

ROMAN CONTACTS WITH TAMILNADU (SOUTH EASTERN INDIA)

- RECENT FINDINGS

K.V.RAMAN,
(Professor of Ancient History and
Archaeology, University of Madras,
Madras - 600 005.

INTRODUCTION:

The studies and researches in the field of ancient India's contacts with the Roman world are growing steadily as more and more archaeological discoveries are coming to light both in India and the Red sea area. After the pioneering works done by Sir Mortimer Wheeler and the French archaeologist J.M. CASAL at Arikamedu near Pondicherry way back in 1946 and 1956 respectively some more sites on the eastern coast as well as in the interior have been excavated which provide valuable additional information. Among the newly excavated sites are some which are neither mentioned in the classical writings nor the indigenous Tamil literature. Here comes field archaeology as a valuable source throwing new light on the hitherto unknown coastal trading centres having commercial contacts with Mediterranean world. The focus of this paper is south Eastern coast of India also called the Coromandal coast flanking the present state of Tamil Nadu. The ancient Tamilagam (Damarica of the classical writers) included the present day Kerala also which was the land of the Cheras besides the ancient Kingdoms of the Cholas and Pandyas. The recently excavated sites which have yielded Roman artifacts in Tamilnadu are: Kanchi, Vasavasamudram (near Mamallapuram), Arikamedu (recently re-excavated) near Pondicherry, Karaikadu (near Cuddalore), Kaveripumpattinam at the mouth of R. Kaveri (Thanjavur Dist), Uraiyr the ancient capital of the Cheras (Trichy Dist), Karur, the ancient Capital of the Cheras, and Alagankulam near Rameshwaram.

These places are mostly dotted on the 800 km. long east coast while some are in the hinterland. This paper discusses the significance of the newly discovered materials. They formed the ancient trading network both on the coast and in the hinterland having close commercial nexus, internal and maritime.

Speaking about the east coast, it is generally felt that the classical writers like Strabo, Ptolemy and the author of the Periplus are somewhat reticent in their observations. As pointed out by Lionel Casson, the Prime source of our information about the trade between Rome and India is the Periplus Maris Erythrian sea "that unique anonymous handbook" written sometime between 40 and 70 A.D. for the use of merchants and shippers who sailed out of the ports of Roman Egypt on the Red Sea to trade with the eastern coast of Africa, with Arabia and India. Even this important work, according to Lionel Casson, which provides graphic details about major ports (emporium) on the west coast and the various items to be bought or sold is very brief on the east coast. The work gives only a list of the more important stopping places with brief references to some local speciality.¹ But this inadequacy of the foreign source is somewhat compensated by the evidence furnished in the indigenous ancient Tamil literary works of the Sangam period attributed to the early centuries of the Christian era and possibly one or two centuries earlier too.

¹ Lionel Casson, Rome's Trade with the Eastern coast of India *Cashiers D' Historire*, XXXIII, 1988 No: 3-4.

More eloquent is the growing archaeological and numismatic evidence on the subject, which helps to fill up the gaps found in the literature. Incidentally, the reason for the limited information on the east coast in the Periplus, according to Casson, is mainly attributable to the fact that the Roman ships visited the east coast only occasionally and they usually stopped on the west coast. The materials they brought or took were taken to the east coast in the Indian crafts by the middleman who had the monopoly of trade. The Periplus mentions that the Indian vessels sailed regularly from the east coast to the west coast and vice-versa. (Ptolemy also gives interesting information of the types of crafts used on the east coast. Added to this was the land-trade route between the west and east coasts, which must have served well for the transport of the goods and the traders. The presence of the Roman artifacts like the Arretine, the amphorae jars, Roman glass, lamps and coins and the presence of the Roman resident traders have to be understood in this context. A Tamil work alludes to the settlement of the Romans at Kaveripattinam (Yavanar-irukkai).²

² Silappadikaram 5-10

B. LITERARY SOURCES:

Let me briefly recall the interesting evidence furnished by the ancient Tamil works on the problem as it would provide the necessary historical background. We find references to the 'Yavanas' (Westerners in general) in many texts, which (as I have shown elsewhere) may refer to the Greco-Romans on circumstantial evidence³. One verse in the Mullaiapattu⁴ describes them as "dressed in wide and puffed skirts, folded up and sustained by a whip with their stiff corset, fearsome looking, strong of body, hard-eyed, stand watch over the tiger-chain that separate the beautiful room".

Nakkirar, a leading poet of the Sangam refers to the statues of women oam-p bearers of excellent workmanship made by the Yavanas.⁵ Some fragments of Roman lamps have been found at Arikamedu and many more found in Maharashtra region.

