The earliest literature of South India is represented by a group of texts in old Tamil, often collectively referred to as Sangam or Chankam literature. Our understanding of the far south of India begins to stand on a firmer ground than before with the availability of this particular literature. The Sangam literature, is generally but not uniformly assigned to the period ranging from c. 200 BCE to CE 300. The
Sangam literature is the earliest literary composition in a language, belonging to the Dravidian linguistic family. For the first time South India becomes visible through poems and songs composed in the earliest known Dravidian language, namely Tamil.

Prior to this only passing and vague references to South India appeared in a handful number of north Indian sources. The later Vedic text, the Aitareya Brahmana, shows an awareness of the southern quarter (dakshinadis). Panini, the great Sanskrit grammarian of the fifth century BCE, spoke of the Pandya region (around the present Madurai in Tamil Nadu). The same area/people, figures in the Greek accounts of Megasthenes as ‘Pandion’, and in excerpts and quotations of Megasthenes by subsequent Greek and Latin authors. One of the clearest references to the far south is available in two edicts of Asoka (c. 272-233 BC) which categorically mentioned the Chodas (in the Kaveri valley), the Pandyas (in the Vaigai valley close to present Madurai), the Satyaputras (northern parts of Tamilnadu) and Keralaputras (Kerala) as areas or people
lying beyond (anta, pratyanta, anta avijita: literally unconquered frontier zones) his realm (vijita).

The Sangam poems give us a much more intimate and direct perception of the region, called Tamilakam. The region to the south of the river Krishna was known as Dravidadesa from which the author of the Periplus and Ptolemy must have derived the term Damirica (or Limyrike). The term Tamilakam is not simply synonymous with the present state of Tamilnadu; it certainly includes the states of Tamilnadu and Kerala and also covers the Coorg area of Karnataka and the Chittoor region of Andhra Pradesh.

**Situating the Sangam Literature**

The Sangam literature seems to have been a significant witness to the gradual but significant process of transformation from the Iron Age to the Early Historical period. The term Early Historical generally refers to the post-Vedic phase of Indian history, beginning from c. sixth century BCE and spanning up to c. CE 300. It embraced
almost a millennium which saw many changes of far-reaching consequences.

The most outstanding and visible changes took the form of the emergence of territorial polities (mahajanapadas) paving the way for the first nearly pan-Indian empire of the Mauryas; the advent of cities and towns belonging to the second urbanization in Indian history; the definite beginning of writing; the beginning of monetization as a result of growing volume of trade; and, the increasing social stratification (varna and jati divisions). Though the expression Early Historical is coined to provide an overarching chronological framework to study and explain these socio-political and cultural transformations on an all-India basis, the changes were neither uniform nor did they occur simultaneously over the entire subcontinent.

Recent historiography emphasizes the regional and temporal variations in the experience of the social and cultural changes brought under the rubric of the Early Historical. While territorial polity and urban centres appeared in the north Indian scenario from 700/600 BCE
onwards, these two processes did not make any particular impact in the peninsular region prior to the second century BCE when the greater portions of the Deccan came within the orbit of the state society and urban formation. But complex monarchical states are not visible in the far south during the age of the Sangam literature. One does note a spurt in urban centres in the Tamilakam from c. second century BCE onwards, thereby bringing the early historical phase to South India. What is significant is that in the north Indian scenario iron technology often accompanied the advent of state society and urban society.

In sharp contrast to this general pattern, South India had a protracted tradition of the use of iron technology which however did not bring about the presence of monarchical state system and urban experience. While north India entered its early historical phase by 600 BCE, the phase from 600—200 BCE in South India is seen not as early historical, but as Iron Age which is followed by the early Historical in South India with the emergence of urban formations, writing, coinage and long-distance trade.
The Sangam literature holds a crucial clue to this transformation in that it provides glimpses of the processes which ushered in the Early Historical in Tamilakam.

