

ILANGA ATIKAL

Born and died: South India, probably in the 5th or 6th c. CE

Biography

South Indian literary tradition attributes authorship of the Tamil epic of the *Cilappatikaram* (*Lay of the Anklet*) to Ilango Atikal. That name, which means the 'Ascetic [younger] Prince,' is probably more a title than a proper name. Whatever the poet's real name, he was likely to be part of the royal family of the Chera kingdom, which ruled the west coast of south India (roughly today's state of Kerala). He is reputed to be the younger son of Cheralatan, a king of the Chera kingdom, and the younger brother of Senguttuvan, another Chera king. This 'younger' element of his identity is significant as explained in a legendary biography. The story goes that Cheralatan was told by an astrologer that when he died, the throne would pass to his younger son (that is, to Ilango, the 'younger prince') and not to his elder son. Hearing this, Ilango said that he would forfeit the crown in favour of his brother and become a monk, or an ascetic, thus the title 'atikal'. (Students of Indian literature will recognise that this story is also told about Bharata, a figure in the Ramayana, who gives up the throne in favour of his older brother, Rama). Ilango did then become an ascetic, who lived in seclusion and wrote the *Cilappatikaram*. However, he still had friends who came to stay with him, such as the poet Sattanar, who is said to have composed another early Tamil epic (*Manimekalai*). Ilango was most likely a Jain, a fact reflected in the story itself, with numerous references to Jain nuns and monks and morality. Jainism differed very little in practice from Hinduism, although its notions of the cosmos, the soul and the afterlife were distinct.