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Bulletin de l'Ecole française
d'Extrême-Orient

Temples, Inscriptions and Historical (Re)construction: The "Epigraphical *Persona*" of the Cōḻa Queen Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī (Tenth Century)

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https://www.persee.fr/doc/befeo_0336-1519_2019_num_105_1_6295

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Cane Nicolas. Temples, Inscriptions and Historical (Re)construction: The "Epigraphical *Persona*" of the Cōḻa Queen Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī (Tenth Century). In: Bulletin de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient. Tome 105, 2019. pp. 27-60;

doi : https://doi.org/10.3406/befeo.2019.6295

https://www.persee.fr/doc/befeo_0336-1519_2019_num_105_1_6295

Fichier pdf généré le 22/09/2021

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Abstract

Taking a bronze sculpture housed by the prestigious Freer Gallery of Art of Washington, D.C., as point of departure, this paper aims to retrace historians' (re)construction of the tenth-century Cōḻa Queen Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī's biography in a vivid illustration of the omnipotence often allotted to epigraphical sources when it comes to dealing with material culture. Wife and mother of Cōḻa kings, Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī is unanimously hailed nowadays as one of the greatest historical figures of medieval south India, a queen who "carved a niche for herself" (Balambal 1998: 176) in History by her impressive patronage of the holy places of Tamil Śaivism. What people are less aware of, however, is that without the numerous inscriptions mentioning her name which have been collected since the turn of the twentieth century and the launch by the Archaeological Survey of British India of its program for south Indian epigraphy, the destiny of the "Queen Mother of the Cōḻa house" would have simply remained unknown to us. The article points how interpretive strategies implemented by successive generations of scholars in order to engage in dialogue with a largely unknown and scattered corpus of epigraphical testimonies lead to the elaboration and diffusion throughout the secondary literature of what can be called Queen Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī's "epigraphical persona".

Résumé

Prenant pour point de départ un bronze exposé par la Freer Gallery de Washington (D. C.) en tant que représentation de la souveraine Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī, l'article propose une réflexion sur la construction historiographique de cette reine Cōḻa du Xe siècle, destinée à illustrer la fréquente omnipotence des données épigraphiques dès lors qu'il s'agit d'interpréter la culture matérielle. Épouse et mère de souverains Cōḻa, Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī est unanimement saluée comme l'une des grandes figures historiques de l'Inde du Sud médiévale, une reine qui « s'est taillée une place » dans l'Histoire grâce à un impressionnant patronage des lieux saints du shivaisme tamoul. L'on sait moins que sans les nombreuses inscriptions pariétales recueillies depuis le tournant du XXe siècle avec le lancement par l'Agence de recensement archéologique du Raj britannique d'un programme d'épigraphie du sud de l'Inde, l'existence et le destin de la « reine mère de la maison Cōḻa » nous seraient demeurés inconnus. L'article vise ainsi à démonter les stratégies d'interprétation mises en place par les générations successives d'érudits cherchant à dialoguer avec ce corpus de témoignages épigraphiques largement inédit et dispersé ; des stratégies interprétatives qui ont conduit à l'élaboration et la diffusion dans la littérature secondaire de ce que l'on peut appeler une persona épigraphique bien particulière.

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Keywords: South Indian history and historiography; Tamil epigraphy; Cōḻa dynasty; temple patronage; royal statuary; museology.

Résumé

Prenant pour point de départ un bronze exposé par la Freer Gallery de Washington (D.C.) en tant que représentation de la souveraine Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī, l'article propose une réflexion sur la construction historiographique de cette reine Cōḻa du x^e^ siècle, destinée à illustrer la fréquente omnipotence des données épigraphiques dès lors qu'il s'agit d'interpréter la culture matérielle. Épouse et mère de souverains Cōḻa, Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī est unanimement saluée comme l'une des grandes figures historiques de l'Inde du Sud médiévale, une reine qui « s'est taillée une place » dans l'Histoire grâce à un impressionnant patronage des lieux saints du shivaisme tamoul. L'on sait moins que sans les nombreuses inscriptions

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Mots-clés : histoire et historiographie de l'Inde du Sud ; épigraphie tamoule ; dynastie Cōḻa ; patronage de temples ; statuaire royale ; muséologie.

Temples, Inscriptions and Historical (Re)construction
The "Epigraphical *Persona*" of the Cōḻa Queen Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī (Tenth Century)

Nicolas Cane*

A famous bronze sculpture housed today in the prestigious Freer Gallery of Art of Washington, D.C., is enthroned in a small room, where it stands alongside other "Hindu Bronzes from the Chola Dynasty". A quick glance at this bronze image (fig. 1a) suffices to appreciate the undeniable qualities that make it a worthy representative of its south Indian artistic tradition. A question displayed in large print on the exhibit label below the image (fig. 1b) piques the visitor's curiosity: "Goddess or Queen?" By taking a closer look, one discovers that the introductory title chosen for this piece of art leaves much less room for the question of its identification: "Queen Sembiyan Mahadevi[1] as Goddess Uma, also known as Parvati". And the short text introducing the object specifies:

> For many years, this sculpture was thought to depict the goddess Uma, wife of Lord Shiva, because she characteristically raises one hand to hold a lotus (now missing). But artists' treatises stipulate that Hindu deities have perfectly straight shoulders. The steeply sloping shoulders of this bronze thus suggest that it represents a historical queen. She is likely the powerful Queen Sembiyan, whose portrait was cast in bronze around the year 990. Indian artists traditionally represented Hindu royalty as beautiful deities because beauty signified excellent character and the right to rule.[2]

Three points are noteworthy here. First, the hint that the bronze's current identification is a rather late development. Second, the claim based on an *argumentum a contrario* that the pronounced slope of the shoulders alone

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1. The transliteration system adopted in the present paper follows the *Tamil Lexicon*'s conventions. Regarding the title of the queen (செம்பியன் மாதேவி), which in Tamil inscriptions occurs as *cempiyaṉ mātevi* or *cempiyaṉ mahādevi* and *cempiyaṉ mādevi* when Grantha characters are used, several spellings occur in secondary literature in English. Among these spellings, Sembiyan Madevi and Sembiyan Mahadevi (or Sembiyaṉ Mādēvi and Sembiyaṉ Mahādēvi with diacritics) are the most commonly found. Transliterated passages aside, I personally use the spelling Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī that presents the advantage of rendering graphically both the Tamil and Sanskrit components in this queenly title.

2. Purchase F1929.84.

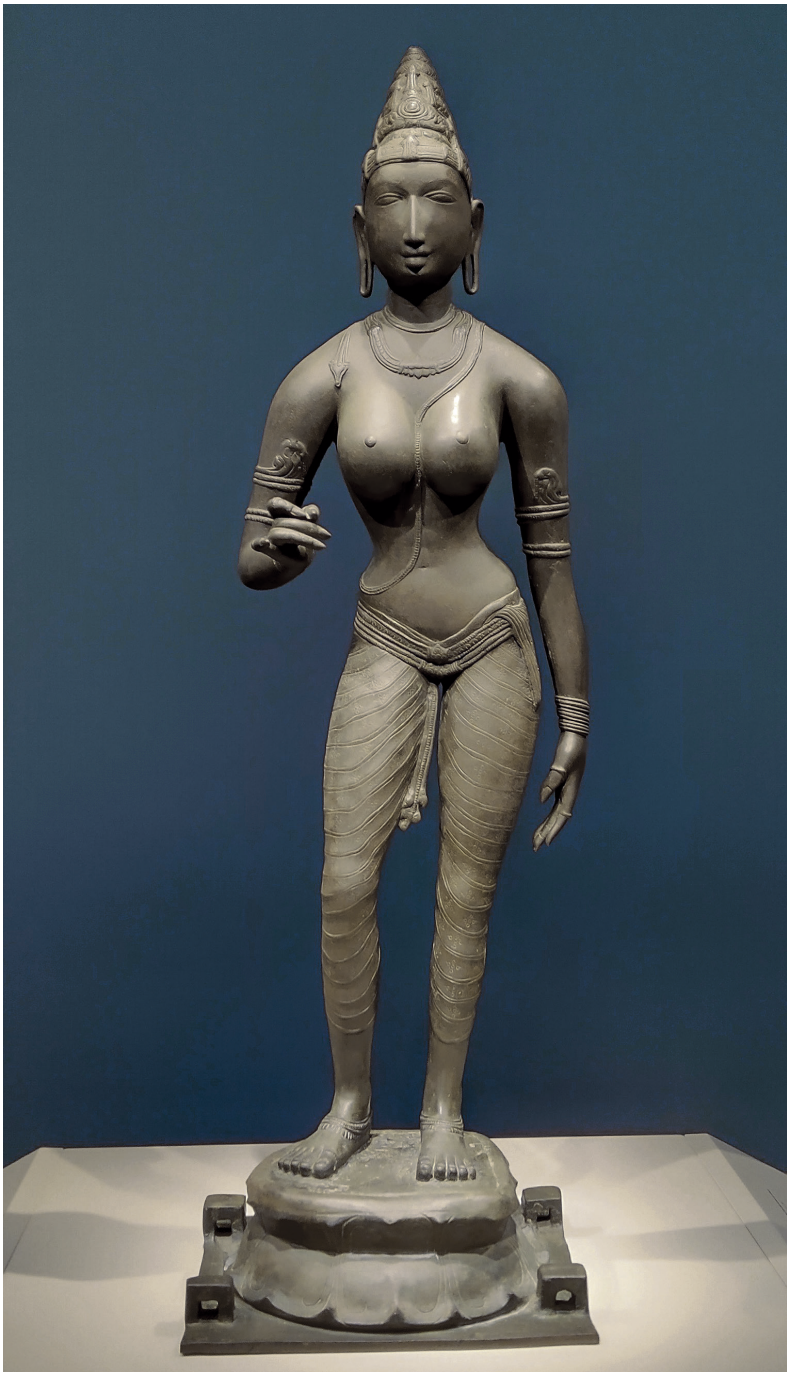

Fig. 1a — The "Freer Devī", Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (Sowparnika Balaswaminathan, 2019).

