
The Portuguese and Dutch Burials in Thangassery: Reminiscence of Medieval Cultural, Commercial and Political Interactions

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Abstract: This article attempts to probe into the aspects of Portuguese and Dutch Burials at Thangassery with reference to culture, trade, and political influences. The port town of Kollam was a trade hotspot attracting traders from Arabia, China, and in later times Portuguese, Dutch, and British.

Keywords: Kollam, Portuguese, Dutch, Unnuneelisandesham, British Era, Thangassery Fort, Burials

Introduction

Thangassery fort (N 08° 52' 53.69" E 76° 34' 6.55") is located on a promontory close to the Arabian sea, near Kollam port in Kollam district, Kerala. Kollam is mentioned in various ancient, foreign and indigenous literature works. It was referred in various literary works as 'Coulam', 'Colon', 'Coilum', and 'Quilon' (Ajit 2017). The port town of Kollam was the capital city of Venad from circa 9th Century CE and was considered an important trade hub in the Indian ocean from early historic times. It played a significant role in Kerala's medieval political scenarios.

The Arrival of Portuguese and Dutch in the Region

The southern coast of the Indian subcontinent played a significant part in the widespread global trade network from early historic times. It is evident from archaeological excavations at Pattanam and several other historical documents and travelogues that highlight the involvement of distant trade interactions. The Arabs and Chinese seafarers dominated trade activities in the region until the advent of Europeans with aggressive trade ambitions. The arrival of Europeans caused political, cultural and economic restructuring that changed the course of history. The cultural residue of the European connection is still apparent through surviving structural remains and cultural legacies evident in Kollam.



Figure 1: Map of Portuguese fort at Thangassery

The new epoch of the western world trade monopoly began around May 1498 CE with Vasco Da Gama's fleet of three ships at Kappad; which marked the beginning of commercial trade between modern European civilisation and the southern coast of India. The primary items procured by the Portuguese to Europe were spices with pepper in high demand. The Arabs and Chinese traders held the duopoly of maritime trade before the advent of the Portuguese in southern India (Menon 1967). The Arabs and Chinese merchants managed to establish trade dominion over the coast because of their sea voyage expertise and the hospitality of the native rulers of Kerala. Chinese maritime trade activities in the southern coastline declined drastically in the 15th century CE making Arabs the prime trading group. The arrival of the Portuguese trembled the balanced trade ecosystem sustained by the Arabs. The Portuguese managed to dethrone the Arab trade monopoly by forming associations with native kings and adopting violent methods such as raiding and destroying ships belonging to Arab merchants.

