The Dark Period: Myth or reality?

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This article is an attempt to reconsider the widespread concept of a Dark Period in the Tamil-speaking South between the third and sixth centuries of the Common Era. Archaeological, epigraphical and literary evidence from the first few centuries before the common era to the seventh century are gathered here and carefully analysed, showing no actual interruption. A decrease in the amount of data may easily be explained as the result of a change of practices—such as the use of perishable materials for buildings, for example. An important part of this article focuses on the Kaḷabhra dynasty, often thought to have been responsible for this so-called Dark Period. However, in the light of an accurate reading of peculiar passage of the Paṇḍyan copper-plates of Vēḷvikuṭi on which K.A. Nilakantha Sastri elaborated, probably for the first time, the concept of a Kaḷabhra interregnum responsible for the Dark Period, and after recontextualising this passage in the eighth-century South Indian history, it appears that the notion of a 'break' in the history of South India, as well as the three-century rule of an obscure dynasty, does not withstand a fact based investigation.

Keywords: Dark Period, Kaḷabhra, Vēḷvikuṭi copper-plates, early South Indian history, epigraphy

The third to the sixth centuries AD in the Tamil country have long been considered a 'mysterious' and 'obscure' chapter of South Indian history because of the paucity of epigraphical and archaeological data that can be securely dated to that period. The concept of a 'Dark Period' was proposed for the first time, as far as I am aware, by the eminent historian K.A. Nilakantha Sastri in his invaluable accounts of South Indian history, which are mostly based on the scrutiny of epigraphs.[1] Framing the

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[1] 'We are in the dark as to when and how the [Śangam] period came to a close. The data that have been gathered together from the Śangam literature may, one may venture to suggest, carry us to about the middle of the third century A.D. or perhaps a little later. When next the curtain rises, it is on a scene that belongs to the middle or even the end of the 6th century A.D. We thus seem to have in between these two periods a veritable dark age of about three centuries of which we know nothing at present. Even the contemporary Pallava history of the age, into which we get some glimpses from various sources, seems to throw little light on the history of the extreme south.', K.A. Nilakantha Sastri, *The Pāṇḍyan Kingdom*, p. 32.

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theory of a tyrannical and oppressive interregnum of the Kaḷabhra clan, he made these unknown rulers responsible for this 'dark age'.[2] This proposition has been subsequently adopted and emphasised by historians. It is so deeply rooted in South Indian historiography that scholars are often reluctant to question it. When they do so, they tend to question the veracity of the Kaḷabhra interregnum but rarely the concept of the 'Dark Period' itself.

There is indeed a relative dearth of archaeological and epigraphical evidence; but does this really reflect a politically troubled period that we can label 'Dark'? And can we build upon silence a body of fantastical theories about a Kaḷabhra tribe that subdued the major dynasties and held sway over the whole of the south of India?[3] In the first part of this article, I will attempt to briefly present the evidence until the sixth century AD, and I will then try to understand how and why scholars have adopted this concept of a 'Dark Period'. The second part will focus on the specific question of the Kaḷabhra interregnum, scrutinising the archaeological and epigraphical sources, in order to draw a tentative but carefully considered fact-based conclusion about these mysterious rulers.

From the Origins to the Third Century AD

Among the first data that we know of in the Tamil country are Tamil inscriptions written in Tamil–Brāhmī script, and later in the early Vaṭṭeḻuttu script. They are usually engraved in caves, on the brow of the cave or on beds carved on the rocky floor itself. Although the earliest are mainly found in the Madurai and Śivaganga

[2] 'A long historical night ensues after the close of the Śangam age. We know little of the period of more than three centuries that followed. When the curtain rises again towards the close of the sixth century A.D., we find that a mysterious and ubiquitous enemy of civilization, the evil rulers called Kalabhras (Kaḷappāḷar), have come and upset the established political order which was restored only by their defeat at the hands of the Pāndya and Pallavas as well as Chālukyas of Bādāmi. Of the Kalabhras, we have as yet no definite knowledge; [...]. The Cholas disappeared from the Tamil land almost completely in this debacle, [...]. The upset of the existing order due to the Kalabhras must have affected the Chera country as well, though there is little evidence on this country in this period apart from the late legends of the *Keralotpatti* and *Keralamāhātmyam*.', K.A. Nilakantha Sastri, *A History of South India*, pp. 144–45.

[3] See, besides the works of K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, and among many others, M. Arunacalam, *The Kaḷabhras in the Pāṇḍiya Country*; and M.C. Venkatacami, *Kaḷappirar āṭciyil tamiḻakam*. Most of the historians dealing with South India have naturally said a few words about the Kaḷabhras. I will simply refer to four of them here: B. Stein, *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India*, pp. 76–80, imagines a conflict between the peasant society and warriors that he identifies as the Kaḷabhras; R. Gurukkal, *Characterizing Ancient Society*, pp. 19–21, evokes a total breakdown of the society; Y. Subbarayalu, 'The Pūlāṅkuṟicci inscriptions', p. 6, does not seem to question the occupation of the country by the Kaḷabhras, but denies their hostile attitude; on the other hand, K. Veluthat, 'Into the "Medieval"—And out of it: Early South India in Transition', p. 46, in a very lucid manner, reconsiders and fundamentally re-evaluates, the data related to the Kaḷabhra. Without denying their existence, he nevertheless states that: 'The picture of a Kaḷabhras presence in the Tamil country rests on evidence of doubtful validity. [...] As for evidence in epigraphy, it is even more dubious'.

districts, these epigraphs are scattered all over Tamil Nadu.[4] They sometimes simply record a name (*tiyaṉcantaṉ* in Aḷakarmalai cave in Madurai district),[5] sometimes the name of a person along with his profession (goldsmith, salt merchant, accountant, nun, sugar merchant, trader in ploughshares, cloth merchant, for example, all in the cave of Aḷakarmalai).[6] They also occasionally refer to a donation, the nature of which is not given,[7] or to the donor of the resting place or the hermitage, called *paḷḷi*.[8] Because of a few words found in these records such as *kaṇi*, *amaṇam*, *patantaṉ*, *kanti*, etc., mainly denoting ascetics,[9] these inscriptions are believed to have been engraved by Jainas, and therefore these caves are considered to be shelters used by Jainas. Is there, however, any need to consider all these inscriptions as Jaina simply because some of them contain some vocabulary used later by Jainas? Is an inscription mentioning a goldsmith or a salt merchant necessarily Jaina because a nearby inscription mentions a nun? Based on palaeography, scholars have assigned these lithic records to the period between the second century BC and the sixth century AD.[10] But palaeographic dating is necessarily approximate, and may only be said to be 'accurate' to within a few centuries.

