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A History of Chennai

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Introduction

Chennai, the vibrant gateway to South India, stands as a living chronicle of centuries past and present. This city, known until 1996 by its colonial moniker Madras, has evolved from a cluster of ancient villages along the Coromandel Coast into one of India's largest and most dynamic metropolitan centers. The journey of Chennai is a tapestry woven with the deeds of powerful kingdoms, the ambitions of colonial empires, and the aspirations of generations determined to shape their destiny. Through each epoch, Chennai has absorbed and transformed influences, emerging as a city that is both rooted in tradition and relentlessly modern.

The origins of this region stretch far back into prehistoric times. Archaeological discoveries—burial urns, stone implements, and even Roman coins—speak to an ancient landscape teeming with life, trade, and culture long before the rise of empires. In these early centuries, legendary dynasties such as the Cholas, Pallavas, and Pandyas rose and fell, leaving behind monuments and temples that still draw the faithful and the curious alike. Their stories, inscribed in stone and sung in verse, continue to shape the soul of the city.

Chennai's historical journey took a decisive turn with the arrival of European powers on its shores. The Portuguese, Dutch, and ultimately the British each laid claim to this strategic stretch of coastline. The founding of Fort St. George by the English East India Company in the 17th century marked the beginning of Madras as a global city—connecting the subcontinent to the world through commerce, governance, and culture. Alongside the fort, Indian merchants, artisans, and communities flourished, giving the city a unique identity defined by both colonial planning and indigenous resilience.

Throughout the colonial era, Madras was more than just an administrative and trading hub. It became a crucible for new ideas and social change—home to pioneering educational institutions, newspapers, and political organizations that would pave the way for India's struggle for freedom. From the grassroots activism of the Madras Mahajana Sabha to the fervor of the independence movement, the city's citizens have played a key role in shaping modern India.

In the decades following Independence, Madras—later renamed Chennai—underwent rapid transformation. Waves of industrialization, urbanization, and political innovation redefined its boundaries and its character. The emergence of the Dravidian movement, the assertion of regional identity, and the embracing of social justice brought new vigor to the cultural and political landscape. Today, Chennai harmonizes its storied past with the energies of a modern metropolis, standing as a beacon of

industry, culture, and education.

This book invites readers on a journey through time, tracing the many layers that compose Chennai's unique history. From the ancient origins in Tondaimandalam to the hustle and bustle of today's cosmopolitan city, each chapter explores a different facet of a remarkable urban saga. Whether you are a resident, a visitor, or a student of history, "A History of Chennai" seeks to illuminate the people, places, and events that have shaped one of India's most fascinating cities.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Dawn of Prehistory - The Early Settlements

Long before the grand temples were raised, before the ships of foreign traders anchored off the coast, and eons before a fortified settlement named Fort St. George took root, the land that is now Chennai was already a stage for human activity. The story of this region doesn't begin with recorded history, but stretches back into the mists of deep prehistory, a time when early humans roamed the landscape, leaving behind subtle, yet significant, traces of their presence. These faint whispers from the Stone Age provide the first clues to the enduring human connection with this part of the Coromandel Coast.

The narrative of Chennai's earliest inhabitants is largely written in stone. Archaeological explorations in and around the modern metropolitan area have yielded tools crafted by prehistoric hands, simple yet ingenious implements that speak volumes about the lives of these ancient peoples. One of the most pivotal discoveries occurred in the mid-19th century in Pallavaram, a locality now part of the city. Here, in 1863, a British geologist named Robert Bruce Foote unearthed a stone hand-axe, a find that would forever change the understanding of India's prehistory.

Foote's discovery in Pallavaram was not an isolated incident. Further exploration, particularly at Attirampakkam in the nearby Tiruvallur district, revealed a wealth of similar stone tools. These artifacts, primarily hand-axes and cleavers fashioned from quartzite, provided compelling evidence of a thriving Lower Paleolithic culture in the region, a culture so significant that it came to be known scientifically as the 'Madrasian Culture', after the erstwhile name of Chennai. The sheer density of prehistoric sites in and around Tiruvallur, with over 40 identified localities, underscores the importance of this area as a hub of early human activity.

Dating these ancient tools has been a meticulous process, pushing back the timeline of human habitation in this part of India considerably. Using advanced techniques, archaeologists have estimated the age of the tools found at Attirampakkam to be as old as 1.5 million years, potentially making it one of the oldest prehistoric sites in South Asia and challenging previous notions about the timeline of human migration out of Africa and into the Indian subcontinent. These early inhabitants, likely *Homo erectus*, were hunter-gatherers, adept at crafting tools that allowed them to exploit the resources of their environment – digging for tubers, butchering animals, and processing plant matter.

