
Naval and Commercial Importance of Kollam, Kerala

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***Abstract:** Kollam occupied a prominent position by virtue of its strategic location and the availability of valuable natural resources at its disposal. Kollam remained a pivotal centre in the exchange of goods between the east and the west and maintained cordial trade and cultural links with all the great empires of the period, Abbasid-Baghdad, Byzantine Constantinople, the Holy Roman Empire, Moorish Cordoba, and Zanzibar etc. It was substantiated by the prehistoric and megalithic relics discovered from various places in Kollam besides other corroborative evidence including the literary sources both foreign and indigenous. But such an important place was left unnoticed mostly by the historians and scholars. Hence, the relevance of the present study assumes greater importance.*

Keywords: Poredam, Kurakkeni Kollam, Trade, Commerce, Tarisapalli Copper Plates, Mampalli Plate, Rameswarathukoil Inscription

Introduction

Among the coastal towns and forts situated on the Arabian Sea Coast, Kollam occupies a predominant position by virtue of its strategic location. It remained a pivotal centre in the exchange of goods between the east and the west and maintained strong trade and cultural links with all the great empires of the period, Abbasid-Baghdad, Byzantine Constantinople, the Holy Roman Empire, Moorish Cordoba, Zanzibar etc. The Perso-Arabic, Hindu, Indonesian, and Chinese seaborne trade, augmented by Central Asian caravan routes, established a strong sense of oneness in this area of social and cultural diversity rooted in four separate civilizations. Malabar's entryway to the eastern Indian Ocean was Kollam. However, historians, archaeologists, and researchers who studied ancient Kerala's history did not place a high value on Kollam, particularly in terms of naval and commercial significance.

Kollam During the Prehistoric and Megalithic Period

From the beginning, Kollam commanded a history. Various prehistoric and megalithic remains have been uncovered throughout the region. Prehistoric cultures and the Megalithic, have been documented in a variety of locations. There are fifteen Megalithic sites in Kollam, which are found in Abhayagiri, Kalluvacha, and Kuvakkad near Kulathupuzha, Karimpalurnear Pathanapuram, Valiyapadam near Sasthamcotta,

Aeram near Anchal, Kadavur and Peruman near Anchalumoodu, Poredam near Chadayamangalam, Kakkotumoola near Mayyanad, Orukkothupara near Odanavattom at Arippa near Madathara. The relics found at Abhayagiri, Orukkothupara, Karimpalur, Poredam and Valiyapadam are of urn burials while at Aeram and Arippa are cists burials. At Abhayagiri, Kadavur, Kakkotumoola and Perumanmenhir types have been noticed (Rajendran 2003: 3).

The discovery of two urn burial sites at Poredam sheds light on the prehistoric people of ancient Kerala. The cultural evidence obtained from Poredam consist of several red ware and grey ware potteries, black- and red-ware potteries and a few iron implements (Rajendran and Kshirsagar 1993: 148). Kollam is included in the mainstream of the evolution of human life. Mesolithic implements and wood charcoal etc. are discovered from Tenmalai in Kollam district (Rajendran, 1987: 266). Mangad, near Kollam, has also yielded the remains of an old village.

