the relatively infrequent basic consonants. The *puḷḷi* also became a convenient marker to distinguish the short *e* and *o* from the respective long vowels.[1] These advantages enabled the *puḷḷi* system to survive all other systems and become the sole standard notation in Tamil grammatical tradition.

6.9 The *puḷḷi* in *Tolkāppiyam*

The functions of the *puḷḷi* are described in *Tolkāppiyam* as follows:

> The nature of the consonant is to be provided with a dot.
> *e* and *o* are also of the same nature.
>
> All consonants without dots retain their own forms when animated with the sound -*a*, and change their forms when combined with other vowels. These are the two ways to vocalise (consonants).

<div align="right">(Tol. Eḷu. 15 - 17)[2]</div>

We can see at once that this is the last stage in the evolutionary development of the medial vowel notations in the Tamil-Brāhmī script. TB-I notation, with its denial of the principle of inherent -*a*, treating the unmarked consonant as basic, and providing a marker for the medial vowel -*a*, is unknown to *Tolkāppiyam* and precedes it chronologically. *Tolkāppiyam* not only describes the *puḷḷi* as the 'natural' (*iyaṟkai*) adjunct of the basic consonant and the short vowels *e* and *o*, but also uses the expression *puḷḷi* to denote the basic consonant itself by extension of meaning.[3] It is thus clear that this great grammatical work must have been composed after the *puḷḷi* was invented and had become an integral part of Tamil writing. Judging from the available evidence of the earliest occurrences of the *puḷḷi* from about the end of the 1st century C.E., *Tolkāppiyam* was composed most probably not earlier than the Late Tamil-Brāhmī Period (ca. 2nd - 4th centuries C.E.).[4]

6.10 Medial vowel notations in Tamil-Brāhmī inscriptions: a comparative study

The characteristic features of the five stages of development of medial vowel notations which have been described above are summarised in Fig. 6.3. A comparative study of the notations shows clearly that all of them are ultimately derived from the original vowel-marker system of the Mauryan Brāhmī script. The modifications are minimal and specifically designed to suit the needs of Tamil. However, TB-I and TB-II systems were, in spite of the advantages gained by the respective modifications, no more than transitional, short-lived experiments replaced by the more stable systems. The comparison also brings out the fact that the Bhattiprolu system which developed from TB-I, and the *puḷḷi* system from TB-II, must necessarily be later than the respective systems replaced by them.

---

1. It is significant that the role of the *puḷḷi* as a 'cancelling' device was further extended in later writing on palm leaf where two *puḷḷi* marks were added over an incorrect or a superfluous letter signalling the cancellation of the letter.
2. Translation after Kamil Zvelebil 1972 (with minor changes).
3. According to the Index Verborum of *Tolkāppiyam*, *puḷḷi* is used with the meaning of "dot over a letter" 3 times, while it has the meaning 'basic consonant' 33 times. (*Tolkāppiya-c-cirap-p-akarāti* 2000: p. 241).
   especially the Table at pp. 140–141