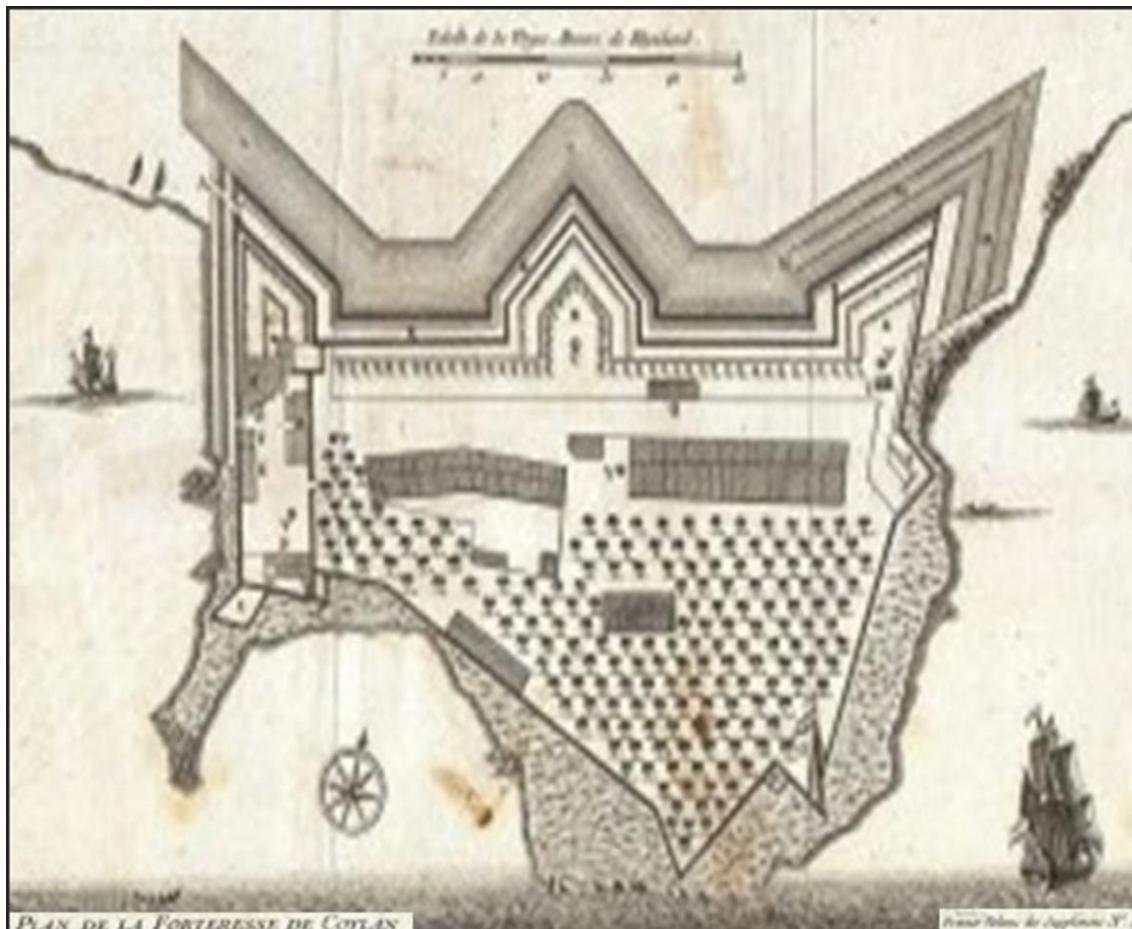


Figure 2: Map of the Dutch fort at Thangassery

The Portuguese established a direct trade relationship with the port on the Malabar Coast from the beginning of the sixteenth century CE. When they realised it was hard to penetrate through a commercial tie-up between Zamorins and the Arabs, the Portuguese favoured other local principalities like the kingdom of Cochin and encouraged them to trade and rise against the economic totalitarianism of Zamorins. This strategy worked for the Portuguese, and they managed to build factories and settlements in places like Cochin, Palliport, Kannur, Calicut, Chaliyam, Purakkad, Kayamkulam and Quilon to accumulate spices, pepper, and other valuable goods. When fortifications became necessary to protect their factories, the Portuguese built Fort Immanuel in Cochin, Fort Thomas in Thangassery (Figure 1), and Fort St. Angelo in Kannur (Menon 1967).

Portuguese commercial intervention not only affected the commercial field but also strongly influenced the region's cultural, political, and religious sectors. The latter half of the 16th century CE witnessed the rise of Dutch merchants on the Malabar coasts. Netherlands formed the Dutch East India Company in 1602 CE with a sole commercial interest in the Indian Sub-continent. The Zamorins and several local kingdoms supported the Dutch movement against the Portuguese in January 1663 CE. The

combined forces of Dutch, Zamorins and local chieftains succeeded in defeating the hundred and sixty-five years of Portuguese relation with Kerala (Menon 1967:205-207). The first Dutch expedition led by admiral Steven Van Der Hagen reached Calicut on 11th November 1604 CE. Dutch expedition to Thangassery fort headed by Admiral Van Goens succeeded in capturing the fort from Portuguese in 1658 CE. A treaty signed between the Dutch and the kingdom of Travancore in 1662 CE agreed upon the expulsion of the Portuguese and their monopoly of the pepper trade. The capture of Cochin by the Dutch in 1663 CE foreshadowed their supremacy and the demise of the Portuguese. The capture of Cochin by the Dutch was preceded by a series of events such as conquest of the Pallipuram fort in 1661 CE and the battle at Mattanchery palace to unseat the Cochin Raja and the coronation of Vira Kerala Varma as king of Cochin on 20th March 1663 CE.

