

Early Coins from Kerala: Situating the trade networks with special reference to Pattanam

Hari Sankar B (Research Scholar, Tamil University)

Dinesh Krishnan (Research Officer, Kerala Council for Historical Research)

ABSTRACT

The paper is intended for session 26, titled "*Early Coins from Kerala: Situating the trade networks with special reference to Pattanam.*" The research problem of the paper is to understand the distribution of coins and their role in understanding the trade network. The study would be based on the catalogue of coins from Kerala. Kerala, being known for its spices from ancient times, was not a secret to the world. Merchants from different parts of Europe, Arab countries, and Pacific regions came here for commercial activities, which resulted in exchanges of ideologies and material culture. Pattanam, an early historic port site on Kerala's coast close to the Arabian Sea, has produced evidence of commercial activities with foreign countries, indicated by the presence of ceramics and other material remains in large volume. According to early literary evidence, the Cheras controlled the region, and the presence of their coins from Pattanam also supports this. Apart from these Chera coins, the surrounding regions of the Pattanam site have been reported with Roman Gold and Silver coins and early Indian silver punch-marked coins in hoards. Interestingly, these coins were found in the sites connecting the Pattanam region to the neighbouring early historic sites like Kodumanal, Keeladi, and Azhagankulam. Hence, these sites can be considered part of the hinterland trade networks that connect the region with other early historic port towns in southern India. This paper tries to discuss the hinterland trade network of the Pattanam site and how these coins can be used to trace the early economic condition of the region and its monetary exchanges.

Keywords: Coins, Trade, Hinterland, burials

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1. INTRODUCTION

The passages connecting the settlements, territories, and landscapes are the pathways that are known as trade routes, and they have been an important landscape feature in cultural interactions. Politics and states were keen on developing and controlling trade routes or highways to improve connectivity and interactions for their advantage (Selvakumar 2018, 3). South India emerged as a prominent trade and exchange centre during the Early historical period, evident by the literary evidence and material remains. The geographical location, long stretching sea coast, backwaters and rivers, and various spices were the main reasons for developing trade and ports in Kerala. Ports like Nelcynda, Bacare, Naura, Eli, and Muziris are mentioned in the Greco-Roman records. As part of the trade, monetary exchanges became an inevitable factor. Pattanam was such a port that became prominent during the Early historical period because of the overall favourable conditions. This can be ascertained from the rich cultural deposits at the site, which include ceramics.

2. BACKGROUND

Pattanam is an archaeological site (N 10°09.434' E 76°12.587') in Vadakkekara village in Chittatukara Panchayat in the Ernakulam district of Kerala. Archaeological investigations at the site revealed an enormous amount of material and structural remains which are indicators of past economy and other culture-related activities. The site, which is close to the Arabian Sea, falls within the Periyar river delta, which provides an insight into the early history of Kerala, its economy, and its maritime activities. The Arabian Sea is about 4 km west of the site; in between the sea and the western

boundary of the site is located the Tattapally River or Munambam backwaters that run parallel to the Arabian Sea (Cherian et al. 2015, 11-12).

The port was under the control of Cheras during the early historic period. Roman Empire and Kerala had commercial links established through literary evidence of Pliny and Ptolemy and artefacts such as ceramics and coins. Pattanam had the presence of Roman Amphora, Arretine ware, Rouletted ware, which are Roman potteries, and other material remains, including cameos, intaglios, and gaming pieces. There was no evidence of Roman coins from the site but had the presence of Chera coins. The *periplus* and other literary evidence clearly showed that the spice trade, mainly pepper, was considered a precious spice. The seven and a half kg black pepper found in the famous Early Historic port town of Berenike in Egypt in an Indian storage jar with first-century CE context (Tomber 2008, 76-77) attests to the pepper trade from the region. It is stated that the western ships arrived in India comparatively light in weight and that a substantial bulk of Indian commodities were exchanged for Roman coins (Romanis 2020, 138). This indicates how large the pepper trade was. The presence of beryl beads from the site indicated the internal trade. Beryl mines are found in the Kodumanal region, which is the closest source of raw material. All these factors indicate the internal and external trade networks of Pattanam.

The present study focuses on identifying and understanding the trade routes by locating the coins. The study also looks at the hinterland sites which could be present along the routes leading to other contemporary sites of Pattanam, such as Kodumanal, Keezhadi, and Azhagankulam.

