

**Merchant Guilds as Agents of Trade,
Military, and Religious Integration:
Valangiyar and Manigramam Networks
Across South India, Sri Lanka, and
Southeast Asia.**

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Abstract

This study explores the multifaceted roles of the *Valangiyar/Velaikkara* and *Manigramam/Vanikgrama* merchant guilds in the Indian Ocean world between the 9th and 13th centuries CE. Moving beyond conventional portrayals of these groups as solely commercial entities, this research demonstrates their integrated functions across trade, military service, and religious patronage. Drawing on epigraphic and literary evidence from South India, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia, the paper argues that these guilds functioned as *hybrid institutions* operating at the intersection of political, economic, and sacred domains. The Valangiyars, closely associated with the Velaikkaras, not only served as armed escorts and protectors of royal and temple assets but also maintained maritime trade routes and alliances with other merchant groups such as the Ainnurruvar and Nanadesis. Likewise, the Manigramams, originating from Kerala and expanding into Tamil Nadu, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia, developed sophisticated networks of commercial exchange, taxation, and temple patronage. Through a comparative and cross-regional analytical framework, this paper reveals how these guilds contributed to the integration of transoceanic trade, regional politics, and institutional religion. The study challenges earlier linear interpretations by highlighting the dynamic adaptability and strategic affiliations of these guilds with state power and religious authority.

Keywords: *Valangiyar, Velaikkara, Manigramam, Vanikgrama, Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka.*

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Introduction

The maritime trade networks of the Indian Ocean during the medieval period fostered a complex and dynamic interplay between merchant guilds, royal polities, and religious institutions. Among the most prominent participants in this transregional exchange were the South Indian merchant guilds **Valangiyar/Velaikkara** and **Manigramam/ Vanikgrama**. Traditionally classified as commercial entities, recent scholarship has emphasized their multifunctional roles that extended beyond trade into military service, religious patronage, and administrative affairs. The Valangiyars, often associated with the Velaikkaras, exhibit a unique dual identity as both merchant-warriors and temple custodians, particularly in South India and Sri Lanka. Similarly, the Manigramams, originating from Kerala and expanding into Southeast Asia, emerge as a powerful transoceanic trading network engaged in commerce, taxation, and infrastructure development. Epigraphic records across South India, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia provide rich evidence of their contributions to state and temple economies, protection of trade routes, and interactions with royal authority. Despite their historical significance, scholarly consensus on the origin, structure, and integrative functions of these guilds remains fragmented. This study seeks to fill that gap through a comparative and cross-regional analysis.

This study examines how the Valangiyar (Velaikkara) and Manigramam (Vanikgrama) merchant guilds functioned as hybrid institutions that combined trade, military service, and religious patronage across South India, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia between the 9th and 13th centuries CE. The primary aim of the research is to investigate the socio-political and economic roles of the Valangiyar and Manigramam guilds by analyzing their dual identity as both commercial and security-religious institutions. It further seeks to clarify their affiliations with royal authority and temple establishments, and to examine their transregional operations across the Indian Ocean

world.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative historical research design using comparative case study analysis to examine the Valangiyar/Velaikkara and Manigramam/Vanikgrama merchant guilds between the 9th and 13th centuries CE. The research adopts a cross-regional approach covering South India, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia.

This study is conducted through the examination of primary sources, specifically inscriptions and secondary sources. These provide fundamental evidence for reconstructing the historical roles and regional adaptations of merchant guilds. The inscriptions are complemented by scholarly works, journal articles, and historical analyses authored by leading historians such as K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, R. Champakalakshmi, and S. Paranavitana.

A comparative analytical framework is employed to investigate the organizational structures, functional roles, and regional adaptations of merchant guilds across South India, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia. This includes epigraphic analysis aimed at identifying patterns in administrative duties, military activities, religious patronage, and commercial operations. Further attention is given to analyzing the institutional interactions between merchant guilds, royal authorities, religious establishments, and extensive trade networks.