Very few of these inscriptions reveal dynastic elements which could help in reconstructing the history of this remote period. Two inscriptions in the Māṅkuḷam caves, near Madurai, dated from the second century BC, mention a donor named Kaṭalaṉ Vaḻuti and a certain Neṭuñcaḻiyaṉ, whose function is not given.[11] These names are similar to those borne by the Pāṇḍyan sovereigns celebrated in the Caṅkam literature, that is, Vaḻuti and Neṭuñceliyaṉ.[12] Historians have thus exploited this strong similarity to corroborate the rule of the Pāṇḍyans in the early centuries before the Common Era. Finding these names in early inscriptions, as well as in ancient literature where they are presented as powerful monarchs, is indeed a striking fact which could conceivably attest to an early Pāṇḍyan kingdom. But one should bear in mind firstly that Neṭuñcaḻiyaṉ is not expressly said to be a king in this lithic record; and second, that the dates given to these epigraphs are extremely tentative. Other Tamil–Brāhmī inscriptions from Pukaḷūr, in Kārūr district, palaeographically dated to the second century AD, mention Ko Ātaṉ Cel Irumporai,

[4] These inscriptions, noticed and published for the most part in various journals, have been gathered in a single volume by I. Mahadevan in 2003, accompanied by a transliteration and a translation, which has become extremely useful as an overview of both the contents and the evolution of the script.

[5] See Mahadevan, *Early Tamil Epigraphy*, p. 382.

[6] *Ibid.*, pp. 369, 372, 373, 375, 376, 377, 381.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 379.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 365.

[9] For an explanation of these terms and their potential relation with Jainas, see *Ibid.*, pp. 129–33.

[10] See, for example, the dates proposed by I. Mahadevan in his *Early Tamil Epigraphy*.

[11] *Ibid.*, pp. 315–17.

[12] There is a king called Ceḻiyaṉ in *Puṟanāṉūṟu* 18 and 19, for example. Neṭiyoṉ is referred to as an ancestor of the Pāṇḍyan king Kuṭumi in *Puṟanāṉūṟu* 9. *Puṟanāṉūṟu* 51 and 388, for instance, mention a Vaḻuti.

his son (?) Peruṅkaṭuṅkōṉ and grandson (?) [I]ḷaṅkaṭuṅkōṉ, identified as kings of the Cēra dynasty.[13]

South India is mentioned in some of Aśoka's edicts from the second century BC: at the borders of the dominions of king Priyadarśin (Aśoka) lies the dominions of the Coḍas, the Pāṇḍyas, the Satyaputra, the Keralaputra, the Tāmraparṇī, the Yona (Yavana) king called Antiyaka (Rock Edict II at Girnār); the king has accomplished a *dharmavijaya* which reached, in the South, the Coḍas and the Pāṇḍyas, up to Tāmraparṇī (Rock Edict XIII at Kālsī).[14] The mention of the Cōḷa and Pāṇḍyan dynasties, already found in the ancient literature, seems to corroborate their existence in the second century BC in the southern peninsula.

Another testimony to the rule of the Pāṇḍyas in the beginning of the second century BC is found in Megasthenes' *Indica*. Many other accounts regarding South India that do not mention the ruling dynasties are found in the works of Strabo, Pliny, Claudius Aelianus and in the *Periplus maris erythraei*, until the second century AD.[15] These textual allusions are supported by the numerous Roman remains, like pottery, coins, etc., discovered so far on the sites of Arikamedu, Alakaṅkuḷam, Koṟkai, Pattanam, etc., testifying to important trading activity on the Eastern and Western coasts of South India.[16] It has been commonly believed that the trade activity with Mediterranean countries ended after the third century AD, corresponding with the beginning of the 'Dark Period'. However, scholars have begun to revise this statement. For instance, R. Nagaswamy reviews the dates of the Roman remains found in Alakaṅkuḷam, and concludes, perhaps a little hastily, that 'coastal trade round the Cape Comorin was active not in the first century A.D. but in the fourth-fifth centuries A.D.';[17] V. Begley remarks that recent findings on the Arikamedu site are assigned to the period between the third to the seventh century AD, indicating that trading activity probably decreased after the first-second centuries AD, but did not cease entirely.[18] Besides, an important factor to consider, as Dr V. Selvakumar points out, is that the scientific techniques for dating are not always accurate, and pre-conceived ideas of a 'Dark Period' where nothing could have happened might have lead to an earlier dating for

[13] See Mahadevan, *Early Tamil Epigraphy*, pp. 117–18; 404–407. No traces of the Cōḷas, the third main dynasty of the Caṅkam literature, have been discovered so far. See Mahadevan, *Early Tamil Epigraphy*, pp. 118–19.

[14] For the text and its translation, see Sen, *Aśoka's Edicts*, pp. 66–67, 98–105.

[15] For the contents of Megasthenes' writings, see Dahlquist, *Megasthenes in Indian Religion*; for a list and a brief description of the foreign accounts on South India, see Nilakantha Sastri, *Foreign Notices of South India*, pp. 41–61.

[16] See Begley et al., *The Ancient Port of Arikamedu*, vol. I, pp. 1–39. See also communication presented during the two-day conference at Pondicherry University in September 2010 by Dr V. Selvakumar on the excavations at Muziris/Pattanam.

[17] Nagaswamy, 'Alagankulam: An Indo-Roman Trading Port', p. 251.

[18] Begley et al., *The Ancient Port of Arikamedu*, pp. 30–31.

some objects.[19] Nevertheless, the period up to the third century AD appears to be a flourishing one as far as trade and contact with western nations are concerned. The decrease in trading activity with this part of the world, if real, does not necessarily imply that a 'Dark Period' starts in South India but may simply reflect a decline or a crisis in the Roman Empire.

Other types of remains, mortuary ones, are also found in abundance during this period. Again, the dating is extremely vague and uncertain, especially when there are no inscriptions on the stone. Ancient Tamil literature also corroborates the presence of these funeral arrangements pertaining to the pre-third century AD.[20] To these, we can add sites revealing dynamic commercial activity, like the glass bead factory in Poruntal, Dindigul district, excavated by K. Rajan who unearthed a large variety of material.[21]

From the Third to the Sixth Century AD: The So-called 'Dark Period'

Although it is a common belief that the period between the third and the sixth century does not provide copious evidence for the reconstruction of the history of South India, the data concerning this so-called 'Dark Period' should nonetheless all be carefully assessed.

The first epigraphical traces of one of the most famous dynasties of South India, the Pallavas, are found in Andhra Pradesh and are dated, again based on uncertain palaeographical analysis, from the end of the third century AD. In spite of the fact that these inscriptions have been found in Andhra Pradesh and that the subject of their donation is in the same State, two Prakrit copper-plates clearly refer to Kāñcipuram as the capital of the dynasty, indicating that south of Andhra Pradesh as well as north of Toṇṭaimaṇṭalam were part of the territory of the Early Pallavas.[22] Their inscriptions, initially in Prakrit and later exclusively in Sanskrit, seem to fill the period between the end of the third century to the sixth century AD, even if it is an almost impossible task to assign a clear and precise date to them.[23] A coherent genealogy of the dynasty and a proper historical reconstruction of this period are therefore not really feasible, but that does not necessarily imply that there was no activity or that it was a troubled era in northern Tamil Nadu: lithic records are often heavily damaged, many have probably disappeared, and so our data are sparse indeed.

[19] Communicated by Dr V. Selvakumar, Tanjavur University, during the workshop held in the Pondicherry Centre of the École française d'Extrême-Orient, 20 December 2010.

