

The Lost Emporium of the World

Muziris, a fabled port in Kerala that traded with the Roman empire, is slowly coming to life again

By M. N. Nair

Fields of green paddy, canals twisting like snakes, single-storey square houses, walled courtyards with straggles of trees at sides and just wide enough in the middle for a small car that one would have to negotiate slowly through narrow one-lane paths crisscrossing each other—that is Pattanam, as typical as any other semi-urbanized village in Kerala. Except that a piece of land there has over the last decade started telling fascinating stories of the past. These stories come in the shape of pottery shreds, bricks, jars of many shapes including one that is mysteriously open at both ends, remnants of a wharf and a canoe. Then there are traces of black pepper, peat, cardamom, rice, and other food stuff from as far back as 2000 years ago, kept to sell or to consume, we will never know what because archaeology only gives the broad strokes. For specifics we need the written literature of those times which is scant. And what



CHERAMAN JUMA MASJID

written word has come down tells us that whatever has been dug up from the innards of Pattanam leads back to Muziris, the fabled port where ships carrying gold, olive oil and fish sauce came from the empire of Rome and returned with black pepper, ivory and other things, a balance of trade that skewed so much towards India that Roman politicians complained about being impoverished by it.

The coast of Kerala was dotted with such emporiums and Muziris was the biggest of all. And yet, now it is not even memory to most of the population. In Pattanam itself, before the archeologists got there, children would collect ancient beads strewn over the ground without anyone knowing its provenance. Where exactly was Muziris? The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, a sailor's navigation manual of the 1st century AD that calls Muziris a market of leading importance, notes, 'Tyndis is of the Kingdom



KOTTAPPURAM KOTA

of Cerobothra; it is a village in plain sight by the sea. Muziris, of the same Kingdom, abounds in ships sent there with cargoes from Arabia, and by the Greeks; it is located on a river, distant from Tyndis by river and sea five hundred stadia, and up the river from the shore twenty stadia'. Cerobothra is the Chera kingdom, confirmed by references to Muziris in the Tamil Sangam literature of the period. But that hasn't really helped pinpoint its location beyond it being somewhere along the Kerala coast. It was thought to be the town of Kodungaloor but there was little archeological evidence to substantiate that. In 2007 excavations started being done by the Kerala Council for Historical Research (KCHR) in nearby Pattanam, which is a few kilometers from the sea along a riverine estuary and they started unearthing an extraordinary number of artefacts. Since then it has been speculated that Pattanam was Muziris. But KCHR, which has done nine seasons of excavations, is cautious of making a direct correlation, instead they caveat

Pattanam as being related to Muziris in some way. KCHR's director P J Cherian says, "Each season strengthened the understanding that the Pattanam site is an integral part of the legendary port of ancient Muziris or Muziri Pattanam. That the Indian subcontinent played a critical role in the first maritime exchanges in human history is unravelled by Pattanam

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evidence. This connection and exchange happened 15 centuries before Vasco da Gama reached here."

In 1985, the scale of this exchange

was attested by the discovery of a contract of 2nd century AD drawn between two traders after goods brought from Muziris had been unloaded on a port on the Red Sea, most probably Berenike in Egypt. One of the parties to the contract, called the Muziris Papyrus, was going to take it take further on land to Alexandria. A paper on it by Lionel Casson, a New York University professor and maritime historian, estimated that "The six parcels of the shipment...had a value of just short of 1155 talents—almost as much as it cost to build the aqueduct at Alexandria Tross...A Roman merchantman of just ordinary size had a capacity of 340 tons; it was capable of carrying over 11,000 talents of such merchandise. And the weather conditions on the route to India were such as to require the use of vessels of at least this size. Loaded with cargoes of the likes of that recorded in this papyrus, they were veritable treasure ships."

In February this year, President Pranab Mukherjee inaugurated the first



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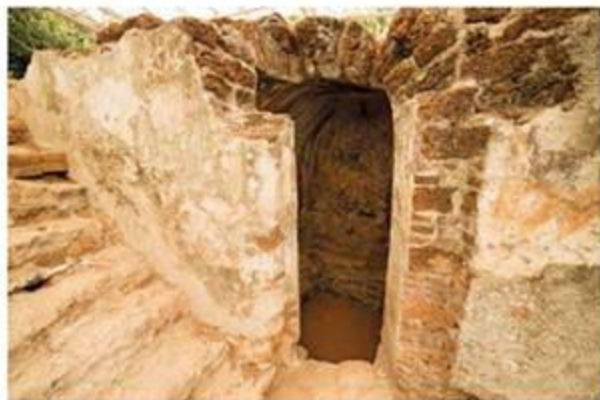
JEWISH SYNAGOGUE, KOTTAYIL KOVILAKOM, CHENDAMANGALAM