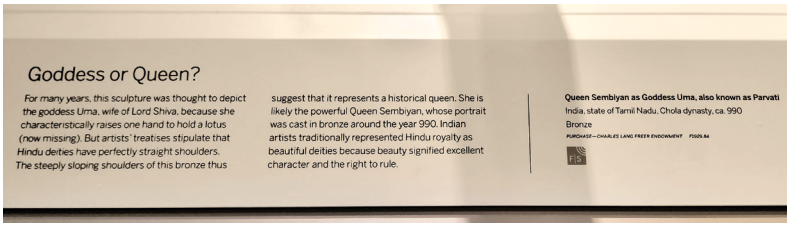

Fig. 1b — The exhibit label below the "Freer Devī", Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (Sowparnika Balaswaminathan, 2019).

suffices to "suggest that it represents a historical queen". And third, the reference to a queenly portrait "cast in bronze around the year 990" that allows the visitor to think that she or he may "likely" be in the presence of the "powerful Queen Sembiyan" herself.

Any attempt to provide an answer to the legitimate question of what was the process that led to the identification of this south Indian bronze, also known in publications as "Freer Devī", amounts to a questioning of the current state of knowledge about a queen referred to in history books as one of the greatest monarchs of medieval south India.[3] The process which has led to the formulation of the sculpture's identity by such a respectable institution as the Freer Gallery is the latest page in the "cultural biography" (Kopytoff 1984) of this remarkable archaeological piece. This same page also exemplifies perfectly the complex relationships we have forged with epigraphical sources in our quest for historical knowledge: unanimously celebrated for their inestimable contribution to this undertaking whose *raison d'être* is the reconstruction of the past, they are at the same time neglected to the extent that they might contradict the story we intend to deliver on a particular page in the history of the Indian subcontinent. Thus it seems sometimes that a real gap exists between the reality of the Tamil inscriptions mentioning Queen Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī and the secondary literature produced about her for over a century now. We will see, through the evocation of some of these inscriptional testimonies, that the fate of the Pārvatī image exhibited at the Freer Gallery of Art is only one of the manifestations of the treatment given to an epigraphical corpus remaining largely unknown – a corpus from which, nevertheless, scholars past and present have shaped the historical figure of the pious Cōḻa queen.

First we will look back in time, not upto the Cōḻa period, but to a more recent past, namely the early days of the Madras Presidency's epigraphical department, at the turn of the twentieth century. It is actually from that time that a remarkable amount of tenth-century inscriptions in Tamil language, which all have in common that they supply references to Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī, spouse and mother of Cōḻa kings, were listed in the Archaeological Survey of India's epigraphical reports among the myriads of stone records remaining from by the Cōḻa period. One critical aspect, revealed through the initial phase of my work (Cane 2017), lies in the fact that this sum of epigraphical testimonies bearing the name of the queen, although unanimously hailed for its remarkable importance, had never been numerically estimated, nor properly gathered into a single corpus for in-depth study.

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3. One may cite, among others, C. Sivaramamurti (1955: 21): "[She] was the most pious [queen] that we know in history and was highly honoured and respected by successive kings on the Choḻa throne during her lifetime and later, and probably was one of the most remarkable queens in the family …"; M. Arunachalam (1970: 7): "The story of this queen and her contribution to the political life and the religious persuasion of the Cholas and to Saivism in general has not had adequate recognition from historians and even from the followers of Saivism"; S.R. Balasubrahmanyam (1971: 158): "She is the noblest among the royal ladies who adorned the early Chola age"; B. Venkataraman (1976: 8): "Sembiyan Mahadevi, unparalleled in the history of India for her contribution to art, architecture, stone sculpture and, more than anything else, to the casting of bronzes"; and Karen Pechilis Prentiss (1999: 96): "Perhaps the more important early Chola patron of Śaiva temples was not a king but a queen: Queen Sembiyan Mahādevī …"

Major chronological issues raised by the dating of epigraphical references to Queen Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī have also to be outlined to address the problematic use which generations of scholars have made of these primordial, yet partial, sources in their attempt to ascribe definite dates to the significant events that marked the life of the Cōḻa queen. The best example of what, to my mind, proves to be a delusive use of this epigraphical material, is provided by two dates which, for about a century now, are assumed to encompass either her lifespan or her period of activity indifferently.

The third and last part of the paper dwells somewhat on the most famous temple attributed to the patronage of Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī, namely the Kōṉērirājapuram temple, to return to our starting point, the bronze of the Freer Gallery. In these pages, I intend to illustrate how chronological considerations on the epigraphical corpus preserved in the Kōṉērirājapuram temple, rather than stylistic considerations on the now well-known elements of novelty in its iconographical program, actually governed the dating of the monument and the subsequent widespread recognition of its historical significance. The omnipotence often allotted to epigraphical sources when it comes to dealing with material culture – and this despite the fluctuating interpretation that surrounds these very sources – will be echoed when it comes highlighting the authoritative role that has been assigned to an unpublished inscription in the identification process of the world-famous Freer Devī.

From the epigraphical survey of southern India to the constitution of an epigraphical corpus: the discovery of the Cōḻa Queen Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī

It is worth recalling at the outset that the Pallava, Pāṇḍya and Cōḻa dynasties of medieval south India are still recent rediscoveries. Indeed, the historiography of the Cōḻas, in the same way as that of the Pāṇḍyas and the Pallavas, took its first steps at the end of the 1880s, shortly after the Archaeological Survey of India launched the epigraphical survey of the Deccan. The discovery of the Cōḻa Queen Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī is part of the history of this scientific enterprise.

On 25th March 1886, Sir Alexander Cunningham (1814–1893), who had been the founder of the Archaeological Survey in 1881 and served as its first Director General until this date, was succeeded by James Burgess (1832–1916), the then Archaeological Surveyor for western and southern India. Only a few months after he had taken the helm of Indian archaeology, Burgess entrusted the newly created post of Epigraphist to the Government of Madras to the German philologist Eugen Hultzsch (1857–1927), with the mission of collecting and publishing all the inscriptions found on the territory of the Presidency. The 21st of November 1886, date of his taking office, marked the starting point of an undertaking which would prove to be of unsuspected breadth.[4]

4. That same year 1886, Benjamin Lewis Rice, Director of Archaeological Research for the Government of Mysore, published the first volume of the *Epigraphia Carnatica* collection. This

Fig. 2a — View of the northern base of the *vimāna*, Rājarājeśvara temple at Tañcāvūr (Nicolas Cane, 2013).

During his first five years of service, Eugen Hultzsch and his first Tamil Assistant V. Venkayya (1864–1912) led two survey campaigns in the Rājarājeśvara (Bṛhadīśvara) temple at Tañcāvūr, which laid the foundations of Cōḻa historiography. During the first of these two campaigns, which ran from December 1887 to April 1888, the grandiose inscriptions in Tamil issued by Rājarāja Cōḻa I (r. AD 985–1014)[5] and his kin at the tail end of his reign, were deciphered and copied by the Government Epigraphist:[6] splendid calligraphies (figs. 2a–b) running out of sight on the whole length

publication in twelve volumes, completed in 1905 by Rice with remarkable effort, brings together a total of 8,869 inscriptions collected through the territory of the princely state of Mysore (present day southern Karnataka). The vast majority of these inscriptions belongs to the "other" huge south Indian epigraphical corpus: that of Kannada language inscriptions. One may therefore consider that the year 1886 was also the starting point of Kannada epigraphical studies (cf. Trautmann, Saran, Granda *et al.* 1985: 4).

5. The dates of reign which appear for every Cōḻa king referred to in the present paper take into account the usual two or three-year period of co-rule between each reigning king and his successor (*yuvarāja*). For examples of overlapping reigns of Cōḻa kings who "shared the burdens of empire", see Sastri (1955: 194–197 and 246).

6. Cf. *G.O. No. 745, 27th July 1888*, Part I, para. 2 in *ARE* 1887–1888. In his report to J.F. Price, Chief Secretary to the Government of Madras, dated 6th April 1891, Hultzsch gives an account of his second campaign in the Rājarājeśvara temple: "I was only away from the 13th November to the 24th December 1890, in order to prepare mechanical copies of those thirty-seven inscriptions of the great temple at Tanjore which, through want of time, were only copied in writing in 1887–8. With the energetic help of my assistant V. Venkayya, M.A., and my experienced copyist, both of whom worked from morning to night, faithful facsimiles of all of them were secured." Cit. Part I, para. 1 of *G.O. No. 452, 10th June 1891*, in *ARE* 1890–1891.

Fig. 2b — Detail of the inscription *SII* 2: 1 (third section), western base of the *vimāna*, Rājarājeśvara temple at Tañcāvūr (Nicolas Cane, 2013).

of the base of a main sanctuary (*vimāna*) that, with its 210 ft. (63 m) in height, remains "the largest and the tallest" temple of all India (Harle 1994: 311) and was therefore popularised under the name of "Great Temple at Tanjore". The discovery, very shortly before then, of the so-called Larger Leiden Plates dated to the 21st regnal year of the same sovereign – the then "first Chōḷa inscription yet translated containing much definite information respecting the dynasty"[7] – provided Eugen Hultzsch with a timely supply of tools through which to apprehend the historical background which saw the building of the Rājarājeśvara over a roughly fifteen-year period. Indeed, this bilingual charter engraved on 21 copper plates, and especially the five plates in Sanskrit devoted to the versified genealogy of the Cōḻa kings, allowed Hultzsch to outline a chronological frame within which to situate the Rājarājeśvara temple and its epigraphical corpus.[8] When James Burgess suddenly retired from office on 1st June 1889, he made the following prediction

7. The first edition of the Larger Leiden Plates was published by James Burgess and Pandit Natesa Sastri in *Archaeological Survey of Southern India* (*ASSI*), vol. 4, 1886, pp. 204 *sq*. Half a century later, K.V. Subrahmanya Aiyer (sometimes spelled Ayyar) was the author of the second edition for the *Epigraphia Indica* series (*EI* 22.34, pp. 213–266). In the introductory notice (p. 214) of this extensively revised edition of the grant, the epigraphist pointed out the limited reliability of the previous version: "While the published Sanskrit text is almost free from errors of transcription, the Tamil portion contains too many mistakes to be noticed here."