[20] See Rajan, 'Life after Death: From Mortal Remains to Monuments'.

[21] See Rajan, *Recent Researches in the Archaeology of Tamil Nadu*.

[22] Maidavōlu copper-plates of Śivaskandavarman (*Epigraphia Indica* VI, pp. 84–89 with facsimile), palaeographically assigned to the first half of the fourth century AD by T.V. Mahalingam, *Inscriptions of the Pallavas*, p. 31; Hīrahaḍagalli copper-plates of Śivaskandavarman (*Epigraphia Indica* I, pp. 2–10 with facsimile), assigned to the middle of the fourth century AD by *Ibid.*, p. 35.

[23] See Mahalingam, *Inscriptions of the Pallavas*, pp. 29–85.

The fact that the Pallavas were ruling Kāñcipuram appears to be corroborated by two epigraphs. The first is the Allahābād stone pillar inscription of Samudragupta, dated to about the middle of the fourth century AD, which states that the Gupta king Samudragupta had conquered Viṣṇugopa of Kāñcipuram, among other kings from Dakṣiṇāpatha.[24] Although the name of the dynasty is not given, Viṣṇugopa has been considered a Pallava king because this name often appears in their oldest epigraphs,[25] and because Kāñcipuram has been associated with the Pallavas from their first copper-plates, as mentioned above. The second is an inscription of the Kadamba king Kākuṣṭhavarman, recording a donation by his son, Śāntivarman, found on a pillar at Tāḷaguṇḍa, in Mysore State, which is palaeographically dated from the first half of the sixth century by F. Kielhorn (*Epigraphia Indica* VIII, pp. 24–36).[26] The genealogical part refers to the first sovereign of the dynasty, Mayūraśarman, who goes to Kāñcipuram, engages in battle against the Pallavas and vanquishes the guardians of their frontiers, the Bāṇas, up to Śrīparvata. But the unnamed Pallava kings, seeing the bravery of their adversary, become his ally and the Kadamba begins to serve the Pallavas. It is therefore plausible that Mayūraśarman, since he was the great grandfather of the ruling king Kākuṣṭhavarman, reigned somewhere during the so-called 'Dark Period'.

Regarding other data located in or related to the Tamil-speaking South, we find some late Tamil-Brāhmī/Early Vaṭṭeḻuttu inscriptions, referred to above, giving names like Ātaṉ Cāttaṉ, Centaṇṭaṉ, Kucalaṉ, etc. An epigraph from Eṭakal might mention a Cēra, called Kaṭumiputta, if we accept I. Mahadevan's interpretation.[27] Western Asian sherds have been discovered in various locations, although in smaller quantities than the Roman remains—which are still found, by the way, until the fifth century—showing a shift or diversification of trading partners.[28] The famous *Raghuvaṃśa* of Kālidāsa narrates that a number of kings present themselves to the princess in order to marry her. Among them, stands the Pāṇḍya:

pāṇḍyo 'yam aṃsārpitalambahāraḥ kḷptāṅgarāgo haricandanena|
ābhāti bālātaparaktasānuḥ sanirjharodgāra ivādrirājaḥ|| 60||Chapter VI
The Pāṇḍya, with pearls hanging down from his shoulders,
His body anointed with fragrant red sandal,

[24] See Chhabra and Gai, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings*, pp. 213 for the text, and 217 for the translation. For the identification of these sovereigns and their kingdom, see pp. 12–20.

[25] See, for instance, the Uruvappaḷḷi and the Neduṅgaraya plates where Viṣṇugopavarman, the Pallava Yuvamahārāja, is the donor (Mahalingam, *Inscriptions of the Pallavas*, pp. 45–51). In the Curā plates, palaeographically dated from the fifth century AD (*Ibid.*, pp. 82–85), the donor is Dharmamahārāja Vijaya Viṣṇugopavarman, and the genealogy mentions his grandfather who bears the same name and title.

[26] Kielhorn, *Epigraphia Indica,* VIII, pp. 24–36.

[27] See Mahadevan, *Early Tamil Epigraphy*, p. 433. For the edition and translation of late Tamil–Brāhmī and early Vaṭṭeḻuttu inscriptions found in Tamil Nadu, see pp. 415–81.

[28] I am grateful here to Dr V. Selvakumar who kindly shared this information based on his own observations.

Resembles the king of the mountains when gilded
At morning with sunlight, his torrents cascading.

The next verse expresses the traditional association between the Pāṇḍya and his personal *purohita*, the legendary Agastya, as we find a few centuries later stated in some of the copper-plates of the dynasty itself:

vindhyasya saṃstambhayitā mahādrer niḥśeṣapītojjhitasindhunāthaḥ|
prītyāśvamedhāvabhṛthārdramūrteḥ sausnātiko yasya bhavaty agastyaḥ||61||
Agastya who pressed down the great mountain Vindhya,
Who drank up entirely and spewed out the ocean,
Became, from affection, the one who put questions
When his [namely, the Pāṇḍya king's] body was dripping from closing ablutions
Performed at the end of his Aśvamedha.

In chapter IV, which describes the various conquests of the hero, the Pāṇḍya is also referred to as the inhabitant of the South:

diśi mandāyate tejo dakṣiṇasyāṃ raver api|
tasyām eva raghoḥ pāṇḍyāḥ pratāpaṃ na viṣehire|| 52||
Down South, the heat of the sun itself
Grows slow; the Pāṇḍyas there
Were powerless before the fire
Of Raghu's dauntlessness.[29]

The author is believed to have lived and written his literary epic during the fourth century of the Common Era. But were the Pāṇḍyans still ruling during these centuries or does Kālidāsa refer to an ancient dynasty the fame of which had still not faded?

It is practically impossible to determine whether there was a real continuity in the Pāṇḍyan kingdom from its beginning until the seventh century AD when we start finding some clearer epigraphical records. The Vēḷvikuṭi copper-plates suggest an interregnum, but I hold this statement to be doubtful, for reasons that I will explain below. Some of the names given in the genealogy of these plates are found in some of the early Pāṇḍyan inscriptions, like Centaṉ in the Malaiyaṭikuṟicci and Vaikai riverbed inscriptions, Arikesari in the Eṉati inscription and possibly in the Iḷaiyāṉputtūr copper-plates.[30] That, again, does not mean that Centaṉ or Arikesari

[29] I would like to thank D. Goodall (EFEO) who has provided the reference, the text and the translation of these verses.

[30] For the Malaiyaṭikuṟicci and Vaikai riverbed inscriptions, see Krishnan, *Inscriptions of the Early Pāṇḍyas*, pp. 1–3. For the Eṉati inscription, now in the Madurai Tirumal Nayak Palace, see Vijayavenugopal, 'Some New Inscriptions of Pandya Kings', pp. 381–391 and *Āvaṇam* 7, 1996, pp. 13–14. I would like to thank Dr G. Vijayavenugopal for bringing this inscription to my notice,

belong to the sixth century or even earlier, for the regnal periods of each king are impossible to establish. There is no point in debating the dates of these Pāṇḍyan kings, for too little is certain, but we cannot exclude the possibility that there was a continuous and old lineage that grew stronger and became more organised in the seventh century.