Sangam literature was coeval with a particular archaeological culture the diagnostic traits of which were the megalithic burials and the use of the Black and Red Ware (BRW). Megaliths were strewn over a vast area of peninsular India, including Tamilakam during the period from c. 500 BCE to 100 BCE after which this burial culture ceased to exist. Megalith burials took various shapes in the form of menhirs, dolmens and rock cut chambers (the last especially in Kerala) which consisted of various types of grave goods interred with the body of the deceased. The earliest Tamil inscriptions written in Brahmi script appeared from 200 BCE onwards, and are labelled as Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions. Thanks to the pioneering efforts of Iravatham Mahadevan growing bodies of Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions are now available. This is one of the sure markers of the transition to the Early Historical phase in Tamilakam. There is little doubt that the protracted political presence of the Mauryas in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh paved the way
for the penetration of Brahmi as the vehicle of writing the local Tamil language. Many of these Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions are donatives records which speak of a degree of homogeneity of cultural practices of inscribing acts of charity in different parts of Northern, Central and North-western India and the Deccan.

For the first time in Tamilakam there also appeared coins as a metallic medium of exchange, clearly highlighting the prevalence of a brisk and growing commercial network. The Sangam literature throws considerable light on non-agrarian economic pursuits, including trade in Tamilakam which are corroborated by Classical texts which were often coeval with the Sangam poems. Three premier Classical texts are the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (c. late first century BCE by an anonymous author), the *Naturalis Historia* by Pliny the Elder (death CE 79) and the *Geographie Huphegesis* by Claudius Ptolemy (c. CE 150). All these Classical texts speak eloquently of the importance of South Indian ports in the context of South Asia’s burgeoning commerce, including sustained maritime trade, with the Roman Empire and the eastern Mediterranean. The maritime profile of Tamilakam
did not escape the notice and imaginations of the poets and bards of the Sangam period.

The evidence of near-contemporary archaeological artefacts like pottery, glass work and Roman coins, bear an unmistakable stamp of long-distance overseas commerce. Information provided by Sangam literature must necessarily be studied in conjunction with other available contemporary source materials.

**The Sangam Literature**
The expression Sangam literature stands for anthologies of poems and songs, composed by bards and minstrels, datable to the period from c. 200 BCE to CE fifth century. This was an entirely oral and bardic composition, not “betraying the slightest evidence of any conscious literary endeavour” (K.Kailasapathi). The language, the literary form and the socio-cultural features of these poems are different from an earlier than those encountered in the two famous Tamil epics, the *Silappadikaram* and the *Manimekalai*, both of which are assigned to c. CE 500-600. The original bardic and oral compositions were subsequently
anthologized later by Peruntevanar who belonged to CE 8\textsuperscript{th} century. It was as late as the 13\textsuperscript{th}/14\textsuperscript{th} century that the final codification of the collection took place. The \textit{Tolkappiyam}, the treatise on Tamil grammar (CE 5\textsuperscript{th} century) and Nannul (12\textsuperscript{th} century) referred to the eight anthologies of poems and the ten songs which form the bulk of Sangam poetry. According to tradition, the anthologization, redaction and codification of the oral compositions were undertaken at three assemblies (Sangam/Chankam) from which was derived the label Sangam literature. The latest of the assemblies is said to have taken place at Madurai in the Pandya realm.

This corpus of floating bardic poems and songs are divided into two broad types: the \textit{Ettutokai} (Eight Poems) and the \textit{Pattuppattu} (Ten Songs). The \textit{Ettutokai} consists of the following:

1. \textit{Akananuru}
2. \textit{Purunanuru}
3. \textit{Ainkurunuru}
4. \textit{Kuruntokai}
5. \textit{Patiruppattu}
6.  *Narrinai*

7.  *Paripatal*

8.  *Kalittokai*

Of these the *Paripatal* and the *Kalittokai* are considered as later compositions and definitely post-Sangam.

The *Pattupattu* or the Ten Songs comprise the following:

1.  *Porunarruppatai*
2.  *Perumpanarruppatai*
3.  *Chirupanarrupatai*
4.  *Pattinappalai*
5.  *Maturaikkanchi*
6.  *Malaippatukkatam*
7.  *Nedunalavatai*
8.  *Kurinchippattu*
9.  *Mullaippattu*
10.  *Tirumurukarruppatai*

Of these the last one, *Tirumurukarruppatai*, is a post-Sangam composition.

The list certainly points to Sangam literature having several layers, taking its present shape over several centuries.
Typical of bardic poems and songs, the Sangam literature demonstrates little systemization or uniformity in literary forms or style. It would be therefore of no avail to look for a homogenous literary corpus in the Sangam literature either in terms of style or form or chronology. Recent scholarship on the Sangam literature has immensely enriched our understanding of this period in South Indian history, thanks to the insightful studies by K. Kailasapathi, G. Hart, N. Subrahmanyam, A.K. Ramanujam, Zvelebil, M.G.S. Narayanan, R. Chamapakalakshmi, Rajan Gurukkal, K.R. Ganesh and G. Subbiah.