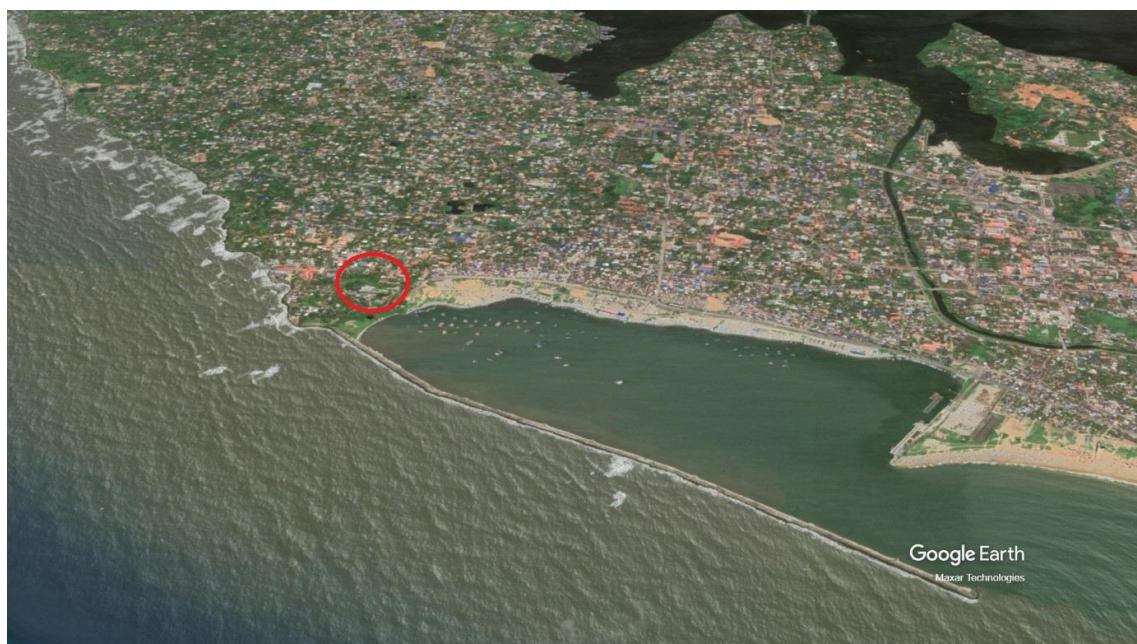


Figure 3: Satellite image of Kollam port with the location of the burial ground
(Courtesy: Google Earth)

The Dutch were also able to make a deal on pepper trade monopoly with Kolathiri raja of Kannur in 1664 CE, making the Dutch presence throughout all key territories in late medieval Kerala. However, the Dutch were under concerted pressure after the Chettuvai conquest of Zamorin with the support of the British in 1715 CE. The Dutch managed to retrieve Chettuvai in 1718 CE, which resulted in Zamorin and other native kingdoms uprising against the Dutch. The native confederacy and rise of mighty Marthanda Varma in Travancore caused trouble for the Dutch administration. In 1741 CE Marthanda Varma succeeded in defeating the Dutch in Colachel War, which was a significant setback. Victorious king Marthanda Varma annexed Dutch establishments at Quilon, Kayamkulam, and Purakkad to the Travancore kingdom. Aware of the defeat of the Dutch in southern Kerala, Zamorin led successful campaigns against the Dutch in the north and captured Cochin and Kannur in 1755 CE. Further, the invasion

of Hyder Ali in 1766 CE weakened the Dutch forces beyond recovery. The Dutch presence was confined to the Cochin fort and region of Thangassery (Figure 2) until they relinquished to the British in 1795 CE (Menon 1967:204-215).

Trade Interactions at Kollam Port Town in Medieval Ages

Kollam engaged in extensive inter and intra-regional trade activities during the medieval ages as a port town. Epigraphical references about the trade engagement of Kollam can be retraced to the last quarter of the first millennium CE. Epigraphical records, travelogues, medieval Malayalam literary works, and archaeological evidence show that Kollam was a prime trade hub on the southern coast (Figure 3) during the medieval times (Kunjanpillai 1996; Muhaseen 2018).

