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Architectural Historiography of the Airavatesvara Temple: Revisiting Chola Heritage through Epigraphic and Cultural Narratives

ABSTRACT

The Airavatesvara Temple at Darasuram is widely regarded as one of the most refined creations of Later Chola architecture and sacred artistic imagination. Constructed during the reign of Rajaraja II in the twelfth century CE, the monument reflects the maturity of Chola artistic traditions and religious patronage. This article revisits the historiography of Chola temple heritage by closely examining the epigraphic, architectural, and cultural materials associated with Darasuram. Drawing extensively from the works of C. Sivaramamurti, S.R. Balasubrahmanyam, S.R. Krishnamurthi, and G.J.R. Mevissen, the paper investigates the historical evolution of Darasuram within the political and cultural environment of the Chola state. While earlier scholarship largely concentrated on monumental architecture and stylistic classification, less attention has been paid to ritual continuity, sacred geography, inscriptional traditions, and cultural memory surrounding the temple. Through historical interpretation of inscriptions, temple iconography, mythological friezes, and cultural traditions, this article situates Darasuram within broader debates concerning Tamil heritage, sacred kingship, and UNESCO heritage discourse. The paper concludes that Darasuram should be interpreted not merely as a static archaeological monument but as a dynamic cultural institution that integrated religion, administration, economy, literature, music, sculpture, and social life during the Chola period.

Keywords: Chola Heritage, Airavatesvara Temple, Architectural Historiography, Epigraphy, Sacred Landscape, Living Heritage.

1. Introduction

The Chola dynasty has a glorious place in the history of South India and is still influencing the cultural heritage of Tamil civilization. The Cholas, from the 9th to the 12th century CE, built one of the most powerful empire states in Asia and turned Tamilakam into a significant hub of political and temple culture, maritime trade and artistic creativity. The construction of the temples by the Cholas represents some of the most enduring symbols of Tamil civilization and the cultural heritage of India.

Darasuram Airavatesvara Temple is a fine example of the temple architecture of South India and one of the great undertakings of the Later Cholas. The temple is situated close to Kumbakonam in the present day district of Thanjavur and was constructed in the reign of Rajaraja II (1146-1163 CE). It is one of the three 'Great Living Chola Temples' which are inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the other two being the Brihadisvara Temple at Thanjavur and the Gangaikondacholapuram.

In the last century there has been a lot of change in the historiography of Chola temple legacy. The colonial archaeologists were more interested with the architecture and style of Chola monuments. Then Indian scholars added to these theories the temple economy, Bhakti traditions and political ideology and cultural development. Many of the older works, however, treated the Chola temples as individual pieces of artistic excellence, but not as a whole as a socio-cultural organisation in its sacred landscape.

The unusual combination of architecture, iconography, inscriptional evidence, ceremonial practices and sacred landscape of the Darasuram make it a case for special consideration. Beyond its royal context and Saivite association, the temple is a repository of the evidence of social organization, cultural memory, artistic patronage and political symbolism.

Through a detailed reading of inscriptions, cultural practices, architectural study and literary references, the paper attempts to revisit the historiography of Chola temple heritage with a historical reading of the Darasuram. The work is a blend of architectural history, reading inscriptions, mythology, cultural geography and discourse of legacy.

The aim of this study is:

1. To study the development of Chola temple architecture development studies through the history
2. To examine inscriptional and literary evidence relating to Darasuram.
3. To understand the cultural and sacred space of the temple.
4. To reevaluate Darasuram as an evolving heritage entity in the history of Tamil culture

Unlike earlier studies that examined Airavatesvara Temple primarily through architectural description, dynastic chronology, or iconographic analysis, the present study argues that Darasuram should be understood as an integrated cultural memory landscape where architecture, inscriptions, sacred geography, ritual continuity, and heritage discourse collectively construct Chola identity. By combining historiography, epigraphy, sacred landscape theory, and heritage studies, this paper offers a new interpretive framework for understanding Darasuram as a living cultural institution rather than merely a monumental structure.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Global Perspectives on Heritage, Sacred Landscapes and Cultural Memory

Heritage studies have undergone a decisive shift from monument-centred conservation toward living heritage, cultural landscapes, and community memory. Smith (2006) critiqued the Authorized Heritage Discourse, arguing that dominant practice privileges expert interpretations at the expense of community agency and intangible cultural significance. Harrison (2013) advanced a relational conception of heritage as a process co-produced between present societies and their inherited pasts. These frameworks are significant for living religious complexes such as the Airavatesvara Temple, where ritual continuity remains inseparable from architectural fabric. UNESCO's 1992 recognition of cultural landscapes broadened heritage assessment beyond individual monuments to encompass spatial interactions between communities and their environments (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2021). Brumann and Gfeller (2022) critically demonstrate that this category has continued to reflect European institutional dominance, marginalising South Asian sacred landscapes in global heritage discourse. Graham, Ashworth, and Howard (2000) examined how heritage is selectively produced within political contexts,

while Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996) theorised dissonant heritage, identifying tensions when a site carries conflicting meanings for different groups. Assmann (2011) provides a framework for understanding how Chola temple traditions, transmitted through ritual, inscription, and artistic convention, constitute institutionalised cultural memory, while Nora (1989) illuminates how temples like Airavatesvara function as condensed repositories of collective Tamil identity.

