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# An Investigation into the Early Human Activities at Alattuchira and its Surrounding Region, Ernakulam District, Kerala

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**Abstract:** *The article looks at the characters of human activities at the eastern part of central Kerala from prehistoric time to modern period. It gives brief information and discussion about the findings which were explored from Alattuchira and its surrounding region. Physiographically, this province falls in low and mid land region of Kerala. Moreover this paper tries to find out the distribution pattern of early settlers by identifying the cultural remains explored.*

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**Keywords:** Alattuchira, Ernakulam, Stone Age, Megalithic, Temples, Ceramics, Terracotta Figurines

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## Introduction

As everywhere in the world, river systems have played an important role in shaping the social, cultural and economic life of the particular region. Recent exploration along the bank of river Periyar identified many archaeological sites includes Alattuchira Kapprikkadu, Puliyanippara, Kottappara, Thundam, Bahupuram and Mulamkuzhy. This work is mainly base on the intensive systematic survey by foot carried out in the valley of Malayattur and Athirapalli hills with a view to locate primary sites. As the valley is too large, measuring an area of more than 30sq km it was imperative to restrict the exploratory survey to a selected part. Hence it is restricted to certain areas falls in the Taluk of Moovattupuzha, Kunnathunaadu and Kothamangalam of Ernakulam district. It covers 15 km square area has been taken for the primary archaeological investigation by considering Kapprikkadu as central point. More over lack of exploration had created a significant gap in the knowledge of archaeological potentiality of this valley. Some extent this investigation helped to understand the characteristics of early human occupation of the particular region.

Kaprikkadu is well known in this region owing to the presence of Elephant Training project and Kaprikkadu Natural Study Centre (NSC). The activities of Natural Study Centre in Kapprikkadu forest area has helped to preserve the natural landscape together with the cultural remains from the local encroachment. The archaeological finding from the above mentioned sites include stone tools(?), Megalithic burials, iron slag, terracotta figurines, ceramics, tiles, remains of early temples and fort. All these cultural remains have spread light on the early human occupation along the banks of river Periyar.

## Location

Study area lies in 10° 17' 51.56" north latitude and 76 ° 42' 04.97" east longitudes. It comprises a strip of land with an area of 15 km<sup>2</sup>. Study area comes under the jurisdiction of *Muvattupuzha*, *Kunnathunadu* and *kothamangalam* Thaluk. It covers major part of Kottappara, Puliyanippara, Mulamkuzhy, Thundam, Bahupuram/Venpuram and Alattuchira Kapprikkadu (Fig. 1). River Periyar originated from Western Ghats and cut across the study area through its centre. Physiographically Kerala is divided into five geographical zones. About 6.40 % areas falls under the category of Coastal Plains and Lagoons (0-10 m), whereas 54.17% belong to Low lands (10-300 m). Midlands of 300-600 m cover an area of 8.44% only. Last two zones comprise areas of 20.35% Highland and 0.64 mountain peaks. Near about 50% percentages of total habitation in Kerala live in lowlands. Infact midland lies between the mountains and the lowlands. It is made up of undulating hills and valleys ranging in height between 300 m to 600 m. It is interjected by gneissic and lateritic hills and interrupted by rivers, lakes and streams. This is an area of intensive cultivation. However the lowland lies below an altitude of 300 m maximum and 10 m minimum. More than that, numerous plains, valley fills, colluviums and sedimentary formations are also parts of the lowland (Soman1997; Nair 1991). Physiographically, the study area comes under the low land where as the remaining area is in mid land. The entire region is surrounded by the river Periyar (*Choorny nadi*) on west and north and Western Ghats on the east and south direction. Alattuchira and its surrounding region possess diverse geographical units. Large section of the province is forested and rest retained for the agricultural activities. Most of the above mentioned sites are located in Malayattoor, Thundam and Edamalayār semi-tropical and tropical evergreen forest ranges. These geographical conditions of the study area played in shaping up a congenial environment for the early settlers.

At present agrarian groups cultivate rice, rubber, pepper, ginger, turmeric, vegetables, coconut, nutmeg and clove. Moreover, different indigenous people (*Malayar*, *Muthavāns* and *Kānis*) settled in the upper region of *Alattuchira* called as *Ponginchuvadu* region at the altitude of 369 m. Cultural materials found out from the sites during the survey date the region to the Stone Age (?), Megalithic and up to 1800AD. Besides stone objects, megalithic burial monuments include dolmen, cist and urn, terracotta female and male figurines, fragments of iron slag and implements, remains of temples and ceramics have been found. Major discoveries and the find spots are given in detail.

