



Resistance versus Rebellion in a South Indian Oral Epic

Two Modes of Opposition to an Expansionist, Self-Aggrandizing, Grain-Dependent State

This article discusses a medieval South Indian folk epic that focuses on several local groups' resistance to their paddy-growing neighbor, a Chola kingdom. Artisans and hunters both opposed the introduction of plow-based farming to an area where trade, rain-fed subsistence farming, and animal herding defined the local economy. An ancient oral legend supports noted historian James Scott's proposal that widespread resentment accompanied the growth of such grain-based power centers. This occurred in many other places as well, especially early Mesopotamia. The Chola monarchy described in this author's oral source developed later but illustrates a similar pattern. When an ambitious king sent out pioneer plowmen, hoping to introduce systematic plowing to an upland area, there was protest. This unique story provides an alternative source of history by centering around one outlying, farm-based family. By the third generation these heroes became rebels, differing from earlier non-farming resisters of change. Eventually these men, descendants of the original pioneer family, killed the reigning Chola. They rebelled against the disrespect that the successor of that first Chola ruler now displayed, despite the consistent loyalty their father and grandfather had exhibited. The ancestors of the story's two heroes had in fact succeeded in making farming this area's new, and now primary, means of subsistence.

Keywords: resistance—rebellion—oral epic—Ponnivala—artisans—hunters

James Scott's book *Against the Grain* (2017) suggests multiple reasons why there must have been strong resistance from the margins against the growth of grain-dependent states. He argues that we have not sufficiently acknowledged the degree of discontent encountered by the rulers of the world's first grain-growing economies. Scott, a Southeast Asianist by training, mainly limits his observations to Mesopotamia, suggesting that by the first half of the third millennium there were roughly twenty grain-based city-states established in this area (2017, 219). But despite much research effort, his well-reasoned discussion of resistance is backed by only a few bits of direct evidence. Scott is very aware of the problem and notes that information of this kind is scarce and hard to come by. That is no surprise. Most rulers prefer to have scribes record successes rather than threats and complaints. Like kings everywhere, in every period, early monarchs ordered records created that featured what they were most proud of. As a result, it is the ruler's perspective that is represented. Scott suggests, therefore, that we turn to oral sources. That is where we are more likely to hear about what underdogs, rather than kings, remember about their past. Alas, there are very few oral sources available that describe an early grain-growing state; the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is one rare example (Scott 2017, 6). This article describes another case: descriptions of resistance and rebellion against an expansionist Chola monarch in one region of South India, as remembered by a peasant population (Beck 1972). The era represented is the tenth through fifteenth centuries.

According to Scott, early state histories have always been told from the point of view of the powerful rulers, who hired scribes. It was their job to record the monarch's perspective. He writes: "Oral epics that survive by repeated performance and memorization constitute a far more democratic form of culture than texts . . . that depend . . . on a small class of literate elites who can read them" (2017, 216). And he continues: "The history of the non-state peoples is written by the court scribes" (2017, 219). The counterstory told by those who lived under such a strong ruler will be found largely in oral traditions. The Ponnivalanadu heroes were only the overlords of their own little kingdom. Their story is captured in the oral epic described here, a tale composed by folk bards who celebrate their rebellious sentiments. It would be interesting to find a Vettuva or artisan legend that prominently features their separate perspective, but as of writing this article, nothing like this is known to exist.

Although Chola rule in South India appeared much later than the early states that grew up in Mesopotamia and Egypt, some of the core issues those monarchs faced were similar. In the Ponnivalanadu story the unnamed Chola king ruled an area located on the banks of the Kaveri river. Its economy was based on grain growing (largely paddy cultivation). The Chola kingdom described was located very near the modern city of Tiruchirapali and it thrived between the tenth and thirteenth centuries CE. Paddy growing was not new at this time. This type of economic base was already well established in most of South India's coastal lowlands. However, this relatively new agro-economy, historically speaking, had not yet taken hold in many outlying, upland locales. One area not yet subject to systematic plowing and irrigation was the land lying along the south bank of the Kaveri river, just a day's walk upstream of the Chola rulers' grand palace. Called Ponnivalanadu, this interesting area is described in detail by the oral folk epic to be discussed here. As Scott has argued, it made good sense for a ruling elite wanting to expand their power to look at the lands that lay upstream. This was a good way to access new supplies of lumber, to expand the state's grain-growing enterprise, and to bring as-yet-independent populations under state control. Both the early Mesopotamian kings and the much later Chola rulers clearly recognized this opportunity and tried to act on it.

As already mentioned, the Ponnivalanadu story is told from the point of view of pioneer plow-farmers, men who believed their own status and glory rested on their ability to plant, harvest, and distribute large quantities of grain. It is no surprise that this local legend features a family skilled in plow-farming. Furthermore, this epic has always been sung by local bards whose livelihoods depended on the goodwill of powerful agricultural families, in particular those belonging to the Kongu Vellalar community. This group still dominates agricultural activities in the region today. The story's heroes are men of this community. Their ancestors were sent to this area to open up new lands for their overlord, a Chola king. They were expected to jump-start a new local economy that he would oversee. But the family link to that original Chola king soured over time. Two grandsons of the original pioneers desired to overthrow the (unnamed) reigning Chola then in power, a descendant (possibly a son?) of the original monarch who had supported their grandfather. The farmer-grandsons were rebels. They disliked the new king, a man who was pompous and oppressive, but they still endorsed his basic values. These rebel heroes wanted to become grain-growing kings themselves by winning independence and gaining full control over their own affairs. But they did not seek a change of lifestyle. Simply put, the twin farmer-heroes of this story endorsed the Chola kings' agrarian value system. They resented the contempt shown by these overlords toward their family but supported expanding the grain-based economic system that they represented.

The epic makes the story's endorsement of this rice-growing way of life clear in its many songs. Over and over, the beauty of the surrounding paddy fields is praised. Their luster supports and uplifts the glory of the king himself. Ironically there probably was never as much paddy grown in this region as the singers make

out. The area is too dry and stony. Nonetheless, that is the vision of prosperity the story extols:

It was a time of justice, a sweet time, the just king rules, rules there
The one who has a signet ring on his finger is ruling the country alone, ruling
there now

At proper times, my Lord, it will rain, it will rain there
In that country, *kaṭaku* samba paddy flourishes, it flourishes there
There is enough rain for the king [named] Ponnayyā, it rains there
In that country *miḷaku* samba paddy flourishes, it flourishes there.

(Beck 1992, 199)

Historians have often glorified the changes brought about due to the introduction of systematic plowing, extensively engineered irrigation, and systematic taxation. These innovations brought with them “civilization.” The evidence cited includes the birth of new urban centers and new levels of luxury for the ruling elite. These changes also created their own evidence for archaeologists to unearth and at which to marvel. There were more monumental buildings; more prestige goods; more traces of elaborate ceremonies; and larger, better-planned irrigation works. Of course, improved record-keeping also emerged in such settings due to the growth of an entire new class of administrators and scribes.