3. THE COINS

Coins are part of the source material for historical studies, which helps explain the economic, social, and political factors of the past formations. In Kerala, coins belonging to various dynasties from early historic to modern times were found in various places. Their presence can be inferred as part of the monetary exchange resulting from internal and external trade.

3.1 Chera coins

The earliest coins of the Sangam period are the Chera, small square copper coins with symbols like an arched hill, elephant, trees, umbrella, river with fishes, swastika, sun, *srivatsa*, wheel (*chakra*), garland and bull on the obverse, and bow and arrow, the dynastic symbol of the Cheras on the reverse. These coins are die-struck. The Cheras in the Sangam age also issued silver coins with the symbols like the Sun, square tank, caduceus, and *sadacharachakra* on the obverse and the dynastic symbol 'bow and arrow' on both sides (Vijayaraghavan 2000, 28-31).

Three coins were reported from Alangad near North Paravur in the Ernakulam district of Kerala. These were found in an earthen pot unearthed during digging for agricultural purposes—two of the coins found were semicircular, and one with a square shape. The coins bear a bow and arrow symbol on the obverse and an elephant figure on the reverse (Sreekumar 1999, 162). Copper Chera coins were found from Pattanam during excavations lasting nine seasons from 2007, with a clear legend, bow, and arrow on the obverse and elephant on the reverse. These coins are also found in Tamil Nadu in Coimbatore, Karur, Perur, Vellalur, and Kodumanal.

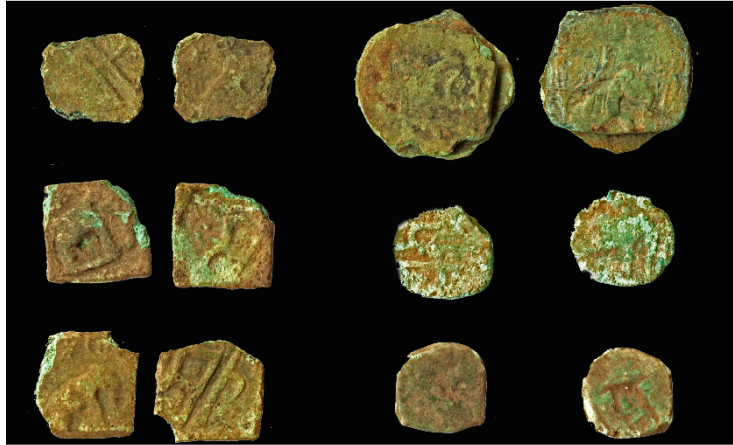


Figure 1. Chera coins from Pattanam excavations (Courtesy: KCHR coin collection)

3.2 Roman Coins

The Roman coins were found in various places within Kerala and outside, mainly in the form of hoards. The Roman coin hoard was first found in Nellore in Andhra Pradesh in 1786, with around 40 gold coins (Berghaus 1996, 8). A die made of bronze from emperor Hadrian was reported from Karur in Tamil Nadu, which shows the demand for Roman coins in exchange for goods (Krishnamurthy 1996, 43-48). These coins are found buried in many sites in Kerala, like Kottayam (Aurei of Augustus Nero), Eyyal, and Poonjar (Aurei of Augustus) (Gupta 1965, 47).

Eyyal - Eyyal was the first Roman coin hoard discovered in Kerala in 1945. Located about 15 km southeast of Kunnamkulam in Tallappalli taluk of Thrissur district in Kerala, the site is located on the Highway between the ancient emporium of Tyndis and Muziris. The hoard contains about 117 coins, of these, 71 were Gold, 12 were silver, and the rest of the 34 were punch marked coins. The coins of this hoard cover a period of about 123 BCE to 117 CE. This hoard has Denarii of Octavian, Claudius, and Tiberius found in highly worn condition and Aurei of Tiberius, Claudius Nero, and Trajan in a well-preserved condition (Gupta 1965, 48).

Valluvally- The site is Located 6 km south of North Paravur in the Ernakulam district of Kerala. The hoard was discovered by local people while digging for agricultural purposes in 1983. The hoard contained thousands of coins, but only 252 were recovered by the local police (Sathyamurthy 2011, 14). Most coins were in good condition with inscriptions.

Nedumkandam- Nedumkandam is located in Udumbanchola Taluk of Idukki district in Kerala. The site is located near the Ghat route to Tamil Nadu. Over 50 silver coins were discovered from this hoard in 1992, but the reported coins are few (Berghaus 1996, 31).