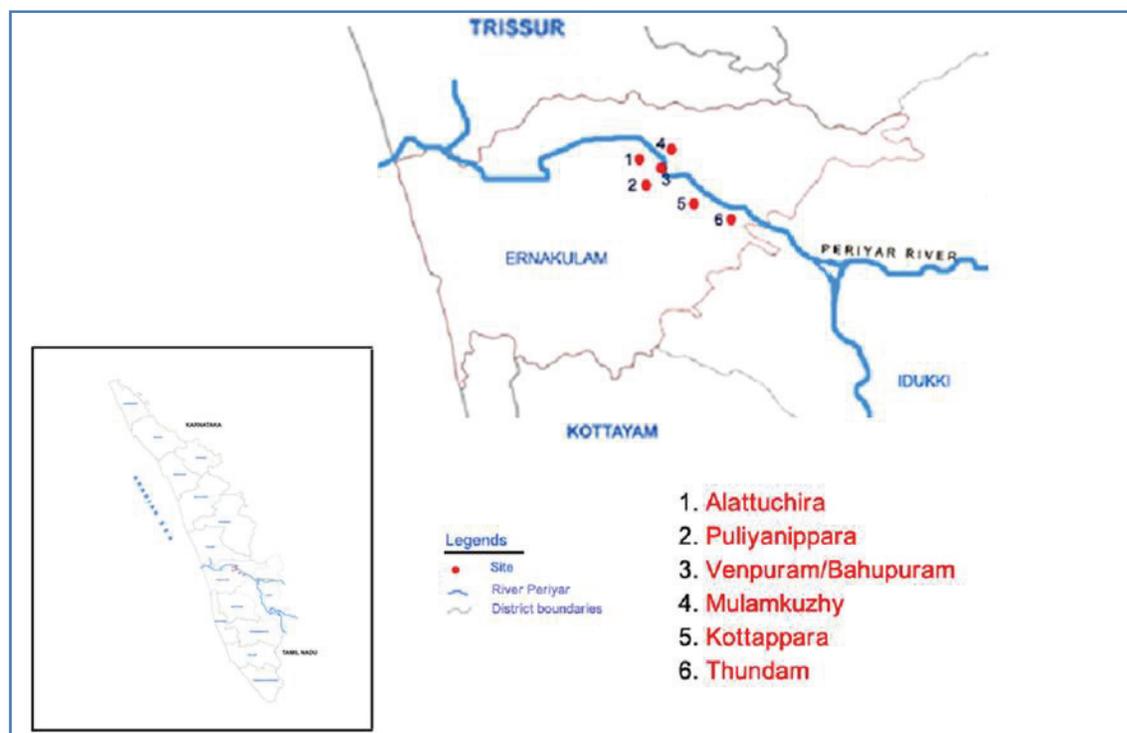


Figure 1: Map showing the study area

## Puliyanippara

Puliyanippara is positioned in the *Vengoor* Panchayath, Ernakulam district and is about 2km west of Alattuchira ( $10^{\circ}10'42.03''$  N  $76^{\circ}32'44.43''$  E). This is a huge rock formation running parallel to the Valppara hill ranges. The land in between the two ranges forms a deep valley. The foot of hillocks are characterized by reddish laterite soil and followed by paddy fields. Three megalithic localities are discovered near the foot of the formation. Several megalithic remains including urn burials and cist are found close to the paddy field, whereas dolmen situated over the rocky surface (Fig. 2). Apart from these evidences, about 6 quartz flakes and a tool have found 12m west of partially disturbed dolmen (Fig. 3). The concentrations of quartz flakes are very high in and around the dolmen. A detailed survey had undertaken to identify the distribution of those quartz flakes. On the basis of quartz flakes distribution, it can be assumed that, most probably, these quartz flakes had a strong connection with the megalithic mortuary practices. Typology of one among the quartz flakes, which was found from the surroundings of dolmen, is similar to Microlith. In this situation two questions naturally arise and pointed towards not only the presence of Mesolithic occupation but also the role of quartz flakes in the mortuary practices of megalithic culture at Puliyanippara. A wide range of rock quarrying activity and intensive cultivation at this place destructed traces of the past culture.