2.2 Heritage Studies and Temple Heritage in India

Scholarship on Indian temple heritage reflects complex intersections of colonial knowledge production, postcolonial nationalism, religious continuity, and tourism pressures. The Archaeological Survey of India has historically approached temple heritage through preservation and stylistic classification, prioritising physical fabric over living traditions. Ministry of Tourism reports (Government of India, 2022) acknowledge the economic significance of temple tourism yet inadequately address tensions between development and the sanctity of living religious sites. Prabha Ray, Kulshreshtha, and Suvrathan (2022), in *The Routledge Handbook of Hindu Temples*, reorient this discourse by approaching the Hindu temple explicitly as a lived, dynamic space whose social base — community formation, patronage networks, and institutional continuity — deserves precedence over aesthetic analysis. Singh (2011) and Poria, Butler, and Airey (2003) highlight that for millions of visitors to South Indian temples, the experience is primarily spiritual rather than touristic, a point extended by Sinha and Kamalapurkar (2024), who demonstrate that pilgrims perceive the sacred landscape as living collective memory. Timothy and Olsen (2006) examined management challenges at sacred heritage sites as tourism destinations, a framework directly applicable to Airavatesvara, where active worship coexists with UNESCO conservation obligations.

2.3 Tamil Nadu Heritage and Chola Temple Scholarship

Scholarship on Chola temple culture productively integrates architectural history, epigraphy, social history, and religious studies. Karashima (2014) demonstrated through inscriptional analysis the sophisticated administrative apparatus underlying temple management, land tenure, and commercial networks of the imperial Chola period. Hall (2001) examined temple networks as institutional nexuses of political authority and economic redistribution. Dehejia (2021), in *The Thief Who Stole My Heart*, extends this analysis through material and epigraphic evidence of Chola bronze production, demonstrating that royal endowments, ritual processions, and temple administration constituted an integrated sacral-political programme. In a subsequent article in *South Asian Studies*, Dehejia (2024) applies epigraphy directly to Kaveri-region Chola temple sites. Champakalakshmi (1996) demonstrated how major temple complexes catalysed temple-town formation in the Kaveri delta. Subbarayalu (2014) supplied detailed epigraphic evidence of devadana land grants and ritual regulations, while Orr (2000) illuminated the gendered dimensions of temple patronage. Branfoot (2007), Michell (1995), and Ali (2004) contributed architectural surveys situating Chola temple design within broader Dravidian trajectories.

2.4 Architectural Historiography of the Airavatesvara Temple

The earliest systematic studies of Chola temples emerged through the Archaeological Survey of India, concentrating on chronology, iconography, and architectural classification. Sivaramamurti (1978) identified Darasuram as the culmination of mature Chola architectural experimentation, placing it within the developmental sequence of Chola temple design. Balasubrahmanyam (1979) advanced this historiography by rejecting derivative characterisations of later temples, arguing instead for a mature phase of decorative elaboration correlated with dynastic chronology and sacred ideology.

Champakalakshmi (1996) broadened the interpretive frame to situate temples within the socio-cultural history of medieval South India, demonstrating that the Chola period integrated religion, literature, music, sculpture, and civic institutions simultaneously under royal patronage, with temples functioning as hubs of dramatic performances, education, and art guilds. Cinthia (2023), in a recent ICSSR-funded study, examines Darasuram specifically as a heritage monument promoting cultural identity in the contemporary context. While these studies established an indispensable foundation, they remain largely insulated from theoretical advances in heritage studies, treating the temple primarily as an aesthetic object rather than a living social institution.

2.5 Epigraphy, Iconography and Sacred Landscapes

Mevisen introduced approaches to interpreting the symbolic dimensions of Darasuram. In *Mythology Meets Architecture: The Stone Chariot at Darasuram* (1993), he interpreted the rathamandapa as a cosmic structure reflecting Saivite cosmological concepts, while in *An Interesting Frieze at Darasuram* (2001) he demonstrated how narrative friezes encode mythological sequences associated with the Tripurantaka legend. Chola epigraphy constitutes one of the richest archives for reconstructing medieval South Indian social, economic, and religious history. Karashima (2014) demonstrated how inscriptions encode agrarian organisation and inter-regional exchange, while Ali (2004) revealed the epigraphic corpus as a performative text legitimating royal authority. Dehejia (2024) in *South Asian Studies* applies epigraphy directly to Kaveri-region Chola temples, demonstrating how inscriptions sequence temple foundations and encode sacred geography. A recent study of the Vasishtesvara Temple at Karanthai, Thanjavur — contemporaneous with Darasuram — confirms that Chola inscriptions record civic, festival, and ritual dimensions of temple life beyond administrative data (Dinesh Kumar (2025)). The sacred landscape of the Kaveri delta, encompassing the Mahamaham tank, the Navagraha circuit, and pilgrimage routes, has been examined by Stein (1994) and Heitzman (1997), situating Darasuram within a living sacred geography theorised by Eck (2012).

2.6 Heritage Interpretation and Tourism Potential

UNESCO recognition transformed Chola monuments from regional sacred spaces into global heritage sites. UNESCO (2024) affirms that worship and ritual at the Great Chola Temples continue daily as an inseparable part of surrounding community life. Heritage interpretation has developed since Tilden (1957), with Moscardo (1996) advancing mindful visitation and Staiff (2014) emphasising constructivist interpretation at complex sites. Ozdemir and Zonah (2025), in *Sustainability*, demonstrate that digital tools — virtual tours, QR-based trails, and educational apps — enhance visitor engagement at UNESCO sites while supporting conservation sustainability, providing an operational framework applicable to Darasuram. Liu et al. (2022) show that UNESCO designation produces a double-edged effect of enhanced conservation resources alongside risks of tourism commercialisation threatening community livelihoods. Sustainable heritage tourism frameworks by McKercher and du Cros (2002) provide models for balancing conservation with visitor access, yet these have not been systematically applied to Darasuram within the Chola Heritage Circuit.