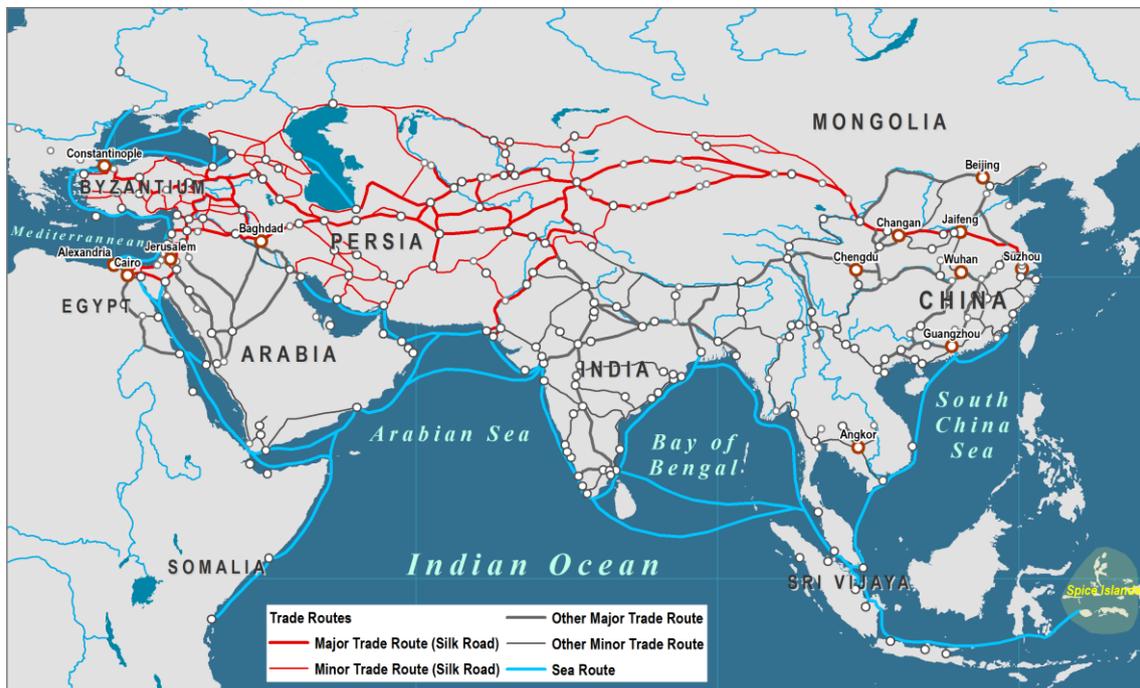


Figure 1: The Silk Road and Arab Sea Routes (Courtesy: Mansson)

Commercial and Naval Transactions of Kollam

Kollam occupied a predominant position in commercial and naval transactions of the East as a repository of all sorts of conceivable commercial goods including fish, rice, banana, cotton, pepper, ginger, cardamom, pineapple, fruits, pulses, gold, herbs, horns, ivory, iron, jewels, betel leaves, pearls, poison, perfumes, peacock, corals, butter and jasmine flowers besides the spices. The town, Kollam is called Kurakkeni Kollam (*Annual Report of the Archaeological Department-Travancore State for the Year 1920-1921 A.D 1922:54*). It remained an important trading centre situated on the coast of Indian Ocean and had brisk trade with almost all the ancient civilizations. As a land of spices and precious jewels it was sanctified by a very pleasant climate and enchanting scenic

beauty. The place was famous for trade in cotton, pepper, ginger, cardamom and other articles of merchandize. Moreover, plenty of fish, rice, bananas, pineapple, fruits and pulses were available there (Hamilton, 1820:321). Kollam was the first port city on the Arabian Sea coast, and it was connected to well-known historical trade routes (Figure 1). The Persian Gulf Route, which ran from the Malabar Coast to the Levantine ports, was one of them. The second was an overland route that ran from the Indian passes to the Caspian Sea via the Khyber and Bolan passes, the Balkh, and the Oxus. The third path from the Red Sea's mouth led to the Arabian coasts.

The wide trade network bounded by the Pacific at one end extending all the way to the Mediterranean at the other, constituted the foundation of oriental global economy in both east and west. As Ashin Das Gupta notes, "the Arab and the Persian in the west and the Chinese and the Malay in the east shaped the Ocean, while the Swahili Coast and the Islands contributed to its richness (Gupta 2001: 23). Navigation became the Arabs' forte in developing trade as well as in expanding their conquests (Engineer 1987: 12).

Classical Writings and Kollam

During the early Christian era and even before that, the account of classical writers mentioned about foreign ships laden with goods lying at the ports of the seacoast of Travancore. The anonymous writer of the *Periplus of Erythrean Sea* describes the commercial activities at the ports of Muziris (Cranganore), Nelcynda (Niranam), Bacre (Purakkad) and Balita (Varkala) where coir, topaz, precious metals, etc., were exchanged for large quantities of pepper, ginger, ivory, peacocks, apes, piece goods and other indigenous products (Sastri 1939: 57). Marco Polo testifies to the presence of trading communities of Jews and Christians at Kollam (Ricci 1994- Reprint: 326).