Additionally, the study applies chronological analysis to trace the evolution and transformations of the guilds over time. This method enables a nuanced understanding of how these institutions adapted to changing political, economic, and religious landscapes, while also highlighting their sustained

influence across the Indian Ocean world.

Results and Discussion

Valangiyar/Velaikkara

The origins of the Valangiyars remain a subject of scholarly debate. Some historians argue that the Valangiyars were closely associated with the Velaikkaras, a distinguished military organization known for their exceptional recruitment practices. K.A. Nilakanta Sastri characterizes them as a highly loyal, permanent military force in royal service (Sastri: 454), primarily entrusted with safeguarding the king. The Tamil lexicon defines the term *velai* as “extremely loyal servants,” while *vaile* is interpreted to mean work, worker, or servant (Madras Tamil Lexicon). Similarly, the term *vel* is associated with “spear” or “lance,” suggesting a martial connotation. The phrase “army of servants” is also used to describe them (SII, Vol. II: 97).

The Valangiyars also functioned as a militant mercantile guild, with epigraphic evidence from both South India and Sri Lanka confirming their commercial and military roles. The Kongunadu inscriptions provide valuable information about these itinerant merchant groups, accompanied by symbols such as elephants, horses, and weapons—indicating both trade and martial functions (Champakalakshmi 1996: 314). These groups were involved in international trade and maintained relations with merchant organizations from various regions. The Tittandatanapuram inscription from the Ramnad District refers to collaborative activity between the Manigramams of southern Sri Lanka and the Valangiyars. It mentions the Manigramams, Anjuvannam, street-residing Chettis (immortal textile merchants), the *Tennilannai Valangiyar* (linked to Sri Lanka), drummers, textile merchants, oil vendors,

and maritime traders. Dated to 1269 CE, this inscription records significant details about the import and export of cotton textiles (ARE 598 of 1026–27), suggesting the Valangiyars' commercial reach across the seas.

The Valangiyars are considered an affiliated body of the Ainnurruvar merchant guild and are believed to have played an integral role in long-distance trade networks across Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka. The Valangiyars or *Valanciars*, at times synonymous with the Velaikkaras, appear to have evolved into a formidable mercantile-military organization. The Velaikkara inscription from Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka contains references to these merchant guilds (EZ Vol. XVIII: 337), while the Vahalkada inscription mentions a *Valangiyar Senapati* or military commander (CTI Vol. II: 235–255), suggesting a structured administrative hierarchy. The Polonnaruwa *sannasa* reveals that the Valangiyars held leadership positions within the Velaikkara formation (EZ Vol. II: 235–255; EI Vol. XVIII: 337).

The Velaikkaras maintained close affiliations with other prominent guilds such as the Nanadesis. The military arm of the Nanadesi guild is noted to have supported the Velaikkaras (ET Vol. I: 34–35). These groups were entrusted with the security of religious establishments, both Buddhist and Hindu, reflecting their loyalty to the monarch. According to the *Velaikkara sannasa* of Polonnaruwa, the Valangiyars provided protection to the Dalada Maligawa (EZ Vol. II: 252). In this context, the temple is referred to as *Munru Kaitturu Dalada Perumpalli* (EZ II: 242), which Wickremasinghe interprets as “Three Hands of the Velaikkaras”, possibly a reference to the *trikaya* concept in Saivism, or more plausibly, to three divisions of the Velaikkara force, as the inscription also mentions an additional eight units serving alongside them.

Further evidence suggests the Velaikkaras were patrons of Shaivism. In the forty-second year of King Vijayabāhu's reign, they were entrusted with custodianship of a Shiva temple named *Vijayaraja Ishvaram* in Kantalai, which may or may not have direct ties to the king (EZ Vol. IV, No. 20). Their management of the temple's property likely brought them economic benefits. Merchant groups such as the Valangiyars and Nagarattars were also prominent within the Velaikkara system. Paranavitana notes that the Valangiyars held leadership roles within the Velaikkaras (EI XVIII: 334), while Rasanayagam records that some Valangiyars, after retiring from military service, served as counsellors within the administrative framework of the Velaikkaras (JRASCB 1924: 278). These insights affirm their dual role as protectors and administrative functionaries who profited from temple patronage and provisions.