Poonjar- Poonjar is located along the Ghat route in the Kottayam district of Kerala, and the hoard had about 5 Aurei (Sathyamurthy 1965, 4).

Idamaruku- Coins of the early Julio-Claudian period have been discovered at Idamaruku in the Kottayam district of Kerala. Idamaruku is a place close to Poonjar (Turner 1989, 74).

Niranam- Another finding has been at Niranam near Tiruvalla in the Pathanamthitta district of Kerala (Turner 1989, 74).

Puthankavu- About 50 aurei have been reported from Puthenkavu, located near Chengannur Taluk in Alappuzha District. The exact number of coins is unavailable (Champakalakshmi 1996, 265).

Kumbalam- The Kumbalam hoard in Ernakulam district of Kerala has nine aurei (Berghaus 1993, 29-42).

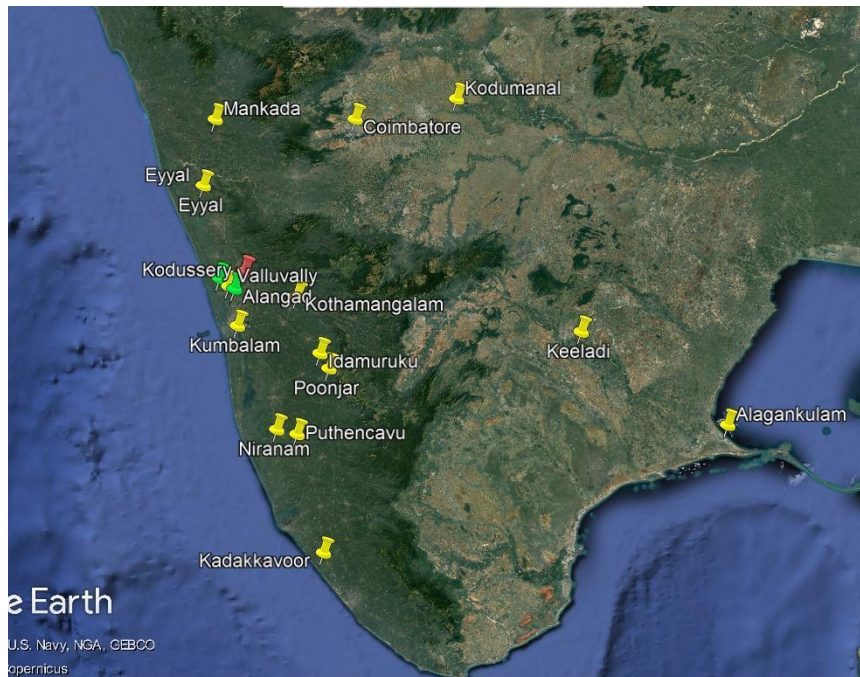


Figure 2. Location of coins (Roman in yellow, pmc in red, Chera in green) (Created with Google Earth)

Kothamangalam- The Roman coin from the eighth to tenth centuries was reported from Kothamangalam in Ernakulam District of Kerala (Valath 1991, 68).

There are a few other stray finds in the Alappuzha district, Kilaloor in the Kannur district, and Kadakavur in the Trivandrum district. However, the details regarding the coins are not available.

3.3 Punch-Marked coins

Punch-marked coins are the earliest coinage of India, and most scholars consider them of indigenous origin. Punch-marked coins are generally known in silver and rarely in copper, with various sizes and weights. The size of the coins varies according to shape and weight. These are made of silver and copper and rectangular or square and sometimes irregular in shape. The term punch-marked comes from the technique used for preparing coins where the symbols are stamped on them with punches. They were in vogue when writing was not current in India and were rarely used (Goyal 1995, 79). Symbols are one most conspicuous features of these coins and do not bear any legend or inscription. Various forms of representations, like hills, birds, trees, animals, human figures, and floral and geometrical patterns, appear on them. However, the exact importance still needs to be clarified and remains as mysterious as ever (Vanaja 1983, 5).

Several silver punch-marked coins have been discovered in different parts of Kerala. Three hoards of punch-marked coins were found from the region, which includes the Elikulamkara hoard in the Kottayam district, the Eyyal hoard in Thrissur district and the Kodusserry hoard from Angamali in the Ernakulam district (Department of Archaeology, Administrative Reports 1971-72, 75-76). The coin's origin is considered to be of something other than Kerala origin. However, an interesting fact is the discovery of punch-marked die from Karur, which can be used to mint coins (Murthy 1994, 51-56). A total of 218 silver punch-marked coins were discovered from the first two hoards, Elikulamkara, and Eyyal, in 1946. Of these, 184 coins were unearthed from Kottayam, and only 162 coins have been classified. Rests of the 34 coins were reported from Eyyal (Gupta 1965, 5).