Preeminent Position of the Arabs

The commercial contacts of Kollam can be traced from the Biblical days, even before the beginning of the Christian era. The earliest reference to such relations comes from the Book of Kings in the Old Testament. Solomon, the wise, King of Israel is said to have sent his ships along with the ships of Hiram, the Phoenician king to Ophir from where they brought gold and silver, ivory, apes and peacocks (*Old Testament* 9/26-28). From this it is clear that Solomon (c.974-932), King of the Hebrews, traded with West Indian ports and the main imports came from Kollam. "Once in three years came the navy of Tharshish bringing gold and silver, ivory, apes and peacocks" (*Old Testament* 10/22). The presence of loan terms in Greek, such as Oryza (Tamil, Arisu), Aloes (Tamil, Puppali), and others, demonstrates the importance of trade. It is thought that the Egyptians and Phoenicians did not go beyond the Southern Arabian marts, where Indian commodities imported by Arabian and Indian traders were available.

Inscriptional Sources on Kollam

Aside from ancient trip accounts, primary sources including as inscriptions, epigraphical evidence, numismatic sources, archival data, foreign notices by competent

academics, and contemporary literature provide insight into Kollam's early history. There are certain inscriptional documents that mention Kollam's antiquity. Tarisapalli Copper Plates (Figure 2), dated 849 A. D., are the most important of them. It is written in Old Malayalam in Vattezhuttu script, and it is followed by a sequence of signatures, ten of which are in Middle Persian (in Pahlavi script) attesting to Christians and Zoroastrians, and four of which are in Judaeo-Persian related to the Jewish community.

The impression of these signatures is “more like graffiti than an inscription”, strengthening the sense of these names as actual autographs. The Arabic portion spells out eleven unmistakably Muslim names: [And witness] to this MaymūnibnIbra[-] hīm and witness MuḥammadibnManīḥ and Ṣulḥ [ʔṢaliḥ] ibn ‘Alī and witness and witness ‘AmribnIbrahīm and witness Ibrahīmibn al-Ṭayy and witness BakribnManṣūr and witness al-QāsimibnḤamīd and witness Manṣūribn ‘Īsā and witness Isma‘īlibnYa‘qūb (Natarajan, 2019: 32-33).

