and helped the Dutch in their trade activities. Initially, the Marathas of Thanjavur accepted the Dutch trade at Nagapattinam for a period of three years. However the agreement was renewed in the year 1661 AD. Accordingly, the Dutch received some privileges and villages in and around Nagapattinam and in lieu of that they agreed to give 4200 Pon and 1 tusker elephant. The Dutch continued their trade activities in this port until the British occupied it in the year 1781 AD.

An inscription found engraved on a loose stone slab kept in the courtyard of the Naganatha swamy temple (*Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy*, 1990, No 57) is significant, since this is the first stone inscription mentioning the Dutch occupancy of the port city Nagappattinam and their liberal donation to the Hindu temple at Nagapattinam. The inscription starts in praise of the God of Nagappattinam's Nagalingam. It is dated in

the Saka year 1695, Kali era 4875 and the Dutch year 1774 (*ulaandesu kumpanir anntu*) in the month of Chittirai corresponding to AD 1775. The Dutch year mentioned in the inscription is nothing but the Gregorian year (English calendar system). It records the gift of some land and revenue which were under the control of the Dutch for the renovation of the temple of Naganatha. The Dutch Governor Captain Bilichingan made an oral order (*yethalooReyi nirpam*) after the local authorities (*maniyam*) approached (*civalentoyini pelattu*) him. The Dutch company is referred to as *Ulandesu kumpanir*. From the above, it is evident that Nagapattinam was functioning as a strong Dutch port city controlled by the Dutch captain Bilichingan, and they were actively involved in the local affairs of Nagapattinam port for a considerable period in 18th century AD. The Dutch East India Company's Governor's name occurred in the inscription in the tamilized form (Maharaja Bilichingan) of the Nagapattinam Governor Christian Van Teylingen. He was a governor of seventh government of the Dutch which had factories at other ports like Sadras, Bimlipatam, Palkole and Jaganadhapuram with their capital at Nagapattinam itself. Accordingly the following revenue was given for the above renovation and for conducting Sivaratri festival in the temple.

1. Daily *kuttagai* from the Company.
2. Revenue from the Harbour (*pusa mugattubarattu kuttagaippanam*) 30
3. Maganmai revenue from the Mint (*kampattattu maganmai*)
4. On areca- net (*pakku maganmai*) 2 in number per day from the Kalasakarar.
4. Tax on betel leaves (*verrilai kuttagai*) 20 leaves per day.
5. Monthly Rent on the onion shop at Big bazaar belonging to the temple.

The inscription also refers to the early *maniyam* Nagamallu Chinnayya Nayakkar who was a friend of the Company (*Kumpani toluggu*) and his successors Mayaludai Ganapathi Chettiyar and his son Subhramanya Chettiyar. Subhramanya Chettiyar was alive when the donation was made. Nagamallu Chinnayaa Nayakkar in all probability was the agent Chinnanna who helped the Dutch in the establishment of their maritime trade in Nagapattinam. From the Battavia Museum Silver plate it is known that the Dutch had possessed 10 villages including Nagapattinam in the year 1676. Among

them the lands from the two villages were given for the renovation work as evident from this present inscription. Pudur is identified with Puttur and Anthonipettai is the same as Anthonipettai referred to in the Battavia Museum Silver Plate: the village Neyveli mentioned in our present epigraph is referred to as *kumpanir gramam* indicating that it was a new occupancy by the company after 1676. From the above silver plate it is also evident that the Naykas allowed the Dutch to Mint Panam and Varagan for circulation at Nagapattinam. The word Kampattam occurring in record also attests to this fact.

Conclusions

From the above discussion it is evident that the port of Nagai or Nagappattinam played a vital role in maritime contacts with Southeast Asian and Western countries in the late medieval period. It was also one of the international (Buddhist) pilgrimage centres starting from the times of Pallavas to the late 18th century CE. The Chinese Pagoda i.e., the Buddhist vihara in this place received royal patronage from the kings of Southeast Asia, especially the king of Srivijay who constructed the Rajarajapperumpalli alias Rajendra Perumpalli. The merchants of foreign trade made significant contribution and they constructed a buddhist vihara, namely Akkasalai Perumpalli, in this port city. The navy of the Cholas stationed in this port and went to Far East up to Southeast Asian countries under the leadership of able King Rajendra Chola in 11th century CE. The port Nagappattinam had enough facility of anchoring large size of vessels like *Kalam* and *Vangam* type of ships.

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Biography

S. Rajavelu, presently, heads the Department of Maritime History and Marine Archaeology, Tamil University, Thanjavur, India. He has widely explored over South India and discovered a large number of Palaeolithic, Megalithic, Early Historic sites and

inscriptions in Tamil Nadu. To his credit he has published 8 books and 75 research articles in various national and International journals and participated and presented research papers both national and International conferences. He is the recipient of Tamil Nadu State Award in the year 1990 for his book, Archaeological Excavations in Tamil Nadu in Tamil. Currently, he is the Editor of Avanam, a journal published annually by the Tamil Nadu Archaeological Society.