The foreign travelogues of Ibn Battuta, Marcopolo and Barbosa describe Kollam port as one of the leading trade hubs in the Indian subcontinent. Indigenous literary works such as *Unnuneelisandesham*, written in the 14th century CE, describe Kollam port's shores filled with Chinese ships such as Chonkam, Chambrani and Chonadan for goods transportation. *Unnuneelisandesham* further describes traders from China, Arab lands and people from the Levant who were present at Kollam port (Kunjanpillai 1996:207).



Figure 4: Present-day view of Thangassery

Various Archaeological explorations at Thanagasseri (Figure 4), Kollam yielded Chinese ceramics and coins, which attest to the robust trade activity that happened in Kollam during the medieval time. The Chinese ceramics shreds and coins explored from Kollam port (Figure 5) belonged to the various province of China and were

produced under the reign of several kingdoms, namely Song dynasty (11th century CE - 13th century CE), Northern Song Dynasty (10th century CE), Yuan dynasty (14th century CE, Ming dynasty (15th century CE) (Muhaseen 2018:68).

The Portuguese and Dutch Burials at Thangassery

The fort's history began in 1516 CE when the Portuguese general Afonso de Albuquerque built a factory with the help of the Queen of Kollam to procure trade goods for Portuguese ships. Furthermore, to ensure the factory's security, the Portuguese governor Diogo Lopez de Sequeria sought permission to build a fort there. The Queen of Kollam granted permission in 1519 CE to erect the Portuguese fort. Until 1658 CE Portuguese managed to safeguard the St. Thomas fort, except few minor rebellions in 1520 CE. The Dutch fleet led by Admiral van Goens in 1661 CE captured the fort from the Portuguese. The Dutch used it as their main warehouse to store goods from Kayamkulam and Tengapattanam. The demise of the Dutch supremacy in Thangassery fort happened when the British took charge of the fort on 20th October 1795 CE (Ajit 2017:175-177).



Figure 5: View of the port from Thangassery lighthouse

The burial graves inside St. Thomas fort are a reminiscence of Portuguese and Dutch inhabitation at Thangassery (Figure 3). The burial tombs are scattered inside the fort, and most of the tombs are heavily disturbed. Some tomb slabs were found displaced from their respective location. Several tomb slabs are now used as washing stones, a platform for water tanks (Figure 24) and some are used for household use by the natives. The author made four visits to the burial ground over the past two years and noticed many of the tombs were missing, some moved from their original location, and permanent constructions have been done above some monuments in recent times. The growing population density in the area will further damage the monuments; before long, most of the tombs might disappear if no authoritative action is involved in protecting these monuments.

Dutch- Portuguese Burial Structures at Thangasserry

Arch Entrance: The Arch entrance (N 08° 51' 48.12" E 076° 34' 0.00") is located towards the Northern portion of the burial ground (Figure 6). It is an elaborate structure among the remaining burial architecture in Thangasserry.



Figure 6: Arch Entrance

Belfry: The belfry (Figure 7) is an integral part of Portuguese-Dutch graveyard architecture. The Belfry structure (N 08° 52' 55.08" E 076° 34' 00.61") is located near the Buckingham Canal towards the centre of the present-day burial remains at Thangasserry. The structure is severely vandalised. Layers of plaster on the laterite stone of the belfry structure have heavily withered off. The presently standing Belfry structure approximately has a height of 14 meters.



Figure 7: Belfry Structure

Tomb-I: This burial (N 08 ° 52' 55.37" E 076 ° 34' 00.29") has a square basement and conical shaped top portion. The structure has eight decorative columns with four carved vertical lines. The upper conical shape also has similar vertical carved lines. The measured height of the burial structure is 2.85 meters and 1 meter in maximum width. The lime plaster is visibly withered in some areas, and the laterite blocks are visible on Tomb-I (Figure 8).



Figure 8: View of Tomb-I

Tomb-II: This burial (N 08° 52' 54.48" E 070° 34' 00.71") is a partly damaged structure. This monument with a square basement has 1.4 meters of height and maximum width of 1 meter at the bottom. The conical-shaped upper portion has a height of 80 cm. There are no engravings noticed in the structure (Figure 9).