The same poet in another verse makes a pointed reference to the sweet-scented wine (tankamal teral) brought in by the lovely ships of the Yavanas "served unto you (king) everyday on trays of chiseled gold by girls with sparkling wrists and after tasting of it, may you be filled with merriment".⁶

Another early poet Tayan-Kannanar throws light on the pepper trade of the Chera country (west coast). He describes how the magnificent ships of the the Yavanas came stirring the white foam of the Periar river (of the Keralas) sailed in with the gold and sailed off with pepper making Muziri (the port-town) prosperous.⁷

³ Vim-ala Begely et al. ed. Rome and India; Sea Trade, Colloquium papers Wisconsin, 1990.

⁴ Mullaiapattu (by Nappudanar) 59-62.

⁵ Nedunalvadaï 101-102.

⁶ Purananuru 56, 17-20.

⁷ Ahananuru 149, 7-11.

Similarly, on the east coast, the celebrated port-city of Kaveripumpattinam on the mouth of the R. Kaveri, described as the 'Kaberis Emporion' by Ptolemy had far-flung overseas trade contacts in the early centuries and according to the Tamil epic Silappadikaram, YAVANAS of whose prosperity was never on the wane had their residences or colony there. It also describes them (Yavanas) of rough speech.⁸

Another interesting reference to the Romans is found in the epic - Manimekhalai (5th or 6th C.A.D.) It mentions how the artists from Magadha, Mahrathi Cratsmen, blacksmiths of Avanti and the Yavana carpenters contributed to build the splendid city of Kaveripattinam.⁹ The word used is 'Yavanatachar' may be taken as carpenters or stone-workers or architects. This again points to the fact that Yavanas were employed here.

C. NUMISMATIC FINDS:

Archaeological finds from the surface and excavations provide excellent corroborative evidence for the Indo-Roman contacts. Tamilnadu has yielded perhaps the largest number of Roman coin-hoards. They have come from almost every district of Tamilnadu from Madras City (Mambalam) in the north-east to Rameshwaram (Alagankulam site) in the South and Karur and Coirnbatore on the west. Kerala also (the land of the Cheras which formed part of Tamilagam) has yielded quite a few Roman coin hoards. These coins range practically from the time of Augustus to Nero though a few coins for the later period also have been found. Recently, a coin of Tiberius has been identified in the Arikamedu collections. Again, two coins the Byzantine dynasty one belonging to Valentine have been found in stratified excavation at Alagankulam on the Pandyan coast. This would indicate the revival or continuity of the trade contacts with the Roman world even during the Byzantine period. This has to be viewed along with a few more coins of the same period found earlier in the hoards.

⁸ Silappadikaram 5-10 and 'Vansol Yavanar' Silappadikaram 29, Usal Vari 11-12

⁹ Manimekhalai 19, 107-108.

D. ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES:

1. KAVERIPATTINAM:

This was a well-known port-town of the Cholas at the mouth of the River Kaveri which is eulogised in the early Tamil literature for its trade with the West and the Malaya coast and also its magnificent harbor, wharfs, and rich merchandise from many countries. Surface exploration and excavations done here have brought to light a vast brick built jetty used for loading and unloading purposes. Quite a number of Rouletted potteries were discovered at many places as also a highly corroded Roman coin.¹⁰

As already pointed out, the presence of Romans here as traders and craftsmen (architects) is mentioned in the Tamil works. The Roman traders came here evidently because they could get the products from several parts of South India. Ceylon and South East Asia. A Tamil work of second century A.D. gives a vivid description of the various goods and articles of trade which came there and their respective places of origin. Mention is made of the horses from across the ocean, products from Malaya coast (Kadaram) and Ceylon (Ilam) pearls from the southern seas, pepper from the western coast, semi-precious stones from the northern hills and the products from the Gangetic and Kaveri valleys. It was indeed an international commercial centre and the Roman traders would have certainly taken advantage of it because they could get at one place the products of different regions. Unfortunately, this ancient city was considerably destroyed and partly submerged by the sea depriving us of the vestiges. However, there is scope for further archaeological work including marine exploration here. On the whole, we can say that it was as important, if not more, as the Muzuri on the west coast. The chief product of export was probably the excellent cotton textiles made in places like Uraiyur.¹¹

¹⁰ K. V. Raman, Excavation at Pampuhar in "The Handbook" pub.by the Exhibition committee II International Tamil Conference, Madras, 1968. 238-40.