The Velaikkaras also maintained strong political ties with Sri Lankan royalty. The *Cūlavamsa* recounts that King Vijayabāhu I dispatched two armies under separate *senāpatis* to Mattikāvāṭṭha and Mahāṭṭha in a campaign against the Cholas, but the Velaikkara troops mutinied during the invasion (CV 58: 36–39). In an article published in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Ceylon*, Nilakanta Sastri, citing Gopinath Rao, describes the Velaikkaras as warriors bound by oath to commit suicide should the king wear flowers unsuited to the occasion or fall in battle (JRASCB, Vol. IV: 67). A commentary on the Tamil devotional text *Tiruvāymoḷi* even invokes the expression “to die like a Velaikkara,” underscoring their intense loyalty (ibid). Pathmanathan suggests that their organizational structure may have been sustained with the backing of mercantile guilds (Pathmanathan 1979: 69), reinforcing the idea that the Velaikkaras functioned as a guild-based mercenary force receiving royal patronage and economic privileges in return

for their services.

Manigramam/Vanikgrama

Manigramam was one of the most prominent merchant guilds in South India during the early and medieval periods. According to Tamil inscriptions, this guild not only participated in commerce but also engaged in public works, such as the construction and maintenance of irrigation tanks, often under their own protection. Scholarly consensus traces their origins to Kerala in the 9th century CE, with subsequent expansion into Tamil Nadu and Southeast Asia during the Pallava and Chola periods (Sastri 1949: 29).

An inscription found on the wall of the Śivapura Vihāra in the Ramanathapuram District records a land grant to the Manigramam merchants (SII, Vol. XIV: 161), reflecting their elevated socio-economic status. Evidence from the *Sthanu Ravi Copper Plates* indicates that the Manigramam was already established as a significant commercial organization in Kerala, actively engaged in trade with Arab merchants at ports such as Quilon.

‘Rules governing the payment of taxes and regulating the functioning of the markets were often inscribed on copper plates and provide useful insights into the organisation of the trade network. The Quilon copper plates of Sthanu Ravi, for example, record trading rights granted to the Nestorian Christian church (Bames & Parkin 2002: 14).’

The charter is dated to the fifth regnal year of medieval Chera ruler Sthanu Ravi Kulasekhara (849/850 CE). And the inscription also confirm the guild’s involvement in maritime commerce with West Asia, particularly during a period when trade between India, China, and Arabia was flourishing. Arab

geographers describe Quilon as a key port of call for Arab vessels voyaging to China and Southeast Asia, inhabited by a cosmopolitan mix of Jews, Arab Muslims, and Persians. The 9th and 10th centuries CE mark a period in which the Manigramam had consolidated its influence in Kerala, actively participating in long-distance maritime trade.

A Tamil inscription discovered at the port of Takua Pa (Takupa) in present-day Thailand further attests to the overseas expansion of the Manigramam guild. Dated to the reign of Nandivarman III (826–850 CE), the inscription refers to Manigramam merchants as protectors of a water tank (Sastri 1949: 25–30), suggesting their combined mercantile and military role. This is consistent with the pattern in the medieval Indian Ocean world, where merchant guilds also undertook security functions, including the protection of trade routes and infrastructure.

The Isthmus of Kra “specifically the port at Tambralinga” was another significant node for these traders. The region served as a strategic point of transit between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. Tamil merchant presence, including that of the Manigramam, is evidenced at Takua Pa during the Pallava era. There, the guild not only engaged in barter trade but also collected local products such as medicinal goods, highlighting its commercial versatility.