The details that provide evidence for these civilization-related developments and the social differentiation generated by them were recounted on clay tablets. They were also illustrated visually, using various sculpted and painted forms of art. But with the growth of this kind of state empire, Scott writes, there was also an inevitable expansion of the labor hierarchy. Workers had to be organized and overseen because the work expected of them became more burdensome. Many men and women were now required to perform long hours of physically punishing toil. In addition, outlying populations predictably lost much of their independence and most importantly, the freedom to work when they wished. As they gradually became incorporated into these grain-based states, these people found their skill sets and even their physical bodies fell under state control. Furthermore, many workers who were absorbed into these growing urban centers likely fell sick because they now had to live in crowded quarters. Their quality of life was further hampered by poor sanitation, a meager diet, and excessive physical stress. Scott argues that these early civilizations, therefore, allowed for “a good life” for those who served as masters or supervisors, but this comfort for the few came at the expense of the many others who experienced life under state control.

REBELLION AND RESISTANCE: THREE EXAMPLES

All these predictable social changes accompanying the growth of a powerful grain-based state must have resulted in dissatisfaction, both from those below and from those on the margins. But where is the evidence for this? Scott suggests that researchers need to look to oral sources. The medieval South Indian oral epic discussed here helps us to understand these predicted sentiments, at least as they find expression in one localized South Indian case. As we begin to explore this

folk legend, however, it is important to note that the Ponnivalanadu story has three separate threads, each of which describes a different social community. Each thread, of course, is linked to a semi-unique cluster of attitudes. These threads are: (1) Families who specialized in using cattle-drawn plows. The key family of Ponnivala heroes exemplifies this. Their clan ancestor, the grandfather, was a man who the Chola king hired as a worker but who was then sent out, along with his brothers, to the margins. This grandfather was asked to establish a new plow-based, grain-growing area. He and his brothers were allied with the Chola king for two generations. But by the third generation the grandsons rebelled, killing that king and achieving independence. (2) But there was a separate group of people already present in this outlying area who were highly skilled artisans. This community depended on trading their locally manufactured products for food staples, likely supplementing this income with mixed types of local food production. Although the epic in question does not provide much detail, there is archaeological evidence from the area that makes it clear these people were self-reliant and successful traders. In addition, they practiced animal herding and harvested rain-fed millet crops. (3) Also important was a separate group of hill-dwelling hunter-gatherers, the Vettuvās. This was a group that had outstanding physical skills. They knew how to use iron tools to harvest both plants and animals and were adept in moving around their mountainous and well-forested environment. Their spears and arrows served them well and provided them with a mixed and healthy forest-linked diet. They were a people able to defend their mountainous tract against unwelcome intruders. They were egalitarian in spirit, and within their domain they moved about with considerable freedom.

The farmers: A rebellious plow-dependent family that opened up a periphery area

The first group, the immigrant plow-farmers, are by far the best described by the Ponnivalanadu story. They are the heroes of this legend, and we get to learn about three successive generations in their leader's family. In the first generation the grandfather, born an independent man, soon had to find work supplied by the Chola king because a severe drought had devastated his outlying homeland. His story illustrates one way that a growing grain state managed to "absorb" people living on its margins. The grandfather worked hard for a monthly payment in grain from his Chola overlord. It was just enough to feed him and his wife. Her labor was also utilized. But due to good behavior and dedication this grandfather and his eight brothers were all eventually selected to become pioneers. The king decided to send them out to establish new farmland. They left for Ponnivalanadu, a known area that lay about one day's walk upstream from the king's palace when one followed the south bank of the great Kaveri river. On arrival, the grandfather was surprised to encounter strong resistance from the artisans living there. With the help of a great god, Lord Vishnu, he and his brothers succeeded in opening up the land. Then, after years of work and struggle, his son took over. This man gradually grew in stature and became a second-generation small ruler. He was kind, generous, a successful farm manager, and a model ruler of a small estate. Despite

this success, he retained his loyalty to the Chola king. Here is what the bards sing about him:

Holding the curved plow, he plows his agricultural kingdom. Holding his (fine) crooked plow, he plows his Kongu agricultural kingdom.

[A local worker, a man who has been called to do the hard work involved and who is inferior to this landowning hero in status, then says to this small ruler:]

“Lord . . . You take the plow in your hands first and make three furrows. Then hand it to us. After that (when we have finished the job) you can sow the seeds.”

(Beck 1992, 159)

We learn that about 80 percent of this man’s fields were dedicated to maize and another 20 percent to horse gram, a type of millet (Beck 1992, 169). In this second generation, however, there was still no mention of the family having built an irrigation system. It seems they still depended on rain to grow their crops. When the harvest was ready, the family then asked the Chola king for the loan of an elephant to help with the threshing along with an official “measuring vessel.” This would allow an accurate assessment of the size of their harvest. After this the second-generation hero returned what he had borrowed, along with a very modest gift of thanks. He took the king a simple pot of fresh curds. The Chola accepted his gesture and promised to continue his support of this pioneer family’s efforts. The hero’s prosperity continued to increase, and soon he and his wife were able to build a small palace. The Chola king was invited to the inauguration ceremony. He was polite and honored the hero with the gift of a small crown along with various other markers of respect. The political alliance between these two families was ritually affirmed.

Here is the song that the bards sing to describe this second-generation success story. Note the exaggerated description of the local Ponnivalanadu hero as a grand king. The same song also emphasizes the importance of good rains, and it bestows on the farmer’s wife Tamarai the status of a goddess in this local area.

The king is ruling authoritatively, the one who has a signet ring on his finger is ruling,

is ruling the country alone.

It rained there three times a month, it poured on the land, and once a year there was a shower of hailstones.

[It was] a good time, a sweet time. See the monarch rule in the country where the [river] Kaveri flows.

The fine creeper vine, Tamarai, the all-knowing one, [she is the] goddess of the agriculturalists, a woman pregnant with revelations. (Beck 1992, 181)

In the third generation we see the status and power of this local immigrant family increase again. An irrigation tank with a fine sluice gate now appears in the story’s descriptions. References to the hero’s fine paddy fields also show up. The description of what he presents to the Chola monarch from now on is also of interest. The tribute payment now consists of: (a) the yoke of a plow, (b) a measuring vessel, and (c) a pot of curds. These gifts can be understood symbolically to be an acknowledgment of: (a) the king’s right to claim a share of each local worker’s field

labor, (b) his right to a portion of each harvest reaped, and (c) his right to a portion of all local animal produce (symbolized by what cows give).

Soon after the building of a local palace, however, the local heroes' relationship with their Chola monarch began to change. The older ruler's two sixteen-year-old grandsons began to resent the king's increasing demands. They felt insulted by his put-downs and the demeaning way he interacted with them. Gradually, the ambition of these grandsons strengthened. They dreamt of overthrowing their overlord to become a pair of independent, grain-growing sovereigns. The twin adolescent heroes rejected their family's identity as simply farm-work managers. They dedicated their own lives to becoming glorious warriors and were soon praised as horseback-riding fighters. After several preliminary tests of these new skills, one twin actually killed the overlord by piercing him with a sword as he sat on his throne. This was rebellion by an insider, an ally. These brothers were not asking for system change; instead the heroes murdered their superior to gain independence. They wanted complete and total control over their own local territory, Ponnivalnadu. But matters are never so simple. Now a variety of outside "resisters" spring up, with whom these young heroes must face off.