Figure 9: View of Tomb-II

Tomb- III: Tomb- III (N 08 ° 52' 54.67" E 076 ° 34' 00.80") located between Belfry and Tomb-II in the cemetery. It is a rectangular burial monument with a height of 70 cm and maximum width of 1.10 meters. The top portion of the monument was destroyed, and no engravings or tombstones were found associated with the structure (Figure 10).



Figure 10: View of Tomb-III

Tomb- IV: This documented burial tomb at Thangasseri (Figure 11) is located towards the western portion of the burial ground. This burial structure has a rectangular basement measured with a height of 1.10 meters and a maximum width of 1 meter at the base of the top roof portion. The Tomb- IV has no burial tomb inscription or engravings.

Tomb- V: Tomb-V (N 08 ° 52' 54.30" E 76 ° 34' 00.18") is located towards the South-Eastern side of the Belfry structure. The structure's total height is 2.10 meters and the maximum width is 80 cm. Tomb-V has a square base and a short conical roof-shaped top portion. The upper middle portion of the structure has a protrusive decoration measuring 18 cm in thickness (Figure 12).

Tomb- VI: This Tomb structure (N 08 ° 52' 53.64" E 076 ° 34' 0.80") is located on North-Eastern side of the Belfry structure. It measures a height of 70 cm and maximum width of 80 cm at the bottom (Figure 13). The top portion of the burial tomb was destroyed, and no tomb inscription is visible.



Figure 11: Tomb-IV



Figure 12: Tomb-V



Figure 13: View of Tomb-VI

Tomb- VII: This Tombstone is located (N 08° 52' 54.08" E 76° 34' 00.06") associated with the Arch entrance structure. The tombstone is heavily vandalised, and recent paintings disturbed the original engravings on the plate. This tomb was raised in memory of 'John Lyon Walcott', who died on 10th April 1810 (Figure 14).

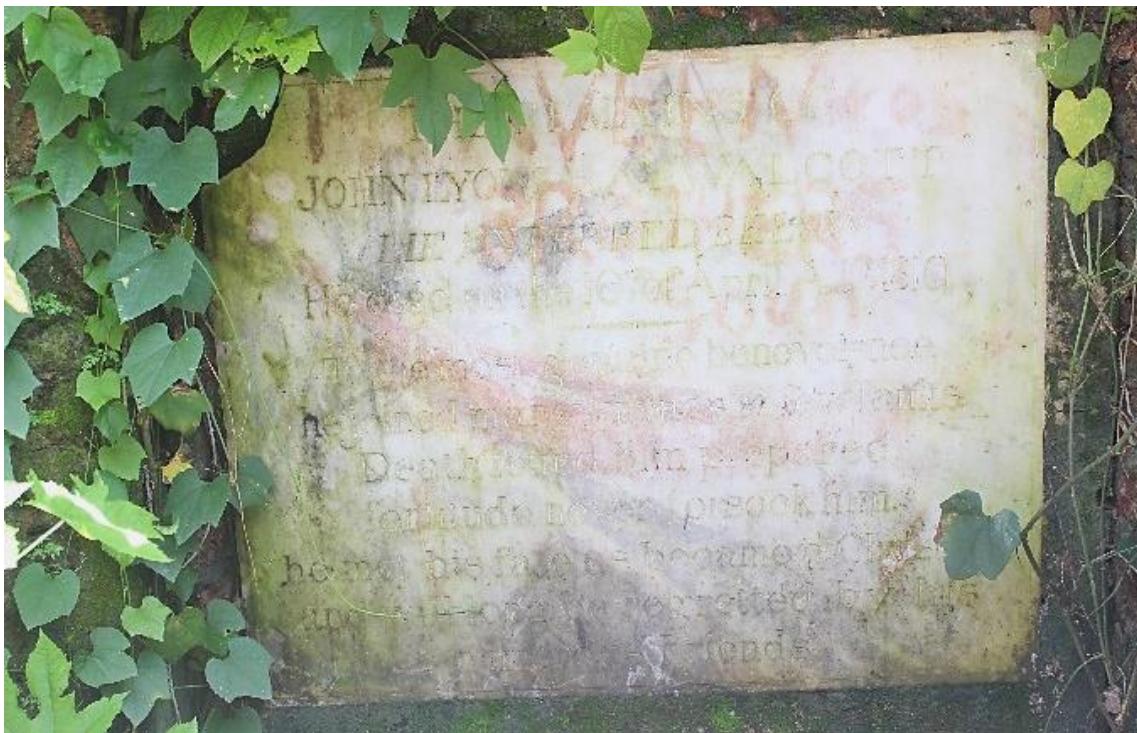


Figure 14: View of Tomb- VII (Tombstone)