8. In his Annual Report dated 9 August 1888, Burgess welcomed the considerable progress made by Hultzsch in reconstructing the royal genealogy of the Cōḻa sovereigns, thanks to the discovery of the Larger Leiden Plates: "Only a very few years ago, our knowledge of the great Chola dynasty of Southern India was very indefinite; the great Leyden grant dating about A.D. 1025 gave us about nineteen names, with the genealogy of the last ten kings, which must have covered the previous 150 years or so. Dr. Hultzsch's researches have brought to light the names of very much earlier

to the Government: another eight years would be needed to complete the epigraphical survey of southern India, provided that Hultzsch would stand at the helm of this daunting undertaking (Roy 1953: 23). The years that followed, new assistants joined Hultzsch and Venkayya to tackle the triple task of collecting inscriptions from south India, editing and translating them, and publishing the texts thus produced, texts and translations, in a new epigraphical series exclusively devoted to this purpose: the aptly named *South-Indian Inscriptions*, which was started in 1890 with the publication of a first volume entitled *Tamil and Sanskrit Inscriptions Chiefly collected in 1886–87*. During the sole year 1892, Hultzsch and his team collected a total sum of 764 epigraphs on the territory of the Madras Presidency, among which the first two inscriptions referring to a then unknown Cōḻa queen (*ARE* 95 & 96 of 1892). Between the years 1891 and 1895, Hultzsch published the second volume of the *South-Indian Inscriptions* (*Tamil Inscriptions of Rajaraja, Rajendra-Chola, and others in the Rajarajesvara Temple at Tanjavur*), gathering texts and translations of the epigraphs he and Venkayya had collected during their second campaign in the Great Temple at the end of 1890. This second volume marked a seminal milestone in Cōḻa historiography by making the Tañcāvūr royal temple's epigraphical corpus accessible to all. By the time of Hultzsch's official retirement on 27th May 1903, after fifteen years of pioneering service to the cause of south Indian epigraphy, four other epigraphs mentioning the queen named Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī ("the Great Cōḻa Queen")[9] had been signalled in the *Annual Reports*. Venkaya, who had already assumed the post of Governmental Epigraphist between 1899 and

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kings, and promises to clear up the tangled genealogy of the eleventh century." Cit. Part I, para. 2 of *G.O. No. 877, 6th September 1888*, in *ARE* 1887–1888.

9. The name Cempiyaṉ, along with Ceṉṉi, Kiḷḷi and Vaḷavaṉ, is commonly used throughout the anthologies of classical bardic poetry which form the earliest literary corpus in Tamil, i.e. the so-called *Caṅkam* Literature (1st century BC–AD 250), to denote Cōḻa kings. The term is traditionally taken to be the Tamil equivalent for *śaibya* "(descendant) of Śibi", after the name of the *bodhisattva* king of the Śibis extolled in Buddhist Literature in Pāli and Sanskrit for his boundless generosity which exemplifies *dāna-pāramitā* or "perfection of giving" (*Pāli Jātaka*, XV.3; *Avadānaśataka*, IV.4; *Cariyā Piṭaka*, I.8; *Jātakamālā*, 499; *Sūtrālaṃkāra*, 64). Śibi is also glorified in three distinct passages of the *Mahābhārata* (*Tīrthayātrā Parva*, 130–131; Appendix 1.21.5; XIII.32) found in the critical edition by Vishnu S. Sukthankar, S.K. Belvakar *et al.* (1933–1972), that retell the famous episode of the king rescuing a dove (Agni) from the claws of a hawk (Indra) by sacrificing an equal quantity of his own flesh weighted in a balance scale. As early as the first centuries of the Common Era, Cōḻa rulers are in fact eulogised in Tamil as descendants of Cempiyaṉ "who extinguished the pain overwhelming the bird", (*puḷḷuṟu puṉkaṇ ṭīrtta*, *Puṟanāṉūṟu*, 37.5–6); the king "who dispelled the anguish of the dove (*puṟavi ṉallal colliya*) by climbing upon the pan of a balance scale (*kōṉiṟai tulā am pukkōṉ*)" in *Puṟanāṉūṟu*, 39.1–4; or "the king of unmatched glory who enthralled the celestial beings by extinguishing the pain overwhelming the bird" (*eḷḷaṟu ciṟappi ṉimaiyavar viyappap puḷḷuṟu puṉkaṇ ṭīrttōṉ*) in *Cilappatikāram*, 20.51–56. Furthermore, in the bilingual copper-plates charters issued by Cōḻa sovereigns from the reign of Parāntaka Cōḻa I (AD 906–954) onwards, the same King Śibi figures as one of the prestigious forefathers extolled in the Sanskrit portion devoted to genealogy, e.g. "Śibi who manifested himself as the ornament of the [Cōḻa] lineage, he who, when approached by the Radiant One (*citrabhānu*, epithet of Indra) under the guise of a hawk, immediately offered his own flesh, thereby making himself the receptacle for the wounds and afflictions of the dove" (*śyena-c-chalād upagate sati citrabhānau dattan nijam-piśitam āśu samastam eva / cakre kapotam apa-hiṃsita-śoka-bhājaṃ yas so 'pi vaṃśa-tilakaś śibir āvir āsīt*, Vēlañcēri Plates of Parāntaka Cōḻa I, Plate Ib, *śloka* 7, edited by R. Nagaswamy (*Thiruttani and Velanjeri Copper Plates*, 1979). It can be inferred from all these occurrences that the title "Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī" roughly means "the great queen of [the royal house of] Śibi", that is "the Great Cōḻa Queen".

1901, during which period Hultzsch was away from India,[10] officially succeeded his mentor on 27th November 1903. After a single five-year term, Venkayya was promoted to the position of Government Epigraphist for India and was himself succeeded by another disciple of Hultzsch, his former Kanarese Assistant H. Krishna Sastri (1870–1928), on 26th November 1908. At that date, eight more inscriptions referring to Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī had been collected, bringing their total to 15. Many more would follow during the twelve-year service of H. Krishna Sastri, as well as afterwards.

Under H. Krishna Sastri, south Indian epigraphy entered a phase of profound transformation. The Government of Madras, which had been assured by James Burgess on his retirement in 1889 that the epigraphical survey of the Deccan would be completed prior to the entry into the twentieth century, was now faced with the following realities: endless postponements and delays in publication due to the ever-increasing sum of epigraphs collected year after year, which resulted in the accumulation of thousands of impressions with little chance of being published in the immediate future. On 5th July 1918, the same government issued an order (*G.O. No. 890, Home, Education*) under which it eventually rubber-stamped a decision which then appeared inevitable. In his annual report dated 23rd July 1919, Krishna Sastri himself echoed, with a perceptible hint of bitterness, the content of the said order:

> The Government had for some time under consideration the best plan for expediting publication simultaneously with collection. They found that the complete critical method of editing inscriptions with texts, translations and historical notes as in the *Epigraphia Indica* and other standard antiquarian journals and the *South-Indian Inscriptions* as published till now, was a slow and costly process and that supplied with the bare epigraphical material, viz., the transcripts of all inscriptions carefully printed, scholars and students interested in South-Indian antiquities could easily take up the work of the translation and exegesis. It was thus that the Government Order under question was issued. It lays down a minimum publication of 2,000 inscriptions each year by this department …[11]

Shortly before he was in his turn appointed Government Epigraphist for India on 22nd June 1920, Krishna Sastri eventually managed to deliver the long-awaited publication of the third part of volume III of *South-Indian Inscriptions*. This third part brought together "texts and translations of 117 important Chola inscriptions",[12] among which a few epigraphs from a village in the Tanjore district called Tirunallam in Cōḻa times, to which I will return later in this paper. The pledge that accompanied the launch of the series, to make inscriptions from south India accessible to all through translation, was definitively broken immediately after this third volume's

10. "On the 28th August 1901 I returned to India after two years' furlough and took over charge on the 8th September. It gives much pleasure to testify to the efficient and energetic manner in which my First Assistant, M.R.Ry. V. Venkayya, has managed the office during my absence." Cit. *G.O., etc., Nos. 762–63, 25th July 1901*, in *ARE* 1900–1901.

11. Cit. Part I, Para. 3 of *G.O. No. 1003, 16th August 1919*, in *ARE* 1918–1919.

12. "*Preface*" to the third volume of the series by K.V. Subrahmanya Aiyer, dated 19 March 1928.

publication. All volumes published afterwards would confine themselves to editing the bare text of epigraphs in modern vernacular scripts, a few lines of introduction in English accompanying them in the best cases and no introductory note of any kind in others. The "scholars and students interested in South-Indian antiquities" that have followed since that time, have consequently been obliged to carry out themselves the rather underestimated work of translation and interpretation.