The Pūlāṅkuṟicci inscriptions (Tiruppattūr taluk, Śivagangai district), discovered in 1979, are composed of three epigraphs engraved next to each other on a rock in a field. The central one is highly damaged.[31] The first inscription begins with a '190th year', but without reference to any dynasty or clan. R. Nagaswamy interpreted this number as the 190th year of the Śaka Era (268 AD) but his suggestion has been refuted by Y. Subbarayalu, mainly on palaeographical grounds. I would tend to agree with the latter, the Śaka Era dating being found, during the early period in the southern half of the peninsula, mostly in the Cāḷukyan records from the sixth century onwards.[32] Considering palaeography, Y. Subbarayalu suggests 500 AD for these inscriptions. Because the Kaḷabhras are supposed to have lived during this period, he concludes that the sovereigns quoted in these epigraphs, that is, Centaṉ Kūṟṟaṉ and Centaṉ, could have belonged to this dynasty. However, given that these names closely resemble those of the Pāṇḍyas, and since the Kaḷabhras are not mentioned at all, although it is true that the second inscription is quite damaged, I would prefer to assume that these kings or chieftains were related to the Pāṇḍyan dynasty, whether by blood or by some other kind of alliance.

Although it is difficult to ascribe a date to these lithic records, it is plausible to assign them to the 'Dark Period' under consideration. Therefore, it is important to draw attention to the fact that one of the three inscriptions records the foundation of three temples in different places by a certain Eṅkumaṉ, chief of the oceanic great army, son of Vēḷ Marukaṉ (*vēḷ marukaṇ makaṇ kaṭalākap perumpaṭait talaivaṇ eṅkumāṉ* l. 3–4). Two temples are called *tēvakulam* but the deity is not given, and the third one is designated as a sanctuary (*kōṭṭam*) for [Vā]ci, and has been built in the resting place for ascetics (*tāpatappaḷḷi*). Their obedience is not really our concern here, but the allusion to their existence indicates that monuments were built for deities, probably using perishable materials, and they have disappeared. This underlines something that should be obvious: that there were temples during this period. The fact that we do not have any evidence of them today, by no means proves that they did not exist.

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and spending some time with me reading it in detail. For the Iḷaiyāṉṉuttūr copper-plates, see *Āvaṇam* 18, 2007, pp. 1–15, edited by Y. Subbarayalu.

[31] See R. Nagaswamy, 'An Outstanding Epigraphical Discovery in Tamilnadu'; Subbarayalu and Raghava Varier, 'Pūlāṅkuṟicci kalveṭṭukkaḷ' (this article edits the text); Subbarayalu, 'The Pūlāṅkuṟicci inscriptions'.

[32] See Salomon, *Indian Epigraphy*, pp. 182–84. However, it seems that a proper survey of Śaka-dated inscriptions has not yet been achieved for the whole of the Indian peninsula, and this statement may need to be altered in the light of further studies.

From the end of the sixth century, the amount of data increases in the Tamil country. Epigraphical evidence becomes clearer, often mentioning the names of the dynasties, sometimes the genealogies, etc. We find the first surviving shrines, rock-cut temples excavated under Pallava patronage, as well as monolithic monuments which almost certainly imitate the conventions of an already established tradition of wooden architecture. This transformation is stated in the famous inscription of the Pallava Mahendravarman I at Maṇṭakappattu, probably toward the end of the sixth century: 'without bricks, without wood, without metal, without mortar, the king Vicitracitta has caused this temple to be made, which is called [the temple of] Brahmā, Īśvara and Viṣṇu'.[33] It thus supports the idea of a change and it is commonly accepted that these changes mark the end of the 'Dark Period'.

In fact, if one considers the data commonly thought to belong to the pre-Dark Period, that is, preceding the third century AD, archaeological and epigraphical evidence encountered in what is today the Tamil-speaking South does not enable one to draw as accurate a historical picture of these centuries as is possible for the post sixth century period. Roman artefacts have been discovered showing exchanges between the Roman Empire and the southern Indian peninsula; excavations reveal the likelihood of certain commercial activities; some Tamil–Brāhmī inscriptions suggest the presence of trading activities, and Jainas. But of rulers, kingdoms and the structure of society, there is hardly any evidence.[34] Our knowledge of it is confined to the ancient Tamil literature, the Caṅkam literature, especially the *puṟam* anthologies which deal with kings and their deeds. But as K.A. Nilakantha Sastri himself pointed out, the Caṅkam literature does not seem to reflect a 'Dark Period'.[35] Furthermore, a corpus of 'eighteen minor works', the *Patiṉeṇkiḻkkaṇakku*, of which the famous *Tirukkuṟaḷ* is the first, is likely to have been composed during the fifth and sixth centuries, showing then a kind on continuity between the Caṅkam and the Bhakti corpora. Although this fact is difficult to demonstrate, I tend to believe that a break of a few centuries in the production of literary works would have been noticed by linguists and philologists.[36]

[33] *etad aniṣṭakam adruma[m alo]*
ham asudhaṃ [vicitraci]ttena
nirmmāpitan nṛpe[ṇa] brahme
śvara-viṣṇu-la[kṣi]tāyatanam
See *Epigraphia Indica* XVII, pp. 14–17.

[34] I have not dealt with religion here. This aspect would require further investigation, which would go beyond the scope of this article. But during the conference, Dr D. Dayalan presented some very interesting data regarding some Buddhist remains in Tamil Nadu, showing that this religion was active in the southern peninsula during the fifth and sixth centuries AD.

[35] Nilakantha Sastri, *A History of South India*, p. 145.

[36] Dating Caṅkam literature is a daunting task. Scholars like Herman Tieken (*Kāvya in South India*) may believe that it all started in the eight century AD, but the generally accepted range of composition

The Kaḷabhras

Before reaching a conclusion about the so-called 'Dark Period', it seems necessary to explore the pieces of evidence we have regarding the Kaḷabhra dynasty or clan, often considered to be responsible for the 'Dark Period' of South India. I will not venture into the investigation of the origins of the Kaḷabhras,[37] nor their religion, but will simply examine the data we can extract from epigraphical and literary sources.

Kaḷabhras are mentioned in Cāḷukya, Pallava and Pāṇḍyan copper-plates. For the first dynasty, one of the most famous who ruled over a part of the Deccan, we read in the end of the seventh century that the Cāḷukya king Vinayāditya Satyāśraya brought into servitude the Pallava, Kaḷambhras, Keraḷa, Haihaya, Viḷas, Maḷavas, Cōḻas, Pāṇḍyas, Aḷuvas and Gaṅgas.[38] In Śaka year 679 (cir. 757 AD), in the Vakkaleri copper-plates, a donation of Kīrttivarman II, it is said that one of his ancestors, Vikramāditya, smote down the kings of Pāṇḍya, Cōḻa, Keraḷa and Kaḷabhras (II a, line 4), and that the father of the donor, Vikramāditya II (who acceded to the throne in 733?), slew the Pallava king Nandipottavarman, entered Kāñcipuram, and also conquered the Pāṇḍya, Cōḻa, Keraḷa and Kaḷabhras (III b, last line).[39] These records, if we accept the veracity of their statement, therefore suggest that the Kaḷabhras were present around the sixth century, but also in the eighth century. They are indeed quoted among the vanquished enemies, and we can thus assume that they were inhabiting, or perhaps ruling, a territory in the vicinity of the Cāḷukya kingdom. Nevertheless, there is no indication here of a Kaḷabhra dynasty who has conquered and ruled over South India for centuries.