2.7 Research Gap

The above review shows that a number of gaps exist. The simplest, the most essential, void is the division of architectural history, epigraphic research and heritage studies into separate projects. The findings of Sivaramamurti, Balasubrahmanyam, and Champakalakshmi laid an essential foundation, but were cut off from recent advances in theory reflected in the works of Prabha Ray et al. (2022) and Brumann and Gfeller (2022). No historical reflection can be found in the Darasuram literature: no

critical examination of the ways in which different traditions of scholarship have built knowledge around the temple. Mevissen's iconographic contributions are mostly on symbolic aspects, without involving epigraphic or living heritage aspects. Secondly, the inscriptional record has been underutilised so far in revealing the role of Darasuram as a living cultural institution, which is highlighted by Dehejia (2024) and Dinesh Kumar (2025). Third, there have been no studies of these intangible aspects of the temple, such as oral history, ritual, and musical connections, that have used cultural memory theory. Fourth, although recent sustainable heritage tourism models have been developed and operated (Ozdemir and Zonah (2025); Liu et al., 2022), sustainable heritage tourism framework models have yet to be applied to the specific context of Darasuram. The present study aims at bridging these gaps by combining different disciplines such as architectural analysis, epigraphic evidence, cultural narratives, sacred landscape theory and heritage studies discourse.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study applies three interrelated theoretical lenses: cultural memory, sacred landscape, and living heritage discourse. Cultural memory theory is used to interpret Darasuram as a repository of Chola royal identity, ritual continuity, mythological narratives, inscriptions, and Tamil historical consciousness. Sacred landscape theory is applied to examine the temple not as an isolated monument but as part of a wider ritual and cultural geography connected with Palaiyarai, Kumbakonam, Pattisvaram, Swamimalai, Thanjavur, and Gangaikondacholapuram. Heritage discourse is used to understand Darasuram as both a protected UNESCO World Heritage monument and a living cultural institution where ritual practice, community memory, conservation, and tourism intersect.

Table 1. Analytical Framework for Interpreting the Airavatesvara Temple as a Cultural Memory Site, Sacred Landscape, and Living Heritage Monument

Theoretical Lens	Key Scholar(s)	Application in This Study	Sections Applied
Cultural Memory Theory	Assmann (2011); Nora (1989)	Interprets Darasuram inscriptions as mnemonic records institutionalising Chola dynastic identity, ritual continuity, and collective memory across generations.	Sections 6.1, 6.3, 10.1
Sacred Landscape Theory	Eck (2012); Heitzman (1997); Stein (1994)	Situates Darasuram within the Kaveri delta pilgrimage geography — connected to Palaiyarai, Kumbakonam, Pattisvaram, Swamimalai, and Gangaikondacholapuram.	Sections 5, 8, 8.1, 10.3
Living Heritage Discourse	Smith (2006); Harrison (2013); UNESCO (2024)	Examines the tension between UNESCO Authorised Heritage Discourse (expert-driven conservation) and the living ritual practices, community memory, and sacred traditions that constitute Darasuram's intangible significance.	Sections 8.2, 8.3, 10.3

Source: Prepared by the author (2026). Theoretical frameworks drawn from Assmann (2011), Eck (2012), Smith (2006), and Harrison (2013).

4. Methodology

The study employs qualitative historical methodology based on textual interpretation, epigraphic analysis, architectural reading, and historiographical comparison. Primary sources include temple inscriptions, Archaeological Survey of India records, sculptural and iconographic panels, literary traditions, and UNESCO heritage documentation. Secondary sources comprise scholarly books on

Chola history, architectural studies, cultural history texts, heritage studies literature, and scholarly articles related to Darasuram and Chola heritage.

4.1 Analytical Procedure

The study was conducted in four stages. Major historiographical works of Sivaramamurti, Balasubrahmanyam, and Mevissen were reviewed to identify dominant interpretations of Darasuram. Inscriptional evidence was examined to understand temple administration, sacred kingship, and socio-economic functions. Architectural and iconographic features were analysed through Cultural Memory Theory and Sacred Landscape Theory. Finally, contemporary heritage and tourism literature evaluated Darasuram as a living heritage site within UNESCO heritage discourse.

4.2 Application of the Theoretical Framework

The three theoretical lenses generated specific analytical questions directing source reading at each stage. Cultural memory theory (Assmann, 2011) directed inscription analysis toward mechanisms of identity transmission, asking what collective memory was being institutionalised and for whose benefit. Sacred landscape theory (Eck, 2012; Heitzman, 1997) directed spatial analysis toward the relational geography of the Kaveri delta, asking how Darasuram's significance was constituted within pilgrimage routes and royal patronage circuits. Living heritage discourse (Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2013) directed heritage analysis toward tensions between expert-driven conservation and community-centred living traditions, asking whether UNESCO management supports or constrains the site's intangible significance. This theoretically guided reading enabled the interpretive synthesis presented in the Discussion.

5. Historical Background of Darasuram

Darasuram is a significant place in the historical Geography of the kingdom of Cholas. The area, which is close to Kumbakonam, was on the southern side of the river Arisalaru and was the second capital of the ancient Chola kingdom.

The significance of Palaiyarai is pre-date to the Later Cholas. Both literary and inscriptional sources point to the city's role as a royal residence for a number of Chola Kings. Various spellings of the city name were used such as Arai, Palasai and Palaiyarai.

After the decline of Kaveripumpattinam with the submergence of the coast, the inland political centres like Uraiyur and Palaiyarai became prominent. Throughout the successive Chola reigns, the Palaiyarai was very much associated and it was a prominent centre for political and ceremonial purposes. In the twelfth century CE, a temple dedicated to Airavateswara was built by Rajaraja II. From inscriptional evidence, the temple was originally called Rajarajeswaram. Subsequent traditions linked the site with the white elephant of Indra named Airavata and thus Airavateswara was born. Rajaraja II's period of rule marked the maturity of Chola artistic and religious culture. Temple iconography and devotional ideology were greatly influenced by the Saivite Bhakti traditions of the Periyapuram written by Sekkilar.