The artisans

The central argument of this article is that in addition to outright upstarts or rebels, men who wanted to carve their own independent kingdoms and separate that territory from a larger, pre-existing political entity, there were at least two other types of outlying, grain-state resisters: trader-craftsmen on the one hand and forest hunters on the other. The story calls these groups of craftsmen artisans. They were a prosperous community already well established in Ponnivalnadu when the immigrant plow-farmers originally arrived. These people had unique craft-based skills but also knew how to supplement their profitable trade-based income with some animal herding and the seasonal planting of modest rain-fed pulse and millet crops utilizing burnt-over forest clearings. These people were adamantly opposed to the takeover of local lands by a bunch of alien grain farmers, men whose presence threatened to dramatically alter the local landscape by cutting down forests, clearing vast tracts of land, and systematically cultivating these newly opened areas using cattle-drawn plows. These farmers were also believed to be planning further changes. They would surely build large water-storage tanks, along with a broad network of channels needed to reliably irrigate the grains they would plant. Furthermore, the craftsmen knew that these newly arrived settlers called themselves "expert plowmen," and that they believed they were superior to mere craftsmen. In sum, their arrival threatened the artisans' previous high status and lead position atop a local status hierarchy.

Despite resorting to various forms of trickery and deception, however, these early artisan-residents never succeed in preventing what they feared most: a plow-farmer takeover. Furthermore, the story attributes much of these craftsmen's lack of success to the intervention of a powerful god, the great Vishnu himself. In this story Lord Vishnu always sides with the farmers—that is, up until the very last scenes in this long, long story. Sometimes the local goddess Celatta also inter-

venes on behalf of the plowmen. As Scott noted when discussing his Mesopotamian examples, “The superiority of farming was underwritten by an elaborate mythology recounting how a powerful god or goddess entrusted the sacred grain to a chosen people” (2017, 7). Confirming this, we see that at the very beginning of this Tamil folk epic the goddess Parvati herself actually hands the heroes’ grandfather (and his brothers) their first plow. She instructs these men, right then and there, to convert the forested lands around them into bountiful crop-yielding fields. In the ensuing encounter Lord Vishnu is further seen supervising a contest between these two groups. There he clearly ensures that the farmers win the day. Several more examples, too complex to detail here, provide further evidence for this show of repeated divine partiality.

The Ponnivalanadu story is also consistent in that it always takes the plowmen’s perspective while describing the local artisans as conniving and deceitful. Nonetheless, the artisans’ side of the story is not entirely hidden. This epic legend makes it quite clear that these craftsmen believe they have been unjustly demeaned. Indeed, when the god Vishnu manipulates the opening farmer-artisan contest there is some core symbolism involved. This great god places the lead farmer well under the soil and then allows him to rise up gradually. It is as if the earth itself is giving birth to this newly arrived plow-farmer. Although the artisans are invited to throw their finest (locally made) swords at the leader in an attempt to decapitate him, Lord Vishnu quickly steps in to offer him magical protection. As a result, the lead farmer survives his ordeal unharmed while the artisans end up embarrassed that their own fine weapons failed. Of course, rising up from the soil is symbolic of these farmers’ claim to have a birthright there. But more important still, now each local artisan must supply any farmer who asks with new plows and other farm tools. Vishnu further announces that this work is to be done for a fixed return. Measures of grain are to become the set currency for each exchange. The work of every artisan is to be paid for in kind, with a pre-fixed quantity of farmer-grown grain. The worth of each particular aspect of an artisan’s work is now fixed and “frozen” according to divine decree. It can no longer be bargained about. Here are Lord Vishnu’s words:

The agriculturalists shall give you food. You shall get it and eat it.
 If you make the yoke [of a plow] you will get three measures (*vallams*)
 If you assemble a plow you will get four measures . . .
 You will accept whatever they give and eat [it]
 Other than this, you can never cultivate the land yourselves.¹

How insulting! We know from other evidence, mainly archaeological and literary, that these artisan-traders were used to being paid with coinage, fine trade goods, and the like. They also knew how to plow and cultivate, though not, perhaps, on a grand scale. The new covenant imposed by Lord Vishnu was therefore highly insulting from the local artisans’ perspective.

The hunters

Notably, there is a second group of resisters in the Ponnivalanadu story, this time a tribe of hunter-gatherers, known as Vettuvvas, who live in the hills. These people

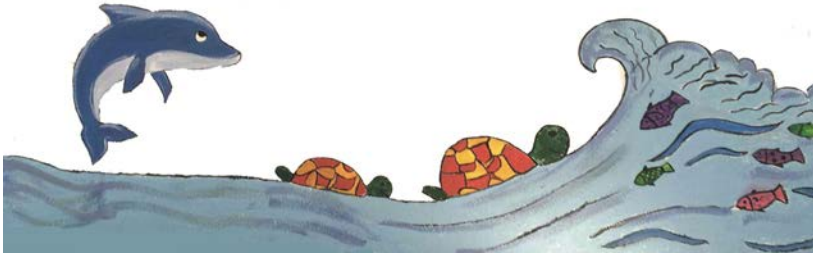
waited and watched the farmer-immigrants from a distance for two generations. They barely make their presence known until near the end of the epic. Described in detail, though, is one short encounter in the second generation. When that first face-to-face meeting happened the twin grandsons were still very young. But that early meeting between the plowman's little family and the family of a hunter-king sets the tone for what happens later. The farmers' mean male cousins had just exiled Ponnivalanadu's heroes, finding an excuse to do so because they coveted these same lands. Wandering in the forest, the exiled couple soon found the hunter-king's palace door. That forest strongman was clever. He realized that these visitors were hungry and he offered them a banquet. But the two refused his food. The hunter knew that his visitors believed he was an inferior and his food therefore polluting. He quickly grew angry. This sets the tone for a variety of other antagonistic confrontations that occur between these two groups much later in the story.

As many anthropological studies have noted, tribal hunters around the world generally embrace much more egalitarian values than do farmers. This story is no exception. Those proud hill-dwelling Vettuva people will not accept an insult of any kind, nor will they endure social manipulation by anyone living on the plains. And we learn even more about the reciprocal set of farmer attitudes: the farmers see these forest hunters as secretive, as cobras, and a fierce wild boar protects their space. It is significant that the Vettuvas are not uniformly killed during the heroes' final battle with them. Instead they lead a kind of timeless existence. The hunters never submit and never accept the farmers' belief that their grain-based agrarian way of life is superior. This pattern of tribal resistance to mainstream values and economics remains prevalent in South India, even today. And the artisans in the Ponnivalanadu story never totally disappear either. But they do drop out of sight after one farmer grandson kills off the last craftsman living in their local area. Even now, families of woodworkers, ironsmiths, and goldsmiths continue to be somewhat segregated socially, if not spatially, from other local communities (Beck 1970).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE ORIGINAL COLLECTION OF THIS EPIC STORY

In 1965 this author was lucky to tape record, with community permission, a thirty-eight-hour retelling of this folk epic. The recording took place as the story was being sung to a village audience by a (near-illiterate) local bard. He, and an assistant, performed their version of this great tale in front of local residents, taking eighteen nights to complete the work. Just weeks after that, the same singer also dictated the tale, revealing certain interesting (unrequested) changes as he created this "written" text. As the bard spoke and sung (with many pauses), his words were taken down long-hand by the researcher's local "scribe." The two collected versions, one performed and one dictated, were later compared in a singer-of-*tales*-style publication (Beck 1982). Eventually the dictated version was fully translated into colloquial English and made available in print, providing the original Tamil wording plus a translation, on facing pages (Beck 1992). That is how this story was first shared with the wider world.