There is however one point of commonalty within the heterogeneous nature of the Sangam literature which relates to the operation of Akam and Puram genres of compositions. Akam refers to the interior or love poems, while Puram deals with the exterior/public or war poems. The oral compositions of bards essentially address the requirements of the Akam and Puram genres by highlighting and praising martial acts of heroes and their love. They also eulogize the lavish patronage they received from their respective patrons who were mostly chiefs and
ruling elites. The Akam theme brings out different facets of love in separation and union, before and after marriage, in chastity and betrayal. The Akam theme revolves around seven types of love, of which two are considered improper and five proper. The love themes are situated in the context of pre-marital love, in wedlock and in extra-marital scenarios. The Puram theme that highlights warlike martial qualities of heroes has, like its Akam counterpart, seven situations. Out of these seven situations, two situations are not prescribed while the other five are approved, and deal with public celebrations of the feats of heroes, the hero’s death in a battle and the bardic praise for the magnanimity of the patron-hero to the bard.

Both the Akam and Puram themes have another point of convergence in that the poems and songs of love and war use five poetic situations or tinai for locating the poetic themes. There are five tinais which are inseparably associated with the poems of love and war. The tinai concept is of enormous importance for a sound understanding of the socio-political and cultural scenarios in the Tamilakam during the days of the Sangam corpus.
Kailasapathi’s researches broke new grounds to establish that the *tinai* concept was not merely a poetic situational theme; it actually offers lively images of the prevalent landscapes or ecozones on the basis of the accounts of flowers and plants associated with each of the *tinais*. The five *tinais* together is called *aintinai*. Given below is a synoptic table of five *tinais* with their respective ecological features and the *Akam* and *Puram* themes corresponding to each.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. no</th>
<th>Name of the Tinai</th>
<th>Corresponding ecological zone</th>
<th>Akam theme</th>
<th>Puram theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Kurinchi</td>
<td>Hilly/mountainous area</td>
<td>Sexual union</td>
<td>Cattle raid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Mullai</td>
<td>Pastoral areas/meadows</td>
<td>Wifely patience</td>
<td>invasion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Neytal</td>
<td>Coastal tract</td>
<td>pining</td>
<td>Fierce battle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Marutam</td>
<td>Riverine, fertile plains</td>
<td>Wifely sulking</td>
<td>siege</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Palai</td>
<td>Dry, arid desert-like zone</td>
<td>separation</td>
<td>Victory</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Politics and Polity

While the Deccan experienced a full-fledged monarchical state system during this period, the Sangam poems do not offer evidence for similar developments in the contemporary far South. The Sangam literature, with its dominant theme of love and war offers expectedly portrays some images of the political activities in the deep south where the ancient Tamilakam was gaining greater prominence. The prevailing political situation in ancient Tamilakam corresponds more to chieftainship, rather than a complex and mature monarchical state society located in a well-demarcated territory. The recent discovery of the Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions has also helped a better understanding, thanks to the researches of Iravatham Mahadevan. One may recall that Asoka was aware of the Cholas, Pandyas, Cheraputras and Satyaputras as his southern neighbours. The putra suffix is a marker of the clan based polity, distinct form a complex monarchical system.

These groups appear prominently in the Sangam corpus. The Sangam literature is bardic in character, composed in
praise of heroic figures. The five-fold tinai division of Tamilakam has a distinct bearing upon the nature of polity and political activities. The fertile river valleys were known as the Marudam tinai; the Neidal tinai stood for the coastal tract and the deltaic area; the hilly regions were labelled as Kurinji tinai and Mullai tinai connoted the dry pasture grounds. The Palai tinai, though representing an arid zone, could be made fit for cultivation by artificial irrigation. The most suitable area for the rise of political powers was of course the Marudam tinai. One notes three levels of polities in the Sangam literature: Ventar, Velir and Kilar. There are therefore indications of the hierarchical nature in the power structure, symptomatic of the slow transformation from a tribal oligarchic set up to a monarchical polity. This transition in political life seems to have coincided with the gradual passage to the Early Historical in Tamilakam from the erstwhile Iron Age.