## Thundam

Thundam is located about 8 km east of Alattuchira ( $10^{\circ}10'33.40''$  N  $76^{\circ}38'17.49''$  E). It is a plain area surrounded by hilly terrains. The survey throughout this region is

evidenced with remains of a structural temples, *Siva* linga and stone images of *Ganapathi*, *Shāsta*, *Gana* and *Dvārapālakās* (Fig. 4). Granite and laterite are the foremost building material used in the construction of temple. Remnants of the temple consisted of *Sōpāna* having eight stone steps that leads to the *garbhagriha*. Inner circumambulatory path (*Pradakṣiṇa*) and foundation can also visible. The foundation is made of laterite locally called *Kolappāra*. It is completely disturbed and in recent time, the local people rearranged the destructed structure and started *pūja* once in a month.



Figure 2: Dolmen, Puliyanippara



Figure 3: Microlith and quartz flakes, Puliyanippara



**Figure 4: Remains of the Structural Temple, Thundam**

### **Bahupuram/Venpuram**

Bahupuram is located around 700m east of Alattuchira ( $10^{\circ}11'09.76''$  N  $76^{\circ}34'08.09''$  E) and surrounded by the river Periyar. It is located on the foothill of Valppara hills (400m; MSL). *Kesari Balakrishnapilla*, a social reformer of 20<sup>th</sup> century has mentioned a village called '*Ekachakra*', one of the early Brahmin settlements in Kerala (Balakrishnapilla, 1995). This place is said to have been located at present Bahupuram. It is believed that, name of present place has an association with '*Baha*' (*bahu + puram*), a character in the epic Mahabhārata. Bahupuram was the place, where *Baha* used to reside. According to several oral traditions in ancient times, this area had a significant position in the long distance trade contact between Tamil Nadu and Cranganore or Kodungallur. This place was possibly acted as a centre point or a major link between ancient Tamil and *Mahodayapuram* or modern Kodungallur in Trissur district. Here it is possible to assume that, the early settlers of the region perhaps produced spices and other trading objects for those who had a demand and transported to coastal region as a trading commodities. It is assumed, due to the existence of ancient spice and other hill product shops (*Malancharakkukada*) at Kodungallur market, Trissur district and Paravur market, Ernakulam district even now. Other than this, major archaeological finds from this area includes shreds of porcelain, remnants of the structural temple (Fig. 5) and terracotta tiles. The temple remains might be of middle phase (1000- 1330 AD) and dedicated to Lord *Śiva*. The area is surrounded by river Periyar from four sides. In addition to this, the area is evidenced certain features in the form of burnt mud clods indicate burning activity (Fig. 6). A small terracotta female figurine and unidentifiable objects had been also identified from this locality (Personal communication with the local person). These archaeological remains found out during the survey suggest that the settlement perhaps started during the early medieval period.

### **Mulamkuzhy**

The site is located at 2 km north of Alattuchira and at the southern bank of river Periyar ( $10^{\circ}12'01.60''$  N  $76^{\circ}32'59.06''$  E). Site was dug out a few years ago for a new construction and revealed a rich variety of ceramics, tiles, decorative stone, and terracotta consisting of both male and female figurine. There are two varieties in the

tile category; one has been identified with multiple semi-circular edges and other is with conical edge (Fig. 7). These tiles are provided with a small nib on one edge of its bed. These are vertical in section and length is about 25 cm and 6 cm width. Huge concentration of the tiles around the present temple suggests that the existence of an early structure with tiled roof. Recent excavation at Kottappuram Fort at Kodungallur, Trissur district revealed the similar tiles associated with other medieval artefacts. Moreover earlier excavations at Cheramanparambu, Cheraman Jūma Masjid, Thiruvanchikkulam, Trikkulaśekharapuram temple and Mathilakam at Kodungallur, Thrissur district also unearthed the similar tiles in intact as well as broken from the medieval context (Raman, 1976).