Wall mural as photographed in 2016



An apt visual metaphor: Two human heroes (the turtles) try to buck Chola empire expansion (the great wave containing many fish) but are themselves threatened from the rear by secretive forest hunters (the porpoise jumping out of the deep sea). (Photograph courtesy of the author.)

All additional illustrations used in this article were designed and developed by the author or at least under her direction. All were originally used in Beck 2013a and/or 2013b. She still owns the rights to every individual image presented here.

A CHENNAI WALL MURAL ANALOGY

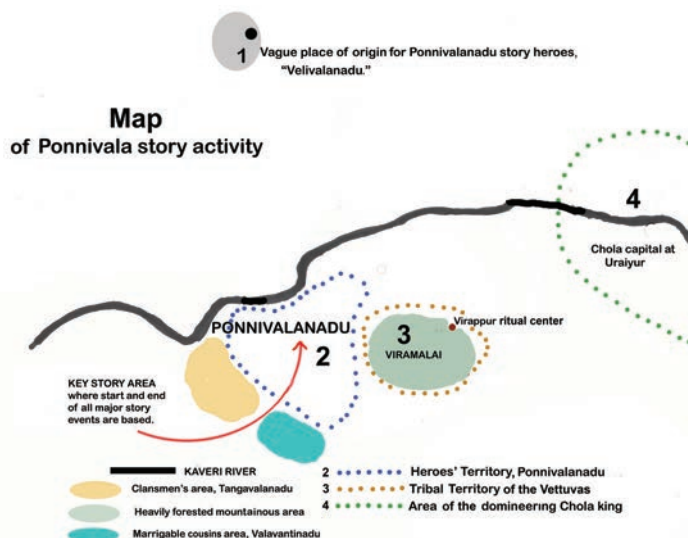
The term Ponnivalanadu describes a region. *Pōṇṇī* is a poetic name for the Kaveri river and *vaḷanāṭu* is an administrative term that refers to a local area having some kind of political identity. The term Ponnivalanadu identifies a local region, but whether there ever was an actual, functioning political unit by this name is not very clear. It is not a geographical entity today. In this author's view, a contemporary, anonymous mural seen on a public wall in Chennai in 2016 manages to portray this indeterminate status well (see image above). Using the simple image of two turtles bucking a large incoming wave, the mural can be read metaphorically. The wave can be seen to represent a powerful, grain-based state, while the turtles can be read as being the story's twin grandsons, young heroes struggling to assert their own regional identity in the shadow of that huge swell. Ponnivalanadu lay just outside the formal boundaries of its powerful neighbor, a forceful and expansionistic Chola empire. The turtles live a life of constant struggle, trying to assert their local pride. They resent the Chola ruler's disdain for their beloved hinterland. But at no point do they rebel against the core principles of the grain-driven economy. Rather, these two men look to the Chola ruler as a role model. They want to become his equal but then rule a separate state that must be carved from the same waters. Threatened and made to feel small by the power of that huge oncoming wave, these two heroes eventually launch an attack on its crest, killing the Chola monarch that is leading its advance. As soon as the king dies, the two Ponnivalanadu leaders assert their independence and enter a forest area the king had (it seems) ruled off-limits to any outside hunters, except himself. Expanding the metaphor further, this author sees the leaping porpoise as a stand-in for a great wild boar, a key ally of the Vettuva hunters. Previously hidden deep inside their primeval forest (here the sea), the porpoise now reveals himself. The boar had quietly waited and watched for an opportune moment to counterattack. Though not shown in the mural, the "porpoise" will soon strike out at the two turtles (the heroes), by entering their flatlands in order to ruin their finest crops.

THE LOCAL GEOGRAPHY

The map seen here tries to roughly estimate the likely geographic location of the story's several regions. On Ponnivalanadu's eastern flank lay the powerful medieval Chola kingdom. Between these two was a forested and mountainous area called the Viramalai. This is where the tribal hunters and their great wild boar lived. Even though the location of Ponnivalanadu itself is a little vague (see 1 on map below), the Viramalai mountains are real, as are several other named places nearby. It also seems that roughly thirty kilometers lay between the king's palace and the edge of Ponnivalanadu. The story heroes walk that distance easily in one day. In sum, this epic story takes inspiration from actual local geography (2 on map). It is noteworthy that Viramalai is the only area that the epic never gives the status of "*nadu*," a suffix used only for "civilized" places. The Chola state, for example, is often referred to as Chola "*nadu*" (*nāṭu*). By contrast, this epic characterizes the Viramalai as a wild area, a place full of mountains and covered by an almost impenetrable forest. To go there is to enter a dark and forbidding region populated by tigers, cobras, and a place that shelters a mysterious hunting and foraging people. Furthermore, at the end of the Ponnivalanadu epic story there is a further marker of this forest as a foreboding space. The twin heroes take their own lives, fatally piercing their chests with their own personal swords. This happens in the Viramalai (3 on map) rather than in a *nāṭu* area. Significantly, too, it is Lord Vishnu who once again intervenes. This great god shoots a symbolic arrow made of flowers from a sugarcane bow, thereby officially instructing the two heroes to perform this terrible act of self-destruction (Beck 1992, 25).²

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

As far as the story's historical authenticity is concerned, a variety of research reports support the basic accuracy of its core themes. Of particular importance is a fairly recent and significant archaeological discovery made at Kodumanal, a site that lies



just a little bit northwest of the area shown on the map above. The results of this (partial) excavation confirm that there was once a significant artisanal community living in this area. Furthermore, this site significantly predates all of the events outlined in the story itself. Kodumanal was a prestigious community that is actually mentioned twice, in sections 67 and 74, of a very early poem titled *Pathiruppathu*. That poem is included in the much-honored Tamil Sangam literary corpus, a body of poems compiled sometime between the first to third centuries CE (Srinivasan 2016). The evidence obtained at the Kodumanal excavation reinforces that early impression: it was a sophisticated community of diverse craftsmen involved in iron smelting and also in advanced forms of blacksmith work. They even knew about an alloy-additive that created hardened (Damascus-style) steel. Additional finds at Kodumanal include evidence of cotton spinning, high-end jewelry making, and much more. Agriculturally speaking, this particular site appears to have depended on a diverse, individual-household subsistence-style economy. Animal husbandry and hand-planted millet crop fields were likely key sources of local food. But good harvests were clearly rain-dependent. Because many Roman coins have been found at this site, it is clear that this settlement was also involved in trade with merchants plying an ancient Roman trade route that ran from the port of Muziris on the Malabar Coast to the well-known town of Kaveripoompattinam (Puhar) on India's eastern Coromandel coast. Kodumanal is located on the north bank of the Noyyal, a feeder stream the traders followed. It empties into the all-important Kaveri river. Trade was certainly a key to these Kodumanal artisans' livelihoods, and at least some of the citizens living there were quite well-off (Karashima 2014, 30, 35).³

And what about the tribal Vettuvus? There is solid evidence of their existence too, but this time the facts are contemporary and not archaeological. A group that proudly calls themselves Kongu Vettuvus still live in pockets scattered through the Kongu region today. Many dwell on the plains and have abandoned hunting for farming. But by all accounts they still resent domination by the wealthier Kongu Vellalar community that surrounds them. Many Vettuvus feel that the Ponnivalanadu story, as recounted by local bards, is unfair to their own history and that it downplays their rights, their bravery, and their inherited fighting skills.