The first Pallava epigraphical records to mention the Kaḷabhras are the Kūram plates,[40] at the end of the seventh century. They are alluded to while describing

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is between the second century BC and the seventh century AD (see Wilden, 'Towards an Internal Chronology of Old Tamil Caṅkam Literature'). Of course, nothing can be proven or dated with certainty, but none of the Caṅkam works seem to refer to a troubled period which could be assimilated to the 'Dark Period' of the modern historians, or even to some territories taken over by obscure and barbarian clans like the Kaḷabhras, whose name is not even mentioned, while the main dynasties and kingdoms are extensively talked about.

[37] Many theories regarding their origin have been proposed. M. Arunachalam, *The Kaḷabhras in the Pāṇḍiya Country*, for instance, deals extensively with them, but nothing appears convincing to me. Supposed references in literary texts or inscriptions never actually refer to Kaḷabhras, but consist instead in similar sounding names or designations (for example, *kaḷvar kōmaṉ*, found in *Akanāṉūṟu* 61.11, who is linked with Vēṅkaṭam [Tiruppati]; *kaḷvar kaḷvaṉ* found in a Muttaraiyar inscription in Centalai: the resemblance was first noticed by T.A.G. Rao in his edition of the Aṉpil plates in 1919–1920, *Epigraphia Indica* XV, p. 49, and he therefore identified the Muttaraiyars with the Kaḷabhras).

[38] See the grant of Vinayāditya giving the village of Kiṟukāgāmāsi in the Vanavāsi district in the Śaka year 616 (694–95 AD), the fourteenth year of his reign, published in *Indian Antiquary* VII, pp. 300–303.

[39] See Vakkaleri copper-plates, *Indian Antiquary* VIII, pp. 23–29, edited by B. Lewis Rice. The editor places the king Vikramāditya, who smote the Kaḷabhras, at the end of the sixth century.

[40] See *South Indian Inscriptions* I, no. 151, pp. 144–55, and *Epigraphia Indica* XVII, no. 22, pp. 340–44.

the deeds of Narasiṃhavarman I, grandfather of the donor Parameśvaravarman, thought to have ruled in the middle of the seventh century:

> *muhur avajita-coḷa-keraḷa-kaḷabhra-pāṇḍyasya*: who conquered many times the Coḷas, the Keraḷas, the Kaḷabhras and the Pāṇḍyas

The next mention is found in a record from the second half of the eighth century. In the Kacakkuṭi copper-plates[41] of Nandivarman II, the conquest of the Kaḷabhras is attributed to Siṃhaviṣṇu, one of the first famous Pallava kings:

> *siṃhaviṣṇur vijiṣṇuḥ malayam atha kaḷabhram māḷavañ coḷapāṇḍyau nijabhujabaladṛptam siṃha[ḷaṃ] keralāṃś ca*: Siṃhaviṣṇu conqueror of the Malaya, the Kaḷabhra, the Māḷava, the Coḷa and the Pāṇḍya, the Siṃhala who is proud of the strength of his arm, and the Keraḷa.

The Pullūr copper-plates[42] of Nandivarman II may provide a small hint about the Kaḷabhras by enumerating the dynasties, clans or groups, who venerate the donor of the record:

> *keraḷa-coḷa-pāṇḍya-maḷavaiḥ kāḷabhra-bāṇādhīpais āndhrais saindhava-śāntavaṃkuravarair gaṃgaiḥ kadaṃbēśvarai[ḥ]*

The case ending *-ais* does not appear for each name given, which are assembled into a few *dvandva* compounds. The Keraḷas, Cōḷas, Pāṇḍyas and Māḷavas are gathered under one compound; Kāḷabhras and Bāṇas under another; Saindhavas and Śāntavaṃkuravars under yet another one. Āndhras, Gaṃgas and Kadaṃbas bear a case ending each. This arrangement of compounds may be the result of metrical constraints. But if it is meaningful, we can surmise that the Kaḷabhra is a feudatory dynasty or clan, like the Bāṇas with whom they are clustered.[43] Nevertheless, it is significant that, despite being a minor dynasty, the Bāṇas have left many traces in epigraphical records. As another minor dynasty controlling a part of South India, would not the Kaḷabhras have left more evidence of their presence? Without denying their very existence, their names being quoted quite clearly in various copper-plates of a few major dynasties, I tend to think that the Kaḷabhras played a minor role in the South Indian scene of the first millennium.

In the copper-plates of Paṭṭattāḷmaṅgalam[44] of Nandivarman II, the Kaḷabhras are quoted among the dynasties who try to approach the Pallava king: *vallabha-kaḷabhra-keralā[ḥ*] pāṇḍya-coḷa-tuḷu-goṃgaṇādayaḥ*. Again, we encounter the same kind of testimony: the Kaḷabhras are quoted among other dynasties, the

[41] See *South Indian Inscriptions* II, no. 73, pp. 342–60.

[42] See *Epigraphia Indica* XXXVI, no. 20, pp. 144–63.

[43] On the early Bāṇas, see the introduction of V. Venkayya in *Epigraphia Indica* XI, pp. 229–40; Govindasamy, *The Role of Feudatories in Pallava History*.

[44] See *Epigraphia Indica* XVIII, no. 14, pp. 115–24.

Cāḷukyas (Vallabhas) and the Keraḷas, who were probably living or ruling over a part of Keraḷa, as their name suggests.[45]

Finally, in the Vēḷañcēri copper-plates[46] of the last king of the dynasty, Aparājitavarman, who reigned in the end of the ninth century, the Kaḷabhras are not mentioned among those who the king vanquished, such as the Bāṇas (str. 10), but while describing his regal grandeur, suggesting perhaps that they were entirely subdued at that time: *kālabhrata-kula-gagana-dinakaro:* he is a sun in the sky for the Kālabhratas.