INTERIOR OF THE JEWISH SYNAGOGUE IN CHENDAMANGALAM, NEAR PARAVOOR



KEEZHITHALI SIVA TEMPLE



KOTTAPPURAM KOTA

phase of the Muziris Heritage Project, conceived a decade ago as a tourism project to showcase the region's history and its extraordinary syncretism. Within a radius of 10 to 15 square kilometres here, there were Jewish synagogues, the oldest mosque of India, a church that symbolises the arrival of the apostle St Thomas, Portuguese forts where Chinese coins were found, the residence of the family of prime ministers of Kochi kingdom, colonial markets. Their time spans spread across 2000 years but the project aspires to

Muziris imprints on the present with the Kochi - Muziris Biennale, India's biggest art event, which will see contemporary artists engage with this history.

bring it under an umbrella of the present. Architect Benny Kuriakose, who did the conservation development plan of the whole Muziris Heritage Site, says it was conceived as a small project. "But later on everybody realised that we are not only

dealing with Kerala heritage, but with the heritage of many other countries. Historians, archaeologists, architects and many others from other disciplines were also involved at different times in the project."

As of now eight museums are open to the public with more on the anvil. "The government is in the final stages of acquiring 50 acres of land for establishing a maritime museum in Muziris. The present plan is to finish the next phase during the next three years," he says. Muziris also imprints on the present with the three-month long Kochi-Muziris Biennale, India's biggest art event, which will see contemporary artists engage with this history.

Meanwhile, KCHR is going in search of Muziris's links in foreign lands. They have just been invited by the Delaware University, USA and Warsaw University Poland to participate in December in excavations being done in Berenike, a site critical for understanding Muziris. "That was the destination port of Malabar people and goods en route to Alexandria via Nile and then to the Roman Empire," says Cherian. He believes that such



JEWISH CEMETERY

explorations are important because very little field studies have been undertaken from a non Euro-centric perspective.

"We should stop seeing either Muziris or Pattanam or any port in isolation. Ports are integral links in a network of people, goods, technology, ideas, languages, skills, belief systems and so on. Only if we can undertake field research followed up by collaborative scientific studies can we really appreciate how we reached where we are today."

Pattanam was an import/export centre and manufacturing area

Dr Roberto Tomber

The exceptional quantity of Roman amphorae sherds is just one of the many categories of important material finds recovered from the Kerala Council for Historical Research excavations at

Pattanam directed by Prof PJ Cherian. Roman amphorae, used to carry food staples throughout the Roman world, are common-place in the Mediterranean. While they have been found at a number of sites in India, the findings from Pattanam far exceed those from elsewhere. This may in part relate to the extensive excavations undertaken there, but also reflects the importance of the south-west or Malabar coast in trade with the West. It is in this vicinity that the ancient site of Muchiri or Muziris was located as well as the source of black pepper that propelled this trade.

The many thousands of amphorae sherds recovered from Pattanam mostly date to the late 1st century BC through the 1st or early 2nd century AD and most belong to a single shape that carried wine. Although belonging to a single shape, they were produced throughout the Empire. The shiploads would have been amassed in Alexandria (Egypt) and then transported across the desert to be shipped out from the Red Sea ports of Myos Hormos and Berenike.

Why the vast numbers of amphorae sherds from Pattanam? In part they may



JEWISH SYNAGOGUE, KOTTAYIL KOVILAKOM, CHENDAMANGALAM

have served the merchants and sailors who travelled from Egypt with the ships and then stayed in Kerala until the monsoons allowed the return of their ships. Indian elites would also have been the recipients of these amphorae, and they may have travelled to other areas of India as gifts or for barter.

We do not know as yet whether we have located the centre of the town, but the artefacts suggest that ancient Pattanam was a thriving port, receiving goods from outside India and acting as hub for the export of goods from throughout India. Not only was it an import/export centre, but a manufacturing area. Therefore it would have been a hive of activity with a diverse population.

Was it ancient Muziris? This is a complicated issue. There are many compelling arguments to equate Pattanam with Muziris, particularly its location that matches both the Greek and Sangam documentary sources, and the large quantities of imported finds. Importantly, there is a decided lack of any other suitable sites in the region that could be Muziris. The type of evidence that would confirm this equation is rarely found

archaeologically—for example, an *in situ* inscription mentioning the place name. However, by continuing to build up a picture of life at Pattanam and continuing to investigate the overall layout of the settlement, particularly in reference to its hinterland, it will be possible to map the epicentre of the ancient port and better understand its place in the landscape. In the meantime, the importance of Pattanam as an ancient trade centre is undiminished regardless of its ancient name.

(Dr Roberto Tomber is Visiting Research Fellow, Department of Science, The British Museum, London, UK. A leading specialist in Roman and Indian ocean pottery, she is a member of the Kerala Council for Historical Research excavations at Pattanam.)