As no attempt has been made since 1930 to list the numerous inscriptions in which Queen Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī appears,[13] a diligent perusal of the 45 volumes of *Annual Report on (South) Indian Epigraphy* published to date by the Archaeological Survey of India is an essential prelude to the research. According to the latest estimate by Yellava Subbarayalu[14] in 2012, out of the total of 44,000 inscriptions from south India reported to date after about a century and half of epigraphical survey, Tamil language inscriptions alone amount to 28,000.[15] Nearly half of this gigantic historical corpus – about 15,000 inscriptions, among which several that mention our queen – is still waiting to be published. As for the sole Cōḷa period,[16] it left to posterity 19,000 out of the 28,000 Tamil epigraphs, or about two-thirds, a sum which one may therefore infer to be about half published at present. Two options are available to scholars to gain access to these roughly 10,000 unpublished inscriptions dated to the Cōḷa period: the first consists in an *in situ* reading, whenever it is still possible; the second requires a visit to the headquarters of Indian epigraphy, at the Archaeological Survey of India office in Mysore, in order to see if rubbings or transcripts of the said inscriptions are available for consultation. After nearly three years of work spent in gathering and studying the epigraphical mentions of Queen Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī discovered to date, the corpus amounts to a total of 63 inscriptions collected in Śaiva temples of 31 different villages across present-day Tamil Nadu. Out of these 63 inscriptions, 47 have been edited, although of these only eight have been translated, while two of them were never listed in any report. The epigraphs from 30 out of the 31 sites suggest the involvement of the Cōḷa queen in their ritual and social life through a three-fold program: building, gifting and regulating donations. Within this

13. Following the survey of the Cempiyaṉmātēvi village by V. Venkatasubba Aiyer in 1925, two entire pages of the *Annual Report* for the year 1925–1926 (Part II, para. 22) were devoted to a summary note on the "important" inscriptions so far discovered mentioning the Cōḷa queen. Two pages that list 20 epigraphs in total collected in 17 different sites across present-day Tamil Nadu. Few years later in 1930, these two pages were reproduced verbatim by Conjeeveram Hayavadana Rao in *Mysore Gazetteer*, *Vol. II. Historical, Part II*, with the addition of three more inscriptions and one village to the list. With a total sum of 23 epigraphs from 18 different sites referred to, this remain the most comprehensive listing of inscriptions referring to Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī ever published, on which, consequently, many authors founded their narrative.

14. Cf. the revised version of the 2006 paper "*Tamil Epigraphy: Past and Present*" in Subbarayalu (2012: 18).

15. According to the same author, inscriptions in Kannada amount to 15,000, while Telugu inscriptions number over 5,000. Regarding Tamil inscriptions so far collected, some fifteen years earlier Noboru Karashima had already estimated their number to be 30,000. Cf. Karashima (1996: 2).

16. This roughly corresponds to the "901–1300 CE" entry in the chronological distribution timeline (1.1) compiled by Y. Subbarayalu (2012: 18).

corpus, a distinction can be drawn between inscriptions crediting Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī with one or several of these three types of activity on the one hand, and inscriptions presenting a "mere" mention of the queen without any involvement from her on the other. By far the less numerous, the second category comprises almost exclusively epigraphs recording provisions made by the female entourage of the queen for the celebrations of her birthday. With these two categories as a base are we able to determine the period of activity of Queen Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī?

Inscriptions from the Cōḻa period, chronological difficulties and issues in determining Queen Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī's period of activity

> She was a pious queen and her whole life was dedicated to the building of temples and in endowing them richly. Inscriptions which mention her as a builder of, or as a donor of munificient gifts to, temples, are numerous. She lived up to the 16th year of the reign of Rājarāja I (A.D. 1001).
>
> K.V. Subrahmanya Aiyer,
> *Historical Sketches of Ancient Dekhan* (1917: 233).

> She survived more than sixty years during which period she constructed number of stone temples and made large number of endowments to various temples. Her last known date is 1001 A.D. … Most of her life was spent in erecting religious edifices and granting endowments for the proper upkeep of the same.
>
> V. Balambal, *Studies in Chōḻa History* (1998: 16).

Many similar quotations gleaned from the abundant secondary literature produced on Queen Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī could have opened the second part of this paper. Separated by nearly one century, the ones chosen here have the advantage of providing an accurate illustration of the reception historians past and present have made of the renowned abundance of epigraphical references to the Cōḻa queen and her activity. No matter how partial and little known these only primary textual sources available to scholars seeking to reconstruct Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī's biography may be, they are perceived as a great mass of evidence to a long life of queenly influence, devoted to an unrelenting patronage towards the ancient sacred places of Tamil Śaivism. Yet, an in-depth study of the available epigraphical corpus in its entirety allows to highlight sub-periods of activity within this seemingly monolithic career of our Cōḻa patron, with what appears to be a fifteen-year period of "epigraphical silence" between the demise of her husband and the accession of her son to the throne on the one hand and, on the other, peak activities revealed by an increase in the frequency of records at distinct times in her career. Addressing the specific chronological issues raised by Queen Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī's period of activity requires at the outset a brief discussion of the dating system commonly used in thousands of tenth-century Tamil inscriptions from the ancient Cōḻa country.

As is the case with most of the inscriptions from the tenth century Cōḻa country, none of the dated epigraphs that make up the corpus refer to any calendar era such as, for example, the Śaka era (AD 78) whose use had slowly begun to spread through south India after its adoption by the Cālukyas of Bādāmi in the sixth century AD.[17] In accordance with the system that prevailed at that time for wall inscriptions engraved on the Cōḻa territory, dates are expressed by reference to the reigns of Cōḻa kings. This practice proves a source of great difficulties to modern readers in the frequent case where the said sovereign is only referred to by one of the two warlike titles *parakēcarivarmaṉ* and *irācakēcarivarmaṉ* (Sanskrit *parakesarivarman* and *rājakesarivarman*) which, according to a tradition alluded to in their grants engraved on copper plates, was prescribed for all Cōḻa rulers: "The alternating between the name Rājakesarin and [that of] Parakesarin became the rule for the kings born in his lineage" (*rājakesariṇo nāma parakesariṇo* [*'*]*sya ca svavaṃśajanmanāṃ rājñam ājñāsīt parivr̥ttitaḥ*, Larger Leiden Plates, *śloka* 8).[18] Consequently, when no other royal title nor royal eulogy (*meykkīrtti*) identifies the ruling king in the preambular portion of an epigraph – which is the case with the vast majority of wall inscriptions engraved before the eighth regnal year of Rājarāja Cōḻa I (992–993) – ,[19] its date is simply impossible to determine with certainty. This fact is crucial for the dating of some inscriptional references to Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī, as will be shown below.

Notwithstanding chronological uncertainties inherent in any Cōḻa period epigraphical research, the secondary literature on Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī is replete with assertions about the supposed length of her lifespan (e.g. "she survived more than sixty years"), the most common of which takes the form of two seemingly innocuous dates next to her name. Indeed, contrary to what one is naturally led to infer from the repeated use made of these two years, we actually know neither the date of birth nor that of the demise of Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī. In the absence of such basic dates, they were substituted with two other dates, i.e. (AD) 941 and 1001. Through a kind of semantic shift from "lifespan" to "period of activity", two epigraphical mentions of Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī presented as her first and last known records are in fact respectively read as *terminus ante* and *post quem* for her lifespan. Collected by Eugen Hultzsch in 1892, the former[20] was also the very first discovered record referring to the queen. This short inscription dated to the 34th regnal year of *matirai*

17. Cf. Sircar (1965: 258–265).

18. *EI* 22.34. See also the Tiruvālaṅkāṭu Copper-plates of the sixth year of Rājendra Cōḻa I (*ca.* AD 1015–1016) in *SII* 3.205: *tataḥ prabhr̥ti co*[*ā**]*nām abhiṣeka kramād ime* / *nāmanī parivartte te rājñām ājñābhidhāyinī*, *śloka* 32.

19. On the appearance of *meykkīrttis* in Tamil inscriptions, see E. Francis (2016). The author shows that, contrary to a widespread belief that these panegyric preambles came into usage from the eighth year of Rājarāja Cōḻa I, the latter had in fact at least two forerunners: the Pallava King Nandivarman III and his proto-*meykkīrtti teḷḷāṟṟ'eṟinta* ("[He] who was victorious at Teḷḷāṟu") in the middle of the ninth century AD, and the Rāṣṭrakūṭa King Kr̥ṣṇa III, who was the first south Indian king to be distinguished by a "full" *meykkīrtti* (*tirumakaḷ muyaṅka*, etc.) as early as AD 963–4. See also Francis & Schmid 2010.

20. *ARE* 96 of 1892 = *SII* 2.75.

Fig. 3 — View of the pillar bearing the first known inscription referring to the queen (*ARE* 96 of 1892). Covered verandah round the central shrine, Ujjīvanātha temple at Uyyakkoṇṭāṉ Tirumalai (Nicolas Cane, 2012).

koṇṭa kōpparakēcarivarmaṉ or "King Parakesarivarman who took Madurai", was found engraved on a pillar (fig. 3) of the covered verandah round the central shrine of the Uccīvanātar (Ujjīvanātha) temple, a shrine built on the top of a hillock overhanging Kaṟkuṭi (present-day Uyyakkoṇṭāṉ Tirumalai, 5 km west of Tiruchirappalli), on the south bank of the river Kāverī. The dating of this epigraph does not present any particular difficulty: while several sovereigns of the line claimed to have conquered the capital of the Pāṇḍyan kings, Parāntaka Cōḻa I – "[He who is] Death to his enemies"[21] – was the only Parakesarivarman whose reign from 906–907 to 953–954 was sufficiently long. This 34th regnal year thus provides us with the date 940–941 for the first known mention of the queen, which reads as follows:[22]

(1) *matirai koṇṭa koppara* (2)*kecari**panma**rkku yāṇṭu mu* (3)*ppattunālāvatu ten*(4)*karai* ***brahma**teyam na**ntipanma**ma* (5)*ṅkalattu tirukkaṟkuṭi* ***para*** (6)***mesvara**ṟkku pirāntakan kaṇ*(7)*ṭarātittatevar teviyār* (8) *maḻaperumāḷ makaḷār pirā*(9)*ntakaṉmātevaṭikaḷār* (10) *°oru tirunontāviḷakku °i* (11)*ravum pakalum °erivatāka nica*(12)*tam cūla°uḻakkāl °uḻakku* (13) *neyaṭṭi cantirātittava*(14)*l °erippatāka vaitta cāvā* (15) *mūvāpperāṭu toṇṇū*(16)*ṟu* ***panmāheśvara*** [***ra****]***kṣai***

In the thirty-fourth [regnal] year of King Parakesarivarman who took Madurai, for the Supreme Lord of the glorious Kaṟkuṭi in Nantipanmamaṅkalam (Nandivarmamaṅgalam), a *brahmadeya* on the south bank (i.e. of the river Kāverī), the venerable spouse of Lord Pirāntakan-Kaṇṭarātittaṉ (i.e. Gaṇḍarāditya son of Parāntaka), venerable daughter of Maḻaperumāḷ, she, the venerable Pirāntakan-Mātēvaṭikaḷ, has deposited ninety adult sheep (or goats) that neither die nor grow old (i.e. to be maintained eternally) for one sacred perpetual lamp to be burnt night and day as long as the moon and the sun [endure], with [one] daily *uḻakku* (measure of capacity) of ghee [measured] by the *uḻakku* [stamped with] a spear (or trident). [This gift is placed under] the protection of the Panmāheśvaras.[23]

21. The Vēlañcēri Plates of the 25th regnal year of Parāntaka Cōḻa I (AD 931–932), provide a gloss for the king's royal title of Parāntaka: "He who is regarded as Death by enemy kings" (*mṛtyuṃ ripukṣitibhṛto … yan manvate*, *śloka* 13).

