

FOREIGN TRADE OF THE EARLY TAMIL WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ALAGANKULAM EXCAVATION

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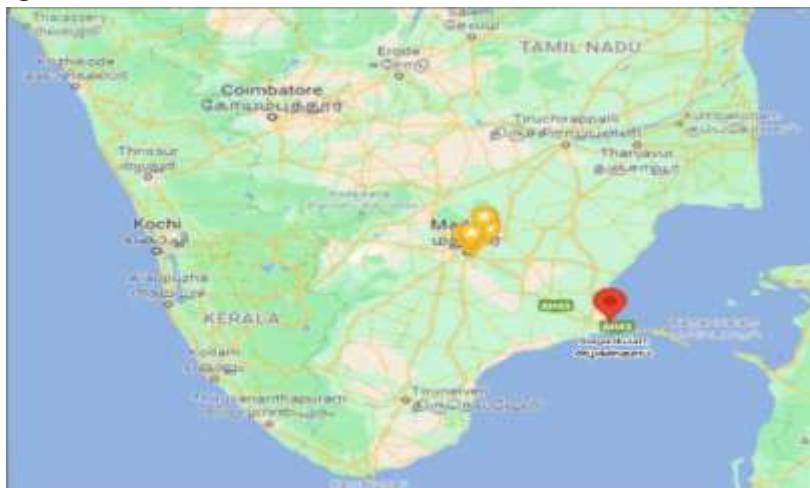
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Introduction

Ramanathapuram district has an area of 4089.57km. It lies between 9.05 and 9.50'North and 78.10 and 79.27'East. This district is bounded on the south by Tuticorin and Tirunelveli district, on the west by Sivagangai and Virudhunagar district. Ramanathapuram district is bounded by palk straits to its east and by the Gulf of Mannar to its South. It has a long coast line measuring about 241 kilometres, perhaps the longest coast line for any districts of Tamil Nadu. One of the seven coastal districts of Tamil Nadu. The sixth largest district in Tamil Nadu, Ramanathapuram covers an area over 12,500 square kilometres (Or) about 4,900 square miles. The district was part of the ancient *Pandyankingdom*. *PalyagasalaiMuthukudumi* to *Ugraparuvaludi* and *UgraPandya* referred to Ramanathapuram district. The Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology located a Roman site in the course of exploration by its excavation branch in the month of September 1933, at a huge mound covering a nearly 15 acres known as "Kottaimedu" (Mound of Fort) near Alagankulam, a riverine village situated on the Coromondal coast in Ramanathapuram district.

Alagankulam was one of the port city of the great kingdom of Pandyas between 2nd Century BCE to 2nd Century AD as addressed through the archaeological findings. It has trade contact with Rome, Egypt and China.

Location of Alagankulam



Egyptian Influence Pottery

An embossed figure in a pot sherd as in coarse variety of buff ware was obtained, side profiles of two ladies impressed on the pot sherd which seems to have been adorned before firing. Both the ladies are shown in the standing posture both of them facing each other. One lady seems to hold a mirror (Or) a fan in her left hand, the other lady seems to hold a jar with long neck, which resembles a small Amphorae jar.

Scholars opine that these figures are molded after the Egyptian paintings. Small granule like motifs decorated all over the potsherd. It resembles that the people of Alagankulam had trade contact to Egyptians.

The Remarkable Evidences for Ancient Tamil Navigation - Potsherd with Ship Symbols

In Alagankulam two potsherds with ship symbols were excavated. One is on a rouletted sherd and another one is on red slipped ware. Both ships are different types in shape and model. The first ship symbol is shown with oar and ladder. This is identified as a Roman ship. River voyage seems to have come into effect during Neolithic period for fishing.

The Evidence Found that Trade with Rome

A rouletted sherd bearing the figure of the ship on the shoulder portion has been excavated during 1996-97 from III excavation of Alagankulam. The figure of the ships found at Alagankulam by comparing with the ancient Roman ship found engraved in the Roman mosaic.

Three masters were the largest type of Greco Roman merchantman and were doubtless among the ships used on the long and demanding route between Greco - Roman, Egypt and India.

Picto Graffito Sherds

The excavation at Alagankulam also yielded two more potsherds of coarse red ware bearing the graffito of a boat. The practice of engraving ship figure on the pot sherds seems to have been prevalent in other countries also as vouched by Archaeologist who came across a pot sherd with the figure of a ship, during their excavation at Berenike situated in Egyptian Red sea coast, in the year 1995.

Trade of Sawed Conchs and Shell Bangles

Large quantity of different specimen of conch pieces have been obtained in Alagankulam excavations. Large number of broken conch bangle pieces were collected from Alagankulam excavation. Conch objects might have been one of the exported component from this seaport since a large number of bangle pieces are found here and the shell bangle manufacture appears to have been a popular industry in this place. Even now Ramanathapuram and Kilakarai near Alagankulam are the main trade centers for supplying fancy articles made out of conchs to place all over India.

An inscribed piece was collected from the eastern slope of Alagankulam. It had two Arabic letters which reads as "*Theek*" meaning a cock. This shows the cultural and commercial contact of the people of Alagankulam with Arabs.

Bead making Industry

Alagankulam was probably a sales outlet of bead making industry exclusively semi-precious stone beads industry and another one is shell beads. Semi-precious stone beads, Agate beads, carnelian beads, crystal (Quartz), soap stone.

Rouletted Ware and Northern Black Polished Wares

At Alagankulam large numbers of Rouletted wares unearthed, which might have been manufactured either for the usage of Foreign settlers at Alagankulam or for exporting to the far eastern countries such as Java, Sumatra and Malaysia.

The fine variety of Northern Black Polished ware excavated from this site strongly shows that the cordial relationship was prevalent between Tamils and people of Gangetic region.

Roman Coins

The discovery of Roman coins from excavations shows that the strong cultural and commercial relationship between Tamils and western countries.

1. A copper coin of Roman Emperor *Valentine-II* (383 - 395 AD). It was minted at Antioch.
2. A copper coin of *Arcadius* (395AD - 408 AD), the coin has victory advancing left holding trophy.
3. A round shaped copper coin of *Corcordia* found.
4. A round copper coin of *SalvsPeipoblitCae* (402-408CE) found.
5. A copper con of *Gloria Romanorum* found.
6. A copper coin of *Gori Aroma Norvm* (408 -423 CE) found.

Conclusion

The excavation at Alagankulam revealed beyond that this might have been an important port city as Kaveripoompattinam and Korkai were the east coast. It is the first Roman site discovered in the pandya country, which seems to have contributed to the sea trade and improvement of commerce of ancient Tamils. It appears that it was a very busy port city.

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