

(1146–1173 CE), was the builder of the *Airavatesvara* Temple at Darasuram. All three temples were planned and created through a deliberate act of royal will in the heartland of the Chola Empire.

Thanjavur lies about 322 km to the southwest of Chennai, while Gangaikondacholapuram is about 85 km from Thanjavur to the northeast. Darasuram lies midway between these two temple towns, approximately 40 km east of Thanjavur.

The temples have been in use for the last thousand years and follow established traditions – religious, ritual, cultural and social – which have been integrated into the everyday life of the people. Together, these three temples have been inscribed onto the World Heritage list as the Great Living Chola Temples (Figure 1).

### History of the Great Living Chola Temples

The three Chola Temples are architectural masterpieces of southern Indian (Dravidian) architecture. An integral part of these structures is their rich decoration with sculpture works representing the finest artistic tradition of the Cholas. The Thanjavur Temple is further embellished with fresco paintings. Constructed within a time span of 150 years, all three sites display similarities as well as differences. The three centres were consecrated as places of religious worship with a well-defined practice of ritual and worship that is still followed to this day.

The temples were constructed by the Cholas in their capital cities and were endowed with land grants for their upkeep and maintenance. Despite falling into neglect due to conflict and a lack of

**Figure 1.** The location of the three Chola Temples in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

