Can Sangam Literature Be Used as Historical Evidence?

A source-critical method for poetry, chronology, transmission and corroboration

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Direct answer. Yes, Sangam literature can be used as historical evidence, but a poem is not an annal and the surviving text is not an excavated artefact from the moment of composition. The Eight Anthologies and Ten Idylls preserve Old Tamil poems about love, war, patronage, landscape, exchange, kings and ordinary life. Their composition, oral circulation, compilation, commentary, manuscript copying and modern printing occurred at different times. Historians therefore analyse linguistic and metrical layers, poetic genre, named people and places, colophons and manuscript variants, then compare claims with Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions, coins, archaeology and external texts. Convergences such as the Jambai inscription's Atiyaman Netuman Anci strengthen specific identifications. They do not turn every poetic scene into literal reportage or give the entire corpus one precise date.

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1 Corpus and source categories

The Ettuttokai and Pattuppattu are internally diverse anthologies. Verse, colophon, compilation, commentary, manuscript and printed edition are distinct evidentiary layers that must be cited separately.

2 Genre and convention

Akam and puram poetry organize experience through conventional speakers, themes and landscapes. Conventions are historical evidence for literary and social imagination but complicate literal extraction of events, geography and institutions.

3 Transmission and textual criticism

Surviving palm-leaf witnesses are much later than proposed composition and reflect repeated copying. Variant readings, omissions, normalization and commentary require stemmatic and philological analysis. Oral transmission may preserve and transform material.

4 Chronological inference

Language, metre, intertextuality, political names, religious vocabulary, goods and securely dated comparanda create relative and probabilistic chronologies. Composition and anthology formation need not be simultaneous.

5 Colophons and prosopography

Attributions of poet, patron and occasion can build relational datasets, but their manuscript history and possible editorial origin must be evaluated. Recurrent names or titles do not independently establish identical persons.

6 Epigraphic convergence

The Jambai record naming Satiyaputo Atiyan Netuman Anci provides a high-value comparison with Purananuru tradition. Pugalur's Cera lineage offers another test. Each supports bounded identifications rather than wholesale literalization of the corpus.

7 Material and external evidence

Coins, ports, ceramics, beads, craft deposits and foreign accounts can test temporal and economic settings. Different source types have distinct sampling biases; agreement must be evaluated by date, location and claim scale.

8 Historical claims and confidence

Poems strongly evidence language, genres and represented values; patterns can support social history; named events require corroboration. Performance and praise are facts about representation even when their narrated claims remain uncertain.

9 Reproducible citation

A historical use should specify Tamil text, anthology, poem and lines, critical edition, variant or colophon status, translation choices, proposed date, independent comparanda and alternative interpretations.

10 Evidence assessment

Strong	The corpus preserves an early and highly developed Old Tamil poetic tradition.
Strong	Genre, compilation and manuscript transmission must be considered before extracting historical claims.
Strong	The Jambai inscription independently supports the historical identity of Atiyaman Netuman Anci and the Satiyaputo title.
Probable	Many poems preserve Early Historic social, political and exchange contexts despite later anthology and manuscript stages.
Probable	Colophons retain some authentic prosopographical information while also reflecting editorial systematization.
Contested	The absolute dates and internal sequence of individual poems, collections and compilation layers.
Unsupported	The claim that the corpus has one precise date or that every poetic description is literal eyewitness history.

11 Conclusion

Sangam literature is historical evidence when read as literature with a history. Its strongest direct evidence concerns Old Tamil language, poetics and represented social worlds. Names, goods, places and events acquire additional historical weight through textual criticism and independent comparison. Separating poem, colophon, anthology, manuscript and modern edition preserves both the corpus's value and the uncertainty needed for credible history.

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This paper is an evidence review for public scholarship.

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