Tomb- VIII: It is a heavily disturbed structure (N 08° 52' 56.24"; E 076° 34' 00.12") (Figure 15) with four tombstones (Figures 16-19) scattered around its premises. The top portion of the burial monument is completely destroyed. The present structure was measured with a maximum height of 60 cm and maximum width of 2.3 meters. Nearby household trashes were kept on top of the burial. A destroyed slab from the burial is now being used as a washing stone by the locals.



Figure 15: View of Tomb- VIII

Tombstone I: This granite tombstone has a length of 56 cm and 35 cm in breadth (Figure 16). The English writing begins with 'SACRED' followed by the name of the deceased, which is worn off badly. The stone also mentions the date of birth and the date of departure of the deceased.



Figure 16: View of Tombstone-I

Tombstone II: Tombstone II shares all the features in Tombstone I with difference in dimensions. This tombstone has a length of 80cm and a width of 54cm (Figure 17). The writings on the stone tomb have faded to the extent that it is difficult to decipher the inscription.

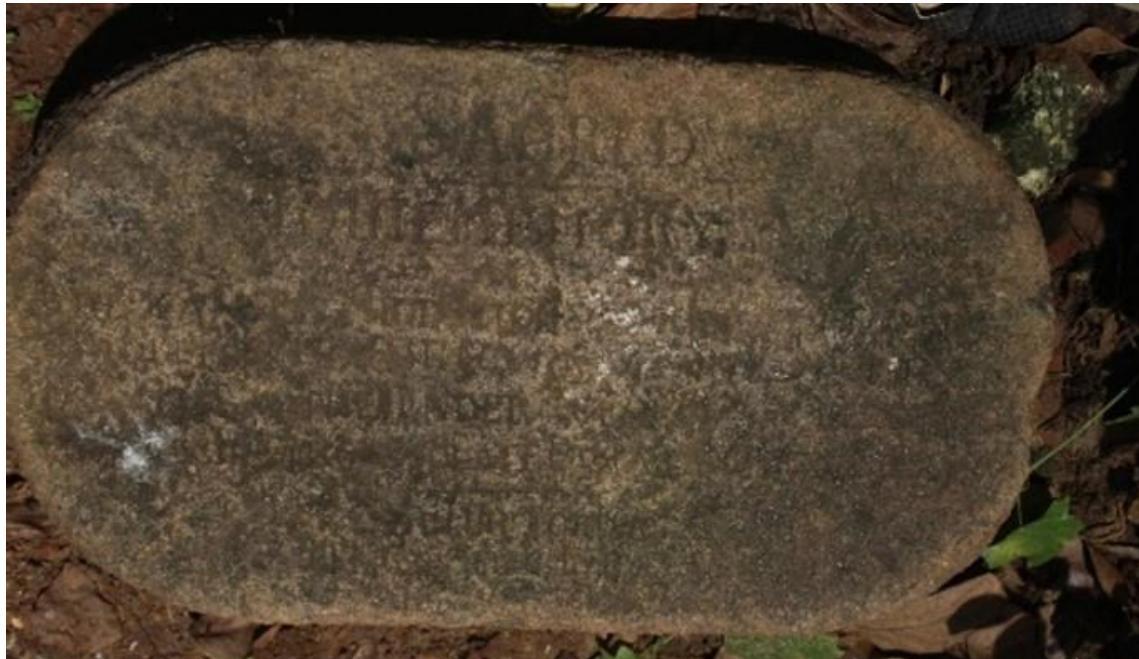


Figure 17: View of Tombstone-II

Tombstone III: The inscription in Tombstone III is heavily faded (Figure 18). Writings on the stone begin with 'In Memory of' followed by the name of the deceased, which is completely worn. The bottom portion mentions the year of death as AD 1810. This tombstone has a length of 90 cm and a width of 40 cm.