Darasuram also reflects the close relationship between royal authority and sacred legitimacy in the Chola period. The construction of monumental temples served not only as an expression of religious devotion but also as a demonstration of political power, cultural patronage, and dynastic prestige. The Airavatesvara Temple, commissioned by Rajaraja II, exemplifies the maturity of Later Chola artistic

and architectural achievements. The temple is renowned for its finely carved pillars, miniature relief sculptures, dancing figures, narrative panels, ornamental friezes, and sophisticated iconographic programme. These artistic features demonstrate the advanced stage of Chola craftsmanship and reveal the integration of religion, aesthetics, mythology, and royal ideology within the sacred architectural landscape. Consequently, Darasuram stands as both a religious monument and a cultural testament to the artistic excellence and intellectual sophistication of the Later Chola age.

6. Epigraphic Analysis of Darasuram

6.1 Temple Inscriptions and Historical Identity

One of the most significant historical sources for reconstructing the history of Darasuram is the inscriptions (plaque). The epigraphs discover that the temple was called Rajarajeswaram and provide information on royal patronage, donation, ritual and administration of the temple. The inscriptional variations, such as the use of the term 'deity' as 'Rajaraja Iswaram' and 'Rajasuramudaiya Narayanar', reveal the historic changes and the adaptation of the temple through linguistic and cultural changes from one generation to the next. Using Assmann's (2011) definition of cultural memory, the inscriptions are not only historical documents but also institutionalised ways of transmitting identity and dynastic legitimacy and collective Chola memory in permanent architectural form.

Table 2. Epigraphic Analysis of the Airavatesvara Temple, Darasuram

Inscription Type	Location / Type	Historical and Cultural Significance	Source / Reference
Nayanmar Sculpture Inscriptions	Basement of Central Shrine	Records the Nayanmar tradition and highlights the temple's Saiva devotional heritage.	ASI, ARE 16 of 1908
Royal Foundation Record	East Wall, First Prakara	Provides evidence for the temple's association with Rajaraja II and Chola patronage.	ASI, ARE 17 of 1908
Chola Historical Inscription	East Wall Fragment	Records dynastic history and reinforces Chola political legitimacy.	ASI, ARE 18 of 1908
Temple Endowment Record	South Wall	Documents land grants and temple renovation activities under Kulottunga III.	ASI, ARE 20 of 1908
Worship Endowment Record	Inner Gopuram	Records donations for worship, reflecting continuity of ritual practices.	ASI, ARE 22 of 1908
Festival and Repair Record	Temple Complex	Provides evidence of temple administration, repairs, and festival organization.	ASI, ARE 23 of 1908
Dvarapala Victory Inscription	Base of Dvarapala Image	Commemorates a Chola military victory and the transfer of a Dvarapala image from Kalyani.	ASI, ARE 24 of 1908
Historical Introduction of Kulottunga II	Temple Courtyard	Contains portions of a royal prasasti illustrating Chola kingship ideology.	ASI, ARE 26 of 1908
Gopuram Construction Record	Courtyard near Outer Gopuram	Records gopuram construction and elite patronage of temple architecture.	ASI, ARE 27 of 1908

Source: Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), Annual Report on South Indian Epigraphy (ARE), Nos. 16–27 of 1908. Table prepared by the author (2026).

6.2 Administration of the Temple

The epigraphic evidence reveals a highly organised administration during the Chola period. Rulers, local elites and devotees endowed the temple heavily with land grants, tax exemptions, agricultural income, ritual endowments, etc. for ritual activities, festivals and institutional functions. The administration included accountants, priests, officials in charge, craftsmen, dancing women and musicians. Inscriptions also indicate that the temple served as a religious as well as administrative hub and was directly engaged in agricultural management, economic redistribution and the administration of the region, thereby highlighting the importance of the temple institutions in the socio-economic life of the Chola state.

6.3 Social and Cultural Life

Chola temples were major centres of music, dance, dramatic performances, education, philosophy, and literary production. As Champakalakshmi (1996) and Subbarayalu (2014) demonstrate, Chola temple institutions functioned as centres of education, artistic patronage, ritual performance, and socio-economic organisation. Women played an active role in music and dance traditions associated with ritual performance and devotional practice. Temple institutions thus functioned as powerful cultural agencies through which artistic expression and intellectual life were organised during the Chola age.

6.4 Sacred kingship and religious patronage

Chola rulers presented themselves as defenders and patrons of Saivism, making temple construction a primary expression of royal authority and sacred legitimacy. The Airavatesvara Temple exemplifies the sacred authority and imperial piety undergirding the Chola political system, functioning as a locus where state ideology and sacred geography mutually reinforced each other. As Ali (2004) observed, Chola inscriptions performatively legitimated royal authority through sacral association, maintaining the intimate relationship between political power, religious devotion, and cultural identity that defined the Chola age.

7. Architecture and Iconography of Darasuram

The Airavatesvara Temple is the pinnacle of later Chola architecture in its mature phase.

While the colossal verticality of the Brihadisvara Temple in Thanjavur dominates, Darasuram stresses ornamental elegance, sculptural complexity and symbolic articulation.

The temple plan includes: *vimana*, *mukhamandapa*, *rathamandapa*, subsidiary shrines, and extensive sculptural programs.