It is only when it comes to the Vēḷvikuṭi copper-plates of the Pāṇḍyan dynasty, in the end of the eighth century AD, that we find a more detailed account concerning the Kaḷabhras. In fact, all theories regarding their role in South Indian history are elaborated on the statement found in this particular record. In the beginning of the inscription, the Kaḷabhras are integrated in a dramatic scenario where they are held responsible for the temporary fall of the Pāṇḍyas, and therefore of the cancellation of a land donation made by King Mutukuṭumi Peruvaḻuti himself, until the advent of Katuṅkoṉ, the victorious king who has the power to restore the lineage:

kol-yāṇai pala (v) ōṭṭi (k) kūṭā-maṉṉar kuḻān-tavirtta palyāka mutukuṭumi (p) peruvaḻuti eṉṉum pāṇḍyādhirājaṉā [|*] *nāka[m*]-mā-malar-(c)-cōlai naḻir-ciṉai-micai vaṇṭ'-alampum pākaṉūr (k) kūṟṟam eṉṉum paḻaṇa[m] (k) kiṭakkai nīr-nāṭṭu (c) coṟkaṇṇāḷar colappaṭṭa* śrutimārggam *piḻaiyāta koṟkai kiḻāṉ [n*]aṟkoṟṟaṉ koṇṭa veḻvi muṟṟuvikka keḻvi antaṇāḷar muṉpu kēṭka eṉṟ' eṭutt' uraittu veḻvi cālai muṉpu niṉṟu veḻvikuṭi eṉṟ' a-(p)patiyai (c) cīroṭu tiruvaḻara (c) cey tār vēntaṉ* [|*] *appoḻutēy nīrōṭ'aṭṭi (k) koṭuttamaiyāl nīṭu* bhukti *tu[y*]tta [|*] piṉ (ṉ) aḻav'ariya* ādhirājarai *akala nīkki akal iṭattai (k)* kaḷabhraṉ *eṉṉum kali araicaṉ kai(k)koṇṭ' ataṉai iṟakkiya [||*] piṉ paṭu kaṭaṉ muḻaitta paruti pōla* pāṇḍyādhirājaṉ *veḻil paṭṭu viṭu katir avir oḻi vilaka vīṟṟiruntu* [|*] *vēlai cūḻnta viyal iṭattu (k) kōvum kuṟumpum pāvuṭaṉ murukki* [|*] *(c) ceṅkōl ōcci* [|*] *veṇkuṭai nīḻal taṅk'* [|*] *oḻi niṟainta taraṇi maṅkaiyai (p) piṟarpāl urimai tiṟavitiṉ nīkki (t) taṉ pāl urimai naṉ kaṉam amaitta* [|*] *māṉam pērtta tāṉai vēntaṉ* [|*] *(ṉ) oṭuṅkā maṉṉar oḻi nakara aḻitta kaṭuṅkōṉ eṉṉum katir vēl teṉṉaṉ* [||*]

Having driven many killing-elephants, Pāṇḍyādhirājaṉ, called Mutukuṭumi Peruvaḻuti [who has performed] many sacrifices, has chased away the

[45] Among all these dynasties/clans mentioned in the various copper-plates, Viḷas and Śāntavaṃkuravars have not been identified and thus remain unknown, as far as I am aware. The procedure of mentioning the name of a region to designate the inhabitants or the rulers, as, most probably, in the case of Keraḷa, seems to have been followed in a few cases: Āndhras, Goṃgaṇas (perhaps for Koṅkana), Mālavas, Malayas, Saindhavas and Siṃhalas (Ceylonese). The others are dynasties or clans known through both literature and/or epigraphy.

[46] See Nagaswamy, *Tiruttani and Velanjeri Copper Plates*, no page number for the text and p. III for the translation, and Brocquet, *Les inscriptions sanskrites des Pallava*, vol. 2, p. 763 for the text, p. 771 for the translation.

groups of enemy-kings; while the sacrifice undertaken by Narkorraṉ is completed—[Narkorraṉ] head of Korkai, who has not failed the path of revelation (*śrutimārggam*) which has been told by the ones who have words for eyes (Brahmins), [those] of the country [full of] water with vast paddy fields, called 'the division of Pākaṉūr', where the bees are humming on the cool buds in the gardens of big *nāka* flowers—the garlanded-king, rising in front of the learned Brahmins, said: 'Ask'; standing before the sacrificial hall, he named this village Vēḷvikuṭi, so that the wealth grows prosperously; at that moment, [the king] poured water; since he has given [by pouring water], [the Brahmins] enjoyed possession [of this land] for a long time. Afterwards, the *kali* king called Kaḷabhra, having eliminated the uncountable *ādhirāja* of rare quality, seizing this broad area, rescinded [this donation]. Afterwards, like the sun which burgeons on the great sea, Pāṇḍyādhirājaṉ appeared [and] sat majestically so that the bright light of emitting-rays (the sun) withdraws; he extensively destroyed the kings and the petty chieftains of this wide world surrounded by the ocean; he brandished a sceptre; he stayed under the shade of the white parasol; having permanently put aside the claim for right of possession by the outsiders for the woman [who is] the resplendent Earth, he has secured [this] excellent honour of possession for himself; the army-king has redeemed the pride [of the Pāṇḍyas]; Teṉṉaṉ (the Southern man), with a bright spear, called Katuṅkōṉ, destroyed the glittering towns of the kings who have not yielded.[47]

Beyond the mere narrative aspect, one can wonder if the appearance of such a unique episode of a great sovereign restoring the Pāṇḍyan lineage by vanquishing some evil kings who have taken over their territory is not a strategy to link the Pāṇḍyas of the eighth century with the old dynasty, well known from the Caṅkam literature, where the king Mutukuṭumi Peruvaḻuti is often mentioned. It could be viewed as a way to root themselves in the ancient Pāṇḍyan bloodline and therefore clearly establish their descent. Later in the copper-plates, the same story reappears and the actual donation takes place at the hand of king Neṭuñcaṭaiyaṉ. But for the donation to happen, the Brahmins are required to prove that it has been given to them in former times:

maṟṟ'avaṉ taṉ rājyavatsalam[48] *m[ū*]ṉṟāvatu celā niṟpa āṅk'oru nāḷ māṭa mā matil kūṭalpāṭu niṉṟa[var]* krodhi*kka (k) koṟṟavaṉēy maṟṟ'avarai (t) teṟṟeṉa*

[47] Lines 31–44. For an edition of these copper-plates, see *Pāṇṭiyar ceppēṭukaḷ pattu*, pp. 19–32 and *Epigraphia Indica* XVII, pp. 291–309, edited and translated by H. Krishna Sastri. The text is given here with *sandhi* dissolved and vowel-length distinguished. The italic letters transliterate the Vaṭṭeḻuttu characters, while the non-italic ones represent the Grantha characters. The edition and the translation of these difficult and sometimes unclear passages is the result of reading sessions with Dr G. Vijayavenugopal, epigraphist of the EFEO Centre of Pondicherry. Whitney Cox also shared valuable comments which helped improving the accuracy of the translation. Any mistakes are nevertheless mine.