As millennia rolled into epochs, the technology of these early peoples evolved. While

the Paleolithic tools speak of a distant past, archaeological layers in the region also reveal evidence of later Stone Age cultures, including the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods. Sites like Vadakkupattu, on the outskirts of present-day Chennai, have yielded Mesolithic stone tools estimated to be around 12,000 years old, suggesting a continuity of human presence and adaptation to changing environments. These tools, such as scrapers and choppers, indicate a broadening range of activities and perhaps more specialized tasks among the hunter-gatherer communities.

The transition to the Neolithic period, marked by the beginnings of settled agriculture and the use of polished stone tools, is also attested in the region. While not as abundant as the earlier Paleolithic finds, Neolithic sites near Chennai, such as those found near Chengalpet, provide glimpses into a different way of life. The discovery of a Neolithic child burial site, complete with pottery, offers rare insights into the burial practices and possibly the burgeoning social structures of these early farming communities. The presence of burnished grey ware pottery at these sites is considered a significant find, adding to the understanding of material culture during this period in Tamil Nadu.

Moving forward in time, the landscape around Chennai reveals signs of the Iron Age and the emergence of more complex societies. This period, characterized by the widespread use of iron for tools and weapons, saw the development of larger settlements and more sophisticated burial practices. Archaeological digs across Tamil Nadu, including areas that fall within the broader Chennai region, have uncovered numerous Iron Age burial sites containing distinctive burial urns and sarcophagi.

These burial sites are treasure troves for archaeologists, often containing not only human remains but also grave goods such as pottery, iron implements, and sometimes even ornaments. The sarcophagi, essentially large terracotta coffins, some with multiple legs, point to advanced crafting techniques and elaborate funeral rituals among the Iron Age inhabitants. The presence of iron objects like hoes, spears, knives, and axes within these burials highlights the transformative impact of metal technology on their daily lives, from agriculture to warfare. Recent findings across Tamil Nadu suggest the use of iron dates back as far as 5,000 to 5,400 years ago, potentially pushing back the generally accepted timeline for the Iron Age in the Indian subcontinent.

Beyond the tools and burials, there is also intriguing evidence of early trade networks connecting this region to distant lands. Finds of Roman coins and painted earthenware in areas around Chennai suggest interactions with the Roman Empire long before the arrival of European trading companies in the medieval and early modern periods. These artifacts, including fragments of rouletted ware and amphorae, indicate that the region, or at least areas in its vicinity like Pattarai Perambadur and Naduvirapattu, served as transit points or perhaps even minor trading centers linked to the lucrative maritime trade routes crisscrossing the Indian Ocean.

While the scale of this early trade might not have rivaled the bustling ports of later eras, these discoveries paint a picture of a coastline that was not isolated but part of a wider world of exchange. The presence of Roman artifacts inland suggests that trade extended beyond the immediate coastal settlements, reaching into the interior. This hints at established inland routes and local networks that facilitated the movement of goods. The commodities exchanged likely included the spices, textiles, and other products of South India that were in high demand in the Roman world, in return for items like wine, olive oil, and precious metals.

The region's geography, situated on the Coromandel Coast with its access to the Bay of Bengal, naturally lent itself to maritime activity. While major ports might have developed more prominently in later periods, it is plausible that smaller coastal settlements engaged in local and regional trade from very early times. The mention of ancient ports on the east coast in classical texts like the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* suggests a network of maritime centers along this coastline in the early centuries CE, with places like Podouke (possibly Pulicat) identified as significant. Though direct evidence for a major port exactly at the site of modern Chennai in these earliest periods is still emerging, the surrounding archaeological landscape clearly indicates a long history of human interaction with the sea.

The prehistoric and early historical evidence from the Chennai region, therefore, provides a crucial foundation for understanding the city's long and complex history. The Stone Age tools from Pallavaram and Attirampakkam serve as tangible links to the earliest human inhabitants, demonstrating a deep ancestry that stretches back over a million years. The burial sites of the Iron Age speak of settled communities with developed social practices and technological capabilities. The scattered Roman artifacts offer tantalizing clues about early connections to distant civilizations through trade.

These early chapters of human presence, etched in stone and buried beneath layers of sediment, are essential to appreciating the full sweep of Chennai's past. They remind us that the modern metropolis is built upon a landscape that has been inhabited and shaped by human hands for an immense span of time, a history far older than the arrival of any kingdom or colonial power. The story of Chennai begins not in the 17th century, but in the almost unimaginable depths of prehistory, a testament to the enduring appeal and habitability of this coastal strip.

As we move forward to explore the rise of powerful South Indian dynasties and their influence on this region, it is vital to remember these earliest settlers who laid the groundwork for the civilizations that would follow. Their lives, their tools, and their burials are the silent prologue to the vibrant history that would unfold on the Coromandel Coast. They represent the true dawn of human history in the area that would eventually grow into the city of Chennai.

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