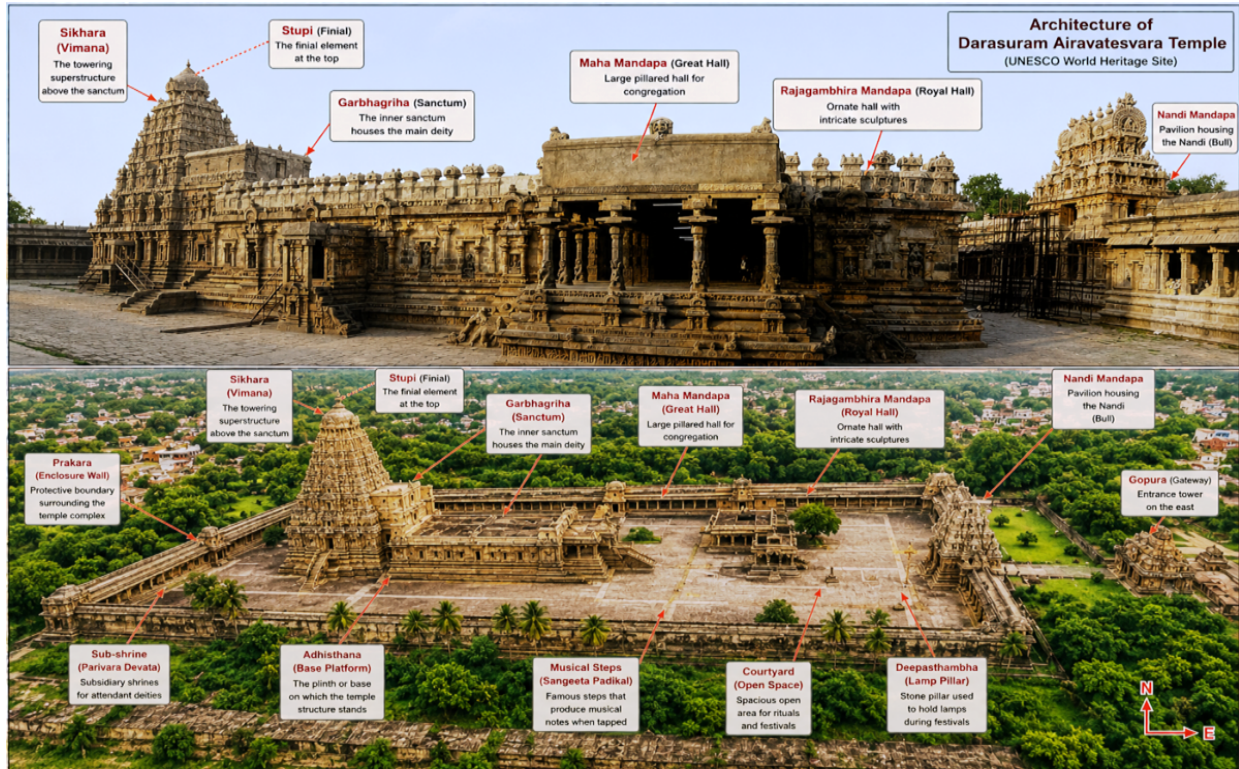


Fig. 1. Architectural Components and Spatial Layout of the Airavatesvara Temple, Darasuram.

Source: Photograph and design by the author (2026). Architectural terminology referenced from Archaeological Survey of India documentation

7.1 The Stone Chariot Concept

According to Mevissen (1993), the adhisthana niches of the Darasuram rathamandapa contain seven deities arranged around a central image of Brahma, namely Surya, Chandra, Indra, Agni, Vayu, Vishnu, and Brahma, forming a symbolic cosmological scheme associated with the stone chariot (Mevissen, 1993). Sivaramamurti (1978) and Balasubrahmanyam (1979) similarly identify these sculptural figures as part of the iconographic programme of the Airavatesvara Temple.

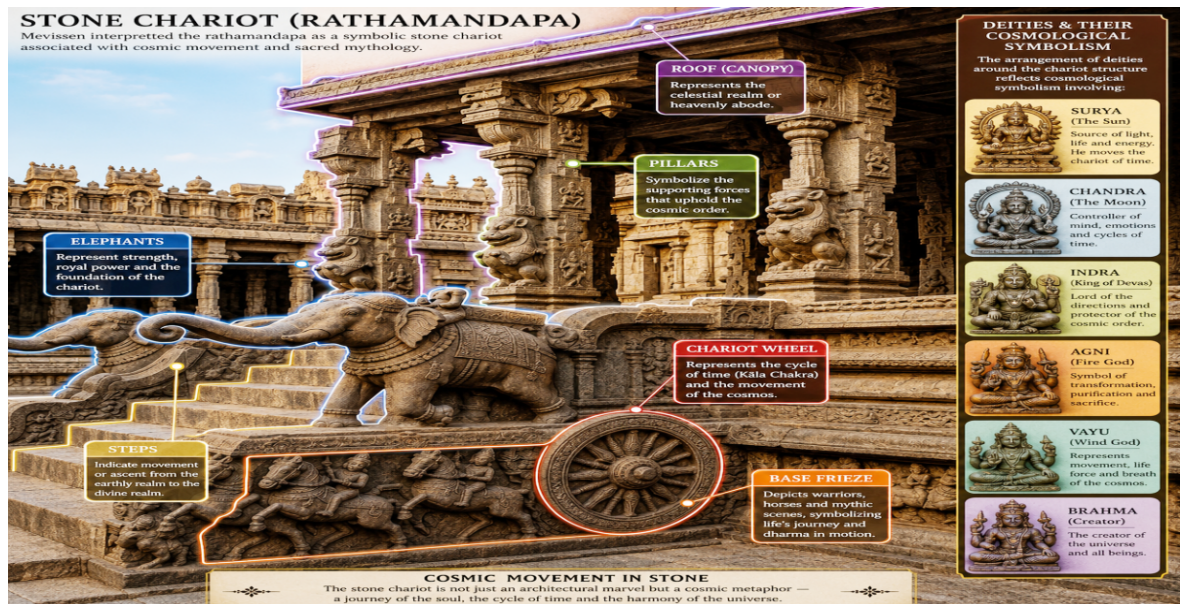


Fig. 2. The Rathamandapa (Stone Chariot) and Cosmological Deity Arrangement, Airavatesvara Temple, Darasuram. Source: Photograph and design by the author (2026). Cosmological interpretation informed by Mevissen (1993)."