22. Grantha characters are marked in bold.

23. All the translations from the Tamil and the Sanskrit discussed in this paper are mine.

Dozens of inscriptions engraved throughout the following decades, under the successive rule of at least five Cōḻa sovereigns, would enable Hultzsch and his disciples to identify the princess bearing the name Pirāntakan-Mātēvaṭikaḷ with the queen of Rājakesarivarman Gaṇḍarāditya Cōḻa (r. *ca.* 949–957), second son of Parāntaka Cōḻa I, a lady who rose to fame under the title Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī.

Fig. 4 — View of the remaining portion of the inscription *ARE* 200 of 1904 after renovation. Southern base of the sanctuary of Candramaulīśvara, Paramasvāmikaḷ temple at Tiruvakkarai (Nicolas Cane, 2011).

The last known inscription recording activity of Queen Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī as well as its interpretation constitute a somewhat more delicate issue. An epigraph dated to the 16th year of the reign of King Rājarāja Cōḻa I (1000–1001) containing a reference to the building in stone of the Civalōkam (*Śivaloka*) temple (present-day Candramaulīśvara) at Tiruvakkarai (about 30 km north-west of Pondicherry) by the Cōḻa queen, has been presented, for more than a century, as the "last inscription of Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī". As illustrated by the two above quotations, this very inscription has consequently been used since then for dating the demise of the queen. What the widespread adoption of this alleged date of death[24] reveals, is that a mere mention of Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī's patronage activity in a given inscription, suffices in historians' eyes to establish that the queen was alive at the time of its engraving. This approach, which has dramatic implications for any attempt to reconstruct biographical facts about the historical figure, appears

24. One may quote, for example, M. Arunachalam (1970: 13): "Sembiyanmadevi passed away, well past the ripe old age of 80, in 1001 A.D., the sixteenth year of Rajaraja's reign"; and K.V. Zvelebil (1998: 60 n. 23): "Married probably at a very young age, she survived her husband, her son Uttama, and died in 1001 AD during the reign of the great Rājarāja."

to rest on a preconception, if not a misconception, about the actual nature of these stone records: the Cōḻa queen would necessarily have been responsible for the issuing and the engraving of each one of the numerous wall inscriptions referring to her activities. The best evidence for this belief is the systematic and unquestioned use in publications of the seemingly innocuous words "inscription of the queen" to denote archaeological artefacts bearing the name of Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī. Such use of language begs a number of questions, at least in the specific case of the inscription which formerly adorned the southern base of the dilapidated sanctuary at Tiruvakkarai, until the renovation which led to the disappearance of the major part of its text under a concrete floor (fig. 4). Contrary to what is stated in the few summary lines given in the *Annual Report* for the year 1903–1904,[25] this epigraph does not actually record "a gift to the stone temple by" Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī herself, but a transfer of tax to the stone temple which she had caused to be built at an unspecified time:

> (5) … ***śrī*korājarājarājakesaripanma*ṟ*k**(6)*ku yāṇṭu 16 āvatu* ***śrī*****kaṇṭa*rāti[*t**]*tatevar nampirāṭṭiyār* ***śrī*°***uttamacoḻarait tiruvayiṟu vāytta °uṭaiyapirāṭṭiyār cempiyaṉ māteviyār* (7) *°eṭuppittaruḷiṉa* ***śrī*****tiruvakkarai tirukka*ṟṟ*aḷi civalokam(*m*)uṭaiya* ***paramasvāmi****kaḷukku tevatāṉamāka ceyta °ūr °oymānāṭṭu °āṉmurnāṭṭu maṇali °ūrār* ***rāja****(8)ke****sari****yāl aṭṭakkaṭava pañcavāra(*ṉ*)*ṉ*e[*l**]*lu °āyirakkāṭi paḷḷippeṟu toṇṇūṟṟu°a[*ṟ*u] kāṭimukkāl …*[26]
>
> In the 16th [regnal] year of His Majesty the King Rājarāja Rājakesarivarman, the members of the village assembly of Maṇali (*maṇali ūrār*) – a village of the Āṉmur [sub-]district in the Ōymā district, which was converted into a *devadāna* to the benefit of the Supreme God residing in the sacred stone temple of Civalōkam in the glorious Tiruvakkarai [village], which the venerable Queen Consort of His Majesty the King Kaṇṭarātittaṉ, the venerable Uṭaiya-Pirāṭṭi who bore the glorious Uttama Cōḻa in her sacred womb [*alias*] the venerable Cempiyaṉ Mātēvi graciously caused to rise (*eṭuppittaruḷiṉa*) – [are assigned] the duty of paying (*aṭṭakkaṭava*) a *pañcavāram* ("one fifth share [tax]") amounting to [one] thousand *kāṭi* (measure of capacity) of paddy and a *paḷḷippēṟu*[27] of ninety-six *kāṭi* and three quarters [of paddy] as measures by the [grain measure] Rājakesarin (*rājakesariyāl*)…

As seen in these few lines, the main object of the Tiruvakkarai inscription was apparently not so much to record the erection of the stone temple by Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī, but rather to officialise the transfer (ordered by the king?) of this major tax – a given quantity of paddy imposed on the *devadāna* lands – to the main deity enshrined in the said temple. The exclusive ownership on these lands and their produce having, by definition,

25. "Records a gift to the stone temple of Śivalōka-uḍaiya-Paramaspâmigaḷ (sic) by Uḍaiyapirâṭṭiyâr Śembiyaṉ-Mâdêviyâr, queen of Gaṇḍarâdittadêvar, who gave birth to Śri-Uttama Chôḻa-dêva."

26. *ARE* 200 of 1904 = *SII* 17.222.

27. In his *Tamiḻk Kalveṭṭuc Collakarāti* [*Glossary of Tamil Inscriptions*], Y. Subbarayalu (2003: 401) glosses the term *paḷḷippēṟu* as "*paḷḷiccanta nilattiṉ pēril celuttappaṭum oru vari*", which can be translated as "a land tax to be paid by villages endowed to Jaina and Buddhist temples."

been obtained by the god himself, the collected paddy was intended to meet the daily expenses of the temple enshrining his divine presence under a regulation of donation (*nivantam*)[28] of which account is given in detail in the remainder of the inscription. But there is nothing in the text of the inscription to indicate a direct involvement by the queen in this specific regulation. Thus, this epigraph represents in no way an "inscription of the queen" and it certainly cannot be considered a reliable indicator for establishing the date of her demise. Furthermore, I should mention the discovery I made during a field trip to the village of Teṉṉēri (20 km north-west of Kanchipuram) led by Dr G. Vijayavenugopal, epigraphist of the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) Centre in Pondicherry, in September 2012. Three lines of an incomplete and hitherto unknown inscription, found engraved on the *adhiṣṭhāna* of the western facade of the Uttamacōḻīśvarar temple (also called Kaṇṭālīśvarar), which bears the date of "the 245th day of the 17th [regnal] year" following the *meykkīrtti* of King Rājarāja Cōḻa I (*ca.* March 1012). The remaining portion records the gift of a silver plate (*veḷḷi-taḷikai*) for food offerings by "the venerable Queen Consort of the glorious King Kaṇṭarādittaṉ, the venerable Pirāṉtakaṉ-Mātēvaṭikaḷ who bore graciously the glorious King Uttama Cōḻa in her sacred womb *alias* the glorious Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī, also known as the venerable Uṭaiya-Pirāṭṭi" (*śrīkaṇṭarādittadevar nampirāṭṭiyār śrī°uttamac*[*ō**]*ḻadevarai tiruvayiṟu vā*[*y**]*ttaruḷiṉa pirāṉtakaṉmāt*[*ē**]*vaṭikaḷārāṉa śrīcempiyaṉ mah*[*ā**]*deviyārāna °uṭ*[*ai*]*yapirāṭṭiyār*, line 2). Whether or not this epigraph is the actual last wall inscription recording Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī's activity, it further demonstrates the lack of basis for retaining the year 1001 as that of the demise of the queen.