It is interesting that the Vettuvus maintain a show of pride concerning their "hunter" identity, at least if one can trust the graphics seen on several of their current websites. The images selected to portray a Vettuva identity often depict very muscular men, bare-chested hunters who carry a bow and a quiver of arrows. Their website use of tiger images is also common. In sum, one can find ample evidence that the story enmity recounted between the Kongu Vettuvus and the Kongu Vellalars is still widespread in this region today.

THE COMPARISON OF SEVERAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

One particular article that describes the results of the excavation(s) at Kodumanal provides specific information on the proportional representation of various food staples found in three locales: Mangudi, Perur, and Kodumanal (Cooke, Fuller, and Rajan 2003).⁴ The first is Mangudi. This hunting and gathering settlement

was located in the southern hills next to a small seasonal water course. Though found almost two hundred kilometers south of the Vettuva Viramalai hills, this site resembles the latter in many ways. About 90 percent of the food material recovered from Mangudi consisted of parenchyma tissue fragments (bits of leaves, stems, and the soft tissues of fruits). That is a much higher proportion than was found at the other two sites. It seems that the residents of Mangudi relied on gathering forest food for their core sustenance. No complete pulses were found at Mangudi, even though a few pulse fragments were recovered. The people living in this settlement likely relied to some degree on shifting agriculture and animal husbandry as well.

The second site is Perur. This rice-growing settlement is located on the south bank of the Noyyal river and probably dates to the early historic period (circa 0 to 700 CE). The excavation site for Perur also lies very near an ancient temple constructed in the eighth or ninth century. The area had a grain-based economy that likely included a number of paddy fields. Excavations have yielded a very diverse assemblage of food fragments including about 55 percent of various parenchyma tissues. Significantly, however, another 35 percent of the total food-related materials found at Perur were rice grains. The remainder consisted of a wide range of millets plus small amounts of a wide range of pulses. Perur was clearly a sophisticated settlement where a variety of foods were readily available. Rice weed seeds were found in large quantities, likely an indication that several areas nearby were used for paddy growing.

The third is Kodumanal. This large and well-established artisan settlement, already described at some length above, had a subsistence-style mixed economy. About 45 percent of the total material found at Kodumanal was food related. Of this some 81 percent fell into the pulse or millet category. Another 19 percent were rice grains. No dates are given for this site, but because it is mentioned in early Tamil poetry (Cooke, Fuller, and Rajan 2003) as a place where lovely gemstones were stored and jewelry made, we can estimate that Kodumanal was in full swing by at least the beginning of the Christian era, if not well before. This area is quite dry, and so agricultural activities here must have been rainfall dependent, as they still are today. Residents likely exploited Kodumanal's surrounding scrub forest for goat and sheep grazing purposes as well.

Although the archaeological results detailed above lack dating precision, taken together the findings suggest that three different types of economies once coexisted in the region. The Ponnivalanadu story itself seems to refer to about six centuries of history that begin around 950 CE. Being earlier in time than the epic discussed, all three lifestyle variants described above were certainly familiar to the local poets and singers who developed this epic's core content. The three key rivalries detailed in the Ponnivalanadu legend match well with what we know of the area's earlier social history from other sources: (1) that well-established artisan colonies located along the area's major trade routes felt threatened by plow-wielding immigrants moving upstream, men who carried with them a different lifestyle and set of values; (2) that small outlying farm-based areas resented attempts at control and domination by a more powerful Chola state lying nearby; and (3) that local

artisans and tribal hunters may have joined together in common cause when it came to resisting grain-state encroachment. It was the hunters and the artisans in particular who strongly resented plow-using farmers usurping what they believed were their own rightful ancestral lands.

As previously mentioned, by the time a third generation of Ponnivala heroes was born, a large irrigation tank had been built. It is notable that this tank actually locates a key event: a moment when one resentful artisan contests the heroes' local hegemony. That poor artisan is drowned in that very tank by the hero-farmers. This incident provides a suitable metaphor for the latter's local takeover. Furthermore, the hunters' wild boar attacked the farmers' fields soon after. He flooded the land by breaking down the tank's perimeter dam and sluice gate. The clever boar managed to create a weapon out of this structure and use it against the farmers who had built it.

This same tank is also the place where the first skirmish between the hunters and farmers takes place as we near the end of the story. Perhaps that tank can be considered a key symbol of the farmers' new and intrusive lifestyle that the Vettuvus so disliked? After all, it was those pioneers who cut down much of their ancestral forest, turning it into a near-treeless expanse of well-irrigated cropland. For artisans and hunters it mattered little whether this new lifestyle was the result of the incursion of a few demanding immigrant families who wanted land to farm or if it stemmed directly from the orders of the Chola king who backed them. Viewed either way, this change was not one that the pre-existing residents of the area wanted. The core symbol for these resisters, what rallied them into action, may well have been the heroes' building of such a grand irrigation tank.

REBELLION: THE FARMERS' PERSPECTIVE

It is important to look a little more closely at the symbolism that lies behind the Ponnivalanadu heroes' rebellious killing of a Chola king. The vicious attack in question was brought on by a very specific chain of story events. Each situation in the lead up to this final confrontation turns on the ruler's demeaning behavior toward the heroes, offending their pride in various ways: (1) Along with a tax payment, the Chola ruler demanded a gesture of submission, a bowing or kneeling of those subordinate farmers in his presence. (2) That same ruler broke key agreement: he no longer honored these men with his support and protection. Instead the monarch actually tried to poison both heroes at the very moment he pretended to offer them a feast. (3) The same king also attempted to trap the two men in an especially designed leaf-covered pit—exactly the same kind of trap commonly used to catch a wild animal. (4) The king invited both heroes to a remote temple. It was located on a high cliff. Once they had climbed up, the king had his assistants grab the access ladder, leaving the two stranded.

All four of these incidents show that this Chola king was disloyal, dishonest, and unethical in his behavior toward the story's twin grandsons. The result is predictable. Those four events actually turn the grandsons of the first settler in the area into heroes. These men are described as great warriors who fight to defend their land and their pride. Eventually they stabbed the king, killing him and also

destroying his palace. There is no doubt that their rebellion was based on anger over perceptions of insult. These small-state heroes were not objecting to the fact that the Chola managed a large grain-growing state. Instead, the twins were basically striving to become duplicate copies of the very monarch they killed. These men are not anti-grain crusaders but rather third-generation outlying farmers who have inherited substantial wealth due to their parents' and grandparents' hard work and earlier successes. These twin heroes have fully absorbed a grain-state mentality and way of thinking.