Table 3. The Rathamandapa Cosmological Deity Arrangement, Airavatesvara Temple, Darasuram

Rathamandapa Location / Niche Position	Associated Deity	Cosmological Symbolism and Attributes	Cultural Memory and Heritage Interpretation
CENTRE	Brahma	Creator; presides over the cosmic scheme	Central axis of the cosmological programme; Brahma's presence legitimises the rathamandapa as a microcosm of creation.
Niche 1 (East)	Surya (Sun)	Solar deity; light and divine kingship	Associates the Chola ruler with solar legitimacy; Cholas claimed solar dynastic lineage.
Niche 2 (North-East)	Chandra (Moon)	Lunar deity; time and ritual cycles	Governs festival calendars and ritual timing within the temple's liturgical year.
Niche 3 (North)	Indra	King of gods; sovereignty and rain	Linked to temple's name — Airavata is Indra's elephant; legitimises royal authority through divine parallel.
Niche 4 (South-East)	Agni (Fire)	Fire deity; ritual sacrifice and purification	Encodes the ritual fire ceremonies performed at the temple; fire as medium of divine communication.
Niche 5 (West)	Vayu (Wind)	Wind deity; breath and cosmic movement	Completes the elemental cosmological scheme alongside fire and water; represents omnipresence of the divine.
Niche 6 (South)	Vishnu	Preserver; Vaishnavite presence within Saivite temple	Reflects Chola theological eclecticism; Vaishnavite imagery coexists with Saivite iconography in the narrative friezes, encoding plural devotional traditions.
Niche 7 (South-West)	Brahma (outer)	Completion of cosmological circuit	Closes the cosmic scheme; the rathamandapa as a whole represents the

Rathamandapa Location / Niche Position	Associated Deity	Cosmological Symbolism and Attributes	Cultural Memory and Heritage Interpretation
			divine chariot (ratha) conveying the universe.

Source: Cosmological interpretation informed by Mevissen (1993); Sivaramamurti (1978); Balasubrahmanyam (1979). Table prepared by the author (2026).

7.2 Narrative Friezes and Mythological Programs

The narrative friezes beneath the mukhamandapa constitute one of the most significant iconographic features of the Airavatesvara Temple. Incorporating themes of Tripurantaka mythology, Vaishnavite symbolism, Buddhist imagery, and cosmic regeneration, these sculptural panels form components of a broader mythological programme communicating interconnected religious and cosmological ideas, emphasising the triumph of divine order over demonic forces (Mevissen, 1993). Applying Assmann's (2011) cultural memory framework, these friezes function as visual repositories of sacred knowledge, preserving theological concepts within the architectural fabric and transmitting religious memory and cosmological understanding across generations. The coexistence of multiple devotional traditions within a single iconographic programme further reflects the intellectual complexity characteristic of the Chola period (Mevissen, 1993; Balasubrahmanyam, 1979).

7.3 Sculptural Refinement and Artistic Excellence

The sculptural refinement of the Airavatesvara Temple represents one of the highest achievements of Later Chola artistic expression. Its intricately carved pillars, miniature reliefs, dancing figures, and ornamental friezes demonstrate exceptional technical skill reflecting the maturity of Chola sculptural traditions under Rajaraja II (Balasubrahmanyam, 1979). Viewed through the lens of cultural memory, these sculptures preserve collective memories of devotion, mythology, and sacred kingship, transforming the temple into a living archive of Chola cultural identity and representing a sophisticated expression of the intellectual and aesthetic ideals of the Later Chola age (Sivaramamurti, 1978; Balasubrahmanyam, 1979).

8. Darasuram as Cultural Landscape and Heritage Tourism Potential

Darasuram should be understood as a sacred cultural landscape rather than an isolated monument. Sacred Landscape Theory highlights its deep historical connections with Palaiyarai, Pattisvaram, Swamimalai, Kumbakonam, Thanjavur, and Gangaikondacholapuram, forming an interconnected network sustained through pilgrimage, royal patronage, festivals, and ritual traditions. The region's sacred geography encompasses heritage circuits, temple festivals, sacred water bodies, rural settlements, and artisan communities. Even today, Darasuram retains its character as a living heritage site through continuing worship, local traditions, and cultural practices. UNESCO recognition has further strengthened its global heritage status while preserving its identity as an active sacred centre, making it a significant example of continuity between Chola cultural traditions and contemporary heritage practice.

8.1 Chola Heritage Tourism Circuits

The historical interconnectedness of Chola temple centres offers significant scope for developing structured heritage tourism circuits across the Cauvery delta region. A carefully planned Chola Heritage Circuit encompassing Brihadisvara Temple at Thanjavur, Airavatesvara Temple at Darasuram, Gangaikondacholapuram, Pattisvaram Temple, Swamimalai, the Kumbakonam temple clusters, the Palaiyarai archaeological region, and Thirubuvanam would collectively represent the full architectural,

epigraphic, and cultural achievement of the Chola dynasty. The circuit connects three UNESCO World Heritage Sites with state-protected monuments and living pilgrimage centres, offering visitors an integrated experience of Chola heritage across its imperial, devotional, and artistic dimensions. Figure 3 presents the circuit sites, their locations, heritage significance, and protection status.