¹¹ K.V. Raman, Excavations at Uraiyur, Madras, 1988.

2. KARAIKADU (also called Kudikadu and Nathamedu in South Arcot Dist).

It is on the same coast about 40 km from Arikamedu with which it shares many features. It lies on the back waters of Uppanar which could provide the necessary shelter for the anchorage of boats. It is also an extensive mound rich in antiquities which included numerous sherds of fine Rouletted ware, fragments of imported double handled amphorae, conical jars (Arikarnedu Types 74/75), beads of semi-precious stones like crystal, agate, chalcedony in various stages of manufacture, extensive remains of the conchshells cutting industry etc.

Limited excavations conducted here in 1966 brought to light the vestiges of glass manufacturing industry here.¹² Excavation done in 1988 by the University of Madras brought to light an impressive brick structure associated with the bead-making workshop. A number of beads of semi-precious stones in different stages of manufacture as well as the raw materials in lumps were found. The associated potteries were the Black and Red ware and fine Rouletted ware. One fragment of the amphorae handle was also found. According to Elizabeth – will it was an import from a locality in Southern Italy. This antiquity of the Roman trade here can also be ascribed to the first century B.C. and A.D.

3. VASAVASAMUDRAM:

Mediterranean amphorae fragments have also been found at a coastal place called Vasavasamudram near Mamallapuram, the ancient port-town of the Pallavas and possibly of the earlier times too.¹³

¹² Indian Archaeology - A Review, 1967.

¹³ R.Nagaswami and Abdul Majid, Vasavasamudram, Madras 1978.

4. KANCHIPURAM:

Excavations in ancient capital town of Kanchipuram have yielded the Rouletted ware besides a large amount of the conical amphorae-like conical jars (Arikamedu types 74/75 of Wheeler) a few of them kept in a row. They clearly indicate the influence of Roman pottery tradition on the local ceramics.¹⁴

5. ALAGANKULAM: (Ramanathapuram Dist)

This is also an extensive site at the mouth of the river Vaigai with easy access to the open sea and in close vicinity to Sri Lanka coast. This is now being excavated by Department of Archaeology, Government of Tamilnadu under the direction of Mr. Natana Kasinathan. Here also fragments of imported amphorae, considerable quantities of Rouletted ware sherds and two Roman coins of the Byzantine period have been found. The site probably was occupied for a time from 1st century B.C. to the 4th and 5th century A.D.

The coin evidence shows that the trade with the Roman world was revived in the Byzantine period after some intervening lull. The site has also yielded a new type of red Rouletted ware. The usual Rouletted ware is either grey or black but types found here are bright red somewhat resembling the arretine but certainly different from it. Its exact origin or affiliation is not known. Whether it was indigenous or imported has to be examined.

¹⁴ K.V.Raman, Excavations at Kanchi, Tamil Civilization, Thanjavur

6. ARIKAMEDU:

This is a well-known Indo-Roman trading station identified with the ancient 'Pouduke' of Ptolemy. It is six km from Pondicherry and located in the mouth of the Ariyankuppam River. The place was excavated initially by the French scholars in 1941; by Sir Mortimer Wheeler in 1946; and again by the French Archaeologist J. K. Casal in 1956.¹⁵ By far it has yielded the most impressive assemblage of Roman artefacts like the Arretine pottery with stamped letters, Rouletted ware, Mediterranean shipping amphorae Roman intaglios and gems besides buildings used for dyeing muslin clothes which the Romans wanted. Wheeler held that Arikamedu was founded during the time of Augustus and lasted for about two centuries on the basis of the date of the Arretine ware (50 A.D) the Rouletted ware and the inscribed sherds found there.

Recently, Vimala Begely has put forth the case for reconsidering the chronology of the site and observed that re-assessment of Wheeler's and Casals material suggests that the date of the founding of Arikamedu should be pushed back to the middle of the third century B.C., while its first trade contacts with the Mediterranean world may have been established by the late second century B.C.¹⁶

¹⁵ R.E.M. Wheeler et al Ancient India Vol.2

L. Fauchaux Une Vieille cite... Virampattinam, Pondicherry, 1945. P.Z. Pattabiramin Les Fouilles d'Arikamedu, Pondicherry, 1946. J.M. Casal Fouilles de Virampattinam – Arikamedu – site Urbaine... 1956 (Paris), (Paris, 1949)

¹⁶ Vimala Begely, Arikamedu Reconsidered, AJA, 1983 and Rouletted ware at Arikamedu: A new Approach, American Journal of Archaeology: 92 (1988) pp. 427- 440.