RESISTANCE: ATTITUDES OF FARMERS TOWARD ARTISANS AND HUNTERS

The Vettuva hunters and the artisans are both highly stereotyped groups as seen through the lens of this story. Even though the hunters and artisans become allies, fighting a common cause near the end of the tale, the artisans are described as being highly individualistic in their actions. They rarely act as a group while the Vettuva hunters always do. The artisans are also seen to favor mean tricks, while the hunters are rather simple-minded and straightforward in their resistance decisions. Furthermore, even though the hunters likely knew how to manufacture the iron rods they stored and likely also used their own ore to make these, they seemed to prefer to use their traditional wooden sticks when it came to a fight. The Vettuvas are also shown to be skilled in ambushing techniques, a strategy they must have been very familiar with from hunting game this way. And these men of the hills always attack together. All are equal. No one fighter stands out ahead of the others in a battle.

THE HUNTERS' WILD BOAR ALLY

The Vettuvas have a key ally in the Ponnivalanadu story, a wild boar named Komban. This huge, black animal uses his knowledge of the forest to trap his farmworker opponents. Eventually that boar snares them all in a forest cul-de-sac, tosses each one into the air with his tusks, and then tramples them as a group, turning them all into mush. His huge white tusks, furthermore, can be called the most primitive or natural weapon of all. His tusks also symbolize his association with the night and his connection to several astrological ideas (Beck 2016b, 2016c). Furthermore, Komban has a star emblazoned on his tongue. In the Ponnivalanadu story this great wild boar receives an important boon at birth. He will be the one to take revenge on the twin heroes for a cruel affront his beloved mother once suffered, long ago. The wild sow was kicked by the mother of the heroes as she lay sleeping on a path the Ponnivalanadu queen wanted to use. Komban, too, cannot tolerate an insult.

THE LITTLE DOMESTIC DOG

Most interesting of all is the fact that it is a very small female dog that finally wins the upper hand against the wild boar. This tiny bitch defeats the great wild enemy

by biting his testicles with her poisonous teeth. The story does not state why this tiny dog has poison in her teeth, but as a multiform of the local goddess Celatta, this tiny bitch clearly shares this goddess's own extensive power: the ability to destroy demons and evil-doers using any of her many fearful weapons, especially a trident. Furthermore, puncture wounds enjoy a special and powerful status in the wider story. Both third-generation heroes, as well as the Chola king, die in this way.

The story of this little female dog is one of the most beloved parts of the larger epic legend, and its separate performance is frequently requested by local audiences. Here again we find the conquest of the forest by farmers expressed in the form of a metaphor. A wild, frightening, and sexually powerful black male being is eventually overpowered by a small, domesticated, brown female. This sub-story has many dimensions: male vs. female, big vs. small, and also sexual aggression vs. modesty and control. By biting the boar's testicles the little palace pet clearly challenges the wild forest beast. He can even be compared to many other black and largely evil beings that populate a wider and very rich Hindu mythology. In Indian palace art, furthermore, Indian kings are frequently seen engaged in a wild boar hunt. There is almost always a companion dog at the raja's side. In sum, this dog-boar confrontation is also about the prestige of a civilized (*nadu*-based) domestic lifestyle opposing a wild, animalistic enemy. The wild boar was, from the farmers' perspective, a most fitting symbol for the core character of this Vettuva tribal group. The boar was a forest dweller, a forager and crop destroyer, while the dog was viewed as a loyal palace protector.

COMPARISON WITH A CHINESE FOLK EPIC

It is notable that the Ponnivalanadu folk story resembles a contemporary Chinese legend described by Anne McLaren and Emily Yu Zhang (2017). They write about a Han Chinese story cycle and provide many parallel details. However, that story does not seem to feature political resistance to a powerful local ruler's control over a similar paddy-growing region; its focus is women and their difficult lives in a male-oriented and highly patriarchal setting. Nonetheless, the two legends do resemble one another. Both assert the identity of a geographically distinct and somewhat marginalized local area. Both deal with admired character categories who suffer oppression at the hands of challengers who wish to dominate them. Also both folk stories celebrate a regional history accepted as largely "true" by local audiences. The Ponnivalanadu story also resembles McLaren and Zhang's legend in that its local oral version(s) are widely considered "primitive" in comparison to more literary and poetic versions that also circulate. In the written versions writers have added such things as metered verse, sophisticated grammatical structures, and higher levels of vocabulary in an effort to raise the story's social prestige vis-à-vis its wider pan-Tamil cultural surround.

Also similar to McLaren and Zhang's description, the tellers of both legends have been observed adjusting their story's content, here and there, for political and practical reasons. In both culture areas these changes can be significant. For example, sometimes an ending has been changed or specific details modified, like

the description offered of how the heroes died. In the case of the Ponnivalanadu legend at least, a recent cinema-style televised retelling resulted in quite a stir. The public understood this expensive production to be a political act. Marxists, atheists, and politicians of other stripes quickly rose up to do battle over its framing.

At the village level there are also political issues to consider. One Ponnivalanadu bard admitted that he barely mentions the tribal parts of the story when he suspects there are Vettuvass present in the audience. That singer knows that many members of this community have now redefined themselves as farmers. Modernized Vettuvass can be very sensitive to put-downs by the dominant farming community resident around them, a group that generally considers itself superior. Furthermore, many local devotees believe that the farmer-heroes of this legend were once gods incarnate. They argue that these story characters should be worshiped. Such attitudes, understandably, are not well received by local Vettuvass, who are angered by those heroes' expressions of disdain for their own deceased relatives.

A few other story topics are also worthy of mention when making this Han Chinese comparison. In the Ponnivalanadu epic there are no scenes that come even close to describing erotic love. This long, long South Indian tale is very straight-laced. The women on all sides, even the tribesmen's sister, are presented as exceptionally chaste women.

Nonetheless, there is one limited love story included and it does bear some similarity to McLaren and Zhang's example. Here, a wealthy family hires an orphaned young boy (the hero-to-be) to serve as a shepherd and general errand boy. This handsome teenager falls in love with his master's very beautiful and innocent young sister. But in the Ponnivalanadu sub-story the two lovers never touch. They do not even declare their love for one another verbally. Telling glances and dreams are the only indicators of romantic attraction. But then Lord Vishnu intervenes and announces that the young pair are actually "cross" cousins and thus legitimate marital partners. As an "orphan," the boy's ancestry was unknown and left to this god to reveal. There are lingering doubts expressed by the girl's two brothers. They refuse to attend the wedding, requiring that it be conducted deep inside a neighboring forest. Lord Vishnu is the only witness and the rituals used are greatly simplified. After that the bride's family still firmly reject the groom, and they send the couple away telling them never to return. Later the heroine suffers terribly due to this cruel birth-family rejection. The parallels with McLaren and Zhang's story are mainly seen in the pain the heroine has to endure. Indeed, all the heroines in the Ponnivalanadu story suffer considerable difficulties, as do McLaren and Zhang's story women.

A VISUAL VERSION OF THE STORY

A graphic novel-style presentation of many of the key points just discussed is included below. It should help readers further appreciate this folk epic's core content (Beck 2013b).

1) An initial alliance between the king and his skilled laborers.



Outsiders are hired as laborers, by a grain-state king (a Chola monarch). The original nine brothers, after years of hardship and drought, find the palace of a powerful grain-state ruler and agree to work for him as agricultural laborers. The eldest serves as their leader.

The king develops an expansion plan, but fears resistance.



The clever king develops a plan to use his immigrant laborers in a new way: as pioneers tasked with opening up new lands. This will allow his grain-based state to expand.

A group of artisans already live in the upstream locale that the king covets.