These few considerations about the assumed lifespan of the Cōḻa queen reflect the following reality: despite a century of scholarship during which a substantial portion of the bulk of epigraphical references to Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī have been edited, contemporary strategies implemented for their interpretation still meet with insurmountable difficulties inherent in the partial nature of the discourse they convey. All the more so as the historical background of both production and reception of the said discourse remains highly speculative. As rightly pointed out by Leslie C. Orr, "Those who composed the inscriptions are not talking to us and they have not anticipated the kinds of questions we bring to our reading of these texts."[29] In the absence of biographical evidence on Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī, apart from the snippets

28. Line 16: "*nivaṉtam ceytapaṭi*" (read *nivantam*) or "in conformity to the established regulation".

29. Cit. Orr (2006: xiii). As early as 1908, the pioneering epigraphist John Faithfull Fleet (1847–1917) pointed out in a seminal chapter on epigraphy "While, however, the inscriptions contain the historical and other information which we seek, they were written, engraved, and published, not with the object of presenting that information, but for other purposes which will be made apparent further on; and as a rule it is only incidentally, and as a purely secondary consideration, that they record the details which are so valuable to us." Cit. Fleet (1908: 4). See also Henige (2005: 191), who observes: "Inscriptions are not without problems as texts. They tend to be formulaic, disembodied, and laconic. While often intended only for the moment – for example, economic transactions or ritual activities – they are also sometimes intended specifically to impress the present and the future and thus can be expected to be replete with rodomontade and inaccuracies."

provided by her titulature, the chronological framework for her existence is still entirely open to debate. And the same applies, to a certain extent, to the queen's active patronage towards the holy sites of Tamil Śaivism. It is thus a mostly conjectural literature that shapes Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī's contemporary "epigraphical *persona"*,[30] i.e. an historical figure who appears to have left an indelible imprint on her time, but whose very existence would have remained unknown without the numerous testimonies recorded in stone attesting to her outstanding activity.

Queen Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī from Kōṉērirājapuram to Washington, D.C.: the installation of an "epigraphical *persona*" in the Freer Gallery

Although epigraphical attestations of Queen Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī's carrier started during the reign of her father-in-law Parāntaka Cōḻa I, as we have seen above, the remainder of the corpus suggests that it was only with Parakesarivarman Madurāntaka Uttama Cōḻa's ascent to the throne in 970–971, that the patronage activity of his mother began in earnest. Before this date, indeed, at least two epigraphical references to Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī are safely identified, three at most if one adds a famous epigraph[31] found engraved on the *antarāla* of the Ananteśvarasvāmin temple's main sanctuary at Uṭaiyārkuṭi (present-day Kāṭṭumaṉṉārkōyil, 25 km south-west of Chidambaram) (fig. 5). This inscription, which is best known for the intriguing epithet *mēṟkeḻuntaruḷiṉa devar* it bestows upon Gaṇḍarāditya Cōḻa – most probably a euphemistic reference to his demise – has already caused much ink to flow.[32] The issues raised by its content and its contemporary interpretations, but above all by its date, being far too lengthy to be discussed properly here, I will confine myself to the following few facts. Because of this very epithet, the epigraph has been more or less implicitly used since its publication by G.V. Srinivasa Rao in 1970 (*SII* 19.11) to provide a dating estimate for the beginning of Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī's widowhood. Bearing a mere second regnal year of Parakesarivarman as sole dating element, it has been assigned to the reign of Parakesarivarman Ariñjaya Cōḻa (r. *ca.* 956–957), Gaṇḍarāditya's younger brother and successor[33] – whose rule remains as little known as that of Gaṇḍarāditya himself. But a decade later, following N. Sethuraman's *Early Cholas: Mathematics Reconstructs the Chronology* (1980), the record came to be reattributed, quite unostentatiously, to the reign of Parakesarivarman Uttama Cōḻa (r. 971–987) in the publications of the Archaeological Survey of India. What otherwise makes this epigraph

30. I borrow the expression "epigraphical *persona*" (*personnage épigraphique*) from Charlotte Schmid (2014: 1, 12 and 201).

31. *ARE* 540 of 1920 = *SII* 19.11 = *SII* 32, Part 2: 2.

32. For more details on the epithet *mēṟkeḻuntaruḷiṉa devar* and the associated "theory of the journey to the west", see Cane (2016).

33. "This is evidently an inscription of Ariñjaya since Gaṇḍarāditya's demise seems to be implied as a recent event." Cit. *SII* 19.11, p. 5.

Fig. 5 — View of the *antārala* on the southern facade of the main sanctuary, Ananteśvarasvāmin temple at Uṭaiyārkuṭi (Nicolas Cane, 2012).

worthy of attention is the fact that it was precisely the commemoration of the demised king that appears to have motivated, at least in part, the building in stone of the first temple attributed to the patronage of his widowed queen by epigraphical sources, i.e. the Umāmaheśvara temple at Kōṉērirājapuram, a village lying 16 km east of Kumbakonam on the north bank of the Kāverī, which in olden times was known as Tirunallam or simply Nallam.

The recognition of the Kōṉērirājapuram temple's historical significance appears to date back to the year 1908–1909, when two survey campaigns were led in the village by K.V. Subrahmanya Aiyer. Although undated, the single epigraph copied during the first campaign at the end of 1908 sufficed to draw the sustained attention of scholars to this local foundation.

Fig. 6 — Sculpted bas-relief with label inscription (*ARE* 450 of 1908). South wall of the *vimāna*, Umāmahēśvarar temple at Kōṉērirājapuram (Nicolas Cane, 2011).

The short inscription was found engraved beneath a sculpted panel (fig. 6), which was fitted into the south wall of the *garbhagṛha* so that the depicted scene is displayed at the devotee's eye level. Here are the terms in which the inscription introduces the sculpted relief to viewers:

> (1) ***svasti śrī*** ‖ ***śrī****kaṇṭarā****ditta******de****var teviyār mātevaṭikaḷārāṉa* ***śrī****cempiyaṉ māteviyā*(2)*r tammuṭaiya tirumakaṉār* ***śrīmadhu****rāntakatevarāṉa* ***śrī***° *uttamacoḻar tirurājyañ ceyta*(3)*ruḷāniṟkat tammuṭaiyār* ***śrī****kaṇṭarā****ditta-******de****var tirunāmattāl tirunallamuṭaiyārkku*(4)*t tirukkaṟṟaḷi* °*eḻuntaruḷuvittu* °*ittirukkaṟṟaḷiyiley tirunallamuṭaiyārait tiruvaṭit to*(5)*ḻukiṉṟārāka* °*eḻuntaruḷuvitta* ***śrī****kaṇṭarā****ditta******de****var* °*ivar* ||| °*u* ||| °*u* ||| °*u* [34]
>
> Hail! Prosperity! The venerable Mātēvaṭikaḷ spouse of His Majesty the King Gaṇḍarāditya *alias* Her Majesty the Queen Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī, while her blessed son His Majesty the Lord Madhurāntaka *alias* His Majesty Uttama Cōḻa was graciously conducting his glorious reign, had graciously caused a sacred stone temple to appear for the Lord (*uṭaiyār*) of Tirunallam in the sacred name of her lord His Majesty the King Gaṇḍarāditya (*tammuṭaiyār śrīkaṇṭarāditta devar tirunāmattāl*). This (man) (*ivar*) is His Majesty the King Gaṇḍarāditya whom [she?] graciously caused to appear while adoring the sacred feet of the Lord of Tirunallam in this sacred stone temple.

Given the obvious significance of this discovery, both the contents of the image and the inscription were briefly described by H. Krishna Sastri in his *Annual Report* for the year 1908–1909. To Krishna Sastri goes the credit

34. *ARE* 450 of 1908 = *SII* 3.146 = *SII* 32, Part II: 218.

for the first speculations with regard to the temple's historical background, the sculpted panel's estimated time of production, the patron who commissioned it, as well as the likeness of the represented individual:

> The act of Śembiyaṉ-Mādēviyār must apparently have been done after the death of Gaṇḍarāditya perhaps as a monument of her husband's memory. The figure thus executed under the orders of the queen and in her life-time must be taken to be a true representation of the Chōḷa king Gaṇḍarāditya. It may at least exemplify the type of the conventional form in which royal personages were figured in their worshipping posture in Chōḷa times.[35]

Setting aside the issue of the validity of this string of assertions and the considerations relative to the degree of resemblance of the alleged funerary portrait of King Gaṇḍarāditya, these few lines by the governmental epigraphist were to prove most influential, not only for later attempts to throw light on the sculpted panel and its relation to the epigraph, but mostly for the portrayal of the widowed Queen Mother of the Cōḻa house fashioned through subsequent decades of secondary literature. Now, because not only this crucial inscription, but all the other epigraphs which were collected on site a few months later, proved to confirm the adage that "there are virtually no 'foundation' inscriptions in the temples of Tamilnadu",[36] in the following *Annual Report*, Krishna Sastri cautiously warned, "It cannot be stated exactly in what particular year of Uttama Cōḻa's reign Uḍaiyapirāṭṭiyār Śembiyaṉ-Mādēviyār got the Tirunallam temple rebuilt on stone."[37] As a consequence, the estimated date for the completion of the Umāmaheśvara's main sanctuary relied, as usual, on the earliest dated event occurring in its epigraphical corpus. Indeed, in accordance with an approach adopted in the field of south Indian archaeology since its very beginning, stylistic considerations for the dating of the building were widely superseded by the study of the testimonies adorning its walls.[38] The coveted "evidence" was supplied by the longest epigraph (238 lines) found on the sanctuary.[39] Although dated to the eighth regnal year of Uttama Cōḻa (978–979), it refers to a decision which was to take effect from the third year of his rule (*yāṇṭu mūṉṟāvatu mutal*), i.e. 973–974: the conversion of a plot of land and its income in paddy into a tax free *devadāna* for the maintenance of sacred flower gardens (*nantavāṉappuṟamāy devadāna iṟaiyiliyāka*), "as funds for the feeding and clothing of the four persons servicing the sacred flower

35. Cit. Part II, Para. 41 of *G.O. No. 538, 28th July 1909*, in *ARE* 1908–1909.

36. Cit. Orr (2004: 460, n. 32), in the sense that epigraphical corpuses engraved on stone temples of the Cōḻa period ordinarily provide no date of completion or of consecration for their building. Yasushi Ogura (1999: 122), for his part, observes that "it is not so unusual for a temple not to have such an inscription, even if it is a royal building."

37. Cit. Part II, Para. 18 of *G.O. No. 665, 28th July 1910*, in *ARE* 1909–1910.

38. On the subordination of material culture to text, one may cite Morrison & Lycett (1997: 216), who observe: "Often, written history occupies a privileged position relative to archaeological data, even when the latter contradict or complement textual accounts. This priority of documents can be the product of archaeological systematics when the material record is simply employed to illustrate 'known' historical patterns or events." See also Trautmann & Sinopoli (2002). On the particular topic of inscriptional evidence, see Henige (2005: 71–72).