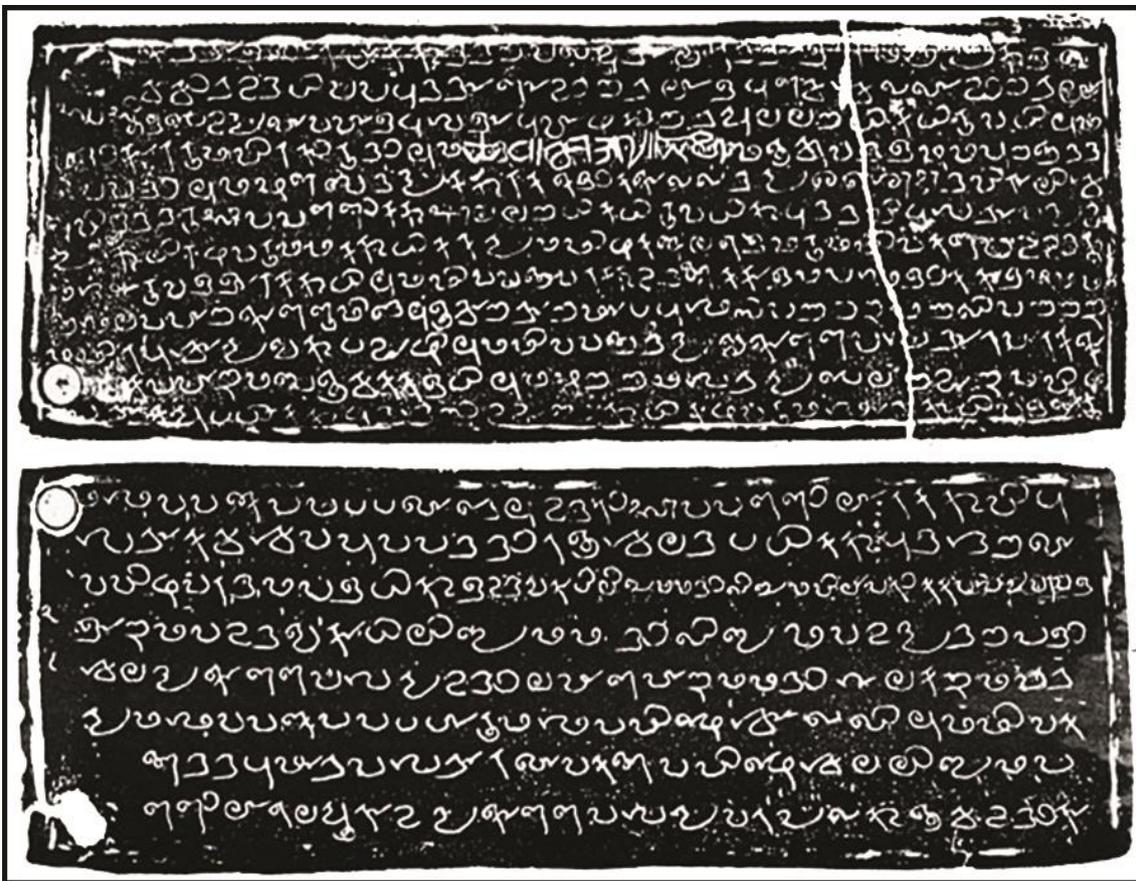


Figure 2: Tarisapalli Copper Plates (Courtesy: Varier and Veluthat 2013)

The significance of this copper-plate grant lay in the fact that members of other religious communities—Zoroastrians, Jews, and Muslims—were requested to recognise and partake in the Christian community's privileges. All four religious communities had to establish permanent colonies in Kollam in order to be included in the royal proclamation process. Venad was just an administrative district of the

Kulasekhara Empire (800-1102 A.D.) and not a separate political entity when it rose to prominence in the early ninth century A.D. The first King of Venad of whose reign inscriptional evidence is available is Ayyan Adikal Thiruvatikal (Raja, 1953: 36). He has immortalized himself in the famous Syrian Christian Copper Plates which were executed by him in 849 A.D in the presence of the important officers of the state and the representatives of the Anchuvannam and Manigramam. Besides the names of the Muslims the inscription reveals several interesting facts. One Muruvan Sapir Iso had enacted a church named Tarisappalli at Kurakkeni Kollam and Ayyan Adikal Thiruvatikal made a gift of a plot of land to this church along with a number of families consisting of Ezhavas, Ezhakayyars and Vannans, remitting all taxes due from them. The Talaikkanam, Enikkanam, taxes payable for renewing the thatching of dwellings, the Menippon from the Sanrars, the Polippon, the Iravvchoru, and the Kuda-nazhi were among the taxes that the families paid to the church. The Ezhavas of the families who had donated to the church were allowed to take their carts to the markets and trade within the fort's confines. The Vannans (washermen) were also allowed similar permission. No one, including luminaries such as Thiyamazhavan (the head police officer) and Mathilnayakan (the fort's duty officer), was allowed to criticise any of these individuals. All complaints against them were to be settled solely by the church. Ayyan Adikal Thiruvatikal made over these places to the Therisa Church as an *attipperu* to last so long as the earth, the sun and the moon last (Rao and Aiyer 1920: 20-25).

The Tarisapalli Copper Plates are historically significant. The text is Kerala's first epigraphical record whose date can be ascertained with any degree of certainty. The record also demonstrates that Kollam was a significant commercial centre at the period. The first mention of merchant guilds like Anchuvannam and Manigramam, which played a significant role in the commercial life of all major towns in ancient Kerala, can be found in the Tarisapalli Copper Plates. The arunoottuvar (six hundred) town assembly and the merchant guilds of Anchuvannam and Manigramam wielded enormous power over Kollam's political and economic affairs. The responsibility for the defence and security of Kollam was vested in these bodies. The Tarisapalli Copper Plates also bear testimony to the spirit of religious toleration and catholicity of outlook which characterised the rulers of Kerala. The Christians were treated on the same footing of equality with Hindus and assigned a very important place in the economic and social life of Kollam. In the early period of the 9th century Venad was ruled by Udaya Simhan who made Kollam, the capital of Venad (Pillai 1948: 314).