There is indeed a powerful group of artisans living upstream. So the king decides to call on his protector-god, Lord Vishnu, for advice. The great Lord tells him not to worry, that he can take care of this problem.

Unaware of the coming challenge, the farmer-pioneers follow the king's direction and set out.



The pioneers leave for an area called Ponnivalanadu, which lies just a bit beyond the edge of the king's accepted territory. They are directed to a pavilion where they encounter a group of artisans face-to-face.

2) The resident artisans protest this threatened grain-state takeover.

The artisans learn of the takeover plan and object, saying they have always used this land.



Lord Vishnu soon arrives and says he will solve the problem by staging a contest. Whichever group wins will gain the right to work the land there. Of course, if the farmers win they will focus on systematically plowing it.

The contest takes place. Vishnu magically hides the lead plowman under the soil.



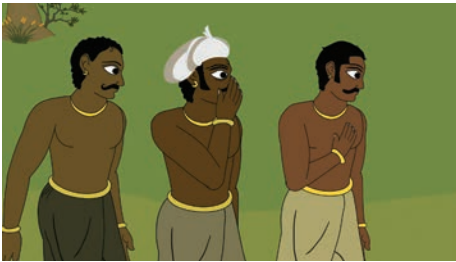
As the contest starts the farmer-leader is made to magically rise out of the land. The artisans are to try to sever his head using their swords. If they succeed the land in the area will remain with them.

The artisans throw their swords but do not succeed in beheading the farmer.



The contest is controlled by Lord Vishnu, who protects the lead farmer by not allowing any sword to sever his neck. Clearly this god is backing the more powerful protagonist. Even the farmer's "burial" underground and subsequent "birth" from the soil are highly symbolic.

Shocked, the artisans lose the contest and must now serve the farmers as craftsmen.



The artisans feel betrayed but can do little about it. Furthermore, they must agree to a fixed contract, proposed by the god, whereby they receive predetermined amounts of grain in exchange for each plow (or sword) that they fashion.

**An exile occurs in the next generation.
The heroes' parents live for a time in the forest.**



The heroes' parents are sent into exile by mean relatives. Heading into the mountains and thick forest they encounter a hunter king. He offers the couple food, which they refuse. This leader is insulted and orders the guests to leave his home.

3) The farmers' grandsons reject domination by the Chola king.

**The hero-farmer's grandsons become bully-style warriors,
not agriculturalists.**



The grandsons no longer want to just oversee fieldwork and be known as plowmen. They want to become kings whose status equals that of their Chola overlord. So they take up a warrior lifestyle and start threatening their clan rivals.

**They beat up enemy lineage mates who once troubled their parents,
sending them into exile.**



The poor male cousins, beaten and discouraged, realize they have no choice but to leave their village homes. They set out to find the nearby Chola king and complain to him about their mistreatment in Ponnivalanadu.

**The king tries to maintain control over the two aggressive farmer-kings who
were once his allies.**



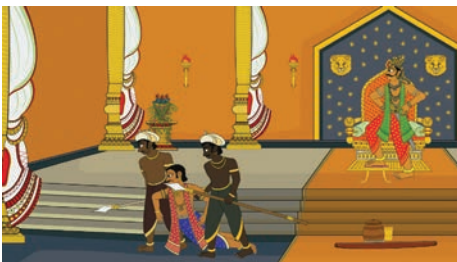
The king meets with the complaining refugees and hatches a plan. He finds that they have never paid him the taxes they owe and so he sends out two envoys to collect the amount due. But the minute they enter Ponnivalanadu they are resisted, even by the farmers' local bulls!

Tribute is demanded and delivered. But it is only one grandson who makes the trip.



The king grasps the significance of the fact that only one brother showed up with the tribute. So, he develops a clever plan to trick the second brother into showing up as well: will he not want to rescue his jailed sibling?

The king jails the first brother and waits for his twin to arrive.



The first brother is dragged off to jail as a way of getting the second brother to come to the palace to rescue his sibling. This strategy succeeds, but only briefly. The two men have been deeply angered by the king's repeated insults. They kill the Chola king in revenge.

In addition to killing the king, the brothers destroy his palace.



After killing the king and leaving his palace in ruins, the two brothers return home to Ponnivalanadu. They now have independence. They are on their own.

4) A chaotic result allows the farmer-kings to enter a nearby forest.

The king's death means that a nearby forest tract is no longer protected by his power.



The king's death presents the heroes with an opportunity. The twin grandsons now enter this once-exclusive forest area, first stealing tribal iron and then capturing a female parrot from their enemies' key tree. It will be a gift to give to their lonely sister.

5) The hunters resist farmer insults by destroying their crops.

The parrot's spouse quickly flies to the forest tribals' palace and reports the theft of his wife.



The forest-dwelling sister, Virtangal, hears the parrot's complaint. She goes to the family temple and gathers her brothers around her. These men are determined to fight back. They are angry at the farmers' many thefts and at their repeated deception.

**The forest princess has a pet wild boar.
It destroys the farmers' fields in answer to these insults.**



The wild boar and its patron princess take a blessing from the forest goddess. The boar then sets out on a rampage. It is determined to destroy all the farmers' fine fields during one long, most unfortunate moonlit night when it breaks the sluice gate on the farmers' irrigation dam.

The farmers' sister has a tiny female pet dog. She now sends it to help fight the ferocious boar.



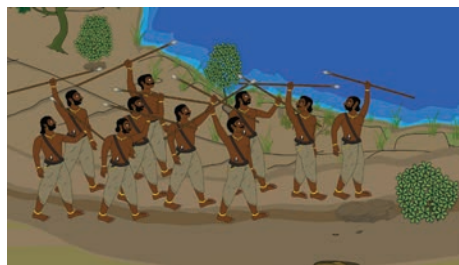
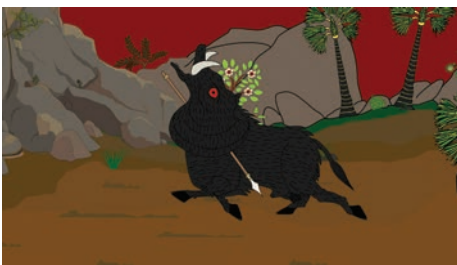
The farmer-brothers have gone on a hunt to try to kill the huge forest boar. Their sister stays in the palace but sends her little dog to help. She is the sister's proxy fighter. Though small, this female dog is magically endowed. She has poison-filled teeth.

**6) War: wild boar versus little dog; hunters versus grain-farmers.
The wild boar and the little dog confront one another.**



The little dog meets the wild boar and there is a standoff and an exchange of insults. Finally, the dog grabs the boar by the testicles and bites hard. The boar is greatly weakened and he stumbles.

The boar is speared by the farmer twins, who were waiting for it on top of a cliff above its path.



The hunters' pet has been killed and they are outraged. They are ready to do battle against the farmers, who have done nothing but deceive them, cut down their trees, and rob them of their females (the stolen parrot is a proxy for their "real" sister).

The farm-versus-forest fight begins in earnest.



There are two different fighting styles: sticks and gymnastic tricks meet with sharp steel swords. But soon Lord Vishnu appears and reveals his own involvement. We see the new hunters he creates using his magical power, a kind of mirage.

7) The epic's ending provides a kind of forest-field standoff, in which tribal resistance and grain-state power stand in the balance.