39. *ARE* 635 of 1909 = *SII* 3.151–151A = *SII* 32, Part II: 52–52A.

gardens, among which [the garden named] 'the Glorious Gaṇḍarādityaṉ'" (*śrīgaṇḍarādityaṉ uḷḷiṭṭa nantavāṉaṅkaḷukkup paṇiceyyum ā*[*ḷ*] *nālvarkku koṟṟu*[*kku*]*m* [*puṭavai*] *mutalukkumāka*, lines 4–7). On the basis of the resulting assertion of a more or less reliable *terminus ante quem* for the building somewhere before AD 975, the innovative character of its iconographical program attracted attention beyond epigraphical circles. To mention the most obvious example of its novelty, the edifice hosts in one of its nine *devakoṣṭha*s what experts in the field of south Indian temple art, starting with Douglas Barrett, acknowledged as the first known full-scaled figure of Śiva Naṭarāja (fig. 7).[40] As for the labelled panel, it received the honour of a full page reproduction in the third volume of the *South-Indian Inscriptions* series (1920) previously alluded to, along with the translated text of the epigraph edited by H. Krishna Sastri. The credit for this first reproduction of the now famous royal portrait goes to V. Maduranayakam Pillai, the then probationary photographer who worked also as draughtsman and copyist, and had sketched it on site a decade earlier during the first campaign led by K.V. Subrahmanya Ayyar.[41] Provided with text and image, successive generations of authors have since delivered various interpretations of the sculpted panel and eventually bestowed upon it the status of "earliest inscribed portrait of Cōḻa royalty" (Kaimal 2000: 141). As regards these different and sometimes competing interpretations,[42] I will content myself to refer the reader to Padma Kaimal's article, as well to my own work (Cane 2016). I should merely add that the alleged portrait was regarded from the outset as contemporaneous with both the label inscription and the whole structure that houses it today, whereas none of the three can actually be assigned a precise date with a high degree of certainty.

Among the eight local stone temples which, like the Tirunallam temple, can be safely attributed to the patronage activity of Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī on the sole grounds of available epigraphical evidence,[43] there is one whose inscriptional corpus points to the special significance the Cōḻa queen and her female entourage attached to it. Seven out of the nine sites on which the nine temples were erected during the reigns of Uttama Cōḻa and his successor Rājarāja I had been the object, over the previous three centuries, of devotional poems by the wandering saints of Tamil Śaivism, Appar, Campantar and Cuntarar. Like the 253 other *pāṭal peṟṟa talam* (i.e. "the sites having received a song [from the saintly trio]") spread over present-day Tamil Nadu, these 9 sites are likely to have sheltered earlier places of worship made

40. "I am on secure ground in maintaining that on a closely datable temple a Nataraja does not occupy a *devakoshtha* before Konerirajapuram…" Cit. Barrett (1974: 105); "On this temple a Nataraja in ananda-tandava for the first time in South Indian art occupies a devakoshta on the temple." Cit. Barrett (1976: 7). Following Barrett, Kamil V. Zvelebil (1998: 19), writes: "[T]he full-fledged, established canonical form in the canonical position, of Naṭarāja in *ānanda-tāṇḍava* makes its first dated appearance in South Indian art in a *devakoṣṭha* on the Umāmaheśvara temple at Konerirajapuram which was built between 969–976 A.D. by the Queen Mother Sembiyan Mahādevī."

41. Cf. Part I, Para. 1 (*Office Routine*) of *G.O. No. 665, 28th July 1910*.

42. See for example Venkataraman (1976: 40–41); Sethuraman (1980: 40–42); Balambal (1998: 176); and Pechilis Prentiss (1999: 97).

43. Cf. Cane (2016).

Fig. 7 — Niche figure of Śiva-Naṭarāja. South wall of the *ardhamaṇḍapa*, Umāmahēśvarar temple at Kōṉērirājapuram (Nicolas Cane, 2013).

from brick, timber and other perishable materials, from about the seventh century AD. The situation appears different when we look at a village lying some 15 km south-west to Nagappattinam, which today, as in Cōḻa times, bears the name of Cempiyaṉmātēvi. Indeed, the epigraphical corpus which

V. Venkatasubba Aiyer, Tamil Assistant under G. Venkoba Rao,[44] found engraved on the Kailāsanāthasvāmin temple when he surveyed the village in 1925, presents the queen as the founder of not only the stone structure, but also of the whole *brahmadeya* of Cempiyaṉmātēvi-caturvedimaṅgalam at the heart of which it has been erected. Furthermore, the said corpus contains ten epigraphs recording donations made between 983 and 992 by a total of twelve queens and princesses, among whom eight spouses of Uttama Cōḻa. Ten out of the fifteen donations thus recorded were made for the specific purpose of financing festivities for the birthday of the Queen Mother "on the blessed day of (the lunar asterism) Kēṭṭai (Jyeṣṭhā) in (the month of) Cittirai (April–May)" (*tiruṉāḷāṉa cittirait tirukk*[*ē**]*ṭṭai nāḷ*).

In 1990, the renowned Asian art historian Vidya Dehejia published a first book dealing with Cōḻa "imperial" art, which displayed on its front cover a reproduction of the bronze housed in the Freer Gallery of Art. Addressing the issue raised by this "extraordinarily elegant piece",[45] the author argued, among many other things, that "it must be admitted that there is something about the bronze, with its singularly sensitive modeling, that sets it apart from standard depictions of the goddess", or that "the noticeable gravity of expression and the remarkable dignity of bearing, together with the exaggerated slope of the shoulders, suggests the likelihood of a portrait sculpture, portraits in India always being idealized to a degree."[46] Consequently, Dehejia proposed to revive a suggestion which had been put forward by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy as early as 1930: "that the piece long famous as the Freer Gallery Devi is in fact a portrait statue of Sembiyan Mahadevi, commissioned for her Kailasanatha temple at the very end of the tenth century and executed by her bronze workshop in the final days of its existence."[47] Yet, although the pioneering art historian and thinker had indeed raised this possibility regarding the bronze which the Freer Gallery had just then acquired, and whose beauty he described as "disturbing",[48] he actually showed more restraint in his assertion than Dehejia did, at least regarding the identification of the image. Thus, he began by stating, "On the whole, one is tempted to regard this as the statue of a deified queen, and in this case to recall such historical cases as that of the widowed Queen Sembiyaṉ-Mahādevī … whose statue was set up in a temple[49] by Rājendra Cola in A.D. 1020. It may be assumed that in such cases where a temple

44. G. Venkoba Rao had succeeded H. Krishna Sastri to the post of Assistant Archaeological Superintendent for Epigraphy (Southern Circle) in 1920.

45. Cit. Dehejia (1990: 36).

46. *Ibidem*, p. 38.

47. *Ibidem*, p. 4. See also p. 38 where Dehejia adds "Queen Sembiyan was an exceptional matriarch, respected and admired by her royal nephews and grand-nephews, her brothers-in-law and their wives and offspring, to say nothing of her own son. I would suggest that one of them commissioned this bronze as a portrait of the queen to be placed in her Kailasanatha temple, built in a town named after her."

48. Coomaraswamy (1930: 1).

49. Coomaraswamy did not name the Kailāsanāthasvāmin in his essay, but he added a footnote here referring to "South Indian Epigraphy, Ann. Rep., 1925–26, pp. 104–5" where the Cempiyaṉmātēvi temple is dealt with.

is erected in honour of a deified queen, that there must have been both a 'mūla vigraha' in the main shrine, and also an 'utsava vigraha' for processional purposes." And the scholar concluded cautiously, "But naturally, there is no authority to suggest an identification of our statue with that of this particular queen."[50] Yet, both Coomaraswamy and Dehejia appear to have less cautiously grounded a reasoning upon an inscription from the Kailāsanāthasvāmin temple. Listed under the reference number 481 in the *Annual Report* for the year 1925–1926, this epigraph was considered by G. Venkoba Rao to be "important in that it refers to the image of Śembiyaṉ-mahādēvi which was set up in the temple in the 8th year of the Chōḷa sovereign (corresponding to A.D. 1020) along with another image of Ishabhavāhanadēva, and makes provision for offering to them." He added that "this portrait-image is not now traceable in this temple."[51] And in the same report the content of the epigraph, which remains unpublished to this day, was summarised as two remissions of taxes by the village assembly, the second of which applying to "the taxes on some land granted by another individual for offerings and worship to the images of Ishabhavāhanadēvar and of queen Śembiyaṉmādēvip-Pirāṭṭiyār and to several other images in the temple for which no offerings had hitherto been made."[52] The Cempiyaṉmātēvi record does not speak of the birthday of the queen nor her parentage. What does it really say about the queenly "portrait-image"? An *in situ* reading of this incomplete and much damaged inscription, associated with a consultation of the transcript preserved at the Epigraphic Department of the Archaeological Survey of India in Mysore, provided with answers. Here is the relevant passage that has fuelled the debate since the epigraph was brought to scholarly attention in 1925:

> (4) … °*iyāṭṭai tulānāyaṟṟuc canikkiḻamai peṟṟa °āyileyatti nāṉṟu*
> (5) […] °*eḻuntaruḷuvitta °i**ṣa**[**pa**]vā**ha**na**de**varkkum **śrī**cempiyaṉmātevi-ppirāṭṭiyār*[*k**]*kum tiruvamutupuṟamāka **sabhai**yom °*[*i*]*ṟaiyiḻicci kuṭutta nilamāvatu …*
>
> On this day of (the lunar asterism) Āyilēyam (Āśleṣā), which this year occurred on Saturday in the solar month of Tulā (Aippaci, Oct.–Nov.), we of the brahmin assembly gave the following land after having exempted it from taxes as land provision for sacred food offerings (*tiruvamutu puṟamāka*) to the God Vṛṣabhavāhana (*iṣapavāhanadevar*) and Her Majesty the Queen Cempiyaṉ Mātēvi (*śrīcempiyaṉmāt*[*ē**]*vippirāṭṭiyār*), whom […] graciously caused to appear …

The inscription being partly obliterated by later additions in the original layout of the *ardhamaṇḍapa*, and most notably by the concrete basin built

50. Cit. Coomaraswamy (1930: 1). See also T.G. Aravamuthan (1931: 34): "We have already seen how the memory of Gandar-aditya was perpetuated by Sembiyan-ma-devi, his queen. Her memory in turn seems to have been perpetuated in a statue set up to her in a temple to Siva which she had herself built at Sembiyan-ma-devi, a village which she re-named after herself and made a gift of to the temple. Grants of land too seem to have been made by the assembly of the village for the offering of food to her image."