Figure 18: View of Tombstone-III

Tombstone IV: This tombstone has an oval-shaped projecting plate with engravings on a rectangular base. The tombstone has a length of 70 cm and a width of 35 cm (Figure 19).



Figure 19: View of Tombstone-IV



Figure 20: View of Tomb- IX



Figure 21: Recent view of Tomb- IX

Tomb- IX: Tomb- IX (N 08° 52' 53.36"; E 076° 34' 01.31") is the most elaborately and artistically carved tomb among the surviving remains at Thangassery (Figures 20 and 21). This uniquely designed tomb has a top portion adorned with two peacocks. Beneath the two standing peacocks, a fully opened peacock feather hood decoration is projected outwards. The lower portion has two spiral pillar decorations on each side. A semi-circular arch-shaped space was possibly designed for carving the deceased's

details between these spiral pillars, though it remains vacant. Engravings on Tomb IX were severely disturbed, and the inscriptions have wholly faded away. This burial monument has a height of 2.6 meters and maximum width of 1.3 meters at the bottom portion.



Figure 22: View of Tomb X



Figure 23: Recent photo of Tomb X



Figure 24: A Burial structure now being used as a platform for the water tank

Tomb- X: This tomb has a conical shape and an oval-shaped memorial plate. This has a height of 1.6 meters and maximum width of 1.10 meters observed at the bottom. There are no visible engravings on the monument at present (Figures 22 and 23).

Table 1: Documented Burial Structures in Thangassery Fort

Sl. No.	Type Description	Co-ordinates	Present Status	Figure Number
1.	Arch Entrance	N 08 °51' 48.12" E 076 ° 34' 0.00"	Heavily damaged	6
2.	Belfry	N 08 52' 55.08" E 076 ° 34 00.61"	Heavily damaged	7
3.	Tomb-1	N 08°52' 55.37" E 076°34' 00.29"	Partly damaged	8
4.	Tomb-2	N 08 °52' 54.48" E 070°34' 00.71"	Partly damaged	9
5.	Tomb-3	N 08 °52' 54.67" E 076°34' 00.80"	Partly damaged	10
6.	Tomb-4	N 08 °52' 54.47" E 76°34' 00.29"	Partly damaged	11
7.	Tomb-5	N 08 °52' 54.30" E 76°34' 00.18"	Partly damaged	12
8.	Tomb-6	N 08 °52' 53.64" E 076°34' 0.80"	Partly damaged	13
9.	Tomb-7	N 08 °52' 54.08" E 76°34' 00.06"	Heavily damaged	14
10.	Tomb-8	N 08°52' 56.24" E 076°34' 00.12	Partly damaged	15
11.	Tomb-9	N 08°52' 53.36" E 076°34' 01.31	Partly damaged	20
12.	Tomb-10	N 08°52' 53.34" E 076°34' 01.29	Partly damaged	22
13.	Tombstone-1	N 08 °52' 53.59" E 076°34' 0.76"	Displaced	16
14.	Tombstone-2	N 08 °52' 53.40" E 76°34' 01.00"	Displaced	17
15.	Tombstone-3	N 08 °52' 53.31 E 76°34' 01.34"	Displaced	18
16.	Tombstone-4	N 08 °52' 53.27 E 76°34' 01.41"	Displaced	19

Conclusion

Trade was the main ambition of the Portuguese and Dutch when they reached the southern coast of India. However, beyond commercial interactions, they infiltrated and

influenced the cultural and political scenarios of the land. Indoctrination of Christian culture, medicinal aids, and military systems was absorbed into the native culture of Kerala.

The Portuguese built the St. Thomas fort at Thangassery, later controlled by the Dutch and British. It was one of the trade hubs of western merchants in Kerala since the 16th Century. The Portuguese and Dutch burials at Thangassery is a valuable cultural vestige that speaks of our history. Unfortunately, many of the tomb structures have been destroyed or displaced. Today, only 16 cemetery related structures are visible (Table 1) and accessible. These structures have been documented for future reference and research. Further archaeological investigations may reveal more structures beneath the soil and bushy areas inside the fort, which are not easily accessible. Further historical research can also be fruitful in deciphering the text in tombs and identifying the deceased and their role in history.

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