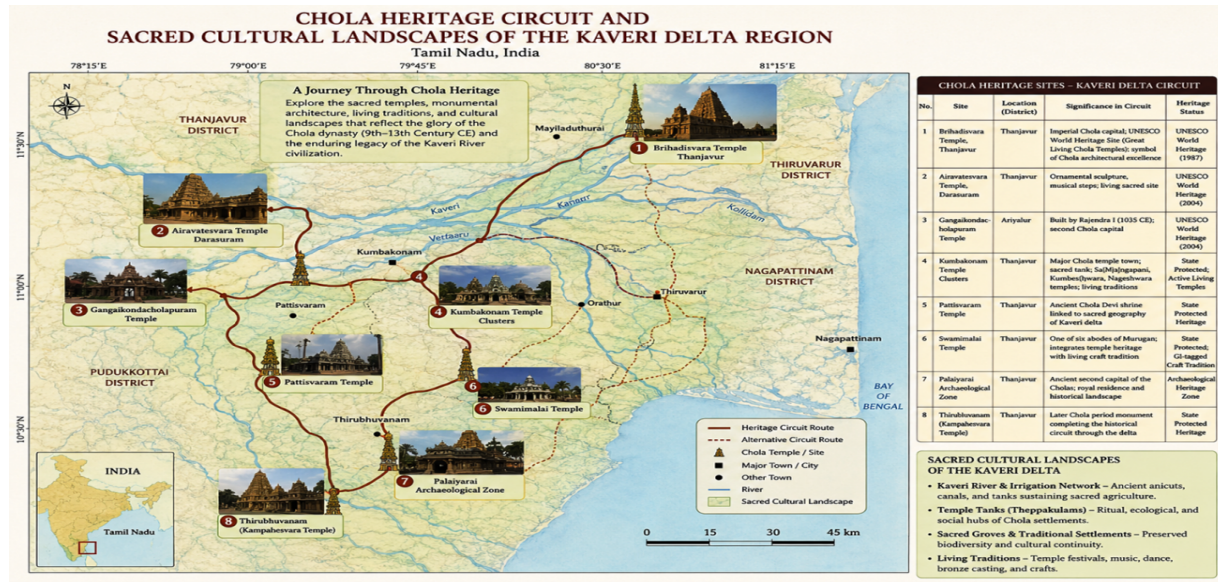


Fig. 3. Chola Heritage Circuit and Sacred Cultural Landscapes of the Kaveri Delta Region

Source: Prepared by the author based on UNESCO World Heritage Centre documentation, Tamil Nadu Tourism records, and field observations (2026).

8.2 Heritage Interpretation and Visitor Experience

Many visitors to Darasuram focus primarily on photography or religious activities without fully appreciating the monument's historical and cultural significance. Applying Living Heritage Discourse, interpretation should communicate not only architectural features but also ritual continuity, community memory, and sacred traditions, enabling visitors to understand Darasuram as a living cultural institution. The site's heritage offers opportunities for guided heritage walks, epigraphic interpretation centres, digital storytelling, QR-based information systems, multilingual signage, and immersive cultural experiences. The mythological friezes, stone chariot symbolism, and Darasuram's historical association with Palaiyara provide rich thematic foundations for heritage interpretation and tourism development (Rahaman & Tan, 2011).

8.3 Sustainable Heritage Tourism Development

Sustainable heritage tourism at Airavatesvara Temple requires careful attention to long-term cultural preservation and heritage management. The site faces increasing challenges of over-commercialisation, unmanaged visitor flows, and tourism-related pressures threatening both its physical structure and surrounding ritual landscape. Future tourism planning must prioritise conservation-oriented practices, community participation, visitor education, heritage-sensitive infrastructure, and cultural sustainability. Local communities, traditional artisans, temple musicians, and small-scale entrepreneurs are essential to developing an inclusive and sustainable heritage tourism framework. A balanced management model should regulate visitor flow, protect sculptural panels and inscriptions, improve interpretation facilities, and encourage responsible tourist behaviour through digital tools such as QR-based systems, multilingual signage, and guided heritage walks. Thus, sustainable heritage tourism at Darasuram

should combine conservation, community participation, cultural interpretation, and responsible visitor management so that the temple continues to function as both a protected monument and a living cultural landscape (McKercher & du Cros, 2002).

9. Historiographical Reinterpretation

9.1 Interpretations of Colonisation

Chola temples were primarily seen through the lens of archaeology, art history and architectural documentation by colonial era archaeologists and early European scholars. Their studies were primarily interested in the chronology, stylistic classification, dynastic history and structural analysis of the temple architecture. These works were important in the documentation and preservation of the South Indian monuments, but they were inclined towards treating temples as archaeological objects rather than living cultural institutions. Many colonial readings, therefore, failed to recognise the continued ritual practices, sacred meanings and indigenous cultural contexts of Chola temples. In this context, however, the living traditions that surround worship, local memory, and community participation were only marginally addressed in the academic literature.

9.2 The Writing of Nationalist History

After Indian independence, nationalist historians and Tamil scholars began to reinterpret Chola temples as powerful symbols of Tamil cultural identity, artistic achievement and civilisational excellence. In this phase the Chola period became widely celebrated as a “golden age” of remarkable advancements in temple architecture, literature, music, dance, administration, and maritime expansion. Chola monuments such as the Airavatesvara Temple were increasingly perceived not only as religious edifices but also as symbols of regional pride and cultural continuity. This historiographical approach focused on the political power and artistic sophistication of the Chola Empire and engaged in the wider debate of Indian cultural nationalism.

9.3 Contemporary Views on Heritage

Modern heritage studies take a more interdisciplinary and community based approach to these Chola temples and sacred landscapes. Studies in modern scholarship center on ideas of community memory, ritual continuity, sacred geography, heritage conservation and cultural sustainability. In this context, the Airavatesvara Temple is increasingly perceived not only as an archaeological monument, but also as a living heritage site that continues to sustain ritual traditions, local identity and collective historical memory. Contemporary heritage perspectives also recognise the importance of incorporating epigraphy, mythology, architecture, anthropology and cultural geography to develop a more holistic understanding of the Chola civilisation. These approaches enable us to view the temple as a historical monument and a living cultural landscape that continues to influence contemporary Tamil heritage consciousness.