[48] For *rājyavatsaram*.

naṉku kūvi [«] eṉṉēy nun kuṟai [»*] eṉṟu muṉṉāka (p) paṇitt' aruḷa* [|*] *[«*] mēl nāḷ nin kuruvarāl pāl muṟai-iṉ vaḷuvāmai mākam tōy malar (c) cōlai (p) pākaṉūr (k) kūṟṟattu (p) paṭuvatu āḷvat' āṇai aṭal vēntēy vēḷvikuṭi eṉṉum piyar uṭaiyatu olkāta vēl tāṉai ōṭ' ōta vēli uṭaṉ kātta palyāka mutukuṭumi (p) peruvaḷuti eṉṉum* parameśvaraṉāl *vēḷvikuṭi eṉṉa (p) paṭṭatu kēḷviyil tara(p)paṭṭa ataṉai (t) tuḷakkam illā (k) kaṭal tāṉaiyāy* kaḷabhra*r-āl iṟakka (p) paṭṭatu [»*] eṉṟu niṉṟavaṉ* vijñāpya*ñ ceyya* [|*] *[«*]naṉṟu naṉṟ' [»*] eṉṟu muṟuvalittu [« *] nāṭṭāl niṉ paḷamai (y) ātal kāṭṭi/ nī [koḷka [»*] (v) eṉ]ṉa* [|*] *nāṭṭ[ā]l taṉ paḷa[m]ai [(y)] ātal [kāṭṭ]iṉāṉ aṅk' a[ppo]ḷutēy* [|*] *kāṭṭa [« *] mēl nāḷ e[m] kuravarāl pāṉ muṟai-il tara (p) paṭṭatai emm-āl-um tara (p) paṭṭat' [»*] eṉṟu* [|*] *cemmānt' avaṉ eṭutt' aruḷi* [|*] *vil kai (t) taṭa (k) kai viṟal vēntaṉ koṟkai kiḻāṉ kāma (k) kāṇi naṟciṅkaṟku (t) tēr ōṭum kaṭal tāṉaiyāṉ nīrōṭ' aṭṭi (k) koṭuttamai-iṉ* [|*]

Subsequently, while his third regnal year was current, there, one day, he [Neṭuñcaṭaiyaṉ, the donor of the present copper-plates], while those who stand in Kūṭal of big walls and storied houses became angry, the king himself called them immediately in a proper manner, [and] first graciously ordered: 'What are your grievances?' Standing while making the declaration, one said: 'Long ago, by your ancestors, by a just order of apportioning, that which falls in the division of Pākaṉūr with flower gardens reaching the sky, ruled [by you], O king [with] killing-elephants!, which possessed the name of Vēḷvikuṭi, Vēḷvikuṭi [being] the name that was given by Parameśvara called Mutukuṭumi Peruvaḷuti, [who performed] many sacrifices, who protected altogether the fence of running water (i.e. the earth surrounded by the sea) [with] the unbending spear-army, [Vēḷvikuṭi] had been given upon request, O you with the oceanic army which does not bow![49], [this Vēḷvikuṭi] which has been rescinded by the Kaḷabhra'. Smiling, [the king replied]: 'Good, Good. Show the antiquity of your claim through your settlement, and you may take it'; he showed the antiquity of their claim through the settlement,[50] here, at that moment; while he was showing, [the king] said: 'The order of apportioning given by our ancestors long ago is also given by us'; majestically, having taken [the settlement?], he bestowed his grace. The victorious king with a bow in his large hand, he who has a sea-army where

[49] The compound *tuḷakkam illā (k) kaṭal tāṉaiyāy* could also be taken as applying to the Kaḷabhras instead of being read as a vocative, following H. Krishna Sastri: 'It has (*since*) been resumed as by the ignoble (*yet*) ocean-like army of the Kaḷabhras' (*tuḷakkam illā (k) kaṭal tāṉaiyāy* kaḷabhra*r-āl iṟakka (p) paṭṭatu*—see *Epigraphia Indica* XVII, p. 308). I thank Whitney Cox for having pointed this out to me.

[50] The word *nāṭu*, which I translate here as 'settlement' following the suggestion of Whitney Cox, is ambiguous. As this scholar pointed out to me, it is not possible to know whether *nāṭu* refers to an official written document recording the donation and/or fixing the boundaries of their land or any other type of proof—not necessarily written—that this land belonged to those who claimed it. He suggested that we cannot rule out the possibility that this word could refer, as it will during Cōḻa times and later, to the [leading] assembly of men of the locality. It is also what H. Krishna Sastri, who translates *nāṭu* by 'district (*assembly*)' (*Epigraphia Indica* XVII, p. 308), seems to understand.

chariots are running, having poured water, has given [the land] to Naṟciṅkaṉ, Kāmakaṇi, chief of Koṟkai; [...]. (lines 103–18)

This record appears to be a very unusual object. It is an official document, engraved with meticulous care, which registers a land donation, the village of Vēḷvikuṭi, to a group of Brahmins. But at the same time, it is a piece of literary theatre: the reader is presented with a *mise en scène* in which the king and the Brahmins interact, using direct speech, like characters in a play. Once upon a time, an ancestor of the present king gave Vēḷvikuṭi to Brahmins who have lost it later to the Kaḷabhras, and this transaction was registered perhaps in an ancient document which the donees have to produce in order to prove the ancientness of their ownership. Only then, the king donates the land which they claim as their due.

But one can wonder if such a vivid *mise en scène*, apart from its intrinsic literary quality, does not have another motive. The scenario could intend to conceal an infamous act with an attractive narration, or at least cover up a donation of a disputed piece of land. The act of presenting an ancient official document to the king may be a subterfuge to justify the regal choice of giving this land to the Brahmins, a choice which might have been contested at that time. The theatricality, beyond any literary concern, could have aimed to tinge the record with reality, thus making the sovereign's decision unquestionable. We are unaware of the factors which led to the choice of the Kaḷabhras as enemies instead of any other clan: it may have been dictated by a certain historical reality, perhaps a thunderous defeat at their hands, but there is no trace which would enable us to determine what actually happened.

Therefore, one should assess the historical information given in this document with extreme caution. Indeed, if we accept these hypotheses, the destruction of ancient Pāṇḍyan kings as well as the rule of the Kaḷabhras can be reconsidered. The interregnum of the Kaḷabhras may have been conceived in order to justify the fact that the land in question does not presently belong to the Brahmins, and used at the same time to claim the famous Mutukuṭumi Peruvaḻuti of the Caṅkam literature as their ancestor. The fictive nature of this whole 'Kaḷabhra episode' is corroborated, according to me, by another fact: no other Pāṇḍyan inscription or copper-plates mention an interruption in the Pāṇḍyan sovereignty. Kaḷabhras are not even alluded to in the other Pāṇḍyan records, except in the Talavāypuram copper-plates (early tenth century):

ālaṅkāṉatt' amar-veṉṟu ñālaṅ-kāval naṉk' eytiyum
kaṭi-ñāṟu kaviṉ-alaṅkaṟ kaḷappāḷar kulaṅ-kaḷaintum
muṭi-cūṭiya muraṇ-maṉṉar ēṉaip-palarum muṉṉikanta-piṉ,
iṭaiyāṟaiyum eḻil veṇpaikkuṭiyilum vel-koṭi eṭutta
kuṭai-vēntaṉ ṟiru-kulattuk kōmaṉṉar palar kaḻinta-piṉ

Having well attained the guardianship over the world by winning the battle at Ālaṅkāṉam,
they having weeded out the family of the Kaḷappāḷar, with beautiful garlands fragrant with scent,
after many other enemy kings, who wore crowns, had gone away before them,
after many kings passed away in the auspicious family of the king with the parasol,
who had raised [his] victory banner in Iṭaiyāṟai and beautiful Vēṇpaikkuṭi.[51]

Again, in this case, very little is said about them. The orthography has probably been Tamilised: Kaḷabhra has become Kaḷappāḷar, and they are mentioned among unnamed enemies that the Pāṇḍyan have fought a long time ago. There is no hint of an eventual interregnum, and therefore, apart from the Vēḷvikuṭi copper-plates, Pāṇḍyan epigraphy does not enable us to infer the conquest of South India by the Kaḷabhras.