As the capital of Venad, Kollam rose to commercial prominence and became a major port on the west coast. The goods were bought and sold both by barter and cash. Ware houses of tobacco, salt, pepper, and other commodities were available at Thankassery, Neendakara and Paravur (Nittu 52 and 70). Ware houses remained under the control of the Commercial Department called *Mulakumatisila*. At that time Kollam had two types of coins, a large coin called *tanga* and a small coin called *panam*. Besides there were reference about the coins includes *achchu*, *kasu* and *palankasu* (Rao and Aiyer 1920: 216-

219). In course of time, a branch of the Chera family settled at the northern part of Kerala and another branch fixed their residence in Kollam. The defeat at Thalayalanganam (Rao 1908: 99) reduced the power of the northern Cheras, when they were subjugated by the Pandyas. The southern Cheras who were earlier settled at Vanchi were forced to retire to the south due to the invasion of the Kongus. Among them Vira Kerala Varma, Koda Kerala Varma, Sri Vira Ravivarma, Udhaya Marthanda Varma, Bhuthala Vira Udhaya Marthanda Varma, Karthikai Thirunal, Uttiram Thirunal, Ayilyam Thirunal, Visakam Thirunal, Mulam Thirunal and Sri. Chitrai Thirunal were some of the prominent rulers (The *Travancore Directory* 1938: 152).

Discussion

As a reservoir of many commodities, Kollam held a strong position in economic and naval transactions. It remained the world's emporium of trade and commerce for a long time. The Arabs occupied a preeminent position among the exterior powers that came down from previous times. The trade of the Indian Ocean had been in their hands since ancient times. Thereafter Kollam lost its significance as a result of several factors. Piracy remained one of the greatest challenges to the maritime trade activities of the period. Pliny, the Elder discusses how Roman vessels bound for the Malabar Coast in the first century carried companies of archers on board because the waters were "greatly infested with pirates" (Pliny 1857: 26). At times they avoided certain ports including Muziris due to threats of pirates. Ptolemy also held the same view and treated Muziris as notorious pirate ports of south-western India (Saletore 1978: 17). Marco Polo wrote that "you must know that from the kingdom of Melibar, and from another near it called Gozurat, there go forth every year more than a hundred corsair vessels on cruise. There, pirates bring their wives and children and spend the entire summer there. Their approach is to construct fleets of 20 to 30 pirate vessels, which then form a sea cordon, in which they drop down until there is an interval of 5 or 6 miles between ship and ship, covering something like a hundred miles of water and ensuring that no merchant ship can escape them. For when any one corsair sights a vessel a signal is made by fire or smoke, and then the whole of them make for this, and seize the merchants and plunder them". So the merchants trading on the Malabar Coast go so well manned and armed and with such great ships, that they do not fear the corsairs (Cordier et al. 1903: 389).

There were sections of people who practice seasonal piracy as part of their livelihood. Ibn Battuta also dealt with the coordinated nature of pirate attacks on the Malabar Coast. In his description he dealt with the Abyssinian men at arms as the protectors on this sea (Defremery and Sanguinetti 1877: 59-60). Athanasius Nikitin noted in his travelogue that the Malabar Coast as "infested with pirates all of whom are Kofars, neither Christians nor Mussulmans; they pray to stone idols and know not Christ" (Major 1858: 11).

Ibn Majid, the Arab navigator of the 15th century gave warning about the pirates of the Malabar Coast in his nautical manual: "Beware of the *al-Kabkuri* in these places, for

they come here for sometimes, although their original habitat is between Koshi (Cochin) and Kulam (Quilon) where there is a large bay. They were people ruled by their own rulers and number about a 1000 men and women are a people of both land and sea with small boats" (Tibbetts 1971: 202). Further the seasonality of their nautical exploits was decided by the pattern of the monsoon that decided the sailing seasons.

It seems that there were pirate communities in South India who operated both in the sea and the land. In the words of Shulman, in South India a bandit is "not made' but rather born as such" (Schulman 1980: 283). Durate Barbosa informed that the Mukkuvar as both "expert seamen" and "shameless thieves" (Dames 1918-1921:64-65). Sebastian R.Frange writes 'the evidence suggests that pirate communities occupied a similar position in Malabar's social composition, pursuing hereditary caste- defined and socially recognised occupations to supplement incomes or accumulate capital (Frange 2011:1275).

Conclusion

Though Kollam possessed an enviable position in the realm of trade and commerce through its topographical features and availability of natural resources from time immemorial it was left unnoticed by the historians, archaeologists and scholars till recently. The maritime trade continued to flourish in the midst of several adversities by virtue of its strategic location and prompt supply of the valuable commodities. But the decline and disintegration of the Kulasekhara Empire and the emergence of series of small principalities in the form of *swarupams* and *nadus* undermined the commercial prosperity and thereby Kollam lost its commercial monopoly. The advent of the European colonies especially the Portuguese almost sealed the fortunes of Kollam.

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