The farmer-twins believe they have won the battle, not fully understanding Vishnu's message.



The brothers think they have won, not understanding that some hunters have evaded them and live on. They go to wash their swords in a nearby river. Vishnu is waiting for them with a flowered arrow. It says to them: "Your own lives are now over too."

The twin heroes commit a heroic suicide by falling on their own swords.



The twin farmer-kings die a self-willed death. A shrine is built in their honor that now enjoys a major annual festival, which draws thousands of devotees.

MATCHING SCENES FROM THIS FOLK EPIC TO RECORDED HISTORY IN THE AREA

Scott's book *Against the Grain*, with which I began this analysis, cites an interesting statement made by Bennett Bronson in reference to North India: "(None) of the smaller northern states lasted longer than two centuries and anarchical interregna were everywhere prolonged and severe" (Bronson 1991, 208, cited in Scott 2017, 225). This provides us with one further way the Ponnivala story appears to match a wider historical reality. As far as can be determined from written historical records, there was a similar pause after about two centuries of Chola efforts to expand. The latter half of the tenth century and most of the eleventh was a period of pushing the state boundaries back. After that expansion came an era of relative peace accompanied by a concern to consolidate state powers. This lasted for about two more centuries. But after that, say by about 1400 CE, serious internecine warfare broke out in this upriver area. That chaos persisted for a very long time (Karashima 2014, 125, 131, 138, 174–75, 181–82; Arokiaswami 1956, 319–23). Manickam also provides an excellent overview of this area's unique history, but unfortunately his well-researched commentary stops at precisely 1400 CE, likely because chaos reigned soon after that.⁵ The Ponnivalanadu story, in sum, expresses this same progression of events nicely through its largely fictional account of the lives of three generations of Ponnivalanadu plowmen-turned-resident-kings. Metaphorically speaking, the story's grandfather-pioneer lived in an era of Chola expansion, his son lived in a period of consolidation and relative peace, and the two grandsons roamed as warriors during an ensuing era of conflict and confusion. Even Scott's observation that most, perhaps all, grain states chose to expand in an upstream direction is reflected in this unique South Indian legend.

Scott has also written, "The early state or empire was usually shadowed by a 'barbarian' twin" (2017, 216). In the Ponnivalanadu folk account we see exactly this: a twinning of the Vettuva hunters' only sister with the sister of the heroic farming family's two grandsons. Both girls are unwed, nubile females who play the role of "only sister" to a cluster of male siblings. In particular, each is able to secretly transfer power to her own warrior-brothers. This equal power of the two females is central to the broader story. The two girls' names say it all. The female sibling of Ponnivalanadu's twin heroes is called Tangal, meaning "younger sister." Furthermore, she is sometimes addressed as Parvati, a gentle name for Lord Shiva's own all-important wife. By contrast, the sister of the forest hunters is called Viratangal. "Vira" is a modifier, meaning "brave." Hence, she is Tangal-the-Fierce. The Vettuvas worship Kali, a very fierce form of Parvati. Viratangal's likeness to this warlike second form of the great goddess is clear. These two women, one of the forest and one of the farm, are combatants on many levels. Unlike Tangal, however, we are never told anything about Viratangal's birth or death. Perhaps she never dies but just remains forever a magical power dwelling deep in the forest? However, the farmers' sister also does not die. Instead, at the very end Lord Shiva sends down a golden chariot to carry Tangal back up to her "true" home in the clouds, close to his own. There, Shiva's court is enhanced and empowered by at least six other young maids. Tangal's re-ascension makes up the required number of girls floating about there, recompleting the set. These young women are always

seen together and are known jointly as the Eru Kannimar or “seven virgin sisters.” Perhaps Viratungal is actually another one of these seven that, like Tangal, was sent down by that great god to assist for a while with earthly matters? This seems likely, but no details are provided.

CONCLUSION

Scott further writes, “Oral epics that survive by repeated performance and memorization constitute a far more democratic form of culture than texts that depend less on performance than on a small class of literate elites who can read them” (2017, 216). In the Ponnivalanadu case, as noted earlier, the perspective recorded in formal records is that of the Chola rulers. The local heroes described by this epic were only the overlords of a small, marginal kingdom that had no scribes. It is their story that has been captured in this oral legend. But it is still not a story told by artisans or hunters. To the best of this author’s knowledge, neither the Vettuvus nor the local craftsmen ever created a similar story of their own to describe these same events.

Although this forest-versus-farm conflict was, ultimately, about differing economic systems, at the story level the actual character dialogs often revolve around emotions relating to respect or disdain. The father of the heroes refused to dine when a banquet of the finest foods the Vettuvus could muster was offered. Later, these same farmers stole Vettuva iron. Then they used it to capture and build a cage for those hunters’ favorite female bird. In revenge a wild boar, the Vettuva sister’s favorite pet, exits the forest to destroy those farmers’ finest irrigated fields. But then that boar has his testicles bitten by the farmers’ little palace dog. In sum, the disrespectful attitudes in this epic also describe a conflict between layered forms of power. The rulers of the “little kingdom” of Ponnivalanadu were not marginalized subsistence farmers. They were committed to using plows to grow large fields of grain, especially paddy. The problem was the difference in status levels separating their little kingdom from their powerful neighbor, a Chola ruler. For the two lords of Ponnivalanadu, that overlord served as a role model for how to achieve high status. It was the artisans and the hunters who stood out as truly different and who remained loyal to an earlier worldview. The story heroes were insiders who rebelled. The artisans and hunters were outsiders who resisted but never won the day.

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Brenda Beck holds a doctorate in anthropology from the University of Oxford. She is currently an adjunct professor of anthropology at the University of Toronto. Beck is also president of The Sophia Hilton Foundation of Canada, a charitable organization that promotes the use of storytelling in education at all levels. She has published eight books, two of which are double-volume works, and has contributed to or edited many more. She has a passion for South Asian mythology, especially for Tamil folk stories.

NOTES

1. A translation of a few lines from the author's transcribed, but unpublished, performance version of the story, Book I, 35–36.
2. This was a devotional act. The heroes left their lives in the hands of the gods. Vishnu's most popular name in this story, furthermore, is Mayavar ("master of illusion").
3. Additional sources include the author's personal visit to the site and several conversations with the chief excavation archaeologist, Professor K. Rajan. Also relevant, but less specific, is Varghese 2012.
4. These numbers represent this author's calculations, based on data presented.
5. Noboru Karashima (2014) provides a rough idea of this progression in Chola rule from the tenth through the fifteenth centuries. To date, however, few South Indian historians writing in English have examined Kongu's specific regional and cultural history, with Arokiaswami and Manickam being two notable exceptions. Clearly, events in this area stand somewhat apart from Tamilnadu's mainstream history. As a general rule, and until quite recently, this area has lagged behind other locales in terms of experiencing the broad social changes that earlier swept across the Indian peninsula at large. Recently, however, this area has been quite progressive and its key city, Coimbatore, is now an advanced, technology-focused, state-wide urban leader. This interesting shift echoes a significant earlier finding by Trude Epstein: that a higher (upstream) South Indian village that never got irrigation water eventually became more progressive than the lower-level village that received extensive irrigation help (Epstein 1964). See also Beck 2016a.

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