

Silappathikaram or The Tale of an Anklet=

Tamil epic poem by Adikal=

Silappathikaram, (Tamil: “The Jeweled Anklet”) also spelled Silappatikaram, the earliest epic poem in Tamil, written in the 5th–6th century AD by Prince Ilanko Adikal (Ilango Adigal). Its plot is derived from a well-known story.

The Silappathikaram tells of the young merchant Kovalan’s marriage to the virtuous Kannaki (Kannagi), his love for the courtesan Matavi, and his consequent ruin and exile in Maturai, where he is unjustly executed after trying to sell his wife’s anklet to a wicked goldsmith who had stolen the queen’s anklet and charged Kovalan with the theft. The widow Kannaki comes to Maturai, proves Kovalan’s innocence, then tears off one breast and throws it at the kingdom of Maturai, which goes up in flames. Such is the power of a faithful wife. The third book deals with a king’s expedition to bring Himalayan stone for an image of Kannaki, now a goddess of chastity.

The Silappathikaram is a fine synthesis of mood poetry in an ancient Tamil Śaṅgam tradition and the rhetoric of Sanskrit poetry, including the dialogues of Kalittokai (poems of unrequited or mismatched love), chorus folk song, descriptions of city and village, lovingly technical accounts of dance and music, and strikingly dramatic scenes of love and tragic death. One of the great achievements of Tamil genius, the Silappathikaram is a detailed poetic witness to Tamil culture, its varied religions, its town plans and city types, the commingling of Greek, Arab, and Tamil peoples, and the arts of dance and music. Unlike the Silappathikaram, its incomplete sequel, Manimekalai, the story of Kovalan’s and Matavi’s daughter, reflects a Buddhist perspective.

Tamil literature, body of writings in Tamil, a Dravidian language of India and Sri Lanka. Apart from literature written in classical (Indo-Aryan) Sanskrit, Tamil is the oldest literature in India. Some inscriptions on stone have been dated to the 3rd century BC, but Tamil literature proper begins around the 1st century AD. Much early poetry was religious or epic; an exception was the secular court poetry written by members of the śaṅgam, or literary academy (see Śaṅgam literature).

Notable works of the 4th–6th centuries include the twin epics Cilappatikāram (“The Lay of the Anklet”) and Maṇimēkalai (“The Girdle of Gems,” the only extant Tamil Buddhist work) and the Tirukkural, a collection of aphorisms on such matters as love, kingship, and ethics. The 6th–9th centuries saw the emergence of bhakti, the poetry and religion of personal devotion, which began in the Tamil region with the hymns of the Ālvārs and the Nāyaṇārs (qq.v.) in honour of the Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva saints. From the 12th to the 16th century many philosophical treatises and anthologies of religious legends were composed, as well as the classic writings of the poet Kampan. From the 19th century, Tamil literature was increasingly influenced by Western forms and ideas.