**Figure 5: Remains of temple and Chinese Ceramic, Bahupuram**



**Figure 6: Burnt mud clods, Bahupuram**



**Figure 7: Fragments of conical edged roof tiles, Mulamkuzhy**

In addition to this, important artifacts recovered from the site are terracotta figurines. The temple land comprises of nearly 1 acre with an undulated surface. Later people had to level up the site to make suitable for new temple, and while doing this, the ruins of early temples were found to consist portion of walls, foundations and a well. Terracotta figurines were found from 4m depth while taking the foundation trench near to the well area. Figures were collected from one place and it has a dump feature. These were perhaps dumped in a well of earlier period. Unsystematic digging process damaged the images completely. There are broken images of both male and female figurines (Fig. 8). These images might have been used as a decorative element, rather than votive. Among this, two are female and rest one is of male figures. Male figurine is identified with *Kiritamakuta* whereas female figurines have not been shown with crown. Both figurines bear decorative necklaces; the female has in addition ear ornament or *kuṇḍala* designed in the shape of flower. One has shown with wide open eyes with eye ball drawn inside. Male figure has broad forehead, long and pointed nose too. Both these figurines are represented with pleasant facial expression.

The female figurines are having oval shaped and pleasant face adorned with closed eyes and narrow nose. Images are decorative with comparatively heavy ornaments on ear with *Chakra kuṇḍala* (Wheel shaped) (Fig. 9), neck with three pendent *kanthābhūṣana* (Necklace) (Fig. 10), double beaded or multiple beaded necklace, *keyūra* (Armlet) circled with floral design and multi designed (Fig. 11) and waist with rope designed girdle. One of the broken female figurines (headless) has been identified with seated in a *Savya-lalitāsana* posture (Fig. 12) and rest of them might be in *Stānaka* posture. Moreover, on the stylistic considerations these terracotta figurines may be ascribed to the medieval phase (c. A.D 1000 - 1300).



Figure 8: Terracotta male and female figurines, Mulamkuzhy



Figure 9: Wheel Shaped Ear rings, Mulamkuzhy



Figure 10: Neck with three pendent *kanthābhūśana*, Mulamkuzhy



**Figure 11: Keyura - multiple and floral design, Mulamkuzhy**



**Figure 12: Broken female figurine in seated posture, Mulamkuzhy**

### **Kottappara**

Kottappara is situated 10 km east of Alattuchira in the reserve forest region. In Malayalam language, the word 'Kotta' stands for Fort and *Pāra* means rock/hill. Altogether, place name *Kottappara* indicates an existence of a 'Fort over the hill'. As the

place name suggests, evidences of an ancient Fort has been identified during this field survey. It is situated on a hillock surrounded by a deep conduit. It has a leveled surface on the top. Fragments of iron slag and red ware potsherds have been found in clusters. Traces of laterite structures were also noticed very close to the hillock. Toponymical study suggests, this area had been proposed in the name of *Perumals*, seems to be the second *Chēra* rulers (9 c. A.D. to 11 c. A.D). One of the places in the region is called '*Perumāmkunnu*' which means the residing place of *Perumāl* or 'the mound related to Perumals'. Another place name '*Airōrkara*' (*Airu* means iron ore and *kara* means area), points towards the location from where iron ore probably collected or iron extracted. In addition to this, discovery of a hard laterite rock formation, locally known as *Kolappāra* (Fig. 13a) provides evidence for quarrying activity in the form cut marks. It is said that once the particular laterite stone (*Kolappāra*) had been collected and used for extracting iron minerals. The ample occurrence of Iron slag (Fig. 13b) in and around the particular region supports the aforesaid presumption. The site has also yielded cultural remains including shreds of red ware and roof tiles.



**Figure 13 a: Iron rich laterite and 13 b: Slag, Kottappara**

Field walk conducted within 1km square area has revealed five megalithic monuments, of which four cist and one dolmen. These Cists are multi chambered and each indicated by circles of undressed blocks of various sizes and shapes (Fig. 14). However, one of the cist circles, with a diameter of 7 m is demarcated by circle of dressed laterite stone. Orthostats of the cists arranged in swastika pattern vary in length from 3 to 5m and with capstone on few. Slight inclination towards SE-NW has been seen in the alignment of Orthostats. An approximate distance between the two cists is 200m. One of the cists has having three small rectangular perforation measuring 5 x 3cm at the centre of the northern orthostat (Fig. 15). However, these perforations have close resemblance to those found on the rock surface. It is also possible to assume that the megalithic people possibly had given a location to their dead as in lifetime and the chamber of the dead should be a prototype of the house. Although Kerala has got plentiful evidence of megalithic graves from various contexts but perhaps it could be the first discovery of this kind from Kerala. The perforation perhaps acted as the entrance through which the offerings and other things in life could have given.