10. Discussion

10.1 Inscriptions as Cultural Memory: Beyond the Architectural Paradigm

The epigraphic evidence examined in Section 6 enables a fundamental reorientation of how Darasuram has been understood in the scholarly literature. Sivaramamurti (1978) and Balasubrahmanyam (1979) interpreted the temple through architectural classification, identifying it as the culmination of a stylistic

sequence within the Later Chola building. While foundational, this approach treats the temple as a finished aesthetic object rather than an active institution. The inscriptional record reveals a different reality: the temple was continuously endowed, administered, and reinterpreted across successive reigns, indicating that its cultural significance was reproduced through ongoing institutional practice rather than fixed at the moment of construction.

Assmann's (2011) distinction between communicative memory and cultural memory is directly illuminating. Communicative memory, living oral and ritual traditions and cultural memory institutionalised, inscribed collective identity are not opposed at Darasuram but mutually reinforcing. The inscriptions naming the temple Rajarajeswaram stabilise dynastic identity in stone, outlasting the oral traditions of any generation. Yet the epigraphic record of endowments for musicians, dancers, and administrators simultaneously demonstrates that communicative memory was maintained within the same institution. This dual operation is what earlier scholarship, focused on architectural form alone, could not observe. By combining epigraphic and architectural analysis, the present study makes this dynamic visible for the first time in the Darasuram literature.

10.2 Architecture, Epigraphy, and the Convergence of Evidence

A central finding is that architectural and epigraphic evidence at Darasuram do not merely supplement each other; they converge to construct a unified legitimisation strategy no single disciplinary approach can fully capture. Mevissen's (1993, 2001) iconographic analyses demonstrated that the rathamandapa and narrative friezes constitute a cosmological programme encoding Saivite theology and royal mythology, yet were conducted independently of the inscriptional corpus. When Mevissen's reading of the stone chariot is placed alongside the epigraphic evidence of Rajaraja II's endowments and administrative authority, a more complete picture emerges: the same ruler who established the temple's economic infrastructure also commissioned its iconographic programme. Architecture and administration were integrated expressions of a single political theology, not parallel activities.

Hall's (2001) analysis of temple networks as nodes of political authority gains additional force when iconographic evidence is incorporated: the rathamandapa's cosmological deities sacralised the very administrative functions the inscriptions record. Champakalakshmi's (1996) argument that the Chola period represented an integration of religion, administration, art, and civic life is confirmed not only by the literary record she examined but by the architectural and epigraphic evidence at Darasuram specifically. The present study provides a material, site-specific demonstration of this broader cultural history thesis.

10.3 Living Heritage, UNESCO Discourse, and the Limits of Authorised Heritage

The heritage analysis in Section 8 reveals a significant tension that existing management frameworks have not adequately addressed. Smith's (2006) critique of Authorised Heritage Discourse argued that UNESCO-style conservation prioritises expert-defined, physically bounded heritage at the expense of community agency and intangible cultural practice. Darasuram presents a particularly instructive case. Its World Heritage inscription has strengthened conservation infrastructure and international visibility. Yet the Airavatesvara Temple remains an active site of Shaivite worship, festival practice, and community ritual precisely the living heritage dimensions the Authorised Heritage Discourse tends to subordinate to physical preservation.

Harrison's (2013) relational conception of heritage as a process co-produced between past and present societies offers a more adequate framework. The temple's significance is not reducible to its

twelfth-century fabric: it is continuously reconstituted through ritual practice, pilgrimage, and community memory. Eck's (2012) tirtha network framework supports this reading Darasuram's significance is partly constituted by its position within a living pilgrimage geography connecting Palaiyarai, Kumbakonam, Pattisvaram, and Gangaikondacholapuram. Management strategies treating the temple as a bounded monument risk severing it from the relational network that gives it meaning

10.4 Historiographical Contribution and Limitations of the Study

The foundational works of Sivaramamurti, Balasubrahmanyam, and Mevissen established the architectural, stylistic, and iconographic parameters of Darasuram scholarship. What none provides is an integrated framework bringing epigraphic evidence, architectural analysis, sacred landscape theory, and heritage discourse into a single argument. The present paper demonstrates that Darasuram operates simultaneously as a cultural memory institution in Assmann's sense, a node in living sacred geography in Eck's sense, and a site where tensions between Authorised Heritage Discourse and living heritage practice identified by Smith and Harrison are concretely visible. This triple framing constitutes the paper's specific interpretive contribution.

Three limitations deserve acknowledgement. First, reliance on published epigraphic compilations rather than direct archival engagement means a systematic re-reading of the Darasuram corpus in Tamil and Sanskrit would likely yield further evidence. Second, the heritage tourism analysis relies on secondary literature rather than field-based visitor studies; empirical research would substantially strengthen the recommendations. Third, comparative analysis with other Chola circuits, such as the Navagraha circuit or Thanjavur delta routes, would determine whether patterns observed are site-specific or broadly characteristic of Chola sacred geography. These limitations point toward a productive research agenda in which this interdisciplinary approach can be extended and empirically grounded.

11. Conclusion

The Airavatesvara Temple is a legacy of the Chola cultural, architectural and artistic traditions which has stayed one of the greatest achievements. As shown in the current paper, the historiography of Chola temple heritage has been shifting steadily towards a more monument-centric architectural conception to a more cultural, social and heritage-focused one. The paper suggests that the city of Darasuram can be viewed as a vibrant cultural area, which embraces divine kingship, continuity of rites, social structure, artistic quality and historical memory, in the epigraphic, architectural and cultural examination. It was not merely a religious monument, but also a living institution which influenced the political, intellectual, economic and cultural life of the Chola world. Collectively, its inscriptions, sculptural programs, ritual traditions and spatial organization reveal how religion, governance and society were intertwined in South India mediaeval times.

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