51. Cit. Part II, § 24 in *ARE* 1925–1926.

52. Cit. Part I, p. 20 in *ARE* 1925–1926.

Fig. 8 — View of the concrete basin which partially obliterates the inscription *ARE* 481 of 1925 on the north wall of the *ardhamaṇḍapa*, Kailāsanāthasvāmin temple at Cempiyaṉmātēvi (Nicolas Cane, 2011).

under the *praṇāla* fitted below the niche of Durgā (fig. 8), a lacuna occurs, very unfortunately, at the beginning of the fifth line, as seen in the above transliteration. The location of this gap, immediately before *eḻuntaruḷuvitta* ("graciously caused to appear"), is indeed the exact spot on the stone where the name of the person who was responsible for the installation of the two images would have been supplied. A person who, consequently, is doomed to remain anonymous. It may be noted in passing that no term such as

tirumēṉi (divine body) or *pratimā* (imitation, reflection), which commonly apply to ritual icons of deities and royal figures, appear in this inscription to denote the image of "[the Lord with] a bull for vehicle" or that of the Cōḷa queen. The remainder of the inscription gives the details of the food offerings, among which figures the menu which was to be served to the queenly image: "divine vegetable meal" (*kaṟiyamutu*) and "divine areca meal [comprising] two arecanuts and eight betel-leaves" (*aṭaikkāyamutu pākkiraṇṭum veṟṟilai eṭṭukkum*, lines 6–7). As for the "several other images in the temple for which no offerings had hitherto been made", they appear to belong to a different portion of the record.

Despite some reviews of *Art of the Imperial Cholas*, that have pointed out Dehejia's lack of objectivity and analysis, whether about her identification of the Pārvatī image exhibited at the Freer Gallery, or more generally about the stylistic criteria used for dating the artefacts covered in the study,[53] the author has reiterated her identification of the bronze image. Firstly, in 1998, Dehejia – who at that time had just become Associate Director and Chief Curator of the Smithsonian's Sackler and Freer Galleries – defended her position in an ironically titled paper ("The Very Idea of a Portrait") in which no more argument appeared:

> Perhaps the artist who sculpted the bronze image perceived in Sembiyan Mahadevi such power and eminence that he could envision her as comparable to none less than Parvati, the great goddess. Would the queen have been recognized from this image, in which queen and goddess seem to mingle and merge? Very unlikely. Is it reasonable to expect such recognition? Once again the answer is no. But when the image was carried in procession during her birthday celebrations, all would have recognized her.[54]

Lastly, in a more recent publication (2009), the art historian and curator delivered a new version of her claim, but this time with the alleged authoritative support of the famous, but still unpublished Cempiyaṉmātēvi inscription. This reference to the content of the epigraph is, is fact, more of a "reinvention" than a "rewording", far from the reality described in the millenium-old epigraph engraved on the *adhiṣṭhāna* of the Kailāsanāthasvāmin temple:

> It is rare to find portrait sculptures of specific queens. An inscription speaks of a bronze image of the Chola queen Sembiyan Mahadevi, installed in the Kailasanatha Shiva temple in the town of Sembiyan Mahadevi (named after the queen). The record makes monetary

53. See for example Michael D. Willis's review (1991: 425): "In a short review it is impossible to deal comprehensively with the flaws of this book." And the one by Diran Kavork Dohanian (1994): "The author's approach is primarily descriptive, with very little analysis, either historical or on the level of meaning, and with only routine consideration of factors of style. There is also a marked tendency to disregard evidence, or scholarly opinion, that may contradict the conclusions she offers. And the authority of the text is undermined by a persistent dependence upon assertions unsupported by analysis and/or correct information. The most astonishing flaw is in the author's fanciful identification of a bronze image of a goddess as the portrait of Queen Sembiyan made at the very end of the 10th century and offered to the temple of Kailāsanāthasvāmin."

54. Cit. Dehejia (1998: 44).

> provisions to ensure that on the queen's birthday, the image would be taken on a processional tour of the town and that Brahmins and townsfolk would be invited to a lavish celebratory feast. … Devotees would likely have "recognized" the bronze as Sembiyan Mahadevi only because it was brought out in procession on the specific occasion of the queen's birthday honors.[55]

Until recently, this version asserting the existence of a processional bronze image of the queen commissioned for her birthday celebrations was reflected in the text of the museum label associated with the "Freer Devī".[56] A decade have passed since Dehejia's 2009 publication and in the meantime the famous bronze have received a new caption, quoted at the opening of this paper. The revised text states as an established fact that a queenly portrait "was cast in bronze around the year 990". Yet, to the best of my knowledge, the unpublished Cempiyaṉmātēvi inscription dated to 1020 remains to this day the sole known epigraphic attestation of a solid image of this queen.

Conclusions

The bronze image of Pārvatī housed since nearly a century in the Freer Gallery of Art of Washington, D.C., and its accompanying exhibit label have provided me the opportunity to illustrate, through the evocation of a few inscriptional references to Queen Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī, what Raymond Aron considered to be the fundamental theme of hermeneutics: interpreting traces of a past that only exists for us through these very remnants.[57] As exposed throughout this article, the main challenge posed by the remarkable sum of epigraphs attesting to the Cōḻa queen's long-lasting activity, lies precisely in the fact that this historical figure and her destiny only exist for us through these intrinsically partial remnants. Despite their elliptical nature, entire chapters of south Indian history, among which the few pages marked by the queen, were indeed built out of the modern interpretations these remnants received at the turn of the twentieth century from a handful of pioneer epigraphists headed by Eugen Hultzsch. We have seen how the numerical importance of the records from the Cōḻa period accumulated within only a few decades

55. Cit. Dehejia (2009: 41–42).

56. The previous caption (readily available on the Net) reads: "Here, sloping shoulders, distinctive facial features, and a regal expression suggest this may be a portrait sculpture of the great Chola patron, Queen Sembiyan Mahadevi (active 941–1001). The queen's son commissioned the bronze to be carried in temple processions on her birthday."

57. "*Si l'on veut donner une indication sur ce que représente le thème fondamental de l'herméneutique, on peut dire les choses de la manière suivante: le passé que nous cherchons à reconstruire ou à réanimer n'existe pour nous que par les traces qu'il a laissées, par les monuments qu'ont édifiés ceux qui nous ont précédés ou par les œuvres grâce auxquelles ils essayaient d'exprimer leur pensée. On peut dire que ce que nous faisons quand nous pensons l'histoire consiste à interpréter.*" Cit. Raymond Aron (1989: 15) (If one wishes to give an indication of what represents the fundamental theme of the hermeneutics, we may put the points in the following manner: the past we are attempting to reconstruct or reanimate exists for us solely in the traces that remain, in the monuments that were built by those who came before us or in the works with which they endeavoured to express their thoughts. We may say that what we are doing when it comes to history is interpreting.)

of survey by the first Governmental Epigraphist and his disciples, coupled with the permanent abandonment of the project to translate inscriptions from south India, made the content of the vast majority of these epigraphs accessible only to the few specialists who followed in Hultzsch's footsteps.

Thus, most of the knowledge we have today about Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī and her patronage activity, which includes a great deal of preconceptions and mistaken interpretations, was actually "written in stone" through roughly half a century of epigraphical reports and so universally accepted afterwards, as to seem no longer in need of critical examination. The very manner of speaking of an "inscription of the queen", which is invariably used to denote the numerous and undifferentiated epigraphs bearing the name of the sovereign, covers in fact a diverse range of historical situations. Furthermore, because of the dire need for a chronological frame within which to reconstruct the Queen Mother's historical destiny, dubious dating based on the sparse evidence supplied by these inscriptional sources was assigned for significant events in her life, such as the demise of her husband Gaṇḍarāditya Cōḻa or her alleged last donation. In the same way, as illustrated with Kōṉērirājapuram, the erection of the stone temples Cempiyaṉ Mahādevī "graciously caused to appear", as well as the materialisation of their innovative iconographical program, were indiscriminately assigned the earliest estimated date for their inscriptional remnants. This is actually the way the Cōḻa queen's historical figure and her legacy as presented in so many reference works, are literally "constructed out of the building blocks of these small texts".[58]

Writings on the assumed queenly portrait housed in Washington, D.C., provides an edifying example of a widespread tendency in the field of south Indian history. One may observe, indeed, a common propensity to approach the epigraphic mass through the lens of reports only, the terse English summaries supplied therein becoming the subject of further interpretations and reconstructions as if they were sources in themselves. The very personal "interpretation" imposed on a never published inscription from the Cempiyaṉmātēvi village, for the deliberate purpose of sustaining a doubtful identification of a piece of art, speaks volumes on the status meted out to epigraphical sources.[59]

58. Cit. Morrison & Lycett (1997: 221).

59. As pointed out to me by Arlo Griffiths, Indonesian Buddhist sculpture provides similar cases of alleged queenly portraits. One may cite here the famous representation of Prajñāpāramitā (Buddhist Goddess of Transcendental Wisdom) from Singasari (East Java) which, since its discovery by the Dutch in the early nineteenth century, is popularly believed to depict the thirteenth-century Singasari Queen Ken Dedes. For further details on this and other doubtful identifications of deified queens from Java, see Reichle (2007: 51–84).

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