Kodussery- Kodussery is located near Angamaly in the Ernakulam district of Kerala. The coins were found inside an earthen jar discovered while digging the foundation of a house. The hoard containing

783 silver punch-marked coins is now kept in the Numismatics Study Center, State Department of Archaeology, Nedumangad, Thiruvananthapuram (Satyamurthy 1994, 45).

4. TRACING THE HINTERLAND SITES AND TRADE ROUTES

The three varieties of coins from the early historic period were found in various places over Kerala. Their distribution pattern will be traced to understand the trade routes and hinterland sites. The Pattanam site has Chera coins, but Roman and punch-marked coins are absent. These coins are found in large numbers outside the site. Foremost, the location of these coins and the Iron age- early historic sites can be combined to get further information about hinterland trade and networks. The interesting fact regarding combining the iron age-early historic site data and of the coin hoards is that there is no evidence of well-recognised settlements identified, or even large mounds which are found in many parts of India in the region except at Pattanam and a few sites like Anakkara and Nachivayal. However, megalithic burials are found all over the area. (Krishnan 2017, 111). An important point highlighted here is that a burial cannot exist without the settlements. So naturally, nearby the burial sites, settlements must have existed. However, the issue is that we cannot recognise them because of the topographic features, continuous habitation, landscape modification, habitation remains, and the environmental conditions of Kerala, mainly seasonal floods. Therefore, we can assume that each burial site refers to a habitation. However, people definitely lived nearby since the vast material culture represented in the burials cannot come from nowhere.

Secondly, the traded materials, mainly pepper, can also be used in this context to understand the hinterland sites. As noted in Sangam and Classical texts, black pepper was one of the important products shipped out in vast quantities. It is possible to produce such a large amount of pepper only in the high ranges as it requires vast areas for cultivation, geographical conditions, trade, and communication for such large-scale trade. The Tamil inscription of Rajendra Chola found on a megalithic menhir stone near Rajakumari in the upper Periyar valley indicates spice production centres and the trade route passed through the region in the later periods also (Kumar 2017, 78-85). In modern days this region is also known for spice cultivating, especially pepper. Considering this, production of the resources must have taken place in the hinterland settlements and neighbouring regions and then transported to Pattanam for external trade.

Furthermore, the port town Azhagankulam on the northern bank of river Vaigai in Tamil Nadu must have trade relations with Pattanam. Both these sites might have connected through the highland area of the Western Ghats and Madurai. Mainly there are two routes connecting these regions, one through the Bodinayakanur pass via Kothamangalam, Adimali, Munnar, Rajakkad, Theni, and Madurai. The second is through Cumbum pass via Kothamangalam, Idukki, Kumly, Cumbum, Theni, and Madurai. The Roman coin hoard found from the Nedumkandam and Poonjar is located in the same region, which indicates that trade and transport prevailed in the region.

Another critical aspect being considered here is that in certain burials, there is the presence of carnelian beads where the raw materials are not locally available. Their presence in these burials is a big question unless there is a great trade network or communication. The literature says that the products from South India reached the Ganges. They also mention that export items such as products of semi-precious stones might have come from the Kongu region of Tamil Nadu. The region is known for the mines of stones and production centres of various stone objects. The semi-precious stones raw materials, such as carnelian, chalcedony, agate, and beryl from Pattanam, might have come from these regions (Krishnan 2017, 252).