The Arretine ware – phase, according to her, can now be dated more precisely to the first quarter of the first century A.D: amphorae occur in substantially earlier levels and the Rouletted ware also in earlier levels. She also surmises that Arikamedu Rouletted ware was probably manufactured locally though the techni1 of "rouletting" which must have been introduced from the West probably sometime in the second century B.C. In short, she has argued for a possible pre-Roman phase at Arikamedu and pre-Roman contacts with the Mediterranean region as attested by the some of the amphorae pieces and the Rouletted ware. The probable date of the pre-Roman phase would be late 2nd century B.C. and first century B.C. She however agrees that the exact extent of Rouletted ware network in the pre-Roman phase has to be worked out precisely.

In order to test this hypothesis steps are being taken to excavate a few more trenches in the Northern Sector of the Arikamedu mound. Possibly, we could also have a better idea of the lay-out of the port and its chronological development. The excavations were started jointly by the University of Madras and the American team led by Dr. Vimala Begely, 1989-90, and are to be continued. A significant discovery was that of two brick built-rectangular tanks perpendicular to each other found close to the river front and resting on the natural sandy soil. The brick sizes are comparable to those found in the earliest structural levels of Wheeler's AK II are (Two sizes: 44 x 28 x 6 cm and 35 x 24 x 6 cm). Probably, these tanks were also used as dyeing vats. The associated pottery are the Megalithic Black and Red ware, and the Rouletted ware (Wheeler's type 74/75) and can be ascribed to the overlap levels of Casal i.e. Second early first century B.C.

Excavation in other trenches yielded enormous amount of the local potteries and few pieces of the imported amphorae and one piece of Mediterranean terra sigilata. Several beads of glass and semi-precious stones besides bangles and pendants were recovered. Excavation is proceeding at Arikamedu which would throw light on the history of further Arikamedu's overseas contacts.

E. RECENT STUDIES IN THE AMPHORAE TRADE:

Another important aspect of the recent re-appraisal studies is related to the amphorae found in Arikamedu and other sites in South India. Elizabeth L. Will has catalogued and studied nearly 70 amphorae fragments from several sites in Tamilnadu like Arikamedd, Kudikadu (Karaikadu), Vasavasamudram, Karur etc. The results of her study throw new light on the amphorae trade in South India. Some of her conclusions are:

1. The wine jars imported into Arikamedu were in part Greek, from the Aegean islands of Rhodes, Knidos and especially KOS and in partly Roman imitation of Koan amphora made in Campania in southern Italy.

2. Of the 37 Koan type fragments studied, 21 are actually Koan jars that are to be dated in first century D.C. and the rest are imitations datable to the first century A.D.

3. Evidence of the import of foodstuffs other than wine into Arikamedu has also been discovered. Nine fragments of containers of garum, a Spanish fish sauce much prized by the Roman palate and several others contained olive oil from Istrain peninsula in the northern Adriatic and from Southern Spain also. Thus, besides imported wine jars, garum and olive oil, jars have also been clearly identified. Elizabeth Will also points out that the presence of garum clearly suggests that Romans were in residence at Arikamedu as it was special to them and not of interest to the Indians. She assigns the amphorae to the first century B.C. and first century A.D. attesting to the Greco-Roman activity at Arikamedu during those times.¹⁷

¹⁷ Information kindly furnished by Elizabeth L. Will, also see Rome and India op. cit. ed. Virnala Begely.

F.TAMIL INSCRIPTIONS IN RED SEA COAST:

Further interesting evidence to state that some of the merchant-sailors trading with the Mediterranean via the Red sea may have been Tamil speakers now comes from the two short Tamil Brahmi inscriptions on potsherds found in recent excavations at the Egyptian coastal site of Quseir-al-qadim in the strata associated with the Roman trade. They give short proper names in the Tamil Brahmi script assignable to the first or second century A.D.¹⁸

Thus the evidence from the field archaeology on the different aspects of the overseas commerce between the Mediterranean and the coromandal coast is increasing steadily and more sites and Roman artifacts are coming to light. The need is to intensify the excavation work on the coastal sites. There is also a great need for collaborative work of the Indian and the classical archaeologists abroad in order to coordinate the evidence from both the sides of this ancient and farflung international trade.

¹⁸ D.S. Whitecomb and J.H. Johnson Qiseir al-Qudin 1980, also V. Begely, Arikamedu reconsidered, p. 481 and Steen E. Sidebotham Ports of the Red Sea and Arabia - India Trade in Rome and India op. cit. ed. V. Begely.