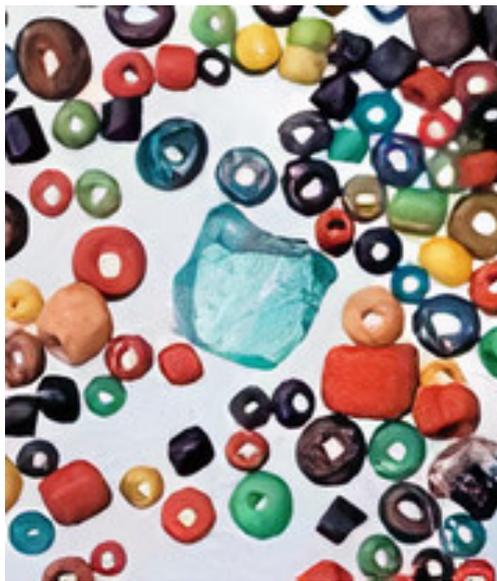


Roman link to old port

EXCAVATION



R Gopakumar, JUL 04 2009, 17:52 IST | UPDATED: JUL 04 2009, 17:52 IST



Over 10,000 beads made of semi-precious stones and glass were recovered.



According to ancient texts, the port of Muziris was an exchange point where the Romans brought in gold and took back the region's aromatic spices, including pepper, better known as 'black gold'. However, no one knows how this celebrated port suddenly disappeared. There has been no mention

anywhere in the sixth century as well as between the 10th and 17th centuries. The Kerala Council for Historical Research (KCHR), which has been spearheading the excavations for the last three years with support from a dozen institutions, has unearthed more evidence every season pointing to the existence of the port.

Initially, speculation was rife that Muziris may have been Kodungalloor in Thrissur before evidence contemporary to the period began to pour in from Pattanam, 10 kms away in Ernakulam district. The evidence unearthed included human bones, storage jars, gold ornaments, glass beads, stone beads, utilitarian objects made of stone, copper and iron, typical pottery, early Chera coins, brick wall, brick platform, ring well, wharf with bollards, and a six metre long wooden canoe parallel to the wharf structure about 2.5 m below surface level. It was clear that the structures indicated a vast 'urban' settlement with an active merchant community.



“Even though the verification is still going on, what technically remains to be established is the reach of the port known as Muziris or Muchiri. My inference is that it may have stretched from Chettuva in Thrissur to Kochi,” KCHR director P J Cherian, also the project director, told Sunday Herald. The British Association for South Asian Studies (BASAS) has now accepted the formation of an international research group on Pattanam for further studies.

River course

It was geoarchaeologist K P Shajan, now in UK, who put forward the hypothesis first in 2004, that Muziris could have been located at Pattanam near Paravur on the south of the Periyar rivermouth. Among other things, what led Shajan and his team to Pattanam was clear geological evidence suggesting that the river Periyar had shifted its course from the south to the north over the millennia. The excavations began at the site in 2007 with Cherian as director and V Selvakumar (Tamil University) and Shajan as co-directors. Several trenches were dug up and systematically excavated so as to distinguish each layer / feature / pit/ structure or activity area on the basis of colour, texture and composition. Subsequently, two more seasonal excavations were taken up in 2008 and from March this year.

The excavationists have concluded that the site was first occupied by the indigenous megalithic (Iron Age) people, followed by West Asians and then Romans in the early historic phase. According to Cherian, the Mediterranean connections were explicit from the large quantity of amphora sherds (wine jar), the terra sigillata sherds, cameo blanks and Roman glassware fragments.

In fact, Pattanam has yielded the largest number of Roman amphora sherds (over 1000) than any other site in the Indian Ocean rim. “The West Asian links are evident from ceramics such as storage jars from Saudi Arabia and Mesopotamia, ‘torpedo’ jars and Turquoise Glazed Pottery (TGP) dating from the Parthian or Sassanian periods and possibly later,” he said.

A variety of ecofacts, including pepper, cardamom and rice was also discovered. The evidences further point to the possibility that site had the benefit of the services of a large number of artisans and technicians but not necessarily residing there. The archaeologists believe that the site might have been first occupied by indigenous population around 1000 BC and continued to be active till the 10th century AD.



Accelerator Mass Spectrometry Radio Carbon analysis done by Bhubaneswar’s Institute of Physics of the charcoal and wood samples from the Iron Age layer and wharf contexts have determined their antiquity as first millennium BC.

“The area’s role as an overseas port for both import and export is clearly visible by its artifacts from the Indo-Roman period,” Roberta Tomber, classical archaeologist and visiting fellow of Southampton University, told an international seminar on Muziris held in Thiruvananthapuram recently. Muziris became important because of the Romans’ interest in trading, and their desire to have contact with regions beyond the reach of conquest and set up trading routes with these places.

According to her, amphora sherds recovered from here and the containers date to between the late first century BC and the first century AD and were used for carrying wine and olive oil. The most common types were from south Italy, from the bay of Naples area, and from the small islands of Kos and Rhodes in the Aegean. It is inferred that the port town was abandoned between 10th and 17th centuries, which marks the beginning of the colonial occupation. Pallippuram Fort, the first ever European fort in India, is located less than 5 km from this site.

The excavation site was more or less concentrated on a homestead though the area covered about 45 hectares. Experts from various disciplines such as geoarchaeology, archaeo-zoology, palaeobotany, archaeo-chemistry and physics, underwater archaeology, metallurgy and institutions such as Southern Naval Command Kochi, ISRO Bangalore, Deccan College Pune, National Geo-physical Research Institute Hyderabad, Institute of Physics Bhubaneswar, MS University Baroda, NRLC Lucknow, Kerala Forest Research Institute, Thrissur, and Centre for Earth Science Studies, Thiruvananthapuram, extended technical support to the excavations. Cherian said that an effort was on to conscientise the people residing between Chettuva and Kochi about the archaeological significance of the land and to be alert while digging up.

Heritage tourism

Clearly enthused by the new developments, Kerala Tourism has launched the first phase of a Rs 100 crore Muziris Heritage Tourism Circuit project that includes ancient synagogues, churches and mosques built centuries ago. “This is another milestone in branding Kerala as a quality tourist destination where responsible tourism is practised in letter and spirit,” said tourism minister Kodyeri Balakrishnan. “This will open up the socio-cultural and religious imprints of a glorious period in its history to the tourists.”

Kerala finance minister Thomas Isaac said that the project aimed at preserving historical buildings and cultural and traditional heritage on the Muziris site, covering seven panchayats and two municipalities in Ernakulam and Thrissur. The heritage circuit includes North Paravur, Methala, Azhikode, Kodungalloor, Chendamangalam, Chittikulangara, Vadakkekara and Pallippuram.

Besides numerous ancient monuments, the surviving elements of markets, streets, footways, bridges and cemeteries will also get a facelift as part of the project. The monuments include the Kottappuram fort, the Jewish synagogue at Paravur, the Paliyam palace, the Vypeenkotta Seminary, the Paliyam Nalukettu, Gothuruthu, the Pallipuram fort, the Kodungalloor Bhagavathy temple and the Cheraman Juma Masjid.