In the Indian mainland, Manigramam’s presence is documented through various inscriptions. An inscription from Tiruchirapalli references the Manigramam of Coimbatore (ARE 1964–65: 228), while another from the Tanjore District dated to the 13th century CE records a donation to a temple near Kumbakonam (ARE 1964–65: 286). The Kottayam palli copper plate

inscription, also from the 13th century (EII Vol. V: 41), confirms the granting of trade rights and legal privileges to the guild, emphasizing its recognized institutional status.

Furthermore, a Tamil inscription from Siam (Thailand), also found at Takua Pa, explicitly refers to the Manigramam (Sastri 1932: No. 22). According to this inscription, the guild was involved in the export of commodities such as cinnamon, pepper, betel, areca nut, and ginger to Arab lands. It also reveals that Manigramam had the authority to collect taxes on cargo arriving from 18 different countries, a testament to its commercial dominance and administrative capabilities.

The expansion of the Manigramam into Sri Lanka is illustrated by the reference to *Vanikgrama* in the Hopitigama pillar inscription, dated to the reign of King Udaya IV (946–954 CE) (EZ Vol. V: 182). This inscription was erected in response to grievances raised by the traders of the Hopitigama market in the Horabora region (near modern Badulla), as well as by villagers visiting the Mahiyangana Vihāra. The complaint concerned the illegal levying of taxes and fees by market officials, contrary to royal decrees. Interestingly, in this context, *Vanikgrama* appears to have also denoted village chiefs, revealing the blurred lines between economic and administrative functions (ibid).

Historian Champakalakshmi argues that the guild likely originated in the coastal region of Kāveripaṭṭinam and was originally known as *Vanikgrama* (Champakalakshmi 1996: 219). Regardless of terminological variation, it is evident that Manigramam/*Vanikgrama* was one of the most influential merchant guilds in the medieval Indian Ocean world. Its members were

integral to the economic fabric of South India, Sri Lanka, and broader Bengal Ocean commerce.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the Valangiyar/ Velaikkara and Manigramam/ Vanikgrama guilds were far more than commercial collectives; they were complex, multifunctional institutions embedded within the political, religious, and military activities of the Indian Ocean world between the 9th and 13th centuries CE. Their widespread presence across South India, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia reveals an interconnected and adaptive network that transcended conventional boundaries between trade, statecraft, and sacred authority.

The Valangiyars, often integrated with the Velaikkara military formations, exemplify the dual nature of medieval South Indian guilds as both armed merchant bodies and custodians of temples. Their alliances with royal authorities and temple institutions in Sri Lanka and South India—underscored by their role in protecting religious centers and serving as *senāpatis*—affirm their significance in sustaining political and religious order. Simultaneously, their participation in long-distance maritime commerce, in tandem with guilds like the Ainnurruvar and Nanadesis, reflects their vital role in facilitating transoceanic economic integration.

Similarly, the Manigramam/Vanikgrama guilds emerge as powerful agents of trade and institutional interaction, evolving from coastal Kerala origins into influential transregional entities with tax-collecting authority, infrastructure-building capacities, and religious patronage roles. Their expansion into Tamil Nadu, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia not only testifies to their commercial

success but also to their deep entanglement with local governance structures and temple economies. The presence of Tamil inscriptions in Thailand, as well as their documentation in Sri Lankan and South Indian records, underscores their integrative capacity across distant maritime spaces.

By examining these guilds through a comparative, cross-regional lens, this research challenges the static categorizations of medieval trade institutions. It reaffirms the argument that guilds like Valangiyar and Manigramam operated as hybrid agencies that linked commerce with military service, taxation, temple patronage, and diplomacy. Their adaptability, institutional authority, and strategic affiliations underscore their importance as facilitators of the Indian Ocean's dynamic, interconnected world.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how merchant guilds acted not merely as economic agents but as integrative forces within the evolving political-religious order of the premodern Indian Ocean world. It invites further research into the mechanisms through which these guilds negotiated power, asserted autonomy, and mediated between local and transregional imperatives.

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