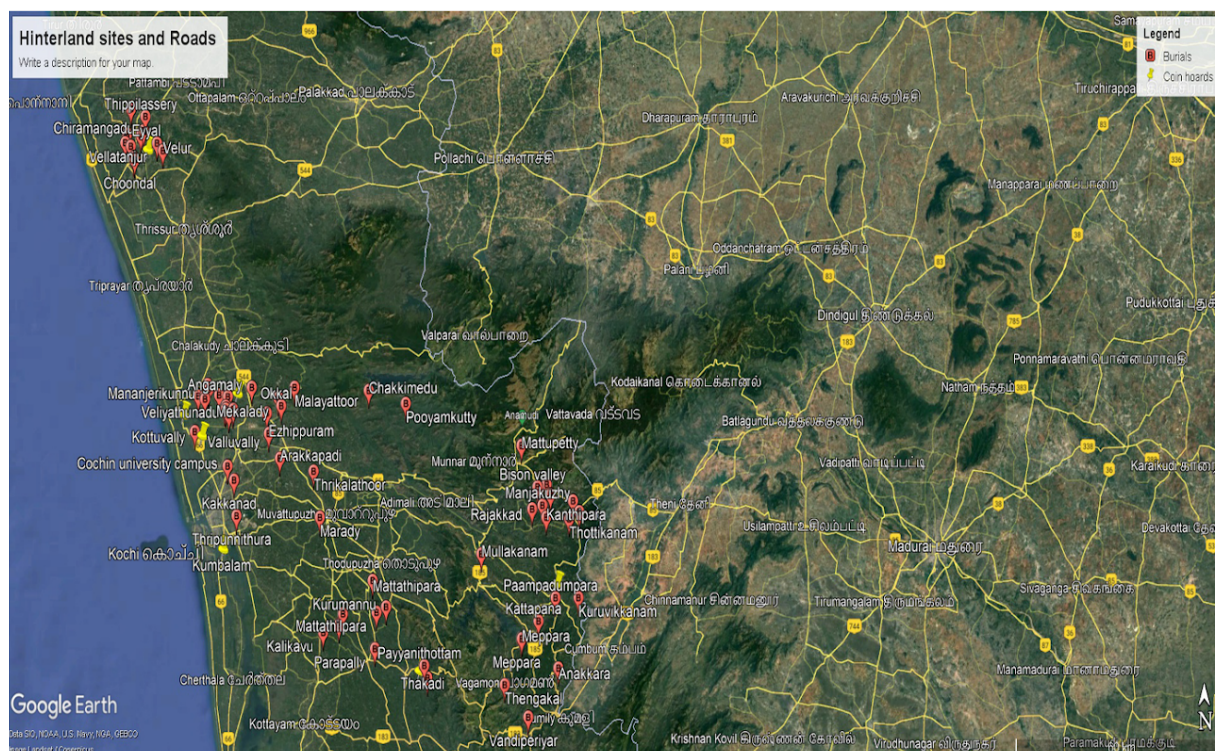


Figure 3. Coin hoard sites along with burials and modern road ways (coins in yellow, burials in red), (created with Google Earth)

The Eyyal hoard of coins with Roman and punch-marked coins is also found along the route to Kodumanal in Tamil Nadu, an early historic site with Roman contacts glimpsed from the excavations. The Palakkad gap is a natural pass leading to the Coimbatore region and then to Kodumanal, famous for beryl mines. Roman coins from Coimbatore and Palakkad and the beryl beads and raw materials from Pattanam indicate trade and transportation between the sites and Eyyal being on the route. The Roman coin hoards are found in various places of Tamizhakam, such as Pollachi, Karur, Vellalur, Kalayamuttur, Madurai, Coimbatore, Yesvantpur, Pudukkottai, Eyyal, Kottayam, Valluvalli, Panangadu, and Puthenchira indicates the commercial contacts from region to region (Krishnan 2017, 190).

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Roman coin hoards, the Chera coins, and punch-marked coins belonging to the Early historic period were recovered from various places in Kerala. The discovery of coins, a medium of exchange, means there were internal and external trade contacts. The material from Pattanam also supports this statement. Many artefacts belonging to the Romans, such as different varieties of pottery and beads, were found at the site. No Roman or punch-marked coins have been recovered from the site, which is a matter of question as they were found in surrounding places. The Chera coins were found at the site and from a nearby site, indicating internal trading activities. The Roman coins were found on the route to other contemporary sites in Tamil Nadu, such as Kodumanal, Karur, Azagankulam, and Keeladi. All these sites, along with intermediate sites, have the presence of Roman coins indicating the trade networks. It is clear that the development of the Pattanam site as an urban centre is based on maritime contacts with foreign countries as well as local interactions and development. The Iron Age people, who lived in the interior areas, supported the development of the port town of Pattanam. The commodities exported from the Pattanam site might have come from these interior locations where the local people cultivated or collected them. The coins might be part of this exchange system for goods found in several places.

Considering the factors mentioned above, it can be assumed that the coins were found on the trade routes or nearby hinterland settlements/ burials which supported the port town of Pattanam. The coins came as part of the trade network and communication between these sites and Pattanam. However, the monetary value of the coins cannot be traced with limited literary evidence.

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