**Figure 14: Multi chambered and disturbed Cists, Kottappara**



**Figure 15: Rectangular perforations on orthostat, Kottappara**

In addition to Megalithic monuments, remnants of a temple have also been identified (Fig. 16). It was difficult to identify the original status of the temple because of the disturbed condition. Even though the roots of a huge tree wrecked the *Adisthāna* or foundation of this temple, the original shape is definable. It consists of rectangular garbhagriha and has its own flights of steps. Ample occurrence of roof tiles in the site suggests that the temple had a tiled roof. A well has also been noticed on the south-western portion of the temple. Recently, native settlers of this particular region modified this temple by rearranging the stone debris. It is now dedicated to two major deities; *Siva* and *Ayyappan* and their subsidiary deities include *Saraswati*, *Ganapathi* (*Ganeśa*) and *Sarpam* (Snake). Architecturally, this temple can be datable to the middle phase (1000-1300AD). Moreover, this temple is situated over *Kolappāra* or the hard laterite formation. There are huge water channels encircled the temple from three directions except from the east. According to the native people, this man made water channels were used to alleviate hard *Kulappara* before taking out for the extraction of iron.



**Figure 16: Disturbed temple structure and its Artistic Recreation, Kottappara**

## **Alattuchira**

Alattuchira is located on the southern bank of river Periyar and is situated in the *Koovappadi* Panchayath, Ernakulam district ( $10^{\circ} 11' 16.59''$  N,  $76^{\circ} 32' 09.51''$  E). It is in a forested land extending about 1km southwards and about 5km northwards from the river bank. The site is relatively undisturbed though at a certain localities the soil cover has been eroded away due to the continuous flood. The locality has clusters of artefacts in the primary context. Of these, there are 45 stone object (dolerite of dyke formation) having unusual character. It is difficult to place or identify them as tool although there is a clear mid ridge on its surface but not able to see prominent bulb of percussion on the reverse face among the collection. Moreover, the task of sorting these stone objects into meaningful groups was not easier. However, a primary assumption has made on these stone object that, it could be tools belong to the Neolithic or later (Fig. 17). Detailed macroscopic studies clearly showed that these are natural stones. *Muthavāns* and *Malayar* were used a similar tool types as spear head and axe ('*Kuzhivadi*' personal communication). This site also gives a large number of pot shreds (coarse red wares) and iron slag. It is not easy to correlate potsherds and iron slag with the stone objects. Systematic typological study and scientific dating are to be done to get the chronology as well as the functional aspects the stone objects.



**Figure 18: Natural Stone objects from Kapprikkadu**

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The work aimed to explore the entire area in order to examine and record all cultural remains and to observe the pattern of distribution of site in the particular environment. As already mentioned, all these sites are extremely influenced by the river Periyar. Many of sites are located along the river bank or short interior. Hence, it could be said

that, early human inhabitants had taken advantages of this water source. Thus, keeping all these information in background, the recent discovery of remnants of temple structures, iron slag and iron ores from *Kottappara*; stone objects from *Alattuchira*; cist, dolmen, Microlithic and quartz flakes from Puliyanippara; terracotta figurines from Mulamkuzhy; remains of temple from Thundam as well as Bahupuram have solidified the evidence of human settlements through the ages. The explored archaeological sites in *Alattuchira* and its surrounding region have evidenced with ample occurrence cultural materials of different periods. Moreover, the exploration at *Alattuchira* could bring out stone tools (?); those are absolutely unfamiliar to Stone Age researches in Kerala. A detailed study is needed, but the preliminary analysis drawn a doubtful statements whether it belong to eolith or tool category.

This exploration has recorded sites and remains of megalithic and even up to colonial period. Kottappara, Mulamkuzhy, Puliyanippara, Thundam and Bahupuram are the sites represent various cultural phases. The context of Microlith and chronological position of stone tools?, traces of megalithic culture rather than burials, iron technology and other characteristic features early human settlers of *Alattuchira* are to be studied through proper research or these questions will be remained unanswered until systematic archaeological researches are being accomplished.

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