Against common belief, literature does not furnish any reliable evidence regarding the Kaḷabhras. A king called Acyutavikrānta, said to belong to the Kaḷabhrakula, is mentioned in the *Vinayaviniccaya* written by Buddhadatta:

accut' accutavikkante kalabbhakulavaddhane
mahim samanusāsante āraddhō ca samāpitō
While the imperishable Acyutavikrānta, having raised the Kaḷabhra family, was ruling the earth, [it] was begun and was finished.[52]

This verse, although referring to a Kaḷabhra family ruling the earth, appears to be a very meagre piece of evidence regarding the overpowering of South India by the Kaḷabhras during the third-sixth centuries. First, 'ruling the earth' is a conventional expression which could be used not only for a king but also for any local chieftain controlling even a small territory. It certainly cannot be considered as proof of the Kaḷabhras ruling over a large territory or having subdued other dynasties. Secondly, the dates of the author, Buddhadatta, are not confirmed and very little is known about him. He is traditionally thought to have lived during the time of Buddhaghoṣa, that is, around the sixth century.[53] But it is impossible to assign any date to this Buddhist work, and therefore to consider the information given in this text as reliable historical data.

[51] Lines 98–101. See Krishnan, *Inscriptions of the Early Pāṇḍyas*, pp. 72–83. The translation is that of C. Schmid (EFEO) and E. Wilden (EFEO).

[52] I did not have access to the original text but the verse is given by K.A. Nilakantha Sastri, *The Cōḷas*, note 7, p. 108. According to him, this verse is given while describing a monastery called Veṇhudāsa, in a city called Bhūtamangalam, on the bank of the Kāvērī, described as the hub of Cōḷaraṭṭha. See also O. Von Hinüber, *A Handbook of Pāli Literature*, pp. 155–56.

[53] See Von Hinüber, *A Handbook of Pāli Literature*, p. 155.

Scholars have tried to establish a connection between this verse written by Buddhadatta and another one found in the commentary of the *Yāpparuṅkalam*, a Tamil medieval work on metrics, probably written around the tenth -eleventh centuries:

aṭutiṟal oruva niṉ paravutum eṅkōṉ
toṭukaḻal koṭumpūṇ pakaṭṭ' eḻil mārpiṉ
kayaloṭu kalanta cilaiyuṭaik koṭuvarip
puyal uṟaḻ taṭakkaip pōrvēl accutaṉ
oṉṟu mutirkaṭal ulakam muḻut'uṭaṉ
oṉṟupu tikiri (y) uruṭṭuvōṉ eṉavē
We will praise our king, the unique one who has the courage of killing,
he of sounding anklets, who has a shining beautiful chest with round ornaments
with the fish combined with the bow and the striped tiger,
Accutaṉ, who has a fighting spear in his large hand resembling the cloud,
revolves the *cakra* altogether of the entire world
surrounded by the ancient adjoining seas.[54]

Because of his name, 'taṭa kai pōr vēl' Accutaṉ has been associated with the Acyutavikrānta mentioned by Buddhadatta, although there is no mention of the Kaḷabhrakula, and in spite of the fact that there is a gap of a few centuries between the two texts if Buddhadatta really lived in the sixth century A.D. The fact that this Accutaṉ wears on his chest the emblem of the three major dynasties of ancient South India, that is, the Pāṇḍyas (the fish), the Cēras (the bow) and the Cōḻas (the tiger), is generally used to nourish the theories of the Kaḷabhra clan taking over the meridional peninsula. But here again, this passage cannot be taken as historical evidence: it is very common for kings and chieftains to claim victory over other powerful dynasties in order to elevate themselves above the others. Furthermore, this verse has probably been composed around the tenth–eleventh centuries, and it is therefore difficult to believe that an isolated passage referring to remote times in such a stereotyped manner can be considered as historical proof of the rule of the Kaḷabhras in South India.

A Tentative Conclusion on the Kaḷabhras and the So-called Dark Period

These two isolated passages are too vague and stereotyped to be considered historical pieces of evidence, particularly when they are not corroborated by any other literary work or archaeological or epigraphical data. The only document which could enable us to infer a Kaḷabhra interregnum is the Vēḷvikuṭi copper-plates, but I believe that this official record has invented such a Kaḷabhra

[54] This passage is a quote from an anonymous poem in order to illustrate a grammatical rule given in one of the *sūtra*-s of the *Yāpparuṅkalam*, pp. 287–88. I would like to thank Dr G. Vijayavenugopal who helped me with the translation of this passage.

interregnum, so vividly described, in order to legitimise a donation to Brahmins of a probably disputed piece of land. The choice to make the Kaḷabhras responsible for a break in the Pāṇḍyan lineage may nevertheless have been influenced by a certain historical reality: although we do not have records directly from them, we know from copper-plates from other dynasties that they were present on the South Indian scene and we can imagine without difficulty that Pāṇḍyas encountered them on the battlefield. But modern scholars have seized the opportunity given in these copper-plates to explain what they thought to be a scarcity of data between the third and the sixth centuries in South India. Hence, bearing in mind the words of K. Veluthat: 'When evidence is not at peace with theory, it is the former that the historian should go to, however alluring the latter may be',[55] I would argue that neither these copper-plates, nor any other evidence so far discovered, can be used to elaborate a theory of 300 years of dominance by the Kaḷabhrakula, plunging the whole South of India into darkness.

The very notion of a 'Dark Period' seems shaky when one considers the data found in early South India. It started with the Tamil–Brāhmī inscriptions in caves, with Roman traces suggesting active trade, with mortuary remains, glass bead factories, potteries, etc., but these various activities do not seem to cease abruptly, although their number decreases. Tamil–Brāhmī inscriptions transform into less numerous early Vaṭṭeḻuttu inscriptions; trade continues after the fall of the Roman Empire but mainly with West Asian countries, and on a smaller scale; mortuary remains probably continue to be erected, and slowly transform into smaller hero stones. Although one should bear in mind that the dating of these pieces of evidence is approximate and very uncertain, the decrease in data which seems to occur can be easily explained, especially when it comes to 'local' evidence, like inscriptions and shelters/monuments. In the early so-called Jaina caves, ascetics or merchants were writing their names or donations on the stone itself, protected from erosion, in the caves they were using as shelters. Slowly, some monuments might have been built out of perishable material which have not survived, as proven by the Pūlāṅkuṟicci and the Maṇṭakapattu inscriptions, on which the epigraphs were engraved. It is only with the appearance of meridional cave-temples in the end of the sixth century that inscriptions are engraved on stone again and can therefore be preserved, explaining the multiplication of evidence and the end of what scholars of the twentieth century have, according to me, wrongly labelled the 'Dark Period'.

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[55] Veluthat, 'Into the "Medieval"—And Out of it: Early South India in Transition', p. 47.

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